A Life Less Ordinary

by Metal_mako_dragon

Summary

He would have been surprised, but Anders' life had never been simple anyway; love, sex, violence, jealousy, hate, and everything in between. Covers Anders and Hawke through years 1-5 of DA2 (part of an ongoing series)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Righteous

Chapter Notes

Character portraits sourced by the wonderful Rabastanka (RedHat).

It had been a long day but he didn't want to rest. The sun was long gone, not that it made much of a
difference in Darktown, but in terms of who came out at night it was imperative. First of all it was
the little blonde girl, Ethel, and her grandfather with arthritis, then Elena, seven months pregnant
and still malnourished despite his best efforts, and now this. The boy wasn't responding and Anders
had to admit for the first time in a long time he was beginning to worry.

"Maker watch over him," the mother was whispering, over and over into her cupped hands.

The husband, Jonathan he if he remembered is name correctly, had brought him in unconscious
half an hour ago. He'd been caught in the middle of a fight between the Coterie and the Carta, mere
minutes from the clinic. Playing with his friends. It made Anders sick to think that even innocent
children weren't safe to play outside around here but it didn't surprise him in the least. He wasn't
that naive. What did surprise him was that he'd stopped the bleeding and sealed the head wound
fifteen minutes ago and the boy's eyes were still firmly shut.

"Why isn't he waking up?" Jonathan asked, brow furrowed, eyes accusing.

It didn't faze Anders, not the way it used to. When he'd first started this clinic, all good intentions
and naivety, people's grief had scared him more than anything. People in suffering tended to lay
blame on the closest thing they could find and Anders, usually being the one who'd tried and failed
to help, was exactly the target they needed. He would have given up...if it hadn't been for Justice.
The spirit, in the early days, had been a strong and comforting presence. He had recognised his friend's tenacity in Anders' own self reliance, sensed his influence in the urge to carry on when he began to doubt himself. Not anymore though, he thought numbly. He ignored the usual hollow feeling he suffered when he thought about how bloody pitiful his life had become and focused more energy into the healing aura around the boy.

I'm pushing myself too far, he thought yet the thought seemed steeped in Justice's usual practicality. Perhaps it was out of spite, maybe if he hadn't been dwelling on Justice only moments before he wouldn't have done it, but he ignored the advice and pushed harder. His aide, William, gave him a sidelong glance and frowned. Anders tried his best to tune everything out and felt for the boy's life source, flinching away from him, and grabbed at it. It was a last ditch effort but considering how depleted his energy reserves were, he had little choice. The boy gasped, drawing in a choking breath, arms flailing up, eyes shooting open. The mother rushed forwards, heedless of the last of the magic still clinging to her son and of Anders' own distress. The mage stumbled back, all energy leaving him as his connection to the Fade lessened just that little bit.

"Are you alright?" William asked with concern, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder, "I've never seen you go for that long before."

"Then you've obviously not heard the rumours," Anders said with a smile, but he knew the joke was hollow.

"Ha ha," William said deadpan, eyes serious, "I mean it, you should sit down, I'll get some water."

Anders nodded and sat in the nearby rickety chair, more to appease William than any actual want to rest. The last thing he wanted right now was rest. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers and tried to tune back into the world around him.

"Thank you serrah, may the Maker bless you!" suddenly there were arms around his shoulders and Anders started badly.

"That's-that's alright," Anders squirmed under the warmth and managed to pull the woman from him and keep her at arm's length; thankfully she was too overjoyed to be offended.

"You saved my son," her face was so open, "I can never repay what you've done. I am sorry, we have no coin to spare but..."

"I don't need payment," Anders summoned a smile from his reserves and tried not to let his control slip; "I'm just glad I could help."

"You truly are..." the woman looked lost for words, "it makes me happy to know there are still good people in this world, even here in Darktown. Bless you serrah, bless you."

Anders watched her leave, her arm tightly around the small boy's shoulders, possessive. Anders smirked a little; that boy would be indoors for months. He'd probably see him brought back into the clinic with cabin fever by the time his mother was done coddling him. Justice was right, he had pushed too hard, but it had been worth it, even if he did now feel like someone had picked him up and thoroughly wrung him out. Anders hung his head and rubbed his face with both hands, feeling Justice pushing against the barriers. He was too tired to fight against him and he could feel the flaring of the markings on his skin, his eyes momentarily blinded by light.

"Not now," he said angrily, closing his eyes and pressing his fingers against his eyelids.

Then he heard it; the sound of booted feet, more than two, maybe three, entering the clinic. So
that's what it was, Anders thought, Justice had probably sensed them long before he had. He was always so vigilant, sometimes it made Anders' head hurt. Even back when he was a Grey Warden, well an active Grey Warden, Anders never would have counted himself as the most perceptive of people. Unless there were templars involved, of course. Thankfully he was pretty sure that not one of the three people approaching his rickety little chair was a templar. One should be thankful for small mercies. He stood up as boldly as he could, picked up his staff and turned.

"I have made this place a sanctum of healing and salvation," Anders hated having to sound threatening; he knew he looked as intimidating as a wet kitten, "why do you threaten it?"

"Wait! We don't mean any harm," the man raised his hands placatingly, green eyes widening slightly, "we just want to talk."

Wow. Anders blinked. He would be the first to admit that living in Darktown had made him rather cynical and, despite how much he cared for the residents, very few of them peaked his interest further than tending wounds. Everyone was poor in Darktown; if you weren't poor you left at the first opportunity. These three, however, were wearing the nicest clothes he'd seen in a long while and, if he wasn't mistaken, that was real gold thread in the dwarf's jacket. Yet that wasn't what had grabbed his attention, despite how much he needed the coin.

Shortish, jet black hair falling into emerald green eyes, high cheekbones, broad shoulders, slim hips, tall and my, my but did he have a pair of thighs on him. Do not stare at the thighs, Anders told himself seriously, that's just rude...despite how tempting it is. He scanned them all quickly, taking in the fact that the stunning man at the front and the girl behind him bore a striking family resemblance and that the dwarf had no beard. Well, Anders thought, not as unperceptive as I thought I was. Not that it got him anywhere but it made him feel better in a silly sort of way. Then he noticed the dwarf was talking.

"Word on the street is you were a Grey Warden once," the dwarf was saying, "we're going on an expedition to the Deep Roads. Do you know a way in?"

"The Wardens?" Anders narrowed his eyes, "What is this? Are you here to take me back, because don't think that..!"

"No, you don't understand," the man continued quickly, "we're not from the Wardens or the templars or anyone else. We just need some help, that's all."

"Right," the dwarf said eagerly, "a way into the Deep Roads, that's all we're after."

Anders found himself relaxing despite the taught sense of suspicion still flowing through him. The initial adrenaline, which had flared at the thought of a fight, was now ebbing away, leaving him once more drained and weak. He leaned against his staff and sighed.

"Ugh, half the reason I left the Wardens was to get away from the blighted Deep Roads," Anders couldn't help but relax a little despite himself; it had been so long since he'd even mentioned his past to anyone and it made him feel a little nostalgic, "those bastards made me get rid of my cat. Poor Ser Pounce-a-lot. He hated it down there too."

"Wait, wait, you had a cat...called Ser Pounce-a-lot," the man, who had seemed imposing and self assured since entering the clinic, now looked as if his own fantasies about heroic griffon riding Grey Wardens were being torn down about his ears, "in the Deep Roads."

"You know that's the look the other Wardens used to give me whenever I took him," Anders smiled, "he was particularly partial to Genlocks. Swatted one on the nose once, drew blood too."
The man's eyebrows rose even higher, if that was possible, while the girl simply shook her head. Anders just stood there, not caring. They'd come to see him, what did it matter to him if they didn't like what they found. He simply stood and watched them back.

"Eh, right, anyway we're getting a little off track," the dwarf finally said, "we're looking for a map into..."

"The Deep Roads, yes I heard you the first time," Anders sighed, "and no I have no desire to have anything to do with the Deep Roads or the Wardens or anything of the sort, sorry."

"But we need to get in through the Free Marches," the man's voice had an odd note of desperation to it that didn't escape Anders' notice, "whatever information you can give us will save lives."

Oh he was good, Anders thought ruefully, going straight for the guilt. Reminded him of another handsome rogue he'd met in Ferelden who had also dragged him into the Deep Roads and lots of trouble. Talk about history repeating itself. No, Anders thought firmly, this time I'm sticking to my bloody resolve, gorgeous thighs or no. Honestly, why did rogues have to wear such revealing clothing? It was terribly distracting.

"Look there are more important things going on here than making coin..." he said as sternly as he could before a thought popped into his head.

Despite the moderately fancy clothes and the respectfully good looking what-he-assumed-to-be siblings, they also looked rather...capable. He was guessing that the dangerous looking crossbow strapped to the dwarf's back wasn't just for show, or the long daggers on the man's, and if he wasn't mistaken was that a well concealed staff the girl had down her back? Another mage? It was a risk but...maybe, just maybe he wouldn't have to go alone after all. He didn't like to admit it but he'd been worried about this all day, the meeting, and the thought of not going alone was appealing. It had been a long time since he'd sought any kind of help. The strangers were beginning to look distinctly resigned until Anders spoke once more.

"...Wait," he said, making all three sets of eyes spring to him, "how about an exchange? You want the maps and I, well, I need some help. You do something for me and I return the favour?"

"What exactly is it you want?" the man asked, eyes suspicious, "I'd rather know the details before I agree to anything."

"Wise man," Anders smiled, albeit without reaching his eyes, "I came to Kirkwall to help a friend, a mage, away from the wretched Gallows."

"Great," the girl muttered under her breath, "templars."

"You want to break someone out of the Gallows?" the man asked, frown still firmly in place, "That must be some plan you have there."

"Well, not exactly, I mean hopefully it'll never come to that," Anders admitted that even he probably couldn't pull off that feat, "I sent him a message to meet me tonight at the Chantry. However the templars have got wind of our meeting and I'm worried...that something might happen. Karl's a good man, I don't want to see him get hurt. If you come with me, watch my back for templars, I'll give you the maps. All I want is for everyone involved to walk away free. Sound like a fair deal?"

All three shifted a little uneasily and looked to each other. Anders waited. He'd become very good at waiting over these past years. The girl looked uneasy but the man gave her a quick, reassuring
smile and she nodded almost imperceptibly at him.

"Alright you've convinced me," the man said, face determined, "it sounds like you could use the help anyway."

"Thanks, I..." Anders found himself hesitating cautiously; it had been so long since he'd had to use social graces, "I'm Anders by the way."

"So we'd heard," the man said amiably, "everyone calls me Hawke, this is my sister Bethany and that's Varric."

"At your service," the dwarf said with a charming smile.

For which Anders was becoming more and more glad. They left with an arrangement to meet in front of the Chantry in two hours and Anders wandered back into the clinic feeling ten times better than he had that morning. Hawke; Anders rolled the name around in his head idly as he waited in the clinic, using the time to prepare a few basic potions in case they were needed. It was a good, strong name, not his first name Anders was guessing, unless he'd had a particularly cruel mother, probably a surname or a nickname. Anders didn't notice he wasn't paying attention until he poured a whole stamina draught onto the floor while staring into space.

"Balls," he said with a sigh, "focus for goodness sakes, this is no time to let your mind wander."

Karl needed his help. That was enough to sober him from his lustful thoughts about the man he'd only just met. So he'd lied to Hawke, just a little. Karl wasn't the only reason he'd come to Kirkwall but it was still part of the bargain. He needed to make sure he was safe, right now nothing else mattered. No matter how much Karl had tried to distance himself from him since coming here, Anders wouldn't abandon him. He knew how trapped Karl felt, he knew because they'd both fought so hard to be free together, and it had never worked. They were so close this time and yet all Anders had was a bad feeling that something was going to go wrong. He was glad that this man Hawke and his friends would be there. Admittedly they had only just met but still, it was nice to have someone watching his back again.

The air was cold but dry. It chapped his lips and bit at his hands but he ignored it, moving from foot to foot to keep warm. The Chantry stood behind him like a monolith, foreboding under the moonlight, staining the paving stones with its eerie red glow. Anders rubbed his hands together and looked down the stairs before him. He was early, he knew, but it didn't stop him from being impatient. He'd become so antsy trying to kill time at the clinic that he'd decided to set out and wait at the meeting point. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Anders sighed and watched his breath turn milky in the air before him, turning back into the shadows under the doorway.

"Been waiting long?"

Anders wasn't proud of the undignified yelp he let slip as Hawke's deep voice spoke into his ear. It would have been almost funny if he hadn't felt Justice's influence in his sudden want to lash out with magic to protect himself, forcing Anders to push him back down. He took a deep breath and spun round to glare at the man who, once more, looked a little stunned and, dare he say it, repentant.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!" Anders said, holding his chest, "Maker's breath do you have a death wish or something?"

"Sorry," Hawke scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, "sometimes even I forget how quiet I
"Take this as a reminder," Anders muttered, catching his breath as he looked around, "where are the others?"

"They'll be here in a moment," Hawke said folding his arms and rubbing at the exposed flesh above his gauntlets.

"I wish they'd hurry up," Anders said; just looking at Hawke in that get up was making him alternately hot and cold; it was rather confusing, "it's bloody freezing out here."

The silence was awkward. Anders sighed and hugged himself for warmth, wishing that right now he could recall how he used to start conversations. He'd always been good at it, being charming and breaking the ice with a joke or a lewd innuendo, and people always tended to take to him rather quickly. Maybe it was all that running away from the Circle, he'd had to learn how to create creative lies and distract people from the truth of his being an apostate mage with little to offer other than maybe some healing and a tumble in the sack. Of course that was all before Warden Commander Cousland and the bloody joining. And Justice. Anders swallowed and tried to ignore his own thoughts; he looked up to find Hawke watching him with interest.

"So," Hawke said, not sounding anywhere near as awkward as Anders felt, "you're Ferelden too?"

"I was, yes," Anders said.

"Whereabouts?" Hawke asked.

"Actually I'm from the Anderfels originally," Anders said distractedly, "you?"

"Lothering," Hawke said, his eyes becoming momentarily distant before refocusing, "so Anders, Anderfels. Bit of a coincidence isn't it? Is that your real name?"

"Well you're a quick one aren't you?" Anders replied wryly.

Hawke was saved from having to reply by the arrival of Bethany and Varric. Anders didn't miss the fact that he'd opened his mouth to speak however. He felt a sudden need to know what Hawke was going to say, but Justice beat him to it. The spirit was coiling around in his thoughts quite passively until he began to lose focus on his mission, then he flared up threateningly in the background. Anders swallowed and gripped his staff a little tighter as they entered the Chantry together.

Bethany looked a little in awe of the temple around them, all dark red light and smoky incense.

"When we find Karl let me talk to him," Anders said to Hawke as they walked through the hall towards the towering statue of Andraste.

"Don't worry," Hawke said, surprisingly reassuring, "we'll be on the lookout."

Anders could only nod in reply. It was odd, this trust; he hadn't been trusted by anyone so quickly in a long time and his patients didn't count. His patients were desperate people willing to trust anyone to help save themselves or a loved one. This man had no reason to trust him and yet he seemed quite willing to.

The Chantry was deathly quiet at this time of night and their footfalls alone seemed magnified by the silence. Anders nodded to the stairs on the right and Hawke and the others followed. He remembered how Karl had liked to visit the Chantry in the Circle. He said it gave him peace, sitting in the little alcoves off to the sides, reading whatever he'd managed to get his hands on. Anders used to joke that he kept dirty books inside his copies of 'The Makers Children', disguised
just so the Clerics wouldn't throw him out. Karl just said that Anders only thought that because that's what Anders would do, and he would laugh and say that Karl knew him so well, because he did. Karl probably knew him better than anyone, other than Justice. Thus they found him exactly where Anders expected him to be, in an alcove away from the main hall, facing the wall, staring down at the desk before him.

"Karl, thank goodness you're here," Anders said quietly, "are you alright? We have to go, come on."

"I knew you'd come Anders," and from the first words out of his mouth Anders knew that everything was lost, but he wouldn't believe it until he saw it, "I know you too well, I knew you'd never give up."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Anders asked, swallowing down the dread, "we really don't have time for this now, we have to get out of here, quickly!"

"It's too late for that, too late now," Karl said softly as he turned to face them, his movements languid, "The templars, they knew I was too rebellious, that I had to be made an example of."

"Karl no..." he could feel his throat closing up as his friend finally faced them.

"They will help you Anders, they will help you to control this anger inside of you," and there it was, on his forehead, the mark, and everything started to fade away, all reason and right and wrong, "this is the apostate I told you of..."

Anders didn't hear any more. All he could see were Karl's blank eyes, staring at him, and that hideous, red sun emblazoned onto his forehead. Gone, he was gone, he'd lost him. He'd failed him. Flashes of memory jolted into his consciousness; the Circle at Ferelden, Karl's smiling face as they hid in the shadows from the templars giggling like children, scolding him every time he was dragged back by Ser Cullen or one of the others after another failed escape attempt followed by tender kisses that made being caught just that little bit more bearable. Scribbled notes in books, making him smile, the smell of sulphur and elfroot on his robes, his soft hands, his kind eyes. And now there was nothing left, Karl had become a puppet dancing a grotesque mimicry of life on templar strings and Anders couldn't cope. He couldn't, didn't want to, please someone tell him this wasn't real. When Justice leapt at the chance while his defences were down Anders didn't even fight it. He fell to his knees and let the sickening sensation of losing himself inside his own body take over, forcing him from control, wresting his own hands from his grasp. He felt his body move without his consent, standing, turning to roar a challenge to the templars gathering behind him, placing himself between them and Karl. The light was blinding, the hate, the rage, the vengeance. Everything slipped away and, for once, Anders was glad for the oblivion that rose up to swallow him.

"You will never take another mage as you have him!"

When he came to it was the same as it always was. There was blood on his hands and he didn't know how it got there. He never understood it, he always cast spells from a distance, he wouldn't know hand to hand combat if it would save his life; but clearly Justice did. Whenever he took over Anders always found bruises from close contact fighting and his staff tended to have a few new notches here and there. Anders looked down as he felt control returning, Justice slinking sated down into his subconscious. He was shaking. He didn't want to see it, it wasn't true.

"Anders, what did you do?" that voice; oh Maker, he thought brokenly, he sounded like Karl again, "It's like you brought a piece of the Fade into this world."
"But I thought the Tranquil were cut off from the Fade completely," Hawke's concerned voice urged him to turn and look to his friend, "how can you still sense it?"

Karl was watching him with a terrible desperation that broke Anders' heart. He looked ready to throw himself at Anders, beg him to make that connection come back, even if only for a moment. Karl had always told him he'd rather be dead than Tranquil, and Anders had always fervently agreed. They'd both been witness to what happened when the brand was sealed, the loss of self, the terrible acceptance of everything around you. Yet now here was Karl, looking at him like he was still in there and it was only making it harder.

"When you're made Tranquil you never think on your life before," Karl said lucidly, "you're severed from your dreams of the Fade. But it's as if the Fade is inside Anders, burning like a sun! I can feel it again, oh Maker don't let me lose it! Kill me Anders, please, I'd rather die a mage than live as a templar puppet!"

"Karl you can't...," he couldn't help the words as they escaped, even though he knew he'd promised, his voice strangled and weak, "please don't ask me to do this."

"There's nothing we can do," Bethany's voice, tainted with sorrow and a certain amount of fear.

"Anders it's fading, please, I can't lose it I..." Karl begged, his eyes wild.

"This isn't right," Hawke's voice was dark with anger, his hands clenched at his sides; his eyes were steady when he looked at Anders and spoke, "help him."

Help him. Anders swallowed down the tears and looked back at Karl. Didn't Hawke understand, that's what he'd been trying to do, all he'd ever wanted to do was help? He stepped forwards, the dagger drawn from his belt and hidden in his white knuckled hand. Everything moved around him like some sort of waking nightmare.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Karl asked, his voice oddly calm and childlike as he stared at Anders' face.

"I'm sorry Karl," Anders tried to smile, tried to reassure him but he couldn't, not in the face of this, "I'm so sorry."

The trip back to the clinic was silent as the grave. In a way he wished he'd brought the maps with him so he could hand them over and get rid of Hawke and the others but he hadn't thought he would need to. He hadn't dreamed that they would find Karl demeaned into a Tranquil, that he would be forced to kill him, lose him, that everything would go so very, horribly wrong. He'd had a bad feeling but this was beyond anything he could have imagined.

Of course now, on top of that, Anders had once more lost control of himself and now his three new companions knew his secret. Justice hadn't made the best impression he was sure, slaying templars left and right and shouting about murdering the entire order in cold blood. Hawke looked a little uncertain whenever he caught Anders' eye and, halfway back to the clinic, he asked Varric if he would take Bethany home to Lowtown. Little sister was not happy about that, leaving her brother alone with the abomination, but Hawke told her that it was dangerous enough being out at night but, what with having had a run in with templars, it was even more dangerous out in the open streets. She finally acquiesced, albeit moodily, and she and the dwarf headed right at the turn to Lowtown while Hawke and Anders headed left.

"Watch yourself Hawke," Varric said seriously, just loud enough for Anders to hear.
Anders was sure it was deliberate. They reached the clinic without incident and he unlocked the door, letting Hawke in behind him.

"So, this is where you tell me you're an abomination," Hawke's voice, despite its sarcasm, was oddly devoid of the usual malice he found when accused of being a maleficar.

"If only it was that simple," Anders said, propping his staff up against the wall and slumping down into the only chair he owned, "I'd offer you somewhere to sit but..."

"I'd rather you explained," Hawke said, leaning against the wall in front of him, arms crossed.

Explained? Why in the hell did this man care about him? Anders thought angrily. He closed his eyes and found Karl's blank stare emblazoned onto the backs of his eyelids. No, he thought, no this isn't happening. He swallowed down the grief that was threatening to consume him and took a deep breath. Explain. At least it would be a distraction. Yet it was easier said than done. Where did he start? It was such a complicated story and telling the watered down version only made it sound like he was an abomination. Still, Hawke's sister was a mage, perhaps he would be more open to the idea than others. Anders silently hoped that he would be.

"When I was a grey warden in Amarathine," he said slowly; picking up a rag and dipping it in the water William had left him he began to clean the blood from his hands, "I met a spirit who had been trapped outside the Fade, trapped in the mortal body of a dead man."

"Define spirit," Hawke said sternly, "I've heard many things called spirits that I would rather went under a different name."

"He isn't a demon," Anders said, looking up at Hawke sternly, "there are spirits in the Fade that embody our virtues, not just our sins. They were the Maker's first children and he was my...my friend. His name was Justice."

"Was your friend?" Hawke frowned.

"I've...I mean it's," Anders stumbled and tried to steady himself; the stress of everything that had happened was slowly sinking in and this interrogation wasn't helping, "when we merged, I did it to help him. The body he was inhabiting wasn't going to last forever and he would have died, I guess. I offered to share my body with him as a favour, I only wanted to help. He shared my views about the injustice of oppression for mages, about the tyranny of the templars and the fact that the Circle just didn't work. We were going to work together, to bring justice to any child torn away from its mother for the pitiful crime of being born a mage."

Anders stopped and looked down at his hands, still smeared with wisps of red. He took a breath and sat back in the chair, once more meeting Hawke's eyes. The man looked much more relaxed than he had, although not entirely unwary.

"I sense a colossal 'but' coming up," Hawke said with a small smile.

"Yes, well," Anders said tightly, "since this sort of thing doesn't happen very often, in fact I've never heard of this level of symbiosis before at all, there was always the chance that it would go wrong. It was my fault, Justice helped me more than I've helped him. I've corrupted him with my hate, the feeling I get when I see any mage oppressed, any templar abusing their position, any boy or girl taken from their family. I can't help it, it just comes out and that's when he appears...only now when he appears he is not my good friend Justice. He is a force of Vengeance."

And I cannot control him, Anders omitted from finishing. He watched Hawke intently as the man
drank in the information. He looked rather blank but he pushed up from the wall and wandered out across the empty clinic, turning back to retrace his steps past Anders' chair. Anders wasn't sure why he felt on tenterhooks waiting for him to say something. He hadn't felt this need for acceptance since, well...

"Well, sounds like I'm not the only one who's had a rough time of it," Hawke said finally, now standing in front of Anders, his hands on his hips, "I'm sorry, that it turned out that way. You sound like you were only trying to do the right thing."

"I..." Anders felt like crying, what with the relief and the stress; instead he shook his head and looked away, "thank you. You're more understanding than most people would be."

"Well, the Hawke family has spent its life on the run, so to speak," Hawke shrugged a little, "my sister is a mage and so was my father. I guess I'm more sympathetic than your regular pedestrian."

"Yes," Anders managed to smile at that thought, falling back on his charm as a distraction, "the word pedestrian hardly suits you."

Hawke let out a laugh but cut it short, looking elsewhere as he once more scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. A nervous tick, Anders noted. When Hawke once more looked to him his eyes were serious.

"I'm sorry, about your friend," he said genuinely, "that can't have been easy for you."

"Karl was a good man," Anders could hear himself becoming defensive and forcibly stopped it before it could start, "he...he was a good mage. There was no reason to make him Tranquil."

"You'd been friends a long time?" Hawke asked tactfully.

"Yes," Anders nodded, trying his best not to focus on his own words, "since we were boys. We were both in the Circle together, in Ferelden. He never entirely approved of my mission in life."

"Which was?" Hawke asked.

"To break the record for the number of attempts to escape the Circle and end up in worse trouble than if I'd never bothered in the first place," Anders said with a smile, remembering Karl's disapproving stare.

"Why, how many times did you try?" Hawke asked incredulously.

"Seven," Anders shrugged, "the last time was when the Warden Commander found me and it was conscription time for the apostate. Saved my life admittedly, I think the templars had had enough of my runaway status, ready to label me a maleficar and get it over and done with."

"But how did the templars keep finding you?" Hawke asked.

"Incredibly angry," Anders said, warranting another short laugh from Hawke, "I never destroyed my phylactery, I don't know why I thought I would ever be able to stay away long enough to become truly lost to them. Ironically joining the Wardens was the only true way out, and all that did was chain me to another order that doesn't appreciate people who say they aren't entirely happy with the retirement plan and try to duck out early."

Hawke nodded, looking unsure of what to say. Anders dropped his now red stained cloth down into the cup of water and watched it soak through, the red leeching out to tarnish the water.
"So we can both agree we've had the shit end of the stick then?" Anders looked up with a wary smile as Hawke spoke.

"Oh you know, templars, darkspawn, spirits, dragons, demons, what's not to love?" Anders shrugged with a hollow smile.

"All that in one lifetime. So that's where you get your sexy, tortured look then?" Hawke said with a wink.

Anders blinked. That he...hadn't been expecting. Not that it wasn't welcome it was just, well, he was still feeling raw from the night's events. It made him feel even guiltier that he was suddenly entertaining thoughts of Hawke when he'd only just helped Karl end his life. Only just found out that Karl had been taken from him. The templars, the *bastards*. Anders felt the anger rising once more and tried his best to force the unconcerned and charming side of his personality back to the fore. Justice certainly did not approve.

"It's not often I find a man willing to speak his mind," Anders said, looking Hawke up and down. "Well I've been told I'm a rare find," Hawke said, trying for levity.

"You were told right I think," Anders said.

"Look, Bethany and my mother are probably having kittens by now, not knowing where I am," Anders had known he would have to leave at some point but couldn't help but feel disappointed, "but I think we should both get ourselves a stiff drink, what do you say?"

"I'll just get the maps...sorry what?" Anders had already started before he realised what Hawke had propositioned, "A drink? At this time of night?"

"Varric has me on his tab at the Hanged Man," Hawke shrugged, looking a little pleased with himself, "so they don't mind if I come around after hours. Well, not so much anyway..."

"That's very kind of you but," Anders tried to think of a reason to say no, "Justice doesn't let me get drunk anymore. I kind of miss it actually."

"Then you can talk and I can drink if you like," Hawke said cheerily, "just...seems like you have a lot on your mind. I'm told I'm a good listener."

"Seems like you're told a lot of things," Anders said with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, apparently I also have a terrible stubborn streak," Hawke said, "I never take no for an answer."

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you," Anders said, surprised at how genuine he sounded, "really, but I can't."

Hawke hesitated, as if he wanted to continue. The man was right, he was definitely stupidly stubborn to have persisted this far in the first place, in Anders' opinion. Who does this, Anders thought? Hello, I'm an apostate abomination. Oh wonderful, would you like to have drinks later? Was the man mad? Not that Anders had ever been attracted to anyone sane before but that was beside the point.

"I'll get the maps," Anders said, standing and walking to the back of the clinic before Hawke could think of something else witty and charming with which to weaken his resolve.
He opened a large chest with a key he kept around his neck and dug around until he felt the small, wooden case he had brought from Amaranthine. All that was inside were the maps, a few letters, the sight of which filled him with dread, and his most cherished possession; the little pillow his mother had knitted him as a boy. It was the only thing the Circle had let him keep. Anders grabbed the maps and locked everything back up.

"Here, as promised," Anders said, handing them to Hawke.

"Thanks," Hawke said, looking a little awkward, "I just wish we could have done more for them."

"You did enough," Anders smiled, "you helped me, more than you know maybe. I appreciate it."

"Well, you know, if you ever need to talk," Hawke said, stubborn to the end, "my family and I are staying in Lowtown with my uncle, Gamlen Amell. If you ask around someone can point you in the right direction."

"I..." Anders felt a little warmer inside, despite the cold numbness that had descended upon him, "I might just do that. You'll be alright getting back?"

"Oh I'm sure I'll be fine," Hawke said as he walked towards the door, "I'm good at going unnoticed when I want to."

Anders waited until the door was fully shut before racing back to the chest and tearing everything back open, hauling the box out and pulling out the letters. He stared at them, not taking in the words, but that didn't matter; he knew them off by heart anyway. Karl was never much of a writer, he preferred practical magic to theory and research, but he'd written to Anders any time they were far enough apart that they couldn't speak, or if Anders was being isolated by the templars after an escape attempt. Anders used to think that Karl just enjoyed the challenge of trying to get his notes past their 'quarantine' in ever more elaborate ways. One time he'd even transformed the letter into a mouse and sent it scurrying through the walls to get to him. Karl never did explain how he'd managed it.

Anders felt the tears before he registered that he was even crying. He wanted rid of them, these reminders of him, reminders that there was one less beautiful thing in his life. He hated losing people, he couldn't stand it. Perhaps because there were so few to lose or maybe because he always felt the guilt was squarely on his shoulders. If he hadn't associated with Karl the man would probably never have been made Tranquil, he would have lived his life trapped in the Circle, yes, but he would have been alive. No, Anders thought angrily, that's no way to live, I gave him hope, I let him see. Anders hated his doubt almost as much as his ultimate feeling of loss. He placed the letters down on the ground, his shaking fingertips barely touching them, and summoned a small flame which fell greedily onto the pages. He watched the dry paper catch, curling, black, words disappearing beneath licking flames.

"Goodbye Karl," Anders said, his voice rough; he wiped his face even as the tears continued to fall, "I'll never forget you, my friend."
"It's because it's a Tuesday," William said adamantly, "it's always quieter on a Tuesday."

"Why would it possibly be quieter just because it's Tuesday?" Anders asked incredulously as he sorted the bandages and splints for the hundredth time that morning, simply for lack of anything better to do, "You're so superstitious."

"I'm not superstitious," William groused, "I'm just more observant than you and I'm telling you Tuesdays are always quiet. No one's going to turn up until night."

Anders sighed and stopped sorting things. He was sure William was probably right, he did notice things like that more than Anders would, but Anders would never admit that the reason he couldn't attest to the fact that Tuesdays were quiet was that he generally didn't keep track of the days. Other than for appointments, but those were few and far between. Generally people just turned up, they didn't book in advance.

"Well, I think I'm not going to be much more use here," William said when Anders didn't take the hint, "I'm going to go see if Haggart wants some running done, maybe get a bit of coin in before the day's out."

"I thought you said you weren't going to work for Haggart anymore," Anders said disapprovingly.

"I don't when I can afford not to," William said with a shrug, "you should get out of here too y'know. Does you no good being cooped up in here like you're hiding all the time."

"I am hiding all the time," Anders muttered as William grabbed his grubby coat and shrugged it on, offering him a quick wave before disappearing.

He was right though, there was no point to this self-isolation. It definitely wasn't doing him any good and, other than the fact that the clinic was now cleaner than it had ever been before, he was beginning to go a little stir crazy. He needed fresh air, perhaps he'd go to the Lowtown market and get some supplies, see if there was any news from Lirene. He hadn't seen her in weeks and she always had new people to refer to him. He retrieved his staff and his coin purse, wincing at how light it felt, and locked the door behind him.

"Going out, are we?"

Anders froze. Shit.

"How perceptive of you Grant," Anders said, deadpan, turning to face the man he knew would be there; the Coterie thug wore a smug smirk, as did his cronies, "and I see you've brought your friends. Venereal disease again is it? I told you not to come running to me every time you catch something at the Blooming Rose."

"Shut yer face, freak," Grant spat, smug look gone as soon as some of his friends started to snigger, "we're here to collect. Now pay up or you know the drill, I haven't the time or the patience to waste on you."

"Or the brain cells it seems," Anders said, inspecting his nails, "still have the scar from our last little tussle do you?"

"Shit, you're asking for it aren't you? Fucking masochist," Grant's face contorted with anger but
also a certain lustful want to inflict harm that Anders was beginning to dislike, "but then I was kind of hoping you would cause trouble. I think I'm gonna enjoy this."

Admittedly last time Grant had threatened him he had only one hirling with him. The Coterie obviously hadn't realised just how dangerous he was, despite his reputation as a mage and a Warden. When Grant had been sent back to them broken and bleeding they'd obviously got the message, and this time they hadn't messed about. There were eight of them in all and even Anders would admit he'd never be able to take them all down before one of them got close enough to disable him. He tensed, watching as the men at the back closed in tighter, blocking his only exit down the stairs. The only other way out was back into the clinic and he'd never get the door unlocked in time.

"Oh my, you had a party and didn't invite me? Now that's just rude."

Nine pairs of surprised eyes greeted Varric as he strolled nonchalantly up the stairs, twirling a crossbow bolt in his gloved fingers. Anders hadn't seen the dwarf in a week, since he'd accompanied him to the Chantry to help Karl, and all of a sudden here he was on his doorstep so to speak. He heard Grant curse colourfully under his breath, the thug's hands clenching and unclenching like they were itching to do a harm that they'd never be able to. Anders had to admit he was glad for the distraction but was failing to see just what good it would do. Two against eight was better, yes, but still bad odds.

"Tethras," Grant said with begrudging civility.

"Ah Grant, I didn't see you there," Varric said with rather overplayed surprise, "but it's good I caught you, your lovely Mistress Lily has a message for you, something to do with protection money I believe, or something like that."

"Is that so?" Grant ground out.

"Oh yes," Varric said, giving Anders a quick smile, "quite urgent. You'd best run along right away and take your friends with you."

Anders had to admit he was more mystified than relieved when Grant actually obeyed. He watched the Coterie and his gang troop sullenly down the stairs, Grant still glaring daggers at Varric, leaving a heavy silence in their wake. Anders tucked his staff back into his belt and put his hands on his hips, taking in the situation while Varric simply shook his head and put the crossbow bolt back into his quiver.

"I can look after myself you know," Anders said finally.

"A simple thank you would suffice, Blondie," Varric said facetiously.

"Considering I'm not even sure what I'd be thanking you for..." Anders said stiffly, unamused at the nickname Varric seemed to have labelled him with, as he headed towards the stairs Grant and the others had taken moments before.

"Saving your sorry arse?" Varric suggested.

"...yes well," Anders stopped and looked over his shoulder, "I could ask you why."

"Let's just assume I'm a nice guy with too much time on his hands," Varric shrugged amiably, coming to stand beside him, "it wouldn't be that far from the truth."

"Hmm," Anders hummed sceptically, continuing on his way; Varric fell into step beside him, "and
I guess you're just going my way are you?"

"I don't know," Varric said, "where are you headed?"

"Lowtown," Anders said, looking straight ahead.

"What a coincidence," Varric said with a smile, "me too."

Anders wasn't sure what the hell was going on but, despite the oddness of the situation, he didn't begrudge the company, however unwarranted it seemed. Varric was really rather interesting to talk to and funny. It had been a long time since he'd met anyone who could make him laugh out loud. He had some good stories too, although a little unbelievable at times, and it made shopping a much more pleasant experience.

"So, you must have some stories, being an ex-Warden and all," Varric said as Anders picked through Lirene's meagre stock.

"That's one way of putting it," Anders said as he perused a pair of black leather boots before looking at his own worn ones and wondering whether it was worth it.

"You should come by the Hanged Man sometime," Varric said, "I like stories, you could say I'm a collector. Is it true you met the Hero of Ferelden?"

"'Met' is a bit of an understatement," Anders said distractedly as he fished for his purse and counted through the coins, "he was the idiot who decided to make me a Warden and then drag me around Amaranthine doing good and fighting darkspawn."

Varric whistled.

"Recruited by the Hero of Ferelden, wild adventures, well now you're just teasing Blondie," Varric rubbed his hands together, "if you don't come round to my suite tonight and tell me all about it I'll have to come looking for you."

"Varric, I didn't know you felt that way," Anders said with mock tenderness, "but I don't put out on a first date."

"Oh well, your loss," Varric said, "and here I was about to put you on my tab."

Anders laughed, enjoying the feeling. He put his coin away; he didn't need the boots, he wanted them. Food for the next week was more important. They left Lirene's as the sun was beginning to fall behind the buildings, casting long shadows. Anders knew he should get back to the clinic soon but, after this short bout of enjoyable freedom, he wasn't entirely relishing the idea as he had earlier. Anders stopped as Varric turned left at the stairs leading further into the market, hesitating.

"Hey, come on now, I wasn't joking before," Varric said when he noted the mage had stopped, "if you don't give me all the juicy gossip on the Warden Commander of the Grey right now I'll never forgive you."

"I have commitments too Varric," Anders said with a weak smile, "I really need to get back to the clinic in case..."

"In case someone needs to take advantage of your generous nature? Come on, give yourself a break, it sounds like you're in there every night. If you don't take some time for yourself you'll get wrinkles."
"Ah and then what would I do?" Anders said faux dramatically, "My youthful good looks are all I have left."

"Hey, your words not mine," Varric said; he paused, eyeing Anders for a moment as if deciding something, "Hawke's coming round tonight too. We were going to have a friendly card game if you're interested."

Anders covered his reaction rather well he thought, considering how visceral it was. He'd been trying his best not to think about Hawke, what with Karl and everything that had happened. Strangely enough being with Varric didn't have the same raw, painful quality as the memory of Hawke did. Perhaps his...being interested in Hawke hadn't helped. He'd come to the conclusion over the past week that everything he touched had a bad habit of turning to shit and so, despite Hawke's obvious want to see him again, he'd done his best to stay away. Now Varric was just dangling Hawke like a carrot in front of him, unfairly Anders thought. The dwarf was sneaky.

"Is that so?" Anders tried and failed to sound uninterested.

"Yes it is," Varric said, "we've been pretty busy over the past week, what with trying to raise the coin for this expedition, and I thought we could use a break."

"Why do I hear more than just you and Hawke in that 'we'?" Anders asked.

"Oh I invited Bethany but she said she never gambles," Varric said with a sigh, "Hawke said he was going to try and rustle up some more interest so there might be some more people, or it might just be us. Come on Blondie don't make me go back empty handed, Hawke will never shut up about it if he's found someone and I haven't."

Anders shook his head, swallowing down the involuntary dread that always tried to surface whenever he thought about the threat of being happy again. Yet the thought of going back to the clinic was just as bad. When he'd refused Hawke's offer of solace a week ago he'd ended up spending the night laying awake alternately dreadfully tired and terrified to fall asleep. Another night like that was not what he wanted. Perhaps he did owe it to himself to have some time off. This was the opposite of the boots, he thought ruefully; he didn't want to go necessarily, he needed to go.

"Alright, for you Varric, I guess I can sacrifice one night," he said, smiling to cover the nerves, "but you can consider this me paying you back for earlier."

"Of course," Varric said with a grin, "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"So then what?" Varric said, literally on the edge of his seat.

"He smacked him on the back of the head and told him to 'stop being so bloody overdramatic' I think were his exact words," Anders shrugged, "I would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so bleak at the time. I thought the other Warden recruit's eyes were going to pop out of her head."

"Ha!" Varric exclaimed, clapping his hands in delight, "You must be joking! From the tales I've heard the Hero of Ferelden is a sombre nobleman, all gallantry and dignity. Not the kind of man to hit a King on the back of his head."

"You've never met him," Anders muttered into his drink, taking a small sip of the ale out of courtesy more than anything else, "the Commander and the King are old friends. King Alistair was a Warden once too you know."
"So I've heard," Varric said, sitting back in his chair and taking a long drink from his tankard, "but I'm still waiting for the juicy gossip that I don't know."

"Not sure what to tell you," Anders shrugged, thinking of all the things he would never tell Varric about Lien Cousland, settling for something mundane, "he's very kind. He was the one who gave me Ser Pounce-a-lot, said he'd found him mooching around Vigil's Keep and remembered I'd mentioned having a cat in the Circle. He was nice like that."

"Oh come on Blondie get to the good stuff," Varric urged, taking another deep swig.

"He has a great pair of thighs on him," Anders shrugged, smiling when Varric choked on his ale. The dwarf glared at him accusingly as he coughed, wiping the beer from his face and jacket.

"Well he does," Anders shrugged innocently, "you asked."

Varric opened his mouth to say something not so flattering but was stopped by the sound of voices coming up the stairs. Two men rounded the corner, deep in discussion about something, but stopped on seeing him sitting at the table with Varric. Anders swallowed as Hawke's green eyes met his; he smiled. Hawke returned it warmly and Anders felt a shiver up his spine. He flicked his eyes to the other man beside Hawke, a tall very unusual looking elf with rather stunning colouring; white hair, olive skin and moss green eyes that seemed to pierce right through him.

"Well," Hawke said, eyes not leaving his, "long time no see."

"You can thank Varric," Anders said, "apparently I'm his date."

"Very funny Blondie," Varric said, turning to greet the newcomers, "well, well Elf, didn't think you'd be gracing us with your presence tonight. Here I thought you gave all the coin you had to Hawke for helping you out."

"Worried I won't honour my debts, dwarf?" the elf said, his voice deeper than Anders would have expected; he took a seat at the opposite end of the table from Anders while Hawke went and ordered some more drinks.

"No, I'm sure you'll just borrow it from Hawke anyway," Varric seemed to glance between Anders and the elf a little concernedly for a moment before turning back into his charming self; Anders frowned.

There was a moment's silence where Anders would have expected Varric to introduce him but nothing happened. He felt a little too awkward and out of practice to do it himself. Despite that the elf was also currently studiously ignoring him while Varric seemed intent on pretending there wasn't a problem. Anders surreptitiously looked the elf over, noting the odd markings on his skin, swirling white tattoos visible where the rather intimidating armour didn't cover. Anders was very glad when Hawke returned to break the silence.

"Good to see you're all getting along so well," Hawke said sarcastically as he put his pint down and placed a tumbler full of red liquid in front of the elf who nodded his thanks.

"Difficult to do when you don't know someone's name," the elf said defensively, as if Hawke was accusing him of something.

"Varric, you're a poor host," Hawke said, sitting opposite Varric while throwing a conciliatory look at the elf that Anders couldn't understand, "Fenris this is Anders, Anders Fenris."
Anders could have sworn that the temperature in the room dropped a couple of degrees. When he looked back to the elf, Fenris, he found the reason why. Anders had to admit he'd preferred being studiously ignored to the look he was now getting. If he'd thought the elf's eyes looked dangerous before they were practically deadly now. Fenris took a deep drink without taking his eyes from Anders for a single moment while Varric looked uneasy and Hawke pulled a pack of cards from his pouch and started shuffling them. Anders cleared his throat and took another swig from his ale, unsure what to say; Justice be damned, it looked like he wasn't getting through tonight without a drink.

"So you're the apostate abomination," Fenris said finally; Anders was actually taken aback, he didn't think he'd heard such disgust from a templar before, never mind the venom in Fenris's voice.

"Fenris," Hawke said warningly but with a hint of patience in his voice that Anders didn't miss.

"I'm tired," Fenris said finishing the rest of his drink in one long swallow before standing, "thanks for the drink Hawke, maybe another time."

"Wait, Fenris..." Hawke sighed and put the cards down, standing hurriedly to follow the elf, disappearing after him around the corner.

Anders stared after him. What in the bloody hell had that all been about? He looked to Varric who was watching him sympathetically. That only confused him more.

"Was it something I didn't say?" Anders asked, sounding a little put out.

"Don't worry about it, it's not you per se," Varric said, "the elf's just a little jittery around mages."

"You could have warned me," Anders said in annoyance, "and I think jittery is the understatement of the age. He looked like he wanted to impale me on a giant spike arse first."

"Thanks for that image," Varric winced.

"You're welcome," Anders said grouchily, not exactly pleased that his promising evening had already been ruined, "where the hell did you find him anyway?"

"By mistake," Varric said with a sigh, "we were hired to do a job that didn't exist. Turned out the job was the Elf, turned out the Elf is a Tevinter slave on the run and turned out Hawke still has a soft spot for hard luck cases. Fenris asked us to help him kill his former master who has apparently been hunting him for the past three years. We went to a mansion in Hightown but the Magister was long gone, if he'd ever been there at all. Killed a bunch of slavers though. Now the elf is holed up there, awfully broody sort, kind of reminds me of you a little."

"Thanks for that," Anders said petulantly.

"Anyway, let's just say that being a cruel Magister's slave for most of his life hasn't endeared him to mages. I didn't really think you two would hit it off," Varric said.

"I've changed my mind," Anders said, taking another long drink, "that is the understatement of the ages."

Hawke returned a moment later looking a little tired and put out. He gave Anders an apologetic look and picked up the cards once more.

"Back to that dump of a mansion then?" Varric asked.
"Mmm," Hawke nodded, looking to Anders, "sorry about that, he's had bad experiences with magic and..."

"Varric has explained," Anders cut in; he didn't really want to listen to Hawke defend this Fenris's actions.

"Oh, alright then," Hawke said awkwardly, "still, I would have preferred to do the introductions a little more tactfully. Guess I've never been one for tact."

"I doubt a city full of tact would have made that any more pleasant," Anders shrugged, "don't worry about it."

Hawke smiled and Anders took another drink, ignoring Justice's disapproval of the situation in general; ignoring his duties as a healer to spend time drinking in a tavern with a man Justice did not approve of his growing interest in and who associated with pretty elves that hated mages. Great.

"So," Hawke said, breaking him out of his thoughts as he began to deal out the cards, "are we playing Denerim rules or Kirkwall?"

Hawke was very, very good at Wicked Grace. Anders was beginning to wonder whether he was cheating or not but decided to give the man the benefit of the doubt and assume he was just talented.

"Maker's breath Hawke, are you trying to destitute me?" Varric said as Hawke swept up another pile of winnings, grinning like an idiot.

"I don't know what you're complaining about Varric. It's all going back into the expedition anyway," Hawke shrugged, "technically you haven't lost anything, partner."

"Oh well, when you put it like that," Varric smiled, finishing his pint and flipping the cards back over the table to Anders who began shuffling them.

"I think I'm the only one here actually losing anything," Anders said with a sigh, "it's a good thing I don't eat much really."

Hawke laughed and shoved him playfully on the shoulder. The man wasn't obscenely drunk yet but he was very quickly getting there. He'd been acting like a man with a mission to get rat-arsed all night, never without a drink in his hand at any given time. Anders had finished three pints already but, as he had feared, couldn't feel the effects at all. Justice somehow managed to keep his mind clear no matter how much he drank, for which he was not grateful. A little fuzziness around the edges would have been appreciated, would have lightened his nerves, but Justice liked to be constantly vigilant. Anders noted that Varric had also consumed his fair share of ale but didn't seem any the worse for wear. Admittedly he was a dwarf and as such had the reputation for being able to imbibe large amounts of alcohol without getting drunk, so Anders wasn't surprised. He pulled the pack apart and grabbed the well worn corners, flick shuffling them back together. That was when he caught Varric watching him out the corner of his eye. Anders pretended not to notice.

"Despite your noble intentions Hawke, I think it's about time I turned in," Varric declared, "I need to be bright eyed and bushy tailed for tomorrow. Maker knows you won't be."

"How presumptuous of you," Hawke said with a mock glare, "but if you need your beauty sleep..."

"Not as much as some," Varric said airily, "I'll see you gentlemen tomorrow."
"Well, I guess that's us being tossed out," Anders said, hiding his suspicious tone behind fake cheer, "it is late I suppose."

"Don't mind him," Hawke said with a wink, "Varric's just sore because he hasn't won a hand against me yet."

"'Yet' being the operative word in that sentence," Varric said as he made his way towards his suite, "plenty of time for that Hawke. Goodnight gentlemen."

Hawke gave Varric a slightly drunken wave and accepted the freshly shuffled pack of cards Anders handed him. Anders didn't miss the fact that their fingers touched for a little longer than was really necessary when handing them over but didn't want to sound like a love sick girl and so justly ignored it. Maker's breath he was a grown man, it wasn't like he was a hormonal teenager anymore. Although it was hard not feel that way when Hawke had basically spent the entire night subtly flirting with him, which he'd tried to ignore. No wonder Varric had cut out early, he either felt he was in the way or was just sick fed up of Hawke's disguised innuendos. Anders stood purposefully, stretching his arms up over his head and savouring the clicking in his joints.

"I'd better get back," Anders said, retrieving his staff from behind the bar where Norah had kindly stored it for him, "work to do."

"No rest for the wicked, eh?" Hawke said, carrying the empty glasses back over to the bar and placing them in an orderly line, in order of height nonetheless; Anders smiled and Hawke frowned a little, "What?"

"Obsessive compulsive," Anders said teasingly.

"I am not," Hawke said, frown deepening, "I just like things in order, that's all."

"Whatever you say," Anders said, enjoying the amiability in the air as he strapped his staff onto his belt, "you do realise you're talking to a doctor."

"And here I thought you preferred 'healer',' Hawke said, walking back to the table with a sly look in his eyes, "didn't you say earlier that doctors are just 'prolific conmen hawking herbs and placebos'?"

"Did I?" Anders said innocently.

"Yes," Hawke said, folding his arms.

"Oh well, 'healer' it is then," Anders said, smiling, "doesn't mean I still can't tell you're obsessive compulsive."

They continued to clear up as best they could, putting out the fire and dousing the lamps. Anders missed the warmth and light as soon as he stepped out into the street with Hawke who turned to fumble with the lock; he managed it, eventually. Varric had apparently made him a copy of the key. Lucky for some, he thought.

"Well," Anders said, breathing the cold air deep into his lungs, "I guess I'll see you later then?"

"Don't be stupid," Hawke said with a drunken shake of his head, "just because Varric sent us packing doesn't mean I'm done with tonight. I have half a bottle of Gallows whiskey that Gamlen hasn't found yet with our names on it."

"Like you need any more," Anders said despairingly.
"Now don't make me drink it on my own," Hawke said seriously, taking hold of the surprised mage by the arm and dragging him in the direction of the Old City slums, "you'll make me look like an alcoholic."

"Hawke, come on, let go," Anders said pulling ineffectually against the man's surprisingly strong grip, stumbling along behind him, "I have to go home."

"We are going home," Hawke said in confusion.

"Oh for goodness sakes," Anders said as the rogue continued to drag him unwillingly forwards, "you can't just bring me into your house like this Hawke, you're blazing drunk and I haven't even met the rest of your family. Are you trying to do me in through embarrassment?"

"You need to relax," Hawke said as if that solved everything.

"And you need to sober up," Anders said with a roll of his eyes as he was jerked up a set of stairs towards a grubby looking doorway.

Hawke was even worse trying to get his own door open than locking the Hanged Man. Of course that might have had something to do with being forced to fumble around one handed considering he refused to let go of Anders' arm. Anders sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose when he heard the lock being opened from the other side. No, this wasn't embarrassing at all, Anders thought ruefully. It was almost as bad as the time Justice had asked Nathaniel to tell him about sex, only not quite as humorous. Hawke backed away from the door as it swung open to reveal a rather grumpy looking older man who Anders assumed was Hawke's uncle. He glared at them both in equal measure.

"Do you have to make such a racket?" he said, "People are trying to sleep!"

"Well I didn't ask you to get up," Hawke said back stiffly, his expression stony, "but then why would you pass up the chance to moan about something?"

"I'm not in the mood for your cheek lad," Gamlen said, "and this is no time for visitors."

"You'd take care to remember who pays the rent Uncle," Hawke sounded scarcely sober to Anders all of a sudden, "don't dictate what I can and cannot do. Not tonight."

"Look, I need to get back anyway..." Anders said in frustration, pulling experimentally at Hawke's iron grip, not wanting to get into the middle of a family feud.

"You little shit," Gamlen spat, Hawke's words obviously touching a nerve, "how dare you...!"

"Who is it?" came a sleepy female voice from further inside, "Garret, is that you?"

"Bethany, it's nothing, go back to bed," Hawke sounded a little repentant at waking his sister but his voice turned cold as stone when he once more addressed his uncle, "Gamlen, I swear, get out of my way before I make you."

The older man looked like he would have loved nothing more than to be able to slam the door in Hawke's face, or perhaps give him a black eye. Thankfully for Hawke his Uncle looked like he'd fall over if Hawke breathed on him too hard and, even while Hawke was drunk, Gamlen didn't look any match for his nephew. Gamlen spun away from the door with a string of muttered curses, leaving Hawke to pull Anders through the doorway despite his best efforts and close the door behind him, once more fumbling to lock the door. All Anders could do was smile apologetically at Bethany, who was standing by an ajar doorway in a long nightdress, rubbing her eyes. He
remembered the look she had given him at the Chantry after seeing Justice but this time she returned his smile. He was guessing Hawke must have given her some sort of explanation. It was then that he noted her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. Anders felt suddenly very out of place, as if there was something going on in the background that he didn't know about. Hawke had finally finished messing with the door and was fishing about at the bottom of a rickety bookcase behind a wooden panel.

"Brother, please, you really should go to bed," Bethany said, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

"Not you too Bethany," Hawke said as he stood up, a little unsteady on his feet, bottle in hand, "you're beginning to sound like Uncle."

"Varric said you needed to set out early tomorrow," Bethany said seriously.

"I'll be fine," Hawke said defensively, "don't worry, I'll not bloody disappoint anyone else, alright?"

Bethany looked as if he'd reached out and struck her. Anders wished he was anywhere but here. Her eyes welled up and she shook her head, lifting a hand to wipe her eye angrily.

"He was my brother too Garret," she said, "and I never blamed you."

Then she was gone, leaving Hawke looking like he wished he could take his words back. Anders tried to decide whether it would be too cruel to leave Hawke drinking alone like this when something was obviously wrong. The evening had started out so promisingly, he thought ruefully; typical for him really that it had all gone to crap. He sighed, pulling out a chair from the dining table and sat down quietly. He summoned a small, controlled flame to light the lantern sitting on the table and watched as Hawke took a long swig from the bottle of amber fluid in his hand before sitting down heavily next to him.

"You never told me you had a brother," Anders said since Hawke didn't seem intent starting.

"He's dead," Hawke said, all tone gone from his voice, "doesn't come up in conversation a lot."

"I'm sorry," Anders said, taking the bottle when offered but deciding not to drink, even if it wouldn't affect him, "what happened?"

"It was a year ago," Hawke said, as if he thought it shouldn't still be affecting him, that he should be strong enough to get over it; Anders felt sad at the thought, "I guess this could be an anniversary of sorts. He was killed by the darkspawn when we were fleeing Ferelden."

Anders didn't say anything. Hawke sounded more like he needed someone to just listen rather than comment on his grief. He felt that perhaps he wasn't the best person for Hawke to be looking for strength from, but he wouldn't turn him away. Hawke was looking into the middle distance, as if seeing something that wasn't there.

"I didn't even see it coming. It charged us all down, me, Aveline, Bethany," Hawke said, "even that useless bastard Wesley. But it didn't even scratch any of us. Went straight for mother and Carver. Bloody idiot was always so full of himself, thought he could take anything on. I always had to watch his back on the battlefield. He was so careless. He just slashed at it without thinking, wanting to be the hero. It picked him up like he was nothing but a ragdoll and crushed the life out of him."

Anders wasn't sure exactly what Hawke was referring to but, in the end, that didn't really matter. He handed the bottle back to Hawke and watched as the other man took another messy gulp,
grimacing as the burning liquid slid down his throat. He also noticed the bottle was almost empty from having been half full when Hawke had started. Hawke's eyes were becoming distinctly glassy. The rogue lifted his hand and rubbed at the bridge of his nose, sniffing conspicuously but refusing to let anything slip.

"Sorry," he said with a shake of his head, "I didn't mean to bring you here and lay my troubles on you."

"It's alright," Anders said with a soft sigh and a smile, "what are friends for? I already told you about all of my troubles, I'll consider us even."

Hawke looked at him intently for a moment, one hand still wrapped around the neck of the whiskey bottle. He looked as if he wasn't sure whether he should ask but was too drunk to remember why it wouldn't be a good idea. Either that or he was just having trouble focusing, Anders couldn't tell.

"You and Karl," he said suddenly, "you weren't just friends were you?"

"Uh," well Anders hadn't been expecting that; the mention of Karl's name sent a spike of guilt and pain flaring through him which Anders forced himself to ignore. he cleared his throat and continued, "no, no we weren't just friends. We were...lovers, for a little while, before I escaped the Circle for good."

"I thought not, the way you looked at him..." Hawke trailed off, "sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up. It's just, I meant to say I was sorry, no one should ever have to hurt the ones they love. If anything like that ever happened to Bethany I don't know what I'd do."

"It won't," Anders said, unable to keep the harshness from his voice, "I promise."

Hawke looked at him blearily and nodded. He reached up and patted Anders on the shoulder, his hand lingering, as did his eyes. Anders felt suddenly wary. Hawke was very drunk after all.

"Thanks Anders," he said with a smile, his words badly slurred, "I mean it."

"Flatterer," Anders said wryly, "come on, let's get some sleep."

But Hawke wasn't listening to him. His hand slid up from Anders' shoulder to cup the back of his neck and Anders gasped at the contact. He tried to pull away but Hawke was still stupidly strong despite his drunkenness, and suddenly there were warm, dry lips crushed against his own. Anders lifted his hands and pushed against Hawke's broad chest, breaking the contact. Those green eyes looked at him in confusion and hurt.

"Shouldn't I have..?"

Anders was sure that Hawke would have completed that sentence if he hadn't passed out onto the table moments after with an awfully loud thump. Anders looked down at him and sighed. Thankfully the noise didn't seem to have woken anyone.

"Story of my bloody life," he muttered without malice, "come on Hawke, I don't even know where you sleep, wake up you bastard."

Hawke didn't respond to his prodding at all. Of course considering it seemed to just be his mother, sister and uncle living here with him, and considering there were only two rooms off the main living quarters, Anders was pretty sure that the room Bethany had gone into wasn't one she shared with her older brother. He picked up Hawke's left arm and slung it around his shoulder, hauling the
other man up with great difficulty. Hawke was a dead weight and, being a fighter made him mainly muscle. He half walked half dragged him to his assumed bedroom and, with a little kinetic shove, opened the door easily. Sometimes Anders loved being a mage; despite the templars and the hatred and the demons you could always rely on it to help you get drunken friends into their beds without having to drop them on the floor.

Anders awoke to the enticing smell of cooking bread. At first he didn't entirely remember where he was but then, as he opened his eyes and took in the table beneath his arms and the ache in his back from having slept sitting up all night in an uncomfortable chair, it all flooded back. By the Maker he felt like shit. Please, oh please let that whiskey have erased his bloody memory, Anders thought as he roughly rubbed at his face with his hands. He was pretty sure that Hawke wouldn't remember his drunken come on, he'd been so drunk he couldn't even stay conscious afterwards, but he still wasn't intent on finding out one way or another. I need to get home before he wakes up, Anders thought.

He lowered his hands and blinked; looking up he noted it was still quite dark outside through the lone, high window. Must still be early, he thought, good. He felt very conscious that he had spent the night in someone else's living room. It was then that he noticed the fireplace was lit and Anders realised he wasn't alone. Thankfully it turned out to be Bethany. If it had been Hawke's mother he might have just had to die on the spot out of principle.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" she asked.

"No, not at all," Anders said groggily, "I mean, don't apologise. I'm sorry you had to tip toe around me but I couldn't get back out last night without the key."

"That's alright," Bethany smiled, "I don't think my brother was exactly thinking straight last night. He isn't usually like that. Even I'll admit you weren't seeing him at his best."

Anders raised his hands above his head and stretched, feeling his muscles strain and joints pop. Bethany stood up to open the makeshift stove above the fire, using a large rag to turn the clay plate inside with the rising dough settled on it. Anders mouth watered.

"Well, I won't impose on you any longer," Anders said.

"Don't you want something to eat before you go?" Bethany asked, looking round at him as if eager for him not to leave.

"I think I've done enough using your table as a bed for the night," Anders said with a smile, hurriedly making to leave before he was talked into staying; the longer he stayed, the more chance of bumping into Hawke, "don't feel the need to feed me as well."

"Oh, alright," she said, looking a little uncertain, but she fished a key from her pocket anyway and walked over to unlock the door.

"Thank you," Anders said, "and I wouldn't recommend making any loud noises around your brother today, he might be a little fragile."

"Oh I will, don't you worry," Bethany said with surprising eagerness, "it's the only way he'll learn."

Anders was suddenly glad he'd never had any siblings.
Favour

The sewer tunnels were not his favourite place to be. Not only did they smell, as one would presume, but they were humid and the putrid air seemed to cling to you in an unnatural way. Of course it wasn't as if he was just strolling through them either, he was sneaking through them which only made it worse. Sneaking made you cling to dank, slimy walls and bend down into shadows filled with Maker knows what. Yes, Anders definitely did not relish his time here, but it was necessary.

"Stay close to me," he said quietly to the man and woman behind him, "and don't stop unless I say so, understand?"

"Yes," the woman said, holding her hands tightly against her breast, shoulders hunched as if to make herself smaller and less noticeable; the man simply nodded.

"Come on then," he said as determinedly as he could.

He'd traced this route so many times now that he could do it with his eyes shut. The way beneath the city, the rabbit warrens sprawling beneath the feet of the unknowing citizens above. Perfect for smuggling, whether it was drugs, lyrium, slaves...or mages. Anders and the underground resistance had agreed that the sewers were their best bet for moving apostates around unnoticed. The templars very rarely ever ventured into them without good cause and, so far, they didn't seem to have realised their potential, for which Anders was forever grateful. The only thing he really had to worry about when running the gauntlet, as Anders liked to call it, was coming into contact with the other less savoury characters who also liked the secrecy the sewers provided. Such as lyrium smugglers or the Coterie.

Anders checked behind him as he jogged down the stairs, making sure the two were still following. The woman, Helena as she had introduced herself, was a mage recently escaped from the circle in Starkhaven who had a sister here in Kirkwall she'd been planning to meet. By sheer chance she'd been forced to duck into Lirene's clinic to avoid a complement of templars and had ended up telling her the whole story. Lirene had sent her straight to Anders, for which he was very grateful. If she'd gone to her sister's house she'd probably already be back in Starkhaven by now, Anders thought as he cautiously opened the door in front of him and checked the gloom for any signs of an ambush; templars always made sure family members of escapees were watched closely.

The man hadn't given his name, something Anders didn't entirely blame him for. Helena was actually very trusting, too trusting in Anders opinion, but the man was standoffish and removed, a little paranoid. His eyes never stopped moving, always searching out dark corners and checking rooms as if to find the quickest and best way out should anything happen. He'd told Anders that he was an apostate and that the templars had been hounding him tirelessly for months. He needed to get out of Kirkwall, to protect himself and his family. Anders sometimes felt like telling the people that came to him that he didn't care what their reasons were; unless they were evil blood mages looking to escape Kirkwall because they'd slaughtered twenty people in a blood sacrifice to summon a horrific demon for their own despicable ends, Anders would help any mage.

They reached the end of the passage without incident. He guided the two through the door and bolted it behind him, just to be safe. Helena and the man looked around timidly at the open air, looking scared and exposed. They were at the far end of the Wounded Coast, on a remote beachhead which was notoriously used by smugglers and raiders. Tonight, however, there was only one small ship docked at the makeshift pier. Anders herded the two mages down the sand and over the rocky outcrop towards the dark, sparkling sea. There was only one woman waiting there, her
short blonde hair shining in the moonlight, her dark eyes watching them dispassionately.

"You're late," she said without any heat behind her words.

"Sorry Layla," Anders said with a nod, fishing out the heavy coin purse and dropping it into her hand.

"Going to the usual?" she asked, pocketing the purse without checking it; that made Anders feel a little better at least, she seemed to trust him enough now to know that he wouldn't cheat her.

"Yes, and don't let them out anywhere else, no matter what they say alright?" Layla nodded and turned to board her small vessel, shouting orders to her crew to weigh anchor.

Anders turned to his charges. Delving into another pocket he pulled two smaller purses out and handed them one each. The resistance always managed to come up with a small amount of coin for the runaways, something to give them a fighting chance at least. Most people who ran didn't take anything with them and found themselves stuck even after their escape with no money for food or lodgings. Helena gave him a watery smile and the man looked at him with wary curiosity.

"It isn't much, but it'll get you some food, or a transport," Anders said, "you're on your own from here. Listen to Layla and do what she tells you. Good luck."

Helena grabbed his hand as she passed him, wringing it tightly and whispering a choked 'thank you'. The man merely nodded to him in thanks but his eyes gave all the explanation Anders needed. They were grateful, relieved, and that was why Anders did what he did. To give mages hope, another chance, the chance they deserved in life. Yes it was dangerous smuggling them out of the city and he'd had his fair share of close calls but the looks of hope on their faces...Anders thought it was one of the most rewarding things in the world.

The trek back through the sewers alone always seemed longer than the journey out. Anders thought it was maybe because the adrenaline was gone, the fear of being caught, the need to run. When it was just himself he was responsible for he didn't feel the same urgency or panic. Thankfully the smugglers must have been having a quiet night that night because the sewers were oddly empty and he made it back to Darktown quicker than usual. He tramped through the streets tiredly, guessing it must be around midnight by now. He wished there weren't so many stairs leading to his house as he lifted his tired legs and used the banister to haul his fatigued body up to the clinic landing.

"Where have you been?"

Anders looked up in surprise. It wasn't that it was unusual for him to find someone waiting for him at his clinic after a run, some people preferred to come at night under the cover of darkness, made it easier to avoid any authorities. Yet Anders didn't think that Hawke really had to worry about that and so wondered what in the Maker's name he was doing leaning against his door at this time at night...or morning, whichever way you wanted to look at it. Anders had managed to avoid him for a couple of days and now he felt like this was some sort of ambush. Anders took stock of Hawke's question and, coupled with the awkwardness of their last encounter and his tiredness, became a little defensive out of necessity.

"What are you, my mother?" Anders said with a frown, "Are you going to ask to smell my breath next? What on earth are you doing here?"

Anders instantly regretted his words as soon as he saw Hawke's stunned expression at the anger in his tone. Hawke pushed up from the door to let Anders unlock it, scratching the back of his neck in
his usual way. Anders swallowed and pushed the door open, blowing out the lantern that hung beside the door to let people know he was in. He'd left it running as he always did while out ferrying through the sewers. He always vainly hoped it would give him some sort of alibi, that people would vouch that he couldn't have been out if he was in his clinic. Not that a jury would ever listen to testimony from someone in Darktown, but it made him feel better. He left the door open behind him for Hawke and walked over to his table, pulling out his potions and supplies so he could sort everything before going to sleep. He didn't look but he could hear Hawke moving around behind him, his footsteps uncertain. Anders took a deep breath and wished that he didn't always have to deal with Hawke when he was so tired and out of sorts.

"Maker," Hawke exclaimed finally, sounding so stressed that it forced Anders to turn and look at him; he watched the man pace back and forth a few times before stopping and starting to ramble nervously, "I must really have done something awful the other night. I'm sorry, whatever it was, I'm sorry alright? I don't remember anything much after getting home, and yes I do remember dragging you through the street like a petulant child, I am sorry about that too, but please just put me out of my misery and tell me what I did? I can't stand the silent treatment."

Anders didn't let it show but he was secretly relieved. He liked Hawke, he was a good friend, and the last thing Anders wanted was to have that ruined by unease. He let out a small sigh and smiled at Hawke who, despite his rather fierce appearance, was looking his age right now; young and uncertain. Anders shook his head and watched Hawke relax a little.

"I wouldn't worry about it, it was nothing that can't be fixed," Anders said, lifting up his right arm to pull his coat sleeve back, "although I do have a rather impressive hand-shaped bruise on my arm."

"Andraste's..." Hawke walked over quickly and took a hold of Anders' hand to pull his forearm closer, making Anders flinch a little at the contact, "did I do that?"

"I didn't think anyone could be that strong when they're that drunk," Anders said wryly, "I pity anyone who gets into a pub brawl with you."

"I'm such an idiot," Hawke said more to himself than Anders.

"It'll heal," Anders said with a shrug, "I told you not to worry about it."

"Still," Hawke let go of his hand and stepped back, crossing his arms and watching him, "I'm sorry."

"Alright," Anders smiled a little, "apology accepted."

There was a short silence, during which Anders continued to stare at Hawke and Hawke replied in kind.

"...You aren't going to tell me what I did are you?" Hawke said after the pause.

"I think it's best some things remain a mystery to you Hawke," Anders said, "let's just forget about it."

Hawke nodded and shuffled his feet. Anders turned back to his table and continued to sort things, just to give his hands something to do. That was one more thing off his list of things he needed to worry about at least, although he would be amazed if that was the only reason Hawke was here to see him. If it was then the man was obviously far more neurotic than he'd first guessed.

"So you came all the way down here in the middle of the night to say sorry for being a drunken
“Whatever gave you that impression?” Anders smiled.

“What kind of favour?” Anders asked as he walked over to his cabinet and put the potions inside carefully.

“Varric and I have a job tomorrow out at the Bone Pit for this stuck up Orlesian, Hubert I think his name is,” Anders could hear the dislike in Hawke’s voice, “apparently he’s very upset because his Ferelden workers were inconsiderate enough to get themselves killed and waste his time and money. He said he doesn’t know what killed them but Varric’s been asking around and apparently the Bone Pit has lots of nasty rumours floating around it. Monsters, cursed ground…”

“I’ve heard dragons used to nest in the peaks on that side of Sundermount,” Anders added.

“Yes I heard that one too,” Hawke said, “although considering how far-fetched most of the rumours are it wouldn’t surprise me if dragons popped out and started running amok.”

“So, what’s the favour?” Anders asked, watching Hawke as he walked back across the clinic.

“Well, Varric’s sure we’ll be able to handle it but a lot of people are dead and something must have done it,” Hawke said, “I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind tagging along, in case it turns out to be some hideous monster that wants to eat the skin off our bones, then we’d have someone there to heal us.”

“Couldn’t have made it sound any more appealing if you’d tried,” Anders laughed, “come on Hawke, you don’t need to ask that as a favour. You’re my friend, if you need help you just have to ask.”

“Well, uh, that’s not the whole favour,” Hawke said, “not exactly…”

Anders frowned. What could possibly be worse than ‘come and heal our post-digested skin back onto our bones after it’s been eaten off by a terrible monster’?

“You see Aveline, you haven’t met Aveline, she’s my friend, she’s a guard,” Hawke explained a little quickly, “she usually comes with us if we need a sword hand but she’s on patrol out on the Wounded Coast tomorrow and so she can’t.”

“…And?” Anders prompted when Hawke stalled.

“Fenris said he’d come instead,” Hawke said, watching Anders reaction.

Oh wonderful. Anders leaned back against the table and folded his arms, watching Hawke critically.

“So the favour that started off as ‘please come and keep us safe from the big scary monster’ is actually ‘please come and be very accidentally chopped in half by the one man in Kirkwall who hates you more than Knight Commander Meredith’?”
"He doesn't hate you Anders," again it set Anders' teeth on edge to hear Hawke defend the elf, "he's just never had dealings with decent mages before. I'm sure once he gets to know you it'll be fine. He was civil to Bethany yesterday."

"I don't think it's a very good idea," Anders said seriously.

"Look," Hawke said, sitting forwards in his chair, "you're both professionals. We're not there to chat and have tea, we're there to do a job. I'm sure the two of you can keep out of each other's way while we're killing whatever it is that wants to kill us, right?"

"I can vouch for me," Anders said, ignoring the petulant note to his voice.

"I can handle Fenris," Hawke said, his eyes earnest, "I promise."

Oh I just bet you can handle him, Anders thought acerbically before he realised how childish he was being and stopped.

"Fine," he sighed, "fine, I'll go. Just don't expect me to ignore it if he says something truly awful."

"Alright, just no fighting," Hawke said, quickly amending, "unless it's something with big teeth and wings trying to kill us."

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Anders didn't realise just how tired he was until he had to get up the next day, early thanks to Hawke's expedition to the Bone Pit. He washed himself down with some lukewarm water and rinsed his hair, glad that he had enough fresh water to fill a tub for once. He had become conscious, on meeting Hawke the night before, that he hadn't washed in while. It wasn't ever really a priority and, anyway, it was such a bloody hassle to get everything together and find the time. He'd aired out his clothes to get rid of the sewer stink and washed them off with a scented cloth. True he did it because he'd rather not go around smelling like a sceptic tank, but it was also cautious. He didn't want anyone to figure out that he spent time in the sewers and start wondering why. Information was valuable around here and he knew that there were people watching him; he didn't need any more trouble than he already had.

 Thankfully Varric was the only one there when Anders turned up at the meeting point in Hightown. It wasn't often that he ventured into this area of Kirkwall, he never really had any need to. He couldn't shop here, far too expensive, and it always made him angry to overhear all the useless, trivial crap rich people thought they had to put up with, like missing lunch with Comtesse de What's Her Name or not being able to find the robe they wanted in just the right colour. The ingrates in Hightown wouldn't know a real problem if it jumped up and bit them in the groin.

"Ah, so Hawke did manage to rope you into this then," Varric said as Anders walked over to the dwarf who was lounging in the sunny marketplace.

"Yes he did. Although there wasn't any actual rope involved," Anders shrugged.

"I can see you're disappointed," Varric grinned.

"Terribly," Anders said with a faux wistful look as he leaned against the wall next to Varric and sighed, "so I hear we have another guest joining us on our little trip."

"That going to be a problem?" Varric asked cautiously.

"Not from my end," Anders shrugged.
"Don't worry Blondie," Varric said reassuringly, "you'd be surprised, he actually seems to have settled down a little since you last saw him. I think Hawke's been a good influence."

Anders frowned and watched the people around him, going about their lives without a seeming care.

"Just how much time have they been spending together?" he asked before he realised how it sounded.

"Someone's jealous," Varric said with a knowing smile.

"I am not jealous," Anders glared at the dwarf, "I just worry about Hawke. This Fenris doesn't exactly seem like the safest person to be associating with."

"For you maybe," Varric said jokingly.

"Yes, well, considering we're all about to trek out to a secluded, monster infested mine I wouldn't joke about that," Anders said.

Anders had tried to reconcile the facts that Varric had told him about Fenris with the elf's scathing treatment of him the night they'd met, but he just couldn't. Varric had told him that Fenris had been a slave all his life, well as much as he could remember of it, and all magic had ever done for him was cause him terrible pain, strip him of his sense of self and command him to commit atrocities for a Magister he loathed. It should be an understandable hatred, Anders thought, he should have been able to sympathise even just a little. Yet he couldn't, and somehow it made it worse that Anders knew that the jealousy he was trying to believe didn't exist wasn't helping. There wasn't even any real foundation for his jealousy. Not yet anyway, Anders thought dryly.

Hawke and Fenris arrived a few minutes later. Anders hadn't seen the elf's weapon of choice the last time they'd met, only been told by Varric that he used a sword. Well that was an understatement, Anders thought with a wince. The sword Fenris carried with seeming ease was almost as big as he was, a humongous broadsword with unusual runes carved into the blade. When he'd joked about being chopped in half he hadn't realised it would actually be a possibility. Hawke gave him a smile that seemed to say he was glad he'd actually shown up and, to Anders amazement, Fenris actually gave him a curt nod in greeting. Anders returned it, more out of courtesy than any actual want to. He suspected that Fenris had been given the same lecture by Hawke that he'd had.

"Alright, are we ready to go?" Hawke said as he adjusted a strap on his leather cuirass.

"As we'll ever be," Varric said.

The smell was the thing that was the hardest to ignore. The place reeked of death and was enveloped by an eerie silence that only heightened the sense of danger.

"This place is cursed," Fenris said, making Anders roll his eyes, "it was foolish for people to think to control it."

"Oh I don't know," Anders said cheerily, "clean up the roasted corpses, put in a few picnic benches, it'd be lovely."

Fenris snorted derisively and replaced his sword on his back. Varric and Hawke were still at the other end of the clearing, inspecting the mining equipment and trying to figure out what had caused the massive damage and killed the miners. They had dispatched a party of raiders when they'd
arrived at the mine but had quickly realised that they alone couldn't have caused so much damage. Especially since most of the corpses looked like they'd been put on a barbecue.

"Are you always so flippant about death, mage?" Fenris asked, voice laced with contempt.

"Are you always so bloody gloomy?" Anders retorted, "And I have a name you know."

Fenris shot him a look but didn't reply. Hawke and Varric returned a moment later. Hawke looked grave and Anders frowned. The rogue was holding something in his hand which he opened to show them all. It looked like a small dagger at first, ivory in colour. It took Anders a moment to figure out it was tooth.

"Is that..?" he started guardedly.

"I hope not," Hawke said seriously.

"I thought dragons were extinct in the Free Marches," Fenris said with a frown.

"Well it's only just over the water from Ferelden," Anders shrugged, "and they certainly aren't extinct there, for which I can vouch personally."

"I take it we're still going in to have a look around?" Varric said, eyeing Hawke critically.

"We need the coin," Hawke sighed, "and I might be wrong, you never know our luck."

Unfortunately Luck had decided to take that day as a holiday. As Hawke suspected it was dragons, lots of dragons of all shapes and sizes. Little dragonlings, chirping and squawking, experimentally blowing flares of flame from their sharp little mouths. They were guarded by their older siblings, matured enough to grow their wings but not enough to really use them. Their hides were thicker, the scales more fully formed, their fire longer reaching, but still fairly easily dispatched. Then they found their mother. She was a little trickier.

"Hawke look out!" Anders heard Fenris shout, but too late.

Anders watched as the dragon caught Hawke full in the chest with one huge, clawed foot, sending him flying through the air before smacking audibly into the cliff face behind him. They'd been fighting the damned thing for more than ten minutes now and it didn't seem to be showing any signs of slowing down. For the first time since they'd set out, however, Anders was glad Hawke had the foresight to bring Fenris along. The elf was a fearsome warrior, quick and nimble but powerful. The markings on his skin seemed to glow as he swung the massive blade in front of him like a scythe before leaping out the way of the dragon's napalm like fire. Anders tore his eyes from the battle as Varric fired another hail of bolts at the dragons head, hoping to blind it. He rushed to Hawke's side as the man struggled to stand.

"Are you alright?" he shouted over the roaring, pulling on his healing magic and sending it down over him like a blanket, hoping to catch any wounds wherever they happened to be.

"I'll be fine," Hawke yelled back, accepting his hand up, "shit, this isn't going well. I need a distraction! Do you know anything that'll slow the bloody thing down?"

"...I might," Anders nodded, "just let me know..."

The dragon took that moment to notice them. Anders was forced to dive to the right while Hawke rolled to the left to avoid the stream of liquid fire that rained down where they had been standing moments before. Anders could feel the heat of it even through his rock armour. Maker he hated
dragons, they were so tenacious. He turned to see Fenris trying once more to get the dragons' attention away from Hawke, but the dragon didn't really seem to be taking any notice, more intent on closing its jaws around the rogue. Hawke stumbled out of the way of the first snapping bite, deflecting the next with his crossed daggers which sent him reeling back with the force of it; the third left him no time to recover, one massive fang catching him across the upper arm, gashing open a long thick red line of muscle and blood. Hawke fell from the force of the blow and dropped the dagger from his injured arm, his face twisted in pain. The dragon reared back again, even as Fenris drove his blade deep into its hind leg, ready to strike. Anders knew that he wasn't entirely thinking straight when he threw himself between Hawke and the large, enraged dragon, with large, gory teeth, but he was sure it was something to do with blind panic. He summoned up all the mana reserves he could and pushed them into the spell, feeling the air in front of him crystallising, the chill pouring down onto him as the crystals formed a thick sheet of ice that stabbed through the dragons long neck and up into its head, slowing its movements as it tried futilely to move through the frozen air.

"Now! For the sake of the Maker somebody kill it!" Anders yelled desperately as he put more force into the spell, feeling his energy draining away as he tried his best to regenerate the crystals that the dragon was slowly cracking its way through, bloodshot eyes intent on him, slavering jaws open wide.

Fenris made the most of the opportunity. He leaped onto the dragon's back and ran along its extended neck like a tightrope walker, searching for the vulnerable area at the base of its skull. Lifting his blade in both hands his white markings flared a ghostly blue and Anders watched in sheer relief as he drove the blade down into its skull until it protruded from its lower jaw. The beast gave a choking, guttural wail and flailed, forcing Anders to let the spell go before the backlash did him damage. Fenris was thrown from the dragon as it convulsed violently in its death throes but managed to land fairly gracefully considering. Its head reared back and then fell with a ground shaking crash, reptilian eyes sliding horizontally shut. The blood that oozed from its gaping wound was thick and black and seemed to shimmer like oil, creating a large pool beneath the twitching corpse.

"Well, I'll have something to write in my diary today," Hawke said, reminding Anders just why he'd nearly got himself killed minutes before.

He once more rushed to Hawke's side as the man stumbled up, his left hand clamped around his other arm, hand slippery with blood.

"Let me see it," Anders said as he felt the rock armour around him crumble away into dust.

"See, I wasn't exaggerating, I knew something would try and strip the skin off of me," Hawke joked, but his face was pale and he looked in far more pain than he was letting on.

When he let go of the wound Anders saw why. Hawke's upper arm was split open like a ripe peach. He could see the white of bone and the long fibres of muscle. Anders had seen far worse in his time but it didn't make it any less affecting. He pulled on his fading reserves of strength and set his hands over the wound, focusing on knitting the muscle back together.

"Someone give him a potion," Anders ordered as Hawke wobbled on his feet dangerously; Fenris was there in a second, holding Hawke steady with one gauntleted hand while he held a potion to his lips with the other.

Hawke drank gratefully. Fenris didn't let go even as the colour slowly returned to Hawke's face, keeping a strong grip on the man and a steadying hand at his back. Anders continued until his vision started to blur and then forced himself to stop. The wound wasn't entirely closed but it
would have to do for now. He reached into his pack and pulled out a bandage, quickly and expertly wrapping the wound to hold it together and make sure the bleeding didn't restart. Then, after making sure Hawke was definitely alright, he took the opportunity to wander over to the cliff and flop down onto the devastated ground to catch his breath.

"You alright Blondie?" Varric said as he returned Bianca to her dormant state and slung her onto his back.

"I'll be fine," Anders said as he rubbed at the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, "just a little tired."

"Well you're lucky you aren't dead," Varric said dryly, "that was some stunt."

"Oh come on Varric, I've fought dragons before," Anders said with a wave of his hands, giving the dwarf a look, "it isn't like I don't know what I'm doing."

"Whatever you say," Varric said, not sounding entirely convinced.

"You think this was bad," Anders said with a smirk, "remind me to tell you about the Queen of the Black Marsh some time."

"Hmm, well, that does sound intriguing," Varric said, his eyes sparkling on hearing of a story.

Anders looked back over to Hawke and Fenris, who had finally let go of the rogue in favour of hovering near him like a worried dog. Anders sighed and looked away. Varric was watching him knowingly, he knew, but he couldn't summon the energy to care. It was going to be a long walk back to Kirkwall.

Hawke had insisted he take his share of the coin for the job, no matter how much he insisted Hawke needed the money more. He'd spent it stocking up on supplies and used nearly all of the rest to help fund whatever the resistance was needing, like potions or coin for bribes. He had to admit it felt good to be able to contribute a little more on this side of things as well. He always suspected some of the other members presumed he was being tight with his money, while the others understood he just didn't have any to spare. Still, it was nice to get the rumours stopped at least.

He spent the next two weeks busy in the clinic, visiting Varric at the Hanged Man and checking on Hawke to make sure his arm was healing properly. Hawke acted like he didn't want to be fussed over but seemed to be secretly enjoying all the attention. Especially from his sister who alternated between rebuking him harshly for even thinking of going into a dragon infested mine in the first place and fussing over his bandages. Anders smiled at the thought. He liked Bethany, she was a sweet girl, a little naive but in a good way. She reminded Anders of himself when he was younger.

It was raining when he left the clinic for Lowtown, miserable, thick grey clouds covering the sky. Anders winced as he accidentally stood in a deep puddle and the water gushed in through the holes in his boots. He cursed and jumped through the water. He really needed some new boots. Perhaps he would stop at Lirene's and finally get that pair he'd seen before, if they were still there. It was pointless to keep putting it off when it was coming up for the rainy season anyway; he would end up with hypothermia or something equally awful.

Lirene's clinic was bright and crowded as usual. The dark haired woman looked stressed as she argued with a gaunt looking man who was trying desperately to tell her about his mother's illness.

"As I said," she said sternly, never raising her voice, "everyone will be seen in turn. Give your
details to my girl and get back into the queue."

The man looked like he wanted to argue further but finally acquiesced with a sigh and slump of his shoulders. He shuffled over to Valia, Lirene's assistant, and started to give her the whole story. Valia listened patiently, nodding at Anders with a kindly smile as he passed her. Lirene looked up as he approached, another rebuke ready on her lips until she realised who it was.

"Oh Anders, I didn't know you were here," she said, relaxing a little, "if you're looking for supplies I'm afraid you're out of luck, we're down ourselves as it is."

"Actually..." Anders said, scanning Lirene's wares with a sigh; they were gone, he should have known, they were too cheap to pass up really, "never mind, I guess you sold them."

"Oh you mean these?" Lirene said with a look of comprehension, ducking down under the counter into a cupboard before she popped back up with the boots in her hand and a sly smile, "I saw you eyeing them up last week. Thought I'd put them aside until you could afford them."

"You're an angel," Anders stated with a grin, "honestly, you have no idea."

"Of course I do," she said, suddenly sounding like his mother, "I've seen the state of those boots of yours, I'm surprised you can even walk in them never mind anything else."

Anders laughed and handed over the money, accepting Lirene's offer of a rag and a stool so he could divest himself of his ruined boots and dry his feet. His socks were also a bit of a loss so he wrung them out and stowed them in his pouch, putting his dry feet into the new soft, fur-lined ones. It was like heaven on earth. Lirene gave him a smile as he left, which he returned gratefully.

Anders was glad Hawke's house wasn't far from Lirene's clinic as the rain had become even heavier while he'd been inside. He sprinted all the way there and ducked under the meagre covering in front of the doorway to hide from the downpour. He took a moment to catch his breath and watched the white sheet of water before him. The last time he had been to Hawke's house had been that disastrous night of drunkeness instigated by Varric; Hawke had been coming to the clinic to have his wound seen to so that Anders didn't have to take time away from his other patients to travel to him in Lowtown. This time Anders thought he'd make the effort, considering he was in the area and all. He reached out and knocked on the door loudly. It was minute before he heard any movement and then the door opened slightly to reveal a face he thought he recognised.

"Can I help you?" the woman looked him up and down a little distastefully.

That's when Anders realised why he recognised her. She looked just like Bethany, only older, with grey hair and not quite as ruddy cheeked. Hawke's mother then, he thought; great. Anders hesitated before shaking himself out of his momentary stupor.

"Yes," he said politely, "I'm looking for Hawke."

"Can I ask who's calling on him?" Hawke's mother said, her voice still rather superior.

"Mother who is it?" Hawke's voice sounded from within, footsteps growing closer.

Fingers appeared around the door and Hawke's mother stepped back to allow her son to open the it further. His eyes widened on seeing Anders dripping like a drowned rat on his doorstep.

"Anders, what are you doing here?" he said with a grin, "Come inside, you're soaking."

It was blessedly warm inside, the fireplace at the other end of the room a roaring blaze. Hawke's mother eyed him with interest as Hawke jogged to his room to find a towel. Again with the
awkward lack of someone to introduce him. Anders gave the woman a small smile which thankfully seemed to be enough of an interaction for her to start talking.

"So you're the Anders I've been hearing so much about," Hawke's mother said.

"Only good things I hope," Anders said, trying his best to be charming.

"Well if saving my fool of a son from dragons is good then, yes, I suppose they have been," the woman smiled and her eyes crinkled kindly at the edges; Anders decided he liked her, despite her initial frostiness.

"Come now mother," Hawke said, returning from the other room with a towel in hand, which he gave to Anders, "don't embarrass our guest."

"I think you're the only one I'm embarrassing Garret," Anders couldn't help but smile as Hawke actually blushed a little; he rarely ever heard anyone call him by his first name, it was rather endearing, "I'm Leandra by the way, since my son seems to have lost his manners."

"It's a pleasure to meet finally meet you," Anders said, causing Leandra to give her son a significant look.

"It's nice to see you have some polite friends Garret," Leandra said approvingly, "I'll make us some tea shall I?"

"Oh don't bother yourself on my account," Anders said, ignoring Hawke as he rolled his eyes, "I'm just here to check on Hawke's arm."

"Nonsense," Leandra waved him away as she walked over to a long cabinet to retrieve a large, cast iron kettle, "unlike my son I know how to look after guests. Just you do what needs doing and I'll see to refreshments."

"Thank you mother," Hawke said with a long suffering note to his voice, "come on then, we'll get out of her way before she sweeps us up to make room."

Anders smiled and followed Hawke to his room. He had to admit that Gamlen's house was nothing to write home about but it was certainly nicer than the hovel he lived in. At least this place didn't have damp running down the walls and a pervading smell from the nearby sewers on a hot day. Alright so Hawke's bed was nothing but a makeshift mattress on the floor with a thick blanket over the top but, well, it was better than nothing. At least it was dry and warm.

"You can stop flattering my mother any time you like, you know," Hawke said sarcastically as Anders undid his hair and let it fall loose so he could dry it properly.

"And why would I do any less to such a delightful lady?" Anders said with a grin.

"Oh shut up," Hawke said, giving Anders a glare with no heat behind it, "you think you're so charming, don't you?"

"So I've been told," Anders said.

Hawke laughed and shook his head. Anders had never seen him so relaxed before, in fact he realised he'd never seen him out of armour before. He was wearing pair of black sack cloth trousers and a white, long sleeved shirt which was looking the worse for wear. Anders patted down his clothes with the towel and tossed it back to Hawke who caught it and chucked it onto his bed.
"Alright, let's get this out of the way then," Hawke said as Anders put his hair tie around his fingers and started to pull his hair back.

That was when Hawke simply took hold of the bottom of his loose shirt and lifted it up over his head. The hair tie slipped from Anders' loose fingers and he couldn't help but stare, eyes a little wide. Oh Maker, why do you torture me so? A little warning would have been nice, he thought as he willed his eyes to please listen to him and stop staring at the well muscled chest before him. He swallowed and looked up at Hawke who, thankfully, hadn't noticed his alarm as he was too busy trying to untie his bandage with one hand. Anders took a breath and stepped forwards, slapping Hawke's hand out of the way as he continued to fumble with it. Being closer, Anders realised quickly, didn't help. Usually Hawke's armour gave him ample access to the wound, so there was no need for him to remove anything. Now all that toned muscle and soft skin was right there and Hawke didn't seem any the wiser as to the affect he was having. Anders hated his life sometimes.

"I would be able to do it myself if Bethany didn't insist on tying it so tightly," Hawke groused as Anders unwrapped the bandage, "I think she enjoys hurting me sometimes."

"She just hopes that it'll remind you not to get hurt next time," Anders said, glad for the distraction, "or maybe not go running after giant dragons."

"I don't remember you telling me not to run after the giant dragon at the time," Hawke said dryly.

"Well I would have if I'd known the bloody thing was there," Anders said, dropping the used bandage onto the floor and inspecting the long, pink scar that was all that was left of Hawke's injury.

He ran his thumbs over the flesh and pulled at either side, making sure both sides had healed back together properly. It felt supple and healthy-and soft...and warm. Anders let go quickly and looked up to find Hawke watching him a little too intently. He cleared his throat and bent down to pick up Hawke's shirt, pushing it at his chest.

"You don't need another bandage on that, it's healed enough now," Anders said, trying to ignore his quickened heartbeat.

"Oh good, now I can show off my manly scar," Hawke said with a sly smile.

"And come up with lots and lots of impossible ways of how you got it I'm sure," Anders said, quickly walking back over to where he dropped his hair tie to search for it.

"I'll leave that to Varric," Hawke said, slowly shrugging back into his shirt, to Anders' relief, "I think the real story is dramatic enough as it is."

Anders looked around but couldn't see where the bloody thing had gone. He heard Hawke walk up behind him but didn't feel ready to turn around just yet. Then a hand tapped him on the shoulder and he jolted round faster than he really should have. Hawke looked at him in concern, Anders' hair tie between his fingers.

"Are you alright?" Hawke asked genuinely.

"I'm fine," Anders said tightly, grabbing the hair tie but not bothering to use it.

"You didn't need to come all the way down here you know," Hawke said, looking a little confused by Anders' mood swing, "I was going to come to Darktown later and see you."

"I was in the area," Anders said with a shrug, crossing his arms, "it wasn't any trouble."
"Oh, alright," Hawke said, scratching the back of his neck, "I suppose mother will have tea ready."

"I can't really stay," Anders said quickly, "I really need to get back to the clinic. Elena is coming in tonight for a check up and I can't miss her."

"But it's still raining. Wait until it's stopped at least," Hawke said as he followed Anders back out into the main room where Leandra was tending the kettle and humming to herself.

"I really can't," Anders said, feeling like an idiot but realising that there was no way he could have the kind of conversation he wanted to have with Leandra after that.

"You aren't leaving?" Leandra said to Anders, cottoning on to what her son was saying, "it's such a miserable night still. Have some tea first to warm you through."

"I'm sorry to run out like this, but I'm afraid I have an appointment elsewhere that I really can't miss," Anders said apologetically, forcing a smile, "but if the offer's still open I'd love to take you up on it another time."

"Well, if it's urgent I guess I can't keep you," Leandra said, "and of course, I'd like that. Feel free to come by any time you like. I'm sure I can rely on you to fill me in on all the details my son doesn't tell me about his so called 'safe endeavours'."

"Mother," Hawke said disapprovingly.

"I look forward to it," Anders said with small bow, "have a good evening."

"And you," Leandra said kindly.

He turned and made for the door, trying to ignore either his conscience or Justice calling him a coward in the back of his mind. He heard Hawke hurry after him and, just as he opened the door and stepped out, a hand wrapped around his arm, stopping him. He turned back to see Hawke standing barely a foot away from him, the door blocking Leandra from view.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Hawke asked seriously, his voice low and hard to hear over the thundering rain behind him.

"I'm fine Hawke," Anders sighed, "really."

"I never thanked you, you know," Hawke said, his hand still tight around his arm as if worried that he'd leave if he let go, "for saving me."

"Yes because I might just not bother to save you next time out of spite," Anders said facetiously, "all because you didn't thank me."

"Very funny," Hawke said, his grip loosening slightly, but his face still serious, "I mean it though, Anders. Really, you're too good to me."

"Don't I know it," Anders said, smiling weakly, "I really have to go."

"Alright," Hawke let go of his arm, "I'll see you soon?"

Anders merely nodded in return before rushing out into the rain. It was cold and he was soaked again in an instant. He turned left at the bottom of the stairs and headed straight for home. He'd lied, of course, he didn't have any appointment, he'd just needed out of there. Hawke seriously needed to stop this almost habitual flirting, Anders thought ruefully, or he was going to go a little
mad...or do something he'd regret. Like act on it. Anders swallowed at the thought. He didn't think he could stand another loss like Karl, it would destroy him. He could already tell that Hawke was the kind of man that he could fall in love with if he let himself and he couldn't let that happen, he couldn't. There were more important things he needed to do, there were people relying on him, he couldn't be selfish, his life wasn't about him anymore..!

Anders didn't realise he'd started running until he fell, his hands splashing into the water logged street painfully, his knees knocking into the hard ground. He cursed, hanging his head as the water soaked into his trousers. He felt sick. Justice was there, in the background, reminding him of their pact, reminding him of all the things he'd promised to do. Love hadn't been on the agenda, it wasn't on the agenda, he couldn't...

He stood up, brushing himself down futilely. He thought he'd accepted a long time ago that this wasn't something he could ever have but it looked like his bloody romantic nature had other plans. He continued walking home slowly through the rain, letting the patter of the water on his head soothe him.
The next time he heard anything about Garret Hawke it was purely by accident. He was shopping for elfroot in the Alienage, the only place to get the herb at its freshest, when a melodious voice floated to his ears.

"Oh Hawke will be pleased then wont he?" the girlish voice said happily, her accent distinctly Dalish if Anders wasn't mistaken, "He's been working so hard for this."

"Tell me about it Daisy," Anders recognised Varric's voice and wished he could make himself invisible, "he can hardly sit still."

He'd done so well in avoiding everyone and that included the dwarf. It wasn't that he necessarily wanted to, he liked Varric a lot, it was just that if he spent time with him he would eventually run into Hawke and that was what he needed to steer clear of. He paid the young elven woman at the stall and stuffed the paper wrapped pack of herbs into his pouch before turning to walk quickly towards the stairs back to the market.

"Hey! Blondie, that you?"

Not quickly enough it seemed. Anders cursed his luck and took a breath, turning around with a forced smile to see Varric with a slim, dark haired elven girl at his side, watching him intently.

"Varric," Anders said, "fancy meeting you here."

"Well, imagine seeing you out in the daylight!" Varric said with obvious rebuke, "Don't you melt or something?"

"Ha ha," Anders said tonelessly, "I've been busy if that's what you're getting at."

"For nearly a month?" Varric asked questioningly, making Anders blanch at how long it had actually been, "What have you been doing, digging a tunnel into the Gallows?"

"Oh no, now you know my plan," Anders said, deadpan, with a roll of his eyes, "I'll have to kill you."

"Oh a secret plan," the girl suddenly piped up, her eyes wide with delight, "that sounds awfully exciting!"

"He was only joking Daisy," Varric said, shaking his head, "it's one of the few things he's good at."

"Thanks Varric, just endear me to the people I haven't even met yet, why don't you?" he looked back to the girl, who looked a little disappointed at the prospect of there not being a secret tunnel into the Gallows, "nice to meet you, I'm Anders."

"I'm Merrill," she said, bouncing on her feet, "Oh! You're Anders! It's so nice to meet another mage! Oh wait, I shouldn't really be shouting that out loud should I? Sorry, I'm not really used to this whole apostate thing, or the introducing thing, and having so many people about listening all the time, only they don't really seem to pay any attention to me anyway and, oh, I'm rambling aren't I? I'll shut up now."

Anders stared at her as she giggled nervously. Was it possible for anyone to be cuter? Anders didn't think so. Where did Hawke find all these seemingly disparate people?
"That's alright," Anders said, finding her smile infectious, "as long as you don't go yelling it around any templars I think I'll be fine."

"I'll remember that," Merrill said sagely, nodding, "no templar yelling, I can do that."

"Don't wind her up," Varric said with a laugh, "she has no sense of irony or sarcasm yet, she takes everything literally."

"I do not," Merrill said, sounding slightly offended, before pausing and looking as if she was thinking hard, "or do I? What is irony, exactly?"

"You're a hopeless case," Varric said, earning him a swat on the shoulder from Merrill, before he turned back to Anders, "anyway, Hawke's been looking for you."

I'll bet, Anders thought ruefully. Considering the last thing Hawke had asked him was 'see you soon?' and Anders had managed to avoid him long enough for him to make another new friend that Anders didn't even know about, he had been sure Hawke had given up on him by now. Instead it looked like he'd just become very, very good at avoiding the things he couldn't have, like Hawke and alcohol.

"Has he," Anders said, not as a question.

"You should know," Varric said cryptically, his eyes glinting a little, "anyway, Hanged Man at nine, my suite."

"I can't," Anders said automatically, finding himself without an excuse to back it up; he floundered.

"Of course you can't," Varric said sarcastically, shaking his head, "look Blondie, just try and be on time alright? Tonight's a big night and I don't think you'd forgive yourself if you missed it."

Could that have sounded any more ominous? Anders thought. He sighed and nodded to Varric, putting his hand on his hip. He couldn't keep it up forever he supposed, but having left it this long only made it worse now. This wasn't going to be fun.

"Nine?" he said.

"Nine," Varric confirmed with a satisfied smile, "see you there."

"Oh this is so exhilarating!" Merrill said, clapping her hands together, "I've never had alcohol before, will I get drunk?"

"And if it's up to me you won't ever get any," Anders heard Varric say as he took the opportunity to slip away, "you're hyper enough as it is."

"Oh don't be such a spoil sport," he heard Merrill reply huffily.

The Lowtown streets were oddly quiet as Anders made his way to the Hanged Man. It was a clear night, the stars shining where the lingering smoke from the foundries didn't obscure them, but that only made it bitterly cold. Anders would be glad for the warmth of the tavern, one of the few things he'd be happy for about the tavern. He tried again to think of an appropriate lie to tell to cover his absence but, as with all his other attempts, he couldn't come up with anything convincing. He'd have to think of something, he could hardly tell him the truth. The door to the Hanged Man appeared too quickly for his liking and Anders steeled himself before walking inside.
He'd never seen the place so crowded. No wonder he hadn't encountered anyone out on the street, Anders thought, they were all in here getting drunk. There were a group of rowdy off duty guards at the tables by the bar, all laughing and stumbling about, sloshing alcohol over the tables and the floor and telling crude jokes. The other tables held the usual patrons who were giving the guards dirty looks, probably for disturbing their usually quiet evening. The bar itself was no exception; it was swamped, probably, Anders thought, as there was an exotically beautiful woman in terribly revealing clothing standing there. Her face rang a bell in his mind but he couldn't quite place it. She was surrounded by a host of googley eyed men, all desperate to buy her a drink. She looked over and caught his eye as he stared, giving him a quick wink from across the bar which, for some reason he couldn't fathom, made his cheeks flush. Anders quickly made his way through the riot towards Varric's suite. Was it possible for someone to have bedroom eyes more than her? he thought.

It turned out that it was, apparently, and he was seeing them right now on the person he least wanted to see them on. Fenris and Hawke were seated at Varric's table, alone with cards strewn between them, the elf's eyes fixed on the man across from him very attentively.

"That's not fair," Hawke was complaining, looking at his cards suspiciously as the elf downed the rest of his drink, "no one beats me four times in a row. You're cheating aren't you?"

"Don't be a sore loser Hawke," the elf shrugged and let out a rare smile, "it doesn't suit you."

"Oh, don't push it," Hawke said with a wry smile of his own, "or you'll force me to teach you a lesson you won't forget."

"Promises, promises," Fenris replied, standing up gracefully, "I take it you want another..?"

He stopped short on seeing Anders in the doorway, his face momentarily showing surprise before his eyes went hard. Hawke saw his reaction and turned in his seat to look at the doorway, his face a picture of astonishment. Anders took one look at those green eyes and wondered just how he'd managed to stay away for so long. Hawke sat back in his chair and grinned.

"Anders!" he said, standing and walking over to the mage as he removed his staff and lent it against the wall.

"I'm going to get another drink," Fenris said darkly before walking down the stairs, looking distinctly put out by Anders' sudden appearance.

"What in the blazes are you doing here? I thought you'd left town or something!" Hawke said grinning, "Where on earth have you been, I've been trying to reach you."

"Oh, well..." Anders realised he still hadn't come up with a convincing reason for his absence and faltered, "...uh, Varric said you were looking for me."

Nice, Anders thought, that was the least subtle evasion I've ever heard. He watched Hawke hesitate, as if he wanted to push the issue, before he closed his mouth and simply offered Anders a seat. The mage took it gratefully, glad that he wasn't going to have to lie per se, just ignore the problem. Much easier.

"I hope Varric hasn't just invited me for another night of drunken revelry," Anders said raising his eyebrows and indicating the cards on the table.

"Not quite," Hawke said, returning to his seat beside Anders, looking at him as if he still couldn't believe he was actually sitting there, "well, damn...a lot has happened since I saw you last, I'm not
Anders watched him, hating how much he enjoyed simply talking to the man before him. Pathetic, Anders thought self-deprecatingly, you really are you know, is this all you need to make you happy?

"I met Merrill today," he said, just for something to say.

"You did?" Hawke blinked.

"I was at the alienage, Varric introduced us," Anders explained, "she seems nice."

"Doesn't she though," Hawke said with an odd look in his eye, as if he hadn't made up his mind about Merrill yet, "she's an odd package, that's for sure."

"What do you mean?" Anders asked, confused.

"Nothing, that doesn't matter," Hawke said, looking excited, "so did Varric not tell you about tonight?"

"No details," Anders said, watching Hawke warily.

"I'm surprised the little bugger could keep his mouth shut, he's just as thrilled as I am," Hawke laughed, "we've raised more than enough coin for the expedition. I've been out getting kit ready all day and bagging up supplies. I'm actually surprised that I'm awake right now considering; I'm shattered."

"That's great," Anders said, trying to sound genuine.

Personally the thought of the expedition had always filled him with trepidation. The thought of Hawke going anywhere the Deep Roads was not top of his list for things he wanted to happen in the near future. Or ever.

"I know, it's felt like forever coming," Hawke said, finishing the last of his pint, his eyes shining, "two months we've been planning this and now it's here. Doesn't feel real actually."

"When are you leaving?" Anders asked, a horrible feeling creeping up his spine.

"Tomorrow," Hawke said, making Anders go a little cold, "tonight's a 'last night on the surface' so to speak."

"How long will you be gone?" Anders tried not to sound as affected as he was.

"A couple of weeks at the least," Hawke said as if it wasn't a big thing at all, "the place we're trying to reach is a week underground and we need some leeway for getting a little lost, and for exploring whatever we find down there."

"Right," Anders nodded, wishing Varric had warned him about what was going on.

But he had no one to blame but himself, for which Anders was acutely aware. He'd ignored his own desires by ignoring Hawke and now he'd left himself no time to worry about the real problem. Like the idea of Hawke not coming back. Anders felt his chest tighten and breathed deeply. Fenris returned a moment later with drinks for himself and Hawke, looking a little harassed. He was followed by the exotic woman from the bar who was unashamedly staring at the elf's backside with undisguised longing. She looked round at Anders and smiled beguilingly.
"Well hello," she said, taking a seat by Fenris; the elf subtly shifted his chair away from her, "I don't believe we've been introduced."

"Oh, Isabella this is Anders," Hawke said, taking a drink from his new pint.

"Anders," she said, rolling the name obscenely off her tongue and narrowing her eyes, "have I met you before..?"

"You know, you do look really familiar," Anders said, wracking his memory, "have you ever been to Denerim?"

"I used to lodge at The Pearl, for a time," Isabella said.

"That's it! You used to really like that girl with the griffon tattoos, right? What was her name?"

Anders snapped his fingers.

"The Lay Warden?" Isabella said, looking suddenly nostalgic.

"That's right! I think you were there the night I..." Anders started.

"Oh!" Isabella sat forwards in her chair, her eyes alighting with recollection, "Were you the runaway mage who could do that electricity thing? That was nice..."

"Please stop talking, now," Hawke interrupted, causing Anders and Isabella to look round; Hawke looked scandalised and Fenris looked like he was just glad someone else had taken Isabella's attention away from him.

"Oh, sorry," Anders said but he couldn't help the laugh that escaped; that had been a very interesting night indeed.

"I wasn't," Isabella said with a sly smile, sitting back in her chair and putting her feet up on the table, ankles crossed.

"Alright, enough," Hawke waved his hands, pointing at Isabella, "I hear enough things from you already that I can't unhear, never mind adding to them."

"I can drink to that," Fenris muttered, taking a long, purposeful swig from his drink.

"You're no fun," Isabella said to both of them.

"Hey, feet off the table Rivaini," said a voice from the doorway.

Anders turned round in his seat to see Varric, Merrill, Bethany and a tall red haired woman he didn't know. They spaced out, greeting each other in turn, sitting down with their drinks and falling into conversation as only good friends could. Anders couldn't help but feel just a little lost.

"So, you made it," Varric said to him, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder as he passed, "told you that you wouldn't want to miss it didn't I?"

"Yes," Anders said, accepting the drink he passed him, "without actually telling me why."

"Well, I thought it would be a surprise," Varric shrugged.

"You are the master of understatement Varric," Anders said with a withering look, "they should put a warning on you."
"You wound me," Varric said dramatically, "and don't act like you don't appreciate my invitation."

Anders would be lying if he did.

If Hawke had been truthful he would have told Anders it was just another night of drunken revelry instigated by Varric. Oh they talked about the expedition for the first half hour or so, until the drink started to take effect and everything just slipped into drinking competitions and trying to get people to do ridiculous things as dares. Anders wondered how any of them were going to get up the next morning, never mind be composit mentis enough to even read a map.

Sometimes I really hate being the only sober one, Anders thought as Hawke once more threw his head back, letting the shot of whiskey slide down his throat, gasping as he came back up.

"Alright," he said, pointing blearily at no one in particular; Aveline was laughing behind her hand as Hawke wavered, "don't think I can't see you laughing at me Captain of the Guard."

"I don't know what you mean," Aveline said airily, taking a drink from her ale.

"You, my friend, have just earned yourself a whiskey," Hawke said with a sly smile, "unless of course you'd rather have a challenge?"

Aveline, Anders had found out quickly, was always up for a challenge. He'd known that Hawke had a friend in the City Guard but Hawke had omitted that she'd recently been promoted to Captain. She seemed like a decent enough woman, if a little rigid about the rules. Anders would try to keep himself on the wary side of friendly with her.

"There's nothing you could dish out that I couldn't do Hawke," Aveline said, leaning forwards with a feral smile.

"Oh really?" Hawke said, looking distinctly, drunkenly pleased with himself, "then why don't you go next door to your troops, who're currently trashing the place by the way, and tell Guardsman Donnic just how madly in love with him you are?"

Aveline went even paler than she already was and seemed to sober up completely. She glared at Hawke and sat back in her seat as Varric poured a shot of whiskey into her glass. She grabbed it quickly and threw it down her throat, refusing to even comment on Hawke's suggestion. Hawke was in stitches, for which Anders was sure Aveline would make him pay later, if the look she was shooting him was anything to go by. Aveline caught Anders sniggering and glared at him.

"You, drink or dare," she said, sounding every bit the Guard Captain; Anders felt the need to snap to attention.

"A bit of an unfair challenge with me really," Anders shrugged, laughing a little at Aveline's scowl, "considering I can't get drunk. Oh, just pour already."

Hawke leaned over to fill his glass. Anders couldn't help but notice how close he was, the heat radiating off his flushed skin.

"You're such a spoil sport," Hawke said with a smile, his eyes half lidded; Anders hoped it was the drink.

"Oh you can talk," Anders said, swallowing the shot and grimacing at the sour taste.

Hawke leaned back, affording Anders a view of Fenris; the glare the elf was sending him could
have melted through iron. Anders just looked back, not letting it get to him. It was his turn anyway, why waste it?

"Alright," he said, pretending to think about it, "Fenris, drink or challenge?"

"Like there's any challenge you could give me that I couldn't do," Fenris snorted.

"Brave words, considering the last person that said them is now cowering in her chair," Anders said with an unconcerned look.

"Hey!" Aveline said, sounding offended, "I am not cowering!"

"Well, come on then," Fenris said, leaning forwards; Anders saw out the corner of his eye that Hawke looked uneasy, "give it your best shot, mage."

"Fine, elf," Anders said sarcastically, "since you weren't wise enough to heed my warning, I'll just have to teach you why no one ever takes a challenge from me."

"You're full of it," Fenris said dismissively.

"So, let's see," Anders said, enjoying himself immensely, "next time you're in the Gallows, and I know you have to go back there at some point because Hawke has an errand to run there tomorrow morning before he leaves, and I know how you can't be parted from him for a second, you have to grab Knight Captain Cullen's arse. And someone else has to see it, or it doesn't count."

There was a moment of complete silence, in which Fenris actually looked stunned that Anders had come up with something either so ridiculous or so good, and the others followed suit. Strangely it was Merrill who broke the silence with a shrill laugh, clapping her hands and falling back in her chair. Varric followed shortly after and then the whole table was in an uproar. Anders was glad he still had the ability to come up with suitably awful dares; he'd been famous for it back at the Circle in Ferelden. Everyone, even the new apprentices, knew better than to accept a dare from Anders. He'd begun to wonder if it had become part of the initiation ceremony, he could just imagine First Enchanter Irving, 'This is the phylactery chamber, and these are the templar barracks and, oh, make sure not to accept a dare from Anders, it's more than your life's worth'. Probably never happened but Anders liked to think it could have. He laughed along with everyone else, but on looking round at Hawke his laugh died. No one else seemed to notice the two of them, all too busy ribbing Fenris and making lewd jokes, but Anders couldn't help but notice. Hawke looked serious and Anders felt confused. What had he done now? It passed in second but, to Anders, it seemed like time was frozen around them. Bethany was the one to break him out of his stupor and, when he looked back to Hawke, the man was laughing and joking with the rest of them once more.

"Anders, how could you?" Bethany was saying, her stern tone ruined by her smiling face.

"Oh, I just have an overactive imagination and endless curiosity," Anders shrugged off the odd feeling and smiled, "that's why I escaped the Circle so many times. I thought up all these plans and then just had to know if they worked or not."

"Troublemaker," Bethany teased, her eyes narrowed.

"Professional troublemaker, thank you very much," Anders said, clinking her glass, "I put in lots of hard work to get where I am today."

Bethany laughed and shoved him in the shoulder, just like Hawke tended to do. Must be a Hawke family trait, Anders thought, when they're drunk anyway.
"I really can't believe they're leaving tomorrow," Bethany said, looking around the table and taking another sip of her wine.

"Neither can I," Anders shook his head, watching as Merrill spilled a tumbler of goodness knows what down Aveline's front, eyes going wide and hands flying to her mouth as she quickly began rambling and trying vainly to mop it up, "the sulphur smell's going to have them vomiting in no time."

"What sulphur smell?" Hawke cut in.

"Oh, did I not tell you about that?" Anders said innocently, trying to gauge whether what he'd seen moments before had even happened; Hawke seemed his usual self.

"No, you left that part out," Hawke said grumpily.

Despite Hawke's seeming return to normalcy Anders spent the rest of the night out of sorts. He jumped between being forcibly happy and cheerful one minute then rather solemn and grave the next. It also didn't help that he got into a rather heated argument with Aveline about the treatment of mages by the city guard in which Hawke had to intervene before one of them threw a punch. He didn't think he entirely endeared himself to Aveline that night if her stony expression was anything to go by. Things broke up not long after, everyone agreeing that they shouldn't push their luck too far considering the hike they were taking tomorrow. Anders stayed to help clean up the vast amount of glasses while the others waved drunken goodbyes and wobbled in a steady stream out of the pub. Aveline had a little more trouble than the others considering she had to round up her troops, who were a little the worse for wear. She was in a foul mood, however, so the threat in her voice was pretty much enough to have them all jumping up out of their chairs and stumbling after her. Varric shooed them out of his suite so he could get to bed, leaving Anders, Hawke and Fenris to walk out into the cold night air together. Anders wished the elf would piss off so he could talk to Hawke alone but it didn't seem like it was going to happen.

"You'll be an interesting sight tomorrow," Anders said sardonically as Hawke stumbled and caught himself on the wall.

"I'm always interesting," Hawke said in what Anders was sure Hawke thought was meant to be charming but came out incredibly slurred.

"You're such a drunkard Hawke," Anders shook his head, "when are you leaving tomorrow?"

"Eight," Hawke grimaced, "eight in the morning. Maker it's going to hurt, I can tell."

"The nice long walk from Lowtown to Hightown will do you good," Anders said as he started to walk towards Hawke's house, "all uphill."

"Actually I've gotten round that one," Hawke said slyly, "Fenris is letting me stay at his tonight. We're both heading out together anyway and it'll save me the walk, I've got all my kit there already."

Anders bristled. He knew he had no right to but he couldn't help it and my, my but did the elf look smug. Or as smug as he could considering the range of emotions on Fenris's face was hard to discern sometimes. They reached the top of the stairs that led down to the market and Anders was tempted to keep walking with them even though it would only take him even further from Darktown. Hawke would be too drunk to notice but, despite the amount Fenris had drunk over the evening, Anders was sure that he would. His eyes were oddly keen in the moonlight.
"Well, if you're heading to Hightown," Anders said tightly, "I suppose this is where we part ways."

"Oh, right," Hawke said, looking around him as if only just realising where he was; he fixed his eyes on Anders and stared at him.

"I'll come and see you off tomorrow," Anders said when Hawke didn't say anything, "if you'd like."

"Yes," Hawke smiled, "yes I'd like that. Maybe I'll think of something clever to say instead of just vomiting on your shoes."

"I bloody well hope so," Anders laughed back, "these are new boots."

"We need to go Hawke," Fenris cut in, voice deadpan as usual, "I'd like to get a least a few hours sleep before I have to wake up again."

"Right, yes, sorry," Hawke said, waving his hand distractedly, "we're meeting at the Merchant's Guild, eight o'clock...in the morning. Dear Maker save us."

Anders watched Hawke stumble off, alternately using the wall and Fenris as support, and tried not to let it get to him.

Anders didn't need to worry about waking up early that morning as he never actually got to sleep. Well, that wasn't exactly true, he'd fallen asleep not long after getting home and going to bed but it wasn't long before the nightmares started and he knew it was going to be one of those nights. The sickening sound of the darkspawn and the distant roaring of the archdemon. He hadn't bothered trying to get any more sleep, it wasn't worth it. Instead he'd read a little more of the new Tevinter tome that the resistance had managed to procure for him, pottered around the clinic for a while and then decided to make something for Hawke which he thought the man might appreciate. A quick and simple hangover cure which Oghren of all people had taught him; for a long time he didn't believe it worked, considering Oghren never seemed to stop drinking long enough to get a hangover, but Nathaniel swore by it so it must be worth something. He set a pot of water over the dying fire and conjured a flame to get it going again. The wood sparked and crackled; he threw another log into the pile and watched as the bark caught.

Hawke really was incorrigible, when Anders thought about it. Why could he never fall for someone normal, someone inconspicuous, someone attainable? Hawke was everything but inconspicuous; he got himself involved in any trouble that was going, he had a sister who was an apostate, he seemed happy to openly defend mages in front of templars if Varric's stories were anything to go by, he drank like a fish, he was terribly irresponsible and kind and generous and handsome...and I really need to stop torturing myself, Anders thought ruefully as he stirred the elfroot into the boiling water. He didn't have any right to Hawke, and even if he did he wasn't sure whether he would take it. Hawke's life was complicated enough as it was without adding Anders' baggage to it. There were things he'd done, things he could never undo, which he was sure if Hawke knew about then the other man would probably never talk to him again. There was no way it would work.

It was just getting light when he set out for Hightown. The sky was pale, only a scattering of thin clouds marring its seeming flawlessness, each tinted a delicate pink by the rising sun. It was a good half hours walk and the air was still bitterly cold. Anders wished he'd brought his gloves as he blew into his cupped hands, wishing even more that he could summon a little flame to keep them warm. The Hightown market was mainly empty except for a few eager merchants just arriving to set up their stalls, trailing their wares behind them in carts. The air was crisp here, much clearer than in Darktown. There was a stiff breeze that found its way inside Anders' coat and made him
shiver and pull it closed. Anders jogged up the stairs towards the Merchant's Guild. He heard the gathering before he saw it.

"...Nice and virginal, ready for a good deflowering!" was the first thing he heard as he walked round the corner.

Lovely, Anders thought, as he looked to the dwarf walking back and forth before the gathering, shouting his speech. Anders scanned the crowd as the dwarf continued, picking out Hawke and Bethany's dark hair and Fenris's stark white. He nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice spoke from just over his right shoulder.

"It was Anders, wasn't it?"

Anders spun round in surprise to find Hawke's mother Leandra standing behind him. He calmed his breathing and let out a small laugh to cover his nerves.

"Sorry, you startled me," Anders said, "how are you?"

"Oh, well, I'm as well as can be expected," she said, her lips a tight line as she smiled, "are you here to see Hawke off, too?"

"Yes," Anders said, falling into step with Leandra as she headed towards the crowd.

"I'm glad he has such good friends to look after him," Leandra said, making Anders feel distinctly guilty considering, before last night, he'd been avoiding Hawke purposefully for weeks.

He didn't say anything back. The dwarf, Bartrand, Anders was sure Varric had said his brother's name was Bartrand, broke up the meeting for a few minutes so that Leandra could talk to Hawke. Not that he was happy about it; he seemed like one of the grumpiest dwarves Anders had ever met, and Anders used to work with Oghren. Hawke didn't look the worst Anders had ever seen him but he did look rough. He looked like the shouting that Bartrand had been doing hadn't done him any good, probably because he had a headache, and he had purplish bags under his eyes from lack of sleep. He gave Anders a warm smile, however, before letting his mother embarrass him with a hug in front of everyone.

"Mother, please," he mumbled as Leandra didn't seem to be letting go any time soon.

"Well, what do you expect from me," Leandra said, sniffing a little as she let her son step back, "I'll be so worried for you while you're gone. I'm just glad you're leaving your sister here where she'll be safe, if both of you had gone..."

"It's alright mother," Bethany said, putting a consoling hand on her mother's shoulder, "although I think I might be safer in the Deep Roads with you brother, what with all the templar activity lately."

The thought made Anders' anger swell; the thought of the templars taking Hawke's sister...he couldn't even think about it. He swallowed and fidgeted with the pouch at his side, trying to distract himself. Then he remembered one of the reasons he'd come all this way.

"Oh, I made you something," Anders said, fishing out the potion and handing it to Hawke with a knowing smile "It's a, well, 'dwarf patented' hangover cure, thought you might need it."

"Oh Maker, you're a lifesaver Anders," Hawke said with genuine relief, opening the potion to sniff it warily, "you've no idea the headache I woke up with."
"Well it serves you right," Bethany said, sounding scarily like her mother, "you shouldn't drink whiskey, it's never agreed with you."

Hawke seemed to steel himself and then put the bottle to his lips and emptied it in three large gulps. He came back up gasping, his face twisted in disgust.

"Maker, what did you put in that? It tastes like shi..." Hawke stopped mid curse when his mother glared at him, "I mean it tastes awful."

"Sorry, I've never been able to disguise the flavour," Anders said apologetically, "it works though, that's all that counts."

"Right," Hawke didn't seem so convinced as he handed the empty glass flask back to Anders, "thanks for that. Actually, there's something I wanted to talk to you about, do you mind giving us a minute?"

Bethany and Leandra shook their heads, but Anders didn't miss the fact that Bethany was watching him with an odd look as Hawke led him aside, under the pillars that lined the Guild.

"What is it?" Anders asked uncertainly.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you a favour," Hawke said, looking serious, "I'm worried about Bethany. She wasn't joking when she said the templars have been more relentless than usual. They're cracking down harder than normal and, well, I wondered if you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on her while I'm gone. Don't tell her I've asked you or she'll have a fit, she's so independent sometimes it drives me mad, but...please, it would mean a lot to me."

"Of course I will," Anders said gravely and he could hear Justice echoing in his voice, "you didn't have to ask Hawke."

Hawke looked at him intensely for a moment before smiling.

"I should have known I could count on you," he said fondly, "thanks Anders, I mean it."

"Anytime," Anders said, "just be careful, alright? The Deep Roads aren't somewhere to be taken lightly, even if they're basically empty after a Blight. Just...stay safe."

He wasn't expecting the hug, which was probably why it took him a few moments to return it. Hawke's breath ghosted over his ear.

"You too," then he was leaning back, his hands staying on Anders' shoulders, "we'll be back before you know it!"

Then he was marching over to his mother and sister, hugging them both warmly, and leaving Anders distinctly torn. He wanted nothing more than to forbid Hawke to go, tell him he couldn't, that it wasn't worth it, but he didn't. He watched the company assemble with a terrible sense of loss. These next two weeks are going to be hell, Anders thought grimly.

"Come on," Anders jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder; he turned to see Bethany with her mother behind her, "you look like you could use some tea."

"Oh, uh," he thought about getting back and opening the clinic but, in reality, he wasn't really in the right frame of mind for healing right now, he doubted he'd be able to concentrate for long enough, "that actually sounds like a good idea."
Anders was starting to become slowly sick of tea. It wasn't just because he was given it every time he visited Bethany and Leandra, which was every day if he could make it, but more because Leandra offered it almost every second of his visit. The poor woman was so worried about her son that she used making tea as her primary distraction and Anders as the person who she could have drink it all. Anders wished that the Hawke family owned a house plant so he would have somewhere to get rid of the steady stream of tea instead of having to run to the bathroom every half hour.

"That's a piece and two," the blonde merchant said as she handed him the parcel.

"Thank you," Anders said handing over the money while balancing the parcel as best he could.

He'd felt bad imposing on Bethany over the past two weeks, what with drinking the families entire supply of tea, no matter whether it was under duress or not, and had thought that he'd better bring a gift. Cake had seemed appropriate, since he was sure Leandra would be delighted to have something to go with the tea, and he'd recently noticed Bethany had a very sweet tooth. Also it was time for a small celebration of sorts since he'd recently had word from scouts on the Wounded Coast that the expedition party had been sighted heading for Kirkwall. Not for the first time was he glad he had friends in dubious places who kept a lookout on the coast.

He couldn't help but feel a little elated today. At first the waiting had been torturous. Initially it had been worse to be around Bethany and Leandra simply because they were a reminder of just where Hawke was, just what he was doing and just how much danger he was in. However, Anders had promised to keep an eye on Hawke's sister and he wouldn't go back on that. He'd asked his contacts in the resistance to keep an ear to the ground concerning Bethany and any information the templars might have on her, he'd set up ward spells on the doors when he knew no one was looking to alert him if anyone broke in and he'd even mapped out some escape routes just in case they found themselves with unwanted visitors. However, considering how concerned Hawke had seemed before he left, things stayed fairly quiet. Anders had begun to wonder whether it was just and older brother's over protectiveness for a little sister that had made him so paranoid. Still, better safe than in the Gallows.

It had slowly become more bearable as the days went by and, after a while, Anders actually found himself looking forward to his visits. Bethany was very interested in mages rights and the hours went by like minutes once they fell to discussing the topic. Thankfully Gamlen was hardly ever in the house, mainly out drinking, or gambling Anders suspected. The older man was a sour sort and didn't seem to like mages much, unless he could use the fact that he knew mages to scare other people into not hassling him for debts. Leandra didn't entirely approve of the rebelliousness he was instilling in her daughter but he managed to get around that by being naturally charming and polite which Leandra didn't seem to be able to resist. She even told him once that he reminded her of her late husband, Malcolm Hawke, which Anders found quite flattering until he thought about Hawke's being attracted to him and him being like Hawke's father. He'd decided not to think about that, more because it made him think about Hawke more than anything else. Still, at least today the wait would finally be over and he could see Hawke and talk to him and make sure he was alright and never, ever let him go on any fool adventure without him again.

"Oh, it's you Anders," he wasn't offended that Bethany sounded a little disappointed as he walked through the door after knocking, he knew she was waiting for her brother to appear, "how are you today?"
"Entirely hydrated," he joked as he placed the box on the table, earning himself a smile from the
dark haired girl; she had already figured out his growing fear of her mother and her teapot, "and
bearing gifts."

"You didn't have to do that," Bethany said as she walked to the table and pulled the brown paper
from the box, "oh my favourite! I love fruit cake, thank you!"

"And that's not all," Anders said, propping his staff against the wall, grinning, "a little sparrow told
me that the expedition party has been sighted off the Wounded Coast. They're due back by
midday."

"Really?" Bethany said, her eyes sparkling, "Oh that's wonderful! Then they'll be back soon? My
goodness it's almost noon now isn't it?"

"It's around ten I think," Anders smiled at her enthusiasm, "I thought we could waste some time
and then go and meet them as they come in?"

"Yes, yes that's a good idea," Bethany said, looking entirely distracted, wringing her hands, "I need
to tell mother, she'll be so happy!"

Leandra was so overjoyed that she didn't have the presence of mind to even think about making
tea, for which Anders was eternally grateful. They ate the cake and talked about everything and
nothing, seeming lost and carefree at the thought of Hawke's return. Time slipped by quickly,
which is what Anders had hoped would happen, and soon they were all making their way to the
Lowtown gate. It was a blustery day, spells of bright sunshine interspersed with large, dark clouds
that threatened squalls but never seemed to do more than spit. Anders couldn't have cared less, it
could have been thunder and lightning he wouldn't have heeded it in the slightest. They stood by
the gate and waited impatiently, looking down the long stairs to the City Gates. When the lengthy
line of the expedition eventually appeared, snaking its way into the city to start the long climb up
into Lowtown and through into Hightown, Anders felt Bethany slip her hand into his and squeeze it
tightly. He gave her a reassuring smile and she just beamed back at him. It wasn't long until the
tired, dusty and rather worse for wear explorers were traipsing past them, hauling cases and
wagons, each silent, eyes to the ground, as if still in the trance of a long walk. Anders scanned them
all eagerly, trying to find Hawke's distinctive dark hair, or even Fenris or Varric. The longer he
looked the more he became aware of Bethany's hand slowly tightening on his.

"Excuse me Miss, I couldn't help but recognise you..."

Anders looked down to find a dwarf standing in front of them, addressing Bethany with a
melancholy look in his eye. Anders blinked at him, as if not sure what on earth he wanted and felt
like telling him that they were busy right now, couldn't he tell, they were waiting on someone
and...

"You are Messer Hawke's sister, aren't you?" the dwarf continued uncertainly.

"That's right," Bethany's voice was toneless and Anders thought she was going to squeeze his
fingers off if she kept up the way she was going.

"Then I'm afraid I can only offer my condolences to you, my lady," the dwarf said with genuine
regret, "he was a fine man, saved my own son Sandal when we were down there in the Deep
Roads..."

"What?" Leandra's voice cut in, disbelieving, "What are you talking about?"
"Master Bartrand, he told us there was a cave in, a most unfortunate and tragic accident..."

Anders stopped listening. He looked up to see the last of the expedition trail past leaving only dirt and cart tracks in their wake. There had been no Hawke, no Fenris, no Varric. Anders felt his mouth moving but no sound came out. He became aware that Bethany had let go of his hand and looked up to see mother and daughter in each other's arms, Bethany pale and Leandra sobbing brokenly. The dwarf looked truly remorseful at having to deliver the news and bowed, respectfully excusing himself. Anders took two steps back and leant against the wall for support.

It wasn't true, he thought, it wasn't. Hawke would never be killed by something as trivial as a bloody cave in. It wasn't true. Fenris wouldn't have let it happen. As much as he hated the bloody elf he seemed to care for Hawke. Fenris wouldn't have let him be killed. Varric, Varric would have done something. The dwarf could charm his way out of any situation. Anders was sure, if there was any way out Varric would know it. He would, he would...Anders didn't really remember how they got back to the house but the next thing he was aware of was sitting by the fire, staring at the flames. He looked round to find Bethany and Leandra sitting at the dinner table, two chairs pushed together, daughter's arms around her mother's shoulders. Leandra seemed to be dozing, her head on Bethany's shoulder, but Anders suspected it was the shock. The healer in him took over and he automatically stood up and began preparing something hot to drink. It was a good distraction and, for once, he didn't begrudge Leandra her constant tea making over the past two weeks. It really did work.

"Here, drink this," he said, lifting Leandra's shaking hands gently to grip the tea cup, "you'll feel better."

Leandra did as she was told, looking like child as she gripped the cup with both hands and sipped carefully. Bethany took the cup from Anders but didn't drink, just sat looking down into the tea as if it would hold some sort of answer. Anders put his hand on her shoulder.

"It'll help," Anders said, still on autopilot; he needed to look after them, make sure they were alright.

He coaxed the two women into finishing the tea and then asked Bethany to help him take her mother to her bed to lie down. Leandra went without a word, shuffling like an invalid. Anders made sure she was comfortable, even stealing and extra blanket from Gamlen's bed to ensure she was warm enough, before placing a gentle sleeping spell on her. Leandra's glassy eyes drifted shut and Anders felt the loss hit him like a physical thing. Now that he didn't have anyone to treat, anything to do, all he could think of was...

"We'll be back before you know it!" Hawke said with a winning smile.

Anders swallowed and shook his head, rubbing at the thick ache that blossomed in his chest. He pushed away from the bed and strode out into the living area, closing the door gently behind him. Bethany was standing in the middle of the room looking entirely misplaced. She turned to him, her eyes wide, looking like a lost, frightened little girl. She'd been staying strong for her mother, Anders thought, and now that her mother wasn't there, like Anders, she'd lost her focus.

"Oh Anders..." she said before breaking down into fits of tears.

Then he was holding her, her arms tightly wrapped around his back, her face pressed into his chest as she cried and cried. Anders rubbed her back soothingly and murmured words, not even sure exactly what he was saying. She shook, convulsing under the sobs, and in a perverse way Anders was glad for her sorrow; it gave him another distraction, another 'patient' to treat, someone else who needed his help. He held her until the sobs stopped coming, until she only sniffed
occasionally, before breaking the hug and looking at her.

"He can't be dead," Bethany said, not looking at Anders, not even seeming to talk to him as she stared at somewhere over his shoulder, "my brother would never be killed by a stupid cave in."

"You should get some rest too Bethany," Anders said, aware that Bethany's words echoed his own thoughts from earlier.

"He isn't!" she said angrily, focusing on him, "He isn't dead!"

"Bethany please, calm down," he said rationally, hearing a certain amount of Justice in his voice as he found it harder and harder to keep himself under control.

"Don't tell me to calm down! You think he's dead well he's not! He's not!" Bethany screamed, pushing him away before running to the bedroom she shared with her mother and slamming the door behind her.

Anders could hear her crying on the other side but knew better than to try and comfort her further. She would calm down on her own, he'd seen it before. People who'd lost loved ones, relatives of the ones he couldn't save, they all lashed out, usually at him. He was used to it, he was used to it...

"I'm used to it," Anders whispered to the empty room, feeling the tears running down his face.

The anger and the pain and losing those he loved, the hatred and the running, always running...he was used to it, but it never got any easier. In fact it only seemed to get harder and harder to bear. Anders fell into the nearest chair, put his head in his hands and tried to stop shaking.

He didn't remember falling asleep but it was dark when he awoke. There was an odd feeling of déjà vu as he pushed up from the table and, for a horrible moment, he was transported back to that silly, drunken night, the night Hawke had clumsily kissed him...he lifted his fingers to his lips automatically but stopped before touching them. He curled his hand into a fist and put it back onto the tabletop.

He looked around to find the room dark, the fireplace empty. Bethany had probably exhausted herself and fallen asleep and goodness knows where Gamlen was. He didn't really care. He felt about on the table for the lantern, opening the glass case to light the wick. The bright light illuminated the room, casting the corners into even deeper shadow. Anders rubbed at his face, flinching in pain at the rawness of the skin around his eyes. He sat back in the chair and tried to think what his next move was.

Find Bartrand and kill him for ever agreeing to take Hawke on that fool expedition in the first place. No, this wasn't Bartrand's fault, it wasn't anyone's fault. It had been an accident, which only made it all the harder to bear as there was no one to blame. Anders wanted someone to blame, he wanted retribution, he wanted justice. Hawke deserved that at least, he deserved to be avenged. Anders tried to swallow down the rising anger and let out a long, steady sigh. He needed to calm down, he needed to think straight.

The knock at the door made him jump and all rational thought flew out of the window. He was out of the chair in a flash and heading for the door. All he could think was, it's Hawke, it's Hawke come home, he isn't dead at all, Bethany was right, she was right, he isn't dead, they found a way back, there wasn't a cave in at all...

"Hawke you..." Ander's words died into nothing but a choked whisper at what he found on the other side of the door.
The templar didn't give him time to close the door again, shoving him hard enough that he fell backwards into the wall. By the time he'd pushed himself back up the room was full of templars. I'm still asleep, Anders thought desperately, this is a nightmare, I'm still asleep. Only he wasn't waking up and the pain in his hands from falling was all too real for this to be a nightmare. He felt his head swim; there were six templars in the room none of which were paying him any attention and one of which he recognised. His old friend Ser Cullen, or Knight Captain Cullen as he was now. Cullen turned to him as he walked past.

"We're here for the girl, Bethany Hawke," he said sternly, "don't make any trouble."

He felt frozen, torn between what he should do. Should he attack, should he try and get to Bethany? If it was just him he wouldn't have hesitated an assault but he had to think of Bethany and Leandra, make sure they were safe. He heard a door open and then there was a scream. A templar appeared in the lantern glow, dragging Bethany by the arm, the poor girl stumbling and scrabbling to get away, and all logic disappeared.

"Let her go you bastard!" Anders yelled, throwing all the power he could into the blast of kinetic magic.

The three templars nearest him were knocked off their feet, allowing Anders the time he needed to send a smaller, more controlled blast at the templar holding Bethany. Thankfully he let go of her arm as he flew backwards into the wall with a satisfying crunch, the wood splintering. Anders ran forwards and grabbed Bethany by the arm, pushing her into the corner and placing himself in front of her. He wished the bloody templars weren't between him and his staff or they'd all be dead by now. He looked around as the three templars scrambled to their feet, all five of them drawing their swords and advancing on him with deadly intent.

"Stop!" came the unexpected cry.

The templars halted their advance dutifully. Ser Cullen stepped forwards, his helmet removed, and placed himself at the front of his troop. He studied Anders intently for a moment, as if he thought he recognised him, before purposefully and slowly sheathing his sword.

"There needs be no bloodshed, serrah," he said, his voice entirely calm and reasonable, "we didn't come here to fight. If both of you come with us quietly, I swear on my life that no harm will come to you."

"No harm," Anders spat, feeling Bethany's trembling hand in his as she stepped up to stand partly beside and still partly behind him, "other than locking us up in the fucking Gallows. I'd like to see you try and get me back again Cullen, I really would."

Cullen looked a little taken aback. One of his templar guards took a threatening step forwards, obviously not happy at the way the apostate was threatening their Captain, but Cullen put out a hand to stop their advance. He looked back to Anders and his eyes narrowed for a moment before widening in recognition.

"I know you," he said slowly, "from the Circle, Ferelden...Anders?"

"You have a good memory," Anders said darkly, remembering the time it had been Ser Cullen's turn to track him down after his escape; that had been an interesting two weeks indeed.

"I thought you were recruited into the Grey Wardens?" Cullen frowned, keeping his sword arm free and close to the hilt.
"I was," Anders said, stalling, trying to see if there was a way to either get to Bethany's staff in her room or somehow get them both to the door; his staff was a loss, surrounded as it was by templars.

"Running again then?" Cullen said disapprovingly.

"You know me so well," Anders said sarcastically, earning him a dark glare from Cullen.

"Look, Anders, please be reasonable," Cullen said, his voice surprisingly gentle, "we don't want to hurt you. We have orders to take Bethany to the Gallows where she will be handed over to the Circle, as will you. There's no need for anyone to get hurt."

Anders remembered Varric saying something about Hawke helping Cullen out with a string of abominations and blood mages infiltrating the templars and wondered if that was why he was being so bloody reasonable. Although, admittedly, Anders had always secretly liked Cullen when he'd been in the Circle in Ferelden. He was a bit of a pushover back then, but kind and gentle, unlike a lot of the other templars. He'd almost been lenient in a way and he was a great one to wind up, when Anders was feeling bored. If he remembered rightly he thought he'd even made him laugh once. That was before his escape attempt however. Cullen was never really the same with him after he'd had to spend a fortnight tracking him down through a swamp, then a forest before finding him at a remote inn near Lothering. Anders focused on that, yes, Cullen was his enemy. They were all the enemy. They were coming to take them away, lock them in the Gallows and never let them be free, make them tranquil, take their lives!

"You're right Cullen," Anders said, hearing the thick echo of Justice in his voice; he lifted his right hand, feeling the flames licking around his palm in a fiery ball, "there is never any need for anyone to get hurt, yet that's all you bastards do! I won't let you take her Cullen, and I'll die before I let you lock me in that fucking prison!"

"Anders, no..." Bethany was pulling on his hand desperately, "there are too many of them!"

"Don't do this," Cullen said threateningly, his hand closing slowly around his sword hilt.

"You'll never hurt another mage!" then Anders panicked as he realised just how much grip he'd allowed Justice to have.

He'd been so focused on his anger, on deflecting Cullen, that he hadn't realised just how much control he'd let slip. He felt the flaring of the markings on his skin, his eyes shuttering white then back again. He saw Cullen take a surprised step back as the Fade seemed to snap and crack around him, fizzling in and out of reality. No, Anders thought wildly, not now, not now! He had to stay in control, he couldn't let Justice out into this, who knows what he might do, who he might hurt. If Bethany and Leandra weren't here maybe he would have been more open to the idea of letting Justice have his way but, as it was, there was too much risk that he would hurt them without knowing he'd even done it. He looked up to see that Cullen had recomposed himself and was now looking very grim indeed. Anders steeled himself for the fight that was sure to come, trying his best to remember how to focus his elemental and primal magic without his staff. Justice was clamouring at the barriers, pushing and pushing until Anders couldn't focus on anything except trying to calm him down. Bethany was pleading with him to relax, her voice frantic with fear but adamant with strong will. Anders felt like he was drowning as Cullen stepped forwards, his eyes going wide as Justice finally broke through and everything went a blinding white.

"Get away from my sister!"

Anders thought that he really must have dreamt the whole thing. He must be dreaming. His eyes flared back and all of a sudden he could see. He wasn't where he'd remembered being; he'd
remembered being in the corner with Bethany and now he was on the floor with Cullen's knee in his back and his arm pulled securely up between his shoulder blades. He tried to move but Cullen only pressed harder. It had been that voice, the voice that distracted him. Cullen must have made his move when that voice...that voice...

"Garret! Garret!" Bethany was wailing and Anders managed to twist around enough to see her run, unimpeded by the templars, into Hawke's arms.

"Hawke..." Anders breathed out in disbelief; he was finding it hard to breathe but wasn't sure if it was from sheer surprise or the full weight of Cullen on his back.

"It's alright Bethany," Hawke looked just as panicked as Anders had felt when the templars had first barged in, staring around the room in horror and anger; then their eyes met, "Anders..!"

"Messer Hawke," Cullen said as he finally lifted himself from Anders and hauled the mage up, keeping him securely held, "please do not add to this debacle, we are here to take your sister to the Circle..."

"The hell you are!" Hawke shouted, instinctively placing himself between Bethany and the templars, "You're not taking anyone! Let him go this minute Cullen or I swear you'll regret it!"

Anders felt Cullen's grip tighten and grimaced. Hawke practically bared his teeth as he snarled threateningly at the advancing templars. He was ready to fight, if Hawke was here, Hawke was here, alive, well and alive, he would fight at his side and they could get away..!

"No, stop, don't fight!" then there was Bethany, throwing herself out into the middle of the fray, stopping everyone dead in their tracks.

"Bethany what are you doing!" Hawke shouted in panic, trying to pull her back but she only pulled away, holding up her hands placatingly.

"I'll go, I'll go with you, just don't hurt my family, please," she was pleading with him and it made Anders sick to watch it; he could feel Cullen shift subtly behind him, his grip never loosening.

"Bethany no!" Anders yelled, "Don't do this!"

"I give you my word as an officer of the order," Cullen said solemnly, "no harm will come to your family if you come with us."

"Bethany don't..!" Hawke was saying, sounding suddenly horrified.

"Then I'll go, I'll go," Bethany said shakily, "but just me. You're only here for me, that's what you said wasn't it?"

Cullen seemed to hesitate and Anders felt Bethany's words like a punch to the stomach. Was she bargaining for him? Was Bethany Hawke bargaining with templars to save her family...and him? No, he couldn't let her do that, he couldn't, he was supposed to protect her, save her, not the other way around. He'd promised Hawke, he'd promised!

"Let him go, he hasn't done anything wrong," Bethany said sternly, suddenly looking very in control, every inch Hawke's sister, "you're here for me. You can take him when you come for him."

There was a moment of deadly silence in the house. Cullen didn't move for a long while, but then suddenly the pressure on his wrist was gone and Anders stumbled forwards and tripped as Cullen
let him go. Strong hands caught him and suddenly Hawke was there, right before him, his green eyes shining in the wavering glow from the lantern. Anders thought he might be losing his mind but forced himself to focus. Then things only got worse again.

"What...Garret? Is that you? I knew it was all a dream, I knew my boy wasn't.!!" Leandra's sleep-fuddled voice drifted out among them and Anders turned to watch her step out into the room.

Then her eyes seemed to clear, coming out of the after effects of the spell he'd put her under, and a terrible comprehension slipped down over her face as she took in the templars and Cullen and Bethany in their midst. Her eyes went wide and she brought her hands up to her face, shaking her head back and forth.

"No, my baby, you can't take her, Bethany!!" she shrieked and launched herself at her daughter.

One of the templars closest to her grabbed Leandra to stop her, while the two nearest Bethany took the now distraught girl by either arm. Anders felt his head spin, feeling Justice once more trying to surface, pushing against barriers that were already weak enough as it was. Then Hawke's steadying hands were gone as he ran at the templar.

"Get your filthy fucking hands off of my mother!" he roared, pushing the templar back and gathering his mother to him.

"Please Hawke," Cullen was saying as he gestured for the templars escorting Bethany to take her from the room; Anders watched her go, the guilt tearing at him, "I'm doing this as a courtesy to you and your family. You helped me greatly with Tarohne and Kerran and I made sure to deal with this case personally so that your family would not be implicated for harbouring an apostate. Please, don't make this any harder than it needs to be."

"Cullen you fucking hypocrite," Hawke said, his voice dark with anger and his eyes narrowed, but only moments later he seemed to look nothing but lost as he stared at Cullen; the Knight Captain only looked back sympathetically, "You...you hurt her and I swear I'll kill you, you understand?"

"She will come to no harm," Cullen said, "I swear to you."

Anders watched Cullen and the last three templar guards leave without another word; his body felt frozen. Justice was screaming in his ears, roaring at him, calling him coward, hypocrite and Leandra's terrified sobs beat at him from without. He could feel all the energy draining away from his body, flashes of memory assaulting him; he was trying to clutch onto her hands but they were pulling him. She ran with him, ran all the way to the carriage and she was screaming at them to stop and he was crying, and crying but they wouldn't listen, they wouldn't listen! He caught a flash of her amber eyes and blonde hair before the templars shoved him roughly into the carriage and slammed the door shut. And he was beating his fists against the door and she was beating back...and then he was the only one hammering on the wood and he knew she was gone forever. Justice was howling and Leandra was sobbing and he could hear his, young hands beating and beating against that hollow wood. Anders lifted his shaking hands and placed them over his ears, trying to block it all out, but it was too much. He felt his eyes roll up in his head and knew no more.

He was warm, and there was something soft pressed against his face. Anders frowned and slowly opened his eyes. The ceiling was unfamiliar but when he looked around he slowly managed to orient himself. He was in Hawke's room, lying in Hawke's bed. There was a small, half melted candle sitting in a cup on the floor beside him. The flame flickered in an unseen breeze, casting wild shadows over the walls. Anders took in a few deep breaths and tried to steady himself. He felt
sore all over and his body felt heavy. He brought his right hand up from under the covers and felt at the soft thing on his face. When he picked it up and pulled it away from his face he found it was a wet cloth which had been folded to lay against his forehead. Anders put it down on the floor beside the candle, his arm going limp.

He lay there, not knowing what to do. He should get up and go home, he thought numbly, he should leave and never come back. Again, he’d failed again, was there anything he could do right? The first disaster had been in Amaranthine, with Rolan, his death had started Anders on the sliding slope down into instability. Then it had been Karl, the man he’d sworn to protect with his life and who he’d ended up slaying with his own hand. Then it had been Hawke, his supposed death, and then Bethany...oh Maker, Bethany...

The door opened and Anders felt like pretending he was still asleep. Instead he just didn't react, even as the person walked over and knelt down beside him, placing the cloth back against his forehead. He looked over cautiously, surprised to find that it was Merrill. She smiled at him sadly but kindly.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm..." he wanted to say fine but that would be a terrible lie, "...still a bit sore."

"Well I'm not much for healing magic so I was waiting for you to wake up," Merrill picked up a potion from behind her and uncorked it, "here, sit up and drink this, it'll help."

Anders did as he was told, the cloth falling from his face as he did. He winced as he put pressure on his right hand. He looked down, realising that Cullen must have had a hold of his wrist in the exact same place Hawke had given him the bruise from before. No wonder it had hurt so much, he thought as he inspected the newly discoloured flesh. He drank the potion Merrill handed him and then gave her the empty bottle back. She put it down beside the candle, the light refracting through the glass in a myriad of little rainbows.

"Do you want to get up?" Merrill asked him after a moment silence.

"Where's Hawke?" Anders said, ignoring her question.

"He's gone to get Varric, tell him about Bethany, see if there's anything he can do," Merrill explained, "Hawke came to me first though, said he needed someone to come and look after you while he wasn't here. He was so worried you know, when he said you’d passed out. You have a bit of a fever too, had it when I got here."

"How long have I been asleep?" Anders asked.

"Oh, I'm not sure, about three hours or so, maybe?" Merrill judged, surprising Anders.

"Three..? I need to go find him," Anders said, throwing the blanket from him suddenly, his skin feeling hot on coming into contact with the cold air.

"Oh, wait, no! I meant get up and stay in the house not get up and go running outside!" Merrill said, trying to sound stern, "You're not well Anders!"

Anders tried to ignore her, stumbling to his feet, but his legs gave out on his as soon as he stood up. Merrill was by his side fussing over him in no time. She put his arm around her shoulders and tried to steer him back to the bed but he wouldn't have it. Finally she acquiesced and led him stumbling into the living quarters. Leandra was there, sitting by the fire, with Gamlen pacing backwards and forwards in front of the writing desk. The older man sent him a glare when he saw him, his hands...
tightening into fists. Anders suddenly wished he'd taken Merrill's advice and got back into bed.

"You!" he said, voice haughty with loathing, pointing his finger accusingly at Anders, "This is all your doing!"

"What?" Merrill said, wide eyed, before realising he was pointing at Anders and not her.

"You coming round here every day must have given them the idea that Bethany was an apostate!" Gamlen shouted, "Or maybe you just sold her out to them, did you?"

"Or maybe," Anders said, his head swimming a little as the anger began to mix with his feverish condition, "it was something to do with the fact that he uncle couldn't keep his big mouth shut about his niece. Selling her out to do jobs, telling the whole undercity that she was an apostate and then wondering why the templars are suddenly bashing his door in..!"

"You ungrateful little bastard!" Gamlen looked a little pale despite his words, as if Anders had hit too close to home, "How dare you talk to me like that!"

The man started forwards, his fist raised as if ready to strike. Merrill took a step back, forcing Anders to do the same, but then a voice stopped them all short.

"Gamlen," Leandra's tone was subdued but worn out, as if she was finding it an effort even just to speak, "please."

"But Leandra..!" the man started to argue.

"Please," she said again, not taking her eyes from the fire, "no more fighting."

They stood there for a moment in silence, Merrill moving back and forth from foot to foot uncertainly while Gamlen let out a harsh sigh and threw his hands up in the air in frustration. He turned and walked to the table, sitting down and folding his arms tightly. Anders felt like collapsing again but didn't want to end up on the floor, especially in front of Gamlen. Thankfully the door took that moment to open and Hawke walked in, closing it tightly behind him. He looked up and saw Anders, his eyes flashing with worry.

"What are you doing up? Merrill I told you not to let him get up," Hawke said severely.

"I wasn't going to let him leave," Merrill said worriedly, "honest."

"I'm fine..." Anders lied, trying to disengage his arm from Merrill's grasp.

"You shut up." Hawke said authoritatively, pointing at Anders, before moving to Merrill, "Merrill, could you do me a favour and go up to Hightown and let Fenris know what's happened? I haven't been able to find Varric anywhere, he must still be out looking for news of Bartrand. Maybe Fenris will be able to track him down."

"Okay, I can do that," Merrill said, lifting Anders arm over her head and looking determined, "he's had a potion so don't give let him have any more for a little while. Oh and he's a bit feverish, make sure he gets a lot to drink."

Hawke nodded, walking over to take a hold of Anders as he wavered on his feet. Merrill grabbed her staff and slipped out into the street quietly, leaving the house as if she'd never been there at all. Anders stared at the floor and tried not to let the room spin around him. He heard Hawke talking to Gamlen but didn't pay too much attention.
"Uncle don't just sit there, can't you make mother something to eat?" Hawke sounded more frustrated than angry.

"There isn't any food in the house..." Gamlen started.

"Then go and get some," Hawke said sternly, "here's some bloody money."

He heard Gamlen mutter something and then Hawke's arm was around his back and he was being steered back into the room again. Hawke kicked the door shut behind him and led him over to the bed, laying him down gently and pulling the blanket up over his chest.

"I'm alright," Anders said weakly.

"Of course you are," Hawke said with a shake of his head, "just lie down and do as you're told for once will you?"

Anders didn't argue. He let Hawke do whatever he wanted, not saying a word as the other man disappeared from view. Anders stayed staring at the ceiling, his head slowly beginning to clear as the potion took effect. He could hear Hawke moving around the room, replacing the candle at his beside and putting more into the other cups dotted about. Then Hawke returned to his field of vision, a cup of water in his hand. He helped Anders to sit up and held the cup out to him. Anders took it with an unsteady hand.

"Drink it, you've got a fever," Hawke said, beginning to look a little worried when Anders just stared down at the cup of water in his hand and didn't move.

"Anders are you listening to me?"

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Anders felt confused; even with the potion helping to cut through the feverish uncertainty he was feeling he was still bemused by Hawke's behaviour, "After everything and I couldn't even..."

"This wasn't your fault," Hawke growled out angrily, finally cottoning on to what Anders was getting at; he took the cup from Anders hand and lifted it to his lips, "now drink this bloody water before I make you."

Anders opened his lips and Hawke tilted the cup until the cold fluid poured slowly into his mouth. He swallowed dutifully until the cup was empty and Hawke put the cup down onto the floor beside him. Anders felt a little better, a bit more lucid, but that only made the memories clearer.

"Hawke, I'm sorry," he said, not caring that the other man didn't seem to blame him, just wanting to say it.

"Anders don't..." Hawke said firmly.

"You were dead," Anders said, shaking his head, "he told us you were dead."

"What are you talking about?" Hawke said, his brow furrowing in confusion, "Who told you I was dead?"

"A dwarf, we went, we all went to meet you and..." Anders stopped; it seemed like a lifetime ago that he Bethany and Leandra had set out for the gate.

"...Maker, what a mess," Hawke said after a short pause, lifting a hand to rub at his face, suddenly looking much older than he had when he'd left for the Deep Roads; his eyes were a little harder,
less carefree, "come on, lie down again, you need to rest."

Anders looked at him for a moment. How had it come to this? he thought. Why couldn't things ever be simple? What was he supposed to do now? When Hawke leaned in to take a hold of his shoulders Anders lifted his arms and wrapped them around him, pulling Hawke close and pushing his face into his neck. The other man seemed surprised but still lifted his arms to hold Anders back.

"I'm so glad your alright," Anders said quietly.

"I'm fine," Hawke said, "it's a bit of a long story, what happened down there, why we didn't come back with the rest of the expedition. I think it's best to wait until your better before I tell you about it."

"As long as you're alive," Anders mumbled, feeling a little woozy.

"I'm alive Anders," Hawke said, a small hint of laughter in his voice, "I'm not going anywhere, alright?"

"Alright," Anders nodded, rubbing his cheek against Hawke's neck in the process.

Hawke leant forwards, lying Anders back down gently before removing his arms and replacing the blanket once more. Anders watched him with half lidded eyes, suddenly dreadfully tired. He didn't want to take his eyes off of Hawke in case this was a dream, in case he woke up in the Gallows or in a world where Hawke really was dead. Hawke picked up the cloth Merrill had been using earlier and wet it again in the bucket of water she'd put in the corner. He then wrung it out and placed it back on Anders forehead. Hawke seemed to hesitate and then moved his hand down to cup Anders cheek tenderly.

"Get some sleep," he said softly.

Anders couldn't have stayed awake if he tried. He fell asleep with the soft traces of Hawke's touch lingering on his heated skin.
When he next awoke it was to the sound of familiar voices in the next room. The candles had burnt low, leaving the room in eerie shadow. He felt refreshed at least, although it was still painful to move. There was an ache in his lower back where Cullen had pressed his armoured knee and his wrist was still tender. Anders got up purposefully, glad that he wasn't feeling ill anymore and looked for his coat. He found it folded neatly at the base of the bed. He slid it on while he thought things through; he needed to get out of here, it wasn't safe. No matter Cullen's strange sense of honour, it didn't mean that one of his troops wouldn't talk despite their Captain's orders. Someone would be coming for him and he needed to get back to Darktown before that happened. He was surprised it hadn't already.

"Well, you look like shit," were the first words out of Varric's mouth as Anders stepped from Hawke's room.

"Thanks for that," Anders said, taking in the rest of the company.

Fenris sat at the other end of the dining table from Varric, his huge sword resting behind him against the wall. He didn't look up. Merrill was sitting by the fire, swinging her legs and eating a piece of bread. She waved to him cheerily.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better," he said, adding, "thank you Merrill."

"Oh no problem," she said with a smile and a shrug, "I rather enjoyed it, helping out I mean. Made me feel all responsible."

"Where's Hawke?" he asked no one in particular.

"He's in there with his mother and Gamlen," Varric said nodding to Leandra's bedroom, looking a little grim, "she's not taking this well, been in bed all day."

"Is she ill?" Anders asked quickly, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Haven't you done enough?" Fenris finally spoke up.

Anders felt his chest tighten with anger and guilt. Anger at Fenris's predictable judgement and guilt that, for the first time, he felt somehow that he deserved it.

"I'd love to know what you mean by that," Anders let the anger weigh out over the guilt and retorted.

"Do I have to explain it to you?" Fenris said, not even gracing Anders with a glance as he continued to look straight ahead, "Drawing attention to Hawke's family when what they need is anonymity? You brought the templars here, it's your doing."

"That's not true," Anders said back stonily, "I did everything I could to keep Bethany safe...!"

"Not enough it seems," the elf finally levelled those dangerous eyes at him, "and after all your big talk of saving mages you couldn't even protect one girl from a measly group of templars. Pathetic."

Varric looked disapprovingly at Fenris but didn't say a word. Merrill just looked back and forth
between the elf and the mage worriedly.

"And I'm guessing you would have done something different," Anders said darkly, "considering you probably think Bethany is better off where she is!"

"What do you mages touch that you do not spoil?" Fenris sneered, "Everything was going fine until you turned back up."

"Oh I see what this is really about," Anders narrowed his eyes, clocking the elf's tone, "you never think of anyone but yourself do you? Hawke's just lost his sister and you're..!"

"Will the two of you give it a rest?"

Hawke sounded more tired than anything else as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. Fenris let out a quiet sound of disgust and looked away from Anders' glare. Anders couldn't help but feel the need to strangle the elf. Such a stubborn, stupid, selfish bastard! he thought furiously. How could he act jealous at a time like this? He didn't even know anything, just made assumptions based on his own unique experiences, judged everyone by their ability to do magic and nothing else. When he looked away from Fenris he found Hawke looking at him disapprovingly. Well Hawke could shove his disapproval, Anders thought as he grabbed his staff from its place against the wall where he had left it what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Where are you going?" Hawke asked, sounding suddenly concerned.

"Back to the clinic," Anders said determinedly, "it's not safe for me to be here, for me or your family. The templars may be back at any time."

"They didn't take you before, I doubt they'll be mounting another search party so soon," Varric said, trying to sound reasonable, but Anders ignored him; he hadn't bothered to speak up when Fenris had made his feelings clear, why should he listen to him now?

"Out of the two of us Varric, I'll be following the advice of the one whose spent nearly their entire life being hunted by templars," Anders said tightly as he strapped his staff to his belt and headed for the door.

"Good riddance," he heard Fenris mutter as he hauled the door open and stepped out.

"Fenris enough!" Hawke said loudly, "Anders wait..!"

He skipped down the stairs quickly, his pace resolute. It seemed to be early morning but Anders had entirely lost track of the hours. The streets were empty and the sky was a pale, sickly yellow and grey of low cloud. It had been night time when the templars had come and Merrill had said he hadn't slept long. It must be morning, Anders thought, focusing on the trivial as he tried not to think about the bigger picture. He heard Hawke running behind him but didn't turn.

"Wait, you shouldn't go alone," Hawke grabbed his shoulder to try and stop him.

"Go back to your mother Hawke," Anders shrugged Hawke's hand away and kept walking, "she needs you more than I do."

"As if I'm going to listen to you when..." Hawke started, keeping pace with the mage.

Anders turned on him angrily, forcing Hawke to skid to a stop.

"And that's the problem, isn't it?" Anders spat, "No one ever fucking listens to me. This is why I do
what I do Hawke, to stop things like this from ever happening, but no one takes any notice. Not until it's too late!"

"Don't start blaming this on me, I've never..." Anders cut him off again.

"I'm not blaming you Hawke," he said in frustration, "don't you understand, this isn't just about you, that it can't just be about you? Can't you see that this is happening everywhere, all the time all over Kirkwall, all over Ferelden, all over Thedas? Every day this happens to someone's family and I need to stop it!"

Anders could feel that anger churning in him, that same hatred that brought him to Kirkwall in the first place. Hawke was staring at him, his expression unreadable. The man looked tired but strong, his eyes dulled and hard.

"You know I agree with you," Hawke said sternly, "so why are you saying this?"

"Because I know you agree but it's only talk when you associate with someone like that!" Anders practically shouted as he jabbed an accusing finger back towards Hawke's house, "He's the kind of ignorance I'm fighting against and you and your friends just sit around and let him perpetuate it!"

"I've never...! Anders you're being unreasonable," Hawke said, "you have to give people a chance to change, you can't expect someone like Fenris to transform in a few months after a lifetime of abuse!"

"Yes, I suppose I shouldn't expect miracles," Anders said, his expression hard, "but until he comes round, if that ever happens, just keep him the fuck away from me if you'd rather he continue breathing."

Anders turned back around and walked down the stairs that led to the market. He didn't hear Hawke follow.

Time seemed to slip past too quickly, like sand falling through an hourglass. Anders noted that fewer and fewer refugees were coming to the clinic; at first he had thought it was imagination but slowly it had begun to worry him. He tried to reassure himself that it was because they'd found homes, or moved up in Kirkwall away from Darktown, but he doubted it. The Coterie was pretty much the only place for work if you lived in the lower city and life expectancy was low for new members. The people in Darktown were disposable and Anders knew it, refugees most of all.

He hadn't seen Hawke in months, not since Bethany had been taken. It had left Anders feeling accountable, what with leaving on such a sour note, but he didn't have the time or the patience to deal with the idea of Hawke and Fenris. He saw Varric occasionally, either when he was out rooting for supplies in the Lowtown stores or sometimes if he felt energetic enough to travel to the Hanged Man. There was always the thought, in the back of his mind, that he could run into Hawke if he just turned up at the right time, but disappointingly the man never seemed to be there. Yes he didn't have the energy to deal with the man, yet he still felt the need to see him. Varric had told him that he hadn't seen much of Hawke either, except every now and then. Now that Leandra had made her slow recovery she was petitioning the Viscount for their right to buy back the Amell estate. Varric had a few interested buyers for the haul they'd brought back from the Deep Roads and Hawke had already told him he'd be using the money to buy the estate, whatever the price. As far as Varric could tell Bethany's capture had all but destroyed Leandra at first but now she had something to work towards, something she could get back, well, Hawke would do anything to see his mother happy again. He hadn't spent hardly a penny of the savings he'd made on himself and seemingly wouldn't spend any of his hard earned share from the expedition either. He now used up
all of his time out making a name for himself and getting as much coin as possible.

Anders continued on as normal. Working in the clinic day and night, meeting with the resistance. He'd been surprised to find that even they had heard nothing of Cullen's midnight raid on the Hawke family home until it was too late. They weren't sure why it had been so secretive but Anders suspected Cullen had kept the whole thing under wraps. In a way that was a good thing, at least Cullen had kept to his word, but in a way it was worrying that their information network could be eluded so easily. They all agreed that they needed to tighten up their operation if they didn't wish further surprises. Sabine, one of his contacts in Hightown, a merchant there, had also reported a rise in the vigilance of the City Guard. More than six apostates had been caught and handed over to the templars in the past two months which was unheard of. Usually the guards left mages to the templars, not involving themselves too frequently in their area. Since Aveline Vallen's promotion however, everything had become more efficient unfortunately. Anders wished he was on good enough terms with the Guard Captain that he could gain an audience with her and actually change her mind, but he very much doubted it. Considering the last conversation they'd had about the treatment of mages he was pretty sure that she felt she was doing her duty in capturing them and practically throwing them in the Gallows herself.

In fact, out of all his unlikely companions, it was Merrill that he bumped into most. She was always mooching about the alienage whenever he went to the stall for herbs and she was always happy to talk. Too happy most of the time. She told him all about how she and Hawke met, about Asha-Belinar, about her time in Ferelden and about the Dalish. Anders suspected that she was lonely more than anything else. The other elves didn't seem to take to her very well and Anders wondered what the secret was. Merrill was one of the sweetest people he'd ever met, there seemed no reason not to like her.

"Gosh it's been a long time since I was out of Lowtown," Merrill said, her eyes wide as she surveyed Darktown in all its splendour, "I've never been to this part of Kirkwall before."

"I doubt many people have a good reason to come to Darktown," Anders said, smiling at her.

"Well you're a good reason to come to Darktown aren't you?" Merrill said innocently, "Your clinic I mean."

"I..." Anders still wasn't used to compliments and Merrill was always so very blunt, "thanks Merrill."

"Oh, that's alright, it's true though isn't it?" she said, keeping up with his longer stride by skipping every fifth step.

"I hope so," Anders said with a sigh.

Merrill had said she wanted to see where he worked and Anders had thought it better to escort her through Darktown rather than just give her directions. Not that he wasn't sure that Merrill could take care of herself if it came to it but she was still so naive; he didn't want anyone taking advantage of her good nature and getting her into trouble.

"Well, it'll be nice to help out again too..." Merrill started as they both climbed down the stairs to the clinic, but she didn't get much further.

Anders heard the scream before he saw who made it. He looked up in alarm and raced up the other set of stairs in front of him, taking them two at a time. The first thing he saw was the blood.

"Anders! Anders help, I don't know what to do with her!" William's panicked voice cut through
"The baby, it's coming!" Elena ground out.

Anders looked up in shock to see William holding onto Elena who was doubled over in front of the doorway, shaking and crying. The ground was thick with mucous and blood beneath her, her long skirt soaked in red. Anders snapped himself out of the shock and ran forwards. He took hold of her other arm, he and William guiding her shuffling through the door. He heard Merrill asking him if she could help, her voice thick with worry, and he shouted at her to get a basin of water from the tank at the back of the clinic. The baby wasn't due for another few weeks he'd thought, he'd been sure. They both helped Elena onto one of the beds before Anders stacked up the fire and quickly lit it with a burst of flame.

"Heat the water but don't let it get too hot," he ordered a wide eyed Merrill who simply nodded in reply.

He grabbed a long, thick sheet and rolled it up before gently lifting Elena's head and putting it underneath. The woman was breathing deeply, long pained breaths which she let out in a short, harsh huff. That was good, he thought, she seemed to be coping well considering; although there was plenty of time for her to start screaming obscenities at him.

"When did this start?" he asked her as he lifted her legs and rolled her sodden skirt out of the way.

"Couple of hours...maybe," Elena said tightly between breaths, "then it all...came out...and I didn't know...what to do..."

"You did fine," Anders soothed, "it'll be alright Elena. Just keep breathing like that, deep breaths. We're going to get you through this, alright?"

Elena just nodded, her long, dark hair sticking to her face as she huffed out breath after breath. Anders grabbed another sheet and placed it over her, for warmth and modesty, leaving it open from the knees down. He reached up and removed her soaked underwear and threw them to the floor. He blanched. That was a lot of blood, more than there should have been. Still, she was dilated and right now that's all he could focus on. He couldn't jump to conclusions.

"You're definitely ready," Anders said, inspecting her, "hopefully this won't last as long as I thought."

"As you...thought?" Elena scowled at him.

"Just keep breathing Elena," Anders didn't want to scare her and he'd rather she didn't start screaming at him from the get go. She nodded and laid her head back. Merrill rushed over with the basin of water.

"Put it here," Anders said, grabbing everything off the table beside him and dumping it on the ground.

"Oh Creators, I've never seen...is she going to be alright?" Merrill asked.

"She'll be fine Merrill," Anders said, wishing he didn't have to keep reassuring everyone.

"What can I do?" she asked, looking nervous.

"You can...you can make sure she's comfortable," Anders said, hoping to keep Merrill out of his
"way but occupied, "keep her hair out her face, mop her brow, keep her distracted from the pain."

"I can do that, I can do that" Merrill said, looking around hurriedly before rushing off to find a rag.

"Anders," William tapped him on the shoulder; the mage turned to find the man looking at him in concern before pulling him aside, "are you sure she's alright, there isn't usually so much..."

"I know." Anders said in frustration, "but we'll deal with that as it comes. We need to get this baby out as quickly as possible, understand?"

"Right," William nodded, "but that isn't really up to us, is it?"

And it wasn't. Five hours later and they were still there, Elena screaming and breathing, breathing and screaming. Anders tried to dampen her pain with magic but it was severely draining his reserves. He'd gone through three lyrium potions already and they were beginning to make him feel nauseous. To make matters worse it was as he and William had feared. The blood wouldn't stop coming. No matter how many times Anders sent the healing magic to clot the blood, on the next contraction it would start again. The ground was thick with it, as was the air with the metallic tang. Merrill was surprisingly useful and attentive and Anders was actually glad she was there. William was never good with distracting mothers in labour, he was too mystified and scared by the entire process. Merrill on the other hand, despite this being her first birthing, seemed entirely calm, keeping Elena distracted, holding her hand, encouraging her. It wasn't long after eight o'clock that the head appeared.

"Push!" Anders yelled, "Come on Elena you can do this!"

"You're doing so well," Merrill was saying, "it's almost over now."

Elena screamed, the sound full of frustration and pain. She threw her head back and ground her teeth together, her breaths coming out in strangled grunts. Anders hurriedly pulled the sheet out of the way so he could reach up and cup the baby's head as it appeared.

"Come on Elena, one more big push!" he shouted.

Then there was that wonderful sound, the sound Anders had been waiting to hear for the past six hours, the wailing of a healthy baby. He pulled the baby down the bed and laid it carefully on the sheet that had moments ago been covering its mother.

"Merrill get the knife," he said, and Merrill jumped up and grabbed the freshly washed dagger from the bowl of water and handed it to him.

Anders cut the umbilical cord and tied it off before handing it back to Merrill. The baby looked fine, it looked good, a little on the small side but that was what he'd expected from Elena. She'd been so thin throughout the pregnancy, never getting enough food for two. He wrapped the baby up carefully and couldn't help the smile on his face as he handed the little bundle to its mother who was looking at him worriedly.

"It's a girl," he said, watching Elena break out into a tired and emotional smile, "and she's healthy, she's fine."

"A girl," Elena started to cry as she smiled down at the baby in her arms, pulling the sheet away from her face, "hello my little girl."

William was looking at Anders with a grin on his face. It was always the same, Anders thought a little warmly, William hated the actual process but he loved the outcome. William was very fond of
children and he loved babies most of all. Merrill also looked ecstatic as she wiped her eyes.

"Oh it's beautiful," she said sniffing, "isn't it though?"

"Yes," Anders agreed, watching Elena closely, "it is."

"I'll go and get the usual, will I?" William asked Anders.

"Good idea," Anders nodded, grabbing his coin purse and fishing out the few pieces he had left before handing them to William.

"What's he getting?" Merrill asked as William left and Anders started preparing the table to inspect the baby.

"Food, milk in case Elena can't breastfeed," Anders said distractedly, "she'll need to stay here for a few days until I'm sure she's well enough to take the baby home with her. She hasn't been well. Elena you'll need to..."

That was when Ander's noticed the silence. He turned round quickly to see the baby kicking in the sheet, gurgling to itself.

"Elena?" he said loudly, walking over to the bed; Elena's eyes were closed and she was too still, "Merrill take her, take her!"

"What? What's wrong?" Merrill sounded terrified as Anders handed her the baby; the infant began to wail loudly.

"Come on Elena," Anders said to no one, reaching out with his fading reserves to feel for the woman's life source, "don't do this."

Nothing. There was nothing there. He shook his head and gritted his teeth. That wasn't possible, she'd been fine moments before, there must be something left! He thought. Anders pushed out a wave of healing and didn't feel it connect with anything. He felt a heavy lump of dread settle in his stomach, sending out another and another. There had been so much blood, from the beginning, but he thought he'd had it under control. He thought she would pull through and then he could treat her. She'd lost too much, too much blood and energy, all to give her child life as it took hers. Anders began to feel light headed as he continued to pour the healing magic down onto the cooling body before him. He wasn't even sure what he was doing; she was dead, he knew, but he couldn't stop. Finally he stumbled and was forced to catch himself on the bed. His hands were still slick with blood and he felt detached, dreamlike. He looked down at the calm face of Elena and wasn't sure what to feel. She wasn't the first person to die in his clinic and he doubted she'd be the last. It was only...he'd been with her the whole time, for so long he'd helped her and watched her grow and now, now she was gone. Moments before she'd been happier than Anders had ever seen her, staring into the eyes of her newborn baby girl and now she was gone. Anders reached down and pushed the hair back from her forehead gently. He could hear Merrill behind him, crying as she sang low and quiet. He turned to see her sitting on his chair, rocking the baby back and forth, her face wet with tears. For a moment he didn't understand why she couldn't make out the words before he realised that Merrill was singing in elvish. Anders walked numbly to the basket at the other side of the clinic and found a clean sheet. He used it to cover Elena respectfully, hiding her pale face and bluing lips from view.

"What's going to happen?" Merrill asked through jerky sobs, as if she were trying to stop crying but just couldn't, "To the baby?"
"There's an orphanage, at the Chantry," Anders said dazedly, "they'll take her."

"She...she doesn't even have a name," Merrill said, looking down at the baby as it babbled, "she didn't even get to give her a name."

"Give her to me for a little while will you Merrill?" Anders said softly, "I need to make sure she's alright."

Merrill nodded and handed the baby over gently, as if unwilling to let her go. Anders went through the motions, cleaning the baby, checking her heart beat. He used his healing magic to feel for any abnormalities but found nothing. She seemed perfectly healthy. He wrapped her in a spare cloth, a smaller one, and placed her back in Merrill's arms.

"Could you look after her for just a little while longer?" Anders asked tonelessly, "I have to get something."

"Of course," Merrill said, "of course I will."

Anders left her singing to the surprisingly quiet child as he walked to the back of the clinic and started looking for a basket, something to leave in front of the Chantry. This was the first time he'd had to do anything like this. He was moving almost on autopilot, shuffling around, moving things back and forth. Finally he found a long, oval wicker basket where he put laundry. He tipped out the few things that were inside and set about making it comfortable.

"They didn't have any fresh milk at the..." William's voice echoed out into the silence and died. Anders looked over his shoulder and saw the man's face fall as he spied the white sheet covering the woman who had been alive when he left, now nothing but a corpse. He sagged against the wall for support.

"Oh Maker," William shook his head, looking up worriedly, "the baby..?"

"The baby's fine," Merrill piped up.

"Thank Andraste," William said, putting the paper parcel he was carrying down onto the table near the door; he walked over to Merrill and looked down at the baby over her shoulder, "poor little mite."

"Anders said she can go to the Chantry," Merrill said softly, "but it seems so wrong just to leave her, doesn't it?"

"Not much else anyone can do," William said sadly, shaking his head, "there's no one'll take her round here. Too many mouths to feed as it is, never mind a young one like that."

Anders ground his teeth as he listened to them talk. This was life, he thought harshly, and they needed to understand that. This was the way things were. There was no 'fair'. Only as he walked over with the makeshift cot and placed it on the table did he realise how exhausted he really was. It took everything he had just to put one foot in front of the other. Merrill lifted the baby into it and watched as her little, brown eyes followed her. She smiled sadly and shook the baby's chubby hand in her fingers before looking up at Anders. The man was staring at the baby, his face expressionless.

"If it's alright," Anders shook himself from his stupor, looking up at Merrill as she spoke to him, "I'd like to take her, to the Chantry I mean."
"You can't go alone," Anders said mechanically.

"I'll make sure she gets there safely I promise, I just..." Merrill looked solemn, "I just want to make sure she's alright."

"I can go with her," William offered, "It's a long walk at this time. I'll make sure she's safe."

Anders looked between them. He felt so tired that he probably wouldn't make it far before he'd have to turn back anyway. He nodded, blinking away the blurry vision that filtered down over his eyes. He needed to lie down. Merrill and William left together, Merrill with the cot in her arms, humming gently. Anders watched them go before shuffling over to his chair and sitting down heavily. He needed to lie down. Merrill and William left together, Merrill with the cot in her arms, humming gently. Anders watched them go before shuffling over to his chair and sitting down heavily. He should really take a stamina potion, he thought, but it might not sit well on top of the amount of lyrium he'd consumed. He felt his head swim and blinked his eyes again. He was asleep before he knew it.

He was cold. Someone was shaking him.

"Anders, wake up," said a familiar voice, "Anders come on, wake up."

He blinked blearily, noting that the lantern had burnt out leaving everything shrouded in darkness. The moonlight from outside was the only illumination, shining in through the doorway. There was someone in front of him, nothing but a silhouette. He sat up straight and shivered.

"Who's there?" he asked groggily.

"It's just us," Anders heard Merrill say and then there was the sound of a struck match and the lantern was relit.

It wasn't just Merrill. Anders blinked at Hawke, wondering if he was still asleep. He looked different somehow; Anders couldn't put his finger on it. It was then that he saw the blood on the floor and the white sheet and remembered everything. He looked to Merrill.

"Did you get her to the orphanage?" he asked slowly, his brain still a little fogged.

"Yes, don't worry, she's safe," Merrill said, taking hold of his forearm and pulling him up, "come on, you can't stay here. Come back to my house, you can sleep there, there's room."

"No, I have to..." Anders started to protest; he needed to clean up this mess, he needed to see to the body.

"Anders you look lucky to be standing," Hawke said, his tone commanding, "come on."

"What are you doing here?" he asked before he thought about why it would be a bad idea.

Hawke stared at him soberly for a moment before shaking his head and putting his arm around Anders' back to hold him steady. It wasn't a long walk to the Alienage from Darktown but it felt like it took forever. Anders was still dead tired and his legs felt weak. He was stumbling by the time he made it to Merrill's house. The elf set about lighting the candles and the fireplace. Hawke walked Anders to the table and sat him down in one of the large wooden chairs, pulling over another chair to face it. Anders just stared at it.

"Merrill, do you need extra bedding?" he heard Hawke ask.

"Yes, actually, I, uh I didn't think about that," Merrill replied a little shyly.
"Mother can lend you some, would you mind nipping to the house?" Hawke asked, "And grab some of my spare clothes as well could you? I'd rather not leave him on his own."

"Right, ok," Merrill sounded a little uncertain but finally acquiesced, rushing out the door.

There was a moments silence and then Anders could hear Hawke moving around the house. His footsteps were certain, as if he knew where he was going. Anders tried to stay awake. This was yet another surreal situation he'd been plunged into. He wasn't used to this yet, this attention. When things went wrong he just had to deal with them, that's the way it was. Yet now, whenever anything happened he was suddenly surrounded by...friends. And Hawke. Anders watched as the man filed back into view with a bowl of water and a rag in his hands. He put the bowl on the table before sitting in the chair opposite Anders, dipping the rag into the bowl before taking one of Anders hands in his. It was then Anders realised his hands were still caked in dried blood, crusted under his fingernails and up his forearms. He wasn't even wearing his coat.

"To answer your question," Hawke said as he wiped gently at Anders right palm, "Fenris and I were at the Chantry when Merrill and her friend showed up with the baby. She told me what happened."

"Oh," Anders said, face instinctively falling into a frown on hearing Fenris's name.

"I'm sorry," Hawke said, rinsing the cloth before turning his hand over to start on the other side.

"So am I," Anders said jadedly.

"Anders, you can't blame yourself for this," Hawke said sternly.

"Are you trying to comfort me or lecture me?" Anders asked with a frown, "Because you aren't doing a very good job of either."

"For Makers sake," Hawke muttered as if to himself, "you know in the past few months I'd almost forgotten how awkward you could be."

"Sorry to disappoint," Anders said but it had no fire to it.

"Anders..." Hawke started, his face softening.

Merrill took that moment to return and Hawke didn't finish his sentence. Merrill fusséd around making up a bed in the spare room, no more than a sheet and a blanket on the floor, but it was better than nothing. At least it was somewhere with a fire. He had used up the last of the wood at the clinic making the fire to heat the water and admittedly hadn't been looking forward to a cold night. She placed the clothes on the table by the bowl before turning to them both.

"I'm going to head to bed now," Merrill said; it was only then Anders noted how tired she looked, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight Merrill," Hawke said with a smile, "and thanks."

Merrill shuffled into her room and closed the door, leaving them in silence. Hawke continued his meticulous cleaning, rinsing the cloth until the water was as deep red as blood before emptying it and starting again. Anders sat in silence and let him do what he wanted. Hawke didn't look at him as he worked and Anders found himself drifting. He only focused again when he realised Hawke was standing in front of him, talking.

"You'll have to take it off, it's got blood on it," he said.
"What?" Anders asked.

"Your shirt, just take it off," Hawke said.

Anders blinked at him stupidly and shivered. He was cold but he reached down and pulled his loose shirt up over his head. Something soft and slightly warm was suddenly around his neck and it took him a moment to realise it was a jumper. He pulled it down over his shoulders and, with effort, slid his arms into the sleeves. It was a little itchy against his bare skin and smelled distinctively of Hawke. Then he was being pulled up out of the chair and led into the other room to sit down on the blanket before the fire.

"I don't want to sleep," he said determinedly.

"You need to," Hawke said in frustration.

"No," Anders shook his head, "it's not worth it. I'll just have the nightmares anyway, there's no point."

He heard Hawke sigh from above him as he sat watching the fire crackle happily over the logs through the grate. Anders heard him move and turned to see Hawke hunched down next to him, pulling the blanket up over his shoulders and wrapping it around. Then he sat down and leaned back against the wall, pulling at Anders shoulders. The mage tried to pull away but Hawke just pulled harder until Anders fell back against his chest. He lay very still as Hawke lifted his left arm to hold him loosely around the waist.

"Get some sleep," Hawke said quietly, "I'll be here if you wake up."

"I'm not going to break you know," Anders said, his voice hard, "I'm not some fragile thing that needs looking after."

"And you're not as tough as you think," Hawke said back, "now sleep."

He could hear Hawke's heartbeat against his ear. This wasn't how he'd expected his day to end. He closed his eyes and let the sound lull him towards unconsciousness.
Birthday

Anders didn't dream any more, not in the way that other mages dreamed. Slipping from consciousness to consciousness, out of reality and into the Fade. He'd used to enjoy it; apart from the whispering of demons the Fade was somewhere he'd always appreciated. Magic wasn't persecuted there, it was freedom. The intangibility of the endless dream, always welcoming, always new, always dangerous. Justice took care of that now. It was one of the few things he'd truly regretted losing after joining with the spirit. His connection to the Fade wasn't lost, not severed in the way the Tranquil were, but simply controlled. Justice roamed the Fade while he slept, keeping the demons at bay and the dreams nothing but a cool, lambent light and the occasionally distant sound of lapping waves and howling winds.

The nightmares were different. The connection to the darkspawn was a little like a pale imitation of the shared consciousness of the Fade. He could feel the darkspawn crawling around him as if constantly just out of sight, yet they were aware of his presence, howling out to him through the shared, black blood that flowed in his veins. Anders had always resented exchanging one set of demons for another but somehow he found the tainted nightmares harder to deal with. In the Fade he'd always had control, in the taint he felt like he was being hunted with no way to defend himself. Cousland had once compared it to being naked in the dark surrounded by hungry wolves and, despite the crudeness of the image, he'd felt inclined to agree.

The sound of the door opening pulled him gently from his slumber but he didn't open his eyes. If he was still where he remembered being before he fell asleep then he'd rather not move. He was warm and comfortable and could still feel Hawke's arm lying over his waist. For the first time in a long time he'd actually slept soundly for the entire night, not a stir of nightmare through the taint, no starting awake trying to figure out if the screams were his own or merely inside his skull. The relief in his body was tangible; his muscles were relaxed, the twinge in his back was gone and he felt...safe. It had been a long time since he'd felt safe, whether it was from templars, the Coterie or the inside of his own head.

There was a gentle sound of feet creeping over floorboards before he heard a soft exclamation of delight. He finally cracked open one eye to see Merrill standing above him, her eyes twinkling in the lantern light.

"You two," she said clasping her hands, "are just adorable."

"Merrill be quiet, he's still asleep," Anders said softly as he sat up.

"Mmm?" Hawke grumbled sleepily.

Well, so much for that, Anders thought. He could feel the cold seeping back into his body, Hawke's warmth gone, the fire burnt out. All he could think of, even as Merrill smiled and Hawke blinked open his eyes, was that he needed to get back to the clinic. It was Justice; he could tell when the spirit was influencing him even if it was sometimes difficult to distinguish their thoughts. Some things are hard, it said, some things aren't easy but I can't just ignore my duty. I have things I need to do, Anders thought, and lying around here isn't one of them, not when there are people I can help. The thought made him feel tight in his own skin.

"What time is it?" Hawke asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"It's half past nine," Merrill said, "thought I'd give you two a lie in, considering last night and all."
"Half nine?" Hawke said, groaning, "Varric's going to kill me, I said I'd meet him half an hour ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Merrill said looking guilty, "only you were both so tired and..."

"It's alright Merrill, it isn't your fault," Hawke said, pulling his hand from around Anders' waist before getting up a little unsteadily; he stretched, grimacing as his joints cracked back into place.

Anders stood up and walked back through to the main room. He looked down to find he was wearing the jumper he'd forgotten Hawke had put on him the night before. He started automatically looking for his shirt and his staff. It was then that he remembered that his staff was still at the clinic. He rubbed his arms, feeling a little exposed without it nearby.

"Are you alright?" Hawke asked, walking up behind him as Merrill started folding up the bedding she'd borrowed.

"I'm fine," Anders said distractedly, looking around for his shirt.

"Which means you're not fine then," Hawke said, nodding and looking at him critically.

"I don't appreciate you analysing me Hawke," Anders said with a frown as he found his shirt and quickly folded it into a small bundle.

"And I don't appreciate being lied to," Hawke shrugged, unconcerned tone belying his annoyance, "but if you're just trying to avoid me then I suppose I shouldn't force the issue."

"I'm not..!" Anders took a deep breath and refused to allow himself to become angry; he knew what he needed to say, even if he didn't want to say it, "I'm sorry if...if I was out of sorts last time we spoke."

"That's a very polite version of events," Hawke said raising his eyebrows, "I distinctly remember you implying I was the sort to encourage hatred against mages, associating with evil people who undermine your cause; practically a templar myself if I remember rightly."

"Well that's a slight exaggeration," Anders said dryly, swallowing down the remorse.

"Yes, slight being the operative word," Hawke muttered, turning to Merrill as she walked into the room with the blanket and sheet, "I'll take them Merrill, I'm going past home on the way to the Hanged Man anyway."

"Too right you will," Merrill said looking at Hawke with a knowing smile, making the other man blink in confusion, "sending me out last night to get bedding from your mother. Can't think of a better way to get some alone time can you?"

Anders had only seen Hawke blush once before, when his mother called him by his given name, but he'd be the first to admit that it never lost its appeal. Hawke glared at Merrill who just looked back at him with her hands on her hips. Anders sighed and wished Merrill wasn't so very blunt all the time. Hawke looked like he wished he could think of something clever to say that would cover up the fact that his motives had been nothing of the sort but simply snorted and shook his head.

"Honestly Merrill, you need to stop reading those awful romance novels of Varric's," he said, eyeing her, "they're tainting your sense of reality."

"Oh, well, maybe I'm just seeing things then," Merrill said airily but obviously not changing her mind.
Hawke and Anders left together. The Alienage was already awake and bustling with elves going about their morning routines. Nyssa waved to Anders as he passed the stall; Hawke stayed strangely quiet. Anders wasn't sure he was really in the state of mind to deal with Hawke at the moment. He had to get back to the clinic and deal with the body and the mess and then start work again. He'd taken more than enough time away already from the people who needed him. He enjoyed Hawke's company but the man tended to bring out the worst in him sometimes. He hadn't meant to shout at him but he just got so...angry. He knew that Hawke felt as he did about mages but, in truth, he knew that Hawke would never truly understand. There were few who could understand him or the fervour of his plight. Hawke thought he knew but didn't realise that his insistence that he understood only made Anders distance himself further. He appreciated Hawke's support more than anything else but it made him feel responsible, as if he were dragging Hawke into his own dangerous world where flight wasn't possible anymore; the only option was to clash head on. Living in Kirkwall Anders sometimes felt he was simply waiting for the spark to hit the powder keg.

"Have you heard from Bethany?" Anders asked as they rounded the corner into the slums.

"...She writes," Hawke answered after a moment's pause, "although it doesn't seem the templars are any more likable inside the Gallows than outside it."

Anders could believe that. Karl's letters had always been filled with undisclosed dread of his templar jailors. Anders had always presumed the contempt and violence of the templars would be only heightened behind closed doors. Out in the open it could only be questioned.

"Orsino seems like a good man," Hawke continued, as if trying to find something positive to say, "as far as Bethany's concerned anyway. She's always been a better judge of character than I am."

"Well, if passive aggression makes a good man," Anders said sarcastically, "First Enchanter Orsino must be up for citizen of the year."

"Bethany says he's very judicious," Hawke said diplomatically.

"That's a nice way of putting it," Anders said before noting Hawke's silence.

Good Anders, he thought in annoyance, just start irritating the man you managed to scare away for months last time you fought. He tried to force thoughts of Bethany and mages and Justice from his mind for just a second and focus on what he really wanted to say. If it was just him, if he were just Anders and Hawke was just Hawke for five minutes what would he want? Well, he knew what he would want but what could he actually get? Hawke started to climb the stairs and Anders took his last chance to stop him.

"What are you..." Anders said, sighing as he tried not to think about the doubt he was feeling in himself at his actions, "I mean, are you doing anything later on?"

"Well, actually," Hawke said as he turned around on the stairs, looking unsure for a moment, "we're all headed up to the Shield tonight, if you want to come."

"The Shield and Eagle? In Hightown?" Anders asked, "Nice if you've got the coin. Special occasion?"

"It's my birthday," Hawke said frankly.

"Oh," Anders said, suddenly feeling at a loss, "you didn't say anything."

"Well there hasn't been much of a chance has there?" Hawke said, followed by an awkward pause,
where neither knew what to say, "So, around eight?"

"Right," Anders nodded, "eight."

"I'll see you later on then," Hawke smiled, not taking his eyes off him as he walked backwards up the stairs.

Anders was just glad that there wasn't that much in the clinic worth stealing. He pushed at the open door and shook his head, wishing that Merrill or Hawke had thought to lock it behind them the night before. The food William had brought was long gone as were the potions from the cabinet, the cloths, the bandages and poultices. Anders would have been angry if he didn't understand that the people who'd taken his supplies probably needed them. Still, it wasn't as if they couldn't just come and ask. That was what he was there for after all, and he knew how to use the supplies better than they ever would.

Yes, he wouldn't have been angry, until he noticed something else was missing. Anders searched the room twice before believing it was actually gone. He'd left his staff leaning against the back wall with his coat. The coat was still there, feathered pauldrons lying on the floor, but the staff was long gone. Anders ground his teeth and rubbed at his face, breathing deeply. Fuck, he thought savagely. It wasn't that he was without a weapon, it wasn't even that someone had stolen something they surely didn't need probably to sell it for coin at the nearest black market vendor, it was the fact that he'd had that staff for years and it wasn't replaceable. He'd made it himself not long after his fifth, and longest not including the seventh, escape from the Circle. He'd made it to the outskirts of Denerim where he'd become friends with a wood carver who allowed him to stay with her in return for work. She had taught him how to fashion heartwood. He could clearly remember her telling him how it was sometimes the best part of the tree to manipulate; dark, strong and resistant to decay. He'd made the staff from a maple tree that fell in a storm that month. Now he'd probably be lucky to ever see it again.

Yet, despite his frustration, the theft didn't give him much time to pause. Anders found himself busy from the moment he arrived back home until long into the night. William had cleaned the blood from the doorway and landing, but the clinic itself was still a mess. He took Elena's body to the back, out onto a small, abandoned area overlooking the cliffs, and burned it. No family to inform, no words, just ashes and wind. It was nine o'clock by the time Anders managed to even think about getting away from the clinic. Those that had turned up the night before and found the place deserted had returned the next, doubling his usual amount of patients. By the time he blew out the lantern and tried to think straight it was already half past. Trust Hawke to choose Hightown, Anders thought ruefully, at least Lowtown was close. It took him a good half hour to walk up to the Shield and Eagle. He felt jittery without the weight of his staff at his back, jumping at shadows. Another reason he didn't appreciate Hightown was its increased population of templars. Not that he saw any, but just knowing they were there somewhere was enough.

One thing Hightown did have going for it was that its establishments were much cleaner and more refined than those of Lowtown. The Shield and Eagle was lit by crystal gas lamps and your feet didn't stick to different parts of the floor with varying degrees of tackiness as was prevalent in the Hanged Man. The clientele were richly dressed and there was much more wine flowing than ale. Yet it somehow lacked the friendly ambience that Lowtown was infamous for. Or perhaps it did have friendly ambience and Anders just didn't feel it, what with instantly disliking ninety percent of the people in the pub. He knew he was getting looks for his scruffy clothing, his unshaven face, but he really couldn't care less. However, it still put his back up.

"And then what?"
He heard Hawke before he saw him. Looking around he found him, a table away, hidden behind a group of men hanging around the bar. Anders saw Varric and Merrill at the bar waiting to be served, talking amongst themselves. As the men moved around Anders saw who Hawke was talking to and felt like turning around and walking out, but he knew that would only be avoiding the issue rather than dealing with it. Fenris was scowling at Hawke who was simply looking back at him patiently. Curiosity started to take over quite quickly. Anders found himself doing something he never would have thought he would normally do. He slipped closer, trying not to be seen.

"This is pointless," the elf almost growled.

"It's not pointless," Hawke said tolerantly, "come on, it's the same as I showed you earlier. The more you practice the easier it'll become."

"Well I think I've had enough practicing for today," Fenris said, pushing what looked like a sheet of paper at Hawke who, determinedly, pushed it back.

"Just read it," he said a little sternly, "it's only a few lines."

"I'll show you what you can do with your few lines in a minute..." Fenris started darkly.

"Fine," Hawke said, "but when Varric comes back and asks what you think of his idea for his new book I'm not covering for you when you can't answer."

Fenris glared balefully at the seemingly unaffected man across from him. Eventually he sighed harshly and looked back down to the paper in his hands, eyes hard with concentration. Anders stayed out of sight and wondered what on earth they were talking about. It was only as the elf began to read that Anders finally understood.

"The fearless...fearless man who stood at note...noth..." Fenris managed before giving up, tossing the piece of paper back onto the table in disgust,

"I've had enough. I'll just tell Varric it sounds awful, I'm sure he won't doubt my assessment."

"Well that's the right attitude," Hawke said with a frown, "you were doing fine, you just need some patience."

"Which is what I am quickly losing with you," Fenris bit out.

"Oi, you aren't allowed to be mean to me tonight," Hawke said pointing at the elf, smiling as Fenris blinked, "it's my birthday."

"That's the fifth time you've used that maxim this evening to get out of arguments," Fenris said, seemingly unable to resist Hawke's smile as he returned it, "I can't wait until midnight when it becomes obsolete."

"Ha, well, I'll just have to make the most of it while it's still valid then," Hawke said, his eyes becoming distinctly flirtatious, "do I get to ask for anything?"

"Don't push it," Fenris said, smiling into his drink.

Anders decided that joining Varric and Merrill was probably the best idea. If he had to listen to any more of that he might have to leave. Or maim someone. He walked round the tables towards the bar and thought about what he had just discovered. So Fenris couldn't read? He could hardly gloat, it made perfect sense in a way. Anders doubted that slaves were permitted to read, too much power was held in the written word, too many ideas of freedom. It was an age old technique of
oppression. Still, it was odd; despite how much he disliked the elf he had to admit Fenris spoke very eloquently, and yet he couldn't understand a simple written sentence. Why couldn't the elf come to his senses and see that the oppression of mages here was practically the same as that of the slaves in Tevinter? He should sympathise with them, not hate them. Anders shook his head as he headed to the bar; no, he wasn't thinking about this tonight. Just one night for himself.

"Oh you made it!" Merrill said when Anders tapped her on the shoulder, "We were wondering where you were. I was getting a bit worried you know."

"And I told you there was no need to worry," Varric said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "Blondie always shows up eventually."

"Nice to know I'm predictable," Anders said with a shake of his head, "get me something strong would you Varric?"

"And waste good alcohol on the only man in Kirkwall who can't get drunk?" Varric said as the barmaid set about putting his order onto a silver tray.

"I'm going to try very, very hard," Anders said with a note of defeat in his voice.

"Well that doesn't sound so good," Varric said with a frown, "are you alright?"

"Never better," Anders lied, his smile not reaching his eyes, "don't ask me that now. I'll tell you another time."

"Fair enough," Varric said, letting it slide, before turning to the barmaid, "and a glass of your strongest."

"Strongest what?" she asked frowning.

"Just whatever's strongest," Varric said, "Trust me."

She shrugged and fetched a dusty bottle from the far right of the bar, pouring a generous helping into a hexagonal tumbler. Varric forked over an obscene amount of coin for a single round and then the three wound their way through the crowded pub back to the table. Hawke and Fenris didn't pay much attention to them, too busy continuing whatever they were saying, until they'd all sat down. Hawke reached over for his drink and looked up in surprise. Anders gave him a tired smile in greeting which Hawke returned, reaching out to clink his glass. Fenris was back to his original plan of simply ignoring him. Anders felt that was probably wise.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming," Hawke said.

"Sorry, busy night," Anders said tiredly.

"Was everything alright after, well..." Merrill stopped, looking a little lost for what to say.

"Yes, everything's fine," Anders lied; of course it wasn't fine, but then there wasn't much that was.

"You look like you could use that drink," Hawke said with a raise of an eyebrow as Anders lifted the tumbler to his lips and drained the large measure in one, long swallow; he gave a cough to clear the burning sensation in his throat and placed the glass back on the table, "fancy another?"

"Shouldn't I be buying you one?" Anders said, trying to gauge if it was having any affect.

"Not necessary," Hawke said, taking a swig from his pint before standing up, "just you being here
is enough of a present."

Anders shook his head and laughed softly. Hawke could probably charm the faith out of a templar if he tried hard enough.

"Same again?" Hawke was saying to Fenris.

"I'll come with you," the elf said, voice toneless as usual.

"Alright," Hawke said, winding his way to the bar with Fenris at his side.

Anders found it hard to stop the resentment as he watched them, mixing with the exhaustion, confusing itself in his head until it became that same old hatred again. He shouldn't be here. None of these people were of any use, they were just distractions. He was being irresponsible, undutiful, losing his focus. Anders frowned and rubbed at his eyes. Where had...? He smirked wryly as his thoughts wavered. Oh Justice was not amused, not at all. He never usually pushed that hard, hard enough that Anders couldn't tell where the thought had even come from. Well it was just tough, he thought as he stared at the table and waited for Hawke to bring him another glass of the strongest alcohol in the house. Let's see how long Justice can stand up to this, Anders thought bitterly.

"It's alright, he isn't even listening," Merrill was saying when he finally took notice of the conversation.

"Not listening to what?" Anders asked.

"Oh I was just saying how obvious it is that you're totally taken with Hawke," Merrill shrugged, taking a tiny sip of what looked like water.

Anders probably would have spat out his drink if he'd had one. Instead he just shook his head and played with the empty tumbler in his hand. He was about to deny it when Merrill simply continued.

"You know I found them this morning, all curled together like two little nugs," she said, starry eyed once more, "cutest thing you've ever seen."

"Merrill," Anders said despairingly, "please."

"Oh, is that right?" Varric said with a raise of his eyebrows and a cunning grin, "Finally confess your undying love did you?"

"I did nothing of the sort," Anders sighed and rolled his eyes, "it was cold, that was all."

"Nice excuse," Varric said sounding unconvinced, "you know if you keep holding off with this bizarre abstinence of yours he might get snatched out from under your nose."

"What?" Merrill looked a little scandalised by the idea, seemingly now entirely convinced Anders and Hawke were meant for each other, "By whom?"

"You really are blind sometimes Daisy," Varric shook his head and took a drink.

Anders didn't need to be told by whom. As far as he was concerned Fenris had made his intentions entirely clear where Hawke was concerned, although he also hadn't yet made any sort of definite move on the man as far as he knew. Anders didn't enjoy being in this ludicrous situation any more than he was sure Fenris did but Varric was right. Fenris was much more direct than he was and he was sure that the elf would either pluck up the courage or get drunk enough at some point to let
something slip. Anders wasn't sure if he was jealous or relieved at the idea. He shook his head, trying his best to sort his thoughts and Justice's from each other. It was becoming a little too difficult. Perhaps the alcohol is stronger than I thought, Anders thought happily.

All Anders could say was that the alcohol, whatever the hell it was, most definitely worked. After the first two glasses Hawke had changed tack and just given the barmaid a sovereign for the whole bottle. Anders wasn't sure whether to thank him or hate him. He was now, much to Justice's disgust, very drunk.

And it felt wonderful.

"He wasn't my first cat," Anders said, watching the amber liquid swill about in his glass, "there was another, in the Circle. Good old Mr Wiggums."

"Where do you get these names?" Hawke said as if to himself, shaking his head in amusement.

"Why didn't you take him with you when you left?" Merrill asked.

"Well he wasn't mine, strictly speaking," Anders said, thinking back to that little stripy, round face and its mean streak a mile wide, "just a mouser that hung around the tower. Vicious little tabby. You know there were some days that stupid cat was the only person I saw. Except that it wasn't strictly a person. Poor Mr. Wiggums."

"Why? What happened to him?" Merrill asked.

"Oh he was possessed by a rage demon," Anders said offhandedly, "took down three templars before they manage to finish him off. I was never more proud."

There was a moment's silence. Anders looked up into the blank faces around him and took a large gulp of his drink.

"What?" he asked innocently.

"Are you being serious?" Varric asked.

"One hundred percent serious!" Anders said, licking his lips and noting they were numb, "He ripped out one of their throats. Literally."

"Holy shit," Varric said through a laugh, "it's all fun and games in the Ferelden Circle, isn't it."

"Not quite fun," Anders said as if he were thinking about it, "but there were a lot of games. Actually Cullen was our favourite for that."

He was drunk yes, but he didn't miss Hawke's eyes hardening. Perhaps it was because he'd been looking for it, he thought, waiting for his reaction. Anders noticed he was staring and looked away.

"He was such a pushover when he first started," Anders said, "we used to wind him up something awful. Have to admit he was good at what he did though, he did find me terribly quickly when I ran away the fourth time. Well it took him a fortnight. Not bad really."

"Do you always wear the robes?" Fenris asked, looking at him quizzically from the other end of the table.

"Not when I'm naked I don't," he said suggestively, making the elf look at him like he had two heads.
Hawke choked on his drink. Fenris had hardly spoken all night, well to him anyway, and Anders was so very fuzzy around the edges that he'd almost forgotten he disliked him.

"I was thinking more along the lines of the fact that they make you easier to spot," Fenris said coldly, "as a mage."

"So does the big 'I'm a mage' sign I wear around my neck," Anders laughed humourlessly and took another drink, "ah, I like to make it easy for the templars."

"You're mental," Merrill said, shaking her head and giggling.

"Thank you Merrill," he said genuinely, "that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, and probably the most accurate."

"Is this what you were talking about when you said 'funny drunk'?” Merrill asked Varric.

"Not quite," Varric said uncertainly, shaking his head as Anders started to hum.

Merrill looked confused and Anders smothered a laugh behind his hand. He felt absurdly happy for no reason. Now he remembered why he'd missed getting drunk so much. Hawke was watching him with a small, rather confusing smile. Anders frowned at him.

"Do I have something on my face?” he asked, "What?"

"Were you really a Grey Warden?" Hawke said, as if the very thought was inconceivable.

"Oh we're not all sombre, stick-in-the-muds running around raining down damnation on darkspawn and slaying archdemons you know," Anders said as he unsteadily poured himself another drink.

"What, like the Hero of Ferelden?" Hawke asked, looking and sounding entirely genuine.

Anders couldn't help but burst out laughing. The table stared at him in amazement. Somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered if it was because they'd never truly heard him laugh before, not properly, not like this. The thought was a little depressing. He used to laugh all the time. He wiped his eyes and focused back on Hawke's question.

"Why does everyone think that?" Anders asked, still laughing.

"The man knows how to make himself a reputation," Varric shrugged, "that much is for sure."

"The man is a complete basket case," Anders said, "there isn't much sombre or noble about him, other than being noble born. His poor mother must have been constantly disappointed I think. Let's not forget this was the man who purportedly said to Knight commander Greigor, just after he tried to evoke the right of annulment no less, 'do you really not feel even a little, teeny bit guilty about wanting to slaughter everything?'."

"Sounds like my kind of man," Hawke said with a snort of laughter.

Anders wondered about that. probably not, he thought blearily. There was something about Hawke that reminded him of his old Commander. They were surprisingly similar in a lot of ways and Anders was sure that they would probably get on each others nerves rather quickly.

"How did you meet?" Merrill asked, sitting forward in her chair.

"Oh being attacked by darkspawn no less," Anders shrugged, "I was being escorted back to the Circle by a lovely group of templars who were very unfortunately slaughtered by a lovely group of
hurlocks when we reached Vigil's Keep, just in time for yours truly to be found in amongst all the carnage. He was nice enough to believe it wasn't me. He was also nice enough to save me from King Alastair's nasty templar escort. She'd have had me going back in a box. Well, if you can call joining the Wardens being saved."

"Wait, you've met the King of Ferelden?" Hawke looked utterly amazed by all this information; Varric just shrugged, he'd heard it all before anyway.

"Oh yes, lovely man," Anders said casually, "That templar cow he had with him was awfully persistent, kept banging on about murder and hanging. Thankfully he allowed Cousland to conscript me. He seemed to have a sense of humour, quite good looking. I could see why the Commander was so smitten with him."

"Wait, wait," Varric was straight in there before Anders had even realised what he'd said, "I distinctly remember asking you for juicy gossip before and you never mentioned that."

"Oh, didn't I? Mention what?" Anders tried to backtrack unsuccessfully.

"Oh no you don't," Varric shook his head.

"...Well it could have something to do with him saying that if I ever told anyone that he would personally hunt me down and disembowel me," Anders said, remembering the glint of desperate bloodshed in Cousland's eye the night he had told Anders the truth about his relationship with Alistair, which had also been fuelled entirely by alcohol, "so if I wake up dead I'll know it was one of you bastards that ratted me out."

Hawke was shaking his head, as he tended to do at some point in the night when Anders ranted on. Anders was starting to think he was giving the man a complex, what with constantly messing with his sense of reality. A bell rang loudly in the background and the gas lights dimmed momentarily before coming back on.

"Time!" the barmaid shouted.

"Bloody hell," Anders said, quickly downing the measure in his glass, blinking away the room as it began to spin and emptying the last of the bottle into the now empty glass until it was half full.

"Slow down Anders," Hawke said concernedly, "we still have fifteen minutes or so."

"Mmm," Anders said through another mouthful of spirit before swallowing with a grimace, "so I need to finish this so I can get some more in before they stop serving."

"You don't need any more," Hawke said, trying to be reasonable.

"That's what you think," Anders said, fishing in his pocket for his coin purse, "but if I'm going to stay like this I'll need more and I refuse to be sober until tomorrow."

"Maker's breath," Varric said, watching in something that resembled awe as Anders swallowed the rest of the glass he'd just poured as if it were nothing but water.

Anders stood up and tried his very best to ignore the shift in balance that threatened to tip him over. He actually managed a fairly straight line towards the bar before a hand closed around his arm and he was suddenly being pulled to the side of the room. There was a distinctly odd feeling of everything tipping to the left. Anders was spun around to face Hawke and did his very best not to fall over.
"Oh no you don't," Hawke was saying, his face seeming overly close to Anders' warped sense of distance.

"Don't you oh no what?" Anders said back as he tried to comprehend Hawke's words, totally confused.

"Exactly," Hawke said, leaning him against the wall so he wouldn't move, "you've had enough, you're going home, come on."

"Hypocrite," Anders scowled, "I don't stop you when you drink too much."

"Well maybe you should," Hawke said.

"Well maybe I will," Anders said childishly.

"Although he is much more fun when he's drunk, isn't he?" Merrill said with a laugh as she, Varric and Fenris joined them.

"See, I'm more fun," Anders said, pointing at Merrill.

"And more free with his information," Varric said.

"And more free," Anders said, moving his finger to Varric.

"He's almost bearable," Fenris said, cocking his head to the side, "almost."

"And almost...hey watch it!" Anders scowled at Fenris who simply ignored him.

"Don't encourage him," Hawke said to them all despairingly.

Hawke escorted him outside, followed by his companions. Merrill and Varric wished Hawke happy birthday again and said their goodbyes before walking together down towards Lowtown. When Anders turned around he saw Hawke a little way off talking to Fenris in a low enough voice that he couldn't hear any of it. He blinked and drew the cool night air into his lungs, trying not to let it sober him up at all. There was a nagging feeling in the back of his head that he should be worrying about something but he couldn't for the life of him think what it was. He looked up at the stars and enjoyed watching as they swayed back and forth over the dark blanket of the sky, looking like shooting stars. He lifted up his hand and splayed his fingers, laughing to himself as he was forced to take a few steps back to maintain balance.

"I need to take him home," he heard Hawke say, suddenly loud enough to hear now that he had stumbled closer, "you don't have to come with me just to walk all the way back up to Hightown again."

"...Fine," Fenris said back after a pause, "just be careful, you know how dangerous Darktown is at this time of night."

"I will," Hawke said, smiling and patting Fenris on the arm, "goodnight Fenris."

"Goodnight Hawke," Fenris said with a nod, sending a cold look Anders way as he walked off towards his mansion.

Anders stuck his tongue out at him as soon as his back was turned. He heard Hawke sigh.

"You're such a child sometimes," Hawke said but he was smiling as he did.
"Better than being an old man," Anders shrugged, "how old are you now anyway?"

"Twenty three," Hawke said, steering him towards the steps that led down into the lower city.

"Is that all? Blimey," Anders said, shaking his head.

"Why, how old are you?" Hawke asked, frowning.

"How old do you think I am?" Anders asked with a sly smile.

"Uh," Hawke looked unnerved, "twenty six?"

"Flatterer," Anders said with a sigh, "I'm thirty in three months. Maker that's depressing."

"It's hardly the end of the world," Hawke shook his head.

"You can say that because you're only twenty three," Anders said, tripping over a cobblestone and catching himself on Hawke's arm, "wait, where are we going?"

"I'm taking you home," Hawke said patiently.

"Oh no, I don't want to go back there," Anders said, not caring that he sounded like a whiny child, "not tonight. I'll just sober up, that's all that will happen."

"No bad thing I think," Hawke said.

"You don't understand," Anders said, sounding as serious as he could, "I don't want to go back there."

"Well where else are you going to go?" Hawke asked in frustration.

"Can't I stay with you? Just for tonight?" Anders said, wondering why his brain was yelling at him about what a bad idea this was.

Hawke stopped walking and it took Anders a few steps before he realised that he was stumbling on alone. He turned slowly to look at Hawke who was watching him with an unreadable expression. Anders suddenly realised that Hawke wasn't anywhere near as drunk as he usually got on these excursions; what with it being his birthday Anders had expected him to be completely shit faced. The silence was unnerving. Anders frowned worriedly.

"Oh come on," Anders said, "I'd let you stay at my house if you needed somewhere to go."

"Not that I'd want to," Hawke said after a pause in which he seemed to have satisfied whatever he was trying to figure out, "what with the mouldy smell and the rats."

"The rats are part of the charm," Anders said as Hawke caught up to him and they continued walking together, "it just isn't the same without them."

"You know I'm finding it harder and harder to tell when you're messing with my head," Hawke mumbled.

Anders didn't reply. He wasn't sure whether he was supposed to have heard it or not.

"I didn't bring you here just so you could drink my alcohol," Hawke said disapprovingly.
Anders had remembered Hawke's hiding place at the bottom of the bookshelf and had, as sneakily as possible, fished it out when Hawke's back was turned. He'd had an odd sensation of déja vu walking through the door of the house and it was making him think of sad things, things that happy, drunk people didn't think about; he'd half expected Bethany to be there. He actually missed her a little, she was a good foil for her brother. Anders wondered if Hawke did the same thing, expect his sister to appear around the next doorway, smiling. I need more alcohol, Anders had thought quickly which had led to the hunt for the whiskey.

"And I didn't come here to sober up," Anders shrugged, pulling at the cork.

Hawke watched him for a moment before taking hold of his arm and steering him into his bedroom. Anders stumbled after him, still fighting with the bottle.

"At least keep it down," he said with a sigh, "mother'll be asleep."

"Oops," Anders said, leaning against the wall as Hawke closed the door quietly, "sorry."

Hawke gave him a look that said 'no you aren't and I know it' before lighting the candles on the table. The room illuminated slowly into a flickering of shadows. Anders finally managed to pull the cork from the bottle and lifted it to take a long swig. It was rough and didn't taste anywhere as near as refined as whatever he'd been drinking at the Shield, but then he wasn't drinking it for the taste. He coughed a little, looking at the bottle with a frown.

"Where did you get this stuff?" he asked Hawke, "Make it yourself?"

"And now you're complaining about the free drinks," Hawke shook his head as he slipped his jacket off and hung it over the back of his chair.

"Not complaining," Anders said, shrugging, "just curious. It tastes like it was made in a bath."

"It probably was," Hawke laughed.

Anders took another drink anyway. No matter what it tasted of it worked just as well. He pushed up from the wall unsteadily, managing to stumble over to the table to put the whiskey down. He was still amazed he'd managed to get this drunk. It must have helped that he'd hardly eaten anything all day before filling himself with lots of very strong spirits over a very short space of time. Justice could obviously only deal with so much of the physiological effects before his system was simply too saturated with poison that he couldn't not feel the result.

"And I think that's enough to keep you going for a while," Hawke said, putting the cork back in the bottle and moving it out of Anders' reach.

"You're no fun," Anders said superciliously.

"Well I don't know about you," Hawke said, ignoring him, "but I'm going to bed."

"And it's your birthday," Anders said with a roll of his eyes, "people would think it was mine to look at us."

"Good thing there's no one here then, isn't it," Hawke said, pulling off his boots.

Anders looked around the room as if only just only just noticing the empty bed in the corner. He put his hands unsteadily on his hips and looked back to Hawke.

"Where is your charming uncle?" Anders asked.
"Oh probably still out getting drunk," Hawke shrugged, "or at the Rose again, who knows with him."

"Your mum must be champing at the bit to get out of here," Anders said, "can't blame her really."

"Well hopefully it won't be much longer," Hawke said, "mother's petition has already been seen, she's just waiting for approval. Hopefully I'll have enough soon to cover whatever extortionate amount they want for it. Needs a lot of work done too, no one's lived there properly for years."

"So you'll be up living with the nobles and that better-than-thou elf, forgetting about all us commoners down under your feet soon, hmm?" Anders said.

"Hardly," Hawke said, "and please don't talk about my friends like that Anders."

"Oh he's a prick," Anders scowled, "and I'm sure he says things about me behind my back all the time so I may as well do the same."

"You're so paranoid," Hawke shook his head.

He watched Hawke remove his daggers from the belt around his waist and then look around the room. Hawke suddenly looked to Anders with concern.

"Where's your staff?" he said with a hint of annoyance, "Don't tell me we've left it somewhere at the Shield, how could you be so irresponsible? If anyone saw you with it Anders! I'm not going all the way back up there..."

"No," Anders interrupted, hating having to remember anything dire at this point in his high of happiness, "no I don't have it anymore."

"Don't have it? What on earth do you...?" Hawke started.

"Some little bastard stole it," Anders said tightly, "come on, don't make me think about bad things just now, I'm trying to be happy."

Anders stepped away from the table and tripped over the edge of the bed on the floor. Hawke reached out and caught him. Anders laughed, finding his feet again, holding on to Hawke for balance. When he looked up Hawke was very close...and his eyes were very green. Anders stared, for once not really caring if Hawke noticed or not. In fact he couldn't remember why he'd ever cared in the first place. Before all of this, Justice and his grand plans, Anders would never have stopped himself. If he saw a chance of having fun, at being happy, he had always reached out and grabbed it with both hands as quickly as possible, and why shouldn't he? For mages, apostates, the chances were few and far between and usually fleeting. That was when Anders noticed that Hawke was staring back.

"Why are you here Anders?" he asked him, his breath warm against Anders' face.

"Well I never gave you your birthday present, did I?" Anders said with a devious smile, the whiskey fuelling his recklessness.

Why are you doing this to yourself? A part of him asked. This is pointless, you can't have this, not anymore. Yet Anders had always wanted what he couldn't have. Freedom, love, a family. Everyone else got to have it, he'd always thought logically, why shouldn't he? There was a time, what seemed like a lifetime ago now, when that had been all he'd ever wanted.

"I already told you..." Hawke started.
"Yes, yes I know," Anders said, smiling genuinely, "it's enough just that I'm here, apparently."

And the thought made him feel something he'd never thought he'd dare to again. He leaned forwards and pressed his mouth firmly over Hawke's, arms slipping around his shoulders. The younger man went rigid in his grasp and, for a moment, even through the thick haze of alcohol, Anders wondered if he'd made a grave mistake. That was before he was suddenly and roughly shoved up against the wall, a tongue down his throat and a leg pressed firmly between his thighs. Anders groaned into the kiss, shifting his head to a more comfortable angle as Hawke pressed him against the coarse wall firmly and continued to ravage his mouth. Hips pressed against hips, chest against chest, panted breaths. Maker this felt good, was all he could think, and right, it felt good and right. He shifted one hand up to curl into Hawke's soft, black hair, twisting the shortish strands around his fingers. Hawke slid his hands inside Anders' coat and ran them down his sides, sending a shiver of sensation up his spine. Anders broke the kiss, gasping.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this," Hawke said as he kissed his way up Anders' jaw, his eyes positively feral.

"Oh, I might have some sort of idea," Anders managed to say, tightening his hold on Hawke's hair and humming encouragingly as he continued.

Hawke growled domineeringly and hauled Anders away from the wall, turning to walk him backwards across the room, kissing him all the while. Anders tried not to stumble, even as Hawke fumbled with the fastenings on his coat, slipping them open too easily, damn those deft rogues' fingers, and shoving the garment roughly off his shoulders. Anders tripped and fell when his feet hit the bed again, ending up splayed out on the mattress. His head spun with the sudden movement and he felt a little nauseous. What on earth was he doing? Hawke knelt down and slowly crawled over him, leaning in to kiss at his neck. Anders couldn't help but revel in the warmth surrounding him, the feel of Hawke's strong hands pulling his shirt from his trousers, teasing fingertips against his abdomen. He felt safe and warm and fuzzy all over. He was never sure whether he was unbelievably relieved or would never forgive himself for blanking out at that moment.

Anders jolted awake with a scream on his lips. The room was dark and, for one horrible moment, he didn't know where he was or how he got there. He looked around in a panic, stopping only when the headache made itself apparent. When the darkness began to spin in front of his eyes he simply flopped back against the bed and lay there, trying to remember something useful.

The door opened cautiously, letting in a stab of bright light. Anders' headache told him it would be a good idea to avoid that, so he did. He grabbed the blanket and pulled it up over his head.

"Are you awake?" he heard a familiar voice ask.

"Mmm," Anders answered in a groan, "no need to shout."

"I'm not shouting," Hawke said, lowering his voice.

Then everything flooded back and Anders went cold. The birthday, the alcohol, the things he'd said, tripping up, the kiss and then nothing...oh Andraste's holy hell, he thought. Anders felt like he was going to throw up but there was nowhere to do it. He didn't think Hawke would ever forgive him if he vomited in his bed now. Slowly, very slowly he pulled the blanket down past his eyes and squinted at Hawke, still standing in the doorway. The light wasn't quite as bright as he'd first thought. Hawke was watching him closely. Anders felt his stomach roll over.

"Hawke?" he decided to say.
"Who were you expecting?" Hawke said, "Knight Commander Meredith?"

"I don't think she'd have much trouble with me today," Anders said moodily, sitting up very slowly and carefully.

"If you get up and come through there's breakfast," Hawke said with a tempting smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"Ugh please don't talk about food," Anders said as his empty stomach swilled unsteadily, "I really don't think I could."

"Well tea then, at least," Hawke compromised, "it'll settle your stomach. Merrill gave me some herbs last week. She found wild mint in the Viscount's garden and managed to pinch some before she was thrown out."

"What on earth was she doing there?" Anders asked, rubbing slow circles on his temples.

"Well...she said she didn't realise it wasn't open to the public," Hawke said with a short laugh, "but sometimes I just can't tell with her. Anyway, get up and get dressed and I'll make you some."

Hawke smiled at him and closed the door. What he'd suggested was totally normal after last night but it was the last thing Anders wanted to happen. What he wanted now, more than anything, was to get home as quickly as possible and pretend none of this had ever happened. He'd never drink again, Justice won, he'd submit, he was obviously a complete and utter idiot, an irresponsible idiot. How could he do this to himself? He thought, cupping his fragile head in his hands and trying to will away the ache between his ears. How could he give in so easily to something he'd managed to resist for months, something he'd decided would just have to be a sacrifice. The cause came first, it came before everything else, including himself. Now he was lying here, hung-over, as if it were simply a normal day for a normal man. Only he wasn't normal anymore. He couldn't act like this, he couldn't pull Hawke into this, he couldn't allow himself to be distracted he couldn't...

Justice and Anders. For a long time he'd wondered where one ended and the other began. He'd looked at it like that for so long that, in a way, he'd hid himself from the truth of it. There was no real divide anymore. He was simply fighting against accepting the other half of himself, against something he had already become without noticing. He was Justice, Justice was him. There was no real distinction anymore, not really. He just wanted there to be because, without a divide, he didn't know who he was anymore. Also because he couldn't find a good excuse, he couldn't find someone to blame, when he did something that he didn't like. Like this.

"Ah so you are alive," Hawke said as Anders shuffled out into the main room, shielding his eyes from the daylight filtering in through the high window.

"Barely," Anders said quietly, "I don't even want to know what it was I drank last night. I might be tempted to do it again. Or track down and destroy every last bottle."

"Don't worry," Hawke said with a quiet laugh, "by the looks of it that bottle was the last. It didn't even have a label on it. Maker knows what was actually in there."

Anders lowered himself into a seat at the table and sighed. He heard Hawke walking towards him but didn't look up. Then a hand, holding a cup, appeared in his view of the table top. It smelled wonderful. Anders was actually grateful to Hawke, right up to the point where his hand carded through Anders loose hair and down the back of his neck, gently rubbing a slow circle at the top of his spine. It felt amazing but, for Anders, all it did was confirm that Hawke hadn't forgotten what had happened between them. Why did things have to be so bloody difficult? Why couldn't Hawke
have been drunk too, like he always was? Why couldn't Anders have listened to Justice for once and not been his usual, rebellious self? When had that ever worked anyway?

"Drink it," Hawke said warmly, "it'll help I promise."

"Thanks," Anders said weakly.

The hand removed itself, leaving Anders staring at the slightly greenish, steaming liquid in the cup before him. He lifted it with both hands and took a small sip. It was still too hot but it tasted fantastic. He blew on it, watching the water ripple, and tried to think about what he was going to do. Although, truth be told, he already knew what he was going to do. He was going to do what he always did, what he'd always lived by before he and Justice became one. He was going to run away from his problems and pretend they'd never happened in the first place.

"So," Anders said, hating every word as it left his mouth, "did I have a good time last night then, at least, to warrant all this pain?"

"What?" Hawke asked a little confusedly as he returned from the other room, "You can tell me that, I think."

"I would if I could remember half of it," Anders said moodily, this time actually being half truthful, he couldn't remember *everything* after all, "nearly gave me a heart attack waking up this morning. Why didn't I go home?"

When Hawke didn't answer Anders looked round cautiously to see his reaction. Hawke was facing away from him, tending to a pot that was sitting over the fire. His silence gave Anders the chance to continue with his facade. He couldn't help but feel the guilt stabbing at him with every word. Coward, he thought mercilessly, you're such a coward. You could have had this, all of this, and you're throwing it away for your own bloody pride. Don't pretend you're doing this for the cause, you could have him at your side, you could do this together, you're just scared, Anders thought harshly, you're just a coward.

"Oh Maker, what did I do?" Anders said when Hake continued his silence, "I didn't pass out in the street or something did I? Or get into a fight? Please tell me I didn't get into a fight."

"No you didn't, I mean...you really don't remember anything?" Hawke asked cautiously.

"I remember the pub," Anders lied believably, "barely. Maker Hawke, please tell me I didn't cause a scene..."

"No," Hawke interrupted him, his voice a little flat, "you were just...very, very drunk."

"Oh," Anders said, trying his best to sound confused, "well, that doesn't sound so bad. Sorry you had to look after me, it was your birthday after all."

"I don't mind," Hawke said, finally turning around to look at him; if Anders truly hadn't remembered anything he would never have suspected Hawke was even trying to hide behind his smile. The rogue swallowed and looked away once more, his shoulders rigid and his voice quiet, "you're a lot of fun when you're drunk you know."

"Oh I'm sure," Anders said sourly, "did I insult any templars when I was in Hightown? That's what I used to do when I got drunk. In fact I think I was out of my face the first time they took me back to the tower. May have got myself caught that time."

"I can believe that," Hawke said as he stirred the pot mechanically.
Don't let yourself become distracted, Anders thought grimly as he looked away from Hawke and stared back into the cup. This is the way it needs to be. Hurt him now, hurt him to save him from the pain. You can't lose what you don't have.
The next thing he heard was that the Amell estate was being renovated. The ivy was being stripped from the facades, the insides scrubbed, the furniture replaced, the stonework cleaned of dirt and the glass washed until sparkling. The name Hawke was on everyone's lips, from the Viscount to the nobles to the templars. Even in Darktown, while spoken of with envy, Anders couldn't get away from him.

"Seriously William, if you go on about it one more time I'm going to cast a silence spell on you," Anders said tightly.

He handed the little girl sitting his chair a hot mixture of panacea. She took it and blew on it loudly before taking a messy sip. William was scowling at him when he looked over.

"But it's just so..! And anyway he's your friend," William said with a put out expression, "thought you'd be happy for him."

"I am," Anders said, only half listening as he checked on the male elf who had come in a couple of hours ago with a lacerated arm; it seemed to be healing well.

"Could have fooled me," William said, "anyways, I can't hang about today. Got a job to do, gonna take a while."

"Alright," Anders said, nodding to him, half relieved that William was leaving so he wouldn't have to put up with his pestering.

Neither he nor Hawke had said anything of that night, for which Anders was glad. For the first few of days, whenever he'd seen Hawke, there had always been an underlying threat of discovery, that he would be found out and then have to explain himself. After a couple of weeks the feeling of panic began to die away. Anders started to get used to Hawke's unexplained sullen turns, his silences, and also Varric's odd glances that looked too interested to be ignored. The dwarf was too nosy sometimes, but Anders knew how to deal with that. He just did as he always did and avoided it.

There were more important things to worry about anyway. Like the steadily increasing amount of Tranquil that were showing up in the Gallows lately. Anders felt himself pulling the bandage too tightly around the old man's arm at the thought and apologised. It never failed to make him furious. Just yesterday Sabine had told him at the meeting about Harriet. Harriet De Mauche was a healer, just like him, very proficient in creation magic. She'd lived in the Circle all her life and had never once tried to escape as far as he knew. Sabine said she'd taken the dangerous trip to the Gallows to see what goods Soilivtus had for sale when she'd seen her. She said she'd even started to call out to her before she noticed the mark. Sabine had looked a little pale as she told him about it, a mixture of grief and fear; grief for a friend lost and fear for her own safety. Harriet had passed her harrowing years and years ago. It was against Chantry law to turn a mage who had passed their harrowing. The templars were taking the rules into their own hands now. This had to stop.

It made him remember something, a conversation he'd had a long time ago. Justice had been asking him questions. The spirit had wanted to learn everything he could and unfortunately he'd seemed to think that Anders was the best person to pester. He'd taken a keen interest in the oppression of the mages. Being called Justice, Anders could entirely believe that it was something he'd pick up on but, back then, he'd merely thought it irritating.
"I understand that you...struggle against your oppression mage," Justice's opaque eyes didn't meet his as they walked back towards Vigil's Keep in the rain.

"I avoid my oppression," Anders said sarcastically, "that's not quite the same thing, is it."

"Why do you not strike a blow against your oppressors?" Justice finally looked at him, his face stern, "Ensure they can do this to no one else?"

"Because it sounds difficult?" Anders said back blithely.

"Apathy is a weakness," Justice said back so reasonably that Anders would have throttled him if he'd thought it would make any difference.

"So is death," Anders sing-songed, "I'm just saying!"

There were times he couldn't believe that he'd ever thought that way, and others when he wished things could go back to that carefree time when all he had to worry about was himself. Now he felt like he was living for half the city, every decision he made was life changing, everything he denied himself was becoming harder and harder to let go of. Especially when it turned up with presents.

Despite how much he and Hawke had distanced themselves from each other the man had still turned up at the clinic often. Sometimes it was with supplies that he said he didn't need, or even just with coin. The children loved him because he always had sweets on him, the adults resented him because he always had money; even with his charity the resentment of what you couldn't have was rife in Darktown. Not that Anders could truly blame them.

One day Hawke had turned up with a rug strapped to his back and Anders just had to ask. He knew the man liked to show generosity but it had seemed a little random.

"What? You had a spare rug lying around?" Anders asked disbelievingly as he washed his hands, "And decided it would look wonderful in my rat infested, hole of a clinic?"

"Well now you're just being ungrateful," Hawke had said, pulling the rug from his back and unrolling it with a swish of fabric, "and dense. Do you really think I'd bring you a rug for your birthday?"

Anders wasn't sure what had shocked him more that day, that Hawke had remembered his birthday or that Anders had forgotten it. Or that Hawke had hidden his present inside a rug. The staff was an odd creation. It was a hybrid, made from what looked like mahogany wood, still with the roots twisting from its tip, headed by a long, slim but dangerous looking blade. There were charms tied into the rope which was knoted across the roots along with strips of blood red cloth. Intricate runes lined the wood where it joined to the metal, trailing down its length. Anders had been speechless for a little while after Hawke handed it to him.

"Didn't think it would be wise to run around the city with that in plain sight," Hawke had said with an amused grin, "the templars might not be so amused."

"It's..." Anders couldn't think of anything appropriate to say, "...it's beautiful. Thank you Hawke."

"No need," Hawke had smiled genuinely, then looked away, frowning slightly, "thought I'd better find something suitably good to repay you for my birthday present."

"What, going out to the pub with you and getting blind drunk?" Anders said with a laugh, still keeping up the lie, the words sticking in his throat, "I'll do it more often if it gets me gifts like this."
"Right," Hawke said, smile tight, "anyway, I have to get back, check no one's slacking off at the mansion. You've no idea the amount those renovators charge, it's extortionate."

Anders never let the thing out of his sight. He had no idea how much Hawke paid for it but, considering the amount of coin the man threw around, Anders could only imagine. He kept it strapped to his belt at all times except when working in the clinic and sleeping. He had to be careful of the blade, which he wasn't used to and had already cut himself on more than once when practicing with it. He'd seen a few of the rougher types that frequented his clinic eyeing it up from time to time but, even after seeing what happened when he left the clinic unprotected, Anders doubted anyone would be stupid or brazen enough to steal when he was actually there watching them.

"Now, keep that covered and come back in a couple of days so I can..." Anders was saying to the elf when he heard the running footsteps.

He looked towards the door instinctively, tensing as it was thrown open. He relaxed on seeing the familiar young boy panting in the doorway, doubled over as he tried to catch his breath. Cricket was one of William's friends, a nice lad if a bit shy. Anders opened his mouth to ask him what was wrong but was stopped short by one word.

"Templars!" Cricket finally managed to shout between pants, "Headed this way!"

"Shit," Anders said, his mind racing; he didn't hesitate, there was no time to, "everyone out!"

One thing Anders was forever thankful for was the ability of the inhabitants of Darktown to scatter at a moment's notice. Anders grabbed his staff and strapped it to his belt before rushing over to help the old man stand up; quickly he found he was too frail to run. Anders felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find the elf whose arm he'd healed taking the old man by the other hand.

"You go Healer," the elf said urgently, "I'll get him somewhere safe."

"Thank you," was all Anders could spare before he ran.

Cricket was already down the stairs and running up the next set, the others pretending to lounge against the railings or running to the derelict buildings surrounding the landing. He ran after Cricket, his feet hardly touching the ground as he jumped down the stairs and took the next set three at a time. He was rushing through escape plans in his head. He needed to get to the sewers as quickly as possible, he could lose them down there. He saw Cricket turn right at the intersection, his young face stark with determination as he shouted back.

"I'll distract 'em!" before he ran full pelt up the street.

"No wait!" Anders shouted after him.

But it was all too late. As Anders shouted after Cricket he saw the light reflected off of bright chainmail as the compliment of templars rounded the corner. Anders froze when he saw the man at their head. He heard Cricket call out to him but didn't catch the boy's words. He knew that face. His eyes flashed white with rage before he forced it down. There wasn't a mage in Kirkwall that didn't know of Ser Alrik.

"That's him!" Ser Alrik was shouting, his cold blue eyes trained on Anders, "That's the apostate!"

Anders kicked himself into gear. There were at least twelve, not counting Alrik, far too many to fight. He ran, straight for the sewers entrance, his feet flying over the well trodden path. He could hear the tramping of heavy metal boots, the rustle of armour jostling armour as the templars gave
chase. There was no time; he didn't bother with the ladder and jumped instead into the dark hole. He hit the ground awkwardly and cried out as his ankle twisted painfully. Well that was fucking clever, Anders thought desperately as he grit his teeth and reached out and cast a quick healing spell over his ankle. It barely covered the pain but he had no time to waste, forcing himself to scramble to his feet. The light above him was already being blotted out as the templars began to descend the ladder. He ran down the stairs and cast a look about. He would have taken time to plan a route but that was before the arrow imbedded itself in his shoulder. With an agonised cry he stumbled forwards and didn't even bother to look back. He ran up the stairs before him and slammed through the door, throwing it shut behind him. Reaching up while still running, he broke the arrow through the shaft. The pain seared down his left side as the metal tip moved inside his flesh but Anders ignored it as best he could and hurried forwards.

Who had given him up? No, he shouldn't think like that, it may not have even been anyone. He just wasn't careful enough, too free with his services, too involved in the underground. It was only a matter of time before the templars tracked him down. In all honesty Anders was surprised they hadn't managed it before now. For a long time Anders had been wondering if the templars in Kirkwall were really as fierce as their reputation depicted. Now it seemed he was going to find out. They were still too close, why couldn't he lose them? Anders thought as he shot another bolt of lightning behind him into the murky darkness. He heard a cry as one of the templars fell but, just as one went down, there was another to replace him. Anders cursed as the pain in his ankle began to seep back, the quick spell he'd cast beginning to wear off. Alrik was suddenly at their head once more as Anders ran through the next door and slammed it shut behind him. He took the time to freeze this one shut with a sheet of ice before half running half limping forwards, trying to remember which way would take him to Lowtown. He could hear the solid shields bashing into the other side of the door and made a snap decision. He went left.

"After him, I want this one alive!" he heard Alrik cry, his voice nothing but a harsh, cold sneer, "Oh we're going to make an example of you mage!"

Anders pushed himself up over the pipes lining the passage he'd found himself in, ignoring Alrik's taunt. There would be other times. He and Alrik were destined to meet at some point but right now, outnumbered and injured, he didn't stand a chance against him. Anders pushed Justice down as he fought to rise to the bait. Definitely no time for *that* either, he thought in a rush as he heard another arrow whip past his head to thunk into the doorframe before him. So much for taking me alive, Anders thought wryly. He hauled it open and ran, throwing a look over his shoulder to check how much leeway he had.

Which was the only reason he managed to avoid the spiked mace of the templar that had, moments before, been where his head was. Anders rolled to the ground and scrambled up, pulling his staff out in front of him and casting a flare of flame at the templar. For a moment he thought he'd killed the man but, just as he got ready to run again he heard the tell tale puff of a smoke bomb. Anders turned as quickly as he could, finding the templar behind him, looming. A fucking hunter, Anders thought ruefully, just what he needed. He brought the blade end of his staff before him and parried the blow but, with his ankle, he couldn't stop the momentum as he fell back. The templar was on him in a second and Anders reacted instinctually. He brought the staff up and aimed as best he could, watching with a dark satisfaction as the slim blade on his staff slid straight through the slit in the templars helmet. The man's arms twitched as he let out a gurgling scream and the sword fell from his limp hands, bright red blood spurting down the bladed end of Anders' staff. Anders stood up as quickly as he could and kicked him off awkwardly, turning to run as he heard the rest of the troop catch up.

He had no idea where he was, Anders realised with panic as he found himself in a large room filled
with huge pipes and areas cordoned off with railings; thick, murky water lay below him, under the walkways, rushing noisily. Anders looked around him for an exit as he limped forwards.

"Lieutenant, take your men around and flank this bastard!" Alrik's voice echoed off the walls.

He had to get out of here, the further he went the more he was simply trapping himself. He hurried along the walkway and was never more relieved than when he found a ladder leading upwards. No matter where it went it had to be better than here. He attached his staff to his belt and grabbed onto the ladder, hopping up and using his arms to pull him faster. He could hear the templars behind him, so close he could hear them panting under the weight of their armour. The ladder seemed to go on forever and his arms began to tire. Anders held on for dear life and continued up the narrow passage, aiming for the small, round patches of light far above him.

How he had managed to run this far he would never know but, as he pushed the heavy sewer plate out of the way, it now made sense to him why he didn't recognise the sewer area he had found himself in. He had never had any need to go to the sewers beneath Hightown after all. One thing he would do after this, Anders thought optimistically, was map out the entire of the sewers so that this kind of mess could never happen again. He stared around himself, the night air cold compared to the heat of the sewers. That was when he realised exactly where he was. The steps leading to the Viscounts Keep sprawled away to his right; he turned on his good foot and sent another blast of thick ice over the sewer hole he'd just exited, listening with dread as the templar below instantly started hammering against the fragile surface. He didn't have much time.

The newly renovated building shone before him in the moonlight. Anders didn't think, he just acted. He didn't have time to think; if he did that he might be dead soon. Or, knowing Alrik's reputation, worse than dead. He stumbled into the alcove and pounded on the doorway. He could hear the shattering of ice behind him and his heart leapt into his throat. Come on, he thought savagely, come on someone! He pounded again, his head beginning to feel light from the pain. The sound of booted feet on the stone echoed around the small courtyard. He nearly fell through the doorway when he tried to knock again and found the door open in front of him.

"Maker's..." Hawke's voice was lost into the night air as he stared wide eyed at the man before him.

Then he shook himself out of his stupor and simply grabbed Anders and dragged him inside, closing the door behind him. Anders found himself pulled along a richly carpeted hallway, stumbling over his bad ankle and dropping his staff from his now numb hand. Hawke didn't miss a beat, pulling Anders' good arm up over his shoulders and practically running them into the main room.

"Garret what's going on...oh!" Anders looked up to find Leandra half way down the staircase; she had her hand to her mouth in shock.

That was when the knocking started, the very insistent knocking at the front door. Hawke continued to pull him towards a doorway that led off to the left past a set of tables along the wall. Anders looked round to find a dwarf scurrying into the room; he thought he recognised him but couldn't find the presence of mind to care.

"Bodahn, get Anders' staff, hide it, now!" Hawke ordered, "Mother, answer the door and don't tell them anything."

Then they were through the doorway and Hawke kicked it closed behind them. Anders looked around him; it looked like a library but his vision was going a little blurry so it was hard to tell. Hawke leaned Anders against the wall and ran to a nearby bookshelf, quickly counting the books on the fifth shelf up before tipping one out. There was an audible click and the wall swung
outwards enough for Hawke to get his hand behind it and pull open the newly revealed secret door. Without another word he hauled Anders from the wall and bundled him into the small alcove behind it.

"Don't make any noise," Hawke said as the sound of templar voices in the hallway became ever more apparent.

Then he closed the door, leaving Anders in darkness. The mage slid down the wall and tried not to pass out. He could hear the heavy tread of templars filing past his hiding place, above his head as they searched upstairs. He wished he could cast a healing spell on his wounds but was too afraid that they would hear or see the glow through the cracks in the bookcase. The last thing he wanted to do now was be caught. If he was found here it wouldn't just be himself he'd be damming, it would be Hawke and his mother too. It was a hangable offence to hide an apostate in Kirkwall these days. Anders shuddered and stayed put, shaking in the corner, until the sounds of pursuit slowly died away. He was beginning to feel cold by the time he heard the click again and light poured in on him.

"Can you stand?" Hawke asked as he leaned down to help Anders to his feet.

"Sort of," Anders said, leaning heavily on Hawke as he helped him back out into the library.

He led him back out into the living room where Leandra was pacing back and forth before the fire. She sent him a dark look, pulling her arms up to wrap them around herself protectively.

"How could you," she said, her voice filled with emotion, "how could you bring the templars into my house!"

"Mother enough!" Hawke said sternly.

"With my Bethany in the Gallows," Leandra ignored her son, "if there are any repercussions from this...!"

"I said enough!" Hawke shouted before checking his tone to a more reasonable level, "Nothing is going to happen, alright? You heard them, everything will be fine."

Leandra turned away with what sounded like a choked sob. Anders felt the guilt like a physical thing. He hadn't meant to cause trouble, he'd just needed to...he'd needed to...

"Come on," Hawke was saying to him, "there's a room upstairs. Can you manage?"

He didn't answer, just nodded his head. Hawke helped him up the stairs one by one until they were on the landing above. He opened a door on the wall facing them and Anders hobbled inside. Hawke took Anders' arm from around his shoulders so he could double back to close the door and Anders experimentally tried to walk on his own. It wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever done, Anders would admit, and his leg crumpled from under him on the first try. He fell to his knees on the hearth rug before the roaring fire.

"Anders! Are you alright?" Hawke sounded worried out of his wits.

"I'll be okay," Anders said faintly, "Just need to..."

He reached down and cast another healing spell on his ankle. The relief was enough to give him another bout of light-headedness, although whether it was from the adrenaline rush or his fading mana reserves he wasn't sure. He felt Hawke behind him, heard him kneel down and felt him place his hands on his left shoulder.
"Fucking hell, you've been shot," he said tersely, "those bastards! Just...just hold still, this is going to hurt."

Anders would have braced himself if he'd had the energy to. Instead he simply hissed in pain as Hawke pulled at the stump of wood which was all that was visible of the arrow deep in his flesh. He cried out as Hawke pulled again, harder, unable to stop himself as the pain flared. Hawke stopped, seeming unwilling to try another time.

"I'm going to have to cut it out," Hawke said.

Anders just nodded vaguely. Hawke was careful in removing his pauldrons first, lifting them over the shard of arrow slowly. He walked round and knelt down once more in front of him to undo his coat. Anders watched him with a dazed expression.

"I'm sorry," he choked out as Hawke pulled his uninjured arm out through his sleeve, "I didn't know where else to..."

"Be quiet," Hawke said tenderly, lifting his hand to press his fingers over Anders' mouth, "just, be quiet for now."

Anders didn't say another word. Even as Hawke cut into his shoulder with one of his daggers he tried his best to bite down on the scream threatening to escape. He could feel the blood running down his back, the pull of flesh as Hawke extracted the arrow head. The warm blood rushed out as the arrow head, the only thing that was stopping it, was finally removed. Anders tried to cast another healing spell to stop the bleeding at least but found he just couldn't, he had no energy, there was nothing left. Thankfully Hawke wasn't as useless a healer as he always said he was. All that visiting the clinic must have done some good then, Anders thought with desperate humour as he felt Hawke wiping away the blood on his back before placing a thick cloth over the wound and wrapping a bandage tightly around it. He placed a steadying hand on Anders' abdomen as he unraveled the bandage in a swathe around and around his chest, holding the cloth in place. Anders tried to mask the pain by focusing on Hawke's touch. There was silence between them as Hawke worked, the heat of the fire a comforting thing against Anders' naked flesh. Hawke let go of Anders to tie off the bandage and then stood up once more. Hawke put his arms under his armpits and Anders found himself lifted gently onto his feet before being walked over to the previously ignored four poster bed. Hawke pulled back the covers.

"Sit down," he said and Anders obeyed without a word.

The sheets were soft and cool against his skin. Hawke undid the trappings on his boots before pulling them off and placing them beside the bedside cabinet. Then the rogue reached up and pushed Anders gently back, helping him to lie down. Anders felt like he was in a dream as Hawke pulled the thick blankets up over him, the pain of his shoulder a constant throbbing ache and his ankle twinging every time he moved his leg. He felt the bed dip as Hawke climbed onto the other side. Anders rolled his head to the left to look at him; Hawke was laying on top of the covers, staring at Anders, his eyes unreadable. Anders opened his mouth to speak but Hawke beat him to it.

"Get some sleep," he said, "you need it. We'll talk in the morning, alright?"

"...Alright," Anders replied, nothing but a whisper of breath against the pillow.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax. He was safe here. Safe. After a few minutes he managed to steady his breathing and felt sleep reach up to claim him.
It was the sunlight that woke him. He felt warm and heavy and the pain was slow to make itself apparent. Anders took a deep breath and cracked open his eyes, blinking into the bright sun. He tried to sit up but felt the wound in his shoulder complain at the movement and lay back, rolling his head to the left to avoid the glare. He was surprised to find Hawke was still there, still asleep, lying on his right side his head pillowed against one folded arm while the other lay stretched out before him, fingers curled around nothing. Anders watched him for a few moments. There was a taught numbness that had settled over his mind, pushing away the thoughts of the previous night. Instead he decided to focus on the simple enjoyment of waking up next to someone, despite the circumstances. It was a true novelty in his case; even before, when he'd allowed himself the pleasure of a night's company, either he'd never stuck around long enough or they hadn't, and trysts in the dark corners of the Circle tower hadn't offered many opportunities for cuddling afterwards. Hawke stirred a little, a small frown marring his forehead before it disappeared with a sigh. He shifted a little before his breathing evened out once more and he continued to sleep. Anders smiled and shook his head.

He managed to free his good hand, with a little difficulty, from under the heavy blankets. His mana reserves were still depleted but had been slowly replenishing as he slept. Enough to cast a healing spell on his shoulder at least. Anders grimaced slightly as he felt the spell pull at the already healing flesh and clotted blood but it felt much better almost instantly. He used his magic to make sure he couldn't feel any infection but the wound seemed surprisingly clean. He'd half expected the templars to have started using poison arrows, what with their sudden lack of ethics. Now that he had time to think about it they could have killed him with that shot if it had been a little to the right, if it had gone into his spine. Perhaps that's what the fuckers were aiming for, Anders thought angrily. Was this the new templar policy, kill first and don't even bother asking any questions? Just tell the Knight Commander that the apostate attacked first and tried to flee and you'll have all your sins washed away by the Chantry? Anders ground his teeth and rubbed at his face, trying to calm down as he felt Justice stirring under his skin.

"Are you feeling better?" Hawke's voice was unexpected and sleepy.

Anders looked round and blinked at him, shading the sunlight that had now moved to once again be in his eyes. Hawke was staring at him, blinking slowly before reaching up to cover a yawn. The younger man shivered a little as he sat up, rubbing at his arms. Anders felt a little guilty considering, if he hadn't been here, Hawke would have had a warm, comfortable night's sleep instead of lying awkwardly on his bed in the cold.

"Anders?" Hawke prodded when the mage didn't reply.

"Yes," Anders said, not sure what else to say.

"Good," Hawke said, sliding off the bed and heading in a sleepy shuffle towards the door, "I'll get us something to eat. Just stay put."

Anders would have complied but the longer he lay there the more antsy he became, especially since he was feeling much better now. He sat up and shivered as the cold air touched his bare skin, sliding out from under the heavy covers. He found his shirt folded neatly on the bedside cabinet, pulling it on and ignoring the large, bloody rip where the arrow had cut through. Looking down to his ankle he noted the swelling with a sigh of defeat. If only he'd had enough time to deal with it properly last night this never would have happened. Now he'd be hobbled around for days waiting for the swelling to go down. His coat was hanging on the back of a chair beside a writing desk. He slid it on carefully, trying not to exacerbate the wound in his shoulder, before limping over to the dying fire. He knelt down and grabbed a few logs from the scuttle, leaning forwards to place them on top of the embers. A quick blast of flame was easy to conjure, even with his low reserves, and
soon the hearth was bright and warm again. He felt the goosebumps rise on his arms as he soaked up the heat and closed his eyes. He was still so tired.

"I thought I told you to stay put," Hawke said, jerking Anders from his daze.

"Sorry I..." Anders didn't have an excuse so he stopped trying to make one.

Hawke was balancing a large plate in his hands as he pushed the door shut behind him. There was the distinct smell of eggs and cured meat. Anders' stomach rumbled in appreciation. Hawke walked over and knelt down beside him, placing the plate on the floor before the fire. Anders swallowed and wished he could just ignore Hawke and eat his impromptu breakfast but he could feel the man's eyes on him. He looked up to find Hawke's expression had turned from its unreadable state to one of worry and concern.

"What happened?" was all he asked.

So Anders told him. It wasn't much of a story anyway, he thought as he told it, just one he'd lived a hundred times over already. The templars had found him and he had run from them. That was it, story of his life. Luckily this time he'd managed to get away with his freedom, and his life, intact. He watched with curiosity as Hawke stayed quiet throughout the whole tale, glaring into the fire. His fingers curled into fists any time Alrik's name was mentioned. There was a heavy silence once Anders finished his tale. one that he was not wiling to break.

"I have business at the Gallows today," Hawke said eventually, his voice tight and hard, "Meredith can't ignore me in the way she used to love doing, not with the status I have now. She's finally granted me leave for a short visit with Bethany in the Circle."

"That's wonderful," Anders said, glad to finally hear some good news for once.

"I'll have a few words with Cullen when I'm there," Hawke said coldly, "about this Ser Alrik."

"No," Anders shook his head and blanched a little when Hawke's dangerous eyes snapped up to focus on him, "it isn't worth it Hawke, the templars protect their own. Anyway it would seem awfully suspicious, don't you think, for you to be ranting at the Knight Captain about a templar who only the night before was chasing a dangerous apostate through the sewers?"

Hawke let out a small sound of disgust and leaned on his right arm, letting his legs splay out beside him.

"That's not the point! He barged his way into my house and searched every room!" Hawke growled angrily, "And he shot at you without prior warning or necessity!"

"And how are you going to explain how you know that," Anders said back tightly, "don't be foolish Hawke, not now."

"Well I wouldn't have said it like that, obviously," Hawke said, once more staring into the flames, "it's just...for Maker's sake, he can't get away with this!"

Anders couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his lips. Hawke was so...young sometimes. It was endearing but he could see the naivety there every now and then. He shook his head and let it hang down, closing his eyes. He blinked them back open quickly enough when he felt Hawke's fingers clapping his chin, bringing his face back up to look into emerald green eyes.

"Don't you ever do this again, understand?" Hawke said sternly, "I mean it Anders."
"I'm sorry," the mage said, face falling, "I didn't mean to drag you into this Hawke I..."

"I don't mean about coming here," Hawke said, shaking his head vehemently, "I mean about making yourself such an obvious bloody target. You can't keep putting yourself out so openly, you can't keep up this pretence that you won't be found..!"

"And I can't stop either," Anders interrupted firmly, trying to ignore Hawke's hand as it slid from his chin to cup his cheek, "don't you understand? That's just what they want! They want to drive me to thinking there's no way out!"

"What they want is to see you dead, or Tranquil!" Hawke said, face twisted in anger, "And you're making it easy for them!"

Anders pulled away and turned to face the fire. He could feel Hawke's frustration as the man took his hand back, picking up a piece of dry ham but not eating it.

"I won't stop Hawke," Anders said evenly, "I don't care if Meredith herself starts hunting me personally. I didn't come here to cower in the undercity like some frightened fugitive, I came here to change things."

"Well this has surely changed that," Hawke said, sounding like he was trying to at least be reasonable, "you can't go back to the clinic now."

"No, you're right," Anders frowned, ignoring the light in Hawke's eyes as the man thought he'd made progress, "I'll have to move. Shame really, I was getting used to that place."

Hawke threw the meat he held into the fire in sheer frustration. He sat up straight and looked at Anders with a mix of worry and anger.

"Anders for Maker's sake!" Hawke burst out, "You're just being a stubborn fool now!"

"And you aren't seeing the bigger picture," Anders said calmly in the face of Hawke's sheer aggravation, "I can't and I won't back down. No matter what they throw at me."

"Well it'll be easy for you to back down when you're dead," Hawke said, glaring at the mage, "won't it."

"I made a mistake, it won't happen again," Anders said flatly, "I got complacent, that's all."

"That's all," Hawke said, shaking his head, "Anders they nearly killed you!"

Hawke opened his mouth to say more but stopped short. It was as if he'd just realised what he'd said and it seemed to affect him enough that he found it difficult to speak. Anders looked at Hawke as the man rubbed at his face and sighed. He didn't look at Anders as he continued to speak.

"At least lay low for a little while," he said, "you can stay here."

"Hawke it's too dangerous for you to..." Anders started but was cut off.

"Don't start with trying to tell me what I can and can't do," Hawke said commandingly, "if I want to put myself in danger I'll bloody well do it."

"And what about your mother?" Anders said soberly.

Hawke looked up at that, his eyes slightly accusing. Anders just looked back, waiting for an answer.
"Mother will understand," Hawke said after a moment's pause, "she was just upset last night, that's all. It was a shock, to be reminded of the night they took Bethany."

"I'm sorry..." Anders started.

"Please stop apologising Anders," Hawke said, taking a deep breath.

Anders stopped apologising. Hawke stayed silent. The fire crackled merrily away to itself, oblivious to the hushed tension in the room. Eventually Hawke stood, hesitating for a moment before he walked over to stand behind Anders, reaching down to run his fingers through the mage's hair. Anders stiffened under the touch but Hawke didn't seem to notice.

"So, do I have to lock you in?" Hawke said, his voice laced with forced humour.

"...No," Anders said after a pause, "I'll...I'll stay, if it will make you feel better."

"It'll make me feel a lot better," Hawke said, sounding relieved, "I need to go out and get some things before I go to the Gallows but I'll be back later, alright? Help yourself to anything, if you need something you can ask Bodahn."

Anders watched Hawke leave, the other man giving him a warm smile as he closed the door, unsure what to feel.

Hawke managed to stretch a few days into a week. Anders was usually more strong willed than this but found that he couldn't help but accommodate him, especially when the man used his new found technique. Whenever he made a request of Anders Hawke found a means to subtly touch him in some way, whether it was his hair, the back of his hand or even just bumping Anders' shoulder with his own. The mage found it entirely distracting and, on more than one occasion, agreed to stay an extra few days just to have Hawke remove himself from his presence. Anders was beginning to worry that he was completely losing his sense of willpower around Hawke, especially when the man was being so attentive to him.

Anders biggest fear had, once again, been Hawke's mother but thankfully that hadn't lasted long. She'd apologised the morning Hawke had convinced him to stay, still rather stiff in her demeanour but at least she wasn't raging at him to get out of her house and never darken her door again. Anders would take what he could get. It also hadn't taken him much longer to recognise the finely dressed dwarf who had apparently allocated himself as Hawke's manservant. He had been the one to misinform him of Hawke's alleged death all those months ago. When they both figured it out Bodahn didn't stop apologising for days. He seemed stricken to have caused such worry and grief, even though it had been short lived and so long ago. Anders was getting a little tired of the dwarf's constant apologising but, mercifully, he seemed to have stopped.

It wasn't long until the trouble Anders had promised Hawke turned up. Thankfully it was in the form of a friend, of sorts anyway. A few days after the incident with Alrik Anders had been hobbling around the library looking for something worth reading when he'd heard the sound of an argument from the living room. He'd felt awkward at first, convinced that it was Hawke and his mother quarrelling about him staying in the house, and had peeked out of the door to find Aveline Vallen standing in the middle of the room, her arms crossed. Hawke was in a similar position only he was standing in front of the fire, staring at his friend with a hard expression. Unfortunately, before Anders could duck back into the library, Aveline looked over and spotted him.

"You," she'd said, eyes hardening, turning back to Hawke, "I want to talk to him."
"Leave him alone Aveline," Hawke said, giving Anders a disapproving look as he limped out of the library and approached them, "Anders just leave it."

"Talk to me about what?" Anders said, ignoring Hawke as he leaned against a pillar for support; like I don't know what, Anders thought.

"You know what," Aveline said tightly, confirming his suspicions, "we've had a report from the Knight Captain of two templars killed in the sewers not far from Darktown."

"That's nice," Anders said cheerfully, "I won't be sending flowers if that's what you were going to ask."

Aveline's eyes were like shards of glass. If possible her demeanour became even frostier. Hawke walked over to place himself nearby the mage, just in case. He also gave Anders a look to tell him that his glib manner wasn't helping. Anders ignored him. If Aveline wanted to talk then they would talk.

"Dead templars," Anders said, narrowing his eyes, "that isn't a guard matter is it?"

"Murder is a City Guard matter," Aveline said back.

"Oh good, then I have some to report," Anders said, crossing his arms, "Harriet De Mauche for one."

Aveline frowned at him, looking confused. He heard Hawke sigh behind him.

"The Tranquil merchant in the Gallows? She isn't even dead!" Aveline said.

"She might as well be," Anders said darkly, "did you talk to the Knight Captain about her while you were having your cosy chat about his dead templars?"

"Why would I? That's templar business..." Aveline started.

"Oh I see," Anders said, "that's templar business, how convenient."

"Stop changing the subject," Aveline said tightly, "there are two men dead and I think that you are responsible."

"...Prove it," Anders had said, dead pan.

He'd stared a challenge at Aveline even as the Guard Captain fumed and Hawke shifted uneasily on his feet. Aveline had left in a tightly controlled rage and Hawke had berated him for making more trouble out of the trouble he'd already made. Anders couldn't help not feeling guilty at what he'd said. The woman had deserved it as far as he was concerned. Aveline had her head so far in the rule book it made Anders wonder if she actually had freckles at all or if it was just castoff ink from the pages. He bet if he joined them up it would spell out all the laws of the City Guard. Everything was so black and white for her, no grey area even existed; and unfortunately it seemed like mage's rights were entirely grey.

It had only taken three days for Anders' ankle to return fully to normal. When Hawke was out on the third day, meeting Varric at the Hanged Man, Anders had sneaked out to Darktown. He'd found William, who was beside himself on finding Anders alive, and asked him to let everyone know that he was alright. The clinic was a complete loss; the templars had turned it over and wrecked everything. Although, even if it had been salvagable, it was now known to the templars and therefore Anders knew he would have to move. He could never come back here. Anders hadn't
really cared too much, his clinic was only as useful as the good he could do in it, it didn't matter to him where he was. So he hadn't really been too broken up about it...until he saw they'd smashed open his chest and spilled its contents. At first he'd panicked, thinking it gone when he found the small wooden case lying empty in the dirt. Then, from under a pile of cloth, Anders saw it and thanked the Maker that it didn't look important. The little pillow was covered in mud on one side and the stitching was coming out at one corner but Anders didn't care. He stuffed it into his pouch and instantly felt better. It also turned out the templars weren't quite as thorough as they thought; Anders opened the secret hollow under the floorboards at the back of the clinic to find his Tevinter book still there and intact.

He and William sorted through the wreckage together, recovered anything worth keeping and then left. Anders asked William to let him know if he heard of anywhere that might be a good place to set up shop again, anywhere abandoned and out of the way. The young man had said he'd keep an ear out and let him know; then he'd grinned and asked him what it was like living in a Hightown mansion.

"Won't be wanting to come back after that," William had joked a little sadly.

Anders didn't have the heart to tell him that it wasn't the mansion that was keeping him there. Hawke could have been living in the dankest hovel in the city and he would still be able to convince Anders to stay with just a look and a soft touch of his hand. Of course the wonderful food and the satin pyjamas Hawke had lent him didn't hurt, but still.

Hawke wouldn't have ever known he'd slipped out if he hadn't found him washing the little pillow the kitchen sink. He'd asked Anders what it was and, even though he could have come up with something, Anders didn't have it in him to lie to Hawke any more. Hawke's eyes had been incredulous when he told him he'd been back to the clinic.

"Why do I even bother talking to you?" had been the outcome of that argument, with Hawke stalking off to slam his bedroom door behind him.

Hawke's bedroom was the only other issue he'd had. Hawke had made up the spare room for Anders while he was staying, a smaller but no less lavish room off to the right of the landing. The bed was unbelievably comfortable and soft, the windows held a beautiful stained glass mural of a flaxen haired girl sitting amidst a sea of flowers and there was real crystal in the gas lamps. It was perfect, yet Anders hadn't been moved in there on the first night. The night after he'd agreed to stay, Hawke had convinced him that the room wasn't ready yet and that Anders could easily sleep with him again. However, he hadn't, as on the first night, stayed gentlemanly on top of the covers. Anders had fallen asleep a respectable three feet away from Hawke with his back turned; then he'd woken up wrapped in Hawke's arms, his head pillowed against the man's shoulder. Anders had made sure that the guest room was ready by the next night. He didn't think he could handle another temptation like that.

It was another few days until Anders became fed up enough to sit down at the writing desk in the guest room and flip through the Tevinter book he'd rescued from his clinic. He'd never quite gotten to the end of it, something always distracted him, and even the bits he'd looked over were merely skimmed. He wasn't sure what he was looking for in the dusty, foreign pages, but he was sure he'd know it when he saw it. He wasn't very well versed in Tevene but he knew enough to scrape by. The writing was in a flourished hand, tall and spidery and embellished with ornate, colourful plates and stylised borders. They were mainly common spells, or common to Anders anyway, and he had yet to find anything he couldn't have found in the restricted section of the library in the Circle.

That was until he found the bomb.
Blood

For Anders there were levels to everything in his life. Tiredness, for one, was something he was very familiar with: vigilant, awake, drowsy, sleepy, tired, exhausted, dozing, unconscious. Or maybe anger: calm, irritated, annoyed, angry, furious, Justice. Yet, despite his law of many, sometimes there were things that he couldn't entirely separate, perhaps because he didn't want to, perhaps because he refused to understand them enough to be able to. Like templars. Oh, he knew how to understand them enough to avoid them, try and predict their behaviour, but to actually give them layers, well, there were but a few that he could think of. Good templar, bad templar; the former were rarer than a blue moon but if you were lucky then you found one that was somewhere in between.

Ser Thrask was one of those middle ground templars that Anders had never really let truly register on his radar. He had all the trappings of a dangerous man, despite his kindness and gentle nature, but had been tempered by the one thing a templar fears most of all. Magic in the family. Hawke had told him all about his encounter with Feynriel and helping the boy escape to the Dalish. Fenris was not amused it seemed and Anders was glad Hawke had disappointed him. During their escapade he had apparently also discovered another escaped mage, a girl, sent with Feynriel straight into the hands of slavers by that idiotic ex-templar who was so sure he was helping. When Hawke had explained about her becoming an abomination and then finding the letter confirming she was thrasks daughter, well, Anders had found it difficult not to take his anger out on Thrask. His own child, he should have looked after her, he was her father for Maker's sake, who else is she going to look to for protection? Letting her escape the Circle and allowing her to be sold into slavery were two entirely exclusive issues that Anders would have just loved to take up with him. Yet, now, Thrask was looking to Hawke for help once more, this time for a group of apostates fleeing from Starkhaven. Anders had known few templars who would sacrifice themselves for a mage without wanting some sort of payment yet, as far as he could tell, standing here on the Wounded Coast in the soft, warm sunlight of early Summer, all Thrask wanted was a peaceful resolution.

And to put all the mages back into the Circle as quickly as possible. There was always something wasn't there.

"I'm not going to help you just put these mages back," Anders said with contempt as they entered the cave in which the apostates had taken shelter, "it's a bit of a wasted journey don't you think? I'll only be helping them out again next week, probably."

"Do you want to shout that a bit louder?" Hawke said with a roll of his eyes, "I don't think Thrask heard you."

"Let him," Anders shrugged blithely, "he seems more than fine with asking for outside help. Maybe I should start charging a fee. It could be like a constantly perpetuated lost and found office."

"Anders," Hawke said with long suffering note, "I haven't decided how we're going to play this yet, it isn't that easy. Why do you think I asked you to come?"

He hadn't heard the man running towards them until he was right on top of them. Maybe it was the dynamics of the cave, their own already echoing footsteps covering the frantic patter of feet. Wild eyes stormed into view and the man reeled back as if already attacked. Fenris had admittedly drawn his sword but one could hardly blame him, considering the type of welcome Hawke tended to generate in people.
"Templars," the man wheezed, "you won't take me back there!"

"Do we really look like..?" Anders started, face incredulous, but was stopped before he could explain.

Blood magic. Anders had lost count of the times, especially since coming to Kirkwall, he'd seen perfectly good, sane mages turn to blood magic seemingly at the drop of a hat. There was no need, he thought furiously, the idiots were only digging themselves a bigger grave and it wasn't just their own. They were destroying the reputation of free mages everywhere with their weakness. Did they want to prove the templars right, Anders thought savagely, make them think that, when left to their own devices, mages would happily resort to slitting their wrists and consorting with demons at the first opportunity?

"Raising the dead?" he said as the last skeleton crumbled back into the dirt it had crawled from, "What have they done? Why do they always..?"

"It's in their nature," Fenris muttered darkly, setting Anders teeth on edge, "mages always seek power wherever they can find it, no matter the cost."

"That's..! Oh I give up with you, I really do," Anders spat, "Why is he even here? I can't imagine it's for the helpful insight."

Hawke was doing a very good job of ignoring them both. For some reason, which Anders was trying his best to understand, Hawke seemed intent on keeping the elf around. However, that wasn't entirely the issue. The real issue was that he insisted on keeping the elf around him. Ever since Anders had found another bolt hole in Darktown and moved out of Hawke's mansion the man had found every chance he could to invite Anders along on his impromptu adventures. Which Anders didn't mind, he honestly didn't. Hawke was his friend, he liked spending time with him and the man did good work. He helped people because he wanted to help. Sometimes he didn't even take the coin they offered in payment. The only drawback was that he seemed intent on keeping Fenris constantly at his side. Or perhaps it was the other way around, Anders thought, that seemed much more bloody likely.

"Alright, we keep going," Hawke said as he walked towards the tunnel the now deceased apprentice had run from.

"You never know," Varric shrugged, "maybe they'll have a change of heart and throw us a party?"

"That would make a nice change," Hawke grinned, "cake or death?"

"I'll take cake," Anders shrugged, wishing he actually felt the levity Hawke was trying for.

He didn't want to kill anyone. Why wouldn't they just listen? Why did they always think they knew better than he did? He'd been running his whole life, he knew how it worked, he knew how to avoid the templars, he knew how to survive. These idiots escape then, a mere few days later, they hit a glitch and start digging into their own flesh and raising demons. He could never in all the decades of the age say he understood Fenris but sometimes the frustration got to him too. He just wished there was no need to run in the first place; without the incentive of capture and incarceration mages wouldn't be driven to this desperation, didn't the templars see? They were as much responsible for this as the fools who felt there was no other way out.

Then there were the fools who wanted nothing more than to go back.

"Wait don't kill me!" the apprentice screamed as they finished off another group of rotting undead,
"I didn't do anything wrong, I'll go back to the Circle, take me back!"

"Calm down," Hawke said, flicking the black, dead blood from his twin blades, "no one's here to kill you."

"Oh, Maker, I didn't want any of this," the young man's eyes were wide, panicked, "I just wanted to get away and when Decimus said we could be free I...but now this. I don't want to use blood magic, I never did!"

"Decimus?" Hawke said, walking forwards to face the apprentice, "Is he the leader of your group?"

The young man flinched at the use of his name, as if struck. Anders shook his head. How had this one even plucked up the courage to flee the Circle at all?

"Yes," the man nodded avidly, "he said we could be free, he said we could live outside the Circle, away from the templars and their rules but this isn't what I wanted. I want to go back!"

"There's a templar, Thrask, he's outside," Hawke said, "the way should be clear. Go to him, he won't hurt you, he'll take you to the Circle in Kirkwall."

"Th-thank you," Anders couldn't help but sneer at the apprentice's snivelling gratitude.

He watched the young mage trip and scramble through the cave with a sigh. He'd never seen someone so quick to jump back into the chains they'd only just freed themselves from. Alright so Anders didn't agree with the blood magic but was the boy mad? Anders had firsthand experience of the treatment runaways could expect back in the Circle. Repeat offences only compounded the punishment but the first was no less painful than the last. The year he'd spent in solitary confinement was in the running for top spot though.

"At least he sees sense," Fenris said, shouldering his blade.

"He doesn't see anything," Anders said, following Hawke as they pushed further into the cavern, "that's the problem."

"So you agree with this Decimus then? Anything but be captured?" Fenris scorned.

"Does it look like I do?" Anders said tightly, "But to run screaming like a little girl at the sight of a skeleton or two doesn't bode well for him, does it?"

The elf merely grunted in reply. Anders knew he was being irritable but he couldn't help it. He already knew this wasn't going to end well and there was nothing he hated more than to have to fight against the very people he was trying to save. Decimus didn't even give them time to speak. Anders tried to shout him down but the man's eyes were wild with frenzy and fear. He called the skeletons from the crumbling cavern floor, screeching through dirt caked teeth, and then the demons came. Shambling horrors that swiped at him with clawed fingers, trailing their presence through his mind, trying to whisper into him. It made him sick to have to kill the man but he was clearly mad. Anders wondered if Thrask was right and Decimus had lit the fire at Starkhaven that destroyed the phylacteries. Not that lighting the fire was exactly mad, just the consorting with demons part. Once everything had finally died down he turned to find a woman standing above the fresh corpse of the bloodied Decimus.

"You killed him, how could you?" Anders felt for her, he did; he could see it in the woman's eyes, she had clearly cared for the man lying dead at her feet, "oh Decimus, why didn't you listen to me?"
"Well I don't think he brought those skeletons from the grave to serve me tea, do you?" Hawke said unsympathetically, his voice hard, "He didn't give us much of a chance to explain."

"Explain what?" the female mage spat, "That you're here to take us back?"

"No!" Hawke said, "Look, we're here to help, alright? I just want to avoid a massacre."

Anders didn't miss Fenris's smile, however clandestine the elf thought he was being as his eyes swept up over Hawke appreciatively. Anders rolled his eyes and wished he could just freeze the bastard solid and leave him here. It would make his life a hell of a lot easier and more enjoyable. Focusing back on the conversation was more important though. Especially when a slightly fervent glint had crept into the female mage's eyes.

"All we want is to be free," she said, "are you saying you won't turn us over to the templars?"

"I can distract them, long enough for you to get away..." Hawke started.

"No!" the woman cried out, her anger evident, "They will never stop looking for us, it's too risky. There's only one, at the entrance, I saw him follow us. Kill him and we can leave safely!"

Anders watched Hawke's eyes harden, his shoulders stiffening, and knew that it would never happen. It wasn't that Hawke didn't want to help, he just didn't like good people dying, and Anders agreed, usually. In these circumstances, however, it was difficult sometimes to separate the want from the need; and the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few.

"Better one death than many," Anders said, his face set.

"No," Hawke said harshly, turning to him, "Thrask is a good man, I won't see him hurt."

Anders sighed and leaned on his staff. Why was he here again? To witness the further stupidity and misunderstandings of the dispute between mage and templar or to actually help these people? Hawke wanted him here to help make decisions but, when it came to the hard choices, he wasn't willing to listen. Too much compromise got you nowhere, at some point you have to start taking sides and sticking to them. The peaceful middle ground that Hawke was searching so desperately for, where mages and templars lived in harmony, was nothing but a delusion.

Somehow Hawke managed to talk the mages down. The threat of death tended to do that to a person though, Anders thought darkly. Choose: go back or die. Not much of an alternative really. He'd said he wouldn't be a part of this, but now here he was, walking with them, shepherding the worried and determined and angry faces back towards their jail. Perhaps it was only his own weakness shining through now. He didn't want to see them dead either and he wouldn't fight against Hawke's decision enough to have the man despise him for what he would have done were the rogue not here; Thrask would be dead and these people would be free to run.

It all went well until Ser Kerras showed up. Bad templar, Anders thought, narrowing his eyes. You could spot them a mile away, that supercilious look, the smug tone, that glint of violence in the eye. He was here to kill, that was all he wanted and that's all he would take. Even Thrask's own logical arguments simply slid off of Kerras like oil hitting water, separating, never to become one. He had the Knight Commander's word to back him so he was untouchable, that's what Kerras thought. There was no compromise to be had, Anders knew, because there never was in the first place. When Kerras drew his sword and lunged at the terrified apprentice at Thrask's side Anders felt the rage bubbling up inside of him and spewing out into bright, flowing white. Everything flashed before him like a distorted abyss of shuddering darkness. The next thing he knew he was being shaken by the shoulders, Hawke's worried eyes boring into his.
"They're dead Anders, they're all dead," he was saying again and again, "please stop."

Anders harshly shrugged Hawke's hands from him. Look around you, see the justice, see it, see your compromise now. Hawke let him go, his hands dropping loosely to his sides as he watched Anders warily. The mage stepped away and felt his feet bump against the corpse of what he knew was Kerras only by his armour. His face wasn't exactly what you would call recognisable anymore. Anders lifted his hands to find them thick with blood; it was splattered down his coat, over his shirt, he could feel it in the coldness of the breeze against his face. Always, this was what it would always be. He couldn't control it anymore, sometimes he wondered whether he wanted to. When Justice took over it was...disturbing. He didn't enjoy having a memory filled with more blanks than a crossword puzzle but more often than not he found his anger and Justice's vengeance far too similar to be truly separate. If he had Justice's power would he do to the templars what the spirit did? Would he let his rage push itself into his own power, into his mind, into his fingers, his nails, scratching, gouging, dismembering, tearing...

"What is this?" he heard Thrask say, his voice visibly shaken but still with that hardness of a templar spying its prey, "Abomination, you...!"

"Hey," Hawke's voice was practically a growl as the templar took a step towards Anders, Thrask's hand going for the hilt of his sword, "back off!"

Anders looked to Thrask, his eyes holding more than their fare share of Justice's terrible stare. He could feel it was still there, and he could see it in Thrask's reaction. The man looked horrified by what he saw.

"What's the matter templar?" Anders said salaciously, "Don't like what you see?"

"Anders don't..." Hawke started, but Anders wasn't in the mood to mollify anyone.

"All too ready to accept my help before, weren't you?" Anders said, looking at him callously, "You templars are all the same. Bunch of hypocrites with the laws at your back, doing whatever you feel like whenever you want. Make you feel good, does it? Helping us poor defenceless mages? Does it clear your conscience?"

"Okay," Varric intervened, lifting his hands placatingly, standing between the templar and Anders, "looks like we'll have to agree to disagree on a few things here..."

Thrask didn't draw his sword but he did take another step forwards, as if to shield the apprentice who was still at his side; the other mages were long gone. Hawke reacted by drawing his daggers and placing himself directly between the templar and Anders. It didn't surprise Anders that Fenris stepped to Hawke's side, sharp, gauntleted fingers tightly wound around the hilt of his broadsword threateningly; it wasn't for Anders that he did it. Yet, despite the elf's intentions, when Anders looked at the picture presented before him he'd somehow ended up with a wall of rather fierce looking defence between himself and Thrask. He looked through it into the templars dark blue eyes, trying his best to tell Thrask with a look that this is what he would face.

This is what was coming.

He should be ready when it did.

He should have known that Hawke wouldn't let it go. He should have been ready for the glances out the corner of those green eyes, the silence on the long walk back along the coast. Yet it still grated against his nerves, made him feel like he was expected to explain himself. Right now that
was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I need to talk to you," Hawke said as they both stood by the East gate, after Varric and Fenris had said their goodbyes and headed home.

"Then you can walk me back to the clinic," Anders said dispassionately, "I really don't have the time to spare."

The hand around his arm said otherwise. Hawke didn't look angry when Anders looked back at him, just worried. Somehow that made it worse.

"I thought you liked talking to me," Hawke said, a smile covering the anxiety in his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it," Anders said, taking a long breath, "I just want to get back and open the clinic. I take enough time away from my patients to run around with you as it is."

Hawke's smile slowly died, replaced by the unreadable expression he always used to protect himself. Anders felt a twist of guilt in his stomach and looked away as Hawke let go of his arm. He knew Hawke meant well, he did, but the man just didn't know when to let something go. Anders needed to deal with this on his own. Hawke couldn't help him with this. No one could.

When he returned his gaze to Hawke the rouge was scratching the back of his neck, his other hand on his hip.

"Didn't realise I was becoming such a charity," he said dryly.

"I didn't mean it like that," Anders said, feeling the ache of tiredness and the bruising on his body becoming ever more apparent.

"Oh, I don't know," Hawke shrugged, eyes a little dull, "you can be awfully honest...when you want to be."

"Alright, if you're going to get nasty," Anders asked tightly, "what is it you want to talk about?"

Hawke looked at him, a frown marring his forehead. Anders wished he could calm down enough to be reasonable to the man but his anger was still fizzing beneath the surface of his skin. It hadn't simmered down like it usually did, back to its dormant state. He felt taut, like a piece of rope wound tighter and tighter, wanting nothing more than to spring apart. Hawke looked unsure for a moment before he spoke again.

"Come home with me," he said.

"I told you I don't have time to..." Anders said quickly.

"Yes, you do," Hawke said with another infuriating smile, "do I have to pick you up and carry you?"

"I'd like to see you bloody well try!" Anders snapped, his anger spilling out once more, "Is this funny for you? Is it? I'll bet it's all a big laugh for you lot, watching me lose control. Is that why you bring me along Hawke? Entertainment?"

Anders shut his mouth as soon as he realised what a complete arse he was being. Hawke was staring at him like he'd gone mad. Perhaps he had. He lifted his hands to rub at the bridge of his nose, noting there was still blood crusted under his fingernails. He'd stopped at a stream on the walk back to wash as best he could but it never all came off. He closed his eyes and tried to make
"Sorry," he said quietly, feeling the anger leeching away just a little, "I didn't mean..."

"Come on," Hawke cut in, his tone leaving no room for discussion.

Hawke's mother was out, Bodahn informed them as they walked in past the blazing fire, on her weekly visit to Gamlen. Anders, for one, was grateful. He didn't think Leandra's overly polite dislike would have done him any good right now. Hawke didn't stop at the main room, heading straight for the stairs. He didn't give Anders a chance to question, only to follow. The mage tried not to feel like he was being led to the chopping block but that's how it felt. Hawke led him straight to his room. Anders knew it was only so they could have some privacy. Voices echoed in the library, what with the upstairs only opening back into the main room, and all the other rooms were obviously too far away for Hawke to bother with. He doubted Hawke wanted what he was going to say to be public but Anders couldn't help but feel out of sorts in Hawke's bedroom.

"So," Hawke started, taking off his jacket and heading straight for the cabinet beside his wardrobe, "scotch or brandy?"

"I don't want anything," Anders said back.

"If you don't pick one I'll just choose for you," Hawke said, not even looking at Anders as he pulled out two heavy tumblers and set them beside the decanters on the cabinet top.

"Fine," Anders said, shaking his head, "then you choose, I really don't care."

Hawke looked over his shoulder briefly before looking away. He picked two of the large crystal decanters and poured generous helpings into each glass. Anders crossed his arms and stood purposefully as close to the middle of the room as he could get. He didn't want Hawke to think he was comfortable.

The glass was warm in his hand as he took it. Hawke was watching him closely, his eyes calculating, standing a mere few feet in front of him. What did he think he would see? Anders thought as he cradled the drink on top of his other arm. Did he think if he looked long enough he would see inside, see what he wanted to? He wouldn't like it, whatever it was, and Anders knew it. It made him want to look away, just in case.

"Drink it," Hawke said, taking a long sip from his own glass.

"I don't want it," Anders said, "I was just being nice."

"Yes, you're doing a lot of that lately," Hawke said, walking away slowly to sit down on his bed, "why is that?"

Anders didn't really have an answer. Not one Hawke would want to hear. Things were coming together, finally after so long; what he had found buried in the Tevinter book had clicked into place. It didn't mean it didn't scare him, it didn't mean there still wasn't a long way to go. The idea was like a seed sitting just under the surface, waiting to stick its leaves up above the ground and feel the sunlight. Until then Anders couldn't help but feel constantly on edge, as if everything he did that didn't involve his mission was just a waste of time, a waste of his energy. Hawke included.

And that's where things fell apart, because every time he thought that he would look at the man in question and the plan was gone. He already did make allowances for Hawke, too many really, and it only made things worse. He made allowances for him but he couldn't get anything back without sacrifice. If he let it go and gave in he'd...Anders couldn't even entertain the thought of it. Being
with Hawke was like a distant memory, or a dream of some kind. Unattainable. All he wanted was for the man to be happy, yet Hawke seemed to persist after him. Anders remembered back to over a year ago when they'd first met, Hawke telling him how stubborn he was; it still seemed unbelievable that he would possibly be this stubborn.

"Look, I didn't mean to snap at you, alright?" Anders said, "Things have just been a bit, well, fraught lately."

"And you call Varric the master of understatement," Hawke said, taking another, larger swallow of his drink, pausing for a moment before continuing, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Anders said, unable to stop himself from relaxing a little bit, swirling the glass in his hand so he could watch the light sparkle through the spirit within.

"You used to talk to me all the time," Hawke said, looking up at Anders, "don't you trust me anymore?"

For Maker's sake, Anders thought, when had Hawke become this blunt without him noticing? Perhaps the drink had loosened his tongue but that could only account for so much candour. Anders opened his mouth to reply but realised he didn't know what to say. Of course he trusted him, but there were certain things he would never, ever tell him. More for his own protection than anything else. If Hawke didn't approve of his plan he would only try to stop him and that he couldn't allow. The alternative, however, was almost more horrific. Hawke might want to help, then what would he do? He couldn't have him involved in this, he just couldn't. If anything happened to Hawke because of him Anders didn't think he would ever forgive himself. Let Hawke hate him, let them grow apart, let Hawke find a normal life with someone he loved, let him be at peace. He'd lost enough as it was.

"You know that isn't true," Anders admonished.

"Could have fooled me," Hawke shrugged, staring at the wall ahead of him, "I thought we were friends."

"We are friends," Anders frowned, "why are you saying all this? What's gotten into you?"

"What's gotten into me?" Hawke looked up incredulously, "Anders barely an hour ago I watched you beat a templar to death with your bare hands."

Anders swallowed down the fear that tried to surface. The blanks in his memory were bad enough without someone else reiterating the actual events back to him. His own imagination simply took over then and tried to play the scene back to him as he imagined it, what may have happened, what did happen. Justice never let him see. He wasn't sure if he was reassured by that or not. Was the spirit protecting Anders or himself?

"You already knew what you might get if you brought me," Anders said back defensively, "I can't always hold him back, especially when there are templars there doing what they do best. Kerras was going to kill them all Hawke, all of those innocent mages lost to one man's vanity and bloodlust. Did you really think I would let that happen?"

"No," Hawke said soberly, looking to Anders once more, "but then it wasn't you that stopped them, was it?"

"Don't say it like that," Anders said, his face grim.

"Well it's true," Hawke said, "We've been seeing a lot more of your not so better half recently."
"Hawke..." Anders wasn't sure what to say, closing his mouth without continuing.

Hawke stared at him, waiting. When Anders didn't continue he sighed, sitting forwards to put his elbows on his knees for support.

"Will you at least sit down? You're making me nervous," Hawke said, finishing his drink and placing the glass on the floor at his feet.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Anders said with a sigh, "I need to get home."

"You always need to get home Anders," Hawke said, "take a break once in a while will you? You're going to give yourself a stroke or something."

"I can't give myself a stroke," Anders rolled his eyes.

"Well I'll give you something worse in a minute if you don't sit down," Hawke said, eyes disapproving, "and drink that will you, before I do."

Anders' lips thinned to a tight line. He opened his mouth, brought the glass to his lips and tossed his head back, letting the smooth, burning liquid slide down his throat. He choked a little but simply swallowed through it. He heard Hawke laugh a little and hated the way the sound instantly put him at ease. He wanted to hear more. Hawke hadn't laughed around him for a long time and Anders knew why. He wanted his friend back, without all this awkwardness.

You want more than that, something whispered to him in the back of his mind. Anders shook his head and walked over to the bed, feet heavy. He put his glass beside Hawke's on the floor and sat down beside him, mirroring his stance. They sat together like that for a few minutes in a, for once, comfortable silence. Anders rubbed at his face and tried not to think about how tired he felt. He hadn't been sleeping much recently. Between working on the translation of the pages in the Tevinter manuscript, working non stop in the clinic and the nightmares he hadn't really had much of a chance. He felt Hawke's hand in his hair before he even saw or heard the man move. Anders sometimes forgot how stealthy he could be. It felt good. No it felt better than that. It felt right, just like it always did. Which was what made it all the harder to do what he did.

"You need to relax," Hawke said quietly.

"And you need to stop this," Anders said; if Hawke was going to be candid then he may as well be too.

"Stop what?" Hawke sounded genuinely confused.

"You know what," Anders said, feeling the hand in his hair stop dead.

It retracted a moment later. Anders looked at Hawke out the corner of his eye and watched his unreadable expression with a mix of sorrow and satisfaction. Push him away, Anders thought harshly, push him or he'll never understand. You have to because he's your friend and you shouldn't let him fool himself into thinking you're something that you're not. He doesn't see you for what you really are.

"I won't let you fool yourself where I'm concerned," Anders said, "you've been doing enough of that lately."

"I've never misunderstood you Ande..." Hawke started.

"Yes, you have," Anders interrupted, ignoring the ache in his chest, "you seem to think I'm worthy
of normalcy but I'm not. Because I am not normal."

"Anders I don't care about that," Hawke said harshly, "and you know it. That isn't all that you are!"

"I have things...things I've done," Anders couldn't stop the hesitation, "reasons I do things that you wouldn't ever forgive me for."

"Try me," Hawke said, anger tainting his tone, "how dare you judge me without giving me a chance!"

Anders looked at him, feeling the defeated look on his own face. Would you? he thought, would you really be so passionate about defending me if you knew that I fled the Warden's not just because they disapprove of abominations in their ranks but because I murdered the templar they basically assigned to me? That the first memory I have after joining with Justice is Rolan's dead eyes staring up at me, his chest split open, his blood the first in a line of many to cover my hands without my knowing how it even got there? No, Anders thought numbly, you wouldn't.

"I'm going back now," Anders said, all tone gone from his voice; he didn't have the energy to pretend.

Hawke didn't move to stop him. Somehow, despite his resolve, it still hurt. Deep down, below the self righteousness, beneath his plans, beneath Justice and everything else, he wanted Hawke to stop him. Stop him and tell him to stay. Yet he pushed and pushed and all he was left with was empty silence and a need to turn around and look at Hawke. Anders opened the door slowly, hesitating. Finally he looked back to see Hawke watching him from the bed heatedly.

"I'm sorry Hawke," he shook his head, "you're a good friend. Better than I deserve."

His footsteps were hollow as he left, echoing in the emptiness of the mansion.

His new clinic wasn't really that different to his old one but he still felt there was something off about it. It was probably just the unfamiliarity that still hung in the air, or the fact that he had to correct his route through Darktown nearly every time he tried to go home. He constantly found his feet carrying him towards the abandoned clinic on autopilot; more than once he'd ended up at the barred door, wondering how he even got there.

Hawke didn't visit. Anders began to miss him but there wasn't really much he could do about that considering it was his own fault in the first place. This was supposed to be what he wanted yet, the longer he let it go, the worse it got. He continued with the translation, trying his best to covertly source a Tevinter dictionary or grammar codex, but it was slow going. The rough translation was enough to understand the basic principles but to actually get all the ingredients and follow the complex instructions he would need to know more. There were even a couple of ingredients he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to find at any Kirkwall merchants, or even perhaps anywhere outside of the Tevinter Imperium. With some of them he wasn't even sure what they were.

"Well, some clinic you run here," Isabela's voice was heavily laced with sarcasm but she was still smiling when he looked up, "are you ever in it?"

"Oh don't you start," Anders said with a sigh, "does it surprise you that I don't feel entirely guilty that I didn't rush back here to cure whatever disgusting malady you've picked up from the Docks?"

"Well, no," Isabela said with a shrug and a sly grin, "but it doesn't mean I don't still have one, and that's what you're for isn't it?"
Anders sighed. He lit the lantern and unlocked the door, letting Isabela follow him inside. It was still early. He had spent the entire night travelling along the Wounded Coast in the rain with a group of apprentices he'd appropriated from the Gallows. His purse was considerably lighter, thanks to the stony faced templar who had held open the door and let them file past. Anders sometimes had to wonder at the vagaries of faith; 'A mage is always unknown'. Yet some templars didn't seem to mind letting the unknown walk freely out the door for a few sovereigns. Maybe the templar thought he'd just take the money and then bring them back in himself a few days later. Anders smiled at that. He'd be bloody lucky, Anders thought wryly, considering how far away the apprentices probably were by now, scattered to the four winds. Templars were always so sure of themselves, with no real good reason.

"So, it's awfully early for you to be about," Anders said as he placed his staff against the wall and divested himself of his supplies.

"Oh I was just, well, around shall we say," Isabela said mysteriously, moving on before Anders could ask any questions, "and I needed to visit anyway so thought I'd drop by."

"Drop by," Anders couldn't help but smile, "how very generous of you. Drop by so I can take care of whatever you've got."

"If you're just going to be a grouch about it," Isabela said with a roll of her eyes.

"Come on then," Anders said, "I'd rather just get it out of the way."

Isabela's smile returned.

"Ah it's not often I get such a good looking man saying that to me," she said mischievously.

"I can believe that," Anders muttered.

"Unless it's Hawke of course," she said, skipping up onto Anders table, watching him closely.

And he still hated that he couldn't help but react. Bloody Isabela and her bloody interfering. He didn't know how much she knew but something about her all knowing smile always set him on edge whenever she talked about Hawke. Maker I'm such a fucking mess, Anders thought, I have no right to be jealous, none whatsoever.

"...I was only kidding," Isabela said with a shrug when Anders didn't reply, "my, my but we are grumpy today aren't we?"

"'We' are not in the mood," Anders said tiredly.

"Is that the royal we or the actual we?" Isabela asked, crossing her arms behind her head so she could lie back comfortably, "As in you and your imaginary friend?"

"Don't start," Anders said, putting his hands out to feel for any trace of infection.

"Complainer," Isabela said lightly, "I remember when you were fun you know."

"I bet you do," Anders mumbled, trying his best to ignore her and focus.

The city awoke around him as he worked. Anders could hear the differences in the echoing sounds, subtle but noticeable when looked for. In his old clinic he could always hear the morning merchant boats arriving, the clanging of bells to open the gates. Here he didn't face the canal, so instead he could hear the clicks and hisses of the sewer systems rumbling into life, water wheels whirring. He
had to admit he missed the lap of water. It had always reminded him distantly of some far-off memory he could never quite keep a hold of when he focused on it. Still, it was better than nothing.

"You can't keep running to me every time you get one of these diseases you know," Anders said as Isabela adjusted her top, giving him an even more generous flash of cleavage than usual.

"Isn't that what magic is for?" Isabela said with a wink, "Anyway I'm hardly holding up the queue am I?"

Anders couldn't argue with that. It was so quiet he could hear the rats scurrying overhead.

"That's not the point," Anders said.

"Yes, well speaking of the point," Isabela said, picking up an empty glass flask and playing with the lid, "is there a reason that we haven't seen you in so long?"

Anders wasn't sure what to say. Because I'm useless at keeping up pretences? he thought. Not the nicest thing to declare and it was only a half truth. He did miss their companionship it was just...

"Oh I don't know why I bother asking," Isabela said after another moment's silence, "considering it's so bloody obvious."

"Then why did you?" Anders asked, really not wanting to have this conversation.

"Just giving you the chance for a little redemption," she said, putting the flask down, "or maybe the chance to ask about a certain someone without having to sound desperate."

"I'd rather not," Anders said back tightly, "and if we're done..?"

"Alright, alright," Isabela held up one hand to stop him, "if you're going to be touchy maybe I'll just leave it."

"Thank you," he said, not really feeling the gratitude.

He didn't watch her leave, simply listened to her boots click towards the door. He could hear someone else coming anyway, someone else here for his services. He heard Isabela's voice briefly raised in greeting and froze.

"Speak of the devil," he heard her say, laughing lightly as she disappeared through the door.

Oh fantastic.

"So this is where you've been hiding yourself?" Varric wasn't even trying to hide how unimpressed he was as he entered the clinic, "I love what you've done with the place. You've managed to make it look almost as un-homely as the last one."

"Oh I don't know," Hawke said back, "there is a certain damp, mouldy charm about it."

Anders was just glad Hawke hadn't come alone. Varric gave him a broad smile which Anders managed to return.

"You look awful," Varric said with a snort, "been up all night again have we?"

"You're observant nature never fails to amaze me," Anders said back, avoiding Hawke as he felt the man's eyes on him.
"Well I warned you about the wrinkle thing," Varric shrugged, "not my fault if you can't accept beauty advice from one as handsome as I."

Anders let out a short laugh. He'd missed Varric the most out of all Hawke's companions, or perhaps it was just laughing he'd missed. He could feel the tension in the air that no one would admit to. Anders brushed his hands down his coat and cleared his throat.

"So, is one of you dying and I just can't tell or is this a social call?" Anders asked, leaning back against his table with his arms folded.

"Well I do have a twinge in my elbow," Varric said humorously, "but other than that it's strictly business."

Anders was all too aware that Hawke hadn't even spoken to him directly, not yet. He kept his eyes on Varric and ignored it.

"What's the job?" he asked, trying not to sound as tired as he felt.

"Well actually we need your expertise," Varric said after a pause in which Anders knew he'd been waiting for Hawke to start explaining; the rogue stayed silent, "you're good with herbs and things right?"

"Right," Anders agreed, wondering where this was going.

"We need to find some things out on the Coast and we're looking for someone who can recognise them by sight," Varric said, "Harlot's Blush? Pure Ironbark?"

"Well, um, Harlot's Blush shouldn't be too hard to find. It'll be just coming into bloom at this time of year. You can find it in sandy ground, usually sheltered from the wind, somewhere damp. Try the mouth of a cave. I can't help you with the Ironbark but the Dalish might know, they're one of the few that can craft it."

He flicked his eyes to Hawke and found the man still watching him. Anders uncrossed his arms and looked back to Varric. How long was this going to go on for? All he really wanted to do was get some sleep before people with real problems started showing up. If he didn't then he wouldn't have the energy to heal anyone.

"Actually," Hawke said, finally addressing him directly, "we were hoping you would come with us. We have no idea what we're looking for."

"I can describe it," Anders said, noting the hardening in Hawke's eyes.

"And I'm sure it'll sound just like a flower," Varric said quickly, "come on Blondie give us a break, we shoot and stab things for a living, flora and fauna aren't our strong point."

Anders sighed and let his head drop forward a little. They weren't going to leave him alone were they? Well fine then, he thought, if this was how it was going to be then that's how it was. Awkward and unpleasant. Wasn't life wonderful?

"Fine, if you're going to insist," Anders said, "when are you leaving?"

"When are you free?" Varric asked with a smile.

"When am I ever free?" Anders said wryly.
They agreed on early afternoon at Anders recommendation that the flower would be at its brightest bloom and easiest to spot. The clinic didn't get as busy as usual. It hadn't been that way for a while now, not since moving, not since the templar raid. People were still a little skittish, as was usual after involvement with the law of any kind. Anders didn't mind, in all honesty and no matter how guilty it made him feel, he could use the break.
Comorbidity

Anders had to admit, when it was a nice day and the reason they were out of the city wasn't one of wanton destruction, he actually enjoyed the countryside. The breeze was warm against his face, the sun high overhead, the clouds nothing but small puffs of cotton wool against the pale blue sky. If the company hadn't been so fraught with tension it would have been a nice walk.

"I fail to see why," Fenris said as Hawke clambered over another dusty outcrop.

"That's because you're being dense," Hawke said with a smile, "only you would say you couldn't see why Isabela's always round at your place."

"She's irritating," Fenris muttered, "and annoying and...irritating."

Anders scanned the area for anywhere the Harlot's Blush might find a nice home. They were close to the cave systems up here but he'd yet to see neither hide nor hair of the flower. Usually it wasn't that rare, especially in summer, but it was proving elusive today. Of course that just meant he was stuck out here longer with the happy trio, trying to pretend everything was normal. Varric and Fenris were doing a wonderful job of being their usual selves while Hawke was not. Well around him he wasn't anyway, not that they were actively trying to engage each other's attention. More avoiding at all costs really. He'd even caught Fenris giving them both confused looks back and forth out of the corner of his eye. It must be obvious then, Anders thought dismally, if even the emotionally underdeveloped elf has picked up on it.

"She's just, er, hopeful shall we say?" Varric said with an amused chuckle.

"She can be as hopeful as she likes," Fenris said, shaking his head.

Anders rolled his eyes and kept looking. Perhaps it was because he was actually purposefully trying to pay as much attention to his surroundings as possible, while ignoring the people he was with, that he heard it.

"Hey," he said, frowning, "did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Varric asked him.

"I thought I heard..?" Anders looked up to cliffs above them and realised only too late that they'd walked into the ambush.

Despite the previous tension the four men moved into formation like they'd been doing it all their lives. Fenris and Hawke moved practically back to back while Anders and Varric took up sentinel positions, all weapons drawn. The enemy weren't too heavily armed, Anders noted as he scanned the area quickly, but there were a lot of them and they were in good positions to surround their group and swarm them if it came to that. He heard the footsteps, which had alerted him in the first place, growing closer until two men appeared at the top of the cliff and looked down on them. One of them was clearly a mage, his expensive robes shining in the sunlight, his face a picture of haughty arrogance, the other nothing more than a mercenary in heavy chainmail. Anders saw Fenris look up and go completely rigid.

"You there!" the mage's heavily armoured companion shouted down, his accent clearly Tevinter, "You are in possession of stolen property! Give the slave to us and there doesn't need to be any violence."
"You want him?" Hawke's voice was as deadly as his stare, "You'll have to go through me first!"

"He isn't yours to claim stranger," the mercenary said coldly, "if you don't hand over the slave right now we'll just have to take him back by force!"

Well, Anders thought with amazement, that wasn't what he had been expecting at all. Bandits, yes, Tevinter slave hunters, no. So Varric wasn't exaggerating when he said that this Magister will do anything to get Fenris back, he thought wryly while he kept him eye on his companions. He had been watching the exchange anxiously, waiting for any sort of signal that they were about to fight. When Fenris' hands were so tight around the hilt of his sword that the elf nearly broke it in two, Anders knew there was no way out but to come to blows. The markings flared on his skin in heated wisps of light.

"I am no slave!" Fenris yelled at the man, leaping to the side as a hail of arrows embedded itself where he had been standing moments before.

"Don't harm the slave!" Anders heard the mage shout, "Master Danarius wants this one alive!"

Anders had been right, there were a lot more of them than he'd seen at first glance. Archers on the cliffs, behind the dunes and out in plain sight. Then there were brawlers and rogues, running in tight formation, backing each other up as they swarmed down the beach towards them. Anders took out as many of the archers as he could before he was forced into close quarters combat. There were three at first, forcing him back against the cliff with savage blows aimed to incapacitate him. Anders knew the drill with slavers, they wouldn't want him dead, they wanted him alive so they could make a profit. A mage was worth a lot of coin, especially in Tevinter circles. As far as Fenris had informed him Magisters weren't above enslaving their own kind.

Anders waited until the warriors were clustered together in front of him before throwing up the sheet of ice, engulfing the three men completely with a startled cry. A short blast followed after, cracking and splintering the ice until it crumbled into pieces, leaving nothing but bloody shards on the sand. He looked up to see Varric disappearing from view in a puff of smoke to avoid a group of warriors who had taken too much interest in him. Hawke was making quick work of another rogue who had engaged him in combat, slicing at the woman's throat, effectively silencing her. Everyone was acting as he'd seen many times before in battle, everyone except Fenris. Anders had never seen the elf in such a wild rage. The lyrium markings on his skin were so bright that it made him seem nothing but a ghost, his face set in a cold rage as he leapt down on a group of foes and sliced two of them clean in half, his blade shining in the sun.

By the time they had subdued the main bulk of the slavers and the few that remained were fleeing, Fenris had managed to get his hands on the mercenary leader who had called out to them earlier. Anders watched in sick fascination as the elf pulled one gauntleted hand back, the markings on his skin shimmering as if in a heat haze, a distant sound of humming power building. Fenris rammed it into the man's abdomen right up to the elbow before pulling out his intestines in a bloody mess. The mercenary took a shocked moment to view his insides, gaping like a fish, before his eyes rolled up and he dropped to the ground, dead. Anders swallowed.

He rejoined Varric and Hawke as they regrouped but Fenris wasn't paying any attention to them. He'd seen something he wanted and was storming across the sand determinedly. Hawke followed, his eyes filled with concern. As they approached it became evident what the elf had seen. The mage from the cliff top was lying half conscious on the sand, trying his best to crawl away. Fenris knelt down quickly on the man's back and grabbed him roughly by the hair, hauling his neck back painfully.

"Where is he?" Fenris's voice was so low it was hard to hear.
The elf spoke in a nothing but a feral growl as he rammed the mage's head forcefully into the sand. The man's eyes watered and he groaned, his nose coming back bloody.

"Please," he said pitifully, "don't...kill me."

"Tell me!" Fenris demanded loudly.

"I don't know," the mage said, pleading, "I don't know I swear! Hadriana brought us."

If it was possible for Fenris to become any more tense then the mention of this Hadriana had the desired effect. The hand in the mage's hair curled tighter and Fenris's face devolved into a wolf like snarl. The man beneath him continued as if he didn't even notice the change.

"She's at the holding caves, north of the city," the mage said, his voice suddenly hopeful, "I can show you the way."

"No need," Fenris said slowly, as if enjoying the fear that crept into the mage's eyes, "I know the one's you speak of."

"Then let me go," the man was practically weeping, "I beg you! I swear I won't...!"

"You chose the wrong master," Fenris said, his voice cold.

He reached down with his other hand and snapped the man's neck without another thought. Anders couldn't help but flinch at the action. He couldn't truthfully say he had expected Fenris to let the man live but, honestly, there was something in the elf's efficiency that made his hair stand on end. Fenris rose slowly, his fingers clenching and unclenching.

"Hadriana," Anders had never heard more loathing and hatred poured into one single name, "I was a fool to think I was free! They'll never let me be!"

"Then they need to be stopped," Hawke said, stepping forwards, "before this goes any further."

Fenris looked up as if he was coming out of a daze, as if he'd forgotten they were even there. Not that it calmed him down at all. Anders wondered for a moment if Fenris had even heard Hawke at all. The elf looked to Hawke, his eyes still hard.

"The holding caves held slaves in the old times but apparently they are no longer abandoned," Fenris said darkly, "we must go quickly, before Hadriana has a chance to prepare...or flee."

The last words were said with deadly intent. Somehow, Anders thought bleakly, his afternoon stroll had turned into yet another day of bloodshed. Just once, Anders thought, couldn't I have a nice time? He took a moment to heal any wounds that needed tending. He would have seen to Fenris as well but the elf didn't give him the chance, striding off up the beach before anyone could follow him. They had to run to catch up.

The holding caves were dark and unpleasant, just like he'd expected, and also filled with slavers, just like he'd expected. There was a constant smell of charring and sulphur from the lava flows in the runnels by the walkways and the air was heavy and dry. It wasn't long before they came across the first sign of this Magister's apprentice Hadriana.

"Blood magic," Anders shook his head as he looked to the mutilated body lying on the altar.

"See for yourself," Fenris said, his voice laced with disgust, "the legacy of the Magisters."
"They sacrifice the unwilling?" Anders asked.

"Is that so hard to believe?" Fenris spat back.

Anders didn't question him further. The elf looked close to snapping and he didn't want to get into a fight here. The situation was already too dangerous without adding that to the pile. For once, and only once, he would hold his tongue. That didn't mean he wouldn't have words with Fenris when they got back to Kirkwall. Anders didn't just want to condemn the elf's views, he wanted to know more about Tevinter. Even having an argument with Fenris may shed some light on things he knew next to nothing about.

It was in the next room, a vaulted cavernous area filled with shuttered light from the roof above, that they found the first survivor. She was an elf, dreadfully young, perhaps no more than thirteen, her large green eyes wide with fear. She cowered from them at first but, on seeing they meant no harm, she came forward timidly.

"Are you hurt?" Fenris asked, trying his best to sound gentle, "Did they touch you?"

"They've been killing everyone," she said, her voice more confused than sad, "they cut Papa, bled him!"

"Why?" Fenris asked, his brow furrowing, "Why would they do this?"

"The Magister, she said she needed power, that someone was coming to kill her," the girl explained, wringing her hands.

Fenris flinched as if struck, his head hanging forwards briefly. Anders couldn't help but pity him a little; guilt wasn't easy to deal with at the best of times, and especially when something wasn't actually your fault. Anders should know, he was the best at blaming himself for things he hadn't truly done.

"We tried to be good, we did everything we were told," the girl paced back and forth, her voice a mix of confusion and worry, "she loved Papa's soup, I don't understand."

"Is the Magister still here?" Hawke asked calmly, bringing her focus back.

"I...I think so," she said, "the Magister said they were to prepare for battle, I think she's very frightened."

When Anders flicked his gaze to Fenris he found the elf's look of dismay was gone, once more replaced by sneering anger.

"She has every reason to be," he said darkly.

"Please, no, don't hurt her," the girl pleaded; Anders felt sick at the thought of the girl defending the very woman who had obviously slaughtered her father in the blood ritual they had seen the remnants of in the previous room, "she'll be so angry if you hurt her!"

"This has been terrible for you," Hawke said.

He stepped forwards and placed a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder. Anders was amazed, considering all the horror she'd witnessed, that the elf girl didn't flinch away. Instead she just offered Hawke a slightly watery smile. Then her face fell and she looked suddenly angry.

"I don't understand," she said, her voice so young and naive, "everything was fine until today!"
"No, it wasn't," Fenris said, his voice hollow, talking as if to himself, "you just...didn't know any better."

The girl looked to him, her eyes widening. She looked lost for a moment or two, as if trying to comprehend something she didn't even know could exist. Then her eyes brightened. Fenris watched her warily.

"Are you my master now?" the girl asked innocently.

Fenris looked as if he were going to throw up.

"No!" he said, appalled, lifting his hands up between them.

"But I can cook," the girl said desperately, "I can clean. What else will I do?"

Hawke looked to Fenris, his eyes watching the elf closely. When Fenris didn't reply Hawke stepped in again. The girl looked to him expectantly.

"If you go to Kirkwall, I can help you," he said, smiling to put her at ease, "go to Hightown and ask for Hawke. Someone will be able to point you in the right direction. Tell Bodahn I sent you, alright?"

"Oh thank you," the girl said, her relief evident, "thank you so much!"

She ran. Anders watched her go and felt strangely distant. How could this be? How could Fenris be so angry at the sight of slaves and yet not understand that those who fled the Circle were simply escaping the same fate? When he looked back to the elf, Fenris was glaring at Hawke. Anders frowned. What on earth was it now?

"I didn't realise you were in the market for a slave," Fenris hissed, making Hawke glare back.

"I gave her a job Fenris," he said angrily, "do you really think I would...?"

"I'm...I'm sorry," Fenris cut him off, his face falling; Hawke's anger seemed to evaporate, "I misunderstood. I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Hawke said, his voice steady, reassuring, "but we'd better hurry. Sounds like this Magister won't hang around waiting for us forever."

It turned out that the Magister wasn't intent on going anywhere. They found her in a dead end room at the end of a maze of corridors. The blood ritual she had performed hadn't only allowed her to summon skeletons and the usual shambling abominations, but demons of a higher calibre. Desire demons rose from the ether, their mockery of female form trying to lure the men away from the battle with promises of their every longing. They fell like the rest, screaming back into the abyss of the Fade. Soon the Magister was left like so many other pitiful blood mages who put their stock in demons before they put their faith in friends; alone and afraid, staring up into their enemy's eyes. Anders was just glad that he wasn't in Hadriana's place. If he'd been looking into Fenris's deadly eyes at that moment, he may have wished the elf to kill him simply to put him out of his misery. The Magister, it seemed, was of a different sort than he. Anders was never more glad to see the differences between them.

"Stop!" Hadriana begged, "You do not want me dead!"

"There is only one person I want dead more," Fenris growled, his voice thick with hate.
"I have information elf," Hadriana said, sounding more sure of herself, "and I will trade it for my life."

"Ha," Fenris said scornfully, "the location of Danarius? What good will that do me? I'd rather he lose his pet pupil."

Fenris raised his blade high behind his head, ready to strike at the woman before him. Hadriana sat up quickly, her cold eyes intent.

"You have a sister," she said, her voice holding a subtle hint of victory, "she is alive."

Fenris lowered the sword not out of mercy but seemingly because his arms had gone too weak to hold the broadsword aloft. Anders watched as the elf took a faltering step back before steadying himself. His face was white with shock and, for a moment, Anders got a glimpse of how very young and vulnerable Fenris really was. Underneath his facade of aloofness and danger he was really still just a young man struggling to seem beyond his years.

"You wish to reclaim your life?" Hadriana had raised herself to her knees, "Let me go and I will tell you where she is."

"We'll find his sister," Hawke said, stepping to Fenris's side to steady the elf, "and then we'll let you go. Not before."

"Ha, do you think I'm a fool?" Hadriana said spitefully, "The woman is in the Imperium. I will not stay captive for the entire time it would take for you to find her. You want to know who you were Fenris, then let me go."

Fenris stared at her. Hawke leaned in, making his presence known.

"This is your call," he said, watching Fenris closely.

The elf looked scarily calm as he looked at Hawke, his face blank. He nodded almost imperceptibly, his eyes hard as glass as he approached the cowering Magister on the floor. He bent down to her as she spoke, leaning in, his body poised like a snake, ready to strike.

"So I have your word," Hadriana sounded stupidly hopeful, Anders thought, considering it was obvious to him that Fenris would never let her live, "I tell you and you let me go?"

"Yes," Fenris' voice was thick with underlying sarcasm, his eyes narrowed, "you have my word."

Hadriana told him of his sister, of her servant class. Not a slave, a servant. Fenris seemed to react to that at least, something breaking through the calm facade that had consumed him. That was before he looked back into the Magister's eyes dispassionately, as if looking at a tiny insect that would soon need squashing.

"I believe you," he said to her, just before he plunged his hand through her chest, wrapped his hand around her still beating heart and crushed it between his fingers.

Fenris stood and turned on his heel, not even gracing the body with a second glance. Anders looked down at the destruction around him and wondered how any mage could let themselves come to this. No, he thought, shaking his head, don't think like that. Hadriana wasn't cruel because she was a mage, she was a demon because of who she was. She could have just as easily been a pitiless templar or a corrupt politician, given a change of circumstances.

"We're done here," Fenris growled, walking swiftly towards the exit.
"Are you alright?" Hawke asked, reaching out to him, "Fenris..."

"I don't want to talk about it!" the elf snapped, turning back agitatedly and getting right up into Hawke's face; Anders bristled, "This is all just...! I don't even know what's real anymore! This could all be a trap, Danarius could have sent Hadriana here to tell me about this supposed sister. Even if he..."

Fenris seemed to deflate suddenly, his voice losing some of its hateful rage as he looked at Hawke.

"Even if he didn't, trying to find her would still be suicide," he said, "Danarius has to know about her and has to know that Hadriana knows."

Then it was back, as if Fenris couldn't help but feel it. Anders wondered if Fenris's hate was anything like his own, that same uncontrollable rage. He frowned as Fenris's eyes swung back to the slowly cooling corpse of his former tormentor.

"But all that matters is that I finally got to crush this bitches heart," Fenris's voice was laced with emotion, more than just hatred, more than just pain; he sounded lost, agonised, as if he were seconds away from simply breaking down, "May she rot, and all the other mages with her!"

"Fenris..." Hawke didn't seem to know what to say, reaching out to touch his friends arm, trying his best to offer comfort that perhaps words couldn't express.

"No!" Fenris flinched away as if scalded, "I don't want you comforting me, just...! Enough, I need to get out of here."

They let him go. Anders watched, for once not commenting on Fenris's generalisation and condemnation of mage kind. After witnessing the cruelty of the people he'd been a slave under, Anders could hardly blame him for his sheer hatred. Yet he still didn't understand why Fenris couldn't see, wouldn't let himself see, that it wasn't magic that made these people evil. They were already evil inside, rotten to the core. In a way it was as if Fenris's agony and hate were all he had left. He wanted so badly to find the life he'd lost but seemed to know, somewhere deep down, that it would never happen. All he had was his desperation, his rage. In losing that, Anders thought, he might lose the last thread of his sanity. Fenris had nothing with which to replace the life the Magister's had created for him, the life he had fled. In a way Anders could sympathise. He'd had nothing with which to replace the life the Circle continually stripped him of every time he was hauled back there.

"Shouldn't someone go after him?" Varric asked as they neared the exit, still with no sign of Fenris anywhere.

"He'll probably be half way back to Kirkwall by now," Anders said into the silence.

"It's probably best to leave him be," Hawke sounded suspiciously cheerless; Anders glanced at him, noting that unreadable expression once again.

"You know him best," Varric shrugged.

For some reason that Anders couldn't fathom the dwarf's words rankled. Hawke knew him best. It was probably true, the rogue and the elf spent enough time together. Even then, Anders thought with a shake of his head, even with Hawke being probably his closest friend Fenris still wouldn't let him near. The elf acted more like a wounded animal than he would ever admit to sometimes.

They made it back to Kirkwall without further intervention from any slavers or Tevinter mages. Anders had even, finally, spotted a small cluster of Harlot's Blush as they were stumbling back
towards the city. The delicate red flower seemed to mock him somehow as he held it in his fingers, as if it had simply lured them out here to be trapped into this nightmare of Fenris's past. Anders scowled at the delicate petals, stuffing two into his pack before following after the others.

"Where are you headed?"

Anders hadn't expected anything and he wasn't sure he wanted anything. He turned to see Hawke watching him from under Kirkwall's large East Gate, people moving in an unsteady stream around them. Varric had already left them, heading back to the Hanged Man to attend to some matters which Anders hadn't taken any real notice of. I really don't have time for this, he thought wearily as Hawke continued to watch him. Anders moved out of the way of the crowd into a small side street, Hawke following unhurriedly.

"I'm going back to the clinic," Anders said, slowing his pace to allow Hawke to at least walk beside him, "I really don't know why you ask any more."

"Just making conversation," Hawke shrugged, trying for a smile.

Anders wasn't sure what to say in terms of small talk. Was this what they had reduced themselves to? They'd known each other for so long and yet their relationship seemed to have come full circle back to the beginning again. At least, Anders thought hopefully, it hadn't disappeared altogether, like he'd tried to engineer. What exactly had he been thinking, when he'd tried to tell Hawke that it wasn't worth his time to even be his friend? Did he think he could really survive this on his own? He was a fool to think that was true, today had proved that more than enough. Fenris was living proof of what happened when you didn't accept the help of those around you, when you curled into a tight ball and tried your best to hold all your demons inside, pushing away every comforting hand offered. Anders continued to walk, Hawke's heavy boot tread at his side; no, he didn't want to be like that.

"Well, if that's your conversation starter, I think you need to work on it a little," Anders said a little cautiously.

"Oh, and you're giving me advice about human interaction," Hawke's smile turned to a smirk, "I must really be losing my touch."

"Don't push it," Anders smiled back, "I happen to be very charming."

"Well why don't you come and remind me all about this charming personality you have at the Hanged Man later?" Hawke said smoothly.

Cheeky bastard, Anders thought, unable to truly mask the happy stutter in his chest. He could feel the underlying stabbings of guilt, of duty, as Justice tried to remind him that he didn't have time for this. This was what he had escaped from before, this need for company, this need for love. Now he was going to put himself through that all over again? Was he an imbecile? Yes, Anders thought, perhaps he was but if that's what it took to be happy, he would enjoy being a happy idiot.

"About nine?" Anders said.

"I'll be there," Hawke said back.

Hawke's smile was happy. It made Anders glad to know he was the one that had put it there. He doesn't deserve to be dragged down with you, Justice echoed in his mind. Anders swallowed and turned away towards Darktown, trying his best to ignore his own thoughts.
"And then Nathaniel said, 'Do you like having Grey Wardens that want you dead?', thinking he sounded imposing," Anders said.

"The boy sounds like a smartass," Varric grinned.

"Oh he was at times," Anders said with a shake of his head, "but the Commander never seemed to take any notice of him. He'd just shrug and say 'Oh, I don't know, not bad considering some of my best friends have wanted me dead at some point or another'. Nathaniel wasn't the only smartarse I had to hang around with."

Varric laughed, sitting back in his chair. They were alone apart from the roaring fire and the occasional visit from Norah to replenish mugs and glasses. Anders had decided to turn up a little early and wait for Hawke in the main room of the pub but, on being spotted by Varric, had been invited up to the suite. The dwarf just couldn't help but nudge him for stories.

"It wasn't easy for them at first," Anders said.

Anders watched the fire as he tried to think back to the electric tension that filled the air every time the Commander and Nathaniel got too close to the reason they hated each other in the first place. Lien Cousland wasn't the type to hold a grudge but then it's different when someone slaughters your entire family in cold, ambitious blood and tries to kill you. Cousland had never told him the whole story of his fight with Rendon Howe in the dungeon beneath the Howe's estate. Yet considering the rather scary glint in his eyes as he said the little he would, Anders could tell he'd enjoyed whatever revenge he had enacted. Nathaniel had never been close to his father, it seemed, but was more than happy to bring up the family honour as a barb in the Commander's side, some reason to try and kill him, to reclaim what he had lost. It took a long time for Nathaniel to come to his senses and realise that the Commander hadn't been the one he'd been fighting against the entire time they'd spent together; it was the shadow Rendon Howe had cast over his whole family, his own personal blight.

"I'd never say they were friends as such, even now," he shrugged, pulling himself back to the present, "but they're Grey Wardens together at least."

Anders looked back to Varric. The dwarf was watching him curiously. Anders frowned.

"Do you miss it?" Varric asked.

"Being in the Wardens you mean?" Anders said with a small, incredulous laugh, "Not bloody likely. Living in that smelly, draughty Keep, eating bare rations, getting up at Maker knows what hours to go and investigate bogus claims of Darkspawn that turn out to be nothing more than a herd of rabid cows?"

"...Really?" Varric said after a pause.

"That actually happened once," Anders smiled at the memory; those cows had been fiercer than any Darkspawn he'd ever encountered.

Varric shook his head, his introspective expression not leaving his face.

"That wasn't quite what I was getting at," Varric said, "I was thinking more of the people, your comrades."

"Oh, well," Anders sighed, "sometimes. The Commander is a great man, he has every right to be respected, but he was a friend to me before he was my superior; and he was a right laugh as well, especially when he was drunk. They were a good lot. Even that crazy Dalish bint we picked up in
the forest could be funny sometimes...when she really put her mind to it and stopped insulting me for five minutes. Nathaniel was a prat, yes, but he was a noble prat at least. He lightened up a little after a while, sometimes he even attempted jokes, which were always awful by the way. The boy never had a sense of humour. Oghren was alright if he had a drink in him which, for Oghren, was always. You like stories Varric? You would have a field day with Oghren, although you may have to wash your mind out with rock soap afterwards. And Justice he...

Anders stopped almost as quickly as he'd started. The silence he left in his wake was so obvious it hurt. Unfortunately the silence also seemed to say more than anything he could have said himself. Anders tried not to look annoyed by his own slip up but couldn't help the tension that found its way into his body, into his fingers as they tightened around the glass in his hand. Things had been so much simpler then, he thought, so much easier. He never would have had to avoid his friends name as if the spirit were dead or estranged.

"You alright Blondie?" Varric asked cautiously.

"I'm fine," Anders said, his tone a little defeated, "can we just talk about something else?"

Varric nodded sympathetically. It was then, trying desperately to think of something else to say, that Anders noticed how late it had gotten.

"Where is Hawke?" Anders said frowning, "Not like him to miss out on an excuse for a drink."

"Maybe he's mopping up the clowns in Hightown who think they can rule the streets," Varric chuckled, "I always love it when they think they see an easy target and it turns out to be Hawke."

"Still, it's been an hour..." Anders felt the itching of worry on his skin, "maybe I'll go and check on him."

"Are you really going to walk all the way up to Hightown just to see if he's there?" Varric said with a dismissive wave, "Come on, he's probably on his way now and you'll just miss him and then have to come back."

"It's not that far," Anders rolled his eyes, "I won't be long."

It was also an excuse to walk off the tension he'd talked himself into. The air wasn't cold, just pleasantly cool. The stone buildings had soaked up the day's heat and were still keeping the temperature at a summery level. The sky was dark but still blue, a rich midnight blue speckled with glowing stars. Anders tried to find peace in the beauty of the evening but found that he couldn't get away from the bad feeling he'd created. It was as he climbed the steps to the courtyard by Hawke's mansion that he heard the sound of footsteps. Varric's assumption of trouble jumped to the forefront of his mind and Anders instinctively unbuckled his staff. He drew in to the wall and sneaked along in the shadows, leaning round the corner to get a better look.

He was surprised to see Fenris there, storming across the courtyard; he wasn't surprised so much by the elf's presence but more because he had heard him at all. The elf was usually silent in his movements, controlled. Now he looked agitated, his feet making soft patters on the stony ground. Anders was about to make himself known when the door to Hawke's mansion opened, sending a stream of warm light out across the cobbles. Hawke ran into view, looking dishevelled, as if he'd only just thrown his clothes on. He caught up to Fenris, grabbing him by the arm to turn him. Anders couldn't help but feel his face set as Hawke's soft voice echoed oddly across the stone.

No, Anders thought, it isn't what you think, it isn't...
"Fenris wait!" the elf didn't look at Hawke, his eyes trained on the ground, "You can't just..!"

"I'm sorry Hawke," Fenris said slowly, his voice sounding desperate, lost, "I can't do this. Please let me go."

"I won't let you run away from me," Hawke sounded determined, "we can work through this, I want to help. I...I care about you."

Fenris looked up sharply at Hawke's words. His eyes were glassy in the moonlight but there were no tears. Anders felt something like pain bursting open in his chest but tried his best to push it away. No, he thought, no I don't want to hear this. Yet he was still there, still listening, still watching. The elf reached up with his free hand; Anders stared, unable to look away, as Fenris pulled Hawke into a soft but deep kiss. Hawke's arms lifted quickly to encircle the smaller man, pulling him close. Anders felt numb. He wanted his feet to move, move him away from here, he didn't want to see this. Yet his feet wouldn't listen and neither would his eyes. He stayed rooted to the spot, watching. Somewhere under the shock he could feel Justice forcing him to see. This is all he would ever have from looking for friendship, he said, looking for compassion, looking for affection; betrayal and pain. He doesn't care about you, he never did, you were just a distraction. You've only ever been a distraction. Somehow it felt like an absurd and unwarranted punishment. Anders watched as Fenris pulled away reluctantly, shaking his head.

"This isn't...I can't..." Anders could hear the frustration in his voice, even as he looked up at Hawke, his expression longing, "I just wanted to be happy, even if just for a moment. I feel like such a fool."

"You're not a fool Fenris," Hawke said, a tentative smile on his lips, "It's alright to feel."

"You don't seem to understand how upsetting this is," Fenris said, shaking his head, his face hardening slightly and his voice rough with anger and emotion, "to remember everything only to have it torn away again! I want to...I can't..."

"Then help me to understand," Hawke said desperately, his hands reaching up to cup Fenris's face, "don't do this..."

"I'm sorry," Fenris said, his voice breaking as he pulled away violently, "I didn't mean for this to happen. Forgive me."

Then he was gone, running as fast as he could across the courtyard. Anders watched him go listlessly. He leaned back against the cool stone wall at his side and let his eyes slide back to Hawke. The man hadn't moved, still standing with his arms outstretched, holding onto the ghost of what had been there moments before. He lowered them slowly before bringing them up to hug around his chest. His bare feet made awkward shuffles as he turned and headed reluctantly back to the mansion, his face unreadable. Anders wanted to call out but knew that would be a very bad idea. He was far too close to each extreme end of his own split personality right now; there was rage, shifting and bubbling under the surface of his hurt, ready to explode outwards with no real target. That would not be advisable, Anders thought with a swallow of fear, but then neither would the alternative; retracting within himself so far that no one would be able to reach. Right now, no matter how much he hated it, the rage sounded better and he couldn't let that happen. The rage would be over with quickly but the introversion would never heal. Anders blinked, realising that he was staring into an empty courtyard, all light and noise gone.

Why hadn't he listened to Varric? Why had he come here? Why did he never..?

Anders wasn't sure how long he stood there, his staff hanging loosely from his hand. It was Justice
who pushed him to think; what are you doing here? It isn't safe, it isn't safe here. Go home. Anders obeyed blindly, looking for any kind of direction that would take him away from where he was. The stairs to the lower city were long and dark. Anders walked them slowly.
Rescue

Chapter Notes

Just a note to say that, even though I've been following the game timeline fairly accurately until now, this chapter includes a mission that doesn't pop up until act 3 of the game. This doesn't mean that I've skipped to that point in the timeline, I've just moved this mission back for my own dastardly purposes!

Things were getting worse. There were days that Anders wouldn't admit it to himself, days where he tried to fight off the apprehensive feeling in the air, in the strained faces of those around him, in the increased patrols and the further Tranquil hawking their wares in the Gallows, but they were becoming ever more difficult to ignore. Even simple meetings were becoming harder and harder to organise. It had been difficult enough when the templars weren't constantly breathing down his neck, now it was nigh impossible to contact anyone without fear of interception. Anders didn't want to think about it but he was beginning to suspect there may be a leak somewhere in the resistance. He'd never had to worry before about who to trust but now relationships were tense between members. People stopped sending written notes, only came in person if summoned, which was hard to engineer. Sabine Le Faust and Tabatha Merrow were two of the few left that Anders could meet with face to face without fear of coming into contact with some sort of trouble.

Lirene was, thankfully, still a friend. She was more than happy to pass messages by word of mouth and Anders refused to believe that she could possibly be a traitor to their cause. She had turned up not long after Anders had lit the lantern to tell him Tabatha wanted to speak with him. Anders had warned her of the danger of coming to his clinic but she never heeded him. One day he knew that she was going to get pulled into something she wouldn't like and he wished she would listen. He didn't need any more people added to his list of penance.

"I'm sorry to make you come out like this," Tabatha said, her hood drawn down to cover most of her face, "but I knew you'd want to know."

The Foundry was deserted at this time of night. The hiss of steam vents was enough to cover any words spoken, just in case someone was listening somewhere. Anders wished he didn't have to think like this but his paranoia was becoming more and more pronounced. Tabatha's message had been urgent, troubled; Anders wished it hadn't made his heart beat faster, made his skin feel tight, when Lirene had delivered it. He wished, some days, that he had never come to Kirkwall in the first place. It made him conflicted as those days increased.

"Has something happened?" Anders asked, keeping one eye on the doorway.

"No, nothing's happened as such..." Tabatha said, looking a little wary; Anders frowned, "it's about Karl."

Anders felt his fingers curl. It had been a long time since he'd even thought about his old friend and the guilt of that still stung. I'll never forget you, Anders had said that day. It had been a pledge of sorts, a promise, but then Anders never was any good at keeping promises. After it had happened Anders would force himself to think about it, force himself to hear the memory of Karl's last breath as it left his body, see those dull eyes as they stared up into him from the blood on the floor. It made the pain sharper, it made his cause more just. After a while he liked to think the wound was
healed; but it was deep. It hadn't healed, it had simply scabbed over. The more he pulled at it the more it came apart and bled slowly. So he'd made a decision to forget the memory of that smiling face and those kind hands. He thought it was controlled but he was wrong. Tabatha simply had to mention the name and everything rushed back. The pain and the anger and the frustration and the rage; sometimes Anders wondered if he'd ever be free of it.

"What about him?" Anders asked, only through strict discipline did he keep his tone even.

"You asked me, don't you remember?" Tabatha looked worried now.

Anders couldn't understand why she looked so anxious. He was about to ask her when a thought struck him that made him feel a little ill. Was she afraid of him? Had he become so bad at hiding his emotions that Tabatha could see through his facade and into the turmoil beneath? Anders swallowed and tried his best to pull himself together. The last thing he needed to do was alienate the few contacts he had left. He didn't want Tabatha thinking he was a danger. There were enough rumours about him as it was.

"I asked you about what?" Anders asked.

"About who performed the rite," Tabatha said again, pulling at her hood.

It was difficult to control oneself when the other half was trying desperately to seek an outlet. Justice was stalking beneath the surface, like a panther behind bars; back and forth, back and forth he could feel the twist and the pull. The waves of hatred washed over him like nausea and he bit them back. He kept his face blank but he couldn't disguise his voice, he didn't have the patience or the willpower to.

"Who?" Anders asked darkly.

"I suppose it won't surprise you," she said, whispering the name as if she feared it, "it was Ser Alrik."

"No," Anders said, his voice low, "it certainly does not."

The name had been coming up more and more often recently. The man wasn't just a mage hunter, he was a destroyer. It wasn't only Anders that Alrik had tried to make an example of. Anders had heard stories that made his blood run alternately hot and cold about the templar. He liked to make them beg, they said. He liked to experiment. The thought of a mage in the hands of that monster made Anders sick. The thought of Karl in his hands made him incensed. The kind of templar who forced mages to choose demons as their only way out of the torment he supplied so that he could legally cut them down. Torturing relatives or loved ones before their eyes to make them confess to things they had never done. Making them Tranquil because he thought all mages should be no more than dogs ready to serve.

And now this. He was the one he'd been looking for all this time and he just didn't know it. He was the one to turn Karl into the mindless husk with death as his only escape. Alrik was the one that forced him to kill his friend with his own hands, forced Anders from his home and tried to murder him...

"Thank you," Anders said, noting Tabatha's concern but finding it hard to care, "for telling me."

"I couldn't not tell you but..." she hesitated, "please Anders don't do anything stupid. That's just what he'd want."

Anders thought about her words as he skulked back through Lowtown. He couldn't help but let
them calm the rage that was simmering deep inside of him, at least just a little. Perhaps he’d been unfair in his judgement of her. She wasn’t afraid of him so much as she was afraid for him. Perhaps Tabatha had learned over the years they had been comrades that Anders could be impulsive on occasion. Especially where friends were concerned. Yet this was different, Anders thought as he tread lightly through the empty marketplace, this was something he could take his time with and plan out. Ser Alrik would be dealt with, there was no other alternative, but the death of a prominent templar shouldn’t be taken lightly. He needed more information before he did anything definite. This would be done right.

The Hanged Man was always welcoming, even in the early evening hours when the tables were mainly quiet. It had a drowsy atmosphere that Anders enjoyed, the firelight lambent on the walls and the hissing of gas lamps. He would have rather waited and made a time to meet Varric when he knew they’d be alone but, after learning of Alrik, Anders couldn't help but be a little eager. He took the chance and walked up the stairs to the dwarf's suite. To make a plan he would need to know everything, he would make sure that this plan was perfect before executing it. He needed information and if there was one thing Varric did very well it was information. He could hear voices from the suite as he drew nearer but decided it was worth taking a chance to steal a moment of Varric's time.

"...I'm just saying," Varric's voice became more and more prominent as he ascended, "if you keep messing the two of them around you're going to end up with nothing. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, as they say."

"I've never understood that stupid bloody saying, why don't you just..?"

Anders stopped at the top of the stairs, having heard the other voice too late to turn back without being noticed. Varric looked up, being in his usual seat facing the door, and his companion followed suit. Hawke didn't look overly pleased to see him and Anders couldn't help but feel a little affronted; considering everything that had happened Anders was sure it should be the other way around.

"Anders," oh things had to be bad if Varric was calling him by his given name, "what are you doing here?"

"I just...dropped by to ask a favour," Anders said hesitantly, "I'll come back tomorrow."

"No need," Hawke stood a little stiffly, "I was leaving anyway."

Anders stepped out of the way to let him pass, avoiding his eyes. Hawke seemed to hesitate briefly before continuing down the stairs. Anders didn't let himself dwell on it. He couldn't allow himself to. Varric watched them both as Anders walked by the fire to the table and sat down. He expected questions but thankfully the one Varric asked was nothing to do with the rather heavy tension that hung in the air.

"So," the dwarf said, "how can I be of service?"

Anders sat back in his chair and tried to think about what he needed to know. Alrik was quite high in the food chain, it would be difficult if not impossible to have him indicted. So that ruled out getting definite proof against him, not that Anders had ever really entertained the thought of giving the man the easy way out. He knew what he wanted, more than anything; Alrik's blood coating his hands, thick, hot, under his nails. Now there was a blank in his memory that he would cherish above all else.

"I need some information," Anders said, "about a templar."
"Anyone specific?" Varric asked, raising his eyebrows.

"His name is Ser Alrik," Anders said, letting the name roll off of his tongue, "I need to know what he's up to, where he goes, who he meets, which templars he has under him..."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Varric said, holding up a hand, "that's a big name you're bandying about there. Even I've heard of this guy."

"...You could have just said no," Anders said, looking disappointed as he started to stand.

"Wait, come on Blondie," at least the use of his nickname put Anders a little at ease, "sit down."

Anders sat back down slowly, trying not to get het up. He needed this. Varric maybe wouldn't understand and he didn't want to have to explain why this was so important. He'd rather the dwarf just cooperated for once, without needing the background details. This wasn't something he ever wanted told in any stories.

"Okay so I didn't say no, alright?" Varric said with a sigh, "I'd just rather know what I'm getting myself into before I start snooping around Meredith's pets."

"All I need is the information Varric," Anders said, "the less you know the better."

"You're really convincing me here," Varric said sarcastically with a shake of his head, "Okay, let me rephrase that, I'd rather know what I was getting you into."

"No need to worry Varric," Anders smiled humourlessly, "I'm just planning a surprise party, lots of tea and biscuits. It's going to be lovely."

Varric looked at him with concern masked behind slight insult. Anders would have felt bad for deceiving him but he knew that Varric understood his meaning. He'd hardly made it undecipherable.

"I think the surprise part is the only truthful bit, right?" Varric said with a frown, "And not one they'll enjoy?"

"Oh you know templars," Anders shrugged, a slightly sinister smile creeping onto his face, "they don't know when to lighten up."

Varric looked at him anxiously for a minute before shifting his gaze to the fire, his face contemplative. For a moment Anders worried that the dwarf truly wouldn't help him. Why was everyone so concerned for him all of a sudden? He could take care of himself and his own business. He didn't need a babysitter to chaperone him around the city making sure he didn't make too much trouble with the big bad templars. He'd only been doing this for the past eighteen years of his bloody life.

"Well, if you're coming to me I guess you've already got half a plan," Varric said, his voice still a little tight, but at least he sounded positive.

"You could say that," Anders said.

"Fine," Varric said, nodding in defeat, "I'll see what I can dig up. Give me a while though. Templars can be difficult business."

"Thanks Varric," Anders said sincerely, "I appreciate it."
It was warm as he left but the air held the subtle hint of moisture, threatening rain. Anders looked up to the overcast sky above and pulled his coat tighter around him. Autumn would be heading in soon. The days were growing shorter. It almost felt as if they hadn't even had a summer. He stepped out into the street, heading towards the empty market.

"What's so secret then?"

Anders felt his heart thud into his chest in panic, spinning around to find none other than Hawke leaning against the wall by the door he'd just exited. Anders stared at him, expression giving away nothing. For a moment there wasn't anything but silence, until he broke it.

"You scared the shit out of me," Anders admonished.

Hawke pushed away from the wall and walked towards him, his hands in the pockets of his trousers. Anders still wasn't used to seeing Hawke like this, his facade distant and cool. Even when they'd been sort-of-fighting Hawke hadn't been this edgy with him. He'd been sullen, unsure, but never cold. Anders began to wonder if he'd done something he didn't even know of to insult the man, or whether Hawke was just becoming rather bitter about the whole affair.

"Well?" Hawke asked, not even looking at him.

"Well what?" Anders frowned.

"What did you need from Varric?" he asked, no preamble.

"I was hardly here for a bedtime story," Anders said facetiously, "what do you think?"

Hawke looked away with a snort, kicking at a stone on the ground, sending it skittering loudly over the cobblestones. Anders watched him closely, wondering why he was even here and why they were talking about this. Hawke had been the one to leave the pub, Anders hadn't asked him to go. Now he was here, acting as if he'd been omitted from a conversation he had nothing to do with. Anders wished he didn't have to talk about any of this, but he knew better than to put it off. Hawke's tenacity was something he was all too familiar with.

"What's this really about Hawke?" he sighed.

"...You're avoiding me again, aren't you?" Hawke said, his eyes finally coming to rest on him.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Anders asked with a frown, "You're the one who practically leapt out of your chair as soon as you saw me. Shouldn't I be asking you that question?"

Hawke eyed him for a moment before looking away uneasily. Now this was a little better at least, Anders thought, he could deal with unease. He was good at that.

"I just thought...I haven't seen you since we agreed to meet and I, well," Hawke looked to his left, sighing, "something came up and I couldn't make it. I thought maybe you got the impression that I'd stood you up."

I wish that I had, Anders thought bleakly, I wish that I'd not bothered to worry about you and just been left thinking you'd forgotten. Instead Anders had been left in little doubt as to what had happened that night. One would have to be blind and deaf not to. Anders pushed down the hateful hurt and tried his best not to show any emotion. He had enough on his mind right now what with the insurrection in trouble...and Alrik.

"You don't need to explain," Anders said tightly, "Varric and I had a few drinks then I went home."
"Oh? Because that isn't what he said," Hawke was back to looking accusing again, "Varric told me you left to look for me and never came back."

"Been talking about me have we?" Anders said with a snort, "Didn't know I was so popular."

Hawke watched him intently for a moment before looking away once more. Anders felt the need to leave before Hawke managed to goad him into saying what he really wanted to. Just how long have you been playing around with me? He wanted to ask, but his own pride and guilt wouldn't let him. How long had Anders himself been playing around with Hawke? How long had he lied to him, kept him behind a wall of indifferent friendship? Anders wasn't quite ready to become a hypocrite yet, despite Hawke's obvious interest in Fenris.

Yet, despite his noble aspirations, it still hurt. Anders knew he had no right to feel this way but it didn't stop him. He'd never been good at covering the petulant side of his personality and even Justice, with all his dignity and graciousness, had never really tempered him. He looked back to Hawke and found the man fidgeting, his eyes staring at the ground.

"Look, that isn't what I wanted to say either. I'm getting off the point here," he said, shaking his head in frustration, "I was actually wondering if you wanted to..."

"What now?" Anders said rolling his eyes, "Need my help finding a lost dog or something?"

"Well I'm so sorry to be such a bother but I distinctly remember you saying never to go back into the Deep Roads without you," Hawke said sarcastically, his irritation only increasing on being interrupted, "or you'd castrate me."

Anders looked back at him, blinking. Why did Hawke have to be such a bloody conundrum? And why couldn't he stay angry at him for more than five minutes at a time?

"The Deep Roads?" Anders said, "What on earth are you going back down there for?"

"To find a lost dog," Hawke said sarcastically.

"Oh really," Anders said, not impressed with Hawke's idea of savage humour.

"A woman asked me to find her brother," Hawke clarified.

"What? Another idiotic adventurer trying to find his fortune?" Anders said, knowing what kind of reaction that would get.

"No actually," Hawke said tightly, "a Grey Warden, some man named Howe."

That had his attention.

"Nathaniel Howe?" Anders asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Hawke said with a frown, "You know him?"

"We were Wardens together, in Amaranthine," Anders said; it had been so long Anders hadn't even entertained the idea of running into any of his old comrades, "I haven't seen him since I left. Why does his sister want you to find him?"

"She said he's missing, hasn't been seen for weeks," Hawke said, "she looked worried."

Anders rubbed at his arms, feeling the coolness of the damp air beginning to chill him. The Deep Roads were not somewhere he'd rather go willingly but, as he knew, Hawke wasn't one to let
something like this go without helping and he, for one, was not going to go back on his threat. He would not go through that again, letting Hawke gallivant off to the Deep Roads with the chance of him never coming back. No matter what state their relationship was in, Anders wasn't willing to lose him completely for the sake of it. No matter how much he hated himself for it, Hawke meant too much to him. Anders was quite sure there was nothing to worry about, Nathaniel Howe could take care of himself. He had crawled out of worse places than the Deep Roads in his time and being missing for a couple of weeks probably just meant that he'd found something interesting down there and was taking a closer look. However, there was always the slim chance that something had gone wrong. He may not have seen him in years but Anders wasn't one to abandon a friend in need.

"When are you leaving?" Anders asked.

"Tomorrow, early," Hawke said, "It's going to be a long trip, maybe three days or so to get to the entrance. She said that he would be in the same area as the expedition, that they were investigating the abandoned Thaig. That's another week or so underground, but it depends on where he is."

"It's part of the Order's business, to map out new areas of the Deep Roads that become open," Anders said, partly to himself, "perhaps that's why they were sent out this far."

"So you'll come?" Hawke asked.

Anders looked at him, watching his disdain change into something more like hopefulness. Anders shook his head. How did the man manage to survive what with his emotions changing from every five seconds to the next? Anders couldn't keep track of Hawke's taciturnity.

"Yes, I'll come," Anders sighed.

"Good," Hawke nodded, "we're going to meet here. Six o'clock."

"Who's we?" Anders asked.

"Besides us? Varric, Aveline and Merrill," Hawke said, looking at him with a small frown, "why?"

"Just curious," Anders lied; he knew he shouldn't have done it but he added, "No Fenris? What happened, did you stop wearing the cat nip?"

Hawke stiffened almost imperceptibly and, much to Anders annoyance, looked momentarily sad before his face became a blank mask once more. He looked at Anders calculatingly, as if trying to discern something, before looking away. When he spoke his voice was tainted with a derisive tone, yet it sounded to Anders as if Hawke was being self-deprecating more than he was angry at Fenris.

"No, I haven't seen him for a while either," he said, "I think he's busy trying to track down his sister."

"Oh, I see," Anders said.

Liar, he thought. I don't have any claim to you Hawke, why don't you just tell me the truth and stop leading me around on this useless bloody chase? Why can't you just let me be? Yet the more Anders thought about it the worse it got. Not worse because he saw fault in Hawke but worse because he realised it wasn't Hawke that wouldn't let it go. It was him. He wished he could just forget all about it and move on but something always dragged him back, kicking and screaming. That need was still in there, buried beneath the years of solitude and pain that had tried so hard to teach him the lesson; there was no chance for him of a normal life. Yet the need for that fleeting glimpse of something wonderful that Hawke had allowed him on that stupid, drunken night was
almost suffocating at times. Something Anders had never dreamed he would even entertain as a thought was becoming something he now felt he had to actively avoid as a future. Not that there was any real chance it would ever happen anyway, he reassured himself. You've made sure of that, haven't you? he thought derisively. Yet even then, even when he'd pushed and pushed and was sure, so sure, that he'd given up, the feeling would surface and Anders would be left thinking the same thing over again.

Do you love me? Because I think I'm in love with you. I think I have been all along. That's why this hurts so much, isn't it?

"I'll see you tomorrow Hawke," he said, his voice calm.

"Alright," Hawke nodded, turning away without another word to walk off into the slowly darkening night.

Anders watched him go and was glad he didn't have the courage to stop him.

"Well I can safely say I have not missed this," Anders said wryly.

Anders lifted his boot to inspect the thick, gloopy substance stuck to the sole. The Deep Roads in the Free Marches weren't quite the same as those beneath Ferelden, but then large, dry, sulphurous, lyrium lined caves filled with archaic statuary, lava and Darkspawn could only be so different. The running rivers of muck were new however.

"Oh, yes, you might want to avoid those," Varric said airily as he continued forwards, "that stuff is a bastard to get off."

"No, you don't say," Anders said, shaking his head and following closely, "and here I was about to have a bath in it."

"Ah, I see that your sense of humour has finally returned then," Varric grinned at him over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, it's probably just hysteria," Anders said with a shrug and a defeated sigh as he tried vainly to scrape the muck off onto a nearby rock, "I'm sure you'll find me rocking back and forth in a corner soon, jibbering about fish."

It hadn't taken quite as long to reach the entrance to the Deep Roads as they had expected. Perhaps it was the efficient silence that they kept that allowed for such a quick pace. Anders and Hawke had kept a steady distance apart, not speaking unless necessary. This had seemed a catalyst for the rest of the group to also settle into a rather noticeable silence. Merrill, for reasons Anders couldn't truly fathom, seemed rather distant anyway and he'd never got along well with Aveline. Varric had been the only one to really speak, acting like the host at the world's most awkward get together.

Once they were underground, however, things started to change. It was really more for survival than anything else. The Deep Roads were lonely enough without making them lonelier. Without the sun or sky above, days of perpetual night, losing track of time and the steady pulse of pale blue lyrium all around, human contact was all you had to keep you sane. Anders had taken it upon himself to make sure that no one stayed to themselves, even Aveline. The sombre Captain of the Guard had seemed rather taken aback at first; whether it was because Anders cared enough to look out for her or that he'd initiated conversation was hard to tell, but even given their history she warmed to him surprisingly quickly. Yes they argued, on occasion, but it was still preferable to the stilted and awkward conversations with Hawke.
"What's happened between you two?" Merrill asked him one night as they set up camp.

Hawke and Aveline were scouting a perimeter while Varric set up bed rolls and traps; the mages had been left to set the fire and begin cooking.

"What do you mean?" Anders asked, hoping to either avoid or delay having this conversation as long as possible.

"You and Hawke of course," Merrill frowned, "you're both acting like total strangers. You've barely spoken to him at all since we set out."

Anders filled the sturdy pot hanging above the fire with water from his flask. He tried to think of an appropriate lie to tell while he fished out the last of the fresh vegetables and herbs he'd brought. They were already beginning to wilt without the fresh air, the heavy atmosphere drying them prematurely. Merrill didn't push, waiting patiently by his side, poking a stick into the fire.

"It's complicated," Anders said finally, settling for ambiguity over straight out lies.

"How complicated can it be to tell someone that you like them?" Merrill said, tutting her disapproval, "The two of you don't look very happy."

"Merrill it's not that simple," Anders said, wishing it was that simple.

"Why not?" she asked, "If you ask me you're both just being stubborn."

Anders couldn't agree more. He and Hawke were sometimes too similar and other times too disparate. He wished above all else he could be frank with the man and just ask him what he wanted, but he was too afraid of what the consequences might be. Anders would rather live with this awkwardness than have Hawke forced into a decision about who he cared for more.

It was on the fourth day beneath the stone that they found what they'd come looking for. Somehow Anders had known that Nathaniel wouldn't really be in any desperate trouble. The man had always known how to take care of himself. All those years in the Free Marches being on his own had created a hardened rogue if nothing else. He seemed to be quite happily skewering Darkspawn with an endless supply of arrows when they turned up. Hawke and Aveline stepped in to help mop up a group of Genlocks that had been trying their best to flank the archer while Merrill cast confusion charms on the Hurlocks to give Nathaniel more time to shoot. Once everything but them in the vicinity was dead they picked their way through the carnage towards Howe who was currently retrieving arrows from the corpses around him. He looked up as they approached, his face spattered with black blood. Anders couldn't help but marvel at how little he had changed. In a way he was glad for it. It was like finding something after a long wait.

"I know you," Nathaniel said, eyes narrowed as he stared at Hawke, "You're Serrah Hawke are you not? We were told about you, you're the one who opened up this whole area."

"Guilty as charged," Hawke shrugged with a lazy smile.

"Well, quite the..." Nathaniel looked over their group until his eyes alighted on Anders; he looked completely taken aback, "Anders!"

"Making friends as always I see," Anders said with a smile.

It was odd, how nice it was to see him. He'd never say they were close friends but Anders had always liked Nathaniel. There was something about speaking to him that felt like coming home after a long, long time. It stirred memories of camaraderie that he hadn't felt since Cousland had left...
on the expedition that had forced others into positions of power at the Keep in his absence. Since the templars had taken renewed interest in him, despite his warden status. Since everything had started to go wrong. Since Rolan. Anders shook himself out of his reverie, focusing on the here and now.

"There's no escaping you it seems," Nathaniel smiled back with a shrug.

"I'm special that way," Anders said, falling back into their banter with unprecedented ease.

"That's one way to put it," Nathaniel said with a roll of his eyes.

Anders let out a small laugh and shook his head. So Nathaniel had found a sense of humour, or maybe just improved on his own inability that little bit. Hawke was giving them both an odd look that Anders couldn't quite discern, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

"Well," Hawke said, already turning to go, "we can give your sister the good news then..."

"Wait," Nathaniel said, "I can't leave."

"There doesn't seem much reason to stay," Anders said, looking to the carnage around his feet, "unless you really are just down here slaughtering Genlocks for a laugh."

"Actually we were told to investigate the area," Nathaniel said with his usual slightly arrogant tone in the face of Anders' humour; the mage couldn't help but grin, "the First Warden himself ordered it. But that's not important. I didn't come down here alone, I was separated from the rest of my group when we were attacked. They may still be alive."

Hawke turned back, his eyes glinting in the blue light of the lyrium crystals hanging from the walls. If there was one thing Hawke didn't seem to be able to resist it was people in distress. Anders shivered, wondering if it was anyone he knew. Somehow he didn't feel he had any real right to ask, considering he'd basically abandoned the Order. Nathaniel gave him a look out of the corner of his eye before focusing back on Hawke.

"Then we shouldn't delay," Hawke said, his face set, "we need to make sure you're people are safe."

"Thank you," Nathaniel said, relieved.

"Let's go," Hawke said, turning to the rest of the group.

Anders wished they'd had time to stop, or even slow down enough to talk. He had things he wanted to ask Nathaniel but the urgency in their pace allowed for no talking other than shouted orders or warnings during battle. It didn't take long to find the wayward Wardens. They met the dwarf, Temmerin, the crazy one Anders remembered from Vigil's Keep who was always obsessed with blowing things up. Anders had always been worried that he'd wake up to find half the Keep in smoking ruins with that dwarf tinkering in his workshop all night with unstable chemicals. Not that he was complaining now, you understand, not when the barrels of unstable chemicals could be used to blow ogres into nice, meaty chunks.

"Someone should take him back to the surface," Hawke suggested as he brushed the dark, sticky blood from his hands and arms onto his armour distastefully, stepping around the eviscerated corpse of the ogre, "this is no place to be alone for a fight."

"I'll go," Varric offered, "not to abandon you all but I'd rather spend as little time down here as possible. No offence."
"None taken," Anders said with a wry smile, "just annoyed you beat me to it, that's all."

"You certainly haven't changed," Nathaniel said with a weary shake of his head, yet there was humour in his eyes, "come on, we should hurry."

While Varric and Temmerin made their way back through the now safe passages, free of Darkspawn, the others ran along walkways and down stairs until they finally came in sight of a large, crumbling plaza. The sounds of fighting were unmistakable and, as they reached the bottom of the stairs, they were greeted with an interesting sight.

Oghren was laughing as he swung his axe back and forth in a wide arc, the deadly heft catching a group of hurlocks by the calves and effectively severing them at the legs. The creatures fell gurgling to the floor, spraying their dark viscous blood all over the stone. The dwarf just grinned and sprinted forwards, letting out a fierce battle cry as he barrelled into a large group of enemies that were surrounding someone he couldn't quite see behind all the flailing limbs and weapons. The dwarf made little impact despite his tenacity and the group simply continued to converge on the lone figure at their centre. Nathaniel was shooting vainly at their legs, trying to slow them down, while Hawke and Aveline ran forwards to help, but they were still too far from the fray. Anders knew it was risky but he raised his staff and conjured a controlled ball of flame, sending it hurtling into the group of enemies, scattering them into bloody, charred pieces on the floor. Nathaniel gave him a withering glance and Anders just shrugged.

"Oh what?" he asked, "Like you wouldn't have done it if you could have."

"I'll never hear the end of this," Nathaniel said, shaking his head and confusing Anders to no end.

"What on earth are you talking about...?" he started, but was interrupted by a very familiar voice.

"Ow, ow, ow, OW!" Anders looked over to see the man he'd just sort-of-saved patting at his drake scale armour, trying his best to put out the flames that were attempting to build on the fur lining.

Anders watched, feeling the instinctual need to hide, as the man finally patted out the flames and then pulled off his helmet, his cool, grey eyes trained on the strangers before him as he strode forwards.

"Alright!" Cousland asked, fuming, "who's the cheeky fucker that threw the fireball?"

Hawke and Aveline stopped dead, still in battle ready stance, and stared. Nathaniel wondered down the stairs nonchalantly, his bow loose in his hand, and Anders followed, trying to keep behind him. Of all the people that it could have been...Anders didn't know what to think.

"You...you could have bloody told me he was here!" Anders hissed.

"Well I didn't think the first thing you'd do was try and blow him up," Nathaniel said back over his shoulder.

Cousland had bypassed Oghren and the two other Wardens that had been fighting with him, walked straight past Hawke and Aveline and was looking at Nathaniel, his expression not amused.

"I swear, Nathaniel, if that was another of your exploding arrows I'll..." his voice trailed away as he finally saw who was standing half beside, half behind Howe.

Cousland blinked. Anders would admit later that his expression had been priceless, but at that moment all he could think was that he was now truly screwed. He couldn't help it, he'd always felt that way whenever he'd made Cousland angry at him. He used to just hide and let it blow over,
better than facing him and getting a lashing while the anger was still hot. The man had a temper on him, yes, but it was very short lived. If you outran it for a while it generally got bored and wandered off, found something else to take itself out on and then never bothered you again. Unfortunately, in these circumstances, that wasn't really an option. So Anders just offered a weak smile and a small, rather mischievous wave.

"Anders?" Cousland shook his head as if to clear away a vision, "Is that really you?"

"Unfortunately," Anders said with a shrug.

There was another moment's silence, in which Anders couldn't help but tense, before he was suddenly pulled into strong arms, a loud laugh in his ear as he was embraced warmly. Or squeezed as Anders liked to call it. Well, Anders thought, that's better than getting shouted at for half an hour solid.

"Ha ha!" Cousland pulled away to hold him by the shoulders, his eyes shining brightly, his grin wide, "So, this where you've been hiding is it? Bit desperate. We weren't that bad, were we?"

"Very funny Commander," Anders rolled his eyes, "you know how much I hate the Deep Roads."

"Yes, well, I'm beginning to agree with you," Cousland said, letting him go so he could take a look back over the dead Darkspawn littered behind them, "we've been down here for weeks. Who are these people?"

Anders looked to Hawke, Aveline and Merrill as they walked over, finally close enough that he had to worry about introducing them. Hawke was watching Cousland with a mix of confusion and distrust. Anders knew he needed to introduce them as quickly as possible. There was no way that Hawke would know who he was talking to, no one ever did unless they were told. Well, Anders thought ruefully, who would believe they were talking to the slayer of an archdemon and the hero of a nation? The man had the dignity of a sailor and a mouth like a dock worker. Anders felt like laughing but thought it wouldn't be that appropriate.

"This is the Captain of the Kirkwall City Guard, Aveline Vallen," Anders started; Aveline bowed respectfully, her face a picture as she didn't seem to know how respectful to be in the face of Cousland's initial words, "this is Merrill and this is Garret Hawke."

"Ah," Cousland's eyes alighted on Hawke, taking him in slowly, "so you're the reason we're down here. You know no one's ever been as far into the Deep Roads as you have, not even me."

"That something I should be proud of, is it?" Hawke said, raising an eyebrow sardonically; Anders winced.

Oh great, Hawke's taken a dislike to him already, Anders thought, this is going to be wonderful. He'd hoped to get away with quick introductions and then see what happened from there, but if this turned into a fight he wasn't going to be held responsible for picking sides. I'll just leave, Anders thought morosely, maybe Nathaniel will come with me and we can go and get a drink or something. Chance would be a fine thing.

"Well, considering where I went the last time I was down here," Cousland was keeping his tone jovial but Anders could see his eyes had hardened just a little, "...yes you should."

"Aveline, Merrill, Hawke," Anders took advantage of the break to interrupt; his group looked at him expectantly, "this is Lien Cousland, Commander of the Grey."

Aveline's eyes bugged out of her head and she seemed to involuntarily fall to one knee, her hand
coming across her chest. Anders smothered a laugh behind his hand. He couldn't help it, she looked so shocked it was almost as if her leg had figured out what to do before her brain had.

Merrill was looking at Cousland with her usual happy smile that she reserved for meeting new people, offering him a small wave that held none of the cheek that Anders' had. Cousland returned it, his smile amused but kind. Hawke, on the other hand, looked rather taken aback before turning to glare accusingly at Anders. The mage had always had the sneaking suspicion that Hawke never did believe the stories he told about his old Commander. Well, now he was just going to have to learn the hard way. Anders wasn't going to take the blame for Hawke's rash words.

"It-it's an honour!" Aveline said, bowing her head.

"Well, well, I should come to Kirkwall more often," Cousland said, stepping forwards to take her hand and pull her back to her feet; a wide blush spread over her cheeks and she swallowed, "if I get respect like this."

"It's only because everyone in Ferelden knows you now," Oghren said, finally joining them, "that's why you don't get any."

Anders smiled at the dwarf and the dwarf grinned back.

"Oghren," Anders said.

"Sparklefingers," Oghren grinned lasciviously.

"Oh how I forgot how much I didn't miss you," Anders said with a roll of his eyes, "thank you so much for reminding me."

"Not a problem," the dwarf said with a shrug, shouldering his massive axe, "I could try harder if you'd like."

"What, are you going to belch me the alphabet again?" Anders said.

"Oh I've learned a few more since then," Oghren shrugged, "how about I fart you the Maker's chant instead?"

"You know it amazes even me how much I never want to hear that," Anders said, "ever."

Anders had phased out of the conversation as he and Oghren spoke, falling back into their sleazy, inane banter. When he next took any notice he wished he'd never stopped listening to it.

"Well then it's a good thing we know someone there then, isn't it?" Cousland was saying to Nathaniel, his second in command's eyes hard with long suffering intolerance, "We'll just stay with Anders."

"Sorry you'll what..?" Anders said in disbelief, blinking.

"Well if what your friend here says is true," Cousland jerked his thumb at Hawke and Anders watched in dismay as the rogue veritably bristled, "and we're only three or four days from the surface here, then we may as well haul the whole affair back to Kirkwall and just get the boat back to Ferelden from there. It's better than trailing back to Orzammar through the Roads, that'll take weeks."

"Brilliant plan," Nathaniel said, shaking his head.

Anders tried to interrupt, to tell Cousland why that would be a tremendously bad idea. The reason
he couldn't just come and stay in his house being that Anders didn't have a house and the fact that it would be a terribly bad idea to stay with him was because he was a wanted man. So many things had happened since he last had a chance to talk to the Commander that he was now regretting not leaving a note.

"Oh? Have you got a better one?" Cousland started immediately, not giving Anders the chance to butt in, "Considering I'm pretty sure you're the reason we were lost down here for two weeks longer than was planned."

"That was nothing to do with me," Nathaniel said tightly; he was usually composed and sober in front of strangers but then Cousland did always manage to get under his skin.

"Well you were the one with the map," Cousland said rather petulantly, "I'm just saying."

"Commander," Anders finally managed to interrupt again, "I mean he might have a point. I don't think it's such a great idea, you just popping up in Kirkwall uninvited, is it?"

Cousland turned to him confusion evident in his eyes. The man never did have a sense of his own importance; sometimes it made Anders smile and other times it made him want to slap himself in the face in despair.

"Why?" Cousland said, frowning at Anders.

"Well, someone of your status can hardly just waltz into Kirkwall without announcing it. And look, I don't really have anywhere you can stay anyway," Anders said tightly, "it's probably not the best idea right now..."

"Oh come on," Cousland said incredulously, throwing his arms out, "are you seriously ditching us? Here?"

"But you don't even like boats," Oghren said to Cousland, "you get sea sick."

"Well it's better than this fucking sulphurous gas!" Cousland said, his temper flaring once again, "And if I have to put up with another night of your whining because you can't get a drink..!"

When Anders looked to Hawke, ignoring the Commander and Oghren as they began to quarrel over all the stupid, niggly things that had annoyed them over the past few days, he wasn't sure what to expect. Sheer confusion could only be a good start though, Anders thought. Despite Hawke's initial dislike Anders hoped that finding out who the man was would allow him to at least be civil. When Anders caught his eye Hawke looked perplexed and a little annoyed. Anders knew he had no right to ask, but the only way this could be resolved was if Cousland got his way. The man could be awfully spoiled at times and, when he got an idea into his head, he was as bad as a mabari a with bone. Anders jerked his head subtly in the direction of the still bickering duo and raised his eyebrows. Hawke frowned before his eyes went wide in realisation of what Anders was asking, shaking his head shortly but vehemently. Anders repeated his motion only with more force, putting a little pleading into his eyes. Hawke hesitated for a moment, his lips thinning. Then he gave Anders a look that screamed 'you owe me so much for this', before taking a breath and opening his mouth.

"Then I suppose it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for the hero of Ferelden to be invited in by a noble," Hawke said formally, "you are all welcome to stay with me while you wait for transport."

Cousland and Oghren stopped dead, looking to Hawke in confusion for a moment as if they'd already forgotten what they were fighting about in the first place. Cousland looked at Anders out
the corner of his eye, his face softening a little, but the mage just avoided his gaze. The Commander broke out into another grin, his hands on his hips.

"Well, since you're offering," he said, still looking a little critically at Hawke but at least he was smiling; Anders would take what he could get, "that sounds perfect!"

"Yes, perfect," Nathaniel muttered, shaking his head.

How had this even happened? Anders thought. They'd come to find Nathaniel and had ended up adopting a troop of Grey Wardens. Last time he checked he was supposed to be avoiding Grey Wardens. Anders crossed his fingers behind his back and hoped to the Maker he'd done the right thing.
"And so then Anders ducks behind the cart and we all follow him and Nathaniel...!" Cousland was laughing so hard he had to stop to breathe, "Nathaniel is left on his own with her and he doesn't know what to do and...!"

"Yes, it was all very funny at the time, wasn't it," Nathaniel interrupted, his husky voice tinged with irritation, "I don't think I've ever been so embarrassed. How was I to know she wasn't a woman?"

"Oh sweet Amaranthine nights," Cousland grinned, turning the meat over the fire to allow it to cook on the other side, "I don't think we're allowed back in the Nug and Blanket now are we?"

"Well, Nate certainly isn't anyway," Anders said, winking at Nathaniel as he bit into a piece of roasted rabbit; the archer simply ignored him and sat brooding on the log.

It had been two days since they'd reached the surface and they were now a mere day's walk from Kirkwall. Unlike the terse silence of the outward journey the return was filled with talk and laughter; it was hard to get a word in edgeways with the Wardens. They never shut up, especially Cousland, and Anders couldn't get enough of it. Aveline and Merrill seemed fascinated by Cousland, Aveline because of his heroic stories, Merrill because of his easy laugh and kind smile. Hawke was the only one who didn't seem to be taken with their new companions. Oh he joined in conversations but Anders could see the stiff set to his shoulders, the smiles that didn't reach his eyes. He knew that the others had started to notice, when Hawke retired early to his bedroll or avoided questions, but Anders didn't feel he had any real way to approach him. Things were still taut between them as it was.

"It sounds like you had a lot of fun," Merrill said as she stirred the pot of watery, herby soup she was making.

"Oh it was all fun and games," Cousland said, "overrun with demons, psychotic broodmothers, talking Darkspawn. What more could a man ask for?"

"A break?" Oghren said, burping and throwing his rabbit bone into the fire.

"What do you think this is?" Cousland said, spreading his hands.

"This is your idea of a holiday?" Anders laughed, "No wonder you're so popular with your men."

Cousland gave him a rude hand gesture that made Merrill giggle and Aveline blush. Anders just shook his head and finished his small but satisfying dinner. He looked over to Hawke to find the man watching him from his seat by Aveline. Anders swallowed and looked away back to the fire.

"I'm going to patrol the perimeter," Hawke said suddenly, standing up.

"But the soup's almost ready," Merrill said, looking at him a little worriedly.

"Save me some," Hawke smiled at her before picking up his daggers and walking off towards the path.

Anders watched him as he faded from the firelight. How long would he let this go on for before he actually pulled himself together and did something? Well, answer your own question why don't you, Anders thought as he stood up and hopped over the log he'd been seated on. He picked up his staff from by his bedroll, strapping it to his belt. No more waiting around like an idiot, he told
"Where are you off to?" Cousland asked as he pulled the stick of meat from over the fire.

"Better we don't go off alone," Anders shrugged, "I won't be long."

Cousland gave him a brief but curious look which Anders ignored. He could see the outline of Hawke ahead of him against the pale sky, the bushes around him dark splotches against the ground. Anders jogged to catch up, listening to the silence settling in around him the further he got from the camp. It was a warm evening but now that the sun was setting there was a slight chill in the air. He could hear the distant shush of water lapping on the shore, accentuated by the brief rustling of wind in the stunted trees. It only took a few moments to reach Hawke. The man didn't turn or slow down and Anders fell into step beside him. At least the silence felt companionable, Anders thought. Almost.

"I could have done this on my own," Hawke said after another few minutes of just their synchronised footsteps.

"How very safety conscious of you," Anders said, "walking off into the dark alone."

"Hardly," Hawke said with a snort, putting his hands in his pockets to stave off the chill in his fingers.

They continued along the path, past a copse of trees. Anders jumped the small stream while Hawke just walked through it. Anders walked backwards, watching him with a small smile for a few paces before turning back. He heard Hawke slosh from the water. A flock of starlings shot up from the ground as Anders rounded the corner, startling silhouettes against the sunset. He stopped and looked out over the coastline, watching the last of the sunlight playing on the water. There was a rare red tinge in the clouds, fading to a burnt orange. Anders could feel Hawke beside him even though he hadn't heard him approach. They stood together in companionable quiet.

"Reminds me of Gwaren bay," Hawke said eventually, his voice soft, "have you ever been?"

"That's east coast isn't it?" Anders asked, trying to call the place to mind, "No, I never have."

"Father took us once, when Beth and Carver were still only young," Hawke said, "maybe only five. I think I must have been about eight. We camped out under the stars every night. I remember fireflies and...well actually not much else. Other than father showing me how to light a fire without magic."

Anders turned to look at the man beside him. Hawke didn't look as reminiscent as he sounded. His face still was still set, hard. Anders wished that he could understand why.

"Were you close?" Anders asked cautiously.

"With my father?" Hawke seemed to come out of his daze and looked at Anders, "Yes I suppose I was. He was always there for us, no matter what happened. And I never begrudged having to move around because of the templars. It was just the way it was. My father was a good man and he loved us. We were just protecting him."

"You shouldn't have to have memories like that," Anders said, looking back out over the bay, "you should have been allowed a normal life. Not being hunted, made to always look over your shoulder."

"Well," Hawke said with a rather cheerless chuffed out laugh, "in a perfect world."
"No," Anders said ardently, "one day it will be the reality, when mages no longer need fear their own gift and can walk freely among their peers. When templars are no longer needed. A day when your sister will be free to come home again."

Anders breathed in the crisp, warm air and let it out slowly. He heard Hawke shift, felt his eyes on him. Anders reached up and pulled his hair free of its tie, letting the breeze blow through the loose strands.

"That sounds like a good day," Hawke said, a smile in his voice.

"It will be," Anders said, returning the smile.

The fading sunlight cast deep shadows on Hawke's face, accentuating his sharp cheekbones. Anders couldn't help but stare, just for a little while. It was so peaceful here, he could almost imagine it was just them, nothing and no one else, no baggage, no needs and no duty. The wind blew his hair into his eyes and Hawke lifted his hand to push it back behind his ear. Anders let him.

"There you are."

Hawke pulled his hand back as if burned and they both turned to see Aveline standing at the turn in the path. She was watching them closely but didn't comment, her expression closed.

"Merrill said that the soup is ready. You'd better get back before the other locusts eat everything," she said.

With that she turned and left. Anders let out a soft sigh. Moment over, he thought cynically as Hawke shifted awkwardly beside him. Anders lifted his hand and pulled his hair back, pulling the small stretch of twine around it and tying it with practiced ease.

"Better get back before there's nothing left," he said.

"Knowing that lot it'll be gone before we make it," Hawke said disdainfully.

"You could at least pretend to like them you know," Anders said disapprovingly.

"It's not that I don't like them," Hawke said, sighing and shrugging a little, "it's just..."

Anders watched him as they continued to walk.

"What?" he prompted.

"It's..." Hawke shook his head and let out a rather self-deprecating laugh, "you just seem happy, that's all."

"I do?" Anders asked.

"Haven't seen you laugh this much since my birthday," Hawke shrugged.

"And my being happy is bad is it?" Anders said, pretending to sound hurt.

"No," Hawke said, "of course it isn't."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, this time flavoured with something more than when they'd first walked out. Anders just enjoyed it while it lasted. He far preferred this to the overformal and uncomfortable conversations they had been having before. Perhaps bringing the
Warden's to Kirkwall wouldn't be as bad as he thought.

Anders had always hated ceremony. Not to say that he didn't mind frivolity, oh that part was fine, it was the endless waiting and useless pretense that slowed the frivolity down to a snail's pace that he couldn't stand. There was nothing worse than being stuck waiting on the Viscount to have enough time to come and greet your party at the gates, not because he wants to particularly, or that the whole thing couldn't be done later, but because he *has* to under some stupidly pretentious tradition.

Well, there was nothing worse than that other than having Lien Cousland in your party at the time. The man was notoriously impatient.

"I swear," Cousland had said after the first thirty minutes, "if that man doesn't come down here and say I can walk through this ludicrous gate into his stupid city in the next five minutes I'm going back to the bloody Deep Roads."

An hour later Anders was amazed Cousland hadn't made good on his threat. The Viscount finally arrived, politically late Anders thought wryly, and there was a lot of, well, *ceremony*. It took much longer than it really should have to get in, get introduced to all the nobles who had come to greet him, be escorted to Hawke's mansion, have to turn down countless invitations to stay with other noble families and even the Viscount himself. By the time they were indoors it was early evening, even though they'd reached the city gates at noon. Anders had tried to slip away to Darktown but Hawke had caught his arm and pulled him close, his eyes hard with warning. Despite the fierceness there Anders found it hard not to react to the proximity.

"Don't you even *think* about dumping this on me and then leaving," Hawke hissed.

"I'm not!" Anders said, insulted, "I need my supplies from the clinic. We ran out days ago and there are still wounds to take care of."

"Well...at least help me fix everything up first," Hawke sounded distinctly huffy to Anders' ears and he couldn't help but roll his eyes; the man could be such a child sometimes, "this is all your doing after all."

Anders felt like telling Hawke that whatever influence he thought Anders had over the Commander that would make this easier didn't exist. No one had that much influence over Cousland, except maybe one man, but Anders didn't think it would really be possible to have the King of Ferelden show up out of the blue just to keep him in line; even if he was being an insufferable prat just because he'd had to undergo some minor political formal procedure.

"Welcome home Master Hawke, I hope you've had a pleasant-oh! We have visitors!" Bodahn looked taken aback before his eyes lit up in recognition.

"Bodahn!" Cousland had said, his foul mood seeming to lighten instantly.

Hawke watched with interest as Cousland strode forwards to clap the dwarf on the shoulder. Sandal, usually quite happy tinkering in the corner with enchantments, looked up and smiled.

"Warden!" he said in his childlike voice, toddling over to stand beside his father.

"What on earth are you two doing here? I haven't seen you since..." Cousland looked noticeably nostalgic.

"It was King Alistair's coronation I think, my Lord," Bodahn said, "my, my but that is a long time ago!"
"You can say that again," Cousland grinned, "hello Sandal."

"Hello," Sandal said back, waving before he turned and shuffled back to his box and started raking through it once more.

Anders hadn't been inside Hawke's mansion since the incident with Ser Alrik and his men. He almost didn't recognise Oranna who he found in the kitchen, looking excitedly around the door at the Wardens as they piled into the house. She recognised him at least, from the day they had saved her at the holding caves, and she even thanked him. Anders waved it away with a smile. He was just glad Hawke had followed through on his promise, not that he'd expected anything less. Being a servant over a slave suited Oranna better, he thought, but then he would say that of anyone. Even Fenris, no matter how much he disliked the elf.

Hawke's mother didn't seem to know what to think. Leandra had been oddly mixed about meeting and accommodating the Grey Wardens. At first she had been overly delighted; to have the Hero of Ferelden staying at her house, she'd been beside herself. Cousland had even behaved, for a little while, and been rather charming to the woman. It was as the day wore by that Leandra had caught comments and saw things that made her doubt the veracity of the legends of the sombre, dignified Hero. Such as, in celebration of the night of their return, having a drinking contest with Oghren that ended up with lots of vomiting, most of it on the floor. Of course Cousland had apologised and then made the junior Wardens Fadius and Thella clean it up, but Leandra had been rather cooler with him since then. Anders didn't mind. In a way he was rather glad Hawke's mother didn't get along with his friends.

Hawke had finally let him go after that debacle and Anders had been glad to get away. Somehow he'd managed to avoid having any serious conversations with any of his old friends yet. Despite the long walk back the Commander was surprisingly cheery and, well, normal. Anders had expected a much bigger reaction to being found, it was almost disappointing in a way. Since coming to Kirkwall if it wasn't the templars he was expecting the Warden's to be searching for him. Much easier to find a Warden than a mage, what with the mutual pull of the taint. Still, even now, in the company of the Commander of the Grey, Lord of Highever, second in line to the Teryn-ship, he hadn't heard a single word about his defection. It wasn't very reassuring. Anders knew better than to believe the Commanders act. Cousland was very good at seeming dense when it suited him, but the man was actually so sharp he cut himself sometimes.

So escaping to the clinic had been a nice reprieve over constantly worrying that he was going to be interrogated; unfortunately, what with having been missing for two weeks, there were a lot of people merely lying in wait for his return. When he unlocked the door he'd lit the lantern on autopilot, not thinking about the moths it would attract. Anders ended up awake all night with people banging on the door, desperate for aid. He wished he had the bad grace enough to blow the lantern out again but guilt stopped him. These people needed him as much as anyone else, if not more.

With the couple of hours sleep he managed to catch before getting up again he managed to revive himself enough to make up a pack and haul his fatigued body back to Hightown. He'd promised Hawke not to leave him in charge of the mess Anders had created for him and, despite his exhaustion, he wouldn't go back on his word. He'd spent the day helping Hawke get supplies, running back to open the clinic, closing it again because he'd promised the Commander he'd be back later and then legs it back to Hightown. He was so tired by the time he got there that Cousland actually looked a little worried.

"Are you alright Anders?" he'd asked, putting out a steadying hand as the mage wobbled a little on his feet.
"I'm fine," Anders said, shaking his head, "just a little tired."

"Right," Cousland said sarcastically, "of course you are. Go and get some sleep."

"I don't need..." Anders started to protest, frowning.

"That's an order," Cousland interrupted, his eyes serious before becoming a little amused, "I can still do that you know. Technically."

Anders didn't have the energy to argue. He'd gone upstairs to the guest room, now decked out with bedrolls on the floor, and fallen onto the bed gratefully. He was asleep as soon as he hit the mattress. It was early evening before he awoke and even then only because Cousland had checked on him. Anders was sure that if he'd been left he could have easily slept for days.

"You never did look after yourself properly," Cousland said as Anders sat up, blinking away the sleep from his eyes, "but this is ridiculous Anders. You're exhausted. Did you get any sleep last night?"

"No," Anders was too tired to lie, "and I don't want to hear about it."

"Oh you don't, do you?" Cousland said, shaking his head, "Well, not now then, but I do need to talk to you. Later maybe."

"Wonderful," Anders muttered.

"I heard that," Cousland said with a frown.

"I know you did," Anders sighed, sitting up.

He looked to his Commander, standing in the doorway, and in his still slightly sleep hazed state it was as if he were back in Vigil's Keep and he was simply being woken to go out on patrol. Perhaps the distinctly Ferelden look of Hawke's mansion helped, and the fact that he was still dressed; sometimes, when he had known it was his turn for patrol, he'd just slept in his clothes as it was too much of a hassle to change. Anders shook his head and forced himself to stand up.

"How's your burn?" Anders asked on autopilot.

"Oh, you mean how is the terrible wound inflicted on me by one of my own subordinates?" Cousland said over afectedly.

"Oh give over," Anders said with a shake of his head, "Go downstairs and I'll take another look."

"I mean seriously, what kind of idiot puts fur lining on his drake scale armour?" Anders asked.

Considering how long they'd been in the Deep Roads the group of Wardens were surprisingly very healthy and mainly uninjured. The worst injury so far had been Cousland's abdomen which, in itself, wasn't as bad as it looked. Oh I will never, ever live this down, was all Anders could think, he's going to hold this over me forever. Anders had treated the burn carefully over the week's hike back to the surface and then along the Coast to Kirkwall. Thankfully Cousland's comments had started to run dry fairly quickly. Now, whenever it was brought up, he seemed more fixated on the armour's originator than Anders' pyromania.

They were currently seated comfortably in Hawke's main living room which had been set up to accommodate the extra guests. Anders had followed the Commander downstairs to find Nathaniel
sitting by the fire on one of the chairs that had been brought in from the library and placed around the table; the writing desk had been moved and replaced with the long, low divan from Hawke's own room. Cousland was currently sprawled on said divan, his shirt pulled up around his chin, while Anders inspected his wound. Nathaniel was effectively ignoring them while occasionally commenting as he cleaned and restrung his bow. Oghren, Fadius and Thella were still out hunting down a ship that would take them back to Amaranthine, or at least stop over at Highever.

"Don't insult me with your rhetorical questions," Cousland said with a frown, "and anyway this isn't my design. It was that moron Wade. Do you know how long it took me to get enough drake scales for him to make this? His precious masterpiece? Three months. And what does he do? Puts fucking fur lining on it. It's meant to be fire proof for Maker's sake."

"Still, it is very good armour," Nathaniel said, pulling down on the bow to tense the wood, "you have to admit."

"Yes, when I'm not aflame because of it. And anyway it bloody well better be considering I gave him forty sovereigns as an incentive," Cousland said, "I swear sometimes I can't tell whether he's brilliant or brain damaged."

The burn was still a rather angry red compared to the man's naturally pale skin but Anders knew by looking at it that it was almost healed. Cousland was just milking it. Anders ran his hands above the skin, letting out a healing energy to check the damaged flesh.

"You know, I'm pretty sure this doesn't even hurt any more, does it?" Andes asked wryly.

"Oh I don't know," Cousland said, his expression rather blandly evasive, "I could still be in agony."

"Don't start," Anders said sternly, but was unable to keep the affection out of his voice, "I've been doing this for longer than I'd like to comment and I know when a burn has healed."

"Trying to say you're old, are you?" Cousland said, grinning as he sat up and pulled his soft, white shirt back down.

"I can make it hurt you know," Anders said, narrowing his eyes.

"Oh goody," Cousland rubbed his hands, a mischievous light in his eye as he winked at Anders, "then will you kiss it better?"

Anders rolled his eyes and pushed up from the floor where he'd been kneeling. Honestly, he'd half forgotten what a shameless, if entirely harmless, flirt the Commander could be but he was now being thoroughly reminded. The entire journey back to Kirkwall had consisted of Cousland either making Aveline flush, Merrill laugh nervously, Anders sigh or Hawke glare rather pointedly. Anders didn't really want to have to tell Cousland exactly why he'd rather he stop winding up Hawke but it was getting to the point where Anders was worried there would actually be a fight. The two men were so alike it was untrue. Alright so Hawke had more restraint than Cousland but still, they were far too similar not to come to blows at some point. Especially with Cousland's temper.

As he washed his hands in the bowl of water on the table Anders heard the front door open. When he looked along the corridor he found Hawke, carrying a large box in his hands, and his mother entering with another two ladies at their heels.

"Welcome home," Anders said to Hawke as he dried his hands; the man in question simply smiled in reply.
Anders knew it was stupid but he'd missed saying that. When he'd stayed with Hawke after the incident with Alrik he'd fallen into the routine mainly because Bodahn said it whenever Hawke returned. Slowly it had built into a habit, and now that he had the chance to say it again it had morphed into something else. He wasn't going to question what that something else was, he was just going to enjoy it while he could. Bodahn was currently taking the coats from the two unknown guests while they continued their conversation, barely even taking notice of Bodahn as they dropped the coats into his hands.

"My dear Leandra what a charming home you have," the woman who spoke seemed around the same age as Hawke's mother, perhaps slightly older, her hair a vibrant blond fading to white, clear blue eyes and a rather aristocratic face.

"Why thank you Viola," Leandra said back, her face the picture of civility, "it's been in the family for generations. The Amell line is a long one in Kirkwall history after all."

"Oh yes," Viola said, but Anders didn't miss the hint of scrutiny the older woman gave, "a very fine history indeed. Where do you get your flower arrangements done? Those lilies are exquisite."

Anders would have shaken his head in disbelief at the inane chatter of the rich but he knew it would only annoy Hawke. The other woman, more of a young lady really, was staying demurely quiet. She was as blonde as her, what Anders assumed to be, mother, her eyes just a slightly different shade of blue. She was pretty, he supposed, but far too regal for his liking. It had only been a matter of time before guests started to arrive, here to see the celebrity. Leandra would want to show off her prize, Anders thought derisively. What with the scandal of Bethany and the already tainted history of the Amell lineage, Leandra would use any opportunity to gain favour with the other noble families. Not that Anders entirely blamed her. It couldn't be easy being in her position, rather isolated socially. Still, he resented the Wardens being used as social pawns.

Anders looked round to say something to the Commander but found that Cousland and Nathaniel had silently extracted themselves from the room without him noticing. I swear those two can be quieter than cats sometimes, Anders thought in amazement. He had only turned his back for a second to greet Hawke and they'd disappeared. He felt distinctly exposed now that he had no back up. Anders turned back to find Hawke beside him, facing away from the women.

"They're staying for dinner," Hawke said quietly to Anders as he placed the box on the dining table, his back to the chattering women.

"Do you have enough room?" Anders asked in the same conspiratorial tone.

"No," Hawke said tightly, "but it's not really up to me. Mother insisted."

"Oh right," Anders said, a small smile on his lips, "couldn't say no could you?"

"Believe me," Hawke muttered as the women finally approached them, "I would if I could have."

Hawke turned with a rather impressively believable smile as his mother drew near.

"Hawke, darling, why don't you show Sirrena the gardens?" Leandra said pointedly, "They're always so lovely at this time of evening."

"Of course," Hawke said, trying his best to sound interested.

The young lady, now revealed to be Sirrena, smiled at Hawke and waited for him to take her arm. Anders watched with sympathy and not a little bit of underlying envy as Hawke led her along the back corridor out into the small private gardens behind the mansion. Anders had wondered but,
after that rather obvious show, was under no illusion as to the real reason for Leandra's choice of impromptu dinner guests. Anders marvelled at the fact that Leandra didn't seem to have noticed her own son's rather marked disinterest in women. It wasn't that Hawke exactly cried it from the rooftops but, even just as his friend, Anders had spotted it fairly quickly. Perhaps it was just hope that drove her forwards, Anders thought with amusement, or she just didn't believe it at all.

Oh my is she in for a shock one of these days, Anders thought with a small smile.

"Well, if I never have to sit through another awkward dinner," Cousland said, stretching his hands above his head, "I'll be a happy man."

Anders couldn't help but agree. Dinner had been filled with stilted, overly polite, upper class conversation. Leandra had seated Hawke between Sirrenia and her mother, leaving the man distinctly uncomfortable throughout the entire affair. Anders couldn't help but find it amusing, watching Hawke try his best to be courteous in the face of both Leandra and Viola's combined efforts to have Hawke and Sirrenia talk, or simply talk about them as if they weren't there. Hawke just glared if he caught Anders laughing into his soup. Anders knew he shouldn't push it considering he was already in the man's bad books; anything that happened, whether it was related to Cousland's visit or not, now automatically seemed to be Anders' fault in Hawke's mind.

Nathaniel had gone to visit his sister and nephew and, thankfully, taken Oghren and the junior Wardens with him. Oghren was no company for nobles and Anders could only have imagined the fiasco he would have caused being around the two rather impressionable looking ladies that had joined their meal. That had left Cousland to be the main focus of the evening, much to the man's chagrin, but thankfully for him he had the age old excuse that allowed Grey Wardens to avoid small talk at all costs.

"Oh, I would, but I'm afraid I can't discuss that. Warden business you understand."

It hadn't stopped Viola pressing him for stories, or asking him overly subtle questions about the state of affairs in the Ferelden Court. The true nature of Cousland and Alistair's relationship may not have been known outside the Wardens but their friendship was already well publicised. Enough for him to be bothered by nosy nobles hoping to garner favour in their own inner circles with a little gossip straight from the lips of the King of Ferelden's confidant. Lien stayed uneasily tight lipped the entire night. Anders had never understood what Cousland had hoped to do if he hadn't been tragically conscripted into the Wardens. He would have made a hopeless Teryn.

They had managed to escape upstairs after dinner was over, leaving Hawke and his mother as hosts. Cousland had always hated formal wear and couldn't wait to get back into his own clothes. Anders had asked Hawke to lend him some while he was here, considering they were roughly the same size. Cousland still hadn't forgiven him for bringing it up.

"And here I would have thought you'd be used to nobles by now," Anders shrugged as he leaned against the wall in the spare room while Cousland changed, "What with all those days in the Denerim Court."

"Well there are fewer of those than you'd think these days," Cousland said, pulling on his worn and patched shirt before picking up his leather jerkin.

He looked over at Anders and sighed, his face losing the polite and cheerful facade he'd been holding up throughout dinner. Anders swallowed and felt suddenly uncomfortable. He could feel the change in the air, from relaxed to a little on edge. He'd known they would have to talk at some point but, in all truth, he just didn't want to.
"A lot has happened," Cousland sat down on the edge of the bed, unclasping the buckles on his shoes.


"I heard about Rolan," Cousland said, not wasting anytime or even bothering to soften any blows, "can't leave you alone for a couple of months, can I?"

Anders felt his face harden. He knew that this was how the Commander dealt with things but he couldn't stand levity in relation to this. He could feel Justice sliding about beneath his consciousness, recognising the significance of the conversation but staying strangely silent.

"It's not as simple as that," Anders said, deadpan.

"I never said it was," Cousland replied, expression serious.

"Then don't joke about it," Anders said tightly.

"I never did trust him," Cousland said, continuing as if Anders hadn't spoken at all, "he was still a templar at heart that one. Couldn't shake the faith off and let it go. I never would have sanctioned his joining, the boy didn't have what it takes to last in the Wardens. I take it Morinth was the one to have him snooping around then?"

Commander Morinth. There was a name Anders wished he'd never have to hear again. The replacement for Cousland during his absence had been a tricky one. He'd seemed friendly but commanding, loyal and yet always distant. Anders should have known from the beginning to be cautious but, after Cousland and Howe, after making friends, after finally learning to trust people, he'd let his guard down. Then came Rolan the templar, recruited in not long after Cousland left, by Morinth no less. Snooping wasn't quite the word Anders would have chosen for what Rolan did. More blatant following. He stuck to Anders like glue, Rolan never let him out of his sight, accompanied him on every mission and watched him constantly. There were stirrings of revolution throughout Thedas, mages rising up against templars, and, even as a fellow Grey Warden, Rolan had suspected Anders above all others. He shouldn't have been surprised that Rolan witnessed his deal with Justice, even though he'd tried so hard to find privacy to speak to the Fade spirit.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Cousland said, not quite a question, not quite an order.

"I'd love to," Anders said, trying to keep the exasperation from his tone, "if I even knew."

He had lost Rolan, that was what had happened. The moon had turned blue and nugs were flying because on that day for one measly hour he had seen neither hide nor hair of the ex-templar. So they had gone to the basement, to the storage rooms, just in case, him and Justice. They had talked and agreed and Anders had given up his freedom without even realising what it would mean. But when he opened his eyes Rolan was there.

And Rolan wouldn't listen. He told Morinth and Anders had to admit that he'd felt so scared and alone that it almost stopped him from trying to escape. He'd finally thought he had found somewhere to be, to stay, no matter how bad it had become. Yet he was running again. However, Rolan was tenacious, as most templars are, and he just couldn't let it go. He chased, Anders ran. He thought he'd lost him, in the forests just outside Amaranthine, but Rolan had caught up and he wasn't alone. Templars and Wardens, Justice hadn't been able to tell the difference, not through the violent anger that had invaded Anders' mind at the thought of being given back to the Circle or dying at Rolan's supposedly righteous hand.
Then there was a dark, dangerous blank in Anders' memory, the first of many to come.

And when he woke from it the forest was aflame and he was surrounded by the bodies of templars and Wardens alike. It wasn't an aftermath of battle as he had ever known it, not the usual bloody and battered corpses of enemies, but a gory abattoir of rent limbs and torn and eaten flesh. The memory still haunted him, no matter how many times he'd seen the same scene since.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Cousland asked with a frown, pulling Anders back to the present.

"I don't remember killing them," Anders said frankly, "but that doesn't mean I didn't do it."

"Anders how can you not remember?" Cousland asked incredulously.

"Because...because when it happens," Anders couldn't help the heavy guilt and shame that settled over him as he explained his most dire failing to one of his closest friends, "Justice takes over and...and he doesn't let me see."

The words sounded naive and evasive even to his own ears. Anders was more than aware that Cousland's incredulous stare changed subtly after his confession; from disbelieving to angry and then to a mixture of both.

"Then Justice...you really did?" Cousland sighed heavily, rubbing his face with his hand, "Anders, what were you thinking?"

"He's my friend," Anders said firmly, knowing that it was a flimsy excuse.

"He was my friend too," Cousland said back, "but that doesn't mean what you did was right. I would have thought you'd know that better than any of us. Why couldn't you have told me?"

"Because you weren't there, were you?" Anders said bitterly, before snapping his mouth shut.

Cousland winced at the insinuation but quickly covered his hurt with anger. He stood, jamming on his jerkin and fastening the buckles.

"Don't try and blame this on me," he said vehemently, "I wasn't the one who took matters into his own hands without even discussing it with anyone!"

"And who the hell was I supposed to discuss it with?" Anders barked back, "Morinth? The mage hater? All fine and well you waltzing off and leaving him to lie in wait, just biding his time until he had enough influence to put his plans into action!"

"I didn't know!" Cousland said in frustration, "And I was played just as much as you were. Do you think the expedition was my idea? Well do you? I didn't pick the people they sent with me, I didn't pick where I was sent, I was just sent, alright?"

Both men fell silent, accentuating the tension in the air as it slowly fizzled. Cousland picked up his gloves and pulled them on roughly, his eyes hard.

"They got me out of the way, and when I came back," he said, "I find that one of my best men, one of my friends, has become a wanted man, an abomination and a murderer. What was I supposed to think Anders?"

The mage didn't have an answer for him. Anders didn't want to think about it. He didn't really care anymore. Killing templars? Killing Wardens? To him it now seemed like a distant crime, no matter
its significance to him. He'd killed many more templars since and would again before his life was over, he could guarantee it. If the Wardens came for him, then it would be the same fight for the same freedom, no matter who it was with.

"So," Anders said, wanting to get to the crux of the matter as soon as possible, "...are you going to take me back?"

Cousland picked up his small, rough leather jacket and pulled it on, fastening the ties. He looked at Anders with the same unreadable expression Hawke used to cover his emotions and, for a moment, the likeness between them was rather striking. Anders pushed the thought of Hawke from his mind, focusing on the matter at hand. He didn't want to fight but, if it came to it, he wouldn't go without one.

"Do you want to come back?" Cousland asked quietly.

"And be executed you mean? Oh that would be lovely, thanks," Anders said sarcastically.

"Then no," Cousland said, looking to the ground while he nodded, "I'm not here to take you anywhere you don't want to go and it's that simple. Alright?"

Anders watched the man before him, not sure what to feel. Gratitude? Ambivalence? Hate? Friendship? Was it wrong that he didn't want any of it? He just wanted everything and everyone to leave him alone, leave him to his fate and not judge him anymore. He judged himself harshly enough as it was without others lining up to do the same. Anders pushed away from the wall on tight fists, ready to leave, but was surprised when Cousland took hold of him and pulled him into a tight hug. Anders stiffened.

"Oh relax," Cousland said softly, his voice an odd mix of true affection and forced calm, "you just looked like you needed one."

"Yes, that's just what all abominations need, a hug," Anders said facetiously, but relaxed nonetheless, "why didn't we figure it out before?"

"Oh how I haven't missed your endless sarcasm," Cousland said tiredly, "I need a drink. Please tell me there's somewhere we can go and get one where no one has a clue who I am?"

Cousland leaned back, breaking the embrace. Despite his young years the man looked old to Anders' eyes. Anders suspected there was more going on back in Ferelden that he wasn't telling him but he wouldn't push, not just yet.

"Well now that you mention it..." Anders said.
Love

One useful thing about Cousland not seeming anything even remotely like his own overblown reputation described him as was that you could take him anywhere and no one would really blink twice at him. Other than in appreciation, admittedly. It was either the conspicuously Ferelden look to his armour or his glorious thighs, Anders thought, that had all the girls and even some of the men in The Hanged Man turning their heads as he and Cousland walked through. Anders knew which he'd be looking at. It was fairly busy but Norah already knew him by sight. She let them up into Varric's suite even though the dwarf himself wasn't there yet. Apparently he was out on business and would be back soon. Anders smiled and thanked her. He was actually glad for the reprieve.

They had managed to slip unnoticed from the mansion, leaving Hawke, his mother and their guests in the lounge talking about whatever on earth rich people talk about after dinner. Hawke had been waiting for the two men to join them in the drawing room but, considering both and Anders and Cousland had balked at the idea of spending any more of their evening in politely forced conversation, the Hanged Man had seemed a much better option. Anders felt a little guilty about abandoning Hawke to the trio of women but, after his night, he couldn't bring himself to truly care about anyone but himself and his own needs, even if just for a little while. Being trapped into more stilted conversation with that lot would have been far too close to torture for his liking.

"Ah, I never get to come to places like this anymore," Cousland said, sitting back in the chair by the fire with his pint in his hand, looking thoroughly contented, "aren't you having one?"

"Doesn't really have the same effect anymore," Anders said, "unless you want me so drunk I can't stand upright."

"Isn't that why people usually get drunk?" Cousland said with a mischievous smile.

"No, that's just you," Anders corrected, still finding it hard to fully relax given their earlier conversation.

Cousland took a long swig of ale and stared into the fire, his eyes half lidded. Anders watched him, using the pause to try his best to unwind. It had been a long time since he'd actually had the chance to sit back and take some time for himself. Before setting out for the Deep Roads he'd been busy with the clinic and since then he'd been busy helping Hawke. Now, sitting in the peaceable quiet, the muttering of voices a comfortable backdrop, the crackle of the logs on the fire, Anders didn't really know what to do with himself. I am getting old, he thought dismally.

"So, other than, well, everything else," Cousland said, shifting to get more comfortable, "how are things?"

"What a vague question," Anders smiled, letting out a small laugh, "probably as well as they are with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cousland frowned.

"It means I'm not as unobservant as I used to be," Anders shrugged, "I can tell you aren't telling me everything either, you know."

It was perhaps a little unfair but turning the conversation back onto Cousland was just another way to deflect it away from his own ruin of a life. He was disheartened enough, what with having to
relive his flight from Ferelden in the first place, never mind iterating the long list of miseries and dangers that he faced here in Kirkwall.

"Oh," Cousland said with a small, not exactly happy smile, "right. Well, I suppose we're both guilty in that respect then."

Cousland looked down into his ale and the smile disappeared, replaced by a brooding expression. He continued in a subdued tone.

"Things aren't going well with Orlais," he explained, "there have been...altercations, shall we say, in court. Not that I've been there for any of them but Alistair writes of them as if they're battles within themselves."

"With Orlais? I mean, I know that things have always been strained since the war but," Anders paused, "well I thought that was past now, so to speak."

"Unfortunately it's nothing to do with the war," Cousland said, "it's the Divine. She seems to think that Alistair isn't taking enough precautions against the mage uprisings in Ferelden."

Anders felt his fingers tighten into fists and couldn't help but react. The White Divine of Val Royeux, now there was a woman he'd just love to have a good old heart to heart with. Not that it would ever happen but any mage could dream. So the old bag was worried was she? Anders thought, good, she should be. The little pockets of resistance that were popping up all over Thedas must be more of a bother than he realised. It brought a smile to his face. If things were bad enough in Ferelden that the Divine herself was taking an interest then perhaps his plan did have a chance after all. It was as if, all over Thedas, mages were simply waiting to hear the call to rise up.

"Why would she think that?" Anders asked, trying to sound calm.

"Well, Alistair's never really felt the same way about mages as the Chantry does," Cousland smiled, "we tend to agree on that much at least, when we aren't disagreeing about everything else. He tries his best to stop the Chantry from taking any extreme measures, exerts his influence where he can, but there's only so much he can do. I guess it was only a matter of time before some arse licking bastard ran to tell the great high Divine that the King of Ferelden is a dirty little mage sympathiser."

Cousland snorted angrily and shook his head. Anders relaxed a little. Well, at least the news wasn't bad as such. Yes it wasn't good that Orlais and Ferelden were at odds once again but at least Anders felt he could rely on King Alistair to support his own people, magical ability or no. It was something he wished Kirkwall possessed; a strong leader with an open mind. Right now all they had was a crusty old Viscount who simply wanted to keep the peace, a Knight Commander and First Enchanter always at each other's throats and a doddering old Grand Cleric who didn't seem to have any real allegiance.

Anders focused back on Cousland as the man took another drink. He wanted to push for more information but, in all honesty, he knew why. Justice was champing at the bit and, for once, he could feel it was at odds with his own needs and wants. Yes he wanted to know, yes he was interested but, right now, no matter how selfish it was, he didn't really want to think about his duties. He'd been through enough recently, he did enough, he deserved...well, he deserved a night of normality at least. No ranting, no ardent speeches, just a night of talking by the fire about whatever came into his head. Like they'd used to do. On the journey back to Kirkwall from the Deep Roads Anders had been reminded just how much he'd missed it.

Anders looked back to his Commander and took in the far look in the man's eyes. He let the silence
settle around them before bringing up what he thought might be the real reason Cousland looked so distant.

"So," he said, pulling Cousland's eyes to him, "just letters then?"

"Sorry?" Cousland frowned.

"You said that he writes," Anders said, sitting back in his chair comfortably, "when's the last time you actually saw him?"

It took a moment for Cousland to catch on. His eyes became a little dull and Anders felt slightly guilty for bringing up anything that was difficult. Still, if it kept the conversation away from him he was happy. The Commander played with the tankard in his hands for a moment before answering.

"Six months," Cousland said, his gaze firmly on the mug before him, "it was just an official visit, to greet the Warden Commander of Orlais while he was visiting the Keep."

"What's wrong with an official visit?" Anders asked with a frown.

"Well, put it this way, you were there for the last one," Cousland said, elaborating when he noted Anders' bemusement, "when we first met, remember? When Alistair allowed me to conscript you? That is an official visit. Admittedly this time I managed to get a proper kiss out of him before he buggered off again but..."

Anders winced. Yes, that had been an awfully brief visit. Your basic hello goodbye scenario. Well, at least I'm not the only one with a love life that's complete crap, Anders thought.

"Do you miss him?" Anders asked.

"Don't ask stupid questions," Cousland replied with a look.

Anders lowered his head a little in apology. He thought back to that day, when he had only just been saved, as it were, from a nasty hangy death at the hands of the ever righteous templars. It hadn't been as hard as he'd thought, saying yes to conscription in the face of death. He hadn't known then that the joining could well have included death, but then that was a fact he didn't begrudge the Warden's not publicising. It would be very bad for recruitment.

He had been busy arguing with Oghren and the female warden recruit that Cousland had brought with him when he'd turned and caught sight of the Commander of the Grey and the King of Ferelden in a rather compromising situation. They had obviously thought themselves hidden behind the barricade wall and the Keep's sentry turret, but Anders had been at just the right angle to see through the gap in the stone as Alistair pressed a chaste but very lingering kiss against Cousland's lips. He hadn't said anything to the others, or even to Cousland himself, until one night, when both were so drunk they had started the 'I love you, no really, you're my best friend' thing, he'd brought it up. Cousland had looked as if someone had told him they'd just found out he was an apostate and he was going to be taken to the Circle. He had instantly sworn Anders to secrecy.

"It was my own fault I suppose," Cousland continued, pulling Anders from his reminiscence, "I was spoiled by the Blight. One moment we were together every minute of every day and then, boom, suddenly it's months until I even see his face. You know, if you'd told me before I joined the Wardens that I'd be obsessing over someone like this I would have stuck a dagger in your eye for even suggesting it. Now look at me."

Cousland shook his head and sighed. Anders smiled kindly. At the mansion, a mere hour ago,
Cousland had looked twice his age. His eyes had seemed haunted by the life he'd lived, the things he'd seen. Now, sitting here before the fireplace, he looked more the young man he should have been allowed to be. Love makes us young, Anders thought regretfully. He reached out and nudged Cousland in the foot with the toe of his boot. The Commander looked up at him expectantly.

"Can't be all bad," Anders said, his smile turning sly, "after that long apart I bet the sex is wonderful."

Cousland let out a chuffed laugh and kicked him back but at least he was smiling now. Anders was glad enough for small victories.

"I've already told you Anders, I'm not telling you any raunchy sex stories," Cousland barked out a laugh, "although it would almost be worth it to see Alistair's face if he found out I had. He's so bloody prudish sometimes it's untrue."

"Not in bed I hope," Anders said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"You can't trick me into telling you anything, you know," Cousland said with an amused glare before shrugging with a smile, "...but no. I'll give you that, he certainly is not."

They both laughed and Anders shook his head. Cousland kept a lousy secret, he thought wryly, although it seemed he'd somehow managed to keep his relationship with a King private enough so he must be doing something right. Cousland finished his pint and put the tankard onto the table with a dull thud. He sniffed loudly, his eyes sharp when he looked back to Anders, calculating. The mage was instantly wary.

"So, enough of embarrassing me," Cousland said, "you and Serrah Hawke, eh?"

Anders rolled his eyes. Oh he should have bloody known. If Merrill of all people had picked up on he and Hawke's rather stilted courtship then the ever sharp and nosy Commander had probably noticed as soon as they'd met. Thankfully he hadn't mentioned any of this around Hawke, he could at least be grateful for small mercies. Now all of the winding up, the cheeky comments and the flirting made more sense. He would have kicked Cousland again if he hadn't known that it would just amuse him more.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Anders tried to evade.

"Yes, yes," Cousland waved his protests away, "and I'm the bride of the Maker reincarnated. Please Anders, if it was going to be any more obvious you'd have to write it in giant red letters on the side of the Gallows or something."

"Thanks for that," Anders said dryly.

"No problem," Cousland shrugged with a smile, "so...?"

"I mean it," he said, "I don't want to talk about it, alright? There really isn't anything going on."

Anders heard the footsteps above Cousland's sniggering long before anyone appeared. He didn't miss that Cousland's eyes snapped to the doorway moments before anyone entered. Good to know the man's reflexes were still intact, despite the alcohol. It was perfect timing in Anders' book; just as the conversation was turning back to him someone appeared as a distraction. Perfect. Anders turned in his chair to see Varric and opened his mouth in greeting. That was until he saw who was trailing behind the dwarf. Fenris stiffened at the sight of him.

"Oh, it seems we already have guests," Varric said, blinking at the pair.
"Sorry, I thought you wouldn't mind," Anders said, tone taut; he nodded to the elf, "Fenris."

The elf returned the nod civilly enough but Anders could see the terse dislike in the twitch of his gauntleted fingers. It had been a long time since he'd seen Fenris and, perhaps because of the lengthy absence, Anders could clearly see the marked difference in him. He looked awful, even Anders would admit it. He had always been lean but there was a slightly gaunt hollow to his cheeks, his green eyes underlined with dark circles against his tan skin. He looked more listless than his usual alert self, the one who tended to walk into every room like he was mapping out the all the exits in preparation for flight. Anders pushed away the feelings of pity that stirred in him, hid them down beneath the dislike. That was the last thing he needed right now.

Varric cleared his throat and the two walked in to take the seats opposite Anders and Cousland's own.

"We can go, if you need..." Anders started, noting Cousland giving Fenris and himself odd looks out the corner of his eye.

"Don't be silly," Varric said, waving away his protest, "the more the merrier. We were going to have a game of Diamondback if you want to join us?"

Anders hesitated and, irritatingly, he could see Fenris doing the same. This was ridiculous, Anders thought. It had been weeks since that night and yet just the sight of the elf brought back the hurt and the anger like it was still fresh. The gentle touch of Hawke's hand against his forehead as they'd stood on the Coast days before was suddenly sullied by the memory of a kiss under the moonlight. Anders wished he could keep better control of himself but, in all honesty, he knew how impulsive he was. There was no real chance of that ever happening.

"I don't believe we've met," Anders heard Varric say, breaking his stare with Fenris as they both looked away uncomfortably.

"Oh, yes, sorry," Cousland said, sitting up and reaching over the table to offer his hand, "Lien Cousland, it's a pleasure."

"Varric Tethras," Varric said automatically, his eyebrows rising into his hairline as he shook the Commander's hand, "The Lien Cousland?"

"No, the other one," Anders said sarcastically.

"Don't mind him," Cousland said, "he's in a mood."

"You mean to say that you found a Grey Warden Commander down in that festering place," Varric said, looking scandalised, "and I wasn't there to see it?"

"Sorry Varric," Anders shrugged, "we can't have all the fun when you're there."

Varric just rolled his eyes slightly and continued to look miffed. Cousland, meanwhile, gave Anders a long suffering look before offering his hand to Fenris. Anders was surprised to see the elf reach out and briefly shake Cousland's hand. Considering how much Fenris hated being touched, it was a very obvious improvement on that front.

"And you must be Fenris," he said.

"You know of me?" the elf frowned, looking suddenly wary.

"You'd be surprised what I know," Cousland shrugged, his eyes glinting, "don't worry, it was
nothing bad."

"I find that surprising," Fenris murmured, but seemed strangely at ease considering the situation.

Anders gave the Commander a scrutinising glance which the Warden simply returned casually. Anders had assumed that the Commander had merely picked up on the fact that he had already said Fenris's name, but now it sounded as if Cousland had already heard of him.

"What? I'm not allowed my own information network now, am I?" Cousland shrugged, "I receive reports from beyond the borders of the Free Marches you know. Someone with markings as distinctive as those, I doubt there's more than one."

"I have been told I'm rather unique in that respect," Fenris said with a laconic shrug, looking down to his forearm distantly.

"You can say that again," Cousland said appreciatively, his eyes trailing over the elf's torso; Fenris's eyebrows rose a little but his stare was not entirely discouraging.

Anders rolled his eyes. Honestly, there was enough of a similarity between Cousland and Hawke as it was already without both of them being attracted to Fenris at first sight. He supposed he couldn't entirely blame them, the elf did present a rather attractive package on the surface, but it didn't make it any easier to swallow. Cousland didn't seem to be able to stop the flirting habit either, even though Anders knew he'd never follow through on it. He kicked Cousland beneath the table and the Commander gave him a petulant frown in return but didn't comment.

"Well, well," Varric seemed impressed, "I'd love to have access to your contacts if they can pull such detailed and obscure information from this far."

"So would I," Fenris said, eyeing Cousland curiously.

"Oh, well, I wouldn't want to give away too many secrets," Cousland smiled demurely.

"I entirely agree," Varric said, "which is why I should probably warn you never to confide in Anders again, just in case he ever gets that drunk on another occasion."

Anders eyes snapped to the dwarf and he glared balefully at Varric, his expression horrified. Varric simply smiled back unrepentantly. Cousland frowned, looking to Anders as if wondering what on earth he could possibly have said. Anders was surprised it took him as long as it did, considering there weren't really that many secrets he had worth keeping about the Commander that he would really be bothered if he let slip. Except this one of course.

"Anders..." Cousland said dangerously as his eyes narrowed in realisation.

"Now Commander," Anders said with a nervous laugh, bringing his hands up in surrender, "I can't be held entirely responsible, I was tired and I'd had a lot to drink."

"I warned you," he said, poking a finger into Anders' chest, "that if you ever, ever told anyone about Alistair that I would...!"

"Disembowel me, yes, I do in fact remember that," Anders said, scooting backwards, "not very surprising really, considering you looked like you meant it."

"Oh, don't go too hard on him," Varric said, diverting Cousland's stare away from the anxious mage, "I may have been prying. And anyway, my lips are sealed, you can trust to that."
Cousland took a deep breath and gave Anders one more warning glare before sitting back in his chair, his shoulders set. Anders made a mental note to kill Varric and dispose of his body in the river. How could the dwarf be so bloody insensitive? Anders groaned internally and just hoped that the Commander was in a good enough mood to consider forgiving him later on.

"I need another drink," Cousland finally groused, "and to hurt something."

"Then I suggest getting a round in," Varric said, rubbing his hands, "and then we play. Perhaps fleecing your subordinate of his measly coin purse would be revenge enough, Messer?"

"Hmm," Cousland said, his smile slowly returning as he looked to Varric with interest, "you know, I'm beginning to like you Master Tethras."

"I get that a lot," Varric said with an enigmatic smile, "so, what's everyone having?"

"Maker's breath Anders you are awful at this," Cousland said, smiling into his whiskey as Fenris collected the winnings from the pot at the centre of the table.

"Yes, yes, laugh it up," Anders said, unimpressed, "you're enjoying this a little too much I think."

"Oh, I believe it's warranted," Cousland said with a shrug and an amused pout of his lips, "considering you betrayed my confidence, blatantly. It's just a fitting revenge isn't it?"

Anders rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair, throwing his useless hand of cards back onto the table. In fact it was better than just 'fitting', even though he'd never admit it to the man's face. After Varric had dished the dirt on Anders' indiscretion he had been expecting fireworks from Cousland; the man was usually extremely irascible. However, the fine sherry cask whiskey Varric had ordered and Anders' rather pitiable losing streak seemed to have mollified him, even if only a little. Now the rule of thumb had come into play and Anders had managed to avoid Cousland's temper long enough for the man to have calmed down. Anders knew he was using up his nine lives what with having pulled off this magnificent feat twice in a row since meeting the man again, but he would take what he could get.

"You, Master Tethras, keep a very fine cellar," Cousland tipped his head courteously to Varric as he took another sip of whiskey, seeming to savour it before swallowing.

"Thirty years old," Varric said with a shrug, "if you're going to drink something refined, then do it right I always say."

"Couldn't agree more," Cousland said, relaxing back into his chair to nurse his drink.

They'd been playing in relative peace for the past three hours, allowing Fenris to re-establish his dominance of any card game you challenged him at. Admittedly his poker face was second to none but that could only account for so much. Anders had no idea why the elf was so very good at cards but his almost empty purse could attest to the fact.

As far as Anders was concerned Varric officially owed him for tonight. Not only had the dwarf ratted him out but Anders bringing Cousland to Varric's suite had allowed the dwarf exclusive free reign to Cousland's vast array of, if he were being honest, very entertaining stories. 'So,' Varric had said not long after they'd begun to play, eyes glinting in expectation, 'I remember some time ago you telling me to ask you about the Queen of the Blackmarsh...'
The dwarf had been losing at cards all night, only marginally less than Anders himself, mainly because he'd been so distracted. Even Fenris, who never really seemed to show much interest in anything other than his own affairs, seemed taken with Cousland's repertoire. The elf had slowly revived as the night wore on, from the rather haunted look he'd had worn at the start of the evening to a much more aware and relaxed deportment. Admittedly Anders had noted that he also hadn't stopped drinking since his first tumbler of tokay which may have had something to do with it.

"Still," Varric said, after Fenris had dealt the next hand, "I can't believe you left Hawke to the mercy of his mother's peers."

"Can't you?" Anders scoffed, grinning, "Are you sure?"

"Well, maybe you," Varric re-evaluated.

"Careful," Anders warned, "and anyway, I don't think Leandra would have appreciated it if we'd popped our heads around the door and invited him to the pub. She's too busy trying to set him up."

Varric chuckled as he lifted his cards from the table, careful to keep them hidden from view. He rearranged a few and then took a drink of ale.

"Who is it this time?" Varric asked, "Please, tell me it isn't Helena De Launce again."

"Who on earth is that?" Anders asked, "No, her name was Sirrena I think."

"Yet another suitor," Varric said, shaking his head, "my, my, that mother of his is tenacious."

"Desperate to get him married off is she?" Cousland commented, sitting forwards to pick up his own cards, "She'll be in for a surprise."

Anders flicked his eyes to Fenris, noting the elf's slight hesitation as he cut the cards before picking out the first to start the deck. It looked to Anders as if he weren't the only one who wasn't entirely happy that Leandra was pushing Hawke towards his duty as an eldest son of a noble family.

"Ha, you have no idea," Varric said, his eyes shifting between Anders and Fenris; Anders just ignored him.

"She seems like an intelligent woman," Cousland shrugged, smiling in amusement, "I'm sure she'll figure it out."

"Figure what out?"

Anders started so badly that he jerked the table forwards, spilling Fenris's glass all over the tabletop. The Commander pulled back from the spill with a startled exclamation before looking up along with the others to see Hawke standing at the top of the stairway, his expression not amused in the slightest. During battle, when they needed to be stealthy, while hunting, all of those times Anders appreciated Hawke's preternatural ability for silence, but not at times like this. He could tell that the man had done it on purpose but didn't have the gall to feel affronted. He had abandoned him after all. Anders noted that Fenris, despite his initial glance at Hawke, had already turned away and was back to studying his cards, the tense set of his shoulders having returned.

"Wondered how long it would take him to figure it out," Varric said, trying to sound amused in the face of Hawke's rather stony expression.

"You bastard, you left me there," Hawke said, ignoring Varric completely to focus on Anders; he didn't even bother to include Cousland at all, "you couldn't have brought me with you? Have you
any idea how fucking excruciating the last four hours of my life have been?"

"Unfortunately, yes we probably can," Cousland said, actually managing to look a little sympathetic, "you can blame me if you like, I made him abscond."

Hawke didn't grace him with a glance never mind a reply. He pulled out the chair beside Anders and sat down, his expression hard. Varric and Cousland seemed to be the only ones at the table truly amused by the situation. Anders felt as if he were suddenly boxed into the room, trapped by Hawke's domineering presence pushing and pulling at him from the next seat, while Fenris, well...if Fenris felt in any way similar to the way Anders had felt after his own indiscretion with Hawke then Anders truly did pity him. That kind of feeling, that denial of something so desperately wanted, something you were forced to refuse yourself for your own selfish reasons, was not a pleasant thing. Especially when the object of your affections did just as good a job as you of ignoring the problem as if it weren't there.

"Well, I expect to be well compensated," Hawke said tightly, "Varric, I swear if you make me buy my own drink I'll...

"Oh come now Hawke," Varric said, looking a trifle insulted, "when was the last time I ever made you buy your drinks here? Honestly, you'd think that I'd cut off your allowance or something."

"Don't get funny with me," Hawke said, sitting back in his chair forcefully, "I'm really not in the mood. I swear I'm never trusting you to have my back again Anders, that was a cheap trick."

"It wasn't a trick," Anders said, frowning; yes he felt bad about it but Hawke didn't have to be so melodramatic, "and anyway, we didn't feel very welcome in your little soirée. I felt like I was at a marriage proposal."

Hawke glared at him and Anders was taken aback by the ferocity of it. The man looked genuinely angry. What in all of Thedas could he possibly be that angry about? Anders thought. The mage knew that it must have been unpleasant but there was no need to go overboard. Anders just frowned and looked away, noting Cousland's matching rather dark expression.

"I'll get us something to drink," Fenris spoke up, breaking the terse silence.

"I'll help you..." Hawke started.

"No," Fenris said quickly, giving him a guarded look as he walked to the stairs, "I don't need any help."

If it was possible for Hawke to become angrier, that did the trick. Anders watched as the rogue, who had pushed up half way out of his chair, sit back down with a strict control bred of wrath. His fingers were curled around the arm rests and he was breathing in too steadily through his nose, his lips a tight line. Anders could see his own concern reflected in Varric's eyes. The dwarf returned his glance with a small shrug and a confused look.

"Hawke, are you alright?" Anders asked after another moment's silence.

"Does it look like I'm fucking alright?" Hawke said back caustically.

"You look like you need to calm down," Cousland said, his eyes narrowed, "don't talk to him like that, he's only trying..."

"I don't need your advice," Hawke bit out, "I'm pretty sure I've heard enough of your voice over the past week to last me a lifetime..."
"Excuse me?" Cousland interrupted, his voice dangerously low.

"I think I'll go help Fenris with those drinks," Varric said with a raise of his eyebrows; Anders watched him go, holding back the need to follow him and extricate himself from the situation.

No, Anders thought, oh no not now, not here. After so long in each other's company, and even though he'd suspected it would come to this at some point, he didn't want to believe that they were actually going to come to blows. Anders knew their personalities were too similar but, in terms of how they dealt with anger they couldn't be more diverse; the Commander was a short fuse, his anger burned fast and hard but didn't last. Hawke, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. Hawke's anger was like a slow burning sulphur pit; the longer you left it the hotter it became and the more it stank. He held everything inside for as long as possible, letting it fester, until it burst out through the surface, usually in a spectacular display of verbal abuse and violence; and now it seemed Hawke had reached his limit, just at the worst time possible.

"If there's something you'd like to say to me," Cousland said, standing, "I'd just love to hear it."

"Commander, please, sit down..." Anders said, standing himself.

"Oh you would, would you?" Hawke said, his voice a dangerously calm facade covering the ire beneath, "I doubt that very much."

"I knew there was something off about you," Cousland shook his head with a snort and a contemptuous stare, "from the first words out of your mouth when we met, I knew you were nothing but an arrogant bully."

"Takes one to know one," Hawke said tightly, his muscles tensing, "Commander."

"You little prick!" Cousland barked, launching himself towards Hawke as he sat insolently in his chair.

Anders jumped forwards and grabbed the Commander by the chest as he tried his best to push past. Being considerably stronger than Anders it was difficult for the mage to keep him back but he held on for dear life. The last thing he wanted to do was let Cousland throw the first punch, if he did there would be no stopping it. If he could just get the Commander to calm down then this could all be avoided, Anders thought desperately. If he could just get Hawke to stop being an arsehole that was.

"Stop it!" Anders said, jerking the man back with a push but still not letting go of him, "Cousland please..."

"Get off of me Anders!" Cousland said dangerously, "I mean it!"

"Not unless you sit down," Anders said back, his eyes just as determined.

Anders could tell that the fact that Hawke hadn't reacted at all was just pissing Cousland off more. The rogue just continued to sit in his chair, tensed and ready yet retaining an impertinent posture. The Commander stared into Hawke's glinting green eyes for a long, perilous moment. Then, as Anders had hoped would happen, the fuse burnt out. Oh Cousland wasn't happy, that much was for sure, but the flare of temper was at least over. Anders felt the man relax in his arms before pulling out of Anders' grasp with a disgusted sound.

"You know what Anders?" Cousland said as he picked up his whiskey glass and finished the last of his dram in one shot, his stare fixed on Hawke, "I always thought you had better taste. I'm tired. I'm going to bed."
With one last contemptuous glare at Hawke the Commander threw his glass onto the table and stormed towards the stairs. The glass rolled precariously towards the edge but Anders reached out to grab it before it fell, looking up anxiously.

"Commander wait!" he called out but the man ignored him, turning the corner and disappearing from sight.

He was left with nothing but a tense, overbearing silence broken occasionally by a crackle or spark from the fireplace. Anders looked down at the glass in his hand blankly, shaking his head. He'd known Hawke could be impulsive, he knew what he was like, but this was inexcusable. Anders would make excuses for the man for only so long, but when he started insulting his friends then Anders drew a line.

"So, do you feel like telling me why you just grievously insulted one of the most respected men in all of Ferelden?" Anders asked tightly, not looking at Hawke as he placed the tumbler down carefully onto the tabletop.

"Because I wanted to," Hawke shrugged a little too easily, his tone suddenly too light for the occasion, "I've been wanting to for days. Does it show?"

"Does it..?" Anders frowned angrily, voice trailing off in disbelief, "What the hell is the matter with you? All we did was go out for a drink, to catch up..!"

Hawke had been so controlled and silent, sitting stewing in his chair, that Anders didn't expect the loud bang as Hawke sat forwards and slammed his hand into the table, his eyes practically gleaming. Anders started back but didn't show his fright; instead he kept his narrowed eyes on Hawke as the man glared up at him.

"Of course, that's all isn't it?" Hawke said, his deep voice raised, "Has anyone ever told you how fucking fickle you are?"

"No," Anders said angrily, his hands clenching, "why don't you enlighten me?"

"I'm sure you can figure it out, you're meant to be clever aren't you?" Hawke spat.

"You really are a piece of work, you know that?" Anders said, shaking his head, feeling the resentment building inside him and trying desperately to push it down, "I don't know what the hell has gotten into you Hawke but I won't let you take it out on me or the people I care about."

Hawke let out a disdainful laugh, eyeing Anders with a look that bordered on disgust.

"Oh I'm sorry," he said facetiously, "I didn't mean to insult your little fuck buddy."

Anders' eyes widened in incredulity. For a moment he was too stunned to be angry, staring at Hawke as the man stared back. He should know better, Anders thought numbly, he should know better than to push me of all people. Does he want me to snap, is that it? Does he need to see me hurt, does he need to see what I do when I get so angry that I can't control myself? Is that all I am? A distraction once more?

"It would help if you knew what you were talking about before you started bandying accusations like that around," Anders was amazed at the calmness of his own tone, even though he knew it simply belied the fury.

"Is that right?" Hawke said, nodding his head and pretending to look puzzled, "because you're usually so truthful, aren't you Anders."
"What in the Maker's name are you talking about?" Anders practically shouted back, truly beginning to lose his temper.

"You know fucking well enough what I'm talking about!" Hawke shouted back.

Anders opened his mouth to reply before he caught sight of Varric at the top of the stairs, a tray of drinks in his hands. He could tell the dwarf had wanted nothing less than to have to come back to his suite but it was his room after all. It wasn't as if he could just go to bed and ignore them both. Anders felt truly sorry for him. Hawke followed Anders' gaze and his eyes hardened as they alighted on Varric.

"Where's Fenris?" he asked, his voice tinged with confusion.

"Norah said he left," Varric said warily.

Hawke looked at Varric for a moment with his usual unreadable expression, leaning forwards against the table. Then he smiled, a twisted, self-deprecating smile, and shook his head, letting out a very cynical laugh.

"Of course he did," Hawke said, nodding as if to himself, "of course. Why would he possibly want to stay?"

Hawke stood up violently from his chair, making Varric look at him worriedly. Anders just watched, not knowing what to think. He could hear the double meaning in Hawke's words and that, in itself, hurt.

"Why would anyone want to be around such a constant disappointment as myself?" Hawke said, not addressing anyone in particular, turning to walk past Varric down the stairs, heading for the main bar.

Varric stepped out of his way but followed him with his eyes. He looked back to Anders, taking in his own confused but still angry expression, and sighed, placing his tray on the table. Varric rubbed his face tiredly and sat down in his chair.

"Hasn't this gone on long enough?" he said to Anders quietly, "Can't you just..?"

"Can't I just what?" Anders said darkly, "You have no idea Varric, you have no idea why I do the things I do. No one does, but then on one stops to think about anyone but themselves, do they? Don't you think that I want to be happy? I'm not a fucking masochist!"

Varric looked at him in shock and Anders felt the rage tightening in his chest. He tried to breathe but the need to hurt something was becoming more and more pronounced. He wanted to tell Hawke just what he thought of him, he didn't want to have to put up with other people's shit just because they couldn't deal with their own realities, he wanted justice for himself. Anders was storming out of the pub before he even knew what he was doing, striding towards the deserted marketplace.

He was pretty sure he knew which route Hawke would have taken. After a few minutes he heard the distinct sound of unmasked footsteps and, as he rounded the corner, saw Hawke at the end of the street, just about to reach the next corner that would take him up towards Hightown. Anders set off up the street as quickly as he could without running. He would be damned if he was running anywhere for that bastard. It was only as he reached the corner he'd seen Hawke take that he realised he couldn't hear the footsteps any longer. That was when the hands fisted into his shirt and he was slammed up against the stone wall. Hawke's eyes were dangerous in the moonlight but
Anders’ own were more than a match.

"Why are you following me?" Hawke hissed, "Hoping for an apology?"

"From you?" Anders said angrily, "No, I wouldn't hold my breath. I just wanted to tell you that I think you're a complete fucking idiot!"

"Is that right?" Hawke said, his fingers tightening in Anders’ clothes.

"Yes! It is!" Anders said back loudly, "For fucks sake Hawke, how could you overreact to such an insignificant..?"

Anders hadn’t expected Hawke to get violent, he hadn’t expected the jolt as Hawke pulled him from the wall and slammed him back against it forcefully. He cracked his head against the stone and the pain flared, mixing with the anger already simmering beneath his skin. Anders reacted instinctually and pushed out with a sharp burst of kinetic magic, forcing Hawke from him physically. Hawke stumbled back but didn't fall, reaching up to hold his chest where the blast had hit. Anders brought up his hand and felt at the back of his head, bringing it back to see blood on his fingertips. He glared at Hawke, his breath coming in short huffs.

"You know," Anders said, shaking his head and laughing humourlessly, "I'm starting to think the Commander was right."

"About what?" Hawke said, his voice oddly subdued as he watched Anders with an unreadable expression.

"I do have terrible taste," Anders said.

Hawke let out a derisive snort and gave Anders a dark look before shuffling over to the wall beside the mage to lean against it. Anders didn't move or look at him; he reached back with his bloodied hand and let out a small flare of healing magic to close the cut on his head. The blood remained however.

"Maybe you do," Hawke said firmly, "everyone else seems to agree."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Anders asked, finding it hard to care about Hawke's feelings in the given circumstances.

"Well, I seem to be very good at disappointing people," Hawke said, shrugging and shaking his head, "you, Fenris, mother, and I'm sure there will be many more to join the fucking list."

Anders looked to Hawke out the corner of his eye, noting that much of the anger that had been present in the man was now gone. All that was left was a self-deprecating smile and a rather hollow glaze to his eyes. Anders hated himself in that moment that he couldn't resist Hawke's own need over his own. He wished he liked himself enough to not put himself through all this crap.

"What on earth could you have done to disappoint your mother?" Anders asked after a moment's pause, purposefully leaving out himself and Fenris for obvious reasons.

"What could I not have done?" Hawke said with a shake of his head, "Be born I suppose."

Anders looked to him sharply. Hawke looked out over the empty street before him as he continued.

"Do you know how long she's been bringing suitable young ladies to the mansion for 'meetings' like those?" Hawke asked him, obviously not expecting an answer, "It must have been only a few
weeks after we moved in. In fact the only reprieve I got was that week you stayed. She refused to bring anyone to the house while you were there, too worried that the templars might show up and embarrass her again."

Hawke's eyes hardened at the memory. Anders watched him cautiously, not entirely sure where Hawke was going with this.

"You didn't miss much more after dinner conversation, after you left," Hawke said, "considering I told our guests to leave so that I could talk with mother. Oh, she was not happy about that. I'm such an embarrassment, apparently. I'm the one who let my brother die, I let the templars take my sister and now I can't even honour the family name."

Anders swallowed, trying not to let his anger soften. Instead he let thought of Leandra keep the ire fresh. The stupid cow, Anders thought, how could she say such things to her own son? How could she possibly blame him for Carver and Bethany? Hawke had his own grief to deal with in those respects, never mind his mother placing the entirety of the fault onto him.

"So I told her," Hawke continued, "I told her that she might as well give up because I have no intentions of marrying some random girl picked for her noble birth. In fact I have not intentions of marrying at all. Do you know what she said?"

Anders watched Hawke closely before shaking his head.

"She said that she knows," Hawke said, his voice laced with hurt that was obviously still fresh, "that she always knew how I felt, that I'm not normal as she put it. But she's more than happy to sacrifice my happiness to keep the Amell lineage going. She said I owe it to my father to keep the name Hawke alive."

Hawke didn't say any more, but then Anders didn't think he really needed to. Anders' own anger was now entirely confused, split between Hawke for being such an impulsive prat and his mother for being an insensitive bitch. Instead of talking to him about this Hawke had gone ahead and taken it out on him. Anders wanted to comfort him but, considering everything he'd done tonight, he just couldn't bring himself to. He watched as Hawke rubbed at his chest tenderly, his eyes strictly on the stone before him. Anders ground his teeth and sighed before reaching out to put his hand over Hawke's own, letting a soft glow of healing magic leech out onto Hawke's already bruising flesh. When he looked up Hawke was watching him, his eyes a little dazed.

"I didn't mean to..." Hawke started, before sighing harshly and looking away, "I'm sorry, if I hurt you."

"You fucking well better be," Anders said, squeezing Hawke's hand a little before letting go.

Hawke reached out to grab at his retreating hand and Anders stiffened at the contact. Hawke's fingers were warm and insistent but, now that he had Anders in his grasp, he didn't seem to know what to do. They both stared at each other, Hawke's lips parted slightly as if in anticipation or that he were about to speak. Anders swallowed down the want to pull him closer and removed his hand slowly from Hawke's grasp.

"I think you should apologise to Cousland tomorrow," Anders said, pushing away from the wall.

"Will I get one back?" Hawke asked, tone defensive.

"What for?" Ander said with an incredulous look, "He didn't do anything to you."

Hawke looked away and chewed at the inside of his cheek. Anders watched him, wishing things
could be simple, wishing he could just say what he felt, wishing Hawke wasn't as insecure as he was. Anders knew that he wasn't perfect, he knew he'd made mistakes, but this was ridiculous. He couldn't just keep making allowances for the idea that he and Hawke could be together. It would never work and the two of them only continued to prove that. He needed to focus on his mission, he needed no distractions and Hawke was a terrible distraction.

Love was a terrible distraction.
Brand

Perhaps he should have felt bad for listening. He would try not to make a habit out of it. He'd already eavesdropped on Hawke before and, considering it had seemed a good idea at the time, he hadn't heard anything he'd entirely liked. Yet Anders was surprised at how difficult it was to stop once you'd started. Especially considering the conversation.

"Look," Hawke said, his voice tight with swallowed pride, "I'm...sorry, about the other night. I was..."

"An insensitive fuck?" Cousland supplied, voice deadpan.

Anders smothered a smile and hoped that the Commander's need to control every conversation he had didn't ruin Hawke's ability to apologise. Honestly, he thought, those two are bloody incorrigible.

"...That's one way to put it," Hawke replied after a long pause.

Both he and Hawke had walked back to Hightown the night before; neither had spoken a single word. Cousland and the others were already asleep as was Hawke's mother and, in all honesty, Anders hadn't really thought about why he'd followed Hawke back to the mansion. There was no spare bed what with the Wardens. He had asked Hawke for the couch in the sitting room and, surprisingly, he refused. 'You take my bed', Hawke had said, his tone partly apologetic. He refused to take no for an answer and had ended up practically pushing Anders up the stairs. The mage didn't want to tell him that it wasn't that he didn't want to sleep in Hawke's very comfortable bed, it was more that he didn't want to give the man an excuse to be forgiven. He had been getting used to the idea of being angry at Hawke, the idea of pushing further apart; now, after a rather enjoyable night's sleep, it was difficult to feel that same resolution. Anders suspected Hawke had known exactly what he was doing.

"Well," Anders heard a chair scrape across the floor as Cousland evidently stood, "let me put it this way Serrah. I don't care what you say to me, why should I? It's pretty much forgotten."

Anders let out a sigh of relief. For a short but tense moment he'd been expecting another fight. Anders started to push away from the wall as quietly as possible in preparation to leave when Cousland continued, his voice serious.

"But I'm not blind. Anders cares about you," Cousland said, "and if I find out you've hurt one of my men for no good fucking reason, believe me, you'll know about it."

"I don't think that's any of your business," Hawke replied stonily.

"Then don't make it my business," Cousland said reasonably, "and we won't have a problem, will we?"

Anders rolled his eyes and shook his head. Oh for Maker's sake, he thought, swallowing down the need to march into the room and tell Cousland to stop acting like his bloody father. The boy was eight years his junior for goodness sakes, he was even younger than Hawke. Still, he shouldn't really be surprised even if it was rather embarrassing. Cousland was a fiercely loyal man and, when it came to his friends and his troops, he tended to act like a panther with cubs; Anders had always pitied the idiot who dared to lay a hand on Alistair and hope to keep it attached to their body.

Hawke didn't reply to the Commander's question. Anders didn't wait around to hear if anything else
was said, skipping off down the stairs before he was spotted.

It turned out Oghren and the recruits had managed to book passage on a merchant vessel headed for Amaranthine the next evening. Anders was a little sad to hear they would be leaving so soon. This had been a chance encounter and, considering his fugitive status, it wasn't as if he could just pop over and visit any time he wanted. There was a nasty sense of finality in the air and Anders couldn't shake the same feeling he'd felt when he'd first fled to Kirkwall; that he would never see any of them again. He had taken the day to open the clinic and see as many people as possible before closing and heading back to Hightown. Oranna had cooked a rather simple yet delicious meal of roast chickens, baked vegetables and fresh bread. Anders had been more than happy to join Oghren and Nathaniel. The two junior Wardens were present but they stayed mainly quiet. Anders suspected they had been told by Cousland that they were to keep their mouths shut about having even seen Anders and, as such, were just keeping their distance. They ate at the smaller table while Anders and the others sat before the fire.

"Well it must be bad if you won't tell us either," Nathaniel said with a wry smile.

"Yeah," Oghren said as he gulped in another flagon of ale, "that boy was in a foul mood when we saw him last night. Couldn't even swear straight."

Anders just pulled off another piece of the roast chicken sitting in the middle of the table and bit into it. He was grateful to the Commander for not having publicised what a complete idiot Hawke had been the night before, or himself for that matter. Still, by not telling the others what had happened it had only caused them to become more curious. He had spent the entire afternoon deflecting their pressing questions. He knew they'd give up eventually but, in the meantime, it was rather tiring.

"You know what he's like," Anders shrugged noncommittally, "he takes offence at the oddest things sometimes."

"Hmm," Nathaniel said, eyeing Anders curiously as he dragged his bread through the grease on his plate, "I can actually agree with that."

"He can be touchier than an ogre with itchy balls," Oghren shrugged as he ate and drank almost simultaneously.

"Do you have to do that?" Anders said, eyeing him disagreeably as the dwarf spilled ale down his beard, already thick with chicken grease.

"Yes," Oghren burped, grinning slyly, "I do."

Anders rolled his eyes and sighed. Cousland was currently visiting with the Viscount to fulfil more bureaucratic niceties before his departure. Thankfully Nathaniel and Oghren were not necessary, much to Anders luck and Cousland's dismay. The Commander was not happy about being left on his own with the thought of trying to be politically correct without any real direction from anyone else. Anders couldn't help but feel a sort of amused trepidation at the thought of the Commander having lunch with a politician. He would either manage to be very good and last out the whole process without incident or end up creating some huge diplomatic disaster that Alistair would probably murder him over.

"And you wondered why I left the Wardens," Anders said with a snorted laugh, "do you really have to ask Oghren?"

"And here I thought you were used to my charm," Oghren said.
"Oh, I'm used to that," Anders said, shrugging, "it's the smell I've never been able to acclimatise to."

"Well that's rich," Oghren said, "coming from the mage who used to smell continually of cat piss."

Anders couldn't help but laugh. Oghren gave him a confused look and shook his head and even Nathaniel looked puzzled by his mirth. Anders didn't care. He would enjoy this reminiscence while he could. Back between Oghren's gutter talk and Nathaniel's noble bearing he felt like just a normal man. Neither judged him in the way most others did.

"How is Pounce-a-lot?" Anders asked; not for the first time he wished he'd had the time to grab his cat before leaving on the dirty little boat for Kirkwall.

"Fine the last time I saw him," Nathaniel said, a hint of irritation in his voice, "little bastard bit me in the ankle. I think Sigrun has infused him with her own unique brand of passive aggression."

Anders tried his best not to grin at the image that sprang to mind; Nathaniel hopping around on one foot with a cat attached to the other, teeth sunk in. Ser Pounce-a-lot had never really taken to Nathaniel. For some reason the man had never seemed to know what to do with the little cat whenever they'd come into contact. When he tried to stroke him he always rubbed him the wrong way or pulled on his tail by mistake, warranting a hiss or a growl or even a laceration if he wasn't careful. Over the months Pounce had learned that Nathaniel was bad news and avoided him, or just hissed at him on sheer instinct.

"Oh dear," Anders said with a barely concealed smile, "well, I'm sure he appreciates that. She was always very fond of him."

"She's been teaching him to hunt nugs," Oghren said, making Anders look to him in disbelief, "what?"

"As in those odd little pig creatures that are three times the size of my little Pounce?" Anders asked.

"Yeah," Oghren said, "don't you remember how vicious that cat is? Little bastard could practically take down a Genlock for Maker's sake."

"True," Anders said proudly, "he should have been made an honorary Warden by now, considering."

It was another couple of hours until Cousland wandered through the main door looking distinctly tired. Nathaniel already had a flagon of ale ready for him which the Commander thanked him gratefully for.

"Have I ever told you I love you Nathaniel?" Cousland said with a contented sigh after the first swallow of beer.

"No, and I don't think I need to hear about it either," Nathaniel said with a wry twist to his lips.

"Oh well, your loss," Cousland shrugged.

"How did it go?" Anders asked, leaning back in his chair.

"As well as could be expected," Cousland shrugged, "I was nice, he was nice, everyone involved was nice. It was horrible, don't ever make me do it again."
Anders laughed and shook his head. The Commander of the Grey did not make a very good ambassador at all. Admittedly it wasn't really part of his remit; that was more slaughtering archdemons and Darkspawn, but it was still amusing to watch. Cousland grabbed a leg off of the chicken closest to him and bit into it hungrily. Apparently the Viscount's food hadn't been to his liking either.

"You'll be looking forward to getting home then?" Anders asked, "Back to reality?"

"I guess," Cousland said, looking a little contemplative, "suppose it'll be rather boring in comparison. Just the usual rubbish, marking up patrols, training, keeping the peace, recruitment drives. Maker, why did I take this job again?"

"Because your little bunny rabbit asked you to?" Oghren said with a dirty laugh.

"You know, one of these days Oghren, I'm going to tell Alistair you call him that," Cousland said with a serious smile, "and then we'll see who's assigned to the Legion of the Dead quicker than you can say 'I take it back'."

They say time flies when you're having fun. Anders had never disliked the saying's truthfulness more than he did right now as he stood on the dock and watched the merchant ship sail away into the distance of the early sunset. The wind had turned chill and in the fading light the warmth of the sun counted for nothing, yet still he stood there. He'd promised himself not to become too attached, but it was a stupid promise. He had already been attached to them, he'd just buried it deep down along with all the other things he couldn't have. Now all he had to do was cover it back up again. It would just take time.

"So," Cousland had said to him, as they'd stood before the gangway; Nathaniel and Oghren were already on board and the junior Wardens were still loading the rest of the expedition's gear.

"So," Anders had said back with a weak smile.

"Don't leave it so long before your next visit, eh?" Cousland had said jokingly.

"Very funny," Anders had said back deadpan, "I nearly died of laughter. Look, my sides have split open and all my insides have fallen out."

"Oh I'm going to miss your endless sarcasm," Cousland had said, shaking his head.

"Don't you mean not miss?" Anders had tried to correct him.

"I know what I meant Anders," Cousland said with a despondent smile.

He had pulled him into a tight embrace which Anders had returned. "Take care of yourself" were his parting words before Cousland had pulled away and marched off, purposefully not looking back. Anders hugged himself, feeling the wind pick up even further, whipping inside of his coat. He pulled it tighter, as if to wrap in the warmth of the memory. One more to add to the collection of things he would keep close to him, the one's he would pull out when things got too hard to bear. Something to remind him of the good in this world that was worth fighting for.

He started leaving out milk at the clinic, even though William gave him looks that told him he thought the mage was crazy. It had admittedly been a long time since he'd seen any cats mooching around Darktown but he could always be hopeful. Talk of Ser Pounce-a-lot had made him nostalgic for a pet, something that gave unrequited love on entirely low maintenance. Anders smirked at the
idea; the complete opposite of any human relationship he'd ever had.

The Qunari were becoming ever more obvious as a presence in Kirkwall, so much so that even Anders had noticed them in Darktown. Since the compound had been opened, after the disastrous storm that stranded the Arishok and his warriors, the distinctive creatures had tended to stick quite religiously to the Docks. Their distaste for humans and elves alike was not something that Anders could ever really attest to, even though that's how it seemed to him most of the time. It was probably more like disinterest, but sometimes Anders had to wonder. Now that they were slowly spreading out into the community, so to speak, Anders began to think about how long they had actually been here. It seemed a long time to wait for a ship, but then he had no clue of Qunari culture. This could be entirely normal for them and he'd be none the wiser; it was a long way from Par Vollen after all.

The information Varric had promised him about Alrik came through in dribs and drabs. It turned out that templars of Alrik's status were more than just 'tricky business' as Varric had put it. The templar was decisively secretive, which only made Anders more suspicious of his activities. Whenever Varric discovered something it seemed to the mage that each was more horrifying than the last. Anders could tell that Varric hadn't wanted to tell him the more hideous rumours; whether it was because of the content or the effect it would have on the mage himself Anders couldn't tell. The most recent revelation had been the most worrying and, so far, Anders wasn't sure whether it was even something he wanted to share with the resistance. Causing widespread panic was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Can I trust you not to run off and do anything rash?" Varric had asked him as they sat together in his suite, holding a folded piece of paper in his hands.

"No," Anders had said with a shrug, watching as Varric shook his head with a sardonic smile.

"At least you're honest," Varric had said, handing him the paper slowly but resolutely.

There were some things in this world that made Anders realise that humanity was capable of great magnanimity, like Hawke's generosity, or his old friends, his old Commander. Then there were things that seemed to overshadow anything that could possibly be good with their sheer cruelty and heartlessness. What Varric had handed him that day was one of the latter. Anders fingers had curled into the paper as he'd read the spidery script that was Ser Alrik's, following the outline of what the templar was calling his solution to the mage 'problem'; the Tranquil solution. He'd tried his best not to fulfil Varric's fears and take things slowly despite this turn of events, but it was difficult. Every day that he wasn't planning how to dispose of Alrik was a day that another tranquil mage appeared in the Gallows courtyard, their hollow stare reaching out no further than the space in front of their eyes. Anders felt the burden of each one on his own shoulders, another life he had lost, another mage he could have saved.

Anders had wanted to ask Hawke for help. He knew that taking on Alrik wouldn't be easy, the man was apparently never without a full complement of templars with him at any given time, but considering he and Hawke's last altercation things were still strained between them. He had seen the man a mere handful of times since the night of their clash and, on each occasion, Hawke didn't seem to know how to treat him. Anders did his best to seem normal but, with Hawke on edge and Anders himself in a constant state of anticipation, it was difficult to do.

It was on a rather sleepy evening three weeks after Cousland and the Warden's had set sail that it happened.
"If I don't tell William, then you have to promise me not to get into any more trouble."

Cricket had turned up a few minutes before, his head gashed open, blood all down his clothes. Anders would admit he'd panicked a little at the sight of him but it had turned out to be mainly superficial, a wound that bled more than it should, not too deep. Anders had known that it hadn't been caused by the 'fall down the stairs' that Cricket was insisting but the boy refused to confess how he'd really hurt himself. At the moment he seemed more concerned with Anders swearing his secrecy about the whole event.

"I will, I promise," Cricket said earnestly, "please don't tell him!"

"Alright, alright," Anders shook his head as he closed the deep gash with a glow of healing magic, wetting a cloth to mop at the drying blood on the boys cheek, "I swear I won't..."

The insistent rapping knock that started at the door stopped him dead. He felt Cricket stiffen beside him, the boy instinctually getting ready to run. Anders placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder before walking around the bench to pick up his staff. Knocking at the door wasn't an odd occasion at his clinic but there was something that sounded wrong about the urgency. Anders had always been wary of persistent knocking since the night Bethany was taken; the Kirkwall templars weren't above obvious trickery to get someone to open a door. He approached the door cautiously and cracked it open. His eyes widened at what he found there.

"Tabatha?" Anders said in disbelief, opening the door wide enough for the woman to slip through into the clinic, "What on earth are you doing here? It's too dangerous to..."

"I'm sorry Anders," Tabatha interrupted, pulling her hood back to expose her panicked face, "I had to come. It's Bethany Hawke, she's escaped into the tunnels! Alrik's after her!"

Anders felt his breath stick in his throat. That couldn't be! Anders thought desperately, Bethany would never...she had wanted to...oh Maker Alrik would...! Anders' mind raced. Tabatha must have seen his shock because she grabbed him by the hands and shook him.

"I thought you'd want to know," Tabatha said, "what are you going to..?"

"We have to..." Anders swallowed down the sick feeling rising; all his careful planning, all his strategy, it was all for nothing; there was no time for that now, "I have to stop him."

"No," Tabatha said, her voice determined even if her eyes didn't show the same, "we will stop him. I wouldn't ever leave you to go alone, not after someone like him!"

Anders was never more grateful to anyone than he was to Tabatha at that moment. She squeezed his hands and gave him a grim smile, which he returned. He wished there was time to think, to plan, but he knew there wasn't. Alrik's reputation revealed him as ruthless and efficient. If they were to have any chance of saving Bethany then they had to act now.

"Cricket, lock the door behind you and blow out the lantern," the boy looked worried but nodded, catching the key as Anders tossed it to him, "tell William...tell him I'll be back later. Stay safe."

Anders didn't wait for a reply and took off at a run with Tabatha at his heels. Thankfully the streets were fairly empty at this time of evening and Anders didn't feel the need to disguise the fact that he was using the sewer entrance that led to the secret tunnels beneath the city. They descended into the murky underworld as quietly as shadows. Anders tried to keep his footsteps as hushed as possible whilst running as fast as he could. They wouldn't have much time, he thought worriedly.

"Where are we going?" Tabatha asked anxiously.
"There's an entrance not far from here," Anders explained, "where the sewers meet the caverns. Stay close."

Tabatha quickened her pace. Anders could hear her panting but he couldn't afford to focus on her. All he could see was Bethany, all he could think of was the feeling of finding Karl turned tranquil, all he could think of was having to relive that same sickening moment over again. It turned him cold, he could feel his heart beating faster and faster. He knew what it meant, Bethany had told him enough times that she...she would rather be dead than suffer through that mockery of life. He would do it, he thought numbly as he forced his feet to go faster, he wouldn't leave her that way, he knew how she felt. But Hawke...

Hawke might not understand. No, Anders thought desperately, it wouldn't come to that. He was going to save her, just as she had saved him from Cullen so long ago. He would.

"It's just here," Anders said, opening the door in front of him out into a crumbling room.

Tabatha followed him through, looking around warily. The entire side of the room had fallen through allowing the clear cavern air to rise up and filter through the cracks. Anders closed the door behind Tabatha and continued without another word, helping the woman as she stumbled over the ruined rocks. They emerged into an airy cave filled with the sound of running water far below them. Ferns were thick against the walls and floor, rocky outcrops tumbling down into the ravine at its centre. Anders followed the path gracefully, staying close to the wall before running out across the small, makeshift bridge that he and some of the other resistance members had built years ago. He could feel the stones scrambling beneath his feet, keeping the pace as fast as he could, running through the gorge and barely seeing it around him, hands against stone, trip, catch and then keep running. He was panting by the time they reached stairs, jumping them two at a time. Anders hadn't heard any telltale sounds of screaming or armour or weapons yet; he was holding out hope above all else.

"They can't be far!" Tabatha was saying breathlessly from somewhere behind him.

"Just stay close," Anders ordered as he pushed open the door before him, "when we..!"

Anders didn't see whatever hit him but the pain was blinding. The blow took him in the side of the face, cracking against his cheek and temple, sending out waves of darkness that claimed him instantly.

"I want him awake," a voice was saying.

"Yes sir," another replied.

Then there were hands on his shoulders and he could feel they were hauling him upwards. The movement sent waves of nausea through him and Anders was forced to swallow down the bile as he blinked open his eyes. The world tilted to the left and then the right before he was settled somewhere in the middle on his knees. He was sure he would have toppled forwards if it wasn't for the hands holding him tightly.

Blinking again he tried to focus on the blurry vision of steel and red in front of him. The side of his face was pulsing in slowly building agony; he could feel the blood running down his neck, slowly creeping. Anders tested his hands but found them securely bound behind his back. The weight of his staff was also missing. Slowly his head began to clear, the dizziness leaving him.

Fuck, he thought hollowly, *fuck* this isn't happening. This isn't...
"Well, well," said that voice again, cold and hard and all too sickeningly familiar, "it's been some time, hasn't it, since we last met?"

Anders forced his head up and tried his best to focus. Not that he needed to, he already knew that it was Alrik before him, his cold blue eyes staring down contemptuously, his mouth fixed into its smug, sadistic smirk. He knew that he would be standing there, gloating in his supposed victory. Anders wished, as his vision cleared, that he hadn't looked up at all.

There were more than a complement of templars from what his limited view of the area showed to him. There seemed to be rows of them, rows and rows of shining armour, of faceless warriors, cold, dark slits for eyes watching him dispassionately. They crowded along the walls of the cave, surrounding him in his prone position on the ground. And there, beside Alrik's imposing form, was Tabatha.

"You," Anders ground out, coughing roughly, "how could you do this..!"

"She has been a very useful plant in your little resistance," Alrik said with mocking pleasure as Anders raged.

"How could you go against your own kind!" Anders cried.

"Don't try and turn me into the villain," Tabatha's voice was haughty, distant, nothing like he had ever heard before; she'd always been so kind, so gentle, Anders had never suspected her, "We both know you've become...unstable Anders. For months now I've been watching you, abomination. How long were you going to hide that from us?"

"Hide it?" Anders spat in disbelief, "From us? You supercilious bitch! How long have you been betraying the resistance! All the apostates caught, all those tranquil in the Gallows, Bethany Hawke, all the times..!"

"Quiet him," Alrik interrupted, his voice brimful with indifference.

Anders heard the booted feet against the stone behind him before he felt the jolt of pain flare down his spine. He cried out before clamping his mouth shut, biting down on the sting of the blow. He wouldn't give the bastards the satisfaction. He glared up at Alrik and the man just looked back, eyes like closed doors. He could get out of this, Anders thought wildly, he could. He'd been in worse situations than this...

"If you're going to kill me," Anders said darkly, "then you might as well..."

"Kill you?" Alrik said with a raise of his eyebrows, letting out an amused laugh that sent shivers up Anders' spine, "Now why would I want to kill you? You've been causing a lot of trouble for me, little abomination."

"Speak for yourself, monster," Anders growled, pulling against the hands at his shoulders; they only gripped tighter in response, "how many good mages have you turned tranquil against the laws of the Chantry just to sate your own vanity!"

"My vanity? Do you really believe that is what this is about?" Alrik looked down on him as if, for a moment, he truly pitied him, "Yes. I can see that you do. Delusion must be a wonderful thing. You don't understand the peace that the rite brings to those, as you are, afflicted with demons and apparitions, those who speak out against their betters, those who would incite rebellion."

"You sick bastard!" Anders shouted, "They're people, not cattle! Tabatha you bitch, how can you help him when you know..?"
Tabatha didn't answer, even as the templars holding him shook him into silence. Anders could feel the markings beginning to flare on his skin, the cool, blue light of Justice finally breaking through the haze of the pain, the full force of his anger. Anders looked up to see Alrik indicating to one of his men who nodded in reply. The templar moved out of the way to reveal two more, each holding the arm of a young, weeping girl. Anders felt his eyes widen before he sighed in guilty relief; for one sickening moment he'd thought it was Bethany, but the girl was unknown to him.

"Another runaway we snared today," Alrik explained, "it seems we will be able to deal with you both."

"Please, I just wanted to see my mum!" she sobbed, "She didn't even know where they were taking me!"

"Let her go," Anders growled out, "you bastard, she's just a girl!"

"No mage is to be underestimated," Alrik said back, his voice grim with satisfaction.

The girl continued to shake and cry, mumbling out excuses. Anders looked round to say something else only to see Alrik picking up a long, thin stick of metal from a brazier behind him, testing the weight of it in his hand; Anders felt the words die in his mouth.

He had seen one only once before and that had been purely by mistake. At the Circle in Ferelden, he had been snooping in the templar barracks when a templar had returned to his room, forcing Anders to hide in a closet in the corner. He had tried his best to be quiet, stuffed into the tight space. When he'd lost his balance he'd put his hand back to steady himself and found five, neat poker like instruments under his fingers, each ending in a small, dull, sun shaped disc. Anders had remembered going cold as he realised just what he was touching. The lyrium rods they used in the rite. He hadn't felt clean for days afterwards.

Anders felt his eyes flare briefly white and the world turned dark before he reined Justice back. The spirit was battering against him from the inside like his own heartbeat.

"Ah, so now we see the true creature," Alrik was saying as Justice began to howl in his mind, desperate to break free and tear the man before him limb from limb; Anders couldn't take his eyes from the white hot sun burning at the end of the poker.

"No," Anders shook his head, his heart leaping into his throat as a hand fisted into his hair and pulled, hauling his neck taut, "you fucking bastards! Let me go!"

Alrik approached him slowly, eyeing him with amusement as he continued to struggle, the Fade snapping and cracking around him as Justice tried desperately to take over. Anders struggled against him. He couldn't lose now, he couldn't! He needed to stay in control, he needed to get out of here!

"Does it make it angry?" Alrik sounded curious above all else, "To see this?"

He moved the disc before Anders eyes and the mage balked at the feeling of the heat against his skin. He felt his breathing speed up, his heart hammering in his chest. Never, Anders repeated over and over again, never, never, never, I'll never live that way! He wanted to look away but found his eyes transfixed to that glowing point of light that would strip him of himself, leaving him an empty shell. Nothing left but ashes of memories filling vacant eyes. Nothing left but what the templars could put in place of his own thoughts. No want to struggle because he would agree that he deserved everything they did to him.
"Would it beg me the way you will?" Alrik asked, his eyes glinting.

"Fuck you!" Andes said, wanting to shout but it came out in nothing but a hoarse whisper.

"Not quite what I'd been hoping to hear," Alrik said, eyes narrowing, "hold out his hand."

Anders went rigid as his bonds were cut. If he could just...! But the hands were on him again too fast, Solid steel gauntlets grasping around his wrists, his arms, pushing him forwards. He tried to wrestle against them but there were at least three that he could feel, holding him down. He watched in an almost detached horror as his left hand was slowly, jerkily pushed out in front of him, fingers clawing against the ground, trying to haul back. The gauntlets bit into his flesh through his coat, and he could feel the strangled grunts coming from his throat as he tried desperately to get away. He looked up sharply to Alrik, knowing that the man could see the fear in his eyes.

"I'll kill you," Anders breathed out, "I'll kill you!"

Alrik just smiled and lowered the rod slowly. Anders renewed his struggles in vain, trying to dislodge the man he could feel leaning against his back. He could smell the heated lyrium as it lowered past his face, a hideous metallic tang reminiscent of blood. He wished he could look away as the disc pressed strongly against the skin on the back of his left hand but he couldn't.

Anders screamed.

The pain ran like a spike up his arm, a thick, hot agony that branched out as if it were shattering through his bones and veins and muscles. His connection to Justice flared and fluxed, stuttering in and out of existence. Anders squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to pass out, his throat running raw as he continued to cry out. After what felt like an eternity the pressure was removed, but the pain remained, pulsing and throbbing. Anders felt detached in his own body. His arm felt numb, gone, as if it had been severed. He was limp and unresisting as the templars hauled him back to his kneeling position, pulling his head back. He began to shake violently as Alrik approached, the brand raised in both hands, pointed straight at his forehead.

"Beg me mage," the man said dangerously, "and maybe I'll consider sparing your life."

Anders felt the Fade building around him as the glow in his eyes began to blank out his vision. The pain was emptying his mind, the sickening realisation that he was about to be treated to a fate worse than death. His worst fear a reality. Everything gone, his memories, his life, everything. The light was eclipsing all, blurring out the templars, Tabatha, the weeping girl and Alrik's cruel, blue eyes. He opened his mouth to speak but it was not his voice that emerged.

"You will never take me, demon!"

Everything went black.

There were flashes of images and sound, hideously loud in comparison to the blank void that had swallowed him.

He saw his hands reaching out to grasp a templar by the jugular and the shoulder, wrenching to the right as the man's head tore from his body.

Then blank silence.

Then thought he saw someone else in the fray as he sent out waves of twisting magic, the Fade rent around him, wailing and screeching.
Then nothing.

Then the lyrium rod was in his blood soaked hands and Alrik was prone on the ground before him and he pulled back and drove the slim metal rod into his face, watching with a blood fuelled lust as it smashed through his cheek bone, through his forehead again and again until there was nothing left but a pulpy, red confusion of bone and brain.

Then again came the void and it was so quiet and Anders felt the need to stay in that comforting darkness. He didn't want to see, he didn't want to know, he didn't want to feel...but someone was calling him. He could hear an echo of Justice's voice, shouting, and another shouting back.

"Please Anders don't hurt her, please stop...!"

Anders forced himself back, trying desperately to grab at his conscious self. Justice pressed back against him, his power building as if to attack. Anders felt panic well up within him. He didn't know what was happening, he'd never felt this level of control before. He pushed back as hard as he could, feeling it like a physical sliding of his own mind back into his body. He fell to his knees and clawed his hands over his closed eyes as the glow faded. When he opened them again it was to see the young girl Alrik had flaunted at him, shivering and crying, staring at him in horror.

"Please," she sobbed, tears streaming down her face, "don't kill me!"

Anders stared at her in shock. He could hear someone behind him but was too numb to turn. His arm ached and he found it hard to keep it held upright. Anders stumbled to his feet. Had he been about to...

"Anders!" a voice said from behind him, "Maker, Anders are you alright?"

He would have killed her, Anders thought numbly, he would have killed her. Justice, he wanted her dead, he thought she...no, no excuses. I can't control it anymore, Anders thought, I can't. This is too much, I've gone too far, I can't keep living like this! I'm going to hurt someone, I'm dangerous, I can't be trusted. Anders felt the hand on his shoulder as someone pulled him gently round. He should have been surprised to see Hawke there but there was something dreadfully appropriate about the whole situation that warranted this awful revelation. Anders stared into Hawke's horrified eyes and felt his heart breaking.

This is what I am, he thought desolately, this is all I am. You never truly let yourself see but now you can't lie to yourself anymore. I'm nothing more than a murderer, that's all I've ever been, I was just too scared to admit the truth because I knew I'd never be able to live with myself.

"Please, say something!" Hawke said, his hands reaching out to grip Anders by the arms.

Anders panicked. He shook his head and pulled away from Hawke, his feet slipping on the blood soaked floor. He could hear the girl weeping as he caught himself on the wall, turned and did the only thing he knew how to do; he ran. The sound of weeping mixed with Hawke's voice as the other called after him. Anders thought he could hear other voices raised with Hawke's but couldn't distinguish them in the echoing gorge. He held his arm close and ran as fast as his feet would carry him.

It took longer than he'd thought to find an exit out of the gorge that led to anywhere recognisable and, even then, it was a long walk back to Darktown. His panic had subsided as he had began to tire, slowing his frantic run to tripping and stumbling. He had found small cave carved into the cold stone and, blinded by exhaustion and fear, he had fallen into it and lay gasping on the ground.
He didn't sleep, he didn't dare to, but Anders couldn't tell how long he lay there, staring at the dirt before his eyes and imagining what would have happened if Hawke hadn't turned up out of the blue to pull him back from the precipice. If he'd allowed Justice to hurt that girl...

An innocent, someone he had sworn to protect, dying by his hands? Anders couldn't conceive of it. He would rather die than become what he most hated.

When he finally fazed back into the present the evening light had faded into nothing but wisps of dying sunlight, filtering in through the cracks in the cave ceiling. Anders had forced himself to stand on weary legs, hauling himself up the wall with his right arm. The gorge had eventually led back out onto the Wounded Coast onto a small rocky outcrop that looked out over the bay. It was completely dark by the time he found his way back onto the path with nothing but a waning moon and the glow from his staff, which he had found inexplicably strapped to his back when he felt for it, to help guide him. He could only think that he had Justice to thank for retrieving his staff; one small thing to be thankful for at least. His left arm had turned cold and lifeless as he had walked but he didn't have the volition to check the wound on his hand. He couldn't look at it. He felt his stomach turn at the thought. He'd tried to use healing magic to bring the feeling back but, after a few tries, he gave up. He would tend to it later, Anders thought as he continued back to Kirkwall.

He barely remembered walking through the streets or seeing anyone else. He managed to find a barrel of water at the entrance to Darktown where he washed himself of the blood as best he could. It was a difficult business with only one working hand and the water was icy cold, further numbing his already cold hands. There was no one at the clinic door when he approached. It was as he thought back, while patting down his pockets mechanically, that he remembered giving Cricket the key. Anders stopped his search and just stood there, staring at the door. He could feel the tears running down his face but couldn't register why he was crying. The door didn't matter, it wasn't important, it was just enough to push him over, to make him stop long enough to think about what he had done, about what he'd almost done. Anders choked back a sob and leaned his head against the door. He flinched back when the door moved inwards with a creak, his hand reflexively twitching to his staff. The fear effectively pulled him from his grief. Anders pulled his staff from his belt and used the bladed end to push the door slowly open, enough for him to slip cautiously through into the dark room beyond. He was only just inside before the door was pushed shut making him jump and try his best to slash out one handed at whatever was closest.

"It's me!" said a familiar voice from the darkness, "For fuck's sake put that thing down!"

Anders dropped the staff to the ground and took a faltering step back, his breathing hard. He could just make Hawke out in the moonlight from the high window, his cheek, his glinting green eyes, his broad shoulders. The man looked like a ghost in the pale light. Anders turned and stumbled to the table, fishing about with his hand until he found the lantern. He opened the glass case and lit the wick, watching as the shadows scurried away beneath the tables and into corners. Anders stared at the pale glow of light building within the lantern and tried to calm his breathing. He couldn't hear Hawke behind him but Anders knew better than to rely on that. Hawke could be silent as the grave when he wanted to be.

"Anders," Hawke's voice was hesitant, coming from just over his shoulder.

It wasn't a question, it wasn't a statement; just his name. Anders could feel everything slowly seeping back through the dead haze he had fallen into; the aching pain in his face where he'd been hit, the throbbing in his spine, the tenderness in his feet and legs from running and stumbling over rocks and dirt for hours, the terrible cold, deadness in his left arm. He wasn't surprised that it had been pure adrenaline keeping him going for this long but when he realised, well, that was when everything ran out. He felt his knees buckle and he dropped to the ground like a stone.
"Maker..!" Hawke exclaimed in dread, his voice seeming to strangle out into nothing.

Anders felt himself pulled up into strong arms, lifting him like he weighed nothing, and he was carried to the back of the clinic where he kept his meagre bedroll. Hawke set him down, sitting up on the dirty blanket, half propped against the wall. Anders stared at Hawke dazedly as the man knelt down before him, his eyes seeming hollow and blank, his expression unreadable. Anders tried to think of something to say in the face of everything that had happened but he just couldn't summon the energy to. Anders watched as Hawke swallowed, his eyes flicking down to his left arm as if it were something awful, something terrible. Hawke reached down and tentatively and pulled back his coat sleeve from his left hand. Anders looked away. He couldn't look at it...he heard Hawke's breath catch in his throat and looked back to the man before him. He looked frozen, his eyes fixed on the red, blistered skin. When he eventually managed to break the stare and look back to Anders the quiet desperation there was overwhelming.

"Please," Hawke whispered out, "please Anders, say something to me. Tell me they haven't..."

"What?" Anders asked in confusion, his brow furrowing; then he realised just what Hawke was getting at, "The mark? No, no it doesn't work that way..."

He wasn't allowed to go any further. Hawke had lunged forwards and gathered him into his arms, his breath desperate and hot against his neck.

"Thank Andraste," Hawke's voice was rough, heated, "Anders I thought I'd lost you. I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm right here," Anders said unthinkingly, "I'm here."

Hawke didn't let him go. His heat was blinding in comparison to Anders own chilled body and despite everything, despite his own self-loathing, his own hate and fear and failings, Anders craved it more at that moment than anything else he'd ever wanted. He reached up with one shaking arm and held onto Hawke for dear life, feeling the man's arms tighten still further.

"You fucking idiot," Hawke was muttering into his neck, "how could you be so stupid? How could you walk into such an obvious fucking trap? Varric told me, he told me he'd found out about Alric's ambush when he was investigating for you. Why didn't you wait, Anders, why didn't you wait?"

Anders just let him talk. Now that he was here, now that he was safe in Hawke's embrace, he was feeling everything. Not just the hate and loathing but the relief and irresistible love for the man holding him. He was safe here, Anders thought childishly, he was safe. He never felt safer than when he was with Hawke, he realised simply. He wanted to stay here, just like this, forever. When Hawke began to pull back Anders was a little humiliated by the small, desperate sound that escaped his throat as he tried to cling tighter. Hawke stiffened momentarily before pulling away just enough that he could look down into Anders' eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said solemnly, "Maker, Anders, if I get my way you'll never be out of my sight again."

Anders stared at him. His mouth opened but he couldn't form the thought behind the words. Hawke gazed down at him as if only just realising something, his breath catching in his throat. Anders couldn't even protest when Hawke leaned in and kissed him, slow at first, tentative, but quickly building until he was being swept away by the passion and desperation of it. Anders groaned in sheer sensation, his fingers clawing and grabbing at Hawke's back as the man pushed him into the wall with the full weight of the kiss. Hawke reached further round and pulled him against his chest.
and Anders let him, letting out a sinful moan as Hawke slid his tongue into his mouth, deepening
the kiss still further. Anders' head was swimming. Everything had been so calm and numb and
now...well now he couldn't help but feel everything. It was as if he were being resuscitated by the
life pouring into him through Hawke's touch, through his insistent lips. Anders leaned into the kiss
and revelled in the feeling as it flooded his body, setting his cold limbs on fire. Hawke broke the
kiss, breathing heavy, and mouthed his way down Anders' jaw, seeming to revel in the fluttering
breath the mage took in response. It took Anders a moment to realise Hawke was speaking, his
voice nothing more than a mumbled string of repeated phrases.

"I love you," he was saying over and over again, "I love you."

Anders felt the ache in his chest, conflicted and painful. You can't, he thought stupidly, you can't
love me. Look at me. Look at what I am, Hawke you stupid fool! He wanted to shout it but the
want and the need and the love and the ecstasy of the moment swept everything from his mind but
those words, echoing again and again as Hawke continued to kiss the life back into him.
The last person to carry him like this, well, ironically enough Anders thought, it had been Karl. He and Anders had been racing each other down the stairs when Anders had tripped on the hem of his robe and tumbled down the entire flight, ending sprawled at the bottom with a twisted ankle. Karl had always been taller than he was and had picked him up with ease, a wry smile in the face of Anders swallowed tears.

"Oh you'll be alright," he had said kindly, "I've got you."

Karl had carried him all the way to the healer, Anders head pillowed against his shoulder, long fingers curled around his thigh and arm. The memory was a distant but comforting one that ran again and again in his mind as Hawke carried him through the gate to Lowtown. And, despite his affection for Karl, something he would never lose, Anders couldn't help but let his present feelings eclipse that boyhood love. The feeling of Hawke's chest pressed against his side, that steady heartbeat radiating out through his torso to thump against Anders palm, his determined eyes that flicked down to him every couple of moments as if to check he was still there; Anders immersed himself in this tenderness, this love, and let it erase everything else.

Right now there was no Justice. There was no blood under his fingernails. There was no Knight Commander Meredith. There were no templars and Wardens. There was him and there was Hawke. Anders realised, as Hawke kicked loudly at the door of the Hanged Man, there didn't need to be anything but that. He listened to the lock opening and closed his eyes, pushing his face into Hawke's collarbone. He felt the man's hands tighten their hold on him and a soft, quick press on lips against his hair before the door opened.

"Thank the Maker," Anders heard Varric's relieved voice, "you found him."

Hawke didn't answer but Anders thought he might have felt him nod in silent reply. He could feel the heat surround him as he was carried inside, the light flickering against the back of his eyelids. He could hear the scraping of chairs, soft exclamations, and stiffened. He didn't want to see anyone else, not now, he couldn't face that, please...Anders kept his eyes firmly shut and his breathing shallow.

"Oh Creators is he alright?" Merrill sounded beside herself with worry.

"He'll be fine," Hawke replied authoritatively, "Varric, are any of the inn's rooms free?"

"Of course," Varric said, no questions asked, for which Anders was eternally grateful to the dwarf, "the end of the hall, on the right."

"Are you sure it's safe?" Anders heard Fenris' distinctively husky voice ask as Hawke started to weave between tables.
"Doesn't look like he's conscious," came Isabela's dismissive reply.

"I should really..." Aveline's authoritative tone cut in.

"I don't think this is a time for questions, do you Guard Captain?" Varric was saying disapprovingly, but their voices were already fading and he could feel the small jerks as Hawke carried him up the stairs.

The next sound he heard was the creak of un-oiled hinges, followed by the slightly cooler air of a disused room. His eyes were treated to peaceful darkness as he opened them, just able to make out Hawke's profile in the light still filtering in from the doorway. Another few strides and he was being lowered gently onto a soft, cold blanket. The bed sagged under his weight a little, moulding to his shape. Hawke started to stand back but Anders was quicker, his right hand reaching up to catch him around the back of the neck and pull him close enough for their mouths to clash together a little awkwardly. Hawke let out a small sound of surprise but didn't pull away, instead moving his head a little to the left so as to allow the kiss to deepen. Anders was breathless once more by the time Hawke stopped; I could get used to that, he thought light-headedly, blinking up into Hawke's shadow cast face.

"And I'll never get anything done if you start that again," Hawke sounded trivial on the surface, but his voice was rough, his eyes decidedly dissolute.

"I don't care," Anders whispered back, curling his fingers into the short hair at the nape of Hawke's neck, his stare intense.

"Well..." Hawke said, swallowing, not seeming to know how to continue, "well...give me a moment will you?"

He stood abruptly, a little flustered, and walked back across the room to close the door. Everything descended into a deep, comforting shade, not quite black, almost blue. He heard Hawke messing with the matches on the table, cursing as they broke when he tried to light them. Finally he managed to get one lit and forced it into the lantern, adjusting the wick. He placed it back onto the table, the room now immersed in a dull, amber glow. Hawke didn't look at him as he turned and headed for the fire. Thankfully the room had obviously been intended for use in the near future as the fire was ready to light, kindling piled high over paper and coals. Hawke lit the taper and watched as the paper caught and curled, setting the twigs alight. He sat there for a moment, watching it burn, fiddling with the box of matches in his fingers, silent in contemplation. Anders watched him, savouring the peacefulness of the moment. Once the kindling had burnt down Hawke placed a few very small logs to the side of the coal to keep the fire hot enough to burn them through.

He still didn't speak as he stood and walked back over to the bed. Anders noted he looked anxious but couldn't tell what it might be about; there were so many things that could be responsible right now that it made Anders head hurt to think about it.

"Are you alright?" he asked as Hawke bent down to start removing Anders boots.

"Me?" Hawke scoffed to quickly, "I don't think, considering the circumstances, that you of all people should be asking that of anyone."

Anders couldn't help but smile a little at the obvious evasion. He wished that his arm were not still numb or he could get himself out of his own boots. Although, he thought giddily as Hawke slid the first off his right foot, it was awfully romantic. Hawke had hastily bandaged his hand and cleaned his head wound before they had left the clinic but Anders knew he'd have to face it sooner or later.
He felt like laughing but restrained himself. Everything was so awful right now, everything had fallen to the lowest it possibly could, and yet here he was, lying on a bed in the Hanged Man with Hawke at his feet trying not to laugh. Hawke pulled off the other before placing them neatly beside each other, out of the way by the bottom of the bed. This time Anders couldn't stop the involuntary laugh, bringing up his right hand to cover his mouth, closing his eyes.

"...What on earth could you possibly be laughing about?" Hawke asked incredulously.

"Nothing, it's just..." Anders shook his head and opened his eyes, "after everything and you're still placing things so neatly. It's just..."

Then all of a sudden everything became very confused. He realised that it wasn't really amusement he was feeling, more a delayed hysteria, and now the shaky feeling of dread and shock was sinking back in. He tried to move the fingers on his left hand and panicked when nothing happened. Anders felt the tears running down his face and moved his hand to covers his eyes, his breath sticking in his throat, his face twisting from a smile to a grimace.

"Anders," Hawke's hands were on his, pulling it away from his face; Anders kept his eyes shut, "you're safe, don't worry, you're safe here. I won't let anyone hurt you, I promise you that."

Anders felt like telling Hawke to stuff his patronising reassurances somewhere unmentionable but, considering the man was only trying to be kind, he just nodded instead. He tried his best to steady his breathing, trying to pull the irrational fear down to a manageable level. This was ridiculous, he thought harshly, he'd been through worse than this, he shouldn't be losing his composure, especially now that the danger had passed. Anders swallowed, pulling his breaths in through his nose and letting them out slowly. Then he felt Hawke's breath on his face and there was the caress of lips against his forehead, then at the side of his right eye, then the other.

"Don't cry," Hawke said quietly, "you need to rest. You'll be fine, you just need some sleep."

Didn't Hawke understand that was the last thing that he wanted? The man seemed to think that sleep cured everything, Anders thought wryly, but then he supposed that Hawke didn't have the same problems with sleeping as he did. Anders cracked open his eyes and watched as Hawke nimbly undid the fastenings on his coat, pulling the garment open. He helped Anders sit up and pulled it off his shoulders and down his arms before throwing it onto the nearby armchair. Hawke pulled the heavy blanket back and Anders shifted to lie against the sheets on his side, shivering against the cool cotton. Anders tried to get comfortable as Hawke stood up and walked over to the chair, tugging at the three buckles down his side that held on his cuirass, pulling it and his pauldrons off over his head once it was loose enough, leaving him in his soft, short sleeved white undershirt. Is he...? Anders thought, his heart rate quickening as Hawke removed the sash from round his waist, the heavy leather kilt falling to the floor, finally realising just what Hawke was doing. He pulled out of his boots and leg armour, leaving him in nothing but his very tight, black trousers. Anders felt his initial panic subside in favour of a new kind.

Well, Anders thought, mouth dry, I wouldn't have to have an imagination would I? Hawke didn't seem to notice Anders stare, or if he did he was doing a very good job of hiding it. He returned to the bed and pulled the covers back further, allowing him to crawl onto the mattress and lay out flat behind the mage.

"The others..." Anders started worriedly.

"Don't need me right now," Hawke interrupted sternly, "I already told you Anders, I'm not going anywhere."
Hawke reached up and pulled the heavy blanket back over them both without another word, his arms encircling Anders and pulling him to lie on his back, his head against Hawke's shoulder. Anders swallowed, trying to rectify the situation in his mind; no, he could do this, this was just friendly, Hawke was simply comforting him, this was fine. Anders relaxed, shifting around onto his side to get more comfortable, pushing his head into the crook of Hawke's neck, his numb arm sandwiched in between them and the other placed tentatively across his chest. Hawke didn't comment, just used his right arm to pull him closer, his fingers digging insistently into his waist, while he brought his left hand up to stroke tenderly at Anders jaw and neck. The mage let out a contented sound and pushed closer, his lips grazing against the tender flesh of Hawke's throat. He felt the other man shiver beneath him and swallowed down the desire that flared at the feeling. The same feeling he'd felt on the night he'd drunkenly confessed to Hawke through a misplaced kiss, the same feeling he'd felt ever since then when the man had touched him, looked at him, anything. The feeling he'd recognised long ago but refused to identify, refused to name except in his weakest moments. Hawke's touch became slightly more insistent and Anders wasn't sure if...what he wanted was...

"I love you," he said suddenly.

The hand at his neck stopped dead, fingers twitching. The other seemed to only tighten further, fingertips etching themselves into his flesh. Anders felt his own fingers curling into Hawke's shirt as he realised what he'd just blurted out.

Am I mad? Anders thought angrily, what on earth am I doing? I can't...this isn't right, I can't pull Hawke into this life, this terrible farce of a life, I can't let him think that...that we could ever have this. It isn't fair. But then Hawke used his position to pull back a little and tilt Anders head up to meet his eyes.

It was those eyes, Anders thought as he lost himself in them all over again, that drew me to you. You're everything I'm not and everything I want to be, all at once. Anders wished he had the courage to say the words out loud; instead he let Hawke swallow the thought of them into his mouth, pulled in deep with tongue and lips, arms circling around his back as Hawke manoeuvred himself down to be level with him. The kiss became insistent, gasping, as Hawke pressed him closer, Anders grabbing at his shoulder before rushing his hand up into silken black hair to run it through his fingers. Hawke moaned and broke the kiss to reach up and pull the tie from Anders own hair, letting the golden strands fall free. He cupped Anders flushed face in his hands and stared at him as if he didn't entirely believe what he was holding.

"Say it again," Hawke said, sultry tone sending shivers along Anders skin.

Say it again. It was a request, an earnest request, but to Anders it somehow twisted itself into a challenge. Say it again, he could feel Justice taunting him, say it again, fool him, betray him, hurt him, that's all you'll do. Say it again, Karl's memory goaded, set yourself up for the fall, the pain of losing him when he finally realises what you are, when he won't stand by you, when he abandons you. Say it again, said the jeering templars, and let us use him against you, let us punish him for your crimes, let us pull him into your world of hate and fear.

Say it again...and live with the consequences.

Anders stared into Hawke's eyes and opened his mouth.

"...I love you," Anders said truthfully, "I always have."

Hawke watched him intensely, oblivious to his inner turmoil. He smoothed his thumbs up over Anders cheeks before letting his hands slide back into his golden hair, pulling him forwards until
their lips met once more. Their bodies pressed together and, once again, it felt right. Anders could feel Hawke, hard against his hip, and everything began to spiral out of his control. His pulse raced as he moved his thigh up and leaned forwards, pressing against that hard heat, listening with anticipation as Hawke groaned into the kiss. The hands in his hair clawed into fists, pulling him tighter, closer, teeth clashing as the intensity built, went beyond what it could deliver. Hawke was his and he was Hawke's in return. He wanted this, Maker he wanted this more than anything. Screw the rules, he'd made them himself anyway, he should be allowed to break them if he wanted to. Like love. Anders had never known a mage who had dared to fall in love, not truly, not completely, not the way he had for Hawke, heart and soul. This would be the rule he would most cherish breaking.

"Take me," Anders said urgently as they broke apart from breathlessness, "I want you to."

"Anders, you're injured, we shouldn't..." Hawke started, lust filled eyes clouded with concern.

"Hawke, I swear, if you don't screw me right now I'll go mad," Anders growled out, reaching down to squeeze Hawke's growing erection through his trousers; the man gasped and let his head fall back, "and you don't want to be responsible for that, now do you?"

"Heaven forbid," Hawke groaned out a husky laugh, leaning in again to capture Anders lips in a searing kiss.

The knock at the door was anything but welcome. Anders felt Hawke sigh harshly through his nose as he pulled back from the kiss, his face a picture of frustration. Anders gave him a look that said 'I told you so' but leaned in to kiss at his neck as Hawke turned to shout over his shoulder; he was stopped by a voice from the other side of the door.

"Hawke?" Fenris' voice was muffled, "Are you in there?"

Anders stilled, his fingers tightening around Hawke's arm. Hawke had gone oddly still in his arms. Anders felt the resentment blossom almost instantly. No, he thought, no. You're here with me, us, together. He pulled back, reaching up to cup Hawke's cheek and turn him round to look into his eyes. Hawke blinked, startled. Then, much to Anders relief, leaned in and kissed him, short but firm, reassuring.

"What...is it?" Hawke asked in between another set of kisses.

"Are you alright?" Fenris asked, his voice becoming rather more insistent.

"I'm fine," Hawke said back, "just...busy. I'll be through later."

There was a quiet pause, in which Anders forced himself to clamp down on a heady moan as Hawke ran his hands up under his shirt, long, elegant fingers playing across his skin.

"Fine," came the eventual reply; Anders could hear his retreating footsteps and knew that the elf was agitated.

And for a brief moment, even through the mutual dislike and years of fighting, Anders sympathised. If Fenris had figured out what was going on then, well, Anders had been in the same situation when he'd seen the elf and Hawke together in the courtyard. And it hurt, he knew it did, probably more so for Fenris who so obviously regretted his decision to leave Hawke's affection behind him and carry on alone.

"Hey," Hawke's husky voice pulled him back, "stay with me. Don't go wandering off into that head of yours."
"I'm not..." Anders' protest was consumed by a quick and rather sloppy kiss; when Hawke pulled away Anders mock glared at him through half lidded eyes, "like I could ignore you."

Hawke laughed, short and hearty, his grin wide as he leaned in to kiss along Anders throat, lips finishing at his ear, hot breath teasing against the sensitive flesh.

"Oh I'll make sure you can't ignore me," Hawke said, his voice deep with desire.

The lantern had burnt itself out as they moved together, leaving nothing but the flickering shadows from the dancing fire as illumination. It didn't stop them. Anders doubted a battalion of templars running into the room could have stopped them at that point. They'd each been swept away by the other's desire, feeding off desperate gasps, heartfelt pleas and moans. Despite Hawke's obvious fervour Anders had been surprised by his gentleness. He took strict care with the burn on his hand, stopped for any cry of pain, needing reassurance that everything was definitely alright before continuing. He'd actually been so attentive that it had begun to drive Anders a little mad with need.

"I swear Hawke," he'd gasped as the man stopped moving within him once more, looking down at him with worry, "if you stop to ask me if I'm alright one more time I'll bloody well kill you."

Things had heated up from there. They had barely moved from the bed since. Hawke had left him briefly to stock up the fire, keeping away the pervading chill that threatened to soak in through the heavy blankets. Other than that they'd remained in a relatively comfortable silence, Anders wrapped in a one armed hold, his head pillowed against Hawke's chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. The mood had been slightly dampened only when Hawke had reached down and pulled Anders left arm up onto his chest, his fingers curling over the hastily wrapped bandage. Anders stared at his hand, hating it for bringing back the memory of Alrik's gloating face, hating it for tainting him with something he'd never be able to rid himself of.

"I'll need to wrap it properly," Hawke said.

"Right now?" Anders protested.

"Yes," Hawke said back firmly, "and I'd rather not fight about it."

Anders bit back the comment he'd been about to let slip. No, he thought, for Maker's sake Anders for once in your life just let someone else make the decisions for you. Hawke slipped from the bed, sliding back into his discarded clothes and armour to go in search of fresh bandages. Anders watched him silently as he left the room, closing the door behind him. The quiet was punctuated only by the cracking and sputtering of the fire and the occasional sound of muffled voices from the adjoining room or further down the hall. After another minute or two of waiting Anders forced himself to at least sit up. He felt drowsy enough as it was and didn't relish the idea of falling asleep.

The air was chill against his exposed skin but he didn't like the idea of trying to struggle one armed into his shirt. Instead he pulled the blankets up further and wrapped the corner around his shoulders, leaning back against the headboard. His arm lay like a dead weight at his side, his hand a mess of pulled bandages. The sight made him smile a little despite himself. Yes Hawke had tried to be as careful with him as possible but, after Anders threat of bodily harm, they had been a little rough. He was sure he'd regret it in the morning when his body was aching but, right now, it was hard to care.

Anders reached over with his right hand and began to undo the bandage. Hawke was right, of course, leaving it would only make it worse. Just because he couldn't feel it, didn't mean it wasn't
there. The bandage came away smoothly, slowly revealing the glistening of burnt, blistered flesh. The skin was weeping, leaving a glaze over his skin. Anders stared down at the red sun on the back of his hand. What did it mean? he wondered, trying not to let the anger build, or the resentment. It meant he would have to be more fucking careful in the future, he thought strictly. He wouldn't let this slow him down. Instead he would let it fuel his resolve. This wouldn't be a reminder of his own failing, he wouldn't let the templars brand him like an animal. He would use this against them, he would use it to remind himself every day of why he fought and of the cruelty of those he fought against. He heard the door open and looked up.

"You never could sit still," Hawke said as he closed the door behind him.

"Well I feel useless enough as it is," Anders shrugged.

Hawke shook his head as he approached the bed with an armful of supplies. He dropped them onto the covers before hopping up onto the bed next to the mage. It was a far cry, Anders thought, from their much more intimate repose moments before. In his armour Hawke seemed bulky and untouchable, despite his gentle hands. Anders wished everything didn't have to end; just for once he wanted to pretend that everything was normal, that they were simply two lovers enjoying a night together, no pretences. Chance would be a fine thing, Anders thought ruefully. Hawke took hold of his left arm and brought it into his lap.

"Is it still numb..?" Hawke started, running his fingers along Anders forearm.

"Yes," Anders interrupted, taking a breath to stop himself from snapping further, "sorry, I just...I don't really know what to do about it."

"It isn't permanent, is it?" Hawke asked, brow furrowed as he unwrapped a bandage from the pile in front of him.

"I don't think so," Anders said; more like I hope not, he thought grimly, "it'll just take time to heal."

Hawke nodded, placing another burn poultice onto his hand, covering the sickening sun from view. Anders let Hawke tend to him, wishing he could feel those fingers against his skin as he worked. Hawke wrapped the bandage carefully before tying it off, his fingers closing around Anders hand even though he knew he couldn't feel it. Neither looked at the other.

"Are you..?" Anders hesitated when Hawke's eyes snapped to him, "are you sure about this? If you're with me, we'll be hunted, hated, the whole world will be against us."

"I don't care about that," Hawke shook his head, "I've already told you, the Hawke family is used to being hunted and hated. It'll take more than that to get rid of me."

Hawke's smile was genuine and Anders couldn't help but return it. He knew that Hawke didn't fully understand what he was getting himself into and, deep down, he couldn't help but be stung by the guilt of it. Not enough to tell him however, but enough that it was there. Anders leaned over until he was pressed against Hawke's side, his head leaning against Hawke's shoulder. The rogue let out a small, contented sigh and leaned his head against Anders own.

"Two and a half years I've been waiting for this," Anders said quietly, feeling Hawke move a little, "I'm still terrified I'll wake up."

"What, and find out it's all a dream?" Hawke's voice was rather too sarcastic to ignore; Anders felt another stab of remorse.

"Hawke, about that night," he started, "your birthday I mean..."
"Do you really not remember?" Hawke asked, his voice more curious than angry.

"Not everything," Anders sighed, "I really haven't been that drunk in a long, long time. I think it affected me more than I even thought possible. But...I do remember kissing you."

Hawke didn't say anything for a long time, long enough to make Anders worry that he had really upset him. When are you going to learn to keep your mouth shut? he thought in irritation.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Hawke said finally, his voice blank.

"It's not that easy, or it wasn't," Anders tried to explain, but it wasn't easy when your excuse was a poor one, "I just...wasn't ready. I've never had much luck with love, or life for that matter. It was, well, I suppose I was scared. One minute I'd promised myself I'd never, ever consider trying to reach for anything normal again and then you swan into my clinic, flashing your bloody thighs..."

"Flashing my...?" Hawke interrupted, pausing before letting out an uncontrollable laugh; Anders sat up and looked at him, relieved to see a wide grin on the other man's face, "that irresistible, am I?"

"Oh don't get any ideas," Anders rolled his eyes, "your ego's big enough as it is without me stroking it any further."

"Hmm," Hawke practically purred, leaning over to kiss him, "I've got something else you could stroke instead if you'd like."

Anders shoved him away but couldn't help the stupid, silly smile that spread across his face. Hawke laughed and reached up to run his hand through Anders hair.

"You're bloody incorrigible," Anders muttered out.

"Get used to it," Hawke winked, leaning back to hop off the bed.

I intend to, Anders thought contentedly. He watched him, burying his trepidation, his anxiety and his guilt beneath his love. He very much intended to.

"You definitely look different," William said for the third time that day.

"So you keep saying," Anders said with a significant look before he turned back to the man sitting on the chair before him.

He was rather busy trying to concentrate on removing the tiny pieces of shrapnel like metal from the man's leg and William wasn't helping. An explosion at the foundry, the man had told him. He couldn't work if he couldn't walk and the factory owner certainly wasn't paying for the treatment of those injured. Anders had told the man he didn't expect any payment and got to work. This would be a busy day, was all Anders could think as thoughts of dozens of injured factory workers played in his head. Therefore he was already up to his eyes without William's constant pestering.

"I'll figure it out at some point," William muttered as he cut long strips of cloth from an old sheet. Anders ignored him and did his best to locate the metal pieces within the man's shin. His left arm had slowly but surely regained its functionality over the two weeks following Alrik's ambush. When he'd woken up the next day to breakfast in bed from Norah, courtesy of Varric, he'd been almost too relieved for words when he'd been able to twitch his fingers on his left hand. From then on he'd kept the arm in a sling, revelling in any sensation as it slowly flooded back. It had been like pins and needles most of the time, a cold tingling that crept down from his shoulder towards his
hand. The flesh warmed as it advanced, regaining all sensation right down to the tips of his fingers. The burn had long since healed, leaving behind the distinctive, red sun shaped scar he'd been expecting. He'd taken to wearing a glove over it when he wasn't in the clinic. No need to advertise himself to the templars more than he already did.

He could tell the difference, however, between the strength in his left hand compared to his right. The connection to the Fade had definitely been hampered by the brand, to what extent Anders couldn't tell, but the magic was certainly weaker. Not that it really affected his ability to any disastrous extent, it just annoyed him when he tried to cast without his staff as a conduit. He would adjust, only it would take time. He could already see the difference in the length of time it took him to practice creation magic; it shouldn't have taken him half an hour to extract the metal, stop the bleeding and heal up the wounds. Anders sighed with effort as he cleaned his hands, nodding in return to the man's thanks.

"I'll tell the others of you, healer," he had said gratefully, "thank you! You've saved me and my family."

When there was another knock at the door Anders had been expecting to find someone from the accident, someone else the factory manager had refused to help, but instead was pleasantly surprised.

"Hawke," he said, smiling, "what are you doing here?"

"Do I need a reason?" Hawke shrugged, leaning against the doorframe with a lazy smile in return.

"Nice try," Anders said, standing back to let the man enter, "but I'm not duped that easily."

Hawke nodded his greeting to William before turning back to Anders. He took in the mages rather unimpressed look and tutted, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Honestly, you're no fun," Hawke said, "alright, alright, I suppose I do have an ulterior motive for visiting."

Anders let out a knowing hum in response, walking back to his table to continue sorting the supplies he had used on his last patient. He heard Hawke walk up behind him and smirked, knowing the man was doing it deliberately. Normally he never heard Hawke move at all. Then there was a voice in his ear and something was being pressed into his right palm. Anders heard William cough in an obvious fashion before getting up to leave quietly through the door, a rather large and knowing grin on his face.

"Happy early birthday," Hawke said, sending shivers up his spine; Anders composed himself and turned round to look incredulously at Hawke's grinning face.

"Birthday?" Anders scoffed, "I think you're pushing it a bit. It isn't for another four months!"

"Well, I did say early," Hawke shrugged, entirely unrepentant, "and anyway, I didn't want to leave it any longer. I'd feel better the sooner you moved."

"Moved?" Anders frowned, opening his hand to look down at whatever Hawke had placed there, "what are you talking about?"

Anders stopped when he saw the key. It shone at him dully from his palm, glinting in the soft sunlight from the high window. Anders opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. He looked up at Hawke, taking in the man's decidedly smug expression. For once he didn't have the heart to be angry about it.
"Is this..?" he asked

"A spare key to the mansion," Hawke interrupted, "yes, it is. Wouldn't be much a present if it was
the key to your own door, would it?"

"But are you...?" Anders started, closing his hand around the key as if to hide it from sight.

"Sure about this?" Hawke interrupted again, "Never more so."

"Will you stop..." Anders started in frustration.

"Finishing your sentences?" Hawke asked cheekily, grinning as Anders glared at him.

He watched Hawke closely, swallowing down the giddy happiness that was trying to cover over
the reasons why this was a bad idea. He had already done enough in confessing his love for the
man, never mind moving in with him and bringing that danger closer too.

"I don't think it's a good idea," he said, hating the words as he spoke them, hating even more the
fact that they erased the smile from Hawke's face.

"Well then we disagree," Hawke said after a pause, "come on, you can't tell me you didn't enjoy
staying last time."

"It's nothing to do with that," Anders sighed, "Hawke, I've got you in enough trouble before
already. Do you really think having an apostate living with you is going to be beneficial to a happy
home? Perhaps you don't remember why I stayed in your house for a week last time?"

"Oh, I remember alright," Hawke said seriously, "that's one of the main reasons behind my gift. Do
you really think I'm going to let you stay here and put yourself in danger when I could have you
close, keep you from harm?"

"Huh," Anders said scathingly, "I'm hardly a damsel in distress. I can look after myself. And I don't
want to put you in any more danger. I mean what about your mother...?"

"I think I can protect my own mother Anders," Hawke said, raising an eyebrow, "and anyway I get
into enough trouble by myself as it is, as she already knows. Well, about most of it anyway. I doubt
adding you to the mix is going to stir things up that much more. Well, not in any bad way."

Anders tried to strengthen his resolve but Hawke took advantage of his silence. He leaned in,
slipping his hands around the mages waist and pulling him close for a short but very effective kiss.
When he leaned back Hawke's eyes were sparkling and Anders looked at him with a cynical twist
to his lips. The smug bastard knows how to play me, Anders thought, feeling his resolve melt in
the face of Hawke's tender caress.

"So you'll stay?" Hawke asked, arms still holding him close.

"...Yes," Anders said after another moment's hesitation, "yes I'll stay."

Hawke grinned and swooped in for another, messier kiss, no finesse like the first. Anders allowed
him his fun for a short while before pushing him decisively away. Hawke frowned as Anders
smiled.

"That's quite enough indulgence for today I think," Anders said, "I am trying to work here you
know."
"Oh is that so," Hawke said, folding his arms and looking around the empty clinic, "and I can see you're just run off your feet."

"Well, not yet anyway," Anders muttered, "but I will be and I need to prepare. You are not helping. So, unless you'd like to be swamped, very soon, by a large group of sweaty, bloody men I'd suggest leaving me in peace."

"Hmm," Hawke said, seeming to find it hard to be amused or insulted, "I can't tell if it's tempting or not. Still, at least I can have you all to myself later?"

Anders pocketed the key before giving Hawke a small, quick peck on the cheek.

"Perhaps," he said teasingly.

"Perhaps," Hawke repeated, nodding, "well, you certainly know how to be grateful don't you."

"I don't know," Anders shrugged, giving Hawke an intense stare which made the rogue part his lips, "maybe you'll find out later on."

He walked Hawke backwards until he was outside the door. Hawke gave him a rather impressed look before standing out of the way to let William past. Anders ignored the laugh William muffled as he walked further into the clinic. He focused on Hawke as he walked backwards down the alleyway, his eyes never leaving Anders own.

"You're good at this, aren't you?" Hawke asked, amused.

"You have no idea," Anders replied before closing the door.

He heard Hawke's laugh even though the thick wood. When he turned round it was to find William watching him, grinning. Anders sighed through his nose and shook his head. He should have known that the boy would figure it out sooner or later, but it was still annoying. He wouldn't be hearing the end of this for weeks.

"I know what it is!" William laughed, "What's different!"

"Do you?" Anders asked, wishing it could be rhetorical.

"You're getting some," William winked, making Anders throw a towel at his face, "no wonder you look so much happier. I always said you just needed a good shag..."

"That's enough out of you," Anders said, pointing, "or I will silence you this time."

William continued to snigger despite Anders threat. The mage ignored him, turning back to his supplies. Still, even as he tried his best to concentrate on getting ready for the flood of injured people he’d more than likely be treating very soon, he couldn't help but put his hand in his pocket and close his fingers around the key there.

Maybe things were looking up.
Anders was relieved that Hawke had gifted him with a key as it was late when he finally managed to stumble up to Hightown, legs weary and mind fogged. Bodahn would have let him in if he was sure, if he’d knocked, but he would have felt bad about waking anyone.

The afternoon lull at the clinic hadn't lasted, as he had thought it wouldn't, and soon after Hawke's departure the workers from the foundry disaster had started to arrive. The man he had treated earlier hadn't wasted any time in telling his colleagues of the apostate healer in Darktown who had saved his leg and, in that, Anders found his first obstacle. His new patients were mainly Lowtown inhabitants, people who hadn't known of him before that day. Sometimes, after the length of time he'd spent in Darktown, treating its inhabitants and slowly becoming part of their community, he forgot that those who visited his clinic could possibly be prejudiced against his help. Anders had always assumed, logically, that if someone came to him seeking aid then they knew very well what he was and what they were setting themselves up for. He had assumed wrongly, it seemed.

Anders had found himself spending the mainstay of his time convincing the injured men that he wasn't trying to harm them. Yes they turned up at his door but it was mainly out of sheer desperation and it was obviously still favoured in Kirkwall to fear the apostate. Anders simply had to bite his tongue at any bigotry spouted or fearful glances when he started to use his creation magic. Yes he wanted to rail at them about their own ignorance, about the stupidity of their unfounded prejudice, but it was neither the time nor place to do so. So he kept quiet and let them shout, trying only to reassure them, coax them into letting him help once they were done. That had only angered Justice, of course, forcing Anders to keep himself strictly in check lest the spirit flare to the surface and reveal him for what he was. Justice, of course, saw no problem with being what he was and, now more so than ever, didn't think that anyone else should mind either. His fervour for his cause made him reckless and Anders found it exhausting to deal with him both physically and mentally.

Anders slid the key in slowly, turning it gently in the lock to try and minimise any sound. He tried not to laugh at himself as he pushed the door slowly open and it creaked on its hinges; Hawke's mansion was so large he doubted anyone could hear him from their bedrooms at the other end of the house. Still, he was so used to houses no bigger than a couple of rooms with walls thin enough to talk through if you tried. Despite his previous stay, living in a place like this would still take some getting used to.

He walked through the dark hallway, out into the moonlit parlour. The fire had long since been extinguished, leaving the smell of burnt coal and wood hanging in the air. Anders crept up the stairs, his feet padding against the carpet. It was a little surreal, he thought tiredly. Would he really be living here? Would this ever work? Yes Hawke seemed very certain but then Hawke always focused on the things he wanted and tended to simply block out any obstacles or reasons against them. Obstacles such as his being very much a wanted man, a dangerous apostate and an abomination. Hawke told him he didn't care but what about his mother? Anders loved Hawke too much to want to jeopardise his relationship with his mother further than he already had. He knew
what Leandra meant to Hawke. In a way she was all the family Hawke had left, what with Bethany trapped in the Gallows.

Anders sighed. This train of thought was getting him nowhere. He was tired and a little distressed by the day he'd had and it was making him think dark thoughts. What he needed was to have this day over and done with, start the next one and go from there. Might not be the healthiest of solutions, Anders thought, but it's all I have.

He didn't want to wake Hawke, but the man had seemed awfully insistent that Anders be here tonight. In all honesty Anders was so tired after his long day that all he had wanted to do was throw himself onto his grubby bedroll at the clinic and sleep. It was the thought that Hawke might think he was refusing his offer that drove him to make the effort. Thankfully when he reached the top of the stairs he saw a soft, warm glow was emanating from under Hawke's bedroom door. Anders walked to it quietly and pushed it open, just enough to slip through and close it behind him again.

The fire was still lit and the lantern was burning low on the table. It sputtered as he passed before flaring back into life, the wick almost burned through. Despite his awful day and despite his tiredness Anders couldn't help but smile at what he found. Hawke was curled up on his side on the bed, an open book in one hand, the other pillowing his head, fast asleep. The mage didn't think he'd ever seen Hawke so peaceful; the man was always so alive, whether it be with joy, anger, sadness, any emotion, that seeing him utterly relaxed was something of a novelty. Anders unbuckled his staff and leaned it against the wall, taking care to make as little noise as possible. He knew he'd have to wake Hawke, he couldn't leave the man sleeping like that, it was too cold at this time of year to sleep above the blankets, but he would enjoy the view as long as it lasted. Anders unfastened his coat and draped it over the armchair by the fire before sitting down to take off his boots. Hawke didn't stir, even as Anders climbed onto the bed behind him. The mage shook his head before leaning in over his shoulder to place a kiss on Hawke's neck, finally rousing him.

"Mmm," came the sleepy, slurred grumble, "where y'been?"

"Busy," Anders said, letting Hawke reach up clumsily to pull him down for an awkward kiss.

"All work and no play..." Hawke said, slitting his eyes open as Anders leaned back.

"Is real life, unfortunately," Anders shrugged as Hawke rolled onto his back, looking up at Anders who leaned beside him on his elbow; there was a pause in which Hawke just stared at him and Anders frowned, "what?"

"You're always so serious," Hawke smirked.

"Well," Anders sighed indignantly through his nose, the days agitation coming back to haunt him in the face of Hawke's flippancy, "sometimes it's warranted, isn't it?"

"Sometimes," Hawke agreed, reaching up to pull the slightly resisting mage down by the shoulders, "but this isn't one of those times."

Anders reached out to steady himself against the mattress as Hawke parted the mage's lips with his tongue, sliding lazily inside. Hands slid up his neck into his hair, pulling it loose. Despite Hawke's facetious attitude grating against his nerves Anders couldn't help but smile into the kiss. Hawke didn't seem to be able to leave his hair alone for a moment. It seemed any chance he got he was touching it, pulling it free, running his fingers through it. They broke apart with a soft sound of lips leaving lips. Anders closed his eyes as Hawke ran his hands deeply across his scalp.

"What is it with you and my hair?" he asked contentedly.
"All good hunters exploit the weaknesses of their prey," Hawke replied slyly, pulling him back down for another kiss before he could protest to the label, "now, about that gratitude you mentioned earlier..."

Hawke pushed up without warning and switched their positions, rolling Anders smoothly over onto his back, Hawke's weight pressing him down into the bed. Anders let out a sound of surprise but it was lost into Hawke's domineering kiss. He brought up his hands to circle them around Hawke's shoulders while the other man ran one hand down to grope him unashamedly through his trousers. Doesn't mess around, does he? Anders thought as he groaned into Hawke's kiss, hips bucking involuntarily. Hawke hummed approvingly and began to move his hand faster. Anders' breath sped up, making him feel distinctly light headed as Hawke pushed his tongue in deeper, stealing what little breath he could pull in. He was beginning to feel markedly like prey by the time Hawke pulled back, leaning in again before Anders could stop him to attack his neck. Anders hissed as Hawke sucked at the flesh of his throat, teeth dragging across the sensitised skin.

"I thought you were tired," Anders managed to say as Hawke climbed further on top of him, lifting himself up onto his forearms.

"Not enough," Hawke said, voice deep and rough, grinding his hips down onto Anders own; the mage let out a sharp cry of pleasure and squeezed his eyes shut.

Anders listened with a thrill as Hawke practically snarled in response, biting at the spot on his neck he had moments before been lavishing attention on. His fingers tightened into Hawke's shirt, wanting to pull it off, wanting to feel the hot skin beneath. Hawke seemed to read his mind, sitting up suddenly to jerk the shirt off over his head. His movements were graceful but rushed, belying his need. He didn't stop at his own clothes either, reaching down to haul Anders' shirt up across his torso, roughly pulling it from his body despite the awkward angle. Then those long fingers were unbuttoning Anders' trousers, hauling them down his hips inelegantly, pulling his underwear with them.

Anders watched Hawke a little warily through half lidded eyes; the man seemed more impatient than usual. He only managed to get the trousers half way down the mage's thighs before he seemed to abandon them and start on his own. Hawke didn't even remove them, simply unbuttoned the front and reached inside to pull his cock free, running his hand along the already solid length. Anders stared at the sight before him and let out a stuttering breath.

"Turn over," Hawke demanded, his voice deep with desire.

Anders obeyed without a word, rolling onto his stomach and pushing up onto his forearms. Hawke was on him in a second, hauling his hips up from the bed, keeping one arm wrapped around Anders' waist as he sucked the index and middle finger of his other hand into his mouth. Anders cried out as Hawke pressed the slicked fingers inside of him without warning. The other man didn't seem to take any notice as he prepared him, teeth once more against his skin as Hawke marked his back, twisting and thrusting inside. Anders groaned and leaned his head down against the pillows, breathing ragged. In the two weeks since the Hanged Man Hawke had never been this, well, animalistic during sex. Anders found, with guilty excitement, that he couldn't help but find it highly arousing.

The next few minutes seemed to stretch out forever for Anders, but in reality Hawke had pulled free and repositioned himself, kneeling behind, crouched over him, his hands reaching down to retrieve something from beneath the pillow to Anders right. He heard the sound of something being uncorked and then Hawke's panted sighs as he prepared himself with what he assumed was the oil he kept. Anders was shaking by the time Hawke slid inside him with a growl, not stopping...
until he was fully sheathed. The pain of the quick entry was coupled with the pleasure of Hawke taking hold of Anders own neglected erection, squeezing it tightly. Anders moaned unabashedly, head jerking up from the pillow. Considering his rough treatment he had expected no quarter from Hawke, yet surprisingly he waited with unanticipated patience until Anders adjusted; finally the mage let his head drop in a curt nod and Hawke slowly began to move at his signal, speeding up as he quickly lost control. Anders panted into the sheets, groaning as Hawke pleased him with his hand, the slick sound of flesh slapping against flesh driving him mad. They moved together urgently, muttering out unknown words, cries, pleas. Finally Anders knew Hawke was close; the man had gone decidedly quiet, his breaths short and shallow. He braced himself against the mattress as Hawke leaned down across his back, driving deep.

"Anders!" he ground out heatedly, teeth clenched as he spilled inside him.

Anders let out a desperate moan in reply, feeling his own release tear through him, falling forwards onto the bed with Hawke's full weight on his back. He lay still, catching his breath. Maker, Anders thought dizzily, my day's not been all bad then? He would have laughed if he'd had the energy. He kept still for another few steady breaths but eventually it became too uncomfortable. He wriggled a little and Hawke moaned sleepily, lifting up to pull out of him gently. Shivering, he allowed Hawke to roll him over and pull him into his arms. Anders shuffled his legs until he managed to shimmy his trousers to his ankles and the kick them off under the covers. Hawke waited until he was done and then pulled him closer, running his face through his hair and breathing deeply. Anders would have protested the stickiness of the sheen of sweat on his skin, or the more unsavoury patches on himself and the sheets, but at that moment he was too tired to care.

"Mmm," he purred as Anders ran his hand over his chest, "I love you."

Anders licked his lips, tasting the sweat, before leaning up to capture Hawke's mouth in a slow, sensual kiss. He never tired of hearing those words. Some people said that they lost their meaning the more they were used but Anders couldn't agree. Hawke hummed contentedly into the kiss, reaching up to run his hand softly down the back of Anders' neck.

"Does that mean you love me too?" Hawke teased as they broke apart.

"You know it does," Anders said before he nestled back down into Hawke's embrace.

"I do," Hawke sighed sleepily, "I know."

Anders woke to the sound of deep breathing and birds outside the window. A far cry from the sound of the sewer works, Anders thought with a sleepy smile. He blinked against the sunshine but didn't move. He had remembered falling asleep in Hawke's arms but at some point in the night they both must have shifted. Now he was on his side, Hawke lying flat out against him from behind, one arm draped over his waist. His sleepy breathing was loud in Anders' ear, tickling the short hairs that ran up his jaw line. Anders breathed in deeply and let it out slow and soft.

Home. He could get used to that, he thought contentedly. His home. It had been a long, long time since he'd had a home, not since he was a boy, and the Circle didn't count. Neither did Vigil's Keep, or his clinic, or any of the places he'd stayed while he was running from the Circle, not really. They were places that he'd lived, they weren't homes as such. Not like this. His home, with Hawke.

Now all I need is a cat and I'm laughing, Anders thought in amusement, letting out a small chuff of breath and stretching his arms. Last night's anxiety seemed to have drifted as he slept, leaving nothing but a small, niggling worry lying underneath his contented state. Anders was finding it
hard to care about anything right then; he was itchy and uncomfortable from the dried sweat on his skin, a little sore from the night's activities, the press of all his thoughts, his duties, his worries an ever present pressure at the back of his mind. Yet none of it seemed to matter as he heard Hawke move behind him, his breathing uneven for a moment before he sniffed loudly. The arm around his waist tightened, pulling Anders closer as Hawke pushed his face against the side of his neck, leaving an ungainly kiss wet against his skin.

"Morning," Hawke said, voice gruff from sleep.

"Actually I'm not sure it is any more," Anders said, closing his eyes as Hawke ran his hand up over his chest.

"Really?" Hawke sounded a little surprised, turning to look up through the window at the high sun shining there, "Hmm. You might be right. I guess we must have needed it."

Hawke was smiling rather too smugly when Anders turned in his hold to face him, making the mage roll his eyes.

"You can stop looking so pleased with yourself any time you like," he said dryly.

"Mmm, then give me a minute," Hawke said, leaning in to kiss Anders slowly, bringing his hand up to run it along his jaw; he leaned back, his eyes intense, "alright, I'm done."

"Oh no, don't start what you can't finish," Anders teased, following Hawke's retreat to recapture his lips; the other hummed in approval, shifting closer.

It was late afternoon by the time they managed to pull themselves away from the bed. Anders couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in this long, never mind purposefully stayed in bed once he'd awoken. Although that was before he had a reason to stay in bed and Hawke could be a very persuasive reason when he wanted to be. Normally, by now, he would have been up, opened the clinic, be healing wounds and cleaning up blood and making up potions and writing up lists and checking his contacts and supplies and working on his translation...in comparison he hadn't done much. Yet, right now, it seemed much more important to be here, in Hawke's house, in his house, taking a bath and working the kinks out of his joints, washing the dirt and sweat from his skin and hair. It was important, Anders thought seriously as he slipped his head under the water, savouring the booming quiet that invaded his ears; it was important because there were precious few moments like these that he could allow himself and he would take them when they came. He would be happy while he could; he owed himself that much at least.

He found Hawke in the parlour, standing before his writing desk with a letter in his hand. The pensive look on his face didn't bode well. It made Anders simultaneously want to burn the letter for ruining the pleasant mood of his afternoon and itch to know what was written there that could have Hawke so concerned. He ran his fingers through his hair, shaking the wet strands free of each other as he approached the oblivious man. Looking round he saw Bodahn stoking the fire, Sandal sitting on the desk by the library door carving at a stone he held in his hand. The blond dwarf looked up at him with his usual smile. Anders smiled back, warranting a wave from Sandal.

"Bodahn," Hawke was saying, not taking his eyes from the letter, "I need you to run a message to Varric for me. Tell him that I need to see both him and Merrill at the Hanged Man as soon as possible."

"Right away," Bodahn said, placing the poker back beside the fire and standing to brush himself down; when he saw Anders he started a little before composing himself, "Oh! Good day, Messer."
"Good day Bodahn," Anders said before turning back to Hawke, "is everything alright?"

"Mmm," Hawke said noncommittally as Bodahn scurried away to comply with his wishes, "it's from Arianni, you remember I told you about her? Feynriel's mother."

"The boy who was having the nightmares?" Anders asked, "I thought you sent him to the Dalish."

"I did," Hawke said, his voice tense, "but it looks like they weren't much help. His mother says he's still having nightmares and that they're only getting worse. She's worried he might..."

Hawke left the threat of it hanging in the air. Anders wasn't sure whether he was afraid to say it because of the distastefulness of the idea or because he thought he would be insulting him. Anders watched as Hawke sighed, putting the letter down onto the table.

"Become an abomination?" Anders finished for him, watching as Hawke's eyes flicked to his before looking away again.

"Yes," Hawke nodded, "she's asked me for my help. Not that I have any idea what good I'm going to be, but I won't leave Feynriel to suffer this alone."

Anders smiled at Hawke, drinking in his resolute expression, his hard eyes. The man could be so indomitable sometimes. It made Anders glad to have met him, to have fallen for him, to be with him. Someone with that same underlying passion to help others that he had. It was nice, sometimes, to know you weren't alone.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Anders asked, noting the eager flash in Hawke's eyes.

"That might be a good idea," Hawke nodded, "the more mages we have the better. You and Merrill know more than I do about the Fade and I think we'll need that knowledge."

They agreed to leave as soon as possible. Hawke went back to his room to get changed while Anders packed up some supplies. It might have seemed trivial but he couldn't help but let Hawke's skittish glance play over again in his mind as he grabbed a few stamina potions and shoved them into his pouch. Does he think he can't bring it up? Anders wondered. It had never been a bone of contention between them before, his possession, well not from Hawke's side anyway. It had always been Anders who was the warier of talking about it, of making it a focus, but now Hawke seemed to be cautious of the topic. Anders wondered if it was something he had said or if Hawke was just more aware of Justice's presence since they had become closer. He wasn't sure what Hawke felt when they were alone together, or what he said half the time. In a way he'd rather not know, yet it wouldn't be something they could avoid forever.

"I don't mind, you know," he said eventually as they walked together through the Lowtown Market, Hawke's eyes straying to the stalls as they passed.

"Mind what?" Hawke asked distractedly.

"Talking about Justice," Anders said, "I mean, he's a part of me as much as I am of him. You don't have to pretend that I didn't make the choice to become what I am. I won't be offended."

Hawke looked at him, a slight frown marring his forehead. He didn't stop walking and Anders hurried to keep up. Great, Anders thought as he took in Hawke's rather foreboding expression, what have I said now? They walked up the stairs towards the Hanged Man in silence. Anders tried to think of something else to say but his mind was a blank. He almost didn't see the pair of grubby children that ran towards them, a boy and a girl, she screaming in delight as the other chased her. Anders side stepped quickly out of their way, pushing him closer to Hawke on the stair. He
stiffened a little when he felt an arm slide around his waist to steady him. Anders turned in Hawke's hold, a little startled by the rogue's proximity.

"...How many times do I have to tell you that I don't care?" Hawke was smiling but there was an underlying frustration there, "I love you for what you are Anders. Don't you forget that."

Anders swallowed, feeling his heart beat a little faster. He wanted badly to lean in and kiss Hawke, let him know that his reassurance was appreciated, but he noticed the stares they were already getting just from their overly friendly closeness. He cleared his throat and tried to look composed.

"I know," he said, smiling, "sorry."

Hawke told him to forget it, like he always did, but Anders couldn't help but feel slightly foolish. How long was he going to project his own problems onto Hawke? His own worries about Justice were manifesting themselves in how he interacted with others, he knew that; but to place his own fears onto Hawke and then try and reassure the other man simply so, in a perverse way, he was reassuring himself...I really am a head case sometimes, Anders thought ruefully. There were enough things to worry about without making up new problems, such as all the things he didn't want to think about, all the things he wished he could ignore now that he and Hawke were happy together. Like Fenris for example.

Of course he's here, Anders thought deprecatingly, when is he not? In all honesty the complaint didn't hold as much water as it used to. Since Fenris' indiscretion he had been more like a ghost and not just around Hawke. He hardly seemed to leave his mansion, according to Isabella, and he had only seemed to be getting worse. Isabella told Anders that he was drinking practically all day at one point; she'd looked genuinely concerned for him and, when Isabella looked concerned for you, that's when you knew you were in trouble. Anders had almost, almost, been tempted to visit with her and make sure the elf was alright; he was a healer after all, it was his job. Yet he'd never really been able to convince himself that it would be a good idea and probably rightly so considering the look he was getting from Fenris now.

Varric, Merrill and Fenris were standing outside the Hanged Man when they approached. Anders hadn't seen them as they'd walked up the stairs, too busy watching Hawke for his reaction, but he could practically feel Fenris' eyes on him. Anders guessed he and Hawke's brief moment on the stairs had been even more public than Anders had realised if Fenris' hard stare was anything to go by. He had apparently had been helping Varric out with a job he'd needed doing when Bodahn had given Varric Hawke's message. Thought he would come along and see if he could be of help. Well, Anders thought sarcastically, isn't coincidence just wonderful.

"So what's the big surprise?" Varric asked, "You know I've been dying of anticipation since your message."

"I know," Merrill said, bobbing on her feet and smiling, "we've been trying to guess for ages! I said a picnic but, considering our usual adventures, I suppose it's a bit hopeful."

Anders couldn't help but smile at Merrill's enthusiasm; the girl never failed to cheer him up. Unfortunately Hawke had to bring everything back to reality. His face was serious and his voice staid as he explained.

"It's about Feynriel," Hawke said, folding his arms, "you remember, don't you Varric?"

"Of course," the dwarf said, "the boy we saved from those slavers, he went to his mothers people didn't he?"
"Yes, well, he's in trouble," Hawke said, not exactly elaborating, "his mother's asked for us."

"So the Dalish couldn't help then," Fenris finally spoke, arms folded as he leaned back against the stone wall of the Hanged Man; it wasn't a question.

"No," Hawke said, his voice terse, "but that doesn't mean I'm not going to try again."

"Hnn," Fenris said dismissively, "how many chances do you give a dangerous mage before you stop trying?"

"As many as you'd give anyone else," Anders couldn't help but say, his voice hard.

Fenris' eyes snapped to his, the abhorrence almost palpable. Anders didn't look away. Oh how he'd forgotten how much he hated the elf's easy intolerance. He began to berate himself for ever having felt sorry for him in the first place. He was a bloody hypocrite most of the time, when he wasn't being a prejudiced arse, and Anders didn't have the patience left to deal with him. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd tried to have Fenris realise the error of his judgement, tried to be reasonable in the face of the elf's sneering replies. If he wasn't careful enough would soon be enough.

"Well," Merrill said, clearing her throat to ease the tension, "umm, I don't know about this Feynriel. Did you say he went the Dalish? Perhaps the Keeper tried to help him?"

Varric told her all about it as they walked to the alienage. For some reason, which Anders couldn't fathom, Hawke didn't protest Fenris joining their party. The elf was stonily quiet and he didn't make any further comments but Anders still resented his presence considering his previous remarks. He wanted to say something to Hawke but wasn't sure how to bring it up. He didn't particularly want a fight but, so help him, if Fenris did anything to jeopardise this boy's safety he wouldn't hesitate in blasting him into a million pieces. Then Hawke might get the bloody picture, he thought angrily. Hawke was so oblivious sometimes that it made Anders want to slap him. Didn't he know how much Fenris' antipathy towards mages aggravated him? On top of that there was still the issue of Hawke's as yet undisclosed relationship. As far as Anders knew neither Hawke nor Fenris had told anyone of that night, and he certainly hadn't let Hawke know what he had seen. Still, it didn't mean it hadn't happened and Anders couldn't help but let that long running jealousy flare up again from its dormant state, despite everything.

At least they were headed somewhere calming, Anders thought. He had always liked the alienage, despite what everyone said about it. Perhaps it was his ability to deal with poverty and hardship, to look beyond that and see the strength of the community underneath it all. Everyone was always friendly here and no one ever bothered him. The air was also ever so slightly lighter; Anders suspected it was from the greenery and the herbs growing in the centre of the square. He breathed deeply, enjoying the rich scent of jasmine and sage as they passed the beautifully decorated tree.

"Oh no!" Merrill's gasp of dread pulled Anders from his reverie, "Hawke you didn't say that the Keeper was going to be here!"

"I didn't know she would be," Hawke said back, blinking.

Anders looked at Merrill's stricken face and frowned. Before them stood a middle aged elven woman with blonde hair, her hands twisting together worriedly, and another, older, her hair white with age, her tattoos and dress distinctively Dalish. The Dalish Keeper, Marethari; Hawke had spoken of her with reverence and Anders could see why. The woman had presence, a calm that seemed to command respect without demanding it. Her eyes seemed oddly timeless as Anders took in her appearance. She looked back at him unafectedly. Anders broke the stare before he would be
"Merrill," the Keeper said, her voice rough but soft, "how have you been my child?"

"I'm fine," Merrill said defiantly; Anders remembered Merrill talking of the Keeper as one would a mother, but she still seemed to want to prove her independence.

"Good," the Keeper said, her face kind but knowing.

"Keeper please," the woman, who Anders assumed was Arianni, said anxiously, "mustn't we hurry? My boy..."

"Yes Arianni, you are right," the Keeper said, nodding to reassure the woman before turning to Hawke, "I am glad you have come. The situation is worse than I had first realised. When the boy, Feynriel, arrived to us I had thought him simply troubled by his lack of experience, but after a short time I realised what the real problem is."

"And what is that?" Hawke asked, brow furrowed.

"Feynriel is no ordinary mage," the Keeper said gravely, "he is what we call a Dreamer. He possesses unrivalled connection to the Beyond and it is this connection that makes him so susceptible to the demons and spirits that dwell there. Dreamers are rare, they usually do not survive. He is the first in many generations to live beyond adolescence."

"Oh Creators," Arianni couldn't help but whisper out, her face wracked with worry as she brought her hands up to her mouth.

"Do not worry yourself, Arianni," the Keeper said reassuringly, "Feynriel is currently in a state of suspended sleep from which he will not awaken. This is, unfortunately, his first step towards his own downfall. If we cannot wake him he will, eventually, die. However, it is possible to try and awaken him."

Hawke had been listening carefully, his expression grave. When the Keeper stopped he took a deep breath before asking the question that Anders himself was anxious to know.

"How do we do it?" he asked resolutely.

"By travelling into the Beyond and communicating with him through his own 'dream' so to speak," the Keeper said, "if you can convince Feynriel to leave the cage he and the demons have built for him, there may be a chance to save his mind."

"Alright," Hawke nodded, no hesitation, "tell me what to do."

"Oh I told you he was wonderful!" Arianni said, her eyes gleaming with adoration as she stared at Hawke, "Didn't I say?"

"Arianni, would you give us some time to prepare?" the Keeper said suddenly, "This is a delicate procedure, you understand."

"Oh," Arianni looked a little taken aback, but her joy seemed to cancel out any suspicion, "yes, of course."

Anders watched her go. There was definitely something the Keeper wasn't telling them, something obviously distressing enough that Arianni wouldn't want to hear it. Anders turned back to the distinguished elf, wondering what the problem could be. Considering how dangerous the whole
affair sounded he doubted it was anything good. Nothing good ever came from a forced entry to
the Fade, well, not in his experience anyway.

"What's the matter?" Hawke asked.

"I must warn you," the Keeper said solemnly, "that Feynriel's status as a Dreamer makes him far
more dangerous than any other mage. His susceptibility to demons is only increased by his
abilities, they are drawn to his power, and if he were to become an abomination...well, he would be
more powerful than you could ever imagine."

"Then we'll have to make sure that doesn't happen," Merrill said sternly.

"You cannot guarantee that Dalen," the Keeper said, shaking her head, "I need you to promise me
that, if Feynriel gives in to temptation, you will do what needs to be done. If you slay him in the
dream he will become what you humans call Tranquil and he will be no further danger."

Anders felt his whole body tense. No further danger? That was all? He couldn't help the anger that
boiled up, feeding off of the Keeper's easy and neutral tone, as if the thought of destroying an
innocent boys mind wasn't a big problem. He pushed it down as Hawke nodded, his face grim.
Anders looked on in resentment, unable to keep himself quiet as Hawke agreed with the Keeper.

"It can't be that simple!" he said, frowning, "There must be another solution."

"We can't just do that to him," Merrill agreed, her face sorrowful, "it isn't his fault!"

"That is irrelevant," the Keeper said sagely, "the havoc and destruction that he would wreak were
he to become an abomination would take the lives of many more innocents before he would
eventually lose his own. Does it not seem fair that this eventuality be avoided?"

Anders bit his tongue and looked away. Of course it was logical, of course it was a valid point, but
when was emotion ever rational? And Vengeance was all emotion and no logic. Merrill's face fell
and she nodded, her eyes downcast under the stare of the Keeper.

"I will leave you to make your group," she said, "but choose wisely. Not everyone is able to
withstand the attraction offered by demons and your task will not be an easy one."

Anders noted the significant look the Keeper gave to Merrill with confusion. Did the woman really
have such little faith in her First? Anders frowned, wanting to speak up, but the Keeper was already
walking towards Arianni, reaching out to place a comforting hand against the distraught woman's
shoulder. He turned back to Hawke, watching as he ran his hand up through his hair and sighed.
Anders couldn't help himself.

"How could you possibly have agreed to that!" he said, folding his arms.

"It's nice to know you think it was an easy decision," Hawke said back dryly, "aren't you the one
who's always telling me that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?"

"Don't use my own words against me," Anders said sternly, "if you're going in there just to make
this boy Tranquil..."

"Believe me, Anders," Hawke said, sounding insulted, "that's the last thing I want to do. If we go
in there strong and we convince him then we won't even have to worry about that at all, will we?"

There was a loaded silence. Varric was the one to break it, looking worriedly between Hawke and
Anders.
"Well, I have to admit, I've always been a little fascinated by the idea of the Fade," he said, "I'll go if you need me."

"It's never held any attraction for me," Fenris shrugged; Anders was about to sigh in relief when the elf spoiled it, "but if you need me, I'm here for you Hawke."

Oh I just bet you are, Anders bristled. He glared at Fenris openly, not caring who saw. He could see Merrill was watching him, her eyes concerned, but she didn't comment. Instead she spoke to Hawke, her tone subdued.

"I'll go," she said, "I mean I'd like to go. I want to help Feynriel."

Hawke nodded to them, his eyes blank. Anders felt his chest tighten, all too aware that Hawke was waiting for him to speak. As if he didn't have enough problems as it was, now he had to worry about the Fade, he thought hollowly. It had been a long time since he'd been there outside of the dream. Not since his time in the Wardens with Cousland at the accursed Black Marsh, and even then it hadn't been for long. That had been before Justice and he were one, when he was just Anders. Now he had no idea what to expect if he entered that other realm by force. He felt he should at least warn Hawke, but at the same time he resented having to.

"If you want me to go, I will," he said; Hawke's eyes seemed to light up, "but I feel I should warn you that I have no idea what will happen. I haven't been into the Fade in years. Justice takes care of that now."

"What do you mean?" Hawke asked.

I thought you said you didn't care? Anders felt like saying out of spite. Yet he held himself in check. It wasn't fair to think that, this was different. Hawke had already made it more than clear to him that he did not concern himself at all with Anders possession. In this situation however, where people's lives would be at risk, Hawke deserved to know all the information he could before entering somewhere as dangerous as the Fade. Anders sighed, ignoring Fenris' critical eyes as they bored into him.

"I mean that it more than likely won't be me you'll be dealing with if I go with you," Anders said, "and if it is Justice, I won't have any control over his actions."

Hawke was still for a moment, contemplative. He watched Anders through unreadable eyes before looking away.

"Well...then we'll deal with that as it comes," Hawke shrugged, "like I said, the more mages the better. Anyway, it might come in handy, having a Fade spirit with us in the Fade."

"Hawke..." Anders started, hearing the anger and fear in his own tone.

"Come on, we're running out of time," Hawke cut him off, turning to walk over to Marethari and Arianni.

Anders left it at that, even though he wanted to say more. They sojourned to Arianni's meagre house to perform the ritual. The Keeper would send them in, with help from Merrill and Anders, and she would maintain their connection and watch over them while they were unconscious. Sending five mages into the Fade would have been enough of a feat in itself, but having more than half the party with no connection to the Fade whatsoever, well, it would be difficult. Not impossible, Anders thought, but tricky to carry out. He was glad that he had brought extra lyrium potions, was all he could think. He was so focused on setting up the ritual that he almost didn't see
"You're name is Anders, is it not?" the Keeper asked; Anders looked up at her as she addressed him, a little wary.

"Yes," he said, not sure what else to say.

"I know that it may seem a little unorthodox, what with us only just having met," the Keeper said, "but I would like to ask a favour of you. As a fellow mage, I would like you to look after Merrill while in the Fade. I would feel much better if there was someone there to keep her from temptation."

"Keeper!" Merrill said, her voice outraged, "I do not need looking after, I will be fine!"

"I don't think..." Anders started to protest, but Fenris beat him to it.

"How ironic," Fenris said sarcastically as he leaned his massive sword against the wall, his eyes narrowed, "asking the abomination to look after the blood mage."

Anders would have glared, he would have bit out a snarky reply, but his anger was overridden by shock. The Keeper was looking at him as if she was surprised that he didn't look more like a demon possessed madman, her brow furrowed. Yet that didn't really register, for once that didn't matter. Anders turned to Merrill, watching as her face fell.

"Blood magic?" he asked quietly, his face incredulous; he couldn't help but laugh nervously, as if that could convince him that Fenris' words were nothing more than contentious, "Merrill, tell me he's lying..."

"I can look after myself," Merrill said maturely, yet he caught the quiver in her words, "and I know what I'm doing."

"You know what you're..." Anders repeated, shaking his head; how could Merrill of all people be foolish enough to think that blood magic was controllable? "Merrill there is not controlling blood magic! You've made a pact with a demon. It'll simply be using you for its own ends!"

"And how is that different from what you've done?" Merrill said back, her eyes narrowed with hurt, "I thought you might understand..."

"Justice is no demon!" Anders said angrily, his face hardening, "And I made no such pact to gain his power. I didn't join with him to further myself, that's not how it worked."

Merrill opened her mouth to say something further but, at the last minute, seemed to change her mind and snapped it shut. Anders didn't know what to say. The revelation explained a lot of things; Hawke's constant underlying wariness of Merrill despite their friendship, the fact that the other elves in the alienage never seemed to accept her, the derision of her own people, but still, on some level, Anders couldn't believe it. Merrill of all people, innocent, sweet hearted Merrill was using blood magic, consorting with demons. It was surreal. Anders shook his head and tried to focus on the ritual. He couldn't think about this now, not with Feynriel in danger, not with Hawke relying on him. He needed to focus. He could talk to Merrill later. Yes, he would deal with it later.

Eventually everything was prepared. Anders sat beside Hawke as the other man lay down on the floor. The rogue looked up at him, his eyes warm, and smiled. Anders smiled back as he felt Hawke's hand slip into his own, fingers warm through his thin glove. He squeezed it briefly before letting go, watching as Fenris and Varric lay down next to Hawke. Anders was glad, in a petulant way, that Varric was separating Hawke from Fenris. I really am turning back into a child aren't I?
Anders thought, shaking his head as he turned to face Marethari and Merrill.

They sat in a tight circle, each reaching out to focus their magic, joining it with the others, feeling the power build. Anders was amazed by the control that radiated from the Keeper. Perhaps this wouldn't be so very hard after all, he thought woefully as the thrumming of the whispering Fade began to build in his ears. He looked to Merrill, noting her distinctly sleepy blinking, and tried to focus. He wouldn't admit it, not even to Hawke, but the idea of letting Justice out around his friends, it scared him. He had no idea what the spirit would do or what he would say. Especially to Hawke. Hawke was the one thing that he and Justice did not agree on and, given the Spirit's previous record, he wasn't exactly convinced of his ability to control himself. As his eyelids grew ever heavier he hoped he hadn't made a huge mistake in agreeing to this. Under the haze of blue light and shushing of distant winds he felt his eyes drift close and everything faded to black.

When he blinked open his eyes he was lying on the floor next to Hawke. It was an odd sensation, like forced sleep; he felt as if he had only just closed his eyes seconds before. He sat up a little groggily, noting that both Merrill and Fenris were already sitting by the Keeper, their eyes alert. He blinked at them before looking to Varric. The dwarf stood up and shook himself, giving Anders a concerned glance before looking elsewhere.

Oh Maker, what had Justice done? was all he could think. He hoped that someone would fill him in on everything that had happened. If they tried to keep it from him he feared it might drive him mad.

"I have to say I am impressed," the Keeper was saying to Hawke as the man sat up, rubbing the back of his neck, "I truly thought that the boy was lost to us."

"Oh thank you, thank you!" Arianni was weeping with joy as she knelt down, throwing her arms around Hawke, "I don't know how I can ever repay you for this!"

"It's alright," Hawke was saying, patting her a little awkwardly on the back, "I'm just happy I could help."

Anders turned back to the Keeper, feeling eyes on him. The woman was looking at him with far less suspicion than she previously had. Well, Anders thought with a sigh, perhaps Justice hadn't made a bad impression on everyone then. He should be thankful for small mercies at least. Anders noticed, however, that Merrill couldn't meet his eyes and that Fenris was also looking distinctly uncomfortable. He wondered why they were both already awake when he had come out of his trance. What had happened in there?

"Alright," Anders pulled Varric aside as Hawke talked to Arianni and the Keeper, "tell me everything."

"You mean you don't remember?" Varric asked, frowning.

"I would have thought you knew how it worked by now," Anders said impatiently, "when Justice takes over I don't see anything, hear anything. It's all a blank."

Varric looked a little uneasy. He took a deep breath before sighing, looking around their group, as if trying to think how best to word it.

"Well, it's maybe a bit of a long story," Varric said, "but the gist of it is that the Keeper was right about people not being able to resist demons and your friend Justice most certainly is not fond of Hawke."
Oh wonderful, Anders thought, what was that supposed to mean? Anders brought his hand up to rub at his face. A long story? How long had he been out? He wished that Varric wouldn't be so bloody vague. He could usually rely on the dwarf to be concise at least.

"What did he do?" Anders asked darkly.

"Oh, well," Varric shrugged, "he didn't do anything as such. Just had a few, uh, choice words shall we say."

"Choice words," Anders repeated tightly, "mind telling me what those might have been?"

"Maybe you should be asking Hawke about this," Varric said, lifting his hands, "I'd really rather not get in the middle of this odd ménage à trios you have going on here."

"Please don't call it that," Anders said despairingly, "honestly, why did I think this was a good idea?"

"You got me, Blondie," Varric said, shaking his head.

Anders tried to wrap his head around the situation. There were too many things running rampantly around his mind, demanding answers. Why on earth had he agreed to this? He had some suspicion that Justice had perhaps influenced him to say yes. Not enough for him to notice the Spirit's control but enough to tip him towards agreeing. He thought he'd been doing it for Hawke's sake, but now he wasn't so sure. And why were Merrill and Fenris looking so put out? Had they fallen in battle with demons? He still needed to talk to Merrill, needed to talk to her about her blood magic...he still couldn't get used to thinking that. It was so wrong that he could almost imagine that it was all a dream and he'd never been told about it at all. There was also a part of him that seemed abhorred by the fact that he hadn't picked up on it sooner; how could he have been friends with her all this time and not known what she was doing? Then there was Hawke. What had Justice done? The rogue didn't look particularly affected but then he was always composed and stalwart when in front of acquaintances.

"I'm going out to get some air," Anders said, feeling distinctly closed in all of a sudden.

No one stopped him or questioned his actions, for which he was glad. The sun was already down below the roofs of the buildings, scarring the sky a dark, burnt sienna overlaid with strips of shining gold. He wasn't surprised; it had been early evening before they had entered the Fade and Varric did say that they had been out for quite a while. He walked over to the large tree at the centre of the alienage, tracing its distinctive pattern with his eyes. There were only a few elves out at this time of evening, leaning against the walls or huddled together, casting wary glances around at the strangers. Anders breathed in, feeling the crisp cold of the coming night. Staring upwards through the lanterns, trying to focus on the stars shining in the dark blue sky building from the east, he tried to calm himself down, separate himself from the world for a while.

He didn't even pay any attention as the Keeper left, or as Merrill hurried past him to her house, closing the door quietly, or even as Varric waved to him before heading up the steps back towards the Hanged Man. Yet he couldn't help but take notice when Hawke emerged, Fenris not far behind him, and the elf took hold of Hawke's arm to pull him back. Anders felt his fingers curl into fists as Hawke turned back. He couldn't hear what either was saying, but Fenris seemed to be apologising for something if his repentant expression was anything to go by. He stared at them brazenly, not caring if either noticed. That was when he noticed the red ribbon, tied around Fenris' right wrist. Anders frowned. Why had he never noticed that before? The elf's outfit was composed almost entirely of black and grey, not exactly the most exciting tones, and the splash of colour was really rather obvious. Hawke reached up to touch Fenris' shoulder reassuringly once the elf was finished
talking, his smile comforting in its levity. Anders couldn't think straight. Where had he seen that colour before? he thought, trying not to focus on the two men, even as Fenris left and Hawke began to walk towards him. Anders wracked his mind, watching Hawke with only half a mind as he tried to recall...

Anders clicked. He pulled his staff from his belt slowly, upending it until the bladed end sat with a dull, metallic thud against the dirt covered ground. He reached up tentatively and ran his fingers through the blood red ribbon that was tied around the shaft. Coincidence, he lied to himself, it's just a coincidence, you're letting your bloody jealousy carry you away again. Anders wished he could convince himself it was true.

"Well," Hawke said, shoving his hands into his pockets as he stood beside Anders, "that was...interesting."

"I'm sure," Anders said wryly, his fingers twisting into the ribbon to tug at it thoughtfully.

"Doesn't like me much, does he?" Hawke said, finally looking to Anders, "Justice I mean."

Despite everything Anders couldn't help but feel a stab of guilt on Justice's behalf. Not that the spirit would be repentant for what he had said or done, Anders was sure, but he still couldn't help but feel it.

"What did he say?" Anders sighed, sounding like a disappointed parent.

"Oh, just something about me being a terrible disruption, keeping you from your duties and generally messing you around," Hawke shrugged with a weak smile.

"I see," Anders said, shaking his head at Hawke's vague answer, "well, I did warn you that I had no idea what would happen."

"True," Hawke concurred, "although I have to admit I wasn't expecting the 'protective older brother speech'. I'm quite sure I had enough of that from your Commander already."

"Hawke..." Anders started, but was interrupted almost immediately.

"I already told you not to worry about it," Hawke said, sidling up to stand closer.

And you had no idea what I was going to say, Anders thought, thinking of all the antagonistic things he could have said or asked. He swallowed them down, leaving a sick feeling of resentment in his stomach. Bizarrely Hawke's touch was soothing against his underlying uneasiness; Anders revelled in it as Hawke raised his hand to run it familiarly over his hair, pulling the mage in for a brief kiss. Anders found he didn't have the energy to care who saw them.

"Let's just go home," Hawke suggested, "I don't know about you but I'm starving."

Anders nodded, uncurling his fingers from the red ribbon and buckling his staff back onto his belt. He listened as Hawke began to explain just what had happened in the Fade, only half listening as they walked back towards Hightown, back towards home.
Chapter Notes

Warning: Depictions of male/male sex

Anders had learned to be wary of happiness from a young age. Not just because of his being torn from his family at twelve years old, no, it had started younger than that and in a much more conventional way. Any child can be bullied, especially when they are even just ever so slightly different from the others and Anders, even before his revelation of being a mage, was always ever so slightly different. He liked to think it would surprise people to learn that he'd been shy when he was young. Perhaps it was his unconscious knowledge of his talents, perhaps it was his mother's over protective nature or his father's cold severity, or maybe even just his nature. Whatever was responsible, he had always tried his best not to interact with anyone else. Yet, somehow, he made himself a target by trying to be as invisible as possible. The irony of his strategy never truly escaped him.

He had never understood why Darren Shaw, the local tavern owner's son, hated him so much. Now, as an adult, he could come up with many reasons as to the bully's need for attention, his own insecurities for example or the fact that his father had been a raging alcoholic, but at the tender age of six Anders had no understanding of his seeming dislike. All he'd known was the Darren Shaw liked to beat him whenever he got the chance and, being twice as large and strong as he was, he generally got away with it. Anders had never truly cared for his own safety, something he had never really gotten away from. Apathy bred of lack of affection he always thought; apart from his mother no one ever truly paid him any mind. Until Darren Shaw threw his cat into the river. Then they paid him some attention, mainly because Anders had pushed Darren in after the cat in a fit of unconscious rage. How was he to know that the boy couldn't swim? All Anders could think, as the Miller jumped into the river to pull the gasping boy from the water, his eyes clouded with tears, was that no one had jumped in after his Mopsy. Who cared about Darren bloody Shaw? It was the first time Anders had wished someone dead and meant it, even if just for a moment, with all his heart. Happiness was a fleeting thing, he'd learned that day; he'd only had Mopsy for a week but, at six, he hadn't loved anything so much in his life till that point, other than his mum.

Now that position was reserved for someone much more complicated. Cats weren't complicated, perhaps that was why he liked them so much. They were laid back, low maintenance creatures, self-centred but loving in their own way. Almost the complete opposite of Hawke who could be really rather highly strung at times, was entirely magnanimous, generous, loving and entirely high maintenance. Anders would have laughed if it had been funny. The man was so much work that he took up all Anders time even without actually being there. When Hawke wasn't bothering him then Anders was thinking about all the things that Hawke did to bother him. When he wasn't at home with him then Hawke was visiting him at the clinic or persuading him to come and help him with some odd job he'd picked up. When he didn't come home because he was too tired to make the journey up to Hightown then Hawke was turning up at his door at one in the morning demanding to know why.

"What on earth are you doing here?" Anders had asked through an irritated yawn, when Hawke had done just that.
"I think I should be asking you that shouldn't I?" Hawke had said back concernedly, arms folded.

That had been the start of a truly spectacular fight. From Anders side it was mainly because he'd had a terrible day, having lost one of his patients and, in the process, completely exhausted himself. From Hawke's side, it seemed to Anders, it was pure petulance and possessiveness, which didn't make Anders feel any more inclined to his point of view. It got so bad at one point that they actually had a man from up the alleyway shouting at them to 'shut up or I'll shut you up!'. Hawke had turned and retaliated with a truly colourful metaphor that included a dagger, a sheep, the man's genitalia and several feet of rope. Anders didn't think he'd laughed so hard in a long time, especially after being so blazingly angry moments before. Hawke had stared at him like he was mad for a whole ten seconds before joining in.

"Want to come in?" Anders had asked one he could breathe again.

Anders didn't know you could have wonderful make-up sex after such a brief but admittedly heated fight. Apparently you could with Hawke. Although the man was insatiable on that front, as Anders was finding out rather quickly. The rogue had pounced on him after the door was barely locked, picking him up, forcing Anders to wrap his legs around Hawke's waist to stay steady. Anders didn't think his examination table had seen that much action in its entire existence. It was as he had laid on his narrow bedroll, curled close to Hawke as he slept, secure arms wrapped around him...that was when the apprehension had set in. Never mind the worries he had about everything else, the worries that actually had a founding in reality; like his worry that he was endangering Hawke through their relationship, that he would only disappoint him in the end, his worries about Fenris, his worries about Hawke's mother. No, this was something else.

Too happy. He was too happy. Something was going to have to give, his conscience told him, something was going to go wrong and everything would be taken away. It wasn't a rational fear; Anders had never believed in fate but, deep down, from that moment when he'd watched Darren Shaw throw his hissing, scratching cat into the water, mindless of his cries, he'd believed in sorrow and its ability to turn up at the most unexpected and inopportune of moments. Now, in this blissful state of almost normalcy, he felt he was just waiting for the hammer to fall.

Until that happened, however, he still had other, real, concerns. Such as Merrill.

"I thought we would need it," he had said by way of a peace offering, handing over the bag of loose tea as Merrill looked at him warily from behind her half closed front door.

He had visited in the morning because Hawke had business with the Viscount that couldn't wait, so Anders had packed himself off to the alienage. He'd be the first to admit that this wasn't something he'd been looking forward to, but at the same time he almost couldn't wait to talk to her. Somehow, rather optimistically he would later tell himself, he had been very sure that this was all some big misunderstanding. That he would turn up at Merrill's door and she would tell him that she'd seen the error of her ways and abandoned blood magic forever.

Instead it turned into a long afternoon, one which he wished had been more in his favour. Anders still couldn't believe how adamant Merrill was that she was in control of the situation. Considering the amount of blood magic she had witnessed going wrong on their travels he would have thought she had learned that consorting with demons never paid off. Contrary to his hopes she refused to listen to any of his reasons or his pleas. So focused was she on saving the heritage of her people that she was blinded as to the dangers. Anders found it hard to hide his frustration. He found himself torn, between himself and Justice. Anders just wanted to help her, Justice to condemn her. Separating the two became increasingly difficult as the afternoon wore into evening and Anders was forced to cut his visit short before he said something he regretted. He left on civil terms but
something between them had been irreversibly changed, something he knew he couldn't fix mainly because he had little control over what Justice did or felt.

"Are you alright?" Hawke had asked after he returned from the alienage looking tired and hollow.

"No," Anders had answered truthfully but did not elaborate.

He hadn't needed to. Hawke seemed to already know, just from his answer, what had happened. Perhaps it was because Hawke was especially good at reading people, or perhaps, and much more likely, Hawke had already had the same frustrating conversation with Merrill that Anders had and knew the outcome. Anders hadn't thought that you could kiss something like this better, but Hawke gave it a good try and he wasn't complaining. Hawke was something he could lose himself in, despite his own hang ups.

Although those hang ups were tricky business too. The main one being Leandra. Anders hadn't been sure how she would take Hawke's final defiance of her wishes for him, her want for him to marry into happiness and have a family, carry on the name. Hawke had refused to tell him just what had happened when he'd told his mother about their relationship, about the fact that Anders was now technically living with them. Through that Anders knew it must be bad; if it was something Hawke didn't want to talk about he generally just made a joke of it or twisted the details to suit his needs. Utterly avoiding the issue wasn't really his style. Oh Leandra was polite enough to him, she wasn't rude or scathing or even derogatory in any way. Anders had to wonder just exactly what had happened that Hawke wouldn't tell him when his mother seemed to be perfectly pleasant. He wished Hawke would put his mind at ease. Now he had been left in a state of limbo, one where he wanted nothing more than to accept that Leandra wasn't as bothered by the situation as he had thought she would be, but Hawke's awkwardness about their talk was stopping him. Anders just tried his best not to think about it. Other than that there wasn't much more he could do.

The trouble didn't end there, of course. It had taken longer than he had expected, considering her tenacity, but Aveline finally turned up at the door to Hawke's mansion a week before his birthday to speak to Anders, under pretences of party business. Anders knew better than that and Aveline had known it was the only way she could get him alone without Hawke hovering over them like a, well, hawk. He hadn't entirely known what to expect; Aveline tended to be eternally reliable in her reactions but, on occasion, she surprised him.

"So, come to arrest me at last?" Anders had said facetiously, "Took you long enough."

"I'm not here to arrest you," Aveline had said, frowning with insult, "I just..."

"What?" Anders had prompted when she didn't continue.

"You told us you could control this," Aveline said gravely, "but after what I saw under the Gallows, with Alrik...I don't think that's true."

"Well," Anders rolled his eyes, "you don't say. Thanks for clearing that up for me, I'd been wondering why I'd been going on so many mass slaughtering sprees in my sleep lately."

"Do you have to always be so flippant about this?" Aveline had bit back, "I mean it is true isn't it? And everything you did that day was all because of some non-existent 'tranquil solution' that you thought Alrik was going to put into place!"

"Non-existent?" Anders couldn't help but scowl in the face of Aveline's trivializing; he pulled his glove off harshly and brought his hand up for her to see, "Had a pretty good go at me though, didn't he? Good thing he didn't get to finish the job or he would have done it to that innocent girl next!
And then another mage somewhere else, or tens, dozens, hundreds more, who knows! Does it matter at all to you that, yes, Meredith didn't sanction his plan but she didn't _stop_ him either? She must have known what he was doing and yet she did nothing to reprimand him. She just as culpable as he is for every one of those mages who were illegally made tranquil!"

Aveline hadn't known what to say at first. Anders had thought, for an incredulous moment, that she was going to continue arguing with him. Then she took a deep breath and her face fell. She had rubbed at her eyes tiredly before answering, her voice soft.

"I am sorry, about what happened to you Anders," she said, "it's just...I wouldn't even know where to start in trying to investigate someone with that much authority. The Viscount would probably shoot me down before I even set one foot in the Gallows. And there's already tension enough between the guards and the templars as it is, never mind me stirring it up more."

She had looked perplexed when Anders had just smiled at her.

"What?" she'd asked warily, "Here I was expecting another tirade but now you look happy?"

"I am happy," Anders had shrugged, fiddling with the glove in hands, "you just told me that you'd considered investigating Knight Commander Meredith. I don't care if it'll never happen, it's the thought that counts."

Aveline still thought he was mad but she also seemed much less hostile towards him than she had been before. Anders couldn't tell whether it was pity over what had been done to him or because Aveline had truly been affected by Alrik's cruel actions against mages. He suspected it was a bit of both; Aveline was an honourable and duty bound woman and any disobedience of the law seemed to anger her, yet she was also rather caught up in her emotions as well, even if she would never admit it. Anders hoped he could keep her on his side for as long as possible. Perhaps having a little more influence with the guard would help the resistance if nothing else.

Then they had _actually_ talked about the party. Aveline seemed to think that there was no reason they couldn't just go to the Shield and Eagle as she had missed last year's get together due to work and patrols. Anders had thought it would just be easier to go to the Hanged Man. Yes, so it wouldn't be anything new but they would have full use of Varric's suite and it didn't really matter where they were as long as everyone was together. Also, Anders had pointed out, they could get as drunk as they wanted and not have to worry about getting turfed out. Aveline had thought about it for a moment before agreeing, her smile turning a little sly.

"Free drinks too," she had said with a shrug, "you can always rely on Varric."

Anders had found that he tended to awaken before Hawke did. Not that the man was lazy at all, it was just Anders was used to getting up very early, around six o'clock, whereas Hawke tended to wake up around eight. Somehow, since living together, they had shifted their sleeping patterns to an odd compromise where Anders seemed to rise naturally around seven and Hawke around half an hour later unless the mage woke him, which he usually tried his best not to do.

Unless it was a special occasion of course.

"Hawke..." Anders purred into the man's ear, sliding up behind him to trail his hands over Hawke's abdomen.

The rogue groaned sleepily in response and pushed his face into the pillow. The sun was just faintly visible from behind the curtains, leaving everything in a dim, hazy light. Anders had
awoken, noting the time, and decided that if Hawke was going to have to wake up on his birthday he might as well make it memorable. He smiled, moving to accommodate the man as Hawke rolled onto his back, still not opening his eyes. Anders watched his face as he let his hands trail across Hawke's body, taking a moment to appreciate the hard, toned muscle under soft skin beneath his palms. And that wasn't the only thing that was hard, Anders noted approvingly. Hawke's brow furrowed, his hands twitching; he blinked open his eyes and lifted his head sleepily, just in time to watch Anders swallow his cock into his mouth as far as he could take it.

"Maker's...!" Hawke's voice strangled out into a choked moan, his hands fisting into the bed sheets and his head falling back against the pillow.

That had been the kind of reaction he'd been hoping for, Anders thought slyly. He hummed appreciatively in response, taking hold of the base in his fist as he pulled back, squeezing gently making Hawke buck his hips without thinking. The mage reached up with his free hand to hold him steady as Hawke panted, feeling a hand finally find its way into his sleep tousled hair, fingers flexing as he moved slowly up and down. Anders twisted his hand slowly around the base of Hawke's length while he moved his head so as to run his tongue up the underside. The rogue let out a string of mumbled curses and fisted his fingers into his hair, pulling painfully. Anders let out a soft cry but didn't stop, revelling in Hawke's response to his own cries as he continued to pleasure him.

"Fuck Anders, I'm going to..!" he started with a stifled shout.

Anders removed his hand and pushed down, taking Hawke into his throat. The man swore colourfully as he came, his voice almost pained, holding onto Anders like a vice. Anders let him, trying to control his need to gag as he swallowed as best he could, his own fingers tight around Hawke's thigh. Soon the man relaxed below him, his hand going limp, his breathing evening out. Anders pulled back, coughing a little roughly before looking up to see Hawke watching him through half lidded eyes, his chest rising and falling slowly.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're completely unbelievable?" Hawke asked, voice gruff as he caught his breath.

"Mmm, I'm sure they have, but it probably wasn't meant as a compliment," Anders shrugged, grinning as Hawke reached down to pull him up for a long and very involved kiss; he waited until they broke apart before saying, "happy birthday."

"Well it's certainly the happiest start to a birthday I've ever had," Hawke said contentedly, "let's see how the rest of it shapes up, shall we?"

Breakfast was a pleasant affair of bread, eggs, cooked ham and beef sausages; and cake. Both Oranna and Anders and even Hawke's mother had chastised him when he'd said that cake wasn't for breakfast. Oranna had been busy the whole day before trying her best, with Anders admittedly not very helpful guidance, to make the birthday cake. It hadn't turned out as well as either of them had hoped. It was a bit of a sad looking thing, all sloped to one side with rather uneven, grainy butter sugar icing over the top. Still, Anders thought with amusement as Hawke eyed it as if it were going to come alive and bite him, it was the thought that counted.

"It's your birthday," Anders had said, scandalised "Come on, live a little!"

Hawke had swatted him half heartedly on the shoulder, his expression distinctly long suffering. He did take a piece of cake though, despite his protests. Anders smiled behind his tea cup so as to avoid any further annoyance on Hawke's part. It was the man's birthday after all, the least he could do was be nice.
"So," Anders asked as he and Hawke left the mansion together, "what are you planning on doing today?"

"Nothing special," Hawke shrugged, walking in step with him, "I need to visit Aveline, she said she wanted to talk to me about something, then I'm sure I'll find something to keep me occupied until later. Are you headed to the clinic?"

"Yes, I'll be there until noon," Anders said as they walked down the stairs towards the marketplace, the sun shining weakly down through the cold air, "then I'll be out."

"Out?" Hawke asked, his face a little concerned.

"Yes, out," Anders repeated significantly, "I'll be back later, don't worry."

Hawke hummed in reply, not sounding entirely convinced. Anders hoped that Hawke thought his dealings were secret because of his birthday instead of the real reason he couldn't tell him; because he and Sabine were meeting a group of apostates in the Lowtown sewers to help them escape the city. Regular fare for Anders but he knew if he told Hawke the man would probably throw a fit. He reacted badly enough to the things Anders did tell him or he found out about by mistake. He appreciated Hawke's concern for his safety but it wasn't something he thought he could deal with on a regular basis. Also if Hawke found out about how much work he did with the resistance and the danger involved he suspected Hawke might demand he cease and desist any contact with them and that was something he wouldn't allow. Of course he could be wrong, Hawke might understand what with living a rather dangerous lifestyle himself, but he couldn't be sure enough to risk trying.

"Alright, then I suppose I'll see you later on?" Hawke said when they reached the stairs leading to Darktown.

"I'll be back at the house about..." Anders quickly calculated, "say seven? That ought to give us enough time."

"Mmm," Hawke hummed again, his eyes unreadable.

Then, without warning, he leaned forwards and pulled Anders into his arms, pressing their lips together tenderly. Anders jumped in surprise, his hands coming up to clamp onto Hawke's shoulders, his eyes as wide as Hawke's were closed. The kiss stayed fairly chaste but Anders could feel the intensity in the way Hawke's fingers were digging into his coat, the press of his chest, the quickness of his breathing. When Hawke pulled back Anders was blushing and several of the nearby merchants and guards were either staring or gaping openly at them.

"Nice to know I can still surprise you," Hawke seemed to say more to himself than Anders, smirking as he pulled away, "stay safe."

"I-I will," Anders stuttered a little, clearing his throat as Hawke turned and headed for the stairs that lead to Lowtown.

Never mind 'surprise', Anders thought dazedly as he turned to walk down the stairs, Hawke was a bloody enigma.

"So, taking advantage of my wonderful hospitality again are we?" Varric had every right to look just a little wary as he spoke his greeting.

For once Anders had managed to last almost an entire day without having an argument with Hawke. The word 'almost' being a key word in that sentence. Tonight, more than any other since
they had started seeing each other, Anders was keenly aware of the frequency with which they tended to fight. Perhaps he'd ignored it before because, even before they'd become involved more intimately, they had tended to argue a lot anyway. Yet now, especially tonight as he had wanted Hawke to have an enjoyable birthday at least, he had realised that they tended to argue on a nearly daily basis about something or other, whether it was minor or fully blown. Tonight's argument wasn't even anything special, or at least to Anders it wasn't; although he suspected that it was something Hawke had been holding on to for longer than he had realised, resulting in it becoming more heated than it had really needed to be.

The apostates Anders and Sabine had ferried through the city sewers were safely, or as safely as they could be, on their way, but it had taken a little longer than Anders had anticipated. No templars this time, Anders thought, just bandits looking for easy prey. Unfortunate for them that their 'easy prey' turned out to be six very angry mages entirely capable of defending themselves. They had been easily dispatched but their interference had slowed them down, forcing them to move cautiously and come out of the expedition more than a little worse for wear. Which had resulted in yet more worrying on Hawke's part. When Anders had tried to sneak back to the mansion an hour later than he'd said he would, his clothes spattered with blood and marks of battle, Hawke was pacing back and forth before the fireplace with a dark frown adorning his handsome face.

"What exactly did 'out' comprise of then?" Hawke had demanded.

And therein started argument which made Hawke rather late to his own get together and in not such a terrific mood when he got there. Hawke simply covered it up with a convincing smile, which seemed to fool nearly everyone in the room except for Anders, Varric and even Fenris who frowned a little at Hawke from his seat at the corner of the table.

"Oh when do I ever take advantage of you Varric?" Hawke joked.

"Other than all the time?" Varric shrugged, "I'd say never."

Hawke grinned compellingly and sat down next to Aveline, accepting her best wishes along with a flagon of ale which she'd had waiting for him. Anders sat down next to him, glad in a way that it was Varric on his other side. At least he'd have someone to talk to for the night without having to pretend there wasn't a problem.

"Everything okay Blondie?" Varric asked quietly while Hawke laughed loudly with Aveline and Isabella at something he hadn't heard.

"Fine," Anders smiled, spinning his drink around in his fingers, not really feeling up to pretending to join in tonight.

"Oh, that bad huh?" Varric said with a smirk.

"Well, it will be fine," Anders shrugged, "at some point."

"Okay, okay," Varric said, raising his hands, "I'll take your word for it. I'm guessing it's not really any of my business anyway, right?"

"It's nothing that bad," Anders couldn't help but smile in the face of Varric's usual charm, shaking his head, "just the usual. Anyway, when have you ever cared whether something is your business or not?"

"I can be conservative," Varric said, sounding believable right up until he ruined it by smirking,
"On occasion."

"On occasion," Anders repeated, shaking his head and laughing a little, "that's a good one. Tell me another."

So Varric did. Perhaps, Anders thought as the dwarf regaled him with his most recent tales, Varric wasn't so much showing off his story telling prowess as he was recognising that Anders needed the distraction. If that was his reason, Anders thought, then he really appreciated it. Whenever he and Hawke fought about something they tended to shout and scream for a little while then, usually after forgetting what the original reason they were fighting for was, they would make up. Generally in the bedroom. Of course there hadn't been time to even shout and scream properly this time, what with already running late, so tensions were still a little high between them. It would die down naturally but, knowing Hawke, that would take a while. The man knew how to hold on to his anger a little too well; even if it seemed he'd dismissed something he had probably just buried it for future use.

Despite his reservations it turned into a better night than Anders had anticipated. Oh it could have been just like any other night or course, but there was something about having everyone together, enjoying themselves, that never really lost its charm. However, Anders couldn't help but notice that Merrill was exceptionally quiet; of course sitting next to Isabella would make anyone look positively shrew-like by comparison, but this was different. It stung his conscience. He agreed with Justice, he did; blood magic was unforgivable. It led only to hurt and ruin, nothing good could come of it but...Merrill was still Merrill. He liked her, a lot. She was kind and ditzy and sweet natured, not hardened or ambitious or delusional like most of the blood mages he had encountered. Which only made it all the harder to watch her isolate herself. She had never really grown close to any of the others in the group, except for Varric. Aveline was polite enough to her, Isabela was her usual self, Hawke was just nice and Fenris, well, he was his predictable self when it came to mages, only harsher. Out of everyone it was he and Merrill who had grown to be good friends, Anders thought sadly; he felt like he was somehow letting her down. Of course he couldn't do anything about it, he was too tied up in his own morality issues; which was why he liked Varric so much. The dwarf was incredibly perceptive.

"Oh, Daisy, you have to hear this one," Varric had said, seemingly out of the blue as he and Anders continued their story swapping session, "it's right up your street."

Merrill had looked round like a rabbit in headlights. Anders couldn't help but be suspicious of the dwarf's actions; he could have been being candid, but then Anders suspected he'd picked up on the rather sad, concerned looks he'd been throwing Merrill, thinking he was being discreet. Merrill smiled a little weakly but stood up out of her chair nonetheless, sidling round past the fire to take the empty seat beside Varric at the end of the table. Anders hadn't entirely known what to say, fumbling over unfinished thoughts and inappropriate words. Finally he just settled on doing something he was sure he would have appreciated had he been in Merrill's shoes.

"Here," Anders had said, passing her his untouched brandy; she took it a little warily, "I think you could use it more than me."

She looked at him for a moment in silence before her smile turned genuinely grateful, her eyes a little glassy as she blinked; she mumbled out a thank you. Anders suspected it was for more than just the drink.

"Oh no, no alcohol for you," Varric said, looking at the glass disapprovingly, "I've managed to keep her away from it since we met and I'm not about to give up now."

"Oh don't be such a spoil sport," Anders rolled his eyes, "just water it down or something, she'll be
Merrill giggled but let Varric pour some water into her glass from the carafe in the centre of the table. She sipped it tentatively, her face screwing up adorably as she coughed. Anders couldn't help but laugh, ignoring Varric's censorious stare.

"Oh, it's awful," Merrill said, staring at Varric as if he were mad, "how can you drink this stuff?"

"Hey, it's his drink, not mine," Varric said, looking scandalised that she could even consider insulting his drinking tastes, "and anyway, alcohol is an acquired taste."

"Well I'm not sure if it's something I want to acquire," Merrill said, although she didn't let go of her glass; Anders thought that it was probably to give her hands something to do rather than wanting to drink any more.

"Well I never," Varric said, looking to Anders as if he were suddenly some sort of miracle worker, "for months now she's never stopped pestering me to try it and now, after one taste, she decides she doesn't want it."

Anders smiled at Varric but wasn't really paying attention to his words. Alright so I still need to convince her, Anders thought as he tried his best to reconcile his want to be friends with Merrill's actions...then I'll just have to try harder. It wasn't the best of solutions but it would have to do. He was sure he could do it, somehow. Anders could be very persuasive when he wanted to be, although Merrill did seem dead set on taking the dangerous road. Perhaps he could help her find another way to fix this mirror of hers, something that didn't involve selling out to demons. Yes he would help her, Anders decided, feeling Justice's indignation as he did. Well, hadn't he pledged to help every mage in Thedas? He argued back. What excluded Merrill from that pledge? She needed his help just as badly as any other mage in trouble. It didn't appease Justice but, on some level, he could feel the spirit take to the idea of helping. Anders was just relieved that he could do even that much; he didn't want to add anything more to the list of things he and Justice disagreed on.

Right now that list consisted solely of Hawke, who Anders was still keenly aware had not spoken to him the entire night. He wasn't sure how long he was going to get the silent treatment but, knowing Hawke, it could be anywhere from one night to a week. The man was entirely unpredictable in his predictability, Anders thought ironically, he would always act the way you thought he would but not necessarily when you thought he would. This time Anders was tempted to initiate a conversation himself just to see what would happen. It was always worth a try, he thought. He turned in his seat as Varric and Merrill continued to talk, his mouth open to speak, only to find Hawke's chair empty. He blinked.

"Little boy's room," Isabela winked at him by way of explanation when she saw his rather lost look.

"Oh," Anders said, ready to turn back to the conversation he had been having; until he noted just who else was missing from the table.

Why do you always have to jump to conclusions? He berated himself. Just because Fenris wasn't at his seat it didn't mean...it didn't mean anything, he tried to tell himself. Why am I so bloody paranoid? Anders thought, he's probably just getting himself a drink or something. He wished he could have believed that, he wished he trusted Hawke enough to stay in his seat and wait for him to come back. In all honesty it made him a little upset that he didn't. Anders wasn't sure whether the failing was Hawke's or his own.

"I'll be right back," Anders said to no one in particular as he stood, making his way to the stairs.
He checked the water closet first, hoping that Isabela had been right and his fears were unfounded. Unfortunately it was empty. Anders swallowed down his rising ire and swept his eyes across the main room. There was no sign of either of them at the bar or any of the tables. Anders stepped lightly down the stairs and headed for the door. You're being an idiot, he said to himself again and again, honestly...

The night air was crisp and fresh, the ever so slight hint of frost hanging in the air. Anders couldn't see anyone in the deserted streets as he stepped out, pulling his coat closed. The moon was hanging high above, painting everything with its silver light, giving the stone buildings an eerie tint against the pitch sky. Anders shivered, casting one more glance around but finding nothing. It wasn't until he turned to re-enter the pub that he spotted Fenris leaning against the wall, his eyes already staring right at him as if he'd been watching him the entire time. Anders stared back, refusing to be intimidated.

"What do you want?" Fenris eventually asked, his voice tight with dislike.

"...Have you seen Hawke?" Anders asked, deciding to be as civil as possible; he'd already annoyed Hawke enough as it was without starting a fight with Fenris after all.

"Yes," Fenris said, refusing to elaborate.

Oh Maker, don't push me right now, Anders thought angrily.

"Do you know where he is?" Anders asked; his voice was carefully neutral despite over annunciating due to trying to control his tone.

"No," Fenris said, his voice smug as he looked away.

All thoughts of being civil and nice and reasonable fled his mind. Why did the elf have to be such a bloody arsehole all the time? Anders thought furiously. He didn't understand how Hawke and the others could stand it. Of course he knew that he got the worst of it but that didn't excuse the elf's actions. All he wanted was for Fenris to either be reasonable or, if that was too much to ask for, then just to ignore him altogether. He really didn't need to be antagonised. However, as usually happened, Anders couldn't even follow his own advice. He couldn't help but reply, to stir things up, all for the sake of his own petulance.

"Well that's very helpful," Anders said sarcastically, "thank you very much."

"Glad I could be of service," Fenris replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Anders snapped. He knew that it was for a lot of reasons, not all of them even related to Fenris at all. His own stress over he and Hawke's relationship, over Justice, over Merrill, over his plans not coming along as fast as he'd like and many, many other problems that plagued him, they all contributed to his anger as he rounded on the elf, his eyes hard.

"What the hell is your problem?" he spat, "Is there a reason you're always such a prick? From the very second we met you've been nothing but a judgmental bastard. What have I ever done to you?"

"Other than constantly whine about the plight of mages, trying to convert me to your pathetic cause?" Fenris said derisively, his posture lazily sardonic, "Well, how about setting mages free when they need to be overseen, overlooking their failings and generally standing for everything I hate? Or maybe being a dangerous abomination who can apparently 'control' himself even though all you've ever done is show us otherwise. Or how about putting Hawke in danger..."

"Shut your mouth!" Anders shouted, glaring when Fenris stopped talking and simply smiled at him
"Oh, touched a nerve have I?" the elf said conceitedly. "Seems you already know you're doing that one then."

"I have never...!" Anders started, feeling the pain of the guilt he already held concerning Hawke flare up.

"Don't lie to me," Fenris practically growled, his face hardening, "you know fine well that your presence in his life is nothing but a threat! You've already brought him enough misery without deluding yourself that this...thing you have could ever work."

"Oh, and I suppose you are just the perfect fucking person?" Anders spat back sarcastically.

"I'm not a mage, if that's what you're asking," Fenris said back darkly, his eyes flashing.

"You bastard," Anders breathed out, trying and failing to control his anger, "you don't even know what love is! I love Hawke, more than anything!"

"Don't bare your heart to me, abomination" Fenris growled, pushing up threateningly from the wall, "unless you want it ripped out."

Anders fingers twitched, desperate to cast something irreversible on the elf, something bloody and rending. Fenris seemed to be thinking the same thing, if his trembling, claw like fingers were anything to go by. Oh do it, Anders thought recklessly, go on, I dare you to lay a fucking finger on me. Anders smirked, shaking his head, reveling in Fenris' confusion as he stated to laugh darkly.

"Oh could you sound any more jealous?" Anders said cruelly; on some level he noted the irony of his words, considering his own fears.

"Be quiet," Fenris snarled back.

"Oh, touched a nerve have I?" Anders parroted back Fenris' words, "You're so transparent. You were a fool to leave Hawke!"

"And you were quick enough to replace me!" Fenris said, looking as if he wished he could take his words back as soon as he'd said them.

"Oh so you do regret it," Anders said, the fake sympathy dripping from his tone, "what a shame. Well, I suppose I should be thanking you, shouldn't I? If you hadn't been a complete coward and let go of the one thing in your life that didn't seem to make you miserable then I wouldn't be happily living with Hawke now..."

Anders didn't get any further. Fenris launched himself at the mage with lightning grace. Anders had almost forgotten how fast the elf could be when he wanted to. He barely had time to pull up the shield as Fenris pulled back his arm and thrust it towards his face. The elf fell back a few steps, repelled, his eyes glinting as Anders lowered the shield and stared at him defiantly.

"This has been a long time coming, mage," Fenris said darkly as he began to circle around Anders like a wolf around its prey.

"You're telling me," Anders said back, "elf."

He refused to wait for Fenris to attack first. Summoning all his control he pulled on his strong connection to his elemental magic. He was all too aware that, without his staff, his left hand was
hampered by the brand. Any spell he cast wouldn't be as effective but then, considering the circumstances, perhaps that could be to his advantage. He didn't want to kill Fenris, after all, despite how much the thought appealed to his darker nature, just hurt him. He felt his power pulling the good sized chunk of rock from the paved ground beneath him with a shattering crack before he launched it at the elf. Fenris barely managed to dodge the heavy projectile, dancing nimbly to the side before rushing in to swipe at Anders exposed left side. Anders hissed, listening as the rock exploded against the wall of a far building. He stumbled back, his right hand coming up to clamp instinctually over the pain that had blossomed on his arm. He looked down, noting the blood that was running from between his fingers. Fenris had cut through his coat and shirt both and straight into the flesh. Anders looked up with a glare into Fenris' deadly eyes.

"What's wrong, mage?" he said, voice rough, "Can't defend yourself without your precious magic?"

"Well why don't you come a little closer?" Anders said, eyes narrowed, "I'll give you a firsthand demonstration."

Anders was glad that Fenris fell for the taunt. The elf leapt forwards again, only this time Anders was ready for him. He stepped to the side at the last moment, pulling on his kinetic magic, reversing the spell to create a vacuum that pulled Fenris forwards even faster. The elf looked momentarily surprised before Anders reached back and punched him as hard as he could in the jaw. The combined momentum of the spell and Anders fist sent Fenris reeling to the ground, blood splattered messily across his chin from a burst lip. The mage couldn't help but feel Vengeance moving around beneath his anger; he knew that the spirit had changed, mainly because the sight of the blood excited it. Justice would never feel that way.

"Is that all you have?" Anders taunted as Fenris stumbled to his feet, wiping at his chin angrily, "I have to say I'm disappointed."

Fenris didn't grace him with a reply. He started at Anders disconcertingly, his eyes hard, his pupils seeming overly dilated. Anders frowned, tensing as the elf darted to the right. Anders pulled on another spell, sending a blast of lightning sizzling into the ground where he'd expected the elf to be. Only Fenris hadn't continued to go right, instead faking left, taking Anders by surprise and managing to catch him across the face. Anders felt his skin split open and reacted on instinct, sending out the fireball at point blank range into the elf's chest.

They both flew back with the force of the blast. Anders felt the breath knocked out of him as he hit the ground, struggling to right himself despite gasping for air. He refused to give Fenris an easy shot by lying on the ground like an idiot. Anders managed to push up onto his hands and knees, looking up to see Fenris struggling to his feet, holding onto his right wrist, his expression pained. Finally he managed to stand upright, noting a patch of red on the ground between them, hoping it was Fenris' blood over his own. But that was when he recognised the colour. Anders smirked, realising what it was.

It was the ribbon, the one he had noticed on Fenris' wrist at the alienage the day they had all gone into the Fade. It was badly burnt, almost black but for some surviving splashes of red. He noted that Fenris was looking at him as if he wished he would drop dead on the spot, an angry looking burn trailing up his right arm where the armour didn't cover. Anders smiled in spiteful triumph, tensing for another attack, but was stopped by something he hadn't even thought about since he had started this whole altercation.

"What the fuck is going on out here?"

Anders noted that he wasn't the only one to start guiltily at the sound of Hawke's voice. Fenris looked to the door just as Anders did, his eyes wide. They both took in Hawke's disbelieving and
entirely furious expression. Oh shit, Anders thought hollowly as his anger died a swift death in the face of what they had done. Hawke stared at them both, the door open behind him; Anders could see Varric and Aveline peering round the doorway, their faces shocked. He wished he could think of a good reply but nothing was really sufficient. Hawke looked back and forth between them, seeming to take in the cracked ground, the rubble and the smoking ruins of the lightning and fire spells he had cast.

Fenris looked away first, swallowing as he kept his eyes on the ground. No one spoke. Eventually the elf stepped forwards a little unsteadily, reaching down to pick up what was left of the red ribbon before turning on his heel and walking off towards the stairs without another word. Anders stared after him. Now, in the calmer, more reasonable light of reality, without the rush of adrenaline and bloodlust, he felt like a complete and utter fool. He could feel the blood running down his face and neck, soaking into the collar of his coat, seeping down his arm. He didn't hear Hawke approach but then he was used to that. He felt him take hold of his arm, hissing at the pain as the movement pulled at the lacerations. He turned to look into Hawke's glinting eyes, his mouth a hard line.

"Inside," Hawke said tightly, "now."

In his slightly disoriented state Anders couldn't find the will to disobey. He walked past Hawke and straight back into the pub. He could vaguely hear Hawke asking Aveline, Varric and Isabela to go to Fenris' mansion and make sure he was alright, but couldn't find the energy to care. Merrill was staring at him worriedly from the top of the stairs. She reached out as he passed, her eyes wide.

"Anders you're bleeding!" she said, "What happened?"

Yet Anders didn't get the chance to answer her because Hawke was once more striding towards him. He took hold of Anders arm, this time the uninjured one, and marched him down the hallway like a prisoner. Anders tried to shake him off but his grip was deadly tight, almost bruising. The mage wondered where on earth they were going until he realised, sickeningly, that it was to the same room they had stayed in that first night they had spent together. Hawke practically threw him through the door, stepping inside before closing it loudly behind him. Despite his repentance at his actions Anders did not appreciate being treated like a criminal. He turned as he, for once, heard Hawke walk up behind him, his mouth open to speak. The last thing he'd expected was the back of Hawke's hand striking him hard across the face, snapping his head to the left. Anders stumbled a little before steadying himself, lifting his hand to his cheek as it began to throb, his eyes wide as he stared at Hawke's livid countenance.

"What the fuck is wrong with you!" Hawke yelled, taking a threatening step forwards, "Can't you control yourself at all?"

Oh, so this is where all the anger has been coming from? Anders wondered through a haze of incredulous vehemence. Been worrying about him have you? It seemed that Hawke's anger had reached its head, if his actions were anything to go by. This wasn't going to end well, Anders thought; Hawke had also been drinking steadily since they'd arrived; Hawke losing his temper and alcohol were never a good combination. For once Anders found he couldn't care. He glared at him.

"I could ask you the same fucking thing," he said evenly.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Hawke shouted, throwing his hands out to his sides.

"It means keep your hands to yourself," Anders said darkly, "unless you'd rather lose them."

Hawke narrowed his eyes, flexing his fingers into fists and back, but didn't comment further.
Anders shook his head. Yes I love you, he wanted to say, but that doesn't mean I'll let you treat me like shit. I judge myself harshly enough for both of us, I don't need you joining in.

"You know," Hawke said finally, his voice tight with suppressed anger, "I suppose I should have seen something like this coming. The two of you have been at each other's throats since you met."

"Nice to know I'm not taking all the blame then," Anders said caustically.

Anders paused, watching Hawke closely. The man didn't seem to entirely agree with Anders statement which only made the mage angrier. All his fault, Hawke thought this was all his fault? Why? Did he really care for Fenris that much? Anders scowled, trying and failing to hold in all the resentment threatening to pour out.

"Oh, well, I guess I was wrong, I am taking all the blame," Anders said; he couldn't stop the hurt lacing his tone, even as he tried to bury it, "you know what? Go ahead. I really don't care anymore. Blame me all you want but tell me Hawke, just tell me, what the hell you're playing at!"

"What are you talking about?" Hawke shook his head, frowning irately.

"How much of a fool do you take me for?" Anders spat, "Do you think I never noticed how you stare at him, how you flirt with him whenever I'm not bloody looking?"

"What?" Hawke's face seemed to soften a little in incredulity, "That's what all this is about? Are you mad? I haven't done anything..!"

"Is that right?" Anders interrupted, "Was that before or after you slept with him then?"

Hawke's eyes widened and, Anders noted, he looked a little guilty before he covered it under a decidedly blank expression. Well, Anders thought morosely, I suppose it had to come out at some point. He had been trying his best not to bring up that night ever since it had happened. Somehow, even though he tried to reassure himself that Hawke did love him, he was always worried that if he brought up Fenris that it would force the rogue into some sort of irreversible decision about who he cared for more.

"How did you..?" Hawke started, frowning, "So you were there that night then. I thought you must have been avoiding me for a reason. Enjoy spying, do we?"

"I hardly did it on purpose," Anders said, folding his arms, "and anyway, you'd have to be a bloody moron not to see what was going on between you two!"

"Yes, you're right," Hawke said back darkly, "and you are a moron. In case you hadn't noticed that was the one and only night we ever spent together. He left me, and that was long before we were involved."

"Then why do you insist on keeping him around?" Anders couldn't help but ask despite Hawke's words, "For a jilted lover he doesn't seem to mind hovering around you like a loyal fucking dog."

"Because he's my friend, Anders!" Hawke shouted in frustration, "For Maker's sake can we not have that at least, without you letting your jealousy run away with you!"

"Me letting my jealousy..?" Anders started, "Are you blind? Ever since we've been together he's done nothing but stare at me as if he wants me dead! And you'd bloody well have to be blind not to see the way he looks at you! To see the fact that he's so obviously still in love with you, he just won't allow himself to act on it!"
"Oh and how would you know that?" Hawke scoffed.

"Because I used to do the same bloody thing!" Anders shouted before he thought.

He snapped his mouth shut as Hawke looked at him, a little stunned, breathing deeply. Oh how do I get myself into these ludicrous situations? Anders thought ruefully. Why can't things run smoothly for once, just for once in my life? Anders felt the anger and the energy leeching away into the silence that followed. He shook his head, avoiding Hawke's eyes as he walked over to the bed and sat down on it heavily. He heard Hawke sigh, looking up to see that he still seemed irritable but was no longer angry. It was a step in the right direction at least, Anders thought. Eventually Hawke shuffled over to sit beside him, the bed dipping under his weight, leaning Anders towards him a little.

"We really aren't very good at this, are we?" Hawke said, his tone warily humorous.

"That's a little bit of an understatement," Anders shook his head.

"Look," Hawke said, his hand sneaking over Anders own, "I swear to you there's nothing going on between me and Fenris. We're just friends."

Anders smiled a little, despite not feeling entirely convinced that everything was as rosy as Hawke was trying to make it. What about the ribbon, he wanted to ask, but he didn't have the energy to fight any more. Instead he squeezed Hawke's hand in his, his anger melting further as Hawke smiled at him warmly.

"I'm sorry, for ruining your birthday" Anders sighed, "seems like all we do is fight nowadays, doesn't it?"

"Well, a little spice never hurt any relationship," Hawke shrugged, smirking; then his expression slipped back into a frown and he reached up to touch Anders jaw, "can we please do something about this now?"

Anders was amazed that he'd almost completely forgotten about his injuries. He shook himself out of his daze, reaching up with his right hand to let the white healing magic leach out over his cheek. He could feel the dried blood pulling as the skin knit itself back together. He did his arm next, frowning at the hole in his coat. He'd have to stitch that, he thought absently as he looked down at the ruined sleeve; he felt Hawke's fingers against his face and flinched away, looking round to see Hawke pull back guiltily, his eyes showing his hurt.

"I..." Hawke stared, sighing before continuing, "I'm sorry I hit you. I was angry...I didn't mean it."

"Well, you'd better be sorry," Anders said, looking at him seriously, "because if you ever do it again you'll know about it."

Hawke seemed to want to say more, but it was lost into the kiss that Anders placed on his mouth. Nothing more than a press of lips on lips, but Anders could feel the heat in it. All the underlying emotion, everything they had left unsaid, still roiling beneath the surface. It pushed them closer, even as it pushed them further apart, Hawke's hands reaching up to cup Anders face as he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue inside the mages mouth slowly, gently. He allowed the rogue to push him back down onto the bed, his hands caressing Hawke's back as the other man ran his hand down his chest, bunching his fingers into the fabric. He let out a soft moan as Hawke pushed his hand up under the material, running his deft fingers up over his chest to take his left nipple between his fingers, pinching tightly as he slid his thigh in between Anders legs. The mage felt his breath catch in his throat, his mind clearing only a little at Hawke pulled back from the kiss.
"Wait," Anders said, reaching up to try and push Hawke away, "wait Hawke, we can't just...I mean who's room is this?"

"It's ours, don't worry," Hawke said, looking down at him with a smile.

"What do you mean ours?" Anders frowned.

"I paid for the night," Hawke shrugged, "thought it might be nice, you know, staying here again. Didn't you notice me talking to Norah?"

"I..." Anders felt like a complete idiot, shaking his head.

"Where did you think I'd gone?" Hawke frowned.

Anders didn't answer him, just reached up to pull Hawke down back into their kiss. How could he have doubted Hawke? His conscience seemed to berate him. While Anders was so assured that Hawke was off somewhere with Fenris, he was actually trying to make amends for their previous argument by trying to make the night a special one somehow. Anders felt like he was living in a cliché. Did things like this really happen in real life? And here he had thought they only happened in Varric's awful romance novels.

It seemed to him, as Hawke continued to ravage his mouth rather expertly, that somehow he'd narrowly missed the hammers blow once again. Still, even as he lost himself in the blissful relief of the moment, he couldn't shake the feeling that it was only a matter of time. It always would be.
Time

He awoke first, just like any other day. So archetypal of them both, something Anders had come to rely on, and yet now today was different. In the purely physical sense, they were in a different bed to start with. There were no blackbirds to wake him, there was no sunshine in his eyes. Despite the good memories the room held for him Anders felt displaced, out of sorts. He and Hawke were also not touching, which was odd; usually when there was some form of contact between them, an arm over his waist, a leg wrapped around his. Today, he awoke facing a dark, unfamiliar wall. When he turned over, blinking away the clinging sleep into the dull gloom, he found Hawke had been mirroring him, facing away, his back turned. Anders stared at the vague outline of broad shoulders and back. He wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch the soft skin at the base of Hawke's neck, to wake him gently, to see his eyes and his smile and know that everything was alright. But he couldn't. Something stopped him. That same old fear, that same old worry. Somehow their situation on the bed, despite last night's reconciliation, seemed wholly emblematic of their relationship. They were together but also simultaneously apart from each other. Anders knew why, he knew that it would always be this way. He couldn't ever be truly close to Hawke because he could never offer himself fully to anyone. He would always have to lie, he would always have to hold back a part of himself. If he ever did give himself fully to Hawke then his plan would be forfeit. Yes he loved him, more than he'd loved anyone before, but that didn't change his goals, his needs. He needed to put the cause first because no one else would. He was the one who would bring about a change that the world would never forget, he was the one who would expose the hypocrisy and the apathy, the cruelty and the suffering. He would be responsible for freeing the Circles of their useless bonds.

He would also be responsible for the loss of many lives. He wouldn't fool himself into thinking it wouldn't happen. The death of innocents was synonymous with war. Yet he couldn't blame it on that when the time came to pass, he couldn't blame it solely on war. He would be the instigator of the fire that was to spread across the lands, freeing mages from their chains as it burned. He would be responsible and he knew, deep down, that Hawke would never forgive him for it. If it came to it...Anders knew that he would accept the consequences. He would pay with his life if that's what it took. He felt the ache in his chest and did his best to ignore it, reaching up to rub at it with his hand while he tried to keep his mind blank.

Until then...until then he should try to be as happy as possible. Ander was all too aware that he had told himself the same thing time and time again and he still didn't seem to be able to follow his own advice. He couldn't afford to waste time fighting and worrying, not like this. He couldn't pretend that he had the rest of his life to make up for any lost time. Every moment was becoming a precious thing. Even before he had envisaged his plan he had been living on borrowed time anyway. Being a warden severely limited your lifespan. He would only have until his mid fifties, if he was lucky, before the Calling would be upon him. No matter which way he looked at it his life with Hawke was wasting away.

Thankfully he didn't have to wake Hawke at all; Anders knew Hawke was awake even before he rolled over onto his back. The man's breathing had become a little louder, then softer and then evened out into almost imperceptible inhales and exhales. Anders watched as Hawke rolled over further to face him, shivering as he pulled the covers up over his bare torso and shoulders. His eyes were barely visible glimmers in the dim light.

"It's bloody freezing in here," Hawke said quietly, his voice a little hoarse, as he reached out under the blankets to pull at Anders hand.
The mage obliged him, shifting closer until he was near enough for Hawke to gather him into his arms. It was what he had wanted, what he needed. That safety, that reassurance; he could let it fool him for a little while. Anders shivered as Hawke's cold hands and arms sucked the heat from his skin but didn't pull away. Being here, being exactly where he was at that moment, was worth more than anything. He would do what needed to be done when the time came but, right now, this was where he belonged.

"I'll get the fire started, if you'd like," Anders said, eyes closed as he revelled in Hawke's quickly warming skin pressed against his own.

"Mmm, no need," Hawke hummed out lazily, "I'm sure we can warm each other up."

"Huh, you would," Anders said as Hawke threw a heavy leg over his own, cold toes against his calf.

Yet despite Hawke suggestive comment the rogue was surprisingly conservative. He wrapped himself around Anders like an ivy round a tree, almost suffocating. There wasn't a space between their bodies; one arm pillowed beneath their heads, the other around his back, chest, pelvis pressed together, legs tangled. Anders reached up to run his palm across the stubble of Hawke's jaw, leaning in to press their lips together, completing the circuit, connecting them fully. Hawke kissed him back softly, for once giving Anders control. The mage suspected it was a further apology, of sorts, for Hawke's behaviour the night before. Well, Anders thought humourlessly, things aren't all bad. We may not be the perfect couple by any stretch of the imagination, but at least we're together.

They lay like that for a long time, tied together, stealing the breath from each other's mouths in slow, gentle caresses of lips and tongue. Anders ran his hand in lazy circles over Hawke's back while the rogue's fingers, as per usual, found their way into his hair, tenderly caressing the thick locks. When they did eventually break apart Anders could feel Hawke's need, pressing against his stomach, trapped between them. Anders trailed his hand down across the small of Hawke's back, up over his thigh and then slid it down in between their tightly pressed bodies, taking hold of Hawke, enjoying the gasped moan the man let loose.

"And here I thought we were going to be proper for once," Anders said, his tone laced with laughter.

"Oh where's the fun in being proper?" Hawke joked back, his voice deep with desire.

They made love face to face; even through the darkness still pervading the room, Anders thought he could see more of Hawke than he ever could with his eyes. In the gentle hands that caressed him, the tender movements as Hawke took him, made him his, completely, the lips that kissed him and told him things he wanted to hear. This was the man he had fallen in love with, perhaps fallen further than he'd thought he could...or should. Anders was barely aware of what he was saying by the time they were close to the end.

"I love you," he panted desperately, "I love you so much... it would kill me, to lose you, Hawke."

"You aren't going to lose me," Hawke pulled back before leaning in to kiss him breathlessly, "I swear to you."

Anders leaned up to swallow the promise into his mouth with another kiss. He couldn't hear it, he didn't want to hear it. It gave him too much hope, made him want for things he couldn't have. Yet at the same time it elated him, made him want to push closer, further, faster, more...

They lay together, bedclothes in disarray, sweaty and sticky, breathing heavily, but Anders couldn't
have been more contented. Hawke pulled himself up briefly before flopping down next to Anders, pulling the blankets up over them both quickly before too much heat escaped. He lay there for a moment, breathing in the moment, committing it to memory. Nothing was perfect but then it never would be; he would just have to learn to enjoy the flaws as much as anything else.

Then he remembered the present. He lay there, debating whether it was worth leaving the wonderful heat they had created just to get it, before thinking now was better than not at all. Anders rolled over to the other side of the bed, ignoring Hawke's confused inquiry. The sheets were freezing in comparison to the patch where they had been lying. He leaned out of the bed quickly, reaching down onto the floor to rifle in the pocket of his coat, which he only knew was there by memory as it was still too dark to see properly. Anders grabbed what he needed, keeping it tightly closed in his fist, before pulling back into the covers with a mumbled curse and shuffling back over to Hawke.

"What on earth are you doing?" Hawke asked, laughing lightly, "oh Maker you're all cold now! Get off!"

"You're so fickle," Anders teased as he reached in to put his cold fingers against Hawke's abdomen, laughing as Hawke batted him away.

"What were you looking for anyway?" Hawke asked as Anders continued to try and attack him with his cold feet.

"Just this," Anders said, grabbing Hawke's right hand and sliding the ring into his ring finger before he could pull away.

"What..?" Hawke sounded confused, lifting up his hand from beneath the covers.

It had been nothing special to look at, when he first found it. He'd been searching for orichalcum on the Wounded Coast, down by the beaches where it was usually prevalent. The glint of silver had caught his eye, half buried in the sand. When he'd picked it up and washed off the dirty grains it had gleamed at him like new. There had been something about it, something appealing. Normally he wouldn't have bothered about a ring, happy to sell it for the coin, but something stopped him. He'd decided to keep it. Then, when Hawke's birthday rolled around and the mage had been unsure what to give him, Anders had remembered his find. Hawke wasn't exactly short of coin, there wasn't anything Anders could buy him that he couldn't get for himself. So he decided to make something instead. He took it to Sandal to have the dwarf enchant it with something useful and, as per usual, Sandal had worked a miracle into the solid silver band.

"A ring?" Hawke only knew what it was from the feel, it was still too dark to make anything out, "what did you get me a ring for?"

"Don't be so grateful," Anders said sarcastically, rolling his eyes even though he knew Hawke couldn't see it.

Anders reached out his hand, summoning a few pale yellow flames, licking around his fingers as he took Hawke's hand in his. The rogue flinched back instinctively, lifting his hand up into the air, but stopped when he realised he hadn't been hurt. He also stopped when the ring began to glow.

"Maker's breath," Hawke said, his hand held above him as he stared at it, "how did you..? What is it?"

"You can thank Sandal," Anders said, reaching up to touch the jagged, glowing fissure that had appeared through the ring, "I can't even begin to imagine what goes on in that boys head, but
there's no doubting he's a genius."

Anders knew that Hawke was a realistic man, he didn't do frippery. If he was going to get him something it would have to be useful. So he had asked Sandal to enchant the ring against fire. Hawke ran into enough dragons, rage demons and blood mages that immunity to fire seemed the best choice for a first line of defence. Sandal had grinned at him before running off and Anders had left him to it. When the blond dwarf had come toddling up to him a couple of hours later holding the ring in his hand Anders hadn't known what to say. Yes he knew enchantments tended to show on whatever object they had been transferred on to but the ring, well, when it came into contact with flame it practically glowed with its own inner fire. The silver was still there but through the middle ran a band of lambent colours, shifting continuously from yellow to orange to red.

"Enchantment!" Sandal had exclaimed happily, dropping the ring into Anders palm before disappearing up the stairs.

Anders didn't think he could have put it better himself. He watched Hawke's face, now illuminated in the rings glow, his green eyes looking almost black.

"What does it do?" Hawke asked eagerly.

"You're so practical," Anders said wryly, "isn't it enough that it's pretty?"

"Give over," Hawke grinned, "I know you."

"Fine," Anders sighed, shifting closer, "it's a fire ward. Considering how reckless you are I thought I could at least make it less dangerous for you to be irresponsible."

"Well, that will be useful," Hawke said genuinely; he turned to look at Anders, his eyes playful, "you're always so thoughtful dear."

"Oh shut up," Anders said, rolling his eyes, "or I'll be tempted to test just how truly effective it is."

"Promises, promises," Hawke said, pushing up onto his elbow so he could lean down and capture the mages lips.

Anders let him. The rings glow slowly began to fade, withering away like a dying match until the darkness of the room returned.

"Thank you Anders," Hawke said as he pulled back, sounding truly grateful.

"Well it is your birthday present," Anders shrugged, feeling a little awkward for some reason he couldn't quite fathom, "I was going to give it to you last night but, well..."

"Better late than never," Hawke finished for him, mirroring Anders own thoughts from moments before.

"Right," Anders nodded shortly.

"Don't worry love," Hawke said, reaching over to run his fingers through Anders hair, "there's no time like the present."

Hawke didn't know just how much that was true, and Anders would make sure he never found out.

"If you don't open the door, you know I'm perfectly capable of blowing it open."
Threats weren't his preferred method of gaining entry to someone's house, but when that someone was the person you'd had a very good go at maiming the night before then sometimes it was necessary. There was a moment's silence, where Anders leaned his weight on the backs of his heels, arms crossed, and waited.

"Yes, I'm still here," he said loudly to the silence, which he suspected was listening.

The sound of some unknown curses could be heard muttered from beyond the door; however they were accompanied by the turn of a key in the lock. The door didn't open but Anders took it as the only welcome he was going to get. Anders hesitated for a minute, wondering if this was really such a good idea, before shaking his head and reminding himself of his resolve. He took hold of the ornate door handle, breathed in deeply and entered.

Anders had never been to Fenris' mansion before but it was just as depressing and dirty as Isabela had described. He found himself in a small entryway, piled with boxes, refuse and dust. The gas lamps were out and, by the looks of them, stayed that way. There was a heavy scent of decay in the air, almost but not quite masked by the thick dust. The smell of rot probably came from the mould, Anders thought, wrinkling his nose; the windowsills were thick with dust as if they had not been touched never mind opened. With no natural or unnatural light the rooms were dull and dismal, curtains drawn. Lovely, Anders thought with a grimace at the dead rat he passed as he headed for the door into the parlour.

I'm surprised he hasn't bloody well killed himself living here, Anders thought, shaking his head. No wonder he's always in such a foul mood. He couldn't help but feel the tension in the air, despite Fenris not having shown himself. The mage could have called out but the silence that was still thick in the air didn't want to be broken. It hung around him like a hunter watching its prey. So instead he continued his search.

The next doorway led to a vaulted hall with an open double staircase, leading up to a second level. There were paintings on the walls, dark faces staring out with ghostly white eyes, and ruined chairs, smashed and broken along the walls. A massive chandelier hung down from the ceiling, covered in cobwebs, large bulbous spiders hanging at their centres. The expensive crystal was crusted with muck and dust and dead flies.

Is that..? Anders thought as he stepped around a large, rust coloured patch on the carpeted floor. Yes, he confirmed as he moved into the room and caught the faint but very distinct scent of death, it was blood. So he hadn't even cleaned away any signs of the battle that had won him the mansion so long ago? Anders thought, amazed. This place, it was almost as if Anders could feel the Fade like static in the air around him. Had the veil been affected by the death and decay left to putrefy unattended, or was the magister who had stayed here responsible somehow? Whatever the reason, the veil was thin here; Anders could feel it through his connection to the Fade, but also through Justice's unease. All this mansion comprised of was old blood, old death, and someone who lived amongst it, refusing to let any of it go. And I thought I was bad at holding on to the past, Anders thought with a raise of his eyebrows as he walked up the stairs towards the landing. He wasn't sure how the layout of this mansion was in comparison to Hawke's but he was sure that the bedrooms were probably up here somewhere, Fenris more than likely in one of them. There were three doors facing him as he reached the top step; the middle one, he thought, probably the master bedroom.

Just like a spider, Anders thought of the elf as he walked towards the closed door, sitting waiting for him in the middle of this ruined web of festering rot. Did that make him the unwitting fly? Only one way to find out he supposed. The door creaked on its hinges loudly. Anders looked inside, glad at least to see light even if it was only from the roaring fireplace. He found Fenris sitting by the fire in a tattered armchair, all the stuffing poking out of holes in the bulging armrest. He didn't look up
as Anders entered, leaving the door open behind him; he simply continued to sit, staring into the lambent flames, his posture tense and ready despite seeming relaxed.

Every room in this house, Anders was finding, had a distinct smell. The entryway of dust and mould, the main hall of death, and now the bedroom which smelled like a winery. The mage noted the large, purple stain on one wall that gave off a heady reek of fortified wine, but was quite sure that the empty bottles littered all over the floor and table contributed quite enough. Isabela hadn't been exaggerating Fenris' taste for alcohol then, he thought as he reached into his bag and pulled out his supplies, taking in the disused bed with its moulding, rotten covers and broken bed posts. He walked around the settee, noting Fenris watching him out of the corner of his eye even as he continued to face the fireplace. Anders ignored him as he pushed back the refuse on the table to make a space before leaning down to place his things onto the cleared spot. Not as hygienic as he would like but it would have to do.

"Get out," Fenris said eventually, just as Anders stood back up.

He wouldn't say he hadn't been expecting that, but it still put his back up a little. Here he was, trying his best to be nice, and all Fenris could do was exacerbate things. As usual, Anders thought bitterly. However, despite his attitude, Anders still refused to be kept in this pitched battle of snarky comments, glaring looks and, more recently, actual violence. He had better things to do with his time.

"After coming all the way up here?" Anders said with a shrug, going for humour over anger this time; it made it easier, "Not likely."

"Oh, you mean the trip all the way from Hawke's mansion?" Fenris growled sarcastically, flicking his fingers as he finally looked at Anders, "How terrible for you."

"Actually I was at my clinic," Anders clarified, refusing to rise to the bait.

"Well, it must be dreadful to have to tear yourself away from your precious patients," Fenris said, his sarcasm only heightening, "I don't care what he has told you to do. You can tell Hawke I don't want his pity."

"He doesn't know I'm here," Anders clarified, cutting the string that held his package together, pulling out the bandages and burn poultices he'd brought; Fenris' eyes snapped to him, narrowed suspiciously, "so you can shut your mouth and let me heal that burn or you can sit there pretending it doesn't hurt, let it get infected and maybe lose your arm. Which would you prefer?"

Fenris glared at him but didn't reply. Anders took that as a yes to the treatment option, despite the elf's frosty demeanour. Honestly, Anders thought as he rolled his eyes, he's like a bloody teenager, moody bastard. Since their fight the night before and Hawke's subsequent reassurance that Anders own jealousies were entirely unfounded, he'd found it much easier to deal with the idea of being civil to the elf. Oh yes he still grated on his nerves, no doubt about that, but it didn't produce quite the same visceral reaction as it had done before. So, after that, he had begun to feel a little guilty about letting their fight get so out of control. Of course Fenris wasn't an innocent party, he struck first, but the wounds he'd inflicted were fairly minor and, anyway, Anders had goaded him into it. Also the mage was more than capable of healing himself, while Fenris wasn't.

Despite the elf's suspicions Hawke had actually instructed Anders to stay away from the Fenris for the time being, which Anders had agreed to, right before Hawke left the Hanged Man to go back to the mansion and get cleaned up. Then Anders had left, gone straight to the clinic, made up his bundle of supplies for treating burns and headed back to Hightown, right to Fenris' door. Well, he'd never been good at following orders anyway, he thought as he knelt down on one knee beside the
armchair, unravelling a bandage.

"Take that off," he said, nodding to the menacing armour that clung to the elf's arm.

"Don't order me around," Fenris spat, even as he reached up to remove the armour with little care, his movements jerky with anger.

"Oh for Maker's sake, calm down," Anders sighed, "don't you ever just relax? You're going to give yourself a heart attack if you keep this up, you know."

"Just do what you've come here to do then leave," Fenris said, looking back to the fire as he placed his injured arm onto the armrest.

Anders would have said something back but he was too busy looking at Fenris' arm. It was a mess; all up the underside of the forearm, over the crook of the elbow and the bicep was a confusion of red, glistening skin and yellowing blisters. The white of the lyrium tattoos still shone through the wound, creating a disconcerting tartan of white slipping under red and sickly yellow only to reappear again. Some of the blisters had burst and were weeping. Anders frowned.

"Weren't you going to do anything with it at all?" he asked, knowing he wouldn't get a reply.

Fenris' didn't reply. Anders sighed again, placing the unravelled bandage onto his knee.

"I thought Varric and Aveline and..." Anders started as he set out the poultices.

"I didn't let them in," Fenris explained shortly.

"Why?" Anders asked with a frown.

"Did you come here to counsel me or heal me?" Fenris growled out, his glare slightly less heated but still angry enough.

"Fine, fine," Anders said, rolling his eyes, "sorry I mentioned it."

They both remained quiet as Anders worked. He placed his hands over the skin, careful not to touch it by accident, using magic to heal as much of the damaged flesh as could be saved. The rest would have to peel off by itself as it was already dead. He used an alcohol solution to clean away the puss and make sure everything was sterile, all too aware that the elf was being overly quiet. Anders knew the alcohol would sting badly; Fenris was just being his usual stubborn self. Next he set about placing the poultices carefully before wrapping the bandages over to hold them in place. It didn't take long, despite the size of the injury; Anders had done it so many times before he could probably have finished it with his eyes closed. He tied off the bandages vigilantly before standing up.

"Don't take them off until tomorrow," he instructed as he picked up the things he hadn't used, pushing them down into his bag.

Well, Anders thought, at least that's over and done with. He was almost through the door before Fenris finally spoke. His voice was low but, considering what he said, surprisingly lacking in its usual malice.

"Don't think this changes anything," he said.

Anders didn't turn as he answered.
"I won't," he said, taking hold of the door, "why would I ever expect something so reasonable of someone like you?"

He left, closing the door behind him quietly. Anders could feel eyes on him as he walked through the mansion, shivering as he quickened his pace. This place...it was definitely far too close to the other side than was healthy. He was glad when he stepped outside, back into the cold sunshine. It seemed to wash away whatever still clung to him from the shroud of death and torpor that seemed to embody the place. Anders looked back to the crumbling facade as he walked towards the stairway back to the plaza. It seemed to watch him back; Anders couldn't tell if it was with mal intent or unvoiced importunacy. However, he had no time to dwell on either.

He didn't have time to return to the clinic, instead heading straight through the Hightown market towards the stairs to Lowtown. He had wasted enough time on ungrateful people, he thought as he shouldered his bag, pulling the strap over his head so he could push it into the small of his back out of the way. At least it's sunny, he thought optimistically, laughing sombrely at that being one of the few things right with his day. He took the steps quickly, all too aware that he only had a limited amount of time. Hawke was busy today, something about checking on the Mines at the Bone Pit, which gave Anders a rare day of complete freedom. Well, until evening time, when Hawke said he would be home and, more than likely, if Anders wasn't there, coming to find him. Honestly, he was beginning to have flashbacks to Rolan what with Hawke's need to always be around him.

Sundermount was always imposing, even on a beautiful day like this. The mountain towered away into the blue sky, the white clouds snagged on its peak, blocking out the sun in an aurora of pearlescent shine. It wasn't an ugly terrain, not as such, but there was always something barren about the land at the foothills of the mountain that made him feel a little cold. There was an aura of decay here, something about the barren rock and the hardy trees, stunted and squat against the patches of rough moss. It didn't help that the place was crawling with giant spiders either, hideous, fat things with poison dripping from their large fangs. Anders dealt with them easily, sending wave after wave of fire at the rushing groups of legs, watching them either fall or flee. The stink of burning spider carcass wasn't pleasant and he rushed past them as quickly as possible as they continued to boil and splutter. It didn't take much longer to reach the Dalish camp.

"Stop right there Shem," said a rather forbidding looking female hunter, her hand sliding to her dagger, "what do you want here?"

"I'm here to talk to your Keeper," Anders said, lifting his hands placatingly.

"It's alright Gaela!" another elf said, running up to her from the camp, his long blonde hair dancing in the sunlight, "the Keeper said to let him through."

"Huh," the elf, Gaela, huffed out in annoyance, "you could have told me Faeran. On you go then Shem, but be aware, I am watching you."

Oh I'm feeling so wonderfully welcome today, Anders thought as he walked past the two elves, keenly aware of the eyes boring into his back. It should have surprised him that the Keeper said he should be allowed into the camp despite not having sent word ahead that he would be visiting but, in a way, it didn't. Marethari was far older and wiser than he; that she knew he was coming even without being informed wasn't such a stretch of the imagination.

The Dalish camp wasn't much to speak of, just a handful of ramshackle tents and carriages, some odd wooden structures that looked like ploughs and some more that looked like statues or totems. At the end of the line of tents sat a smithy, an older looking elf with a stern countenance, stoking a kiln with a pair of bellows. The centre of the camp was marked with a large fire around which several elves were sitting. They all looked up suspiciously as he passed but none spoke. Perhaps
they knew they didn't have to; the reputation of the Dalish hunters was enough to keep most people in line.

He found Marethari sitting on the scrub grass by the path that led to the mountain, a few miscellaneous objects laid out before her. She looked up as he approached but did not stand. Anders waited for a moment in silence, thinking about what he wanted to say, before deciding to sit. The Keeper didn't protest.

"You've come about Merrill," the Keeper said at last, just as Anders had opened his mouth to speak; it wasn't a question.

"...Yes," Anders replied, "I wanted to ask you about...well about the things she won't tell me."

"She is a stubborn girl," the Keeper's face transformed from its usual stoicism into a kind smile, "a lot like yourself, I dare imagine."

"I..." Anders wasn't entirely sure how to deal with the woman before him; she seemed to be talking to him and into him at the same time.

"So, you want to know more about the mirror," the Keeper said, reaching out to move the pieces before her around on the grass.

Anders looked at them but couldn't find the significance in the dagger, the tablet and the necklace that Marethari shifted around in front of her. She speaks in questions that aren't questions, Anders thought to himself, trying to wrap his head around her manner of speech. He breathed in deeply before answering.

"Yes," Anders nodded, "Merrill tells me it isn't dangerous."

"But you don't believe her," the Keeper nodded.

"I get an odd feeling when I'm near it," Anders tried to explain, "almost like..."

"The feeling you experience when the spirit inside of you takes control?" the Keeper inquired, her eyes fixing on his.

It was the first straight question she had asked. Anders tried not to bristle at the implication; Marethari seemed genuinely curious. He sighed, looking away from the Keeper's stare, out over the bare rocks. He felt like telling Marethari that there wasn't much to feel when Justice took control considering he basically blacked out every time, but that wouldn't be entirely true. He still felt a little sick every time it happened, every time he felt like a passenger in his own skin. The mirror gave him that same ill feeling in his stomach whenever he was near it. Merrill said she didn't notice and Anders had to wonder if it was Justice who produced the feeling in him.

"Something like that," he evaded, "all I know is that there is definitely nothing good about that mirror. I was wondering if you could tell me anything more about it."

The Keeper watched him in silence, her eyes calculating. Anders looked back, mustering his will, keeping his eyes steady.

"The mirror was once used for communicating with the Beyond," the Keeper began to explain all of a sudden, "its arts are lost to us but Merrill was determined to fix it, to try and rediscover its lost secrets. I told her of the dangers. We have already lost two of our clan to that mirrors will."

"Merrill mentioned a Tamlen," Ander said cautiously.
"Yes, his name was Tamlen," the Keeper nodded, "he was never found. Both he and another of our clan discovered the mirror in a cave not far from our camp, when we were still in Ferelden. The other was Mahariel. He was not taken by the mirror as Tamlen was, but he was taken by the loss of his friend. He left the clan to search for Tamlen, refusing to believe that he could possibly be gone. The mirror breeds only obsession and death. Nothing good will come of its restoration."

Anders wondered why Merrill hadn't told him any of the details. Perhaps it was because she was more cautious of him now that he had shown his condemnation of her blood magic, or perhaps, and this is what he hoped, it was because she knew deep down that what she was doing was wrong and hadn't wanted to give any more evidence towards the evil the mirror was capable of. Anders knew it was more than likely the former, even if he wished it was the latter. He looked into the Keepers eyes, noting the slight glimmer of hope there.

"I wanted to ask you," he said seriously, "if there is any way to help her."

Marethari's smile returned, crinkling her eyes, making her look rather matronly.

"Believe me child, I have asked myself that same question many, many times over," the smile faltered a little as she continued, "but Merrill's will is strong and her intent clear. I have tried to deviate her from her path but to no avail."

"Then what about..." Anders hesitated when the Keepers eyes grew sharp, "the demon itself?"

Marethari looked grim, looking down to the pieces before her once more. Anders wondered what she was thinking.

"No good can come of bargaining with a demon," Marethari said strictly, "you know this."

"Who said anything about bargaining with it?" Anders said, cocking an eyebrow.

Marethari looked up in surprise. Anders felt like he should feel insulted but could hardly blame the Keeper for her assessment of him. He was already technically an abomination, despite not having made a deal with any demon. The true nature of he and Justice's relationship was known only to a few and understood by even less than that, if anyone at all. For Marethari to assume that he was playing with fire in the same way Merrill was wasn't much of a stretch. However, his words seemed to have shaken her impression of him.

"You suggest killing the demon?" the Keeper asked, "It has crossed my mind before, but it would not be an easy task."

"Oh, who likes easy tasks?" Anders shrugged flippantly, "What makes this demon so special?"

"Not special," the Keeper said, shaking her head, "simply powerful. A demon of pride. I have not acted before now more because I know my own limitations. I would not delude myself into thinking that I could defeat it alone and I would not risk the lives of others of our clan."

"Good thing I'm a willing volunteer then," Anders smiled breezily.

"It is also very persuasive," Marethari said with a significant look, assessing him closely.

"I find being possessed a useful boon in that area," Anders said, cocking his head, "believe me, the spirit within me would never make a deal with a demon, it's not even within his comprehension, and he'd never allow me to be seduced either."

Marethari watched him for a moment longer before nodding slowly. Anders wondered whether this
plan was even worth considering. Killing a demon wasn't always as easy as it sounded, especially those who were higher up the food chain. The more powerful they become the trickier they get. Anders thought wryly. Simply fighting with it wouldn't always be enough to defeat it. If this was the route they were to follow then it would take a certain amount of research and preparation.

"Then I will...consider your offer," Marethari inclined her head, "it may be a last resort."

Anders stood, feeling more than knowing that the conversation was at an end. The Keeper watched him, as if sensing there was something more he wanted to ask. Anders hesitated, wondering if he would be pushing his luck, wondering if she would know, somehow, what he was planning to do if he asked. There was something preternatural about Marethari, something that made him pause. He had wanted to ask about Merrill, of course, but he would admit he'd had an ulterior motive in coming. Anders tried to shake away the doubt even as he pushed himself to ask the question.

"Before I go," Anders said, "I was wondering if you might know of some ingredients I'm having trouble finding."

"I may," the Keeper nodded, "what is it you seek?"

"Sela petrae and drakestone" Anders said, trying his best to sound off hand.

Marethari's eyes hardened immediately, a frown creasing her brow. Anders could feel the change in her demeanour as if it affected the air around him, a strange sense of danger pervading his being.

"What need do you have of such things?" she asked.

"Just something I'm working on," Anders shrugged, aiming for ambiguity over an outright lie.

"Drakestone is a common name, but sela petrae is not. We Dalish call it 'halava' and, as far as I am aware, you humans call it 'devil's peat'," the Keeper said sagely, "Yet you speak of it in by the Tevinter terminology and you are not Tevinter yourself. How much do you know of these things you seek?"

"Enough," Anders answered, his face set.

The Keeper sighed, her face showing her age. She suddenly looked as she had when he had first arrived; troubled. Anders couldn't help but feel responsible. He could sense Justice, sliding around beneath his consciousness. The spirit wanted to know, more than Anders did. It was then that he realised the Keeper had already given him what he sought, perhaps unknowingly.

"I cannot help you with this child," the Keeper said, confirming Anders suspicions that she would be unwilling to help, "some things are not meant to be trifled with."

"Alright," Anders said lightly, making Marethari frown in confusion, "I was just wondering anyway. Let me know if you ever want to do anything, about Merrill I mean. You know where you can find me."

He could feel the Keeper's eyes on him as he left, curious, probing. Anders did his best to seem nonchalant. Things were looking up at least, he thought. All he had to do was as Merrill what havala was and he would be sorted. He could keep looking for drakestone, he would find it somewhere, somehow.

One step closer, Anders thought numbly. The memory of Hawke's smiling face flashed up accusingly. Anders kept his eyes on the ground, his face grim as he walked the long road back to Kirkwall. One step closer.
It was early evening by the time he returned to the mansion. Bodahn greeted him cheerfully and informed him that Hawke had already returned and was waiting for him in the library. Anders thanked him. The long walk back had given him time to settle his mind somewhat for which he was glad. He hated thinking on his plan when Hawke was there, especially if the man was trying to distract him; it always made Justice irate. Thankfully he wouldn't have to deal with that tonight.

"Hawke?" Anders closed the door behind him as he entered the library, looking around.

"Up here," came the reply from the top of the stairs.

Anders unhooked his staff and placed it in the corner of the room before ascending the stairs. He found Hawke sitting at the large table by the balcony, an open bottle of wine and two glasses, one full and one empty, sitting before him. Hawke reached out to pour the deep red liquid into the free glass as the mage approached, taking the chair across from him. It always made Anders smile that Hawke poured him a drink if Hawke was drinking, even though he never touched it.

"Well," Hawke said, his eyes sparkling despite his rather severe tone, "seems it really is like talking to a brick wall with you sometimes."

"Sorry?" Anders asked, hesitating as he sat down, blinking confusedly at Hawke.

"I went to check on Fenris," Hawke said, "was going to make sure his injuries were taken care of. Seems I needn't have bothered though."

"Well," Anders sighed, shrugging, "someone had to do it and, anyway, you know I'm a far better healer than you are."

"Admittedly," Hawke said.

"I don't see what you're getting upset about," Anders frowned, "honestly, you'd think you expected me to have no self control whatsoever."

"Who said I was upset?" Hawke frowned before smiling, "Actually I'm rather proud of you."

"You're rather...what?" Anders blinked.

"There was a time when I wouldn't have been happy leaving you in a room alone together," Hawke shrugged, "and that was only last night. Thank you, Anders, for compromising at least. It means a lot to me."

Anders looked out over the balcony, shaking his head. Hawke was an enigma as always. Anders could never tell when the man would be angry or happy that Anders had gone against his wishes. Not that the thought of it ever affected Anders actions, no, the mage was too strong willed for that. It did make Hawke difficult to predict however. Thankfully, today Hawke seemed to be in a good mood. The rogue reached over the table to take Anders hand in his own, tracing the palm with his fingertips. Anders ran his finger over Hawke's ring in return, watching as the magic within reacted to his touch, sending orange and crimson swirls through the silver band. He looked up to find Hawke watching him intently.

"Actually I have something for you," Hawke said, reaching down with his free hand to pull something from his trouser pocket.

"It still isn't my birthday," Anders smiled, eyes narrowed teasingly, "I always knew you couldn't count."
"Ha ha," Hawke said, deadpan, as he pulled his hand from Anders and got up to walk around the table to stand behind the mage, "you're hilarious, now sit still."

Anders frowned but obeyed nonetheless. He felt something being hung around his neck, reaching up to pick it up in his hand and look down at it. His eyes widened on seeing the amulet in his palm.

"This is...a Tevinter chantry amulet?" Anders breathed out in disbelief, "Where on earth did you find this?"

"Well," Hawke shrugged when Anders looked up at him over his shoulder, "lying around. I thought you might appreciate it."

"Hawke," Anders said seriously, "do you want me hung, drawn and quartered? It's sacrilege to wear this in any land under the Divine!"

"The Divine condemned their chantry because it freed mages from the Circle," Hawke said, his countenance entreating, "I thought you might sympathise."

Anders couldn't help but be buoyed up by Hawke's enthusiasm. It was at moments like these that he could almost believe he could rely on Hawke's support no matter what happened. He closed his hand around the amulet before slipping it down under his shirt.

"I like it," he said, smiling, "maybe not on the outside of my clothes, I'm not that eager to see the hangman's noose, but I do like it. Thank you."

"Good," Hawke said, sounding relieved as he leaned down to wrap his arms around the mages shoulders, his voice soft in his ear, "for a moment I thought I'd done something wrong."

"Of course not," Anders admonished, reaching up to squeeze Hawke's arm; he took a moment to revel in the warmth before continuing, "you know I've often wondered what it would be like, in the Tevinter chantry. The Circle makes it sound like the void itself, the Black Divine stalking Thedas making it unsafe for kittens and virgins."

Hawke hummed in his ear, his voice decidedly humorous as he spoke.

"Well, those kittens and virgins will just have to find a big, strong mage to protect them, won't they," he said, kissing his neck briefly as Anders laughed.

"Well, from what I hear of the Tevinters that's the last thing they'd want," he said, still smiling, "for the virgins anyway. I've never heard of any horrific...kitten rituals. Although it's still early days."

"You never know with Tevinters," Hawke agreed with a grin, "they are ruthless after all."

And there it was again, that pain. Anders tried to push it away, tried so hard to focus on the here, the now, the present not the future. It was more difficult that he'd ever imagined it would be. You only have yourself to blame, Anders thought with a sigh, you were the idiot who fell in love. This would all be so much easier if you hadn't given in. Hawke was frowning at him when he looked back up to the man holding him.

"Are you alright?" he asked concernedly.

"Yes, fine," Anders said, hesitating before he asked, "Hawke, I know you don't disagree with my opinions about the Circle and templars but..."

"Oh not this again Anders," Hawke said, sounding more than a little exasperated, "how many times
do I have to say that I support you in this? I wouldn't be here if I didn't."
"You say that now," Anders mumbled, speaking up when Hawke frowned, "What you've seen so far, it's only the beginning. There will be more violence, I know that. If you tie yourself to me, I'll only hurt you."

The silence that followed only made his anxiety worse. You keep offering him these chances to back out, Anders thought, and one day he's going to realise his mistake and leave. Anders hand tightened on Hawke's arm, his breathing shallow.

"You know," Hawke said soberly, "sometimes I think you'd be happier if we were apart."

"And you have no idea how far that is from the truth," Anders said, hearing the desperation in his voice.

"Then I'll never let it be true," Hawke said seriously, leaning in to kiss Anders firmly on the mouth before pulling back, "I love you, Anders, till the day we die."

"How morbid of you Hawke," Anders said, trying for levity and failing, his voice hitching as Hawke stared at him, "I love you too."

I always will, Anders thought as Hawke leaned in again to capture his lips, till the day I die.
"I can't believe it's snowing," Anders said, shaking his head, "this early! It shouldn't be doing this for another couple of months yet at least."

"It's just freak weather," Hawke shrugged as he continued to trudge forwards, hardly taking any notice of the delicately falling flakes.

Anders shook his head and smiled fondly. Hawke had been the one to suggest it, getting out of the city for a little while, just the two of them. Anders had only agreed because Hawke wouldn't stop pestering him, honestly the man was like a mabari with a bone when he got an idea into his head. Although, when he thought about it, it had been a long time since they had done anything together just for the sake of it, even if it was just to go for a walk along the Coast. Yes it had been cold when they left but the sky had been mainly clear, all sunshine and fluffy white clouds, until they reached the paths to the caves; that was when the huge, feather edge cloud had swooped in from the south and the snow started. Not that it bothered him. Anders had always loved snow, it reminded him of home, distant memories of thick wave after wave of white flakes in swirling flurries. Hawke on the other hand seemed to be too practical to be sentimental about the weather. Anders hurried after him as the snow continued to swirl around them.

"Aren't you cold?" Anders asked as he fell into step beside the rogue; Hawke was wearing his usual armour with no added layers to keep out the chill.

"No," Hawke shook his head, "I don't really feel it that much."

"That's probably just the hypothermia talking," Anders joked, smirking.

"Oh sod off, I'm not that cold," Hawke said, giving Anders a quick smile, "I'm just hot blooded, that's all."

"Well, I can vouch for that at least," Anders said, laughing as Hawke shoved him playfully, stumbling into the scrub at the side of the path, "watch it! Honestly, one of these days you're going to push me over a cliff, then you'll know about it."

Hawke grinned, skipping ahead before turning around, walking backwards as he faced Anders. The mage found his footing and followed Hawke, a wry twist to his lips. The sky above was a washout of white-grey cloud, low enough to obscure the tops of the jagged hills. The water of the bay reflected it dismally, creating a sheet of tranquil, slate, hardly a ripple disturbing the surface other than the falling snow. Everything seemed deathly still and quiet as they walked together, talking about everything and nothing. Anders would be the first to agree that this had been a good idea. It was difficult to relax in Kirkwall these days and usually when they left the city it was for business over pleasure. Just being out in the open without any commitments, breathing in the sea air untainted by smoke from the foundry or the reek from the Docks, was respite enough.

"Well," Hawke said as they walked down onto the beach, a small layer of white lying atop the dirty golden sand, "trust me to pick today of all days to go for a long walk."

"Yes, remind me never to trust your internal barometer again," Anders said, bumping Hawke's shoulder lightly with his own as they stood, watching the water lap against the shore.

"It's hardly a storm," Hawke said, trying to sound contrite.

"I know," Anders said, leaning into Hawke as the other man slipped his arm around his waist and
pulled him close, "I was only joking."

In the months since Hawke's birthday things had finally begun to settle down. Anders had worked out a tight schedule that allowed him to separate his day fairly between all his duties; he rose early, usually leaving Hawke curled up under the covers, fast asleep, and travelled to Darktown in the early winter gloom to open the clinic. There he stayed, usually all day, unless he had supplies to collect or business with the resistance, which wasn't quite as often these days. Even the templars seemed to have been infected with the calm that had descended over his life. The number of patrols on the streets had evened out, not increasing any more as they had been prone to, and even raids and new tranquil in the Gallows were at a low. Anders refused to let himself become complacent but, for now, he would enjoy this lull while it lasted.

Once he was done at the clinic he would blow out the lantern, travel back up to Hightown and eat a late dinner with Hawke or, if he was very late, grab something for himself from the kitchens as he passed before hauling himself off to bed. Hawke tried his best to stay awake, to at least see him before he went to sleep, but he didn't always manage it. It was on those days, when Anders had to creep around the room while Hawke slumbered, sneaking under the covers, doing his best not to wake him, that he realised just how little time they were spending together despite his best efforts. Some days he didn't even get to speak to Hawke at all, despite living with the man. He would be gone before Hawke was awake and then back after he was asleep.

On those nights Anders had taken to sneaking off to Hawke's study when he returned from the clinic, to work on his studies. The translation itself was almost complete, just a few details here and there that needed ironed out, but Anders needed it to be perfect. He had also started his research into his and the Keeper's fledgling plan. Pride demons, it seemed, were well documented for a reason. They were incredibly difficult to sever ties with once a deal had been made, he was finding out, but he didn't let it discourage him. He would find some way to help Merrill.

He had also begun, when he'd had a particularly gruesome day or even just when he was tired enough to let Justice take a little more hold of him than he usually allowed, writing down the arguments behind his actions. It was a cathartic exercise, it cleared his head of questions and, when he was feeling down it buoyed him up, reenergised him, to remember what he was fighting for. A manifesto of sorts, he thought, something he would have happily distributed throughout the mage population if he wasn't sure that it would cause mass panic and be burned on the spot for its sacrilege. Sometimes he worked well into the small hours of the morning, only realising how late it had become when the watery sunlight began to shine in through the windows. Hawke seemed to have noticed how tired Anders was these days but didn't comment. The mage knew that he should reassure him, but wasn't sure what to say. He couldn't tell him why he was doing it, why it was necessary, so instead he just tried his best to cover it up. Which was another reason this was such a nice reprieve; it was a chance to spend time together without having to worry about anything else.

"That reminds me," Hawke said, "you are remembering the party next week, aren't you?"

Well, not much else anyway, Anders thought wearily.

"Oh not this again," Anders tried to ignore Hawke's attempts to distract him as the rogue nuzzled at his neck, "I already told you that I think it's a bad idea."

"Stop being so stubborn," Hawke said testily, despite the kiss he placed against Anders jaw, "honestly, you'd think I was inviting you to tea with the Knight Commander."

"Well attending a party full to the brim with nobility and being forced to hobnob with them all night isn't exactly my idea of fun," Anders said, looking at Hawke out of the corner of his eye, feeling his exasperated sigh against his neck, "anyway, how exactly were you planning on
introducing me to your peers? As the possessed apostate mage or your lover?

"How about both?" Hawke said challengingly, his face set.

"Nice plan, I'm sure that will go over swimmingly," Anders said back sarcastically, "but I think I'll have business elsewhere that night."

Hawke's presence at his side swiftly disappeared, made all the more notable because the heat they had generated where they touched was replaced by the freezing chill of the afternoon air. Anders sighed, looking to his right as Hawke walked down towards the water, stopping short of the miniscule waves lapping the sand. Hawke had been subtly harassing him about this party for weeks now and had only become more and more piqued as Anders continued to refuse.

Leandra had become determined to push her sons status to the top of the nobility somehow and, as he wouldn't marry his way there, she had come up with the idea to have him do it the other old fashioned way; social climbing. Of course she didn't seem to realise that she'd picked the only other thing Hawke hated more than the idea of marrying some random noble girl, which was socialising with nobles for personal gain. Anders couldn't help but sympathise, he would rather spend his evening having all the hairs plucked from his legs one by one than have to be nice to the group of self centred, stuck up prigs that comprised the Kirkwall nobility. However, despite wanting nothing more than to be there for Hawke as he suffered through another of his mother's wonderful plans, he really didn't think his presence would have the desired effect. In fact it would probably just raise more questions that, given the circumstances, would be very difficult to answer.

"Honestly Hawke, are you going to be in the huff with me over this for much longer?" Anders asked, folding his arms, partly for effect and partly for warmth.

"I am not in the huff," Hawke said tightly, sounding to Anders awfully like he was, "I was just hoping for some support; I suppose it was too much to hope for though."

"For Maker's sake," Anders shook his head, an incredulous smile on his lips as he walked down the sand to take his place by Hawke's side, "you are so melodramatic sometimes. It's one evening! And you know fine well why it would be far more awkward for me than it will be for you."

"Yes," Hawke said, turning to look at him intensely, "but if you think that I'm afraid to tell anyone what you are to me, then you have another thing coming."

Anders swallowed, feeling his humour lose some of its credibility in the face of Hawke's earnestness. He cleared his throat, looking away, out over the bay. The low cloud created the illusion of an endless sea and sky, merged into one. Even the snow was mirrored as it fell seamlessly into the water, creating a never ending void of grey and white.

"As appreciated as that is," Anders said, looking down at his feet before he looked back to Hawke, "it probably isn't one of your best plans."

"Says who?" Hawke said petulantly.

"Says me," Anders frowned, "honestly Hawke, what are you trying to say? That you would tell the Knight Commander, the world, that you love an apostate and are willing to stand beside him?"

"Exactly," Hawke shrugged, a defiant glint in his eye, as if he were challenging more than just Anders to dispute his decision, "and I don't care what anyone says. I'm not ashamed and I'm most certainly not afraid. Just let them come and try and take you away from me."

Anders stared at him, blinking. Hawke had appeared perfectly affable this morning and during their
walk yet, over the past few minutes, seemed to have worked himself up into a passion. Anders could almost believe that someone was genuinely threatening him, so fervent was Hawke's reaction. He knew he shouldn't have laughed, especially considering how idealistic Hawke was being, but he couldn't help it. Hawke glowered at him as he hid his laughter futilely behind his gloved hand, eyes creasing. Hawke could be so endearingly naive sometimes, Anders thought.

"Are you laughing at me?" Hawke asked crossly, a deep frown adorning his forehead.

"No, no I'm not," Anders said, ignoring Hawke's chuff of disbelief as he reached out to pull him close, ignoring the rouges resistance, "honestly, I'm not. It's just..."

He leaned in, pressing their lips together in a kiss that only deepened as Anders slid his tongue into Hawke's mouth. He was glad to feel Hawke's arms circle around his back, pulling him tighter against his chest. The mage leaned back slowly, opening his eyes, smiling softly at Hawke's confusion.

"It's just sometimes you can be so unrealistic," he said, continuing quickly as Hawke opened his mouth to protest, "but that's what I love about you."

"Oh is that so?" Hawke said dryly, "So you aren't just trying to get out of laughing in my face when I was trying to be sincere?"

"Oh Hawke," Anders rolled his eyes at Hawke's insecurity, "of course not. You have no idea what it means to me, to hear you say what you just did. I've...no one's ever told me...I mean, no one has ever even suggested to me that they would do what you just offered."

Hawke's face softened, his eyes losing their fire. He reached up with both hands to cup Anders face, his fingers particularly cold against the mage's jaw.

"Then the rest of the world has never noticed just how wonderful you are," he said slickly, "and they don't know what they're missing."

"Smooth talker," Anders smiled before letting Hawke pull him forwards for another slow, deep kiss.

They broke the kiss after a minute or two but didn't pull apart. The snow had almost stopped now, only the occasional flake drifting down from the still persistent cloud. Anders placed his head on Hawke's shoulder, enjoying the warmth and the feel of Hawke around him. It was true, he thought distantly, he'd never had someone tell him that they would basically defy every societal convention just to show how much they wanted to be with him. A part of him was still reeling from the idea that he could be worth this kind of affection while the other felt the desperate hope that it always did when Hawke spoke this frankly.

"So, will you come?" Hawke asked eagerly.

Anders was perfectly aware that Hawke knew what he was doing. The man was more than capable of manipulating him and, generally, against his better nature, Anders tended to fall for it. He couldn't be too hard on himself, however, as it was usually because Hawke meant every word he said; that was how he turned Anders around and ended up having him agree to whatever he'd been disagreeing with moments before. The rogue's honesty was his greatest weapon, Anders had found out very quickly, and it was one he had yet to find a defence against.

"As long as you don't expect me to dance or be sociable in any way," Anders said as he pulled back from their embrace, ignoring Hawke's grin at his obvious acceptance, "then...fine, yes, I suppose
"You're the best," Hawke said, swooping in to kiss him briefly, "and what do you mean no dancing?"

"I'm not dancing," Anders said, pulling away so he could clamber back up to the path and continue his walk.

"Oh come on," Hawke said teasingly, as he followed him, his boots making muffled crunching sounds in the sand, "is it because you won't or you can't?"

"I am perfectly capable of dancing, thank you very much," Anders said snippily, making Hawke grin.

They continued their harmless bickering as they walked around the footpaths, occasionally stopping if either of them saw a sprig of elfroot or the glimmer of orichalcum, or even just to steal a brief kiss. Hawke's ability to put Anders at ease never failed to amaze him. He never felt more normal than when he was talking about something truly trivial with the man. I just hope it's enough to get me through this bloody party I've been talked into, Anders thought dismally; the things I do for you, he smiled, looking at Hawke as the man continued to talk, slipping his hand into his as they walked back towards Kirkwall together.

Anders felt that his birthday rolled around far too fast. At least I didn't forget it this time, Anders thought. He didn't think he'd live down another blunder like that. Hawke still teased him about last year.

Hawke had told him he had business with the Viscount, something he was sure would unfortunately take up most of the day, so Anders had called on Varric for some company. Thankfully the dwarf wasn't busy and more than willing to spend some free time with him. Unluckily Anders had thought it a good idea to bring up the party. He hadn't considered that Varric would be so perceptive but, in hindsight, he really should have known better.

"You're serious?" Varric said, eyes wide, "You're actually going?"

"Well how did you get out of it?" Anders asked incredulously.

"I said no," Varric said as if the answer were blatantly obvious, frowning, "why, how did you get roped into it?"

Anders could feel the blush on his cheeks and tried his best to will it away. Too late, he thought grimly, noting Varric's sly grin. The mage shook his head and continued to bundle up the elfroot he had bought into manageable bundles before placing it into the lockable chest at the back of the clinic. Varric leaned against the table and watched him knowingly.

"Oh I see," the dwarf said, lifting his eyebrows suggestively, "so Hawke used the tried and trusted bedroom technique did he?"

"He did nothing of the sort!" Anders said, not sure why he was feeling so embarrassed, considering the truth wasn't actually anything dirty, "Not that it's any of your business anyway."

"Well how else could he have finally managed to get you to say yes?" Varric shrugged as he watched the mage potter about, tidying things away and generally keeping his hands busy, "You've done nothing but complain for weeks that he won't let up about that party and then all of a sudden you turn around and ask me why I'm not going!"
Anders sighed. Varric was right and he knew it but that didn't make it any easier to swallow. It was one thing to know you'd been played but quite another to have someone else point it out to you. He gave Varric a withering look and tried again.

"Look, he asked me to go as his back up," Anders explained, "and now I'm asking if you'll be my back up. I'm going to be the only person there who isn't noble and it's been a long time since I've had to lie convincingly for an entire evening straight and pretend I'm having a good time."

"Pity you didn't think about all of this earlier then," Varric said, inspecting the fingernails of his right hand, "before you let Hawke seduce you to his will."

"Oh shut up," Anders said, sitting down heavily in his chair; that was when something occurred to him and he smiled slyly, "you could consider it my birthday present."

Varric looked at him, his eyebrows raised, before he let out a hearty laugh. Anders blinked at the dwarf as he continued to guffaw, slapping his thigh.

"You're just as bad as he is!" Varric exclaimed, still laughing, making Anders protest futilely, "Honestly, I think Hawke is rubbing off on you."

"Well, that's the polite way of putting it," Anders said suggestively, laughing himself as the dwarf lifted his hands in surrender.

"Alright, alright," Varric said, "I don't need any details, thank you. I hear enough from Isabela as it is."

"And here I didn't think there was anything you wouldn't want to know," Anders teased.

He had agreed to meet Hawke at the pub around six. They had no definite plans, more just to see where the evening took them, so he accompanied Varric back to Lowtown as it approached evening. It was cold but clear, a virulent sunset of crimson, umber and gold cresting the western sky. Anders fastened his coat tightly, listening to Varric talk with half an ear as he breathed in the chill air, pulling his coat closed and fastening the clasps tightly. It was nights like this, with the threat of snow on the air and the clear sky spotted with stars above him, that he couldn't help but be reminded of Ferelden. He knew it sounded silly, considering it was technically only over the water, but Kirkwall had always seemed like a foreign country a million miles away. The people were so different here. Anders would be the first to admit that he had never really had any connection to Ferelden as a homeland, especially considering it wasn't technically his homeland at all, but on occasion he found something he missed about it. Sometimes Anders wondered if Justice felt the same way. He tried not to dwell on the idea, all it did was make him feel guilty, as if he had trapped the spirit into a life he never would have chosen for himself. Justice was just as wary of the Fade as Anders was now. Was it possible for a spirit to feel homesick? Anders wondered as he and Varric walked up the stairs in front of the Hanged Man.

"Hey, are you even listening to me?" Varric said loudly, pulling Anders attention back to him.

"Sorry what?" Anders said, blinking, "My mind wandered."

"Well, it's nice to know I'm interesting at least," Varric said back sarcastically.

"Overwhelmingly," Anders smirked, trying to banish the dire thoughts he'd been having from his mind, "now what were you saying?"

"I was saying," Varric said purposefully, "that I need to swing by Daisy's to get something first."
"Alright," Anders shrugged, "I'll just see you back here then?"

Anders made for the door to the pub but was stopped by Varric's shout. Anders turned around in surprise to stare at the dwarf who, in contrast, looked entirely calm.

"Oh come on," Varric said, "aren't you even going to give her a chance to say happy birthday?"

"I..." Anders hadn't even thought about it, "right, of course."

Goes to show how highly you rate yourself doesn't it? Anders thought derisively. Still not used to having friends are we? Honestly, Anders, you are a useless mess sometimes. The alienage was fairly quiet as they sauntered through the plaza. Varric knocked as a courtesy on Merrill's door, entering before he'd even received a reply. Anders followed him in, turning to close the door behind him. When he turned back he nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Surprise!" Merrill shouted as she leapt at him, her arms out wide.

"By the Maker!" Anders took a step back, raising his hand to his rapidly beating heart, "What on earth..? Merrill you scared me to death!"

"Oh, uh," Merrill looked a little apologetic, laughing nervously, "sorry. I just, well, it was supposed to be a surprise so...it's a good thing you're surprised I guess!"

"A surprise..?" Anders frowned, before he saw the table behind Merrill.

It was laden with food. Anders was so used to Merrill having nothing edible in the house that, at first, that was what surprised him. Until he realised what it was supposed to be for.

"Wakey wakey," Varric said with a short laugh, prodding the mage in the arm, "are you in there?"

"I...yes, sorry," Anders shook his head a little disbelievingly, "I've just never...I mean no one's ever thrown me a surprise party before."

"Well that's good because I've never thrown one before," Merrill grinned, "this way you won't know if I've done anything wrong."

Anders smiled, reaching out to squeeze the elf's shoulder.

"Thank you Merrill, Varric," he said, "really, I...I don't know what to say."

Varric waved away his thanks as if it weren't necessary while Merrill smiled shyly. She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by the door opening. They all turned to see Hawke sneaking in and closing the door behind them.

"Is he here ye..?" Hawke stopped short as he turned to see Anders smirking at him, "oh."

It was so rare to see Hawke caught out, Anders thought, drinking in the sight. The man was always so prepared and, when he wasn't prepared, he usually adapted quickly to any situation he found himself in. Yet now he looked a little like a deer caught in the hunter's sights. He blinked, rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly and then started to laugh.

"Guess I'm later than I thought," Hawke said, walking forwards to lean in and kiss Anders briefly, "surprise?"

"You're a little late for that," Merrill said, "I already scared him out of his wits."
"Well at least someone did it," Hawke shrugged, grinning as Anders tutted at him.

"Honestly, you're such a schemer Garret Hawke," Anders said as Merrill and Varric headed for the table, already talking amongst themselves.

"What? Why am I getting picked on? It wasn't just my idea," Hawke said, raising his eyebrows, "anyway, I enjoy scheming. Scheming is fun."

Anders rolled his eyes but couldn't help the laugh that escaped. For a blinding moment he felt ridiculously ordinary. He enjoyed those moments. They were rare enough to cherish these days.

The meal was simple but delicious. Baked potatoes and fish, done in oil and herbs, fresh bread, spit roasted beef and pork, boiled vegetables. Merrill had said that she wasn't much of a cook but Anders couldn't entirely trust her on that considering everything tasted wonderful. Isabela turned up not long after they had started eating, a conspicuously unlabelled bottle in her hand.

"What?" she said too innocently as Anders looked at the bottle with a grin, "It's your present."

"I thought as much," Anders chuckled, "only you would get someone a present that you know you're going to drink all of."

"What a terrible thing to say," Isabela smirked, "I was planning on sharing it you know."

"How very out of character," Anders said audaciously, ducking as she swatted at his head with her free hand.

"Nice to know you've got your sense of humour back at least," Isabela said airily, taking a seat and placing the bottle onto the table with a thump, "I see there's still nothing a good rogering won't cure."

Merrill had gone red while Varric muttered something that sounded like 'here we go' and Hawke had put his head in his hands and sighed. Anders couldn't summon the will to be embarrassed. He was too relaxed. He had just laughed, shaking his head, and let the comforting talk of his friends wash over him.

Anders and Hawke had left just before ten o'clock. He had hugged Merrill heartily goodbye, noting her blush, and they had walked Varric and Isabela back to the Hanged Man where they had said goodnight. The walk back to Hightown was a pleasant one; what with the freezing chill Hawke had thought it best to walk the entire way with his arm tightly around Anders waist. The mage wasn't complaining. Bodahn informed them that Leandra had already retired for the night as they walked into the main parlour. They had both withdrawn to Hawke's bedroom but neither he nor Hawke was tired. The rogue had quickly excused himself, saying he had a few things to finish up, before disappearing off down the hallway. Anders had picked up his book while he waited for him to return and sat himself on Hawke's long chaise longue, practically lying on it. When Hawke had returned he had stood smiling at him for a moment before picking up his own book and sitting down at the other end of the small couch. Anders had tested his luck and put his foot in Hawke's lap, grinning behind his book as the man began absently running his fingers over the sole.

"What are you reading?" Hawke asked after a little while.

"It's just Varric's latest nonsense," Anders said, smirking, "he requested my opinion so that, unfortunately, means I have to read it first."

"What? You mean you don't like tacky romances and clichéd swashbuckling?" Hawke ribbed him
with a sarcastic smile.

"Oh I can't get enough," Anders replied facetiously, "honestly Hawke, I'm only doing it to keep Varric happy. This is hardly my first choice of reading material."

"Well I think that you secretly love it," Hawke said, his fingers gently rubbing the ball of his foot, "and you're just too proud to say anything."

"Oh is that right?" Anders said, an eyebrow cocked as he kept his eyes on the book in his lap.

"Yes, it is," Hawke said back, running his fingertips lightly up the sole of his foot; Anders shivered but refused to look up.

"Hmm, that doesn't seem very likely," Anders turned the page, his expression teasingly sceptical, "but whatever makes you feel better."

"You're such a liar," Hawke murmured back before pinching Anders little toe.

"Ow!" Anders jerked his foot away, looking up to Hawke's grinning face before giving him a half-hearted kick, "You little bugger."

"Sorry," he said unrepentantly, returning Anders smile as the mage placed his foot back into his lap cautiously, "couldn't help it."

They sat reading together in comfortable silence until Anders lost track of time. Hawke's hand, every now and then, tried its best to wander up his leg to more interesting places but Anders just batted him away with a humorously disapproving look. When Oranna knocked at the door an hour later he actually jumped at the sound. He ignored the laughter in Hawke's eyes at his jitteriness and returned to his book as the door opened.

"If you don't need anything else, I'll be going to bed," Oranna said, her voice oddly staid; Anders looked up at her with a frown.

"Thank you Oranna, we're fine," Hawke said back, his smile far too pleased, "goodnight."

"Goodnight," the elf, closed the door behind her but not before Anders caught her enigmatic smile.

Anders blinked. What an odd interaction that had been. Oranna never informed Hawke of when she was retiring for the night. What on earth had that all been about? If Anders wasn't so very sure that Hawke wasn't into women he would have been seriously suspicious. Not that he wasn't still seriously suspicious, if only for different reasons. He watched Hawke for a moment longer but the man seemed not to have noticed anything at all. Anders returned to his book, occasionally flicking a glance up at Hawke.

"Oh dash it," Hawke said after another few minutes, his forehead creased into a frown, "I meant to ask Oranna to bring me those papers the Viscount asked me to look at."

"Where are they?" Anders asked abstractedly, turning another page.

"In my study," Hawke said, sighing through his nose; there was a pause, in which Anders looked up to see Hawke staring at him hopefully, "you wouldn't go and get them for me would you?"

"What? Oh come on, it's only along the hall," Anders said, unable to resist smiling in the face of Hawke's indolence.
"But it's cold out there," Hawke groused, "and you're closer."

"By a few feet," Anders said back, rolling his eyes, "oh fine, where are they exactly?"

"You're the light of my life," Hawke grinned, ignoring Anders tut of disapproval, "they should be on my desk."

Hawke was right, it was cold out in the hallway. Anders shivered, his bare feet icy against the floorboards. Honestly, Hawke is such a lazy arse sometimes, Anders thought, making me get his bloody papers. It's my birthday for Maker's sake, shouldn't he be waiting on me hand and foot? He crossed his arms for warmth as he hurried to the other end of the landing, hissing as he took hold of the freezing metal door handle.

"Bloody Hawke and his..." the complaint died on his lips as he pulled the door open and looked inside.

If there were any papers Anders needed to retrieve he didn't think he would have been able to find them anyway. The floor of the study was a sea of white sheets, the lantern on the table throwing the chaos of the room into bright illumination. It was a completely extraordinary sight; considering how freakishly neat Hawke was his study was always pristine.

But that wasn't the only unusual thing.

Sitting in the middle of everything, atop a pile of rather important looking papers, was a small ball of ginger and white striped fur, chewing determinedly on a long trail of red ribbon. Anders stared at the sight before him, unable to summon enough brain power to work his mouth. He was quite sure that he looked entirely moronic at that moment in time but wasn't entirely aware of it. The kitten looked up at him, its paw moving up and down reflexively until it pulled he ribbon from its jaws; it yowled plaintively. Anders didn't hear Hawke creep up behind him, but then he never did.

"Happy birt-what the hell!" Hawke had started softly but his voice leapt a couple of decibels on seeing the calamity before him; Anders look round at him, taking in his horrified expression, "The little bastard! You've only been in here five minutes and look what..!"

Anders was sure that Hawke would have continued his rant until it became truly epic in proportion, if he hadn't silenced him with a very forceful, very passionate kiss. Hawke let out a surprised 'oomph' as his back hit the wall, one hand coming up to grab at Anders side and the other burying itself in the mages hair. Anders didn't let up until Hawke was panting for breath, his hand curled into Anders shirt. When he pulled back Hawke's eyes were practically gleaming. The rogue let out a short, breathy laugh, his eyes half lidded.

"Well," he said as Anders broke away from his weak grasp, "that's one way to say thank you."

But Anders wasn't entirely listening. He was too busy stepping delicately over the paper covered floor to scoop up the kitten who was still trying its best to destroy the red ribbon hooked to its claws. It pawed at his fingers, trying to climb around his hands as Anders grinned. Oh, you're going to be trouble, I can tell, he thought, looking at the destruction the kitten had already caused.

"I can't believe the mess you've made," Hawke said, seeming to have recovered from his momentary daze as he walked over to poke the kitten in the head, earning a swipe with a paw for his troubles, "you even ate the ribbon. Honestly."

"Where did you find him?" Anders asked, still not entirely sure he believed what he was holding.

"It's a her actually," Hawke said, "and you can thank Merrill. She was the one who told me that
there was a man selling them in Lowtown, said they were hard to miss considering they attacked her ankles every time she went shopping for vegetables."

Anders pulled his hands close to his chest, trying his best to keep a hold of the squirming kitten. He laughed softly when the little animal simply took this as another challenge and began trying its best to climb up the front of his shirt. He leaned his face down and snuggled the top of the kitten's head with his nose. It let out another meow and pushed back before sniffing at him warily. Having given him a cursory once over the kitten seemed to deem him suitable before it rubbed its head against his chin, nearly falling from its perch in the process.

"Oh well aren't you just the cutest little thing?" Anders said, ignoring the badly disguised snort of laughter Hawke let slip on hearing him speak to the kitten in such a sappy voice, "Aren't you though? Yes you are. What are we going to call you, you little terror?"

The kitten meowed again, rubbing its face against his collarbone, before twisting around and once more trying to get free. Anders felt Hawke's hand on his arm and looked up.

"Let's go back to the room," he said, jiggling on his feet, "it's freezing out here!"

Anders followed him, cooing to the kitten the entire time. Once they were back in the room, the heat enveloping them, he relented and placed the kitten onto the floor, watching as it began strutting around the room, tail high in the air.

"Well aren't you just the little madam," Anders said drolly, following the kitten's progress as it sniffed at the rug cautiously before pouncing on it.

Hawke walked up to hug him from behind, his arms slipping around his waist to pull him close. Anders leaned back, unable to truly focus on Hawke as he continued to watch the kitten. He noted the tiny 'm' on her forehead denoting her as a tabby, and that each of her four paws were entirely white.

"So," Hawke said, sounding ridiculously pleased with himself, "what are you going to call her?"

Then it came to him. Anders grinned. He couldn't wait to hear what Hawke thought of...

"Madam Snowpaws," he said decisively, "I think that sums her up quite accurately, don't you?"

Hawke laughed, just as Anders thought he would, and he could feel him shaking his head. Anders turned, leaning his head to the side to get a look at Hawke over his shoulder. He was smiling at him adoringly.

"Honestly," Hawke said, "where do you get these names? What's wrong with Mittens or Fluffy or something like that?"

"What's wrong with Madam Snowpaws?" Anders shrugged in reply, "Some people have no imagination."

"Cheeky bastard," Hawke said without malice as Anders turned in his hold to face him.

He pulled Hawke into a tight embrace. How had he, of all people, Anders thought, ended up attached to a man like Garret Hawke? Sometimes he wasn't sure if he was lucky or cursed. The other man held him in return. Anders wasn't sure he could really tell Hawke what this meant to him, but he could try.

"Thank you," Anders said sincerely, "really, I mean it Hawke."
"Well you'll be looking after her," Hawke smiled mischievously as he pulled back, nodding to the kitten, "don't thank me just yet."

Anders turned around to see the kitten clawing decisively at the rug, tiny claws pulling small runnels of fluff out of the pristine fabric. Anders let out a quick cry and started forwards, scooping the kitten away from its attack of Hawke's hearth rug. He shook his head and tutted at the cat.

"No Madam Snowpaws we don't wantonly destroy the furniture, now do we?" he said as the kitten watched him intently with its tiny yellow eyes, "No, that's right, we don't."

Perfect, Anders thought as he and Hawke played with the kitten on the rug before the fire, laughing at the little cat as it tried its best to pounce on every available thing, everything was perfect. He didn't think he'd ever been this content. Yes he was happy, he realised as he knocked on Oranna's door, waving away her apologies for deceiving him and laughing at her squeals of delight as he asked her if she'd like to hold the squirming ball of fur, but it was more than that. He felt like he was truly home.

"Well, well," Hawke said, smiling as he leaned against the doorframe, watching as Oranna lay on her back on the floor, giggling as the kitten walked jerkily over her stomach, "who would have thought it, hmm?"

"What?" Anders asked.

"If I'd been someone else, watching us, and I had been asked how long we would last," Hawke said, his smile soft, "I wouldn't have given us a more than a month until we killed each other. Now look at us. Four months down the line and we're practically a little family, aren't we."

Anders didn't answer; he couldn't. He smiled instead, glad when Hawke took that as enough of a reply. Why did Hawke have to say that? He had been happy in his illusion, even if only for a little while. Now he couldn't stop thinking the same question over and over again as he watched the scene before him. If he had found all of this, this life with someone who loved him, before joining with Justice, would he still have offered himself to the spirit? It was a painful thing to consider. The mission had become his entire life; it had been his only focus for so long now that thinking about a life without it was almost incomprehensible. It felt too much like betrayal. Somehow, Anders realised, he had managed to put himself in a catch twenty two situation where, in the end, he would be forced to betray someone close to him. Whether it be Hawke or Justice, the thought of disappointing either was agonizing. He felt Hawke slip his hand into his, twining their fingers together, and knew deep down that he'd already made his decision when he had allowed the spirit into his soul and, in that moment, he hated himself for it.

Anders thought back to the time when he had scorned Fenris for leaving Hawke, all the times he had rebuked the elf in his head for abandoning someone who had clearly cared for him. For leaving Hawke alone when all he'd wanted was to be loved, just like anyone else. That was when Anders realised, as he gripped Hawke's hand firmly in his own, that he'd become the thing he hated most.

A hypocrite.
For once Anders didn't wake up first. The feeling of calloused fingers trailing across his upper arm, soft lips against his shoulder, pulled him from the darkness behind his own eyelids. He blinked them open, momentarily confused by how light the bedroom was. Normally when he awoke the sun wasn't even up.

"Finally," he heard Hawke say, his voice teasing, "not like you to lie in."

"Mmm?" Anders hummed sleepily as he rolled over onto his back, blinking up at Hawke who was leaning over him, resting on his forearm, "What time is it?"

"It's only just after ten," Hawke said, reaching down to push the hair out of Anders' eyes, "but it was such a novelty to find you still sleeping that I thought I'd just leave you."

"Hawke..." Anders started to admonish, pushing up unsteadily.

"Ah ah," Hawke shoved him in the chest lightly and Anders fell back against the sheets, blinking up at Hawke in surprise as the man smiled down at him, "you've been running yourself ragged these past few weeks, don't think I haven't noticed. There's nothing wrong with taking a little respite now and then."

Anders tried to look contrite, even as Hawke watched him steadily from behind his smile. Anders reached up and ran his hand over his face, feeling the sleep still clinging to it. He'd be the first to admit that he had been exhausting himself needlessly, sometimes recklessly, but it still made him indignant that Hawke had taken liberties with his usual routine.

"Anyway," Hawke continued, trailing his fingers down over Anders' chest, "I was waiting for you to wake up."

"You were, were you?" Anders said, raising an eyebrow sardonically.

"Yes," Hawke said, his eyes turning distinctly lustful as they followed the path of his fingers, tickling across his abdomen, "I had such an interesting dream this morning."

"Is that so?" Anders smirked, shaking his head, "and I suppose you'd like to share?"

"Oh, I was thinking more of showing you," Hawke said, his hand disappearing under the sheets, "you see, you'd been captured by these slavers..."

"Ah!" Anders couldn't help but bite down on the cry as Hawke took a hold of him suddenly and squeezed.

"But it was alright, because I rescued you," Hawke said, grinning at Anders reaction.

"Oh...of course," Anders rolled his eyes as best he could, "couldn't possibly have rescued myself
now, could I?"

Hawke began to move his hand up and down in a steady rhythm, watching Anders lazily. Honestly, Anders thought through the haze of building desire, even in his fantasies I need taking care of.

"Course not," Hawke shrugged, "so anyway, I found you chained to this wall, something like this..."

Hawke rolled over deftly until he was sitting astride Anders' hips, his hand still tightly around him, while he reached up with the other and pulled both of the mage's wrists into one tight grip and hauled them above his head. Anders breath caught in his throat as Hawke stared down at him through half lidded eyes.

"Oh," Anders said breathily, "is that so?"

"Mmm," Hawke hummed appreciatively, "and did I mention you were naked?"

"No, you...," Anders gasped as Hawke's hand sped up ever so slightly, "left that part out."

"Well you were," Hawke said with a sly smile as he let go of Anders' erection and shimmied down to place himself between the mage's thighs, "so I pushed you up against the wall..."

"Hawke, please," Anders protested as Hawke made sure not to touch him anywhere except his wrists.

"...and you wrapped your legs around my waist," Hawke said, not quite a command, more of a reminiscence.

Anders obeyed anyway, lifting his legs shakily to wrap them around Hawke's slim waist. The rouge smiled predatorily down at him and ground forwards, rubbing his cock along Anders behind in anticipation, making the mage whimper a little with need.

"And then," Hawke continued huskily, stopping to suck the fingers of his free hand into his mouth slowly, purposefully; he trailed them down Anders' torso and teasingly across his erection before pushing them up inside of him without warning, "you begged me."

Anders cried out softly as Hawke moved inside him, waiting for the next stage of his fantasy to become a reality before he would proceed further. Anders stared up at him, his eyes glazed, breathing ragged.

"Don't suppose I..." Anders bit back a groan as Hawke twisted and opened his fingers, "...I put up any resistance, did I?"

"...Would you like to?" Hawke leaned forwards, his voice nothing but a breathy growl, his eyes dangerously dissolve.

Anders stared up at him, Hawke's stare sending a thrill of ecstasy down his spine. He glared up at him, setting his jaw. He saw Hawke's breath stutter in his chest, his hand clenching tighter around his wrists.

"Never," Anders breathed out, watching Hawke's eyes gleam.

"Beg me," Hawke demanded, forcing another finger inside of him; Anders couldn't help the cry that escaped, even as he shook his head against the pillows.
"I won't," Anders gasped, trying not to think about how very much he wanted to.

"I said beg me," Hawke said darkly, right into his ear, twisting his fingers at just the right angle to brush the tips against the spot inside that drove Anders wild.

"Ah!" Anders cried out, not caring how loud he was being or that he was giving in, "Maker, Hawke, please fuck me!"

"That's better," Hawke ground out breathily.

The next thing he knew Hawke was pushing slowly inside of him. Despite the rogue's caution it still hurt a little to have him inside without any lubrication, but Anders allowed him his indiscretion just this once; he didn't think, at this point, he would have been able to resist anyway. Hawke took hold of him once more with his free hand and stroked him in time with each frenzied thrust. They moved together, gasping, Hawke leaning down to capture Anders' lips in a panting kiss. The mage tried to free his hands, desperate to touch Hawke, to slide his hands along his strong back, but the rogue only snarled in response and tightened his grip. Eventually Anders couldn't hold back any longer; his release tore through him, even as Hawke continued to drive inside of him with impassioned fervour. He shook from the sensation, trying his best to hold his legs around Hawke as the man continued to take him, lasting only a little longer until he too found his release. Anders let his legs slip away and slid bonelessly to the bed, his eyes closed and breathing calmed.

He only opened them when he felt Hawke's lips against his cheek, then his neck, tender and gentle; then he noticed Hawke had let go of his wrists and brought his hands down to run them over Hawke's shoulders. When the rogue looked up he was once more his normal self, calm and placid. He leaned in and captured Anders' lips in a soft kiss, sliding his tongue across the mage's own.

"So," Anders said when they broke apart, "did it live up to your expectations?"

"Oh, on a scale of one to ten?" Hawke said, pretending to think about it, "I'd say a thousand times better."

Anders let out a tired laugh and shook his head. Hawke lay down beside him and pulled him closer, his face pressed against the top of his head and an arm thrown carelessly over his chest. Anders trailed his fingers absently over Hawke's forearm, feeling the soft hairs beneath his fingertips. Hawke kissed the top of his head and breathed sleepily, stifling a yawn.

"We can't go back to sleep now," Anders said humorously as Hawke coughed a little, "we're only just up!"

"Well you're only just up," Hawke said petulantly, "I had to lie here for three quarters of an hour with that dream going round and round in my head, driving me crazy, while I waited for you to wake up."

"Such restraint," Anders grinned, "how unlike you Hawke."

"Oh shut up," Hawke said, but he was smiling, "anyway I wasn't planning on going back to sleep. I need to get up and get ready. Got some business out on the Coast today."

"You do?" Anders looked up quizzically.

"Just some trouble with raiders," Hawke shrugged, "that was what the Viscount was asking me about the other day. Apparently two rival factions have banded together and have been causing more trouble than your usual marauders, so he asked if I would take care of it."
Anders watched Hawke closely. The man frowned.

"You just can't say no, can you?" Anders smiled.

"Oh what?" Hawke shoved him playfully, "I'm just a helpful person, that's all. Anyway it's better me and Varric than a bunch of Aveline's new recruits or something, isn't it? I know what I'm doing."

"I didn't say you didn't," Anders said, "but you are a reckless arse most of the time. Which is why I'm coming with you."

"Oh no you don't," Hawke admonished, "weren't you listening to me earlier when I said I know you've been exhausting yourself? I'm not chancing you getting distracted and hurt just because you're not focusing properly."

"Now who's underestimating whom?" Anders said with a frown, "And who was it that just exhausted me even more after pointing that out?"

Hawke had the good grace to blush a slightly before rolling his eyes and snuggling back into Anders' hair so the mage couldn't see him. Anders laughed softly and let himself enjoy the feeling of Hawke nosing through the loose strands.

"There's just no winning with you, is there?" Hawke mumbled out, slightly muffled.

"No," Anders agreed cheerfully, "glad you've finally caught on."

It was then that a plaintive yowl interrupted them both. Hawke sat up and leaned over Anders to reach down over the side of the bed. When he moved back he was holding a dangling Madam from his hand which he deposited onto the sheets between them. Anders grinned at the little ball of fur as she began nosing around, trying to climb over Hawke's chest.

"Good morning terror," Anders said, scratching the little cat behind her ear, "guess you're hungry are you?"

"She's not the only one," Hawke said, his stomach taking the opportune moment to grumble loudly, "come on, let's get up and get some breakfast."

"It's practically brunch by now I think," Anders said as he sat up, hissing slightly as a pain flared up his spine.

"Are you alright?" Hawke asked quickly, reaching out to steady him, sounding concerned, "I...I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"It's alright Hawke, honestly, you'd think I was made of glass," Anders rebuked him, "I'm fine. I sometimes think you forget I'm a mage at all."

Anders ran his hand down his spine and across his lower back, letting out a glow of healing magic which dissolved the pain into a slightly tender heat. Hawke shook his head as Anders looked at him as if to say 'see?'

"Something tells me we'll need washed first," Anders said as he slipped into his discarded pyjamas, "before we do anything else."

"I'll ask Bodahn to stock up the hot water tank," Hawke said as he pulled on his shirt and loose trousers.
Anders watched Madam fondly as she pawed about on the vast bed, tripping over the ruffles in the thick covers. He listened with only half an ear as Hawke opened the door and stepped out. He spun around as if being attacked, however, as Hawke let out an undignified yell. Anders rushed to the door to find Hawke holding his chest in fright and glaring at a very amused Isabela who was leaning against the wall beside the door.

"Maker's breath Isabela, you wench, you scared the living crap out of me!" Hawke said harshly, looking to Anders as he smiled; then he looked back at her suddenly, eyes suspicious, "Just...how long have you been out here?"

"Oh, long enough," Isabela shrugged lazily, her eyes distinctly lascivious as they trailed up and down Hawke unashamedly.

"You..." Hawke tutted and crossed his arms, "bloody hell, can't anyone get a moments peace around here without someone dropping by to interrupt?"

"And here I was coming to offer my services," Isabela said, trying to sound hurt, "and update you on my hunt of course."

"Well, can it wait? I was just about to have a bath," Hawke said.

"I suppose," Isabela said, sounding bored, until she looked up to Anders then Hawke, her smile returning, "unless you're going to have a bath together..."

"Isabela," Hawke said warningly, "I'll see you downstairs."

"You're no fun," Isabela said as Hawke turned to make his way to the stairs.

Anders watched him go, looking down as he felt Madam trot past his ankle. He looked back up to find Isabela watching him with a grin on her face. Oh here we go, Anders thought, reaching down to scoop up the kitten before she could escape towards the stairs after Hawke.

"So," she started, looking him right in the eyes, "he likes it when you...?"

"Don't start," Anders interrupted decisively, "honestly, is nothing sacred around you?"

"Nothing fun," Isabela shrugged, looking down at the kitten, "where did you find that little fur ball, by the way?"

"She was a gift," Anders said, stroking Madam, "anyway, why are you here?"

"Just a new lead on the relic I've been searching for," the rogue said, folding her arms and leaning against the wall, "thought Hawke might be able to help out again."

"You mean you really think it's your relic?" Anders said, smirking, "Not just a chest with an old shoe and some bad love poetry in it like last time?"

"That was a perfectly honest mistake," Isabela said, "and yes, I do think this is a good lead. So I thought I'd do an exchange. I help Hawke out with these raiders on the Coast and he helps me find my relic. Fair trade I'd say."

"Very fair," Anders said, watching as Hawke reappeared at the head of the stairs, "how unlike you."

Isabela swatted him in the side of the head but Anders just laughed. She sidled past Hawke with a
wink but Hawke just shook his head as he walked past her. Isabela disappeared down the stairs as Hawke and Anders re-entered the bedroom.

"Oranna said she'd bring us up something to eat," Hawke explained, "and it'll take a while for the water to heat up.

"Alright," Anders said, sitting back down onto the bed with Madam in his lap, poking the kitten in the head and laughing when she seemed to glare up at him.

They ate a quick breakfast of bread and honey with some light tea before taking a short bath together in Hawke's overly large copper bathtub. Unsurprisingly Anders found that Hawke was more than ready for another go as they lay against each other in the hot water, but Anders managed to dissuade him by reminding him Isabela was still in the mansion. Hawke blanched at that and relented. Honestly, Anders thought as Hawke scrubbed his back, he's got the libido of a seventeen year old. Hawke asked him what he was laughing at but Anders just shrugged and said nothing, letting Hawke wash his hair, revelling in the feel of long fingers massaging his scalp.

"Well," Hawke said with a grin, "if they manage to stand up to all of us they deserve to control the whole bloody Coast."

Somehow, as the morning had worn on, they had managed to expand their small group considerably. When they had descended to the living area to see to Isabela they had found Fenris waiting in the lobby, trying his best to ignore Isabela's wandering eyes. The elf had looked up as they entered, eyes fixed on Hawke. The rogue had smiled back.

"Fenris, what are you doing here?" he had asked.

"I heard from Varric that you were planning an expedition to the Coast," the elf had shrugged back, "thought you could use an extra sword."

"I could," Hawke had said, grinning, "we're just about to leave in fact."

"Good," Fenris had said, grinning, "we're just about to leave in fact."

"Fenris, what are you doing here?" he had asked.

"I heard from Varric that you were planning an expedition to the Coast," the elf had shrugged back, "thought you could use an extra sword."

"I could," Hawke had said, grinning, "we're just about to leave in fact."

"Good," Fenris had said, standing; he'd even nodded to Anders half civilly, which the mage had returned bemusedly.

When they met up with Varric at the Hanged Man they found Merrill was waiting with him. She greeted them cheerily. She had been talking to Varric too by the looks of things and, despite not really needing another hand, Hawke said that two mages were always better than one. Now they were walking down the coastal paths in the cool winter sunshine, Hawke and Varric talking about what information they had on the raiders while Anders chatted to Merrill and Isabela happily pestered Fenris.

It was only as they neared the crossroads that they heard the sounds of fighting. Hawke had jumped up onto one of the jagged outcrops of rock to get a view down the path, his face grim.

"Looks like we've found our target," he said stonily, "they've got some people pinned down, I think they might be City Guard."

"Probably a routine patrol," Varric said, "suppose we're coming to the rescue once again, eh?"

They hurried down the path, careful to watch out for archers spying them from the beachhead or the rocks above, and made their way to the small group of guards huddled behind a large boulder. They rounded the corner just in time to see an arrow spear through the helmet of an unfortunate guard who had lifted his head to peer out from behind the rock. Hawke motioned Anders and
Varric to follow him, while Merrill, Fenris and Isabela secured themselves out of sight behind another of the boulders strewn across the area.

"Orden you bastard!" one of the female guards was shouting as they ran and hunched down beside them, her eyes flicking to them with wild hope as she finally acknowledged their presence, "thank the Maker! Are you the back-up I sent for?"

"Do we look like City Guard to you?" Hawke said incredulously, "I was sent by the Viscount to get rid of these men."

"Shit, then he didn't make it through, I should have guessed," the woman said, shaking her head, "but if you're here to help then it's appreciated either way. They've had us trapped since we got here, bloody ambush. It was only meant to be a normal patrol, we aren't equipped to fight them and that fucker Orden knows it!"

"Don't worry," Hawke said determinedly, "I've got an idea."

"Does it involve me taking out those traps over there?" Varric asked, his keen eyes trailing over the narrow path ahead.

"Only after we've cleared the way of those archers," Hawke replied, smirking down at the dwarf, "awfully keen aren't you?"

"Killing bandits? Oh it just makes my day," Varric shrugged, rubbing his gloved hands together, "Bianca's been so lonely lately."

Hawke told them to stay put and sprinted back to the others. Anders cast a shield around him, just in case of stray arrows, and was glad that he did when he heard the sound of two such projectiles smashing and splintering against his magic. Anders leaned out from behind the boulder and thrust his staff at the archer who had broken their cover to fire at Hawke, sending out a deadly bolt of electricity which struck them full force in the face, sending them backwards soundlessly to the ground before leaping to the next nearest target. Anders listened with satisfaction to the shriek that followed. Well, one down, one almost down, a dozen or so more to go, Anders thought. He ducked back down to find the lieutenant watching him.

"Not averse to a little magical help are we, lieutenant?" Anders asked, noting her rank from her armour.

"Right now? I wouldn't care if you were the Black Divine himself," she laughed bitterly, "just kill Orden and I'll swear I didn't see anything."


Hawke soon returned, flattening himself to the rock beside Anders.

"We're one archer down for sure, maybe two," Anders informed him, "up on the left."

"Nice work," Hawke said before looking at him sternly, "but don't attack without back-up, understand?"

"Yes, mother," Anders said wryly, ignoring Hawke's consternation, "so what's the plan?"

"You, me and Varric, up that right hand path to that ledge there," Hawke said pointing to the way ahead, "Varric you take out any traps, Anders you cover us and I'll take out anyone who gets to close. Isabela and Fenris will go left and Merrill can be their cover. If they run into any traps
Isabela's more than capable. We'll flank them. Take out any archers before you focus on anyone else."

Anders nodded, pulling open the buckle on his pouch so he could get inside to the lyrium potions with ease during the fight. Hawke was telling the lieutenant and her men to stay put, keep behind the rocks and this would all be over soon. He did say, however, that if they needed any help they would shout for it. She nodded determinedly and said they would be ready.

"Hawke," Anders tapped him on the shoulder, pulling him close, "what about this Fell Orden? Sounds like he could be trouble."

"Blood mages usually are," Hawke said tersely, "but I'm sure he'll be just as vulnerable as any other once we've taken down his cronies. We'll just need to be careful of his spells until we're close enough to swarm him."

"He's a blood mage? Wonderful," Anders said despairingly, "could have told me that earlier."

"Well I'm telling you now, am I not?" Hawke said with a cheeky smile, "alright. Come on, let's go."

Anders cast the shield spell on all three of them as they ran crouched towards the pathway. Varric got to work instantly on the exploding gas trap hidden cunningly beneath the sand, reaching in with deft fingers to unpin the trigger mechanism. Anders looked up just in time to see the archer jump up from above the ledge they were aiming for, pulling back their bow. He sent out a flaming ball of fire from the bladed end of his staff into their chest. They yelled in pain as they fell to the ground, still burning, before falling still. Hawke was scouting just a little further ahead, his hand hovering around his throwing daggers. Anders and Varric jogged to catch up.

"There's another," Varric said, once more holstering Bianca as he made the ledge safe of traps. That was when the three warriors who had obviously been laying wait just over the bluff, ran up and over and straight down towards them. Hawke sent a dagger into the neck of the first, the man falling with a gurgling scream as blood jetted from the wound out across the sand. Anders rammed his staff into the ground, sending the earth beneath the feet of the other two shooting into the air in jagged spikes. They fell to the ground, disoriented, and it was only a matter of seconds before Hawke appeared behind them, reaching down to cut the throat of the first. Anders froze the second solid, even as she tried to scramble to her feet, before blasting the warrior with a burst of kinetic magic, shattering her into bloody shards.

"Not such a bad plan so far," Hawke laughed breathlessly as they regrouped on the ledge; the sounds of yelling and fighting were now audible from the other side of the camp, "sounds like the others have gotten started."

"We should go before we lose the element of surprise," Varric said, holding his crossbow lovingly in his hands.

"What? With all that magic Anders has been throwing about?" Hawke teased, ignoring the mage's scowl, "I'd be surprised if they don't know we're here by now."

Varric went first, his deadly aim taking out the two archers who were waiting for them on the left as they ran up and over the bluff. Anders quickly assessed the remaining threat, noting with dismay that there were a lot more people stashed away back here than they had initially thought. He counted at least twelve fighters in the central belt of sand, another set of archers up over on the opposite ledge, another group of brawlers down to the right and then a man he could only assume
Anders thought ruefully, ran straight towards the five brawlers from the right, disappearing in the cloud of a smoke bomb, his eyes alight with the lust for battle.

"Shit!" Anders cursed, running after him as Varric continued to try and snipe the archers on the opposite side; he watched in relief as Isabela, Fenris and Merrill finally joined them from the other path.

Anders sent the first two brawlers into a crushing prison, ignoring the men as they hacked and coughed, blood running from their eyes and noses and their own armour began to devour them alive, crunching and buckling inwards until it had shredded through their flesh and left them torn and rent on the ground. Hawke had appeared again behind the other three, stabbing the first man in the back before tearing up through his spine, turning to kick the other in the face. Anders ducked as the fifth man got too close, swinging his massive sword at the mage's head. He sent out a burst of magic at his feet, tripping the man up, before he drove the bladed end of his staff down into his chest. The man choked out a scream but managed to reach up, a dagger in his hand, and jab it forcefully into Anders' calf before he fell still. Anders stumbled back, with a cry, pulling himself behind the nearest rock, dragging his leg behind him. He pushed himself flat against the rock and reached down, hesitating only slightly before he yanked the dagger from his leg, biting down on the cry that tried to escape. It was Varric who ended up ensconced behind the boulder with him, just as he'd finished healing the wound.

"You alright Blondie?" Varric shouted to be heard over the sounds of the battle.

"I'm fine, someone just got a lucky shot," Anders yelled back, "where's Hawke?"

"Still out there," Varric said, reloading Bianca with practiced ease, "him and Fenris are taking out what's left of the warriors, trying to give us a shot at Orden."

"Trust him," Anders said, shaking his head, "come on, we'd better get back out there."

Varric ducked out first, spraying a hail of arrows into a rogue who had been laying wait for them to emerge, embedding their chest like a pin cushion. They rushed past the corpse and rejoined the fray, finding the ground littered with bodies. There were a mere handful of Orden's men left, each looking far less cocky than they had at the beginning of the fight. The raiders had obviously thought their superior numbers would overwhelm their smaller group, but they had thought wrong. Anders sent a wave of deadly ice into the feet of two men, trapping them to the ground. Fenris was on them in a flash, decapitating the first with a deadly scythe like blow before impaling then next through the chest. Anders spotted Merrill up on the ledge on the far right, casting elemental spells at those who were trying to flank them. Isabela was busy taking out anyone who tried to flee back towards the Coast, slicing down through one man's torso with a well placed thrust. Everything seemed to be going well.

Anders felt it before he saw it. He'd been wondering, anxiously, why Orden hadn't seemed to have contributed much to the battle yet other than sending the odd spell at whoever was closest. He would have perhaps figured it out sooner, he thought, if he hadn't been so distracted. As it was he only had time to raise a shield around himself and those closest to him before the blast wave hit, tearing the shield to pieces and sending him sprawling to the ground. Anders could feel the blood magic in the air around him, that hideous metallic tang hanging in the air. He felt it draining the mana right out of him, leaching it into the atmosphere itself, stealing his energy right out of his veins. He struggled up, reaching into his pouch for a lyrium potion as he blinked away the dark patches from his vision, only to see something that made his heart stop in his chest.

 Orden was standing in front of Hawke, six or so feet away from him, his grin manic, his hands
raised. Hawke was blinking, lying face down, struggling to push up on shaking arms and legs, unaware of the terrible danger he was in. Anders panicked, trying to send out a blast to knock Orden off balance but the motion made him feel sick and he doubled over, feeling the blood magic once more leaching away his mana, unable to cast even the simplest of spells. He looked up in horror as Orden began to wind his own blood spell around his fingers, running rivulets of red blood streaming from the cuts in his forearms. Anders cried out, forcing down the building nausea as he tried to stumble forwards.

"Hawke, look out!"

Orden released the spell just as Hawke managed to turn, crouching, his eyes wide. But the spell never connected. Fenris moved so fast that Anders almost didn't see him until he was in the path of the blast, taking it full in the chest. He flew back, right over Hawke, tumbling over twice in the dirt before landing on his front, motionless. Anders stared in shock before quickly shaking himself out of it and draining the lyrium potion in his hand, feeling it quell the rising sickness inside of him and replenish his magic. He looked back to see Hawke had also recovered and was currently showing a rather shocked Fell Orden why it was very unwise to attack his friends. Hawke had barrelled into the man with a roaring cry, sending him sprawling to the ground before he sent his twin daggers down, one into his chest and another through his eye. Orden's arms twitched like a grotesque puppet's on jerky strings, stirrings of magic still visible around his fingers until Hawke twisted the dagger in his face and the man fell still.

"Need some help over here!" came Varric's voice, pulling Anders eyes away from Hawke.

Anders ran as fast as he could to the dwarf who was leaning over Fenris with a grave expression. He'd recognised the spell as soon as he'd seen Orden get ready to cast and it filled him with dread.

"No, don't touch him! It's a trap!" Anders shouted as Varric reached out, but it was too late. As soon as Varric's hand touched Fenris' shoulder, with the intention of rolling him over, an electric thrill ran through the elf's body, his eyelids flying open to reveal nothing but hard, black eyes, completely devoid of white. Fenris leapt up with a snarl, swiping out at Varric as the dwarf stumbled back, saved only by Anders' timely warning. The elf's eyes swerved about as he stayed crouched on the ground, growling low in his throat.

"What the hell!" Isabela called out from behind Anders, "What's wrong with him?"

"It's a Phage spell, blood magic," Anders spat bitterly, "works even after the caster is dead. We need to get it out of him, he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Fenris!" Hawke said, distracting the elf's deadly eyes away from Varric; he rounded on the rogue instantly, springing forwards to tackle him to the ground.

"Fuck!" Anders swore, rushing forwards as the two men wrestled on the sand.

"Bloody hell he's strong!" Hawke ground out as he managed to somehow roll Fenris off of him and pin the smaller man to the ground with great difficulty.

"It's the magic," Anders explained quickly, "it'll be working through the lyrium in his skin. I need to draw it out, can you hold him?"

"For a little while," Hawke grunted out as Fenris snarled and snapped at him like an animal, trying desperately to throw him off, "but whatever you're going to do, do it fast!"

Anders closed his eyes, hoping above hope that this would work like he'd practiced, and pulled
slightly on the connection between himself and Justice. He felt the spirit awaken, his own power reaching out to try and take control of Anders' own but the mage pulled back, just enough. Justice seemed confused and impatient but Anders didn't have time to mollify him. He needed the spirit's power to cast a potent enough dispel to counteract Orden's own powerful blood magic. He hated to admit that it was easier to master strong blood magic than it was creation magic and his own reserves were not enough to draw out the poisonous spell leaching through Fenris' body. He reached out his hands, placing them against Fenris' neck and shoulder, trying not to flinch at the feel of the tainted spell trying its best to rush out into him. He pushed back forcefully, feeling his stomach turn over as Justice washed up through him, the markings flaring on his skin, rushing out furiously at the blood magic that dared to try and corrupt him. Anders wretched and tried to pull back, even as Fenris' eyes began to lose their darkness, but Justice pushed again, sending him reeling. He thought he could hear Hawke's voice but he wasn't sure, it sounded far away, as if from a great height. Anders felt himself falling but managed to catch himself before he did, hands curling into the sand, grinding it up beneath his fingernails. He pushed back again, relieved when Justice seemed to subside a little, just enough for Anders to be able to finally force him back into dormancy.

"Anders! What's wrong?" Hawke's hands were around his shoulders, pulling him back against his chest.

"Nothing," he gasped out, "it's nothing. I've got it...under control."

"Like fuck you have," Hawke said angrily, "what did you do?"

"Is he alright?" Anders ignored Hawke's question.

He glanced over to Fenris who Merrill was now worriedly checking over while Isabela and Varric went to tell the lieutenant the good news and request their help in getting Fenris back to Kirkwall. He noted the dark patch of squirming blood that was festering on the ground in front of Fenris' face, writhing like a pool of dirty red maggots.

"He's unconscious," Hawke said, not letting go of Anders, "he spewed that up just after you let go of him."

"Good," Anders nodded, finally calming his breathing and managing to break away from Hawke's insistent grasp, "but he isn't out of danger yet."

"What do you mean?" Hawke asked, his face lined with concern.

"The Phage spell works by the amount of time spent in the system, that's why it's so deadly," Anders explained as he got shakily to his feet, "even just a short amount of time in the blood gives it enough of a foothold to turn into a blood fever like you saw. It's like a weed. You think you've removed it but it's really just the leaves you've pulled, the root going deeper. We need to get him treated properly."

Hawke nodded gravely, looking over to Fenris, taking in the elf's pallor and swallowing. Anders helped Hawke to his feet, checking him over quickly for any wounds, healing a shallow cut in his forearm and a longer laceration that ran down the back of his neck. Hawke tried to bat him away, tell him they weren't important, but Anders didn't listen to him. The lieutenant, who finally introduced herself as Harley, and her men arrived a moment later. She thanked Hawke, spat decisively in Ordens' now ruined face and then asked how she could be of service. Hawke asked her to help him take his injured man back to the city and Harley readily agreed, ordering the remains of her troop to lift Fenris carefully and carry him as fast and as gently as they could back to Kirkwall. Anders looked on, trying to hide his concern as best he could so as not to worry the
others. It had been a long time since he'd seen a Phage spell that potent. The last person he'd known who was taken by it died within the first twelve hours, even after the blood leach itself had been removed.

"Is he going to be alright?" Hawke asked as they followed Harley and her men, like a grim funeral procession.

Anders looked at him, his eyes tight. Hawke looked back, waiting for an answer, seeming to become more and more worried as Anders stayed silent.

"I think so," Anders reassured him, "we may have caught it in time."

"Alright," Hawke nodded, not really sure what to say in the face of such a vague answer, "alright."

Hawke had Fenris taken back to the Hawke family mansion and had Harley's men take him upstairs and put him into the master bedroom as it gave Anders more room to work. Even in the short time it had taken them to return to Kirkwall Fenris' condition had continued to worsen at an accelerated rate, the colour draining fully from his skin and a sweat breaking out over his forehead. He was lost into a feverish delirium by the time they managed to get him onto the bed. At first Hawke had seemed relieved that he was even conscious, until he had seen the grim look Anders was giving the elf.

"It's not a good sign," Anders said after Hawke had thanked Harley for her help, "can you get some water? And my extra supplies from the kitchen?"

While Hawke was gone Anders asked Varric and Isabela if they would go to the nearest merchants they knew of and buy up all the elfroot and deathroot they could find. The two rushed off to fulfil their task, promising to be back within the hour. Meanwhile he employed Merrill's help in trying to combat Fenris' building fever. The elf's skin was burning to the touch, like a hot iron, and Anders tried his best to push the healing magic down through the blood spell and into his system. But it was difficult, like trying to push oil through water, and it only barely relieved the unseeing glint in Fenris' eyes as they flew open.

"Ai shalah!" the elf choked out, squeezing his eyes shut again, his breath misting in the air despite the warmth of the room.

"What is he saying?" Merrill asked worriedly.

"I don't know," Anders lied, holding the elf down as he tried to raise himself weakly from the bed, "It's Arcanum. Merrill could you go and help Hawke find my things, he's taking too long."

Merrill ran off, leaving the door open behind her. Anders listened intently as she padded down the stairs before turning back to Fenris who was staring up at him with a glazed expression, his eyes slightly opaque. It may have been his paranoia, but he'd rather not have too many people know that he was learning the Tevinter language. Anders kneeled down beside the bed.

"Can you hear me?" Anders asked him in the best Arcanum he could remember; he was sure his grammar and pronunciation were terrible but the meaning should still be decipherable.

Fenris frowned, his mouth opening tentatively.

"I...it's hot," he said, or Anders was sure that's what it meant.

"You have a fever," Anders said back, watching as the elf closed his eyes again, his head lolling on
the pillow, "we need to heal you."

Fenris didn't reply, his breath hitching. Anders frowned, shaking his head, before reaching out to undo the elf's breastplate and remove his armour. He was wearing only a thin shirt beneath which Anders cut away with the small dagger Hawke kept in his nightstand. His frown deepened on finding what seemed like a large, bleeding wound in the centre of his chest beneath the black cloth. He reached out tentatively and touched it, finding it wet beneath his fingertips. The blood, however, seemed to move around of its own volition, much like the blood Fenris had vomited up after Anders had tried his best to heal him back on the Wounded Coast. Anders wiped it off onto Fenris' ruined shirt and sighed. He hated feeling helpless, he hated not being able to cure something even with his extensive knowledge of healing magic. He stood up as Hawke and Merrill eventually returned.

"Here," Merrill said, putting his supplies onto the bedside cabinet messily before trying to sort them.

"Thanks Merrill," he said, turning to Hawke, who was standing with a basin of water in his hands, "could you heat it over the fire?"

Hawke nodded silently, throwing concerned looks at the once more still elf lying on the bed. He set the basin down before the fire and set up the metal stand that slotted inside to place the basin on top of. Anders helped Merrill sort what he would need before making a quick excuse to slip through to the study. He knew it might be a long shot but he raked around and pulled out his Tevinter book.

"Something, there has to be something in here," Anders chewed at his lip as he skimmed page after page, trying to recall if he'd ever seen anything related to the Phage in the worn pages.

He was so absorbed in searching that he didn't even hear Hawke behind him. Afterwards, he would think, he shouldn't really have blamed himself considering he never heard Hawke come up behind him.

"Anders what are you doing?" Hawke asked.

"Fuck!" Anders jumped round, dropping the book to the floor, his heart beating double time, "dammit Hawke, don't scare me like that!"

"Sorry," Hawke said, scratching the back of his neck before reaching down to pick up the Tevinter book which had fallen pages down; Anders snatched it back from him, making Hawke frown, "Merrill said she needs your help."

"Alright," Anders said, trying to think what he was going to do with the book now that he couldn't put it back where he had hidden it, not with Hawke watching him.

Instead he kept a hold of it and took it back through to the bedroom, slipping it into a drawer in the dresser once Hawke had walked past him. He joined Merrill and together they set about preparing the ingredients for a potion to combat the fever and, hopefully, do its best to negate the slowly creeping sickness. Varric returned first with a healthy supply of medicinal herbs, followed not long after by Isabela who had also found a good stock and very fresh. Hawke had to leave for a while when his mother returned from her visit to her brother and explain the situation. Anders and the others continued to work tirelessly until everything that could be done had been done. Slowly, one by one, they left as the hours lengthened and the duties that needed attended to were only able to be done by Anders. Before the mage knew it he was sitting, alone, beside Fenris as the elf seemed to slumber fitfully; he watched him with tired eyes before rubbing at the bridge of his nose.
"I don't even know if you can hear me," Ander said slowly, "probably not, but...I want to thank
you, for saving him. If there's anything I can do to stop this, I will, I promise you that."

He didn't get a reply. After a moment he heard the door open and looked up to find Hawke closing
the door behind him. He gave him a tired half-smile, looking up to the clock to find, staggeringly,
that it was quarter past five in the evening.

"Any better?" Hawke asked hopefully as Anders stood, working out the kinks in his back.

"Not any worse," Anders said diplomatically, watching Hawke's face fall a little.

"...If it wasn't for me," Hawke shook his head, expression derisive, "he wouldn't even be here!"

"Hawke, don't," Anders said, shaking his head in frustration, "if it wasn't for Orden, none of us
would be in this situation. It wasn't your fault."

Hawke opened his mouth to protest but seemed to stop half way through forming the words. He
closed his lips tightly before hanging his head and sighing. Anders walked over to him, pulling him
into a close embrace. He'd meant to comfort him, that was all, but it was then, as he held onto the
thing he realised had become most precious to him, that he realised just how close he'd come to
losing it. Anders arms tightened around Hawke almost painfully. The rogue let out a confused
sound before trying to pull back.

"Anders..?" he started, but was cut off.

"I...I nearly," Anders didn't want to say it out loud, pushing his face into Hawke's neck, "just let me
hold you for a little while, alright?"

Hawke nodded, reaching up to hold him back loosely. Anders tried not to think about Hawke being
the one lying in the bed, wasting away to nothing. The thought made his chest ache and he hated it,
the hollow feel of it.

"I'll need to stay awake tonight," Anders muttered into Hawke's neck, "to check on him."

"I can stay with you," Hawke said, pulling him closer.

"You don't need to," Anders shook his head, "no sense in both of us exhausting ourselves."

"That's not the point," Hawke said, voice hard, "I'm here for you, both of you. You'll need someone
to keep you awake, help you with things, don't pretend you can do this all on your own."

Anders smiled, leaning back to look into Hawke's eyes, trying to think of something appropriate to
say.

"It's...I mean it'll be alright," he said, rubbing Hawke's arm tenderly, "I promise."

Hawke smiled back, even if just a little. Anders felt guilty for promising something he might not be
able to deliver, but in the end it was all he could do. He would just have to convince himself just as
much as Hawke that it was true.
Anders had never been more thankful that Hawke had allowed him to sleep in that morning. As the night wore on, the bedroom slipping into dark shadows and lantern light, he could feel the weeks of late nights and early mornings catching up with him. Hawke helped, much more than he would care to admit, and the mage was glad that he had offered to stay with him as he watched over Fenris' condition. He would talk, about important or trivial things, make tea, get up and check the elf's pulse or temperature or reaction speed when Anders simply became too tired to stand.

"You need some sleep," Hawke insisted for the hundredth time that night as Anders' eyes blinked back open, not having remembered them falling closed.

"You know I can't," Anders said tightly, "just get me another cup of...no, actually coffee would be better."

"You don't even like coffee," Hawke frowned, but got up and wandered out of the room to make some anyway.

Once he was gone Anders did what he had been doing all night when Hawke left him alone in the room; getting out the Tevinter book and quickly ransacking it in the short time he had while the other man was gone. Somewhere, deep down, he knew that he was being overly mistrustful in not letting Hawke see the book. Anders was pretty sure that Hawke couldn't read Arcanum and the pictures that accompanied the spells were mainly vague allusions to their outcomes more than actually illustrating what they did. Yet there was something about it, perhaps the book had come to represent more than the paper and leather it was comprised of. It wasn't the instigator of the plan anymore, it was the plan, and having Hawke near that, touching it, seeing it, was almost too much for Anders to bear. It made it far too real, too close. He liked to think that he still had time before anything truly final happened, before he brought everything he'd worked so hard to build crumbling down around himself. So as Hawke wandered off to start the lengthy process of making coffee which Anders would have to force himself to drink, he continued to look through the book and try and focus on Fenris and the Phage spell over his own destructive future. He managed, throughout the whole night, to read the book from cover to cover.

"Nothing," Anders shook his head and put his face in his hands, elbows leaning on the desk, "I don't fucking believe it."

There wasn't even a hint of what he needed contained between the leather bindings of the book. Not that he should really have been that surprised, it was more a book of offensive and defensive spells than healing magic. Still, there was the occasional blood spell or ritual detailed on the yellowing paper and he'd hoped that somewhere it would contain even just the details of the Phage spell itself. If he could understand how it was cast that may have thrown more light on how to reverse it. However, it seemed that the Tevinter tome had run out of luck just at the wrong time. Anders closed it with a defeated sigh and threw it angrily back into the drawer, closing it and locking it just in case.

"Are you alright?" Hawke entered a few minutes later, holding two steaming cups of dark, black liquid, "I thought I heard banging."

"I'm fine," Anders lied, smile tight, "just...just dropped something."

"Oh," Hawke said, unconvinced, "here, drink this, it'll wake you up at least."
Anders sipped it and balked. Hawke made seriously strong coffee. Wake me up? Anders thought giddily, I'll be awake for the next two days if I drink all this! He sipped it tentatively, watching incredulously as Hawke took large gulps, seemingly unaffected by the bitter drink. It didn't take long for the caffeine to kick in, sparking Anders senses back into life. He fidgeted when there was nothing to do and found himself babbling nonsense which, thankfully, seemed to amuse Hawke if nothing else. When he found the clock hands had reached six in the morning he wasn't even sure what he'd done to fill up all of the time. Fenris was still unconscious but he was breathing which was more than he could say for most people affected as he was.

"Well," Anders said as he held the elf's wrist and counted the fast beats against his fingertips, "nothing really seems to have changed."

"Is that good?" Hawke asked through a stifled yawn, sitting back in the large armchair sleepily.

"Well it's...surprising," Anders said, at a loss, "I'm just glad he hasn't deteriorated further but, considering, I'm confused as to why he hasn't. To answer your question though, yes, it is good. It gives us more time."

Hawke nodded and smiled, albeit a little grimly. He stood with effort and shuffled to Anders' side, looking down at Fenris' face, his eyes hard. He watched, flinching a little sympathetically as the elf twitched in his sleep.

"Unfortunately the worst thing for the moment isn't the spell," Anders sighed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "he'll dehydrate before the spell has a chance to do any damage of its own. We really need to get him to wake up so I can get some fluids into his system."

"Well, how do we wake him up?" Hawke asked.

"I...I'm really not sure," Anders shrugged in defeat, hating to admit it, "I don't want to worry you but most people put under this powerful a Phage are dead by this point. It's a miracle he's still breathing, never mind conscious."

Alright so I didn't want to worry him, Anders thought, watching Hawke swallow, but perhaps it'll help. Maybe he doesn't realise just how bad the situation is. The mage had noted recently just how much Hawke had come to rely on his ability to heal anything and everything. Even those on the verge of death itself were people he was able to save, sometimes even those who had slipped just over the edge. It was a sobering thought, by the looks of things, for the rogue to see that even he was fallible.

"We can't just sit here and watch him die," Hawke said angrily, "there has to be something we can do. Everything has an antidote, it's just finding it."

"Exactly," Anders said, "but that's the hardest part. I was hoping Merrill might know something, what with her knowledge of blood magic, but she's never even learned the Phage."

For which Anders was guiltily glad. When he had asked Merrill if she knew the spell, equal parts hopeful and terrified that she would say yes, he would admit he had heaved a sigh of relief when she said no. A spell this hideous wasn't something he would want someone like Merrill to ever know. It gave him more hope for her redemption at least. It did not, however, help them in their quest for finding a cure. Anders lifted his right hand to his mouth and chewed on his nails. Hawke watched him anxiously and Anders tried his best to ignore the pressure of it on his skin. He needed help with this, someone who knew more of blood magic than he did. He wasn't sure what he'd been hoping would happen through the night as they had watched Fenris twitching on the bed, sometimes murmuring to himself in Arcanum, parts of sentences and slurred words, but whatever
amazing recovery he had been hoping for hadn't occurred. This called for drastic measures, he thought, hoping that he wasn't dipping his hand too far into the fire with this one.

"Hawke, I need to ask you a favour," Anders said finally, watching Hawke's eyes light up as he recognised the beginnings of something that might be a plan; Hawke liked plans, they gave him a grounding, something to follow.

"Anything," he said quickly.

"I need you to take this to Lirene, you know Lirene's store don't you? In Lowtown?" Anders said as he strode to the desk, pulling out a sheet of scrap paper and dipping a quill into the inkwell.

"Of course I do," Hawke said, hands on his hips, "how could I forget the woman who introduced me to you?"

"Flatterer," Anders said, smiling a little, glad at least that Hawke seemed to have been buoyed up enough by his enthusiasm to joke again, "just give this to her, tell her it's urgent, and come straight back. Don't read it."

Anders blew on the ink to dry it before folding the paper tightly into a square. He turned to hand it to Hawke who was watching him with a scrutinising glance. The rogue took it uncertainly, his enthusiasm somewhat dampened by Anders' ominous instruction.

"Don't read it," Anders reiterated strongly, watching Hawke's expression become annoyingly unreadable.

"My, my you really don't trust me at all do you?" Hawke said soberly.

"It's nothing to do with trust Hawke," Anders said seriously, "it's for your own protection, believe me."

"Protection? What on...?" Hawke looked stern, setting his jaw, "Tell me."

"No," Anders said back, just as forcefully, "there are some things you don't need mixed up in Hawke and trust me, this is one of them. You want to help save Fenris' life? Then do this for me and don't ask questions."

Hawke looked like he was going to protest until Anders brought up the fragile issue of Fenris' life, making him once more look despondent and more than a little sad. He looked down at the note in his hand as if it were a viper, ready to strike, before pocketing it and leaving without another word. Anders watched him go with a long sigh, hoping beyond hope that this was the right thing to do. If not then Hawke's anger may be warranted after all.

Hawke returned within the half hour, proving to Anders that he had at least understood the urgency as he had obviously run there and back. Anders made him some tea and ignored the cautious glances Hawke sent his way when he thought the mage wasn't looking. Anders tried his best to get Fenris to drink some water but the elf simply choked on anything he managed to pour into his mouth, spitting it out instinctively, eyes screwed decisively shut. Anders noted that his skin was becoming chapped around his lips, his forehead dry of sweat but still burning hot. They were running out of time, he thought, listening to each tick of the clock as if it were mocking him. Can't stop time, can you? it seemed to say, even though you wish you could. He better come, Anders thought harshly, he bloody owes me and this is important.

The sun was up when a knock finally came at the door. Anders opened it and found Bodahn
standing there, looking distinctly unnerved.

"There's a...gentleman here to see you Messer," the dwarf said, looking up at Anders with trepidation.

"I'll come down," Anders said, "I want you to take Sandal and go with Oranna to her room. Stay there until I say, understand?"

It was a testament to the effect his guest had that Bodahn obeyed his instructions blindly, his relief almost palpable. Hawke had risen from his chair when the knock came and was now hovering around the rug, pacing, his eyes set. Anders watched him for a moment, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

"Hawke," the rogue's sharp eyes snapped to his defiantly, "go to your mother's room and keep her there. Don't come through here, no matter what you hear, do you understand?"

"Like hell I will," Hawke growled out, not surprising Anders at all, "I've had it up to here with this secretive shit Anders. If this is dangerous I'm not leaving you in here alone with whatever crazy bastard you've decided to invite to our house!"

"Yes, you will, because I'm asking you nicely," Anders said, trying his best to put as much pleading into his eyes as possible.

Hawke was much easier to manipulate if you coddled him. If you fought him he only fought back harder and this was something Anders needed Hawke to capitulate to, quickly if possible.

"We're wasting time," Anders said, walking over to Hawke, taking his hands in his, feeling the rogue's long fingers tighten around his own, "please Hawke, I know what I'm doing. I'm asking you to trust me. Please."

Hawke watched him closely and Anders saw that it was worry that lay beneath his hard stare, not anger. Anders could hardly blame him, his request wasn't exactly confidence building and he knew he hadn't sugar coated it. This was a very dangerous game he was playing and Hawke wasn't stupid, he had realised that as soon as Anders had told him not to read the note. Hawke already felt responsible for Fenris' injury and Anders could tell that he was fighting against his request because he didn't want to be responsible for Anders getting hurt by something he could have prevented. Anders squeezed Hawke's hands and kissed him, expecting resistance but instead receiving a passionate reply complete with tongue and teeth. Anders allowed Hawke to kiss the breath from him before the rogue pulled back and stared hard into his eyes.

"Any sign of any danger, anything I don't like the sound of, I'm breaking down that fucking door," Hawke said, "and don't think I won't."

With that he strode out of the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him. Anders listened as Hawke knocked on his mother's door before entering, waiting for the soft click of the latch closing before he too left the room. The mansion seemed deathly quiet without its usual occupants, the air itself seeming to stay hushed in the presence of the man downstairs. Anders walked down the carpeted staircase softly, walking out into the streaming shafts of dust filled sunlight. The fire was already burning. The man sat in a chair in front of the blaze, legs crossed at the ankles, dark eyes fixed on Anders' own. The mage noted his all white garb with a growing sense of irony, contrasting with his midnight dark hair and eyes.

"Well, well," the man said, smiling predatorily, "long time no see."
"I don't have time for your games Alesis," Anders said sharply, "I asked for your help and that's all I want from you. After that I'm quite sure I can keep up my end of the bargain of never seeing you again."

"Such unkind words," Alesis shrugged, sitting up, his long jet black hair falling over his shoulders, "but I suppose I'm returning the favour, eh?"

"You owe me," Anders said tightly.

"Yes, yes," Alesis rolled his eyes and stood up; Anders couldn't help but take an involuntary step back, noting the red rim around the man's eyes glow a little on noting Anders' reaction, "never thought you'd be the one scared of me Anders."

"Enough," Anders said decisively, shaking his head and trying to get used to the tainted feel of the mage before him, "let's get this over and done with."

Alesis followed him silently. It made Anders' skin itch to turn his back on the man but he was pretty sure he was still more than a match for him if Alesis decided that things weren't exactly even between them. He led the mage into the bedroom and, despite knowing that Hawke was more than capable of picking the lock or, as per his threat, battering the door down, he locked the door anyway. Better than someone walking unwittingly in and getting involved. He turned to find Alesis dropping his jacket casually onto the armchair by the fire, letting his dangerous eyes trail over the bed where Fenris lay, insensible.

"So, this is why you sent for me," he said knowingly, "I always knew you'd need me again someday Anders."

"Shut your mouth," Anders said seriously, pocketing the key, "do you know how to cure a Phage spell or don't you?"

"So little faith," Alesis smiled, "I've learned much more than you could ever hope to in the last few years."

"I'm sure," Anders said derisively, "and I'm quite sure I'll never want to know any of it. Now stop with the small talk and tell me how we do this."

Alesis watched him for a moment, his handsome face pulled into a split of smirk and hard eyes. He walked towards Anders slowly, like a snake sliding across the floor, gentle but deadly. Anders held his ground even as his skin began to crawl. Alesis reached up and smoothed his soft palm across Anders' cheek, smile widening disturbingly when Anders slapped his hand away forcefully.

"You used to like it when I touched you," Alesis said nastily.

"That was before you started fucking around with blood magic," Anders said stonily, "and before you raised the demon that almost killed me."

"I already told you that was an accident," Alesis shrugged, walking back to the bed, Anders watching his every move, "some people just don't know how to forgive and forget."

"And that's how I like it," Anders said, "now tell me how we do this so we can both get back to our lives."

"Oh what, your fairytale life here with Serrah Hawke...?" Alesis scoffed, instantly interrupted.

"Say his name again and I'll kill you where you stand," Anders said darkly, feeling Justice's
markings flare briefly on his skin.

Alesis looked momentarily worried before he covered it beneath his usual aloof arrogance. The blood mage shrugged, trying to look unconcerned.

"How long has it been since he was infected?" he asked Anders, rolling up the sleeves of his expensive looking white shirt.

"It must have been...around noon yesterday," Anders said, trying to calculate the time, "nineteen or twenty hours I'd say."

"Cutting it a little fine," Alesis said with a frown, "but it should still be salvageable."

Anders walked over to stand beside him, looking down at Fenris and hoping the elf would forgive him for using blood magic to save his life. It was the last thing he wanted to do but sometimes the only way to fight fire was with fire. When Alesis reached out to touch the elf's bared chest wound Anders instinctively reached out to grasp his wrist and halt his movements. Alesis' eyes snapped to his, noting the discomfort in Anders' face as his skin came in contact with Alesis' own.

"I'm not going to hurt him you idiot," Alesis said derisively, "I just need to gauge some things to see just how long this might take."

Anders let go warily, folding his arms as the blood mage ran his fingers over Fenris' brow, touching the bloody wound on his chest and flinching. Finally, after another few minutes of poking and prodding, the man seemed satisfied. Anders watched him expectantly.

"This should be fairly quick," Alesis said, breathing deeply, "he's got a strong constitution and he seems to be fighting against the infection fairly well. I'm guessing that's why he's lasted this long."

"Good," Anders said, "tell me what needs done."

"Well, it isn't possible to destroy a Phage once it has been cast," Alesis explained, "as you know, it works even after the mage who cast it is dead. So instead you have to draw it out, give it somewhere else to go. It's a parasite, it needs a host."

"I'm not sacrificing anyone else for this," Anders said harshly, "don't think..."

"I'm not asking you to," Alesis rolled his eyes as if Anders were simply being prudish, "I can take the Phage into my own blood and destroy it there, that's the simple part. The difficult part is getting it into me."

Anders frowned, almost interested as to how Alesis hoped to destroy a Phage that was in his own system, but not enough to ask for an explanation. If the blood mage wanted to endanger his own life so be it.

"Why? Can't you just draw it through the wound?" Anders asked, confused.

"Not quite," Alesis said, "it needs to be, how should I say, purified before I can absorb it or it will kill me, of that I'm sure."

"So how do we do that?" Anders asked impatiently, becoming more and more frustrated by all this time wasting.

"I need a conduit, someone to pass the blood through before I take it into me, so I can filter out and take what I need," Alesis explained, eyeing Anders purposefully, "Elvish blood isn't compatible
with humans."

Anders stared at him incredulously.

"You want to use me?" the mage couldn't help but laugh, "Are you joking?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Alesis said, "Look, you're the one who wants my help. You can either
do as I tell you or you can watch your friend die slowly and painfully. It's really here or there to
me."

I bet it isn't, you heartless bastard, Anders thought bitterly. How do I get myself into these
situations? Letting Alesis use blood magic on Fenris was bad enough but...through him? Justice
would never allow it.

"I don't think that will work," Anders said tightly, "I...look, isn't there any other way?"

"No," Alesis said, sounding frustrated, "there isn't."

Anders looked down at Fenris and shivered. The elf's skin was becoming patchy and translucent in
places, as if the moisture had been drawn out completely. Anders didn't need Alesis to tell him they
were running out of time, he knew that himself. If they didn't act soon then it would be too late and
all they would be able to do would be to put Fenris out of his misery before the truly painful stages
of the spell kicked in. Anders refused to watch as the elf's organs failed one after the other, the
Phage devouring his skin, leaving him nothing but a ruined corpse. He steeled himself, took a deep
breath and told Justice sternly that he was just going to have to co-operate.

"Fine," he said, "fine, if that's how it has to be. Let's just get this over and done with."

Alesis smiled at him disconcertingly but Anders shrugged it off. He watched as Alesis set about
setting up the ritual, grimacing in disgust as the other man cut his fingers on a dagger at his belt
and smeared some obscure symbols onto the elf's skin in his own blood. Anders could feel Justice's
anger and tried to push it down as best he could. He didn't need the spirit hampering this process,
not when its success was so vital.

"Don't worry, you won't need to do anything," Alesis said, "just give me your hand."

Anders reached out warily with his right hand, hissing in surprise when Alesis drew the tip of his
dagger across his palm. The cut welled up instantly, crimson red. Anders swallowed, not believing
he was about to take part in what could only be called a blood ritual. No matter if it was for a good
cause, it was still blood magic. It made his stomach turn over to think that. How could he possibly
judge Merrill now? He watched as Alesis cut a similar gash into Fenris' palm, the cut taking longer
to bleed than was normal.

"Kneel beside the bed and take his hand, that's all you need to do, the spell will do the rest," Alesis
said nonchalantly.

"And how do I get it out of me into you?" Anders asked, not ready to engage in this until he knew
exactly what was going to happen.

"Just the same way," Alesis shrugged, "easy as all that."

"Right," Anders said with a derisive snort, "easy."

He walked to the bed, kneeling down gently, ignoring the pain in his hand. Fenris' eyes twitched
fitfully and he mumbled something in his sleep. Anders smoothed the sweat dampened hair from
his brow and tried to tell him that it would be alright in Arcanum but he was quite sure that the elf was far beyond their reach by now. He swallowed down his fear, breathing deeply, and took hold of Fenris' hand, their blood mingling together.

The reaction was instantaneous. Anders doubled over, catching himself with his free hand on the floor. His vision swam and he felt sick. He could feel the Phage spell as if it were a sentient thing, homing in on him. It seemed to recognise that the life of its host was waning dangerously and saw in Anders a new, strong target. Something it could happily live in for the next so many hours until it had devoured him too. Anders heaved as it flowed into him, his fingers tightening around Fenris' own, arm shaking with the effort to keep himself upright.

"Alesis," he choked out desperately, "get it...out of me!"

"Patience, Anders," he heard the blood mage say from somewhere above him, hands suddenly around his shoulders, pulling him upright, "it's a virtue."

The next thing he knew there was a fist smashing into his cheek, sending him reeling backwards. He managed to catch himself with his free hand, still holding onto Fenris in a death grip, spine arched as he tried to steady himself. He could taste blood in his mouth from a cut on the inside of his cheek but he couldn't feel the pain over the sickness, the invading heat. He stared up at Alesis dazedly, trying to think straight.

"That's for kicking me out of the resistance onto the streets like a dog," Alesis spat. Yet his hard eyes softened a little as he slowly got to his knees to kneel beside Anders, pulling his dagger across his tongue, blood dripping down his chin. He pulled the mage close.

"And this is for asking me to come back."

Anders didn't have the wherewithal to stop him as Alesis closed his lips over his own, plunging his blood covered tongue into his mouth. All he could feel was the sudden, sharp spike of hot, surging pleasure that jetted down his spine. He let out a loud moan, mind swimming, his hand leaving the floor to bury itself mindlessly into Alesis' thick, soft hair, crushing him closer. The blood mage supported his weight as he continued to kiss Anders senseless. The mage could feel the nausea being removed, sucked from his system, and the feeling was overwhelming. He couldn't think straight, he couldn't think at all. All he could do was ride out the waves of ecstasy rolling through his system. He thought he could feel Justice trying to wake him from his delirium, trying to bring him back to reality, but it was like looking up at the moon on a cloudy night; the light was faded, cold and indistinct. He couldn't focus on it through the burning heat coursing through his veins. Alesis let his hands trail down under his shirt, leaving red hot tracks of bliss on his skin. Anders groaned and bucked his hips involuntarily, feeling Alesis smile against his lips. Anders tried to shake his head, feeling tears running from his eyes and into his hair. The feeling was becoming unbearable, too much all at once, turning his nerves raw with sensation, desperate for release.

The blood continued to flow, in through his palm, out through his mouth, for what seemed to Anders like a lost eternity. In reality it had only been a few minutes but the mage was misplaced in his disorientation, only able to cling to Alesis like a lifeline. The other man jerked him closer still, propping him against his thigh, and began to stroke him roughly through his trousers. Anders choked out a sob and tried to break away, the sudden euphoria too much to bear. Alesis ignored his struggles and held him still, drinking in his distress through their kiss. It wasn't much longer until Anders felt the spell reach its climax. His eyes, which he had kept decisively shut, flew open and he came with a stuttering, breathless cry. He did his best not to pass out as he let Fenris' hand drop from his own, his arm falling uselessly to the ground, his mind struggling to right itself. Alesis drew back slowly, his own eyes hard, black shells, devoid of white, his lips smeared with Anders
own blood. He lowered Anders carefully to the floor; the mage watched dazedly as Alesis seemed to struggle for a moment, blinking his eyes, brow furrowed in concentration. The blood mage screwed his eyes shut, letting out a small sound of consternation, but when he opened them they were once again normal. Anders swallowed, calming his breathing, and pushed up onto shaky arms, trying his very, very best not to think about what had just happened. He used the bed covers to pull himself up and looked down at Fenris.

"Thank the Maker," he breathed out, hanging his head.

The wound in his chest was completely gone and, even in the short space of time since the spell had been removed, there was already a slight hint of colour in the elf's face. Anders reached out to take Fenris' wounded hand in his again, letting out a glow of healing magic which closed both cuts simultaneously. The elf frowned and let out a soft moan. Anders was never happier to hear it than he was at that moment.

"Well, that was enjoyable," he heard Alesis say from behind him, pulling him back to reality, "you should call me up more often."

"Get out," Anders said without pause, hearing the hoarseness in his own voice and clearing his throat roughly, "I don't ever want to see your face again."

Silence, but for a snort of breath. Anders waited, breathing shallow, for the other mage to leave.

"...You could have killed me that day," Alesis said, voice retreating towards the door, "but you let me live, for whatever reason. I never thanked you. This makes us even Anders."

The mage didn't look around as Alesis left. He also didn't want to know how the mage got through the locked bedroom door without the key which, when he checked, was still in his pocket. He kept a hold of Fenris' hand until the elf eventually blinked open bleary, tired eyes and looked at him in confusion. Anders smiled at him.

"Welcome back," he said with a short, rather hysterical laugh.

"Back?" Fenris said, his voice barely audible and cracked from his overly dry throat, "Where...was I?"

"Don't talk," Anders shook his head, "you've been very ill. I need you to drink some water, do you think you can?"

Fenris tried to swallow and grimaced, nodding his head feebly. Anders let go of his hand and stood up shakily, walking to the pitcher of water and pouring some into a clean tumbler from Hawke's dresser. He knelt back down and propped Fenris' head up with an extra pillow, lifting the glass to his chapped lips. The elf sipped cautiously, swallowing painfully. Anders let him have a few more before he set about checking the damage the spell had managed to inflict before it had finally been removed. He placed his hands over Fenris' chest and felt out with his healing magic. What he found wasn't quite as bad as it could have been. Some damage to the skin, which was easily fixable, some damage to the lymphatic system but that would heal with time. His vital organs seemed mainly undamaged other than from the trauma. Anders took a draught of the potion he and Merrill had made up earlier and mixed it with the water. He also took the opportunity, while Fenris was still dazed, to wash away the blood symbols Alesis had smeared onto his skin.

"You need to drink as much as you can, I know it tastes terrible," Anders said apologetically, "you're dehydrated. You had a fever."
"I can't remember," Fenris said dazedly, closing his eyes, "I'm...so tired."

"I know, but don't sleep now," Anders said, "finish your water first. I'm going to tell Hawke you're alright."

"Hawke?" Fenris' eyes fluttered open, "Is he hurt?"

Anders couldn't help but smile, despite himself. As much as the comment would usually cause a spike of jealousy he couldn't bring himself to become angry now. He was too relieved.

"No, he's fine," Anders said.

"Good," Fenris croaked out, taking another sip of water, his face screwing up, "ugh. You weren't joking about the taste."

Anders grinned, shaking his head, and unlocked the bedroom door. He went to Oranna's room first and informed the worried residents that it was safe to come out. Then he went to Leandra's room and knocked softly.

"Who is it?" came Hawke's stern voice.

"It's me," Anders said, watching as the door flew open to reveal Hawke, his mother hovering behind him worriedly.

"Is he..?" Hawke started but stopped, eyes widening, "What happened to your face?"

"Uh..." Anders faltered.

Shit, he thought harshly. He thought he'd taken care of all of his wounds but he'd forgotten about the rather savage punch Alesis had given him. He reached up and let out a flare of healing magic, flexing his jaw. Hawke looked at him in annoyance.

"Just an accident," Anders said breezily, "anyway, you'll be happy to know he's awake. He's going to be fine."

"Thank Andraste," Hawke sagged in relief, momentarily distracted, "what about your friend?"

"He wasn't my friend Hawke," Anders said darkly, trying to push down the ire that word caused in him, "and you don't need to worry. He won't be back."

"Well...good," Hawke said uncertainly, looking a little worried by Anders' anger but obviously deciding not to push, not yet anyway, "can I see him?"

"Of course," Anders said.

They returned to the bedroom together. Anders watched fondly as Hawke did what he always did with someone who had done something against his wishes and got themselves injured. He ranted at them, telling them they were an idiot, before realising that they were still very ill and then fussing over them as if he'd never been angry at all. Fenris was still quite disoriented and so had a hard time following most of what Hawke said, but he let Hawke help him drink his potion and mumbled out something about being glad that he was alright. Anders slipped away as Hawke continued to talk to the elf, making for the bathroom at the end of the landing. He nipped inside and locked the door behind him, turning to the toilet, dropping to his knees and promptly vomiting up the meagre contents of his stomach. He held onto the wall and heaved, bringing up stinging bile and acid, eyes watering as he breathed raggedly. He spat out the vile taste in his mouth and sat back unsteadily.
He lifted a shaky hand to wipe at his mouth, realising that it wasn't just his hand that was shaking. His whole body was trembling. He felt unclean, dirty, like his skin was crawling with ants. The places where Alesis had touched his bare skin itched. The memory brought on another wave of nausea and Anders lunged forwards as more bile and watery stomach fluid wrenched up his oesophagus. The mage spat and sniffed, pulling himself up so he could get some water from the basin to rinse out his mouth.

"Calm down," he said, hugging his arms around himself, his head falling against his chest, "just calm down. Everything's fine now. Calm down."

Oh dear maker, Anders thought, when will you ever see fit to bless me with some bloody common sense? When will I start making the right decisions? Ever? Anders shook his head and wiped his face and eyes. He wasn't sure what he was going to tell people that he'd done to save Fenris but it would most certainly not be the truth, that was for sure. He'd think of something. Until then maybe they'd be distracted enough by the fact that the elf had recovered. Hawke seemed to be sufficiently preoccupied by it, Anders thought, mercifully. He splashed his face with water and dried himself with the hand towel before leaving the bathroom, back out onto the landing. When he rejoined Hawke in the bedroom Fenris was already asleep. He'd managed three quarters of the potion before he'd passed out from sheer exhaustion. Hawke had pulled the covers over him and made him as comfortable as he could. Anders thought the elf looked as contented as he'd seen him in a long time. At least his face wasn't marred with pain anymore, Anders thought with a sigh.

"Alright," Hawke's serious tone pulled him from his thoughts; Anders looked up to find the rogue watching him, arms folded, "tell me what happened."

Anders stared at him. He didn't know what to say. Instead he found himself childishly shaking his head in reply, looking away when Hawke frowned incredulously at him.

"Anders, don't think I'm just going to stand here like a moron and assume that everything was solved with bunny rabbits and flowers," Hawke said facetiously, "this room reeks of blood and as much as I'm sure you'd love for me to think that bruise on your face was an accident, I'm not that stupid."

The mage swallowed and studied the pattern on the bedcovers intently. What do you want to know? he thought sharply, that I was desperate enough to take part in blood magic or that somehow I managed to get myself sexually abused while doing so? Because I'm not proud of either.

"Did you use blood magic?" Hawke asked him bluntly, so bluntly in fact that it made Anders flinch.

"No!" Anders denied; technically he hadn't used blood magic and he would cling to that technicality for as long as it took him to get over this.

"Did you let someone else?" Hawke tried again.

Anders opened his mouth to reply but fell short; however, his hesitation was enough of an answer. Hawke sighed roughly and scrubbed a hand over his face. He didn't look angry, much to Anders' relief, but he didn't look happy either. In fact he was looking decidedly blank.

"Anders, Maker dammit!" Hawke said finally, his voice tired, "How could you?"

"How could I what?" Anders said back, his own anger at himself building, making him snap out his words, "How could I not stand to watch as Fenris' organs melted inside of his own body while he was still alive? How could I not stand to watch you crushed as you blamed yourself for the rest
of your life over something that wasn't even your fault? How could I live with myself when I knew, I knew that I could have stopped it? Is that what you're asking!"

Hawke stared at him in shock as Anders voice rose.

"You have no idea what I just did to save his life," Anders voice shook, "and I'll never tell you. You understand me?"

"Anders please..." Hawke said, reaching out for him, eyes bright with worry.

"No," Anders backed away in a panic, "just leave me alone!"

He ran. Anders didn't even know where he was going. He was out on the street before he knew what he was doing, Hawke's worried voice following him, but he ignored it, he ignored it all and ran blindly through the dim sunlit alleys and familiar pathways until, somehow, he ended up at the clinic in Darktown. He'd heard Hawke running after him for a while but had managed, in his blind pursuit of escape, to lose him. He found himself doubled over for lack of breath, legs shaking from exhaustion and emotion alike. Anders managed to unlock the door and stumble inside, kicking it closed before falling against the wall and sliding down it, tears already streaming down his face.

"I'm so sorry," he sobbed, his chest heaving and he broke down, "oh Maker I'm so sorry."

He brought his hand to his face and covered his eyes, screwing them shut as he continued to cry. He couldn't remember the last time he'd let go like this, felt like this. He could sense Justice lurking in the background, unsure and wary in the face of Anders' emotion. It only made the mage feel worse. His chest spasmed under the weight of his guilt, fresh tears streaming down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he said again, shaking his head, "You always try and stop me and I never listen to you. I know this isn't what you wanted. How did you ever end up attached to such a worthless piece of shit like me? I'm so sorry Justice, for everything."

The spirit pressed back, slightly comfortingly bemused, which Anders, in his distraught state, couldn't help but appreciate. He tried to smile a little but it became lost in his tears again. He wasn't sure how long he sat there but he was cold by the time a tentative knock came at the door. He flinched and stared at the door as if it were a battalion of templars, ready to drag him off.

"Go home Hawke," he said tightly, expecting the rogue to have guessed where he would go.

"It's me," came the unexpected reply, the door opening tentatively.

"Merrill?" Anders said, looking up to the elf as she stared back in shock.

"Oh Anders," she said anxiously, rushing into the clinic, to stand above him, "what's wrong? What happened?"

Anders stared at her, thinking back to the long talk they'd had after he'd first learned of Merrill's blood magic, how disparaging he'd been, how sure he must have seemed, how much he claimed he would never turn to it, no matter the cost. Such a hypocrite, he thought scathingly, you're such a hypocrite Anders, in every aspect of your worthless life. Yet, even with his own self loathing battling to get out, Merrill's worried eyes and Justice's comforting presence were all he could see and feel. He couldn't stop the tears from returning, not in the face of all this conflicting trauma.

"Merrill I've made a terrible mistake," Anders said, his voice breaking.

"Anders," Merrill said soothingly, lowering to her knees and taking the mage into her arms; he put
his face against her shoulder and wept, holding her tightly while she stroked his hair, "it's alright, everything will be alright, I promise. Don't cry anymore."

Anders tried to stop but he couldn't. It felt like years and years of grief were finally emptying from his body, wave after wave. Merrill held him, letting out soft shushes and comforting words. He managed to calm himself a little but the sobs wouldn't stop convulsing in his chest, his shoulders shaking.

"Hawke sent me to find you, he's so worried," Merrill said, making Anders feel worse than he already did, "I think you scared him. He said you ran off without telling him where you were going. He didn't want to leave Fenris alone while he's sleeping so I said I'd come get you."

"I..." Anders didn't know where to start, "it's a long story."

"Well I'm sure there'll be lots of time for it later," Merrill was smiling at him motheringly when she pulled back, "but right now we need to get you home. Hawke's useless with sick people, you know that. Who's going to make sure he doesn't poison Fenris by mistake with a potion he's made if you're not there to watch over him, hmm?"

Anders let out a shaky laugh that he didn't really feel, which seemed to mollify Merrill a little at least. He allowed her to pull him unsteadily to his feet. Anders wiped his face with his handkerchief before blowing his stuffed up nose. Merrill waited patiently while he sorted himself, her eyes bright in the sunshine from the window outside. So much for getting away from my problems, Anders thought numbly, instead I just create new ones. He followed her, feeling distinctly like a prisoner being led to execution, locking the door behind him before walking with Merrill back up towards Hightown.
Hatred

Chapter Notes

Warning: Depictions of male/male sex

Sometimes it was difficult for Anders to accept, but hatred was easier than forgiveness. If he thought back over his life to anyone who had ever done him wrong or hurt those he loved, the hatred came first and it was far too difficult to replace. It was meant to be cathartic, or so they said, forgiving the people in your past, letting go of your anger, being free. Yet when he tried to imagine it, well, it had the reverse effect. Forgive his father? Forgive Darren Shan? Forgive the templars that hunted him? Forgive the Divine? Forgive Morinth? Rolan? Alrik? Not bloody likely. The thought made him wash between anger and guilt both. As he walked with Merrill, listening to the elf babble on as she usually did when she was a little nervous, he continued to think about how hard he found it to forgive people.

Yet now he was going to be asking Hawke to forgive him. Ah sweet hypocrisy, Anders thought ruefully, how you follow me so. He watched the as the city came to life around him; people walking to their work, laughing and talking, watching the sky, hanging out their washing, reprimanding their children, scowling at the City Guard who patrolled the streets, picking pockets, complaining, breathing, alive. Kirkwall was like a huge, living organism, a whole comprised of the sum of its parts. As Anders wandered through the middle of it with Merrill at his side he couldn't help but feel like an intrusive foreign body. It would only be a matter of time, he thought, before the creature that was Kirkwall realised he didn't belong and turned on him, the occupants converging on him like white blood cells, rejecting him as a body would a virus.

"So then I thought...Anders are you listening?" Merrill asked, her eyes watching him as he moved out of the way of a man carrying a large wooden crate.

"Mmm? Sorry," Anders shook his head, "I was miles away."

"That's alright," Merrill smiled, "I was just rabbiting on anyway."

They walked through the market and cut down an alleyway towards the mansion district. Anders felt the guilt and the panic and the grief melting away into the usual numb hollow feeling that followed. He was aware that he did it to protect himself, sealing himself away from the world. It was a distinctly dangerous state to be in, he knew. He was always too calm when he hid all his emotions inside like this, it made him reckless, all too happy to say things he would later regret. He felt like the best option would be to turn back now and return to the clinic, open it and spending the rest of his day doing something good with his time instead of getting into a probably horrible argument and fucking up his life a little further than it already was.

"Do you," Merrill hesitated a little as they passed two City Guard, leaning casually against the wall of the Blooming Rose, "want to talk about it?"

"It's not really something you can talk about while walking through the streets Merrill," Anders said heavily.

"Oh," Merrill said, "well, if you want to talk about it later..."
"Thanks," Anders said quickly, "really, I mean it."

The truth was he still felt accountable for having berated Merrill over her own blood magic and the thought of trying to apologise and explain to her as well as Hawke all in the same day was a little too much to handle. Instead they walked the rest of the way in silence. Hawke was in the kitchen helping his mother and Oranna when he and Merrill returned to the mansion. Anders watched as Merrill hurried off to tell Hawke they were back. As it was Anders took the opportunity to sneak upstairs to the bedroom unseen. Despite the state he was in Anders couldn't help the disbelieving chuff of breath he let out at the sight that greeted him. Fenris had the good grace to at least look guilty as he sat on the edge of the bed, trying his best to get up.

"Don't even bother," Anders said, shaking his head, "you aren't in any fit state to be up and about yet. You need to rest."

"I feel much better," the elf tried to argue, looking uncomfortable.

"It's only been a few hours," Anders said sternly, "believe me if you'd seen yourself before you were cured you would be agreeing with me. You need bed rest for at least another two days. Your body needs time to heal."

Fenris sighed, looking like he was going to protest further but instead he lay back down on the bed stiffly. Anders stocked up the fire, which had burned low in his absence, and set he and Merrill's potion back over the blaze. He brought it to the boil and added more water to thin it down. Fenris was silent the entire time, nothing but steady breathing in the background. Anders used the ladle lying by the grate to scoop up some of the bitter tonic and placed it into the mug Hawke had obviously been using before, now clean.

"I know, it's vile," Anders said as Fenris eyed the mug with distaste, "it wouldn't be medicine if it tasted nice, would it."

"What a convenient excuse," Fenris said, deadpan.

"Just drink it," Anders said wearily, "it'll bolster your immune system, stop you catching anything else while you're healing. And don't try and get up again. You need anything, just shout, I'll leave the door open."

Anders placed the mug on the bedside table before turning to leave the room. He was stopped by something that it took him a moment to realise was quite a shock.

"Anders," Fenris said, making the mage turn.

"Yes?" Anders asked.

"I..." the elf faltered, looking elsewhere, "Hawke told me that it was you who cured me. I want to thank you, for saving my life."

Anders stared at him. It was then that he realised what had made him stop. It wasn't that Fenris was thanking him, although that was amazing enough. He had called Anders by his name. In all the time they had known each other the elf had never addressed him by his given name, not once. Anders nodded dumbly.

"You don't need to thank me," he said quietly.

"Oh don't be such a martyr about it," Fenris said, finally looking him in the eye, his face as sincere as he had ever seen it, "thank you."
"That's alright," Anders said back with a small rather surreal smile, before turning and exiting the room, leaving the door ajar behind him.

That was a lie though, Anders thought, nothing was alright. Yes he was glad he'd saved Fenris' life, he was glad that the elf could at least thank him properly considering what he'd gone through to get it done, but in the end, nothing was alright. Anders stared at the man he found waiting for him on the landing, who stared back.

"There you are," Hawke said, monotone.

Anders looked at him, noting his determined eyes and stance. There wasn't going to be any getting away from this, Anders thought, not like usual. It wasn't going to be pretty.

"Study?" Anders suggested wearily.

"Good enough place as any," Hawke shrugged.

Anders had forgotten that they had ensconced Madam in the study while they used the master bedroom for Fenris. The little kitten meowed and trotted from her makeshift bed on seeing them both. Anders wished he could pick her up and just spend the next few hours messing around on the floor with her, thinking about nothing. As it was he simply smiled hollowly at the little cat, reaching down to scratch behind her ears. If only life were so simple.

"It's becoming a bit of a habit, isn't it?" Hawke asked, making Anders look up over his shoulder at him.

"What?" Anders asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

"You," Hawke said, "running away every time I ask you something you don't want to answer."

"Huh," Anders shook his head, returning his gaze to the kitten, "I would have thought you knew by now, running away is what I'm best at. Been doing it for long enough."

"This isn't funny Anders," Hawke said seriously.

"Too right it isn't funny," Anders said back, just as seriously.

He stood up and turned to face Hawke. The rogue was watching him cautiously, as if he didn't know what to expect. Anders stared at him, the empty reckless feeling building in his chest. It was hard to ignore something that was trying so hard to burst forth. All of a sudden he wanted so badly to tell Hawke everything, exactly what had happened. Somehow he wanted to hurt them both, he wanted to make Hawke hate him as much as he loathed himself. Luckily for Anders Hawke seemed just as determined as he was to have everything out in the open.

"I want the truth," Hawke said determinedly.

"The truth?" Anders laughed humourlessly, "Who ever really wants to know the truth? People think they want to know but once they learn it then all they wish is that they'd never heard it in the first place."

Sometimes the truth is best left buried, Anders thought giddily, his irresponsible nature taking over, but if that's what you want Hawke then that's what you'll get.

"So you want to know all about it do you?" Anders said, noting the trepidation in Hawke's eyes at his candour, "Fine. I'll tell you what happened, but you're not going to like it."
"Look..." Hawke swallowed, suddenly sounding like he wanted Anders to stop talking but the mage ignored him.

"The man who was here earlier, we used to work together in the resistance, and yes we fucked for a short while," Anders said carelessly, watching Hawke closely, "until he turned to blood magic and nearly killed me. Pride demon. I found him summoning it in one of the abandoned warehouses down at the docks. Thing was vicious, went for me when I tried to stop him making his deal. He says it was an accident but you can never tell with blood mages. People tend to change when they get a taste of power and he certainly has changed."

Hawke pulled his folded arms tighter, opening his mouth to speak, eyes hard, but Anders cut him off. Going to tell the truth for once in your life, are you? Anders thought ruefully, you certainly pick your moments.

"So thing is, I didn't exactly do any blood magic to save Fenris," Anders said, "but I did help."

"You helped?" Hawke sounded upset but Anders didn't stop.

"Well if you can call having a blood spell dragged through your body and sucked out of your mouth while someone jerks you off helping," Anders shrugged, watching Hawke's eyes widen, "then yes, I suppose I did."

Hawke stared at him, eyes round with shock. His mouth opened and closed a few times before he eventually snapped it firmly shut. He walked a little awkwardly to the chair by the desk and sat down carefully, arms still folded tightly. Hawke watched Anders for another moment before finally looking away. The mage didn't entirely know what to say into the silence he'd created, so he let it linger.

"You..." Hawke said eventually, his voice betraying his revulsion at the mere thought, "let him touch you?"

"Well, I didn't exactly have a choice," Anders shrugged, shivering a little at the memory.

"What?" Hawke's eyes were once more sharp, narrowed, focused, "You mean he...for fucks sake! Who is he? Dammit Anders you tell me who he is right now, I'm going to kill the fucking little shit!"

Anders blinked at Hawke as he stood purposefully, his eyes blazing with anger, a sheer contrast to the shocked and quiet state he had been in. He backed away as Hawke strode towards him but the rogue was faster, grabbing Anders by the shoulders and shoving him forcefully up against the wall. The mage shivered in his grasp, the numb feeling wavering in place of fear and a slight thrill of danger. Why can't you just hate me? Anders thought painfully, please Hawke don't make this more difficult than it has to be.

"Don't Hawke, he's a dangerous man, I don't want to see you hurt," Anders gasped as Hawke leaned in, pressing him harder into the wall.

"He won't be so dangerous with a dagger in his throat," Hawke growled, shaking the mage forcefully, "his name Anders."

"No, I can't tell you," Anders shook his head, eyes hard.

"Tell me!" Hawke shouted in his face, baring his teeth, "How dare you protect him, after what he's done to you!"
"I'm protecting you!" Anders cried out angrily, "Fuck him! He can go and die for all I care! It's you I love!"

Hawke growled low in his throat, crushing Anders into the study wall with his weight, pushing up against the mage, chest firmly against chest, a solid thigh pushing its way between his legs. Hawke's eyes were alight with fury and more than a little underlying lust. Anders couldn't help but feel the stress of everything begin to weigh down on his body, trembling from the effort to stay calm. He reached up and pushed back at Hawke's chest but the man was like an immovable wall.

"Hawke, back off will you?" Anders said irately, glaring at the other man.

"What's wrong?" Hawke spat, his own irrational ire evident, "Am I not good enough for you anymore? What do you want me to do? Slice my wrists open before I touch you?"

"Fuck you!" Anders spat, "You think I wanted to use blood magic? Don't you know me at all? It's the most sickening thing I've ever done and that's saying a lot considering it's coming from me!"

"What's this?" Hawke scoffed nastily, "You tell one truth and now you want to confess more, is that it?"

"You'll be lucky," Anders ground out, eyes narrowed, "you couldn't handle the real truth Hawke!"

"Try me," Hawke said challengingly, "got many more dirty little secrets hidden back there?"

"Plenty," Anders spat back, his eyes flashing.

When he didn't continue Hawke snarled and lunged at him. The rogue captured his lips forcefully, splitting them apart with an insistent tongue and invading his mouth. Anders let out a moan in distress but Hawke simply kissed him harder. He reached round and held onto Hawke's arms for support, turning his head a little to the right as Hawke ravished his mouth. The mage was panting for breath when Hawke eventually pulled back. He wasted no time in asking what was obvious to Anders was really bothering him.

"Have you been fucking around behind my back?" Hawke growled out insistently.

"Actually it's one of the few things I haven't done behind your back," Anders shrugged spitefully.

"Don't lie to me!" Hawke shouted, voice tinged with hurt.

Anders would never know whether it was of his own volition or whether Justice, who's ire had momentarily flared at being accused of something so unjust, took control of his hand. Whichever it was he reached back and slapped Hawke hard across the face. The rogue blinked in shock, staring at Anders, a hand raised to his cheek. Anders couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry, his emotions fluxing back and forth with such irregularity. Instead he found himself, somehow, back to that hollow recklessness he'd started with. He stared at Hawke as the man came back to himself, his eyes flashing.

"I'm not lying to you," Anders said back soberly, "I've done many, many things you aren't aware of Hawke but cheating on you is not one of them."

Hawke eyed him savagely, breathing unsteady, not saying a word before he swooped in again. Anders closed his eyes and lost himself to the feeling of Hawke's tongue sliding around inside his mouth, caressing everything it could touch, trailing along his hard palate with the tip and smoothing over his own tongue. A pair of insistent hands grabbed him by the buttocks and squeezed territorially, as if claiming him. Anders groaned into Hawke's mouth, even as the other
man pulled his pelvis forwards and ground against him hard. When Hawke spoke again it was to ask different question of him, one that sent shivers down his spine.

"Tell me who you belong to," Hawke ground out, his eyes smouldering, pupils wide.

"I don't..." Anders gasped, trying to push at Hawke's chest, suddenly indignant even through the haze of emotion, "belong to anyone!"

"Liar," Hawke growled, pressing harder, "tell me."

"No," Anders choked back a cry.

"Say it!" Hawke shouted, shoving Anders painfully into the wall.

"You! I belong to you!" Anders screwed his eyes shut, his breathing turning to nothing but a series of gasps as Hawke began to grind him against the wall in a steady rhythm, "Hawke, please, stop..."

"Too fucking right you do," Hawke said darkly, ignoring Anders' plea, eyes wild, "and I'm going to make sure you don't forget it."

Anders held his breath as Hawke hauled him from the wall, throwing him face down onto the desk. He lay there, shaking, as Hawke, incensed, reached around to unbutton his trousers deftly before yanking them down. Anders bit down on his lip to stifle the cry, tasting blood, as Hawke pushed inside of him unprepared. Maker it hurt, but you deserve it, don't you? Anders thought miserably, after everything you've done to him you deserve to have him hurt you back. Hawke didn't seem to notice Anders silence, too lost into his own frenzied lust as he rammed into him again and again, long elegant fingers gripping his hips hard enough to bruise.

"No one touches you but me," Hawke leaned down across Anders back, speaking into his ear as he ground his hips forwards, "no one."

"No one," Anders agreed breathlessly, "but you."

"You're mine," Hawke said, biting down at the junction of his neck and shoulder, marking him.

"Yours," Anders mewled, "I'm yours Hawke, always."

Maker why does this feel so good when it's so fucking wrong? Anders thought dizzily, holding onto the sides of the desk for support as Hawke sped up his thrusts, pounding him into the desk forcefully. It banged against the wall with each jerk of Hawke's hips, accentuating the rogue's licentious fury. Anders tried to gain some purchase with his feet on the floor so as to free his own neglected erection which was trapped between himself and the desktop but Hawke wouldn't let him. The rogue snarled, stopping only to kick Anders feet wider apart before continuing, harder and faster than before. The mage moaned into the wood against his face, screwing his eyes shut, torn between the grief and desire devouring him from the inside. Hawke eventually reached over to prise his hands from the desk before jerking Anders suddenly upright, pulling him back against his chest. Anders couldn't help the sob that escaped at the change in position, Hawke driving up into him, deeper and deeper. He let his head fall back lifelessly onto Hawke's shoulder, listening dazedly to Hawke's short, quiet gasps, knowing he was close.

"Dammit, Anders, I'm...!" Hawke didn't finish, instead he let out a choked groan as he went rigid, hands clamped around Anders' shoulders as he spilled inside of him.

Anders let out a guttural cry as he felt the heat filling him, tipping him over the edge. He came over the desk, his legs shaking with effort. Hawke's breathing had calmed considerably, the man now
panting softly against his neck. Anders stayed against him, quivering, until Hawke finally moved back, pulling out slowly. He couldn't stop the pained sound that escaped, hearing Hawke's breath catch.

"Anders..." he started, his voice filled with remorse.

He hadn't meant to worry him, but Anders legs took that moment to give way and he fell to his knees on the floorboards. Hawke let out a sound of distress and quickly knelt down behind him, pulling the mage back against his chest, arms wrapping around him tenderly. Anders reached up to hook his right arm around Hawke's neck, closing his eyes and breathing slowly. Always the same, Anders thought, Hawke lost his temper and then afterwards he always regretted it.

"Are you alright?" Hawke asked, sounding thoroughly upset, "Maker I didn't mean to...fuck, why do you do this to me? Why do I always lose control around you?"

Hawke buried his face into Anders' shoulder, kissing softly at the brutalised skin where his teeth had broken through. Anders didn't reply, just lay there in a daze as Hawke ran his hands tenderly over his body, trying desperately to sort the damage he had done.

"Why does this always happen?" Hawke sniffed quietly, sadly, almost as if speaking to himself.

"It's just the way it is," Anders said laconically, eyes glazed, speech slow, "I hurt you, you hurt me, we make up and then start the process all over again."

"No," Hawke said, shaking his head vehemently, pulling Anders up a little so he could look down into his eyes, "no I don't want it to be like this anymore. I don't want to hurt you Anders. I love you."

He would have replied, had he known what to say. I hate you and I love you, I need you and I resist you. Anders had yet to find a relationship which wasn't complicated beyond belief, yet he and Hawke seemed determined to test just how long two people could be together before they ended up killing each other with their passion. He closed his eyes, knowing that Hawke was waiting for him to speak, waiting for him to say that everything would be alright, to forgive him. Anders found, hollowly, that he didn't have it in him.

"Don't go to sleep here," Hawke said anxiously when Anders did not reply to his words, "come on, we can use the spare bedroom."

"Can't sleep, it's too early," Anders protested sleepily.

"We've been up all night Anders," Hawke argued, "we haven't slept since Orden and I, for one, am completely bloody shattered. Considering everything that's happened we deserve some rest. All I want, right now, is to go to sleep with you in my arms."

Anders would have protested, should have protested, but his body was sore and his mind was fogged with exhaustion and emotional stress. Instead of pulling himself together and leaving, he allowed the rogue to carefully move out from under him and pull him to his feet. He ignored the pain aching in his joints and his abused flesh. He could heal it later, he thought as he tried to push away his anger at the thought. There was no time for that now, he needed sleep, he needed rest. He and Hawke tried their best to tidy up the study but they had made more of a mess than they'd realised and, now that the adrenaline was gone, their exhaustion was all the more prevalent. Anders forced Hawke to stop his obsessive tidying and eventually pulled him from the study by the hand. It was there, sitting on the chairs Hawke had brought upstairs onto the landing for visitors, that they found a rather awkward and wary looking Aveline. Hawke stared at her in surprise.
"Aveline," he said needlessly, "what are you doing here?"

"I, well," Aveline stood and folded her arms, looking anywhere but at them, "I came as soon as I could. Lieutenant Harley informed me of your service and I thought I'd come and make sure everything was alright."

"Oh," Hawke said, smiling, even though it didn't reach his eyes, "everything's fine Aveline. There were some...complications, but everything's fine now."

"And Fenris?" Aveline asked, finally glancing between them both.

"...I was talking about Fenris," Hawke said, looking a little abashed.

"Oh I see," Aveline blushed, "I'll, well, um, if things are sorted then I guess that's good and I'll just go now and see you later Hawke, alright?"

She was gone before either of them could say another word, traipsing down the stairs in a clatter of armour. Anders dropped Hawke's hand and shook his head. He couldn't help but feel far more awkward than when they'd found Isabela outside their door.

"Do you think she...?" Hawke started miserably.

"Heard us?" Anders sighed, rubbing his face.

"Well that's...embarrassing," Hawke said, looking distinctly blank, "how am I ever going to be able to look her in the eye again?"

"I'm sure she'll get over it," Anders said wryly, "she's a grown woman after all. Come on, no time for thinking about that now. Let's get some sleep."

The bed was soft and cold. Anders lit the fire to heat the chilled air while Hawke pulled the heavy curtains to block out the daylight. Anders peeled off his soiled clothes and placed them onto the armchair in the corner. When he turned around Hawke was behind him, wearing nothing but his shirt, his eyes watching him steadily. The rogue reached out and pulled him into his arms, leaning in to kiss him softly, tracing delicate patterns across his shoulder blades. Anders hesitated before reaching up to hold him back, feeling the heat of the fire against the backs of his legs, filtering up across his torso. Hawke sighed contentedly as Anders curled the fingers of one hand into his hair, pulling back and taking Anders with him as he stepped backwards towards the bed. He lay down, pulling the mage down beside him. Anders shivered as he touched the cold sheets, rolling to the side a little as Hawke pulled the covers over them both. He twined his arms around Hawke's body, laying his head against his chest, staring at the dust motes drifting through the slanted spike of sunshine which had managed to peek through the curtains. He eventually closed his eyes as Hawke pulled the tie from his hair and began separating the strands with his fingers.

"I love you," Hawke said as Anders drifted to sleep, the words following him down into the void like the darkness that swallowed him; Anders was not sure what those words truly meant anymore.

The next few weeks were ones that Anders remembered for a long time afterwards. If anything became too hard to bear or something made him sad or doubtful, he just thought back to the days after he and Hawke's worst fight to date and couldn't help but smile. Despite the rather morbid state of mind he had fallen into after their spectacular row things had picked up rather quickly. Hawke had never been more attentive and tender with him than he was then, even more so than the week he had spent with him after Alrik's first attack. Hawke separated his time between caring for Fenris and caring for Anders, which the mage occasionally scolded him for. Fenris continued to
recuperate at a decent pace. He was up and walking again by the second day, albeit a little gently, and by the third he was too antsy to contain any longer. He returned to his own house, despite Anders still fussing over his wellbeing. The mage wasn't sure but Hawke may have been responsible for Fenris' discomfort more than Anders was. The mage was sure it couldn't have been entirely enjoyable for the elf to watch Hawke taking any spare moment to touch, kiss or generally molly coddle him. If he had been in Fenris' place he was sure that he would have left long before, no matter what anyone would have said.

Hawke was so desperate for Anders to know how sorry he was that he didn't even protest when Anders told him he wouldn't be attending his mother's party. The rogue just smiled sadly and told him it was alright, that he was sorry he'd forced him into it in the first place. Anders spent the night with Merrill instead, taking the opportunity to finally explain himself to her. He had been nervous about what the others would think of his methods for saving Fenris but, thankfully, Hawke was more than happy to deal with it. He wasn't sure what the rogue told them but, whatever it was, it most certainly wasn't the truth. It was only Merrill that ended up learning what had truly happened. He couldn't bring himself to lie to her, not after everything he'd said. He'd been worried she would be angry at him, resent him, but instead she was far more understanding than he had ever been of her.

"It's not easy," Merrill had said, "refusing to use it when you know it can help."

"Which is why I purposefully didn't learn any of the spells," Anders had said, smiling wryly, "not that it did me any good in the end, did it?"

"Oh, don't beat yourself up about it," Merrill had smiled genuinely, her eyes turning distinctly wicked, "you saved Fenris's life. Now you can have him forever in your debt. Isn't that worth it?"

Anders had laughed with her, enjoying the feeling. It was true that Fenris didn't seem to know how to act around him anymore. Whenever something happened that prompted the elf to spout his usual mage hating diatribe it seemed to have much less heat behind it than normal. He had also taken to occasionally addressing Anders by his name which the mage was finding it hard to adjust to. It seemed to make Hawke happy however so Anders didn't say anything. In a way he was glad that the antagonism between them had lessened at least a little. It was one less thing he had to worry about.

When Anders returned to the mansion the morning after the party Hawke was looking distinctly worse for wear and overly happy to see him. They ended up laying on the chaise lounge together all morning, Hawke pillowed against Anders' chest, telling him all the sordid details of the night before.

"Some of those people," Hawke shook his head in disbelief, "honestly, I've never met such an ignorant, cruel set of arseholes as I did last night. Most of them were alright but a few of them...some of the things they were saying about mages Anders, honestly, they would have made Justice's head explode. It really is a good thing you weren't there."

"That bad?" Anders frowned, "Like what?"

"You really don't want to know," Hawke said despairingly, "let's just say that Alrik's views apparently weren't confined to Alrik alone."

"Oh," Anders said grimly, stroking his fingers through Hawke's hair, "I see."

"Don't worry though," Hawke said, pushing up to look into Anders' hard eyes, "I threw them out."
"You what?" Anders couldn't help the laugh that escaped, smiling fondly as Hawke leaned in to kiss him chastely on the lips.

"Did you think I would keep such belligerent, narrow minded idiots in my house after they said things like that?" Hawke looked affectionately insulted, "You really don't know me at all do you?"

"Hawke," Anders said, shaking his head, "sometimes...you really don't know what you mean to me."

"Oh yes?" Hawke said, his smile distinctly dissolute, "Why don't you tell me all about it?"

Varric was one of the few of their group that didn't seem to believe whatever Hawke had told him about Anders' miraculous work on Fenris. The dwarf didn't have to say anything as such, Anders could tell in the way he sent sly glances at him when he thought the mage wasn't looking. He would have told Varric the truth but, in all honesty, was too paranoid that it would somehow end up in one of his stories. He trusted the dwarf, yes, but his inability to pass up great material was something he also knew Varric was a slave to. So instead he kept his mouth shut and pretended not to notice.

"You know it's getting awfully sickening, visiting you and Hawke recently," Varric said one day as they sat in Hawke's garden, Anders drinking tea while Varric sipped his coffee.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anders asked, eyebrow raised.

"Like you have to ask," Varric scoffed, "honestly, can't you two keep your hands off of each other for a second?"

"What's the matter Varric," Anders smirked, "jealous are we?"

"More like vomitous," Varric replied, "I don't know what it is he did but you sure are making him pay for it, that's all I'm saying."

"You like to think you're subtle, don't you?" Anders shook his head, "But I'm not telling you anything."

Varric just gave him a suspicious look but didn't push further. Anders returned to the clinic but always made sure to get away at a reasonable enough time if he could so as to have dinner with Hawke. Things settled down. Hawke stopped asking so many questions about what he'd been doing, where he was going, and consequently Anders told him much more about his activities than if he'd been interrogated as usual. It was a month after Orden when things started to fall apart again.

"It's been a while," Sabine smiled at him when Anders ducked through the door, turning in surprise.

"Sabine!" he said, returning her smile, "I didn't know it would be you here tonight."

"Thought you could use a hand," the woman smiled, her mousy brown hair slipping over her shoulders.

Anders had been informed by the resistance about a group of apostates they had managed to smuggle out of Ferelden and over to Kirkwall. Anders had been bemused by the plan, wondering why on earth they would smuggle them into the city just to have them smuggled out again, but apparently it would be the last thing the templars would suspect. Anders admitted that was probably true but it didn't make it any more sane. He had made his way to the sewers that night,
quite sure that he would be doing the run alone as usual, but was more than happy that Sabine had
decided to join him. The three apostates, two women and an older man, eyed him suspiciously but
Sabine reassured them he was a friend. They made their way slowly through the rancid tunnels,
keeping as quiet as possible, talking in hushed voices.

"Is everything alright Anders?" Sabine asked as they filed through into the caverns, the fresher air
a great relief.

"Yes, why do you ask?" Anders said, keeping his eye on his footing.

"I...heard about Alesis," she said, lowering her voice even further.

Heard about Alesis? Anders thought numbly. What on earth was that supposed to mean? He
couldn't help but feel a building sense of trepidation as he thought about how this might affect his
relationship with the resistance. Associating with blood mages was something he had castigated
himself and now there were already rumours floating around about his consorting with Alesis.

"Oh?" Anders said tightly, "What did you hear?"

"Just that you'd been in contact with him," Sabine whispered back, "Grould told me. I thought he
was joking but then Farah confirmed it. I thought we'd seen the last of him Anders. What on earth
drove you to bring him back?"

"It was a favour," Anders said vaguely, "for a friend."

"But he's a..!" Sabine started to admonish.

"A blood mage, yes, I do in fact remember that," Anders hissed, "hard to forget really when
someone's pride tries to murder you, literally."

"I'm not getting at you," Sabine said as the path evened out finally, giving them more room to
manoeuvre, "I was just worried, that's all. I've heard things about him recently, nasty rumours, but
when it comes to Alesis I can't help but believe them."

Anders stopped, letting the apostates they were ferrying catch up a little. He turned to Sabine,
noting the older woman's kind eyes, trying not to think of Tabatha and the distrust she had infused
him with.

"Thanks Sabine, but I'm alright," Anders assured her, "trust me when I say that if I never see his
face again it won't be a day too soon."

They carried on through the caverns until they found themselves back in the sewer system.
Everything was going as usual until Anders opened the door that led into the intersection beneath
Darktown. The sound of fighting was unmistakable. Anders signalled for the group to stop, forcing
them back into the wall. He peered around the corner and looked down into the pit beneath. It was
too dark to see clearly, the fogging mists of gas and steam obscuring his vision even more, but he
could easily see the telltale red symbol of the Coterie on the armour of a few of the men. The
others were too obscured.

"Coterie," Anders said as he leaned back, "Sabine you wait here with them, I'll take care of this."

"Not on your own!" Sabine said, catching his arm.

"I'll be fine," Anders said, "and we can't just leave them here on their own. If I need you I'll shout,
alright?"
Alright," Sabine nodded curtly, obviously not entirely happy with the situation, "just be careful."

Anders nipped out through the door quietly and made for the stairs, keeping to the shadows. Whoever the Coterie were up against had them on the run, there were only two rogues left alive when Anders finally reached the battle. He had managed to keep himself hidden, sticking to the walls, and was almost past them when he inadvertently gave himself away.

"Hawke?" he said, before he realised that he shouldn't.

The man in question spun around in surprise. It was then that Anders noticed Fenris in the background, chasing after the two rogues for a short while into the gloom, Aveline not far behind him, and another man crouched on the ground. Shit, was all Anders could think as the man stood, revealing the telltale insignia of the templars on his slightly worse for wear armour.

"Oh," Anders said, eyes flicking up to the doorway where Sabine and the others were ensconced.

"What on earth are you doing here?" Hawke asked, walking over to him.

"Could ask you the same thing," Anders said before strapping his staff back on to his belt, watching the templar warily, "friend of yours?"

"Actually we were here looking for him," Hawke said, nodding to the templar who Aveline was now helping to his feet, "what about you?"

"I'm, well, kind of busy," Anders said, giving Hawke a significant look.

"Busy? Oh..." Hawke caught on, flicking his eyes up towards the door Anders had been looking at, "busy. I see. Well, um, perhaps we should just escort Ser Emeric back to the Gallows, make sure he gets there safely."

"That would be much appreciated," Anders said, smiling at Hawke.

"Here to help, as always," Hawke smirked back, "I'll see you later?"

"Of course," Anders said, watching as Hawke began talking to the templar, waving a little awkwardly at Aveline and Fenris who looked just as surprised as Hawke to see him.

Eventually Hawke managed to persuade the templar to leave with them and Anders returned to Sabine. The woman sighed in relief on seeing Anders unharmed. They continued on their way unhindered and delivered the apostates out onto the Coast into the early evening sun. The man thanked them gravely for their assistance before turning and shepherding the two younger women towards the path. Anders watched them go, sending his good wishes with them.

"He's a handy man to have around, isn't he?" Sabine smiled as Anders looked at her quizzically, "your Serrah Hawke."

"Oh, well," Anders laughed a little awkwardly, "I suppose he is."

"You're really very lucky, you know," she said as they began the journey back to Kirkwall, "he's a good man. I've heard he supports our cause rather passionately."

"That's one way of putting it," Anders said, his smile long suffering, "almost recklessly at times."

"It's nice to see," Sabine said, her eyes distant, "the youth of the city being so open minded."

"I'd hardly call him a youth," Anders laughed out loud, smiling at the thought of Hawke's face if he
heard anyone calling him such, "he's twenty four."

"Well you're all young to my eyes," Sabine said matronly, "even you Anders."

"Thanks for that," Anders said wryly.

When Anders returned home later that night the living room was oddly empty. He leaned his staff in the corner and warmed himself by the fire. It was as he stood there that he realised Hawke and his mother were in the library. Their voices travelled up the narrow room and floated out into the main chamber making it impossible not to overhear. That's what Anders told himself anyway.

"Well I don't see anything wrong with it," Leandra said, sounding oddly girlish.

"Mother please, I don't know if..." Hawke said back, his voice slightly muffled.

"Oh come now darling," Leandra admonished, "I've seen the way Anders looks at you and you look at him. Is it so bad that it makes me feel like courting again?"

"I'd just rather know who he is first," Hawke said protectively, making Anders smile.

"Oh there's no mystery with you is there," Leandra said wearily, "I'm really very flattered by the flowers."

"Just don't do anything reckless, you know it's dangerous out there," Hawke said sternly, his voice becoming clear as he opened the door, speaking over his shoulder.

"Yes, yes," Leandra said back, "of course I will. Goodnight Garret."

"Goodnight mother," Hawke smiled at her before closing the door and sighing.

He turned and jumped a little on seeing Anders by the fire, watching him back. Hawke sidled up to him, wrapping both arms around his waist slowly before leaning in for a kiss. When he pulled back his eyes were distinctly amused.

"That's the second time you've surprised me today," Hawke teased, "must be a record."

"Well I've been around you long enough to pick up some tricks at least," Anders shrugged cheekily, "anyway, what's this about a suitor?"

"Eh? Oh you mean mother," Hawke said, lowering his voice and looking distinctly put out, "I don't know, she's been getting flowers delivered for months now. Expensive too, white lilies."

"So that's where they come from," Anders said, looking over Hawke's shoulder at the fresh bouquet that sat, tied with a silk ribbon, on the writing desk.

"Mmm," Hawke said, not sounding as impressed as Anders did, "whoever he is he has taste but I just wish he'd show his face so I can..."

"Deem him worthy?" Anders smirked, laughing a little when Hawke shoved him lightly in the shoulder.

"Don't make me sound like a chaperone," Hawke said wearily, "I just worry that's all. I mean only today I was helping with a murder investigation that ended with more than one woman dead."

Anders frowned as Hawke's face fell, the rogue looking a little disquieted. Anders took his hand, squeezing comfortingly. Hawke looked up at him and shrugged.
"I just hate it when things end badly," Hawke said sighing, "that templar you saw earlier, he was investigating Ghyslain de Carrac's wife, Ninette. They thought she was missing but, well, turned out she was more than just missing."

"Did you find her?" Anders asked warily.

"I found her hand," Hawke said making Anders wince, "in a bag."

"That's...horrible," Anders said, knowing it was a rather insufficient description of events, "did you catch who did it?"

"No," Hawke said angrily, "but I will, you can count on that."

Always so passionate, Anders thought with a sad smile as he reached over to run his hand down Hawke's neck softly. The rogue sighed roughly, reaching up to put his hand over Anders' own.

"Sorry, it just gets to me sometimes, that's all," Hawke said.

"You don't need to apologise," Anders shook his head, "come on, let's go upstairs and relax for a bit. You'll feel better."

"Sounds nice," Hawke said, leaning in to nuzzle against his neck, "although I can think of better things to do than just relax..."

"You would," Anders said, jabbing him playfully in the side, laughing when Hawke jumped.

"Ow," the rogue said, rubbing his side tenderly, "has anyone ever told you that you have bony fingers?"

"Not until now," Anders said, sticking out his tongue as Hawke tried to get him back, skipping out of his reach.

He laughed as Hawke glared playfully at him, chasing him up the stairs as Anders ran for the bedroom.
For the first time in a long time Anders woke up screaming. It used to be he would lay there in the dark, gasping, eyes wide, desperately trying to convince himself that he was alone and there were no Darkspawn waiting for him. Now, with Hawke, he didn't have that responsibility anymore, for which he was eternally glad.

"Shhh," Hawke said sleepily, a clumsy hand sliding across Anders' cheek while the other pulled him closer, "you're alright, it's alright."

"Sorry," Anders said after a moment's pause, slowing his breathing, "...didn't mean to wake you. Just a nightmare."

"It's alright," Hawke said again, already falling back to sleep, "I'm here."

Anders rolled his head to the left and placed a blind kiss somewhere against Hawke's face. The rogue let out a dreamy chuckle before his breathing evened out and Anders knew he was asleep. The room was still drenched in darkness, proving that it was still far too early to be awake. Anders lay in the bed, running his fingers absently along the arm Hawke had draped across his chest, knowing he'd never get back to sleep. He envied Hawke that ability; the man was a deep sleeper and seemed to find it extremely easy to drift off again even once he'd been awoken. As it was the mage knew that he would be lying there for hours until the sun eventually came up.

"Might as well get up," he said to himself with a sigh.

He extricated himself from Hawke's embrace, pulling the thick cover up over the other man's shoulders to stave off the chill. At that moment, watching Hawke sleep peacefully, he realised just how tired he really was. His muscles were sore and weary, probably from tensing during his nightmare, and his mind was foggy. Even Madam was still in dream land, Anders noted with a small smile, curled in her basket at the foot of the bed. He left the room quietly, pulling on one of Hawke's thick jumpers, and went to the study.

Anders unrolled the scroll and weighted it down on the desk, blinking away the sleep in his eyes. The words were slightly hard to read by the dull candle light but he knew them by heart anyway, each phrase beneath crossed out lines of ink, each correction. The reasoning behind his being, he was beginning to think of it as. Not that I should need to justify it to myself, Anders thought with a shake of his head as he reached over to pick up the feather quill. The scratching sound it made against the scroll was oddly comforting as he started to write.

'...Every man, woman and child in Thedas has an indelible right to freedom. For centuries people have fought for this right, championed and even deified those who have brought its peace to the land. Yet if Andraste preached freedom and ended slavery, why then are mages incarcerated and kept as slaves? Why would a people who wish to be seen as civilised and progressive allow themselves to be blinded by the sermonizing of a religion which, in itself, goes against its own principles?...'

His mind wandered as he continued to score the words onto the sheet, blotting any spills with torn spots of paper and replacing the candle when it burnt too low. The sun eventually rose and there was no longer any need for the candle light but he left it burning anyway. He enjoyed watching the lambent flame playing in the draught out the corner of his eye. The birds were singing in the back garden by the time the study door creaked open and Anders heard a pair of bare feet walk up behind his chair. Hawke held on to the back of the chair and leaned down to place a kiss on the top
"Morning," he greeted through a yawn.

"Good morning," Anders turned and looked up into Hawke's still sleepy face, "eventually."

"How long have you been up?" Hawke asked, blinking away the tiredness as he reached over to leaf through the small stack of scrolls Anders had managed to fill.

"I couldn't get back to sleep," Anders shrugged, replacing the quill in the inkwell, "five hours or so I suppose."

"But it's only eight," Hawke said, sliding his hand across the mage's shoulders, "Honestly, Anders, you must be exhausted, come back to bed. We don't need to be up, let's get some more sleep."

"No, it's alright, I'm awake now anyway," Anders said, reaching up to put his hand over Hawke's, "but you go if you're still tired."

"Not that tired," Hawke shrugged, sniffing, "would have gone if you were coming but not much point otherwise."

Anders laughed, looking back to the freshly dried words before him.

"Exactly how much sleep would I have gotten if I went back to bed with you now, hmm?" he asked.

"I can be good," Hawke said, trying to sound insulted, "when I need to be."

"Course you can," Anders said, smiling and shaking his head, "come on, let's get some breakfast."

Hawke's mother was still asleep so they didn't bother to set up the table, opting instead to eat in the kitchen for ease. Hawke made some strong tea while Anders made a simple meal of toasted bread over the fire and Oranna's raspberry jam. They ate in comfortable silence. Anders listened to the fire crackling in the background, enjoying the moment of quiet and peace with Hawke.

"So," the rogue said eventually as Anders cleared their plates from the table and put them into the large sink, "you ever going to let me read these late night scribblings of yours?"

"When have I ever said you couldn't read them?" Anders asked as he worked the pump to rinse the crockery.

"Well, I just assumed they were, you know, clandestine," Hawke shrugged, "considering you only write them in the twilight hours."

"Hardly," Anders said, reaching for the dish towel, "I only write it then because I've nothing better to do when I can't sleep. Read them if you like. In fact, I'd appreciate your opinion."

"I'll warn you now that I'm hardly a great literary critic," Hawke said with a smile.

"I don't want you to correct my grammar," Anders said with a smirk, placing the plates back into the cupboard, "I just want to know what you think, that's all."

"Alright," Hawke said through a yawn, "I'll look it over later if you'd like."

Anders walked over and sat back down at the table, reaching out to push Hawke's hair from his eyes. The other man blinked at him as if coming out of a daze.
"Are you sure you don't want some more sleep?" Anders asked as Hawke took hold of his hand, playing with his fingers.

"I'll be fine," Hawke said back, tracing fingertips over his palm, "got things I need to do today. Might as well get them done early and out of the way. You going to Darktown?"

"Mmm," Anders confirmed, "be there most of the day. Do you need me to find you anything?"

"No, I was just checking," Hawke smiled, "I might come and see you later."

Hawke spent a rather overindulgent amount of time kissing him goodbye, Anders thought, but he wasn't complaining. It was raining lightly as he made his way towards Lowtown, the Spring winds setting in, bringing light showers and fresh air from off the mountain. Up here in Hightown the winds always brought sweet smelling air from the countryside but in Darktown all they did was blow the choking smoke from the foundries over the whole area. There was a reason Hightown was filled with nobles and money after all. Anders' nose wrinkled as the lift clanked down into Darktown, catching the first whiff of hot metal and coal smoke. He knew that he would soon have floods of people in his clinic with the usual lung problems that this time of year caused. Anders held his handkerchief over his mouth and nose as he continued through the smog infested alleys towards his clinic. It was as he rounded the corner into the main street that he heard the scream.

"Someone help me! Please, he's going to kill me!" the woman cried out piercingly.

"Be quiet, I'm trying to help you!" a man's voice said back.

It was hard to see them through the fog but Anders ran forwards anyway, drawing his staff. As the smoke cleared away a little he saw them, struggling by the mouth of a side alley, the man holding onto the woman's arm as she tried desperately to get away.

"Hey!" Anders shouted authoritatively, "Let her go!"

The man looked up, eyes narrowed, but didn't waste any time in releasing the woman and fleeing into the alley. Anders ran to the woman, looking the way the man had run but was unable to see him for the smog. He helped the distraught woman to her feet.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, fighting back her tears, "thank you. I thought he was really going to kill me."

"You shouldn't be out alone in the fog," Anders said, "not with the kind of people that come out in it-wait..."

Anders thought he could smell blood in the air, even through the metallic haze surrounding them. He reached down and took hold of the woman's hand, turning it over. He looked at the gash in her arm with a frown.

"Oh," she said, sounding faint, "I didn't even feel it..."

"Don't worry, it doesn't look too deep," Anders reassured her, "come on, I can see to it if you'd like."

"Yes," she agreed, seemingly unable to take her eyes from the wound, "thank you."

Anders led her along the main street and down the long, narrow alley to his clinic. It was blessedly fog free, what with having no windows that were North facing, and the air was a little fresher
inside. The woman looked around her, holding her hand to her breast. Anders put his staff in the corner of the room and grabbed some medicinal alcohol and a clean rag from his cabinet. The woman was eyeing him curiously as he returned, offering her his only chair.

"So," she said as Anders covered the bottle neck with the rag and upended it, "you're the Healer of Darktown, are you?"

"That would be me," Anders said as he replaced the cork in the bottle and took hold of the woman's arm, "sorry, this is going to sting."

He woman hissed quietly as Anders disinfected the wound, cleaning away the blood.

"I've heard of you," she said, "you helped my cousin Alfie when the foundry explosion happened. I almost didn't believe him until he showed me all that was left of the wound on his leg."

Anders noted her slight trepidation as he put down the rag. Most people were slightly wary around magic, especially from an apostate, but thankfully the woman seemed to trust him.

"Don't worry," Anders said with a smile as he placed his hand above the wound, letting out a soft glow of healing magic, "it won't scar."

"That would have been the least of my worries Serrah," the woman said with a soft smile as she viewed her arm, not a trace of trauma left on the skin, "I'm Melanie by the way, Melanie Murphy. Thank you so much, for all your help."

"My pleasure," Anders said; he hesitated for a moment before asking, "Did you know that man?"

Melanie looked up at him, shaking her head and looking a little afraid. Anders felt like she might be hiding something but waited for her to speak before he pressed any further.

"No," Melanie said, "I don't know him, but I think he's been following me for a while. I've had this feeling, you know, like someone's been watching me. Then today he comes out of the alley when I'm walking past. He kept saying he was trying to help me but I wasn't going to believe that. I mean he had a knife on him!"

"Have you spoken to the City Guard?" Anders asked with a frown.

"Yes!" Melanie said with a wry laugh, "Lot of good it did me to. They said they needed proof before they could act and I don't even know who he is! Hopefully he'll stay away this time. My cousin said I shouldn't be going out alone but it's not easy when him and my husband work all day. I can't stay inside forever."

Anders couldn't help but think back to what Hawke had said to him a few weeks ago, about women going missing. Finding Ninette de Carrac's hand in a bag along with some other paraphernalia. He sighed, his frown deepening. Melanie stood up, pulling her bloodied sleeve back down.

"Well, thank you again," she said, "I'd better get back."

"Wait," Anders said, blinking, "you can't just go back out there on your own. Where do you live?"

"Lowtown," Melanie said, looking a little hopeful, "the Old City Slums."

"I'll walk you," Anders said determinedly, "it's still early, the streets are too empty at this time."

"Are you sure?" Melanie asked.
"Of course," Anders said with a smile, "come on." It turned out that there was a good reason Melanie Murphy was more than happy to be escorted around the city by a known apostate. Her sister was a mage, taken to the Gallows when she was seventeen. The family had managed to hide her for nearly a decade before the templars finally found her and dragged her off. Melanie hadn't seen her since.

"She was always the pretty one, Susannah," Melanie said a little sadly, "I was so jealous whenever the boys looked at her and not me. Oh I used to spite her for it! It seemed so important then when we were teenagers but, well, I'd take it all back in a heartbeat if it we could only have her home."

"I'm sorry," Anders said, pushing down the anger that always rose on hearing of the grief the templars caused.

"Oh, I'm not special," Melanie said wistfully as they approached the Slums, "happens every day in Kirkwall."

"I know," Anders said, trying not to put too much weight into the words, "but it doesn't make it any more right."

Anders tried not to think about it as he made his way back to the clinic after delivering Melanie to her door. The suffering was never confined only to the mage that was taken, it effected the families that lost them too. It wasn't that he wanted to ignore it, far from it, the thought of it grieved him on but...sometimes it made him wonder what had happened to his own family. He'd had so many chances to return to the Anderfels and yet he'd never made the long journey back to the North. Probably wouldn't be able to find them anyway, Anders thought as he walked back through the fog. Not that he cared much if he ever saw his father again and as for his mother, well, perhaps he was too ashamed to face her as he was now. The last time she had seen him he had been her innocent little boy, now he was an apostate, an abomination, a murderer. He couldn't imagine embracing her with arms that were so readily covered in blood.

"Maker I'd forgotten how awful that stuff is!"

Anders turned from stirring the healing potion he was heating over the fire and smiled as Hawke closed the door behind him. The rogue pulled the rag away from his face a coughed roughly before stuffing it back into his pocket.

"Aren't you glad you live in Hightown," Anders said as he reached for an empty bottle and the ladle beside it on the table.

"Am I ever," Hawke said, walking over to sit in Anders' chair, "don't think I could stand to breathe in that fog day in and day out again. It was bad enough when we lived in Lowtown, it's even worse here."

Despite its eventful start Anders' day had been fairly quiet. People tended not to venture out into the fog and for good reason. Not only was it toxic for the body but, as Melanie had proven, it was also a good screen for thieves and murderers. The clinic usually became busy later in the evening once the foundries had burnt out and the workers had gone home. Anders had spent the day making up supplies and waiting for someone to show up asking for aid.

"Brought you some fresh herbs," Hawke said as he pulled a brown parcel from his satchel, throwing it lightly onto the table, "I went to visit Merrill and stopped by the stall at the alienage on the way here."
"Oh, thanks," Anders said genuinely, "I've just used up the last of my deathroot actually."

"No problem," Hawke said, stretching his arms up to work out the kinks in his back; he looked around the empty clinic wryly, noting the long, disorganised rows of full potions bottles Anders had managed to make, "so, busy day then?"

"Not really," Anders shrugged, laughing a little to himself as Hawke got up and started his usual obsessive sorting, putting the bottles into order, "not with this fog. Although I did have a little excitement this morning."

"You did?" Hawke said, not looking at him as he placed a lyrium potion into a group with the others.

Anders watched him thoughtfully, wondering if Melanie's stalker could possibly be related to Hawke's own investigation. The rogue had told him that Ser Emeric had basically passed the baton on to him and Hawke was rather passionate about finding the killer. He didn't want to get Hawke's hopes up but he also didn't want to withhold any information that would help.

"Yes," Anders said as he put out the fire beneath the pot, "there was a woman being attacked in the street when I was coming to the clinic. She said she's been being stalked for weeks and then, suddenly, a man grabs her in the street and tries to drag her off."

"Really?" Hawke said, turning from his sorting to look at Anders with curiosity.

"I thought you might be interested," Anders said, "it was all a little odd. She said he kept telling her that he was trying to help but he had a knife and he'd gashed her arm open by the time I scared him off."

"What did he look like?" Hawke asked, walking to Anders as the mage cleaned his hands in a basin of water.

"About my height," Anders shrugged, "I didn't get a good look at his face. He was wearing a red shirt, looked expensive, and he had a heavy Orlesian accent. Unfortunately she didn't see much of him either. Do you think it's related to your case?"

"Could be," Hawke said, reaching up to run his finger across his lips thoughtfully, "but there are so many crimes in this city that I can see why Emeric became frustrated. Trying to follow a good lead is like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

Anders dried his hands before closing the gap between himself and Hawke, slipping his hands around the man's waist. Hawke looked up at him and blinked, as if he'd been lost in thought, smiling a little as he reached up to slide his hands around Anders' shoulders.

"I have faith in you," Anders said with a smile, "you're far too tenacious to let this one go."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Hawke said with a short laugh, leaning in to kiss Anders chastely on the lips, "do you want to walk back up to Hightown with me?"

"I'd love to," Anders sighed, "but I think I'll be getting busy soon. Most people come out in the evening once the fog has cleared. I might be back late."

"Oh well," Hawke said, a little disappointed, "I suppose I could hang around here a little longer. Maybe if I wait until people start turning up then I won't have to walk home in this dratted fog."

Anders grinned as Hawke leaned in to kiss him again, only this time not so chastely. Right, he
thought as Hawke slid his tongue slowly into his mouth, *that's* the reason you're staying. Nothing to do with distracting me from my work at all.

It was another week before Hawke got his next lead, although Anders almost wished that he hadn't. He was due to meet Hawke at the pub around nine. Varric was hosting his usual cards and drinking session and Anders had been talked into it as he, apparently, 'needed to get out more' according to Hawke. Anders had told the rogue that his opinion was rather rich considering he had become a bit of a hermit himself since he'd taken this case, spending all his time on the investigation.

As the mage made his way through Lowtown, heading for the Hanged man, he looked up casually at a series of identical posters plastered onto the wall. He had looked away before he realised what it said, looking back sharply. He stopped and walked over to the wall, reaching up to trace the words on the flyers. The large black *MISSING* printed as the heading had caught his eye but it was the name that had stopped him. Melanie Murphy. There was a sketch of a woman's face, smiling at him from the middle of the poster, a good likeness of the woman he had met merely a week ago. Anders reached out to pull one of the posters from the wall before folding it up and putting it into his pouch, his face pensive.

"What took you?" Hawke said as Anders entered Varric's suite.

Hawke pulled out the chair next to him and Anders took it gratefully. He greeted Aveline and Isabela who were already sitting across from him, talking with Varric. Hawke was drinking brandy from a large snifter glass, delicately sipping the amber liquid. He frowned as Anders started routing in his satchel before producing the folded up poster.

"Sorry," Anders said, "I got caught up at the clinic. Here, I've got something you might want to see."

Hawke put down his glass and took the poster from Anders. He unfolded it and read the large bold print, his eyes narrowed.

"You remember I told you about the woman who was being stalked? The one I saved from being attacked?" he asked, continuing when Hawke nodded, "Well that's her."

"Missing since Monday," Hawke said distantly as he read out the scrawl at the bottom, his eyes refocusing as he looked to Anders, "that's three days ago."

"Long enough," Anders shrugged a little grimly.

Hawke folded the sheet back down, his face brooding. Varric finally looked over, having finished whatever story he was telling, and caught the mage's eye. Anders nodded to him as the dwarf got up from his chair and walked around the table to speak to him.

"Nice of you to join us," Varric said.

"Oh I'm not that late," Anders said with a roll of his eyes, "anyway I was busy. I know you, we're never started here for the first couple of hours anyway."

"True," Varric shrugged, noting Hawke's contemplative expression, "but that doesn't excuse tardiness. Hey, Hawke? You in there?"

"Mmm?" Hawke said, blinking at Varric, "Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking."
"Well stop thinking and tell me what's on your mind," Varric said, obviously having scented a story from over the other side of the room.

Hawke shook his head, passing the folded poster back to Anders who put it back in his satchel.

"It's not something I really want to talk about right now," Hawke said, his cheerful smile belying the weariness in his eyes, "I'll tell you later, alright?"

"Alright," Varric said, looking a little suspicious, "if you say so Hawke. Ah, there's Norah, does anyone want another drink?"

They talked for another hour or so, catching up and relaxing, before Varric brought out the cards and they started to play. Anders noticed that Hawke was still distracted. The rogue was normally undefeatable at cards unless Fenris was at the table, but he managed to mess up quite a few hands before the night was out. Isabela was happy however as that made her the best player in the group and she walked away with a healthy nights winnings. I really should have Hawke teach me how to play Wicked Grace properly one of these days, Anders thought as he watched Isabela raking her winnings towards her with a sly smile.

"So, is anyone going to get me a drink or what?" Isabela asked as she poured the coin into her purse.

"I think I'll opt for 'or what'," Aveline said with a raised eyebrow.

"Your loss, Guard Captain," Isabela said, looking Aveline up and down appraisingly, making the other woman snort in disgust.

"I'll get you one, but then I think I'm going to head home afterwards," Hawke said, "I'm really very tired tonight."

"Oh well," Isabela shrugged, looking a little put out, "should have known with a crowd like this that my night wouldn't end eventfully, what with the two eligible men already bonking each other."

Anders sighed even as Varric chortled and Hawke and Aveline shook their heads. You could always rely on Isabela to lighten the mood, or bring down the tone, whichever way you wanted to look at it. He looked to Hawke as the man stood, heading towards the bar. Anders could tell he really was tired by his movements, usually graceful, being slightly clumsy, his feet dragging a little on the ground.

"What have you been doing?" Isabela asked once Hawke was down the stairs, "Tiring him out?"

"None of your business," Anders said with a smile, "just had some late nights, that's all."

"Ooh, I like late nights," Isabela said, putting her chin in her cupped hands, "care to tell?"

"What about 'none of your business' do you not get?" Anders asked incredulously, even as Varric smirked.

"Well if I'm not going to get any tonight I might as well get some thrills," Isabela shrugged.

"Typical," Varric said, earning him a scowl from Isabela.

"Really though," the rogue said, turning back to Anders, "is he alright? Haven't seen him this lethargic in a while."
Anders wasn't sure what to say. Hawke obviously didn't want to talk about it but the mage guessed that was more from his own want not to think about the case more than not wanting anyone to know. He thought that vague truth was probably the best option.

"It's just this investigation he's working on," Anders shrugged, noting Varric's eyes spark on hearing information, "he's running himself ragged trying to solve it and, well, that's it really."

"Oh," Isabela said, turning as Hawke reappeared at the head of the stairs; she took her drink from him with a licentious smile, "well I guess I'll let you off with it then."

"Let me off with what?" Hawke asked in confusion.

"Going home early," Isabela said, sipping her wine, "here I thought you were just getting old but it turns out you have an excuse."

"I don't even want to know what you told her," Hawke said wearily, looking at Anders.

"It was all perfectly decent," Anders said, raising his hands placatingly; he watched Hawke for a moment before standing, "do you want to head home now?"

"Yes," Hawke said candidly, "I really need to go to bed. Goodnight you lot, it's been fun."

It started to rain as they walked back, forcing them to hurry, nipping under awnings and overhanging buildings anywhere they could. However it was the type of rain that, despite being fairly light, managed to be incredibly dense. Even using their evasion tactics by the time they returned to the mansion they were already soaked.

"Here," Anders said, laughing a little as Hawke tried to struggle out of his wet shirt, the material clinging to his skin, "let me help."

He reached down and pulled the sticky material away from Hawke's abdomen before hauling it up over his raised arms. Hawke sighed and shivered a little, taking the towel Anders handed him gratefully. The mage set about taking off his own wet clothes before drying himself off. Hawke was still listlessly rubbing his hair by the time Anders had put on his soft, dry pyjamas. He watched Hawke, noting his distant eyes, and felt concern creeping up on him. Anders walked over to the bed, which Hawke was perched on the side of, and sat down next to him.

"You've been drying your hair for the past ten minutes," Anders said with an affectionate smile; Hawke turned to look at him slowly, pulling the towel from his head before dropping it onto the bed.

"Sorry, I keep losing focus today," Hawke said, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, "I'm just...really tired."

"Come on then," Anders said, picking up the towel and throwing it onto the armchair by the fire, "get your trousers off and get in."

"You know, usually I'd take advantage of that," Hawke smiled sleepily.

"It really is a testament to how tired you are that you aren't," Anders smirked.

It was as they lay together, Hawke wearing nothing but a long thick nightshirt, pressed tightly for warmth, that Hawke finally began to talk. He was drained, Anders could hear it in his voice, but the rogue had obviously been bottling up his anxiety, as per usual, and now that he'd found himself comfortable and safe, needed to get it out. Anders just listened, commenting where appropriate,
and let him talk.

"It just makes me so angry," Hawke sighed, his voice a little slurred as he moved his head around on the pillow, "every time I hear about a woman being assaulted or going missing...I'm starting to feel responsible for all of it."

"It isn't your fault Hawke, you're doing everything that you can," Anders said softly, although he felt a little hypocritical considering he tended to feel the same way whenever he saw a tranquil mage in the Gallows or heard of a templar raid.

"I know, it's just...I get the feeling whoever's doing this, they've been doing it for a long time, maybe even years. And they don't seem to want women so much as..." Hawke shivered a little, shaking his head, "pieces of women. If they've been doing it that long and getting away with it, what chance have I got of finding them?"

"Well," Anders said, leaning over to kiss Hawke on the forehead, looking down into the dim vision of his half lidded eyes, "they haven't had you on the case before now, have they? No wonder they couldn't find who they were looking for."

"Sycophant," Hawke smiled sleepily, shifting closer; Anders wrapped his arm across Hawke's chest, feeling the man's breathing even out.

Hawke wasn't the only one who was exhausted. After having had very little rest due to his nightmare Anders was also quite ready to go to sleep. Yet Hawke's anxiety had affected him more than he'd realised. There was something about this investigation, something he found oddly familiar. It had been nagging at him for a while now but Anders couldn't truly put his finger on what it was. It would come to him, Anders thought, as his eyes drifted closed and he fell asleep to the sound of Hawke's soft breathing.

When Anders awoke the following morning he was glad to find the sun was already up. It wasn't often that he allowed himself the luxury of sleeping in but even Anders knew that both he and Hawke had definitely needed it. Hawke was still sleeping, curled onto his side, the fingers of his right hand coiled into the covers. Anders got out of bed slowly so as not to wake him but completely ruined it when he nearly stood on Madam who had tried to stroke against his ankle at just the wrong moment.

"Maker's breath!" Hawke bolted awake as the little cat screeched and Anders tripped and fell onto the floor with a cry and a loud bang, "What! What's going on?"

"Oh bollocks, ow," Anders said, rubbing his elbow as he struggled up, looking around the floor for the kitten, "I nearly stood on the cat."

Hawke blinked at him sleepily for a moment before his lips eventually twisted and he let out a snorted laugh. Anders glared at him as Hawke's chortle turned to a full blown laughing fit, the rogue flopping back down onto the covers, shoulders shaking with mirth while Anders kneeled down to look under the bed.

"It's not that funny," the mage grumbled, finally spying the kitten under the top of the bed, hunched down, tail swishing back and forth angrily, "come on Madam, come out of there, it was an accident."

"Oh, you're face was a picture," Hawke said, still laughing, "you should see yourself!"

"Thanks for all the helpful input Hawke," Anders said tightly as he shuffled further under the bed,
trying to coax out the angry kitten; Madam was having none of it however, lying down properly, tail still twitching, and purposefully turning her back on Anders.

The mage sighed and began to shimmy backwards across the floor with the intent to stand up. Instead he managed to finally get Madam out from underneath the bed but not quite in the way he'd thought. Just as he was about to extricate himself from underneath the bed a hand descended and slapped him squarely on the arse, causing Anders to jump involuntarily and bash his head on the wooden runner down the side. He let out a sharp cry and Madam, having obviously had enough of Anders' antics, bolted from under the bed and hid under the armchair, growling low in her throat.

"Hawke you bastard," Anders whined once he was finally free, kneeling up to look at the only slightly remorseful man lying on the bed, holding in his laughter with a hand over his mouth, "that bloody hurt!"

"I'm sorry," Hawke laughed out, "I am, honestly, I didn't think that would happen! It was just irresistible, your cute little arse waving about like that."

"Oh, don't think you can flatter your way out of this one," Anders said, eyes narrowed as he rubbed at his head, letting out a small amount of healing magic to take the edge off the ache.

"Would I ever?" Hawke said, reaching over to pull Anders back onto the bed, "Come on, I am sorry, I promise. Here, let me kiss it better."

Anders tried to resist but Hawke was looking regretfully adorable as he tried to be contrite, his hair tousled and face marked from the pillow. Anders allowed the other man to pull him onto the bed and then down for a slow, rather sloppy kiss. Hawke's fingers wandered into his hair and caressed the small bump the blow had left carefully. Anders sighed contentedly through his nose and allowed Hawke to subtly roll him over so that the rogue was pressing him down into the sheets. One of Hawke's hands sneaked away from his hair and trailed down his body, reaching between them to slide into the mage's pyjama trousers.

"Hawke," Anders said, "honestly, I thought you were still tired."

"Oh I'm quite awake now, thanks to you," Hawke smiled, licking his lips as Anders let out a soft groan while Hawke continued to manipulate him skilfully, "I think you really need to make it up to me, don't you?"

"You bloody would," Anders gasped, feeling an electric shiver run through his body as Hawke squeezed.

There was something about morning sex, Anders thought as Hawke moved with him while they coupled, that he found incredibly sensual. It was lazy and slow and with none of their usual franticness. Hawke took his time and Anders was never more glad that the rogue was especially thorough by nature. By the end Anders was aware that he was being rather loud but he couldn't find it in himself to care.

"I think half the street was just privy to what I did to you," Hawke said with a sly smile, his voice dark and syrupy like treacle.

"Well," Anders said, feeling his face heat a little despite not really caring, "then I hope I gave them a good show."

"Mmm," Hawke hummed appreciatively, rolling over to lie on his back beside Anders, letting his breathing slow, "you certainly did."
They lay there like that for a while, relaxing into the bedclothes as the sun travelled slowly across the room. Anders was the first to sit up, running his hand through his hair.

"Well, I think I'll try getting up again," Anders said, "hopefully this time I'll succeed."

"Oh, come on," Hawke said teasingly, "you can't say that the last time didn't have a good outcome."

"No, I'll give you that," Anders said as he stood up and pulled off his pyjama top, "but this time I really am staying out of the bed."

Hawke grinned, running lazy eyes over Anders' naked body, before letting his head flop back against the pillow. Anders gave himself a quick wipe down from the basin by the door before drying himself and getting dressed. He walked back over to the bed, smiling down at Hawke as the man continued to doze. The rogue squinted up at him though the sunshine, trying to get up. Anders reached down to push the surprised man back into repose.

"You need to rest," Anders said seriously, "if you get to say it to me when I'm exhausted then I get to say it to you."

"Fine, fine," Hawke said, obviously not having the energy to argue, "I'll stay in bed. What time is it anyway?"

Anders looked over to the clock on the dresser. Even he was surprised they'd managed to sleep in this late.

"It's nearly eleven," he said.

"Really?" Hawke said, eyebrows raised, "Bloody hell."

"Well, it doesn't really matter what time it is if you don't really have anything to do today," Anders shrugged.

"I was planning on going to Lowtown to speak to this missing woman's brother," Hawke said, rubbing his face roughly, "what did you say his name was? Alex?"

"Alfie," Anders corrected, "and I think she said he was her cousin. You can still go in the afternoon."

"It nearly is afternoon," Hawke pointed out.

Anders smiled, shrugging, but acquiesced. Hawke had a point. He leaned down to capture the rogue's lips in a soft kiss.

"Alright, but don't overdo it," he said in his very best stern-doctor-voice, "the last thing we need is you collapsing from fatigue."

"Yes mother," Hawke teased, laughing when Anders poked him in the stomach, batting his hand away.

Anders shook his head and said goodbye before heading out to the clinic once again. Probably for another day of boredom, Anders thought, until evening time when he would be so busy he wouldn't be able to think straight. As he walked out of the door he really began to envy Hawke his freedom to lie in bed all day if he wished. The fact that the rogue didn't take advantage of that fact only made it harder to ignore in Anders' book.
"Letter for you."

Anders looked in surprise at the thick, yellow envelope, complete with heavy red wax seal, that Hawke dropped into his lap. Hawke normally had letters delivered every couple of days from someone or another, whether it was to ask him for help, for coin or even just thank him for performing a service. Anders on the other hand hadn't had a letter since, well...Karl had been the last person to write to him. The mage turned the envelope over to read the strangely familiar scrawling script on the front and frowned, looking up at Hawke as the man walked back over to his writing desk to sort through his own mail.

"Hawke this is addressed to you," Anders said, standing up from his seat by the fire, twirling the envelope in his fingers.

"Yes, I know," Hawke said, looking over his shoulder, "but look who it's from."

Anders inspected the envelope more closely, his eyes widening with delight on spying just whose crest was emblazoned onto the rumpled red wax. The familiar twin laurel branches of the Cousland's stared back at him.

"Don't think he'd really be writing to me," Hawke said, voice laced with dry humour even though his dislike was still evident, "do you?"

Anders didn't reply, too busy breaking the seal and unfolding the rich, heavy paper to reveal the letter within. Cousland's recognizable spidery script filled the page, each line sloping slightly to the left. Anders shuffled back to his seat and curled up in it, flattening the letter out against his knee.

_Dear Serrah Hawke,_

_As you've probably guessed this isn't for you, so give it to him will you?_

Anders couldn't help but smile, letting out a small laugh. Hawke looked over curiously but just shook his head when the mage continued to read.

_Dear A,_

_How are you? I'm sorry that it's taken me this long to write but things have been rather busy here as of late. There's been a lot of travelling back and forth, not much time for luxuries like letter writing. Still, I hope everything has been well for you since we last met._

_How is Hawke? And don't laugh, because I know you are. I'm not just being nice I am actually interested. I've been hearing some interesting rumours from over the water recently. Something about Kirkwall's most eligible bachelor being attached to some unknown man who the templars suspect of being an apostate. Hope you've made the right choice there. Remind him that if he treats you badly I'll pan his bloody face in, will you?_

_Oh for heaven's sake, Anders thought, rolling his eyes and tutting as he leafed to the next page. That Cousland was still being over protective of him while he wasn't even there was a feat even for the Commander. Anders couldn't help but smile at the next sheet, the script even messier than the last. Cousland's writing was so untidy that even a short letter took up more than one page._

_Not too much to report from our end, well not anything I would risk commending to paper. I_
managed to spend a month at Court not so long ago. Miss it already, and by it you know who I mean. E's really been pushing Al to get married. I think he's desperate for an heir. You know what he's like about the whole 'Theirin blood' thing. He'll be lucky. Not just because of me but there's the taint to consider. I've been tempted to explain things but apparently that wouldn't go over too well according to Al. I think I might leave it to T, he's more diplomatic than I am.

Anders supposed that 'E' was for Arl Eamon, 'Al' for Alistair and 'T' was probably Bann Teagan. Although it still cracked him up that Cousland went to the bother of using code for names when he'd clearly stated the name Theirin in relation to an heir. Honestly, Anders thought, it wouldn't take a genius to figure it out. It amused him to think the Commander probably thought he was being very clever.

Anyway, might be a while before I can write again. I've sent this through a friend in the Denerim Port Authority, makes it far less likely to be intercepted by anyone I wouldn't want reading it. Haven't figured out a way for you to reply yet without causing trouble. Everything coming to me is being read first, like they think I don't know it. Maybe I'll be able to work something out. I'll let you know. It would be nice to hear from you.

Keep yourself safe,

Lien

So the Commander was still under surveillance, so to speak, Anders thought. Figured. What with being attached to Alistair and his general leniency where mages were concerned it wasn't surprising that he was being watched. The Chantry seekers were infamous in their persistence. Anders wouldn't have risked sending a letter back even if Cousland had said it was possible. Far too risky, for everyone involved. Still, it was wonderful to hear from his friend.

"So, did he have anything interesting to say?" Hawke asked as he leafed through a letter of his own, his eyes fixed to the paper before him.

"Uh, well, not really," Anders lied badly, not sure that passing on Cousland's 'message' to Hawke was the best idea.

"Hmm," Hawke said, flicking his eyes up to Anders suspiciously before looking back to his letter, "I don't want to know."

Anders laughed it off, getting up once more and heading upstairs to the study. He hid the letter within the heavy pages of his Tevinter book before placing the book itself back in its hiding place. Best to keep all the sensitive things which would incriminate him together, Anders thought wryly, just in case the templars did decide to raid Hawke's mansion for whatever reason. The Commander's subtle warning had not been lost on him. That the templars suspected Hawke of being involved with an apostate was bad enough. Hopefully the rogue's status as a noble would protect him, although Anders was sure that would only last so long. He didn't want to think about it but, if it came to it, his choice would come down to two paths: leave Kirkwall and stay with Hawke, or leave Hawke and stay in Kirkwall. The thought of either made his stomach flip over. So don't think about it until you have to, Anders thought as he walked back down the stairs, because it's far too bloody depressing. As he reached the foot of the stairs he looked up, hearing a familiar voice, to find that Aveline had turned up while he was gone. The Guard Captain was standing in front of Hawke, her face distinctly put out.

"Honestly Hawke, he's driving me mad," she said wearily, nodding to Anders as he walked back to his seat by the fire, "please, you know more about this case than I do. Can't you speak to him?"
"Alright Aveline, alright," Hawke said, nodding, his face grim, "I'll talk to Emeric for you. Although it sounds like the man has a point, don't you think?"

"It's not like I haven't looked into his claims," Aveline said in frustration, "who do you think had to apologise to DuPuis? Honestly Hawke we raided his mansion and found nothing at all! If I don't get this sorted Emeric's going to cause an incident and I don't want him dragging any of my men into it."

"I said I'll talk to him," Hawke said strongly, "don't worry Aveline, I'll get this sorted."

Aveline left looking far less stressed than she had when Anders had first seen her. He looked to Hawke as the man leaned against the writing desk, arms folded and face pensive.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, attracting Hawke's gaze.

"I don't know," Hawke said tersely, "it sounds like Emeric has a suspect but Aveline seems convinced that there's no proof of his guilt. I'm going to go to the Gallows, talk to Emeric about it, see what he has to say."

"Well, at least he's been looking into it," Anders said, trying to find something positive to say, "do you want me to come?"

Hawke looked at him with a despairing frown which Anders couldn't help but resent a little, even though he knew it was warranted. So Anders had never been one for subtlety, Hawke should know that by now.

"Anders," Hawke said, shaking his head, "I'm going to the Gallows. I really don't think it's a good idea for you to be any closer to that place than is strictly necessary, never mind in it."

"It's not like I haven't been there before," Anders muttered, lifting his hands when Hawke glared at him purposefully, "fine, alright, I won't go anywhere near the bloody Gallows. Just don't you dare go running off to do anything rash if Emeric gives you information you think you can use."

"Don't trust me at all, do you?" Hawke grumbled as he pushed away from the desk, wandering over to stand before Anders' chair.

"Not really, no," Anders smirked as Hawke scowled, "I know you too well. If you're going to do anything please don't go off alone."

"Would I do something like that?" Hawke said with a small chuff of weary laughter, "I'd never hear the end of it if I did."

"So this is your way of politely inquiring if someone is involved in a murder investigation, is it?"

Hawke gave Anders a withering look but at least had the good grace to look a little abashed. Fenris was smirking and Varric looked like he was trying not to laugh as they crept through DuPuis' seemingly empty mansion.

It had turned out that Emeric had been more convincing of Hawke than he had been of Aveline. In relation to the rash of murders which he and Hawke were investigating the templar was still convinced of the guilt of Gascard DuPuis, an Orlesian nobleman who lived in Hightown. The very same man Aveline had been forced to humiliatingly apologise to after a failed raid on his mansion. The very same mansion Hawke had, only minutes before, very skilfully picked the lock of. The very same mansion they were now trespassing in.
"Oh come on," Hawke shruged, although despite his carefree words he still kept his voice down, "even if he isn't guilty maybe he can give us some information if nothing else."

"Then why didn't you ring the bloody doorbell?" Anders asked, looking at Hawke with a smile.

"Because if he is doing anything wrong then announcing ourselves would only give him time to hide it," Hawke said back calmly, "wouldn't it."

Anders sighed. Hawke had a point. Although, Anders thought, I doubt this is what Aveline meant when she asked him to sort out Emeric for her. She was probably hoping for something less illegal than breaking and entering.

"So what makes you think that he's guilty anyway?" Fenris asked as they crept into what looked like a large dining room.

"Emeric said that DuPuis fits the description given by the few witnesses this case has," Hawke couldn't help but look uncertain as he talked, "but...well, even with that, the witnesses have never been truly reliable. Most of those I visited told me completely different stories than those that they told Emeric in the first instance."

"So Emeric is balancing all this, the validity of the investigation and his own career, on faulty information?" Varric said, looking scandalised, "That's no way to run a network. Why didn't you come to me Hawke? I could have tried to find some information that was actually worthwhile."

"Well..." Hawke floundered as he knelt down in front of the far door, pulling out his lock pick, "you can do that for me later, can't you."

Anders was beginning to worry that this little excursion of Hawke's was going to end in disaster. There hadn't been a single sign so far that DuPuis was anything but your run of the mill Orlesian nobleman. Fine wines in the cellar, hardly used bone china on the dinner table, exquisite flower arrangements in every room. Of course that was until they entered the second floor hallway. Hawke was just about to start ascending the set of stairs to the third floor when Anders stopped him.

"Wait," Anders said, his brow wrinkling, "something's wrong..."

"What?" Hawke asked as he turned, his eyes sharp.

"It's...I don't know," Anders shivered, rubbing his left hand up his right arm and swallowing, "something down there feels wrong."

He pointed to the end of the hallway where there were three identical doors. The group approached cautiously. Varric had already drawn Bianca and Fenris kept his hand hovering around the haft of his broadsword. Hawke looked to Anders, noting the mage's increasing unease as they neared the doors. Anders looked around, feeling that familiar taint pulling at him like a thread attached to his naval which someone was yanking insistently from the other end. He swung his eyes from door to door before settling on the left hand one. Hawke tried the handle and found it, surprisingly, open. What they found inside, however, was even more of a surprise.

"Blood magic," Anders said with distaste, shaking his head.

"A Kirkwall mage who has turned to blood magic?" Fenris said, his eyes half lidded with sarcasm, "How astonishing."

"So he is up to something," Hawke said, his eyes narrowed as he approached the table where vials
of blood and other magical bits and pieces sat, "can you tell what he's been doing?"

Anders walked over to stand beside Hawke, pushing down his need to leave the room and get as far away from the corrupted magic as possible. He examined the contents of the table with disgust; a raven's foot, labelled blood vials, werewolf pelt, demonic ichor...

"It looks like some sort of tracking spell," Anders said, eyes hard, "but I can't be sure. I don't know any blood spells myself but it seems similar to the basic tracker spell used by the templars. It's how they track mages using their phylacteries, it's why they take our blood in the first place. It basically tells you exactly where a chosen person is at any given time."

Hawke looked grave as he lifted his eyes from the table and met Anders gaze.

"The sort of spell that would be handy if you were a serial killer who wanted to follow his victims until he knew they were alone and vulnerable," Hawke suggested darkly, "that sound about right?"

"It could be," Anders agreed, wrapping his arms around himself to stave off the infectious aura of the blood magic.

Hawke began to pick through the vials of blood on the table, trying to make out the names scrawled onto their labels. Anders shuffled backwards to stand by the door, feeling uncomfortable. It wasn't that he hadn't disliked blood magic before, of course he had, it was just...ever since Alesis his perception and sensitivity to it seemed to have increased. The very thought of it made his stomach roll over with the memory of it pouring through his system in a mix of agony and ecstasy. He distracted himself as best he could by watching Varric expertly picking the lock of an ornate chest at the far end of the room. The dwarf grinned in triumph as the lock finally clicked. His grin died however when Fenris opened the chest's lid to reveal its contents.

"Women's clothing," Fenris said, his voice flat as he pulled out the top of a heavy pearl silk dress, "all of it."

Hawke turned from the table, striding across the room to stand behind Fenris as the elf ransacked the chest. Anders swallowed down the revulsion as he watched the countless garments pulled from the box. He frowned as Varric reached in to pull out a yellow scarf, slightly dirty, with a blood stain at the corner. He couldn't be sure, lots of women probably wore the same thing but...Melanie had been wearing a yellow scarf the day he had met her. Anders looked away as Fenris stood up, folding his arms, his eyes grave.

"This doesn't exactly instil confidence in his innocence," the elf said, "does it."

"He'd need a very, very good fucking reason to get out of this one," Hawke said darkly.

"We need to find this DuPuis then," Varric said as he finished rooting around the rest of the room, "and have him tell us all about it."

And find him they did. At the top of the stairs they came across another locked door which Hawke made quick work of. The rogue had become very quiet and focused since they had found, what Hawke was obviously thinking of as, undeniable proof of DuPuis' guilt. He hadn't spoken as they walked back down the hallway and ascended to the third floor but Anders could tell he was angry. When they entered the room a man whom Anders could only assume was DuPuis didn't look particularly happy to see them; the terrified woman on the floor, however, did.

"Who are you?" DuPuis said, frowning, "You're not him..."

"Oh thank the Maker," the woman sobbed, trying to stand, "help me, please! He's gone mad!..."
"Quiet yourself!" DuPuis said harshly, turning to the woman, "I already told you, I'm only trying to help."

On hearing those words, spoken in an almost identical fashion, Anders froze, his eyes widening in recognition. It must be, Anders thought, his own ire rising, the clothes, the accent, Melanie's scarf in the chest...He grabbed Hawke's arm to get the rogue's attention.

"Hawke! The man that attacked Melanie," he said, "it's him!"

"You're sure?" Hawke asked, ignoring Gascard's intense stare.

"Positive," Anders said seriously, looking back to the man before them, feeling the same tainted aura that had hung above the table downstairs surrounding him in the room, "and he's definitely a blood mage."

DuPuis straightened a little as Hawke drew his twin daggers slowly from his belt. The woman looked like she wanted nothing more than to run to their group for safety but DuPuis stood between her and them.

"So," Hawke said, watching DuPuis closely, "Emeric was right."

"Wait!" DuPuis said as Hawke took a menacing step forwards, "Shit, I know what this looks like but I didn't hurt her!"

"Oh, so the wild eyed hysteria is just for show then," Hawke scoffed, looking at the woman's frightened gaze.

"You don't understand," DuPuis said hurriedly, "Someone is after her. I had to keep her safe!"

Like I haven't heard that one before, Anders thought ruefully. Although it was hard to tell with someone like DuPuis. His face was so very earnest yet there was something flat and hard about his eyes that Anders didn't like. The blood mage shifted on his feet, keeping himself between them and the woman on the floor.

"I don't know why you're here but there's a killer out there," Gascard's eyes narrowed in anger, "and I think he's playing us both."

Hawke did not sheath his weapons. When he took another step towards the nobleman DuPuis' eyes widened a little in panic. He lifted his hands placatingly.

"Just..!" he said hastily, "just let me explain!"

The rogue stalled, obviously torn. Anders knew how Hawke's mind worked. He'd been tracking this killer for over a month now and it had slowly become his sole focus. He had spent nearly every day immersing himself in the investigation, even if he'd tried his best to hide the fact. Now he had a man before him, with a bleeding woman at his feet, a blood mage who kept missing women's clothes in a chest and whom Anders had confirmed he'd seen attacking a woman that had only recently been reported missing. The mage knew that Hawke wanted nothing more than to drag DuPuis to Aveline, let the Guard Captain work her magic on him and have him confess. However, Anders also knew that Hawke would want to hear the truth for himself before he handed Gascard over to anyone else. That was why he stopped. That was why he slowly, very slowly, sheathed his daggers and crossed his arms. The woman let out a soft whimper but Hawke was intent on DuPuis.

"Alright," he ground out, watching the blood mage closely, "let's hear it."
DuPuis noticeably relaxed, his shoulders slumping. To all intents and purposes he looked like an innocent man who had been caught in a compromising situation. Anders could sympathise with that, considering he'd met Cousland in a similar fashion, but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to fully lower his guard. There was something about DuPuis that set the hairs at the back of his neck on end.

"Several years ago, my sister was murdered," DuPuis said, his tone open and forthcoming, "the bastard's now in Kirkwall, killing again. The same way he killed my sister."

Hawke frowned. Anders could tell he was interested. As soon as anyone talked of losing someone close Hawke couldn't help but become interested, Anders thought wistfully. He felt like he needed to warn the rogue, tell him that there was still something very wrong with DuPuis that he couldn't put his finger on. That same déjà vu that had been plaguing Anders since Hawke started this case was still hovering around inside his head, evading him. Hawke looked to the woman as DuPuis continued his story.

"It starts with a bouquet of white lilies," Gascard said, turning away from them; Hawke's head snapped back to the blood mage, eyes wide, "he sends them to each new victim..."

"Wait," Hawke said, stepping forwards once more to pull a surprised DuPuis' around by the arm, "what did you say? White lilies?"

Anders felt a cold dread creeping up on him.

"Yes, lilies" Gascard said, pulling his arm from Hawke's insistent grasp, "he always sends them. My sister, she received white lilies every day for a week until she went missing."

"Were they tied with a black silk ribbon?" Hawke asked quickly, swallowing.

"Yes," Gascard replied, looking confused, "but how would you know..?"

Hawke didn't grace him with the courtesy of listening. He turned quickly and walked back to the group. Fenris and Varric were watching him warily. Hawke had gone scariliy calm and Anders couldn't help but hope beyond hope that this didn't mean what he thought it meant.

"Fenris, I need you to go back to the house and check on my mother," Hawke said, his face slightly panicked despite trying to keep control, "if she's there, keep her there. If she isn't..."

Anders shivered. Oh Maker, please don't let this happen, he thought desperately, not after everything you've already taken from him. Not after his father, Carver, Bethany...please.

"If she isn't," Hawke said, swallowing, "please, I need you to find her."

Fenris didn't even ask why and, for once, Anders was glad of the elf's seeming want to follow Hawke's orders without explanation. The only hesitation he showed was the cold warning glare he sent DuPuis before he left. Varric was now also looking distinctly worried, as if he'd just figured out the connection himself.

"Hawke..." Anders started, tying to get the other man's attention, but it was no use.

By the time Anders had finished saying his name Hawke had grabbed DuPuis by the shoulders, ignoring the blood mage's consternation.

"Do you know where he is?" Hawke asked without hesitation.
"Do you think I'd be here if I did?" DuPuis spat, "Of course I don't! I was hoping to lure him here tonight with her but instead you turned up. I know he's been after this woman, that's all I know. It's why I brought her here, took some of her blood, so I could follow her if he managed to get his hands on her."

"So you can track them," Hawke said, his eyes lighting up momentarily, "you can track someone he's taken?"

"I can," Gascard had lost his arrogance slightly on hearing the hint of hope in Hawke's voice, "why do you ask me this?"

"Because I think he might be after my mother," Hawke said seriously.

"Are you sure?" Gascard said, sounding excited.

"Don't I look sure enough to you?" Hawke said bitterly.

DuPuis nodded cautiously, finally pulling himself from Hawke's insistent grasp. The blood mage looked at them all warily, as if unsure as to whether to trust them or not. He seemed to come to a conclusion fairly quickly. Anders was grateful that Hawke was bad at hiding his feelings when he was truly worried.

"I can find a woman he has taken," Gascard confirmed, "but it's not as simple as it sounds. I would need a sample of her blood to complete the spell."

"Oh, well," Hawke said angrily, throwing his hands up into the air, "good thing I have that vial of my mother's blood that I always carry with me, isn't it? Of course I don't have any of her blood! There must be another way!"

"There is no other spell I know of," Gascard said, shaking his head, reaching out his hand behind him, "why do you think I took some of her blood...?"

Gascard stopped short, as did everyone else, on noting that he was pointing at nothing but empty air. The woman that he had captured had, at some point while Hawke had distracted DuPuis, slipped away. Gascard cursed loudly, obviously angry as he stormed around the room, checking that she wasn't hiding anywhere.

"Maker damn it!" he said, eyes flashing, "That stupid woman! Doesn't she know the danger she is in? He'll find her and he'll..."

"Wait, you said you took her blood," Hawke said desperately, "you can track her then, can't you?"

DuPuis stalled, his eyes settling on Hawke. The man actually looked relieved enough for a moment to laugh derisively.

"Of course!" DuPuis said, "What the hell was I thinking? I can track Alessa and if he takes her then..."

"Hawke, he's talking about blood magic," Anders said, making the rogue's eyes snap to him, "are you sure you want to do this?"

"Anders, this is my mother we're talking about here," Hawke said flatly, "if he can help, then I don't care what he has to do."

"It's not that simple," Anders tried to argue, noting Hawke's hardening eyes and feeling a pit of
dread forming in his stomach, "once you get involved in this, it'll..."

"Didn't stop you, did it?" Hawke interrupted stonily.

Anders felt the statement like a slap in the face. He snapped his mouth shut and looked away. He heard DuPuis talking but wasn't entirely focusing on the words, too busy trying to push down the equal parts guilt and anger that Hawke had brought about in him. He knew that he'd been wrong to do what he did and it wasn't something he could ever say was a high point in his life but...he'd done it for Hawke. He'd done it to save his friend's life. Didn't he understand that at all? Did he think it was some sort of ego trip, some sort of long unfulfilled wish? Anders tried not to think like that. Hawke was being unreasonable because he was worried, that was all. He couldn't take his words to heart. Still, even with that reasonable explanation, Anders couldn't help but feel hurt.

"Yes I've used blood magic and lyrium to augment my powers" Gascard was saying when Anders tuned back in to the conversation, "I'm not proud of what I've done but I had to. He took my sister from me!"

'I had to'. The words went round and round in Anders' head. They were poignant because they were familiar. They were the same words that Anders had said to himself over and over again after he'd saved Fenris. Words of justification.

"Alright, so it's decided," Hawke said, making Anders blink; what had he missed? "you go and prepare, I'm going to try and find Emeric, see if he knows anything that might help. Varric, go with Anders to the house and make sure mother is safe."

"I want to go with you," Anders said, looking sternly at Hawke.

"Gallows, Anders," Hawke reminded Anders harshly, "I'm going to the Gallows. Just go with Varric. I'll be alright."

He wanted to argue, really he did, but the guilt and the pain kept his mouth firmly shut. He nodded to Hawke as the rogue left with DuPuis close on his heels. Anders didn't even say one word to Varric as they too left the mansion and headed for home. His thoughts were becoming confused with anxiety and remorse. If anything happened to Leandra, oh Maker, Andraste, anyone, please don't let her be gone. Let her be there, let her be safe. It'll break him, Anders thought hollowly, if she dies and I don't know if the pieces will ever go back together again quite right. Hawke's mother had become everything to him since the loss of the rest of his family. Anders himself, he and Hawke's relationship, had been the only bone of contention between Hawke and his mother, which Leandra seemed to have eventually accepted, making Hawke happier than ever. The things that Hawke did, doing jobs around the city for coin, gathering a reputation, making something of himself, he did it all to make his mother proud, to give her the life she'd always wanted. Without that subtle glue holding him together, Anders wasn't sure if Hawke wouldn't simply crumble under the weight of everything life had already saddled him with.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

Anders and Varric had returned to the mansion to find their worst fears were a reality. Leandra wasn't home. Bodahn informed them that she had set out several hours before on her weekly visit to her brother. Fenris had been and gone, already out scouring the city, and it wasn't long before Gamlen himself showed up at the door. Anders couldn't bring himself to deal with the man right now. He left that to Varric as he sat by the fire instead, biting the nails of his right hand and trying desperately to think if there was any way he had of finding Hawke's mother short of running around the streets calling out her name. Varric had been the one to talk him out of that plan. They
needed to be here at the mansion so that Hawke knew where to find them after he'd met with Emeric, Varric had reasoned with him. Anders knew that the dwarf was right but it was difficult to sit about doing nothing. He wasn't feeling particularly reasonable right now.

"Please calm down messer," Varric said with a sigh as Gamlen glared at the dwarf, "I'm sure Hawke will be back soon with news."

"Calm down?" Gamlen said heatedly, "you tell me there's a serial killer on the loose, Leandra's missing and you want me to calm down?"

"We don't know that anything is wrong as of yet," Varric tried to explain, "we're looking into it..."

"My sister has been missing since four o'clock," Gamlen said sternly, "she never turned up at my house and that's when she visits. She is never late! How long does she have to be gone before we know something has happened to her..?"

Gamlen's rant was cut short when the front door banged open. Anders stood up quickly and turned towards the entrance hall, his mouth open to speak. What he found there made the words die in his throat. Hawke was leaning against the doorframe, blood dripping from a large gash over his left eye and multiple cuts and lacerations on his arms and legs. Anders snapped himself from his shock and rushed to his side.

"What the hell happened?" Anders asked worriedly as he helped Hawke over to the chair he'd only recently vacated.

"Emeric's dead," Hawke said, his voice hollow, "it was a trap."

"A trap?" Varric asked, his brow creased with confusion, his mouth twisted with anxiety.

"Someone told him that I'd sent a message to meet me in Lowtown," Hawke said, blinking as Anders set about healing his wounds, "when I got there he was already dead. I was ambushed by shades."

"I thought I told you not to run off alone," Anders said quietly as he closed a large wound on Hawke's forearm.

"Well I'm sorry for not listening to you but we don't exactly have the luxury of time at the moment, do we?" Hawke said tightly, looking up at them, his anger lessening to confusion when he saw Gamlen hovering behind Varric, "Uncle?"

Gamlen scowled at Hawke's incredulous tone. Anders tried to ignore Hawke's building panic and think about what their next move should be. Gamlen explained to Hawke what he had already explained to Anders and Varric. The tension in Hawke's body only increased as Gamlen spoke. By the time he was done he looked ready to jump from the chair and go running out of the door. Anders hovered nearby once he'd finished healing Hawke, just in case the man felt like doing just that.

"Has Fenris found anything?" Hawke asked, curling his hands together.

"He hasn't come back yet," Varric said.

"...We can't wait for him," Hawke said after a moment's pause where he tried to sort his thoughts, "we have to do something. DuPuis said he would be in Darktown, setting up the spell to follow Alessa. Hopefully it will lead us to our man...and mother."
"Maybe someone in Lowtown saw something," Gamlen offered, his face lined with worry; Anders may not have liked the man but he did look genuinely concerned for his sister's wellbeing, "I'll go there and see what I can find."

"Alright," Hawke nodded, watching a little detachedly as Gamlen hurried off.

"Then it's Darktown for us," Varric said, trying to sound enthusiastic, "we'd best find DuPuis as soon as possible."

Hawke nodded, standing from the chair, but he wobbled a little on his feet. Anders suspected it was a combination of exhaustion, stress and maybe minor blood loss. He reached out to steady the rogue, hating the hollow look he saw when their eyes met.

"Are you sure you're alright Hawke?" Anders asked as Varric began walking towards the front door.

"Don't have much of a choice," Hawke shrugged, sighing when Anders frowned, "I'll be fine."

"I know you will," Anders nodded, noting Hawke's surprise; usually Anders wasn't one to let things like this go, "everything will be. I promise."

Hawke watched him for a moment, cautiously, before he let a small, hopeful smile grace his lips. Anders hoped beyond hope that the universe wouldn't make him out to be a liar.

The feeling of familiarity had only increased as they entered the Foundry. Anders shivered and tried to simultaneously quash the sensation while trying to pinpoint its source. Hawke was too intent to notice Anders discomfort, his daggers held in a white knuckled grasp. Varric held Bianca carefully, looking around uneasily as they skulked as quickly as they could through the dark corridors. Gascard Dupuis brought up the rear of their group, his iron wrought staff held at the ready. The blood mage had performed his ritual, much to Anders distaste, and located Alessa deep in the Foundry district of Lowtown. Hawke hadn't wasted any time in hurrying them all through the streets, ignoring and avoiding the thugs who he would normally have relished chasing out of Lowtown. Although Anders could hardly blame him considering the first thing they had found when they'd neared the foundry was the beginning of a trail of blood. Hawke had stiffened at the sight of it, letting Gascard inspect it with cold eyes. They had gone forwards without another word, the quietness of the night surrounding them, making their footsteps echo.

They hadn't seen any sign of Fenris as they had made their way to their destination, for which Anders was rather unhappy. Considering there was definitely a strong malignant presence involved Anders would have appreciated having the elf's blade at his back. As it was they were without any real front line fighters in their group. He knew that Hawke hadn't been thinking about strategy, probably didn't have the presence of mind to, and Anders didn't have the heart to try and stop him. They would just have to be careful and move cautiously, as difficult as that might be.

"There," Hawke said worriedly, pointing to the trail of smeared red on the floor, "more blood. They are here somewhere."

"Then we follow it," Varric said, "and quickly."

Hawke didn't dispute his decision. There was a strange feeling of despair in the air. Anders wondered if he was the only one who could feel it. It was cold, like a winter's day, invading his clothes and stripping the heat from him. He hurried after Hawke, lifting his right hand to touch his face, feeling warm fingertips come into contact with warm flesh. Why? He wondered, why do I
know this feeling? He felt a shiver run up his spine, a memory of a voice whispering in his ear. He almost spun around in fear, expecting someone to be standing behind him. Control yourself, Anders thought harshly, even as he swallowed down the fear.

They ran up the creaking wooden stairs. Everything seemed submerged under an ironically audible layer of hush. Every move they made, every rustle of armour or panted breath seemed magnified. Dust motes swam lazily through the slanted moonbeams, swirling as they rushed past. The hulking machinery seemed like the bones of some great animal, left for centuries in some abandoned cave. Anders didn't feel like he was even in Kirkwall anymore, transported instead to some remote and desolate place where no life could surely survive. Hawke continued to follow the blood trail, careful not to stand in any of the dull crimson patches. They were led eventually to the corner of a small, box room in the back.

"Looks like someone forgot to conceal the entrance to their secret hideout," Varric said wryly as Hawke wasted no time in kneeling beside the obvious entrance.

A cold sound like a gasping breath emerged when Hawke opened the trapdoor, making Anders take a step away from the dark hole in the floor. No one seemed to hear it but him, or if they did then they didn't react. Anders swallowed down the terror that had momentarily tried to emerge from his throat as a cry. What on earth is wrong with me? Anders thought, feeling Justice beginning to become concerned with the evil aura hanging in the air. There was something here, something making him want to do nothing but grab Hawke and run, run far away from here and never come back. It was a terrible, irrational kind of fear, one he wasn't used to. He had to force himself down the rickety ladder into the waiting darkness.

The ladder led to an underground room, completely open but for the few structural pillars holding the roof in place. There was a thickness to the air that made Anders gag. It tasted like hot metal and rotting flesh, bitter and sour. He inhaled shallowly through his nose, hating the tingling sensation it left as it worked its way inside his body.

"Can't you smell that?" Anders asked quietly into silence as they walked forwards to descend the short staircase into the main room.

"Smell what?" Varric asked, frowning.

"That smell, it's..." Anders floundered, "I don't know."

"I can," Gascard said from somewhere behind him, "it smells like death. Old death."

Somehow he didn't find that very reassuring. In fact he began to wish DuPuis had never said it. He'd been floundering as to how to classify the smell but the blood mage had hit on the truth of it. Old death. Not just rotting flesh but ancient rotted flesh, corpses unburied and left to fester. It was as they walked out into the room that it started to make a little bit of sense. The hand around his ankle sent shivers of fear up his leg and into his body. Anders cried out and tried to pull away, unbuckling his staff and swinging it round purposefully to stab the bladed end into the rotting wrist that extended from the crumbling ground. Black blood gushed from the wound as Anders severed the undead arm in two, the hand twitching and twisting as it fell from his ankle to the floor. Hawke and the others had already rounded on hearing his call, looking around wildly for a culprit.

"It's an ambush!" the mage shouted, just in time for the rage demon to rise soundlessly before them from the torn ether.

"Scatter!" Hawke called out authoritatively as shades began to emerge from the dank, dark walls, their soulless eyes swerving right and left, looking for prey.
Anders ignored Hawke's order and ran towards the rogue, sending out a wave of rock to block the path of the shades who had tried to converge on him. The rock only held for a moment, wavering before it crumbled, but it gave Hawke enough time to duck to his left, past the shades who had bypassed Anders barrier, and out into the open. The shades stared after Hawke before turning, as one, to look at Anders. The mage swallowed and backed up, realising just how close he'd become to the fight without realising. He sent out a wave of ice as the five swirling black cloud like creatures swam through the air noisely towards him. The ice caught three of them, freezing one solid. The ether that shades were comprised of was susceptible to freezing and Anders was more than happy to take advantage. An arrow whizzed past his shoulder and through the frozen shades body, sending shards of frozen darkness splintering across the floor. Anders turned to see Varric nod to him. He nodded back before running for the far wall, separating himself from the fray to allow for more time to cast.

When he turned back most of the shades were chasing after Hawke, swishing across the floor, or trying to smother DuPuis. There were too many, Anders realised. Without a warrior, someone who could withstand their attacks and allow the others to pick them off, the ether beasts would swarm them before they had a chance. Add the rage demon into the mix, who was already roaring across the dirt caked floor towards Varric, and they were in serious trouble. This calls for something a bit more drastic, Anders thought, hoping he could pull it off. He readied his staff in front of him horizontally and closed his eyes, pulling deep on the elemental power inside of him. The slumbering power of the tempest stirred at his call, reaching out to feel the wind running through his fingers. He could feel the glow of the ice spell still alive in the back of his mind even as the tempest began to shimmer with its own pale fire. Trying his best to bring both glowing points of light together Anders felt his reserves begin to waver, the mana draining away into the spell itself. He didn't stop, didn't let it slow him down, just grit his teeth and pushed as hard as he could with his mind, watching in satisfaction as the light began to slowly fuse together, melting and swirling like mist. When he opened his eyes he could feel the white sheen covering his vision. He reached out and released the spell into the air like a memory being recalled. The effect was akin to releasing a raging leviathan into a pond.

"Holy shit!" Anders vaguely heard Varric shout as the dwarf watched huge shards of ice and snow rushing through the violent air around him.

Anders had cast a shield spell on their party to protect them from the raging wind and ice, but the shades and the rage demon weren't so lucky. They shrieked as they fell, impaled with large icicles or simply torn apart by brutal eddies. The wind howled and screamed, bouncing off of the walls of the room, pulling dirt from the floor in small twisters and ripping grit and rock from the ceiling. The air was filled with swirling debris, colliding with the shield as if desperate to get inside. Anders watched with grim satisfaction as the rage demon was speared through the chest with a large sheet of ice which had been circling the room at a fierce speed. The demon wavered, trying to claw its way across the ground even as it melted into the floor and back to whence it came. Once he was sure that everything around them was dead or dying Anders pulled back, reigning the spell in. The air died down from colossal to harsh to breezy. When he had pulled it fully under control he lowered the shields and sighed, wavering slightly on his feet.

"A little warning would have been nice," Hawke said with a smile as he rushed to Anders side, reaching out to steady him.

"Sorry, no time," Anders shook his head as he pulled out a lyrium potion, pulling out the cork and taking a large swig, "wasn't sure if it would work anyway."

"Well I'm glad it did," Varric said as he sheathed Bianca, "those ghouls were getting a bit too close for comfort."
"Where on earth did you learn to do that?" Gascard asked, eyeing Anders curiously, almost greedily.

"Oh," Anders shrugged, not wanting to give too much away, "from a friend. But there'll be plenty of time to talk later."

"Right," Hawke agreed, making sure Anders was alright before he let him go, "let's keep going. Mother must be down here somewhere."

The shades and the demon had been what Anders expected to find in the lair of a crazed magical serial killer. What he hadn't expected to find was something that looked to all intents and purposes like a living room transplanted from a fine mansion. They descended a set of stairs into the room, eyeing the couches and the grandfather clock and tables with disbelief. The ground was scattered with books of all kinds, letters among them, candles illuminating everything.

"Has he been living here?" Anders wondered out loud as he reached down to pick up one of the books, dusting off the dirt.

"It looks like it," Varric said as he picked up a half finished apple, only just starting to go brown, "and I think he's been here recently."

"This is..." Anders hesitated as he continued to flick through the book in his hands, picking up another before confirming, "they're all chronicles of blood magic, spells, rituals. Where on earth did he find all these?"

"Maybe this has something to do with it," Gascard said with a snort as he handed Anders a half torn letter.

Anders read it with growing ire. Someone from the Circle itself? Such a bunch of callous, hypocritical bastards. They condemn those who live free of the Circle itself while harbouring blood mages and traitors in their midst. Anders had always said that mages were their own worst enemies but it was never more obvious than times like now.

"Hawke," he said, eyes still on the paper before him, "you should see this. Hawke?"

Anders looked up when the rogue didn't reply. He found him standing a few feet away, his eyes trained on the wall in front of him intently. Anders walked towards him and touched his arm. Hawke didn't even seem to react, instead walking forwards until he was before what looked like a small shrine with a picture at its centre.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Anders asked, noting Varric and Gascard had also noticed Hawke's odd behaviour.

The rogue reached up and pulled the painting from its place of honour among the candles and flowers on the wall. He brought it down and stared at it, his face blank. Anders approached him cautiously. Eventually, when he was close enough, Hawke looked up at him. Anders flinched a little at the deadness in Hawke's eyes, as if he knew somewhere deep in his heart that they were far too late. He hoped that Hawke was mistaken even as the rogue offered him the painting. Anders took it, looking down in the flickering candlelight into a face that, if he didn't look too closely, could have been Leandra.

"She looks just like mother," Hawke said coldly as he looked around the room oddly.

"Who is she, I wonder?" Varric asked as Anders passed the painting to him, glad to be rid of it, "a sister? A wife maybe?"
"Does it really matter?" Hawke asked, voice tight, his eyes hardening again, "I've wasted enough time trying to understand his motives. I want him caught, I want my mother back! None of this matters!"

"Then let's keep looking," Anders said quickly, seeing all the telltale signs that Hawke was about to lose it; this was the last place Anders wanted that to happen.

"He's right," Varric nodded, passing the portrait to Gascard who skimmed it quickly before dumping it onto a table, "there's only one way to go from here."

The air grew colder as they walked down the short corridor out of the strange misplaced room. Anders moved unconsciously closer to Hawke, their arms shuffling together as they walked. He felt Hawke's hand slide against his own, fingers twining with his tightly. Anders felt his chest tighten. Everything would be fine, he repeated over and over again, everything would be fine. They would save Leandra from this madman and they would all go home and be safe and happy and...but it was all a fantasy. Anders could tell from the way Hawke's fingers twisted almost painfully around his own. He could feel it in the air, smell it in the blood soaked ground, see it in the man's crazed, joy wild eyes. Anders stared at the mage they found after they'd descended the stairs into the lowest level of the lair. He was an older man, his hair turning slightly grey at the temples, wearing rich robes lined with gold. He was seemingly normal but for his eyes. Anders watched him tersely, ready to act at a moment's notice, alert and prepared, standing at Hawke's side...until his mind was swept blank when he saw just who was standing next to the mage.

"Ah," the man said to Hawke, "she said you would come."

"Where is my mother?" Hawke said furiously, over annunciating every word.

Anders couldn't take his eyes from the man by the mage, standing smugly, leaning against the back of a chair that faced away from them. He smiled at Anders cruelly, even as the mage took an involuntary step closer to Hawke, crushing himself against the rogue's side. So this is why everything has seemed so sickeningly familiar, Anders thought hollowly. Hawke looked to him in confusion.

"Anders what..?" he started, following the mage's scared eyes.

"Ah and here you said you never wanted to see my face again," Alesis said, pushing up from the chair, his white coat billowing slightly around his knees, "would you prefer I wear another? It could be arranged you know."

"Not another word," Anders said darkly, his voice containing hints of Justice's deep bellow; everyone seemed to have gone quiet, watching the two in confusion, "what the fuck are you doing here?"

"Shouldn't I be?" Alesis said, watching Hawke's confusion with seeming mirth, "Considering I've been so instrumental in my Master's plan, I thought I had a right to be here when he reveals his creation."

"You know him?" Hawke said, aghast.

Alesis laughed, flicking his eyes to Hawke, looking him up and down as if he were an insect.

"'Know' is a little bit inappropriate," Alesis said with a shrug, "considering everything we've done together Anders."

"You shut your fucking mouth Alesis!" Anders said harshly, pulling his hand from Hawke's so he
could take a menacing step forwards.

"Didn't he tell you?" Alesis asked, laughing a little, looking to the man by his side who simply smiled back affectionately at him, "Who it was that saved your little friend from the Phage?"

Anders swallowed, feeling everything was once more spiralling out of his control. This hadn't been what he'd expected, he wasn't prepared for this! Alesis stared deeply into his eyes and Anders felt his breath speeding up, flashes of memory assaulting his mind. The places the blood mage had touched, so long ago now, felt like they were burning. What has he done to me? Anders thought wildly as he stumbled back against Hawke. The rogue's strong hands pulled him close. When Anders looked up Hawke's eyes were hard, livid with contained fury. Thankfully it wasn't directed at him.

"You," Hawke said as he looked up at Alesis, the blood mage seemingly unconcerned by the amount of venom Hawke had packed into the one word.

"Oh so he did tell you," Alesis said, "how unexpected."

"One more word out of you and you're a dead man!" Hawke growled, holding on to Anders as if he was worried he might fall if he let go.

"Ah, I very much doubt that," Alesis said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes, "considering you're standing there with an enemy at your back. Isn't that right, Gascard?"

Anders stiffened, turning swiftly along with Hawke and Varric to stare at the blood mage behind them. Gascard snorted, eyes narrowed, staring loathingly at Alesis. Looks like I'm not the only one who hates the bastard with every fibre of my being, Anders thought.

"What are you talking about?" Hawke asked, brow furrowed in anger, "he's here to help us!"

"What, did he tell you I killed his father this time? Or his sister? Which yarn did you pull this time Gascard?" Alesis asked, crossing his arms.

"Nothing that didn't work," Gascard said as he walked past them, ignoring their scandalised stares; the blood mage looked past Alesis to the older man beside him, catching his eye, "Quentin. I've come back. Please, you don't need this son of a whore at your side any longer! I'm much more of an apprentice than he!"

"You deceiving son of a bitch!" Hawke said, staring at the man only a few feet in front of him, "you fucking lied to me..!"

Anders was sure that Hawke would have said more, and perhaps Gascard himself would have said more too, if Varric hadn't taken that moment to send a crossbow bolt squarely through his neck from behind. The blood mage's eyes widened in shock, as did Hawke's momentarily, before he choked out a gurgling cry and fell to his knees, his hands coming up to scrabble uselessly at his neck. Everyone watched with varying degrees of dispassion as Gascard DuPuis slumped over onto his side, gurgling, blood pumping steadily from his throat as his heart began to slow.

"You were asking for that one, my friend," Varric said darkly as he reloaded Bianca, watching Gascard's corpse as if he wanted nothing more than to spit on it.

"Well," the man revealed as Quentin said, "another rat taken care of. He was never talented enough to be my apprentice. I have you now, Alesis. More than a Master could hope for."

"You're too kind," Alesis said with a short bow.
"That's enough!" Hawke shouted, furious, "enough of your bullshit! Where are all the women who have gone missing? Where is my mother!"

"Oh you do go on, don't you," Alesis said, his lips twisting into a grimace, "how do you stand it Anders?" 

"Oh, I don't know," Anders said with terse sarcasm, "could be something to do with the lack of ritualistic sacrifice or kidnapping or murder that he does. Now answer his fucking question!"

Alesis watched Anders for a moment as if deciding something, his smile unusually mild. It made Anders shiver to see it. Alesis stayed purposefully quiet, setting Anders' teeth on edge.

"You sent her lilies," Hawke said, speaking now to Quentin, "and she's been missing all day. What have you done with her?"

"I've sent a lot of women lilies," Quentin shrugged, seeming to enjoy the charade they were playing through, "that man, Emeric, he was such a thorn in my side. All I wanted to do was complete my work, my precious work, and he hounded me! And then there was Gascard, desperate to return to my side, tracking me the only way he knew how. So I started laying false trails, I sent lilies out to many of the eligible women in Kirkwall, hoping to throw them off my sent."

Hawke's grip on Anders loosened and, for a brief moment, there was a hint of hope in his eyes. Anders couldn't help but feel that it was about to be prematurely squashed. Alesis was looking far too pleased with himself for Hawke's mother not to be involved in this somehow.

"For a while I thought I would never have the freedom again to continue my search, to find the right...ingredients needed," Quentin said cautiously, "but then I received some fantastic news. It turned out that I was already sending flowers to the right woman, the woman who would make all of my dreams a reality, and I didn't even know it."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Hawke asked, his voice losing its authority as fear set back in.

"I saw her portrait when I, um, visited your beautiful mansion," Alesis said, making Anders blood run cold, "as soon as I saw her face I knew that she was the one my Master had been searching for. The very living vision of his wife."

No, Anders thought numbly, no that's a lie. That's a lie. He felt Hawke's hands tightening around his arms and couldn't find the presence of mind to try and figure out what was happening. It wasn't true, it couldn't be. Alesis was a liar, that's what he did, he lied to manipulate people, to hurt and control them. This wasn't his fault, it had been an accident of fate, it had been an unfortunate accident. Oh Maker, Anders thought as his mind swam, please, no, tell me this wasn't my fault!

"You're so full of shit," Hawke said breathily, no heat left in him.

"Oh but it's true," Quentin said, walking with a dreadful finality towards the chair against which Alesis had been leaning, "my wonderful apprentice told me of this woman, this beautiful woman, and now you can see what my powers have granted me. My own wife, my own wonderful bride, brought back to me through the power of the Maker himself!"

Anders didn't think he'd ever seen anything more grotesque and terrifying than the thing which emerged from that chair, its limbs flailing awkwardly, moving unnaturally on odd feet as it turned to reveal an all too familiar face. He felt bile rising into his throat, the source of the smell, the wrongness, the everything...this was it.
"No," Hawke whispered brokenly, only enough for Anders to hear, finding his voice again as he broke away from the mage and rushed forwards, his daggers drawn, "you bastard, I'll kill you, I'll kill you!"

Everything blurred away into sounds and smells and dark and light. Anders knew he was moving, fighting, killing but on some level he knew he wasn't fully in control. The shock and the guilt were pushing him back down into himself, letting Justice flare to the surface but not enough to truly block him out. He was aware but only barely, watching everything flash before his eyes, hearing Hawke's terrifying cries as he slashed through the shades and the demons that Quentin and Alesis sent at him. He had never seen the rogue so incensed, his eyes wild with battle fury. He watched as he sent twisted runnels of Fade magic out against the desire demons, watching detachedly as they crumbled, screaming, back into the ether from which they came. Anders began to feel numb, mindless and cold. What scared him the most, as the battle raged on around him, was that he was beginning to enjoy it. He needed it, this blanket of apathy that had fallen over him even as he sent out wave after wave of flame and ice and rent the Fade itself around him, all he wanted was to curl up and never have to think again.

It's not true, he thought brokenly, it's not true. I didn't do it, I was only trying to help, I swear, I didn't mean for this to happen! This time, unlike all the others, it was Varric that pulled him back from the edge, the precipice which beckoned him. Anders felt himself regaining control, like rushing to the surface of the water, all the sounds and smells becoming more vivid, alive, clear. He shook his head and stared at the dwarf. He could feel the tears running down his face even though he wasn't aware that he was crying.

"Calm down Blondie," Varric was saying calmly, "it's all over."

"I'm alright," Anders said bleakly, "Where's Haw...?"

He didn't finish his sentence because he found Hawke just by looking to his left, and the sight broke his heart. He was on his knees, his 'mother' pillowed in his lap, a soft, eerie smile on his face as he looked down into the woman's opaque eyes. Anders lifted his hand to his mouth to hold in the scream and the vomit and the need to tell Hawke it wasn't his fault and to say he was sorry, so sorry...everything was trying to get out at once but Anders couldn't let it. Hawke reached down and closed her eyes with delicate fingers before pulling her up into a final embrace. Varric lowered his eyes respectfully from the scene before him while Anders couldn't tear his eyes away. Hawke eventually lowered her to the ground carefully. The mage could see the crude stitches where Quentin had sewn the women together. The thought made him balk. That a mage could fall so low, pervert his magic to something so base and vile, ruin so many lives all to fulfil some mad dream of bringing back nothing but a ghoul in place of a beloved wife. He stumbled slowly forwards, reaching out to place his hand against Hawke's shoulder. As soon as he made contact the seemingly placid man pulled away violently. Anders let out a shocked gasp and stepped back, feeling as if Hawke had stuck him.

"Don't touch me," was all Hawke said, his voice gravelly, laced with anger and hurt.

Anders swallowed, feeling a terrible dread creeping over him. No, don't blame me for this, please Hawke, please, I can't lose you...

"Hawke, it wasn't..." he said, nothing more than a whisper, but he knew the man heard it because he stood, eyes hard, and rounded on him.

"Don't talk to me," Hawke said, his tone even harder than before, "don't look at me, don't even think about me. Trust you, that's what you said that night, didn't you? To trust you, because you knew what you were doing, isn't that right?"
"Please," Anders said, shaking his head as Hawke advanced on him; he could see Varric watching them warily, concerned, "please Hawke I didn't..."

"You said you knew what you were doing!" Hawke shouted, grabbing Anders by the arms and shaking him, "You promised me! You fucking liar! He never would have hurt her if that bastard hadn't seen her face! Look what you've done!"

No, no, no, Anders said as Hawke shook him again, roughly. He heard Varric's voice, stern, asking Hawke to calm down, to let Andres go, but the mage wasn't listening. All he could see were Hawke's broken eyes, watching him, staring into him. Please don't do this, he thought dazedly. He watched in a detached sense of fascination as Hawke pushed him away before pulling back and slapping him hard across the face.

Everything went black.

When he came to Hawke was on the floor, blood gushing from his mouth, and Anders knew then, with a calm bred of shock, that everything was over. Justice had been too close to the surface, what with the fight and Anders own lack of control. He couldn't blame him, Anders thought numbly as he stared down at Hawke's incredulous face, Varric's own shocked eyes watching him warily as he knelt down beside Hawke, a potion in his hand. Justice was only protecting himself, protecting Anders, but to hurt Hawke...Anders looked down at the man before him, feeling all his love and affection and want and need curling up inside himself into a ball. Never you, Anders thought dazedly, never you Hawke, never this. He took a faltering step back, Hawke's eyes never leaving his, and then another. Before he knew it he was walking, then turning, then running up the stairs, back across the blood stained dirt that had led them here, into this hell.

Hawke did not call out after him.
Sorrow

It was all relative, he thought blankly, life was at least. Feelings could change and grow and diminish but they were all truly just paper cut outs of past moments. Everything rolled around in a huge, never ending circle of decay and growth, past and present; Uroboros, the serpent devouring its own tail, destroying as it created.

"I hurt you, you hurt me," Anders said to no one, "you said it would have to stop. You said so yourself."

Anders watched as the dagger fell from his hand, glinting in the growing dawn as it twirled, before making a minute splash in the rolling waves that crashed against the cliff on which he stood. He waited there for a moment, hand still outstretched, and wondered dimly if this could possibly be the lowest he'd ever come in his so far short but very eventful life. No, Anders thought hollowly, it isn't. At least this time I didn't get a chance to go through with it.

The mage remembered asking him once, Fenris that was, whether or not he'd ever considered it as an option. In all honesty, given the elf's unwavering determination, it hadn't surprised Anders that he had said no. Still, perhaps he'd been looking more for absolution than agreement; that what he'd tried to do all those years ago in that small, high room in the Circle tower of Ferelden had in some way been justified.

"Did you ever think about killing yourself?" Anders asked Fenris as they walked through the streets; Hawke and Varric were ahead of them, talking together, out of earshot.

"I could ask you the same thing," Fenris said back a little evasively but his voice was hard.

"I'm serious," Anders said earnestly, "to get out of slavery, to escape Danarius... don't tell me you never thought about it."

"I did not," Fenris said virtuously, "to kill oneself is a sin in the eyes of the Maker."

"You... believe that?" Anders had asked incredulously, feeling the guilt stab at him.

"I try to," Fenris shrugged, his eyes softening just a little as he finally made eye contact with the mage, "some things must be worse than slavery."

"...And some things are worse than death," Anders had muttered back quietly, although he knew that Fenris had heard him.

Anders couldn't help but laugh flatly as he felt the rising air current lifting off the face of the cliff to ruffle his hair. His thoughts were a mess, jumbled memories and opinions and feelings and an overwhelming inability to tell which were his and which weren't. However there were many memories more prevalent than the others, the most pertinent to his current state. The mere thought of the cell that had held him for almost a year, those four grey walls surrounding him, that one, tiny high window that, in the winter, only let in sunlight for half an hour of the day, the endless hours of loneliness eating away at his ability to cope... He had run from the city after leaving Hawke and Varric in Quentin's underground lair and he kept running until he was out on the Coast, in the gloaming, watching the dark silhouettes of the grass swaying against the slowly brightening sky. Then he'd made his way to the cliff top, standing there with the dagger in his hand, until he found that he couldn't raise it to his chest with the same impunity as he had done that first time.

"I just wanted to be free," Anders whispered, not entirely sure who he was trying to convince.
He had tried to make a joke of it, that night of Hawke's birthday a couple of years ago, but in reality it had been anything but funny at the time. Mr. Wiggums may have had a ludicrous name but, in truth, the cat became a lifeline to him in that long year he had been kept in solitary confinement by the templars. He had been a mean beast, Anders wouldn't lie, but after a few weeks they had become tentative friends. Anders would save some of his food for the little cat and, in return, Mr. Wiggums would allow himself to be stroked. After a while he even began to sit in Anders knee if the mood took him. By the end of eight months the cat even got it into his head to occasionally sleep on the mage's bed, curled up by his feet. Anders hadn't realised just how much he relied on the cat's company until it wasn't there anymore.

That was when the nightmares started. Until that point Anders had never had trouble in the Fade. He was a strong, powerful mage. He had escaped the Circle six times already and he would do again. Those were the things that kept him sane over the first two thirds of his year's sentence, thinking those things and having a 'pet' for company. He hadn't realised just how precarious his mental state had been. The two had been relying on each other, his will and his need for love and affection; remove one and the other simply tumbled to the ground, useless. As soon as the shock of losing his one connection to the outside world left him, Anders belief in his ability to see this through, his belief in himself, crumbled; unfortunately it had been the demons, not the templars, who were the first to notice. The first eight months had been bad enough, he wouldn't lie. Anders wasn't used to being cooped up in such a small space, unable to see the world outside even if just through a window. In comparison the last four months were like a living hell. He couldn't sleep for fear of the demons who, in sensing his weakness, began to hound him mercilessly. Every time his eyes slid closed from exhaustion they were there, waiting for him, with tempting promises of freedom and damning lies that Anders couldn't help but begin to believe were true.

They'll never let you go. That's what the demons told him, over and over and over again until Anders shook and covered his ears futilely to try and block it out. They'll never let you go. You'll be trapped here forever in this tiny space until you lose your mind, until you can't even remember what it was like to feel the breeze against your skin, the lapping of waves on the shore, the touch of another's hand...your own name. It was a month before the year was up when he stopped eating. That finally got the templars attention, although not in the way he'd ever wanted it. Force feeding wasn't an experience he ever wanted to relive. Instead of helping, like the templars seemed to hope, it merely became one of the many things that slowly, over the next few weeks, drove him to sheer desperation.

It was a simple affair, Anders had been surprised to find, slipping the slim dagger from the templar's belt when he was distracted. Ser Farley his name was, if Anders remembered rightly. He never did like having to force the mage to eat, especially when Anders was sure that he looked like he was at death's door. So it had been easy, stealing his blade, hiding it up the loose sleeve of his robes until the templar left. What hadn't been so easy was going through with it. He had sat, staring at the far wall, tracing the memorised patterns of cracks and chips in the stone while he ran his fingers lightly over the sharp edge of the concealed dagger. It had seemed like hours before he managed to summon both the courage and the energy to place the tip of the blade against his chest, murmuring out two purposeless words into the silence around him before he slid the dagger into himself at a best guess of where it would kill him quickly.

'I'm sorry'

Anders still wasn't sure who he thought he had been apologising to. Admittedly he hadn't been thinking straight, in fact he was quite sure he had nearly lost his mind, but sometimes he wondered. He didn't remember much of what happened next. He didn't remember any pain or people's faces or being carried from the cell. The next thing he could recall was waking up in the dark, a small candle sputtering at his bedside as it tried not to go out. Nothing since had ever felt as surreal as
that moment. After waking up to the same view, the same ceiling, for nearly a year and then suddenly he'd found himself staring at something completely different.

That was when he'd realised, or perhaps more taken it as a sign, that it simply wasn't his time to die. Anders had never believed in fate before but at that moment his scepticism had been shaken a little. That someone had been able to save his life when he'd been so broken and lost and on the brink of losing it forever...there had to be something in that, didn't there? Yet now, despite his epiphany all those years ago, he was beginning to doubt that was what had happened. I'm just a survivor, that's all it is, Anders thought emptily, I just keep dodging the hammer at the last moment. Everything is conspiring to have me plummet from the cliff edge and all I do is grab it as I fall and haul myself back up again. In the end I'm just waiting for the day I don't reach out to stop my descent at all.

'It would kill me, to lose you Hawke.'

'You aren't going to lose me. I promise.'

Desperate words spoken in a desperate moment. He had believed them too, that another loss like that of Karl would break him and, over time, Hawke had come to mean far more to him than Karl ever had. Anders was sure that if that happened he would be forced back to that hollow, fraught state of mind which had pushed him to try and take his own life in the first place. Yet now that he was here, now that it had happened, now that he was alone again, all alone...he couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it.

Anders wasn't sure how much of his determination to live was applicable to Justice's will but, even without the spirit, the mage felt that the act was simply too selfish now for him to perform. He wanted to be free...yet there were people relying on him. If he died now then hundreds and thousands of mages would simply carry on, hundreds and thousands of templars would simply carry on, and nothing would change. He owed it to them, he owed it to Justice, to see this thing through before he even thought about death. Anders snorted out a humourless laugh. Only a few months ago now he'd been thinking of his cause, of the likelihood that he'd be giving his life for it, and the thought of dying had scared him. Now, standing here as the sun came up over the water, illuminating the white tipped waves, the scrub trees protruding from the cliff, the gulls cawing and swooping through the air, it seemed like a release he couldn't wait to grasp hold of.

The other thought that was driving him towards that end, he realised, was the comprehension that he couldn't go back. Even if Hawke came round, which he probably would, if he truly blamed Anders for this then it would forever separate them and he couldn't handle that. Anders needed everything or nothing at all. This desperate middle ground he and Hawke lived in was tearing him apart. So he would do what he always did; he would avoid the problem all together and focus on his next move. When he thought about it, right now there was one thing he needed to do, one thing above all else. It was the one thing he couldn't help but notice, despite how little attention he'd been paying to his surroundings as he fled; he'd seen Quentin's corpse, his dead face scarred with blood and mouth open in shock, but there was no sign of Alesis anywhere. Anders guessed he had slipped away during the fray, just like the cockroach he was.

And Alesis needed to pay.

"Don't you know what time it is?"

Anders felt like telling the man who stood before him, leaning against the half open door and rubbing his piggy eyes with fat fingers, that he was perfectly aware what the time was. Before
everything had happened Anders probably would have been perfectly reasonable, maybe even apologised for waking him at six in the morning, but he was past being civil. Instead he simply grabbed the man by his shirt front and marched him backwards, eyes wide, into his house before slamming the door behind him.

"Yes Gillan," Anders said, "it's time for you to tell me everything you know, starting with what you did for Alesis not too long ago if the rancid smell in here is anything to go by."

Gillan DeFries, the resistance's liaison to the more seedy side of the Kirkwall mage community. Anders had never liked the man. He was cunning and slimy, like most middle men, with an arrogance that usually swiftly left him once he was threatened. He liked to act big, but in reality he was just a weasely excuse for a human being who made his living exploiting the needs of others. Anders, as such, didn't have the time or the want to pander to him. He could feel Alesis still clinging to the air of Gillan's small hovel. The blood mage had been here alright.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gillan said roughly, brushing himself down and glaring at Anders, "who do you think you are, barging in here..."

"Shut your fucking mouth," Anders said soberly, watching Gillan blanch and flick his eyes towards the front door; Anders was well aware that it was the only way out and that he was between it and Gillan, "and tell me the truth before I feel the need to show you why mages are feared."

"Alright, alright!" Gillan threw up his hands, laughing nervously, "No need to get violent, I can be reasonable. I ain't got no allegiance to Alesis anyhow. He was here a couple of hours ago, he was looking for transport."

"What kind?" Anders asked tightly.

"A ship," Gillan said, backing away with a frightened expression when Anders took a few steps forwards, "I'm not lying, I swear! He wanted a ship to Ferelden, he said he didn't care where it took him!"

Anders frowned. Ferelden? What on earth would Alesis want to go there for? No, Anders thought, that isn't important. All that matters is that I get to him before he leaves.

"And you got him one, I presume?" Anders asked, lifting his hand and summoning a few, harmless flames, watching them dispassionately as they licked around his fingers; Gillan couldn't take his eyes from them.

"Y-yes," he stuttered, blinking, his voice panicked, "a mate of mine is the captain of The Lady Rose, she leaves at noon."

"Where is she headed?" Anders asked.

"Redcliffe," Gillan said quickly, "she's due there in two days."

Anders smiled darkly at Gillan's whimper of fear when Anders let the flames, which had been sitting placidly in his hand, flare up momentarily before dying out. Gillan tried to look imposing as Anders turned to leave but the mage didn't miss his shaking hands or his swallow of fear. So, Anders thought as he walked back out into the streets of Lowtown, The Lady Rose. He was quite sure that Gillan hadn't lied to him. The man had been too terrified. If he did lie and Anders found out, well...Gillan knew what mages were capable of. Anders would rely on that fear for as long as it lasted.

So, Anders thought, if I was a more than likely injured blood mage with a need to lie low until
noon in a city like Kirkwall, where would I hide? Probably somewhere close to my escape route, which means the Docks. Plenty of places to hide there, plenty of abandoned store rooms and warehouses, access to the sewers linking to Lowtown. Anders focused on his task, blocking out the pain and emptiness that constantly threatened to rise up and overwhelm him. He knew where he would check first and, if Alesis was there, the irony would not be lost on him. It was where he'd first learned of his blood magic after all, the warehouse where Alesis had nearly killed him. It would be nothing short of poetic justice if he were to return the favour on those very same bloodstained cobbles.

The air was quiet, still and slightly humid. The early morning sun was pale and wan but offered a little warmth. Anders made his way through the Docks as silently as he could, clinging to the walls and keeping to the shadows as much as possible. There was a patrol of City Guard out on the streets as he approached the warehouse district down by the water. Anders slipped into a small, dim alley to avoid them, listening to the clink of their armour and the murmur of their voices until they faded from earshot. Anders stared at the dark wall before his eyes as he waited for the coast to be clear. Where would Hawke be now? Anders wondered distractedly. At home probably, he would have taken his mother home. No, for Maker's sake Anders, he thought savagely, stop. Stop thinking about all the things you're going to lose and focus on what you can do instead. He pushed himself away from the wall and exited the alleyway before continuing towards his goal.

The warehouse where Anders had fought the pride demon all those years ago was no longer abandoned. Anders cursed quietly as he watched the early shift of dock workers ferrying goods in and out of the large main doors. Perhaps Alesis would have found another place to hide if this one was now in operation...but there was something in the air here that called to him. One thing he hoped he could rely on was that Alesis was a creature of habit if nothing else. He would perhaps not be expecting Anders to follow him so soon, or at all, and would then not care if his hiding place seemed too obvious. Anders would take the risk. If he was going to find Alesis then he needed to be methodical and start with all the places that seemed the most likely. That's what Hawke would have done. Fucking hell, Anders thought as he closed his eyes and sighed, just shut up and get on with it.

There were too many people at the front entrance to risk entry that way. Anders didn't look like a dock worker and his clothes were too conspicuous so he wouldn't chance trying to blend in. Instead he slipped down the narrow alley between the warehouses and searched for the side entrance. It was locked but Anders didn't let that stop him. He checked to make sure there was definitely no one about before reaching out and letting a small amount of ice magic freeze the lock solid. Then he stepped back before ramming the door with his shoulder, hearing the lock snap satisfyingly before the door gave way and swung inwards. Anders peered through into the gloom, setting his resolve, and entered the warehouse.

It was bigger inside than he remembered. Whoever had bought the old warehouse must have not only renovated it but extended it as well. Anders entered in a small alcove hidden behind a vast shelving unit stacked with boxes. He looked along the narrow corridor to his right, created by the shelves and the wall of the warehouse, and started to creep along in the slight gloom. As he approached the end he peered out into the brighter, airier atmosphere of the warehouse. It was huge, reaching all the way back along to the left where the doors, which made up nearly the entire wall of the warehouse, were open to the sun, workers standing chatting and working and moving merchandise. The warehouse itself was filled with boxes and large unknown objects covered in dust sheets. The voices of the workers echoed slightly as Anders picked his way carefully deeper inside, through corridors of boxes and tarpaulins. He nearly walked right into the two dock hands who were busy piling crates from a long barrow into the bottom of a set of shelves, marked from collection. Anders pulled back just before he made himself visible, flattening against a large crate.
"I'm telling ya," one of them was saying, a short, stocky man who looked in his late thirties, "it smells funny down there."

"I can't smell nothing," the other, younger man argued back, "you're making it up Tom."

"I ain't," Tom said crossly, "you must have a cold if you can't smell that. It's like...I don't know, dead rats or something, dead things."

"Probably just a cat or a dog," the other man shrugged, "got itself into the basement and died. I wouldn't worry about it."

"Not worried," Tom said with a frown, "just don't like it, that's all. It's not clean. I'll tell the Super, he'll do something about it."

The basement then, Anders thought grimly, how fitting. Interesting that someone with no seeming magical prowess had detected the smell of blood magic. Or perhaps it wasn't Alesis at all, perhaps it was just a dead cat or dog. He crossed his fingers and hoped that it wasn't. Anders crept back the way he had come and found another way through the labyrinth, keeping an ear out for workers, as he made his way to the offices and stairs that ran along the back of the warehouse. If there was a way into the basement it would be there. It was quieter at the back, far from the back and forth of constant movement. Anders sneaked past a window of a small room where a tall, bald man sat leafing through papers, marking down things with a quill. Beyond the room was a long set of stairs leading up to the second floor, a thin strip of balcony that ran almost the full length on all three walls apart from the one which housed the main door. Anders scouted about and found the entrance to the basement beneath the stairs, a large wooden trapdoor with a lock which was thankfully not in place. The mage hauled it open, hating the noisy clank it made, easing himself onto the stairs it revealed before lowering it as quietly as he could after him.

The darkness was complete. Anders pulled his staff from his belt and summoned a soft ball of light at its tip. He held it out in front of him as he slowly descended, watching his footing. It illuminated dry walls and a roughly carved floor, much like the basement beneath the foundry. The smell which the dock worker had picked up on was also similar. Alesis, Anders thought darkly, where are you hiding, little cockroach? The stairs led down to a wide corridor with five large doors leading off of it. Anders pale, white light cast everything into an eerie black and white, shadows shifting and dancing as the staff bobbed in his hands. Anders knew he should be worried, apprehensive about facing Alesis at last, but he couldn't bring himself to be. It was as if, in pushing all his other feelings down, he had forgotten how to feel anything else, even fear. Four of the five doors were locked when he tried them, but the fifth, the furthest from the stairs, wasn't. Anders cringed at the loud creak from the hinges as it swung open, revealing what seemed to be a large gloomy storeroom. The mage walked in carefully, casting his light about and keeping his eyes open. The door swinging creakily shut behind him was the first sign of danger. Unfortunately there was no way for him to dodge the large crate which was pushed down on top of him from the tall pile on his left.

"Shit!" Anders cursed in pain as he was thrown to the ground.

The crate was fortunately empty but it still hurt. His left shoulder and arm ached and throbbed as Anders pushed the crate from him and stumbled to his feet, scanning the white lit darkness. Everything was silent but for his heavy breathing.

"I know you're here," Anders said slowly, "why don't you try fighting fair for once in your life?"

"Any reason I should?" Alesis' voice whispered right into his ear.
Anders spun round, raising his staff, but there was no one behind him. He narrowed his eyes, trying his best to listen out for telltale signs of where Alesis might be. The blood mage was using his magic to throw his voice, creating pockets of Fade magic that mirrored the actual space around his physical being. Anders had seen it done before, it was nothing but a trick. Unfortunately it was a very effective trick in these circumstances which made it all the more dangerous. Anders continued into the room on silent feet. It was as he rounded the corner of the last set of boxes that two almost invisible black hands swam up from the floor and grabbed his feet, tripping him to the ground. Anders grunted in pain as he hit the dirt covered floor, his shoulder and arm still tender, but spun over as quickly as he could. He summoned the fireball without thinking, throwing it into the chest of the shade which had been responsible for his fall, now free from the floor and looming above him. The creature shrieked, swishing backwards, but Anders was too fast for it. He summoned the wave of ice crystals and trapped the creature, freezing it solid. He stood slowly, letting out a soft shimmer of healing magic over his left side to take away the ache of the bruise that was swiftly forming.

"Is that all you have Alesis?" Anders said into the gloom before he pulled back and drove the bladed end of his staff into the frozen shade, shattering it, "Rather pathetic fare if you ask me."

"Speaking of pathetic," Anders looked up to his left as the voice seemed to come from above him; he shook his head however as, when Alesis spoke again, it was from his right, "why are you here on your own?"

Anders ignored him and continued his search. He found himself free of the boxes and in a wide, low roofed area of the room. He risked adding a little more light to the orb spell on his staff and blanched, instantly wishing that he hadn't. Rows and rows of swivelling, dark eyes looked back at him, attached to bodies which themselves seemed made of the same shadow as the darkness. The shades didn't move even as they all focused, as one, onto the lone mage standing in the small pool of light before them. Anders watched them warily, trying to calculate their numbers. Foolish, Anders thought, there could be hundreds waiting in the dark for all I know. This was a bad idea but it's a bit late to be thinking that now. Anders listened with grim satisfaction as the sound of footsteps approached. They echoed dully against the dirt floor as Alesis emerged from between the group of huddled shades, slowly illuminated by Anders' light, his white coat seeming to glow in amongst all the shifting darkness. Anders couldn't help but be glad when he spied the scorch marks, rips and signs of blood on the once pristine garment.

"So," Alesis said, running his hand tenderly over the seemingly intangible head of the nearest shade; the creature wavered a little but stayed obediently still, "Serrah Hawke has not accompanied you. What a shame. I was looking forward to killing him."

"You'd be so lucky," Anders said, not dropping his guard for a moment, "Seems like you've already missed your chance. Or was that your plan before or after you ran away from the battle like a little girl?"

"Oh, I don't know," Alesis shrugged nonchalantly, although Anders could see his eyes narrowing, "probably sometime before he started blaming you for his mother's death, isn't that right?"

Anders felt his fingers tighten around his staff, the suppressed feelings battering against him from the inside, desperate to get out. He ignored them as best he could, quelling them with the thought that, if he stayed calm, then Alesis would be dead soon. The thought was enough to satisfy him for the moment.

"Probably," Anders shrugged, doing a much better job of seeming unconcerned than Alesis was, "but then I'm not the one fleeing the country, am I?"
"Not much reason to stay now," Alesis said, keeping well within the boundaries of his shades, "what with Quentin dead. I've been meaning to leave for a while; learning his research was all that was keeping me here."

"And what? You thought you'd go to Ferelden?" Anders asked, "Shame you'll never make it."

"Oh I'll make it alright," Alesis smiled slyly, "it's you who won't be seeing the light of day for a while, dear Anders, not me. Such a shame really. You had such potential..."

Anders was ready for an attack, he had been ready ever since he entered the warehouse itself; a frontal assault by the shades he could see, a rear assault or flank by those who were more than likely hidden in the darkness, an assault from Alesis himself...but he hadn't expected his own body to betray him. Anders let out a sharp cry and fell to his knees as burning hot trails of agony ignited along his chest and neck. The pain was debilitating, washing away all ability to think straight, just as it had that night he'd saved Fenris from the Phage. It took all his swiftly draining energy just to keep a hold on his staff. He could hear Alesis approaching but couldn't look up, his head hanging limply forwards. It afforded him only a dim vision of Alesis' boots walking in to his view, the agony still tearing across him, before a pair of white clad knees joined them.

"Did you really think I wouldn't safeguard myself against you, after everything that's happened?" Alesis asked overly reasonably, reaching out to take hold of Anders' chin to lift his head up, looking into his eyes, "That night you asked me to help you, when we shared our little...moment together, I left a little present behind in your body. Something to give me a control should you decide to turn on me. It allows me the cause you pain..."

The mage gasped as the agonised patches on his body suddenly flared with ecstasy, his eyes screwing shut against his will. His staff dropped from weak fingers, falling to the floor, making the light waver and bounce. He tried to think straight, tried to make his mind obey him, but it was too difficult to focus. It was the same feeling he had felt back in Quentin's lair when Alesis had looked at him. What spell *is* this? Anders wondered wildly, unable to truly focus on his own thoughts.

"...or pleasure," Alesis said; Anders forced his eyes open to find Alesis watching him, "but I'm not sure you really deserve it, considering you only recently tried to kill me."

The blissful feeling quickly dissolved again into rending torture. Anders couldn't stop the scream that issued forth into the darkness, falling forwards into Alesis' waiting arms. The blood mage was laughing even as he held him, seeming to enjoy Anders' screams. Anders shook his head and tried to call on his own magic to protect him, to dispel the effects of Alesis' magic, but his mind was too confused and jumbled. Instead he could only lay against his enemy, shivering and trying his best to bite down on his own cries.

"One day," Alesis said, his voice hot and close against his ear, "we will meet again. Perhaps there will be a reckoning then, for whom I do not know. However, for now I will leave you here to your misery. It's my turn to spare your life this time. Now you owe me. Farewell Anders."

The mage had been beginning to manage, somehow, to try and force his way through the pain, try and focus his mind. Once Alesis was finished talking, however, he let out a surge of pain so powerful that Anders didn't even hear himself scream. His body went rigid in Alesis' arms and then he knew no more.

When he awoke it was pitch black. His body felt weak, drained, just as it had after performing the ritual to save Fenris. Anders forced himself up on shaking arms, patting around blindly on the floor for his staff. Whatever magic Alesis had used on him it was most certainly blood magic. That
bastard, Anders thought darkly, that fucking bastard, I'll kill him when I get my hands in him. What has he done to me?

Eventually, after a few minutes of sightless searching, Anders found his staff. He picked it up and cast as large a light spell as he could manage in his current state. The small ball wavered unstably but cast enough light for Anders to manage to stumble his way back to the entrance. He used the boxes to keep himself upright, hoping that he hadn't been out too long. It must have been around eight in the morning by the time I found him, Anders thought, trying his best to calculate the time and sort through his thoughts. Unfortunately for him it was definitely far beyond eight o'clock in the morning when he exited the warehouse. The building itself was suspiciously empty, the main door closed and everything packed away neatly for the night. The sky was pale but filtered through the yellow glow of late evening, confirming that he must have been unconscious for nearly the whole day. Anders stood on the dock front, watching the water wavering in the amber light, his mind blank.

He'd failed. Alesis would be long gone. Even if he followed him to Ferelden now there would be no way to track him. The blood mage would slip away into obscurity as soon as he landed, it was what he was best at after all. Anders lifted his hand to absently rub at his chest, the memory of the flaring agony still fresh in his mind. He looked out across the water and watched the waves dance. Alesis' parting words came back to him as if through a fog. Yes, Anders thought determinedly, there will be a reckoning, but it will be for you.

And I'll be the one to see it through, you can count on that.

He began to walk on automatic pilot, not taking proper notice of where he was putting his feet or where they were taking him. He didn't pay attention to the people around him, the changing of evening into night, or even his hand as it pulled the key from his pocket and unlocked the door. The house was quiet as he entered and locked the door behind him out of habit. The sound of footsteps on wood, footsteps on carpet, were unmistakable. Anders wondered along the corridor and out into the familiar living area, the fire blazing, just as Hawke reached the bottom of the stairs. Anders looked at him as if surprised to find him there. What am I doing here? He thought as Hawke hurried towards him, his arms lifting up. Anders flinched back instinctively and Hawke stopped dead only a few feet from him, his face stricken. The mage tried to find it in himself to feel pity or remorse, but it was all still buried so deeply that nothing came when called upon. Hawke watched Anders warily, his eyes equally as haunted as the mage's were. For a long minute there was nothing but the crackle and hiss of the fire.

"Where have you been?" Hawke asked finally, bringing his hands together, fingers twisting around each other.

"I..." Anders wondered whether he should lie, but he couldn't find a good reason to, "I went to the Coast, and then I tried to find Alesis."

"You...you went alone?" Hawke said incredulously, the rest coming out in a rush, "What were you thinking? Did you find him?"

"Yes," Anders said, unable to hide the bitterness, "but he escaped."

Hawke didn't seem to be able to stop himself as he finally closed the gap between them, his hands reaching out run along Anders' arms, eyes trailing over his body.

"Did he hurt you?" Hawke asked earnestly.

It was a simple question, Anders thought, but at the same time a truly awful one. Anders watched
Hawke, trying to wrap his mind around the situation. Only this morning he had considered suicide as a way out of this endless cycle of hate, love and misery that his life had become, and now here was Hawke, trying his best to shake up his resolve and pull him back in with those concerned eyes and his soft touch. I got your mother killed, Anders thought hollowly as he watched Hawke, doesn't that mean anything? Don't you hate me now? Don't you realise what a danger I am, what I do to your life when I'm in it? Anders stepped back and felt the armchair by the fire bump against his calves. He sat down heavily, lifting his hand to scrub at his face. How did I get myself into this? Why am I so weak when it comes to you Garret Hawke?

"Anders, please, are you hurt?" Hawke kneeled down in front of him, reaching up to run his palm over the mage's cheek.

"Am I hurt?" Anders could hear the lack of tone in his voice, "How can you ask me that? Yes he hurt me, but it's nothing I can't live with. I can understand him, he makes sense. What I can't understand is how you can talk to me like this after everything I've done..."

"No, w-wait, please," Hawke stuttered out, taking a breath before he grasped Anders shoulders, locking eyes with the man, "I was angry, upset, I...I don't blame you for this, how could I? It wasn't your fault..."

"You should," Anders said, ignoring Hawke's sigh of exasperation, "it was my fault."

"Please Anders, stop this?" Hawke said tiredly, his eyes dropping from his stare, his grief tainting his tone, "I can't do this now. I just can't.

Anders watched, wanting to say more, his hollow recklessness fuelling him, but thankfully he didn't. There was something, deeply buried, that was warning him to stop talking, now. He listened to it even though it didn't make much sense to him. Hawke always apologised but it wasn't enough this time. This tragedy, losing Hawke's mother to a mistake Anders himself had made...the mage knew he couldn't live with that guilt. He also knew that Hawke wouldn't have let it go this easily, he was probably just hiding it beneath the grief and loss. It would come back some day and, until then, Anders would know that under the smiles and the touches and the kisses, that Hawke blamed him. I can't do it, Anders thought, hating that Hawke's touch was bringing his tired, dead sense of feeling to life. He didn't want to feel it, he didn't want to know. He wanted to leave now and never come back, but it was too cruel, too hard. He couldn't leave Hawke alone here, not like this.

"Alright," Anders said, reaching up to pull Hawke into his arms, "I'm sorry. You must be tired. We should get some rest."

"I...don't want to sleep," Hawke said, surprising Anders on some level; Hawke was always the first to profess sleep as the best cure for anything, "I just...I don't know. Just please don't let me go."

I won't, Anders thought as he held Hawke closer, the rogue's arms sliding from their place on his shoulders until they were around his back. Fingers curled into his coat and Anders felt Hawke push his face against his neck. He could feel the wetness there, pressed against his skin, but couldn't summon any emotion in return. He felt cold and dark. He pulled Hawke as close as he could and kissed his neck softly.

"We put her in the library," Hawke was saying tonelessly, "we didn't know where else to put her."

"Shhh," Anders said, lifting a hand to run it down the back of Hawke's neck, "everything will be alright."

"I told her I'd be fine. She said I should be strong," Hawke continued as if he hadn't heard him,
"that she was proud of me but..."

Anders closed his eyes as Hawke's breath hitched. The rogue didn't continue. Anders pulled away gently and helped him to stand, noting Hawke's blank, glassy eyes, before leading him up the stairs and into their bedroom. He sat Hawke on the edge of the bed and then removed his own coat and boots. Hawke watched his every move closely as if worried that he would disappear. Anders tried to hold on to his resolve as he climbed onto the bed and pulled Hawke down beside him. The rogue curled around his side tightly, resting his head upon Anders' shoulder and his arm over his chest. Anders held him around his shoulders with one arm while he brought his other hand up to stroke gently at Hawke's soft, black hair. As he stared up at the canopy above them, the flickering fire light casting wavering shadows onto the far wall, he had an odd feeling of déjà vu. He felt like he'd been here before, feeling this same emptiness while lying like this, comfortable but hollow. Softly, not really knowing where the tune came from, he started to hum. It may have been his mother, he thought as the gentle melody filtered out into the room, who had sung it to him. There was a vague recollection of long blonde hair and gentle hands but Anders truly couldn't remember.

"It's alright," he said as Hawke tried to pull himself closer, "if you want to sleep. I'm here."

"I know," Hawke said, "I just...I don't know. I just want to stay here like this for a little while."

Anders nodded, craning his head down to place a soft kiss on Hawke's hair. He felt detached, odd, as if it wasn't even him performing any of these actions, saying any of these words. He was doing what he thought he ought to do in this situation. It wasn't what Hawke needed, he knew that; what Hawke needed was his full attention, something to distract him from the fact that his mother's corpse was lying downstairs. Anders tried his best to snap himself out of the daze he'd fallen into and come back to reality. The only thought that stopped him fulfilling that goal was the one that reminded him that he wouldn't have this for much longer. No safe home, no warm bed, no family, no Hawke...nothing to take the edge off the bleak life he was living before which had only been bearable because he knew that he was doing good in Darktown and his mission was important. Somehow, over the last six months, Hawke had slowly become more important to him than all of that, without him really noticing. Now, take Hawke away and everything else started to seem pale in comparison. It was still important, he would still do it...but the passionate fire seemed to have died, doused by the flood of loss.
It was two days after the funeral when Anders finally decided. Hawke had received dozens of letters from the nobles of the city, after news of Leandra's tragic death had spread, and the turnout for the funeral had been larger than either of them had expected. Anders was sure that a small, private ceremony would have suited Hawke better considering his state of mind, but the man hadn't been able to refuse. He had placed his mother in the Amell family mausoleum, enclosed within silver and white marble. Anders stood by Hawke through the entire ceremony and didn't protest when the rogue slipped his hand into his, fingers twining together. He didn't protest when they returned home and Hawke tried his best to act normal, to pretend that he was better, that he was past everything, he was fine. He didn't protest when Hawke finally broke down in his arms the next day, just held him and let him cry. He only protested when Hawke, in his grief stricken state, took offence to something he had said and told him what Anders had feared he would at some point.

"Hawke, I didn't mean anything by it," Anders had tried to reason with the incensed man before him.

"Do not patronise me!" Hawke had shouted, pacing back and forth.

"Please, just calm down..." Anders had said tiredly, rubbing at his forehead, eyes closed.

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down!" Hawke had yelled against Anders plea, "Not after everything you've done!"

Hawke was stressed, he was upset and he was tired, Anders had tried to rationalise to himself. Yet he hadn't been able to ignore that this was something he had known would happen. That somewhere, deep down, Hawke still blamed him; that was all Anders could think it was, all he could comprehend it as. Originally he had wanted to leave the day after his fight with Alesis. He had given Hawke his night of solace, that was what he had thought...but on waking and seeing Hawke sleeping peacefully, pillowed against his chest, his resolve had wavered. Over the next few days he began to lose the understanding he had come to before, that he would have to disappear. He began to get used to Hawke's mood swings; he was entitled to them after all wasn't he? Considering everything that had happened? Then the funeral, well he couldn't leave Hawke then, he couldn't let him go through all this alone. After the funeral was over, Anders began to think about staying...but it was that one shouted accusation that brought him out of the haze of acceptance and ambivalence he had fallen into out of habit. Hawke tended to have that effect on him, he knew, but this time it was different. This time Anders wasn't resisting for Hawke's benefit. He was doing this for himself and, despite his determination, he couldn't help but feel incredibly guilty.

It was a week after Leandra's death. The first rays of sunlight woke him. Must be early. Anders had awoken first, as usual, but instead of lying in bed and waiting for Hawke to wake up, as he had been doing the past week, he instead slipped out from under the covers quietly and dressed himself. Just focus on what you need to do, Anders thought with determination as he pulled on his coat quietly and fastened the trappings. He walked to the writing desk and wrote the letter quickly, holding it in his hands while it dried. Looking around the room he rocked back and forth on his feet and tried not to look at the bed, but it was impossible not to. He crept over silently, looked down at the sight and tried not to feel anything, endeavoured to force the apathy on to himself even as the pain tried its best to vie for poll position.

Hawke was sleeping on his side, one arm outstretched over the spot Anders had vacated, the other
pillowed beneath his head. His hair was tousled, falling over his closed eyes and, for a moment, he looked very young and vulnerable. Anders wanted to reach down and push the hair from his forehead, run his fingers across his cheek and kiss him awake...but he knew he couldn't. He looked down as something pressed against his thigh. He found Madam, who had been sleeping at the foot of the bed as usual, had awoken and was now busy walking across the covers and rubbing herself against the mage, tail high in the air. Anders smiled softly at her as he folded the now dry letter in half and placed it onto the pillow next to Hawke.

You're such a recreant, he thought hollowly, can't even tell him to his face. It was a coward's way out, he knew, but he had his reasons. Facing Hawke and telling him he was leaving...Anders knew what would happen if he did that. He didn't think he'd be able to stand up to any argument Hawke would make in return. He would be convinced to stay, that he was certain of, Hawke always managed to manipulate Anders to his point of view. He reached down and ran his hand from Madam's head all the way to the tip of her tail. The cat began to purr, letting a shiver run through her tail. Anders continued to stroke her while he watched Hawke breathing softly.

"You be good now Madam, I know what you're like," Anders said quietly, hating the vacant tone to his voice but not sure how to rectify it, "no destroying the furniture and no climbing the curtains, alright?"

The cat let out a short, trilling meow, almost as if she was answering him. Anders smiled sadly, scratching her neck, trying to make himself leave. It wasn't easy, not that he'd thought it would be, but he'd thought he was stronger than this. Why am I so weak when it comes to you Hawke? Anders thought, echoing his thoughts from that tragic night a week ago. He watched as Madam eventually lay down next to Hawke, curling round into a circle in the warm patch Anders had left. The mage crept quietly to the door and opened it, throwing one last glance at the family he had known from the start was never more than a dream, before slipping through and closing it behind him.

Anders hadn't really been sure why he thought it would work. Perhaps it had seemed a clever idea at the time but had forgotten two key elements of Garret Hawke which rubbished his plan before it had truly started; One, he was unbelievably stubborn and wouldn't let go of an idea once it was in his head and two, he knew how to pick almost any lock in the city. Anders awoke in his clinic to the now mainly unfamiliar dull hiss and click of the sewer systems whirring to life, blinking open his eyes only to find Hawke sitting in his only chair watching him, a very familiar letter clutched in his hand. Anders sat up so quickly he nearly strained his back. Hawke didn't take his eyes from him, even as Anders rubbed the sleep from his face and wished he'd had the presence of mind to find somewhere else to stay for a while so that Hawke couldn't find him.

"Care to explain this?" Hawke asked, holding up the letter as Anders stood and reached for his coat from its place on the table.

"...I thought it was perfectly self explanatory," Anders said, keeping his voice steady, not making eye contact.

"Fuck," Hawke said as if to no one, shaking his head, "I can't believe you...you would leave me a letter. Is that all I mean to you?"

Anders tried not to listen, tried not to let it hurt him. It didn't work. He purposefully didn't look at Hawke as he walked to the cold hearth. Rationalise it, he said to himself, be logical. Tell him what he needs to know.

"It wasn't working Hawke, you know that yourself. 'We can't keep going on like this'," Anders said,
keeping his back to Hawke as he started the fire, "wasn't that what you said?"

"Don't you dare turn this back on me," Hawke said dangerously, "I meant we had to work things out, not...not this."

"Maybe there is nothing to work out," Anders said coldly.

It sounded harsh, he knew it did, but that was what he needed. The reason he'd written the letter in the first place was so that he wouldn't have to do this with Hawke. He didn't want to talk about it, he didn't want to have to reason and convince and argue. He just wanted to be left alone. It was difficult enough as it was without Hawke trying to make it worse.

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" Hawke asked soberly after a long silence.

"...It means I'm sick fed up pretending," Anders spat back, "and I can't do it anymore."

It was an open ended statement and Anders knew it. He meant every word of it; he was fed up, fed up pretending to be alright when he wasn't just so he could be strong for Hawke, fed up having to hide everything he was doing from the rogue for fear that Hawke would condemn him. That was what he had meant, although, considering their topic of conversation, Anders knew how Hawke would misconstrue it. The rogue was suspiciously quiet as Anders let the silence linger. He chanced a look over his shoulder and then wished he hadn't. Hawke wasn't looking at him anymore. He was looking down at the folded letter in his hands, shuffling it round and round between his fingers, his face blank. It was a rare countenance to see on Hawke; he looked like he had finally given up. Anders turned back to the fire, blinking away the sheen forming on his eyes.

"But you said..." Hawke started softly before stopping dead.

There was a long pause and then he heard Hawke stand. Anders stayed crouched on the hearth, trying to ignore the awkward sounds of Hawke moving behind him. This is the right thing to do, he kept telling himself, it's the right thing to do.

"Is this really what you want?" Hawke asked quietly.

"...Yes," Anders said with difficulty.

"Alright," Hawke said, voice breaking before he stopped to clear his throat, "if it's what you want then..."

Hawke didn't finish. Anders listened as the rogue simply strode across the room, opened the door to the clinic and walked through, leaving it open behind him. Anders sat staring at the empty doorway for longer than he really should have. Somehow he hadn't expected it to be that easy and, underneath his relief, it made him sad to think it. Hawke was always so stubborn and determined yet, when it came to keeping a hold of Anders, Hawke always seemed to just...give up. Whether it was because he respected Anders' decisions or he just didn't care, Anders couldn't tell. When he finally found the presence of mind to stand and walk to the table he found that Hawke had left his letter there. Anders picked it up and blinked when something, which had been resting atop the letter, fell to the floor. Anders frowned, reaching down to pick it up. His face fell as recognised the ring between his fingers, glowing with a red fire. The gift he had given Hawke for his birthday...Anders closed his hand around it and held it close. Slowly he reached into his shirt with his other hand and pulled out the loose chain that held his Tevinter amulet. He unclasped the chain and slid the ring onto it, watching as it slithered down to rest awkwardly beside the flat talisman. The ring was cold when he slid it and the amulet back under his clothes, resting against his skin.
It had been raining all day. Not just normal rain either but a downpour, sheets of large, heavy drops forming white walls of water. The noise it created as it hammered against the ceiling was amazing enough in itself, interspersed occasionally with bright flashes of lightning and loud claps of thunder. Early summer thunderstorms weren't unusual in Kirkwall but it was only barely summer now. Anders stood on the promenade in Darktown overlooking the canal, leaning against the railings, and watched the rain fall. If he reached out far enough he could put his hand into the deluge, letting the water tap against his fingers persistently. He drew it back slowly, bringing his hand up to watch the droplets roll like frightened insects down his palm and over his wrist, disappearing into the cuff of his coat.

He shouldn't be standing here, out in the open like this. He knew that but it hadn't stopped him. In all honesty he'd lost track of time, watching the torrential rain, losing himself in a daydream like state as he listened to the shush and tap of water hitting water, water hitting stone. Despite the building heat of the air there was still a hint of chill in the moisture pervading everything. He had fastened his coat closed and pulled his collar tighter around his neck to stave it off. There weren't many people about on the promenade today. Occasionally someone had walked past, some of them stopping to view the monsoon before moving on, some of them even greeting him quietly with a nod of their head and one muttered word.

"Healer," they would say with respect.

Anders didn't reply. He couldn't bring himself to. The very thought of commanding anyone's respect made him feel like laughing out loud. Not that he'd ever considered himself respectable, just that he'd become used to and rather fond of the idea of being liked by the residents in Darktown. Now it just seemed like some big, cruel joke that the universe had been playing on him. In the long month since he'd left Hawke everything was beginning to seem like a joke. The air around him echoed with the dull thud of the rain and the occasional whistle of wind. Anders continued to stare at the whiteout before him, trying to discern the grey and brown of the cliff across the water.

"What are you looking at?"

Anders didn't turn. He heard Merrill walk up beside him, leaning next to him on the railing. He continued to stare out into empty space. What was he looking at? Nothing. In truth he wasn't even watching the rain, not really. It was just a distraction. Merrill didn't press him further. She just stayed by his side, mirroring his actions, looking out intently over the canal. Eventually Anders found the energy to talk.

"How are you Merrill?" he asked softly, barely audible over the thrashing rain.

"Me? Oh I'm alright," Merrill said with a bright smile, "just the usual. I've been helping Varric with some research for one of his new novels actually. He's trying to include the Dalish, you see, and so he wants me to tell him all about our history, well what we know of it anyway, all about the Dread Wolf and the Creator and the elder gods, our practices and all that. So that's kept me busy."

The gap would have been a natural one in a normal conversation, a polite way of giving the other person a chance to speak, comment or ask a question. Unfortunately Anders had lost his ability for following civilised conversations lately and didn't pick up on the cue. Merrill didn't seem to mind. Perhaps, over the last month, she'd become used to it. Instead of leaving the awkward silence she just went right on talking as if nothing had happened, updating the mage on everything that had been happening lately. He wouldn't say that he'd isolated himself from his friends but he had started visiting less, mainly because of the selfish reason that the more time he spent around them the increased chance there was of running into Hawke. Anders listened to Merrill distractedly,
picking up on a few things that she said, not once making eye contact. His stare remained strictly forwards, not out of any necessity, but just out of habit.

"So Varric found his brother finally," Merrill said, propping her chin on her palm as she leaned forwards, "that was a bit of a shock I can tell you. All this time he's been planning on how he would get his revenge and then when he finds Bartrand he's nothing more than a raving lunatic. I feel kind of sorry for him actually. Varric I mean, not Bartrand. Having to look after someone you really want to hate but you can't bring yourself to."

Anders nodded a little and hummed in agreement. He knew what that felt like. Merrill seemed to take this as a good sign, perking up a little. Do I really look that pathetic? Anders thought miserably, I must do. The elf carried on with more enthusiasm.

"And Fenris has had a bit of news too," Merrill said, "he thinks he might be on to something in tracking down his sister. He's had a few leads and Varric's been helping him out. Still, finding someone in the Imperium seems like it's a lot harder than he first thought. They're so secretive up North. Like trying to get blood out of a stone asking a Tevinter for information, or that's what Varric says anyway."

That was good news at least, Anders thought. Fenris deserved to get his life back, find what he'd lost. The elf had been surprisingly civil to him whenever they'd run into each other over the last so many weeks. Without being around Hawke Anders hadn't expected to see Fenris again either, but every now and then he'd seen him around Lowtown, or with Varric. Usually they exchanged nothing more than their usual polite greeting but, as time wore on, Fenris had begun to throw him concerned glances whenever they found themselves in each other's company for longer than it took to say 'hello'. Only the other week Fenris had truly surprised him by inquiring quietly if he was alright. Anders had looked at his reflection in the cracked piece of mirror he had at the clinic when he'd returned home, convinced he must look like he was on death's door if Fenris of all people was asking after his health. He wondered just how far the elf's ability to empathise went; in all truth he had expected Fenris to disparage him, considering he'd obviously hurt Hawke with his proclamation, but it seemed not. Instead, even though he didn't come out and say it, the elf seemed to understand on some level and was willing to be considerate at least. Fenris had been in the same situation with Hawke himself, after all.

"That's good," he said leaning back from the railing and finally looking to Merrill, giving the elf a small smile.

Merrill watched him for a moment, her eyes a little glassy. Anders frowned, wondering what he'd done now. Merrill shook her head when Anders opened his mouth to speak, sniffing a little suspiciously.

"Oh don't mind me," she said, smiling back at him, "it's just been a long time since I've seen you smile, that's all."

Anders swallowed, feeling a little guilty even though he knew it was irrational. I must be such a joy to be around, he thought gloomily. Not that Anders was the type to feel sorry for himself after a tragedy, no he was too used to them for that. He'd admit that the day he'd awoken to find Hawke waiting for him in the clinic he'd been a bit of a mess. Well, maybe a bit more than just a mess. He had locked the clinic and sat slumped in the corner ignoring the alternately timid and aggressive knocks at his door. He didn't eat anything, he barely slept and when he did it was only to fall into fitful nightmares.

However, once he finally had managed to get some sleep he woke to find the next day just a shade brighter. Not very much but at least a little. His resolve returned, slowly, and allowed him to finally
look at the situation objectively. He had to keep going forwards, he couldn't stay stuck in this limbo. So he'd swallowed down all the pain and the guilt, difficult as it was to do, picked himself up off of the floor and continued on as if nothing had really happened. Of course he couldn't help but think about it but he couldn't let it affect him, not to the point where he couldn't function anymore. He had reopened the clinic the same day, much to the relief of Darktown.

He wasn't an idiot either, he noticed that Merrill never talked of Hawke when she came round to visit and give him any gossip he might have missed. Varric mentioned him now and then, but it was trickier with the dwarf. Varric had been there when it happened after all, Merrill hadn't. Anders didn't exactly feel forced into telling the dwarf what had occurred on the night of Fenris' miraculous recovery but somehow he didn't think it would be easy to have conversation with him if Varric didn't know all the details. That was how he'd justified it to himself anyway. Perhaps he just wanted Varric to know so that maybe he wouldn't judge him too harshly after what he'd seen Justice do. It was true that Varric had been much more sympathetic once he'd learned of Alesis and the blood ritual. Anders didn't tell him everything, just enough. Varric had tried to tell to Anders about Hawke, tried to tell him that they should really meet and talk, but any time he started his usual placating conversation Anders either shut him down or very unsubtly changed the subject. Eventually Varric had given up even trying.

It's better this way, Anders thought disconsolately. That was what he'd been telling himself anyway. It kept the truth at bay and all the grief that came with it. The side of him that was Justice was perfectly content with the situation. Now he didn't have to choose anymore, now his path was clear of distractions and things which could jeopardise his mission. The other side had faded a little in the shadow of Justice's enthusiasm, wilting in the dark. It was easier this way, far easier, but it didn't mean it was any less painful. Life had carried on, it always would. He had lost something, something very precious, but in the scheme of things it was really just another in a long list of beautiful things in his life which he had lost. What he could count on, what he could rely on, was Justice. The spirit wouldn't leave him, not just because he couldn't but also because he truly didn't want to. They were one and yet separate, whole and yet distinguishable. In the many weeks since Leandra's death Anders had relied on that above all else. They would do this together, they would make this world a better place, somewhere he would be glad to live, not the hive of fear and prejudice which it was. Then...well, after that he could be free.

Free and alone.

"So," Merrill said, pulling Anders attention back to her; the mage looked round to meet the elf's gaze, "are you coming?"

"Sorry?" Anders asked, blinking, obviously having missed something important.

"To the pub," Merrill said with a light laugh, reaching over to pat him on the head, "you really aren't in there today, are you?"

Just today? Anders thought wearily. Still he laughed shortly and apologised. Merrill waved it off before pulling him bodily away from the railing, linking her arm with his, and basically marching him to Lowtown. Anders tried to protest, say that he needed to return to the clinic, but it was no use. When Merrill knew someone was just trying to placate her she never took any notice. Anders was kind of glad for it actually, her enthusiasm and want to help.

The more he thought about it, it was useful actually, Merrill turning up to invite him to the Hanged Man; he needed to talk to Varric anyway. Hopefully the dwarf would be in his suite or, if not, Anders could leave a message for him. He had tried to find news of Alesis' whereabouts through the resistance but, as of yet, there was no word of him at all. It wasn't something he wanted to do
anyway, talk of the blood mage to the members of the underground. Sabine and some of the others were already concerned enough about him as it was and, considering the rumours that had sprung up around Quentin's death, asking for information was a little risky. The resistance's network also only spread so far and news from Ferelden was hard to come by. So in the end Varric, with his extensive information network, was a much safer and more reliable bet.

As they rounded the corner out of the Old City slums the sound of voices made Anders stop, his head snapping up. It made him feel a little ill that his heart couldn't help but begin to race at the sound. He pulled Merrill into the wall, ignoring her confused protests, and watched the street ahead carefully. He didn't have to wait long until he saw just what he thought he would. Hawke walked around the corner of The Hanged Man with Fenris at his side. Anders looked on, not entirely sure what to feel. He looked...well, he looked different, Anders thought unsurely. His hair was a bit longer than usual, sitting in the awkward slightly spiky mess it usually did when Hawke didn't cut it. His stubble had also been left unattended, forming a rough beard. It made him look older, Anders thought as he watched the two men walk thankfully towards the adjacent street, talking together in low voices. He caught sight of Hawke's face just before they disappeared and, irrationally, it made Anders want to call out to him. He looked drawn, paler than usual. Yet, instead, the mage kept his mouth shut firmly. He could hear Merrill sigh beside him as she pulled away from the wall.

"You're going to have to talk to him at some point," she said bluntly, "you can't avoid each other forever."

"Says who?" Anders said, not looking at her as they continued towards the Hanged Man.

"Me, that's who," Merrill said, "and don't think I'll let either of you away with it for much longer. Honestly, if you don't talk about it how are you ever going to get it sorted out?"

"And who said anything about sorting it out?" Anders mumbled but, unfortunately, Merrill heard him.

They were almost at the pub door but Merrill stopped dead, hauling Anders to a halt as a consequence. He looked around in surprise to find her staring at him steadily, her face a mixture of disbelief and distress.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, "You've both come through worse than this before, haven't you? I mean, this isn't the end of everything. It can't be."

Anders watched the elf, feeling like he should try and reassure her somehow. Merrill was still so innocent in many ways, despite her blood magic and all the things she'd had to endure. Out of their group she had always been the most taken with Anders and Hawke's seemingly unshakable love. He felt like he was ruining her somehow by showing her what real life was like, tainting her with his own cynicism.

"All things come to an end sooner or later," Anders said, hating that he believed it.

"That's not true," Merrill said, frowning, "that's just an excuse. Come on, it's obvious that you miss him and that he misses you too."

"Merrill, please," Anders sighed, releasing the elf's arm and opening the pub door, "I really don't want to talk about it."

Merrill didn't say anything else as they entered, although it was clear to Anders that she wanted to. Norah told him that Varric was in his suite when he asked. Merrill followed him solemnly up the
stairs. They found Varric staring into the fire; Anders enjoyed the rare opportunity to take the dwarf by surprise.

"Ah, you startled me!" Varric said, letting out a chuff of laughter when Anders patted him on the shoulder, "It's been a while. How are you?"

"It's only been a couple of weeks," Anders shrugged, sitting down opposite Varric, Merrill sitting down beside him, "same old, same old. Yourself?"

"Oh you know me," Varric said, taking a drink from his ale, "always busy, busy. I've had some, well, family matters to attend to."

"Yes, Merrill told me," Anders said, "how are things with your brother?"

Varric sighed, sitting back in his chair. Anders could see from the firelight that it wasn't only Hawke that looked worn; Varric did too.

"It's...complicated," Varric said, "he's, well if Merrill's explained then there isn't really much more I can tell you. He's not any better and he's not any worse. He's just...Bartrand, only now I can't shout at him because it makes me feel bad. Anyway, let's not dwell on the melancholy shall we?"

"Couldn't agree more," Anders said with a small smile, "actually, while I'm here, I need to ask a favour of you."

"Fire away," Varric said, his eyes regaining a little of their normal sparkle.

"I need to find Alesis," Anders said bluntly, not bothering to sugar coat it, "and I thought you might be able to help me track him down."

Varric frowned a little uncomfortably while Merrill leaned forwards and turned so she could talk to him face to face.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Merrill asked, "I mean, what are you going to do?"

"Daisy..." Varric started, obviously much more aware of what Anders planned to do than Merrill was but not sure if she should really hear it.

"I'm going to kill him," Anders said matter-of-factly, ignoring Varric's concern, watching Merrill's eyes widen momentarily before she sat back in her chair with a soft 'oh'.

I don't need your concern where this is considered, Anders thought blankly, it's just an inevitability. Something I should have taken care of long ago. Anders let the spike of remorse swell up through him. It wasn't the first time he'd wished that he'd killed Alesis when he'd had the chance, all those years ago.

"I will find him, with or without your help," Anders said as Varric stalled, "it would just be easier with it, that's all."

"I didn't say I wouldn't," Varric said, placing his flagon on the table carefully, "I just don't like the idea of you going off alone to do it. I saw him fight, Anders, he's powerful and a blood mage..."

"You're preaching to the choir," Anders said with a dismissive wave, "please, spare me the 'concerned friend' speech and just say yes or no."

Varric frowned, looking a little put out. Anders wished that he could be his usual charming self but,
since he and Hawke had gone their separate ways, he had found himself becoming far more blunt and discourteous. He watched Varric closely, hoping that his manners wouldn't put the dwarf off completely.

"Fine," Varric said eventually, "yes, I'll look into it for you, but I mean it Blondie, no running off alone thinking you're invincible. I get enough of that from Hawke already without you joining in."

"When have I ever thought I was invincible?" Anders asked, shrugging, "I'm far too realistic for that. Oh, by the way..."

Varric raised his eyebrows as Anders hesitated. The mage had tried to make it sound casual but, in truth, he felt a little silly for asking. He had only returned to the mansion once, when he was sure that Hawke was out, to take back the Tevinter book which he had forgotten to retrieve when he left and to return his key. The fact that he didn't really have any other belongings that needed removing seemed entirely emblematic of the state of their relationship. He'd never truly moved in to Hawke's life, so to speak, or so he tried to tell himself. There was one thing that disputed that fact however.

"Well, have you been to the hou...I mean Hawke's house recently?" Anders said, correcting himself.

"I was there just the other day," Varric said, "why?"

"How's the kitten?" Anders asked, tapping his fingers on the table.

I think I'm destined to lose every cat I ever own, Anders thought ruefully as he watched Varric's face soften.

"She was fine last time I saw her," Varric said, "jumped all over me as soon as I sat down. Nearly had a sneezing fit what with her rubbing her face all over my nose."

"Sounds about right," Anders laughed, trying to hide the melancholy in his voice as much as possible, "she'll be getting big I guess."

"You're telling me," Varric said, "I think she forgets she isn't a kitten anymore."

As usual Anders changed the subject quite quickly once he had learned what he wanted to know. He knew it would be awkward to let the conversation continue; Varric would only start talking about Hawke. So instead they began talking about far more banal and easy subjects, like politics and the Qunari. It turned out that it was to the Qunari compound that Hawke and Fenris were headed when Anders and Merrill had avoided them earlier. It seemed that the Arishok had been having trouble and, considering Hawke had assisted him before, had asked for him personally to sort another problem. Hawke had taken Fenris because apparently the elf knew all about Qunari custom and law and was handy to have along whenever the Arishok was concerned. Anders knew that he should be anxious, what with Hawke mixing himself up once more with the Qunari, but it was a little difficult when the thing you should be apprehensive about was also the thing you were trying to avoid

Anders and Merrill spent the rest of the afternoon and a little into the evening talking with Varric. She gave Anders a protracted hug when they eventually left, making him promise to come and visit her tomorrow before she would let him go. Anders promised, even though he knew that he might not keep it.

The sunset was pale and insignificant, doused by grey clouds and a slight drizzle of rain that set a haze through the air. He wondered through it, watching the buildings with a strange curiosity.
When the time came, would the apostates in the city stand with him or against him? Would they fight if forced to or would they surrender and face the consequences? Everything was moving closer and closer and yet Anders wasn't even sure if the world was ready for a revolution. From what Cousland had told him it sounded as if Ferelden was ready to rise but was Kirkwall? There was the resistance, of course, but what of the Circle itself? Would they cower in their tower or would they show the templars exactly why it was wrong to imprison mages? Perhaps, Anders thought as he walked towards the meeting point he had appointed earlier for the transfer, it wouldn't matter. After he'd done what he was going to do he suspected that someone as radical as Meredith would invoke the right of annulment, even though the Circle itself hadn't been involved. The First Enchanter would have no choice but to protect the people under his care. It wasn't a perfect system but then neither was the one that was currently in place. Anders hoped that, when the time came, he could make sure to get Hawke's sister out of the tower safely at least. It may be a selfish want, he thought, but after everything he'd done it was only right that he try and make amends. Getting Bethany free and back to her brother was something he swore on his life he'd try and make a reality.

By the sewer entrance at the dock edge sat a grubby looking woman pulling black glossy feathers from a severed raven's wing. She looked up as Anders approached, the wall she leaned against keeping her dry from the rain and casting the street into shadow from the swiftly deepening sunset. Anders leaned against the wall beside her, watching her as she stood.

"Wondered when you'd show," the woman said, showing her dirty teeth.

"Do you have it or not?" Anders asked, his eyes flicking up and down the street even as he tried to look casual.

"No need to be hasty, my dear," the woman smiled craftily, reaching into the pouch at her waist to pull out a bundle of cloth, "Farah assured me you'd have the coin..?"

Anders sighed. Black market dealers were always only interested in one thing. He reached into his coin purse and fished out three gleaming sovereigns. The woman's eyes lit up on seeing them. She reached out and grabbed them from Anders' palm, scratching at them with a broken nail to make sure they were real.

"I'm not trying to rip you off," Anders said stonily, "now hand it over before we're seen."

The woman gave him a shrewd look but pocketed the money before shoving the cloth bundle into his hands. Anders unwrapped it quickly as the woman began walking hurriedly towards the sewer entrance. The mage looked into the bundle and scowled, looking up and calling out just before the woman disappeared.

"Hey, wait!" Anders shouted, watching the woman turn and shake her hands, her countenance angry.

"Keep your bloody voice down idiot!" the woman said as Anders ran towards her.

"This isn't enough," he said tightly as he stopped before her, thrusting the bundle at her face.

"Isn't enough?" the woman scoffed, eyes narrowing, "You any idea how hard it is to come by drakestone, sonny? That there is all you'll find in Kirkwall, unless you want to go to a dragon's lair and fish some out yourself!"

"There has to be more than this," Anders said in frustration, looking over his shoulder to make sure no one had walked around the corner, "who did you get it from?"
"Oh no, can't be telling you that," the woman shook her head and crouched down to open the sewer entrance, "I don't let out information about me clients. You want something you go through me and I say I can't get you any more than that. Was difficult enough getting that much!"

"Please, I need..." Anders started but the woman cut him off.

"I said I don't have any more!" the woman said harshly, "You want more then you find another supplier who might have some but you'll be lucky. Now get out of here before we're caught doing what we shouldn't be doing by the City Guard."

With that she left Anders standing alone in the gloaming, holding the small cloth bundle with the handful of drakestone at its centre. Anders stood looking into the bundle, his lips a tight line. It had taken him a long time to build up enough coin to afford the drakestone he needed and now all he got was this? The amount he held in his hand was barely a tenth of what he needed. Anders folded the cloth roughly, tying it tightly at the top before stuffing it angrily into his pack. Looks like I'll have to track down a new supplier, Anders thought wearily. Yet another delay, yet another obstacle. Not that he was really that close to completing the spell yet anyway, but getting the drakestone was going to be another part completed, another step in the right direction. Now it felt as if for every step he took forwards that he was taking another three back. He took a deep breath and began the short walk back to Darktown, his purse light and his heart heavy.
Conspiracy

Anders studied the map more closely, trying to discern the perfect place for a strategic ambush. He reached up and pushed his sweaty hair back from his forehead. It was swelteringly hot in the clinic. The full heat of summer had hit early and there was yet to be a storm, like there had been last month, to break the high temperatures and the humidity. Yet the heat wasn't the only thing that was getting on his nerves. He had been here for hours now, doing his best to work with the other resistance members and create a foolproof plan, or as foolproof as any plan to take down Meredith and her templars could be. That was easier said than done however, considering no one could agree on anything.

"I'm telling you that we need to get her alone," Farah, a tall, skinny woman in her late thirties was gesturing angrily at Sabine as she spoke, "you think we could possibly take down Meredith if she had her templar escort with her too?"

"I didn't say we could," Sabine said back calmly, "only that your idea of fighting them in Hightown seems awfully unrealistic. It would only give the templars the advantage."

"I don't see how we're going to lure them anywhere else," Ghalt, the resistance's intelligence man, said with a shrug, "they'll stay where they're strongest, Meredith most of all."

"I say we weaken them before we strike," Farah said, her eyes fervent, "I mean that's Anders' plan, isn't that right?"

"We don't know Anders' plan," Sabine said tightly.

The man in question looked up slowly at the three arguing mages and sighed through his nose. No wonder there hadn't been a mage uprising that had ever worked properly, Anders thought, they find it impossible to work together. He put down the blunt pencil he'd been using to mark out his strategies and lifted his hands, trying to calm down Farah and Sabine, who were now arguing.

"Oi!" he said when they didn't take any notice, forcing them to finally stop and look at him in surprise, "Shut up will you?"

"Been wanting to say that all night," Ghalt muttered, earning a dark look from Farah.

"Look," Anders said, placing his hands on the table before him and trying to sound rational, "I've already told you that I can't tell you the specifics..."

"Then how are we supposed to know when to act?" Sabine said; she, out of all of them, had been the most suspicious of Anders' secrecy.

"Believe me Sabine," Anders said with a serious look, "you'll know the signal when you see it. It's going to be hard to miss."

Sabine gave him a scrutinising glance but nodded begrudgingly. Farah folded her arms and sat down huffily next to Ghalt who ignored her as best he could. Anders pulled his shirt away from his body and shook it back and forth to let some air flow against his skin. He looked back to his map of Kirkwall and tried to focus.

"Ghalt, can you show me exactly where the templars would put up barricades if we attacked from..?" Anders started to ask.
That was when the knocking started, loud and quick and insistent. Anders hung his shoulders in defeat; if it wasn't his own people distracting him it was something else. The other three were looking to the door in trepidation.

"Who would it be at this time of night?" Farah asked, her cocky arrogance gone at the first sign of trouble.

"Don't worry," Anders said, hoping it wasn't the kind of trouble he didn't want, "people knock even if the lantern is out."

He readied his staff despite his easy stance and opened the door cautiously. The man he found there was vaguely familiar even in the gloom. He looked at Anders with relief, panting as if he'd run for miles. The mage didn't open the door any further than he needed to.

"Thank the Maker," the man said, gasping, "Healer, we need you, in Lowtown, there's been an accident!"

"Slow down," Anders said authoritatively, pushing the man back so he could slip out into the alleyway and pull the door closed behind him, "what's happened?"

"We don't know, it's some sort of gas, it's killing everyone!" the man said, his eyes wide and filled with panic, "We can't stop it, it's spreading, but we managed to get some people out. Can you treat them? We don't have anything to heal them, they just get worse and worse and we don't know what to do!"

Anders frowned. He thought that the man before him may have been one of the men he treated after the foundry exploded but he wasn't sure. Ever since Tabatha's betrayal he had been wary of people turning up and asking him to go places with them, no matter if it was for a good cause or not.

"Can't you bring them here?" Anders asked, "I could treat them..."

"No, we ain't got no time!" the man said in alarm, "Please, I'm begging you!"

"I can't just do magic out on the street," Anders said in frustration, "if it really is an emergency then the City Guard and the Templars are sure to be swarming all over it."

"We can take care of 'em," the man assured him quickly, and unreasonably Anders thought, "I swear, there's only one City Guard there, he's young, I can get rid of him. Please Healer, we don't know anyone else that can help. My daughter, please, she's dying..."

He looked into the man's eyes and could find no lie there. Not that he took that as proof that this wasn't a trap but, if it was true, it sounded like he was needed. A poison gas? His prowess as a spirit healer, what with Justice's help, should be more than capable of cleansing their bodies of any impurity. Damn my inability to refuse, Anders thought with a humourless smile.

"Wait here," he said, pointing, even as the man's face transformed from pensive to overjoyed.

"Oh thank you, thank you!" he was saying as Anders slipped back into the clinic and closed the door.

"Who is it?" Sabine asked, her face worried as Anders opened his cabinet of potions and began emptying it into his pack, "What's going on?"

"There's been an accident in Lowtown," Anders said, "some sort of poison. I'm going to help."
"Are you mad?" he heard Farah say in disbelief, "you can't do magic out in the open on the streets of Kirkwall!"

Anders ignored her as he stood, fishing out his key to the clinic and tossing it to Sabine. The older woman caught it, looking back up to Anders, her worry evident. Yes I'm probably being an irresponsible idiot, Anders thought as he watched Sabine, but sometimes it works. Story of my life I guess. He shirked on his coat even though it was far too hot to be wearing it. He might need the protection.

"Lock the door once I'm gone," Anders said, "and if you need to leave then lock it behind you and put the key inside the lantern, alright?"

Ghalt and Farah's mouths were hanging open as they stared at him, unsure what to say. Sabine's lips, in contrast, were a thin line. She wasn't happy about this, Anders could tell, but she nodded nonetheless. Anders nodded back in farewell before rushing out of the door. The man was still there, fidgeting on his feet. His eyes lit up on seeing Anders return.

"Lead the way," Anders said determinedly.

Well, Anders thought with guilty relief, at least I know it isn't a trap.

Lowtown was in a panic which, despite sounding like a bad thing, was actually a bonus. Anders and his guide managed to slip through the chaos unnoticed. The heat in the maddened crowd was stifling, pushing against the crush of bodies and fighting to get through. Anders could feel the sweat dripping down his back but ignored it as best he could. He had caught site of a few City Guard trying to control the terrified residents but thankfully there was no sign of the templars yet. One thing Anders noticed quite early on was that they were the only people going in the opposite direction to everyone else. They pushed through the thronging hoards of panicked people, forcing a path towards a side alley.

"It's down here," the man said breathlessly as they finally broke free of the mob and stood for a moment at the mouth to an alleyway, "we don't know where it came from. Everyone started going crazy, attacking people. The others started throwing up and, well, then they don't stop and then..."

"It's alright," Anders said catching his breath and walking further into the alley, his nose wrinkling as he caught the first scent of the poison on the air, "just show me to those who are ill and I'll do what I can."

The man didn't waste another second. He ran down the alley, avoiding bundles of refuse and what Anders recognised with building horror were dead bodies slumped against the walls. The ground was slick with spreading patches of vomit and blood as the alley finally opened out into a larger side street. At least it's cooler back here, Anders thought humourlessly.

He rounded the corner at the end of the alley and then instantly pulled back, flattening his body to the wall. The other man continued round without compunction but then he had no reason to be afraid. The City Guard, the sight of whom had forced Anders to stop, was talking in a calm voice to the crowd of people in the street. Thankfully he hadn't noticed Anders, for which the mage was very grateful. The mage peered around the corner and watched as the man who had led him here managed to walk casually behind the guard, making it look as if he was simply rejoining the crowd. Then the man nodded to the crowd of people as if giving them a signal. Once he was in position he turned picked up a large piece of rubble from the ground and wasted no time in striking the City Guard over the head. The Guard stumbled forwards into the crowd, dazed, only to receive a solid punch from another man who had been standing in front of him. The Guard fell forwards...
and was caught by a couple of women and a man who lowered him gently to the ground, unconscious.

"It's safe!" his guide shouted.

Anders rushed out from his hiding place and joined the crowd, scanning the area to make sure there were no more unwelcome guests. Fortunately he was faced only with a sea of terrified and anxious faces, all speaking over each other. They pawed at him, speaking so fast he could barely understand what with them all talking at once.

"Please, where are the injured?" Anders said loudly, trying to talk over the din of voices. "Someone show me to the infected people!"

A hand reached out from the fray and grabbed his wrist. Anders looked down to find a young girl, perhaps only ten or eleven, tugging at him. She looked worried, yes, but less so than the adults. He let her pull him towards a small blacksmith that was set into the wall beside a set of stairs that were alive with a swirling, green glowing gas. Anders stared at the gas as the girl led him into the shop and the crowd of adults followed after him, clucking like a flock of chickens. The shop was hot, the air thick with the smell of illness and vomit. The dim lantern inside revealed the effects of the poison he'd been staring at; seven people lay on the ground and another five were grouped around the blacksmith's empty water basin next to the anvil, emptying their stomachs or heaving on empty ones. Anders stared for a moment, wondering who was in more danger. He decided quickly that those who weren't moving should be the first who were treated. He turned and crouched down before the little girl, looking into her large brown eyes.

"I know you're scared," he said, "but I need you to do me a favour. Go to the end of the street and keep a look out for any Guards or templars, alright? If you see them then you come straight back here and tell me, okay?"

The girl nodded emphatically before hurrying off.

"And don't go near the gas!" he shouted after her as she slipped out of the door; he turned to the others who were now crowding around their loved ones, murmuring out quiet pleas and reassurances, "Please, everyone out, I need everyone outside. Come on, hurry up!"

They all stared at him, some accusing, others confused and the rest bemused. Anders took hold of the nearest woman and pulled her to the doorway.

"These people don't have much time!" Anders shouted as he pushed her as gently as he could back out into the street, "Now get out and let me concentrate before they all die!"

That one word seemed to snap them all from their stupor. Anders knew he was being harsh but he didn't have time to pussyfoot about with people who weren't dying. They filed out quickly, throwing tearful glances back over their shoulders at siblings, children, parents, lovers. Anders tried not to think about that as he hurried to the first girl who was lying on the ground, picking up her limp arm and feeling her pulse. It was sluggish and erratic but at least her heart was still beating. Anders placed it gently back onto the rough sack which she'd been laid upon. He closed his eyes and placed his hands over her body and called upon Justice's power within him. It had always been much more difficult to employ his spirit healer abilities ever since Justice had transformed into Vengeance. The spirit was either too keen to help or unwilling to. Mercifully the spirit was more than happy to lend his power to Anders healing ability now, but it sometimes came as too great a surge. Anders tried his best to regulate the flow of power and keep it at an even level as he let out a cleansing aura into the air around the girl's body. He could feel the infection ravaging her system, seeping out through her lungs and into her bloodstream. Anders pushed a little
harder to force the poisonous gas from her lungs; it came out in a wheezing gasp and the girl's eyes flew open, blinking and glassy.

"It's alright," Anders said softly, watching as she heaved in lungfuls of fresh air, "just relax, I'm trying to help you."

He wasn't sure if she was comos mentis enough to understand him but he carried on regardless, flushing the poison from her blood. Once he was sure that she was stable enough he moved on to the next and the next. Eventually he had five cured patients lying confused and dazed on the floor behind him. Unfortunately when he reached the six and seventh, an older man and woman, they were already dead. Anders heart sank but he knew, however much he regretted losing them, that there was no time to mourn. Deal with them later, Anders thought solemnly, there are still others alive who need you more than they do. He stood up and hurried over to the five still huddled around the rancid bucket. Anders doubted whether they would be able to keep down any potion he gave them to drink so he set about using the same technique he had used on those who had been unconscious. Once they had stopped being sick he sat them all down on the floor and leaned them against the wall. He wiped the sweat away from his eyes as it dripped from his forehead and tried to focus.

"Drink this," he said as he handed out glass flasks of the potions he had grabbed before coming here, "you need to finish it all, and drink lots of water, you'll have lost a lot of fluids..."

"Guards! Guards!" Anders was interrupted by a young voice that he didn't recognise but was sure must be the little girl he'd posted on watch.

Anders cursed, quickly buckling his pack closed and trying to think how he could get out of the narrow side street to avoid questioning. The little girl flew into the blacksmiths, stopping only when Anders took a hold of her shoulders.

"How many?" he asked.

"Two," the girl said, her cheeks flushed from running, "an old man and a woman with red hair."

Red hair? Could it be Aveline? No, Anders thought, I can't take that chance. I need to get out of here before I'm seen.

"Is there any other way out of here back onto the main street?" he asked.

"Uh uh," the girl shook her head, "only other way is down into the square but that's where all the nasty gas is. The other people that went down there to help us haven't come back yet."

"Other people?" Anders asked distractedly as he looked over the girls shoulder to the door, expecting the guards to walk through at any moment.

"Yup," the girl said enthusiastically, swinging her arms, seemingly unafraid now that no one was dying, "the Guard tried to stop him but Serrah Hawke told him he was going to stop the bad gas from..!"

Anders didn't hear any more of what she said. He continued to stare at the door, listening with a dull sense of awareness as the sound of the approaching Guards grew louder. He looked over his shoulder at the old man and woman, staring lifelessly at the ceiling. You fucking idiot, Anders thought in a panic as he stood, Hawke you fucking idiot what have you done? He raced from the blacksmiths, hearing one of the Guards asking him to stay with the group. When he ran straight for the stairs, still covered in swirling green gas, the same Guard shouted for him to stop in an urgent
and disbelieving voice. Anders ignored him, choking as he inhaled the thick poison but not slowing. He cast the purifying spell on himself as he ran, blinded by the stinging gas as his eyes began to tear up, and then set about readying himself to help anyone he came across. The building heat, combined with the gas, was making him light headed but he tried his best to stay focused and objective.

What he hadn't expected to happen upon, when he rounded a corner and found himself at the square, was a fight. He hadn't heard the sounds of battle until he was right on top of it, the fog of gas dampening everything. Anders scanned the fray, trying desperately to find a sign of Hawke or anyone he recognised. Surely he didn't come down here alone, Anders thought, aghast. He ran out into the square, avoiding an archer who had taken a sudden interest in him and ducked behind the walled garden in the centre. As he crouched there, trying desperately to see, someone appeared through the fog and dropped down beside him, hacking and coughing. Anders blinked in surprise as he recognised Fenris' white hair before he recognised the elf's face. He reached up instinctively and sent out a wave of purifying magic, expelling the poison from his system. Fenris' cough stopped almost immediately; the elf lifted his hand to his throat in confusion before looking up and seeing Anders sitting next to him.

"What on earth are you doing he..?" he started to ask but was rudely interrupted by a rather burly looking warrior who took that moment to slam his sword into the ground between them.

Fenris stumbled to his feet, his sword at the ready, while Anders rolled out of the way before standing. The warrior focused on Fenris, swinging his massive blade at the elf's head. Fenris ducked and dodged to the left, lifting his sword and arcing it down towards the man's leg. The warrior blocked the blow just as Anders sent a burst of flame driving into his back. His armour protected him but the force of the blow put him off balance, allowing Fenris to lunge forward quickly and slice at the exposed flesh between the plates of armour on his body. The man fell to the ground with a cry, his blood bubbling and hissing as it came into contact with the foul air. Anders ran back to Fenris' side as the elf looked around for more enemies.

"It'll take too long to explain why I'm here," he said, holding his staff at the ready in case anyone else decided to attack, "how many others are with you? Where's Hawke?"

"Just Varric," Fenris said, eyes alert, his hair sticking to his forehead with sweat, "and we've been split up. It was an ambush, I have no idea where they are!"

"Then we stay together until we find them," Anders said seriously, "I have to get the poison out before it kills them. We don't have much time."

Fenris nodded in reply and Anders was grateful for the elf's pragmatic and unflappable nature. They set out together through the viscous fog. Unfortunately the next enemy they came across wasn't so easy to fight. Not because they were powerful but because it was a civilian. The woman was on top of them before they saw her, running silently from the green haze before them. She lunged at Fenris first, baring her teeth, her eyes clouded and crazed. The elf had raised his blade to attack but, on seeing she wasn't part of the group of mercenaries that had assaulted them, didn't seem to know how to react. He pushed the woman from him when she tried to claw at his face with her nails. She stumbled back with a cry of anger, her wild eyes spinning over to Anders. The mage was not so forgiving. He raised his staff and waited until she ran at him; when she was close enough he sent the bladed end deep into her heart.

"No!" he heard Fenris shout in dismay.

The elf ran to his side as the woman slumped to the ground. Anders pulled his staff free of her body, his face bleak. Fenris grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around.
"What have you done?" he shouted, "She was an innocent, you should have helped her..!"

"I couldn't!" Anders said, pulling away from Fenris' grasp, "Don't you think I would have if I could?"

Fenris watched him warily, that age old rivalry and dislike seeming to fuel his suspicion.

"It's the poison," Anders explained as he looked down at the dead woman at his feet, "for some of them, the unlucky ones, it's getting into the brain before it kills them. Drives them mad. There's nothing I can do; once it's gone that far the damage is irreparable. The most we can do is give them a swift death."

"...I see," Fenris looked grim but at least he wasn't glaring anymore, Anders thought, "I misunderstood. I apologise."

"No need," Anders shook his head, "come on, we have to keep looking."

They found Varric next, holding off a group of four mercenaries who had him pinned down behind a pile of crates. Fenris charged the mercenaries while Anders ran to Varric's side. The dwarf was holding a cloth over his face to try and filter out the poison gas but it was barely effective. Anders treated him quickly and then rushed to help Fenris. The elf had already slain two and injured the third. Anders left him to deal with the maimed man while he sent a bolt of shining spirit energy surging into the fourth enemy of the group, a rogue who had been trying to flank the elf. She stumbled, disoriented, giving Anders enough time to rush in and slam the blunt end of his staff against her leather helm. She fell to the ground stunned. Anders rammed the bladed end of his staff into the dirt at his feet and sent runnels of rock from the ground to surround her torso and hold her in place. When he looked up Fenris was swinging his massive blade to rid it of the dripping gore it was encrusted with.

"Well, can't say I've ever been happier to see you," Varric's hoarse voice made Anders turn to see the dwarf walk a little unsteadily out into the square.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Anders said dryly, not really in the mood for small talk; the oppressive heat was beginning to take its toll on him, "have you seen Hawke?"

"Not for a while," Varric shook his head as he reloaded Bianca, "they've had me pinned down there ever since they separated us. Last I saw of him he was pairing off against that crazy bitch of an elf."

"The one that set this up you mean?" Fenris asked, his face hard.

"Can you think of any other crazy elves around here?" Varric asked, then he smiled, "Oh, of course, look who I'm talking to..."

"Nice," Fenris said in a deadpan voice, "where did they go?"

"They were headed over that way last time I saw them," Varric pointed to an alleyway.

The alley's dark entrance was flanked by two massive barrels which were spewing out the poisonous gas. Fenris stopped to grab a long, bent piece of metal from the satchel of one of the dead mercenaries and ran towards them, Anders and Varric at his heels. The elf jammed the piece of metal into a matching hole in the first barrel and began to turn it quickly. The barrel made a creaking, squealing sound as the lid closed with rough, jerky motions. Eventually the lid snapped shut and the gas stopped, thinning almost instantly in the air around them. Fenris quickly dealt with the second one while Anders examined the closed barrel.
"So that's where it's coming from," Anders said with a frown as they entered the alleyway, "let's find Hawke quickly, we're running out of time."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the man in question stumbled into view and crashed against the wall to their left, an incensed, snarling female elf holding onto his back, her legs wrapped around his waist. Hawke reared back and rammed her into the wall again, this time hard enough to dislodge her. He ran a few steps forward before turning, his twin daggers lost, and pulled out his short close quarters dagger as she staggered to her feet. Fenris rushed to his side while Varric trained his crossbow on the elf. Anders stood in the background, looking Hawke over for any of the side effects of the poison. No need to get too close unless I don't have to, he thought harshly.

"Took your time," Hawke said to Fenris, rubbing his neck tenderly; Anders could see it was red and lacerated crudely as if by someone's nails.

"Sorry, got a bit caught up myself," Fenris said sarcastically, "what are you complaining about, you're still alive aren't you?"

"Barely," Hawke said as he watched the now trapped looking elf before him; Anders had almost convinced himself to slip away...but then Hawke began to choke.

Fenris was the one to catch him as he stumbled, wheezing, to the ground. Anders hated the sheer dread that infected him at the sight of Hawke in distress but he didn't waste a second, rushing to Hawke and dropping to his knees beside him. Varric kept the female elf from fleeing while Anders worked, searching Hawke's body for the deadly toxin. Hawke's eyes were closed tightly as he thrashed, the elf's eyes anxious as he watched Anders work. The mage forced his racing heartbeat to slow as he listened to Hawke's frenzied gasps, forced himself to concentrate on flushing out the poison. He started with the lungs, emptying them with a forceful push. Unfortunately he hadn't banked on Hawke not having enough oxygen in his system, as he had already been choking, to withstand the treatment. When Anders emptied his lungs Hawke's eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out.

"He isn't breathing!" Fenris said in alarm, his eyes flying to Anders as the mage stopped his treatment.

"Shit!" Anders exclaimed, before doing the only thing he knew that would help.

Sometimes there was no place for magic, even Anders knew that. A rejuvenation spell wouldn't be of any use unless there was air in the lungs. He took a deep breath and leaned down to place his lips tightly over Hawke's and blew deeply, filling the rogue's lungs, while he reached out with his right hand and cast the spell. The rogue's skin was slick with sweat and blood. Hawke's beard tickled his face as he leaned to the side to take in another lungful of air before he recaptured Hawke's inert lips and blew again. He felt Hawke moving beneath him and pulled back, watching in relief as Hawke's eyes fluttered open torpidly. The rogue drew in deep, gasping breaths, his eyes confused and searching. Anders took the opportunity to heal the smaller wounds Hawke had on his body, the scratches at his throat, a knife wound along his arm; it wasn't until Hawke spoke that Anders remembered why he'd been trying his best not to be seen.

"Anders?" Hawke said as he coughed.

Fenris helped him to sit up, putting him at eye level with the mage. Anders wasn't sure whether he felt like running away from or railing at the man sitting before him. For better or for worse, the anger won out.
"You stupid bloody reckless arse!" Anders shouted with a scowl, "Exactly what the fuck were you thinking when you ran into the cloud of poisonous gas? Enlighten me!"

Hawke stared at him in confusion, his mouth opening and closing. Fenris looked a little uncomfortable and stood up, walking over to join Varric in taking care of their prisoner.

"W-why are you shouting at...why are you even here!" Hawke shouted back once he had regained his wits.

"Why am I shouting at you?" Anders asked facetiously, "Oh I couldn't imagine why. You nearly died, you moron! What were you planning on doing if I wasn't here?"

"I would have been fine," Hawke spat back as he stood; Anders mirrored his actions.

"Of course you would," Anders sneered, "you would have been a fine corpse!"

"Like it's any of your fucking business," Hawke said angrily, "I didn't ask for your bloody help!"

"And what about Fenris and Varric," Anders said with a glare, "planning on them being miraculously 'fine' as well were you?"

"To be fair he has a point," Varric said with a cough as he and Fenris secured the stonily silent elf, "I'm starting to think my friendship with you is bad for my health Hawke."

"Oh what," Hawke growled, "you're siding with him too, are you?"

"...Actually it was a joke," Varric said dryly, raising an eyebrow, "didn't realise I'd lost touch with my humorous side that badly."

Anders had never been so happy to see the City Guard in his life. Yes he wanted to know exactly what had happened, yes he wanted to help, yes he wanted to look for more survivors even though he suspected there wouldn't be any, but he definitely could not deal with Hawke right now. When Anders heard approaching footsteps he looked up over Hawke's shoulder. The Guards were running towards them from the now gas free square, obviously having taken the dissipation of the poison as a sign that it was safe to enter. Hawke, despite his anger, seemed to notice Anders' panic and turned to look behind him.

"Fuck," Anders muttered as he backed further into the alley, "is there another way out of here?"

"There's a sewer entrance at the end of the alley, behind those boxes," Hawke said, his anger seeming to evaporate as he fell to planning; Hawke turned back to Anders as the mage hesitated, "I'll distract them, go!"

Anders nodded awkwardly to Hawke as he continued to back down the alley. The rogue's eyes seemed to soften as they watched him go but Anders wasn't sure if he was just imagining it. Don't you dare do anything stupid now, Anders thought hastily, forcing himself to turn and run towards the safety of the sewers. The sound of Hawke's voice as he began talking to the Guards seemed to follow him as he dropped down into the darkness and headed for home.

"Oh thank the Maker you're safe!" Sabine said when Anders finally shuffled through the clinic door.

Ghalt and Farah were gone, having had more pressing business to attend to it seemed. Sabine stood and rushed to his side, fussing over him in a motherly sort of way that Anders found it hard to
"Please, Sabine, I'm alright," Anders said as he gently extricated himself from her.

"Well," Sabine said sceptically as Anders wandered to his chair and sat down, leaning his staff against the table beside him, "you don't look alright."

Anders scrubbed his hand across his face and was quite sure that she was right. He felt awful and it wasn't just because of Hawke. He hated losing people; not that he blamed himself for the deaths of the old couple back in Lowtown but because of the fact that if he hadn't been forced to sneak there then he might have been able to save their lives. He hated having to flee the scene like a criminal when he wasn't finished treating the people he'd come to look after, then once again being forced to run from the scene of battle even though all he'd done was help. It made him so angry sometimes that he found it hard to control himself. Running into Hawke, nearly losing him and then getting into a stupid fight...that had just been the icing on the cake. Anders wasn't truly angry anymore, he was frustrated and upset, but he didn't want anyone to know. He didn't want Sabine to know. He needed to be strong for them, for the resistance; she didn't need to see him like that.

"It's just been a bit of a rough night Sabine," Anders assured her, pasting on a weary smile, "one of many. I'm quite sure I can handle it."

Sabine nodded slowly but her eyes were cautious. Of course she knows I'm lying, Anders thought grimly, but at least she's nice enough to pretend to believe me.

"I need to go," Sabine said as she walked over to Anders and handed him the clinic key he had given her, "I just wanted to make sure you were well and everything was alright."

"Thank you," Anders said genuinely, "that means a lot."

Anders sat in the chair, staring at the wall in front of him, long after Sabine had left. So running into him didn't matter that much did it? Anders thought ruefully, how long are you going to keep that lie going? He hadn't been prepared, that was the worst part, he hadn't been ready to see Hawke and then they had ended up arguing, just like usual. Better that we're apart really, Anders tried to rationalise, we were obviously destined to end up like this. We can't even be civil when we see each other, I mean that's ridiculous, it's only right this way, it's best, it's...

Terrible. Awful. Worst fucking decision you've ever made in your measly life.

Anders stood up and walked to the door, locking it before placing the key in his pocket. He undressed listlessly. It was a balmy night, the air warm, no need for a fire. He blew out the lantern and then got into bed. You should try closing your eyes, Anders thought dryly as he continued to stare into the swirling darkness, it usually helps when you're trying to get to sleep. It was difficult, however, when there was a so much on his mind. Tensions were running high in the city. The Qunari were causing trouble and the Viscount didn't want to deal with it. That was why he had Hawke do it for him, Anders supposed, but then that was still avoiding the issue. The issue being that the Arishok didn't seem to want to leave from what Anders could tell. The Qunari leader had been given more than enough time to wait for his ship back to Par Vollen but it had never arrived. Anders was beginning to suspect there was no such ship in the first place.

Then there were the templars. Meredith had been coming down harder than usual on the apostates who had been caught recently. Not only that but the number of templar patrols had been raised throughout the city and raids on family homes and resistance safe houses had been occurring more often. Anders was feeling the squeeze of Meredith's hand as if it were around the back of his own neck. The harder they tried to fight, the harder Meredith pushed back against their efforts. The
mage was beginning to wonder how long it would be before Meredith simply took the final step and began openly seeking the resistance with a mind to quashing it once and for all.

Then there were the personal things, like Aleisis who, according to Varric's sources, seemed to have vanished into thin air. Every now and then Varric would get a report from a friend of someone who might fit his description but no one was ever sure, not completely. Anders was beginning to worry that he would lose track of him for good. Not that he would mind being rid of the nasty little prick, just that he didn't like having Alesis where he couldn't see him. It wasn't what he wanted, to lose track of him, then over time forget all about him, until the blood mage finally decided to sneak back and take Anders by surprise. I'll be bloody waiting for the day that he does, Anders thought darkly, pulling the thin covers further down to allow his body to cool.

He wasn't even going to think about Hawke any more. It wasn't worth it. He'd had something that he'd always wanted, that he'd spent his life wishing he was worthy of, and then he'd thrown it away. Hawke had tried to fight him on it, tried to save what they had, but Anders hadn't listened. Now all he could do was try and convince himself that it was the best decision, that it had to be this way. It was the only way he wouldn't go mad. What he had with Hawke...it was like a dream or a mirage. Beautiful but intangible and, ultimately, fleeting. Every good thing comes to an end, Anders thought. Yet, even as the weight of all his worries pressed on his mind, the thing he found he missed the most was something that seemed entirely trivial. He missed Hawke's soft breathing as he lay in the dark and went to sleep. Perhaps that was why he'd found it so difficult to drop off into the void over these past few months. Hawke usually fell asleep before he did and he always lay close enough to have his arm around Anders in some way and to have his sleepy breathing audible. Now, lying on the floor alone with silence all around, Anders was finding it difficult to adjust.

"I...miss you," Anders said tonelessly into the darkness, shaking his head as he realised what an idiot he was being, "for fuck's sake, go to sleep. Talking to yourself now, that's never a good sign is it?"

He closed his eyes and sighed, trying his best to ignore his heightened awareness of the silence surrounding him.
Food shopping was not one of Anders' favourite activities. Not because he particularly disliked the actual doing of it but more because the stalls in Darktown weren't worth buying from. Unfortunately he didn't have a choice. He would have preferred to visit Lowtown and at least get some fresh vegetables but his coin purse was depressingly light. You know things are bad when you can't even afford Lowtown, Anders thought grimly as he inspected the meagre produce before him.

"You gonna buy summit or what?" the stall keeper, a burly woman with a headscarf and only a few rotten teeth, said unkindly.

"Yes, yes," Anders assured her, "I'm just...deciding."

"Well hurry up," the woman barked, muttering to herself as she sorted through the boxes behind the stall, "ain't got no time for browsers."

As he picked up some wilted herbs and some small, sickly looking potatoes a group of three women turned up at the other end of the stall, chatting to each other. The stall keeper instantly abandoned Anders and went to attend to her new customers, obviously seeing them as more lucrative fare. The women, one young and the other two roughly middle aged, began picking up produce with practiced ease, proving that they shopped here regularly, talking to each other all the while.

"Oh I know," the younger woman said, elongating all of her vowels to irritating effect, "it's madness so it is!"

"Murder is as murder does," one of the older women said with a shrug, her dark hair tied in a loose bun, "I say let 'em be, it was no more 'an those Guards deserved."

"I agree with you Maisie," the third said, her voice high and nasal, "I mean they think they can get away with anything they like! I heard they raped and killed her! Them boys was only doing what was right."

Anders listened with curiosity as the women continued to talk. He hadn't had much news from the rest of the city lately, what with holing up in his clinic and trying to lay low after the gas incident. He'd pretty much stuck exclusively to Darktown since the incident and, despite the fact that he didn't mind the place, he was becoming a little sick of the same streets over and over again. News of the outside was welcome, even if it sounded miserable.

"What's that Laura?" the stall keeper said as she began toting up the amount for the goods the women had bought, "something happening up in Hightown?"

"Haven't you heard?" Laura, the woman with the nasal voice, said in disbelief, "I'm amazed, usually you've got all the gossip Carolyn!"

"Well I ain't had many customers today," Carolyn said, puffing up her shoulders, "so come on you three, tell us the news."

"Well," the younger woman said, leaning in as if she were about to impart a secret, "you heard about those Guards what were murdered the other day, how they've been looking for the people that did it?"
"Aye, I heard about it," Carolyn said; Anders moved a little closer so as to hear better.

"Turns out it was two elf boys," Maisie said, pulling all the attention to her, "they says the Guards raped and killed their sister and that no one was doing anything about it. So they took it into their own hands and did it themselves!"

"My, my," Carolyn said, "well, can't say I blame 'em. Those Guards don't do anything for us common folk and anyway even if the Guards were caught they'd only be punished a little. We know how it works around here. So, never mind that, have they caught 'em then?"

"Not quite," Maisie continued, "this is the best bit. Turns out, you'll never believe it Carolyn, they've gone to them Qunari."

"The Qunari?" Carolyn frowned, "What good'll that do 'em?"

"Seems like a lot of good," the young woman shrugged, stealing back the attention, "looks like they've been given protection in return for joining their crazy order or whatever it is. The Guards are going nuts over it, demanding the Qunari hand them over but you know what that Arishok is like. He never listens to anything anyone says."

"Oh I know," Maisie said, "it's just like Jake's boy Malcolm, did you hear about..?"

Anders tuned out as soon as the conversation took a side turn for another topic. He paid the stall keeper for his goods and began heading for home. So the Arishok was finally showing his true intent? Anders thought. It didn't surprise him really. He'd already decided that the Qunari leader must have some ulterior motive for staying in Kirkwall. Seems like he's recruiting, Anders thought wryly as he headed down the steps towards the alleyways, I'm sure that won't go over well with the Viscount. Ever since the Viscount's son had been murdered the regent had been withdrawn and his rule fragile. The news had put the whole city on edge, half of them blaming the Qunari and the other half blaming the Chantry. Anders himself blamed the ignorance and cruelty of the woman who perpetrated the whole event, one Sister Patrice Varric had told him. The dwarf said that she had basically tried to instigate an anti-Qunari riot by murdering the Viscount's son and then setting it up to look like the Qunari themselves had done it. Now, what with the Arishok being difficult again, it seemed to Anders that there was no way out of this situation without bloodshed. He just hoped that it wouldn't be too awful.

"Help! Help me!" the scream stopped Anders in his tracks.

Why do I always ruin things by hoping for peace and quiet? Anders thought ruefully. Probably someone getting bloody mugged, again. He hurried towards the sounds of distress, rounding the corner back into the main street, only to be greeted by a bizarre yet terrifying sight. As if prophesied by the woman's story, two huge Qunari were standing at the lift entrance to Darktown, their deadpan faces scanning the area before them, while a third Qunari walked back towards the lift dragging a man after him by his ankle. The man was squirming and shouting, trying desperately to get free but the Qunari wouldn't let him go. Anders stared in disbelief as the other people in the market, who had been staring in silent horror, finally began to react. The sound was sudden and violent; everyone began shouting and screaming at once as the two Qunari started to walk forwards into the crowd, grabbing whoever was closest. Anders backed round the corner, shaking his head in amazement. A man ran at one of the Qunari, who was now holding a screaming woman by her arm, a dagger in his closed fist. Anders watched as the Qunari simply reached out, a long blade in his hand, and cut the man down without hesitation. The sight of spraying blood and the nonchalant violence sent the screams to a new pitch. The mage continued to back away as even more Qunari appeared from the entranceway, their eyes intent on the scattering people.
What the fuck is going on? Anders thought, his mind slow with shock as he turned to run back towards the clinic. Had the Arishok declared war on Kirkwall? No, Anders thought, that can't be right, surely he wouldn't go that far! But the Qunari he had seen were surely not rebels, the rogue Qunari lived out on the Coast, they never ventured into the city itself. As he ran more and more screams arose around him, the sounds of people fighting and dying echoing along the narrow network of alleyways. People were running into the mouth of the alley form the opposite end, eyes wide with fright, looking over their shoulders as they hurried forwards. Anders dodged them and slipped into the intersecting alleyway which led to the clinic. As soon as he turned the corner, slightly out of breath, he found a large group of children waiting for him, huddled together, at his door.

"Anders, thank the Maker," William said, springing forwards from the group, "what's happening? They were chasing us and...!"

"I don't know," Anders said, "I don't know what's happening but we need to get out of here. Who are all these people?"

"They're mates of Cricket's," William said, jerking his thumb at the boy in question as he stayed with the rest of the children, "we were all out in the street when those Qunari came from nowhere, started hauling people away! So we ran before they could catch us and came here to hide, we didn't know where else to go."

"Alright," Anders said, trying to get his mind straight as he looked the frightened children over, " alright, we'll get out of this, it's going to be okay. All of you follow me, we need to go somewhere safe!"

Anders was never more glad that he received no complaints or questions from the crowd of worried children who rushed to his side. William, and Cricket who appeared from the back, were useful in helping him to ferry the others towards the end of the alley and down into the other main street. It was a streaming tide of pressing bodies, pushing towards the exit to Lowtown. Anders shouted to the group to follow him closely and they all pushed out into the panic, falling into the swell of screams and violence. Anders rushed towards the nearest alleyway on the opposite side and stood at the mouth, pushing the children in as they ran past him, trying his best to make sure everyone was there. They waited for him like frightened rabbits, clutching at each other, some crying, some silent. Anders herded them to the end of the alley and then pushed through the throng. He crouched down and opened the sewer entrance that was there, pushing the cover out of the way. How many times is this place going to save my skin? Anders asked himself.

"Alright, everyone inside," he said authoritatively.

"But, what's down there..?" one of the children asked in a frightened voice.

"They'll find us! They're breaking into the houses and just pulling people out..!" one of the older kids panicked.

"Then it'll take them longer to get to us here," Anders tried to rationalise, "come on, follow me closely and we'll be fine, I promise. I'll take you somewhere safe but we can't go through the streets, not like this."

They seemed to hesitate but, finally, William stepped forwards, followed closely by Cricket, and descended down into the sewers. It took another few moments, filled with the sounds of destruction and fear growing ever closer, until the children began to filter down into the dark hole in the ground. Anders waited as patiently as he found possible before following them, pulling the cover back as best he could. The sounds were muffled but still audible as Anders reached the
bottom of the ladder, letting out a small amount of light from his staff to illuminate his surroundings. There were no lights in this part of the sewer, wouldn't be until they reached the main line under Darktown. The children crowded around him, into the pool of light.

"It's alright," he tried to assure them, "we'll get up to Hightown and we'll find somewhere safe for you all. Now, everyone take the next person's hand, we don't want anyone getting lost down here."

A chorus of silent nods was his reply. Anders wadded through to the front of group, his light reaching out to show William's pale face, his eyes wide. Anders reached out and took hold of the teens shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. William swallowed worriedly but nodded to Anders regardless. The mage walked forwards, listening to William telling the others to hold hands and keep up no matter what. The sewers were eerily quiet the further they got from the entranceway. Yet what Anders found even creepier was that anytime they passed close to any of the other entranceways the sound of screaming and death reared up once more. It was as if the real world which they had escaped from was fading in and out of existence as they walked. Any sound the children made echoed loudly through the long corridors and cavern like intersections. Anders was glad when they reached the main access ways, illuminated by dirty gas lamps. He put out the light spell and turned.

"Is everyone still here?" he asked.

"Yes," William nodded after he finished counting the row of little heads which stretched behind him like ducks following their mother, "we're still here."

"Good," Anders said, mapping out in his head the route they needed to take, "let's keep going."

They walked the long way from Darktown up to Lowtown, through corridors, maintenance ways, dank rooms and precarious shortcuts. Anders was amazed by how quiet the sewers were. What with the attack seeming to be taking place in every street they passed, from what he could tell of the sounds from above them. He thought that more people would have fled into the sewers to escape. Maybe they didn't have time to, Anders thought anxiously, and here I thought the templars were all I had to worry about in this damned city. He ferried the children past him into yet another room as he held open the door. I'll get them to Hightown, he thought as he watched them pass, I'll get them to Hawke, he'll know what to do. It was the last thing he wanted to do, see Hawke, but in all honesty, at a time like this, he was already desperate to know if the rogue was alright. Anders knew what Hawke was like. If there was any way for him to be recklessly heroic then he threw himself at it like he was destined to do it. Despite everything that had happened, despite how much Anders tried to convince himself that he didn't, that he couldn't...he still loved Hawke and didn't want to see him hurt. He continued to let his mind wander as the children rushed through the doorway. It was as the last child walked past him into the room that the explosion hit.

Anders had never had any experience with the compound that the Qunari called **gatlock**. He had only ever seen magical explosions and demolitions which tended to leave behind no trace once it was performed. As he picked himself up off of the floor, choking on the dust and dirt filling the air, reeling from the blast and the piercing squeal in his ears, he could taste something bitter and tangy which he thought, dazedly, must be the explosive powder itself. He rushed forwards as the air cleared and had to force himself not to stop dead in horror. He could hear the sounds of crying and coughing from around him but all he could see was the blood. There was blood everywhere. He looked up to the ceiling, seeing that it had completely collapsed, crushing everyone who had been directly beneath. There were thick, red rivulets running from under the huge pile of unsettled rubble before him. He stumbled forwards, trying desperately and futilely to pull at the large, crushing rocks, the shock making him numb.
"Can...is anyone hurt!" he shouted, "Can anyone here me!"

He looked to his left and right, taking in the handful of children who had been safely out of the way, all stumbling towards the wall and looking around in terror. It made Anders feel guiltily relieved to find Cricket among them.

"William!" Anders shouted once the shock had worn off, "are you in there, anyone, come on!"

"I'm here," William ran towards him from the left of the room, choking on the dirt and the smell, "oh Maker what is this...what have they done? They were only kids! Those bastards, I'll...!"

"Calm down!" Anders shouted, not feeling calm at all, "We can't...we can't get out this way now, we need to go up."

"Up there? To the surface?" William said in disbelief as the remaining children hurried to them, clinging to their clothes, "But we just got away from there!"

"It's not as if we have a choice," Anders said back, looking down at the children, automatically turning around to check them over for any wounds or injuries, trying his best to ignore the smell of blood in the air, "we'll...we'll go through Lowtown and get to the Hanged Man. Maybe we can find some help there if not a safe place to hide."

Everything's happened too quickly, Anders thought numbly, Maker why is this happening? They were children, only children! Anders forced himself to stop thinking about it, to try and focus. Thankfully William hadn't argued with his decision. Anders rushed everyone out of the room before anything else collapsed. Once he found a way out to Lowtown he practically had to force them up the ladder after him but, luckily, despite his initial hesitation, William seemed to be helping him once more. Together Anders and the remaining children entered out into the Alienage. Anders looked around, checking everything was safe, before he finally saw the view out over the rest of Lowtown.

Kirkwall was on fire. Anders stared at the huge, dirty grey plumes of smoke belching out into the air, supported by greedy flames. He could hear the distant sounds of more explosions, watched as large chunks of rock flew into the air and shot out into the water in loud splashes.

"By the Maker," he said softly, almost unable to believe what he was seeing.

The whole city was under attack. So the Arishok has planned this, Anders thought angrily. Now, while the City was weak, while their leader was weak, he had finally struck. He wondered whether the story he had heard from the women at the stall had anything to do with all of this. Eventually Anders beckoned the others to come out of the sewer. The Alienage itself was deathly quiet but there were signs of destruction all over the small square. The stall was on its side and many of the building's doors were hanging off of their hinges. Nothing was ablaze here, not yet anyway. There were still distant sounds of mayhem on the air but Anders couldn't see any danger at hand. We need to get through to the Marketplace, he thought vigilantly, and then we can push through into Hightown from there. He gathered his charges and hurried towards the steps, running up them towards the Slums. That was when, at the end of the short street, he spotted the three large Qunari warriors ganging up on someone he thought might be a City Guard from what he could see. He stopped and backed against the wall, forcing the others to mirror his actions. He turned to them and spoke sternly.

"I'll be right back," he said strongly, "do not move from here until the way is clear, understand?"

William nodded even if the other children did not. Anders took that as the best he was going to get
and rushed forwards, readying his staff as he ran out into the small square ahead of him. The Guard or whoever it was had fallen to the floor, the Qunari looming above them. Anders, relying on the element of surprise, sent out a blast of kinetic magic which forced all three of them stumbling. Without giving them a chance to recover Anders lashed out with a flaring cone of fire, instantly devouring one of the Qunari and badly burning another. The third, as yet unscathed, was now being engaged by the person they had previously been attacking. Anders ignored them for now and focused on the injured warrior who had turned to face him, eyeing him dispassionately. Anders held his staff ready and circled slowly as the Qunari edged closer. He waited, watching the hulking creature and its large sword anxiously. Careful now, he thought to himself as the Qunari drew ever closer. He could hear the sound of the third warrior fighting, shouting in their unknown language. He let his concentration slip for just a moment, only a moment, but that was when the Qunari before him sprang.

Anders reacted purely on instinct, dodging to the side and practically rolling out of the way of the massive sword. He cried out in pain as he felt the metal blade bite deeply into his thigh as he dodged. Anders rolled over only to see the Qunari lifting his blade for another blow. Anders barely had time to lift his staff and parry the attack with the bladed end. The shock of the blow was sickening. Anders felt the reverberations shoot up his left arm, sending the muscles to jelly. Ever since the brand his left arm had been susceptible to sudden shocks, making it useless and practically paralysed when it gave way. He tried his best to deflect the next blow but the Qunari succeeded in sending his staff flying from his hands to skitter across the cobbles. Anders looked up in horror as the blade descended a third time. He tried his best to raise a shield, cast an offensive spell, any spell, but his arm was so numb that he couldn't begin to protect himself. He raised his right arm instinctually and looked away as the blade descended. When it didn't connect, however, he chanced a look up. The Qunari still had his sword raised, his face still impassive, only there was now the tip of a large, gory blade protruding from the middle of his chest. Anders blinked, watching in detached fascination as the blood dripped down onto his coat. Then the blade retracted with terrible efficiency and Anders scuffled backwards before the dead Qunari fell on top of him. He looked up with an anxious smile, ready to thank his saviour but the words died in his mouth when he realised exactly who it was.

"Stay where you are apostate," the woman said sternly, her icy blue eyes trained on him. Meredith. Knight Commander Meredith. Oh great, Anders thought sarcastically even as he began to panic, oh fucking brilliant! Does it have to be now? As in right now? Anders tried his best to get to his feet, swallowing as he kept his eyes on Meredith and her very large sword. His right leg screamed at him, the deep laceration gushing blood down the outside of his leg, soaking into his trousers. He limped backwards, away from the templar, trying desperately to think what to do. He had felt Justice attempting to leap to the surface as soon as he'd recognised the Knight Commander's face. It wasn't as if Anders wouldn't have loved to show the Knight Commander exactly what he thought of her but, in his current condition, he was in no state to. No left arm, no staff, injured, alone...

"Hey!" came the sudden shout of a very familiar yet inexplicable voice, "Get your bloody hands off of my subordinate!"

Anders was sure he must be dreaming. Meredith spun round, both she and Anders staring in disbelief at the group of men and women standing at the other end of the square. The man at the front walked forwards purposefully, trailed by two companions, and pulled his helmet off. Not that he needed to. Anders would know Cousland's voice anywhere. What was he doing here? Anders thought, blinking at the man before him. How did he manage to turn up at the most opportune of moments? When he truly thought about it Anders didn't care. All he cared about was that, somehow, his Commander was here and that he wasn't alone anymore. Oh I've never been happier
to see him so angry, Anders thought light headedly, stumbling back against the wall of the building next to him.

"Nathaniel, see to him," Cousland said to the man next to him as he pointed at Anders.

Nathaniel hurried forwards, past Meredith, and stood beside Anders, rummaging in his pack. Anders stared at the rogue in confusion as his leg began to ache steadily. His hair was cut short, falling to just around his ears. Because of the small difference Anders almost hadn't recognised him at all. He began to wonder if he was losing too much blood but then, suddenly, the pain in his leg flared up, forcing him to drop to his knees with a cry.

"Anders, what the hell is wrong with you?" Nathaniel asked him, turning to shout to the others, "Hey! He's badly wounded, does anyone have a potion?"

The other Warden who had come forwards with Cousland and Nathaniel rushed to the rogue's side. She pulled a red potion from her bag and handed it to Anders. The mage drank greedily, feeling the tonic leach out into his system, bringing the warmth back to his left arm and taking the edge off the wound in his leg. He finished it just as Cousland and Meredith came face to face. This isn't going to be pretty, Anders through wryly. He turned to Nathaniel.

"What the fuck are you lot doing here?" he asked bluntly.

"Well, nice to know you're happy to see me," Nathaniel said sarcastically, "it'll take too long to explain, I'll tell you later."

"Alright," Anders said, shaking his head; then he looked up sharply as if just remembering something, "there were some children with me, I left them at the top of the stairs. Could you see if they're alright?"

"I'll get them," Nathaniel nodded, turning to the other Warden, "Sarah you stay here with him, make sure he's well."

Sarah saluted dutifully. Nathaniel rushed off and Anders looked back to the Commander and Meredith, tuning in to their rather icy conversation.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing, templar?" Cousland said acerbically, eyes shining like flints.

"My job," Meredith said stonily, "this apostate needs to be taken into custody. Now tell me who you are before I have you arrested!"

"Well what do you know," Cousland said, his sarcasm almost palpable, as the other Warden's he was with filtered out into the square, "an irritable templar, what a surprise. I'm Cousland, the Warden Commander of Ferelden, who the fuck are you?"

"I am Knight Commander Meredith," Meredith said with comportment, an odd contrast to Cousland's vulgar cynicism, "and I do not recognise your authority here Commander."

"You can 'not recognise' it as much as you like," Cousland said with a shrug and a smile that didn't reach his eyes, "I don't really care. What I do care about is that you've attacked one of my men, someone under my care, and if you try it again you'll have me to answer to whether you believe in my authority or not!"

Anders struggled to his feet. Sarah looked to him anxiously as he wavered on his feet but he waved her concern away before stumbling towards the arguing pair. He turned when he heard footsteps,
watching with relief as Nathaniel led William and the children towards Sarah. He looked back to Cousland and tried to get his attention. Easier said than done, Anders thought wryly.

"This man, if I have his identity correct," Meredith said over affectedly, "is guilty of several crimes against my order in this city. He has attacked and killed many templars and helped apostates escape the city boundaries..."

"Look," Cousland interrupted, putting Meredith's back up even more, "I don't care if he's personally poured poison in your tea, alright? You don't touch him, understand me? Grey Warden mages are out with the bounds of templar jurisdiction. I wouldn't have thought that you needed me to tell you that, Knight Commander."

The tension between the two leaders was blatant. There are already enough fireworks going off around here, Anders thought angrily, without these two making it worse. Anders hobbled forwards and took Cousland by the arm, finally garnering some of his focus. The Commanders eyes softened a little on seeing him but his voice was hard when he spoke.

"Don't get involved in this," he said tightly, pushing Anders gently back.

"I will personally be contacting the First Warden about this outrage," Meredith said icily, pulling Cousland's attention back to her.

"And I'm sure he'll be more than happy to hear it," Cousland said with a smile, his eyes hard in contrast as he leaned to his left and looked to Meredith's sheathed weapon, "right after I tell him all about that lovely sword you have there, it is unusual, wouldn't you say so Nathaniel?"

"Quite," Nathaniel said in a clipped tone as he stationed himself at his Commander's side, eyeing Meredith distastefully.

Meredith straightened, her eyes narrowing. She had sheathed her sword once Cousland had identified himself but the resonance it gave off and the irregular colour of the metal was far too impressive to hide. Anders stared at it, wondering why he found the sickly feeling the blade gave him so familiar.

"Oh yes, I'm sure he'd just love a closer look at it," Cousland said cheerfully, "a good, long look. But then, for whatever reason, that's the last thing you'd want. So why don't we all just agree to leave each other be, we'll go our way and you can hop it."

Anders rolled his eyes as Meredith bristled. Why did the Commander always have to be so tactless? he thought wearily. Once, just once, he could be courteous and everything could run smoothly...and nugs might fly.

"I do not have time for this," Meredith said, her voice flat, "in case you have not noticed this city is under attack..."

"Yet you had more than enough time to arrest a supposed apostate, isn't that right?" Cousland muttered.

"...and I must protect it," Meredith continued as if Cousland had never spoken, "so I will let this go, just this once, but be warned apostate I will not be so lenient a second time."

With that the Knight Commander turned in a flourish of silver and red and walked briskly, back ramrod straight, towards the Marketplace. Anders sighed at the reprieve, his shoulders sagging. His arm was feeling much better now that the potion had time to work. He reached down with both hands and let out a concentration of healing magic to close the gash in his leg. When he looked
back to Cousland the man was glaring at him. Anders frowned. What have I done now? he thought anxiously.

"Is he alright Nathaniel?" Cousland said to his second in command, his eyes never moving from Anders.

"Seems to be," Nathaniel said, "why?"

"Because I need to do this," Cousland said before he reached over and smacked Anders forcefully on the top of the head.

"Ouch!" Anders said, taking a step back, reaching up to rub at the throbbing spot on his head, "What on earth was that for?"

"Did you get my letters or didn't you?" Cousland said furiously.

"I got one," Anders said in confusion.

"Did you get my letters or didn't you?" Cousland asked furiously.

"I got one," Anders said in confusion.

"Why have you never replied to any!" Cousland shouted; Anders watched in confusion as Nathaniel rolled his eyes, "For Maker's sake Anders I thought you had been captured by the bloody templars, or you were dead or something terrible! I've sent you three letters, three in the last two months and told you how you could write back to me and you never did!"

"I never got any bloody letters," Anders said back with a scowl, his own grief and anger at the whole situation pouring out as it saw an outlet, "how do you suggest I reply to something I never received in the first place!"

"But I sent them to Serrah Hawke's address, how could you not have received them if you got the first one!" Cousland shouted.

"Oh I don't know," Anders said facetiously, "probably something to do with the fact that I haven't been living with him for about two months now! That could be the problem!"

Cousland's anger evaporated, replaced instead with bewilderment. He opened his mouth and then closed it a couple of times, a deep frown adorning his forehead when he finally managed to speak.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said heatedly.

"We broke up," Anders said tightly, watching Cousland's eyes widen a little, "but in the current scale of things that isn't really important right now, is it."

Cousland looked at him critically, as if dying to ask him more questions. He let out a long, tight sigh but seemed to bottle everything up. He turned to Nathaniel and gave him some quick instructions to round up the Wardens and get them ready to leave. He turned back to Anders, poking his finger into the mage's chest.

"You will tell me everything that bastard has done," Cousland said, making Anders roll his eyes; why did it not surprise him that the Commander instantly blamed Hawke even though he had no information? "but later on."

"Right," Anders said, nodding in agreement, "later, good, because right now I need your help. I have to get to Hightown and make sure everything is alright but I have these children with me and I'm starting to think there's nowhere safe in this whole bloody place anymore. Can you get them out of the city?"
"I can do my best," Cousland said, gesturing to a one of the wardens who was standing by Nathaniel, a man that Anders recognised as he approached.

Stroud. Anders had thought he would never see him again. I should be so bloody lucky, the mage thought tersely.

"Yes Commander?" Stroud said in his heavy Orlesian accent, eyeing Anders with interest but saying nothing.

"I need you to take these children out of the City," Cousland said, his voice and demeanour changing as he spoke to his subordinate, becoming more professional; he called for Sarah to bring the children over, "once you're out on the Coast I want you to take them to the harbour and keep them there. Stay there until I return. Nathaniel will lead the others to the rendezvous point."

"What about you Commander?" Stroud frowned.

"I'll be fine," Cousland said, "I have something I need to do here first then I'll come and find you at the harbour. Now go, before any more of those Qunari decide to turn up."

Stroud looked like he wanted to argue but closed his mouth firmly shut when Cousland gave him a hard stare. He saluted and then turned to Sarah, taking charge of the children. Anders looked to William, noting the boy's worry. He hurried to Anders' side, shying from Stroud's glare.

"Don't worry William, I'm alright," Anders comforted him, "I need you to go with this man, he'll keep you safe."

"What's going on Anders? Why aren't you coming with us?" William asked.

"I need to get to Hightown to find out what's happened," Anders said, "and I need to find Hawke...and the others."

The break between his words only made his worry more obvious. William reached out and patted him on the shoulder, his smile tainted with worry. Anders put his hand over William's and squeezed it reassuringly. He turned to Stroud and gave the man a hard look.

"Anything happens to these children," Anders said, "and I'll be holding you personally accountable."

"No need to threaten me mage," Stroud said haughtily, "after this I'll be considering us even."

Anders let out a dismissive chuff of breath as Stroud began to lead the children towards the other Wardens. He watched William and the others go until they were out of sight, trying not to think about the idea of them not making it out of the city safe and well. He was pulled back to reality by Cousland's hand thumping down onto his shoulder.

"Alright Anders," the Commander said, his mouth smiling even though his eyes were grave, "what the hell is going on around here?"

"Like I would know," Anders shrugged, feeling a little useless, "anyway why are you staying? I thought Grey Warden's weren't allowed to interfere in other cities' political affairs."

"Maybe I'm not being a Warden right now," Cousland said nonchalantly, "maybe I'm just helping out a friend."

Anders smiled, shaking his head. Why was it some days he was so incredibly unlucky, other days
he was incredibly lucky and on rare occasions like these he was both things in the same day. Time seemed to have become nothing in the impending crisis. He couldn't truly remember how long it had been since he set out to go shopping, when everything had been normal, how long it had been since he watched the Qunari begin butchering people in Darktown. Everything had turned into chaos around him and now everything was chaos in his mind. This short reprieve from the madness, standing here with Cousland, was beginning to seem like a hallucination. How could this be real, how could everything just fall out this way by chance?

"Well, then I guess we'll both have to just find out for ourselves then," Cousland said as he and Anders began hurrying towards Hightown, on the alert for Qunari or templars, "we were here on a different mission when all these Qunari began rampaging around the city. We had no choice but to fight them off."

"They started attacking in Darktown," Anders said as they passed the Hanged Man, the air becoming thick with smoke as they neared the fires, "but I couldn't see any reason for the attack, any provocation. I think the Arishok might have been planning this."

"Well from what I've heard of the Arishok here in Kirkwall," Cousland said, "I could easily trust that assessment. So, where exactly are we headed?"

Anders sighed, wishing the Commander hadn't asked. He knew what sort of reaction it would get.

"I need to check on Hawke," he said, "at his mansion in Hightown. Chances are he won't be there, not with all this going on in the city, but if he isn't then maybe Orrana or Bodahn might know where he is."

"Alright," Cousland said, for a moment sounding like he would leave it at that before he spoiled it by continuing, "so...you've broken up but you're still checking on him, hmm?"

"Don't start," Anders said as they both ran up the stairs towards Hightown.
"He went where?"

It was as Anders had feared. When he and Cousland had reached the mansion Hawke was not at home and the place was a mess. It had looked as if a hurricane had blown through it; chairs were overturned and broken, tables smashed and doors knocked in. There was only one that still stood closed. When they knocked there was a soft cry that was swiftly silenced from beyond the heavy wood. They had announced themselves; the sound of scraping furniture and other things being moved was their only reply. Then the door sprang open to reveal Oranna, Bodahn and Sandal hiding in the kitchen. The elf girl had been overjoyed to see them, rushing to Cousland and throwing her arms around him.

"Relax, it's alright," Cousland had said with a soft laugh, "we're here to help, everything's fine."

For one moment Anders was sure that everything was going to be fine and that they would find Hawke and the others, make their way out of the City to safety...then Bodahn had told him exactly where Hawke had gone.

"Gone to the Viscount's Keep...that fucking idiot!" Anders said angrily, shaking his head in worried disgust, "What does he think he's going to do? Take on the Arishok all by himself? He's going to get himself killed!"

"Anders, calm down," Cousland said sternly, "we can't lose our heads, that won't help anyone. We need to decide what we're going to-hey!"

Cousland stopped short, his shout full of consternation and anxiousness, as he watched Anders turn on his heel and march towards the main door. Anders heard Cousland quickly telling Oranna and the others to barricade themselves back in the kitchen and not to come out until they returned. Then there was the sound of running footsteps as the Commander caught up with him just as he reached the door.

"Don't think you can just rush into this," Cousland was saying as Anders opened the door and stepped out, "hey, Anders! Come on, don't be a reckless arsehole, not now of all times!"

"I'm not being reckless," Anders said tightly, looking around the deathly quiet streets; dark clouds had turned the evening into a dark imitation of night all around them, "I just know what I'm going to do, so now I'm going to do it, that's all."

"Well you won't get to do any of it if you're dead, will you?" Cousland said wryly as he hurried to keep in time with Anders' purposeful steps, "I can see what's going on here. If I were the Arishok and I was instigating a coup de tat then the first thing I'd do would be take out the leader and then take over their stronghold."

"Then that means kill the Viscount and take over the Keep," Anders said, looking at Cousland as if he were only further affirming his rash actions, "which is exactly where Hawke was headed, which is exactly why I know where I'm going."

Cousland opened his mouth to argue further, his frown deep, but was stopped by Anders next statement.

"If it were Alistair would you hesitate?" Anders said seriously.
The Commander snapped his mouth shut. Anders was glad that at least Cousland understood, to an extent, how he felt. Not that Cousland was happy about it, oh Anders could tell that he wasn't from the continuing frown and the downturn at the sides of his mouth. Still, Anders thought, at least he isn't blowing up like he usually does. He's probably saving that for Hawke. Anders tried to push away the trivial thoughts as he and Cousland ran through the streets towards the Keep.

Hightown was an uncanny juxtaposition of burning carts and barrels, partly destroyed buildings, roaring fires and deathly quiet streets. Anders and the Commander had bumped into a few citizens as they had made their way up to Hightown but, once they reached the deserted marketplace, they hadn't seen a single soul since. It was as if someone had come along in the night and snatched them all away. And that's probably exactly what happened, Anders thought angrily. All of this mindless violence and for what? Religion? A code of conduct? Disagreements over lifestyle? The Arishok may have had qualms with the Kirkwall way of life and, in all honesty, Anders could empathise. He could see many flaws in their society, many things that could be changed for the better, but kidnapping people and forcing them to accept your views and your law was not the way to do it. Not much different than your plan now, is it? Anders conscience bit back at him. He swallowed and continued to run, choking on the thick smoke and smell of burning flesh on the air. No, he tried to argue back, this wasn't how it would be when he liberated the Kirkwall Circle, he wouldn't let it be like this. He swallowed down the bitter taste of his self assurance and forced himself to focus on the present. There's no time for that now, he thought as he and Cousland ran, panting, up the long stairs to the Keep. When they reached the top it was to be greeted with more fire, although not the natural kind.

Anders watched with a certain amount of awe as the mage before him lit up the narrow palisades and columns with bright licks of golden flame. The Qunari that stood before him, at least twenty in number, were being swiftly reduced. As Anders hurried forwards he could see that there were already at least ten lying dead on the ground by the door of the Keep. He looked around as the Commander gestured for him to follow, seeing no one else around. He raised his staff as they neared the oblivious mage, twirling it around his head before letting out a deadly fork of lightning from the end. The electric blue and white bolt shot through the air and slammed into the nearest Qunari warrior, sending the large beast to its knees in shuddering agony, before it leapt to its next target. Four fell in total, making the unknown mage look over his shoulder in surprise. Well, well, Anders thought as he shook his head, I'm just running into all the important people today am I not? Not that he recognised First Enchanter Orsino by looking at him, Anders had never actually seen him before, but he'd recognise the robes of a First Enchanter of the Circle anywhere. That and the distinctive staff that the man carried. Anders stopped at the elf's side while Cousland continued to rush forwards, straight towards the remaining Qunari force.

"Cousland stop!" Anders shouted futilely after the man; honestly, he thought, he's worse than Hawke.

"I don't know who you are," Orsino said, his voice rich in tone, "but thank you, I appreciate your help."

"There will be plenty of time for you to thank us later," Anders said as he readied his staff.

Orsino nodded and, without further ado began sending offensive spells into the approaching wave of Qunari. Anders, in contrast, kept all of his focus on Cousland. He revitalised the man with vigour spells, keeping his reaction time sharp, his blows powerful and healing him when necessary. As always, even though he was trying to stay focused on Cousland's health, the man was captivating in battle. Anders would always be the first to say that Hawke was graceful, his style of fighting allowing him to be brutal as well as devious, but he had to admit that, skilled as Hawke
was, he had nothing on the Commander. Cousland's style was so subtle that it almost didn't look like a battle at all, more of a deadly dance between enemies. He hardly ever made physical contact with the hulking Qunari that surrounded him; his daggers were the only things they touched and, once they had, they tended to fall to the ground in a lifeless heap with a slit throat or a lacerated torso. Cousland wove in and out of the blows as if he were entirely unconcerned with the situation, rolling, ducking, sending out poisoned throwing knives into legs and arms, slicing at ankles and sending daggers into chests. Soon the only sound in the small square was the crackling of burning flesh and the distant yells and screams from within the Keep itself.

"Well," Cousland said as he approached, brushing away the ashes from his armour, his face and his body splattered with blood, "the Qunari aren't quite as hardy as I remember."

"Just who are you?" the First Enchanter said quietly as he looked at Anders and Cousland, focusing more on the rogue.

"Hardly important right now, is it?" Cousland said with a shrug, "although you're the First Enchanter of Kirkwall if I'm not mistaken, right?"

"I-I am," Orsino said, a little confused. "Look, this little chat is all very nice and all," Anders said tightly, "but we really have more pressing issues to deal with. Have you seen Serrah Hawke?"

Orsino looked at him as if he couldn't possibly believe that he and Hawke could know each other. Oh for Maker's sake, Anders thought with a roll of his eyes, I don't look that bad do I?

"He and his companions are inside the Keep." Orsino said; he indicated to the dead Qunari around their feet, "these Qunari were blocking the entrance. I was distracting them to allow Serrah Hawke to gain entry."

The sounds of screaming from inside the Keep had fallen strangely silent. Anders couldn't help but let the lull fill him with dread. If there were no screams then surely that was because there was no one to scream. He rushed forwards, stumbling over dead bodies and discarded weapons, ignoring the shouts of Orsino and Cousland alike. All he could see in his minds eyes was Hawke dying or Hawke dead, and he couldn't stand it, he couldn't believe it to be true, he wouldn't, he needed to see him. He needed to know he was alright, more than anything. He rushed up the stairs and pushed his way through the small gap in the massive front doors. He was greeted with more corpses inside, Qunari and City Guard alike, some with their insides laid open and others with arrows through their throats. He paid no heed, only kept moving forwards. He could hear Cousland and Orsino following him but there was also something else which was becoming all too apparent. The sounds of battle.

Anders had been so busy convincing himself that his worst fears couldn't possibly be a reality that, when he ran into the throne room, he almost didn't believe what he was seeing. Fenris and Varric were the first people he recognised, before he saw Merrill and Aveline standing behind them. The shock made his feet slow as he stepped towards the familiar figures standing off to the left of the main hall, their eyes trained on the same unbelievable event.

Hawke was slowly circling the Arishok. The Qunari leader dwarfed the smaller man, his usually impassive eyes intent on his enemy, his hands gripped around his twin swords. Hawke's twin daggers looked paltry in comparison. The people in the hall, mainly nobles of Hightown, looked on in tense trepidation. Anders looked on in horror. Hawke was duelling the Arishok.

"How..?" he said without even truly realising he was talking aloud.
"Anders!" Merrill almost whispered as she rushed to him, taking hold of his arm in an awkward half hug, "you're alright, I was so worried!"

"I told you not to run off!" Cousland's voice was nothing but a harsh whisper as he and Orsino appeared behind him.

He turned to look at his Commander, at the First Enchanter, at Merrill and the others, at the rest of the spectators with their wide eyes and their open mouths. He couldn't take any of it in, it was too much. Everything was narrowing down to the amazement and the disbelief.

"How did this happen?" Anders said in anger, "This has to...we need to stop them!"

Anders blinked away his initial shock and made to step forwards, determined to stop this insane duel before it had even truly started. He was never more confused than when Fenris stopped him. The elf looked serious, verging on grave, and more than a little worried.

"Don't," he said, shaking his head.

"Don't?" Anders repeated, incredulous, "what do you mean don't? There's no way he can..!"

"It's the only way," Fenris said, pulling Anders back towards the group, "you don't understand. The Qunari they, well, this is just the way it turned out. Hawke was determined to stop this and a duel was the only way the Arishok would agree to end the bloodshed."

Anders watched Fenris closely, seeing the sadness and anxiousness that the elf was trying to hide beneath his apathetic exterior. Of course he's worried, Anders thought as he turned back to watch Hawke and the Arishok, of course he is. Who wouldn't be worried by this? They stood together and watched. Anders had never felt more helpless than when he watched as the Arishok moved in, when he watched as the massive Qunari swung his two mismatched swords at Hawke's head and torso, the rogue only just managing to roll out of the way. Hawke righted himself quickly and managed to leap forwards, landing a long laceration down the Qunari's leg. Whatever effect he had hoped for did not come. The Arishok didn't even seem to notice the wound. Instead he lashed out with his injured leg, catching Hawke squarely in the chest. Fenris tightened his grip on Anders' arm as the mage jerked instinctually forwards. Hawke tumbled across the ground, coughing roughly from the force of the kick as he scrambled to his feet. The Arishok gave him no time to recover, striding in to swing one blade down, meeting only hard marble as Hawke rolled to the right and got to his feet. The rogue dodged as the second blade swung at his head, ducking in to stab at the Qunari's exposed chest but, unluckily, sending his dagger directly into one of the leather straps that criss-crossed the creature's pale skin. Hawke was forced to abandon the blade, stuck into the Arishok's armour, and duck away as the Arishok made a grab at him. Anders felt his chest tighten as the Arishok reached up with one hand and batted away the offending dagger imbedded in his armour; it skittered across the marble floor, out of reach. Hawke spared it a glance but seemed to give it up as lost. He spun his one dagger in his hand, he and the Arishok back to sizing each other up. Anders nearly jumped out of his skin when Cousland spoke.

"Oi Hawke!" both the rogue and the Arishok looked to Cousland, Hawke in surprise and the Qunari only with seeming curiosity, "Catch!"

Hawke caught the dagger that Cousland threw with practiced ease. He looked down to the weapon, longer and more curved than his own. The Arishok stared at Cousland as if affronted, although Anders found it very difficult to tell what the Qunari was thinking as his facial expressions were so very slight and subtle. Cousland just folded his arms and shrugged.

"Don't try and argue that it's illegal," Cousland said sternly, "I know the rules of a duel."
The Arishok didn't reply. Instead he simply looked back to Hawke and attacked without warning. Anders felt the need to close his eyes as Hawke blocked the Arishok's huge longsword with his crossed daggers, the force of it sending him stumbling backwards; somehow he managed to keep them open. The Arishok wasted no time in lunging in again with his twin headed blade, sweeping high, aiming for Hawke's throat. The rogue ducked under the fatal blow at the last second before throwing himself forwards, twisting through the air to send his dagger sinking into the Arishok's forearm. The Qunari let out a deep growl of pain and reared back, his wrist bleeding heavily, gashed open from wrist to elbow. Hawke had backed off once more as the Qunari bared his teeth and stared at his wound, his eyes particularly stony as he once more brought them back to his target. Hawke watched him carefully before darting in again, faking right then going left, managing to once more get in close and land a critical strike at the Arishok's neck. Blood poured down the Arishok's torso, stark red against pale grey. Yes, Anders thought, yes you can win this Hawke! His anxiety began to lift, reminding him that Hawke was a trained warrior, he knew how to fight, what on earth was he worrying about? It was going to be alright, he was going to win and...

That was before the Arishok dropped the sword in his left hand in favour of grabbing Hawke's arm by the wrist, lifting his right fist and slamming the hilt of his twin bladed sword down onto the trapped man's forearm. Anders swore he could hear the bone as it cracked. Hawke's gritted teeth let barely a groan escape.

"We have to stop this!" Anders turned to Fenris, his eyes practically begging.

Anders would give him his due, Fenris looked ready to step in and interfere just as much as he wanted to, but thankfully there was no need. Fenris' eyes lit up and Anders looked back to see what could possibly make him react in such a way. He watched in shock. Hawke was still held by the Arishok, who seemed to be happy holding and twisting Hawke's broken arm, not allowing the man to retreat as Anders was sure he wanted to. He felt his breath catch as the Arishok raised his sword, seemingly intent on holding Hawke down and slaughtering him. Yet instead of trying to extricate himself from the impossible hold, Hawke had gone on the offensive, taking the opportunity to strike at the Arishok's exposed chest once more while the Qunari was too busy holding onto both Hawke's arm and his other sword. Only this time he seemed to put every ounce of strength into the blow, driving his dagger deep into the Arishok's heart. The Qunari let out a choked grunt and stumbled backwards, seemingly more surprised at the action than the wound itself, his back hitting one of the tall pillars that surrounded the room. Anders watched as the Arishok looked up at Hawke, his eyes clouding over, his hand reaching up to clasp the hilt of the dagger. Only he never got the chance to pull the blade free. His massive body slumped slowly to the ground, sliding down the pillar until he sat upon the floor as if simply resting. The death was so quick and anti-climactic that the room was left in a hushed silence, broken only by Anders' footsteps as he ran forwards, followed closely by Fenris.

"Hawke don't move, you have a broken arm," Anders said apprehensively, catching the rogue as he staggered backwards and nearly fell, careful not to touch his wounds.

"You don't fucking say," Hawke said, his eyes glassy.

Then suddenly, from the deathly silence, everyone in the room began to cheer. The sound was almost deafening, people hugging, people crying, people calling out for their champion. Hawke tried his best to look alive for them but Anders didn't care about that, didn't care about reputation or fame. All he wanted was to get Hawke somewhere safe where he could practice his creation magic.

"We need to get him out of here," Fenris said as he looked about anxiously, echoing Anders thoughts, "I'll keep the way clear."
"Good idea," Anders said, looking to Hawke who didn't seem to be taking much notice of him, "can you walk?"

"Think I'm going to...pass out now," Hawke said with a laugh as if he hadn't heard Anders at all, before his eyes fell closed and his legs gave way.

Anders struggled under the sudden full weight of Hawke's body in his arms. Between them both he and Fenris managed to gather Hawke a little awkwardly and carry him from the hall. People were still cheering, trying to run forwards to thank him, trying to touch him, show their gratitude, express their sher relief. Anders warned them off rather frighteningly, trying to stay calm and failing. It was as he shouted at a rather scared looking woman who had tried to catch his arm that he realised she looked different from the others; she was wearing robes. Anders looked up and stopped when he was suddenly staring into the eyes of Bethany Hawke.

"Bethany," he breathed out in shock; Fenris stopped walking, holding Hawke's uninjured arm around his shoulders.

"Is he alright?" Bethany said, her eyes wet with tears, "Please tell me he's alright!"

"He will be, I promise, he'll be fine," Anders said automatically, still amazed that she was here. Staring at Bethany was like looking into the past, back to days when things had seemed so much simpler. It was then that the thought struck him. Anders knew that it was a terrible risk but he had been acting on instinct ever since had been told that Hawke had put himself in danger. Also it wasn't just Hawke who had lost a mother, Anders thought, Bethany had too and now she must be beside herself with worry over her brother's safety. Now, with this seemingly once in a lifetime opportunity staring him in the face, he couldn't pass it up; he grabbed at it before it became too late.

"Come with us," he said seriously.

Bethany stared at him as if he had two heads. To have Hawke's sister there for him when he woke up, Anders knew that it would mean everything to him. Then, with Bethany out of the Circle, he could try his best to get her out of the City to freedom. Anders' mind was working on overdrive as the First Enchanter walked up beside their group and watched them all. Anders would admit that, even though he'd never liked the sound of the man, that he was looking rather sympathetic just now. Of course, that was when Cullen showed up, pushing his way through the crowd. Anders ground his teeth. He handed Hawke to Aveline, who had been standing behind him.

"When you get him home lie him down and don't move him," he instructed the stoic woman, watching as she tried to hold back her worry.

He and Bethany watched as Hawke was carried out of the main doors, Varric and Merrill rushing out after him. Anders looked back to Bethany as he heard Cullen's voice.

"First Enchanter," Cullen was saying, "I need to talk to you."

"Come on," Anders urged Bethany as Cullen pushed closer, "I'll make sure you aren't hurt, I swear on my life."

"I can't," Bethany whispered back, looking as if all she wanted to do was run.

Then, suddenly, there was an arm around Bethany's shoulders and a friendly smile looking back at her. Bethany started badly, blinking at Cousland as he smiled.
"Yes you can," Cousland shrugged, pulling everyone's attention to him as he looked to the Knight Captain, "hey Cullen! You don't mind if we borrow your mage for a little while do you?"

Anders swore that if the whole situation hadn't been so dire that he would have found Cullen's reaction incredibly funny. At first he looked around in shock, then he blanched, then his face fell into a resigned expression.

"Oh," Cullen said, "it's you."

"What do you mean 'oh it's you'?" Cousland said, sounding insulted, "Is that any way to greet the man who saved your life?"

Bethany was looking around in sheer confusion, the First Enchanter following suit. Cullen sighed roughly, his templar escort holding back the crowd and keeping order as their Captain struggled with Cousland's rather indomitable nature.

"No I suppose not, but this is hardly the time to be talking about that is it?" Cullen said, "I need to speak to the First Enchanter and Bethany Hawke needs to come with us."

"Oh we'd only be borrowing her for a little while," Cousland said rolling his eyes as if it wasn't as big a problem as Cullen was making out, "you can come if you want, make sure we don't spirit her away somewhere."

"Cousland please, I don't have time for..." Cullen started.

"Well send one of your little lackey's then," Cousland said, shaking his hand at the multitude of templars dotted about the entrance hall, "just hurry up about it will you?"

Anders glared at Cousland but, in truth, was more than glad that he'd decided to bring his influence into the equation. Anders had forgotten that Cousland and Alistair had been the ones to save Cullen from Uldred at the Ferelden Circle. It seemed like he wasn't the only one being reminded of the fact, if Cullen's face was anything to go by. The Knight Captain looked incredibly frustrated and flustered.

"Alright, fine, just get out of here!" Cullen groused, looking distinctly uncomfortable, "And no funny business, you hear me? Anything happens and it's on my head, you understand?"

"Perfectly," Cousland smiled, looking genuinely appreciative, "thanks Cullen."

Anders frowned as Cullen blushed a little before turning away and clearing his throat, but in truth the mage wasn't even listening anymore, too busy rushing with Bethany out of the door after Hawke and the others.

Hawke was still unconscious when they arrived. He had been placed on his bed, his blood soaking into the heavy covers beneath him. Cousland had persuaded the templar that Cullen had sent with them to wait outside Hawke's bedroom door. Anders was glad that he could freely practice his creation magic without having to think about hiding it too well. Aveline had looked distinctly relieved as Anders and Bethany walked into the bedroom. Anders had immediately switched from worried friend to stern doctor. He ordered Varric to get him some bandages, Aveline to heat up some water and Merrill to bring him any elfroot she could find in the storeroom. No one argued. Anders only stopped when Cousland touched his arm softly.

"I need to go," the Commander said, making Anders panic irrationally.
"You'll be back though, won't you?" he said before he realised how stupidly desperate it sounded.

"Of course I'm coming back," Cousland said with a smile and a shake of his head, "got to bring your lost brats back, don't I? Anyway, have other things to do here that I might need your help with...better not to say too much. We'll be back by dawn."

It was only after Cousland had left that Anders realised that Cousland had said 'we'. He frowned but didn't think on it further. It was now only he and Bethany alone in the room with Hawke. She looked worried but strong in the face of it. Anders patted her reassuringly on the arm before he walked forwards towards the bed.

"I can help," she said quickly, making him stop; Anders watched her, she sounded like nothing would change her mind.

"Good," Anders said as he pulled off his coat and dumped it on the nearest armchair, "you see to that laceration on his leg, I'll deal with the broken arm."

Bethany looked as if she wanted to protest, perhaps thinking that she should have more say in her own brother's care than Anders, but thankfully for him she simply followed his instructions. Luckily, Anders thought, the break in Hawke's arm was clean. He could thank the Arishok for that much at least. He found the process of healing the wound really rather soothing. It was orderly and familiar. First of all setting the bone and being glad that Hawke was still unconscious for that part of the procedure. Then, once everything was in place, stopping the bleeding and healing the flesh where the bone had torn through. He was forced to stop half way through and rummage through his pouch for a lyrium potion and replenish his energy. He drank half and offered the rest to Bethany. She took it gratefully and they both got back to work. It was just as Anders began removing Hawke's armour so as to get a look at the quickly forming bruise on his chest that the rogue woke up. His green eyes were a little fogged and his smile far too happy considering everything that had happened. Probably concussed Anders thought, leaning in to check Hawke's eyes. He frowned when Hawke reached up to hook his arm around the mage's neck.

"Just can't wait to get me out of my clothes, can you?" Hawke said, making Anders swallow, his eyes widening with astonishment.

Anders was unable to react in time to stop Hawke pulling him down into a deep kiss. Anders could hear Bethany draw a startled breath in the background as he tried to extricate himself. What hurt the most, however, was probably the shiver of familiar pleasure that slipped down his spine as Hawke pushed his tongue into his mouth. Hawke's beard was slightly wiry, scratching against his face. It was unfamiliar, odd and it pulled Anders back to reality. He wrestled Hawke's uninjured arm away from his neck before leaning back, his breathing unsteady. Hawke was blinking, his eyes far more alert than they had been. When they focused on Anders the rogue reacted as if he'd been hit. All the relaxed happiness drained from his face, leaving the air around them tense and morbid. Anders hated it, he couldn't stand it, this estrangement. Hawke opened his mouth to speak, his eyes turning hard, but Anders beat him to it.

"Excuse me," he mumbled quietly as he stood, avoiding Bethany's confused stare, "I'll...be outside."

He rushed from the room before either brother or sister could speak. He pushed past the templar standing guard at the door and headed downstairs. All he really wanted was to be alone but unfortunately the living room was still full of people. Aveline look up from her seat by the fire next to Merrill. Varric stood by the writing desk and Fenris paced back and forth in the middle of the room, only stopping when he caught sight of Anders at the foot of the stairs.
"Is he well?" Fenris asked, ignoring Anders' own discomfort.

"Yes," Anders said, still feeling a little flustered but trying to calm himself down. "Yes he's fine. He just needs some rest and...he'll be fine."

Anders was aware that everyone was staring at him and tried to act as normal as possible. He walked further into the room, purposefully not making eye contact with anyone.

"You alright Blondie?" Varric asked as Anders walked to the chair by the writing desk and sat down.

"I will be," Anders smiled as best he could, dropping it when he realised that it probably wasn't very convincing.

"Can we see him?" Merrill asked, standing from her chair.

"He's with his sister just now," Anders said monotonously, "it's probably best to give them some time alone."

Merrill nodded solemnly before sitting back down. Everyone was silent as they waited. Anders wished that he could think of something to say, something to start a conversation that would at least distract them all, but nothing would come. His mind was still in a state of disbelief from the impromptu slip back into the life he'd left. The kiss had been like some cruel snapshot of the happiness he should have had. Yet, as Anders sat there, listening to Fenris’ light footfalls as the elf continued to walk around the room, unable to sit still, he realised it wasn't just the kiss that had him unable to think straight. It was the look on Hawke's face after he had realised exactly where he was and what he had done. A look filled with remorse and completely devoid of hope even as it wished for something it knew it couldn't have. It made Anders feel like a complete and utter bastard for putting it there in the first place.

When Bethany eventually descended the stairs, followed by the templar, saying goodbye to everyone before she was taken back to the Circle, Anders couldn't even bring himself to face her. There would be no rescue, there would be no 'spiriting away' as Cousland put it. Hawke would probably never speak to him again if he did. He'd only be putting Bethany in danger, keeping her further from her brother than she already was. Even as the others headed upstairs to see Hawke, Anders stayed where he was, his eyes trained on the nothing before him.

"Aren't you coming?" Aveline said in confusion as she neared the bottom of the stairs.

Anders just shook his head and smiled a little. Aveline, and Merrill who stood behind her, looked at him a little oddly before they continued up the stairs. It wasn't his place anymore, Anders thought. That was just the reality of it. People liked to pretend that there was the chance of friendship after love and perhaps for some people there was. Not for him and Hawke it seemed. There was too much underlying need between them for a friendship to be viable. Anders ignored the hollowness in his chest at the thought of never seeing Hawke again. It didn't seem entirely conceivable. No Hawke? They'd known each other for three years now and, even then, when they met Anders felt like he'd already known him for much longer than that. His mother used to tell him that everyone had someone they were destined for in this life. Anders had never believed her, he'd never believed in the idea of only getting that one opportunity for love. Yet now, here in Hawke's living room, the heat of the fire warming the coolness of the summer night, he felt like he was throwing away his one chance at happiness. Anders felt the distinct need to get up and leave. He was only stopped by the fact that he had left his coat upstairs and that Cousland had said he would return. He looked to the clock, grimacing; only ten o'clock. Cousland had said he'd be back before dawn.
"Looks like I'm in for a long night," Anders mumbled to himself.

The visitors filtered back down the stairs at different intervals. Aveline was the first to appear, looking far less worried and a little more irritated than she had before she had ascended to Hawke's bedroom. Anders blinked as she said her goodbyes.

"Honestly," the Guard Captain said, "that man is incorrigible when he's injured."

Anders couldn't have agreed more, wondering how many times Hawke had probably tried to get up before Aveline had threatened to tie him to the bed. Varric and Merrill came next. The elf looked tired but happy, giving Anders a comforting smile that seemed to say that everything would be alright. Anders felt bad that the blank look he gave her back said that it didn't believe her.

"You've done a good job as usual," Varric said, trying to be light-hearted, "no one would have known that he'd been duelling someone way out of his league with the patch up job you did."

"Bethany helped," Anders said dully.

"Yeah, well you can be as modest as you like," Varric shrugged.

"Don't you want to come and stay at my house tonight?" Merrill said, shifting on her feet, "Get some sleep? You look exhausted."

"I would," Anders said, actually tempted by the thought of uninterrupted sleep, "but I have to stay. Cousland said he would come back and I should really take another look at Hawke's wounds before I go."

"Oh, okay," Merrill capitulated, seemingly unwilling to persuade him further, "then I guess we'll see you tomorrow?"

Anders nodded his goodbye to them both. It was another few minutes until he felt the familiar rub of a cat around his ankles. Anders looked down and smiled genuinely at the little, alert face that looked back at him.

"Hello you," Anders said as he reached down, Madam smelling his hand a little timidly before she recognised him and allowed him to stroke her.

Yet another teasing slice of something I can't have, Anders thought wistfully as he stroked the cat, scratching behind her ears. Madam began to purr with the quality of a baby dragonling and just as loud. Anders laughed softly at the sound. She was basically a cat now but still gangly like a kitten. Anders watched her swirl about his hand, moving her head to make him scratch just the right patch of fur. He didn't hear Fenris coming down the stairs at all. It was only as the elf spoke that Anders realised his presence, hiding his surprise rather well he thought as he looked up.

"He's asleep," Fenris said slowly, watching Anders with an odd light in his eyes, "if you want to tend to him."

Anders nodded slowly, a little confused by Fenris' blunt statement. He watched Fenris and Fenris watched him back. Is it just me or is something odd going on here? Anders thought with trepidation. Fenris seemed to be looking at him with purpose, as if searching for a sign. Eventually he looked away, his eyes downcast but determined. Anders almost thought he was going to stand there in front of him indefinitely until he spoke again suddenly.

"If you break his heart," Fenris said, making Anders look at him even as the elf avoided his eyes, "I'll never forgive you for it."
And with that Fenris turned on his heel and marched down the short corridor to the main door and left without another word. Anders stared after him, trying to figure out the odd exchange they had just taken part in. In a strange way it felt to Anders like a realisation and not just for Fenris but for them both. It seemed to the mage that Fenris had finally realised that he could never fully have Hawke in the way that he wanted to, for whatever reason that was Anders wasn't sure. A small, silly and irritating part of Anders' mind liked to think it was because Hawke was still in love with him. Anders hated that part because it gave him hope while taunting him. His own realisation was a little harder to deal with. Anders stood up, leaving the cat staring up after him, and thought about it as he walked to the stairs and ascended them slowly.

He loved Hawke and he truly didn't care what the rogue did, it would never change. Anders liked to think he was perhaps strong enough to resist, or to make himself fall out of love or be discerning or have better taste in partners, but it wasn't true. Anders loved Hawke, flaws and all, just Hawke seemed to love him despite its faults. The realisation wasn't a new one, he'd give himself that. It was just something he had rediscovered. A knowledge he had buried so that he could survive his own decision to leave. But you aren't allowed a normal life, his conscience argued, you can't afford to be involved, to care, to love. That was when Anders realised exactly where he had heard that argument before and the thought made him a little ill. It was what the templars and the Chantry priests had drummed into him as a boy and continued on through into his adulthood. You will never be normal, you will never live a normal life, you will never be worthy of the things normal people are worthy of. How did I end up like this? Anders thought as he walked across the landing and opened Hawke's bedroom door, spouting the Chantry's own abusive lies back at myself, allowing that to become the doctrine by which I live my life? It was as his amber eyes met Hawke's green that he realised he'd been living a lie to protect himself and had somehow ended up practicing the very thing he was trying to fight against.

You shouldn't deny yourself anything, Anders said to himself, I thought you wanted to be free.

"Fenris said you were asleep," Anders said for lack of anything better.

"Then Fenris is a liar," Hawke said, his voice suspiciously toneless.

Anders walked into the room and closed the door behind him. Hawke was following his every move with alert eyes as if he expected Anders to attack him at any moment. The mage approached the bed, his nose wrinkling at the smell of the blood still soaked into the bedclothes.

"Are you in any pain?" he asked clinically.

"A little," Hawke said, looking away, "nothing serious."

"I can help if you'll tell me where it is," Anders said, crossing his arms.

"No, it's fine," Hawke said.

The silence that descended was awkward and, paradoxically, rather loud. The rustling of fabric as Hawke moved on the sheets was like gusting wind through trees. Anders shuffling on the carpet was akin to sheets of rain falling against the ground. He hated it more than their rather formal and stilted conversation. It shouldn't be like this, Anders thought, you should be able to tell him how you feel. No hesitation, no unease, just tell him that you love him and be done with it. Don't lie anymore Anders, he thought to himself, it's not worth it. Be as happy as you can for as long as possible, remember? Only what came out wasn't quite the forward confession he'd hoped he could say. Instead what he said sounded unfoundedly jealous and irksome.

"Fenris was up here for a long time," Anders said.
"We were talking," Hawke said, moving carefully as he pulled himself into a sitting position.

"Oh really?" Anders said, irritated even as he reached out to help Hawke sit up, "What about?"

"Actually he said that I shouldn't let go of the one thing in my life that seems to make me truly happy," Hawke said, looking straight at Anders as he said it.

"Well that's good advice," Anders said tightly, hating that his heart began to race.

"Yes," Hawke agreed, "which is why I think I'm going to take it."

"That's good," Anders evaded, standing back up and brushing himself down, "I'll be downstairs if you need me."

Everything was conflicting. Anders wasn't used to feeling this way, it was odd and difficult to deal with. He was used to being focused on what he wanted. Before Justice he had wanted freedom no matter what, after Justice he had wanted the same thing only on a large scale; he wanted it for everyone and forever. Now, with Hawke in the mix, Anders couldn't decide on what he wanted. One moment he would be so adamant that he loved Hawke and their life together that he couldn't imagine having anything else and then, moments later, he would be desperate to be apart as he was scared to death that he would only hurt himself and Hawke with their relationship. Now was one of those moments. Yet as he neared the bedroom door, ready to walk through and extricate himself back into the world of solitude, nightmares and regret, he was stopped by a single word, a word that rekindled the hope that he thought he'd lost the day he told Hawke that there was nothing between them worth fixing.

"Wait," Hawke said.
When Anders was younger he'd never been good at waiting. Why? had always been his argument. Why would you wait for something that you wanted? Good things come to those who wait? Who were these strange people, Anders would wonder, who had to wait for all the good things? As he'd grown older, when he'd found out the hard way how the world worked, he'd learned the value of waiting. When you were young your needs were simple and immediate, they could be solved in seconds. As you grew older things became more complicated. When you were trying to build an escape plan or rouse a rebellion then waiting for the pieces to fall into place was sometimes all you could do. Over many years of struggle and hardship Anders had learned the value of waiting. Perhaps that was what made him hesitate at the doorway, made his hand curl tightly around the handle as he stared at the freedom beckoning to him from the other side. But it wasn't what made him stay.

"Please," Hawke said as Anders continued to stand beside the open door.

It wasn't that one pleading word which made him stay either. It was the tone of Hawke's voice, the need there, the sullen desperation. It made Anders close his eyes and set his shoulders. There was a dreadful and yet hopeful inevitability hovering in the air. There's no going back this time, he thought, you have to understand that. If you do this then, well, it's forever this time. He kept telling himself that over and over as he watched the landing slowly disappear, obscured by the closing door. When it clicked shut the sound was reminiscent of the finality he had worked himself into. He turned unhurriedly, folding his arms, and looked at Hawke.

The lantern light threw the room into an odd relief of black, yellow and red; shadow, light and blood. When he had returned to tend to Hawke's injuries Anders hadn't truly paid any attention to the destruction the house had undergone when ransacked by the Qunari. The others had righted things as best they could but everything had still been a mess downstairs. The bedroom itself wasn't too unruly but it still felt odd and out of place. Hawke fit into that idea of change and incongruity. He looked so very different than he used to, his armour new, his face obscured by the longer hair and the beard. The only things that hadn't changed were his sea green eyes, staring out from beneath dark locks. Anders met Hawke's gaze steadily even as his heart hammered in his chest. He walked to the armchair near the bed and sat down, his back rigid. He felt out of place, awkward, everything he shouldn't feel around Hawke. The silence was heavy and oppressive. The smell of timbers smoking drifted in through the partially open window.

"I want to know," Hawke said eventually, staring ahead of him.

"Know what?" Anders asked, tone clipped.

"Why," Hawke said, "I want to know why you left."

Anders shifted uncomfortably on the edge of the chair. Did they really have to do this? Why couldn't things just be simple for once? Why couldn't Hawke just let everything go and..? Fuck it, Anders said to himself as he shook his head, I thought you said no more lies? So tell him the truth.

"I couldn't stand that you still blamed me," Anders said quietly, looking down at his hands, "for your mother's death ."

"...What?" Hawke said, sounding taken aback, "but I already told you I didn't..."

Anders chanced a look at the rogue and noted his rather confused and relieved expression. Hawke
frowned, sitting forwards away from the headboard.

"Is that all?" Hawke said, sounding a little irritated.

"No, it's not all," Anders said back, mirroring Hawke's irritation, "but...that's not important right now."

"Then when is it going to be important Anders!" Hawke shouted back, his anger flaring up at last. "Because I've seen you once in the last two months and I happened to be dying at the time! I'd say that's as low as it's ever gotten between us. I'd just love to see what happens when it gets worse."

"Oh you would, would you?" Anders spat back, "Like to see it when I do something truly terrible that you can't forgive me for, is that it?"

"Yes that's it!" Hawke yelled sarcastically, turning to haul his legs over the side of the bed, preparing to stand, "I almost can't fucking wait!"

Anders stood up as Hawke continued to struggle out of the bed, his right arm obviously still pained. The healer in him was desperate to reach out and help him while the rest of him was so blazingly angry that it could hardly form coherent thought. When he walked forwards and stood in front of Hawke imposingly his feelings became an odd mix of the two.

"Don't you dare get out of that bed," Anders said darkly.

"Fuck off," Hawke growled in response, "what do you care? You left me here on my own Anders, you fucking left me! What, did you think I wouldn't give a shit? Is that what you thought?"

"It wasn't about you!" Anders shouted back, "For Maker's sake why is it always about you Hawke?"

"It isn't! When have I ever said that?" Hawke asked incredulously, forcing himself to stand despite Anders glare, "I only ever thought of you! Yes I can be a selfish bastard sometimes, I'll admit it, but so can you. You never tell me what you're really thinking, you never tell me what your plans are, and don't pretend that I'm exaggerating. I know when you're lying Anders, I can tell."

Anders stared back at Hawke and tried to set his stance, tried to stay strong in the face of all the truth that Hawke was spouting at him. His feelings had transformed once more. Now part of him was furious while the other was guilt ridden. For once it was easy for him to tell which was himself and which was Justice.

"I only ever wanted to protect you Hawke," Anders said stonily, "don't try and make out that I was being selfish, hoarding secrets; that's not what this was about."

"Protect me? What are you talking about 'protect me'? Like I can't look after myself?" Hawke said, throwing his left arm out angrily as he took a hobbling step forwards, "I don't need you to edit out all the things in life that might hurt me, I'm a grown man!"

"Oh really?" Anders said, mimicking astonishment, "And what sort of grown man gallivants around the city constantly throwing himself into harm's way just to get some fucking recognition?"

"The same sort of man who makes himself an easy target for the templars by running mages in and out of the city and practicing magic in the streets!" Hawke bit back.

"Well...at least I'm not an attention seeker!" Anders shouted, feeling like a child but not able to stop the accusation.
"I might be," Hawke said angrily, "but at least I'm not a repressed introvert who couldn't admit to a true feeling in his fucking life!"

"Well you're a...you're a fucking idiot!" Anders shouted back for lack of anything better to say.

"Well so are you!" Hawke agreed heatedly, "But I love you anyway!"

"Yes well I love you too!" Anders yelled before he realised exactly what he was saying.

They stood there, glaring at each other, chests heaving with exertion and emotion. Oh shit, Anders thought as he felt himself stumble forwards. When he moved Hawke lunged forwards. Their mouths clashed frantically, angrily, teeth against lips against tongues, fighting for dominance. How had it come to this? Anders didn't care. Before, when the air had been alive with silence and electric tension, everything had felt so very wrong. Being apart from Hawke felt wrong. Yet now, here, tangled in Hawke's arms as the rogue lifted them to hold him tightly, everything was falling back into place. Anders could feel his heart beating in time with Hawke's as they kissed. How could I ever have left this behind? Anders didn't care. Before, when the air had been alive with silence and electric tension, everything had felt so very wrong. Being apart from Hawke felt wrong. Yet now, here, tangled in Hawke's arms as the rogue lifted them to hold him tightly, everything was falling back into place. Anders could feel his heart beating in time with Hawke's as they kissed. How could I ever have left this behind? Anders thought, trying to recall the feeling which had convinced him that leaving was his only option; he couldn't recall it no matter how hard he tried. He brought up his arms to hold Hawke tightly in return. When Hawke walked backwards it was Anders who tripped over his own feet, sending them both falling to the bed in a tangle of limbs and gasping breaths.

"Don't, Hawke, we shouldn't..." Anders started as Hawke rolled over to lay half atop him.

"Shut up Anders," Hawke said, leaning in to capture his lips before breaking away to nuzzle at his neck, "just shut up."

Anders couldn't have put it better himself. He let out a heady groan as Hawke began sucking eagerly at the flesh of his throat, his left hand making quick work of the buttons on Anders shirt. The mage was useless to resist; even if he had wanted to he didn't think Hawke would let him. Anders was being swept away on a wave of relief, love and sheer lust. His mind was blank of all obstacles, all reasoning. He reached up as Hawke sat back, took two fistfuls of the rich fabric of the rogue's shirt and ripped the front open, sending buttons flying everywhere. Hawke blinked in shock, looking down at his ruined shirt as Anders sat up and began to lave at the sensitive flesh. Anders heard Hawke gasp, a hand reaching up to pull his hair loose, deft fingers curling through the soft strands. The mage pulled back, looking up into Hawke's eyes, his dilated pupils making them seem almost black in the low light.

"You're sure about this," he asked, hating that he needed to know, that he needed the reassurance, "about me..?

"Don't ask stupid fucking questions," Hawke smiled despite his ire, hand still threading through his hair.

It really was a stupid question, Anders thought as he reached up to pull Hawke down onto the bed. The rogue moved his right arm slowly, carefully, as he caressed Anders' chest. It still wasn't alright, everything wasn't fixed and Anders knew it, but the least he could do was care for Hawke. He wanted him to know he was sorry, he wanted to look after him. Anders rolled them over to the cleaner side of the covers, away from the drying bloodstains. He pulled back, looking down to Hawke's bemused face. He leaned back down to kiss him deeply, sliding his tongue inside to caress everything it could touch. Hawke hummed in appreciation, his hands reaching up to slide around Anders' behind and squeeze tightly. The mage leaned back, hovering over Hawke as he revelled in his touch. They moved together frantically, hands sliding over hot flesh, lips tasting lips, hips grinding against each other. Anders lost himself completely into the dissolute motions,
not caring when Hawke rolled them back over, straddling his hips. Anders sat up, legs still trapped beneath Hawke's strong thighs, and began kissing at the rogue's neck. His beard brushed against the side of Anders' face, tickling and scratching at him but he didn't care. He felt Hawke reach up and pull his shirt down his shoulders tightly as he tried to get it off, pulling his arms down behind his back. Anders breath caught in his throat as Hawke leaned back a little, still pressed tightly against him, and looked down into his eyes.

"Promise me," Hawke said, "promise me you won't leave me again."

"Hawke..." Anders tried to be reasonable but it was impossible to when they were both so far gone.

"Promise?" Hawke said, sounding dangerously anxious.

"...I promise," Anders said hesitantly before leaning up to capture Hawke's lips in a soft but heated kiss.

That was the moment the door burst open, forcing them both apart, eyes turned in fright towards the tall, blonde man in full platemail armour standing bemusedly in the doorway. Anders blinked. He couldn't be quite sure, he'd only met him the once, but was that really..?

"Oh, sorry," the man said, laughing awkwardly, "wrong room."

"Who in the hell are..?" Hawke started irately before he was cut off.

"Alistair for Maker's sake get out of there!" Anders blanched as he recognised the Commander's voice.

He could hear Cousland's getting closer and pulled his shirt back up over his shoulders, feeling incredibly embarrassed; Alistair was suddenly pulled back by insistent hands, his armour clinking loudly, before Cousland popped his head around the door. He hesitated for a moment, looking back and forth between Hawke and Anders, still on the bed.

"Uh, sorry about that, he's no good with directions," Cousland said quickly, "gets lost in his own castle most of the time."

"You do know that I'm standing right here," Anders heard Alistair say from beyond the door, "and amazingly enough I can hear everything you're saying."

"You don't mind if we all stay the night...or a little while longer," Cousland said with a slightly contrite face, completely ignoring Alistair, "do you?"

Anders looked to Hawke as the man shook his head back and forth, more in bemusement than agreement. However, Cousland took it as an affirmation. He thanked Hawke before ducking out of the doorway, pulling it almost closed. Anders and Hawke listened in sheer bewilderment at the retreating voices.

"I seriously can't take you anywhere, can I?" Cousland was saying, "You always do something to embarrass me!"

"I always do something?" Alistair retorted, "Says the man who, earlier on, groped me in front of my uncle."

"Oh that was an accident," Cousland said back exasperatedly, "and anyway he isn't really your uncle."
"That wasn't really my point..." Alistair replied wryly before their voices were cut off by the sound of a closing door.

There was a long silence. Anders felt the distinct need to laugh out loud but wasn't sure if it was appropriate. Only moments ago they had been apart, fighting like cat and dog, then they had been together, tearing at each other like animals and now they were both sitting on the bed in relative peace and quiet. Life is a bloody mystery to me most of the time, Anders thought, but with Hawke it's a constant enigma. He looked round at the man in question only to find him looking back.

"What on earth is he doing here again?" Hawke asked in annoyance as he sat back against Ander's legs, "And who the bloody hell was that other person?"

"Well to answer your first question, I don't know, the Commander didn't tell me why he's here," Anders said with resigned weariness, "and to answer the second, well, that was the King of Ferelden."

Why is it that every respectable person I know isn't actually respectable in the least? Anders thought as Hawke's eyes turned as round as dinner plates.

It had taken Anders a while to calm Hawke down after informing him that the King of his homeland was staying in his house, sleeping in the next room no less. Hawke couldn't stop gibbering about having been so rude and not having greeted him properly and all such other nonsense. Anders tried to remind him that Hawke shouldn't worry; considering the day he'd had he was probably more than entitled to be a little out of sorts. Anyway, Anders thought, from what Cousland told me of Alistair he's not one to be hung up on formalities. However Hawke still hadn't listened to him. Anders had ended up threatening to stun him as a last resort and, even then, it was still difficult convincing him to change out of his dirty armour into something more comfortable while Anders pulled the stained cover off of the bed. He had found a replacement cover in one of the large cupboards along the back wall of the bedroom and managed to coax Hawke into the bed. It was easier when Anders himself was in it, he found. Hawke eventually slid under the thin cover and curled up next to Anders, legs and arms twined about the mage's body as if he was scared that he would flee. Anders settled into the heavy embrace, soaking in the wonderful familiarity and allowed himself to fall into contented oblivion.

When he woke it was to the sound of voices and movement, shouted orders and the scraping of wood against wood. He sniffed, blinking his eyes open into the pale light of early morning. The window was still open when he turned to look, his view limited as Hawke was still wound around him like a creeping vine. Whatever is going on downstairs I'm sure I don't want to know about it yet. Anders smiled happily when he turned back into Hawke's embrace. He found the man staring sleepily at him through half lidded eyes. Anders watched him back, unsure for a ridiculous moment as to what he should do. Then Hawke took the responsibility out of his hands when he leaned forwards without warning, still half asleep by the looks of things, and kissed him. Anders closed his eyes and revelled in the feeling, lifting up a hand to brush it gently over Hawke's bearded jaw. When the rogue pulled away he was smiling.

"It's been too long since I've been able to do that," he said softly, his arms tightening around Anders.

Anders couldn't have agreed more. He couldn't speak for Hawke but the feeling of waking up in this familiar bed surrounded by the man he loved was almost too much to hope for. The mage kept expecting to wake up at any moment, back in his clinic, to discover this was all a dream. Well, Anders thought with a small smile, if this is a dream I guess I'd better make the most of it.
"Then I suppose I'll just have to make it up to you," Anders suggested with a sly smile.

He quickly worked his hand in between them before taking hold of Hawke without hesitation. He watched, with a reminiscence of the lust from the night before, as Hawke's mouth fell open and his eyes slid shut while Anders slid his hand back and forth.

"Nnh, well I wouldn't...say no," Hawke groaned before rushing forwards to capture Anders' lips once more, his breath coming in startled gasps.

The knock at the door didn't give them enough warning. Anders pulled the cover up with a curse as Cousland strode into the room before stopping dead, his eyes wide.

"For the Maker's sake! You're supposed to wait after knocking!" Anders said, blushing furiously as he was pulled back into Hawke's embrace.

"Yes, well, uh..." Cousland faltered, looking a little unsure as to what to do, "sorry, I thought I heard... well, um...and I assumed you were up."

"Well we're not!" Hawke said angrily, "Get out, go on! Out!"

"Okay I'm going, I'm going!" Cousland lifted his hands in a gesture of peace before backing out of the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

Anders pushed his face into Hawke's shoulder and sighed, the rogue's skin cool against his flushed face. Honestly couldn't they get a moments peace around here without someone or other just waltzing into the room and interrupting them? He took a moment to calm down before he shifted round onto his side and looked up at Hawke. The man was staring at the closed door as if mesmerised. Anders frowned, reaching up to wave his hand back and forth in front of Hawke's face. Finally he got a reaction as Hawke blinked and looked down at him.

"I know, I'm sorry, he's a terribly impatient person at times..." Anders started as he reached up to push Hawke's unruly hair back from his forehead, but Hawke interrupted him.

"Last night..." Hawke said dazedly, "I was dreaming wasn't I?"

"About what?" Anders frowned.

"About the King of Ferelden walking into my bedroom," Hawke said, looking down at Anders, "that was a dream wasn't it?"

"Unfortunately..." Anders sighed, "no, it wasn't."

Anders didn't think he'd ever seen Hawke get up so quickly in his life. He watched in amazement as the rogue veritably leapt from the bed, rushing to the basin and mirror where he started furiously washing his face. Anders watched him with a mixture of worry and amusement. He continued to lie on the bed and watch Hawke fret, throwing clothes on, brushing his hair, deciding to shave and making a mess of it. Eventually Anders decided it would be best to stop watching Hawke suffer and do something to help.

"Here," Anders said, still only wearing his nightshirt, "let me do that before you cut your own throat."

Hawke gave him a withering stare but handed over the razor nonetheless. He forced Hawke to sit down and began to carefully scrape away the thick hairs with the sharp metal blade.
"You need to calm down," Anders said, tutting when Hawke tried to speak, "don't talk or I might cut you by accident! Anyway, like I said last night, everything will be fine so stop worrying."

"That's easy for you to say," Hawke said agitatedly, "you've already met him and, for whatever reason, you've always seemed perfectly at ease with everyone you meet regardless of their status. He's a King for Maker's sake Anders, he's my King! This means a lot to me..."

"I swear Hawke I'm going to slice your bloody ear off at this rate if you're not careful," Anders glared pointedly, "now stay still and be quiet until I'm done."

Thankfully the threat of maiming obviously worked and Hawke closed his mouth tightly until Anders was finished. Once the mage had cut away the last of Hawke's beard he rinsed the razor and put it away safely. When he turned back Hawke was already washing the last of the soapy suds from his face. Anders smiled softly at him, reaching over to run his fingertips across Hawke's smooth face. The rogue looked so much younger with a clean shaven face. He had suited the beard but Anders definitely preferred him without it. Hawke reached up and put his hand over Anders' own before pulling him closer. At least he's calmed down a little, Anders thought, before Hawke yanked him down into his lap. Anders fell with a yelp, arms coming up instinctually to loop around Hawke's back for support. He glared at the rogue as he laughed, one arm around Anders back while Hawke traced Anders neck with his free hand. So much for calm then, Anders thought wryly.

"Could you maybe sit still for five minutes?" Anders said with a deadpan expression.

"What are you talking about?" Hawke beamed audaciously, "I'm sitting still now, am I not?"

"That wasn't really what I meant," Anders rolled his eyes; he looked at Hawke as the man smiled happily to himself, "what are you looking so pleased about?"

"What a stupid question," Hawke laughed as he leaned in to kiss Anders briefly on the lips, "what isn't there to be happy about? Last night I got to see my sister in person, I haven't seen her for months! I defeated the Arishok in single combat, I may as well be the champion of all Kirkwall, I'm being visited by Kings and dignitaries..! But most of all..."

Hawke stopped to shift Anders closer to him until the mage was pressed against his chest, arms around his back. Anders swallowed as he looked into Hawke's passionate, green eyes. It's been so long since I've seen him like this, Anders thought, and for once I can be glad for the expression I've put on his face.

"...most of all," Hawke repeated, his voice lowering to a dusky timbre, "I have you here with me; I'll always have you here with me, forever."

"Flatterer," Anders breathed out as Hawke closed the gap between them, sliding his tongue slickly between Anders' lips.

But Anders knew that Hawke was right. This was all that mattered. The White Divine and the Black Divine could be outside on the landing having a drinking contest right now and Anders couldn't really have cared less. Well, he thought, maybe would have to have a peak that that, but that's not really the point. The point is that this is it, no more backing out, no more doubts. This is the real thing, just you and me Hawke. Eventually they broke apart, breathing heavily.

"Well," Anders said with a breathy, almost nervous, laugh, "I suppose there is a good reason then."

"Too right there is," Hawke said as Anders stood up, brushing a hand back through his hair, "now, I suppose introductions are in order."
"Someone looks very confident all of a sudden," Anders smirked as Hawke stood up, rubbing his hands together.

"Do I?" Hawke said, "Good, because I'm actually shit scared on the inside."

Anders couldn't help but laugh. He pulled off his nightshirt and quickly dressed himself in whatever came to hand. Once he was ready he reached out to take hold of Hawke's hand and lead him out of the bedroom door. The sight that greeted them, however, made them both stop in their tracks and stare. Everything that had been knocked over had been righted, everything that had been broken had been cleared away and disposed of, the damaged floorboards were being replaced by a young man with a large canvass bag full of tools, the banister was being polished, the fire damaged curtains were being taken down. Anders walked to the balcony, with Hawke in tow, and stared open mouthed at the similar scene in the downstairs living room. Cousland, Alistair and another man with a beard were sitting around the table by the unlit fire eating what looked like eggs and bacon. This is surreal, Anders thought torpidly. Hawke pulled at his hand and Anders followed him, looking around him as he walked. He recognised some of the people who were rearranging things as grey wardens but there were others who he'd never seen before. What the hell is going on? He wondered as they walked down the stairs and out into the living area.

"And to think this was supposed to be a little break before we had to start working again," the bearded man was saying with a sigh as they approached.

"Oh that's alright, I'm used to spending my free time in still burning, war torn cities," Alistair said with a shrug and a smile, "I like to think it gives me an edge over other monarchs."

"A rather dull edge if you ask me," Cousland smirked, jerking forwards with a scowl when Alistair kicked him under the table, "hey! No need for violence."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alistair shrugged innocently; he looked up kindly as Anders and Hawke approached, smiling gently, "ah, it seems our hosts are awake."

Cousland and the other man turned in their chairs to look at them. Cousland eyed Hawke a little critically but didn't say anything. Anders just hoped the commander would be civil enough until he'd had a chance to explain things to him. Maker knows I don't need Cousland embarrassing Hawke in front of King Alistair, he thought wearily, Hawke would bloody murder him if that happened.

"Ah yes," the bearded man said with a smile that crinkled his eyes, "the hero of the hour I do believe."

Hawke was too busy staring at Alistair to take any notice of anything else. There was an awkward moments silence where Anders was sure he was going to have to say something just to break it, but then Hawke finally found his voice. He dropped to one knee before Alistair's chair, lowering his head and thus missing Alistair's look of complete bemusement. 

"My liege..." Hawke started but Alistair was already out of his chair and reaching down to grab Hawke's hand.

"Oh please, don't do that," Alistair said, pulling a rather wide eyed Hawke up by the hand, "and it's just Alistair, or King Alistair if you must but I don't recommend it. Makes me sound unreasonably respectable."

"And we couldn't have that now, could we?" the bearded man shook his head and sighed.
"Oh, sorry, suppose I should introduce you," Alistair said, oblivious to Hawke's rather confused sense of awe, "this is my uncle Teagan...well, he's not really my uncle but his brother brought me up...well he didn't really bring me up-you know what I think I'll stop talking now."

"Good idea," Cousland said with an affectionate smile.

"Thank you for the support as always," Alistair said with cheerful sarcasm before turning back to Hawke, "anyway I should thank you for allowing us to stay in your home, it's very kind of you and I appreciate it."

"Not at all," Hawke said, finally sounding more like himself again, "it's an honour."

Anders walked round to the other side of the table and stood beside Cousland's chair while Alistair continued talking to Hawke. He nudged the Commander in the shoulder and the man looked up at him quizzically. Anders jerked his head in the direction of the library and Cousland nodded. They both slipped away unnoticed, Teagan and Alistair too busy questioning Hawke about his involvement in the Arishok's rebellion. Cousland followed Anders into the library and closed the door. Thankfully there were no workers in this part of the house as of yet but Anders still kept his voice down when he talked, aware that voices carried up the stairs and out over the balcony.

"Did the children get back safely?" he asked without hesitation.

"Yes, of course they did, they were with my Wardens weren't they?" Cousland said with a reassuring smile, "I went straight to the harbour after I left you. They're a bit of a handful, you're lot, aren't they. Were running circles round Stroud when I found them."

"Doesn't surprise me," Anders said as he shook his head, but in truth he was more relieved than words could express.

"And I'll tell you what they were less impressed than Serrah Hawke about meeting a King. Although I think Alistair quite enjoyed it. He likes meeting people who aren't in awe of him," Cousland said casually, "They went back to Darktown when we got back to the City gates. I tried to convince them to come back here with us but they said that they wanted to get home. That tall one, Walter..?"


"Right, William," Cousland said, snapping his fingers, "he was mighty worried about you. He said to tell you he'd make sure the clinic was alright and that he'd wait there until you got back. He seems like a nice kid."

"He is," Anders said fondly, "they all are."

No, no time to start bringing yourself down again, Anders thought ruefully. It wasn't your fault, it was an accident. Still, even with his own empty reassurances, Anders couldn't help but see the red blood pouring from under the rubble in his mind's eye. He shook his head and looked back to his Commander. He watched Cousland for a moment before forcing a smile, enjoying the other man's confusion.

"Did you really have your Warden's clean the house before we woke up?" he asked amusedly.

"They aren't all mine," Cousland shrugged with a laugh, leaning against a tall bookshelf, "but I thought we might as well earn our stay this time. Anyway the place was a bloody mess. Some other workmen turned up at about six in the morning through so we let them in. Said they were sent by some of the nobles to help with repairs. Maker knows how the nobles even knew that this place
needed repairs but who am I to question the speed with which information travels in Kirkwall."

Anders nodded, wondering how long he could stall before he needed to start talking about the real reason he'd dragged Cousland in here. Not very long it seems, Anders thought as the Commander eyed him critically.

"What's wrong?" Cousland asked quietly.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Anders said slowly, tilting his head to the side as he watched the younger man before him, "How old are you again Cousland?"

"Eh?" the Commander blinked, "What's that got to do with anything..?"

"Just tell me," Anders said.

"I'm twenty three next month," Cousland said perplexedly, tagging on mordantly, "why, are you going to get me a birthday present?"

"And how old am I?" Anders said, watching Cousland's confusion heighten.

"I don't know," Cousland admitted, "you know Anders I'm not really sure where you're going with this..."

"I'm nearly thirty two years old," Anders interrupted Cousland gently, "and no offence to you Commander but I've been on this earth nearly a decade longer than you have and I know how the world works. I don't need you imposing on my love life like an irate mother."

"I wasn't going to..!" Cousland started indignantly, pushing up from the bookshelf.

"And don't pretend you weren't going to say something to Hawke," Anders said, pointing at Cousland, "because we both know that's a lie. Look, I really appreciate your help Commander, I honestly do; you have no idea how glad I was to see you when Meredith had me backed into that corner, and when you told her where to go I thought all my birthdays had come at once...but when it comes to me and Hawke, well, that's between me and Hawke if you understand me. I can take care of myself."

Cousland struggled for a moment, first of all looking angry, then resentful, then contrite and finally beaten. The Commander of the Grey lifted his arms and let them drop in defeat, flopping down onto one of the low tables beside a pile of books. He looked up at Anders and sighed.

"I didn't mean to imply you couldn't," he said apologetically, "but it's just that sometimes you don't look after yourself, and don't deny it!"

Anders closed his mouth, having opened it to protest to Cousland's statement.

"You've never had a very high opinion of yourself, don't think I haven't noticed," Cousland said, folding his arms, "and I just hate to think of you letting someone walk all over you because you think that you aren't worth anything better, that's all."

"Actually I left him, if that's what you're implying," Anders said tightly, hating the hint of truth in the Commander's words.

"...Really?" Cousland said, eyebrows raised, "Oh. Well, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that it's just...oh what the fuck am I even talking about anymore? Look, all I want you to know is that you're my friend Anders and I want you to be happy. I'm sorry if I get a bit, well, involved
sometimes but it's just because I'm..."

"A control freak?" Anders smiled.

"No!" Cousland denied, hesitating for a moment before shaking his head, "Well, alright maybe, but that's not the point. The point is that I don't like to see my friends hurt. I've had enough people in my life hurt when I should have been there to protect them and, well...fuck I really can ramble can't I?"

"Commander..." Anders started, seeing the window of sadness Cousland was trying quickly to cover up.

"Don't worry about it," Cousland shrugged, smiling half heartedly; there was a terse silence and then Cousland smiled, reaching over to slap Anders on the shoulder, "I guess you aren't going to tell me what happened between you two?"

"We broke up," Anders said, shrugging, "and then we got back together."

"I'll take that as a no," Cousland said dryly, "alright, I'll keep my mouth shut this time, but you have to promise me that you'll look after yourself."

"Fine, I promise," Anders said with a laugh, shaking his head.

I'm making a lot of promises today, Anders thought, I suppose I should try harder than I usually do to keep them this time.

"You know we should really get back out there before Serrah Hawke has an apoplexy or something," Cousland said, obviously trying to lighten the mood, "honestly, I've never seen someone so nervous about meeting Alistair before."

"Well, he is a king," Anders shrugged as they both headed for the door.

"I know but..." Cousland floundered as he opened the door, obviously unable to comprehend it, "I suppose I just don't see it. To me he's just Alistair."

Anders smiled as they headed back out into the living area. That's what it's supposed to be like when you're in love, Anders felt like telling Cousland, it doesn't matter who they are and who you are. Everything's equal in love and war, as they say. Hawke didn't truly seem to have noticed they had even left the table as they approached. Anders was glad that he seemed to have calmed down. He was still rather stiff as he talked to Alistair but he was keeping his head. Anders took a seat beside Cousland and helped himself to some of the cold bacon, picking it up and chewing on it thoughtfully.

He watched Hawke with an affectionate smile as he continued to interact with the people around him. I wonder if you know what I see when I look at you? Anders thought as he watched Hawke. Your charisma, your self-assuredness, your easy laugh, your kind smile, your magnanimity, your nobility. Yes you have your faults, yes you can be reckless, you're not infallible, but then no one is. Do you know how inspirational you are to others? Perhaps you don't Anders thought as he sat back in his seat. I was a fool to let all of that go, I know that, but I was just scared that when you found out what I'm really capable of that I would ruin something in you. I don't want to hurt you, I don't want to extinguish that beautiful fire you have inside. Everything sometimes seems like it's hanging by a thread, waiting to fall; the sword of Damocles ready to drop and sever everything that's holding us together. Hawke looked round, perhaps feeling Anders' eyes on him, and smiled at him, his eyes kind and loving.
Forever. It seemed an awfully large and unrealistic commitment yet there was something he found very appealing about the word. Anders rolled it around in his mind, testing the feel of it; forever. Yes, he thought as he watched Hawke, returning his smile, I think I can do that.
So he liked to use work as a distraction, that was fair from Anders' point of view. No matter that the workmen and other Warden's gave him odd looks when he began to help carting the last of the rubble and broken furniture out into the garden. Anders had never been good at sitting still if he could help in any way. Now, especially, what with the complication of once more forgiving Hawke despite Justice's best efforts to force him into another confrontation, Anders needed the distraction.

"Alistair, what's this?"

Anders was passing the guest rooms, carrying a bundle of broken wood which he'd been planning to throw outside, when he heard Cousland's voice. He looked around the corridor for his friend before noticing that one of the doors was slightly ajar. He knew he shouldn't have, he knew that if it had been him that he would have hated someone to pry but...well he'd always been interested to see how they interacted when they were alone together. A relationship like that of Lien and Alistair's was never an easy one, he thought. The deception necessary to keep it alive tended to pervade every inch of it after a while, ruining anything that was actually real. That didn't seem to have happened with these two. Oh and here I said I'd stop this eves dropping nonsense, Anders thought a little guiltily as he shifted closer, tilting his head so he could look through the crack. Alistair was sitting on the bed, dressed in a simple white shirt and brown trousers, while Cousland unpacked his bedroll and his supplies.

"It's a sock?" Alistair replied warily.

"It's a filthy bloody sock," Cousland said, holding said offending item at arm's length while he looked at Alistair disapprovingly, "How did it find its way into my bedroll?"

"Maybe it likes you?" Alistair suggested with a smile, "Socks are sneaky like that. Anyway, it's not mine."

"It has your name stitched on it," Cousland said with a satisfied smirk as he pointed to the hem, watching Alistair laugh a little awkwardly.

"Oh, uh...ha, ha. Ha," the king stopped laughing and let out a soft sigh, expression contrite, "part of templar training, back at the Chantry. The men were... always getting their socks mixed up. Anyway, uh, sorry about that. I'll take it from you right now."

"Too right you will," Cousland said, throwing the sock at Alistair's face.

"Ugh, no, don't!" Alistair scrambled away from the sock, "You don't know where it's been!"

"On your foot, I'm guessing?" Cousland said with a sarcastic smile.

"Exactly!" Alistair said, "Therefore it has the right to be labelled a deadly weapon. I could have you arrested for treason; trying to murder a monarch with his own socks."

Anders smothered a laugh as Cousland shook his head and smiled, walking forwards to lean down onto the bed, sliding one bent knee along beside Alistair's thigh.

"Going to punish me then," Cousland said suggestively, "are you?"

This is where I leave then, Anders thought with a raise of his eyebrows. Honestly, he thought as he prepared to carry on down the hall, the pair of them are like schoolboys. How on earth did they
ever manage to muster an army and defeat the blight? The mind boggles. It was as he passed the door, however, that something Alistair said forced him to stop.

"You don't like Serrah Hawke very much, do you?" Alistair said quizzically.

"Where did that come from?" Cousland asked, sounding a little put out.

"I'm just curious," Alistair said genuinely, "and it's really rather obvious. I'm not that stupid, well, not most of the time."

"I could say something you know...," Cousland started humorously before he hesitated, sighed and finally capitulated "alright, I suppose I don't really like him, no."

"He seems alright to me," Alistair said, accompanied by the sound of the bed sheets rustling, "other than the fact that he seems to think I'm the best King in the whole world ever, but that's not so bad is it?"

"Oh stop enjoying the flattery, I thought you hated all that sycophantic nonsense," Cousland said casually, making Anders smile despite himself, "and anyway he's really just an arsehole and he messes Anders about. Also he thinks he's all this, that and the other, when he isn't."

"I'm quite sure that your friend Anders can take of himself, from what you've told me," Alistair's voice turned sly and slightly muffled as he continued, "And I always knew that letting you slay that archdemon would go straight to your head. Now you think everyone else is just an insignificant pipsqueak."

"Let' me slay the archdemon, that's rich! And I do not look down on everyone..!" Cousland said, affronted, but his indignant tone quickly faded off into a gasp, "...Alistair stop that..."

"What?" Alistair said innocently, even as Cousland continued to protest, "I'm not doing anything."

"You fucking liar, I can see you..." Cousland stopped short and let out a heady moan, his breathing speeding up, his voice worried as he continued, "Alistair, the door..."

Definitely time to leave, Anders thought as his face heated slightly. What on earth am I getting so embarrassed about? It wasn't as if he'd never heard anyone else fooling around before. He reached the end of the corridor before he heard the door click shut, sealing the two lovers inside. Still, Cousland was his friend and, in a way, he'd always seen him as a reckless-little-brother type. The thought of him and Alistair together made him feel the need to charge into the room and tell them to be more careful. Honestly, Anders thought, I'm turning into him.

"Where have you been..?" Hawke asked as Anders walked out into the back garden and dumped the wood on the ground with the rest of the rubble, "...are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Anders said quickly, "why?"

"You're all red," Hawke said, reaching out to feel his forehead, "do you feel ill?"

"No, I'm not ill," Anders batted Hawke's hand away and tried to stop blushing, "I'm just hot, that's all."

"Whatever you say," Hawke said with a shrug.

Hawke gave him a slightly disbelieving look but seemed to let it slip. Anders watched him appreciatively as Hawke turned around and bent over, shifting the rubble into manageable bags so
"I thought I told you not to do anything strenuous," Anders said in annoyance as Hawke began lugging bags over to the wall, "it might feel like your wounds have healed but they still need time to set."

"I'll be fine Anders," Hawke said dismissively, "honestly."

"...Fine," Anders muttered as Hawke once more bent over in front of him, "but don't come crying to me when your arm falls off because I am not reattaching it for you."

The part of him that was Anders had to resist the urge to slap Hawke on the arse. The part of him that was Justice had to resist kicking him face first into the pile of sharp wood and jagged rubble. Anders sighed. He hated the duplicity of his feelings most of the time, hated the push and pull inside his own mind, but right now it was becoming unbearable. Usually he and Justice's views were never too disparate, only on occasion, but when it came to Hawke they were constantly at odds. He turned and left as quickly as possible, feeling Hawke's eyes on him as he rushed back into the house. In all honesty all he felt he needed was some time alone to sort through his thoughts; instead, he received guests. As he entered the living area it was to be greeted by Varric and Merrill wandering along the corridor. The dwarf was eying the situation with the look of a writer spying a very interesting and profitable story while Merrill just looked a little anxious.

"Welcome to the madhouse," Anders said, dead pan, as Varric smiled, "or maybe 'slightly more mad than usual house' would be more appropriate."

"Well you look better," Varric said, eyes narrowed a little in suspicion, as usual ignoring Anders' offer of a normal conversation in favour of being deliberately contentious.

"Yes, I..." Anders couldn't help but hesitate, resisting the urge to say that he wasn't quite alright, "we worked something out."

"Just like that, huh?" Varric said with a raise of his eyebrow.

"Gosh, everything was so broken last night," Merrill said brightly as she looked around her; despite her naive smile Anders had a feeling she was talking about more than just the furniture, "but now it's all fixed!"

"Yes," Anders said unconvincingly, "all fixed."

The living area was still being worked on so Anders led Varric and Merrill into the library. For some reason the room hadn't been as badly damaged as the rest of the house and so was completely empty of workmen and wardens. They sat around the table on the upstairs balcony, Anders pouring himself and his guests large glasses of the apple juice Oranna had squeezed that morning. Trying to be polite and charming this evening was going to be hell. He felt on edge enough as it was, what with Justice, but the thought of dealing with everything else as well was not at all enticing.

"So I see we have visitors," Varric said as he looked down at the steady ebb and flow of Warden's in the living room below.

"Mmm," Anders hummed in agreement, "they're the Commander's troops."

"What are they all doing here?" Merrill asked, leaning both her forearms on the balcony and peering over the edge.

"Not sure," Anders shrugged, beginning to wonder that himself; he had wanted to ask Cousland
earlier but hadn't been sure if he would tell him, "Grey Warden business I assume."

"How perceptive of you," Varric said, eyeing Anders as if sure that he was withholding information.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Anders said wryly, listening with half an ear as the door downstairs opened and closed.

It was only when he heard the voices, as two people ascended the stairs, that he took notice. Varric and Merrill both looked to the stairs with interest as Cousland and Alistair appeared. The Commander looked a little surprised but covered it well.

"Oh, sorry," he said, "thought there wasn't anyone up here."

"Need some more time alone do we?" Anders smirked into his apple juice, avoiding Cousland's eyes.

"No," Cousland said warningly, glaring at Anders as subtly as he could, "we were just looking for somewhere quiet to sit."

Anders looked away with an amused snort. He knew he shouldn't be winding the Commander up about such a delicate topic while they had guests but, well, Varric already knew and he doubted Merrill would tell anyone if she found out. Other than that he wouldn't deny it to himself that he was feeling a little jealous of Alistair and Cousland's seemingly simple love. The only thing that they seemed to have to worry about was being separated for long periods of time. Which is also difficult, Anders thought with a defeated sigh as he looked down into his drink, and the grass is always greener...

When he looked up he caught Merrill looking at Alistair, silently indicating to her own top, running her finger up and down and looking pointedly at the bemused man. Anders was confused himself until Alistair seemed to catch on and look down, noticing that his shirt was buttoned up all wrong.

"Oh," he said embarrassedly, "I see. Um, yes, it's a new trend I'm trying to start in Ferelden. I like to call it the 'I got out of bed in the dark and couldn't dress myself' look."

"And you pull it off very well," Cousland said with a slightly worried laugh as Merrill giggled in the background.

"Why thank you," Alistair said sarcastically, suddenly looking as if he'd rather be anywhere but here, "but if you'd all kindly excuse me, I actually have some business to discuss with Serrah Hawke. Teagan said that there's no more holiday apparently because he's a big spoil sport. So, back to work."

"Well don't think that I'm wasting any more of my holiday on politics and all that nonsense," Cousland said dryly, walking over to sit down at the table, accepting a glass of juice from Anders, "I'll be here if you need me."

"Your never ending support is as invaluable as ever," Alistair said with a roll of his eyes.

He waved goodbye before he turned to exit down the stairs he'd only just climbed. Varric was watching him closely, obviously interested, while Merrill swung her feet and slipped her juice.

"Well, it's nice to see you two again," Cousland said charmingly, making Merrill smile shyly, "sorry it couldn't be under better circumstances."
"Those are difficult to find nowadays," Varric said with a shrug, "we're lucky to still have a city standing around us, never mind being able to sit and drink pressed apples in relative comfort."

"You're not wrong," Cousland said, his eyes dulling slightly despite his smile.

"Who was that?" Merrill asked innocently, breaking into the conversation to point at the stairs Alistair had only just left by, "That man who just left?"

"Oh, well," Cousland said, looking a little wary, "he's a friend."

"It's alright," Anders said, catching Cousland's eye, "Merrill won't tell anyone and I'm sure we can make Varric promise not to. You will promise, won't you Varric?"

"Cross my heart," Varric said solemnly, his eyes sparkling with curiosity.

The Commander drummed the fingers of one hand on the tabletop, his eyes still unsure as he flicked them back and forth between the elf and the dwarf. Anders could understand why he was wary, he'd only met his friends once and that had been some time ago now. Yet it was difficult for Anders to separate his view of Varric and Merrill from Cousland's view of them. Finally the Commander seemed to come to a decision. He sat forwards and clasped his hands.

"When I say that this doesn't go beyond the confines of this house," Cousland said, his demeanour losing all of its jovial and carefree attitude, "I can't stress it enough. Understood?"

Varric and Merrill both nodded enthusiastically, despite the slightly worried glances they threw Anders' way. The mage smiled at Cousland; he could be so over dramatic sometimes. Just another personality trait of Cousland's which reminded him of Hawke. Why is it that I relate everything back to him? Anders thought dully. Honestly, my bloody life is beginning to revolve around him. When did I become so dependent on his love? He sighed as he listened to Cousland telling Merrill and Varric that they had actually just met the King of Ferelden, feeling a little awkward and out of place with his uneasy thoughts. He stood up, giving a weak excuse about having to check on something, and left to see if Alistair really had gone to find Hawke. If he had, he wanted to know what he was going to say. Admittedly he'd only met Alistair twice, this visit included, but he got the sense that he would be an easy man to get information from without him truly noticing. I may be wrong, Anders thought amusedly as he walked back towards the garden, but I rarely am. It was as he neared the door to the outside that he heard Hawke's voice coming from the kitchen. He followed it, pushing open the door, and found Hawke, Alistair and Nathaniel sitting around the large preparing table, eating a bunch of scraps from the larder.

"Ah, so nice of you to join us," Hawke smiled as he pulled him out a seat.

"Join you in absconding from work, I see," Anders smirked as he took the seat, leaning back casually so as to disguise the tension in his shoulders.

"Oh I wouldn't go that far," Alistair said with a shrug, "this is working, it's a...pre dinner, post rubble hauling snack."

"Or breakfast," Nathaniel said gruffly, "for some of us anyway."

Anders looked at the rogue more closely, noting the dark circles beneath his eyes and the slightly gaunt look to his cheeks. He had to suppress the instinct to push more food across the table onto his plate. I'm quite sure that Nate wouldn't appreciate you mothering him, Anders thought wryly.

"What has that man had you doing?" Anders asked Nathaniel as he poured himself some heady looking reddish purple wine from a carafe.
"Oh, you know, this and that," Nathaniel said, jerking his head back and forth with his words; Anders didn't miss the more unsubtle jerk he gave towards Hawke.

Hawke, in return, laughed a little and took a drink from what looked like a flagon of ale.

"It's alright, you can just say it's Warden business you know," he said, smiling, "I won't pry, I'll just be terribly curious, that's all."

"Oh I wouldn't tie yourself in knots wondering about it," Alistair said dourly, "saying 'Warden business' is usually just another way of saying 'extremely dull'." "I'll take your word on that," Hawke said, nodding politely to Alistair.

"Anyway, there are things which we can talk about," Alistair cheered up a little, despite looking a little put out, "they are all to do with work, but at least we can talk about them."

"Work?" Anders said with a slight frown, "Why exactly are you all here?"

Nathaniel and Alistair looked at each other for a moment, only a glance, before Alistair leaned forwards on the table and clasped his hands. Why on earth does this suddenly look so important, Anders thought warily as the atmosphere changed from carefree to heavy. He felt the need to sit up straighter in his chair.

"Well, I'm sure Lien has told you, but Ferelden and Orlais haven't exactly been getting along recently," Alistair said, accepting Anders' nod as confirmation, "well, it's only become worse as of recent, for obvious reasons, and we came here to ask the Viscount for help. Lot of good it did us considering the poor bugger's been decapitated. So now we're in a bit of a pickle, as they say."

"Wait," Anders said, "what obvious reason? I haven't heard anything about another war with Orlais."

"Oh it hasn't come to war yet," Alistair lifted his hands and shook them, "not yet anyway. That's what we're hoping to avoid. And you really mean to say that you haven't heard the news?"

"What news?" Anders said, perplexed.

"Actually I'm surprised that you haven't heard," Alistair said as he continued to eat, "mind you, I suppose the Chantry have been trying to keep it quiet."

"What news?" Hawke asked steadily, his brow furrowed.

"I can see their plans have worked then," Nathaniel said as he took a sip of his wine, raising his eyebrows.

"What news Nathaniel?" Anders asked again, more forcefully than before.

"That we freed the Circle of Magi in Ferelden," Alistair said, as casually as you please, looking around the table forlornly, "you don't have any cheese do you?"

Anders stared. No, he thought, that wasn't what I just heard. That couldn't have been right. This was a dream, or it was a joke, or...

"I'm sorry," Anders said slowly, over pronouncing every syllable as he tried to let the words sink in, "could you please repeat that..?"

The door took that rather inopportune moment to bang open loudly. Anders looked around in a daze
as Cousland, his countenance livid, strode into the room with a worried Merrill at his heels. What on earth is going on here? Anders thought, please someone tell me if this is all real? Am I dreaming or hallucinating? Which one is it?

"Lien, what's happened..?" Alistair asked, standing worriedly from his chair, followed by Nathaniel, Hawke and Anders.

"You!" Cousland said furiously, pointing straight at Hawke.

"What?" Hawke blinked, "What the hell is wrong with y..?"

He didn't get any further, mainly because Cousland managed to punch his mouth shut, sending Hawke sprawling back onto the table. Anders rushed forwards without thinking, putting himself between the Commander and Hawke, shaking his head in disbelief. Alistair hurried around the table and took hold of Cousland's arm, trying to hold him back as he struggled forwards.

"Lien calm down, for the Maker's sake!" Alistair said, eyes wide.

"What the fucking hell was that for?" Hawke shouted as he pushed himself up from the table, rubbing at his throbbing jaw and wiping the spilt food from his clothes.

"What was it for?" Cousland raged, "What was it..? You son of a bitch! You think you can just do that to him and get away with it?"

"Commander you're making no bloody sense," Anders said harshly, yet he had a bad feeling that he did know and that he just didn't want to believe it was true, "just calm down and..."

"No wonder you wouldn't tell me, no wonder you wouldn't say what had happened between you two!" Cousland raged.

Alistair was obviously finding it hard to constrain the man in his arms so Nathaniel hurried around the table to help. Anders felt like his world was spinning. He looked to Merrill, noting her guilty expression. Her wide eyes confirmed his suspicions. I told her those things in confidence, Anders thought, but he was too confused and angry to truly focus on the fact that Merrill and Varric had obviously been talking about his affairs to the Commander.

"It had nothing to do with you!" Hawke shouted back fiercely, yet his face was set into a slightly worried expression.

"Hawke don't make this worse," Anders said, looking over his shoulder at him before he turned back to Cousland, "Commander, we talked about this already, this is hardly the place..."

"Oh yeah," Cousland interrupted, his voice alive with furious sarcasm, "you mean when we talked and you told me nothing? Nothing about the fact that he fucking bullies you, how he hits you? You left that part out didn't you?"

Well when you put it like that, Anders thought angrily, it makes me sound like a complete and utter bloody pushover. Why does everyone feel the need to meddle in my affairs? Why does everyone always think they know better than I do? What am I, a child? The atmosphere in the room, which had been overly tense before, now changed in favour of awkward silence.

"Commander stop it," Anders said with quiet agitation, feeling his shoulders tense; he didn't need this kind of truth thrown in his face, he knew his own failings, "I already told you that I can look after myself and this really has nothing to do with you..."
"Well it doesn't fucking sound like it!" Cousland said, irate eyes turning back to Hawke, "I swear Alistair you let me go now! Hey, you, don't you walk away from me..!"

Anders turned to see Hawke striding through the kitchen door, his face set. Anders cursed. There was so much he had to set right, so many people in the room looking to him for an explanation, but in reality he couldn't stop himself from following Hawke. Really drives the truth home doesn't it, Anders thought in irritation as he hurried after the retreating man, that you can't do anything without putting him first? Hawke wouldn't slow down, despite Anders shouting for him to wait, to stop, anything. He strode up the stairs with Anders at his heels, only stopping once he had marched into the empty bedroom. Anders rushed in after him, taking the time to close the door as he was sure this wasn't going to be a quiet affair. Hawke was pacing back and forth in front of the unlit fireplace, the early evening light streaming in through the window casting everything with a pale golden light.

"Hawke," Anders said cautiously, taking a few steps into the room, "I'm sorry, I already talked to him about this and he promised me he wouldn't say anything. You know what he's like, he's so overprotective, even though he's practically just a boy, and I told him I didn't need this and...Hawke are you listening to me?"

What are you apologising for, one half of him thought angrily, this isn't your fault, he should be the one apologising to you! It's not that simple, the other half argued back, things rarely are. Anders took another few steps towards the pacing man, hoping to get his attention. As he got closer he could see that Hawke's expression wasn't furious like he had expected it to be. It was anxious and distressed. Anders frowned, reaching out to catch Hawke by the shoulders on his next pass. He jumped as if frightened, looking to Anders with slightly wide eyes. The mage's frown deepened as Hawke backed away from him without a word, turning to sit on the bed and lean forwards with his elbows on his knees. Anders watched him guardedly, unsure what to expect. Eventually he couldn't stand the silence any longer. He opened his mouth to speak but, surprisingly, Hawke beat him to it, saying the very last two words Anders had ever expected to hear.

"He's right," Hawke said hollowly.

Anders blinked. How many unbelievable things am I going to hear in one day? he thought numbly.

"Hawke, what are you..?" Anders started but Hawke interrupted him.

"I said he's right!" Hawke yelled, looking up to Anders sharply before looking away, "please, don't make me say it again."

"What do you mean he's..? What the hell is wrong with you?" Anders yelled back, "Rating our relationship by the ravings of an ill informed man who's been listening to too much gossip now are we? Is that how you do things?"

"No," Hawke said, the anger seemingly having drained from him as Anders spoke, changing the pace once more as he looked up at Anders imploringly, "I just...I just didn't want to think about it, it was so much easier when we..."

Hawke stopped, closing his eyes and hanging his head. He sighed softly as Anders stood rigidly in the middle of the room, feeling exposed and terribly confused. He watched Hawke as if he expected the man to leap up and take hold of him at any moment. Instead the rogue stayed unusually still and quiet, his eyes still closed. Anders walked purposefully to the window and stared out at the slow beginnings of the sunset, lacing the thin clouds with flaring gold.

"I..." Hawke started hesitantly after a long moment's pause, "I never blamed you, for mother I
mean. It's...it's complicated."

I don't care! part of Anders screamed while the other part wanted nothing more than to run to Hawke and gather him in his arms. He kept his eyes decisively on the scenery outside the window and tried his best to ignore the two extremes of his own personality. Hawke seemed to take his silence as an encouragement to continue, or perhaps simply an acceptance of his explanation.

"Just before my father died," Hawke said, his voice dull, "he made me promise him that I would look after everyone once he was gone. Maybe a bit of a heavy thing to make a nineteen year old promise on his father's deathbed but...but I did. I promised him. I swore I'd look after my mother, after my sister and brother."

Hawke swallowed loudly, pulling Anders' eyes to him. Hawke was facing away from him on the bed, shoulders slumped. Anders watched him as dispassionately as he could. Everything had been so easy before this, if everything could just be avoided then it would all just go away, Anders thought, not the healthiest way to deal with a relationship but it was what he wanted, it was what he always did.

"And you can see how good a job I've done of making good on my promise," Hawke said quietly, "losing Carver was bad enough, but Bethany and then mother...I-I didn't think that I could stand it. It was all I had to do, it was all I was meant for and I couldn't even protect my own family. I was so busy running around this stupid bloody city solving everyone else's problems that I couldn't even protect my own family!"

Hawke stopped dead, once more closing his eyes, screwing them shut, his breathing unsteady as if he were holding back years of emotion and grief. Anders turned away, feeling his own turmoil responding to the sight like rising waters behind a dam, ready to burst forth. Anders turned from Hawke, looking back through the slightly misted glass before him.

"I never blamed you Anders," Hawke said quietly, "I...blamed myself. I couldn't blame anyone but myself. It was my fault, I wasn't fast enough, I wasn't smart enough. I didn't blame you. I took it out on you."

Anders shivered. Why are you saying this to me? he thought angrily, why are you telling me this? I don't want to hear it, I don't want to know. Let's just forget this, let's go back, I don't want it! But he couldn't say it, he couldn't, he just wanted Hawke to stop so they could go back, go back...

"Every time something happens and it's my fault, I take it out on you," Hawke sounded hollow as he spoke, "when Cousland came here that first time, when I started that stupid fight and I hurt you...it was because of the things mother had said. And I was jealous, I was jealous of the way you smiled around everyone but me."

Don't you understand it's making me feel worse? Anders thought desperately even as he kept his demeanour calm and composed. You're making me sound like we've never had a good moment in our whole life together! But he couldn't say it, he couldn't, he just wanted Hawke to stop so they could go back, go back...

"After the thing with Fenris and that fucking blood mage, I, well I felt so guilty, I should have protected you," Hawke stopped again, shaking his head, "I keep letting you put yourself in danger, I keep failing you, then all I do afterwards is hurt you so I can protect myself. I..."

"Hawke..." Anders said, not sure what he wanted to say, all he wanted was for all of this to stop.

"He's right," Hawke said as if he hadn't heard him, "he's right, I'm no good. All I do is fuck things up. I can't protect anyone, all I do is make things worse. You're all I have left and I just make it
"Hawke please shut up," Anders said, hating that his voice broke and ruined the severity he'd been trying for.

He heard Hawke stand from the bed but didn't turn. Even when he felt Hawke hovering worriedly behind him he still couldn't face him. It explains a lot, doesn't it? he thought, but it's still just baggage. No, no it's important, Hawke needs me just as much as I need him. He's just manipulating you, he knows how to play you, he just wants to use you and then...! Anders shook his head, trying to rid it of the conflicting thoughts rolling around inside, driving him mad. He felt Hawke's tentative hand on his shoulder and couldn't help but shrug it away angrily.

"Don't," he said harshly, "just don't."

Hawke's silence said more than any words ever could. Maker this is such a mess, Anders thought bitterly. Why do people always stick their bloody noses into my business, why can't I ever just have my own life?

"Please," Hawke said, sounding anxious, "I don't want to fight anymore."

"I don't want to fight either, but it's all we're bloody good at, isn't it?" Anders spat, "I don't like fighting, Hawke!"

"Who does?" Hawke said back plaintively, "I don't like..."

"Yes but you haven't been fighting for your entire fucking life!" Anders interrupted heatedly; in a way he couldn't tell who he was angrier at, Hawke or himself, "Since before I can even remember I've been fighting against something or someone and I'm tired Hawke, I'm so tired of it all!"

Hawke stared at him, his mouth open as if to speak but no sound emerged. Anders was forever grateful for Hawke's bout of sudden speechlessness. He didn't think he could have handled questions at a time like this. He turned back to the window just so he didn't have to watch Hawke watching him back. He didn't need to feel judged or sympathised with or anything. He just wanted to be.

"All I've ever wanted was to be happy," Anders said, the fire draining from his voice, "I don't like fighting, I don't like battle, I don't like war! I don't want to cause misery and hurt and pain, I just want to have a normal fucking life! Is that so much to ask for? Ever since I was little all I've ever dreamt of was having a life just like everyone else's, with a job and a family just like everyone else had. Not this, not what I ended up with. Not sharing my life with a violent spirit and waging war against the templars because it's the only way I'll ever be free! I don't ignore the things you do to me Hawke, I fucking tolerate them because, when it comes down to it, I love you and that means more to me than anything. I'm not saying that it's right, I'm not saying that it's the way things should be, but it just is."

I can't tell you what it does to me when you blame me, when you hurt me, because I'm too ashamed to even admit it to myself half the time, Anders thought. I don't ever want to feel the way I did standing on top of that cliff ever again, not ever again. So you had better mean it when you say you love me, Garret Hawke, or I'll never forgive you. Anders turned to look at Hawke, still standing behind him, his arms hanging at his sides loosely, his expression miserable.

"I'm sorry," Hawke said, his voice choked, "Maker Anders I'm so sorry, for everything."

"I know you are," Anders said, shaking his head, "did you think even for a second that I'd be
"By Andraste don't talk like that, please!" Hawke closed the gap between them in two quick strides and gathering Anders into his arms, "Please, I can't lose you again, I can't. I'm sorry, please forgive me, I'm sorry."

Anders let Hawke hold him, torn between his love and his resentment. Why should you put up with it? he asked himself. Because I do love him, he answered back, and I'd do anything to keep hold of that. Losing it once was torture enough, I don't want that again. He pulled back a little, enough to see Hawke's face, before he leaned in and captured his lips. The kiss wasn't pleasant, it was needy and desperate. Hawke clung to him as if he were drowning, forcing Anders to stumble backwards. He sat down automatically when his legs hit the bed, pulling Hawke down with him. He didn't want to, not like this, not when they were both so hurt. Everything was open and raw; Hawke pulled at his clothes urgently while Anders simply lay back and watched him. This isn't right, he thought, but I need it; I don't want it, I need it.

When Hawke slid inside of him Anders bit down on the cry he wanted to scream out. He held it all inside and let Hawke take him, let him tell him how much he needed him, how much he loved him, through their carnal union. He clawed at Hawke's shirt, bunching the fabric between his fingers, his hips jerking involuntarily with each thrust. Hawke panted, hot and wet, against his neck as he drove forwards fervently. They were each of them oddly silent as they continued, Hawke as if he were scared to speak, Anders fearful of what he might say. The rogue eventually reach down between their sweat slicked bodies and took hold of Anders semi erect cock, twisting his fist around it and pulling in time with his bodies movements. Anders felt the rush of pleasure through him like an illness, it made him feel slightly sick and slightly elated all at once. He turned his face into the bed cover, away from Hawke, listening dully to the wet slap of flesh and Hawke's quiet gasps. His exposed legs felt cold while his back and torso felt burning hot. Hawke began to thrust faster, forcing a soft groan from Anders' throat; even for Anders it was difficult to tell if were a sound of pleasure or of pain. Hawke seemed to react but Anders didn't focus too closely, only bit his lip when Hawke pushed down harder, the rogue's panting breaths shallow and quiet. Anders let out a huffing breath as Hawke came inside of him, squeezing his eyes shut and holding him tightly. Hawke's hips jerked spasmodically as Hawke slumped down on top of him, the hand around his erection having gone limp.

Anders swallowed down the hollowness building inside of him as he lay there, feeling Hawke's chest pressing down onto his as the man gasped for breath. Anders finally reached up with shaking arms and pushed Hawke off of him, forcing the rogue to roll to the side or fall off of the bed. Hawke watched Anders in confusion and hurt as the mage stood up and pulled his trousers back up, pushing his already flagging erection back into his underwear.

"You didn't...wait where are you going?" Hawke said as he sat up shakily, his tone betraying his alarm.

"I need to go to the clinic, William's been waiting there all day for me," Anders said abruptly, thinking of anything that would allow him to leave, 'I'll be back before midnight."

"Midnight? Wait, Anders please, don't go like this," Hawke said apprehensively, "we need to..."

"I said I'll be back later," Anders said as he grabbed his coat from the back of the chair where he had left it that morning, not even looking at Hawke as he threw it on and then left the room.

He didn't take notice of the wardens, of Oranna or Bodahn or sandal. He didn't stop to talk to Merrill who stood waiting worriedly beside Varrie and Nathaniel. He brushed past them all, heading straight for the main door. As he neared the end of the corridor he thought he heard a door
open and then Cousland calling after him.

"Anders wait, I'm sorry!..!" he shouted, but it was cut off as the door snapped shut behind him.

Sure, of course, everyone's so fucking sorry, Anders thought harshly. Why can't there just be a time in my life where someone isn't sorry for something? Can't we just be together Hawke, without you always having to make it up to me? Without you always ruining me and then having to tell me you're so very sorry? The evening light had turned a dull umber as large grey clouds had rolled in to cover the sun. Anders walked agitatedly through the streets, all too aware that he had left his staff leaning against the wall in the bedroom, feeling stupid and exposed without it. How long until I get my normal life? he wondered hopelessly, how much longer do I have to endure this bloody farce before I can say that I'm truly happy, with no worry in the background, no apprehension that it will all come tumbling down at any minute?

Never, Anders decided as he reached the stairs to Lowtown and began the long descent towards Darktown. I'll never have it, it's obviously not possible. No wonder I agreed with the fucking Chantry and those idiot templars, Anders thought angrily, it's not because it's right, it's because it's true. I can't have a normal life, no matter how much I deserve it just as much as the next man. But wait, he thought as he walked, his mind skipping back and forth like a bird on a wire, that's all changed now, hasn't it? Alistair's words, so suddenly interrupted by Cousland's anger, came back to him in a burst. The tower of Magi in Fereldan... free. Anders couldn't believe even the thought of it, let alone comprehend it. Free, he thought, his anger and his grief and his hope mixing together to form a mad conglomeration that made his insides twist and turn. All the mages who had survived Uldred, all those men and women and boys and girls, from the First Enchanter to the lowest apprentice... were free. His elation was almost unbearable. That this could happen, that it was truly possible. I can do this, he thought adamantly as he continued his journey, I can make this happen. It's time for Kirkwall to join the rest of the civilised world, to join in his dream, in his vision.

It's time for Kirkwall to be free.
Sometimes it wasn't life itself that brought home the reality you were shifting through, but more the spaces in between; the waiting, lying awake before sleep, walking from one place to the next, times when there was nothing better to do than ponder. Anders hated pondering, it never led to anything truly useful or pleasant for him. Generally, he thought, because the things I have to think about are usually the things I don't want to think about. Anders had been given plenty of time simply to think over the past few hours. Walking to Darktown in the evening light through still ruined streets had afforded him a unique view of the awful differences between the classes. The destruction in Hightown was bad, yes, it looked terrible...until you saw Lowtown. Which only looked worse until you saw Darktown. In Hightown there were very few spills of blood on the streets in comparison to Lowtown. In Darktown people were still scrubbing the pavements to be free of the thick, dark red splashes in the streets and up the sides of houses and walls. The City Guard presence in Darktown was almost non-existent, the only people who had been able to protect the residents of Darktown from the Qunari were those very same residents.

Anders bit down on his anger, feeling Justice swell. It wasn't only the mage's of the City he would be freeing by the looks of things. When the revolution came it would liberate the entire of Kirkwall, there would be no upper class and lower class. Everyone would become equal, no one would be given special treatment. These people, Anders thought as he looked around him while he walked, nodding to those he knew, offering help where he could, these people are worth ten times what any noble would be. They can weather the hardest of tragedies without falling apart; perhaps that's why I admire them. They are what I wish to be. They are what I need to become, with that single minded strength. Anders shivered as he thought it, Justice sliding beneath the surface of his skin.

As he reached the clinic, as he talked to William, receiving the awkward hug from the teen and returning it, he was forced to keep Justice at bay, the spirit boiling with anger at the injustice of everything around him. Why should these people have lost more only because they were poor? What did money of all things have to do with their right to live. Such an insignificant and pathetic aspect of society ruling over the fate of life itself. Justice hated it and so did Anders, making it all the more difficult for the mage to separate his thoughts. He had been finding that more often recently; was it himself or Justice who wished nothing more than to march up to the Viscount's Keep, find Aveline, take her by the throat and push her up against a wall, tell her how the Coterie ruled the streets when the Carta weren't exerting their influence, how half the children he knew, some barely ten years old, were already working for the crime lords that ruled the undercity.

For Anders the thought of freedom still seemed ineluctably distant but for Justice the want and the need for retribution was becoming almost unbearable. Anders stayed in Darktown for as long as he could stand it, healing the injured, tending to their cuts, their broken bones, their wounds, helping to dispose of the many bodies which were beginning to rot in the streets. He did it because no one else would. Which is why I wish to help the mage's of this cruel city, Anders thought, yet the tone was oddly reminiscent of Justice, I help because no one else will.

Justice. As Anders walked back to the mansion in the dark, the full moon hovering above, painting the cobbled streets pale white, he couldn't help but think about his friend and compatriot Justice. I keep calling him that, Anders thought bitterly. How long before you admit it to yourself? How long before you truly see that he isn't Justice anymore? He isn't your friend, he isn't righteous, he isn't good. He's Vengeance now. He's a demon. You've turned him into a demon. Maker, how was it
even possible? How could this happen? I...I never meant to hurt him, I just wanted to help, all I ever wanted to do was help, but a demon..? Anders detested the mere thought of it. That he could be capable of such corruption. Hadn't he always tried his best to be good? He never hurt a soul when he ran from the Circle and he never hurt the templars that found him. The most he did was talk their ears off on the usually long trip back to the tower which, admittedly, would have been torture enough.

Not now. Now his hands were so steeped in templar blood that he was surprised he ever managed to wash it off. Not only templars but wardens too, blood mages, abominations...the list was endless. Ever since running from the Circle that seventh time he had been cast into a world of violence and death. He hadn't realised just how much of a shelter the Circle was until he'd become a Warden. Even with his constant forays into the great wide world, he hadn't truly understood anything until then. He'd read of it, yes, he'd dreamt of it, yes, he'd traipsed out into it, yes, but experienced, truly experienced, no. If only the Circle wasn't necessary in the first place, he thought, if only he and the other mages brought under its tutelage weren't sheltered from the outside world to such an extent that they found it impossible to survive there. Yet that's why they do it in the first place, isn't it? That's how they keep us trapped. Don't go outside, they say, it's a big, bad, scary world for mages out there. You wouldn't know how to handle it even if you did escape. And do you know the worst part? Anders thought with a wry smirk, they're right. I didn't know how to handle it and look what happened to me. If only we had been free, if only there had been someone there to show me how to live, perhaps this never would have happened but then...if we had all been free in the first place there would have been no need for Justice and I to join.

Anders sighed. His life was comprised almost entirely of 'perhaps' and 'if only' and 'what if's'. The truth of the matter was that he was here with Justice, or what was left of the spirit, and they were going to see this through no matter what. Better to focus on the reality than the fantasy, Anders thought as he pushed open the door, savouring the slight warmth still emanating from the hallway. He had expected everyone to either be in bed or gone. What he found however was, as usual, contrary to his desires.

"How long are you going to sit there?"

Anders had half expected to return and find the Commander, all his troops and Alistair gone but instead, as he walked into the living room of the mansion, he found Cousland curled up in an armchair by the dying fire, his eyes trained on the emptiness before his face. Cousland looked up as Anders spoke, the mage standing before him with folded arms. The gloom around them made the world feel smaller, as if they were all alone, everything faded down to next to nothing. The feeling had been following Anders all day, a sense of isolation, but now it seemed to have reached its peak.

"As long as it takes for you to forgive me?" Cousland said, unfurling gracefully from the chair to sit in it properly, his face serious.

Anders watched him for a moment in silence. It hadn't been the best of days, he thought sarcastically. All he wanted was for once, just once, everything to run smoothly, everything to go off without a hitch, just for a few days in a row. What he didn't need was other people's concern manifesting itself as violent outbursts and forcing him to confront the truth; that he was fed up of the complacency he had forced himself into, even as he craved it above all else. He needed everyone to leave him alone just as much as he needed Hawke to love him. He needed the Commander to protect him just as much as he needed him to back off.

"Don't hold your breath," Anders said flatly.
"Oh come on Anders..." the Commander said with a frown, stifling a yawn.

"Don't start," Anders said slowly and tersely, making Cousland's eyes widen, "because I'm really not in the mood. Don't think you can just say you're sorry and it will magically fix everything."

"I didn't think it would!" Cousland said, his face falling, "I just..."

"No, I'm not doing this now," Anders said, shaking his head as he turned from Cousland and headed for the stairs.

I have enough on my mind with Hawke and the Circle and Meredith and Orsino and Justice and the fucking Chantry, never mind having to deal with other people's neuroses. He heard Cousland getting out of his chair with difficulty, wobbling a little on the pins and needles in his legs from having sat bunched up in the chair for so long.

"Wait!" he said in a hushed voice, "Please, Anders, I need to talk to you!"

"About what?" Anders said with a harsh sigh, not looking around as he started up the stairs.

"I need to know if it's true," Cousland started, his voice unwavering in its intensity, "what your friends told me about you and..."

"You really are unbelievable!" Anders interrupted in angry disbelief, rounding on Cousland, his hand gripping the banister in a white knuckled grasp; the Commander stared up at the irate mage with trepidation, "You fucking attacked him without truly knowing whether the reason you did it was even true? What is wrong with you?"

Cousland blanched, looking chastened, but his determination still shone through. No wonder the archdemon never stood a chance, Anders thought as he grit his teeth, he's so tenacious it's bloody untrue. Anders could feel the anger inside of him, roiling beneath the surface as Cousland continued to stare at him, the influence of Justice which he had felt pounding at him over the dreadful hours in Darktown.

"I'll admit that I overreacted and I'm sorry about that," Cousland said seriously, "but it doesn't change the fact that there has to be some truth in their words. This is serious Anders, is he really..?"

"Oh, is he really what?" Anders said, furiously dismissive, "What business is it of yours what he does to me and I do to him? Do I ever ask you about all the times Alistair's done something to hurt you?"

"Being forced apart for months is hardly in the same league as being beaten on a regular basis!" Cousland snapped back, his eyes darkening.

"Beaten? Do I look like the sort of person who would allow himself to be beaten even once, never mind on a regular fucking basis?" Anders realised he was shouting and lowered his voice to an angry hiss while Cousland stewed on the steps below him, "You have a right bloody nerve Cousland, you really do. If I'd known you considered me that weak minded I would have left Ferelden sooner!"

He cares about you, Anders tried to reason with himself, but it has nothing to do with him, he argued back angrily. Anders closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to rectify his thoughts. He wanted terribly to calm down but, what with Cousland staring at him as if he were someone to be pitied, it was becoming increasingly difficult.

"I'm only asking because I'm worried about you," Cousland said sincerely, "and you haven't denied
that he hits you..."

"Oh for the sake of the Maker on high!" Anders finally burst out, glaring down at Cousland who looked startled by his exclamation; Anders continued in a low, vicious tone, his eyes narrowed as he stalked towards the Commander, forcing him to step back, "You really think you know it all, don't you? So I didn't deny it, of course I didn't because it's true. He has hit me, on occasion, but I'm guessing Varric left out the fact that the last time he did it Justice almost killed him in return?"

Cousland opened his mouth to say something as he continued to step back and back again, Anders still advancing, but was stopped when the mage kept talking.

"Oh, and what other sordid things have they been whispering to you, hmm?" he asked, feigning contemplation, "Did they tell you about the fact that after you left the pub on your first visit was the first time he got violent? That he bashed my head off the wall and in retort I tried my best to crush his ribs? That he backhanded me so hard once that I practically saw stars? How about the time I wound him up, worried and hurt him so badly that, even though I begged him to stop, he fucked me anyway? No?"

Anders only realised that they had walked the entire length of the living room when Cousland was forced to stop when he hit Sandal's work desk, his eyes wide and his face shocked. Good, Anders thought savagely, good, I'm glad he's traumatised because he fucking deserves it. He wanted to know, didn't he? All the sordid details? Well now he knows and, as usual, he probably bloody regrets it. The slick, hot sense of satisfaction that slid along his body as if it were in his veins only made Anders confused even as he enjoyed it. Who is it that is satisfied by this, he thought desperately, myself or Justice?

"I never said we were perfect, Commander," Anders said, trying his best to push down the terrible need to hurt someone, "and I get by because I know that few people are. It's not what I've always dreamed of, no, but at least it's something. You have to understand that I need this, but most of all I need you to understand that it has nothing to do with you."

He was never more surprised than when Cousland blinked and then, of all things, began nodding slowly. Anders watched with a guilty sense of fulfilment as the Commander reached up to rub at his exposed forearms with his hands, looking down at the ground. He seemed, to Anders growing sense of regret, not only stunned but also terribly upset. The Commander swallowed slowly, blinking a little rapidly, before he looked up at Anders again. He didn't say anything, perhaps because he knew there were no words that could form a fitting reply to what Anders had just spouted. Instead he took a hesitant step forwards and simply wrapped his arms around Anders' shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug. Anders didn't even resist. He simply shivered as Cousland brought one hand up to stroke softly at the back of his neck. The anger wavered, trying desperately to hold on, even as it drained away. Don't, he thought brokenly, please don't. I'm supposed to be angry at you, I'm supposed to be angry at everything because I need it, I need to have something to stand as a barrier between me and the rest of the world. Please, please don't take that away.

Anders didn't realise he had relaxed into Cousland's comforting hold until his head dropped forwards onto the Commander's shoulder. The rough leather and the buckles of Cousland's jerkin dug into his cheek but he didn't care. He just stood there, trying to slow his rapid breathing, and let the warm affection sweep over him. He could feel the burning anger being slowly doused by the calming feel of Cousland's calloused fingertips brushing over the hairs at the nape of his neck. The silence, in contrast to his own hushed yells and the cacophony that had been playing inside his own head, was deafening.

"I never..." Cousland hesitated even as his hands continued to work mechanically, "it is none of my
business, you're right, you're absolutely right Anders...but there's just one thing I need to tell you, one thing and then I promise I'll never mention it again."

Cousland pulled back, forcing Anders to lift his head and stare with dead eyes into the sincere, grey ones before him. The Commander lifted his right hand, the left still laying against Anders’ shoulder, and cupped the mage's face. Anders blinked at the contact as Cousland smoothed his thumb across Anders' cheek.

"You deserve better," Cousland said in an almost whisper before he leaned in and placed a chaste kiss on Anders' jaw.

The mage stood, confused and speechless, as Cousland let go and slipped past him. It took him a moment to come to himself but, when he turned around, Cousland was already gone. He thought he heard a door closing somewhere upstairs and guessed that the Commander had probably joined Alistair back in their room. He reached up absently and touched the place where Cousland's soft lips had pressed against his skin. A shiver ran through his body in response. It wasn't from attraction, it wasn't even truly to do with Cousland at all; only the Commander's act of affection had made him realise something. It had been such a long time since Hawke had been so carelessly affectionate with him. Yes he had been cozy with him this morning, yes he had kissed him, but it had all been tainted with anxiousness and need. He and Hawke hadn't been truly close since before his mother died. Anders felt his mind fluxing and faltering, jumping between his righteous anger and the terrible, hollow misery building in his chest. Everything was so much easier when he let Justice take hold, when he saw the world through his pragmatic eyes; when he saw his mission before him and nothing else. Instead, here, as Anders, he couldn't help but feel everything. He brought his arms up and wrapped them around himself, holding in the tremors of anger and grief as he turned and rushed up the stairs, stumbling as he lost his balance.

Hawke sat bolt upright in the gloom as Anders hurried into the room and closed the door, his breathing ragged. Where am I? Anders thought as he stumbled towards the shadowy figure of Hawke, his eyes shining with worry in the moonlight, what is this life I have around me? Who am I?

"Anders, what the fuck is going on! Are you alright?" Hawke walked forwards to meet him, raising one hand to try and take hold of him.

Anders beat him to it. I need you, Anders thought savagely. He staggered forwards into Hawke, lifting his arms to pull him close, ignoring the surprised grunt Hawke let out in reply. Anders felt as if he were being torn apart from the inside. He clawed at Hawke's nightshirt, pushing his face into the rogue's neck and breathing in the smell of sweat and worn cotton and Hawke and he felt the man bring his arms up to hold him back but then, but then, it was all too much and too close and Hawke was all around him, leaning in to kiss at his neck eagerly and Anders couldn't stand it, he needed out, he pulled away, but then there were Hawke's eyes, his beautiful, green eyes, staring at him in hurt and confusion and Anders leaned back in and kissed him, kissed him to feel that connection, that wonderful heat, but then Justice, oh Justice who was not Justice, began to respond to his anger, his distress, he pushed and pushed and Anders broke away gasping, feeling the markings flaring on his skin, hearing Hawke call out to him, terrified, as Anders pushed the spirit down and he lunged back, pulling Hawke close, sliding their bodies together, hearing himself plead and sob and Hawke was shouting at him, telling him angrily to calm down and Anders couldn't hear and he couldn't stand it and he needed and he...wanted and he...

'You deserve better'
knees weak. He slammed the door behind him and fumbled with the lock, closing it just in time as Hawke began turning the handle, his muffled voice alternately angry and worried, demanding and pleading that he open the door. Anders sank to the ground, his hands over his ears, his body shaking, and wished for everything to disappear. I can't, I just can't, he thought brokenly, I can't stand this any longer, I can't! I need this, I just want to be needed, I want it, please...! After a few moments the door handle ceased to shake and the banging stopped. Anders slowly removed his trembling hands from his ears and looked up. He stared at the door in the darkness, waiting in trepidation for it to open. Hawke was more than capable of picking the lock, even with the key still in the door, but, for whatever reason, he seemed to have just...stopped. Anders breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth, leaning back until he met the wall, slumping against it. He looked down when he felt something soft nuzzle at his hand, watching detachedly as Madam climbed awkwardly into his lap. Her ginger fur looked black in the moonlight, the stripes of white almost luminescent. He lifted a hand to rub gently at her head, listening to the purr in her throat.

What am I? He thought desolately. How can I love if I don't even know what I am? Every part of me is tearing away in a different direction, he thought as the reality of the world began to sink back in. Anders just wanted to be free. Justice only wanted a revolution. Vengeance, however, wanted to tear the world open and watch it bleed. What the fuck is wrong with me? he thought hollowly, what the fuck am I supposed to do? Answer me that, all powerful Maker. Answer me, you fucking piece of shit! Come on, why don't you answer me? Isn't that what you're for, to forgive, to grant solace, to save and all of that bullshit? You fucking hypocrite!

"I suppose father was right," Anders said with bitter humour as he stroked Madam and felt the cat's purring contentedness through his thighs, "what was it he used to say? The Maker doesn't have a place in his heart for freaks of nature. Who knows, by the looks of things he may have been right about me after all."

Madam let out a plaintive meow, standing up on her back legs as she used her front paws to climb up Anders' shirt. The mage smiled softly, his self deprecation melting a little as she sniffed his face, her whiskers tickling his cheeks.

"Nice to know you obviously disagree," Anders said in a choked voice, running his hand down the length of the cat's spine and her tail.

Madam turned around three times before settling in a curled up ball into Anders' lap. The mage stared at the contented animal, trying to feel the affection he had been so desperate for, but everything seemed to have gone a little cold and numb. Anders continued to stare into the darkness until exhaustion claimed him.

The world came back to him in a haze of pale light and birds chirping in the trees. Anders blinked into the soft glow, turning his head slightly to the left so as to afford a better view of the window. The sun wasn't visible, meaning it must still be early morning. Madam was sleeping in his lap when he looked down. He reached down and stroked the little cat between her perky ears, smiling a little as she jerked awake with sleepy eyes, opening her wide mouth in a yawn, flattening her ears back against her head. Anders lifted her gently up and placed her on the ground before he stretched out his legs, grimacing as the blood leached back into them painfully. Eventually he managed to stand, shuffling over to the door and unlocking it. When he pulled it open and walked out it was to be greeted with an odd sight. Hawke was sitting against the opposite wall, still wearing his nightclothes, eyes heavy, staring straight at him. Anders blinked, feeling Madam slide out of the room past his ankles.

"How long have you been there?" Anders asked monotonously.
"I don't know," Hawke shrugged as he reached up to rub at his face, "since last night...I don't know how long."

Anders stared at him. Is that supposed to impress me? part of him scoffed, while the other part sympathised with Hawke's discomfort after spending his own night just as cold and uncomfortable. Eventually Anders shuffled forwards until he was standing in front of Hawke. He found it hard for a moment to decide whether to offer him his hand or not. After a moment's indecision Anders finally lifted his left hand until it was obvious enough to Hawke what the gesture meant. The rogue stared at it a little blankly for a moment before he reached up and took hold. He could feel the heat of Hawke's skin through the thin leather of his glove, pulling up to help Hawke to his feet. Anders didn't wait for him, instead following Madam and her upright tail into the master bedroom. He heard Hawke follow, closing the door behind him.

As soon as he was inside Anders began to remove his coat, slipping his fingers through the familiar trappings and undoing them mechanically. He could hear Hawke as he hovered behind him hesitantly, even as he undid the three top buttons on his shirt and pulled it over his head, dumping it onto the floor along with his coat.

"Whatever it is," Anders said flatly, "I don't want to hear it. All I want is to get as much sleep as I can before I'm forced to get up again, understand?"

Hawke was silent in reply. Anders continued to disrobe until he stood naked before the bed, grabbing a long nightshirt from the drawer nearest to him and shrugging it on. He had just slid his knee onto the bed, the covers already pulled back by Hawke the night before, when a hand curled around his arm gently. Anders stiffened and pulled away from Hawke's tentative grasp, turning to sit on the bed and stare coldly up at the man before him. Hawke looked back, his hands on his hips even as his face remained uncertain. Eventually he spoke, his voice calm and authoritative.

"I need to know what happened last night," Hawke said.

"Oh you need to know?" Anders said facetiously, "I see, well that's fine then, isn't it? Hawke needs to know so the world must stop until he finds out."

"The last thing I need right now is your fucking sarcasm," Hawke said, eyes narrowing, "by the Maker Anders you scared the living shit out of me last night. I thought you were being taken over or dying or something terrible!"

Taken over. Anders mulled the words around in his head as Hawke stared at him; they weren't so inaccurate.

"Something like that," Anders shrugged nonchalantly, making Hawke bristle in response, "but it's really none of your concern so I wouldn't worry yourself about it."

"Worry myself? Anders don't you understand anything?" Hawke was on the verge of shouting but somehow managed to reign himself back in, "I love you Anders and seeing you like this...don't you see that it hurts me too?"

"Oh of course," Anders spat, rolling his eyes, "if it hurts Hawke then it must be important."

"Stop that, just stop it!" Hawke finally yelled, his eyes furious and hurt, "Stop pretending to yourself that I'm some sort of, Maker I don't know, terrible egoist who cares for no one but himself! When did you start thinking of me as a callous bastard who never loved you to begin with!"
When you stopped seeing me for who I am, Anders thought as he stared up at the desperate man before him, when you started thinking everything could be solved by a hug or a kiss or a quick fuck, when you started treating me like something to be dominated and possessed. You of all people Hawke should understand just how much I need to be free. Hawke was pacing in front of him as Anders watched the sunlight slowly strengthen, drifting over the furniture and the fireplace, over the dresser and the wardrobe, over the room which had become so familiar to him over the years. He looked back to Hawke as the man stopped suddenly in front of him, holding something in one hand while he chewed the nails of the other. He looked to Anders and then looked away.

"I had a lot of time to think," Hawke said tiredly, "last night I mean. Seeing you like that, by the Maker...you can think of me what you like Anders but all I could wish for last night was that you would be alright. I...fuck, I had this all thought out and now that it comes to saying it..."

Hawke shook his head and swallowed, frowning a little as he looked about the room. Anders watched him with unease, shifting his legs up onto the bed. After another moment's silence Hawke turned to him, looking down at the thing in his hands as he held it between his fingers.

"It came out a lot fancier and more charming in my head," Hawke said as he fiddled with the thing, fingertips tracing it carefully, "basically I realised that there isn't a lot I can say to you that you haven't already heard before so...I wanted you to have this."

He passed it hesitantly to Anders. The mage took it, dangling a little from his fingers by the leather thong. It was a basic amulet, a silver hexagon with a green jewel imbedded in its centre. Anders could feel the magic radiating from it, the energy. What on earth would Hawke be doing with something like this? He looked to the man with an unamused expression. Was this some sort of joke?

"You couldn't think how to explain your feelings to me," Anders said blankly, "so you thought you'd try and pawn me off with a gift instead?"

"No!" Hawke said strongly, forcing himself to calm down, "No, I...it was my father's."

Anders blanched, the guilt instant and painful. Oh, he thought wearily, for fuck's sake. Why does he have to do this now? Why when I need to stay strong and independent? Why are you trying so hard to keep a hold of me Garret Hawke?

"I'm not sure why he even gave it to me, I mean it doesn't do me any good, I'm no mage, Bethany would probably have got more use..." Hawke stopped suddenly, sighing awkwardly, his eyes fond as he looked at the shimmering amulet in Anders' hand, "but it's the only thing of his that I have left. It means a lot to me."

Hawke finally looked up into Anders' eyes. The mage swallowed at the intense stare. Is this what you were looking for? something inside seemed to taunt him, while another berated him for being so easily fooled.

"You...mean a lot to me, Anders," Hawke said.

Suddenly the plain amulet that he held in his hand became a precious, priceless thing. Anders stared at it, a rare beam of comprehension breaking through the thick clouds of indecision and anger that clouded his mind. This was just like his mother's pillow, Anders thought, that's all I have left of her except the faded memories; this is all Hawke has left of his father and...he wants to give it to me. The thought of handing over that worn, torn ragged pillow to anyone filled Anders with consternation. He rubbed his thumb over the worn silver and looked up at Hawke. The man watched him blankly, that age old look which he always used to protect himself. Anders extended
his hand, holding the amulet between his thumb and forefinger, the tie dangling loosely.

"I can't accept this," Anders said quietly, seeing Hawke's face fall and quickly amending himself, "it's...it's not something you should ever have to give away."

Hawke hesitated, looking at the amulet. He reached out and took it back, holding it by the leather thong. Then, just as Anders expected him to walk out and never return, he stepped forwards until he was directly at the side of the bed. Anders watched him detachedly as Hawke reached out with both hands and tied the amulet around the mage's neck. The feel of the heavy silver resting next to his Tevinter amulet and Hawke's ring made everything suddenly seem very important. Anders reached up automatically as Hawke leaned back and took hold of his shoulders, pulling him close until the rogue was forced to climb onto the bed with him. Anders didn't let go even as Hawke moved around to fold himself onto the bed, one leg still dangling off of the side.

They stayed huddled together in the cool morning light, neither saying a word. Anders had his face pushed into Hawke's neck, while Hawke had slid his arms around Anders' back, holding him tightly. The only noise he could hear was the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Everything seemed to have become hushed, quiet. Anders felt the world Justice had built for him in his mind crumbling beneath the weight of Hawke's own sacrifice. It's nothing! Justice tried to argue back, it's nothing compared to what I will do to save these people, to free this city, to make this world just and fair! It was true, it was all true and Anders knew it, but right now all he could feel was the silver against his chest and the arms around his body.

"This...doesn't mean that I forgive you," Anders murmured against Hawke's neck, feeling the arms around him tighten, "but I do believe you."

"...That's what I hoped you'd say," Hawke sounded relieved, trying for humour and failing, "apart from the part where you don't forgive me of course."

Anders let a small smile grace his lips. It was only the truth, Anders thought. What Hawke didn't know was that the reason he was accepting this gesture of peace was because he couldn't forgive himself just as much as he couldn't forgive Hawke, no matter how much he wished he could do both. Anders let the smile die before he pulled back, reaching up to unclasp the chain around his neck. Hawke looked at him in confusion as Anders slid the ring from the chain before reattaching it once more. He took a hold of Hawke's right hand, splaying the fingers, and slid the silver band back onto his finger. Hawke brought his hand up between them and looked at the ring, his eyes slightly distant. Anders stared at it with him, reaching out without thinking and running his fingertips lightly over the cold metal, watching as the fire within glowed in response.

"You kept it," Hawke said without removing his eyes from the ring.

"Of course I did," Anders said, looking up at Hawke, his face decidedly blank but for the intensity in his eyes, "did you really think I ever wanted you to leave?"

"Well..." Hawke floundered, shaking his head a little as he looked anywhere but at Anders, "yes! Is that stupid of me? You told me that it was what you wanted."

"This might come as a shock to you," Anders said with a sardonic tone, "but sometimes I lie, Hawke. In fact, I'm really rather proficient at it."

And you don't know just how much that is true, or just how dangerous that makes me, Anders thought as Hawke stared at him. The rogue blinked and looked away, his dark hair falling into his eyes, his face unshaven and slightly pale from lack of sleep, the skin looking inelastic and slightly puffy. He brought a hand up to rub at his sleep filled eyes before he scrubbed at the rest of his face.
He looked down with a small, disbelieving laugh before he looked up at Anders through his long, dark eyelashes.

"You're unbelievable," Hawke said, smiling a little, "has anyone ever told you that?"

"Yes," Anders returned the smile as Hawke leaned in and kissed him with careless affection, "I believe they have."

Anders revelled in the feeling, closing his eyes and forcibly pushing away all other thoughts, all other feelings; the feelings of Justice's own wants, of Vengeance's own ire, of his own need to be free of everything, of the thought that this couldn't possibly survive, that he was surely destined for a bad end, that this was only another vast illusion he was spinning for himself and willing falling into. Anders pulled back from the kiss slowly, opening his eyes to look at Hawke as the man watched him back. Everything he was trying to deny was true...but so was Hawke, so was their love, no matter how much he tried to run from that. In the end everything would happen the way it should and Anders knew it couldn't change. He closed his eyes and leaned back in, capturing Hawke's lips and pushing their bodies together, feeling the amulet pressed between their chests.

So be it.
Champion

Everything was strangely silent as Anders jolted awake from the nightmare, even himself. Especially myself, Anders thought dazedly. Usually there's far more screaming involved. He fumbled about a little blindly until the darkness of the dreamscape faded into the pale light of early morning, filtering through the curtains and illuminating the room. Everything was deathly still, even the birds outside seemed to have abandoned their song. Anders reached down groggily to pull the thick blanket up over his torso, feeling a slight chill from a draught. Been a while since I've had one of those, Anders thought as he tried and failed to recall the contents of the nightmare. He brought his hand to his face and scrubbed at the tired skin, feeling the weariness beneath. When he squinted at the clock on the mantelpiece it read a depressing ten past eight. I've only been asleep for an hour? Anders thought in irritation. He felt like he'd been asleep in a tomb for a hundred years. His joints were stiff and his back and neck ached. That's what I get for sleeping sitting up on the study floor all night, he thought with a sigh. Somehow he'd ended up feeling more tired than when he'd fallen asleep in the first place.

"Hawke," he whispered, turning to look at the peaceful face half buried in the pillows next to him, "you awake?"

No reply. Hawke continued to breathe quietly, his eyes shifting back and forth beneath his eyelids. Dreaming, Anders thought, I wonder what about? He couldn't help the soft smile that worked its way onto his lips as he watched Hawke. I doubt either of us will ever be free of this feeling, Anders thought, sometimes I think it's love, and other times it feels like...something more than that, if that's even possible. The mage pulled back when the hazy feeling of love began to dissolve into the usual hollowness he used to protect himself. He blinked sleepily up at the canopy above him. Stop thinking about it, Anders instructed himself as he began to feel the distinct need to reach over and wake Hawke just to see his green eyes blink open. Think about something else...Maker I'm thirsty. I want some tea, yes, and a biscuit. One of those fancy Orlesian biscuits Hawke always buys. I think I deserve that at least. Having found a suitably trivial distraction Anders sat up slowly, mindful of his tender body, and slid quietly from the bed.

The house was quiet as he crept across the landing. He would have expected the Wardens to be up by now at least but then, after a long march and a strenuous few days in Kirkwall he didn't think Cousland would begrudge them a small lie in at least. Anders was more amazed by the fact that they had managed to accommodate twenty five Wardens, Cousland, Alistair, Bann Teagan and the King's escort of five Royal Guards. At first glance Hawke's mansion didn't seem that big but, as Anders had found from his short stay the first time, it was deceptive in size. The Tevinter founders of Kirkwall had been ingenious if nothing else. Having limited space to work with forced the architects to build in a rather drastic fashion, even in the expensive and regal part of town; Hawke's mansion was like a rabbit warren which led to another corridor lined with storage rooms, two small bathrooms and a small sitting room. The corridor ended in another set of stairs which, eventually, led to the attic which was still under repair. The landing led to the two master bedrooms, a small guest room, the study and then a further door which led to a corridor with three guest rooms, the master bathroom, a dining room and, at the end, a spiral staircase leading down into the cellar. Anders had only been to the cellar once, returning from his trip with his hair matted with spider webs, many with the poor spiders still attached. Suffice to say he hadn't been planning a return trip. Even with all that space however, Anders still hadn't thought there would be enough room, unless someone wanted to sleep in the
cellar. However, from what he had seen of the rooms the night before, it seemed as if the Wardens had inveigled their way into any room they could find, even the dining room, spreading out their meagre bedrolls on the floor and just kipping wherever their blankets fell. Ah, reminds me of the good old days, Anders thought with a wry smirk, or not.

He walked down the stairs, revelling in the feeling of the thick carpet between his toes, before sneaking to the kitchen. It creaked noisily as he opened the door and slid inside, turning to close it behind him. He hadn't paid any attention when he entered which was why he received such a terrible fright when he turned to find Cousland and Alistair still in their nightclothes, watching him silently from their seats at the table. Anders physically jumped, bringing his hand up to his chest, glaring at Cousland as he laughed sleepily into a cup of what looked like strong, dark tea.

"Bloody hell, you could have said something!" Anders said quietly, shuffling to the table and pulling out a chair, "Nearly scared me to death."

"Sorry," Cousland said, sounding anything but.

The Commander and the King didn't look any better than Anders felt. Cousland had developed distinct bags underneath his eyes and Alistair looked as if he could sleep for a century and still not be satisfied. Seems like Hawke and I weren't the only ones to have an unpleasant night, Anders thought sadly. He hoped above all else that their weariness wasn't anything to do with him. Cousland reached for a steaming pot in the middle of the table, sitting on a stone slate, and poured another cup before scraping it across the wood towards Anders. The mage took it without a word, gratefully sipping at the burning hot liquid. He looked up at Cousland but the man was already back to staring into his own cup.

"So," Alistair said, breaking the silence; Anders looked at him, noting the slight puffiness around his eyes, "nightmares?"

"Mmm," he hummed in confirmation, feeling the steam from his tea waft against his face.

"You know I'd always hoped that after the Blight ended they would stop," Alistair said gloomily, "seems it was too much to hope for though."

"I'm surprised the rest of the troops aren't awake too," Cousland said through a yawn, rubbing at his right eye, "I guess they're either too polite to make a fuss, which I doubt very much knowing my men, or they're the lucky ones who're still asleep."

"I vote for the latter," Alistair said before taking a messy sip of tea, propping his chin in his hand, "why aren't I ever the lucky one?"

"What do you mean why aren't you ever the lucky one? You're always the lucky one!" Cousland argued back.

"Or the time that we crossed the river to get to Lothering and I was the one that fell in," Cousland said, frowning, "or when we went to the Wonders of Thedas and they had that the Antivan
Mocking bird which they let us hold; I was the one it shat on!"

Anders was laughing tiredly into his hand by the time Cousland was finished. Alistair just shrugged again and raised his eyebrows before leaning over to place a small but gentle kiss on the Commander's cheek. Cousland rolled his eyes but Anders didn't miss the loving smile he gave in return. The mage looked back to his tea and tried to will the jealousy away.

"Sounds more like you have terribly bad luck than I have particularly good luck," Alistair said as Anders turned in his chair and began ransacking the cupboard behind him.

"Where's Nate?" Anders asked as he moved boxes about.

"He went to his sisters yesterday," Cousland said, "he'll be back later on probably, he wasn't very specific."

Anders hummed in response before he reappeared with the biscuit box and put it in the middle of the table beside the pot of tea. Anders opened it and reached inside to pull out one of the biscuits, each individually wrapped in thick wax paper, decorated with gold leaf.

"Someone has expensive taste," Cousland said with a sardonic tone which Anders didn't miss; it seemed that the Commander wasn't quite through with his dislike of Hawke.

"Oooh," Alistair said as he leant over the table to snatch one from the box, "I know these! Aunt Isolde used to have them bought in, Antivan or something aren't they?"

"Orlesian," Anders mumbled around a mouth full of biscuit; Cousland suppressed a laugh as Anders quickly chewed and swallowed, "royal ambrosia and cognac."

"Yes!" Alistair looked genuinely excited as he unwrapped it, "Oh, she never used to let me have any! I managed to steal one once but I dropped it when I was running through the hedge behind the kitchens. Always wondered what they tasted like."

"Then why don't you have them at home?" Cousland asked, leaning over to break a piece from Alistair's biscuit and pop it into his mouth.

"Well I'd forgotten about them really," Alistair shrugged; he took a large bite of the crunchy biscuit, seeming to savour it as he chewed, "mmm. Tastes like victory."

Cousland shook his head and sniffed before taking another sip of tea.

"Only you would consider finally tasting a biscuit after years of trying as victory," he said but Alistair ignored him, seemingly too caught up in eating his hard won treat.

They sat in companionable silence for, what seemed to Anders, to be an indeterminate amount of time. He found his mind drifting as he occasionally sipped his tea or reached for another sugary biscuit. He stared out of the window, half obscured by the ivy hanging from the ledge above. The day still seemed pale and wan, as if the weather reflected the shock Kirkwall was still under after such a brutal and sudden attack. The fact that it had been quelled so quickly, basically by one man, probably contributed to the hushed quiet over the city. Usually by now there would be the sounds of the merchants making their way to the market, or nobles and City Guard walking the streets.

"So, are you going to ask him or not?" Anders blinked as he looked away from the window and back to his guests; Cousland was prodding Alistair in the shoulder.

"Well, I mean it might not be the best time," Alistair said with a sigh, "everything's in such an
"Which means it's perfect timing!" Cousland said enthusiastically, suddenly seeming much more awake, "I mean the City Guard are too busy keeping the peace and reorganising themselves, the Templars are too busy doing the same thing and everyone else is in disarray. I couldn't think of a better time for a clandestine meeting, can you?"

"What on earth are you two talking about?" Anders murmured sleepily.

"He wants to..." Cousland started impatiently but was interrupted almost immediately by Alistair.

"I wanted to ask a favour of you," Alistair ignored Cousland's glare and continued, "I told you yesterday about Orlais, about why we had come here to ask for help. Well, that's only half the reason as to our visit. Actually, I had wanted to try and get in contact with the mages here in Kirkwall."

"Well," Anders sighed, slumping his chin into his cupped hand, "then you want to talk to the First Enchanter, Orsino, I'm guessing that he's at the Gallows trying to..."

"No, sorry, you misunderstand," Alistair was forced to interrupt again, "I don't mean mages of the Circle. I'm talking about those outside the Circle, living free in the City."

Anders stared at him. I'm really too tired to be dealing with this right now, he thought wearily. The King of Ferelden wants a secret meeting set up with the mage underground of Kirkwall? Everything seemed far too bizarre. The news of the freedom of the mages in Ferelden still hadn't truly sunk in yet, never mind the idea that there could possibly be others out there who wished to help the Kirkwall resistance.

"It's alright Anders," Cousland said, obviously taking his silence as distrust, "you can trust him, I swear on my life."

"It's...it's not that," Anders shook his head and looked down into his now cold tea; his own wavering reflection stared back, "it's just, well, I never thought that I'd ever hear those words from anyone of your stature."

"I don't know what you mean," Alistair said with a lazy smile, "we're both the same height, aren't we?"

For some reason, unbeknownst to him, Anders started to laugh at Alistair's stupid joke and he couldn't stop. Perhaps it was the build up of hysteria from the night before which he'd not yet had a chance to rid himself of, or perhaps it was the peculiar situation he'd found himself in, where a Warden Commander and a King were asking him to set up a meeting with a set of wanted apostates in one of the most strictly religious and templar governed cities in all of Thedas. Or maybe it's both, Anders thought as he wiped the tears from his eyes. Cousland and Alistair had laughed along for a little while but were now looking at him with barely veiled concern.

"It wasn't that funny," Cousland said with a frown.

"I know," Anders hiccoughed, coughing roughly, "I know. I'll calm down in a minute, honestly, I'm alright. It's all so sudden, all of this. Forgive me if I'm a little elated."

"Suppose I can't begrudge you that," Alistair said, reaching for another biscuit.

Anders noted with humour that the box was almost empty. Oh Hawke will be amused, he thought wryly. I'll just have to hide them at the back of the cupboard so he doesn't find them for weeks. Oh
honestly Anders, he thought with a smile, are you really thinking about biscuits at a time like this? Think how far we will come, how much credence we will gain, with the backing of an entire kingdom behind us! The thought made his head spin.

"I can set something up," Anders hiccupped again, frowning with displeasure, "oh for heaven's sakes...right, well, thing is it might take a while, how long are you here for?"

"Another week, at a stretch," Cousland said, "I'm due back at Vigil's Keep in ten days and there's something happening that I have to be present for."

"I can stay for longer," Alistair said cordially, "Eamon has taken my place at court while I'm gone, he's the Royal Steward after all, so I could stretch that to two weeks."

"No, you couldn't," Cousland cut in, his tone dead pan and serious, even as Anders continued to hiccup in the background, "because you aren't going into the underbelly of Kirkwall without either myself or my men at your back."

"Oh don't be such a spoil sport," Alistair said with a roll of his eyes, "honestly, you'd think I didn't know how to take care of myself, I was a Warden once too you know! And I'll have the Royal Guard with me."

"Oh, great, just put me at ease why don't you," Cousland said sarcastically, "just remind me that I'll be leaving you here at the mercy of Kirkwall with only five men who couldn't find their own arses with both hands!"

Anders took a deep breath and held it as long as he could while Cousland and Alistair continued to argue. After a minute and a half he was forced to let it out but the hiccoughs started again almost immediately. He sighed and hung his head, feeling ridiculous. When he looked back up Cousland was frowning unhappily but he was no longer arguing. Well, Anders thought with a smirk, I can see who's good at manipulating who in this relationship then.

"Two weeks," Alistair confirmed to the mage, making Cousland sigh purposefully.

"That's more than -hick- enough," Anders said, trying to swallow down the spasms in his diaphragm, "considering the disarray in the city and the general distrust in the resistance as it is -hick-...then I'd say about a week. The longer we wait the more people I can gather."

"Then make it for the day before I leave," Cousland said imploringly to Alistair; Anders could see the King struggle under the entreat ing gaze of his lover, "please, or I'll never stop worrying and it will drive me mad and then..."

"Alright, alright," Alistair finally acquiesced, missing Cousland's victorious smile as he lifted his hands soothingly and closed his eyes; when he opened them Cousland was once more contrite, "then a week from now, is that good enough for you?"

"Yes," Cousland smiled, his arm moving forwards, the hand out of sight under the table.

Anders swallowed down another hiccough and rolled his eyes as Alistair jumped but tried to hide the motion. The King laughed nervously and tried his best to look normal. I do not want to know where he is putting his hands, Anders thought as he looked at a distinctly smug Cousland who was looking innocently in the other direction. Anders stood up and picked up the pot of cold tea, setting it back onto the cooking range. He opened the hearth and stocked up the fire, giving the logs an extra boost with a small lick of flame from his fingers. He stood with his back to the King and the Commander, containing his hiccoughs behind closed lips, and smiled. He may have laughed but, in
essence, Alistair was right, Anders thought as he watched the hot plate begin to darken with heat, the water in the pot beginning to steam; we are all just people, all striving to the same goal. Peace and freedom for all the lands of Thedas. So it might seem an impossible goal, it probably was, but that didn't make it not worth fighting for. Freedom is always worth fighting for, he thought fervently, listening to the soft plops as the water changed from simmering to boiling.

"Then I'll get started straight away," Anders returned to their conversation as he emptied his cold tea into the sink and picked up another cup from the cupboard, "I'll let you know when we can -hick- expect to be ready."

"Thank you," Alistair said, looking genuinely grateful.

The air around him steamed as Anders poured two reheated cups of tea. He turned back to the table and grabbed the last biscuit from the box. Everything falls into place eventually, he thought with grim determination. The Tevinter spell, the support of Hawke, the freedom of the circle in Ferelden and now the backing of a nation. Good things come to those who wait indeed, Anders thought with vigour. No matter what I will see this through. He nodded to the Commander and Alistair as he made to leave, the cups balanced levelly in each hand. He was just opening the door when he was stopped by Cousland's hand tugging at his nightshirt.

"Is everything alright?" Cousland asked quietly.

Anders knew exactly what he was referring to and it wasn't the hiccoughs. He sighed through his nose, trying to avoid the Commander's knowing gaze. Alistair was looking at his fingernails, occasionally biting at them.

"It will be," Anders said with a resolute smile.

"...As long as you're sure," Cousland said, letting go of his shirt and sitting back in his chair.

"I am," Anders said, not entirely sure how to, or even if he wanted to, continue; instead he just opened the door and left before Cousland could ask him any more awkward questions.

He tried his best to suppress his hiccoughs as he ascended the stairs, the tremors they caused making the tea cups shake. He could hear the sounds of the house awakening as he walked across the landings, the muffled thumps and shallow voices from behind doors. He pushed open the bedroom door and slipped inside before anyone saw him.

Hawke was in the exact same position he had left him in, laying on his front with his face half hidden by the pillow, his breathing steady and even. Anders placed the tea and the biscuit onto the bedside table and climbed onto the bed. Hawke stirred lightly, shifting around on the bed and moaning a little in his sleep. Anders leaned against the headboard, his legs pulled up and to the side. He reached out with his right hand and stroked Hawke's jaw, feeling the stubble beneath his knuckles. Hawke shifted again, leaning unconsciously into the touch. Anders smile and repeated the motion. After a few moments of easy silence, Hawke's eyes blinked open. Anders watched him warily, unable to entirely shake the tense feeling which Hawke had instilled in him over the past few months. It all seemed rather insignificant and unfounded, however, as Hawke smiled warmly up at him. Anders hesitated for a moment before returning it. He smothered a hiccough as Hawke pushed up from under the covers, his muscular back rippling under the wan sunlight.

"Is it silly that I almost expected to wake up and find you gone?" Hawke asked, trying to sound amused but unable to hide the uneasiness in his tone.

"Yes," Anders said, hiccough making the end of the word sound wobbly and high pitched.
Hawke looked at him and smiled with a frown. He waited in silence for a whole twenty seconds until Anders, feeling a little uncomfortable with the scrutiny, hiccupped again. Hawke let out a muffled laugh and crept over to sit up beside the mage who was now steadily glaring at him, although the gaze held no heat.

"Oh what?" Anders said, "Can't a man have the -hick- hiccoughs?"

"So there is something you can't cure then?" Hawke said slyly as he shuffled closer until he was pressed up against Anders' side.

"Don't start," Anders said, "it's bad enough when you..."

He would have continued but Hawke took that moment to lunge forwards and scream in his ear. Anders reared backwards and nearly fell off the bed; he would have too if Hawke hadn't grabbed his arms and pulled him back onto the bed. The rogue was laughing whilst trying and failing to look repentant. Anders glared at him once more, this time meaning it, and tried to slow his rapidly beating heart. He hiccupped again, making Hawke's laughter redouble.

"You absolute bastard!" Anders said, "That trick has never -hick- worked on me!"

"I'm sorry, I am, I thought it would help," Hawke chuckled, continuing to pull Anders closer until they were pressed fully together, chest against chest.

Anders found himself staring into sparkling, green eyes and found it suddenly very difficult to be angry. He hiccupped quietly as Hawke's breath washed over his chin. The rogue leaned in to run the tip of his nose over Anders cheek. The mage felt his breath jumping once more in his throat but couldn't tell if it was the hiccoughs or just the intense feeling of anticipation.

"I brought you tea," he said in a slightly dazed, breathy voice, pointing vaguely behind him.

"It can wait," Hawke said, his voice dark with desire as he leaned in and captured Anders' lips.

Maker yes, Anders couldn't help but think as a warm sense of relief mixed with apprehension flooded through him. Hawke's strong arms lifted to encircle him, crushing him close. Anders was powerless to resist, even as a small voice in the back of his mind shouted at him to do just that. He pushed it away, focusing solely on the building heat between their lips and pressed flesh. You need this, he told himself sternly, you do. Let everything fall into place, let it, and things will come together in time. The apprehension did not abate but then neither did the relief. Anders lifted his hands tentatively to return Hawke's steady hold. The rogue growled in appreciation and pressed his tongue thickly across Anders' own. The mage shivered and shifted his head to the left, allowing for a better angle. He pressed his flattened hands against Hawke's back, relishing the warm flesh over solid muscle beneath his palms. Hawke eventually pulled away, his pupils wide and his cheeks slightly flushed. Both were panting for breath.

"So," Hawke said, reaching up with one hand to trail his curled fingertips through the hair at the nape of Anders' neck, "that's the trick that works on you, is it?"

"Very funny..." Anders started before he stopped, realising that Hawke was right; his hiccoughs had stopped completely, "oh."

"Oh indeed," Hawke said with a wry smile, leaning in again, "although I think I'd better just check..."

"Yes," Anders grinned, feeling younger and more carefree than he had in a long time, "I suppose you should."
It was a few days before he even heard back from Sabine. Their network was, as Anders had expected, rather devastated by the Qunari attack. Lirene had been the most reliable way to pass messages through to the other members of the underground but now, with everyone scattered, it was difficult for such messages to be passed on.

"Most of them are coming here to check on each other," Lirene told Anders when he had tried to find out any information about Sabine and the others, "so if you leave it here with me then I'll try and get it passed one to as many as possible."

"Thank you," Anders said with a smile, passing a subtle sovereign into her palm as he grasped her hand, "you have no idea how important this is."

"Oh I'm sure I know well enough," Lirene smiled gratefully, gripping Anders' hand tightly as she accepted the coin.

Anders had never begrudged donating money to Lirene for her help. She risked enough as it was, helping apostates in Kirkwall, but Anders also knew that the money went to a good cause. Lirene did as much for the refugees as he did.

Things were looking up. Everything was underway. Anders began to relax a little. That was, of course, until Knight Commander Meredith called a public meeting in the main square before the long stairs to the Keep. Hawke attended, only managing to persuade Anders not to by pointing out that he would be able to hear everything from the window of the sitting room on the second floor. Cousland decided to sit with him, not too keen to show his face in front of Meredith. Not because he was scared of her, not at all, but because he didn't want to cause an incident with Alistair watching; Anders was quite sure that the Commander was worried the King would blame him for creating a diplomatic incident.

"I have to hand it to her," Cousland said as he leaned his chin against his folded arms on the windowsill, next to Anders, "she's a powerful public speaker."

"She's a successful bully you mean," Anders said with resentment, staring at Meredith as she stood proudly in her shining armour before the crowd of nobles and commoners, "look at her. I bet she just couldn't wait for the Viscount to kick it. Gives her all the reason to do what she's doing now."

"Taking control of the city after it becomes leaderless," Cousland shook his head, "it's just like Perrin Thernhold all over again."

"Mmm," Anders agreed strongly, feeling all the hope and high expectations he'd had over the past few days being overshadowed by the long reach of the templars.

When Hawke returned from the informal assembly he didn't look any more thrilled by Meredith's proclamation than Anders was. He slumped into the large armchair in the living room and looked slightly blank. Anders sat across from him while Cousland hovered near Anders' chair, his arms folded.

"Is everything alright?" Anders asked after a tense few moments where Hawke stared into space.

"Not really," Hawke said, finally looking up into Anders' eyes, "you heard her didn't you? Templar authority is being imposed on a temporary basis until a suitable replacement can be found. Right, and once Meredith's got a taste of true power I'd love to see her just hand it over to someone else."

"I didn't mean that," Anders said, making Hawke frown, "I mean I know what she said, I was listening. It's just I saw Meredith talking to you after she was done posing and I wondered if
something was wrong."

"Oh, yes, that," Hawke said, rubbing his hands on the tight cotton trousers beneath his imposing armour, "well...it seems I'm to be bestowed an honour, for saving Kirkwall from the Qunari."

"Really?" Cousland said sardonically, letting out a muffled grunt as Anders jabbed him in the side to get him to shut up.

"At least it shows you're appreciated," Anders said with a smile, "you did risk your life to see that the Qunari left the city in peace after all. What is it then? A position somewhere, or a title?"

"No, well, yes," Hawke floundered a little, making Anders smile widen, "they're naming me Champion."

Anders smile fell away to be replaced by sheer shock. The Champion..? That wasn't just any old title. Other terms of reverence suffered the stains of their holders, the lingering baggage of office and entitlement. However, Champion was not an appointment that could be attained by political subterfuge or bribery. It could not be owned or willed. It was earned with blood and leadership in times of great turmoil. Hawke wasn't just being given a cursory title to mollify his ego or pacify the people who so obviously saw him as a hero. He was being given the highest honour the city had to offer, one which hadn't been won for many, many years.

"Champion?" Cousland's eyes were wide, "Well...that's unbelievable. There hasn't been a Champion in Kirkwall since the Blessed Age!"

"Hasn't there?" Hawke seemed, to Anders keen eyes, to become even more nervous after Cousland pointed this out.

"It's alright," Anders said, pulling Hawke's eyes to him; the rogue seemed to relax a little as Anders looked at him seriously, "you'll be fine. You deserve it Hawke, you do. Don't think that they would just bandy the title Champion around if they didn't mean it. Especially coming from Meredith. I'm sure it stuck in her throat having to tell you that."

Hawke laughed, breaking into a smile that reached his eyes, making them light up under his heavy brow. He reached out to take Anders hand, smoothing his thumb across the thin glove Anders always wore.

"Thank you, love," Hawke said; Anders smiled in reply, even as he heard Cousland snort before turning on his heel and walk away up the stairs.

Now it wasn't just a King and a Warden Commander he had for support, Anders thought with joy, but a Champion of the City. Just when something turned up to bring everything to a standstill, something else came along to get it running again. It was another four days, with the meeting finally secured, looming in Anders' mind like a milestone, that a familiar face appeared at the door.

He, Cousland, Alistair and Nathaniel were eating fresh bread and honey in the living room, talking about Nathaniel's sister and his nephew and niece, when the doorbell went. Bodahn answered it but Cousland's seat was facing the hall, affording him a clear view of whoever was entering. Nathaniel and Anders were gobsmacked when Cousland stood up, back rigidly straight, and pointed towards the entranceway. Alistair just continued to eat as if he were entirely used to this kind of behaviour.

"You!" the Commander said loudly, stepping forwards, "what in the name of Andraste's great flaming tits are you doing here?"

Anders turned in his chair to find a familiar man wheeling a very large box into the living room. I
know that face, Anders thought as he wrinkled his brow.

"Why Commander, what a pleasure it is to see you again," the man simpered, clasping his hands.

Anders knew him in an instant. Wade, he thought with a smirk, the man was always so very overdramatic. He could turn even just the simple act of entering a room into a grand reunion. He hadn't seen him since his time at Vigil's Keep. Oh how I do not miss his constant whining, Anders thought.

"I am here to see Serrah Hawke," Wade said, scanning the room and finding it sans Hawke, "I have a delivery for him."

"A delivery?" Anders said, standing to walk over to the large, wooden box; Hawke hadn't told him he was expecting anything, "Of what?"

Of what indeed. Wade was finally persuaded, more by Cousland's threatening to gut him if he didn't comply than any reasonable arguments, to let them open the box without Hawke being present. Anders almost couldn't believe what was inside. The armour gleamed like molten silver set into russet blood, the pointed reflection of light making the jagged pauldrons and razor-sharp gauntlets seem like living things. Anders reached in and pulled out the rich red fabric of the cuirass, adorned with thick leather belts and real hawk skulls, marvelling at the smoothness of the cloth. He looked down into the box as Cousland hunched down and ran his fingers over the impressive greaves, covered in heavy diamonds of plate argent. Wade was fussing terribly, telling them to be careful, bouncing on his feet. Alistair and Nathaniel were finally tempted over by the small fuss Wade was creating, staring down into the box with raised eyebrows.

"How come I never got anything this fancy after my coronation?" Alistair said, sounding huffily put out.

"You were given the heirloom armour of the Ferelden kings," Cousland said, "isn't that enough?"

"Oh your majesty!" Wade said, his eyes jumping to Alistair, "Such an honour to see you again also!"

Anders wasn't truly paying attention to anyone else. He put the cuirass back into the box and stared at the full set.

"It's...beautiful," Anders said, for want of a better word, which stopped Wade's bouncing at least; he grinned as he imagined Hawke's face on opening this particular box, "Oh Hawke is going to be very happy with this."

"Do you think so Serrah? Oh I'm so glad you agree," Wade said ecstatically, "it is my masterpiece after all!"

"Hey, I thought this was your masterpiece," Cousland said in irritation, indicating to his own fine armour with its gleaming scales, "even though it catches on fire most of the bloody time."

"Well it was a masterpiece," Wade said sympathetically, giving Cousland a conciliatory and yet slightly patronising look, "until I was commissioned to make this beautiful set by the Count and Comtesse Lancet themselves, in honour of Serrah Hawke's new mantle of Champion. I have worked tirelessly for days, serrah, days, to craft this!"

"It still doesn't explain what you're doing here," Cousland said huffily; as soon as Wade opened his mouth to explain, however, Cousland seemed to realise that he was surely in for a terribly long and tiresome explanation, "alright you know what never mind! You can sit down and have a drink as
long as you promise to shut up."

It turned out Hawke was more than happy with Wade's design. He returned from his visits around town, mainly to the nobles who wished to thank him for saving their lives, and to make sure everything was alright with Aveline and the others, to find Anders and the box still waiting for him in the main room. Anders looked up from his book, when Hawke asked what was in the box, and smiled mysteriously at him. Hawke's eyes nearly popped out of his skull when he pulled back the lid. Yes, Anders thought with a smile, that's what I expected. He instantly devolved from proud warrior and Champion of Kirkwall into a ten year old boy who'd just been given his first hunting knife. Hawke pulled it out and instantly began trying it on. Anders shook his head as Hawke basically swapped his old armour piece by piece for the new.

"We have guests," Anders said as Hawke fumbled with the pauldrons, unused to such cumbersome armour; Anders stood up and walked behind him to help with the straps, "what would they think if they came downstairs and found you half naked in the sitting room with me, hmm?"

"That everything was running as usual?" Hawke teased, flexing his fingers appreciatively in his new argent gauntlets, the light flickering off of them flatteringly.

"Oh piss off you cheeky swine," Anders smiled despite the insult, letting out a short laugh when Hawke turned suddenly and grasped him by the shoulders, his eyes distinctly mischievous.

"What terrible language to use in front of the Champion!" Hawke said, unable to hide his smile as he tried to be stern, "I could have you locked up for threatening me."

"How terrible," Anders said with faux anxiety, lifting his arms up to circle them around Hawke's lower back, feeling the multiple belts below his fingertips, "does that mean I shall be punished?"

"Mmm," Hawke said, his eyes half lidded as he jerked Anders fully against his well armoured body, "I'm sure I can think of something."

Anders had found that, as usual, the easiest solution he and Hawke had found to their relationship problems was to get over them and move on as quickly as possible. We're practically acting as if nothing has happened, Anders thought as he felt Malcolm Hawke's amulet dig into his chest as he and Hawke pressed together, and yet so much has changed. He closed his eyes and leaned into Hawke's embrace. Their lips had only just met, however, when a rather desperate knock sounded at the door, loud and fast. Hawke sighed through his nose and opened his eyes. Just typical really, Anders thought as Hawke pushed forwards to impress a rather intense kiss onto his lips before pulling back. The knocking continued.

"Suppose we'd better get that," Anders said, pulling away from Hawke and walking towards the entrance corridor, "or that will be, I'll better get that I suppose, considering you're too lazy to do it yourself."

"Tell them to fuck off will you?" Hawke said casually, grabbing Anders arse as he passed.

Anders jumped and smacked Hawke on the arm; the sharp metal of the gauntlets did not lend itself to gentle fondling, that was for certain. Hawke sniggered a little before he started gathering up his now discarded armour while Anders advanced on the door. The knocking came again, louder if that was possible.

"I'm bloody coming!" Anders said tightly as he unlocked the door and opened it, "If the city is on fire again I don't want...oh."
Varric stared back at him, his hand raised to knock again. Anders looked up to find Aveline standing behind him. There was an awkward moment of silence before Aveline began to talk.

"It's Fenris," she said without preamble, "the bloody Seneschal has the contractors at his door and they're going to pull the place down."

Anders stared at her, blinking. What?

"Who is it?" Hawke shouted from the living room.

Anders turned and called for Hawke to hurry. The rogue veritably sprinted to the door, his face set, his tone anxious. It drove home to Anders just how stressed and jumpy Hawke had become recently, always expecting the worst in any situation. Aveline stared at Hawke with wide eyes while Varric whistled on seeing the imposing armour.

"What?" Hawke asked sternly, "What's going on?"

"I think it's fortuitous that you tried that armour on," Anders said, "seems like it's time to use that influence of yours."

"I want the facade demolished, no not there! Here! Look, look at the plans I have and you will see what I am talking about..."

Seneschal Bran stood in the small courtyard with at least twenty men, all carrying various forms of pick axes and sledgehammers, surrounded by bags of rubble which had already been chipped away from the admittedly crumbling facade of Fenris' mansion. Anders rushed after Hawke with Varric and Aveline at his side, coming to a halt when they were close enough to speak to the auburn haired man. Bran, in the meantime, was busy pointing to said plans to show the foreman beside him exactly what he meant.

"We need to be careful not to damage the adjacent mansions, the structure is unsound enough as it is..." Bran was saying, only to be interrupted by Hawke.

"Seneschal Bran, if you please Serrah Hawke..." Bran said as he turned, his eyes widening slightly as he took in Hawke's impressive figure; Bran stalled for a moment before finally finding his words, shooing the foreman away, "or is that Champion now?"

"That sounds about right," Hawke said, inspecting his razor like gauntlets and seeming to savour Bran's swallow of disquiet in response, "we were just out for a leisurely stroll, you understand, and I heard that you were starting work."

"That's right," Bran said tightly, "there are many buildings that require repair after the Qunari attacked the city. We can't all have it as easy as simply performing a single duel and then shirking all other responsibility. There was extensive fire damage and much destruction, the entire of Hightown is being refurbished."

What an arrogant prick, Anders thought with a shake of his head. A simple duel? Had the man seen the Arishok? I'd like to see you kick an invading army out of Kirkwall practically on your own, Anders thought, leaning back on his heels and inspecting the man before him critically. Aveline stepped up beside Anders to make sure that the Seneschal was aware of her presence.

"That's funny," Hawke said, "I don't remember there being any reported damage at the upper
"Yes, well, this building has long been under scrutiny from the authorities and those in charge of upkeep and repair, namely myself," Anders looked at Bran with barely concealed facetious disbelief; who died and made you Viscount, Anders thought derisively, "so I am taking this opportunity to tidy up this district."

Anders watched in concern as three burly men began smashing in the delicate palisades that flanked the heavy wooden door. Aveline stepped forwards, her face alive with indignation. Hawke reached out a hand to stop her however, his face set. Varric frowned at him as Hawke folded his arms and stared at Bran. The auburn haired Seneschal was trying his best to seem haughty and distant, as usual, but Anders could see the disquiet in his eyes.

"Well, that's awfully nice of you but you needn't bother," Hawke said with a shrug.

"Oh yes, and why is that?" the Seneschal said in irritation.

"Because you're demolishing my future property," Hawke said with a raise of his eyebrow.

"Yes his-wait you're what?" Anders did a double take, flinching a little when Hawke kicked him subtly in the ankle with his argent shod foot.

"I beg your pardon..?" Bran started.

"I said I want to buy this mansion," Hawke shrugged, "I've had my eye on it for a while."

"But...but this is preposterous!" Bran said, hackles raised, "This land is earmarked for development, how could you..! Am I to understand you are to sell the Amell estate?"

"No," Hawke said with an impudently amused expression, "I'll be keeping that thank you very much, I did pay for it after all. I think I'll take this one as my...summer house."

Anders couldn't help the barely concealed snort of laughter, despite his surprise, trying to disguise it as a cough. Varric looked up at him with a grin.

"Summer house," bran sounded as if he were on the verge of exploding, "it's barely four hundred yards from your other one!"

"Well, it's nice to have a change I always say," Hawke said cheerily, shaking a flippant hand towards the mansion and the workmen, "couldn't stop those lovely men knocking down my mansion could you?"

To say that Bran left with a bee in his bonnet was a severe understatement in Anders book. Hawke instructed them to just leave the rubble and the mess where it was and, basically, jog on. Anders could hear the Seneschal muttering as he passed their, undeniably, smug group. Something about 'arrogant' and 'Meredith', as far as Anders could tell. Good luck with that, Anders thought in disbelief.

"It's nice to see you're feeling better Hawke, but you certainly took your time," Fenris said, inspecting his nails, "were you going to wait until after I was buried under a mountain of rubble or before?"

"You..!" Hawke started, pointing at the elf angrily; however, as per usual, Hawke didn't seem to be
able to stay annoyed at Fenris for very long, "are an idiot."

"Really?" Anders said, pulling Hawke's attention to him, "I thought that was you. You did just offer to do the impossible after all."

"Eh?" Hawke said, looking baffled; Fenris looked at them both with confusion, "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Well I thought that would be fairly obvious," Varric said, leaning against the wall casually, "considering this place must be worth at least three thousand sovereigns."

"I'd say it was closer to four," Aveline said as she looked about, her nose wrinkling distastefully at the thick smell of dust in the air, "although I'm sure the interior decoration will bring the price down a little."

Fenris looked back and forth between them all in sheer confusion. He pushed away from the wall and stepped forwards. Hawke looked at him calmly. Oh dear, Anders thought, and here I was worried that our biggest problem would be not having enough money to cover the cost...Fenris had always prided himself on his independence, his freedom and his ability to deal with everything alone. Even before everything had become far more complicated between Hawke and the elf, Fenris had still always rebuked most offers of help. Anders couldn't see the news that Hawke was now the owner of Fenris' own home going over that well.

"What is going on here?" Fenris said in annoyance.

"Well, things got a little complicated," Hawke said with a sigh, "you must have known that we could only hold back the Seneschal for so long."

"You mean," Fenris frowned but looked entirely resigned to the decision Anders assumed the elf thought Hawke was referring to, "well isn't that wonderful. I suppose I'll be looking for new lodgings fairly soon then?"

"Not quite," Hawke said with brief hesitation, watching Fenris as he continued to stare at him, "I'm buying the mansion."

"You're buying...my mansion," Fenris said slowly, his eyes narrowing.

"It isn't technically yours at all," Aveline said, one hand on her hip, "which is what I've been telling you for months now but you never listen!"

Anders noticed that Fenris was no longer taking any notice. He had trained his dangerous eyes on Hawke and was paying none of them any heed. Anders subtly made his way towards the door, indicating with a subtle jerk of his head for Aveline and Varric to follow. I'm quite sure that I would perversely enjoy watching Hawke be emasculated by Fenris, Anders thought, but perhaps I should be nice for once and let him be rebuked in private. They left just as Hawke began his indignant speech. Anders didn't hear Fenris shouting but then that didn't mean anything. Anders didn't think he'd heard Fenris shout once in the entire time that he'd known him. The closest he'd come was probably just after Hadriana.

"It's good to see you're well," Anders said to Aveline as soon as they were alone in the courtyard.

"You too Anders," Aveline said with a sigh, "what a mess this whole thing is. You have no idea what it's like having that arse of a Knight Commander striding into your office every hour to ask for updates or demand that I change this, that or the other! It's hard enough getting everything back to normal as it is without her throwing her silvers into the mix."
I can just bet it isn't, Anders thought, his face darkening on hearing Meredith's name. Varric thankfully distracted him as he laughed softly, shaking his head as he looked back towards Fenris' mansion.

"My, my," Varric said as they stood together in the early evening light, "that's gratitude for you."

Anders couldn't help but feel a stab of anger. Who are you to talk? He thought as he folded his arms. Considering everything you said behind my back and you're just...

"Oh come on Varric," Anders said with a wry glance at the dwarf, "we all know the vagaries of gratitude."

Varric at least had the good grace to look chastened. Aveline frowned but didn't ask further.

"Yes I'm, uh, sorry about that Blondie," Varric said, giving the mage a serious look, "honestly I didn't think he'd overreact the way he did."

"That's hardly the point," Anders said, looking away, "and you've met the Commander before. I would have thought it was plain to anyone that had been in his presence for more than five minutes that he is an entirely irascible man."

"Too true," Varric said, scratching at his neck, "I suppose I really should know better by now but I didn't and that's just the way it is. Whether we continue with this partnership is entirely up to you."

"Oh don't be such a bloody drama queen," Anders rolled his eyes and folded his arms, holding in the antipathy he couldn't help but feel towards Varric for going behind his back, "of course we're still friends. If your ever try anything like that again, however, then we may have to have words."

Varric smiled up at him and nodded.

"Deal," he said.
"So he's going to refurbish the whole lot?" Cousland asked with a frown, "Seems a little excessive."

"You haven't seen the state of the interior," Anders said as he bit through a thread, snapping it, "and anyway what I find even more amazing than that is that Fenris is allowing it at all."

The clinic had been moderately busy the morning after their encounter with the Seneschal. Anders was sure that it was due to his absence since his brief stint after the Qunari attack. His determination, good will and a smattering of guilt had prompted him to return and, having nothing to do except hang around the mansion pretending he wasn't in the City at all, Cousland had offered to join him. They had fallen, ineluctably, to talking about the stubborn elf. Anders hadn't had time to speak to Fenris and, even though they were on speaking terms, Anders was still amazed that the thought had even crossed his mind. Wanting to speak with Fenris? Anders thought as he continued to sew two thin strips of leather together with a large needle, I must be losing my mind. Here I thought that the meeting was going to be the most bizarre event of the week. Or hopefully this week, Anders thought. The idea of the meeting still made his insides flop over with combined excitement and worry.

The Commander also evoked that very same feeling in him. At first Anders had been wary of Cousland's accompanying him through Kirkwall and then spending the day helping the residents of Darktown who showed at his door. What if, by chance, someone recognised him? It was farfetched, admittedly, but there were still some Ferelden refugees kicking around Darktown and Cousland had been a notable noble figure before his family's massacre. Yet that argument hadn't stopped the Commander.

"I'll just stick some civvies on and no one will know the difference," he had shrugged, "...not that anyone seems to recognise me in my armour either but, well, better safe than sorry I suppose."

Now Anders found himself seated beside the Warden Commander, sewing a harness together, while Lien Cousland, heir to the Terynship of Highhever, mucked about on the dirty floor with Julie and Lucy, the two nine year old orphan twins that William had just recently taken under his wing. Anders looked at the unlikely bunch kindly but not without a sense of sadness. Many children had been left parentless after the Qunari had raided the city but Anders would never cease to be amazed by the vivacity and ability of children to bounce back from tragedy. When Anders had first seen the girls when he had visited the clinic to see William four days ago, they had been practically mute and incredibly shy, clinging to William's trousers and shirt. Now here they were, laughing and playing as if the world had returned to normal. It's in their eyes though, Anders thought wearily, as he spied the same slightly haunted look in the twins' eyes as he used to see in his own not long after first being taken to the Circle. Everything leaves its mark.

It was also heart-warming for Anders to see William coming into his own, looking out for those around him in a fatherly sort of way. It didn't surprise him though, William had always loved children. As does the Commander by the looks of things, Anders thought warmly. He smiled as Cousland ran a broken comb, which Lucy had handed him expectantly once it became obvious to the girls that Cousland was more than happy to play along, through Lucy's hair. The girls sat giggling to themselves, Julie holding a headless doll to her chest while she stole shy glances at the Commander, Lucy sitting proudly between Cousland's outstretched legs.

"So are you trying to tell me that gorgeous creature has been holed up in an absolute dump for years?" Cousland said as he began plaiting Julie's thick, brown hair.
"Yes," Anders rolled his eyes at Cousland's shameless description of Fenris, "and no one has been able to persuade him otherwise. He's never taken any help with that decrepit old mansion other than having Aveline distract the Seneschal from its shabbiness. Until today I had honestly thought he'd stay in it until it either caved in on top of him or he contracted some hideous disease from all the filth."

"Oh well," Cousland shrugged, "sounds like it can only be a good thing then."

Anders nodded vaguely in agreement. He still hadn't managed to get a truly satisfactory answer from Hawke about how he had managed to persuade Fenris to let him refurbish the mansion. The elf hadn't had much say in Hawke's purchasing of the mansion as, without that, Seneschal Bran would have literally jumped on the building and had it flattened in a day. However, allowing the insides to be completely gutted and replaced was an unbelievable miracle. Anders stared into space as he continued to sew, only pulled from his daze when Julie stood up to allow her sister to swap places with her. Anders grinned on seeing Julie's hair separated into two, perfect, identical plaits, tied off with some of the thick thread which he had discarded on the floor.

"You are disturbingly good at that," Anders pointed out with a smirk, nodding to Cousland's handiwork as the Commander started again on the second twin.

"Yes, well," Cousland sighed even as a small smile graced his lips, "mother had always wanted a girl and, being the youngest, I was sacrificed to the cause. I was forced to do all that girly stuff; piano lessons, lute lessons, being the focus of mother and her friends, having to entertain the girls and young ladies that visited with their parents. Fergus...never had any of that."

Anders frowned as the smile slid off of Cousland's face to be replaced by a blank and slightly cheerless expression. The Commander's hands continued their work mechanically.

"He was always too manly for any of that," Cousland said softly, shaking his head.

"...Is everything alright?" Anders asked, aware that he was parroting Cousland's own concern back at him.

"Mmm?" Cousland said, looking up at Anders quickly, as if he had been lost in thought, "Oh, yes, fine."

Right, Anders thought wryly, everything's fine eh? And Meredith and Orsino are having a torrid love affair. Why is it that as soon as I have a problem everyone jumps down my throat trying to solve it but when they have a problem it's some sort of huge secret that can't be discussed? Anders jabbed the needle forcefully through the thin leather, enjoying the slightly savage motion.

"Maybe we could go visit," Cousland suggested, a little too quickly; Anders looked at him out of the corner of his eye. Oh he really thinks that's going to distract me does it? For fuck's sake.

"What on earth would you want to visit Fenris for?" Anders asked with a quizzical look, hiding his irritation beneath his confusion.

"Oh, well, I mean I have nothing better to do," Cousland said, "Alistair is holed up with Teagan, planning a strategy of how-on-earth-do-we-talk-to-Meredith-without-being-emasculated, I've already handed out all my orders to the troops, Nathaniel is busy and I'm here with you doing not much. Thought it would be nice to get out...or something."

"You thought it would be nice to get out," Anders parroted, unable to help the wry smile that graced his lips, "the Warden Commander and wanted apostate taking a leisurely stroll through the
gardens, was that what you envisaged?"

"Well when you put it like that..." Cousland shrugged, smiling; oh, thinks he's got away with it, does he? Anders thought. We'll see about that.

"Mmm, well, if you really want to I suppose it would be fine," Anders pulled the string tight and began sewing in a knot; Cousland has always been a terrible liar he thought with a shake of his head, "I need to speak with Fenris anyway."

"Good," Cousland said, smiling at Anders before he leaned forwards and grabbed Julie unexpectedly, making the girl squeal with delight as he began tickling her.

The stillness of the mansion was accentuated by the chipped stone lying on the ground before it and the broken palisades by the doorway, Anders thought. It was as if, walking up the spotless stone stairs to the upper mansion district, they were suddenly transported to the foothills of Sundermount at the entrance to some ruin, creeping with ivy and filled with musty air and the smell of decay. Well, even more of the feel of a ruin, Anders thought ruefully. The once impressive building was bad enough before without the introduction of any more damage. Cousland stood with him before the heavy oak doorway, once Anders had knocked, and stared critically at the fascia.

"Not exactly what I pictured when you said 'mansion'," Cousland said with a raised eyebrow.

"I did warn you," Anders said, tapping his foot impatiently; he didn't entirely enjoy being out in the open in Hightown like this without Hawke nearby. Although the Commander was a very good substitute for Hawke's protection Anders still knew that he was a known face to the templars and trouble, right now, was the last thing he wanted. Not with the meeting taking place in only a few days. Everything is tenuous enough as it is, Anders thought tersely, forcing himself to calm down. The mage's of the city, Circle and apostate alike, were all on edge. The templars had enough influence before the Qunari gave them an excuse to seize power but now...? The name Meredith was uttered like a curse among those on the street, with anger and fear. It's about time, Anders thought with a dark frown, about time that the Knight Commander revealed herself for the snake she is. You don't seem to even see it Meredith, you're so blind. The more you tighten you grip around the beast you think you've tamed, the more your gauntlet cuts into its flesh, then the more likely it is to tear you limb from limb.

"Is he even in there?" Cousland asked as he stepped to his left to peer through the dirty window into the mansion's murky innards, pulling Anders from his dark thoughts.


Even if he is he won't have heard me knocking, Anders thought wearily. The only reason he heard me last time was because he was on the alert for visitors. The mage put his hands on his hips and sighed. There was an odd feeling of unresolved tension which seemed to hang around Fenris' abode like a haze. Anders detested it. Why didn't I feel it last night? He wondered. His last visit had shown him just how wretched and plagued the building was, whether by the magister who had owned it or the old blood that contaminated it, he could not tell. The itchy feeling of the Fade tingled faintly against his skin, even from outside. How on earth does he survive here...? Anders thought, but then he stopped, his fingers curling into his coat. There was a sudden and inexplicable feeling of sickness in his stomach. When Cousland stepped back from the window Anders could have sworn he saw something move behind it. He turned his head quickly and stared but the thing was gone.
"How long do we wait exactly?" Cousland asked, looking around to Anders and frowning on clocking his slightly worried expression. "What's wrong?"

"...It's nothing," Anders shook his head quickly, pushing down the fear that had arisen; a small, pale face had been staring at him from behind the filthy, dark glass, he was sure of it. He shivered, remembering the ghostly faces of the portraits lining the great hall in Fenris' mansion, staring out at him as if pleading somehow, mute and importunate. It probably would have been better if they did tear this ghastly place down, Anders thought in irritation, scrubbing at the tingling feeling on the back of his neck, "maybe we should try this?"

I've never used it, he thought, looking dubiously at the bell rope which hung beside the door, and neither has anyone else for a hundred years by the looks of it. Still, if he's in that bedroom, which seems likely considering it's the only properly functioning room in the whole place, then it's all he'll hear. The rope felt silky and strong beneath his fingers as he stepped forwards to grasp it. The dull and echoing sound of a bell emanated through the glass and stone. They stood for further few minutes until finally a slight slip of a face flitted behind the glass. This time, to Anders relief, he knew that it was real. The click of a deadbolt and heavy lock disengaging sounded through the thick oak and then the door cracked open. There was no one there when the dusty innards revealed themselves. Anders shook his head as Cousland blinked.

"Huh," Cousland joked as he pushed the door open further and entered, "it's like the story of the haunted Orlesian mansion that mother used to tell me when I was younger!"

"Yes," Anders agreed; not that he'd ever heard the story but it seemed entirely appropriate.

The mansion was in its usual state of disrepair but there were already signs of change. Things seemed to be missing from their usual stations. Anders could only tell because of the pale spots on walls where paintings had been removed, or the sight of the new wood, free of dirt, where rugs had once lain. Fenris was waiting for them in the room connecting the entrance to the main hall. He was in the process of lighting one of the gas lamps, turning only once the murky glass began to flare with a fierce light.

"What do you want..?" Fenris started to ask in the usual slightly exasperated tone he always used with Anders, before he saw Cousland standing next to the mage and stopped, "...ah. I see you've brought a friend."

"Well, I didn't think that you'd forget a face that quickly," Anders said with a raised eyebrow.

"I didn't say that I didn't remember him," Fenris shrugged before walking without preamble through into the great hall; Anders followed, used to the elf's derisive and flippant attitude, and Cousland followed, a little put out, "Cousland wasn't it?"

"Yes," Cousland said, unable to stop his mouth hanging open as he looked around the hall, taking in the dark walls, the ghostly portraits and the massive chandelier, "wow. I really thought you were joking but you weren't! This place is a dump."

Fenris stopped half way into the hall, the already lit lamps throwing his figure into a confusion of light, shadow and glinting amour. Anders was momentarily thrown by the image, as if there were someone staring out at him from behind the elf. Anders closed his eyes for a few seconds before opening them. The brief flare of fear was gone, replaced by embarrassment. It's just the Fade playing tricks on you, Anders thought as Fenris began to talk, don't take any notice of it.

"So, been talking about me have we?" Fenris raised a sardonic brow.
"Not as such," Anders said, a heavy tremor running through his shoulders as he turned to inspect the now bare wall behind him, paintings and tapestries gone, "we were just discussing the renovation and the Commander asked if he could see the mansion."

"Even after you told him what a dump it is?" Fenris seemed confused; it made Anders smile a little to hear Fenris refer to his home in the exact same way that Anders did himself. At least he's honest, Anders thought.

"Mmm, well you do have a lot of interesting relics and artwork," Anders said, making it up on the spot; truthfully he had no idea why Cousland wanted to visit, "although it looks like most of it has gone now."

"They arrived this morning and apparently they'll return later today, Hawke's men that is," Fenris said as he continued to walk towards the dual staircase, his tone unamused, "everything's being removed to Hawke's basement for storage while they work on the interior. It seems Hawke doesn't waste any time when he's determined."

"Only just figured that out, have you?" Anders smirked cheekily, making Fenris tut and rolls his eyes.

"Hey wait a minute, that's a painting of Highever!" Cousland said suddenly, turning before he reached the stairs and striding over the stained wooden floorboards to the far wall; the paintings there still hung delicately by thick brass wire, staring out across the hall.

Anders watched as the Commander reached up with one hand to trace the ornate wooden frame of a painting at the far end of the wall. It differed from the others in that it was a landscape, comprised of a view from the end of a set of fields facing up towards a large, stately looking castle. Highever? Anders thought, that's the Cousland family estate isn't it?

"Do you mind if...I mean, can I take a look around?" Cousland looked up over his shoulder a little anxiously to Fenris who stood half way up the stairs, Anders close behind him.

"Of course," Fenris shrugged, "if you see anything you want you are free to it. The valuables Danarius collected are nothing to me."

"Oh no, I wouldn't take anything," Cousland said, a slightly nostalgic look to his eyes, "I'd just like a look. Thank you though."

Fenris nodded politely as Cousland returned to inspecting the painting, before continuing up the stairs. Anders felt momentarily worried at the thought of leaving Cousland on his own, wondering around this odd building. Don't be so foolish, Anders rebuked himself as he followed Fenris, it's just a bloody house. It can't do anything. He shook himself and walked steadily up the stairs and into the well lit, warm bedroom. Even this room, which had always seemed the least cluttered and liveable of them all, had already undergone packing and dismantling. Fenris wasted no time in walking to a large pile of books, which sat beside an empty bookcase, and began piling them into three large wooden crates placed in the corner of the room. Anders ran his hands up and down his upper arms, underneath his feathered pauldrons.

"So," he said, glad that he was able to distract himself from the odd feeling creeping around his skin, "where exactly are you going to stay while this is all going on?"

"Here," Fenris said as if it were blatantly obvious.

"Here?" Anders repeated in disbelief, "But...won't that be a little difficult? Not just because of
everything going on around you but, well how will you explain why you're here? No one is supposed to be living here at all!"

"Hawke already figured that one out," Fenris shrugged, sighing as he seemed to realise that he wouldn't be getting any peace just yet; he stopped packing and sat back on his haunches, looking up at Anders as the mage hovered around the middle of the room, "he told the men he found to move the belongings that I am a guardsman that he has hired to stay in the property and make sure everything runs smoothly."

How on earth did Hawke get away with all of this? Anders thought perplexedly as he stared at Fenris. First he buys the mansion, then he refurbishes it and then he pretends that the true owner, in a sense anyway, is a guardsman?

"I really am surprised that Hawke is still breathing right now," Anders said without thinking as he surveyed the room, blinking a little and darting his eyes back to Fenris as he realised how candid and relaxed he was being around the elf.

Fenris stared back at him for an awkward moment in which Anders was sure that his own discomfited sense of humour would ruin him once again. Instead, however, Fenris did the last thing Anders would have expected. He smirked, albeit only slightly, and let out an amused chuff of breath that almost resembled a laugh.

"No more than I," Fenris said as he turned back to the books and continued packing.

Miracles do happen then, Anders thought with astonishment. Is this really happening? Anders thought as he shook his head, being told to get out and that nothing had changed. Anders felt a shiver up his spine and looked up on instinct to find Fenris staring at him, his eyes focused on him sinisterly.

"Everything has changed though, hasn't it?" the elf seemed to say, his mouth moving in an awkward vestige of a grin.

Anders sat up straight and blinked. When he opened his eyes again Fenris was once more turned away from him, still piling books into the waiting crates. What..? Anders thought nervously.

"What did you say?" Anders asked, his voice slightly breathy.

Fenris looked over his shoulder, a frown marring his forehead.

"I did not say anything," Fenris said slowly, looking at Anders in puzzlement.

"Oh..." Anders said, laughing it off and scratching nervously at the back of his neck, "I must be hearing things. Never mind."

Fenris just shrugged in reply. Anders waited until the elf had looked away once more before letting the humorous mask he was wearing fall away. What the fuck is wrong with me? he thought harshly. Since when can I not tell the real from the Fade? They're just tricks of the mind, he assured himself, just my thoughts mixing with the thinness of the Veil. That's all it is. Yet somehow, despite his own assurances, Anders felt as if it was all just an empty reassurance. There was something else here, something else in the air. He felt...watched. Just like the last time.

"I have to wonder why you even stay here," Anders said, eyes darting around the room as he did so.
"You're not the first to ask that," Fenris said as he finished storing the books and stood up to fit the crate's lid.

He picked up a hammer and some nails which sat on the mantelpiece above the unlit fire and began nailing the lid shut. Each dull bang of the hammer against the wood as the nail imbedded itself into the crate made Anders jump slightly.

"The enjoyment of having power over something that is Danrarius' is all that keeps me here," Fenris said nonchalantly, although Anders could hear the underlying tension in his voice, "it is the irony that I take pleasure in, not the building itself."

"Oh," Anders said for lack of anything better to say, "that makes sense I suppose."

The final nail bent as Fenris struck at it, causing the elf to let out a rather colourful and vulgar curse in Tevene. Anders had laughed before he realised what a mistake that would be. Fenris' sharp eyes snapped up to meet Anders' anxious and slightly caught out expression. There was a brief awkward pause before Fenris spoke.

"Are you laughing at..?" Fenris started.

"Just something I remembered from earlier," Anders lied quickly, noting Fenris' disbelieving and unamused stare.

"So you were speaking Tevene," Fenris said, ignoring Anders' lie completely; the elf looked as if he were being vilified after days of speculation, "when I had that fever I, well, I wasn't sure of much but...when I woke up I could have sworn I remembered you talking to me in my own tongue."

"...Yes," Anders sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly; there's no denying it now I suppose, the mage thought, even if Fenris is the last person I would have chosen to find out, "I do speak a little."

"You never said anything," Fenris frowned; Anders marvelled a little at the transformation that the elf seemed to have undergone. He looked almost...

"Excited."

"When exactly would it have come up in conversation?" Fenris said wryly, noting Fenris' slightly abashed expression, "Think about it Fenris, this is the first truly civilised conversation we've ever had. When exactly would I have had the chance to tell you that I know a smattering of Tevinter? What good would that have done?"

Fenris had the good grace to look a little ashamed at his accusation. The elf picked up another nail and hammered it smoothly into the crate, completing the construction. He placed the hammer back onto the mantelpiece with a harsh sigh, rubbing at his forehead with the underside of his forearm where the armour left his lyrium lined skin open to the air.

"I see your point," he said.

Fenris' eyes flicked a little coyly to Anders as he walked across the room to pick up an open green bottle and lift it to his lips. The mage shook his head and snorted out a huff of breath through his nose as he spied the telltale purple grapes on the label. Fenris took a large swig before setting it down.

"Doesn't explain why you know it however," Fenris said as he stood with the bottle in one gauntleted hand, eyeing Anders with a small amount of suspicion, "planning on moving are we?"

"Oh yes, to live a happy life in the Tevinter Imperium among all the power hungry magisters and
blood mages," Anders said, deadpan, "just what I've always wanted."

"Huh, well," Fenris shrugged, his eyes seeming to lose their suspicion but not their curiosity, "if not to live amongst the Tevinter, then why?"

"It was helpful," Anders said, bending the truth slightly, "to understand some of the things I managed to acquire in the Circle."

"You were allowed Tevinter manuscripts in the Circle tower?" Fenris said, his lips twitching in amused disbelief.

"Well I didn't say we were allowed them," Anders shrugged, letting out a laugh in return.

The wine bottle was lifted once more and Fenris took another deep drink. Anders held his hands together, running the thumb of the right over the fingers of the left. They were cold even through the glove. Fenris once more distracted him as Anders began to frown.

"Go on then," Fenris prompted, watching as Anders looked up sharply at the challenge.

"What?" Anders asked.

"Say something," Fenris said as he put the bottle down once more, leaning back against the table and folding his arms.

Why do I feel like I'm being tested somehow? He thought.

"Um, well," Anders floundered; most of the words he knew were related to ingredients and magical methods, "possum ego nonnullus vinum habeo." [1]

He knew it wasn't the best thing to ask and, more than that, he knew that it was probably absolutely wrong. Which was why Fenris, after staring at him wide eyed for a few seconds, began to roar with laughter. Anders didn't think he'd ever heard anything quite like it. Whenever Fenris talked Anders found it difficult to think of him as free. The elf always sounded guarded and, despite his candour, his inability to let go tended to make him seem caged. Now, standing before Anders, trying to hold in his continuing laughter as it began to die down, he seemed no more a slave than the Commander did.

"My, my," Fenris said with a wry smile, "what atrocious grammar."

"Oh give me a break," Anders said with a roll of his eyes, "the grammar is bloody well confusing!"

"And 'habeo' " Fenris said, holding down his mirth as he tried to emulate Anders' pronunciation, "that's not how you say it."

"And I would know that why, exactly?" Anders said sardonically, "It's not as if I've ever had someone to practice with!"

As Anders defended his position the light, melodic sound of music drifted to his ears. Another trick? he wondered anxiously. No, no it sounds real, he thought as he noticed Fenris looking around in curiosity at the sound.

"Is someone playing my piano?" Fenris asked.

"It'll be the Commander," Anders said with a sigh, "sorry, he can't keep his hands off of anything...wait, you have a piano?"
"Yes," Fenris said, not without distaste, "in one of the back rooms, some sort of parlour, where Danarius was entertained no doubt."

And now he's back to sounding bitter, Anders thought wearily. Despite everything that had happened between them Anders couldn't help but prefer Fenris sounding happy and relatively carefree to his usual snarky and begrudged tone.

"Well, I'd better go and check on him," Anders said, standing; there was an awkward silence in which both mage and elf looked anywhere but at each other. Now that the short-lived sense of camaraderie had died away Anders was unsure as to how he should act.

"Right," Fenris nodded, using his usual brusque nature as a coverall.

Anders nodded as Fenris turned to begin pulling the books out of a smaller bookshelf that sat against the opposite wall. I doubt it will ever work, Anders thought as he contemplated his rather strained relationship with Fenris, but I guess it's nice while it lasts. He left, closing the door behind him, and instantly felt the darkness and chill of the mansion flood over him. Shit, he thought, I didn't even get to ask Fenris how Hawke managed to persuade him into all of this. Oh never mind, it probably isn't that interesting anyway. Anders spun on his heel and stared out over the large, gloomy hall. The air itself felt alive, hovering around him like a silent watcher. The mage shivered for the umpteenth time and began quickly walking down the stairs, following the disjointed strings of melody and chord. The haunting tune didn't help his unease. Why did the Commander have to wander off in this bloody place? Anders thought as he pushed open a large door which led to a long, wide corridor. The music seemed to be emanating from one of the doors on the left hand wall. Anders tried the first two but found them both locked. The third gave way and, on opening the heavy door, the music grew loud and seemed far less ethereal. Anders closed the door behind him after entering; Cousland sat facing away from him, his fingers moving hesitantly over the keys while his feet pressed the shiny brass pedals at the piano's base.

"Enjoying yourself?" Anders said, enjoying Cousland's jerk of surprise, fingers jumping away from the keys as he looked round.

"Uh, yes actually," Cousland said with a short, unamused laugh, "it's been a long time since I messed around on one of these."

There's that melancholy again, Anders thought as he considered the Commander's tone. Anders walked forwards, forcing Cousland to make room as he sat down on the long, low piano stool. He stared at the slightly yellowed piano keys, a stark contrast to the short, black sharps and flats. He brought his hands up and laid them in a familiar shape against the keys, pressing down with his gloved fingers to create a pleasing if slightly out of key sound. Cousland sniffed, his face blank as he stared at Anders.

"I didn't know that you played," the Commander said.

"I don't, not properly," Anders shrugged, "there was one, in the tower that is, my friend Karl and I used to mess around on it. Don't suppose it's there any longer. What's going to happen to Kinloch Hold now that it's no longer a Circle tower?"

"Actually I'm not sure," Cousland said, tinkering on a few keys with his index finger as he talked, "Alistair said that it should become a military stronghold again, as it was under the Anwars, but I don't know. I think it would be better left empty. A testament, perhaps, to the distrust of man."

"Sounds a little dreary," Anders said, removing his glove so that he could better feel the keys.
He heard Cousland's hissed intake of breath and looked to the man in surprise. The Commander's eyes were trained on Anders' left hand, a disbeliefing frown making his young face seem suddenly much older than it should. Oh shit, Anders thought as he realised just what had caused such a virulent reaction, I forgot he didn't know.

"What the fuck is that?" Cousland asked as he grabbed Anders' left hand before he could pull it away, staring down at the slightly faded red sun shaped scar, "is that what I think it is?"

"I didn't get it done for a laugh if that's what you're asking," Anders said as he pulled his hand back, replacing his glove.

"Who? Who did it!" Cousland's fuse seemed to have been lit, Anders thought, the man's eyes alight with an inner fire, "Was it that bitch Meredith?"

"Do you really think that Meredith would have pissed about putting the brand anywhere but on my forehead?" Anders said sardonically, but there was a hint of dark bitterness underlying his tone, "No. No it was someone else, another templar who believed themselves above Chantry law."

"Is he to be reprimanded?" Cousland asked strongly, looking quite ready to stand up and march to the Gallows to demand that very action if it had not yet been committed.

"I always find it's a little difficult to reprimand dead men," Anders said with a sinister smile.

Cousland looked at him with an unreadable expression for a moment before nodding in understanding. Suddenly Alrik's mutilated face snapped into Anders consciousness, the image stark and gruesome. Anders blinked and tried to rid himself of the memory. I don't ever want to think about that fucker ever again, he thought even as he could feel Justice react to the idea. Anders knew that Justice didn't want to forget. He wanted to remember because the pain of it, the anger and the sorrow, fuelled his fervent resolve. We will all be free, Anders thought as he stared down at the branded scar, and nothing like this will ever happen to another mage ever again. Ever again.

"This place really is a fucking hellhole, isn't it?" Cousland spat, pulling Anders back to the present.

"The mansion?" Anders said with a frown, wondering at Cousland's change of topic, "Well it's nothing special but..."

"I was talking about Kirkwall," Cousland said tightly, eyeing Anders significantly.

"Oh, I see," Anders said, feeling as if he were being scrutinised somehow, "I wouldn't say it's the best place in Thedas, no, but it's not all as bad as it seems. There are good people here, mages, elves, men and women. They deserve a better life than that which Meredith seems to believe in."

"Which is why you're building the bomb, right?" Cousland said.

Anders breath caught in his throat and everything seemed to slow down to an implacable level. A heavy feeling of dread settled around him like a shroud. Impossible, he thought, that's impossible. He looked tentatively to his right to find the Commander staring at the piano keys, lost in thought.

"How did...you know?" Anders almost stuttered out, making Cousland look up at him innocently.

"Know what?" Cousland asked in confusion, "That Kirkwall's a shithole? Well, the overwhelming templar presence gives that away, not that they're all bad exactly, just that their Knight Commander is a psychopath..."

Fuck, Anders thought as Cousland continued to talk, fuck. He didn't even say it, it was...something
else. The relief to find out that the Commander didn't know of his plan was overwhelming but the anxiety and the undercurrent of fear was also still discernable. What is wrong with this place? What is happening to me? Anders stood up suddenly and shuffled out from behind the stool. Cousland looked round at him in surprise, seeming to notice the mage's disquiet.

"Sorry, didn't realise I was that boring," the Commander said, trying for humour; it quickly dissolved however as Anders shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, "are you alright Anders?"

Yes, he wanted to say, yes I'm fine. Nothing is wrong. Nothing. Yet it would be a terrible, terrible lie. Something was dreadfully wrong here and Anders could only stand it for so long. When did this...presence become so strong? Anders thought. He tried to pull on Justice's reserves of knowledge but even the spirit seemed puzzled by the circumstances.

"I need to go home," Anders said apprehensively as Cousland stood, opening his mouth to speak only to be cut off by Anders once more, "I want to go home now!"

The walk wasn't a long one from Fenris' door to Hawke's but Anders felt every step like it was an hundred miles. By the time they reached the portico he was shaking. Cousland looked worried but didn't say anything further, even when Anders marched past Bodahn as the dwarf hailed his greeting and continued up the stairs and across the landing until he was safely ensconced in the familiar bedroom. The feeling of being watched from a distance hadn't truly dissipated. It made Anders' skin itch, as if covered in ants. He pulled in a steadying breath and stared at the slightly dim room around him. It was heading towards evening now and the gas lamps were yet to be lit. The dark corners of the room seemed to mock him, shimmering beneath his eyes. When he looked up to the windows, noting the steadily waning colour of the sky, Anders could see the edge of Fenris' mansion peeking in at the top left of the glass. The mere sight of it made him scowl. He immediately strode across the room and began hauling the heavy curtains closed. He heard the door open and close but didn't pay any heed, still struggling with the thick velvet lined fabric.

"Hey! Hey what's wrong?" a set of strong arms suddenly pulled him back from the curtains and Anders squirmed around, meeting Hawke's bewildered gaze; it wasn't until he did that Anders realised just how fast his heart was beating, "Cousland, he said that you were...

Anders didn't give him a chance to finish. He pushed forwards and buried his face in Hawke's neck, arms sliding tight and quick up around the rogue's back as he kissed greedily at the skin beneath his lips. Hawke let out a sound of surprise and tried to push Anders back.

"What are you doing? Wait, Anders, what's wrong..?" Anders didn't give him a chance to finish, leaning back only to lunge in and capture Hawke's lips in a needy kiss.

Hawke stumbled a little, each man holding the other steady as Anders kissed the breath from him. The mage quickly brought his hands between them and began to undo the buckles of Hawke's belt. When Hawke eventually pulled back from the kiss his eyes were distinctly lustful. Good, Anders thought, I need this. He reached up and pushed at Hawke's chest, sending the other man backwards onto the bed, his trousers undone and falling low on his slim hips, his face the picture of surprise. Anders shrugged off his coat, letting it drop to the floor, and climbed onto the bed, leaning down over Hawke to reclaim those soft lips.

"So," Hawke said as they lay naked together on top of the heavy bed covers, "now will you tell me what's wrong?"

Their coupling had been fairly brief but, for Anders, it was enough. The phantasmal itching feeling
was gone, replaced now by a more physical one made by the fine sheen of sweat on his naked skin. Anders lay wrapped across Hawke's left side, his head tucked against the rogue's neck and his arm across his chest. In a way he still felt slightly foolish for allowing himself to become so easily spooked. It's not as if I've never dealt with Fade sprites before, Anders thought derisively. Whenever the Fade was too close to the physical realm, wherever the Veil became thin, mages were always the first to be affected by it. It played tricks on your mind, calling up memories or worries from your subconscious or even, if particularly unlucky, demons themselves. It's something a bloody apprentice is taught to deal with, Anders thought, and here I am throwing a hissy fit over it. Yet, despite Anders' own rebuke as to his ability to cope with something so normal, there was still an inkling in the back of his mind that there was more to it than that.

"It wasn't anything that isn't solved now," Anders said truthfully as he laid a gentle kiss against Hawke's slightly salty skin.

"Uh uh, I'm not letting you slink out of it that easily," Hawke said, reaching up to run his hand tenderly over Anders' jaw and down the mage's neck, "not that it wasn't enjoyable, but it was a little more impulsive than I'm used to. Come on love, you really scared me there. You looked like you'd seen a ghost."

The sigh Anders let loose was replete with weariness. It's such a difficult thing to explain to someone who isn't a mage, he thought. I wonder if Bethany ever talked to him about it. Maybe she's never encountered it before. Anders closed his eyes and revelled in Hawke's gentle touch. Oh just bloody tell him, he thought as Hawke rolled his head to the left and placed a kiss against Anders' forehead.

"I just...got a little spooked, that's all," Anders shrugged his left shoulder slightly, "that mansion is no place for a mage."

"What mansion?" Hawke asked, sounding confused.

"Oh, yes, well," Anders said, feeling suddenly silly, "Cousland and I went to see Fenris and then we were playing on his piano and..."

"You went to see Fenris?" Anders winced on hearing the disbelief in Hawke's voice, pulling back and pushing up onto his forearm so he could look down at the rogue; Hawke's eyes sparkled in the dusky light, "Wait you were playing the..? I didn't know you could play the piano!"

"I can't," Anders said with a sigh, realising he'd been sighing an awful lot today, "not very well anyway, but that's beside the point. That mansion is far too close to the Fade than is healthy for any abode. Can't you feel it when you're there?"

Hawke seemed to want to persist in gaining answers to his first question but, after a moment's hesitation, acquiesced. He blinked up at the canopy above him, not taking his eyes from it even when Anders reached out with his left hand and smoothed a lock of hair from his forehead.

"I have noticed it's always cold there, no matter the time of year," Hawke said unsurely, "but further than that, not really. My father may have been a mage and I know that Bethany is very sensitive to the Fade but I have no reckoning of it at all. Other than that short trip to save Feynriel my dealings with the Fade are rather limited."

"I see," Anders said, wondering how he could put this so that Hawke would understand; the rogue was watching him warily, "have you ever had a dream which, when you woke from it, you couldn't tell if you were still dreaming or not?"
Hawke nodded but said nothing, allowing Anders to continue.

"Well it's like that, sort of," Anders said rubbing at his eyes tiredly, "only much more... real shall we say. Most of the time it's easy to tell the difference between the Fade and the real. One is tainted with an ethereal quality which always separated it from the other, but sometimes it's more difficult. Sometimes, if the Veil is too thin or even torn then it can play...tricks on the mind. That's all that happened, it's nothing to worry about. Fenris' mansion is a bloody minefield of worn patches of the real, allowing goodness knows what to seep through. I allowed it to get to me. It was stupid and I won't let it happen again."

Once Anders had stopped talking he realised that Hawke was smiling, even if only a little. He frowned, making Hawke's smile widen. The rogue reached up to trace the pad of his index finger over Anders' cheek.

"I can't believe you never told me you could play the piano," Hawke said, practically grinning now.

"Honestly Hawke," Anders said with exasperation, glaring down at the younger man, "I tell you all about why I was acting like a mad man and all you can say is that?"

"You told me not to worry about it," Hawke shrugged, making Anders realise that Hawke was right and that he had basically told him just that, "and anyway it looks like you understand it far better than I do and that you have it under control. Still, if it gets you this aroused every time it happens, perhaps we should swap houses with Fenris after his mansion is restored, hmm?"

Anders knew that it was just a joke on Hawke's part but the thought, the mere thought, of living in that hellhole of a mansion was enough to make him feel physically ill. He shivered even as Hawke laughed and pulled him close for another kiss. The rogue didn't seem to notice his discomfort as he slipped his tongue into the mage's mouth and caressed it lazily across Anders' own. Anders soon found it difficult to breathe never mind think. By the time Hawke pulled back Anders was panting and he could feel the colour in his cheeks.

"The only reason I brought up the piano thing was because it made me realise something," Hawke said, continuing the conversation as if everything was normal; Anders lay back down next to Hawke and pillowed his head on the rogue's broad shoulder, trying his best to feel the same way, "we don't really know that much about each other, do we? Well, I don't about you anyway."

"What are you talking about?" Anders said with a frown, trying to laugh it off, "of course you do. You probably know more about me than anyone alive."

Anyone since Karl that is, Anders thought morosely. The older mage had been his closest confidant from a young age. There wasn't much that they had kept from each other. As he thought about his old friend an image of Karl's smiling face, far younger and happier than it had been before the tragedy at the Chantry, flashed into his mind's eye. Anders shivered and took a deep breath through his nose, willing the image away. Why can't I get rid of this feeling? Anders thought in irritation.

"Still, I was thinking, it's the little things, isn't it?" Hawke said, sounding a little contemplative, his voice trailing off; suddenly he rolled over, pulling Anders with him, so that he was looming over the startled mage, "You don't talk about yourself much."

"Neither do you," Anders shot back, feeling suddenly defensive.

"I'm not getting at you," Hawke said, frowning, "it's just, well how about, I don't know...who was
"This is ludicrous," Anders rolled his eyes, ignoring Hawke's flat look of annoyance, "my first what?"

"Your first partner," Hawke said, "and I really don't think it's ludicrous to want to get to know a little more about you."

"Partner at what? You mean sex?" Anders asked with a frown, "and I didn't say that!"

"No, you're first partner at chess," Hawke said sarcastically, "yes I mean sex."

"Oh," Anders said, not entirely in the mood for sharing memories; just play along until he gets bored, half of Anders thought harshly, while the other half warmed greatly to the idea that Hawke cared enough to ask, "actually it was Karl."

Hawke's expectant expression faded a little in exchange for a slightly repentant look. He shifted on his forearms before leaning down to place a chaste kiss on Anders' lips.

"Sorry," he said, no longer seemingly as eager for questions as he had been, "I didn't mean to..."

"No, it's alright," Anders said quickly, interrupting, "I don't mind talking about it, it's just...no, I don't mind at all. Look, it was a long time ago. I'm more than capable of keeping my memories of Karl separate from each other. The person I released, he wasn't Karl anymore."

Just keep telling yourself that, Anders thought tauntingly, can't even bring yourself to say the word 'killed' can you? Released? What a joke. I killed him. I killed him once he was already dead.

"What about you?" Anders asked before his thoughts became too dark, keen to distract himself.

"Me? Oh, well," Anders smiled a little when he noticed there was a slight blush across the rogue's cheeks, "he was a, umm, friend of my fathers. Vincent Farthen. One of the farmers on the upper east side of Lothering. I worked for him over the summer when I was seventeen. Let's just say that one day one thing led to another and we ended up in the hay barn."

"You dirty young man," Anders teased, laughing away his awkwardness when Hawke shoved him with his free hand, "what on earth are you blushing for? Honestly, we've done more than that since then I think."

"True," Hawke smirked before looking once more a little embarrassed, "it wasn't anything we did as such. It was more the fact that Father got worried when I didn't come home when I usually did and he came looking for me. Suffice to say that he and Vincent Farthen didn't stay friends for much longer after that."

"Oh," Anders said, looking a little sympathetic, "that's not such a good way to tell your parents that you prefer boys I suppose."

"Not exactly," Hawke said, "although my father was always a very open minded man. Not to say that he wasn't angry when he found us; Maker was he livid, but I guess it was because he always thought of me as his little boy. I was the first and I was always his favourite. He didn't blame me for the fact that it was with another man. Not the way mother seemed to."

"She seemed alright with it though, didn't she? Us, I mean," Anders felt a little wary of speaking to Hawke about his mother; everything was still far too close for comfort and he was feeling on edge enough as it was. The last thing he wanted to do was start another argument.
"'Seemed' being the operative word in that sentence," Hawke said as he traced a light pattern of fingers and palm over Anders' chest, "I'm not sure she ever really accepted that she would never have any grandchildren, never have the family name carried on. What with Bethany in the tower and Carver taken by the blight."

An uncomfortable silence followed Hawke's words. Anders wasn't sure what to say. Everything that sprang to mind was dreadfully inappropriate. Instead he just kept his mouth tightly shut and let Hawke gaze at him with a distant look, running his fingers over his father's silver and emerald amulet which lay against Anders' chest. Eventually, after another minutes silence, Anders became fidgety and discomfited. He looked about for something to do, spying something on Hawke's neck which he had never truly noticed before. He reached up and touched the pale, slightly raised flesh of the scar.

"Where did you get that?" he asked quietly.

"This?" Hawke said, reaching up to touch the same spot, his fingers brushing Anders' own, "Maker, that's an old scar. It was Carver, actually. I was sixteen and he must have been about thirteen. He wouldn't stop pestering me about showing him how to fight with the daggers father gave me. So I gave in and the little bastard nicked me when I was showing him how to perform a rising lunge. He never was the most nimble of warriors, that was for sure, more of a brawler. It was a fairly shallow cut but by Andraste did it bleed though! Mother was beside herself! She thought I was dying! Bethany closed it up but there was no stopping the scar."

Hawke looked very nostalgic, with a small smile and a slightly hazy quality to his stare. After another moment he blinked his eyes and seemed to return to reality. Anders looked into his eyes and marvelled at the honesty there. No need to hide anything, Anders thought feeling his heart swell, even after everything we've been through, after everything I've done to you and everything you've done in return, you're still so honest with me. Anders watched as Hawke looked down at him and seemed to search his body, his eyes lighting up as he let his hand caress a long, slim scar that traversed his lower abdomen, close to his pelvis. If only I could give you that same trust in return, Anders thought hollowly.

"What about this one?" Hawke asked, "I don't remember this."

"I would be amazed if you did," Anders said wryly, "considering you weren't there when it happened. It was from Ro...a templar. He got in a lucky shot."

Anders was more than aware that he had almost blurted out Rolan's name. Not that it would have been disastrous for Hawke to hear, it was unlikely Hawke would know anything about the circumstances of Rolan's death, but mentioning it to him just seemed wrong somehow. Anders considered it one of the darkest and most rueful moments of his life but he had come to terms with that, over time. What scared him more was the thought that Hawke might not.

Hawke's stare was tinged with suspicion at Anders rather blunt and obscure answer. Beside Hawke's very candid and thorough tale of his scar Anders was all too aware that his seemed cagey and defensive. Hawke waited patiently, however, until Anders moved on, selecting another blemish with which to learn something more of his lover.

"This?" Anders asked quietly, keeping his question short so as to hide tension in his voice.

"Hmm?" Hawke said, looking down to where Anders pointed; a mottled red patch in the shape of a splotchy circle placed just above Hawke's left hip, "oh, that's not a scar. It's a birthmark. Bethany has one too, but hers is much smaller and it's on her shoulder. Still she used to like to pretend that it meant we were the real twins, when she'd fallen out with Carver that was, which happened quite
often. She always said we looked more alike."

"You miss her," Anders said, not insensitive enough to make it a question, rolling onto his front and laying his head cheek down on his folded arms.

"Yes," Hawke said, looking up and staring into Anders eyes, "I do. But I have hope. You heard King Alistair. Ferelden have no Circle! One day Kirkwall's day will come, I guarantee it. One day my sister will come home. One day you and I can live together and not fear ever being torn apart."

How many times are you going to make me thank the Maker himself for giving me you Garret Hawke? Anders thought, swallowing down the emotion working its way up his throat, threatening to burst out in a fervent yell of agreement. Instead he simply smiled, a heartfelt smile, and nodded. Hawke smiled back, his eyes determined as they homed in on Anders back.

"What about these ones?" Anders felt Hawke running his fingers from in between the mage's shoulder blades to the small of his back.

Anders shivered. Yet another wound given to him by the templar order. He didn't want to say it but talking about them, even just that simple act, was inflaming Justice's ire. I really can't control him anymore can I? Anders thought bleakly as Hawke continued to watch him.

"What are they like?" Anders asked, stalling so as to give himself time to calm down; he knew exactly which scars Hawke was referring to.

"They're long and thin," Hawke said, propping himself up a little on his forearm so as to afford a better view.

"Mmm," Anders said, closing his eyes; at least this is something I feel vaguely comfortable talking about, not that it's a particularly pleasant story, "second time I ran from the Circle. I secreted myself in an empty crate being delivered back to the mainland. Managed to get to the other side and sneak out of the storeroom in the Spoiled Princess. Was out for...it was a couple of weeks that time, not particularly nice ones either. Same old routine; templars found me and carted me back but since I was a repeat offender they thought they should teach me a lesson."

Hawke watched him in silence as he continued to trace his fingers lightly across the strips of pale flesh. The memory was still rather vivid for Anders, when called upon.

"Unfortunately the man they got to give me said punishment was rather, shall we say, partial to a good whipping," Anders said wryly, "Ser Draugh, what a bastard he was. Had torn half the skin off my back before the Knight Captain turned up to see what was going on. I hadn't exactly been paying attention but it turned out that Draugh had been yelling more than I had. I think my silence put him off more than if I'd screamed the tower down."

And so far everything you've pointed out has an entirely miserable and depressing story behind it. Compared to Hawke, Anders was beginning to feel like a weary victim of life more than a strong and defiant rebel against it. Let's stop looking at things with stories we don't know, Anders thought, just for a moment. He pulled his right arm out from under his head and reached out to run his finger along a slim scar on Hawke's bicep. As he traced the skin he couldn't help but let out a small smile.

"I remember this one," Anders said as Hawke looked down to see what he was referring to.

"Oh yes," Hawke smiled softly, "that bloody dragon. Good thing you were there that day or I don't think we'd be lying here playing 'name that scar'. I think I might still be pondering life from its belly somewhere, or maybe someone would have turned my bones into a very interesting
necklace."

Anders couldn't help but laugh, his efforts slightly muffled by the pillow. Hawke sniffed in as if to
wake himself up, letting the breath out slowly as he further examined Anders flesh. Eventually he
seemed to find what he was looking for and leaned over to touch Anders' left shoulder. The mage
could feel Hawke's fingers dancing over the slightly raised tissue.

"And I remember this one," he said, seemingly unable to resist leaning down to kiss the back of
Anders' neck now that he was close enough to, "getting that arrow out was something I won't forget
in a hurry."

"You're not the only one," Anders said dryly, rolling over until he was once more on his back
beneath Hawke who was still leaning over him; the mage took hold of Hawke's free hand, looking
down at his torso as he placed it over a small scar just above his right hip, "and you were here for
this one too, remember Orden?"

"How could I forget?" Hawke said jovially but Anders could hear the underlying hatred in his tone.

"Well this was from a stray sword, I think," Anders said, "I didn't notice it at the time, as you can
imagine, and healed it afterwards. I did notice this one though."

Anders lifted his right leg a little to display the jagged scar on his calf.

"I thought the bastard was dead but he apparently had enough life in him to put his dagger into my
leg," Anders said.

"Which is why you should always stay out of the way of the main fight," Hawke said, voice tainted
with badly hidden exasperation.

"Well I would have," Anders said, "if you hadn't run in like a maniac straight towards all those
warriors who looked ready to chop you up and serve you for lunch."

"Hmm," Hawke said, shrugging a little and hanging his head until their foreheads almost touched,
"well, I suppose I can let you away with it then. What about this one?"

"Oh that was when I..." Anders stopped dead as he realised what he'd almost said.

And here I thought mentioning Rolan would have been a mistake, Anders thought as Hawke's
fingertips hovered over a small scar on his left pectoral, just above his heart. It seemed just as
insignificant as all the others but, in reality, it held far more significance than any of them; the scar
from the templar dagger he had used to try and end it all. Anders stalled, floundering for an easy
lie. Hawke looked at him with a frown. Think of something for Maker's sake! Anders thought
desperately.

"...when I was careless during a fight with a Hurlock," Anders said unconcernedly, "let the bastard
get too close and he managed to get me with his sword. Would have died I think, if Velanna hadn't
been there to heal me."

He didn't notice the intensity of the silence until he stopped talking, looking up into Hawke's green
eyes as they bored into him. Anders swallowed and tried to remember that he was good at lying, he
was very good at it, and that he would continue to be very good at it if he could only stop himself
from feeling stupidly guilty whenever he tried to lie to Hawke. Hawke brought his hand up from
Anders chest and ran it along the mage's jaw, watching the path of his fingers as they wound their
way into Anders' hair and smoothed through the soft strands. Hawke eventually looked back into
the mage's eyes, the steady strength and acceptance there making Anders want to kiss him and tell
"You don't need to lie to me," Anders felt like protesting but knew it would be useless; Hawke always seemed to know when he was lying, "if you don't want to tell me you can just say."

"It's not that I don't want to tell you," Anders said, feeling instantly stupid for saying it; of course it's because I don't want to tell him, he thought derisively, "it's just that..."

It's just that what? Anders thought, why can't you just tell him? Because it's too close, it's all still too close, that feeling. You should be able to tell him; if you can't, it just proves you're still scared that it might happen again and you can't have that. You can't, and he's been honest with you. He deserves more than your lies, he thought guiltily. You love him more than you ever thought you could love someone. If you can't tell him, then who exactly can you tell?

"I did it to myself," Anders said, steeling himself as the fear of rejection and disgust welled up inside of him.

Hawke stared back at him with a blank expression which quickly dissolved into a frown and a smile. The rogue shook his head and continued to smooth Anders' hair.

"Why, what did you do?" Hawke said, making Anders wonder if he understood, "throw yourself into danger as per usual?"

"...No," Anders said, hesitating only for a second before pushing ahead, "I...tried to kill myself.

The transformation in Hawke's face would have been comical if it wasn't for the severity of the situation. His eyes widened, shuttering beneath blinking eyelids, his mouth opened slightly, his jaw slackened and his forehead smoothed out. After a moment Anders couldn't help but take pity on him and started talking in his normal voice as if he were simply remembering what he had for breakfast the day before.

"You remember I told you that I was put in solitary confinement for a year at the Ferelden Circle, don't you?" Anders said, watching Hawke nod dumbly, "Well, turns out that spending nearly a year on your own can drive you a little mad. I started to think they'd never let me out so I tried to make my own escape instead, as per usual. Didn't work though, as you can see."

His attempt at humour was either not appreciated or not heard. Hawke looked back down to the scar on Anders' chest and said nothing. After a moment he leaned in and, hesitating only slightly, kissed the faded mark. Anders watched him warily. What on earth..? he thought, but then Hawke pulled back until his lips hovered above Anders' skin. He ignored Anders' silence, running his lips in a string of kisses up over his chest, his neck, ending in what started as a chaste but quickly devolved into a deep and passionate and breath stealing kiss. Anders allowed it to happen, partly because the love and affection were what he needed, and partly because it saved him having to think of something to say or deal with the fallout of his confession straight away. When you decide to tell the truth, Anders thought as Hawke caressed his tongue, you really pick your moments. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed six times in high pitched, tinkling alarm. Hawke pulled back just as it stopped. Anders found it easy to meet his eyes but not to speak. Thankfully Hawke did that for him.

"Thank you," he said seriously.

"What, for having such terrible aim?" Anders said, trying to make a joke of it.

"No," Hawke said as he slid from the bed and began washing himself with the cloth and water by
the door; he looked over his shoulder and caught Anders' eyes, "for telling me."

Anders nodded, not sure what else to do. Am I really that closed off? He thought, so much that Hawke feels the need to thank me for any scraps of truth I might throw him? Anders watched Hawke, feeling the oppressive aura from Fenris' mansion still hanging around him. He purposefully tried to will it away. No, he thought, this isn't how I want things to be. But he might reject you, he might hate you, part of him scalded, is his trust really worth the risk?

"The templar...this scar," Anders said hesitantly as Hawke dried himself; the rogue looked round as Anders sat up and shimmied to the bottom of the bed, "his name was Rolan and he wasn't really a templar anymore he was a Grey Warden. But he was a templar at heart, he never truly gave up the faith. He was the first templar I ever killed."

The silence in the room was neither accusatory nor encouraging. Anders carried on regardless before he lost his nerve.

"He was the one who witnessed my joining with Justice," Anders said, remembering the dusty storeroom and Rolan's accusing eyes, "he was the reason I fled the Warden's and came to Kirkwall. He came after me, with some Warden's as back up and they caught up to me outside of Amaranthine and I...killed them all. I don't remember it but I remember the aftermath. It was the first time after joining with Justice that I truly realised why we were always told in the Circle to never make a deal with a Fade spirit, no matter whether its intentions were good or bad."

Anders watched Hawke watch him back. The rogue just looked at him with a nonchalant expression as he slid on his underwear. Anders was never more confused than when Hawke smiled at him.

"Are you done being worried that if you tell me about something you regret that I'm going to suddenly stop loving you and tell you to get out?" Hawke said, walking over to stand between Anders legs and run his hands over the mage's shoulders.

"Uh," Anders said stupidly, utterly lost, "I suppose so."

"Good," Hawke said seriously, "because we've all made mistakes. Maker knows I've done things I'm not proud of Anders but don't you dare start thinking that I'm going to stop loving you for that. Till the day we die, don't you remember?"

All the time, Anders wanted to say, I remember all the time. Yet the words wouldn't come. He nodded instead and smiled slightly as Hawke turned to continue getting dressed.

"So come on, get dressed," Hawke said vivaciously, "or, knowing your friends, someone will be barging through that door any second, regardless of etiquette, and demanding to know what we've been up to."
Thick grey clouds signalled that Autumn had finally come, billowing in from over Sundermount's jagged peak, threatening rain and thunder. The end of summer storms always proved fierce, a stark contrast to the thick heat and oppressive humidity of the previous season. The cold air blowing in from the north met the stagnant warmth of the Kirkwall summer and the reaction was virulent. Anders stared out through the painted glass of the sitting room window at the slowly purpling clouds, deepening like a bruise. His fingers traced worried patterns on the windowsill, eyes trained on the outside world. When the glass shook in the windowpane Anders assumed it was because someone was opening the door and creating a through breeze; instead, when he looked over his shoulder and found nothing, he realised it was simply the wind picking up, gusting against the mansion's frontage. He shivered at the feeling of a light touch of fingers up his spine. Wonderful weather for one of the most important days of my life, Anders thought wryly.

He had talked to Hawke about it that morning, the meeting that was. Anders hadn't truly been able to rest all night, tossing and turning beneath the sheets, wracked alternatively by excitement and anxiety alike. He did not have the nightmares, he did not sink into oblivion as usual; instead he was kept on the teetering edge, both desperate to sleep and yet too agitated to drift off. It was made worse lying next to Hawke who, once he was gone, tended to sleep like the dead. Anders spent half the night resentfully staring at him and the other half pacing noislessly around the room, fiddling with anything he could find to entertain himself with. He wished he could work on his manifesto, simply to give both his hands and his mind something to focus on, but unfortunately there were two Grey Wardens, Mayforth and Layla, encamped on the study floor. In the long run he had made do with nothing in particular to do except worry until the pale light of dawn worked its way through the curtains. Eventually Hawke had awoken and they had both begun preparing for the day, Anders hiding badly disguised yawns behind his hand every few minutes.

"So you're all going to meet in the same place?" Hawke had said incredulously, "Isn't that far too dangerous? Come on Anders think about it. What would happen if the King of Ferelden and the Ferelden Commander of the Grey were found associating with the apostates of Kirkwall in secret!"

"I don't know," Anders had said distractedly as he sorted through his supplies for the umpteenth time that morning, Hawke hovering behind him.

"It could mean war with the Free Marches!" Hawke said irritably, "Can't you see that? What were you all thinking when you came up with this plan exactly?"

Anders had shrugged in reply. He was in no mood to argue about or even discuss the specifics of the meeting. All he wanted was for the day to pass relatively quickly so that night could fall and the meeting could commence. He didn't need Hawke's overreacting or his worrying or his tetchiness making his already fraught nerves any worse. So he had stayed quiet while Hawke ranted on, answering monosyllabically, unable to apply any inflection to his voice. Eventually he had noticed that Hawke was no longer talking.

"What's wrong?" Anders had asked, looking over his shoulder; Hawke hesitated, standing in the middle of the room with his arms folded, watching Anders critically.

"You sound..." Hawke shook his head, eyes flicking from Anders own and then away again, "never mind, it's nothing."

It seemed to Anders that it must be far more than simply nothing. Hawke acted strangely with him all morning, fluxing between silently watching him or being overtly cheerful. It was a little
disconcerting and Anders couldn't understand why he was acting in such an odd manner. It was a relief when the rogue finally informed Anders that he had things to do in the City. Apparently Hawke had volunteered to accompany Alistair, Cousland and Bann Teagan on their obligatory visit to the Knight Commander. Anders had nodded vaguely in Hawke's direction, noting his worried stare but unable to summon the peace of mind to care.

He wouldn't deny that he was tired. Not only had he not slept but he had worked tirelessly since parting with Hawke to do all he could to make sure everything ran smoothly. He had put a lot of thought into a place where they could congregate that would be both safe and yet above suspicion. The two major haunts the resistance used were obviously out. The sewers were too risky and not somewhere that was exactly conducive to a good atmosphere, while the docks were watched too closely as they were havens of illegal activity. In a fit of desperation, when he had thought there would be nowhere suitable, Anders had almost been tempted to ask Hawke if they could use the mansion. No one would surely raid the very abode of the Champion of Kirkwall. Yet he had ended up deciding against it for many reasons, the foremost of which being that it was too risky to ask apostates to creep through Hightown to congregate at one spot, and that he was unwilling to have Hawke involved in this any more than he needed to be. Thankfully there was somewhere staring him straight in the face the entire time; his clinic. It was in Darktown, away from the prying eyes of the City Guard and the Templars or even spies, and it was familiar.

Anders had spent his day setting up wards in the surrounding area, backed up by glyphs of protection and paralysis if the wards were to be broken by any unwanted visitors. He had also asked William to speak to his contacts in the underground; they were to set up decoy activities all over the city to distract the authorities and anyone who may be on the lookout. He had then set about making the clinic as spacious and clear as possible. He wasn't sure how many people would attend, it may be few, it may be many. He had been tempted many times to rush to Lirene and ask how many of the resistance members she had been able to contact but was too cautious to risk jeopardising anything. Sabine was the only true confirmation he had; he hoped beyond hope that she wouldn't be the only person there.

Nathaniel had returned the evening that he and the Commander had visited Fenris. Anders had been preoccupied, yes, but speaking to Nathaniel always calmed him down. Despite their close quarters over the past few days Anders had seen very little of Nathaniel or the other Wardens ensconced about the mansion. He had managed to catch Howe at dinner with his comrades and had found, a little surprisingly, that he was welcomed warmly at their makeshift table. The two women across from him, one of whom he recognised as Sarah from the night of the Qunari attack, turned out to be rather raucous and, truth be told, hilarious. Such a contrast to when she was on duty, Anders thought as he watched Sarah practically cackle at some ridiculous joke Nathaniel had attempted, I was never that solemn or respectful when I was killing darkspawn. In fact the only person who seemed to be put out by his appearance was Stroud but then Anders knew the Orlesian was still bitter that Anders had left the Wardens.

"So why did you cut it?" Anders had asked, flicking Nathaniel's shortish hair with his fingers; the rogue had scowled at him which only made Anders smile and Sarah snort into her soup.

"He was fed up looking like a girl," Layla, the woman seated next to Sarah, had said with a smirk.

"Or it could have had something to do with having half of it burnt off by some idiot dwarf's explosive tendencies," Nathaniel had said tightly, eyeing them all with disdain.

"You don't mean Temmerin, surely?" Anders had said with an incredulous smile.

"Who else would I bloody mean?" Nathaniel had said bitterly, "Stupid little bastard just had to be
testing something when \textit{I} walked past. Blew off his own eyebrows and set my hair on fire."

Anders hadn't laughed that hard in a long time. It helped, he thought, that the women across from him and most of the men at the table were laughing too. Not just laughing either, but \textit{laughing}, the sort that only friends could do together. Nathaniel hadn't laughed as such, not that Anders could blame him entirely as he was the butt of the joke, but he still joined in and talked away the evening with him. Considering Anders spent the entire night in the company of the very people he'd actively been trying to escape from for years, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been so relaxed.

Yet, despite all of his efforts, Anders couldn't help but feel tense and anxious. That Alistair was meeting with Meredith on the very day the meeting was due to take place was a truly bad idea. She'll be having him watched, especially if she already knows about Ferelden freeing their Circle, Anders thought, we'll have to take extra precautions against being followed. He was lost deep in thought when the window shook again; this time it was actually because the door to the sitting room opened and then closed. Anders turned to see who it was, confused to see Cousland walking towards him donned in his thick travelling trousers and a woollen jumper.

"I thought you were going to the audience with Meredith," Anders said as Cousland flopped into an armchair by the roaring fire.

"So did I," Cousland said with a snort, pulling his socked feet in so he could curl up in the chair, "but that was before I told Alistair about my not so friendly meeting with Meredith on the night of the Qunari attack. After that he seemed to think it would be prudent if I stayed behind."

"Oh," Anders said, a small forced smile gracing his lips, "I see. Probably for the best."

The mage pushed away from the window and walked slowly to the couch opposite Cousland. He sat down with a sigh, relishing the warmth from his proximity to the fire. They sat in silence, both watching the curling, lambent flames as they disappeared up the chimney. The orange glow of the firelight was an odd contrast to the shadowy daylight pouring in through the window. Anders could feel the itch of eyes boring into the back of his head. When he turned to look at Cousland Anders found he wasn't even watching him, the man's eyes were still intent on the fire. Anders swallowed, reaching up to rub at the raised hairs at the nape of his neck.

"I'm glad you're feeling better after yesterday," Cousland said without looking up, "you really looked terrible at the elf's mansion."

"Yes, well," Anders still felt a little silly about that whole affair, despite his continuing unease, "I guess I've been a little jumpy lately. It was a mistake to spend so much time in that place. The Veil is thin there, too thin. Sometimes I used to wonder why you never hear birds singing in the upper mansion district. Now I know why."

"But we've been into the Fade together before," Cousland frowned, finally looking up from the fire to meet Anders' eyes, "it wasn't \textit{that} awful, and it didn't seem to affect you at all, not that badly anyway."

"You mean that time at the Black Marsh?" Anders said, looking at Cousland incredulously, "are you mad? I had a terrible time! I already told you that I despise forced entries into the Fade, nothing good ever seems to come from it. Also that entire marsh was a mess of monsters, demons and darkspawn, all because the Veil was one step away from being torn open and allowing everything and anything to spill through. And anyway...that was all before Justice and I joined. The Fade is a little more complicated now."
Cousland looked as if he wanted to ask further but instead kept his mouth firmly shut. The silence descended once again. Why are you here? Anders wondered as Cousland once more looked away, I'm guessing it's for more than the company. Anders didn't want to seem cruel but he couldn't deal with the Commander's pussyfooting around, acting reserved one moment and then anxious to talk the next. Not right now. Not when he was still so het up. Anders sat forwards and took hold of the leather thong around his neck, pulling it up until the heavy pendant flopped out over the top of his shirt. No need to be so stressed, he tried in vain to tell himself as he began playing with the amulet Hawke had given him, resting his elbows on his knees and holding the silver amulet between his fingers. Anders wasn't sure but he could have sworn he felt the metal reacting to his touch.

"Where did you get that?" Cousland asked him; Anders looked to the Commander, noting his slightly tense repose.

"It was a gift," Anders said, slipping the amulet back underneath his shirt, "from Hawke."

"Oh," Cousland said, sounding unimpressed; there was another silence, this one tinged with awkwardness, before Cousland spoke once more, "Anders there's something I need to talk to you about..."

"Commander, if it's another bloody lecture on relationships, I warn you now I may be forced to murder you," Anders said sternly.

"No," Cousland assured hurriedly, "no. It's nothing like that, it's just...alright, let me start again."

Anders watched the Commander take a deep breath and shake his head. What on earth has gotten into him? Anders thought, remembering Cousland's already odd behaviour over the past few days. Normally the Commander was nothing if not self assured at all times, even under pressure. Sometimes especially under pressure. Yet his recent visit had afforded Anders a view of his more awkward and insecure side, something Anders wished he could understand.

"You've been a good friend to me Anders," Cousland said, raising his hand to stop him when Anders opened his mouth to speak, "please, just let me finish. This is hard enough for me as it is."

Alright, now I'm worried, Anders thought. Why on earth does this sound like a confession?  

"I know I've already apologised for my behaviour, but I feel that's not enough," Cousland said sincerely, "you deserve to know why. I know I've been acting a little out of sorts since I arrived, especially around you, and you're a grown man, I know that, you can take care of yourself...fuck, this is starting to sound like an excuse. Well I suppose it is an excuse."

Cousland let out an exasperated sigh and sat up straight in his chair, unfolding his legs so his feet were once more on the carpeted ground.

"You asked me yesterday if everything was alright," Cousland swallowed, his eyes hard, "I lied when I said yes. Thing is I've been having some...family problems lately and they've put me in a rather bad position."

"Family problems?" Anders frowned; as far as Anders remembered Cousland didn't have much of a family left to have problems with, "What are you talking about?"

"I know that no one is supposed to know," Cousland carried on almost as if he hadn't even heard Anders' talk, "about me and Alistair, but he was my brother and out of everyone I thought he was the one I could trust. Turns out I was wrong about that."

"Cousland," Anders said strongly, finally garnering some of the Commander's attention, "will you
"please tell me what's wrong?"

"Fergus, my brother I mean," Cousland started, his voice a little hollow, "I told him about my being in love with Alistair and he...disowned me. He said that I was a disgrace to the family, a disgusting joke. He told me never to come back to Highever again, not as long as he is Teryn. I'm not even a Cousland anymore, not really. I think the only reason he didn't tell the whole Kingdom about my affair with another man is because of the stain it would put on the family name."

_What?_ was all Anders could think, his eyes fixed on Cousland in shock. That had been the last thing he ever would have expected to come as an explanation from the Commander of all people. When he and Anders had travelled together as Wardens Cousland had always had a good word to say about his brother, or an embarrassing story to tell. It had been obvious then to Anders that the siblings were close. Somehow I always end up thinking that other people's problems can't possibly be as bad as my own, he thought as he stared at Cousland's blank face. It's all relative, isn't it? How can one measure grief and loss? Is it better to have had and lost or never to have had at all?

"I can't believe..." Anders said, shaking his head, "you're the only family each of you has left and the bastard does something like that over such an insignificant prejudice! Are you sure he wasn't just overreacting? Have you spoken to him since?"

"Anders," Cousland said harshly, "did you know that Fergus and his new wife had a baby a year ago? No? Neither did I, until I found out from a noble at the Denerim Court who seemed very confused as to why I was shocked to hear I had a fucking nephew I knew nothing about. I haven't been home in three years."

The world around him seemed to become that little bit smaller again. A dark cloud floated across the sun, cutting off the sunlight like dousing a candle. The shadows seemed to lengthen slightly and the firelight forced Cousland's face into an iridescent contrast of dark and light. The Commander seemed to keep talking just for something to do, to occupy himself. Anders could see the tension in his shoulders and his fingers as he flexed them mechanically. It's always the things closer to home that hurt the most, Anders thought morosely. Give him darkspawn to kill or an Archdemon to fight and he's cooler than an Anderfellian winter, but have someone he loves say one hurtful thing and it seems to wound him beyond repair.

"What did Alistair think of it all?" Anders asked, unable to keep the outrage from his voice.

"I didn't tell Alistair. Not until the other night actually," the Commander said, his tone oddly even now, "he was always so, I don't know, endeared by the thought of having a family. Not that there was much left of mine, you understand, it's just...even having Fergus as a brother made him happy. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that I'd lost it all. That it was just us with no chance of anything more. Yet when I told you that night that you deserved better it made me realise that I was doing the same thing as you were. I was blinding myself to the truth of it all. Alistair deserved to know."

He sat back in his chair and relaxed both his arms onto the armrests, looking irritated and uneasy.

"Anyway, none of that matters right now. The thing is that after Fergus everything changed," Cousland said matter-of-factly, focusing on Anders, "it was his duplicity that made me realise this was my reality; I started turning my friends and the Warden's under my command into my real family. At the time I thought it seemed perfectly logical but maybe it was just...desperate. So I'm sorry if I've been treating you strangely Anders it's just you remind me of him a little."

"What, your brother?" Anders asked, frowning anxiously.

"No, not him," Cousland waved his hand dismissively, his eyes becoming distant and fond as he
focused on the space between them, "you remind me of my father. Do you know what? I think you
two would have gotten along very well. He was serious by nature but he had a ridiculous sense of
humour. Used to drive mother mad. He was kind to a fault and far too trusting. I respected him but
I worried about him as well. I promised myself, after he and mother were killed, that I would never
let anything happen to the people I love ever again. Not if I could stop it."

Cousland threaded his fingers together and pushed his thumbs one against the other until they slid
past each other with a slightly violent motion. I see, Anders thought sadly, I see now. It doesn't
make it any easier, or better, but it makes sense. Anyway I can hardly judge. I made myself a
similar promise twenty years ago.

Anders stood up and walked to stand beside the armchair in which the Commander sat, facing the
opposite direction. He brought his hand down onto Cousland's shoulder and squeezed
comfortingly. When Cousland looked up at him he smiled, albeit a little self deprecatingly.

"Don't worry," he said with a snorted, derisive laugh, "I won't be so overbearing again. Not to say I
won't worry, I can't promise that, but I won't interfere. I promise. Now that I've availed myself of
the weight of that stupid secret I feel much more...free of it, I suppose. I had to tell Alistair sooner
or later."

Cousland shrugged and Anders pulled his hand back. The cloud passed and the room was once
more cast in pale white light. I wonder if any of us know how to live a real life anymore? Anders
wondered as Cousland stood a little awkwardly and wandered back to the door by which he had
entered. He wasn't sure what he could say that would be appropriate to the gravity of the situation.
It was as Cousland opened the door that Anders finally spoke.

"What did he say?" he asked, making Cousland turn.

"Who?" the Commander asked.

"Alistair," Anders said, not sure if it was really any of his business but he felt culpable in some way
for Cousland's revelation, "when you told him."

"Oh," Cousland smiled, instantly putting Anders at ease, "I won't lie and say that he wasn't
disappointed but I think that was more in Fergus than me. He said that it didn't matter. I'm the only
family he really needs, apparently."

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disappointed but I think that was more in Fergus than me. He said that it didn't matter. I'm the only
family he really needs, apparently."

The way it should be, Anders smiled in return. Cousland left. Anders returned to the window and
recommenced tracing his fingers over the varnished, knotted wood of the windowpane. We are
tried and tested but we always triumph in the end. People hurt us but we always have someone else
willing to give us love in return. Anders wasn't sure how he would have felt in Cousland's position.
Hating someone for rejecting you was one thing but when it was family...well, Anders had never
had anyone in his short lived family betray him to that extent. Well, not anyone he cared for
anyway. His father had eventually brought the templars to their small house in Nordbotten to take
him away, but Anders had never truly felt it as a betrayal. Surely you had to care for and trust
someone to have them betray you, isn't that right? Anders thought sardonically, I think mother was
more betrayed by his actions than I was. Perhaps if it had been her. Yes, Anders thought, if mother
had been the one to do it then perhaps I would know how it felt. The mere idea of it made Anders
feel cold inside, shrivelled up. He did not envy Cousland his position and only thanked the Maker
that the Commander had Alistair to fall back on. Anders knew that a blow like that would have
crippled him. Perhaps the Commander was stronger than he but, so far, considering he had shown
Anders his more affectionate and trusting side, he was sure that Lien Cousland wasn't half as
impervious to hurtful feelings as he made out. Anders cursed Fergus Cousland for his lack of
foresight and his bigotry. He should have considered himself lucky to have a brother. Family were
meant to care for each other, not hurt each other.

He lost track of time as he stared up into the sky, the clouds blowing past quickly, black against purplish grey against white. Eventually the telltale flash of lightning made him squint, followed quickly by a loud banging rumble of thunder. The storm was directly overhead. It didn't take long for the rain to start, first pattering, then drumming and then hammering against the window. The wind shook the glass again. Anders sighed, his face blank as he looked down at the never ending drops of water splashing against the stone sill outside, minutes seeming to stretch by like hours. Why does everything have to be so difficult? He wondered a little naively. Why can't life be simple, even if just for a little while? All of this pressure, I don't want it, I don't need it. I should have to put up with it in the first place. We should all be living normal lives with someone we love, surrounded by family who care for us, until we grow old and grey. Not this. Not struggling against every aspect of the measly lives we've been left with, gaining one thing only to lose another and then repeat the process ad infinitum.

Anders eyes hardened as he watched another sharp flash illuminate the sky and listened to the deep roar that followed. Which is why this is so important, he thought as the meeting once more came to the fore in his mind. Even just giving mages that choice, that bedrock of normalcy, that freedom they deserve, was more important to him than anything. Not being hunted like animals, being templar playthings, being kept under lock and key, but being allowed to be real people. Normal people with wants and needs just like any other. Anders let his head drop forwards until it rested against the cold glass, setting up a halo of condensation around his head; the anxiety was back. He nearly jumped out of his skin when a pair of arms suddenly circled around his chest and a deep voice sounded in his ear.

"What are you looking at?" Hawke asked.

"Bloody hell!" Anders said; he had known it was Hawke even before the rogue opened his mouth. No one else knew how to sneak up on him with the same deadly efficiency as Hawke did, "Can't you ever just say hello?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Hawke shrugged, leaning back a little as Anders turned in his loose hold, "anyway you're cute when you're affronted."

"I am not affronted," Anders said dryly, using humour to cover his worry, "or cute for that matter. I prefer 'charmingly handsome'. And for your information I was enjoying the peace and quiet but now you're here."

"Ouch," Hawke said, even as Anders leaned in to kiss him briefly on the lips, "you certainly know how to wound a man, don't you."

"Oh shut up," Anders said with a small smile, "you're a grown up now, I'm sure you can handle it."

He always sees through me so easily, Anders thought as he broke away from Hawke's hold, I wonder does he see it now? The anxiety eating away at me, the fear lurking at the back of my mind? He reclaimed his seat on the couch before the fire and Hawke joined him, sitting with their sides pressed together. Perhaps it doesn't matter if he does or if he does not, Anders realised as Hawke slid his arm around Anders' shoulders and pulled him closer. Perhaps it's just enough that we're together. The anxiety didn't lessen but, in some way, it did become easier to bear.

The reality of the situation right in front of him was the most precious thing, right at that moment. Take life as it comes, Anders thought, that's the only maxim I ever lived by before all of this. Why change it now? His apprehension continued to mock him but he did his best to ignore it. He smiled as genuinely as he could and looked up at Hawke with affectionate amusement. His dark hair was
slightly damp, sticking up in odd directions, and his clothes were new on, giving away that he must have been caught in the downpour. Anders reached up and slid his fingers into Hawke's hair, shaking it lightly to separate the strands.

"Got caught out did you?" he asked.

"You certainly are the perceptive one," Hawke said with a narrow eyed smile as Anders pulled his hand back, "yes, we did. On the way back from the Keep it started to bloody monsoon. We had to run for the last bit. Not the most dignified thing; two nobles, five Royal Guards and one King all legging it across the courtyard."

"That sounds like the start to a dirty joke," Anders laughed as he made himself comfortable, placing his head on Hawke's shoulder; the proximity to Hawke, relaxed as the man was, was helping greatly in calming him down. Anders knew that he should be asking Hawke what Meredith had said, what the outcome had been, but right now he couldn't bring himself to. Afterwards, ask afterwards, Anders thought, you still have time, "Lucky no one was probably paying any attention to you then, they were more than likely running for it as well."

"Huh, you're right," Anders felt Hawke laugh as his body jerked with the sudden sound; Hawke reached up with the hand around Anders' shoulders and began running his fingers absently through the locks loose of Anders' hair tie, "You sound a little more relaxed than this morning."

"Mmm, well," Anders said, closing his eyes and revelling in the feel of Hawke's fingers and the heat where their bodies touched; the tiredness from his lack of sleep the previous night was slowly catching up with him, "I suppose I was a little tense."

"A little," Hawke scoffed, "that's an understatement."

Anders would have loved to refute Hawke's statement but he was too busy pushing his face closer to Hawke's neck, breathing in the smell of slightly damp skin, hair and fresh clothes. There was something comforting, he found, with the way that Hawke treated him just like any other man. Anders knew that he was anything but normal yet when he was in Hawke's arms he felt like he couldn't be more ordinary; and it was wonderful. Yes he was still worried about the meeting, yes he couldn't stop thinking about all the things he was going to say, all the plans they were going to make, but right now he felt like he could stay here for a week and nothing would really matter. Perhaps Cousland's confession had made him feel more focused on the things that really mattered. Life, love and being happy.

No, Anders thought suddenly, his eyes opening, a scowl marring his forehead, you can't bloody think like that. There's no room to be selfish, not now, not ever. Can't you see that? Everyone's relying on you, you can't let them down! The swell of ire seemed to pass quickly, like a dark cloud over the sun, the light that came after banishing the black thoughts from his mind.

Why does it always have to be one or the other? He thought, anger giving way to sadness, why can't I have both? Why can't I be free and in love? Everything seemed too momentous for him to wrap his head around.

"Hey, you asleep?" Hawke's voice was quiet, as if not to wake Anders if he were.

"Not quite," Anders murmured, hiding the tension beneath his sleepiness.

"Good," Hawke said and Anders could hear the smile in his voice.

The mage cracked open an eye and peered at the still crackling fire. Hawke leaned his cheek
against the top of Anders' head and let out a contented sigh. The steadily consumed logs, glittering with red hot heat, could only remind him of the fact that time was also being steadily eaten away. It was mere hours now until his world changed forever. Distraction, Anders thought quickly as his blank panic began to return, distract yourself.

"And what would you do if I was, hmm?" Anders asked with a sly smile, forcing Hawke to lift his head when Anders lifted his, allowing himself to become lost in those emerald green eyes.

"I would have let you sleep," Hawke shrugged, mouth quirking at the corner, "don't think I don't know you didn't sleep all night. You're always easily distracted and oblivious when you don't sleep. And your left eye twitches. Also you get grouchy, let's not forget the grouchiness."

The smile Hawke gave as he spoke was one designed to provoke humour, to cover up the reality of the close and personal statement he had made. It was expertly done, Anders would admit, but he knew what Hawke was doing. Anders knew because he considered himself a master of using humour as a shield when he knew things were getting too close, when he allowed things to become real. Despite Hawke's best efforts, however, Anders found it impossible to ignore the truth that Hawke had revealed to him. They shouldn't matter but they do, Anders thought, these little things. It's the little things that show me how much you care Hawke. The things you don't need to know yet you do anyway.

Hawke was watching him with barely discernable concern, as if he wasn't sure what kind of reaction his words were going to get. Anders stared at the man next to him, with his arm around Anders' shoulders, his fingers trailing along the side of his neck, his house Anders' house, his life Anders' life. Why do I always fight against what I want? I want what I can't have and then, when I get it, I can't stop trying to run from it. Yet now, sitting on the settee in front of the roaring fire, the storm raging outside making the daylight dim, staring into the eyes of someone who seemed to love him unconditionally, Anders was struggling to understand why he did it.

Just as Hawke seemed to be no longer stand Anders' silent stare and opened his mouth to speak, Anders beat him to it.

"Kiss me," he said as seriously as he could, unable to truly hide the obvious need in his voice.

If someone were to ask Anders how many times he and Garret Hawke had kissed before that point, or how many times since, he couldn't rightly answer. Yet he could remember few kisses so well. Their first kiss, clumsy and half forgotten as it was, stuck in his memory, as did the searing and passionate one on the night of Hawke's birthday. Yet both of those, while memorable, were tainted slightly with the fact that he had forced himself to actively hide them at a time when the thought of being with Hawke filled him with dread and excitement alike. The kiss he gave Hawke as a thank you for Madam always stayed in his head but that was overridden by the playful memories of that night, as did their first proper kiss on the night he confessed his love; the countless others seemed to blend together into a mix of normal and every day. But this kiss, Anders would always think when he remembered it, this kiss was something different. This was the first time he ever realised just how much Hawke knew about him on an intimate and personal level. No longer were they simply living together, as big a thing as that might seem, no longer were they only partners, only lovers.

It was when he realised that he'd already noticed Hawke knew all of the little things that made him tick. Hawke knew how he acted when he hadn't slept well, yes, but there was more than that. Anders realised that Hawke knew that he liked his tea strong but if he refilled it then he preferred to fill the rest with hot water and weaken it down. He knew that Anders hated to sleep in but, if he did, then he would only stay in bed if Hawke was with him. He always stayed in the clinic for as
long as he could and sometimes missed dinner, yet Hawke always made sure something was made up in the pantry for him. He would bring him herbs and supplies to help him keep the clinic going. He read his manifesto and told Anders what he really thought. He supported him and listened to him and was there for him.

All those dreams of romance and love I used to have, Anders thought as Hawke deepened the kiss slightly, they never dealt with anything so mundane. Yet now all he could see were the many things which held their greater love together. Like the fact that he knew Hawke preferred coffee but didn't drink it all the time because he thought it was too expensive to import. That he would love a dog but was afraid it would chase Madam and so didn't buy one. That he wrote letters to Bethany religiously every week. That he had only taken Anders' birthday gift off once and that was during their break up. That he was kind to a fault and loyal and most of the time entirely naive. As they broke apart, his eyes sliding open to meet each Hawke's half lidded stare, all of those grand dreams seemed far more insignificant than the reality he had created for himself.

"You're worried, aren't you," Hawke said, not a question, "don't be, love. You're the most passionate person I've ever met. They'll listen to you. If you can't show these people what it is to fight then I don't know who can."

Anders reached up with his right hand and habitually pushed Hawke's dark hair from his eyes, letting his fingers continue in a gentle caress down the side of his face and over his neck, as if mapping the skin. So strong, my love, you're so strong and honest. You know what you want and you take no less than that. So no more, he thought strongly, no more worrying, no more what if's, no more resenting what I have because I may lose it in the future. Living in the moment is what I always promised myself and yet I've never truly managed to follow it through. Now seems a perfect time to start. He looked at Hawke and ignored the ticklish feeling of eyes on the back of his neck.

"I love you," Anders said as strongly as he could muster.

"I love you too," Hawke said easily, yet his smile seemed taut and his eyes too bright; is this what I've brought us down to? Anders thought ruefully, that you truly began to doubt me?

The thought seemed to be negated by the look in Hawke's eyes; he was too happy to be doubtful. Anders nestled back into Hawke's embrace, strong arm encircling his shoulders and holding him close. Everything seemed to be hanging on the edge of some great precipice, waiting for only a faint wind of change to tip it over the edge into the unknown and yet here he was sitting in relative normalcy, only able to focus on the immediate and seemingly insignificant things around him. He felt safe and warm. The fire crackled in the grate, the storm battered against the windows in another strong gust of wind. Hawke's soft breathing was a faint whisper in his ear. Just for a moment, Anders thought as his eyes blinked closed, I'll just rest for a moment...

He was asleep before the thought was even finished.
Artifice

It's an odd feeling, the displaced and fuzzy sense that you've woken up after the event, that something very important has passed you by. You start by blinking your eyes open, taking in the faded daylight and the long shadows, perhaps still enveloped by the comforting warmth or the coolness of the dreamscape; then everything seems to jump from contented to frozen, your stomach clenches with both shock and anguish while your brain skips into overdrive as it tries desperately to find the nearest clock. Anders went through these very same motions as he awoke on the settee, heavy and warm underneath a thick blanket.

Fuck, was the only rather inelegant and yet entirely appropriate word his mind could produce as he jolted upright, the cool air of the sitting room spilling its way into his clothes as the blanket fell away. What time is it, Anders panicked, shoving the blanket down his legs and scrambling from the couch, what fucking time is it! The storm was still raging outside, the rain pummelling the windows mercilessly, and the thick, dark clouds over the sky gave the illusion of night, casting the room into a gloomy mix of firelight and shadow. Anders stumbled to the mantelpiece and grabbed it with both hands, peering up into the ornate and overly stylised clock ticking away merrily to itself.

Ten past eight. Still another three hours to go. The relief was the same as any other person in his situation would have felt; a flood of euphoria that doused him like a cold bucket of water. It made his nerves tingle and the accelerated beat of his heart all the more noticeable. For a full thirty seconds he felt more alive than he had in years. The adrenaline was quick to wind down however. Oh thank the bloody Maker, Anders thought as he sank into the nearest armchair just to take the weight off of his weak legs. Slowly everything returned to normal. Anders ran his hand roughly over his face and shook his head. I really thought...Maker how irresponsible I am! Anders could feel that familiar inner struggle simmering within him and purposefully tried to clear his mind of the anger that his panic had instilled in him. He took a deep breath and savoured the smell of wood smoke and coals. The spicy, earthy smell of a dying fire always served to calm his nerves. Perhaps it was the memories of travelling with the Wardens, the scent of the fire at camp on the wet Ferelden air, or maybe something more deeply buried; burning peat and the chill of snow. It made him think of...

Home, Anders thought groggily, not entirely sure where the thought had even come from. It felt displaced and distracting. He shook his head and sighed harshly. No time to think about any of that now, no time for anything much. He stood and rolled his shoulders, working out the kinks in his joints. His stomach was roiling with nerves and anticipation. He lowered his arms and took another calming breath. Closing his eyes brought soothing darkness and Hawke's words, 'If you can't show these people what it is to fight then I don't know who can'. He opened his eyes once more to find the world unchanged before them, yet all the while his heart filled with hope as the words echoed in his head.

'They'll listen to you'

Anders steeled his resolve as he looked towards the rain spattered windows, the darkness devouring everything beyond like a hungry beast. This was it.

He left the room and closed the door behind him. The winding corridor was silent and dim, the fluttering of candlelight emanating from the far end. As Anders neared the upper landing, so did the flickering candlelight near him. As he rounded the corner he came face to face with a startled Hawke, holding a single candle holder in his right hand and a plate in the other.
"I was just coming to wake you," he said a little uncertainly.

"No need," Anders said with a small smile, "although I wish you hadn't let me sleep at all. There really isn't time for..."

"For making sure you get some rest so you don't fall asleep during the very important meeting?" Hawke smirked as he turned around and began walking back towards the landing; Anders followed, even though Hawke's flippancy grated a little against his nerves.

"I doubt that would ever happen," Anders said, "this all has me so on edge that I feel as if someone's been feeding me your coffee all night."

"Didn't stop you drifting off earlier," Hawke said with an amused shrug. He stopped at the small table and chairs he'd had placed by the balustrade on the landing, looking out over the living area downstairs; he placed the candle in the centre and the plate, which Anders could now see held a couple of slices of bread, some roast beef and a few roasted potatoes, by the first chair. Hawke took the opposite seat, sitting down heavily, while Anders took the other.

He picked at the food for a moment, feeling Hawke's eyes on him, and then forced himself to eat it. It didn't sit well in his empty stomach. He had been hungry earlier but now he felt he had gone past it; the food now sat like a heavy lump in his gut. He looked down over the balcony for something to distract him, surprised to find the area empty. The Commander and Alistair had taken to spending most of their time there when they weren't busy, as had the Warden's, and even without them there Bodahn and Sandal were usually in sight. The wind howled outside, gusting for a moment before settling down, leaving only the heavy patter of rain as a backdrop.

"It's quiet," Hawke said eventually; when Anders looked back to him he found the rogue staring out over the balcony exactly as he had been.

"Yes," Anders agreed, "where are the others exactly?

"Well Cousland told me earlier that the Warden's he'd brought with him wouldn't be back, they're already gone," Anders frowned, annoyed that he hadn't been given a chance to say goodbye, especially to Nathaniel, "they have some mission further north, or something like that. All very hush, hush."

"Let me guess," Anders said with a snort, "Warden business."

"That's exactly what he said," Hawke smiled, a slight frown marring his forehead.

"That's what the Commander always says," Anders said, shaking his head as he bit into a piece of meat.

I can't believe he sneaked them out without telling me, Anders thought as he chewed on the beef. Just because I left it doesn't mean I don't care anymore. Being a Warden wasn't restricted purely to killing darkspawn and the mutual affliction of the taint. They're my friends. The thought made his stomach knot up once more. Anders pushed the plate before him away half finished, sitting back in his chair.

"You should finish that," Hawke said without looking round.

"And you should stop being my bloody mother," Anders said, smiling nonetheless; he was finding it very difficult to be unhappy around Hawke recently, "thank you though, for making it up for me."

"I didn't make it," Hawke said, looking round at Anders with laughter sparkling in his eyes,
"Oranna did that."

"You know what I mean," Anders said, smile still in place as he narrowed his eyes and leaned forwards on the table, his forearms crossed over each other; the candlelight danced on Hawke's face, showing up the stubble he had neglected to shave and the slight bags under his eyes. Hawke eventually leaned forwards, mirroring his stance, and pushed the candle out of the way. Anders found his left hand taken between Hawke's strong fingers while the rogue removed the thin glove he always wore. Anders watched Hawke stare down at the pale, red sun scar and sighed, hanging his head a little. He knew, without Hawke saying a word, exactly what was going through his head.

"I'll be careful," Anders assured as Hawke looked up at him, a little startled, "I promise. Tonight of all nights I'm not taking any risks."

"...You say that now," Hawke shrugged, looking back to Anders hand as he ran his thumb over the glossy flesh of the scar, "but I know what you're like."

"What? Helplessly rash, hopelessly heroic and terribly handsome?" Anders said humorously, "In other words just like you, you mean?"

"This isn't a joke Anders," Hawke said seriously as he once more caught the mage's eye; the smile dropped slowly from Anders' face and he focused instead on the feeling of Hawke's fingers tickling against his palm, "I know you don't want me there..."

"It's not that I don't want you there, Hawke," Anders interrupted, frowning indignantly, "you have to know that I would have you by my side before any other, I just don't want you involved any more than you have to be, for your own sake!"

"I know that," Hawke said, giving Anders a strong look, "but if I can't be there to watch your back then I'll worry, understand?"

Anders felt silly doing it but he nodded in affirmation regardless, feeling like a chastised child who had been told not to stray too far from their parent. Hawke swallowed and said nothing further. Always so caring, Anders thought as he stared at the man across from him, sometimes it amazes me that you would want me at all. You could have any man you wanted and yet for some unknown reason you chose me. The thought, something he didn't dwell on too often, buoyed his spirits just a little. The world outside continued to turn and Anders wondered absenty how many other people were sitting in this same position with someone they loved. The clock continued to tick and the wind continued to howl through the side street. Again Anders felt as he had sitting by Hawke on the couch earlier; trapped in a bubble of time, his destiny splaying out flat before him like a map in a myriad of directions all trailing off to unknown ends. Anders closed his eyes and felt the contented feeling sweep over him like a blanket. He wished again, furtively, that he could stay here like this forever.

Then there it was again, that feeling. Anders frowned as the crawl of eyes on his back once more made itself clear. Then he thought he felt a chill of fingers playing through his hair, the faintest hint of distant laughter trilling in the air by his ear. Anders shivered and tried to open his eyes.

"I'm here for you, you know that don't you?" he thought he heard Hawke say.

Anders forced his eyes open and looked from hazel brown into emerald green. He feared that the voice had been once more in his head but Hawke's stare seemed to say otherwise. Anders lifted his right hand to rub at the side of his neck and nodded, hoping that Hawke had actually spoken the words he had heard. Hawke nodded back but did not confirm his words. Did you just speak to me? Anders became almost desperate to ask but he knew the consequences of that one question would
be disastrous. Hawke worried about him enough as it was without finding out that he was hearing voices in his head. It's just my imagination, Anders tried to convince himself unsuccessfully. He hoped that it was true and, more than that, he hoped that nothing like this happened at the meeting. It was bad enough that he was a nervous wreck without having to worry about this to.

He needed to be strong, he needed be independent, he needed to be a leader.

Yet under it all, under the fervent want to be free, for everyone to be free, and the guilt and the struggle and the submission and the hatred and the pain, sat one incredibly important thought. A thought that Anders hardly dared to dream could be true. That, with the support of Ferelden behind them, with the influence of the King and perhaps even the Warden's, that soon their Circle would be freed by just means, no need for bloodshed, no need for death.

No need for the bomb. No need to find more blood on his hands than the thick, undetectable sheen that already coated them.

The mere thought made his heart skip about in his chest. A way for Justice to keep his purity, no further corruption of human death to taint the already contaminated spirit. A way for mages to be free without a war stretching before them, without having to fight to be liberated. A way for he and Hawke to be together without the constant threat of Anders' actions tearing them apart.

Anders stared at Hawke as the sound of voices drifted from the hallway downstairs. Cousland strode in along the entrance hall with a familiar face at his side.

"Varric?" Anders said, feeling Hawke's fingers let go of his hand; he looked back to Hawke to find the man standing from his chair, turning to walk towards the head of the staircase, but he didn't miss the odd look in his eye.

Anders stood quickly and hurried after him, grabbing his arm to halt his retreat. Hawke turned back in surprise only to have Anders jerk him into a tight hold, arms folding around him as if to protect.

"I know you're here for me," Anders said into Hawke's ear before pulling back to look him in the face, "but I'm here for you too."

"I know," Hawke said, mouth twitching into a semblance of a smile before he looked a little embarrassed, but leaned in to kiss him nevertheless. Anders closed his eyes and couldn't help imagining this in a time of peace, with no threat hanging above their heads. It was a calming thought.

"Hey you two," Varric's voice cut through, bringing him back down to earth from his lofty thoughts, "get a room."

Anders broke the kiss and shook his head. This was far too normal, far too mundane. Shouldn't a day this momentous be outstanding and extraordinary in every aspect? It seemed not. He and Hawke walked down into the main area, the light dull and flickering all around. He couldn't help but feel affronted at Varric's presence. Everything was planned out meticulously in his head, every movement and countermeasure, and now people who did not figure into his plans were turning up to ruin the calm that vigilance brought.

"What are you doing here?" Anders asked with a raised eyebrow as Varric casually took a seat on a stool by Sandal's worktable.

"Honestly Blondie," Varric said with amused incredulity, "did you honestly think I would be sitting at my table passing by a boring, uneventful evening when the story of the century happens in the
same city?"

"I was on my way back from escorting the troops to the gate when I met Varric," Cousland said, "and he asked to tag along. I didn't think you'd be this offended."

Cousland just shrugged when Anders glared pointedly at him. Does he really have to go around telling everyone? Anders exaggerated. The raw feeling of nerves was difficult to truly ignore and Varric's easygoing attitude was not conducive to his calm.

"No," Anders said, his disapproval obvious, "but then that would depend on whether you want to endanger the success of the most important night of the life of any mage in all of Thedas."

"Oh hardly," Varric said in a laid back tone, "you won't even know I'm there, honest."

"This isn't a joke," Anders said stonily, noting Varric's slight look of astonishment, "the more people that attend the more likely we are to be found, or for someone to be followed, and that cannot happen, do you understand me?"

"I think you're underestimating your friends a little," Cousland said, giving Anders a conciliatory look; the mage simply sighed roughly in reply.

"I wouldn't ever take a risk like that," Varric said, clearly insulted, "you know me Blondie. I'm an expert at not being seen."

"That's not the point," Anders retorted; the sudden knock at the door was not loud but it made Anders jump nonetheless, "Maker damn it, who is that now! At this time?"

Hawke answered the door. Anders continued to argue with Varric. Cousland tried to be diplomatic. The mage felt the struggle between his nature and his need to be greater than ever. Here was a friend, a trusted friend, offering to come with him, to support him, and yet he could not accept. He made out that he did it for the sake of the resistance and yet, deep down, he knew it was his damned pride that was ruining his one chance to not be alone in this.

"I hope we're not interrupting," came a very familiar voice which stopped Anders in his tracks.

Finding Varric sniffing after a story was not a surprise to him, but finding Fenris the self proclaimed mage hater at his door when everyone seemed to be determined to attend his meeting about freeing mages was. Merrill, standing at the elf's side, was merely a further conundrum.

"Is there anyone else who'd like to come along?" Anders half shouted as he looked around their gathered group, raising his arms in consternation only to have them drop again in defeat.

"Oh I have no intention of attending this absurd rally," Fenris said, actually making Anders relax a little despite the elf's debasement of his efforts, "I'm just here to stop him from doing anything rash. Like running after you."

Fenris jerked his head in Hawke's direction and Anders couldn't help but look to the rogue with anger flashing in his eyes.

"You told him?" Anders knew that his anger was both misdirected and unsound but he couldn't help it; things were getting a little out of hand.

"Anders it's Fenris, I really doubt he's going to tell the templars that you're..." Hawke stopped short, as Anders heightened his glare, and turned to look at the subtly amused elf, "wait, you wouldn't would you?"
"Oh I already have, didn't you want me to?" Anders opened his mouth, his face the picture of outrage, but Fenris simply rolled his eyes and shook his head, "it was a joke you over sensitive prat. I have been known to make them every so often you know."

"Well now is hardly the time!" Anders yelled, finally losing his temper; he turned to Merrill who looked a little worried when Anders glare fell on her, "and what's your excuse!"

"Umm," Merrill said timidly, "Lirene told me."

Ander wished, perversely, that she could have given him an answer that wasn't so very reasonable. He snapped his mouth shut but couldn't stop the irrational and boiling anger that had built up in him.

"Oh come on, don't stop there!" Anders said accusingly, hearing a door open in the background, "Is there anyone else who knows about this secret meeting?"

"Well," came Alistair's now familiar and jovial tone; everyone turned as one to look at the man standing by the kitchen door who looked no more a King than any other peasant on the street; he was dressed in his disguise of travelling trousers and shirt, a rough jacket of leather that could have been one of Hawke's and a black, woollen hat that was most definitely Oranna's. He grinned at them all and shrugged, "hopefully not Meredith anyway."

There came a time in the face of all expectation and anticipation that the excitement died down to an almost quivering bleakness. A moment of truth, as it is known. A penultimate fear and exaltation which embedded itself into ones psyche and refused the admission of any sense of reality. Anders knew that he used it as a barrier between himself and the real world, but it had been so very long since he had felt it that it was almost nostalgic.

He used to have the very same feeling whenever he fled the Circle, whenever he knew that his plan had worked and knew that he was beyond their reach for however long he could keep it that way...that infant, squirming joy that blossomed in his body was both needed and detested.

They had left the relative safety of the mansion and ventured out separately towards their destination. Anders had been rather desperate, after his brief anger, to kiss Hawke goodbye but, juvendilely, he felt awkward when Fenris was hovering around the rogue so protectively. Instead he gave him a simple but reassuring nod, which Hawke had returned with a smile. Anders sent Varric with Cousland and Alistair, travelling through the sewers, while he and Merrill journeyed through the empty streets, keeping to the shadows and the alleyways. They had spoken very few words to each other, not long after leaving.

"Anders..." Merrill had started as they jogged down a narrow, dark side street.

"This isn't really the time for talking Merrill," Anders tried to reason, yet he couldn't deny that he felt much more relaxed knowing that Merrill was at his side than if he'd been doing this alone.

"Please, I just want to apologise," the elf said, her eyes wide with sincerity as Anders stopped at the end of the street to check if the coast was clear; he looked at her and sighed, nodding, "for telling Cousland about...about everything. I'm sorry, I thought I was helping I swear, I just..."

"It's alright," Anders said, shaking his head when Merrill opened her mouth to continue, "really, we can't do this here. We'll talk later, alright?"

Darktown was lively as usual. Dim lamps buzzed with flies, children played in the streets and thieves and thugs lounged against walls, watching them hungrily as they passed. Thankfully
Anders knew that the residents of the undercity either refused to or knew better than to attack him. He and Merrill aimed for the clinic, not deviating in any way from the quickest route. They passed William at the head of the alley; the youth nodded to Anders.

"All in place," he had said quietly before pushing from the wall and walking nonchalantly in the opposite direction.

That was when the feeling had started, coiling around him like a snake trying to squeeze the breath from his prey. He opened the door as quietly as he could, shepherding Merrill though before slipping in himself. Tell me where are all the past years gone? Anders thought as he stared at the sight before him. That a truth like this could be the outcome of so many disappointments, so many failures. Under all the hope he had truly feared that no one would come.

As if to refute his fears there was not an inch of floor space that was not occupied by a warm body. Everyone sat, as quiet as Chantry mice, faces of all ages, elves and humans, men and women. The clinic was gloomy as usual but William had put out a few lanterns and there were even a few mages letting faint light spells seep from their staffs to stave off the darkness. Anders stared in disbelief at the myriad eyes which stared back. He swallowed, even as he recognised some people, others strangers; Merrill took his hand and led him to the side of the room where there was a small clearing, behind his examination table and its one measly chair. He barely managed to find enough surprise to be amazed that Cousland, Alistair and Varric were already there, the rogue standing protectively before the King with his hands hovering subtly around his daggers.

There was a moment of awkward silence in which Anders knew that, despite the presence of the two extremely important men standing by his side, everyone was staring at him. He cleared his throat and found himself looking at Merrill. She smiled back at him reassuringly, nodding as if to say that she believed in him. Anders didn't think that she would ever know how appreciated it was.

Right, Anders thought, do it now or never do it at all. He took a deep breath and turned to his chair, stepping up first onto it and then up onto the sturdy table. The myriad of eyes followed him. He looked around for a few seconds, noting Sabine and Farah off to his right, Ghalt and Gerrard not far behind them. So many, he thought, so many I've never even met. So many ready to make a stand.

But where to begin? Suddenly, after so long planning this moment, words seemed to fail him.

"Friends and strangers, humans and elves, we are here on this the eve of...

He trailed off. No, Anders thought, this isn't it. The rehearsed speech began to sound like someone else's words, not his, not real. He could see restlessness shiver through the crowd like a rippling breeze. He swallowed, hearing hushed whispers in the crowd and seeing accusing eyes. He steeled himself once more and lifted his head as proudly as he could.

"You know I could stand here and talk as fluently as you like about things we already understand but the truth is that we all know why we are here," Anders said strongly, watching in relief as the accusation seemed to turn to interest, "we are here because we are forced to be here. Our meeting like this? It does nothing if it does not drive home just how tight a grip the templars have over us. Do we see any others but the criminals in this city forced to make such clandestine meetings just to have a chance to talk?"

"No!" came an anonymous male voice from the crowd, fervent in his agreement.

"Too right we don't," Anders nodded back, feeling the mood in the room change from cold uncertainty to a building charge of buzzing enthusiasm, "we are an oppressed people, perhaps for
far longer than we should ever have been. Yet even under this oppression there are supposed to be rules that are followed, rights that we have, few and far between as they are. Here in Kirkwall we are not even allotted that simple and much needed courtesy! Mages who have passed their harrowing being turned Tranquil, killing runaways from the Circle without a second thought! What would Meredith do if she found us here, gathered like this?"

"Kill us all," Anders managed to distinguish the pale, red haired woman who spoke up, her eyes hard and her mouth a tight line.

"Or worse," Anders agreed, looking around the rapt faces once more, "but I say to this, no more. For twenty years of my life have I run from this tyranny, content to stay clear of the templars and scrounge for as much freedom as I could get. But now I say, no more! No more fear, no more hatred, no more killing and Tranquil and families lost! For too long have we simply survived, despite our resistance, without taking action."

A wave of encouraging murmurs and calls of encouragement swept across the crowd. For a moment Anders felt as if he were once more standing at the edge of the cliff, the dagger spiralling away from him, that feeling of trepidation mixed with an indeterminable will to carry on no matter what. He met Sabine's eyes and saw the keen glint there as the older woman nodded in agreement.

"But I say no more," he said again ardently, "which is why I have asked you all here despite the danger. I have recently learned of something that will change all of our lives. There is someone here I need you all to listen to. Alistair?"

The blonde man, who had been busy removing his woollen hat, looked up in agitation. Anders could see he was a little nervous but that became quickly buried beneath hardened resolve. Anders jumped down from the table and offered the small 'stage' to the King. He watched Alistair climb up solemnly and couldn't help but be impressed by the change in him. Over the past week he had become so used to seeing the tall man as a rather goofy and affectionate individual that he suddenly seemed an entirely different person, his face set and his bearing proud. He looked every inch the regal figure he was, even without the imposing armour.

"My good people," Alistair's voice was loud and rich as he spoke, "I bring news from over the Waking Sea..."

"Who're you?" Anders heard a voice shout, high and nasal, tone accusing; Anders couldn't help but bristle. Can't they just let the man speak? Anders thought in irritation. He opened his mouth to tell the arrogant git to keep his bloody mouth shut but was stopped when Cousland took hold of his arm gently. The Commander shook his head with a smile.

"Who am I?" Anders looked back to Alistair to find the man staring down imposingly at the crowd, "My name is Alistair Theirin."

A flutter of excitement made itself known in snatches of sentences and amazed exclamations.

"The King!"

"..is it truly him..?"

"Can't be!"

One of which stood out above all others, however.

"Bollocks!" shouted a tall, rangy woman with short brown hair and a scar over her left eye; Anders could have sworn he had seen her around the docks but he couldn't be certain. The crowd suddenly
became split between laughter and indignance. Anders worried for a moment that the feeling of rebellious camaraderie he had built up would soon descend into a rabble. He needn't have worried.

"Alright, I would not deny you proof," Alistair said with a shrug as he reached down to grasp the one piece of his regal outfit which he had refused to remove; he drew the sword with an impressive ringing of steel on steel, the long silver blade shining like a beacon in the dull light. There was a notable silence as Alistair turned it deftly and rammed it point first into the table, embedding it into the wood. It stood there like some kind of testament to his authority. Alistair grabbed the pommel to make the insignia there clear to all. The Ferelden coat of arms, the red Mabari warhound rampant, shone like wet blood; the seal of the Theirin bloodline, the King's sword. A few gasps of disbelief could be heard, some whispered 'it's him, it really is the King!'. Alistair waited patiently until silence once more reigned.

"I know very well where I am," Alistair said, "and I know that my authority perhaps doesn't stand for much here in Kirkwall, but I'm sure many of you are of Ferelden birth..." there were cries of agreement, "and for the others this information holds just as much weight. I am here to tell you what the Chantry have been trying so desperately to keep quiet. That there is no longer a Circle of Magi in Ferelden. That we have set our mages free."

There was a terse silence before it was broken once more by disparate cries of joy and scepticism.

"You lie! That can't be true!"

"I heard rumours, but to believe it..?"

"It is true!" Cousland stepped forwards and took up his place before the side of the table, all attention shifting to him, "I can vouch for it personally."

"And why should we listen to you?" the rangy woman once more asked, her doubt clear.

"Because he's the man who slew the archdemon and stopped the blight," Anders said loudly.

To find that the Hero of Ferelden himself was suddenly amongst their midst seemed too much for the mages to handle, seeming to only compile their disquiet when added on top of Anders' rousing speech and the rebel King of Ferelden telling them that there were no longer chains to hold them. Anders could understand their incredulity, their doubt and their shock. He had felt it all himself after all.

"I come here with an offer of help," Alistair said, making Anders' heart quicken, "that any mage, man, woman or child, regardless of race or age, is welcome in our lands. I will personally assure the safety of anyone who wishes to flee the tyranny of Kirkwall for the safety of our shores..."

For a moment Anders nearly forgot to breathe. What? He thought in sheer anger and disbelief.

"No!" he found himself shouting before he realised that might not be such a good idea.

Alistair stopped mid sentence to look at him, followed by everyone else in the room. Oh fuck, Anders thought, his anxiety and his anger warring for dominance. It can't be this way, he thought as he hoped beyond hope that he was doing the right thing. He could feel Justice bubbling beneath his skin and felt spurred on by the spirits incensed fury.

"What?" Alistair said in confusion, suddenly sounding much more like the man he had come to know; confused and a little shy.

"I said no," Anders said again, ignoring Cousland's pointed look which seemed to be telling him to
shut up, "that isn't why we're here. We didn't come all this way and gather here, against our better natures, to hear that we can run."

Anders felt Merrill at his side, an uncertain presence but comforting nonetheless. Varric was simply staring at him along with the others, seemingly unsure of what the mage would say next. Anders felt his anger fuelling his courage as he faced up to what he felt was his responsibility.

"We don't need you to give us new homes," Anders said, "we already have homes and we should be able to stay in them without being forced to fly in fear of the templar's despotism. What we need is your support..!"

"Which is something I cannot give," Alistair said, once more regal and untouchable, "Ferelden has its own problems to worry about. Freeing our Circle has brought us a lot of unwanted attention. We cannot split our forces now and weaken our grip on our homeland."

"Then you doom all mages to a continued life in chains!" Anders said furiously, seeing Cousland stare at him as if he was seeing someone else entirely, "I thought you were here to help us break free!"

"We are here to offer what help we can," Cousland said calmly, "which is more than anyone else is bloody doing. There will be a time for fighting Anders but that time is not now."

"So you say," Anders said, hearing a few murmurs of approval, feeling them encourage Justice even further, "but how many more Tranquil will appear in the Gallows before then, how many more families torn apart, how many more deaths before enough is enough!"

"But he's offering us sanctuary," came a young, male voice from the crowd, "to live free? I would go anywhere."

"He's right," said another; Anders was unable to see who was talking as he wasn't high enough to survey the crowd, "I don't want to fight."

The world seemed to flash brightly before his eyes and Anders had to purposefully work to push Justice back into dormancy. The agreement of the mages with Alistair's view only irritated him further. The spirit could not understand their lack of honour or will to fight. Anders remembered Justice's own incredulity when Anders had originally told him, back in Ferelden, of his apathy towards the plight of mages everywhere. The feeling within him now was similar and yet tainted somehow with the anger and violence that Anders had come to associate with Vengeance. He hoped that no sign of the spirit had manifested itself on him physically. The lack of reaction in those around him told him that it hadn't. He felt a hand slide into his own and looked to his left to see Merrill looking at him worriedly.

"No, we must stand together!" Anders recognised Sabine's gravelly voice, trying to find her face in the crowd, "We must fight if we are to be free!"

"We can't think only of ourselves," he was surprised to hear Farah speak, especially in such a crowd; Anders was used to her attention seeking but she sounded incredibly genuine, "there are other mages relying on us, those who can't help themselves."

"That's fine for you to say," said an unknown female voice, shrill and breathy, "but you don't 'ave kids to worry about, scared every minute that you'll have to see them taken from you just because of your gift!"

"She's right!"
Oh Maker, Anders thought as he watched the crowd begin to fight amongst itself, what is this? Does embarrassing me make you happy? Setting me up to fall? You offer me solace and then you mockingly remove it at the last second. All I want is freedom, all I want is to be free!

"Please! Good people!" Alistair called out, garnering some attention back from the bickering mages before him, "I am not here to make decisions for you. If you want to take my offer it is always open, please understand that, but the longer you wait the greater the risk you run. There is a boat leaving tomorrow from the fifth Dock, the Maitland. She is bound for Redcliffe and she is under the protection of Commander Cousland and the Ferelden Grey Wardens. If any here wish to leave safely then she sails at noon. For those who stay behind...my thoughts go with you and I pray for your safety."

Anders had expected another uproar as the King stepped down from the table, wrenching his sword from the mangled wood, and turned with Cousland at his heels to leave the clinic. Instead there was a deathly silence. He stared for a moment at the open door before it closed behind them. Anders took a deep breath, forcefully telling Justice that exploding out into this situation would only make things an hundred times worse than they already were. The safety of these people is paramount, he thought as he felt lost gazes wondering over his skin. He squeezed Merrill's hand before letting go.

"Alright, shows over," he couldn't help saying bitterly, "what you decide in the end is really none of my business but I urge you to think long and hard before you choose what it is you want. It may seem a blessing, this offer of sanctuary, but believing in something better is never simple. No one ever said that this was going to be easy."

No one spoke. Anders felt unsure and a little queasy as Justice roiled around inside of him like a seething storm. Enough, Anders thought sternly, I need to get back before something terrible happens.

"There are too many of you here for everyone to leave at once," Anders said suddenly, changing the subject, "so here's what we're going to do. Group together with those that you know and leave in threes. Stay to the back alleys, and the sewers if you know your way around them. Come on, we don't have all night, the longer we wait then the greater the risk of being found!"

Once the danger of their situation had been re-established it didn't take long for the mages to organise themselves. He watched them with a mix of compassion and dispassion, a mix of Anders and Justice. The shock of the evening hadn't truly sunk in yet. Alistair's words were not at all what he had been expecting. He thought he was being offered a cure, but instead all he was given was a bandage for the bleeding wound that was the mage's predicament.

"Come on Anders," he heard Merrill say, pulling his eyes to her; she had been very quiet throughout the proceedings but then Anders found it hard to truly blame her for that. Merrill had always been shy in crowds, "we need to get back too."

"She's right Blondie," Varric stepped out of the way of a tall man herding two teenage girls towards the door, speaking in hushed voices, "it isn't safe here."

"It isn't safe anywhere for us," Anders said tightly, "that's the whole point."

They both gave him uncomfortable looks that only served to once more inflame his ire. He sighed tersely and watched as the last few groups of mages began to ready themselves for the dangerous journey to their homes, wherever that may be.

"Fuck, I've had enough of this," Anders spat, "I need to go home."
The fires were dancing merrily and there was the sound of laughter and glass clinking on glass when Anders finally stepped through the door of the mansion. The contrast to his dark mood couldn't have been any more obvious. Even Bodahn, who always seemed indomitable in his cheerfulness, refrained from greeting him as he usually did. Instead the dwarf closed his mouth after opening it and shied away from Anders' angry stare.

He found Hawke and Fenris sitting by the fire in the main room, drinking what looked like Hawke's Antivan brandy. Seeing the two of them sitting in such an intimate setting, happy together, only served to aggravate him further. He tried to march past without being seen but that seemed too much to hope for.

"You're back!" Hawke said happily, looking round and half standing from his chair before Anders spoke, stalling his movements.

"Not now Hawke," he bit out, unable to control the anger still simmering within; he didn't want to take it out on Hawke, that was the last thing he wished to do, but right now he knew how close he was to simply exploding. Thus the best plan he had was to not be around anyone until he had himself under control.

"What?" Hawke said in confusion, his voice a little slow with drink, "Are you alright? Cousland and Alistair came back a little while ago..."

"I said not now!" Anders barked, seeing Fenris' deep frown before he turned on his heel and continued to walk across the room and up the stairs.

He didn't stop until he was sitting on his bed, smoothing his palms over the covers. Calm down, he ordered himself, I said calm the fuck down. His nervous system strictly ignored him in favour of continuing to tingle like a thunderstorm. He bit down on his bottom lip until he tasted blood and forced himself to focus on the pain. As he heard footsteps on the stairs he purposefully flopped backwards onto the bed so as to relax the tension in his muscles.

He closed his eyes. This is all wrong, he thought wearily as Justice finally, without the continued aggravation of the mages dissent from his cause, simmered down. This isn't what it's supposed to be. We were supposed to have a grand plan together, a way to oust Meredith from her usurped title of ruler and set the Circle free. Instead what do I get? Another chance to run, he thought sadly, what a fucking joke. Back to the starting block, he thought grimly as his hopes of avoiding the bloodshed and the killing seemed to wither and die. Instigating a war is the only weapon I have now, he thought as the Tevinter spell came to the forefront of his mind.

The door creaked open slowly before closing once more. Hawke was usually deathly quiet but, with a drink on him, he was always a bit clumsier. Anders kept his eyes closed as he felt the bed dip beside him. It wasn't long before he felt Hawke's fingers on the back of his hand, coyly tracing a soothing pattern over his knuckles.

"I'm guessing something went wrong?" Hawke said after another minute's silence.

"...It's what I get for putting faith in people before I put faith in myself," Anders managed to say after a seemingly endless silence in which Hawke's soothing motions served to calm him a little.

"What happened?" Hawke asked.

The fingers left his hand and a moment later reappeared in his hair; Anders couldn't help the heady groan that the sensation caused.
"I expected more than Alistair could offer," Anders said, unsure whether he was still truly angry or whether he was now simply resigned, "Ferelden cannot stand with us."

"He won't help?" Hawke sounded surprised and hurt all at once.

Anders cracked open an eye to look at him; The lantern light danced on his face, making his bright eyes shine a little in the gloom. Anders found he couldn't even consider twisting the truth, never mind lying to him.

"Yes, he's offered to help," Anders sighed, "he said that he'll grant asylum to any mage who wishes to ask it of Ferelden."

"Well...isn't that a good thing?" Hawke asked with a frown, letting out an unwitting laugh, seeming rather patronising despite his best efforts, "When I saw you come in I thought that something terrible had happened!"

Anders closed his eyes once more as the anger rose in him at Hawke's words. No, he thought, no it isn't his fault, he doesn't know what happened..!

The blackness that descended upon him was so precisely akin to the darkness behind his own eyelids that Anders almost didn't notice the difference. The only thing that gave it away was that familiar sickening feeling of being pushed and pulled and sucked down into the darkness itself, a spinning sensation in his head and the inability to open his eyes. Anders panicked, feeling his heart rate quicken but knowing that he wasn't fully connected to his vital systems, that everything was confused and frantic and frightening.

For one horrible moment he didn't know what was happening and the next he was blinking his eyes open and staring down at Hawke. The man looked both stunned and livid all at once yet, when Anders looked about him in sheer confusion and shock, unsure as to why he was standing by the bed when last he remembered he had been lying on it, Hawke's face lost its anger and instead became incredibly anxious.

"Anders?" he asked as he rose quickly from bed to stand before the mage.

"What? How did I..?" Anders tried to think through the rapidly thinning haze of anger that hung over his mind. As reality seemed to slot back into place the answer to his unfinished question became all too clear. Oh fuck, Anders thought in dismay as he looked to Hawke in distress, "Justice?"

"You didn't know?" Hawke said in confusion, the thought only seeming to worry Hawke more, "One minute you were lying there and the next he burst out and began..." Hawke trailed off, a deep frown marring his forehead.

"Began what?" Anders asked in a slight panic; for the Maker's sake Justice! Anders screamed in his mind. What would you have done if we weren't somewhere safe, somewhere no one but Hawke could see us? You know the dangers as well as I do and thrusting yourself into my consciousness without my consent is fucking dangerous!

"Never mind," Hawke said darkly, shaking his head, his eyes alight with withdrawn fury.

"No, don't you dare say 'never mind',' Anders said, swallowing, "you tell me what he said Hawke, I need to know!"

"He said that I don't understand you and that...that you have no need of me," Hawke said, his eyes narrowing a little in hurt; Hawke was always bad at hiding his emotions when he was drunk.
Anders felt instantly guilty for allowing Justice to say something so awful and untrue.

"Damn it Justice," Anders muttered before he took hold of Hawke by the shoulders, forcing the man to look into his eyes, "I swear Hawke, if there's anyone in this messed up world that I need, it's you. Please don't listen to him, he's just angry."

Hawke nodded a little, blinking before he sat down on the bed once more. Anders lifted his right hand to rub at his forehead, feeling a headache beginning to build as tension beneath the skin. He frowned and looked down at Hawke. The rogue was staring at him a little blankly.

"...You can't control him anymore, can you?" he asked candidly.

Anders blanched at the statement, no matter how free of accusation it was. The very same thought had been in his mind recently but there was something about having it voiced aloud by another that made it all the more real. This night is turning into hell, he thought bleakly.

"Not as much as I used to be able to, no," Anders admitted, his shoulders tensing, "but please Hawke, let's not talk about this now. I can't, I really can't."

"Alright," Hawke agreed after a moment of hesitation in which Anders thought he would argue back, "tomorrow then."

The soft knock at the door made both men look around awkwardly. Anders cursed under his breath, hoping to the Maker that it wasn't Cousland because he couldn't promise himself that he wouldn't shout the man deaf if he tried to discuss things with him tonight. The mage walked stiffly to the door and opened it a crack to peer through. When he found Bodahn of all people standing on the other side he relaxed a little and pulled the door open wider.

"Bodahn, what is it?" he asked as the dwarf handed him something, frowning as he found himself holding a folded letter with a name scrawled on the front in red.

"A lady, Messer," Bodahn said, looking a little unsettled, "she just came to the door and asked me to give you this. I tried to tell her that the name didn't match but she wouldn't listen..."

At this time of night? Anders thought, feeling Hawke's eyes on him. He looked down to the name on the letter front and froze. Bodahn continued to talk but Anders didn't hear him. No, that's not possible, was all he could think as he continued to stare at the name. Again the feeling of disembodied eyes tickled against his neck, a girlish voice playing on the air.

"I'll be right back," Anders said quickly to Hawke, who looked at him in confusion as Anders slipped out of the door and closed it; he turned to Bodahn and stared at him intently.

"Who gave this to you?" he demanded.

"A woman, Messer, she said to give it to you," Bodahn said.

"But who was she?" Anders asked rather desperately, "Did you recognise her?"

"No Messer," Bodahn said, surprised at the mage's vehemence, "it was dark outside and she was wearing a travellers cloak and hood. She mentioned you by name though..."

Anders didn't give him time to finish. He rushed down the stairs, along the corridor and outside faster than he ever would have imagined he could. He burst out into the cool night air and stared around the dark courtyard, running out to stand by the central garden and stare futilely down the side streets and main walkways. There was no one in sight. He listened for the sound of footsteps.
but heard none. When he returned inside Bodahn was once more waiting at the end of the corridor. He seemed as if he wanted to ask something further but was afraid to. Anders found himself ignoring the dwarf in favour of standing in the middle of the room, staring down at the red, scrawling letters stained on the front of the folded parchment.

Leif Rødberg.

Who is this woman? Anders thought desperately. Who is this woman who knows my name?
The next day seemed to pass as a leaf on a river, swift and inconsequential. Despite the importance of the events taking place, Anders found it difficult to truly focus on anything. He found himself once more torn between his duty and himself. Half of his resistance could be leaving Kirkwall that very day and he found that, guiltily, he couldn't bring himself to care. Justice damned those who would flee, while Anders couldn't help but resent their abandonment even though, deep down, he understood it.

The tail end of the storm from the night before kept light showers intermittent over Kirkwall, drenching him in a fine mist of dew like water droplets as he walked towards the fifth dock. His mind felt heavy, as if his head were a weight on his shoulders, making his neck ache. Despite the feeling of belonging which had built up during the last week, surrounded by friends, Anders felt suddenly lonely. The Warden's were leaving, as was the King and his escort, and Hawke, despite his naturally loving behaviour, couldn't help but be a little distant with him.

He had tried to talk to Cousland earlier in the morning, when he was sure that a good night's sleep with Hawke at his side would have calmed him enough to at least be civil. It had started well but, what with the combination of Justice's impatience and Cousland's quick temper, had rapidly descended into a shouting match. Anders had tried to be reasonable but had only ended up attacking Alistair's sense of honour which had enflamed Cousland to no end.

"How can you be so short sighted!" Anders had found himself roaring; he'd come across Cousland in the library pacing back and forth as if working himself up for something. As they had begun to talk Anders realised that it was this very conversation he had been doing it for.

"Short sighted? What the fuck is that supposed to mean!" Cousland had shouted back, his own authoritative bark much more powerful than Anders' own voice, "We came here to help you and your friends because we thought it was the right thing to do! What? Would you rather we had just sat on our arses and kept it all a big secret?"

"And that's what I mean by short fucking sighted!" Anders hadn't been able to ignore the deep, tenor quality that invaded his voice, feeling the sizzle of magic in the air around him, "to think that this is in any way only about me and my friends!"

There had been a terrible pause then, during which Cousland, just as he had the night before, stared at him as if seeing someone else entirely. Anders had frowned angrily at him and demanded to know what the hell was wrong. Once he received the answer he almost wished he had never asked the question.

"I'll admit it's been a while," Cousland had said, somewhat calmly, as he eyed Anders critically, "but I'd never forget that voice. Just how long are you going to let him use you like this Anders?"

He had refused to grace him with an answer but it wasn't truly because he was angry at the accusation. Instead he found himself worried by it, unsure any more as to who was really using
who. When it had all begun, the determined pact he and Justice had made, it had been so very right and well intentioned. Now, as he fled from Cousland's accusing stare, he couldn't help but once more feel the weight of the unwitting mistake they both had made by joining in the first place. He hid it beneath an outraged snarl and stalked out of the library to the safer confines of the sitting room. He uses me no more than I use him, Anders had thought weakly as he stared at the floor, and that's just the reality I have to accept now.

A stray ray of sunlight momentarily broke through the thick clouds above him, forcing him to squint under the yellow glare. It was quickly swallowed once more by the greedy clouds, turning everything back into the usual grey. Anders continued to march forwards across the heavy stone slabs, ignoring the calls of merchants hawking their wares and dock workers shouting orders and lewd comments to each other. It seemed somehow like he was approaching the sight of a battle already fought, ready to walk amid the dead and see who could no longer be counted amongst his forces. There were few enough of us as it was, Anders thought bleakly, now how are we supposed to fight?

The fifth dock was normally, as the others were, mainly empty. Today, however, you could hear the voices before you saw the crowd. He had seen the tip of the masts from over the buildings before he had even seen the rest of the ship. When Anders rounded the corner and descended the stairs to the dock, his fragile hopes of things not going as badly as he had feared were crushed. At least four dozen people stood chattering on the long pier, jutting out adjacent to the imposing ship which sat stationed in the narrow dock. The *Maitland* was indeed an impressive vessel, Anders had to admit. The small, dirty merchant ship he had bartered passage on to bring him to Kirkwall seemed like a simple rowing boat in comparison. She was tall, throwing the already gloomy pier into further shadow; two levels and a main deck, three proud masts with sails tightly bound. She was thick hulled but built for speed, a long narrow hull tapering to a svelte stern. There were no ornate decorations on the half round of the captain's cabin, or along the sides. This was a ship built for one purpose; to escape in safety.

Wet, salty air assaulted his nose while the sloshing of water beneath the ship herself drowned out most of the hushed conversations around him as he pushed through the crowd. People avoided his gaze as it fell on them, or stopped speaking as they noticed him approach. Many he did not recognise at all, some he identified from the night before and one he actually knew.

"Ghalt," he couldn't help but say aloud as he bumped into the tall man.

"...Anders," Ghalt eventually nodded after shifting about in uncomfortable silence.

Many words tried, one after the other, to force themselves out of his mouth. How can you do this? Why are you leaving us? We need you! Anders did not let any of them slip, no matter how much he wished to spout them at the man he had come to rely greatly on for gathering intelligence. In truth he hadn't been expecting anyone he knew well to leave. Seeing Ghalt was actually quite a shock. He began to wonder how many more of his friends may be hidden among the crowd.

"Look," Ghalt said at length, pulling Anders' thoughts back to the present, "I'm sorry, about...leaving. I have to admit that I'll miss Kirkwall, but I have been waiting my whole life for an opportunity like this. I can't stay."

Well hurry up and fuck off then, Anders felt like snapping but managed to keep his acerbic words to himself. Instead he simply reached out and patted the burly man on the arm, nodding in what he hoped looked like understanding.

"Stay safe," Ghalt said as he clamped his large hand down onto Anders' shoulder.
"And you," Anders managed to say before he quickly quitted the man's presence; he did not want to taint his parting words with anger.

It was as he pushed his way through the crowd that a very familiar voice made itself known. 

"These people are under suspicion and I will not allow this ship to leave until I am satisfied!"

Anders reached the edge of the crowd and pushed out past elbows and shoulders until he was free of it. The end of the pier was empty but for three people, two of which he knew and the other he recognised from Cousland's troops. Aveline and Donnic stood by the tall, blond Warden, whose name he could not recall, indignantly glaring at him. Well, Aveline was anyway. Her husband was, Anders had always found from his limited dealings with the man, far calmer than his spouse.

"We are leaving imminently, madam," the Warden said politely but obdurately, "Commander's orders."

"Then I would speak to this Commander," Aveline said, eyes narrowing, "I will not allow...Anders?"

Anders smiled humourlessly at the odd break in her sentence.

"Won't allow me to do what?" Anders said as he finally reached their small group; he nodded to the Warden and received a courteous nod in return.

"That's not what I meant," Aveline said tightly, "do you know these men?"

"Mmm," Anders nodded, "yes, they're Cousland's troops."

Aveline opened her mouth again, clearly intent on continuing her diatribe, when she realised exactly which name he had said.

"Cousland? You mean...?" Aveline started, looking startled.

"Well, well, it looks like I have quite the little send off party, eh Blake?"

Everyone, including the crowd on the pier, looked to the top of the gangway to find Cousland, once more in his drake scale armour, both arms propped on the rope handrails. The tall Warden, Blake, nodded to his Commander with respect but also with a small smile of amusement that seemed out of place on his stoic facade. Cousland descended quickly, feet sure on the rough board beneath him, and stepped down onto the smooth stone. Aveline was staring at him just as she had the first time they had met, her cheeks seeming to flush involuntarily. Donnic looked at her with a frown and eyed Cousland with blatant suspicion. Oh, everyone's jealous of the Commander, Anders couldn't help but think with genuine hilarity as he took in Donnic's reaction and remembered Hawke's same response on meeting Cousland in the Deep Roads.

"I didn't realise..." Aveline floundered, sounding nothing like her usual self assured and strong willed self, "forgive me Lord Cousland, I didn't know this was your ship."

"Easy mistake to make," Cousland shrugged, "I wouldn't worry yourself over it Guard Captain Aveline."

So easy to fool them, is it? Anders thought. Cousland may have seemed his usual calm and charming self to the others, but Anders could see the slight hardening of his eyes and the tension in his stance at the mention of the word 'lord'. Cousland spared a brief glance for Anders before looking away. The mage just stood casually to the side, his arms folded, unable to summon any of
the anger or the outrage or the hurt he had felt that morning. Everything seemed to have become a
little dead inside. He watched Cousland charm Aveline expertly, to the point where even mild
mannered Donnic decided to intervene and say that, if Aveline wasn't intent on holding these
people, then they had better leave. The Guard Captain seemed a little torn, for a moment, between
her duty and her want to be respectful to the man who saved her homeland. For a moment Anders
knew exactly how she felt.

He stood to the side as the Guards left and he waited patiently as the mage's began to file past, up
the gangway and onto the ship that would take them away. No templars had shown which was, in
itself, a mystery. That Aveline had obviously been tipped off about suspect persons leaving
Kirkwall on this ship made him wary but it was odd to think of Meredith having anyone else do her
dirty work. Usually the Knight Commander was more than happy to show her true colours,
especially now that she seemed to think they were validated by her status.

When everyone had boarded the pier was once more its usual ghost haunt. The sounds of the city
docks floated on the midday breeze, the faint chill of approaching snow apparent in the air. Anders
had walked to the end of the pier as the proceedings took place. Soon he heard Cousland join him,
standing by his side as they stared out over the glittering water. The Gallows were an undeniable
blight on the scenery, towering out of the water, casting a long shadow over the ships that sailed in
and out of the harbour.

"So," Cousland said after a long silence, but for the lapping of waves against the stone, "I suppose
nothing I say will convince you to come with us?"

Considering everything they had said to each other that morning, an offer such as that was the last
thing Anders had expected. He looked to Cousland as the Warden continued to stare out over the
glassy sea. As usual he forgives far too easily, Anders thought. In a way it was a sad thought, not
on the Commander's part but more on his own. He had been like that once too, yet now he found
far easier to hold grudges and keep everything inside where it only fuelled the fires of Vengeance's
hatred.

"You know I would," Anders said, meaning it only as a placation yet it astonished him how much
he truly wished it could be so, "but I can't."

"I know," Cousland nodded with a sad smile, "I know but it never hurts to ask, isn't that right?"

"Right," Anders said looking away as Cousland turned to face him, hurriedly thinking of
something else to say, "I take it Alistair isn't going with you?"

"No," Anders could hear the numb element to the Commander's tone and wished that he hadn't
brought up such an obviously contentious topic, "no, he's heading back to Denerim on the Victory.
She's the flagship of the royal fleet. Make's this pile of wood and nails look a bit like a skiff."

Cousland laughed a little awkwardly and then stopped when he realised he was the only one doing
it. There was an awkward silence. Anders tightened his folded arms as the breeze gusted
momentarily into a strong wind. I shouldn't let it get to me, he thought as he squinted into the pale
sunlight, I only have so long left before things will have gone past the point of no return. I should
be savouring these moments, not waiting for them to end. It was as he lost himself in musings of
the revolution to come that Cousland interrupted his thoughts with a rather apt statement.

"I wish you wouldn't look like that," he said cryptically.

"What?" Anders looked to him more out of confusion than any great want to, "Look like what?"
"Like a man ready to die for his cause," Cousland said, sending a shiver up Anders' spine; the mage looked away once more, his eyes hard as Cousland continued, his voice subdued "I should know. I wore the same look myself once."

Anders didn't reply straight away. He let the thought settle in his mind and create something in response, a feeling more than words.

"Don't worry Commander," he said, unfolding his arms, "I'm not quite ready to die yet."

"...Well good," Cousland said.

The next thing he knew Anders was being pulled into a tight hug, strong arms wrapped around his lithe frame. Cousland had always been stronger than him but Anders felt as if he were having the air crushed bodily from his lungs. He pulled in a coughed breath and lifted his arms to return the embrace.

"Don't do anything fucking stupid while I'm gone," Cousland said before pulling back, holding Anders by the shoulders, his grin covering up the sorrow in his eyes, "or I'll be back here to give you a good bloody hiding, you hear me?"

"I hear you," Anders said, rubbing at his chest and shaking his head.

It was the second time he had stood and watched one of his closest friends sail away across the Waking Sea, unable to truly persuade himself to leave until the ship was out of sight. Such a sentimental fucking idiot, you really are, Anders thought harshly as he turned to walk back up the pier in the afternoon sunlight. So many gone, so few remain. I want to save them, all of them. Yet who is it I'm really saving with all of this talk of revolutions and bloodshed? Is it the mage's of Thedas, those I have sworn to protect, or is it myself?

As Anders reached the top of the stairs, still lost in thought, he bumped into someone, jostled to the side by the tall stranger's burly walk.

"Excuse me," he said absently, only reacting when the stranger took hold of his arm. Anders pulled back and instantly fell into a battle ready stance, his senses heightening and jumping to full alert. It was only as he finally got a good look at the stranger that he realised she wasn't really a stranger at all. The woman from the meeting, he thought as he remembered the doubtful words and the scar over her eye.

"I always said that they were a bunch of hypocrites," the woman said, making Anders blink as he checked around them for people who may be listening, "leaving like that just when things are getting difficult. But don't let it worry you. I'm with you, if no one else is."

With that she turned and began walking away as if she had never stopped. Anders blinked at her retreating back. When she turned again he couldn't help but listen.

"I'm Rayzla, by the way," she said with a sly grin, before once more turning and marching off towards the end of the Docks.

Anders watched her for a moment more before he shook himself and forced his legs to walk forwards. It wasn't until he had reached the main walkway, leading to the stairs that would take him to Lowtown, that he realised just how unbelievably happy her words had made him. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and simply smiled. He noticed a few people who passed him by giving him odd looks but he found it hard to care. You aren't alone in this, he thought, never think you're alone in this.
Yet, despite Rayzla's encouraging words, it was impossible to be truly content with the situation. Especially with the letter a burning presence in his left pocket.

He read it.

He read it again.

He folded it up tightly, dragging his nail along the creases, and placed it on the table. He waited a full minute before picking it up and opening it once more.

He read it again.

_Nice little dream you've got going here. So close and yet so far._

_Freedom with a bang, is that about right?_

_Shame that even though you can build it, you don’t know how to set it off._

The thick, blocky writing was a stark contrast to the elegant script on the front of the letter itself. It spoke of two authors, not just one. The language used seemed rather immature and blunt. It didn't mince words and Anders knew, in an instant, exactly what it was referring to. The Tevinter bomb; whoever they were they knew he was building it and they also obviously knew he was still having trouble translating the entire procedure. What they stated was entirely true. He had no idea exactly how to set off the bomb once it was complete. Exactly _how_ they knew all of this was another matter altogether but Anders was beginning to understand his visions and auditory hallucinations. Someone was manipulating him through the Fade. Another mage, Anders thought seriously, but _who_? It had been two weeks since Cousland's departure. Two weeks of waiting in vain for some sort of conclusion.

Yet despite the worry of this person, or perhaps persons, knowing of his plan, what Anders found the most distressing was the name scrawled on the front. Not just any name; _his_ name. A name he hadn't seen or heard in twenty years. The last time he had heard it...

_No let him go! Leif! Leif...!

Memories of long golden hair and grasping hands. Being pulled down a dirt track. Trying to get away...Anders opened his eyes, not realising he had closed them in the first place, the library coming back into view. He looked down to the letter on the table before pulling out the others which had arrived since the first. Disturbingly these had not been delivered as the other had but instead he had found them hidden around the house in places only he would look. He had found the second inside the pages of his Tevinter tome, marking out the page where he kept his translation. Anders had almost, for a moment, thought he was going mad, that he had put the first letter into the book himself and then forgotten. When he had opened it to find a completely different letter altogether he had felt a cold shiver down his spine. Two thoughts sprang to the forefront of his mind instantly; they were in my house and they know my secrets, all of them. Who are you? he thought anxiously. Who _are_ you?

Other than his name scrawled on the front the second letter had contained no further correspondence in red script; instead it contained a folded sheet of ancient, stained paper on which he found a hand written account by an unknown author, the small, neat handwriting almost illegible at times.

_Ancient Tevinter lore is hard to come by, but there's history to be had here in Kirkwall, the city once home to the Imperium's slave trade._
What answers does Kirkwall hold? Why look here instead of Perivantium or Vol Dorma? The Imperium does not give up its secrets easily. Even with the magisters centuries dead, our journey is perilous.

Here on the dock of the Gallows, we renew our vows. And should we fail, search for the markings of the Band of Three.

There was an odd symbol marking the final line and it was simply signed as The Band of Three. What it was supposed to mean Anders had no clue at the time. He had spent the entire day setting wards around the house when he was sure Hawke wasn't in. Yet the next day he had found one folded into the shirt he had put out the night before. When he checked the house in a panic he found that not a single ward had been disturbed. He had slipped back to the study, where he had begun to compile the letters he had gathered. Again there was no communication, only another tattered piece of paper.

The viscount is suspicious, but the bribe was sufficient to gain access to the restricted section of the archives. The money would have been better spent elsewhere, the archives being almost devoid of Imperium-era records.

When the slaves revolted, they hunted magisters and burned the city—at least the parts that could be burned. One account says that the streets were littered with piles of scrolls and books set aflame.

Is our quest futile? Did the slaves destroy the answer? As Maferath's armies toppled the Imperium, they sent three magisters and their legions here. They never arrived. But why march here of all places? What were they coming for?

The letters arrived, one each day, and continued to unfold a story of this mysterious Band of Three. Anders found that, after his initial disquiet, he began to await their arrival. After a week's worth of letters he began actively searching for them. Hawke had caught him a few times opening drawers in odd rooms and asked him if he had lost something. Anders had just said 'yes' and forced Hawke to leave it at that.

The story that was revealed through further letters spoke of the Band's continuing research into the importance of Kirkwall. The author explained that they thought the magisters perhaps settled in Kirkwall for the minerals contained within the hills more than for the military advantage of the harbour as was originally thought. The vast quarries the slaves were forced to dig made up most of the city now. They spoke of finding old relics among the black market of Kirkwall, tomes thought lost. Just like my own, Anders thought as he read the account of the nameless author, running his fingers of his right hand over the Tevinter tome. They spoke of the sewers and secret caches of lost Tevinter knowledge, of the disappearance of slaves on a vast scale, of Tevinter mages researching a lost art, of seeing the outlines of glyphs in the maps of Kirkwall. The final note he had received spoke of something which he had suspected himself for a while now.

It is well known that the Veil is thin in Kirkwall, small wonder given the suffering in the city. But we've discovered the magisters were deliberately thinning it even further. Beneath the city, demons can contact even normal men. Did they seek the Black City to compound the madness of their previous efforts? Or was it something else? We've found a chamber where the Veil is at its thinnest, long-since looted, but the power is still there. Tonight we will go there.

Pray for us. Pray for us all.

The memory of Fenris' mansion flooded back, making Anders wonder if the magister himself had perhaps known of this odd phenomenon when he bought the building in the first place. Yet the fear
in the faded words was what sparked his remembrance of that day he had visited Fenris with the Commander. The final words on the stained paper sent shivers up his spine. What is this place? Anders had thought as he read over the account again and again, what is it that Kirkwall holds deep in the bowels of the earth? It was only as he turned the note over to place it back into the envelope that he realised there were words scrawled in red on the other side. He read them with trepidation, almost afraid of what they would say.

Do you understand yet?

Perhaps you should try going home.

Home. As Anders read the word he could have sworn he could smell the smoky burning of a peat fire in the air. He had started so badly that he had dropped the letter altogether. It was only as he did so that he realised just how often he had been sensing things that reminded him of the vague memories he had of home lately. The smell of snow on the air despite it not being the right time of year, the smell of wood smoke despite there being no fire in the room. He began to wonder just which thoughts were his and which were seemingly being planted there. He hated to admit it but the thought scared him. Yet, despite his fear, the as yet unfinished tale of the Band of Three began to intrigue him more and more. The itch to find the truth behind this mystery was almost unbearable. How will it help us? Anders thought as he pondered the resistance and the bomb itself, how will it help set us free?

Perhaps you should try going home.

The words rang in his head until he was practically seeing the red letters scratched onto the backs of his eyelids while he slept. The thought was unnerving and yet, at the same time, somewhat exhilarating. It wasn't the first time he had thought about making the long journey to the Anderfels but something had always held him back. Now, with a purpose behind him, he began to wonder why he had been resisting this calling at all.

A week after the last letter arrived the snow started. It was a bitterly cold day. A day that seemed to symbolise more than it normally did for him; Hawke's birthday. He tended to think of it as an anniversary of sorts, even though it had been a few weeks before that date when they had truly become partners. Yet his first, true and admittedly drunken confession of love had come on Hawke's birthday, so he tended to think of it as a milestone. However, despite the importance it held for him, he hadn't had either the time or the wherewithal, what with the letters and the intrigue of the Band of Three, to think of or obtain a present. Instead he decided, however cheaply, to chip in to Varric's gift of a set of brand new daggers to replace the now ruined set Hawke had been left with after fighting the Arishok. He knew he should be paying more attention to the present but he was finding it increasingly difficult.

No one had shown themselves since the mysterious letters had stopped coming, not a hint of the stranger anywhere. Yet Anders had continued to feel observed and, occasionally, he thought he could hear a girlish voice on the air when water ran in the background or the wind blew through the gaps under the door. During that time he had re-read the letters countless times, hoping to find some overlooked clue as to the authors identity. Yet nothing was apparent. The yellowed parchment was fairly thin but strong, the ink was an odd shade of red but he wasn't sure what either of these things meant. The pages on which the account of the Band was written were too old and worn to bother trying to identify. He wished that he could show them all to someone he trusted for an opinion, like Varric, but he knew that as soon as the dwarf saw the name and the mention of secret research that he would become curious as to why Anders had it in the first place and then...well he didn't want to have to explain himself.
As if everything else hadn't been going to the dogs, Hawke had also been difficult to deal with over the past three weeks. The day after Cousland had left Hawke had demanded that Anders talk to him about Justice and, by escaping to the clinic and only returning after he was sure Hawke would be asleep, Anders had managed to delay that unpleasantness until the day after. He had hoped that he would have been able to awaken before Hawke, as he usually did, but unfortunately his body was simply too tired to awake at seven. When his eyes had fluttered open he found the other side of the bed empty. He had lain there, staring at it as if it were some sort of ill omen, until Hawke had returned to the bedroom with a pot of tea. The rogue had set it on the bedside table, poured him a cup and then sat down on the side of the bed and looked at him expectantly. Anders had sipped the hot liquid, sitting up against the headboard, savouring the warmth while he thought of something to say.

"How long has it been this bad?" Hawke had eventually asked when it became clear that Anders wasn't going to speak.

From then on Anders had forced himself to tell Hawke the truth. He deserves the truth from you, Anders had reasoned, he deserves to know just what sort of man he shares his bed with. He would admit that it had frightened him, telling Hawke about his struggle with Justice, how he had slowly realised that the spirit was becoming more forceful and more influential, that more and more he was having difficulty telling their thoughts apart and, most of all, that it had been going on for a long time now. When Anders admitted that things had been bad enough on Hawke's twenty third birthday the rogue had looked at him as if he didn't know him anymore. The thought caused a blossom of pain to open in his chest.

"I'm sorry, love. I'm sorry I kept this from you," Anders had said plaintively, setting his tea on the bedside table as he pulled his legs up towards him for warmth, "I just...I just didn't want to believe that it was true."

"It's alright," Hawke had said, yet Anders could hear in the tightness of his voice that he wasn't being wholly truthful, "I'm here and you're here, that's what is important. There will be time for us to figure out how to undo this...this union."

"Hawke, it's not that simple," Anders had retorted, looking imploringly at his lover; please don't make me think you're only staying with me because you think that one day I'll change, he thought, please, "don't you think that if it were possible to separate us that people would have been doing it already instead of simply killing abominations?"

"I don't know," Hawke had replied a little darkly, observing Anders closely, "all I know is that there's an antidote to every poison."

That comment had gone down as well as could be expected. Pushing Justice back after he reacted viscerally to Hawke's implication of his nature was a feat unto itself. Anders would admit that he could tell Justice had also been unhappy with Anders frankness in relation to their problems which had also put the spirit on edge. Hawke had lunged forwards to capture Anders in his arms, even as the mage struggled in anger to get away.

"You can't do this Hawke," Anders had cried, "you can't provoke him like this! Why? Why do you do it! Don't you see what it does to me?"

"I can do it and I will," Hawke had said, holding Anders still, his eyes fervent, "because he needs to see that you're mine and I'm yours and that this life has nothing to do with him."

Once more Hawke's naivety was somewhat of a hindrance. Anders had wished Hawke could understand him better but then, deep down, he didn't really blame him. Why would Hawke
understand? Why would anyone understand? Being joined to a consciousness in the way Anders was to Justice wasn't as simple as any mortal companionship; they were one, whole, a union of mind, body and soul. There was no way he could expect Hawke to realise that he didn't really know in himself what was Anders and what was Justice anymore.

Talking about Justice had been like his own personal inquisition. He felt accountable on so many levels for so many different things; the deaths and the misery, not being able to save those he loved, not being able to love Hawke the way he should. It's not something I look forward to doing again anyway, Anders thought as he brooded over their talk about Justice. He once more folded the letter and put it back into his pocket. The only thing I thought it had been good for was to distract Hawke from the letter and that didn't even work. Anders had been so sure that Hawke had been sufficiently distracted by Justice's foul temper to forget that Bodahn had delivered him a letter at all. Instead Anders had returned home only a week ago to find Hawke sitting by the fire with a familiar piece of parchment in his hands. Anders had frozen on seeing the seemingly innocent scene; at once he had been desperate to rush forwards and grab the letter away from Hawke's hands as he watched the rogue's eyes follow the lines of text, yet he couldn't bring himself to. It would be too suspicious. Instead he had swallowed down his irrational fear that Hawke would somehow know of his plans, and approached him. Hawke had looked up at his advance and smiled at him, albeit a little firmly, before asking exactly what Anders had feared he would.

"Who's Leif Rødberg?" Hawke had asked, making Anders mind race.

"Why are you reading my letters?" Anders had retorted.

"It was just sitting on the desk," Hawke said casually yet too quickly to be entirely believed, "and you haven't answered my question."

"He's...an old friend," Anders said tersely, "you don't know him."

"Then why are you receiving his letters?" Hawke had frowned.

"Someone wanted them passed on to him," Anders had shrugged, taking the letter back as casually as he could when Hawke offered it, "and I'd be grateful if you wouldn't read them Hawke. They're private." And there was formed yet another bone of contention that had been wedged between them. Anders couldn't give it the attention that he should have as he was too preoccupied with making sure Hawke didn't find the other letters and the rather worrying account held within their pages.

The others had been easier to deal with, at least marginally. Merrill was simply overjoyed to have Anders forgive her indiscretion in talking with Cousland and, as things were still a little fraught with Hawke, he had been spending a lot of time with her. She had even begun accompanying him to the clinic most days when she didn't have other duties to attend to. Anders had been grateful for her support, it meant a lot to him to know that he still had friends.

Varric had been a little trickier. Anders usually loved Varric's quick wit and keen eye for detail but when it was directed at him he couldn't help but resent it. The mage had visited the Hanged Man a few times but, on each occasion, Varric had managed to steer the conversation towards Anders' conduct at the meeting.

"For a minute I thought you were really going to lose it there Blondie," Varric had said with a concerned look, "I mean, here I was thinking you'd be happy to have the Ferelden King welcoming you all with open arms but instead you seem ready to instigate a full scale rebellion. Am I right or not?"
Anders hadn't visited Varric since he had voiced his very astute observation. In contrast to both Merrill and Varric, he had only encountered Fenris once. He had bumped into the elf at Lowtown market while gathering herbs and information from Lirene. Thankfully the elf had no real idea as to the turmoil in his mind or his life, not in the same sense as the others did, and so had fallen back on simplicity instead.

"Actually I just wondered if you were alright," Fenris had shrugged nonchalantly as if to say that it didn't really bother him either way, as he always did when inquiring after Anders wellbeing, "considering last time I saw you, you looked as if your head was about to explode."

Ironically it had been the most pleasant of his friendly encounters since the meeting. Fenris, he had found once he got to know him a little better, was really very down to earth. Most of the time his black and white attitude grated on Anders' nerves but, at times like this, he greatly appreciated the elf's candour. He had dismissed his own problems as insignificant, which Fenris accepted with ease, and instead asked the elf how things were going in the search for his sister. It served as a refreshing distraction, being able to ask someone else about their problems for a change. Fenris had sighed and continued to pick through the assortment of wares at the weaponsmithy.

"Not well," Fenris had said, "it's difficult enough obtaining information from the Imperium as it is and, despite that, I already have to be clandestine in my efforts so as to avoid Denarius' ever watchful eye. I am not fool enough to think that he wouldn't use a situation like this to his advantage."

They had walked together for a short while, sometimes in thoughtful silence and sometimes discussing ideas for obtaining news of Fenris' lost sibling. Anders found it an entirely soothing exercise. Silences with Fenris were not as they had once been; they weren't accusing, as with Hawke, or awkward, as with Varric. The elf was an entirely judgemental being, Anders would never fool himself into thinking that wasn't true, but he was also rather compassionate beneath all his aloofness and his bigotry.

Anders had purposefully been spending the mainstay of his free time at the clinic, partly to distract himself from the continuing feeling of watchfulness and partly to keep Justice away from Hawke. In the process, however, he had managed to virtually estrange himself from the man in question, only seeing him once or twice a day. He had done such a good job of keeping them apart that, when he had asked Hawke the day before what he was planning to do for his birthday, the man had replied that the noble families had discovered his celebration and had decided to throw him a get-together. Hawke said that he'd tried to refuse but that his protests were not heeded in the slightest.

"I didn't think you'd want to go," Hawke had shrugged when Anders hadn't said anything in reply.

"And you were right," Anders had smirked dryly, "I suppose we can have our own party another time, hmm?"

Anders knew that Hawke wasn't stupid enough to miss the guilt and the hurt in the mage's eyes. Yet neither said a thing. Anders knew that he had purposefully been pushing them apart and yet he hadn't truly thought of the consequences until that moment. He had spent the whole day at the clinic, distracting himself from thoughts of Hawke, and returned to find the mansion empty. He wandered around for a little while, trying to dispel the hollow feeling that mirrored the mansion's emptiness.

He remembered that Bodahn had taken Sandal on a short trip to Cumberland, a large city to the west, to meet with some fellow traders who had been on an expedition to the Korcari Wilds. Apparently there were some things Bodahn wished to purchase from them, for Sandal's benefit more than his own. Hawke had been happy to let them go, as he had with Oranna when he had
basically ordered her to go out of the house and do something fun and enjoyable for once. When
the poor girl had seemed stricken at the idea of going out alone Hawke had asked Merrill for help.
Anders wasn't sure if Hawke knew that Merrill didn't get out much herself, what with working on
the mirror and being terribly shy, but he had declined to interfere. The two girls had ventured out
just before Anders had left. He hoped that they wouldn't get into too much trouble.

The library was too quiet and it reminded him of Hawke. It made him think back to the time
Hawke had hidden him here from Alrik and his men. Anders ran his hand over the books in the
false bookcase. You saved me then, he thought bleakly, you always save me and yet all I can do is
hurt you in my efforts to save you. He rummaged through the books for another few minutes
before grabbing one and leaving through the door on the upper landing to head to the sitting room.
It had already grown dark. Anders lit the gas lamps and set about clearing out the fire. Without
Bodahn or Oranna around he had found himself cleaning out the fires himself, not that he minded
too much. Yes it was messy and laborious, and the coal and wood ashes puffed into the air and
made him sneeze, but he enjoyed setting the new fire alight. Placing the delicate kindling over the
crumpled twists of parchment and coals, watching it burn almost timidly at first before the fire
really caught, then watching it greedily devour the paper and wood, adding smaller logs and sitting
back to see his handiwork turn from a pile of inanimate objects into something that seemed almost
alive.

He sat back in the armchair by the fireplace and sighed as the warmth began to spread out into the
room. He had donned Hawke's thick woollen jumper to stave off the chill in the air and had even
purloined the rogue's travelling blanket from the cupboard in the bedroom, which he now pulled
over his legs. He began reading the book he had brought, a heavy tome on the history of Kirkwall
which he hoped to be able to glean some facts from that might support or contradict the account of
the Band of Three, but found that he was rereading sentences over and over simply because he
wasn't paying enough attention. He couldn't stop thinking about Hawke. It was half past ten before
the door to the living room creaked open and then clicked closed.

"Well you're back early," Anders said as he pretended to read his book, "did you have fun?"

No reply, yet he could hear Hawke walk across the floorboards to stand by his armchair. Been
drinking have we? Anders thought as he closed the book and placed on the table by the lantern.

"Hawke did you hear..?" Anders stopped talking when he looked up and saw Hawke's face.

He was wearing his finest clothes. A heavy crimson coat of fine twill rimmed with black and silver
thread, a red silk shirt festooned with the Amell crest, tight, black cotton trousers and elegant shoes
of leather and gold. He looked every inch the gentleman he was supposed to be and yet, when
Anders looked at him, all he could see was the same earnest young man he had met four years ago.
The look of sheer epiphany on Hawke's face made him hold his tongue and wait for the rogue to
speak.

"I was talking to Lady Harrimont, at the party," Hawke said, all of a sudden, "you don't know her,
but I saved her husband a long time ago from the group I used to run with, the Red Iron. She's been
staying in Kirkwall while he lives in exile. Did you know they've been married for forty three
years? They've spent forty three years together and yet she says that she misses him every day.
Every day, Anders."

As Hawke said his name he reached down and pulled Anders out of the chair, holding him tightly.
Anders wasn't sure what to think. He found his arms trapped in between them, folded at the elbow
with both palms resting against Hawke's broad chest. He looked at Hawke in astonishment, able to
smell the alcohol on his breath as the rogue continued to talk.
"She doesn't even have him by her side, and yet every day I have you here beside me and I let you drift away," Hawke said earnestly, making Anders feel guilty all over again.

"Hawke I..." Anders started but Hawke cut him off effectively; he leaned forwards and captured his lips in a rather sloppy and drunken kiss. He tasted of smooth wine with a hint of whiskey tang.

He hadn't realised until that moment just how far apart he had pushed them in the last three weeks. He and Hawke hadn't kissed this freely since the night of the mage's meeting. He found himself melting into Hawke's embrace as the rogue slipped his left hand down to the small of Anders' back and pulled their bodies flush against each other. When they broke apart both men were panting for breath.

"No, no more apologies," Hawke said without spite, "no more words Anders, no more promises. I was standing there all night at that stupid party because I was angry at you, because I was fed up of you forcing me away, when I could have been here with you instead. I don't want to talk Anders, all I want," Hawke leaned in and kissed him fiercely, pulling back only slightly so as to talk once more, "is you," another kiss, "here with me," his mouth trailed Anders' jaw, making the mage gasp as Hawke bit playfully at this earlobe, before breathing hot and wet into his ear, 'all night. Just us."

Anders didn't think he'd ever heard a better offer. He forced his arms out from in between them and circled them around Hawke's shoulders. He wanted to say that he was sorry, he wanted to tell Hawke why he had been so secretive lately, he wanted to promise that it would never happen again. Yet Hawke had already said that he wanted none of these things. For the first time since they had met Anders thought that he may understand Hawke's need to speak through the deeds of the flesh more than promises and pleas. He wondered if Hawke somehow saw actions as more powerful than words; actions were physical and could not be taken back, unlike words spoken in haste. So instead of trying to woo Hawke or cajole him, Anders simply whispered into Hawke's ear.

"Yes, my love," he said, "for you, anything."

He swiftly found his lips once more devoured. Hawke was slightly unsteady on his feet and he stumbled a little, forcing Anders back towards the chair. His desire was obvious to Anders through the thin, tight material of his trousers, digging insistently into his hip. He's just drunk, a bitter and unhelpful part of him tried to say, he won't even remember any of this by morning. Yet the other half of him couldn't help but soak up the loving feeling that emanated from Hawke's honesty. Anders turned them round slowly before pushing Hawke into the armchair. The rogue fell a little ungracefully into the padded chair and blinked as Anders leaned down to capture his lips once more.

This is real, Anders thought as he felt Hawke's tongue slipping past his lips. He'd spent so long focusing on the ethereal happenings over the past few weeks that he was rather absorbed by the reality of the feeling of Hawke on his body. He wasted no time in sliding Hawke's coat off his shoulders to pool around his waist, then working quickly to undo the taught buttons on the front of his trousers. Hawke moaned into his mouth, breaking away with a gasp of pleasure as Anders freed his already rigid cock form the confines of his constricting clothes. The mage dropped to his knees in between Hawke's open legs and, without giving Hawke a chance to speak or even to open his eyes, took the stiff flesh into his mouth.

"Anders fuck...!" Hawke keened, his hips jerking from the chair; Anders gagged as Hawke forced himself too far and drew back, taking hold of the feverish rogue's hip with his left hand. Hawke groaned as Anders trailed his tongue from the base to the tip before once more taking the head between his lips. Once Anders was sure he wouldn't move too violently he began to move slowly
up and down the shaft, his right hand trailing light touches over the base. Hawke continued to pant and groan seemingly random pleas and obscenities before a heavy hand threaded through his hair, the fingers massaging soft patterns on his scalp. Anders hummed appreciatively, making Hawke's breath stutter and the hand in his hair try and encourage him to move faster. Anders complied, laving his tongue over the thick cock in his mouth as he moved back and forth. His own arousal was becoming harder and harder to ignore as it built as a coil of heat and stiffness in his own underclothes.

Just as he heard Hawke's telltale breathing, fast and shallow, he pulled back entirely. Hawke let out a sound of loss and opened his eyes to look at Anders in confusion. Oh don't worry, Anders thought, I'm not quite finished yet. He took Hawke in his fist and, as he stared into his lover's eyes, let a small amount of magic flow to his fingertips. He watched in satisfaction as Hawke's body went rigid as he let a rush of static sparks flare out from his hand to engulf his pulsing member. Hawke's eyes snapped shut, his teeth clenched, and let out a long, guttural cry of ecstasy as he came rather violently over his shirt and the arm of the chair. Anders massaged the softening flesh in his hand while Hawke lay gasping for breath, his body essentially boneless. After a full minute Hawke finally opened his eyes and stared at the slyly smiling mage between his legs.

"You..." Hawke said breathily, "have been keeping that one quiet."

"I thought that it was worth saving for a special occasion," Anders shrugged; he let go of Hawke as the man pushed up out of the chair, instantly going to his knees and enveloping Anders with his arms and a passionate kiss. The heat of the fire was soothing and welcome as Hawke pushed Anders down onto the hearthrug, letting a hand trail up under the mage's jumper and shirt to run teasing trails across his abdomen. It was as Hawke let his other hand trail down into Anders trousers that the rogue broke the kiss.

"You're so beautiful," Hawke said as he looked down into Anders' half lidded, amber eyes, his face flushed; he continued to work the mage inside his trousers with his fingers until Anders was groaning and writhing in need. Hawke leaned down to kiss at his neck and lave at the sensitive flesh; he withdrew his hands from inside Anders clothes. The mage had expected him to begin undressing him but, instead, Hawke knelt up and began pulling at his own clothes.

"Hawke, what are you doing?" Anders started to ask, leaning up on his forearms.

"I just thought," Hawke said in a lust filled daze, "that maybe you'd want to, you know..."

"Want to what?" Anders asked with lustful impatience, the heat in his groin swiftly becoming an ache.

"You know," Hawke said as he pulled down his trousers and his underwear with them, "do me."

At first, even with desire clouding his senses, Anders hadn't been sure if he'd heard Hawke correctly. Hawke? Domineering, officious, forceful Hawke was offering himself to him? Anders almost didn't believe it until Hawke, now naked from the waist down, climbed on top of him and freed Anders erection from its confines.

"It's been a while," Hawke said as he kissed the mystified mage, "so you might want to go easy on me, alright?"

"Hawke," Anders said, accepting another kiss before he lifted his hands to take the rogue's sweat shined face in his palms; Hawke looked down at him expectantly, "you don't have to do this, if you don't...I mean..."
"It's alright, really, I want to," Hawke said with a small smile, "I trust you Anders, more than anyone."

And, through the need and the desire, Hawke's confession stung at Anders conscience. He trusts you and yet you can't even tell him the whole truth about yourself. You hide things from him even after you promise yourself that you'll never lie to him again. Anders tried to push the thoughts away as he watched Hawke suck his fore and middle finger into his mouth before he reached back and, to Anders gratification, awkwardly slid the slicked digits up inside himself. Fuck that's hot, Anders thought with a surprised moan as he watched Hawke prepare himself. The mage leaned up and capture Hawke's lips, drinking in the other man's panted breaths. After a few minutes Hawke finally brought his hand back round and sat up, straddling Anders' thighs. Of course, Anders thought with a small amount inner amusement as he watched Hawke raise himself up and take hold of Anders, guiding himself down, I would never have expected someone as dominant as Hawke not to be on top.

When Hawke finally lowered himself down all logical thought fled Anders' mind. All he could think, all he could feel, was the hot and incredibly tight heat surrounding him. He watched Hawke as the man lowered himself a stage at a time, his teeth clenched and brow furrowed in concentration and pain. Anders reached up with his right hand and flattened it against Hawke's thigh, letting a small amount of soothing magic flow through Hawke's system to lessen the ache the rogue was bound to be feeling. He was glad to see the look of pain fade from Hawke's features, the man's eyes slitting open to watch Anders for a moment before he impaled himself fully with a loud grunt. Anders couldn't help the cry of bliss he let escape as he was fully enveloped. Hawke took control of the pace, lifting himself slowly up and lowering himself back down as Anders panted and groaned beneath him. The muscles in Hawke's strong thighs rippled in the firelight as he steadily increased the speed. When Anders looked down Hawke's body he realised, to his astonishment, that Hawke was once again already semi erect. He reached up and took hold of Hawke once more as the rogue leaned forwards and began pushing back and forth onto him.

"Maker you feel...so good." Hawke moaned as Anders began to pump Hawke in time with the rogue's own jerking thrusts, "inside, yes, oh fuck yes."

Anders once more let the magic flow to his hand and spur Hawke into full hardness, the rogue growling like an animal as he tightened around Anders almost involuntarily. The mage closed his eyes in ecstasy and let out a soft whimper of elation.

"Please, Hawke," Anders said faintly as Hawke increased the speed once more until he was driving back against Ander's pelvis with the slap of flesh meeting flesh, "I can't...anymore, I'm going to..!

It was all the warning he could give. Hawke drove back against him and Anders screamed his completion into the silent, night air while Hawke once more spurted his seed in between their tightly pressed bodies. Anders mind was a joyful blank as he rode out the waves of thick, hot, rapture flowing through his veins.

Eventually Hawke fell forwards onto him in exhaustion, forcing Anders to slide out of him at the change of angle. Hawke let out a soft groan at the feeling and let himself go limp, his body a heavy, crushing weight against Anders' already breathless chest. Only when Anders began to struggle beneath him did Hawke seem to notice. He pulled himself up onto unsteady forearms and looked down at him.

"Sorry," he said absently, before rolling off of the gasping mage to lie on his back beside him before the fire.

They lay like that for what seemed an endless and entirely peaceful amount of time, until Anders
breathing slowed and the sweat began to cool on his skin. Eventually he managed to push himself up and pulled off the heavy jumper he still wore, now too hot for the heavy garment. His shirt stuck to him disagreeably but he couldn't find the presence of mind to care as he lay back down on his side and snuggled against Hawke, his arm thrown over the rogue's chest. Hawke was rather unpleasantly sticky but Anders ignored it in favour of feeling the rising and falling of Hawke's chest. The soft rumble of appreciation Hawke made when Anders kissed at his collarbone vibrated against his palm.

"That was," Hawke said sleepily, after another unidentifiable lapse of time, "surprisingly enjoyable."

"Hmm, what are you trying to say?" Anders murmured against Hawke's shoulder, "doubting my abilities now were you?"

"Ha, of course not," Anders shifted around to allow Hawke to bring his right arm up and wrap it around the mage's shoulders, "it's just I've only done it a few times and I'll admit I never found it that pleasant."

"Are you trying to say that I give the best birthday presents?" Anders grinned half heartedly as Hawke chuckled.

"Mmm, yes you could say that," Hawke said with an amused sigh.

There was another break in the conversation, yet this time Anders found the silence rather oppressive. Mainly because he knew that he should speak. As the afterglow faded his feeling of responsibility rose once more. You love him, Anders reasoned with his unreasonable nature, you trust him, so just tell him for the Maker's sake!

"Hawke," he said, receiving only a sleepy mumble in reply; this really isn't the best time to do this, is it, Anders thought, "Hawke there's something I need to tell you."

"Mmm?" Hawke said as Anders pushed up onto his forearm.

"It's important Hawke," Anders said seriously, yet the rogue's eyes still stayed annoyingly shut; Anders took a deep breath and decided it was about time that they both started calling each other by their names, "please Garret."

Hawke's eyes blinked open and he looked up at Anders in confusion, as if he had been expecting to see someone different altogether. After a terse moment of silence Hawke smiled up at him. He reached up with a clumsy hand and trailed it down Anders bicep.

"You never call me that," he said, yet thankfully Anders thought he seemed happy at the change; Hawke let out a chuff of amused laughter, "I can't help it, whenever I hear my name spoken like that I always think I'm getting into trouble. Anyway, what's the special occasion eh?"

Looking into Hawke's open and trusting face took the edge off of Anders' apprehension. He swallowed, looked up towards the fire and then began to speak.

"You know the other week, when you asked me about that letter I received?" Anders said, waiting until Hawke nodded in confirmation, "You wanted to know who Leif Rødberg was and I told you that he was an old friend you didn't know?"

Hawke nodded again, only this time a little less blithely. There was a sudden hardness to his features that spoke of nervousness.
"When I said that you didn't know him, well..." Anders hesitated, "that's only half true."

"Really?" Hawke said, his eyebrows raised as if he hadn't been expecting Anders to say that at all, "Then who is he?"

Anders looked away from the fire and into Hawke's earnest eyes.

"He's me," he said simply, noting the rogue's blank look.

"He's..." Hawke breathed out, a frown deepening on his brow, "but you said that I didn't...

"Know him? No, you don't know him and you never will," Anders said genuinely, even as Hawke propped himself up on his forearm so they were at eye level, "Leif Rødberg died a long time ago. There's very little of him left, if anything at all truly survived. He's more of a...memory now. Something I'm not sure if I want to truly remember or not."

Well this is something new, Anders thought as an odd feeling surged through his mind, I've never let anyone this close before. I've never told anyone these things, these things I tell you Hawke. The rogue in question continued to watch him for a moment before he simply lay back down on the rug. Anders felt a spike of anxiety at Hawke's lack of response. Everything else seemed to flood out in a rush.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry," he said quickly, "I haven't received only one of those letters, but almost a dozen now and they know things about me Hawke, things I've never spoken of to anyone, and I need to know who sent them and I need to go home..."

"Go home?" Hawke said as if to himself, "What, to Ferelden?"

"No," Anders said impatiently, "to the Anderfels."

"The Anderfels?" Hawke said incredulously, "That's over a thousand miles away!"

"I know, I know but you don't understand!" Anders said pleadingly, "They know things Hawke, they know who I am and I need to know who they are...!"

"Shh, love, shh it's alright," Hawke said, shaking his head as Anders slowly stopped his tirade, swallowing down the words trying desperately to get out of his throat, "this is all just...a little too much for me to take in right now. I...need some sleep. We both do. We'll talk about it in the morning, okay?"

Anders nodded, even as he wished he could simply tell Hawke everything straight away and get rid of the awful weight on his chest, share the burden. Instead he and Hawke left the mess of clothes behind them and wandered, together, through the cold hallway, out through the library and up the stairs until they were in the bedroom. Anders undressed while Hawke slid sleepily under the covers. The sheets were cold as Anders, dressed only in a nightshirt, slipped in and curled up beside Hawke. Despite the rather tumultuous night they had shared, however, Hawke still seemed more than happy to wrap Anders in his arms and hold him close. Anders revelled in the feeling while it lasted, hoping that tomorrow he could at least be more coherent and calm, for Hawke's sake if not for his own.
Farewell

There was a time, what felt like only yesterday, when he had looked into the mirror and a youthful, carefree face had stared back. No lines around the eyes, no grey hair forming almost seamlessly through the lustrous golden blonde; skin firm and smooth, not slack and a little dull.

Birthdays were becoming more and more depressing every year. Before all of this, being joined with a spirit, being actively passionate about the revolution, being in constant danger every day of discovery and death, or worse, he had never truly noticed any of these seemingly radical changes in his appearance. He hadn't even noticed birthdays, as such, except as a tool to track his age. Now, as his thirty third year loomed at the end of the week, he felt suddenly old. As if, the last time he checked, he had been seventeen, on the run and without a care in the world.

A small, red spider began crawling tirelessly up the mirror's edge. Anders watched it for a while, its delicate legs shifting one after the other over the rough sided glass. He heard a crow cawing in the garden, it's coarse, abrasive call harsh against the pervading silence. The dark haze of early morning obscured the snow clouds, leaving the room in pervasive shadow. The air was bitterly chill against his face and hands. Reflected in the mirror the window showed small flurries of snow twirling past the glass, illuminated by the lantern on the windowsill. Winter had descended early on Kirkwall. The snow lay in the streets and the birds flocked north en masse, as if startled at the sudden chill in the air and the wind.

Not exactly the best time for travelling, I'll admit, Anders thought as he continued to stare into the mirror, but it's not as if I have much choice. It had been a further three weeks since Hawke's birthday and everything was in the final stages of preparation. I can't believe I'm really doing this, he thought as he stood from the chair by the dressing table and wandered across the bedroom to look down onto the bed. Madam was curled in a tight ball at the foot of the bed, his small body nestled into the folds in the thick duvet. Hawke lay under the covers, only the top half of his head visible, his hair scattered about his eyes and over the pillows. Anders smiled softly as he remembered telling Hawke of his plans.

"Alright, let me get this straight," Hawke had said as he stared at Anders, seated across from him at the dining table as they ate, "you have been receiving basically threatening letters from an unknown woman, or as far as you know it's a woman, trying to lure you in with vague promises of help and perhaps dangerous magic and, on top of that, you think that they may be manipulating you maliciously through the Fade in order to get you to go home? And you want to listen to them?"

"Well, when you say it like that," Anders had said sardonically, "it makes it sound like I'm walking blindly into a trap with my eyes closed."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't want to exaggerate now would I," Hawke had replied just as dryly.

"I'm going, Hawke, and there's nothing you can say that will change my mind," Anders had said staunchly.

"You know what? I should be able to argue with that and yet I know I'll never get anywhere," Hawke had said furiously, "This is crazy Anders, give me one good reason why should I agree with this lunacy?"

"Because you love me," Anders had said, knowing that it was a low shot to pull, "and because I need this, more than I can maybe ever explain."
"For fuck's sake," Hawke had muttered, shaking his head and sighing roughly; there had been a 
tense few minutes silence before Hawke seemed to change tack, "and I can't believe you didn't tell 
me that someone has obviously been creeping around our house without our knowledge! I know 
what you're like Anders, I know you like to play things close to your chest, but this is ridiculous!"

"I didn't want to..." Anders had started.

"Worry me, yes, I know," Hawke had said tightly, rubbing his face with his right hand, "honestly, 
you'd think that worrying was a terrible thing the way you talk about it. Why can't I worry about 
you? It's what people who care about each other do, they worry."

"Tell me about it," Anders had said with a snort, "I think I do enough worrying for the both of us 
Hawke, so just leave it to me will you? Anyway, you won't have to concern yourself. I'll write 
every day so that you know I'm alright and I know you won't be able to write back but..."

"What?" Hawke had locked eyes with him, a deep frown marring his forehead, "You'll write?"

"Well, yes," Anders had said a little uncertainly, "I mean, unless you'd rather I didn't..."

"Who the fuck are you going to be writing to?" Hawke had said in irritation, "Considering I'll be 
right next to you the whole time I think it would be more prudent to just talk to me, don't you?"

For a whole minute afterwards Anders hadn't been able to speak coherently, simply jumble half 
finished sentences with half finished questions. Hawke's revelation was something which, in 
hindsight, he should have been expecting and yet it had taken him entirely by surprise. After 
receiving the myriad of letters and after sorting through his thoughts and feelings and realising that 
he could find no evil intent, he had made up his mind and decided that the only rational thing to do 
would be to head to the Anderfels as soon as possible. Yet, after long deliberation with himself, he 
had already come to terms with the fact that he would be going alone. To find out that Hawke was 
willing to take on this rather momentous journey with him...it made him smile to think of it now. 
He had tried his best to talk Hawke out of it at the time, reminding him that he had duties here, he 
was Champion now, that his sister needed him, that Kirkwall needed him.

"Bethany knows how to take care of herself, I'll have Cullen looking out for her while I'm gone,"
Hawke had said reasonably, as if employing the Knight captain of Kirkwall was an easy feat, "and 
as far as Kirkwall is concerned, don't be so stupid. You are more important to me than this bloody 
city will ever be. I'm sure Aveline can keep the peace until I return."

That had been that, as far as Hawke was concerned. So bloody practical and decisive, Anders 
thought as he continued to smile at the sleeping man. He sat down on the edge of the bed carefully. 
The last three weeks had been a rather frantic mess of preparation. Anders was committed to 
getting the expedition underway as soon as possible and, as such, had begun hastily compiling a list 
of things they would need. The list, it turned out, was rather extensive. Two sturdy horses, fully 
equipped, horse blankets, saddle bags, food provisions, pots and pans, a pot stand, a tent, thick 
blankets, travelling packs, winter clothes, gloves, hats...it went on from there. Hawke had already 
told Anders that there would be more than enough money for everything but Anders had begun to 
doubt it as the list grew longer. Hawke, however, had simply laughed at his doubts.

"And you were all worried that I wouldn't even have enough money to pay for Fenris' mansion,"
Hawke had said when Anders had looked amazed at the thought of Hawke being able to afford all 
of the equipment, "you really have no idea just how much I have saved, do you?"

Hawke hadn't bothered to inform him as to just how much money the rogue had managed to 
acquire and Anders was too polite to ask. Instead he simply handed over the list which Hawke took
gratefully off his hands and, after adding a few things of his own and crossing off some things he thought they wouldn't need, traipsed out into the light winter snow with Varric to do some shopping.

"I know all the best places," Varric had shrugged when Anders asked why he had volunteered to accompany Hawke, continuing with a wink, "and all the best discounts, at that."

The others had been, admittedly, a little shocked to hear of the trip but in the mainstay seemed to take it fairly well. Merrill had been worried, both that something might happen to them on the way and also that she would be left in Kirkwall on her own. Anders had felt a little guilty at that but reminded her that she still had Varric to look out for her and Bodahn and Sandal were always there if she needed anything.

"Right Daisy," Varric had said, shaking away the look of shock from his face as they sat in his suite at the Hanged Man, "and it's only for a little while I'm guessing?"

"Well," Anders had said, sipping the hot milk, honey and rum that Varric had ordered for him, "it might take quite a while. I've done some basic calculations and it looks like maybe about three months there and back, give or take a few days."

"It's a long way," Aveline had said with a shake of her head, "are you sure it's wise, considering the rising tensions due to mage uprisings throughout the land."

"I hardly think mages will be the biggest problem we have," Anders had shrugged, smiling as Aveline rolled her eyes, "and anyway, we won't be looking for diversions. There and back, that's the plan."

"I see," Varric had said with a whistle, "well then, if you need anything for the trip, then you know I'm more than happy to help. Or maybe if you need things...kept an eye on, I'm your man. If you get my drift."

"I get you Varric," Anders had smiled softly while Hawke played with the mage's fingers underneath the table, "and I appreciate it. Really, I do."

Then, once the initial shock was over with, the elf and the dwarf and the Guard Captian had set about asking him all sorts of questions about his past, ranging from embarrassing to mundane to things he would never answer. He had told them as much as he had revealed to Hawke. That he was brought up in the Anderfels, after which he was discovered by the templars and taken to the Circle in Ferelden. Of course ever sharp Varric, unlike Hawke, had picked up on the obvious discrepancy straight away and jumped on it like a mabari on a bone.

"But why Ferelden of all places?" Varric asked, "I mean, the Hossberg Circle is far closer surely. Why did they cart you half way across Thedas just to put you in another Circle tower?"

"Because..." Anders had felt Hawke's curious eyes on him as he twined their fingers together, "because I escaped from Hossberg four months after they took me there."

"And? I mean are they really so impatient with the mages who escape that, if they do, they simply dump them as a problem onto another Circle?" Varric had scoffed.

"No, it wasn't only that," Anders had said, glancing at Hawke and then away again as he strayed into the territory of things he'd rather not talk about, "it was because the only reason I escaped that first time was so I could get back home. I almost made it too, all the way back to Nordbotten. They thought that...if they took me away, so far away that there was no way I could possibly get back,
that it would deter me from escaping at all."

He felt Hawke squeeze his fingers tightly, warmly, and returned the action. The irony of the templar's plans never failed to amuse him, albeit a little darkly. Carting him off to Ferelden just so he was nowhere near his mother had never deterred him from his determination to escape; in fact, it had only galvanised his will and made him resolute and indomitable in his want to be free.

It had only been as they set out to inform everyone as to their plans that Anders inquired after Isabela. It was as he asked Hawke if he knew where she was that he realised she hadn't even come to check on Hawke after the Qunari attack and his infamous duel with the Arishok. When he stated that it had been a while since he'd seen her, Hawke looked a little uncomfortable.

"What? What's wrong?" Anders asked, feeling confused at Hawke's disquiet.

"Actually, I have something to tell you about Isabela..." Hawke had sighed.

So Hawke told him everything. About the relic's true purpose, about the truth behind the Qunari attack, about Isabela's inevitable betrayal despite Hawke swearing to protect her.

"In a way, I'll admit, I'm not really surprised," Anders had said, "why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"It never really came up," Hawke shrugged and yet Anders could see the disappointment and the hurt in his eyes; if there was one thing Hawke valued above all other traits then it was loyalty, and if there was one thing he hated above all others it was betrayal, "and truth be told I was kind of hoping she would turn up again at some point. Yet it's her life. I have no real say. I just wish she'd...I don't know, trusted me a little more."

Anders had purposefully forced himself not to think about Hawke's reaction to Isabela's treachery. Her actions were unlike his in that they were entirely selfish, yes, and yet in the way they affected Hawke they were far too similar to his own plans than he was comfortable with. He had taken his mind off of it all by thinking about what he was going to say to Fenris.

Oddly enough, Fenris had turned out to be the trickiest of all their companions. After things had become more settled between the three Anders had expected him to be the most understanding, what with Fenris becoming as at peace as he could be with Hawke and Anders relationship and he and the mage's tentative friendship. Instead, when Hawke invited Fenris to their house, as Anders refused to set foot in that blighted mansion of his, the elf had seemed entirely aghast at the idea.

"Are you both mad?" he had said, pacing back and forth in the main living room before the fire while Bodahn ushered Sandal into another room away from the uproar, "that's far too dangerous a journey to undertake so lightly!"

"Oh, we're hardly taking it lightly," Anders had rolled his eyes as he forced Fenris to stop pacing and handed him a cup of steaming, black coffee; the elf had eyed him for a moment before Anders sighed and took it off him to add a slosh of whiskey to the hot drink before handing it back. Hawke had looked between the two in confusion, as if he was both intrigued and amazed that they could possibly have a repertoire between them that he knew nothing about.

"I don't appreciate your flippancy, mage," Fenris had said, refusing to use Anders' name and labelling him instead, as he always did when he was angry, "have you ever even travelled that far before? I have and I'll tell you now it isn't half as easy as you'd think it would be. Countries don't appreciate people just waltzing from one land into another, especially not these days with all the tensions fraught between them."
"Which is why we're going to be careful," Hawke had said, making Fenris snort in disgust and take a short sip of his coffee, "and I've already applied for a letter from the Grand Cleric which will grant us safe passage through any land under the Divine."

"Which won't do you any good in Tevinter, now will it!" Fenris had snapped back.

"That'll be why we're not planning on going through Tevinter then," Anders had said in retort as he sipped his own tea and stared into the roaring fire.

Fenris had argued with them for what seemed to Anders like hours but was probably nothing like it. All he could surmise from the elf's growing desperation to downplay their plan as idiotic and borderline suicidal was that Fenris was simply desperate not to have Hawke leave Kirkwall. Which, admittedly, he could understand, yet it served only to irritate him. After all Fenris' talk of rescinding any claim to Hawke's affections it looked to Anders as if Fenris was still far too protective and fond of Hawke than was strictly decent, given their strictly platonic relationship. Anders had allowed Hawke to do most of the talking and, eventually, Fenris had realised that nothing was going to change the rogue's mind.

"Well," Fenris had said at last, sitting in a tall armchair and swilling the now cold dregs of his coffee around in the cup, "you didn't half pick the worst time of year to travel."

Anders had at least been able to agree with that if nothing else. Over the weeks he had studied the old and worn map of Thedas countless times, making calculations, trying to think where the best places would be to stop, to rest outside of towns, where they could get provisions on the way, how much they would need to get in between stocking up to last them until the next town. Slowly, over a week's worth of deliberating and planning, he had ended up lying on the bed with Hawke explaining his finalised ideas. He had lain on his side, the map splayed out before him on the rumpled covers, dancing in the firelight, while Hawke lay behind him with his chin in the nook of Anders neck and his hand tracing soothing but entirely distracting patterns on his hip.

"So if we head west, through the forest to Cumberland, then we can join the Imperial Highway," he had said, feeling Hawke's steady breathing against his shoulder, "then it's over into Orlais and we can make a stop at Val Chevin. From there we can head north to Montfort then all the way to Andoral's Reach. From there all we have to do is go up over the low ridge of Kal-Sharok, then it's just the last push up and over the Hunterhorn mountains and down into the Anderfels."

"Wouldn't it be easier to cut up through Nevarra a little more?" Hawke had suggested after a short pause, his hand quitting Anders hip as he leaned in heavily on the mage's back so as to point at the map, "In fact if we headed due north then the highway would take us straight to Nevarra. We could work our way up to Trevis and Nessum and then over to...well actually we could go up to Weissaupt, stock up there, then continue through the gap in the mountain range and round to Nordbotten from there. Would save us having to climb up over that blasted ridge at all."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Anders had argued back, "I mean I'd thought of going through Nevarra but I really don't want to go that close to the Imperium..."

"Why not?" Hawke had interrupted.

"Because I think it's...it's just a bad idea," Anders had sighed as Hawke kissed at his neck, "as is going anywhere near Weissaupt. You are aware that the main headquarters of the Grey Wardens is stationed there, aren't you? And that I'm still technically a deserter?"

"But Anders think about it," Hawke had said as he trailed his finger along the map, mimicking Anders planned route, "if we go the way you suggest then we'll be going over Kal-Sharok and the
Hunterhorn ridge in the middle of winter. Now I've never been there personally but I'm guessing that they'll be covered in snow and that there won't be a viable pass at that time of year. That makes it incredibly dangerous which is something I'd rather avoid."

"I'm not going near Weisshaupt," Anders had reiterated strongly, "or Hossberg for that matter."

"Yet you'll go to Cumberland, seat of the most powerful Circle in the whole of Thedas," Hawke had said with a raise of his eyebrow.

"I won't be going anywhere near the Cumberland Circle, that's not the point," Anders had said tightly, "And don't you think I'd thought about how dangerous this whole trip will be? Why do you think I wanted to go alone in the first place?"

"Because you're a mad bastard," Hawke had said, his rough stubble rubbing against Anders' neck, "which is why you need me there to stop you doing any 'mad bastard' things. Now, let's look at this again..."

Eventually, after a few hours of arguing back and forth about the pros and cons of each decision, Anders had managed to convince Hawke that his route was their best bet; and Hawke had managed to convince him to make some adjustments. Instead of attempting to scale Kal-Sharok at all, when they reached Churneau they would go north-east and re-enter Nevara, heading to Perendale instead of north-west to Andoral's Reach. From Perendale they could skirt the foothills of Kal-Sharok and then head up to the low pass in the Hunterhorn mountains which led straight down into the Merdaine. As Anders pointed out this would add quite a few extra days onto the last leg of their journey and there wasn't a town between Perendale and Nordbotten to restock their supplies.

"Then we'll just have to take on extra at Perendale and tighten our belts until we reach the Anderfels," Hawke had said with a defeated shrug, "I'll take my bow with us so we can hunt and I'm sure we can find some small settlements along the way where we can barter food. If not we'll just have to survive on what we have until we get to Nordbotten."

Anders remembered, as he now sat on the bed where they had planned their journey, Hawke's practical and entirely realistic approach to travelling which he had greatly appreciated. He reached out and carefully carded the fingers of his left hand through Hawke's silky black hair, making the sleeping rogue moan softly in response. Everything had come together far quicker than if Anders himself had been left in charge, that the mage could admit to. He was organised, to a point, but he did tend to overestimate or underestimate and sometimes not use his common sense in relation to a decision. He wouldn't have thought of the true dangers of crossing a mountain range in the winter, or what they could do if they found themselves running out of supplies. All he could see when he looked at the map were places he couldn't go, places he wouldn't go and all the places in between. Hawke had bought all of their supplies, commissioned tailors to make fur lined coats and boots, thick gloves and hats, picked out horses from the merchant at the stables by the West Gate. I really should have expected it, Anders thought as he continued the habitual motion of his hand, considering how officious and overprotective Hawke is I'm surprised he even let me write the list in the first place.

"Hawke," he said after a further few minutes of teasing Hawke's hair through his fingers, "Hawke are you awake?"

"Mmm," Hawke murmured sleepily, slightly muffled from beneath the blanket, his eyes still closed, "yes."

He watched as Hawke blinked his green eyes open. The man took a deep breath and let it out slowly, flicking his slightly vacant gaze up to Anders, the rest of his face still hidden beneath the
"It's fucking freezing," he said; Anders could hear from his tone that it wasn't a question, "isn't it."

"Of course it is," Anders smile widened, "it has started snowing again. I think it must have been doing it all night."

"Joy," Hawke said monotonously, "what a wonderful start to any journey."

"Don't be such a pessimist," Anders said as Hawke pulled the covers down a little and pushed his face up out into the open; his jaw was dark with stubble, "I was waiting for you to wake up. I'll go and make us some tea, or coffee if you'd prefer."

"Takes too long," Hawke yawned, "just tea's fine."

Anders noted that Hawke was giving him a rather inscrutable look but didn't have the wherewithal to try and figure it out. However when he stood he finally realised what that odd glint in Hawke's eyes had been about; Hawke moved too fast for him to react. The heavy bedcovers lifted up and he emerged like a funnel web spider, snatching Anders down into the warmth of the cotton sheets with a yelp before smothering them both back under the thick duvet. Anders heard the dull thud of cats paws hitting the floorboards as Madam quitted the bed while he squirmed around in the dull light under the covers, unable to see anything except the seemingly never ending folds of material that he managed to paw away from his face.

"Hawke! Honestly you..!" Anders would have continued if he hadn't suddenly found a tongue down his throat. Hands shivered up from nowhere underneath his thick shirt and caressed his bared skin while Hawke slid atop him with ease and pressed him down into the mattress. Maker he's warm, Anders thought contentedly as Hawke continued to kiss him slowly but thoroughly. After another moment's indulgence he forced himself to break the kiss and pull rather futilely at Hawke's wandering hands, "We really don't have time for this you know."

"Oh there's always time for this," Hawke replied, pulling back to allow Anders a view of his lascivious grin, his hair pushed forward awkwardly by the heavy cover over his head, "and anyway, you do remember that this is the last time we'll have a decent bed for the next week or so, don't you?"

"Yes," Anders said, realising that he was forcing himself to be tediously practical, "and I also remember that I had a bath last night for the sole purpose of being as clean as possible before setting off this morning. So as much as I would love to join you in your...endeavours," as he spoke he reached in between them to give Hawke's obvious erection a good squeeze to emphasise the word, making the man gasp, "I'll have to pass."

Anders always believed that Hawke forgot just how agile he could be when he wanted to. Which was why the rogue seemed so surprised when Anders rolled them both over and then shimmied himself out from under the covers and stood up beside the bed, brushing down his shirt and watching the squirming confused pile of bedclothes with subtle amusement.

"I'll go and get you that tea," he said smugly as he walked towards the door, picking up one of the candles he had lit that morning to light his way, Hawke still struggling to free himself.

"It won't be as fun without you..!" Hawke called after him in a sing song fashion as Anders walked out of the bedroom and across the landing.

He still found making tea a calming exercise of sorts. Stoking the fire which he had lit earlier,
filling the kettle and setting it to boil, measuring out the leaves into the teapot; the routine soothed his nerves. We're really going. I'm really going home. The steam rose as he poured the freshly boiled water into the enamelled pot, watching as the leaves swirled and danced in the currents of heat.

Telling Sabine had perhaps been the hardest of them all. After displaying his own fervour and willingness to fight at the meeting, now he had to turn around and tell his closest comrade that he was leaving the city. The older woman had been rather shocked at the news, yet more in a disbelieving and angry sort of way than Merrill and Varric had been. It was only made worse by the fact that he could only give her vague and illusive reasons as to why he was leaving in the first place.

"It's for the good of the resistance Sabine, I can't stress that enough," Anders had said as seriously as he could, "if everything works the way I believe it will then you have no idea how much this will help us."

"You're right," Sabine had said back, her eyes narrowed, "and the reason I don't know is because you won't tell me, you never tell any of us your plans!"

"I can't," Anders had said strongly, "and it's not because I don't want to, it's for your own protection..."

"I'm getting more than a little tired of hearing that same excuse from you, young man," Sabine had said, making Anders smile unwittingly; it had been such a long time since anyone had called him 'young man' that hearing it from Sabine was almost comical.

"Then I'll just have to make this the last time I say it," Anders had said, making Sabine sigh harshly through her nose, "and ask you to trust me, like you always have. I wouldn't do this if it wasn't necessary, you know that, don't you?"

"...I do," Sabine had replied tightly after a few moment's silence, "but it doesn't mean that I have to like it. You had better come back safe Anders or, believe you me, I will come looking for you myself."

I can hardly blame her, Anders thought as he poured out the now dark brown tea into two cups, collecting the sodden leaves in the mesh of the small metal sieve. He had felt the exact same way when Hawke had announced he was heading off into the Deep Roads without him all those years ago. He knew what it was to wait anxiously for someone's safe return.

The thought of the reason behind his journey was something he had forced down behind planning and sorting and worrying and all of the other things he always did before a trip. Admittedly the only other trips he'd ever taken before this had been his escape attempts from the Circle, but they were surprisingly similar. The mysterious woman, the letters, the band of three...they were like a subtle undercurrent towing him along. He had stuffed the letters into his napsack when Hawke wasn't looking. Better safe than sorry, he had thought even as he wondered why. What possible use could they be? Anders wasn't sure but he felt that taking them was the right thing to do. He wasn't going to think about it beyond that.

" Aren't you up yet?" Anders admonished as he re-entered the bedroom holding the two mugs awkwardly in one hand while he held the candle in the other.

"No," Hawke said matter-of-factly, still in repose under the blankets, "you didn't tell me that it was so bloody early!"
"And I also didn't tell you to wake up," Anders said wryly as he handed Hawke his tea.

"Yes, you did," Hawke said as he placed the steaming cup on the bedside table so he could wriggle up the bed into a sitting position.

"No, what I asked you was if you were awake," Anders said with a pedantic smile, sitting once more on the edge of the bed and sipping the hot liquid, feeling it warm him from the inside as it slid down his throat, "you could have just ignored me."

"You're a right cheeky bastard today, aren't you?" Hawke muttered as he picked up his tea again and began drinking it, "Anyway I'm not getting out of bed until the fecking sun shows up. Everything's already packed down at the stables, all we have to do is get ourselves ready and then outfit the horses. No need to rush."

Anders couldn't help but agree, even if he had been awake for longer than he really needed to be. He wasn't sure why he had awoken so early but it had seemed right to. He stared out of the window as he drank his tea, watching as the slow hint of dawn began to glow behind the clouds. The snow continued to fall, seeming only to thicken as time ticked by. Wonderful, Anders thought in annoyance as he finished his drink and put the empty mug onto the table next to Hawke's, just what we need.

Hawke was making no move to leave the warmth of the bed; Anders shook his head and tried to think if there was anything else he needed to do except get dressed. He had already asked Oranna to take care of Madam while they were gone, which the girl had been more than happy to do. Bodahn and Sandal would look after the mansion and all of its needs and also Fenris was staying here while the continued renovations to his house went on. In relation to the resistance Sabine and Farah were in charge until he returned and were to keep an eye on any changes to the templar situation in Kirkwall and Varric was to help them with anything they might need in his absence. Everything was seen to, everything was alright; the only thing he had to worry about now was getting himself and Hawke safely to Nordbotten and back. Easier said than done, Anders thought as he felt Hawke's hand on his arm, pulling him back down towards the bed.

"Don't tempt me," Anders said sleepily as he pulled back wearily against Hawke's grasp.

"I'm not tempting you," Hawke said with a jerk of his arm, yanking the mage down to lie against him, his head resting against the rogue's shoulder, "because I'm not giving you a choice. Now get some more sleep for Maker's sake. We have a long ride ahead of us today and we need all the energy we can muster."

Anders wanted to protest but it was too much of an effort. Instead he snuggled against Hawke, who was himself still under the duvet. Hawke wrapped him in a warm embrace and kissed the top of his head, letting out a small chuff of laughter as Madam once more leapt onto the bed, padding around warily as if she expected it the bed to once more erupt in movement and throw her off. Anders closed his eyes and revelled in the warmth and comfort which he was about to abandon for a tent in the snow.

The horses shuffled their hooves and snorted, sending out puffs of misty breath into the cold air. The stables were mainly empty, only one other horse in a stall at the far end. He and Hawke had travelled down just after dawn.

Anders had to admit that Hawke hadn't spared any expense in their transport. Both were healthy creatures and perfect for their journey; bred in the far reaches of the north they were used to low temperatures and harsh weather. He stood by his steed, a stunning, tall, chestnut brown Friesian
mare, and stroked her thick mane while she swished her long tail back and forth and nickered. Hawke's purchase for himself had made Anders roll his eyes but smile affectionately when he first saw it; an elegant but well muscled Warlander stallion, its glossy black hide a beautiful contrast against the pure, white snow.

"You just had to buy yourself a big, manly horse," Anders said in amusement as Hawke secured the straps on his saddlebags, "didn't you."

"Of course," Hawke said with a grin, pulling his gloves tighter as he walked towards Anders before sliding his hands around the mage's slim waist, "you know me so well."

Anders blushed and looked around to see if anyone was watching. Thankfully the stables were empty of people as the stable hand was outside sorting them some food for their steeds. Hawke leaned in and kissed him, his lips slightly chapped from the cold. He couldn't help but note that Hawke was in an exceptionally good mood, considering the weather was so very cold and they were leaving their creature comforts behind them. Anders reached up and slid his hands into the fur lined neck of Hawke's coat, making the man let out a startled sound. When he pulled back his eyes were bright and mischievous, "Put your gloves on! Your hands are freezing."

"Why should I? It gives me all the more reason to warm them up on you," Anders smiled beguilingly as he ran his hands down Hawke's chest and then slid them deeper into his coat, feeling the thick fur against his fingers.

"You saucy little minx," Hawke purred before he kissed him again, a deep laugh rumbling though his broad shoulders; just as the rogue had slipped his tongue into Anders' mouth there was a rather nervous and embarrassed cough from the doorway of the stables. Anders sprang back as he used to do when caught trying to sneak into the forbidden section of the archives by a senior enchanter, with a look of pure innocence. He and Hawke looked to the stable hand, a girl in her late teens with ruddy red hair and a pale face which was currently stained with a deep blush.

"There's some people here to see you, Champion," she said in a small voice, eyeing Hawke with a certain amount of awe and confusion.

"Thank you Lily," Hawke said with a smile, seemingly unaffected by the unease and tension in the air.

Why is it nothing seems to bother him? Anders thought with a shake of his head, and trust him to have learned the girl's name. He's such a bloody charmer sometimes. He let Hawke take his hand, warm leather meeting cold fingers, despite his discomfort at being watched like some exotic animal by the girl as he was led out of the stables and back into the snow. He would admit that he had expected one their friends to come and see them off but not all of them. Varric, Merrill, Aveline and even Fenris were standing by the entrance to the stables, dusted lightly in an icing-sugar like layer of snow.

"Trying to sneak out undetected, were we?" Varric said with a sardonic smile, his duster laced up over a thick shirt and a thick scarf wrapped around his neck "you should know by now that nothing happens in this city without me knowing first, Hawke."

"So I should," Hawke said with a smirk, "what was I thinking?"

"Were you really going to leave without saying goodbye?" Merrill asked as she shifted towards Anders; she was wearing the thick woollen coat Anders had been given by way of payment by the Darktown butcher for saving his son's life. He hadn't needed it and had passed it on to Merrill, quite sure that the girl was always freezing in winter but never admitted it. How she and Fenris
managed to get by with no shoes at this time of year still baffled him.

"Of course not," Anders said with a short laugh, smiling at Merrill, "we already talked, just yesterday! I thought that was our farewell."

"Well it wasn't," Merrill admonished as Fenris rolled his eyes.

"Only you would think that saying goodbye wasn't saying goodbye," Aveline said with a shake of her head, the snow settling thickly on her red hair, turning it white.

They moved under the awning at the front of the stables so as get out of the snow.

"And here I thought you hated the cold," Hawke said, looking to Fenris with an awkward smile.

"I do," Fenris shrugged as he folded his arms against the chill, returning Hawke's smile, "but it doesn't mean I can't go out in it."

"Right," Varric said sarcastically, "it just gives you something else to complain about."

"Watch it, half pint," Fenris said, earning him a scandalised look from Varric and a badly disguised laugh from Aveline.

It was nice to know, somehow, that there were people who would happily walk out through the cold and the snow just to wish him farewell on his journey. Varric, Fenris and Aveline talked with Hawke while Anders asked Merrill to help him with the horse rations that Lily the stable hand had sorted for them.

"I can't believe you're really going," Merrill said, her tone an odd mix of excitement and wistfulness, "I mean, you've been in Kirkwall for how long now?"

"Too long," Anders said, letting out a humourless laugh and looking away from Merrill's bright eyes as she frowned at him, "I was only joking. It'll be a nice change though. I've never been beyond Ferelden and the Freemarches, well, not that I can remember anyway."

"Didn't you ever think of going home before now?" the elf asked as she handed Anders a small sack of dried horse nuts.

"Yes," Anders said a little uncertainly as he took the sack and pushed it into the saddle bag along with the stacks of compressed hay sheaf, "and no. I mean...it's a little complicated. I haven't been home in over twenty years. I'm under no illusions that I'll find my family when I get there. Not even sure if I want to, in all honesty."

Which is a half lie and a half truth, Anders thought as he and Merrill completed their task in silence. She tried to give him a reassuring smile as they walked back to the others, each pulling a horse behind them, but it didn't quite come across as strongly as Anders was sure she would have liked. She probably knows I'm not telling her the whole truth, Anders thought, Merrill's always been more perceptive than she seems.

They led the horses, clopping over the snow covered stone, to the others who were laughing at some joke Varric had just told. Hawke looked up as they brought the horses to a stop, Merrill running her hand over the stallion's neck and murmuring something to it in Dalish.

"All ready?" Hawke asked.

"All ready," Anders answered.
The final farewells were an odd mix. Merrill was a little tearful as she told Hawke to stay safe and then hugged Anders tightly, telling him sternly not to do anything rash or stupid and to come back as soon as he could. Aveline gave them both some helpful last minute advice about staying away from rumours and making sure not to travel after nightfall. She gave Hawke a friendly pat on the arm and Anders an amiable nod before turning to walk away through the snow towards Hightown. Varric was his usual charming self, making a quip about not trusting Orlesian sailors and only buying merchandise from dwarven merchants. The likelihood of running into any sailors seemed slim to Anders considering their route took them nowhere near the coast but considering Hawke laughed quite loudly at the statement, Anders thought he must have missed some in joke or other. He shrugged and waved goodbye as Varric and Merrill began to walk towards the main street. All was silent as Fenris pushed away from the wall and shook the snow from his hair.

"Well," he said, "I suppose this is where I tell you not to be an heroic idiot on your travels, Hawke."

"You mean don't be myself?" Hawke said with amusement, faking insult, "How could you?"

"Oh shut up," Fenris said, looking away before sighing, "just be careful. Both of you."

"We will," Anders said, trying to be reassuring.

"Of course," Hawke said with a warm smile; Fenris shifted on his feet, seeming to want to wish Hawke farewell properly but looking as if he wasn't quite sure what was appropriate. When he didn't move Hawke was the one to step forwards. Fenris instantly put out his hand as if to shake but Hawke simply shook his head and pulled Fenris into a tight hug. Anders watched a little uncomfortably as the elf went rigid in Hawke's grasp, his eyes fluttering closed for a few seconds before he seemed to force them back open and return the embrace a little awkwardly. He couldn't be sure if Hawke had truly noticed Fenris' reaction or not but wasn't really intent on finding out. Hawke patted Fenris on the shoulder before turning to get up onto his horse. Anders nodded to Fenris in parting.

"Bring him back safe," Fenris said suddenly, just as Anders had turned towards his horse; when he looked back he found the elf's eyes oddly beseeching.

"Nothing else comes before Hawke," Anders said; he wasn't quite sure why he said it in such a way. Perhaps, he thought as he slid his foot into the stirrup and hauled himself up to swing his other leg over the saddle, he had wanted to both reassure Fenris and to warn him in the same instance. That I'm still paranoid about them is really rather sad, Anders thought regretfully, I trust Hawke but I suppose it's Fenris I don't fully understand yet. Anders shook off the black thoughts and urged his horse into a walk, the mare tossing her head a little and letting forth a whinny. They waved goodbye to Fenris as they headed towards the gate. The gate keeper checked Hawke's papers and didn't even give Anders a cursory glance as the two men rode out of the city. If only it were so easy for all mages to leave Kirkwall, Anders thought morosely.

The landscape was a wash of milky white, dotted here and there with clumps of trees and the odd fence and small escarpment. Everything was still and silent but for the horses dull footsteps and the sound of their bags creaking. The snow made the air seem thick somehow, as if it had substance, and the snow clouds made the water of the bay seem steely grey. The long, silky hairs on his horse's ankles were soon caked in snow and her mane was smattered with delicate snowflakes. Anders admitted that it wasn't the most practical weather to travel in but he couldn't help but find it rather beautiful. He held the reigns with one hand while he dug about in his pocket for his gloves, pulling them on as they turned left at the signpost for Cumberland.
"Well what?" Anders asked as they broke into a trot and headed down the shallow incline towards the main road by the coast.

"No strange and wonderful name for your new pet?" Hawke grinned, his eyes sparkling as they snow flowed around them, landing softly against Anders' skin with soft pats.

"Wanker," Anders said, sticking out his tongue juveniley; he looked down at his horse while Hawke chuckled, noting her superior bearing and almost dainty steps, "she deserves a dignified name, something proud. I think...Brynhildr."

"Brynhildr?" Hawke repeated, frowning, "Where did you pluck that one from?"

"Oh it's..." Anders faltered, swallowing down the odd lump in his throat before he could continue, "it's from a story I was told when I was little. She was a warrior queen who angered the gods. They cursed her to stay within a castle surrounded by a ring of fire until there came a man strong enough to rescue and marry her. Which one does."

"Let me guess," Hawke said as they followed the snow covered path which was marked with a small, dilapidated fence, "it all ends in tears. These Anderfelian saga's always do."

"It's quite a sad story actually," Anders said, unable to keep the melancholy from his tone, "her one true love is tricked into marrying another by a sorceress and she marries someone else. When he remembers the truth it's all too late...the short and long of it is that he ends up dead and she kills herself in despair."

"...Right," Hawke said, trying to be kind even as he somewhat ridiculed the sentiment, "it all ended in tears."

I suppose it did, Anders thought as he and Hawke continued down towards the water to take the trail to Planasene Forest.

It all ended in tears.
The first thing that he noticed were his legs. The ache didn't start until the end of the first day, after
they had reached Planasene and set up camp on the outskirts under the tall, imposing pines. Yet as
he walked around the perimeter of their camp, setting up wards to make sure wolves or other
unsavoury creatures didn't disturb their rest, the flaring burn in his buttocks, thighs and calves was
all too obvious.

"Are you alright?" Hawke laughed, eyeing him as they set up the tent on a patch of dirt which
Anders had cleared as best he could.

The sun was making its swift descent towards the horizon. The snow had stopped mid afternoon
and the clouds had drifted off to the south, leaving the sky clear and slightly hazy. Anders almost
wished the clouds had stayed; with a clear sky it would be an even colder night.

"I'm fine," Anders said as he sat down with the pretence of making up the fire, touching his hands
to his thighs and letting out a soft shimmer of soothing magic to relieve the pain in his legs and
rear, "just not used to riding a horse, that's all."

"I can see that," Hawke said as he continued to put the finishing touches to the tent, knocking the
wooden pegs into the ground to hold the guy ropes tight, "you know it's only just occurred to me
that I never asked you if you could ride before I bought the horses. I just assumed you could.
Everyone in Lothering could ride, I was in the cavalry division at Ostagar and all Aveline's troops
can. I suppose I just got used to the idea that everyone did."

"Lucky that I can then," Anders said with a short laugh as he actually began starting the fire.

"What," Hawke said with a cheeky smile, "did the templars give you riding lessons?"

"Ha ha," Anders said back tonelessly, "in fact it was one of the first things I learned to do after
escaping the Ferelden Circle the...second time, I think it was. I, um,
_acquired_ a horse just outside of Westhill."

"Acquired as in stolen, then?" Hawke had said wryly while he unpacked the thick furs from his
stallion's saddlebags.

"And here I was trying to be discreet about it," Anders laughed, "poor man was having a piss at the
side of the road and next thing he knows there's some fifteen year old apostate grabbing his horse
and trying his best to ride away on it. The thing nearly threw me more than once but then I didn't
know what I was doing. So you could say I was self educated in the rules of horse riding."

"I'll admit I wondered why you held the reigns in such an odd way," Hawke said as he crawled into
the tent to flatten out the furs; when he emerged he lifted his hands to mimic Anders, holding the
reigns tightly grasped in his fists with his thumbs facing him, "my dad would have clapped my ear
for something like that. He always told me I should hold them as if I were carrying two mugs of
tea."

"Well sorry if I happen to be more comfortable holding them the way I do," Anders said a little
huffily, "it just seemed natural, that's all."

Anders lit the fire with a small summoned flame and watched as the orange flickering tongues
began to devour the wood. He added further twigs and waited until there was enough of a blaze to
add a few logs. It was cold, yes, but the trees helped to shelter them from the worst of it,
containing the heat and producing some of their own natural warmth which kept the ground frost to a minimum. Anders filled the pot with water from his canteen and set up the pot stand over the blaze. Hawke joined him once he was done, sitting down heavily and folding his legs, reaching out to warm his gloveless hands against the fire.

"What's for dinner, dear?" he asked with a wicked smile, laughing and ducking out of the way when Anders swiped at his head.

"It's beef stew and you'll shut up and like it," Anders said as he started pulling apart the fresh herbs he'd brought with him.

"Really? Stew?" Hawke said, his face showing his surprise, "Well, I didn't realise I'd be getting such five star treatment. The best I can cook is broth, or slop as Carver always liked to call it. Do you want me to help?"

"After you've just extolled the prominence of your cooking abilities?" Anders smiled as he watched the water begin to simmer, "That's alright, I think I can handle it on my own."

"Git," Hawke said with amusement as he shuffled closer to the fire and warmed his feet.

Anders had purposefully brought some perishables with which to cook on the first few nights. It was thankfully cold enough to keep some small parcels of cooked meat and paper wrapped cheese in with their supplies. The beef was slightly dry as he unwrapped the cloth in which Oranna had put it but it soaked in the stock of herbs and meat juices as it cooked. Hawke decided to take a walk back down to the last of the rivers they had crossed earlier, half a mile or so back and still audible from the camp as a distant roar, while Anders finished cooking. The mage kept himself entertained by drawing runes into the dirt by the fire, humming songs to himself and feeding Brynhildr a couple of apples he had brought while he watched the stew. Hawke's stallion had whinnied as if in jealousy as Bryn munched happily on the apples, so Anders slipped him a few chunks of sugary tablet which Oranna had cooked for them before they left. Anders had already decided to name him Sigurðr, after Brynhildr's lost love. Hawke seemed far too pragmatic to give his steed a name.

"No telling Hawke," he said as he patted the stallion's neck and readjusted the horse's blanket, "he wouldn't approve of me spoiling you."

The last rays of evening sun were filtering in through the trees when the stew had thickened and Hawke returned, his feet caked in snow and their canteens refilled.

"It's beautiful out there," he said, a little out of breath as he kicked the ground, dislodging the snow from his boots, and placed the canteens down by the tent, "the sunset's all red and gold, makes the snow shine like diamonds. And the light on the mountains...it's that evening light, you know? They look scarlet against the- oh is that ready?"

Anders couldn't help but laugh. Hawke was always so vivacious in his descriptions and yet entirely practical in his wants.

"Just spoil the romance why don't you," Anders said with a mischievous look to which Hawke rolled his eyes, "Yes, it's ready. Pass me that bag would you? It has the bowls in it."

They talked as they ate; the darkness grew around them until the fire was their only source of light. The cold became more and more noticeable as the firewood began to run out. He and Hawke ended up sitting side by side, pressed together for warmth as they spoke in soft voices, the darkness enshrouding them like a blanket. Only the trees around them were visible, flickering in the red light of the dying fire. As soon as it became too dark to see properly they decided it was time to turn in.
Anders lit a stubby candle for Hawke and then crawled into the tent and shuffled around until he was under the thick, fur lined blankets. Hawke made sure one last time that the horses were secure and comfortable before blowing out the candle and joining him.

"Warmed it up already have you?" Hawke teased as he slid under the covers and moved about until he managed to lie flat; he pulled Anders flush against his side, "Bloody hell it's cramped isn't it? Never mind though," Hawke said slyly as he slid a hand down Anders' back and groped his arse.

"All the more excuse for you to cop a feel, eh?" Anders laughed sleepy as he pulled Hawke's wandering hand back up and placed it around his waist, "You cheeky bastard."

"Well considering you left me to fend for myself this morning," Hawke said, trying to sound put out, "I think a good grope is the least you could offer me."

Anders laughed and gave the rogue a deep and thorough kiss goodnight by way of apology. They lay together in the darkness, Anders listening to Hawke's breathing, a steady rhythm in time with his heart beat.

"I'm glad you're here," he said after a few minutes of silence, in which he wasn't sure if Hawke was asleep or not.

"...And I'm glad you'd have me," Hawke murmured drowsily.

"Hawke," Anders admonished, feeling a little guilty that Hawke would ever think such a thing of him, "as if I would have anyone else."

"Mmm," Hawke said, although Anders could hear the smile in the sound, "goodnight love."

He found talking in the dark a little odd. He had become so accustomed to the flickering of lantern light or the red embers of a dying fire that just hearing Hawke's voice and feeling him against his body was a novel and oddly comfortable way to fall asleep.

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Planasene forest was an ancient and sprawling place. The path they followed was littered with pine needles and lined with ferns and dense vegetation. Small delicate, white flowers, known as snow drops, created an effect of fallen snow on the undergrowth which the real snow was restricted from doing by the dense canopy above. The trees were mainly tall, straight pines but Anders had seen sturdy hollies, twisting and gnarled Ferelden pines and some tall and broad trunked redwoods among them. The light was sparse in places and vibrant in others as the trees thinned and thickened. The air was heavy with the sharp smell of pine needles, the lingering smell of damp undergrowth and the heady smell of the furs he wore. Anders wasn't truly used to wearing skins and the faint hint of animal musk on the soft pelt was still unmistakable. The peaceful calm was broken only by the harsh call of crows and ravens or the intricate and beautiful song of the blackbirds; everything else was covered in the gentle sounds of distant water running or the airy, open silence of the forest.

He had always enjoyed being in forests or woods or around growing things in general. There was an overwhelming sense of energy and hidden life within the dense undergrowth below and the thick canopy above. He could almost feel the flow of energies from living thing to living thing, constantly coursing through the ground to the trees and the plants and to the animals who survived within them. Kirkwall was so devoid of green life, apart from in Hightown. Yet even the displays in the centre of squares and in the richer gardens were all too contained for his liking. He preferred things wild and free to do what they naturally would, not trimmed and kept like pets. The forest soothed him in a way that even Hawke's beautiful garden never could.
They rode for three days until they reached the half way point, marked on the road by a small cairn with a red cross splashed across it in messy paint. Behind it, almost obscured by creeping ivy and thick sprays of fern, was an even older stone. They had stopped at the waypoint to eat some rations of dried pork and fetch some more water from a nearby stream. Anders inspected the stone while Hawke scrambled down the bank towards the freezing water. As he pulled back the greenery he found ancient, weathered, stylised markings spelling out one word.

"Ashenk," he said to himself as he ran his finger along the rough grooves of the letters, wondering what it meant and which language it was in; he couldn't help but think it sounded vaguely Qunari but had no idea what a Qunari word would be doing inscribed on a stone in the middle of the Planasene.

The sun rose later and set earlier by fractions, seconds of daylight lost every day as winter tightened its grip on the land. The frost on the tent grew whiter every morning and the cold became harder to ignore. It was as if he had stepped into a different world. Living in Kirkwall, confined to its dark grey stone and the bleak landscape of the surrounding coastland, seemed to have dulled his senses. Despite the only colours of the forest being greens and browns and whites it was like an exotic landscape in comparison, vibrant and alive. The journey so far had been filled with a plethora of wild calls and howls which he hadn't heard in years; wolves howling, long tailed badgers barking in the night as they foraged for food to keep them through hibernation, foxes wailing as they squabbled. They passed few travellers on the road, so far only two men, a hunter and tracker out to gather skins and furs before winter made it impossible to hunt some of the animals which would slip underground for winter, and a couple of dwarven merchants, one headed to Kirkwall and the other to Cumberland.

He and Hawke rode mainly in comfortable silence, talked about random topics or perhaps something that sprang up from a thing seen or heard. It was pleasant, almost carefree and strangely normal. Four days into their trek, only a hundred or so miles from Kirkwall, Anders was beginning to feel like someone else entirely.

Or perhaps simply more like himself than he'd felt in years.

The distant roaring of falling water mixed with the howling of wind across open plains; the distant echo of the Fade tickled at his senses, forcing the void into which he usually slipped to a dim glow that seemed to shift and shake all around him. He didn't watch it so much as he felt it cradle the essence of his being, a projection of himself from his own minds eye. The shallow connection he still possessed to this ghostly realm was welcome and yet mocking all at once; glad not to have lost it completely and yet always craving the peaceful, indistinct atmosphere and impossible landscapes. He continued to float in a dreamless state, barely conscious of his surroundings and yet aware enough to know that his mind was here while his body was still laying firmly on the ground, in the tent with Hawke. He continued his tentative union with an almost forgotten part of himself, savouring the peace it brought.

Then there it was.

A twitch, a shiver through the dull glow, a quivering change that couldn't be distinguished from the fuzzy quality of his unconscious condition. He felt a presence in the air. Suddenly a sound began to build, like crickets chirping, first dozens, then hundreds and then thousands and thousands of them. It undulated and grew and expanded until there was nothing but noise, deafening and shrieking. In his dissociated state he felt helpless, unable to do anything but feel the fear and the uncertainty and the need to wake coursing through him. He wanted to scream but knew there was no link between his voice and his mind. Then the words came.
"It snowed here today," someone said, young, female and high pitched. Her voice was almost drowned by the continuing din; she spoke as if talking to herself or someone else entirely, "but the sun was shining too. Isn't that strange? A snow storm and yet the sun was shining."

Please stop, Anders wanted to shout. The girl's voice became completely consumed by the rising cacophony. It built up and up and up and up and then... everything snapped; a deathly silence descended, seeming ironically loud in the absence of sound.

"Happy birthday," were the words that awoke him on the fifth day beneath the trees, whispered into his ear by warm breath and followed by hot lips.

He woke calmly despite the fear and disquiet still pumping through his veins. Anders moaned into the fur lined blankets and opened his eyes into the gloom. The ache in his body from sleeping rough for days was becoming harder and harder to soothe with magic alone. He hadn't wanted to start using stronger healing spells on himself so regularly and thus had begun massaging his legs and stretching his back muscles at every rest stop. Yet it only relieved so much. Today he awoke, face down on the lumpy, fur covered ground with Hawke by his side, propped up on one arm while the other strayed under the blankets, long fingers rubbing deep circles on the small of the mage's back. He breathed deeply and swallowed down the need to gasp in air.

Everything had been fine. Stupidly he had hoped that...

"Maker that feels good," was all he could find the presence of mind to say.

No need to tell him, Anders thought as Hawke leaned over to kiss his cheek, it was just a dream. Hawke's stubble had progressed over the last four days into a dark coating on his cheeks, chin and upper lip. It scratched against his face but then Anders could hardly complain as his stubble was in no better a state than Hawke's. The air was cold against his face, nipping against his lips, but the rest of his body was comfortably warm. He looked up at Hawke, seeing only a silhouette against the creamy canvass, holding a vague impression of eyes and nose.

"Are you alright, love?" Hawke asked as Anders continued to lie still and in silence.

"Me? I'm fine," Anders said drowsily as he pushed himself over onto his side to face Hawke.

"You sounded like you were having a nightmare," Hawke said uncertainly as he brought his caresses to Anders neck and rubbed hard at the aching muscles at the top of his spine.

"Just the usual," Anders let the white lie slip with a contented groan, his eyes sliding almost shut as Hawke ground the tips of his fingers deeper, "you've done this before, haven't you."

"Ha, maybe," Hawke said as he slid his massage along the mage's sensitive flesh to Anders' shoulder, "so, what would you like first? Tea and breakfast or your present?"

"My present is something that can be opened outside is it?" Anders joked as he shuffled closer to Hawke, feeling a telltale hardness against his hip once he was near enough, "Are you sure you don't have it in your pocket right now?"

"I could do, if you'd like," Hawke said with a deep, needful groan, his breath hot against Anders' face, "but that would just be the first part."

"Sounds like a good start to me," Anders replied breathily before Hawke leaned forwards and kissed him; he slid his hand past the layers of thick clothing until he wrapped his hand around Hawke's rigid length, making the man gasp into the kiss.
Their love making was an odd and yet enjoyable mix of hilarity and sheer lust. The small tent made it awkward to manoeuvre and more than once Hawke nearly knocked the entire ensemble down as he became more vigorous. Anders hadn't been able to contain his laughter at Hawke's frustration, the rogue muttering and cursing as he tried to find a more comfortable position. Yet by the time they had found the most acceptable spot, with he and Hawke lying on their sides, the rogue flush against his back, grinding into him, Anders couldn't help but let the laughter be consumed by ecstasy and need.

"Please, faster, yes," Anders panted as Hawke's searing breath slicked the back of his neck, followed by wet lips and tongue caressing the juncture of his shoulder, "there, there. I'm close. I'm..."

The simplicity of the moment was mixed, inexorably, with the complexity of his fears and worries and lust and want and need and love; for a few stuttering moments he felt everything. Hawke followed him seconds later with a keening growl, hips spasming as he panted against Anders' shoulder. Sometimes I forget what true freedom feels like, Anders thought as they lay together, panting into the cold air, but then you remind me Hawke. The man in question nuzzled and kissed drowsily at his neck, murmuring soft words to him. To go anywhere and not fear, that's what it is. I can go anywhere with you and feel as safe as if I were a normal man.

"Well," Anders said after a moment's silence, "I think we've made a mess of these furs."

"Is that the best compliment you can give?" Hawke laughed, unable to keep up the serious tone he'd been trying for, "It'll wash out. I had to scrub that bloody chair in the sitting room but it did come out."

"Oh yes," Anders chuckled at the memory of Oranna telling Hawke, innocent as a babe, that there was something sticky which wouldn't wash out of the chair by the fire; Hawke had blushed to his roots and told her quickly that he'd take care of it, "and you had the cheek to blame it on me."

"It was your fault!" Hawke said, still staunchly defending his position, "Honestly, you were the sober one. I was drunk! Did you really expect me to pay attention to something like that?"

"Yes, yes, keep blaming me if it'll make you feel better," Anders said, letting out a soft gasp as Hawke pulled back and slid slickly from his body, "mmm. If that was my present, though, I'm perfectly content."

"Now that's a compliment," Hawke said as Anders rolled onto his back, grinning as he leaned in to kiss the mage.

Anders brought his hand up to slide it around Hawke's neck and pull him closer, deepening the kiss. By the time they broke apart Anders was all too aware of the sleek layer of sweat across his body, his clothes damp from their excretions and exertions. Lovely, Anders thought, and no way to get cleaned up without freezing my arse off. Not that I regret it but the aftermath is always more trouble than it's worth when you're in the middle of nowhere. The light was much clearer and stronger now, making the off white canvass glow. Hawke leaned back and placed a last, quick kiss on Anders' nose, making the mage laugh softly.

"Right," Hawke said, shuffling out from under the furs, "oh fuck it's bloody freezing! Shit, shit, shit. Whose bright idea was it to travel in fucking winter, eh?

"Don't look at me," Anders said with faux innocence, "it's my birthday, you can't blame me for anything today."
"Oh that's right, just use my technique why don't you?" Hawke said dryly as he ruffled Anders' hair, making the mage chuckle and bat his hand away, "Come on, we better get cleaned up and get breakfast started or we'll never get a move on."

They changed clothes in the ever so slightly warmer environment of the tent, laughing and fooling around as they tried to undress and re-dress lying down next to each other, rolling around in the cramped shelter. Hawke volunteered to make something hot to drink while Anders used an old, half remembered scourging spell to try and get the worst of the mess from their bedding. They drank in companionable silence as the sun sent rays of pale, wan light through the trees. There was a slight mist in the air, making it even colder than it should have been, trapped in the hollows by the roots of trees and the dimples of land lurching down into the forest. Anders fed the horses while Hawke packed up the camp quickly and efficiently.

"Eat up Sigurðr," Anders said as the Stallion chomped noisily through his nosebag, "because for some unknown reason Hawke seems to have packed most of the things into your bags."

"I did it because he's stronger!" Hawke called as he scattered the ashes of the fire with his boot before striding over to Anders and the horses, "Besides, Bryn already has to carry you doesn't she?"

"You really are pushing it," Anders said as he Hawke laughed to himself, pulling the rogue by his coat until he was close enough to kiss, smirking as he spoke, "because if you keep up the insults then I'll just have to rethink all the wonderful things I was planning for the bedroom we'll be renting in Cumberland. So, any more quips you were planning to tell?"

"Only that you look exceptionally slim today," Hawke said as he slipped his arms around Anders, the mage shaking his head but smiling as Hawke continued, "and have I told you how handsome you are recently? No?"

"Backtracking won't do you any good now," Anders said as he slid from Hawke's hold to divest the horses of their finished food bags, unhooking them from the bridle.

"Is that right?" Hawke said as Anders shook the bags and began folding them away, "well how about this then?"

Anders felt Hawke slip up against his back and slide his arms around his waist; then there was something solid and heavy placed into his right hand. What on earth..? Anders thought as he brought his hand up, his left still holding the thick canvass bags. He opened his fingers to find a circular case the size of his palm, bulbous like a locket, made from what seemed to be a pale, white wood.

"Thought it might be useful, in case we get lost," Hawke said as he leaned his chin on Anders' shoulder; the mage dropped the bags down onto the ground and opened the sturdy clasp on the front of the wooden case. When he opened it he couldn't help but gasp in amazement.

"Hawke," he said, staring down at the thing in his hands, as it shone and spun, "what is it?"

It opened like an oyster shell. The bottom half held a delicate, quivering strip of metal which was balanced on a small pin at the centre. Underneath was a piece of pale stone into which was etched what looked like directions; north, south, east, west and all the increments in between. Around the outside of this was a strip of deep blue lapis lazuli and then a smaller ring of red stone. The inside of the lid was almost as wondrous as the other half, plated with a concave piece of azurite dotted with small, milky opals set into intricate groups. As he studied it he realised that each cluster was a constellation of stars, connected by almost invisible white lines.
"It's called a compass," Hawke said taking it from Anders' hands so as to rotate it; the thin strip of metal stayed in the same position no matter which way Hawke turned it, "don't ask me how it works because I don't rightly know. It was made in Orlais by a, well, I suppose you could call him a scientist. The merchant had all sorts of praises to heap on him so I suppose he's rather prominent in his field. Anyway, the basics of it are that this," here Hawke pointed to the red tipped end of the metal strip, "always points north, no matter what. And this," here he pointed to the inside of the lid, "is the sky as seen from Kirkwall. So you'll always be able to tell where you are in relation to home."

Hawke continued to talk for a short while but Anders wasn't really listening. He was staring at the compass as Hawke's fingers moved over each piece, explaining things as he went. He had never been given such a lavish gift before. It seemed like something a king should own, not a lowly apostate with barely two silvers to rub together. He knew that, in Hawke's eyes, money was no object but this? Surely the obscene amount of money Hawke had paid for it could have fed a Darktown family for a year. He swallowed down the rising feeling of guilt and pasted on a smile, turning to look at Hawke over his shoulder.

"Thank you," he said, "it's beautiful."

Hawke smiled back but his forehead creased in a small frown. He leaned back as Anders turned in his hold and looked at the compass between them.

"What's wrong?" he asked, "Don't you like it?"

"I do," Anders said quickly, "of course I do Hawke...it's just I'm not sure if-I mean it's..."

"What?" Hawke asked, frown deepening.

"A little...ornate," Anders said diplomatically, feeling flustered but hiding it as best he could, "I mean it looks like it should have its own escort! How could you possibly think I could ever be entitled to something this precious?"

Hawke's frown slowly transformed into a warm and yet scolding look. He brought Anders' hands up with his and placed the heavy compass back into his palm, closing his hands around them to fold his fingers around it.

"When are you going to realise that you're more precious than any of these things that I give to you?" Hawke said, silencing Anders' as the mage opened his mouth to speak, "I mean it Anders, I'm not just saying this. You need to understand that you are the dearest thing to me. I love you and I do because you're strong, stronger than me even though you don't always realise it. You're kind and you're caring, you make me laugh even though there are times I'd like to kill you," Hawke smiled as he said it, leaning forwards to rest his forehead against Anders' own, "and you love me back, which is the best gift I think I've ever been given in my life. So, as far as I'm concerned, you are more entitled to own this than anyone else I know, King or pauper."

Speechless didn't quite cover the feeling Anders felt sweeping over him as he listened to Hawke. He knew that Hawke was blunt to a fault and tended not to hide his feelings unless he was truly upset, but a confession such as the one Hawke gave him as they stood together beneath the trees was something that stayed with him for a long time afterwards. He loves you, Anders thought as he fiddled anxiously with the compass and kept his eyes from the earnest green ones he could feel boring into him. He really loves you, more than everything else, he thought as Hawke slipped him into a tight embrace before pulling back. Maker why is love so bloody daunting? I don't want to hurt you Hawke but you make it so difficult to believe that I won't. He placed a chaste kiss on Hawke's lips before pulling back and sniffing conspicuously.
"I love you too," he said in a small voice, finally meeting Hawke's gaze, "more than anything."

"I know you do," Hawke said, and yet there was a hint of relief in his voice that Anders wasn't sure if he imagined or not; Hawke coughed a little suddenly, as if to cover up his rather serious nature, running his hands up Anders' arms and patting him roughly on the shoulder, "now let's stop being so sappy about this and get on the blighted horses already. I swear you turn me into such a sentimental fool sometimes."

"Better than being just a fool then, isn't it?" Anders said as Hawke stepped around him to pick up the nosebags which Anders had discarded, still staring down at the now closed compass.

He heard Hawke call him something rude but didn't catch the words. He sniffed again and wiped quickly at the wet sheen threatening to spill from his eyes. Now who's a sentimental fool? Anders thought as he brushed away the evidence of his emotion before placing the compass into his satchel, still attached to the belt beneath his furs. He and Hawke mounted the horses and checked them into a slow walk, making their way back to the main path in a silence bred of understanding.

Another day's ride found them at the edge of the Planasene. The trees had started to thin as the sun began to set and, as the day dwindled into nothing more than a deep, golden glow the trees came to an abrupt end. The Vimmark Mountains appeared as towering cliffs and buttresses, obscuring the sky to their right as faint stars began to appear. They were encrusted with heavy drifts of snow but the cliffs were mainly free of white, revealing the red stone beneath. The forest path ended on the edge of a steep incline which sloped down towards the sea and the beginning of the Vimmark ridge; the steep and impressive mountains dwindled to rounded foothills as they approached the coast, allowing a small pass between them and the thin strip of beach visible beside the water.

Everything was still hidden beneath a thick layer of snow, rolling down the slope and glinting in the evening sun. They decided to camp one last night in the shelter of the trees so as to escape the snow for as long as possible. Anders stood on the cusp of the slope and stared out over the stunning view while Hawke warmed some water to make a measly broth with the last of their vegetables and dried herbs. If he squinted he thought he could make out the walls of Cumberland in the distance, sticking out into the coast as a vague, black block near the water's edge. Another couple of days and I'm sure we'll make it, Anders thought as he unfolded the map he kept in his satchel and examined it. Yes, a few more days.

"Which one of these is better?" Hawke called out suddenly, pulling Ander's eyes from the landscape; he turned and walked back to the camp, stowing away his map as he walked, to find Hawke holding two rather worse for wear carrots. Anders smiled as Hawke eyed them both critically.

"Whichever one is less rubbery," Anders said, "but in all honesty you might as well chuck them both in. Once they're boiled you won't be able to tell the difference."

"Oh," Hawke said as he pulled out his sharp hunting knife and began crudely chopping the carrots into the boiling stock, "fair enough."

Anders unhitched the saddles from the horses and placed them beside the saddlebags and bridles already sitting at the foot of the tent. Bryn snorted noisily, tossing her head and flicking her mane as Anders covered her with her thick blanket.

"Stop it you," he said as he smoothed his hand along her nose; she instantly began snuffling against his coat and trying to get into his pockets, "oh I see. Can't wait five minutes, can you?"
He pulled the last of the tablet from his pocket and split the slab in half. Bryn pulled her share from his hand with insistent lips and stood, crunching the rough sugar, her ears flicking back and forth. He offered the last piece to Sigurðr who ate it happily, swishing his tail as Anders covered him for the night in the thick blanket of wool, a twin to Brynhildr's own.

"You know I wish you wouldn't feed my horse that rubbish," Hawke said, making Anders turn guiltily to find the rogue eyeing him affectionately from his place by the fire, "you'll do him a damage."

"Oh but it's alright for me to feed it to Bryn, then?" Anders said as he walked back to the fire, sitting down by Hawke and stretching his legs towards the heat.

"She's your horse, you spoil her all you want," Hawke held up his hands in submission, "but don't do it to mine too, please?"

"Oh he'll be fine," Anders said, mollifying Hawke as the rogue gave him a stern glance, "it was the last piece anyway, the tablet's all finished."

"What? I didn't even get any!" Hawke said, sounding suddenly indignant.

"I know," Anders said, "I gave it all to your horse. Anyway, you wouldn't want to rot your teeth with that rubbish now, would you?"

Hawke gave him a playful shove which sent Anders over onto his side; he shook his head as Anders laughed. When the mage sat back up and shifted closer, until they were pressed against one another, Hawke didn't complain. Instead he lifted his left arm and wrapped it around Anders' shoulders, pulling him even closer. Anders watched the flames flickering around the pot, blackening the metal even more.

"Well, I'd say that this is turning out to be a rather pleasant journey, wouldn't you?" Hawke said as he leaned his head against Anders' own.

"It's only been a week," Anders said, "I wouldn't go counting your chickens before they've hatched."

"Good thing I don't own chickens then, isn't it," Hawke joked.

"That's not exactly the point I was making..." Anders started.

"I know, I know," Hawke sighed faux dramatically, "you are speaking to a country boy here, remember? I know all about chickens. We used to have them on the farm back in Lothering. They were a right bunch of idiots, always running off and getting chased by foxes and giant spiders and anything else big enough to eat them. And who do you think was the lucky person that had to round them up whenever they escaped?"

"That sounds like an easy question," Anders said, smiling, "would it be you?"

"Too right it was me," Hawke said, his tone filled with resentment, "I hated those bloody chickens. Give me a good old, plodding cow any day. At least they don't have aspirations beyond eating grass and sleeping. Our chickens seemed to think that they were wild fowl but as soon as they got into any trouble it was 'bwaah bucauh bwaah' and there was me, running around like a lunatic trying to gather them up! Bloody idiots."

Anders' body shook with suppressed laughter as Hawke relinquished his hold on him so as to lean forwards and check the dinner. He couldn't help the snigger that escaped however as the mental
image of Hawke, running around amidst a flock of scurrying chickens, came unbidden to his mind.

"That's right," Hawke said dryly, "laugh, go on. If it had ever happened to you then believe me you would be solemn with understanding right now."

"I'm sure," Anders said as he rummaged in the bag behind them for the rough, earthenware bowls and spoons.

"Well, what did you do for entertainment? In the tower I mean," Hawke clarified as he stirred the soup.

"Entertainment? That's a broad term," Anders said, letting out a stream of breath through pursed lips as he thought, "What I thought of as entertainment wasn't always exactly appreciated. I used to play practical jokes on the templars all the time, well on the ones I knew wouldn't be too harsh on me anyway. One time I jinxed Ser Godfrey's sword so that every time he drew it from its sheath it started screaming 'murder, murder!', even if he was just polishing it. Maker that was a good one. Unfortunately the drawback was that after a while, if anything went mysteriously wrong, they knew it was my fault. Then, even if it was someone else's doing, I got blamed for it anyway. Have enough scars on my arms to attest to that."

"Scars?" Hawke frowned, looking a little astonished at the thought of such harsh a punishment for so seemingly harmless a wrongdoing.

"Yes, well, Knight Captain Yethan favoured the cane," Anders said with a shrug, "if I had done something he thought was particularly bad then he would hit me here," Anders rubbed his hand against the underside of his forearm, making Hawke wince, "Maker did that hurt. Broke through the skin a few times. I still have the scars."

"Sounds like a barrel of laughs," Hawke said tonelessly as Anders passed him the bowls.

"Why do you think I ran away so many times?" Anders said, noting the slightly distant, hard look in Hawke's eyes, "but yes, even a hardened cynic and professed templar hater like myself can admit that there were some decent if not entirely misguided templars at Kinloch Hold. I mean Cullen was one, I think he secretly liked us even though he had been trained to trust us as much as a rabbit trusts an eagle. Yet he always...Hawke are you listening?"

"What?" Hawke asked, blinking as he looked up, "oh, sorry, my mind wandered. What were you saying?"

"Admittedly nothing that interesting," Anders said as Hawke ladled out the soup, "are you alright? You seem a little out of sorts."

Hawke kept his eyes on the spoon as he continued to ladle out the dinner. Once he was done he handed Anders his share and sat back against a tree stump, blowing on the bowl to cool it down. What is he thinking? Anders wondered, yet he didn't want to pry. Hawke always talked in his own time.

"It's just..." Hawke said after another few minutes of eating in silence, "I mean, you don't think anything like that would happen to Beth, do you?"

"Bethany? Are you joking?" Anders said, doing his best to reassure Hawke, "Let me put it this way Hawke, you should definitely not use me and my experiences as an example for someone like Bethany. I was a reckless, foolhardy, angry teenager; my twenties didn't see any improvement and it doesn't look as if my thirties will either. Bethany on the other hand is a considered, kind and
lovable individual. I'm sure she'll keep herself out of trouble. The main reason I was always
punished was because I went looking for trouble and, if I couldn't find any, made some of my
own."

"Such a rebel," Hawke smiled; well, the side of his mouth twitched, which was good enough for
Anders.

He knew that Hawke worried about his sister, even though he tried to remain positive in the face of
everything that had happened. Bethany's incarceration in the Gallows had been a huge blow for
Hawke which the man didn't talk about often. In all honesty Anders worried about her too; yes she
was a calm, strong and intelligent woman but then Karl had been a calm, strong and intelligent
man. Not that he would ever tell Hawke that. Now that Hawke had become champion of Kirkwall
his anxiety over Bethany had lessened. He was now more hopeful that nothing bad would befall
Bethany more because of her brother's status than her own good qualities. Amiable traits got you
nowhere when the templars decided to make an example of you.

"Well I wasn't a rebel all day long," Anders said as he sipped his soup, "I mean there were studies
to attend and things to do. Our tutor was a woman named Wynne; she was older and I'll admit we
didn't get along at first. Could have had something to do with the bucket of water I placed on top of
the door the in the first class we had. Soaked her right through. I grew to respect her though; she
was a wonderful healer, a spirit healer like me. Funny, isn't it? The ever so subtle difference that
turns you from a sought after commodity into a hated abomination."

"Wait, I don't understand," Hawke said as he bit through a large chunk of potato, "what's a spirit
healer?"

"A spirit healer is a mage proficient enough in the school of creation and confident enough in the
Fade to ask a spirit for help," Anders said, recalling the definition from a book he had read once,
sure that he sounded terribly clever as Hawke was eyeing him with interest, "a good spirit that is. If
you were to go through that same process but make a pact with a bad spirit you would be a blood
mage, and if you were to go through that same process but let the good spirit into your mind you
would be an abomination. Like me."

"Ah the subtle vagaries," Hawke said with a shake of his head.

"I know," Anders said with an unamused chuff of breath, "would you believe I was actually highly
regarded for my abilities in the Circle before my stint in the Wardens?"

"Actually I wouldn't," Hawke grinned, "not after you've just told me all about your terrible
behaviour."

"Besides that," Anders said with a shake of his head, "mages who master the art of creation are few
and far between. I think there's too much human nature involved in our talents; many mages enjoy
destruction or twisting the laws of nature; entropy and primal. Creation takes a lot of effort and it is
the most difficult to learn. You have to love what you do, you have to care, or it will never work."

"Sounds like the perfect thing for you," Hawke said as he stared once more into the fire, "but I
thought that you knew other things too. I mean you know elemental spells."

"Yes, but the connection isn't quite as strong," Anders tried to explain, not sure fully how to put it
into words, "for example I know spells from the primal and the spiritual but it would be impossible
to learn anything entropic. It is a school of magic diametrically opposed to creation. It undoes
things while creation builds them. It's odd but it really becomes a part of you. I even find that I
don't get along with those well versed in entropy. There's just some natural dislike I get before I've
even been introduced to them. It's like the magic within us reacts before our minds and personalities have the chance to."

Hawke was watching him intently as he spoke. Anders shifted about in his knapsack, which he was using as a cushion, and continued.

"So that's sort of what happens," Anders said, stirring his dinner to bring up the carrots and potatoes, "you form a connection with a certain magical art and it usually matches your personality in some way, or so I've found anyway. You'd think with my rebellious nature I would have taken to the primal but there was something about creation that drew me. Transforming what already exists and bringing new things into being..."

He trailed off as the fire continued to crackle and spark away merrily to itself. Hawke tilted his bowl up to drink the last of his soup before setting the bowl down on the ground. Then he once more slid his arm around Anders, across his back and down, his long fingers curled around the mage's waist. Anders shifted around to get comfortable as he finished his soup.

"It makes sense to me, what you said about a mage's personality matching their craft," Hawke said after a contemplative pause, "Bethany was always a healer before anything else and so was father. He taught her everything he knew before he died. You're like them in a lot of ways, I can see that; only you're more mad and reckless, of course."

"Oh, of course," Anders chuckled, finishing his dinner.

They sat together and watched the sky through the trees, darkening to a deep, velvet black pinpricked with stars. As the feelings of comfort and happiness pervaded his mind Anders found that he had almost forgotten the nightmare completely.

Almost.
One thing which Anders could say that he hated most about travelling was unpredictable weather. One moment you were walking under puffy white clouds dotted on a blue sky and the next...

On the afternoon of the seventh day a storm rose up from the South; the weather deteriorated from cold but pleasant into devastating within the hour after they had stopped to eat lunch. The wind buffeted the horses and the thick, fast moving clouds pelted them with hail and sleet. As the tempest grew more violent they had been forced to find shelter beneath an overhang of rock at the base of a nearby cliff. The driving winds did not come from only one direction, however, and made it impossible to truly escape the harsh weather. They had found themselves quickly soaked and freezing in the cold, gusting wind.

"We'll just have to push through it!" Hawke had shouted over the noise of the wind.

It had turned into an unpleasant, wet and very bitter day. Anders found that the furs were more of a hindrance than a boon when sodden; heavy and cold. They reached the gates of Cumberland in almost pitch blackness. They had only the light from Anders' staff to guide them and that had to be extinguished before they reached the city and anyone could recognise it for what it was; they covered the last few hundred feet with edgy trepidation, aiming as best they could for the subtle light of the city ahead. The guards at the gate were thankfully quick to admit them, not paying too much attention as they held the swinging lantern over Hawke's papers, as all travellers were checked after nightfall, the wind threatening to blow them out of the guard's hands. As soon as they were admitted through the gates Anders realised why the guard had been so hasty to let them in; it was the changing of the shift. The new guards, plodding out past them as they entered the city, did not look at all happy to be starting their duty in the freezing darkness.

They had found the inn at the end of the first, and what looked like the main, street. The darkness and the sleet had made it difficult enough to see, even despite the lanterns lining the street, but as soon as Hawke had spied the word 'inn' they had both hurriedly dismounted and hitched the horses to the nearest post. Inside they found that the inn was everything they'd hoped it would be; brightly lit and warm. Rather to Anders discomfort it was, however, filled with people. He had hoped, admittedly knowing that it was rather unlikely, that they could find somewhere quiet to stay the night. Yet, with the storm high and spirits low due to the weather, it only seemed natural that everyone was packed into the inn's pub, soaking in the heat from the fire and the alcohol from the bar. Each round table was surrounded by at least five people, some hunched over their flagons talking in low voices, others rearing back in their chairs, loud with drink. The scene of noise and merriment tinged with unease had instantly put Anders out of sorts.

"Two brandies please," Hawke said as he slumped his folded arms onto the well polished bar, "and make them half a gill if you don't mind." [1]

Hawke had been in a foul mood for most of the day but it had only worsened as the light had failed. Anders was sure that the sun had still been up when the darkness of the storm had descended upon the land but the thick, impenetrable storm clouds overhead had made it so as no light could break through. For some reason this seemed to make the situation ten times worse for Hawke; he bit out one word answers to the few questions Anders' had asked him and sat hunched on his horse with his face set into a grim look. Thus, when they finally reached the safety of the inn, the first thing he had done was head for the nearest drink. So while Hawke dallied at the bar Anders was forced
to find the proprietress on his own and sort lodgings for themselves and the horses.

He couldn't help but feel the eyes on him as he moved through the crowded pub, even though when he casually glanced around he could find no one staring at him as such. Which didn't mean it wasn't happening as soon as he turned his back. I used to be good with crowds, Anders thought ruefully. When he was younger he had been the master of manipulating people to his will, hiding his true nature beneath charm and humour. Yet, since Justice, Anders had become more wary of and less able to handle people in general, of that he was fully aware. Now, being away from Kirkwall, somewhere unknown, he was somewhat out of his element; Justice had slowly become inured to the Kirkwallers, able to deal with many of them without thinking, but here...Anders just did his best to appease the spirit within him and pull on his old reserves of calm and charm.

It turned out that the lady of the house was easy to find. She was a tall, slim woman with curly, brown hair mainly pulled up beneath a white cap. Anders found her rushing around the front entranceway, herding two unruly dogs and a heavy set man in a dirty cloak back out of the door. The wind outside was still fierce and wild.

"I said no rooms! I'm sorry," she was saying in an authoritative tone, "you'll have to try the Ruby Dagger on Garner street."

"Where's that then?" the man asked, voice gruff but, to Anders' ears, oddly cultured.

"Down to the right at the end of the road," the woman said, recoiling as one of the dogs snarled at her; the man grabbed the animal by the collar and hauled it closer to him, "everyone knows it."

The man turned with a nod and headed back out into the dimly lit street, the wind still howling, his dogs following obediently. Anders winced at the thought even as Justice simmered beneath his skin at the woman's unjust treatment of a stranger. I'm sure he and his dogs would have appreciated a night in the stables over heading back out into that awful weather, Anders thought, and imagine saying 'everyone knows it'. It was obvious, even to the mage, that the man was travelling as they were and probably didn't know Cumberland any better than Anders knew Antiva City. Of course another thing the woman had said made him equally unhappy; no rooms. Yet there was something in the way she had spoken to the man that Anders didn't quite believe.

The woman bustled off through a door to the side of the corridor and Anders quickly followed. It turned out to be a kitchen of sorts, which the woman was now busy moving expertly around. He cleared his throat but the woman didn't seem to pay him any attention.

"Excuse me Madam," he said as she rummaged through a cupboard, "we have two horses outside that need stables for the night."

"That'll be ten silvers for each horse," she said brusquely.

"Um, I have the coin to pay..." Anders started, entirely put off by the woman's attitude.

"John!" she shouted without sparing him a glance; after a few moments a young, flustered boy appeared at the doorway, "this man has horses out front. See you get 'em in the stables and make sure you lock it behind you this time, mind!"

"Ma'am," John hurried away before Anders could say a word to him.

The woman continued to bustle around, making Anders feel a little uncomfortable, as if he were intruding in some way. He had recognised the lie in the woman's voice as she had spoken to the burly stranger in the entrance hall and, if his suspicions were correct then...
"And I also require lodgings," he said, asking casually, "do you have rooms free?"

"We ain't..." she started, finally turning around to look at him; as soon as she did Anders knew that he was vindicated. As she caught sight of him her demeanour changed in an instant. She eyed him up and down and smiled, straightening and brushing down her apron covered dress, "...ain't got many left. Why, how many did you need, dear?"

Not quite the same story as you gave to the poor man you threw back out into the storm without a second thought, is it? Anders thought angrily. He wasn't sure if she was suddenly being so attentive because she liked the look of the expensive furs he was wearing or because she found him attractive. Considering he hadn't washed properly for a week and was sure he looked a little rough he put his money on the former. Supercilious cow, he thought as he pasted on a convincing smile.

"Two actually," Anders said; he knew that Hawke wasn't shy about his sexual inclinations but Anders found it better to always be discreet in situations like this and especially with people like this. He would prefer to sleep comfortably on his own for one night rather than being thrown out onto the street, back into the storm.

"Well actually we've only got one left," the woman said, looking conciliatorily at him.

"That's fine, really," Anders said quickly, unwilling to lose lodgings on a night like this and happy that it gave a believable excuse for he and Hawke to share a room, "it's no real problem. Anything to get out of this blighted storm will be appreciated, Madam."

"Oh I know," the woman said as she led him back through to the main pub; Anders sighed in irritation as he walked past Hawke who was sneakily sipping small amounts out of Anders' brandy glass, his own lying empty beside him. They ended up in a back room that looked like a study of sorts, "it's been frightful nearly all evening here, can't go outside without being blown back in! Bless you for taking just the single room, serrah, I'd hate to have to try and sort anything else at this time o'night."

"No trouble," Anders said, continuing his fake smile.

"I'm taking it you're here with that gentleman at the bar?" she said as she pulled open a heavy ledger and began scribbling in it with a long, worse for wear quill.

"That's right," Anders said as he pulled open the coin purse that Hawke had given him; she looked at him with interest and he quickly amended, "we're travelling from Kirkwall."

"Oh we get a lot of people coming through here from the West. Kirkwall and Starkhaven, they all stop here," the woman said, seeming mollified by his as she turned back to the book, "only you've picked a bad time of year for travelling, dear."

Of which I am well aware, Anders thought ruefully, but he kept his charming smile in place and paid the woman the forty silvers she asked for. He gave Hawke's name for her ledger and a fake one for himself, William Abbot. The proprietress stowed the forty silvers in a heavy chest and then led him upstairs to show him the room.

He had all of the supplies and baggage ferried upstairs from the stables, wrapping his staff in a long fur blanket so as to disguise its true nature. He stowed it under the bed, hating that he had nowhere safer to keep it. Once he had divested himself of the heavy furs and his damp coat, he joined Hawke at the bar; both glasses by the rogue were now conspicuously empty. Anders shook his head and sat down, declining the barman's offer of another brandy. Hawke still had his folded arms up on the bar, his head placed firmly atop them. Anders shook him a little and received a mere
"Come on, you've hardly eaten all day and now you're quaffing alcohol," Anders scolded, "you're going to get drunk."

"Good," Hawke said in a muffled tone, sounding like a huffy child, "I want to. I feel terrible. I'm all cold and sore and my head hurts. This is all your fault."

"Oh is it?" Anders rolled his eyes and sighed, realising that Hawke was already on his way to being as drunk as he was aspiring to be, "Well how about a nice long sleep on a clean, comfortable bed to cheer you up, hmm?"

"I'd rather have a nice long fuck on a clean, comfortable bed," Hawke said as he lifted his head from his arms; the bartender, who was busy serving another man at the end of the bar, gave them both an odd look to which Anders simply smiled tightly.

"Wouldn't we all," Anders said tersely in a loud voice, adding under his breath, "stop moaning at me, keep your bloody voice down and come up stairs."

"I'm not moaning," Hawke groused as he stood slowly and yet followed Anders dutifully.

The room was small but wonderfully warm. There was a large, roaring fire on the wall opposite the door, a dresser, a small writing table and a large, queen sized bed. There were rafters overhead and the walls were painted in a rich cream. A four pronged candelabra in the corner threw odd shadows over the floorboards as Hawke shuffled across the room and flopped onto the bed with a satisfied groan. Anders closed the door, walked immediately to their knapsacks and began opening them.

"Hawke, get off of the bed," he said tightly as he started rummaging through his clothes, sighing in sheer irritation when he found most of them soaked through; he turned to see Hawke still lying unmoving on the bed, "$\text{Hawke! Get off of the bed before you soak it through!}$"

"Alright! Alright," Hawke said grouchily, pushing up and sliding backwards off of the bed before shrugging out of his furs and throwing them haphazardly over the back of the chair by the writing desk.

Anders took a deep breath, let it out slowly and forcibly relaxed his shoulders which, he had realised, were bunched up tightly around his neck in agitation. The knapsacks and saddlebags had all been treated with beeswax to make them as waterproof as possible but the sleet had been torrential; it had worked its way through all the holes and openings it could find and done its best to soak everything within. Anders pulled the sodden contents out and set them out to dry as best he could. With the clothes he wrung them out into the empty basin by the dresser and then laid them over any available surface. He took Hawke's furs and placed them in a neater fashion over the back of the chair before moving it closer to the fire. His own furs were hanging over the dresser, looking as if they would take days to dry. Thankfully the skins lining the inside were quick to dry and kept the mainstay of the wetness out. Only once he had sat down on the edge of the bed, sure that he had done all he could, did he realise how unbelievably tired he was. He heard Hawke rummaging through the things he had placed on the dresser and looked at him a little vacantly.

"There isn't anything left to eat," Hawke said with a sigh, "$\text{I'm going to go and ask, they're bound to have at least some bread lying around.}$"

"The lady said she would bring us something," Anders said as he scratched at his scalp, hating the slick feeling of grease in his wet hair, only accentuating the itch all over his body; Maker I could kill for a bath right now, he thought.
"The lady?" Hawke mimicked as he shuffled to the hearthrug and flopped down onto it in an ungainly fashion, "Didn't you get her name?"

"No, I didn't," Anders said as he rubbed at his face, "and to be honest I don't really care either."

"Well that's a fine attitude," Hawke said in an arrogant tone that grated against Anders already raw nerves, adding sarcastically, "make friends wherever you go, do you?"

"You know what Hawke?" Anders said as he lay back, "Just shut up. I have enough on my mind right now without listening to your..."

He would have continued but it was at that moment that the wet patch on the bed, in which he was unwittingly lying, made itself known to him by way of soaking through the back of his shirt. He sat up suddenly and looked down at the bed, face twisted in anger.

"Wonderful," he said tightly, standing up and hauling his now sodden shirt off over his head; Hawke looked up at him in confusion, "that's wonderful. You can take the bloody bed Hawke, I think I'd rather sleep on the rug. At least it's fucking dry!"

"What? Oh it can't be that wet," Hawke said in what Anders could only take, wound so tightly as he was, as a patronising tone.

"Well you won't mind sleeping it then," Anders said as looked at the shirt in his hands, realising he had nothing else to wear in its stead.

Which was of course the moment that a knock sounded at the door. Anders swallowed down his rising ire, pulled his wet shirt back on and strode across the room. He pasted his now rather fraught but polite smile back onto his face and opened the door.

"Just a little something we had left in the kitchen, dear," the woman said as she handed him a tray with some bread, cheese and cured meats on it; when she looked around Anders, seemingly with the intention to say something to Hawke, she suddenly gasped and pushed past the startled mage, "oh my but it looks like a wash house in here!"

"Oh, um, yes," Anders said trying to sound polite but feeling the tension within his body tighten even further as this woman invaded his personal space, "everything was soaked by the storm."

"Well you should have said, dear," Anders swore that if she called him 'dear' once more that he would strangle her himself, "I'll put them up on the pulley downstairs if you'd like, they'll be dry a lot quicker."

"Yes, please, that would be great," Hawke suddenly chimed in, giving the woman a charming smile to which she replied in kind; Anders felt, at that precise moment, like sending them both through the nearest wall. Instead he just watched as Hawke helped the proprietress gather all of the wet clothes and furs and then even accompanied her downstairs. Anders stood by the fire, breathing in the smell of smoky wood, before walking to the bed and sitting rigidly on the dry side of the cover. He bent his head forwards, reached up with both hands and rubbed deeply at his shoulder blades. What on earth is the matter with me? he thought self-deprecatingly. He brought his arms down with a defeated slump and scratched at an itch on his forearm, noting the dirt caked under his nails as he did so. A wash, he thought, I need a wash and then at least perhaps I'll feel human again afterwards.

He had begun to realise, as he set up the well used pot stand over the fire, forcing the contraption to fit, that it was the familiar pull of Justice's ire beneath his skin that was the main reason for his
unease. After a calm, pleasant week in the forest, just he and Hawke alone together, he had become used to feeling at peace. Now, with the feeling of Justice once more making himself known inside of Anders' mind, he couldn't help but see the sheer contrast between their natures. He had become so close to Justice's way of thought, his outlook on life, while living in Kirkwall that he almost hadn't realised that his own thoughts were being pushed aside. His own wants and needs, such as the ability to laugh at a situation or just sit and not think about anything but he found that it was...mainly Hawke; and he knew that was Justice's doing.

Anders tried his best to clear his mind as he heated a pot, filled with water from the pitcher on the dresser. He used the practiced motions to force his anger and worry into dormancy; emptying the dregs in the basin out of the window into the howling wind, filling it with heated water from the pot, finding a wet cloth from amongst his supplies along with a shard of solid soap. Anders removed his shirt and began meticulously washing his arms, revelling in the feel of the hot water running over his skin. He wasn't surprised to see that the water was a dark brown by the time he had only done his face, arms, and chest. Hawke returned just as he was heating up a second pot and emptying the basin once more.

"Bloody hell, close that window, will you!" Hawke said as Anders pulled the basin back inside, "you're letting all the heat out!"

Anders ignored him as he closed the windows and fastened the latch. In the state of calm he had induced within himself, he couldn't bring himself to listen to Hawke's inflammatory words. Instead he simply walked back to the hearth rug, filled the basin once more and began lathering up the cloth.

"What are you doing?" Hawke asked, sounding rather irritated or so Anders thought.

"I'm washing, what does it look like?" Anders said, finally looking up at the rogue as he stood by the foot of the bed. Don't be antagonistic, he told himself sternly, "Take your shirt off and I'll do you too, if you'd like."

Hawke looked at him for a few seconds, blinking beneath an angry scowl, before his countenance suddenly underwent a quick and complete transformation. His brow smoothed out, his eyes lit up and his mouth twisted into a toothy grin. He let out a barking laugh that made Anders stare at him as if he had lost his mind. Honestly, Anders thought as he stared at his lover, his emotions are so taciturn when he's even just a little drunk.

"Well," Hawke said as he wiped his eye and slowed his laughing fit to a few, breathy chuckles, "that's an offer I find it hard to refuse."

"What are you talking about?" Anders asked, feeling the irritation swing back into play even as he tried to ignore it; Hawke's own amusement was serving only to annoy him. Oh so it's alright to be an arsehole all day and then suddenly you're all smiles and laughter and everything's fine, is it? Anders thought as he started scrubbing at his sides.

"Oh come on, 'take your shirt off and I'll do you too'?
" Hawke said, still grinning as he walked over to the rug and sat down beside the fire, facing Anders over the basin, "There's a double entendre if ever I heard one, as the Orlesians would say."

The laugh Anders' let out was a mixture of feelings; half genuine amusement and half appeasement. He rinsed himself down as Hawke pulled his shirt off. Anders stared at him as the firelight flickered over his sculpted body; his muscular arms, his toned abdomen, the dark hairs on his chest. He reached out, as Hawke turned round to dump his dirty shirt onto the floor beside his feet, and ran his fingers down the taut flesh of Hawke's right bicep, trailing down over the inside of
his elbow and down to his wrist bone. He followed his fingers with his eyes. This is real, he thought, *this* is real. Not the anger or the fear or the other people who would incite it.

Doesn't make it any easier to bear though, does it? Anders sighed, letting his hand slip from Hawke's soft skin to the floor.

"You're not going to tell me what's wrong, are you?" he heard Hawke ask as he watched the shadows on the rug.

I don't want to talk about this, he thought, I just want to go to sleep, wake up in the morning and *leave* this place. He rubbed at his left arm in agitation and tried to imagine, with the flickering firelight, the soft rug beneath him and the soft cream walls, that they were at home, in Kirkwall, waiting for...but it didn't work. Justice wouldn't allow him to play out the fantasy. The side of him that was the spirit was too wrapped up in the injustice witnessed since entering the inn and that, mixed with Anders' own unease, was hard to temper. He could feel Hawke's eyes on him and forced himself to talk.

"I just..." Anders hesitated, not sure how to put it into words, "I don't like it here, that's all."

"Is it you or *him* that we're talking about here?" Hawke said seriously, making Anders look up sharply; Hawke certainly picked his moments to be observant.

"Both," Anders said tightly, "for different reasons."

"Well I think that you should maybe keep him a little more under control," Hawke said, instantly putting Anders' back up, "because if anything happens here, well, we're not in Kirkwall any more Anders..."

"I love the way you say that as if I don't know exactly where we are and what the situation is!" Anders snapped out, eyes narrowing as he dumped the cloth back into the dirty, soapy water with a dull slap, "and yet *despite* being so fucking understanding of our *situation* you decide that acting like a complete bastard, getting drunk as soon as we come within ten feet of alcohol and leaving me to deal with everything as acceptable, do you? Don't you think I've had an awful day as well?"

"I am not bloody drunk," Hawke said with a scowl, "and I'm so sorry for trying to look out for you. I'll make sure not to do it again!"

"Good," Anders growled out as he stood, snatching up his shirt and using the unsoiled patches to dry off his still damp skin; Hawke continued to stare angrily at him but Anders found it hard to care, hissing out, "because I can take care of myself, I always have! I don't need you telling me to be careful Hawke, I'm not an imbecile."

Anders climbed into the bed, on the dry side, shivering as the chill cotton enveloped his warm skin. He tried to relax, even as he heard Hawke shifting around on the hearth rug, but found it almost impossible. This was supposed the be a relaxing night; stay in a warm bed, eat a warm meal, feel comfortable and together...and now they were further apart than ever, even though they were barely five feet from each other.

The room plunged into flickering gloom as the candles were extinguished. Anders shut his eyes and pulled the thick blankets up until they were beneath his nose. He hated fighting with Hawke but he hated it even more when they went to bed angry at each other. Anders felt Hawke slip into the bed, purposefully lying as far on the other side as possible; he felt both a sense of sheer satisfaction and a stab of guilt as the rogue muttered under his breath about the heavy, damp covers on his side. There was a lot of moving about, shifting and rustling. Anders continued to lay still...
and opened his eyes, watching the continuing flicker of the orangey yellow firelight revealing the
room in a nightmarish and distorted fashion. He wasn't sure exactly how long he lay there,
watching the windows shake as the persistent wind rattled them again and again, trying his best not
to shiver or think about the man lying just as still behind him. Eventually, after what felt like hours,
Anders finally turned to lie on his back, turning his head to afford him a vague view of the lump of
white covers and snatch of dark hair that was Hawke. He stared.

"Hawke," he said after a few moments of deliberation with himself, in which he won over Justice's
own refusal to apologise, "Hawke are you awake?"

No reply. Anders rolled his head back over sadly until he was staring up at the ceiling. He shivered
against the sheets and tried to ignore the squirming guilt in his stomach, making him feel slightly
sick. Just as he was about to turn back over into the small patch of warmth he had made there was
once more the sound of rustling and movement. Anders looked back to Hawke only to find himself
enveloped by a strong pair of arms and sudden heat. He breathed out unsteadily and shifted back
onto his side of the bed, pulling Hawke with him, until they were both free of the damp patch on
the other side. Anders allowed Hawke to haul him close and wrap him in a tight embrace, even as
Hawke's long stubble scratched at his neck. They lay still, soaking up each other's warmth, and
Anders tried to bite his tongue into silence. Yet the need to break the quiet won over him.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice falling to a half whisper, "I didn't mean to shout at you."

"...Let's just go to sleep," Hawke said, voice suspiciously toneless, making Anders grimace.

There was still an unspoken tension in the air. Anders knew that he couldn't fully attribute it to he
and Hawke's fight but was unable to identify the source of his continuing unease. He sighed softly
and eventually closed his eyes, forcing himself to try and fall asleep. Everything wasn't alright,
Anders thought as he felt sleep claim him, but at the very least they were together.

"How long is this fucking thing going to last?" Hawke said miserably as he stared out of the
window and picked at his roast pork and cabbage

They were alone in the pub but for two men, seated at a table on the opposite side of the room
drinking beer and muttering to each other inaudibly. The storm had continued to blow through the
night and into the dull grey morning, occasionally letting out heavy showers of sleet or even snow
as the day grew colder, making Anders' spirits sink. Everything had been going rather swimmingly,
in regards to keeping to the rough schedule he had in his mind, and now they were already being
delayed. He had wanted to be away from Kirkwall for as little time as possible but right now,
sitting in the pub eating a coarse but hearty meal, he felt as if their stint of good luck had already
been cursed.

Of course the fact that Hawke was still in a bad mood with him also may have had something to do
with that.

The proprietress, whom Hawke had informed him was named Fiona, had offered them lunch when
it looked like they wouldn't be leaving. Hawke had also already inquired about taking the room on
for another night and had been informed by the inn keeper that there was actually another room
free, allowing them to have one each. The thought made Anders heart sink. There was something
about this place, he thought as he took another mouthful of pork and chewed thoughtfully,
something that seemed to be affecting not only him but also the atmosphere itself. There was a bad
feeling in the air. Anders had begun to wonder, as Hawke's foul mood continued, whether the
rogue's tetchiness could also be ascribed to this unnamed influence. It had only occurred to Anders
after he had awoken, feeling warm, refreshed and comfortable, that Hawke's behaviour was
actually very out of character. It wasn't unusual for Hawke to have been in a bad mood while they were out in the storm but generally, once he was no longer cold and had some food in him, he tended to lighten up a little. Last night they had both ended up winding each other up until they snapped, instead of being simply relieved to have found lodgings and be together in the same room. Anders continued to ponder the strangeness of the ambience. Hawke ate his food with savage motions of his fork and eyes cast to the table. They finished in silence.

"What's the plan then?" Anders asked as Fiona cleared their table, the woman smiling at Hawke in what Anders supposed she must think as a beguiling fashion; he felt his lips tighten as Hawke once more returned her advances. She placed two apples onto the table for each of them before heading towards the kitchens.

"What are you asking me for?" Hawke said, smile falling as he looked back to the mage, "This is your trip, I'm not going to force you into anything."

"Force me into anything?" Anders mimicked, unable to stop his eyes from narrowing; he knew that Hawke wasn't himself and yet it was still difficult not to react to the rogue's irritable attitude "I was asking your opinion."

"No, you were trying to get me to make your decisions for you," Hawke said patronisingly as he took a swig of his light ale while he watched Anders sternly; the mage kept his mouth shut as he tried to suppress his rising anger and thus he heard Hawke's muttered addendum, "as usual."

Anders had to physically bite his tongue to stop himself from yelling at the man across from him, had to grip both of his hands tightly together to stop himself from lashing out. As he sat there, breathing deeply in and out, he tried to remind himself that this was all too odd to be reasonable; Hawke was acting very out of sorts, Anders himself was out of sorts, everything was off somehow. It didn't calm him down but it did allow him to refrain from verbal or physical violence.

"I'm going to get some more supplies," Anders said suddenly as he stood, keeping his eyes averted from Hawke; he grabbed his shiny, red apple and stuffed it into his pocket, "we'll need more food and herbs to last us until Val Chevin. Do you need anything specific while I'm out looking?"

"No," Hawke said succinctly as he looked up at Anders, "so does this mean that we're staying another night or not?"

"Yes we'll be staying another night," Anders said as he shrugged on his heavy overcoat and pulled the fastenings tightly closed, "even if the storm stopped now it's already too late to set out and, at this rate, it looks like it won't stop until tonight or early tomorrow at the latest. We might as well...stay here."

"I'm not moving anywhere else," Hawke said churlishly as he took another long drink, frowning heavily as he obviously picked up on Anders' hesitation.

"I didn't bloody ask you to," Anders snapped back, swallowing down the rest of the words which were trying desperately to get out of his mouth, "we'll stay here and then we'll set out tomorrow, alright? I'll be back later."

The freezing wind outside was still preferable to the warm interior of the inn. The clouds were thick and grey but at least they were brightly lit and higher than they had been. When he had first awoken the city was half steeped in low cloud and darkness. Now, as he headed to the stables, he did so in the dull light of day. Everything looked strangely friendlier in the light than in the darkness, yet it still did not ease his nerves. He found the stables open, the horses within champing on their nosebags and swishing their tails. He found John, the stable boy, and the barman brushing
down the horses. Anders nodded to them both and headed straight for Bryn who was standing in the corner with Sigurðr. The two impressive animals made the other steeds in the stables seem entirely plain in comparison.

"Hello girl," he said as Bryn whinnied when he drew near, reaching up to run his hands over her ears, laughing as she tossed her head and flicked her ears in annoyance, "cold night?"

Anders checked her blanket was secure and then set about checking Sigurðr too. He knew that the stable hand was obviously taking good care of them but he just wanted to make sure; also talking to animals who couldn't talk back was something he found entirely calming. He muttered under his breath as he pulled the apple from his pocket, smiling as both horses instantly began trying to nuzzle their way to the sweet prize. Anders shoed them both back before retrieving his dagger from his belt and slitting the crunchy fruit inn two. He set out his palms flat up and gave them both their treat before the other horses noticed. He wiped the sticky juice and horse spit from his hands and patted them both goodbye. He had intended to ask either the boy or the barman for information about Cumberland but, when he turned around, he found the stables empty.

He left the stables and shut them tightly behind him just in case. He wasn't sure if someone was coming back but he thought it was better safe than having all the horses within running wild over the city. Having no idea where to go he decided to start with the main street he had only glimpsed on their arrival. As he wandered along the dark cobbles he was afforded a much clearer view of Cumberland. They called it the granite city and with good reason; the mainstay of the buildings were built using the steely, grey stone. The heavy, dark wood which made up the rest of the architecture only added to the overbearing and looming quality of the streets, some buildings three stories high, blocking out the little light that entered. The walls around Cumberland were high and strong, bordering the city right down to the coast where the large docks were clearly visible. The City was built on a mixture of flat patches and soft inclines leading all the way from the top of the hill on which it was built to the coast where it ended. The streets, which were visible as a dark trace work running through the thick clumps of buildings, were twisting and irregular; a testament to the city's quick growth and the lack of planning which had accompanied its sprawl.

Yet there was an odd mix of practical building techniques and cultured statues and gilding on the buildings. It was Nevaran after all, even if the statues were mainly of bulky men in heroic poses, or hefty dragons and fair maidens. Every alcove in the street seemed to hold some dainty carving or mural, an odd contrast to the lack of artistry that accompanied the buildings themselves. As he walked he spied ruined buildings through alleyways, walls crumbling and crawling with ivy and moss, ruined carvings and faceless statues peering out from between the rocks.

The main street, which Anders had walked as he observed the city, ended and he had found no shops to speak of. He was left facing a large two story house with ivy trailing across the rough stonework and twirled around the wrought iron window casements. The conjoining street ran steeply down to the left and up to the right, its cobbles indented with two runnels for carts to follow. Anders looked both ways as the wind picked up and twirled around his prone figure, biting at his exposed face and hands. Should have brought my gloves, he thought ruefully as he rubbed the cold flesh of his fingers together, and I should have asked the bloody inn keeper where the shops are. For a moment he considered going back but the thought of facing Hawke's surely smug satisfaction on seeing Anders wander back into the inn to ask for directions was too incensing. He would rather walk around aimlessly for hours than suffer that. Unfortunately the weather was not only miserable to be out in but it also made the streets almost completely empty, leaving no one to stop and ask information of. Anders sighed and decided to go left; the street he joined was wider than that which he had left, leading downhill in the direction of the docks. There's bound to be a market near there, surely, Anders thought optimistically, there's usually some sort of marketplace near the docks in most cities. It was as he passed out of the shadow of the tall, residential buildings
that he caught his first sight of it.

The water in the bay was like a badly scratched sheet of steel. The waves were tall but short lived beneath the fierce winds, falling in white curls only to rise again in shadowy hillocks. They broke against the rugged rocks of the island, standing tall and isolated in the bay, in sprays of white foam and mist; and above it all sat the highest seat of power for the Circle of Magi in all of the lands under Andrastan Chantry rule. The Drūwisburg.

For Anders the large fort was an impressive and yet rather conflicting sight. It contrasted not only with the slate grey sea but also with the slate grey city, built as it was from pale Nevaran stone. The outer wall, which flowed around the entire fort, followed the jagged rocks which edged the island itself. The Keep was comprised of a large, round central building with four smaller stone towers attached at regular intervals, each castellated, dotted with slim, tall windows and holding all of the familiar trappings of a once fully functional defensive fort. There were large inner wards, surrounded by high, wide curtain walls dimpled with crenelations. Anders could just see, past the obscuring buildings before him, the large heavy drawbridge which was currently held up fast to complete the wall.

The island itself was obviously of human make. Anders liked to think he would have spotted it himself even if he didn't know the history behind the Drūwisburg. It was an old Nevaran stronghold, a left over relic from the times of Cumberland's main occupation as a fort town, and back then it had been a proud coastal defence. However, when Cumberland became a large enough city to require its own Circle, the White Divine had ordered the Drūwisburg to be essentially separated from the mainland and turned into the Circle tower which was to become the most powerful and well known outside of the Tevinter Imperium. It had taken two years to hew the dirt and stone from the ground itself and let the sea devour the land, turning the once proud fort into nothing more than all the other Circle's; a convenient prison.

Anders tried not to watch it as he walked but he found it hard to keep his eyes from wandering. The street he was on veered to the right, steering him deeper into the city itself. He found himself in a large square, off of which branched many streets and alleyways. In the centre there was a welcome spay of greenery, the stone on which it sat covered with moss and lichen, the small garden comprising of ferns and hardy, dark leaved bushes with blue flowers. Anders tried to catch the eye of the few people that passed him as he headed for the opposite side of the square but no one seemed willing to engage him in conversation. Instead Anders simply continued to plunge further into Cumberland. It was only as he found himself at another intersection that he realised that he wasn't entirely sure of his way back to the inn. He took a deep breath as he looked about him, wishing suddenly that he hadn't been stubborn enough to run out into the city without a blind clue of where he was going.

"Bugger, bugger, bugger," he muttered to himself as he pulled his frozen fingers up underneath his armpits and jiggled on his feet to try and bring some warmth back into his limbs, "where the fuck am I?"

It was only when he dropped his arms once more to his sides that the wet, snuffling nose at his side became apparent, rubbing against his knuckles. Anders let out an undignified yelp and reeled back, turning in panic to look down at the large, wet, black, white and tan dog that stood patiently before him. Anders stared into its huge hazel eyes and blinked, eventually looking around to try and find its owner once his heart rate had sufficiently slowed. He needn't have bothered searching, however, as a few second later a large man ran into view, another dog trailing at his heels, and called the dog to him with a clap and a whistle.

"I've told you about running off like that!" the man said sternly to the dog who, in return, only
seemed to wag its tail and let its tongue loll out of its mouth, "You stupid mutt, you. One of these
days you're going to get lost and...! Oh, I apologise, I hope she didn't bother you too much serrah."

Anders only realised the man was addressing him when he looked up and found himself being
watched by the stranger. He recognised the man instantly; he was the very same unlucky
individual which he had witnessed being thrown from the inn the night before. In the brighter light
of day Anders saw him much clearer than he had done in the half lit gloom of the inn hallway; he
was very tall, at least a head above Anders himself, with unruly light brown hair and a thick but
closely cropped beard and moustache. He had a stern yet handsome and somehow likeable,
trustworthy face, holding the bluest eyes Anders had ever seen. His clothes were stained and worn
but seemed of good quality'; thick, black coat and trousers all covered in a long, dark green
travelling cloak. On his back he wore a hefty backpack and at his side Anders could see a long,
broad sword and a short dagger. Sudden curiosity about this stranger welled up in him and he
hesitated only a moment before finding his voice.

"Oh, no, of course not," he said with a smile, lifting his hands back under his armpits as the large
dog once more turned and walked back to him, sniffing at his coat with interest, "just gave me a
scare, that's all."

"I wouldn't worry about Sascha, serrah," the man grinned as he walked up to pull Sascha back by
the collar gently, suddenly making Anders feel more at ease than he had all day, "she wouldn't
know how to bite someone if it would save her life."

"I'm not so sure about that," Anders laughed gently, scratching the back of his head and
floundering for something to say; he wasn't sure why but he felt the need to keep this man around.
Anders found, guiltily, that the man was instantly rather charming and, after feeling unhappy and
lonely since reaching Cumberland, the man's friendliness was greatly appreciated. Also the man's
thick Ferelden accent was hard to ignore, forcing a warm feeling of nostalgia into Anders' cold day.
The mage struck on something he knew that the man probably wouldn't know, thus giving him an
excuse for a conversation, "actually I was just looking for the local market. You wouldn't happen
to know where it is, would you?"

The man's other dog, a heavy set golden Labrador which hadn't taken its eyes from Anders since its
master had begun conversing with him, padded closer to the tall man and sat down imposingly at
his side. The tall man looked down at him with a sympathetic smile.

"Sorry, I'm actually not from here, this is my first time to Cumberland," the man said as he pulled
his long cloak tighter around him to stave off the wind.

"That makes two of us then," Anders said, making the man bark out a laugh.

"Ha! And here I was about to ask you if you knew any good inns here," the man said, absently
patting the golden Labrador, ruffling the dogs ears, "talk about the blind leading the blind, eh?"

"It would be that," Anders said, feeling a strange and rare sense of fate slipping up on him.

Anders generally didn't agree with fate but, when too many coincidences collided in his life, he
couldn't help but feel there was something else at work; seeing the man thrown from the inn,
having the storm force them to stay another night, being offered a second room to stay in...Hawke
is going to kill me, Anders thought as he watched the man before him, yet he couldn't really bring
himself to care. He had a strangely good feeling about this stranger, something akin to a humming,
underlying power.

"Well actually," Anders said, "I think I could recommend somewhere you could stay for the night,
"If I'd like? Are you joking?" the man said with a shake of his head, his eyes dulling a little, "I spent last night huddled in a doorway serrah, anywhere you could recommend would be an improvement over that!"

"A doorway?" Anders repeated incredulously, eyes widening in disbelief as he remembered listening to the raging storm and the freezing cold winds as he had fallen asleep, "Maker's breath, how are you still living?"

The man chuckled softly but Anders felt Justice swelling once more on hearing how Fiona the innkeeper's actions had led to this man's serious peril.

"Bloody hell," Anders said, "well I was going to say that if you help me find the market that you can have the second room we were offered but, after hearing that, I won't take no for an answer, no matter what you say!"

"I can't take your room serrah..." the man started, looking politely contrite.

It was then, as he stood in the middle of an unknown city talking with an unknown man, that he saw something that he didn't think he'd ever seen another do willingly in public. The stranger reached up and let a brief flare of flame run over his cupped hands, something that Anders had often wished he could do in the winter time when his fingers went numb with cold. He stared at the man who, suddenly looking like a deer caught in the hunter's sights, stared back. Anders watched as the man drew in a stuttering breath and took a step back, his mouth opening as if to speak, but he beat the stranger to it. Anders lifted his own hand and, discreetly, let a quick rush of blue healing magic swirl from his fingers where it vanished into the air. The stranger's stare became something different; no longer fearful but more disbelieving. Anders grabbed the man's hand and hauled him quickly to the nearest alcove, away from the main street and prying eyes.

"You're a mage," the man said matter-of-factly, not taking his eyes from Anders.

"Looks like I'm not the only one," Anders said, finally putting two and two together; a Ferelden mage, he thought, no wonder he's being so open with his powers, "but I'd be careful who you let see you doing that. There's no freedom here, my friend."

"I..." the man's shoulders sagged and he looked a little embarrassed, "it's become a habit. I...I can't believe I didn't notice you were..."

"I'm good at hiding it," Anders said with an incredulous smile, finally realising why he found this man's energy so reassuring, "unlike you. I really can't believe you just did that in public! Honestly, what if I hadn't been a mage? You'd have the town screaming for the templars, that's what," Anders forced himself to stop ranting as the stern man before him shuffled his feet contritely, "...but you're Ferelden, aren't you? I mean your accent...what on earth are you doing here?"

"You mean you don't know?" the man said, frowning when Anders shook his head, looking around them even though the street itself was empty, "it's the meeting of the College, here at Drūwisburg. Many have come..."

Anders listened as the man talked but found that it was hard to concentrate entirely on what he was saying. The College of Magi was meeting now? Here? No wonder I could feel the power in the air, the unease. Get that many mages together, all with opposing views, and you were asking for trouble. The grand Enchanter was one woman that he would not wish to fill the shoes of; keeping all of those different sects under control must be a nightmare, Anders thought as he eyes strayed
back to the pale fort on its man made island. The stranger continued to talk, telling his how he had
travelled with a few others from Ferelden to be here for the meeting, but how they had become
separated and had arrived separately. When he had arrived it was already nightfall and the
Drūwisburg was closed up tightly for the night. Apparently he hadn't been able to gain access all
day and was now worried about where he would spend the night, what with being a free mage in a
land where mages were still incarcerated. It didn't take long for Anders to make up his mind. There
was no way he could sleep soundly knowing he'd left a fellow mage out in the cold at the mercy of
an unknown city.

"I said I'm not taking no for an answer and I mean it," Anders said, looking behind him as he
quickly tried to remember his way back to the inn; thankfully he thought he was pretty sure of the
general direction, "now follow me, I can get provisions another time. We need to get you a hot
meal and out of those wet clothes before you get hypothermia."

"Well that's an offer I can't refuse," the man said, his eyes glinting suggestively beneath his heavy
brow.

Anders laughed a little breathily, clearing his throat and trying to ignore the feeling of those intense
blue eyes watching him. I am not flirting with this man, Anders told himself sternly as he thought
of Hawke sitting back at the inn, waiting for him to return...or perhaps just drinking more beer and
not caring at all where Anders was. The mage pushed down the now familiar resentment and began
leading the man and his dogs back to the inn.

"I'm Callum, by the way," the man said after they had talked casually for a few minutes, "Callum
Crummock."

"I'm..." Anders hesitated, unsure whether to give out the alias he had used at the inn; somehow he
felt strangely safe and at ease with this man, however, and decided that trusting him was actually a
reasonable idea, "well, everyone calls me Anders."

"Anders? Nickname, eh?" Callum asked.

"Something like that," Anders shrugged as they continued to walk in step with each other.

"Well you've already met Sascha," Callum said as he indicated to the large, long haired dog who
was plodding along in front of them, "but this is Luce, she's a bit standoffish with strangers so don't
be offended if she doesn't say hello."

"Don't worry," Anders said as he eyed the Labrador and she eyed him straight back, "I'm more of a
cat person myself."

Callum laughed, his tone deep and rich and somehow comforting. As they walked Anders
pondered once more about life and the odd places it took you to. One moment you could be
walking alone, lost and angry, then the next you could find yourself in good company, content and
knowing exactly where you were and where you were going. Stranger things have happened,
Anders thought as he, Callum and the two mismatched dogs walked in their odd group back
towards the inn. Well, I'm sure this wasn't what Hawke was expecting I'd bring back when I said I
was going to get supplies, Anders thought with a grin.

Chapter End Notes
In case anyone was wondering, Sascha is a Bernese Mountain Dog – my favourite!

[1] A 'gill' is an old fashioned measurement for spirits which equates to a ¼ of a pint. Bartenders usually dispense spirits in fifths or quarters of a gill (the pubs that serve quarters are basically the equivalent of pubs that now have 35ml optics, they get all the custom!), so in modern terms Hawke is technically asking for a 'double' brandy.
Status, Anders had always found, was more of a con than an actuality. He seemed like a nobleman, with his expensive furs and his fine horse, therefore he was treated as such; despite the fact that, in reality, he was a wanted apostate with barely any money to his name. Being the partner of the Champion of Kirkwall gave Anders many benefits which any mage outside of the Imperium only ever dreamed of having, yet he was still known in Kirkwall for who he really was. Outside of Kirkwall it seemed that appearances were everything. He looked noble therefore he was noble. Thus he found bargaining with Fiona the innkeeper much easier and more enjoyable as 'William Abbot', than if he had simply been Anders of Kirkwall.

Hawke was out when they returned to the inn, something else that made the entire situation easier for Anders to handle. He honestly wasn't sure how Hawke, in his agitated state, would have reacted to his inviting a stranger to effectively stay with them for the night. The rogue was very jealous by nature, something Anders had dealt with on many occasions throughout their relationship. He did not wish to encounter it again.

He had told Callum to take the dogs to the stables and put them in the corner with Bryn while he entered the inn and found the innkeeper. As Anders talked to Fiona about Callum taking her second available room he had been afforded a quick but rare glimpse into how the other half lived. She was obviously put out by his request and yet, as he was a wealthy paying customer, she found it extremely difficult to disagree with him. Every argument she tried politely to inject into the conversation was simply rebuffed by Anders' charming or placating statements.

"Alright serrah," Fiona had said with a slightly tight lipped smile, "if he's an old friend of yours I wouldn't have him out on the streets in this weather. The room beside yours is already made up, he can take it when he wants."

Anders tried to give her the money for the room but was told Hawke had already paid. In a way he was glad of her honesty but Anders marvelled at the fact that Fiona was only more than happy to keep a man off the streets, out of the storm, as long as he knew someone who had money. When he asked her if she knew where Hawke had gone she informed him that he had left about half an hour ago, saying something about looking for Anders himself. The mage felt a stab of guilt mixed with recrimination; one half of him felt bad for making Hawke come after him while the other felt justified considering Hawke's behaviour. He'll come back when he can't find me, Anders compromised between his conflicting thoughts.

He found Callum in the bar, standing awkwardly by the wall near the stairs, and led him up to his new room. When they were inside the taller mage instantly relaxed, his shoulders slumping down and his face losing its tight, apprehensive expression. Anders looked around the second room and found it to be just as pleasant as he and Hawke's next door. Fiona had already placed Hawke's now dry clothes and belongings on the bed. Anders frowned and scooped them up, quickly removing everything and placing them back into the room next door. When he returned Callum was standing before the now lit fire, staring at him.

"Is something wrong?" Anders asked innocently, closing the door.

"You didn't tell me that it was here you were staying," Callum said heavily, rubbing his cold hands together before the blaze.

"Why is that important?" Anders asked with seeming curiosity, trying his best to make out that he had no idea why Callum would have an aversion to this inn, "I thought you said anywhere would
"Oh it's just..." Callum sighed and shook his head, looking away into the fireplace, "no, it doesn't matter. Thank you, for all of this, I really appreciate it."

"It's not a problem," Anders said as he walked further into the room and sat on the bed.

They had talked rather openly and extensively as they had walked back through the quickening winds but it had been mainly trivial small talk. His curiosity was beginning to come back to the fore now that they were alone and once more free to talk. Coming across another mage in the streets without the templars breathing down his neck was a truly novel phenomenon, notwithstanding the idea of learning more of the College meeting. I suppose I should get to know him a little better before I start grilling him for information, Anders thought wryly. He had already noticed that Callum had removed his cloak, pack and weapons, placing them by the desk in a very neat fashion; the pack, sword and dagger were resting against the wall with the cloak folded trimly atop it. Anders had heard of mages who used enchanted swords instead of staffs but he had never met one personally. Still, his overtly orderly manner was obviously a left over from training in the Circle. Anders smiled sadly as he recognised the familiar behaviour. Added to Callum's obvious nervousness around other people and the rather careless display of his powers in public, Anders found it easy to guess as to his roots.

"So," Anders said, finally pulling Callum's attention back to him, "Circle mage, are you?"

"Um, why would you...? Yes, I mean I was," Callum said quickly, forcing himself to relax when Anders smiled, "I suppose you've heard?"

"About the Ferelden Circle?" Anders asked, to which Callum nodded, "Yes, I've heard. Sorry, it's just you seem so out of place..."

"Yes, well, I'm still a little out of practice with normal people," Anders winced at Callum's label for non-mages; there's nothing abnormal about being a mage, Anders thought in annoyance. It was obvious to him that Callum was still steeped in the Chantry's own bigoted views, "it's only been, well, around six months now that I've been free. It's taken some...getting used to."

There was an odd silence in which Anders found himself staring at the taller man, listening with half an ear to the rattling windows, buffeted by the wind. Finally, just as the silence started to become awkward, Callum walked to the bed in two long strides and sat down casually next to him. Anders, as cold as he was, couldn't help but feel the warmth Callum exuded and shifted unconsciously closer to him. There it is again, Anders thought with growing interest, that feeling. It was something familiarly comforting, something soothing, as if he were sitting next to someone he used to know well. Yet, despite Callum supposedly being from the Ferelden circle, Anders didn't recognise him. Keep talking, he thought, no need to make him feel uncomfortable.

"I know what you mean," Anders said, sliding his hands in between his thighs to try and warm his chilled fingers.

"How long have you been, you know..." Callum said, watching Anders with what seemed to be curious awe.

"An apostate you mean?" Anders asked; Callum nodded cautiously, making him feel like laughing. The word apostate, for a Circle mage, was almost a curse word, "Oh, on and off for the last twenty years."

"Twenty years?" Callum said with incredulity, turning to Anders, filled with sudden energy, "By
the Maker, how did you..? Wait, what do you mean by 'on and off'?

"Let's just say that the Circle and I have always had a love hate relationship," Anders shrugged, feeling strangely at ease with the man next to him, "and there was usually more hate than love. I think I probably still hold the record for greatest number of times escaped from a Circle tower."

"Wait, wait," Callum said, his eyes lighting up, "you're that Anders?"

"I didn't realise there was more than one of me," Anders grinned.

"No, I didn't mean...it's just I heard stories about you, from the other mages," Callum slowed down his hurried speech and composed himself, "I was only in the Ferelden Circle for just over a couple of years, you see. I'm originally from Starkhaven, been there since I was six, and then a few years ago there was a huge fire and all of the phylacteries were destroyed. All of the mages who didn't flee were dispersed between the other Circles. I was sent to Ferelden, and then King Alistair declared the Circle defunct and..."

"Lucky for you," Anders interrupted with a smirk.

"...yes," Callum said with a small smile as he turned to look into Anders' eyes, "I suppose it was."

Then there it was once more, that familiar, sudden spark which Anders hadn't felt in what seemed an age. In fact, if he remembered correctly, he hadn't experienced this since he was sixteen years old. Oh, he thought as he swallowed and quickly looked away, I see. Now I understand. The last time he had felt such a sudden, visceral and seemingly inexplicable attraction to someone had been...

"You're accent though," Anders said quickly, feeling suddenly and distinctly uncomfortable, "how did you end up with it if you're from Starkhaven?"

"Actually that was mainly down to my tutor, she was a Ferelden mage," Callum said, placing his arms behind him on the bed and leaning back against his hands; Anders could feel the bed dipping just behind his body, shivering at their sudden and increased closeness, "she sort of, well in a way I suppose she brought me up. I think I got my accent from trying to emulate her. What about you though? I mean I can hear the Ferelden loud and clear but you say your r's like a Marcher."

I do? Anders thought as he laughed. Again that flood of comforting relaxedness washed over him and he found it hard to pull back the discomfort he had been feeling only moments before. The room seemed suddenly far too warm as Callum looked down at him.

"Well, I've been in Kirkwall for years now, I suppose I've picked up a little of the Free Marches accent," Callum said, placing his arms behind him on the bed and leaning back against his hands; Anders could feel the bed dipping just behind his body, shivering at their sudden and increased closeness, "she sort of, well in a way I suppose she brought me up. I think I got my accent from trying to emulate her. What about you though? I mean I can hear the Ferelden loud and clear but you say your r's like a Marcher."

"Why would I mind?" Callum asked as he leaned subtly closer, "I've always had a knack for Creation magic, it's something I take pride in."

Yes, definitely explains it all, Anders thought quickly as he turned once more from the tall man to look towards the fire. The feeling was identical to that which he had felt when he first met Karl all those years ago at Kinloch Hold. It had all started off fairly innocent but, once they got talking, the tension between them had grown and grown until, finally, it snapped. They'd had their tongues down each other's throats within the hour. It had only been the next day that Anders had found Karl was just as proficient a healer, if not even more so, than he was; and now the magic within him was
reacting so strongly to the mage seated next to him that Anders found it hard to think of a good excuse to leave the room. The glint in Callum's eyes only signalled to Anders that the other man was surely feeling the same attraction as he was. There was also something in the man's demeanour that seemed to have changed since they first met, something that seemed more genuine somehow than his slightly startled and out of place attitude. For fucks sakes, Anders thought, get a hold of yourself!

"I, um, I really need to go and look for my friend, he shouldn't have been gone this long..." Anders started as he pulled his arms in and put his hands in his lap, trying to huddle himself tightly together so as to extricate himself from the rather subtle and yet erotic closeness Callum had engineered.

His plan didn't entirely work as he had thought it would. As he turned to Callum, intent on finishing his sentence and then leaving to look for Hawke, the taller mage took him entirely by surprise. He found it impossible to continue talking as there were suddenly two strong arms wrapped around his torso and his mouth was occupied by dry lips and wet tongue. It felt both wonderful and terribly wrong all at once. Anders went rigid and let out a muffled sound of surprise, so occupied with the sudden change of circumstances that he didn't even hear the door open. He tried to lift his arms to push the other man away but found that they were trapped within Callum's tight hold. Thankfully, or perhaps not so he would later think, he was suddenly released as he was jerked abruptly backwards by the shoulders, falling from his precarious seat on the bed. He looked on helplessly as he watched a dangerously quiet and incensed Hawke hauling a very confused Callum from the bed and planting a powerful and yet sloppy punch against his jaw.

"Hawke wait, don't..!" Anders said as he scrambled up from the floor, rushing forwards as Hawke reached out to haul Callum back as he stumbled from the force of the blow, intent on throwing another punch, the other mage's eyes equal parts fearful and enraged.

Anders reacted instinctively. All he could see, all he could imagine, was that Callum would do what Anders or any other mage would have done in his place when attacked seemingly at random; react impulsively with magic. The thought of Hawke being caught off guard by any defensive or offensive spell sent him into a sheer panic. He ran forwards until he was between the two quarrelling men and did the only thing he could think of; he pushed them both back and placed himself firmly between them.

"Stop! I said just stop !" Anders said, breathing erratically as he lifted his hands to stall the two men; he looked around in a panic to find the door still half open. With a quick push of kinetic magic he shunted it closed. No need for anyone hearing this, Anders thought with a wince. The last thing he needed was the authorities involved.

What amazed him the most was probably the fact that Hawke had stopped when he asked him to. Usually the rogue never listened to him when he was this irate. When he looked back to Hawke, he found the man glaring daggers right back at him. Oh fuck, Anders thought, he's never going to believe me, is he? This is a nightmare, this is a fucking nightmare. He kept his hands lifted, the only sound in the room being the rough exerted breathing from the quick scuffle.

"Alright," Anders said unsteadily, "just stay there, both of you. Just let me...let me explain..."

"Who the fuck is that!" Hawke interrupted in a raised voice, just as Anders had expected him to, pointing fiercely at Callum who, in return, looked entirely affronted.

"I think I could ask you the same..." Callum started angrily.

"Let you explain?" Hawke continued, heedless of Callum's words, "I go looking for you, out there
"looking for you Anders, and I come back only to find you with some other man's bloody tongue down your throat! What do you expect me to fucking do!"

"It was just a misunderstanding," Andres tried to placate, feeling entirely lost as Hawke practically snarled in response.

"Uh, I think I've made a mistake here," Callum spoke up, sounding as if he finally comprehended the situation, rubbing at his jaw tenderly, "I didn't realise..."

"Shut the fuck up and get out!" Hawke barked at the taller man, making Callum frown, "You heard me you fucking ingrate, get out of this room now!"

No, Anders thought forcefully, no! This isn't anyone's fault. It's all a mistake, please just..!

"Hawke!" Anders said as forcefully as he could, hauling the rogue's attention back to him; he turned to Callum, "You don't need to go anywhere. Hawke, I need to talk to you, next door."

"You have to be fucking joking me!" Hawke started but Anders cut him off once more.

"Next door, now," Anders said as authoritatively as he could.

Hawke stood there, watching him, his eyes hard with suppressed rage, his lips a tight line and his breathing audible through his nose. Yet when Anders turned and left the room the rogue went with him. The fact that Hawke followed him at all gave him a small amount of hope. Anders gave Callum an apologetic look as he left and then closed the door. Once he and Hawke were back in their room he closed the door and placed a silence ward upon the room, making sure no one outside could hear them. I'm not naive enough to think there won't be shouting, Anders thought as he finished the spell and turned to face Hawke. How right he was. As soon as he turned around Hawke had him by the shoulders and slammed him up against the wall, his face twisted into a snarl.

"You fucking duplicitous bastard!" Hawke yelled as Anders gasped at the pain that flared up his spine, "How could you!"

"It's not what it bloody looks like," Anders said quickly as he reached up to grip Hawke's wrists, "stop it Hawke, you're hurting me!"

"Good, because you're hurting me!" Hawke shouted, giving Anders a final shove before he turned away in hurt and disgust, adding under his breath, "You just can't see it."

"Are you going to let me explain or are you going to keep believing that's true?" Anders said, even as he felt guilt pressing down on him as Hawke's admission sank in.

Hawke stood in the middle of the room with his arms folded and his face set. He stared at the far wall and said nothing. Anders wasn't used to Hawke allowing him to speak in a rational manner when they fought. In truth he wasn't entirely sure what to do other than just explain. Somehow the solution he'd ended up at seemed far too simplistic.

"I met him when I was out trying to find supplies," Anders said, noting that Hawke refused to meet his eye, "he told me he spent last night outside Hawke, and that he didn't have anywhere to stay tonight either. I told him he could have our other room..."

"And then you decided to let him fuck you as a thank you gift, is that it?" Hawke snapped nastily, making Anders scowl even as he flinched.
"No!" Anders said forcefully, "He's a mage, Hawke..."

"So what?" Hawke once again interrupted with a yell, "That's supposed to make a difference? I couldn't care less if he was the Emperor of Orlais! If he touches you again I'll cut his fucking hands off!"

"For the sake of the Maker will you calm down!" Anders shouted back, glad that he had shielded the room or they would have had half of the street banging on the door telling them to keep it down by now, "It's a bit more complicated than that and it's not his fault! He didn't know I was with you..."

"Or you just forgot to tell him, is that it?" Hawke said, spreading his arms out, his eyes gleaming with anger, "How convenient Anders. I put my fucking life on hold to come with you on this trip and the first thing you do when we reach another city is jump on the first man who shows an interest in you, is that it?"

"...Would you really think something like that of me?" Anders said after a moment's hesitation, his face showing the hurt that Hawke's doubt caused.

Remarkably, instead of snorting in disgust and looking away as Anders had expected him to, Hawke seemed to react more to Anders' calm than his angry, placating words. He stared at Anders with a deep frown, the lambent light in his eyes seeming to die out just a little. Hawke placed his hands on his hips and moved distractedly back and forth at the foot of the bed. Anders watched him warily, unsure of what the man would do next. He couldn't help but feel somewhat accountable; some of Hawke's words held true. He was interested in the other mage, as he had only just found out, but it was a purely physical thing. He would never dream of acting upon it.

"I don't know," Hawke said, shaking his head and rubbing at his temples agitatedly, "I...I don't know what to think. Can you blame me, Anders? For Maker's sake if you'd walked in and I was kissing someone else what would you have thought?"

"Fair point," Anders had to concede, pushing away the thought of his own jealousy, "but I swear to you Hawke, it's the truth. He kissed me just as you walked in, I was trying to push him away. It was a mistake."

Hawke sighed heavily and sat on the bed, staring down at the floor, his stance rigid and yet far more relaxed than it had been. The rogue reached up with his right hand and once more began massaging his head with his fingers. Anders approached him guardedly, stopping when he stood before Hawke. The man did not look up. Anders sighed and slowly lowered himself to his knees, finally garnering Hawke's attention as the man stared at him in slight surprise. Anders reached out tentatively and pulled Hawke forwards into a tight hug. Thankfully he found no resistance.

"I would never do that to you Hawke," Anders said as he felt Hawke lift his arms and hesitantly hold him in return, "I swear to you. You're the one I love and I would never do anything to jeopardise that."

There was a keen silence, during which Anders was forced to wait for Hawke's reply. Eventually the rogue pulled him tighter against his chest and breathed out roughly next to his ear.

"I know you wouldn't," Hawke said, sounding terribly conflicted, "I just...can't think straight right now. I have a headache and I feel a little ill."

Anders leaned back gently, looking at Hawke with a soft frown. His utter relief at having Hawke believe him was now being overrun by concern. Didn't Hawke have a headache last night as well?
Anders thought as he reached up to run his fingers through Hawke's hair. There was a slightly glazed look to his green eyes that seemed off somehow. Anders let a small amount of soothing magic flow from his fingers down onto Hawke's scalp, watching as the rogue noticeably relaxed, his shoulders losing their tension and his back its stiffness. Anders let his hand trail down to the back of Hawke's neck and let his fingers rub the knotted muscles at the top of his spine.

"How long have you felt sick?" Anders asked, his tone serious.

"I...I can't remember," Hawke said with tired frustration, "maybe this morning? It got worse sometime this afternoon. I'll be fine, it's just a bug or something."

"Don't be silly," Anders said with a stern glance, "if you're ill we're not going anywhere until you're better. It's probably something to do with being soaked through and chilled to the bone yesterday in that blighted storm."

"Don't start fussing over me," Hawke said irritably, but Anders could see the pallor of his face and feel the clamminess of his skin now that he was close enough.

"Well don't start acting like nothing is wrong then," Anders said firmly, "now get into bed and I'll go and ask for some tea. It'll be good to get something hot inside you."

Hawke let out a small if somewhat surly smile as he nodded grudgingly.

"I swear you've been talking in innuendos since we arrived here," he said, his smile widening marginally as Anders leaned in to kiss him affectionately on the lips; his expression did however shift back to serious as he continued, "what about him next door?"

"What about him?" Anders asked innocently. "I'm not going to throw him out into the street all because of some stupid misunderstanding Hawke. Please, be reasonable. He doesn't have anywhere else to go. It's only for one night and anyway, it'll give us a good excuse to share a room again tonight."

"Mmm," Hawke said grumpily, "...I'm not saying I like it but...I suppose. We're leaving tomorrow anyway. Just keep him away from me until then and we'll have no bloodshed. I honestly wasn't kidding about the chopping off of his hands if he thinks about laying them on you again."

"Understood," Anders said seriously, unable to resist leaning in and kissing Hawke again.

"Stop it you," Hawke said with a chuff of laughter, "if I am ill you're going to catch it too."

"Don't care," Anders said with a smile, "is it my fault if I can't help but find you irresistible?"

Hawke smiled and looked down at the floor, pulling Anders closer once more until their foreheads touched. The rogue closed his eyes and let out a contented sound.

"I'm sorry that everything happened like this," Anders said with a sigh, "honestly Hawke I didn't mean to...."

"It's...fine. You explained, I believe you, let's leave it at that alright? And I'm...look I'm sorry for being such an arse," Hawke said tightly; Anders knew that Hawke hated to apologise and so did not resent his tone, "last night, this morning, I've not been feeling myself. I don't know, maybe it's just being ill, but I know I've been acting like an idiot and I...apologise."

Anders leaned his head to the side and placed a chaste but lingering kiss against Hawke's bearded jaw. He watched as Hawke's mouth twitched once more into a half smile.
"Apology accepted," Anders said, "now will you please get into bed so that I can fuss over you unnecessarily?"

"Oh here we go," Hawke rolled his eyes.

Anders left Hawke to undress and get comfortable. Before he went downstairs to ask for tea, however, he knocked on Callum's door. He waited until he heard a mumbled reply before entering. The tall man was sitting in a chair by the fire, which he had moved from its place by the writing desk. He looked up concernedly as Anders closed the door behind him.

"Look, I'm sorry about that..." Callum began but Anders lifted his hands to stop him.

"It's alright," Anders said, "just, well, I think that you should avoid Hawke until we leave tomorrow."

"You're leaving tomorrow?" Callum asked, standing from the chair; Anders felt the familiar, apprehensive attraction like an itch in his spine, forcing himself to ignore it.

"Yes, hopefully," Anders said, unsure now if he had the will to speak to Callum about the Circle meeting; there was an awkward silence, one which Anders greatly wished to break, "I'm going downstairs to ask for some tea, umm, would you like anything? Something to eat? I'm guessing you haven't had any lunch."

"That would be nice," Callum said slowly, nodding, "but you're paying for all of this and I have no money to give you..."

"I told you not to worry about that," Anders said, his breath hitching as Callum took a step towards him, "don't. Just don't, I know what you're feeling and..."

"And you feel it too?" Callum said, taking another step forwards.

"Well...yes, of course I do, but I can't," Anders said decisively, "I won't do that to him. This isn't just a joke, it's serious."

Callum stopped, a mere foot from him, his tall figure imposing in the small room. Anders avoided his deep blue eyes and tried to ignore the quickened pace of his heart. I shouldn't have come back in here, Anders thought desperately. He froze as Callum leaned in slowly, crowding him against the wall, not stopping until his lips were level with Anders' ear.

"Then he's a lucky man," Callum said, his tone distinctly husky, "because if you weren't attached I would be screwing you senseless on that bed in a heartbeat."

"I'll just go and get you that food," Anders said breathily, quickly slipping away from Callum's mesmerising energy and hurrying through the door, pulling it shut behind him.

He stayed there for a minute, calming his breathing and forcing himself to push down the confusion of want and need and guilt that was swirling around in his body. Just go and get that blighted tea, he thought as he pushed away from the wall and trundled down the stairs in a flustered manner.

"Please try and eat just a little more," Anders said beseechingly.

"I can't, I feel sick," Hawke said groggily, laying his head back against the pillows and closing his eyes, "I just want to go to sleep."
Anders had been very glad when he'd found out that Fiona had cooked a thick lentil and ham broth for dinner. Yet when he informed her that Hawke was unwell she had instantly began fussing, even more so than Anders himself. The mage had to talk her down when she began making up supplies and readying herself to look after him, telling her that he was more than capable of looking after Hawke himself. Fiona had thankfully acquiesced and instead made him up a big bowl of soup and some hot, strong tea. She had informed him that she would bring both Anders and Callum some food in a little while.

Unfortunately Hawke seemed incapable of even eating the simple soup. Anders set the bowl aside, looking worriedly at his lover as he brushed Hawke's hair back from his damp brow. His condition had only worsened as the night drew on. Anders had blown out all of the candles, leaving only the flickering firelight so as not to agitate Hawke's headache further. It seemed that every time he soothed the pain from the rogue's pounding temples it only returned a few minutes later and, as for the nausea, it was a near constant affliction. Hawke hadn't thrown up yet but, after forcing him to eat some of the liquid broth, Anders was just waiting for it to happen. Fiona had been nice enough to give him a worn, wooden bucket just in case.

However, despite Anders suspicions that Hawke was ill due to catching a chill from the storm, he had yet to confirm it. He had tried examining Hawke with his magic, to see if he could find the source of the illness, but so far nothing had made itself apparent. Instead of calming him down this only made him worry more. What is it, Anders thought in frustration, why can't I tell what it is? Hawke had all the symptoms of the flu except that, instead of a fever, his skin was cold, clammy and irritable to the touch. All I can do is try and keep him warm and hydrated, Anders thought miserably. He hated seeing Hawke ill, especially when it was something he couldn't cure. He used a small face towel to dab Hawke's face dry, running his fingers once more through his sweat dampened locks.

"Do you think you can drink some tea?" Anders said as he ran soothing fingers over his scalp, "I've put some sugar in it, it should help make you feel better."

"...Alright," Hawke said determinedly, slitting open his eyes.

Anders helped prop him up with an extra pillow and lifted the now warm tea to his lips. It seemed to go down easier than the soup had and Anders was actually hopeful for a moment that he'd be able to get some sugars into Hawke's system. That was until Hawke began gagging, his chest convulsing and his eyes widened in panic. Anders only just managed to pull the bucket to the side of the bed in time before Hawke lurched up over the edge and brought up the meagre contents of his stomach with a vile retching sound. Anders moved up to sit on the side of the bed and rubbed comforting circles on Hawke's back, his shirt damp with sweat beneath Anders' fingers, as the rogue dry heaved over the bucket, panting in between and spitting out the bitter taste of bile.

"So I think tea...is out of...the question," Hawke said with a dreary almost laugh as he flopped back against the bed; Anders wetted the towel he'd been using and wiped Hawke's lips and chin before handing him a cup of water to rinse out his mouth. Hawke did so gratefully and didn't complain as Anders tucked the covers back around him. At least he's not completely out of humour, Anders thought dryly as he leaned in to kiss the rogue's forehead.

"I'm sorry love," he said quietly.

"Not your fault," Hawke said sleepily, his brow furrowed slightly in pain as the headache seemed to once more make itself known.

"I just wish I could help," Anders said as he sat down once more on the bed.
"You are helping," Hawke smiled, closing his eyes and sighing in relief as Anders let out another wave of soothing magic through his system, "mmm, I wish you could keep that up all night."

"I think I might pass out in half an hour if I did, unfortunately," Anders smiled, "but I'll keep it up for as long as I can."

"Don't do anything dangerous," Hawke mumbled as he let out a long, contented yawn.

"Of course not," Anders smiled, moving over to lie down beside Hawke on the bed, keeping the magic flowing while he watched Hawke fall gently asleep.

It didn't take long to find out that even half an hour was pushing it. Anders stopped after about twenty minutes when his vision began to blur and lay flat on his back to catch his breath. The energy involved in keeping a steady flow of strong magic was something which any mage was susceptible to. Thankfully Fiona arrived a few minutes later with some soup and bread for him. He informed her that Hawke was feeling a little better and was now asleep. Mercifully she seemed to be mollified by that and left them in peace. Anders devoured his dinner ravenously. Lyrium, he thought as he searched his pack for potions, if I keep taking short breaks and replenish my energy I should be able to do this. He took a few deep swallows of the slightly metallic potion and felt it seep through his veins and into his system.

He managed another twenty minutes before he had to stop again. He took a short break to regain his strength, taking the time to freshen himself up and distract himself, shaving off the long, thick stubble and washing his hair in some lukewarm water. Once he was done he continued his vigil over Hawke. He carried on as such until it became too difficult to carry on.

"I can't keep this up," he said to himself after the third hour; he had almost exhausted his supply of lyrium and was beginning to feel particularly woozy, yet whenever he stopped feeding Hawke the magical aid the rogue's sleep became restless and his skin would once more break out in a sweat. Anders shook his head gently and continued to lie next to Hawke on the bed, waiting until his head stopped spinning. There's only one solution to this, Anders thought grimly, but Hawke isn't going to like it. He is asleep though, his conscience reminded him. Good point, Anders thought, what he doesn't know won't hurt him.

It was already two in the morning when he knocked at Callum's door. He felt bad for waking the man but, in all honesty, he cared more for Hawke's safety than another's sleep. After a few moments of silence he knocked again, a little louder. This time there seemed to be some response, the sound of feet on floorboards, the turning of the handle; Callum appeared at the door with a candle in nothing but his underwear. Anders stared at the lean, well muscled body before him, floundering for the words he'd been meaning to say.

"What's wrong?" Callum said in a gruff voice, clearing his throat as Anders finally looked up to his face; Callum let out a sly, sleepy smile, "Changed your mind?"

"I...no! No it's not that, I..." Anders said quickly, keeping his voice down so as not to wake anyone else; he composed himself and looked to Callum seriously, "I need your help."

Once he had fully woken and dressed himself Callum followed Anders to his room. The vague flickering of the candlelight only added to the already chaotic light of the fire; the combined effect illuminated everything and yet nothing as the room stayed primarily dark with slivers of light dancing random patterns over the walls and the furniture. Anders closed the door, trapping them both within the small room, and explained as much of the situation as he could. It sounded rather less dramatic as he told Callum that Hawke was ill and he needed constant magical attention to help him through the night. When the taller mage asked what was wrong with him Anders found
that he couldn't really answer, other than list the symptoms; unfortunately these made it sound as if he was merely suffering from the flu, something which usually went away on its own as long as the person was being cared for well enough. Not exactly something you would go to the trouble of keeping up a constant magic vigil for. Still, Callum, who looked as if he would rather be asleep than helping someone who had physically assaulted him mere hours before, nodded a little begrudgingly and agreed to help.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Anders said as Callum placed his candleholder on the small dresser, picking up on Callum's resentment towards Hawke, "about Hawke I mean. He may have...overreacted a little."

"A little?" Callum said with a snort, shaking his head; again Anders had the sense that he was talking to a different person once more, again Callum's personality seemed to have changed slightly, making him seem far more at ease. Maybe he's just tired, Anders thought as he watched the taller man, "Well, what's past is past, as they say but then I'm not exactly doing this out of the kindness of my heart."

What in all of Thedas was that supposed to mean? Anders thought in confusion.

"What?" Anders said, blinking in the gloom as he turned to look at the taller man, noting that he was much closer than he had been when he last looked.

"I mean that I'm not doing this for free," Callum said, taking another step forwards; oh this was a bad idea, Anders thought, bad, bad idea. Why do I keep putting myself into these bloody situations? I never learn, do I? Yet he found it hard to be worried by the idea of Callum, a professed healer, asking for payment when there was another in need. Instead the idea simply made both Anders and Justice bristle with anger.

"Are you really telling me you want money after all I've already given you..?" Anders frowned crossly but was swiftly interrupted.

"Who said anything about money?" Callum said as he reached up to cup Anders cheek. Anders pulled back roughly even as he had instinctively tried to lean into the touch. He glared at the taller man.

"I said no," Anders said harshly, "how could you..?"

"I'm only asking for a kiss," Callum said as Anders tried his best to keep his distance, walking backwards around the small room as Callum pursued.

"What in 'no' do you not understand?" Anders bit out, looking worriedly to Hawke to make sure the man was still asleep.

"The part where I know you want it as much as I do," Callum said, once more shifting closer; Anders swallowed down the truth of it and tried to ignore the pull of their mutual attraction, "I swear I won't ask for anything more than that. Just a kiss."

"Aren't you listening to me?" Anders hissed, "He's ill and I can't do all of this on my own! Don't be an arsehole about this!"

"And all I'm asking for is..." Callum shrugged, making something in Anders snap.

He grabbed the surprised man by the collar of his loose shirt, yanked him down and slammed their mouths together. Callum let out a muffled sound and brought his hands up to hold himself steady as
Anders backed him aggressively into the wall and slid his tongue into the taller mage's mouth. It amazed even Anders that the sheer intensity of his attraction to the man he was kissing the breath from was completely overridden by his concern for Hawke's safety. He almost didn't even feel it anymore. After another few seconds of thorough kissing Anders pulled back and glared at the startled man.

"Now will you stop thinking with your cock and help me?" Anders asked sternly.

Callum's mouth hung open for a startled moment before doing the last thing that Anders had expected; transforming into a wide grin. He brought his hand up and looked around a little abashedly as Anders let go of him, scratching at the back of his head.

"You know what? I like you," Callum said with a genuine and entirely blunt sense of acceptance as he once more met Anders' eye, "So, what exactly is it you need done?"

There were many things that Anders wished to say at that precise moment but, somehow, he managed to refrain from any of them. Instead he told the taller mage exactly what he wanted him to do and Callum simply nodded in casual approval.

"You know I'm really very impressed," Callum said quietly as he moved a chair to the side of the bed and sat down, "there aren't many people who can take me by surprise but you managed it, and with style I might add."

"Well excuse me if I'm not flattered," Anders said acerbically as he moved onto the bed and set about moving the pillows so he could lie down.

"Ha, you are a prickly one aren't you?" Callum grinned, looking like some giant from a fairytale as he was seated on the small chair in the flickering gloom.

"Can you blame me?" Anders said tightly, finding that everything spilled out in a rush when he tried to verbalise his thoughts, "Everything was going so well and now all of this happened, Hawke's ill and I don't know why and you are being a pain in the arse and suddenly seem like a completely different person to the man I met yesterday..."

"You shouldn't judge a book by its cover serrah," Callum said, halting Anders' rant in its tracks.

"Oh shut up," he said irritably, for lack of a better reply; Callum merely laughed softly in response. Anders watched as Callum reached out and lifted Hawke's inert arm from under the thick blankets. The taller mage took hold of his wrist in a loose hold and began the spell which was known to any mage who was taught creation magic as a skill; it was one of the first he learned as a teenager from his tutor. When he looked up he found the other man watching him in a scrutinising manner.

"You should get some sleep," Callum said, "you look bloody exhausted."

"I'm fine," Anders said, scowling as he yawned and gave himself away. "Right, and I'm the Maker incarnate," Callum scoffed as Anders lay back down next to Hawke who was still dead to the world, "sleep. I'll wake you when I can't do any more."

Despite still feeling twitchy at sleeping with a relative stranger in the room Anders couldn't resist the pull of sleep. His limbs felt weary and heavy, his neck was weak and his head lollled against the pillow. The room danced around him in the firelight as it had the night before only this time it was with more of a dreamy quality than that of a nightmare. Anders instinctively curled up next to Hawke and let his eyes drop closed. As he slid down into the void he could have sworn he heard
Callum's rich voice, as if speaking to Hawke himself.

"You've a really good man here, serrah," he said, "I don't blame you fighting tooth and nail to keep a hold of this one."

He awoke to the familiar smell of wood smoke and the unfamiliar sound of birds chirping. He blinked open his eyes and rolled his head over lazily to look out of the window. He smiled when he found that the storm had obviously passed; he was greeted by a blue sky and pale winter sunshine. It was only as he became fully aware that the smile slid from his face. Sunshine? He thought in confusion.

"Fuck," he said as he sat up blearily and looked around the now empty room, his voice becoming stronger as he cleared his throat, "f*ck! Why didn't he wake me?"

Anders turned to the other side of the bed to check on Hawke. Amazingly he found the man sleeping fairly peacefully. The mage examined him carefully, finding that he was still unwell but his symptoms seemed to have lessened significantly. The fact that Callum's negligence in waking Anders hadn't impacted on Hawke's wellbeing made the mage feel less inclined to hurt the taller man. He smiled in relief and set a quick but heartfelt kiss on Hawke's cheek before sliding from the bed. It still doesn't explain why he didn't bloody wake me up, Anders thought in annoyance. He hurried next door to Callum's room and knocked. The door swung open under the force of the knock, forcing Anders to stall his movements. The room was bright and airy when he looked in, the bed still unmade and the curtains open. He frowned and entered cautiously.

"Callum?" Anders said quietly as he stepped through the doorway; the room was empty.

Did he have somewhere he needed to go? Anders thought as he looked around the room. He could find no trace of the man other than the bed he had slept in. He returned to Hawke and was glad to find the man awake. All thoughts of Callum fled as he walked to the side of the bed and knelt down.

"Morning love," he said with a genuinely relieved smile as he looked into Hawke's sleep fogged green eyes.

"Mmm," Hawke groaned, "morning. How wonderful. Please don't tell me I have to get up."

"Of course you don't," Anders chuckled, "but how do you feel? Is your head sore? Do you feel sick?"

"One question at a time," Hawke said as he sat up carefully, "I'm...feeling a little better actually. A little stiff and, well, alright still a little nauseous, but definitely much better."

"Then we stay here until we find out what's wrong," Anders said decisively, making Hawke sigh harshly and look entirely put out, "don't start with me Hawke, I can't even tell what's wrong with you..!"

"Oh I just have the bloody cold or something," Hawke said dismissively, "it's nothing serious. I'll be fine."

"How can you say that when you don't even..!" Anders would have continued but Hawke took that moment to loop his arm around Anders neck and pull him in for a deep kiss; Anders couldn't help but close his eyes and enjoy the feeling.

The door opened without preamble, the only warming being the squealing of the hinges. Anders
sprang back from Hawke, pulling the man little off balance, and turned to see a very startled Fiona standing in the doorway holding a tray of food. Anders stared at her anxiously as he watched the woman undergo a familiar transformation. It was something Anders had seen often throughout his life, usually when he was on the run from the Circle and someone discovered he was a mage; the lips tightened, the eyes hardened, the back straightened. It seemed fairly obvious to him that being caught kissing another man was basically the same to most people in this blighted land as using magic illegally. Anders saw it coming before Fiona even opened her mouth.

"Oh, good morning Fio..." Hawke started in his usual cheerful tone.

"I thought I'd bring you some breakfast," Fiona interrupted him clinically, thumping the tray down onto the dresser, "and I think it would be best if you ate it and then left."

"What?" Hawke said in confusion.

Anders winced to hear Hawke's tone. It wasn't entirely his fault but Hawke had never been very understanding of the fact that two men together just wasn't acceptable to most people, despite his mother's own prejudice. Anders had too many experiences under his belt of being persecuted not to know how people viewed such an unnatural relationship, as they called it. As far as Anders was concerned they wouldn't know something truly unnatural if it crawled up and bit them in the genitals, but that didn't change the fact that most people were still, in his opinion, a set of bigoted, narrow minded fools. Usually he would be more than happy to simply leave but now, with Hawke ill, he was more concerned with the rogue's welfare than some silly woman's uppity ideas about right and wrong.

"You heard me," Fiona said, crossing her arms and adopting an arrogantly superior look, "this is a good house I run here, I don't hold for that kind of behaviour. It'll be best if you leave as soon as you're done."

"Look," Anders said seriously, "my friend is still very ill. I'd appreciate it if you at least let us..."

"Don't you get demanding with me serrah," Fiona said haughtily, "do I have to call the authorities here myself to remove you or will you just leave by yourselves?"

"The authorities?" Hawke said with a deep frown, "Now wait just a minute here...!

"You heard me, I'll have you thrown out," Fiona said shrilly, "and don't bother trying to find lodgings anywhere else, I'll be telling the other taverns to watch out for you. Such disgusting behaviour and under my roof! You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

"You can't just throw us out like this, please," Anders swallowed down the bitter taste in his mouth as he basically pleaded with the stroppy woman, hating every word of it, "he's sick and it's three days travel until the next town."

"That isn't my problem," Fiona said stonily, "now that'll be twenty bronze pieces for the breakfast, or do I need to call the City Watch?"

Anders stared at her, his eyes hard. Hawke struggled out of bed and made to argue further but Anders stopped him. He could see from the fierce glint in Fiona's eyes that she wasn't joking. What annoyed him the most, he found, wasn't that she had turned from being a sweet thing into a supercilious bitch but was more the fact that he hadn't listened to his gut instinct about the woman. He had found himself starting to like her despite the bad impression she had initially made. Now, as he savagely rooted around in Hawke's furs for their money purse, he was angry at himself that he hadn't stuck with his first impression of her.
"Well I hope you're happy without yourself..." Anders started, unable to hold back the anger now that he knew they would have to leave anyway, finally finding the purse and pulling it out; it felt strangely light as he yanked the strings open. Anders stopped speaking as he tipped up the large purse and blanched when nothing came out. He felt his heart skip a beat and drew in a short startled breath. No, he thought, no that's impossible, there was at least a hundred sovereigns in here!.

Then, just as Fiona began asking him irately to hurry up, further threatening to call for the City Watch, a small piece of crumpled paper fell from the seemingly empty purse and tumbled into Anders gloved hand. The mage looked at it in trepidation, hurriedly unfolding it to find a few words scrawled messily onto it in what looked like charcoal.

'Never judge a book by its cover serrah'

I don't believe...Anders closed his hand around the paper tightly, crushing the small scrap harder and harder as the anger within him grew. I don't believe it!

"It's gone," Anders said as Hawke looked at him in concern, "it's all gone."

"Gone?" Hawke asked in confusion, "what do you mean by gone?"

"I mean it's gone!" Anders barked furiously, a deep, irrational feeling of hurt swelling in his chest, "That bastard, that fucking wanker! He's robbed us, he's bloody robbed us!"

"What?" Hawke said in shock, shuffling as quickly as he could over to Anders and taking the purse from him with an unsteady hand; the small amount of colour that had returned to Hawke's face drained away as the empty purse crumbled between his fingers. He looked back up to Anders in angry distress, "You mean that fucking hardluck case you dragged in off the street has stolen our money? For fucks sakes! I knew there was something off about him, he's a fucking con artist!"

"What? I thought you said he was an old friend of yours," Fiona said, looking highly affronted, "you lied to me!"

"Oh shut your face you stupid witch," Anders snapped at the woman, finally losing his temper, making her huff and puff in offence, her cheeks turning an interesting hue of red; Anders dug around in the pocket of his coat and found a half-silver, slamming it down onto the dresser, "you can keep the change and piss off! We'll be gone before you get back with your precious City Watch. On you go, go on, fuck off why don't you!"

Fiona grabbed the money from the dresser top and stormed from the room without another word, her face the picture of impotent rage. Anders watched her go and couldn't resist slamming the door behind her with a quick jolt of kinetic magic. When he turned back to Hawke the man was still staring at the purse in his hand, his face drawn tight and his expression decidedly blank.

"We have to go after him," Hawke said as he threw the purse on top of his pack in disgust, "we need that money Anders."

"We can't go running after him, you're not well Hawke," Anders tried to reason, feeling panic and indecision making his heart rate quicken.

"I'm not that bloody ill!" Hawke snapped back, "And unless you'd rather return to Kirkwall and wait another few years until can raise the funds for another trip then I suggest we both start thinking about where he might have gone."

The thought made Anders' chest tighten. This isn't happening, Anders thought miserably, Maker's
breath why does this have to happen now?

"Alright," Anders said, physically trying to calm himself down, "Alright. Then we... we ask the
guards at the gate. If he left the city then they would have seen him."

"Didn't he tell you anything else?" Hawke said as he quickly began to dress himself, his shaking
fingers fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, "anything could be a clue."

"He said he was here for the meeting of the College of Magi," Anders said tightly as he helped
Hawke with his buttons, focusing on forcing the small metal buttons through the holes in the soft
material, "but in all honesty I don't know what to believe anymore. I'm beginning to think his
whole story was a pile of shit."

"Then we go to the gate and check with the guards," Hawke said as calmly as he could.

Anders finished buttoning Hawke's shirt and looked up to find the rogue watching him with an odd
look. He rubbed his hands together and felt a sudden flood of embarrassment and shame wash over
him. How could he have been so stupid?

"What?" Anders asked firmly as he helped Hawke into his jacket.

"You're just so..." Hawke shook his head and lifted his hand to run it through Anders' hair, "you're
far too trusting sometimes."

"Don't rub it in Hawke," Anders said, trying his best not to snap out the words, "I know I've fucked
up, just please don't start on me alright?"

"Who said I was starting on you?" Hawke said, his eyes gleaming with an odd light.

He leaned in quickly once he had both his arms through his coat sleeves and gave Anders another
kiss, this one fierce and possessive. Despite his unease and his hurt Anders found he couldn't help
but melt into the kiss as Hawke pulled him closer, sliding his arms tightly around Anders' back.
When he finally pulled away Hawke's face held a distinctly familiar expression; a dangerous and
yet passionate look which he adopted when he had spied an enemy in his sights.

"It's that fucker who should be worried," Hawke said, his deep, rich tone adding to the threat in his
words, "if he thinks he can waltz in here, touch up my man and then steal all of my money then he
has, well..."

Hawke stopped to grin ferally, his eyes glinting dangerously.

"He has another fucking thing coming."
It was a strange feeling, chasing after a thief. It was something he had never actually done, despite the amount of times he had been stolen from. Having been on both the giving and receiving end of robbery Anders hoped that he had garnered enough experience of both to understand the feelings on each side; the selfish need and yet the necessity behind it.

The first thing which had ever been stolen from him, that he could remember anyway, was a wooden toy horse which he had himself found lying in the woods near his house when he was seven years old. Thus, even though he had become rather fond of the thing, it had never truly been his to begin with. The first thing to be stolen from him with any meaning behind it was at the Ferelden Circle when he was fifteen; his girlfriend, one Gerta Beath, the prettiest apprentice to ever grace Kinloch Hold was stolen from him by Joshua Nevis. It had been the first instance in which he truly felt the angry sting of loss. After that it was a long list of petty thefts all the way up until having his staff stolen when Hawke and Merrill left his clinic unlocked all those years ago.

His own thieving career had begun on his first successful escape attempt from Hossberg, where he had stolen a plethora of food, such as apples and pies, plus a heavy winter jacket, all so he could survive the harsh weather on his dangerous attempt to reach home. The last thing he had stolen to date was probably a coin purse from a fresh templar corpse, as far as he could remember, of which he couldn't tell whether he was ashamed or not.

Yet, for each of his experiences, he liked to think that he knew the motives driving them. That, when stolen from, the idea seemed selfish and unfair and yet, when stealing through desperation, the idea of someone denying you the right of the stolen item seemed just as selfish. Thus, as he thought about why Callum may have stolen their money, he liked to think that it was because he needed it, not just because he wanted it. He did help me look after Hawke, he tried to reason, even if he was a complete prat about it. Yet his actions contributed to you having to rush out after him, even with Hawke still ill, the other half of him argued back, to rescue the last hope of being able to reach the Anderfels at all. Anders sighed in frustration as he and Hawke rode as swiftly as they could back towards the East Gate. Everyone who had stolen from him had done so based on some sort of necessity.

Except Joshua Nevis. He was just a prick.

The guards at the East Gate had seen him enter but not leave and recommended checking with the guards at the only other way out of the city, the West Gate. Which was easier said than done, Anders had thought, considering that meant they had to traverse Cumberland to reach their destination. Anders was just holding on to the hope that Callum had left Cumberland at all. Maybe he's still hidden somewhere in this labyrinth, Anders thought bleakly, and if he is then we'll never find him. Please, oh please don't let that be the truth of it.

"We would have had to do this anyway," Hawke reasoned as Anders’ face fell, "and, at the very least, it is sunny."

The journey turned out to be less arduous than Anders had feared. They followed the directions that the guard had given to them. Instead of turning left at the end of the street, as he had done the day before, they turned right and went uphill. Thankfully this led them to what looked like a real main street, lined with pubs, more inns and even, at the end, a marketplace. Not that they could buy anything from it, of course. Anders looked at the stalls and shops sourly as they rode through, wishing he had done this yesterday and avoided all of this unpleasantness. Not only would he never have run into Callum thieving Crummock but he would also have found supplies and he and
Hawke could have been merrily on their way by now. If I had only turned right, Anders thought bitterly, bloody typical.

The main street turned out to be more useful than first thought. It practically ran the entire length of Cumberland, creating an easy and swift route to the West Gate. Only a few times did Hawke have to stop a passerby to ask for directions. Anders was glad that they were making such good time but he wasn't naive enough not to pick up on the tremor in Hawke's hands as he held the reins, or the pained looks which Anders caught out of the corner of his eye. Hawke seemed to think he did a good enough job of disguising his pain beneath an apathetic visage but Anders had been a healer too long not to know that Hawke was still terribly ill and trying to hide it. We need to find this Callum, get our money back and then come back here and find lodgings. I don't care what that cow Fiona said, Hawke's life is far more important than other people's prejudices.

The West Gate was an impressively large and ornate affair. The polished granite shone in the early sunshine, accentuating the tall carvings of slender youths and ornate flora and fauna; twisting grape vines heavy with fruit, birds in flight, flowing water. To top it all off, a long, twisting dragon wound over the top of the archway, in the process of being slain by a chevalier. Compared to the East gate it was an astounding work of art. People arriving from Orlais must expect more than those arriving from the Free Marches, Anders thought wryly.

When Hawke inquired of the guards whether they had seen Callum leaving the city earlier, they informed him that they had only just come on duty.

"You need to ask Lorna and Heath, serrah," the guard said, helpfully pointing to the guard's station built conveniently in to the wall itself, "they had last shift. If this man's as distinctive as you say he is then one of them is bound to remember him."

Anders truly hoped so. They found the aforementioned guards in the guard station drinking what looked like strong tea. The room itself was surprisingly comfortable; the chairs were topped with thick cushions and there was a small fireplace which burned happily on the far wall. The guards, Lorna and Heath, must have been sipping their hot drinks and munching on toasted bread happily when Hawke and Anders knocked on their door, Anders thought.

"He's very tall, at least six and a half feet," Hawke said to them, "and his clothes were worn and dirty."

"He had a dark green cloak and a big backpack," Anders said, beginning to worry as both guards shook their heads and looked to each other for confirmation, "and he had two dogs with him, a Labrador and another big one..."

"Oh!" Lorna suddenly lit up with recognition, "the man with the dogs, I remember him! Don't you remember him Heath? Yes, he was scruffy looking, blue eyes?"

"Yes!" Anders said, excitement pumping through his system like a drug.

"You just reminded me, with the dogs that is," Lorna continued, "one of 'em jumped on Heath and I had to go over and help get the mutt off."

"I only looked at the blasted thing," Heath muttered defensively, folding his arms.

"Right," Lorna said with a raised eyebrow, "anyway, he left here about...well I'd say about a half an hour ago at most. If you left now I don't see why you couldn't catch up with him."

Best news I've heard all day, Anders thought with sheer relief. If Lorna hadn't been a guard he
would have kissed her, however, you never knew how these things would be taken. He did not wish to end up in a head lock...or jail for that matter. Instead he thanked her gratefully and hurried back outside with Hawke.

"He didn't have a horse?" Hawke confirmed with Anders as they manoeuvred their way out of the city, "You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Anders said tightly, "I think I would have noticed that, don't you? But that doesn't mean he hasn't purchased one now that he has all of that money at his disposal."

"Don't remind me," Hawke said darkly, spurring Sigurðr into a quick trot, then a canter and then, as they reached the open road, a swift gallop; Anders and Bryn were left hurrying to catch up.

I wish he wouldn't push himself so hard, Anders thought unhappily as he finally caught up to Hawke, urging Bryn faster to keep in stride with the muscular stallion. The road had made a swift right turn as it exited Cumberland, heading up towards the Imperial Highway. Anders could see the forest ahead of them as they sped up the well worn road, the trees covered in a heavy layer of snow, looking like a large iced cake. The snow around them shone in the sunshine, gleaming harshly. The landscape was still hidden beneath the thick, frozen white layer, stretching all the way down to the water. The road was already carved out by those who had travelled it since the snow had stopped, turning into a dirty, slushy mess. Other than them the road seemed fairly empty. They passed a few horse drawn carts and a couple of people on horseback but, other than to check if they were the man they searched for, they paid them no heed.

The horses sent out thick milky clouds into the air as they galloped along the road, hooves making dull thuds in the mushy ground. They raced silently towards the thick line of trees, enshrouding the road in shadow.

"Are you sure he would have gone this way?" Anders called to Hawke as they slowed the horses to a fast canter, Bryn whinnying in annoyance at the change in pace.

"Can't think of any reason he'd leave the road, the snow is too thick," Hawke said back, keeping his eyes on the road ahead as the tall trees began to loom above them, "anyway we would have seen tracks if he had."

Riding into the forest at such a speed was an odd experience. Sounds dulled almost immediately and the airy quality of the open became quickly muffled. The light dimmed and the feeling of being trapped inside heightened. Anders frowned and pulled his coat tighter as they were forced to slow once more, the road twisting and turning too often to allow for their increased speed. As they pushed deeper into the forest Anders began to feel distinctly edgy. Again, he thought, it's that feeling again. The heavy push of the air against his being, as if he were being suffocated by it; the mal content, the feeling of being watched. They continued in silence. Anders looked to Hawke as they rode deeper into the dense trees, but the other man didn't seem to have noticed anything. Anders opened his mouth to speak but wasn't given the chance.

He didn't see what hit him. Whatever it was it took him square in the chest with a thick crack. He was thrown backwards into the air, landing with a heavy thud on the road. His head cracked against the hard ground; the shock sent a wave of pain through his system. He couldn't breathe, his vision dulled and blurred, then brightened suddenly. His ears rang. He couldn't move. Was that Hawke's voice? He couldn't hear properly. Everything was muffled and hazy. Was it Callum, was it templars, he thought wildly, was it an accident? He took deep choking breaths, coughing roughly and painfully as he tried to orient himself.

Blinking his eyes Anders found himself staring up at a narrow strip of sky bordered by pointed tree
tops. Then there was a shape moving in front of it, a silhouette of a face; the only distinct feature being a set of grinning teeth. Who is that? Anders thought woozily. His mind felt slow and sluggish, the back of his skull throbbed painfully. Anders tried to push himself up on unsteady hands but was forced down by a weight on his chest. The pressure caused pain to flare across his torso. *Fuck,* Anders thought wildly as adrenaline seemed to heighten his senses, bringing everything back to life, oh fuck. What the *hell* is happening? As he once more tried to move the agony in his chest grew like a grinding of bone against bone, sharp points digging into his flesh. A broken rib? he thought desperately as he lay as still as possible, wheezing and screwing his eyes shut until the pain lessened.

"I wouldn't move if I were you, pretty boy," someone was saying, "not unless you want us to put your friend here out of his misery."

"No!" it *was* Hawke's voice, Anders thought, glad at least that he didn't sound hurt, "Don't you fucking touch him!"

"Thought so," yet another voice said from somewhere behind him, "wise choice serrah. Wise choice. Get their hands bound lads, we don't want no funny business."

As Anders lay on the ground, getting his breath back and trying to pull his mind into order, the irony of the situation did not escape him. Bandits, he thought as someone hauled him none too gently from the ground, pulling him to his knees by the scuff of his neck. How wonderful. Pity that they went to all this trouble when all of our money has already been stolen.

"You bastards!" he heard Hawke shouting, "What do you want from us?"

"Well I thought that'd be perfectly clear serrah," the other voice replied, "we saw you splashing round that coin at the inn, all donned in your furs and silvers. How naive of you, serrah, how naive to think you'd go unnoticed."

Fucking sarcastic pig, Anders thought as the man behind him shook him roughly. He grit his teeth and tried not to let the groan of agony escape his lips but didn't do a very good job.

"Oh, I think I might have hit this one a little hard Boss," the bandit was now roughly pulling his arms behind his back, ready to bind them together, talking in a sneering, sarcastic tone.

"What a shame," the 'Boss' replied, forcing Anders to look up and take in the sight before him. Perhaps they had expected them to be easy prey. Anders thought he vaguely recognised two of the men from Fiona's inn; they sat next to us in the pub when we had lunch yesterday, didn't they? No wonder they were waiting here for us. Huh, Anders thought with a wry smirk even as the grinding pain in his chest flared with every breath, easy prey indeed. There were four men in front of him, the two horses behind them being held by a fifth, and then the last man behind Anders himself. Hawke was standing before this so called leader, being held by another one of the men. Maybe if there were twice as many of you, Anders thought dryly, you'd have a small chance of beating us.

"You keep your filthy fucking hands off of my things, or I swear to you I'll..." Hawke started menacingly.

Anders had meant to be subtle, ease in a quick sleep spell on the man behind him and then quickly heal himself before launching an all out attack on the men in front. Circumstances dictated, however, that this was not to be. He managed to take in the whole picture before he witnessed the sight which set him off, the sight that made his blood run both freezing cold and boiling hot all at once. The leader had sneered at Hawke's words, his grin turning to a furious scowl, and launched a
heavy fist into the rogue's gut. Hawke dropped to the ground, doubled over on his knees at the feet of the man whom he had addressed, his face ashen and his eyes wide as blood dripped down his chin.

Anders wasn't sure exactly what happened next but he wasn't entirely unaware of it either. One moment there was the feeling of blinding rage and blood rushing in his ears, then the world seemed to flash past his eyes in a vision of screams and fire and blood and bone. The next thing he knew he was standing with one of the bandits kneeling before him, his head held tightly between Anders' clawed fingers. He looked around wildly to find that he was now facing what looked like only three men, two already lying dead and broken on the ground, the others staring at him with vengeful eyes and shocked faces. Anders tried to take in the rush of information quickly, forcing himself to slow his fast, panted breaths. Justice was not at all happy. Not at all.

"Stay back from him I told ya!" their leader was shouting, "He's a fucking mage! You son of a whore! Let 'im go, come on, let 'im go and you can have your friend back in one piece!"

Anders didn't understand his words until he managed to focus on the leader with any real sense. The man wasn't tall but he was broad, dirty blonde hair falling into his grimy face, his eyes dark and focused on Anders intently; and his hands holding the kneeling Hawke flush against his legs and a dangerous looking dagger tight against his throat. Anders felt his panic returning even as the pain in his chest grew worse and worse. He wanted to heal it but it would take too much time and he couldn't take his hands from his hostage or Hawke...oh Maker no, Anders thought. I will not be beaten by a bunch of scum like you! He thought a little hysterically as he looked into Hawke's eyes. They were alight with something he very rarely saw in his lover; fear. Hawke was most definitely ill, Anders thought as he tried desperately to figure out his next move, if he wasn't then he would be out of that hold in a heartbeat and that man holding him would already be dead.

"I said let my buddy go you freak!" the leader shouted again when Anders didn't respond, digging the dagger even deeper into Hawke's throat, sending a single rivulet of blood trailing down its length as the sharp edge cut into the sensitive flesh. Hawke let out a gasp of pain and drew quick, shallow breaths. Anders felt a terrible calm descending over him. He looked up into the leaders eyes and stared at him menacingly.

"You make one more move," he said slowly, dangerously, "and I swear I'll crush you buddy's fucking skull like a melon. Then you and your other pieces of filth will be next."

"Don't you threaten me boy," the man sneered, even as his comrades cowered and looked to their leader uncertainly.

"Shut your mouth before I sear it shut!" Anders snapped, baring his teeth predatorily as he felt the markings on his skin glowing faintly, "Now give him to me before I make you regret it."

"I think we should do what he wants Boss," one of the other bandits said hurriedly with a worried look, "he ain't like no mage I've ever heard of."

"Shane's right," the other agreed readily, despite their leaders agitated state, "bloody hell Boss he's killed John and Bain without even breakin' a sweat!"

"I said shut yer cowardly mouths!" the leader growled back, the glint of blood lust and pride in his feverish eyes, "I'm not bowing to this abomination. I'd sooner be dead!"

"That can be arranged," Anders said nastily, his voice slipping down into the deep booming of
Justice's fearful tone.

Things were already bad, Anders would never deny that, yet it was then that things got truly out of hand. Anders was the only one with the view to afford him the chance to see the others coming. One moment they were in a standoff, facing each other down, and then the next there was a large golden dog lunging onto the back of the bandit on his left. The man shrieked and fell to the ground as the other two turned in shock. The man on his right received a forceful smack of kinetic magic to the face for his troubles, the force of the blow sending him flying to the ground. Anders felt both triumphant and eternally relieved as he watched Callum run into view through the trees, his sword drawn and his other dog Sascha running at his heels. He came back, the part of him that was still Anders thought giddily, he really...

Then the world stopped. The breath seemed to freeze in his lungs. The pain in his chest seemed to disappear. The screams of the other bandits fell away. Anders watched the bandit leader with a sensation of falling from a great height as the man, who had yelled in despair as he saw his men fall, suddenly grinned manically as he stared into Anders' eyes; the man pulled Hawke's head back and, without hesitation, gouged the dagger deeply across his throat. The rogue's eyes went wide as he fell forwards, blood gushing from his neck in a thick, red waterfall, a hand coming up to futilely clamp over the gaping wound as a horrifying gurgling noise emanated from his split throat.

Anders heard a keening noise leaving his mouth but wasn't aware of having made the sound. He felt blood between his palms but wasn't aware that he had killed the man at his feet. He rushed forwards even though he didn't remember moving at all. The next thing he knew the bandit leader was in two pieces, the shredded legs lying on the ground and the mangled torso held between his hands, the face half torn from the skull exposing the gory bone beneath.

By the time he managed to regain his wits and drop the dead man to the ground Callum had managed to reach them, pinning the one of the bandits to the forest floor. Anders paid him no heed. He spun on his heels and tried to move but his feet felt as blocks of stone, weighting him to the ground. Everything had become very quiet and still and deadened. He stared, trying to will his body into action, even as he watched Hawke lying face down on the ground in a quickly widening pool of his own dark red blood. It was barely a few seconds until he bolted to Hawke's side but it had felt as if time itself had stopped completely. Anders dropped to his knees and rolled the man over hastily with trembling hands, his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest.

"No!" he screamed his throat raw as an ashen, lifeless face stared up at him, eyes half lidded, mouth slightly open, neck split like a ripe fruit, "No! Hawke! Please no, Hawke...!"

He pulled desperately on his reserves of magic, spells rushing through his mind in a flurry as he tried to remember the right one, continuing to call out to the unresponsive man before him. Dead, he thought numbly, he's dead. Oh Maker no this can't be true, he's not dead! He's not fucking dead! Anders felt the tears streaming unbidden down his face as he hastily healed the clotting wound back together, sealing the veins and the artery and skin and the muscle, but still there was no blood flowing in Hawke's body, no breath in Hawke's throat. No, no, no, please no, was all he could think brokenly over and over again as his hands began to shake. The magic was falling against dead flesh, refusing to absorb into the tissue. Anders let out a scream of frustration as he tried to force it through, reaching out hurriedly to touch Hawke's pale face, trying desperately to feel for his life force. He heard Callum rushing to his side but didn't look up.

"Please wake up," he said brokenly, his voice nothing but a hoarse whisper "please Hawke I'm begging you, don't you leave me here like this. You can't, you can't die. You can't because I love you too much, I love you more than anything, I love you, I love you..."
He wasn't aware that he was sobbing until he found it difficult to speak over the convulsions in his throat and the anguished cries jolting from his lips. This isn't real, he thought dazedly, this isn't happening. It's a dream, a nightmare, it's not true... He did not hear Callum move but he did feel the hand on his shoulder, long fingers squeezing tightly. The feeling seemed to ground him even as he tried desperately to avoid reality.

"He's gone my friend," Callum's rich voice said softly, replete with sympathy.

"No," Anders said quietly, sniffing as his nose ran, shaking his head violently as a wave of pain and anguish tore through his body, making his magic flare.

How can I give up on him? He thought soberly, how could I ever dream of such a thing? He felt his grief turn to anger, his sadness to ire, as a thought occurred to him. This isn't how it is supposed to be. This isn't the end of things and I know it!

"No! Don't you let this happen!" he shouted suddenly into the air around him, "You help him! You help him Justice or I swear I'll make sure you never see your work finished!"

He heard Callum backing away from him with a gasp, the hand disappearing from his shoulder as Anders' immersed himself in the familiar stunning blue glow, the markings on his skin flaring and the Fade itself fizzing in the air around him. Anders reached forwards and grabbed Hawke roughly, pulling the heavy weight of his love into his arms, pushing away the sheer torture of holding the dead man against his chest.

"I swear to you, I'll die before I see it done!" he screamed into the cold air, his voice breaking, "I'll die! You bastard, you bastard help me! Help me!"

All of a sudden there was a terrible, writhing itch beneath his skin, a force like that of lightning and the building hum of a thunderstorm as the glow grew brighter and brighter. The resistance within himself was both clear and entirely shocking to Anders. He could feel that Justice was defying him, truly opposing his will to capture Hawke's life force before it was all too late. Anders grit his teeth and kept his resolve clear and true, holding Hawke as tightly as he could while he both begged and demanded that the spirit within him help save the life of the man he loved. I've done it before, Anders thought wildly, with Justice's help I've saved people who have already slipped over. It has to be possible to save him, it has to be!

No one had ever been gone for as long as Hawke had, however, no one had been dead for so long. Anders banished the thought from his mind and forced himself to stay focused.

"Help me," he whispered as the Fade began to snap and crack around him, his vision blurring through the tears, his voice lost to the rawness of his throat, the power around him building and building until the pine needles littering the ground on which they sat began to spit and hiss and burst into fits of flame, sparkling and sending shoots of smoke swirling into the air. Anders closed his eyes and pushed all of his energy into giving Justice what he needed, begging the spirit to help him through their union. A sound like a thousand birds flapping their wings began to surround him, the light becoming blinding in its intensity. He felt the blood seeping into his trousers, against his knees. Hawke's blood.

As he knelt there, on the frozen ground, Anders did something he had sworn in his eighth year on this earth that he would never do again. He prayed.

"Let him live," he pleaded as he forced his face down against Hawke's neck, trying to ignore the thick smell of blood, "all mighty Maker please, save this man that he may live. I beg you!"
Then suddenly there was nothing. No light. No sound. No humming power. No itching resistance. Anders didn't move. He couldn't move. The thought of moving without Hawke there to do it for seemed like such a ludicrous idea that he almost laughed hysterically. When he did pull back he did it slowly, keeping his eyes open as he looked down at Hawke, into the rogue's face with his closed eyes and his calm expression. Anders felt a spasm shock across his back, shaking his head and smiling eerily as his mind crumpled beneath the weight of the truth. This isn't real, he thought giddily, this isn't real. This is a dream. This isn't real. I'll wake up. I'll wake up and he'll be alive. I'll wake up.

Wake up Anders. Wake up. Please wake up!

"Hawke," he said, his fantasy crumbling as he reached out and touched the soft skin of Hawke's neck, "my love, my life...please..."

Then there it was. Anders didn't move, he hardly dared to breathe. Then there it was again.

Hawke moved.

Anders stilled, his eyes frozen in place as they stared at Hawke while the man moved his head subtly to the left and then the right, his forehead creasing in a frown. Anders felt an inarticulate noise leave his throat, somewhere between a sob and a yell, lifting his other hand to his mouth as he smudged his tears against his cold cheeks.

He's alive, he thought wildly as he hugged Hawke so tightly he nearly choked him, he's alive!

"Hawke!" he yelled in a choked voice as he pulled back, watching the rogue's eyes flit open and stare at him blankly, "Hawke speak to me, by the Maker say something! Hawke? Please love, say something to me!"

"...Something smells nice," Hawke mumbled out after a pause, swallowing with difficulty as he stared at Anders in confusion, "have you been cooking? I'm really hungry."

Anders couldn't stop himself from bursting into a fresh set of tears, only these were of joy over those of despair. He laughed as he sobbed, holding Hawke to his chest and rocking them both back and forth as he simply relished the feel of Hawke's chest rising and falling with each breath, the mumbled and confused words spilling from Hawke's mouth, the shaky hands that tried to pry him away.

"You're alright, you're alright," Anders said again and again, his voice half muffled against Hawke's fur coat, "oh Maker, you're alive!"

"Of course I'm alive," Hawke said, sounding a little annoyed, "why wouldn't I be?"

Anders didn't reply. Never again, he thought staunchly, never again, never again. I'll never even think of it, I'll never even imagine that it could be true. Hawke can't die, just as I can't until my work is done. It's just the way the world is, he thought hysterically, it's just the way things are. I'll never let it be true Hawke, I swear to you. I'll always be here to pull you back my love, always.

When he finally found the courage to lean back, as Hawke's hands became more and more insistent, he found himself greeted by a familiar face. Sascha the dog was standing over them, wagging her tail and sniffing at Hawke's shoulder, alternately panting and snuffling at his thick fur coat. Hawke smiled with a frown, reaching up shakily to rub the dogs head in an affectionate manner.

"Hey there girl," he said, laughing softly as the dog began to lick at his face, "oh, hey, giving me
kisses now are we? What are you doing out here all on your own?"

It was surreal. As if nothing had happened at all and it was simply a normal day. Hawke was smiling and talking and breathing and alive. It was then that, through the jumbled mess that was his mind, Anders remembered that Hawke had never seen Callum's dogs.

"By Andraste," Anders heard Callum saying breathily in the background, "just what...what are you?"

Anders looked up at the tall mage, standing a few feet to his right, out of Hawke's field of vision, Luce the Labrador sitting vigilantly at his heels, Bryn and Sigurðr standing by the trees on his right. I could tell you but you probably wouldn't appreciate it, Anders thought as the other man watched him warily. Everything seemed to be slotting slowly back into place as if nothing had happened at all. Anders felt Hawke sit up and watched him do it in a dreamy state of mind, as if he were asleep and this wasn't truly real at all. The rogue turned sluggishly, regaining his strength as he continued to stand up on slightly wobbly legs.

"You..!" Hawke said fiercely as he stared at Callum with flashing eyes.

His words fell away, however, as Hawke finally spied the decimation around him. The large pool of blood at his feet, the twisted bodies of the bandits lying across the road, the bandit leader sprayed over the pine needles. Hawke spun round slowly in shock, even as Callum stared at them both.

"What in the fuck happened here?" Hawke asked harshly, stopping to look back and forth between Anders and Callum.

It was only when Anders tried to stand that the dream state shattered. He managed to get into a half standing position before the broken rib in his chest sent screaming agony through his body, followed by the large bleeding gash on the back of his head sending waves of dizziness over his mind and the fact that he had used every last ounce of mana in his body to save Hawke making his body weak and sluggish. Anders fell to the ground with a heavy thump, only exacerbating his injuries. As his eyes slipped closed he thought he heard Hawke calling his name and felt hands on his face.

Then everything faded into darkness.

It was still dark, even when he opened his eyes. At first he thought it might be night time but, as he tried to look around, he found that he didn't feel real at all. That he couldn't feel his limbs moving or breath entering his lungs or his eyelids opening and closing. He panicked a little as he struggled to regain his faculties.

"Don't worry," a girlish voice whispered in his ear, loud and breathy, "it's alright. You'll be alright now."

Anders continued to struggle despite her words. Who are you? He tried to scream, who are you? What do you want from me! But it was useless, she did not reply. Instead a flickering light made itself known, somewhere behind him, starting as nothing but a soft yellowish glow before building and building. Soon there was a crackling sound accompanying it, then the glow turned with an orange tint, seeming to close in on him as it became apparent that it was fire he was seeing. It swarmed around him as he struggled and gasped, the very darkness around him being consumed as the fire began to roar. He could feel the heat of it, the intense burning heat, and yet could not vocalise his screams.
Let me go! He tried to yell, let me go!

The fire was all around him now, creeping closer and closer until he was sure that he could not breathe but for smoke and heat entering him, the fire scalding his flesh even as he was sure that he had none. He tried to pull back but realised that he had nowhere to go. No, he was trying to shout, no, no...!

"No!" he jolted awake, the swift pain in his chest making him close his eyes and cry out softly, easing slowly back against something soft.

He heard movement around him and forced himself to open his eyes. He was greeted by the flickering light of the fire which burned a few feet away from him. Just...a dream, he thought as he watched the lambent flames, that's all. Then there were hands against his face and he looked round to see Callum hovering above him, his face half shrouded in darkness. Anders stared at him, realising as the thing beneath his head moved, that he was leaning against a dog. He looked dazedly to his right as Callum began using his healing magic in a concentrated pool of light against his chest, seeing Sascha watching the fire with her large brown eyes, her head lying against the ground in between her large paws. He stayed silent as Callum continued to work, looking through the fire to find Hawke, asleep under a thick fur blanket, his head lying on his folded arm with his face buried into the crook of his elbow.

What happened? Anders thought dazedly as he looked back to Callum. The darkness all around them indicated that it was, in fact, night time. The tall mage had finished his work and Anders swore that he could feel the bone setting. He tried to move into a sitting position but Callum's heavy hand pushed him gently back down. Anders stared at him bluntly and Callum stared back. The sharp crackling of the wood in the fire made him flinch. He felt numb, as if purposefully forcing the feeling over himself.

"Why are you still here?" were the first words to leave his mouth.

Callum frowned. His tall, imposing figure leaned back, balancing on his haunches, and watched him. Anders didn't respond to his affronted reaction, merely waited for a reply. Everything felt disjointed, out of place, sickening him.

"You...your friend," Callum started, his voice an odd juxtaposition to his strangely threatening pose; uncertain and worried, "he explained...look, it's fairly simple. You passed out, he told me everything and then basically forced me to help you."

"Help me?" Anders frowned, lifting his hands into the firelight, not even reacting when he saw the blood still staining them.

"You were exhausted," Callum said with a sigh, sounding oddly calm as he talked of Anders condition; it was something Anders recognised, something that pulled him slowly back towards the real world. That clinical tone, the very same as he used when treating someone, "you both were. Which doesn't really surprise me. We put you on the horse and basically got as far into the woods as we could before this idiot here collapsed. Didn't warn me he was basically dead on his feet."

It still doesn't explain anything, Anders thought as Callum continued to talk. The cold, numb feeling began to dissipate, leaving confusion and hurt and pain in its wake. Anders frowned, feeling his chest tighten.

"You didn't answer my question," Anders said angrily even as his voice hitched with pent up emotion, "why are you still here?"
"Well, did you..." Callum hesitated, looking awkwardly away to the fire, "bloody hell, did you really think I'd just abandon you both in the middle of the woods, half dead? I'm a thief not a murderer. And...after seeing that, well..."

What? Anders thought, you stuck around because you found out I was an abomination? You expect me to believe that? He managed to sit up with a struggle, Callum trying to convince him to lay back down, his hands on Anders shoulders. It was no use. The pain and the guilt needed somewhere to go. The delayed shock of what he had seen, of what he had felt, was coursing through him, both paralysing and stimulating his senses. Anders pushed back against Callum's hold and tried to get up onto his knees. The pain in his chest wasn't as agonising as it had been but the ache was persistent and the weakness in his limbs had not abated. He stumbled to the ground, half falling against Callum as the taller man caught him. Anders struggled in his grasp, trying to pull away.

"Let me go!" Anders snarled, "You bastard, this is all your fault!"

"Calm down, will you?" Callum growled, trying to keep a hold of the squirming mage, "For the Maker's sake I'm only trying to help!"

"Help?" Anders hissed, "How dare you, how could you! You almost got us killed, Hawke almost died...!"

The words died in his mouth, wilting away to a mute, gaping mouth. Anders felt the sudden rush of adrenaline seep from his veins, leaving him once more limp and weak. He felt the tears slipping from his eyes but did not weep. He felt Callum's arms encircle him and hold him still, as if worried he would begin raging again any second. Instead he simply lay there, guiltily glad for the strong arms around him and the familiar pull of safety and kindness that Callum ironically exuded.

"Oh Maker I almost lost him," Anders whispered, unresisting as Callum shifted him round until he could see the other man.

"He's alright now," Callum said edgily, "I promise, he's just tired and still a little ill it seems. Blood loss probably didn't help any, but I think he'll be fine."

"Why did you come back?" Anders asked, frowning up at the other man as his jumbled mind flitted from one confusing topic to the next.

"I..." Callum paused, "actually you can thank Sascha for that one. Silly mutt, aren't you?"

Anders looked to his right as Sascha, on hearing her name, lifted her head and looked at them both expectantly, wagging her tail with dull thumps against the ground.

"I think she must have heard you," Callum said quietly, "I certainly didn't. One minute we were all walking together and the next she starts barking, wouldn't stop. Then all of a sudden she's bounding back through the trees towards the road, leaving me and Luce to catch up and, well, that's where we found you. I'll admit that Luce is more of a fighter than Sash but..."

Everything fell silent as Callum trailed off, seeming to realise that he was just rambling. He looked down at Anders as the other man stared back.

"You saved us," Anders said matter-of-factly, his voice quiet as if only just realising the truth, "we'd both be dead if you hadn't come back."

"Oh I'm not sure about that," Callum said with a soft smile, staring at Anders intently, "it seems to me that you are more than equipped to take care of yourself."
"Justice only plays when he feels like it," Anders said back, unable to take his stare from Callum's blue eyes, flickering in the firelight.

"Justice?" Callum asked, leaning down fractionally, "your friend told me about your, um, unusual circumstances."

"The spirit inside of me, that's his name," Anders said breathily, swallowing down the chaotic feelings inside of him, "how can you be so calm when you know what I am?"

"Oh, well, I suppose I'm trusting my gut on this one," Callum said with a weak laugh, "and the dogs seem to like you, they usually have a sense for evil things, so..."

"...Why are you staring at me like that?" Anders asked in nothing but a whisper, unable to tear his eyes away.

"Because I really want to kiss you," Callum admitted breathily before he swiftly closed the gap between them and pushed their cold lips together, sliding his tongue into Anders mouth.

He found no resistance because, for once, Anders gave none. The feeling was exquisite. It was what he needed. This pleasure, this heat, wiping away all other emotion and grief from his body and his mind. He closed his eyes and moaned headily into the other man's mouth, bringing a shaky hand up to slide it into Callum's hair. The other man kissed him slowly, gently, despite his seeming fervour. Once more it felt right even as it felt wrong. Anders forced the feeling away and responded in kind, sliding his tongue over the other man's as Callum held him close. After another minute they parted slowly, Anders breathing deeply as he opened his eyes. He watched Callum open his and look at him almost fondly.

"You really are incredible," the other man said as he shook his head, "you're an abomination, I barely know you, I stole from you; you should hate me and I should hate you... yet all I can think about is..."

Callum leaned in for another kiss and frowned when he found Anders' fingers against his lips, holding him gently back.

"I don't hate you," Anders admitted as Callum leaned back, "but I'm afraid that one is all you're going to get."

A sigh was Callum's only response, and a sad nod of the head.

"I thought as much," the other man said as he looked across the fire to Hawke, "I wasn't joking when I said he was lucky. I've never seen anything like what you did back there. I mean, bloody hell, he was dead and you brought him back, and that light, it was really something else. No abomination I've ever seen has given off such a pure light, or had such control over their faculties. You called him a spirit, this Justice, but I'm guessing he's more of an angel, eh?"

Anders didn't have the heart or the energy to argue with him, or explain the lengthy and complicated circumstances behind both himself and Justice. Instead he was simply glad for Callum's seeming understanding. As he relaxed against the man behind him he realised just how terribly tired he was even though it seemed he had slept for the entire day.

"You should go back to sleep," Callum said, reminiscent of his words the night before; the association put Anders back up, making him remember Callum's betrayal.

"And how do I know you won't rob us blind during the night and leave us here?" he said seriously, eyeing the man critically.
"Really? You still think I'm going to do that?" Callum said with a raise of his eyebrows, "I could have left you to die and kept your blighted money if I had wanted to, but instead I helped you out because...well for a lot of reasons. And anyway, why should I trust you? How do I know that spirit of yours isn't going to go crazy in the middle of the night and kill me, hmm?"

"Because Justice would never do that," Anders said tightly, "he's no demon."

"And I won't leave until I get you to Val Chevin," Callum said just as seriously, yet a small smile ticked at the side of his mouth, "so I suppose we'll both just have to trust each other. It's three days to Val Chevin by the main road, but by the coastal route it's only two, if we hurry. There's someone there I think can help us."

"Who?" Anders asked warily, trying to think seriously about trusting both he and Hawke's lives to this man, "and wouldn't it be a better idea to just go back to Cumberland? Hawke's ill and he needs food and shelter, not to stay out here in the cold..."

"Not such a great idea," Callum interrupted, "one of the rogues that attacked you, he got away. Look I think he might have headed back to Cumberland. After seeing what you did to his boss it wouldn't surprise me if he went straight to the Chevalier's themselves and told them everything. He'd probably see a jail cell as protection after that display."

"I don't care what they do to me," Anders said angrily, "this is Hawke's life we're talking about!"

"And it's yours too," Callum replied strongly as he lay the mage back down against the fur blanket on which he was lying, "you know as well as I do what the templars do with abominations. Do you like your head attached to your body or not?"

Anders scowled but, even though he didn't like it, had to concede to Callum's assessment of the situation.

"That's what I thought," Callum said as he sat up, leaning against his backpack, "it'll be fine, I know the way. We'll push along the coast and take the ferry over the river. Easy. Now get some bloody sleep before I send you to sleep myself, alright?"

Right, Anders thought, easy. He forced himself up and managed to get onto all fours, despite Callum telling him just to lie down. Once he was up he crawled around the fire, ignoring the pine needles and mud sticking to his hands, until he reached Hawke. Callum sighed and shook his head, even as he patted the blanket Anders had been lying on, urging Sascha onto it where the dog curled up happily, tail wagging as her master sat down next to her. As Anders slowly lifted the blanket and edged himself down until he was lying behind Hawke he saw the golden Labrador trot into view, taking up a vigil beside the fire. Anders covered himself with the thick fur blanket and shifted around until the ache in his chest wasn't too painful. Hawke was wonderfully warm and real and alive in his arms. Anders wrapped Hawke in a one armed hold and kissed the back of his neck, smiling as the man moaned softly in his sleep.

Anders slipped down into the abyssal darkness, where he knew the nightmares were waiting for him.
Anders was shaken, screaming, from the abyss of sleep by hands tight around his shoulders. His eyes sprang open, wide and searching, his breath coming in swift pants as he tried to focus on the dim view of the person above him. There was a pale, thin light in the air, stretching through the trees, sending vague shadows over the world before his eyes.

"Hey, wake up, you were having a nightmare," Anders' bleary mind found it difficult for a moment to identify the voice but, as he became more aware, he recognised Callum's slightly higher pitch, "Anders, are you alright?"

"I..." Anders looked around, lifting his hands up automatically to place them over Callum's own and gently remove them; the tendrils of the nightmare were still clinging to his mind, making everything around him seem sharper and clearer than usual even as it was hidden beneath the gloom, "I'm fine. I'm..."

Anders rolled his head to the left and stopped speaking immediately. He stared at the empty patch of blanket where Hawke had been sleeping the night before. His stomach pitched.

"Where is Hawke?" he asked seriously, his hands tightening around Callum's wrists.

"He went to get some water," Callum said as if it were a perfectly normal occurrence, which it would have been, under normal circumstances; unfortunately these were not. Anders pushed Callum away forcefully, causing the man to reach back and steady himself against the cold ground while Anders struggled out from under the thick blanket, "calm down for Maker's sake, the brook is only over there!"

"Why did you let him go off alone?" Anders said tightly as he stood shivering in the cold air, hurrying across the campsite towards the sound of running water which could be heard trickling through the trees, "Why didn't you go with him?"

"Well I did suggest it to him," Callum said casually, shouting after him, "but surprisingly he refused!"

Callum's words were lost to the barrier of the tall, thick trunked trees as Anders weaved around them. The light became more prominent as he neared the brook, illuminating the peeling bark of the leafless, skeletal birch trees and the thick layer of pine needles squashing beneath his feet as he walked. He found Hawke in a clearing, facing away from him as he hunkered down beside what looked like a stagnant pool of water with the small brook feeding into it from one end. Anders started to call out but then swiftly closed his mouth as Hawke leaned his head to the right, affording Anders a view of what he was doing.

The rogue's face was as blank as Anders had ever seen it, yet, after years of studying Hawke's blank looks, Anders liked to think he could pick out the nuances beneath them. Such as the slight tightening of the eyes, indicating discomfort, or flicking out the very tip of his tongue to wet his
lips, showing indecision; all of which Hawke was doing right now as he gazed at his reflection in the water and ran his fingers across the thin, red scar which started at one side of his throat and ended at the other. Anders wasn't sure what to say, if anything at all. He wanted nothing more than to rush to Hawke's side and tell him everything would be alright but...in truth he didn't know if everything would be alright and he was fed up of lying to the man he loved just to cover everything up and pretend it didn't exist anymore. Thankfully Hawke, as Anders should have been able to guess, sorted it for him.

"How long are you going to stand there for?" Hawke said after a moment's silence.

"...Not sure," Anders said, swallowing down his unease as he tried to sound as normal as possible, "for however long it took you to notice me, I suppose."

"Should have spoken up sooner then," Hawke said, letting his hand drop away from his throat before standing and looking over his shoulder towards Anders, "I heard you coming as soon as you left the camp."

Should have known, Anders thought as he walked out into the clearing and ambled to Hawke's side, watching the pool as he did so. Hawke's sense of hearing has always been impeccable. The water was hidden mainly beneath the mass of heavy lily pads and their trailing tendrils that sat in the centre of the pond, or the thin layer of frozen water which circled the edge, sneaking in from the white, frost covered ground. The only clear patch seemed to be a small piece where Hawke had obviously broken through the frozen layer, leaving a jagged mess of ice floating in the torpid water.

By the time he looked up at Hawke the man was once more looking away from him, surveying the tall trees with distant eyes. Of course Anders wasn't naive enough to think that he was truly looking at his surroundings; he could easily tell that Hawke's thoughts were focused inwards. Anders wasn't sure what to say. He sniffed in the cold air and let it out in a tight, ineluctable yawn, his eyes squinting closed as he brought the back of his fist up to cover his mouth. Hawke snaked his arm around Ander's back, his fingers tightening around the mage's waist to jerk him closer. Anders stumbled a little, ending up pressed against Hawke's side as the rogue flexed his fingers like talons. He looked at Hawke out of the corner of his eye, noting the pale skin of his face and the dark circles beneath his eyes, but still the rogue did not look at him.

"Do you feel any better?" Anders asked once the silence became too much to bear.

"...No," Hawke replied, merely leaving a deeper silence in the wake of his monosyllabic answer.

Anders took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He turned awkwardly in Hawke's one armed hold, bringing his right arm up to take hold of Hawke's shoulder and force the rogue to face him. Hawke's eyes were dull and slightly unfocused, only making Anders worry more as he reached out tentatively to slip his fingers under the man's chin and tilt his head back gently. Hawke acquiesced, allowing Anders a good look at the slice of red scar tissue on his throat. The sight of it made Anders heart race with the memory of muscle and tendon and blood spilling out beyond his control. No, he thought fiercely as he brought his right hand up and ran it smoothly across Hawke's neck, no, I won't think about it. It's not real, not anymore. He let out a small amount of healing magic, one simple spell to take away the ache that was sure to be present in the throat muscles and another, more complex, to help quicken the natural healing process that the flesh was undergoing.

Hawke brought his head back down to face Anders once he was finished, his eyes watching the mage closely. Anders tried to hide his anxiety but clearly didn't do a good enough job. Hawke frowned and looked away, his eyes gleaming in the low light.
"Hawke..." Anders started, trying to ignore the sudden bad feeling in the air, "please, love, look at me?"

"I didn't remember," Hawke said incongruously, making Anders blink in confusion, "I didn't remember anything at all until I woke up this morning and..."

Once more Hawke's hand strayed to his throat and he looked into the distance, as if recalling something he would rather he could forget. Anders let his hand trail up and cupped Hawke's cheek tenderly but the other man pulled away with a terse sound of aggravation. Please don't hold it all inside, Anders silently begged as the man before him once more moved to the water's edge and stared down into the murky pool, his hands balling into fists.

"I've never been so..." Hawke's voice didn't trail off so much as strangle out into nothing; the rest was said in a whisper which Anders didn't catch all of, "...I wake up and..."

"Don't do this, please," Anders pleaded feeling a sickening sense of irrational guilt spread through him, "talk to me."

What do you have to feel guilty about? Anders thought angrily as he tried to push the feeling away, for Maker's sake you saved his life! When Hawke didn't move everything began to tumble out of Anders' mouth in a rush, words tripping over each other.

"I don't know what you felt, I probably never will," Anders said, "but I swear Hawke I've never...I've never been so scared. I thought you were gone...and you were. You were Hawke and I nearly lost you forever and... oh Maker, please. Damn it, look at me!"

When Hawke turned around Anders almost wished he had kept his mouth shut. The man's eyes were alight with an indistinct mess of anger, fear and grief. The words died in Anders' throat and he quickly tried to figure out what he should do next. What do we do now? Anders thought a little brokenly, why can't things just go back? What am I supposed to do?

"You want to know what I think, do you?" Hawke spat, his face contorted in anger, "You fucking little whore! I wake up and you're kissing him, letting him touch you!"

"What?" Anders thought, his mind freezing in shock, refusing to make sense of Hawke's words; last night? Anders thought stiltedly, I thought Hawke was asleep!

"Don't act innocent with me," Hawke said quietly, dangerously, his words muddled with anger, "I believed you when you said that he came on to you and you pushed him away, like an idiot I believed you and I held myself back from...and then...then you're unconscious and I'm left alone, asking someone I don't even trust for help and I wake up and you're...! I fucking lay there and I watched you Anders! Don't you dare tell me you didn't want it!"

I didn't, it wasn't like that, I...Anders' thoughts were a jumbled mess of guilt. The memory of fresh blood, striking against Hawke's pale skin, against his knees as it soaked into the fabric. He shook it away, trying to focus on the situation.

"It wasn't like that," Anders said genuinely, hating the sound of disgust and the sharp glare this earned him from Hawke, "I swear, it wasn't! Just listen to me and..!"

"More lies, is that what you want to give me now?" Hawke interrupted, on the verge of yelling; Anders' face crumpled, the stress of the situation bearing down on him immeasurably. His vision blurred and he blinked away the tears only to see Hawke sneering, "fucking tears now! Don't try your sorry act on me, I've had it up to here with you messing me about!"
"I'm not, I mean I haven't..." Anders shook his head and tried his best to explain but Hawke didn't give him the chance.

Hawke had him by the shoulders and backed against the nearest tree before Anders could even blink, a pair of insistent lips ground against his own and a thorough tongue thrusting into his mouth. Hawke engulfed him, broad chest pushing him against the thick bark while his hands trailed round under Anders' robe to squeeze territorially at his buttocks, pulling him forwards so as to grind their pelvises roughly together. Anders let out a keening whimper into Hawke's domineering kiss, his hands shaking as he held weakly onto the arms of Hawke's thick coat. Hawke growled ferally at the sound and shoved Anders harder against the tree trunk. When he pulled back Anders was panting for breath, the air thick with milky condensation. Hawke continued to grind against him, making Anders shake his head. Something was wrong, very wrong, he could feel it in the air as a heat haze along with a faint smell akin to burning coals and wood smoke. What's happening? Anders thought with alarm.

"Hawke, _don't_," he said, gasping, "...not now. Don't be like this, it's not what you think..."

"Shut up," Hawke said tightly, his voice deep with desire and an almost indiscernible amount of fear; Anders winced, "you're mine, do you understand that? _Do_ you?"

"Of course I am," Anders said as Hawke slowed his frantic thrusting; he looked into Hawke's eyes and tried to convince him that everything was alright but the glazed look there didn't seem to see him, "I'm always yours Hawke, always, you _know_ that. What's wrong with you? What do you need from me?"

The question seemed to spark something, causing Hawke's eyes to snap back to the fiery intensity Anders was used to. Before Anders could react Hawke had hauled him from the tree and swiftly switched their positions, his hands trailing up to once more clamp onto Anders shoulders, pushing him down almost violently, "on your knees."

"What?" Anders asked uncertainly, his own mind a whirl of confusion, shame and, to Justice's consternation, complete submission.

"I said on your _knees_," Hawke snapped, shoving Anders to force him down onto the spongy layer of pine needles and mud.

Hawke 's long fingers were suddenly in his hair, pulling the tie free and burying themselves in the golden strands while the other fumbled with his heavy belt and the buttons of his trousers. Anders' breath came in soft pants, watching avidly as Hawke peeled back layers of clothing, keeping his face close enough that, when he finally freed his stiff cock, it brushed against Anders' cheek. Hawke said nothing, just continued to rub tense circles on Anders scalp. Anders swallowed down his insecurity and managed to pull back enough to look up at Hawke but the rouge's face was hidden as he leaned his head back against the tree. The persistent hand in his hair yanked him forwards once more. This is what he needs? Anders thought a little deliriously even as his stomach squirmed uncomfortably at the thought, why is it always like this? Why does he feel the need to claim me like some sort of animal? Because you force him to doubt you, you let him see the things that you know will hurt him, Anders' conscience supplied nastily, forcing a stab of guilt deep into his heart, and because you fucking deserve it.

Anders opened his mouth and took the tip of Hawke's penis between his lips, pushing away the hurt and the pain, sucking gently before he slid forwards and engulfed half of the thick length in one swallow. He heard Hawke let out a deep, needful moan, the hand in his hair trying to pull him closer. Anders closed his eyes took hold of Hawke's hips as he pulled back slowly, running his tongue along the underside as he did so. After another long, slow suck Anders felt Hawke's other
hand join the first, grasping the back of his head as the rogue let out a frustrated groan.

"More," he growled breathily, grunting as Anders tried to pull back, "more. Take it deeper, come on, I know you can."

The hands held him fast as, to Anders' surprise, Hawke began pushing his hips forwards, sliding his cock further and further in until it forced Anders to gag. The mage tried to pull away, pushing against Hawke's strong thighs, but the man before him seemed lost in the haze of ecstasy and either didn't notice or didn't care. Tears sprang to Anders' eyes as he screwed them shut, Hawke continuing to push forwards until he was imbedded fully in Anders mouth, sliding uncomfortably into his throat. He forced himself to hold his breath, hands shaking as they clung to Hawke's thighs, until Hawke pulled back with a sharp sigh. Anders breathed steadily through his nose and tried to move but Hawke simply fisted his fingers into the mage's hair and growled, once more forcing his rigid cock fully into his lover's mouth.

It wasn't that he had never done it before, he had on many occasions, remembering how much Hawke seemed to enjoy the sensation. However, this was entirely different. Hawke he had never forced him into anything during sex, usually stopping if Anders became uncomfortable. The one and only time had been after Fenris and the phage, something that Anders had sworn he would never allow Hawke to do to him again, despite his confused feelings at the time. Yet here he was, once more submitting to the humiliating act of being used. You can stop this! he could feel Justice raging as Hawke continued to take him. Yet the swirling confusion of feelings inside of the mage resisted both Hawke and Justice, spiralling between the terrified memories of losing Hawke forever, the angry need to break away, the terrible guilt eating away at him, the strange sense of something wrong in the air and the once more odd and paradoxically unpleasant enjoyment from the act itself that he tried desperately to deny.

"Anders...ah, fuck yes," Hawke gasped out as he slowed his thrusting pace, finally pulling back and leaning once more against the tree to allow Anders more control; the mage continued to pleasure his lover tentatively, trying urgently to ignore the unrelenting struggle within himself and blank out his feelings altogether, "I'm...I..."

Hawke came without warning causing him to once more pull Anders closer. The mage choked, his eyes wide, and pulled away from Hawke's now weak hands. The thick, sticky fluid of Hawke's release caught him across his cheek and jaw as Hawke continued to grunt and buck his hips. Anders spat out the salty fluid in his mouth and coughed roughly, leaning to the side with one hand braced against the ground while he rubbed at his abused throat with cold fingers. He listened absently to the rustling of fabric as Hawke sorted himself, taking deep breaths and blinking the tears from his eyes. When he once more looked up Hawke was watching him with half lidded eyes and an indiscernible stare. Anders stared at him as if he didn't know who he was looking at, getting to his feet with a blank stare. Hawke's eyes followed him warily. When he offered Anders his handkerchief hesitantly the mage snatched it angrily, turned on his heel and made to leave.

"Anders wait," Hawke's uncertain tone was as distressed as it always was, accompanied by a strong hand clamping around the mage's arm, "I'm sorry...I didn't..."

Anders shook him off forcefully and continued to walk away, wiping away the evidence of their union onto the white handkerchief with forceful jerks. Hawke did not call out or try and stop him again. Anders kept his breathing as steady as he could and tried to calm himself. I shouldn't be...he isn't himself, he's...something's wrong...

It didn't work. Once Anders knew he was nearly back at the camp he stopped, put his back against the nearest tree and slid to the ground, shaking violently.
What the hell just happened? he thought faintly. Whenever things went wrong Anders started to believe he should only ever expect them to get even worse. That's the way things always seemed to pan out. Yet now, here, in the middle of nowhere with Hawke ill, both of them split apart by jealousy and anger, no supplies and a mere stranger to rely on, things seemed at their very lowest.

Anders put his head into his hands and let the sob that had been building in his chest break out quietly. Maker I just want to get back home, he thought, feeling Justice's resistance to such a thought. He knew that this journey was important, he knew that better than anyone, and yet all he could think about was being safe and well with Hawke, back in Kirkwall where at least they had friends and...

Like to lie to yourself, do you? His conscience bit out, making Anders curl tighter inwards. Trying to believe that Hawke isn't like this all the time? So pathetic. He's always done this, always. Whenever he's scared or lost or angry he takes it out on you, and the worst part is that you let him. It's not like that, Anders shook his head and leaned it back against the tree, steeling his nerves. Sometimes the underlying truth was easier to ignore than even facing up to the reality of their life as it was. Anders closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

The next thing he knew the sound of snapping twigs cracked to his right. He looked up, alert for trouble, and watched with a sense of relief as the golden Labrador trotted past him, sparing him a quick glance before moving on. Anders didn't have the time or the wherewithal to move before Callum rounded the tree in front of him with an arm full of small logs, catching sight of Anders and looking down at him in surprise.

"What are you doing on the..?" Callum started to say, hesitating as he finally got a good look at Anders' face, "um..."

There was a moment's silence in which Anders wasn't sure what to do. Eventually he merely nodded in reply, staying seated on the ground. Callum looked about him, obviously expecting to find Hawke somewhere close. When he didn't, and when Anders still did not rise from the ground, Callum placed the logs he had collected down by his feet and whistled on Luce. The Labrador, who had disappeared into the trees, came bounding back and looked to her master attentively.

Anders watched laconically as Callum reached down to offer him his hand, eventually reaching up to take hold of it and allow the taller man to pull him up strongly. The momentum made Anders stumble a little once he gained his feet, allowing Callum to pull him into a quick hug. Anders tried to break the hold but Callum simply let him go, looking down at Anders' panicked face with troubled confusion.

"I wasn't trying anything," he mumbled as he bent down to once more gather up the logs, "just looked like you needed it, that's all."

Anders brushed down his clothes awkwardly, feeling distinctly out of place as Callum turned away to continue back to the camp. He brought his hand up and brushed the stinging tears from his face before slowly following the other man's lead. When he reached the camp Callum was lighting the fire in the way that Anders always did, holding his hand to the side of the carefully piled logs and summoning a small, dancing flame, keeping it burning until the greedy fire caught on one of the twigs, snapping and cracking as it devoured the wood. Callum stood up, watching Anders surreptitiously as he moved around, packing the camp away in the heat from the fire. Anders approached him cautiously, his nerves still raw and tender, waiting until the tall man stopped moving before he opened his mouth to speak. Instead, however, Callum took one look at him and simply stepped forwards to gather Anders once more into his arms. When the other mage tried to pull back Callum simply held him close.

"You really look like you need it," Callum explained in a mumbled voice.
"...Maybe Just for a moment," Anders eventually agreed, closing his eyes as he relaxed into the embrace.

"You really know how to send mixed signals," Callum said in amused disbelief; there were a terse few moments in which neither spoke nor moved. Then, as Anders felt the tension in him rising once more, Callum started to talk in his usual cheerful manner, "you know what? You suit your hair loose. You should wear it like that more often."

"Ha, you think?" Anders said, tempering the choked emotion in his voice, "I think I will be now that I've lost the tie for it."

"Did you two...have a fight or something?" Callum asked.

"It's nothing," Anders lied; the last thing he wanted to do was talk about it.

"Whatever you say beautiful," Anders felt Callum shrug and pulled away gently, looking up to see the taller man smiling down at him, "just don't cry, okay? Or you'll make me want to smash that creep's face in more than I already do."

"Don't you dare even..." Anders scowled, fixing Callum with an icy stare as the other mage laughed and shook his head.

"I was kidding, just kidding," Callum raised his hands and turned to continue repacking his rucksack, "also, I thought you might want this back."

Anders caught the large purse that Callum tossed to him, obviously hand sewn, and looked down at it with a very small smile. Their money, and all of it if the weight was anything to go by. Anders opened the drawstring and looked inside to see the calming shine of a myriad of hefty gold sovereigns and slim silvers. He looked up and nodded to Callum as the man smiled back, giving him a small shrug and an amused pout.

Hawke returned just as Anders finished packing up the horses. He watched Anders warily as the mage flicked his glance towards him and then away again. Hawke sat down by the fire and said nothing. You still care about him, Justice seemed to question him, even when he treats you like filth you want to look after him. It's not like that, Anders thought as he bent down to retrieve the small parcel wrapped in paper and string which he had purposefully kept out. He walked over to Hawke and handed him the parcel. I know that isn't really my Hawke, Anders thought bleakly, it's not really him. Hawke looked at the package in confusion. Anders noted that the rogue's eyes were glassy and red, further fuelling the want to forgive him and try and find out what was truly wrong.

"It's the last of the breakfast I saved from the inn," he said softly, "eat it, you need to keep your strength up."

"What about you? Will you be alright?" Hawke said, looking up at him in concern; somehow Anders knew that Hawke was asking about more than just the food.

"I'm not hungry," Anders said, unsure where to put his hands as he stood awkwardly beside Hawke; finally he reached out with his right hand and placed it onto Hawke's head, sliding his fingers into his messy, black hair and smoothing the thick strands as Hawke looked down at the parcel in his hands, "please, just eat it."

He removed his hand slowly and turned away to continue packing. You forgive him as you hope he forgives you, is that it? his conscience berated him as he fed Bryn half a sheaf of compressed hay, you let it all go because somehow you feel you deserve it. No, Anders tried to deny, no that's
not it. I don't... 

Despite his conviction and his willingness to believe that Hawke was surely somehow blameless for his actions, Anders couldn't finish the thought.

"My eyes are dim, I cannot see, I have not brought my dog with me, I ha-ave not brought my dog with me," Callum sang loudly as they walked across the wet sand in the waning sunlight.

There was a brief instant of silence in which both Sascha and Luce raced past them, paws creating dull thuds as they ran, the larger dog holding a soggy stick in her mouth. Anders smiled secretly as Bryn watched the dogs with what he could only describe as interest, her ears flicking forwards as she snorted. Callum and Anders were walking while Hawke rode on Sigurðr. He threw a quick, surreptitious glance at Callum and found the man grinning at the excited dogs as they continued their chase, Luce barking as Sascha evaded her, before the taller mage launched back into the verse, "there were rats, rats, big as Antivan cats in the store...!"

"Will you stop that bloody racket?" Hawke cut in hoarsely, throwing Callum a withering glare. Callum subsided with a roll of his eyes, continuing his song as a hum under his breath.

Anders had found it a short couple of days. Perhaps it was the lack of conversation between himself and Hawke or maybe it was the fact that Callum never seemed to let a single second of their journey pass in silence. When the man wasn't singing he was talking to Anders, and when he wasn't talking to Anders he was talking to his dogs or sometimes even the horses, and when he wasn't talking he was humming or clicking his tongue or patting his hands against his knees or making any and all manner of noises. For Anders it created a comfortable background of activity which he could focus on or ignore at his leisure. It seemed, however, to drive Hawke increasingly to distraction.

The beach, when they had reached it, formed a striking landscape. The snow, which had fallen thick and frozen hard, had been washed away by the incoming tide of the Waking Sea, leaving a smooth, wavy line where the white layer of snow met the dark, wet sand. The lounging hills spread up to their right, obscuring their view of the lower half of the mountain range and the burnt orange of the cliffs, creating a pale backdrop of white and beige. As there had been nothing more than a mild breeze since they broken from the forest gloom, the sea spread away like a sheet of ice to their left, broken only by the occasional ripples of fish feeding or birds landing in the freezing water.

They had taken to camping just below the snow covered dunes. Callum and Anders managed to melt the snow with a controlled ring of fire which they formed easily between them, creating a quick and simple area for a campsite. The steam it created was short lived but made a wonderful hissing noise that, for some reason, made Callum giggle like a madman. Anders was just glad that there was at least one happy person in their group. It distracted him from the melancholy that he and Hawke shared equally.

"Well isn't someone in a bad mood today," Callum said with a raise of his eyebrows; Hawke looked away from him and returned his gaze to the back of Sigurðr's head, "oh wait, no, that's just you, isn't it."

Anders gave Callum a warning glare but the taller man just shrugged and sucked on his bottom lip, dragging his teeth across the reddened flesh. Things had become a little more complicated between the two mage's despite the quickness with which time had seemed to pass and their friendship seemed to grow. It was an oddly quick turnaround, Anders had thought with curiosity, from the man he had met in Cumberland to the man who was now helping him on his journey. As far as he
was concerned, despite Callum trying to rob them blind, the man was considerably easy to get along with. He reminded Anders of what it was like to have someone at your side who needed no explanations from you. Callum knew Anders' life because Callum had probably had the same upbringing. They got along like a house on fire.

It had been on the first night on the beach that Callum had noticed the bruises on the side of his neck.

Hawke had weakly been throwing Sascha a stick down by the shore while Anders and Callum sorted the camp. When Callum set the fire alight Anders had instinctively moved towards it, pushing his loose hair behind his ears before stretching his hands out towards the warmth. He had been so intent on the flickering flames that, when he had felt Callum's fingers against his jaw, he literally jumped and turned to look at the taller man in surprise.

"What happened to your neck?" Callum asked with a frown, drawing his hand back; at the time Anders hadn't even known that there were any marks to speak of and had thus looked at Callum in confusion.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, allowing Callum, when the taller mage asked permission, to touch him; the other man's frown only deepened as he examined Anders.

"You've got some bruises," Callum said, "just below your ear, they're...like finger marks or..."

The realisation hit Anders first and, moments later, surprisingly also seemed to occur to Callum. Anders took a short, sharp breath and tried to dismiss the memory of Hawke's hands, crushingly tight around his jaw as they held him still, fingers digging into his skin.

"Must have been one of those bandits," Anders said quickly, clearing his throat, "they weren't exactly gentle with us after all."

"Fuck off," Callum said tersely, once more taking Anders by surprise with his candour, "you're talking to a healer, don't try and bullshit me. Those bruises are fresh and you didn't have them yesterday. I would have noticed. Did he bloody well do that to you?"

"That's none of your business," Anders replied stonily, feeling a roiling sense of shame pitch about in his gut.

"...Yes, well, I guess it isn't," Callum said, eyeing Anders critically, "but count on it, I'm not one for violence. If I see him lay a hand on you I won't be responsible for my actions."

"And if you touch him I won't be responsible for mine," Anders had said back seriously, folding his arms and bringing his hands up under his armpits to keep them warm, "anyway isn't that a bit hypocritical, saying you don't stand for violence and threatening it on someone else?"

"Who said I'd be violent?" Callum said just as seriously but as his eyes locked with Anders' his face devolved into a sly smirk, "I'm really rather good with restraint...or at least I've had no complaints so far."

Anders had silently cursed himself as he blushed at Callum's insinuation and shifted on his feet. Even now, as they walked along the beach, the memory of Callum's words sent a small flush of colour to his face. He wished the other mage wasn't so suggestive. Every time he said something evocative Anders couldn't help but, well...visualise. It was terribly distracting and, to a certain extent, enticing. Not that he would ever dream of taking him up on his offers but, if he was to be completely honest with himself, considering the latent misery of his current situation, the thought
of some playful, casual and all around enjoyable sex was very welcome.

"Is that the ferry?" Anders asked as they rounded a bend in the coastline, the setting sun casting thick shafts of light between the long, thin, dark clouds that sat above the horizon.

"That's it," Callum said enthusiastically, "I'm glad it's a calm day, I've been over that thing in bad weather before and I do not recommend it."

"How much longer?" Anders barely heard Hawke speak above the crunching of the sand beneath his boots, his voice having weakened greatly.

"Not long love," Anders said as he reached up to place his hand on Hawke's leg while Sigurðr tossed his mane, "another couple of hours at most, I hope. Then once we're in Val Chevin I'll get you some hot food and you can lie down, get a decent night's sleep. Sound good?"

Hawke merely nodded sleepily in reply, tightening his hands around the reigns. Since his illness in Cumberland Hawke's health had only continued to decline. His nausea seemed to have dissipated slightly but he was subject to crippling headaches and complete loss of appetite causing his body to grow weak and his mind distracted and feeble. Anders' worry over Hawke's condition had only heightened as they travelled. He had been hopeful that Justice's 'cure' when Hawke had been close to leaving them forever had also cleansed the rogue's body of any illness. However, it became increasingly clear that this was not the case.

As things grew worse he had insisted that Hawke ride instead of walking, encouraging him to eat the bare rations he had spared or the roasted meat of a snow hare that Callum had managed to catch, making him thin broths flavoured with elf root and embrium when the rogue could no longer stomach foods with any substance. He held Hawke close and talked to him in quiet tones, held him as he slept and fed him as much magical aid as he could without doing himself any damage. He had been forced to ignore Callum's lingering stares, replete with antipathy towards Anders' seeming submission to a man who Callum obviously thought treated him like shit.

The man has a point, Anders' conscience pointed out as they headed towards the steady lantern glow of the small ferry docks. No he doesn't, Anders argued back, he doesn't know anything about me, about us. All he's seen is Hawke at his worst so it's no surprise that he thinks that way but it doesn't make him right. It doesn't.

The docks were a simple affair, constructed from dark, hard wood with a set of stairs leading to a small platform and a dinky hut. The ferry was just readying to leave as they arrived. It was a medium sized boat of odd design, with a large, flat deck indented with long, squat benches and a low, curved hull. There were six well muscled men seated at long, flat oars, three on either side of the boat, most leaning forwards against the thick wood or leaning back and gazing up at the sky above.

There were only two other people boarding, a young, nondescript man accompanied by a shorter, blonde haired woman with odd eyes the colour of amber. Anders was sure he felt her watching him surreptitiously but ignored her scrutiny. He had bigger things to worry about than the probing gaze of a stranger. He helped Hawke down from Sigurðr and kept the rogue steady as they made their way towards the gangway. Callum was already talking to the burly dock master, the squat man seeming dwarfed by Callum's imposing height, his square jaw and dirty brown hair offset in the fading light.

"How much for passage?" Callum asked, "We've three passengers and a couple of horses and dogs."
"Quite the party," the man grinned as he eyed them, "it'll be, let's see, that's fifty silvers for the lot o'ye."

"Fifty?" Callum said with a comical raise on an eyebrow, "A bit steep isn't it?"

"It's the price as is agreed by the Orlesians and the Chevaliers, I'm afraid serrah," the smaller man said with a conciliatory shrug, obviously having no love for either of the higher powers he had mentioned.

"That must be a hard sell," Callum smirked, "I'll bet that price goes up and down more than a whore's knickers on a Friday."

Anders rolled his eyes at the crass joke but the dock master broke out into a hideous cackle and slapped his leg with glee. Callum laughed along with him.

"That it does serrah, that it does," the dock master said, showing the gaps in his teeth as his grin widened, "there's not many as can make me laugh like that you know. Ah, what's say we shove it to 'em, eh? You give me forty and I'll say no more about it. 'Tis too much they charge anyway."

"If you say so," Callum smiled with a nod, "it's very much appreciated. In fact let's call it forty one and you keep what you like for yourself, eh?"

"Now you're my kind of man serrah," the dock master said, rubbing his hands chubby together to bring the warmth back into them, "much obliged, very much so."

The ferry rocked as they boarded, Anders keeping Hawke upright as Callum took a hold of the reigns and did his best to make sure the horses stayed calm. Luce seemed to have no problem with the boat but Sascha had to be coaxed onto it by Callum, half affectionate persuasion and half authoritative orders. Eventually the large dog crept onto the boat and lay down at Callum's feet, her ears down and her body shaking almost imperceptibly. In all truth Anders could hardly blame her. The water was an unsettling black, glittering shivers of light shifting across the surface as the sun slipped down below the horizon. It looked as if you fell in that you would fall forever without ever reaching the bottom.

Anders helped Hawke sit down on one of the benches and stood behind him, keeping his hands on the rogue's shoulders. He looked up to Callum as the dock master waddled around the deck lighting the lanterns to chase the shadows away.

"Good at that, aren't you?" Anders said wryly in a low voice as Callum smoothed his hand down Bryn's long nose, making the horse blink her eyes sleepily.

"What?" Callum asked as he looked down at Anders, smiling a little and looking away as he caught on, "oh, right, well it's a useful trick, isn't it?"

"What, being a charming sod?" Anders asked.

"I find it gets you far in life," Callum said cheekily, "and tends to save you money, if not get you things for free sometimes. It's served me well anyway."

Anders had found out, through talking to Callum as they walked together towards Val Chevin, that the story he had told Anders at the inn in Cumberland had been only half true. Yes he had been a Starkhaven Circle mage from the age of six but what he neglected to tell Anders had been that he was an apostate runaway for most of that time. He had managed to travel rather extensively during his forays from the Circle and had picked up many useful traits, such as charming people out of their money, valuables, common sense and, on more occasions, their clothes.
"I knew you were a mage as soon as I looked at you," Callum had admitted when Anders asked him how he could have been so careless as to use magic out in the open if when they met in Cumberland, "didn't you feel it too?"

"I...don't know what I felt," Anders had replied, quickly changing the subject as Callum surreptitiously raked his eyes over Anders' body, "anyway were you lying about the College meeting as well?"

"Not as such," Callum had said casually, "I did come over with a group of friends, the rest of which did go to the meeting, but it had ended a couple of days before I met you. I had some other stuff I wanted to deal with. Anyway politics isn't really my thing, if you get my drift. It's all nonsense and talking, lots and lots of talking, which never seems to lead anywhere."

Anders couldn't have agreed more. There was something about the other mage that, at times, reminded Anders very much of himself when he was younger. It gave him a warm feeling of nostalgia, one that Justice wasn't exactly overly pleased with. He softly rubbed his thumbs over the back of Hawke's neck and moved subtly closer to the man. The ferry ride was over quickly, depositing them at a far more lavish dock on the other side of the river.

"Welcome to Orlais," Callum said with a sly smile as held out his arm to let Anders and Hawke leave the ferry before him, stepping down onto the well paved dock lined with glowing lanterns in the gathering dark.

Even in the dark the streets of Val Chevin were far more splendid than those of Cumberland. It may have been a smaller city on the edge of the Orlesian empire but it seemed that no expense had been spared in outfitting it as if it were Val Royeux itself. The streets were smoothly cobbled in pale stone and the light was generous as it streamed not only from the lanterns but also from the shop windows and the open doors of taverns out of which laughter and song spilled in abundance. The streets were lines with greenery and well trimmed trees and herbs, perfuming the crisp air with the scent of lavender and sage. There were people walking the streets, dressed in a plethora of outfits, from fine furs to dirty rags, yet all seemed perfectly content as they chatted and walked and ran and even, on one occasion, danced past the three travellers. Anders couldn't help but delight in the heavy Orlesian accents that flitted past him, snatches of conversation that he did not understand but, in the exotic foreign language, all sounded incredibly important and profound.

"This friend of yours," Anders asked Callum as he kept Hawke close, the rogue pressed against his side while Anders slid his hand around the man's waist; to his gratification no one seemed to spare their embrace a second glance, "do they live somewhere close?"

"Oh, she doesn't live here," Callum said, "she's just visiting a friend, but I'm sure that she can help us out. She's nice like that."

"I hope you're right," Anders said anxiously, holding Hawke tighter as the other man stumbled; he turned his head and whispered tenderly into Hawke's ear, "it's not far now love, not far."

It was only another five minutes until they reached what looked like a residential district, tall, elegant houses lining a flat, paved street on a slight hill. Anders suggested stopping so that Hawke could once more ride instead of walk but Callum assured him that it wasn't much further.

"It's only at the top of this hill, I swear," Callum said.

The top of the hill thankfully wasn't very far away. However, by the time they reached the house Anders was basically holding Hawke's full weight by himself as the rogue dragged his feet and
drew laboured breaths. Even Callum, who had expressed his dislike for Hawke on many occasions, was also looking a little concerned. The abode they stood before was an elegant town house made from large, neat grey stones, with twisting steel railings fencing in a small garden and a short set of steps leading to a demure red door. Bright light poured from the downstairs windows and Anders could swear he saw movement from within.

"Just get us inside," Anders pleaded with the taller mage, "please, he's getting worse. He needs to rest!"

"Alright, just wait here," Callum said, his dependability a wonderful balm for Anders' anxiety.

"Don't worry Hawke," Anders said encouragingly, "we're here now."

"I feel sick," Hawke said weakly, letting his head drop down as he swallowed with effort, "Anders..."

"Just a minute love," Anders said fretfully, trying his best to feed Hawke a small amount of soothing magic while he watched Callum's progress.

The mage had reached the door, knocked and was waiting for a reply. Anders silently begged the people inside to hurry up. Thankfully his prayers were answered when he heard the heavy click of a key in a lock and then the door swung open, spilling light out onto their ragtag group. Sascha barked happily and wagged her tail at the person in the doorway. Anders, despite his worry, couldn't help but stare at him. He was distractingly handsome, with chiselled aristocratic features, chocolate brown hair that caught the light and eyes even bluer than Callum's. He seemed perfectly groomed and even the clothing he wore was exquisite. Anders got the fright of his life when the man opened his mouth and, instead of the fine Orlesian he had expected to emerge, spoke with the thickest Western Free Marches accent he thought he had ever heard in his life.

"Can I help you?" he asked politely, even as he eyed them all confidently.

"Actually I'm looking for the lady of the house..." Callum said, even as a woman's voice drifted from the hallway beyond.

"Who is it Sebastian?" the woman said, her lilting Orlesian accent unmistakable, appearing as this Sebastian, as he seemed to be called, stepped aside; she was a little shorter than he, her red hair cut into a long bob that danced just above her shoulders, her face a picture of refined beauty, "Oh my, it seems we have visitors."

"Do you know them?" Sebastian asked seriously.

"No but then I think I recognise you from your description," the woman smiled up at Callum, "Callum isn't it? But from what she said it didn't sound as if we should have expected you."

"Then she's here?" Callum said quickly, "Please, I need to talk to her, one of my companions is very ill..."

"Oh no, that won't do," the woman said, sounding genuinely regretful as she looked across their group, her eyes settling on Hawke; she left the man's side and stepped daintily down the stairs, heading towards Anders and Hawke, "come, bring him inside and we'll let Wynne have a look at him."

It took Anders, who was juggling so many things in his head as he tried to get the situation straight, a lot longer to react to the woman's words than he should have. When they did sink in, however, his eyes snapped up to the woman in shock while she did her best to support Hawke's other side
and steer him towards the steps.

"Did you say..?" he asked dazedly.

"Why Callum," said a rich, matronly voice, "I didn't expect to find you here. I see you've brought friends with you, such a...wait..."

At the sound of that very familiar voice from the doorway Anders looked round quickly, staring up at the woman whom he hadn't seen for nearly six years yet he considered more of a parent than those he had been born to.

"Is that..?" Wynne stared at him in what seemed to be joyous amazement, her face lighting up with her slow, familiar smile, "Anders, that is you, isn't it?"

That was the moment in which Anders entirely lost his sense of concentration, messed up the spell he was feeding to Hawke and caused a flood of nausea to re-enter Hawke's system in a rush. The rogue was vomiting onto the street in a noisy splatter of bile and half digested food in seconds, making Anders curse under his breath and the woman who was helping him make a surprisingly soothing sound as she smoothed Hawke's hair back from his sweaty forehead, considering he's just showered her shoes in sick.

"You really aren't well, are you my sweet?" she said sorrowfully, "Come on, let's get him inside." Anders, overcome as he was, could only obey.
Convalescence

Perhaps it was because of the mad heroics or his fearless nature, or the way he appeared to grin in the face of danger, sometimes seeming to welcome it more than dread it as any normal person would. Hawke had always been the stalwart hero. Even when Anders finally found himself inveigled into his life and bore witness to Hawke's vulnerabilities and his weaknesses, he still couldn't shake the image he kept of the rogue in his mind; of him doing something idiotically brave and gallant, like duelling the Arishok or facing off against blood mages and templars and darkspawn and dragons...

Now all Anders could see was the thick, pink scar that travelled across his throat. He saw it when he looked at Hawke because he found his eyes seeking it out even before his brain could tell them not to. Then, when he closed his eyes, his brain very unhelpfully served him with a mental image of it. Anders had been forcing himself to act as normal as possible over the past few days, travelling with Callum and keeping Hawke as well as he could, yet now, here, safe in this house, his conviction was failing him.

"I want to help," he said strongly, keeping a hold of Hawke's hand as he stood beside the bed on which they had placed him, "no, I won't leave."

Everything had happened very quickly, or so it had seemed. They had been bustled inside, into the warm, light filled house, and then everything seemed to burst into franticness. One minute he and the lady of the house were helping Hawke shuffle through the door, the next thing Hawke was hanging limply between them, a dead weight. Anders felt the pull like a sinking feeling. He had looked to Hawke in alarm to find him unconscious, head dangling loosely. The man whom he had heard called Sebastian stepped forwards when the lady began to struggle under Hawke's heavy weight and, much to Anders' relief, helped him carry Hawke to a room upstairs.

Now there's no need to worry, he had unsuccessfully tried to tell himself as they lowered Hawke awkwardly to the double bed, you're safe and you're among friends. The red haired woman told him that she would fetch some supplies and rushed downstairs, Sebastian following her demurely. Anders had watched them go distractedly and focused himself on Hawke; he is going to be fine, Anders told himself.

Which was the moment Wynne had promptly taken over, much to Anders' chagrin.

"And here I'd almost forgotten how terribly stubborn you are," Wynne shook her head in what seemed like affectionate disbelief, "you know exactly why you shouldn't be involved in this. I am more than capable of helping this man but, if you stay, you will simply get in my way."

"I am not an imbecile, I am perfectly capable of helping you with whatever you need!" Anders bit back, unrealistically trying to temper the anger that rose from the stress and frustration that was building in him; he took a long, slow breath and ran his thumb over the back of Hawke's hand, "please, Wynne, look...either you let me stay and help you or I do this myself."

"For which you are in no fit state," Wynne said disapprovingly; she turned to Callum, who had stayed leaning against the wall by the doorway once the others had left, "how long have you been travelling like this?"

"Just two days," Callum shrugged, holding up his hands pleadingly when Wynne frowned at him, "Anders has been looking after him, it's not as if we've neglected to treat him or anything!"
"Well no wonder you look so exhausted..." Wynne continued as she reached down to pull Hawke's heavy coat from his shoulders.

It was the fact that he hadn't even realised that he'd moved until he looked down and found his hand tight around Wynne's wrist that scared him the most. When he looked back up to the woman before him she was wide eyed, staring at him as if she'd seen a ghost. Or perhaps worse. Anders let her go as if her flesh burned him and searched the room for something else to focus on. Unfortunately Callum was looking just as stunned as Wynne. Anders cleared his throat and kneeled by the bed to remove Hawke's coat himself. The rogue was still unconscious but he moaned and his face wrinkled in pain when Anders moved him. It only made things worse. Anders felt like the world was staring at him, as if he were some sort of freak. I just want...I can't...please stop judging me! he thought disjointedly, curling his hands into fists as they began to shake slightly. He kept his eyes on Hawke's pale face and tried to distract himself by thinking what the best course of treatment would be.

"Anders," Wynne's voice was hushed and yet stern, "I almost didn't believe it, when I was told. What have you done to yourself child?"

He didn't know how to answer her. Perhaps he didn't even really know anymore.

"That's not important right now," Anders said authoritatively, yet he refused to meet Wynne's eye as he motioned to Hawke with his hand, "he needs help and he's going to get it, whether it's from me or from both of us or all three of us, that really isn't my concern. I just want him well and that's all that matters."

Even Anders himself was impressed by his control, his commanding air; that was until he stood up and was forced to clutch at his chest in pain. Callum started forwards, only stopping when Anders waved him away in irritation.

"I'm fine," he said strongly.

"What is the matter with you?" Wynne asked concernedly.

"Do you mean other than the templars, the Wardens and the terribly fucked up love life?" Anders snapped at her.

The older woman stared at him, unamused, her pale blue eyes narrowed as she folded her arms.

"...Yes," Wynne said dryly, "I do."

"He's still healing from a broken rib," Callum cut in, staring at Anders accusingly; Anders scowled back, "and I can't bloody believe you didn't tell me it was still painful. I would have done something about it!"

"I said I'm fine," Anders bit out, "we have more important things to deal with here!"

"Well you certainly do not, young man," Wynne said, her frown stern and implacable, "you've been travelling with a broken rib? Anders I thought you knew better! You need to rest and have someone look at it before it becomes impossible to heal. Ah!" Wynne held up her hand as Anders opened his mouth to argue, "no discussion, just do as I say for once in your life. I will look after this man and he will be fine, I swear to you."

Anders ground his teeth and let out a sound akin to a growl of frustration; strangely it made him think of the sound Hawke made when he became inarticulately angry. He looked down at the man in question, feeling the anxiety once more seeping in through the haze of anger and tiredness. He
reached out and brushed the thick locks of silken black hair away from Hawke's forehead. I can't leave you here, he thought, I can't. I have to look after you. You're here because of me. I won't lose you again Hawke, never again.

"I won't leave," Anders said tightly as he ran his fingers up into Hawke's hair and his thumb over the man's sweaty forehead, "I...I swear I won't do anything straining or, well, look I promise I'll just sit in the bloody corner and keep my mouth shut. Please Wynne, please understand. I'm not leaving this room until he's conscious."

When he looked back to the older mage he found a mix of emotions in her open eyes; worry, confusion and frustration. Anders simply held his ground. This is ridiculous, he thought, I'm so tired of fighting with everyone I meet.

"Can't we just agree on this," Anders sighed, "please?"

"...Alright," Wynne finally capitulated, "but my terms are that Callum does something about that rib before it becomes too damaged to set."

"I can do it myself..." Anders started as he walked carefully over to the large armchair beside the unlit fireplace.

"I can't leave," Callum said in the sort of tone that left no room for discussion, "you have little enough energy as it is without draining yourself more. Sit down for Maker's sake."

For once Anders did as he was asked. Not because he was capitulating, as he was sure Callum thought, but more because the man was right; he had no energy left, whether it was to heal himself properly or continue arguing. He let Callum undo the fastenings on his coat and shuffled out of the heavy garment, all the while keeping his eyes on Wynne as she set about examining Hawke with her eyes and her magic. A few moments later the red haired woman, who had helped him bring Hawke inside, entered the room with a carafe of water and what looked like a basket of herbs and tonics. Wynne thanked her, calling her by a name that Anders was sure he recognised; Leliana. He frowned, unsure why the name rang a faint bell in his memory. In a story somewhere? Maker I need some sleep, Anders thought, even as he resisted the idea for all it was worth. He continued to watch as the red haired woman stood next to Wynne and stared down at Hawke, her gaze attentive and yet seemingly kind.

"You've been putting too much strain on your chest," Anders listened absently to Callum as the soothing magic fell from the mage's hands, through his shirt and down into the damaged tissue beneath, "the bone seems to have set properly, it's just bruising in the muscle that's causing the pain. Well, I think anyway. You need to rest a little more."

"I don't want to sleep," Anders said, shaking his head and looking to Callum even as he felt the drowsiness in his movements.

"Don't start this again," Callum said with a rough sigh; Anders knew what he meant. Callum had spent the past couple of days berating him for exhausting himself by refusing to sleep until it was absolutely necessary, "you'll go to sleep or I'll make you, understand?"

And yet even as you preach you have no understanding of why I loathe it as much as I do, Anders thought, but then I suppose you wouldn't. It had taken him long enough to summon the courage to explain to Hawke exactly why he was wary of sleep. The nightmares were fickle things, difficult if not impossible to predict and yet reliable in that they usually manifested themselves when he was terribly stressed, tired or upset. Tonight seemed like a prime candidate for the pull of the taint to make itself known. Mix in the fact that he'd been having some rather disturbing dreams lately and,
well, sleep was the last thing on his mind. Callum continued to stare at him and Anders just stared straight back. Yet...I'm safe here, Anders thought, I'm safe. This place, these people...maybe it will be alright for once. Maybe.

"You have no idea how unthreatening you sound," Anders finally said, unable to help the smirk that escaped the overlying barrier of stress, fatigue and worry, "do you?"

"Oh you can talk," Callum tried to sound stern but the small smile he let slip ruined the effect, "this coming from the man who looks like he'd have trouble intimidating a kitten."

"Oi, watch yourself," Anders mumbled out as he closed his eyes, reveling in the comforting energy the other man was sending forth, "I'm quite sure that I don't need to try that hard. Justice is more than intimidating enough for the both of us."

"And from what little I've seen of him," Anders heard Callum reply, "I'd say that was a terrible understatement."

He awoke, not having remembered falling asleep. It was almost completely pitch black and the room was very cold, the air crisp and bitter against his cheeks and hands. It was only as he moved that he realised, in his slightly disoriented state, he was no longer sitting the armchair. He was lying down on what felt like a bed, wrapped in what felt like a woollen blanket. As his eyes finally grew acclimatised to the dark he managed to make out the vague outlines of the furniture illuminated only by the thin light seeping in through gaps in the drawn, heavy curtains. He pushed up onto his forearms slowly, holding the blanket to him as best he could to stop the heat from escaping.

"Hawke?" he said instinctively into the darkness, "Are you awake?"

As his senses returned to themselves he managed to locate the rogue, sleeping only a few feet from where Anders himself was lying. He pawed his way up the man's body and listened as he finally made out the soft, even sound of Hawke's shallow breathing. Finally Anders' hands found Hawke's face, brushing up over the bristly hair covering his jaw, feeling over nose and eyelids, back down to trail over ears and neck. Anders breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth as a weary sigh. He hadn't remembered walking to the bed, surmising only that someone had placed him there. Maybe Callum was feeling generous, Anders thought as he tried his best to distract himself from the strange feeling of waking in an unfamiliar room, alone and cold with no real idea of what was going on around you.

Hawke felt fine, that was his conclusion. Anders used a quick examination spell to check over his systems but, as far as he could tell, the man was sleeping soundly. Anders swallowed before coughing roughly, loud in the silence. He shifted closer to Hawke, pushing up against the rogue's side and wrapping an arm over his chest. It didn't make him feel any less worried but it did help, at least a little. The shimmering darkness played about before his eyes like a squirming, swarming mass of wriggling insects. Even when he closed them it was the same. He pulled himself even closer to Hawke and laid his face against the man's shoulder. Hawke's steady breathing was more noticeable at this close range, smooth and low and calming.

The next thing Anders knew he was blinking his eyes back open into the daylight, jerking awake and looking around wildly. He struggled up, the woollen blanket falling from his shoulders, and looked behind him to find Wynne by the window. Her silver hair shone brightly in the pale sunshine, offset by the blood red colour of her robes. She watched Anders surreptitiously out the corner of her eye while she tied back the curtains. Anders rubbed at his face and sat up properly. Even with his night's rest being mainly undisturbed he felt oddly fatigued. The lack of greeting from Wynne was another odd factor thrown into the mix. She wasn't exactly acknowledging his
presence as of yet and, after his rather interminable behaviour the night before, Anders wasn't in the mood to start up a conversation right away. Instead he looked down to his right and noticed that Hawke was still asleep. He frowned. It wasn't that it was surprising really, not with all he had been through and how ill he was, yet Hawke normally woke with the sound of obvious movement in the room around him. Perhaps Anders would have let it slip if he hadn't been so anxious about Hawke's condition but, with the rogue so ill, Anders was desperate to speak to him and ask him how he was feeling.

"Hawke?" Anders tried again, shaking the man by the shoulder, "Wake up. Come on Hawke, I know you're tired, I just..."

He would admit later that he may have overreacted a little. When Hawke didn't respond to being shaken awake Anders leapt to terrible conclusions. For Wynne, who ran to the bed and pulled Anders back as he began to shout and panic, he must have looked like a lunatic. Yet, in Anders mind, all he could see was Hawke dead. Hawke dead on the ground before him. Hawke's blood on his hands.

So he had lost control when Hawke did not respond to his attempts to wake him and, as such, went a little over the top. For Anders it was a justified momentary madness.

"Oh Maker no, Hawke," he was pleading as Wynne pulled him away from the inert rogue lying motionless under the duvet, while Anders clung to him, "wake up, please!"

"Calm down Anders," Wynne was saying over and over, "he's fine, there's nothing wrong with him!"

"Wake up you bastard!" Anders shouted, trying his best to struggle forwards, his legs tangling in the woollen blanket as he pulled against Wynne's strong grip.

"He won't wake up no matter how loud you shout," Wynne said authoritatively.

What? Anders thought wildly, turning in Wynne's hold, effectively pushing the other woman back a few steps away from the bed; a few seconds later he heard footsteps from beyond the door, hurrying across wooden floorboards. As he faced Wynne he heard the door rush open and the sound of huffed breaths and the noises of the household filtering into the once quiet room.

"What's going on?" Anders heard Callum even though he did not see him.

"He will not awaken because I have placed him in a healing trance," Wynne continued as if Callum had not interrupted them, speaking with terse reasonability.

"A...a healing trance?" Anders said incredulously, "What on earth were you thinking? I don't even know what's wrong with him and you're putting him under without asking me?"

"I beg your pardon but I think I know well enough not to put someone into this deep of a trance without first learning of their symptoms," Wynne replied, raising an eyebrow scathingly, "after you fell asleep from exhaustion, and don't try and deny that is the truth of the matter, Callum explained everything. He also told me all of your friend's symptoms and I decided that a deep heal would surely clear him of his illness."

Anders rounded on the unsuspecting Callum next, finding the man a little taken aback by his accusatory tone.
"And you let her do this?" Anders said angrily.

"Well...well, what is wrong with that?" Callum finally said, frowning in annoyance, "She knows what she's doing Anders, I mean bloody hell she's a better healer than either of us."

"Speak for your fucking self," Anders muttered as he shuffled off of the bed and walked around to kneel by Hawke's side.

"Language young man," Wynne said seriously before turning to Callum, "and who is 'she' exactly, the cat's mother?"

"Sorry," Callum said contritely while Anders checked Hawke's vitals closely and in more detail than he had done that morning.

"Listen to me Anders," Wynne said as Anders stopped checking Hawke and rubbed at his face tiredly, "I understand you've had a difficult journey from what I've been told but taking your anger out on others is not the way..."

"I'm the one responsible for him, I'm the one who will decide how he is treated," Anders interrupted icily, "do you understand me?"

Quiet returned to the room, yet it was agitated rather than calm. Anders didn't have the will to fix it, to make into something better, to not sully these moments with his own bitter anger. He couldn't bring himself to care.

She left me there, the truth finally broke through, she left me there. Anders looked to Wynne as the older woman walked, tight lipped and silent, around the bed and out of the room. Callum frowned at Anders accusingly but Anders simply retained his distant stare and waited until he too left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

He did not move from his position, kneeling by the bed with Hawke's hand in his as he checked his pulse once more. In truth he knew that Hawke was fine, that Wynne had probably made the right decision, but he had not been strong enough to stop the anger and resentment from leaking out. Justice wasn't helping in that department. She left you there, the spirit seemed to remind him, she is no longer your ally. It wasn't her fault Anders tried to argue back, but it fell flat in the face of truth, of what he knew was true in opposition to what he had always hoped was true. Anders tightened his grip on Hawke's limp hand, bringing it closer until he pressed his lips against the unresponsive flesh.

He closed his eyes. Flashes of darkness and stone walls sprang up behind them, that one, tiny window high above his head. He opened them hurriedly, trying to calm the sudden quickened pace of his heart. There were no longer any walls, holding him inside like a caged bird, yet he did not seem to be able to fully let go of the fear that still bound him to its memory.

It turned out that there was a reason he recognised the name of the lady of the house. Once he had made sure Hawke was as comfortable as he could be he pulled on his coat, did his best to wash his face in some of the water left from the night before and then left the room. The house was tall and fairly narrow, lending itself to steep staircases and slender corridors. He didn't even remember any of the layout from his quick but eventful journey the night before but, as far as he could make out, downstairs was probably the best bet. He had descended the stairs carefully, clinging to the railing, and made his way into what looked like the sitting room.

"Oh you are awake," the red haired woman smiled at him kindly as he entered.
The room was beautiful, even Anders couldn't help but notice. Rich cream walls decorated with fine paintings, tall bookcases of dark mahogany filled with texts, a long bay window that flooded the room with light, a lavish and yet tasteful fireplace that was ablaze with light and warmth. The lady herself was seated on one of the two large, ornate couches that were placed around the long coffee table in the centre of the room; she placed the book she had been reading down onto the table next to a dainty cup and saucer and a pot of tea. Anders blinked and wasn't entirely sure how to act as she took hold of his hand and led him to the other couch, basically instructing him where to put himself. Anders did as he was told and accepted the cup of tea that she poured for him.

"Thank you," he said stiltedly, "I...I mean for your help, and the tea of course."

The woman laughed brightly, somewhat soothing Anders' unease. He lifted the tea to his lips and took a small sip. It was light and slightly fruity, something he had never tasted before. He placed it back into the saucer and watched the woman, still puzzling over where he had heard her name.

"I'm so sorry that your friend isn't feeling well," the woman said; Anders couldn't help but love her thick Orlesian accent, "but I'm sure that Wynne will have him up and about in no time."

"Of course," Anders said, hiding the hardness that tried to seep into his tone beneath a smile; change the topic, Anders thought, think about something else, "but I have to ask...I don't know you from somewhere do I?"

"I do not know," the woman smiled beguilingly, "I do not think we have met before, but then oh! What a silly I am, we haven't even introduced ourselves properly yet. My name is Leliana."

"Yes, I heard Wynne..." Anders stopped himself, realising that this wasn't the way you introduced yourself to a stranger, "sorry, I'm Anders."

Leliana frowned slightly, watching him with the same expression Anders was sure he was wearing.

"Maybe I have..." Leliana said slowly, "I recognise your name."

"Yes and I yours," Anders said, "but I'm really not sure where from."

"Oh well," Leliana shrugged as she sipped her own steaming cup of tea, still smiling, "perhaps in a previous life."

Anders laughed lightly, already feeling far more at ease. He would remember where he had heard the name Leliana but, right at that moment, he was far more preoccupied with other thoughts. He and Leliana talked for what ended up as an hour. She was surprisingly chatty, despite seeming demure and reserved on the surface. She told him of what had happened after he fell asleep, of Wynne healing Hawke, and Anders listened attentively. It seemed that Leliana was quite the practical organiser. She had already found a storeroom for Callum's dogs to sleep in, the horses were out back in the small garden allocated to each house, their things were stored securely in the room she had allocated to Hawke and, as far as she was concerned, a friend of Wynne's was a friend of hers. Anders just smiled and thanked her when she said that they could stay as long as they needed to, neglecting to mention the fact that he and Wynne were not exactly on the best of terms.

"Oh Sebastian?" she said when Anders inquired as to her other guests, "He is a friend of sorts, I suppose."

Anders couldn't help but smother a smile at her strange, slightly oxymoronic classification.

"I know him from relations with the Chantry," Anders wouldn't lie and say that Leliana admitting
to relations to the Chantry didn't put him on edge, but he did not react; staying in this relative safety for as long as it took to get Hawke well was all he was concerned with, "he is a brother there, you see."

"Dresses very well though, doesn't he?" Anders said quickly, just to fill his side of the conversation, "for a Chantry brother."

"Oh, well," Leliana laughed, "yes I suppose he does. Hmm, I suppose it isn't a secret as such. The thing is...you have heard about the Starkhaven massacre, no doubt?"

The light that filtered in through the windows had taken on the heavy, golden glow of evening as they talked. That's what I get for sleeping in until midday, Anders thought ruefully. It made the room seem warmer somehow, cosier, more intimate. Somehow Leliana's words held more weight in this odd setting.

"I heard something about it at the time," Anders said, "the royals there were killed, weren't they? But that was a while back now."

"Yes, but, well," Leliana looked momentarily sad, "you see Sebastian, he was their son."

"Oh, I..." Anders shuffled in his seat, suddenly feeling oddly out of sorts; how had he ended up sitting this living room gossiping about seemingly trivial rumours, no matter how tragic? "that's terrible."

"He is still rather upset about it, as you can imagine," Leliana said, "he was exiled by his father and sent to the Chantry, so I will not lie and say he had any real love for the Maker at first, but he came round in the end. Now he is rather devout, I would say. He is such a good man. He still rallies support for his family's cause. I believe he wishes to catch those responsible."

Thankfully for Anders the sitting room door took that moment to open, revealing Callum on the other side. The taller man hesitated on disturbing what seemed to be, at first sight, a clandestine conversation. However Anders took the opportunity to break the heavy atmosphere before the other man could leave.

"Where did you run off to?" Anders said, for lack of anything better to say.

"I..." Callum hesitated, taken off guard, "I've just been checking on the dogs."

"Right, of course," Anders said, "actually I guess I should take a look at the horses as well. Would you please excuse me?"

"Of course," Leliana said, looking between the two men in slight confusion but smiling brightly nonetheless, "yes, I suppose we have been talking for rather a while. I have things I must attend to but, please, help yourselves to food. Shauna, she is my housekeeper, she will help you with anything you need."

"Thank you, again" Anders said as he left, adding politely, "I don't know what we would have done without your charity."

The garden was small and shadowed, the sunlight blocked by the tall houses that surrounded it. It seemed secluded, despite the windows that looked out onto it from the other dwellings around about. Fortunately, Anders thought, at least there was somewhere for the horses to stay. Unfortunately Bryn and Sigurðr were happily munching on what looked like a well trimmed bush when Anders entered. The mage rushed forwards, his eyes wide, and quickly pulled Bryn away, Sigurðr looking up at his seemingly odd antics.
"No Bryn!" Anders said, quickly fumbling open the saddlebags to root around for the hay sheaf he kept there, "Bloody hell, do not destroy the garden! Here, eat this you silly horse."

He was so suddenly preoccupied with stopping the horses embarrassing him any further that he didn't even hear Callum walk up behind him.

"Seems like you're a different person again," Anders started badly and spun around, only to find Callum standing right in front of him; Anders stepped back and found himself braced against Bryn's side.

"...What on earth is that supposed to mean?" Anders cleared his throat and looked for a way past the other man; however, Callum seemed to have him effectively trapped between the horse, the wall and the shrubbery. The atmosphere at once flipped from calm to charged, "let me past, I need to go back inside."

"It means your split personality is rather hard to handle sometimes," Callum said, if anything moving closer rather than further away, "One minute you're all smiles and light and then suddenly you're colder than a yeti's bollocks. Care to explain why you've been such an insufferable prat to Wynne since we got here? She said that you two were close at the Circle, that she was your tutor, and we're only trying to help..."

"And you know nothing about it," Anders couldn't help but bite out, the tension in the air doing nothing to calm his already frayed nerves, "so just leave it alone."

"No, I won't," Callum said, his brow dark, "I want you to tell me what's wrong."

"Yes well you seem to want a lot of things that I just can't give to you," Anders said, "don't you?"

Callum's frown only deepened, yet not with anger. There was a dangerously dissolute glint to his eye as he took hold of Anders by the shoulders and jerked him forwards, making the smaller man gasp and place his hands against Callum's chest.

"Don't," Anders choked out, his mind rushing to catch up with sudden change in circumstances, "we can't do this."

"So stop me," Callum said breathily, his fingers tightening into Anders' coat as he stared intensely into his eyes.

Anders almost didn't. It was intoxicating, this presence, this energy, the sudden switch to this electric apprehension in the air around him. All he wanted, all he needed, was to let Callum sweep him away back into that wonderful, carefree world of irresponsibility. Once this had been all that he'd known. He would never have hesitated in taking a moment to indulge himself in this lustful want. Even when he and Karl had been lovers it was never exclusive. Not many mages considered themselves as such, or in Anders' experience anyway. Before Hawke, before realising what love was for him, he wouldn't have stopped Callum at all.

"I said don't," Anders said strongly, just as Callum leaned in to kiss him; Anders pulled out of the other man's grasp and pushed him away, "and I meant it. You don't seem to believe me but I love him and that means more to me than anything!"

Instead of dissipating the tension in the air only grew more intense. Anders marched stiffly back inside but he could feel Callum's smouldering gaze against his back. He felt incredibly stupid that it affected him so badly but he panicked. He hurried along the corridor, blindly turning into the first room he came across and closing the door behind him. Unfortunately, when he turned around, it
was to find two pairs of eyes staring back at him. Wynne sat at what looked like a writing desk, a
piece of paper stretched out before her and Sebastian stood at her side, his intense blue eyes fixed
on Anders in surprise.

"Anders, are you alright?" Wynne asked after a short pause.

"I'll come back and speak to you later, Senior Enchanter," Sebastian said in his thick, refined
Marcher accent, heading towards the door Anders had just entered through.

"You don't have to..." Anders said, flustered, "I didn't mean to..."

"It's alright," Wynne said as Sebastian moved past Anders with a subtle, curious glance before
leaving.

Yet nothing was alright. He seemed to be bouncing from one uncomfortable situation to another.
Unable to escape long enough to settle his nerves. Wynne was the last person he wanted to speak to
right now yet she seemed more than happy to take advantage of Anders' blunder. He tried to make
an excuse to leave but couldn't think of anything appropriate. Instead he gave in, walking further
into the room to sit down on a chair by the window, off to the right of Wynne and her desk.

The older woman watched him as she cleared away the things she seemed to have been looking at;
a letter with a red wax seal was hurriedly rolled up and placed off to the side. Anders looked out of
the window and sighed. He supposed it would have come to this one day but, in all truth, he wished
it didn't have to be now.

"So I take it Irving is still alive," Anders said, knowing how tactless he was being, "if you still
haven't been promoted to First Enchanter."

"First Enchanter Irving is well," Wynne said tightly, "thank you for asking."

The silence was disturbed as the clopping of horse's hooves and the rattle of carriage wheels
trundled past the house. Anders watched the vehicle roll along the street, the twin horses walking
obediently forwards, heads down, eyes blinkered.

"It has been a long time since I saw you last," Wynne started politely.

"Are we really going to do this?" Anders asked disbelievingly, "Small talk? I'm sure we've known
each other too long to do this dance. Just ask me what you're really thinking about."

"I have been in contact with Cousland," Wynne said offhandedly; Anders wasn't surprised at all but
it still rankled. If there was one thing he couldn't stand it was people talking about him behind his
back, "you probably know what he has told me but, well, I wanted to hear it from you before I
would believe any of it."

"You didn't believe him?" Anders said with an incredulous, scathing laugh, "Why on earth not?"

"He told me..." Wynne hesitated, seeming lost as to how she should handle the situation, "he told
me a lot of things but...Anders is it true? That you have allowed yourself to become possessed, by a
Fade spirit."

"What of it?" Anders said back carelessly, looking at Wynne as if she had merely asked him what
he would like for dinner.

Anders knew the truth of it had an impact, yet that it was made worse because of his flippancy.
Wynne's face crumpled slightly before the older woman could pull herself under control and fix her
stately mask back into place. Anders watched her with a mixture of sympathy and loathing. Justice was close, he could feel it, and the thought made him anxious. It had been nearly six years since he had last seen the woman he had almost considered a mother, or something close to it. Another thing the templars had tainted, another thing they had ruined.

"And here I thought I had taught you well," Wynne said with a smile, her voice a little choked as she looked down at the desk before her.

"You taught me well enough," Anders said folding his arms and trying his best to keep himself in check; it wasn't easy, "but sometimes there are things you just can't prepare for. Sometimes there are decisions you need to make on your own."

"But how could you agree to this?" Wynne finally burst forth, turning in her chair to look Anders straight in the eye, "To become an abomination Anders? To abandon the Wardens..?"

Then suddenly it wasn't only difficult to control, it was impossible. Wynne's tone was what set him off, even over her words; accusatory and disappointed. She's disappointed with me, Anders thought caustically, with me?

"How could I?" Anders interrupted, his voice dangerous and low, "You of all people want to know how I managed to make such a bad decision? Have you never made a mistake Wynne, never done something that you would regret for the rest of your life?"

"I...I don't understand what you mean," Wynne said, both affronted and seemingly puzzled.

"Oh, well then," Anders said with a snort, "I suppose I never meant that much to you anyway, is that about right?"

"You make no sense," Wynne said dryly, "but then perhaps that is all I can expect of one who willingly becomes an abomination."

The words hurt, even if he tried to tell himself that they didn't. Somewhere, hidden beneath the pain and the betrayal, Anders still cared for her a great deal. Everything you love is always torn away, Anders' conscience supplied unhelpfully, everything.

"I see, then maybe you don't think it worth remembering," Anders said, feeling the anger swell inside his chest until it seemed as if he were about to explode, "how you left me there, that long, slow, torturous year, left me in that tiny cell to rot, alone, scared, friendless, pushed and pushed until I just couldn't take it anymore? How you and everyone else, you all left me there!"

Wynne blanched and looked away, her brows furrowed. Anders stood up and began pacing back and forth, willing himself to leave. Yet Justice would not let him, Justice wanted his say, wanted to hurt her as she had hurt him. They are no longer your friends, your family. They allow the templars their unjust cruelty, they allowed you to be punished, punished until you almost fell prey to demons as an easy escape from the torment they subjected you to.

"There was nothing any of us could have done," Wynne said after a tense moment of silence, "you continued to disobey the templars, you continued flaunt your power over them by escaping, what you thought was going to happen I don't know."

"What I thought was going to happen?" Anders parroted incredulously, "What difference does that make? They tried to drive me insane to keep me in check and, if you hadn't noticed, it nearly worked!"

"There was nothing we could do," Wynne said again, holding her hands tightly together, "don't you
think we tried? Anders you must understand that there are consequences in this world."

"I think I can safely say that I understand that better than anyone!" Anders shouted back, physically reigning himself under control as he felt Justice boiling beneath his skin, desperate to break free, "I never understood your subservience to the people who hurt you the most, to the people who were the most unjust. For Maker's sake Wynne they took your son from you!"

It was unfair, it was mean spirited and it was cruel but Anders wasn't sure exactly why he should care anymore. She needs to understand, they all need to understand. Justice forced the thought violently into his mind. No more middle ground, no more compromise. He was aware he was shouting, he was aware he was losing control of himself but, on some level, it no longer concerned him. Wynne did not answer. She brought her clasped hands to her mouth and leaned her elbows against the desk. Anders couldn't stop the sound of disgust that he let slip.

"Maybe you don't care," Anders said quietly, shaking his head, "maybe you do. It doesn't matter anymore. A reckoning is upon this land, you have seen it; Ferelden is no longer bound by the petty rules of the templars, resistance is growing in all of Thedas. Soon Wynne, soon the day will come. Then there will be justice, justice for the years of pain and the hatred that they have caused."

"And you will be the one to give it to them?" Wynne looked up sternly, her words lashing against his building anger.

"As if one man could do such a momentous task alone," Anders said dismissively, "even with Justice's help I am not enough. No, I will not deliver this punishment, that is not my role. I am not the sword, I am the light. I will make them see. Once the mages of this land realise the insubstantial nature of their bonds they will break themselves free...and then there will be nothing left to stop us."

Then there it was, that dreadful look, that horrified realisation dawning in another's eyes when they realised it was no longer Anders they were talking to. He stopped, forcing the heavy glow from his eyes, and shook his head, watching as the flared markings on his skin dissipated and vanished. We are not one, we are not separate. We are an accumulation of thoughts, a fusion of life and life beyond. A marriage of the past, the present and all that is to come. Anders felt the pain inside himself as a living thing, struggling to break free of the strong barrier of Vengeance coiling and twisting and strangling his being into nothingness.

He did not wait for a reply, he did not wait for the appalled, whispered words of pity or fear. He forced himself to leave before Wynne could say another word, heading up the stairs and rushing into the room where Hawke was resting. Anders closed the door and walked stiffly to the bed, removing his boots before climbing up to lay beside Hawke.

Everything felt detached, cold, unfeeling. The cloth against his skin, the air he breathed in and out. Anders watched Hawke, focusing on the sleeping man's steady breathing to try and calm himself down.

The pent up fury still flowing through his veins did not disperse. He curled as close to Hawke as he could and tried desperately to feel whole again.

"Please wake up," he said sadly, "please Hawke, I need you. You're all I have, all that keeps me as me. I don't want to become what I would if you were not here. I don't want to become a monster."

The kiss he placed against Hawke's face was soft but restrained, holding back all of the real want and need that the mage was truly feeling. He buried his face against Hawke's neck, breathing in the heady scent of his skin and hair, soured by the unwashed odour from his clothes.
He ignored his stomach as it took the inopportune moment to rumble loudly. Maker I'm starving, he though miserably. He knew it was a stupid thing to do but tried his best to suppress his hunger and stayed on the bed next to Hawke. It wasn't that he didn't want to eat but more that he didn't want to run into anyone downstairs. And I have now just realised how pathetic I am being, Anders thought ruefully, you're acting like a scared child. But you are scared, a part of him said, you are scared of your own thoughts and actions, scared that one day they will be your undoing. Anders frowned sadly and closed his eyes, staying still as a statue while the light faded.

It was pitch black once more when he awoke. Of course he knew that didn't mean it had to be terribly late, it was the middle of winter after all, the sun set at four o'clock. Anders rolled over and felt about on the bedside table until he found the candle he had seen there earlier. He summoned a small flame and lit the wick, creating a small pool of light on the bed.

Hawke was still asleep. Anders reached out with his free hand and once more ran his fingers through Hawke's black hair. He thought he saw the man's eyebrow twitch in response to his touch but, when he checked for any further movement, he saw nothing. Anders sighed softly and placed the candle back onto the table. Considering how sick he was it might take days to heal. He scrubbed at his face and glanced at the clock he had seen sitting on the mantelpiece.

"Fuck," he said resignedly as he spied the time; he had been optimistic, it seemed, in hoping that it was still early. The time read eleven thirty five, "great, that's just wonderful."

The rest had done him good, calmed his frayed nerves, allowed both himself and Justice time to settle down. The only problem being that he was now wide awake and it was almost the middle of the night. You know you'll never get back to sleep, he told himself, you've thrown yourself completely out of synchronicity with the day. I should get up, move about, at least it will be something to do. He shimmied to the bedside and stood up, shivering in the freezing air. He walked carefully over to the table by the window and felt around until he found Hawke's heavy fur coat draped over the chair. He pulled it on, grateful for the instant warmth that began to seep into his chilled skin. After giving Hawke one last kiss on his cheek and pulling the covers tighter around the sleeping man, he picked up the candle and set out into the corridor.

The house was deathly quiet. With every step he took the floorboards seemed to creak. He found the stairs and descended, keeping to the narrow strip of rug that trailed down the centre. The candle threw bizarre shadows through the banister onto the opposite wall, flickering like shades. Everything was exaggerated and eerie, feeling like a dream. Anders pulled his furs closer and continued to creep down the stairs. As he buried his face in the thick fur the unmistakable smell of Hawke rose from the soft hairs. Anders breathed in deeply, smelling the distinct musk underlying the animal smell.

He continued to look around, narrowing down the rooms that could be the kitchen by crossing off, in his head, the rooms he had already visited. He ended up in a cupboard, the storeroom where the dogs were sleeping soundly and a bathroom, before finding his way into the kitchen. Amazingly it was even colder in this room than any of the others. He placed his candle on the large oak table at the centre and rubbed his hands together to bring the warmth back into his fingers. He walked the full length of the very clean kitchen, inspecting the cupboards and opening them to peer inside. Eventually, after scaling the long kitchen, he found the way into the scullery. It was a treasure trove; a cooked chicken and a large ham sat on the third shelf up, underneath some thin cheesecloth. Anders' eyes lit up. He returned to the kitchen to find himself a plate before pulling the leg off of the large chicken and cutting himself a big chunk of ham with the carving knife that sat on the countertop. He managed to forage a few slices of bread from inside a large porcelain jar, standing like a tower inside, before making his way back through along the corridor towards the
sitting room. It was only as he opened the door, candle in one hand and plate in the other, expecting to find further darkness and cold, that he was surprised once more.

Callum looked up, a little startled, from his place lounging on the couch. The room was filled with the flickering of firelight, sending lambent orange and gold dancing around the room. It was warm and welcoming and yet strangely intimate. Anders knew instantly that he shouldn't be here.

"I was wondering when you would wake up," Callum said with a small smile that made Anders swallow, "Can't sleep? Me neither. Close the door, will you? You're letting all the heat out."

Anders did as he was told before he thought about why it would be a bad idea. At least it's warm, Anders thought morosely. He shuffled into the room and took a seat on the couch opposite Callum. He placed his plate onto the coffee table and began picking at the food. Yet, once the first sliver of chicken was placed in his mouth, he found he was suddenly no longer hungry; being famished for so long, he seemed to have gone beyond it. Mix that with the uncomfortable, anxious feeling in his stomach and he completely lost his appetite.

"You'd better eat something," Callum said as Anders pushed the full plate away, "you haven't eaten since yesterday."

"I will," Anders lied, "I'm just not that hungry right now."

"Right," Callum said, half convinced and half unsure; there was an awkward silence, filled with the crackling of hot twigs snapping in the fire, "you really aren't going to tell me what's wrong, are you?"

The words simply called up everything he had run from earlier; Callum's hands on his shoulders, fingers tight, curling like talons, Wynne's sad eyes, her pain, her disappointment, the heat in Callum's eyes, so close, those lips, that energy, so close. The world seems to be full of denial, Anders thought, denial of things I want, of things I can't have. And if it isn't what I can't have it's what I cannot give. He sat back against the couch and smiled deprecatingly.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring into the fire, "about earlier. I didn't mean to snap at you. It wasn't you I was angry at."

"Then who?" Callum asked, leaning over the table to snag a piece of bread; Anders tried to push the entire plate over to Callum but the other mage simply frowned and pushed it back, giving Anders a significant look, "you eat it. Don't be an idiot about it now."

Anders forced himself to pick up the piece of ham and began eating it half-heartedly. It was good, dry and salty, but he felt he couldn't appreciate it. Callum's question was perhaps more loaded than the other man realised. There were so many things that he should be able to let go of but found himself hanging on to, like stones around his neck dragging him beneath the rising water. He let the silence stretch out because he wasn't sure if he truly wanted to answer. When he heard Callum stand up he looked to the other man, following his movements.

"Do you play?" Callum asked, making Anders look at him questioningly, "Chess I mean."

The tall man picked up the heavy chess board and brought it to the table before Anders even replied. He placed it in between them, the elongated shadows of the pieces flitting over the table like spidery fingers.

"Do you?" Callum asked again; Maker he is stubborn isn't he? Anders thought.

"A little," Anders said before correcting himself, "I mean yes, I do, we played a lot, in the tower I
mean. What it really comes down to is if there is anything that takes a long time to learn and to perform then I've probably done it at some point."

"Ha, yes, I know what you mean," Callum said with a wry smirk; Anders took another bite of ham and chewed slowly, trying to enjoy the flavour, "so, which would you like, black or white?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not really in the mood," Anders declined, wishing he was tired enough to sleep.

"Don't start with this," Callum said with affectionate frustration; it still amazed Anders at how quickly he and Callum had found this repartee. Sometimes it felt like he had known the other man for years instead of days, "it's either this or I keep asking you questions. So, which will it be?"

"I'll take white," Anders replied.

"Thought so," Callum said.

Chess was a mixed bag for Anders, both an enjoyable stimulation of the mind and a trigger for bad memories. He transferred the ham to his left hand while he reached forwards and made his first move.

\textit{e4}

The pawn stood forwards of the front line like a defiant warrior. Anders always thought that chess was an apt representation of battle as well as an apt metaphor for life. The generals sent the troops out to slaughter while they stayed safely at the rear, relaying their orders to those who were to die. As far as everyday life went, he found that the same principle applied. The lower classes struggled and scraped along, working to provide for those above them who sat on the wealth of oppression and glutted themselves on the ignorance and frivolity that their lives demanded. Dulce bellum inexpertis, as the Tevinter would say, war is sweet to those who have never fought.

"So," Callum said, making Anders sigh, "why do you always wear that glove?"

"I thought you said it was either play chess \textit{or} ask questions," Anders replied as Callum moved his own pawn.

\textit{c5}

"Yes, well I changed my mind," Callum shrugged, biting into the bread hungrily and sitting back to watch Anders' return play.

The man in question studied the board intently. He's either trying to put me off or he really wants to know; despite his sneaking suspicion, Anders gave Callum the benefit of the doubt and voted for the latter. Still, he was in no mood to talk, especially about anything that would make Justice feel the need to make himself known. Talking about the templars was the last thing on his mind.

"It's a fashion statement," Anders said, trying to joke it off as he brought his knight out into the game.

\textit{Nf3}

"Bollocks it is," Callum said, "you don't need to lie to me."

"...I suppose not," Anders' fake smile fell away; he placed his ham back onto the plate and began removing his glove, pulling at the fingers one at a time until he could remove it easily, "I didn't think that...well, I mean I wouldn't care one way or another if it was out in the open but I don't
think it would be wise to advertise myself to the templars anymore than I usually do."

Callum had picked up his own knight to mirror Anders' move but stopped halfway on spying the red scar on the back of Anders' hand, now free of the glove. He placed the black, horse shaped piece down onto the board sharply, his fingers tight around it. When Anders looked up he found Callum's face set, hard.

\[ \text{Nc6} \]

"I hope they got what was coming to them," Callum said harshly, "whoever did that to you."

"And here I thought you didn't approve of violence," Anders said, flexing his fingers and rubbing them with his other hand; sometimes, in the cold, they became stiff and sore.

"I don't," Callum said, "but everything has its consequences."

Anders nodded, even as Wynne's voice seemed to echo Callum's. Consequences, everything was always about the things that happened because of the things you decided to do. It was true but, at the same time, consequences only begat consequences. Alrik scars him for life, Anders kills him, Meredith hears of another templar death and clamps down harder on the mages, the resistance fights back harder, the templars respond in kind and on and on and on it goes. It was true that sacrifices had to be made and yet Anders hated to do it. He picked up the pawn and placed it next to its brother.

\[ \text{d4. Callum instantly captured it. cxd4} \]

First blood, Anders thought, and how ironic that it is I who takes it. The taller man placed the pawn to the side of the board like a ghostly spectator. You told Wynne that you would not be the one to bring freedom to the mage's of Thedas through your own hand, Anders thought, but what you plan makes you just as culpable for every man, woman and child who will die. The templars deserve it, Justice fought back, the Chantry deserves it. There was always retribution, Anders thought, always.

\[ \text{Nxd4} \]

The pawn was avenged. Anders placed Callum's black pawn on his side of the board. He looked up to see the other man still staring at his hand. It wasn't a pleasant topic but at least it was a distraction.

"Yes, it hurt, if that's what you're wondering," Anders said tonelessly.

"Actually I wasn't," Callum shrugged, "I'd always imagined it would be impossible for it not to hurt. I was actually thinking that they must have been a sadistic fuck, whoever they were. Did they...torture you?"

It would be a lie to say no, Anders thought, but in the full scale of things what did the templars do that hadn't been to torture him, whether it be physically or mentally. He felt jaded to think it but Alrik's torture had not seemed anything special to him. He watched as Callum moved his knight forwards and tried to think of a quick and easy way to explain. Nothing came to mind.

\[ \text{Nf6} \]

"He didn't aim for my head and miss, if that's what you're getting at," he replied sarcastically, making a snap decision to reflect Callum's play and move his knight out to cover the centre of the
"No need to be flippant," Callum said as he brought out his pawn.

"What is this," Anders asked, ignoring Callum's rebuttal, "speed chess?"

"Sorry, am I playing too fast for you?" Callum smirked.

"Fuck off," Anders said back as he moved his bishop out to the front line.

It was a cheap way to avoid the issue but Anders knew that Callum understood what he had done; humour as a diversion. He could also see that Callum had more to ask and yet the man fell silent as they continued to play. Anders tried to ignore the feeling of tension in the air. He finished his ham and watched as the start of the game progressed fully into the middle. This was the part that he loved the most, the cat and mouse chase, the attack and the retreat. Bd7, Callum brought out his bishop, Bb3, Anders retreated. e6, Callum advanced his front line, O-O, Anders castled and prepared for war.

By the time they reached the endgame Anders couldn't help but be impressed with Callum's skills. Anders' king was still stuck, hiding in the bottom right of the board, one pawn ahead, the rook beside. Callum's queen hung before him like a waiting vulture while his own queen valiantly defended the breach in his barricade wall. Callum's king was open at either side but heavily defended, rook to the left on the back line, bishops lying in wait to break the line of check, two pawns before their king and a knight ready for battle. The only way in is to be cunning, Anders thought.

Lara Heisman, the only Circle apprentice more cynical than he had been. She had taught him how to play but, more than that, she had taught him some very hard lessons in life. She had always told him that chess was a ruthless game, just as real life was. Perhaps that was the more apt, and less pretentious than his own, metaphor for life. There were rules but that didn't stop people from using them to their advantage in order to win, or simply to sate their own desires. It was as he thought this that he realised his victory was staring him in the face.

"Check mate," Anders said as he sent his queen striding up the board to capture Callum's pawn, settling the queen directly in front of the quivering king, backed up by the rook behind and with no way for Callum to break the line or execute a capture, Anders knew he had won.

He looked up to find Callum doing the last thing a man who had just lost would be expected to do; grinning widely, his eyes intent on Anders. The smaller mage frowned and began moving the pieces back into their original places one by one, starting with the whites. It was only as Callum spoke that Anders was once more forced more stop his movements.

"You have no idea how much I want to throw you down onto that couch and fuck you right now," Callum said leaning back against the couch, his eyes half lidded as he trailed his right hand up the inside of his thigh suggestively.

Anders looked up in surprise. His words were akin to a kiss, he felt them as if against his own body. The dangerous feeling of attraction was back, thudding through his veins like adrenaline. He
cleared his throat and shook his head, unsure which he hated more, Callum's probing questions or his come-on's.

"That's an interesting reaction to losing at chess," Anders said, keeping his tone as neutral as he could.

"I've always found intelligence attractive," Callum shrugged.

Anders took a deep breath and continued to sort the pieces slowly, wishing the sitting room wasn't painted in such a romantic light; the chess and the company didn't help. Bloody hell, Anders thought worriedly, as if only just realising the state of his predicament. He stood up without warning and made to leave.

"Wait," he heard Callum say in a startled tone, rushing up from the couch to follow him.

"Just let me go," Anders said as he reached the door; Callum placed his hand against the door just as Anders took hold of the handle, forcing the smaller mage to turn and face him, "let me go. You can't have me."

"What are you talking about 'have you'?" Callum scoffed, "You're not a sword or a piece of furniture, I don't want to own you Anders. It's fairly simple. I like you and you seem to like me, unless I'm very much mistaken. It's just sex, that's all."

That's all. He made it sound so easy, so plausible, so reasonable. He hated the feeling as much as he wanted it. He would never admit it to the man but Callum, to put it in truthful yet crass terms, made him feel like lying back and opening his legs and to hell with the consequences. Anders found him immeasurably attractive, far more so than Hawke. Yet, despite that guilty admission, he knew that the feeling was far different to that which he felt for his lover. It wasn't just lust he felt for Hawke, it was love; something he had never fully experienced before, a deep connection to another human that bound him to them far more than any throw away carnal pleasure ever could.

Which was perhaps why, Anders thought, he fought against it just as hard as he strove to keep it. He craved Hawke's love almost like a drug and yet, on some level, resented the addiction. He wanted to be free of everything, free of all ties and responsibilities and duties. Perhaps that was why what Callum offered him seemed so attractive, it was a freedom from everything he feared the most. Yet still, it was not enough.

"That used to be all," Anders replied, "it did. I won't lie and say I don't want you, what's the point? It's just...I can't. I won't. You know why, so stop it, just stop. It's no good, for either of us."

"Then kiss me again," Callum said stubbornly, leaning in closer.

"And where would it stop?" Anders said back desperately, "It would never be enough. No, you have to understand, we have to stop this."

Anders reached up and, tentatively, ran his hand gently over Callum's cheek, down across his beard and round to his neck where his pulse beat wildly. The taller man closed his eyes. Anders, to his concern, found it incredibly difficult to remove his hand from that soft, warm skin. When Callum opened his eyes they were dark, pupils dilated, his lips slightly parted. Anders felt like everything was shrinking down to the tiny space that enclosed them both, tighter and tighter until he found it difficult to breathe.

"I can feel your heart beating," Callum said, so softly that Anders almost didn't hear him.

"Don't," Anders breathed out faintly, "please."
The taller man leaned down, his intent clear and his eyes focused and sharp. Anders pushed backwards against the door, one hand still around Callum’s neck, the other holding the door handle in a death grip. He felt the wood against his back and closed his eyes.
Hot breath against his neck, a teasing of lips against his ear, a slow, sensual sliding of fingers up inside his shirt; his own hand falling limply away from the door handle. That wasn't how it started, no, but it was how it progressed. If Anders was being truthful with himself, and right now seemed like a good time to start, this had started the moment he saw Callum in Cumberland. A meeting of something more than just like minds, more than just physical attraction, it was something...more. Anders couldn't define it and he couldn't deny it. Which was perhaps the worst part of the problem.

Anders let out a choked sigh as Callum pushed him tighter against the door. His arm tightened its hold around Callum's neck and he squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Everything was becoming hazy and constricting, light headed and dark. Yet one thing, one question, rolled around and around in his mind.

What are you doing? What on earth do you think you're doing?

"Are you sure?" Callum asked him huskily.

It seemed odd to Anders somehow, as if he didn't associate being asked with having sex. Who asks? Anders thought confusedly. Hawke certainly did not. Hawke didn't ask permission for anything, he knew what he wanted and he took it, it was part of what Anders loved so much about him...and had learned to hate on occasion.

"...Yes," Anders felt his mouth move but wasn't sure how he came up with an answer; in truth he was doing what he knew Hawke always did. He was acting before thinking. He wanted this, he wanted it so badly, but there was a heavy, dark, thunderous cloud of doubt and fear and anger looming right above his head, waiting to strike him down should he go too far.

It was odd to feel everything so strongly through his left hand, usually covered by the thin leather glove. Callum's worn shirt felt smooth but there was a strange sense of power there, tingling against his fingertips. Anders let out a panted breath as Callum finally lunged down and clamped his lips against his throat, sucking at the tender flesh.

Maker, stop this, stop this, you can't..! But I want him, I want him and he wants me and he...he...

His left hand seemed to continue without his consent, dragging across Callum's abdomen, feeling the hard, toned muscle beneath. Callum leaned forwards, cramping him further against the door. His breath jumped in his throat and he groaned. He let this head fall back, exposing the long, smooth line of his throat. This isn't right, this shouldn't be, his conscience cut in once again. You're such a filthy fucking liar Anders, such a fickle deceiver. How can you do this to him? Hawke loves you. And he treats me like a possession, Anders fought back. He came on this journey with you, did he not? Ander had no answer, simply kept his eyes firmly shut and continued to let Callum trail hot, wet kisses up across his throat and towards his jaw.

The buttons on Callum's trousers were undone with obscene ease, the thick material flopping open and allowing room for the bulging erection beneath to lift up, trapped inside Callum's loose underwear. The other mage had released his throat, bringing his forehead down against Anders' shoulder and letting loose a long, low groan as Anders hesitated. Anders' eyes sprang open.

How could you tell if this was more than just attraction. Could you tell the difference between Hawke's love and this man's affections?
He holds me too close, he suffocates me, he treats me as if I am his and nothing more.

He loves you.

Is love that simply definable? Anders thought wildly as he drew deeply from Callum's scent, all around him. Is love a tangible existence or merely the inability to let go? To be who we really are? To conform to each other only to later resent each other for it? The thought left him a little cold. The world began to blur. He heaved in a constricted breath and tried to find something to focus on. The crystal lamp he could see over Callum's broad shoulder, twinkling in the firelight, served him well enough. The light refracted as it hit the crystal, sending myriads of tiny rainbows dancing through the lamp and across the wall.

This isn't what you want.

Yes it is, yes it is. It's all I ever wanted, all I ever needed from anyone. Why shouldn't I hold on to this ideal of what love should be? The dreams I used to have while I stared from the windows in Kinloch Hold and let myself be lost in the fantasy of having what everyone else was allowed to have.

Anders felt himself tearing in all directions, not just in two. He was scared, scared of how much he wanted this, scared of Hawke's violence and his disappointment if he were ever to find out, scared of how much Justice seemed to condemn him for his actions while Vengeance seemed to spur him on, gloriously revelling in both Anders' torment and his pleasure. Everything seemed to go blank, fade away; he felt distanced, alone inside of his own head.

I should...you shouldn't. This is...it can't be. I want...I want never gets.

The world seemed to tilt back and forth, his mind feeling the rip as the force of his own personality and the other which resided within him fought despetrly. Everything began to feel distinctly fragile and unwilling, whilst also seeming so very, very easy.

He placed his palm against the small visible patch of Callum's abdomen, his fingers aimed downwards into the wiry hairs jutting from above his underwear, and pushed down slowly, his hand sliding inside, down, down, until his hand was wrapped around Callum's long, thick, rigid cock. He felt the tears falling from his eyes but, in truth, no longer knew what they were for. The intense feeling of distortion and dissonance had faded into a numb cold, making it impossible to focus.

"Oh fuck," Callum breathed out in elation, lifting his head up to rub his cheek against Anders' own, "that feels..."

Then all of a sudden the taller man froze. Anders didn't know what to do. He stayed as still as he could, even as Callum leaned back, blinking the hazy lust from his eyes, and brought his right hand up to touch his face. He frowned, pulling his hand away and looking at his fingers as he rubbed the tips together. Then he looked back to Anders and his face fell. Perhaps, Anders thought later, that was what had broken through his haze of confusion and apathy; the completely distraught look on Callum's face as he reached forwards and, tentatively, rubbed his thumb through the steadily flowing tears on Anders' cheek.

"Anders," he whispered out, reaching down hurriedly to pull the dazed mage's hand out of his underwear, "Maker what have I done? Anders, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."
"What are you doing?" Anders asked, his voice slow and a little slurred, unable to follow what was happening, "I thought..."

"Look at me, hey, focus on me," Callum leaned down to Anders’ height and stared into his eyes, suddenly looking scarily serious; his eyes darkened as Anders frowned and slid a little down the door, his legs weakening beneath him. Callum caught him beneath the armpits and held him up, "okay, it's alright, come on. Here, hold onto my arm, come and sit down. That's it, one step at a time, come on."

He was unsure why it was so difficult to make his feet obey him. They dragged across the floor as he walked, holding onto Callum for all he was worth as the other man guided him to the couch and sat him slowly down. The heat from the fire was disorienting and Anders felt himself swaying slightly, his mind awash with sensation. He blinked blearily and looked to Callum as the other man knelt in front of him before reaching up to cup his face and stare into his eyes. Callum nodded his head and released Anders' face. Then he sat back, his expression mortified, and shook his head.

Anders watched disconnectedly as Callum quickly replaced it with a look of determination and pushed himself up, taking a seat to Anders' left and pulling the pliable mage against his side. The long arm around his shoulders held him tight against Callum while the other man placed his left hand onto Anders' shoulder and let out a simple but entirely effective rejuvenation spell. Anders pushed his face against the side of Callum's chest and closed his eyes.

"It's alright, you know," Callum said softly, lifting his right hand to stroke Anders' hair gently, smoothing the strands again and again, "you just need to calm down."

"I do feel calm," Anders said dazedly.

"That's because you're in shock," Callum said worriedly, and with a hint of remorse, "just relax, you'll be fine."

They sat like that for what felt like hours and yet, when Anders finally began to come round, turned out to only be ten minutes or so. Callum continued to feed him the low, steady flow of energy. The clock on the mantelpiece read twelve thirty two. Anders breathed slowly through his mouth. He tried to sniff but found his nose blocked. He closed his eyes and slowly allowed the buzzing, foggy feeling to dissipate, even as the reality that sunk back in was not something he wanted to face. The steadily creeping shame that was crawling up through his thoughts as the sensation poured back in, was somewhat nauseating. Never, he thought, I've never lost control so badly, not while I was still aware. By the Maker, he thought as he swallowed, what's happening to me?

"How do you feel?" Callum asked softly, his fingers still teasing through Anders' hair.

"I feel..." Anders hesitated, wishing he were anywhere but here, "...like a fucking moron."

"Don't say that," Callum said, even as he sounded uneasy; the taller man sat back a little and forced Anders to look up at him. Anders hated the blind, conciliatory acceptance he found in Callum's eyes. I don't deserve it, he thought, I'm just a capricious bastard who can't even take what he wants when it's offered to him on a silver platter. Anders forced himself to stop thinking about that as Callum continued to talk, "but still, I thought you were...I mean, by the Maker Anders what were you thinking?"

"I don't know what you mean," Anders said, tensing defensively.

"Why did you say it?" Callum continued, his tone a mixture of perplexed and angry, "I asked you if
you were sure and you said yes but really you were thinking...for fuck's sake what were you going
to do? Let me take you even though you didn't want it? Because, the last time I checked, they call
that rape and, sorry, but I'm not really into that."

Anders pulled away from Callum roughly. He tried to stand but found his legs weak and
Callum was glaring at him but his frown was one of sympathy and compassion. That only made it
worse. Anders tried desperately to get his thoughts in order but that was difficult when you had
three or four different opinions of every decision you were making, all vying for attention, all at
once.

"How can you sell yourself so low?" Callum said, reaching out uncertainly to place his large hand
on Anders' shoulder.

"I did say no," Anders bit out, scowling, feeling suddenly vindicated amidst all of his guilt, "I told
you over and over that we couldn't do this!"

"And then I asked you if you were sure and you said yes," Callum reiterated strongly, shaking his
head, as if offended at what Anders was insinuating, "but why? In Andraste's name Anders, you're
a mage!"

"And what does that have to do with anything!" Anders shouted back, feeling his emotions once
more spilling out beyond his control.

"It means you don't take any that kind of shit from anyone," Callum said incredulously,

"Oh and it's that easy is it?" Anders scoffed nastily; flashes of memory, of Hawke's stern eyes, his
tight grip, his fierce anger, his agonising apologies, "just say no and suddenly everything will be
sorted?"

"Yes, actually, it is," Callum said back, "I don't care who it is, if it's me or anyone else; if you say
no and they don't listen you blow them across the fucking room!"

"I would never do that to him...!" Anders had started before he realised what he was saying; he
stopped short, the rest of the words sticking in his throat where he forced them down with a heavy
swallow.

He'd said too much. He knew he'd said too much because Callum's face was frozen in shock but his
eyes were sparkling with what was, unmistakably, building comprehension. Anders didn't know
what to say to make this right. Oh Maker I look like such a pathetic fuck, he thought derisively,
such a pitiable piece of shit. Can't stand up to him, can't stand up to Hawke, can't tell Wynne what I
really feel because I let Justice rule me. What are we now more than the worst of all of us? My
impatience, Justice's righteousness and Vengeance's sadistic lust for destruction. I don't know who
I am anymore, he thought blankly, yet I've only ever had Hawke to cling to like a rock in the
middle of the raging river. I need him, Anders thought, and maybe it's impossible to explain exactly
why. Even to myself.

"What," Callum hesitated before continuing, his voice incredibly even and steady, "what exactly is
that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Anders replied angrily, "I just...I just meant..."

Anders wasn't sure exactly what he did or didn't mean. He didn't move as he felt Callum's fingers
once more against his skin, this time stroking jerkily against the fading bruises on his throat.
"You're..." Callum let out a disbelieving sound, nothing more than a chuff of breath, "this is madness."

Anders opened his mouth to deny it but something inside, something desperate, forced it shut.

"Are you trying to tell me," Anders winced to hear the suppressed rage in Callum's steady voice, "that he...does things to you without your consent?"

"That isn't your concern," Anders said, sighing roughly as he realised that, in not denying it straight away, he had basically said yes; he tensed further and tried to move away.

"Is that what you're saying?" Callum said, his voice deepening, "That's...wait is that what he did to you in the forest? While I was there? Maker preserve me, I don't believe it!"

"It's nothing like that!" Anders retorted, forcing himself to stand on shaky legs, "What do you think I am, a bloody useless idiot who can't stand up for himself?"

"No, I think I know your problem," Callum said back angrily, standing himself, towering over Anders, "I've met your type before. All laughs and fun on the surface but deep down you don't have enough of an opinion of yourself to fill a pint glass! And it shows, Anders, it really shows. Fuck me, you're worth far more than that absolute bastard upstairs. After all that I've seen you do for him since we met and all he can do is fuck you up to show his gratitude?"

Anders backed away from the couch, turning to face the long bay windows, the heavy curtains drawn. His shadow was long and distorted, seemingly small in comparison to Callum's lengthy silhouette.

"I've already made up my mind," Anders growled out, feeling ridiculous and guilty all at once; there was a heavy silence that Anders was desperate to fill, "I know things aren't perfect but then what is? You make me sound like a Maker be damned, pitiful victim."

"Doesn't sound far from the truth to me," Callum scoffed, making Anders narrow his eyes, "if you let him use you like one."

"It's not like that, damn you!" Anders turned, looking at the man with misplaced anger; he wasn't even sure who he was truly angry at any more, Callum, Hawke, himself? The doubt made him falter, "Who do you think you are? You barely know me, know us, yet you judge me! I know there are things wrong, I'm not a fool, but..."

"But what?" Callum said, clearly having trouble controlling his temper.

"But nothing," Anders snapped out hurriedly.

"No, don't fucking start backtracking," Callum said, sounding suspiciously like Wynne when she became angry, only with more swearing, "you tell me what could possibly stop you from growing a backbone."

"I..." Anders hesitated, feeling as if he were about to break open everything he had told himself he would never do. What is it that you felt? he asked himself with surprising candidness, What is it that you felt when he forced you that first time, after Fenris and Alesis and all that hate and pain? What is it that you felt when he struck you after the fight outside the Hanged Man. What did you feel in the forest despite your anger, despite your rage against what you thought you should have done? The answer was clear and painfully obvious, so much so that it took a long time to say, mainly because saying it only made it true. Anders opened his mouth and said it, even though he barely understood it, "I brought it on myself."
"What?" Callum practically whispered.

"He saw, I mean..." Anders quickly tried to explain it, more to himself than to Callum, "he saw me kissing you and, well, he's a jealous man but I'm the one who provokes him."

Callum stared at him as if he had two heads. The man's face was a mixture of incredulous and furious, his frown so deep it cast shadows across his brow. He placed his hands on his hips and looked around the room before settling back onto Anders.

"I really can't believe what I'm hearing," he said blankly, "I really fucking can't. You think he's punishing you and that you deserve it. Is that what you're saying? You are unbelievable. You know I thought you were stronger than this."

"You thought?" Anders spat back like a cornered cat, lashing out wildly, "You've only known me for a few days and you thought? How dare you judge me when you have no idea what you're talking about!"

"I hate to say it sweetheart but I probably know you better than you think," Callum said contentiously, "and the only reason I'm bothering is because I really like you..!"

"And I love him!" Anders yelled back, feeling irrational and idiotic but not knowing what else to do.

"Ah fuck it, this is a waste of bloody time," Callum snarled, "you give as much of a shit about what I say as you do about yourself, so I guess I should just shut the fuck up and leave you in your little delusional world, that about right?"

With that he turned on his heel, strode to the door and yanked it open before disappearing through it into the gloom. Anders stared after him, his eyes fixed on the dark hole in the wall. Everything began to deflate, down from the adrenaline and the anger, leaving him drained and disoriented. He forced his legs to work. Keep moving, he thought, forcing away the feelings of distress and self loathing, keep moving and don't think about it. You're fine. You'll be fine.

You're always fine in the end Anders, he said to himself, trying so hard to believe it would be true. Everything always works out somehow. Somehow.

He sat back down onto the couch and mechanically started placing the still scattered white chess pieces back into place. Rook, knight, bishop, Anders said in his head as he placed the small, carved figures back onto their squares, his hands shaking. He tried to place the queen beside the bishop but the piece fell from his fingers, a sharp clack against the wooden board. Anders brought his hands up to his face and covered his eyes. The sob escaped him as if he were trying desperately to hold onto it yet, once he had started, it was impossible to stop. Unlike his tears from before which seemed to have little meaning, this time he knew exactly what he was crying for. He covered his mouth to mask the sound of his grief. Pathetic, he thought, so pathetic. Look at you, defending your own weaknesses. You're thirty three years old, you've been free from the Circle and the Warden's for years and yet you still act as if you're trapped and helpless. Perhaps you don't need to grow up so much as grow young. The way you were, remember? I can't be like that anymore, Anders tried to fight back, I can't. It's too late.

"I just..." Anders' words were lost in his constricted throat; he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, forcing himself to stop weeping like a fool. Just calm the fuck down and get a hold of yourself.

He let his hand fall away. It wasn't until he was standing right beside Anders that the mage even
noticed there was someone else in the room.

Anders looked up in surprise to find Callum walking around the side of the couch and sitting down beside him with a weary thump. He watched the taller man confusedly. Callum looked conflicted, watching Anders for a wary moment. Just as Anders opened his mouth to speak, however, Callum reached out and once more laid a comforting arm around Anders' shoulders. Anders let it happen because it was what he wanted; for once it wasn't only what he needed, but what he wanted. He pushed himself as close as he could get and allowed Callum to hold him.

"I'm sorry," Anders said quietly, feeling a little awkward, twisting his fingers together and keeping his eyes facing forwards; he wasn't even sure that it was Callum he was apologising to, "I'm really sorry."

"Don't apologise to me," Callum said softly, shifting a little to allow him to press harder against Anders' side, "I should...I should be sorry. I shouldn't have shouted."

"No," Ander said, trying to laugh but it sounded stilted and forced, "no, you were right. I think sometimes I need a good shouting at."

Callum sighed. The firelight began its slow turn from golden to orange as the flames died down, the deep red embers shining through. The room felt incredibly still and silent compared to the rather spectacular shouting match they had filled it with moments earlier. Anders was surprised they hadn't woken anyone.

"What you need is to open your eyes," Callum said eventually, "you need to see just how...how wonderful you really are. Heck Anders, you're intelligent, funny, kind. You're a great guy, when you aren't being a complete prat that is."

"Thanks for that," Anders said, managing to sniff noisily as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against Callum's arm.

"Not a problem," Callum said, trying for humour, but Anders could hear his own unease echoed in Callum's voice.

The longer he stayed there, the calmer he became and the more foolish he felt. He's right, you know, his conscience supplied, you make excuses for Hawke so that you don't have to feel accountable for the way you react. That's why you do it. You don't want to face the truth of the matter so you make out that you deserve it instead because, in your head, that justifies him. Then you don't have to deal with it further; he gets to say he's sorry and you get to forgive him and move on. Is that about right? Have I covered everything? Anders lifted his head and once more stared at the opposite wall. How could you let yourself come to this? He thought. This isn't what love is meant to be.

"You know," Anders said, feeling terribly tired now that everything had calmed down, drained away, "it's not easy. I'm not making excuses," he explained quickly when he saw Callum frown, opening his mouth to interrupt, "I just...the things I do and say...to me it sometimes seems as if I'm not even in control anymore."

There was an awkward pause. Anders shook his head slightly and leaned forwards, away from Callum's comforting heat. Perhaps if you reveal enough you'll frighten him away, he thought bitterly, is that what you want?

"Every decision I make, it feels like I'm split in three or four minds, all vying for dominance. It's difficult to like yourself when you don't even know who you are," Anders said tightly.
"Then maybe you should make the effort to find out," Callum said, his hand appearing against Anders' back, rubbing a long slow circle against the soft fur of Hawke's coat, "because from what I've seen of you, you're someone worth knowing. I may have only known you a few days but...but I can tell. I've never felt a connection this strong before, not to anyone and you, well, you are something else."

"And that is an understatement," Anders said softly, a short laugh managing to follow his words, this time stronger than before.

Callum laughed too. The atmosphere seemed to lighten somewhat even as the darkness underlying everything remained, lurking in the background. Callum continued the soothing motions of his hand. Anders felt himself drifting off. I wish I could stay like this, he thought, I wish...I wish I could be with them both. You don't love this man, his conscience scoffed, offended.

Do you?

Anders didn't answer his own question. Instead he sighed and leaned back, allowing Callum to lift his arm and hold him once more. Callum wasn't wrong, Anders thought, in fact he seemed to have hit the nail on the head. This connection he felt, this longing mixed with understanding, it was as intoxicating as it was right. Right in the way that Hawke's touches were, right in the way he felt when he helped a mage escape the templars, right in the way he used to feel when he set foot on the opposite shore of Lake Callenhad, free of the Circle for as long as he could run.

"This night," Anders started, "it may have turned into a bit of a living hell for a minute or two there but still, I'm kind of glad for it."

"Then you really are a masochist," Callum said, half joking, half serious.

"No, I mean it," Anders said, turning his head to the left to look at the man beside him, "really. You've, I don't know, forced me to confront things, the thing I've been hiding from. Maybe it will finish me or maybe it's for the best. Still, I know one thing for definite."

He felt his heart rate pick up as the taller man turned to look at him questioningly.

"I...like you too," Anders said softly, "I like you a lot."

Callum's smile was slow, creeping across his face while he shifted Anders closer. They stayed side by side, staring into the fire as it burned low in the grate, casting short, red tinted shadows over the rug.

It was a grey, overcast day when Hawke finally awoke. Anders was checking his vitals as he stared out of the window, Hawke's wrist in one hand, his own heartbeat keeping time with the rouge's pulse, when he was startled by a rough, quiet voice.

"Good morning," Hawke said.

Anders looked down in surprise to be greeted by Hawke's smiling face, his eyes half lidded and groggy. Relief flooded through him. He had known Hawke would be fine, he hadn't doubted it but, until he saw his eyes open, it hadn't seemed entirely real. Now, despite everything, he couldn't help but smile back, taking Hawke's hand and squeezing it in his own.

"It's two in the afternoon, love," Anders said, sliding onto the bed to sit beside Hawke.

"Really?" Hawke said with a frown, "I slept in that long?"
"Actually, I have something to tell you," Anders said, reaching out to run his hand down Hawke's arm; Hawke watched him warily, "you've been asleep for nearly two days."

"Two days?" Hawke said, trying to sit up too fast and grimacing instantly before lowering himself slowly back to the bed, "Alright, that hurt."

"Don't try and get up," Anders said with affectionate scorn, leaning down to place a soft kiss against Hawke's lips, "I'm sure you feel a lot better..."

"I do," Hawke interrupted.

"...but that doesn't mean you can jump up and start moving about," Anders said as he leaned back, his hand running up over Hawke's shoulder and down to caress his neck.

The movement seemed to trigger the memory; his hand caressing Callum's neck, the thump, thump, thump of the blood rushing against his fingers. Anders pulled his hand back and cleared his throat.

"Where is this though?" Hawke was saying as he scanned the room with his eyes, "I remember walking up a street and then I heard people talking but, after that, I'll admit it's mainly a blank."

"We're safe," Anders said, taking hold of Hawke's hand once again, playing with the man's fingers, "you remember I told you about my tutor in the Circle, Wynne? No?" Hawke looked a little blank but Anders continued, knowing he was rambling, "well she's here visiting a friend and she allowed us to stay, plus Callum knows her so..."

"Oh he's not still here is he?" Hawke asked dryly.

"Of course he is," Anders sighed, smiling a little even though he felt the irrational guilt tightening around his chest; change the subject, he thought quickly, "now, look, how do you feel Hawke?"

"I feel much better," Hawke said, snuggling into the thick, creamy duvet and closing his eyes, "just tired, that's all."

"No other symptoms?" Anders asked as he used another quick scanning spell to feel for infection or disease, "You're sure?"

He would have stopped it if he'd seen it coming. Hawke grabbed his hand unexpectedly and pulled Anders forwards with a jerk. The mage let out a sharp gasp and fell, unhindered, into Hawke's warm embrace. Dry, insistent lips found his and then Hawke was kissing him, with that same rough intensity that he always did; Hawke managed to roll them both over despite Anders' struggling, plunging his tongue into the mage's mouth. Anders had to physically force Hawke from him, thankfully not too difficult a feat considering the rogue was still quite weak from his illness.

"Stop, Hawke," Anders said breathlessly, the other man lying atop him, pressing him down into the mattress.

His mind jumped; Callum's weight pressing him against the door, his own hand sliding lower and lower until Callum gasped in ecstasy. Anders swallowed and looked up into Hawke's confused eyes. He steeled his expression and tried to smile, unsure whether it was convincing or not.

"You need to rest," Anders said, sliding out from under the subdued man and shepherding him back into the warm spot on the bed, bringing the covers up and tucking them around his shoulders, "please, the last thing I want to see is you ill again because you didn't take enough care."
He stood up and rubbed at his chilled arms. It was still bitterly cold and Wynne had ordered that no fire be lit in Hawke's room until he was awake. Part of the process of a healing trance dealt with keeping the patient's body in a state of suspended animation, allowing the magic to work more effectively. Anders took the opportunity to distract himself by walking to the hearth to build up a fire. He could feel Hawke's eyes on him but studiously ignored it. Neither spoke; even as the fire grew into a roaring blaze Anders kept his mouth shut and watched the flickering flames. He stood up and brushed the bark and coal smears from his hands onto his trousers. Hawke will be cold, Anders thought practically, looking about until he found Hawke's fur coat, sitting atop the table where he had placed it that morning. He picked it up and returned to the bed, feeling the thick, soft fur beneath his fingers as he draped it on top of the duvet.

You want to ask him, don't you? His conscience asked him contritely, but you won't. I will, Anders thought, just not right now. Not now. Hawke grabbed his hand once more as Anders made to leave. "Wait," he said, voice laced with apprehension.

Anders stopped. He turned back and looked down at Hawke, his green eyes earnest and open, as they always were. Yet despite Hawke's sincere gaze his words were stilted and unsure.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I was going to get you some food," Anders said, only a half truth, "you need your strength if you want to be up and about."

"I'm not hungry," Hawke said quickly, keeping a hold of Anders' hand as the mage made to leave again, "wait, don't go. I want to talk to you."

"Eat first," Anders said with a stiff smile, "then talk. Just wait here, I'll bring you something."

It was the situation he fled from, not Hawke himself. So many things were clogging up his mind that he found it hard to focus on just one at a time and, as far as Anders was concerned, the situation with Hawke was the biggest and most difficult problem on his mind right now. So get things off your mind then, he thought practically, then maybe you can deal with it without distractions.

He found Callum with the dogs, in the storeroom beneath the stairs. It was a dull, musty room, lit only by candlelight. The tall man was sitting on a rough sack, sorting through an unwrapped bundle of bones and meat scraps. He looked up as Anders entered and closed the door behind him, chucking a large chunk of raw meat to Sascha and what looked like a cow's thigh bone to the Labrador. There was a silence between them, not awkward as such, more tense than anything else.

"So, I'm guessing he's awake," Callum said at last, not looking at Anders as he wiped his hands against the sack on which he sat.

"Good guess," Anders said back, leaning against two large crates which were piled in the corner; he folded his arms and watched Callum openly.

"You'd have to be an idiot not to see the difference in you," Callum said tonelessly.

"What do you mean?" Anders asked, frowning.

"Haven't seen you this happy since we met," Callum said, making Anders shift awkwardly and look away, "or this uneasy. So, mighty companion of the Champion of Kirkwall, why are you down here with me when your lover is awake upstairs?"
Many things in Callum's speech threw him, too many all at once. Anders sighed and tried to sort through his thoughts, keep his focus.

"How did you know he was the Champion?" he asked, more out of curiosity than anything else; Anders had never mentioned it, "I never said anything."

"Wynne told me," Callum shrugged as he threw more scraps to the dogs, "she said something about a mutual friend, Cousland by name, who told her all about it. I almost didn't believe her at first. You know Lord Cousland?"

Well that's not so good, Anders thought, Wynne knowing all about Hawke through Cousland. I'm sure he didn't paint him in the best of lights.

"The younger one, yes," Anders said, glad at least to be on a subject he was comfortable discussing.

"Been there once, Highever that is," Callum said, "recently mind you. Impressive place. Teryn Cousland is a just man and the Teryna, oh ho, haven't seen a woman that beautiful since, well, actually don't think I ever have."

"Is that right," Anders said, not a question.

"That's right," Callum said, looking up to Anders with a smirk, "what's wrong. Jealous?"

"You wish, my friend," Andres retorted, pushing away from the crates.

Callum laughed lightly. Sascha finished her food and wondered over to her master, sniffing at him hopefully.

"Anyway, you didn't answer my question," Callum pressed as he gave his dog the last of the scraps before standing, forced to stoop slightly in the low room.

"What? Oh, right," Anders said, clearing his throat and relaxing his shoulders and trying his best to sound casual, "actually I was wondering what you're plans are, once you leave here I mean."

The soft, restricted laugh Callum gave him in reply was hard to interpret. Anders wasn't sure whether to be reassured or worried by it. The taller man put his hands on his hips and grinned without it reaching his eyes before dropping it to a smile, licking his lips. He let out another short laugh and walked towards the golden Labrador, sitting obediently, and petted her gently.

"I'd ask why," Callum said, "but it seems rather obvious, I suppose."

"Meaning?" Anders said defensively.

"You know what it means," Callum shook his head, "look, I wasn't just saying what I said last night to get you on your back, alright? I like you, I do, but I'm not about to become the middleman in some insane ménage à trios, especially not with the Champion of Kirkwall."

"Oh, so now you know who he is it makes all the difference, does it?" Anders said dryly, "Didn't seem much of a problem to you last night."

"I didn't know last night," Callum retorted, "and, for your information, it makes a big difference. If he's the same man I've heard tales of then...fuck me, duelling a Qunari Arishok and winning? Surviving the Deep Roads twice? And he's got a temper on him, from what I've heard. I'm pretty sure, if he wanted to, he could chew me up and spit me out without breaking a sweat."
Anders couldn't stop the derisive sound he let slip. Why does it always come down to this? He thought. Can we really not think of anything else?

"Actually I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," Anders said wryly, his gaze sharp as he looked at Callum, noting the man's slight look of surprise, "but I suppose I am still a little naive on some points. I wasn't planning to bring you along as a bloody fuck on the side, you absolute idiot. You're a good man, you've done a lot to help me, maybe more than you know, but when are you going to get it through your skull? I won't betray Hawke like that. That isn't why I asked. I asked because I like you, you've been a good friend, short as it's been, and I have precious few of those. So, if your trumped up ego can see past your cock for five minutes, let me know will you? We leave tomorrow. The offer stands till then."

One down, Anders thought with a modicum of pride in how he'd handled that situation. He walked down the hallway towards the sitting room, where he could hear many voices talking all together and the soft, gentle chink of cups meeting saucers. I'll speak to Wynne and we'll sort this out, Anders thought as he reached for the door handle. It was only as he opened the door that he realised why there was such a ruckus.

"...and I have to thank you again, Mistress Leliana," Hawke was in the middle of saying when Anders walked into the room, "for taking me in at such a dire hour and allowing me to stay in your home."

"Of course serrah Hawke," Leliana waved away his courtesy, "and please, just call me Leliana."

Everyone was seated by the fire. Leliana and Sebastian on one couch, Wynne and Hawke on the other. Anders' mind took a moment to catch up.

"What on earth are you doing down here?" Anders couldn't help but cut in.

Four pairs of startled eyes rounded on him at once. Admittedly he would probably say that Sebastian looked more demurely irritated than startled but it was still a reaction. Anders took a deep breath and tried to continue looking angrily at Hawke while under such scrutiny.

"You're not well enough to be up," Anders said, "I told you I'd bring you some food."

"Well, I thought I'd have a go at getting up," Hawke replied diplomatically, with none of his usual sarcasm or bite, "anyway, your friend here seems to think there won't be a problem. She's given me a check over and apparently I'm fine. Thank you again by the way," Hawke said to Wynne, turning away from Anders as he said it.

"Think nothing of it," Wynne smiled, although Anders could see it lacked its usual warmth.

"That's not the point..." Anders tried to argue as he walked over to stand beside Hawke, seated as he was on one of the couches.

"Never mind that," Hawke merely smiled heartily and grabbed Anders by the hand, using his trick from earlier to simply jerk Anders down onto the couch beside him, "just sit down and have a cup of tea, you'll see, I'm fine!"

There wasn't much space at Hawke's end of the long couch and Anders found himself squeezed in beside the other man. Hawke shifted a little to make more room but their proximity was a little hard to ignore, and not just for Anders. The mage noticed the subtle glances Sebastian threw him, especially when Hawke decided it would be a good idea not to let go of his hand. Anders smiled uncomfortably and tried his best to seem at ease; he wanted to simply remove his hand from
Hawke's grasp but, if the other man wanted it there, Anders knew it would be a useless endeavour.

"So, Champion..." Wynne started to say.

"Please, call me Hawke, everyone does," Hawke smiled back charmingly.

"Of course," Wynne smiled, "serrah Hawke, I feel I must ask, how is the situation in Kirkwall?"

Hawke seemed thrown by the question and, despite everything, Anders couldn't help but find it amusing. Fighting, yes, being ridiculously brave, yes, being charming, yes, being politically minded, no. He was many things, Anders thought, but at ease discussing political affairs he was not.

"I think Wynne is asking about the upheaval after the Viscount was murdered," Anders murmured to Hawke, leaning in to speak quietly even though he knew everyone else could see and hear him; whether fortunate or unfortunate, spending most of his life in a Circle tower had forced him to become politically minded.

"Oh, right," Hawke said, squeezing Anders' hand in silent gratitude; only Anders looked to the door as it opened and Callum walked in. He gave the man a small smile which, after the taller man took a seat in one of the large armchairs by the window, Callum returned. Hawke continued as if nothing had happened, "Well, as there was no one ready to stand in for the Viscount after his...unfortunate demise, the Knight Commander of the templars has stepped in."

"Meredith?" Leliana said, her eyes flicking to Wynne before they returned to Hawke.

"It's only temporary, you understand," Hawke said.

"But the Grand Cleric, Elthina," Sebastian finally spoke, leaning forwards, "surely she had some sort of say in the matter?"

"It's only temporary," Hawke reiterated strongly, "it's not a permanent solution, it's just a quick fix until a suitable replacement can be found."

"That isn't what happened with Perrin Threnhold," Wynne said sagely, "Kirkwall has a rather bloody history in relation to templar rule."

"The Chantry would never allow the templars to become an autonomous body," Sebastian said offhandedly, "it is too dangerous."

"I don't know about that," Anders said, unable to help himself, "you obviously don't live in Kirkwall."

The Starkhaven prince's sharp, blue eyes looked to the mage, studying Anders closely. Anders did not move or react. He saw Sebastian's stare once more shift down to he and Hawke's joined hands but he did not comment further.

"I would think that Kirkwall would be more preoccupied with the threat from Orlais, at the moment that is," Leliana said as she sat back, stirring a teaspoon of sugar into her tea.

"What threat?" Hawke asked, frowning.

"Surely you have heard," Leliana said, watching them all equally, "of the unrest brewing between Ferelden and Orlais. It is only getting worse. I have heard rumours from the capital. Everyone is nervous, especially the nobles. Everything seems to have come to a head; either truce or war."
"Surely the Empress would not risk open war with Ferelden now that the Ferelden templars have been all but disbanded," Sebastian said, his eyes narrowed, "the mages there would surely take it as a call to arms. Whether the Divine herself sanctions it or not, war would lead to disaster."

"You all really haven't heard then?"

Anders looked to Callum along with the others, surprised mainly by the fact that the other man hadn't spoken since he entered. The tall mage lounged in the armchair at the other end of the room, watching them all with a lazy stare. Anders didn't miss Callum's eyes hardening as they swept over Hawke.

"Heard what child?" Wynne asked, her forehead creasing in a frown.

"I'm surprised," Callum said, "what with all your connections. Still, well, I suppose no one is supposed to know yet and maybe I didn't find out in the most moral of ways..."

"What did you steal?" Anders sighed, unable to hide his smirk.

"Hey now," Callum said, "I didn't steal anything, I...appropriated it for a short space of time. It was just a letter, at the Cousland estate. Anyway that's all semantics, the real point is that I doubt we have to fear war with Orlais any longer."

"And why would that be?" Leliana was watching Callum intently, her eyes bright.

"Because the Empress of Orlais' daughter, Aurélie, is due to be married to the King of Ferelden," Callum said conspiratorially, "a truce through matrimony, as they say. Once the two countries are bound by blood then I imagine Orlais won't have to worry about Ferelden anymore, not with their influence."

There was a deathly silence. Anders was sure he could hear his own heart beating in the stillness that descended upon the room. Strangely it was Hawke that spoke first, breaking from his shock.

"King Alistair is getting married?" he said, aghast.

"That's right," Callum said, "there's no two ways about it."

"To a woman?" he said, making Anders glare and kick him subtly in the foot.

"Surprisingly," Callum said back, frowning in irritation as he eyed Hawke distastefully.

"It has not been announced," Leliana said, her shock making her speech a little suspicious.

"I don't think anyone's supposed to know," Callum shrugged, "but the letter I read was from the King's confidant, Commander Cousland, so I'm taking it as truth."

Two thoughts sprang into his mind as the shock wore off. The first may not have been the most monumental, yet somehow it still came before everything else. Oh Cousland, Anders thought, closing his eyes for a moment. This is going to break him. His Commander may have been a brash, sarcastic, short tempered war hero but Anders knew that didn't make one bit of difference when it came to the King. When they had last met Anders knew that Cousland's life was making him an old man before his time; his love was the only thing keeping the spark of life in him, it seemed. His second thought was a little closer to home. That bloody weak minded prick Alistair, he thought angrily, not only is he going to chose politics over love, he's going to allow Orlais to influence his reign! All this talk of supporting mages, of freeing our people, and he makes his bed with the enemy. Anders knew that he was being harsh but it was only the truth. Alistair may be an
impressive man, he thought, kind and true, but he's no politician. Orlais is going to play him like a lute and make him dance to their tune. By then it will be too late for him to see that he has been used.

"Excuse me for a moment," Anders said with a tight smile as the others continued to talk; he let go of Hawke's hand but, as he made his way to the door, he heard Hawke making his own apologies before following him.

Anders didn't turn around as he walked. He slipped into the study, where he and Wynne had talked, and left the door open behind him. He walked to the window and proceeded to pretend to be looking out of it. He didn't hear Hawke enter but he did hear him close the door. There was a moment of silence and then a pair of strong, comforting arms slid around his waist and a strong, warm chest pressed against his back. Despite himself, despite his promise to not give in to Hawke's charms before they had talked, Anders leaned back into the embrace.

"I don't believe it," Anders said blankly, shaking his head.

"Neither do I," Hawke said strongly, "that idiot is probably lying. I mean, does it sound plausible to you?"

"I don't know," Anders said, looking down as he put his hands against Hawke's arms and held them tightly, "if he was telling the truth and he really did see a letter from the Commander to his brother then...yes, I fear it is true. Only something this important would force Cousland to contact his brother."

Hawke held him closer, his breath warm against Anders' neck. The mage sighed unhappily and looked down at the floor.

"All that talk," he said, "all those promises, and he throws it all away. He submits to them after he seemed so willing to fight. I don't want to believe it. All those mages he made promises to, telling them that they would be safe in Ferelden. He's betraying them all."

"But Anders, the Circle isn't going to be reinstated just because the King is marrying an Orlesian," Hawke said reassuringly.

"Oh don't be so naïve Hawke," Anders said scornfully, "you'd have to be blind not to see what Orlais is doing! One minute they're threatening war and the next they're all smiles and wedding proposals. As soon as they have an unbreakable bond between themselves and Ferelden, Orlais will be sending dignitaries to the Ferelden court, they'll be influencing the Teryns, they'll be trying their best to bolster the Chantry, get the templars back in power and the Circle re-established as quickly as possible."

"You don't know that..." Hawke started; Anders turned angrily round in Hawke's hold. Hawke did not let him go even as they stood face to face, his hands gripping Anders' sides tightly.

"Are you mad, Hawke?" Anders said in irritation, "at the moment Ferelden poses as big a threat to Orlesian rule as the Tevinter Imperium does. Orlais may not have direct governmental control of Thedas but, by running the Chantry, they have religious control. What the White divine preaches is then filtered down to all the Chantries in the land. If Orlais were to lose that influence it would be devastating for them! Of course they won't waste an opportunity like this to fix what they see as a huge risk."

Hawke was silent for a moment, staring into Anders' angry eyes, before he finally nodded and hung his head slightly. He pulled Anders closer, lifting his head back up to place a soft, chaste kiss upon
his lips. Anders sighed and allowed Hawke his comfort, kissing him back even though he felt like
nothing more than screaming and breaking every chair, window, bookcase and ornament in the
room in a fit of rage. Instead Anders pulled in a long, slow breath and let it out through his nose.
He leaned his forehead against Hawke's and closed his eyes, lifting his arms to hold the other man
back.

"Your friend," Hawke said after a short pause, "Cousland. Is he going to be alright, do you think?"

"What would you care about how the Commander feels?" Anders asked harshly; Hawke looked at
Anders with rebuke.

"Look, just because we don't get along doesn't mean I hate him," Hawke said reasonably, "anyway,
it's not something I would wish on my worst enemy. Losing the one you love, it's not right and it's
not fair."

"Life isn't fair," Anders shrugged, feeling old and jaded.

"That's not an excuse," Hawke said sternly.

"Would you marry some girl you didn't even know just to benefit Kirkwall?" Anders pushed, his
eyes intent, "Even though you already had someone who loved you?"

"No," Hawke said without hesitation, his words too quick to be untrue, "but I'm not a King and I
don't have that kind of responsibility. He has the fates of his whole nation upon his shoulders.
They're not long out of one war, what with the Blight, and I doubt they're ready for another so
soon."

"I'm sure Orlais is well aware of their weaknesses," Anders spat out bitterly, "Maker this is a
mess."

Hawke hummed in agreement. They stayed that way for a few minutes, just holding each other.
Anders wished there was no underlying tension or bad feeling between them. So tell him, his
conscience pushed again, just tell him! Anders wasn't sure where to start. Thankfully Hawke
seemed more intent than he was to discuss their situation.

"Anders, I know this perhaps isn't the best time to talk," Hawke started unsurely, "but about what
happened, in the forest I mean..."

"Please Hawke, not now," Anders said, his tone defeated.

"I need to apologise to you," Hawke carried on regardless of Anders' protest.

"You always do," Anders said angrily, pulling back from Hawke but not fully breaking their
embrace; Hawke looked a little lost for words. Good, Anders thought, good because I need to
speak for once, "I've had enough of your apologies Hawke, enough of you treating me like shit and
then making up for it by saying you're sorry and treating me like a prince for a few weeks
afterwards. That's not how the world works. Now listen to me because I'm only going to say this to
you once. If you ever, ever do anything like that to me again...I'm gone, and you won't find me this
time."

The man in question opened his mouth to speak but nothing came forth. Hawke closed his mouth
slowly before simply swallowing and nodding his head. Anders allowed the other man to pull him
slowly back into their close embrace but kept his face determined. It felt...good. Empowering.
Anders felt younger than he had in a long time.
"Anders, if I ever lost myself again and hurt you the way I have done before," Hawke said solemnly, "I'd leave myself, no questions asked. Not before you punched me in the nose that is."

"Or more likely kicked you in the bollocks," Anders said with a small smile, more glad than Hawke knew at the rogue's sincerity.

"Oh, you're a hard man," Hawke said, grimacing a little at the thought before leaning forwards as Anders moved in and kissed him. Properly this time.
He would not lie and say the atmosphere of the room was as relaxed and yet excited as he hoped it would be. Anders knew he should have expected as much but recent events had forced his optimism back to the fore.

It had not been a particularly pleasant evening, despite Anders’ fervent want to reinstate sanguinity as the main factor in his life. Oh it seemed pleasant enough on the surface, no one was directly offensive or spiteful, but the undercurrent of tension, dislike and hidden motivations made it almost impossible to relax. Between both himself and Wynne being actively avoidant of each other, Wynne being tolerantly pleasant towards Hawke, Sebastian Vael doing his best to get Hawke's attention while purposefully ignoring Anders and Leliana trying, optimistically, to play hostess and gloss over the simmering cauldron of intrigue that they had all created. If not for Callum Anders was sure he would have had a truly miserable night. The two mages had basically spent the rest of the night locked in quiet conversation in the corner of the room by the large bay windows, doing their best to ignore their surroundings. Anders had found it rather calming, despite the understated and, as he continued to drink throughout the evening, more unsubtle glances from Hawke.

Once the chiming of midnight had forced the members of their congregation to bed Anders had been, despite his better nature, a little antagonistic. Being alone in the room with Hawke, with both a heavy silence and a large, empty bed between them, only seemed to make things worse. He had breathed in deeply, isolating the heady scents of brandy and pipe smoke, and asked the first thing that came into his mind, "have you been at the pipe weed?"

"No," Hawke said with forced humour as he began unbuttoning his shirt, avoiding Anders' eyes, "I tried it once when I was fifteen but it didn't agree with me. Anyway when have you ever seen me smoke? It was Sebastian."

"Oh so it's Sebastian now, is it?" Anders said dryly, latching onto the latent hostility of their chosen topic.

"Don't be like that Anders," Hawke said in a despairing tone, "anyway is it entirely fair to demonize the man when you barely know him? You didn't speak to him all night, just sat in the corner with him. If you took a moment to see things from Sebastian's point of view then I'm sure you would understand him better."

Anders felt like laughing but managed to keep it purely on the inside. Hawke turned away to remove his shirt and drape it over the back of a chair by the desk. Anders smiled nastily because he knew Hawke couldn't see it. Understand him more? Anders had thought, I really don't think there is much more to understand. The man known as Sebastian Vael was someone he felt he knew completely as soon as he had heard him speak at dinner that night; mainly because he had met numerous similar men and women before, bigots and hypocrites all. The man was outcast by his family, exiled and disgraced, Anders thought, and now he finds solace in the arms of an outdated and secular religion which damns the different and the outcast. The hypocrisy astounds even me.

"Oh you mean his point of view that all mages should be kept under lock and key, safely guarding all of the normal people from us dangerous abominations of nature?" Anders said sarcastically.

He heard Hawke let out a soft sigh, his shoulders slumping as he picked up his nightshirt. He did not turn as he spoke to Anders. The mage watched him with cautious determination. He was not going to be talked down in regards to this subject. Hawke knew how important this was to him and,
until recently, he had also thought it important to Hawke. How can he fraternize with someone so open about their intolerance? Anders thought.

"Fenris once thought as he did," Hawke said after a moment's pause, "and yet even his own, albeit measured, conversion doesn't seem to have affected you as much as it has him. Since you and he started talking I thought you'd both become a little more tolerant."

"Of each other, yes," Anders said quietly, barely able to hold back the vitriol in his tone; he too began dressing for bed, his movements jerky and aggravated, "but that's only because he has actually changed, as little as that change has been. I did not tolerate his behaviour before and I have no idea why you think I should start accepting it in a complete stranger now."

"Anders," Hawke said harshly, rounding on the other man as he pulled his nightshirt into place, "for the Maker's sake why are you taking this so personally? All I did was talk to the man, mainly because he wouldn't leave me alone, and you were no help, sitting with that bloody prick all night while you left me on my own."

"Oh dear, could you not look after yourself without me there to direct the conversation for you?" Anders sneered, his ire rising unexpectedly in reaction to Hawke's accusation; he knew the words were inflammatory but he had reacted on instinct. Truthfully, it didn't even sound like something he would normally say. He felt a little chilled at the thought.

Hawke watched him for a few moments, his mouth partially open, before he snapped it shut and his eyes became hard and deadened. The rogue moved with an efficiency bred of fury, jerking back the duvet and climbing into the bed without another word.

Falling apart again, Anders thought as he stood by the bed, pulling off his trousers. He tried to remember the feeling of optimism that Callum had inspired in him, the will and determination to take control of his life instead of simply reacting. Which was a fine goal, at least when you didn't have outside influences constantly affecting your own responses. He knew that Justice was unhappy with the situation, with Anders continued association with Hawke even after finally realising their relationship had been devolving slowly into something he had never expected or wanted.

Yet, despite knowing this, Anders was more afraid of the fact that it was now almost completely impossible to tell when the spirit was influencing him. Before, when Justice exerted his power over Anders' personality, there was a feeling of wrongness, a sickening wrench in his gut. Now it was nearly seamless; Anders only knew that it was not his words leaving his mouth because he would never say something so hurtful off the cuff. He was never this irritable without Justice's influence.

Staring down at the bed, the twin candlelight casting bizarre double shadows across Hawke's half hidden form, Anders couldn't help but feel the dread once more settling in his stomach.

What happened when he could no longer tell the difference? Would there come a point when Justice's thoughts would become his thoughts, not through compromise but simply through an inability to stave off the spirit's increasingly dominant personality? Would he even know it was happening?

Anders climbed into the bed slowly, shivering as the chill cotton brushed over his legs. He leaned over to blow out the candles, smelling the faint hint of smoke in the air as he settled down under the covers, unconsciously shifting closer to Hawke's heat. The mage swallowed before closing his eyes, the darkness surrounding him mirroring that behind his eyes. The thought made him jumpy. How would he tell the difference, he thought again and again, it's the same, the same.
He slipped down inside of his own mind where they were waiting for him.

Hands grasping his, tighter and tighter. He is digging his feet into the mud, slipping on the insecure ground. She is screaming. The steel gauntlets are vice like around his arms, hauling him from her, from his home, towards a life of imprisonment and fear. She tries to lunge for him but there is already someone between them, a tall, dark figure with deep blue eyes and a loathsome stare.

He hears her call his name but there is something off about the voice, somehow younger, somehow girlish...

"Leif..."

Anders was sure that there could have been more to the dream, perhaps something revealing, perhaps something he had forgotten, perhaps something new. In a perverse way, despite his deep hatred of the memory, the dream always served as a teasing glimpse of something he purposefully never dwelled upon. The dreams were a way for him to see his mother's face without feeling like a masochist. However, instead of the usual reliving, Anders found himself gently shaken awake, his mind spinning at the sudden silence and his heart racing. He looked up into the darkness and managed to discern Hawke's silhouette against the pitch.

"You were screaming," Hawke said softly, his tone wary.

"I..." Anders was amazed to hear himself panting, finding it hard to speak, "I was dreaming. It was...just a dream."

The darkness above him moved and he both watched and felt Hawke lay down beside him. He calmed his breathing, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dark, managing to roughly make out the outlines of the bed posts and the moonlight behind the curtains. He looked to his left and saw, to his surprise, that Hawke was staring straight at him, the light glinting against his seemingly black eyes. It was odd to find the other man awake; usually, after being disturbed from sleep, Hawke was quick to fall back into slumber. Yet not this time it seemed. The subtle, filtered white light softly illuminated Hawke's skin, accentuating his black beard and messy hair. Anders swallowed and looked away, up towards the ceiling. Despite his outward calm he was still buzzing and jittery, unable to break away from the anticipation the dream had inspired.

"It was about my mother," Anders said suddenly and a little recklessly if he was to be honest with himself, "the dream I mean."

When he looked over again Hawke's eyes were still open and staring. He looked frozen as if he were neither listening nor awake. For a mad moment Anders thought Hawke might be sleeping with his eyes open. He couldn't help but laugh at the thought, partly out of nervousness, partly out of a need to deflect attention from his blurted statement and partly out of truthful hilarity. The laugh started as reserved, low and breathy but was soon out of control. Anders brought his hand up to smother it but it was no use. Oh Maker, he's going to think I've finally gone insane, Anders thought, and maybe I have. Yet, after a few moments, Anders heard an unexpected response. He rolled onto his side and faced Hawke once more, glad at least on some level as he watched his lover laugh softly into the pillow.

"You know I would ask why you've started laughing for no reason that I can see, but I know that whatever answer I get will just confuse me more. You really are a mystery to me most of the time love," Hawke said sleepily, "you know that don't you?"
"Well I'd hope so," Anders said, breathing deeply so as to smother his hysteria, "or I suppose you might start to find me boring."

"Impossible, I'm sure," Hawke said, closing his eyes; Anders watched as Hawke frowned, "...do you want to talk about it?"

"About what?" Anders asked, his voice wobbling a little as he tried to stop laughing.

"Your dream," Hawke said, his eyes staying shut, "your mother."

"...No," Anders said, hating that he hesitated, but keeping his resolve tight, "no, not now. Tomorrow Hawke. Tomorrow, if you want, I'll tell you anything you like."

Anders wasn't sure if he had any right to Hawke's affections at that moment but through a mix of drowsiness, slight frenzy and a need for comfort he reached out and touched Hawke's face. It was all it took. Hawke opened his eyes suddenly and stared at him.

"I'm sorry, about earlier," Anders said truthfully, "please, let's not fight."

Anders watched Hawke, staring as the rogue pushed up on his strong arms, his hand sinking into the thick mattress. He did not rush, he was not too slow, he simply crawled across the bed until he was looming above the mage. Anders looked up at him and smiled.

"You know I've just realised the best part of our relationship, considering all we do is fight," Hawke said, his voice still husky with sleep.

"Oh yes?" Anders said, his heart beating faster once more, yet this time for a far more pleasurable reason.

"Making up," Hawke elaborated succinctly before lowering himself easily to cover Anders' body, his mouth finding Anders', his left hand gripping the mage's waist.

In a way, even though he knew that there was still an underlying current of tension between them, Anders couldn't help but agree. Besides, it made their coupling all the more potent. At least it lets me forget, just for now, Anders thought, even if allowing Hawke to distract him with sex grated against his nerves. For once he felt he needed it just as much as Hawke did. He sank back into the covers and allowed the feverish feeling of Hawke's touches to wash all thoughts from his mind.

The horses champed in the early morning light, their hides glistening in the dawn fog. Bryn's mane was a curtain of dew drops, shivering to the ground like rain any time the mare tossed her head. Anders pulled the straps tighter on Sigurðr's saddle. The cold was biting, nipping at his face and hands. Anders pulled his woollen scarf more securely around his neck and shivered. It was an odd feeling, as if they were starting their journey again; goodbyes and cold, bitter weather.

"I can't thank you enough for your hospitality," Hawke was saying to Leliana as Anders stood in the street, pulling on his gloves as he finished checking the steeds.

"Not at all," Leliana smiled beatifically, allowing Hawke to kiss her hand, "I wish you better luck in your endeavours Champion."

"I'll take that as a polite way of you telling me not to get myself nearly killed again," Hawke replied audaciously as he bowed, "thank you again Leliana."

Anders heard their words but was not truly listening. He stared aimlessly out into the fog as if
waiting for something to appear. I perhaps did not expect him to come with us, Anders thought, but I at least expected a goodbye. The mage leaned against Bryn and rested his head against the horse's shoulder. The mare let out a rough snort and leaned back towards the mage. The mist shifted around them almost imperceptibly, from thick to opaque to dissipated to thick once more.

There was a strange sense of excitement in the air despite Anders' disappointment. He felt closer to it, to his goal, even if only by a step, and once more he felt closer to Hawke, even if only by a fraction. Trying your best to look on the bright side are we? he thought derisively. Yes, he replied, not sure if he was becoming truly split not only in his views of others but also in his view of himself. Best not to dwell on the things that make you sound crazy, Anders thought with a soft laugh into the rough horsehair beneath his cheek.

In all truth, despite the good food and good hospitality he had experienced over the past few days, Anders was glad to be on his way. This inertia bothered him. He knew that it was only partly his own wants and mainly Justice's prodding that had caused this itch under his skin whenever he thought about their journey, but that did not make it any easier to live with. Even then, despite his own needs, there was the niggling thought in the back of his mind that staying put too long might be a bad idea. If the bandit that had escaped his wrath truly had fled back to Cumberland and alerted the chevaliers to Anders' slaughter of his fellow robbers then he was quite sure that the templars would have been informed immediately. An abomination on the loose was a templars favourite prey and there was always one honourable enough, or bloodthirsty enough, to jump at the chance to hunt it down. It may have just been an idea bred by his niggling paranoia but Anders, for one, was not willing to wait around to find out.

So he had made his goodbyes; a heartfelt farewell to Leliana who had sheltered them in a rather desperate time, a brief farewell to Sebastian with enough newly discovered, underlying dislike to fill the entire room and a rather longer and more cathartic farewell from Wynne. It had been unexpected but Anders was glad for it. The last thing he wanted was to make an enemy of a friend.

"And how long will it be until I next see you?" the tall woman had asked him from the doorway as Anders finished dressing, pulling on his thin glove to hide the scar.

"You mean until I next unexpectedly bump into you," Anders had replied hastily, flicking a glance to the other mage, "isn't that more accurate?"

"I...would not have it be so," Wynne had said cautiously.

"Oh, is that right?" Anders was more than aware that he had meant it to sound sarcastic but, somewhere between the words forming in his mind and them leaving his mouth, it had turned into something hopeful.

Wynne had, much to Anders misled sense of relief, taken it as encouragement.

"We have never entirely seen eye to eye, of that I am well aware," Wynne had started, not making eye contact with the younger mage, "and you are so reckless Anders, so very foolhardy that I find it almost impossible not to become angry at you. You make the most unwise of choices child and you test my patience again and again but..."

Anders watched her warily, unsure exactly where this was going. If she's trying to apologise she's doing a very bizarre job of it, he thought, or at least until she spoke once more.

"I am sorry," she had said bluntly; for a moment Anders hadn't known what to say.

"I'm...I mean," Anders floundered, caught off guard; which was perhaps the reason his reply was
so truthful, "as am I."

Now I know that Justice isn't paying attention, Anders thought giddily. The spirit surged against Anders' seeming submission to a woman who had named him monster. Anders replied in kind by purposefully pushing him back down into the pits of his subconscious. Anders was more than aware that it was more difficult than usual.

"Look, I didn't mean to shout at you..." Anders said quickly, lifting his hands and taking a step forwards.

He wasn't allowed to finish his sentence. Wynne strode into the room and pulled him into a deep, warm embrace that stole all coherent thought from his mind. His arms lifted automatically to hold her in return and yet he had to fight the urge to throw her into the wall or crush her ribs. The thoughts were enough to give him whiplash. For a blink of an eye he felt as he did when she would scold him for running only to have her cradle him as his anger and pain spewed out in return, before Justice once more exerted his fury upon him.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Anders said quickly, disengaging from their embrace before the feeling forced him to do something irrational.

"I know you did not child," Wynne replied, her voice suspiciously choked, "we were both harsh in our judgements. I was unfair to you and I am sorry."

"I shouldn't have brought up your son," Anders said, stepping back further and looking into Wynne's eyes, "it was cruel..."

"What happened to you..." Wynne interrupted, "no, what happened to us both at the hands of the templars, was cruel. They took my son from me before I even had a chance to hold him in my arms and then...and then they took you away and there was that same helplessness. I never wanted to admit it Anders because, well, then I would have had to face the truth; that I was as trapped and inferior as any other mage. I could not live with that burden. I knew that the thought would drive me to something rash and so I did what I had to."

"You pushed it away, ignored it," Anders said with a sigh, nodding briefly even as he began to shake with Justice's repressed anger, "believe me I know how that feels."

"All I had gained in trying my best to teach you, in watching you grow, in caring for you," Wynne said quietly, "and all they could do was take you from me. You and so many others."

I truly am a selfish prick, Anders had thought guiltily, why do I always assume? I didn't speak a word to her before I left the Circle that final time and, instead of learning the truth, I fostered an unwarranted hate that only simplified the rage within me. The thought did not soothe Justice's rage but it at least lessened Anders' own underlying ire.

"You were one of the most apt and dedicated students I have ever trained Anders," Wynne had said, her face once more determined and strong, "and I do not wish you to leave here believing that I think of you as nothing more than an abomination. I may not agree with the choices you have made but I will not condemn you for them. I will not speak as the templars have trained us to, not any longer."

He would not lie and say that Justice had been happy about anything he had exchanged with Wynne that foggy morning but, for the first time in a long time, he found he did not care. He had to believe he was in control of this, that he could foster this strength and let it grow, or he knew that he would be in the same situation as Wynne had been all those years ago. That terrible feeling of
despair and helplessness, of knowing you can never hope to overcome your oppressors. Stop being a slave to your fear, Anders thought determinedly.

"Will you see Cousland when you return to Ferelden?" Anders asked as he and Wynne had walked down the stairs to join the others.

"It could be arranged," Wynne said with a small frown, "but why do you ask?"

"When you do can you give him this?" Anders asked as he handed Wynne a hastily scribbled and sealed letter; the enchanter had looked down at it, resting in her hand, and smiled softly.

"Of course I shall," she replied.

Everything is tainted with bitter sweetness, Anders thought as Bryn swayed slightly beneath him. Hawke was hauling himself into the saddle before him, Sigurðr snorting and tossing his head. The close mist made for a mystical, claustrophobic atmosphere. Anders waved goodbye with the feeling of a man walking into the unknown, with both enthusiasm and trepidation.

"At least it isn't snowing," Hawke said with a capricious smile, despite the tension visible behind his merry eyes.

"Do not tempt fate," Anders replied as he nudged Bryn into a walk.

The morning was as floating through a mountain top cloud. Anders tried to mask his hurt and anxiety ridden excitement beneath an apathetic mask. Even just a chance to thank him properly would have been enough, he thought. The memory of bright eyes and his kind smile, cast in the dying embers from the fire, his warm embrace, the feeling of confused affection they both shared even if for an absurdly short time. Anders hunched further into the saddle as they headed for the Eastern gate.

The scenery of Val Chevin was even more impressive in the daylight than it had been during the candlelit night they had arrived there. Pale stone buildings with tiled roofs, ornate, twisted railings and inlaid statuettes of dancing women or youths in repose. Yet despite the beauty and seeming frivolity of the city the thick fog seemed to dampen everything, including the vivacity of the foliage and the relaxed atmosphere. Instead of focusing on the exotic architecture, the soaring arches and towering columns, Anders noticed the more unsavoury aspects of the skyline. The looming Chantry cathedral lurked inside the mist like a hulking leviathan in the depths of the sea. Anders peered up towards the hidden towers, fading into the soft, white mist, seeming oddly distant and removed. The horse's hooves were muffled in the mist. Anders lowered his gaze back to the wet cobbles before him, his heart heavier.

The top of the hill seemed to come too soon. Anders felt a little cold inside as the gate came into view, just as Leliana had directed. Do not become attached, Justice's voice rang inside his mind, so as there is nothing to lose. It may have been the truth but, once again, Anders was treated to a glimpse of Justice's inhumanity, his inability to understand the workings of human emotion. The spirit was unable to comprehend, no matter how much Anders infected him with his own distorted human nature, the sting of loss or the hole it left behind. You were companions for less than a week, Justice would argue; but in that time I found something so rare and precious that I sometimes think I am not worthy of it at all. The brief time he had spent with Callum had reminded him of just who he was, who he really was, and not who he was expected to be.

Which was why he couldn't stop himself from rounding Bryn harshly back towards the city at the sound of barking muffled by the mist. Which was why he couldn't stop the smile stretching across his face as two swift shades loped through the mist trailed by a tall, dark shadow of a horse. Which
was why he spurred Bryn back towards Callum as the other man finally trotted into view.

"Ah, thought I'd missed you," Callum said lightly, sitting back audaciously in his saddle; the horse beneath him let its head hang towards the ground with a dopey expression on its face. Bryn looked away with seeming disdain.

Anders stared at him and for a few moments he had no idea what to say. During the previous night's conversation Callum had quizzed him briefly as to his journey plan. Tired and distracted as he had been, notwithstanding enjoying the other mage's company, Anders had thought it mere polite curiosity. Now, it seemed, he was being once more shown just how bad a judge of character he could be on occasion. No need to advertise the fact, however, Anders thought mischievously as he eyed his friend.

"Nice horse," he finally said sarcastically, although he couldn't keep the smile from his face, "so are you going to ride twenty paces behind us for the entire journey or what?"

Callum laughed out loud. It was as uplifting and clear as ever, even seeming to penetrate the heavy, overlying effects of the fog.

"If you're going to be a facetious swine the entire time," Callum grinned, holding his reigns tightly, "then yes."

"Fine, fine," Anders shrugged, "I'll keep the insults to a minimum. Are you really coming with us all of the way? It's going to take a fair while you understand."

"I think I realised that, thank you very much," Callum said, "but I may not be able to keep you company for the entire journey. I can go as far as Perendale. I have some business in Trevis that I've been meaning to attend to. So all in all this seems like our meeting was fortuitous in more ways than one."

The sound of Sigurðr clopping up beside them both was a little wake up call to Anders. He looked to his left and found Hawke's disapproving stare settled on Callum.

"What do you want?" was all Hawke asked in a barely civil tone.

There was an awkward silence, during which Callum looked at Anders with what the mage could only describe as affectionate disapproval. The tall man shook his head and let out a low, breathy chuckle.

"You didn't tell him anything, did you," Callum said to Anders, his tone betraying his words as a statement and not a question.

Guilty as charged, Anders thought with a wince. In truth he had thought the likelihood of Callum agreeing to join them on their expedition was fairly low; low enough that bothering Hawke with the idea seemed idiotic. In other words he hadn't wanted to start another argument over something that would very likely not happen anyway. There had been enough of a bad feeling between himself and Hawke recently without pointlessly feeding the flames of dissent. However, now that the unlikely situation had come to pass, Anders found himself at somewhat of a disadvantage.

"Can you blame me for thinking it unnecessary?" Anders said with a sigh, noting Hawke's confusion, "In all honesty I really didn't think you would turn up."

"Excuse me, can someone explain exactly what is going on here?" Hawke butted in, "And make damn sure that it isn't what I think it is?"
Unfortunately for the Champion of Kirkwall, this was one time that he would not be getting his way. No matter his love for the man who was now staring at him with accusation in his eyes, Anders was more than ready to stick to his decision.

The Vimmark Mountains were now almost completely lost from sight, shrouded as they were in the slowly lifting morning mist and falling into the background beyond Cumberland's stubby peninsula. They were replaced by the long, low, rolling hills of Arlesans, spotted with the remnants of the heavy snow fall and covered in thick, rough heather and scrub grass. The landscape was a mix of beauty and the wasted, desolateness of winter. Skeleton trees and bleak colours, heavy rivers brown with peat and swampy paths of slushy, half melted snow.

The lack of conversation didn't help of course. It was as it had been before, on the two days travel from Cumberland to Val Chevin; Callum would talk endlessly, Anders would remains polite and civil and Hawke would stay stonily silent. Only this time he did not have the excuse of being too ill to talk. Now it was simply down to a childish huff, as far as Anders was concerned, and Hawke's quiet was beginning to grate against his nerves.

It was a five day journey to the next town of Montfort and on the way the trio were forced to camp out in the rough by the road or find shelter as they could in any small villages they passed. The landscape had quickly devolved into a rolling heath, flanked by the Arlesans hills on one side and by the start of the Nahashin marshes on the other. The flat grasslands were easier to traverse than the uneven roads in the Free Marches, yet the low land was prone to damp and wet which made it hard to find a suitable campsite and left the adventurers open to the wind and rain as the unpredictable weather continued to assault them.

"Just how long are you planning on acting this way?" Anders asked as Hawke settled beside him in their tent.

It was the fourth night of their journey and the third out in the rough. They had left the comfort of the small village of Rouix behind them, which had been merely a short detour but a very hospitable one. Hawke had not said a word of thanks to Callum, who had been the one to suggest stopping by the village where, he had informed them, he had previously stayed with a young widowed woman who ran a guest house of sorts. Anders had asked no further questions where the young, widowed woman had turned out to be very happy to see Callum again. Now, lying on the slightly damp furs in a cold tent with the wind howling outside and bending the thick canvas back and forth, he missed the warm blanket by the fireplace where he had spent the night with Hawke at his back.

"I don't know what you mean," Hawke replied to Anders accusation, his tone deep and final.

"I mean how long are you going to act like a bloody mute," Anders clarified, trying his best to make out where Hawke's face was in the darkness; he was aware that he was being loud and that Callum, who was a mere few feet away in his own small tent, could probably hear them but hoped that the high winds would keep their conversation as private as it could be.

"I don't want to talk to him and I'm not going to be coerced into it by you or anyone else," Hawke replied after a short, terse pause, "you made the decision and I let it slide, that's all there is to say."

"Oh you let it slide, did you?" Anders said slowly and scornfully.

"Damn it Anders, don't start, I'm not fighting about this," Hawke said gruffly, "if I'd wanted a fight then I would have started one the minute you told me you had invited the rival for my affections."

"He isn't a rival for your bloody affections Hawke," Anders said in exasperation, shifting around
awkwardly and feeling for the rogue's face in the dark; once he had found it, with Hawke hissing as he poked his finger into the man's eye, he slipped his hands around his bearded cheeks and held him as gently as his irritation would allow, "listen to me. I invited Callum because I enjoy his company and, practically, because you can never have too many mages around in a fight, if it comes to that. I did *not* bring him along to turn you back into a jealous pig."

Anders felt Hawke's own hands struggle out from under their fur blanket and fumble out to grab Anders' shoulders. He hauled Anders closer with a few swift jerks and groped up towards his throat.

"I am not being jealous," Hawke finally growled after his bumbling movements were over.

"Could have fooled me," Anders said, rolling his eyes even thought he knew Hawke could not see it.

"I just don't like not being consulted about important things," Hawke said tightly, "like who is journeying with us and whether or not they plan on shagging you up against a tree once my back is turned."

"I thought you said you weren't jealous," Anders said dryly.

"...Sorry," Hawke eventually ground out after a long pause during which the wind shook the tent violently, "look, I...trust you, I do Anders it's just you make it so bloody difficult sometimes."

The mage shivered as a quick draft slipped under the blanket and around the small of his back. He shifted closer again until he was pressed fully against Hawke's heavily clothed form.

"Stop it Hawke," Anders said, feeling a little guilty despite himself, "I know that I may not always give you the best reasons to believe in me but please understand that I love you more than...than my own life, Hawke. However, sometimes you make that bloody difficult too."

One of the hands on his shoulders shifted jerkily down his chest before sliding over his waist and curling protectively around him. Hawke leaned forwards and fumbled a kiss against Anders' forehead. For a moment the mage wasn't sure whether it was meant to have been on his mouth or not, until the kisses began trailing down his face, as if blindly searching for his lips.

"I could help you with that you know," Anders said with a hint of laughter in his tone, "if you're trying to apologise."

"I'm just trying to kiss you," Hawke groused against his cheek, "apology wasn't really the top of my list. Unless we're in this together?"

"When has it ever been otherwise?" Anders whispered before lifting his head and capturing Hawke's dry, chapped lips.

Taking part in a dual apology was fair enough but initiating it was still somewhat irritating. He knew Hawke's pride was a handicap the man could not rid himself of but still, he hated being the bigger man all of the time.

Soon, as he continued to ponder, Hawke swiftly slipped his eager tongue into his mouth. Anders started as the rogue's deft hands slid down into his clothes, long fingers cold against the warm flesh of his behind. It was a short struggle to do so but Anders quickly forced them apart.

"Oi, what kind of apology is this exactly?" Anders asked strongly.
"Quite a good one, I thought," Hawke said, his humorous tone belying the worry beneath.

"Oh here we go," Ander said in vexation, "going to fuck me to show you're still in control of me, are you?"

"What? No!" Hawke rebutted instantly, "Why do you always jump to that conclusion?"

"Because otherwise it would be a huge coincidence that after every time we fight about you being jealous you feel the need to claim me afterwards," Anders bit out, "and don't deny it Hawke, I'm not a moron and neither are you. You know fine well what you are doing."

"And so what if I do want to be close to you?" Hawke said back, "Is that wrong now?"

"Of course it isn't," Anders said as calmly as he could manage, "but still I want to know that you aren't doing this to prove that you love me. You're doing it because you love me."

The hand at his waist squeezed tighter and Hawke shifted uncomfortably, or at least what Anders assumed was uncomfortably. It may simply have been a tree root digging into his side for all Anders knew.

"You think so lowly of me," Hawke said, his voice almost lost under another gust of wind.

"No, no," Anders tried to clarify, "I just...please Hawke, you need to understand this. I am yours, always, and I accept you in return but I do not in any way belong to you. I am not yours to claim, just as I do not lay claim to you either. We are together through love, not...not ownership."

"...You really do say the most righteous things sometimes," Hawke said suddenly, his light tone trying too hard to cover the vitriol beneath, "and in all honesty sometimes I find it difficult to know who I'm talking to."

Anders blanched and, instinctively, pushed away from the man before him. Hawke's words were too close to his own fears for him not to react. That Justice was too close, that he was insinuating himself into his waking life without Anders ever realising it was happening. The cold returned as he sat up and, even as he felt Hawke grab at him and say something he didn't quite catch, he pushed his way out of the tent and into the dark blackness of the night. The cold hit him like a punch to the gut. He curled instinctively in on himself and did something that forced him to realise his own hypocrisy. He ran.

"Where do you think you're..!" Hawke's voice was lost to the stormy winds and Anders quickly hurried forwards, his feet slipping against the ground and the chill cold whipping against his face and sucking the heat from his clothes.

What are you doing? He thought as he took a wrong step in the dark and felt his foot hitting water, the freezing liquid rushing into his right boot. He hauled it back and stumbled onwards. The clouds above briefly flew apart to reveal the wide, full moon above, bathing everything in a faint, silvery light. Despite this Anders still rushed against the tree before him, the thorny twigs scratching at his face and hands. Only then did he stop and come to his senses.

"Fuck," he thought angrily, slamming his hands against the black bark, the clouds once more swooping together to swallow the moonlight, "fuck, fuck, fuck!"

The rough, icy bark of the gnarled tree raked against his cold palms, tearing at the flesh. Anders hissed and pulled them back, letting out a brief flare of healing magic, a green light illuminating his surroundings.
"Is this what you want Justice?" Ander spat into the darkness, his voice rising as he continued, "Is this it? You'll drive me from all those I hold dear and we'll be left alone? Alone? Only it won't be you alone, will it? It'll be me! I'll be the one left abandoned with nothing left but this fucking cause to drive me forwards!"

Anders growled in frustration, spinning around so as to put his back to the wind. It thrust him forwards a few paces and he curled his arms around himself. Another brief pass of moonlight highlighted the scrubby vegetation and rough heather, the small, dark puddles of marsh water and the bright, luminous snow. Anders shook his head and screwed his eyes shut.

"Of course that is what you want," Anders said to himself derisively, "of course it is. You want me to be just like you. You want to suck all of the humanity out of me until I turn utterly into Justice, walking around spouting honourable and virtuous nonsense! Don't you see, can't you understand that all you are doing is pushing yourself further from your goal. We need friends Justice, we can't do this on our own! I thought you'd figured that out already!"

Silence but for the howling of the wind over the heath and shifting of grass and rippling water. Anders realised that he was standing, in the middle of nowhere without his staff and freezing cold, talking to himself. Well, not exactly to himself but Justice was suspiciously quiet considering Anders' own anger. His voice was quiet and weak as he continued, folding in on himself.

"I can't go on like this Justice," Anders said softly, shaking his head and opening his eyes to the blackness, "I can't. Please just...I know you're frustrated, I know you're angry, believe me I know, but this is too much."

Then the darkness shifted. He thought he could distinguish the subtle sound of footsteps and clothes rustling. The wind died down momentarily and Anders, in a panic, cupped his hand and released a small orb light spell into the air. The light floated up and hovered around his head like a firefly. Hawke's face was illuminated, pale like a ghost and panting from exertion. Anders was given a moment to stare before Hawke lunged forwards and grabbed him tightly, an odd mix of angry grappling and a worried hug.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Hawke shouted in his ear, "You can't just rush off like that!"

"I'm...I'm sorry Hawke, I..." Anders leaned into Hawke's embrace and tried to take as little comfort from it as he could.

"Not now, come on, let's get back to the tent for Maker's sake," Hawke said quickly.

They walked back together, Hawke's arm securely around Anders' waist, steering him as the soft orb light lit their path.

"I'm sorry Hawke," Anders muttered into the rogue's ear as the tents came back into view.

"Please, not right now," Hawke said tiredly, "I'm tired, I'm cold and I just want to get inside."

"Hawke, I can't, I'm sorry, I can't keep going like this," Anders tried to put strength into his words but all that emerged was a whisper.

A whisper which was lost as the wind blew the words from his mouth and scattered them into the air.

They were almost to Montfort when Callum finally pulled him aside.
It was a bleak day, the sky overcast with thick, bright, grey clouds which covered the entire aspect. The stormy winds had all but blown themselves out but it had left the air colder than it had been, bitter and biting. The hills were giving way fully to the open heath, the Fields of Ghislain appearing as a vast, sprawling wasteland rolling off towards the horizon. They had stopped for a quick rest by a milestone cairn, declaring it twenty five miles to Montfort. The horses were lying on a small patch of grass beside the road while the dogs mooched around Hawke as he ate the dried meat Leliana had supplied them and some, admittedly sour, wild buckthorn berries Anders had found that morning on a few sparse shrubs.

Anders had taken advantage of, what looked like, the last of the trees for some time, a few rugged pines, and relieved himself. Luckily, after making sure his clothes were in order, he discovered a small stream running down from the hills to feed the vast marsh which was becoming ever more apparent. It was as he bent down to fill his water canteen that a hand descended on his shoulder.

"Oh, sorry!" the man who had surprised him shouted as he made a quick dash along the riverbank to retrieve the wayward canteen as it bobbed and skipped along the clear, flowing water; Anders watched Callum closely as he slowed his rapidly beating heart and stood up. Soon the taller man was jogging back to him, handing him the cold, wet bottle, "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Then why on earth did you creep up behind me without announcing yourself?" Anders said as he grabbed the bottle from Callum's hand, slid the cork back into the neck and secured the fastenings; he watched the taller man warily, "And just how long have you been standing there anyway?"

"I don't know what you mean," Callum shrugged but he moved on far too quickly for Anders' liking, "anyway, I'd been hoping to get you alone at some point."

The grass squashed considerably underfoot as Anders tried his best to navigate his way back to the road, staying to the myriad of tiny hillocks created by rocks and thick grass, in between which lay soggy and squelchy ground. He heard Callum follow.

"Why is that?" Anders said after a moment's silence.

"Oh, well, just wanted to check that you're alright really," Callum said breezily, "you just seem a little on edge that's all."

Anders jumped to the next hillock, a large flat mound of grass, and stopped suddenly to round on Callum. Unfortunately for the taller man he had been following Anders very closely and, on being forced to stop so suddenly, could do nothing but flail his arms and take a step back. The squelching, sucking sound was unmistakable as Callum's foot hit the boggy earth. The taller mage looked down with disgust at his submerged foot and Anders winced, knowing how vile a feeling it was to have your boot filled with freezing, scummy water.

"Sorry!" he said quickly, reaching forward to take hold of Callum's hand and pull him up onto the hillock on which he stood; it was wide, yes, but with them both balancing on its surface the space became suddenly small and cramped. Anders swallowed as Callum placed a hand on his side to keep them both steady, "come on, let's get to the trees, it's drier there."

At the small clump of heavy set fir trees they were still far enough from Hawke not to be overheard and, because of the trees, mostly hidden. Anders felt Callum's hand on his arm just as he made to quit the trees and head back to Hawke and the animals.

"Wait," Callum said entreatingly, "please, Anders, I meant what I said."
Anders turned back to him slowly, with a defeated sigh, and looked to the other mage wearily. Being alone with the man he was still finding it difficult not to want while he tried his best to hold himself together was not exactly what he was in the mood for. Anders folded his arms and tried to focus on something else, like the jarring, luscious green of the fir trees in comparison to the smatterings of snow nearby.

"Look, you may think I'm an idiot," Callum started, "but I'm not..."

"When have I ever called you an idiot?" Anders butted in despite himself.

"Well you act like I might be, sometimes," Callum shrugged and let out a long, slow sigh; he rubbed at his face, "all I want to know is that you are well."

"You heard us fighting the other night," Anders said, deadpan, "didn't you."

"Yes," Callum admitted, "but that's not the only reason I'm asking. I mean I heard what you were saying, hard not to considering you were shouting it at the top of your lungs most of the time but...you sounded a little manic Anders. Are you sure that you're feeling alright, what with, well, what with..."

"What with being an abomination?" Anders asked tonelessly.

"That wasn't what I was going to say," Callum frowned.

"But it's what you meant, wasn't it?" Anders said, his tone unwavering.

I should be used to this, Anders thought sadly, I should be more used to people taking this badly. Yet instead they've sheltered me from it for so long, Hawke, Merrill, Varric, even Aveline to an extent. Only Fenris has ever been truly wary of my nature. They've all grown to accept me but, even though it has helped me to accept who I am, it has also led me to forget exactly how dangerous that is. That I am a treacherous being and I need to be wary of myself at all times. I can't grow too complacent or...or something very bad might happen. I need to be vigilant. Maker, Anders thought with a shiver, I sound like a bloody templar.

"Look, I'm alright," Anders said as he watched Callum fidget and search for words to express himself properly, "I may have been a bit upset the other night but, well, it wasn't all down to Justice. I was just airing some grudges, I suppose. Anyway, look, your concern is appreciated, really, but I'm fine."

Considering Callum's unamused face Anders was quite sure he didn't sound half as convincing as he had hoped he did. The taller man took a step closer and stared hard at the smaller mage, his deep blue eyes locked intently with Anders' own. Callum watched him in silence, time seeming to stretch out as Anders became lost in his stare. He was pulled back only by Callum's voice.

"You're afraid," he said grimly, "aren't you."

It was difficult to form a reply. Truthfully Anders didn't want to think about it, which was probably the main reason he found it so hard to deny it. He found that anger was the only way to summon enough courage to form such a lie and make it believable. It came so easily, the hot, flowing rage, that he almost couldn't tell where it had stemmed from at all.

"Oh you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Anders spat, making Callum flinch slightly and his eyes widen in shock, "like me to be afraid so you can comfort me again, is that it? You're all the same, all so bloody predictable! Why are you even here, hmm? Hoping for something on the side, is that it? You're all the same!"
Right, Anders thought, that's right! All the same, all wanting something because no one would ever do anything for you if they didn't want something in return. Who would ever do something for someone as worthless as you! He turned his back on the stricken mage took a few, long, determined strides back towards their makeshift camp. It was as he took the third that the shock of his own thoughts hit him like a splash of cold water to the face. He faltered and stumbled before standing still altogether.

Maker, Anders thought heavily, what is happening to me?

"I didn't mean to make you angry," he heard Callum say; Anders lifted his hand to his head and rubbed at his forehead, feeling the building tension quickly transforming into a headache.

"No, don't apologise," Anders said tightly, not moving when Callum walked slowly to his side, "I was...out of order. I'm sorry, I didn't mean what I said. I was just..."

Callum watched him with open eyes, his expression almost encouraging him to continue. Anders swallowed and took a deep breath, hoping he wasn't making a huge mistake in letting too much slip.

"...afraid," Anders admitted, letting his held breath out with a rough sigh, shaking his head and looking away again, "not that there's much I can do about that."

"Don't say that," Callum said, his tone doing little to hide his vexation, "I thought I already told you that you're stronger than you think you are."

"I know that," Anders said, splaying his hands in a sign of helplessness, "but it doesn't make it any easier. Justice is still a part of me and, I don't know but...somehow I get this odd feeling that he knows me better than I ever realised. Not that I thought there was anyone who knew me better but still, I think he might be using that to his advantage now. I think that he may be closer to me than I could ever have known possible, or maybe me to him, oh I don't know!"

Anders let out a short sound of disgust and threw his hands up in the air before placing them on his hips, pacing back and forth while Callum watched.

"Doesn't help that I can't get a decent night's sleep..." he muttered as he walked.

"You've been having bad dreams?" Callum asked speculatively.

"I was going to say because of this awful terrain," Anders said with a snort, "but yes, you are right. My sleep hasn't exactly been undisturbed lately."

"Want to talk about it?" Callum suggested in an off-handed manner.

The urge to tell him was rather vicious in its intensity. Are you mocking me now? Anders thought angrily as Justice slid around beneath his thoughts. He felt watched, scrutinised. So now you want me to talk, is that it? Maker I don't even know anymore. Is it me thinking this or is it you? I don't want to be afraid of you Justice, it's the last thing I want.

"Maybe later," Anders said in what he hoped was a convincing tone; Callum smiled at him but it didn't quite reach his eyes, "when we're clean and warm and well fed, maybe then."

"And with a drink down us?" Callum's smile etched itself a few millimetres higher; Anders felt his anxiety lessen slightly, glad to feel a little of the tension leave his shoulders and rigid spine.

"if you can find something strong enough," Anders shrugged, smiling as charmingly as he could
"I'm sure I could," Callum said as they both began wandering back towards Hawke and the road, shaking his sodden foot to fling off as much water as possible, "I find I have a knack for finding people's hidden stashes."

"All strictly legal of course," Anders grinned.

"Of course!" Callum said, his smile now bright with its usual genuine beauty.

Anders laughed, the feeling shaking off the shroud of anger and fear that he had found covering him for far too long. I have to believe in myself, Anders thought as Hawke looked up as they approached, I have to trust in us all or there is no chance for me.

For any of us.
Hunted

Chapter Notes

Translation for the 'Orlesian' (ehem, French) can be found at the end of the chapter. I hope it is acceptable, my French flatmate translated for me and he has already confessed he is bad at French (despite being French!), so I can blame him if it is wrong!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Montfort appeared on a cold, windy, early evening; dark, high walls surrounded the raised fort town, with a large portcullis gate held open as folk passed in and out of the city. Anders had been in anticipation of seeing it for an hour before they finally arrived, what with the surrounding countryside transforming from rolling heath into barren farms and smaller settlements, their dirt track paths leading like tributaries into the proud line of the Imperial Highway.

The city itself had none of the welcoming charm that Val Chevin had displayed. It was obvious even as they trotted through the gate, once more admitted by Hawke's sanctioned papers and given directions to the nearest inn by the gate guard, that Montfort was a city built upon a city. The opulent Orlesian architecture of delicate, sprawling archways, neat two storey buildings and small, tidy walled gardens, all built of pale Nevaran stone, seemed as if it were physically trying to strangle out the dark, gothic architecture lying just beneath. Anders could see it immediately, perhaps because he had seen so many renditions of Tevinter structural design in book after book that he had appropriated from the Circle library. The twisting towers of the church they passed as they walked their horses into the main square may have been gilt in gold but the twisted spires and dark, hanging gargoyles revealed their true origins. That Orlais tries so hard to deny the mere existence of the Tevinter Imperium is perhaps never so obvious as here, Anders thought as he let the reigns go slack, allowing Bryn to follow Sigurðr's lead, allowing him to take a closer look at his surroundings.

The city was mainly flat, as far as he could see through the narrow alleyways and behind buildings, apart from a steeply rising hill at its centre which was ringed by a high wall. Anders supposed that it was the residence of the city's Lord and, perhaps, all that was left of the original town when it had been nothing but a fort.

"Have you ever been here before?" he turned in the saddle to ask Callum; the taller man was also taking stock of the city, his horse plodding dolefully forwards as the dogs stuck close to their master's heels.

"No, not once," Callum said distractedly, his gaze finally settling on Anders, "I've never been this far north before to be honest."

"You haven't?" Anders frowned, "But I thought you knew that woman in Rouix."

"I do know her but that's basically as far as I have been," Callum admitted, "actually I've travelled more in the South than anywhere else."

"So you've never been to Trevis?" Anders felt a little daunted on Callum's behalf, turning back so as to spur Bryn on and catch up to Hawke as they turned into a street off of the main square; it was
thick with people, churning together like a living river despite the cold air and dreary weather. There was a stubby statue of a man riding a prancing horse in the centre of the small plaza, ringed by a low stone wall. The waning sunlight glinted off of the statue as it gestured up towards the sky mutely. The only other noticeable landmark was the looming of a tall cathedral which sat a little away from the square, yet had a rather impressive and wide pathway leading to its front. The building was, unsurprisingly, built of the same dark stone as the Tevinter architecture he had seen. It was an odd thing, he thought as they rode through the square, to think that a Chantry stood here that would have once practiced the ways of the Imperium.

"Never," he heard Callum reply once they were through the busy square.

"So how do you plan to get there?" Anders couldn't help but ask, swivelling round once more in his saddle.

"Oh I have a knack for finding my way," Callum answered vaguely, "anyway it wouldn't be the first time I've trekked to some place I've never even stepped foot in, on my own-watch out Anders!"

The mage jerked around and pulled Bryn to a halt suddenly, causing the horse to whinny and take two uncoordinated and dangerous steps backwards. Anders reined her in and looked around him in a panic, hoping he wouldn't find anyone injured. Thankfully no one appeared to be hurt and, after the small disturbance had passed, everyone around them simply continued walking by; however, as Anders turned back in his saddle to walk forwards once more, he was greeted with the sullen face of an old woman carrying a large box of apples. Her dirty blond hair fell thinly from her head and down over her shoulders, on which hung a grey, ill-fitting dress. She scowled at Anders heatedly before continuing on her way out into the flow of people in the street. Anders slowed his heartbeat, which had skipped up into his throat at Callum's sudden warning. The taller mage brought his horse around to Anders' side and patted him roughly on the shoulder.

"Alright there?" he asked, face pulled into a kindly smile.

"I'm fine," Anders breathed out, laughing a little nervously and shaking his head, "come on, let's keep going."

'La Tour de l'alchimiste' was an impressive building if nothing else, although Anders' initial thoughts were that it looked more like an attraction than an inn. It was at least five stories high, a slim, round tower complete with murder holes, slim windows and topped with jagged crenelations. The whole debacle was built against the side of a large, grey wall which seemed to fence off the important part of the city that rose as a hill in the centre. The tower itself crept up the side of this natural rise akin to a snail climbing a wall, the dark grey rock it was built from glinting in the low light. The three men took their horses to the large stables situated to the tower's right, under an overhang in the cliff wall.

"Stay," Callum said authoritatively and yet affectionately to the two dogs, shepherding them beside the horses as the large beasts shifted back and forth on their hoofed feet; as he turned to leave it was to the shuffling of paws. Of course, when Callum looked back, it was Sascha who had crawled forwards, now lying three feet from where she had been ordered to stay, "oi, come on girl," Callum knelt down again, ruffling both of his hands through the thick fur behind the dog's ears, "I know most places don't like animals in the rooms but, for you, I'll see if they'll make an exception. Deal?"

Sascha let out a loud bark and swished her tail half heartedly across the hay strewn floor.

"Couldn't have picked anywhere more ostentatious, I suppose," Anders smirked at Hawke as he pulled his belongings from Bryn and hauled them up onto his back.
"Says the man who complains if he's not sleeping on the silk sheets at home," Hawke said, a slight smile gracing his face.

"I do not!" Anders said back, scandalised and affronted.

"Whatever you say, my dear," Hawke replied airily.

It was perhaps a testament to how worried Anders was that he took Hawke's term of endearment entirely to heart, letting it warm him up from the inside. Saying that they had been rather distant with each other since leaving Val Chevin was unfortunately a thinly veiled threat; they were pretending that everything which had happened had only caused a slight separation of thoughts and feelings, an undercurrent of constant, itching anxiety. Thus, at that moment, any affection from Hawke made Anders scrabble forwards to receive it. So lost was he in Hawke's oddly warm words that he jumped slightly on feeling Callum's hand place itself at the small of his back while they walked to the entrance. Thankfully Hawke had already entered through the door as the action was so sudden and unexpected that Anders didn't have the wherewithal to remove it.

"After you," Callum said, guiding him gently through the door; Anders was ashamed of the perfunctory blush on his cheeks, caused by the oddly chivalrous and yet intimate action. He shook his head and entered the inn, clearing his throat loudly.

Hawke had already wound his way through what looked like a lively pub, a fair contrast to the grim, grey day and unfriendly faces outside. The large, round room was decked out with no less than twenty tables, closely packed with six chairs to each, most of which were already full. The walls were lit up with ornate candelabras, holding large, dripping white candles, and each table was also thus adorned. It gave the pub, which was basically built of heavy, grey stone covered in some long, rather worse for wear tapestries to cover the draughty windows, a very cheery and comforting atmosphere. Not only comforting but alive with the thick, rich, diverse accents of the Orlesian region. Anders couldn't stop himself from smiling softly as drunken and sober men and women regaled their companions with unintelligible words which he drank in happily.

There was a long, well polished bar opposite the entranceway where a young woman with a rather impressive bust, contained within a tight, low cut, frilled black and white dress, was absently polishing a glass and staring into space. Anders made for the bar as he felt Callum close at his back. When he finally reached it Hawke was already speaking to the young woman and, despite his rather jumpy attitude, he couldn't help but stifle a laugh. The woman was speaking very fast in Orlesian, a string of words which were as indistinguishable to himself as he was sure they were to Hawke.

"Ah monsieur, bienvenue!" she said in a rather perky manner, her eyes lighting up as they gave a startled Hawke a quick once over, smiling appreciatively, "Voulez-vous quelque choses à boire...?"

"Je suis désolé, mademoiselle," Hawke said in a rather forced Orlseian accent, holding his hands up to stop her as he continued slowly, "Je ne parle pas encore très bien le orlàis. Parlez-vous King's Tongue?"

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"Yes, that would be wonderful," Hawke sighed in relief, visibly relaxing as soon as he was no longer under the pressure of speaking the foreign tongue, "three if you have them."
Well at least he's got the hang of keeping a low profile, Anders thought with relief, even if it does mean I'll have to sneak into his room during the night. The thought made him smile.

"Well you're out of luck there, my friends," the girls said with a shrug, "I'm afraid we are rather busy as you can see. There is only one room left, at the top of the tower, but it is big, two beds. All I can offer."

"Then that's fine, we'll take whatever we can get," Hawke said quickly, although his eyes flashed to Callum as he said it, "is there any food being served?"

"Ramona is the cook, I'll ask her if she can prepare dinner for three," the girl said, lifting her hand and flicking her slim wrist in the direction of a small side door, through which Anders assumed the kitchens were housed, "you three go up to your room and I'll sort all of these things for you. Just take those stairs over there, follow them all the way to the top, on you go."

"Should I not pay for the..?" Hawke started but was interrupted almost immediately.

"I said on you go now," the girl flounced with a saucy smile, standing up and placing her hands on her hips, making her bosom bounce in such a fascinating way that Anders couldn't help but stare, "you come back down and see me in a little while, beau, and we will work everything out."

Anders only came to himself when a heavy hand descended on his shoulder and a string of hot, wet words trailed into his ear.

"You do know it's rude to stare, don't you?" Callum said, his voice low and sultry.

"I...!" Anders started badly and looked up to find the barmaid watching him with open amusement; he felt his cheeks redden for the second time since entering the inn; this is ridiculous, he thought in annoyance, "Pardon, pardon."

The girl waved his apology away and laughed, her eyes falling quickly on Callum as Anders moved away from the bar in embarrassment. Callum's hand followed his movements, stalling him slightly as he tried his best to weave through the tables. Thus he managed to catch their brief conversation, not that he understood a word of it.

"Je m'excuse pour mon ami," Callum said in an exquisite Orlesian accent which stopped him dead in his tracks; well, well, the man had kept that one quiet.

"Ah, tu parle Orlais," she smiled.

"Ouais mademoiselle," Callum inclined his head charmingly.

"Étes-vous occupé ce soir?" she replied, making Callum laugh softly and yet appreciatively.

"Malheureusement, je suis pris," Callum said, lifting his free hand in a conciliatory fashion.

"Ce la vie," the girl sighed, before quickly flicking her eyes between Callum and Anders, focusing on where Callum's hand still gripped Anders' shoulder and once more smiled saucily, "ah, êtes-vous avec lui?"

"Non, non," Callum said with a grin and a wink, "mais j'aimerais bien!"

Anders would not lie, he was completely nonplussed when the girl began laughing and eyeing the two of them in a far more interested light. Callum simply turned back to him, taking in his confused expression, and gently nudged him forwards. Anders complied, mainly because he felt a
little uncomfortable, as if he had most definitely been talked about without his knowledge, and he was now itching to know what on earth Callum had been saying. He stayed quiet, however, as they both ascended the long, winding, circular staircase that led them up and up the inside of the tower. By the time they reached top Anders was out of breath. The door was already open and he hurried inside to drop his heavy bags onto the floor. The barmaid had been right about the room being big.

It was almost pitch dark, however, and Anders walked in to where he could see Hawke fumbling around, trying to find a light. He reached him just as the other man picked up a candle. Anders smiled and placed a hand on Hawke's hip to steady him as the man gasped in surprise at Anders' sudden appearance.

"Don't do that love," Hawke let out a chuff of breath; Anders smiled and brought up his free hand to summon a tiny flame to light the candle.

Hawke's face flickered into being, his green eyes dark and intent in the lambent light. Anders felt a thrill shiver down his spine at that look and, even as Hawke moved away to begin lighting the other candles, he couldn't tell if it was from pleasure or fear. There were two large, double beds against each side of the circle, facing each other, each complete with a bedside cabinet, and on the side opposite the door stood a large, unlit fireplace and a long table with a few chairs stacked beside it. The roof was flat and hung with thick canvass like material, against which Anders could see spots of damp. The walls were adorned with unlit candelabras and there were candles on a writing desk by the door. Thankfully there were rugs haphazardly overlaying the stone floor and the two windows, one beside each bed, looked secure enough. All in all, despite living in a far more grandiose room in the Amell manor with Hawke, Anders couldn't help but find it extravagant.

"I wonder how much they are going to charge me for this?" Hawke said with a shake of his head as he placed the candle back on the small bedside cabinet.

"Well, look on the bright side," Anders said with a shrug as he flopped down onto the nearest bed, already revelling in the soft, thick mattress, "it's only for one night."

"That's the bright side?" Callum said humorously, "I'd much prefer staying here to ever going back in that damnable tent again."

"Which can be arranged," Hawke said with a closed lipped smile and hard eyes while he squatted down to rummage through his knapsack.

"Hawke," Anders said warningly before pushing himself up on his elbows and looking over to Callum, "so, who wants a drink then?"

The taller man's eyes practically lit up. He quickly walked over to the other unclaimed bed and stripped off his heavy travelling coat and the thin jumper beneath, leaving him in a thick, worn shirt and tight-waisted travelling trousers. Anders did his best to appraise Callum's form subtly, a quick flash of memory worming its way under his skin; Callum answering the door to his room at the Cumberland inn, his toned body revealed under the flickering candlelight. Anders shook his head abruptly and cleared his throat. Callum was watching him subtly but keenly.

"I'm ready when you are, my friend," the taller man said boldly.

"I'll, um, I mean..." Anders faltered, eyes flickering to Hawke as the other man stood up with a canteen in his hand, opening it and taking a long drink; he found himself suddenly mesmerised by the long, elegant curve of Hawke's neck as he tilted his head back to finish the canteen completely, his adam's apple bobbing up and down; he looked back to Callum with a forced smile, "you go on
ahead, I just want to get changed out of these dirty clothes."

"Alright, Callum shrugged with a cheeky smile, "but I hope you aren't too long, I don't have that much coin to spare so I was hoping you'd treat me to a drink or two."

"Oh I would be honoured," Anders said sarcastically, feeling a swift itch under his skin as he waited for Callum to leave.

"Oh and I have to check about the dogs," Callum murmured to himself as he walked through the door, stooping so as not to bang his head on the low arch.

It was as he looked back to Hawke, the other man almost silhouetted against the candles behind him, that he realised just how incredibly aroused he really was. Whether it be from Callum's intimate gestures earlier, the exquisite Orlesian accents he had heard surrounding him or even Hawke's endearing terms and intense stares, Anders knew not and, at that moment, he didn't really care. Perhaps it's something to do with not having had any satisfying sex since Perendale, he thought caustically. Even their brief coupling at Val Chevin had been rushed and filled with underlying tension and unease. Anders pushed the idea away as he sat up. Never mind why, he thought, feeling his heart rate increasing, just act. The thought rankled somehow, even as he called out Hawke's name to get the man's attention. Wasn't this what he said he didn't want? Anders sat down on the bed and tried to ignore his own thoughts.

"Hawke?" Anders said, his voice low.

"Mmm?" Hawke replied as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, looking to Anders though the dim light.

Anders simply lifted his hand in a loose fist and curled his forefinger back and forth slowly, beckoning Hawke closer. The other man walked over to Anders with a soft frown under his loose, dark fringe. Once he was standing before Anders, who was half sitting, half reclining on the bed, propped up on one elbow, he finally voiced his question.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked, eyebrows raising a little as Anders reached up with his free arm and took hold of the front of Hawke's shirt, pulling him gently forwards until he was forced to place his hands on the duvet, either side of Anders' hips, to stay upright.

"Well I was hoping you might," Anders said, looking up at Hawke through his thick lashes.

"Eh?" Hawke said, blinking and looking slightly startled.

"Do I really have to spell it out for you?" Anders said with a hint of annoyance as he deftly began to unbutton Hawke's shirt with one hand.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" Hawke said, his frown still in place as he reached down to stall Anders' efforts, "Bloody hell Anders, can you blame me? The last time I tried anything you screamed at me before damn well near running into a bog in the pitch dark!"

"I didn't..!" Anders immediately started to protest, his face marred with a betrayed expression; that was before he realised that Hawke's words were not that far from the truth and, from Hawke's point of view, were probably entirely accurate, "I did say I was sorry about that," he added softly, avoiding Hawke's eyes.

"Which I...already accepted," Hawke said, hesitantly, his gaze leaving Anders' face and wandering away to a spot above the mage's head; he began quickly doing up the undone buttons on his shirt, "look. I preferred your other suggestion. Let's go downstairs and get a drink. I could use something
strong and bitter."

The two adjectives held unfortunate connotations for Anders' current view of their relationship. He let go of Hawke's shirt as the other man leaned back, his eyes focusing on the space where Hawke had stood, watching the darkness absently. He felt the hollow space inside his loose fist and wished that his thoughts weren't so taciturn. He knew, on some level, that his mood swings were becoming entirely impossible to entertain. I would be angry if Hawke were as back and forth in his wants as I am now, Anders thought as he sat up, placing his palms against the duvet beneath him and hating the aching quiver in his muscles, the pent up energy searching for release.

"Aren't you coming?" Hawke's voice cut through his dark thoughts; Anders looked up absently, searching out the other man's face in the dim light.

"Mmm," Anders hummed in agreement, nodding his head, even as he felt every fibre of his being begin to rebel against him; the seemingly indefensible feeling of hatred at Hawke's rejection of his advances, the mixed rationale of petty self-deprecation and ideas of Hawke's own failings...Anders could only smile tightly and force himself to stand, walking with Hawke to the doorway as he tried his best to suppress his own mutinous mind.

"That's incredible," Callum said, shaking his head with a slight drunken waver, "you could make money with that."

Anders smiled softly before pursing his lips in an affectation of annoyance. As with most large towns and cities the pubs only became busier the later it got. It was difficult to hear yourself speak over the raucous noise of the thirty or so other patrons in the room, swilling ale and mead, singing and laughing, jostling and smiling and, occasionally, breaking out into a fight. It would be an understatement to say that Anders was feeling hideously self-conscious and uptight. He felt as if he were itching from the inside any time a warm body knocked into his shoulder or leaned too far back in their chair behind him. Drinking along with his comrades had been his only option. Unfortunate, however, that it had little to no effect.

"Challenge any man to a drinking contest and he would be under the table before you even felt a tingling in your toes," Callum laughed, bringing his flagon his lips for a long, slow swallow.

"It has its advantages," Anders shrugged, "although I also think it's a complete waste of time and money trying to get me drunk."

"It has happened," Hawke cut in conversationally, although his tone so low that it was hard to make him out through the din, "my birthday, remember?"

"Partially," Anders conceded; the reminder didn't help. Thinking about Hawke's disastrous twenty third birthday never did.

"Oh so you can be a lush," Callum said with a grin, "when it suits you."

"It's not me it has to suit," Anders mumbled into his drink while Callum clapped him on the shoulder, laughing, and Hawke watched them tightly out of the corner of his eye.

Justice was his keeper in that respect, just as much as he was the keeper of his rage and his dreams. Although lately, since the mysterious stranger had begun sending their letters, Anders had regained at least that small portion of his old life. A taste of what it had been like to be truly human again. His odd dreams which, to an extent, could be called nightmares, or perhaps simply an odd mix of the two. Still, despite their indistinct nature and sometimes disturbing qualities, Anders appreciated
them for what they represented more than what they portrayed. The pure act of being able to dream was akin to a breath of fresh air in a stagnant room, an inch of freedom that spurred him on even as it worried him. He wasn't sure whose will was greater, his in his want to be free or Justice in his want to judge all humankind for their immorality.

"We need more it seems," Hawke cut into his thoughts; Anders looked up to find him staring into the bottom of his empty glass.

"Well, I got the last lot," Callum shrugged, gulping down the last of his drink, obviously in expectation of the next.

"Funny, I don't remember that," Hawke said, looking to Anders out of the corner of his eye with a subtly annoyed expression.

Clearing his throat, Anders took a sip of his whiskey while sliding his foot forwards under the table to subtly tap Hawke's leg. The rogue's eyes narrowed sharply but he offered no rebuttal or harsh words. Instead he stood, a little unsteady from the drink and the nudging and bumping of other patrons, and made his way towards the bar. Anders sighed and tried his best to feel guilty; his efforts were thwarted when he felt Callum's hand on his arm. Even knowing that it was the touch of a friend did not register with his nerves; he flinched before forcefully settling the anxiety which sprang up inexorably.

"So you," the tall mage started, sitting back in his chair as far as he could without annoying anyone else, "drunk. That sounds interesting."

"Not as much as you'd think," Anders said with a forced smile.

"Now I know you're withholding the truth," Callum shrugged, "that can't possibly be. You're mad enough when you're sober."

"Thanks for that," Anders replied.

He would have said the silence which was left was awkward, if there was any silence to be had. And perhaps it was only Anders that felt uneasy, considering Callum merely continued to watch him, his fingertips tracing the outside of his flagon delicately. The whiskey was bitter and senseless in his mouth, burning as it slid down his throat. I really wish I was drunk, Anders thought, irritated that Justice was seemingly responding more to Callum's attempts at conversation than Anders was himself.

"So you speak Orlesian," Anders started suddenly, trying his best to appease his inner desire for conversation.

"Yes," Callum replied, nodding. "I learned young. The Knight Commander at Starkhaven, Herla, she was a strict woman but not entirely dispassionate about new...recruits. In fact she quite liked to see us busy nearly every minute of every day. If I wasn't with my tutor I was learning something. Orlesian, Antivan, alchemy, astronomy, the history of the Chantry, of the Free Marches, the list is endless. Most of it I don't remember anymore, or just bare facts, but Orlesian was always something I enjoyed."

"Why?" Anders asked, sitting forwards and watching Callum with a little more interest.

"Well, I suppose it's the language of our neighbours, it makes it handy to travel," Callum said.

"So you planned that from a young age then?" Anders said with a short laugh, "Travelling?"
"You bet your arse I did," Callum said enthusiastically, "I mean being stuck in the..!"

Callum stopped short, looking around him before laughing and shaking his head. He leaned forwards on the table, his arms folded atop each other, and lowered his voice conspiratorially. Anders had no choice but to lean in closer to hear him. He could smell the thick, heady scent of ale from Callum's breath and sweat from his shirt. Anders swallowed when he realised he was close enough to see the grey flecks in Callum's deep blue eyes.

"The thought of being stuck in a Circle tower for the rest of my life never suited me," Callum said quietly, "it's not in my blood, or I would use that as an excuse anyway, and Starkhaven is rather more...conservative than Ferelden used to be."

"I've heard that most places are," Anders said sadly, waiting for the inevitable revelations of Starkhaven's cruelty.

"Yes, well, let's just say that I didn't allow myself to be caught very often," Callum said emphatically, lowering his voice when he realised he was becoming too loud; he's had a lot to drink, Anders thought, best make sure he doesn't say anything too incriminating, "managed to stay out for years the second time, but the two times it did happen...weren't pretty."

"Only twice?" Anders' opened his eyes widely, remembering all of the unpleasant punishments he had suffered through over his many attempts at escaping, "Wait, years? What did you do? Destroy your phylactery?"

"Of course I did," Callum said, smiling incredulously, "you mean you didn't? No wonder you were forced to escape so many times, they kept bloody finding you!"

It created a sickening, guilty twist in his gut when he automatically swatted Callum on the arm while the other man laughed, as if they were age old friends. The desire and lust from earlier began to slink slowly from its hidden chamber in his mind, crawling and scratching at his conscious thought, responding to the other mage's penchant for understanding him perfectly. Anders did his best to suppress it. He gave the other mage a tenderly scornful glare.

"It wasn't that simple," Anders said, "our phylactery chamber wasn't only protected by spells, you needed more than one mage to pass through the chambers. I would have needed an accomplice to help me."

"Oh come on," Callum said, smirking and leaning in even further, "don't try to tell me you didn't have any friends."

"Oh I had friends alright," Anders said back, "just not any that agreed with my wanton lust for freedom."

"You have to be joking," Callum scoffed, frowning when Anders just looked at him, "really? No-one else? That has to be bollocks. There must have been one mage among them willing to risk being caught just for the chance to elope with you."

Anders sniffed and shrugged, licking his lips uncomfortably just to feel the tingling sensation of the wetness drying on the sensitive flesh. The sounds of the crowd seemed to be closing in around him, shrinking down the habitable space to the space above the table where he and Callum colluded quietly. I want out, I want out of here; it rolled around and around in the back of his mind along with all the other jumbled thoughts, putting further pressure against his itchy nerves.

"Charmer," Anders said automatically, eyes flicking to the bar to check that Hawke wasn't on his
way back, "but no."

"Hmm," Callum said, watching Anders closely, "so there was never anyone special, eh?"

Anyone special, eh? The comment was harmless. It's harmless, Anders thought dreadfully, it's just a joke, he doesn't mean anything by it; but his own self assurance fell on deaf ears. The increasing sense of claustrophobia mixed inexorably with the sudden and sickening pain and guilt of the memory.

The thick, hot, wet blood coursing over his hand, in which was clutched the dagger. The panted, choking breath in his ear. His knees buckling from beneath him, dropping them both to the ground. His fingers tight in the bulky material of the robes, slick and sweaty. Laying the cooling body down onto the cold ground. Watching the life leaving Karl's eyes and knowing it was he who had stolen it away.

"I didn't say that," Anders most definitely did not want to talk about that; no, not now, not ever. Yet somehow it seemed improper and even illogical to lie to Callum, despite his fear.

"Then there was," Callum said interestedly, his eyes gleaming with intoxication and curiosity; he carried on in an almost sing-song tone, "I sense a tragic story lurking in the background..."

It was perhaps fortuitous in both the most and the least possible way. Out of the frying pan and into the roaring hot fire was the maxim that sprang to mind as Anders felt the familiar, tingling, fearful crawl of realisation up his spine. For a full ten seconds he couldn't believe it was true, Callum's voice and the sounds of the pub fell into the background before his instincts surged into motion and forced him to reach out and grab hold of Callum's hand. The contact seemed to break the hold that Justice had momentarily acquired over him.

"Anders what on earth is wrong with you?" Callum asked bemusedly, "You look white as a..."

"Outside," Anders interrupted succinctly, locking eyes with the other man, "templars, three...no four of them. They're getting closer. We need to get out of here."

Callum's eyes widened only a fraction at Anders revelation but his hand gripped back painfully tight. So they did follow us here, Anders thought in despair, from Cumberland, but how? No, no time for that, no time!

For once he was glad that Callum was not only a fellow mage but also a fellow apostate. He needed no explanation, he did not panic, he already knew what the plan was because it was one he had surely executed before. There was no time to retrieve their belongings from the top of the tower; once up there they could be easily trapped. They had to get to the horses and the dogs and flee the city as fast as they could.

"Do you trust me?" Anders said quietly, even as he felt the draft from the opening door of the pub, hearing the vague sound of clinking armour over the din.

"Don't have much of a choice, do I?" Callum said with a grim smile, eyes shifting to look over Anders' shoulder; the mage knew what Callum saw, knew from the tensing bred of fear despite his own rebellious nature.

Anders took a deep breath and held it tightly in his lungs. He felt slightly light headed as he stood and turned to face the three templars who had entered the pub, knowing the fourth remained just outside the entrance. The blank, faceless helmets that gazed back at him were intent. Anders knew that they were well aware of what he was, not only from their malignant presence but also from
their rank; hunters. There was no reason a party of four hunters would be out, alone, at this time of day in this sort of place. Time seemed to slow down as Anders continued to stare, his body a lone beacon among the sea of raucous revellers who, only now, were beginning to notice the rather unusual and threatening sight by the doorway. Surely they would not attack in such a confined space filled with civilians? A part of Anders thought, aghast. No, the other answered, they will kill you by any means necessary. They expect you to kill these mortals before they do, abomination.

He gave them no time to strike first. The surge of power was akin to a silent breeze, then a wind, then a vortex of air which brought eyes and ears and a terrified silence from the crowd around him. The energy built in his raised right hand as he pointed it at the group of templars. The templars raised their drawn swords and prepared to annul the spell. They were too late. The release of spiritual energy surged forth, throwing the patrons in its path harmlessly to the floor as it sought its target. The templars tried to escape but their heavy armour slowed them down. The blast hit them full on, causing an intense, crunching and shattering sound as they were thrown into the solid, cold stone of the wall. Anders wasted no time, turning to grab Callum and rush over the debris of splintered tables and chairs and confused and screaming people. He looked around hurriedly to see Hawke still by the bar, staring in shock.

"Hawke hurry!" he shouted before quickly tearing down one of the tapestries to reveal the window behind; he cupped his hands without hesitation and used a swift burst of kinetic magic to blow the stained glass out into the street as the evening darkened and the sun sent sharp light against the dark stone, "Callum get the horses!"

The other mage wasted no time in jumping through the empty hole in the wall. Thankfully Anders found that Hawke had also wasted no time in struggling his way through the now wild crowd to his side. The patrons were, as Anders had hoped, running frantically towards the one exit which was exactly where the templars had placed themselves. As the heavily armoured hunters struggled to their feet they found themselves faced with a wall of screaming men and women who surged past them like a strong tide, hindering their pursuit. Anders grabbed Hawke's arm and, without further thought, they jumped out into the cold and ran after Callum towards the stables.

The uproar was spreading like wildfire and the danger was not over. Anders felt it before he saw it; the veil of silence was something he had experienced many times before but never with such visceral humour. A templar's most deadly weapon, the skill to annul both the ability to cast magic and magic already cast. The loss of magic, for a mage, was akin to a death sentence. The loss of magic for one such as he, however, so intrinsically linked to the Fade itself, was laughable. Anders spun on his heel to see the fourth templar speeding towards them around the curve of the tower, behind him the stream of fleeing people as they dispersed into the city against a dimly lit background of shadows and lambent street lamps.

He heard Hawke call out. A portion of his being reacted, the other only grinned. The templar twisted the sword in his hands and raised it over his right shoulder, his heavy boots thumping across the cobbled street. Anders felt the iridescent glow consume his body, the unsteady and flickering surge of magical ability flowing back into his silenced torpor. The hunter was given all but a moment to hesitate on witnessing the full power of the being he faced before Justice thrust out his hands and lifted the man into the air, screaming and flailing his legs. The templar's armour began to glow, then shine, then luminesce as the faceless templar began to shriek. Kill me would you? You pathetic being. The thought flowed around and around in his mind until it was uncannily obvious to Anders what was wrong with this scenario.

He contorted his fingers and the Fade itself ripped through the useless armour like tissue paper, shredding through the flesh and muscle and bone that lay beneath. The shriek turned to an agonised gurgling as blood poured down the once pristine steel, red upon silver upon red upon red. He
dropped the ruined corpse of the hunter to the ground with a squelching clatter that rang in the hollow street.

Anders felt paralysed.

"Maker's...get on the bloody horse!" it was an incredible effort to turn and look at Callum behind him, the tall mage holding the horses be the reigns; he felt the scars on his body flare down as Callum's face remained determinedly worried. Hawke, behind him, was quickly hauling himself into the saddle.

No time for talking, was the thought that spurred him into action, just go, go! Bryn was eager and fizzing beneath his thighs as Anders, without thought, quickly spurred her forwards into a gallop, heading for the gate. It was all he could see, all he could think about, as he saw the other hunters finally stumble out into the street and shout for them to stop. Unsurprisingly, they did not comply. The sounds of arrows clinking and spitting against the cobbles at Bryn's feet only spurred Anders faster. He cast a quick glance behind him to check that Hawke and Callum were there before looking back to the street in front of him, watching as the buildings rushed past in an indistinguishable blur, people launching themselves out of the way of their speeding group as they careened into the main square. There were guards rushing towards them from the front of the Chantry cathedral and from their station in the square. Anders yanked Bryn to the left and down the main street, kicking her decisively in the flank. The horse whinnied in irritation even as she spurred herself faster.

"The gate guards!" he heard Hawke call out, as the familiar sound of cracking, splitting rock could be heard.

Anders looked forwards to the gate. It was closing fast, the portcullis lowering, the thick metal bars obscuring the view of the vivid sunset.

He couldn't think. Thinking would only get them caught. Just act, it told him, it urged him, just act and leave the consequences for when you are safe and alive. They were twenty feet from the gate when Anders hauled Bryn to a standstill. The horse rose up on her back legs and pawed at the air, tossing her head madly. Anders held on for dear life until she was once more on the ground. Then he let it happen.

The power surged through him as lightning through a cloud on a storm wracked night. The subtle cracking of stone he had heard earlier, as Callum had more than likely tossed a few rocks at the guards following them, was nothing compared to the booming, splintering sound of rock jarring away from its foundations that Anders created. The Fade manifested itself through him in a devastation unlike anything he had ever produced. The gate before them stayed completely untouched, the guards on the wall above held onto the sides and shouted in fear as the foundations began to crumble around them. The people bellow shrieked and screamed in terror, running back towards the city as block after block of the wall began to tear itself down in a steadily building avalanche of rubble and debris. Anders spread his hands wide and let out the shout he had been holding within him, unknown words uttered in the deep, resonant tenor which he had not heard with his own ears for over five years.

The rubble turned from inanimate objects into deadly missiles with a sole purpose. The violent hunks of stone careened past the three companions just as the templar hunters finally caught up, rounding the square and down into the main street.

And straight into the path of the hurtling rocks. Anders felt the rush of wind as the boulders rushed past them, carried by the insatiable power that the Fade supplied for him. The first templar was crushed outright, his lifeless body crumpling under the boulder that pounded into his chest and
flattened him to the ground before rolling deafeningly onwards to crash into the statue in the square's centre. The other two were less fortunate. One was left with only his legs trapped and mangled beneath a huge section of crenulated wall, screaming and howling in pain as it continued to squash him, while the other managed to dive out of the way only to end up crushed between two still rolling boulders, his upper half free and squirming, blood foaming from the bottom of his helmet, his arms flailing futilely as he tried instinctually to free himself even as the life drained from his body.

The shock of recalling the summoned power was impossible to handle. Anders felt Bryn's fear and agitation as she danced on her feet and whinnied, pulling herself round in circles until Anders felt dizzy and nauseous from the motion. He growled in frustration and fear before bucking the terrified horse once more into a frantic gallop. He heard the dogs barking wildly, he felt himself weightless as Bryn jumped the cacophonic mess of strewn rocks and cracked foundations, all that was left of the wall, and escaped out into the steadily darkening landscape.

How long they rode for Anders could not have recalled if his life depended on it. All he knew was, that when Callum's frantic shouts for him to stop finally sunk in, he was cold, shaken and almost mindless with shock. He looked around unseeingly, only barely aware of the barren land surrounding them and the lack of road beneath them. He tried to dismount but merely slipped and fell from Bryn, grunting harshly as he hit the ground. Attempting to get up on shaking arms he found no strength in them, or in the rest of his body for that matter. He was helpless as he felt hands against his shoulder and was lifted into a sitting position against a familiar warmth.

"Anders, it's alright," Hawke's voice was strong and comforting, even if Anders knew he was lying, "they're gone. We got away. We're safe."

His mind scrabbled for a response, his mouth opening and closing before he finally managed out a choked whisper, "I did it, I did it all. I did it."

"He doesn't look well," he heard Callum say, "and we have no idea where we are!"

"Just shut up!" Hawke snapped back, holding Anders tighter, "We...we need to find somewhere to stay for the night. The cold will kill us before those bloody templars do."

It was gradual but it was ineluctable. Perhaps it was Hawke's reassuring warmth, his comforting energy, or maybe Callum's worry, or perhaps simply his own strength of will which he had started to believe had abandoned him altogether. Or even the arrival of a wet, snuffling nose rubbing itself against his ear, a wet tongue licking at his face and the soft whine of a dog. Anders lifted his hand unsteadily and patted Sascha vaguely on the head. The dog barked, to which Callum swiftly grabbed the dog by the collar and ordered her to be quiet, huddling both the mutt and the Labrador to himself. Whatever it was Anders began to tune back into reality as Hawke and Callum continued to bicker.

"You idiot, they'll never stop hunting us!" Callum spat, "Didn't you see? Have you ever seen such power? The templars will be scouring the land for us for days if not weeks!"

"It's too dark, even for them, and they have no idea where we went," Hawke replied agitatedly.

"And they're not the only ones!" Callum rebutted, "Face it, we're lost!"

Anders felt the cold nipping wind against his face and lifted his hand to rub at his cheek. Then he brought it down onto Hawke's arm and squeezed reassuringly. The rogue turned his attention back to Anders in an instant.
"Are you alright?" were the first words out of Hawke's mouth; Anders turned a little in the rogue's tight hold and looked at him, his face barely lit in the swiftly diminishing light.

"I will be," Anders said, "I mean I am. Just help me up."

It was more difficult than he had imagined. His limbs were weak and traitorous but Hawke's steady grip on his arm and his own strength supplemented Anders' own. He breathed in slowly and tried his best to make out his surroundings.

They were out on the heath, surely the Fields of Ghislain and not the other direction, towards Orlais. The ground beneath his feet was dry, the horizon blemished with thousands of tiny hillocks of grass and mud, not the sticky, wet mess of the marshes. The sky was approaching its twilight, the last of the sun's light brazen against the skyline. It cast the oncoming stars into a pale confusion and left the landscape as a barely discernable silhouette, as it did his companions. My love, he thought sadly, forgive me. Anders reached out and ran his cold hand down the vague, dark shadow of Hawke's face. The other grabbed his hand tightly and placed a furtive kiss against his palm, breath hot and clammy against his skin.

"I..." he wanted to say he was sorry but, even in his disillusioned state, he knew it was neither the time nor place for blame, 'you're right. We need to find shelter.'

"A sensible idea," Callum piped up, throwing his arms into the air, "but that's not exactly going to be easy now, is it. I dare not summon a light to guide us, who knows if they are watching the heath."

"They will be," Anders answered quickly, steadying himself against Bryn as he gently broke away from Hawke's hold, "we can't give ourselves away. So we must be quick, come on."

"What do you mean come on?" Callum basically shouted in exasperation, "You have no idea where you're going!"

"You're right," Anders said, closing his eyes and calming himself, "I don't, but what I do know is that there are settlements all across this area. Didn't you see them as we rode in? The farms and mills? We can't be that far from Montfort, there has to be somewhere close."

"And you're going to find it for us?" Callum asked strongly.

"No, not me," Anders said as he started feeling around for Sascha in the darkness, "I think I have a much better nose for the job."

His hands found thick cotton before they found soft fur, fingers wrapping around Callum's arms. Anders realised the other mage was still only in his shirt. The hand that steadied him, brushing against his neck as it took hold of his shoulder, was deathly cold.

"Maker, Callum," Anders whispered, "you're freezing. There's a blanket, on Bryn, take it."

"I'll be alright..." Callum started to protest.

"Just take it," Anders pressed, leaning in to quickly embrace the man before him; as reality continued to settle back into place in his mind, the more Anders realised how close they had all come to a hasty death. Callum didn't waste any time in returning his hug, the strong arms around him shaking in the cold, "you trust me?" Anders repeated softly.

"Don't have much choice," Callum said back, the brief but hopeful hint of humour in his tone, "do I?"
Barmaid to Hawke:

"Ah, welcome sir! Would you like a drink..?"

"I am sorry, madam. I don't speak very good Orlesian. Do you speak King's Tongue?"

Callum to Barmaid:

"I apologise for my friend."

"Ah, you speak Orlesian?"

"Yes, madam."

"Well, what are you doing later tonight?"

"Unfortunately, I am otherwise engaged."

"That's life. Ah, are you with him?"

"No, no! But I wish I was!"
In the grand scheme of things it wasn't something he found out of the ordinary and perhaps that was what made the situation bearable. Yes the circumstances were very different than what he was used to, yes the geography and landscape were unknown and yes he was caring for more than just himself, yet it was still the same basic principle; run from the templars, stay free and stay alive. He knew that Callum had no qualms about breaking into the lone farm they found after a gruelling two mile hike across the howling, bitter moorland in the pitch black, following Sasha's low, growling barks, but Hawke was obviously less accustomed.

"If you'd like to spend the night outside then be my bloody guest mate," Callum had said in a harsh whisper as he picked the lock on the front door and crept inside.

Anders couldn't see Hawke's reaction but he could guess that it wasn't exactly pleasant. There was no time for discussion. Anders had grabbed the other man's arm and hauled him quietly inside, leaving the animals to shift around in front of the small barn they had passed.

The room they found themselves in was just as dark and cold as the outside they had escaped from. There was no howling wind, however, and the thick walls kept them safe from prying eyes. A heavy silence dominated the house, broken only by the occasional creaking of Callum's footsteps from the second floor.

The walk to the farm, as Anders had already assumed it would be, had been uncomfortable, tense and fraught with suspicion. Hawke had been snappish and over protective when Anders had finally come round from his stupor after fleeing Montfort, however his behaviour and mood slowly deteriorated him into a silent, terse mess of a man that barked out replies and voiced irrational accusations at both Callum and Anders alike. Anders had put up with his absurd and basically baseless allegations mainly because he was sure that he had not been the only one stunned and shocked by his actions during their escape.

It had not helped that this seemingly mental break was something Anders had essentially seen coming, not that he hadn't hoped it wouldn't happen this time. Hawke was, generally, a stalwart and stereotypical male; he shied from displaying his own deep feelings to any but Anders, and then only when forced to, he put on masks of bravado and recklessly devoted his life to sorting everyone else's problems. The only downside to this lifestyle being that, considering Hawke hoarded grudges and anger in the same way dragons hoarded treasure, when Hawke snapped he tended to do it rather spectacularly and usually at entirely inopportune moments. Since the morning after he had cured Fenris of the phage and been introduced, very inhospitably, to Hawke's ability to express his spite physically, Anders had been constantly wary of provoking the same reaction. Unfortunately, it seemed that the phrase 'knowing is half the battle', really wasn't exactly apt to their situation. Unless knowing was the easy half of the battle because the other half, predicting the outbursts, was infinitely more impossible.

Hawke's words as he held him close on the moor, telling him that everything was fine, were only testament to the man's trauma; Anders understood and, to an extent, respected this. In a way he was almost elated that Hawke was displaying his symptoms more clearly, so clearly that it was too overt for Anders to overlook. So When Hawke's shock deteriorated into useless, spiteful anger, he couldn't find it in his heart to beat some sense into him, even when the rogue began insinuating that Anders and Callum were in this together, plotting against him. All he had wanted, all he had needed, was to find some form of shelter, get them inside, warm, fed and rested before he could take a proper look for injuries and other, less physical, forms of distress.
Unfortunately, even acquiring this simple thing seemed to set Hawke on edge.

"But people live here, they'll find us!" Hawke said in a desperately low voice.

"No they won't," Anders said finally, letting go of Hawke and stealthily searching for a lantern in the dark house; he let out a soft ball of light, finally unafraid of it giving away their position.

"What...what is that supposed to mean? Where has that bastard gone?" Hawke growled, his tone suspiciously deadpan; Anders lit the lantern and turned just in time to find Hawke striding silently towards him. The mage had little time to place the lantern back onto the table before Hawke grabbed him by the arms and shook him roughly, "What have you done?"

"Take your hands off me," Anders said in a deep, commanding tone, each word emphatically and separately stated; Anders didn't realise how dangerous he must have sounded until Hawke, basically, did as he was told, "I have done nothing to harm the people here..."

Callum took that moment to descend the stairs, a soft orb of light flitting around his head like a demented halo. He seemed overly tall in the small house, stooping slightly under the low roof. He looked at them both, as they stood rigidly apart, with some concern.

"They were already asleep," he said normally, lifting his hand to collect the orb of light and dispel it, "but I made sure they'll stay that way until morning."

"You son of a bitch, what did you..?" Hawke's sudden anger would have surprised Anders if it hadn't been a staple symptom of his darkening mood over the last few hours; the rogue stormed forwards, his eyes gleaming murderously at Callum. Anders all but leapt between them, holding Hawke back angrily.

"Don't be an idiot," Anders spat, keeping his voice down even though he knew that the residents of the house were now sleeping so soundly, thanks to Callum's magic, that a raging bull running through their bedroom wouldn't have wakened them, "you need to calm down, sit down and let me look at you."

"Don't you patronise me!" Hawke shouted back, the pitch of his voice jarring in the silence and confined space, "I've had enough of your secrets and your understanding and your bloody rationalising! If there was any time for me to be sanely unhinged, I'd say it was right about now, when my cuckold is leading us around by the throats, murdering people in their sleep!"

Yes, he had been quiet and he had been ready to sit Hawke down and try his best to help the rogue through his pent up distress which, if he wasn't mistaken, had been once more building since his distasteful attack on Anders himself in the forests just outside Cumberland. He had been willing because, stupidly, he now thought, he still loved Hawke more than the other man would perhaps ever know and Anders himself could ever understand. Yet, as usual, all his good intentions were just that; good intentions.

One of the main flaws in he and Hawke's relationship, Anders had always known, was their ability to fight with one another. Of course fighting is normal in any relationship, in fact it was generally considered somewhat healthy. Yet when he and Hawke quarrelled it tended to be similar to a slowly building wave in the ocean that grew and grew until it hit the shore at a hundred feet high and caused immense devastation. Everything Hawke did served to irritate him further and vice versa until they were soon at each other's throats demanding answers. In this situation, after everything that had just happened, Anders knew that it could only be bad and yet he couldn't stop himself from retaliating.
"You bloody fool," Anders spat, shoving Hawke backward a few paces, causing the rogue to look at him in astonishment, "what do you think he did? Put a dagger to their throats? Poisoned them? Eh?"

"I just used a powerful sleeping spell," Callum muttered to no-one in particular, seeming to realise that there was suddenly a fight in progress that he didn't really want to become involved in.

"Did you think that's what I did all those years? All those escape attempts from the Circle?" Anders asked cruelly, trying his best to keep his voice down, his gestures sharp and scathing, "Is that why you thought I was fine with everything that was happening, because I just murdered and stole from every soul I came across?"

"I didn't say that..." Hawke bit out, folding his arms.

"I'm going to put the animals in the barn," Callum said softly, "check if there are any farmhands on the grounds that need seeing to."

He was gone in a swift passing of footsteps and a closing door. Anders didn't acknowledge it because, at that moment, he couldn't focus on anything but Hawke's blatant self-righteousness. It made his blood run both blazingly hot and icily cold to think that Hawke thought him capable of such depravity.

"You didn't have to say it," Anders said angrily, getting carried away as his voice rose higher, "you hypocritical bastard. You always say you understand, that you always did; 'I understand because my father was a mage, my sister is a mage'. Well good for you! You don't understand anything! You never have!"

"Don't you dare try and say that I don't know what it's like!" Hawke barked back at him, eyes glinting in the dim light.

"Oh, so you ran from some templars for a little while, wonderful, how wonderful for you!" Anders continued without pause, "Then you managed to stay in Lothering for, oh, how many years was it? Your parents building you a family, keeping you safe, giving you a life? You don't understand because when you ran from the templars it was never you they wanted! You've never been dragged away from your parents, from the life you'd just started to live, back to a prison where you are punished and punished just for being who you are!"

The silence was somehow more pronounced than it should have been. The fact that it was late at night, in the middle of nowhere, only made the calm after the storm seem more like a dead calm. Anders glared at the man before him, waiting for a reply. Unfortunately, as was usual in Anders' life, he never got exactly what he had been expecting. Or perhaps what was worse was that it was the last thing he had come to expect from the man who had once told him that he didn't care whether Anders was possessed or not, that he would love him either way, love him for the man that he was. Instead he got:

"And who is that Anders?" Hawke said bitterly, "The man I fell in love with or the man who tears down rock walls as if they were made of fucking sand?"

He had always and always would appreciate Hawke's ability for blatant honesty but, at that moment, he resented it more than anything else the other man had ever done. The anger inside himself was only as strong as the fear that lurked behind it. The true source of Anders' own distress had been the bright, vivid, colourful, loud, crashing, screaming experience he'd had not hours before.
I saw it. He couldn't stop the thought from flashing again and again into his thoughts. I saw it all. It had never occurred this way and, despite his previous wishes that Justice would allow him more control when the spirit took command of his body, Anders was now ready to rescind that wish. He had seen every sordid, insane, ballistic moment of Justice's rampage through Montfort, as brief and bloody as it had been. He would say that the result of this had left him cold and numb just from the sights he had seen, yet it was something else which had shaken him to his core; far more than the gory sight of his own hands tearing the templar hunter into bloody strips of flesh and steel.

To have this next stage of symbiosis between them, this evolution in their joining, he and Justice had come one, glaring step closer to what he had always worried they would one day become. A whole being. Or, on an even more dreadful note, there was the lurking danger that it was not a symbiosis at all. That one day there would be no more Anders, not even a Justice. All that would be left would be Vengeance and the demon would devour them both whole, living within the husk of his corpse until it was no longer of use.

To put it plainly Anders was terrified and Hawke's scornful attitude wasn't helping in the slightest.

"I'm sorry," Anders said, trying to sound strong but losing the effect as his voice broke, smiling deprecatingly, "I didn't realise there was a difference between the two."

He walked to the fireplace and began picking up logs from the pile of roughly chopped firewood that sat beside it. He didn't hear Hawke move around behind him but that didn't come as a surprise. He never heard anything of what Hawke did, silent as the rogue was. Anders continued to pile the thin twigs into a pyramid before placing the logs carefully. The practiced motions made him feel calmer, even if he knew that the calm was only barely masking the turmoil beneath. The hand on his shoulder should have been a surprise but Anders, drained as he was, barely reacted.

"We need to get some rest," he heard Hawke say in his deep monotone, setting Anders' teeth on edge as the words and the apathy they conveyed sunk in.

"You're not even going to ask me are you?" Anders smirked wryly, lifting his hands mechanically to warm them against the flames; silence in return. Anders shook his head and felt the need to scream well up in his chest, suppressing it with both the force of will and the fear of being caught, "we're so good at avoiding the difficult things that I'm not even sure if I understand the truth between us anymore."

"I understand you Anders," Hawke said tightly, forcing Anders to turn and look into the rogue's narrowed eyes, "I understand that you love me but..."

"No," Anders interrupted Hawke, making the other man sigh angrily and push away from him, his audible footsteps testament to his agitation; always the same, Anders thought, he breaks open and everything spills out and then, just as quickly, he tries to cram it all back in again and pretend that nothing is wrong, "no, you don't understand me at all because I won't let you."

That got his attention. Hawke's gaze sprang to him like a bird of prey on a hapless rabbit. The Champion of Kirkwall kept his gleaming eyes on the mage as he slowly took a seat in the armchair by the bottom of the stairs, the steadily building firelight flickering over his imposing form. Anders continued regardless. The truth, or the truth which justified his lies, had to be exposed at some point.

"And I won't let you because I...I couldn't bear to see you hurt because of me. All this time, since I first met you, since I first admitted to myself that I was in love with you, all I've tried to do is protect you," Anders said matter-of-factly, leaning back against the side of the fireplace and watching Hawke dispassionately.
"I don't need you to look after me," Hawke said dangerously, his expression tightening.

"Oh yes, you do," Anders smiled half heartedly, shaking his head, "you'd never admit it but you do. You're a fragile, beautiful thing Garrett Hawke, like a flawed gem. You put too much weight atop you, piling up and up until the pressure builds too high. You never let it out until it's too much too late. You lash out with your fists or your innermost desires and you hurt the people around you, it's just what you do. So you do need protecting Hawke, you do because through all the other things you have suffered since I met you, you've had one constant that the very least allowed you to vent that frustration and anger."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Hawke asked quietly, glaring.

"Me," Anders said with a soft, sad laugh, "you've always had me Hawke, even before we were properly together. I don't know why it is but I've always allowed myself to be used and, when I wasn't allowing it, it was being forced on me whether I liked it or not. I can...I can admit that, no matter how distasteful it is for me to do so. It's you who will not admit to his inner workings, the real reasons behind why you work the way you do."

"You hypocrite," Hawke sneered, throwing Anders' accusation back in his face, "all I've ever done is open up to you. I told you why I...why I take things out on you..."

"Which I could already tell was a half truth when you told it to me," Anders said, noting as Hawke evaded his eyes, "I don't know why you won't tell me the truth Hawke and, in all honesty, it doesn't matter to me right at this moment but what does matter is that, well, that I might not always be here for you and you have to understand that."

The silence in the room suddenly became very audible, as if the walls themselves, the furniture and the curtains and the rugs and the fireplace, were all holding their breath and staring at the two men who stared at each other, one intensely and the other with remorse.

"What?" the one word, as it scraped its way through Hawke's clenched teeth, sounded more like a curse than a question; Anders was almost afraid to answer it, considering Hawke's previous violent behaviour.

"I..." Anders swallowed and let his shoulders fall, swallowing down the guilt and taking a deep breath before continuing, "I'm dying Hawke."

Anders wished that the sustained feeling of held breath would release the room from the incredibly tense state it was confined to. He tried to stay relaxed but it was impossible, what with the atmosphere and with Hawke's slow and almost indistinguishable change of expression. A strange hint of confusion in the rogue's angry glare, a frown marring his forehead. The guilt was also beginning to beat at Anders from the inside, lashing out and making him queasy.

It wasn't to finally tell Hawke the reason behind his secretive nature, it wasn't to let him closer, it wasn't to finally admit to something that he constantly tried to ignore. No, that was what Anders tried to believe was his reasoning. Instead, far less nobly, it was to hurt him, to hurt him as Hawke had hurt Anders, to cloak the real reason for his guilt behind another unquestionable fact of his existence. He would hide the thing he could control, killing innocent people to start what was sure to be a devastating war, behind something he couldn't control, the dark taint that was slowly, very slowly, eating him alive from the inside out.

"Don't lie to me," was his final, and strangely apt, request from Hawke; if only you knew Hawke, Anders thought, if only you did then perhaps you would kill me now and end all of this madness before it consumes us both.
"I wouldn't lie to you about this," Anders said back with a sigh, "I've...look, you can't tell anyone about this, it's meant to be a secret. Grey Warden initiates only. I mean, even I didn't know until after the Joining, which was unpleasant enough without being told afterwards that you probably wouldn't live beyond fifty if you even reached that."

Hawke's malignant glare had been significantly reduced as Anders spoke, ending up as more of a dawning realisation that he wasn't being fucked with. Even his hands, which had been balled into tight fists, were now open, the loose fingers trailing over his knees.

"The Joining is kept under wraps for a reason," Anders continued, hoping that he knew Hawke well enough to know he would never tell another soul of the rites of the Grey Wardens, "haven't you ever wondered why the Wardens can sense Darkspawn, seek out their presence, know their attacks before the enemy even shows itself?"

The blank, worried stare he received in reply didn't encourage him but Anders continued regardless.

"We take the blood of the Darkspawn into our bodies," Anders said, making Hawke flinch a little, his eyes blinking as if still trying to comprehend what was happening, "we drink it, assimilate it, whatever you want to call it. It becomes us, or maybe we become them, who knows. All I do know is that the rite of Joining is only survivable by some and the others are...not so lucky. Ha, or perhaps they are the lucky ones," Anders laughed humourlessly, "considering, if you survive, all you have to look forward to is madness and an early death."

He knew that he wasn't being very tactful about it, he knew it because, deep down, he didn't want to be. He wanted Hawke to be hurt by his confession, he wanted him to suffer as he had made Anders suffer. The worst part, however, was that he wasn't sure which part of him so craved this need to cause pain. Justice would never hold for such behaviour; so was it Anders himself or perhaps Vengeance who, still so close to the surface, would surely revel in the wounding of another?

"They named it the Calling," Anders said, reaching out with his right hand to once more feel the warmth of the fire; in a way he was almost afraid to stop talking, afraid of what Hawke might say, "because every Grey Warden feels the Call at some point in their lives and, when that happens, well, let's just say that it's better to go out fighting than to wait for what happens naturally..."

"Stop," Hawke burst out suddenly, his hand held up rigidly as if to shield him from any more words; Anders stopped as requested, staring at Hawke tensely. He wasn't sure how Hawke would react and was ready for anything.

The other man took a moment to find his voice again, never once making eye contact with Anders as his gaze flitted around the room without seeming to see anything. Finally the other man lowered his hand and began to breathe steadily in and out, his eyes resting firmly on the floor in front of his feet. Anders wanted to ask him if he was alright but the more bitter side of his mind urged him to let other man suffer a little longer in his knowledge of the truth.

"You..." Hawke stopped after he had forced out the word, swallowing and shaking his head as he closed his eyes; what he said next was not phrased as a question, "you're not lying to me."

"No, I'm not," Anders said after a short pause, "I wouldn't do that Hawke, I promise you that. I just...I thought you needed to know why I do the things I do."

Liar, his conscience bit at him, you bloody liar. Go on, tell him that's why you are the way you are, tell him it's fear of your own mortality, tell him it's so you can live before you die. Don't tell him
the real truth, the real fears you hold in your heart. Just bully him into submission by making him pity you, yes, that will make everything better! Anders winced as the cruel observation rubbed salt into the wounds he kept so expertly covered up. I'm doing it to protect him, Anders tried to cry out in retort, if he knew the real truth...Maker, it would be worse, far worse.

"I thought you should know why I always rush in, why I don't look before I leap," Anders shrugged, trying to see the truth in his lies, "why it's so important to me that I can live life as best I can while I still have it. I love you Hawke, I love you, and I always will but I gave up on this life a long time before I met you. Justice gave it a new meaning, even if it hasn't turned out to be exactly what I expected, and I need you to accept that. I never deceived you on that front Hawke and I never mean to. I'm a liar and a cheat and all I'll do is hurt you, I warned you from the beginning..."

He would have continued, if Hawke hadn't sprung from the chair, raced across the small living room and hauled him from the floor. Anders took in a startled breath as he found himself face to face with a livid and yet entirely distressed Hawke. The man's mouth twisted grotesquely between a manic grin and a wail of agony. His hands were vice like around Ander's biceps, keeping the mage close even as he tried desperately to back away.

"You thought I should know!" Hawke roared, panting as he shook Anders savagely, knocking him twice against the stone mantelpiece above the fireplace; the mage winced as the knocks left aching sores against his lower back, "You fucking bastard, you kept this from me and you tell me now? Here of all places! In the middle of nowhere, no food or money, being chased down like dogs by the very people who've tried to take you from me over and over again, and you're trying to tell me it's all useless?"

"I didn't say it was useless!" Anders said back, trying to sound reasonable, "Please Hawke, you're hurting me!"

"Hopeless, futile, worthless, take your fucking pick!" Hawke spat, his voice raising hysterically as his eyes gleamed with mania, "All of this time I've been so desperate to save you, to be with you, make you happy so we can grow old and grey and have a life somewhere good, somewhere surrounded by friends and children and stupid, stupid cats and you're telling me it was all a dream? A fucking dream that I had, I imagined, I invented?"

The squeal of the door opening was almost lost to the pounding of the blood in his ears, caused by the sudden fear and guilt at what he had done, at his own continued struggles with Justice and with the terrible split within himself. The cold wind pouring into the room, however, was hard to miss, as was the looming figure of Callum as he charged into the room and hauled Hawke suddenly backwards by the shoulders.

"Don't you dare hurt him again!" the other mage bellowed, his eyes glinting angrily as he kept a strong hold on the other man; Hawke reacted instinctively in his wild state and Anders could do nothing but call out a futile warning as the rogue jabbed backwards with his elbow, catching Callum square in the solar plexus and winding him.

"Hawke stop it! Stop, don't hurt him!" Anders yelled, trying to separate them.

It was no use, he was thrown out of the way as Hawke pushed him aside with a growl before grabbing Callum by the collar, who had doubled over from pain and lack of breath, and hauling him up only to punch him savagely once, twice, three times square in the face. Anders stood hurriedly on shaky legs and looked on helplessly as Hawke pulled back for another punch. Unfortunately for the rogue, he seemed to have forgotten in his fury that Callum was a mage. The other man lifted his hands just as Anders screamed 'No!' and let out something Anders would never have expected; a potent leaching spell, designed to incapacitate your target by draining their energy
and will. Anders remembered Callum saying that he hated violence but was amazed that, even in such a highly charged situation, he had held true to his principles. However, despite Callum's good intentions, the spell did more than it was intended to. Considering Hawke's hysterical state and his lack of energy before the fight, the spell leached too much energy from him and the rogue promptly passed out cold on the stone floor.

"Hawke!" Anders cried, rushing forwards to bundle the unconscious man into his arms, "Hawke, are you alright?

"He shouldn't have..?" Callum looked perplexed, panting roughly as he shuffled backwards and sat down heavily into the chair Hawke had previously occupied; he watched for a moment, tilting his head back to stem the bleeding in his battered nose, looking on silently as Anders did his best to revive the inert rogue, "I think he must still be ill if it affected him that badly, or he was just exhausted. Don't worry, he'll wake up in a couple of hours."

"Don't worry," Anders whispered out through a rather crazed and unhappy laugh, "don't worry! Maker why am I such a terrible person?" his voice rose and rose until he was shouting, staring up at the ceiling as if demanding an answer, "Why are you doing this to me!"

"Bloody hell, keep it down!" Callum said hurriedly, getting up once more to take hold of Anders, pulling him away from Hawke and trying his best to stem the mage's rising panic, "I've taken care of the others here on the farm but I don't know how close the next settlement is. I don't want anyone to hear us and come snooping!"

"It's all my fault," Anders was saying mindlessly, bringing his hands up to cover his face, the adrenaline draining from him as he sank back into Callum's warm, welcoming embrace; the other man held him tightly against his chest, lifting a large hand to pat his hair softly, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry Callum, you shouldn't even be here, it's all my fault."

"Shh," Callum hushed, "come on now, believe me, I've been through worse and with far less pleasurable company. Well, apart from him. Met a few of his kind in my time."

"Of course not," Callum said with a sarcastic snort, ruined somewhat by the blood once more streaming from his nose; he noticed it with a sigh of annoyance and lifted his hand to his face, obviously intent on healing the wound. Surprisingly, especially for Anders, the smaller mage reached up to stop him. Callum looked at him, perplexed. Perhaps it was to ease the guilt still rolling around in his gut or for a real want to help or...something more. Whatever the reason, Anders kept a hold of Callum's hand while he lifted his right up until it cupped Callum's jaw. Anders concentrated as he let out a short, quick fix spell to set the other man's nose into joint. The crack was audible. Callum hissed in pain but bit down on the rest as Anders continued to fix the broken blood vessels in his nose and cheeks and try his best to alleviate the pain of the swiftly forming bruises.

It would have been routine, normal, everyday, if Callum hadn't kept eye contact with him through the entire procedure. The arm around him pulled him a little closer. As if in instant reaction Anders felt his heart rate speed up unhelpfully, his breath leaving a heaving chest as Callum slowly pulled his hand free of Anders' loose hold, as it reached out to match its twin, encircling the smaller man who was now practically flat against his body, pressing against his toned muscular form, the heat from his body growing, feeling a suspicious hardness beginning to press against him, as Callum's hand slid down the length of his spine, lower and lower until it...

"Stop," Anders pleaded abruptly, breathily, "Maker Callum don't."
There was a tense moment that surged between them, tinged with apprehension should Callum not heed his plea. Of course the other man did, eventually, slowly releasing his strong grip on the smaller mage along with a long, slow exhalation of breath. Callum closed his eyes as Anders ran his hand down the other mage's jaw tenderly before leaning up to place a chaste kiss against his cheek. Then Anders shuffled backwards across the freezing floor, trying to ignore Callum as he shook his head while Anders knelt down and began tending to the still unconscious Hawke.

At least it calmed me down, Anders thought as he tried his best not to think about the fact that his skin was fizzing with repressed need and lust, well, in one sense anyway. Hawke was still completely unresponsive but, on examining the rogue Anders found that at least his breathing and heart rate were stable and he was, for all intents and purposes, asleep.

"I think I saw some spare bedding upstairs," Callum said morosely from behind him; Anders looked over his shoulder as the other man stood, towering over him. His eyes were a little dull and he looked exasperated but neither he nor Anders seemed to have the urge to bring up why, "I'll go and get it."

"Thank you," Anders said softly as Callum once more summoned the small orb of light to flit around his head and ascended the stairs at a slow plod.

They spent a long, uncomfortable night in the usurped living room of the farm house, all three bundled together under the thick, itchy blanket Callum found in a cupboard on the upstairs landing. Callum forced Anders to sleep on the side closest to the fire, Hawke sandwiched in between them while Callum lay half curled at the far end, his back to them both. Anders had spent almost the whole night awake, Hawke bundled in his arms, feeling the rogue breathing in and out and running his right hand again and again over the rogue's arm.

It was somewhere around early morning when Hawke finally awoke, although when he did he was in no fit state to make much sense or properly comprehend what was happening around him. Anders soothed him with calming words and tried his best to understand the words coming out of Hawke's mouth.

"Dream 'gain," Anders managed to make out as Hawke pawed at him senselessly, "c'm with me. He wants you. All th'fire..."

"Don't speak," Anders said, leaning in to kiss Hawke's mouth closed, trailing a further few up his face until he felt Hawke slowly drifting back to sleep, "I'm here with you, I promise."

Once Hawke slipped back into sleep Anders found he felt more alone than he had before, hollow and sad. He fed the fire and kept watch until Callum woke up, turning awkwardly under the blanket while he blinked his eyes open and frowned sleepily at Anders.

"Get some sleep," the tall man said after a moment of silence, "I'll make sure we don't sleep too long. I'll wake you when we need to leave."

Anders would have protested if he wasn't so dead tired. His sleep was restless, plagued once more by a pair of amber eyes, switching fitfully to red, flames breathing in from the sides and trying to consume the air and all around him. He woke in a reserved panic to find Callum shaking him awake, telling him gruffly that they should leave soon. He got up quickly and noticed that it was barely light outside. As Callum left him to snatch enough supplies to keep them going until they could find somewhere else to get food, he found Hawke had awoken before him and was sitting quietly at the large, rough table at the other end of the room in what seemed to be the kitchen. Anders approached him softly while Callum busied about stuffing as much food as he could into a
"Hawke...", Anders said, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

It would have been perhaps less painful just to stay quiet. Anders damned his need for reassurance, his optimism that forced him to think that things would still somehow work out for the best. Instead he was treated to the swift jerk of Hawke's hand pushing his hand away before the man stood rigidly and walked past him to bundle up the blanket that Anders had abandoned on the floor. The mage stood as if struck, staring at the space where Hawke had been.

"We need to get out of here before the owners wake up," Hawke said, his deep voice a little rough.

"Then..." Anders coughed to hide the hurt in his tone, "then I'll get the horses and the dogs. I'll meet you at the barn."

The animals seemed to have had a cosier night than they had, despite there being no fire in the barn. The horses had lay down in a little triangle on a pile of hay at the far end of the barn and, in between them, the dogs were curled up like nugs in a blanket. Sascha had been absurdly happy to see him and Anders tried to remind himself to get the dogs something to eat as he petted her and quickly got the horses ready. The steeds munched happily on the hay as Anders checked them over, the light quickly brightening the barn around him.

"So what's the plan?" Callum said as he heaved himself into the saddle of his morose looking horse.

The thought of it made Anders laugh. Should he be surprised by his own wants and needs getting the way of common sense? He knew that Hawke wouldn't be.

"We need to keep heading north," Anders said as he stroked Bryn's mane and looked to the steadily rising sun.

"North?" Hawke said, "You mean we're still..? Huh, fuck, I suppose I shouldn't really be shocked by this should I. Anders, we're going home."

"No Hawke, I'm not going back to Kirkwall until I've done what I came to do," Anders said calmly, even as he avoided Hawke's stare, "I'm too close now to turn back."

"I shouldn't have to say this," Hawke ground out, "but it's too fucking dangerous out here. I can't protect you in this bloody wilderness, I need to get us back to Kirkwall..."

"And you truly think I'm safe there?" Anders asked, finally looking up to Hawke as he sat in Sigurðr's saddle, a stark silhouette against the sunrise; the rogue looked away, his expression closed, "I'm not going back yet, we're half way there Hawke, half way to something that I need, and I won't give it up because of some useless bloody templars, I won't. You know I won't."

Hawke had said nothing in reply. In a way that saddened Anders more than if they'd had a raging fight like the one from the night before. He wasn't sure how to deal with it so instead he ignored it. Anders pulled himself up onto Bryn's back and got himself settled.

"I hate to point this out," Callum said softly, seemingly unwilling to break the silence that had fallen over them, "but how the hell are we going to know where we're going?"

Anders had been prepared for that question. He began digging in the satchel on his belt and pulled out the two things he would be eternally glad he had never abandoned to his knapsack. The rumpled map was somewhat the worse for wear but still entirely readable and, further down, still in
its soft pouch, was the white wooden shell like compass which Hawke had given him for his birthday.

"Pardon my Orlesian," Callum said with a small amount of wonder as Anders opened the expensive piece of equipment, "but what the fuck is that?"

"This," Anders said, noting Hawke's intense stare as he looked to the compass, "is our way to get back on track."

Cold days and bitter nights. They found the road before they found anything less conspicuous but Anders refused to ride the Imperial Highway. He thought it only common sense. It was the most obvious place that the templars would not only be patrolling but surely setting up checkpoints at the towns along the way.

Instead they bypassed all of the places that Anders and Hawke had carefully planned along their journey, opting to stay out in the wilds of the Fields of Ghislain. Anders wished that it did not have to be so. When they could find no house or barn to sleep in then they were forced to huddle between the horses, snuggling up to the dogs for comfort while the freezing air surrounded them. They subsisted on anything they could kill with a bow or catch with a quick trap spell, pick off of a bush or steal. Hawke made it clear that he disliked the latter method the most but Anders and Callum paid his moral righteousness no heed. If Hawke wanted to starve for his pride then Anders wouldn't stop him.

Until Hawke started to look particularly hungry and lethargic. Anders decided it was worth forcing him to eat the stolen cheese and bread.

"I won't tell you again," Anders said, ignoring Hawke's blank stare as he chewed the food slowly.

He and Hawke were in a place that Anders thought he should be used to but, instead, wasn't sure if it was familiar or not. It wasn't exactly animosity, or even companionship or hatred or love or anything normal. When he thought about it hard, which he tried his best not to do, it was more a sort of limbo. They spoke sparingly and only when necessary, mumbling to each other or asking stock questions. They both existed in the same space and yet there seemed to be a void like gulf between them. When they slept they slept together and Hawke held him tightly, yet Anders couldn't say that he felt any warmth from their embrace. Anders knew that there had already been more than enough reasons for he and Hawke to fall into this state before they had even considered this journey together. Now, after everything that had passed between them since then, he was unsure how he could ever patch them back together. In truth, even though he was ashamed to think it, he was surprised that Hawke was still by his side.

It was hard and slow moving across the moors. It was treacherous enough terrain normally but now, with the added impetus of the templars and of finding a warm, dry roof over their heads before the sun set, it made it doubly so. The landscape was mainly featureless and bleak, barren grass and heather in messy hillocks which were difficult to ride over with any haste, if even at all. Then there were the bogs, of which there were many and which were also mainly hidden until you were right on top of them. Many times they were forced to dismount as whoever was leading the group sloshed their horse into unexpected water and was forced to rear back with a harsh whinny. It was impossible to travel once the sun went down, for fear of falling prey to one of the impromptu marshes.

Then, even with taking precautions, staying far from the road, travelling discreetly and leaving long before anyone awoke if they broke into a house or barn, there were a few close calls of note.
The first happened on the third night when they managed to break into a storehouse at a mill. They had been following a river for most of the day, a sluggish, lazy body of water that reflected the dull grey sky with the colour of slate. A water mill appeared conveniently as it became almost too dark to continue. At first it seemed to all go as well as it had before; break in, hide in the storeroom until before dawn and then leave. That was until they were awoken in the morning by the storeroom door being flung open. Anders had felt the blood drain out of his face as he saw a group of guards and farmhands loping towards them, weapons drawn. It had turned out that the Miller's wife had seen them break in and had sent one of the servants for the local guards in the nearest town of Ghislain. They had barely managed to escape and with no food to show for it.

The second had been even more disturbing, for Anders at least. On the seventh day out in the wilderness, miserable cold and hungry, Hawke began refusing food. Anders berated him, thinking it once more because of his refusal to eat their stolen produce. Instead, after constant prodding, Hawke admitted that he wasn't feeling particularly well. Anders couldn't help, despite he and Hawke's continuing antipathy, feeling instantly worried that Hawke's illness was returning. So, despite the rogue's muttered assurances that he was fine, Anders used his magic at select intervals throughout the day to keep track of Hawke's wellbeing and also to help him feel better. He hadn't thought about his use of magic, as low and subtle as it was, attracting unwanted attention.

They had been working their way up out of a low dip, in which ran a small stream, when it happened. It had been Luce that had begun to growl, no barking, no snapping, just a long, intimidating growl that alerted them to someone nearby. Knowing that something was terribly wrong Callum quickly told them to shut the hell up and get off the horses. In other circumstances Anders may have objected but thankfully he didn't have the force of will to do so because, not seconds after they had secreted themselves back down in the dip, the itchy feeling of fear began to crawl up his spine. He felt it walk closer and closer, making the itch worsen and worsen. He closed his eyes and hoped with all of his heart, as futile as he knew it was, that the templars who he knew were now standing just above the dip down to the stream, didn't see them. He had stared straight ahead, even when the templars above them began to talk. That was when Anders felt his hand clasped suddenly between strong fingers. He had looked to his left in surprise to find Hawke clutching at him. The rogue's stare was intense and yet, in spite of everything that had happened, Anders sure he could feel the reassurance the man was trying convey.

It had been surely more than luck that made the templars move on that day without finding them and yet Anders couldn't think of a reason that they hadn't been found. None of them had used any magic to hide them. Such a strategy was useless against templars considering it was magic itself that they hunted, reaching out to them like a beacon. It was a mystery that Anders chalked up to sheer good luck.

How much longer that luck would last, however, was yet to be seen.
This somehow seems like a significant time to write down a monograph, of sorts, against the follies of rash action; or perhaps epitaph is more apt, but then there is no need to be morbid. I have missed this, the cathartic act of writing. It makes things easier to handle, I find it thus anyway, easier to sort through the thoughts which now dominate my mind, plaguing me.

We are at the Grinning Dragon, in Perendale and it is nine o'clock. I am hungry, alone but for Hawke sleeping soundly on the bed and Sascha at my feet. I do not want to sit here any longer simply driving myself mad with my own terrible thoughts. I can't stop my mind from working, from thinking over and over about what has happened and why and how, if possible, I could have stopped all of this madness. We should never have left Kirkwall, that is one point I can at least attest to agreeing with wholeheartedly. I am starting to wonder why I even did it in the first place. This journey will be the end of us, if I cannot salvage what little we have left.

I am losing my sanity, that much is certain. Hawke's illness has pushed us back into the city. We could no longer survive out in the barren landscape with his failing health. Yet the crowds and the constant fear of the people around me, of my own actions and reactions, is enough to have me climbing the walls. I felt safe out in the wilderness at least, somehow being far from civilisation, from the templars, has stemmed the tide of Justice's anger. Or should I say Vengeance. Yes, I should. For the guise of Justice is no longer apt. I do not know if my old friend is truly separate from the demon within us both or whether they are one and the same. My definitions of him have changed so many times since we joined our minds and souls that I wonder if I haven't figured all of this out before, only to dismiss it in a fit of impotent dismay. Perhaps I just refuse to accept the truth. That sounds like something I would do.

Hawke's illness is getting worse again. I cannot for the life of me find the source of the infection. It is not a common cold or flu and it doesn't seem to be from any other source, no cuts or sores, no bad humours, no reddening of the eyes or bleeding from any orifice, no malnutrition, although I fear that may come if his appetite does not pick up. Instead the symptoms are only headaches and a pervading weakness that seems to be draining him completely. I fear that soon he will deteriorate again, back to his original state during our stay in Cumberland. I am at a loss and it pains me to be so. We are so very far from home and the only person I can rely on is Callum, of whose healing capabilities I am eternally grateful. Yet I feel cannot keep asking for his help, detaining him to help treat a man he dislikes, keeping him constantly at arm's length and yet longing for him all the while. It is not fair and yet I do it for both selfish and unselfish reasons; because I enjoy his company and his flattery, and because of Hawke's deteriorating constitution.

All of this and yet I avoid the issue. At least I can attribute that to fear perhaps more than anything else. I am frightened. I do not know what to expect, of this journey or of myself. The letters which called me to return to the Anderfels are thankfully still in my possession and yet I still do not understand what importance they are to me, to this journey. What are we to find when we reach our goal? I wish above all else that I had the answer.

For I need this. I need this more than I can ever make anyone understand, not even Hawke, barely even myself. I do not understand this need because it is not fully my own, it is Justice's, it is Vengeance's, it is the being who houses all three streams of consciousness that fall into one word. I cannot give it form or name because I fear for it to even exist. I wish that there was some way to make this right, some way to satisfy all desires and yet not destroy everything I have been working so haphazardly to build. I cannot shake the feeling that there is nothing left for this endeavour, that our well being and our lives will only be put further in danger with every step we take.
The dreams are getting worse. I recognise the voice, I can swear that I do, but something isn't right. I feel like I should know more, that I've seen this before. The words, the flames

Perhaps I don't want to remember.

No. I don't remember. I just

The door rushed open without preamble and Anders stopped writing so suddenly that he sent a long, black line of scratchy ink down across the bottom of the parchment. He cursed softly and looked up to find Callum closing the door while Luce loped into the room and sniffed at Sascha, the other dog having lifted her head in greeting.

"Here, I managed to get us some food," Callum said as he dumped a worse for wear sack onto the chair by the door, panting roughly, his face ruddy and ruffled; Anders pushed away the writing, hiding it out of sight under another light sheaf of parchment, "but the landlady was asking about money for the room again. Caught me on the way up the stairs. I don't think we can hang around here for much longer."

Anders nodded to him and sighed, trying his best to bring his thoughts off of the parchment and back to reality. It was difficult, mainly because he didn't want to think about the present. Everything felt as if it were closing in around him and he wanted nothing but to turn around and ride as fast as he could back to Kirkwall where he could get Hawke some proper help.

"Is he any better?" Callum asked as he walked into the room, looking sideways at Hawke while he sat down by the fire, rubbing his hands together.

"No," Anders replied vaguely, his eyes flicking back to the half hidden sheet of scribbled words. The writing had not only been cathartic but had also allowed him to straighten out his thoughts. He hadn't really had a moment to himself, not truly, since everything began falling apart. Since Cumberland. Now, even amidst the chaos they had created, this brief but enlightening exercise seemed to have opened his eyes. Blind, Anders thought, I have been blinded not only by my narrow-mindedness but also by these petty details, these distractions. Callum, Hawke's illness, our arguments, meeting old friends, the templars...all have given me little to no time to consider the truth behind my journey. All the research I did in Kirkwall, it was all deviated; I was looking at the history, not the actual source material. I find it almost impossible to fathom why, but I have not once taken a spare moment to consider what it is the riddle asks of me. Still, we must keep moving. The templars may only be a distraction in the grand scheme of things, but they're a rather dangerous one at that.

"We leave at dawn," Anders said as he stared at the far wall, drumming his fingers lightly against the dark wood of the table.

"Alright," Callum said warily, watching Anders even as Anders did not watch him; the silence lingered, punctuated only by the stark crackling of the burning logs. When Callum spoke it seemed loud and out of place, "look, I know I said I had other business that I was going to deal with, out in Nevarra, but, well, if you're still going ahead with this then...I can make time. I mean I can help...if you want me to come, that is!"

Anders looked to the man as he coughed roughly and tried to sound nonchalant. He smiled. It had been a while since he had felt the need or the want to smile. He would not lie, he had been hoping beyond hope that Callum would suggest what he had been wary to ask. Since Val Chevin, Anders had only put Callum in far more danger than the man would surely have ended up in on his own. Yet now, with Hawke ill and their supplies light, he had been dreading the long journey over the
barren lands between themselves and Nordbotten. With Callum there at least there would be an extra pair of eyes at his back.

"Actually I was hoping you would say something along those lines," Anders said, catching Callum's eye.

The other man returned the smile. Anders told him to get some sleep. It can only be easier the more hands we have, Anders thought practically, even as he shivered beneath the heavy feeling of being watched. He stayed seated at the table, sipping the smooth, heavy wine the landlady had brought them earlier, until he was sure the other man was asleep. Then he unclasped the buckle on the small pouch above his right hip and pulled the small bundle of letters free. Laying them out one by one, in date order, Anders once again started to read.

He did not know what time it was but the candle had burnt low, almost to the end of the wick, when he heard feet hitting the floorboards behind him. Anders looked over his shoulder and watched as Hawke pushed up from the flat, hard mattress, blinking his eyes wearily and shivering in the cold. He wasn't sure whether to be surprised or concerned. He opted for neither. After a moment of silence Hawke's vacant gaze swept across the walls, over the fireplace and the dogs and Callum between them, and ended up locked with Anders' own.

"You're still here," Hawke said a little blearily, scrubbing at his eyes as he shuffled to Anders' side.

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?" Anders asked, swivelling to sit sideways in his chair as Hawke approached.

"I had a dream," Hawke said, reaching out to steady himself on the chair back as he stumbled, "you were gone. I couldn't find you."

"Well you can see," Anders said, sighing, "it was just a dream."

"Right," Hawke nodded, his head hanging loosely, murmuring so quietly that Anders almost didn't catch his last words, "I hope it stays that way."

I'm not sure if I was supposed to have heard that or not, Anders thought, but it doesn't mean I didn't hear it. He lifted his left hand and placed it over Hawke's own, warming the cold fingers he could feel beneath his. Yet, even as he stared up at Hawke, somehow the gesture seemed disconnected. He felt no warmth, barely any recognition of his feelings at all. It seemed hollow. It felt purposeless. Despite that Anders felt the need to fight against these draining thoughts. I love him, he repeated again and again, and he loves me. In the end, that's all that should matter. A thick sense of anger and growing agitation began to bubble beneath his consciousness and Anders knew that Justice was unsettled by his thoughts.

"You need to get more sleep," Anders said, standing automatically to help Hawke back to the bed in the corner.

"I can't," Hawke shook his head, even as Anders forced him to sit down, pulling the covers back, "I...I can't."

"I'll be here when you wake up," Anders promised, sensing Hawke's fears before the other man even voiced them.

"Why don't I believe you?" Hawke asked after a moment's pause, letting out a deprecating laugh and shaking his head, "Fuck, look what I'm saying."
"I'm going to make all of this right Hawke," Anders said quietly, yet the force behind his words seemed to set the silence itself on edge; Hawke looked up at him and blinked sleepily, "I need you to trust me."

"I don't like it when you say that," Hawke replied as he gently lay down, wincing as he stretched out his legs and back, "I remember what happened that last time you did."

The blanket was rough beneath his fingers as he pulled it up across Hawke's chest, smoothing out the ruffles. When he leaned back Hawke was already asleep, his face half cast in shadow. Anders stood by the bed and watched him for a long time, long enough for the last of the candle to burn itself out and cast the room into complete darkness. He didn't even feel the cold when he finally managed to move, summoning a soft light to allow him to collect the letters he had been reading and store them away.

He didn't feel the cold. He climbed gently onto the other side of the bed and slid beneath the covers, wrapping himself around Hawke's inert form, feeling his chest rise and fall. Yet, despite that, neither did he feel the warmth. Deep down, as he allowed sleep to claim him, he wondered what that meant and, if it was possible to find out, whether he would even want to know.

Perendale passed by like a shadow. Anders could not even recall the room they had stayed in, or the streets they had slunk through, doing their best to leave the city as unnoticed as they had entered it. All Anders would remember later, as they rode out towards the dwindling ridge of the Blasted Hills, was a vague image of stunted buildings and dour faces.

His re-reading of the letters had done no good. The riddle still stared at him from the yellowing parchment, mocking him silently. Anders hated it. Was this simply another diversion? Another thing to fool his senses? To pull him from the right path and send him chasing red herrings in the lake? He didn't know and, in all honesty, wasn't sure if there would be any way to find out before they reached the Anderfels. He just hoped that the information was not vital, or they would all be in trouble.

The landscape around them was twisting itself into a scene from a warped dream. Everything was bare rock and devastated vegetation, laid out beneath a dull sky. Small, stolid trees that clung to the stone, bared their roots like claws, searching for soil. The heather was colourless and the peat was cracked and dry, seeming burnt and exhausted. The plants were brittle underfoot and the ground beneath it spongy. Water was hard to come by; they heard it, yes, running underground, beneath their feet, or far in the distance, but it was somehow difficult to ever place it. The sweeping low foothills rolled across the land like waves, creating a sense of false distance, never allowing Anders to correctly perceive how far they had gone or how far they still had to go. Everything began to look the same, even the few sparse herds of elk that watched them from the hills inquisitively, or the eagles that soared high above their heads, vague strips of black circling against the heavy, grey clouds.

The horses were slow to travel and the bleakness of their surroundings seemed to drain him further of will and energy. Hawke stayed on Sigurðr, even when Anders and Callum were forced to dismount and lead the horses themselves. Anders led the large, black stallion along with Bryn at his side. Sometimes he thought he could feel Hawke staring at him but, when he looked back, the rogue's eyes were always elsewhere.

"They say the dragons that nested here did this over a thousand years ago," Callum said as they rested beneath one of the high corries set into the mountain's east face, in amongst the terminal moraine and hidden from the flat plains bellow, "that a trio of heroes set out from Andoral's Reach to slay the dragon that had been terrorising the residents. Turned out that, when they finally
climbed all the way to the peak, exhausted and hungry, all they could find were a few baby
dragonlings."

"I can see this story ending well," Hawke muttered sarcastically through a mouthful of stale bread.

"The warriors slew them in retribution before returning to their town," Callum continued, "That
night the mother returned to find the nest empty. She lay waste to the entire area, miles and miles
of land burned by her fire. They say nothing grows here now, not the way it used to."

"And the warriors?" Anders asked, looking up towards the corrie, to the high peaks lost in the
cloud behind it.

"The story goes that the townsfolk drove them out beyond the walls as a sacrifice, to appease the
dragon," Callum said with an oddly humorous glint in his eye.

"Is that true?" Anders asked.

"Well, Andoral's Reach still stands," Callum shrugged, "take from that what you will."

The history, however suspect, served only to make their travail across the foothills even more
gloomy and stilted. Anders found himself with a lot of time to think, almost too much. The letters'
riddle had served only to further confuse and aggravate him. He could not understand the relevance
of this Band of Three or how he could figure out who the sender might be. It made his head hurt to
think of it and usually he found his mind wondering to another topic. Something less taxing and
aggravating. They were so close, so close, and only getting closer.

That night the wolves attacked. Only two, what Anders assumed were probably a hunting pair
which had been sent out to bring food back to the den. They were thin and weak, desperate for
food. Anders almost felt it wrong to slay them, but if they didn't kill them then and there the beasts
would only try again. He felt he could sympathise. Hawke skinned the wolves and the cooked the
meat in silence. Their meat was tough and stringy but it was all they had.

He wished they could stop, just for a moment, and yet fear of discovery and the fierce need to
know drove him onwards. Callum was a great help to him then, when Hawke could not or would
not be so. Everything was running together into a mess of evasion and escape and pushing
onwards, onwards, onwards and the taller mage was always there with a friendly hand on his
shoulder or a quick joke or even a subtle embrace if they found themselves alone, which was
almost never.

There were whispers in his mind, whispers of threat and salvation. The dreams grew more vivid.
The girl's voice became louder, somewhat clearer. She talked about the snow and he could have
sworn that she said his name. There was a house, he was sure there was a house, somewhere
desperately memorable. The interference seemed to be dwindling as they neared the Hunterhorn
mountains, the hiss and crackle in the dream resembling the sound of a raging fire more than
background noise. It was disconcerting even as it was exciting.

Hawke tried to play down the state of his health but Anders could tell that things were becoming
slowly worse and worse. The man grew cold too easily, despite wearing the thick travelling coat
that Callum had stolen from the next room at their previous residence in Perendale. He barely ate
and water seemed to sicken him. Anders tried to convince him to eat more, making weak soups
when they had the chance, but nothing seemed to work as it should.

There is something here I am not seeing. There is something here...keeping me distracted? Anders
shut the thought down as quickly as it appeared. He glanced sideways at Callum and frowned
slightly. My paranoia is building, he thought as he felt the hairs on his neck rise in anticipation, I cannot allow myself to lose control, to give in to these feelings. Sometimes he thought the whispers sounded familiar, sometimes far too close for comfort. Once, only once, as they sat around their small fire in outlying rocks beyond the last of the foothills of Kal-Sharok, the tiny, distorted voice managed to slip through into his mind and Anders barely noticed until it pointed him to the other mage and made him watch as it whispered...

'...death to...'

He convinced himself that it was his imagination while the terrified part of himself covered its ears and eyes and ignored the world around it. Anders kept his thoughts to himself and hid all under a mask of vague smiles and blank stares. Even Hawke, in his disassociated, ill state, began to give him concerned glances.

The outlying ridge of the Hunterhorn Mountains was low in comparison to the main body of rock which loomed to the west but it still looked formidable. It was capped in thick snow, the white tendrils trailing down the rubble of scree slopes and boulders which had tumbled over millennia down onto the harsh landscape below. It created a stone wall, thick and lofty peaks forming a jagged and narrow ridge which seemed to run non-stop from one end of the outcrop to the other. Apart from one, tiny flaw. A shallow, snow covered dip, almost hidden against the dirty grey clouds tinged with red from the setting sun, which created a pass of sorts to the other side. The path that led to it was barely discernable, a thin, winding line trailing across the inhospitable and intimidating face of the mountain. It was to this uninviting place that they were bound; the only way into the Merdaine without passing within spitting distance of Weisshaupt. The three men stared at it critically as their steeds moved back and forth beneath them, huffing out clouds of pale air.

"This was your plan," Callum said flatly.

"Didn't look so bad on the map," Hawke replied with flippant sarcasm, "anyway, I thought you said you were adventurous?"

Callum didn't grace him with a reply. Anders ignored them both and continued to survey the area. He knew that Hawke was being sarcastic but it was sadly true. It had looked easier on the map. He hadn't realised the climb would be this steep and covered alternately by scree and rock falls, making the sheerness of the face not their only worry. Trust things to become more difficult instead of less. I don't know if we can even take the horses up that track but, without them, there's no chance Hawke would ever make it. The thought made Anders feel a little sick. This truly couldn't be the end of things, could it? he thought desperately, stopped by a stupid hunk of rock?

It was then, as he brought his gaze to the root of the mountain, that he saw what seemed to be houses, hidden just below the hillock before them. Anders frowned and pulled out his map. Nothing. He jerked Bryn into a walk and shifted forwards, the other two men still bickering behind him.

"I can't believe there's something this far out," Anders said to himself; as he rose up on the hillock he was granted a better lay of the land; the ground slipped away from them in a steady decline for what looked about a quarter of a mile until it reached the foot of the mountain. There, nestled against the heavy snow falls and alluvial fans of light grey rock, sat a small hamlet of half a dozen buildings. Between the trio and the houses was a pure white layer of untouched snow, seeming dirty grey in the half light, broken only by a small, dark brown, weaving line which seemed to be a dirt track of sorts.
"Is that a village?" Hawke asked as he nudged Sigurðr closer to Bryn.

"Seems like it," Anders said, once more consulting his map, "although there's nothing here about a settlement."

"Well, if you don't mind me saying, that looks like a pretty old map you have there," Callum said, "that lot looks like a fairly new build. The empire is always trying its best to start new colonies, well, you know, keeping up the faith and all of that."

"What do you mean by Empire?" Hawke frowned, looking incredulous, "You mean the Orlesians? Oh come on, you must be pulling my leg! What in Thedas would they be building all the way out here for? And anyway, I thought this was still Nevarran soil, technically."

"Technically," Callum shrugged, pointing to the settlement, forcing the others to follow his gaze, "don't you see it?"

Anders squinted. The setting sun was casting an eerie glow against the heavy, dark grey clouds. It took a moment to make out anything in the slowly gathering dark but, once he did, it was difficult to miss what Callum had been referring to. It was the tallest building of them all, of course.

"I know I've said it already," Anders said, "but this time I really can't fucking believe it."

"A Chantry?" Hawke breathed, his laugh tinged with the beginnings of hysteria, "well fuck me."

"I didn't say the Orlesians had to have built the place," Callum shrugged, checking his horse into a walk and manoeuvring it down towards the makeshift track, his dogs trailing behind him, "but they stick in a Chantry and, heck, how are you supposed to tell the difference?"

Anders didn't have an answer. He sat atop his horse and watched Callum trot towards the dirt track.

"Fucking templars," Hawke growled, "great. That's all we need. We can't stay there."

"I agree," Anders said, snorting with derision, "or I would, but actually we don't have much choice. It's getting dark, we have no food, unless you count the last of the wolf you refused to eat, and, even though you keep denying it, you aren't fit for a night out in the snow."

The fact that Hawke didn't deny it or form a reply of any kind was testament enough to his physical state. Anders didn't look round as he walked Bryn forwards, easily following the heavy trail of broken snow Callum had left in his wake.

The residents were lighting the torches as they approached. The settlement turned out to be nothing more than what seemed to be seven houses, closely gathered in a circle on a small flat of land, with a two storey inn at the back of the group on the left and the Chantry standing at the centre. As Anders drew nearer he found that Callum was already talking to one of the lamp lighters.

"So we could ask at the inn?" the taller man was asking.

"You can ask," the stranger said; the flickering of the torchlight revealed a young woman, short but stout, her straw like brown hair sticking out from beneath a thick hat of what looked like elk hide. She looked them all over warily as Hawke finally joined them, holding the lit torch close to herself, shielding it from the light wind that ruffled the flame.

Anders was expecting her to say more but, after surveying them suspiciously, the woman simply turned on her heel and treaded off through the snow, leaving deep runnels parallel to those she had
made on the way out.

"Friendly lot," Hawke said with a snort.

"Well, before you arrived she suggested the Chantry for shelter," Callum smirked, "she didn't seem too pleased when I asked if there were any other options."

"We'd best get indoors," Anders said, ignoring them both, "folk are always more suspicious after dark. Come on."

The building he had suspected of being an inn turned out to be something more like a large pub. Anders didn't care, that was good enough for him. It was warm and bright and there were few people actually filling the large, mainly empty space. Two men, wrapped up tightly in heavy clothes, sat by a table at the far end of the room, and a further three were huddled around the large, roaring fire, situated to their left as they entered. All eyes turned to Anders as he walked in and headed straight to the bar, which was a short, makeshift structure of rough planks and thrown together shelves filled with bottles of spirits and mead. The barman was tall, rivalling Callum, with thick, dark eyebrows, a heavy moustache and hair to match, looking something like a dead cat plonked atop his head. His face was deeply lined and his hands, as he placed them on the rough wood before him, were like frying pans, large and splayed, the fingertips flattened and the nails filled with dirt. The mage could feel Hawke's tension and Callum's doubt.

"Why don't you two sit down," Anders suggested with a thin smile, "I'll get us something strong to drink."

Hawke looked like he would protest but, after a further heavy stare from Anders and a nudge from Callum, which Hawke shoved away roughly, the two men shuffled to a nearby table and sat wearily on the wobbly chairs.

Anders, after everything he'd suffered through lately, took no time to be intimidated or pussyfoot around. He turned around, looked straight at the barman and waited. He wasn't sure if it was a test or if it was a challenge, but eventually the tall barman lost out. He sniffed loudly and, as if a signal, the soft murmur of voices started up in the bar once more as the patrons began talking to each other.

"What'll it be stranger?" the man asked, his voice deep and gruff.

"We're travelling north," Anders said, reaching into his belt pouch to search for the little stolen coin they had managed to scavenge, "looking for a room for the night, if you have one."

"No rooms here," the barman said bluntly, "this here is a mining town messer. Best try the Chantry if you want shelter. We ain't no inn. Just food and drink strong enough to keep the heat in ye."

"Then that'll do for now," Anders said, pausing to look around before leaning in and speaking in a low tone, "unless you're looking to make a little extra coin?"

The barman picked up a rag, riddled with holes and looking rather unsanitary, and began rubbing at a pool of amber liquid on the bar. His expression did not change but the quality of his voice did.

"Keep talking stranger," he said, as if allowing Anders to speak.

"We are not unaccustomed to sleeping in the rough but it would be an understatement to say that I would appreciate a roof over my head tonight, friend," Anders said, "and I don't care what kind. Store room, barn, in with the horses, I don't really care. I have..." Anders let the coins rattle out onto the bar and shimmer dully in the light, "fifty eight, no, fifty nine silvers. All three of us,
somewhere to stay, one night, then we'll be out of your way. No questions asked."

There was a brief pause, during which the last three words of Anders speech seemed to simmer in the barman's mind. Anders hadn't mentioned the other man's offer of the Chantry and Anders was sure he was aware of that. Yet, just as Anders began to think he'd made a mistake, the barman's large, frying pan hand reached out and seemed to swallow up the coins, trailing them backwards off of the bar and into the large pocket sewn onto the front of his thick, stained overalls. Anders looked up into the man's brown eyes and, despite the lack of expression there, he could have sworn the corner of the man's eyes crinkled. He leaned down and brought a large jug from under the bar along with three, rough hewn glasses.

"We have a room of sorts, where we keep the mead and the spirits," the man said, "nothing fancy, just a strip of stone in between the barrels. It's yours serrah and, for that amount of coin, here's something on the house. I can get you some bread and salted meats in the mornin', tis all we got."

"Many thanks," Anders said, accepting the three glasses the man offered.

He turned and walked over to his companions. As he plonked the glasses down a heady whiff of burning ether hit his nose. The drinks were definitely not the regular fare, or at least Anders hoped that no one drank anything this strong on a regular basis. If they did it would probably eat right through their stomachs in a week. He pushed one to Callum and one to Hawke. Callum picked it up without forethought and downed it in one, his face screwing up and his mouth opening in a harsh cough.

"Andraste's tits that's strong stuff," he said hoarsely, settling into a grin and patting his chest appreciatively, "you must have done something right, to get us the good stuff that is."

"Well, he's given us the storeroom for the night," Anders shrugged, looking at his drink sceptically, even as Hawke sniffed at his before mirroring Callum's actions. However, Hawke barely shivered and merely let out a subtle cough before placing the glass back on the table. Callum looked at him with what could have been taken as respect, "honestly Hawke."

"What?" Hawke said, lifting his eyebrows at Anders' tone.

"Oh nothing," Anders said, smiling lightly; but really, honestly Hawke, he thought again before pushing his drink towards the rogue. Hawke reached out to rub Anders' forearm affectionately as the mage offered him the glass, before picking it up and swallowing it in one. Anders cleared his throat and looked down at the table, feeling a little self conscious.

"Alright," Callum said, breaking into the moment, "I'm going to see if there's anywhere I can put the animals. The dog's don't mind the cold but it's the wolves I'm worried about. I'll be back in a bit."

The atmosphere was quietly soothing. It was pleasant to be somewhere so anonymous, able to relax at least a little as the heat from the fire filtered out into the room and the subtle voices washed over him. Callum's departure, however, was a mixed blessing. On the one hand it made Hawke visibly relax but, on the other hand, it left a rather awkward silence between them. Anders looked to Hawke but the other man just stared wearily at the table before him.

"You look tired," Anders said as the silence stretched on, "you should get some sleep. It's a long climb tomorrow."

Hawke nodded. Anders wished that he could take the man's hand, at least for comfort, but felt the action too overt to explain away to those watching. The rogue stood up and gathered the glasses
before taking them over to the bar. Anders watched out of the corner of his eye while Hawke spoke to the tree-like barman. There was a quick exchange of words before the tall man pointed Hawke to a door at the back of the room, behind the stairs that led to the second floor, almost hidden. He watched Hawke with a critical eye as the rogue headed to the storeroom, noting the slight dragging of feet and the lethargy in his sagging shoulders and stooped back.

We have to hurry, Anders thought with a sigh, listening as the door opened and closed. It was with a genuine leap in his heart and a jerk of air in his lungs, something he was sure he should be used to since living with Garret Hawke of the feather light feet, that Anders reacted as a hand landed on his shoulder.

"Steady there stranger," said a surprisingly boyish voice, "didn't mean to startle!"

He found that the face matched the voice as a young man, seeming no more than his late teens, walked around the table from behind him and sat, without waiting for an invitation, in the seat next to Anders. His face was startlingly fresh, round and chubby, rosy cheeked and snub nosed. Anders stared at him.

"Do I know you?" the boy asked, sipping at a heavy looking flagon; Anders looked around the room in confusion, trying to see where this person had sprung from. He found it relatively quickly. The group by the fire were missing a man and the two that remained were now throwing furtive glances to Anders' table. The mage sighed. Wonderful, he thought, I've attracted the local wildlife.

"I think not," Anders said bluntly, "and I'm afraid I have no more coin for drink."

"Oh, you sell me short, serrah..?" the boy left the statement hanging, his face contrite.

"Just serrah is fine, thank you," Anders said.

"Come on Haslif, stop troubling the customers!" the barman spoke up, making the boy scowl.

"I aint causing no trouble," the boy named Haslif snapped, his visage becoming happy once more as he turned back to Anders; honestly, the mage thought, I don't need this, "anyway serrah, I thought I heard you mentioning that you were travelling north."

"You have good ears," Anders said facetiously, narrowing his eyes at Haslif.

"It's my prerogative, serrah, to be in the know," Haslif said, tipping up his flagon and looking down at the empty vessel sadly, "and it aint often that we get new faces round here. Information is always a good bargain, 'specially for those travelling."

He'd heard people such as this hawking their wares before and, normally, he ignored as much as he ignored any conning craftsman. Yet something here made him hesitate; there was a light in the boy's eyes, a fervent glint, that spoke of having something worth selling. Anders felt his hand itch. There was a brief scratching under his skin and, suddenly, Justice began to react. Anders bit down on his lip and watched the boy carefully. The last few pieces he had to his name burned in his back pocket.

"Information of things in the north eh?" Anders said with vague interest, "That's a little unclear, isn't it?"

"Depends," Haslif shrugged, "but it aint for all ears. How about you get me and my friends a drink and I take you to a quiet corner, eh?"

Anders sighed roughly. What is it Justice? Anders tried to ask, knowing it was futile but feeling
that it was necessary nonetheless. The spirit stayed irritatngly quiet. Well if you say so, Anders thought sarcastically.

"You have a deal," Anders said.

The barman was disapproving as Anders handed over the coin but poured the thick, amber liquid into the flagons all the same, gaining Haslif and his cronies a quick round of ale before Haslif pulled Anders to the furthest table, happy with his prize sloshing in one hand, and sat them both down.

"So," Anders said, "this information you have better be worth it."

"Oh, you'll see how cheaply you bought this prime information serrah," Haslif said, taking a messy swallow, "if you want to know what I've learned. I have all sorts, even some about the Wardens you understand, secret stuff!"

Anders would not lie and say that it did not spike his interest. Yet, even though he was no longer a part of their order, it did not mean he could not use it to his advantage. He was sure that the boy would only try his best to get as much out of him as possible, more than he had to give. I have no more coin to bargain with this churl, Anders thought, so why not use power instead? He put on his most sinister smile and hardened his eyes.

"Oh I'd love to hear all about it," Anders said quietly, enjoying the worry that crept into Haslif's face, "about how you discovered such interesting information about my brothers and sisters."

The silence that followed could be cut with a knife. Haslif looked at him with a mixture of disbelief and dismay. Then, just as Anders was sure the boy would leap from the table, he began to grin, albeit a little warily.

"Ah, ha ha!" Haslif laughed nervously, "You had me going there, you really did!"

"Had you going, did I?" Anders snorted; I'll show you how much I have you going.

It was absurdly easy to pull the dagger from his belt, making the boy shift back rigidly in his chair, before dragging the sharp edge over the tip of his finger; Anders had his back to the room, allowing only Haslif to see as the blood that began to well from the cut showed itself to be as black as coal. Anders looked up to Haslif once more and kept his smile in place as Haslif's jaw flapped up and down in shock.

"Quite a joke," Anders said, "isn't it."

"I...I didn't know, Warden," Haslif started to shout before he slipped into a whisper, shaking his head, "forgive me!"

"Think yourself lucky that I'm in no mood to interrogate you," Anders continued the rouse, "to find the source of your illegal information. How about instead you just tell me what I want to know and we don't say any more about it."

"Of-of course!" Haslif said, "I mean, anything I know, you can..."

"Nordbotten, what do you know?" Anders asked authoritatively; at that moment he was working on nothing but instinct and, as far as Justice seemed to think, his instinct was telling him to ask about home.

"Nordbotten?" Haslif said breathily, frowning, "I, well, actually there have been rumours lately..."
"About what?" Anders demanded.

"About...strange things," Haslif said, leaning in conspiratorially, "strange things as in stuff that makes the Maker fearing people nervous, if you get my meaning. People going missing, never to be seen again. Strange lights at night, sounds from the hill."

"The hill?" Anders asked, frowning; this hadn't been what he expected and, in truth, the information made his blood run cold.

"The man who told me, he was a traveller too," Haslif said, "was coming down to try his hand in the mine, make some coin. Said he'd lived in Nordbotten for the last decade but recently he'd been scared to even leave his house for fear of being snatched. Said it must be demons, in that haunted place. He said it was up on the place they called the hill, an abandoned house for as long as he'd known it. Looked right scared stiff, so he did, when he told me."

The mention of the 'hill' made Anders shiver. How could this be possible? he thought, he can't mean the same house, surely...

"Is he still here?" Anders asked eagerly, "The man you're talking about?"

"No, not anymore," Haslif shook his head, "couldn't hack it in the mines. Too cold, too much hard labour. He left a few months ago, went south to Perendale..." Anders frowned as Haslif trailed off, the boy's eyes leaving Anders' own to look behind the mage.

"What have I told you about talking to strangers?" a familiar voice interrupted suddenly.

Anders looked over his shoulder and up, all the way up, into Callum's smiling face. Yet, as Anders looked closer, he was sure that something was off in his expression. The man was ruddy faced, as he usually became in the cold, his lips twisted upwards and his pose amiable and yet his eyes...his eyes seemed somewhat hard, his smile not melting them in the least.

"Nothing that stopped me talking to you when we first met," Anders said with a raise of one fine eyebrow.

"Ha, true," Callum said, "but then I'm not a rumour spreading liar."

"Oi!" Haslif interjected, his face crumpling in anger, "I wasn't telling no lies, this man here paid good coin for...!"

"You gave him the last of the money?" Callum frowned, annoyed.

"It was mine to give," Anders shrugged, feeling the latent animosity building in his companion; what on earth is wrong with him all of a sudden? "anyway, why not distract myself with idle rumour? I need something to keep me bloody entertained on this trip."

Haslif continued to look put out, although his furtive glances at Callum, obviously seeing just how tall and broad the intimidating man was, kept him silent. Anders wasn't sure what was wrong but he tried his best to downplay he and Haslif's conversation. No need to spread the rumour, Anders thought with subtle humour.

"Anyway, I'm tired," Anders said, stifling a yawn, "thank you for the lovely chat Haslif."

"Not at all...serrah," he did not miss Haslif's hesitation on calling him Warden in front of Callum; the boy's good at his craft at least, Anders thought, no information for free, that's for sure, "your patronage is much appreciated."
The walk to the door beneath the stairs was short but filled with a tingling, dangerous feeling of tension. Anders pushed open the door and found a short, narrow corridor before him, lit by a single, dim candle, that turned sharply to the right and disappeared out of sight. He was about to advance when he heard the door behind him close and a heavy hand grabbed him roughly, spinning him around. Anders opened his mouth to protest but was stopped covetously by an insistent tongue making its way inside and persistent lips silencing him. Callum forced him up against the wall and, for a delirious moment, Anders felt the will leave his body and the sheer delight of the act of the kiss steal all thought from his mind. It was short lived, however. After another few seconds Anders came around, pushing Callum away until the man hit the other side of the tiny corridor. He dared not raise his voice for fear that Hawke might hear him.

"Don't fucking start," Anders said seriously, even as his heart pounded in his chest.

"So don't pretend you didn't want it then," Callum shrugged, licking his lips as he stared at Anders, as if to taste the trace of the mage that lingered there; Anders shivered.

"Right," Anders said, "that's why I shoved you into the wall, because I wanted it so much. I already told you, this isn't why I invited you along." 

"You know, I really hate it when people lie to themselves," Callum sighed disapprovingly, lifting his arms and folding them before his broad chest.

"And when people lie to others it seems," Anders said, skilfully changing the subject, "what was that all about back there? Intimidating that poor boy."

"Poor boy?" Callum scoffed, "Oh of course! That little parasite? I hate his kind. Taking advantage of any traveller that wanders through just to make a quick piece of silver or a sneaky drink. Is it so wrong that I don't like to see people taking advantage of you?"

"You mean like you just did?" Anders said back acidly.

Callum frowned, looking slightly abashed. Anders couldn't help but feel a little guilty, despite the lingering suspicion that Justice would not let go. The smaller mage sighed, letting his shoulders slump.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head, "I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just...just a little nervous, that's all."

"You don't say," Callum said dryly, yet a small smile graced his lips, "still, I forgive you. I suppose it's just too difficult to stay mad at such a beautiful face."

"Oh shut up," Anders said dismissively, even as he felt the burning on his cheeks.

He led the way through the narrow corridor, stealing the candle as he went, and found another door at the end. The room they entered was dark, barely visible even with the candle in hand. He placed it atop the stone floor and let the dim light allow them at least to manoeuvre.

Hawke was already asleep on the floor, having pulled a pile of heavy, empty sack cloth sheets from the corner to cover the narrow strip of floor space between barrels of mead and crates of bottles. He was underneath their only blanket but Anders was not about to suggest that Callum join them, not after his previous lack of restraint. Instead Anders settled down behind the rogue, snuggling under the blanket, placing a protective arm around his lover and fitting himself comfortably against the other man's body.

The small amount of heat that built between them was comforting, even if the deafening thoughts
in his head were enough to keep him awake for most of the night. He couldn't stop. He wished, in
vain, that there was someone he could tell this to and yet Justice seemed entirely opposed to the
idea. The very thought of sharing the information he had learned made the spirit fizz with anger.
Anders couldn't understand it. So instead he was forced to drive himself mad with the thoughts,
again and again.

Strange noises.

People missing.

Demons.

The hill.
Flesh

The mountain loomed before them. Anders wished that there was another way to continue their journey, something less precipitous, but unfortunately there seemed to be no other option. That morning he had asked the barman, in his desperation, if there was perhaps even a way to the other side of the mountain through the mines. The barman had let out a rough puff of breath and shaken his head, which Anders had taken as a semblance of a laugh; also as a refusal. Anders had accepted the meat and bread the man had offered and the three travellers had sat around one of the rough tables, jerking apart the tough, salted meat and chewing in silence. Thankfully the barman had allowed them to use his small toilet to freshen up before they left. Anders had taken the opportunity to shave off the thick beard that was forming in place of his usual stubble. It felt nice to be clean shaven, made him feel a little less wild and a little more civilised. He wasn't sure why it would matter but it seemed that it did.

He was glad to leave the town, even in the semi darkness of early morning. It was bitterly cold. A thick, cold, heavy mist had crept upon them in the night and blanketed the town. It only added to the preternatural feel of the place. The short stay had been enough to have his senses on high alert, despite the calm he portrayed. Being as close to the Chantry as they were, literally across the muddy, snow strewn pitch of land between the pub and the holy building, was enough to have him tense and aggravated. He had not seen a single templar during their short stay in the mining town but Anders found it difficult to calm down, considering the violence and tenacity the templars had recently shown.

It was a short ride along the dirty track out of town and towards the mountain. The dark brown path was only just visible in the dim light that brightened slowly as the sun continued to rise, somewhere above the cloud in which they were immersed. They followed the track closely as they soon found themselves absorbed by the fog. The town disappeared behind them in a matter of seconds, swallowed whole. Or is it us who is being swallowed? Anders thought bleakly as he nudged Bryn onwards, following Callum in front and leading Hawke behind.

"Well, I would say something optimistic," Callum said as the first of the large boulders began to loom out of the mist, like silent watchers, "but it's a bit difficult to do when I start thinking that the Chantry looks like a saner option than the insanity we have planned."

"There's always time to turn back," Hawke piped up wryly, "I'm sure the templars would have a jolly old time teaching you the error of your ways."

"Oh?" Callum replied nonchalantly, "Strange. It sounds to me like you'd much rather do that yourself."

"Please shut up, both of you," Anders said tightly, unable to truly focus on their squabbling as he continued to watch the ominous boulders as they passed by.

The fog was illusory. It made the landscape seem false and confusing. The giant blocks of stone seemed to sail past as if upon a swirling ocean, half caked in snow and hardy lichens of varying colours. All sounds were somehow amplified despite the heavy layer of mist. Everything was eerily quiet until the sharp, echoing sound of a rock falling would split the silence, or the scrabbling of an animal in the distance, the sound of running water, the cracking of ice melting and dripping. Anders did his best to repress the disquiet in his mind. He did not like it here. It felt as death; cold, bleak and shrouded in mystery.

It wasn't long until the ground began to incline. Anders could see it the exertion of the horses and
feel it as Bryn pulled against the ground with more force than usual. Soon the path, which had been fairly straight until now, took a sharp turn to the right before splitting into two. The ground began to incline even more steeply on the left and the path that followed it was much less visible beneath the snow, while the other path was well dug and lined with stones. A worse for wear sign, half rotted, declared that this was the way to the Hunterhorn mines.

"Then this is our path," Anders said slowly, looking at the shabby trail which ploughed off into the snow and disappeared up into the fog.

"Wonderful," Hawke said, more as if to himself than to the others; Sascha barked and Bryn shifted away from the loud noise nervously.

"We'll keep going until the path becomes too narrow," Anders said authoritatively, "and that's if it does. Hopefully we can stay mounted for the entire ascent but somehow I doubt it. I don't want to take any risks. If things become too treacherous then we get off the horses and we lead them up. Hopefully we can break out of this damned fog at some point."

"You're the boss," Callum said with a shrug, then he whistled tightly, "come on Sach, Luce, stay close girls."

It was tough going from the start. The path, after following it for about twenty yards, soon became lost under the snow, leaving the travellers to make their best guess as to where it went. Unfortunately they chose wrongly and soon found themselves riding towards a shallow cliff, dirty grey in the murky light and running with water and frozen moss. They were forced to follow the cliff until they found what looked like a way up onto the mountain, two oblongs of rock that seemed to have been pushed into place to flank a narrow gap which only just allowed the horses through.

Thankfully it was the correct path. Unthankfully the slope they were forced to climb, which initially veered up to the right, was very steep and barely wide enough to fit two horses. They stayed single file and Callum kept strict control of the dogs as the horses trudged up the path, occasionally slipping against hidden ice or stones or being forced to scramble over a rock fall which had tumbled across the path. Anders found his heart leaping into his chest on more than one occasion when Bryn misplaced her step and slid ominously towards the cliff that was beginning to form on the side which sloped back down to the ground below. It only grew worse as they climbed higher, the path zigzagging back and forth, as the fog began to cover the ground and then the previous parts of the path which they had already followed. Sliding towards the ground was one thing but sliding towards the swirling mist? Anders quickly lost track of how high they were and the mist seemed that it could be easily be a twenty foot drop or a thousand. He did his best to keep his eyes in front, following Callum and the dogs, and ignore the creeping dread that jerked his body taught every time Bryn tripped or the stark, resonant, staccato cracks of falling rocks sounded in the fog.

"Is it me?" Callum said after a good hours climb, "or is it getting lighter?"

"Yes, you're right," Anders mumbled curiously as he looked around himself cautiously, "we must be coming to the top of..."

He wasn't given the time to finish his sentence. The fog began to rapidly thin around them, first showing the swirling eddies in its structure, then wisps of blue and then, finally, they broke through the surface of the cloud and out into the wide open air. Anders wasn't sure whether it was a blessing or a curse.

"Maker's breath, would you look at that?" Callum said in wonderment, "It's not every day you see
something so beautiful!"

Anders couldn't help but agree. The cloud which they had been stuck inside was now below them, looming like a shifting sea of dense, white smoke. It completely covered the mining town below, obscuring it from view, and extended for a good half a mile back out into the flat plains between themselves and the Blasted Hills. Yet that wasn't the only amazing sight. Their height, surely now at least a good couple of hundred feet, afforded them a stunning view of the lands back towards the south. The sky was supremely blue, pale around the dazzling sun as it hovered in the eastern sky and darker into the west where there were heavy grey clouds peeping over the top of the Hunterhorn ridge, barely visible as it curved ever so slightly back towards the towering western peaks in the distance.

The planes below seemed almost unrecognisable. While crossing them on foot the fluctuations of grass and heather and peat and rock had seemed inconsequential; yet now, from above, the features created a beautiful and yet bleakly coloured pattern of squirming brown lines through patches of tan and grey and pearl white snow. Unknown deltas of mud, which would normally have held water, were revealed by their aerial perspective, as was the rest of the vast, flat plains which they had not traversed. If Anders turned in his saddle and looked back towards the north east, he could just make out the towers of what he assumed must be Weisshaupt, nestled in between the end of the ridge and a set of incongruous, knobly and yet lofty hills that led deep into Nevaran territory. The panorama was astounding.

The downside was the sudden perception of height. He hadn't been able to tell how high they were in the fog and that had unsettled him enough. Now, however, he knew exactly how high he was. Too high. The path was still fairly wide as long as they stayed single file but one edge always dropped away as a sheer cliff while the other side rose as steeply as the other descended. There were some small areas in which the land seemed to even out slightly, creating a short respite as the zigzagging path became even wider and snaked its way over the mountain instead of scratching its way up the outside of it, but these areas were too short lived for Anders' liking.

Now that they were free of the fog another downside was the continuing blind summits. It was almost impossible to tell how much further they had to climb as the mountain continually blocked the view of its summit with the foreground. Each zigzag in the path above created a false summit which, when surpassed, only revealed another three, then when those were gone another two were revealed in their place. It was intensely demoralising and also made time seem as nothing. If not for the passage of the sun Anders would have had no idea how long they had been climbing at all. The cold had also not alleviated. The chilling, wet cold of the fog was now behind them but it was only replaced with the bitter, biting wind of the open mountain face. Anders hunched his shoulders and did his best to protect his face and neck from the cold.

It was a further two hours before they finally stopped. They had found a small segment of the path which flattened out briefly and incorporated a small, flat area which led off of the path. Anders was sure that it was where one of the huge boulders they had seen at the bottom of the mountain must have dropped from, leaving a deep, bowl shaped hole in its wake. There was just enough room to squeeze in the horses and the dogs, sit down uncomfortably on the frozen dirt and lean back against the cold rock. Anders dug around in the sack they had put the food into and handed round the last of the meat and bread he had saved from that morning. I probably could have tried one of the other houses if I hadn't been so desperate to get out of town, Anders thought morosely as he stared out of the gap and down into the nothingness of the air; when sitting down he could not even see the land below them. The sight of the open air with nothing beyond it made his stomach turn. He pushed himself closer to Hawke and was never more glad than when he felt the man's arm snake around his shoulders, grounding him even as his stomach continued to flip about as if
floating on nothing.

"Here," Hawke said, passing him their only canteen of water, "you need to keep drinking."

"Thanks," Anders said, taking a long drink of the freezing water, gasping once he was done; his teeth tingled painfully and he licked at them before shaking his head and passing the bottle to Callum. While the other man drank Anders leaned his head on Hawke's shoulder and sighed, "How are you feeling love?"

"Me? I'm alright," Hawke obviously lied; Anders didn't think that Hawke knew that Anders could usually tell when he was lying, "just tired that's all."

"Mmm," Anders replied with a non-committal hum, "alright. Just let me know if you start to feel ill or dizzy. This is the last place I want to have you feeling light headed Hawke."

The sun was high in the sky, signalling midday, by the time the path began to narrow fitfully, some places having been seemingly designed that way and others looking to have simply crumbled away. They were slowed then by Anders suggesting that they dismount and lead the horses from then on. Hawke hadn't seemed thrilled by the idea but Anders, despite his concern for Hawke's wellbeing, didn't let that get to him. He was far more afraid of a deadly plummet claiming Hawke's life than his illness.

The air grew thinner as they continued their ascent and the cold grew bitter, a breezy wind blowing against them inconstantly, cutting at their cheeks and hands and chapping their lips. Icy chunks began to form in both Callum and Hawke's beards as the condensation from their breath began to slowly gather and freeze. Everything became more exhausting. The ground was slippery and uncertain and the sloping path was steep despite its indirect route up the mountain face. His legs soon grew tired and stiff and the pain from the cold was hard to ignore. His ears and nose ached, forcing him to dip into his reserves of mana just to stave off the cold and the building headache.

"Does anyone else hear that?" Anders heard Callum say; the smaller mage lifted his head wearily, having been walking with it down for so long, staring at the path; his neck was so stiff that it resisted being straightened.

"Hear what?" Hawke mumbled past the makeshift scarf across his mouth; a strip of spare cloth which Anders always kept to use as a sling just in case of emergency. He had wrapped around his neck and lower face to stave off the freezing air.

"That noise, like whistling..." Callum said, straining his neck as he looked above them, towards the next incline in the path.

Once more they were taken by surprise. Just as they had suddenly broken free of the fog, so did they find themselves looking up at the last leg of their climb. The sharp, chaotic, broken toothed ridge was suddenly revealed to them as they took the next faltering steps up towards the summit. The pass seemed far wider and more inviting from this distance than it had seemed from the base of the mountain, creating a hole like a missing tooth in a set of dragon's fangs. The razor-like ridge was peppered with snow and encrusted with ice, the rock beneath alternately silver and dark grey, shining in the sun. Anders didn't think he'd ever been happier to see the top of anything before in his life.

"Thank flying fuck for that," came a quavering voice which Anders was surprised to find was his own; he couldn't stop his jaw from chattering as he spoke, shivering in the cold, "come on, let's get over this thing and down off this dratted mountain as fast as possible. I don't want to be doing any of this in the dark."
It may have sounded like an exaggeration but winter days were always deceptively short and Anders refused to be at any more of a disadvantage on this already treacherous track. The mountain pass, when they finally reached it, was a large, fat bottomed 'u' shape, filled with snow and flanked at the top by the broken and shattered rocks of the ridge which had been interrupted by the gap. The rocks seemed to lean in over the top of the gap, as if waiting to fall and crush those beneath. The whistling sound turned out to be the wind passing through the thin runnels between some of the teeth like ridges, which were tightly packed and left large, thin cracks between them. The sound somehow made him feel colder than he already was. He hurried after Callum and the soft paw prints of the dogs while looking around nervously, leading Bryn forwards slowly as they both stumbled through the deep, frozen snow.

"And here I thought I'd had my fill of wonders for one day!"

Unfortunately Callum stopped with his exclamation at the start of the path on the other side, the beginning of the descent, and Anders was forced to look up and see why. Despite everything he couldn't help but hold his breath and let all fear leave him in exchange for another emotion which he wasn't entirely sure how to deal with.

Home, was all he could think as he surveyed the vast expanse of land that was revealed to them on the other side of the Hunterhorn ridge. The mountain sloped away before them, after a short but steep decline, at a much shallower gradient, creating a feeling of relief and safety all at once. When the mountain finally reached the ground below there was a small dip before a set of smaller foothills arose, covered in verdant green trees dusted with snow like icing sugar. The green was startlingly bright and welcoming. Looking back towards the landscape behind them, compared to the almost lush and verdant one before them, made it all the more easy to believe the story of the dragon's devastation.

The forest that started on those foothills seemed to continue without a break for miles until it hit loch Gurtad, one of the main tributaries of the mighty Lattenfluss river which split the Anderfels almost in two. The Anderfels were not flat as the preceding landscape had been, it was rolling and sheer, carpeted in trees, snow, tall, steep hills and wide rivers. The Lattenfluss snaked its way up through the sweeping landscape, starting in the high red stone cliffs to the west, sliding down from the edge of the Hunterhorn Mountains and widening as it flowed into the uneven low grounds. Anders could see the rolling landscape all the way to the Colean sea, the vast coastline like a shimmering yellow snake, he could just see the high walls of Hossberg in the low river valley north of loch Napoit and, if he squinted through the slightly hazy clouds lying low on the land, he thought he could see the shadowy outlines of the Wandering Hills on the distant horizon and the huge, dark bulk of the burning mountain of Tallo's Eye.

Then there, there beyond the foothills and the edge of the forest, sitting just before the river as it widened and became a visibly wild set of rapids, there sat his goal, a place he had not seen for over twenty years, the place where he had been brought screaming into the world; the small town of Nordbotten sat in seeming peace just beyond the trees.

"Now I can see why you wanted to come back here," Hawke's voice sounded close to his ear as the rogue and Sigurðr squeezed up beside him and surveyed the land with as much awe as the mage, "it...it makes me think of home."

"Of Ferelden?" Anders asked vaguely as he ran his eyes over the beautiful sight before him.

"Yes," Hawke said sadly, reaching up to pull his makeshift scarf down around his chin, "yes it does."

Then he felt it. A set of cold fingers twining with his own, holding his hand softly even as they
shook. Anders tried his best to squeeze Hawke's fingers in return but the action was painful and difficult, his fingers frozen and stiff with cold.

"Well, at least it's all downhill from here," Callum said cheerfully, even as Anders noted the blue tinge to his lips and the incredibly ruddy colour to his cheeks.

Anders nodded, shivering in the wind, and turned back to Hawke. The numbing of the cold was mixing with the hot excitement of seeing his home. He stared into Hawke's bright green eyes before leaning in and lightly kissing the rogue's chapped, cold lips. The other man pushed forwards even as he trembled. The feeling was distantly pleasing. Anders felt Justice growl, as if from at the end of a long tunnel. Anders instinctually opened his eyes and looked to his left. There he found Callum staring at them both with an unsettling look in his deep blue eyes.

'...death to...' Vengeance whispered into the dark corners of his mind.

The taller mage noticed his stare and looked away slowly. Anders broke the kiss but didn't pull back, instead resting his forehead against Hawke's.

"We're almost there," Anders said so softly that it bordered on a whisper.

"Right," Hawke said in return with a humourless laugh, "and then it's only the long, long trek all the way back to Kirkwall. I'm really not looking forwards to climbing this fucking thing all over again."

"Ha," Ander said, kissing Hawke's cheek before leaning back, "there's one thing we can agree on."

Hawke was smiling which Anders was glad for. Yet, when he had kissed the man, he had quickly let out a swift spell to check the state of his health. What he wasn't glad for was the state of Hawke's physiology. Anders could feel the slowness of his heartbeat, the sluggish blood in his veins, the pounding of his temples and the numbness overlaying the pain in his limbs. Get to Nordbotten, Anders thought fiercely, get there and end this...whatever it is!

Callum was no longer watching them when Anders looked back to the mage. No need to be jealous, Anders thought, and yet there was something beneath his skin that tried to tell him he was lying to himself. Leave me alone Justice, Anders thought strongly.

"Alright," he said to them both, "let's get down before we freeze! Hopefully it'll be warmer in the forest."

Despite no longer having to endure the toil of climbing it was almost more difficult to go down than to climb up. The cold had pervaded his joints, making him stiff and sore, and the jolting his knees and back received every time he took a step down became painful very quickly. The path was still fairly narrow and rugged so the men decided to stay off of the horses. Sascha and Luce, who had stayed rather obediently close to their master since leaving the mining town, now loped ahead, chasing each other down the mountain. The sun was beginning to set in the east by the time they were half way down but the mountain ridge had long before obscured the light, casting them in a chill shadow.

"Remind me that I prefer climbing next time I suggest going up anything high," Anders said breathily as they continued to tramp down the path; Bryn stumbled at his side as she nosed at a patch of alpine flowers growing from the cliff they walked by.

"I'll remind you, next time you plan on any trip, of all the things that have happened on this one," Hawke said dryly.
"Ha ha," Anders said in a strict monotone, "as if I haven't..."

He would have said more. He would have finished his sentence. He would have continued to re-forge what little affection he and Hawke were showing each other. He would have, if the booming sound from above hadn't arrested his attention completely.

"What in the Black was that?" Anders said worriedly, looking up and holding the reigns of his horse tightly.

No one was given the time to reply. The booming turned to a terrible cracking, and tumbling of hundreds of explosions, rocketing and echoing over the mountain above them.

"Get in to the cliff!" he heard Callum shout even as he looked up; the first of the rocks, hurtling towards them, were already visible.

Anders threw himself at the cliff face and tried his best to pull Bryn close to him, wrapping his arms around the horses head to blanket her eyes and ears. Then, as instinctually as he breathed in and out, he threw up a shield around both Hawke and Callum. It was not a moment too late.

The first were larger than they had looked, bouncing with heavy, astounding cracks as they rocketed from the top of the cliff and bounded past them like over excited puppies. Anders felt dust and wild chips of stone scattershot against his coat and hair, screwing his eyes shut and praying to anyone who would listen that they would not be killed this close to their salvation. Then the boulders came. The crashing was deafening and further apart, growing terrifying closer with every exploding crack. The horses were whinnying in fear, Bryn trying desperately to pull against Anders tight hold, and, from further down the slope, Anders was sure he could hear the yelping and barking of the dogs. All was darkness as he refused to open his eyes. All he could smell was the thick musk of the horse as he pressed his face against her thick forelock.

He felt more than saw the boulders fly overhead. The air rushed by him with a terrible dragging sensation and the vague light behind his eyelids grew dark. He thought he heard Hawke call out but didn't hear the words. They were drowned out as the barrage of rock consumed them, rushing by in a thunder of dirt and a hail of stone fragments. Anders' ears rang and he pushed his face harder against Bryn's head and held his breath.

Yet even when the sound of rock was falling far below them, as Anders stood back shakily and looked around him with wild eyes, the noise persisted. That was when he saw Hawke yanking desperately at Sigurðr's reigns, trying his best to calm the horse even as he shouted his commands in fear. The black stallion reared back, pawing desperately at the air, his mane flying wild and about his terrified eyes, jerking violently to the side and back while Hawke was pulled closer and closer to the edge of the cliff they so precariously stood beside, his feet dragging forcefully through the dirt and slush and rocks.

"Calm down!" Hawke yelled, his voice strained with exertion, "Maker, horse, calm yourself!"

Anders felt his heart stop. He felt everything slow down. He opened his mouth and screamed.

"Hawke let go! Hawke!"

Sigurðr reared again in fear, the dirt beneath his back two hooves crumbled and gave way, Hawke looked up in fear and dismay. The horse flailed, its whinny turning to a high pitched bleat of terror as it tried to bring its airborne legs back to the safety of the earth. Instead the doomed animal, in its desperation, brought its twin, powerful hooves down onto Hawke's prone chest. The man sailed backwards and smacked loudly into the cliff as the horse slid with a terrible squealing ineluctably.
down the cliff. Anders felt a fool afterwards but he couldn't stop himself from closing his eyes tightly and covering his ears, drowning out the terrified sounds of the horse as it fell to the rocks below. All he could hear was the rushing of blood in his ears, pounding and pounding and pounding...

It was Callum's large hands that covered his a moment later, pulling them gently away from his ears. Anders slowly opened his eyes and blinked away the dark patches on his vision. The other mage was looking at him with sympathetic eyes, leaning in to hold Anders softly. He could feel himself shaking.

"It's alright," Callum was whispering into his ear, over and over, "it's alright Anders, it's alright."

No, Anders thought sadly, no nothing is alright. Fuck this, fuck it all! He pulled away from Callum and hurried forwards towards Hawke. The rogue was pushing up shakily from the cliff, pale and startled and wide eyed. The front of his coat was ripped open, showing the bloody shirt beneath.

"Here, hold onto me Hawke," Anders ordered, letting his doctor's instinct take over and keep him calm as he let the rogue grasp his shoulders with shaking hands and lean his weight against him, "here, sit down, sit down and stay calm."

"I'm alright," Hawke said weakly, "I'm...I can't feel anything..."

That's not what I want to hear, Anders thought madly, don't tell me that! Hawke sat down against the cliff obediently while Anders steadied him. The mage reached out to pull back Hawke's ruined clothes and felt his heart rate quicken at sight of the wide, quickly deepening bruises and heavy lacerations split into his skin. Anders quickly lifted his hands and began clotting the swiftly flowing blood, turning the lacerations into messy lumps of dark, crusty blood. He let out a strong wave of pain relief into Hawke's system and, simultaneously, did his best to raise Hawke's blood pressure which had already been low when he checked it at the mountain pass and was now dangerously so.

"We need to get him warm," Anders said quickly, authoritatively, "we need to get off this mountain and into that forest, now."

"Anders, it's still another hour at least until we..." Callum cut in, placing a gentle hand against Anders' shoulder; the smaller mage looked up at the other man coldly, his eyes hard.

"I said now," Anders replied in a dark tone; Callum returned the stare.

"Alright," he said with a sigh, "alright, but we'll have to hurry. He's ill enough as it is. If he gets any worse he'll probably freeze to death before he dies of any internal injuries."

Anders felt his mind go blank, cut short and then snap back into action. The thought of Hawke dying, the memory of Hawke dying...No, no no, Anders thought in anguish, no I won't let it happen. Never again, I promised you never again! I'm going to save you Hawke. I'm going to save us both.

He barely remembered the journey down the last leg of the mountain and into the rough, thick grass and hardy ferns of the valley below. He barely remembered finding the dogs, mostly unharmed but for Luce, who was limping, or coming across Sigurðr's broken and mangled body lying amidst a rock pile at the end of the path. He did not remember the sun setting, the darkness, Callum leading him as Anders led Bryn, Hawke perched languidly on the mare's back.

It was the warmth of the fire that revived him. Anders blinked at it, wondering how he had come to
be kneeling before it at all, and was amazed to find that it was himself who had lit the pile of twigs and dirty moss that now crackled before him. He looked up languidly and found dense trees around him, heavy set pines that sent out hundreds of spindly needles on thick, bushy branches. To his left and found Hawke, lying curled towards the fire, asleep beneath the bulky blanket, Bryn, barely visible in the lambent firelight, lying behind him under a tall pine tree and flicking her ears. He could not see the other animals, Callum's dogs and his horse, but he could hear them breathing in the darkness.

"Welcome back," came the deep, resonant voice from behind him.

There was no moon to illuminate Callum, the light from the fire was obscured by Anders' body, hiding the tall mage in the thick of the darkness. Anders felt him move before he saw him. He seemed to emerge from the pitch, like a spider from a hole and, for a split second, the feeling of wrongness which he had felt vaguely during their previous intimate encounters jolted to the surface. Until Callum's arms wrapped themselves around him, until he was enveloped in the other man's warmth and the strong, ecstatic feeling of lust coursed through his system like a drug. Anders sighed shakily into Callum's shoulder, pressing his face against the solid muscle, sliding his forehead along until it rested against the warm flesh of the man's neck. He felt lightheaded and dangerously close to collapsing.

"I should be the one," he said through a heavy, laborious breath, "it should be me. I should be the one dead, not him!"

"Quiet yourself," Callum said calmly, rubbing soothing circles against the mage's back, "you're upset, it's alright now. We're safe, we're warm, we're off that blasted mountain. Everything's going to be fine, I promise you."

"I don't understand," Anders continued, breathing deeply as he kneaded Callum's back, his fingers working mechanically, feeling the rough jacket beneath, "I don't understand you. Why are you here? Why are you so kind to me? I am nothing but a monster, a harbinger."

"Anders calm down," Callum tried to reason but to no avail.

"Ill omens and bad luck follow me like curse but it's not just me they find, no," Anders pulled back, staring at the man before him frantically, "it's those around me! They are cursed too! Those I love..."

He stopped short, his breath catching. He felt sick. He felt weak and pitiful. You're not strong enough, you don't deserve him, the hateful voice inside his head mocked, all you bring Hawke is death and destruction and more trouble; and now him, now you do it to this beautiful creature as well. Anders shook his head, feeling everything spiralling away. Callum reached up to trace his jaw with tender, covetous fingers.

"No, I'm..." Anders jerked out, "I'm sorry I..."

"Shh," Callum said, "don't apologise to me. Never apologise. Why should I think it anything but an honour to be told that I am loved by one whom I love as well?"

Anders couldn't move. In a way the feeling wasn't entirely pleasant. He wanted to move. He tried his best to push away but the surging feeling of ecstasy that ripped through his system was devastating. Callum's deep, blue eyes seemed to suck the will from him, drawing him forwards into the deep, passionate kiss that waited, waited as if knowing that it had won. When they touched it was electrifying. Anders moaned sinfully, putting up no resistance whatsoever as Callum slid his
tongue inside and caressed him thoroughly. The tall man leaned forwards, pressing the svelte mage backwards with his bulk, the pressure creating an intimate connection against Anders' already straining erection.

The darkness danced behind his eyes and Anders shook, his hands rushing to Callum's shoulders as he lost his balance. He felt the sudden shift as the world tipped up and there was the feeling of pressure at his back, rough twigs and dead pine needles creaking and snapping. His head swam. He wanted it, he wanted it even as it was wrong. He didn't resist the trailing hand as it slid slowly from his back, around his hip and down to begin sensually smoothing against his groin.

Anders let out a startled groan but the noise was swallowed by Callum's expert lips, pressing and rubbing and licking and caressing and holding and rocking and moving and moving and moving. Time seemed to become endless. He could not tell where it began or where it ended, as if this had always been and always would be. The sensations were vivid, real and oh so desperately wanted. The shock had left him deadened, the cold had left him numb and this, this, the burning touches and the wonderful warmth of Callum's lips, was furiously thawing the winter like cold that pervaded his body. He wasn't aware of his own movements, his own languid hands pawing and pulling, his own lips and tongue returning the intimacy, the need, his hips jerking plaintively as he desperately sought more friction. This is wrong, he thought again and again, this is wrong! You can't do this, you can't, stop, you don't, you won't, stop it, stop it! For once, in that terrible moment, he thought that the voice wasn't his own. Justice...? he thought with vague, distant confusion.

It was too late. The surge of his completion stole all thoughts from his mind, forcing his head back and his neck to arch and a nearly silent, dreadful, fraught, aching gasp to leave his taught lips, his mouth open wide and his teeth bared. He felt his body jerk once, again, again and again. Callum's weight atop his felt simultaneously claustrophobic and protective. It felt as if an age had passed before his taught muscles collapsed and he was left panting and limp on the frozen ground. His head lollled to the right and he could feel the heat of the fire against his face. He blinked open his eyes. The lambent flames continued to dance and rise until they were extinguished from existence.

"Incredible," Callum's voice was hoarse and breathless, hovering above him; Anders rolled his head back to the centre and looked up at the handsome man straddling him. Callum shook his head, his eyes half lidded, "you...I could feel it as you..."

He had no questions to ask and no answers to give. Anders curled his fingers into fists to warm them against his palms. His breathing slowed but shuddered every second breath. He felt drained and yet satisfied, confused and yet peaceful. He looked to his right once more, only moving his eyes, and felt his body cool as he spied Hawke, still sleeping, through the flames.

"Don't worry, he's asleep this time," Callum said with a short laugh that made Anders feel sick with guilt, "I put him under before you returned from your, well, whatever that was...trance? Thought it would do him good, give him time to heal. Give him a rest. Give us time alone."

Anders looked back up to find Callum leaning down to once more kiss him deeply. He did not have the will to push the other man away and, lost inside his dizzying and tumultuous mind, he could not discern whether he wanted to or not. After another minute Callum leaned back but only so far, enough that their noses still bumped together. Anders blinked lethargically and tried to form coherent thought.

"Callum..." he started in nothing but a whisper.

"No, don't talk, dear heart," Callum said, his words sending thrills of affection and warmth into Anders' body; the smaller mage winced, bemused by the carnality of his reactions, "you need to rest. It's still a ways to your little village, I'd say another four days, maybe five."
"Hawke..." Anders started, hearing the distress in his voice, trying to rise from the ground; Hawke is too ill, exhausted, drained, he'll never last out here! He thought desperately.

"I told you not to worry, he'll be fine," Callum soothed, "haven't I taken good enough care of him already? I swear, we will all make it to Nordbotten alive. I give you my word."

He did his best to calm himself. Things had devolved, down from the dizzying high of Callum's touches and his burning heat, down into the blanket of chill, numb fog he had been swimming through since their escape from the mountain face.

"I'm cold," Anders said quietly, beginning to shake against the dwindling heat of the fire and the man above him.

"What?" Callum said, seeming lost in thought, "Oh! You should have said earlier. Come on, let's get some rest."

The tall mage pushed wearily up onto his feet before leaning down to help Anders to rise from the ground. He allowed himself to be led, Callum holding him close as they did, a few steps to the side to a familiar thick, dark blanket which was laid on the ground a short distance from the fire.

"Is that Sigurðr's blanket?" Anders asked in confusion.

"Whose? Oh, was that the horse's name?" Callum didn't seem to be sure whether he should be considerate or not as Anders was speaking with little inflection in his voice, "Well then yes, it is. I stopped at the rock fall when you kept walking and took the supplies from its pack, little as they were. We need all the shelter we can get."

Anders wouldn't lie and say that wasn't true but there was something about sleeping under the dead horse's blanket that made him shiver. Or maybe it's just the cold, Anders thought wearily as Callum pulled him gently down onto the rough blanket, wrapping him in a strong embrace, laying tightly against his broad chest, before the blanket was brought around to envelop them both.

Despite the added warmth Anders couldn't stop shaking as he fell into a fitful slumber, the darkness behind his eyelids seeming to flicker with the lambent light of the fire.

Days became endless beneath the trees. The sunlight was muted, filtered through the tall, irregular pine trees, and the air was still and dense. Sound seemed to shudder to a halt as it hit the wall of evergreen that flanked the path on either side. The vague rustling of animals in the undergrowth and birds in the trees, cawing harshly, was difficult to place. It was disorienting. Anders found himself constantly on edge, as if waiting for something to jump from the gloomy undergrowth at any moment.

He had awoken that next morning still pressed tightly against Callum, their legs tangled together and their chests pressed flatly against each other, arms winding like tree roots across his back. The feelings that assaulted his half awake mind were difficult to deal with; he was both frantically guilty whilst being ecstatic and blearily lustful. Neither suited him well. It was only as he had tried to move, gently so as not to wake the other man, that he realised Callum had been awake since before he had even opened his eyes.

"Good morning," a deep, mumbled voice had breathed into his ear as the hands against his back slid suggestively downwards.

It had been enough to force the consequences of his actions back to the fore. Anders had pushed away suddenly and stumbled up onto his hands and knees and then his unsteady feet. Callum had
stared at him in confusion and surprise. Anders had forced himself to ignore the man's own feelings as he dealt with his own. He had woken Hawke, with great difficulty, and then set about examining the man whom he had sworn to protect, whom he had always loved, and whom he could not imagine his life without. It's because of this love, Anders thought as he had felt Callum's eyes boring into his back, this treacherous feeling. I crave it as I crave freedom, which similar quality they share; elusiveness.

Travelling became difficult. Hawke was weak but still belligerent and refused to either ride with Callum or allow Callum to ride with Anders. The mage was forced to make the rogue ride with him on Callum's horse, as it was a sturdier Clydesdale and better suited to heavy loads, while Callum rode atop Bryn. It was an uncomfortable and slow way to travel. Hawke's constant presence against his back, hands tightly wound into the fabric of his jacket as he held onto him for support, only further reminded him of Callum's seemingly earnest grip, his deep eyes and sanguine smile. Yet Hawke's warmth and his waning energy were dominant in his mind. He felt weighed down, pressured by the multitude of wrongs, mysteries, fears, loves and feelings he had. He wished for a simpler time and a simpler heart.

On the second day he was awoken by the sound of intense screaming, loud and drastic in his mind, ringing and accompanied by the sound of breaking wood and flames licking and devouring. The sight of the woman, a woman he knew, running around a small room, in and out through one door, tearing at her hair. At first he thought he was already awake, that the dream had become his reality. Even Hawke shaking him by the shoulders, while Anders babbled and tried to pull away, was not enough to bring him back into the reality of the world around him. Vengeance was screaming along with the memory, in anguish as well as letting lose howls of joy and rage. All seemed to be merging into one, all realities becoming a certain truth, until Hawke took more drastic measures rescue him from his own mind. The stinging blow that snapped his neck to the left did the job that the rogue's words could not. Unfortunately, when he blinked his eyes back open into the chill, dim light of early morning, Anders had been greeted by the sight of Callum and Hawke laying into each other savagely.

"Keep your Maker damned hands to yourself, you son of a bitch!" Callum was shouting while he swung clumsily at the smaller man before him.

Callum's lack of experience in fighting was obvious in his ungainly punches and inability to predict his opponent's blows. Which was perhaps why Hawke, even when ill, managed to send the larger man spiralling to the ground with a swift punch to the gut and, as Callum doubled over, a heavy knee to the face. Anders had been forced to stumble upwards and break them apart, his mind still reeling with Vengeance's fury and Justice's submissive fear. Anders had never been more relieved that Callum was still compos mentis enough to tell his dogs not to attack when Luce and Sascha rushed to their master's aid, teeth bared and snarling frightfully, snapping and barking.

"You don't know what's best for him!" Hawke had yelled furiously as Anders held him back from further attacking the prostrate man before him, "You'll never understand you piece of filth, you keep your hands off him or I swear I'll kill you!"

It had been a long day. It had taken a long time to calm Hawke down, with the guilt and fear still rolling around in his gut, before seeing to Callum. The rogue had spat in disgust as Anders helped Callum to his feet and helped him to a nearby tree stump. He used a spare piece of cloth to wash away the blood from a laceration on Callum's cheek which had been caused by the hard metal rims at the top of Hawke's long boots. The mage had watched him keenly with his incredibly blue eyes while Anders had worked, healing the cut with a brief glow of healing magic, the skin stitching back together. The tension between the two men as Anders bundled them onto the horses and forced them to continue was palpable. He wasn't sure how much longer it would be before the
whole powder keg of their trio exploded and, for once, he wasn’t even sure that he would be the one to ignite it.

He found himself pulling out the letters of the band of three, looking over them again and again when he thought no one was looking. Yet, oddly enough, the writing on the front of each letter was beginning to look familiar, the scrawling red letters which spelled out his name. Anders found himself staring at them for longer and longer lengths of time, trying his best to think where he had seen it before. Even then, as he emblazoned the red, scrawling text onto his eyes, he began to wonder if he was creating a false sense of familiarity simply by over-reading the texts so often.

Food was sparse and strange. The animals in the forest were distrustful and incredibly difficult to catch. The vegetation was only slightly familiar and, at times, completely unknown to him. Anders tried his best to remember the herbs and mushrooms he had seen his mother collecting in the forest when they foraged together, but he did not trust his memory enough to risk poisoning them all. The berries which seemed to dominate the hard leaved, thorny bushes throughout the forest, were a dangerous, bright cerulean. Anders, well versed in herbs and wild foodstuffs as he was, knew better than to trust them. The dogs managed, a few times, to dig up some odd, lumpy root vegetables, resembling scrawny potatoes, at their small campsite on the second day and as dusk fell on the third Anders managed to surprise a pair of large snow hares. The watery rabbit and potato stew Anders managed to make was so sweet and hearty that Anders was sure he'd never eaten anything more wonderful in his life.

Hawke's chest healed quickly but the deep bruises remained, like black runnels across his pectorals and abdomen. Anders checked his health continually but it was never good news. If things weren't the same then they were deteriorating, which only made Anders' heart sink. He tried to be kind to Hawke, tried to have them act as they once had, affectionate and loving, but his feelings and the incredible tension between the three travellers made it almost impossible.

Then, on the fourth day, came the thing which, in his opinion, he really should have thought about. He blamed his lack of preparation on being distracted by the mass of other problems he had been inundated with since the journey began; and now there was a further problem to add to the pile. Grey Wardens. He should have been more worried than he was, strange Warden's in a strange land were sure going to be more tricky to deal with, but he found it difficult to be afraid. He felt them before he saw them, lots of them, and knew that it was an outpost and not a patrol by the patterns that the switching, marching, alert presences trailing through his awareness. The pull of the taint was like a jerking behind his navel, a direct pressure in the heavy pounding of the dark blood in his heart. He had changed their route instantly, swerving them off of the path and out into the woods. Hawke had looked around him and gripped more tightly at Anders' coat, muttering close into his ear.

"What are you doing?" he had asked, "We shouldn't leave the path."

"Warden's, Anders had said back, the one word seeming to explain to Hawke exactly why Anders was doing what he was doing.

"Not Darkspawn?" Hawke asked.

"No, not Darkspawn," Anders said back, "they're far too regimented. We just need to stay as far away as possible and they shouldn't notice me."

Hawke was more alert from then on. When they camped Anders had everyone take turns to keep watch, shaking each other awake as they felt their eyes drift closed. They did not notice anyone following them and, after noticing the outpost even though he had not seen it, Anders did not notice any presences in his field of awareness. The nights, which had been growing longer as they
travelled west from Kirkwall, had slowly become shorter and shorter as they travelled north to the Anderfels. Now, as they approached the most northern point in their journey, the sun was setting earlier than when they had started. Anders could feel that Hawke was asleep against his back as he nudged Callum's horse forwards faster, reaching up with his right hand to hold onto Hawke's arms.

The trees lined the path were tall and ungainly but seemed a little more regimented than the wild forest they had been traversing before. The sky was clear and the stars were emerging brightly, showing the constellations, all at an odd angle to their normal positions. The moon was nothing but a slim scythe like blade in the deep blue sky, casting no light onto the dark earth below. Yet no light was needed to spy the high, wooden wall that appeared at the end of the road, small torches strapped to large poles before the heavy wooden gate, illuminating the trees around the entrance to the small village that had caused him so much trouble and woe.

"Been a long time coming," Callum said as they trotted forwards in the gathering dusk.

"Yes," Anders said, staring ahead intensely, "Yes it has."

Hawke's magical Chantry ordained papers may have been lost but thankfully they were no longer needed to enter. Anders remembered enough of his mother tongue to talk to the guards that spoke down from the high walls, asking their business. He had talked them inside with a story of travelling from Kassel to visit relatives. Somehow it had seemed too simple a plan but, nevertheless, it had worked. The gates had opened and they had walked the horses inside with the dogs close at their heels. Unfortunately, what with having said they were visiting relatives, Anders found he could not ask the guards for directions to the local inn. Instead they were forced to find it themselves and, after a good fifteen minutes of slow riding along the small, winding main street, they found it.

They put the horses into the small stables beside the inn, Callum told the dogs to stay, and they entered the building. Anders was more than aware that, from this vantage point at the end of the street, he could see the black mass of the Hill, looming against the darkening blue of the sky.

The inn was small but homely, the bottom floor was a long, low room lit by a wide fireplace, warm and bright, with few tables and a staircase at the back left that led up to the second floor. The place seemed empty but for a middle aged man sitting by the fire, smoking a long pipe. He looked up as they entered, revealing deep wrinkles around his smoky grey eyes, and looked them over warily.

"Good evening," Anders said in Anderfelian which he could see put the man instantly at ease, "we are looking for some rooms for the night."

"O'course sir," the man said, his accent thick and rustic; he showed his Anderfelian lineage when he stood, showing off his tall, broad physique and braided, greying blonde hair, "I got three rooms if that suits ya. Ten silvers a night, each that is."

"Alright," Anders said, feeling around for any spare money that he may have forgotten about; Perendale had been lucky, they had managed to slip away from the inn without paying, but this man wanted the money in advance, "thirty silvers, that sounds good..."

"How much?" he heard Callum asked him, obviously not understanding what they were saying.

"It's...he's asking thirty silvers," Anders said, switching jerkily back into King's Tongue.

"Here," Callum said, handing over the rough coins.

"Where did you get this?" Anders asked, looking at the coins in confusion.
"You seem to forget I am a thief by profession serrah," Callum smiled humorously, "you didn't think I'd let the barkeep in that mining town _keep_ that money did you?"

"Ha!" Anders laughed even as he gave the money to the confused looking inn keeper, "you never fail to surprise me, really."

"Don't judge a book by its cover, serrah," Callum said with a twinkle in his eye; Anders did not miss the ironic humour in the statement, remembering the small note that Callum had left when he had stolen their money and now here he was offering to pay Anders' bill for him.

He paid. They were shown upstairs into a narrow hallway lit by tall candles.

"These three here are yours serrah," the innkeeper said, indicating to three doors, two on one side of the corridor and one on the other, "The one at the end there is already occupied. If you want anything during your stay I'll be downstairs until late, I'm usually up until after eleven. I can get you some food if you're hungry and there's some drink in the cabinet under the stairs. You can help yourselves as long as you know some restraint."

"Thank you, that's very kind," Anders said, pushing his way into the nearest room as the tall innkeeper made his way back downstairs, heavily thumping against the creaking wood.

The room was cold and dark. Anders set about finding the candles by the light thrown in from the corridor and lit them with a small summoned flame. He looked down at the desk illuminated before him and thought once more about the letters in his pocket. When he turned around Hawke was standing behind him, looking over his shoulder, and Callum had already made his way into the room across the hall. Anders would have jumped if he had been at all surprised.

"Hawke?" Anders asked, feeling far too tired to enjoy the excitement of realising exactly where he was and the significance that held, "How do you feel. Is your chest alright?

"Mmm," Hawke said, leaning his head against Anders' shoulder and breathing in deeply; Anders brought his hands up automatically and placed them loosely against the small of Hawke's back, "I'm alright. I just have a bad feeling about...about all of this."

"What do you mean?" Anders asked vaguely, all the while looking around the room over the rogue's shoulder.

"I can't explain it," Hawke said, pulling back only to lean in and kiss Anders lips softly; the sudden act of affection took Anders by surprise and made him focus on the man in his arms, "I just feel like I'm being watched. Can't you feel it?"

Anders shook his head. For once he did not have that itching sensation that spoke of being observed, that crawling under his skin. He felt oddly...normal. He wasn't sure if it was true normality or simply the calm before the storm.

"Don't worry love," Anders said, reaching up to brush Hawke's now long, shaggy hair away from his eyes, "we've made it this far haven't we?"

"Don't you dare say 'what could possibly go wrong'," Hawke said with a wry look, "I don't want you jinxing everything now."

"As if I would," Anders smiled, knowing that it didn't reach his eyes from the blank look that Hawke gave him in return, "let's get some sleep at least. I want to be ready for whatever tomorrow may throw at me."
"You're not alone in that," Hawke said, nodding sagely.

Anders watched the rogue as he closed the door. He caught a brief glimpse of Callum, pottering around in his room across the corridor, and gave him a brief wave goodnight which he saw returned before the door closed completely. He cleared his throat as Hawke gave him a dark look before stripping off his coat and throwing it onto the bed haphazardly. Anders turned back to the desk and, as Hawke busied himself with undressing, pulled out the letters. In amongst them he found the letter which he had written to himself in Perendale, unfinished and crumpled, and, caught between two corners of parchment, there was a small piece of white, very wrinkled paper. He plucked it from the rest and placed the others on the desk, unravelling it with both hands delicately. He smiled and let out a small laugh as he spied the very note that he had recalled earlier, Callum's mischievous note left after stealing all of their gold.

"Never judge a book by its cover serrah"

He dropped the note down onto the other letters and made to turn away. Then he stopped. He stopped and moved back to the desk, reaching out to move the piece of paper and reveal the topmost letter in the pile beneath. No, Anders thought, no I must be...

He kept his fingers against the scrap of paper, sliding it down to rest just below the letter. He stared. No, it must be a coincidence, it must...They were the same, the scrawling spidery script that wound across the white scrap of paper and the scrawling red letters which emblazoned his name onto the front of each letter he had been sent. Anders looked back and forth frantically, trying anxiously to find both similarities and differences. Oh Maker, Anders thought as his mind swam, no this can't be true. It can't be. How could he...? Why would he...? Anders grabbed both the scrap and one of the letters and made to cross the room, reaching out to take hold of the door handle...

He felt the world twist and squirm as his hand tried to clasp around the door handle. Anders shook his head, hearing Hawke's voice but not understanding his words. He felt everything tip backwards, as if standing on a lurching ship in a terrible storm, and stumbled until he felt himself hit the desk from which he had walked. Everything blurred and swam in his vision. He panicked, vaguely seeing Hawke's shadow as the man rushed to his side, feeling his hands grabbing him as he tipped with a disquieting feeling of vertigo, towards the floor.

He never hit.

His vision went black and everything became dampened silence. He felt himself as if floating in a void of nothingness, trying desperately to look around himself or to reawaken from this sudden fit.

"No, there is no awakening for you," came a disgustingly familiar voice, echoing around him in this dark prison, "and there never will be again."

The feeling was instantaneous and visceral. Anders growled low in his throat and cursed his lack of foresight. That sickening voice, one which he had hoped to hear only as he silenced the man forever. The reason behind all of this, surely; no one else would have been able to influence him from so far afield.

"Alesis! I fucking should have known!" Anders started, hearing his voice but not truly understanding how this could be, how he could have been so blind, "Show yourself you filthy piece of shit!"

"Silence!" the voice said, "Pets should only speak when spoken to, and you have been my little pet for so long now. You wanted to know why I led you here? Don't you want to know your past? The reason you've been having such troubling dreams?"
"Shut your fucking mouth!" Anders yelled.

"I think it's you who should shut yours," Alesis said disdainfully, "honestly Anders, or should I say Leif, you are so very impatient. I had it all planned, bringing you to your old house, showing you your past, it was all very dramatic. But then you ruin it all by figuring out my little rouse."

"Callum," Anders spat in anger, grinding his teeth, "I can't believe it, he's not like you! He's not a filthy blood mage with delusions of grandeur!"

"Oh and you'd be right," Alesis said, his voice shifting around in the dark, making Anders dizzy and disoriented, "he's such a pure soul. So trusting, so willing to help! Did you really think I would give myself away so easily by sending one of my own minions to lure you to your death? I know how sensitive you are to blood magic since your little, well, dalliance in the dark arts. Callum was the perfect choice, he's everything that you've ever wanted, so desperately, all that love and kindness and understanding. Enough to make me sick, but I put up with it all."

"Why? For fuck's sake Alesis this is insane even for you!" Anders spat, "Couldn't come and attack me on my own terms, was that it? Had to lure me so far from my friends because you're afraid? Because that sounds plausible!"

"So much anger in you, I always liked that," Alesis said silkily, "I have found out so much about you my dear Anders, so many interesting things. So many things that people are willing to tell when you cut off one finger, then another and then move on to the whole hand. Oh they'd spill their guts, if I didn't do it for them. Shall I let you see what I found? Shall we share, dear Leif?"

And the voice showed him. Anders watched in fascination and fear as, from the darkness, a shimmering vision appeared. The darkness around himself melted away to reveal what looked like a perfect replica of Nordbotten, complete with people and buildings and horses and there, in the distance, was the house on the hill, the house in which he had grown up. It was midday and the streets were strangely swarming. For a quick, panicking moment Anders' curiosity outweighed his fear. What is this? Where am I? Is this the past, the future?

"How can you do this?" Anders asked, looking around as none of the apparitions took any notice of him; he watched in confusion as the people swarmed past him, "Where are you going?"

It became obvious rather quickly. Anders followed the mob of citizens and kept up with their fleet footsteps only by jogging with them. What's happening? He thought desperately, realising with a sinking feeling that they were all headed up the small, dirt path towards his house, his house. The hill.

"She'll bring destruction upon us," one of the women beside him said to a tall, dark haired man at her side, "she needs to be taught some reason or we're all doomed!"

"She will," the man said back dangerously, "she will or we'll have to explain it to her."

The house came into sight all too quickly. The front of the mob was already at the door, talking with a tall woman in an ankle length, blue dress, her long blonde hair trailing over her shoulders and down her back. Anders knew her immediately as she surveyed the crowd with amber eyes, the image of his own. Mother, he thought wildly. Without another thought he began pushing forwards, moving through the crowd like a nonexistent shadow, until he could hear what they were saying."

"There's no way Arnvé, he's gone and you know what happens!" the man at the fore of the mob was saying, his rich brown hair standing out from his head at odd angles, seeming to mirror his anger, "If you keep asking about him they'll have us all on the chopping block!"
"I won't abandon my son, not for anyone," Anders' mother, Arnvé, said proudly, holding her head high and staring at the thirty or so people surrounding her house as if they were nothing but insects, "these rules, they do not govern us, they should govern no one! Leif never did any wrong, he hasn't hurt anyone, he should be able to come home."

Anders rushed to the door, looking up at his mother with a crippling sense of sadness and excitement.

"Mother! Mother it's me," he said irrationally, knowing she couldn't possibly hear him; yet he couldn't stop himself, "mother please, what's happening? Mother!"

"You silly witch!" one of the women shouted, "you heard the templars, they said that if you even ask about where they've taken him they'd make an example of us all! They're going to burn this village to the ground, don't you understand?"

"They wouldn't dare!" Arnvé shouted, glaring at them all, "This town? This is Nordbotten, we survived the first Blight, the Warden's rode here, mounted proudly on their griffons to defend us! How can we have come to this? We should fight against those that attack us, not cower in fear!"

"You don't know where they've taken him and if you don't shut your mouth about it then I'll do it for you," the man closest to Arnvé said darkly, "I don't want to hurt you Arnvé but you don't leave me much choice!"

"You wouldn't dare, Rogfan," Arnvé said defiantly, "and I no longer need to ask about my son. I know where they have taken him and I am going to get him back. You won't need to worry about me any longer, you bloody hypocrites!"

"You know?" the man named Rogfan asked quietly, looking suddenly frustrated and ashamed.

"Of course, you think I'm a fool?" Arnvé shouted one final time before turning from them all and storming back into the little house that stood on the hill, the little house that held many fond and terrible memories for the man who watched this unknown scene play out.

The mob watched the door with a terrible sense of finality. One of the men by Rogfan began talking with him quietly.

"What's going on?" Anders asked, knowing it was in vain but feeling a sudden surge of dread as the mob moved as one, obviously having a pre-arranged plan; Rogfan nodded somewhat sorrowfully and stepped aside, allowing the others to begin surrounding the little house, "What are you doing? Get away from here!"

Two heavily set men emerged from the group, armed with planks of wood and heavy hammers. Anders felt his heart beating even as he felt detached from his body.

"Father," he said in breathy dismay as he looked to the shorter of the two men, "Maker, no, you can't let them!"

Without preamble his father and the other man held the boards against the front door, the only door and hammered them quickly over the wood. Anders could hear his mother moving around inside, hear the door handle being tried and the sound of her muffled voice from inside as she shouted, asking what was going on. It didn't stop there. The men continued their work until the two front windows were similarly boarded crudely. Anders watched with cold dread as he saw the top of his mother's head run into view, all that was visible above the board, her hands beating on the window. Anders shook his head back and forth again and again as he watched his father tramp back down to
the group, looking beaten but hard eyed.

"You should do it," Rogfan said, passing Anders' father an ominous torch as the man tried to slink away, the fire licking at its tip, seeming overly bright in the dull landscape.

"No," Anders said strongly, "no, no, no! You can't do this!"

His father took the torch reluctantly, turning back towards the small house where Arnvé still banged futilely against the doors and windows, yelling and cursing. The man stared at the house with blank eyes. Anders found himself running forwards, his face split into an angry snarl, standing before the unseeing man and screaming into his face.

"She's your wife. She loved you, you bastard! You bastards, all of you! How can you do this!"

The man paid him no heed. Anders saw him reach back in preparation to throw the torch. In a last act of desperation Anders lunged forwards to try and tackle the man to the ground. He fell forwards as if the people were nothing, of no substance, ending up face down on the floor. By the time he managed to struggle back to his feet and turn around the thatched roof was already licking with flame.

"Please no!" he screamed, hearing the mirrored screams from inside the house as his mother finally realised her fate, pushing up as he felt the grass beneath his fingers and the pain in his chest as his heart beat, "Oh Maker stop this, someone help her! Please someone, you can't do this!"

Time seemed to speed up as the despair tore at Anders' soul. The fire ravaged the roof, greedily devouring the dry thatch and roaring merrily as it did. Anders ran to the house in anguish and tried to pry the wooden planks away but the wood was ethereal and ghostly under his hands. He fell to his knees and sat there, shaking in fury and terror. He stared up at the house and shook his head again and again.

"It's not real, oh Maker it's not real!" Anders said in agony, his eyes widening as his mother's screams reverberated in his skull again and again.

The words did nothing, his mind had consumed him. It was real, it was so very real, he could feel the heat of the fire and hear his mother's cries and see the silence of the watching crowd. He opened his mouth and screamed and screamed, covering his ears to no avail. All death, all death, his mind heaved, death to, death to! He looked up through the distorted perception of his mind and watched as the fire seemed to explode from the top of the house, roaring upwards into the gathering darkness as the scenario melted around him, fading away back into the initial darkness of the dream. The fire swirled and danced and rose and rose before finally plummeting back to the vague grounding of the abyss. Anders stared with mindless terror as the fire swam and twirled, slowly dwindling from a raging mass into a familiar form. The armour was the same, the height, the build, the face.

Anders found himself staring at the figure of Justice as he had once seen him, that time so long ago in the dusty store room in Ferelden, before they had joined their beings together; in his true form, his face hidden behind a grand helmet, his body concealed in heavy, plate armour, his greatsword at his side and his shield upon his back, Justice stood before him, shining in the darkness. Yet he was not the same, he was no longer the pure spirit Anders had once known. His shining, ethereal being no longer shone with the white, silvery light. It was orange and red, flickering with fire and anger and hatred. Anders couldn't take his eyes from those that shone from beneath the helmet, regarding him with a growing sense of recognition.

Those eyes were his own, the amber distorted with flickering red.
Anders felt a shiver of fear as another form materialised into the void. Alesis looked down at him, resplendent in his white coat and trousers, his midnight black hair melting into the darkness itself.

"So this is the demon himself," Alesis smiled sleekly at the vision of Justice before them both, watching as the spirit turned to the blood mage at his side. Anders pushed himself up to his feet and swayed weakly back and forth, "This meeting has been a long time coming. I have a proposition for you, demon. You don't want to live within this weakling forever, do you? Let us talk, I'm sure I can give you much better agreement."

Anders stared, mystified, drained and dismayed, at the terrible scene before him. He looked to Justice and found it within himself to call the spirit by his true name.

"Vengeance don't..." Anders whispered in dismay before the spirit turned in anger towards him and rushed forwards, consuming his prone form in a flurry of flame and fury.
The meaning of a being could never be entirely encapsulated in a single name. Most names were arbitrary things, chosen for their sound or a fleeting idea at the time of birth or even for a hope that the child would perhaps turn out the way you always imagined your child would. The name associated you with a wider world, the world of your family, your clan, your nation. It defined you only in as much as a surface trait; everything that lay beneath held no connection to it, was something transcendent of it.

Anders, from the moment he had his first conversation with Justice, understood that there was nothing arbitrary or independent in the link between the spirit's name and his state of being. Justice was an embodiment of the very thing the human's of Thedas named him after. He stood for the ideals of his namesake and nothing more than that. It gave him a single mindedness that Anders had initially loathed and yet, over time, come to respect; he attributed this to a growing sense of his own obligations and role in this world, while in the skulking dark of his subconscious he feared that his reasoning was based on a deep seated guilt that he had never fully recognised his potential. That he had never been able to live his life in the way he had naively promised himself he would as a young man; by his own rules.

Yet, he had found, rules in and of themselves were an ever changing, intangible and unreliable source on which to base one's life. When he was a boy, living in the Anderfells, he had lived by the rule that his parents always knew best and would always look out for him. When this rule was destroyed, the day the templars dragged him from his life and dumped him, hundreds of miles away in an unknown land, he had been forced to construct something new, shaping himself into a different being altogether. Live in the moment, forever planning ahead into dreams that would never become realities. He would live for himself and purely for himself, no one else looked out for him and therefore he would return the favour.

Until he fell in love for the first time. It wasn't an easy thing to accept, not at all, even though it was something he told himself he wanted to find, perhaps purely on the basis of peer pressure and societal conditioning. Dashing his rule, once again, Karl had somehow managed to adjust his jaded and cynical view of the world ever so slightly back towards the idealistic feelings of his early childhood. Not that he had ever allowed the man to know how much he had changed him, no. Anders hid this disturbing realisation back down inside his mind along with everything else he wished to ignore and to forget. It was only, years later, that the tiny chink Karl had created in his blithe, cynical armour, came into play.

Justice had questioned not only his moral centre, his code of conduct, but also his place in the world as a whole. Having been segregated, hated and feared for most of his life outside and inside of the Circle, Anders had, initially, found the idea of being a part of the world 'as a whole' as a laughable and somewhat cruel idea. Yet, the longer Justice had pestered him and, after a rather lengthy and involved partnership through the most dangerous and eventful portion of his life up until that point, the longer he had spoken to Justice, Anders began to realise that there was perhaps more to life than his own bitter cynicism and underlying hatred of who he then called the normal people. Everything had seemed, somehow, to brighten. He was part of something, the Warden's, and despite feeling trapped into yet another lifestyle there was something about the camaraderie and the small amount of freedom that he had clung to desperately.

Joining with Justice had been both a wonderful thing and a terrible, terrible mistake. Before that point, considering all of his training and the constant pounding of Fade lore by the senior enchanters, he had believed Fade spirits to be something ethereal, sacred and, above all, infallible.
Justice must know what he is doing because something as timeless and pure such as he must be the be all and end all of truth and significance. Another foolish and naive concept which was to be quashed beneath the heavy and unforgiving boot of consequence.

Until that point everything had been with a changeable purpose, never one thing from one day to the next, never fixed and certain despite his belief that it was so. Now, with he and Justice's souls as one, he found himself on an unchangeable and set course towards certain destruction. It was something he had initially rebelled against, then finally accepted with a heavy heart and then begun to fervently pour his heart and soul into.

Until Hawke. Hawke was something he had not banked upon. Karl had been his first affair with the concept of love, something which he had believed to be ended the day that he felt his lover's blood coursing over his hand. Then Garret Hawke had marched audaciously into his life, swept him off of his feet and told him boldly that there was no such thing as an end of anything. Everything was as he had believed it to be in his younger years, nothing was set in stone, everything was allowed. Justice did not agree. His life became torn in two. His love for Hawke was something he had never thought he would ever be able to feel at all, never mind simply because he was already sharing his soul with a spirit which had been steadily growing in violence and fervour since they had joined in Ferelden. Hawke had brought the colour back into his dull life, in more ways than one.

Then it had become something entirely changeable, something as unreliable as the rules he had tried his best to adhere to. Hawke's love was both a hindrance and a boon, something that Anders had trouble finding the true nature of. A real relationship was not something he had ever really experienced before, what with spending the mainstay of his formative years locked up inside a dusty old tower with a group of older peers and a host of apprentices who were just as clueless about life as he was. Hawke was a real person, with faults and foibles and wonderful traits which Anders loved and loathed in equal amounts. It was exciting, it was dangerous and gave him something to fight against even as it gave him solace from the world, arms to fall into when things went south and someone to argue with when Justice needed an outlet.

In all his long years of strife and toil, punctuated by moments of joy and solace, he had tried his best to truly forget his past. It was something he had done to an almost sociopathic level, which he tried his best not to think about. He blocked his past because it tried its best to define him and, as Anders had held true to his entire adolescence, he would not be shaped by anything but what he wanted to be. His name was something he had chosen, not that which his parents gave him. He was no longer Lief Rødberg, son of Arnve of the Red Mountains, he was Anders, the mage with a mysterious past and a will of his own. He would be free, he would be his own man, he would do whatever he damn well pleased because there was no Maker and there was no Black, there was only the world and the Fade and everything in between. Nothing, not even Justice's tight grip on his destiny or Hawke's domineering love, would entirely steal his freedom from him.

Vengeance was the poison, the Great Unraveller, the inverse, the polar opposite, the negative of all being. He was the one who would lay all to waste without mercy or repentance. Vengeance was the one thing he had never banked upon, and now, here, at the culmination of his life's efforts, he had fallen prey to that very oversight.

When his eyes flew open, the vision of Alesis and of Vengeance's burning form still blazoned onto his waking vision, he felt an odd sense of acceptance which had never truly felt with Justice. Anders had always fought against Justice's consciousness just as Justice fought against Anders' control of his own body. It was the intrinsic difference, Anders had always thought, between their forms which formed the basis of their antithesis. With Vengeance, the true form of the demon which Anders had perverted Justice into, there was a slick sense of recognition, of familiarity, that forced Anders to accept the demon's possession. It was the waking possession, the sense of himself
in his tormenter, the human element corrupting Vengeance's being, the ability to see and feel the actions as they took place.

To see Hawke's face, as the man looked down at him in concern, go slack with fear as he seemed to realise the terrible creature his Anders had become. To see the awful guilt and dread in Callum as he staggered away from the possessed mage, out into the hall, obviously having run to his side at the first sign of trouble, his eyes wide and hands grasping at the walls and doorm. Anders felt his mouth twist into a tight grin as he lifted himself from the floor, something that morphed into a mix of glee and despair as he looked down at himself only to find the flames of Vengeance dancing around his body, ephemeral and ethereal and damning.

Anders found that he could hardly even refer to himself as such, it seemed wrong to call himself Anders or Leif or Justice or Vengeance. Yet, if he were to pick one, the latter seemed all the more appropriate for, when he was done with his retribution against those cowards who killed poor Leif's mother, he would then take out his just anger upon the vile thief Alesis who had harmed poor Anders so dreadfully and wronged Justice by introducing the blood magic poison into his body. Every aspect of his being called for Alesis's blood, even as he descended the stairs with Hawke's strong, terrified voice calling after him.

He found the inn keeper where they had originally seen him. The man stood up with a crashing sense of fear and panic. He still seemed tall, imposing, but Vengeance's eyes viewed him as nothing but a coward. The vision Alesis had shown him flashed against his vision, even as the inn keeper threw himself against the wall and cried out while Vengeance approached.

...the tall man by his father's side, his wrinkles gone, now smooth faced and young, stoic and casual but for the hammer and wooden boards in his large hands. He lifted the wood and began to hammer it into the rough, carved doormframe while his mother shouted from inside the house...

"Traitorous being, why do you cower from one who has come to release you from your torment?" Vengeance heard the echo of the Fade in his voice, sending his pitch to an almost indefinable level of construction, not deep and not high and not anywhere in between; it seemed to come from another plane, travelling through the vast echoes of time before reaching out into the material plane before him.

The man screamed in fear, tripping and crashing into the small table before the fireplace, trembling on the floor before he began crawling towards the doorway. Vengeance kept his grin in place as he walked through the once peaceful room until he stood with his heavy boot upon the horrified man's back.

"Mercy, mercy!" the man cried in Anderfellian, "Maker help me, please let me live! I am no heretic, I have lived a good life! Please, whatever demon you be, leave me in peace!"

"Anders! Dear Maker stop, stop!" Vengeance heard Hawke's voice from the stairway behind him but did not turn; one who does not know my true name has no right to command me, he thought, one who knows so little about me has no right to my life, "Stop this! Justice? Justice let him go, I'm begging you!"

Vengeance ignored him. He pressed harder against the man's back and listened to him howl with a perverse sense of glee.

"You know what you have done, liar," Vengeance said, lifting his foot away only to reach down and drag the man from the floor with preternatural strength; the inn keeper's terrified blue eyes stared back at him as he held them face to face, jaw slack and face pale, sweat beading on his
brow. He tried to grip Vengeance's arms with his own hands but the flames seemed to burn at him even though they left no wound behind, "you know exactly what you have done. You remember it as if it were yesterday, don't you? How you hammered the nails into the house as if into her coffin? How you stood and watched her burn and breathed a sigh of relief that it was not you, that your life had been spared by the sacrifice of another?"

"No, no!" the man cried, tears summoned to his eyes, "dear Maker, please spare me! It's you, it's you isn't it? I knew you would come, he told us so! He told us you would come back for our damned souls!"

"Arnve trusted you," Vengeance hissed, listening only half heartedly to the sound of Hawke moving around behind him and Callum's heavy footfalls as he descended the stairs, "all she wanted was freedom for her son! And all you fearful cowards could do was think of your own worthless necks."

"I didn't know, I had to do it!" the inn keeper yelled, "You can't blame me, it wasn't my idea, she would have...!"

"I have no time for your pleading," Vengeance said as he dragged the man to the fireplace, "you have been judged for murder based on the most degraded and vile of motives; for the sake of your inflated sense of your own worth and your disgusting prejudice against those who are different."

The man was screaming, filling the small space with his terrified yells, pleading for his life, his legs kicking against the floor. Vengeance felt more than heard Hawke run at him, his hands held up, ready to disable the mage. It took only a swift and inconsequential burst of kinetic magic to send the rogue flying through the air. Vengeance heard the man hit something with a crash, the sound of splintering wood and falling metal. He paid it no heed. He only had eyes for the wretch he held in his hands.

"You have been judged," he said again, "and I find you guilty."

Throwing the man into the fire was easy. The fireplace was large and the fire was well stoked and blazingly hot. Keeping him there was harder. The man's head and shoulders fell into the roaring fire with a terrible scream and he instinctively tried to roll away from the burning heat. First Vengeance placed his boot against the man's abdomen, shoving him back into the flames, but as the man became more desperate, the fire consuming his clothes and beginning to burn his flesh, Vengeance was forced to kneel down, pin the man's arms to his sides and hold him inside the fire. This allowed him an overly close view of the shrieking man as his face and neck reddened and began to blister, his clothes consumed by fire, the skin quickly blackening as the man's yells turned to gurgling. The cooked skin began to split and spill hissing, spitting blood down into the coals. After another moment the yells slipped away into a fitful, ragged, breathy panting, tainted with the sound of gurgling and choking. All power in the man's limbs was gone, only shifting spasms jerking against Vengeance's hold.

He watched with a sense of wonder as the man in his arms died, his flesh crisped and sliding from the muscle and bone beneath. The smell was intoxicating as well as being enough to make him retch. Once the man's eyeballs burst, leaking bubbling liquids down onto the man's ruined face, Vengeance let go and leaned back. It was with a sense of happiness that he looked down and realised that the fire had not touched him, that he seemed unharmed by the flames which still burned merrily on the remains of the man's clothing.

He let out a soft laugh, turning to look over his shoulder and find Callum kneeling beside Hawke, looking to have been in the process of touching the man's shoulder and inspecting a bleeding wound on his head, more than likely before the display Vengeance had put on only moments
before. Callum looked petrified as soon as Vengeance had him in his sights. The spirit looked away with another laugh, more powerful this time, and reached down to the fresh corpse before him to rip a handful of half cooked flesh from the man's chest. The heady taste of blood and meat in his mouth was intoxicating. He hummed in bliss and closed his eyes, working the flesh between his teeth before swallowing it, feeling the blood dripping down his chin. The blood seemed to convey a strength and daring into his very limbs, invigorating the tired and worn muscles from weeks of travelling.

"Is he awake?" Vengeance asked, turning towards Callum as he stood, looking about the room casually as he let the piece of meat fall with a splat against the floor; he was sure he could hear and feel the residents of the village rising in panic, having heard the screams emanating from the inn.

"...N-no," Callum finally replied, his voice weak and his eyes filled with pain, even as he bolstered himself and tried to be courageous in the face of the monster before him, "he's unconscious. He hit his head...he..."

"Good," Vengeance said pragmatically, "stay here, mortal, and keep him safe. Anders would be most devastated if either of you were to be destroyed."

"He's...he's still there? Anders?" Callum seemed to grip Hawke's arm with nervous energy, "Let me talk to him, please, I need to...!"

"Quiet!" Vengeance shouted, listening to the running of boots outside in the street, the shouting of voices, "You do not make requests of me traitor. I have been one with the man you call Anders for longer than you have known him, longer than you will ever know him if I had my way. Yet it would upset him if I were to tear off your arms and legs as I would so love to."

Callum's face paled and Vengeance chuckled as he watched the mage try his best not to back away into the wall, away from the wrongness and the threat standing before him.

"Who knows little one," Vengeance said as he turned to walk towards the front door, leaving Hawke and Callum behind him, "perhaps I will be allowed to break your skin and watch you bleed once I have you confess to your treachery with that disgusting blood mage Alesis. Perhaps..."

The crowd which he found beyond the door was smaller than he had expected. Four guards, who had probably been within hearing distance, and a small group of burly men and one older woman who were all holding makeshift weapons of sticks and farming utensils. Admittedly he could hear doors opening and closing, the sound of voices speaking and conversing as they poured out into the streets. There would be more, more than the petty group that stood before him now.

It was obvious from their scared expressions and their tense stances that they had been expecting something awful to emerge from the doorway but, on seeing the abomination of nature that stepped from the inn, flames licking around his being and an unnatural grin on his face, two of the men dropped their weapons and stumbled backwards before turning and running with silent fear back into the dark night.

"They are spared," Vengeance said, putting odd emphasis on his words, making his speech sound aberrant and jerky.

His eyes swept over the petrified guards and the two remaining men before falling on the older woman. When he made eye contact with her, her eyes widened and she tried to bring her hands up to spare the scream that ripped from her throat. Vengeance's grin widened.

...the woman who cried out as Arnve held her head high, watching the cowardly crowd shifting
before her house "You silly witch! You heard the templars, they said that if you even ask about where they've taken him they'd make an example of us all!" Arnve watched her with open disdain, even as she railed her disgust to the crowd as a whole...

"Traitorous being," Vengeance repeated as if they were last rights, advancing on the woman as her comrades lifted not a finger to help her, petrified as they were, "why do you cower from one who has come to release you from your torment..?"

Was it fate that led him to the Hill? Perhaps he would have believed it was if he believed in fate at all. Instead he believed it simply fortuitous that the man whom he was pursuing, the one he remembered as being called Rogfan, had fled in terror up the pitch black hill towards the very source of all the ruin that was being brought against him and his fellow villagers. Vengeance had pursued him carefully and yet casually, enjoying the heightened sense of fear the man seemed to have as he watched the instrument of his death simply idle towards him as if he were doing nothing more than taking an afternoon stroll.

Behind him Nordbotten burned. The bodies of the guilty lay broken on the streets, in their homes and some dragged halfway between, lying bleeding in the doorways. Those slain innocents, protecting their kin or carrying out their duty as guards, lay alongside them. The only one he had been unable to find was the one Leif called 'father' and Anders named 'bastard'. It was of no consequence. Vengeance could not discriminate between those who were to die and those who were a threat to his being. His thoughts were not thus evolved, he played with baser natures.

Such as the enjoyment he felt for the irony of the man trying to take refuge in the burnt out husk of the house that emerged on top of the low hill, like broken teeth against the almost black sky, illuminated mainly by the flickering flames around his own being. As soon as he came within a hundred yards of the building he could feel the wrongness in the air, the terrible feeling of lingering death and blood unconsecrated.

The man was crying and shaking as Vengeance stepped inside what was left of the house. The irony did not stop at the man's choice of protection, even as he realised it was useless to hide from his own death; the further irony came from the fact that Vengeance did not truly care for the fate of this woman, Arnve. The destruction he had reaped on those responsible for her death was reserved purely from the impotent and guilty fury of the one he called Anders. Even as he killed them he was sure he could hear the poor man screaming for Vengeance to stop, to stop, somewhere in the back of his mind. He simply ignored it and continued his work.

It was so good to be free!

"You feel this place holds significance?" Vengeance asked even as Rogfan cowered in the burnt out husk of what had been the corner of the small living area and kitchen, "Yet it frightens you, I can feel it even over the fear you feel at my presence."

"Please, please!" the man was weeping, his dark hair streaked with grey, "I didn't want to kill her! They made me do it, I tried to stop them!"

"All such liars in the face of death," Vengeance tutted and shook his head disapprovingly, "you do not seem to realise that I know of your sins. Would you lie to the Maker if he stood before you?"

"T-the Maker is a-a god!" the man seemed to unfurl only to spout his religious nonsense, seeming to see it as a sort of shield.

"Ha! Ha ha ha! You are an entertaining one at least," Vengeance laughed riotously, even as he
approached the man with confident steps, "does it make you feel better to think of an afterlife? Of forgiveness for all the terrible things you have done in your measly existence? Would it destroy you to know that nothing exists there, that once I kill you your soul will be sent into oblivion where nothing can think or plead or repent? Does it give you solace?"

The man barely had time to scream before Vengeance rushed forwards and plunged his hand through his chest, wrapping his hand around Rogfan's heart before pulling back, feeling the veins and arteries popping and snapping until the heavy, bloody muscle was steaming in the cold air. Vengeance stood, laughing as the blood dripped down his arm, and walked towards the other side of the house...

The sudden light was as instantaneous as the sickening feeling of ripping, tearing and utter paralysis. Vengeance roared and shielded his eyes as the light shone an intense white, rising up around him to surround his being. He felt the spell before he could identify it and, once he had, it was far too late to reverse the effects. The heavy heart was crushed between his fingers and he curled his hands into fists and let out a long, protracted cry, trying to move his paralysed limbs. It's too late, Vengeance thought in a moment of clarity, by the spirits themselves it's too late...

Anders felt his consciousness thrown back into the fore as if he were being thrust from a dark, terrible nightmare. The world felt as if it were burning, choking the life from him as he heaved in air and spat out the vile taste of blood in his mouth. He opened his eyes and found the flickering darkness shifting before his vision, trying to push up on shaking arms and blood slicked fingers, pushing against something soft. The air was alive with the terrible sound of roaring and laughing. He felt not only disoriented but also wounded, heavily, as if he were missing a leg or an arm and just hadn't yet truly realised that the limb was gone. Once he managed to turn himself over onto his back, with great effort, he realised just why he felt such a horrendous loss in his being.

There, trapped inside a cone of light, stood Vengeance. Impossible, Anders raged even as his mind shrieked and spat at the thought of everything he had just done. It wasn't a dream, Anders thought wildly, oh maker it wasn't a dream! No, no, please! We can't do this, this can't be. He felt the bile retching up his oesophagus accompanied by hideous chunks of what he knew to be human flesh. The vomit slid over his hand and he shook it weakly, wiping his trembling lips against his coat sleeve.

The spirit seemed like a combination of his waking world and the darkest areas of his nightmares made whole, combined sickeningly before his eyes. They were no longer one, no longer could he feel Vengeance's sickening pull on his body and soul or Justice's terrified and heavy moral presence. Anders stared at the world and couldn't believe his eyes.

"Vengeance," he whispered, his voice rasping and breathy, "how..?"

"Ah the sweetness of the innocent," the sickeningly sweet voice interrupted, seeming to cut through the cacophony all around him, "it always serves as a nostalgic reminder, for me at least."

Anders stared as Alesis slid from the pitch like a pale faced incubus, ready to prey on him in his vestige of waking sleep. The mage stared at the smiling man before him, trying his best to struggle to his feet, even as the ground beneath him was uneven and...and then he looked down and...

"What is..?" Anders unwittingly slid his hand against the soft thing again as he looked down, pulling away what turned out to be a cloth only to reveal the white face of a dead woman, black eyes wide open and staring at him, her face encrusted in dark, spattered blood, "Fuck! Oh fuck, what have you done?"

Pulling himself away from the dead bodies he lay against was absurdly hard and coldly revolting.
Every placement of his weak hands only forced his palm into contact with frozen, clammy skin or wet, soaked rags and clothes, in what fluids Anders was too sickened to even imagine. His frantic, fumbling escape only seemed to make Alesis's smile widen, make his eyes sparkle and his gleaming white form all the dirtier despite its pure appearance. The words of the boy from the mining town drifted with difficulty into his consciousness, reminding him of the danger he was in.

...People going missing, never to be seen again. Strange lights at night, sounds from the hill...

"Poor little bird without its wings," the blood mage taunted as Anders crawled towards one broken, crumbling wall, trying desperately to rise up onto his feet, "it stumbles and it cries out but there is no one there to help it. No one there when the fox approaches."

"Oh shut your mouth Alesis," Anders said in as bored a voice as he could manage, all the while reeling with the torn, ragged and wounded state of his mind and body; without Justice the world seemed somehow darker, less pragmatic, his emotions were rampant and his anger was without an outlet, "if you were as cunning as a fox you wouldn't have panicked at the first sign of my figuring out your little plan."

"Oh bravo! Bravo!" Alesis applauded caustically, as he stepped towards Vengeance still trapped in his cage, howling in vain, "Oh my little bird has sharp little talons! Just how I like it. I had forgotten how much I missed your fire and I see that it is definitely your fire, now that you have lost your counterpart here."

"How?" Anders ground out, trying not to give in to Alesis's mind games but, in the process of panicking, he only found himself sinking deeper, "what have you done to me!"

"What have I done?" Alesis said, "I thought you were the clever one, out of all of us? No? Come on Anders, or should I call you Leif?"

"Don't call me that you fucking prick!" Anders shouted, cursing in frustration as he slid down the wall and landed jarringly on his knees; Callum please, Anders screamed in his mind, please help me! He felt like a hypocrite but at that moment he could hardly care less, "Unless of course you tell me your real name."

"Is this to become a touching moment?" Alesis mocked, stepping over the dead bodies around his feet and crouching before Anders, leaning in towards the mage and watching him with eyes the colour of blood, "Such potential in you, even yet. How I hate you, how I loathe you, and yet you're still so, urhh..."

Alesis grinned as he clenched his fists and shook them, emphasising whatever feeling he was trying to convey. He reached out with a gloved hand and touched Anders' lips, even as the other mage flinched away from him. If I can only get him close enough, Anders thought desperately as he fingered the hidden dagger he kept in his belt, a present from Hawke long ago.

"Trust that idiotic little slut to fall for you," Alesis sighed, "it wasn't easy to find someone that I thought you would find so...appealing. Someone you would trust no matter what because he was just like you used to be, when I first knew you that is."

"Get to the point you rambling bastard!" Anders spat.

"I'll get to the point when I'm good and ready," Alesis said as he trailed his fingers down Anders' front, letting out a tiny amount of the vile and yet wonderfully erotic feeling that jerked at the core of his being, sending rapturous bliss through his veins. Anders groaned and felt his limbs go limp, falling forwards against the body of his enemy. Damn him! He thought viscerally, losing all feeling
in his hands, losing grip on the dagger's hilt, "ah you remember this I see! Good, good. I taught it to Callum, did you know? The things I told that sweet boy! The things he believed! That we were rescuing you, that you were terribly troubled and that I was the only one who could help you. Well, I suppose it was perhaps a half truth, since I have removed the tumour."

"Don't talk about Justice like that," Anders growled, even as Alesis ran his fingers down his back, letting out a spill of ecstasy, "uh, stop it, just stop it! Let us go!"

"Let you go?" Alesis sighed, pulling back to stare down into Anders' eyes, "And here I was, about to ask you to join me. Don't you understand? I've freed you from your fear. I saw it all, that day when I connected with your very soul, as I kissed those sweet little lips of yours...I saw your darkest secrets. You were scared of this Justice even then, weren't you? I saw it all, more than you knew even then! I saw the demon inside you, the power he held, I saw him lunge at the blood that flowed through your body, the blood on my lips. I'm here to take this demon of Vengeance off of your hands. As far as I see it, you should be thanking me!"

"Alesis," Anders ground out as Alesis's black, silken hair brushed against his cheek, "if there is any way to thank a thin, stinking scrape of excrement on the floor then please, let me know."

He had expected another laugh, or perhaps a blast of the pain Anders remembered all too well as the antithesis to the thrill of bliss which Alesis had already delivered. Instead he found himself falling towards the ground once more as Alesis backed away, removing his support. Anders landed against the cold stone with a heavy smack, feeling his head spin and his ears ring. The sound of scuffling footsteps and huffed breaths; a struggle. Anders wrenched himself upwards with a cry of pain, his arms protesting to their rough treatment, accompanied by the sound of a hissing, jarring spell rebounding off of a shield. He looked up only in time to see Alesis throw Callum heavily into a wall with a burst of tendril like blood magic, the red vines seeming to seek the tall mage even as the spell completed, wrapping around him, immobilising his limbs and seeming to cause him terrible pain. The mage opened his mouth to cry out but the tendrils simply closed his jaw, shut tight.

"Don't you dare hurt him!" Anders growled, feeling the anger within him welling further, creating a pool of hot, boiling fury pitching about in his stomach, "Don't you touch him, or Justice, or Hawke or anyone!"

"Don't I dare, don't I dare!" Alesis cried out, rounding on Anders and, with a sweep of one delicate hand, he sent the mage careening across the floor only to slam into the opposite wall, "I don't need to dare anything, sweet little bird, because I already know how this will turn out! How long do you think it's taken me to kidnap and kill all of these villagers, hmm? Luring them up here at night in their dreams only to slaughter them, building the curse that would trap your precious spirit? All the while sending you those teasing images, those safe nightmares that made you only oh so more curious about how you could be helped with your pathetic rebellion? I have been planning this meticulously since before you even routed me from Kirkwall, you little fool!"

Anders lay against the wall helplessly with only a view of Callum before him, twisting his body futilely, grinding his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut as the blood ropes began to cut into his skin. What have I done? Anders couldn't help but think, what doom have I led us to?

"You underestimated me, you've always underestimated me!" Alesis shouted, turning away from them with a gleeful laugh only to throw a hideous, twisting spell out into the dark night; Anders heard the cries of men and women alike from further down the Hill. Anders tried not to imagine what had happened to the villagers and guards who had more than likely been ascending the Hill to kill the demon. Blood magic was relentless and without mercy, "But I will show you, I will show
you all exactly whose war this will be! I will..!

The words did not fall short in Alesis's mouth so much as shudder to a halt, his hands flailing wildly as he tried to reach around to his back and grab desperately at something.

"You fucking, vile bastard!" Hawke's voice was rough but filled with intense hatred, "Keep your magic away from him! I'll kill you!"

There was a moment, a single moment, in which Anders was sure that the man had only overlooked, in his arrogance, the abilities of the missing member of their group; the moment was sickeningly short lived. Alesis used the blood, the blood which was shown, as he turned, to gush down his back from the dagger imbedded in his shoulder. He used the blood to lash out at Hawke who had made his attack with what looked like the last of his strength. Hawke fell with a tired, pained grunt to the floor beside the dead bodies already piled high. The spell seemed to curl around the rogue's weak legs and slide beneath the skin. Hawke howled in pain and fury, trying to reach down and instinctively claw at the skin which now snaked with myriad red lines, crawling and splitting the skin as they went.

"No!" Anders cried, once more trying to move; you may as well have asked him to pluck the moon from the night sky. His body felt as lead, heavy and dull and malleable.

"You deny it still?" Alesis grinned, yanking the dagger carelessly from his back, holding it in his hand, "You deny the foolish, ignorant naiveté that led you to leave your home and plunge out into the unknown towards a goal which you were not even certain of? You still struggle against your fate?"

"I don't believe in fate," Anders said darkly.

"Oh well that changes everything then, doesn't it?" Alesis shook his head and tutted once more, his tone patronising, "such as to deny ones fate and the fate of those closest to them. Just like this lamb to the slaughter here," Alesis gestured to Hawke carelessly with the dagger, "he's been so ill, hasn't he?"

"What have you done to me?" Hawke managed to choke out through his tensely clenched jaw.

"You want to know? It's terribly clever!" Alesis smiled like a devil, "You see I took all of those phage spells, all of those terrible poisons, into my body for a reason. I have made pacts with many demons in my life and, in return for the blood I have shed in their honour, they have given me immeasurable power! I used some of that power to create the sweet sickness you see killing your lover here, a phage spell that takes months to even show in the body. And the best part? Oh I haven't gotten to the best part yet."

Alesis strutted to Anders side, leaning down so as to speak into the mage's ear.

"Every time you tried to heal him it only made it all the worse!" Alesis said with glee, "Isn't that wonderful? All of this time you thought you were healing him and you were only speeding the process further. The vile blackness I left behind in your body has been poisoning him, slowly draining his life away."

"Liar," Anders bit out, but he could hear the helplessness and pain in his voice; no, oh Maker no it isn't true! Hawke can't die, I won't let it happen!

"Would I lie to you, little bird?" Alesis leaned back and watched Anders with as sane an expression as he had ever seen on a madman, "Perhaps we should ask our guest of honour?"
Anders was not sure whether he was overjoyed or terrified at the prospect of letting Vengeance loose once more. One part of him was incredibly happy to be rid of the spirit from within his body while the other still bled profusely, his soul torn and his life force depleted, crying out for the return of its other half. He opened his mouth as Alesis stood before the glowing cage, the demon howling from within, desperate for freedom, the blood mage staring forwards as if to seize his destiny, and he knew not what to say. The cage did not shatter or collapse, it simply disappeared as if it had never existed in the first place. Vengeance did not spring from his prison, bearing arms, he did not scream frightfully into the night, the sound seemed to stop all at once. Suddenly there was no light or sound, but for the flickering of Vengeance's flames and the muffled, agonised grunts of Hawke and Callum as they suffered beneath Alesis's cruel magic.

"So, Vengeance," Alesis said stoically, "once more I pose the question to you. Who would you rather hold a pact with, who would you chose to lead your revolution forwards?"

Anders stared up at the vestige of all his fears made reality; Justice consumed by Anders' own hatred and agony, his dread and his ambition. The spirit surveyed them slowly, as if unsure how to truly interact without his host as a conduit. The demon looked down at the ethereal sword and shield in his grasp.

"Sky and stars," the demon said slowly, "Fade and Real. A pact has already been wound between the eternal elements and this one."

With a long, dangerous point of his flaming sword to Anders' prone form, the demon declared his intent. Alesis snorted and shook his head.

"This one is nothing but a coward and a sycophant," Alesis slandered, "you have seen how he cages you, how he suppresses you. I would never curb your need for destruction! I am the vessel you seek, I am the perfect host for one such as you. Think of the true chaos we could together reap through this world!"

"I need no further cage," Vengeance interrupted, stepping forwards and making Alesis flinch back in fear even as the mage tried his best to hide it, "the war I seek will come. I will drink the blood of cities and harvest the souls of the willing. This one will make it so. It is the pact."

"I made no such pact with you Vengeance," Anders said seriously, his eyes hard even as his heart tried its best to beat its way out of his chest, "where is Justice, let me speak with him!"

"Justice is no more, Justice will ever be," Vengeance said, his cold, amber eyes piercing but soulless, "we are one. All three as one. The pact you made with this being is sealed. The life of your Hawke for the war that will sate me."

"What?" Anders breathed, "I made no such deal! I-I would never barter with Hawke's life so carelessly!"

"Damn you!" Alesis spat, "Damn all of you! I will give you far greater a reward than just a war! I can sate your appetite for all of eternity! Chose to deal with me demon, I will be your servant, I will obey you, I will not fight the..."

"Silence, worthless mortal," Vengeance's voice boomed as if a physical force, sending Alesis stumbling into the dark, "this one has forgotten his pact. The cold morning, the snow beneath your feet and the bandit's blade spilling this one's life onto the ground. I was begged, I was pleaded with. You offered this one's life in return for the completion of your task. I will see my task done or I will reclaim the life that I so generously saved."
Sense. Everything began to make an eerie, sickening sort of sense.

"Justice," Anders felt his voice quiver as he stared at the demon, "Justice, I made a pact with him, not you. He saved..!"

"You do not understand," Vengeance said, his head cocked as if with curiosity, "this one is Justice, this one is Anders, this one is Vengeance, the son of two; Pride and Anger. I am the controller of your fate. I am the bridging gap between Fade and Real"

The world seemed to compress, down into a tight, terse little spot on top of the Hill, creating a centre to everything that was. Anders felt the world shiver and tears fell from his eyes. What have I created? He thought wildly, what is this I have done?

The howling from the darkness was terrible but familiar. Anders forced his head to the left and watched as the pitch erupted into flame and shifting shadow. There spewed more recognizable forms; demons of the ether. Shifting rage demons with their soundless burning, scoring swatches across the stained grass, a tall, imposing pride demon with its hideous smile and grotesque body. Amid the small host, with his body surrounded by shades, Alesis stood, wild eyed and seeming possessed by his own madness.

"You have resisted a pact which would have done nothing but made you stronger!" he called, "Now you will be nothing more than bits and pieces once you are torn and rent by my minions! Go, kill it, kill them all!"

Anders tried to defend himself from the oncoming horde, swishing and thumping their way across the grass into the small pool of light around Vengeance's, in comparison, small form. Anders panicked as the magic in his veins seemed dampened by his rent soul, his terrible inner wound. He watched in terror as the instruments of their death were thrust towards them.

Yet the charge was interrupted. It was not obvious at first, just visible from the slowing of feet or the look of worry and lack of intent in the creature's movement. Then it became too hard to ignore. The charging host came to a stop a few metres from the small, burnt out husk of a house. Anders stared. The demons fidgeted, trying to come closer and yet recoiling in what seemed oddly like fear. Vengeance watched them with dispassionate eyes.

"What are you waiting for!" Alesis screamed, "Kill them, I said kill them! I command you to kill them!"

When Vengeance took a hesitant step forwards, as a toddler does trying to reach its mother for the first time, so did the demons and shades further retreat. The black shades were the first to fully dissipate, leaching back down into the ground and fleeing the battle. Then the rage demons followed suit, leaving only the tall, bulky pride demon, hunched over and cowering before the small, seemingly ineffectual demon before it.

"Leave me, abomination!" the Pride demon roared even as Alesis tore at his hair and screamed in frustration, "You have no place with us."

"What am I?" Vengeance asked, sounding strangely unknowing and inexperienced, "What am I if I am not you?"

"You are neither us nor them, you are of the Black things," the Pride demon growled out, shifting back, gouging runnels of thick, dark earth into the luscious grass.

"I am neither," Vengeance repeated, watching the demon grovel and cower, trying its best to shy
away back into the Fade from whence it had been summoned; he looked down once more at the weapons in his hands, "I am neither human nor spirit, spirit nor demon."

He lifted his hand and the demon shrieked unnaturally. It turned on its heels, gashing the earth in its panic, and ran towards the prone form of Alesis, still furiously watching the scene unfold. As the huge demon charged towards him his face turned pale and he tried to throw up a hurried and thus botched shield spell. The last Anders saw of the blood mage was his pale face and clothes consumed by the raging darkness of the Pride demon's scaly body as it wrenched its way back into the Fade.

A cry was released into the air. Anders turned from Vengeance and watched as Callum lay, finally free of the blood spell, on the cold, stony ground. Hawke, similarly, lay shaking and weak, pale faced, as the blood lines dissapeared from his legs.

"Callum," Anders said, using his almost useless arms to crawl towards the tall man lying against the stone, his body covered in thick lacerations; he received no reply, "Callum! Don't you dare die on me now, don't you dare! Hawke, please Hawke tell me you can hear me!"

He could feel more than hear Vengeance as the demon approached them once more. The flickering light was as repulsive as it was beautiful. Anders panicked. Both Hawke and Callum seemed barely aware of anything, blinking blearily at the world before them. We need to get out of here, Anders panicked! His body rebelled as a dying horse refuses to pull the wagon. Part of him wished to run and the other wished nothing more than to beg Vengeance's forgiveness, to make them whole again, to rejoin their souls.

"I require fealty from this one," Vengeance said curiously, once more pointing at Anders, "you must choose."

"I will not swear to you demon," Anders said weakly, trying his best to be strong and failing as his body failed, "I will not bow to you! I will not darken us both further! Callum get up, get up!"

"Anders..." Callum's voice was quiet and weak.

"You will choose between the one you call love and the one you call death," the demon said, sounding somehow aggravated, "you cannot have a duplicate of useless feelings, you are far enough from your focus with only this one Hawke. Anders must choose between these loves and sacrifice the other. I require it. The blood will be good. The blood will slake my need for death."

Crawling across the floor had been vile and difficult. Anders only just managed to reach Callum, touching the man's bloodied legs, when the dagger was kicked into his field of vision. Anders held his breath and looked up to Vengeance, seeing the awakening slowly taking place in the demon's eyes. It saw the blood and it stood in anticipation of the surrender. This can't be, Anders continued to deny the reality, it can't, it can't. I am not Vengeance, I am Anders, I am Anders, no more than that and no less! The name did little to console him or truly separate his will and fear from that of the hellish being before him.

"Save one," Vengeance said, "give the other to me. I will reward your sacrifice."

"I'll never shed blood in your name!" Anders spat, feeling the hypocrisy of the statement like a knife to the gut.

"Your rebellion is too late in coming," Vengeance said, "you have been feeding my lust for a long time, making me stronger, giving in to the dark hatred inside of you. Many times you have killed in the name of Vengeance. You are my creator. I will honour you as you do me. We are neither one
nor apart. I require a sacrifice. I require blood. Choose or I will choose for you."

The hilt of the knife felt as a lie in his hand. He gripped it hard enough to turn his knuckles white, pulling it towards him and grating the blade against the stone ground. I must choose, Anders thought in dismay, I must choose...

Sometimes there is no turning away from your own destiny and sometimes destiny finds even those who do not believe in its wandering vagaries. Anders felt Vengeance's watchful gaze on his body. Part of him wished nothing more than to serve, the other to betray. A third part, almost lost to the dominance of the other two, wished nothing more than for Justice to return and stop this utter madness.

Hawke lay still at the other side of the ruined room, split from the mages by a few strewn dead bodies, their corpses twisted into grotesque forms. Anders stared at him, feeling the heat of love and anguish fuelling his volcanic anger, ready to burst forth. My love, my life, Anders thought sadly, I will save us from this, I swear. I will free us both from the madness and tyranny, I will keep you safe. I swear it.

Has it always been this, will it always be this? I would do it willingly, this sacrifice, but so many times I have fled from it in fear or anguish. I do not know what I will become if I am to do this thing; that is not something I ever considered before.

"Anders, what is...happening?" Callum's voice was ghostly, seeming far flung and dozy.

"Callum," Anders looked up at the man as he tried to move his ruined body; the smaller mage managed to crawl a few feet further, putting him level with the tall man, looking into those deep blue eyes, glassy with fatigue, "please, save your strength. You're...you're going to need it."

"Alesis, I didn't know...I swear to you," Callum heaved out, choking on a gurgling, bloody cough that splattered from his mouth and out over the dark floor.

"Shh, don't speak," Anders said, leaning in to kiss his blood stained lips; the other man reciprocated as much as his guilt and weakness would allow, "it's all going to be alright. I promise you. I'm going to make all of the pain go away."

"The demon...!" Callum exclaimed harshly, looking wildly up at Vengeance, standing in the background.

"Don't worry about him," Anders said, lifting his free hand with great effort to allow him to stroke his fingers down Callum's cheek, "I'm...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, for everything."

"Anders...?" Callum asked, trepidation riddling his tone, making his voice waver.

"Please believe me when I say that I loved you, I promise that I did," Anders said, smiling through his anguish as he forced himself to sit up, looming over the taller mage, "I thank the Maker for the day he threw you into my life. Never think that it was your fault. None of this was your fault."

"What are you doing?" Callum breathed out, "No, stop...!"

"Forgive me," he whispered into the nothingness as he raised the knife, unconsciously echoing the very words he had said years before in the Circle tower before he plunged the dagger into his own chest.

As Anders brought the sharp knife down forcefully into his abdomen, feeling the sheer and agonising pain flare in his body, the irony was not lost on him. I will save you both, Anders
thought, this is my battle to win. I will save you both and you will be free of me, free of this terrible destruction and hatred, free to live your lives as you should have been.

And I will be free forever.

He felt the blood running from the wound as he withdrew the knife. The pain was terrible and dreadfully final. It was difficult, so difficult, but Anders didn't hesitate to plunge the gory blade back into himself, even as Callum screamed for him to stop, feeling the searing agony in his left side, feeling the horrible, sickening, clenching pain as the knife punctured his lung. His chest heaved in agony, an awful pressure pushing down on him as he slid to the floor, wheezing and bleeding profusely.

"Anders, by the Maker Anders! Anders no, don't do this please!" he heard Callum screaming, "someone help us, someone help!"

I'll save you both, Anders managed to think through the cloud of agony and fear and anger. He found his vision blurring even as he felt Callum's hands fumbling against his arm.

Everything became calm and somewhat numb. Sounds were muffled and feelings fell short of their mark. He stared up at the darkness above him and wondered as to the end of his life. He had not wanted this, he had not planned for this. It all seemed too sudden. He was meant to die in the Deep Roads, that had been his plan until he merged with Justice. Then he had expected to die in a blaze of glory, or infamy, or, as much as he had loathed the idea, at Hawke's hand once his task was complete. Yet here, here in this very grave where his mother's ashes lay, it seemed a hideously cyclical and vicious way to end his life. He did not want to die. He wanted to live. He wanted to be free. He wanted to end his days in love and loved. He wanted...he wanted...

"Tell Hawke..." he gasped with terrible strain, "tell him..."

Vengeance slowly appeared in his misting gaze and Anders' voice failed him. He vaguely heard Callum continuing to shout and weakly shake his limp form. Vengeance continued to come closer and closer until his face became clear. A hand reached out and touched the mage's forehead calmly.

"You have chosen wisely," the demon said, "now sleep, my father, my mother. Sleep as those of the eternal, of those saved from damnation."

He thought he heard someone singing. The sound of a fire crackling in the grate. The smell of woodsmoke on the air. Anders did as he was told.

He closed his eyes and slept.

End Notes

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