The Flawed Ruby

by mille_libri

Summary

As Champion of Kirkwall, Lucas Hawke finds that the calls on his time, sword, and purse can be oppressive ... but the treasure he's found more than compensates.

Notes

The first two chapters of this were originally meant to stand alone, but they gave rise to the longer story, so I'm leaving them at the beginning, where they started.
"You know," Isabela purred, draping herself over Lucas Hawke's shoulder, "you don't have to read this dreadful correspondence right now. Matter of fact, I'm sure you did it yesterday."

"That was two weeks ago," Lucas said, dropping a kiss on the busy fingers that were trying to dip beneath his shirt collar.

"Time flies when you're killing things." Isabela reluctantly unwound herself, moving to the looking glass hanging near the door of Hawke's study and adjusting her hat.

Lucas watched her, enjoying the movement of her rear under her short tunic. The hat, a small black top hat that perched with careful precariousness on the side of Isabela's head, was one of his favorites.

"If you don't start, you'll never finish, and remember you promised me a new hat if this took more than an hour."

"So I did." Of course, he'd be happy to buy her one anyway, knowing she'd be likely to come to bed tonight wearing nothing but the new hat. But he dutifully plucked the first letter from the stack of mail. "An invitation to join the Society for the Prevention of the Advancement of the Indigent of Darktown. I think not."

"Stuck-up prigs," Isabela commented, leaning toward the mirror with her teeth bared to see if something was stuck in them. "Like to see any of those fancy nobles last ten minutes in the Undercity."

"Mm," Hawke said, agreeing with her. He lifted the next sheet, a closely written scrawl that he had to squint to read. "Another copy of the Manifesto. Anders's writing is getting smaller." Isabela didn't respond to that one; there was little to say about the mage's continued descent into obsession. Hawke tossed the page over the left arm of his chair in the system he had created and Bodahn lived with long-sufferingly. Pile on the left, burn; pile on the right, keep. "Oh, this one's interesting," he said, rereading the letter to make sure he wasn't misunderstanding. "Some merchant has imported a thousand extra nugs, and wants to know what I think of financing a nug farm outside Kirkwall."

Isabela giggled. "Imagine that poor man, surrounded by a thousand nugs."

Lucas laughed along with her. "The last thing we want is those overbreeders too close to Kirkwall."

"Tell him to send the shipment to Seheron. Maybe the Qunari would like them."

"What would a Qunari do with a nug? Cook it?"

Isabela frowned, considering. "Too small. It'd be like a single bite to a Qunari, and it has too many bones for a proper amuse bouche." She grinned wickedly. "Maybe they'd find other uses for a little, round, warm nug."

Lucas was silent for a moment, imagining the possibilities, as Isabela's eyes twinkled naughtily at him. "Would a nug even fit?" he asked at last, refusing to give her the satisfaction of disturbing him with her suggestions.

"They're big men," Isabela said. "Be interesting to find out."
"You find out," Lucas said, shuddering. "Still, that would explain why they're so grumpy all the time."

"It would, wouldn't it?" She chuckled, moving away from the mirror to the mantelpiece.

"Isabela."

"What?"

"Put the snuffbox back."

"But you don't even take snuff." She pouted at him. "Please?"

"You don't take snuff, either. What are you going to do with it?"

"Sell it, of course."

"You know, I'd just give you money if you asked."

"Where would be the fun in that? Besides, you can't join the Coterie's monthly Wicked Grace game unless you came by the coin dishonestly."

"So taking a snuffbox from a house you practically live in, with the owner's permission, counts as dishonest?" Lucas grinned at her.

She shrugged. "It's a grey area." Then, to distract him, "What's the next one say?"

"Invitation to dinner with Fifi de Launcet. I'd rather go live at the nug farm." He glossed over that one as quickly as he could, not wanting poor Fifi to wake up tomorrow and find her hair cut off, or her spoiled white Persian cat dyed orange. He loved Isabela's jealous streak, but she occasionally overdid it.

"Fifi de Launcet is a nug," Isabela muttered.

Lucas didn't respond, staring at the next letter with a frown. "This is an elegantly written missive on expensive paper that asks me to come rescue Duchesse de la Fabreux's kitten from an apple tree in her garden ... last week." He shuffled through the pile. "Oh, and three more on subsequent days. She doesn't have servants for that?"

"She does. An entire retinue of attractive young elven girls, any one of whom could easily climb a tree, but ... ahem ... that's not the feline they're hired to service."

"Isabela!"

The pirate smirked at him. "It's true."

"You could use better language."

"I didn't say the word. I just suggested it," she said primly, but her eyes were dancing. "Someday we're going to have to do something about what a prude you are."

Lucas doubted that; some attitudes were too deeply bred to be done away with. But it wasn't worth the argument, so he turned to the next letter as Isabela came over to perch on the side of his desk, her long tanned thigh carefully placed mere inches from his hand. He ignored her, with some effort, and focused on the parchment in his hand.
"Ooh, treasure map?"

"Yes. Of the Alienage. A young boy, to judge by the handwriting, thinks there's a treasure buried there." He couldn't help it—he put that one in the "keep" pile. Surely something could be done to make the boy's fantasy come true. Would the Seneschal approve of a midnight excavation to plant treasure, and then another to help the boy "find" it?

"You have that look."

"Which one?"

"The altruistic one." Isabela gave a dramatic sigh.

"I'm sorry, is there something wrong with being nice?"

"Well, it isn't half as much fun as being naughty." She slid off the edge of the desk and straddled his lap.

Lucas leaned back, giving her a fond smile. "You know I can't concentrate when you do that."

"That's the idea." She wiggled a little bit to make sure he wasn't missing anything.

"If I can't concentrate, I'll never finish," he murmured against her lips, which were suddenly very, very close to his.

"Let Bodahn do it."

"If I let Bodahn do it, he'll say yes to everything."

She shifted on the pile of papers, removing one from under her shapely bottom. "Even to the invitation to speak to the Kirkwall Gardening Society?"

"He'd have the nug farm half built already." Lucas grinned at her. "He might even make me go to dinner with Fifi de Launcet."

Hastily, Isabela removed herself from his lap. "Hurry up then. I'm bored of this; I want to do something fun!"

There were a few moments of silence while Lucas sifted through a couple of invitations to fancy dinner parties; the usual pleas for money to be given to various charities, both legitimate and not; and requests for assistance in endeavors ranging from repairing the fountain in the Hightown marketplace to assassinating the Black Divine. He shredded that one into small pieces before consigning the scraps directly to the fireplace. Leaving such a letter intact was dangerous for everyone involved. It was flattering that people assumed he had such a range of talents, but tiring as well, sorting the people who actually needed help out from the ones out to purchase cheap help with breaking the law.

Sighing, he picked up a fat envelope. The rich scent of sandalwood filled the air, and he glanced over at the chair where Isabela was lounging, her legs parted just far enough.

"Hm." He grinned, knowing what awaited him. Slitting open the envelope, he withdrew a packet of papers, skimming the first few lines. "I thought you wanted to go out. This reads more like you want to stay in."

"Maybe I want to do both."
"A little of the old in-and-out, eh? I could be convinced, if you tried hard." Sliding a small key out from under the blotter on his desk, he opened a drawer on the right-hand side, sliding the manuscript inside it. "I'll keep this and read it later."

"Have you kept all my friend fictions? And you said you were too embarrassed to read them." Isabela grinned at him, and Lucas flushed.

"I never said I read them."

"That blush says it all, lover." She got out of the chair and leaned over the desk, giving herself a good view of the contents of the drawer and Lucas an excellent view of her superb cleavage. "You shouldn't keep those first ones. I've gotten much better since then."

"I like them just the way they are."

"Ooh, what's this?" Before he could stop her, one browned hand had reached into the drawer and purloined the small box he kept there. She popped it open, and frowned down at the contents. Poking her finger amongst the shining stones, she said, "What are these for?"

"I find them here and there. Fragments of onyx, pieces of opals. I pick them up."

"Why?"

Lucas cleared his throat. "I don't know, do I need a reason?"

"I thought I was supposed to be the one attracted by shiny objects. But I take them to sell and make coin. You don't need more coin, and these wouldn't buy you much, anyway." She lifted a red gem, holding it up to the light. "This ruby isn't worth anything, flawed as it is."

"Perhaps it won't bring me any coin, but I kept it for a reason."

"What reason?"

Lucas stood up, putting his hands on her shoulders and turning her to face him. "They reminded me of you."

"Broken and worthless?" Her eyes met his, and he could see the vulnerability she tried to hide, buried deep behind the sarcasm and deflection.

"Unique. Each gem in that box has a certain flaw that sets it apart from all others of its kind."

"So you value me for my flaws?"

Lucas was no fool; he recognized the danger sign in the question. "I value you because there's no one else like you. And because you bring light and color into what might have been a very boring life. Because you saved me from having to marry someone like Fifi de Launcet and spend the rest of my days worrying about Kirkwall politics." He closed the space between them, kissing her.

At last she pulled back from the kiss. "Fancy words are all well and good, but how about you take me upstairs and put your mouth to even better uses?"

"As you please," he said. "I'll just put these away and be right up."

Isabela sauntered from the room, looking as contented as a cat with a saucer of cream. As Lucas closed the little box, he noticed that one of the stones was missing. Isabela had palmed the flawed ruby. A smile spread over his face and he hurried to catch up with her.
It was bloody cold in Kirkwall. Not for the first time, Isabela wondered why she stayed. She had her ship, her freedom, plenty of money to equip it and go, to be Siren of the Seas once again. She shivered in the chilly wind that whirred through Hightown as she made her way across the marketplace from the hat shop, where she had kept the milliners busy showing her the new stock until well after their usual closing time. She'd bought heavily, of course, having her purchases delivered to the Hanged Man, where they would join the rest of her collection.

A drizzle of rain struck her, and Isabela glared up at the sky. She turned her steps resolutely toward the shadowy alleys of the red light district. Reaching the Rose, she tugged at the familiar heavy door. Before too long she was seated with a cup of warm spiced rum in front of her. She sipped it, enjoying the rich flavor on her tongue and watching the usual bustle. The place was busy tonight; Isabela was far from the only person who had sought refuge here in the welcoming warmth. She was, however, one of the few who wasn't venturing even further into the more intimate welcoming warmth to be had in the arms of the employees. Looking around, she considered her options ... but she'd had them all. Their quirks had begun to pall, their skills to bore her. Nothing stirred in her at the thought of their hands and mouths on her body, and even the overheated room and the rum hadn't quite touched the chill at her core.

Leaving the rum half-finished, an offense she had rarely committed against such a fine beverage, Isabela left the Rose. She felt a certain relief as the door closed behind her and left her in the darkness of the alley. The back stairs that led down toward Lowtown were nearby, and she very nearly turned in that direction, heading for the raucous jollity of the Hanged Man and the unmade bed she paid for. There would be warmth there, hiding in the bottom of numerous bottles of questionable ale, glowing from the fireplaces, on offer from the various drinkers. Always sport to be had in the Hanged Man ... if she wanted it.

Another shiver wracked her, and she knew she didn't want to walk in this cold rain all the way down the slippery stairs only to find herself in a room full of greedy strangers.

And so at last she gave in to the impulse she hadn't wanted to name, turning in the opposite direction and skirting the shadows of Hightown to avoid the guard patrols. He'd made her a key, but she never used it; she was more comfortable getting in her own way. Carefully she jimmed open the casement, not wanting to leave any marks or make a sound that might waken Bodahn or Sandal, and climbed inside. Her boots were wet, and she took them off in order to keep from tracking dirt on the white carpet. Without them, she felt small and vulnerable, and for a moment she thought about putting them back on and leaving the way she had come in. But a gust of wind shook the panes of glass, the rain splattering against the window, and she shivered again. With her boots in one hand, she padded across the soft carpet, her feet sinking into it, and up the stairs.

Isabela would have known where she was blind-folded, as Hawke's deep snore rumbled from the room. She found it annoying, she told herself. Truly she did. But a smile tugged at her mouth all the same, hearing it, and she lost no time closing the door and shedding her clothes. The heat from the fire was crackling warm on her chilled skin as she crossed the room. She lifted the covers and slid into the warmth there. Hawke snorted loudly. He rolled over, reaching a heavy arm out. It closed around Isabela's body and tugged her closer against him, the heat of his body finding the chill that filled hers and chasing it far away.

"Mmm." He sighed in contentment, curling against her. His breathing slowed again as he returned to the depths of sleep.
Isabela was tempted to wiggle, to arouse him in more ways than one, to make the need that had brought her here the hedonistic drive that she was most comfortable with ... but she was drowsy, and warm, and at last, safe in the shelter of his bed, his body, and ... yes, his heart.

Warm at last, she surrendered to sleep.
"Oh, sweetie, you are going to regret that."

"Just play your card."

"Are you sure? You want me to play this one?" Isabela held the card in question teasingly above the table. "Because you'll lose, and you wouldn't want that, would you?" She pouted softly, her lower lip full.

"I wouldn't be too sure, Rivaini. Hawke's got a few tricks of his own, you know."

"Oh, I could show him some tricks. I could show him things that would have him busting right out of that armor." Isabela's eyes glinted at Lucas across the card table.

He ignored her, playing his next card.

"So you're going to be that way about it, are you?" She played another one, drawing it seemingly at random from the middle of her hand.

"You say that to all the boys," Lucas pointed out mildly. He frowned at the table, then at his hand, and drew another card.

"But I always mean it." She glanced at a card, dropping it on the table, and grinned wickedly at Hawke. "I just mean it more where you're concerned. When are you going to let me make a man of you, Hawke?"

"What happened to 'once they see you naked with your ass in the air, they don't think they have to follow orders'?” Lucas looked up at her through the brown hair that had fallen into his eyes, his face perfectly serious.

Isabela's eyes warmed, and she leaned across the table, letting her cleavage bulge against the edge. "I'm not in charge around here, in case you can't tell."

"I was talking about me," He quirked an eyebrow, the faint shadow of a smile glimmering on his face as he dropped another card on the table. "I think being seen naked with my ass in the air would be bad for my image, don't you?"

Varric choked on his ale, nearly spitting it onto the table. Isabela laughed in delight ... until she took a good look at his card. "You bastard, you were stringing me along the whole time!"

"Guilty as charged, I'm afraid." Lucas grinned at her. "Pay up."

"In your dreams."

"Tsk, tsk, Isabela. No one likes a welsher."

"He's got you there, Rivaini."

"I'd rather he had me upstairs," Isabela grumbled. She dug a small pouch from her cleavage, shaking a few coins out of it. Cupping them in her hand, she reached across the table, ready to drop them onto Hawke's palm.

"Do you think I'm going to fall for that?" Lucas asked. "You shorted that by a good ten silvers."
Isabela narrowed her eyes, glaring at him. "Fine." She tucked the pouch back into her cleavage, taking a long swallow of her ale.

"The coin, Isabela."

"Right." She dug another pouch from the top of her boot, shaking the missing silvers out onto the table.

Merrill drifted over to their table. "Oh, Isabela, did Hawke beat you at cards again?"

Isabela pouted up at the elf. "He cheated. He taunted me with images of his naked ass."

"Hawke got undressed in the middle of the Hanged Man?" Merrill's eyes widened and she clapped a hand over her mouth, stifling a shocked giggle.

"I wish. He just teased me with the idea that he might. How's a person supposed to concentrate with that picture in their head?"

Merrill nodded, taking her hand off her mouth. "It's true; Hawke does have an attractive backside."

Lucas turned red, Varric raised both eyebrows and leaned forward eagerly, and Isabela guffawed. "You tell him, kitten."

"Wait, am I not supposed to have said that? It's true—Varric, don't you think so?" Merrill's eyes were huge in her face, and she looked from one to the other, stricken at the idea of having made another social gaffe.

"Yes, Varric, do tell. What do you think of Hawke's ass? You've got the view down there, got it right in front of you," Isabela drawled, sliding her wicked smile from Hawke to Varric and back again.

"Wouldn't know, Rivaini. What does a woman look for in a good ass, anyway?" Varric asked, unperturbed.

Lucas shoved his chair back from the table. "I think that's my cue to go."

"No, stay, Hawke. Don't you want to know why all the girls love your ass so much?"

"Not especially, no, but do tell Varric. I'm certain he needs the information for his next story."

Hawke left the table, dropping several coins on Norah's tray and exchanging a few quiet words with the waitress on the way out. He was oblivious to the way Isabela's eyes clung to him as he left, but Varric didn't miss the pirate's distraction.

Lucas headed out across Lowtown, sticking his hands in his pockets and whistling a jaunty tune. By now, most people who accosted solo walkers in Lowtown knew who he was—and in Hightown and Darktown, too, for that matter, although less so on the docks—and left him alone. He glanced up at the sky, dark and sprinkled heavily with stars, wondering if it was late enough that his mother had gone to bed. He'd been optimistic that once they won the estate back and moved in she would stop waiting up for him, but so far nothing had changed. He would come in to find her nodding over her embroidery, she would wake with a start, and automatically her eyes would look past him for Bethany. And then her face would fall, her eyes filling with tears, and she would go sadly to bed with hardly a word for him.

It was enough to make a man not want to go home.
But he couldn't go back to the Hanged Man, either; Isabela's constant flirtation was too much. Varric's eyes on him all the time, watching hungrily for a new story, were too much. Poor Merrill's lost little looks were too much. It was all too much—he'd never asked to be anyone's hero. Certainly he hadn't been his brother's. Or his sister's. But somehow half of Kirkwall looked to him to get them out of every mess they landed in.

He turned his steps, slipping in the back door of another mansion.

“Hawke?”

“Yes. You open?”

“Come up; I have just uncorked the bottle.”

He entered the ruined parlor, taking the glass Fenris held out to him, sinking into his accustomed chair. And the two of them ended the night as they ended so many, sipping fine vintages side by side and staring morosely into the flames.
Lucas picked up his boots, tiptoeing across the landing in his socks in hopes that he wouldn’t wake his mother. She had been nodding in her chair over her sewing when he’d come in late the night before. Gently he’d awakened her and led her upstairs to her room, hoping she was tired enough to get a good night’s sleep. He hadn’t heard a peep outside his door yet this morning. Perhaps she was having a lie-in, resting for once.

He was halfway down the stairs before he saw her, sitting next to the window, looking out on Hightown. Her hands were folded empty in her lap; no sewing, no mending, no reading.

“Mother?”

“Ah, there you are, darling,” she said, turning to him with a smile on her face. The shadows were still there under her eyes, but there was a brightness in her face that he hadn’t seen in a long time. “I was just thinking about the three of you, playing together. You and Carver so strong, but Bethany could always get her way.”

“Usually by going running to you or Father,” Lucas agreed. He sat down on the bench next to her. He’d had his fill of wallowing in the grief, but somehow this seemed different.

“None of them would want me to spend the rest of my life grieving for them, would they? I finally realized that—and that I’m missing your life while I pine for theirs.”

“Mother.” He took her hand. It seemed so small there in his larger one.

“No, let me finish. I am so proud of you for all the hard work you’ve put into building a life here in Kirkwall, for earning the money to buy back this house, for taking such good care of all of us.” She squeezed his hand. “And while I know we’re both sad that your father and Carver and Bethany didn’t live to enjoy it, we’re still here, and it’s time to stop acting like I died with them.”

“It sounds so good to hear that,” Lucas said.

“It feels good to say it.” She glanced out the window. “You know, I used to sit here when I was a girl, wishing for my life to start. Waiting for something big to happen to take me away from all of this … and it did. In all our years in Ferelden, I never had time to sit and look out the window—I was always busy cooking or sewing or tending all your scrapes and bruises. But here I am, back in Kirkwall, waiting again.”

“I didn’t think you should have to work so hard anymore, Mother.”

She smiled, patting his cheek. “I know. But I spent so much time as a peasant’s wife; I can’t just sit here. Bodahn does all the work, anyway. He organizes the servants and plans the meals. And you hardly need me to tend your bruises. I really should get busy trying to find someone who can.”

“What?”

“You need a wife, my dear, if you’re going to take your place in Kirkwall society. And perhaps, if you’re going to rise to a position of power within Kirkwall.”

“Mother, I—“ But he cut himself off. She didn’t need to know how unhappy he was living in splendor, or how often he dreamed of throwing it all over and joining a caravan as a nameless mercenary. This new peace and determination in her was so fragile, he didn’t want to disturb it. He
doubted she’d find him a woman he was interested in, anyway. “I think that’s a fine idea, if it interests you. But surely there are more productive things you could do with your days.”

“Such as? You sound like you have something specific in mind.”

“We no longer live in Lowtown, but so many Fereldan refugees do. And not just them—all of Lowtown and Darktown are in squalor. We have the money to help alleviate their suffering and you have the experience to know where that money would be best applied. Maybe you could work with Lirene?”

A smile spread across his mother’s face. “Darling, what a lovely idea. You have always had such a tender heart.”

“One thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to hire you a bodyguard. Lowtown can be dangerous, especially—“

“No.” Her firmness startled him.

“Why not?”

“I took care of myself in Lothering for many years. I helped run the farm, I dealt with the merchants. I am perfectly capable of keeping an eye out for dangerous situations—living with you has taught me that. And I will not flaunt my wealth by having a bodyguard tagging along behind me all the time.”

He started to protest, and she shook her head firmly. “No, Lucas, that’s the end of the discussion. No bodyguard.”

“Very well, Mother.” He squeezed her hand again. “I’m late to meet Varric; he has some project in mind, no doubt. You know how he is.”

“I do. Be careful, darling.” The familiar worried words were lightened by the smile she turned on him.

He was just putting on a scarf to get ready to go down to Lowtown when the bell rang at the front door. When it opened seconds later, Lucas had to smile; only one person was that impatient.

“Ah, Hawke, there you are.”

“Aveline.” He tried to control the flutter in the pit of his stomach. Foolish. In all the years they’d known each other, Aveline had never shown any indication that she thought of him that way. Lucas knew she was still mourning her husband, but deep down part of him couldn’t help wondering what would happen if he approached her. He’d never done so because he wasn’t certain enough of his own feelings—if he spoke to Aveline, he would have to be sure. There would be no trifling with her affections.

“I know you’re a noble-about-town now, but if someone had some work to throw your way?”

“I thought you disapproved of me.”


“But you want me—and Varric—to use our disapproved methods to take a task off your hands?”

“Yes. That’s about the size of it.”
“All right, then. Who do we have to kill?” At her frown, Lucas grinned. “Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

Aveline cast him a withering look, following him into the house and taking a seat near the fire. “It’s that Templar, Emeric. He insists that every murdered or missing woman in this town has fallen victim to that monster who cut off Ninette’s hand. Now, Kirkwall’s a big city. Not every murder can possibly be connected.”

“So what’s he doing to annoy you so much?”

“Making himself a big pain in my ass, that’s what. He went so far as to accuse a noble, Gascard duPuis, of being the killer. Emeric was so convincing about it that I agreed to raid duPuis’ mansion. And found nothing. Not a thing. Do you have any idea how much ass I had to kiss after that fiasco? Not again, I can tell you that much.” Her green eyes flashed angrily.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Talk to him. Look at his evidence. Figure out if he’s got a point. If it goes somewhere real, and he can prove any of his accusations, I’ll take it back off your plate.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Just shut him up. But preferably without causing an incident with the Chantry! They’ve put him out to pasture, but he’s still one of theirs. No killing.”

“Right. Okay if I maim him a little bit?” He grinned as she stood up, muttering under her breath. “Aveline. You can trust me.”

She smiled at him over her shoulder. “I know that, Hawke. If I couldn’t, you’d be in jail by now.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he called, watching her as she stalked out of the room. What a woman; no neediness there. All fire and determination. What would it be like to have that directed his way? Perhaps it was time to think about that a bit more seriously.

The Hanged Man was quiet and redolent with the yeasty smell of a new batch of ale undergoing the brewing process. “Varric in?” Lucas asked Corff as he passed the bar.

“Yeah, he’s up there. Where else would he be?”

Lucas smiled briefly to acknowledge the truth of that statement, proceeding up the stairs. He grazed his knuckles against the doorframe to announce his presence before pushing open the half-shut door. Varric was sitting there in his oversized chair—Lucas thought it looked like a throne, which was probably what Varric was going for—looking up at a scrawny man in Coterie armor. “You let me know if there are any more issues. Blondie’s got enough to worry about. And for the Maker’s sake, man, try to live up to your reputation! He knew you were there the other night and thought you were trying to rob him.”

“Right. Sorry. We’ll keep it on the down-low next time.” The man took the pouch Varric handed him and took a peek inside it. He nodded briskly at Varric and pushed past Lucas to leave the room.

“More charity, Varric?”

“Charity? Me? I don’t have a charitable bone in my body.”

Lucas had to hand it to the dwarf; he’d never met anyone else who could lie so unblushingly. It was
an open secret between them that Varric paid the Coterie very well to keep a surreptitious eye on Merrill, Anders, and Isabela. Which reminded Lucas … “Any chance you have some contacts who could be persuaded to keep a discreet eye on my mother?”

“Hawke, what do you take me for? I’ve had people looking out for her since the first time we shook hands.”

“I should have known. You are a prince among dwarves.”

“I know it.” They grinned at each other. “Sounds like your mother’s thinking of getting out more?”

Lucas nodded. “She seems to have had a change of heart—literally overnight. She wants something to do. I suggested she work with Lirene and the Ferelden refugees in Lowtown, but I don’t want her down here alone. I suggested a bodyguard, but she was—“

“Stubborn? Imagine that, a stubborn Hawke.”

“It’s not stubbornness when you’re always right.” Lucas smirked, and Varric chuckled, waving to a nearby chair. He poured a cup of ale, which he slid across the table to Lucas.

“So, Hawke,” Varric began after they’d both drained their first cup and refilled.

“Uh-oh. This can’t be going anywhere good.”

“Now, now, I’m just curious. You’ve been doing the noble thing for a few years. Anyone else, I’d think they might get complacent living the soft life … but not you. You must have plans. In fact, you must be bored shitless.”

“You’re not wrong.” Lucas took a long swallow of ale and settled back in the chair, sighing. “I haven’t been thinking too far ahead. Mostly I’ve been worried about Mother, trying to take care of her. But as for my own plans—I don’t know. Mother wants to find me a nice wife. Although marriage might not be enough of a challenge to keep me entertained, I don’t know.”

Varric snorted. “ Depends on who you marry. I can’t say I ever saw you as the marrying kind.”

“Hadn’t given it much thought, really, but it’s something to consider.”

“In the meantime? What will you do ‘til Mommy hogties you to the altar with some simpering young thing?”

“You paint such an appetizing portrait.” Lucas chuckled, taking another swallow of ale. He hated to rise to Varric’s bait, but he was bored, and it sounded as though the dwarf had something in mind that might be diverting. “I don’t suppose you have any tasks that require a large blade?”

“I could find a few. Time to get Hawke and Tethras back in action, then?” Varric’s eyes gleamed as he raised his mug in a toast.

Lucas raised his as well and clinked it against Varric’s. “By all means.”

“I don’t mind telling you, Hawke, I’m relieved. I thought you might tell me you were thinking of going back to Ferelden. Good to hear you’re sticking around.”

“Would you have missed me?” Lucas teased. What he didn’t tell Varric, or anyone, was the way the walls of Kirkwall seemed to close around him sometimes, forming a tunnel Lucas had to pass down, not allowing any deviation from a set path. More than anything, Lucas wanted to punch a hole in that
tunnel, to escape Kirkwall and stand somewhere high atop the world letting the wind whip through his hair. But his mother needed him. Aveline needed him. Varric, for all he wouldn’t admit it, and Merrill and Anders and Fenris … they needed him. He took a long swallow of ale to cover his sigh, but something in the dwarf’s sharp eyes told him that Varric knew all too well what he was thinking.

“I’d have wept into my pillow every night. You’re the perfect hero, Hawke.” At Lucas’s snort, Varric grinned. “Well, if nothing else, you give this place respectability.”

“I’m sure Aveline wouldn’t agree. Oh, Aveline! That reminds me—she wants us to go to the Gallows and talk to that Templar Emeric, remember him?”

“How could I forget? It’s not every day I find a severed hand in a sack. Rivaini’s been looking for you, too.”

“What does she want? Someone to help find her pants?”

“Pretty sure that’s one mystery we might as well all give up. Something about her relic, I think.”

Lucas drained the last of his ale and stood up. “Well, let’s get to it, then.”

“ Inspiring words.”

“What can I say? It’s a gift.”
Walking through the main tavern of the Hanged Man, Lucas spotted a familiar figure at the bar. “Might as well find out what she wants,” he said to Varric.

“Of course. Have to catch her now before she moves to the other end of the bar.”

He glanced down at the dwarf, wondering what that comment meant. True, Isabela was often here, but finding out what she needed was literally no less than Lucas would have done for any of their friends. “If you’d rather not, Varric?”

“Who, me? Come to think of it, maybe I’ll just go see if Bianca needs anything.”

“Varric,” Lucas said warningly, but the dwarf was already halfway up the stairs. He could move with surprising speed when he wanted to.

Lucas slid in between Isabela and a woman in Coterie armor who was putting the moves on Corff. He was a little surprised that Isabela wasn’t startled.

She grinned. “Come on, Hawke. You think I didn’t hear you coming? You can’t stealth worth a damn.”

“Well, hello to you, too,” he said, frowning.

“Now, now. No sulking. Although … that’s a tempting lip.” She leaned in close, and Lucas jerked his head back, irritated.

“Varric said you wanted something.”

“Always business with you. All right, if you must.” She took a long swallow of ale and signaled for another. “Do you remember the relic I told you about? Of course you do; mind like a steel trap, you have.”

He leaned an elbow on the bar. “Out with it.”

“I have a lead.”

“Oh, here we go again,” Lucas groaned.

“No, really, I’m sure of it this time!”

“That’s what you said the last time. We dug up half the sewers and what did we find? A bale of badly written poetry and an old boot.”

“Well, it could’ve been the relic.”

“The relic looks like bad poetry?”

Isabela looked startled, then frightened. She reached for her ale, drinking it down and banging the cup on the counter in an unmistakable request for a refill. She’d been drinking a lot more heavily recently, Lucas had noticed. Maybe he should start bringing her along more often. The lack of a ship and this constant search for the lost relic seemed to be taking a toll on her.

“So, your lead?”
“I just … wanted to let you know that I might soon be taking you up on your offer of help. That is, if you’re still willing …”

Lucas had rarely seen Isabela look so uncertain. He patted her on the shoulder. “Of course it is.”

“Great. Great! Thanks.”

“You busy right now?”

“Do I look it?”

“Well, then—fancy a chance to go hit things?”

She grinned, her persona slipping back into place almost visibly. “You do know how to show a girl a good time, Hawke. Now, if you’d only let the girl show you one in return …”

“I’m sure there are a dozen men within shouting distance who would love to have you show them a good time, Isabela. Why bother with me?”

“I don’t really have to spell that out for you, do I, Hawke?”

He chuckled as they turned toward the door. “No, I suppose not. The pursuit and all that.”

“See? Let me catch you just once, I’ll be bored, we’ll all be able to go on about our business.”

“Oh, no. My manly feelings, you see. I couldn’t take the subsequent rejection.”

“Hawke, I imagine you could take just about anything.”

“Just keep those thoughts in your imagination, where they belong.”

“Spoilsport.”

“What’s the matter, Rivaini, Mount Hawke proving too tough a climb again?”

Isabela grinned wickedly at the dwarf. “Just means I need to get out my special climbing boots. With the spikes.”

Lucas shuddered. “Is that supposed to sound alluring? Because, ow.”

“Never know until you try.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“If the two of you are finished, you mind if we go now? I can write my own dialogue, and it’s a lot better than yours. I count on you, Hawke, for the plots.”

“After you.” Lucas bowed, and Varric preceded him grandly through the door. It would have been more impressive if the door of the Hanged Man hadn’t stuck while they were trying to open it, however.

Outside, Lucas began to lead the way toward the stairs down to the docks, but Varric stopped, looking in the direction of Hightown. “Hawke, if we’re going to see the Qunari, doesn’t that call for the elf? Having someone along who knows their language can’t hurt. Unless you’ve picked up some Qunari in your travels?” he asked Isabela, who shook her head, looking queasy.
“The Qunari? That’s where you’re going?”

“They’re the big action in town,” Varric said.

“Oh, look, there’s a big scuff on my boot,” Isabela said, bending over to inspect the leather. For once, Lucas didn’t think it was a ploy to get him to look at her cleavage, although he couldn’t help but notice how round and full her breasts were. “I have to … go to the cobbler. Immediately.”

“Can’t it wait until after we’ve seen the Qunari?”

She raised an eyebrow at him, turning away and hurrying down the street.

“Well, that was abrupt,” Varric said.

“You know anything about that?”

“About Rivaini being obsessed with her boots? They’re her power source.” Varric grinned.

Lucas frowned at him. “I think there was more to it than that.”

“Go after her and find out.”

“She wouldn’t tell me anyway.” Shrugging, Lucas left the problem for another day. “I’m not talking to the Arishok with just you. No offense, but you’re not much of a shield.”

“I’m not anyone’s shield—why do you think I spend so much time with a human who’s three times my size? If you want to hide behind someone, we should get Aveline.”

“Good thinking.” Lucas grinned. He couldn’t wait to see Aveline face off against the Arishok.

As they reached the top of the stairs up from Lowtown, traffic seemed to slow. Lucas muscled his way through the crowds to see what the blockage was. It turned out to be a familiar elf standing at the top of the stares, glaring at all comers. “Ah, Hawke, there you are.”

“Fenris, you could have come down, you know, instead of causing a traffic jam.”

The only response to Lucas’s comment was another glare; not that he had expected anything else. Fenris could never admit to actually wanting to join Lucas for the day, because that would be allowing himself to depend on someone, an idea that was anathema to the elf.

“If you’re not busy, would you like to join us in going to see the Arishok?” Lucas asked. No doubt Fenris would, but it was always well to attend to the courtesies where the elf was involved.

“Of course. Uh, Hawke … are you aware that the Arishok is the other way?” the elf asked as they moved farther into Hightown toward the Viscount’s Keep.

“We’re picking up Aveline.”

“Do you think that’s wise? Aveline is not precisely subtle.”

“Says the pot about the kettle,” Varric put in, earning himself a special glare.

“True enough,” Lucas said, not specifying which of them he was agreeing with. “But it’s Aveline’s city, after all. She should know what’s happening in it.”

Aveline agreed with that opinion, as it turned out, and so the four of them approached the Qunari
compound on the docks together. A lone Qunari came out of the compound, placing his large body directly in front of Lucas.

“Hawke.”

“That’s the name,” Lucas said cheerfully.

“A patrol has gone missing.”

“Really? Sorry to hear that.”

“Where were they?” Aveline asked, looking concerned.

The Qunari didn’t break eye contact with Lucas as he answered. “They were to patrol the Wounded Coast looking for Tal Vashoth. Most bas in this city have no concept of honor, but you, Hawke, have a bare inkling of what it may consist of, and so I will do you the courtesy of asking: Did you kill them?”

Lucas frowned, parsing the compliment out of the Qunari’s long-winded speech with some difficulty. “I’m flattered you would consider me a candidate, but I don’t know why I would tell you if I had killed them. After all, I would hardly want you to try to kill me in retaliation.”

“I seek an answer to a question, nothing more. Vengeance is not relevant to this task.”

“Hawke can’t be your only suspect. There’s the Coterie, the Carta, the Raiders, just for starters.”

At that the Qunari did look away from Hawke, casting a withering look at the dwarf. “Only Hawke could be considered capable of felling an entire karataam.”

“Well, congratulations, Hawke,” Varric muttered.

“Yes, I feel so fortunate. As it happens,” Lucas said, “I did not kill your karataam. Would you like me to help you find out who did?”

“That is my task, human.”

“Of course. Foolish of me to consider offering my assistance.”

“Foolish indeed, Hawke,” Fenris muttered as they walked past the big Qunari. “It is not wise to taunt the Qunari. Their sense of humor is not conducive to your flippancy.”

“Pity.” Lucas sighed dramatically.

Fenris said something in Arcanum under his breath; from the exasperated look that accompanied it, Lucas decided it probably wasn’t complimentary. The silent Qunari at the gate opened it as they approached. Lucas could feel the guard’s black eyes on him as they walked into the compound toward the Arishok’s dwelling. He wondered what the Arishok did all day. It appeared he spent most of it on his throne, but he seemed too energetic for such inactivity.

He looked up as they approached, his gaze flowing over Varric and Fenris, resting briefly on Aveline with something like amusement, and finally settling on Lucas. “Serah Hawke.”

“Messere. You wished to speak to me.”

“Yes.” There was a pause as the two men looked at one another, before the Arishok continued, “I did not know your name the last time we spoke. I did not care to. But we hear things; you have
changed your fortunes, Serah. The Qunari have not.”

“Yes, we’ve noticed,” Aveline put in. “When is that boat coming?”

“When it comes.” The Arishok allowed Aveline a brief frown before looking back at Hawke. “Someone has stolen the formula for gaatlok. You will want to hunt him.” He folded his arms and looked away, as if to signal that the interview was over.

“Gaatlok?” Lucas asked.

“Their explosives,” Fenris said quietly. “I am surprised such a thing was allowed.”

“It was not. The thief assumed the formula was for gaatlok, because that was what we wanted him to think, but in fact the formula was for sar-kaamek, a poisoned gas.”

“Why not just kill the thief?”

The Arishok’s eyes glinted at Lucas, and in them Lucas could read a certain satisfaction.

“What does this gas do, then?” he asked.

“It is as dangerous as those who breathe it; it causes them to turn against their own.”

“Aren’t you worried about your people?” But Lucas knew it was a futile question before the Arishok confirmed that Qunari were immune. “So you let some thief walk out of here with this formula, didn’t bother to stop him. We all know you hate this city—”

“Even though we don’t know why you’re still here,” Aveline muttered.

“Why bother to warn us?” Lucas continued, as though Aveline hadn’t spoken.

The Arishok tilted his head just a little, studying Lucas as he might study a bug under a magnifying glass. “No one in this city can claim the honor of being an ally, or even better, a good rival. But you, Hawke, you have shown promise. I give you this information to see how you will deal with it.”

“Could be Javaris,” Varric suggested.

“I thought he got the idea last time. Can you really see him storming the compound to steal the formula?”

“I can see him hiring someone to do so,” Aveline said.

“Many have sought the formula for gaatlok,” the Arishok said, “but only the short mouth chose to delude himself beyond ‘no’. As I say, Hawke, you will want to hunt him.”

“If he’s made any of that gas, I’ll have his head,” Lucas vowed grimly.

The Arishok stood up, crossing his arms across his massive chest. “Panahedan, Hawke. It is interesting.”

“What is?”

“That I do not hope you die.”
In Dreams

Isabela was loitering around the top of the stairway that led up from the docks. “What did horned and grumpy have to say?”

“Stolen formula, catch the thief for him, maybe we’ll get lucky and not die,” Lucas summarized. “Sorry you missed it?”

“Not particularly. You going after this thief?” She fell into step next to him, her long legs nearly matching his strides.

Aveline had fallen back to walk with Fenris when Isabela joined them, and Lucas glanced back briefly at her, wishing she had stayed next to him. It took Isabela repeating her question for him to notice she had spoken. “Um, yeah, I suppose. Varric, where is Javaris these days?”

“Haven’t heard much about him recently. I can ask around. The Coterie might have tabs on him; he pissed off enough of them to be on their list for the next half an age.”

They were nearing the Hanged Man now, and a slender woman who had been waiting next to the door rushed to Lucas’s side. “Oh, Serah Hawke, I’m so relieved to find you here.”

“Arianni?” he asked, hoping he had her name right. “Is this about Feynriel?”

“Yes, serah. H-he …” She looked around her nervously, then leaned in closer. “He is so unhappy in the Circle. All their restrictions … And now—Now—“ She gave a sob, trembling. “He has gone into a dream and will not wake!”

“How do you know all that?” Isabela asked bluntly. “Aren’t they supposed to be all locked away there in the Gallows, no letters home?”

Lucas was annoyed at Isabela’s brusqueness, which had Arianni cringing away from the pirate, but he had to admit it was a good point. “How do you know, Arianni?”

“Well, Ser Thrask … Um …” The pinkness in the elf’s cheeks said enough for Lucas to get the picture. “He says there is nothing the Circle can do for Feynriel, that if he doesn’t wake they will make him Tranquil. Oh, please, serah! Please don’t let that happen to my son!”

“What can I do? Knight-Commander Meredith doesn’t exactly approve of people interfering with her work.”

Looking around anxiously, Arianni drew him away from the Hanged Man into the mouth of a nearby alley. “There is a ritual that can send a non-mage into the Fade, someone Feynriel trusts.”

“Then why don’t you go?” he asked her.

“Feynriel doesn’t trust me. He thinks—he thinks I want to make him Tranquil!”

“I sent him to the Circle. Why would he trust me, if he doesn’t trust you?”

“He thinks you’re looking out for his best interests. I think maybe he sees a little of his father in you. Please help him!”

“What would you want me to do?”
“I’ve sent for Keeper Marethari. She’s waiting in the Alienage and will explain everything. Will you come with me?”

“All right.” Lucas looked at the others.

Aveline was fidgeting, looking up at the sun. “Hawke, I have to get back. And this—“ She gave Arianni a disapproving glance. “This is not something I should be helping with. Excuse me.” And she was gone, stalking off toward the stairs, her shoulders stiff.

There was silence for a moment as Lucas wrestled with the decision. “Fine. I’ll help. Lead me to Marethari.”

“Oh, thank you, serah, thank you!” Arianni appeared as though she might faint from relief, but she rallied and led the way toward the Alienage. Lucas walked with her, not wanting to talk to his team. He could feel Fenris’s bristling disapproval behind him … but Fenris was behind him, despite his disagreement with Lucas’s decision, and Lucas appreciated the elf for that unswerving loyalty.

Marethari was waiting for them beneath the venedahl tree. She reached out a hand to Lucas, who, as usual, wasn’t sure if he was meant to shake it or kiss it. He settled for gripping her fingers for a moment.

“It is good that you have come,” she said. “We have no time to lose.”

“Oh, my poor Feynriel!” Arianni shrieked. Marethari shot her a quelling look, and the elf took a visible breath, calming herself with difficulty.

“We should speak indoors. What I have to say is not for the entire Alienage to hear.”

“May I come?”

Lucas was startled, not having noticed Merrill leaving her house and appearing in the midst of their group.

Marethari’s mouth pinched as she regarded the elven mage, but at last she gave a short nod, leading the way to Arianni’s small home. The seven of them were a tight squeeze in the cramped quarters, and Lucas noticed Fenris staring at the finicky neatness of the tiny house. He smothered a smile, thinking of Fenris’s vast mansion and the utter chaos it was in. There was something to be said in the difference, of freedom and how it was defined and kept, but Lucas would leave that train of thought for another day.

“Feynriel has gone into a dream. I fear the consequences if he does not come out,” Marethari said.

“I assume he would not survive,” Lucas said carefully, not looking at Arianni.

“It is worse than that. Far worse. Feynriel is a somniari. He possesses magic that allows him to control the Fade, to walk in the dreams of others and to … affect their dreams, and through dreams, their waking lives.”

Fenris was looking faintly green at that idea. Merrill was frowning. Varric, having no connection to the Fade, seemed merely intrigued. Isabela was watching both Arianni and Marethari carefully. Lucas was surprised that she didn’t make a joke, or offer a suggestive remark.

Marethari continued, “Feynriel is the first somniari to survive in two ages.”

“That we know of,” Merrill put in, garnering herself an irritated glance from the Keeper.
“We are as certain as we can be. Most somniari attract demons at an early age. They do not last long.” Under her breath, she added something that might have been, “Mercifully.” Then she looked up, her eyes meeting Lucas’s squarely. There was a message there, a warning he could read clearly, and he felt his irritation with the Keeper rise a notch. So she didn’t want to do what must be done. She hadn’t wanted to be firm with Merrill, either, and the little elf was clearly up to something no one was going to be happy about. Now it was another struggling young mage, and Marethari was using Lucas as a hired sword to avoid getting her own hands dirty. Well, maybe Lucas would have liked to have been one of the good guys himself, had she—or anyone—ever considered that?

Arianni was babbling something hysterical about taking care of her boy, while Lucas’s eyes stayed locked on Marethari’s. He nodded, briefly, letting the old mage know that he understood her.

“You will need to enter the Fade,” she said. “It is the only way to reach Feynriel. I am prepared to perform the ritual as soon as you are ready.”

“You will send him into the Fade to save this half-blooded boy?” Merrill said angrily. “You would never do so much for me!” Marethari ignored her former First completely, and Merrill’s face filled with sadness. “I see. I truly see, now.” Quietly, she let herself out of the crowded hovel.

Lucas caught Isabela’s eyes on the closed door, a rare seriousness in the pirate’s face. Isabela cared for Merrill with a tenderness she showed no one else. He wanted to tell Isabela to go after the little elf, but the moment passed and Isabela’s amber eyes turned toward Marethari with an unforgiving light.

Marethari was still looking at Lucas. “Are you ready? Are your companions ready for what they will face? Think carefully, for all will be brought to temptation.”

“Companions?” Fenris’s face hardened. “I have no desire to submit myself to magic … but I will do so if you need me, Hawke.”

“Thank you, Fenris. Your practical good sense will serve me well, no doubt.” Lucas grinned, but there was no answering smile on the elf’s face.

“I admit, I’m fascinated, Hawke. Never been to the Fade.” Varric reached around to stroke Bianca’s stock, a nervous habit that belied his eager words.

“You’ve never been anywhere, Varric,” Isabela pointed out. She nodded at Lucas, unable to repress her enthusiasm. “I’ll go. I’m always up for a party.”

Marethari clearly was less than pleased with all three responses, to judge from the silent disdain with which she regarded his companions. Not that Lucas cared—these three would fight an army of demons if such a thing was required. He wished Aveline was there with her strong shield arm … but Aveline had refused to assist in this task at all. She would not have joined him in the Fade willingly.

“We’re ready, then,” he said to Marethari. “What do we do?”

The room went black, then a wavery grey. Lucas blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to adjust to the softened edges and blurring of his surroundings. He appeared to be in a hallway of some sort. From behind him, Fenris’s sharp voice said, “Do not trust your sight. Nothing here is real.” Then, after a moment, he repeated, “Nothing here is real,” as if he was attempting to convince himself.


“Well, as long as we’re all clear on that.” Lucas strode down the hallway, surprised to find it firm and solid beneath his boots. He led them all through a door and into a large courtyard, where a fat...
demon hovered, watching them as they navigated a flight of stairs. It was difficult with the reduced visibility—Lucas expected to miss a step and go tumbling down any minute.

The demon came toward them. If it had had a mouth, it would have been smiling. “Welcome! Such a surprising amount of activity … but it has potential.” It looked Lucas up and down. “Perhaps we could—“

“Shut up,” Fenris said, a little desperately, and he leaped forward, his sword slicing the demon neatly in two. Two rage demons emerged from the floor behind them; Varric spun to level Bianca at one, and Isabela rolled across the floor to bury her daggers in the other.

When they were nothing but a pile of sparks on the hazy floor, Varric said, “That was bracing. You think that’s going to happen a lot around here?”

“Marethari said these somniari draw demons, so I wouldn’t be surprised. All the better reason to get this done with quickly.” Lucas looked around, squinting to try to bring things into focus. Up the steps and across the courtyard from where they stood, a door gave off a faint glow. “I guess we go up there.” He looked questioningly at his companions, who shrugged and seemed willing to follow him into the room he indicated.

Pushing open the door, he stepped through, and found himself altering, changing seamlessly into a younger version of Arianni. A little boy sat at a table, writing on a piece of vellum, while a man Lucas recognized as Vincento, Feynriel’s father, bent over him, heaping praise on the boy’s accomplishments.

Oh, for the Maker’s sake, Lucas thought in irritation. The boy had father issues? Well, who didn’t? “Feynriel,” he said aloud, disconcerted to hear Arianni’s voice coming from his mouth. “Your father never paid this kind of attention to you. He disowned you, remember?”

The vision of Vincento looked up and glared at him. The young boy morphed into the older Feynriel, who looked between Lucas in his Arianni form and the demon in its Vincento form, burst into tears, and ran away, the wall fluttering open as he ran through it. Lucas was relieved to see that once Feynriel was gone he no longer had the guise of Arianni, but his relief was short-lived.

“You took him! He was mine!” The demon transformed as it spoke, taking the seductive shape of a desire demon. She sashayed toward Lucas, the tassels on her breasts twirling.

“Oh,” she said, disconcerted to hear Arianni’s voice coming from his mouth. “Your father never paid this kind of attention to you. He disowned you, remember?”

The noise distracted the demon’s attention away from Lucas. She turned to the pirate, grey hands speculatively caressing her own breasts. “Ah,” the demon said. “Instead of attacking, maybe I will simply take a new plaything, now that you have run off my old one. Tell me, handsome,” she said, casting a flirtatious glance in Lucas’s direction, “how loyal is your pirate queen? What would it take to tempt her from your side?”

Very little, it appeared. Isabela was uniquely vulnerable to a desire demon’s wiles. Lucas could see her licking her lips, her eyes on the demon’s hands.

“Stiff masthead’? That was the best the demon could do? But apparently it was working on Isabela. Her eyes were glazed over, and she was swaying toward the demon.

“Should I turn around to let you stab me in the back, or let it be a surprise?” Lucas said. He
recognized inevitability when he saw it. Isabela couldn’t be trusted to put the needs of others above her own desires.

Isabela glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Aw, aren’t you just the sweetest thing.” She took two slow, languorous steps in the demon’s direction.

“Mmm,” purred the demon. “The Siren’s Call II lies waiting for you in Kirkwall harbor. Oh, the gleaming, muscular bodies of the crew, the smell of fresh pine from the masts … and I will be waiting for you under the furs in the captain’s cabin.” She crooked her finger, walking backward with Isabela following her.

Lucas shook himself. What was he thinking, letting her fall under the way of a demon like this? “Isabela!”

The demon looked back over her shoulder, glaring at him. “Kill him!” she commanded, and Isabela obediently turned, pulling her daggers. Lucas ducked just in time to avoid the one that flew over his head, thanking the Maker that he’d fought with Isabela long enough to know her moves. Varric and Fenris were occupied with the desire demon and two shades that had appeared from the corners of the room, which left Lucas to deal with Isabela. He was reluctant to kill her, even in the Fade, not knowing what that would do to her in the real world.

Isabela, however, still firmly in the demon’s thrall, had no such scruples. Her blades were flashing as she moved, and if Lucas hadn’t been significantly more agile than the average two-handed weapon wielder, he’d have already found out, firsthand, what happened when a person died in the Fade. He was glad he had spent so much time sparring with Fenris, learning the elf’s more graceful style.

He lifted his blade over his head, dancing back when Isabela thrust a dagger at his ribs, then brought the sword down in a swift circle, clipping her in the unprotected side. Isabela dodged at the last minute, avoiding the worst of the blow. In a puff of smoke she was gone. Lucas knew this move, so he whirled around to be ready for her … only to find that she was still at his back, having anticipated that he would move to block her. The sharp point of the dagger sank into his back. The pain was excruciating. He was about to fall to his knees, unable to stand for the agony, when he caught sight of Fenris and remembered the elf’s mantra. “Nothing here is real.” The wound wasn’t real; neither was the pain.

Deftly, Lucas shifted his sword to his left hand and smashed his right elbow into Isabela’s face as she came around to attack him from the front. The blow bloodied her nose and knocked her backwards. Turning to face her, he ran her through with the sword. Her eyes met his, filling with tears as she gingerly touched the edge of the blade. Lucas couldn’t believe what he had done. He reached for her hand, but her image wavered and faded, and then he, Fenris, and Varric were alone in the room.

“Hawke, what did you do?” Varric asked, staring at the empty space where Isabela had been. “Did you really just kill Rivaini?”

“It was her or me,” Lucas said. “I didn’t want to!”

“You couldn’t have just … knocked her out or something?”

“What would you have done?”

Varric looked up at him. “Good point. How do we get out of this to see if she made it back?”

“I believe we must finish with Feynriel before we will be allowed out of this cursed place,” Fenris said. He was rubbing his arms, shivering. There was nothing the elf hated more than magic, and here
he was, surrounded by it.

“Well, Feynriel’s not here anymore. Let’s go see if that courtyard is still there—maybe he’s out there now.” Lucas led the way back through the door, unable to get Isabela’s startled face and tear-filled eyes out of his mind. Assuming they both survived this nightmare, he was going to have to make it up to her, although how to do that eluded him for the moment. He wondered what an appropriate apology might be for killing someone. White lilies, perhaps. Isabela might find that amusing—if she still lived. He quickened his pace, wanting to get out of the blasted Fade as soon as possible.
On the other side of the Fade-created courtyard, another door pulsed. “Wonder what’s behind there.” Lucas glanced at his companions. “I hope neither of you are going to be as easy to sway as Isabela was.”

Varric chuckled nervously and Fenris cleared his throat. They looked stalwart enough, but Lucas didn’t miss the lack of a real response.

On the other side of the door, he found his appearance had altered again; he was now an elf wearing robes. A mage of some kind, then. A group of elves were standing in a forest glade that seemed odd in this place of stone walls. Lucas recognized Marethari, standing next to Feynriel and saying, “… our hope for the future, Feynriel. He is at the mercy of the Circle for now, but he will find freedom through the Dalish and lead our people back to prominence again.”

Well, Feynriel was a teenager, after all. It only made sense that his dreams would be both as simple as his father’s approval and as grandiose as saving an entire culture. Lucas strode into the middle of the glade. “This is a trick. She’s a demon.”

“He’s a First Enchanter?”

Oh, is that who he was supposed to be?

Feynriel’s voice wobbled, but he stayed by Marethari’s side. “The Dalish are honorable people; the Keeper wouldn’t lie to me!”

“The Keeper wouldn’t look to a human as her savior,” Lucas countered.

“Don’t listen to him,” the demon-Marethari said. “You are of our blood; you will restore us to our former glory.”

“But…” Feynriel looked back and forth between them. “The Circle says I am untrained. I can’t control my magic—I don’t even understand it! How can I save you?” His voice broke as the realization began to break in on him.

“That’s a demon, Feynriel. You know it,” Lucas said softly.

“He lies!” snarled the demon-Marethari. “The First Enchanter is a pawn of the Templars!”

“Mother’s people don’t consort with demons.” Feynriel’s mouth turned down, his shoulders slumping in defeat. He turned and walked from the scene, the walls opening for him and closing behind him.

“How dare you!” The demon no longer looked like Marethari; it had grown into a hulking huge Pride demon, and it roared over Lucas’s head. “With my power joined to his, Feynriel would have changed the world.”

Lucas shrugged. “I just didn’t think he wanted to go through life looking like you. I’m sure he’ll thank me later.”

The demon stopped short, staring at him. In a calmer tone of voice, it said, “That’s the trouble with you humans—so caught up in appearances, you never find real power. If you look only at the surface, you never touch anything deeper. Perhaps your friends’ loyalty is only skin deep, as well?”
The demon’s eyes roved between Fenris and Varric. “Would this slave stick by you, if offered his heart’s desire?”

“Cast your eyes elsewhere, demon,” Fenris said, the faint quiver in his voice belying his strong words. “I won my freedom from the magisters long ago, and I did it with the assistance of no supernatural force.”

“Freedom? Can you call it that, when you still bear their marks on your body and in your mind? What if I can offer you power to challenge any who would chain you, enough to ensure your safety no matter what strength is marshaled against you?”

Fenris swallowed audibly. He was shaking, Lucas noticed, and he reached out to lay a hand on his friend’s arm. Fenris side-stepped the hand, casting a black look at Lucas.

“If you accept this offer, you are no better than the magisters who did this to you,” Lucas said in a low voice.

“But … to face them as an equal …” There was a tremulousness in Fenris’s voice, a wonder, that Lucas had never heard before. His eyes fixed on the demon, the elf took a slow step forward. Then he crumpled to the ground, disappearing from sight.

Varric patted Bianca. “Always wanted to shoot that broody bastard in the ass.”

“Nice shot.” Lucas was relieved not to have to fight Fenris. He wasn’t sure he would have won.

The demon howled in rage and charged Lucas, who threw himself out of its path at the last moment. The charge clipped him on the side and sent him sprawling. Varric put a trio of bolts into the demon, clustering them in its right flank, which distracted the demon enough that Lucas could get back up from the floor and get his sword into position. He swung it at the demon, feeling the sharp steel score the demon’s stomach. It pierced only the outer edges of the thick flesh—black blood oozed rather than spurted from the site as Lucas set himself for another strike. He’d have to hit it straight on, then, to have a chance to truly kill the thing. Lucas danced around in front of the demon, taunting it as he bobbed and weaved to avoid its meaty fists as they tried to close on him. Then he ducked under the big arms and thrust his sword into the demon’s belly, putting all his weight into it, forcing the blade through the rubbery layers of skin.

Hard as it was to get the sword in, it was harder to pull it back out, especially while avoiding the flailing fists. The demon had slowed now, great gouts of blood spilling from the wound in its stomach. Crossbow bolts jutted out of its skin in many places, and Bianca was busy spitting more sharp barbs at it. Lucas put some space between himself and the demon, and then, with his sword out in front of him, sprinted at full speed toward the demon. He prayed he didn’t trip and fall, because the momentum would shove his own sword through his stomach and out his arse, most likely. The demon was lumbering toward him as he ran, and he launched himself off his back foot, into the air, and the combined momentum sent the sword deep into the demon’s heart. Lucas was grateful that the thing disappeared as soon as it was dead; he had not relished having to pull the sword back out, not to mention cleaning it.

“Seems like the elf protests too much,” Varric commented, stowing Bianca back where she belonged. “All that refusal to be tempted, and all it took was one little demon.”

“Often we’re loudest in our denunciation where our longing is greatest. Fenris would very much like magic to do something good for him, but he doesn’t trust it to do so.” He looked down at Varric. “What would you have done, if a demon dangled the thing you wanted most in front of you?”
Varric’s face creased as something like sadness passed over it. “Wouldn’t believe it,” he muttered. “Not possible.” He cleared his throat, his lips tightening as he looked up at Hawke. “What about you, Hawke? What could a demon have tempted you with? I notice they didn’t even try for you. Wrong type, maybe? You don’t seem to have much trouble with desire, but pride—no offense, but I’d have thought you were ripe pickings for a pride demon.”

Lucas shrugged, not wanting to go too far down that path. “Apparently Isabela and Fenris were juicier targets. Who knows why demons do what they do?”

“Maybe Feynriel does.”

“I doubt it. He doesn’t seem to know why he does what he does, much less what makes other people tick. That’s the trouble with mages—their magic takes over everything else about them. People spend too much time coddling them, or fighting over how to use their power, and not enough time teaching them to be real people. Feynriel’s not a bad boy, but his mother and Thrask and the Circle and Marethari have him pulled every which way.”

“You’ve studied on that a lot, haven’t you, Hawke?”

“If I had taken the trouble to teach Bethany better hand-to-hand combat skills, she might still be alive today.” He turned toward the door, wondering how much more of this it would take before they found Feynriel in a space where they could speak to him. But he couldn’t help wondering—if the demon had promised to bring Bethany back, or Carver, or Father … would he have taken that deal? He liked to think of himself as a man too consumed with the practicalities of daily life to be seduced by dreams, but was it true?

Resolutely, Lucas steered his thoughts away from the speculation. There was no point in asking what might have happened; what had happened was enough.

In the courtyard, they found Feynriel, pacing back and forth and muttering to himself. He looked up as they approached. “Serah Hawke! What are you doing here?”

“I came to help you, Feynriel, so that you can awaken again.”

“My dreams last longer and longer, it seems. If any of this,” he gestured to their surroundings, “can be trusted, it will be the second time you’ve saved my life. I am grateful. But what happens the next time you are not there to step in?”

Lucas restrained himself from rolling his eyes, but only barely. All the resources at this mage’s disposal, and he had to turn to someone who was barely more than a stranger to save his life? “You have to learn to stop getting into these messes in the first place; step in for yourself once in a while.”

“I—I’m not strong enough. Everyone says so.”

“Not strong enough! You control the Fade, and the dreams of the people in it.”

“That can’t be right.” Feynriel frowned. “I can’t even wake up.”

“That’s because the Fade’s your medium, kid,” Varric explained. “And demons are drawn to you like flies to honey.”

Feynriel looked down at the dwarf thoughtfully. His eyes narrowed. “If what you say is true, then this is a great power. I will need to be trained in how to use this power effectively. The Circle would squash it; we can’t let that happen.” He was muttering to himself now, growing more excited with every word.
“What if the Circle is right? What if this power is dangerous, and you need to learn basic magic skills and how to control them before you can trust yourself to unleash it?” Lucas tried to get through to the boy, who seemed caught up in the potential promises of his abilities, muttering to himself about making a certain girl mage dream certain things. “Feynriel! Get a grip!”

“Serah Hawke.” The boy looked at him now, considering. “I can’t see how the Circle can help me now; my powers are far greater than they have any concept of.”

Lucas groaned. He had wanted the boy to step up, not swell up. This kind of arrogance was dangerous. “You’ll hurt someone, if you don’t know how to control your magic.”

“Then I should go where they can train me. I must go to Tevinter! Yes, the magisters there will know how to help me, to teach me in the uses of this power. I will be a great man there, maybe a magister myself. I can get people to give me money through their dreams, and learn their secrets, and they’ll have to help me.”

Lucas shook his head, listening. How quickly corruption grew, when you opened your heart to it and welcomed it in.

“This is a far cry from the sniveling boy we pulled from the slavers’ hands,” Varric said. It wasn’t a compliment.

Feynriel was still talking to himself. “My mother would never agree to such a journey, or look kindly on my attempting it. I mustn’t speak to her of my plans.”

“How exactly do you intend to get out of the Circle and make your way to Tevinter?” Lucas cut in.

“Why, you’ll help me, of course. Can you give my mother my farewell? No doubt she’ll take the news better when it comes from you.”

“You assume a great deal,” Lucas said. “I haven’t agreed to help you go to Tevinter, or even that studying there is a good idea. Why exactly do I want to put such power into the hands of those who are little more than enemies?”

“I wouldn’t be giving my powers to the Tevinters,” Feynriel scoffed. “They would be training me. My power would remain my own.”

“And if you believe that, I have a bridge in Par Vollen to sell you,” Varric said. “Kid, the Tevinters would have you scraping and bowing to them in nothing flat. The magisters would own you, and I’m not talking metaphorically.”

Lucas shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I really can’t let this unchecked, uncontrollable power go free.”

“Hawke,” Varric said warningly.

“Varric, I can’t. My father always used to say his magic should serve that which was best in him, not that which was most base. Do you think this boy cares about that? Look at him! No one in his life has ever taught him how to harness his powers, how to control them, and now they control him. He can’t even wake up on his own! And I’m supposed to just let him waltz off to Tevinter and assume the magisters are going to make something of him when his parents, the Dalish, and the Circle haven’t been able to? Look what the Tevinters did to Fenris, for the Maker’s sake!”

“Well, Broody isn’t always the most balanced …”
“He might be a bit off on the subject, but he’s not wrong. I am sorry, Feynriel,” Lucas continued, turning to the boy. “I know you never asked for this power to be bestowed on you, and I know you’ve been done wrong by everyone you’ve ever come across. But it’s too late. You’ve lost any chance you ever had to control this thing.”

“I can! I can call a demon to my aid, it will teach me—“

“Not a chance.” Varric leveled Bianca at the boy.

Feynriel’s eyes filled with tears. He looked at Lucas. “Please, serah. I can try!”

“You’ve been trying. Either I do something here and now or the Circle makes you Tranquil. Is that what you want?”

Feynriel shook his head slowly. He fell to his knees.

“I don’t know what happens when I kill you in the Fade, Feynriel, but I’m going to try to set you free, free to join the Maker. And may he watch over your soul.”

Lucas was on the verge of tears himself. The options before him were either that Feynriel would die, which would mean Isabela and Fenris had also died, and he had lost two loyal companions; or that nothing would happen, that Feynriel would merely wake in his cell in the Gallows and it would all have to be done all over again, some other way. Neither sounded palatable. With a feeling of desperation, he plunged the knife he carried into the back of Feynriel’s neck, saw the boy pitch forward onto his face, saw his body disappear. And then blackness came down over Lucas’s vision and slowly the little room Arianni lived in came into view. Groaning, he pushed himself up on his elbow, closing his eyes while he waited for the dizziness to pass.

“It is done,” he heard Marethari say. “I’m sorry, Arianni. Feynriel is Tranquil.”

The word galvanized Lucas off the floor. “Tranquil?”

“Yes. A mage becomes Tranquil when he is killed in the Fade. Did I not tell you that?”

“It must have slipped your mind.” Lucas bit the words off. Not for a moment did he believe she had ‘forgotten’. She had anticipated the choice he would make, he was sure of that.

“You killed my son?” Arianni stared at him in shock and horror.

“Yes. Rather than have him go free, to run away to Tevinter and have himself trained by the magisters, or send him back to the Circle to be made Tranquil, I chose to kill him. I didn’t know I was condemning him to a fate worse than death.” Lucas heard a sob in his own voice, and took a long, shaky breath. “I would never have willingly done that to a person. I will have to live with the fact that I’ve done it now.”

“Oh, Feynriel! I must go to him!” Arianni rushed out of the room.

“It is a pity she did not show such personal solicitude before things came to this pass. She might have saved us all a great deal of … discomfort.” The voice was familiar, and Lucas heaved a great sigh of relief. He turned to see Fenris and Isabela both standing there, looking perfectly normal, if a bit uncomfortable when he tried to meet their eyes.

“Is there anything I should know about the effects of killing someone in the Fade who is not a mage?” he asked Marethari, not bothering to try to keep the edge out of his voice.
“No. Your friends should suffer no adverse reaction, other than their feelings about their own choices.” Marethari’s voice had a certain smugness, and Lucas decided he was done with her.

“In that case, I believe we will take our leave. Keeper.” He bowed to her, just enough to be polite, and let himself out. Even the less-than-fresh air of the Alienage was a relief after Arianni’s home.

“Hawke.” Fenris’s voice was rough, and Lucas shook his head.

“Not now, Fenris. Not—just, later, all right? I will speak to you both later.”

“As you wish.”

“You know where to find me, Hawke,” Isabela muttered, practically under her breath. Both of them hurried away while trying to seem casual, which was amusingly awkward enough to distract Lucas and make him feel less as though he might break down in tears at any moment.

“Varric,” he said, when he could trust his voice.

“Hawke?”

“Thanks.”

“For—? Oh. Anytime. I have enough demons of my own, I don’t need any others trying to crowd into my head. Of course, you’d think the same could be said of Broody and Rivaini.” The dwarf chuckled.

“If you ever want to talk about any of them …”

“You’ll be the first. Make that the only. I’m not much of a talker. Well, not when it comes to my own stories,” Varric amended when Lucas raised his eyebrows. “Drinks?”

“Not today, I think. I believe I’ll go home. Tomorrow morning, we go looking for Javaris.”

“Can’t wait.”
“Ah, darling, there you are.” Leandra bustled toward Lucas as soon as he walked in the door. “I have good news!”

“What kind of news?” Lucas clasped her hand in his big one, smiling down at her. While he readily admitted that his parents hadn’t been perfect, they had stood behind their children stoutly, and had never asked anyone else to fight their battles for them. He was grateful for their example.

“There’s a party at the Seneschal’s tomorrow, and he suggested that there might be some young ladies there who were … eligible …” She let her voice trail off, flushing a little. “I find I am turning into your typical old lady, with all their hunger for grandbabies.”

Lucas laughed. “Well, I can’t promise grandbabies tomorrow, but I can certainly meet a few young ladies for you. In the meantime …” He steered her toward the mirror over the hall table and stood behind her, both of them looking into it. “I want you to look at that pretty face and stop thinking of it as old. You’re still a young, strong woman, compared to many, and I think you should start thinking of some companionship for yourself.” Her face crumpled, and he squeezed her shoulders. “You’ve grieved long enough. Father wouldn’t want you to waste your life mourning him—neither would Carver or Bethany.”

“To think that you and I are all who are left. It’s almost more than I can bear.”

“If we’re all that’s left, isn’t it then our responsibility to see that the name Hawke is one to remember, and not just for the intensity of our mourning?” He grinned at her, then sobered in the face of her serious gaze. “They’re with the Maker now. Would you rather have them smiling down at us, knowing we are living our lives with love and happiness, or weeping over us as we throw away all that’s good in our lives by wishing for things that can never be?”

His mother patted his hand, still on her shoulder. “When did you get so smart? I … will think about what you’ve said.”

“Starting at the Seneschal’s party?”

“Yes. Starting then.” She smiled at him in the mirror, then gently disentangled herself from him and wished him a good night, heading up to bed. Lucas followed after a while, feeling like a hypocrite. They were fine words he had said to his mother, but he couldn’t imagine any of his lost family being happy with what he was doing with his life, running to and fro on other people’s errands and putting off his own life. Something would have to be done, he told himself as he kicked off his boots and dropped his armor on the floor. But what? He fell asleep still wondering.

The following morning, he left directly after breakfast to meet Varric in Darktown, the most likely place to find Javaris these days. He wasn’t particularly surprised to find Fenris loitering around his door. The elf, to his credit, got straight to the point.

“I have been thinking about what happened in the Fade.”

“I imagine you have.”

“That a demon could play so easily on my fears disturbs me.” It was more than a disturbance—Fenris looked as acutely miserable as Lucas had ever seen him. “I failed you,” Fenris said, almost whispering.
“You failed yourself.”

The elf gave an eloquent shrug, discounting his responsibility toward himself. “I swore to follow you, and when you needed my loyalty the most, I turned from you.” He shivered, his lips tightening. “It will not happen again.”

Lucas nodded, offering Fenris a half-smile. “Everyone gets one free demonic possession before I hold it against them.”

Meeting Lucas’s with a half-smile of his own, Fenris took the offering in the spirit with which it was intended. “Good to know.” He hesitated, clearly expecting more, but Lucas felt no need to kick a man when he was already down. Yielding to that demon had shaken Fenris deeply as it was.

“Coming to Darktown? We’re hunting Javaris.”

Fenris chuckled grimly, remembering their first meeting with the dwarven merchant. They hadn’t exactly parted amicably. “He will certainly be pleased to see you again, no doubt.”

“Yes, indeed. We’re like long-lost brothers.”

Varric was waiting for them outside Anders’s clinic. “Blondie heard you were coming down today. He’d like to talk to you.”

Lucas groaned. Just what he needed in his day—more crazy.

“Hawke, be nice to the guy. He’s done a lot of good down here,” Varric said.

“For now.” Lucas trusted the mage about as far as he could throw him … and often itched to find out just how far that was. But Varric was still looking at him reproachfully. He sighed—the dwarf was as bad as his mother, sometimes. “Fine, I’ll talk to him.”

He pushed through the door into the clinic, noting the neat rows of cots and the convalescent patients who lay there. Anders did a good job with the place, Lucas had to give him that. If only he could trust the mage to continue doing so without yielding to the militant voice in his ead. Maybe today would be an improvement on Anders’s general level of paranoia and anxiety, he told himself. Maybe.

The mage was sitting at his desk, scribbling something on a piece of parchment. He looked up as Hawke came in, but instead of brightening in welcome, Anders’s face tightened. “There you are.”

“Was I lost?”

“You’ve been scarce around here, that’s for sure.”

“My coin has been here enough for both of us.”

They stared at each other, then Anders put down his pen and stood up. “Things are getting worse. The Templars are patrolling regularly. They were practically on my doorstep the other night.”

“Are they hunting you?”

“Not specifically. They’re just checking the camps, as far as I can tell. But it’s not like the clinic is a big secret. It’s only a matter of time.” He stared at Lucas as if inviting him to share Anders’s outrage and fear.

“Is there something you think I can do to make you invisible to the Templars?”
Anders drew himself up, offended. “I thought you might have come to check in because you cared. People do that, you know. I’m sorry that I assumed you were one of them.”

Lucas sighed. “If Meredith comes for you, Anders, no one can protect you. You know that as well as I do. I’ll send some more coin down; you can buy more food and supplies.”

“That is appreciated.”

Lucas left the clinic. He regretted the increased tension between himself and Anders. The mage’s romantic overtures had taken him by surprise and he had been more forceful in repelling them than he’d intended … but it went further than that. It went to Anders assuming that because of Lucas’s father, and Bethany, that there was a sympathy between them, when in fact having grown up with apostates made Lucas feel less kindly toward them than he might have otherwise. His own life had been sacrificed, he felt, dedicated at an early age to learning swordcraft so that he could be the family’s protector. Just as Bethany had had more to offer the world than magic, Lucas felt he had more to offer than a sword-arm—but her magic had kept either one of them from any chance to develop into anything else. Carver had been different. There was nothing he enjoyed more than fighting, and Lucas liked to think that his little brother had gone down fighting and taken ten darkspawn with him. Grievously wounded by the ogre’s attack, Carver had stood against the approaching horde, one shining blade amongst the many tainted ones, buying the rest of them precious time. Lucas wished he could have one more moment with his brother to hug him for his sacrifice, and shake him for his stubbornness.

“Everything okay in there, Hawke?” Varric asked as he came through the clinic doors.

“No. It never is. Just gradations of the problem, really.”

Fenris, mercifully, kept his thoughts to himself. Anders was one of the few things Varric and Lucas disagreed about, and the last thing they needed were the elf’s strongly worded comments on the mage. Fortunately for all of them, Aveline appeared at that moment, striding through Darktown with all the power of her position visible in her attitude. A smile lit Lucas’s face involuntarily at the sight of her.

“Hawke, any luck finding Javaris?” she asked.

“Varric says he has a lead.”

“Varric can speak for himself,” the dwarf said testily. “The Coterie says Javaris has been working out of a shanty south of here.”

“Let’s go see if we can shake this Qunari formula out of him.”

“Will we be literally shaking him? Because I could get a lot of mileage out of you picking up Javaris by the feet and shaking him until all the coins drop out of him.”

“You would advocate shaking a dwarf?” Fenris asked. “That seems unlike you, Varric.”

“Not me, of course. I’d like to see someone try to pick me up and shake me. Bianca would have a thing or two to say about that,” Varric said, patting her shining stock. “But other dwarves? Why not. They don’t like it, they can learn to run faster.”

“You appear to think very little of your own race,” Fenris remarked.

“No less than you think of yours, elf.”
“You have me there.”

“I don’t see why either of you should feel strongly toward other elves and dwarves just because of some shared physical attributes,” Aveline said. “It isn’t as though I look around at other humans and think warm, fuzzy thoughts about our racial connection.”

“I can’t imagine why not,” Lucas said.

“Aren’t there any particular humans you have the warm fuzzies for, Aveline?” Varric asked.

“Do not add me to your list of stories, dwarf.”

Lucas smothered a smile, thinking of some broadsheets he had seen earlier. Aveline apparently hadn’t seen those, or she’d know it was already too late.

A small shack ahead of them had a crowd of people gathered around it. Varric stopped short. “Well, shit.”

“What?”

But Lucas had no need of the dwarf’s explanation. In front of the shack, a woman with the distinctive Coterie splintmail, not to mention the approved Coterie haircut, was motioning to passersby, calling out, “Turn up your purses, Kirkwall. The leases of Javaris Tintop are for sale.”

Lucas approached her. “Are you selling Javaris’s assets?”

She eyed him, casting a less appreciative glance at his companions and sniffing audibly when she recognized Aveline. “Who’s askin’?”

“The name’s Hawke.” It was a familiar one to her, as he had expected. “I was looking for Javaris.”

“Well, he’s skipped with no clues outstandin’. What he’s got left is ours; he owes us some back dues for about ten years. It’s a meager lot, but up it goes. You buyin’?”

“Information.”

“Ain’t got none o’ that for coin. Y’oughta know better.”

Lucas reined in his irritation. She couldn’t know what was at stake, and the Coterie were notoriously close-mouthed. “There’s a lot riding on my finding Javaris. Can you help me?” He sidled a bit closer, giving her his best wide-eyed innocent look.

Judging by the softening of her posture, she liked what she saw. “Usually value privacy, we do … but since ‘e run out on payin’ us, too, well …” She shrugged. “I’d put ‘im at Smuggler’s Cut, if I were bettin’. It’s a cave outside town, houses some o’ the less savory elements.” She grinned, disclaiming membership in the unsavory club.

“Thanks.” Lucas gave her a smile and a wink and tossed her a small pouch of coin.

She seemed disappointed but unsurprised that nothing more was forthcoming, turning back to the fire sale of Javaris’s belongings. She called after Lucas, “You see Javaris, you tell ‘im I said ‘don’t come back’.”

“How far is this Smuggler’s Cut?” Lucas asked Varric.

“Couple of hours outside town, I’d say.”
They took the lift up to Lowtown. Lucas squinted up at the sun, calculating whether there was time to get to this cave, deal with whatever he found there, and get back before the party he’d promised his mother he would attend. There wasn’t, he decided with a sigh.

“If he’s outside town, he can hardly be ready to release this gas, even if he’s made it.”

“Are you willing to gamble lives on your logic?” Fenris asked. There was no censure in the elf’s voice, just curiosity.

“That could be actionable, if Javaris succeeds in making this gas and you knew and didn’t stop him in time.” Aveline’s green eyes were serious and a little worried; dare he hope she was concerned about him? No, Lucas decided, no doubt her concern was strictly for the welfare of the citizens she was tasked to protect. As it should be, of course, he reminded himself.

Varric snorted, chuckling. “So Javaris makes this stuff out at Smuggler’s Cut and takes out the public-spirited citizens out there? Who’s going to cry about that?”

“Point well taken, Varric,” Aveline conceded.

“Will I see you at the Seneschal’s tonight, Aveline?” Lucas asked.

She sighed. “Yes. I’ve been informed that it is in keeping with my station to appear at these things. I’d rather be out here with a sword in my hand, though.” There was a brief silence as all three men considered the rejoinder Isabela would have made to that remark, and Aveline bristled. “Steel, you immature imbeciles!” Muttering under her breath, she stomped off.

“Speaking of Rivaini,” Varric said, even though no one had mentioned her directly.

“No, Varric. Really, not now.” Lucas didn’t care to consider why he was less tolerant of Isabela’s betrayal of him in the Fade than he had been of Fenris’s. Possibly because the elf had approached him directly and at least attempted to make an apology? Either way, he wasn’t interested in considering Isabela’s issues right now.

“Fine. Drinks, then, since your day has freed up until you have to go get pretty for the Seneschal?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Fenris begged off. No doubt he would go back to his mansion and close the door on the bright sunny day and brood. Lucas wondered how long it would take the elf to embrace freedom and begin to consider what he would do with the life that was now his own. No one would be able to rush him, though—Fenris would have to come to an understanding of freedom on his own or he would never believe the conclusions.


“Dimly.”

“That’s because you’ve had them too often.”

“You can say that again.” Lucas chuckled, following Varric through the crowded streets of Lowtown. Much as he wasn’t looking forward to dressing up and making small talk with all the stuffed shirt nobles of Kirkwall, he was far from minding the change of pace, the chance to use his brain instead of his blade for a while. Perhaps he could make some business contacts tonight, begin developing a profession that didn’t involve killing people or tracking his boots through the muck in
Darktown or doing the bidding of the Qunari.

He and Varric had a couple of ales, Lucas slowly relaxing in the familiar raucous atmosphere of the bar. He wasn’t paying much attention to the scuffle going on behind him—everyday stuff for the Hanged Man—until he heard a familiar voice crying out in pain and outrage. Lucas was on his feet before he had time to think, whirling around to see a large man with red hair pinning Isabela’s arms painfully behind her back while a shorter man tried to pat her down for knives. Isabela struggled and kicked, but the redhead was twice her size in all directions.

Lucas charged in, planting his foot firmly in the backside of the smaller man, sending him staggering against Isabela and the redhead. The impact loosened the redhead’s grip on Isabela’s arms just enough for her to wrench one free. In a lightning-fast spin, she managed to reverse their positions so she held the redhead’s arm pinned behind his back. She shoved it upwards, and he cried out in pain. “See how you like it,” she said. “Next time, when a lady says to leave her alone, take her word for it.”

“Lady?” sneered the shorter man. “Where?”

Lucas was irritated by the simple slur far more than he felt he should have been. He introduced the smaller man to the business end of his fist, sending him skidding along the floor. The floor of the Hanged Man had been known to eat through people’s shoes—smart people touched it as little as possible. The smaller man looked as frightened of the waste left on the back of his shirt and his pants as he was of Lucas as he got to his feet and ran out of the bar. Isabela gave the redhead one more twist of the arm before shoving him away from her. “And don’t come back!” she shouted after him.

Lucas approached her, looking down into her face. He’d never noticed how small of stature she was before. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I hate that they got the drop on me. Don’t know how he knew to watch for my boot dagger,” Isabela grumbled. Neither she nor Lucas noticed the satisfied smirk on Varric’s face. The dwarf hadn’t stirred from his spot at the table during the fracas.

As Lucas’s eyes met Isabela’s, he remembered yesterday in the Fade and her quick and easy betrayal of him. So did she, to judge by the way her gaze shifted under the weight of his. “I’ll see you later,” he said gruffly, skirting around her.

“Wait, Hawke.”

“What is it?”

Isabela came around in front of him. “I’m sorry I abandoned you in the Fade. That was foolish of me.” She gave a forced smile. “I mean, I didn’t even get the ship in the end.”

“Did you think you would?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking. I couldn’t think. I could only feel. It was like being on the ocean, with the breeze in my hair and the scent of the tar on the ropes. There’s nothing like it. And I wanted that feeling again, so badly. I—it’s not an excuse, I know, and I’m really sorry.”

Lucas envied her the wonder and the longing in her eyes when she spoke about the sea. Grounded she might be for the moment, but the ocean was in her blood. It was her passion in a way Lucas
could only imagine being passionate about anything. “I don’t blame you,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Isabela was already starting to bluster in compensation for her moment of sincerity and in defense against his assumed condemnation. She stopped in mid-word. “What? No angry rant? No bitterness? No casting me out of the Hanged Man for life?”

“Do I even have that power? It’s news to me if I do.” He smiled at her. “No, none of that. Not this time.”

“Why?”

Something made Lucas want to explain … but they were in the middle of the Hanged Man, and he didn’t need an audience. “You were made to be fodder for a desire demon,” he said instead.

“Ooh, are you trying to get me to jump into bed with you? Because it’s working.” She swayed against him. Their gazes were locked together; Lucas had never looked so deeply into her eyes before. There was more there than he had expected to find, and it took him by surprise.

He stepped back hastily, deflecting the moment as best he could. “You mean you weren’t ready to jump into bed before? I’m crushed.”

Isabela blinked, caught by surprise for a brief second before her mask slid back into place, and Lucas was startled. Had she felt that look the way he had? Had she meant her suggestion differently than her usual onslaught of innuendos? “Anytime, big boy,” she said, but Lucas wasn’t so sure.

Something felt different between them, something seemed to have shifted. Lucas wasn’t sure what it was, but he rather liked the less cocksure Isabela he was seeing right now. Without planning to do so, he heard himself saying, “So I have to go to the Seneschal’s and make nice with a bunch of nobles. Do you think you could clean up and go with me? You’d, uh, have to be on your best behavior. If you have a best behavior.”

She grinned, a slow smile like warm syrup. “Sweet thing, I can clean up with the best of them. Just you watch.”

“I can’t wait,” he said, and as she disappeared up the stairs, promising to be ready when he came back for her, he found he really couldn’t.
It Happened One Night

Lucas arrived at the Hanged Man with a few minutes to spare before he was due at the Seneschal’s party. He had left his mother to be escorted by Bodahn, who would see that she got to the keep safely. She had been wild with curiosity about who he was taking, but he hadn’t felt comfortable telling her it was Isabela. In truth, now that it was too late to back out, he wished he hadn’t asked the pirate to go with him—after all, wasn’t he supposed to be trying to meet a nice girl to settle down with, in order to give his mother the grandbabies she’d been asking about? For that matter, Aveline had said she would be there. If he were ever going to pursue his attraction to Aveline, was it really the right idea to bring Isabela along? The two women reacted on one another like oil and water.

It was too late to back out now, though. He was here, and upstairs Isabela was dressing, and all he could do was hope that she would wear something that didn’t embarrass him too badly.

Varric came down before Isabela did. “Hawke! Did we agree to meet here?”

“What? No. Are you going to the Seneschal’s?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Good food, lots of intriguing little tidbits of gossip to collect, very few members of the Merchant’s Guild. I always wondered why those idiots don’t go to more events—you learn so much. It’s the source of a lot of my advantages in business.”

“Huh.” Lucas was fidgeting slightly. Where was she?

The wrinkles in Varric’s forehead suddenly smoothed out. “Oh, you’re here for Rivaini, are you?” He chuckled. “This party certainly won’t be dull.”

Lucas groaned, and Varric left, still chortling to himself.

Isabela appeared a few moments later, so swathed in a long black satin cloak that Lucas couldn’t see what she wore beneath it. Admittedly, he was nervous, but her hair made him less so—it was swirled up on top of her head in a startlingly elegant sweep, shining in the dull lamplight of the Hanged Man like ebony. Even her makeup had been toned down somewhat. Nothing about her screamed pirate queen. And she knew it, stepping down the stairs carefully and with the knowledge that every eye was on her.

“Shall we go?” she asked him as she reached the bottom of the steps, holding her cloak up to avoid contact with the floor. Lucas could do no less than offer her his arm, and he felt almost stereotypically big and manly with such a beautiful woman on his arm. He resisted the urge to smirk at every man he passed, pointing up the fact that she was with him and not them … but just barely.

Outside, he turned to look at her. “Isabela.”

“No. No pretty compliments, no remarks on how surprised you are that I look like something other than a cheap floozy. Let’s just go, all right?” she said, looking around almost nervously.

Lucas looked at her more closely, and he could see what he hadn’t before—that she was uncomfortable and a little scared. “If you don’t want to do this, we don’t have to.”

“Of course I want to,” she snapped. “Just … walk, all right.”

“If you insist.” He held his arm out and they headed for the steps up to Hightown.
The keep was lit up, fancily dressed couples moving up the stairs in front of them.

“Well, at least we’re not late,” Isabela muttered.

“The faux pas would be arriving early, anyway. One likes to make an entrance at these things.”

“I know all about making an entrance.” She clutched the closure of her cloak, and Lucas blanched, wondering what she was wearing underneath it. He hoped this wouldn’t turn out to be a tremendous mistake.

“Serah Hawke and guest,” intoned the guardsman at the door, a big fellow with bushy brown sideburns. He looked vaguely familiar to Lucas, who frowned for a moment, trying to place him.

“Guardsman … Donnic, isn’t it? We met a few years ago—you had been attacked on patrol.”

“Oh, yes, of course. You’re the captain’s friend.” He inclined his head.

Lucas had to tilt his head a bit to look up at the fellow, an unusual turn of events. He was used to being among the tallest people in the room. “I see my infamy has preceded me,” he said, grinning.

“Yes, Serah.” Guardsman Donnic’s serious face didn’t alter by a muscle.

Isabela started quivering, clearly holding back giggles, and Lucas hastily made his good-byes to the guardsman. “Stiff-necked sort, that one,” he remarked to Isabela as they moved away from the door.

“I doubt it’s his neck the ladies are interested in getting stiff,” she murmured back.

“Will you, please, exhibit some—” The words died in his throat as they reached the coat check and Isabela slid her cloak off her shoulders. Her bare shoulders. Her very shapely, browned, bare shoulders. Her dress was a deep, dark blue, bound tightly over her generous breasts. So tightly that nothing was exposed, but absolutely nothing was left to the imagination. He felt an instantaneous urge to unbind those lovely breasts and let them fall free, preferably into his hands.

Isabela’s eyes warmed knowingly as he stared. “Hawke.”

“Yes? Oh, um … Right.” He held his arm out to her, feeling himself stir as those warm, round, firm breasts brushed against his arm. Holy Maker, she knew what she was doing. As they walked further into the room, he couldn’t help noticing that the skirt of the dress, falling from just beneath her bosom, was made of long, silken petals of the same dark blue material, and the panels shifted and parted as she walked, displaying tantalizing glimpses of her long tanned thighs and the exquisitely fitted black boots she wore. Whatever she was paying her dressmaker, it wasn’t close to enough. The dress was absolutely stunning and appropriate for the occasion, and just as absolutely guaranteed to make every man in the room want her to take it off. Lucas felt a startling surge of protective anger at the thought. No one would lay a finger on her if he had anything to say about it, he thought, forgetting momentarily that Isabela was more than capable of defending herself and no doubt had seven or eight daggers concealed in that dress.

“Your eyes are about to pop out of your head.” Her tone made it clear she knew what else was likely to pop out, as well.

As luck would have it, that’s when he spied Aveline. Her finery was pure Ferelden—garish colors, ill-fitting corset around her waist, short skirt that did nothing but make her look awkward. She desperately needed a visit with Isabela’s dressmaker, Lucas thought. He moved toward her, Isabela following in his wake.
“Hawke.” Aveline said with a small, tight, nervous smile as he approached. It disappeared when she looked over his shoulder. “Isabela,” she said coolly.

Isabela wore a big smile. “Aveline.”

“Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hawke invited me.”

“Did he now.” From the lack of amusement in Aveline’s green eyes, Lucas imagined he was in for a dressing down next time he saw her. And deserved, no doubt. What had he been thinking, bringing Isabela to a function of this nature? Especially when whatever lay between Aveline and himself was yet to be explored. Never mind that in the contest for men’s attention tonight, Isabela was the clear winner and Aveline hadn’t even made an entry. Being attracted to someone was about more than their looks, he told himself. “And how are you finding your evening?”

“Just got here,” Isabela said cheerfully.

“Isabela. Do not steal anything.”

“I’m no thief! What do you take me for? I come by all my goods the honest way—gambling and piracy.” Isabela’s eyes were twinkling, and Aveline gave a deep, exasperated sigh before turning away from the other woman.

“Keep an eye on her. If she does anything—anything!—to embarrass me, I know who I’m throwing in jail.” She stalked off, leaving Lucas to stare after her, mourning another lost opportunity.

“You know, mooning after her isn’t going to get you anywhere. Not with that one. That big girl needs a man who can take what he wants.”

He turned to look at Isabela, startled. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think, I’m blind? I can see how you stare after her, like you’re trying to decide which cut to sample first.” She tilted her head to the side, studying Aveline’s departing backside. “Me, I might go for the haunches. She’s got nice thighs under all that armor.”

“Are you talking about …”

“Eating her, mm-hm. I bet she’s tasty.” Isabela gave him a wicked grin.

“Isabela.” Lucas groaned.

“Then dance with me, if you want to keep me quiet.”

He looked out onto the dance floor. It was a relatively staid set—he was surprised Isabela wanted to dance to such a tame piece of music. “If you want to.”

She shrugged, making him wonder how firmly that dress was held up and if another shrug would loosen her breasts from their tight binding. “We’re here, after all.”

It took only a moment to get into the rhythm. Lucas had always enjoyed dancing, and he did it well. Isabela murmured appreciatively in the back of her throat as he executed a set of steps not only perfectly but with a semblance of panache.

“Don’t get any ideas,” he said to her.
She pouted. “I don’t know why not. You’re an adult, I’m an adult, and I know I’m good in bed. Worried about your performance, Hawke?” Her eyes sparkled wickedly up at him, and he had to admit that kissing her sounded like a pretty good idea right about now.

Lucas grinned at her. “I’m sure I can keep up with you.”

“Are you now? Not many can, you know.”

“Maybe you pick the wrong ones.”

He could almost see the bantering response freeze on her lips, her eyes opening just a little wider. “Maybe I do.”

There was an opening there, an invitation for him to take it a step further, to ask her what she meant … but he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know. Not right now. He looked over her shoulder. “Oh, look, there’s Mother.”

The remark hadn’t been intended to be a bucket of icy water down Isabela’s dress, but she apparently took it as one. She dropped his hand in the middle of the dance. “I’m sure you’ll want to go speak to her. I think I’ll get a drink.”

“Isabela!”

“Catch you later, Hawke.”

Well. He could go after her, he supposed, or he could go see to his mother, who appeared to be speaking with the Seneschal. After all, he thought, he was here mostly so his mother could introduce him to some nice girls. Might as well give her the opportunity. He crossed the room to stand at his mother’s side.

“Lucas, my dear! You remember Seneschal Bran.”

The little man gave him a frosty nod, but it wasn’t nearly as cold as Isabela had been.

“Very nice soirée, Seneschal.”

“It was. Excuse me.” With a warmer nod for Lucas’s mother, the Seneschal went off in search of more congenial conversation. Lucas and his mother wandered through the crowd for a little while, chatting with the other guests. Lucas hoped to drum up a little work of the non-mercenary variety, but no one seemed to be looking for anyone with his particular set of skills. Actually, other than mowing people down with a giant sword, he wasn’t entirely sure what his set of skills might be. His mother devoutly believed he could do anything he set his mind to, but he knew better.

They paused to watch the dancers, and his mother turned to him. “That reminds me. Who was that you were dancing with earlier, darling?”

“Lady Lavinia Peabody.” The lie came out before he had time to think about it, and once out, he could cheerfully have cut out his own tongue.

“Oh. I don’t think I’ve heard that name before. Is she from Kirkwall?”

“Uh … Cumberland, actually.” Why was he doing this? Because his mother would have been shocked and disappointed to find out he’d brought his pirate companion as a date when he was supposed to be finding a suitable woman? Possibly, but he didn’t think that was all. If that was all, he could tell her the truth, and he didn’t seem capable of that for the moment. “She’s in town visiting
friends.”

“How nice. Can I meet her?”

“I don’t know if she’s interested in seeing me again.”

“Of course she is, darling. How could she not be?” His mother patted him on the arm. Fortunately, before she could press him on the question of meeting the false Lady Lavinia, an acquaintance claimed her attention and she headed off in that direction.

“Amateur.”

Lucas whirled around to see Varric grinning up at him, a plate of nug kabobs in his hand. “What are you talking about?”

“You know. Lady Lavinia Peabody. That was the best name you could come up with? If you wanted to pass Rivaini off as a posh patrician, you should have asked me. We could have created a persona.”

“Wipe that smirk off your face. I don’t know why I said that, but we’ve seen the last of Lady Lavinia. After tonight, it’ll be like she never existed.”

“She never did exist.”

“Exactly.”

Varric shook his head. “Hawke, you have this entire town fooled. Everyone thinks you know exactly what you’re doing, and you really have no clue, do you?”

He wasn’t dignifying that shot with an answer.

“Well, whatever you want to say, you’ve pissed Rivaini off. I think you’re going to want to go apologize, unless you want ‘Lady Lavinia’ to start stripping in the middle of the party.”

“She what?”

Varric’s chuckle floated after him as he rushed off to find Isabela. He barely registered passing Aveline, who was talking with the guard at the front door. Lucas hoped there was nothing about to go wrong with the party. He supposed Aveline knew where he was if she needed any help.

He spotted the blue silk dress and the elegant column of Isabela’s tanned neck as she stood sipping at a fluted glass of champagne. He’d never noticed how slender and well-shaped it was before—her hair usually covered it. “Isabela.”

She turned around. “Hawke! Sorry I got in a snit earlier. It was … silly of me.”

“I’m sorry, as well. I wasn’t listening to you.”

“Who does?” Isabela shrugged. “I shouldn’t have gotten heavy on you.” She looked around, appearing as ill-at-ease as he’d ever seen her. “Look, I should go.”

“I’ll walk you back to Lowtown.”

“Nah. I can handle myself.”

“Wouldn’t want your dress getting ruined, though.”
“Well, when you put it that way.” She smiled, and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.

As they stood waiting for Isabela’s cloak, they heard the voice Lucas had been dreading behind them. “Darling boy, you’re not leaving already, are you?”

Quickly he whispered into Isabela’s ear. “Your name is Lady Lavinia Peabody. Play along, and I’ll explain later.”

“All right, but you owe me one.”

Oh, he was going to regret this. “Fine. Also, you’re from Cumberland.”

“Why in the world am I—“

“Lady Lavinia Peabody?” Hawke’s mother came up to them, holding out her hand. Isabela shook it.

“And you are?” Her accent was awful; hoity-toity and not like Cumberland at all. Lucas was hard put not to wince.

“Leandra Amell … Hawke. I’m so pleased to meet you.”

“Same here.”

Lucas noticed that his mother was peering at Isabela closely, and he hurried to distract her. “Mother, we were just—I mean, Lady Lavinia is off early in the morning, so I was going to walk her back to her friends’ house.”

“Oh. Leaving Kirkwall so soon, dear? I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, I might be back.” Isabela’s eyes held a twinkle Lucas didn’t entirely like. “It depends on whether Serah Hawke and I can come to an … understanding.”

No, he definitely didn’t like that twinkle. Especially not when his mother caught her breath. “An understanding? Oh, my. Well, don’t let me stop you. Next time you’re in Kirkwall, Lady Lavinia, I hope you’ll come to dinner.”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

Thank the Maker Isabela’s cloak was delivered. Lucas grabbed it hastily, wrapping it around her. “Let’s go, Lady Lavinia,” he growled.

She had the grace to wait until they were outside before she burst into laughter. “You should have seen your face. Any particular reason why you needed to invent a new identity for me?”

“Mother wants me to meet a nice young lady and settle down and have babies. If she’d known I came with you, she would have insisted on introducing me around … and I’m really not in the mood to meet any ‘nice young ladies’.”

“Not itching for the patter of little feet, Hawke?”

“Not at the moment. Someday, maybe.” When I know what I’m doing, he added silently to himself.

They walked together in unusual silence down the Lowtown stairs. At the bottom, Isabela turned to look up at him. “All right, Hawke, time to pay up.”

“Pay?”
“You owe me one. For Lady Lavinia.”

“Oh. What, exactly, do you want?” he asked warily. Knowing her, it could be anything from a night in bed to the Viscount’s crown.

“A kiss.”

“No, really.”

“I mean it. One kiss.”

“What’s the catch?”

There was something vulnerable in her eyes in the lamplight. “I want you to kiss me . . .” she took a deep breath. “The way you would kiss the kind of woman who would wear this dress.”

“Ah. I see.” Why was he feeling short of breath? Was it excitement, or fear? “And I assume you’d like to do this now?”

“So formal. Yes, I want to do it now. You sound like a sailor getting a splinter out of his finger,” she grumbled.

“Sorry.” It was awkward, this, standing here and preparing to kiss her. And then, as she lifted her face to him, her amber eyes reflecting the light from the lamps, it suddenly wasn’t awkward at all. Lucas slid an arm around her waist under the cloak, pulling her against him, watching with fascination as her lips parted just slightly, her head falling back on her shoulders. He bent, touching her lips lightly with his. For a moment, he considered ending it there, telling her that was how he would kiss the kind of woman she was pretending to be, but he found he didn’t want to. Instead, he traced her bottom lip with his tongue before venturing inside her mouth. Isabela was trembling against him, no doubt from the strain of remaining passive and allowing herself to be kissed, he thought. Her tongue met his lightly, little touches that made him want more. He pulled her hard against him, exploring her mouth thoroughly. The taste of champagne was as heady as if he had drunk it himself. Her gloved hand clutched his upper arm.

An outcry from a nearby alley broke them apart. Isabela seemed to recover quickest, her hand going to a dagger hidden inside her bodice—although where it could have been concealed was beyond Lucas. Nothing came of the cry but two drunken prostitutes staggering out of the alley.

They were left alone, staring at each other. “Was that what you wanted?” he asked, his breathing finally back under control.

She didn’t answer. “Good-night, Hawke.”

“Good-night.” He would never, ever understand women, he thought, taking the stairs two at a time back up to Hightown.
Not on Your Tintop

Lucas felt pretty good when he got up in the morning. Apparently fancy parties were better for a person than drinking wine with Fenris or ale with Varric half the night. What a concept. He buckled on his armor, keeping his thoughts as far from the woman who hovered near the center of them as he could. He had kissed Isabela, yes, but it wasn’t going to happen again, and it hadn’t meant anything. Not to him, and certainly not to her. He knew too well how she operated to have any illusions there.

He finished buckling on his armor and headed for the kitchen, plucking a scone from the plate Sandal was preparing.

“Enchantment!” the dwarf said. Lucas raised the scone to him in salute—although it occurred to him to wonder if Sandal could enchant a scone, and if so, what kind of enchanted scone he might be eating.

It was a lovely day outside, and Hightown was absolutely silent. Clearly Lucas had gone home from that party a lot earlier than the rest of the guests had.

He was going to need help if he was going out to Smuggler’s Cut to track down Javaris. Fenris wouldn’t be awake this early in the morning; Aveline would undoubtedly have duties, as would Sebastian. He would have to start the morning where he always started—in the Hanged Man, with Varric. Part of him dreaded the inevitable moment when he would run into Isabela, but the part of him that was filled with an almost electric thrum of excitement wasn’t dreading it all. All the way down the long stairs, he gave himself a stern talking to. Isabela took no man seriously; he had no interest in becoming a notch on whatever passed for her bedpost. Surely his interest was kindled more by the new sides to her personality he was discovering, and by friendship. Yes, they would be better friends now, he thought. That was all.

Varric was still in bed, according to Corff. Not for the first time, Lucas wondered who the dwarf took to bed—other than his crossbow. He’d never seen Varric express a particular interest in any woman. Or man, for that matter. As he climbed the stairs, he hoped devoutly that this wouldn’t be the day he found out.

“Rise and shine, Tethras.” He knocked on the door for good measure before walking in.

The dwarf was sitting up in bed with a steaming cup of black coffee in his hands. Bianca lay on the pillow next to him, precisely as if she had slept there all night.

Lucas shook his head. “Fenris was right. You are a strange, hairy little man.”

“Takes one to know one, Hawke,” Varric shot back. “I was surprised to find Rivaini here when I got back, down in the bar as always … and you all the way up in Hightown.”

“You know, just because I went out with Isabela doesn’t mean I was going to sleep with her.”

“It has for everyone else she’s ever gone out with—what’s the matter with you, Hawke?”

Lucas crossed his arms, leaning against the wall, and stared down at the dwarf in confusion. “Varric, is there some reason you— No. Absolutely not. There will be no stories of me in a frilly white pirate shirt ripping off Isabela’s clothes!”

“I like to write from life.”
“You do not!”

“I absolutely do.” Varric looked affronted. “Look, maybe I embroider a little, but the base fabric is always the truth.”

“Is that what you’ll tell Aveline when she finds out about that story of her and her guardsman?”

The dwarf smirked. “What makes you think that isn’t based on a true story?”

“I know Aveline. She would never touch one of her men—she’d think it was inappropriate.”

“She might not do it, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t want to.”

“Aveline?” Varric was unmoved by Lucas’s incredulity, and Lucas decided to let the whole subject go. “Look, we need to get out to Smuggler’s Cut. Would you mind getting out of bed and coming with me?”

“Well, when you put it like that.” The dwarf climbed out from under the covers, finding his pants and tugging them on under the nightshirt he wore. Lucas would have preferred not to know that Varric didn’t wear smallclothes. He turned his back for the rest of the dwarf’s ablutions. “Who we taking this morning, Hawke?”

“Looks like it’ll have to be Merrill. She’ll be up, don’t you think?”

“Daisy will be fresh as one, no doubt about it, and happy to get outside the city walls. Rivaini’s been around this morning, too.”

“How do you know?”

“There was a scuffle downstairs.”

“The Hanged Man’s known for lots of scuffles.”

“Name three that Rivaini hasn’t been involved in.”

Lucas turned around, meeting Varric’s twinkling gaze. “Do you ever worry that someone’s going to assassinate you?”

“Me? I’m just a businessman, living in a bar. What could I possibly know about anything? You ready, Hawke?”

“Yes, so sorry you’ve been having to wait for me,” Lucas said drily, following Varric. They knocked on Isabela’s door down the hall.

“Smuggler’s Cut, eh?” she called. “Just grabbing a few more knives.”

“Don’t you already carry ten or twelve?”

One amber eye came into view through the crack in the door, the one Lucas had suddenly found his own eye pressed up against, trying to sneak a peek inside. Isabela’s eye twinkled at him. “Come on, Hawke, ten or twelve? You know me better than that.” Hastily he stepped back and she opened the door. “Of course, anytime you want to count my knives, Hawke, I’m at your service.”

It was both strange and relieving to see her in her usual clothes again. He couldn’t quite get the picture of the elegant woman he had escorted the night before out of his mind. Somehow it was hard to see the familiar pirate as the same person.
He shook off the abstraction. “Let’s go, then,” he said brusquely, leading the way down the hallway.

They picked up Merrill in the alienage. As Varric had predicted, the elf was glad to get out of Kirkwall for a little while. Lucas was never entirely sure about Merrill; he liked her well enough, but the possibility of blood magic always hovered when she was in combat, and ultimately he didn’t trust her not to eventually fall to a demon’s whispers. Isabela was quite fond of her, though, as was Varric, and their instincts about people were usually trustworthy.

The way to Smuggler’s Cut started through a tunnel built in Darktown; it was a fairly easy fit for his companions, but a tight squeeze for Lucas. He let the rest of the party go first, feeling quite vulnerable bringing up the rear, bent over as he was to fit into the low tunnel. You had to be a dedicated smuggler—or a dwarf—to put up with this kind of thing.

The highlight of the tunnel was all the boxes and chests strewn around. They didn’t poke into all of them, but they looked at enough to be entertained by the wide variety of items contained within them. As he started to close the lid of a chest, Lucas saw a faint gleam in the bottom as something reflective caught the torchlight. He reached in and pulled out a small bottle, with an exquisitely detailed little ship inside it.

He started to call out to Isabela—it seemed like the kind of thing she would like to have—then for some reason thought better of it. He tucked the ship safely away; he would sort out his reasons for bringing it with him later.

After what seemed like half an age, they finally emerged onto a rocky stretch of sand not far from the Wounded Coast—and were immediately attacked by a company of mercenaries. Lucas was glad the others were in front: Isabela’s daggers were instantly accessible, as was Merrill’s magic, and Bianca was an extension of Varric’s arm. His own sword was out as soon as he could stand up straight, but the others were in the thick of combat by that point. Lucas was mostly the clean-up crew, which he didn’t mind at all.

Once all the mercenaries were down, Varric approached a small, cowering figure hiding behind some bushes. “Get up, Tintop.”

The merchant stood up, looking over Varric’s shoulder at Lucas. “Aw, it’s you. Blasted dog-lord, did you have to kill all my men?”

“Did they have to attack me?” Lucas asked reasonably. “Hello, Javaris.”

The dwarf snorted. “Keep it for a dwarf who cares. You knew these were my men and you cut ’em down anyway.”

“Should’ve ponied up for better quality fighters, shouldn’t you?” Isabela asked. She flipped one of her daggers end over end, the blade flashing in the sunlight.

Lucas nodded. “True enough—you get what you pay for.”

“Who can I pay to get rid of you?”

“No one. I’m in your face until I get my answers.”

Javaris sighed. “Granny’s garters, she would hire you, of all people. I can’t buy a break on discount.”

“Maybe if you paid more,” Varric muttered under his breath, earning himself a glare from Javaris.

“You know what, go ahead. Pike my head back to that sodding elf. I need the rest. What’d she tell

“What do you mean, what elf? The one who—Oh, sod it all. You’re bird-dogging for the Qunari? Bitch-born elf really did it, then.”

Lucas moved closer to the dwarf, letting his height speak for him. “Javaris, either tell me what you’re babbling about or tell me what you did with the formula.”

“Hey, stay back. I’m talkin’.” Javaris took a few steps deeper into the bushes.

“Merrill, make sure he stays there,” Lucas said.

“Of course, Hawke.” Roots burst from the ground and entwined themselves around Javaris’s legs.

“Hey!”

“Talk fast, and she’ll let you go.”

“All right, so I’m minding my own business, same old, you know.”

“There’s nothing ‘same old’ about you minding your own business,” Varric muttered.

“Whatever.” The two dwarves glared at each other, until Lucas snapped, “Javaris.”

“Right. Elf comes along, says she stole somethin’ from the Qunari, she’s gonna blame me for it. I say ‘not a chance’, she says ‘already done’. I grab some men, get out of there.” He looked around at the bodies of his men. “Shoulda grabbed more men.”

“Or better quality.” Lucas frowned. “What elf?”

“I don’t know. They all look alike.”

“Where is she then?” Isabela asked. She appeared to lose control of the dagger she was flipping, and it landed an inch from Javaris’s toes. “Oops. Did I do that?”

“Scuff these boots and you’ll be buying me new ones.”

“What did those cost, a whole copper? I think I can spare the coin.”

“The elf, Javaris!” Lucas snapped. “Where is she?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“She framed you for stealing a Qunari formula. You may be incompetent, but you do like to look out for number one, and that means knowing where she is.”

Javaris frowned. “You’re not as dumb as you look. Elf’s in Lowtown, not far from the stairs down to the docks. I had a guy tail her.”

“You better be telling the truth.”

“Or what? You’ll come back here and kill my guards? Thanks for that.”

“Thedas isn’t big enough for the both of us, Javaris,” Lucas said. “Make yourself smaller.”
“Yeah, I’ll just do that.” The roots receded and the dwarf moved to the nearest body. As Javaris frisked the bodies of the dead mercenaries for whatever saleable—and portable—things they had on them, Lucas gestured for the others to follow him.

“Back to Lowtown, Hawke?” Isabela asked.

“Yes, no time like the present, is there?” He sighed, looking at the tunnel entrance and not relishing going back the way they’d come. “Let’s get it over with.”
By the time they made it through the tunnel and emerged from Darktown, sweaty, smelly, and exhausted, it was beginning to get late in the day. “What do you think, Hawke?” Varric asked. “Too late?”

“Whoever this elf is—assuming she exists and Javaris didn’t just play us—I don’t think she can be trusted to wait much longer. We should go find her tonight, before she does something we’ll all regret.” Lucas glanced at Isabela and Merrill. “You two with me?”

“Yes.”

“Of course, Hawke!”

He rather hoped, if the elf existed, that she would get mouthy. It had been a long day, and he looked forward to a fight to stretch his muscles after hours bent over in that cramped tunnel. They went toward the stairs leading down to the docks, as Javaris had said, but they wouldn’t have needed the dwarf’s directions. A stream of people came running past them, many of them coughing and holding their hands over their mouths.

“She made the formula,” Varric said with resignation.

“Looks that way.” Lucas pushed his way through the fleeing crowd, the others following in his wake. He recognized one of Aveline’s guardsmen, Maecon if his memory served correctly, coming out of an alley half-carrying an old man. “What’s happened here?”

“Serah Hawke?” Maecon looked confused, then his head seemed to clear and he stood up straighter. The old man tottered away as fast as his legs could carry him. “What are you doing here?” the guardsman asked.

“It’s a long story. What happened here? Why are all these people running?”

“I don’t rightly know, serah. Somehow the air—it’s poisoning people. There was a cloud that came out and it surrounded everyone. I … There are still people back there. In the alley. Killing each other. It’s like they’ve gone crazy. I’d stop them but … I can’t fight the damned air, serah.” He shook his head.

“Let me by, then. And stay back.” Ordinarily Lucas would have been more courteous, but he was tired and frustrated, and time appeared to be of the essence.

As it became clear that Lucas and his team intended to go back into the alley, Maecon rushed in front of him, his eyes wide. “Maker, please, wait, Messere Hawke! That street is death, don’t you understand? All I can do is warn people. If someone like you dies on my watch, I’m right stuffed.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Isabela drawled.

Lucas frowned at the guardsman. Aveline surely couldn’t have trained him to be such a milktoast. “Then I suggest you pray to the Maker that I don’t die. Meanwhile, get out of my way.”

Still muttering to himself, Maecon moved aside. Lucas glanced over his shoulder at the others. “I suggest we try not to breathe.”

None of them bothered to point out the impossibility inherent in that suggestion. They all just
nodded, looking grim. Lucas led the way into the alley, seeing tendrils of some kind of green fog stretching across the ground toward him. Well, this wasn’t going to be good.

The alley gave way to a street, cloudy with gas, that appeared to be deserted at first. In a corner, a barrel spewed the green fog. A man lay in front of the barrel with a metal latch lying a few inches from his outstretched hand. A knife jutted from his back.

Lucas coughed as the mist swirled around him, its sharp, acrid smell turning his stomach.

“Hawke, you think that latch closes the barrel?”

“Try it,” he snapped at Varric. What was the dwarf asking stupid questions for?

Varric picked up the latch, wrestling with the lid of the barrel until he got it firmly closed. Immediately the flow of the gas stopped and the alley began to clear.

“Was that all of it, then?” Merrill asked, looking around.

“’Fraid not, kitten.” Isabela gestured toward a side street with an open courtyard. The fog had covered the street, and they could see people fighting each other. Not just the armored mercenaries they would have expected, but housewives with sharp knives and an older man swinging his cane viciously at anyone who came near him.

“Let’s try not to kill anyone if we can avoid it,” Lucas said.

The other three nodded, although all of them knew how difficult it could be to deflect an attack from someone who wasn’t rational.

Lucas took a deep breath and moved into the courtyard, great blade held high above his head. He slammed the pommel into the head of a civilian who lunged at him with a club. The man dropped to the ground, and Lucas kept going. He could see two barrels in the corners of the courtyard, both of them spewing forth clouds of green gas. How much could one barrel hold? Enough to coat the ground with the noxious stuff. The fumes rose up, filling his head with a buzzing sound that was absolutely maddening, and he slammed the flat of his blade right and left into those who came toward him. He felt strong and powerful and he relished each blow.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Varric pick up another metal latch, wrestling it onto one of the barrels, and he saw Merrill reach out a hand to clobber Varric in the back of the head with a fist made out of earth and cobblestones wrenched from the ground. Out of nowhere, Isabela appeared behind Merrill, grasping the mage around the waist and dragging her, kicking and struggling, out of the reach of the poison.

Lucas struggled against the rage that was rising in him with the buzzing sound in his ears, searching through the red haze for the other barrel. Was there another latch there? A mercenary appeared in front of him, chanting something. Lucas strained to understand the words: “make the powder, blame the oxmen; make the powder, blame the oxmen”. But it was too difficult to comprehend. Powder? Oxmen? He cut the man down without a second thought.

“The Arishok was right,” said a voice next to him. “The poison got the thieves.”

Who was that mouthy little dwarf talking to? Why didn’t he just shut up? Lucas bared his teeth, swinging his sword at an oncoming person and paying little attention to the backswing that almost clipped the top of the dwarf’s head.

“Hey, Hawke, watch it!” The beardless little bastard was glaring at him now.
“You watch it, shorty.”

“Both of you, shut up before I kill you,” said a woman’s voice. Isabela was kneeling next to the man Hawke had just killed, pulling something shiny and metallic out of his pocket. As she looked up at him, Hawke couldn’t help imagining blood, rich and red, running down her face. He started to move, the sword lifting off his shoulder and coming down—

Just as he realized what he was doing and deflected the blade, staggering as he unbalanced himself, Isabela rolled to the side. She came up with a dagger in her hand, flinging it at his head. It glanced off his upraised gauntlet.

Varric grasped the metal latch that had fallen from Isabela’s hands, sprinting for the barrel. Lucas watched him go disinterestedly. The fumes from the gas were overpowering now, and it was hard to stand upright. He blinked, blessed darkness filling his vision.

When he came to, Isabela had his arm over her shoulders. “Straighten up, big guy. We’re not done with you yet.” She was half-carrying, half-dragging him out of the way of the fog, which was dissipating now that the barrel was closed.

“What happened?”

“ Took you down from the inside,” Varric said on his other side. He was carrying Lucas’s sword. “Never thought I’d live to see the day. You and Rivaini here nearly killed each other first. That’s no way to end a story.”

“It didn’t seem to affect you, though,” Lucas said, frowning at the dwarf.

Varric shrugged. “Qunari and dwarves don’t mix much. Could be something in their formula doesn’t work as well on me. Who knows.”

“You missed, you know,” Isabela said softly, very close to his ear.

“Thank the Maker.”

“Not exactly what I would have said, but … thanks for that.”

“Yes, let’s all be grateful that I have bad aim,” he said drily.

Isabela glanced at him, her amber eyes narrowed, then looked away.

“Serah Hawke?”

It was a new voice from behind them, and Lucas turned, shrugging off Isabela’s arm so he could stand on his own. He felt strangely cold without it, a sensation he put away to think about some other time. There was an elf standing before him, a thin, sickly-looking elf, whose fever-bright green eyes were lit with triumph.

“I can’t believe we caught someone like you. I’m glad.” She looked around at the courtyard, where the clearing fog had revealed a number of bodies lying sprawled on the ground. “These poor people.” She coughed. “Someone like you makes a much better target.”

“Care to explain your particular brand of crazy?” Isabela snapped. “Or should we just kill you on general principles?”

The elf coughed again. “My people,” she whispered. “They lose their culture, taken from them by
humans and Chantry. They go to the Qunari for purpose and lose their selves. So we set up the Qunari, to take the blame for this disaster and cause the people of Kirkwall to rise up against them, driving them from here once and for all.”

“All in favor,” Isabela muttered. Lucas glared at her. She avoided his gaze, her mouth set in a stubborn line.

“Who put you up to this?” Lucas asked.

The elf coughed again, hard, leaning against a building for balance. “They will enrage the faithful.” Her voice was weakening, her knees sagging beneath her.

“‘Enrage the faithful’?” Varric echoed. “Who does that sound like?”

Isabela groaned. “Sister Petrice again? I thought we’d seen the last of that hag.”

The elf had slumped into a sitting position, her breath a harsh wheeze. And then it stopped altogether.

“What do you think was wrong with her?” Lucas asked.

“I wouldn’t put it past the oxmen to make the compound toxic, so whoever makes it dies,” Isabela said darkly.

“I’m with Rivaini. Sounds like something the Arishok would do.”

“Let’s notify Guardsman Maecon, get him to call Aveline to clean this up. Carefully, so no one else is hurt.”

Lucas insisted on waiting to make sure the clean-up was finished to his satisfaction. When Aveline arrived, she wasn’t pleased to have him hanging around looking over her shoulder, and she let him know as much in no uncertain terms. Varric and Isabela had left already, no doubt to go back to the Hanged Man, bathe, and drown their cares. Merrill had appeared to apologize, her fair skin flushing with the embarrassment of having nearly killed Varric. Lucas had pointed out that maybe she should apologize to the dwarf instead of to him, which caused Merrill to turn fluttery and uncertain, but she promised to do so as soon as she felt up to it. If asked, Lucas would have thought he would have been a much harder person to apologize to than Varric. Then again, if he’d turned on Varric and nearly killed him, he wasn’t sure what he’d have said to the dwarf, either.

Which made him think of Isabela, whom he had actually turned on and tried to kill. He should say something to her. He wanted to—but what to say? Other than, “gosh, I’m sorry I swung at your head.” They fought together; she knew what he was capable of. And she had been susceptible to the gas, too, he told himself.

“Hawke,” Aveline said sharply. “You’re asleep on your feet. Go home and get yourself cleaned up.”

“What? Oh. Right. Yes.” He nodded, turning obediently in the direction she had pointed, but somehow the stairs up to Hightown seemed very long, and the Hanged Man was nearby, warm and welcoming. Maybe by the time he reached it he would have thought of what to say to Isabela.
Lucas pushed open the door of the Hanged Man. The typically raucous sounds coming from inside weren’t quite what his throbbing head needed, but they were familiar, at least, and none of them were aimed at him—unlike what he would face in the comparative quiet of his own home, where he would have to answer a lot of questions. The very idea made him tired.

He was accosted almost immediately by Devens, a regular who wandered around talking to no one in particular. “Are you one of them?” Devens asked.

“One of whom?”

“They.”

“Oh. Not today.”

“Good.” Devens wandered off, addressing his monologue to the next person he bumped into.

To his surprise, Lucas found Merrill there, sitting at a table with Isabela and playing a hand of Wicked Grace. The elf couldn’t keep her mind on her cards long enough to pay attention to the game; she always lost, even against people far less skilled than Isabela. He couldn’t figure out why Merrill would have chosen to play cards with Isabela, or how she had gotten here so much ahead of him, much less why she would have come if she was determined to avoid Varric. The whole set of questions made his head hurt. He should have gone home, he thought, gone to bed. But then he would have had to face his mother’s questions, tell her all about his day and the Qunari and the poison gas. She had been through enough—she didn’t need to know the slimy details of the dark underground of Kirkwall. It made Lucas feel good to know that Varric had men keeping an eye on his mother as she helped Lirene and the Fereldan refugees; he worked and slept far better knowing that her welfare was seen to.

As he approached their table, Merrill looked at her cards with a sad face, then put them down. Isabela winked at the elf, pulling in the pile of winnings. She picked a small wooden object out of the pile and turned it around in her hand, studying it.

“Isabela, why do you always win at cards?” Merrill asked. From anyone else it might have sounded whiny, but Merrill genuinely wanted to know. Lucas paused, interested in how Isabela would answer and not wanting to distract the pirate with his presence.

Still looking at the wooden object in her hands, Isabela answered, “Because I cheat, kitten.” She met Merrill’s eyes across the table. “Never bet anything you’re not prepared to lose. This trinket—it’s elven, isn’t it? From your clan?” Isabela tossed it across the table in a swift flick that looked casual, but the wooden carving landed squarely in Merrill’s palm. “Have it back. And don’t hazard it again, not unless you’re absolutely sure your hand is the best.”

Merrill nodded, her fingers closing over the object. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. There’s no fun in taking something you didn’t earn.”

The elf frowned, looking confused, and Lucas couldn’t stay out of the conversation any longer. “She means beating you at cards didn’t take a lot of work.” He put a comforting hand on Merrill’s shoulder. “Don’t worry—she says that about most people. Very few can give her a challenge in a card game.”
“Oh, Hawke! You’re here.” Flustered, Merrill got up. “I should … go.”

She hurried out of the Hanged Man, clutching her token.

“What was she doing playing cards with you?” Lucas asked. He couldn’t quite meet Isabela’s gaze, which appeared to amuse her.

“Trying to work up the nerve to apologize to Varric.”

“Did she?”

“Not yet. I waylaid her—figured that conversation would go better after a night’s rest. Varric’s having a bath, anyway, and I don’t think anyone wanted that sweet little kitten to die of embarrassment walking in on him.” She chuckled.

“Speaking of …”

“Embarrassment? Baths? Or dying?”

Lucas couldn’t help but laugh. “Actually, all three are important topics at the moment.”

“You hope you don’t embarrass me by dying while we’re taking a bath together?” Her golden eyes met his, and he swallowed, unable to stop himself from picturing Isabela’s tanned curves dripping wet in a bath.

With an effort, he put the image out of his mind. “No, I desperately need a bath, and I am embarrassed that I almost killed you.”

“Pretty ham-handed way to work in an apology.”

“I’m not good at subtle.”

“No kidding.” She smiled, though, and pointed to the seat across from her. “Sit down, Hawke, before you fall down. That was some powerful stuff—you weren’t prepared for its effects, and it took its toll on you. Better that you tried your skill on me than on someone who couldn’t have gotten out of your way so easily.”

“Kind of like you fleecing Merrill at cards, then?” He sank onto the bench, sighing in relief. Sitting down felt good.

“Better me than someone who wouldn’t give her back her toys, yep.”

“I’ve seen you get a lot of fun out of taking things you didn’t earn before.”

“Not from a friend. It’s one thing to win from Varric—that’s a challenge—but not from her.”

“You’re quite the woman, Isabela.”

“ Took you long enough to notice.”

Their eyes met, the air feeling heavy around Lucas under the weight of her gaze. If Norah the waitress hadn’t come by, he didn’t know what he would have said.

“Jigger of your finest whiskey for my friend here,” Isabela said. As Norah moved away again, retrieving a bottle from the bar, she added, “The Hanged Man’s finest isn’t much, but it’ll get you just as drunk as anything you’ll find in Hightown.”
“Drunker, I imagine,” Lucas said. “But I think the last thing I need in my state is to get drunk.”

“You should have more fun, Hawke. Get the stick out of your arse occasionally.”

He sighed. “Someday.”

Norah set the bottle down with two glasses. Isabela lifted it, giving him a questioning look as the lip of the bottle hovered over his glass, but he shook his head firmly. “More for me, then.” She poured, drank, and poured again. Sitting back, staring into the liquid at the bottom of the glass, she said, “You know, Hawke, I thought I was going to have to watch myself around you, but it turns out, you’re all right.”

“Am I? You know, that’s mildly insulting.”

“You know what I mean. You’re not afraid to get your hands dirty, you don’t short the weights when dividing the coin, and you don’t poke your nose into affairs that don’t concern you.”

He snorted. “Not unless some big guy with horns shoves my nose into his affairs. Mostly, I just want to keep my nose clean, and Kirkwall seems determined not to let me achieve that goal.”

“You say that, but I’ve seen you. Anytime one of us has a problem, you’re right there. If I’d had someone like you on my ship when the—storm hit, maybe we wouldn’t have been shipwrecked.”

Lucas toyed with his empty glass, seeing Carver in his mind’s eye, his sword waving bravely in the air as the darkspawn closed around him, and Bethany with the streaks of taint marring her beautiful skin. “Thinking about what might have been is pointless.”

Isabela gave a harsh, mirthless laugh. “You’re right; what was I thinking?” She tossed off the contents of her glass. “Forget the past, celebrate the present.”

Present. Why did that make him think of something? Oh, yes. He dug inside his breastplate and took out the exquisitely carved ship in a bottle he had found in the tunnel. “That reminds me—I found this. Thought you might like it.”

“Ooh, isn’t that just the cutest thing?” Isabela took it from his grasp, studying the ship inside with a critical eye. “That’s a good job; got all the details right. Makes me wish I was on her right now, sailing along over the waves with the wind and the sea spray in my face. Ever been on the ocean, Hawke?”

“Does the journey to Kirkwall count?”

“No.” She looked disgusted at the very thought.

“Then, no.”

“Someday I’ll have my ship, and I’ll take you on my first voyage. You can be first mate. Or cabin decoration.” She winked at him.

“I’m not sure I’d be very good at either.”

“You won’t know if you don’t try.”

“Isabela.”

“Hawke.”
As they stared at each other across the table, the memory of their kiss came back to him. Would it hurt to accept, just once, everything she offered? He was so tired, so lonely, so weary of carrying everyone else’s burdens and never having the chance to rest. Surely for one night he could forget all that in the all-too-willing arms of the beautiful woman across the table.

Isabela must have seen the change in his eyes, because she stood up, dropping a coin on the table to pay for the bottle of whiskey. “Come on upstairs. I’m going to order you a hot bath, and then … we’ll see what kind of fun we can get up to.”

He allowed her to lead him up the stairs to her room, and stripped off his armor while she ordered the bath. There was an unspoken accord between them that neither one had any interest in proceeding while he still smelled of blood and vitriol and the last remnants of that Qunari poison. If she watched him as he sank into the hot water, he wasn’t aware of it. Behind him he could hear her shuffling cards, and she kept up a running monologue of interesting hands she had played as she was learning the proper way to cheat. Lucas found himself laughing at some of her stories and asked a few questions. It felt startlingly natural to be here with her, sluicing the water over his shoulders while they chatted like old friends. Or old lovers.

Once he was clean and dry, he wrapped the towel around his hips, knotting it in place. Isabela’s eyes roamed over his broad chest, sprinkled with dark hair, and down to where the hair formed a thicker trail below the line of the towel. “My, my. I see lifting that sword certainly does nice things for the muscles,” she said.

“Hm.” Now that he was here in her room, practically naked, Lucas felt unaccountably nervous. He’d done this before, many times, but mostly he kept it to the women of the Blooming Rose, preferring practiced anonymity and the simplicity of coin given for pleasure received.

She put the cards down next to her, shifting on her perch atop the dresser. “Don’t get shy on me now, big boy.” There was something in her voice, though. She wasn’t as certain as she sounded. That should have been reassuring … but it wasn’t. It made him all the more nervous. Was he making an incredible mistake? He’d avoided this for so long, dancing out of range of her suggestions and innuendos. Maybe he should have kept moving.

Isabela pulled off her boots, crossing the room to him. She seemed so small in her bare feet, so vulnerable, and something in her eyes as she lifted her face to him seemed almost afraid, as though she was just waiting for the rejection she was sure was coming. Without further thought, Lucas took her face in his hands and bent to kiss her.

Her soft lips parted for him, her tongue touching his lightly at first, and then with more boldness. He was barely aware of shuffling toward the bed, their mouths still joined, or of stretching out on the remarkably comfortable mattress—not what he would have expected of the Hanged Man at all, he thought hazily. Isabela tucked herself into the curve of his body, and the warm, soft kisses went on and on …

Until Lucas awoke the next morning in unattractive mid-snore to find a very irritated pirate staring down at him as he sprawled across her bed, the towel still firmly anchored around his waist.
“Get out,” Isabela said.

“Wha?” Lucas blinked and rubbed his face, sitting on the side of the bed and trying to think. That gas must have taken more out of him than he’d known, if he’d fallen asleep in bed with Isabela. No wonder she was looking at him like the cockroach under her boot heel. His reflections were interrupted by his breastplate being thrown at him; he just managed to move aside before the large piece of metal landed in his unprotected lap.

“Get dressed, and get out. You’re lucky it’s my reputation on the line, too, or I’d keep your bloody armor and let you walk out of here in that towel. Come to think of it, the towel belongs to the Hanged Man, so I’d have had to take that, too.” There was no humor in the smirk on her face, and Lucas hastily did as he was told, muttering an embarrassed “excuse me” as he had to brush past her to pick up his smalls.

Isabela didn’t budge the entire time, standing there with her arms folded across her chest and a very forbidding look on her face.

Lucas paused at the door. “I’m really—“

“Don’t you dare.”

“Right.” He closed it gently behind him and turned to find Varric leaning against the wall with a teacup in his hand.

“Oh, if I could paint a portrait of your face right now.”

“Nothing happened.”

“You think I don’t know that? Come now, Hawke, I know what doesn’t happen around here, too.”

“I really don’t think I like you,” Lucas muttered. Whatever was in that cup smelled delicious. He was ravenously hungry, and thirsty, too.

Varric handed him the cup. “For you. If you’ll get that frown off your face, I’ll take you to breakfast, too.”

“You’re buying?” Lucas practically choked on the sweet, fragrant tea. “All right, tell me the truth, did Isabela poison me in my sleep? How long have I got?”

The dwarf was snickering as he led the way down the stairs. “I’m not buying, the Arishok is. We’ve been instructed to come into his presence this morning and explain what happened with the gas. I imagine you’ve got a few things to say on that topic.”

“Do I ever.” Lucas put the teacup down on the bar as they went by. “I’d like to be sure Fenris is along, so we know what they’re saying behind our backs.”

“Aveline’s taking care of that. Of course, since the Arishok found out the elf can speak Qunari, there’s been precious little talking where we can hear. Still, the elf’s got sharp ears.”

Lucas paused briefly in the doorway, looking back. Surely he could have explained himself better than … well, better than not at all. He seemed to put his foot in it every time he was around Isabela.
And now he’d have to go talk to the Arishok, with Aveline, apparently, and try to keep his romantic life out of his thoughts for a while. You’d think, given how badly that was going, that trying to forget it would be a more pleasant prospect.

Breakfast had, of course, been a lie. Lucas had suspected as much from the start. But he wished he’d argued more—standing in front of the Arishok with his stomach growling made it hard to feel particularly daunting.

“It appears,” the Arishok said heavily, “that I was wrong about our thief.”

Well, that was a bracing way to begin. Suddenly Lucas felt much less hungry and much more vindicated. “New sensation for you? No doubt you’ll get used to it,” he said, ignoring Aveline’s shocked indrawn breath and Fenris’s silent but eloquent disapproval of his irreverence.

The Arishok merely looked at him. “People are saying that we were careless with our trap.”

“Since when do you care what people say?” It was honest curiosity this time—Lucas couldn’t imagine the Arishok being interested in gossip.

“It is not my duty to cause undue trouble. This elf, however, felt that it was her duty to do so. She would have ensured that people died, no matter what choices had been made.” He shook his heavy head ponderously. “I admire conviction, and there are some of you who have focus … but so many of your kind are committed to weakness.”

“You don’t seem particularly concerned by this elf’s claim that she has supporters.”

“Our enemies strike from shadow because they cannot stand before us. This is not a revelation.” His tone dripped with contempt. “It doesn’t matter. We are here to satisfy a duty to the Qun, and we will do so, no matter who stands in our way.”

“It’s taking long enough,” Lucas remarked.

“It will take as long as it takes. No ship is coming.” He added, almost as if to himself, “I am stuck here.”

“You could have built a ship by now, you know. We would have helped you. I bet, if you asked, the entire city of Kirkwall would have a big boat-building in your honor. We could make it a party.”

The Arishok glared at him. “It is not about a ship. Filth stole from us. Not now, not the saar-qamek, but some time ago.” He stood up, his eyes flashing. “We are all denied Par Vollen until I recover what was lost under my command. That is why I do not simply walk from this pustule of a city!” He was thundering at them now, staring down from the top of the stairs with his fists clenched. Lucas was hard put not to take a step back—the leashed power of the giant before him was awesome, and he understood fully in that moment what he had not before, that Kirkwall could not stand under a full-on Qunari attack. Many of the Viscount’s decisions were clear to him suddenly. The Arishok shouted, “Fixing your mess is not the demand of the Qun, and you should all be grateful!” There was silence for a moment when he had finished speaking. The heads of the two Qunari flanking the Arishok turned, just slightly, toward him, and he took a step back, collecting himself with obvious difficulty. Turning his back on Hawke and the others, the Arishok walked ponderously back to his chair and sank into it. “Thank you for your service, human,” he said in a dull, dead voice. “Leave.”

Lucas motioned to the others, and they did so with alacrity.

“Interesting,” Varric said when they were halfway up the stairs from the docks. “Even the Arishok
isn’t entirely in charge here.”

“No, that much seems evident.” Aveline frowned. “I wonder if we could use that.”

“Unlikely. The Qunari are strongly resistant to outside influences,” Fenris said.

“I was afraid you might say that. It was just a thought.” Aveline turned to Lucas. “You’re coming to inform the Viscount of what the Arishok said, I hope?”

“Oh, yes. Looking forward to it.”

Varric snorted. “Better you than me. I’ll be drinking later, if you’re not avoiding the Hanged Man altogether.” The dwarf strolled off, whistling.

“Finally come to your senses about that place?” Aveline asked.

“Something like that.” Lucas was not about to share the story of his experience with Isabela—or lack of same. Aveline would not be amused by the idea of him with Isabela, and he was still too unsure of his feelings for both women to start a conversation that might require his defining those feelings.

They walked quietly up the stairs to Hightown. Fenris had disappeared at some point, ducking away to go do whatever it was he did in the daylight. Buy the wine he drank at night, possibly. Lucas wasn’t overly concerned—Fenris always seemed to show up where he was needed, even if Lucas never knew where to find him during the day. It was nice to have one team member who didn’t require being looked after and worried over constantly.

“Hawke,” Aveline said abruptly.

“What is it?”

She glanced at him, her face pink under her freckles. “Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.” She looked ahead. “Ah, there’s the Keep. Good. Let’s see what the Viscount has to say.”

Nothing at all, as it turned out. Lucas and Aveline waited outside Seneschal Bran’s office while he finished up a meeting. He ignored them completely, shaking hands with an Orlesian noble and bowing obsequiously as the long-winded fellow took his leave. Finally Bran turned to Aveline.

“Yes, Guard Captain?”

“We have urgent news for the Viscount. We must see him at once.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible today. The Viscount is otherwise occupied.”

“You don’t understand.” Aveline was holding onto her temper with both hands, and Lucas was impressed with how well she was managing. Tact had never been her strong suit, but she had learned a great deal of it in the course of her new position. “This is to do with the Qunari, and the gas that was released in Lowtown. A number of people were killed.”

“Lowtown?” Bran dismissed the entire area with a sniff. “I imagine the claims of mortality were exaggerated.”

Lucas snapped, “I can assure you, they were not.”
“You were there, Serah Hawke? Why am I not surprised?”

“I stopped it from getting any worse. If we hadn’t been there, the gas would have spread and many more would have died.” Lucas disliked bragging about his prowess, or really bringing any attention at all to the work he did, but in this case it felt necessary.

“Indeed.” The Seneschal pursed his lips in thought. “Come back tomorrow, just after lunchtime. The Viscount can see you then.”

“Tomorrow? The Arishok made threats. He changed his whole story! The Viscount needs to know about this before tomorrow lunch!”

Lucas’s agitation made no impression on the Seneschal, who merely lifted his eyebrows and waited patiently for Lucas and Aveline to leave his office.

“That supercilious son-of-a-bitch!” Lucas said as they walked down the stairs together. “Who does he think he is?”

“The real power,” Aveline said, shrugging her shoulders. “He has the Viscount’s ear. And other parts, if the rumors are true.”

“Ew. I didn’t need that image in my head.”

“I know someone who claims to have walked in on—Oh, Saemus, I didn’t see you there.”

The Viscount’s son was standing in front of them. His hands, white-knuckled, gripped the railings as he looked down on the entry hall of the Keep. “Captain Aveline. And Serah Hawke. I understand you had an eventful day yesterday.”

“That’s one word for it.”

“The Qunari couldn’t have known that gas was lethal. They aren’t like that.”

Lucas shook his head. “Take the blinders off, son. Qunari may not be all bad, but they don’t care about us at all. They were perfectly happy to let their gas kill as many of us as was necessary to get the point.”

“The point being to leave them alone.”

“Yes, fair enough, the point being to leave them alone! But we didn’t ask them to come to Kirkwall, and we aren’t asking them to stay.” Lucas thought it was a good argument, and was rocked back on his heels when Saemus fixed him with a pair of very blue eyes.

“Perhaps, Serah Hawke, the same could be said of you.” He turned on his heel and disappeared into the depths of the Keep.

“He has a point,” Lucas said in the silence that followed.

“Not a good one.” Aveline wasn’t watching the Viscount’s son; she was staring at the floor, studying the tips of her boots. “Hawke?”

“What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you. Can you come to the barracks for a few minutes?”

“I don’t see why not.” His heartbeat had sped up. Was this the kind of talk he hoped it would be?
Her discomfort said it was possible she was about to confess that she returned his … interest in her. Lucas followed her into the barracks, nodding at the few guards he recognized. Aveline ushered him into her office and looked around to see who was outside it before shutting the door. “Why all the secrecy?” he asked as she sank into the chair behind her desk.

“I have a favor to ask. A favor I can only entrust to you. It’s … a small matter, but I worry.”

“A favor? What kind of favor?” He leaned forward, his hair falling over one eye. “Will I like it?”

Aveline frowned. “I … don’t know?” She reached into her desk drawer, withdrawing a package efficiently wrapped in brown paper. “Do you know Guardsman Donnic?”

“That’s the one we saved from ambush a few years back, right? The tall one?” Too tall, Lucas thought, disgruntled that this meeting wasn’t about what he had hoped it would be.

“Right. Take this package to him, wait while he opens it, and report his reaction to me. He isn’t to know it came from me.”

“But why—“

“No questions.” Aveline’s face was set and firm.

“You need me for something as simple as this?”

“Who can I trust besides you? I know many people in Kirkwall, but you—you’re more than a friend to me.” Her green eyes were shining as she looked at him across the desk.

Lucas’s pulse leaped.

“You’re like a brother,” Aveline went on.

It fell again, his heart thudding almost painfully in his chest. “It … must be something important,” he said, his voice hoarse in his ears.

“That’s none of your business.” Her voice was clipped and short now, as if she was embarrassed to have been caught being emotional.

“How very Qunari of you.” Lucas stood up, holding his hand out for the package.

Aveline shook her head. “I already regret this. I’m not about to make it worse by admit—exposing unnecessary facts.”

“Fine,” Lucas snapped. He took the package from her, noticing that she had trouble letting it go, and that her eyes were soft and vulnerable in a way he’d never seen them. Relenting, he patted her hand. “Don’t worry, Aveline. I’m here to help, whenever and whatever you need.”

“That’s sweet, Hawke.” Her eyes darted to the door. “Now, hurry back with his reaction.”

“Yes, serah.” Grumbling under his breath, Lucas let himself out of Aveline’s office. “Have you seen Donnie?” he asked the first guard he saw, a feisty blonde named Brennan.

“In the dining hall.”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime,” she said, in a voice that made it clear she wasn’t just talking about directions.
What is it with women? Lucas wondered as he made his way to the dining hall. The one he thought he wanted thought of him as a brother, and the ones who wanted him were either scary or confusing … or both. He should have stuck to prostitutes, he thought sourly. Sabina wasn’t exactly imaginative, but she was affordable, clean, and got the job done.

Guardsman Donnic was just standing up as Lucas entered the dining hall. “Serah Hawke,” he said with recognition, even though not with any notable pleasure.

“Donnic. I have something for you.”

“Do you?” Donnic reached for the package, wrestling Aveline’s tightly tied knots apart with some effort, and took off the brown paper. They both stood for a long moment, staring at the object in his hands. “It’s a copper relief of what looks like marigolds,” Donnic said flatly. He squinted at the bottom of the frame. “Yes, it helpfully says so. Marigolds. Is there a significance to this that I’m missing?”

Lucas threw up his hands. “You’ve got me there.”

“Well. Thank you, then,” Donnic said, transferring his frown from the ‘artwork’ to Lucas.

“Oh, anytime.” Lucas turned around, heading back to Aveline’s office, shutting the door firmly behind him.

She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, staring at the door, and she blinked when he came in. “You’re back. ‘Course you are; you’re efficient. You get things done, good or ill.”

“Efficient. That’s me, all right.”

“Well?”

“Yeah, he was underwhelmed.”

“Didn’t he understand what I meant?”

“He didn’t know it was from you, remember. And I did know it was from you, and I don’t understand what you meant.”

Aveline jumped up, pacing the floor. “It should have been obvious. Metal is strong, copper ages well, flowers are soft,” she muttered to herself. “I’ve gone about this the wrong way, I can see that now.” She looked up at Lucas. “Don’t talk to him again.”

“No problem.”

Diving behind her desk, Aveline came up with a piece of parchment, which she held out to Lucas. “Here—this is next week’s roster. Go post it, and then wait for Donnic to see it. Then come back and tell me his reaction. I need to know exactly what he says—that’s key.”

Lucas grinned at her. “Keep giving me all this make-work stuff to do and I’ll get the impression you just like having me around.”

“Just do it, will you, Hawke, and don’t yank my chain.”

“Yes, Captain.” He saluted, leaving the room with the roster.

“Hey, Hawke, you getting a job as the Captain’s lackey?” Brennan asked. She was leaning against the wall with her arms folded, almost as if she’d been waiting for him to come out.
“Apparently I am today. Hopefully not tomorrow,” he muttered under his breath, tacking the roster up on the wall.

“Donnic, come look at this,” Brennan called. “New roster’s up.”

He came out of one of the dormitories, frowning at Lucas before peering at the roster. “Hightown? What’s this nonsense?”

Brennan pushed off the wall, coming to stand next to Donnic. She puckered her lips and made kissy noises. “Someone’s got the cushy job, don’t they? Wonder why …”

“There must be some mistake. I’m not working Hightown. No one’s shoving me off on the sidelines.” Donnic pushed past Lucas, stalking out of the barracks.

“She missed that time,” Brennan said.

“What do you mean, missed?”

“The Captain. She misjudged Donnic right and proper if she thought he’d fall all over himself kissing her bits because she gave him Hightown.”

Lucas stared at the blonde guardswoman and she returned the look with one that said she thought he was a complete idiot. And then the light dawned, and he groaned. He was a complete idiot. “I’ll tell her.”

“You do that.” Brennan smirked. “And next time you’re in the barracks, stop by and see a girl. I’ll have better things for you to do than hang a roster.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Aveline was waiting, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet with impatience. “What did he say?”

“He hated it.”

“What? Hightown’s a reward!”

“He took it like a punishment. The man likes his job, Aveline.”

She looked crestfallen. “All right … I can fix this. I need three goats and a sheaf of wheat. You’ll take them to his mother.”

“So this ridiculous investigation was—“

“A ridiculous courtship.” She sank down in her chair, burying her face in her hands and groaning.

“Aveline, that’s not the way to get into a man’s pants, much less his heart.”

“I’ve been focused on being captain so long, it’s all I know.”

“You’re having trouble speaking your mind?” Lucas asked incredulously.

“I just …” She looked up at him, tears shimmering in her green eyes. “I want him to know that I feel … if something happened to him …”

Lucas shivered at her tone. He thought he understood. If something happened to Isabela, he—He
caught himself. Isabela? Why should she come to mind right now? He didn’t have any special feelings for Isabela. He’d thought he had them for Aveline, but clearly that had been a mistake. He pushed the thoughts aside to focus on Aveline’s very real, very present trouble. “You need to go somewhere that you aren’t captain and guardsman. Like the Hanged Man.”

“Like it’s that easy.”

“If it isn’t, he’s a fool,” Lucas said. He crossed to her, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Trust me.”

“Oh, where have I heard that before?” she muttered, but she nodded.

“All right. Tomorrow night, Hanged Man. And don’t wear that,” he admonished.

“Right.” Aveline sounded doubtful, so he gave her his best encouraging smile before shutting the door behind him.

He found Donnic near the entrance to the Keep, complaining about his new orders to Guardsman Jalen. “Donnic, I’ve got a job for you, if you’re interested.”

“I don’t think the Captain would like it—“

“No, she said it was all right. Come by the Hanged Man tomorrow after supper and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“All … right.”

Lucas let himself out of the Keep, glad that it was only a short distance across Hightown to his own home. It seemed as though it had been a very long day. Or a few of them.

And apparently this one wasn’t quite over. As he walked into his house, his eyes met those of Isabela, as she perched on his stair rail, carving something into the soft wood.
The Pirate's Pleasure

Lucas stopped short, staring at the pirate on his stair rail. “Isabela?” he asked stupidly, as though it could possibly have been someone else.

She stabbed her knife into the railing, leaving it standing straight up, and unhurriedly swung one long, brown leg over and jumped down. “You owe me, big boy. For what didn’t happen last night.”

“I said I was sorry about that.”

“Actually, you didn’t.”

“Well … maybe not, but only because you wouldn’t let me.”

“So don’t.” Isabela walked toward him, stopping just a few steps away. “I don’t want your sorrys.”

“What—“ His throat felt tight. He cleared it and tried again. “What do you want?”

“I think you know.”

“Isabela …” He was tempted, no question about that. What man wouldn’t be? She was beautiful, and exotic, and deadly, and witty, and intelligent, and experienced … But what would it mean? Lucas was sure he wasn’t ready for sleeping with Isabela to mean something—but he was equally sure that it wouldn’t mean nothing, either. The distance she’d left between them, the fact that she was waiting for him to decide, said this wasn’t just a casual tumble to her, although she was trying to pretend it was.

“What?” she snapped.

He wanted to ask why, but sensed that the question wouldn’t go over well. The memory of last night’s kisses came to him, sending warmth flowing through his body. He wanted her—he could admit that now—and when was the last time he’d done something he wanted to do? With sudden decision, he grinned. “Will you respect me in the morning?”

Her eyes widened with surprise, and there was the briefest hesitation, as though she hadn’t expected him to agree, before she returned the grin. “That,” she said, “will depend on your capabilities.”

“Oh, I’m being judged, am I?” Their eyes were locked on each other’s now, excitement passing between them with the badinage. “What if it’s you who can’t keep up?”

She laughed. “That’ll be the day.”

There was a pause, as time hung suspended between them. Then Lucas stepped toward Isabela just as she was leaping for him.

He half-expected her nose to smash into his jaw—after all, nothing between them had gone quite right yet. But this did; her arms wound around his neck, her legs wrapped around his waist, and her mouth met his, all in what seemed like the same motion. Lucas hoisted her up a little higher for easier carrying, and, kissing her all the while, made his way up the stairs toward his bedroom. The last thing he needed was his mother coming out of her room and finding him kissing Isabela.

When the door of his room shut behind him, he was somewhat surprised. He didn’t quite know how he had managed to navigate the stairs without falling. But with Isabela’s tongue dancing in his
mouth, he didn’t care, either.

Still gripping him with her strong legs, she straightened, breaking the kiss, and drew two daggers from the scabbards at her back. She flung them across the room and drew two more from somewhere in her tunic. Those, also, ended up decorating his walls, one slicing through his bedcurtain on the way. Isabela dug three more knives out of her boots and tossed those, too.

“You know,” Lucas said breathlessly, “you could have just laid them on the table.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Her hands threaded through his hair, her mouth coming down on his again. She was right, of course—watching her throw those knives around his room had been surprisingly erotic.

He maneuvered them to the bed, turning around so that he landed with his back on the mattress, Isabela straddling him.

She wiggled, and Lucas groaned. “Mmm, I like a man who doesn’t mind me being on top.”

“I don’t mind at all. I do, however, mind your top being on. Let’s do something about that, shall we?” Lucas sat up, fumbling at the laces that held her tunic closed, wanting to see her breasts, wanting them to spill into his waiting hands.

“Allow me.” She shifted a bit, tugging at the bottom of the tunic, and yanked it off over her head, throwing it as recklessly as she had the knives. Her breastband followed, leaving her naked except for her kerchief, her gold jewelry, her boots, and the tiniest little scrap of black fabric masquerading as smallclothes.

Lucas stared at her for a long moment. Her body was as beautiful as he had imagined. More so, if he were being honest. He had expected long hours in the sun would have damaged her skin, and that sheer weight would have pulled her breasts out of shape—but they were round, and full, and utterly perfect. He buried his face between them, rubbing his cheek against her smooth skin.

Isabela shifted in his lap, her fingers closing on his shoulders as she leaned back to give him better access.

Lucas took a soft nipple into his mouth, suckling on it as it hardened against his tongue. Isabela sighed in pleasure, the sound arousing him more than he would have imagined. He turned his attention to her other breast, licking and nibbling and sucking, just as he had wanted to do the other night at the party. Just the thought of that dress and the tight confinement her beautiful breasts had been in while she wore it made him want to kiss them more. So he did.

Isabela was vocal in her enjoyment of his attentions, gasps and moans and cries pouring from her mouth as her hands shifted on his shoulders, no doubt causing permanent wrinkles in his shirt. Not that he cared, but it was getting rather warm in the room to be fully clothed.

Pulling back from her, he started on the buttons of his shirt.

“Let me.” Isabela grasped his shirtfront with both hands, yanking it apart. Buttons flew everywhere. Lucas had a sudden image of Sandal coming in to clean up tomorrow, finding buttons and pieces of Isabela’s clothing and knives everywhere, and nearly choked trying not to laugh.

Then laughter was the furthest thing on his mind, because Isabela’s tongue and teeth were mirroring everything he had just done to her breasts. He’d never thought of his own nipples as being particularly sensitive, but under her ministrations the slightest touch made him throb, his pants growing tighter and more uncomfortable by the moment.
“Isabela!”

“Mmm,” was her response. She pushed him backward, her tongue continuing down his chest and across his stomach. He could feel the soft brush of her breasts against him even through his pants, and couldn’t control the need to thrust up against her. “Look at you, big boy. Getting sleepy?”

“H-hardly,” he gasped, barely able to get the word out, because her hand had replaced her breasts, stroking slowly up and down. There was really nothing he wanted in the world more than to get these damned pants off. “Please, Isabela!” He didn’t care if she ripped those in pieces, too, if it meant he could be free of the restrictive fabric.

“Well, since you ask so nicely.” Then her clever fingers were unfastening the buttons on his pants, brushing maddeningly against him in a way that was far from accidental. His hips were practically dancing in the air trying to get closer to those tantalizing little touches. At last, the pants were on the floor somewhere, his smallclothes with them.

“Maker!” He drew her against him, needing to kiss her again. Isabela rubbed against him, the teensy little smallclothes, little more than a string, it appeared, hardly a barrier between their bodies. “Take them off,” he gasped between kisses.

She shifted just enough to slide the little piece of fabric off. Any other woman would have looked awkward, but Isabela looked … like a goddess, he thought hazily.

And then there was no more thought, because she came down directly on him, smooth and hot and wet. So wet that Lucas slid inside her as though they had been made to fit each other.

She rose and fell above him, her breasts bouncing, her rhythm increasing slowly as they both grew damp with sweat. Lucas’s eyelids felt heavy, but he forced them open so he could watch her. Isabela had her head thrown back, her mouth open, and cries of pleasure escaped her lips as her movements sped up.

“H—H—Hawke!” she cried out at last, grinding down on him with a final hard thrust.

Caught up in watching her, Lucas was startled by his own climax, groaning as it hit. He pushed up against her, holding her hips tightly to keep her with him as he finished.

He lay back, spent and panting, expecting her to fall next to him, but she climbed off of him and then off the bed entirely.

“Isabela?”

“Go to sleep, Hawke.”

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” he said, not amused by the joke. “I want to lie here and enjoy what just happened with a beautiful woman in my arms.”

“I’ll go get you one.”

He sat up, frowning at her. “Something I said?”

“I’m not one for the touchy-feely when the touchy-feely is over.”

“Wham, bam, take it on the lam?”

“You got it, big boy.” She fastened her breastband, then bent to pick up her tunic.
“I won’t bite.”

“Too bad.” She winked at him, straightening the tunic and starting to relace it.

“Isabela, why don’t you stay a little?”

She groaned. “You’re not one of those types who takes a tumble and then starts spouting relationship talk, are you?”

“No, but I might just be one of those types who takes a breather and is ready to go again.” He couldn’t have said—and wouldn’t have imagined an hour ago—what was so important about keeping her from rushing out of the room, but something was.

Isabela stopped dressing, looking up at him. “What makes you think I want another go?”

That stung. Lucas fought back his initial reaction, which was to voice his injured feelings loudly, because something told him that was what she wanted. Instead he folded his arms above his head and leaned back against the pillows. “Suit yourself,” he said with false casualness.

He’d really thought it was too transparent to work, but she paused, looking at him thoughtfully. “Well, you’d be passable with a few pointers, and who better to give them to you than me? I won’t sleep here, though, so don’t even think about it.”

“Really. You don’t think this bed is more comfortable than your bed at the Hanged Man? My mother spared no expense picking out the mattress and sheets.”

“Your mother picked those out?” Isabela shook her head, her eyes twinkling. “That’s pathetic.”

“It is,” he acknowledged. “You could pick out new ones, if you want.”

“Whoa, there, stud! Come on back to the stable,” she said. “I’m not your girlfriend; I’m not moving in; I don’t even like you that much.”

He clenched his teeth. She did know how to get under a man’s skin. “And I don’t like these sheets that much, is all I was saying. And wouldn’t I be less pathetic if a hot pirate had picked out my sheets? Think of how that would sound to the next girl I bring home.”

Ah-ha. Lucas wasn’t a particularly vain man, but there was something quite arousing in the flash of anger in her eyes when he suggested sleeping with another woman. She covered it quickly, but not quickly enough.

She ripped the tunic back off over her head, dropping the breastband on top of it. He considered asking her to take off her boots, as she had last night, but something told him they were more than boots to her, and she would only take them off if she wanted to. Briefly he mourned the lost opportunity of last night, the softer, more vulnerable Isabela she had been willing to be in front of him … but there would be time to see that side of her again, he hoped.

Lucas wasn’t sure when she had gone from someone he wasn’t sure he was comfortable having a tumble with to someone he wanted to see a lot more of, but she had. And as she climbed back into the bed and brought her mouth to his, he couldn’t regret it for a moment.
He woke in the morning to the whisper of fabric as Isabela dressed herself, opening one eye to watch the show. She turned to pry one of her knives out of the wall and saw him looking at her. Being Isabela, she did her best not to show her surprise, but Lucas could see the small start she gave.

“Sneaking out? I thought you were better at it than that.” He shifted in bed so he could look at her more easily.

“So did I.” Isabela concentrated on the knife, which was sunk deep into the plaster.

“Afraid you would see me and be so turned on by my morning breath you’d want to jump right back into bed?”

She looked at him over her shoulder, a slow grin spreading across her face. “That’s not exactly what I was thinking.”

“Ah. I have it. You were concerned that your own morning breath would be too much for me to handle.” Lucas sat up, pulling the sheet up over his midsection.

At that she laughed outright. She yanked the knife the rest of the way out of the wall and tucked it into her boot. “Just for that, I’m leaving that one here.” She nodded toward a jeweled dagger that had embedded itself in the door of Lucas’s wardrobe.

“Sandal will be horrified.”

“Will you?” The question was casual, asked as she bent over to tuck a second knife into her boot, but there was something in her tone that wasn’t.

“Be horrified? Hardly.”

“Good.”

Lucas glanced out the window. The sun was higher than he had hoped; time to get up and try to save Kirkwall for another day, he thought with a sigh. “Coming with me to tell the Viscount about the gas?”

“No. Um … I found this amazing hat shop in Lowtown. Think I’ll do some shopping.”

“Suit yourself.” Looking at the kerchief on her head, which he had only ever seen her without when she accompanied him to the party, Lucas wondered if Isabela even wore hats. But he couldn’t blame her for wanting to skip the meeting with the Viscount—he’d have skipped it himself, if he could have. Somewhere in Kirkwall, there had to be someone else who was willing to take on all this stuff, he thought. “Will I see you at the Hanged Man tonight?”

“Well, I live there, so if you’re there, you probably will.” Her voice was clipped, and Lucas got the message loud and clear.

“All right, then.” He got himself out of bed, and Isabela promptly yanked the last of her daggers out of the wall and opened the casement. “Taking the window?”

“Or would you rather I parade through your house and let your mother see me?” She smirked at his expression. “Didn’t think so. I’ll see you later, Hawke.”
“Yup.” He watched her slide through the window, and listened for the sounds of her progress down the side of the house. There were none—she was a professional, after all—and Lucas went back to dressing. Something black lay on his carpet, and he leaned down to find it was Isabela’s very small smallclothes. Should he give them back? It was impossible to know if she had overlooked them by accident or on purpose. Either way, to give them back seemed … somehow ungentlemanly. And he wouldn’t want to be that.

He unlocked the chest in which he kept the few keepsakes he’d been able to bring from Lothering, and tucked the scrap of fabric inside, safe from Sandal’s curious eyes, not to mention his mother’s. For a moment, he paused to look over the contents—Bethany’s old rag doll; the militia armbands he and Carver had worn in the battle of Ostagar, both bloodied and torn; a piece of his father’s last staff, broken off when his mother had been forced to use it to defend herself as they fled. Memories flooded his mind of happier times, when he and his siblings had been together. He blinked moisture out of his eyes, closing and locking the chest again.

Getting dressed, Lucas left his room to find his mother standing on the landing looking out the window. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning, darling. Where are you off to today?” she asked, but idly, as though he had distracted her from important thoughts.

“Visiting the Viscount. More issues with the Qunari, I’m afraid.”

“Oh? Oh, the Qunari. Surely they can’t be too much trouble, down there on the docks.”

‘Too much trouble’? Hadn’t she heard what had happened in Lowtown? Maybe not—in any case, she clearly wasn’t interested, her gaze already turned back out the window.

“I doubt I’ll be home for dinner, Mother.”

“That’s all right. I won’t, either.”

“Late shift at Lirene’s?”

“Something like that.” She leaned her head against the window, looking for all the world like a lovesick schoolgirl. For a moment, Lucas paused on the stairs, wondering if he should ask. But after all, she was a grown woman. She had a right to her secrets if she chose. She would tell him when she was ready.

The Viscount wouldn’t be ready until after luncheon, Bran had said, so Lucas took his time, strolling through the Hightown market, gazing at various wares. When he found himself handling a jeweled dagger and wondering if Isabela might like it, he cast the dagger down abruptly, turning away from the market stall to the obvious disappointment of the shopkeeper.

At last, the appointed hour came to meet the Viscount. Aveline wasn’t there, nor Varric, so Lucas settled in to approach the Viscount by himself. Might go better, at that.

There was a tenseness in the Keep that seemed strange to Lucas. He had missed something this morning, that was evident. His hackles rose higher when he was ushered into the Viscount’s office without the standard amount of hassle from the Seneschal.

“Hawke.” The Viscount was staring at the back wall of his office, his hands clasped behind his back.

Dispensing with the preliminaries in his irritation at being forced to wait until after lunch, Lucas said, “I take it you’ve heard about Lowtown.”
“Yes. Years of nice, quiet anxiety gone, along with a whole street.”

Lucas was glad the Viscount couldn’t see him roll his eyes—or maybe he should have seen. All those people killed, who knows how many more who could have been if Lucas hadn’t been there, and the Viscount was worried about his anxiety level? “Yes. Accidentally on purpose, if you will.”

“And a mad elf; a zealot.” The Viscount groaned, rubbing his forehead. “I knew the Arishok had no plans to leave—it seemed clear after the first year—but I didn’t know it was just as annoying for him.”

“He’s a hair from the edge,” Lucas said. “You need to keep everyone calm.”

Sighing, the Viscount turned toward Lucas. “It’s a shame. He was making overtures of peace. A Qunari delegate and entourage came to see me this morning—it’s why I made this appointment for after lunch, so I could talk with the Qunari first. And now this.”

“This?” From the Viscount’s tone, it sounded as though something more than the saar-qamek had gone wrong.

“The delegate and his entourage disappeared as soon as they left the keep. Literally from my doorstep. What do you suppose will be the Arishok’s reaction?” He lifted his head and met Lucas’s eyes for the first time.

A missing Qunari entourage? Lucas could feel the tension such a situation generated all the way to his vitals. “We need to get out in front of this, and fast.”

The Viscount sank into his chair, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. “I feel I’ve been trying to turn a stampede. Someone is pushing very hard to bring this city to the brink of war.” He waved at Lucas. “Speak with Seneschal Bran; he can give you any details you need.”

Lucas couldn’t help staring at the man in front of him. Was he really assigning the entire diplomacy of the city to a minor noble? And without waiting to see if Lucas would agree to help? He was beginning to see why Knight-Commander Meredith took so much of the decision-making on herself—Dumar wasn’t even close to being strong enough to bear the weight of the city on his shoulders.

And Lucas himself? What would he do? Turning to leave the office, he couldn’t help but feel trapped, again. In good conscience, he couldn’t let the Qunari take their vengeance out on the innocent … and he was the one person in Kirkwall who might be able to defuse the situation, since his relationship with the Arishok was less hostile than most.

A vision came to him as he knocked on the door of the Seneschal’s office, a vision of a ship in the midst of a calm blue sea, with the ocean breezes blowing in his hair and the sun beating down on his face. How he wished for just a moment of such peace.

“Enter!” The Seneschal’s voice woke him from that dream, and he pushed the door open.

Seneschal Bran took off his spectacles as Lucas came into the room. “Hawke.”

“Seneschal.”

“The Viscount has no doubt informed you of this morning’s latest disaster?”

“He has.”

“You understand the need for discretion, I hope?” The Seneschal’s tone conveyed how unlikely he
found that prospect. “If there were anyone else we could trust with such a mission … but then, beggars can’t be choosers.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to point out that they were only beggars because no one in Kirkwall’s ruling force had bothered to forge a relationship with the Arishok, but the resulting argument would waste time and Lucas was unlikely to win it. “What information do you have?”

“Very little.”

“You sound as though you don’t care if this delegation is found.”

The Seneschal sighed. When he spoke, his tone was that of someone speaking to a very small child. “Apparently I must educate you in the realities of government. The most we can hope for from the Qunari is neutrality, so there is little incentive for us to aid them. On the other hand, many factions in Kirkwall would be … unsettled were it to look as though we were providing assistance to the Qunari. It is to our benefit not to appear overly concerned by this development.”

“Well, you’re doing a great job, then,” Lucas snapped. “Do you have any idea how this happened? I have a hard time imagining anyone subduing a Qunari delegation.”

Clearing his throat, the Seneschal betrayed his first sense of unease in the interview. “Their swords were tied into their sheaths.”

“What?”

“I advised it. It seemed a respectful compromise—the Qunari would not have to be separated from their weapons, but it would be more difficult for them to cause trouble here in the keep.”

It seemed a foolish and short-sighted decision to Lucas. After all, the average Qunari could snap weaklings like the Seneschal or the Viscount in half without bothering to reach for a sword. He groaned. “I don’t suppose this could all be the Arishok’s idea?”

“For what purpose? I think we both know that if the Arishok wanted … anything, including the city itself, he could just take it. There would be no need for him to stoop to such a complicated plot.”

“Has anyone told the Arishok?”

“You mean, have I sent anyone off to be killed for delivering the news? No. The longer we keep this knowledge from the Arishok, the better. Once he finds out, the Viscount is right to be concerned that we will no longer be able to maintain the illusion of peace. And I assume you would agree with me that Kirkwall is not prepared to defend itself from a Qunari attack.”

“And why not? We all know it’s coming.”

“We do not have the manpower.”

Lucas glared at the prim little man behind the desk. He would take this argument up with Aveline later—even if these fools didn’t see what was coming, she ought to. “Do you know anything useful at all?”

The Seneschal raised his eyebrows. “If I were you, I would start with the city guard. I am reliably informed that several men who were scheduled for duty this morning failed to appear. You might look for them, although where you would find someone with so little regard for honor and duty, I couldn’t tell you.”
“You couldn’t? Really?” And this was the man who was the power behind the throne of Kirkwall?

“You can, I take it?”

“If a dissolute and debauched sell-out of a city guard can’t be found in the Hanged Man, it’s because someone else already found him there and killed him.” Lucas paused in the doorway. “You know, if you got out of this office more and actually lived in the city, you wouldn’t need me. Food for thought.” He closed the door firmly behind himself and set out across the keep for Aveline’s office. Someone in this pile of stones was going to take charge of this mess, and for once, it wasn’t going to be him, he told himself firmly.
Aveline was in the midst of a knot of guardsmen, barking orders, when Lucas arrived in the barracks. She caught his eye over Brennan’s shoulder. “Hawke. I take it you’ve heard.”

“About the Qu—” Her eyes flashed at him and he swallowed the rest. The barracks were more or less open to the public. “Yes. I’ve heard. What are you doing about it?”

She glared at her people. “You have your orders. Step lively!”

They did. Donnic gave Lucas a curious glance as he went past. “Are we still meeting at the Hanged Man tonight?”

The Hanged Man? Lucas frowned, trying to remember. Oh, yes, he was setting Aveline up with the fellow. “Absolutely. I’ll see you there.”

“Hawke, are you sure we should go forward with that ridiculous farce, after everything?” Aveline asked as she closed the door to her office.

“If you think trying to develop a relationship with Donnic is a ridiculous farce, then, no, we shouldn’t. If you think he’s the man you want, then, yes, we should.”

“But—with the Qunari situation …”

“All the more reason. There will always be a Qunari situation, or a band of mercenaries to stop, or … something. Take your moments when they come, make them if you have to. Surely, I don’t need to tell you that, not after—” He stopped short of saying Wesley’s name.

“I can stand to hear his name, Hawke. I was married to him. But you’re right, Wesley’s fate should be a reminder not to let the grass grow under my feet. Now,” Aveline said, changing tone, “what to do about this delegate?”

“Maker, can’t any of you do anything yourselves?” Lucas groaned, rubbing his forehead with two fingers.

“Not as easily as you can,” Aveline said, unperturbed. “What we do commits all of Kirkwall to our path, but what you do doesn’t. Also, the Arishok trusts you, if he can be said to trust anyone. If you can’t find the delegates …” She trailed off, and Lucas snorted.

“You mean, when he kills the messenger, the city loses a lot less if that messenger is me.”

“That would be the Seneschal’s position.” Aveline grinned at him.

“Well, then, let’s go. I’m not getting any younger.”

“You want me to go with you to see the Arishok?” Aveline looked surprised.

“You’re the Guard Captain! Shouldn’t you already know where the delegate is? Or at least which of your men is part of this conspiracy?”

“I have some ideas about the second one, yes, but as for the first? Somewhere in Darktown, I presume, but the guards don’t exactly fare well in that part of the city.”

“So you’re saying I’m on my own for this one.”
Aveline sighed. “Much as I’d like to help, Hawke …”

“You’re bailing on me just like the Viscount and the Seneschal.” She had the grace to look guilty, at least, but she didn’t deny the accusation. “Just so you all know—if I ever need a favor from the city of Kirkwall, I’d better have it before I can finish asking.” He shut her office door behind him very firmly.

He debated going to get some support before visiting the Arishok, but decided if he delayed at all, he wouldn’t have the nerve to go, so he marched down the Lowtown stairs and on past the Hanged Man to the docks. Merrill appeared as he passed through Lowtown, and he prevailed on her to come along. The Qunari feared and distrusted mages, except for their own leashed and chained versions, but he’d rather have Merrill than no one.

Isabela was hanging around the docks, playing a game of dice with a knot of sailors, and appeared to be winning heavily while she was at it. When she saw Lucas approach, she collected her coin, much to the sailors’ vocal disapproval, and came over to him. “Exciting doings afoot today?”

“If you think the Seneschal letting a Qunari delegation get kidnapped right under his nose is exciting, there are.”

She gave an elaborate yawn. “The Qunari again? Why doesn’t everyone just leave them alone?”

“I think they’re fascinating,” Merrill put in. “What do you think they do when their horns get itchy? Do they rub them against a tree, like a halla?”

Isabela snorted in laughter. “Kitten, I’d pay good coin to see that.”

“You want to come with me while I give the Arishok the bad news?” Lucas asked her.

She made a face. “Pass. Why don’t you just let it go, Hawke? Leave well enough alone, let the Viscount and all of them lie in the bed they’ve made?”

“Do I really need to answer that? If the Qunari lose their temper, we lose our city. You know that as well as I do. And there are people in this city I’ve come to care about.” Her eyes widened at that, and hastily he continued, before she could make a remark. “Like my mother. And Varric. I’m quite fond of Varric.”

“You two would make a cute couple.”

Merrill had been watching the two of them, wide-eyed. “Hawke likes Varric?”

“No, that way, Merrill,” Lucas said.

“Oh. Well, I suppose the height difference would be awkward.”

“I will pay you a sovereign if you don’t start trying to figure out how that would work,” Lucas said. Isabela’s eyes twinkled. “And I’ll pay you two sovereigns if you do.”

“Isabela.”

“Hawke.”

“I might as well go, then.” But he didn’t. He stood there looking at her.

“Any time now.” She knew what was in his mind, the questions he had, and she wasn’t going to
answer them, that was plain from the wolfishness of her smile.

With an effort, Lucas pulled his eyes away from her, looking over his shoulder at the Qunari who stood, arms stolidly folded across his chest, outside their compound. “I wish I knew what was stolen from them.”

“Stolen?” Isabela might have been turned to a statue, she’d gone so white and still.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” Of course, they hadn’t done much talking. He couldn’t help the smile, but there was no answering one on Isabela’s face. She was staring at him, her eyes as round as gold coins. “The Arishok said they can’t go back to Par Vollen until they recover something that was stolen on his watch. If he’d only said what it was, maybe I could find it for him, steal it back from whoever took it.”

“Your stealing skills aren’t that good,” Isabela said. She sounded surprisingly hesitant—he’d never heard her unsure about her banter before, and wondered if she was nervous teasing him now that they’d been to bed together. Maker, he hoped not. That would be awkward … and no fun, either.

He grinned at her. “Isn’t that what I keep you around for?”

The sally appeared to have flopped, though, because she just gave him a withering glance. “Not where Qunari are concerned.” She moved past him. “See you later, Hawke.” And then she was off, weaving her way through the crowds on the dock, leaving Lucas to stare after her and wonder if she’d meant she really wanted to see him later, or if it was simply an inevitable consequence of living in the same town, or if it was just a thing she said.

“Hawke, do you think it would itch?”

“What?” He turned in surprise, having forgotten Merrill was there. “What would itch?”

She was frowning in concentration. “Varric’s chest hair.”

He took a deep breath. “I imagine it would, yes. Which I suppose would be nice for anyone who liked that kind of thing.”

“Elves don’t have much hair.”

“Good to know.” Lucas turned and nearly jogged to the Qunari outside the compound. Anything to get out of any further contemplations of Varric as a bed partner!

“Basra.” The Qunari deigned to tilt his head down to look Lucas in the eye, which he recognized as a sign of respect. “You are allowed, as long as the Arishok deems it so.”

“Yes, I’ve gotten that message.”

“Have you business here?”

“I need to speak to the Arishok. I have information he will want.”

“Very well. Pass.” The Qunari stepped aside, and Lucas went on, feeling the wary eyes of every Qunari in the compound on him as he went. It didn’t build his confidence to know that his only support was a slender elven mage, however powerful she might be.

The Arishok was hunched over on his grand chair, staring at the ground between his boots. He looked up, slowly, as Hawke and Merrill approached. “Hawke. What do you want? I have no
interest in adding to my distractions.”

Lucas itched to ask what was so fascinating about the floor of the compound that the Arishok didn’t want to be distracted from, but his errand was too serious to get himself killed over having a smart mouth. “You sent a delegate to the Viscount.”

“Yes.” The Arishok’s head lifted a little more, his eyes narrowing as he studied Lucas with new interest. “It was an attempt, in response to the saar-qamek and our part in that … problem.”

“I’m sure I’ll regret telling you this, but … your delegate is missing.” He held his breath, waiting for the explosion, but there was none. Lucas could feel a tension in the air, though, a stillness, as though dozens of Qunari were holding their breath, as well, waiting to hear what would be said. The hairs prickled on the back of his neck. One wrong word …

“If you were anyone else, those words would have been your last.” The Arishok spoke slowly, calmly, deliberately, but his words were heavy with the threat for all that.

“No one else would have dared to tell you.”

“Yes, I have no doubt of that. You are handling this travesty yourself?” At Lucas’s nod, the Arishok nodded as well. “Then I will stay my hand. For now. But know this—the provocations we have suffered have been effective. I can fulfill my duty to the Qun most easily by sifting through rubble.”

They stared at each other, and at last Lucas let out his breath. “Understood, Arishok. I will report to you as soon as I know anything.”

“Do that.” It was a dismissal, and Lucas took it gratefully.

As they left the compound, Merrill, who had been watching the whole thing with wide, fascinated eyes, said, “I was wondering what he wore under those strange pants of his, and now I finally know—nothing at all. Qunari don’t have much hair, either.”

Lucas turned his head slowly to stare at her, as always unsure if she was crazy or just clueless. “Thank you, Merrill. Good to know.”
Sin and Donnic

It was getting on in the day, the shadows lengthening in the depths of Lowtown as Lucas and Merrill emerged from the docks. It seemed as good a time as any to head for the Hanged Man and look for the corrupt guardsman there. Lucas didn’t like to admit it to himself, but he was disappointed in Aveline. She took such pride in announcing how carefully she selected her guardsmen—how could she have admitted someone who was willing to sell himself to the highest bidder?

The bar was bustling, as it always seemed to be. Lucas suspected that the owner of the Hanged Man must be the richest person in Kirkwall, selling off cheap booze at such a rate. He wondered who it was. Varric loudly disclaimed any ownership in the place, but it didn’t do to put too much stock in what Varric said.

“Serah Hawke, there you are.”

Lucas was startled by the voice, and by the tall presence looming out of the crowd, having entirely forgotten about Aveline’s mission of romance. “Guardsman Donnic.” He hoped the name came out heartily enough to cover the fact that he hadn’t remembered the man was supposed to be there.

“Have a drink.”

“Already have one. Serah Varric was good enough to treat me.”

“Varric’s a prince, all right.” Lucas looked for the dwarf, but saw no sign of him. “Where is he?”

“He said something about an important meeting.”

“No doubt he’s hiding from it. I’ve never known Varric to actually go to a meeting unless physically dragged there and tied to a chair.”

“Hm.” Donnic nodded politely, but it was evident he had no interest in Varric’s feelings about meetings. “Serah, is there a reason you asked me to meet you here? You said something about a job, if memory serves. Although I must tell you I’m not comfortable taking outside work without the Captain’s express permission.”

“Oh, you’ll have that, don’t worry.” Lucas did his best to keep the smile off his face and the twinkle out of his eye. “First thing, though …” He looked around the room, but had to admit that without their uniforms he couldn’t tell a guardsman from a Templar. “I’m looking for a guardsman, perhaps one who was supposed to be on duty this morning and didn’t show. Do you see such a person in here?”

Donnic raised an eyebrow, but took advantage of his greater height and far more extensive knowledge of the guardsmen to look above the crowds. “I see several of my fellows here. Hm. Well, that’s odd.”

“What is?”

“That’s Oswald. I thought—he begged off this morning, said he was ill.”

“He is,” Lucas said shortly, muscling his way through the crowds in the direction Donnic had indicated.

The man in question, a red-head with a thick mustache, was at the bar surrounded by a large number of bottles. The labels were of some of the finest brands money could buy … but Lucas rather
suspected the contents were less high quality. Corff did like to soak a sucker. Lucas had seen Fenris
supplementing his income by selling off his empty wine bottles to Corff, and it was doubtful Fenris
was the only one.

Lucas shoved his way past all of Oswald’s newfound friends to stand next to him at the bar, but
Donnic got there first. “I thought you were ailing, Oswald.”

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” Oswald looked around Donnic, then up at the big guardsman. “I felt better. Is
that a crime?”

“Yesterday, you borrowed money from Brennan because you hadn’t a copper to your name, you
said.” Donnic crossed his arms over his chest, gazing down at Oswald. Lucas had been intending to
accost the guardsman himself, but it worked just as well to let Donnic do it. He had to admit, he liked
the man so far—Aveline appeared to have made a good choice. Come to think of it, she ought to be
here. He hoped nothing had held her up. She’d have been quite useful right about now.

Oswald sneered at Donnic. “Yeah, that’s right. Yesterday I was short on cash, but tonight I’m paid
…and blessed.”

“Do you want to explain what it is you mean by that?”

“Wish you could’ve gotten in on it, then? All I had to do was turn my head, and more coin than I see
in a month as a guardsman rained down on me.”

“Turn your head?”

“Yeah. So I didn’t see those filthy ox-men walking out of the Keep, or what happened to them when
they did.”

Lucas was angered by the man’s response, but his reaction had nothing on Donnic’s. The tall
guardsman closed his hand on the collar of Oswald’s shirt, lifting the smaller man by it. Oswald
gurgled, kicking his legs, as the front of his shirt collar constricted his windpipe. Eyes blazing,
Donnic shook him.

“You’re unfit to wear a guardsman’s uniform! How dare you take money to betray the delegates of a
foreign nation. If the Qunari attack over this, and they very well might, the blood of every person
they harm is on your hands,” Donnic raged.

Oswald’s hands were scrabbling at his shirt, undoing the top two buttons to relieve the pressure on
his throat. He wheezed, “Should’ve known better than to tell you. Everyone knows about you,
wanting to get in the captain’s pants.”

Donnic’s face froze, and Lucas did his best to keep his eyebrows from flying up off his head. So, the
wind sat in that corner, did it? Wasn’t that interesting.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed this,” he said conversationally to Oswald, “but Donnic’s about twice
your size, and he’s holding you up like a puppy. Do you really think it’s a wise idea to piss him off?”

The shirt had tightened again as the slack allowed Oswald to sag forward against the edge of the
unbuttoned collar. He tried to speak, his face turning red.

“How about,” Lucas continued, “if you tell me who paid you … and blessed you … and I’ll see
about asking Donnic politely if he’ll put you down.”

Oswald’s head bobbed up and down frantically. Lucas looked up at Donnic, who frowned and then
let go of the collar. Oswald sprawled on the ground at their feet. Lucas put his foot on the man’s back to keep him from getting up.

“Who was it?”

“It—it was a Templar! I just did what he said, that’s all!”

“Since when is a guardsman in the practice of taking orders from Templars?” Donnic asked sharply.

“He had the seal of the Grand Cleric!” Oswald moaned. “Please, can I go now?”

“Start walking and don’t stop until Kirkwall has seen the last of you,” Lucas said, removing his foot. “You’re through here. If I ever set eyes on you again, I’ll bring you to the Arishok and you can explain your actions to him.”

Oswald scrambled to his feet and hurried out, wide-eyed at the threat.

“Thanks for your help,” Lucas said, turning to Donnic.

“Was that what you asked me here for?”

“Not exactly.”

“What, then?” Donnic was frowning at him suspiciously.

“About … what Oswald said—“

“Look, if you’re trying to get to the captain through me, you can think again,” Donnic said. “Have some backbone; talk to her yourself.”

“Like you have?”

The shot hit. Donnic and Lucas were left staring at one another. Then Donnic straightened his shoulders. “Good-night, Serah Hawke.” He left the Hanged Man, walking stiffly, just in time to miss Aveline’s grand entrance down the staircase.

“You took your sweet time,” Lucas snapped at her, noting the loosened hair, the faint hint of perfume, and the still severe tunic and pants that had replaced her armor.

“Varric. All this frippery,” she growled, but her eyes shifted. It hadn’t been entirely Varric and his frippery, such as it was—she was nervous, and had been stalling.

“Aveline.”

“Fine. I couldn’t do it, is that what you want me to say?”

“No, I wanted you to come down here five minutes ago so Donnic could have seen how nice you look.”

“He’s gone, then?” Her mouth turned down, her whole face seeming to droop.

“He is, thinking I arranged this whole thing to get to you through him.”

Aveline huffed a little laugh. “That would have been clever of you.”

“No, it wouldn’t have. You’d never have fallen for something like that.” He put his hands on her
shoulders, looking into her eyes. “Aveline, what are you going to do about this?”

“I don’t know. I’m an idiot.” She sighed.

“Admitting it is a good step.” Lucas gave her a little shake and a smile. “Now where to?”

“The barracks. Ferelden. The deepest hole I can find.”

“You’re not the hiding type. You never have been, not since the day I met you standing there in the midst of a crowd of darkspawn and shouting at them to get back before you kill them. What’s changed now? Why is Donnic scarier than darkspawn?”

“Because … because I don’t want him to get scared and run away when I shout at him.” Aveline’s voice was a mere whisper. “I freeze up. I’m only comfortable when on patrol, doing what I know how to do. But I can’t fight and talk.”

“Fine. Then you set up a patrol; I’ll do the fighting and clear the way for you, you do the talking.”

Aveline frowned. “That doesn’t sound romantic.”

“Maybe not, but it sounds like you. Will you give it a try?”

“All right. Thank you, Hawke.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s a new service I provide, along with tracking down missing Qunari and cleaning up the messes of Kirkwall’s finest citizens.”

“Did you find the Qunari?”

“No, but I have a good lead. Meet me at the Chantry first thing tomorrow morning.”

“The Chantry?”

Lucas nodded. “It appears so.”

Aveline shook her head, scowling. “Should’ve known. See you tomorrow, Hawke.”

She left, and Lucas headed up the stairs to Varric’s room. The dwarf was writing away, tucked in a cozy chair in front of the fire. He looked up as Lucas came in. “How did it go?”

“It didn’t. Donnic was already gone.”

Varric nodded. “I thought as much when she took so long. She going to try again?”

“If I have to drag her to his room at midnight,” Lucas said grimly.

The dwarf leaned back in his chair, laughing. “I’d pay good coin to see that.”

“Now you sound like Isabela,” Lucas remarked without thinking. Varric’s eyebrow raised and he opened his mouth. “Not a word. Not a syllable, unless you want me to tell the Merchant’s Guild how much you made on the last shipment that came in.”

“You wouldn’t!”

Lucas raised his own eyebrow in response.

Varric swore good-naturedly.
“Why are you up here, anyway?” Lucas asked. “Shouldn’t you have come down with Aveline yourself to see the results of your handiwork? She looked quite nice.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Varric said indigently. “I do nice work.”

Lucas folded his arms, perching on a table near the door and swinging one leg. “What’s going on, Varric? I can read you like a book.”

“Oh, that’s a good one. Where it comes to people, Hawke, you’re functionally illiterate.”

“Hey!”

“Charming, but illiterate. Nonetheless … there is something. It’s good that you’re sitting down. I’ve got some news about—about Bartrand.”

As always when he heard that name, Lucas’s mind flashed him a picture of Bethany’s clouded eyes and pale, greyed face, and he had to fight the urge to vomit.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly,” Varric said.

“Tell me he said the wrong thing to an Antivan spice merchant and was eviscerated.”

“I wish. No, it appears my dear brother is back in Kirkwall.”

Lucas was on his feet, fists clenched. “Tell me where.”

“I don’t know where, yet. I’m working on it. He’s got to know he can’t afford for me to find out where he is, so he’ll be keeping a low profile.” Varric gave a half-hearted smile. “No dwarf jokes, please.”

“I want to know as soon as you do.”

“Don’t worry, Hawke. We’ll make him answer for what happened to Bethany.”

“Damn right we will.”

They stared at each other for a minute before Varric cleared his throat. “I was kind of on a roll, here. Anything else I can do for you tonight?”

“There was something, but I can’t remember what.”

“Let me know if it comes to you.”

“Will do.”

Lucas found himself on the outside of Varric’s door, staring at another one just down the hall. He hadn’t let himself think about her today, hadn’t wanted to touch on the question of what was next, but now that he was here … His legs started moving of their own volition, until he was standing just in front of that closed door, ready to knock.
Sleeping with the Rivaini

Lucas felt like an idiot, standing there frozen in the hallway of the Hanged Man, his hand raised to knock at Isabela’s door. Would she laugh at him? Was she waiting for him? Would she send him home and tell him she’d had what she wanted?

He hadn’t even known what he wanted—he still didn’t, if he was going to tell himself the truth—but somehow all this long day while he’d been working to fix everyone else’s problems, the memory of Isabela in his arms had made him feel that at last, he might have gotten something back from Kirkwall, some bit of comfort or happiness. And he didn’t think he could just leave it at one night without at least trying to see what more there might be. Lucas didn’t pretend that Isabela could be a long-term choice; she’d made her distaste for such things more than clear. But for the short term, perhaps there was comfort to be found there in her arms.

The door was yanked open in the midst of his inner romantic wittering, and Isabela stood there, arms folded, tapping her booted foot on the floor. “Any minute now, Hawke.”

“You knew I was there?”

“A pirate doesn’t live long without devising some ways to tell when someone is approaching her door. What do you want?”

The blunt question rocked him back on his heels. Didn’t she know? Or was that a hint that once was enough and she was done with him? Lucas stammered, “I was just … checking to see … if you needed anything.”

“Like a good hard session of knocking boots?” Her frown eased, a twinkle appearing in her amber eyes.

“Something like that.”

“Hawke, you’re too serious. You need to lighten up, have some more fun.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Got anything in mind?”

“What, I have to do all the work?”

He shrugged, trying to smother the slow smile that wanted to spread across his face. “Maybe I don’t know how to have fun. Can you think of a better teacher than you?”

Their eyes met and held, and Isabela chuckled. “You win. Come on in, big boy.”

Lucas didn’t wait to be told twice, moving past her into the room while she shut the door. “Nice place you have here.”

“You think that line up all on your own?”

He gave her the most exaggerated pout he could muster. “I worked on it all the way here.”

“Cute. Be cuter if you were naked.” Isabela hopped on the bed, crossing her legs. “Strip for me, Hawke.”

Why was he so nervous? Lucas wondered, fingers clumsily attacking the buttons on his shirt. This was hardly the first time he’d been with a woman; it wasn’t even the first time he’d been with
Isabela. And why were these buttons so damned small? “Sod it,” he muttered, and ripped the shirt open, buttons flying everywhere.

Isabela nimbly dodged the projectiles, laughing. “That’s more like it. Nice to see a little eagerness.”

“Says the woman still fully dressed.”

“Oh, did you want to see me naked?”

Her eyes were dancing with humor and her laugh was rich and warm and intoxicating, and Lucas didn’t want to wait another moment. He leaped at her, sending her backward onto the bed with him on top of her.

“Mm. I do like a man with initiative,” she murmured. “What else you have in mind, Hawke?”

His fingers were busy at the laces of her tunic, opening it so that her breasts spilled out of the front, and he answered her question with his mouth, teeth and tongue teasing her skin.

Isabela arched her back, offering him easier access to her delights, and wriggled a bit to pull the tunic down off her shoulders. Seeing the effect the movement had on him, she kept wriggling until the garment lay on the floor. Lucas’s big hands traced the lines of her body, cupping her thigh and tugging until her leg was wrapped around his waist. Only then did he kiss her, reveling in the feel of her naked body moving beneath his.

He couldn’t get enough of her, framing her face with his hands to hold her still as he kissed her again and again.

She wasn’t content to lie still and be kissed for long, though. Her legs tightened around his waist and with a sudden thrust she was on top of him, rubbing herself against the ridge of his erection, still trapped in his pants.

“Please, Isabela.”

“Pleading already? You’re too eager.” But she submitted to his unspoken request and slid farther down, working the buttons and letting him loose.

Lucas kicked his pants across the room, his smallclothes caught halfway down his legs, and began to reach for her, but his hands fell to his side as he felt the wet heat of her mouth envelop him. She knew how, too, licking and nibbling and sucking. He had wanted to hold back, but Isabela was having none of it, and he tumbled helplessly over the edge with her mouth still on him.

She sat back on her thighs, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and grinned at him.

“That was no fair.”

“Don’t they say all’s fair in love … and war?”

“Which was that?”

Isabela laughed, a deep rich sound that made Lucas smile in response. He sat up, wiggling his smallclothes the rest of the way off and sending them flying. “My turn.”

“Oh, Hawke. I thought you’d never ask.” She pushed him back onto the bed, climbing over him until she was just above his mouth.

Lucas lost himself in the taste and scent of her, in the moans and cries that grew louder and louder, in
the twitches and shudders of her body in response to his ministrations.

“Oh. Oh! Oh—Hawke!” she shouted at last, pressing her palms against the wall to steady herself as she climaxed.

He had to admit, he did enjoy the way she said his name at her peak. Possibly next time he could get her to say “Lucas”, he thought, sprawling across the bed as she got up and cleaned herself off a bit.

“Off you go, then,” she said briskly.

“Are you joking?”

“I don’t sleep with men, Hawke. How many times do I have to make that plain?”

Lucas propped himself up on his elbows, looking at her. “Why not?”

“Because men are saps. And once they see you sleeping … everything changes.”

“I saw you sleeping last night.”

“And everything will change. Just wait.”

“Maybe things need to change, you ever think of that?” He sat up, watching her as she tugged the tunic back over her head and straightened its fit.

“Hawke. Don’t start with that.”

“That?”

“That whole love nonsense.”

“Who mentioned anything about love?” He frowned. “Isabela, you’ve been chasing me for years, hounding me with incessant sexual innuendoes. Now you’ve caught me, and you want me to believe twice is enough? Either you’re a coward, or I’m very bad … and the sheer amount of coin I’ve spent at the Blooming Rose suggests the first one seems more likely.”

She glared at him. “Fine. We can do it again, but you can’t stay here.”

“I’ve had about enough of this. Look, you’ve been working with me for a long time. I think you should have learned enough respect for me by now to give me the benefit of the doubt. I’m not looking for a lifetime, Isabela. I don’t even know if I have a lifetime, or … what kind of lifetime I would want. But I know that being here with you is a lot nicer than going home to a cold empty bed and a mother who wants me to fill it with an equally cold empty noble. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time—in case you haven’t noticed, the daily life of Lucas Hawke, scion of the Amell family, isn’t exactly a hootenanny.”

“Ever been to a hootenanny, Hawke?”

“Dozens of them. Remember, I grew up in farm country. Want me to show you?”

“Maybe some other time.” But her hands had stilled on her tunic, leaving it half-laced.

“I’m not trying to make this more than it is. Why are you?”

Her eyes widened, her mouth falling open for a moment. Then the pirate was back, her eyes hardening to the color of a sovereign and her mouth shutting. “I’m not. What would make you think
such a thing?"

“Good, then.” Lucas was relieved. This had been supposed to be a nice uncomplicated tumble at
first. The fact that he wanted more had surprised him a little, but the fact that she was afraid of him
wanting more had surprised him a lot. “Does that mean you’ll come back to bed?”

“Can I leave my boots on?”

“Why not? If I could ask, though …”

“Yes?” Isabela paused, looking at him with steely trepidation.

“The necklaces. They pull my chest hair.”

“Well, that can be fun.” She gave him a wicked grin.

“Possibly, but not restful.”

“Oh, I don’t think you should expect to be resting any time soon.”
The chirping of birds often woke Lucas in his home in Hightown, which he found alternately charming and sickeningly precious, depending on his mood and how much he’d had to drink the night before. This morning, what he at first thought was an extremely large and unmelodic bird turned out to be the crashing of broken glass downstairs in the bar, which he realized after he had opened his eyes and remembered where he was.

“’Bout time you woke up.” Isabela was already dressed and applying her makeup in front of a mirror.

He watched her, bemused. Strange though it seemed, it had never occurred to him that Isabela actually put on her makeup—it had always been such a part of her that Lucas was surprised to think of her without any. He wondered what that looked like, and immediately set that as a task for himself, to wake up one morning early enough to see her natural beauty. Or to bathe with her. Mm, yes, he thought, definitely that one.

“No time for that, lover.” Isabela was smirking at him over her shoulder. Apparently his thoughts hadn’t been difficult to read. “Man-hands is downstairs waiting for you, said something about the Chantry. You going off to pray for forgiveness for your many sins, Hawke?”

“Possibly to thank the Maker for the good sense to finally take a sexy pirate up on her many offers,” he said, climbing out of bed and beginning to search for his clothes.

Isabela snorted, leaning forward to line her eyes with a black pencil. Lucas paused in what he was doing, watching, and was astounded at the difference it made. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

“What?”

“All that. With the goop and the stuff and the … stuff.” He waved his hand to encompass the many bottles and jars on her dressing table.

“That? My mother. Only good thing the hag ever did for me. ‘Course, she only did it so I’d bring in a better price.” She rolled her eyes at herself in the mirror. “Want to hear some of the other things she trained me in?”

There was danger in her tone, and Lucas recognized the signal. “I think I’ll pass. Some other time, maybe.”

“Yes.”

“See you tonight?”

She pursed her lips, dipping her finger into a jar and coloring them, before answering. “Maybe not tonight. Maybe tomorrow night.”

“As you wish.”

Isabela turned around, narrowing her eyes at him. “Don’t get cute with me, Hawke.”

“You,” he told her, gathering up the last of his belongings, “are no fun. Work on that, will you?” He touched the bottom of her chin with two fingers, turning her face up to him.
“Out you go,” she said, but without the tartness he would have expected from her.

“Before Aveline knocks the door down.” Lucas grinned.

“She wouldn’t dare; she might see someone having fun. I think the sight would turn her blind.”

Lucas chuckled, closing the door behind him. He hurried down the hall, not ready for Aveline to see him leaving Isabela’s room first thing in the morning. Of course, he realized, too late, Aveline had come here looking for him. She would either have to know where he had spent the night, or he’d have to come up with a much better lie than he usually was capable of.

Fortunately, Varric had Aveline so worked up about the previous night’s fiasco with Donnic that she barely spared a moment for a distracted greeting for Lucas in the midst of her tirade against the dwarf for “gussying her up”. Varric took it well, at least.

“Let’s go,” Lucas said, cutting into another blast of words. “You can relieve all your frustrations on the Grand Cleric.”

Aveline and Varric followed him out of the bar. Lowtown looked almost cheerful this morning, rays of sun filtering through the buildings and actually landing on the pavement. He said as much to Varric.

“Hawke, you didn’t sample the wares this morning, did you?” The dwarf realized what he had said and laughed, highly pleased with himself. “Apparently you did. A fine vintage, so I’m told.”

“Shut up, Varric.”

The dwarf obediently stopped laughing, but a smirk remained firmly fixed on his face. Lucas sighed in exasperation and moved faster to catch up with Aveline, who was already on her way up the long stairs to Hightown.

“You don’t really think the Grand Cleric is involved in this Qunari nightmare, do you, Hawke?”

Lucas spread his hands apart in an eloquent gesture. “I wouldn’t think so, from what I’ve seen of Elthina, but it’s hard to tell with people. They keep their thoughts and feelings buried so far inside them.” He sighed, looking ahead up the stairs, and missed the startled look Aveline gave him.

“I’ve never heard you talk like that before.”

“Doubtless you haven’t. Kirkwall gives me a lot to think about.”

“Anything in particular on your mind?”

He shook his head. “Today all I want is to settle this Qunari nightmare, as you call it, once and for all.”

Aveline grunted an agreement, and they saved their breath for the climb. Lucas often wondered how Varric, with his shorter legs, managed it, but the dwarf never seemed bothered by the long stairs. Come to think of it, Varric never seemed bothered by much of anything—except Bartrand and the Merchants’ Guild.

Another long flight of stairs brought them to the Chantry, where a man in blinding white armor approached Lucas. “Serah Hawke!”

Lucas frowned, trying to place the man and the accent. Ah, yes. “Brother Sebastian, isn’t it?”
“Brother no longer, I’m afraid. After you aided me in finding the mercenaries who killed my family, I renounced my vows in order to go home to Starkhaven, but …” He looked around him, his eyes misting. “I can’t bring myself to leave this behind so easily.”

“I see.” He rather envied Sebastian his calling, which was clearly genuine. “Would it be possible for us to see the Grand Cleric?”

Sebastian frowned, looking over Lucas’s shoulder at Varric and Aveline with some curiosity. “Perhaps. I would have to ask her.”

“Could you go and do that, then?” Lucas said, holding onto his patience with both hands.

“There’s no need for that, Sebastian.” Lucas was all too familiar with the cold, clear voice and with the sharp face and glittering blue eyes of the woman who came from a doorway behind him and put herself in his path.

“Sister Petrice.”

“Mother Petrice,” she said with a malicious triumph he wasn’t sure he deserved. “It seems we’ve both gone up in the world, Serah Hawke. Unfortunately, Grand Cleric Elthina cannot grant an audience to just anyone. Why don’t you tell me what it is you need to know, and I’ll see you get answered.”

Varric muttered, “I bet you will.”

Lucas snorted a little at the dwarf’s comment, but he kept his eyes on Petrice. “I’d be willing to make a bet of my own that you know just why I’m here, Petrice. Funny how you and issues with the Qunari seem to go together.”

“And you always assume their side.”

Sebastian was watching them both closely as they stared at one another.

“I assumed their side before because to assume yours would have been to let them kill me,” Lucas pointed out.

“I did not wish you dead … but a death was necessary. Perhaps that is too fine a point for you to comprehend, but you can’t deny you came out the better for it.”

“As did you.”

“Hawke, what is this all about?” Sebastian asked.

“We have reason to believe that a Templar may have abused the Grand Cleric’s authority.”

“That is impossible,” Petrice snapped. “No Templar would dare.”

Lucas turned on her, practically shouting. This woman brought out all the worst in him. “Her seal was used in the abduction of the Qunari!”

Petrice’s face froze except for a muscle twitching in her jaw.

“That pause says you knew about this,” Aveline said, taking a step toward the Mother. “Did the Grand Cleric?”

“She would never!” Sebastian said, shocked.
“The Grand Cleric trusts her stewards to enact the wishes of the Maker,” Petrice said unwillingly.

“Oh, Petrice,” Lucas said. He shook his finger at her admonishingly. “It sounds like you’ve been very bad. This will shock Her Grace, no doubt.”

Petrice looked at him, then at Aveline, and then over Lucas’s shoulder at Sebastian. Her gaze met Lucas’s again with a mixture of defiance and defeat. “Very well, then. My former bodyguard, Ser Varnell, has become a radical. I offer him to you as … reconciliation.”

“That’ll be the day,” Varric said, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Ignoring him, Petrice went on, “Meet me in Darktown this afternoon.” Hastily, she whispered directions to the meeting place, then turned and hurried away up the stairs, leaving them all staring at her retreating back.

“Need I say I’m skeptical?” Aveline said.

Lucas shrugged. “It’s her game, for the moment. We’ll just have to watch for the right time to make our move.”

“Hawke, has this been going on long?” Sebastian asked. “I cannot believe Mother Petrice could be responsible—“

“Can’t you?” Lucas asked mildly. “You must not have spent much time with her. Would you care to come along and see what ‘Mother’ Petrice is capable of?”

Sebastian nodded. Lucas hoped the former brother wouldn’t get in the way in combat … but it never hurt to open someone else’s eyes to what was going on around here. Some day one of them might take it all off his hands, he thought hopefully as he led them all down the Chantry steps.
As they moved down the shining, freshly scrubbed white marble steps of the Chantry, Aveline fell into step next to Sebastian. “It surprises me to see you still in Kirkwall, Brother Vael.”

“Please, just Sebastian. I am no longer a brother of the Chantry, and … I am not certain whether I deserve my family’s name.” His voice dropped to a near-whisper with the admission.

“Because you haven’t returned to your home and your people, to take up the reins?”

Lucas winced at the bluntness of the question, even though it was what they had all wanted to ask. Next to him, he heard a soft amused snort and saw the upward quirk of Varric’s mouth.

Sebastian was not amused, nor did he seem offended. He responded thoughtfully to Aveline’s query. “I was not trained to rule—I was meant for the Chantry from the start, since my parents already had the ‘heir and the spare’, and I do not know if I would be doing the people of Starkhaven any favors to give them as ruler a callow youth with no experience. Also …” He cleared his throat self-consciously. “While I had thought that when Hawke destroyed Flint Company my vengeance was achieved, I have since discovered—I have new information that makes things feel … unfinished.”

“What kind of new information?”

“I know now who hired the mercenaries. Knowing who was behind the deaths of my family makes it much harder to view the deaths of Flint Company as justice.”

Aveline frowned. “Death without the rule of law is never justice.”

“That’s debatable,” Varric whispered under his breath, and Lucas knew he was thinking of Bartrand.

“Who was it, Sebastian?” Lucas asked.

“The Harimanns. They’re a noble family of Kirkwall. I grew up with their children—they were my parents’ allies.” There was great pain in Sebastian’s voice. “I cannot believe they betrayed my parents that way.”

“I’ve heard of the Harimanns. They say Johane Harimann is basically a recluse.” Varric made a glugging sound, tipping his hand above his mouth like a bottle, while trying to hide the gesture from Sebastian.

“Why would they turn on your family, then?” Aveline asked.

Sebastian threw up his hands. “Money? Power? Who can say. Lady Harimann was always jealous of my family, because my parents were royalty and she was mere nobility.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. Sebastian made the statement simply, without boasting, but it was clear this distinction was one Sebastian thoroughly understood and took for granted.

“I can’t imagine that pushing her into outright murder, though,” Sebastian continued, his accent thickening with emotion. “There’s just no sense to it!”

“What are you going to do?”

“Do? I—I need to talk to her, to ask her why.”
“They should pay for their crimes against your family, Sebastian,” Lucas said. In his mind’s eye he saw Carver, thrown aside like a broken toy; Bethany, her face streaked with taint. Who would pay for his siblings?

“No,” Sebastian said, softly but firmly. “Unless I understand why they did it, any revenge I might take will be hollow, at best. I must speak with Lady Harimann.”

In the silence, Varric chuckled. “Here it comes, Hawke.”

“You see,” Sebastian went on, paying no attention to Varric’s comment, “I am the last of my line. Therefore it behooves me to be cautious and to take certain precautions to protect myself.” He paused, then continued, his voice slightly louder. “I should not go alone and make myself a target.”

“Hawke,” Aveline said.

Lucas closed his eyes and shook his head. Here it went again.

Varric grinned at him. “I don’t know why Choirboy here didn’t just yell ‘Hawke to the rescue!’ to begin with. It’s what everyone else does.”

“‘Choirboy’?” Sebastian asked.

“He nicknames everyone,” Aveline told him. “Everyone except for me and Hawke, so far.”

“And Bianca. Don’t forget Bianca.”

“How could we possibly?” Lucas asked. He glanced over his shoulder at Sebastian. “If the Arishok doesn’t kill me today, come to my place when you’re ready to talk to this Lady Harimann, and I’ll accompany you.”

Without waiting for a response, he climbed onto the lift down to Darktown. As the blackness closed in around them, the creaking mechanism lowering them slowly into the depths of the muck that lay below Kirkwall, he heard Sebastian whisper to Aveline, “Will the Arishok really kill him?”

Lucas felt rather than saw Aveline’s expressive shrug of the shoulders. “Anyone else, probably. Hawke … might have a chance.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Varric said.

“It’s more or less what the Viscount said when he saddled me with this task.”

The lift landed in the depths of Darktown and Lucas got out, squinting in the light. It was very dim, but after the pitch darkness of the lift, it seemed bright. Thinking of Petrice’s directions, Lucas scrutinized the markings on the wall in front of him and then took a left and another left, then a series of rights. The particular pit of despair chosen for this little event was even gloomier than usual for Darktown and stank of dead rats.

“Have to hand it to this Varnell,” Varric muttered. “Nice place for an extremist rally.”

“Varnell? This is Petrice’s handiwork. She loves slumming—remember that hovel in Lowtown? She’s here somewhere.” Lucas didn’t bother looking for her; she’d show up when it was least convenient.

“That’s great. Can’t wait to see her.” Varric climbed a set of rickety steps, watching for traps as they went.
Lucas didn’t think he would find any—this rally was the trap. He wished for Fenris, or Isabela, or even Merrill, in Sebastian’s place. The Chantry brother was an unknown quantity. Lucas just hoped he wouldn’t get killed in the fray that was sure to come. It would have to look bad, getting a Chantry brother killed in a rescue mission for the Qunari.

Ahead of them, he heard a voice, shouting. “Like any beast, remove the fangs and it is lost. They are weak before the faithful of the Maker!” There was a smothered groan of pain before he went on. “The only certainty in their precious Qun is death before the righteous!” The venom with which the voice said “death” and the louder groan that followed, as well as the cheer that went up, gave little doubt as to what was happening.

“They’re killing the Qunari,” Aveline said grimly.

“Shit! We’re too late.”

Lucas agreed with Varric’s sentiments, but he was saving his breath and his energy for that damned Petrice.

They rounded a corner, and he recognized Ser Varnell from their meetings several years ago in Lowtown. The Templar, still fully armored—so not so rogue after all, Lucas thought—stood in front of a Qunari. The warrior was chained to the wall, thoroughly, so that he couldn’t move a muscle. Before Lucas could cry out, much less cross the room and stop him, Varnell buried a knife in the only unchained portion of the Qunari’s body, his neck. Blood spurted across the room, spattering the Templar and several of the faithful, when Varnell removed the knife.

Two other dead Qunari hung, similarly chained and bloody, next to the one Varnell had just killed. One remained. The shouts of the crowd, urging Varnell on, drowned out the sounds of Lucas and his party’s approach.

The Templar whirled to the last Qunari, whose eyes blazed with defiance.

“Beg for your life, oxman!” one of the crowd-members screamed. Of course, the Qunari did no such thing. He didn’t even speak as Varnell’s knife approached his throat.

An arrow flew from somewhere to Lucas’s right. It couldn’t find purchase in the Templar’s armor, but the impact was enough to knock the unprepared Varnell to the side. His knife scored the neck of the Qunari instead of sinking in. Blood flowed from the wound rather than spurting.

Lucas turned in surprise to see Sebastian nocking another arrow, and his impression of the Chantry brother went up a notch or two.

“Good shot, Choirboy,” Varric whispered.

“Ser Varnell!” The cold, clear voice cut through the rest of the noise in the room, and Lucas looked up to see Petrice appear on a platform above Varnell’s head.

“Take a knee, faithful. The Chantry blesses us,” Varnell said, suitting his actions to his words. His ‘flock’, such as the ragged and unkempt mass of people surrounding him might be, followed his lead.

Scornfully, Petrice cried, “You claim a blessing? When you have used the power of the Grand Cleric so openly? You have brought wrath down upon you.”

Even though Lucas was completely aware of the depth of Petrice’s hypocrisy, he still found her words compelling. No wonder she gained followers, he thought.
Petrice gestured in Lucas’s direction. “You remember Serah Hawke? The Qunari have friends. How will you answer their allegations?”

Varnell responded by rising swiftly to his feet and savagely completing the job on the last Qunari. Lucas watched this, feeling conflicted. Certainly he wasn’t on the side of death … but could he truly be sad about four less Qunari in Kirkwall? The uprising was coming, he could feel it in the Arishok’s growing anger. These four Qunari taken out today wouldn’t be wielding their blades against the citizens of Kirkwall. It was hard to be sorry about that.

On the other hand, this wasn’t the way. This secrecy, this flouting of the law, this incitement of mob violence—this did nothing but undermine the rule of law in Kirkwall and endanger the citizens in another way.

“You want a fight?” Lucas shouted. “Face someone whose weapons are not bound!” To prove his point, he drew his blade. Next to him, he heard the scrape of metal as Aveline drew hers as well.

A smile lit the Templar’s face. “Righteous! Destroy them!”

“Destroy them?” Sebastian asked. “Look at us, and look at them. It’s a slaughter waiting to happen.”

Lucas didn’t disagree, but the mob certainly did. “Try telling them that.”

Varnell’s rabble were on their feet, drawing homemade bows, shivs, and daggers from the rags they wore. Their sheer numbers were impressive.

Bianca ratcheted and spat her silver barbs, and three of the unarmored oncomers went down with leg wounds.

Just before he closed with the first of the crowd, Lucas glanced up to the platform and saw that Petrice had disappeared. Naturally. He put all his frustration into the blow of his pommel against the temple of first person he could reach—a red-haired man, not much more than a boy, who crumpled to the ground at Lucas’s feet.

Moving through the mass of people, Lucas parried all the blows he could. He didn’t want to kill these people—he only wanted to get past them and reach Varnell. The Templar was moving toward Lucas, clearly with the same thought in mind.

They came together in the center, their blades sparking as they clashed together. Lucas set himself to defeating the powerful Templar, his focus narrowing to the arms and legs and sword in front of him. He was vaguely aware of the distinctive sound of Bianca, the twang of arrows from Sebastian, and the familiar cries of Aveline in combat. He trusted to the three of them to keep the ‘righteous’ off his back.

Varnell knew what he was doing. He handled his blade easily, and Lucas was hard put to dodge the blows while trying to land some of his own. Varnell drew first blood, the tip of his sword catching Lucas in the joint of the armor at his shoulder. It hurt, but he was familiar with pain, and used to fighting through it. He ignored the sensation and continued the fight.

He was growing winded, his feet slowing, when he saw his chance. Varnell missed his footing as he stepped back from a thrust. He didn’t fall, but the momentary distraction allowed Lucas time to whirl his sword above his head, which enabled him to bring it down with extra force. Varnell leaped to the side at the last minute, which meant that Lucas’s mighty blow fell on his arm rather than his head or shoulder. Bone cracked beneath the sword blade, and Varnell’s left arm swung useless at his side. As the Templar screamed in pain, Lucas flipped his sword, striking Varnell square in the chest with the
pommel and sending him staggering backward.

“Hawke!” It was Varric’s voice, above what remained of the fray, and Lucas knew exactly what to do. He ducked, and a quarrel flew above his head and speared Varnell through the eye.

Lucas got to his feet again, blinking sweat out of his eyes. He surveyed the room. Most of the combatants were down. Some had clearly insisted on fighting to the death, but most had minor, incapacitating wounds. Aveline and Sebastian were busily tying them up while Varric trained Bianca on the last few, who appeared to have lost the will to fight with the death of Varnell.

“What now, Hawke?” Sebastian asked.

“Aveline, you’re going back to the Keep anyway to get your guardsmen for all these wretches?” Hawke asked. She nodded briskly, frowning around her at Varnell’s ‘faithful’. “Get the Viscount, too. Time to bring this mess to his attention.”

“Right.” She disappeared the way they had come.

“Meanwhile … Varric?” Lucas glanced at the dwarf, who already had his pack out and was unloading the healing supplies. “Let’s see what we can do for these poor deluded idiots.”

“Up yours,” snarled a bearded man at his feet.

“He goes last,” Lucas said to the dwarf, who accidentally managed to kick the man in the privates on his way past to treat a woman with an arrow through her hand.

“I am surprised that you did not kill more of them,” Sebastian observed. “Your reputation—“

“Is not always based on fact. If you’re going to last in Kirkwall, you’re going to have to learn not to believe everything you hear.”
Risk and Reward

Varric and Lucas, with Sebastian’s assistance, had the scene mostly cleaned up by the time the Viscount arrived. They had unchained the Qunari and laid their bodies out on the ground, uncertain how the Qunari chose to deal with their dead.

The Viscount stopped short at the sight, his jaw falling open. “Maker preserve us.”

Sebastian nodded his head, murmuring some lines of the Chant to himself.

“Your Excellency,” Aveline said, “these people were all involved, although the Templar there committed the murders.” She directed a few of her guardsmen to start collecting the crowd-members who could walk and talk and take them back to the Keep, with the rest in charge of getting the wounded medical assistance. With a concerned glance between Lucas and the Viscount, she headed back to the Keep herself to make sure the rioters were dealt with properly.

The Viscount, seeming oblivious to Aveline and her guardsmen’s hard work, walked through the room, staring down at the dead Qunari delegation. “Madness. This is madness!”

“Yeah, that’s one word for it,” Lucas muttered under his breath.

As if he hadn’t heard, the Viscount went on, carefully lifting the long skirt of his robe away from the blood that had spread beneath Varnell’s fallen body. “And Chantry involvement, as well? Even if they are fringe elements.” He clucked his tongue. “It could not be worse.”

“Her Grace had no knowledge of this,” Sebastian said, eager to keep Elthina’s name clear of this mess. “I trust she will deal with it swiftly.”

Lucas had yet to see the Grand Cleric do anything swiftly; he lacked Sebastian’s confidence that this matter would be any different.

The Viscount paid as little attention to Sebastian as he had to Aveline and Lucas. He surveyed the injured members of Varnell’s ‘faithful’. “You are sure this is all of them?”

Shaking his head, Lucas said, “A Mother serving the Grand Cleric allowed this to happen.” He ignored Sebastian’s horrified intake of breath. It would do no one any good to cover up Petrice’s involvement, even if it did embarrass the Grand Cleric. For that matter, if a little embarrassment got Elthina to take a more active role in Kirkwall, they would all benefit. Lucas considered himself a devout Andrastean, but he had never seen any divinity in Elthina’s particular brand of blinded ignorance. It was her duty to stand up to Meredith, and to Dumar, too, if it came to that, and she seemed unwilling—or unable—to carry out that part of her assigned tasks in the Maker’s service.

A groan from the Viscount dragged his attention back to the matter at hand. “Are you quite sure she was behind this? Did you see her brandish a weapon, or hear her tell them to fight you?”

“No. I can’t say that. But she incited them; there’s little doubt about that.”

“Of course not. Too much to be hoped that there would be anything overt. A blasted Mother!” The Viscount didn’t seem to have any trouble believing in the involvement of a Chantry official. He heaved a deep sigh, his shoulders rising and falling with it. “You have no idea the storm these allegations would cause. It would destroy what support I do have.”

Lucas couldn’t help bristling at the Viscount’s casual dismissal of his understanding of the political
situation. Who had been on the receiving end of the Arishok’s ranting and the Viscount’s own whining? Who had been in here stuck in between Chantry zealots who wanted to kill him and Qunari who would probably have wanted the same if he had managed to free them in time? No idea of the storm? Lucas knew all too well the size of the storm the Qunari were prepared to unleash on the city once they had enough provocation, and he knew equally well that there were people out there prepared to press the Qunari until they broke, no matter who was hurt in the process.

With those thoughts running through his head, he met Varric’s eyes. The dwarf was wearing a sardonic smile that said he knew exactly what Lucas was thinking—and also knew that Lucas wouldn’t speak his thoughts aloud.

“Do you think this Mother will return here?” the Viscount asked, appearing oblivious to Lucas’s silence.

“This will have scared her off. She won’t come back. If we’re lucky, she’ll lay low for a while.”

“She claimed that this was not her intention,” Sebastian put in.

Lucas snorted. Petrice could ‘claim’ that all she liked, but she had intended all of this, and worse. She wasn’t going to stop until she started a war.

The Viscount was looking at Sebastian, however—hearing what he wanted to hear, believing what he wanted to believe. “That is something,” he said with some relief. “I will make my inquiries. Gently,” he added, when Sebastian bristled and started to protest the Grand Cleric’s innocence again. Swiveling his head to look at Lucas, he said, “And you should be careful in your associations.”

Varric gave a strangled cough. The dwarf was practically choking, he was trying so hard not to laugh. Lucas clenched his teeth together. ‘Careful in his associations’? Because having been lured into a trap by Petrice three years ago was his fault. Naturally.

Of course, in the Viscount’s eyes it was Lucas’s fault—because Lucas was standing in front of him, an easy target, and everyone else who might have taken some of the blame was either concealed in shadows … or the Arishok.

Looking around him at the fallen bodies of the Qunari delegation, the Viscount said, “Right now, we have other problems. We have the delegation here, but I can’t return the bodies to the Qunari in this state. Serah Hawke, you know the Arishok. What should I do?”

Lucas’s jaw dropped. Was the Viscount seriously considering trying to hide the cold-blooded murders of an entire Qunari delegation from the Arishok?

“Well, there’s a way to get the city burnt down,” Varric muttered. The Viscount turned to the dwarf with a sharp look.

“Varric’s right,” Lucas said. “Hiding this would only make it worse.” He chose not to share the fact that he had already been to the Arishok and told him about the disappearance of the delegation; that might send the Viscount right over the edge.

The Viscount sighed, nodding. “It would, wouldn’t it? I am losing my sense of how to balance this nightmare.” He nudged a Qunari body with the toe of his boot. “If I ever had it,” he added, almost to himself. After a moment, he looked up at Lucas. “I appreciate your help in this matter, Serah Hawke.”

The message wasn’t subtle; the Viscount wanted Lucas to continue acting as intermediary and inform the Arishok of the day’s events. Lucas had been planning to do so all along, but he resented
the hiddenness of the request and the resulting concealment of the very real danger to Lucas’s life and limb (and those of anyone who might accompany him) in carrying out the Viscount’s unspoken command. “Of course,” he said, keeping all the rest of his thoughts firmly to himself.

“As bad as this is, it could have been much worse without you. Kirkwall owes you.” He held out his hand. “I owe you.”

Lucas reached to accept the Viscount’s thin, cold hand, and was rewarded with a hearty handshake. Over the Viscount’s shoulder he caught Varric’s eye, and could tell by the sardonic glint there that the dwarf was wondering if the handshake preceded a more solid payment or if it was supposed to be the payment all on its own. For the moment, Lucas didn’t care. It was nice to be appreciated, for once.

The Viscount turned away, letting his retinue of guards lead him out through the warren of tunnels. Lucas wondered how long it had been since the Viscount visited Darktown. Almost certainly too long.

“Where to, big guy?” Varric asked.

“I suppose we’ll go see the Arishok. If I’m lucky, the beheading will be quick and merciful.”

Varric and Sebastian followed him back to the lift, both quiet, for which Lucas was thankful. He was tired, overheated from the moist, stale air of Darktown, and wanted nothing more than a nice long drink and then an even nicer long sleep. But this kettle of fish would boil over if he didn’t see the Arishok immediately. He didn’t truly believe the Arishok would have him killed … but stranger things had happened.

“Hey, Varric.”

“Yeah, Hawke?”

“If the Arishok takes the news badly, you’ll see my mother is taken care of?”

There was a momentary silence in the darkness of the lift, and Varric’s voice was more sincere than usual when he spoke. “I’m offended you even have to ask.” In a different tone, he said, “Hey, about that …”

The lift reached the top, the door opening to the sunshine of Lowtown. All three men breathed a sigh of relief. Lucas stepped briskly out on the cobblestones, Varric’s comment forgotten. In the dazzle of the light, none of them noticed the dark-haired woman who slipped out of the shadows and followed them toward the docks.

At the Qunari compound, the big one by the gate stepped aside when he saw Lucas coming. “You are allowed, basra … until the Arishok declares otherwise.”

Lucas flicked an irritated glance at him, but let the comment go. It wasn’t worth it. And, after all, it was completely true. Once within arm’s reach of the gate guard, the Arishok’s word was the law, and the laws of Kirkwall, even such as they were, meant nothing. It was too bad there was no leadership in Kirkwall strong enough to stand up to the Arishok … except Knight-Commander Meredith, and it set a terrible precedent to let the Templars take command of a major city. Not that she didn’t already get her own way in most everything, but there was still a titular head of the city that wasn’t based in the Chantry, and that was important.

The Arishok was waiting, standing in front of his throne with his arms folded. “So.” He waited.
Quickly, efficiently, Lucas told him the events of the day, and the outcome.

There was no indication that the Arishok, or any of the surrounding Qunari, felt any sense of personal grief at the loss of their companions. That, more than anything else, turned Lucas away from them and their Qun—to work and live so closely with other people and to feel nothing when those people died seemed to him to be such an empty life. He’d rather die than live that way.

“It is regrettable that you could not rescue my delegates, and I would have preferred to hear that you had killed all of those responsible.”

“I killed the man who was at the head of the mob. Those who followed him … they were in the grip of madness. Almost as though they had breathed in a gas like the saar-qamek.”

“Hm.” The Arishok considered that for a moment. “That is an analogy I can understand. You hoped to save them for further usefulness. Yes, I see that. And this … Petrice?”

“She is out of my reach for now, Arishok, but I will be keeping a sharp eye on her.” Lucas hoped Sebastian, overawed by his first experience with the Qunari, would have the sense to keep his mouth shut.

“See that you do. If I hear her name connected with my affairs again …” There was no need for the Arishok to finish the sentence. Lucas understood perfectly. He wished Petrice and the Arishok would just fight a duel and get it over with. After staring down at Lucas for a long time, the Arishok said, “I have seen every vice and weakness of your kind, and how few of you take responsibility. Your Viscount remains a fool … but you are not. Panahedan, Hawke. I will keep one good thought about your kind.” He took his seat, crossing his arms again and staring off into space above their heads. Lucas didn’t need the other Qunari shepherding him through the compound to know he had been dismissed.

“That went well,” Sebastian said cheerfully as they emerged from the compound.

“You think so? I think it’s the calm before the storm,” Lucas said. “They’re waiting for something, and when it happens, they’ll move.”

Whatever Sebastian might have said in response was drowned by Varric saying, “Say, isn’t that—” and squinting at a shadow across from the compound entrance.

Lucas followed his gaze, but couldn’t tell what, or who, Varric was looking at.

“Never mind.” Varric grinned, though, and Lucas wondered what joke he had missed. “Come on, let’s go get a drink at the Hanged Man.” He spoke a little louder than usual, for no good reason Lucas could tell.

“What, exactly, is the Hanged Man?” Sebastian asked.

“Oh, Choirboy, your bell’s about to be rung. Do you play Diamondback?”

Lucas followed the dwarf and the archer. He’d been impressed by Sebastian today, impressed enough to ask the man along next time there was a job to do. Sebastian hadn’t been overly squeamish, and his aim was incredible. Yes, he’d be a good addition, if Varric didn’t corrupt him too fast.

The Hanged Man was bustling, as always, and the familiar liveliness of it was more soothing than Lucas would have imagined. Even more soothing yet—and more surprising—was the armful of pirate he got within minutes of walking through the door. Isabela appeared breathless, as if she had
been running, he thought, but with her mouth molded so beautifully to his, all thought was short-lived. She had climbed him like a tree, her legs gripping his sides tightly.

“Come upstairs.” She was already tugging at the buckles on his armor, much to the amusement of the rest of the patrons.

“You sure you wouldn’t rather have your way with me right here?” he teased, but he was already moving.

Isabela licked his neck. “I will if I have to. Move faster.”

“Your wish is my command.” He wasn’t sure what had changed her from not wanting to see him tonight to this mad urgency, but it was clear he wasn’t going to get that question answered right now. Maybe he’d ask her in the morning. For now, he had better things to do.
Breakfast the next morning was the Hanged Man’s finest mystery stew. Lucas groaned, staring into
the bowl. “I could be eating Bodahn’s fresh-made scones and clotted cream, with a nice plate of
bacon and eggs along with it, instead of this stuff.”

Isabela’s booted foot rubbed up and down his leg. “Should have thought of that last night, shouldn’t
you?”

“When exactly would that have been?” he asked, raising an eyebrow in her direction.

She laughed. “Then stop complaining.”

“Howe’s complaining? That’s a new one.” Varric pulled up a chair. He leaned over and delicately
sniffed the contents of Hawke’s bowl and made a decidedly unappetizing noise in response before
settling into his chair.

“No, it’s not. You just don’t hear inside my head.”

“You’d be surprised.”

Lucas ate in silence for a few minutes, as Varric and Isabela exchanged news about their fellow
lodgers.

“What’s on the schedule for today, Hawke?” Varric asked at last, when Lucas had scraped the
bottom of his bowl clean.

“The Wounded Coast.”

Isabela’s face lit up in a way Lucas found highly distracting. Varric’s, however, did not. “What are
you trying to do, Hawke, ruin my boots? Sand, sun, wind, salt … all those may be fine for Rivaini
here, but you can count this dwarf out.” He paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. “You might
want to take Blondie, though. All that time in Darktown hasn’t been good for him—he could use an
airing out.”

Lucas stifled a groan. The last thing he wanted was to spend a day on the coast babysitting Anders
and his self-righteous spirit passenger. Varric had a point, though. “Fine,” he snapped, not caring that
his tone was openly grudging.

“Tell you what,” Varric said, pushing his chair back, “I’ll even talk him into it for you.”

“You’re a prince among dwarves.”

“So they tell me.”

“Are we really waiting for the big pouty guy?” Isabela asked, trying out a pout of her own.

“Do you want to deal with Varric if we skip out on him?”

She answered with a long-suffering sigh. Then suddenly she brightened. “I know what we’ll do.”

Lucas was afraid to ask—he’d seen that mischievous smile before. All the way up the steps to
Hightown he worried about what was on her mind, afraid she was going for his mother. “You know
why we’re going to the Wounded Coast, don’t you?”
“Picnic!”

“Sure. And we’re cleaning out thugs so Aveline’s route will be clear tonight.”

“Of course. I knew that.”

“So it would be best not to bring too many people along,” he continued, hoping she’d gotten the hint.

“Depends on who the people are.” She grinned at him, practically skipping up the steps. Not that Lucas was complaining, because being below her provided him a rather fine view. “Ah! Just the person I was looking for.” Isabela disappeared over the top of the stairs.

Lucas caught up to her, and her intended target, just in time to see the puzzled, rather pained look on Fenris’s face as he repeated her invitation. “You want me to go on a … picnic?” He pronounced the word as though she had asked him to come along and be poisoned. And she hadn’t even mentioned the mage yet.

“Yeah, it’ll be fun. Come on, Fenris, you don’t have enough fun.”

“I don’t think there’s any way you can argue with that,” Lucas put in, grinning.

“The question to be asked is whether I am required to have this ‘fun’.” Fenris peered up at him hopefully, but Lucas was having none of it.

“Yes. Absolutely. Tell him, Isabela.”

“If you’re lucky, we’ll get to kill people.” Her grin was positively lupine.

Lucas had to stifle a chuckle at how quickly Fenris’s face brightened. “You’re in, then?”

“I … had nothing better planned for my day,” Fenris admitted.

“There’s the enthusiastic broody elf we all love,” Isabela cooed.

Fenris visibly recoiled at the “L” word, and Lucas jumped in before Isabela could make it worse. “The Wounded Coast will have healed itself by the time we get there, at this rate.”

Anders met them at the gates at the edge of town. Fenris had brought one of his expensive bottles of wine, Anders had some surprisingly fine cheeses in a hamper, and a quick swing by Lucas’s estate had netted some meats and bread and fruit. They were all set for an actual picnic. The sun was shining, the breeze was refreshing as it lightly caressed their faces, and for once Fenris and Anders were keeping their remarks civil.

But, naturally, since this was still Kirkwall, such a state of affairs couldn’t last for long. As they walked single-file along a narrow ledge, a voice shouted down at them.

“You are in possession of stolen property.”

Lucas stopped, shielding his eyes with his hand as he looked up. He didn’t need Fenris’s growl, half enraged, half frightened, next to him to recognize the armor of a Tevinter slaver.

“I think you’ll have to be more specific,” Isabela shouted back. She had frozen at the man’s words, but relaxed when she, too, recognized the armor.

“All of you, back away from the slave if you value your life.”
There were more of them now, in the path ahead of them and behind them. “You’re slipping, Isabela,” Lucas said.

She shrugged. “What can I say? The view was very distracting.” She winked at him. Her arm moved so quickly he hardly saw the motion, and two daggers flashed in the sun as they flew from her outstretched hand. One landed in the throat of a Tevinter, and the other found the thigh of a second. At the same moment, Anders balled his fists and threw a fireball at the loudmouth on the overhang.

Lucas was about to move toward the Tevinters ahead of him on the path when he heard a gasp and a groan next to him. Fenris was jerking about in agony, his body crackling with energy. “Isabela!” Lucas shouted. “Find the mage! Anders, clear the path!”

With a terse “On it,” Anders turned the power at his fingertips on the line of Tevinters coming up behind them while Isabela scrambled up the bank, her boots digging into the sand. Lucas took a stand above Fenris’s helpless, pain-wracked body, determined that not a single slaver would survive this day to return to Fenris’s former master.

He slashed and parried and kicked and hacked at every Tevinter who came near, completely losing track of the passage of time. Finally the last of them seemed to be down. From above came a groan, a scream, and a stream of high-pitched babbling that sounded a lot like pleading, and Fenris cried out, his muscles relaxing as the magical bonds released him.

Lucas reached a hand down to his friend. “You all right?”

“No. You look all right?” There was naked rage in Fenris’s face, which almost covered the humiliation of being kept completely out of the battle.

“No. You don’t,” said Anders, shortly. He put his hands on Fenris’s shoulders, holding the elf still despite Fenris’s instinctive attempts to get away. It was no small feat—Fenris was surprisingly strong—and Lucas was impressed that Anders could hold him so effortlessly. The mage had his healer face on, and looked, as always, more comfortable and himself than he seemed at any other time. He passed a hand over Fenris’s chest, blue light sinking in through the breastplate. “You’ll be all right now.”

Fenris shrugged away, trying valiantly to keep his lip from curling in disgust at having been touched by the mage. “Thank you.” It was the most ungracious thanks Lucas had ever heard, and Anders grinned at it.

“Any time. My pleasure.”

Lucas looked around them at the fallen bodies. Meeting Fenris’s eye, he said, “They’ll never learn, will they? Even when they have the tactical good judgment to take out the best fighter from the get-go, they can’t stand against us.”

Fenris grunted, but he seemed pleased by the compliment.

Then something landed at their feet from the overhang above, with a heavy thud and a faint, muffled groan. It was a man in the robes of a Tevinter mage. Isabela lowered herself down after it. “Little present for you,” she said to Fenris. “Thought you might like to ask him some questions.”

“Why, yes. I do.” Fenris bent over the mage, grasping his hair and pulling his head back.

The mage shrieked, tears leaking from his eyes.

Fenris put his mouth very close to the mage’s ear, enunciating each word even more carefully than
usual. “Where is he?”

“Please! Please don’t kill me!”

Anders groaned. “This is an example of your fearsome Tevinter mages? I’ve seen kittens who had more guts. You give mages a bad name!” he said to the Tevinter, who had his eyes shut, his face twisted in pain.

Ignoring both mages’ words, Fenris gave the Tevinter’s head another tug. “Tell me,” he said insistently. “Where is Danarius?” He eased up a little to let the man speak. “Where?”

“I don’t know, I don’t! I swear. Hadriana brought us.”

Fenris put a hand out to steady himself. His whole complexion had gone ashen, his body stiffening. Oblivious to the elf’s response, the mage stammered, “Hadriana has a hideout in the holding caves north of the city. I can lead you there. Please! Just don’t kill me!”

Controlling himself with an obvious effort, Fenris said, “No need.” Deftly he snapped the mage’s neck, getting to his feet. He swayed slightly and a shudder wracked his body. “Hadriana.” The name was a curse and a plea and a sob, all at once. “I was a fool to think I was free. They’ll never let me be.” He gasped, choking back tears, while the rest of them stayed silent, letting him battle his demons on his own.

Once the spasms had passed, Lucas asked, “Who is she?”

“Hadriana. Danarius’s apprentice.” Fenris’s voice started off shaky but gained strength as he spoke. “A sniveling social climber who would sell her own children to please her master. If she is here, it is at his bidding. I knew he wouldn’t let go!”

“Neither will I,” Lucas said quietly. “They’re no longer a threat to you, Fenris. You will never go back there, I swear it.”

Not comforted by Lucas’s words, Fenris turned to glare at him as though he were a very small child. “There will be more,” he said loudly. “If Hadriana is here, she won’t stop. We need to find her.” His hands clenched. “We’ll send a message to Danarius he won’t soon forget.”

The elf had come a long way, Lucas thought. Once he would have assumed he would have to fight this battle alone; now at least he was assuming Lucas would be with him when he did it. For someone as downtrodden and untrusting as Fenris, it was a huge step.

He clapped a hand on Fenris’s shoulder, ignoring the elf’s automatic attempt to pull away from the touch. “Lead the way.”

Fenris nodded shortly, turning around and going back the way they had come. Isabela silently fell into step next to the elf. Lucas watched the two of them, thinking that in many ways they were very alike—both so fiercely protective of their freedom.

Anders interrupted his thoughts. “I’m glad to have a few moments to talk to you.”

Uh-oh. Here it came. One of the many reasons Lucas tried to avoid being alone with Anders was that it always seemed to come with some request for help with one of the mage’s pet projects. Of course, Lucas thought with an inward sigh, most of his friends were afflicted with the same problem, always asking for his help. But Anders’s self-righteousness made his pleas less welcome, which Lucas felt guilty about even while he couldn’t prevent it. “What is it?” he asked, realizing that
Anders had been waiting all this time for a response.

“Have you noticed how many Tranquil are in the Gallows courtyard lately?”

“Can’t say that I have. And what in the Maker’s name are you doing in the Gallows courtyard, anyway?”

“I have to go there for supplies; Solivitus keeps me in potions for my clinic. And every time I go there are more Tranquil, selling their bloody wares. Good mages, too. Mages that I know passed their Harrowing.” He held up a hand as Lucas started to speak. “I know what you’re going to say, that I’m just too sensitized to it, but it’s more than that.”

This was leading in a direction Lucas really didn’t want to go. He tried to head it off. “What’s it to you how many Tranquil there are? Surely that’s the Templars’ lookout.”

Surprisingly, Anders didn’t take the bait. He held himself back from the rant Lucas could practically see in his face, speaking rapidly and in a low voice to avoid attracting Fenris’s notice. “The Templars are using the Rite of Tranquility to control mages!”

“You can’t know that.”

“They are working on a deliberate plan to turn every mage in Kirkwall in the next three years.” Anders punctuated that outlandish and somewhat hysterical-sounding statement with an insistent look that practically demanded that Lucas join him in his outrage.

“Whatever you think of Templars, you can’t imagine they’d be so heartless as—“

Anders cut him off. “They’re worse. I’ve talked to people on the inside, who told me all about it. The plan is the work of a Templar named Ser Alrik. I’ve had a run-in or two with him myself. He’s the one who did the ritual on Karl.” The mage’s voice broke on the name, and Lucas kept quiet, remembering the dignified, quiet man he had met so briefly years ago. It was a shame to take a vibrant individual and make them Tranquil, true enough … but surely their own experiences had proven that some mages couldn’t control their abilities. How else was the Chantry to see to it that magic served man instead of ruling over him? Anders, unaware of Lucas’s thoughts, pulled himself together and continued, “Alrik is a nasty piece of work. He likes to make mages beg.”

“Wait, you said ‘a run-in or two’. What types of run-ins?”

“I need to know that I can trust you, Hawke. Can I trust you?”

Lucas suspected he might regret the promise, but he said, “Of course you can.”

“I’m involved with a group that smuggles mages out to freedom. I’ve been in the Gallows—I’ve seen Ser Alrik’s work first-hand. He’s a sadist, cold-blooded as a lizard. He likes to experiment on the mages in his charge, find out what it takes to push them into the arms of demons.”

“Can you take this up with the Knight-Commander?”

Anders stared at him incredulously. “I’m sorry, did you ask if I, an apostate mage, can take this up with the Knight-Commander?”

“Right. Sorry. So … what is your plan?”

“There’s a way inside the Gallows, a secret entrance. If you’ll come with me, maybe bring Varric or Isabela, we can sneak in and find the evidence of the Tranquil Solution.”
“‘Tranquil Solution’?” Lucas echoed.

“That’s what he calls it—it’s his plan to bring the mages to heel, to solve the ‘mage problem’ once and for all. I’m told he intends to bring the plan to Val Royeaux, to the Divine herself. We must stop him before he can do that!” Anders’s voice rose, and Isabela, far ahead, turned to look back at them. Lucas shook his head at her. Fenris was upset enough—explaining all this in front of him was likely to go badly.

He muttered to Anders, “This Ser Alrik would be a fool to keep his plan in writing.”

“It’s the only chance we have. Please, Hawke.”

“All right. I’ll help you. But not a word to anyone until we’re ready to go in.”

“Of course. And … thank you. You’re a good man, Hawke.”

“Uh … sure.” Lucas quickened his pace, glad to see that the holding caves were ahead so he could escape this conversation. Isabela, who seemed to know, said Anders had once had a sense of humor, and a carnal appetite, that rivaled her own, but Lucas had never seen any sign of it. Mostly he just found the mage’s constant earnestness tiresome.

He joined Fenris and Isabela just below the mouth of the largest cave.

“We must be careful,” Fenris said quietly. “These caves were designed to protect against raids by other slavers. No doubt that is why Hadriana chose them.”

“Maybe she wanted to redecorate,” Lucas offered. “Add a few flowers.”

Fenris glared at him. “She’s not a ‘flowers’ kind of woman.” He looked up at the mouth of the cave, trying and failing to hide how frightened he was, and then glanced back at Lucas. “Let’s hope this isn’t a waste of time.”

“It’s not.” Lucas held Fenris’s gaze, trying to transmit to the elf some of his own confidence.

Isabela began inching her way up toward the cave. “No way to find out but to get to it.”
Another Torment

Fenris, although he quite evidently wanted to dash into the cave screaming a challenge at Hadriana, allowed Isabela to go first. Lucas watched her as she moved cautiously inside, her eyes gleaming like a cat’s in the dark as she tested each step and surveyed the walls and floors for traps. This workmanlike seriousness of hers was what he had always found most attractive about her. Right at the moment, mingling with the memories of the previous few nights, the sight had him practically bursting out of his armor. He took a deep breath to try to bring his thoughts back to the mission at hand. Storming the lair of a Tevinter blood mage was going to be hard enough without being distracted by carnalities.

Isabela beckoned to them to follow her. Near the mouth of the cave was a large room filled with half-burnt candles that surrounded an object in the center. The smell told Lucas what it was long before his eyes adjusted to the dim light enough to see.

“Blood magic,” growled Fenris. “They are still here, at least. That’s good.” He turned to Anders. “See? This is what it means to be a mage in Tevinter. Do you still envy them?”

Anders went closer, leaning over to inspect the body, that of a male elf, that lay on the table. “What spell was this man’s blood used for, do you think?”

“What does it matter? In a society where mages rule, they have no need to justify their pursuit of power, or the means by which they get to it.”

Sensibly, Anders didn’t respond to Fenris’s venom, instead following Isabela as she began working her way down a long, dark passage, deeper into the hillside.

“So, this relic of yours …” he began conversationally.

Lucas winced at the echo of the mage’s voice, thinking that he was announcing their coming as surely as if they had rung a doorbell, but a glance at Fenris told him the elf wasn’t concerned. And why should he be, Lucas realized, following the elf’s thought processes. Hadriana would be expecting Fenris already—either in chains, brought in by the group of slavers they had already killed, or on his own, hunting her. There would be no element of surprise today.

Isabela seemed to agree with him. She replied to Anders casually, “What about it?”

“I find it strange that you don’t know what it is.”

She glanced up at him briefly before turning to check a suspicious shadow on the wall. “It was in a box.”

“And you didn’t open it?”

“It was locked. It was in a locked box.”

“Never stopped you before,” Anders pointed out.

Isabela stopped and turned to him, her hands on her hips. “What do you want me to say?”

Wide-eyed, Anders said, “Nothing. I just found it curious, that’s all.”

“Well, you know what curiosity killed.”
“That’s not funny!” Anders protested.

Isabela’s silence said that it hadn’t been meant to be.

In the quiet, a faint sound came to Lucas’s attention. He caught up with Isabela. “You hear that?”

She nodded. “Someone’s alive up there.”

“Shouldn’t we hurry?”

Isabela grinned at him. “If I was a Tevinter mage, I’d leave someone crying to make people hurry so they forgot to look for traps.”

“Good point.” He dropped back and let her do her work, still chafing at the delay, however, as the sound of a person’s broken-hearted sobs echoed down the hallway.

At last they came into a large open room, where a slender blonde elf crouched amid a pile of bodies, her mouth open as she rocked back and forth in the depth of her grief.

Fenris hurried to her side, his hands moving restlessly above her head as though he wanted to touch her in a comforting manner but didn’t know how.

“We have got to find him a woman,” Isabela muttered to Lucas before she, too, rushed toward the crying elf. She crouched down next to her, uttering comforting nonsense syllables that seemed to calm the girl.

“Are you hurt?” Fenris asked. “Did they … touch you?”

The elf pulled herself together for a moment, looking around at them all in confusion.

“What’s happened here?” Isabela asked gently.

“She—She’s killing everyone!” This statement brought a fresh wave of sobs.

“Why? Why would she do this?” Fenris’s question sounded defeated, as though he already knew the answer but couldn’t stop himself from asking anyway.

“She said … someone was coming to kill her.”

Fenris recoiled as if he had been struck, the statement hitting him with such force that he actually grunted at the impact.

The elf went on, looking at Isabela desperately. “We tried to be good! We did everything we were told. She loved Papa’s soup! I don’t understand.” Tears rolled down her face, but the racking sobs were under control now.

Isabela reached out a browned hand and patted the girl on the shoulder.

Lucas asked quietly, “Is the magister still here?”

The elf looked up at him, wide-eyed. She nodded slowly. “I heard her say she was preparing for battle. I think she’s very frightened.”

“She has every reason to be,” Fenris growled, his voice and face as murderous as Lucas had ever seen them.
Getting to her feet, the elf cried out, “No, please don’t hurt her! She’ll be so angry, she’ll …” Her voice trailed off as she looked down at the other bodies, as if she had just realized there was no one else left for the magister to hurt.

“This has been terrible for you,” Anders said.

“Everything was fine until today,” the elf protested.

“It wasn’t. You just didn’t know any better.” There was a deep, long-lived pain in Fenris’s voice.

“What’s your name?” Lucas asked the elf.

“Orana.” She looked around at the four of them. “Is one of you my master now?”

“No!” Fenris shouted.

“But … I can cook, I can clean … What else will I do?”

Lucas smiled. “If you go to Kirkwall, I can help you. At the front gate, ask for a guard named Brennan, tell her to take you to the Champion’s home. Can you remember all that?”

Orana nodded, sniffling.

“Good. Once you’re in my home, my mother and the two dwarves who work for us will look after you until I can get there. But hurry, now. You won’t want to be here when we find the magister.”

Her eyes were huge in her small face as she realized the sense of his words. She dashed out of the room, her small feet making no sound on the stones.

“I didn’t realize you were in the market for a slave,” Fenris sneered at him.

Lucas frowned down at his companion. “I gave her a job, Fenris.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.” To his credit, Fenris flushed at the misunderstanding. “My apologies.” He cleared his throat. “Now, let’s find Hadriana and be done with this place.”

They moved further into the caves, the torches on the walls sputtering as they passed. At last, in the farthest room, deep within the mountain, they found a single mage surrounded by guards. The guards attacked immediately, and Lucas, Isabela, and Anders had their hands full with them.

Fenris, absolutely and utterly silent, went straight for the mage. Her vivid blue eyes widened and lit with bloodlust as he came toward her, and they fought with magic and blade, Fenris doggedly battering his sword against the protective ward the mage had thrown up around herself.

As he hacked his way through the startlingly incompetent guards, Lucas couldn’t help but wonder what had led this Hadriana to pin herself here in the depths of a cave from which there was no rear exit, waiting for a man whom she had to know was living only to kill her and the magister who had sent her. She fought fiercely, but she was frightened, too, quite evidently.

And then, as the blood from the fallen guards began to draw itself into a massive pool, he knew, and felt sickened that he hadn’t seen it sooner. The mage’s eyes were glowing with power as she drew the blood to her and began to summon demons from the earth.

“Do they all have to do this?” Isabela asked plaintively.

“I don’t!” Anders shouted, blasting several demons with a fireball.
“Present company excepted, then.” Isabela threw herself into a back handspring to avoid the outstretched inky arms of a shade.

“Arrrgghh!” Fenris’s voice suddenly rose above the din as he put all his might into a massive blow. His sword pierced the shield Hadriana held around her, aided by her distraction as she tried to control the demons through the blood bond. The tip of the blade slashed across her chest.

Before Hadriana could use her own blood to power an even stronger spell, Fenris lashed out again, catching her in the side. She fell to the ground, her hand over the gaping wound. Immediately it began to glow, but Fenris put the edge of his blade across her throat, pressing just enough to disrupt her attempt at healing herself.

“Stop,” she gasped. “You don’t want to kill me.”

“There is only one person I want dead more,” he growled. The blade shifted in his hands. Looking closely, Lucas could see that the elf was trembling with the effort of keeping himself under control.

“I have information, elf, and I will trade it in return for my life.”

“The location of Danarius? No doubt he will reveal himself to me without any assistance of yours.”

The mage’s blue eyes glittered with triumph, knowing even before she spoke the effect her words would have on Fenris. “You have a sister. She is alive.”

The blade slipped from his hands, clattering to the ground.

Hadriana pressed her advantage. “Allow me to live and I will tell you where she is.”

Lucas walked up to them, standing next to his stunned friend. “How do we know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t. But I know Fenris, and I know what he’s searching for.” She was enjoying this, her power over him, and her pleasure turned Lucas’s stomach. “If he wants me to betray Danarius, my price is my life.”

Fenris swallowed hard, struggling with the decision.

“This is your call,” Lucas said, hoping his friend would know that he supported whatever choice was made.

At last, Fenris crouched next to the mage. “Answer all my questions truthfully and I will let you go.”

Hadriana’s eyes searched his face. “I have your word?”

“Yes. You have my word.”

Hurriedly, Hadriana said, “Her name is Varania. She is in Qarinus, serving a magister named Ahriman.”

“Serving?”

“Yes. She is a servant, not a slave.” Fenris didn’t speak, his eyes searching Hadriana’s face, and the mage said eagerly, “You believe me?”

“I believe you.”
Hadriana began to get up, a smile on her face, but the glow of Fenris’s markings stopped her, and she looked down in horror at his fist buried in her chest. He squeezed her heart firmly, holding it there for a long moment after the body had gone limp, then he got to his feet, pushing past Hawke as he stalked toward the entrance to the cave. “We are done here.”

“Why did you promise, if you knew you weren’t going to keep it?” Lucas asked. He had been both surprised and unsurprised by the elf’s actions. Fenris was a man of honor, mostly, but honor went out the window where great hate was concerned, or so Lucas had found.

Isabela gave him a contemptuous glance, and Fenris turned back to him, his eye flashing with anger. He spat on the ground. “That for her ‘deal’,” he said. “What am I supposed to do with this information now? It’s only another torment, dreamed up in her last extremity. Even if this ‘sister’ actually exists, trying to find her would be certain suicide, and Hadriana knew it.” He shook his head. “In the end, all that matters is that I finally got to crush this bitch’s heart. May she rot, and all other mages with her,” he said venomously.

“And here I thought you were unreasonable,” Anders said, sarcasm dripping from his tone.

Fenris looked at the mage. “You think I wouldn’t do the same to you without Hawke’s protection? Think again.”

“That’s comforting.”

“You saw what was done here!” Fenris shouted, turning back to Lucas. “There’s always some excuse, some reason why mages need to turn to blood magic or demons to prove their power and get what they want. Even if I found my sister, who can say what magic has done to her?” The anger was bleeding from his voice, leaving grief and loss in its wake. “What does magic touch that it doesn’t spoil?”

He and Lucas stood looking at one another in the sudden silence that had fallen on the cave. In the depths of Fenris’s green eyes, Lucas could see the elf regretted, if not what he had said, then who he had said it to. But the hurt and the anger were too raw for Fenris to admit.

“I … need to go,” he said, turning on his heel and sprinting awkwardly toward the entrance.

Lucas began to follow his friend, calling his name, but Isabela’s hand on his arm stopped him. “Let him go, Hawke. He needs to fight these demons on his own, and you’ll only drive him away if you follow him now.” When Lucas hesitated, uncertain, she shook his arm. “Trust me. I know how he feels.”

“Come on,” Anders said. “Didn’t someone say something about a picnic?” Lucas and Isabela both looked at him with raised eyebrows, and he shrugged. “I don’t know about the two of you, but I could use something to get the bitter taste of that encounter out of my mouth.”
Lucas let Isabela and Anders lead the way as they ambled down paths and climbed over rocks toward the Wounded Coast. The scene with Fenris still bothered him. It had been the elf’s prerogative to kill the woman who had tormented him so much and for so long; Lucas had freely admitted that, so why had he felt the need to get on his friend’s case about it? Fenris had offered unswerving support since the day they’d met. Why had Lucas not returned that support?

When he got back to Kirkwall, he would seek the elf out and apologize. Fenris’s friendship was too important to him to let a disagreement fester between them.

Isabela climbed to the top of a large rock and stood there, looking out over the ocean. The breeze played with her hair and the bright kerchief that held it back, and the edges of her tunic fluttered, offering teasing glimpses of the tanned legs that lay beneath it. She was stunningly beautiful, like some sort of goddess of the ocean.

In that moment, Lucas thought he understood what it cost her to be marooned in Kirkwall, far from the ocean. She belonged here, where the air smelled of salt and something cold and fresh from the vast sea.

Then she withdrew her gaze from the horizon and climbed down. She wouldn’t look at him; instead she studied the ground. “Looks like someone’s been through here. Might as well keep going and get done whatever we came out to do.”

“I thought we were going on a picnic,” Anders said.

Lucas drew his attention from Isabela and her sudden change of attitude. “Picnic plus.”

“We take out some bad guys, Lady Man Hands gets laid,” Isabela explained. She studied the ground, moving on ahead, while Anders stared at Lucas, mystified.

“It’s like this … um … well, it’s kind of a long story. How about if we kill some bandits and don’t worry about why we’re doing it?”

“Sounds like old times,” Anders observed.

Isabela disappeared into the grass as there was movement around a corner. Anders readied his magic and Lucas his blade, but both of them paused in horror when the foe turned out to be a matched pair of mabari.

They stared at the onrushing dogs, who were clearly enraged and not about to stop for a pair of fellow Fereldans. Lucas didn’t know what might have been in Anders’s mind, but he couldn’t help but think about a litter of mabari pups he had seen once and how hard he had begged for one of his own. He’d even had a name picked out—Loghain, for the Hero of River Dane. Of course, given the change in Loghain’s reputation after the Blight, it might not have been a good choice for a dog’s name after all.

A sharp, pained whine and a death gurgle interrupted his thoughts, and both the dogs dropped with Isabela’s daggers in their skulls. She grinned at Anders and Lucas. “Two big strong men stopped in their tracks by a couple of puppies. Can’t decide if that’s pathetic or adorable.” There was an outcry behind her—the shouts of men and the baying of more hounds. “Guess we’ll find out. You boys want to get your asses moving?”
“Aye, aye, Captain!” Lucas was a bit embarrassed to have been caught mooning over a dog.

“Never liked those animals,” Anders said with a shudder as they followed Isabela. “The Templars used them sometimes—my third escape from the tower they had one. Ugh!” He hit a small pack of half-grown mabari with a fireball. Lucas winced at the yips and the smell of singed hair.

It didn’t take him long to get past his squeamishness, however. These mabari had been trained to kill, and they were bent on doing their job. It was them or him, and he didn’t intend to die by mabari, not today or any other day. Lucas threw himself into the combat, finding an especial satisfaction in taking out the trainers who had corrupted the noble beasts.

At one point, he found himself side-by-side with Isabela. She rarely fought straight on, preferring to dodge and roll and attack from the shadows whenever possible, but she was full-on dueling one of the bandits, blades flashing and arms moving almost too fast to see. Lucas blocked a blow from his own bandit, then twisted his sword to bring it around and chop at the man from the side. Somehow there was a tremendous exhilaration at fighting next to someone so skilled, feeling her energy fueling his.

Both bandits dropped at the same time, and Lucas and Isabela exchanged wild grins before moving on to their next opponents.

At last they were all down. Isabela cleaned and stowed the daggers she’d used, looking at the bandits. “You think we should clean these up?”

Lucas sighed. “Probably. The last thing Aveline needs on this patrol is Donnic asking her why there are all sorts of dead bandits and their dogs lying around.”

It was a dirty, sweaty, smelly task, and when they were done Isabela wasn’t the only one looking longingly at the ocean waves.

“Let’s head down that way,” Lucas said. “Maybe we can wash some of the fight off us and break out the picnic basket.”

But as was typical of Kirkwall, something got in the way on the way to the picnic. Several somethings, in fact—abominations, roaming the coast.

“This is not good,” Lucas muttered under his breath.

“If only—” began Anders, but he subsided when Lucas glared at him. The two men differed strongly in their perception of what constituted the biggest dangers in Kirkwall, Templars or mages, and the only way they managed to work side by side was by agreeing to disagree.

At least they were in accordance on the idea that abominations had to be killed on sight. For several minutes there was silence except for the grunts and shouts of combat. At last the abominations had fallen. Isabela kicked at a charred body, victim of one of Anders’s fireballs. “Hawke.”

“What is it?”

“Didn’t one of those ugly horned beasts of yours tell you something about having lost a patrol? Think we found it.”

Lucas groaned, kneeling next to her to study what she’d found. Yes, it clearly seemed to be fabric from a Qunari’s clothing. Further searches uncovered a sword and some polishing silks blazoned with Qunari markings. “Damn it. Can’t I get away from them for a single day?”
Neither of his companions answered him, not that he’d expected them to. He buried the sword in the sand, marking the spot on a nearby rock so he would remember it, and tucked away the polishing silks to show the Arishok.

“Let’s keep going. At this rate, Aveline will catch up to us, and she won’t forgive us for lousing this up for her.”

“Seems to me if we do all the work of getting her into his pants, how’s she ever going to know how to do it again by herself?”

“That’s not a bad point, Hawke,” Anders said.

Lucas sighed. It wasn’t a bad point, and was one he should have stopped to consider before getting himself entangled in Aveline’s affairs. But … he was the one who had urged her to kill Wesley herself, and the moment of their parting, not even a private chance to say good-bye, haunted him. He owed her some happiness after all she had lost. He didn’t say as much to his companions, though—his feelings about Aveline, not to mention Isabela and love in general, were in too much turmoil to be explained, or even understood, properly.

There was another group of thieves camping out; Lucas and the others dispatched them easily. He wondered why so many thugs and mercenaries kept coming to Kirkwall. He had personally killed what felt like hundreds—surely either some enterprising scofflaw should try to kill him or they should find some other city to make their base in. Starkhaven sprang to mind as a likely possibility. He imagined himself trying to convince a group of armed ruffians to move to Starkhaven in the midst of a battle, and grinned at the idea.

“You won’t be laughing when I tell you who’s down there,” Isabela said, landing lightly on the path next to him after an excursion over some rocks.

“That’s too bad. I have a feeling I’d rather be laughing. All right, who is it?”

“Evets’ Marauders. Including Fell Orden.”

“And that’s … bad?”

Isabela stared at him as though he’d just folded a winning Diamondback hand. “Yeah. Orden’s a blood mage; Evets is head of some of the most bloodthirsty pirates still afloat.”

“Does he work for … what’s his name, the guy you’re afraid of … Castillon?”

“I am not afraid of Castillon!”

“Riiight,” Anders put in. “That’s why you jump every time someone says ‘relic’.”

Isabela actually did start when he said it, shaking her head angrily in an attempt to cover the reaction. “I do not. And that’s beside the point, anyway. We were talking about Fell Orden and his crew. Did I mention Orden’s a blood mage? He’ll boil your blood in your veins.”

“Well, that certainly sounds unpleasant. Any reason I should want to go near him, then?”

“Man Hands and her boyfriend are down there, with some more of her guards.”

“Maker’s blood! Really?”

“Would I lie to you?” She grinned. “Well, I’m not this time, anyway. We better get down there if
we’re going to salvage her date.”

Anders chuckled. “I thought we wanted him to see her in command.”

“Yes, but naked,” Isabela said. “Naked is the important part, and no one wants to be naked around Evets.” She shivered in a rare moment of revulsion. “No one.”

“That’s a story it looks like I don’t want to hear,” Anders said.

“No. You really don’t.”

“Then we should get down there and shut this Evets down.”

“That is what I like about you, Hawke. You get things done, even when most men would be shaking in their boots.”

“That’s what you like about me?” He grinned at her. “I must be doing something wrong.”

“Don’t worry, I can teach you a few things.” She led the way down a narrow, rocky path toward a promontory. Lucas could see Aveline and Donnic crouched behind some big rocks, along with a few other guards.

Aveline looked up as they approached. “Hawke! What are you doing here?” Her tone was patently fake, her eyes venomous. He had screwed up royally, it appeared.

“Just out for a picnic.” Lucas returned her look with a bland smile. Served her right for being a scaredy-cat.

A young guardsman looked up, relief evident on her face. “Good timing, all of you.”

“Evets Marauders,” Isabela said succinctly.

“Oh, shit,” Aveline groaned. “Really?”

“Why does no one believe me?”

“I believe you. I just don’t want to.” Aveline turned to her guardsman. “How many?”

“I can’t tell. Victor Longdeath’s up there, and Fell Orden, and they’ve done a good job keeping us back. Plus there are traps. I can’t get anyone close enough to tell what’s going on.”

“I think we can help with that,” Lucas said. “Isabela?”

She nodded, disappearing into the tall grass along the path. The rest of them waited more or less patiently until she returned, swinging a disarmed trap jauntily. “Big group,” she said. “Twenty, by my count, all good men.” Sweeping her gaze over Aveline’s guards, she turned to Lucas. “I think we should take care of this, Hawke. No point getting anyone else involved.”

“Yes.” Aveline glanced around at her guards, clearly not happy with their general timidity. “I’ll go with Hawke’s team. The rest of you stay here.”

Donnic stood up. “No. With all due respect, Captain, I cannot in good conscience allow you to go into battle with these … civilians without a competent backup.”

“I’ve done it before,” Aveline said hotly. “These civilians are—“
“Aveline, it’s fine.” Lucas raised his eyebrows at her, trying to get his point across. She glared at him, then turned to Donnic.

“Very well, guardsman, but we will have a discussion about this insubordination back at the barracks.”

“Yes, we definitely will,” Donnic muttered as she stalked off.

“I’ll just … stay here, then,” the guardsman in charge of the patrol muttered, looking as if she very much hoped no one would ask her for any further heroics.

No one did. Lucas went first, finding Donnic at his side. The guardsman looked pleased to be going into battle. “Evets,” he said to Lucas. “I’ve heard of them. This will be quite the day’s work.”

“That it will.”

Isabela had disappeared into the grass again to pop up where the marauders least expected her. Aveline was just behind Lucas and Donnic; Anders hung back a bit to provide healing and ranged attacks.

“I hear you coming, little guard. You won’t find us unprepared!”

“Sounds like a challenge to me,” Donnic said.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself. Let’s go!”
Ducking an incoming fireball, Lucas asked himself for at least the thousandth time why he let himself get dragged into these things. Aveline and her guards could have taken care of these people, he told himself.

Well, perhaps not. He caught a sword on his own, using his greater body strength to shove the other fighter back, and then disentangled his great blade and cleaved the marauder’s head open. These marauders were tough, and there were a lot of them. Other than Aveline herself, and Donnic, the rest of the guards hadn’t even made an appearance in the fight; they were all still huddled safely by the rocks on the entrance to the promontory. Lucas made a mental note, ducking another blade as it swung toward his head, to rib Aveline about the quality of her troops. Surely she could do better than this!

An arrow grazed his shoulder, uncomfortably close to his neck.

“You’re in trouble now!” called a familiar voice, and he turned just in time to see Isabela sinking her daggers into the archer’s kidney. So much for Victor Longdeath, then, he thought, watching the thin, black-clad figure crumble to the ground.

Fell Orden was standing protected on a height, and everyone who tried to come near him doubled over in pain, screaming out garbled words that included “blood”, “boiling”, and “veins”.

Aveline was the next one on her way up toward him, and Lucas began to join her before recognizing Donnic at her side. What could be better for a romance involving Aveline than charging a blood mage together? Especially since he saw Anders readying a spell that appeared to be aimed at Orden. The marauder mage froze in place just as Donnic and Aveline came in range, and together they finished him off.

Lucas, Anders, and Isabela had the rest of Evets’ crew well in hand, and he had rather hoped Aveline would take advantage of the moment, but instead she and Donnic barreled back down from the height, smashing into a small knot of marauders together.

“Can’t say as I think much of your Evets,” Lucas remarked when it was over, finding himself standing next to Isabela. Aveline’s timid guardsman and her crew had finally poked their noses out now that the fighting was past and were rounding up the wounded to take back to Kirkwall. “Which one is he, anyway?”

“He’s not here,” Isabela said morosely. She shoved a handful of loot from one of the marauders down her tunic without even looking at it. “Mark my words, he’s not going to appreciate this, Hawke. He’ll come after you.”

“Evets by himself is harder to deal with than his whole crew?” Lucas raised his eyebrows. From anyone else he’d have taken the threat with a grain of salt, but Isabela didn’t spook easily.

“He can be.”

Anything further was interrupted by Aveline stalking toward him. “Hawke, what are you doing here?” she asked in a furious whisper.

“You asked me to be here, remember?”

“Yes, but you were supposed to stay out of sight!”
“Would you rather I let you two get killed? Your guardsmen could use a bit more training,” he said, pointing to the head guard who had cowered her way through the fight.

“She doesn’t like mages; she’s all right otherwise,” Aveline said. “A surprising number of them are afraid to go up against a mage. Think they’ll be turned into toads or something.”

“Well, that should be easy to fix. Anders!” Lucas called.

“Hawke?”

“Can you give Aveline’s guards a hand and let them train against you?”

“Right. Put more power in the hands of the Templars.”

“My guardsmen are not Templars!” Aveline snapped.

“Really? So you’re saying the real power in Kirkwall is that doddering old fool Dumar? Keep dreaming.” Anders moved away, his shoulders stiff.

Aveline glared after him. Lucas shrugged his shoulders. “Ask Merrill when you get back to Kirkwall. She’d love a chance to go up against the guards.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Aveline sighed. “Good idea, Hawke. I should have thought of Merrill myself.”

“You think the kitten is going to want it spread about that she’s got magic? She’s no fonder of Templars than Anders,” Isabela objected.

Aveline nodded, thinking through the problem. “I can tell the recruits she’s visiting from the Dalish; Dalish mages are still protected, even in Kirkwall. Well, to a limited extent.” She frowned thoughtfully, then sighed, clearly setting the difficulty aside for further consideration, as she turned back to Lucas. “This is hardly what I brought you out here for.”

“Isn’t it?” Isabela asked. “’Cause you got all sweaty next to Guardsman Drooly over there, got to show him how well you handle a big stick …” She winked, and Aveline scowled.

“Shut up, whore.”

Isabela raised her eyebrows, smirking, and then drifted away in exaggerated silence.

“She’s got a point,” Lucas said. “You wanted us to help Donnic see you in your element—this was it. Go over there, say something.”

“In front of all those guards?” Aveline looked horrified. “I couldn’t possibly.”

“You can and you will, or I’ll get Isabela to do it for you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Lucas merely looked at her, and she groaned.

“You would.”

“In a heartbeat. So get moving!” He looked Aveline in the eye. “You of all people know how short our time with someone can be. Don’t waste any more of it.”

Not for the first time, he wished he could have known Wesley better, watching the pain flash across
Aveline’s face. She had never worn her heart on her sleeve, but it had always been clear how much she had loved her husband, and how much she missed him. Then she pulled herself together with an effort, and nodded.

“You’re right. I know you’re right. But when I imagine myself walking over there and … I just don’t know how to say the things that need to be said without losing … Maybe I should just resign myself to being alone.”

“No!” Lucas’s outburst startled her, and he softened his tone as he went on. “Wesley wouldn’t want you to be alone, and he would absolutely not want you to give in to your fears. You’re the bravest person I know, except when it comes to your own happiness, Aveline.”

She swallowed visibly, looking from Lucas to Donnic. Her whole heart was in her eyes as her gaze rested on the tall guardsman, and Lucas wasn’t at all surprised when Donnic turned under the weight of that look. His face didn’t change as he came towards Aveline.

“Captain?”

“Guardsman … Donnic.”

“You wanted to see me?”

“I … did. Yes. Because … Because I …” She looked at Lucas helplessly, and he shook his head, backing away slowly. This was for her to do—he wouldn’t do her any favors acting as her mouthpiece.

He even turned his face away to give them some privacy, and only then discovered that he had nearly backed right into Isabella.

“Good job,” she said, peering around him unashamedly.

“What are they doing?”

Her eyes twinkled naughtily, and she reached up. “This,” she whispered just before her lips met his. Any curiosity he had about watching Aveline and Donnic disappeared as he tasted the blood and sweat and metallic tang of battle on her lips, feeling the exhilaration of a good fight rise in him as those flavors mingled with the exotic spiciness that was all Isabela.

There was a noise nearby, and Lucas broke the kiss reluctantly to see Anders standing nearby and glaring at them. “If you’re all quite finished?"

“Actually, I wasn’t. Are you sure you can’t make it back to Kirkwall on your own?”

“Oh, sure,” the mage snapped. “Drag me all the way out here for a ‘picnic’, and as soon as the day turns into something other than death and blood, I get sent home.”

“Yes, well … sorry about that. Maybe you could tag along with the guards?"

“Just what I always wanted to do.” Still grumbling, Anders turned back up the path toward Kirkwall.

“You weren’t very nice,” Isabela said.

Lucas sighed. “I know.” He should probably find a way to make it up to Anders at some point, little as he enjoyed spending time with the mage. He looked around to see Aveline and Donnic, their heads very close together, murmuring quietly together. As he watched, Aveline gave a little laugh
and a nod, and Donnic’s grin nearly split his face.

“Looks like our work here is done, and I know a very private beach,” Isabela said, sliding her arm into his. “Shall we?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

The beach was secluded, indeed, with a low-hanging rock overlooking it and surrounded by more rocks. It was difficult for Lucas even to get down into it, but he managed, with Isabela’s help. They spread out the picnic and ate, then stripped down and swam in the ocean. The water felt cool on Lucas’s skin, overheated from a day in metal armor. Isabela’s wet, naked body pressed against his, her hands and mouth on him, hungry and demanding.

He lay back, letting the tide pull the water up his body and away again, letting Isabela’s mouth work its magic. He lost himself in the sensation; there seemed all the time in the world to feel her hot, wet tongue play along his length, her wet hair tickling his stomach, the ocean moving beneath him until he felt almost as though he was moving with it. It almost didn’t register when Isabela took her mouth from him and climbed atop him, sliding up and down his length in time with the waves. Slowly, inexorably, he climbed the peak, forcing his eyes to stay open so he could watch as Isabela’s skin reddened with the rise of her passion, as she threw back her head and fondled her own breasts, as her movements became more erratic as she neared the peak.

Lucas grasped her hips, holding her to him, feeling the blood pounding in his head and through his body, mingling with the sound of the waves all around him.

And then it was over, the pleasure filling him like a cresting tide and then ebbing slowly as Isabela collapsed onto the sand at his side.

They lay there together, relaxed and at peace in a way Lucas had rarely achieved in Kirkwall, or before. Even as the first stars began to come out above him, he was reluctant to move.

But Kirkwall called; his mother would worry, and no doubt there was something important to do. He got to his feet and began to dress, as did Isabela. Neither of them spoke, not wanting to break the moment.
Isabela disappeared on the way back to Kirkwall, which Lucas took as a not-so-subtle signal that she was done with their … whatever it was for the night. Could it be called a relationship? he mused, climbing the long steps up to Hightown. She wouldn’t, that was for sure, but did that mean it wasn’t one?

It was too complicated for his tired mind to deal with at the moment. Why did he feel such a need to put a label on it, anyway? Hot sex, a good friend to banter with before, during, and after—what more could a man really ask for?

Any mental response to that question was quashed when he closed the door of his house behind him and saw a very uncomfortable elf perched on the stone bench in the entryway.

“Fenris?”

Fenris stood up, clearing his throat as he came toward Lucas. His green eyes shifted back and forth, looking anywhere other than at Lucas as he spoke. “I’ve been thinking about what happened with Hadriana. I took my anger out on you, undeservedly so. I was … not myself. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Fenris. In your situation, I— Well, I can’t even imagine what it would be like to be in your situation, so I have no room to judge how you handled it.”

Blinking in surprise—Lucas’s response was clearly not what he had anticipated—Fenris said, “You are very generous.”

“No. Just … there’s enough in Kirkwall to get mad about. Being yelled at by a friend in his extremity—” Lucas sighed. “I guess I’m just glad I could be there for you. Do you—” He paused again and looked closely at Fenris. “Do you want to tell me about her?”

Fenris blinked again, clearly surprised by the question and by Lucas’s interest. “Very well.” He sighed, walking across the small entry to stare at the wall while he spoke. “When I was a slave, Hadriana was a torment. She would deny my meals, hound my sleep … whatever she could think to do in order to cause me pain. And humiliation. Because of her status, I was powerless against her … and she knew it,” he added savagely, his fist clenching. “The thought of her slipping out of my grasp now … I couldn’t let her go.”

“I’m glad you killed her, then. Sounds like she deserved it.”

Nodding, Fenris turned around, facing Lucas again. His face was still troubled. “I should be happy now that Hadriana is dead … or at least satisfied. But I feel nothing but disquiet. This hate—I thought I had gotten past it. To feel it inside me again now and to know it was they who put it there …” His voice broke, and he looked down at his feet, collecting himself with visible effort. “Bah.”

Lucas waited, not wanting to disrupt Fenris’s attempt to gain control of himself.

Clearing his throat, Fenris offered a small smile. “I am sorry. I did not come here to burden you further, merely to apologize for my behavior.”

“We’re friends, Fenris. Burden away. My shoulders are your shoulders.” Lucas grinned, but Fenris’s smile had disappeared.

“Friends,” he said softly. “I am not certain I know what that means.” He turned and left, leaving
Lucas shaking his head. Danarius had really done a number on Fenris—Lucas hoped someday he would be allowed to return the favor.

With a weary sigh, he went inside the house. His mother was sitting in the parlor, knitting a sock.

“That’s a happy sight. Haven’t seen you knitting in a long while.”

The last thing his mother had knit was a scarf for Bethany to wear in the Deep Roads. Lucas hoped she wasn’t thinking about that right now, the way he was, the way the bright red of the scarf had stood out against the pale mottled grey of her skin. He was glad his mother had been spared that sight.

She smiled, her thoughts clearly elsewhere. “I was worried I might have lost the knack for it, but this is turning out quite nicely. It’s for a little orphan in Darktown.”

Privately, Lucas wondered how useful socks would be to the Darktown orphans—most of the ones he’d seen didn’t even have shoes—but it was nice to see his mother enthusiastic.

“Where have you been, darling?” she asked.

“Picnic by the shore,” he said, smiling to himself at the thought.

“Must have been nice. With some of your friends?”

Listening to her, you’d have thought he was ten years old. “Yes.”

“What about that girl, what was her name? Lady Lavinia? Have you seen her again, or did she go back to Cumberland?”

“No,” he said, trying not to laugh. “I can honestly say I haven’t seen her again … although I certainly wouldn’t mind.” He couldn’t help thinking of the way Isabela had looked in that dress.

“And … is there anyone else who’s caught your fancy?”

Lucas considered telling her about Isabela, but what could he say about their relationship that would be appropriate for his mother’s ears? “Not that I can think of,” he said casually. “What about you?”

To his surprise, his mother blushed. “It’s possible that someone might have looked at me twice,” she said.

“Now, Mother, do we have to have a talk? Let’s see … there were the birds, and the bees, and when they got together …” He grinned.

His mother chuckled. “Get along with you. If anyone needs to have a talk, it’s me telling you to be more serious about your life. Stop spending all your time in that seedy bar with those … odd people and settle down with a nice girl.”

“I’ll think about it. Good-night, Mother,” he said, and strode past the parlor door. The cheery smile was gone—did she really think that was all he did, drink in the Hanged Man? Where was she every time he raised a blade in defense of Kirkwall, every time he faced down the Arishok because the Viscount was too afraid to do it himself? He was closing in on thirty years old, and his mother still treated him as though he was a careless child, frittering his time away.

Then again, he said to himself, shutting the door of his room behind him and beginning to unstrap his armor, wasn’t he frittering his time away? He didn’t care about any of the tasks he was given, not in
any personal way. He did them because someone needed to, because he could, because it was easier to say yes than to sit by and watch other people bungle tasks he was perfectly capable of accomplishing.

Possibly, yes, because he liked the challenge. Tap-dancing with the Arishok was more interesting than taking an interest in politics, that was for sure.

Lucas yawned. He wasn’t going to figure it all out tonight, or tomorrow for that matter. For now, a good night’s sleep, and then he’d see what the next day brought.

The first thing it brought was a note from Aveline, in her aggressively messy handwriting.

Hawke –
This was all incredibly stupid, and you made it wonderful. I was mute, and now I want to sing! I can never repay you for all your help. Perhaps it’s simple—thank you. I’m sure there was at least one moment where you thought I was beyond all help, but you helped me anyway, just as you have since the day we met. I’ll always be here for you … just, knock first.
Aveline
P.S. If you don’t get that damned Templar Emeric out of my hair soon, I take it all back.

He grinned. Aveline hadn’t been where his heart lay after all, but he still cared for her, and he was very glad to see her happy. He was less glad to be reminded of Emeric. The odds that the Templar had actually stumbled on a serial killer at work in Kirkwall were very slim … but slim or not, Lucas supposed he ought to investigate. He might as well at least talk to the man.

With a sigh, he began strapping his armor back on. Another day, another duty.
Lucas decided to ask Sebastian to come along to the Gallows, to give him a chance to get to know the archer a bit better. As they strolled through Hightown, Isabela joined them as well, which made Lucas happy, but did throw a bit of a monkey wrench into any possible conversations with Sebastian—it was nigh impossible to have a serious discussion around Isabela.

Further confounding the day, they managed to pick up Anders as they were about to get on the Gallows ferry. The mage had been heading across to pick up some potions from Solivitus. Lucas wasn’t sure how he was ever going to get any answers out of Emeric with a very prickly apostate along … but if Anders was going to be anywhere near the Gallows, Lucas preferred that it be with him instead of alone. He was of mixed minds about the Circles of Magi and the Templars in general, but Knight-Commander Meredith’s tight ship was no place for Anders and his spiritual passenger. The first time they heard Justice’s voice coming out of Anders’s mouth, they’d kill him, no questions asked, and Lucas still had some hopes that the mage could someday learn to stand up to Justice and just be the gifted healer he so unquestionably was.

In the meantime, of course, the mage was a hot potato, and Lucas would have to be careful that he didn’t say the wrong thing to the wrong Templar and get them all thrown in jail. He glanced at Isabela and then meaningfully at Anders, and was relieved to see the pirate’s brisk nod in response.

The ferry docked at the Gallows and they filed off with the rest of the passengers. For all that it was so closed off, the Gallows marketplace did a bustling business.

Lucas walked with Anders, glancing occasionally at the wares on display in the various stalls, but with most of his attention on the mage.

“You don’t have to stare at me,” Anders said in a tight, angry whisper. “I’m not going to go crazy and start shouting at the Templars.”

“Are you sure?”

He got a glare for his trouble. “I come here all the time. Besides …” He looked around at all the people shopping. “There are too many innocent people here to make an issue. I’d get the worst of it trying not to let anyone get hurt. If I were ever to attack a—” He stopped, pressing his lips together. “Not here, all right? So stop worrying.”

“Right.”

Behind him, Isabela was pestering Sebastian with questions about his sordid past, as she so often did, and the archer was parrying the questions with his typical bland good cheer.

“You know, Isabela,” he said eventually, “I don’t understand why you don’t find a ship. You don’t seem to care about what Hawke does—so why do you stay?”

Judging by the silence, it had been an effective way to redirect Isabela’s curiosity. Then Lucas heard her chuckle, that deep, familiar chuckle that called up some very interesting memories. “Mostly the sex,” she said. Lowering her voice to a very suggestive whisper, she said, “Hawke’s an absolute tiger between the sheets.”

He was? Lucas couldn’t help a small, very pleased smile. She’d never told him that. Glancing over at Anders, he saw the mage raise an amused, speculative eyebrow in his direction, and did his best to smother the smile. The last thing he needed was Anders getting any ideas.
Sebastian was silent after Isabela’s comment, but then, so was she, so apparently the archer’s gambit had been successful in distracting Isabela from chasing after the salacious details of his own history.

Further speculation on Lucas’s part on what he might do to be even more tiger-like in bed was halted by the appearance of Ser Thrask. The Templar looked unusually down-hearted; even his mustache was drooping.

“Serah Hawke, may we speak?”

“Of course.”

“Something has happened to Feynriel while he was in the Fade; he is Tranquil.”

“I … am sorry to hear that.” Lucas didn’t have to feign the sadness in his own voice; he still felt guilty over the way that had turned out. “How is his mother taking the news?” He hadn’t seen Arianni since the ritual.

Ser Thrask’s eyes shone with tears. “She … she took poison rather than see him like that.”

Lucas was stunned. She had seemed so strong; he wouldn’t have imagined that she would go to such an extreme. “I’m sorry.” The words seemed inadequate, and he turned away, sick at heart.

He felt a soft touch on his arm. “It’s not your fault.” Isabela looked up at him. “You didn’t know.”

“I did it, whether I knew or not. Apparently I wasn’t content with just destroying my own family.”

“You didn’t destroy their family; Feynriel couldn’t control his powers. There’s no telling what would have become of him, or who he would have hurt. This way … Arianni only hurt herself.”

Lucas clenched his jaw. Isabela was right; he agreed with her. But he couldn’t forgive himself for being the unwitting cause of Feynriel’s Tranquillity or Arianni’s death. He reached down, grasping Isabela’s hand briefly, just a quick squeeze before letting go. “Thanks.”

“Serah Hawke!” Knight-Captain Cullen was suddenly before them, his voice cheerful, and Lucas pushed his feelings about Feynriel and Arianni down deep where he could worry at them later. Ser Thrask saluted his superior and left them, the shine of tears still in his eyes.

“Knight-Captain, how’ve you been?” Lucas began, but was interrupted when Anders pushed himself between them.

“Yes, how have you been? How does it make you feel, controlling mages by misusing the Rite of Tranquillity?”

Cullen’s eyebrows flew up and he stared at Anders, while Lucas resisted the urge to slug Anders in the jaw. Was the man trying to get himself thrown in the Gallows?

“There is a rumor going around to that effect,” Lucas said mildly, when Cullen looked at him. Shaking his head, Cullen said, “I understand such an idea had been discussed, but I know of no plans to put it into effect just now.”

“You expect us to believe that?” Anders asked, getting nose to nose with Cullen.

“Have I ever lied to you?” Cullen asked in a very soft whisper. The two men stared at each other, and in that locked gaze was something unspoken. Lucas remembered that Anders had been at Kinloch Hold in Ferelden, where Cullen had originally been posted. Apparently they had known
Anders blinked first and looked away, his throat working as he swallowed. “No,” he admitted unwillingly. “You haven’t.”

“Then believe me now. The Harrowing has served for centuries, and it will continue to do so unless the mages continue to struggle against their Maker-ordained existence. If these uprisings continue, we may be pushed into more stringent measures.”

The softening of Anders’s features disappeared with Cullen’s words. “Of course, it’s always the mages’ fault. Couldn’t possibly be the Templars overstepping their boundaries, or the injustice of locking people away for life just because they happen to be born with magic.”

Lucas stiffened at the word “injustice”, watching Anders closely to see if he was still in charge or if the spirit had taken control.

“Contrary to your opinion, not everyone is out to persecute mages,” Sebastian said, his accent thickening with his emotion. Anders whirled to face the new attacker.

Lucas could feel the tension rising, and could almost sense Justice gathering itself to make an appearance. Here in the Gallows, that would be fatal to Anders, certainly, and most likely to other, more innocent bystanders as well. The market bustled with them.

“Look,” he said, hoping to distract them. “Isn’t that Emeric? He’s the Templar we’re here to see,” he explained to Cullen. “Something about women’s disappearances.”

“Oh, yes. He’s a bit cracked on the subject,” Cullen said, seeming glad for the diversion. “But overall I believe it’s mostly a figment of his imagination.”

“Ninette’s severed hand was no figment,” Lucas reminded him. Ninette had gone missing several years ago, and her hand had been found in a sack inside a foundry.

“No, but there has been no repetition of that method of operation. Still, it seems unlikely to do any harm for you to talk to him.”

“Very well. Knight-Captain.” Lucas nodded to Cullen, shepherding Anders away in Emeric’s direction. Isabela and Sebastian followed … and so, Lucas noticed, did Cullen’s eyes, which lingered on Anders with what appeared to be wistfulness. Lucas felt sorry for the Templar—hard enough on a Templar to harbor feelings for any mage. Devastating for him to harbor feelings toward Anders. He hoped that situation wouldn’t worsen over time, and made a mental note to keep Anders well away from the Gallows from now on, if at all possible.
Lucas led the others over to where Ser Emeric stood watching them. “I wondered how long it would take you to come see me,” Emeric said without preamble.

“I’ve been a bit distracted.”

“Qunari tend to do that,” Anders put in.

“So I’ve heard. Meanwhile, other women have been abducted.”

“Yes, the guard captain told me you’re still chasing disappearing acts. Are you sure they haven’t just left the city?” Lucas asked.

Emeric scowled. “That’s not funny. I need your help urgently. My investigations into the disappearances of Ninette and Mharen and several other women have led me to a Hightown noble named Gascard duPuis.”

“DuPuis? There’s a name you couldn’t make up if you tried.”

“It’s Orlesian.”

“Well, that explains it.”

Emeric’s lifted eyebrow said he was still not amused. “When my investigations led me to duPuis, I contacted the city guard. They raided his mansion, but nothing was found, and I was reprimanded and forced to apologize. Meredith has forbidden me from continuing my investigation.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Because she never told me I couldn’t ask for outside help.”

“That’s me,” Lucas said. “Everyone’s last resort.”

“I am desperate for your assistance, Serah Hawke. Laugh at me if you must, but help me while you do it.”

“Very well. Tell me what you know about Gascard duPuis.”

“He knew two of the murdered women and made inquiries about the others—I can’t imagine that’s a coincidence.”

Lucas nodded. “It bears investigating, at least.”

“Thank you.” Emeric’s face brightened. “Having heard nothing but ridicule for years now, it is encouraging to be treated with some gravity.”

“How is it that you became the lead investigator in this matter?” Sebastian asked.

“I knew Mharen, and where the other Templars imagined just another escaped mage, I knew she wouldn’t have run. After that, when I discovered other women missing …” Emeric shook his head. “I couldn’t sit by and do nothing. The rest of my order, on the other hand, believes this a matter for the city guard—“
“Naturally,” Anders muttered.

Emeric continued, “And the city guard seems to think it’s not their problem, either.”

Lucas sighed. Another matter caught in the tug of war between Knight-Commander Meredith and Viscount Dumar. How many lives could be saved if the two of them could only learn to work together? “And I’m supposed to be the outside help,” he said. Too late he realized he had spoken the last thought aloud.

Narrowing his eyes, Emeric said, “What if one of the women who was killed was someone you loved? If Gascard duPuis is guilty, he must be stopped!”

Isabela’s face was the first one to come to mind when Emeric asked his question. Lucas put that aside to wait for another time, and turned to glance at the actual woman, who had been remarkably quiet during the whole exchange. Her face was set and hard, and her eyes when they met his left no doubt as to her opinion.

Sebastian spoke it for her. “This is a worthy cause. If we can help, we should.”

“I can’t make any promises,” Lucas said.

“Just find out what duPuis is hiding. If he is innocent, find evidence to prove me wrong, and I’ll not bother you again.”

Lucas nodded curtly, and he led the others away.

“You weren’t very optimistic,” Sebastian remarked as they walked away.

“Should I have made promises I don’t know that I can keep? What if this duPuis runs before we can investigate him? What if we can find no proof of either guilt or innocence? I’m no miracle worker, Sebastian. Andraste was that, and look what happened to her.”

“No, not compare yourself to Andraste!” Sebastian said, shocked.

“I’m not. That’s just the point.”

Sebastian shook his head, muttering something under his breath. Lucas was partly sorry he had shocked his friend, but partly not. Sebastian couldn’t go around thinking everyone was holy and selfless and respectful—not if he was going to live in Kirkwall.

Anders and Sebastian both made rather awkward excuses to disappear shortly after the ferry docked, leaving Lucas and Isabela to walk together. His steps turned toward Hightown.

“Tired from all that talking?” she asked, grinning up at him.

“It’s surprisingly harder work than fighting.”

“No surprise there. Most things are harder than fighting.”

“You’re not much of a talker, are you, Isabela?”

“Can’t say that I am. Better uses for a mouth any day.”

Lucas chuckled. “You could have that written up and printed on cards as your motto.”

“What about you, Hawke? You feel the need to talk, talk, talk right about now?”
“How could you tell?”

“Because we’ve been sleeping together for a while and you’re not the kind of guy who can do that forever without slapping a name on it.”

He nodded, appreciating her directness. “I take it you don’t feel the need for any slapping?”

Isabela laughed throatily, causing heads to turn in her direction. She walked on confident in the attention, enjoying it. “Slapping in the right context can be entertaining. But when it comes to putting names on things … that’s rarely entertaining. It usually just makes people unhappy when other people can’t live up to what they think the name means they should do.”

Frowning, Lucas tried to parse his way through the sentence. “You think I’ll have expectations.”

“Mm-hm. I know you will.”

He waited for her to elaborate or comment on his presupposed expectations, but she continued walking, not looking at him. “So … um … how do you feel about that?” She turned her head slightly, raising an eyebrow, and he sighed. “You think we should break things off.”

“Got it in one, skipper.”

“What happened to my being a tiger in the sack?”

Isabela chuckled. “Well, you are that, and you promise to get better with practice, but it’s not worth all the whines and the wherefores.”

“I do not whine,” he said, affronted, “and I certainly do not wherefore.”

“Maybe not now. But you will. They always do.”

“How do you know? You break things off long before this stage with most men.”

“That’s true. And women, for that matter. I just know—I know you, Hawke. You’re not the tumbling type.”

“Is there any way I can change your mind?” He hadn’t expected this. He’d been going along on a bright sunny day, and out of nowhere there was a lightning storm striking in his most vulnerable place—his heart. It surprised him how unhappy he was about her decision, but he supposed it shouldn’t have. He had grown to feel more and more toward her recently as they spent more time together, and to be more eager to be around her. He supposed he should have known she would have become uncomfortable with the progress, but he’d been busy enjoying himself, not to mention dealing with everyone in Kirkwall’s little issues, and hadn’t been prepared for this.

“Ah, Hawke,” she said, looking as though she knew exactly what was going through his mind. “I’ll miss you.”

“Wait, are you leaving entirely? Did you get a ship?” he asked, alarmed.

“No. Just … getting bored of this.”

No Isabela at his side? No Isabela appearing like a vision from the darkness to stab their enemies with her daggers? No Isabela making lewd comments and laughing that deep, beautiful laugh of hers?

Lucas searched frantically for some enticement to keep her as part of the team. “At least … at least
stay through tonight. I’m going after this Gascard—you never know what you might pick up in his house,” he said, knowing Isabela’s piratical love of plunder. “And then Varric and I are going to Bartrand’s house.” He caught Isabela’s hand in his. He knew he didn’t want to face down the man he saw as his sister’s killer without her with him; the reasons for that were something he could worry about later. “Come help me with that. For Bethany. She didn’t deserve what he did to her.”

Isabela’s hand closed around his fingers. “Yeah. Bastard has it coming all right.” She had always been fond of Bethany. Then she pulled her hand away, and something in her seemed to close off. “Fine. I’ll meet you at the DuPuis house later tonight.”

He watched her disappear into the crowds, feeling suddenly very alone.

That feeling didn’t alter as he came into his house, finding his mother just preparing to go out. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes shining, and she looked younger than he remembered her seeming in quite some time.

“Where are you off to looking so nice?” he asked, bending down to kiss her cheek.

“Oh, just meeting a friend for dinner, darling. I didn’t expect you home so early, or I might have suggested …” She trailed off, biting her lip. “But perhaps not yet.”

Ah, Lucas thought. So it was that kind of friend. “Well, have a lovely evening, Mother.”

She gave him another smile and hurried out. Lucas twitched aside a curtain, watching her as she crossed the courtyard. He couldn’t see any sign of anyone following her, and made a mental note to ask Varric if he still had men keeping an eye on her … or if that was only in Lowtown. She deserved to meet someone nice, he thought, turning away from the window and resolutely keeping his thoughts from wandering in Isabela’s direction.

In his effort to distract himself, he turned to his gear, gathering up everything he would need for both of the night’s missions, forgetting all about his mother and her date. He had all his things together when the sun was still high in the sky; too early to go break into Gaspard duPuis’ mansion or to go looking for Bartrand. Staying home, alone with his thoughts, wasn’t an exciting option … and he might have gone to the Hanged Man, but he didn’t want to run into Isabela, not right now.

He shouldered his gear, leaving the house without bothering to tell Bodahn where he was going. A brisk walk took him across Hightown to the crumbling mansion where Fenris lived, and he let himself in, taking pleasure in the crunch of debris under his boots as he crossed the foyer.

“Hawke?” The familiar voice echoed through the empty mansion. “Is that you?”

“Who else?”

“Perhaps I have nightly visitors you are unaware of.” Fenris’s voice held a touch of his usual dry humor.

“In heavy armor?”

There was a silence as Lucas made his way up the stairs. “It was just a suggestion.”

“Would you like to have nightly visitors?” Lucas asked, pausing in the doorway. Fenris was just … Fenris. He had never really thought of him having emotions, or needing a lover. More and more, Lucas was coming to think maybe he hadn’t looked closely enough at any of his friends, or before them his family, and that they all held depths he was unaware of.
Fenris laughed bitterly, draining the glass in his hand to the dregs. “Whatever type of visitor would come here is probably not the type I would welcome.”

“You’re still waiting for Danarius.”

“I am. I shall be, until he comes. Which he will,” Fenris said fiercely, his green eyes meeting Lucas’s as though Lucas might have challenged the statement. “This gap in years is puzzling, but as soon as I relax—“ He swallowed visibly. “There he will be.”

There was nothing to be said to that. Even if Fenris was wrong, which Lucas didn’t believe he was, there was no convincing him otherwise. They looked at each other quietly for a moment, before Fenris reached over the side of his chair and picked up a bottle.

“It’s the last bottle of the Agreggio,” he said. “I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.”

“And Thursday qualifies?” Lucas raised his eyebrows.

“Ah, not just any Thursday. This Thursday.” At Lucas’s puzzled frown, Fenris nodded. “It’s the anniversary of my escape.” He smiled, but without humor. “Astía valla femundis.” Before Lucas could ask what that was supposed to mean, Fenris gestured with the bottle to the other chair. “Care to hear the story?”

The sound of the wine pouring into the proffered glass was loud in the quiet room. Lucas took the chair and the glass, cautiously saying, “I thought you avoided talking about this.”

“Not on special occasions.” That bitter smile was still on Fenris’s face as he stared down into his now refilled glass.

“In that case, then, yes. I’d like that.” Lucas had always wondered how Fenris managed to escape someone as powerful and motivated to hold on to him as Danarius.

There was silence for a long moment, and Lucas promised himself that if Fenris wasn’t ready to speak, he wouldn’t ask. At last, the elf took a fortifying swallow of the wine, clearing his throat before he spoke. “No doubt you are familiar with the endless battles the Imperium and the Qunari have fought over Seheron.”

Lucas nodded. It was a history lesson he hadn’t paid much attention to at the time, but he’d brushed up on everything he could about the Qunari in recent years.

Fenris went on, “I was on Seheron with Danarius during a Qunari attack. He found a ship that was leaving for the mainland, but there was only room for one aboard—not all his power could manage to convince the captain to take me on.” He flexed his arm, watching the play of the firelight along the lyrium. “I imagine the forbidding nature of my appearance, which Danarius had cultivated, worked against him in this instance. The captain did not seem eager to have someone who looked like me aboard his ship.” He snorted a short laugh. “I was left behind; I barely escaped the city with my life.”

“I’m surprised Danarius didn’t stay behind with you, in that case.”

“He was given no choice.” This time there was a genuine, if grim, mirth in his laugh. “The look on his face as the ship drew away from the docks was priceless.” He drank deeply, savoring the memory.

“So you escaped the city. What next?”

“I was found by a group of rebels—they were called Fog Warriors. Bands of them roam the jungles
around Seheron. They took me in, and I stayed with them for some time. Until—Until Danarius found me.” His fist clenched.

“And he took you back.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. He ordered me to go with him.” Fenris’s face twisted. “I had grown fond of the rebels—their way of life was beyond my experience. They answered to no master, and when Danarius came, they refused to let him take me. He …” He took a deep swallow of the wine, and went on, his voice thickening. “He ordered me to kill them. So I did. I killed them all.”

The abject misery in Fenris’s voice said more than his words how the incident had affected him, and Lucas wanted to reach out and touch his friend, reassure him, but he knew how Fenris would react to anything that felt like the barest hint of pity, so he kept silent and still, waiting as Fenris got hold of himself.

“I was with them only a few months,” Fenris said softly, almost as if he were talking to himself. “But in that brief time, I felt as if I truly lived. They were bold. Strong. Free with their affections. I was in awe of them, and I owed them everything. And I turned on them even so.”

“Once a slave, always a slave?” Lucas asked.

Fenris nodded. “It felt inevitable. My master had returned, and this … this fantasy life was over. When I looked down at their bodies, I felt—“ He stopped, his voice shaking. “I couldn’t—“ Visibly fighting tears, he said, “I ran. And never looked back.”

“Didn’t Danarius stop you?”

“The rebels had wounded him.” Fenris’s voice was so low Lucas had to lean toward him to hear properly. “He sent soldiers to capture me. They failed.” The tone of his voice made it clear that they failed by dying at his hand; Lucas could picture his friend taking them all on, his body glowing with power. “It was weeks before Danarius was able to mount the hunt in earnest, and by then I was long gone.”

“But you didn’t stay in Seheron. You could have found another band of Fog Warriors, become a rebel.”

Fenris gave him a withering look. “And when I told them what I had done to the first group to take me in, what would they have done then? No. At any rate, I felt unworthy. Also, I did not know at that time if I could truly escape Danarius—if I had joined another band and he had found me again …” He made a gesture of helplessness.

“I see.”

Taking another fortifying gulp of the wine, Fenris savored it for a moment, the torment in his face easing for a moment as he looked thoughtfully at the fire. “I had no idea what escape meant; not then. The idea that I had a choice as to where I could go and what I could do never entered my mind. My only thought was to get as far from Danarius as I could—I stowed aboard a ship for the mainland, and moved south as soon as it docked. Chased by my former master every step of the way.”

“I have to wonder why you didn’t try to escape sooner.” The ferocity of Fenris’s independence was so far from Lucas’s conception of what a slave must be like that it was hard for him to imagine the elf ever acting a subservient part.

“You have not been a slave,” Fenris pointed out. “A slave does not dream of freedom; he thinks only
of his master’s wishes and what the next hour will bring. It did not occur to me that I could be anything else until I had a taste of it; really, not until I met you.”

Lucas had never considered himself a paragon of freedom, but he supposed compared to Fenris’s past he was. “You hear stories of slaves rebelling all the time,” he said. “They did in Kirkwall. Why do they do that if they think of nothing but their masters’ will?”

“Perhaps I overgeneralize from my own experience. I knew nothing other than the life of a slave.” Fenris paused, looking down at his arms. “You see … the ritual that gave me these markings also stripped me of my memory, whether as an integral part of the ritual or merely a fortunate happenstance, I have never known. Danarius certainly enjoyed reminding me of my loss whenever an opportune moment arose.” He held out his arms toward Lucas. “Whatever I was before these may as well have never been. Perhaps … perhaps if I had known who I was all the time, I may have felt differently about escaping. As it is, I still feel that I struggle every day with the question of who I am. Who I was, that identity is lost to me for all time. But who I am to become? That answer eludes me.”

“Me, too. I know who my mother thinks I should be, who Aveline thinks I should be, who my father wanted me to be, who the Viscount expects me to be, who the Arishok thinks I should be … but who I want to be? A total mystery.” Lucas drank deeply from his own glass, which he had almost forgotten he was holding.

“Then I am in august company.” Fenris leaned forward, looking Lucas in the eye. “I have never spoken about this to anyone. Never wanted. Perhaps this is what it means to have a friend.”

Lucas smiled. He thought about how many people he spent time with, and how few were truly his friends. Fenris asked for nothing, and offered companionship on the brightest days, the darkest nights, and in the midst of the bloodiest battles. “Yes,” he said. “Perhaps it is.”

Fenris lifted his glass. “To you, Hawke. May I fight at your side for years to come.”

With a chuckle, Lucas said, “Perish the thought. Let’s say instead, ‘may we share wine together for years to come.’ Some day, it would be nice to stop fighting.”

“Yes. Wouldn’t it, though.” They drank deeply.
To Hear the Song

After some time, Lucas stirred in the chair. “Not that this chair isn’t comfortable,” he said.

Fenris snorted; Lucas’s feelings about the hideous brocade chairs had been made clear long ago, and were a standing joke between the two men. “You have other places to be.”

“So do you.”

The elf raised his eyebrows in question.

“If you don’t mind. We’re seeking out Bartrand.”

“I see.” Fenris had been the fourth member of the team in the Deep Roads; he had witnessed Bartrand’s betrayal of Varric, and had been there while Bethany sickened with the taint. He had watched as Lucas was forced to kill his sister to prevent her from becoming a ghoul. He, of all people, knew what this particular mission meant. He stood up, swaying a little, then regained his balance, blinking.

“The wine going to be a problem?” Lucas was surprised; Fenris rarely showed the effects of his drinking binges.

“No. I merely sat in the chair too long.”

Lucas didn’t want to ask how long that was. “You mind coming along?”

“Of course not. I am at your disposal at all times, Hawke, you know that, and at this time in particular.”

“Thank you.”

Fenris nodded gravely. He took his sword down from its hooks and followed Lucas from the room.

Hightown was dark and quiet—at first. But then, as they made their way toward the isolated courtyard where Varric had said Bartrand’s house was located, they came upon three still figures in their path, all poised for a fight and clutching daggers.

“The Silent Sisters,” Fenris said.

“Yep. Again.” Lucas sighed, drawing his sword. Just once, he’d like to walk through Kirkwall at night without being set upon by whatever crazy people were at the top of the food chain on that particular day.

As they joined battle with the three members of the cabal that they could see, Lucas worried. Where there was one Silent Sister, the rest of the group was likely to be hiding in waiting, and while he and Fenris were experienced at combat, he didn’t look forward to taking on twenty knife-wielding thugs at once.

Their sheer speed was the biggest problem. They kept darting inside the reach of his sword to try to nick him with their undoubtedly poisoned blades, and fending them off was very difficult. Fenris only had one to deal with—they liked a challenge, the Silent Sisters did, so they preferred the bigger guy with the heavier armor if they had a choice—and Fenris had better hand-to-hand skills. An arm through the body cavity did tend to get a foe’s attention.
With relief, Lucas saw his opponents finally go down under the heavy blows of his blade, only to see ten more leaping down from rooftops. He always wondered why they did that—was the effect of relief on the opponent really worth losing three of their members? But soon there was no time to wonder any further, and he was being slowly forced back into a corner by the group surrounding him.

In that moment, he was indescribably relieved to hear the familiar ratchet and twang of Bianca, and Varric’s equally familiar fulsome praise for his crossbow.

“T ook you long enough!” Lucas shouted, ducking a blade that embedded itself into the wall next to him and swinging at the nearest Silent Sister. She dodged, but not quite fast enough, and the edge of the sword left a gash on her arm.

“Should’ve poisoned that,” said a sultry voice from the shadows next to him, and Isabela landed a perfectly thrown dagger in the jugular of the wounded Sister. “I keep telling you, poisoning the blade does half the work for you.”

“I’m an overachiever,” Lucas said briefly, parrying a dagger thrust.

“I’ll say.” Isabela gave him a slow wink that both confused and distracted him, and then she seemed to disappear completely, reappearing on the other side of the confrontation next to Fenris.

Lucas dragged his thoughts away from Isabela’s comment to wonder why it was that none of Aveline’s guards ever showed up for one of these scraps. Of course, if the guards could take out the Silent Sisters and their ilk, then it would be safe for people to walk the streets of Kirkwall and there would be no need for guards, he thought cynically, renewing his efforts against the circle of Sisters surrounding him.

With Varric and Isabela helping, taking the rest of the crew out was strenuous but manageable, and eventually they stood panting over a pile of bodies.

“Anyone poisoned?” Lucas asked. They checked for wounds, and Isabela dabbed some anti-poison ointment she said she’d gotten from a friend who used to be an Antivan Crow. She said it with a smirk that made Lucas feel hotly resentful of whoever this ‘friend’ might be, forgetting for a moment that he no longer had any claim on her himself. Not that he ever had had a claim on her, or that he’d ever really wanted one, he told himself firmly, dragging his attention back to the matter at hand. “That little scrap must have woken Bartrand up,” he said to Varric as they entered the darkened courtyard.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you, but it doesn’t look like it.” Varric squinted into the shadows where the door was located. “Matter of fact, it doesn’t look like anything’s been awake here in a good age or more.” He caught the skeptical glance Lucas threw his direction and frowned. “My sources saw people making deliveries here less than a week ago, and you know how good my sources are.”

They were undeniably good. Lucas blew out a frustrated breath. “Then I suppose the cobwebs are here to discourage tax collectors.”

Varric stared at him a moment and then groaned. “You’re thinking it’s a trap. Great … it’s been ages since my brother tried to kill me.” He closed his eyes for a moment.

Lucas didn’t disturb him, thinking he must be remembering those horrible moments in the Deep Roads when they knew Bartrand had locked them in. But when Varric started to grin, and his hands closed around a phantom Bianca as though he was spraying crossbow bolts around a room, Lucas began to get concerned.
“Varric?”

“What? Oh, sorry.” The dwarf grinned sheepishly. “I was just imagining taking out Bartrand and a whole company of his men single-handedly, and then having him grovel at my feet.” He sighed. “Good times.”

“They would be … but where was I?”

“Waiting outside to chronicle my mightiness, naturally.”

“As I do so often.”

Varric shrugged. “You could give it a try.”

“And have you constantly complaining about people getting blood on your boots? I don’t think so.” Lucas shook his head regretfully. “No, I think I’m going to have to keep doing all the fighting and let you scribble your little stories.”

“A-ha!” Varric’s tone was pure triumph, and Lucas looked at him in surprise. “I knew you liked my stories,” the dwarf said smugly.

“‘Like’ is a rather strong word.” Lucas was painfully aware of someone else who wrote stories standing behind him, and of Isabela’s silence where she should be interjecting some delightfully filthy banter.

“Can we move forward, please?” Fenris asked. “I grow uneasy standing here on the doorstep like a carefully wrapped gift.”

Further silence from Isabela where there should have been an innuendo, and Lucas sighed. “You’re right, Fenris, as you so often are. Ready, Varric?”

The dwarf took a breath, and nodded, pushing on the door. It opened to his touch, swinging on slightly squeaking hinges that underscored the silence in the rest of the house. Lucas stepped inside and froze, so that Fenris and Isabela collided with his armored back.

Their protests at this were silenced when they came around him and saw what he had seen—the sprawled, mangled bodies of what looked like the estate’s entire staff.

The smell was overpowering, and Lucas fought the urge to vomit.

Bending over to touch the arm of one of the men, Varric grunted in surprise. “These corpses are still warm; they’re not even stiff yet. Someone’s been here today.”

“That is your consideration?” Fenris asked in surprise.

“Dead’s dead, elf. Nothing to be done for these people now; the best we can do is find out who did this, and why.”

Fenris conceded the point, stepping back to let Varric look over the bodies.

“What happened to them?” Lucas asked. Mostly, they just looked bloody … and scared.

“It looks like … like someone cut out chunks of their flesh and ate it.” Varric’s voice was thick.

“Ew.”
Isabela bent over one. “No expert did this; amateur hacking by someone who doesn’t use knives a lot,” she said, her voice matter-of-fact.

“Good to know.” Lucas looked toward the door. “We should keep moving; there may be more people in here in danger.”

“There goes Hawke, always on the lookout for someone to save,” Isabela murmured under her breath, pushing past him.

Pushing it open swiftly, she rolled into the room, disappearing into the shadows. Cries of rage and the clang of blades followed, and Lucas nearly tripped over Varric in his haste to get into the room. Isabela was in a circle of four men dressed in House Tethras livery, a pretension of Bartrand’s that reminded Lucas all too strongly of the Deep Roads. She was doing her best to hold them off, but they seemed remarkably strong, and while her blows bloodied them, the wounds weren’t slowing the men down at all, as far as Lucas could tell.

He charged into the battle next to her, hearing Fenris’s hoarse shout just behind him as the elf did the same, and their larger blades hacked into the men’s bodies, slowing them down far more effectively than Isabela’s more subtle attacks had done. Whatever was wrong with them, they couldn’t withstand the heavy blows of Lucas and Fenris’s swords, and soon the men were down. Varric knelt by the two who were still living, lifting their eyelids and studying their bloodshot eyes carefully, and then he gave them a merciful dispatch.

“Whatever happened to those men, Hawke, they were barely worthy of the name there at the end,” he said, getting to his feet. “What kind of insanity has my brother gotten himself mixed up in?”

It was at the tip of Hawke’s tongue to say that, knowing Bartrand, it could be anything, but he held off. No matter what he had done, the man was Varric’s brother, and you didn’t kick a man’s family in the balls just for a cheap shot. “Let’s go find out,” he said instead, leading the way through the next door. This room was empty, thank the Maker. The one after that had another group of men in Tethras uniforms who seemed utterly out of their minds.

One of them, who seemed to be a commander of some kind, was exceptionally strong, so much so that it took the combined efforts of Lucas, Fenris, and Isabela to bring him down. He was also carrying a rather fine battle axe, which Lucas appropriated. Fenris glanced at him with a raised eyebrow, and Lucas grinned. No doubt there would be a long, intense game of Wicked Grace at some point to determine which of them would end up with the weapon.

But as they moved further through the house, there were no more thoughts of smiling. The place was booby-trapped, as Fenris found when he did his patented rush toward a group of more crazed men in House Tethras gear, and filled with those armored maniacs. And then, when they finally reached a room at the end of the house that seemed quiet, they opened the door and found the rest of the household staff … or at least, what was left of them. Several of them seemed to have been hacked to pieces.

“Maker,” Lucas breathed.

“You can say that again.” He glanced quickly at Isabela as she came to stand next to them, but she was looking at the bodies. “Poor sods,” she muttered.

Fenris had turned away abruptly, and was studying the miraculously clean walls. Lucas remembered the story the elf had just told him, and wondered if Fenris’s Fog Warriors had looked like this when Fenris finished with them.
Varric stayed in the doorway. “What did Bartrand do to these people? I mean, he’s an ass, but he’s not a killer.” He caught Lucas’s dark glance, and shrugged. “Not with his hands, at least … he never was before. What can have happened to him?”

“Let’s go find out.” The longer Lucas was stuck in this house, the more uncomfortable he became. All he wanted to do was find Bartrand, wring his neck a little for Bethany’s sake, and get out of here. He led the rest of the group at a much faster pace through the rest of the mansion, finding another crazed group of guards in the main foyer.

They left the usual carnage on the floor. Lucas idly wondered who was ever going to be able to get all that blood out of the carpet, and decided he must be spending too much time at home if that was what concerned him most in this situation.

At the top of the stairs, before the only locked door in the mansion, Lucas heard a sound. On edge, he whirled, stopping himself only just in time from taking the head off a large dark-haired dwarf who had emerged from another bedroom when Varric shouted “Hold up, Hawke!”

“Varric? Is that you?” the dwarf asked. “Praise the Ancestors.”

Gesturing for Hawke to put his blade away, Varric said, “I know this man. He’s Bartrand’s steward. Hugin, what are you doing in here?”

“I’ve been hiding in here, but the guards … they’re like crazed animals. I didn’t dare go past them. Everyone in this house has gone mad!”

“What did he do to the guard to make them like this?” Lucas asked.

“He’s been forcing them to eat lyrium. He—He even cut chunks off the servants’ bodies and fed it to them; he said it was so they could hear the song better.”

Fenris covered his eyes, groaning, and turned away, unconsciously rubbing at the lyrium tattoos on his arms.

In a hushed voice, Varric said, “Bartrand’s not exactly a nice guy … but this doesn’t sound like my brother.” The dwarf was fighting for control, more upset than Lucas had ever seen him.

Lucas frowned. If the statue was gone, though … “You said he sold the statue?” he asked Hugin. “To whom?”

“I don’t know. It’s why we came back to Kirkwall. He was already ranting about the sodding idol and its singing. In his better days, he hated the thing and couldn’t wait to get rid of it. When it was gone, though,” he closed his eyes, shaking his head, “he got worse.” The dwarf was shivering violently, even though it was perfectly warm in the house.

“Everything’s all right; you’re safe now,” Lucas assured him.

Hugin looked up at him with an expression that was part pity, part contempt. “I wish I believed that, human.” He gestured toward the locked door with his head. “Bartrand took the last of the servants and locked himself in his study—no one’s come out for days. The sounds coming out of there—” He stopped, looking nauseous. “I hope they’re dead.”

“What do you mean, you hope they’re dead?” Varric demanded.

“Varric, whatever’s in there … give it a merciful death. That’s all it’ll be good for.” Hugin looked at them all a moment, as if deciding whether there was more to say, and then he ran off, stumbling and
nearly falling on the stairs. He caught himself and made a desperate dash for the door. They could hear it slam behind him, the sound echoing through the house.

Eyes narrowed, Varric stared at the locked door of the study. All was silence inside; Lucas wasn’t sure he wanted to know what that meant.

“No one’s come out in days?” Varric muttered, almost to himself. “Then we go in after them. Come on, Hawke, let’s finish this.” He strode to the door of Bartrand’s study and, without pausing, kicked it down.

Lucas barely recognized the dwarf that barreled out of the room, a great-axe lifted high above his head, screaming, “I’ll make your blood and bones sing the song for me!”

Varric was so stunned he couldn’t move; Fenris reached out and grabbed his jacket, pulling him out of the path of Bartrand’s blade just in time.

“Don’t kill him!” Lucas said hastily. He might hate Bartrand’s guts, but the man was Varric’s brother, after all.

Isabela nodded briskly, throwing herself across the floor in a smooth rolling motion, coming up just behind Bartrand. One of her daggers caught him at the knee, neatly slicing through the ligaments there. He stumbled and fell, moaning about the song. Fenris removed the great-axe from his reach, helping him to sit up. Not gently, because Fenris had been there in the Deep Roads, too, and had seen Bethany before the end.

“I can’t … I can’t … I can’t hear it anymore,” Bartrand babbled. “I just need to hear the song again! Just for a minute.” He stopped, as though listening, and then shouted to no one in particular, “Stop saying that! I know I shouldn’t have sold the idol to that woman! It was a mistake! A mistake!”

Varric grabbed the front of his brother’s shirt, shaking him. “Bartrand! Get a hold of yourself! Do you know where you are? Do you know what you’ve done?”

Blinking, Bartrand appeared to focus on his brother’s face for the first time. “Varric? You’ll help me, won’t you, little brother? You were always the good one.”

“Help you? You left me to die! And for what? Some trinket?” Varric shrieked. It was the first time Lucas had ever seen his friend lose his composure. “Look at yourself! Look what you’ve done to the men and women who served you! Where’s your nobility, brother? Where’s your dwarven honor?”

Lucas met Isabela’s eyes above Varric’s head, both of them clearly thinking the same thing—how strange it was to hear Varric talk about dwarven honor without being ironic. Bartrand, meanwhile, blinked at Varric, his face blank, his mouth moving soundlessly. “He doesn’t look so good,” Lucas said gently. “I’m not sure he even really knows we’re here.”

“Oh, no, he doesn’t,” Varric said grimly. “I didn’t come here just to leave without telling my brother he’s a filthy nug-licker and demanding some answers. Why’d you do it, Bartrand? Were you already crazy, even before you found that damned statue?”

Bartrand’s eyes blazed up with anger, and he tried to stand. “Idol!” he snarled. “It’s not a statue, it’s an idol. It wants to be worshipped! It wants me—it wants me back. She stole it from me!”

“Who did you sell the idol to, Bartrand?” Lucas asked.

“She glittered like the sun, but her heart was ice,” the dwarf whispered. “She won’t feed it … not like I did.”
“Great, a riddle,” Isabela said, frowning. “Just what we needed.”

There was no real point in continuing to interrogate the wreck of a man who sat before them. Gently, Lucas said to Varric, “You’re not getting any answers. If there ever were any, they’re long gone.”

Varric swallowed hard, his eyes glittering suspiciously. “For three years, Hawke, all I’ve wanted is to look him in the eye and get his answers. Why he abandoned us in that thaig, what any of this was for.” He looked at his brother a long time, and shrugged his shoulders. “I guess there’s nothing he could say that could make it right, after all.”

“There’s nothing you can do to him that would be worse than this.”

“No!” Varric drew Bianca, aiming her at Bartrand with fierce determination. “I’ve been counting the days until I could put a bolt in his conniving little brain.” He looked up at Lucas. “It’s not just us!” The specter of Bethany hung between them, and Lucas looked away, trying not to see her grey, tainted face in his mind’s eye. “How many more people will die for his folly?” Varric asked hoarsely.

Varric didn’t need his permission, Lucas knew that, but the dwarf seemed very much to need his agreement, to be backed up in his decision and to know he was doing the right thing. Lucas had felt the same way when he put the knife between Bethany’s ribs, but at least he had had Bethany herself, asking him to set her free. He nodded. “He’s clearly past saving. Make it clean.”

Turning back to his brother, Varric took a careful aim. “I wish I could have done it before I had to see you like this. Good-bye, Bartrand.” Bianca clicked, and a bolt appeared in Bartrand’s chest. He almost looked relieved before his eyes glazed over and he slumped to the side, dead.

Varric stood over his brother’s body for a long time before turning away. “Come on. Hawke. I don’t want to look at this place anymore.”

Together, they exited the house, leaving it to the ghosts.
Outside, Varric stopped in the courtyard and looked up at the stars, breathing deeply of the night air. The dwarf was shaking. And no wonder, given what he had just gone through.

Lucas laid a hand on his shoulder. “Varric?”

“Yeah, Hawke. I’m all right.”

“You don’t look it.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Varric attempted a semblance of his usual grin, but it fell flat. “Hawke?”

“What is it?”

“Thank you. I—I wasn’t sure I could go through with that.”

Lucas nodded. “It was the right thing to do. He wasn’t going to get any better.”

“Who do you think he meant? ‘Her heart was ice, but she glittered like the sun’—just like my brother to be cryptic for the first time in his life just when we needed a straight answer.”

“You mean who he sold the statue to? I can’t imagine what that could have meant,” Lucas said.

“Maybe there was a statue of someone in marble where the person lived?” Isabela suggested. “You know, stone heart, like ice, and glittering in the sun?”

“Possible,” Varric said, but his tone was doubtful. “Anyway, we have another stop to make tonight, don’t we?”

“Oh, no, Varric, I can’t ask you to do that,” Lucas protested. “We can go after duPuis another night.”

“With a name like that? Some poncy Orlesian serial killer is just the kind of person I want to get my hands on.” The hands in question tightened on Bianca’s stock. “Seriously, Hawke, let’s go.”

“If you insist.” Lucas met Fenris’s eyes above Varric’s head, and they shrugged at each other. Maybe it would be good therapy for him, Lucas decided, following Varric across the white cobblestones of Hightown toward Gaspard duPuis’s estate.

When they reached the door, Varric looked down at his fingers, which were still trembling. “Rivaini, could I impose on you?”

“My pleasure.” She got to her knees, her entire focus on the lock in front of her. Lucas found her captivating this way, when all the masks and facades were dropped and she was purely herself, and he felt a stab of pain that the relationship between them, such as it had been, was ended.

The door swung open on creaking hinges, the sound eerie in the deep silence of the night. Inside, the house was just as silent—no servants came to the halls in their nightgowns to find out who had come in. There was no evidence that anyone was at home.

“Let’s search the place, anyway,” Lucas said. If duPuis wasn’t at home, where could he be?

Isabela picked up a letter lying on the hall table. “This accompanied shipment of some artifact.”
Lucas read it over her shoulder. “I wonder who this anonymous ‘friend’ is.”

“Hard to say. Could be anyone, really.”

From the darkness came the now-familiar groaning of shades, as they rose in all the corners and began to converge. A rage demon, fiery and bright, was coming down the stairs.

Fenris drew his sword. “Magic again? Must they all be mages?”

“You’ve lived in Kirkwall this long and you still have to ask?” Varric made Bianca sing, her quarrels slicing through the pudding-like forms of the shades.

Lucas supposed it shouldn't have been a surprise that duPuis was an apostate; as Varric pointed out, Kirkwall was teeming with them. Still, he'd have preferred something more straightforward, someone they could put in jail. Much as he believed in the role of the Circles, he hated to put anyone in Knight-Commander Meredith's hands.

They made short work of the shades and the demon, and made their way up the stairs to the main hall, finding a note there indicating that duPuis had been asking about missing mages from Starkhaven. “Was one of the missing women from Starkhaven?” Lucas asked.

“Not that I remember. The only mage we know of is Mharen, and she was from Kirkwall.”

They kept on through the house, farther up and farther in. There was a note on a hall table from Knight-Commander Meredith, apologizing for the earlier search of duPuis' mansion.

“Take a moment,” Varric said, “to appreciate the irony that Knight-Commander Meredith apologized to an apostate. And she thinks Kirkwall's such a tight ship.”

Isabela snorted. “I know a tight ship when I see one, and Kirkwall isn't it.”

“Hawke.” Fenris's deep voice was concerned as he called from a bedroom. Lucas joined him, and they both looked through the chest of women's clothing in the otherwise rather bare room. “Do you think he keeps their clothes as some variety of ... emblem of his crimes?”

“Like a trophy? He could. Although ...” Lucas thought the clothes looked like they all belonged to the same person. “It's hard to say.”

Isabela appeared in the doorway, silently gesturing to a room down the hall. Lucas followed her, trying to be as quiet as his three companions, and failing utterly. Whatever sounds there had been in that room that Isabela had been trying to alert him to ceased as he came closer with a clatter of armor and the admittedly heavy tread of his feet.

Then from inside the room came a scream, a woman's voice, and Lucas forgot about being quiet. With one thrust of his shoulder, he burst the door open, finding a young blonde woman kneeling at the feet of a dark-haired man. She was sobbing in fear, cringing away from him. Her face turned in his direction as the door flew open.

“Help me, please! He's gone mad!”

The dark-haired man's jaw dropped, but he seemed bewildered, rather than angry, at the intrusion. “You're not—you're not him,” he stammered. “Shit, I know what this looks like, but I didn't hurt her!”

“Then prove it. Let her go, and we can talk,” Lucas said.
DuPuis raised his eyebrows. “If I let her go, you'll kill me. I know about you, Serah Hawke. I don't know why you're here, but there's a killer out there, and I think he's playing us both. Just ... just let me explain!”

“I'm not going to kill you,” Lucas said, hoping he wasn't lying. “I'll hear what you have to say. Just step away from the girl.”

“Very well.” duPuis moved away a couple of steps. “Several years ago, my sister was murdered. The bastard's now in Kirkwall, killing again, the same way he killed my sister. It starts with a bouquet of white lilies. He sends them to each new victim.” Looking down at the blonde woman, he said, “Alessa was going to be next. But I took her, so he would have to come to me. I was finally going to face my sister's killer, but then you showed up.” His lip twisted as he looked at Lucas.

“He's lying!” the girl cried out, holding out her arm, where the blood stood out red from a puncture wound. “He hurt me!”

“I've explained this,” duPuis said impatiently to her. “I need your blood to track you down in case he takes you. It was for your protection!”

“I don't believe you!” She got to her feet, running clumsily from the room. Lucas and his people stepped aside to let her go, then moved back in front of duPuis, making it clear he had no chance of going after her.

“She'll go straight to the city guard. They'll ruin everything!” duPuis snarled.

Lucas let the smear on Aveline's reputation go unremarked. The guards were her problem, and she was still working on whipping them into shape.

“So you are a blood mage,” Fenris said from behind him. “Give me one reason why we should not put you down.”

“I used blood magic to augment my powers. It was to track Alessa, nothing more. I—“ duPuis looked down at his hands. “I'm not proud of what I've done, but ... I had to. He took my sister from me! She was all that I had.”

“Tell us what you know. Maybe we can work together,” Lucas said.

DuPuis snorted. “I know about you, Serah Hawke. You would want him arrested, put in jail, sentenced by a court of law. I want vengeance! I want his blood dripping from my fingers.”

“I suppose I can't blame you for that. Still ... if what we both want is to get this killer off the streets of Kirkwall before he strikes again, it won't hurt you to tell me what you know about him.”

“All I know for certain is that he must be a powerful and experienced blood mage, and that he uses the women's bodies—or parts of them—for some ritual.”

“He'd have to have a fair amount of coin, too,” Isabela said thoughtfully. “Not just for the flowers, but if he's moving around from city to city without being discovered—that means he's paying people not to notice him.”

“So we're looking for a rich, closeted mage?” Lucas groaned. “Because there aren't enough of those in Kirkwall.” He looked Gaspard over; the man was certainly a rich, closeted mage, but somehow Lucas didn't think he was a killer. At least, not this killer. “Gaspard, it's every man for himself. If I see you again, I'm turning you in to the Knight-Commander.”
“Very well. If you should find out anything further about this man, Serah Hawke, find me in Darktown. I owe him.”

“Fine.” Lucas glanced at Fenris. “Will you mind staying until Serah duPuis is packed and ready to vacate the premises?”

“It will be my pleasure.” The elf leaned against the wall, crossing his arms and looking his most forbidding. Lucas had spent enough time with him that he no longer saw the scary markings and the spiky armor—he just saw Fenris. But most people still found his friend a frightening figure, with his lines of snaky lyrium markings and the giant sword as tall as he was. Certainly duPuis seemed impressed.

Lucas left the duPuis mansion with Varric and Isabela, catching himself just in time before offering to walk back to the Hanged Man with them. That wasn't on the table anymore, he remembered, and he felt surprisingly unhappy about it.

There was no use in arguing with Isabela. She was a woman who knew what she wanted, and what she didn't want. Maybe he should be more like that, he thought. How many times had he bemoaned the way his friends and the city fathers of Kirkwall pushed him back and forth? Maybe it was time for him to stand up and push back, declare what he wanted and go for it.

He let himself into the house, where the lights were dim, his mother already gone to bed. He snuffed out the candles on his way up. In his room, he lay back fully armored on the bed, heedless of what might get on the coverlet, and stared up at the ceiling.

Standing up for what he wanted was all well and good ... if he only knew what that was.
Lucas closed the flimsy door of Merrill's home behind him, leaning back against it and sighing. He hated to say no to her, he really did, but this eluvian nonsense ... a mirror that she admitted had probably been responsible for the death of one of her clanmates, and she wanted to fix it with blood magic? Merrill had always been a bit on the unstable side, but that was crazy, and he had told her so.

To her credit, she'd stood her ground, paling but not backing down or breaking into tears, and they had had quite a reasonable discussion, but her disappointment had been palpable, and Lucas felt guilty, despite his certainty that he was in the right.

He left the alienage and went to Lirene's to see if his mother was there, and ended up drafted into helping sort through the line of needy refugees. Late that afternoon, the line (and his purse) having shrunk quite a bit, he left Lirene's with his mother on his arm.

“Darling, I'm so glad you came to help today. It meant so much to everyone.”

“I was happy to lend a hand, Mother. It's nice to see you busy again, the way you used to be in Lothering. You look ... content.”

“I am content. More than that, even, maybe.” There was a faint flush on her cheeks. “Perhaps ... Never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing, darling. Look, there's your friend Varric. I'm sure the two of you must have some kind of mischief to get up to you.” She reached up on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

Lucas watched her go, feeling a vague disquiet. Something was going on there, and he should have a better handle on it, but how could he when she still treated his life as some type of child's game?

“She'll be all right,” Varric said.

“You still have people keeping an eye on her?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Varric.”

“Don't thank me, Hawke. I just came from Daisy's.”

Lucas looked down at the dwarf. “No. That eluvian is trouble, and her solution? 'Fixing' it with blood magic? You can't think that's a good idea.”

“You sound like Broody. Or Blondie.”

“If those two agree, then it's a good idea for the rest of us to listen.”

Varric snorted at that idea. “Come on, Hawke, don't you need a nice walk out to Sundermount?”

“No. And neither do you.” Lucas frowned at his friend. “Now, are we going to the Hanged Man to drown our sorrows, or am I going to find somewhere else where I won't be hounded into doing something I already said no to?”
Varric looked down at his boots. He sighed heavily. “Fine. Have it your way. But ... I wouldn't expect Daisy to come along on any future jobs for a while.”

“I wouldn't have asked her to.”

They went into the Hanged Man, unusually silent with one another. Only their companions, particularly Merrill, Anders, and Fenris, could create such division between them, and Lucas hated it when it happened. It was hard for him not to be in agreement with Varric; the dwarf had been his most stalwart support since the day they'd met. But for once, he was going to stick to what he had decided rather than being swayed by what everyone else wanted.

Varric was accosted almost immediately by some young scamps from his wide net of informants and excused himself to deal with them, leaving Lucas at their table alone. Or, alone for a few moments. A bottle was placed heavily in front of him, and a familiar exotic scent enveloped him.

“Isabela. I thought we weren't speaking.”

“We're not.” She sat down across from him, her golden eyes on his. “But you had plenty to say to that sweet little kitten this morning.”

“You, too? Is there anyone Merrill didn't go crying to?”

“I happened to drop in; she didn't come crying to anyone. But she is disappointed, and I don't know why you won't help her.”

“Blood magic? A corrupted mirror that has already claimed one life? Either of those would be a good reason. Together, they're inarguable.” Lucas found the sight and the scent of her incredibly tempting, more so than he would have imagined they could be after such a short time. He wanted to see her smile, to taste her kiss, and it simultaneously saddened and angered him that he couldn't. “What do you want, Isabela?”

“I want you to help her.”

“What's in it for me?”

He asked the question without thinking through what he wanted the answer to be, but as her head reared back and she looked him in the eye, his resolve solidified.

“What do you want, Hawke?” Isabela asked softly.

“You.”

“Not on the table.”

“On the table, in the bed ... all of it.” He smiled, but without humor.

“I thought we said that was done with.”

“No, you said that was done with. And I went along with it, because I always go along with what you all want, whether I agree with it or not. But I'm pretty much done with that now. So here you are—you won't sleep with me, you don't want to talk to me because you're so afraid you might feel something for me other than pure indifference, but you'll bully me into doing something for Merrill that I've already said no to? The Void with that, Isabela. You can't have it both ways.”

“This is important to her.”
“Yeah, I get that,” Lucas said. “And I think it's admirable that you—and Varric—are willing to stand up for what's important to your friend. But I'm your friend, too, and I don't notice anyone lining up to stand up for what's important to me. 'Get my relic, Hawke.' 'Save the mages, Hawke.' 'Find my brother, Hawke.' 'Fix my mirror, Hawke.'” He leaned across the table toward Isabela, shocked at the venom coming from his own mouth but feeling unable to stop it. “I have a name. You want me to help Merrill? Fine, I'll do it. But I want something in return.”

She was staring at him, her golden eyes wide. “What?”

“I want you to call me by my name when you ask me to help your friend. My first name.”

There was fear in her eyes. Whatever that meant to him, it meant the same to her, and she didn't like it. Lucas stayed where he was, holding her eyes with his.

“If I don't do it, you won't help her?”

“Right.”

“Just your name?”

“Just my name.”

Her chest was heaving with her rapid breathing; she reminded him of nothing so much as a trapped bird. “Why?”

“Because that's what I want.”

“Fine.” She moistened her lips with her tongue, and then spoke rapidly, as if she couldn't finish if she paused even for a moment. “Will you help Merrill fix her mirror, Lucas?”

“Yes.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “Was that really so hard?”

“Leave me alone.” Isabela stood up abruptly, moving around him, but Lucas caught her by the wrist and pulled her down into his lap. Maker, she felt good.

“I don't want to do that,” he whispered, holding her there. She could get away if she really wanted, but he was going to make her work for it.

“Hawke. Lucas. Don't.” But she didn't move, and he closed in on her mouth, capturing it with his, the kiss slow and heated.

At last, Isabela pushed at his chest, and he let go of her lips. “This is ridiculous,” he said.

“What?”

“I want you; you want me. What possible reason is there for us not to spend time together when we want to? In bed or out, for that matter.”

The look of the trapped bird was back, and she pushed harder, scrambling off his lap.

“Isabela.”

“What?” she snapped, stopping in the act of fleeing up the stairs.

“Think about it, will you?”
“Fine.” And she was gone, leaving Lucas feeling quite pleased with himself. Yes, he had capitulated on helping Merrill ... but he had gained something far more valuable in return. Time to stand up for what he wanted, he'd said, but he hadn't known what that was. Now he did.

The next day's trip out to Sundermount was filled with merriment. Isabela was cheerful and occasionally lapsed back into her natural flirtatiousness. Varric forbore from his usual complaints about having to walk through grass and dirt and get his clothing soiled. And Merrill, after some initial surprise, accepted the situation without question, which annoyed Lucas probably more than it should have. Would a little gratitude for his help have been too much to ask?

There were no scowling elves standing guard at the edge of the camp, which surprised Lucas, until he saw Marethari standing motionless near the central fire, watching them. So she had guessed they were coming, had she? Or more like had snooped on Merrill in the Fade. Lucas wasn't entirely sure such a thing was possible, but if it was, Marethari would certainly do it.

Remembering how much he disliked Marethari made Lucas feel better about helping Merrill.

He nodded at the little elf as she approached the Keeper, hoping to give her courage. “You can do this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“Right, then.” She approached Marethari.

“So. You have been working to restore the eluvian, lethallan.”

“Yes. And ... I need the arulin'holm.”

“How can I give you such an artifact, knowing the use to which you will put it?”

Merrill had explained about the ancient carving tool the clan held, and how she hoped to use it to restore the mirror to full use again. She drew herself up now, taking a deep breath to fortify herself against Marethari's disapproving look. “You can give it to me because I am invoking vir sulevanan. You can give me whatever task you like, and ...” She flushed slightly. “With Hawke's help, I will complete it.”

“Do you know what it is Merrill is asking?” Marethari asked him.

“I know why she wants this arulin'holm, but not what she's invoking.”

“You see, the artifacts of the People belong to us all—any member of the clan can ask to use the arulin'holm if they perform a task set for them by the Keeper. In this case ...” She looked at Merrill.

“There is a varterral in a cave near the camp. A number of hunters have gone after it and not returned. If you can deal with the varterral, you may have the arulin'holm.”

“What, exactly, is a varterral?” Lucas asked.

“You will see.” Marethari had a bit of a smile on her face as she turned away, and Lucas looked at Merrill, repeating his question.

“I ... can't explain it, really. It's a creature of the wild, who guards an ancient treasure. Usually they let the Dalish pass, though. If this one has been attacking ... I don't know why it would.”
“Let's go find out, then, Daisy,” Varric said gently.

She led them to the cave Marethari had indicated, and they fought their way through walking corpses and giant spiders to a central cavern where a huge long-legged spider-like creature waited them, spitting pools of milky venom at them that made the floor slippery, pounding the cavern floor with its giant legs, stabbing at them with its sharp feet.

The battle was long, and all of them were exhausted and covered in goop and scratches by the time it was over. When the varterral was dead, they found the bodies of several of Merrill's clanmates deep within the cavern, along with the varterral's pile of gold, which Lucas had no compunction about taking to divide amongst his companions later. After the fight they'd been through, Merrill didn't even bother to argue. She was too distraught over her lost clanmates to care anyway, whispering her anguish on Isabela's warm, sympathetic shoulder as they made their way back to the Dalish camp.

Marethari was waiting for them; she took the clan amulets that Merrill had taken from the bodies of their lost hunters without comment, and Lucas had an even stronger sense than usual that Marethari had known all along what they would find in that cavern. Why she had sent so many hunters after the varterral if she had known they couldn't defeat it, he had no idea. But then, he had no idea why Marethari did anything, and really couldn't bring himself to care.

“Are you going to give Merrill the arulin'holm?” he asked now.

Frowning, Marethari looked at the tool in her hand. It seemed so light and flimsy to be worth all this effort; Lucas couldn't imagine what Merrill really hoped to accomplish with something so delicate. “I had hoped you would reconsider, lethallan,” she said to Merrill.

Merrill drew herself up to her full height, wiping the traces of her tears away with an impatient swipe of her hands. “No, Keeper. It's more important to me now than ever.”

“This is an error,” Marethari said. “I cannot deny you what you have earned through vir sulevanan, but I cannot give you the means to destroy yourself with that mirror, either.” She turned to Lucas. “Serah Hawke, I give you this tool of my people in the hope that you can talk some sense into her.” She looked at Merrill again, a long, searching, up-and-down look that said all too plainly how little hope she had of Merrill ever coming to her senses, and turned her back on all of them, leaving Lucas staring at the tool, so small in his big gauntleted hand.

“You will give it to me, won't you, Hawke?” Merrill asked anxiously.

He hesitated. If Marethari didn't want this thing in Merrill's hands ... if Merrill openly admitted that the mirror had killed someone ... He looked up and saw Isabela's eyes on him. More than the bargain they had made was the reminder that Isabela and Varric, who were two people whose judgment he trusted, had faith in Merrill, and that both of them were here because of that faith, to get her this tool. He handed it over, quickly, before he had time to rethink.

“Thank you.” Merrill's hand closed around the tool. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked past Lucas to Marethari's retreating back. “I don't know why she won't try to understand. My people have lost everything. Everything! Even our gods are gone. I want to bring back this one thing, to reclaim and hold on to a piece of our past, and I will do whatever it takes to accomplish that. I just ... I can't understand why the Keeper won't even consider that I might be right.”

Privately, Lucas very much doubted if Marethari ever admitted that anyone else might be right if it meant she would be wrong. “Can't test it out if we never get back to Kirkwall,” he said to Merrill.

“No. You're right. Let's go.” Merrill turned away from her clan, all of whom had been ostentatiously
ignoring her, without another glance.

Isabela walked with Merrill all the way back to Kirkwall, but Lucas didn't mind. The breeze blowing Isabela's short skirt around in front of him was enticing, and Varric was telling his best stories, and he had every intention of testing Isabela's resolve as soon as they got back.
White Lilies

As soon as they were through the gates of the city, Merrill disappeared into the warren of streets that led to the alienage, the arulin'holm clutched tightly in her hand, so that she could get straight to work on the mirror.

Lucas looked in the direction she had gone with some disquiet. He hoped she knew what she was doing. But Marethari distrusted her—and disrespected her—so thoroughly, he couldn't help but feel that someone someday had to give Merrill the benefit of the doubt. And Varric and Isabela were in Merrill's corner, and he'd take their instincts about people over Marethari's any day.

He ambled along with both of them through the city, nodding to people he passed. Most of the nobles were used to his odd assortment of companions—expected it, really. Isabela got more notice than most, but that was because of her looks. He'd have stared, too, he thought with a smile.

Tonight, he was accompanying her to the Hanged Man, and he wasn't leaving unless she asked him very nicely.

And from the sidelong glance she sent his way, full of heat, he didn't think she was intending on being particularly nice.

At the Hanged Man, one of Varric's young urchins waylaid him, while Lucas followed Isabela to the stairs. She stopped and turned to him, a glimmer of a smile in the back of her golden eyes. "You think you're coming up, don't you?"

"I think you want me to."

"Someone's got to do something about that ego of yours."

"Someone should either get herself up the stairs or prepare to be kissed right here," Lucas growled, stepping closer to her.

"Ooh, I may like this new you." Isabela stood up on her tiptoes, but just as she was about to kiss him, Varric called his name.

"What?" he snapped over his shoulder.

Varric had caught up with them, and in a low, intense voice, he said, "Hawke, it's your mother."

Lucas frowned, not understanding. He looked through the crowd at the Hanged Man, confused as to why his mother might have come here. She had never darkened the doors when they lived in Lowtown, and now she could send Bodahn or Sandal or that new elf, Orana, down if she wanted him. "Where?"

"She's not here. The boys saw her come to Lowtown with someone, the man she's been seeing, and ... she was carrying white lilies."

"He brought her flowers?" Something about the lilies was supposed to be important, but Lucas couldn't—didn't want to—remember what that was.

"Hawke. The white lilies. You remember what Gaspard said; they're the calling card of the butcher."

"Surely a man can give a woman lilies if he wants to." There was a desperate sound in his voice
now; Lucas very much wanted Varric to convince him there was another explanation.

But the dwarf didn't speak. Neither did Isabela. Both of them watched him with sorrowful expressions, waiting for him to spring into action.

"No," Lucas said brokenly. "No."

"Lucas." Isabela put her hand on her arm. "You want me to go?"

Without thinking, he pulled her against him, holding her tightly, burying his face in her hair. After a moment, her arms went around him in return.

This was real. This was happening. His mother needed him; he had to get moving. Letting go of Isabela, he said, "Varric, get your urchins moving. Have them go get Anders. And Fenris. Damn it, have them get everyone. Now, no matter what else they're doing. Does your boy know where the man took my mother?"

"It's ... it's the warehouse where we found the ... parts," Varric said.

"Yes. Yes, of course. I should have thought of that." Lucas looked at Isabela. "You'll come with me?"

She nodded, her eyes serious and dark and deadly.

"Thank you." He cleared his throat, still feeling as though he were in some kind of dream. "Let's go."

The three of them got to the foundry first. It appeared deserted, but Isabela found marks on the floor where someone in high-heeled shoes had been walking, following them to a trapdoor in the back. Merrill had caught up with them by that point, her face paler than usual in sympathy with Lucas.

Isabela went first into the depths below the trapdoor. Her face, serious as Lucas had rarely seen it, reappeared a moment later, just as he was preparing to follow her. "Hawke. Don't come down here."

"I have to." When she didn't move, he said, "I'll have to know whatever it is eventually, Isabela. Let me by."

She moved, reluctantly, and he descended into the depths of the underground, seeing almost immediately what she had seen—a woman's body lying on its side, facing away from them, her hair gleaming pale in the dim light from the lanterns that lined the walls.

"Mother!" He hurried to her, putting his hand on her shoulder and rolling her over. "Alessa," he said softly, recognizing the girl who had been at Gascard's. There was mingled relief, shock, and shame in the word. It shouldn't be a relief to see so young a woman dead, but it was.

"Hawke," Varric said. "Look at this." He showed Lucas a note that said something about quicklime and the texture of skin. "What do you think—?"

"Let me look." Lucas hadn't noticed Anders arrive, but then, right now he probably wouldn't notice anything short of an Archdemon. The mage took the note from Varric's hands, frowning over it. "It looks as though he's preserving their bodies. Why would he do that?"

"Who wants to know why that sick bastard does anything?" Lucas snapped.

They were all silent around him, and he didn't bother to continue the conversation, hurrying ahead
into the tunnels, knowing they were all behind him. Shades and rage demons tried to block the path, but Lucas cut his way through them, feeling a hysteria building inside him. If he didn't find his mother soon—

Fenris had caught up to them now, as they made their way through the dim tunnels. Another note found on the ground mentioned the mage Mharen, the one who had set off Emeric's quest for the truth in the first place, and her beautiful hands and fingers. “He seems to be interested in ... parts,” Anders muttered. “Did you see the girl? He removed her breasts.”

“Parts?” Fenris said in disgust. “Is there anything you mages will not profane?”

“Fenris,” Varric said sharply. “No time for that now.”

The elf subsided. “I am here, Hawke. You can count on my blade, whatever comes.”

“Thank you.” Lucas kept going down the dimly lit, dank corridor, stopping only when something hard crunched under his boot. The gleam of gold caught his attention, and he picked it up. The familiar broad face of the locket, the “L” engraved onto it—he had seen that all his life. “This is my mother’s,” he whispered to Isabela, who put a hand on his arm in quick, instinctive sympathy. “My mother’s. She never took it off, not ... not ever.”

“Let's go find her,” Isabela said, looking at him steadily until he could think again.

Lucas nodded, swallowing hard to keep his emotions in check. A bend in the hall and a flight of rickety steps took them down into a brightly lit hole, where it was evident the man had been living. There was a bed, a pile of papers, a table and chairs, and on the wall, a portrait of a woman.

Varric frowned at it. “That looks like—“

“Like my mother. How could he have a picture—“

“Because she looked like someone else,” Anders said. He had another of those notes in his hand, and he gestured with it. “This one says he missed an anniversary because he was looking for the perfect face.”

“These books are on necromancy,” Merrill said, her voice dripping with disapproval. In other circumstances, Lucas might have found it funny that the blood mage disapproved of raising the dead.

“What does that mean?” Fenris asked.

“I think ...” Anders looked up at Lucas, stricken, and as human as Lucas had ever seen him. “I think it means he is creating a monster.”

“What kind of monster?”

“One made of ... body parts.”

“How is that even possible?” Varric asked with a grimace.

“Come on, then,” Lucas said desperately. He no longer cared what the man was doing—he cared only about getting to his mother. As he rushed down the hall, Isabela at his heels and the others behind her, he prayed that he wasn't too late.

Later, looking back on the events of the day, Lucas would wonder why he had been so surprised. Anders had tried to tell him, to explain what awaited him. But no one could have prepared him. Not
enough.

In another hole in the ground, another damp, dirty cave of a room, candles flickered on every available surface, candles with flowers twined about their bases. The effect anywhere else would have been romantic. Here it was grotesque.

At the end of the room, a chair covered in torn, faded brocade that must once have been splendid stood with its back to Lucas. A man stood up from in front of it, locking icy eyes on Lucas's. He smiled. “You must be Lucas. Leandra was so certain you would come for her.”

“Where is my mother?”

“She is here. She has been waiting for you. What a lovely, gentle woman.” The mage came out from behind the chair, his voice deepening and darkening. “You will never understand my purpose. Your mother was chosen because she was special, and now she is part of something ... greater.”

“Please,” Lucas said. All he could think of was getting his mother out of there before anything ... unthinkable could happen. “I don't want to hurt anyone. Just ... let me take my mother home.”

The mage smiled grimly. “I have done the impossible. I have touched the face of the Maker and lived.” He moved in front of the chair again, reaching out his hand to touch something—someone—sitting in it. “Do you know what the strongest force in the world is?” He met Lucas's eyes again. “Love.”

Lucas was aware of the others behind him, ready to move on his command, but he was frozen in horrified fascination. Whatever waited in that chair terrified him, but he needed to see it, to know how far this filthy mage had gone.

“I pieced her together from memory,” the mage went on, walking toward Lucas. “I found her eyes, her skin, her delicate fingers ... and at last, her beautiful face. I have searched far and wide to find her again. And no force on this earth will part us! Come to me, my love!” he said, spreading his arms wide.

And the figure in the chair rose, turning, and moved, each hitching step a torture. She wore a decayed wedding dress that was dotted with blood, but the face that looked back at Lucas, the blank, unfocused eyes ... they were his mother's.
Lucas couldn't tear his eyes away from the horrific figure stumbling toward him. This was—unthinkable. But there was no time to think. Shades were rising from the shadows, a rage demon coming toward them out of the dark depths of the tunnels, and the monster who had killed Lucas's mother was busy raising more.

His people were moving behind him, attacking the demons, and Lucas drew his sword and rushed the mage. He could hear someone screaming, and he thought possibly it was him, but it seemed unimportant in comparison with making the bastard who had killed his mother—worse than killed her—pay for what he had done.

He closed with the mage, who threw up a shield around himself just in time. Lucas battered at the shield, his throat raw from giving voice to his rage. “Fight like a man, you son of a bitch!”

How long that went on, with him throwing himself at the shield and screaming and his friends fighting the demons around him, he didn't know, but eventually the shield fell, and he fell with it, landing on top of the mage. When the fog of rage cleared, he was straddling the mage, pounding his head against the ground, and Isabela's strong hands were closing over his.

“Hawke. He's dead. Hawke!”

“What?” he said hoarsely.

“He's dead. And your ... she needs you.”

Lucas turned to see the thing with his mother's face tottering toward him, and he disentangled himself from the mage just in time to catch the body in its ragged wedding dress as it fell into his arms.

“Mother!”

Her mouth opened, her breath coming in raspy bursts.

Lucas looked frantically over his shoulder at Anders. The great healer; surely he could do something. But the mage shook his head.

“His magic was keeping her alive. There's nothing I can do. She's ...” Anders shook his head. “I'm sorry.”

Merrill mutely nodded in agreement, wringing her hands together.

“I knew you would come,” his mother whispered.

“You know me,” Lucas said, trying to force a smile for her sake. “I always save the day.”

But she saw through him, just as she had when he was a little boy. “Sh. Don't fret, darling. That man would have kept me trapped in here. But now ...” There was a small smile on her face. “Now I am free to join your father, and Carver, and Bethany.”

Yes. That would be her attitude; Lucas felt an extra stab of grief that no matter what he'd done, he had never been able to make up for the loss of the others. Maybe he'd never tried hard enough.

“But you'll be all alone,” she finished, sorrowfully.
“I'll be fine, Mother.”

“My little boy has become so strong.” With the last of her breath, she whispered, “I love you. You've always made me so proud.” The final words were little more than images formed on her lips, which Lucas barely saw through the blur of his tears. He bowed his head over her body and cried, weeping for her, for his father, for his brother and sister, and last of all, for himself. Because she was right; he was alone.

As the storm of his tears passed, he became aware of a strong hand on his shoulder. “Lucas,” Aveline said. “I'm so sorry.”

Later, he promised himself he would find the energy to be angry with her. She was the Captain of the Guard; she should have known this was happening, she should have found a way to stop it. But for now, all he had the strength to do was nod.

“Hawke.” It was Sebastian; he and Aveline must both have come in after the fighting started. “Let me take the body to the Chantry, begin the preparations for the pyre.”

“Yes. Yes, the pyre,” he said hoarsely. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

He let the Chantry brother lift his mother's body—no, not his mother's body, the thing made by that dead mage—out of his arms. Fenris was there to take the body's legs, which didn't surprise Lucas or Sebastian. There was belief buried deep in Fenris's scarred heart; of course it would be him.

Above his head, Lucas heard Aveline talking to someone. “I'll bring my people in; we'll look around and try to find out who he was, who the ... women he used were. You take Hawke back to Hightown.”

“Got it.” It was Isabela's voice, soft but decisive. Lucas paused a moment to consider how odd it was that Aveline and Isabela agreed on something; how much more odd it was that Isabela would involve herself in taking care of him in this situation. But then the pirate's strong brown hand was closing on his arm, lifting him to his feet. “Come on, Lucas. Let's go home.”

Home. His mother's home, so quiet. Silent, even. “No!” He wrenched his arm out of Isabela's grasp and looked around at all of them. “No.”

Merrill was watching him, wide-eyed and confused. Anders was looking down at the floor. Varric was frowning in sympathy. Fenris and Sebastian were halfway down the passage with their grotesque burden; Aveline was beginning her investigation. Only Isabela seemed to understand.

“You don't have to go back there if you don't want to.”

“No tonight,” he said, almost pleading with her.

“Not tonight.” Isabela turned to Varric. “You'll go make sure the servants know, and keep up with Chantry-boy about the pyre?”

“Yeah, I'm on it.” Varric glanced at Lucas again. “Hawke.”

Lucas nodded, understanding all the things the dwarf wasn't saying, hoping Varric understood how much they meant to him.

Isabela slung his arm over her shoulders, leading him up and out of the depths of that black, filthy nightmare.
Behind him, he heard Varric talking to Merrill and Anders, taking charge of everything, and he felt a deep gratitude to the dwarf. Later, sometime, he would have to tell him. For now ... “Oh, Maker, Isabela,” he said, nearly choking with the effort of holding back more tears.

“I know. Keep it together until we get to the Hanged Man,” she said with uncharacteristic softness. For her, he would try.

They made it to her room without too many incidents. A couple of people tried to talk to them in the Hanged Man, but Isabela just kicked them, which effectively stopped anyone else from coming near. In her room, she let go of his arm, and Lucas sank onto her bed, his head in his hands. The urge to weep had passed; now he just felt numb; spent; empty.

Isabela watched him from the doorway. “I ... feel I should say ... something.”

“You don't have to. I know emotional stuff isn't your thing.”

“At least your mother loved you. Not everyone can say that,” she offered, sitting down next to him.

“I couldn't save her. I should have kept an eye on her, paid more attention to what she was doing, where she was going. This is my fault.”

“It's not like you haven't had a lot to do,” Isabela said. “And Varric's people had an eye on her, more thoroughly than you could have done if you'd tried.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “It's not your fault. If you have to blame someone, blame that mage, Quentin.”

“Was that his name?” Lucas asked. He couldn't bring himself to care if it was or wasn't, but he supposed it was better to have an identity to hang his anger on.

“That's what Aveline said. Look, you loved your mother, and she knew it. You would have stopped this if you could. It wasn't your fault.”

Lucas looked down at his hands. “Mother was all I had left.”

“You don't really think that, do you?” There was a surprising softness in Isabela's voice. “Family's not just the people you're related to by blood. There are other people who care about you.” She caught herself. “Like ... Aveline. And Varric. Fenris seems to think you're all right.”

He looked to her, almost tempted to smile at her transparency. “I'm not particularly concerned with Fenris's feelings right now.”

“No. I imagine you wouldn't be.”

“Sebastian's taking care of the pyre?”

“Right. And Varric's handling everything else. You don't have to do anything.”

“Except sit here and think.” He swallowed, the image of that face coming to his mind again. Groaning, he rubbed his hands over his eyes, trying to blacken it out. “I don't want to think. I just want—I want it all to go away, just for a little while.”

Isabela put her hand on his thigh, squeezing gently. “You're in luck, then. I happen to be an expert at making thinking go away, just for a little while.” She got up, leaving Lucas in confusion, but came back with a bottle. “Here. Drink this.”

It was Antivan brandy, a particularly fine—and valuable—vintage. Lucas tipped up the bottle, taking
a long swig, before handing it back to Isabela.

“Good.” She straddled his lap, her hands beginning to work at the clasps of his armor. “Between me and the brandy, we’ll get you through this,” Isabela said softly. “I promise.”

And he believed her.
Coping Mechanisms

The morning came too soon. Lucas woke with a dry mouth, a splitting headache ... and an armful of sleeping pirate. He closed his arm around her, pulling her closer against him, wishing he could just stay here in bed with her until ... until he could stop thinking, stop remembering.

But it was no use. With wakefulness came the memory of his mother's fate, and the pull of all the things that needed to be done before she could rest. He had let his friends take over for him yesterday, let them do for him what he hadn't had the strength for ... but wasn't that kind of thing what had brought him here in the first place? If he had spent more time with his mother, instead of letting Varric keep an eye on her, maybe she would still be alive today.

He shifted out from under Isabela, who muttered sleepily. She raised her head to look at him as he began searching for his clothes. “You all right?”

“Fine.”

Isabela blinked, coming to full wakefulness. “Right. Tell me another one.”

“I have to go see about … the pyre, and Gamlen, and … There must be a thousand things to do.”

“Want some company?”

Startled, Lucas turned to look at her. “I … could use some, but this isn’t really your thing, these kinds of details.”

“Not usually.” She disappeared under the covers, hunting for her smallclothes. “But you’d be surprised how many times I’ve been in charge of final services on board ships. Different on land, what with the Chantry and all, but still, you might want someone with you who’s been there.”

“You’re right. I never have had to manage all these details. We had to leave Bethany in the Deep Roads, Carver in Lothering, and Father … obviously we didn’t go to the Chantry for him.”

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t get sentimental on me, Hawke,” she said briskly, buckling on her boot. Lucas hadn’t even noticed she’d taken them off. “You’re a half-decent guy and I owe you one.”

“Of course. You might even owe me two,” he said, striving for a tone as light as hers. He appreciated her lack of sentiment in this case—a different woman, one who would hold him and coddle him and take care of him, would just tempt him to stay here and not get back at it. Instead, Isabela sharpened him and made him think and wouldn’t let him wallow in sorrow or self-pity.

“Maybe.” She smiled at him, fastening the corset around her tunic, under her generous breasts. “You’d better hurry up and get dressed.”

“Yes. Yes, I should, shouldn’t I?” He really didn't want to. Once he left this room, everything that had happened yesterday would be real. But there was no other choice; as usual, there were things to do.

Lucas got up and found his filthy armor, buckling it on piece by piece, feeling it weigh him down.
Time for a new set, he thought. He would never be able to wear this one again without thinking of his mother and of the mage who had killed her.

In the tavern of the Hanged Man was the last thing he wanted to deal with—a room full of people awkwardly trying to make him feel better. He nodded at their ham-handed attempts at condolences, pushing through as fast as he could. Near the door, Varric found him.

“Hawke.” The dwarf looked kindly at him, but wiped the sympathy off his face in response to a dark look from Isabela. “Everything’s set. I talked to Bodahn at your house, he said he’d make arrangements there, Choirboy’s on top of the pyre and the services later this morning. Aveline cleaned up that … place and talked to the Seneschal and the Viscount about what happened.”

“Thank you, Varric.” Lucas spoke through a thickened throat, having trouble getting the words out. After all the times he had complained that his friends simply demanded and demanded and demanded ... it was good to know they had his back so thoroughly when he really needed them. “And ... if I forget ... you'll tell the others I said thank you, too, won't you?”

“Naturally.”

He pushed his way out of the Hanged Man, blinking in the daylight, and stood, uncertain. To the Chantry, or home? “Did someone talk to Gamlen?”

“Blondie and Daisy stopped in to tell him. He was ... well, she was the last of his family, too.”

Lucas nodded. He and his uncle weren’t close; never had been. He hadn’t even seen Gamlen in months and he was fairly sure neither of them had missed each other in the least. But her renewed relationship with her brother had made his mother happy, and Gamlen had been good to her. And had never tried to capitalize on her newfound wealth, when in theory he had every right to after they had squatted rent-free in his home for over a year. “Good,” he said in response to Varric’s comment. “I mean ... I’ll talk to him at the services.”

That settled it. Chantry first. He had no desire to go home, anyway. That had been her house, her home. He’d reclaimed it for her, and in memory of Bethany and Carver, both of whom would have appreciated it more than he did. To go there now, every room silent and empty, by himself ... He wasn't ready.

Lucas led the way up the stairs to Hightown and then up the other stairs to the Chantry. Sebastian met him at the door. “Hawke. I am so sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ve taken care of everything. Leandra and I had spoken a number of times about her faith, so I think I was able to arrange things the way she would have wanted them.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.” It occurred to Lucas that he hadn’t given a lot of thought to how everyone else who had known his mother would react to her loss. She had had friends in Kirkwall, a number of them, others who would miss her. It was comforting in some ways, and increased his guilt in others.

The service proceeded without Lucas needing to do much. Fortunately the Chant covered everything needed, so he didn’t have to speak, really only needed to stand there, which was about all he felt capable of anyway. He was grateful for Isabela’s silent but stalwart presence next to him, Fenris and Varric behind him, Aveline on his other side, her eyes faraway. Surely she was thinking of Wesley’s final moments, and of Carver, standing so bravely against the onrush of darkspawn, and of Bethany,
as he was.

He couldn't bring himself to look at the thing on the pyre, to consider the ashes as they flew upward or to think of them as belonging to his mother. They had found the rest of her body, and were burning her head with it as properly as they could. Probably he should ask what they had done with the other parts, and if they had found out the names of the other women and contacted the families, but he couldn't summon the energy to do so.

Sebastian led the service, which was attended by a number of nobles, Fereldan refugees his mother had helped, the servants from their estate, the shopkeepers she had dealt with ... She would have been pleased to see how many people came to pay their respects, Lucas thought, standing in the receiving line with Gamlen later, mechanically saying “thank you” over and over to everyone who offered their condolences.

After it was done, Isabela and Varric boxed him in. “You're coming back to the Hanged Man with us, Hawke.”

“I should go home,” he protested. “I'm sure there are ... things ... to manage.”

“What things?” Varric said asked. “You forget, I just had to do all this for Bartrand, which was a much more complex task given everything he was involved in. Your money is all your own, you're the only heir, so that's easy, and trust me, you don't want to be going through her belongings yet.” His voice softening, he added, “Really, Hawke, let us get you drunk some more before you go home. You'll thank us later.”

“After the hangover I had this morning? I'll pass.”

“That was the Antivan brandy,” Isabela said.

“You opened that?” Varric looked as though he was about to protest, but thought better of it. “Yeah, I suppose you did. I hope you enjoyed it.”

“I did. I don't know how much Hawke remembers.” Isabela shot him a glance, her golden eyes warm, and Lucas couldn't help a little smile in return. He remembered, all right. He wasn't sure he would ever forget. She had known just what he needed—more, had been just what he needed. He couldn't imagine wanting to spend that particular night with anyone else. Which said a few things he didn't want to think about just at the moment.

“Fine,” he said. “Let's go to the Hanged Man.” He put his hand on Varric's shoulder. “Thank you for everything you did.”

“Don't thank me, thank Aveline and the Choirboy.”

“Are they coming?”

“They should be, later. Choirboy won't drink, though, the prude.”

They found their usual table ready for them, tankards already laid out, and Lucas nodded his appreciation to Corff, the bartender. Of course, he'd been either personally or indirectly responsible for a great deal of coin flowing Corff's way over the years, so a little consideration was due ... but it was nice that he hadn't had to make that point.

Varric poured for all of them, and they sat looking at the cups for a moment before Varric lifted his. “Have to start with this one: to Leandra.”
“To Leandra,” Isabela echoed.

Lucas lifted his cup and stared down into it. “To Mother,” he muttered, and drank. “And Carver. And Bethany. And Father.” He drank after each one.

Varric watched the proceedings sympathetically. Tapping the edge of his tankard against Lucas's, he said, “To Bartrand,” and drained the cup.

Isabela frowned, looking as sad as Lucas had ever seen her. “To my sailors,” she said, drinking deeply.

“Toasting the fallen?” Fenris's voice cut into the melancholy that was taking over the table. “Allow me to add to the supplies.” He placed a bottle of Aggregio Pavali, his favorite wine, in the middle of the table. “Hawke, I do not know what to say, but ... I thought you could use this.”

“Keep it,” Lucas said, touched by the gesture and the thought behind it. “We'll drink it together.”

Fenris gave him a small smile. “I look forward to it, my friend.” He took his seat and the tankard Varric filled for him. “Sebastian and Aveline say they'll be down shortly, just finishing up some final details.”

“Daisy said she would see us all later; didn't feel this was quite her thing. I guess the Dalish bury their dead or something like that.”

“Don't dwarves leave theirs in the Deep Roads?” Isabela asked.

“You're asking me? Andristian, born and bred. If the Stone has any interest in me it hasn't said so.”

Lucas let them talk; he was content to sit in the midst of the noisy tavern and drink. Maybe alcohol wasn't a long-term solution for his problems, but for tonight he thought it was the only thing that was going to get him back into that house.

He didn't know how much later Aveline and Sebastian came in. He stood up, nearly upsetting the chair, and waved at them vigorously. “My friends! My dear, dear friends!”

Sebastian was grinning at him. “How much has he had?” he asked the table in general.

Silently, Varric held up an empty bottle.


“Hawke, you must stop drinking,” Aveline said, very loudly and slowly, right in his face.

Lucas grinned at her. He put an arm around her, and then his other arm around Isabela, since the pirate happened to be standing right next to him. “My two best girls,” he said, squeezing them both. He laid his head down on a shoulder, realizing too late that it was Aveline's. Trying to fix his mistake, he leaned his head the other way, but found not only no shoulder, but no one holding up his other arm. He would have fallen if Fenris hadn't suddenly appeared and caught him.

Varric took the other arm, since Aveline had also unaccountably disappeared. “My friend,” Varric said softly in his ear, “you're going to want to be going now before you say anything that's going to get you killed.”

Lucas frowned. ‘Get him killed?’ What had he said? He looked to Fenris, who was smirking. Wait, was the elf smiling? At him? Fenris never smiled. “You're not so tough,” he said to Fenris, who
laughed out loud.

“I’ll take him back to Hightown, shall I?” he said.

“That would seem to be best,” Aveline said, her voice clipped. “Whose idea was it to let him drink this much?” She appeared to be glaring at Isabela.

“Wait,” Lucas said to Fenris. “I need to fix this.”

“In your condition? I fear you would be the one who needed the fixing. You are not exactly at your diplomatic best.” Fenris dragged him inexorably toward the door.

Lucas tried to look around, to find Isabela, but it occurred to him that of course she had probably had enough of him. His high spirits leaked from him, and he found tears stinging his eyes. Not very manly of him.

“Hawke,” Fenris said, half-leading, half-carrying him through Lowtown. “Shut up.”

“Shut up? Was I speaking?”

“You were singing.”

“I was? What was I singing?”

Fenris shook his head. “Something about the dawn coming. Which it shall, long before we reach Hightown, if you do not focus on placing one foot in front of the other.”

“The dawn does come,” Lucas said softly. “Every day. And will keep doing so ... but my mother ...” He felt tears rolling down his cheeks again, hot and stinging.

“Yes. I ... cannot imagine what it must be like to lose your family. Anything I could say would be insufficient. I'm sorry.” Fenris said the words stiffly, uncomfortable with emotion, as always.

“You don't even know if you have a family to lose,” Lucas pointed out. “Are you going to try to find your sister?”

“You are drunk.”

“Yes.” Lucas nodded, his head feeling heavy. “Are you going to try to find your sister?”

“You already asked me that.”

“You didn't answer.”

“Hawke, that type of search can only end badly. Even assuming it is not some variety of trap laid by Danarius, any search would certainly let him know where I am and lead to my recapture.”

“I would never let that happen.”

Fenris snorted. “You are many things, my friend, but infallible is not one of them. I appreciate the gesture and the intent behind it, but ... I cannot imagine my sister would be pleased enough to hear from me to make it worth the risks.”

“Don't you want to know?”

“Of course I want to know!” Fenris shouted. “But that does not make it a good idea.”
Lucas met the elf's glare with one of his own. “I've never known you to be a coward.”

His shoulders slumping, Fenris looked away. “Then perhaps you do not know me as well as you imagine.” He let go of Lucas's arm. “I believe you can find your way from here, even in your current condition.”

He walked off in the direction of his mansion, and it was only then that Lucas saw the bottle of Pavali clutched in the elf’s free hand. His friend was going to spend the evening sitting alone in his dilapidated mansion, staring into the fire, drinking, and brooding. Again. Something seemed wrong about that—surely Fenris deserved something better.

Lucas looked up at the stone front of his own mansion, which he hadn't set foot inside since his mother—

All his own drinking had apparently been for naught, because right now, standing here, he was suddenly stone cold sober again. He put his hand on the doorknob, trying to make himself push it open.
It seemed that the Maker was as reluctant for Lucas to enter his home as Lucas was—before he had the chance to turn the doorknob, a page in the uniform of the Viscount's personal guard came running up to him.

“Serah Hawke! The Viscount needs to see you. Right now.”

Lucas squinted at the boy, wondering if he was still drunk and this was some kind of hallucination. “Do you know what time it is?”

The page gulped. “Yes, Serah. So does the Viscount.”

“Then it's important.” Lucas sighed. Of course it was; when wasn't it? Still, he hadn't wanted to go home anyway. “All right, let's go.”

He followed the page through the darkened streets of Hightown. It was possible, of course, that this was some type of trap, but really, who would need to go through anything this elaborate? And it wasn't out of character for the Viscount to panic and have him come running, even in the depths of night. He wished Fenris hadn't gone home, though. The elf's stalwart presence at his side would have been nice right about now.

Inside the keep, he hurried up to the Viscount's office, finding the man pacing back and forth and muttering to himself. “Serah Hawke,” he said in relief as Lucas entered the room. He frowned—apparently Lucas's debauch this evening still showed. He wouldn't be surprised if he smelled like a distillery to someone who hadn't spent hours in the Hanged Man. “Are you ... all right?”

“You mean, am I sober enough to handle whatever it is you've called me in here for? I'll manage.”

“I ... was sorry to hear about your mother. I knew Leandra when we were all much younger; she was a lovely girl. And no one deserved ... that.”

“No. No one did,” Lucas said shortly, not wanting to travel any further down that particular conversational path. “What can I do for you?”

“It's—it's my son, Saemus. He—“ The Viscount held up a crumpled piece of paper. “He left me this note. He's gone to the Qunari, converted to the Qun.”

“Well, that was only a matter of time,” Lucas said. The boy's ideals had been leading him down this path for years; surely the Viscount had been aware of the possibility. But then, he supposed that being aware of a possibility and being prepared for a reality weren't necessarily the same thing.

The Viscount winced at his flat tone. “Yes, I suppose ... it has been tending in that direction for some time.” He took a deep breath. “Please, Serah Hawke, convince Saemus to come home.”

“Me? I've barely spoken to him.”

“Perhaps so ... but you are one of the few who can enter the compound—and the only one the Arishok will allow to finish a sentence in his presence, much less listen to. Also ... I believe your example has inspired the boy.”

There was an accusation there, and one that stung Lucas. “The only contact I've had with the Arishok has been at your request,” he snapped. “Perhaps if you'd done your own dirty work where
the Qunari were concerned, Saemus would have been inspired by your example.”

Lucas could tell that the Viscount was on the verge of ordering him out of the darkened office before he appeared to remember that there was no one else he could ask to perform this task for him. “Knowing what I know now, perhaps I should have. But those decisions are in the past. In the present . . .”

“He’s of age. I have no legal right to drag him out of there.”

The Viscount shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. If he remains there—either I lose my son, or my opponents begin to claim that my office is in the hands of the Qunari. Everything I do will come under suspicion.”

Lucas wasn’t aware of any opponents to the Viscount, except those who were tired of him doing precisely nothing. And no matter how loudly people muttered, no one else wanted the job. “And if the Arishok isn’t disposed to let Saemus leave?”

The Viscount rubbed his forehead. “I only hope you can convince him. Please, Serah Hawke. You are my last chance to bring my son back to his senses.”

“I will do my best,” Lucas said, turning on his heel and leaving the office. He didn’t think there was any further chance of bringing Saemus back to his senses . . . but he would see what could be done. Having just lost his mother, he was more kindly disposed than usual to a father trying to salvage his relationship with his son, no matter what the Viscount’s true motivations might be.

He imagined most of the others would still be at the Hanged Man, and in stages of inebriation that would make them poor choices to take to see the Arishok, so he detoured only far enough to get Fenris out of his mansion, and the two of them went down to the docks together. Fortunately, on Fenris inebriation took the form of making him more taciturn and, oddly, more well-spoken.

The Qunari at the gate let him pass. Even at this hour of the night, most of the Qunari seemed to be up, gathered around their fires and looking menacing, and the Arishok sat on his stool at the top of the steps as though he had been waiting for them. Of Saemus there was no sign.

“Serah Hawke.”

“I’m here about the Viscount’s son.”

“Are you?” The Arishok sounded skeptical. “In four years, I have made no threat, and yet the populace lines up to hate us simply because we exist. But despite lies and fear, bas still beg me to let them come to the Qun. They hunger for purpose.”

Lucas looked around; other than Qunari warriors, he saw a few elves. There was no evidence that the Arishok had been overrun with eager bas . . . unless they kept the converts hidden.

The Arishok continued, “The son has made a choice. You will not deny him that.”

“Possibly not,” Lucas agreed. “He is an adult, able to make his own decisions. To have snuck off in the middle of the night without facing his father, however? Surely the Qun demands a more honest, forthright decision than that.”

“It is not my role to reject the free choice of viddathari, or to ask how the break with their past was made. The son responded to his own demand of the Qun. He is neither my slave nor my prisoner.” Annoyance passed over the Arishok’s features, a surprisingly open expression from one usually so guarded. “He is not even here.”
“What?”

“He went to his father. Ask the Viscount why he would send you and a letter both.”

Lucas would have liked to have asked the Viscount, had the man possessed the balls to come here himself. He would also have liked to have strangled the Viscount. “That's something he probably could have mentioned,” he said, sighing. “Did the letter say where they were meeting?”

“At the Chantry. A last, pointless appeal by your toothless religion, I suppose.”

The Chantry? Lucas and Fenris exchanged a glance. “The Viscount wouldn't have chosen the Chantry. But I think I know who would.”

“Petrice,” Fenris spat, as if the name tasted unpleasant in his mouth.

“Yes.”

The Arishok nodded slowly. “A suspect in many things. If she has threatened someone under my command again, there is only one response.”

“I've had about enough of Petrice,” Lucas agreed. Perhaps it was wrong of him, but he would have cheerfully let the Arishok handle this, had it been up to him. He sighed again. “I'll go to the Chantry and deal with her.”

“I will be watching, Hawke,” the Arishok said. “The demand of the Qun is clear.”

So was their dismissal.

Outside the compound, Fenris turned to Lucas. “This will not end well.”

“No.”

“Perhaps you should let it be the Viscount's and the Arishok's problem.”

“Who are you, Isabela?” Lucas snapped.

Fenris's mouth quirked up at the corner. “It was merely a suggestion.”

Lucas sighed. “Yes, and one I wish I could take you up on. But ... if I don't deal with this, no one will.”

There was no denying the truth of that statement, so Fenris didn't bother. “Would you like to collect any more back-up?”

“No. Let them drink. We can handle Petrice. Sebastian may be back in the Chantry by the time we get there; that would be convenient. Unless he decides to agree with her, but he's always seemed smarter than that.”

“I would imagine he is.”

They arrived in front of the Chantry just as the bright moon ducked behind a cloud. Lucas tried not to see any symbolism in that.

Inside, the Chantry was silent and deserted. Lucas had never been here so deep into the night before; he wondered if it was always this quiet. Did Andraste take a nap in the quiet hours of the night, or was Her love and Her blessing open at all hours? He'd always thought the second.
Saemus knelt in front of the great statue in the center of the Chantry, his head slumped to the side. At a casual glance, he looked as though he might be praying, or possibly sleeping, but the unnatural stillness of his body told Lucas a darker tale.

"Venhedis," Fenris said quietly next to him, having come to the same conclusion.

Lucas felt tears pricking at the back of his eyes. Ridiculous—he had barely known Saemus and had despised the boy as an idealistic zealot. “They didn't have to kill him,” he said, his voice breaking. For a moment, he saw his mother's face on Saemus's body, and the tears spilled, hot and stinging.

“Tears, Serah Hawke? For what you have done?” Petrice's cold voice came from the shadows. “Pouncing upon the Viscount's son, a repentant convert, in the Chantry itself—a crime with no excuse.”

“It's your crime,” Lucas snapped. “No one will believe I did this.”

“Really? Maddened by the killing of your mother, you ran amok, shouting zealous filth. Yes.” Petrice nodded. “Your Qunari masters will finally answer.”

“I have no Qunari masters. Every single time I have approached the Qunari, it has been at the Viscount's request. Perhaps if he had gone himself, Saemus would have learned to respect his father and his father's office,” Lucas said softly, almost to himself. He looked at Petrice. “All this will do is make people hate you—and fear the Chantry.”

Petrice snorted. “I have kept the fear of the Qunari fresh in every sermon, every prayer. The people will know who to believe, who to follow. When people hear of this attack against an innocent penitent, they will rise.”

“And in so doing they will be slaughtered,” Fenris said. “No one here knows what it is to face a Qunari attack, not truly. This city is utterly unprepared for what they can and will unleash.”

She didn't bother to look in Fenris's direction. A smug smile was crossing her face as she held Lucas's gaze. “You will answer, Serah Hawke.”

Behind him, Lucas heard an intake of breath, and he turned to see the Grand Cleric standing there. She nodded, her eyes sad. “There is death in every corner, young Mother. It is as you predicted. All too well.”

Petrice's face practically glowed with triumph, but as the Grand Cleric's eyes met Lucas's, he understood that she knew what had occurred here. A great wave of weariness swept him—if she had known what Petrice was capable of, why had she not acted? Why was it left for him, again, to sweep up the mess the powerful created through their indolence and their inability to take the responsibility that was theirs to wield?

“Petrice.” The Grand Cleric approached her subordinate. “What has happened here?”

“Saemus Dumar was a Qunari convert. He came here to repent and was murdered.”

“He came here to make peace with his father; lured here by you!” Lucas said. “You killed him so no one would follow his free choice, right or wrong.”

“It could not be allowed. How many might have been tempted by his example?”

“Is that what Andraste teaches? Kill them if they attempt to think for themselves, if they're wrong or lost or scared or misguided? That's not what my Chant of Light says!”
“Peace,” the Grand Cleric said firmly, stepping in between them. “As many would have been tempted as would want to go, I suppose. We cannot hold our people by fear; we must keep them with us because they want to be here, because they understand the truth through us.” She turned to Lucas. “You are friends with the Captain of the Guard, yes?” At his nod, she continued, “The young Mother has erred in her judgment. A court will decide her fate. The Chantry respects the law, and so must she.”

Petrice looked up, her mouth open to protest, and then she flew backward, a Qunari arrow embedded in her chest. Lucas turned in time to see the Qunari in the doorway raise his bow, take careful aim, and shoot Petrice again, this time between the eyes. He stood there for a moment, then he nodded briefly at Lucas and was gone.

The Grand Cleric hadn't moved a muscle. She stood now, looking down at Petrice's body at her feet. “Send for Viscount Dumar,” she said softly.

Lucas didn't need to; Fenris was already out the door and on his way to the Viscount's keep.

In the time it took for the Viscount to arrive, Lucas and the Grand Cleric cleaned up Saemus and laid him out on a pyre, so that the Viscount didn't have to see the way Petrice had posed him, and they moved Petrice's body out of the way. They didn't speak beyond what was necessary to accomplish those tasks. Lucas was surprised the Grand Cleric was willing to get her hands dirty, but she didn't seem to want anyone else to see what had occurred in the Chantry that night. When the Viscount arrived, after a few brief words of explanation, the Grand Cleric left.

Lucas couldn't help but be disappointed. This was the woman they were all looking to for spiritual guidance? To mediate the increasingly strident arguments between the Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter? What was she doing, waiting for the Maker to come down from on high and resolve all of Kirkwall's problems personally? Lucas considered himself as faithful as most people, but if they were going to be waiting for the Maker's intervention, they'd be waiting a long time.

He left the Viscount alone with Saemus. It crossed Lucas's mind that if the Viscount had ever shown Saemus in life the tenderness he was displaying toward his son now that death had parted them, perhaps things might have been different for all of them. But then, who was Lucas to talk? Had he spent more time with his mother, shown her more tenderness and care, she, too, might still be alive.

The dawn was breaking as he left the Chantry, Hightown beginning to awaken around him, most of them still blissfully unaware of everything that had changed overnight, and he envied them their peace.

Weary to the bone, he let himself into his house without a thought for the fact that it was the first time he'd entered since his mother died, and, pausing only to remove the sharpest pieces of his armor, he collapsed face first onto the bed and fell into a deep but troubled sleep almost immediately.
Lucas slept very, very late into the next day, waking with sunlight streaming in his windows. He lay in bed for a long time after, trying not to think. Maker only knew what would happen now. The Viscount, the Arishok, the Grand Cleric, the Knight-Commander... if he had half a brain, he'd get out of Kirkwall right now before someone embroiled him in another mess.

He sat up abruptly. Why didn't he? What tied him in Kirkwall? Nothing any longer. He could leave Bodahn to watch over the house, and Varric—assuming he couldn't pry the dwarf out of the Hanged Man to come with him, which he probably couldn't—would surely be willing to oversee his finances. The dwarf would almost certainly do a better job with them than Lucas did, anyway.

Throwing the covers back, he got out of bed, throwing on a shirt and pants instead of his dented icky armor. He still couldn't look at it without thinking of his mother, and he didn't want to think of his mother. Not right now.

Lucas looked around the room. Yes, he could probably take off with a fairly small bag, especially if he wasn't planning on fighting. Not that he knew where he could go that didn't involve fighting, but that really wasn't the point right now. The point was to hold on to the idea.

When he left his room, the physical embodiment of the idea was there in front of him: Isabela was stretched out on his banister, adding to the obscene wood carving she'd begun a while back.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked her, starting down the stairs toward her.

She sat up, still perched on the banister, and looked at him. “Nice hair.”

“I just got up.”

“I figured that one out all by myself.”

“Aren't you clever, though.” He leaned on the rail next to her. “Can you figure out what I'm thinking, too?”

Isabela slid farther down the banister, away from him. “No.”

“Liar.”

“Well, the answer's no.”

“Come on, Isabela. Why not? Surely it can't be because you're afraid.”

She frowned at him. “Please. You think you can get me into bed by calling me chicken?”

“Calling you sexy, and irresistible, and exotic, and gorgeous hasn't gotten me very far—I thought I'd try a new tactic.”

“When did you call me those things?”

He moved closer, and this time she stayed put. “In my head, all the time.” He lifted her hair off her neck, kissing her smooth skin. “Isabela, you sexy, irresistible, exotic, gorgeous pirate of a woman, will you run away with me?”

She had been leaning slowly into his embrace as he spoke, but when the import of his last words hit
her, she jerked back, banging her head painfully into his jaw.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Lucas said.

“Run away with you? Where?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“Why?”

“After the events of this past week, do you have to ask that? Would you want to stay in Kirkwall?” He frowned at her. “Do you want to stay in Kirkwall?”

“Well … not as such, but … I have to find the relic.”

“Or Castillon will come after you.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, then, let’s find the damn relic and get out of here!”

Isabela's eyes widened. “Do you mean it?”

Lucas nodded. “If I help you find your relic, will you come away with me? Anywhere you want. Everywhere, if you want. I don't care.”

“I'll ... think about it.”

“Fair enough.” It was as close to a yes as he could expect, and really as much as he needed right now, since the whole idea was barely a few minutes old. “Meanwhile …” He pulled her against him, whispering in her ear. “Have you ever done it on a banister?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you have.” He reached between her legs and ripped her tiny black smallclothes off her, finding her already damp. She sighed, spreading her legs farther, balancing with all the agility of years of climbing riggings.

Lucas’s mouth explored everywhere—on her neck and her ears and her collarbone, dipping down into the valley between her breasts, and Isabela threw her head back and sighed.

“Hawke.”

“Mm?”

“You've gone a little crazy, haven't you?”

“Don't you like it?”

Her moan as he filled her was answer enough.

Much later, Isabela went searching Lucas’s room for her clothes, discarded during the second round. “You’ll be at the Hanged Man later?”

“Probably. Why, where are you going?”

“I have to see someone who may have a lead on the relic.”
Lucas got out of bed, starting the hunt for his own clothes. “I’ll come with you.”

“Not this time, Hawke.”

“Why not?”

She looked him up and down. “Because they’d make you for a noble as soon as you walked in the door, and that would get us both killed.”

He couldn’t argue with that. “Just … don’t go getting in any trouble without me, all right?”

“Who, me?” She batted her eyes coyly at him, and Lucas pulled her to him, kissing her thoroughly.

“You.”

“Fine. If it looks like the lead is going anywhere, I’ll come get you.”

“That’s all I ask.”

Isabela disappeared, climbing out the window and shimmying down the drainpipe. While Lucas was never quite sure why she didn’t use the door, in this case it was a bit of a relief, because less than a minute later Bodahn came knocking at the door, announcing that Aveline had dropped in. It wasn’t that Lucas was ashamed of his relationship with Isabela … it was just that he’d rather not talk to Aveline about it. There was no love lost between the two women, and the memory of Lucas’s old feelings for Aveline lingered just enough that he didn’t much want to talk about his sex life with her — particularly not the kind he shared with Isabela.

Lucas finished getting dressed and met Aveline in the atrium. She was pacing back and forth, but she stopped when she saw him. “Hawke. I don’t care what else is going on—I came to see if you were all right.”

“I’m fine. Thank you, Aveline.”

She looked at him searchingly. “How can you be fine?”

He smiled. “Have it your way, then. I’m not fine.” Taking a seat on the bench along the wall, he leaned his head back. “Has it been worth it, Aveline? Do you ever think maybe we should have stayed in Ferelden?”

“What, and be killed by the darkspawn? No, thank you.”

“It might have been … quicker.” He thought briefly of his mother, of that twisted body, and then pushed the thought away. “Of course, Kirkwall has been a bit better for you. How is Donnic?”

Aveline’s face softened. “Donnic is … fine.” She sank down on the bench next to him. “But … he wants to marry me.”

“That’s wonderful news.” He meant it, too. The feelings he had tried to nurture for Aveline were at rest now, as they should be. “But you seem to think there’s something wrong with it.”

“Wesley … you know, the way he died … losing him was the hardest thing, especially since I was the one who struck the final blow. If something like that happened to Donnic?” She sighed. “But the alternative, of course, is living without love, making it all about work and duty. I tried that, and there was Donnic all along, sneaking his way inside my heart. I don’t know what I would do without him.”
“Seems like you have your answer, then.”

“I suppose I do … but it still seems … a big step.”

“An important step, Aveline. You should take it.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Hawke. You know, you are the closest thing I have to family; your approval and support mean a lot.”

“You have it. Always,” he said, squeezing her hand. “And … thank you. For being there all along. For helping me keep their memories alive. It seems such a tremendous burden, being the only one left who truly remembers them, all of them.”

“I know. I won’t forget, I promise.”

“And I won’t forget Wesley, either. For what it’s worth, I think he would approve of Donnic.”

“I think he would, too.”

“Well, don’t tell me that, for the Maker’s sake,” Lucas said, giving her a little push. “Go tell Donnic.”

Aveline smiled, getting up. “I believe I will.”

“Good.”

Lucas watched her leave, sighing. This wasn’t quite what he had originally intended, but in many ways it was better. Donnic was good for Aveline, and for whatever reason, Isabela was good for him. She was the breath of fresh air he hadn’t even known he needed.

He went to the Hanged Man later in the day, finding Varric holed up in his room scribbling rapidly. The dwarf glanced at him briefly as he came in, then his eyes darted guiltily away.

“What is it?” Lucas asked. Something felt very wrong.

“Nothing.”

“You are lying through your teeth.”

Varric sighed. “Yes. I’m lying through my teeth. Look, Hawke, if I tell you something, will you promise not to do anything … crazy?”

“Define crazy.”

“Extreme.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t think I tended toward extreme reactions.”

“This time you might.”

Well, that could only mean one person. “What has he done now?”

Varric winced. “It’s as bad as it’s ever been. Worse.”

“What has he done?” Lucas asked again, enunciating each word sharply.

“It’s like this—“
“Let me guess. After I told him I wasn’t buying his nonsense about the ‘Tranquil solution’ and wasn’t going to sneak into the Gallows looking for proof of it, he came to you, and you being the soft touch that you are, you agreed to go with him.”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“So what did you find in the Gallows?” Lucas crossed his arms across his chest.

Varric sat back, sighing. “Ser Alrik was as bad as Blondie said. We ran into him in the tunnels as he was about to make a female mage Tranquil, for reasons you can probably guess. He had a bunch of his men with him, all standing around in a circle. I’m not exactly the righteous type, you know that, Hawke, but … some people deserve to die. What Blondie—what Justice, or Vengeance, or whoever they all want to call themselves, did … those Templars deserved it.”

“And then what?”

“And then he—they—it turned on the mage. She was cowering, begging for her life, and … Blondie’s not in control of that thing, whatever it is.”

“I could have told you that. I did tell you that,” Lucas said.

“I know.”

“Did he kill her?”

“No. He pulled himself back at the last minute.”

"And the 'Tranquil Solution'?”

Varric put his quill down, saying. "Alrik had a letter on him; it was his idea, but the Knight-Commander and the Divine wouldn't go for it."


“Hawke.”

“Where is he?”

Varric looked away. “I don’t know.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows, waiting.

“I really don’t know, Hawke, I swear!”

“How much did you give him?”

“A lot.”

“Andraste’s ass, Varric, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking he was my friend! That a lot of people owe him their lives. That we owe him our lives.”

“So you put a lot of money in the hands of a dangerous, uncontrolled abomination and let him go free?”
Varric rubbed his hands over his face. “Yes.”

Lucas shook his head. “I hope he thanks the Maker and all his lucky stars he met you, Varric.”

“I hope he gets some help.”

“There is no help for what he is,” Lucas said evenly. “You know that, I know that, and he knows that.” He studied the dwarf for a moment. “If I ever see him again, you know I’ll kill him.”

“Yeah. I know. Not happy about the idea of two of my best friends at odds with one another, trying to kill each other.”

“I can’t say I’m thrilled about it, either.” Lucas sighed. “Varric, I know who you are. I love you for your soft heart and your belief in people, all the things about you that you try to hide. But in this case … I hope we don’t all live to regret what you’ve done.”

“Me, too, Hawke.” They both stared gloomily into the fire. “Me, too.”
Torn Between Two Crises

After a long silence, Varric stirred, looking at Lucas uneasily. “Hawke. We okay?”

Lucas nodded. “Of course we are, Varric. You are who you are. I wouldn’t want you to be anyone else.”

“Not even a pirate?” Varric grinned at him, but sobered when Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Too soon.”

“Yep.”

“How about drinks and a round of Wicked Grace, then?”

Lucas smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

They played a few rounds down in the tavern. Varric mostly won, as usual, but occasionally Lucas caught him cheating and managed to take a hand.

Varric was dealing when the door burst open. He looked up, over Lucas’s shoulder. “Uh-oh.”

“What?” Lucas automatically reached for his sword.

“Wrong danger. Your girls are here.”

Frowning, Lucas turned to look. Sure enough, Aveline and Isabela were both charging across the room toward him, each looking more distressed than he’d ever seen either of them. “Hawke!” Isabela said urgently as she reached him.

“Get back, strumpet,” Aveline snapped. “This is official Kirkwall business, not some selfish prattle.”

“Get off your high horse! I have problems, too.”

“Yes, right. Like ‘What drink should I order?’ and ‘Who’s the father?’” Aveline said caustically.

“Hey!” Lucas cut in between them, holding Isabela back with some difficulty. Aveline had struck a nerve this time. Clearly letting them bicker any further wasn’t going to get anyone anywhere.

“What’s going on?”

“The Arishok is sheltering two fugitives who have … ‘converted’ to the Qun,” Aveline said quickly, before Isabela could get a word in. “He must be convinced to release them.”

“The bloody Qunari again?” Isabela said. “I’m going to die!” She said it loudly and stridently, and Lucas could tell the tone was only partially for effect. She really thought it was true.

“What do you say we take this upstairs?” he said, aware of all the usual crowd of Hanged Man regulars silent and staring at them. “Then you can both explain what it is you’re talking about.” As he led the way up to Varric’s rooms, he couldn’t help sighing. How could things possibly have gone so far awry in a few hours? Running away was sounding better and better.

Isabela started talking as soon as they entered Varric’s room, not wanting Aveline to get a word in before she had a chance to speak. “I met with the man about the relic; he knows where it is. A man called Wall-Eyed Sam has it. Hawke, if you help me get it, Castillon won’t kill me, and we can go away, just like you asked. Please!”
“Go away?” Aveline asked, looking between Lucas and Isabela in shock. “When was this planned?”

“It wasn’t, really,” Lucas said. “It was an idea, once we found the relic.”

“I’m trying to keep an entire city from rioting against the Qunari,” Aveline said in exasperation. “I would think that’s important enough to keep you from running off and shirking your responsibilities.”

“My responsibilities?” Lucas asked, outraged. “Where have you been all this time? Or Meredith? Or Dumar? Or Elhina, for the Maker’s sake! This city has never been my responsibility—it got dropped on my shoulders by everyone else who was too busy or too tired or too incompetent, or too crazy, to do their own jobs. I didn’t even want to come here, remember?” he said to Aveline. “This was Mother’s idea, and now she’s …” He broke off, realizing that Aveline wasn’t looking at him. She was looking at Isabela, and the pirate was looking away, chewing nervously on her lower lip.

“Make that harlot tell me what she hasn’t already told me, Hawke, or so help me—“ Aveline said in a low, dangerous voice.

“Well … it might be connected,” Isabela said reluctantly.

“Connected?” Aveline practically shrieked the word.

“Look, the relic is important to someone, all right? Maybe it will help.”

Aveline made a noise of disgust. “You would say anything you had to in order to get your own way.”

Lucas rubbed the bridge of his nose. “All right, one at a time. Aveline, why would someone run to the Qunari? What do they get out of it?”

“They’re elves accused of murder,” Aveline said, shrugging. “I imagine the Qunari look pretty good in comparison to hiding in the alienage or being hauled into jail.”

“What if they have truly converted?”

“How are you going to prove it? The Arishok will claim they’re true believers no matter what, you know that.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Lucas said. “My gut tells me the Arishok wouldn’t take nonbelievers in out of spite toward us. If he wanted to make his point, he could have made it in a number of other ways—has, in fact—without sullying his own beliefs.”

Aveline sighed. “You may be right, but it doesn’t matter. If I allow this, how many more will follow their example? We will never be able to keep order if people think they can run to the Qunari for refuge from their crimes.”

Lucas couldn’t help laughing. “If you really think the Qunari are such an attractive option, I clearly haven’t brought you along for enough of my dealings with them. The life they will have under the Qun, so I understand from Fenris and from my own observations, is anything but a walk in the park.”

“Whatever,” snapped Aveline. “All I know is, justice must be respected. Those elves are my prisoners, and I expect the Arishok to turn them over.”

“Oh, that’ll go well,” muttered Varric, who had been watching silently.
“I hope it will,” Aveline said. “I’m hoping the Qunari aren’t looking for a fight; hoping they’ll be reasonable. But either way, I will make my stand.”

“What have these two elves done that they’re worth risking your life and the tenuous peace in this city over?”

“They killed one of my guardsmen.” Aveline’s eyes were flinty and cold.

“I am sorry,” Lucas said, knowing how personally she took the welfare of her men. “But isn’t this an issue for the guards, in that case? Quite a few of them. I don’t see how I can help.”

“You’re the only person in Kirkwall the Arishok will give the time of day to!”

“And he will stop doing so if I keep coming to him in everyone else’s stead!”

Aveline held his gaze for a long moment, then looked away, her shoulders slumping. “I can’t go in with a full unit; it will just increase tension. But you’re right; I’m the captain. It’s my responsibility.”

She looked at Isabela, then back to Lucas again, and something crossed her face that Lucas couldn’t define. Disappointment? Surprise? Whatever it was, she seemed to realize at last which way the wind was blowing, and how hard. “If you won’t accompany me, I’ll go on my own.”

Lucas dropped the pretense; if she was aware that his decision was already made, there was no point in pretending otherwise. “Not alone, Aveline. Take Fenris; and Varric,” he added, looking at the dwarf for agreement. Varric nodded, albeit reluctantly.

“Very well.” Aveline stopped to glare at Isabela. “This had better be real, or so help me—“

Isabela, unusually enough, kept silent, holding Aveline’s gaze steadily, before the Guard Captain turned and stalked from the room.

“Varric,” Lucas said. “If she gets in over her head, send one of your urchins for me.”

The dwarf nodded, hurrying after Aveline.

When they were alone, Lucas turned to Isabela. “Now, tell me about this contact of yours, and about Wall-Eyed Sam. Why has this come up so suddenly?”

“Sam’s just come back to Kirkwall, but he’s been busy, talking to black market dealers all over Lowtown.” She shrugged. “It didn’t take my contacts long to get wind of it. Then they came to me. Simple.” Frowning, she added, “What frustrates me is that he’s held on to the relic so long.”

“Who is this Sam?”

“He used to run with Martin.”

Martin was a poison merchant; they had helped him out several years back. He lived just down the hall. “And Martin never thought to mention that his old buddy had your relic?”

“Not sure he knew. Raiders aren’t big on telling each other secrets. You talk, someone decides they can make money from what you have, you die. According to Martin, Sam’s a bit of a magpie. Picks things up that don’t belong to him, holds on to them until the heat dies down, unloads them at a profit.”

“And Sam’s got potential buyers now?”

Isabela nodded. “Tevinter mages. I doubt they’ll look kindly on us interrupting.”
“Too bad we sent Fenris with Aveline, then,” Lucas said. He and Isabela were pretty formidable on their own, but he would have felt better with some backup, especially Fenris’s giant sword and even larger need for revenge against Tevinter. He put his hands on Isabela’s shoulders, looking at her intently. “You are absolutely certain this is your relic?”

She nodded, her eyes locked on his. “The contacts gave me a description of the book. It’s the right one.”

“Book? I thought you didn’t know what the relic was.”

Isabela pulled away from him, squirming uncomfortably. “Well, I … I know it’s a book, written in a foreign tongue. That’s all I know.” She caught his hands and held them in hers, looking back up at him beseechingly. “Honestly, what does it matter? It’ll save me from Castillon. And as soon as we get it and I return it to him … we can go away. Anywhere you want. I promise.”

He put his arms around her, resting his cheek on her hair, letting himself imagine it for a long moment: the sun and the sea spray and Isabela, far away from all this mess. “All right,” he said at last. “We’ll go find this Wall-Eyed Sam, get your relic back, and return it to Castillon.” And he tried to pretend he thought there was the slightest chance it would all go that smoothly.
“So how do you want to do this?” Lucas asked Isabela, untangling himself from her embrace. “Just the two of us, or do you want to wait for Fenris and Varric to be done with Aveline’s errand to the Qunari?”

“I’d be happy if I never heard the word ‘Qunari’ again,” she said.

“You and the rest of Kirkwall.”

“So let’s go; I don’t want to wait around and give Sam the chance to sell the relic off to the Tevinters.”

Lucas agreed, following her out of the room and out of the Hanged Man into the dark night of Lowtown. He considered going for Merrill, since the alienage was close, but Isabela was in too much of a hurry for even that brief detour.

It wasn’t far to the warehouse where she expected to find Wall-Eyed Sam, but the alley they needed to go through was blocked by five burly Qunari.

“Maker’s balls,” Lucas groaned. “These guys again?” He didn’t see Aveline, and the look on Isabela’s face, like she wished she was in the depths of the Korcari Wilds far away from any of this, said the Qunari were here for them. Or, more specifically, for her.

She didn’t wait for the Qunari to speak, leaping at the first one with her daggers out. She had ripped two parallel cuts in his stomach before he could stop her. He tried to pull his sword anyway, despite the gaping wounds, but Lucas’s blade got there first, slicing open the Qunari’s throat. In the midst of the blood that sprayed the alley, he and Isabela turned to face the other four Qunari. They would fight first, since it appeared they had no other choice, but then she was damned well going to tell him what this was all about.

In this circumstance, at least they had the advantage—the Qunari had the numbers, but they were held back by the narrow alley walls. And Isabela’s daggers were far more useful in these close quarters than the longswords the rest of them were using.

Most of the fight consisted of Lucas blocking the Qunari’s blows while Isabela ducked under his blade to stab and slash. He got in a good strike against one of the Qunari, burying his sword deep in the man’s guts and twisting it as it came out. Isabela got one in the back of the knees and stabbed him in the throat when he went down.

The other two were determined to fight to the death, Qunari-style, and Isabela seemed to go a little berserk when faced with them—her knives flew like rain, lodging themselves in the unprotected chests and stomachs of the two Qunari, and when the throwing knives failed her she launched herself at the nearer of the two and beat him in the chest with her daggers until his pectoral muscles were little more than pulp. Lucas managed to take out the other one before dragging an uncharacteristically hysterical Isabela away from the Qunari she was eviscerating.

He looked around at the carnage, shaking his head. Killing five of the Arishok’s men had not been in his plan for the day. “If the Arishok asks, we’ll say it was … an accident.” Not that anyone would believe Isabela had accidentally stabbed a Qunari warrior three dozen times. He’d have to work on his story before the next person sent him in front of the Arishok.

“He won’t ask,” Isabela said in a small voice.
“How do you know that? You’ve never even met the Arishok.”

“No, but he’s here for the same reason we are.” Her voice was growing stronger, her presence of mind returning. “The relic belongs to the Qunari.”

“It what?!” He had begun to suspect so when the Qunari faced them down, but hearing her confirm it made his heart sink.

“It belongs to the Qunari and they … want it back.”

Lucas stared at her. He couldn’t believe he had been so stupid all this time. The clues had all been there right in front of him, and he had never bothered to follow them. “Your relic is the reason they couldn’t leave.”

“Yes.”

“And when were you going to tell me this?”

“I— I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Didn’t want to— Are you out of your mind? Isabela, all this time, and you never trusted me enough to tell me the truth?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Because I thought you might overreact.”

“You think this is overreacting?” Lucas asked. He took a step closer to her, his hands clenched, so angry he could hardly speak. “Tell me what the relic is.”

“It’s a book. A sacred text. I stole it from them, and they followed me here to get it back.”

“Then give it back to them.”

“I can’t! If I give it back, Castillon will kill me.”

Lucas took her by the arms, shaking her. “Do you think, do you really think, that I would ever let that happen?”

“I don’t need your protection!”

He let go. “No, but because of you, everyone else does. How many more people have to die, Isabela, to save your skin from some absentee pirate lord?”

Her eyes were on the alleyway behind him. “Hawke, Wall-Eyed Sam is back there. He’s about to sell the relic to the Tevinters so they can lord it over the Qunari. I’ll never be able to get it back if they take it. I have to stop him!”

“Then go get it.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You want the relic, you go get it.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

He looked at her. “You must think I’m a prize chump, Isabela. All this time, thinking you trusted me, thinking we were friends, thinking—never mind what I was thinking. And you never even
considered telling me the truth, did you?”

“Yes, I did! I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid—“ She caught herself. “I didn’t think you’d help me if you knew.”

Isabela was standing in front of him, looking up at his face, her eyes wide and her hands pressed against his chest. Lucas took her hands, gathering them in his. “If you had told me before, at any point; if I thought you really trusted me, that you—that you really felt something for me, nothing would have kept me from helping you. I would have kept you safe from Castillon, whatever it took. But … you lied to me. Over and over again.” He shook his head, pushing her a little away from him as he let go of her hands. “You’re on your own, Isabela.”

The softness and the vulnerability he had glimpsed a moment ago was gone as if it had never been, her eyes as hard and cold as gold coins. “I always have been.” She turned and ran into the alley, and Lucas, for all his fine words, strongly considered going after her. Then he thought better of it, and straightening his shoulders, he went to go find Aveline and see if he could help. There would be time enough to deal with the consequences of losing Isabela later.
The Qunari Problem

Lucas made his way across Lowtown, striding quickly. He wanted to tell himself he was walking so fast so that Isabela couldn’t catch up with him, but really it was because he knew she wouldn’t even try.

How could she have kept this from him for so long? All these years at each other’s side and she had never once thought to mention that it was her relic that kept the Qunari here?

Of course she had thought to. She had simply chosen not to. She hadn’t trusted him; she hadn’t been willing to count on him against Castillon. Whatever lay at the bottom of this muddle of his feelings for her had clearly not been reciprocated. And with that thought, he walked faster. He had made a mess of things, letting Aveline go face off against the Arishok without him; hopefully there was still time to fix it.

As he started down the steps toward the docks, it was immediately obvious that there would be no fixing whatever had gone wrong. Screams filled the air, and he could smell the sharp, coppery scent of blood. He nearly fell down the stairs in his haste. Aveline. Varric. Fenris! Had they survived?

At the bottom of the steps, he stumbled over the body of a guardswoman he recognized but couldn’t name. He looked around him at the chaos, the people who worked on the docks running and screaming, pursued by Qunari, all the more menacing for their silence.

“Hawke!” The low, hissing voice was familiar, and Hawke was relieved—at least Fenris had survived what had happened here. The elf was behind a stack of crates, Aveline’s head in his lap. Blood was seeping from a nasty wound in her thigh and spreading in a pool below her. Fenris had tied the wound off as best he could, but she needed a healer.

“What happened here?”

Fenris shook his head. “She demanded the elves back. The Arishok was … disinclined to acquiesce to her request.”

“And then he started killing everyone?”

“No until she shook her finger in his face.” A small smile passed across Fenris’s face. He met Lucas’s eyes, all seriousness again. “Hawke, do you know about the relic?”

“I do now.”

“Isabela had not told you?”

“No. I just went along with her, like a chump.” He looked around. “Where’s Varric?”

“I sent him after some help for Aveline. She wanted—she tried to attack the Arishok. You can see how that went.”

“He didn’t kill her. That’s something.”

“No.” Fenris looked down at Aveline’s white, drawn face. “He must bear some respect for her—she is the only person who has been keeping this city together while the Knight-Commander and the Viscount and the Grand Cleric bury their heads in the sand. Well, perhaps not the only one.” He glanced at Lucas again, his meaning plain.
“I can hardly claim to be holding the city together while all this is going on,” Lucas said. He should be out there, he told himself, out there fighting for these people.

“You held off the Qunari attack for years. No one else could have done as much—or if they could have, they failed to make the attempt, much less succeed at it. The Arishok was looking for you, when we arrived. I believe he was disappointed you were not with us.”

“Poor thing.” Lucas may have said more, but just then Varric came around the edge of the stacks. One sleeve was torn and bloodied, but otherwise he was his usual self. Merrill was just behind him; she knelt next to Aveline, clucking over the wound in the Guard Captain’s thigh.

“Hawke, welcome to the nightmare,” Varric said. “You lose Rivaini somewhere along the way?”

“You could say that, yes. How is she, Merrill?” Lucas asked, changing the subject. He didn’t like Aveline’s pale face or the silence where she should have been chastising him. He had already lost his whole family—and Isabela. He couldn’t lose his oldest friend, too.

“I think she’ll be all right. I’m not the best healer, but this is pretty straightforward.” The mage put her hands on Aveline’s leg, closing her eyes as her magic sought the edges of the wound.

Aveline gasped and stirred, shifting her leg, and Merrill sat back.

“That’s the best I can do,” she said. “The wound is healed, but I can’t replace the blood she lost.”


“Lie back,” Fenris said, his hands gentle and his voice firm.

“F-Fenris?”

“Yes. Your people … I am sorry.”

Aveline winced, closing her eyes again, a tear seeping out of her eye and rolling down into her hair.

“Hawke,” Varric said, his voice low but urgent. “Can you hear them? The Qunari are spreading out. They’re attacking the whole city.”

Lucas could hear it; the screams in the docks area had died down, replaced by low moaning here and there. But from above, in the direction of Lowtown, fresh screams filled the air.

“What could they possibly hope to accomplish?” Merrill asked.

Fenris glanced at her contemptuously. “We are a disease to them,” he told her. “They will eradicate any who do not agree to join the Qun. It is due only to Hawke’s efforts that they did not do so years ago.” His voice was even, but Lucas thought he could hear an implied criticism in it.

“I did the best I could!” he shouted. “I’m no diplomat, no politician. I’m a Fereldan farmer in the wrong place.”

“We—we know that, Hawke.” Aveline struggled to push herself up on her elbow. “And you still did … did more than the rest of us.”

“I doubt the Arishok cares what happens after this,” Varric said.

They were all looking at Lucas now, all their decisions resting on his shoulders again. Isabela was gone, the city was under siege—what was to stop him from jumping on a ship and going home to
Ferelden and leaving them all to their own devices?

“They will not stop in Lowtown,” Fenris said. “They will continue until the whole city is in their hands.”

Unwillingly, Lucas thought of Bodahn and Sandal in his estate, and Orana. The elf had seen enough horror in her life; could he abandon her now for his own selfish reasons?

He sighed heavily. “All right.” His eyes fell on Aveline. She couldn’t come with them; certainly couldn’t fight.

“Leave me here,” she said firmly. “I’ll be fine.”

Merrill looked at her doubtfully. “Are you … I don’t think that’s wise.”

Fenris looked up, his sensitive ears twitching faintly. “We may not have to leave you,” he said. “Over here!” he called more loudly.

Running feet were heard outside, and then Donnic’s anxious face was peeking around the crates. “Aveline,” he said in deep relief. “Are you all right, love?”

“Fine now.” Her face showed her own relief at seeing Donnic alive and well.

Watching the two of them made Lucas remember Isabela and what she had done, and he turned his back, walking to the edge of the crates. “All right,” he said, speaking to himself as much as to any of the rest of them. “I’ll solve their Qunari problem—but then I’m done, and no one had better call on me again.”

“I’m with you, brother,” Varric said, appearing at his elbow. “After this, we’ll get drunk for ten years and sit around telling stories.”

“A fine plan,” Fenris agreed, joining them. He had handed Aveline over to Donnic. Her blood still stained his leggings, but he was otherwise unharmed.

“I know a lovely story about a Keeper who turned himself into a halla stag to win the love of a woman who dreamed of being a halla,” Merrill piped up behind them. All three men turned slowly to stare at her, and she flushed. “What? You drink, I’ll tell stories.”

Varric smiled at her. “Come on, then, Daisy.”

Lucas bent over Aveline. “We’ll take care of this. You take care of yourself.”

She nodded, her face still pale and drawn with pain. “Hawke … Thank you.”

“Serah Hawke,” Donnic said.

“Please, call me Lucas.”

“Lucas. I would accompany you, but—“

“No. You stay here, organize any survivors, get them somewhere you can fortify. We’ll come back for you.” Or someone would, Lucas thought. Four people against all the Qunari in Kirkwall? Well, the rest of his family was at the Maker’s side. He might as well go join them today.
Following the Leader

Lowtown was burning. Piles of wood lay here and there as crude attempts at barricades, but a Qunari could have gone through them easily, had he wanted to. To Lucas, that appeared to be the oddity—the Qunari didn’t seem to want to go through the barricades after the people. They appeared to have moved through Lowtown in a single body, taking out only those who got in their way.

“These people are not the ones they need to kill, and the Qunari know it,” Fenris said quietly at his side. “They will continue to Hightown—are, in all probability, already there—and rid themselves of the leadership. It is well that you were not with us today, my friend. The Arishok would see you as the largest, perhaps the only, obstacle to his taking over the city.”

“But not Aveline?”

“If Aveline was really in control, she wouldn’t need you,” Varric pointed out. “I love Aveline, and she’s done the best she could with a bad job, but … she’s not the power in this town. Not any part of it.”

Lucas shrugged. Varric was probably right—he usually was—but it didn’t really matter, not right now. Right now he needed to catch up to the Qunari, and debating the power levels in Kirkwall wasn’t going to get him there.

Small pockets of people were beginning to emerge, and ahead of him, near the hovel where he had lived with Gamlen for so long, he could hear sounds of combat. Lucas felt a pang of guilt that he had forgotten his uncle so thoroughly … but knowing the old man, he was at the Rose, far from all this nightmare.

As they came around the corner, they saw a small group of men in silver and blue armor fighting some Qunari—those left behind to round up stragglers or kill off anyone coming toward the main body from this direction, Lucas surmised. He and his companions threw themselves into the combat, turning the tide for the armored men.

At last, the Qunari were down. The head of the armored men looked to his wounded, none of whom were hurt so badly they couldn’t walk, and then turned to Lucas, who noted with some surprise the griffon embossed on the man’s armor. Grey Wardens? What were they doing in Kirkwall in the middle of a Qunari uprising?

“You have our thanks,” the Warden said in a heavy Orlesian accent. “This attack was … unexpected.”

“You’re telling us,” Varric muttered.

“I am Stroud, of the Grey Wardens.”


Stroud nodded an acknowledgment. “I cannot believe the Qunari would dare such an attack. This will lead to war with the Free Marches for certain.”

Lucas was by no means so sure about that. Kirkwall had been home to so many Fereldan refugees that the rest of the Marches rather looked down on it at this point; and the Qunari were formidable people, based far away. He thought it was far more likely that the Qunari leadership would offer some coins as a half-hearted apology and the rest of the Free Marches would accept it, shrug, and tell
stories of “poor Kirkwall”. He didn’t bother to go into that political mess, though, because Stroud was already gathering his men to move out.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

“Pressing matters take us elsewhere, but we can spread word to the other free cities. Perhaps they can bring aid.”

“Aid?” Lucas echoed. “We need help now, or more people will die. What could be more important than helping stop an invasion?”

“I cannot say more,” Stroud said. “My apologies. Unfortunately, even if we wished to, Grey Wardens cannot involve themselves in political struggles.” He and his men strode away, not looking to either side at the suffering and death they were passing.

Lucas watched them go with rising frustration. Finally, he yelled after them, “Oh, yeah? Tell that to the sodding King of Ferelden!”

There was no response from the Wardens, and he turned back, making his way toward the Hightown steps.

Fenris fell into step beside him. “It is of no matter, anyway,” he said practically. “They were going to die themselves before we helped them. They would not have been much use to us going forward.”

“Political struggles,” Lucas growled. “If I ever see that ass again, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind.”

“Unlikely,” Varric said. “Grey Wardens seem to be mostly heard of and not seen.”

“Good.”

They made their way up the Hightown steps, coming out into the marketplace. It was mostly deserted, except for two Qunari dragging a screaming noblewoman away by her heels. Bianca had her say with one of them, who fell with one of her bolts in the back of his head, and Merrill and Fenris between them took out the other one. Lucas helped the noblewoman, whom he knew by sight but had never met, to her feet.

“Get inside somewhere, and don’t come out until you’re sure it’s safe,” he said to her.

She was wild-eyed with panic and he wasn’t sure she had understood what he said, but she nodded and ran off in the direction of Lowtown, where hopefully she would be safe enough. He realized as she went that he had failed to warn her about looters and hoped she wouldn’t run into any.

His thoughts were rather forcibly dragged away from the departed noblewoman when four more Qunari stepped out of the shadows to face him. One of them said, “Serah Hawke. It seems the Arishok was unable to take you captive. Unfortunate.”

“For him, or for me?” Lucas asked, but the Qunari were no longer interested in talking. They attacked, and Lucas’s team countered. No sooner were the Qunari down, though, when a Qunari saarebas appeared from the shadows where the others had been hiding. He raised his arms and pushed them forward, and Lucas and the others were knocked to the ground as if by invisible fists. Lucas’s head cracked sharply against the cobblestones as he went down. He rolled to his side, trying to push himself up, but his vision was blurry and he couldn’t quite seem to get his legs underneath him.
The saarebas was coming closer. Lucas blinked, trying to clear his vision, but he knew he couldn’t move fast enough to get away, much less to do anything to stop the saarebas.

And then a sword appeared in the middle of the creature’s chest, and it dropped without a sound as the sword was just as abruptly removed.

Behind the saarebas stood a woman so beautiful Lucas thought he must have died and gone to the Fade. Her eyes were blue as a mountain lake, her hair shining gold, and she wore heavy … Templar armor?

Lucas rubbed a hand over his face, trying to wipe the fuzziness away from his vision and head.

In a clear, crisp voice, the vision of loveliness snapped, “Heal him,” and blessed relief washed over Lucas. Finally able to scramble to his feet, he took another look at the woman, noting now the lines around those beautiful eyes and the rather cruel set to the mouth.

“I am Knight Commander Meredith,” she said, and at last Lucas understood a great deal about Kirkwall. He might have followed this woman himself, obeying her blindly, had he been a Templar.

“Lucas Hawke.”

“I know who you are. Your name comes up in my reports with disturbing frequency.” She snapped her fingers at a Templar who stood behind her, and he and the shivering young mage lad who must have been the source of Lucas’s healing moved behind him to take care of the rest of Lucas’s companions. Fixing Lucas with that cold blue gaze, Meredith asked, “Is this your doing?”

“Indirectly, probably.” He didn’t know that he could have prevented the attack had he gone with Aveline instead of Isabela, but the possibility existed.

Meredith’s sardonic gaze said she had suspected as much. “The Qunari have taken control of the Viscount’s keep; they are gathering the nobles there.”

Lucas couldn’t help hearing some smugness in that cool voice. Having the Viscount and many of the nobles taken prisoner was good for Meredith—at best, it made them all look weak. At worst, if they were killed, her power in Kirkwall would be all the stronger.

“They will be looking for converts,” Fenris said behind him. “Those who agree, live. Those who don’t …”

“Charming.” Meredith was looking over Fenris, and Lucas couldn’t tell if she meant what the elf had said or how he looked while he said it. “Then we must do something.”

Lucas’s eyes widened. At last, a member of Kirkwall’s leadership who was prepared to actually accomplish something herself? The idea was intoxicating.

“Come along,” Meredith snapped. Lucas fell into step behind her along with the Templar and mage who accompanied her, and the others followed them.

In front of the Viscount’s keep lay several Qunari bodies and a few in the robes of a mage, along with some in Templar armor. Meredith barely glanced at them as she moved toward the stairs, until a groan came from one of them.

She detoured in that direction, and snapped at the Templar who followed her to help the man up. He was an older elf, to judge by his greying hair, and someone high up in the Circle, to judge by his elaborate robes. He looked around at the bodies, his face creased in sorrow.
“Surely they cannot all be …” he muttered to himself, but it was clear that they were. The mage blinked back tears. “Gone,” he whispered. “I told them to run, but they stayed and fought …”

“And yet you survive, First Enchanter Orsino,” Meredith said coldly.

“Your relief overwhelms me, Knight-Commander.” The two of them stared at each other, anger practically crackling between them.

“Ooh, this is good,” Varric whispered at Lucas’s elbow. “Got any popcorn?”

Meredith frowned at the First Enchanter. “There is no time for talk. We must strike now, before it’s too late.”

“I think I love her,” Lucas whispered back to Varric. “I thought I was the only person in Kirkwall who could make a decision.”

“And who will lead us into this battle?” Orsino was openly sneering at Meredith. Given her reputation, Lucas wondered at the mage’s temerity. “You, Knight-Commander?”

“Who better?”

Orsino looked at Lucas. “I see Serah Hawke has joined us.” At Lucas’s surprised look, the mage smiled. “Oh, I know who you are. I have … correspondents who have kept me up on your exploits.”

Meredith’s jaw set. “He is not even from Kirkwall. I will fight to defend this city, as I have always done!”

“To control it, you mean,” Orsino snapped. “I won’t have our lives tossed to the flames to feed your vanity.”

Fenris appeared at Lucas’s other side, saying softly into his ear, “The Arishok will not countenance her; if we are to end this with any sort of peace, it must be you who approaches him.”

“Again?” Lucas groaned.

“I am afraid so, my friend.” Fenris hesitated, then said, “It is possible there is a way …”

Lucas looked at him, his heart sinking. So much for letting someone else lead. “Fine,” he said. He stepped between Meredith and Orsino. “I won’t have the two of you costing us the city while you snipe at one another. I am in charge.”

Meredith’s beautiful blue eyes widened. “You? How dare you!”

“The Arishok doesn’t care about any of your issues, or your hierarchy,” Lucas said to her warily. “He … I believe he comes closer to respecting me than he does anyone else here. Had you been the one to go to him all those times previously, I would happily be letting you lead, but it was me.”

Meredith subsided, her mouth closing with an audible snap. “Very well, then,” she said grudgingly. “But whatever you plan, be quick about it.”

Fenris said, “They will be waiting for you.”

“I’m sure they will.” Lucas looked thoughtfully at the stairs. He couldn’t see anything from here, but that meant the Qunari couldn’t see them, either. “Orsino, how are you with fire?”

The mage created a blast of flame in each hand for response. Meredith looked at him warily, her
posture tense, but didn’t interfere.

“Qunari wear no armor; they are more vulnerable than most because of it, but also tougher than you would expect. On the other hand, beyond javelins, they use no distance weapons,” Fenris said.

“Exactly. Orsino, I want you to go to the top of those stairs and start lobbing fireballs at any Qunari you see. Keep them up as fast and as steady as you can as long as you can. The flames and smoke should confuse and distract them long enough for Meredith to attack.”

The mage and the Knight-Commander looked at one another with antagonism, but there was trust there, as well. They both seemed certain the other could and would carry out the assigned task.

“My team and I will use the distraction to sneak by into the keep and take care of whatever is inside.” Lucas didn’t worry about Varric, who was sneaky as they come, or Fenris, who was used to fighting Qunari. Merrill was a little more worrying, but she was slender and could run like a halla. He would be the most difficult to maneuver through … but given what the other Qunari had said, about the Arishok capturing him, he wasn’t worried. For whatever reason, they wanted him alive.

For once, the plan went exactly as predicted. The Qunari were enraged by the fire, but the light of it and the smoke impaired their vision. Meredith was like a killing machine, cutting them down in the smoke and flame with precision and no emotion whatsoever. And Lucas’s team found themselves in the main hall of the keep, which was littered with bodies, but absolutely silent and deserted.
“They will be as deep inside as they can,” Fenris said softly in the hush of the empty keep. He stepped over the scattered bodies without a glance at their faces. Lucas wished he could divorce himself as thoroughly from his feelings as Fenris seemed to be able to do.

Varric frowned thoughtfully. “Probably in the throne room. The Arishok has always struck me as a man who appreciates a good poetic irony.”

“We might as well go up there, then. Nothing we can do here.” Who had done this? Lucas asked himself. Had it been the Viscount, with his willful blinders; or Meredith and Orsino locked in their Gallows, focused so fully on one another there was no room for anyone else; or was this his own fault? If he had been a little bit stronger, or more clever, or .. something … could he have prevented this?

“Hawke.” Varric waited until Lucas looked at him before continuing. “This was always going to happen. The Arishok was never going to leave without a fight.”

“Maybe.” If Lucas could have found Isabela’s relic, though, if he hadn’t been so distracted by her body and had been more suspicious of her flimsy tales …

“Varric is right. And more will die if we stand here wringing our hands.” Fenris’s voice was kind, but his words were undeniable.

Lucas nodded. “Let’s go, then.”

At the door of the throne room, they could hear muffled weeping, the murmurs of frightened people, the voice of the Arishok. And then an odd series of dull thuds. Lucas kicked the door open.

On the floor at his feet lay the severed head of the Viscount, his crown a few feet back looking surprisingly flimsy. The head appeared to have rolled across the room. Lucas closed his eyes. The Viscount had been in pain after the loss of Saemus, but no one deserved that. The bodies of two nobles lay farther into the room; people who had protested, Lucas imagined. Examples to the rest, who shrank back against the walls, cowed.

His eyes met those of the Arishok across the room. “We have guests,” the Arishok said. “Shanedan, Hawke. I expected you,” he continued, coming down the steps toward Lucas. “Earlier than this, I have to say.” He shook his head. “For all your might, you are no different than these bas. You do not see.”

“I’ve seen plenty. Is this really the way you want to end things?” Lucas asked. “Starting a war on principle, a war you can’t win?”

There was something in the Arishok’s eyes that told Lucas he had guessed right; that there was no official permission for this attack. Would the rest of the Qunari support this? Lucas doubted it. The end was nigh for the Arishok, either here in Kirkwall or if he went back to Par Vollen. Which he couldn’t do without the relic, which Isabela had, and she was gone … It all made Lucas’s head hurt.

After a pause, the Arishok spoke softly. “What would the Qunari be without principle?” His eyes bored into Lucas’s. “You, I suspect.” He took a step back from Lucas. “Prove yourself, basra, or kneel with your brethren.”

Lucas was aware that this was a mark of great respect, that he was being given an opportunity
beyond what anyone else in this room was being given, and while he could have wished for the chance, instead, simply to leave, he would take it for what it was. He drew his sword, and behind him he heard the others prepare to fight, as well.

Four Qunari against the four of them. Tough as the Qunari were, they had no real chance. Something told Lucas the Arishok hadn’t expected them to have; he wondered why the man had sacrificed four of his warriors. A good way to rid himself of dissenters? But there was no time for further consideration. The bodies of the four Qunari lay at his feet, and the Arishok was coming toward him, his broadaxe over his shoulder.

“You are basalit-an after all. Few in this city command such respect.”

Lucas recognized that whatever basalit-an meant, it was an honor to be called that—but could he parlay that honor into a victory for Kirkwall? The Arishok’s steely gaze suggested that would be difficult.

Then the gaze softened, almost a question in it. “So tell me, Hawke. You know I am denied Par Vollen until the Tome of Koslun is found. How would you see this conflict resolved without it?”

The tome was far out of all their reach—Isabela was as far away as she could get by now, no doubt, Lucas thought, trying to ignore the tightness in his chest at the idea of her fleeing from him and the memory of her betrayal. He was about to suggest alternatives, none of which sounded like something the Arishok would go for, when there was a sound of fighting in the antechamber. Lucas’s heart lifted, imagining that Meredith must have come. He could just see her striding into the room in her Templar armor—

And then he turned and saw the very last person he had expected to see today, stepping on the body of a dead Qunari who had been in her way.

“I believe I have the answer to your little problem,” Isabela said. The Tome of Koslun was held casually at her hip. She looked briefly at Lucas, her cheeks reddening faintly, before she turned to the Arishok. “I’m sure you’ll find it … mostly undamaged.”

Lucas didn’t even want to imagine what “mostly undamaged” might mean. Knowing Isabela, she had drawn filthy things in the margins.

The Arishok clearly didn’t know Isabela. He took the book in his hands reverently, looking it over. “The Tome of Koslun …”

Isabela glanced at Lucas again, and then away again. “It … took me a while to get back, what with all the fighting everywhere. You know how it is.”

No, Lucas had no idea how it was, or why she was back, or what he felt about it. Under the circumstances, he felt it was best if he kept his mouth shut.

Behind him, Varric chuckled. “You do know how to make an entrance, Rivaini.”

“Hawke thought you’d be halfway to Antiva by now,” Merrill chimed in.

Isabela smiled at the elf. “It’s his damned influence, kitten. If it weren’t for him, I’d have sold the thing and be lying on a beach sipping a cold drink by now. Or, at the very least, I’d have given it to Castillon and gotten that bastard off my back for good.” Her gaze drifted over Lucas’s face again, not stopping, as she said softly, “I was halfway to Ostwick before I knew I had to turn around. It’s pathetic.”
The Arishok, entirely ignoring all their chatter, had at last satisfied himself that the book was in a condition he could accept. He handed it off to another Qunari, and then turned back to Lucas.

“The relic is reclaimed. I am now free to return to Par Vollen.” But before anyone could breathe a sigh of relief, he added, “with the thief.”

“What?” Isabela said, startled.

Lucas saw Fenris close his eyes briefly, as if in acknowledgement. Clearly, the elf had known, or at least suspected, this was coming.

“She stole the Tome of Koslun. She must return with us.”

Lucas felt blank panic fill him. Send Isabela off with these … these creatures? Not a chance in the Void. “What do you do with … thieves?” He was mostly stalling for time; he wasn’t sure he really wanted to know.

“She will submit to the Qun and the Ben-Hassrath.” The Arishok’s eyes flicked across Isabela’s face as though she were an item of no consequence. “More than that, I will not say.”

“You can’t take her!” Merrill said.

The Arishok ignored her, his eyes on Lucas.

It was leader against leader, and only Lucas’s words would count. “You have your relic,” he said. “She stays with us.”

He felt rather than heard Isabela’s swift intake of breath. Had she thought he would turn her over? She may have betrayed him, but he was no monster … and whatever had been between them hadn’t gone away.

“Rivaini?” Varric murmured. “You might want to move out of the way.”

She did so, several large steps out of the Arishok’s reach, only to be grabbed by another Qunari and held still, despite her struggles. Lucas felt a nearly overwhelming urge to wrestle her out of the creature’s grasp, and he fought it off with difficulty.

“You leave me no choice,” the Arishok said. “I challenge you, Hawke. You and I will battle to the death, with her as the prize.”

“No!” Isabela shouted. “No! I stole your book, I’ll fight you. He’s got nothing to do with this!” She redoubled her efforts to get away, but the Qunari held her firmly.

“You are not basalit-an. You are unworthy.” The Arishok looked at her briefly, then returned his gaze to Lucas. “Alone amongst these bas, you are worthy of fighting.”

“You have what you came for. Why can’t you just go? What are you proving now?” Lucas snapped.

“We do not suffer thieves. She cannot walk away from this insult.”

“Hawke. There is no other choice,” Fenris said.

“I will take her. If you object, duty demands that we fight. Which will it be, Hawke?”

“If it’s a fight you wanted, it’s a fight you’ll get. Let’s dance,” Lucas said.
“NO!” Isabela shouted. “Hawke, don’t! Not for me!”

But they both ignored her. There was almost a smile on the Arishok’s face as he shook his broadaxe in the air and shouted, “Meravas! So shall it be.”

Lucas would never have been stupid enough to think a duel to the death with the Arishok would be easy, but he would have thought he could hold his own better than he felt he managed to. The Arishok had amazing bursts of speed in addition to his sheer size and strength. Lucas was used to being bigger and heavier than most of the things he fought; here he was at a disadvantage. He tried to remember all the tricks Fenris used against him when they sparred together, but the Arishok pressed him so hard it was difficult to do anything but parry and retreat and dodge. He got in a couple of good blows, and it was an advantage that he was fully armored and the Arishok wasn’t, but still the broadaxe bit into his side and dented the metal encasing his arms and knocked the breath out of him with full-force thrusts.

There came a point when Lucas had to admit that he wasn’t going to win; he simply wasn’t strong enough. In a brief moment after he had pushed the Arishok back off him one more time, his eyes met Isabela’s, and he could see she had come to that conclusion as well.

What kind of life was he dooming her to by dying? The Qunari would have no pity on her; they would break her, despite her best efforts to resist. And the rest of Kirkwall? Dimly as he ducked another blow he glimpsed Varric, Fenris, Merrill, their faces little more than a blur. The Viscount was dead; there was no longer any pretense of leadership in the city. Chaos and mass hysteria would follow, even if the Qunari didn’t burn the entire town and assimilate all its citizens.

He had to win. Despite his exhaustion, despite the wounds and the damaged armor that made it hard to move, despite the Arishok’s advantages, he had to win. And with that thought in mind, he set himself.

So far, the Arishok had had everything his own way. He had to find a way to take the attack to the Arishok instead.

He danced out of the way of one of those high-speed onrushes, and noticed for the first time that the Arishok took a moment to recover after it. That he could use, if he could last long enough for the Arishok to build up the energy to try it again.

So he jogged. Around and around the room, just out of reach, until he heard the roar of rage and frustration that meant the Arishok was going to rush him. He stayed where he was, gauging his moment, and just as the Arishok reached him, Lucas took a page out of Isabela’s book and rolled past the oncoming Qunari. It was awkward, because he had never practiced the move, and he would never have been able to get to his feet in time, but he didn’t have to; supine, he raised his sword and stabbed upward, the blade entering in a particularly vulnerable, but unarmored, area of the Arishok’s anatomy and tearing its way through his intestines on its way up.

Lucas withdrew the sword with some difficulty. Slowly, the Arishok turned, shock and pain widening his eyes. He staggered backward, falling onto the stairs as he tripped on the slick of his own blood and fluids.

“One day,” he said hoarsely, “we will be back.”

Getting to his feet, Lucas stood facing his fallen enemy; he owed him that much respect. But he didn’t respond to the final words, and the light faded from the Arishok’s eyes.

Silently, the rest of the Qunari lifted the body and filed from the room. Lucas knew they would be
gone before nightfall. He had won, he told himself, not sure he believed it. Not sure what, exactly, he had won.

The Qunari procession, with the Arishok’s body at his head, was still filing out when Meredith hurried in, Orsino at her heels. She watched the Qunari go with something like disappointment.

“Is it … over?” she asked.

“It’s over.”

Behind Lucas, the nobles, who had cowered and cried throughout the duel, came forward, and there were shouts of “The city has been saved!” and “Huzzah for Hawke!” and “Good riddance” and other things Lucas couldn’t quite make out.

Meredith watched the outcry, her beautiful face twisted with bitterness. Had she wanted to drive the Qunari out herself? Lucas wondered. Well, she’d had her chance. Many chances, for years. Lucas would have been glad to have let her fight the final duel, if she’d only been here. But as usual, no one had been here but him, and he would damn well take the credit and the accolades and whatever other rewards he could get. It was about time Kirkwall gave him something back.

“It appears …” Meredith said slowly, grudgingly, “that Kirkwall has a new champion.”

Lucas smiled. Might as well have the name as the game, he supposed. He swayed slightly, suddenly dizzy, and he realized that he was bleeding from several wounds.

Isabela was suddenly at his side, her arms around him, her magnificent breasts pressed against his side. He was angry with her for … some reason he couldn’t quite recall. At the moment, it didn’t seem important. “Come on, Hawke,” she said. “Let’s get you home.”

Time enough to remember why he was angry with her later. For now, he let her lead him from the room, with Merrill and Varric and Fenris following them.
Some Kind of Family

Lucas collapsed in bed as soon as Isabela and the others got him home. He was only vaguely aware of Isabela starting to remove his armor, and her exclamations of dismay as she saw the injuries that apparently lay beneath each piece.

He slept for hours, possibly days, and awoke refreshed, and famished. Someone stirred near his bed in the dimness of the sunlight filtered by shades and curtains, and his heart leaped, thinking it was Isabela, and then sank again as he remembered her treachery. He would have to deal with that now, and he didn’t want to. Lucas wished with all his heart that he could go back to simply not knowing. Because knowing raised all sorts of feelings and questions that he didn’t know how to address, how to answer.

Given the tangle of his thoughts, his first feeling on recognizing Fenris was relief.

“You are awake at last,” the elf said, smiling a little.

“Master of the obvious, as always. I don’t suppose you have a steak handy? I could eat half an ox.”

“I will ring for Bodahn.” Fenris got up, ready to suit the action to the word, but Lucas reached a hand out to stop him.

“Wait! Fenris, are you … we … um …”

“Isabela has returned to the Hanged Man. She said that she would wait there until you wished to speak to her; or she would ‘clear out entirely’ if you no longer want her around. She did not express a preference between the two options,” Fenris added.


Fenris’s mouth thinned into a humorless line. “He said ‘you’re welcome’ and not to come looking for him.”

Lucas sighed, settling back against the pillows. “I suppose that was Varric’s idea—‘ he began, but his words were cut off by a scuffle in the hall and a cry of pain.

Instantly, Fenris was on the move, the room suddenly bright with the flare of his markings. He stood by the door for a moment, listening intently. Lucas got out of bed, but even after healing and sleep, he was moving slowly, in no condition for whatever fighting was about to be required. He worried for Sandal and Bodahn and Orana, as well.

But he needn’t have. Fenris threw the door open to find two dwarves dressed in the distinctive uniform of the Carta essentially frozen in front of it, and Sandal staring at them with disapproval.

“Enchantment,” he said.

“Indeed. Thank you, Sandal.”

The dwarf looked at Lucas with a bright smile and then walked calmly away as though nothing had happened.

“What are they doing here?” Lucas asked, not expecting Fenris to have an answer.

But the elf surprised him. “It is not the first time. Over the last couple of days since the duel with the
Archdemon, there have been three separate attacks. All of them foiled by Sandal, may I add. That dwarf is … not normal,” he said stiffly, his usual disapproval of magic tempered by not entirely understanding what Sandal was. As a dwarf, he shouldn’t have been able to use magic, but unquestionably he did use it, and to great effect.

“All Carta?” Lucas was throwing his clothes and armor on, regardless of the aches and pains left from his battle.

“All Carta.”

“What does Varric say?”

“That the Carta does not typically work that way.”

“Well, that’s helpful.”

Fenris shrugged. “He is looking into it.”

Frowning, Lucas said, “If you all think I’m just going to lie here in bed and wait to be murdered while Sandal sleeps, you can think again. Let’s go.”

“To the Hanged Man?” The elf’s green eyes rested on him with interest.

“Yes.” To see Varric, he told himself. That was all. Get to the bottom of the Carta attacks. But it was clear from the amusement on Fenris’s face that he wasn’t fooling his friend any more than he was fooling himself, and he cursed himself as ten kinds of a fool that he couldn’t seem to stay away from a woman who had lied to him, betrayed him, and nearly gotten all of Kirkwall massacred or assimilated into the Qun.

Despite all the undeniable truth of what she had done, though, he couldn’t forget that she had come back. That she had watched him fight with fear in her eyes. That in the end, it had been Isabela at his side half-carrying him home, and she had waved off anyone else who wanted to help. Was that guilt? Or … something more? And if it was, did it matter?

The questions were making his head spin. The sounds of hammering and the smells of wet paint and plaster weren’t helping with that, although he was glad to see that people were back to work fixing the evidence of the Qunari’s destruction.

The Hanged Man looked blissfully normal, outside and in. Varric was holding court at his usual table, enthralling a circle of eager listeners with what Lucas recognized as the tale of his duel with the Arishok.

“And here’s the man himself,” Varric said, glimpsing Lucas over the shoulder of one of the patrons. “Come, tell us all about it Hawke.”

“Fought the Arishok. He lost. Good times,” Lucas said tersely.

“Well told.” Varric waved his listeners away.

“There was another attack at the estate,” Fenris told the dwarf as he and Lucas took seats at the table. “Hawke was awake for this one. He is somewhat upset.”

“Upset? Wouldn’t you be upset if a bunch of dwarves kept attacking your home?”

“Perhaps.” Fenris shrugged.
“I don’t get it,” Varric said. “The Carta’s all about smuggling and other illicit but profitable activities. Unless someone paid them, there’s no profit in attacking you. Unless they’re stupid, and stupid rarely pays.”

“I can’t recall pissing off the Carta recently. Of course, I can’t recall not pissing them off recently, either.”

“There were some hints from my sources about a hideout somewhere way out in the desert, near the Vimmark mountains.”

“Why would they have a hideout all the way out there?”

“Anyplace no one else wants to go makes a good hideout.” Varric frowned. “I suppose now you’re going to want to go march halfway across the desert.”

“Come on, Varric,” Lucas said. “Don’t you want to get away from it all?”

“Which all? You mean my comfy bed, my nice meals, and my network of spies bringing me juicy gossip I can turn into stories? Yes, can’t wait to exchange them all for sand and dust and probably blood and death.”

Lucas smiled. Varric would grouse, but he would go along, they both knew it. He looked at Fenris. “Fancy a trip to the mountains?”

To his surprise, the elf looked momentarily uncomfortable. “I will … need to look into something before I can say for certain.”

Blinking in surprise, Lucas nodded. “Sounds fair. Let me know by tomorrow?”

“I can do that.”

“Where are we going?” The familiar voice made every hair on Lucas’s body stand on end. He could practically smell her exotic perfume.

“I thought you were going to wait here until I wanted to talk to you,” Lucas said without turning around.

“I got bored of that.” Isabela stood next to the table with her hands on her hips, glaring pointedly at Fenris and Varric.

“This is my table, Rivaini.”

“I care, Varric.” Her tone said the exact opposite, and the dwarf got up with a heavy sigh.

“Fine, have the juicy argument at my table without giving me a front-row seat for the fireworks. See if I split the royalties with you.”

Varric went up to his own room; Fenris left the Hanged Man altogether. Isabela turned a chair around and straddled it.

“Hawke.”

“We need to talk,” Lucas said, although he was still reluctant to actually do so.

“Couldn’t we skip straight to the sex?”
“Who says we’re going to be having any more sex?”
Isabela sighed loudly. “Look, I came back, all right?”
“For what?”
“For … Kirkwall.”
“Maybe they should have made you the Champion, then,” Lucas snapped.
“I’ve dueled that Qunari jackass myself if you hadn’t gone all noble and gotten in the way!”
“He wouldn’t have gone near you. You’re a woman and a thief, which makes you entirely without honor in their culture.”
“Am I without honor in your culture, too?” Her voice was surprisingly soft, her eyes as open as Lucas had ever seen them.
“I … don’t know. You came back, as you say.”
“And that has to mean something, doesn’t it?”
“I don’t know if it matters what it means. You were responsible for the Qunari being here, for all those deaths.”
“Don’t forget all the men who went down with my ship. Don’t you think I know that? I could’ve kept it all from happening by just giving the relic back to the Qunari, or never stealing it in the first place.” She frowned, standing up and kicking the chair out of her way. “I guess I’m just selfish and that’s all there is to me.”
“Wait!” Lucas stood up, too. He stepped closer to her, and in a low, intense voice said, “I never said that.”
“You thought it. You must have. All this time and I’ve never seen you take a single thing for yourself.”
“You’re wrong. I did take something. Something I wanted very much.”
“‘Wanted’?” she echoed softly. “Past tense?” A spasm of something that might have been pain crossed her face before she snorted in disgust, turning away from him. “I guess that’s what I get—you’re the Champion of Kirkwall, and I’m just a lying, thieving snake.”
He caught her arm, the words tumbling forth before he had time to think about what he was saying. “Whatever you think you are, don’t put words in my mouth. I never said any of those things about you. I … you’re still my friend. Giving up the relic can’t have been easy for you, and I appreciate it.”
“So … you don’t want me to go away?”
Lucas shook his head. “I don’t want you to go away.” He shouldn’t be forgiving her, he told himself. He wasn’t even sure he did forgive her; but he was sure that he couldn’t just let her walk out of his life. “We’re going to investigate some Carta hole by the Vimmarks in a couple of days. Will you come with us?”
They stood there, looking into one another’s eyes. “Well …” Isabela said at last, “what would I do if I wasn’t getting into trouble with you?”
“Get in trouble with someone else?”

She didn’t tear her gaze away. “Where would be the fun in that?”

“So you’ll come with me?”

Isabela smiled. “Try and stop me.”

Lucas turned, breaking the moment between them. “Good. We’ll leave first thing, day after tomorrow.” He hurried out of the Hanged Man before he could be tempted to take things any further. He didn’t even want to contemplate why he had backed down so easily; he only knew that he couldn’t let her leave. There would be time enough to talk about her betrayal, to get answers, to … well, he didn’t know what he wanted to do, but he couldn’t do any of it if she left.

He went home to find Aveline waiting for him, pacing restlessly back and forth across the entryway.

“Why didn’t you tell someone you were here?” he asked her. “Bodahn would have got you a cup of tea. You look like you could use one.”

“I don’t need tea,” she snapped. “I need my head examined.”

“And you came to me? I hardly think I’m the best person to be looking into someone else’s head.”

She stopped pacing at last and turned to him. “There was no one else I could go to. You’re—you’re like family to me, Hawke.”

He sat down on the bench and patted the place beside him. “Then come tell me what’s wrong … sis.”

“Don’t get cute.”

“Can’t help it. I was born this way.” He grinned at her.

Aveline rolled her eyes. “It’s about Donnic.”

“And?”

“And on your advice, I agreed to marry him.”

“I’m very intelligent.”

Aveline punched him in the arm. “Will you be serious? I have to plan this … wedding thing, and wear a dress, and all sorts of things that I’d rather just run away and hide from.”

“Sounds like a good exercise for you.”

“It is not. Not at all.”

“Well, why don’t you get someone to help you with the dress? Isabela, maybe.”

“That whore? I wouldn’t wear a dress she picked out if it was the only cloth left in Kirkwall.”

“Go easy. She might play straight with you.”

Aveline glanced at him. “Still hung up on her?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”
“How would you put it?”

Lucas was fairly caught, since he hadn’t the faintest clue how he would put it. “So, find someone else to recommend a dress. Seneschal Bran might know a good dressmaker, or … oh, I know. Go talk to Lady Elegant.”

“How does the potions maker?”

“They don’t call her ‘Elegant’ for nothing.”

Aveline considered that for a moment. “All right, that’s not bad. But it’s not what I came here to talk about.”

“What is?”

“I … will you give me away?”

“You really want me to?”

Aveline nodded. “Please, Hawke.”

“I don’t suppose you’d agree in exchange to start calling me Lucas.”

She smiled. “I might.”

“Good. In that case, it would be my very great pleasure.”

“Thank you, Haw—Lucas.”

“Out of curiosity, do you have a date set?”

“A month from tomorrow.”

“That soon?” Lucas groaned. “I’m just about to leave for some mysterious location in the Vimmarks, running down some Carta dwarves who want to kill me.”

“Can’t you put it off?”

“According to Fenris, they’ve attacked three times since my duel with the Arishok. I don’t think I can.”

“All right, then. I’ll push the wedding back two weeks.”

“Can you do that?”

“In order to have you and Varric there? Absolutely.” To Lucas’s surprise, Aveline turned and threw her arms around him. “Come back safe, Lucas.”

“You just don’t want to have to ask the Seneschal to give you away.” He grinned, hugging her back.

“Damn straight.”

Two days later they were on their way, Varric, Isabela, Fenris, and Lucas. The walk was long and dusty, but it was good to be out of Kirkwall, and good to be doing something again, even if it was hunting someone who wanted to kill him.

Isabela and Varric were ahead, arguing heatedly about a Wicked Grace rules issue that seemed fairly
minor to Lucas but had them both hot under the collar. Lucas was surprised Fenris wasn’t walking with them, as he was as passionate a Wicked Grace player as either of them, but the elf stuck to Lucas’s side, looking uncomfortable.

“Is the sand hot?” Lucas asked, gesturing at Fenris’s bare feet.

“No.”

“Then what’s going on? Is this about whatever reason you were reluctant to leave town?”

“I … need to tell you something.”

Lucas waited. It was rare to see Fenris this agitated.

“I have … done something that is almost certainly foolish.”

“You?”

Fenris cast him a dark look. “Do not joke.”

“I wasn’t. I’ve never known you to do anything foolish.”

“I have this time. You remember when Hadriana came to Kirkwall?”

“Naturally.”

“And she spoke to me about … my sister.”

“Yes. She was in Qarinus, wasn’t she?”

“She is now in Minrathous. I have—been in contact with her.”

“Fenris, that’s wonderful! I’m so glad you were able to find her.”

“She … may come to Kirkwall. I have sent her money to do so.”

“I think that’s great. What’s bothering you about it?” Lucas asked.

“The very great possibility that it is all a trap, and that she will bring news of me back to Danarius.” Fenris looked miserable. “I cannot help but think I was meant to contact this … sister.”

“Has she told you anything about herself?”

“No. Very little. Only that our mother has passed on and that she—Varania—had thought I was dead.”

“Hm.” Lucas considered that for a moment. If Varania was anything like Fenris, it wasn’t surprising that she’d be reticent. But if she was trying to lead him into betraying himself, she would remain close-mouthed, giving out only as many details as would keep him on the hook. “Did you think she might arrive while we were gone?”

“I believed there was a chance, but it appears there is no ship expected from Minrathous for the next few weeks.”

“Then we have some time. Let’s look into it together when we get back.”

“Thank you, Hawke.”
“Anytime, my friend. And Fenris? I’m glad you did that. A person should have some kind of family they’re connected to.” He thought of his mother for the first time in a number of days. How proud she would have been of him. Bethany, too. Carver would have been bitterly jealous and secretly bragged about his big brother to anyone who would listen and not tell Lucas about it. His father …

Impatiently Lucas shook his head. They were all gone. This was his family now—the red-headed guardswoman waiting for him to walk her down the aisle; the beardless dwarf who was always there when needed; the lyrium-marked elf who had been his companion on countless nights when he needed a friend; and the pirate who heated his blood and made him laugh and infuriated him. When you thought about it, he was pretty lucky.
Deep in the desert, they saw a crumbling tower in the distance.

“What you want to bet that’s where we’re headed?” Varric said glumly, taking a swig from his canteen.

“Of course it is.” Isabela lifted her hair off the back of her neck. “What idiot puts a tower out here?”

“As far as I can tell from the maps,” Varric said, “there isn’t even any here here.”

“Which is probably why there’s a tower. Whoever built it, they were keeping something far away from … everything else.” Lucas was sweltering in his armor. If that tower offered some shade, it was well worth heading for.

They kept walking, all of them wearied by the endless stretches of sand and sand and more sand.

It was just before noon on their fourth day of travel through the desert when they finally reached the darkened sands under the shadow of the tower. Varric breathed an audible sigh of relief when the shade touched him, reaching for a handkerchief and running it gently over Bianca’s stock. Lucas had to wonder if he actually thought the crossbow could sweat.

There was a walkway of some kind, massive stones built to form a passage, and with some interchange of glances and a set of shrugs, they entered it. Lucas was relieved to hear his boots clatter on the stone rather than sinking into the sand. He was a strong man with a lot of stamina, but walking through the desert in full armor wasn’t the best idea he’d ever had.

He turned his head to say as much to Isabela, who happened to be behind him, but she wasn’t looking at him. She was staring over his shoulder at something in front of him. Lucas turned his head and looked at a dwarf who had suddenly appeared in the way, his eyes clouded over with something but still managing to positively blaze with triumph.

“You’ve come!” he said hoarsely.

“You sent such friendly calling cards.”

Without appearing to hear what Lucas had said, the dwarf turned around, shouting behind him, “Everyone! The eldest child of Malcolm Hawke has come!”

“There are more of these guys?” Varric muttered. “Fantastic.”

Fenris frowned slightly. “Why would it matter that you are the eldest child?”

Lucas shrugged. “At this point, I’m also the only. Maybe it’s some title of honor, who knows.”

“I don’t think it’s your honor they’re interested in,” Isabela said.

“What do they want with your father’s child, anyway?” Fenris asked.

“Good question.” As the dwarf turned back in his direction, Lucas asked him.

“It began with him. Blood for blood!”

Lucas groaned. “Why does it always have to be blood? Why can’t it ever be spit, or a lock of hair?”
“You really want to run into a spit mage? I question your sanity,” Varric said.

“For a change of pace? It might be nice.” Lucas took a long step toward the dwarf. “What is it about the blood? What do you want?”

“The only thing that matters is that you’ve come to us!” The dwarf moved closer to Lucas in his turn. Behind him, Lucas could practically feel the others tensing, readying for a fight. “The only reason I came here was to find out why the Carta attacked me!”

Isabela moved up next to him, shoulder to shoulder. “I don’t think you’re getting any answers from this guy.”

“You have a point; it looks like talking time is over.” Lucas could hear Bianca finding her place in Varric’s hands.

As if to prove her right, the crazed dwarf drew a pair of wicked-looking daggers. “For the blood! We must have it! Corypheus will walk in the sun once more.”

And before Lucas could ask who Corypheus might be, the dwarf attacked, and so did five others who suddenly appeared from the shadows. Tired as he was, the great blade was heavy in Lucas’s hands, and the dwarves were fast. Whatever might be wrong with them otherwise, they were Carta-trained and experts with their daggers.

Fortunately, Isabela was something more than expert with hers, and none of the dwarves had a defense against Fenris’s lyrium-fueled powers.

Winded from the journey and from his recuperation from the fight with the Arishok, Lucas only got in a few good blows in the combat, the others managing most of the fight between them. When it was over, he leaned wearily against the wall, the smell of the dwarves’ blood nauseating him. “Sorry. I’ll get my wind back once we’ve had a chance to rest.”

“You idiot.” Isabela handed him a canteen. “Drink that. All of it. Slowly.”

“I can’t take the last of your water.”

“Yes. You can. These dwarves have to have water somewhere in here, and we’re going to keep fighting. Can’t have you passing out from heatstroke and dehydration.”

“The rest of you need water, too.”

“Not as much. We’re not wearing a thousand pounds of metal strapped to our backs and didn’t just nearly kill ourselves in a stupid duel,” she said crossly. She turned her back on him, looking out through the other end of the passageway. “Doesn’t look like this bunch have any friends coming right after them.”

“Who is this Corypheus? Anyone ever heard of him?” Varric asked.

Lucas shook his head, feeling the coolness of the water start to work its way through him.

Fenris said, “It sounds like a Tevinter name, but not one I am familiar with.”

Chuckling, Lucas took another short sip, making the water last as long as he could. “With a name like that, you know he’s going to go ‘mwahaha’ at some point.”

“I don’t much like things that go ‘mwahaha’, Hawke.”
“Same here, Varric. But it sounds like we might have to meet up with him, if he’s the one who’s been sending these dwarves after me.”

“Well, we’re not going to do it by standing here. Come on, Hawke.”

“To think I have lived to see the day when Varric is the one urging us on into danger.” Fenris gave the dwarf a sardonic half-smile.

“Just for that, you can go first, you broody bastard.”

“If you like.” Fenris gave a brisk nod, and moved ahead. Varric followed him, Bianca at the ready, and Lucas and Isabela came behind.

She kept giving him concerned glances. “Watch it,” she said suddenly as they approached a part of the walkway that had been broken at some point. It was strewn with rubble. “The ground’s treacherous here.”

Lucas glanced at her in surprise.

Ahead of them, Fenris chuckled. “Showing concern for others, Isabela? Will wonders never cease.”

Isabela cleared her throat. “I just … didn’t want to see Hawke’s brains dashed on the ground. Where would we be without them?” Silence answered her question, and she looked away, fiddling with the handle of a dagger stuck into her belt. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I appreciated the thought,” Lucas told her softly.

“Just … watch your step, will you?” she muttered.

They found themselves at the entrance to the tower, staring at the door.

“I suppose we ought to go in,” Lucas said reluctantly.

“Unless you prefer having the Carta continue to appear at your doorstep intent upon your blood.” At Lucas’s sour glance, Fenris lifted his eyebrows. “If we do not go in, we have come a long way to look at a door.”

“Elf’s got a point, Hawke.” Varric didn’t look any happier about it than Lucas was.

“Fine.” Lucas pushed the door open. As he had half-expected, inside they found a bunch of Carta dwarves who attacked on sight, shouting things like “Malcolm Hawke’s blood” and “we need more blood” and a few who skipped the excess and just mindlessly chanted the word “blood” over and over again.

For dwarves who were obsessed with his blood, they seemed awfully intent on spilling it. It was apparent that whatever had made them crazy had failed to simultaneously make them more intelligent.

It was hard work taking them down. Carta dwarves were well trained, and more and more of them kept appearing out of the woodwork. Lucas, already wearied by the duel with the Arishok, the long march, the lack of water, and the heat, found himself flagging sooner than he would have liked, but Isabela was always there in front of him, moving in a blur, her daggers flashing in the dimness of the tower’s interior.

At last it was done, and they all leaned against the walls, panting with exhaustion.
“Hawke,” Fenris said, “how is it you get into these situations so often?”

Lucas shrugged. “It’s a gift.”

The elf snorted. “Well, if so, I for one think you should return it.”

Varric stared at him in surprise, then chuckled. Isabela laughed, too, then Fenris’s rare smile lit his face. Lucas couldn’t help joining in, glad to have these particular people at his back.

The laughter didn’t last long; a noise was heard farther in, reminding them that they still didn’t know what, or who, lay ahead of them in the darkness.

Varric took the lead this time, Bianca at the ready. Behind the others, Lucas couldn’t help looking into a half-open bag that lay next to a crate. Stale biscuits and a rusty spoon, but beneath them, a gemstone, a rich, red ruby. He took it from the sack, turning it over in his fingers. In the light from a torch on the wall, he could see the flaw in it, the crack deep inside that kept it from being perfect. Looking up, he saw Isabela moving ahead of him, and it struck him that she was like the ruby: beautiful, valuable, rare, but far from perfect. Many would reject the ruby because of its flaw; many had rejected Isabela over the course of her life, leaving her as hard and cold as any gemstone. But inside—what depths would the right man find there, if he had the patience, the forgiveness, the understanding?

Lucas shook his head. What romantic nonsense. He must have a worse case of heatstroke than he’d thought to be thinking such things, to be imagining that he might be the right man. They’d had some fun together, they’d fought alongside one another, they’d had some really good sex … He had no illusions as to how deeply he had touched her heart, and no illusions about his own.

Nonetheless, he tucked the ruby safely away, and somehow felt better because he knew it was there.

Ahead of him, Varric was talking to someone, his calm, rational, “let’s not go crazy and kill people” voice. Lucas hurried his footsteps, finding Varric at a stand-off with one of those crazy dwarves, Bianca’s nose practically in the dwarf’s chest.

Fenris and Isabela glanced at Lucas as he passed them, but Varric didn’t so much as blink, his eyes steadily on the other dwarf.

“Hawke,” he said, “meet Gerav, a greedy, brilliant, bastard son-of-a-nug from the Carta.”

“The Hawke,” the other dwarf said, his crazy eyes widening. A disturbing smile spread across his face. “The Master will rise! He will be free.”

“Is that what you’re all doing here? Worshipping demons?” Varric asked.

“We drink the darkspawn blood. He calls us …”

Lucas felt nauseous at the very thought. “Why would you drink that stuff? Won’t it kill you?”

Gerav clearly knew nothing of why, or how they could survive. “The Master is calling,” he said instead. “He needs the blood. More blood. All the blood.”

“All the blood? Not just some blood?” Lucas asked, but the dwarf wasn’t forthcoming with answers. Gerav stepped forward, burying Bianca’s nose more firmly in his chest. Lucas looked down at Varric. “Do you want to spare this bastard?”

Varric looked from Gerav to Lucas and back, his finger twitching on Bianca’s trigger. At last he
shook his head, his decision made. “Not if he’s after you, Hawke.”

Gerav disappeared in a cloud of smoke, and then it was on again, fighting Gerav and several of his similarly crazy friends. Lucas was relieved that in the end it was Fenris who killed Gerav, sparing Varric from having to take that blow.

When the fighting was done, Varric knelt next to his old friend, removing a ring from Gerav’s finger and turning it over and over in his hand. “I used to do business with the Carta. Gerav was a nutcase then, too, but in a good way. Not unlike you,” he said, with a sideways look at Lucas. He reached down and closed Gerav’s staring, clouded eyes. “I can’t believe he ended up like this.”

Without another word, he stood up and stalked into the darkness Gerav had come from. Lucas, feeling helpless, followed, with Isabela and Fenris behind him.

Deeper into the labyrinth of rooms, they found Varric staring at a very large dwarf, who seemed marginally less crazy than the rest of the dwarves they had run into. He had an equally large sword pointed at Varric.

“Uh, Hawke? A little help here?”

“You’re the Hawke?” The sword point didn’t waver. “I knew you would come.”

“Such a nice invitation, too.”

“I swore to Corypheus that we would bring him all of Malcolm Hawke’s blood. One way or the other . . .”

“Well, my father’s dead, so I’m afraid you’re out of luck.” Lucas frowned.

“Pity. It would have been easier if the blood was purely his.”

Lucas shrugged. “My mother did have something to do with it, or so I’m told.”

“Corypheus!” the dwarf called, looking around the room as though this Corypheus could hear him. “We have done as you command! Your sacrifice is here! You will see the surface once more!”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Lucas growled. “Varric, down!”

Varric rolled out of the way, and away from the business end of the dwarf’s outstretched blade, and Lucas struck. The dwarf caught Lucas’s sword on his own with a force that jarred Lucas’s teeth, and from concealed locations around the room, other dwarves rose, arrows flying.

“Venhedis!” Fenris swore, his lyrium markings activating themselves as he sprinted across the room for the balcony several of the archers stood on. Isabela was climbing a scaffolding to the other balcony, and Bianca was having her say from somewhere behind Lucas. His focus was entirely on the dwarf before him, who made up in strength and speed what he lacked in height and reach. It was a tough duel, but Lucas knew something the dwarf didn’t—that if he could hold out long enough, his team would take down the rest of the dwarves and come to help him.

It hadn’t been that long ago that he wouldn’t have needed any help, but he did today, still feeling the weakness in his limbs from his convalescence, and he told himself it was all right to count on the others. In combat, at least, they had never let him down.

Still, it felt strange not to be able to beat even this tough dwarf in a fight. As soon as he was back in Kirkwall, he told himself, he would be back at his training regimen, as well.
Soon enough, as he had predicted, the others were victorious over the rest of the dwarves and even the strong one lay dead on the floor. Lucas wondered for a moment if Varric felt anything for these dwarves, seeing his own people lying dead. But then, if they had all been humans, Lucas didn’t think he’d have felt any particular kinship.

A glow came from underneath the strong dwarf, some type of gemstone, perhaps. Isabela, always the first at something shiny, turned him over and clucked in disappointment when the glow turned out to be coming from that giant blade. “For you, Hawke, I guess.”

He picked up the sword, and then something happened, the glow suffusing him, jolts of energy all through his body. He could barely hold the sword, but something told him he wouldn’t be able to let go of it, either. “I can feel it,” he gasped, “inside me.”

“When I say that, I’m usually a lot happier,” Isabela muttered, but there was worry in her face. “Put it down, Hawke!”

“I can’t.”

And then the spasm, or whatever it was, passed, and the sword was quiet. But there was something within it … something that called to Lucas’s very blood. He stared at it for a long time before Isabela snapped her fingers under his nose.

“Wake up.”

“Right. Sorry.” He blinked, with an effort, and looked away. “Weird sword. Tough, though, too. Nearly couldn’t take that guy out. Thanks for all your help. Shall we move on?”

Varric frowned. “A weapon with a mind of its own? It’s no Bianca, but I guess it’ll do.”

“Or it’ll make you go mad and start capering about the room looking for stale biscuits,” Isabela said.

“By all means, if I start capering, do stab me.” Lucas grinned at her.

“My pleasure.”

“You know, this is going to sound strange, but I feel this sword is going to take me to Corypheus.”

“Then let us go,” Fenris said. “I have no desire to spend any more time in this tower than necessary.”

“You know, elf, sometimes you make a lot of sense.”

Lucas led the way through a long passage. The wooden walls gave way to stone, and then to a short flight of stairs that led even farther down. Behind them, there was a crackle, and some sort of magical seal closed off the way back out.

“Damn it,” Lucas said. “I guess we should have seen that coming.”

“You think?” Varric groaned, and Fenris muttered something uncomplimentary about magic.

Following the hallway, they came to an open space where they could see some sort of central structure rising. “I guess we go up there,” Lucas said.

“You think Corypheus is at the top?” Varric asked.

“Is that what your magic sword tells you?” Fenris crossed his arm, glaring. Lucas could tell the elf was extremely uncomfortable.
“Yes, that’s what my magic sword tells me.”

“Hawke,” Isabela said, calling him to the railing and pointing upward, “I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but those are darkspawn up there.”

“Yes, they are, aren’t they?” He remembered Lothering, remembered watching the people he knew die, remembered Carver standing, so brave, against the crowd of the darkspawn, giving them all room to flee.

Isabela’s eyes were soft as she looked at him. She nudged him in the side. “In case it ever comes up again, I prefer towers filled with coin to towers filled with darkspawn.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He smiled at her, glad for the pull back to the present, and for the way she knew how to lighten his mood.

The first room they came to seemed at one point to have been a prison. At the moment, only one cell was full, and it held a demon behind some kind of a barrier. Lucas moved toward it to investigate the barrier, only to be overwhelmed by darkspawn. For a moment, it was like Lothering all over again; he almost turned to call out to Bethany. But Bethany was gone, and he was here.

The new sword cut through the decaying flesh like butter. He had never felt so powerful; it was almost disappointing when the last of the darkspawn was down.

“Let’s let this thing out and kill it,” he said, approaching the demon, the bloodlust pumping through his body and fueling him with energy.

And then out of nowhere, a voice that was part of his very being resonated through the air.

“… be bound here for eternity, hunger stilled, rage smothered, desire dampened, pride crushed. In the name of the Maker, so let it be.”

“Father?” His lips formed the name, but no sound came from him.

The others had found the way to release the demon, and they were fighting it and several more, while Lucas looked around him.

“Father?” he said again. Tears came to his eyes. His father was dead; he had seen his father die. What was here was … a memory? An enchantment? It wasn’t real.

He joined the others in the combat. When the last of the demons, black bloated shades, had faded into nothingness, he heard the voice again.

“I can do nothing about the Wardens’ use of demons in this horrid place. But I will have no one say that any magic of mine ever released one into the world …”

Lucas looked all around him. “That’s my father’s voice,” he said in wonder. “Did—did you hear that?”

“We heard it. What does this place have to do with the Wardens?” Varric asked. “What did your father have to do with them?”

“Nothing. I don’t think I ever heard my father speak of Wardens in all my life.”

“Perhaps this is why,” Fenris suggested. “If he was asked to bind demons to this … fortress, perhaps he preferred not to be reminded of what he had done.”
“My father was a good man!”

Fenris held up his hands. “I do not doubt that. But the evidence of your own senses, his own voice, tells us that he was here, and for whatever reason, he bound this demon here. Perhaps others, since he said ‘demons’.”

“I don’t understand why he would do that,” Lucas said.

“Well, we won’t figure anything out just standing here. Come on.” Isabela moved to the doorway and turned around to wait for him to catch up.

Lucas felt a curious reluctance to leave the room. He had found a piece of his father here, a piece of his family. He didn’t want to let that go.

“Come on, Hawke. Maybe there are more demons,” Varric suggested.

Fenris agreed, “That seems as though it would be a safe bet.”

Lucas nodded, following both of them into another room. As he stepped in, they all looked at him, and he could hear what they were hearing: a man’s voice, moaning. Begging. Asking to be set free.

“Is that your father?” Isabela asked in a low voice.

He frowned, listening. It was hard to tell because pain was distorting the voice. It was familiar, but it wasn’t his father’s. And then it struck him who the voice belonged to, and he ran, following it, down a hall full of cells until he came to the last one, where a man lay on a cot in a barred cell. A tall man who appeared powerfully built, with a shock of black hair.

“Please,” the man whispered. “Please let me go. I—I won’t tell anyone; you can have some blood, if you really want it. Just … give me some water. Or … something. Please.”

Lucas gripped the bars. “Carver?”
Lost Time

The man in the bed struggled to sit up. “L-Lucas?”

“Maker’s breath!” Lucas turned to call to Isabela. “Hurry, please. Got your lockpicks?”

“Is the Divine old and wrinkly?” She took the lockpicks out of the pouch at her waist and got to work on the cell. “Is that your brother?” she asked under her breath. Inside the cell, Carver was lying back, eyes closed, his breathing harsh, echoing off the stone walls. “The one who …”

“The one I thought was dead, yes.”

How could it be Carver? Lucas had last seen him as they fled Lothering, standing against an onslaught of darkspawn. He had been badly wounded by the ogre; how was it possible he hadn’t been killed, either in battle or by the taint?

Varric and Fenris had caught up by this point. “Hawke, there is nothing about you that isn’t weird,” the dwarf said after a hasty sizing-up of the situation.

“Can’t help but agree with you.” Lucas held onto the bars, staring at his brother, waiting impatiently for the click that would mean Isabela had finished with the lock. As soon it came, he pushed the door open and knelt at his brother’s side. “Water. Hurry, please.”

Varric, always on the lookout for his creature comforts, had stocked up while they were making their way through the Carta-held lower parts of the tower. He handed Lucas a canteen, and then a small squat bottle. “Antivan brandy. Give him just a swallow; it’ll get his blood going.”

Carefully, Lucas fed his brother a swallow of the brandy, and then an equally carefully measured amount of water. Not knowing how long it had been since Carver had last had something to drink, he didn’t want to overwhelm his stomach with too much at once.

Swallowing, Carver lay back, squinting at Lucas. “It—it is you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Carver, how—why—what—“

Varric chuckled. “I think what Hawke is trying to say is what’s a nice kid like you doing in a darkspawn-infested tower like this?”

“W-who are you?” Carver asked, his voice a hoarse croak, and Lucas hastily gave him some more water.

“Introductions all around, then. This is Varric and Fenris and Isabela. They’re … friends, from Kirkwall. Everyone, this is … this is my brother. Carver.” Despite his attempt at breeziness, he could feel tears springing to his eyes. Of all the things he had expected … “Are you real?” he asked wonderingly, the question out before he could think whether it was the right one.

Carver propped himself up on an elbow. “I feel real,” he said, starting to sound like his old self. “But this place … One minute, I’m in the practice yard, getting ready for a bout against Eddric the Anvil, and the next I’m locked up here by some crazy dwarves.” He shook his head, taking another swallow of the water. “Until they started this nonsense about Malcolm Hawke’s blood, I thought Eddric had paid them so he wouldn’t have to fight me.”

“You’re a prize fighter?”
Carver nodded. “In Orlais.” He eyed Lucas and the others. “And you …”

Isabela laughed at that.

Varric, chuckling as well, said, “Hawke’s sort of a high-class mercenary.”

Carver glanced at them, his eyes lingering on Isabela, and then looked back at Lucas. “In Kirkwall? Did you make it there?”

“Yes, I—“ Suddenly it hit Lucas that Carver didn’t know any of what had happened. “Uncle Gamlen …”

“Gamlen’s a broke, drunken sot,” Isabela said bluntly.

Lucas looked at her over his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

“Not a rich noble like Mother always said? I bet she was mad when she found out.” Carver took another long swallow, then pushed himself into a sitting position. “How is Mother?”

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Lucas tried to prepare himself to say it. There was no easy way, so he didn’t even try to soften the news. “Gone. Mother’s gone. So is Bethany.”

“What?! How can—Both of them?” Carver’s face twisted. “I guess … I guess I knew that somehow. I kept thinking I should go to Kirkwall, try to see if you’d all made it, but I thought how ridiculous, how could you have gotten out of Lothering …” He looked at Lucas, frowning. “How did you get out of Lothering?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“It was a Grey Warden. He found me, fought off the darkspawn, got me to safety. It was the Maker’s blessing that I wasn’t already tainted, he said.”

“A Grey Warden?” Lucas echoed. “But Flemeth told us they were out of reach.”

“Who’s Flemeth?”

“Oh, Junior, you’re never going to believe this one,” Varric said. “Flemeth is the nice old lady who turned into a dragon and carried your brother and sister and mother—“

“And Aveline,” Fenris put in.

Varric glared at him; he hated to be interrupted. “I was getting to her. And Aveline, to Gwaren, where they found a ship bound for Kirkwall.”

Carver rubbed a hand over his face. “I must still be delirious. I could swear he said ‘the nice old lady who turned into a dragon’.”

“He did. It’s a bit of a long story, really.”

“I thought I boiled it down nicely,” Varric protested.

Carver swung his legs over the side of the cot, blinking for a moment. “Little dizzy. I think they may have hit me a few times.”
“Judging by the bruises, more than a few,” Isabela said.

Lucas stood up, looking at his friends. “Would you mind giving us a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

The three of them left the cell; Lucas could hear their low voices as they moved down the hall.

“Interesting bunch,” Carver observed.

“You have no idea. But … they’re good friends, too. They were there for me when—“

“Tell me what happened to Mother and Bethany.”

“Bethany—the taint. We went on an expedition into the Deep Roads about a year after we arrived in Kirkwall.” Remembering her grey skin and clouded eyes, Lucas rubbed a hand over his face as though that would erase the vision. “It’s how we met Varric—the dwarf. It was his brother who ran the expedition, but Bartrand—Varric’s brother—went crazy and locked us in down there. We found our way out, but not before … It moved so fast,” Lucas whispered. “So fast. I didn’t even know she’d been wounded.”

“I knew it. Somehow, I knew. I could even have guessed it was the taint.” Carver shook his head. “Ironic, really—you leave me behind to fight darkspawn so you can escape, and Bethany’s the one who ends up with the taint.”

Lucas turned away, gripping the bars of the cell. “Mother—she … she was kidnapped by a man, a mage, who … he was creating a—a person, made in the image of his dead wife. It was—“ He couldn’t go on.

“You don’t have to say any more. Please. Just—did you kill the bastard?”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

“Good.” Carver sighed, a weary, mournful sound. “So … you live with Gamlen, back there in Kirkwall?”

Lucas gave a soft chuckle. “No. The expedition in the Deep Roads … we came back with quite a bit of treasure. Enough to buy back the Amell estate.”

“Mother got to go home?” Carver asked. “I’m glad. I know she loved that house.”

“She did. She was so happy there.” Lucas turned to look at his brother, his eyes stinging with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry, Carver. So sorry I couldn’t save them.”

“Lucas.” Carver got to his feet, swaying just a little before getting his balance. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“You weren’t there. You don’t know!”

“I don’t have to have been there. You were our protector, since we were little. Anything we needed, anyone who threatened us, there was Father, and there was you. I know you did your best for them, and look how far you got! All the way to Kirkwall, back to Mother’s home estate.”

“Carver, will you—“ Tears were flowing freely down Lucas’s face now. “Will you come back with me, back to Kirkwall? So that we can be a family again? These past months, years, without them, without you …”
There were tears on Carver’s face as well as he nodded, and then they were embracing, holding onto each other as if they never intended to let go again.

After a few moments, there was a discreet cough, and Lucas turned to see Fenris, his face averted out of respect for their privacy. “Hawke.”

“Yes?” Lucas and Carver spoke together.

Fenris chuckled. “We may have to consider an alteration in nomenclature.”

Carver’s eyebrows rose, and Lucas hastily translated. “Most of Kirkwall just calls me Hawke. Mother … Mother mostly went by Mistress Amell once we were there; I think she hoped it would increase her chances of returning to the level of society she had come from, and Bethany … was Bethany.” He looked at his brother. “With you along, maybe I can be Lucas for a change.”

“Or, perhaps, Champion.” Fenris smiled, nearly a guffaw from the normally stoic elf, and Lucas glared at him.

“Champion?” Carver echoed.

“Has he not revealed to you how he dueled a Qunari Arishok in single combat and thus was the instrument of removing the Qunari threat to Kirkwall entirely?”

“Must have slipped his mind,” Carver muttered.

“It’s not that important,” Lucas said. “Except that it was only a little while ago, so I’m still recovering.”

“Anything else I don’t know?” Carver asked Fenris.

The elf shrugged. “Nothing I can think of. No doubt Varric and Isabela will have more stories.” His eyes twinkled at Lucas, who felt an overwhelming desire to strangle his friend.

“You’ve picked a Void of a time to develop a sense of humor,” he grumbled.

Fenris chuckled. “Varric and Isabela would like to know if we are going to be continuing our way through this tower at any point.”

“Tell them we’ll be there in a minute.”

“I shall do so.” The elf disappeared.

“He always talk like that?” Carver asked.

“Yes. Always. He’s from Tevinter,” Lucas explained. “He was a slave to a magister there; the markings you see on him are lyrium, branded directly into his skin.”

“Maker.”

“Exactly.”

“And the other two? Varric and … Isabela?”

“Varric’s a special case.” Lucas grinned. “A story for every occasion, and no shortage of bravado, but the truest friend I’ve ever had.”
“How did you find him?”

“He found me. He’d been watching me. The first year we were here, we worked for a smuggler.”

He rolled his eyes. “Uncle Gamlen sold our services to pay off his gambling debts.”

“Charming.”

“Exactly. But useful—we learned a lot. And impressed Varric, who found me one day and suggested we work together to get money to invest in his brother’s Deep Roads expedition.”

“That’s … how you lost Bethany?”

“It was. The cost was greater than I would ever have been willing to pay.” Lucas closed his eyes, seeing again her greying face. “But we came out of it rich men, able to buy back the Amell estate and give Mother back the status she had lost.”

“Isabela, then?” Carver asked. The tone of his voice rather alarmed Lucas, who had not forgotten that Isabela was an incredibly beautiful and sexy woman, but had rather forgotten that she wasn’t in any way marked as his. There was no way his brother could know what was between them … not least because Lucas himself wasn’t sure what was between them. But he was damned sure he didn’t want to see his brother go after her.

“I sort of stumbled on her,” he said. “In the tavern where she and Varric live. And she’s been with me ever since.”

Carver gave him a sharp look. “With you? You mean—”

“At times. We’re not … together, but …”

“You’d like to be.”

“Yes? No? It’s complicated.” He looked at his brother. “Is there anyone you …?”

Carver laughed. “No, not me. Not the settling-down type.”

Thinking of Carver’s conquests in Lothering, Lucas grinned. “Some things never change. Still like a good scrap? I get the feeling there are a few waiting ahead of us.”

“A chance to get back at the bastards who kept me in there? Lead on, brother.”
When Lucas and Carver rejoined the others, there was a flurry of greetings … and then silence. Even Varric seemed to be at a loss for what to say.

Carver had looked through the cell for his gear, but hadn’t found it; and Isabela, who had looted her way through the Carta-occupied rooms below, didn’t think she had seen any when he described it to her. Carver swore bitterly. “That was my favorite sword,” he said by way of explanation. “Besides, here I am with nothing to fight with, and darkspawn ahead. I lived through the taint once—I’d like to do it again.”

“I hear that,” Varric muttered.

Lucas drew his own sword. “You’re welcome to this one as long as we’re in here,” he offered. “I think I’m stuck with the glowy thing as long as we’re in here.”

“Don’t talk about Fenris like that,” Isabela joked, and the elf frowned at her.

“Do not be ridiculous.”

Carver was looking over Lucas’s sword. “Not bad, brother, but you’ve got some nicks in the blade.”

“Yes. I had only just recovered from the fight with the Arishok before we came out here; hadn’t had time to care for my sword.”

“You haven’t recovered yet,” Isabela corrected. She looked at Carver. “He got himself half killed, and now he wants to do it again. Is that a Hawke thing, or are you smarter than your brother?”

“I’m standing here, aren’t I?” he said to her, and Lucas could see the way his brother’s shoulders squared, making him seem just that little bit bigger. Carver was a taller man than he was, broader in the shoulders. Had he been that way before, and Lucas had just forgotten? Had he never noticed? It was disconcerting not to be the largest person in the team.

“Let’s go,” he said sharply, leading the way through a seemingly endless maze of stone-walled rooms and halls.

In one room was a cell with a demon inside, held back by a barrier, much like the one they had found just before stumbling upon Carver, and they took the demon and all its friends out.

Carver started to crow about their prowess, but Lucas caught his arm. “Wait for it,” he said. His brother frowned at him, but the frown cleared and turned to wonder when they both heard their father’s familiar voice floating in the air.

“I may have left the Circle,” it said, “but I took a vow. My magic will serve that which is best in me …”

Lucas and Carver finished the familiar saying with the voice: “Rather than that which is most base.”

“Father said that all the time,” Carver said softly. “He taught it to Bethany in her cradle. Why was Father in a Grey Warden tower, binding demons?”

“I don’t know. Whatever it was, he never told any of us about it. Do you think Mother knew?”

Carver shrugged. “It’s hard to say. They were both good at keeping secrets, at least from us.”
“He sounds like a man of great strength,” Fenris said unexpectedly. “I think I would have liked to have met your father. Bethany was … very strong herself, and I must imagine that is where it came from.”

Lucas knew how difficult it was for the elf to speak kindly of any mage. “Thank you, Fenris.”

Fenris nodded, his green eyes serious.

“Are we going now?” Isabela asked. “You won’t find any answers standing around and jawing.”

“Good point.” Lucas didn’t look at her; a disquiet still lay within him, and whether it had to do with the still unresolved troubles between them left by the Qunari and the relic, or whether it had to do with her admiring looks at Carver’s broad shoulders and Carver’s clear admiration of Isabela’s … assets, he didn’t know and didn’t care to investigate just at the moment.

He walked with Fenris and his brother toward the center of the tower, now that they finally appeared to have found it.

“Carver, have you been in Orlais ever since the Blight?” he asked abruptly.

“Yeah, mostly,” Carver said, glancing at him in surprise. “I got the Void out of Ferelden as soon as I could; no point staying to fight the Blight if I didn’t want to become a Warden, and … seeing the way Blackwall lived, no thanks. Ended up in a bar fight after a couple months as a merc, and took on half the bar single-handed. A fight coordinator named Stark, nasty little dwarf …” He glanced at Varric. “Er, sorry.”

“No, no, no harm done. I’ve met some fairly nasty humans in my time as well,” Varric said breezily.

“Right. So Stark saw me fight, said I had some promise, added me to his stable. It’s good work, good money, the girls all know who you are … and pretty safe, really, since it’s mostly staged.”

“I knew it!” Varric said.

Carver grinned. “Got a little boring, there, really. This is a nice change of pace, fighting for real.”

“Change of pace?” Lucas stopped and stared at his brother. “This is my life!”

“What are you blaming me for? I didn’t ask you to abandon me in Lothering.”

“Yes, you did! You said, ‘go on without me, it’s the only way you’ll make it.’”

“Bullshit,” Carver snapped. “I would never have said that.”

“Well, you did. Ask …” Lucas trailed off miserably. There was no one left to ask. Except for Aveline, but she didn’t like to talk about that day.

Quietly, Fenris broke into the conversation. “Hawke.” Lucas and Carver both looked. In the middle of a stone bridge ahead of them stood what looked like a man. Or a ghoul. It was hard to tell which, precisely. He was bent and mottled and what hair he had left stuck up in patches on the stretched-out skin of his scalp.

Seeing them, he got up, hobbling toward them in what he appeared to think was a run, crying out in a rusty croak like the caw of a crow, “The key! The key!”

“Is that you?” Carver asked, and Lucas gestured at the glowing sword.
“I think it’s this. Or me. Or us. Or all of the above.”

“How do you bring the key here?” the strange man asked.

“If that’s a key, what does it open?” Isabela asked, always practical and concerned with locks.

The strange man was sniffing the sword. “Magic from the blood,” he whispered. “Old magic. It made the seals; it can destroy them.” His eyes were clouded and greying, like those of the dwarves, but also brighter, somehow.

Carver was studying the man, frowning. “That’s Warden armor,” he said. “A different kind than Blackwall wore—he was the Warden who rescued me—but I recognize the sigil.”

“So this isn’t Corypheus, then,” Varric concluded, his fingers dropping from Bianca’s stock.

“This is no magister,” Fenris assured him.

“Do you know where … or what … Corypheus is?” Carver asked the man, speaking slowly and loudly.

The man sprang back with a hiss of fear. “Do not say his name! You will wake him. He will hear you, and he will wake, and then we will all die.”

“Let me guess, he wants to drink my blood, too.” Lucas sighed. “Or you do. Or someone does.”

Next to him, Isabela shook her head. “I don’t.”

“Good to know.”

“Blood?” The strange man looked more closely at Lucas, sniffing him, and then sniffing Carver, who stepped back, his lip curling in disgust. “The blood of the Hawke! You are the Hawke! But … I smell no magic on you. Either of you.”

“I think I’m glad Bethany’s not here,” Carver muttered.

Ignoring him, the man went on, “You carry the blood. You hold the key. The key … to his death. Yes! Yes, I can show you the way.”

“Before we go anywhere with you, I want to know who you are. Are you a Grey Warden?” Carver asked.

“Wardens, yes. Guardians against the Blight. Yes. This is where I belong. I know the way out. Follow me: down and in. Down and in.”

“Down?” Varric echoed. “Can’t we just go straight up?”

They all looked at the strange man, and he shook his head. “Every seal, you touch the key to it. Only then they open. Only for the Hawke.”

“Which one?” Carver asked.

The man looked from one of them to the other and shook his head.

“We’ll take turns,” Lucas said.

“Sure. Why not?”
“Down. Down. Down.” The strange man was chanting as he hobbled away. “Down in the depths …”

“Hawke, do you ever meet anyone sane?” Varric complained.

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “Look around you and see what you think.” He glanced at his brother. “Present company excepted.”

“You think I’m sane?”

“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. For the moment. Anything can happen in five years.” They grinned at each other.

“So we’re listening to the nice madman, then?” Isabela asked. “Or are we setting up camp?”

“Carver?”

“I’m not a hundred percent, brother, but I’d rather keep moving and get the Void out of here.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

Everyone appeared to agree, and Lucas led the way across the stone bridge. On the other side, they found a circular room with a glowing dais in the middle of it, and the strange man standing, twisted and bent, in front of it.

“Let me guess, one of the seals.”

“Two thousand years, the magic holds. Never broken,” the strange man whispered in his destroyed voice, hobbled across the room toward him.

“Two thousand years? How old is this Corypheus?” Varric asked, but the man ignored him.

“Give it the key,” he hissed. “Let it take the magic back to itself.”

“Let me,” Carver said.

“I’ll do this first one,” Lucas told him. “You’re only just recovering from what they did to you. Save your strength for the next one.”

“Fine.” Carver stepped back, not looking entirely pleased with the decision.

Lucas stepped up onto the dais, holding up the glowing sword, but nothing happened.

Fenris cleared his throat. “Hawke, I am afraid to say this, but it appears to require—“

“Blood. I know.” He tugged off a gauntlet and ran a finger along the edge of the sword. It was fairly dull, so he had to saw a little bit before he got any blood. He watched it run dripping down the edge of the blood and fall through the blue glow onto the floor. Then the glow disappeared, snapping away as if by magic—well, exactly by magic—and a demon appeared, standing directly next to Lucas and roaring.

The others moved into position around the demon, Fenris attacking first, his markings blazing bright in the dimness, the room lit only by smoky and sputtering torches. Due to the poor visibility, Varric had to get closer than usual to ensure that Bianca’s silver spikes impaled the demon and not any of their party, which put the dwarf squarely in the way of Carver’s onrush. He practically tripped on Varric, swearing viciously at the dwarf as he danced around him.
“Sorry, Junior,” Varric said, getting out of the center of the fighting. He and Bianca kept watch from the edges, getting in a barb here and there when they had a clear shot.

Isabela was everywhere, rolling and stabbing and slashing as if there were two of her. The demon couldn’t predict her, so he ignored her, focusing his rage on the brightly lit elf. Fenris was agile enough that he could move out of the way in time to avoid most of the blows that came his way, and he kept the demon’s attention so Lucas and Carver could attack from the sides.

And then the demon was down. Carver turned to Varric. “Sorry about that. Used to fighting alone.”

“No harm done. Except to my boots.” Varric looked down at his usually polished footwear and sighed.

Lucas could tell the dwarf was less than pleased with his brother. It had been an unfortunate way to start out, but hopefully once Carver learned the way they fought he and Varric would develop a better relationship.

The strange Grey Warden was back, reappearing from the shadows and rubbing his hands together over the body of the demon. “It is good. The blood worked.”

“All this talk about my blood is a little creepy,” Lucas said. He wrapped a strip of cloth around his finger to stop the bleeding, hoping he could keep further blood loss in this tower to a minimum. The Grey Warden was still walking around the demon, muttering to himself, and Lucas called, “Are you at least planning to tell me your name?”

The Grey Warden looked up, startled, and stood staring at Lucas. “Name?”

“Yes. What you’re called. Or … were called.”

“So long since … I was … Who was I? La-Larius. Yes. I was Larius.” He looked pleased with himself and the fog over his eyes seemed to clear a bit, if only for a moment.

“Larius, I’m Lucas. This is Carver, and Isabela, and Varric, and Fenris.”

“And won’t you sit down to tea,” Varric muttered.

Larius ignored him, frowning. “There was a … a title, too. Commander? Yes! Commander of the Grey.”

“He was a Warden Commander?” Carver said softly. “And now look at him. There go any ideas I ever had about joining the Wardens.”

“You wanted to join the Wardens?” Lucas asked him in surprise.

“Well … not really. But after being saved in Lothering by a Warden, I always had a sneaking feeling I should return the favor by pledging my life to the cause. Never quite seemed to get around to it, though.”

Larius was still not listening to them. Once the floodgates of his past self had opened, they seemed to remain that way. “I am dead,” he said, “but I never died.”

“Riddles, now? So boring,” Isabela protested. She began wandering around the room in search of something to loot.

“How does a Warden end up like this?” Lucas asked. “I thought you were immune to the taint. Isn’t
that basically what being a Warden is all about?"

“The Calling. It comes to us all. The voice we can’t resist. Our death.” Larius looked off into the distance, as if he truly was hearing music none of the rest of them could hear.

Varric cleared his throat. “Yeah. I’ll be … over there.” He went to join Isabela, far from the ruined remnants of a Grey Warden.

Larius jerked around in shock. “Corypheus calls! In the darkness! What waits there?”

And then he was gone again, hobbling away into the shadows. Lucas considered asking Isabela to follow him and drag him back, but he didn’t want to take the chance of the party getting separated, and he wasn’t sure he would have been willing to touch that lunatic, so he hesitated to ask her to do so.

“Well, that wasn’t cryptic at all,” Carver said, staring off into the darkness where Larius had gone.

They went in the direction Larius had taken, moving down to the next level of the tower, taking out a few darkspawn on the way, although not as many as Lucas had feared they would find.

The lower level held another of those bound demons that filled Lucas with such unease. Why would his father have done this? He had been against blood magic his whole life, or so Lucas had thought. Had it been his experiences here that had solidified that distaste? How had Malcolm Hawke, Circle mage, ever found himself in a deserted tower in the midst of a wasteland, working with Grey Wardens, in the first place?

He asked his questions of Carver, almost giddy with the joy of having someone who had been there, someone who knew, to talk to, but Carver had no more answers than Lucas did, and less curiosity. All Carver wanted was to kill the demon, the joy of fighting enough for him.

When the demon was down, and Lucas stood, panting, leaning over to catch his breath, he heard the voice again. “Father,” he said softly.

“I’ve bought our freedom, Leandra,” his father’s voice said. “We can go home now, us and the baby. We’ll be together. I hope it takes after you, love. I would wish this magic on no one.”


“May they never learn what I have done here.” The voice was gone, as if it had never been, leaving Malcolm Hawke’s two surviving sons, both free of magic, staring at each other.

“The baby …” Lucas said.

“He’s talking about you,” Carver said. “Of course.”

“All these things he did—he did them for us, then, for Mother, so that they could go and make the life we lived with them.” Lucas carefully didn’t look at Isabela. Would he have done so much for her? He had dueled an Arishok for her, but … all this? Perform acts that went against the very grain of who he was? Had he ever loved or wanted anything in his life enough? Standing there, looking at his brother, intensely aware of Isabela’s presence, Lucas realized just how much of his life he had wasted not thinking about what he was doing, acting, reacting, based on what others did.

“All that work Father did,” Carver said, “and here we are, right back where he started.” He shook his head. “Talk about your life going nowhere.” He shouldered his borrowed sword. “Let’s get the Void out of here.”
“Now you’re talking, Junior,” Varric said fervently and they moved off, deeper into the tower.

After a swift, unreadable glance in Lucas’s direction, Isabela went with them, leaving Lucas and Fenris standing alone.

Lucas looked at his friend. “Thinking about the dangers of magic again?”

“No. I am thinking … Your father seems to have loved you all very much, and to have dared much for your sake. I am wondering what it must be like to hear his voice again.”

There were so many thoughts flooding Lucas’s mind, he wouldn’t have known which to voice first. “There’s no sense in letting it get to me. Carver’s probably right, just a dead end.”

Fenris’s eyes were steady on him. “If you do not let it get to you, what was it for? Surely an experience such as this, a voice from the past, that came to you for a reason.”

“Then what’s the reason?”

“That you must determine for yourself; every man must tell his own story.”

“You sound like Varric,” Lucas grumbled as they began following the others.

“Varric is merely the scribe. You live the tale he embroiders. What is to be the next chapter, Lucas?”

“I only wish I knew.”
The Magisters of Old

Varric’s voice floated back to them from farther ahead. “Hawke, hurry it up!”

Both Lucas and Fenris put on speed, trying to catch the others, and found them in the midst of a fight with more darkspawn than they had seen yet.

Isabela was moving more slowly than usual. A large purple bruise on her forehead suggested why. Varric was trying to stay back out of the range of the darkspawn while keeping Bianca’s voice steady and true above the din of the battle. Carver was in the midst of a group of the creatures, his blade flashing, but he was tiring quickly, and Lucas remembered that they had only just rescued him from a cell, after Maker knew how long of being restrained and tormented with a lack of food and water.

He didn’t even have to look at Fenris; the elf’s markings were already active, lighting the field of battle, and then the white light was in motion, attacking the darkspawn around Carver.

Behind them all, Lucas spied the massive form of a genlock with an equally large, heavy shield poising itself to rush at Isabela. Distracted by the archers around her, the pirate couldn’t see what was coming.

Lucas ran past her, catching the genlock in mid-rush. The clash of the shield against his armor sent him staggering back. Undaunted, he leaped in the air, trying to bring his sword down on the darkspawn’s head, behind the shield. He felt the blade scrape along the creature’s scalp, but it appeared to do nothing more than enraged it … although at the very least, its focus turned from Isabela to him.

He lost track of how long he fought the thing. It relied on the heavy shield for its attacks, and on its surprising speed. Lucas wasn’t as fast as Isabela or Fenris, but he managed to get out of the way of most of the genlock’s onrushes; the more difficult task was getting his sword around the shield and doing the genlock any damage. The shield was as tall as the creature, and as wide, and it hid behind it very effectively.

Behind him Lucas could hear the shouts and thuds of the others fighting, but he couldn’t spare a moment to look over his shoulder and see how they fared. Perhaps the din was dying down over time? But he couldn’t be sure.

At last, he saw a blur of movement behind the genlock and heard its bellow of rage as Isabela managed to stab it somewhere painful. Lucas pressed his attack, so tired he could barely lift his heavy sword, but knowing he couldn’t afford to let his energy flag now.

Then Carver was there, panting as heavily as Lucas, but at his side, where he felt most right. It was like Ostagar, like Lothering. But it wasn’t, either, Lucas told himself, because today they were going to win; they were both coming away from this knowing the darkspawn who had threatened them were dead.

And soon enough, they were, the genlock taking a lot of blows before it succumbed but at last falling, its tainted blood seeping out onto the stone floor.

Tainted blood, Lucas thought dazedly, staring at the black ooze. What about tainted blood? “Is anyone injured?” he asked urgently, remembering. “Let’s get some water and clean off everyone’s wounds.”
“Rinse your mouth out, with brandy or whiskey, not with water,” Carver said, “then spit. Don’t swallow.”

Isabela chuckled at that one, a rich, suggestive sound.

Carver glanced at her, a grin lighting his face. “I like the way you think.”

“Keep it in your pants, big boy. Darkspawn-filled towers are no place to get dirty.”

“Excellent advice,” Lucas growled. He didn’t really think his brother would move in where he had expressed an interest, and Isabela flirted with everyone … but he didn’t like it.

“Hawke,” Varric said. “Bianca’s complaining about sore feet. What do you say to a rest?”

Carver looked at his brother, mouthing “Sore feet?”

Lucas shook his head. “Don’t ask,” he muttered. To Varric, he said, “I can barely lift my sword. Sounds like Bianca’s got the right idea.”

“Across the bridge it looks relatively clean, and we should be able to see anything that might be approaching,” Fenris suggested. “I will take first watch.”

“Thanks.” Lucas led the way across the bridge. He managed to stay awake long enough to supervise clean-up and double-check for open wounds—fortunately, there were none—and then collapsed on his bedroll next to his brother. He lay awake for a few minutes listening to Carver’s familiar rolling snore before sleep overtook him.

In the tower, it was impossible to tell either night or morning or even how long he had been sleeping, but Lucas awoke feeling better than he had since they set out through the desert. He lay without moving for several moments, watching Isabela and Varric play cards.

“This must be like Orzammar, don’t you think, Varric?”

“Don’t ask me, Rivaini. I wouldn’t set foot in Orzammar if you paid me. Matter of fact, I think I’m paid to stay away. ‘Come near the gates and you lose a hand’ or some such thing.”

“You must have been a very naughty dwarf.”

Varric chuckled. “Possibly.”

There was a pause, and then Isabela’s disgruntled mutter. “You had that card up your sleeve.”

“Please. Give me credit for some originality.”

“Ah. You had it buried in your luxuriant and strangely compelling chest hair.”

Another chuckle. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“You keep teasing me, and I’ll take you up on it.”

“That’ll be the day, Rivaini. That’ll be the day.”

Next to Lucas, Carver stirred. “She’s quite a woman,” he said softly.

“Yes.”
“Any special reason you’re not with her?”

“Nothing I care to share in an echoing tower.”

“You mean she doesn’t know why?”

Lucas shook his head. “Oh, she knows. I just figure if I’m going to talk about it, it probably ought to be with her.”

“See, that’s your problem, brother. Too much talking.” Carver stood up. He’d taken off his shirt to sleep, and Lucas didn’t miss how he positioned his bare chest so that Isabela could see the muscles as he stretched. Carver had always been good-looking, and those looks had gotten him far with ladies of all ages and inclinations. From his attitude, Lucas gathered they still did. But Isabela had been around quite a bit; surely shared experiences and whatever they might mean to one another counted for more than a well-defined set of muscles … didn’t it?

He got up, fumbling on his armor. When they got out of this Maker-forsaken place, he and Isabela would talk, he told himself, conveniently forgetting to remind himself that they had never yet succeeded in having a real talk about anything truly important.

“You finally up and about? I see the Hawke brothers have a few things in common,” Isabela said, casting a sidewise glance at both of them.

“We could all hear what they had in common,” Varric grumbled. “Bianca was tossing and turning all night. The darkspawn don’t need to wonder where we are—they can just follow the snores.”

Lucas chuckled. “Family failing. Father was terrible, if I recall.”

“And Bethany sounded like a lumberjack. She hated to be reminded how bad her snoring was. She —” Carver looked down at his hands, his smile fading. “I knew, somehow, that she was gone, but still—it’s hard to believe it’s real.”

“I know.”

The moment was broken by Larius scuttling out of the shadows. Had he been there all along, listening, Lucas wondered uneasily. He didn’t like the idea.

“He wakes,” Larius said urgently. “The magic grows lax—he feels us walk where no step goes.”

“Riddles again,” Isabela said in disgust. “I’ll be over here.” She started rummaging around in the rubble in the corner, looking for loot.

“Corypheus is waking?” Lucas asked.

Larius nodded. “He calls. Like an Old God. He mimics their cry. He calls the dark children and the light, to free him, through the taint in the blood.”

Carver asked, “So is he a darkspawn? A demon?”

“He is more.”

“Well, that’s clear as mud,” Varric muttered.

“He thinks. He talks. He pierces the Veil. He wants what was once his.”

Fenris shook his head, shooting Lucas a look that clearly asked if they really had time to stand there
listening to the ravings of a madman. All he said, however, was, “I will be with Isabela,” and he stalked off.

Larius shuffled closer to Lucas, his weird glazed-over eyes shining with a disturbing light. “When the seals are gone, he will wake. And he must die.”

“I can get behind that,” Carver said.

“Yes … yes, he must die … die …” Larius twisted his hands together, wandering off into the shadows still muttering.

Carver looked at Lucas. “So, we go kill this Corypheus?”

“Fine with me. Isabela, Fenris—you ready to kill things?”

“Now you’re talking my language.” Isabela sauntered toward Lucas. “Dark gloomy towers really aren’t my thing, you know.”

“It might come as a surprise to you, but they aren’t mine, either.”

“So what is?” She was very close to him suddenly, looking up into his face, and Lucas couldn’t seem to remember what they had been talking about.

“What is what?”

“Your thing, Hawke. What is your thing?”

He wanted to kiss her. Desperately.

“We doing this or not, brother?” Carver’s voice broke through the haze, and Lucas rolled his eyes, holding back a groan with some difficulty.

“Let’s get it over with.”

They made their way down, crossing a damp, dank floor covered with some kind of slimy green plant, and in the process fighting more darkspawn and some deepstalkers, which Lucas remembered, not fondly, from his previous foray into the Deep Roads.

At last they made it back to a set of stone stairs that led up. Breathing a sigh of relief, they all scraped their boots off on the edge of the stone, glad to be leaving the smelly rotting plants behind.

Out of the shadows Larius came hobbling. Lucas was almost relieved to see him; having Larius in front of him seemed safer than having him somewhere in the shadows, doing who knew what.

“He feels the seals weaken. He knows you are close. You must be ready!” Larius hissed.

“Oh, I’m ready.”

Larius looked over his shoulder, an expression of deep alarm crossing his face. “What’s that? No! No … They’re here.”

“‘They’re here’?” echoed Varric. “No, that’s not creepy at all.”

“Who is it this time?” Carver asked. “The Holy Cheesewheel of Andraste?”

Larius ignored him, turning around and staring into the shadows with dread.

If something as disturbing as Larius was afraid of what else might be lurking in the dark, Lucas was
fully prepared to be frightened by what appeared.


And then four very normal-looking people emerged from behind the stairs, talking to one another as though they didn’t know anyone else was present. There was a rather attractive woman leading the group, and she stopped in mid-word and stared at Lucas and his people, and at Larius, as though they were all specimens of something she would rather not have found in her soup.

She looked at Lucas, and at the sword he carried. “You! You have the key. And you’ve come through the seals. How is this possible?” She came very close to him, staring up into his face.

He imagined he didn’t smell particularly good after all this time in the tower, and after crossing that goopy marsh, but he held still and let her look.

Behind him, he heard Isabela mutter sulkily, “Draw a picture, it’ll last longer.”

“You must be the one,” the Grey Warden breathed. “Child of Malcolm.”

Carver cleared his throat loudly. “Malcolm has two children living.”

The Warden’s gaze flicked over Carver, and then back to Lucas. “I am Janeka, leader of these Grey Wardens.”

“Lucas Hawke. My brother, Carver.”

“Did you know my father?” Carver asked.

“Personally? No. But I have heard of him, of course.” She looked at him expectantly, then said with some surprise, “You don’t know! Without your father, this prison would have fallen long ago.”

Lucas and Carver exchanged bewildered looks.

Janeka continued, “The Grey Wardens built this prison to contain one of the most powerful darkspawn we’ve ever encountered.”

“Well, I guess that answers that question.” Varric leaned against a wall, pulling Bianca from his back and beginning to polish her, a sign that the dwarf was on his way to being well and truly freaked out.

Lucas couldn’t blame him. “Where does my father come in, then?”

“Even the best magic fades. The Wardens needed to reinforce the seals. The task required the blood of a mage untainted by … Warden training. The last to perform the ritual was your father.”

“Blood magic?” Carver said skeptically. “Father?”

Janeka looked at him full-on for the first time. “To avert the Blights, forbidden magic is sometimes required.” She turned her attention back to Lucas. “And now, we can use the aid of a Hawke again. I have done extensive research on Corypheus, and I believe the ancient Wardens were wrong.”

“No!” Larius burst out. “No, you must not listen to her!”

Lucas and Janeka both ignored him. She went on, “He is humanity’s greatest opportunity. A darkspawn who can talk, feel, reason …”

“I thought he was asleep,” Isabela interjected.
Before Janeka could respond, Larius pushed himself in between Janeka and Lucas. “Corypheus is using you! He cares nothing for the Blights.”

The other Wardens behind Janeka shifted uncomfortably, and she turned on them, snapping, “Don’t listen to this creature! He’s half darkspawn himself. I know how to harness Corypheus, to use his magic to end the Blights.”


Lucas looked at his companions, his eyebrows raised in question.

Varric shrugged. “If he doesn’t help, it’s one more big darkspawn to stick a bolt in. Bianca’s good either way.”

Fenris’s lip curled in disgust. “A darkspawn and a mage. Just what the world needs.”

Isabela was staring at Janeka, her arms folded across her chest. “I say tear down the walls,” she said when Lucas looked at her. “Better to kill him outright than to leave him here.”

Last, Lucas looked at his brother, seeing Bethany’s grey tainted face in Carver’s.

“If he could stop the Blights, brother. If no one had to die of the taint, ever again,” Carver said hoarsely.

“No, you mustn’t!” Larius pleaded. “Corypheus calls her, and she listens.”

Janeka said nothing, her bright green eyes fixed on Lucas’s face.

“Yes,” he said at last. “Let’s use every weapon we have against the Blight.”

“You fool! Would you destroy us all?” Larius pulled himself up, looking more human than he had yet, and he turned to the other Wardens. “I led you, all of you. Who do you serve? The Grey Wardens, or the call of a darkspawn?”

As one, the Wardens left Janeka’s side and crossed to Larius’s, the uncomplicated simplicity of the action chilling Lucas. Had he made the wrong choice?

“You bastards,” breathed Janeka. As Larius and the Wardens disappeared into the shadows, she turned to Lucas. “With me, Hawke. We must get there before they do!”

He nodded, following her as she hurried up the steps.

“Larius has been here for years,” she said breathlessly. “He knows its secrets better than anyone.”

“Then how can we hope to get there first?”

Janeka cast him a withering glance. “Have you seen him? He can barely walk. If he wishes to bar my way … Well, we will just see about that.”

“He appears to have moved swiftly enough to keep up with us,” Fenris pointed out, but Janeka ignored him, rushing on ahead up the steps.

“My guess, elf, is that she knows that. Hence the running.” Varric shouldered Bianca, sighing. He wasn’t a fan of swift movement; being the shortest member of the group, it was difficult for him to keep up.
Gone was the relatively leisurely pace with which they had traversed the rest of the tower. They ran up steps and hurried along passages, following Janeka all the way. Lucas felt little compunction about trusting the Grey Warden this far. She wanted to get them to Corypheus by the shortest and fastest way she could, and they wanted to get to Corypheus and deal with him quickly so they could leave the tower and go home. For the moment, at least, they all had the same goal.

Once they reached Corypheus, he didn’t know if Janeka could still be trusted—but he would take her over Larius’s twisted mind and tainted body any day.

At last, they reached fresh air at the top of the tower. Lucas was exhausted, thirsty, hungry, dirty … the last thing he wanted right now was to do any fighting. But, of course, Larius and the three Grey Wardens were there before them, standing in the middle of a long stone bridge that led to a central pavilion.

Janeka advanced toward them, drawing her staff. “You can’t stop me, Larius.” Larius came closer, and they stood looking at one another. Janeka continued, “The Wardens will see I am right about this. With Corypheus’s power, we can end the Blights forever.”

“Can it really be that simple?” Fenris asked behind Lucas, but no one answered him.

Larius looked past Janeka at Lucas. “Hawke, you must listen to me! Janeka is blind to the truth—Corypheus is using her!”

Lucas looked fully into Janeka’s eyes. “Are you hearing darkspawn voices in your head?”

“No!” she said quickly. Possibly too quickly. “Of course not!”

Carver stepped up to Janeka’s other side. “Lucas, the man’s a madman. Anyone can see that. Twisted by too many years in the Deep Roads.”

Lucas wished he was as certain.

“She is a traitor to the Wardens, not fit to wear the griffons!” Larius spat.

Whatever was going on, Lucas reminded himself, Larius had been shadowing them throughout the tower, doling out information by the spoonful. “Step aside, Larius.”

“No. It is better to die than to live with Corypheus free.” Larius drew his sword, and the three Wardens behind him armed themselves at the same time.

The other Wardens were good fighters, but Janeka’s magic added to the might of Carver and Lucas and Fenris, and Bianca’s sneaky silver barbs more than overwhelmed them. Lucas felt a certain amount of guilt felling Grey Wardens, every little boy’s childhood hero, but it was kill or be killed. He had no other choice.

Janeka spared her fellow Wardens only a glance once they were down, stepping over their bodies to get to the pavilion with a casualness that chilled Lucas through to his bones. So much for trusting that they were on the same path. From here on out, he had to assume that Janeka was out for her own purposes, and that those were quite likely on a path that would intersect his own unpleasantly.

She approached the central dais, on which a tall figure was standing, enmeshed in what looked like chains of light, almost reverently. “He sleeps now, but not for long,” she said softly. “The last of the prison’s magic still holds him.”

“Let me guess, this is where my blood comes in again.” Lucas sighed.
“I’ll do it, brother. You’ve shed enough blood for this.” Carver clapped a hand on Lucas’s shoulder.

“I shouldn’t let you.”

“What, because you’re the oldest?” Carver snorted. “I think we’re long past that crap. I’m not your job.” There was an old bitterness in his tone.

Janeka had ignored both of them, her green eyes shining as she fixed them on the gaunt figure in the chains. “Free him now, so that we can bind him while he’s still weak.”

“Hawke, are you certain this is what you wish to do?” There was an old trepidation in Fenris’s voice; a darkspawn magister had to be pretty high up on the elf’s list of fears.

Carver looked at Janeka. “What do you need me to do?”

Lucas wasn’t going to bother arguing with his brother; freeing Corypheus was their way out, after all.

Janeka gave Carver a small knife, and he strode to the center of pavilion, in front of Corypheus, and using the knife, cut into the ball of his thumb, letting the blood flow.

There was a flash of light as the lock broke, and Corypheus moved, sinuously, like a snake, blinking as he looked around him.

Carver backed away, slowly, in an attempt to avoid drawing Corypheus’s attention.

“I will bind him,” Janeka announced. She stepped forward, raising her staff, and sent a bolt of light at Corypheus. The magister merely raised his hand, and magic flowed back toward Janeka and knocked her across the floor. Putting a hand to her head, she got dazedly to her feet. “Oh, shit.”

Corypheus looked at her with a mild curiosity. He raised his hand again, looking at it. Almost to himself he said, “Is this a dream? Am I in dwarven lands?” His gaze traveled past Janeka, settling on Lucas. “You. Serve you at the Temple of Dumat? I must speak with the first acolyte. Bring him hence at once!”

Softly, Janeka said, “The Wardens captured Corypheus just after the First Blight. This was part of the Imperium then.”

“You, dwarf!” Corypheus was looking at Varric now. “Be you a dwarf? Are these humans your slaves?”

Varric raised an eyebrow and started to say something, and Lucas frowned at him. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You have to admit, it would make a great story.”

“Whoever you be,” Corypheus said, irritation growing in his voice, “you owe fealty to any magister of Tevinter. On your knees!”

Fenris made a gagging sound. Lucas could only imagine how his friend must be reacting to a magister telling him to get on his knees.

“The Free Marches haven’t been part of the Imperium for six hundred years,” he said to Corypheus.

“Oh, that’s telling him,” Varric muttered. “Shall we offer him tea and crumpets next?”
Isabela crossed her arms, glaring at Janeka. “She wanted to bind him; we see how well that worked. Any other bright ideas?”

Janeka returned the glare, but said nothing.

Corypheus was staring at Carver; he shifted his gaze to Lucas, then back to Carver. “You are what held me. I smell the blood in you.’

“Ew.” Carver reached for his sword.

“Carver, no!” Lucas moved toward his brother, hoping to stay his blade, but Corypheus turned his back on both of them, raising his face and arms toward the ceiling.

“Dumat! Lord! What waking dream is this? We sought the golden light, and you offered us the power of the gods themselves. But it was black … corrupt. Darkness ever since. How long? How long?”

Janeka drew her breath in sharply. “He speaks of the Golden City. He was one of them, the magisters who violated the Maker’s sacred space.”

“Bullshit!” Carver and Varric spoke simultaneously, and shared a measuring glance with one another.

“They became the first darkspawn,” Janeka went on as though they hadn’t spoken. “It was he and his kind who brought the Blight down on all of us.”

“The original magisters,” Fenris said darkly. “It is their depravities the magisters of today strive to live up to.” The lyrium markings flared to life along the elf’s arms. His intense desire to bury his fist in Corypheus’s heart was evident to Lucas.

Janeka looked at the elf, then at Lucas, then down at the floor, shame-faced. “Larius was right. Corypheus must have been controlling me, whispering in my mind …”

“Little late to admit that, isn’t it?” Isabela asked caustically.

“He doesn’t seem to have much of a plan,” Lucas observed.

“Everything I’ve read said he was only asleep, in stasis.” Janeka looked back at Corypheus, who still had his arms raised, carrying on a one-sided conversation with Dumat. “Perhaps he called me without being aware of it?”

“Can we destroy him now, Hawke?” Fenris’s markings were a clear, pure white that almost hurt to look at, his hunger for the kill nearly overpowering his considerable control.

“It’s flattering when you think about it,” Lucas said. “First he went after the Maker in his house, and now me in mine. I think we can return with a favor with an epic killing.”

“Very good.” Fenris drew his sword, and in a blur of light, he attacked.

Bianca was ready almost as quickly, her sharp barb spearing through the air on its way to Corypheus. The magister turned, as if he sensed the movement behind them, or had finally decided the insignificant people at his feet were worth listening to, and a bolt of magic shot from his hands. It leaped among them, crackling like lightning.

Isabela and Varric and Fenris leaped agilely out of the way; the Hawke brothers were a little slower,
and both cried out in pain as the magic writhed through them.

Janeka, meanwhile, had turned and run, stopping to watch well out of range.

“I really hate her,” Isabela muttered. She held a hand down to Lucas. “You getting up?” Her voice was softer than her words.

“Yep. I’m all right.” He took her hand and got to his feet.

Fenris was a flash of light around the base of the dais where Corypheus floated, dodging the magic and striking blows, although it appeared he was enraging the magister more than injuring him.

Carver looked at Lucas. “You ready? Let’s show this asshole what it means to be a Hawke.”

Lucas grinned. It felt right, the two of them fighting side-by-side again. He enjoyed fighting with Fenris … but it wasn’t the same. Had never been the same. He supposed he ought to be grateful to Corypheus for giving him his brother back …. but gratitude only went so far.

It wasn’t an easy fight by any means—Corypheus called down fire and ice, lightning and stone, drawing his strength from the elements clashing in the air above him. But at last Isabela managed to slip through the magister’s barriers while his attention was focused on the others, and she severed the tendons at the backs of his knees, causing him to fall on his face, screaming in rage and pain. Lucas was ready for the move, had in fact distracted Corypheus on purpose to allow Isabela to disappear into the shadows, and his sword was poised when the magister fell at his feet. With a single swing, Corypheus’s head was severed from his body.

Lucas stood, watching, as the body twitched, a faint dark cloud of something emanating from it.

“Ew,” Carver said. “You think whatever that is comes from how old he is?”

“I vote we don’t try to find out.”

The cloud appeared to dissipate as it floated toward the doorway.

Janeka crept out of hiding, looking from Lucas to Carver and back. Whatever attraction her undeniable beauty had held for Carver, her cowardice had erased it, and he looked at her in disgust.

Isabela and Fenris leaned against the stone wall of the walkway, waiting to be ready to leave. Varric was at Lucas’s side, looking up at Janeka with pity.

“I … I am so sorry,” she said. “I feel like such a fool.”

“That’s because you are,” Isabela remarked flatly.

“I really thought I could do it,” Janeka continued. Her whole demeanor had changed; where before had been overweening arrogance, now was a deep-seated regret and sorrow. “It never entered my mind that Corypheus had planted that thought. Perhaps …” She sighed. “Perhaps it is time for the long walk.”

“You wouldn’t have done this if you were yourself,” Lucas offered, ignoring the snort of disdain Isabela gave at his words. Janeka was admitting her wrongdoing; what point would there be now to yell at her about it?

“I should not have been so weak.”

“No. You should not have.” Fenris’s green eyes were blazing. “You nearly brought that creature
down on all of us. There is no telling the damage he could have accomplished.”

“He was very powerful.” Janeka’s eyes flashed with her old spirit for a moment. She cleared her throat, giving Lucas a small nod. “You have my gratitude. I feel like … a whole new person.” A little smile played across her face, and she turned, making her way back down the steps.

Varric watched her for a moment. “Hawke, let’s go home.”

“Maker, yes.”

Wearily, the five of them began the long journey back to Kirkwall.
At Home in Kirkwall

Lucas looked ahead at the gates of Kirkwall, coming closer and closer now. He would be glad to be home—especially because he was bringing his brother home with him, home to that echoing house that now would resound with ... well, probably with their arguments, he had to admit. Carver was as stubborn and sulky as he had ever been. But an argument was better than the silence that had reigned since their mother was killed. Even the servants walked with hushed footsteps, and Lucas couldn’t help but contrast that with the noisy household he had grown up in. The sounds of his mother preparing the meals, of his father chopping wood, of Carver shouting and Bethany crying ... of the laughter as their father jollied them out of the fuss.

Yes, having Carver home would be an improvement. He hadn’t talked much with Carver about plans yet, largely because Lucas had so few of his own. He also hadn’t asked Carver about his life in Orlais, an omission he felt guilty about ... but he also felt conflicted. Why hadn’t Carver made an effort to come to Kirkwall, to find out if the rest of the family had survived the Blight? He apparently hadn’t so much as sent a letter. Lucas didn’t want to ask why not—because he wasn’t sure he really wanted to know the reason.

For similar reasons, he had yet to talk to Isabela. He could feel her eyes rest on him occasionally, dark and smoldering with ... some emotion he couldn’t name and she probably didn’t want to.

As if the shade of his father had hitched a ride home on his shoulder, Lucas could practically hear Malcolm Hawke’s voice. “Faint heart never won fair lady,” he would say. “Stepping outside your door is a risk you take—if you don’t decide which way to turn, something else will decide for you.”

Not that Lucas could ever remember his father saying those exact words, but ... he was sure those would be his thoughts. And he wanted to be the kind of determined, decisive man his father had been, he did. But was it too late? He should have taken charge back in Lothering. Or before, when his father died, but instead he let himself be moved by Bethany’s magic and the need to hide it, by the Blight, by Gamlen, and on and on and on. It had been the easy way, and he’d always been able to blame what happened on someone, something, else.

On the other hand, he hadn’t liked the consequences, more often than not. Maybe it would all have gone better if he’d been stronger, more determined.

“So this is Kirkwall.” Carver looked around him as they went through the gates, appearing unimpressed. “Orlais is a lot prettier.”

Varric shuddered dramatically. “Don’t let anyone in Kirkwall hear you say that, Junior.”

Carver rolled his eyes at the dwarf. “If you think I’m going to answer when you call me that, you’re out of your mind.”

They hadn’t gone more than a dozen steps when a figure in the familiar orange and blue of the guards came hurrying toward them.

As she came closer, Lucas recognized Guardsman Brennan. “Champion, thank the Maker you’re back! Perfect timing.”

“What’s going on?”

“The Captain was tearing her hair out worrying you wouldn’t be back for the wedding, for one thing.” They shared a grin, which was interrupted by Carver’s loud clearing of the throat.
“I’m his brother.” His shoulders were more square than usual as he pushed himself just enough in front of Lucas to give Brennan a good view.

“They grow Hawkes bigger wherever you were,” she said, eyeing Carver up and down.

“You’d better believe it.”

“Brennan, was there anything else?” Lucas asked. He’d seen his brother form assignations plenty of times before; the show hadn’t changed much.

“Yes.” She drew her eyes away from Carver’s physique reluctantly. “The Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter are going at each other in Hightown. If you hurry—well, please do. No one wants a war, and they seem likely to start one.”

Lucas sighed. So it began again, and him not even home long enough for a bath and a change of clothes. “Lead on,” he said to Brennan.

She did so, flirting with Carver all the way.

They could hear Orsino shouting from the top of the steps. As they drew closer, Orsino picked Lucas out of the crowd. “Ah, at last, someone you might listen to, Knight-Commander.”

The people moved aside as Hawke passed through, and he only just barely resisted the urge to throw Carver a triumphant glance.

Meredith was there, her golden hair shining in the sun.

“Who is that?” Carver asked in a whispered aside. “She’s … she’s a goddess.”

“Also crazy,” Varric put in, “if you like that sort of thing.” His tone indicated he wouldn’t be at all surprised if Carver did.

“The Knight-Commander,” Lucas whispered to his brother, a shiver working through him as Meredith’s clear blue eyes found him.

“Do not hide behind the Champion, Orsino,” she snapped. “He has no role in this.”

Lucas wasn’t sure if he did or not, but Brennan wasn’t wrong; he was just about the only person who could step between these two and not wind up in jail, at the very least. “I can speak for myself, thank you, Knight-Commander.”

Orsino smiled. “I think the Champion’s views would be appreciated. Or are you afraid of what he might say?”

“Are you? My only interest is in keeping order and protecting the innocent. Can you say as much?”

Lucas waited until both of them turned to look at him. “What’s the plan today, Orsino? Cause a rebellion? Irritate the Knight-Commander until she comes down on the mages as hard as she can?”

“The people in this city need to know what is really happening!”

“Perhaps they need to hear it from someone who isn’t part of it,” Lucas said mildly. “We hardly want them tearing down the Gallows with pitchforks and torches; that won’t be good for anyone.”

“You never know,” Orsino said darkly.
“You forget the Qunari attack. We all saw the result of that. Do you really want another of those, only with Kirkwall’s own people fighting each other?”

“Then lock me up, if my opinions are so offensive! She’s going to do it anyway.”

Lucas turned his attention to Meredith. “You can’t deny your measures have become more extreme recently.”

She met his gaze with her own icy stare. “And you could do better? How well did you guard your own mother? Did she not die at a blood mage’s hands?”

He clenched his teeth together, feeling Carver’s anger rise next to him. “You keep my mother out of this. If either of you had done your jobs better, that monster would not have been free to murder so many women.” He looked at Orsino. “There’s no denying that rogue mages are all over this city.” Lucas thought of Anders. Where was the mage now? Was he still in Darktown?

“Exactly,” Meredith agreed with satisfaction. “Would you have us do nothing?”

Orsino clenched his fists at his sides. “I would have you not paint us all with the same brush. Not all mages are awaiting the opportunity to wreak havoc!”

Meredith didn’t bother to respond, her eyes on Orsino’s hands like a cat watching a bird. Any hint of magic from the First Enchanter and she would pounce, Lucas could tell.

“Fighting her at every step doesn’t improve your position, First Enchanter,” he said to the mage.

“Someone has to!”

“All I am trying to do is keep order until there is a ruler capable of succeeding where Dumar failed,” Meredith said coolly.

“Stand down, Orsino,” Lucas said. “Go back to the Gallows. Don’t give her any further reason to think ill of you.”

“To … to think ill of me?” Orsino laughed, the sound just a step from hysteria. “Yes, that’s what I worry about.”

“First Enchanter, you are not yourself,” Meredith said, taking his arm. He immediately threw her hand off, and they stood glaring at one another.

And then from the direction of the Chantry Grand Cleric Elthina came, moving unhurriedly through the crowd. Sebastian was behind her; he nodded at Lucas, but the worried look didn’t leave his face.

At the top of the steps, Lucas glimpsed Aveline, drawn from her office by the confrontation. Her face was pale, and she was staring as if she had seen a ghost. Only then did he remember Carver; of course, she was seeing a ghost, as far as she knew. Lucas was suddenly impatient to get the First Enchanter and the Knight Commander out of the way as quickly as possible.

Elthina was speaking quietly to both of them, and they stood with their heads hanging slightly, as if they were being scolded by their mother. At last, they turned toward the stairs, Sebastian accompanying them to be sure no further trouble occurred.

Turning to Lucas, Elthina smiled her gentle smile. “You have my thanks for stepping in, Champion.”

“And you have mine. What can be done about those two? Can one of them be reassigned?”
She sighed. “I only wish it was that simple. Or perhaps it is even more simple than that—they will see reason, if the Maker wills it.”

That sounded pretty much like a copout to Lucas, but he wasn’t about to argue with her. The Grand Cleric was dispersing the crowd that had gathered, and once that was accomplished she returned to the Chantry without a backward glance.

“Come on,” he said to Carver. “There’s someone you should see.”

He had filled Carver in on Wesley’s death and Aveline’s hard work as Guard Captain and on Donnic on their way back from the Vimmarks, but there had obviously been no time to prepare Aveline for Carver’s return. There were tears in her green eyes as they approached.

“Lucas,” she breathed. “Is that—?”

“I can speak for myself,” Carver said.

Aveline raised an eyebrow. “It’s him all right. Same old Carver.”

“Same old Aveline.” They both laughed and hugged each other.

Lucas, watching the reunion, couldn’t help but be amused. The two of them had spent the brief period between Lothering and when they’d had to leave Carver behind for dead at dagger points. None of the Hawkes had trusted Wesley until it was clear it was too late for him; Carver additionally had not handled well the idea that Aveline was as good with a sword as he was. From his reaction to Isabela in combat, Lucas hoped that his brother had improved in that area and grown to accept women as equals in skill and prowess.

Even as she was being released from Carver’s hug, Aveline was shooting questions at him about how he had escaped and where Lucas had found him and why he had come back, but she didn’t really leave enough space for him to answer them. And Carver was swaying just a bit, dark circles under his eyes indicating he was probably as tired as Lucas himself.

“Why don’t you let us go back to the estate and freshen up a bit,” he suggested, and maybe you and Donnic can come to lunch tomorrow. We’ll get the whole group together, get Carver to tell his story to everyone at once so he won’t have to keep repeating himself.”

“Am I really ready to meet your crew?” Carver asked.

“You’ve had the most colorful ones already,” Aveline told him. “What happened to that pirate w—wench of yours, anyway?” she asked Lucas. “I thought I saw her.”

To Lucas’s intense disappointment, Isabela seemed to have disappeared. So much for that talk they needed to have, he thought. Varric was drifting down the stairs, too. There were probably half a room full of messages from his spy ring waiting for him back at the Hanged Man. And Fenris was trudging through Hightown looking aimless, when in fact he was making a beeline for that derelict mansion he was squatting in.

“She must have left. You can give her whatever piece of your mind strikes your fancy tomorrow. For now … I’m exhausted, and Carver still hasn’t seen the house.”

“What is it, some kind of hovel? I would expect better from the Champion of Kirkwall.”

Lucas was too tired to try to decipher his brother’s tone. “Come on, I’ll show you.”
Carver’s eyes widened, his jaw dropping, as they stood in front of the estate. “You have got to be joking. This is where Mother grew up?” He huffed a short laugh. “Certainly explains some things.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Lucas agreed.

The door opened and Bodahn stepped out. “Ah, there you are, messere. We were beginning to worry about you.”

“You know I’m like a bad copper—I always turn up. Bodahn, this is my brother, Carver. Carver, this is Bodahn. He and his son Sandal run the place for me, along with a girl named Orana. She mostly keeps to herself.”

“A good girl, that one, but shy,” Bodahn agreed. “Welcome home, Master Carver. It’s … it’s a real shame your mother couldn’t be here to see this.”

Carver swallowed. “Thank you. Yes, it is.”

Lucas led his brother inside. Bodahn murmured something about starting on a good dinner and excused himself, while Carver’s head swiveled around as he tried to take in everything they were passing. “This is where you’ve been living?”

“Sorry now that you didn’t get in touch sooner?” Lucas grinned at his brother.

“Maybe.”

“We’ve only been here a few years. Before that we were at Gamlen’s, which was … not like this. Not like home, either.”

Carver looked at him, startled. “You still think of Lothering as home?”

“Don’t you?”

“No. I wouldn’t go back if I could.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to go back to,” Lucas said sadly.

“But you wish there was.”

“Sometimes.” Lucas cleared his throat. “Are you hungry? Do you want the tour? Or shall I show you straight to your room?”

“I have a room?”

“Well, it’s a guest room, but feel free to make yourself at home for as long as you like.” Lucas put his hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I hope you’ll stay. This … this is too big a house to live in alone.”

“We’ll talk more later,” Carver promised as Lucas showed him a large, airy room that overlooked the rest of Hightown.

Leaving him there, Lucas returned to his own room, looking forward to getting out of his armor and into his own comfortable bed. When he opened the door, he found it already occupied; a beautiful pirate knelt there, industriously carving something on one of the posts. She looked up as he came in, her face expressionless. “Took you long enough.”

“I didn’t know you would be here. I thought you’d gone back to the Hanged Man.”
“Well, I didn’t.” She hopped off the bed. “Stupid time, though, really, what with your brother and all and just getting back. Maybe I should—”

Lucas caught her by the arm as she tried to pass him. “No. Stay. Please?”

She stopped, looking up at him, so close he could have kissed her easily. But he didn’t; too many times they had let circumstances and sex and their own particular issues get in the way of conversations they should have.

“Why did you come here today?” he asked her.

“Because …” She pulled her arm out of his grasp and crossed the room to look out the window. “You can see the harbor from here. I was on one of those ships, you know. I was ready to leave, to take the relic and go, and I thought—I thought what they would do to you if they didn’t have the relic.” Isabela turned to look at him, her golden eyes meeting his squarely. “I was ready to face the consequences.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Why did you do that? You didn’t have to do that, face the Arishok.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No. You didn’t.”

“Yes,” Lucas said firmly. “I did. In the first place, I wouldn’t have let the Qunari take anyone that way, back to the life that would have awaited you there—“

“I would have escaped!”

“You would have died trying. Or wished you had. I like you alive, thank you very much.”

“So you did it because you’re such a humanitarian?”

“I did it because I couldn’t face the thought of a life without you.”

The words hung in the room between them. Isabela’s hand gripped the heavy fabric of the curtains, her knuckles white, and Lucas knew instinctively that he had said too much.

“I don’t … I don’t know what that means, Isabela. I had only a few seconds to decide what to do, and I knew how … how much it meant that you came back, and how much I didn’t want those men dragging you out of there by your hair, and … it was my fault, anyway.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was mine.”

He sighed. “We’ll deal with that another time, all the times you lied to me about the relic, all the times I went in front of the Arishok when you knew what he was waiting for. But that day, in that room—he was there because I couldn’t talk him out of it, because I couldn’t convince the Viscount and the rest of them to handle him and the rest of the city properly. It wasn’t my job, but I took it on, and then I did a half-ass job, whining about how no one else would take it off my hands. So that day, in that room, it was my responsibility to take him on. Not yours. It was my day to step up and make a decision and be a man.”

“You do that every day,” Isabela said softly.

“I wish that were true.”
“So now what?”

Lucas crossed the room toward her, gently prying the curtain fabric out of her hand and taking that strong, brown, calloused hand in his. “Now … I want you, Isabela. I want you with me. In my bed … and wherever else strikes your fancy.” He grinned at her. “But at my side, too, making me laugh and keeping me on my toes and showing up in the most surprising places and embarrassing me and always being right there where I need you.”

Her eyes were very wide now, her lips slightly parted as her breath came fast, but she didn’t speak.

“Will you, Isabela? Will you at least give it a try? No promises, no commitments, no big words, just …”

“Oh, shut up already, will you?” And then her mouth was on his, hot and demanding and eager, her arms around his neck as she climbed him like a piece of rigging, wrapping herself around him.

Much, much later he thought sleepily about asking her for a clearer answer, but after all, wasn’t that the beauty of Isabela? She never gave a straight answer to anything. But here she was, fast asleep with her head pillowed on his chest, her silky hair tickling his skin, and that was all the answer he needed, at least for now.
Lucas wasn’t surprised to awaken alone the next morning. Isabela had left him a message, however—her smalls, pinned to the headboard of his bed with her dagger. He left them there, wondering if she was going to make a collection out of it. Or if, perhaps, this was her idea of keeping some of her things at his place. Either way, he approved.

He got up, humming a cheery song. Isabela in his life, Carver home where he belonged … life was good.

Carver was already awake, eating a mammoth breakfast that must have been Bodahn’s version of a welcome home.

“Hey, brother. You eat like this all the time? No wonder you have to get yourself in so many fights, just to stay in shape.”

Lucas took a seat and started helping himself. “I’m happy to share both the food and the fighting, as long as you want.”

Carver looked down at his plate. “I’m … not sure.”

“Why not? You said you were a prize fighter in Orlais.”

“I was. I am. More to the point, I’m someone there, on my own. No magic, no big brother, no doting parents … just me. Carver.” He put down his fork and knife, leaning forward, his eyes earnestly on Lucas’s face. “Do you know what that’s like?”

“No. I can’t say that I do. While you were just Carver, I was … alone. No parents, no siblings, no one to care if I lived or died.”

“Come off it,” Carver scoffed. “You have better friends than any our family ever made. Any of the three we met would care; I could see that from the first. And Aveline, too.”

“It’s not the same, don’t you see?” Lucas pushed his plate away untouched. “All our lives we had each other, Carver, and then Father died, and we lost you, and we lost Bethany, and then Mother—and I had no one.”

Carver shook his head. “You can keep saying that as long as you want to, but I’m going to keep telling you that you have a richness in your friends that some people look their whole lives for, and you’re passing it over because of our family?”

“No! Well …” Lucas thought about that for a moment. “Well, maybe.”

“Think about it, brother. You and I were constantly beating the living crap out of each other, Bethany cried all the time. Mother worried about money and complained that we didn’t have the kind of life she grew up with. Father was always so tense, always listening, as though the Templars were going to come through the door at any moment. Don’t you remember any of that?”

“Yes, some of the time. But then … you and I sparred together as much as we fought. I learned half of my moves by dodging yours! And Bethany used to come start tickling us while we were fighting and make us laugh instead. Mother told us all these stories about life in Kirkwall that we thought she was making up, and we were fascinated by them, the food and the parties. And Father … Father carried us all on his back, made sure we were safe. Don’t you remember any of that?”
They stared at each other across the table, and Lucas marveled at how they could have been raised in
the same house and had such different experiences. Yes, things had sometimes been the way Carver
described, but not all the time.

Carver chuckled. “Bethany had those tiny little fingers; she was a wicked tickler.”

“She was, wasn’t she?” Lucas grinned.

“All right, it was that way sometimes. I guess … I got so caught up in always being Lucas’s little
brother. My whole life I was shorter and skinnier and not as good with a sword and not as smart and
…”

“Well, you sure made up for the shorter and skinnier, and I wouldn’t want to go up against you in a
sword-fight. I’m not so sure about your brains, though.” Lucas smirked at his brother across the
table.

Carver threw a sweet roll at him.

“So … you’ll stay? Just—try it for a little while, see how you like it.” Lucas put the sweet roll on his
plate. “I’ll be honest with you, half the time I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve spent so much time
being pushed in one direction or another, just staying on my feet sometimes takes all I can do. Maybe
you’ll have better luck, be able to mold this life in Kirkwall into what you want.”

“What do you want, Lucas?”

“Void if I know. You to stay, for one. Isabela, for another. No more being sent all over the Free
Marches as someone’s errand boy.”

“I can’t imagine you as anyone’s errand boy.”

“Ask Varric. He’ll paint you a nice clear picture.”

Carver grinned. “I’m not sure I’d trust any of his pictures.”

“There’s truth at the center of them. It’s just not necessarily the truth he pretends it is.”

“All right, brother. I’ll stay, for a little. No promises.”

“One promise—you won’t leave without telling me.”

“Yeah. That one I can do.”

“Good.”

They applied themselves to their plates, then spent an hour sparring together, falling back into easy
rhythms, testing out the things they had learned in their time apart.

As they sat in the garden afterward, letting their heartrates return to normal, Lucas looked up at the
sun, calculating the time remaining until the others would be arriving for dinner. “Come on,” he said
to his brother. “I think we have time.”

“Time for what?”

“To go meet the rest of the family.”

“Uncle Gamlen?”
“The very same.”

Lucas led the way through Hightown, turning down an alley.

Carver stopped, frowning in confusion. “I know I don’t know my way around this place very well yet, but … I thought you said Gamlen’s place was in Lowtown.”

“It is.”

“Then … aren’t those the stairs?”

Lucas nodded. “You learn fast, brother. But at this hour of the day, there’s no chance Gamlen would be at home. He’ll be at the Rose.”

“The Rose?”

“The Blooming Rose. Otherwise known as the brothel.” He grinned at his brother. “You’ll probably want to know how to get there, too.”

Carver raised an eyebrow. “You think I have to pay for it?”

“I think sometimes that’s easier and more convenient than other ways of procuring the same service.”

Frowning as he parsed the sentence, Carver said, “I think you’ve spent too much time with your elf friend and his fancy words.”

“You might be right.” Lucas pushed open the door of the Rose. “After you.”

Gamlen was right where Lucas had expected him to be, nursing a mug of the cheapest ale the place offered at the bar. The girls put up with the old coot, but only when there was no one more desirable—or with more coin—available. Privately, Lucas thought his uncle came as much for the atmosphere and the company as he did the sex, but it was hardly the kind of thing he wanted to ask about.

“Hey, boy. Back from your fancy party, then?”

“Yes. Quite the party,” Lucas said dryly, thinking of those endless halls filled with darkspawn.

“Came home with more useless trinkets to fill the old house with, did you?”

“Only one.”

“Hey!” Carver protested.

“Uncle Gamlen, there’s someone I’d like you to meet. This is Carver.”

Gamlen put his mug down, frowning as he peered into Carver’s face. “Aye, you’re an Amell, aren’t you? You look just like my father, the old bastard. Act like him, too, so superior, nothing ever good enough for you?”

“Amazing. It’s almost like you know me,” Carver said sarcastically. “You look like a dirty old man all the girls run away from, did you know that?”

“Your brother’s been telling you tales, has he? About how Uncle Gamlen sold him and pretty little Bethany to the smugglers, how he made them live in one tiny filthy little bedroom for years, in a nasty little hovel in the middle of Lowtown?” Gamlen sneered at Lucas. “He tell you how he was never home, out scrounging gold from whoever would toss him a coin, while his mother never lifted
a finger, just wept for her baby Carver and her dead mage husband?”

“Something like that.” Carver was staring at Gamlen in fascination and disgust.

“Couldn’t abuse my hospitality fast enough, and couldn’t get away fast enough once they had something better. Not that any of that coin ever got left behind at my place, no, sir.”

Lucas flushed. Gamlen was drunk, and belligerent with it, but he wasn’t wrong. Lucas owed him; and since they were the last family either had had in the world before Carver had been found, Lucas probably should have been more attentive. “Yes, well, Uncle, nice seeing you again.”

“‘Nice’. Like we’re at a sodding garden party. He get all the manners, or are you just going to stand there with your tongue out?” the old man asked Carver.

“You’re what Mother was so desperate all those years to come home to?” Carver asked him.

Gamlen flushed, looking away. “Things were different when Leandra was young. She was … if she’d stayed, it would all have been different.”

“Of course it would have.” Lucas rather doubted it, but there was little point in arguing with the old man. “We’ll leave you to it, Uncle,” Lucas said. “Carver?”

“Right.” With some difficulty, Carver stopped staring at his mother’s brother. “Let’s go.” Outside in the sunshine again, he breathed a long sigh. “He’s horrible.”

“He’s gotten worse since Mother died. I’m not sure if he’s been sober since. He— They really loved each other once, and he was almost bearable after we moved out of his house. She visited him all the time.”

“I take it you haven’t.”

“Not so much, no.”

“I couldn’t tell from his warm and affectionate attitude.”

Lucas grinned. “He’s a special brand of old coot, but at least he’s ours.”

“It’s hard to believe he was Mother’s brother. She was so … mannerly, so …”

“I know. And he’s nothing like her. Maybe he was, though, before she left. From everything I’ve heard, she was the favorite child, and then she ran off with an apostate and disgraced the family, and Gamlen was left to pick up the pieces. I don’t get the impression our grandparents were particularly grateful.”

“Like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were always the favorite,” Carver said, as though it were obvious. “If you’d run off with an apostate …”

“I was?” Lucas stopped walking to stare at his brother. “Are you joking?”

“No. The biggest, the strongest, the smartest, the most responsible …”

“Huh. Funny, I always thought it was Bethany.”
“Well … you have a point. They did coddle her a fair bit,” Carver admitted.

“Besides, if I was Mother and you were Gamlen in this scenario, you beat him all hollow—you made something of yourself.”

“A prizefighter.”

“Better than a drunken gambler.”

Carver grinned. “Glad you think so. Hm …” He looked Lucas over. “What do you say, brother?”

“To what?”

“You and me, a little bout in the ring, a little money down.”

“A prizefight? Between us?”

“I’d wipe the floor with you, of course,” Carver said breezily.

“You would not!”

“Then it’s settled.”

Lucas groaned. It would be once Varric got hold of the idea, that was for sure. “Fine. But let’s get through Aveline’s wedding first. I think she’d rather not be in town for this one. And speaking of, we’d better get back or everyone else will be there already.”

“They’re your friends, don’t you trust them?”

“Alone in my house? Not for a minute.”
Varric was already at the estate when Lucas and Carver got back, lounging in the parlor with Fenris, the two of them having a friendly wrangle over a recent hand of diamondback.

“You couldn’t possibly have had the last priestess,” Varric protested.

“Why, because you had already secreted it up your sleeve?”

“No, because I had it in my hand after you dealt it to me!” Fenris smiled enigmatically, and Varric shook his head. “There was a time, elf, when you didn’t cheat.”

“No, because I had it in my hand after you dealt it to me!”

“Do not tell me you truly miss those days. You know you prefer a foe worthy of your steel.”

“Think a lot of yourself, do you?” Varric muttered.

“Now, now,” Lucas said, coming in before Fenris could respond. “Play nice, you two.”

“And take all the fun out of the game? Come on, Hawke.”

“I know a few tricks at diamondback myself,” Carver offered, and both the elf and the dwarf forgot their rivalry in their interest in the newcomer’s statement.

“You don’t say. Maybe we’ll have to have a friendly game,” Varric mused.

“Not tonight,” Lucas said firmly.

“And deprive Rivaini of the chance to beat the pants off you?”

“Literally,” Fenris put in, a faint smile quirking the corner of his mouth.

“I would never be foolish enough to bet my pants.”

“No, you probably wouldn’t.” Varric sighed dramatically. “You really are a terrible stick-in-the-mud, Hawke.”

“He always was.” Carver grinned, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe.

“Hey!”

Varric leaned forward in his chair. “No, no, Hawke, I’m interested. Tell us more, Junior.”

Carver’s face clouded with anger, but before he could say anything, Bodahn announced, “Guard-Captain Aveline and Guardsman Donnic.”

“I’ve told you before, Bodahn, you don’t have to announce us,” Aveline protested. “We’re practically family.”

“Yes, Captain. Of course.”

“I’m never going to get through to him, am I?” Aveline grumbled.

Lucas shook his head. “Probably not.”

Donnic followed her into the room, nodding at Lucas. “Serah Hawke. Welcome home. And Serah
“Hawke.” He reached out a hand to shake Carver’s.

Carver complained, “What is it with all of you people and the titles and nicknames? Please, call me Carver.”

“Carver, then. I’m Donnic.”

“I have to say. I’m still getting used to there being no Wesley,” Carver said bluntly. A silence fell on the room, and he looked around. “What?”

Aveline swallowed, not looking at Donnic. “I suppose it’s only to be expected. I’ve—we’ve all had years to get used to it, and Carver here has only had a few months.”

After he’d known the man for all of a few hours, Lucas thought, but he didn’t say as much.

“You seem like a fine fellow,” Carver was saying to Donnic, whose ears were red. The man was shy at the best of times; Carver was hardly helping.

“Junior, you are digging yourself a hole so deep they’d have to send a team of Grey Wardens to find you,” Varric said.

Another silence, and now Lucas and Carver were shooting displeased looks at Varric.

At that moment, Bodahn announced Merrill and Isabela. Merrill looked around at them all, blinking her wide green eyes. “Oh! Isabela, I think we came at the wrong time. Everyone seems cross. Do you think the dinner’s been burnt?”

Merrill’s innocent comment broke the tension, and everyone joined in Isabela’s hearty laugh. Everyone except Carver, Lucas noticed, who stared at Merrill for a moment before shaking himself and pushing away from the door. He crossed the room, nodding at Merrill noncommittally when they were introduced.

She stared at him. “You’re bigger than Hawke. But … wait … you’re Hawke, too.”

“That I am.”

“We’ll work something out, Daisy,” Varric assured her.

“If you keep calling me Junior, I’ll be working my issues out on your face,” Carver told him. He stretched his mouth in a smile, but Lucas could tell he wasn’t entirely joking.

“No call for violence. Junior.”

Carver glared at Varric, who smiled blandly back at him. Fenris, sitting between the two, looked up at Carver just as blandly, but it was clear from his posture that he had placed himself there for a reason.

“You know,” Lucas remarked to the general air, “Mother always said you caught more flies with honey.”

Isabela chuckled. “My mother said if you practiced hard enough, you could catch flies with a well-thrown knife.”

Sebastian was announced in time to hear the last comment, and he raised an eyebrow. “If we’re comparing, my grandfather taught me to hit a fly with an arrow from the battlement.”
“Or you could stay inside and avoid the flies altogether.” Varric grinned, settling back more comfortably in his seat.

“I always found a good ice spell settled them the best.” Merrill frowned. “But why are we talking about flies?”

“Hawke brought it up. And, really, Daisy, you didn’t tame the flies and make friends with them?”

“Who could make friends with a fly?”

“If anyone could manage it, it would be you, kitten.” Isabela smiled at the elf affectionately.

“Oh. Um, thank you, I think.”

There was a general chuckle, and Lucas grinned at Carver across the room. “Welcome to a night with my friends.”

“Yeah.” Carver looked around at them all. “I think I’m going to need a drink.”

“Seconded,” Donnic said fervently. He hadn’t spent a lot of time with the group in general, and was still getting used to it all.

“Shall we head into the dining room?” Lucas suggested, leading the way. Isabela walked next to him, and he caught himself wanting to reach out and touch her but not wanting to presume, wanting some type of confirmation of what they had agreed to last night but not wanting to push for one and be rejected.

Void with it, he decided at last. It was that kind of wishy-washy thinking that had gotten them here. He caught her hand, pulling her to a stop, regardless of everyone else right behind him, kissed her. He kept it brief but firm, and was relieved to see her grin when he let her go.

“Well, look who woke up,” she said, winking at him before sinking into the spot next to his at the table. Idly she took out a dagger and began to carve something into the wood. Bodahn would be horrified, but Lucas didn’t think he cared.

“Go ahead, Donnic, doesn’t that make it your turn?” Carver asked.

Donnic flushed. “Perhaps later, Serah Hawke.”

Carver started to protest that they were supposed to have established a first name basis, but Lucas glared at him across the table, and his mouth snapped shut. Clearly, little brother was still a bit of a druffalo in a potions shop when it came to polite company. Of course, Lucas couldn’t imagine the life of a prize fighter was all fancy parties and good manners, even in Orlais. No doubt that had been part of his charm.

Aveline had been suspiciously silent through all the chatter that occurred as people were seating themselves, and as soon as everyone was settled with a drink in front of them, she leaned across the table and pinned Carver with a look. “Now. Where in the Void have you been, and why didn’t you let your mother know where you were?”

“Aveline,” Lucas protested.

Isabela put a hand on his arm, shaking her head minutely. Lucas wanted to know where his brother had been, too, but he hadn’t wanted to push. He should have guessed that Aveline would have no such scruples.
“It’s all right,” Carver said. He drained his wineglass and signaled Bodahn for a refill. “I wondered when someone would get around to asking.” He cast a sidelong glance at Lucas, who frowned. Of course Carver would take his attempt to be sensitive as disinterest.

“Well, then, where were you?” he asked.

Carver leaned back. “You all know the story, how we fled from Lothering, how the darkspawn were right behind us, how I was attacked by an ogre?”

“I believe the version I heard came with a bit more embroidery than that.” Sebastian grinned at Varric, who took a small bow.

“I do my humble best.”

“I’m sure you do.” Carver frowned. “Well, I was left there—or I volunteered to stay behind, depending on who you ask—and I kept fighting as long as I could. I thought … I thought I was a goner. At some point, I passed out, and when I woke up, I was in a tent in the Hinterlands, and a man was tending my wounds. He told me he was a Grey Warden, said it was a miracle I hadn’t been tainted, and that he would care for me until I was well enough to travel.”

“A Grey Warden?” Aveline asked. “You mean …”

“No, not the Hero or the King. This man called himself Blackwall, said he was a recruiter for the Wardens, but …” Carver paused, looking thoughtful. “In all the time I was with him, he never made any attempt to contact the other Wardens.” He shrugged. “Between Ostagar and Lothering, I’d had enough of the Blight myself, and by the time I was on my feet again it was much too late to try to follow the rest of the family. Blackwall was pretty pessimistic about any chance that they might have escaped alive, anyway. Eventually, I came to agree with him.”

Varric said, “Of course, you didn’t know about the dragon.”

“You still haven’t told me that story,” Carver reminded him.

“Oh, that was Asha’bellanar,” Merrill said. “She flew Hawke and the others out of Ferelden, then put a piece of herself in an amulet so no one could find it. Then we set her free, and she turned into a dragon again, and she flew away.”

Carver stared at the elf for a few moments when she was done speaking. Then, tearing his gaze away with what appeared to be some effort, he said, “That’s not the kind of thing I could have guessed would happen.”

Sebastian chuckled. “I think you’ve just described everything that’s happened to Hawke since I met him. Including your miraculous return from the dead.”

“Well, I wasn’t dead. I was in Orlais. I drifted there to get away from the Blight, got caught in a tavern brawl, noticed by a fight coordinator, and I’ve been there ever since.”

“And you never thought to look for your family?” Aveline asked.

“I was sure they—you—were dead. I didn’t think there was any point.”

Everyone else at the table seemed to accept the explanation at face value, but remembering what Carver had said about the way he remembered their growing up, Lucas imagined his little brother had enjoyed being the only Hawke. They would have to find a way to give Carver his own identity here in Kirkwall if Lucas wanted him to stay. And he’d have to get Varric to stop calling his brother
Junior.

“Hawke,” Sebastian was saying, “did you know they are planning to put up a statue of you?”

“Of me? Why?”

Donnic frowned at him. “You killed the Arishok. You saved the whole city. Why wouldn’t we put up a statue in your honor?”

Lucas looked down at his plate. Bodahn had just ladled sauce over the meat on the plate, and for a moment the juices and sauce running together looked like blood. He swallowed against the bile that rose in his throat. “I did what I had to do. Nothing more.”

“The rest of the city does not see it that way, my friend,” Sebastian said gently.

Aveline cleared her throat. “If you think you’re unhappy, you should see the Knight-Commander every time they refer to you as the Champion of Kirkwall.”

Sebastian agreed, “She does look rather like she’s sucking a lemon when the subject comes up.”

“If she’d moved any faster, she could have had it.” Lucas picked up his wineglass, but that looked like blood, too. He put it back down.

Into the silence, Varric said, “So, Aveline, how are the wedding plans coming?”

She glared at him across the table. “You miserable dwarf, why didn’t you tell me you had planned everything before you left? People kept looking at me as though I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

He chuckled. “What kind of a surprise would it have been if I’d told you? I’m only sorry I missed the chance to see your face.”

Aveline’s eyes narrowed even further. Next to her, Donnic smiled and took her hand, and she relaxed just a bit. “Now, love,” he said, “you know you were relieved to have it all off your hands. As am I. Thank you, Serah Tethras.”

“Maker’s balls!” Varric exclaimed. “Donnic, the only people who call me Serah Tethras are Merchants’ Guild members, and I have a tendency to do bad things to them when they do. Please, for all our sakes, call me Varric.”

“For that matter, all of us.” Lucas smiled at Aveline’s fiance. “For better or worse, you’re marrying into the family. You might as well accept us and all our quirks.”

“Quirks, you call them?” Fenris raised an eyebrow.

“I was being generous.”

“You were lying through your teeth,” Varric said.

“That, too.” He looked at Aveline. “I appreciate you pushing back the wedding. Even more now that we’ve got this big lug back to attend it.”

She smiled at both of them. “Maybe you could both walk me down the aisle. Not quite the same as if my father were here, but … as you say, family all the same.”

It almost looked as if Carver was blushing. He ducked his head, muttering, “Well … if you really
want me to, then, I suppose …”

“I really want you to,” she assured him.

“It’s our pleasure,” Lucas said. “You know it is.” He lifted his wine glass. “To Aveline and Donnic, and to family, however you may come by it.”

“To family,” echoed the others, although Lucas noticed that Isabela only mouthed the words, Donnic looked a bit uncertain, and Fenris looked almost fearful. They would come around, he told himself.

The rest of the dinner went by with more jokes and laughter and less awkward moments, Lucas was relieved to see. People relaxed more as the wine flowed. Sebastian, Aveline, and Donnic left early, all with early mornings. Varric escorted Merrill down to Lowtown; none of them liked the elf going off on her own.

Carver watched the doorway they had left through. “What’s her story?” he asked abruptly.

Fenris snapped, “Blood mage. Watch yourself near her.”

Isabela sat up straight in her chair, studying Carver with sudden concern. “That is the sweetest kitten in all of Kirkwall. You lay a hand on her—either of you—and you’ll find my dagger in places you don’t want sharp and pointy things to go.”

Fenris flicked a glance at her. “As long as she harms no one. If she does …”

Carver was still watching the door. “She doesn’t look like a blood mage.”

“They rarely do,” Fenris said bitterly. He picked up the bottle in front of him and stood up. “Hawke, I will take my leave.”

“We’ll see you at the wedding, Fenris.”

“Yes. You shall.”

Carver looked at the table and the last remaining bottle of wine, and at Lucas and Isabela, still sitting next to one another. They had hardly glanced at each other throughout dinner, and Lucas could feel the tension and the anticipation rising in him. “So,” his brother said, “you two going to bed, or am I? Because I’m not sitting here watching you try to pretend you’re not about to go at it like two mabari in heat.”

Isabela grinned. “Well, if you’re going to be like that, maybe we’ll just get to it right here.”

“No, we won’t. Good-night, Carver.” Lucas got up, shoving his chair back, and he reached for her, tossing her over his shoulder.

“Hawke, you beast.”

He winked at his brother and left the room, climbing the stairs with a remarkably calm pirate slung over his shoulder. In his room, he put her down.

“I should get you for that,” she said, purring as she reached up to pull his head down toward hers. “But I kind of liked it. This time.”

“Maybe I’ll try it again.”

“Maybe I won’t like it as much next time.”
“I’ll take the risk.”
At Aveline's Wedding

It had been a stroke of genius on Varric’s part to take care of the wedding details for Aveline. As the day approached, she was anxious enough over the decision to get remarried at all, whether Donnic was making a tremendous mistake, whether as Guard Captain it was a terrible idea to marry a fellow Guardsman, whether she ought to dismiss Donnic from the guards once they were married … The litany of concerns went on and on.

Lucas listened patiently to it all, reassuring Aveline as best he could. Carver and Isabela had less patience, and alternated between telling Aveline to get over herself and disappearing where they could roll their eyes at each other unseen. Varric wrote everything down, which only made Aveline more nervous, certain that all her worries would appear in the next installment of Hard in Hightown, although Varric assured her that it was all too realistic and wouldn’t sell.

By the time the wedding date finally dawned, everyone involved was more than ready for it. Merrill and Isabela and Guardsman Brennan helped Aveline get ready. The dress was simple and pretty—selected by Isabela, although she had made Varric promise not to tell Aveline as much.

Half of Kirkwall was there, it seemed. In the absence of a Viscount, Aveline and Seneschal Bran were effectively the heads of Kirkwall, and no one had missed Aveline’s hard work and the resultant clean-up of the streets. So quite a number of the city’s nobles were in attendance, as well as many of the ordinary citizens.

When Lucas and Carver were summoned to join Aveline in her walk down the aisle, she was pacing anxiously back and forth across the antechamber of the Chantry where she had gotten ready.

Isabela used the excuse to slip out, with Brennan on her heels. “You can take over from here,” she said to Lucas. “I can’t take much more of this. If Donnic takes my advice, he’ll have her on her back within ten minutes of the end of the ceremony.”

“Wait, your advice?” Aveline stopped pacing and darted for the door. Carver put himself in front of her. “Go get that whore and bring her back. I want to know exactly what she said to Donnic!”

“She wouldn’t tell you,” Carver pointed out.

“And Donnic’s too sensible to take her too seriously. Besides, you’ll see him soon enough.”

“Soon? Maker, I’m not half ready!”

“Yes. You are.” Carver put his hands on her shoulders and forcibly turned her away from the mirror.

“Donnic fell for you fighting thieves and criminals; he’s going to think you look beautiful no matter what. Which you do,” Lucas added hastily as Aveline tried to break out of Carver’s grip and turn back toward the mirror.

“Come on,” Carver said, pushing her inexorably toward the door.

Aveline clutched Lucas’s arm, pulling him to a stop. Her green eyes were bright with tears. “Am I doing the right thing?”

“Marrying Donnic? I’ve never seen you do anything righter,” he assured her. “Let’s go get you married, shall we?”
She let them, finally, escort her out of the antechamber and into the main hall of the Chantry. The brothers and sisters broke into the Chant as she came out, the sweet tones soaring over the assembled guests. Her grip tightened on both brothers’ arms until Lucas nearly winced with the pain.

More than a few female heads turned to watch Carver, who looked quite striking in his wedding finery, and he was far from blind to the sensation he was causing, winking roguishly at the comelier young ladies as he passed them.

Lucas had eyes for only one; the beautiful pirate who waited next to Aveline’s place, wearing that extraordinary blue dress again. This time, he would be taking it off her, he promised himself. She grinned at him, clearly able to read his thoughts across the room. He found he didn’t mind that at all.

The brothers Hawke handed Aveline off to Donnic, whose grin stretched from ear to ear as she took his arm. Lucas was thrilled to see his friend finding happiness with someone who cared for her so deeply.

The Grand Cleric herself performed the ceremony, and had clearly spent enough time with Aveline to keep the floweriness to a minimum. The ceremony was simple but sweet, and Lucas found himself thinking about the vows as his friends exchanged them. Could he ever promise himself so wholly to one woman? Not until he could look at her the way Donnic looked at Aveline, he decided, with his heart in his eyes.

He didn’t look at Isabela, not wanting her to get the wrong idea and be spooked, but he wondered what she was thinking. She had been married before, but hadn’t mourned her husband when he was killed; instead, she had embarked on an affair with the assassin who had killed him. Lucas couldn’t imagine she harbored any particularly kind thoughts about any further marital adventures.

And he didn’t want to marry Isabela anyway. That wasn’t their relationship, he told himself. What, exactly, their relationship was he couldn’t have said, and he was glad that he didn’t have to.

He turned his attention resolutely back to Aveline and Donnic, watching the happiness in Donnic’s face and the growing wonder in Aveline’s as they exchanged their vows and promised themselves to one another.

He and Carver stood together watching the happy couple walk down the aisle to the cheers and applause of the assembled guests.

Carver sniffed. “They grow up so fast, don’t they? Seems like just yesterday she was a little girl waving a really big sword around.”

Isabela shoved herself between the two of them. “And now here she is, getting ready to play with one again. Just what she needs, too.”

“Good point.” Carver raised an eyebrow. “You happen to know any likely girls in this crowd who might be skilled in the art of swordplay?”

“One or two. But you’ll have to figure out which ones for yourself.”

“Have a heart,” he protested.

“The pursuit is half the fun.”

He looked at her, then at Lucas. “Well, that explains a few things.”

“Shove off, Carver.”
“Yes, ser, big brother, ser.” Carver saluted and joined the crowd of people heading for the reception.

Grand Cleric Elthina and Sebastian, who had been assisting with the ceremony, joined them then. “A happy couple.” Elthina’s face was shining. “I always love a good wedding, watching two people pledge their lives to one another with whole hearts and hope for the future.”

“Don’t look at me,” Isabela said brusquely, hurrying after Carver.

“And you, Champion? How do you feel about weddings?”

“I’m happy that Aveline’s happy.”

Sebastian looked around, seeing that the three of them were alone, most of the other guests well on their way down the aisle toward the reception. “Hawke. There is something we wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh? I’m all ears,” Lucas said, although inwardly he was bracing himself. These last few days of being left without any tasks assigned him by those higher up who didn’t want to dirty their own hands had been so nice—it appeared it had been too much to hope that they could continue.

“The Divine is sending an agent to Kirkwall to look into the unrest between the mages and the Templars here,” Sebastian told him.

“Good for her. It’s about time.”

“I have been suggesting to Her Grace that if she stepped forward … Well.” Sebastian flushed and looked away from Elthina, who shook her head at him.

“The Chantry’s teachings are clear, Sebastian. Do you think those who are deaf to Andraste would listen more carefully to me? No.”

“Does that mean you favor the Templars?” Lucas asked, drawn into the conversation in spite of himself.

Gently, Elthina said, “I favor peace, which is not the goal of either side, it seems.”

“You can’t foster peace by doing nothing!” Sebastian exclaimed.

Elthina sighed. “I did not expect things to deteriorate so fast. I thought … after the Qunari …” Her pale blue eyes were sorrowful. “How can anyone wish for more violence?”

“That’s why the Divine is sending an agent?” Lucas asked.

“Yes. Kirkwall has drawn more attention than I would like.”

“I have offered to help in whatever way I can, Hawke.” Sebastian looked at him expectantly.

Lucas gave an inward sigh, but schooled his features carefully to avoid giving any sign of his annoyance at having been trapped this way at Aveline’s wedding. “I am your humble servant.” He was glad Varric wasn’t there—he would have heard the faint sarcasm there loud and clear. Fortunately, Sebastian was utterly deaf to sarcasm where the Chantry was concerned. Elthina’s eyes rested on Lucas’s face, and he wondered if she could sense his weariness with all of this. If so, she didn’t remark on it.

“Thank you, Champion,” she said in her gentle voice. “You honor me.”
He let that one go, and she continued.

“No one wishes to see the Free Marches become another Imperium.”

“With Meredith in charge? Small chance of that,” Lucas said.

“That is what I wish you to tell the Divine’s agent. I do not want the Chantry to think they need to take drastic measures—that won’t be good for Kirkwall. Mages, Templars, or citizens.”

On that, at least, Lucas could agree with her. “None of us wants to see the Divine’s armies march against Kirkwall.”

Sebastian opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it. Then, in a rush, he said, “Surely the Divine wouldn’t treat the whole city as enemies!”

Lucas found his friend unbearably naïve at points. Sebastian fought next to apostates all the time—couldn’t he see how hard it would be for the Divine’s armies to separate the mages and the mage supporters from the rest of the population? The Chantry’s army would have no choice but to treat the entire city as hostile.

Elthina appeared to agree with Lucas. She looked sorrowfully at Sebastian. “The Divine is concerned, Sebastian. It is never wise to draw the concern of the powerful. Too often their aid comes as a weapon instead of a tool.’

The wedding reception was getting started, and Lucas wanted to be there, dancing with Isabela. Or at home, in bed with Isabela. Or, really, anywhere but here being drawn into yet another argument he wasn’t qualified to deal with by those who should already have settled it themselves.

“Tell me about this agent of the Divine,” he said, keeping the impatience from his tone with difficulty. “When is she due to arrive?”

“I do not know; I believe the Divine wishes it to be a surprise.” Elthina smiled a little. “It is possible she is already here, observing without her presence being made known to us. As to who she is … I know only that she is called Sister Nightingale, and she acts as the Left Hand of the Divine, sent to do work that might blacken the Divine’s name.”

Sebastian looked shocked by the very concept that the Divine might need such an agent. “Surely …” he began, but a gesture from Elthina silenced him.

“I do not know if you can say anything that would convince this Sister Nightingale,” Elthina continued. “The Divine has heard my protests already and they have fallen on deaf ears. We must all hope that your powers of persuasion will be greater than my own.”

Lucas rather doubted that they were, but he was willing to give it a try. And aware that nothing he could say would get him out of this. “As you say, Your Grace.” He bowed. “Let me know when you know where and when I am to meet this Sister Nightingale.”

“Thank you, Hawke,” Sebastian said, and Elthina inclined her head, her eyes shining with what Lucas took to be hope.

He took his leave of both of them, heading for the reception. The dancing was in full swing, and Isabela was at his side almost as soon as he walked into the room.

“There you are. I thought you’d never get here.”
“Sorry. Unavoidable delay.”

She rolled her eyes. “What did you promise to do this time?”

Lucas groaned. “I’ll tell you later.” He put a hand on the small of her back, feeling the warmth of her body through the silk of her dress, caressing her there. “Have I told you what this dress does to me?”

“No, but you could dance with me while you do.”

That was an invitation he was happy to accept, drawing her body against his and moving with her, feeling the silk slide against him, the brush of her tightly bound breasts, the tantalizing glimpses of luscious brown skin as the petals that made up the skirt slid apart when she moved.

Isabela tilted her head back, watching him. “So?”

“So?” He teased her a little, sure that she could feel him stirring, their bodies were pressed so closely together.

“So what does this dress do to you?”

He pulled her harder against him, growling as he bent to whisper in her ear. “It makes me want to rip it off you right here.”

She danced back a little, forcing him to chase her. “But then it would be ruined and I couldn’t wear it again.”

“Mm. That would be a shame.”

The music ended, and they stepped away from each other and applauded politely with everyone else. Isabela fanned herself exaggeratedly. “It’s awfully hot in here, Hawke. Maybe I need some champagne.”

“By all means.” Under other circumstances, he might have been desperate to get her home—but tonight, she was already promised to come home with him, and he enjoyed the idea of prolonging the evening.

Guardsman Brennan was standing by the bar, a fluted champagne glass in her hand. “Saw this one coming a long time ago,” she remarked as they joined her.

“You said as much,” Lucas remembered. He nodded at a pretty brown-haired elf who stood next to her.

“Serah Hawke? Champion? Don’t you remember me?” The elf looked at him expectantly, and he frowned, trying to place her.

“I’m sorry. You look familiar, but …”

“I’m Lia. You remember, you saved me from that man, outside the city? It was several years ago. I was younger then.”

He did remember her now—kidnapped by a magistrate’s son who had been hearing voices in his head, almost certainly demons whispering to him. Lucas had killed the boy rather than let him continue to live in torment. “Of course. How have you been?”

“Good, thanks to you.” She nodded in Aveline’s direction. “The Guard Captain has been very good to me, and I earned my shield just a couple of months ago.”
“Congratulations.” Lucas smiled. It was nice for once to see a positive outcome from all the hoops he jumped through for everyone and their brother.

“I was wondering …” She traced a nervous finger around the rim of her glass. “You had a friend, an elf.”

“Oh, I know the one you mean,” Brennan broke in. “Damn fine, too. Looks like he could push a woman up against a wall, and—“

Seeing Lia’s face redden at Brennan’s words, Lucas interrupted the flow. “That would be Fenris.” He looked Lia over. Probably too young, but maybe a young, idealistic elf girl was just what Fenris needed to give him a new perspective on life. Maker knew he needed something. “He’s here somewhere. If I see him, maybe I’ll give him a nudge this way.”

Isabela made a strangled sound in the back of her throat, which Lucas chose to ignore.

Lia, still blushing, gave a nod. “Thank you, Serah Hawke.”

“My pleasure.”

“Another one gone,” Brennan observed, draining her champagne. “Too bad; he’s quite the dish. But … there are always more fish in the sea.” She gestured with the empty glass. “I hear that’s a Hawke over there.”

Lucas glanced over to see Carver dancing with Merrill. The elf was beautifully light on her feet, almost made for dancing, and Carver’s head was bent next to hers protectively.

“That’s a Hawke,” Isabela confirmed, a hardness in her voice. “And you might want to go cut in. Right now.”

“He’s not going to hurt her,” Lucas said as Brennan suited the action to the words and cut through the dancers to get to his brother.

“Not if I hurt him first.”

Lucas didn’t bother protesting any further—he wasn’t as certain of his brother’s intentions as he pretended, and he trusted Carver to be able to work out his differences with Isabela. He decided to go dance with Merrill himself, though, to try to subtly warn her away from Carver.

“Oh, Hawke! Quite the party, isn’t it?” she asked. She really did dance beautifully. Lucas wondered if it was from all the frolicking in the forest Varric insisted the Dalish must do.

“Beautiful.”

“The dancing makes me homesick.”

He looked down at her, seeing dark shadows beneath her green eyes. “Why don’t you go visit?”

Some of the animation left her face, and she glanced away from him, over her shoulder. “No, I don’t think that would work.”

“Nothing’s stopping you.”

At that she looked up at him again, her small features set and determined. “I’m stopping me. I made my choice, Hawke. I left. I can’t unleave, and I wouldn’t want to. No, Kirkwall is my home now.”

She softened her face again, as if by an effort of will, listening to the music. “If I want to dance more,
I’ll … just have to make that happen.”

“Just pick a good partner, will you? Someone who dances … to the same music you do.”

“Where would I find such a one as that?”

Lucas had to admit, partners seemed hard to come by, especially in Kirkwall. But … “Aveline found one.”

“She did, didn’t she? Maybe there’s hope for all of us.”

Maybe there was, Lucas thought. As the music came to an end, he looked around the room and found Fenris, hiding away in a dark corner. He left Merrill, hoping his warning about Carver hadn’t been too subtle, and made his way toward Fenris’s corner.

“Hawke. You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“You may have missed it, but this appears to be a party.”

Fenris raised an eyebrow. “Do not be ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous. Well …” Lucas grinned, his eye on a dark blue silk dress. “I haven’t ripped that dress off Isabela yet and had my wicked way with her, but the night’s still young. What about you?”

“I would prefer Isabela leave her dress on.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes, trying to decide if the elf were being serious or not. Still, she looked damn fine in the dress, so he could see the point. “To each his own. In the meantime … someone was asking me about you.”

Fenris paled. “Danarius? Here?”

“No! No, nothing like that. A woman, Fenris. A woman.”

“Oh.” The elf still looked alarmed. “Hawke, this does not appear to be the right time …”

“When will there ever be a right time? Or do you intend to squat, alone, in that mansion for the rest of your life?”

Fenris’s silence indicated that he had, indeed, thought some such nonsense.

“You can’t do it, my friend. Someday you have to live your own life. As long as you let fear dictate all your decisions, you’ll never be free.”

“It is not that simple.”

“It can be.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, then Fenris looked down at the full champagne glass in his hand. “Perhaps you are right. I … There is … something … I have been giving some thought to. Yes, perhaps it is time.”

“Good. And while you’re trying to make up your mind about that something, see that girl over there?” Lucas pointed to Lia, who was dancing with Tomwise, the poison maker. “She likes you, although why I can’t imagine.”
“Why do you not pester Varric with this type of thing?”

“Trust me, I would if I thought it would get me—or him—anywhere.”

“Ah, I see your own entanglement approaching,” Fenris said with some relief, and Lucas turned to see Isabela walking purposefully in their direction, the petals of the skirt parting to reveal and then conceal a gorgeous leg with every step.

“Think about what I said, though, will you?”

“I … shall, Hawke. And I do appreciate the concern.”

Lucas wasn’t sure he believed that one, but he let it go.

“Are you done solving the problems of everyone in Kirkwall?” Isabela asked, sliding her hand around Lucas’s arm, the slender fingers caressing his wrist. “Because I have a problem, too. Want to know what it is?”

“No.” Fenris pushed past them, nearly spilling his champagne in his haste.

Lucas retrieved the caressing hand and kissed her fingers. “I want to know. What’s your problem? Should I go looking for it?”

“Maybe you should take me back to your place and do a very thorough search.”

“That is the best idea I’ve heard all night.”
They didn’t actually make it back to his place. In a dark corner of Hightown Lucas pushed Isabela back against the wall, kissing her hungrily while his hands moved to the petals of dark silk that covered her legs, brushing them out of his way and spreading her thighs with hands and knee.

The seat of her tiny pair of smallclothes was already damp as he pushed it aside and found the core of her. As he teased her entrance, Isabela grabbed his shirt in both hands, pulling him closer to her. Their kiss was wild, passionate, making Lucas’s head spin.

Isabela pushed against his fingers, sighing into his mouth when two of them slipped inside her.

“Take me, Hawke,” she said urgently into his ear. “Right here.”

“But …” Maker, he wanted to. Her hands were on him now, freeing him from his pants, and she was right there, so ready. “Your dress.”

“I’ll get … another one,” she panted, tugging on him, one leg wrapping around the back of his thigh.

“Now, Hawke.”

He lifted her, pinning her against the wall, and sank himself deep inside her.

Isabela cried out, and some part of him knew she was upping the volume on purpose, to tease him with the idea of being caught. So he stopped, holding her there, feeling her pulse around him.

“Hawke,” she protested, wriggling against him as best she could.

“You going to be … going to be quiet?” he said, biting back a moan as she tightened herself around him. It took everything he had to hold still, but he was going to win this one.


“No.”

“Fine. I’ll be quiet. This time,” she whispered just before taking his mouth again, catching his lower lip between her teeth. “Now move, damn it!”

“Like this?” And he moved, just a little. Maker, it felt good.

“Hawke,” she whispered. “Please.”

That nearly sent him over right there, Isabela begging. With a groan he moved in earnest, kissing her hard to keep from voicing his own pleasure.

It felt so good that he was almost disappointed when he felt the tension rising in him. But if he knew Isabela, something just as good was coming when he got her home, and she was already shuddering against him, her head thrown back against the wall, her hair slipping from the pins that held it elegantly up and off her slender neck.

“Maker, you are so beautiful,” he whispered just before he let himself go, and he was so lost in his pleasure that he didn’t see her eyes open, or the searching, hesitant, almost hopeful expression in them.

When he thought he could move again, Lucas let her down.
“The Champion of Kirkwall, rutting against the wall in the middle of Hightown. Never thought I’d see the day,” Isabela said, poking him in the arm.

“You didn’t.”

She frowned. “Did so.”

“It’s night,” he pointed out, grinning.

“Smartass.” She rolled her eyes at him, taking his arm. “Come on, let’s get back to your place so I can take this off.”

“So soon?”

Isabela gave an exaggerated yawn. “I’m exhausted. I’m going to look at the damage to the dress from your unseemly display of manliness and then go straight to sleep.”

“Really.”

“Really.”

“We’ll just have to see about that.”

Since she had no intention of doing any such thing, and kept him up half the night, they slept in very late the next morning.

Or, rather, Lucas slept in very late the next morning. Isabela was gone, her blue dress hanging over the open door of his wardrobe. He hoped Orana wouldn’t mind cleaning it.

He got up and dressed, feeling pleasantly sore in several unusual muscles, between the dancing and what came after.

On his way down to breakfast, he happened to look into his study and was surprised to see Isabela lounging in his chair, her booted feet propped up on his desk. She was sorting through a stack of papers.

Lucas stopped in the doorway, leaning a shoulder against the frame. “That’s private.”

Isabela didn’t look up from the paper she was going over. “You think you have any secrets from me?”

“A man can dream.”

“Between me and Varric, I’d have thought you would have given up that particular dream.” She held up the paper. “As it happens, this one’s mine. Message from our favorite dwarf.”

“You’re getting mail here now?” Lucas thought he kind of liked that, even if it was only from Varric.

“I won’t make it a habit if it bothers you.” Isabela swung her legs down from the desk, and Lucas hastily raised a hand.

“By all means. My desk is your desk.”

“Good.” She leaned back in the chair again. “Guess what this says?”

“Your mother’s coming to town to shake her finger at me for ruining her little girl?”
Isabela laughed at that one. “Hardly. She’d be more likely to shake you down for my fee.”

Lucas decided not to follow that path any further—there were too many places where it could branch in the wrong direction, and he didn’t want to endanger this fragile bubble of happiness they were standing in. “So what’s in the message, then?”

The smile faded from her face. “Castillon’s in town.”

“Well, it’s about time.”

Isabela sat up straight in the chair. “What?”

“Let’s get him out of the way. I’m tired of you having to live in fear of this Castillon person.”

“You’d fight him for me?”

“I fought a Qunari Arishok for you,” he reminded her softly. “Can this Castillon be any worse?”

Isabela blinked, the professional duelist and pirate captain taking over her expression as she looked Lucas over thoughtfully. “He’s more devious, that’s for sure. His style would be harder for you to combat.”

“He won’t expect us to attack him, though, will he? He’ll be expecting you to run.”

“Yes. That’s probably true.”

“Then we’ll surprise him.” Lucas smiled at her. “I love surprises.”

“Me, too.” She sighed. “But he’s holed up somewhere in Kirkwall and Varric hasn’t been able to find out where.”

“He will. Or you will. Between you, don’t you know pretty much everyone in the city?”

“Close. I just don’t know if we can find him before he finds y—us.”

“What about his people? Does he have people?”

Isabela raised her eyebrows. “Oh, that’s good. I like the way you think, Hawke.” She got to her feet. “Ten to one Velasco will be at the Rose any given night. Velasco is Castillon’s right hand—he’ll know where to find him.”

“So we surprise this Velasco at the Rose.”

“Right. Step one, we get Velasco. Step two …” She frowned. “Something exciting happens. Step three, profit.”

“I think you’re missing some details there.”

“I’m still working out the kinks,” she admitted.

“Probably we should figure those out before we get started on step one.”

“Fine, then,” Isabela snapped. “What’s your bright idea?”

“We could kill him and search his body. We might find something that way.”

“Never knew you to be so bloodthirsty, Hawke.” She shook her head. “He wouldn’t carry anything
in writing. Castillon’s too careful for that.”

“Hit him until he talks?”

“Too used to it. You’d end up killing him, and we’d be back at step one, but with one less lead.”

“We could ask him nicely.”

Isabela glared at him. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

Lucas thought it over. The best way to draw this Castillon out of hiding was to give him something he wanted. And the only thing he wanted that Lucas knew of … “We’ll give you to Velasco.”

“What?”

“Castillon wants you. If Velasco can get his hands on you, he’ll take you to Castillon.”

“And you follow me?” For a moment, he thought she was going to protest, but then she smiled. “Ooh, that’s clever.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of getting Varric’s network of ragamuffins to follow you. I wouldn’t want to take the chance of losing you by following myself. Stealth isn’t exactly my specialty.”

She chuckled. “No, it isn’t, is it?” The smile faded, and she regarded him thoughtfully. “Neither is playacting, for that matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“To sell this to Velasco, you’ll need to be convincing. And you’ll need to get creative. Call me names … maybe even hit me. You’ll have to stick with it. Velasco’s a clever son-of-a-bitch. If you waver, he’ll notice.”

Lucas wanted to blindly assure her that he could do it, but she was right—he wasn’t much of a playactor. “We could get Aveline to deliver you. She could do it nicely.”

Isabela nodded. “That could work.” She stepped up close to him. “Tell the truth, though, Hawke. Haven’t you ever wanted to slap me? Just a little?”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“I mean it.” She looked at him, and he could tell she was thinking, as he was, of the day of the Qunari uprising, the lies and the desertion. “Still … I wanted to know why, Isabela. I still want to know why.”

She sighed in aggravation, stepping away from him. “You and the talking! Always with the talking.”

“Honestly, you seem to think it’s a bad thing that I’ve never wanted to hit you.”

“If that were true, you’d be the first man I ever met who could say it.”

He took her hand and pulled her back to him, tilting her chin up so he could look her in the eye. “I’ve never wanted to hit you, Isabela.”
She blinked, looking almost frightened. Then she smiled, a slow, wolfish grin. “That’s just because you know I’d hit you back.”

“If I ever hit you, you have my permission to hit me back as hard as you can.”

“I hit pretty hard.”

“I know you do.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment, Lucas refusing to back away from the almost challenging expression on Isabela’s face.

Finally she broke away and he let her go. He had made his point. Whatever she had been used to in the past—and it hadn’t been good, he was sure—he didn’t fit that mold, and he wasn’t going to. The question was whether she would ever believe it, and what either of them wanted to do about it once she did.
They gathered at the Hanged Man later that afternoon, everyone except Sebastian, who probably
wouldn’t have approved of the plan, and Merrill, who had no poker face whatsoever. As he climbed
the stairs to Varric’s rooms to collect the dwarf, Lucas thought he saw the last missing member of
their merry band disappearing down the hall; those feathers were hard to mistake.

When Varric answered the door, he asked, “Was that Anders?”

The dwarf raised his eyebrows. “Do you really want to know?”

“Only if he’s about to hurt someone.”

“Then, no. It wasn’t.” Varric closed the door behind him more sharply than was perhaps necessary
and preceded Lucas down the stairs to their usual table.

Isabela was animatedly outlining the plan to Aveline.

“You want me to turn you over to a pirate?” Aveline said in a horrified whisper. “Not a chance! My
reputation as an officer of the law—“

“Yes, yes, stick-up-the-arse, blah blah.” Isabela waved her silent.

“I’ll do it,” Carver offered. “I think I met the fellow you’re talking about at the bar last night
anyway.”

“At the Rose?” Lucas asked.

“Oh, like you’ve never been there.”

“Not what I meant, actually. I just wondered if you’d seen Uncle Gamlen while you were there.”

“Right.” Carver may have looked a bit sheepish at having jumped to the wrong conclusion. Or Lucas
might have been imagining it. “As it happens, I chatted with him a bit. He’s a bitter old man.”

“That he is.”

“But while we were there, someone slipped him a note. I, er, happened to glance over his shoulder
while he was reading it …”

“Of course you did. Anyone would have. Good on you, Ju—“ At a glare from Lucas, Varric caught
himself and hastily corrected to, “Fisticuffs.”

Carver mulled over the new nickname for a moment and apparently decided he could live with it.
“Anyway, the note said something about the Gem of Keroshek. Anyone ever heard of it?”

“ Heard about it, once, long ago.” Isabela furrowed her brow, trying to remember. “I thought it was a
myth, honestly.”

“Can’t hurt to investigate, can it? The note said something about Darktown. I thought maybe Merrill
and I—“

Isabela’s dagger was out and resting lightly along his throat before he could finish speaking. “What
did I tell you about staying away from her?”
“I don’t know what you’re on about. She seems like a perfectly—” He stopped as the dagger pressed more firmly against his skin.

“Sweet, innocent girl who wouldn’t harm a fly,” Isabela finished for him.

“Yes. Except for the blood magic, she’s completely innocent,” Fenris put in, earning himself glares from both Isabela and Varric.

“Which reminds me. Fenris.” Aveline pinned him with a glare of her own. “You stay away from my recruits, do you hear me?”

“I—what?”

“My recruit Lia. After she saw you at my wedding, she can’t stop talking about you.”

“Oh.” Fenris looked sheepish, and embarrassed, and perhaps a little bit interested. Lucas made a note of the possibility.

Aveline pushed her chair back. “I’m off to Orlais the day after tomorrow for my honeymoon. Do, all of you, try to stay out of trouble for a couple of weeks.”

“Of course,” Lucas assured her.

“I won’t even leave the tavern,” Varric promised.

Isabela dropped her a slow wink. “I hope you do all sorts of things I would do.”

Aveline turned a peculiar shade of dark red. “Was it really necessary to leave that piece of … filthy trash for Donnic to read?”

“I don’t know. Was it?”

The red deepened, if anything, and Aveline left the tavern without another word.

Isabela watched her go. “It was.”

“How do you know?” Carver asked her.

“Do you see how she’s walking? That’s a woman who has been thoroughly … read to.” She grinned. Then she turned to Hawke. “We ready?”

He started to protest again, but something in her eyes stopped his mouth. She wanted him to do this, for whatever reason of her own. So he would. “Yes, whenever you are.”

Isabela relaxed a bit. “You want to go on ahead and make sure Velasco’s there?” she asked Carver.

“Will do. I’ll come back if he’s not.”

“And I’ll go get my network ready to track you,” Varric said. He left the table with Fenris.

Isabela got up and walked up to Lucas. “Remember, whatever I say …”

“And whatever I say.”

“We don’t mean it.”

“Right.”
They went to the Blooming Rose together, acting sloppy drunk and frisky. Lucas found it easier than he had anticipated—acting drunk made it easier to speak loudly and overact his part in a way he might otherwise not have been able to manage. “Come on, lover,” he said to her, throwing an arm around her shoulders. “I’ve got a big surprise for you.”

“Oh, I love surprises. What is it?”

“You’ll like this one,” he promised, leading her up the stairs to the room Carver had pointed out as being occupied by Velasco. He knocked on the door.

“Go away!” shouted an accented voice.

Lucas kicked the door open.

The man in the room drew a knife. “You bastard!” Then he recognized Isabela and she widened her eyes as if she had just recognized him, and there was a moment of silence when nobody moved.

The prostitute broke the moment when she scurried out of the room, and Velasco sheathed the knife, even as Lucas tightened his grip, letting his arm wrap around Isabela’s neck as she struggled to get away from him.

“I brought you a new plaything,” he said to Velasco.

“So I see. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Isabela fought free of Lucas’s restraining arm, but he caught her wrist and dragged her back against him, holding her immobilized. She would wear bruises in the morning, but then, so would he. He groaned as she stamped on his foot. “You’re insane!” she said.

He shrugged. “I’m the Champion of Kirkwall. How much longer did you think I could risk being seen with someone like you?”

“I thought I could trust you,” she ground out between her clenched teeth.

Lucas grabbed her by the hair and tipped her head back so he could look in her eyes. “Remember the time with the book and the Qunari and the duel? This is just like that … only much funnier.”

She spat into his face with remarkable accuracy, considering the angle. Velasco took her from Lucas, binding her hands viciously tight.

“You back-stabbing little shit,” she whispered venomously. “You’d better start sleeping with one eye open.”

“Don’t worry, serah,” Velasco assured him, tossing him a pouch of coin. “Castillon will take care of her. He’s been looking for her for a long time.”

Lucas watched as Velasco escorted her from the room, several of the men from the main tavern joining him as they left. He thought he was going to be sick to his stomach. But he had agreed to this; it had been his idea, even. Surely he wouldn’t have if he didn’t trust her to be able to take care of herself? And she wouldn’t have done it if she didn’t trust him to come after her.

There was something warm and heart-melting in that idea, that they trusted each other. But he couldn’t look into it now. He made his way down the stairs, still selling it as if he hadn’t a care in the world, just in case Castillon still had men in the brothel. He clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Let’s get out of here. No good action left.”
“Whatever you say, brother.”

Varric met them outside with Fenris. A small elven girl was whispering in the dwarf’s ear. She scampered off as Lucas approached, and Varric turned to him. “They’ve gone down the stairs to Lowtown. I’ll get another report at the bottom.”

“Then let’s go.” Lucas felt his anxiety rising further with every moment Isabela spent out of his sight.

Another child met them at the bottom of the Lowtown stairs, pointing them to the docks, and then one more waited on the docks to lead them to a tumble-down warehouse near the end.

Lucas motioned to the others to follow him as he slipped inside. He should have let Varric or Fenris go first—both of them lighter on their feet and far less heavily armored than he—but he had to see her.

She was tied to a support pole in the middle of the room and Velasco was walking around her, teasing her with the point of a dagger along various portions of her exposed skin. “We could work something out,” he was saying. “If you’re good, I will tell Castillon to go easy on you.”

“Castillon wouldn’t take your recommendation if he was on fire and you were carrying a water bucket.”

Velasco snarled at her, raising the dagger, but it fell from his fingers as Bianca’s bolt nestled itself in his heart.

“Good shot,” Lucas said. He leaped over the railing to rush to her. Several of Velasco’s men got in front of him and he drew his sword, whirling it in a sweeping motion around him, causing them to leap out of his way. He managed to keep them at bay long enough to get to Isabela, using one of the hidden daggers from her boot to slice through the ropes holding her. “You all right?” he looked her over anxiously.

She pushed him out of the way, thrusting a dagger into the throat of a man who had been about to stab Lucas in the back. “Talk later. I’m fine.”

Well, if she was going to be businesslike about it, he could be, too. He was still a bit thrown off by how much he wanted to hold her and make sure she was all right. If something had happened to her … His next swing of the sword was backed with all his power, and nearly sheared off a man’s arm.

Castillon’s men gave them a bit of a difficult time, but eventually they prevailed. Carver had blood trickling into his eye from a head wound, Fenris had a long gash in his forearm, and Varric’s coat had been torn. He was by far the most vocal about his pain.

Isabela tied a tourniquet around Fenris’s arm to staunch the bleeding and Lucas rifled through boxes and drawers in the office looking for any type of healing potion or poultice for his brother. Over her shoulder, Isabela called to him, “Velasco sent for Castillon. He’ll be here any moment.”

Lucas finally found a small chest of healing supplies and handed his brother a potion. “Then we should get ready.”

“You find anything that might tell us why he’s in Kirkwall?”

A voice came from a small boat tied to the interior dock of the warehouse. “You could just ask him.”

“Castillon?” Isabela leaped to her feet, daggers out.
“I knew I should have taken advantage of having you tied up like a lovely present just waiting to be opened.” Castillon sighed, leaping lightly off the boat onto the dock. “But I suspected there was something up your sleeve, and I was right, as I so often am.”

Varric lifted Bianca into position, but Isabela waved him back.

“I see Velasco has finally paid for being such a fool. He makes a pretty smear,” Castillon continued.

Lucas crossed to Isabela, standing next to her with his arms folded.

“How he glowers at me, Isabela. He’s a keeper, I think.”

“Stay out of it,” she snapped.

“Grandmother would be pleased to meet him.”

“Granny would stick a knife in your eye for everything you’ve done these past few years.”

Lucas looked from one to the other. Castillon was lighter of skin than Isabela, and had green eyes to her exotic tawny gold, but there was a certain facial resemblance. “It never crossed your mind to mention you were related?”

“Cousins,” Castillon said. “My father and Isabela’s father were brothers. Not that it did them any good. They still sank each other’s ships, and each other, while they were at it.”

“And you tried to do the same to me!”

Castillon shrugged. “Who am I to go against a family tradition?”

Isabela crossed her arms over her chest, watching him with narrowed eyes. “What are you doing here, Aramis?”

“Kirkwall is lovely this time of year.”

“Bull.”

He chuckled. “Always so suspicious. I came to find you, dear cousin.”

“Why?”

“So we’re not killing him?” Carver asked, sounding disappointed.

“How will he tell everyone how I bested him if he’s dead?”

Castillon shook his head. “You bested my men. I, however, am still standing.”

“That can be remedied,” Fenris said, the lyrium leaping to life all along his arms.

“Now that is a nice trick. I do not suppose you would like to be a pirate?”

“Dibs,” Isabela said.

“Alas. I suspected as much. You always were greedy.” Castillon sighed dramatically.

Fenris blushed, and Isabela shook her head. “Not like that.”

Castillon blinked at that, glancing at Lucas with a more alert expression than he had used thus far.
“Indeed? You have changed. Grandmother will be glad to hear it.”

Now it was Isabela who blushed. “Get to the point.”

“As it happens, cousin …” Castillon cleared his throat. “I am here to deliver you the ship. Grandmother’s orders.”

“I have got to meet your grandmother,” Varric muttered.

“She’s a peach,” Isabela agreed. “Slap your hand, did she, Aramis?”

“Something like that. So you will take the ship and I will go and we will agree to leave one another alone?”

Isabela nodded.

“Then I believe our business is concluded.” Castillon bowed. “Until we meet again.” He walked back to the small boat, casting off the lines efficiently, and rowed it out of the dock.

Varric was already deep in the nearest crate. “More scarves. Where do they all come from?” he muttered.

“Here, let me help.” Carver joined him, pulling a broken staff out of a tall crate. “Merrill might like this one.”

For once, Isabela let it go. She was watching where Castillon had gone.

Lucas wanted to hold her, to kiss her, to … he wasn’t sure what else he wanted, and that made him nervous.

At last she glanced at him, a quick sideways look before she looked back down at her boots. “You didn’t suck tonight, Hawke.”

“I live for your high praise.” He hesitated, then said, “I’m glad you got your ship back.”

“The fastest ship in the ocean,” she said dreamily.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I …” She glanced at him again, and then away. “I really should haul anchor first thing in the morning, but … you know how these things go. I’ll have to do a thorough inspection, make sure Castillon took good care of her …”

“I see.” Lucas’s heart was frozen somewhere around his toes. So she was going to leave him after all. No Isabela in Kirkwall? How was he going to do without her?

“And …” Isabela looked up and then away again. “I’ve taken a bit of a shine to Kirkwall and to … some of its people.” She cleared her throat. “Merrill, for example. She needs someone to look after her.”

Lucas’s heart started beating again. Maybe she wasn’t leaving Kirkwall … but was she leaving him?

Isabela swallowed visibly. “I’m … going to go back to the Hanged Man tonight. Can I … um … speak to you there tomorrow?”

He didn’t know where things had gone wrong. Desperately, he said, “You know I didn’t mean any
of that, right? About the Qunari and the Champion of Kirkwall thing?"

She nodded. “I know.” Now she did look at him, over her shoulder. “I just need … some time to think. I’ll see you tomorrow, Lucas.”
Lucas spent a largely sleepless night, tossing and turning, unable to straighten out the tangle of thoughts running through his head.

In all the time she had been searching for her relic, afraid of this Castillon, why had she never thought to mention they were related? Why had she never told Lucas what the relic was, or that it pertained to the Qunari?

Well, all right, that one he understood. She hadn’t trusted him. Isabela didn’t trust easily; it had taken all the years they had worked together for her to believe he wasn’t going to turn his back on her. And she had trusted him tonight—she had waited for him to come for her. And while she had lied to him about the relic, and had run as soon as she got her hands on it … she had come back, on her own.

Would she leave him now that she had her ship? He didn’t want her to go; in a world of things he wasn’t sure about, he was absolutely sure of that. While he had trusted her to take care of herself tonight, the thought that something might have gone wrong and he could have lost her entirely was … He didn’t even want to think about it. Somehow, somewhere along the line, she had become more important to him than anyone else in his life. If she left Kirkwall—he wanted to go, too.

Yes. With dawn filtering in his windows, Lucas could see more clearly than he had in a long time. Possibly ever. He wanted to be with Isabela, wanted to make his life with her, wanted that far more than he wanted this big fancy house in Hightown or the title of Champion of Kirkwall or any of the responsibilities that came with them.

The decision, the heart-deep feeling that it was the right one, put his mind at rest, and at last he slept, deeply, until the sun was high in the sky.

Lucas took his time getting dressed, taking care with his clothes and his shave and his hair, doing his best not to speculate on what might happen tonight.

Carver was out when he went downstairs, Bodahn didn’t know where. Lucas was a little relieved—he really hadn’t wanted to talk to his brother until after he talked to Isabela anyway.

The rest of the afternoon passed slowly as he tried to while away the time by sorting through the stack of mail, most of it ridiculous or unwanted. At last, he couldn’t wait any longer and he left the house, making his way as slowly as he could manage down the long stairs and to the Hanged Man.

As he came in from the sunny day he blinked in the tavern’s dim light, eventually finding Isabela seated at a table, an untouched bottle in front of her.

She looked up as he approached. “Y … you’re here.”

“I am. Is this seat taken?”

“It is now.”

He sat down, gingerly, her nervousness contagious. “I’m not too early, am I?”

“No, you’re fine.”

“Did you get a chance to go over your ship today?”
Isabela nodded, her eyes brightening. “She’s beautiful. Or she will be, once I get done with her.”

Lucas had to smile at her enthusiasm. “So when do I get the grand tour?”

“When I’m done with it. Right now, it’s not fit to be seen. Castillon had this obsession with mustard-colored satin.”

“Not your color.”

Isabela shuddered. “No. Ugh.” She leaned forward, her eyes on Lucas’s, more open and direct than she had ever looked at him before. “I wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I’m—I’m glad you walked in here all those years ago.”

Lucas’s pulse sped up; it sounded so much like the preamble to a good-bye. But he kept his worry off his face as best he could. “I am, too. You’ve added a lot of much-needed spice to my life.”

She smiled. “You do know how to flatter a girl.” Clearing her throat, she went on, “Now that I have my ship … I was thinking … I’ll need a new crew, and … I’d like to have someone like you on board.”

“You offering me a job?” His heart was pounding with hope now, that maybe she wanted what he wanted.

“I am. I’ll need … someone I can really trust, who has my back, no matter what happens.”

“You know I do,” Lucas said softly.

“Yes. So … what do you say?” She looked almost afraid; it was all the proof Lucas needed that she really wanted this.

He grinned. “Exploring the world with you and getting away from all this? Best offer I’ve ever heard.”

Isabela’s eyes lit up, the tension in her easing. “You and me, chasing that horizon. I can’t think of any place I’d rather be, or …” She looked away, suddenly uncomfortable again. “Or anyone I’d rather be with.”

“What is it?” Lucas leaned across the table toward her. “What’s wrong?”

“I … I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me.”

“I think—I think I’m falling for you. It’s … okay if you don’t feel the same, but … I need to know, Hawke, if I … if I have a chance with you.”

“You never wanted to talk like this before,” Lucas said softly.

“I know. I … haven’t had a lot of good luck with … all this. But—I want to try. With you. And I can’t deny what I feel. Not any longer.”

“Neither can I.” He took her hand, her strong brown fingers curling around his. “You have all the chances with me that you need. Just … promise you won’t run off and break my heart?”

“Would it?”
Lucas nodded. “It almost did the last time. I don’t think … I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Promise you won’t give me a reason to?”

“I’ll try not to.”

“So will I.”

Lucas got to his feet, still holding on to her hand, and pulled her against him. She came willingly, her arms winding around his neck. They held each other, not moving, for what felt like a long time, oblivious to the sounds of the Hanged Man around them. At last Isabela pulled back, looking up at him. “Come upstairs?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

She kept hold of his hand all the way to her room, as if she was afraid to let go. As soon as the door closed behind them, she reached up to kiss him, her lips soft and tentative on his. Lucas cupped her cheek with one hand, holding her face there as he slowly deepened the kiss, taking time to explore and taste and tease until her mouth opened for him, her hands closing on fistfuls of his shirt to hold herself up.

Slowly his hand drifted to the laces of her tunic, tugging at the ends until they came untied. Isabela pulled back long enough to pull the tunic off over her head. Her scarf got tangled with it in the process and she let both fall, her hair tumbling loose around her shoulders and down her back. Lucas carded his fingers through it, the silky texture and exotic scent making him dizzy. Sliding his hands under her hair, he began unfastening her necklaces, laying them on the table near the door as they came off. When her throat was bare to him, he began kissing the smooth brown skin, teeth and tongue exploring as his hands cupped and massaged her heavy breasts.

“Hawke,” Isabela breathed, and he raised his head to look at her, stilling his motion until she opened her beautiful eyes to look at him.

“Lucas,” he said firmly.

Isabela smiled. “Lucas.”

“That’s more like it.” He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, spreading her out before him with her legs apart, clad only in her tiny black smallclothes and her boots. Slowly he unfastened the buckles on one of those ever-present boots, smoothing his hands over the firm skin of her thighs as it was revealed to him, lifting her bare leg to press kisses along the inside of her knee and down her calf to her foot, taking the toes in his mouth to nibble.

“Mm.” Isabela shifted restlessly on the bed. “That feels good.”

Lucas kept it up, then turned his attention to the other leg, removing the boot and repeating his actions.

Eventually, looking for more, Isabela hooked her free leg around the back of his thigh and pulled him forward until he collapsed on top of her. She held him there, kissing him.

He lost himself in that kiss, the pure sensation of being there in her arms, feeling her nearly naked beneath him. That had happened many times before, but this was different. There was something in her kiss, in the eagerness in her, that she had never allowed to show before.
She nudged him over onto his back and stripped him of his clothes with single-minded efficiency, shedding her smallclothes as well before she climbed on top of him. She teased them both by slowly stroking herself along the length of him. Lucas groaned, lifting his hips to press more firmly against her. “Isabela.”

Chuckling at the desperation in his voice, she guided him inside her, rising and falling slowly, her eyes closing with the pleasure of it. Lucas sat up, rubbing the side of his face against her breasts, his arms stealing around her to hold her against him as she moved.

Isabela took his face between her hands, kissing him fiercely. All movement stopped as they kissed, but he could feel her pulsing around him, her walls tightening and tightening.

“Lucas, I need …” She tipped her head back, catching her breath sharply as he reached between them to stroke her. “Yes. Please.”

She shuddered around him. When he felt her relax, he rolled them over, carefully, and began to move inside her, watching her face as the pleasure built in her again, kissing her as his own began to rise to its peak.

They flowed over the edge together, holding on to each other, still kissing as their bodies began to cool. Lucas shifted onto his side, pulling her against him, reveling in the fact that she came willingly, tucking her head against his chest and wrapping a leg around him.

He fell asleep to the soft sound of her breathing and the gentle brush of her breath across his skin.
Swabby

Lucas awoke to find Isabela looking at him anxiously. Before he could bring his brain into focus enough to ask her what was wrong, she was off the bed, seeking out clothes and disappearing into the closet at the corner of the room.

He sighed, stretching out in the bed, waiting for her.

“You going to lie there all day?” she asked, emerging from the closet fully dressed.

“You have a better idea?”

“I have all sorts of things to order for my ship. I need to do an inventory, talk to the sailors and make sure I approve of them, redesign the captain’s cabin completely …”

“So you’re saying you’re not in a hurry to rush off to the open ocean.”

“Oh, I am. I just want to do it right.” She paused at the foot of the bed, looking down at him doubtfully. “Did you mean it? You’d really go with me?”

Lucas got up on his knees, reaching out to touch her hair, which was spilling over her shoulder. “I would go anywhere with you.”

She blinked, and he wondered if in the light of day she was regretting what she had said to him last night. There was something about her that was like a wild creature, slowly being tamed; she needed to be able to come to him on her own terms.

He tugged on her hair affectionately and got up, searching for his own clothes. “Do you want my help? With the ship?”

Isabela looked at him sideways. “No.”

It was a clipped sound, and while Lucas sat on the edge of the bed and laced up his boots he wondered what he had said wrong. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, looking up at her face. “Hey. It’s your ship; you’re the captain. I’m not trying to take over. I don’t even know anything about ships! I’m going to be the worst landlibber you ever saw.”

“Landlubber.”

“What?”

“It’s landlubber, not landlibber.”

“See?” He grinned at her. “I don’t know anything. But I’m pretty good at carrying things around, and I used to be a fair hand with a hammer back in Ferelden. So I’m offering to be put to work at whatever task you might need a hand with. And …” Lucas paused, not quite sure how to frame the next bit. “If you need … an investor with some ready coin …”

“I don’t need your money!”

“Okay. But you can have some if you find it would be useful.”

Isabela studied his face carefully, frowning. “You’re going to insist on being all … thoughtful and supportive, aren’t you?”
“Well, maybe not insist, but …”

“And, what, I’m supposed to roll over and be all grateful all over the place?”

He tugged a little harder on her hand, pulling her into his lap. “I’ve never done this kind of thing before. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Well, I haven’t. So I’m figuring it out as I go along. But … here’s the thing. The person I decided to do it with for the first time is you. Isabela. Prickly, sexy, funny, smart, sneaky, pirate captain Isabela. That’s all I’m really asking you to be, is the you that you are. Me, on the other hand … I’ve got no sodding clue who I am. So, you know, if I do something you don’t like, you can just slap me and maybe that’ll fix it. Can’t promise anything, though.”

She raised a hand and slapped him, lightly, on the cheek.

“What was that for?”

“To see if you’d like it.”

At that he kissed her. She shifted until she was straddling his lap, kissing him back, hard.

Lucas was breathing heavily when she broke the kiss. He lay back on the bed and tried to drag her with him, but Isabela chuckled and disentangled herself from him. “Come on, then, swabby. Things to do.”

“Now?”

“You can think of a better time?”

“I can think of things I’d rather do right now. Shouldn’t a swabby’s first job be to attend to the needs of his captain?”

“Oh, you will. Later.”

She kept him hopping the rest of the day; Lucas had the sense that she was testing him to see if he had really meant that he was willing to help out. She had him ripping down fabric from the walls of the captain’s cabin—a truly hideous mustard-yellow satin that he had to agree had been a terrible choice. Then he was in what she called the bilges, moving casks around while she and her bosun checked supplies and reorganized. Finally, she set him to coiling massive ropes while she talked with some of the crew.

By the time the sun was setting, Lucas was hot, dirty, and exhausted. Isabela looked him over admiringly. “You’re starting to look like a sailor.”

“I think I’d rather have been fighting,” he groused.

“Oh, there’s some of that. But it’s a lot of work keeping a ship in top condition, and you can’t cut corners if you want to win those fights.” She raised an eyebrow. “Still want to sail with me?”

Mostly what he wanted was a cask of ale, a massive bronto steak, a long bath, and to sleep for ten hours … not necessarily in that order. “I sure as the Void wouldn’t be sailing with anyone else.”

Isabela grinned. “Glad to hear it.” She tucked her arm in his. “Come on, let’s get you back to Cushytown and into your silk jammies.”
As they entered his estate, they could hear voices from the dining room. Carver’s, and Merrill’s. Isabela lost her good cheer immediately, stalking into the room to find Carver feeding Merrill something on a fork.

“Mm,” Merrill moaned. “That is so good.” She looked up and saw them. “Hawke, did you know Hawke … er …”

“Carver,” supplied the owner of that name.

“I suppose that does make it easier. Did you know Carver can cook?”

“News to me,” Lucas said.

Carver grinned. “Something I picked up during the Blight. Blackwall’s cooking was crap, so I took over. You know how I love to eat.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

Looking Lucas over with a raised eyebrow, Carver asked, “What have you been up to today? You look like you’ve been crawling around in the sewers.”

“I was a swabby on Isabela’s ship.”

“Got you jumping to her tune, does she? Never thought I’d see the day my big brother was some woman’s love slave.”

Lucas glowered at him. “I was helping.”

“Oh, I’m sure you were.”

They looked at each other, Lucas’s brows drawn together and Carver grinning at him. “And what were you up to today?” Lucas asked, not breaking the eye contact.

“Oh, we went looking for thugs in Darktown,” Merrill said brightly. “Were they thugs?” she asked Carver.

“Yeah, I’d say they were thugs.”

“Why, kitten?” Isabela asked, taking the seat next to Merrill and snagging a forkful of food. “Oh, that is good.”

“Isn’t it? These were the people who sent the note to Gamlen, about the gem.”

“I thought you weren’t going to go after that.”

“You told me not to, but I don’t take orders from you, big brother.” They were still staring at each other. “Not any longer.”

“And you took Merrill why?”

“Oh, it’s all right, Hawke. I didn’t have anything better to do, so I was going to follow you, but Carver said I wouldn’t want to follow you where you were, so I’d better come with him instead. And then the thugs jumped us, and so we had to fight them.”

Lucas finally took his eyes off his brother. Merrill was eating with a better appetite than he’d seen in her in quite some time, she’d clearly enjoyed herself, and it wasn’t as though he’d been going to go
hunting some mysterious gem on Gamlen’s behalf. “Well, then,” he said. “Sorry we interrupted your dinner.”

“There’s more, if you want it,” Carver offered.

“Orana didn’t fuss when you took over the kitchen?”

Carver merely grinned at him, his old “women don’t fuss at me” grin that had always set Lucas’s teeth on edge. It was less bothersome now, because of Isabela.

“Do you want some?” he asked her.

“Please.”

When he came back into the dining room, plates in hand, Merrill was just getting ready to go.

Carver got to his feet. “I’ll walk you back to the alienage.”

“You don’t have to. I hardly ever get lost anymore.”

“I want to. To say thank you for coming with me today,” He grinned at her. “I might have gotten lost in the Undercity myself if you hadn’t.”

“Oh. Well, in that case …”

Lucas could see a blush stealing across the elf’s fair skin under the warmth of Carver’s gaze.

Isabela growled and started to get up from the table, but Lucas caught her wrist and shook his head at her. “Come back as soon as you’re done, will you?” he asked his brother. “There’s something I want to talk to you about. Something you might find … interesting.”

Carver looked at him suspiciously. “Sure.”

“Ooh, sounds exciting,” Merrill said.

The two of them left. When they heard the front door close, Isabela leaned across the table, her food lying untasted on the plate in front of her. “What’s the big idea?”

“Well, first of all, Merrill seems to like him.”

“She’s too sweet and innocent to be preyed on by someone like that!”

“My brother,” Lucas reminded her. “And he’s not a bad guy, despite that. He played around with a lot of girls, but he never mistreated one.”

“I don’t want him to break her heart.”

“Neither do I, which is why I propose we give him a distraction.”

“What kind?” Isabela sat back in her chair, watching him curiously.

“If you and I are going to go sailing off into the sunset, then someone has to take over the Amell estate, right? I propose that we make my brother into the Champion of Kirkwall. And even, if we have the time, make him Viscount.”

“Make him what?”
“You heard me. The city needs one, Carver needs something to do that stretches his brains as well as his brawn, and it would be entertaining.”

“Your brother couldn’t be Viscount in a hundred ages.”

“Want to bet?”

Isabela leaned forward again, her eyes glittering. “Ooh, that could be fun. What do I get if I win?”

“What do you want?”

“How. I already have a ship … Do you know, I’m not sure, Hawke. Isn’t that a first. I’ll tell you what, prize to be named when someone wins.”

“Deal.” Lucas stood halfway up in his chair to meet her across the table and seal the bet with a kiss. A long kiss, broken only when she tried to climb across the table to get closer to him and ended up putting her knee in her plate of food.

“Ew. Hawke, look what you’ve done.”

“What I’ve done?” He chuckled, resuming his seat and tackling his now rather lukewarm food.

Isabela took up her napkin and started cleaning off her knee, and the top of her boot.

The door closed again and Carver came back in. “So, brother? I’m all on pins and needles. Unless that was just an excuse to get me away from Merrill.”

“She’s been through a lot,” Lucas said mildly. “She doesn’t need her heart broken.”

Carver started to protest, then seemed to remember some of the incidents Lucas might have been alluding to and thought better of it. “Then what was it you wanted to talk about?” He sank into a chair, putting his feet up on the table.

Isabela looked up from her boot to grin at Lucas, clearly thinking her bet was the safe one. But Lucas knew his brother better than she did.

“Carver, what is it that you want most out of life?”

“Really? That’s where we’re going?”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what I want, and save us all the time.”

“All right, I will. You want to be rich.”

“Yeah, so far so good.”

“You want to be powerful.”

“Wouldn’t hurt.”

“You want everyone to know that you’re better than I am.”

Carver grinned. “You mean they don’t already?”

“I’m going to give you all of that. And more.”
“How?”

“How have you ever thought about becoming Viscount of Kirkwall?”

Carver sat bolt upright in his chair. “You’re shitting me!”

“Not in the least. I think we can do it.”

“And what will you be doing?” Carver asked suspiciously.

“Swabbing the bilge and cleaning out the decks. Isabela has promised to run away with me and turn me into the fiercest pirate that ever sailed the Antivan mainland.”

Isabela made a strangled sound of protest in the back of her throat. “There is so much wrong with that sentence …”

Carver chuckled. “Mother would be appalled.”

“Probably. Bethany would be shocked—me running away to be a pirate and you ruling a city-state in the Free Marches.”

“No, I don’t think she would. I think she knew us better than we knew ourselves.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“Do you think you can make it happen?”

“I think I can.”

“Fine. Then you have to do something for me.”

“What?” Lucas asked.

“Come with me to talk to Gamlen about this gem. I think it means a lot to him, and … I feel like we should do something for him. Let’s face it, brother, no one actually wants to spend their days broke and drinking cheap ale in a brothel.”

“You have a point. All right, we’ll talk to Gamlen tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”
Meredith's Hatchet Man

Isabela went along with them when they headed for Gamlen’s in the morning, and Merrill met them as they passed the Hanged Man. It was odd to be walking this way, he with Isabela and Carver with Merrill, and for a moment, Lucas lost himself in a strange daydream of what it might have been like if his mother were alive, visiting her with their partners.

“Wake up there, Hawke. You have a dangerous look on your face,” Isabela told him, elbowing him sharply in the ribs.

“What kind of look says dangerous to you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Happy. Knock it off.”

“I am sorry. Would abject misery in your presence suit you better?” He grinned at her, and after a moment she smiled back.

“Well, maybe you don’t have to go that far.”

No one answered their knock. Lucas would just as soon have left, assuming Gamlen must not be at home, but Carver jiggled the doorknob and the door creaked slowly open.

“Shut that!” Gamlen’s voice croaked from inside, and Carver stepped inside, motioning the others to follow.

Gamlen lifted his head from the table, blinking at them in the light of the open door. “What is it you lot want, then?”

Carver leaned across the table. “I want to know about the wallop mallet.”

“The what?” Gamlen and Lucas spoke at the same time.

Keeping his eyes on their uncle, Carver said, “You heard me. The wallop mallet.”

“What in the Maker’s name is a wallop mallet?” Lucas asked.

Gamlen chuckled, which turned into a cough, which turned into a coughing fit. Merrill hurried to his side, laying her hand gently on his back. “Oh. I can fix that. Do you want me to fix that?”

Glaring at her, Gamlen said, “What do you think?”

“I don’t know.” Merrill’s face was wide open and guileless, and Gamlen’s glare softened a bit.

“Yes, please. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Oh, no, no trouble at all.” Intently, Merrill laid the other hand on his back, and immediately it became quieter in the room. Lucas hadn’t even noticed how harshly his uncle was breathing until now. “You should stop drinking,” Merrill admonished the old man as she took her hands away.

“Tell me something I didn’t know,” Gamlen muttered. He gestured to a big wooden stick hanging on the wall. Lucas must have looked at that thing a hundred times when he lived with Gamlen, but he had never paid attention to it before. “That’s a wallop mallet. Haven’t played since I was a kid. Last time I was any good at something,” he muttered under his breath.
“You were a good brother,” Lucas told him. “A … better brother than I was a son.”

Gamlen looked up at him but didn’t say anything, and Lucas was glad of it, because it had been nothing more or less than the truth.

Carver took the mallet down from the wall, and they all studied it. Merrill shook her head, sorrowfully. “I can’t believe they used the wood from a vhenadahl tree to make this wallop mallet. It’s just a child’s toy!”

“Hey!” Gamlen got to his feet and snatched the mallet back. “It’s a lot more than just a toy to me.”

“I only meant … those trees are sacred to my people.”

As Gamlen looked away, scuffing his feet uncomfortably, Carver frowned at the mallet. “There’s nothing there. The thugs in Darktown, they said …”

“Thugs?” Gamlen asked. “Darktown?”

“You know these Hawkes,” Isabela said. “Always getting themselves beaten up in Darktown.”

She ushered the rest of them out the door, leaving Gamlen looking at the mallet wistfully.

“What’s the big idea?” Carver asked. “We were supposed to find out about the gem.”

“He doesn’t know anything about any gem,” Isabela said impatiently. “How could he, and live like that? The wallop mallet is about something else, maybe about what turned him into such a sot in the first place.” She turned to Merrill. “What did you say about the verandah tree?”

“Vhenadahl,” Merrill corrected her. “It’s in the middle of the alienage; it’s the way the alienage elves stay connected to their—our—heritage.”

“Well, then, let’s go look there,” Carver said, leading the way. “Maybe there’ll be something carved on the tree.”

Lucas followed, content to do so for once, and very pleased with his plan. Only last night he had decided to make Carver the Champion of Kirkwall, and now here his brother was in the lead, and Lucas could just sit back and enjoy the ride. It felt nice.

In the alienage, they circled the tree, heedless of the strange, and occasionally hostile, looks they got from the elves. Merrill reached out and touched the tree affectionately.

“Can you tell where they cut the wood for the wallop mallet out?” Carver asked.

Before Merrill could answer, a dark-haired elf emerged from the shadows. “Wallop mallet?”

Isabela caught on first, while the others were still staring at the elf. “Yes, wallop mallet. You have something for us?”

He held out a folded paper.

“Whoever’s behind this is like an underpaid brothel wench—he enjoys leading us on,” Isabela remarked. She handed the note to Carver, who groaned.

“What?” Lucas asked.

“It’s just another place to go. Some fish warehouse on the docks, in two weeks.”
Isabela looked at the elf. “Where did you get this note?”

He shrugged. “I was given a few coins to hand this over to whoever came talking about wallop mallets.”

“What did the person look like?”

The elf smiled. “Human. But then, you all kind of look alike to me.”

Lucas rolled his eyes, but handed the elf a few coins for his trouble before they left the alienage.

They reconvened at the Hanged Man. “So what do you think?” Lucas asked his brother. “Wait the two weeks and go to meet whoever this is at the fish warehouse?”

“Might as well.” Carver looked downcast, though. “I thought this would be—“

“Faster? Welcome to Kirkwall.”

Carver rolled his eyes, clearly taking this as older-brother hyperbole.

“I’ll go check out the warehouse during the day while I’m looking in on the ship,” Isabela offered. Lucas raised his eyebrows at her, wondering why she was throwing herself into this with such enthusiasm, and she shrugged. “What? I like a good gem as much as the next person. More, really. And Gamlen’s not such a bad old cuss.”

A messenger appeared next to their table, followed shortly thereafter by Varric. “You didn’t tell me you were here,” he complained, taking the seat between Merrill and Carver.

Lucas opened the message. “How did she ever find me here?” he groaned.

“She?” Isabela snatched the note from him. “Oh. Her.”

Carver was watching both of them. “Do tell.”

“The Knight-Commander desires my presence at the Gallows. I’m sure she has some task for me that will be inconvenient, unpleasant, and entirely beneath her dignity.”

“You make her sound so petty, Hawke. I don’t think she’d like that.” Varric grinned.

“Probably not.”

“So are you going?” Isabela asked.

“Might as well. She’ll keep after me if I don’t.”

Merrill looked troubled. “I think I’ll stay here, Hawke. You don’t need me in the Gallows.”

“No, we don’t.”

“And you stay out of those gardens, too, Daisy,” Varric admonished her, “unless you want to find yourself Meredith’s long-term guest.”

“But they’re so lovely. They’re the only place in Kirkwall you can find Andraste’s Grace.”

“The white flowers?” Carver asked. He smiled. “I used to pick those for Mother.”

“From the Chantry’s garden,” Lucas muttered.
“You’re just jealous you never thought of it.”

They left the Hanged Man and made their way to the harbor ferry, which took them to the Gallows, and then through the gauntlet of bucket-headed Templars guarding every door and gate and corner on the way to Meredith’s office.

She stood up behind her desk when they arrived at the door of her office. “Champion. Captain. Serah Tethras.” Her eyes wandered over Carver, who stood up a bit straighter under her look. “And you are?”

“Carver Hawke.”

“I was under the impression that the Champion here was the sole survivor of his line.”

“Surprise.” Carver chuckled weakly. “We found each other.”

“How nice for you.” She looked at Lucas. “Shut the door.”

When he had done so, she began, “There was an incident within the Gallows. A number of phylacteries were destroyed and several mages took the opportunity to escape. Most of the fugitives have been recovered.”

“But?” He knew what was coming, but he wanted to hear her say it.

Meredith’s mouth pinched into a thin line. “We have not been able to locate the last three. We … require your help to locate them.”

Next to him, he could practically hear the many, many comments Varric was holding himself back from giving voice to, and he thought Isabela choked back a laugh. Certainly Meredith seemed to think so, if the iciness of the glare she shot at Isabela was any indication.

“How did the phylacteries get destroyed?” Lucas asked. “I thought that was all but impossible.”

“It should have been, but somehow these mages managed to corrupt several of my own Templars, who assisted them in their escape.” She clenched her fist. “They turned their backs on their duty and endangered the entire city in the process.”

“I take it they were punished for their leniency,” Isabela said.

“Oh, yes.” Meredith almost smiled at that. “Thoroughly.”

It sounded to Lucas a bit like shutting the barn door after the horse had gotten out, which he imagined had been Isabela’s point in making the comment.

“Why are these last three mages so difficult to find?” Carver asked.

“Most of those who fled went straight to their families, and offered no resistance when the Templars came for them. The last three, on the other hand … There are extenuating circumstances.” Meredith looked at Lucas. “Those who are reluctant to speak with Templars will have fewer reservations speaking with the Champion of Kirkwall. The people of Kirkwall trust you.” She said it with evident reluctance. “They will tell you things they would hide from a Templar.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said. Privately, he wasn’t at all sure about this task. He believed in the Circles, yes, but he wasn’t the son and brother of apostates for nothing—people belonged with their families, at the end of the day. “What can you tell me about these mages?”
Meredith handed him a thick packet. “This will tell you everything you need to know about them. And, Champion? Do not dawdle. Any atrocities committed by these mages are on your hands from this point forth.” A small smile played around her mouth. “I know that you, of all people, are aware of the dangers such apostates pose.”

For a brief moment, Lucas wondered what it would feel like to break the Knight-Commander’s neck. He left her office without another word, afraid of what he might do or say if he stayed a moment longer.

“I wouldn’t put a ship’s rat under the care of that woman,” Isabela said as they got on board the ferry that would take them back to Kirkwall. “Tell me we aren’t going to turn in these poor mages?”

Flipping through papers, Lucas said, “That depends on the mages. I don’t like Meredith any better than you do, but some mages are a danger to themselves and others.” He carefully didn’t look at Varric as he said it. They still disagreed about Anders, and probably always would. “This one doesn’t seem too bad. Emile de Launcet. Parents are Orlesian nobles living in Kirkwall; he’s been in the Gallows since he was six. Meredith suspects he went home and his mother is covering for him. We’ll go, we’ll drink some expensive tea, we’ll see what’s what.”

“Fine.” Isabela crossed her arms, lifting her face to the breeze. “I’ve got plenty of ship to work on anyway.”

“Good. I’d hate for you to be bored.” Without waiting for a response, Lucas picked up the next set of papers. “Evelina. Wait, I remember her. Says here she was from the Fereldan Circle originally, arrived in Kirkwall with a bunch of kids, orphans and refugees from Ferelden. She used to hang around near Tomwise’s, begging for coins.”

“I remember her, too,” Varric said. “She get caught?”

“She went to the Gallows asking for food and shelter for the children; they locked her up.”

“Shouldn’t we help her?” Carver asked.

“We’ll see if we can. Maybe we can send her back to Ferelden.”

“How is the Fereldan Circle these days?” Varric asked.

Carver made a face.

“That bad?”

“Not as bad as the Gallows seems to be,” Carver conceded.

“Who’s the last one?” Varric asked.

Lucas flipped a few more pages. “Huon, an alienage elf. It says his wife still owns a stall there, but she claims she hasn’t seen him. Maybe Merrill can help us.”

“I’ll ask her,” Carver offered.

There was a noticeable silence following his words, into which Lucas said, “Sounds like a plan,” daring Isabela or Varric to argue with him.

They didn’t. The ferry docked on the other side of the harbor. Isabela went to go look in on her ship, Varric to the Hanged Man, and Lucas headed up to Hightown with his brother, wondering what he
had gotten himself into. Was he really just Meredith’s hatchet man now? Was that what being the Champion of Kirkwall was all about?

Piracy was looking better and better.
Kirkwall Nights

Lucas let piracy distract him for the better part of two weeks, in which Isabela gave him a brief but intense course in ships and the management and care thereof. He spent his days painting and scrubbing and hammering and generally making himself useful wherever he was told—and he earned the kind of rewards pirates only dream of, doled out generously by his very own pirate queen.

He would have thought it would get boring after a while, constantly at someone else’s beck and call, but he found it refreshing to always know what was ahead of him, and to have the ultimate responsibility rest on someone else’s shoulders for a change.

Peremptory notes came from Meredith demanding to know why he hadn’t found her missing mages, and he somehow managed to keep himself from sending back notes demanding why her Templars hadn’t found them—among other reasons because the last thing anyone wanted was the Templars taking a closer look at the alienage.

They had planned a big dinner at the Hawke estate for the night after Aveline and Donnic were due back from their honeymoon, and Lucas was glad enough to take a break from jumping at Isabela’s every command to take Orana’s list to the market.

Carver joined him, and Lucas wasn’t surprised when Merrill appeared shortly after they’d left the house. She and Carver had been spending quite a bit of time together, and Isabela’s patience for it was growing shorter by the day. Lucas wasn’t so sure—Merrill seemed much more confident and less fluttery than she’d ever been before, and Carver was more gentle than his normal self when the elf was around. And in the long run, they were both adults, and Lucas was tired of being the arbiter of everyone else’s behavior.

Merrill smiled at both of them now. “Hello, Hawkes. Where are you off to today?”

“Shopping.” Lucas grinned. “For a change.”

“Oh, let me see!” Merrill took the list from him. “Where were you planning to go?”

Lucas and Carver exchanged shrugs. “Hightown Market?”

“No, no, don’t do that. Come to the alienage; the vegetables are much better quality.”

“Than Hightown?” Lucas asked skeptically.

Merrill looked at him as though he was daft. “Of course. We elves know how to grow things.”

“Whatever you say, then,” he agreed, and they accompanied her to the alienage.

Lucas let Merrill take the list and he and Carver ended up following her around while she haggled. It was a side of her Lucas had never seen before, or at least, had only glimpsed occasionally while she used her magic—serious and determined and focused.

As she was leaving a stall, the proprietor, a woman with tired, worried eyes, caught her wrist. “Merrill … are these the men who wanted to know about Huon?” she whispered.

“Yes, Nyssa.”

“He-he was here. Yesterday.” Nyssa shivered. “He scared me. He kept shouting about ‘true elven
power’. He said …” She hesitated. “He said he was coming back for me tonight, to take me away from this forever. I don’t know what that means, but … I don’t think I want to go.” Her grip tightened on Merrill’s wrist. “You’ll be here, won’t you? Help me?”

“Of course,” Merrill said.

“Please don’t hurt him! I don’t … I didn’t want the Templars to take him, but now I’m wondering if the Circle isn’t the best place for him after all.”

“We’ll do our best,” Lucas promised her gently.

Nyssa nodded and returned to her stall.

“It must be so painful to have to turn in your own spouse,” Carver said quietly as they left the alienage. He glanced at Lucas. “Do you think Mother was ever tempted?”

“No. But then, I don’t think Father was ever frightening, either. I can’t remember him using his magic much at all, except to train Bethany.”

“You are both so lucky,” Merrill said. She looked down at her feet. “I wish … the Keeper, or anyone, had as much faith in me as the two of you seem to have had in your father.”

Lucas put a hand on her shoulder. “We believe in you, Merrill.”

She smiled at him. “That’s sweet, Hawke. An exaggeration, but sweet nonetheless.”

Carver stayed quiet, his eyes on the back of Merrill’s head. Lucas couldn’t read his brother’s expression—and he didn’t try too hard. Whatever was in Carver’s heart was his own, he told himself; if he needed help with it, he would ask.

They convinced Varric to get the dinner party started that night and make their apologies to Aveline and Donnic for being late. Isabela met them in the alienage as darkness fell, all of them crowding into Merrill’s tiny little house watching Nyssa as she paced near the vhenadahl, waiting for Huon.

“You actually think this guy is dangerous?” Isabela asked, swinging her legs with little regard for the dangerous sway of Merrill’s rickety table.

“Nyssa thought he was, and Nyssa doesn’t scare easily,” Merrill answered, not moving from her spot at the window. “There he is!” she hissed suddenly.

She hurried out the door, the others behind her, only to see Nyssa walking toward a bald elf. They were staring at each other with an odd intensity, and Merrill cried out, “No!”

Isabela immediately sent a blade spinning through the air, catching Huon in the throat, and he fell.

Nyssa stopped moving, shaking her head as if to clear it, then she fell to her knees next to Huon’s body. “Huon, no. Oh, no.” She looked up at Merrill, tears in her eyes. “What was wrong with him?”

“Blood magic,” Merrill said softly. “I don’t know why.”

“He felt trapped,” Carver said morosely. “I’d never want to see anyone I loved in a Circle.”

Lucas looked at his brother in surprise; it wasn’t entirely a new sentiment, given the circumstances of their lives, but … Carver had toyed with joining the Templars, a long time ago. Perhaps his brother’s feelings for Merrill went deeper than Lucas had imagined they did.

Merrill was looking up at Carver with a softness in her green eyes.
“Time for a party, yeah?” Isabela asked.

“I suppose so. We’ll need to notify the guards that Huon’s body is here.”

Nyssa nodded, wiping away the tears on her cheeks. “I’ll do that.”

“You aren’t afraid that they’ll think you were holding out on them before?” Merrill asked.

“I’m not afraid.” Nyssa sank back onto her heels, sighing. “After all these years, trapped in a marriage that couldn’t be, I’m free. Little as I wanted to be,” she added, smoothing her hand over Huon’s bald head.

They left her alone with her husband, then, as she seemed to want, but they were a quiet group on their way back through Lowtown and up the stairs.

In the middle of the Hightown Market, a group of men awaited them. At his side, Lucas felt Isabela stiffen. He glanced at her, but she shook her head.

One of the men, moving lightly in leather armor, stepped forward, a smile on his face. He undoubtedly meant it to be charming. “The Champion of Kirkwall, yes?”

“Yes,” Lucas said shortly.

“Forgive me. I should introduce myself properly.” The man gave a courtly bow. “I am Nuncio Caldera Lanos.”

“Antivan,” Isabela murmured.

Lanos looked her over. “Very astute of you. I do hail from that beautiful country. Alas that we could not all be enjoying the warm breezes and refreshing iced drinks of Antiva City.” He looked around him with a faint shudder of disgust. “Nevertheless … I have come to you in search of aid. There is an … elven assassin loose in the area. My men and I have been chasing him.”

“Good luck to you.”

With a faint, tight smile, Lanos continued, “We have been … unable to run him to ground. My understanding is that he has hidden himself among the local Dalish. No doubt playing on their shared heritage.” His eyes flicked over Merrill, and she shivered. Carver stepped protectively in front of her, and Lanos’s smile widened unpleasantly. “This elf is a master manipulator who will endanger even his own kind to ensure his own survival.”

“Assassin-hunting a specialty of yours?” Carver asked.

“Let me guess,” Isabela said, “your duty to Antiva.”

“Oh, you are wise. It was that, at first,” Lanos said, “but I have lost many good men to him. It has now become … personal.”

“I’ll bet.” Isabela snickered, and Lanos’s hand went for the hilt of his sword.

It seemed evident that Isabela knew more about this situation than Lucas did. And she seemed to be sympathizing with this assassin, whoever he was. A former lover, no doubt, Lucas thought, wishing he didn’t feel the jealous tightening of his gut at the thought.

Lanos glared at Isabela. “This man is nothing but a murderer, a thief, and a liar.”
“And you want me to use my wily, wily ways to hunt down this assassin for you,” Lucas finished. He gave an exaggerated yawn. “Tell me why this is my problem.”

“This elf is very dangerous. He must be brought in before he kills again.”

“And?”

Lanos frowned. “And there will be coin in it for you. A great deal of coin.”

“Ahh. Now that’s more like it.” Lucas smiled. “Pleasure doing business with you, Serah Lanos.”

One of Lanos’s men said, “We won’t be waiting here for you. When you have the elf, bring him to our campsite outside the city. And … do it quickly. For everyone’s sakes.”

Lucas didn’t miss the implied threat. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

“You do that.” Lanos gestured to his men and they moved out.

“What was that all about?” Lucas asked Isabela as soon as Lanos and his men were out of earshot.

“I’d bet my left earring they’re looking for an old … friend of mine,” she said, staring into the darkness after the men. “And that they’re Crows.”

“Antivan Crows?” Carver asked in surprise. “You’re sure?”

“Not entirely, but …” Isabela nodded. “I think so.”

“Do we want to mess with Crows?”

“If it’s my … friend they’re after, we do.”

Lucas decided not to pursue that line of questioning. He didn’t think he wanted to meet Isabela’s … friend. Not just yet. He looked at Merrill instead. “You think we could go talk to your people, see if they would tell you where this man is?”

She sighed, looking sad. “They would be more likely to tell you, Hawke.”

He couldn’t argue with that. Still … “You should come with us. You ought to talk to Marethari.”

Merrill looked up at him, her big green eyes wide and resigned, but she didn’t bother to respond. They returned to Hightown, where they found Fenris loitering around the outside of the Hawke estate. He looked up as they approached, starting guiltily.

“Ah, Hawke, there you are. I … ah … was merely … lost in thought.”

Isabela looked at the elf, her eyebrow raised. “Kitten, let’s head inside. You, too, big guy.”

With a curious glance at Fenris, they both followed her inside the house, leaving Lucas to fold his arms and lean against the wall with a weary sigh. Of all the people who asked things of him, Fenris was the least troublesome about it, but … for a change he’d like to have everyone happy, or at least content. Just for a moment. “Something on your mind?” he asked.

Fenris growled. “I am an utter and absolute fool.”

“Why now?”
The green eyes narrowed as Fenris glared at him.

Lucas smiled broadly at his friend. “It’s Lia. Isn’t it?”

“Among other things, yes. Ever since you pointed her out at that extravaganza of Aveline’s, I see her everywhere, and she … looks at me.”

“Yes. It’s always a bit unsettling when a woman looks at you. I find it so myself.”

“You are making sport of me.”

“I would never! … Well, all right, maybe I would.” Lucas looked more closely at the elf. “But there’s something more, isn’t there? More than simply knowing a woman finds you attractive.”

“There is nothing about me that is suited for a woman’s happiness. Or anyone’s happiness,” Fenris muttered.

“Do you want to tell me what the problem is?”

“Hawke, you know who I am, what I have been and what I have done. What right have I to ask for …” He let the words trail off, wrapping his arms around himself. “I am sorry. This was … a mistake. I should never have spoken—in fact, I should never have come here tonight. I will … I will see you later.”

“Fenris, wait. Talk to me!”

“No … no, Hawke, I … I have much to think about. We will speak later.”

Lucas decided to let his friend go; in this mood there would be no getting through to him. Something had clearly gotten to the elf; he wondered what it was. Hopefully Fenris would tell him before whatever the problem was got any worse.
Inside the mansion, Lucas found the rest of his friends sitting around in his parlor drinking some very expensive Antivan brandy. “Glad to see you weren’t in a hurry to start without me.”

“Here.” Isabela handed him the bottle and a glass. “We saved you some.”

He upended the bottle and a few drops drizzled into the glass. Lucas made a show of tipping the glass back and letting the paltry amount of liquor run onto his tongue. He smacked his lips. “Very tasty.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Carver raised his own glass—tolerably full, too—in a toast to Lucas, grinning.

“Wretches, all of you. In my own home, no less.” He crossed to the loveseat where Donnic and Aveline were sitting together. A happier, more relaxed Aveline than Lucas had ever glimpsed before; she had even let down her hair. Leaning down to kiss her cheek, he said, “I take it Orlais is nice this time of year.”

She smiled. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“We all would.” Varric held an imaginary pencil above an imaginary piece of paper, waiting expectantly.

“Not a chance, Serah Tethras,” Donnic said. His hand rested possessively on his wife’s shoulder, caressing a tendril of gingery hair that lay there.

Aveline smiled, a relaxed, almost sleepy smile.

Varric frowned. “‘Contentment in the Barracks’? It’ll never sell.”

“Good,” Aveline said tartly. “You’ve made enough money off me as it is.”

“And don’t I help you lock people up? It’s a fair deal.”

“Hardly that! And that’s Hawke, anyway, helping the Guards.”

Lucas decided it was time to interject. “It might not be me for much longer.”

All eyes were on him suddenly, and he glanced at Isabela, looking for assurance. Rather to his surprise, he got it; her eyes shone with a soft golden light, an expression that looked like … happiness.

He smiled. “It appears that I may be contemplating a career change. The captain of the Siren’s Call II is looking for a … cabin boy.” Lucas raised an eyebrow, grinning wickedly at the captain in question.

Chuckling, Varric said, “Glad to hear you’ll be moving up in the world.”

Aveline looked from Lucas to Isabela and back again. “Are you sure about this, Hawke?”

“Very much so. I’ve—I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” The words came out softly, aimed at another woman entirely.

Isabela frowned, and he could sense she was becoming uncomfortable with his open emotions.
“He’ll have to work hard.”

“She’s already taught me how to hollystone the decks,” Lucas said smugly. He was unprepared for Isabela smacking him on the back of the head.

“Holystone, you idiot.”

“Right. Holystone. That’s what I meant.” He grinned at her, and, albeit reluctantly, she grinned back.

“Aren’t they sweet?” Merrill sighed. She was sitting ensconced in a large chair, with Carver lounging on the arm. He looked down at her affectionately.

“Don’t go getting any ideas, kitten,” Isabela said.

“Oh, I don’t think I would make a good pirate,” Merrill said seriously. “I got sick in the aravels.”

Aveline was on her feet, her brow creased with concern. “All that aside, Hawke, who’s going to take over here? You’re important in this city; you’re the only person Meredith will listen to. We need that here.”

Lucas nodded at his brother. “You have another Hawke, ready and willing to take on the mantle and make it look even shinier. Bonus, he doesn’t mind being called the Champion of Kirkwall.”

“Have to earn that one, Fisticuffs,” Varric said.

“Lucky for me I’ll have you to teach me how to swagger around Kirkwall like I owned the place.” Carver smiled at the dwarf, and the two of them stared at each other for a moment.

Aveline was looking at Carver, too. “Are you ready for this?” she asked him.

“Was he?” Carver asked, gesturing toward Lucas with his head.

“No,” Lucas answered emphatically. “I’m still not.”

“Well … that’s true, but …” Her hands waved in the air, indicating further objections.

“To think I’ve lived to see Aveline at a loss for words.”

“Too bad you can’t say the same,” she snapped at Varric.

“If I were at a loss for words, how could I say anything?”

Aveline glared at the dwarf, and he laughed.

From the loveseat, Donnic said, “I haven’t known Carver here very long, but it seems to me he has as much chance as anyone to take on Hawke’s role. No offense intended, of course,” he added, looking at Lucas.

“Oh, none taken, I assure you.” If he was going to be entirely honest with himself, if not with the others, Lucas would have to admit it stung just a bit to think he could be so easily replaced, even by his own brother, but that was what he wanted, after all. If the others were going to have to get used to Carver, and Carver was going to have to get used to Kirkwall, Lucas would have to get used to receding into the background.

Aveline glanced behind her at her husband. Donnic held her gaze firmly, and after a moment she sighed. “You’re probably right. I’m sorry, Carver.”
Carver shrugged. “It was a bit of a surprise to me, too, when Lucas came up with the idea.” He raised an eyebrow in Lucas’s direction. “You want to tell them the rest, brother?”

‘The rest’ was going to go over with an even bigger splash than the initial announcement. Lucas nodded. “While I was thinking about what I wanted, and what I needed, I gave some thought to what Kirkwall might need, as well.”

“Generous of you to think of us,” Aveline muttered.

“Shh, love.” Donnic pulled her back down next to him on the loveseat.

Lucas continued, “What Kirkwall really needs is someone strong enough to stand up to Meredith, to Orsino, and to the Grand Cleric.” He was glad Sebastian wasn’t here to put in his two coppers about the idea of someone standing up to Elthina. “And besides the strength, that person has to have the authority; they need to be Viscount.”

Varric’s jaw actually dropped. “You’re shitting me. Juni—er, Fisticuffs as Viscount of Kirkwall?”

“At a loss for words yet, Varric?” Isabela grinned at him.

“Getting there, Rivaini.” He looked speculatively at Carver. “But, on the other hand … in the absence of another candidate … Yeah, I can see it.”

“Thank you for your ringing endorsement,” Carver said.

Varric ignored the sarcasm. “Anytime.”

From the doorway came the sound of a throat being discreetly cleared, and Lucas turned to see Bodahn standing there. “Dinner is served, messere.”

“By all means,” Lucas said in relief, “let’s eat. I’m starving.”

“Are you sure you can manage to keep up with his ravenous appetite on board your ship?” Carver asked Isabela as they made their way into the dining room.

She grinned and winked at him, making it clear whose ravenous appetites were more likely to be hard to keep up with.

Dinner was raucous and hilarious, jokes flying thick and fast, Varric and Isabela telling stories. Even Donnic joined in, telling several tales from his patrols. Lucas found it adorable that all of Donnic’s stories featured Aveline as the hero.

As if by an unspoken agreement, no one spoke of Lucas’s plans to become a pirate, or the intent to turn Carver into first the Champion and then the Viscount. It hadn’t occurred to Lucas that in making a change in his own life, he would be changing all his friends’ lives as well. Hopefully they would all get used to it by the time he had Carver established and he and Isabela were ready to leave.

The party broke up when the bells tolled from the Chantry, reminding Aveline that she had a guard change to supervise.

Lucas walked Aveline and Donnic to the door. “Glad to see you both looking so relaxed. I doubt that’ll last, now that you’re home and ready to get back to whipping the guards into shape.”

Donnic looked down at his bride with open delight. “It won’t take her any time at all.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Aveline told him, but her tone indicated she didn’t believe him.
Hanging back just a bit, Donnic said softly, “Serah Hawke, I wonder if I might ask for a moment of your time at some point.”

“Any time you need, Donnic, and please, call me Lucas. We’re practically family now.”

“Yes. I suppose that’s true, isn’t it.”

Aveline’s new husband didn’t look exactly enthused about that; Lucas supposed he couldn’t blame him. He’d married into a strange new family—no doubt it would take him some time to get used to it.

Merrill slipped out past Donnic, with Varric along as escort, the two of them waving good-bye over their shoulders as they headed for the Lowtown steps.

Donnic caught up to his wife, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. She turned her face up to him in the moonlight, laughing. A month ago, Lucas would have been envious of that look. But he had his own treasure now, a box of endless surprises.

He got one now, as he turned from the door to see Isabela perched on the railings at the top of the stairs, her scarf off and her hair flowing loose over her shoulders.

“Upstairs, Hawke.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.”

From the open doorway of the dining room, where Carver sat with the bottle of brandy, came a groan. “Is this kind of thing going to happen every night?”

“I truly hope so,” Lucas said to him as he passed the door on his way to the stairs. It was worth thinking about, though—if they were sharing the house with Carver, they should probably give some thought to his comfort.

That was a consideration for another time, however. For now, there was a beautiful pirate watching him with heavy-lidded eyes as he reached the top of the stairs. She hopped off the railings, following him to the bedroom, and kicked the door shut behind her.

And then she attacked him, pushing him back against the bedpost, tearing his shirt off him, her hands and mouth exploring the contours of his chest. Lucas closed his eyes, arching his back into her touch.

“Don’t move,” she said. “Put your hands above your head.”

He reached up, holding onto the bedpost with both hands while Isabela finished ridding him of his clothes with single-minded efficiency. Then she was on her knees before him, her soft wet mouth enveloping him, taking him deep into her throat and then teasing just the tip of him with her tongue, the alternation of sensations maddening.

“Isabela, please,” he whispered. “Please.”

She chuckled against him, and he moaned at the sensation. Her strong fingers gripped the backs of his thighs, and she got down to business in earnest, working him until he couldn’t take it any longer.

Isabela stood, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, as Lucas tried to catch his breath.

Once he had, he reached for her. “My turn.” Picking her up, he tossed her on the bed. Isabela gave a most unpiratical squeal as she landed on the mattress, and an even less piratical giggle. It was quite possibly the cutest sound Lucas had ever heard, and he felt his heart warm and expand at the sure
knowledge that she would only have made that sound in the presence of someone she truly trusted.

“You are absolutely amazing,” he told her, climbing on the bed and spreading her legs open. He didn’t bother with her boots or her tunic, and when the scrap of her underclothes got in his way, he tore it off. He caressed her with fingers and tongue, determined to give her as much pleasure as she had given him. Her hands tangled in his hair, holding him against her, soft moans escaping her lips as she rode the waves to the summit.

As she sank back against the pillows, sated and sleepy, Lucas worked the buckles of her boots and slipped them off her, and loosened the laces of the black corset she wore and inched that off her, too, before sinking into the bed next to her.

She was practically asleep at that point, but he marveled at how naturally she molded her body against his, tucking herself against his side. Sighing, she murmured something under her breath, something that Lucas thought might have been “My Hawke,” before she slid into sleep.

He was hers, he thought. Was that a first for her? Had anyone ever been truly hers, absolutely and completely? Had she ever let herself trust anyone to that extent before? The very thought that he might be her first in that way, as she was his, had him wanting to wake her, to make love to her again, to tell her all the complicated emotions she made him feel … but it was too soon for that, too new and fragile. Instead, he took what she had given, treasuring it as he did the flawed rubies and chipped opals he had begun to collect that reminded him so of her, and fell asleep with a smile on his face.
Remnants of the Past

Finding urchins alone in the Undercity was far from difficult. Avoiding being swarmed by urchins in the Undercity was a much greater challenge, as was finding the particular group of urchins they sought.

Evelina had cared for a fairly sizeable band of Fereldan orphans, feeding and housing and clothing them as best she could. Lucas felt vaguely guilty that he hadn’t noticed when she disappeared from her usual begging spot near Tomwise the poison-maker’s shop; and that he hadn’t given her more money in the first place.

Looking around him in the Undercity, he thought of the large mansion in Hightown, the rich foods and the opulent fabrics and the fine wines. He needed none of those things, and they could buy the people here so much.

The closed doors of the clinic gave him another pang. Unstable as Anders was, he had been the best thing that had ever happened to the people down here, and Lucas was responsible for his disappearance, for the ills and ailments that could have been healed if Anders was still in residence. Varric knew where the mage was hiding, he was fairly sure, but he hadn’t asked. Hadn’t, really, wanted to know. Maybe he should.

He turned toward the dwarf, finding Varric staring at the closed doors with a similarly troubled look on his face, and decided now was not the time. Instead, he asked, “Do you remember any of Evelina’s particular crew? I’m not sure I ever saw any of them, at least not to know that they were with her.”

Varric looked away from the clinic, frowning. “Mostly kept to themselves, I think. Evelina wanted to keep them from the thievery most refugee kids fall into down here. It’s why so many of them end up in the Carta—or worse.”

“Laudable goal,” Carver remarked. “But it’s hard to fight with scraps against an organized crew bent on recruiting, offering all sorts of tempting goodies to suck in the fresh fish.”

“True enough.” Varric nodded. “Still, I think she had a few who were doing all right under her wing. They must have been devastated when she was gone.”

“You think they’re still around?” Lucas asked.

Isabela gave him a sidewise look. “Sheltered runaway kids down here, without their protector?” She didn’t elaborate—she didn’t need to.

Lucas didn’t want to believe Evelina’s children might be dead. “We’ll keep looking,” he said firmly, ignoring the silence from the others. “Rotten place to grow up,” he said to Carver.

“No worse than a lot of the places we lived.”

“Come on, Carver, the darkness? The rats?”

“You can eat a rat without being afraid a noble’s going to come along and put you to death for poaching.”

Once again, Lucas was struck by the vast difference between his memories of their childhood and Carver’s.
“Hey. Hawkes. Shut it,” Varric hissed. He waved them back as he approached a young boy, skinny almost to emaciation. “You want to make some coin, kid?”

“W-what do I have to do?”

“I just want to ask you some questions.”

The boy was hesitantly reaching for the coin Varric held in his hand when another boy, this one bigger and clearly older, came up behind him and hauled him back by the collar of his filthy shirt. “Cricket, what did I tell you about staying away from people? You can’t trust any of these rich Kirkwallers.”

Varric winced and muttered something about his reputation, but it was Carver who stepped forward. “Look, guys, we’re just down here looking for someone who wants a job. Might be you, might be somebody else.”

“Why should it be us?” the older boy asked suspiciously.

“Why shouldn’t it?”

“Say, you look familiar,” Lucas said. “Have I seen you down here before?”

“No,” said the older boy automatically. “We all look alike to you people.”

“You know, I’m from Ferelden, too. Lothering. What about you?”

“Elmridge. In the West Hills,” said the younger boy. “I miss it.”

“Me, too,” Lucas told him.

“My parents died on the boat, and I was alone here, until—“

“Cricket,” the older boy said waringly.

“Evelina, right?” Lucas said, ignoring the older boy completely. “She took you in, and then she disappeared.”

Cricket nodded.

“We’re fine here, serah,” the older boy said, putting a hand on Cricket’s shoulder. “We don’t need your help, or your job.”

“Walter … maybe we should tell them.”

“Hush!” Walter shook the younger boy. “We don’t tell them anything.”

“Evelina’s back, isn’t she.” Isabela stepped toward them, and suddenly she was Captain Isabela. Lucas still hadn’t gotten used to the change in her when she took command of her ship; her authority was unquestioned. “She came back from the Circle, and found you here. Didn’t she?”

“Y-yes,” stammered Cricket. “There was something … wrong with her.”

Lucas’s heart sank. Abomination? Blood magic? Some kind of infectious disease? Any of them was plausible; none were good.

Walter stood looking at them indecisively. “Maybe you’d better come with me,” he said at last.
He led them deeper into the Undercity. Anyone else would have been frightened, but Lucas had been down here often enough that he no longer worried about his person—or his sword. His purse was another matter, but that he could afford to lose.

A worn bit of canvas propped up on sticks covered a small area in a corner, and Walter and Cricket led them there. “E-Evelina?” Walter called.

The familiar careworn face emerged from under the canvas. “Walter! I told you not to bring anyone here!” She shivered, a spasm of pain crossing her face.

“We came to help,” Lucas said. Of course, that wasn’t strictly true—in actuality, they were the long arm of Meredith’s law—but he preferred to think of himself as a helper.

“No one can help,” she said wearily. Then a change came over her, and she withdrew under the canvas. “Go away! You have to—”

She was groaning and grunting as if she fought something. Lucas stepped forward to try to do something, but a familiar and unexpected voice came from the shadows.

“The mage suffers because of what those who held her captive forced her to undergo. Only she can win this battle. She must be left to stand or fall on her own.”

Lucas turned to meet the militant blue gaze of the spirit who lived behind Anders’s eyes. “Justice.”

“This was no justice,” the spirit intoned. The voice barely sounded like Anders any longer.

“What’s this?” Carver asked.

“He used to be … our friend,” Varric said, his voice a little shaky.

Isabela’s hands hovered above her daggers, her stance ready to roll if anything happened.

“It wasn’t justice,” Lucas agreed, carefully edging away from the spirit-possessed mage and toward Evelina’s hovel.

“Don’t move. It is not for you to help her.”

“Oh, I get it,” Isabela said. “He doesn’t want to prevent her from becoming an abomination. He wants her to become one because he thinks that’s the way to enact justice on the Templars.”

“It doesn’t work that way!” Lucas exclaimed. “It’s not the Templars who will be on the receiving end of the abomination’s destruction, it’s these children. How is that justice?”

As Anders’s mouth opened to speak Justice’s words, a cry of pain and rage and anguish came from the hovel, making further argument unnecessary. Evelina had lost. A hulking abomination rose where she had lain, tearing the canvas in its rage. Cricket gasped. Walter grabbed the younger boy by the shoulders and shoved him in a corner. It was filled with garbage, but at least it was out of the way of the abomination.

“Is this what you wanted?” Lucas asked. He drew his sword.

Justice stayed out of the conflict; Maker forbid he lift a hand against another abomination, Lucas thought bitterly. He wondered if Anders was actually still in there somewhere, or if the mage had lost himself entirely in the cause of justice.

The fight was a short one, made only slightly more difficult by Walter’s attempts to help. The boy
wasn’t bad with the short, rusty blade he had apparently scavenged from somewhere, but he could use some training.

And then the abomination was dead, and so was Evelina. Cricket emerged from his corner and stood looking at what was left of the woman who had cared for him. “What happened to her?”

Expecting Justice to comment, Lucas glanced over his shoulder, but the mage was gone. Of course he was.

Varric moved forward to stand at Cricket’s side. “No one knows, kid. Sometimes … sometimes mages lose it, and it sounds like she had more than enough provocation.”

Cricket looked up at Walter, standing at his other side. “What will we all do now?”

“Same as before. We stick together.”

“How many are you?” Carver asked.

“Eight, now. Used to be more, but—” Walter gave an eloquent shrug.

“Varric.”

“Say no more, Hawke. Consider the clinic reopened as a home for refugee children.” Varric smiled. “Should’ve thought of that before, really. I’ll take care of everything.”

Walter frowned. “We’re all right.”

“You may be, although the way you hold that sword is all wrong,” Isabela told him. “But everyone else? All the other refugee kids down here need help same as you did. Besides, once these two get going you might as well roll with it.”

“But …”

“Here, let me show you a better grip.” Isabela took the rusty weapon out of his hands and started demonstrating.

While the boys were distracted, Lucas moved closer to Varric. “You know I have to go after him.”

“Hawke.”

“Varric, the man’s a danger to everyone around him. Look at what he’s already done to himself!”

“I know, but …”

“No buts. I’ll see Aveline tomorrow, have her bring a troop down here.”

“She’ll never find him.”

“Maybe not,” Lucas said grimly, “but we all have to try. There’s no telling what he might do next.”

Varric didn’t answer, but the uncharacteristic worry on his face spoke volumes.

The next morning, when Lucas spoke to Aveline, she was just as doubtful about the chances of locating Anders. She agreed to try, but the guards weren’t always welcome in the Undercity, and the denizens knew well enough how to hide things, and people, they didn’t wish to have found. Anders had done enough through his clinic that even in his current state, Aveline suspected he would find
those still loyal to him who were willing to help him hide. No doubt that was how he had been living anyway.

Lucas left her office feeling downcast. Had he gone wrong somewhere along the way? He and Anders had never been what he would have called pals, but they had been companions—could Lucas have prevented this descent somehow?

His dark thoughts were interrupted by Donnic. “Serah Hawke, what a pleasant surprise to find you here.”

“Donnic, I thought you were going to start calling me Lucas.”

“Indeed.” Donnic looked uncomfortable, though, and Lucas didn’t push the issue. “There was … Do you have some time? Perhaps we could find a tavern and have a talk.”

“Of course. I had a few errands to run for Isabela, but they can wait a while. She has more than enough work to do on her ship, although I confess I’m not sure I understand it all.” Lucas smiled, both because Isabela being happy with her ship made him happy and to make Donnic feel more comfortable.

Once they were seated in one of Hightown’s more neighborly establishments with ales in front of them, Lucas waited for Donnic to broach whatever topic was concerning him, but Aveline’s husband stared into his tankard and didn’t speak.

“Something on your mind?” Lucas asked at last.

“You met her first husband, didn’t you?”

“Oh. Briefly. And … not when he was at his best.” Wesley had already been suffering with the darkspawn taint; he had gone downhill rapidly, until … Aveline had been so strong through it all, a true warrior.

“So I understand. I wish—“ Donnic broke off.

“You wish you knew more about him? I can see that.”

“Exactly. Aveline is wonderful, so generous and strong and intelligent, but sometimes I wonder if she looks at me and wishes things were different, or if she … if she sees him,” Donnic finished in a low voice.

Lucas nodded. He had never wondered about Isabela’s past in that way—she had chosen him now, and he was content not knowing who she had chosen in former times—but Donnic’s situation was different. Aveline was different. Fiercely loyal, when she gave her heart, she gave all of it, and had only done so twice. It was no surprise that Donnic wondered. Lucas took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Probably she does, sometimes,” he began. Donnic looked at him reproachfully, but Lucas held up a hand to indicate he wasn’t finished. “I don’t know who lies in your past, but I imagine sometimes you look at Aveline and think about whoever came before her. It’s only natural.”

“Perhaps,” Donnic acknowledged. “There is something in what you say.”

“But, also, think of it this way. Aveline married Wesley when she was very young; he was her first love, yes, but he was also the love of a girl who had seen very little of the world. Aveline as she is today has seen a great deal. She suffered deeply after Wesley’s loss, but she kept so much of that to herself. She threw her whole self into being the best Guard she could.”
“And she did excellently well,” Donnic said softly, a smile playing over his face as he thought about her.

“That she did. And then she chose you. This Aveline, who has been married before and knows what it’s like to be in love and to be married, this Aveline who has been around every kind of man here in Kirkwall and been propositioned by quite a few—she chose you.” Lucas grinned. “In all the time I have known her, I have never once known Aveline to make a decision hastily, or to turn aside when she made one. You’re just lucky you didn’t mind being in her path, or you’d have been made to like it anyway.”

At that, finally Donnic broke into a smile. “I would have, wouldn’t I?” He turned to look fully at Lucas for the first time. “I owe you an apology Serah—Lucas.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I have thought of you as … a rival, if you will, a … a threat, really. Because of the place you hold in Aveline’s life, because you are the only person she knows who also knew her first husband. Well, you and now your brother,” he corrected himself. “I was … Well, frankly, I was jealous.”

In the face of Donnic’s honesty, Lucas felt the need to be honest as well. “As was I, at first. I had entertained the notion that I might be romantically attracted to Aveline, but—it’s just as well she made her liking for you known before I could go further down that path. I love Aveline, but as a sister. We would never have suited one another beyond that, and you fit her perfectly. I’m glad she found you, Donnic.”

“Thank you. And I, in my turn, am glad she found you—without you, she would never have lived through the Blight or come to Kirkwall. You are her family now in all the ways that matter, and I hope you and I can learn to be friends.”

“Well, usually I drag my friends through mud and dark caves filled with spiders and nearly get them killed on a regular basis, so if you don’t mind any of that, I say we skip the learning and get right to the friendship.”

Donnic laughed. “I’ll drink to that.”
Lucas came downstairs the next morning to find Carver in the dining room, sitting over a cup of tea. “I didn’t think you liked tea.”

“I don’t. But Bodahn thinks a future Viscount of Kirkwall should cultivate a taste for it.”

He had a sudden vision of his burly brother sitting down to a cup of tea with Seneschal Bran, a leisurely chat over tiny biscuits about the state of affairs in Kirkwall, and tried not to laugh. But Carver’s face when he took a swallow of the stuff made it impossible to keep a straight face.

Carver glared at him. “You done?”

“Yes—yes, I suppose.” Lucas sighed. Always nice to start a day with a good laughing fit. He couldn’t remember the last time he had. Things were already looking up.

“Good, because I want to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“I want to meet Merrill’s clan.”

Lucas sat down, frowning at his brother. That was not at all what he had expected to hear. “Have you asked her about that?”

“She says she doesn’t want to go.”

“No kidding.”

“All the more reason someone should. She’s pining away for them, for the forests, even for the halla.”

“They don’t have any halla; that’s why they’re stuck at Sundermount.”

“Whatsoever. I want to go.”

Lucas sighed again. The morning had taken a sharp turn downhill. “I do have to go out that way chasing down some Antivan serial killer, or some such.”

“He’s not a killer.” Isabela, bootless, had padded to the door so softly neither of them had heard her. She sat down on the edge of the table and began tugging on one of her boots. “He’s a former Crow.”

“Former Crow, killer—there’s a difference?”

“Yes! Zevran is …”

“Wait, did you say Zevran? Zevran Arainai?” Carver asked. “From the Blight?”

“That’s the one. He didn’t kill the Warden, so the Crows tried to kill him. Now he’s taking down the Crows, single-handedly.”

“And they’re trying to use me to get at him?” Lucas asked.

“Yep.”
“Friend of yours?” Lucas tried to keep the sour jealousy out of his voice, but from Isabela’s irritated look, he didn’t succeed.

“You might say that. He killed my husband. Nicest present anyone’s ever given me.”

Carver grinned across the table. “There you go; good luck topping that one.”

Lucas ignored his brother. He knew he shouldn’t ask, but he couldn’t help it. “And then the two of you …?”

Isabela outright glared at him. “Enjoyed a lot of congratulatory rolls in the hay, yes. We going to have this problem everytime we meet someone I slept with? Because it’s going to happen a lot.”

Well, that killed the morning completely, right there. Lucas got up and stalked out of the room. At the Hanged Man, Varric was out, and he didn’t much want to go see Gamlen, so he detoured to Merrill’s, finding Varric there trying to cajole her out of her house. She was staring at her broken mirror, and didn’t even turn when Lucas came in.

“You talk some sense into her, Hawke.”

“My brother says he wants to meet your clan,” Lucas said.

At that, Merrill did turn, two spots of bright color staining her delicate cheekbones. “Don’t let him. They’ll—they won’t be kind to him.”

“I doubt Fisticuffs is used to people being kind to him.”

Lucas ignored Varric, his eyes on Merrill. “He should see where you came from,” he told her gently.

“And if … if he believes what they say about me?”

“Carver’s never taken anyone else’s word for something in his whole life. I don’t see any reason why he should start now.”

“Come with us, Daisy,” Varric urged.

A spasm of pain crossed her face. “I miss them all, you know. Even the Keeper. But—they don’t miss me. They don’t want me there.”

It was hard to argue with that. The Keeper seemed to feel some affection for Merrill, but the rest of the clan did not. Still … if your family was alive, you had to try, didn’t you? He said as much to Merrill, who sighed deeply.

“Very well. Are we going now? Let’s go now, before I change my mind.”

So they did. A brief detour to Hightown to collect Carver and Isabela, and they were off on a nice walk in the sunshine to the distant forest. Or it would have been, if Isabela wasn’t angry with Lucas, Merrill wasn’t sad about her clan, and Carver wasn’t so nervous about meeting them that he kept stepping on the back of everyone’s heel in his hurry to get there.

Two of the hunters met them at the outskirts of the camp. “You’re back,” one said, her tone indicating it wasn’t a pleasure to see them.

“Hello, Ineria,” Merrill ventured.

The elf pretended not to hear. Carver’s face darkened, his fist clenching. Lucas put a hand on his
brother’s arm and gave him a warning shake of the head. “We’re looking for an elven assassin,” he told them. “We were given to understand he might be coming here.”

“You’ll find him in the caves,” said Ineria. Lucas thought that was remarkably forthcoming of her, until she went on. “He told us to tell you. Otherwise, we’d have killed you all rather than reveal his location.” Her glance grazed over Merrill, making it clear she was including her former clanmate in the statement.

Merrill blinked back tears, and both Carver and Isabela bristled. Lucas thought they would do more damage to Merrill by making an issue of her clan’s hostility, however, and he hurried them all past the two hunters in the direction of the caves.

Bears, spiders, booby traps that made Isabela crow in delighted admiration as she was disabling them —Lucas thought they would never get to the back of the cave. But they did, and a slender blond elf came from the shadows. “Now you, I wasn’t expecting. Tell me, what did Nuncio offer the Champion of Kirkwall to tempt you into chasing a poor former assassin like me?”

“We just wanted to get to you before they did,” Isabela said, and a smile broke out across the elf’s face.

“Naturally! I had heard you had become a … companion to the Champion.” He held out his arms, and the two of them shared a long embrace. So long and so tight that Lucas clenched his teeth to avoid making a smart-ass remark that would only make Isabela angry.

“Mm, Antivan leather,” Isabela said, sniffing appreciatively as she pulled away. “I thought you’d be dead by now.”

“Me? I take a lot of killing. And I’ve found the benefit of having powerful friends.” His eyes raked hotly up and down Lucas’s body. “As have you, I see.” He stepped forward, bowing slightly. “But I am remiss. I am Zevran Arainai, adventurer and occasional assassin.”

“Lucas Hawke.”

Zevran’s smile didn’t dim at Lucas’s shortness. The others introduced themselves, as well, Carver fawning a bit, clearly quite impressed by Zevran’s past as a companion of the Grey Warden. Nodding at them all, Zevran said, “I must admit, I had expected a direct assault by the Crows. This is much more pleasant.”

“Are they after you just for leaving the guild?” Lucas asked.

“Oh, to the Crows, that is the greatest offense. They like to have it said that the only former Crow is a dead Crow. I like to prove them wrong,” he added grimly. “On further thought, I should not be so surprised that Nuncio feared to face me himself. It is possible that I killed the last four assassins they sent after me. And all their men. Oh, and the Guildmaster.” He smiled.

“Typical Zevran, can’t help embroidering the story.”

“What is a story without some embellishment?”

Varric chuckled. “Now you’re talking. Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“So I suppose the question is, now that you have me, what will you do with me?” He winked.
“That is the question,” Lucas agreed. He didn’t particularly want to take a veteran of the Blight to be killed, and Isabela wouldn’t go along with it anyway, but they kept … looking at each other, and he didn’t want to just roll over and bring this former lover of hers along for the ride, either.

“That is the question,” Lucas agreed. He didn’t particularly want to take a veteran of the Blight to be killed, and Isabela wouldn’t go along with it anyway, but they kept … looking at each other, and he didn’t want to just roll over and bring this former lover of hers along for the ride, either.

“Hawke,” Isabela said sharply.

“I suppose I’ve never killed a Crow,” Lucas said, forcing a smile. “Perhaps we should start with your friend Nuncio and his crew?”

Zevran burst out laughing. “Oh, I do like your style. By all means, let’s do that.”

They made a plan as they returned to the Wounded Coast where they were to meet Nuncio and his men. Or, rather, Lucas and Varric made a plan, while Carver comforted the distressed Merrill with assurances of her clan’s total unworthiness of her, and Isabela and Zevran laughed loudly and ostentatiously.

Lucas seethed at the sound, and Varric laughed at him. “You are the easiest mark in Thedas, you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s got no interest in him. They had fun together, but he’s not up for more than that, and where he was concerned, neither was she. But she’s pissed at you for being jealous, and she’s making you suffer. And boy, are you suffering beautifully.” He sighed. “Ah, the word portraits I could create about your suffering.”

“Shut up, Varric.”

“See, Hawke, that’s why you’re such a delightful companion. The witty banter, the sparkling repartee, the snappy comebacks …”

Lucas glared at the dwarf and started taking longer strides that he knew Varric couldn’t keep up with. It didn’t seem to bother Varric, who kept chuckling at Lucas’s expense.

In the end, they didn’t need much of a plan. They strolled into the Crows’ camp with Zevran and Isabela still chatting away, and the Crows didn’t need a diagram to know what was up.

“So,” Nuncio sneered, “Zevran told you, did he? Well, this time his Warden isn’t here to protect him, and he’s made our jobs easier by bringing you with him.” He looked at Zevran. “No one fails the Crows and lives.”

Zevran laughed. “A charming fairytale to help you sleep better, no doubt, but alas, sadly so very untrue, as I am the living, and incredibly awesome, example of he who failed the Crows and lived to make them regret it very much. Also,” he added, his eyes hard and entirely humorless, “while it would be nice if the Warden were here, I believe the Champion of Kirkwall and his lovely companions are more than a match for a few Crows too indolent to get their hands dirty.”

Enraged, Nuncio lunged for him, and Zevran met the lunge with a dagger to the eye. Nuncio fell without a sound.

His men attacked even as he fell, and Lucas and his team found that the legendary prowess of the Crows had not been exaggerated. They were fast, they were strong, they were unpredictable. And still they fell, one by one.

Merrill attended to a slash on Varric’s cheek, her magic closing it carefully without the slightest trace
of a scar on his bestubbled face, and Isabela slapped some elfroot on a cut on her arm and tied her kerchief around it to hold it there. She cared not at all about a scar.

Zevran stood up from Nuncio’s body with a handful of trinkets collected from the Crow’s pockets. “These will do nicely as tokens of my victory over yet another Crow cell. Ah,” he corrected himself, “our victory. My apologies. Killing my former comrades-in-arms is so satisfying I forget what I owe to those who assisted.”

“No, our pleasure,” Lucas replied, struggling to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

Isabela, more cheerful now with a good fight behind her, leaned against Lucas’s arm. “He means it, you know; he just doesn’t sound like it,” she told Zevran.

“I do not blame him at all.” He smiled at her. “It has been a true delight to see you again, and you appear to be traveling in fine company. I wish you both great joy. But for me, I have to move on. So much war to wage with my former brothers, and so little time.”

With a final, somewhat more restrained embrace of Isabela, Zevran left the camp.

“What a fine figure of a man, don’t you think, brother mine?” Carver asked, grinning at Lucas.

“Not exactly my type, Carver.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I was worried you were thinking of throwing me over for him.” Isabela took his head between her hands and drew his face down to hers for a long, satisfying kiss.

“Now that you mention it, he did seem quite interested in my … blade,” he said playfully.

Isabela gave him a tolerant glance that suggested he shouldn’t push it too far after his display of jealousy all day, so he subsided.

The fight with the Crows seemed to have helped Merrill past the disappointment of her clanmates’ overt hostility, that and Carver’s arm solicitously helping her over rocks even when she didn’t need the help. Lucas didn’t see a lot of hope for his brother’s future happiness there—even without any planned success for Carver in the human world, Merrill was at heart too much still one with her people to truly make a life with a human. He only hoped they wouldn’t hurt each other too much before they were forced to let one another go.

As for him, he felt ashamed of his petulance in the face of an old and dear friend of Isabela’s. If he wasn’t secure in what they had, that was on him. She was who she was, and that was who he had fallen in love with. He resolved to apologize when they returned home, and to promise that he would never do it again, and to seal those promises by making her feel completely in charge—a process he hoped would be infinitely satisfying to them both.
Sebastian was waiting for them at the estate, alternately pacing and sipping the tea Bodahn had provided for him. Lucas leaned over to his brother. “See, now, he makes it work.”

“Shut up.”

“Ah, Hawke … s, there you are. Merrill, Isabela, Varric, how nice to see you.”

“Sebastian, what brings you here at this time of night?” Lucas asked.

“Yeah.” Carver grinned. “Aren’t nice little Chantry boys supposed to turn into pumpkins at this hour of the night?”

“Do they really?” Merrill asked.

“No, Merrill. We don’t,” Sebastian said patiently, while Varric and Isabela smothered smiles.

“Oh. That would be interesting, though, wouldn’t it?”

“Very.” Lucas smothered a smile of his own. “Sebastian?”

“I have been told that Sister Nightingale is in town and ready to meet with us.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows. “You don’t say.”

“Yes. I had hoped you … all would accompany me.” Sebastian looked around at them somewhat hesitantly.

“Come on, Daisy, I think this job isn’t for us,” Varric said.

“Why not? I like the Viscount’s keep—the throne room is so quiet now that they don’t use it.”

They all turned to stare at her. “Merrill, how do you get into the throne room?”

She looked at Lucas wide-eyed. “Through the door. How else?”

“Yep, I think we’ll be off. Come on, Daisy, I’ll tell you a story.”

“Not the one about the town mouse and the country mouse again, please, Varric.”

He chuckled. “I’ll come up with something new, then.”

When they were gone, Lucas turned to Sebastian. “Did Sister Nightingale say how long she’d be there?”

He shook his head. “I suggest we don’t delay.”

“In that case, please, lead on.”

Of course, Lucas knew the way to the Viscount’s keep perfectly well, since the entrance was practically at his doorstep, but he preferred to hang back on this one. He let Carver move ahead and walk with Sebastian, and watched their awkward attempts at small talk with mingled amusement and concern. “He’s going to be a disaster with the nobility,” he murmured to Isabela.
“You never know. He’s swoonworthy, so that’ll get all the simpering noblewomen—and some of the men—and he’s intimidating, so that’ll get some more. It might be enough.”

“Mother would want more for him.”

Isabela glanced at him. “Your mother raised him,” she observed. “Was he much better than this when she was alive?”

Lucas thought that one over, remembering his mother’s lectures on manners and social graces, and the way Carver’s attention would always wander. “Not really,” he admitted.

“Then let her rest in peace; stop dragging her spirit out every time you want to feel inadequate.”

The words were matter-of-fact, so it took a moment for their bluntness to sink in. When it did, Lucas’s head snapped around and he stared at her in shock. “How can you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s what you were doing. Make your brother Viscount if you think you can, but don’t pretend it’s because he needs you to protect him, or because it’s what your parents would have wanted. Either it’s what he wants, or you need to back off.”

“I … think it is what he wants.”

“More than he wants the kitten? Because he can’t have both.”

“No. No, he can’t.” Lucas watched his brother, troubled by Isabela’s suggestion that this was more about him than it was about Carver.

They were practically inside the keep now, and facing a familiar tall figure on guard duty at the door. “Lucas?”

“Good evening, Donnic. We have … business inside.”

Donnic looked at him, brow furrowed, evidently trying to decide if the business seemed likely to be something he needed to call Aveline about. Eventually he made a decision, and called another guard over. “Jalen, watch the door for a few minutes, will you? I have some business with the messeres Hawke.”

“Of course.” Jalen bowed courteously and took Donnic’s place.

Sebastian eyed Donnic uneasily. “Hawke, are you certain …?”

“Donnic can be trusted, without question,” Lucas said.

“Thank you.” Donnic bowed gravely.

They made their way through the keep to the throne room. Isabela dropped to her knees before the door and began to pick the locks, but the door swung open under her touch.

The room appeared deserted, a single candle the only evidence that anyone other than themselves had been inside in months. Lucas looked around uneasily; this felt more like an ambush than he was entirely comfortable with.

A shadow moved just outside the circle of light.

“Who’s there?” Lucas called.
“Yes, I’m sure she’ll answer you.” Isabela sounded amused.

Then a lovely Orlesian-accented voice came out of the darkness. “Isabela?”

“The same.”

Carver frowned. “I know that voice.” He lifted the candle. “Show yourself.”

A slender, pretty woman with short red hair stepped into the light from the candle.

“Sister Leliana?” Carver and Lucas said in disbelief.

She smiled sadly. “Once that was me, yes. Now they call me Sister Nightingale.” She looked them over. “I am glad to see you survived the Blight, both of you. I heard your sister …”

Lucas winced, thinking of Bethany’s grey face. “It was the taint.”

“I’m sorry. That’s … well, I was going to say that was a terrible way to lose someone you love, but there really is no good way, is there?”

“None that I can think of.”

Sister Leliana—Sister Nightingale, if that’s what she preferred to be called now—turned to look at Isabela. “You’re looking well.”

“So are you.” A look flashed between the two women, one Lucas recognized, having been on the receiving end of it from Isabela a number of times. He looked at her, and then at Sister Nightingale, and couldn’t help imagining the circumstances under which they’d obviously found themselves in bed together. Hastily, he pushed those thoughts away to savor at another time.

With a small smile, Sister Nightingale faced them all again. “As I believe you know, the Divine has sent me to Kirkwall to investigate the possibility of a rebellion rising here.”

“We’re doing our best to keep that from happening,” Lucas told her.

“So I hear. I have some experience with unconventional situations. Perhaps I may be of assistance? The Divine believes that Kirkwall’s problems may be spurred by an outside group.”

“With all due respect, Sister, I do not believe so,” Sebastian said.

“Meredith and Orsino are enough by themselves,” Carver said bluntly. “They won’t listen to each other, they can’t work with each other, and if someone doesn’t defuse one or the other, they’re going to tear the city apart to get at one another.”

Donnic nodded. “That is bluntly put, Sister, but is fundamentally correct. My wife is the Captain of the Guard.” He paused proudly for Leliana’s murmur of acknowledgement of Aveline’s achievements. “And she has been working her best to keep the citizens in line—and more, to make certain the citizens know someone has their best interests at heart, which no one else seems to have. But even she can’t keep the peace between the Templars and the Circle.”

“But Grand Cleric Elthina has it all under control,” Sebastian said hastily. “She can quell Knight Commander Meredith and First Enchanter Orsino with a look.”

“She can, but she doesn’t.” Carver inclined his head apologetically toward Sebastian. “I’m sorry, but that’s the truth.”
Lucas considered interjecting, but they were doing fine without him.

Sister Nightingale looked at all of them. Her blue eyes were unreadable, but Lucas had the sense that she was weighing each of them, and the accuracy of their statements. “Divine Justinia believes the situation in Kirkwall is the worst threat to Thedas since the Qunari invasion,” she said at last. “She takes it very seriously.”

“What is she planning?” Lucas said, chilled by the possibilities inherent in that statement. He thought of Anders and was further chilled by the remembrance of how terribly lost the mage was in the midst of his hatred- and Justice-fueled paranoia.

Sebastian frowned. “A handful of apostates? How can that possibly—?”

Sister Nightingale looked at him, and he subsided. The expression on her face made it clear that she thought the handful of apostates was a threat indeed. “If Kirkwall falls to mages, none of us are safe.” Still looking directly at Sebastian, she said, “Tell Elthina to leave. The Grand Cathedral in Orlais is open to her whenever she might need it.”

She nodded to Lucas, and Carver, and Isabela, and quickly at Donnic and Sebastian, and then she was gone, and they were left standing there wondering how they could keep the future she had outlined from coming to pass.

“I will talk to Elthina,” Sebastian muttered, and he excused himself.

“I should tell Aveline what happened here. I imagine she will want to increase the guards around the Divine.” Donnic shook his head. “You live an interesting life, Lucas. Possibly too interesting.”

“It can slow down any time,” Lucas told him. With a final nod, Donnic left.

“Come on,” Carver said. “Let’s go to that fish warehouse and see what Uncle Gamlen’s secret admirer wants. I … really can’t deal with all this any more tonight. I need to sleep on it and see what I think.”

Lucas and Isabela were both fine with that plan, and the three of them went without talking down to the docks, and to the warehouse. A bored-looking security guard let them in, but a few of his friends turned up before they could do any serious searching, and an energetic scrap ensued.

They tied the ruffians up in a circle in the middle of the warehouse, which reeked of rotting fish, and Isabela teased them with her daggers until one of them coughed up the information that this, too, was just another trap for Gamlen, and the true end of the story would be lurking in a cave on the Wounded Coast in another few days.

In disgust, Isabela gave them all liberal knocks on the head with the hilts of her daggers as a way to relieve her annoyance, and they left the warehouse.

“You know this will never end,” she said to them. “Every time you go someplace, someone will send you on to another place.”

“She’s right.” Lucas looked at his brother, who shrugged.

“Maybe she is, but now I’m curious. And annoyed. And sooner or later I’m going to find whoever it is that’s been jerking us around and have some fun.” Carver smiled grimly. “Besides, Uncle Gamlen deserves something nice to happen to him. If this is it, I figure it’s worth a little of my time.”

Lucas wondered if Carver saw something of himself in Gamlen, or if Carver felt as though he had
missed out on something by not sharing that Lowtown hovel with their uncle for so many years. Either way, it was a kind thing he was doing.

Back at the estate, Carver pulled Lucas aside, letting Isabela go on up to bed. “I … wanted to ask your opinion about something.” He took a carved wooden ring out of his pocket. “I, sort of, picked this up at the Dalish camp … I thought Merrill might like it.”

“You want to give Merrill a ring?” Lucas asked, surprised.

“Oh. Oh, not like that. I mean, maybe … but I suppose I really couldn’t …” Carver groaned in frustration. “I was only thinking that this was from her clan and maybe she would like it, I didn’t mean anything else by it.”

“But you think you might someday?”

“I don’t know. I mean, if I’m going to be Viscount, then I can’t really promise her anything, but …”

“Do you want to be Viscount?”

Carver grimaced. “Yes … I think. But if it means that I can’t … Oh, Maker’s balls! I don’t know what I want.”

Lucas put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Give Merrill the ring. Tell her why you picked it up for her, and see how she reacts. Maybe that’ll help you straighten things out in your head.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Thanks, brother.”

“Anytime.”
What Friends Do

A messenger arrived early the next morning. Lucas had just sat down to breakfast when he received the message, recognizing Sebastian’s copperplate hand immediately. He heaved a sigh.

“What troubles, lover?” Isabela asked.

“Sebastian’s going to want me to talk sense into the Grand Cleric.”

“Talking sense into people isn’t really your specialty, brother, is it?”

Lucas shrugged. “Sometimes, I suppose.” He grinned at Carver. “Just because it never worked on you …”

“You going to go?” Isabela asked.

“He’ll just keep at me until I do. Maker only knows why Sebastian can’t talk to her himself.”

“Leave me out of this one, then. I’m going to go down to the ship and see about the repairs to the surgeon’s quarters.” She got up from her seat, tousling Lucas’s hair casually as she passed him. He caught her hand and kissed it but she tugged it away and was out the door before he could go any further toward convincing her to stay.

Looking back at his brother, he found Carver studying him with a quizzical expression on his face.

“What?”

“You really think this is going to last?”

“What, me and Isabela? I can’t see why not.”

“Then you’re the only one. My straight-laced big brother and the biggest … pirate in Thedas? Not exactly what anyone would have predicted.”

Lucas smiled. “Good. I’m tired of being predictable.”

“But … isn’t all this exactly what you always wanted? Nice and settled, fine things, good food … power? I’ve been trying to figure it out, why you don’t want to be Viscount, why you’re running from this Champion thing as fast as you can go—or saying you are and not quite getting there, which is what it really seems like—and I can’t come up with a good reason.”

“I suppose I can see your point—but really, all of this was Mother’s dream for us. I think, as the oldest, I was the one first in line for that dream, so she raised me to think of all this as what I wanted. Then … we got here, and we met Gamlen, and we lost Bethany. By the time we had the estate back—I don’t know, I guess it didn’t mean as much without you, and Bethany, and Father, and I saw what being left as the caretaker of the estate, of the Amell legacy, if you will, did to Gamlen, and I don’t want to end up that way. Or like Dumar. Or for the Maker’s sake, like Varric! Spending his life scribbling away at everyone else’s stories. That’s not for me. And once I realized that, I started looking around, and I realized that someone I loved was under my nose the whole time, and that a life with her would be different, and exciting, and—mine. Not Mother’s, or Kirkwall’s. It would be my life, to do with as I please. That’s what I want.”

Carver nodded slowly. “I suppose I can see that.” He took his hand out of his pocket and turned the
carved Dalish ring over in his fingers. “I don’t know what I want. I’m torn in two different directions. I was always envious of the way you were groomed to be the little princeling of the Amells … but I’m not a poncy noble, either, so do I really fit in this life? And then there’s … the other choice, so … wild and free and sweet and … all kinds of things I want, but if I have that, then I can’t have the other. “

“Give her the ring,” Lucas said. “See what comes of it.”

“Right. Give her the ring.” Carver got up abruptly. “I think I’ll go now, before I can think better of it.”

“Maker’s blessing,” Lucas said, and then he wondered about the deeper implications of the phrase. Would the Maker really bless a union between one of His children and a Dalish elf? Was he subtly making his own preferences plain by using the phrase? He got up as well, groaning at the complications. This was why he tried not to introspect these days. He had Isabela, and piracy, and a life of impulse and adventure and very little thinking beckoning to him. It was sounding better and better.

In the Chantry, he found Sebastian pacing up and down in front of Elthina’s office. “Ah, Hawke, there you are at last. You will speak to her?”

“I’ll speak. I can’t guarantee she’ll listen.”

Sebastian ignored the caveat, knocking at the door.

Elthina looked up from the papers on her desk as they came in. “Sebastian. Champion. Good day.” Her ice blue eyes rested on them calmly.

Lucas would have bet a pretty copper she knew all about Sister Nightingale and just what they had come to say. So he didn’t bother with a preamble. “Sister Nightingale says you must leave Kirkwall.”

“What?”

“The Divine will be taking action against Kirkwall. You must leave for your own safety,” Sebastian said urgently.

Elthina frowned at him. “Sebastian! I’m surprised at you. Andraste would not thank me for saving my own skin at the cost of people’s lives … or their souls. We serve the Maker’s purpose here; His purpose does not diminish in times of crisis. Quite the opposite.”

Sebastian flushed to the roots of his hair, but he didn’t back down. “You must be protected. Kirkwall needs you.”

“Yes. It does. When I became Grand Cleric, I took a vow to these people. I will not break it now, out of fear. I will not leave my flock,” she said firmly.

“Would you let yourself die?” Sebastian asked.

Elthina’s pale eyes lit with an inner fire. “If that is what it takes, what the Maker wills, I am ready. There is no greater devotion than to lay one’s life at the Maker’s feet. There is no better death than to take the blow for another.”

Lucas admired her faith. He almost envied it. He believed in the Maker, but not enough to die in His service. He nodded at Elthina to indicate that he recognized the firmness of her decision. “It was my
task to carry the warning. What you do with it is up to you.”

“Hawke!” Sebastian had clearly expected a more supportive ally, and his blue eyes were filled with disappointment. He turned to Elthina. “Please, Your Grace! Sister Nightingale thinks there will be war.”

“Then I must make peace.”

For a moment, Lucas felt a wild hope that perhaps at long last she would step in between Meredith and Orsino and force them to behave, to settle down. That she would truly make peace. But then he thought of all the chances she had already had, and the hope faded. She would do nothing more than she already had, and Kirkwall would continue on its current destructive path.

Elthina looked at Sebastian, offering him a small, warm smile. “Settle yourself, Sebastian. I am in no personal danger. I am Grand Cleric—who would dare attack me?”

Appearing unconvinced by her bravado, and with reason, Lucas thought, Sebastian straightened himself. “If you will not shield yourself, then I will be your shield. You will come through safely. By the Maker’s name, I swear it,” he said firmly.

“If you insist, I cannot stop you.” Elthina inclined her head to both of them as a gesture of good-bye. “Champion. Sebastian.”

As soon as they were outside her office, Sebastian turned to Lucas, frowning. “You could have been more persuasive.”

“Against her? Her mind was made up before she even went in there. Do you think the Divine sent Sister Nightingale as her first attempt? She’s probably been trying to get Elthina to leave for months. If the Divine can’t convince Elthina, how do you think I’m supposed to?”

Sebastian clearly wanted to continue arguing, but Lucas held his gaze steadily, and at last the other man sighed and turned away.

“Now, as long as I’m on this side of Hightown, I might as well go talk to the de Launcets about their missing mage son. Do you want to come with me?”

“I wish you the Maker’s own luck finding the boy, but I believe my place is here, Hawke, from now on.” Sebastian’s tone made his meaning clear—he was no longer considering himself one of Lucas’s companions.

“Very well,” Lucas said. Sebastian hadn’t really been part of the family anyway, always torn between Starkhaven and the Chantry. “Good luck keeping her safe. If you need help, I hope you will call on me.” It was doubtful whether Sebastian would, but Lucas felt he needed to at least make the offer.

Not really wanting to tackle the de Launcets just yet, or by himself, he stopped off at Fenris’s dilapidated mansion on the way, surprised to hear loud voices coming from the office upstairs, and even more surprised when he went into the office to find Aveline there, leaning her knuckles on the desk, and shouting at Fenris in her best “listen to me, you idiot” voice.

“I do not have the authority to impound and search every ship coming from Tevinter, and I wouldn’t if I could!”

“But I need to know! If she doesn’t come alone …”
“Fenris, get hold of yourself.”

“I need to know if it’s a trap, Aveline!” the elf bellowed, his voice louder than Lucas had ever heard it.

“What is going on in here?” Lucas asked.

Aveline scowled, and Fenris looked shame-faced and stared down at his desk.

“Good. You talk to him, Hawke. I’ve had my fill of stubborn and unreasonable today.”

Coming from Aveline, the irony in the statement was delicious, but Lucas swallowed his smile because neither of the other two people in the room were going to be amused. “Maybe someone could catch me up.”

Fenris swore in Tevinter, turning away and folding his arms over his chest.

“Swearing isn’t going to solve anything,” Lucas told him, “and I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s been going on.” He felt a sharp pang of guilt; since he’d taken up with Isabela, his evenings of drinking and chatting with Fenris had been all but nonexistent, and clearly the elf had been going through something he needed to talk about.

“It’s my sister.”

“The one Hadriana told you about?”

“Yes.” Fenris paced back and forth behind the desk. “I didn’t tell you, but I followed up on Hadriana’s information. Everything she said was true.”

“You have a sister? That …” At Aveline’s sharp shake of the head, Lucas dropped the enthusiasm from his tone. “That sounds like good news?”

“It … ah, I don’t know,” Fenris groaned. “I eventually contacted her, and have been corresponding with her for some time. She didn’t believe me at first, but eventually she came around. I was able to convince her to come here—“

“After he sent her a hefty amount of coin,” Aveline interjected.

“She’s a tailor,” Fenris snapped. “She needed the money. At any rate, her ship is due to arrive here in a few days.”

“And he wants me to stop every ship coming in and search for hidden Tevinter magisters.” Aveline glared at him.

Fenris glared back. “And if it’s a trap?”

“Kirkwall is your home, Fenris, and we are your friends!” It would have sounded better if Aveline wasn’t shouting the words at him, but the meaning was there. “Do you think we would let anything happen to you?”

They both turned to look at Lucas. “What she said.”

Fenris growled. “You really will not help me?”

“We’ll go with you to meet your sister,” Lucas promised. “Both of us. Isabela and Carver, too, if you want. We’ll have her meet you in the Hanged Man—nothing can happen to you there.”
“You … you would do that?” Fenris looked between the two of them.

“Of course,” Aveline said impatiently.

“Of course,” Lucas echoed.

“I—I don’t know what to say.” Fenris looked as though he was fumbling for more words, and Lucas stepped in to keep him from any further discomfort.

“Say you’ll come with me to the de Launcets to look for this mage child of theirs. I can’t face a bunch of Kirkwall nobles by myself.”

“The de Launcets?” Fenris raised his eyebrows. “It’s worse than that, Hawke. They’re Orlesians.”

Lucas groaned.

So did Aveline. “Apparently I have to come, too, in order to prevent the two of you from creating an international incident. Well, let’s go. I have things to do today.”

“Yes, Captain.”
The Gem of Keroshek

They collected Carver and Isabela. Lucas looked at his brother with his eyebrows raised questioningly, and Carver shook his head. Clearly he hadn’t given Merrill the ring yet. They went to the de Launcets’ mansion, where a very stiff butler met them at the door. Aveline stepped forward. “Can you call—“

But she got no further before a diminutive woman with a very strong Orlesian accent came hurrying toward them. Her headlong rush was paused briefly while she tried to decide whether to drape herself over Carver or Lucas. Eventually she settled on Carver. “The Champion of Kirkwall! Here, in my own home. Please, but you must come in.”

He shot Lucas a smug look over his shoulder and let the Lady de Launcet lead him inside, the rest of them trailing along after them.

“You must allow me to order a bottle of wine. Cherie, the best red for the Champion. Oh, where is that girl?” she muttered to herself when no answer came immediately after her call.

“I’m sorry, madame, but I’m afraid this isn’t a social call,” Lucas said.

Carver glared at him. “In fact, my brother is correct. We came out of concern for your family’s reputation.”

“Oh, how kind!” She waited for him to explain.

“You see, it’s about your son—“

“Emile! Yes, the Templars were asking about our poor boy. I told them he was never any trouble to anyone; the only reason we had to send him to the Circle was the incident with le Duc d’Orsois’ wig, and Emile didn’t mean to set it on fire …”

“But recently—“ Aveline began.

Lady de Launcet continued, “I haven’t seen my poor boy recently. It’s such a trial, the way they take our children away and raise them so far from their family. They wouldn’t even let me send my own servants to attend him in that Gallows of theirs!”


“Exactly! I told the Templars not to worry, I was certain Emile would turn himself in soon. He’s such a good boy.”

Fenris and Lucas exchanged glances, both suspecting that her ladyship knew a lot more about her son’s disappearance from the Gallows than she let on.

A man came from the other room, frowning at her. “Dulci! What have you done? You should have told the boy to throw himself on the mercy of the Templars. At this rate, he is going to get his fool self killed.”

“Guillaume! Darling! We have visitors!” Her ladyship’s permanent smile was looking a bit strained. “The Champion of Kirkwall and … and his charming companions!”

Lucas wasn’t sure how he felt about being reduced to a charming companion, but it was some
comfort to see that Fenris liked the appellation even less than he did, and Aveline was practically fuming.

She wasn’t the only one. Guillaume de Launcet stormed into the room, his fists clenched, eyes on his wife. “Don’t you ‘darling’ me, Dulci! He has been telling people that he’s our son, that you gave him gold. Do you know what Knight-Commander Meredith will do if she finds that out?”

Her ladyship opened her mouth, but for once, nothing came out.

Carver looked down at her, patting the hand that still lay on his arm. “So difficult when your child comes to you for help, isn’t it?” he murmured. Lucas was impressed; he hadn’t known his brother had it in him.

“I … I didn’t mean to lie to you, Champion. I … I barely saw Emile. I didn’t think it was worth mentioning.”

“Of course. You have a mother’s heart.”

“I gave him some money. I had to! Not very much, just enough so he could start a new life. He said that was what he wanted.”

Lord de Launcet snorted. “New life. He is in that hideous dive, the Hanged Man, getting drunk on cheap wine. If that is living … well, perhaps he would be better off in the Gallows.”

“It’s a wonder the Templars haven’t found him,” Fenris murmured.

“What if I went down to that … hideous dive and spoke to Emile. Maybe I can convince him to turn himself in,” Carver suggested.

“Oh, Champion, you would do that for us? I cannot begin to thank you!”

“Would you?” Lord de Launcet asked, more quietly. “Emile is not a blood mage, just a foolish boy. Please, don’t let the Templars kill my son.”

“We won’t,” Aveline said.

As they left the house, Lady de Launcet was still clinging to Carver’s arm. “Did you know I have two lovely daughters? Oh, yes! They would love to meet you. Perhaps you can come to tea, Champion.”

Carver cleared his throat, and Lucas bit back a laugh. “I … would like that.”

“Oh, lovely! I will send a card around. Such a pleasure to meet you!”

The rest of them waited outside while Carver got himself disentangled. Lucas and Carver walked together down to the Hanged Man, neither of them saying anything about the impersonation, but it had definitely given them both a lot to think about.

The Hanged Man was bustling as usual, and Varric immediately hailed them from the familiar table in the back. Merrill was there, too, her eyes lighting up when she saw Carver. Lucas wondered what her reaction would be when Carver gave her the ring.

Carver left them and headed for the table, and Merrill’s side. Fenris rolled his eyes, and disappeared in the direction of the bar, to try to wheedle the wine cellar key out of Corff so he didn’t have to drink the typical Hanged Man swill. Aveline saw a few of her guardsmen in the corner and went to
go order them back to work.

That left Lucas and Isabela to look for Emile. “Ten silvers says I find him before you do.”

Isabela smirked at him. “Done.”

She climbed up on a table and bent low over her boot buckle. Her eyes scanned the room, and she pointed. “Over there.”

Lucas followed her finger to a boy with a truly disastrous haircut who was staring at her with his mouth open. “Cheater.”

“I merely use the gifts the Maker gave me.” She hopped down and sauntered over to the boy’s table. “Close your mouth. You look like a fish.”

“Um. Uh. I—“ He cleared his throat, trying to get a hold of himself. “Did it hurt, when you fell from the Maker’s side?”

“Trust me, the Maker wouldn’t let me get within ten feet of him,” Isabela said briskly. “Emile de Launcet?”

“What? How did you know? I mean …” He straightened up, putting on a face Lucas assumed he meant to be sexy. “I mean, I see you’ve heard of me.”

Lucas groaned. “Tell me I was never that clueless.”

“All right, if you say so. You were never that clueless.” She said it as though reciting a lesson, and Lucas rolled his eyes at her.

“Look,” he said to Emile, “the Templars are looking for you. You’d better turn yourself in.”

“No!” Emile stood up, looking panicked. “Not tonight! I gave Nella my signet ring in exchange for a kiss. Oh, such a kiss. And tonight,” he added with shy pride, “she’s going to make me a man.”

“That’s so cute!” Isabela said. “Nella’s good. She knows just what to do. Trust me, I know.” She winked at Emile, whose eyes widened when he got the picture.

“Oh. Oh, my.”

“Isabela. Go easy on the poor boy.” Lucas’s estimation of Meredith and her Templars had gone down even further. They couldn’t find this ridiculous child in the middle of the Hanged Man? Where had they been looking, the Hightown market at noon?

“Look,” Emile said, lowering his voice. “I know I said I was a blood mage, but that was only to look dangerous and … suave. I’m not really one.”

“Oh, we believe you,” Isabela told him.

“I’ve been in the Circle since I was six! I’ve never … stood in the rain, or had a real drink. How old do you think I am?” He looked from one to the other of them.

“Sixteen,” Lucas hazarded.

“Nineteen,” said Isabela.

“I’m twenty-six.”
“No!”

“Yes. I have done nothing, been nowhere. All I wanted was to live a little, to kiss a girl, to know the love of one, to be a normal person just for a little while. Please—let me have this. Just this, and I will go back peacefully.”

Lucas and Isabela glanced at each other. “Fine,” Lucas said at last. “Go have your fun. Knock on the second door on the left past Nella’s when you’re ready to go back.”

“Oh, thank you!” Emile rushed to Nella’s side, taking her hand and hurrying her to the stairs.

“And what are we going to do to pass the time?”

“I’ll give you three guesses.”

She grinned. “Race you.”

Emile had more stamina than Lucas had given him credit for. It was well into the small hours of the morning and he and Isabela were considering whether to go for round three when Emile knocked. He was smiling from ear to ear when Lucas opened the door.

“Satisfactory?”

“Unbelievable.”

From the bed, Isabela chuckled. “That’s my Nella.”

Emile looked at her wistfully. “Serah, you are one lucky man.”

“Don’t I know it.” Lucas grinned at Isabela over his shoulder before closing the door behind him and escorting Emile back to the Gallows.

By the time he had Emile safely back and had talked Cullen into not killing the poor boy and had made his way back to the mansion in Hightown, dawn was breaking. He met Carver coming down the stairs as he was about to drag himself up them to bed.

“Out carousing until the wee smalls, brother? That’s no way to run a city,” Carver said cheerfully.

“Luckily, that’s your job, Champion.”

Carver grinned. “Go get ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“We’re going after that gem of Uncle Gamlen’s today, don’t you remember?”

Lucas groaned. “No, I had entirely forgotten. I’ll tell you what, you gather the others, you all go without me, and bring back whatever you find so I can see it.”

Carver considered that for a moment. “Fine, but whatever it is, I get first dibs.”

“After Gamlen?”

“After Gamlen.”

“Done.”
Lucas made it to bed before he collapsed, and was almost instantly asleep.

Hours later, voices downstairs drew him out of the depths of sleep. He climbed out of bed, still fully clothed, and made his way down to the dining room, where he found Isabela, Varric, Fenris, Aveline, Carver, and some brown-haired woman he had never seen before. They all stopped and looked at him expectantly.

“Uh …” Yeah, that was about all he had.

The brown-haired woman looked at Carver. “Shall you tell him, or shall I?”

“I think we should let him guess.”

“You’re the gem of Keroshek?”

She smiled. “Not exactly.”

“But she is what we found when we went looking for it,” Carver supplied.

The woman stood up. “I’m your cousin. Gamlen’s daughter.”

“Gamlen has a daughter?”

“I know. It was news to me, too,” Aveline said. “He’s never mentioned her that I knew of.”

“No, he certainly hasn’t. And Mother didn’t know, either, I’m sure of that. I wish she could have met you. She’d have loved to know that Gamlen had family left.” He reached out a hand. “Pleasure to meet you, cousin. I’m Lucas.”

“Charade.”

“So you set all this up to meet Gamlen?”

She nodded. “But he didn’t come.”

“To be fair, he might have, if you had said ‘Come meet your daughter’. He seemed pretty much done with the gem when we talked to him about it.”

“Then maybe people can change. My mother, Mara, said he was obsessed with the gem, that nothing was important to him but finding it. She left him when she was still pregnant with me.”

The doorbell rang, and Bodahn rushed to answer it.

Lucas looked at Carver. “Gamlen?”

“Gamlen.”

Charade looked uncomfortable. “I’m … not sure about this.”

“After all you went through to get here?” Carver asked her.

“Having family may be more worthwhile than you think,” Fenris said.

Lucas looked at the elf, glad to hear him espousing such an optimistic viewpoint. He hoped Fenris’s sister was everything his friend was looking for.

Gamlen came in, frowning. “What is it? I was in the middle of—” He stopped, looking at Charade.
“Who is this?”

She stepped forward. “I …”

Lucas thought they could use a hand. “Gamlen, meet Charade. Her mother’s name was Mara.”

Gamlen’s eyes widened in shock.

“Charade, meet Gamlen. I believe he’s your father.”

Charade tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“I … I didn’t know,” Gamlen whispered. “She didn’t tell me. One day, she was just … gone, and I … I should have gone after her. I want to think I would have, if I had known, but I was … I was a foolish boy.”

“People change,” Carver offered.

“I hope so.”

Charade said, “She used to tell me I was so much like my father, but she never even told me who you were until—until it was too late.”

“Too late? Mara is …?”

“Yes. Just last year.”

“Oh.” Gamlen fumbled for a chair and sank into it. “You never forget, you know, not when you really cared for someone, even if you were so selfish and stupid as to let them get away.”

Varric and Fenris exchanged a look, and both of them got up and quietly left the room. After a moment, Aveline followed, and then Isabela.

Gamlen was quietly weeping. Charade went to him and put a hand on his shoulder. When he got hold of himself, she asked softly, “So … you don’t mind? That I’m not the gem of Keroshek.”

He put his hand over hers. “You’re far better. A treasure I never even knew I was missing.”

Carver got up, too, and he and Lucas started to leave the room. They were stopped by Gamlen’s voice.

“Boys.”

“Uncle Gamlen?”

“You’re both dreadful meddlers … but I’m glad to have you as part of my family.”

Charade smiled at them both. “That goes for me, too. A father and two cousins—a treasure I didn’t know I was missing, either.”

“You two have fun getting to know each other,” Lucas told them. “We’ll talk more later. I assume you’re sticking around, cousin?”

“For a while, anyway.” She nodded. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”
They left Charade and Gamlen to get reacquainted, after instructing Bodahn to make up a room for their newfound cousin if she chose to stay. In the morning, the dwarf told them Charade had chosen to go back to Lowtown with Gamlen.

Carver frowned thoughtfully over his omelet. “You know, we’ve all just taken her word for it that she’s Gamlen’s daughter.”

“Why would she lie?” Lucas asked. “He’s not exactly a prize.”

“I suppose. No money, nothing much to offer.”

Lucas nodded. “I’d be more worried if she’d decided to stay here.”

Bodahn came into the room, handing Lucas a folded note. “Messenger, serah.”

It was from Aveline. “Apparently Fenris’s sister has arrived. And she’s not alone.”

“Did we think she would be?”

Lucas sighed, pocketing the note. “No, I suppose we didn’t. But we hoped. Fenris deserved … well, he deserved a second chance at his life.”

“Isn’t that what he has here?” Carver shook his head. “You, Fenris, Charade, all thinking that finding what you imagine you’ve lost is the only way forward.”

Stung, Lucas said, “You’re welcome to leave at any time.”

“Really? You mean that? Because I seem to recall you all but begging me to stay.”

He was about to hotly deny having done any such thing … but Carver wasn’t wrong. “I suppose I did, at that. Don’t you feel at least a little glad to be back together?”

“Sure. I’m happy to be here with you, brother. But I was happy on my own, too, which seems to be the difference. Having you in my life is a good thing, but when you weren’t in my life, I wasn’t pining away for everything I had lost.” Carver shrugged. “What makes me different from the rest of the family, it seems.”

“I suppose it does.” Lucas looked down at his napkin. Had he been pining? Well, of course he had been pining. Even with Carver here, he had been pining away for the rest of the family. What was there to do about that now? Should he stop thinking about Bethany, about his parents?

“Let them go, Lucas,” Carver said, leaning across the table. “Let them go. Live your life, not theirs. Not the one you think they’d want for you.”

“I … will give it some thought.” Lucas got up hastily. He didn’t think he could change his entire outlook on life quite as easily as Carver seemed to think he could … but he didn’t deny that maybe he needed to.

The doorbell was ringing as he entered the hall, and when Bodahn opened the door, two very agitated individuals poured in, casting annoyed glances at one another. One was Fenris, the other Hubert, in whose mine Lucas was a partner. He sighed. Fenris no doubt wanted him to come with him to meet his sister, and whatever Hubert wanted, it wasn’t going to be enjoyable.
“Hawke, I must speak to you,” Fenris began urgently.

At the same time, Hubert flung up his hands and said, “Catastrophe, partner! We are ruined. Ruined, I say!”

They both glared at one another.

Lucas stepped toward them before they came to blows. “Fenris, it’s time?” he asked.

“I … yes. Now, please, Hawke.” The elf was clearly in an agony of suspense—he would never have let someone else see him beg this way if he had been in his right mind.

“Let me deal with this, and then we’ll go,” Lucas promised. “Why don’t you have Bodahn go wake Isabela?”

With a parting glare for Hubert, Fenris moved past Lucas into the rest of the hall, leaving Lucas alone with his partner.

“Hawke!” Hubert wailed.

“Now, now, don’t panic. Tell me what happened.”

“A cart came back from the Bone Pit. It was half-wrecked, and filled with mangled corpses.”

“Corpses?” Lucas echoed in disbelief. Whatever minor inconvenience he had expected Hubert to consider a catastrophe, corpses were several steps beyond.

“Yes. The horse pulling the cart was the only survivor, and it does not speak. Town full of rotten mages and not one can get answers from a horse!”

“Shocking,” Lucas agreed. It was an interesting speculation—was there a mage out there who could communicate with horses? He’d never heard of one, but despite having been raised by and with apostates, he really didn’t know all that much about the capabilities of mages. He could believe someone was out there with such a skill. “I’ll look into it.”

“Oh, I knew I could depend on you, partner. You’ll go quickly, too? Every moment the mine doesn’t run is money out of our pockets.”

Typical Hubert, Lucas thought, ushering his business partner out of the house with assurances that he wouldn’t allow the grass to grow under his feet. All his concern was for the money, and he hadn’t spared a thought to the families of the men who were killed, or the safety of those who might still be trapped in the Bone Pit.

He called for Bodahn, who was just coming down the stairs. Fenris stood in the hall, fidgeting, and Carver waited in the door of the dining room.

“Bodahn, can you take a message to Aveline that there’s trouble at the Bone Pit? Something very bad appears to have happened there, and there may be survivors trapped there who need assistance.”

“I’ll go,” Carver volunteered.

Lucas caught himself starting to protest. Why shouldn’t his brother deal with the Bone Pit? After all, if Lucas went off to play pirates, which sounded better and better all the time, Carver would be stuck dealing with Hubert and Lucas’s half of the mine.

“Sounds good. See if Aveline and her guards can go with you, and—“ He caught himself again.
Carver didn’t need to be told what to do. “I mean, do as you think best.”

“See, you’re learning.” Carver grinned and went off to arm himself.

Isabela came down, nodding at Fenris. “Ready to go face your former master?”

“You cannot know for certain it’s a trap,” he snapped at her.

“Actually …” Lucas took Aveline’s note from his pocket and handed it to Fenris.

Fenris read it and crumpled it in his fist. “And she sent this to you rather than to me?”

“I think she thought I might be more likely to believe it.”

“Perhaps,” Fenris admitted reluctantly. He stared at the paper blankly, a world of hurt and hope and sorrow and longing in his green eyes that made Lucas’s heart ache for his friend, so vulnerable and trying so hard to hide it. “Let’s go.”

“After you.”

Lucas followed the elf and Isabela down the long stairs from Hightown to Lowtown. Isabela walked silently at Fenris’s side; he seemed to gain some comfort from having her there.

At last they reached the familiar door of the Hanged Man. Fenris stood in front of it, staring at the door-handle, polished smooth by countless hands, as if he didn’t know what it was there for.

“We should get it over with,” Isabela told him at last.

“Yes.” But he made no move. “If I—if I don’t go in, then …”

“Then it will be another day, when you’re not expecting it,” Lucas said. “I’m sorry about your sister, but we need to deal with this, once and for all, to get this tiger off your tail for good.”

“Yes,” Fenris said again, his voice stronger this time. “Yes.” He yanked on the door handle, and went into the Hanged Man.

Inside it was, as always, dim and rank with the odor of spilled ale. It was also practically empty—Lucas had never seen it like this, not at any hour of the day. The mystery was solved when he saw Varric get up from the back table and come toward them, and when he saw the slender red-haired elven woman get up from her seat at one of the front tables, her eyes on Fenris as if she saw a ghost. Perhaps that was what it felt like, Lucas thought. Certainly he’d had a hard time getting used to Carver being back.

“It really is you,” the elf said in a whisper, taking a step toward Fenris. Her eyes were as green as his.

“Varania?” Fenris asked, like someone awakening from a dream. He moved towards his sister in turn, one hand rising to touch her cheek. It was clear he had entirely forgotten that this woman was the bait in a trap set especially for him.

“Where is he?” Lucas asked softly when Varric reached his side.

“Upstairs. Corff and I got everyone out, figured we’d want privacy for this.”

“I’m on it,” Isabela said, preparing to slip into the shadows.

Lucas caught her arm. “Fenris has to do this. If we do it for him he’ll never be able to live with
himself.”

She started to protest, then sighed. “All right.”

Meanwhile, Fenris and his sister were speaking quietly. “We played in our master’s courtyard while Mother worked,” Fenris said hoarsely. “I—I remember it. I haven’t remembered anything since …”

“Leto …” Varania’s voice was filled with pain.

“Is that—“

“Your name. Yes.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked her. And then Lucas saw the spasm of pain in his face. “You brought him here,” Fenris said, stepping back. His voice cracked as if he was holding back tears. “You betrayed me.”

“Leto, I never meant—I never wanted—please, you have to believe me!” Varania shrieked.

And then a tall, gray-haired man in the robes of the Imperium was coming down the stairs of the Hanged Man, his eyes on Fenris, and Lucas saw his friend crumple in the magister’s presence.

“My little Fenris,” the magister drawled. “Predictable as always. Dangle someone you want to love, someone who can unlock those memories you think must be so precious, and you will leap at it, chase after it like a cat after a scrap of paper.”

Fenris didn’t argue; he didn’t even bristle. His eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry it came to this, Leto,” Varania muttered.

“What a good Imperial citizen,” Danarius said, patting Varania on the shoulder. She glanced at his hand as though she wished it wasn’t there, but she didn’t move away.

“I never wanted these filthy markings of yours, Danarius,” Fenris said, holding out his arms where the lyrium tattoos snaked, “but I won’t let you kill me to get them.”

“Never wanted them? You fought for the privilege. So fiercely, too. And all to free your mother and sister. Do you see what freedom got them? I found your sister on the streets, and took care of her all this time … just in case.” Danarius gave a small, tight smile. “Now you’ll come back, my little wolf.”

Lucas had had just about enough of this. He stepped forward. “Fenris isn’t going anywhere.”

“Your new master, pet?” Danarius looked Lucas up and down. “Impressive.”

“Stop it,” Fenris said.

“Come over here.”

“I—“ Fenris’s struggle against the voice he was used to obeying without question was palpable.

“No.”

“You dare?” Danarius formed a ball of some kind of light in his fist, but as soon as it had formed, he gasped and it flickered out.

“Templars,” Isabela murmured, a lilt of curiosity in her voice. “Your doing, Varric?”
“Not mine, Rivaini.” Varric unslung Bianca, preparing her to fire.

“Pet, if you don’t stand down and call me master, your little friends are going to get themselves hurt. Is that what you want?” Danarius asked.

Fenris looked desperate. The markings were glowing all along his skin, but his usual anger was nowhere to be seen.

“Leto, just come with him,” Varania whispered, distressed.

“You don’t tell me what to do,” he snapped at her. Lucas was glad to hear some of his friend’s usual acerbity back in his voice.

“No, but I do. Call me ‘master,’” Danarius commanded.

“No!”

“Your Templar’s cleanse won’t last for long. A weak attempt at best. What, have you got some stripling whelp back there who just learned the skill?” Danarius impatiently set himself and reached for his magic again. He staggered a bit, but then straightened, advancing on Fenris menacingly.

“Not another step.” Lucas had his sword out, and its tip was at Danarius’s throat. “I don’t know what you were thinking when you came here, but Kirkwall is my city, and no one drags one of my friends out of it.”

“Hawke,” Fenris said, sounding more like himself than he had since they entered the Hanged Man. “Leave this to me.”

“He’s all yours.” Lucas dropped the sword slightly and stepped back, leaving Fenris facing off against the man who had taken his mind, his memories, his very identity from him.

“You are no longer my master. From this day, I kneel to no one.”

“I gave you those markings. I know how they work.”

“Yes, no doubt you do.” Fenris’s fist flashed forward, connecting firmly with Danarius’s jaw, the magister’s head snapping back.

Pleased, Isabela whispered, “I taught him that.”

“Good job, too,” Lucas told her.

Danarius kept reaching for his magic, but between the Templar and Fenris, he could hardly catch his breath. Fenris continued to batter at him until Danarius went down on one knee, panting and wheezing. “Fenris,” he whispered.

“Don’t call me that.” Now Fenris activated the lyrium markings himself, reaching for Danarius’s heart, squeezing it inside the magister’s chest, standing over him, his face set and grim, until the last of the light had left Danarius’s eyes.

Only then did he turn to his sister, who put up her hands in front of her face. “Please, Leto, I had no choice! He found me … on the streets, after Mother died, he paid for me to learn a trade, he said—he said he was going to make me a magister.”

Fenris froze, staring at her, his face paling in shock. “A magister? You’re—you’re a mage?”
Varania nodded, her eyes wide and fearful.

“And you sold out your own brother for a little bit of power?”

“You sold us out!” she cried. “When you won that tournament and asked your boon, our freedom—but what freedom was there for two elves alone on the street? We had no protector. You didn’t even know who we were! What was I supposed to do, Leto?”

“Stop calling me that!”

“I did what I had to do to survive,” Varania whispered. “If that makes you want to kill me, do your worst.”

Green eyes met green eyes, the two of them staring at one another, a lifetime between them, a lifetime that Fenris didn’t even remember. At last he stepped back. “Get out of Kirkwall. Never let me see or hear from you again.”

Varania didn’t waste time; she scurried out as fast as her feet could move.

Fenris stood with his head hanging, his white hair over his face so that Lucas couldn’t see his expression. At last he looked up, a depth of sorrow in his eyes that made Lucas’s heart hurt. “I thought discovering my past would bring me a sense of belonging,” Fenris whispered. “But I was wrong.”

“I’m sorry.”

As if he hadn’t heard, Fenris muttered to himself, “Magic has tainted that, too. There is nothing left for me to reclaim.”

Son and brother of apostates, little as he was certain of the extent of magic’s true dangers himself, Lucas was stung. “You can’t blame magic for this! A man like Danarius would be the same whether he had magic or not.”

“Hawke,” Isabela said softly, her tone disappointed. She was right; it was hardly the time.

Fenris lifted his arms, staring at the lines of lyrium with disgust. “I feel unclean. As if this magic is not only etched into my skin, but has also stained my soul.”

Isabela gently put a hand on his arm, nudging it down. “What you need, my broody friend, is a bottle of Antivan brandy. Maybe one for each hand.”

He looked at her under the curtain of white hair, and she nodded encouragingly.

“Yes,” he said at last. “Let’s get out of here.”

Fenris and Isabela left. Lucas opted not to go with them, knowing at this moment what Fenris needed was some of Isabela’s medicine—drinks and more drinks and wild stories and unconditional understanding.

After the door had closed behind them, and Corff had straightened up from behind the bar, where he had been hiding, soft steps were heard coming down the stairs, and to his surprise Lucas recognized Lia, the elven guardswoman.

“Is he gone?” she asked.

“Yes.”
“Good. I … wouldn’t want him to know I was here. I think … it would be best if he didn’t know I knew any of that.” She blushed.

“Shit, that was you, with the cleanse?” Varric asked in disbelief.

Lia nodded. “Captain Aveline likes to have a few of us with Templar training, just in case. She’s made a special deal with Knight-Captain Cullen.” She opened her eyes wide. “Oh, I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone!”

“It’s all right,” Lucas assured her. “No one will hear it from me. But—thank you. You really helped.”

“Do you think he’ll be all right?”

“Fenris? Eventually. Maybe what he needs now is something to live for.” Lucas smiled at her, and she blushed again.

“Maybe so,” she said softly. “I’d like to think that.”
Wounded Dragon

With Isabela off comforting Fenris, and Corff cleaning up the Hanged Man, Lucas and Varric found themselves with nothing to do.

“Might as well go to the Bone Pit, see what Carver found,” Lucas suggested.

“Hawke, when are you ever going to learn to relax? Just when you get one job done, you give yourself another.”

“I suppose that’s true. I don’t know, I don’t like time to hang on my hands.”

“Then you put it down and pick up a deck of cards. Or a mug of ale. Or a quill.”

“If only it was that easy.”

“It is, my friend. It is.” But despite his protests, Varric kept pace with Lucas as they left the city and headed in the direction of the Bone Pit.

It was evident that something bad had happened there. The carrion birds that flew high in the air, circling, the stench of decay, were presages of what they would find. As they drew closer to the mine itself, they found equipment and people and … pieces of people scattered across the ground, more thickly the closer they got.

“Hawke,” Varric said. “This is—bad.”

Lucas sped up, thinking of Carver and Aveline and Merrill out here, where people had died. And then, above the calls of the birds overhead, he heard something louder, something ear-piercing and powerful. He and Varric looked at one another.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“If I had to guess, that’s a high dragon. Let’s go.”

They ran. Lucas remembered only a little about riding a dragon from Lothering to Gwaren, but he had heard it cry once, and this was what it had sounded like. Only this dragon was angry, and, if he didn’t miss his guess, in pain. The others had done it some damage, he thought hopefully, but even as he thought it he could feel the blood pounding in his veins, the fear that he had lost his brother again.

There was a long, winding path down into the quarry near the mine, and the sounds were coming from there. Varric and Lucas took the path, half-sliding, half-running.

At the bottom, they found a wounded dragon, shrieking and breathing fire and lashing out with wings and tail as Carver battered at its leg with his sword, over and over again. He seemed weary, but he was still standing. Off to the left, Merrill sat with Aveline’s head in her lap. Aveline appeared to be unconscious, her face smeared with blood. Donnic sat next to them, holding his arm. Merrill’s skill at healing was only moderate, but Donnic would have been more panicked if Aveline was in serious danger.

“You check on Aveline,” Lucas told Varric. “I’m going to help my brother.”

“You got it, Hawke.”
Carver glanced around briefly as Lucas joined him, a grimace that might have been a smile passing over his face, but he was too wearied to do more. With a nod at his brother, Lucas got himself set. The dragon’s mighty tail was too big to block—he would have to dodge it. But the wings he might be able to do something about. He waited, slashing at the dragon to keep it busy, keep it focused on him, until the next time the great wing was raised, and then he darted underneath it, blade lifted high above his head, and had the satisfaction of hearing the dragon scream in rage and pain as his blade tore through the membranes of the wing.

He heard Carver yell something, encouragement, maybe, and then saw a bright flash of something strike the dragon full in the open mouth, choking off a burst of flame. Glancing quickly over his shoulder, Lucas saw that Varric had taken over tending the wounded and Merrill was with them, her staff in play. Carver was grinning at her, clearly feeling a burst of renewed energy now that he wasn’t facing down a high dragon all on his own. Lucas slashed at the wing again, tearing another hole in it, and then circled around the dragon’s front, fending off a mighty sweep of one great foot, to try for the other wing.

The dragon beat the air with its remaining wing, and Lucas was sent rolling across the sand by the gusts of air that came from it. Carver was down, too, but Merrill was just outside the range of the wind, and she kept casting, hitting the dragon in the snout and the mouth and the eyes. One particularly well-timed shot broke off one of the dragon’s giant teeth, and it fell to the ground.

Tiring, the dragon stopped beating its wing, and Lucas and Carver got to their feet. The sand wasn’t the best thing for firm footing, and both of them were stumbling a bit in their heavy boots, but they were of one mind now, and they rushed the dragon, blades raised, hacking and slashing at the other wing, and then at the legs and tail, until the dragon was bleeding from dozens of cuts. It was backing away from them now, its roars more of wounded outrage than the heat of battle, its head beginning to droop.

Lucas was about to finish it, but it didn’t feel right. Instead, he stepped back, and nodded at his brother.

Carver had been down on one knee, panting for breath, exhausted by hours of combat. Lucas wondered if he, too, was wounded and simply covering it better than Aveline and Donnic had been able to. Now Carver got to his feet, lifting the sword. He took a moment, closing his eyes as he caught his breath, and then he charged, sword at the ready, and thrust it with all his might, deep into the dragon’s chest, through the heavy skin and between the ribs.

The dragon cried out, weak puffs of smoke coming from its mouth, and struggled weakly against the intrusion of the great metal blade. And then it gave a final croak and the head fell to the ground. Carver barely scrambled out of the way of the collapsing body in time.

He and Lucas and Merrill stood looking at the dead creature for a long while.

“Where do you think it came from?” Merrill asked at last. “How long has it been here?”

Carver turned to look at her. His hair was sweaty and fallen in his face, which was bright red with his exertions. “Does it matter?”

“There might be another one.”

“Oh, that’s a cheery thought.” Carver half-sat, half-fell onto the sand. “If there’s another one, brother, I’m going to let you handle it. I think I’ve had enough of dragons.”

Lucas grinned down at his brother. “If I had a copper for every time you said you could beat a
dragon single-handed …”

“Which I did.”

“Which you mostly did.”

Merrill knelt next to Carver, putting her fingertips on his forehead. She closed her eyes as though she was listening to something, and then her fingers flexed. Carver gasped, and then immediately started breathing more evenly than he had since Lucas arrived at the battle site.

“I thought so!” Merrill sat back on her heels triumphantly. “You had a broken rib.”

“And now I don’t?”

“Now you have a cracked rib,” she told him. “Some things I can heal completely, other things the body has to do on its own.”

“Thank you, anyway,” he said softly, holding her eyes with his.

Lucas left them alone, sensing that was what Carver wanted. He wondered if his brother had gotten up the courage to give Merrill the ring yet.

Varric looked up as he came near. “I think the Captain here is going to be all right. She’s starting to come around.”

Donnic had taken Merrill’s place; Aveline’s head now lay in his lap, and he was stroking her face. He still appeared to be favoring his right arm.

“Are you all right?” Lucas asked him.

“I think it’s just wrenched. It’ll be all right with some rest, and after I’ve had the city surgeon look at it.” He touched Aveline’s face gently. “As long as she recovers, that’s all I can truly ask for.”

“How are we going to get her back to Kirkwall?” Varric asked.

“I think there might have been a broken cart up there; let me go see if I can fix it, maybe we can wheel her back in it.” Lucas suited the action to the words, climbing up the sandy slope with some difficulty.

While he was tinkering with the cart, Carver and Merrill made it to the top. Carver came over to him, one hand on his chest, presumably over the cracked rib.

“You going to be all right?”

“Merrill says so. With some rest. Do you all ever get any rest in Kirkwall?”

Lucas laughed. “Any day now.”

“Well, I’m going to head back to the alienage with Merrill. I think—I think tonight I’m ready to give her that ring.” Carver nodded. “So don’t wait up, big brother.”

“Good luck.” Lucas resisted the urge to tell his brother to be careful with Merrill’s heart. He would, or he wouldn’t. Merrill was a grown woman, and Lucas thought there was likely to be more to her than most people thought. Either way, she was going to have to fend for herself eventually, and he trusted his brother.
He finished fixing the cart and helped Donnic carefully bring an awake and protesting Aveline up the slope and deposit her in it, and then he pulled it back to Kirkwall, with Donnic’s help.

They took Aveline back to the keep and Lucas saw both her and Donnic under care of the surgeon before he left. Varric had already gone back to the Hanged Man, but Lucas was in no mood for that, not tonight.

There was little point hunting down Fenris, much as he might have liked to; if Isabela wasn’t back at the estate yet, then Fenris wasn’t ready to be seen. It was the first night in a long time that Lucas had been alone, completely on his own … and he wasn’t sure he liked it. Maybe that was why he did so much around town—to avoid being alone. He wasn’t sure if he liked that vision of himself, either.

The empty mansion was eerie; Lucas found he jumped at every noise. Even Bodahn and Sandal were out somewhere, and Orana was fast asleep in her room off the kitchen. Lucas was just thinking about turning in early, and wondering if he could sleep in this too-silent house, when the door opened. He went into the hall, thinking to greet Isabela coming in … but it was Carver. A downcast Carver, whose evening clearly hadn’t gone well.

“You gave her the ring,” Lucas said softly.

“I gave her the ring. And here I am.”

“I’m sorry. You want to talk about it?”

Carver looked like he was on the verge of saying no. Then he sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping, and he nodded. Lucas led him into the parlor, pouring them each a generous brandy before they sat down. It was almost like those long evenings with Fenris, except that brooding wasn’t really Carver’s usual reaction.

He waited until Carver had taken his first fortifying gulp of the spirits before asking, “Was she upset?”

“No. Far from it. Touched, really.” Carver looked down at the amber liquid swirling around in the glass. “I … I should have guessed that it wasn’t just a fancy ring. Apparently it had a meaning, and I missed that, and I looked like a fool.”

“How could you have known? I’m sure Merrill didn’t hold that against you.”

“No, but … it didn’t help. If I—if I was really serious about her, wouldn’t I have tried to find out about the ring? She told me a long story about the Dread Wolf, and I tried to ask questions, but … well, I was never very good at paying attention when someone was trying to teach me something.”

“You used to practice sword drills when Mother told stories at bedtime,” Lucas agreed, grinning. “No matter how many times she told you to settle down and get to bed, you never could sit still long enough for her to finish the story.”

“Exactly.” Carver nodded, sighing. “And I tried to make a joke, but … there again, I should have known better. Merrill has no sense of humor when it comes to her people. She told me—she told me it was a Keeper’s ring, the kind she might have worn if she hadn’t been kicked out of her clan. Then she told me I was very sweet, the way you’d tell a little boy when you were about to pat him on the head.”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly. So … I told her that I—“ He stopped, swallowing hard, and looked at Lucas. “Let’s never
mind what I told her, all right?"

“All right.”

“Bottom line is, I’m not an elf. And … something about a mirror? I didn’t really follow that part. I think she wants to talk to you about that one.” Carver drained the last of his brandy. “So I’m not an elf and I’m not a noble and I’m not a prizefighter and I’m not the son and brother of apostates. I guess—I guess I’m not anything. Isn’t that just dandy.” He stood up and threw the glass violently into the fireplace, watching it shatter. “Good night, brother.”

He turned and left the room, leaving Lucas sitting there alone, wondering if he had really done his little brother any favors by bringing him back to Kirkwall. Would it have been better for both of them if he’d sent him back to Orlais? Lucas sighed, wishing … well, he didn’t really know what to wish for.
Beck and Call

There was no chance Lucas was going to be getting any sleep now, with Carver’s situation weighing heavily on his heart, so instead he headed through the dark and silent streets of Hightown for Fenris’s mansion. He found there what he expected to: Fenris and Isabela sitting side by side on the desk in the ruined study, passing a bottle back and forth. Far from their first, he could see.

“How either of you eaten anything all day?” he asked them. Come to think of it, what had he eaten? It had really been quite a long day.

“Something …” Isabela frowned. “Maybe?”

“We have not left the mansion,” Fenris corrected her.

She turned to look at him, frowning. “And why not?”

“Why not?” he echoed, confused.

“Why haven’t we gone anywhere? We could go anywhere. You could go anywhere you want. You’re free!”

“Am I?”

Isabela ignored Fenris’s reluctance, her eyes brightening. “You could become a raider! You could join my crew!” She turned to Lucas. “Tell him, Hawke, tell him to come with us.”

“I’ve heard worse ideas,” Lucas admitted.

Fenris sighed. “And I can just see your crew now, throwing me overboard in the dead of night out of fear of these cursed markings.”

“With that attitude, you’re going nowhere at all,” Isabela informed him. She yawned. “But I, on the other hand, am—I’m going to go to sleep.”

And she proceeded to do so, curling up in one of Fenris’s brocaded chairs. She was out cold in just a few moments. Lucas touched her hair gently, grateful to her for taking on Fenris’s emotional state all day. Then he left her there, looking peaceful, if not exactly comfortable.

“She doesn’t understand,” Fenris said softly. “Yes, I am free. Yes, Danarius is dead. Yet it doesn’t feel like it should.”

“Are you sure you know how it should feel?” Lucas shrugged. “You wanted him to stop chasing you, now he has. Maybe it wasn’t fear of Danarius holding you back after all.”

Fenris looked at him. “Perhaps. I thought if I didn’t need to run and fight to stay alive, then I would finally be able to live as a free man does. But now I find I don’t know what that means. I thought to have rediscovered who I was, but now I will never know what lies in my past. I have nothing—not even an enemy.”

Lucas resisted rolling his eyes, remembering that his friend had gotten a very late start on living, in many ways. “Has my past helped me live my life? Has Varric’s? Aveline put her past behind and moved on—she’s the smartest of us all. Let the past lie. Think instead that maybe you’ve been living the life of a free man all this time. No one forced you to come work with me, to spend time at the
Hanged Man, to play Wicked Grace with Varric. Those were your choices. Your free choices. With Danarius dead, you have cut the last tie that was holding you back—anything is possible for you now.” He thought of Lia, of the bright hope in her eyes, but decided Fenris wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Hm.” Fenris tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is time to move forward. I just … don’t know where that leads.”

“Nobody knows where their future leads, Fenris.”

“The future of a slave is never uncertain. But … I am no longer a slave. Perhaps it is time that I remembered that.” He stood up. “And I am hungry. Shall we go and see what Corff is serving at the Hanged Man? My treat.”

A sleepy voice came from Isabela’s chair. “Hear, hear. I’m coming with you.”

Lucas and Fenris both chuckled and helped her out of her curled-up position.

Fenris stood looking at both of them, hesitating. At last, he said, “Of all the things I hoped to discover in Kirkwall, I never thought to find friends. Thank you. Both of you. Wherever the future leads, I hope it is never far from your sides.”

Not knowing what to say, Lucas merely smiled at his friend. Isabela, on the other hand, snorted. “Mush. If I’d known that was what you were serving, I’d have stayed asleep.”

Fenris chuckled, and the three of them made their way out of the mansion, through the darkened streets, and down the long stairs to Lowtown.

At the Hanged Man, they found Varric sitting with Merrill, both of them unaccountably silent. When Lucas came in, Merrill stood up, hurrying to him. “Hawke. Hawke, I—”

“Let’s talk upstairs, shall we?” Whatever she had to say, he’d rather it was in private. He glanced at Isabela. “Save me some stew?”

“We’ll do our best.”

In Isabela’s room, Lucas took a seat on the bed and watched Merrill pace up and down the room, muttering things he couldn’t quite catch. At last she stopped, taking a deep breath that looked like it was meant to get her courage up.

“I’m sorry about Carver,” she said. “I didn’t—He … I mean …”

Lucas held up a hand. “That’s between the two of you. I’m sorry it didn’t work out, for what it’s worth, but I understand the issues. Or, at least, I think I do. But that’s not all this is about, is it?”

“No. It’s … it’s the eluvian. It won’t work. It just—sits there, doing nothing!”

“It’s a mirror,” Lucas pointed out. “Is it supposed to dance?”

“It is at least supposed to reflect, and it doesn’t even do that!” she snapped at him. She took another deep breath, this one to calm herself. “I need to ask you a favor.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows.

Merrill continued, “I thought the arulin’holm would be the last thing I needed, but it wasn’t enough. I think …” She looked down at the ground, and in a very small voice finished, “I think I need to go back to the spirit that helped me at the start of all this.”
“Oh, no.”

“I have to, Hawke. Please.”

“Why would you think this demon will help you?”

“Because he knows about the mirror! I don’t know how much, and of course it’s dangerous to trust … But he said he witnessed its forging. He told me how to cleanse it of its corruption.”

“He told you, in fact, exactly what you wanted to hear.”

“No!” Merrill held his eyes for a moment, and then dropped her gaze. “Well, maybe. But he’s the only one who knows how to make it work.”

“That can’t be true. Summoning a demon can’t possibly be the only way.”

“It’s the only way I know.”

“You know I can’t go along with this.”

“No … but I’m going to do it anyway.” Lucas had never seen Merrill so determined. “I’m going to Sundermount; the spirit was sealed in an artifact there.”

“And now we get to the favor.”

“Yes. If … things go wrong, if he … possesses me—I need you to strike me down.”

The room was very silent after that, both of them looking at each other. “You know I will,” Lucas said at last.

Merrill nodded. “Yes, I do, which is why it has to be you, and not …”

“And if you overpower me and I fail?”

“Hawke, you have faced down Qunari and varterrals and ogres! You won’t fail.”

“You have more confidence than I do. But if you’re determined to do this, then I will go with you.” He couldn’t let Merrill become an abomination—for Carver’s sake, for Isabela’s, even for Varric’s, if not for the greater good. He considered suggesting she should go to Marethari, but he knew her answer to that. Getting up from the bed, he asked, “When do you want to do this?”

“In two days’ time.”

“Fine. Then for now, I’m going to go get something to eat, and you’re going to go really think about what you want and if this is truly it.”

Merrill said, “All right,” fairly meekly, but they both knew her mind was made up. Lucas went back to the main room of the tavern with a heavy heart.

Lucas was awakened the next day, in Isabela’s bed in the Hanged Man with his pirate queen sprawled across his chest, by a messenger from Knight-Commander Meredith, demanding his presence at the Gallows.

Isabela made a face. “Her again?”

“Looks like it.”
The messenger, one of Varric’s bright army of urchins, said, “There’s a poncy fellow from Hightown waiting for you downstairs, too, Champion.”

“Poncy?”

The boy wrinkled his nose. “Orlesian. Smells funny.”

Lucas groaned. “Hubert.”

“You’ve got quite the exciting day lined up already, lover.” Isabela kissed his chest. “And to think, the plans I had . . .”

After signaling for the wide-eyed boy to close the door before he saw more than Lucas was entirely comfortable with, Lucas caught the small sun-browned hand that was working its way under the covers. “Vastly as I prefer your way of planning my day to theirs . . . Hubert is more than capable of coming up here.”

Isabela winked. “He could watch.”

“He could not!” Lucas got out of bed, hunting for his clothes. “I take it you’re not joining me in my lovely trip across the harbor to the Gallows?”

“Not a chance. I have business to take care of.”

“In that case . . .” He leaned down and kissed her long and thoroughly, resisting her attempts to pull him back into bed. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Count on it,” Isabela said throatily.

In the tavern, Hubert was haranguing Varric, who was nodding along, occasionally making what appeared to be inflammatory remarks. Hubert saw Lucas approaching and his face lit with relief. “Partner! You live!”

“Yes. And the dragon doesn’t. I assume you’ve already had men out there carting away the remains?”

“But of course. Dragonbone and dragonhide and dragon’s teeth—one cannot allow them to go to waste.”

“Good. Send me the receipts of what you get for them, and we’ll split those profits among the families of the men it killed.”

“Split the—among the families—split the profits?!?” sputtered Hubert. “My dear Hawke, think of my equipment, none of it salvageable, the salaries of the miners, what I had to pay the men who took care of the dragon’s corpse, my investors . . .”

“I’m your investor,” Lucas reminded him.

“Yes, but—split the profits? Are you certain? I will be ruined. Ruined!”

Lucas watched his business partner steadily.

At last Hubert sighed. “I curse the day I came to this wretched city and bought that Maker-forsaken mine in the first place. Fine, we will split the profits, and then you can have the mine. I will go and find a way to make money somewhere . . . else.” He looked around the Hanged Man, sneering, leaving no doubt as to what he thought about this particular corner of Kirkwall.
“If you insist.” Lucas didn’t particularly want the mine, but better him than Hubert, he thought philosophically.

“Bah!” Hubert swept out of the room.

Varric chuckled. “Well, that went differently than I expected.”

“What am I going to do with a wrecked mine that’s infested with dragons and spiders?”

“Sell tickets?”

Lucas chuckled. “It might be the only way to make it turn a profit.”

“Let me put some of my people on it, Hawke. I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Varric, it was a lucky day when I met you.”

“Yes, it was very lucky for you, wasn’t it?” Varric sighed happily.

“Maybe you’d like to come to the Gallows with me, while you’re chortling?”

“Sure, why not. Wasn’t like I had anything better to do with my time.”

Fenris, who had apparently not gone home last night—or slept, by the look of him—offered to come, too, and so the three of them took the ferry across the harbor.

Meredith awaited them in her office. Her clear and icy blue eyes were as beautiful as ever, but her face seemed cruel and pinched, somehow, her gaze just a little off. “Champion.” She said. Her eyes flickered over Varric and Fenris, but she didn’t bother to acknowledge them. “I understand that Emile de Launcet was finally brought in. He seemed quite willing to be returned. Perhaps too willing.”

It took Lucas a moment to follow her implication. “He’s no blood mage. Just an idiot.”

“Yes, well, perhaps there is danger in that, too.”

Lucas wondered if Fenris was going to add his agreement to the comment, but his friend was silent.

“As it happens,” Meredith continued, “the boy’s father made a spirited appeal for his safety, so we have been convinced to keep a watch on him but otherwise leave him as he was.”

“I’m glad to hear that. The boy isn’t dangerous; he just needs guidance.”

“Oh, guidance he shall have.” Meredith gave a small, chilly smile. “Now, on to the point of my calling you here. It appears there is a conspiracy afoot within the Gallows. The mages are responsible, but they have blinded everyone to their truth. Orsino can preach treason in the market, but still the sheep bleat that the mages are not dangerous. Fools!”

Again, no comment from Fenris. Lucas was impressed with his friend’s restraint. Perhaps his newfound freedom was teaching him to be a bit more open-minded where mages were concerned … or possibly, more cautious of Meredith. Either way, it seemed a good thing.
“Is there something you need from me, Knight-Commander?” he asked.

“I need to bring hard evidence to the Grand Cleric! It is the only way she will believe me.”

“And you wish me to get that evidence for you? What if it doesn’t prove what you want it to?”

Meredith shrugged. “Then I am wrong.” She didn’t appear to entertain that as a serious possibility, however. “I would never ask you to lie, Champion.”

Varric gave a very faint chuckle; Lucas wasn’t sure if Meredith even heard it. But he did, and he didn’t disagree. He didn’t put it past Meredith at all to expect him to lie for her.

“I understand there is a meeting in Hightown at night, two days hence. Be there, and we can all see what this conspiracy consists of.”

There was time to get to Sundermount and back before the meeting, and no reason to refuse to at least go see. “Very well,” he agreed. “I will do what I can.”
Lucas convinced Fenris to come along to Sundermount—if Merrill needed someone to kill her before she became a danger, Fenris would do so without hesitation. He hoped Fenris could keep his mouth shut on the way; the dour elf’s disapproval of the entire mission was nearly palpable. But Lucas saw no way to keep Merrill from going out there and exposing herself to danger from this demon short of tying her up in the basement of his estate. Since that solution was obviously unworkable, his next best option was to go with her and make sure that whatever happened, she harmed no one but herself.

Varric came along as well. Lucas had considered asking the dwarf to stay behind, because if they did have to kill Merrill on some mountaintop it would hurt Varric deeply, but staying behind and wondering what was happening was just as bad. He left a note for Carver and Isabela, telling them he would be gone all day but not saying where. Neither of them needed to spend their day worrying, either.

They were a somber bunch, despite the bright, beautiful day they were passing through. Merrill was anxious and jittery and yet filled with a quiet excitement—she had been looking forward to fixing this eluvian, to stepping through it and finding on the other side … whatever it was she thought was there, and Lucas could sense that she was absolutely thrilled to finally be on the path toward her goal.

She was stunned to find her clan still there, aravels parked in the same place they had been the last time they had all been out here. “Why are they here?” she whispered. “They should have left years ago.”

“No halla,” Lucas said. “Doesn’t that mean they’d have to stay put?” The aravels looked terrible, now that he noticed—the covers were tattered, the wood old and weathered, the wheels splintering. What had they been doing out here all this time?

He felt distinctly uncomfortable walking through the camp, feeling the hostile glares of all the elves on him. They had grown angrier in the years since Lucas had last visited Sundermount.

A tall elf with a bow and quiver strapped to his back stopped them. “What business have you here?” He looked at Merrill, sneering. “I hope you don’t think you’ve come home, flat-ear.”

Merrill flinched at the epithet, then straightened her back and looked the other elf in the eye. “No, this is no homecoming, Fenarel. Why is the clan even here?”

“None of your business,” Fenarel snapped. “We will leave when we feel like it.”

“But the longer you stay, the more you decimate the animal population, the harder it is to find food,” Merrill protested.

“It isn’t your place to be concerned about the way we live,” he told her, but Lucas could see that Merrill wasn’t wrong. The elves were thin, painfully so, and their eyes were hollow. They weren’t eating much. Why were they still here?

“You can’t stay here! Eventually the humans will force you to leave.”

“Shemlen,” snorted Fenarel. “Like any of them would come so near to Sundermount. The spirits keep us safe.”
A shiver of alarm worked its way down Lucas’s spine. Were they all possessed? He didn’t really want to find himself fighting an entire clan of elves, even in their current undernourished state. Especially in their current undernourished state, he amended to himself. The last thing Merrill needed on her conscience was a fight with her clan.

“What are you doing here, Merrill?” Fenarel demanded.

Behind Lucas, Fenris snarled, “Hunting a demon.”

“And what, you thought to find one here? Look to your own people,” Fenarel said, with a significant glance at Merrill. “If anyone knows about demons …”

Merrill looked down at her hands, at the scars on her palm, but she didn’t say anything.

“Where’s the Keeper?” Lucas asked. If anyone could keep Merrill from going down this path, it would be Marethari. He didn’t much like the Keeper, but she was a powerful mage. She must have answers.

“I … None of your business,” Fenarel said defensively.

“Is she all right?” Merrill asked in alarm.

Fenarel looked at her, something more than mere anger in his eyes. “None of your business, I said.”

“Is there something wrong with the Keeper? Tell me!” Merrill begged.

“She’s not in camp,” Fenarel admitted unwillingly. “I haven’t seen her all day.”

“Maybe she’s off picking herbs, Daisy,” Varric said, laying a comforting hand on Merrill’s arm.

“Perhaps.” Neither Merrill nor Fenarel looked comforted by that idea.

The day was wearing on; if they were going to climb the mountain and accomplish Merrill’s task and be back down before the sun set, they needed to get moving. Lucas said as much to Merrill, who agreed reluctantly, and he promised Fenarel that they would keep an eye out for the Keeper on their way.

They made the climb up Sundermount in all but complete silence. Merrill was too tense to speak, Lucas and Varric too worried, and Fenris didn’t seem to see any point in it.

At last they arrived at a cave at the top of the mountain and Merrill led them inside. A stone statue stood in the middle of the cave, and next to it, huddled on the ground shivering with her arms wrapped around herself, was the missing Keeper.

Merrill ran to her, falling to her knees at the Keeper’s side. “Keeper! What are you doing here?”

With some difficulty, Marethari pulled herself together. “I … couldn’t let it have you, da’len.”

“What?” Merrill put a hand on the statue’s stone leg. “It’s not here! It’s … empty. This is very wrong. Keeper, what have you done?”

“The demon’s plan was always for you to complete the mirror.” Marethari lifted a hand, tracing the line of Merrill’s cheek. “To make a doorway from his world into ours. And you would have been his first victim.”

“No,” Merrill moaned.
“So you stopped it,” Lucas said in surprise. “You saved Merrill.”

“Hawke,” Fenris said. “It is not that simple.”

Looking at Marethari, seeing how she suffered, Lucas felt foolish for thinking, even for a moment, that there could be an easy way out.

“The demon is still here,” Merrill whispered, and the Keeper nodded. “She made herself its prison. In order to kill the demon, we must …”

“Now, da’len. Do not wait.”

“Keeper, I can’t! You can’t ask this!” Merrill was near tears, and Marethari was near the end of her strength. Her breathing was coming quickly, her body wracked with shivers.

“You must do it now!” Fenris shouted, moving at his surprising speed across the cavern, but he was too late.

Where Marethari had been, the hulking, purple body of a pride demon now stood. “You always knew your blood magic had a price, da’len,” it intoned in a twisted parody of Marethari’s voice. “I have chosen to pay it for you.”

“No!” Merrill scrambled to her feet, stumbling over her own feet as she backed away from the demon. “No, this isn’t the way this was supposed to happen!”

To his credit, Fenris kept his mouth shut rather than rub salt into the wound. Instead, the elf focused on bringing his blade and the lyrium inlaid into his skin to bear on the demon. Bianca was in service, as well, her ratchet and clank preceding the flight of an iron bolt into the demon’s tough hide. Lucas drew his sword. He gave a glance toward Merrill, who stood as if frozen, staring open-mouthed up at the demon, her cheeks wet with tears.

At last she got her staff in motion, and after the first tentative strike, her anger fueled her magic, sparks flying as lightning stabbed at the demon, over and over, while it screamed and writhed and fought to get past Lucas and Fenris to the mage.

They kept battering at it until it was on its knees. Suddenly, instead of the demon, Marethari knelt there, clutching her stomach, bleeding from multiple cuts. She looked up at Merrill, struggling to focus. “Da’len?”

“Keeper!” Merrill ran to her.

“You—you’ve beaten it.” Marethari winced, groaning in pain. “You are … so much stronger than I ever gave you credit for being.”

“Oh, Keeper, if only you’d realized that sooner.” Merrill reached down to touch the Keeper’s face.

“Help me back to the clan. They should know that the demon is gone.”

“Wait, what?” Lucas asked. “I thought …”

“It’s a trick, Hawke. The demon is bound to the Keeper’s life; she has to die in order for it to be defeated,” Fenris told him in a low voice.

“Let Daisy handle it. She needs this.” Varric shouldered Bianca.

Lucas stepped back, doing as he was told. Varric was right; Merrill needed to handle this fight, to put
to rest her difficulties with Marethari, once and for all.

Merrill drew a small knife, holding Marethari by the shoulder. “Ir abelas, Keeper,” she said in a voice thick with emotion, but steady and firm. She stabbed Marethari in the heart with a single forceful thrust, and then sank to her knees, holding the body in her arms while the life ebbed from it.

“Is it gone?” Fenris asked.

“Yes.” Merrill’s face crumpled, and a storm of weeping took her as she rocked Marethari in her arms. “I don’t want this—I never wanted this! Creators, let this be a bad dream … I’ll wake up and feel like an idiot and she’ll scold me for not listening …”

“You weren’t listening,” Fenris said, but under his breath.

Merrill heard him nonetheless, casting him a stricken glance. “If there was a price to pay, it was my right to pay it, my responsibility. She … she kept the clan here for me! She put them in danger to keep me from suffering the consequences of my own actions. She had no right!”

Put that way, Lucas couldn’t help but agree. Marethari had put Merrill above all else, but she hadn’t offered Merrill the respect of actually talking to her, or trying to help her. She had decided what needed to be done, and she had done it on Merrill’s behalf, with no concern for what Merrill might actually have wanted—or what she might have been capable of. He knew without question that Merrill would far rather have been lying here in a pool of her own blood than have had to take a knife to the woman who had stood in the place of a mother to her for so long, to have had to doom the clan to a life with no Keeper.

“She wanted to protect you,” Varric offered.

“Yes,” Merrill said bitterly. “But she never asked if I wanted to be protected. Why couldn’t she have believed in me?”

They all stood there while she gently cradled the Keeper’s body. There was nothing to say to that last question—clearly, Marethari never had believed in Merrill, or none of this would have happened, and now there was no one left to say why she hadn’t.

At last, Merrill got to her feet, laying Marethari’s head carefully on the ground. “I … should go to the clan. Someone needs to know. They need to come … take care of her.”

The three men hung back on the way down Sundermount, sensing that Merrill wasn’t up to talking yet. Lucas wondered what she would do now, how this experience would change her. Because it must—there was no question about that. She could no longer fix the eluvian, Marethari had, essentially, betrayed her, and she could never go home to her clan again, that much was certain.

They were assembled waiting for her at the bottom of the mountain. Fenarel came toward her, his bow drawn. “Where is she? We know the Keeper went up the mountain, and so did you, and now here you are. Where is she? What have you done?”

Merrill didn’t even seem to notice the arrow staring her in the face, or the drawn weapons in the hands of the rest of the clan. She walked slowly toward Fenarel. “The Keeper, she …”

A dark-haired woman from the back pushed forward. “Look at her! She’s covered in blood. What did you do to her?”

Finally, Merrill managed to get the words out. “She’s dead. She—she’s dead.”
“I should have guessed you’d turn on her, you monster.” The dark-haired elf had her sword poised to strike. Next to Lucas, Varric drew Bianca, loading a bolt into the chamber. He felt a chill—this was going to go horribly badly in just a few moments if someone didn’t do something.

He pushed himself in front of Merrill, shielding her with his body. “This was a tragedy, but Marethari herself made the decision to have things end this way. Let me take Merrill home to Kirkwall; I promise you, I will make sure that she never hurts anyone.”

Merrill glanced at him reproachfully, and he heard a grumble from Varric, too. This seemed to be the only way to get Merrill safely out of camp, however, without harming the other elves. They had suffered enough.

The dark-haired elf’s sword remained upraised. “You expect us to take the word of a shemlen?”

“Stand down, Ineria.” The blond elf had put his bow away. “It’s what she deserves, a life among the humans.” His gaze rested on Merrill with more compassion than Lucas had yet seen in him. “She was our First, once, and the Keeper loved her. It seems … it seems she loved Merrill more than she loved the clan. Let her live with that, if she can.”

Slowly, each of the other elves put their weapons away, and they silently stepped back, letting Merrill and Lucas and Varric and Fenris walk through them.

At the end of the line of elves, Merrill turned. “Fenarel. All of you … I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I never wanted this. If I could have saved her … if I could have died instead …”

“Get going,” Fenarel said quietly. “Before we change our minds.”

They didn’t wait to be told again. Merrill walked on, head bowed. To Lucas’s great surprise, Fenris walked with her. Perhaps he felt a kinship with her now that they had both lost their clans. At the very least, he wasn’t accusing her or condemning her, and his silent presence seemed to be all Merrill had the ability to stand right now. He and Varric hung back, both of them glad the day hadn’t gone any worse than this.
Kidnapped

Isabela wasn’t at the estate when Lucas returned to Kirkwall. He was disappointed, but not entirely surprised. She often slept on the ship, some nights when work had gone late or she had been enjoying her time singing songs and playing cards with the sailors, or at the Hanged Man. He had hoped to see her tonight, to talk to her about Merrill. The elf had been sad all the way back home, and wouldn’t allow Varric to walk her back to the alienage. He had followed her, of course, discreetly, while Lucas and Fenris returned to Hightown.

Lucas turned in with a sigh, not relishing his bed as much as he would have with Isabela in it. He couldn’t wait until her ship was ready and they could sail away. But Kirkwall wasn’t done with him yet, he reminded himself. There was still Meredith’s famous meeting tomorrow night. He imagined it would prove to be nothing more than the Knight Commander’s fevered imagination running away with her again, but he would go, to keep the peace if nothing else.

The next morning he slept late, ate a hearty breakfast, and then ambled down to Lowtown. Varric was in the Hanged Man, writing away. On being questioned, he said he hadn’t seen Isabela at all since he’d come back, and that Merrill had shut herself away in her little hovel with every appearance of closing herself off from the world.

The two of them passed the day with cards, joined in the middle of the afternoon by Fenris and Carver, and then in the evening by Donnic and Aveline, who were going to accompany them to the meeting Meredith was so concerned by.

Fenris and Varric, as the quietest, approached the meeting site first. Lucas had no claim to stealth, and Aveline and Carver were each about as subtle as a bronto, so the conspirators heard them coming.

“The Champion!” called out a mage in the middle of the darkened courtyard.

A bearded blond Templar stood in their way, his arms crossed. “We know you’re working with Meredith. You can’t stop us!”

“Run,” another mage said to him. “We’ll handle this.”

“We’ll handle it together,” the Templar corrected.

Lucas raised his eyebrows. Was this the conspiracy, mages and Templars working together to protect each other? No wonder Meredith was displeased. But wasn’t this exactly what Kirkwall had needed all these years? He raised his hands. “Wait. I have no quarrel with you.”

But they had one with him, or they assumed they did, which was bad enough. The dark sky was lit by magic as the mages attacked, and metal rang on metal as the Templars drew their swords. Lucas and the others had no choice but to defend themselves, and all too soon it became clear that the mages and Templars intended it to be a fight to the death.

Lucas was sick of death. He didn’t want to fight anymore, didn’t want to take on these problems as his own, but they left him no choice. When it was over, he looked down at the blond Templar at his feet and felt nothing but disgust at the whole situation.

“Hawke,” Varric said. He was kneeling next to one of the mages, going through the pockets of her robes. “They’ve got a warehouse. Do you believe that? Another conspiracy, meeting in a warehouse on the docks. Just once, I’d like to see them show some originality.”
When Lucas didn’t respond, Carver crossed to the dwarf and looked over the note he’d found. “Might as well go look into it.” He looked around at the carnage. “I didn’t expect this. They were protecting each other.”

“If only mages and Templars all across Thedas could do as much,” Donnic said huskily.

“Yes,” Aveline agreed, but her voice was tart, “but preferably with less insistence on dying in the process.”

Lucas walked with the others down through Lowtown to the docks, but his heart wasn’t in it. In the distance, he spied Isabela’s ship gently rocking at the end of its wharf, and he felt a sudden intense longing to be aboard, locked in her arms in the luxurious captain’s cabin, nothing around them but the ocean.

Inside the warehouse, it was the same old thing. Mages shouting, Templars threatening, magic flying, blades drawn. Another blond Templar, but this one known—Keran, whom Lucas had saved from blood mages all those years ago. To his credit, Keran objected when he saw Lucas.

“Not the Champion! No. I can’t do this.” He ran and hid himself in an office while his companions attacked, and only when it was all over did he come out, his hands raised above his head. Keran didn’t even look at the bodies, his eyes on Lucas. “I told them not to do it, I swear,” he said. He was practically quaking with fear.

Lucas was tired and sweaty and wounded in at least three places, and with no mages amongst his team, he was making do with chewing elfroot, which tasted like wet grass. “You told them not to do what?” he snapped.

“If I knew you were the one they were talking about, I would have warned you.”

“Warned him about what?” Carver asked, sounding as testy as Lucas felt.

Keran shook his head. “I don’t hold with kidnapping. Not after what I went through.”

“Kidnapping?” Aveline asked. “What are you talking about?”

Softly, Varric said, “I don’t think I like where this is going.”

“They said … they said Meredith was sending someone after us, that we needed a hostage … leverage, someone they cared about.”

“Rivaini,” Varric whispered.

Isabela? No way was some bumbling group of mages and Templars going to get the drop on Isabela. “Has anyone seen Merrill?” he asked.

“No one would imagine that Merrill would be leverage for you, Hawke,” Fenris said.

Keran cleared his throat, forcing the words out. “I heard they captured some pirate wench. Apparently she had quite a mouth on her … and more daggers than they could count.”

“Maker. Isabela.” Lucas thought he was going to be sick. “How did they take her?”

Keran looked guiltily away, and Fenris shook his head.

“It’s the same story as always, Hawke. Always. When in an extremity, a mage will always turn to blood magic.”
“So it seems,” Lucas agreed painfully. His vision swam and he blinked, trying to clear it, and his head. He took a quick step toward Keran, his hand closing on the Templar’s armor, lifting. Keran rose on his toes, trying to keep his balance. “If you hurt her, you bastards are going to pay. Every single one of you.”

“Hurting her wasn’t the plan. It was just … just to keep you from bothering us.”

“Oh, I think I’ll be bothering you.” Lucas tightened his grip, lifting Keran clear off the floor.

“Thrask says Meredith will cause open war with the mages if she stays in charge,” Keran wheezed.

“Do I look like I give a damn about Thrask, or Meredith, or the bloody mages?” Lucas asked. “You tell me where she is, right now, or I will snap your neck this second.”

“The main base … is on the Wounded Coast … an old ruin.” Keran’s breath was coming in ragged gasps.

Lucas dropped him, the metal armor clanging as it struck the floor. “You had better hope that the rest of my stay in Kirkwall is a short one, because if I ever lay eyes on you again, you’ll wish I’d left you to those blood mages.”

Keran scrambled to his feet and stumbled from the warehouse.

Turning to look at the others, Lucas said, “Let’s go. I’m not leaving her out there a moment longer than I have to.”

There was no disagreement. Wounded, tired, it didn’t matter. Even Aveline, never outwardly Isabela’s strongest supporter, was ready to go after her immediately.

In the time it took to get all the way to the Coast, as he stumbled through the sand in his heavy boots, as his heart thudded painfully against his ribs over and over again, Lucas couldn’t stop imagining Isabela helpless, bound by blood magic, being beaten or tortured or … killed. He couldn’t help thinking about his life without her, how empty and purposeless it seemed, yawning ahead of him, cold and dark. Was this how Fenris felt, he wondered, how Carver felt? Or Varric? None of them had another person to tie their futures to, to inspire and encourage and cajole them out of their cozy niches and into something altogether and utterly different. Except himself, he supposed. Maybe that was what he had been for all of them, someone to give them purpose and make their lives interesting.

Well, he was done with that. If—when they found Isabela alive and well, he was bloody well getting out of Kirkwall, away from the mages and the Templars and the nobles’ inability to do a damned thing for themselves.

And if … he couldn’t help the thought. If they didn’t find Isabela alive? Well, maybe he’d do everyone a favor and kill Meredith. Maybe he’d take out Orsino while he was at it, let Kirkwall start entirely afresh.

Maybe— But his dark thoughts of potential vengeance were interrupted when a man in dirty rags stepped out of the underbrush in front of him. Lucas frowned at him—he looked familiar.

“Hawke,” said the man, his deep voice cracked, sounding strained and painful. “How’ve you been? Sticking your nose in every problem in Kirkwall since you stumbled off the boat, from what I hear.”

“Samson,” Aveline said with weary exasperation. “Did they let you out of jail already?”

“Paid my fine, I have. Public vagrancy,” he explained to Lucas. “Our Captain Aveline likes the streets clean.” He looked at her over Lucas’s shoulder. “Be a better job if you opened a soup kitchen
in the jail, fed the people.”

“You don’t come begging for food,” Donnic said.

“No, what I need goes deeper than mere kibble.”

Lucas stepped closer to him. “I don’t give a damn what you need. You can get out of my way yourself, or you can stand still and let me throw you over the rocks and into the ocean. I really don’t care which you choose, but be quick about it.”

“Don’t you want to know what the mages and Templars are doing down there?” Samson had a greedy gleam in his eye, and Aveline groaned.

“None of us have any lyrium to pay you with.”

So that was it. Samson was an ex-Templar and a lyrium fiend. Lucas felt a certain amount of pity for him, or he would have if there had been room in his heart for any emotions beyond fear and anger.

“The Templars down there have lyrium a-plenty. All I ask is you close your eyes to where it goes when you’re done with ‘em.”

“What do you know?” Lucas asked impatiently.

“I know they’re up to their blood magic. Oh, yes.” He nodded. “They claim innocence, but back them into a corner and they go straight for the power. Rest of us don’t have that option, never will. That’s why they need to be locked up.”

“Exactly,” Fenris agreed.

“You want lyrium, and all you have is ‘they’re using blood magic’?” Aveline asked incredulously.

Donnic was watching Samson with rather more understanding than the rest of them. “You don’t want lyrium,” he said quietly. “You want us to put in a good word for you.”

Samson looked at him quickly, almost in panic, then relaxed a little. “That’s right. I want to take up the shield again, take up the fight, do my bit. Meredith kicked me out—I didn’t leave on my own. If she’s gone …” He shrugged. “Maybe there’s a place for a broken-down ex-Templar in the order that made me what I am.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Donnic told him, ignoring the glare Aveline shot his direction. “We’re going after Thrask and his people—you go back to Kirkwall and get Knight-Captain Cullen, bring him here with as many Templars as you can muster.”

“All right.” And Samson was gone, moving surprisingly fast.

Lucas put the ex-Templar out of his mind even before he was out of sight. Isabela was what mattered now, and he was going to get to her as quickly as he could.

He was too angry, too frightened, for subtlety. He and his team went in with naked steel drawn, ready for a fight. Thrask met them at the entrance to the camp, his hands up, pleading for mercy, for calm, for a chance to talk.

“I didn’t mean for you to come here,” he said.

“Didn’t you? When you sent me such a nice calling card.” Lucas gestured with his chin over Thrask’s shoulder at Isabela, who was being held up against a female mage who had a dagger to
Isabela’s throat. From her wide, panicked eyes and her utter stillness, Lucas could tell Isabela must be held by some type of magical bond, and the scene made his blood boil in his veins until he could hardly remain still. It didn’t help that the dagger being held to his lover’s throat was her own.

“Why do you support Meredith?” Thrask asked, looking at Lucas curiously, ignoring his comment. “You have to know how harmful she is to Kirkwall. Please, Champion, I have nothing but respect for you. With your help, we will see Meredith gone.”

“Nothing but respect?” Lucas said. “When you kidnap my lover? When you bring her here under the influence of blood magic and hold her at knife point in front of me? Do you think I give a damn about Meredith right now? I never have! You can all resolve your own differences … or you could have, if you had left the woman I love alone.”

“We will release her as soon as I have your word you will support us,” Thrask said.

At that, the mage holding Isabela shrieked. Lucas could see blood, rich and dark, well up where the dagger’s edge had dug into Isabela’s skin. “No! The girl dies. And then the Champion. And then all his friends!”

“Stand down, Grace,” Thrask ordered.

“Grace.” Fenris sighed. “We should have killed her when we had the chance.”

Lucas dimly recalled them. Grace and her fellows had fled to Kirkwall when the Starkhaven circle burned. Lucas and his team had found them hiding in caves, using blood magic to protect themselves, and they had talked Thrask into bringing them to the Gallows.

“We will not kill an innocent to achieve our ends,” Thrask told Grace. “We will not become Meredith.”

“What do I care for Meredith?” Grace asked. The dagger dug deeper. Lucas heard an animal moan of pain, and realized it had come from himself. “I am here for the Champion!” she said.

But whatever she might have had to say beyond that, no one would ever hear. No sooner had the last word come from her mouth than a quarrel was buried inside it. Lucas hadn’t even heard Bianca get into motion.

As Grace fell backward, the knife slid across Isabela’s throat. Another mage knelt at her side as she crumpled into the sand and healed the wound even as it was being formed, and then, with an apologetic look at Thrask, he cut his own palm and loosed Isabela’s bonds.

In the confusion that followed, Thrask stood staring about him in disappointment and anguish; mages were attacking Templars, Templars attacking mages, all Thrask’s careful work forming an alliance between them over the years gone in an instant. Lucas would have had some pity for him, but Lucas was barely aware of anything going on around him. He had gone down on his knees in front of Isabela as soon as she was healed, gathering her gently in his arms.

“Isabela. Maker, say something, please.”

She blinked at him, getting her bearings slowly. “When they took me, I was sure I was going to end up in the hold of some slaver’s ship. But this …”

“I’m so sorry. They only took you because of me.”

“And you all came to save me?” Isabela looked at the others, standing well back from the mage and
Templar confusion, over his shoulder. “How sweet.”

“I—Isabela, I love you. I never want to live without you. Not a day, not an hour, not a heartbeat.”

She swallowed, a depth of emotion in her eyes that he had never seen before. “I … think whatever I might have to say in response to that is best kept private.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he told her, bending to kiss her.

“I might have something to say anyway,” she said, clinging to him despite the blood and other evidence of battle on his armor.

Carefully, he helped her to her feet, and they looked around at the carnage. The mages and Templars had taken each other out quite efficiently; not one remained standing.

And then he saw Knight-Captain Cullen hurrying down the bluff with Samson, and several other Templars behind them. Cullen was saying, “I came as soon as I—“ And then he stopped and looked around him, his face falling. “Oh, Maker.” He looked over at Aveline, approaching her carefully. “Captain. Samson never said you were involved in this. I trust you were here to stop these traitors, not join them?”

Aveline crossed her arms over her chest, scowling. “That had better not have been the accusation it sounded like.”

“I apologize, but … many of those here were people I thought trustworthy. I … no longer feel I can trust my own judgment.”

Lucas could understand that, and he sympathized with Cullen’s situation.

“If they had seen what I saw in Ferelden, they would have known better than this,” Cullen continued.

There was really nothing to be said in response to that. Cullen barked some orders to his Templars, and they started collecting the bodies and laying them out.

“Do you need anything further, Knight-Captain?” Lucas asked.

“Oh, Champion. No, I don’t believe so. You and your people can go.” Cullen waved at them, and Lucas and the others hurried off before he could change his mind.
Lucas didn’t let go of Isabela all the way back to Hightown, and uncharacteristically for her, she didn’t protest against his hovering. Instead, she leaned against him, her arm around his waist, her dark head against his shoulder.

The others left them some space, and they all scattered once they came in through the gates of Kirkwall. Even Carver opted to go for drinks at the Hanged Man rather than coming home, so Lucas and Isabela entered the mansion alone.

“Let’s get you to bed,” he said softly.

“Ordinarily, I would say I don’t need to be coddled, but …” Her voice trailed off.

“I am so sorry that happened to you. I wish it had been me.”

“I don’t. I just wish I’d been able to fight back. That damned blood magic.” Isabela shuddered. “I can’t describe what it was like to have that in my head.”

“It was my fault—they took you to get to me.” Lucas cupped her face in his hands. “It nearly drove me out of my head to think they’d hurt you. I—Isabela, I love you. I didn’t know how much until I thought I’d lost you. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

There were tears in her eyes. To Lucas, it was a mark of how much she had suffered at the hands of the mages that her defenses were so far down, and much as he treasured the open display of emotion, he hated that it had come at the cost of her suffering. “Hawke. Lucas. You do make me happy. More than I imagined anyone ever could.” She laughed a little. “When I met you, I thought you had a giant stick up your ass, and I couldn’t imagine anyone making you bend.”

“I did. And I’m sorry I can’t bend more for you.”

“It’s all right. We’ll keep working at it. A few years of piracy and you’ll be amazed at how limber you are.”

Lucas smiled. “I look forward to it. When do we leave?”

“Are you sure you’re ready to give all this up?” She gestured at the empty house around them.

“I never wanted this, you know that. The house, the Amell name, that was all for Mother. Champion of Kirkwall was never my idea—I filled the role because there was no one else to do it, but now … well, Carver can, or Aveline, or even Varric.” They both chuckled at that idea. “I don’t care what happens to Kirkwall. It isn’t my city. I just want you, and the open ocean, and our life together, and I’m ready to run away any time you say the word.”

Isabela searched his eyes, seeming surprised and pleased by what she saw there. “You really mean it.”

“You are the most important thing in my life, and I’ll prove that in any way you want me to.”

For answer, she pulled his head down and kissed him. “All that time when the mages had me, I was angry with myself for being trapped, and I was kicking myself for counting on you to rescue me, just like any pathetic maiden in a fairy story—but you came, and you saved me, just as I would come for you if the tables were turned. We—we really are partners, aren’t we?”
“Absolutely. I know you would have my back, and I will always have yours. I promise.”

“Let’s go, then. As soon as we can.”

“Tomorrow?”

Isabela laughed. “Not quite so soon as that, but … three days, I think. Then we’ll be ready.”

“At your command, Captain.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that. Take me to bed, you scurvy dog.”

He lifted her in his arms and carried her up the stairs.

In the morning, when they awoke tangled in the sheets and wrapped in each other’s arms, they lay in bed a long time, exchanging languid kisses and making plans. The sun was high in the sky by the time Lucas got out of bed, and Bodahn was preparing lunch by the time he made it downstairs.

“Well, look who deigns to join us,” Carver said when Lucas came into the dining room. “How’s our favorite pirate?”

“Tired, but I think she’ll be all right.”

“You’ll never guess what arrived for you this morning.” Carver waved an embossed envelope around.

“What?”

“Royal summons. Our very own King Alistair is in town.”

Lucas felt he ought to have been more excited about that, but as it was, he only managed to summon a polite, “You don’t say.”

“Yes. He wants to meet with you.”

“Wonder what he wants to talk about.”

“Probably to bring Ferelden’s most famous expatriate back into the fold.”

“Pass. Why don’t you go see him?”

“Me?” Carver looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Sure. I’m not going back to Ferelden, that’s settled, but you could. Maybe His Majesty can find you something to do that you’ll enjoy.”

“You and Isabela off, then?”

“In a couple of days. I’ve had it with Kirkwall, and mages and Templars, and Meredith, and this Champion nonsense.”

“I can’t say I blame you, after what they did. Varric’ll miss you, though.”

“I know. But I can’t stay here for him … and he won’t leave.”

They attacked their lunch; by the time they were finished, Carver had made up his mind to take the meeting with Alistair. Lucas left him there composing his reply and made his way down to Lowtown
to check on Merrill.

The elf seemed her normal self, cheerful and scattered, and he could see that the mirror was covered by a sheet in her back room, as if she had given up on it. He told her that he and Isabela planned to leave Kirkwall. Merrill was saddened, but more on Isabela’s behalf than on his. Lucas promised to send Isabela down to say good-bye, although he knew she wasn’t a fan of big emotional moments.

Merrill intended to stay in the alienage and see what she could do for her people there, a goal Lucas thought was admirable, if ultimately doomed. But it gave her a task and someone to look after and care for, and he believed that was what Merrill had needed all along. If Marethari had given Merrill more responsibility in the clan in the first place, more of a position in the hierarchy, made her feel more integral, none of this might have happened. He was glad to see Merrill trying to make the best of where she had landed, and he hoped the elves of Kirkwall would be richer for her presence in their lives.

From the alienage, he debated dropping in to the Hanged Man to see Varric … but he wasn’t ready to say good-bye to the dwarf. Not quite yet. Varric would try to convince him to stay, and he was glib and persuasive enough that Lucas wanted their plans to sail to be much farther along than they currently were before he put himself in the position of trying to say no to the dwarf’s inevitable schemes.

Instead, he made his way to Darktown, wandering past the clinic. His own funds and Varric’s had been used to make it a haven for the abandoned children of the Undercity, run by a group of refugee women who had taken on the children as their own. It was a bright spot in the darkness down there, and a fitting end for something that had begun with so much hope. Lucas hadn’t heard a word from or about Anders in some time. He wondered what the mage was up to, but couldn’t bring himself to care too much. He hoped Anders wouldn’t hurt anyone, and felt vaguely guilty that he hadn’t killed him as soon as he realized the mage didn’t have control over his passenger, spirit or demon or whatever it was.

He considered going inside the clinic, but he had never been part of the day-to-day running of the orphanage, and he didn’t want to disrupt things, so he contented himself with watching the door, listening to the sound of children playing and crying and running and laughing, glad that at least something good had come out of his sojourn in Kirkwall.

From the depths of Darktown to the heights of Hightown. He made his way to the Chantry, where he found Sebastian kneeling in prayer. Sebastian wanted him to intercede with Elthina again, to talk her into fleeing the city. Lucas declined; he thought Elthina more than intelligent enough to decide how she wanted to handle the unrest and her role in it … and if she was caught in the growing tension between Orsino and Meredith, it was nothing less than she deserved for refusing to stem the problems from the start. She had given them a long rein—no one could be surprised that they were now running away with it.

He decided at last not to tell Sebastian he was leaving. They had never been overly close, and Lucas really didn’t want to deal with the inevitable disappointment, or the equally inevitable attempts to convince him to stay and take on more of the Chantry’s own mess. Let them get Sister Nightingale back if they needed a Champion; he was done with the job.

As night fell, he returned to the mansion, finding Carver and Isabela both still out. He summoned Bodahn from the kitchen to ask if he had heard from them.

“Master Carver sent a note to say that he was dining with the King of Ferelden tonight. Did I ever tell you that the boy and I traveled with His Majesty during the Blight? Those were hard times, indeed.” Bodahn clucked his tongue.
“Yes, I believe you’ve mentioned it once or twice.” Or possibly a hundred times. “Have you seen Isabela?”

“She went down to her ship, said she might be late and not to wait dinner for her.”

“Thank you, Bodahn. I … I wanted to tell you how much I’ve appreciated your help all this time, yours and Sandal’s.”

“It was our pleasure, messere, and the least we could do after you saved the boy’s life.”

“I’m going to be leaving the city in a few days. I believe Carver is remaining here, though, and you’re welcome to stay on with him.”

Bodahn gave a formal, and rather exaggerated, bow. “Meaning no disrespect to Master Carver, serah, but the boy and I were thinking it might be time to move on. Perhaps to Orlais, this time. We were considering taking up being merchants again.”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck.” Lucas reached for his bank book, and wrote out a slip, handing it to Bodahn. “This is for the two of you, as a nest egg, or seed money to rebuild your business.”

“Very generous of you, serah, thank you.”

Lucas nodded. “Safe travels to both of you, wherever you go. Can you send Orana to me, if she’s available?”

“Of course, messere.”

The little elf came in, twisting her hands nervously in her apron. “You sent for me, messere?”

“Yes, Orana. I wanted to tell you that I am going to be leaving Kirkwall shortly, and to ask if you would prefer to stay on here with Master Carver or if there is some other arrangement I can make for you?”

She frowned, looking down at the ground. “I … I don’t know.”

“You’ve done very good work here. Would you like work as a servant elsewhere?”

“It’s … all I know, messere.”

“Then I will do my best to find you a new position tomorrow, if that suits you.”

She nodded, not looking up. He considered giving her a bank draft, as well, but he didn’t think she would know what to do with it, and he imagined she might be overwhelmed if he did so. Maybe he’d talk to Varric about her. Either way, he would make sure she was taken care of before he left.

As Orana returned to the kitchen, the door opened, and Isabela came in. She came straight to him and plunked herself down on his lap. “Second thoughts?”

“Not a single one. Arrangements made to sail?”

“High tide, day after tomorrow. You should have heard the sailors cheer.”

“I rather feel like cheering, myself.” He grinned at her. “But maybe I can find a better way to express my enthusiasm.”

“I can think of a few suggestions.”
“Your orders, Captain?”

“Upstairs, swabby, and look sharp about you.”

“Aye, aye.”
In the morning, Lucas and Isabela hurried together across Hightown to the Viscount’s Keep. Avoiding Seneschal Bran and that entire half of the building, they went into the guard quarters. Lucas was glad to see that he had timed things correctly—Aveline was still barking orders and had not yet released the guard out into the city for morning patrols.

She saw them over the guardsmen’s shoulders and nodded to acknowledge their presence—not without a faint frown at seeing Isabela there.

As the guard scattered, their orders firmly set in their minds, Lucas grabbed Donnic’s arm. “Can you afford to stay for a few moments?”

“I … believe so, yes,” Donnic said in surprise. “Is there something amiss?”

“Aveline will think so.”

“Aveline will think what?” she asked, waving them into her office for greater privacy.

“We … have something to tell you,” Lucas said. She had gestured for them to sit, but he couldn’t, too nervous about how she would take the news.

But Aveline, unexpectedly, was nodding. “High tide in the morning. I wondered when you would show up here—or if I was going to have to track you down.”

Isabela laughed. “Nothing gets by you, big girl.”

“I do see the harbormaster’s schedule every day.” Aveline smiled, pleased to have taken the edge off the moment.

“And … you’re all right with this?” Lucas asked her.

“What choice do I have?” she asked him. “I can hardly tie you to Kirkwall. Once you began carrying on with this harlot, it was only a matter of time.”

“You do say the nicest things,” Isabela murmured.

“Well, come here, then, you filthy slut.” The two women embraced, long and hard, betraying the affection that had always lain under their constant insults and digs at one another.

Lucas turned to Donnic, holding out his hand. As they shook, he said, “Take care of her.”

“I have no other plans for my life but to do so,” Donnic assured him earnestly.

“Good.”

As Aveline and Isabela broke apart, both sniffing suspiciously, Lucas took his lover’s place, holding his oldest friend close. “I’ll miss you, you know.”

“You’d better write. And visit, all the time. Kirkwall will be so dull without you.”

He grinned at her. “You know you’re going to love that.”

“Yes. That’s true.” Aveline studied his face. “You’re happy with this?”
“Absolutely. I can’t wait to go, to see what lies beyond the horizon. It has to be better than what I’ve found here.”

“You could have told me.”

“We only decided yesterday. I … wanted it scheduled so nothing could stop us.” A faint shiver ran down his spine. Even now, he was afraid that somehow Kirkwall would dig its hooks into him and pull him back, that he would never really get away.

“I understand,” Aveline said. “You’ll let us throw you a party at the Hanged Man tonight?”

But Lucas shook his head. “No. Any grand gathering, any attention called … No. You can throw us a party at the Hanged Man the first time we stop back in.”

Aveline raised her eyebrows. “And who says we’ll be happy to see you back, after you’ve run out on us?” But her eyes were twinkling. “You take good care of yourself … and your pirate.”

“Will do, Captain.”

They took their leave of Aveline’s office. Lucas reached for Isabela’s hand, holding and squeezing it, smiling down at her happily. He had no regrets, no worries. This felt like the right step, and he couldn’t wait to take it.

In the atrium, they ran into Carver, who was hurrying past them. “Can’t talk! Late for my meeting with the King!”

“Only Carver would be late to meet with the King of Ferelden,” Lucas remarked.

Isabela grinned. “Alistair won’t care. He’s as likely to be late as Carver is.” She looked speculatively up the stairs at Carver’s retreating back. “Matter of fact, I think they’re likely to get along quite well.”

“Good. Carver can have the statecraft. I won’t need it any longer.” He shook Isabela’s hand gently. “There’s only one monarch I intend to worry about pleasing.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that.” They were outside now, and she looked around. “Where to next? Fenris or Varric?”

“Fenris. He’ll take more convincing.” Lucas glanced at her. “Are you sure you’re okay with bringing him on as a sailor?”

Isabela nodded. “He needs freedom as much as you, and a change of air, and a chance to decide who he is and who he wants to be. We can offer all that.”

“And the sailors won’t mind his … special talents?”

“Mind? He’s bloody useful in a fight; that’s what they’ll care about.” She frowned. “I’m not sure I’ve brought enough wine, though.”

“He probably ought to cut down,” Lucas said dryly.

They let themselves into the mansion, calling out so that Fenris would know it was them. They were surprised to find he wasn’t alone; the guardswoman Lia was there, kneeling next to his chair, the two of them murmuring softly but intensely. By the time Lucas had realized what was happening, it was too late. Lia looked up at them, her face distressed and tear-stained. With a last glance at Fenris, she rushed out of the room, fleet as a deer.
“I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You … did not.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows at that patent falsehood, and Fenris sighed.

“Had you not arrived, the conversation would have continued, but nothing would have changed.”

“You broke that poor girl’s heart?” Isabela said sharply.

“I saved her from a more painful, more permanent break in the future. I am … too damaged for any woman at this point in my life, and certainly far too much so for an innocent young girl like Lia, however brave and determined she might be.” Fenris’s eyes were on the door, eloquent with regret.

Isabela knelt next to him, in a similar position to the one Lia had been in. “Come with us,” she urged him.

“Piracy?” He raised his eyebrows, looking from Isabela to Lucas and back. “This is an official plan?”

“We’re leaving in the morning,” Lucas said. “We came here to tell you—“

“Good-bye,” Fenris finished. He closed his eyes, swallowing hard. “That would be difficult to do. You have been—both of you have been …” He shook his head. “I have no words.”

“Then don’t use them. Come with us, instead. Let me show you freedom as it ought to be.”

Lucas had rarely heard Isabela so earnest. He knew she felt a kinship with Fenris, that the two of them were very similar in ways that he couldn’t entirely grasp. He might have felt threatened if he didn’t know that Isabela had given herself to him freely; it was a choice he intended to try to live up to every day. And he, too, wanted the elf along on their adventures. Alone amongst their friends in Kirkwall, Fenris understood the need for freedom, the way Lucas had felt trapped by the chains of this city almost from the beginning. Aveline had found her place bearing the burden of those chains, lifting it off others; Varric in chronicling it; Sebastian in praying for it; Merrill in studying it; Anders in decrying it. But Fenris had no connection to the burden of the chains; he was as free and as desperate to feel his freedom as Lucas was.

“Please come,” Lucas said now to his friend. “We really want you with us.”

“You do?” There was a pleased look in Fenris’s eyes now, a brightening.

“Very much so.”

“In that case …” He hesitated. “Yes. I will join you.”

Isabela hugged him, spontaneously, and Lucas could see Fenris, never comfortable being touched, exerting all his considerable control to allow the affectionate gesture. He understood what his friend had meant in saying he was too damaged for any woman; it would be a long time before he could return Lia’s affection the way it ought to be returned, and Lucas agreed that she deserved better. He commended his friend for his restraint and his wisdom … if not necessarily for the fear that had sparked them.

Getting to her feet, Isabela said, “We leave tomorrow morning at high tide. You might want to be on board tonight.” She frowned, thinking. “I believe it’s Babson and Gutter watching the gangplank tonight. Tell them the captain sent you. Password … ah, yes. Andraste’s knickers. Or her tits.” She
shook her head. “No matter. Mention Andraste and her unmentionables, and they’ll let you aboard.”

Fenris chuckled. “I can see piracy is going to be an education in many ways.”

Isabela winked at him. “You have no idea.”

“We’re off to the Hanged Man. Coming to say your good-byes?”

“Tender them to Varric for me. I believe … I will be glad to leave this place with as little fanfare as possible.”

“What we’re trying for, too,” Lucas told him.

“The Champion of Kirkwall?” Fenris shook his head. “Good luck.”

The truth behind Fenris’s skepticism was underscored as Lucas and Isabela walked through Hightown’s marketplace. A messenger in Templar livery, clearly an initiate, found them, nearly shoving a note from Meredith into Lucas’s hand.

“Urgent,” he panted. “From the Knight-Commander!”

Lucas opened it, glancing over the lines. It was a summons, to meet her at the Gallows without delay. He frowned down at the initiate. “Do you know what she wants?”

“Me, serah! No.”

“In that case, tell her I’ll be there first thing tomorrow. That’s the earliest I can be available.”

The initiate blanched. “She’s not going to like that, serah.”

“And I’m sorry you have to deliver the message,” Lucas told him. “Maybe you can take your time heading back, say you couldn’t find me.”

“Lie, serah? To the Knight-Commander? I could never!”

“Oh, you’re going to go far in the Templars.” Lucas sighed. “Well, then, I’ve done all I can for you. Tell her first thing tomorrow.”

“Very well,” grumbled the initiate, and he made his way through the crowds back down toward the docks and the ferry to the Gallows.

“If Aveline knows when my ship is sailing, so does Meredith,” Isabela said, her voice low.

“I know. I thought of that.” Lucas put an arm around her shoulders and steered her through the crowd toward the stairs, leaning over to speak quietly in her ear. “We could stage a big fight at the Hanged Man, and make it seem as though you’re leaving without me.”

“We could.” Isabela frowned. “But I’d rather not. Not on our last night.”

“Then what do you recommend we do?”

“I think …” She held up a finger for him to wait while she thought it through. “I think we could leave tonight. High tide tomorrow was already fairly late in the morning, but that means it’s also relatively late tonight.” Isabela looked up at him. “You up for it?”

He didn’t even have to stop to think. The sooner they sailed out of Kirkwall Harbor, the better, as far
as he was concerned. “Absolutely.”

The smile she gave him would have been more than worth quashing any misgivings he might have had. “Good.” Then the smile faded as she considered what would need to be done. “We’ll want to go aboard as late as possible to avoid giving anyone any ideas, and I don’t dare warn my crew. We’re lucky Teo’s a good egg; he’ll manage.” Teo was her second-in-command.

“Then we’d best get on with our day. Have you spoken to Merrill?”

“I dropped in on her yesterday.” Isabela looked down, scuffing the edge of a step with the toe of her boot. “I wish we could take her, too, but she won’t go.”

Lucas had no desire to have Merrill aboard, but he knew Isabela held a deep affection for the elf. “I’m sorry. I think she’ll be happier in Kirkwall, amongst her fellow elves. She wants to make their lives better.”

“From a broken magic mirror to a broken magic race,” Isabela said sadly. “She loves throwing her life away on causes she can’t do anything about.”

“It’s her life,” Lucas pointed out. “We have to let her do with it what she feels is right.”

“I know.” Isabela cleared her throat. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“We don’t have to.” Lucas tightened his arm around her shoulders, pulling her against him, giving her comfort in the press of their bodies against each other.

At last they reached the bottom of the steps, and Lucas groaned and slapped himself in the forehead with his palm. “I completely forgot about Gamlen.”

“You won’t find him down here at this hour, anyway,” Isabela told him. “He’ll be at the Rose until long after … late tonight.”

“I’ll have Varric or Carver say my good-byes. Gamlen and I were never all that close anyway.” He wished he felt more badly about leaving his mother’s brother behind, but … he didn’t. They had found Gamlen’s daughter for him, or helped her find him, rather, and Lucas felt that was enough, better than some awkward moment trying to memorialize a relationship they’d never really had to begin with.

They entered the Hanged Man, finding Varric writing at the usual table. He eyed them askance as they came toward his table. “’Bout time you made your way to me.”

“We saved the best for last,” Lucas told him, sitting down.

“Meredith’s going to do her damnedest to keep you here, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, we know.”

Varric nodded. “Figured you would. I sent a care package aboard an hour ago … and there may be a plan to distract the Ice Lady tonight.” He smiled. “It wouldn’t do to ask too many questions.”

“Trust me,” Isabela told him, “we weren’t going to.” She stretched out a hand and took hold of one of Varric’s, holding it for a moment. “You’ll be missed.”

“You, too, Rivaini. Place won’t be the same without you.”

“I hope not. I like to leave places different than they were when I came.” Isabela grinned.
“You do, too,” Varric said. “Look what happened to Denerim after you left.”

“Hey! That wasn’t my fault.”

“So you say.” Varric grinned, and Isabela laughed. She left them, then, to go upstairs and pack up the few things from her room that she hadn’t already loaded aboard the ship.

Lucas pulled out a chair and sat down across from Varric.

“Hawke, Hawke, Hawke.”

“Don’t you dare make me cry,” Lucas warned him.

“No promises.” Varric smiled, then cleared his throat. “This is awkward, you know. I hate sentimentality.”

“Then don’t do it. We’ll be back, you know.”

“Yeah, you say that, but … it won’t be the same.”

“No, probably not.”

“And today of all days!”

“What’s today?” Lucas asked.

“Look, I just want to say that it’s been an honor knowing you.”

“Same here. Without you, none of this would have happened.”

“That’s got its good points and its bad ones.”

Lucas smiled. “Let’s focus on the good ones, shall we? The part where we became filthy rich and ruled the city and helped a lot of people and I fell in love with a dashing pirate.”

“Those are the good parts, aren’t they?”

“Well, those, and however many nights we’ve spent here in this filthy bar, drinking cheap, horrible liquor.”

“Ah, yes.” Varric leaned back in his chair and chuckled. “The best parts of all. Do you know it’s been six years? Six years since I found you dragging your tail out of Bartrand’s office and chased you down in the street.”

“Six years today?”

Varric nodded solemnly. “Six years today.”

“Well, what do you know.”

“More than you, it seems.”

“What can I say, they’ve been busy years. I’ve rather lost track of the calendar.”

“Who’s going to keep your calendar on Rivaini’s ship?”

Lucas gave Varric his best attempt at puppy-dog eyes across the table. “You could.”
“Me? Leave Kirkwall? That’ll be the day. No, Hawke, my adventuring days are over. I’ll sit here where it’s warm and comfy and spin my little tales and be a pain in Aveline’s ass the rest of my life.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Ah, Hawke. Not to get too maudlin on you, but … I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too, Varric. There really is no one like you.”

“Aw, get on out of here before you make me cry, you big softie.” Varric held out a hand, and Lucas shook it, and that was it—all the good-bye either of them could stand.

Lucas got to his feet. Varric asked, “Going up to see your brother?”

“Yes.”

“He was with His Majesty, the royal bastard of Ferelden, all day, but I hear he’s gone back to the mansion now.”

“Is there anything that goes on in Kirkwall that you don’t know about?”

Varric’s face grew shadowed. “One or two things. But those aren’t your concern any longer.”

Lucas knew he was referring to Anders; and Varric was right, the mage was no longer his concern. “Best of luck to you, Varric.”

“You, too, Hawke. I’ll tell Rivaini where you’ve gone.”

“Tell her I’ll meet her at the place at the time.”

“Absolutely.”

Lucas left the Hanged Man, looking up at the sky. Just enough time to get back, pack a few things, say good-bye to Carver, and be off. He worried, though. Meredith was unpredictable. What if …

No. It didn’t bear thinking of. He was getting out of here tonight, one way or another.

“Carver?” His voice echoed in the mansion. That was one thing he would not miss—this big drafty place that reminded him so painfully of his mother, and of her last days.

“Yeah?”

“Come upstairs with me, I have to tell you something.”

“I have something to tell you, too.”

“Great.” Lucas took the stairs to his room two at a time. “I’ll go first.”

Carver was right behind him, leaning against the doorway of his room while Lucas lugged out his battered old valise and started filling it. Quite a few things were already aboard ship—these would be the last, most important things: Bethany’s old rag doll; the militia armbands he and Carver had worn in the battle of Ostagar, both bloodied and torn; a piece of his father’s last staff, broken off when his mother had been forced to use it to defend herself as they fled, Isabela’s small clothes from the first time they had made love, the box of gemstones he kept to remind him of her, manuscripts in both Varric’s handwriting and Isabela’s, a pressed rose from Aveline’s wedding.

“I take it you’re leaving,” Carver said at last, as Lucas stopped to finger each item and let the
memories flood him.

“Yes, sorry.” Lucas shot his brother a sheepish grin. “Tonight, to avoid getting caught and kept here by Meredith. Maker only knows why she thinks she needs me, but she does, and … I’m done with it.” He looked at his brother. “I’m sorry to leave this on your shoulders.”

“Well, that’s the thing.” Carver was grinning broadly. “You aren’t.”

“What do you mean?” Part of Lucas wondered if Isabela had somehow convinced Carver to come be pirates with them. He would like the idea well enough, but it didn’t seem right for Carver.

“I’ve got a job.”

“What kind of a job?”

“The King of Ferelden—Alistair—has offered me a job in his personal guard.”

Lucas laughed. “Well, Isabela did say the two of you would get on well together.”

“She did? How did she know?”

“I think it’s possible she slept with him.”

Carver’s eyebrows shot up. “Really.”

Lucas shrugged. “She doesn’t kiss and tell, but she drops a lot of hints.”

“Huh.”

“So when are you leaving?”

“When he goes back to Ferelden.” Carver frowned thoughtfully. “It feels strange to be going back there, but … good, too. Right. One of us should be there.”

“It was our home,” Lucas agreed. “The last place we were all together. And personal guard to a king sounds like a job tailor-made for you, little brother.”

“I wish I could return the compliment, but I still have trouble seeing you as a pirate,” Carver confessed. “You sure this is what you want?”

“As sure as I’ve ever been of anything.” Lucas fastened the valise and crossed the room to stand before his brother. “You take care of yourself.”

“Always have. And you stop by and see me next time you’re in Denerim.”

“Count on it.”

They embraced, holding each other tightly for a long moment, then stepped back, neither sure what else there was to say. Maybe there was nothing—maybe they would go their separate ways now except for occasional visits. For the first time, Lucas thought he was all right with that.

He left the mansion for the last time, and took the steps down to Lowtown for the last time.

Lowtown was in an uproar, elves tearing through the marketplace shouting and guards chasing them. Lucas stopped, instinctively thinking he should help … and then he noticed that the elves weren’t actually doing any real harm, and the guards didn’t seem anxious to catch them. He caught sight of
one of Varric’s urchins and the kid winked at him. Lucas grinned. This was their idea of a diversion, then, an elven uprising staged for Meredith’s benefit? He saw the light gleam on Templar armor coming up from the Gallows ferry and decided it was a good time to keep moving.

He continued to the docks, glad that his conspicuous armor was already aboard. In regular clothes, he looked just like anyone else, not the Champion of anything, and that was fine with him.

The ship was there, quiet in the soft shadows of the oncoming evening. As Lucas’s feet touched the deck, the two sailors who had been stationed on the dock climbed aboard and pulled the gangplank up behind them.

Isabela was standing by the big wheel, and he went to join her. “Do we have all our cargo?” he asked her softly.

“He’s below; didn’t want those markings of his shining and giving everything away.” She looked up at him. “You’re here.”

“I said I would be.”

“I wasn’t sure I really believed it … until now.”

“I’m yours, as long as you want me,” he promised.

“Good.” Turning to the elf at the wheel, she gave him the order, and slowly the ship began to pull away from the dock.

Lucas held his breath as they navigated through Kirkwall’s harbor, terrified lest the chains hidden deep in the water should come up and stop them … but they didn’t, and eventually they sailed out of the channel and into the open ocean and on towards the setting sun.
Lucas lay in the bunk, enjoying the early morning light spilling through the windows and the warmth of Isabela pressed against him. He would only have a few minutes of this peace—late sleeper as she had been in Kirkwall, Isabela was up with the first cry of the seabirds on board her ship, and involved in every aspect of its management and maintenance until long after sunset.

She loved it, though. He could see how it kept her on her toes, how it challenged her physically and mentally, and how alive she had come since they sailed out of Kirkwall’s harbor, and he loved to watch her. He loved slightly less the work he did, but it was work he chose—or that Isabela chose for him—and that made it a vast improvement over what would have awaited him in Kirkwall.

It had been nearly two weeks after the destruction of Kirkwall’s chantry before they had heard of it, and by that point, the search for Hawke had already begun; it had been too late to go back and check on their friends and family without being caught up in the investigation and the reprisals.

A letter from Varric had caught up with them a few weeks later, detailing what had happened—Anders resurfacing and his decision to bring attention to the plight of Kirkwall’s mages by blowing up the Chantry; the death of Elthina in the destruction. Sebastian had been grievously wounded, but had survived, vowing to retake Starkhaven and use the city as a launching point to revenge himself on mages everywhere. Merrill had gone to the Chantry after it was destroyed and worked her fingers to the bone, to hear Varric tell it, in the service of clearing the rubble and finding the bodies of the dead and wounded, earning herself the respect of the city … but the aftermath of the destruction, as Circles rose up across Thedas, had made it too dangerous for her to remain, and she had fled. Varric didn’t know where.

Aveline and Donnic had survived the day, and Aveline had essentially taken over the city, imposing martial law in order to care for the victims and keep looting to a minimum and offer safety to the survivors. Seneschal Bran was acting as Viscount, with Aveline’s assistance.

Carver had left the city only a few days after Lucas had, in service with King Alistair of Ferelden, so he was safely away. Lucas looked forward to the next time they made port in Denerim and catching up with his brother then. Isabela had fond memories of His Majesty, as well, from her time in Denerim during the Blight.

For the moment, however, the two of them and Fenris had agreed that keeping Lucas out of sight was in everyone’s best interests. If the world wanted to see him as a symbol of the mages’ freedom and of the Templars’ dominance, simultaneously, he would have to live with that—but he had no intention of being prosecuted as anyone’s scapegoat over something he’d had no involvement in. Varric’s letter assured them of his own safety, and that of Aveline, but warned that the Chantry appeared to be hunting for Lucas, for no reason he clearly understood.

Hiding out on board the ship was fine with Lucas. He had no desire to go back into the world, to be pressed into service again on someone else’s behalf. These days, his orders came from his chosen captain, and from no one else, and he was happy to obey her slightest wish.

She stirred in his arms now, rolling over to blink at him sleepily. “I should get up.”

“Or you could stay here. It’s early yet.”

“It’s the middle of the watch. I should check and make sure no one’s gone to sleep.”
“On your ship?” Lucas chuckled. “They wouldn’t dare. Besides, Fenris is on this watch, and you know how fearsome he can be.”

The elf had taken to shipboard life instantly. The sailors generally respected him and didn’t mind his aloofness; he preferred to sit up in the yards alone when not on duty, looking out over the ocean, thinking his long thoughts. He seemed to be more contemplative than broody these days, which was a step in the right direction. And Isabela was moving him up in the ranks—far faster than Lucas was rising, which occasionally rankled. He didn’t particularly want command, however, so it was only a minor irritation—and he found the sailors’ friendly contempt of him as the captain’s shiny plaything amusing.

Isabela seemed to accept Fenris as a substitute for her own authority, and she relaxed into Lucas’s arms, looking up at him. “My grandmother liked you,” she said.

“Did she?” They had been in Rivain during the disaster in Kirkwall, as nearly as Lucas could judge the timing, and he had undergone some very thorough questioning by Isabela’s grandmother—a formidable old lady, still beautiful and apparently quite deadly, if the awe in which the villagers held her was to be believed. Looking at her, Lucas could see exactly what Isabela would be like in another few decades. He had left Rivain uncertain as to whether he had passed the test, although he imagined that the fact that he had lived to see another shipboard sunrise probably said a great deal.

“She said she thought you could handle me.” Isabela chuckled. “If anyone can.”

“Can I?”

“What, handle me? I suppose that’s for you to say.” But there was no fear or apprehension in her expression, as there would have been in Kirkwall. When he had actually sailed away with her, leaving that life and his title and his mother’s family mansion behind, it had proven to her something about his intentions and his feelings that she had never quite put into words. Lucas didn’t pretend that all her worries had been put to bed forever, but he was content to wait and deal with them when they arose, and to enjoy the moment while he had it.

In that spirit, he bent his head to kiss her, caressing her with hands and lips until they were joined, rocking together with the rhythm of the ship beneath them, easing into their pleasure with no hurry. After all, they had all the time in the world.

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