Justice in Surrender

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Summary

All Tobias Hawke wants is to stay alive. Kirkwall is no place for an apostate like him… and definitely no place to fall in love with an apostate like Anders. He knows he should get out. Trouble is, it may already be too late.

Notes

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“Justice that love gives is a surrender, justice that law gives is a punishment.”

~ Gandhi
Chapter 1

The clinic was, as ever, packed. The lantern that hung from the wall outside cast a dim, yellowish light over the huddled group of people waiting to enter, although its role as a signifier of what lay within was largely unnecessary. Everyone knew where to find the healer. Everyone knew where to go when they needed him… and knew that he would be there.

He always was.

Of course, Tobias reflected, as he skulked at the edge of the group, trying to avoid the worst of the coughing, hacking and vomiting, that was the problem. An old man, being held up by a pair of thin, rough-looking women who appeared to be his daughters, seemed to be almost insensible with fever. Bloody bile dribbled down his chin, his ravaged face pallid and sweaty, and his eyes rolled in hollow sockets, skin pulled tight with pain. Someone cannoned into one of the women in the crush. She swore, the old man sagged, and somehow—against all his better judgement—Tobias found himself helping, slipping a broad hand beneath a skinny, unnaturally hot arm, and keeping the frail body from hitting the filthy, dirt-packed floor.

The woman turned, readying a ferocious glare at his interference, and then mumbled a hasty ‘thank you’ instead.

“Let me help you get him inside,” Tobias suggested.

She nodded. Her grubby, pinched face seemed to relax a little and, together, the three of them half-steered and half-carried the old man through the press of bodies, through the rough wooden doors, and into the clinic.

Funny, Tobias thought, that he’d never heard of this place the first year he’d been in Kirkwall. Hadn’t needed it, he supposed. Working under Athenril—despite Mother and Carver disapproving—had offered certain benefits, and a tidy healthcare package was one. That, and anything he could safely skim off the proceeds owed to that two-faced, manipulative bitch.

They had not parted on good terms. Definitely not after that last job, which made the score coming up in Tobias’ future all the more important to get right.

He frowned at the stray thought, promises of glory and vast wealth a little outweighed by the prospect of danger and horrific death. Varric said the Deep Roads were virtually empty after a Blight, but what if the rumours were true, and the Fifth Blight had been nothing more than an unusually large incursion of darkspawn, allowed to run riot after the failure at Ostagar?

That was not, of course, an allowable topic of conversation in his family. Carver took references to the King’s army, failure thereof, very personally, and Mother just went all weak and weepy and started talking about Bethany… and then everything ended up in one of those bitter, tear-sodden and recrimination-strewn arguments that being crammed in under Gamlen’s roof left them so vulnerable to.

It would all change, Tobias had promised himself. He’d fix it. Mend everything, and maybe make up for the things he’d broken in the first place.

It should have been me….

The old man coughed, and spat up a weak posset of bile, blood and phlegm, which spattered the front of Tobias’ leather jerkin.
One of the women shot him a look of guilty apology, and he smiled weakly, while trying to breathe through his ears. Maker, but it stank in here. The clinic might have been one of the cleanest places in Darktown—the floor was kept well-swept, the low make-shift beds and tables washed, and brass dishes of charcoal and copal resin burned at the doors—but there was no disguising the stench of illness… or death.

Between the slumped bodies of the genuinely ill, and the furtive figures who were here for less life-threatening reasons, the healer was at work. Twin globes of blue light worked over the body of a child: a young boy, clutching his father’s hand as he lay on a narrow pallet.

Tobias thought of the first time he’d come down here, with Varric and Carver in tow, trying to follow up on a tip about maps and a runaway Grey Warden. He’d expected some grizzled brute of a man, taciturn and snarling, not… well, not Anders. Not someone bright and tense and made of contradictions, with those tired eyes and that air of weary, battered hopefulness.

If he’d been thinking properly, Tobias would have known it would be trouble. If he had learned anything in the fourteen months since falling off that stinking boat, it was that everyone had a price. A man who refused every offer of coin or barter, and wanted only to save another mage from the templars… well, it was just too bloody noble to be reasonable, wasn’t it?

And then, naturally, that awful night had gone horribly, hideously wrong. Karl had been Tranquil, it had all been a set-up, and they’d made a really nasty mess of those expensive Chantry carpets. And Anders had turned out to be… well, whatever Anders was. A not-quite-abomination, perhaps? A creature of two worlds, in whom the Fade and the living plane collided in roiling, barely controlled, glowy glory? Tobias wasn’t sure, although he’d recoiled from the word Carver had used when—in the dank, cold air of a side-street off the chantry courtyard—Anders had tried to explain. Monster. Huh… his brother had scorn to spare for mages at the best of times, and he wasn’t likely to shut up about this in the foreseeable future.

He’d nagged all the way home when, finally, they’d left a despondent and exhausted Anders at the edge of Darktown, and headed back to the delights of Gamlen’s smelly hovel.

You can’t possibly trust him! You saw what he did to those men!

Now, Tobias helped heft the sick old man onto a nearby pallet, and flinched mentally from the recollection of suspicious contempt on his brother’s face.

I saw the way you looked at him. It’s not going to be like that, is it?

“Hawke!”

Anders’ voice, burred a little by fatigue, cut through the thoughts, and Tobias looked up, catching sight of the thin smile, the dirty blond hair… and that bloody awful coat that smelled like wet dog.

They hadn’t seen much of each other since that night at the chantry. A couple of brief exchanges, but Tobias had been busy playing errand boy, scraping up the last ten sovereigns he needed to buy his way into Bartrand’s expedition—and settling a few old scores before it was time to leave. Besides, there’s nothing like unleashing a raving Fade spirit on half a dozen templars to make conversation awkward the next day. Not to mention what had happened to Karl.

Tobias pushed the thoughts away and jerked his head at the old man he’d helped bring in. The women with him looked nervous, one fussing around her father, the other all but cringing as the healer approached.
“Got another one for you,” he said, as Anders went to the old man’s side, those long fingers skimming with practised ease over forehead, lips, cheeks… down to the joints of his elbows and knees, testing their tightness and checking for signs of weakness.

The former Warden’s mouth curled pensively. He frowned, a terse, clinical expression settling where that all too brief smile of recognition had been.

“How long has he been this way?”

The less intimidated of the women muttered out a reply—five days, though the fever had worsened suddenly—and Tobias realised he might as well not have been there. Quick-fire analysis followed; short-hand references to diagnose and offer threads of hope.

“I can make him comfortable,” Anders promised. “Beyond that, I don’t know, but at least it’s a start.”

One of the women began to cry, and Tobias’ back tensed. He never knew what to do with weeping females and, invariably, they got parcelled onto him—just as she did now, turning to him with her shoulders shaking and her face all red and screwed up. Oh, Maker… He patted her gingerly.

“Oh, Maker….”

Anders glanced at him and nodded to the back of the clinic, where a row of cookpots were balanced over a stone-hearthed fire, and a handful of the scrawny runaways and apprentices who served as his unofficial assistants were boiling water and mixing plaisters and poultices.

“You can wait back there… and ask Clara to hurry up with that salve, will you?”

And there it was. A brisk, business-like demotion to the rank and file. Worse, Tobias found himself wordlessly obeying. With his arm tentatively around the sobbing woman’s shoulders, he headed into the hot, smelly miasma of steam, and supposed that at least the odour of boiling elfroot and redblossom was better than that of piss, blood and infected wounds.

As they walked away, he could feel Anders begin the healing. He didn’t need to look; every pulse of it beat in his body, with the sweet, dark pull that only magic had.

Tobias had never possessed the knack of healing. Bethany had. When they were children, even though she was younger than him, she used to put her stubby-fingered hand to his grazed elbows or skinned knees with all the grace and confidence of a girl twice her age. She’d take the pain, and leave him whole, and he could almost taste the power in her. Endless, like the sweet, cool depths of a dappled pond. Father had been different, of course. His power tasted like hot leather, like a dusty book that lived beneath his skin, and was somehow always distant and restrained. And Anders… well, different wasn’t the word for that.

A tiny shiver traced Tobias’ spine as he settled the woman on a wooden stool and, as he’d been asked, chivvied the girl standing over one of the cookpots. She nodded, picked up a clay pot full of some foul-smelling unguent, and scurried off to Anders’ side. A Circle runaway, Tobias guessed. There were always gaggles of castaways here, cutting bandages or boiling roots, and Anders wouldn’t talk about any of them. He just called them ‘volunteers’, with that small, peculiar smirk… and the same faces rarely stayed around for long.

Carver would probably have made some dire comment about them getting rendered down for ointment, but Tobias had been in Kirkwall long enough to hear about the so-called Mage Underground. He’d never had proof of it—probably because he hadn’t needed it, safe enough as
he’d been in the smugglers’ employ—but you heard stories. They did what even the Collective couldn’t do, so people said. Helped apostates, helped the runaways and the undiscovered, and shielded the business of those involved from the templars which, in this climate of suspicion and near-hostility, had to be a good thing.

So, Tobias hadn’t asked complicated questions. And he didn’t plan to, certainly not until after this Deep Roads gig was over and—cash safely in hand—he could afford the sole possessor of the maps he needed taking offence. Not that he thought Anders would. He might not welcome interference in whatever it was he was involved in, but Tobias doubted he’d back out of his end of the bargain… especially after that night at the chantry.

He handed the sobbing woman—now just sniffling, thank the Maker—a grubby handkerchief from the pocket of his leathers, patted her back and muttered some vague platitudes, and settled down to wait. It didn’t really surprise him that his gaze fell on the healer, drawn there across the busy room, across the litter of bodies and desolation, as if by some magnetic force.

He didn’t look like an abomination. Soothing light enveloped his hands, suffused his whole body—not quite that eerie, split-skin, eye-glowing thing—but more than Tobias had ever seen a mage do. It was as if a whole ocean of power ran through his veins, that pale skin turning translucent as he made the Veil shake.

The old man coughed, spluttered, opened his eyes and seemed to ask for his daughter. Anders sagged, reaching a hand to the pallet for support, and the damp woman at Tobias’ side flung the handkerchief back at him and rushed to her father.

Tobias mopped absently at the stain on his jerkin, and watched that little moment of happiness flare in a dim and uncaring world. He watched Anders smile, too, just for a moment looking so free and happy, despite the wobbly tiredness.

He drove himself too hard, refusing to admit that he’d be no use to his patients if he was worn thin and too exhausted to think straight. That much had been obvious from the first time they met. Varric called it self-indulgence… that constant drive to martyr himself on the pyre of righteousness. He was probably going to write a poem about it.

Tobias shook his head ruefully at the thought, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he leaned against the clinic’s rough wooden wall. The plaster had mostly rotted away, leaving the frame beneath bare, riddled with woodworm holes and the smell of dry rot.

Still, he waited. He didn’t mind.

Eventually, the clinic emptied for the night. The old man was well enough to be taken home, though whether he would last the night was anyone’s guess. The patients filed out in dribs and drabs; a man with his hand on his son’s shoulder, watching intently as the boy’s rattling cough loosened, his steps growing firmer as they headed out of the door. A woman in a dull slub shawl clutched a baby to her chest and a dark glass bottle in one thin, red-knuckled hand.

“I’ll pay you, messere,” she repeated, as Anders ushered her towards the exit, gently but firmly. “I will. I’ll find some way to pay you…”

He smiled wearily. “Hm. If I wanted coin, I’ve been going about it all wrong. Go on. Go home, and don’t forget… every four hours—”

“Until the fever’s been down for a full day.” She nodded fervently. “Thank you. Thank you….”
Tobias watched him wave her off, and pry the last remaining refugees, drunks, whores and desperate people out into the night. He’d wondered, the first time he came down here, how Anders could bear it. It must be like suffocating under the dregs of Kirkwall’s slops… worse than the sprawl of Lowtown, or even the old city slums that he called home. (Although, technically, Tobias had to admit that he didn’t think of his uncle’s place as ‘home’ so much as ‘that shack where I leave my stuff and pray to Andraste that the old bastard doesn’t sell it while I’m out’. Relations within the family were somewhat strained after so long cooped up together.)

He still didn’t really understand it. Perhaps it was penance on Anders’ part, he thought, or passion, or the just easiest way the man had of numbing himself, burying all his wounds under other people’s hurts.

Anders sighed as he shut the door, slid the bar across, and turned to pace back across the room, hands slightly outstretched at his sides, as if he hadn’t been able to flex them all day.

Tobias watched, green eyes tracing every line of the movement, balancing the weight of every footfall. When Anders stopped, rolled his shoulders, leaned his head back and stretched that long, white neck, it felt like cruel titillation.

They were alone. Even the scrawny bag of runaways was gone for the night, the fire damped down and the smell of greasy ointments and herbs hanging in the air like some dank, verdant perfume.

“So,” Anders said, giving him a tired, genial smile, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Tobias snatched his mind out of the gutter. No. He’d already promised himself a night of vast alcohol consumption and debauchery at The Blooming Rose once the expedition was over. It had been rather too long since his last visit, but the money he’d have spent ridding himself of his frustrations had been needed elsewhere.

Trouble was, all that chastity left him… preoccupied. Especially in the presence of an interesting, attractive man whom he was at least sixty percent certain had similar predilections to his own. He shrugged.

“Come to The Hanged Man,” he heard himself say. “Come have a drink.”

Anders shook his head. “Justice doesn’t let me get drunk anymore.”

“She should stop you trying?”

The smile widened, lighting up a face worn to creases by a long day. A few wisps of blond hair had escaped from his stubby ponytail, and they stuck out, frizzy and unkempt. For a brief moment, the desire to smooth them down assailed Tobias, and he clenched his fingers, focusing his attention on those dark, sunken eyes, shaded with fatigue.

“It’s late, Hawke. What do you want?”

“Bartrand’s fixed a date for the expedition. We leave in a fortnight.”

“Oh.”

A small frown pinched the healer’s brow, and Tobias recalled what he’d said before: My maps are yours, as am I… Even then, despite the blood and the chaos—or maybe just a little bit because of it—the words had nudged at his core.

“I see.” Anders cleared his throat. “Will you want me to…?”
Tobias glanced around at the clinic. “And take you away from all this splendid glamour? I couldn’t possibly.”

“I did say that I’d—”

“Your patients need you. I won’t deprive them of that. Anyway, Bartrand has plenty of healers and hired muscle on his payroll. We’ll be fine.”

Tobias folded his arms across his chest. He cocked his head to the side, and wondered if he was imagining the way Anders’ gaze seemed to follow the lines of his flesh. Unlike the other mage, with his heavy boots and trousers, and that ridiculous feathered coat, Tobias favoured a sleeveless jack in a rough, green-tinted leather, his tanned skin bare to the elbows. Studded leather bracers and light breeches toughened with leather patches completed the look: subtle enough that the guard didn’t quite chase him out of Hightown, should he find himself in the market, and yet both light, protective, and faintly intimidating enough that he could get business done in the rest of the city.

Anders frowned. “Hm. Sure you’re not just worried about Justice?”

He smiled mirthlessly, and Tobias understood the tension in his stance. He shook his head.

“No,” he lied.

The thought had occurred to him, naturally, even before Carver had started whining about it. It was true that he’d have been useful, both as a healer and because the Deep Roads were definitively Grey Warden territory. However, the prospect of being stuck several miles underground with Anders in full blue-glowing rage mode—should it happen—had not been encouraging, and Tobias had decided it might be sensible to offer an option on the expedition around a few of his other contacts.

Anders didn’t seem appeased, though. He nodded grimly, and lifted one hand to scratch at the back of his head.

“Look, I… I’m sorry for the way I dumped all that on you before. About Justice, and— well, it all got a bit weighty, didn’t it?”

Tobias shrugged, a smile pulling at his lips. “It’s all right. You’d be surprised how many people tell me their darkest secrets when we’ve only just met. I must look trustworthy or something.”

“You look… something,” Anders admitted. “True. Proud. Like even if you don’t agree with me, you’ll be honest.”

Tobias blinked, a little taken aback at such grand words.

There was very little natural light anywhere in Darktown. Lanterns and thick, greasy tallow candles lit the clinic, and Anders made a slow circuit of the room, blowing all but three of them out. Little pools of stagnant, yellow light caught at the pitted, stained floor, and left both men adrift in them.

Tobias took a step forward, towards the pale figure outlined in gold, his gaze fixed firmly on those dark, guarded eyes.

“I try to be… honest,” he said carefully. “And whether I agree or not, you could tell me anything. If you wanted.”

He stopped the other side of a low table, its surface littered with stacks of bandages and stoppered bottles.
“Anything?” Anders echoed, raising one of those dark, penstroke eyebrows.

A smile quirked his lips, brief as a spark, and it was easy and wicked and delicious. Tobias blinked, sure he must have imagined it but, no, there were still traces of it there.

“Careful what you offer,” the healer said quietly, and it was playful… tempting.

Tobias’ gut tightened, the lazy spirals of lust that had been half-heartedly picking at him growing more urgent. Two weeks, and then the expedition would be gone. Down into the dark, where the monsters were…the things that had killed Bethany and so very, very nearly done for the rest of them. Filthy, blighted creatures with black, poisonous blades and stinking ichor in their knotted veins, and they would know only death and destruction. And that wasn’t even touching on the possibilities of rockfalls, fever, or Maker knew what other perils the Deep Roads might hold.

He’d come here to speak to Anders about it, because the man had been a Grey Warden and—insane stories about cats and twisted Fade spirits aside—his knowledge would be useful…and Tobias had known before he even got here that it wasn’t the only reason.

He cleared his throat. “So, uh… how about that drink?”

Anders crossed to the poky little space right at the back of the clinic, partitioned off by a thin wall and a curtain hung on an old broom handle. Tobias wasn’t sure, but it looked as if he actually slept in there. It made sense, he supposed…the clinic had too much in the way of potions that might have been worth stealing to be left unattended.

He waited, listened to the rustling and rummaging, and watched as Anders re-emerged, brandishing a bottle of cheap wine and two tin mugs.

“Ta-da.”

Tobias grinned. “Not quite what I meant, but I’m not complaining.”

The glug of liquid filled up the quiet, and Anders motioned him to sit on the cleanest of the narrow beds, its covers long since stripped off to be boiled. Tobias tried not to think of how many people had died on this thing, or how many babies had been delivered, how many unpleasant rashes and peculiar pustules examined…. But then the pallet creaked under Anders’ weight, and they were sitting side-by-side, and a mug of slightly scummy wine was pushed into his unresisting fingers.

“So… two weeks, you said? Before you leave?”

Tobias nodded. He swallowed heavily, excruciatingly aware of the other man’s presence. That smell of herbs and sweat, the mingled grease and muck of this bloody place, and this bloody city… there should be nothing pleasant about it, and yet it all swirled together in the most intoxicating, enticing ballet of scent, and he didn’t want to go into the dark without—

“Yes.”

_Sod it._ Tobias slipped Anders a sidelong glance, watching the hard lines of his profile, shadowed against the dim light. He brought the wine to his lips, took a long sip, and winced at its sharpness. Anders stared at the far wall, and it seemed as if he was looking back into a pit of memories. Amaranthine, Tobias supposed, and the Blackmarsh, and… other things.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, I _was_ thinking it might make a pleasant jaunt… you know, a change of
pace from dodging those Coterie bastards down at the docks, but—"

“I’m serious.” Anders thumbed the rim of his mug and frowned. “Don’t take anything for granted
down there. Any… feeling, any whisper. It’s not safe. It won’t be safe, even after a Blight.”

Tobias contemplated the thought, and wondered if deciding not to ask the mage to accompany him
was really a good idea.

“Is Carver going with you?”

He shrugged. “He wants to. He’s helped get a lot of Bartrand’s money together, so…. Of course,
Mother isn’t too keen.”

“I can imagine,” Anders observed laconically, though the wryness wore off as he sipped his wine,
and his face turned desolately sad. “She’s already lost one child. Losing someone you care about
is… well, it’s not good.”

“No.”

Memories turned over in Tobias’ mind, but they didn’t gore him the way they had a year ago. Their
edges were dulled now, like the familiar shadows on a bedroom wall, stripped of their power to
frighten simply through repetition.

He frowned, aware of the weight behind Anders’ words still hanging in the air between them, and
cursed inwardly.

Stupid of him not to have asked before, he supposed. It hadn’t been all that long since this man—this
man who spent every day healing and tending and nurturing, because he was afraid of what he might
do if he didn’t—had stuck a knife into the chest of a friend he’d wanted to risk everything to save.

“I, er….” Tobias cleared his throat awkwardly. “Are you all right? About… you know.”

“Karl?”

“Mm.”

Anders nodded slowly. “Not really. But I will be, I expect. He was a good man… a good mage.”

Silence fell between them like a rough cloth, touching all manner of raw wounds. Tobias winced,
faintly ashamed of himself for coming here tonight, for having these thoughts, these… desires. What
had he wanted? To play out a seduction scene, a last tumble before his great adventure?

He took a mouthful of the appalling wine, and tried to swallow down with it the unnerving
realisation that—whatever had been in his mind when he left Gamlen’s house—things were not
going to plan.

He was aware of Anders looking hesitantly at him, those dark eyes slightly narrowed, as if a question
might be hovering on his lips… lips that Tobias found his gaze drawn to, close as they were. Even
after just a few sips, a wine stain bloomed on the lower one.

“You know,” Anders began, his voice low, “growing up in the Circle, everything is about order and
rules and the templars. As apprentices… we had to find ways to make that bearable.”

Their gazes locked. Tobias inclined his head fractionally, trying to give a sign that he understood, but
without all the messy clumsiness of words. Anders wanted to say it, though. Needed to, possibly.
“Karl and I… he was my first,” he said, with a slight coyness that Tobias found both surprising and rather touching. “It was more than just breaking rules, finding stupid little ways to get under the templars’ skins. We could forget everything… forget the Circle, and the world, and… just for once, we could feel like we were more than just templar slaves.”

His voice echoed with a melancholy wistfulness that made Tobias’ chest ache. He’d loved like that, once… for the length of exactly one summer. Cal had been a big, beautiful, blond-haired farmer’s boy, full of selfish perfection, effortless grace, and casual cruelty—especially once he discovered Tobias’ secret. Oh, it was fine to allow a fledgling Hawke to kneel for him in Lothering’s waving barley fields, apparently, but not an apostate in the making. Not a freak, cursed by nature and marked with the Maker’s disfavour.

Tobias blinked, letting the memories ebb away.

“We hadn’t been together for a long time. But still… it hurt.”

He frowned, and glanced at Anders, left breathless by the sheer simplicity of his expression. There was pain there, and regret, and the memory of something sweeter, and yet all those things were bound into one clean-honed mask of sorrow… as if he really believed it was all his fault, or that he could have done something to change it.

Tobias wanted to say something useful, something that patched up the hurt and the cracks, and maybe even covered over some of his own embarrassment, but he struggled to find the words.

“So, uh… you… and Karl, huh?”

He gave himself a good, hard mental kick, amazed at his ham-fisted idiocy.

Anders just smiled benignly and raised his eyebrows. “Well? I’ve always believed people fall in love with a whole person, not just a body. Why would you shy away from loving someone just because they’re like you?”

Those dark eyes, deep-set and ringed with shadows, held his gaze for a little longer than could possibly have been necessary, and want spooled in Tobias’ gut, undeniable and unanswerable.

“Why indeed,” he murmured huskily.

He wanted this man, contradictions and complexities and everything. He wanted to crush his mouth against those lips, kiss him until they were both light-headed and gasping, rub his chin along that scruffy jawline and breathe in the scent of his hair and—quite possibly most of all—he wanted to take Anders to bed and fuck until they were both too exhausted to move.

These things were facts. They were natural. They were safe, comfortable, sane things to want, and they did not scare him. And yet, Tobias knew he wouldn’t do any of them.

Every thought he might have had in his head tonight, any consideration of coming here, alone, to tempt the healer into his arms, lay shrivelled and flaccid in him. He took a slow swallow of the foul, sharp wine, and wrenched his gaze away from Anders’, fixing it instead on the far wall, and the damp, flaky plaster.

“You… really cared for him, didn’t you?”

It wasn’t a question, although it sounded like one. The answer was obvious in every etched line and shadow on Anders’ face, and the hot burn of guilt bubbled at the back of Tobias’ mind. Why had he not seen it, that night in the chantry? He should have done. That particular note of horror in Anders’
voice when he saw the brand, the way he’d so carefully held Karl’s head as the life and the light ebbed from him… and that moment when he’d turned and fled, a whirl of grief and anger crested with feathers.

Anders nodded ruefully. “Once. Yes. It’s… hard to believe he’s dead, and at my hand.”

“You helped him. Don’t forget that. It wasn’t your fault we were too late.”

We? What are you talking about, Hawke?

Tobias took another mouthful of wine, and pondered that. He’d been there—like he found himself in so many other places in this poxy city—fulfilling an obligation, a contracted service. That, and nothing more.

Besides, Anders hadn’t really been too late. He’d been tricked. There was a distinct difference… although perhaps it wouldn’t be kind to raise that point right now.

Anders scowled. “It’s the bloody templars… that’s what it is. They don’t see us as people. They don’t care that Karl was someone’s son… someone’s lover.”

As if to illustrate his point, he stabbed a finger at the air—apparently forgetting that he was still holding the tin mug in the same hand. It was almost two-thirds full, and threatened to spill all over the floor. He frowned at it, as if suddenly recalling its existence, and leaned close to pour the majority of the wine into Tobias’ mug.

“There you go. No… if you’re born with magic, they hear about it. They search your little rat-spit village and find you. They tell your parents they’ll be thrown in prison if they ever ask about you, stripped of their rights in the eyes of the Maker. And,” he added bitterly, the tail of the rant snaking like a wild thing, “if you run away, they hunt you down. Again and again and again.”

“Personal experience, I take it?” Tobias asked, privately wondering if this was what Anders had meant about Justice not allowing him to get drunk.

Less than a quarter of a cup of wine and his coordination was starting to go… no slurring, no unfocused eyes, but it looked as if he was struggling to keep his grip on the world.

“Yep. After the seventh escape attempt, you’d think they’d have given me credit for trying, but no. Bastards.” Anders’ brow furrowed afresh as he gazed into the mainly empty mug. “Andraste’s words were that magic must not rule over man. But it’s not ruling to simply wish for the same right as any other man, is it?” He looked up suddenly, and those dark eyes pinned Tobias, all at once pleading and yet fired with a righteous anger. “Doesn’t every mage deserve the freedom you’ve had?”

“I—”

Well. Of all things, he hadn’t expected jealousy.

Part of him wanted to argue that it wasn’t like that, that his kind of apostasy meant running and hiding and—if you weren’t careful—actually coming to believe that you’d done something wrong simply by existing. And there was no going back. When she got to the age of about twelve, Bethany had grown resentful of everything their parents had done. She’d screamed and shouted that they should have let her go to the Circle, instead of keeping her hidden away. She could have been safe, she’d protested, and not always looking over her shoulder, always living in fear.

She had, from her exalted position as the joint youngest, and the only girl, declared that she would have been better off. She hadn’t meant it, but it had made their mother cry.
Still… safety and security over family? Over freedom? Some days, Tobias could see the merits of the Circle, as an abstract idea. But, to hear Anders describe it… to see the way some of the templars looked at mages in The Gallows… that wasn’t security. It wasn’t even control.

“I think,” he said carefully, weighing the words before he spoke them, “I think that things do need to change. But—”

“And they watch,” Anders said darkly, seemingly not even aware Tobias had spoken. “They pry, they… wait for you to slip up, and they try to force it on you. Throw you at demons and wait for you to burn.”

Tobias peered at him, noticing an alarming sheen to his eyes, and the faint hint of blue light crazing the back of his hand. He coughed gently.

“Er, Anders? You’re, um, you’re starting to glow again….”

Anders blinked, shook his head and, closing his eyes, took a deep breath. The light subsided, but the taste lingered in Tobias’ mouth. Magic, and more than magic. Something wide and wonderful, like hot metal and honey, and the bursting of a thousand stars. His forehead throbbed with the echo of it, and his tongue felt dry.

Anders opened his eyes, apparently in perfect control once more.

“And, as yours is the only head here, and I’d rather not rip it off, I should stop. Yes. Sorry. I should try to keep to more… pleasant… topics.”

He flashed a thin, guilty smile, and they looked at each other in silence for a little. Tobias was unused to this—this strange, complex feeling, this sense that he had no right to take what Anders might or might not choose to give. It would have been easy, he supposed, to push the flirtation further, to just do it now… lean forwards, take that wide, handsome mouth against his. If he moved quickly enough, there wouldn’t be time to think.

He had no idea why he didn’t do it.

For more than a year, the only men he’d been with were the stalwart employees of the Rose, who could be trusted to provide him with exactly what he wanted: sex, and a comfortable pretence of intimacy that lasted just as long as the coin did. There was something wonderful about the earthy, joyous, slightly drunk couplings he could manage with one of Madam Lusine’s mid-priced tarts; something unrepentant and without repercussions.

Anders blinked first. He looked away, and he seemed… sad. Or maybe just tired. Yes, that was it, Tobias decided. He was tired. Everyone was… tired.

He stood the tin mug down by his foot and clapped his hands against his thighs.

“Well,” he said, readying to stand, “thanks for the drink. I should probably go.”

Anders looked mildly surprised. “You’re going to walk home through Darktown? Past the alienage? At night, and on your own?”

“I’ll be fine,” Tobias assured him. “Really.”

Anders shook his head incredulously. “And they say the stories about you are all bullshit. Hmph.”

“Stories?” Tobias grinned. “You haven’t been listening to Varric ramble on, have you? I swear, last
time he told the story about the ogre, the thing was thirty feet tall and had six arms.”

Funny what time changed, he thought. A year ago, he’d have punched out anyone trying to make a
tale of that thing, and his eyes would have been full of Bethany’s bloodied, slumped body. Not true
now. The words were only words, and they didn’t mean anything. They were… dulled, like the
memories.

“Hm.” Anders grimaced. “They’re worse when they’re possessed. Anyway, just… watch yourself,
Hawke. All right?”

Tobias’ mouth hung open for a moment as he wondered about possessed ogres, but he decided it
was a question for another day. There were, he thought, many questions for Anders that he needed to
keep wrapped up safe, held tight to his chest until he worked out how to ask them.

“I will,” he said instead, and refused to contemplate the notion that Anders meant in the Deep Roads
as well as on his long, lonely walk home, because quite obviously he would be coming back here
before the expedition left.

Wouldn’t he? Yes. Obviously. Two weeks. There would have to be a reason, a… an excuse.

When Tobias left the clinic, Darktown’s stagnant air hit him full in the face. He almost thought it
would paralyse him, knock him out like chokedamp and leave him a petrified corpse. But it didn’t.
He glanced over his shoulder, thinking he might see Anders at the clinic’s door, but it was already
closed against the night, the lantern a dim glow in the darkness.

He picked his way over the huddled bodies in the tunnels, slipping through the shadows the way a
man who worked in his kind of business learned to do, and headed for a place that wasn’t quite
home.

Above ground, not even the moonlight made Lowtown look pretty. Salt stung the air, and Tobias’
feet hit the dirt-packed streets in a steady rhythm, as he waited for the world to start making sense
again.
Chapter 2

It took weeks to get out. Weeks to get down there, weeks to negotiate the tunnels and the routes… weeks working their way through the thaig. The things they saw—the impossible, profane, horrific, fucked-up things—followed every footstep out of the dark.

He didn’t care to admit it, but the experience bonded them. Marked them indelibly, and linked them together. Him, Varric, and Isabela. Carver should have been there too… would have been, without their mother’s humiliating, impassioned appeal. Right there in the square, in front of everyone. Down on her knees, almost, begging him to leave her precious baby behind.

Begging him to choose, Tobias noted. Not begging Carver to stay. That was the worst thing.

Precious Baby had not, of course, been impressed. Tobias couldn’t blame him, yet he had been unable to refuse Leandra’s appeal. He hated dealing with crying women. If it hadn’t been for the whole expedition staring at them, he and his brother would probably have come to blows, although, if looks alone could have killed….

He’d regretted it, as the descent began. Uneasy, uncomfortable… tense. He should have stuck up for Carver, argued for his right to be a part of this, to be his own man for once.

It hadn’t mattered; Tobias had stacked the regret up with all his other regrets, all the other things he kept thinking he could have done before he left the city. It had been a maelstrom of activity, preparing. As if they could smell the gold on the breeze, they’d all jostled like a pack of hunting hounds, terrified some other bastard would muscle in on the prize before they got their snouts into the best bits. Keeping the Coterie off had been hard enough, not to mention the host of other two-copper guilds and companies, snuffling around like street dogs.

And, as the darkness closed over his head, and the very walls of rock seemed to pulse with heat and energy, Tobias wished there’d been another chance to see Anders.

When they hit the first group of darkspawn, less than three days into the trek, that faint wish twisted quickly into regret at not having dragged him along. Oh, the nobility of respecting his dislike of the Deep Roads, his commitment to his patients—and the possibility of Justice bursting out without control—was all fine but, faced with the filthy, pocked bodies of ‘spawn slashing at his flesh, Tobias sorely rued the lack of a Warden.

It got worse, naturally, before it got better.

By the time they finally made it back to the surface—beaten, betrayed, bloodied and really, truly, royally pissed off—he wasn’t sure the rewards were worth it.

“There’s blood on my coat,” Varric said mournfully, fingering one wide leather lapel with his gloved hand. “That’s never going to come out.”

They stood in the winding sidestreets of Lowtown, a little way up from the docks, where the smell of tar stained the air. Salt sluiced through the breeze that lightly ruffled Tobias’ dark hair, grown long enough now to almost reach his jaw. He snorted, eyeing the dwarf’s ruined garment. Bloodstains, ragged tears, rock dust, mould, and all sorts of filth from the dark places he never wanted to think about again marred practically every inch of the leather.

All in all, they were both as much of a mess as each other.
Tobias cocked an eyebrow. “You may actually have to consider a new coat, Varric.”

“Are you crazy?” The dwarf looked up at him, affecting total disbelief. “I love this thing.”

“Hmph. Well, you could afford it, that’s all I’m saying. Whole new wardrobe, if you wanted.”

Varric shook his head. “No. A little specialist cleaning, it’ll be fine. Same goes for me, I guess,” he added, wincing as weak sunlight pierced the clouds overhead. “I’m headed to The Hanged Man. Hot water, a good shave, a bath… a drink. Possibly not in that order.”

Tobias shaded his eyes with one hand, still painfully unused to the brightness, and nodded. Their first day back in the city, and he could think of nothing more than getting clean, getting drunk, and getting home.

*Possibly not in that order,* he thought, with a smile.

They’d parted ways with Isabela at the docks. It seemed odd to be without her now, after all those endless weeks of circumstance forcing them so close together. He’d distrusted her initially… which he supposed was reasonable, given the fact their first meeting had been marked by her knifing a man in the throat. Still, for all her posing and self-consciously bawdy banter, he’d grown to rather like her. Tobias respected skill, whether it was in a man or a woman, and he’d never been in the business of judging a person’s morals.

Isabela got the job done and, if you were sure *you* were paying her more than the other side, she was well worth having as an ally. Not that Tobias planned on making the mistake of trusting her.

Still… he suspected he’d seen a little way beneath her shell, some of those nights in the dark. After Bartrand betrayed them, left them shut in and ready to rot, Isabela was the most incensed. Tobias had soon seen why. She guarded little about herself except her freedom and—once that was under threat—only her anger and that sharp whip of a tongue had kept her from going completely insane.

Of course, after week upon week of cock jokes and endless rounds of ‘Have You Ever…’ as they traipsed through the lyrium-lit, red-bloomed darkness, he’d been ready to strangle the bitch.

There had also been the embarrassing incident behind the rockfall, when she’d ‘accidentally’ happened upon him having a piss and—Varric being asleep at the time—had tried to… enliven the journey.

Tobias imagined Isabela wasn’t turned down often. Her sheer aggressiveness probably eroded most people’s defences—and she was an attractive woman, at least in principle. She’d even shown him her tattoos. Eventually, he’d sighed, and slipped her a quick one up against a handy boulder. There had far too many sharp bits of rock, sludgy lichens, and scuttly things in the darkness, and she insisted on scratching and biting like a cat in heat.

It was an uncomfortable, perfunctory experience, and he had the horrible feeling that it was going to come back to haunt him… particularly given the gentlemanly cough with which Varric had announced his presence, just as they were finishing off.

Tobias cleared his throat. It still felt as if he had half the Deep Roads coating his tongue. He squinted at Varric, aware of the sounds of the bazaar drifting down on the air. So much colour, life… so much *light.*

“S’a good idea,” he said. “I’ll be by later, I expect. After I see Mother.”

Varric’s expression tightened. “Ooh. That’s gonna be messy, Hawke.”
Tobias nodded wearily. “Yes. Yes, it probably is.”

It was.

He paced the narrow streets, turned around and overwhelmed by the smells coming up from the market, the feel of the breeze on his face… the whole chaotic reality of Lowtown. He mounted the dusty stone steps, knocked at the cracked, peeling wooden door, and had no idea what to say when she opened it.

Leandra stared, any words she might have had for her son lost in a dry, strangled gasp. She folded against his chest, arms locked so tight around his neck he could barely breathe, and her tears were strangely hot against his skin. Tobias set down the bags and packs he’d been carrying—an uncomfortable thing, walking through Lowtown with this much ill-concealed gold on him—and hugged her to him, tentatively at first, a little afraid… though he couldn’t have said why. She smelled of soap and lavender water, and his chest felt full enough to break as he buried his face in the crown of her hair.

His homecoming was made of tense, difficult hours, rife with resentment and flashes of anger amid the joy and relief. Carver’s fury at his brother’s rejection—that emasculating, humiliating insult—had not lessened. Bitter and boiling with rage, he’d stormed off and, once the expedition had left, lost three days in an ale-soaked binge, returning home only to inform Leandra he had decided to join the templars.

That news shocked Tobias, though he supposed it shouldn’t have. It was the most hurtful, most calculated retaliation Carver could have made… a reaction not just to being left behind this time, but to every abandonment, every moment of isolation they’d ever inflicted on him. What was it he’d said once?

*How do you think I felt? A lone blade in a house full of mages. I couldn’t even excel at that for fear of bringing notice.*

He must have hated them all, Tobias realised. Sometimes. Poor Carver.

It stung, in any case, and he wondered if it would be possible to patch things up… if his brother would even see him. The letter Carver had left for him hinted obliquely at ‘knowing where his loyalties lay’, and seemed to assure that he didn’t plan on ratting out family, yet Tobias found he cared less about that than what Carver’s leaving had done to their mother. Arrogant of him, he supposed. With the protection he’d had from Athenril’s company long gone, less than ever stood between him and the possibility of templar discovery. Not to mention, coming up from the Deep Roads a wealthy man—just the way he’d promised—was hardly likely to make him less noticeable.

He didn’t know what to do. His mother was still clutching his hand, still running with a near-incoherent stream of news and reaction to Carver’s leaving, and what everyone had thought had been his death. Tobias raised an eyebrow at that, unsurprised to hear Bartrand had come back to the surface weighed down with loot and the terribly tragic tale of how his younger brother and business partner had both been lost to the perils of the Deep Roads.

Gamlen, naturally, was already nudging Tobias’ packs and bags with an inquisitive foot, face lighting up like an eager ferret when he heard the clinking within.

Tobias scowled at the old fart and, extricating himself from Leandra’s embrace, promised they’d talk more once he was cleaned up.

It seemed to take hours to scrape away the grime.
Hot water duly fetched, the luxuries of soap, razor, and washcloths laid out before him, Tobias scrubbed and rinsed, and still felt as if he’d never be clean enough. The stink of the place was branded onto him, he was sure; gouged into his flesh like Fenris’ lyrium markings.

He wondered if the elf was still squatting in Danarius’ mansion, brooding to himself among the shattered glass and blood-soaked stone. It seemed… fitting, he supposed.

Tobias sluiced clean water over his head, and shook like a wet dog as he straightened up, wiping his wrist across his eyes and reaching for a cloth to dry himself. There were a lot of people to catch up with, he realised. Business contacts, sources of information, acquaintances… and even those he loosely termed ‘friends’. He was acutely aware that there weren’t too many of those. His line of work was to blame, probably.

Still… that could change, couldn’t it? He was a man of independent means now—or he would be, once Varric arranged what he called the ‘liquefaction’ of the assets they’d brought up from the Deep Roads.

Tobias scrubbed at his hair with the now-damp cloth, and cast a glowering glance around the poky, wood-walled room that seemed so very empty without all of Carver’s things in it.

First things first: the Void could take Lowtown. They would have the old Amell estate back, even if he had to bribe every notary and clerk in Seneschal Bran’s office—damn it, even if he had to bribe the viscount himself!

Tobias draped the cloth around his neck and frowned at the wall. Not long after their arrival here, Leandra had said that, with Bethany gone, it didn’t feel like the Blight was really over. There were four of us when it began. Tobias winced as he recalled her words, and the hot lance they’d been to his deep-seated well of guilt. Oh, she still blamed him, even if she didn’t say it aloud anymore.

Well, he couldn’t bring his baby sister back, and he couldn’t prise Carver from this new-found vocation (Or could he? Tobias wondered how long the training and initiation took, and made a mental note to drop some coin around The Gallows in return for information… and maybe a little persuasion…) but he might just be able to make sure his mother was safe, comfortable, and well provided for. Gamlen, too, if it came to it. Not that the old bastard deserved it.

Tobias sighed, his shoulders tensing as a fleet of different troubles slipped up on him. For so long, the boundless, faceless stretches of time—where day and night had no distinctions, and it was easy to lose count of their passing—had been filled with the heady problems of staying alive, and finding a way out of the mess they’d been in. Now, faced with the delicate and knotty chaos of family, finance, and all those other comparatively mundane things, he felt lost and unreal… like a ghost in his own existence.

The air was cold on his bare skin, though he hadn’t noticed the goosebumps rising on his arms.

Tobias smiled to the empty room, recalling all the vices he’d promised himself he’d indulge when he got back. Right now, the prospect of getting blind drunk and blowing a handful of sovereigns on the finest service Madam Lusine had to offer seemed like a bloody good idea.

He dressed quickly—same style of leather-patched clothes, though he mourned the loss of his favourite jerkin, which would never be the same again—and stowed the majority of his new wealth under the loose floorboard beneath the bed. Tobias knew Gamlen knew about the hiding place… but his uncle knew he knew, and was also aware of exactly what Tobias had done to the last man who stole from him. Sometimes, you didn’t even need magic to inflict a really imaginative punishment on someone.
Tobias pressed a kiss to the cheek of an indignant and confused Leandra—not home more than a few hours and he was already leaving? Where was he going? When did he mean to be back?—and mumbled something about seeing a business associate.

It was true, in its way.

Just over an hour later, he was sitting on a barstool upholstered in threadbare velvet, while the smell of whiskey and six kinds of cheap perfume tickled his nose. What few windows the place had were covered by tight-drawn red drapes, and the stultifying, dingy interior gave the impression of a sort of permanent midnight.

The Rose was a Coterie operation, but Tobias didn’t much care. Lusine counted many far better known faces than his among her clientele and, as discretion was valued in her business, his patronage passed without incident. Besides, it wasn’t as if he actually worked for Athenril anymore… or as if he’d ever been completely averse to letting a few titbits of information about her schedules slip, should the right person happen to buy him a very expensive drink.

To Tobias’ way of thinking, everyone wanted something. That was the nature of the world. It made sense for him to give a little of what he could to as many parties as possible… particularly if he could do it without anyone finding out. After all, a man never knew when he might need a fresh option.

“Come to a decision yet, my dear?” Madam Lusine oozed, leaning ingratiatingly over his shoulder.

It was amazing how pleasant—or at least a poor facsimile of it—she could be when presented with a neat pile of sovereigns up front.

Tobias stifled a belch, set down the cloudy glass that, until recently, had held a shot of very raw liquor, and nodded. The place wasn’t terribly busy yet, though there were a fair few sots and lechers propping up the bar. He gathered from the looks he’d been getting—and one or two not-so-whispered comments—that his sudden revival from alleged death was going to be the stuff of gossip before tomorrow. At that precise moment, he didn’t care.

“Yes,” he said, glancing towards the blond man at the end of the bar.

They’d exchanged a few words since Tobias had sat down to drink but, in all honesty, he wasn’t bothered about paying to talk.

“Excellent choice,” Lusine drawled. “Esel, you take special care of our guest, won’t you?”

The blond flashed a gap-toothed smile and pushed away from the bar. His white calico shirt, unlaced at the neck, was cut close to show off his broad chest and shoulders, that dense-packed body tapering to slim hips and long, lean legs, encased in dark breeches. Skin the colour of honey, large, pale blue eyes, golden hair… and a mouth that Tobias had wanted to fuck from the first moment he saw it.

Yes, he would do very nicely indeed.

Esel led him upstairs, to one of the small chambers festooned with more musty drapes and crammed with furniture far too ornate to fit the space. The ridiculous curlicues on every bit of wood—along with the sheer number of gold tassels and satin pillows—added to the sense of seedy, underwhelming opulence, like a woman who patched her faded beauty with paint and powder.

Tobias didn’t care. He didn’t care that everything smelled faintly of old sweat and stale attar of roses, although he did care just a little when the door closed behind him. It echoed, and a passing jolt of nausea stabbed him, as he blinked and reminded himself there was no stone, and no darkness.
Paying double was definitely worth it.

Esel stripped him deftly, murmuring all the while in a low voice that had a slight accent—Antivan, perhaps? Kirkwall was a port city—and an oddly calming quality. Andraste’s mercy, look at him, he was such a man, so strong, so handsome… all crap, Tobias knew, but crap that it was quite pleasant to hear. Long-fingered, square-palmed hands smoothed over his flesh, firm and warm and full of comfort, and Esel knelt before him with a bowl of hot, scented water and a washcloth.

Tobias closed his eyes. Rivulets of wet warmth tracked his body, caressing the lines of chest, hips, and thighs. The cloth made pass after pass over his most intimate places, and he slid his fingers into a wealth of blond hair as its softness was replaced with the ineffable sweetness of a hot, talented tongue.

The whore knew his trade, definitely. He teased and licked along Tobias’ length, not swallowing him whole until he was hard enough to beg, and then tormenting him with long, slow strokes that pushed him close to the edge, yet never let him fall.

After several minutes of that game, Esel pulled off abruptly and glanced up at him, eyes heavy-lidded and mouth wet. He grinned that gappy grin of his—Tobias wondered briefly whether the missing teeth had merely been rotten, or actually knocked out—and moved the fun to the bed. Tobias sprawled back on the frayed and shabby coverlet and watched him disrobe properly, the only sound in the room the echoes of revelry and conversation filtering up from downstairs. He propped himself on his elbows and watched the lean, muscular figure move before him, unbinding the blond hair from its stubby ponytail, shaking it out… gazing at him with a blank kind of acceptance in those blue eyes.

Tobias frowned, and reached down beside the bed. Coin was a bloody wonderful thing. There was another bottle here: cheap whiskey, but really quite tolerable. He uncorked it, swigged, gulped down on the burn of it hitting his throat, and leered as Esel clambered onto the bed.

“Oops,” Tobias said, tipping the bottle enough to slosh a splash of whiskey over his chest and the upper part of his stomach. His body tightened at the coolness of the liquid, and the proximity of the other man.

Esel just smiled, bent his head, and lapped at the spilled liquor. Breath hissed between Tobias’ lips as whatever teeth the blond had left grazed his nipple. Swift, firm swipes of mouth and tongue—too fast, too efficient to be kisses—travelled over his chest, and he let his head loll back, spinning lightly in a happy, mellow haze.

It felt good to be taken care of, to be pampered and touched and soothed. It wasn’t enough, though, and eventually Tobias wanted more. Esel appeared to understand… to have anticipated it before he even knew it himself. The blond produced another bottle; this one a small, rounded affair in smooth clay, with a painted stopper. Oil. It smelled of roses, like almost everything else in this sodding place.

Tobias allowed himself to be stroked, anointed and liberally smeared, and watched as Esel prepared himself. He really was an attractive man, Tobias thought, staring blearily at the corn-gold hair and the broad, curved chest, and the pretty, smiling mouth.

Abruptly, he grabbed the blond’s arm and—with a little more vigour than was really polite—positioned him face-down on the bed, pillows gathered in his arms and legs splayed beneath him. His skin was paler on his back, the faint lines of a summer tan marking how he must prefer to wear his shirt, with sleeves pushed up and neck undone. Tobias shied from the thought. He didn’t want to dwell on who Esel was, or whatever joys and sadesses his life contained. Instead, Tobias parted the cheeks of his round, white arse, and set about methodically fucking him.
The whore made it easy. Of course. He was pliant, loose; a wave of warm flesh and simple pleasures, hot and yielding. He wriggled for Tobias, moaned for him as he was filled, and worked back against him, providing the perfect blend of resistance and submission. The wooden bed frame, with its silly curlicues and grubby drapes, creaked and groaned in time to every movement.

In the next room along, drunken male laughter echoed through the wall. A female voice squealed, giggled raucously, and then whooped as furniture thunksed and scraped across the floor. Another door slammed somewhere. Sweat prickled on Tobias’ skin, and he fell down into a crouch over Esel’s body, wanting… closeness, he supposed. Stupid, really. Still, he ran his hand over the bunched muscles of the blond’s arm, and laid his cheek on one hard shoulder blade as he stroked deeper, sinking his cock into a hot, willing grip, and pressing himself against all that smooth, warm flesh.

Esel shifted under the increased weight, moaned a bit, and stretched one hand back to wind lazily in Tobias’ hair. He murmured something that might have been Antivan, and tugged lightly at the dark strands.

Next door, the fuzzy bubble of voices and giggles gave way to the rhythmic thud of bed against wall, interspersed with loud, uninhibited cries.

Tobias closed his eyes, his body jerking against Esel’s, the smell of skin and warmth and sweat all around him, perfumed with oil and sin. It was, he supposed, entirely possible that the blond’s writhings and groans of pleasure were genuine. He decided to believe they were, and lost no time in clamping his body tighter to Esel’s, hips rolling with the ceaseless rhythm of a goal determined, a quest to be fulfilled. Open-mouthed, panting hard, Tobias crushed his face to that tangle of dirty blond hair, parched lips kissing pale neck and shoulders, his hand seeking to lock itself around the long-fingered fist that lay clenched on the coverlet.

Something surged in the pit of his gut—not lust, not desire, but something deeper, something more primal. It was part of the essence of who he was… what he was. Magic permeated everything, the silver thread that ran through the world, and it uncoiled inside him, a dark serpent seeking purchase on slippery, uneven ground. Tobias held it back, the way he always did. If you never showed it, no one knew you had it… or so his father used to say. Sparks blistered beneath his skin, all cold fire and aching want, and he could have sworn he could smell elfroot.

A word that wasn’t a word—a name that wasn’t a name, just a broken, empty gasp of a thing—left his lips, dragged from him like a cry of defeat.

He didn’t last as long as he’d hoped. Ironic, really, given what he’d paid.

Tobias bucked and thrust his way through it all, aware of his hoarse cries and the way that—just for a few precious moments—the world was bright and warm and wonderful. The euphoria pitched quickly into a dead, slimy weight of discomfort once he was done, and the man in his arms no longer felt… right.

He rolled off, sticky and apologetic, and sat dumbly while Esel got up and—in a distinctly leisurely manner—pottered around the room, humming to himself as he rinsed out the washcloth and cleaned them both off.

“You are a very handsome man,” he purred, in those silky, faintly foreign tones. “You come see me again, yes?”

In the next room, the other couple were still going at it. The bed was damn near fixed to burst through the wall any minute, and a loud screech of female laughter echoed, only slightly muffled. It
seemed strangely incongruous, and Tobias frowned, suddenly feeling slightly silly.

He dragged his gaze from the crack he’d been staring at in the far wall, smiled tightly at the look in those wide blue eyes as Esel came to kneel on the bed beside him, and wondered why he’d picked this one out of all the faces Madam Lusine had to offer.

He lifted a hand and touched it to Esel’s jaw. It was smooth, like much of the rest of him… like a lot of Lusine’s people. More than just shaving. Caramel, or long hours with a cotton thread, Tobias supposed. Esel didn’t flinch from that small, intimate gesture. He kissed Tobias’ palm, and gave him a long, lingering look designed to smoulder and inflame.

“I think you come see me. I make a wonderful time with you, yes? You forget all about him.”

“What?”

Tobias’ hand dropped like a lead weight to the coverlet, as if the blond’s skin had scalded him. Esel gave him an amused, guarded look, then shrugged, and took a swig from the half-empty whiskey bottle before passing it to Tobias.

“Nothing,” he said, smiling beatifically. “No one, I’m sure.”

Tobias’ frown deepened. He was, he reflected, drunk. Not drunk enough, but drunk all the same. And bored. Next door, the woman was shrieking and her cully was screaming out to Andraste’s flaming tits, and the bed was thudding against the plasterboard. Tobias lifted the bottle and took a long gulp, while Esel’s fingers traced wordless poems over his skin, and tweaked at his nipples.

A warm, damp kiss planted itself at the point of Tobias’ shoulder. He stood abruptly, shaking the touch away, leaving Esel to sprawl across the bed, that self-satisfied smile still on his face. He laughed softly, and Tobias glared at him, demolishing a little more of the whiskey as he padded, naked, to the various points around the room at which his clothes had been left.

With his immediate needs fulfilled, the shine had worn off this musty little room. The blond on the bed—head propped on his hand, slack cock draped across one firm, powerful thigh, and that bloody grin on his face—was little more than leftovers from a meal Tobias had no desire to finish.

He dressed briskly, left Esel the rest of the bottle and a few silvers’ tip that Lusine didn’t need to know about, and jogged down the stairs.

Funny how expensive it could be to feel so cheap.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Amended 26/8/11 to fix an erroneous mention of a certain plot point that shouldn't have been in there 'til later chapters.Oops. If you never noticed, carry on. No screw-ups here, no sir...

“Hawke!”

Varric beamed cheerfully at him, arms outstretched, though he didn’t bother to get up from his chair. Actually, Tobias decided, it was more of a throne. Gaudy and lavish, like his whole suite—which it was a pleasant relief to see The Hanged Man’s management hadn’t touched, despite the unexpected length of Varric’s absence, and Bartrand’s exaggerated reports of his demise. Now, it looked like the dwarf had never left: the merchant prince, holding court at the centre of his own little world, bathed in lamplight and with the invisible threads of a hundred puppets tied to his spread fingers.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

Tobias shrugged and mumbled something non-committal. There was a festival air to the suite tonight, with people crowded in and a constant buzz of chatter and clinking mugs making the space feel small and cramped.

“He has family in the city,” said a familiar, deep voice, like the light of a warm dusk poured over dark blue velvet. “He is the only one of us who does, aside from you. Why would he not spend time with them?”

Fenris was seated to Varric’s left, draped over one of the carved chairs around the table with that customary artful elegance of his. Like some kind of otherworldly creature, Tobias thought, eyeing the shock of white hair, the arm propped casually over his bent knee… that body whose sinuous, exotic lines belied its hard, often brutal strength. The elf lifted his chin, fixed Tobias with the sharp sliver of an icy green stare, and nodded.

“Hawke.”

“Fenris,” he returned. “Good to see you.”

“Family,” Varric announced, mouth curled into a moue of distaste as he poured red wine into a fresh goblet and pushed it towards Tobias, “is not the first word I’d use to describe Bartrand right now.”

A girl in a tight blue dress edged past between him and the table, her perfume a strong wisp of flowers in the sultry, beery warmth. Tobias stepped aside, gave Varric a knowing grin, and slipped into one of the empty chairs.

“You wouldn’t use any of the others in polite company, though, right?”

The dwarf smiled mirthlessly and raised his cup to Tobias, as if in a toast.

“Of course. Good thing it’s just us, isn’t it? Two-faced, back-stabbing son of a— you know he’s
skipped town?”

Tobias took a sip of the wine, raising his eyebrows in approval. Deep, rich, fruity… it looked as if Varric was already spending his share of the proceeds. He swallowed, mildly annoyed at the fact unpleasant memories of Bartrand’s betrayal cloyed the taste on his tongue.

“Can’t say I’m shocked to hear it.”

“Huh. Neither was I.” Varric’s lip curled slightly. “Still, first I hear of him, I’ll let you know. He can’t have gone to ground completely. I’ll find him… and when I find him—”

“We,” Tobias corrected. “You better not think of cutting me out of this one.”

Varric nodded solemnly, the gleam of an utterly cold, ruthless hatred in his eyes. It was a bargain sealed, an accord struck, but then—as the candles at the centre of the table flickered—the lamplight seemed warmer, the dwarf smiled expansively, and he was the charming, jovial raconteur once more. A gesture here, a word there… everyone was having a good time, and everyone would leave the tavern knowing Varric Tethras was back in town—and back on top.

Tobias glanced across the table, catching Fenris’ eye. That the elf still had anything to do with him surprised Tobias slightly. After his circumstantial, rather chaotic introduction to the Hawke brand of Kirkwall underworld, Tobias had imagined he would leave, perhaps never to be seen or heard of again, except in whispered rumours. A tattooed ghost who could move like a shadow and tear the living heart from a man before he realised he was even in danger… well, such an individual might command ridiculous fees as a mercenary or assassin. Tobias could think of no end of sensible applications for someone with Fenris’ talents—and yet the elf seemed quite happy squatting in his old master’s mansion and surviving on whatever scraps of work he bothered to take. Well… inasmuch as Fenris ever seemed happy about anything, of course.

It seemed strange to Tobias, but he had trouble enough with Fenris’ prickly, offish manner that he didn’t want to question. The night they’d first encountered him—saved his life, as a matter of fact—he’d spewed vituperative bile at Tobias for being a mage instead of actually thanking him. He’d made his opinions perfectly clear, and Tobias supposed he had no choice but to respect them.

He drifted in and out of the conversation, picking up loose ends about this or that, such-and-such who’d left town or been knocked out by a rival since he’d been… away. Kirkwall was constantly changing, its underbelly a roiling pit of vipers all thrashing against each other, seeking a way out of the tunnels and into the sun. The few months he and Varric had been gone had been a lifetime for some people—albeit a short one with a particularly messy ending. Tobias listened, nodded, filed away mental notes concerning shifts in power between the Coterie and some of the other, smaller guilds.

There were rumours—because there always were, when you sat at Varric’s table—that tensions with the qunari were running high again. All that business with the explosive powder, whatever it was they called it…. Grutlock? Gratling? Tobias couldn’t remember, and he frowned as he stifled a whiskey-flavoured belch and swilled more of Varric’s good wine. The… stuff, anyway. The fact the bastards had it was common knowledge now, thanks to Javaris. Whispers were running through the alienage like wildfire, saying how the grey-skinned devils wanted to blow up half of Lowtown, and how the elves would be the first to suffer, like they always were. There had been some minor unrest, apparently. Nothing the guard hadn’t been able to clamp down on with arguably undue force, naturally.

Varric pulled a face. “Oh, tell me Daisy didn’t—”
“I doubt Merrill even noticed the guards,” Fenris said dryly. “She is possibly the least observant person I have ever met. I have not seen much of her. She appears to spend all her time with… books.”

The word seemed to carry a slightly disparaging flavour for him, but then the elf shrugged and shook his head. Tobias watched the fall of white hair move with the gesture, candlelight dancing on it in soft reflections.

“Your Guard-Captain has kept a close eye on her in your absence.” Fenris glanced at Tobias, eyes glittering in the warm light. “As she has many things.”

Tobias snorted. “Aveline’s hardly my captain,” he protested. “She refused point blank to overlook certain… trade routes… when I asked her.”

As a matter of fact, it had been a blazing row. Tobias had rather thought the woman owed him for her new-found position, and he would have made a damn sight more coin a damn sight more quickly if she’d swallowed her bloody principles and just done what he’d asked. A certain section of the coast, left unpatrolled on a particular night. Not hard, but no. Obviously far too much of a boon for the mighty Aveline to even consider granting.

Well, bugger her. He didn’t need her now. Didn’t need anyone. He was… made. Yes.

Tobias upended the goblet and drained it, peering at Fenris and Varric, and their worn, slightly blurry profiles. They were discussing other news now. Names, places… things that had happened without him. The exiled whatsit was still in town, apparently, despite certain persons having usefully abetted his revenge upon a certain mercenary company. His Highness, the holy-brother-turned-prince… thing. Sebastian. Tobias squinted, recalling ridiculously shiny white armour, perfect hair, and a big, fat… coin purse.

There was talk of envoys from Starkhaven, Fenris said, though he had either had no opportunity or no inclination to learn more of the political complexities. Tobias didn’t really mind. It was very easy to lose himself to simply ogling Fenris when he was drunk. All the interesting questions, such as how far down those curious tattoos extended, and exactly what sorts of noises that rich, gravelly voice made at the point of crisis, became less coloured over with the fact of what an arrogant prick he could be.

“What about Blondie?” Varric asked eventually, topping up the goblets. “Still fighting the good fight? My sources tell me the templars haven’t caught up with him yet.”

Fenris curled his lip. “I am sure it is not for want of trying… or for want of Anders giving them cause.”

Tobias’ goblet stopped en route to his mouth. There were still people everywhere, raised voices and extravagant good cheer as the drink and the coin and the gossip flowed. His gut roiled, and he swallowed heavily.

Fenris shot him a guarded look, head very slightly inclined. “I… heard about Carver joining. For what it is worth, I’m sorry. I imagine it must be a difficult position to be in.”

What, that my own brother thinks I’m aberration of nature and should be caged like an animal? That he’d turn his back on everything our family gave up—just so Father could spare Bethany and I that fate—and claim that he’s doing it for some sense of the greater good, instead of just admitting that he’s reacting like the spoilt little brat he is?
Tobias didn’t say it. He allowed his mouth to twist into a curl of uncertain regret, and nodded.

“Thank you, Fenris. I, uh… imagine Carver believes he’s acting for the best. And there are good people in the Order. Perhaps a few more like my brother will help turn the tide.”

That one was met with deathly silence. Tobias swigged his wine, and wished they were talking about something else. He was getting over-warm, too; the sickly smell of rose oil seemed to rise off his skin, and he wasn’t sure whether he was the only one who could smell it.

He made his excuses not long after, as the crowds began to thin out and Varric started asking questions about what he planned to do now.

They’d talked about it a little before, down in the dark. The three of them. Isabela wanted a new ship, naturally. Tobias wasn’t sure whether she’d keep chasing Castillon’s relic if she got one, or whether she’d simply point the prow at the horizon and be nothing but a speck on the waves before the people she owed even knew she was gone. He suspected the latter and, all things considered, hoped she got her wish. She probably deserved it, one way or another.

Varric had been cagey. He meant to buy out this damn bar, Tobias guessed, and spend the rest of his life sitting back telling stories, and paying off the representatives from the Merchants’ Guild. Good luck to him… even if he had laughed at the mention of Tobias intending to reclaim the old Amell estate.

You, Hawke? Nobility? Hah!

Tobias supposed it was a ridiculous notion. But, if it gave Leandra some peace, it was worth it. Anyway, after coming on to two years in the Maker-forsaken pit of Lowtown’s slums, he found he was rather intrigued by the idea of a mansion… not that what he’d seen of its filthy, ugly belly—full of slavers and the detritus of years of misuse—had been all that enticing.

It didn’t matter.

Tobias told himself that, as he made his way back to Gamlen’s. The rough walls of buildings wobbled a little under his skating fingertips, and his loose strides flowed through the soft darkness.

And it was dark… but that didn’t matter either. Overhead, visible through the crowded, leaning shapes of tenements and sloping roofs—a collage of silhouettes that dented the sky—there hung a waxy, pitted disc. An almost full moon, flanked by the points of stars that glimmered between the clouds.

Tobias stopped and gazed upwards, grinning madly at the sight, and aware of every breath of breeze, every tang and pinch of tar and salt and filth on the night air. The bare skin of his arms rose to goosebumps, and then the hair on the back of his neck began to rise, too.

Tar, and salt, and filth… and some bunch of clever buggers who just won’t bloody learn….

He turned, ready to confront the figure that appeared at the cross-section of two alleyways, about eight feet in front of him. Thin, not terribly tall, swaddled from tip to toe in dark clothes, head and face covered by a cloth mask… could have been human or elf, male or female. Didn’t matter; Tobias’ gaze took in the narrow blades, one in each hand, like twin shreds of moonlight. He’d already snatched out the dagger he wore at his belt—a weapon he was familiar enough with, even if it wasn’t the most powerful at his command.

If Tobias’ father had taught him anything, it was the value of secrecy. All the years they’d spent moving from village to village (and, oh, how ironic that Lothering was supposed to have been the
last place they would ever call home...), shifting on every time suspicious tongues began to wag, so
that they stayed forever ahead of the threat of discovery. Every time, Tobias and Bethany would
have Malcomb’s litany drilled into them: do nothing unless you have to. Magic is a tool, not a yoke.
Don’t be ashamed that you have a gift, but be wary of those who lack it.

At the time, most of the words seemed stupid. Where Bethany had wished for nothing more than to
be normal—or at least treated as if she was—Tobias had been arrogant. He’d wanted to believe the
rules didn’t apply to him, that they were proof of nothing more than his father’s weakness... right up
until the day, when he was thirteen years old, that Malcomb lost his temper and, to teach him a lesson,
bested his son with the most ferocious blast of magic Tobias had ever seen. He’d learned what it was
to be caught in a vice of pure energy, to feel his body tear and rend from the inside out, and he had
seen the fury in his father’s face—motivated by a dark, blind weight of terror—and only then had he
understood: it is better this than nothing. Better hiding than being caught, better freedom than
submission... better together than alone.

Right now, Tobias could have wished he wasn’t alone. Or drunk. Or both. Or—

“Oh, balls,” he murmured, as another four attackers emerged from the sidestreet opposite.

All part of the same gang, no doubt. Maybe they were hungry. Maybe they were all refugees. Maybe
they just thought they were tough, and all had matching tattoos somewhere under the heavy folds of
clothes.

He didn’t know but, when the tension finally broke and they rushed him, Tobias ducked, dived, and
jabbed his blade at the first available set of ribs. Two of the gang were next to useless fighters,
adding weight to the hungry refugee theory. He kicked one in the groin, the crumpling and pathetic
mewling suggesting it was in fact a man, and elbowed another in the face. Pivoting on one foot,
Tobias landed a fresh punch to the assailant’s stomach and disarmed the figure while it was still
doubled over and retching. Pain seared his knuckles, but he gripped the extra blade tight and shoved
it forwards, into the next body charging towards him. He kicked out, smashing the sole of his boot
flat across a kneecap, twisting away from the glimmer of steel and the threat of blood.

Something—someone, maybe—hit him across the shoulders, and he stumbled, spinning out of the
press of bodies shortly before a fist connected with his mouth. Tobias shook his head, spat, tasted
blood... and gasped at the cold feel of metal in his flesh.

Malcomb had possessed a staff. For as long as Tobias could remember, it had stayed locked away in
a trunk—and not just because it had a naked woman carved into the neck, although that particular
decoration had caused no small amount of furtive giggling when he was young. It raised all sorts of
questions about his father’s past—a past which, aside from the briefest mentions of the Circle Tower,
and how it was no place for any normal human being—Malcomb had never been eager to discuss.

The staff, though... apart from the nude lady, it was nothing more than a carved bit of wood, like
something a goatherd might carry. On closer inspection, there were runes and sigils etched into its
surface: wards of protection and blessing. Malcomb rarely used it. After all, nothing would scream
‘apostate’ quite so much as running around with a bloody great stave strapped across one’s back.

They were useful, he’d said. Tools for the channelling and concentration of a mage’s power, and
concentration—as Malcomb Hawke had so often told his children—was important. Their wits were
their greatest defence against the dangers of the Fade, and against the things to which they must
never give in.

Never give in....
Tobias pressed a hand to his side, blood welling stickily between his fingers. His vision blurred, and it was hard to count who was down and who wasn’t. He flung out his palm, feeling the energy flow even before he was ready for it, and it burst from him. Searing, bright, hot… and the other things came with it.

Even as the bolt of light left his hand—a jagged thing that shot through the nearest body, singeing flesh and scattering the rest of them in shock and fear—Tobias could feel the interest snaking through him. Metallic whispers… voices he usually only heard when he was asleep. His hand burned with the uncomfortable heat of the spell, and the blood beneath his other palm sang to him with all kinds of hidden dangers.

*Think how Merrill did it, up on Sundermount. One cut, and the power was there for the taking. You could use it… you don’t even need to learn how. You already know, really, don’t you? You’ll know. You will. You’ll feel it, and it’ll feel so right….*

He’d never been sure whether they were the voices of his own temptation, or truly the whispers of demons. Malcolm had died too damn young, leaving as many unasked questions as he had unanswered ones.

At least one of them was dead. A raw-edged, bloody hole through his—or her, or whatever—stomach. A hot, meaty smell hung in the air, and Tobias raised his hand again, fingers half-curled, as if to fling a fireball at the nearest chancer. Somebody muttered ‘fuck this’, and the whole pack of them ran, splintering away into the shadows.

He straightened up a bit, wincing at the blazing rod of agony lancing his side, and allowed himself a triumphant grin.

“Yeah… better fuckin’ run,” Tobias muttered, shortly before the one masked figure he’d missed punched him in the kidneys.

He wheezed, doubled over, and felt the next blow land on the back of his head. Lashing out, dagger in hand, his blade caught at a sleeve, ripping cloth and tearing at the resistance of skin. His palm crackled as he began to summon another blast of power, but he was groggy, unsteady… afraid. The feel of something blunt and heavy—a jemmy, maybe, or a handy bit of wood—swung and cracked at the backs of his knees, wiping them out from under him, and Tobias fell.

His head hit the ground with a hard thud, and then through the stars swimming across his vision there was blood… so much blood, whirling like raindrops. He could taste its oily, bitter power, which was odd, because he was almost certain it wasn’t *him* doing that.

There was a horrible noise, and someone screamed.

“Ooh, will you look at that!” cried a familiar voice, light and breathy and full of excitement. “Look, I got one! That’s right… you leave him alone, you!”

Tobias tried to sit up, but the world had other ideas. His body seemed weak and empty, cold and full of nothing but pain and slippery voids of uselessness where he was accustomed to finding muscles. He groaned, and let his head drop back against the stone with a small thump.

A shadow fell over him, and he peered up, wincing. If there *was* a Maker, Tobias decided, He had a very odd sense of humour.

“*Merrill*?”

The elf looked down at him, her face that peculiar mixture of innocence and wildness: huge eyes,
green as leaves and phenomenally expressive, and peachy skin criss-crossed by those strange, arcane tattoos that apparently had meaning for the Dalish.

A thin, clammy hand patted his cheek as she frowned at him in concern.

“Hawke? Hawke, you’re not dead, are you? Please don’t be dead. It’d be really inconvenient if you were dead, and I’d probably get into horrible trouble.”

Andraste’s bosom band, did she have to talk so much? He groaned again, aware of the light-headedness brought on by loss of blood, and unable to resist the soft, fluffy clouds of soothing, dark warmth that wanted to fold over him.

Just a minute to close his eyes, that was all. Just to catch his breath.
Chapter 4

Tobias awoke on a thin, uncomfortable mattress… little more than stuffed sackcloth on a narrow pallet, really. He opened his eyes, but wherever he was appeared to be dim, ill-lit, and there was a pervasive smell of something dank and green, like… boiled elfroot and redblossom?

He tried to sit up, assailed at once by the double spectre of nausea and pain in his side. He blinked, squinted down at his body, and discovered that he had been stripped to the waist, wounds dressed, and then covered up with a worn, baggy broadcloth shirt. It didn’t fit, itched slightly, and smelled of something greasy, but at least he still had his own trousers on.

Tobias reached a hand beneath the shirt, fingers nudging against the edges of the bandage that ran around his waist. A wad of dressing covered over the place he’d taken the blade, and he gritted his teeth as he tried to prod beneath it, assessing the damage. Not half as bad as he’d thought, he realised… which meant one of two things.

Oh, sod it….

He lay still, gradually becoming aware of the sound of voices. There was a low, earnest murmur, a quiet buzz of conversation beyond… where was he, anyway? With difficulty, Tobias sat up slightly, peering around what now appeared to be less of a room than a small, windowless cubby-hole. The bed he lay on had a couple of brown woollen blankets folded at its foot, and a battered trunk stood at the end of it. There was a chair with one broken leg, propped up crookedly against the wall, an upturned crate that held an unlit candle in an old saucer, a sheaf of papers and a well-used writing set, and a small stack of books. Tobias frowned as he made out the titles of the top three: *Of Fires, Circles, and Templars: A History of Magic in the Chantry*, *Brahm’s Scale of Demonic Possession: A New Evaluation* and, perhaps most alarmingly, *The Forbidden Herte*, which appeared to be a well-thumbed romance novel of dubious literary merit.

He glanced to his right, towards the voices, beyond the old curtain and the dusty partition, and away from this strange little space, which he suddenly felt he had no right to be in.

Anders’ clinic. Merrill must have… well, *how* she’d done it Tobias had no idea. She couldn’t possibly have carried him all the way from Lowtown. He couldn’t have— Maker, he was in Anders’ bed.

At least a dozen different questions and unsettling thoughts jockeyed for position in Tobias’ mind, but he bit down on them all and tried to concentrate. He eased himself awkwardly into a sitting position, struggling against his sore bits and the desire to stay as silent as possible, so he might hear what was going on. Snatches of conversation drifted through from the clinic, but Tobias couldn’t make out everything. He frowned, trying to piece together what was going on.

“…just isn’t possible,” someone was saying. A woman, by the sound of it: the well-modulated tones of a matronly type, radiating rueful disapproval. “All we can hope for is moving those most at risk, and then—”

“And what when that means every single mage in the Marches?” A young man’s voice, this one, sharp and clear and full of intractable determination. “Because it *will* come to that. We all know it will.”

“Gethyn,” the matronly one warned. “That is not necessarily true.”
“It bloody is!” he retorted. “It’s already starting. Meredith’s not even waiting for people to be denounced before she orders searches. Four more caught last month… barely more than children. We have to up the numbers we’re moving, and we have to move them now.”

“You think I’m not aware of that? My own sister—”

Another voice chimed in, and Tobias’ chest clenched on the familiarity of those weary tones.

“It’s not as simple as that. Look….” Anders sighed. “It’s a mess. This isn’t even considering the mages pouring out of Starkhaven. Tantervale is almost overwhelmed.”

“Well, Orlais, then.” the one called Gethyn snapped, a note of petulance stretching the words thin. “What about passages south? What about the man who organised the—?”

“He’s dead,” Anders said bluntly. “Fell foul of the Raiders once too often. That’s the problem with sea travel. Besides, Ferelden’s hardly safe. We’re better off sticking with the original plan for now, but it’s impossible to get more than small cells across the Vimmarks. The only other way is east, to Ostwick, and that takes coin.”

“Then you’ll have to find more money.”

“Gethyn!” the woman chided. “Of all of us, Anders has—”

“It’s all right, Selby. This one goes ahead as planned. As for the others, give me, I don’t know, a week or two… I’ll get the money.”

There was a shuffling sound, as if papers or scrips were being picked off a table… and maybe the faint clink of a coin purse. Tobias’ brow furrowed, and he held his breath as he listened. Another voice—breathy, reedy, like a young girl—piped up.

“It doesn’t matter where I end up, messere. Only that I’m free. I won’t forget this.”

Footsteps, movements… the sound of bodies shifting, and an embrace freely given. Then, just maybe, a girl’s slight sniffle. Tobias fought the urge to twitch the curtain aside and peep out; curious, but anxious not to give away the fact he was eavesdropping.

“Take care, Clara. And be careful, all right?”

_Clara_. Tobias’ memory caught up with him, coughing up the recollection of one of Anders’ pale, nervous, so-called ‘assistants’ who’d been helping in the clinic for the past few months.

So… this was how the Mage Underground worked, was it?

“I will. I promise.”

There were a few more murmured farewells, the definite clink of a moneybag or two, and more footsteps. Tobias listened carefully, squinting in the dimness, trying to work out whether the meeting—if that’s what it was—had adjourned, or whether just a few of the participants had left. He thought he heard a door swing shut, but everything seemed to echo, and it was hard to tell whether that was his fuzzy head, or the acoustics of the place.

“What?”

Tobias blinked. That was Anders again, his voice coming from a different part of the clinic. Tobias wished he could see who he was talking to.
“No… no, I can’t. I have a… patient.”

“You know, they’re starting to take you for granted, Anders.”

Tobias hadn’t heard this one before. Another male voice, but deeper and darker, with a hint of self-assured cockiness. He found his fingers tensing inexplicably on the edge of the bed. Anders’ bed, he corrected… where he had been laid to heal and rest and— shit, this was going to be embarrassing.

His head hurt and his tongue tasted furry, but Tobias shelved those inconveniences, and strained to hear what this new man was saying.

“You’ve been here for longer than many of the refugees. You’re part of the landscape now. Fereldans or Marchers, they don’t even bother looking for anyone else. You put yourself at risk helping them.”

“They look out for me,” Anders muttered, and Tobias could all too easily picture the diffident shrug with which he’d say that.

It was true, though. The refugees had a searing, hard-edged loyalty to him… and Darktown did seem to protect its own.

The other man didn’t sound convinced. He chuckled mirthlessly. Tobias had no idea what he looked like, but pictured him as tall, dark, broad… probably armed.

“And a lot of bribes are paid on your behalf. You have friends in useful places, Warden.”

“Don’t c—”

“Are you with us, then?”

Tobias’ frown deepened. He didn’t like the sound of this. Anders didn’t appear to, either.

“It’s risky. Very risky.”

“So? Was it not you who said we had to take the initiative? Bring the fight to the Chantry’s door? Push back for every indignity the templars inflicted?”

The rustle and soft clink of papers and bottles being moved—debris of whatever meeting had been going on, Tobias supposed—almost covered over Anders’ terse sigh.

“Yes, but…. Fine. When?”

“We’ll call for you. This week, I think. Colwyn is waiting on the word from his informant. They’ve upped the guard since last time, so we’ll need to be in and out fast. You, me, Mariah, and Gethyn. There are six names on the list.”

“Six?” Anders sounded doubtful. “We’ve never moved that many at once before.”

“They’ve never let Alrik have such free rein before,” the other man countered darkly. “You’ve seen what he does. You know what he did to Ka—”

“Yes.” The word was a brisk, clipped thing, shoved into the conversation like a wedge.

Tobias bit his lip, rather wishing he’d stayed safely unconscious. This talk of guards… they didn’t just mean moving apostates out of the city, did they? This was **breaking** them out, and that meant—no, surely not. Not The Gallows. The place was a fortified warren. There was no way anyone could
sneak in and make off with imprisoned mages. It was madness… and yet they spoke of it as something they’d done before.

**Anders, what in the Maker’s name are you involved in?**

“Well,” the other man said, oddly cheerful, “I suppose I should be on my way. Let you get back to tending your… friend. He’ll be all right, will he?”

“Hmm? Hawke? Oh.” Anders seemed distracted, the answer coming as if he was reluctant to give it. “Yes. He was lucky. He… usually is.”

“I see. And he’s… gifted?”

Tobias’ shoulders stiffened, a prickle of discomfort seeping through his flesh.

“He’s a mage, yes,” Anders said slowly. “But—”

“Of course. The one who sent that elf-blooded boy to the Dalish.” Another low, rather hollow chuckle sounded. “You do find yourself the most interesting company, Anders.”

Tobias listened, but couldn’t pick up more than a disinterested grunt from the healer. He supposed he should consider himself fortunate that Anders chose to protect him in such a way… unless it wasn’t protection, but simply a lack of trust. They did not, he reminded himself sharply, know each other all that well, despite the intensity of the events they had shared.

Anders’ clinic kept him busy. Aside from a handful of occasions, he’d hardly left it to accompany what Varric insisted on calling Hawke’s Band of Crazy on any of their… outings. It was something Tobias had intended to rectify after the Deep Roads, with vague thoughts in his head that maybe life wouldn’t be so much about cheap, messy mercenary jobs and shady deals to undercut competitors. Although, he reflected, with the damage he’d seen Anders do to an entire unit of templars, perhaps he had missed a trick there. And, if Anders needed coin, Tobias saw no reason he shouldn’t push a few opportunities to make it his way.

He blinked, dragging his thoughts back to the present, and cursing himself for still thinking like a bloody smuggler. Too long now, he’d been in this craphole of a town, grubbing out enough to make ends meet and fixing solidly on the vision of a future full of gold and profit.

There was much, much more in play here than that… and he’d been an idiot not to realise it.

Tobias chewed thoughtfully at the inside of his cheek, listening as Anders murmured something he couldn’t make out. The shabby curtain hung up across the partition shifted slightly, as if in a breeze, and the sound of footsteps echoed on the worn boards. Tobias frowned at the curtain’s ragged hem, wondering if he ought to swing his legs back up on the bed and feign sleep.

“It’ll be the usual place,” Anders said, rather tersely. “I’ll leave a sign.”

“All right.” The other man sounded faintly amused. “With any luck, we’ll be hearing from our friends in Starkhaven soon. It promises to be… interesting.”

“Goodbye, Elias.”

“All right, all right… I’m leaving. Mistress Selby’s right, isn’t she? You’re really quite distracted.”

“I’m tired,” Anders replied. “Very, very tired.”
He sounded it. Tobias’ frown deepened further, but he stayed still, stayed quiet. Eventually, he heard the footsteps recede, and doors close, and Anders let out a sound mid-way between a long sigh and a groan of frustration. Tobias didn’t fully expect it to hit him quite so hard. Odd, he thought, for someone else’s simple expression of annoyance to thud into the centre of his body, and leave him aching.

He glanced around the cluttered little space that held him, full of the fractured pieces of Anders’ life, and was aware of a sudden melancholy, piercing and awkward. That… and the faint scent of rose oil rising from his warm skin.

Tobias scrubbed a hand over his face, swallowed heavily and, rising from the bed, slipped past the shabby curtain into the clinic proper. There was no way of telling the hour down here—time didn’t matter much to Darktown, because it was either still trudging on without you, or you were already dead—but the place was empty, so it must either have been very late or very early.

Anders was crouched in front of the hearth, laying a fire. There was no discernible sign of anyone else having been in the clinic. Tobias took care to make some noise, bumping against a few tables and shelves to announce his presence. Anders glanced up, then straightened, wiping soot-smudged hands against his knees.

“Hawke.”

The word was a soft, dry thing that brushed the air between them like a feather. Tobias hadn’t noticed how quiet it was. Funny, really, when the Undercity was so full of people. It shouldn’t be so given to silence… like some kind of early grave.

Anders smiled thinly at him. “Typical, I suppose. Hardly back from the dead, and already you’re making trouble.”

“I wasn’t dead,” Tobias protested, realising how dry his mouth felt, and how it turned his voice a little hoarse. “Bartrand—”

Anders shook his head. “I’ve heard. You’re the talk of Kirkwall. Well, certain parts of it.”

Tobias blinked. In amongst all the peculiar, clandestine things he’d awoken to, he was aware there was someone missing.

“Um. Where’s Merrill?”

“I sent her home. She kept trying to help.”

Tobias winced, briefly recalling a storm of blood magic that had whipped around him like some dark hurricane, vile and furious. He knew how rigid Anders’ views were on that subject, and wondered if the elf had mentioned what she’d done. Unlikely, he supposed. Still, he wasn’t sure he liked the feeling of owing his life to her—or to that particular power.

“How did she…?”

“She heard you and Varric were back, apparently. Said she missed you at The Hanged Man, so she started home and… ran into you, as it were. Scared up a couple of lads from the alienage, and they brought you here. You were— well, if it was anyone else, I’d say lucky.”

The suggestion of a smile curled the edge of Anders’ mouth, but it couldn’t disguise the concern in his face. Tobias responded the best way he knew, with a shrug and the pretence of innocence.
“What, I’m not allowed to be lucky?”

Anders crossed his arms across his chest, causing the feathered shoulders of his coat to rustle like a molting gull. He shook his head incredulously. “There is a whole other word for what you are, Hawke.”

Tobias raised a curious brow. There was a tired kind of warmth in the healer’s voice, and a look on his face—the smallest hint, perhaps—of relief. He wasn’t angry, then, though there was a touch of reproach when he cocked his head to the side and said:

“So, does this mean no more cutting through alleyways on your own in the middle of the night?”

Tobias snorted. “Maybe. Not when I’m drunk, anyway. I was… celebrating,” he admitted cautiously, brow creasing with the effort of not remembering the trip to the whorehouse, and Varric’s rather good wine.

Anders shot him a look that was at least two-thirds a poorly disguised smirk.

“Yes,” he said, his tone carefully bland. “I have a salve for that. Remind me to get you a pot… just in case.”

Tobias winced, bit his tongue, and studied the floor.

“Right, then,” Anders said brightly. “Shirt off. Let’s have a look.”

“Wh—?”

Amusement softened the healer’s face, and a trace of the wicked grin Tobias had seen once before curved his lips. He hadn’t realised how much he’d wanted to see it again.

“Well? Injuries don’t heal themselves.” Anders pointed to the nearest pallet. “Go on… sit down.”

Tobias perched meekly on the edge of the pallet and started to peel off the shirt, struggling when it came to raising his arms over his head. Anders leaned in to help, and he almost flinched at the contact. That scent of herbs and grease, the faint wet dog aroma that rose from his coat… the warmth of his presence. Tobias closed his eyes, willing his traitorous flesh not to react. He’d made enough of a fool of himself already, and there were too many unknowns, too many uncertainties where this man was concerned.

Whatever else he was, Anders was not a treat, a reward… a frivolous delight that Tobias could indulge when he wanted. That much—along with the troubles and the darkness that touched him—was abundantly clear, yet it didn’t quench any of the wanting. And, quite possibly, he wanted it too… didn’t he? It felt like it. Maddeningly, achingly like it, as if the air between them was groaning like a chain under tension, a rope creaking so hard it must inevitably snap.

Tobias thought of that night he’d come here, before the Deep Roads, when he’d thought no further—if he’d thought at all—than that first glimmer of interest. He had shied away then, wrong-footed by seeing Anders in a new light, seeing the wounds of grief and loss that he carried… the battle scars of one who had found more in life than the clumsy release of flesh and need.

It had scared him.

But the Deep Roads… week after week in the dark, almost forgetting what it was like to feel sunshine on his skin, or the wind in his hair… that had changed things. Trouble was, up here on the
surface, Tobias was pretty sure that absolutely everything was about to change, and he felt lost and adrift, as if the world was in ribbons around him and he didn’t know which way to turn.

Stupid, he told himself. It was just the after-effects of the expedition gone bad, and maybe one too many bumps to the head. He’d get the money sorted, spend it where it needed spending, and work on building himself a nice little nest egg. No more running interference with the Coterie, no more pissing about with runt-arsed dock outfits… maybe set himself up in business. Couldn’t be too hard, could it?

The rough cloth of the borrowed shirt whispered away from his skin, leaving him bare and defenceless. Tobias opened his eyes, and found Anders hunkered down in front of him, head bent as he unwrapped the dressing.

So close. So… focused. Tobias stared, his gaze picking out the bedraggled, moth-eaten edges of each grey-and-white feather on the shoulders of that awful coat. The cuffs were frayed, too, though they’d been meticulously repaired. Everything about the man was worn thin, Tobias realised, yet kept from complete ruin by the sheer force of effort.

He held his breath, watching the pulse twitch at the base of Anders’ throat, watching the rise and fall of his chest, and the softly moulded sinews of his neck. One small, frizzy hank of blond hair had escaped its binding, and hung down over his ear. Anders reached up a hand—long fingers stained and still smutted a little with soot—and swept it back, tucking it behind his ear.

Tobias exhaled softly, barely aware that he’d already lifted his own hand to do just that… a gesture of unasked for intimacy, the impulse for which left him bewildered and confused. He dropped his hand back to the pallet and dug his fingers into the wooden strut that edged it.

If Anders had noticed, he gave no sign of it. He glanced up at Tobias briefly, those dark eyes soft and shrouded with concern.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, unwinding the bandage.

The strip of cloth brushed Tobias’ skin, and he was sure it was leaving welts behind it… as sure as he was that Anders must be able to hear the thudding of his pulse. He swallowed, shook his head, and tried to breathe normally, uncomfortably aware of his own arousal. The hardness of his nipples could, perhaps, be blamed on the slight chill in the air. Anything further south, however—

*Picture Gamlen in the bath. Now. All naked and saggy and… oh, Andraste’s twat…!*  

Anders’ lean, clever fingers skated the edges of the wound—the whole thing was closed up now, leaving just a mass of rough, red skin and some heavy, mottled bruising—and their touch was light, delicate… gentle. Tobias told himself it was clinical, detached, and that he shouldn’t think the things he was thinking.

It was difficult not to, though. Difficult not to picture those hands on his body, the way they’d feel as they rubbed, gripped, slapped… long fingers, work-smudged, dry and firm, wrapped around his cock and wringing the pleasure from him, with that wide, wonderful mouth crushed against his and the taste of—


That seemed to help. Tobias began to breathe slightly more easily.

“This might feel strange.” Anders placed three fingers flat over the wound. “Try not to move.”
Tobias tensed, watching the faint glow of blue well under the healer’s skin. His first thoughts were of Justice, of watching that terrible, uncontrolled rage that had torn templars apart and left scorch marks on stone floors, but then the pale light enveloped Anders’ fingertips, blossoming out like some kind of formless flower, and it felt… odd. Not unpleasant, exactly, but definitely odd. Warm and cool at the same time, running through Tobias’ flesh with a texture that was halfway between liquid and air. He shivered, peering down at the patch of light, and found himself almost disappointed when it faded and—worst of all—Anders drew his hand away, leaving the place cold and lonely, and unblemished except for a faint scar, and the shadow of a bruise.

Anders cleared his throat, flexing his hand as if it was cramped or sore. “There. No lasting damage, but I’ll give you a balm for it. Use it for a week, just to make sure.”

Tobias was still staring at his side, and the echo of a blade that had been a little bigger than he’d thought.

“That’s… amazing,” he breathed. “How do you—?”

Anders shrugged, rocking back on his heels. “It’s a knack, I suppose. Anyone can learn potions, poultices… even basic healing spells, but it can be tricky to master. You’ve either got it or you haven’t,” he added, with a wiggle of his fingers and a surprisingly impish grin.

Tobias blinked, and let out a short, delighted chuckle. “Bethany could do it,” he said, still smiling, though the expression slid to sadness as he realised he’d mentioned her name. He didn’t do it often. “I mean, she….”

Anders nodded sadly, sympathy suddenly suffusing that beautiful grin. He shifted so fast from one mood to the next, Tobias noticed, as if his feelings were never muddied with uncertainty, or as if they all happened at once; one great well of emotion lapping at the walls he’d built around himself.

“She was a special girl, from what you say.”

“Yes.” Tobias bit his lip, uncomfortable at how bare and vulnerable he felt now, sitting here half-naked and fully exposed. He took refuge in a shrug and a self-deprecating grimace. “I’m… really better off just smashing things.”

Anders laughed softly and, clambering to his feet, tossed Tobias the borrowed shirt.

“I’ve seen what you can do. It’s… an eclectic mix. Your father’s teachings?”

Tobias winced as he pulled the shirt back on, but it was easier to move and, in any case, it seemed important he managed to do it without asking Anders to touch him. He wasn’t sure he could deal with that again.

“Most of it,” he said cagily. “He was the one who taught me to fight. Said being a mage didn’t need to mean being totally defined by magic. Still, he showed Bethany and me a lot. A good grounding in elemental and arcane magic, but basic stuff, really. The force spells I picked up from a man who used to work for Athenril… an apostate outside the Kirkwall Circle.”

It was more than he’d meant to say, and Tobias cursed that gift that Anders had… encouraging him to talk, just by his silence. He’d meandered over to the fire again, and was laying in kindling. He set it to burn with the wave of a hand and a tiny gout of flame, then turned to the rank of cookpots and coppers, lifting lids and inspecting contents.

“He’s dead now,” Tobias said bleakly, standing and making his way over to where Anders was, because where Anders was seemed somehow like the better place to be; as if there was a physical
warmth to his proximity. He wet his lower lip tentatively. “Coterie. Not templars. Do you… do you need some help?”

“You don’t need to volunteer in payment.”

Anders sounded amused. Tobias shrugged.

“I know. I… I’d like to help. If there’s anything I can do, or… if you need…. I mean, I know what you’re doing here. More than just the healing. You—”

He supposed the clang of a metal lid dropped back into place atop a pot was meant to shut him up, but he didn’t allow himself to be deterred.

“—help mages. Don’t you? The—”

“If you’re desperate to do something,” Anders said briskly, nodding at the pot, “you could strain this for me. Stinks, so it means it’s ready.”

“—Underground.”

Anders sighed, and gave him a long, pensive stare.

“Hawke,” he said at last, shaking his head. “You’ve never known what it is to be a prisoner. The Circle take you from childhood, and they fill every day you have with rules and endless preaching about restraint and responsibility, and—”

“I’m still a mage,” Tobias snapped, riled by the ease with which Anders fell back on the same tone of ‘the Circle’s full of bastards’ talk that he’d heard from his father… like it was something he couldn’t understand, and that made him inferior somehow. He frowned. “I want to do something. How about coin? What if—”

Anders’ expression darkened, and Tobias cursed himself inwardly. Had he given away the fact he’d overheard earlier? Maybe he should never have said anything. Just taken the little clay pots of ointment, smiled, and gone home, as if none of this had anything to do with him.

Bullshit.

“How were the Deep Roads?” Anders asked, his voice tight and drained. He pushed his sleeves back, setting the lid of the pot to one side and preparing to heft it over a large copper, above which sat a fine metal sieve, slightly cone-shaped, to catch the herb parts. “I meant to ask when I saw you.”

He was right; the stuff stank, like old silage and pond water. Tobias wrinkled his nose, but the irritation lingered as fetidly as the smell.

“Oh, you know,” he said airily. “Dark.”

“And heavy.” Anders nodded. “I remember.”

He glanced up then, meeting Tobias’ gaze, and carrying with him the ghosts of memories that clearly stretched back so much further than this dim, damp little room, and the mess and blood of this particular war. Tobias realised just how much more than him Anders had seen—how much more he’d lived through—and he understood both how useless it would be to pretend otherwise… and also how utterly infuriating the man could be when he wanted.

The pot tipped, and Anders frowned down at the gloopy, stagnant mess of boiled plants, buds, roots
and whatever else was in there as it slopped into the sieve. Tobias felt useless, just standing there and watching, contemplating how little he truly knew of Anders’ life, his past… all the things that he kept knotted up beneath the surface, this impossible, incredible creature who was equal parts monstrosity and angel of mercy.

He blinked and shook his head, aware he was still groggy, and probably not thinking clearly.

“Karl was the reason I came to Kirkwall,” Anders said quietly, setting the pot down and picking up a wooden spoon, pressing its flat to the boiled mass of herbs. Beyond his voice, there was no other sound but the trickle of liquid running into the copper. “Well… most of the reason. I wanted to leave Amaranthine anyway, and the things he said in his letters—”

*Letters?*

Tobias said nothing, hoping his silence would leave Anders room to talk, and maybe even shed a little of the weight on his shoulders. Anders bared his teeth, his mouth a sudden curl of penitent anger.

“The bloody *letters* were what got him caught. As if keeping mages penned up like animals isn’t bad enough, they have to search your belongings for any trace of contact with the outside world, any… any *scrap* of something personal. They had no right! He passed his Harrowing, he was—”

Tobias nodded. Guilt. Yes, he was familiar with that one.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said, and he knew from the sour look Anders gave him that they were words that would have to be said plenty more times before they took root… just as it taken him the best part of a year to start believing Bethany’s blood wasn’t still on his hands.

“We’re all doing what we can,” Anders muttered, returning his attention to the copper and sieve. He scrubbed the back of his wrist over his forehead, and it left a thin streak of green behind it. “All of this… everything I do here, it isn’t enough. The templars have pushed almost every hedgemage, back-alley healer or potion seller out of Kirkwall. People who can’t afford Circle fees haven’t anywhere else to go, and it’s only going to get worse. It— Pass those bandages, would you?”

He pointed to one of the low tables. Tobias did as he was asked, fetched the rolls of coarsely woven cloth and laid them out where Anders gestured. The crushed, pressed, damp mass of herbs was divided up and spooned into criss-crossed layers of bandage, folded over and tied off, ready to be applied as poultices to the inevitable wave of wounds, infections, phlegmy chests and swollen joints that, Anders assured him, would be rolling up at the door before long.

They worked efficiently, shoulder-to-shoulder, Tobias watching and learning and just a little bit lost to confusion. He was tired, he realised, despite the hours of rest in Anders’ bed, with its worn-out blankets and oddly contradictory reading matter.

“It’s almost dawn,” Anders observed, and Tobias wondered how he could tell.

They’d been carrying on in silence for a while… not that it had been unpleasant. There was something comfortable about it, Tobias thought. Something restful. Strange, really, he supposed; as if, the longer he spent in Anders’ company, the happier he could be with just waiting.

“You should go home.”

Tobias wanted to argue, to protest that he could stay and be at least marginally useful, but two thoughts prodded at him. First, the fact that Leandra was going to go completely *spare*, particularly if she found out exactly what had happened last night. Second, he suspected Anders didn’t really want
him here, which was a rather painful realisation.

Maybe, Tobias reflected, ‘didn’t want’ wasn’t quite the right term. It certainly wasn’t the impression he was getting from standing here like this, close enough to share the warmth of body heat, their hands moving effortlessly across each other as they folded and tied plaisters.

And yet, he allowed himself to be pushed away. He nodded, agreed, smiled sheepishly when Anders passed him a rag to wipe the sodden smears of boiled elfroot from his skin, and lost a little bit of himself to searching for answers in those dark eyes.

The actual leaving was stilted, like so much of what passed between them. Tobias knew he blushed when Anders gave him a pot of redblossom salve, and said it was ‘just in case’. He wedged his tongue in his cheek and said nothing. The whore probably hadn’t even been poxed. Still, there were long, awkward seconds filled up with things that were left unsaid… untouched.

He almost made it away before the tension broke.

“Hawke.”

Tobias paused at the clinic’s door. He glanced back at Anders, catching the look of uncertainty on the healer’s face; eyebrows twisted into a frown, and lower lip drawn in.

“Mm?”

“I’ll, uh… perhaps I’ll see you at The Hanged Man. Sometime. You’re right. I should get out more.”

The words hung on the air, full of clumsy, self-conscious promise. Tobias wasn’t sure what to make of it, but then he wasn’t sure what to make of Anders, full stop. He nodded.

“Yes. That’d be… good. And I’ve always got work going. You know that. If it helps.”

Anders inclined his head; tacit agreement, Tobias supposed. Well, that was fine. For now.

He let the door close behind him, and picked his way through the nightly leavings of Darktown’s muck. Let Anders have his secrets and his shadowy associates. He’d share them when he was ready… and the prospect of that filled Tobias with a clean, determined glee.
Chapter 5

The following months seemed to improve things, in their way.

No worse for wear after his encounter, Tobias healed. Life continued much as it had been before the Deep Roads, but with the comparative security of wealth behind him. Days and weeks were lost in a comfortable minutiae of letters to the Viscount’s office, bureaucratic replies and copies of more letters from the seneschal's assistants… and Varric’s frequent assurances that the buyer he had lined up for the best of the artefacts from the ancient thaig was ‘due from Orzammar any day’.

Still, that was fine. Leandra appeared to be recovering from Carver’s departure; all the more eager to fuss over Tobias now he was the only child she had left to coddle. He bore it with gritted teeth, and as much grace as he could manage, and held onto the thought that, once they did reclaim the Amell estate, it might even be big enough to misplace her in.

There was still work. Still people who wanted certain delicate jobs done… as there always were in Kirkwall. Tobias hadn’t sprouted enough pride to turn his nose up at them, especially now they were asking for him by name. He could pick and choose, though, and that was a nice change.

The only dead end he kept hitting—well, all right, one of the only two dead ends—was the Underground. Every enquiry he made, every word tossed into a darkened corner in The Hanged Man or the back end of The Gallows, and it got him nowhere. Nothing. No one would even admit to knowing a man named Elias, though the denials stank of falsehood.

Tobias didn’t know what to do about it. Openly showing his hand after so long hiding what he was did not come naturally. Malcolm’s voice seemed to gnaw at the back of his mind, murmuring warnings and reproaches. Admittedly, there were plenty of people in the city who knew Tobias for an apostate, but he didn’t relish the thought of the knowledge becoming widespread, especially not with the possibility of reclaiming the estate still on the table. And he definitely wasn’t prepared to push the information out there, where it could end up being used against him, simply in order to trade it for answers to questions he shouldn’t be asking.

No. If he wanted to know what Anders was involved in, he ought to approach Anders himself… which was a problem. He hardly seemed willing to talk.

That, of course, led to the second dead end: an infuriating, maddening brick wall of a man whom, despite everything, Tobias couldn’t quite bring himself to leave alone.

Anders drove him crazy. There was no point denying it… and it wasn’t just, as Carver had so eloquently put it on that Void-taken night at the chantry, like that.

It was, Tobias admitted ruefully, everything. The contradictions, the hidden things… the power. The more Anders had kept himself withdrawn, shut up in his clinic and barely seeing sunlight, the more fascinating he became. Equally, with every crumb of information he dropped about Justice, Amaranthine, the Wardens, or any of the other myriad things he seemed to so hate mentioning, Tobias wanted to dig for more.

Anders appeared, if not exactly to loosen up, then at least to make more of an effort at not keeping himself in total isolation. As good as his word, he even started showing up at The Hanged Man every so often. They all gravitated there, Tobias and his eclectic band of sometime followers… something about the attitude of the place, he supposed. Like Varric said, the bar was special.
The beer was dreadful, most of the wenches were ugly, and on any given night of the week you could find at least a dozen criminals, reprobates and mercenaries getting steadily bladdered at the rough wooden tables, but it had its charms. More than that, it was a space apart. Tobias had no idea how many bribes Varric had been required to pay for the privilege, but the city guard rarely looked any further than the front door, and none of the big rackets had a foothold inside, either.

You were just as likely to see Coterie faces drinking at the bar as any other outfit, or any number of independent mercenaries or… contractors, as Tobias liked to term it, foreign or Marcher. Yet, in here, their loyalties were their concern and no one else’s. Turf fights stayed outside, and any business transactions happened in the strict privacy of back rooms. If there were fights, the clientele would generally study their drinks with intense interest until the noise died down, whereupon Corff, the barkeep, would tut gently about the mess and toss a bit of sand over the bloodstains. It took at least three stabbings and a decapitation before the patrons of The Hanged Man would make much of a fuss.

So much more laid-back, Tobias thought, than the taverns further downtown, where the dockworkers and the labourers drank, and everything was divided by the intense loyalties of which street you lived on, or who was the better Wallop player.

Often, they’d take over Varric’s suite for the night, and the dwarf would get to play the magnanimous host and sprawl back in his chair, telling stories that made Merrill’s eyes grow even more enormous. Isabela would be there, smelling of cheap ale and whiskey, and Fenris, knocking back drink after drink that, very gradually, would start to erode his aura of portentous brooding. Occasionally, even Aveline might look in, and they’d all pull themselves a little more upright and smile glassily, then breathe a sigh of relief when she went. (Tobias respected the woman, but she cast a damnable pall over a great deal of his business, and she’d never made any secret of her disapproval, which annoyed him immensely. He also struggled, even now, to look at her without remembering the flight from Lothering, and all the things he’d so badly wanted to leave along that blighted roadside.)

They were good times, made better by the fact that things were truly looking up. It might not all be sunshine and roses just yet, but life was finding balance. Tobias was glad of it. And then, into all that, in would walk Anders, with his terrible coat and his tired eyes and—Tobias was a little surprised to discover—a wicked, filthy sense of humour and an ease among people that he’d never expected to see. He’d thought, he supposed, the man would be timid, awkward… unused to company. Maybe that he’d brood and keep himself at a distance, the way Fenris did (at least until the second bottle), but he couldn’t have been more wrong.

For a start, he knew a lot more dirty jokes than Tobias expected… and some of them were apparently drawn from personal experience.

“I’ve got it!” Anders exclaimed suddenly, on one particularly boozy evening, thumping the table with the flat of his palm then pointing at Isabela. “The Pearl, in Denerim. Wasn’t it?”

Tobias frowned, catching at the loose threads of conversation that had been floating around him like jetsam. Ah, yes… Isabela had mentioned that she felt as if she knew Anders from somewhere. There had been a general muttering of laughter, and the suspicion voiced that this was merely one of her varied pick-up techniques. Varric had chastised her for a lack of originality—but it now seemed there was actually a grain of truth to it.

She held her mouthful of ale, eyes widening and cheeks puffed out for a moment, then swallowed and nodded emphatically.

“Yes! You know, you’re right….” A predatory grin curled her lips as she tipped her head to the side,
gold jewellery clinking, and regarded Anders in open appraisal. “Mmm. It is you.”

“What pearl?” Merrill piped up, from the end of the table. “Who had pearls? I don’t think I’ve ever seen Isabela wearing pearls.”

“Only as a necklace,” Varric muttered into his pint.

“What?”

“Drink your beer, Daisy,” he said kindly.

The elf looked confused, thin fingers curled around her mug. “Did I miss something dirty?”

Tobias, legs stretched out and feet up on a spare chair, chuckled. He most definitely wasn’t going to be the one to explain it to her. Besides, he was distracted by the knowing smirk Anders was giving Isabela and—as he brought his mug to his lips—busy attempting to convince himself that the twinge at the base of his chest was utterly, definitely, not jealousy.

Anders’ smirk widened into a flat-out dirty grin. “Yeah. You really liked that girl with the griffon tattoos, didn’t you? What was her name?”

Isabela smiled and traced a finger suggestively around the rim of her mug. “Ah… the Lay Warden. She was special. And you…”

The finger was raised, levelled at Anders, and then wriggled lewdly. It never failed to amaze Tobias just how obscene the woman could make virtually any simple word or gesture seem, purely by intonation or expression. It was probably a gift.

 “…you were that runaway mage who did the electricity thing. I remember that.” Isabela picked up her pint, took a sip, then sighed happily. “Mm. That was nice.”

Tobias coughed, ale dangerously close to making a painful exit out of his nose. He’d almost mastered his splutters when Merrill frowned, evidently more confused than ever.

“What electricity thing? I saw one of those mages we fought in the caverns up in Sundermount use an electricity spell. That wasn’t very nice. Took weeks for my eyebrows to grow back.”

Varric put a hand to his forehead and rubbed wearily at his brow, shoulders vibrating a little until he got control of his sniggers.

“Oh, it’s not the same, sweet thing,” Isabela said, leering at the elf over her pint. “Not the same at all.”

“Isn’t it? Oh. But—”

“Here you go, Daisy.” Varric topped up her ale from the earthenware pitcher that sat in the centre of the table. “I’ll explain it to you when you’re older.”

Merrill’s clear, soft brow furrowed, and she looked as if she might protest, but then she lapsed into mildly perplexed silence. Isabela lifted her greasy mug to knowingly curved lips, dark eyes fixed on Anders with a stare part nostalgic warmth and part speculative hunger, and chuckled to herself as she sipped.

He just grinned, and went back to nursing the same half-empty tankard he’d had all evening, gaze dropping to its scummy innards and pale fingers worrying at the handle. Tobias tried nominally not
to stare, but now there was a whole new edge to that sharp profile, backlit by warm firelight and torches smouldering smokily in their sconces. He didn’t think he’d be able to imagine Anders in a whorehouse—for what else could they possibly have been talking about?—especially given how disparaging he was of Kirkwall’s red lantern district, but maybe it wasn’t so improbable. He’d known pleasure for pleasure’s sake once, hadn’t he? A man who hadn’t ever been carefree couldn’t possibly look as weighed down by life as Anders did. Only prisoners who’ve known freedom can truly feel the pain of its loss.

Tobias’ thoughts wandered lazily as he looked at the other mage and—not for the first time—touched on who he might have been, before Justice. He’d have liked to know him, he decided; to have met the man who lived on in those brief flashes of wicked, playful glee, and dirty jokes about templars, tarts, and priests.

“You should explain it to Fenris,” he said idly, causing Anders to glance up at the mention of the name. “Might convince him mages are good for one thing, at least.”

Isabela gave a throaty laugh, but Tobias wasn’t looking at her. He was watching the unabashed, delicious grin spread over Anders’ face, and the amusement dancing in those dark eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, meeting Tobias’ gaze levelly. “I can think of six or seven, easily.”

The close, rich air of the suite—thick with grease, ale, sweat, soot and spices—seemed to press in just that little bit more. A blade of unsullied, pure want skewered Tobias right through his middle, leaving his gut clenched and his breeches slightly pinched.

He shouldn’t keep doing this, he told himself. It wasn’t the first time. More importantly, it wasn’t fucking fair.

Anders only ever drank a quarter of what the rest of them put away, but he was always the life and soul of the evening for the time he was there. It was like watching the years peel away, as if his troubles could lift off him as easily as grime, and he’d suddenly seem so light and happy… a different man entirely, but for that same core, that same dark fire that burned within him, intense and unwavering.

And they kept doing this. The flirting. Tobias would catch himself starting it; throwing out some double entendre or gaudy quip as bad as one of Isabela’s. Anders would bat back something flippant, and then they would grin at each other, and the air would grow heavy… just like it was now. And neither of them would seem to want to look away.

The first few times, it had been fun. Tobias wasn’t used to seeing Anders so relaxed, and he liked it. He enjoyed the freedom, the warmth of this glittering, winking flame of a man who felt so familiar—as if, just for once, magic wasn’t a barrier between him and the rest of the world, but a common ground he could share with someone—but it never bloody came to anything.

Now, he could feel Isabela’s gaze on the back of his neck. He blinked, and Anders looked away first, a small smile tucked at the corner of his mouth as he shook his head and drained the last of his mug.

Tobias buried himself in his own ale, and tried to avoid catching Isabela’s eye.

He didn’t listen to much more of the conversation, such as it was. She had another lead on her damn relic, so she said. Varric had heard more rumours about various things… but then he always had.

The night slipped on and, eventually, they went their separate ways. Merrill left first, with the
customary jokes about bits of string. The rest of them got in another round and, once Corff had called
time and the regulars were being poured out of the doors, Tobias supposed he must have been drunk
enough to think it was a good idea to engineer leaving the tavern at the same time as Anders.

It was late, and dark, and outside The Hanged Man, cool air blew down the alleyways, a thin lance
to an otherwise rather sultry night. Tobias still couldn’t get used to how much warmer it seemed here
than in Ferelden.

Varric had offered him use of a bed, but he’d gracefully declined, protesting that he should get back
to Leandra before Gamlen actually gambled the house away from under her.

Anders, naturally, looked practically sober. The light breeze ruffled the shoulders of his coat, and he
was already a few paces ahead of Tobias.

The alley smelled mainly of piss and slops. Tobias quickened his steps to catch up, wondering which
route Anders would take back to Darktown. If he only had his company for a handful of cross-
streets, it didn’t give him much time… though time to do what, he hadn’t quite worked out.

Fully caught up, walking side-by-side, Tobias staggered, throwing a hand out to the wall for support,
his body lolling closer to Anders as he sagged. Lovely stuff… just the two of them, weaving an
unsteady, companionable path into the night. His palm grazed rough stonework, other hand brushing
against Anders’ arm for support. Anders stumbled, but didn’t bow, and gave him a mildly
reproachful look, mouth loosely wreathed in a smile. Tobias breathed in that familiar, sharp scent;
herbs and grease, overlaid with beer and the piquant ambience of the tavern. The murky light—just
the yellow-edged sickle of a pale moon, and the few torches burning at the end of the street—picked
at the hard lines of Anders’ face, and set twin points of silver in his eyes. There seemed to be the
faintest sheen of blue to the dimness that shrouded his cheekbones, and his lips… and it didn’t seem
awfully difficult to believe in possibilities.

“You’re drunk,” Anders observed mildly.

“Co-rrrect!” Tobias grinned, straightening up. “You should try it sometime. Bugger Justice.”

“That… isn’t quite how it works, but— You know, you’re going to have a terrible head tomorrow.”

Hedonisis… hedon… thing. Fun. Speaking of which, you’re very handsome. Anyone ever told you
that?”

There. They were out there now, those words. Buzzing free between them, batting at the silence as
softly as moths. The corner of Anders’ mouth tipped further into an excruciatingly appealing smile,
and an undeniable warmth touched his face as he looked away, his gaze turning hazy.

“You really are going to regret all this in the morning, aren’t you?”

Tobias shook his head. “Not everything. Not the things I actually mean.”

“You drink too much,” Anders countered, still ostensibly studying the wall. “Has anyone ever told
you that?”

Footsteps scuffed at the end of the alley. Tobias dismissed them as some lone drunk or streetwalker,
fuzzily aware that, if they did turn out to be anything violent, Anders could explode with raw blue
fury at them. Except he couldn’t, could he? Justice wasn’t a tap he could turn off and on, but a force
that burst from him when all other control was lost.
Tobias wondered if it was very wrong that, just briefly, he found that thought arousing, but he didn’t waste time considering it. He shrugged.

“I don’t. You just always happen to see me when I’m drunk.”

The footsteps passed on a bit further, then stopped, replaced by the sound of a man relieving himself noisily against a wall. Anders shot him a look of mingled amusement and reprimand.

“It’s not good for you,” he remarked, as they walked on. “That’s all I’m saying.”

Tobias snorted. “Advice on clean and healthy living? From you?”

“Healer,” Anders reminded him, holding up a hand, index finger slightly extended. “Right here?”

It earned him another snort. Tobias stuck his thumbs in his belt loops, allowing his boots to scud the ground comfortably as he walked; long, loose steps with the darkness flowing around them, elastic and beautiful… and Anders almost close enough at his side. He turned his head, forgetting to speak for a moment—so busy just watching the way the moonlight made the other man seem smoother, younger, maybe even happier—and then, when he did find the words, they came out slightly jumbled, falling over each other in their impatience to get out of his mouth.

“You don’t… I mean, it’s not— You barely leave that bloody clinic,” Tobias managed as they crossed the expanse of the bazaar, eerily empty in the night and devoid of everything but the black skeletons of stalls, and a couple of derelicts bedded down in the doorways. “Getting you out tonight was rare enough. You don’t visit the whorehouses, or so you say—”

Tobias wrinkled his nose. He’d had occasion to use the redblossom salve Anders had given him after all, as things had turned out, and would rather not have been reminded.

“P-point is,” he tried, as they cut across another sidestreet, which opened out onto a flight of wooden steps that would lead down to the mouth of the Undercity. He could have turned off by now, he supposed. Gone home. Didn’t need to keep following Anders. He was still doing it, though. “Point is… what you do isn’t good for you. Keep yourself shut up… shut away. All alone.”

The steps were treacherous. Tobias had to concentrate on the way down. At the bottom, Anders turned suddenly, and they almost collided next to the damp, salt-stained stonework of one of the old dockers’ colonnades that led off into Darktown’s mess of tunnels and rats’ nests. He stopped, almost stumbled… and not by design this time.

This particular stratum of the city overhung the docks. The faint sound of waves, and the tar-streaked scent of the sea, floated up to take the edge off the filth. A rat the size of a small cat scampered along the bottom of the wall, and Anders started to turn away, ready to start heading back to his own little bolthole.

“Good night, Hawke.”

“Wait.”

Tobias’ hand shot out, grabbing at his wrist, surprising them both with the speed and accuracy of his reflexes. He let his fingers flex on Anders’ skin, aware of the supple warmth, the light, fast pulse, and the firmness of corded sinew and bone beneath the slim bounds of flesh.

Green eyes met dark, and the clouds in Anders’ face nearly frightened him.

“Isn’t there ever… y’know?” Tobias shrugged one shoulder, trying to make himself understood.
“Something for you?”

Anders stared at him for a long, complicated moment, then shook his head.

“You’re drunk,” he muttered, turning once more to go, tugging a little at the grip still enfolding his wrist.

“Anders….”

“Really. I-I can’t— I’m sorry. It’s a bad idea.”

“What is?” Tobias demanded. “Hm?”

Anders gave an exasperated sigh. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“It’s not healthy,” Tobias warned. “Shutting yourself away from everyone. It won’t help keep Just —”

“And what do you know about it? You… you have no idea. All right?”

Anders pulled his wrist away, hard, and Tobias was sure he felt—just in that fleeting moment—the sharp prickle of magical energy nip at his fingertips. Like electricity, almost. He couldn’t help thinking of Isabela’s words, and a beery grin slid across his face.

He moved, shuffling around clumsily, insinuating himself between Anders and the wall, blocking his exit and making sure to be in the damn way whichever direction he turned.

“Oh, come on…. Why not just once, hm? The way you were talking tonight, with Isabela, I—”

“I’m not that man anymore,” Anders muttered. “You know that. You know what I am.”

“I don’t care.”

“It—”

Anders broke off, his lips thinning to a tight line as he glared at Tobias.

They were close then, facing off in the alleyway with barely inches between them. The familiar scent of the man grazed Tobias’ nose, and he ached to close the distance between them. He could do it, he knew… and he half-wanted to, itching for the chance, and almost hungry to see Anders fight back.

He wouldn’t, though, would he? Wouldn’t fight. He wanted it too much. That was evident from the look in those dark eyes, and the way his mouth had softened, lips tensely curved now, parted in something not entirely a sneer. It seemed so ridiculous to keep pretending, Tobias thought, to keep clinging to the lie that it didn’t matter, this heat and this desire… that they weren’t real, or important.

Sometimes, he wondered if Anders thought he was too good for it. Maybe he did; maybe everything took second place to his precious cause and his lofty ideals. Sober, Tobias knew it was something different… something he couldn’t understand, because he had nothing to judge against. All he knew of spirits of the Fade were whispers and things he’d learned to ignore, to guard against from the dark spaces of his dreams. His father had been adamant on that point. You never even gave them the chance to speak. That way they couldn’t corrupt you.

Not that Anders seemed corrupted. Many things, but… no. Nothing that burned as brightly as he did could be so polluted as to be beyond saving. Tobias believed that more strongly than he’d ever believed anything… which scared him a little.
“I want you,” he murmured, feeling the tension and the longing crack around them, breaking like the dark, foam-topped waves that crashed against the city’s feet on squally nights.

Anders hardly seemed to be breathing. He blinked, and a hoarse, dead gasp of a noise left his throat.

“You’re a pushy bastard when you’re drunk, aren’t you?” he muttered, his voice low and husky, marked with an odd, dry bravado.

A pang of regret prodded Tobias, and he wet his lips, almost sorry for causing that tangle of discomfort and desire written so plainly on Anders’ face.

“I do drink too much,” he said, with a small, nonchalant shrug. “Apparently.”

Anders scoffed incredulously. He didn’t seem angry, though. Just so tired, and sad.

“Justice… doesn’t understand things like this. He—I can’t… I can’t,” he repeated, little more than a whisper.

“Maybe,” he purred, “Justice could use some instruction.”

Anders swallowed heavily, throat bobbing. When he spoke, the words were tight threads, pulled near to breaking over the things he seemed to want to say instead.

“It’s hard enough to keep control. You don’t… you don’t understand. I couldn’t ask anyone to—”

“You keep saying how terrible you are,” Tobias murmured, knowing his breath would be tickling Anders’ lips, in just the same way as he could almost taste the other man’s barely suppressed groan of need. “I haven’t seen the evidence.”

He leaned in then, so ready, so eager… and so not expecting Anders to flinch away, breaking from him with a sudden burst of fresh determination.

“No.”

He said it forcefully, but without resentment. Tobias expected the dark pull of magic to crackle between them—black fire burning in sweet spirals under his skin—but it wasn’t there. Not from Anders, anyway. Just… perfect control. Complete resolve. He turned from Tobias, turned to face the long, dim tunnel back to Darktown, leaving him with nothing but the view of that ragged, feathery pelt at his hunched shoulders, and the back of a bowed head, touched by the light of a pitted, waxen moon.

Tobias sighed, feeling foolish and clumsy. “I’m… sorry.”

The stubby ponytail twitched a bit as Anders shook his head, and let out a short, terse breath.

“If I’d met you a year or so ago, we wouldn’t have been having this conversation.” The tatty pauldrons shifted over something that looked, to Tobias’ bleary eyes, like a resigned shrug. “Huh… probably wouldn’t have bothered with any conversation, at least for a while. But it’s all different now. Everything’s changed.”

Tobias frowned. There was something about the quality of those words… the way Anders said them. It reminded him of—what did the Dalish call her?—Asha’bellanar. The witch with the amulet, and those strange and cryptic riddles of hers. Something about not being afraid to leap into the precipice of change. Well, that was fine… if you knew there was going to be something soft there to land on.
“Anyway,” Anders said dully, “that part of my life is over.”

Tobias puffed a long, resigned breath out through lips that felt loose and flabby, and decided he should probably lay off the drink for a while. Anders was right; he’d regret this one in the morning.

Still, if he was already going to regret it… well, in for a silver, in for a crown.

Tobias reached out, laying his hand gently on the back of Anders’ waist… or where it would have been, somewhere beneath the hard-edged fabric of his coat.

“Fine,” he said quietly, feeling him tense at the uninvited contact. “I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. Forget it. Doesn’t matter. But… as your friend? You’re too hard on yourself. Justice might not be human, but you are.”

Anders raised his head, turning to look at him, mouth half-open and the seed of some argument or rebuttal probably already prepared, but Tobias was ready. He leaned in, swift and brief, and pressed a light kiss to Anders’ cheek.

“You are. So, be careful,” he said, pulling back as Anders stared, blinked… and looked so ball-churningly lovely with that mix of confusion and affronted pride on his face. “Please?”

“Wh—”

Tobias shook his head. Everything seemed crowded and dizzy, and he could still feel the prickle of beard growth against his lips, the firm warmth and the undeniable scent of Anders’ skin.

This was it, he told himself. Starting tomorrow, no more drink.

He moved away, awkward and clumsy, turned, pointed himself back at the steep rank of rough, wooden steps, and forced unwilling legs to start making the climb. The night air felt cold… cold right down his bones. Tobias had made it halfway back up to the street before he raised one hand in a gesture of farewell to the man he’d left behind him.

He didn’t listen for a reply. Just walked away, unsatisfied longing beating a violent tattoo at the base of his gut, and his skin tingled in the cool air.

Tobias’ feet found their usual stride and, before long, Lowtown’s familiar streets and walls and landmarks were slipping by, and he didn’t even have to think about it… just as he didn’t have to think about the ache of loneliness and the sting, not of Anders’ rejection, but of realising just what it was he wanted from the man, and how badly he wanted it.

You’re an idiot. A prize-grade, first-rate fucking idiot, Hawke.

At least, Tobias supposed, with Carver off playing soldiers with the templars, he had the bedroom to himself. Easier to whack off in the dark and pretend it solved the problem… pretend it was just bodies, just the lure of forbidden fruit that appealed to him so.

Maybe he could make himself believe it.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Gratuitous and sticky gobbets of love to everyone reading, following, reviewing etc. You'll have noticed by now I'm deviating a bit from the in-game timeline. This is for a number of reasons, largely that getting the estate back being so tied to romantic options bothered me to an irrational degree. I'm also cheerfully ignoring whole swathes of plot in favour of focusing on certain aspects, so if you're hating this, please complain.

In this chapter: Kirkwall is growing ever tenser, and Tobias’ frustrations are not waning. Also, healing magic is much more difficult than it looks.

Things were changing in Kirkwall. There were whispers everywhere, pooling out from The Gallows like the shivering breeze across a lake, ruffling all they touched and leaving ripples to spread out behind them.

People said the qunari weren’t waiting for a boat. People said they meant to stay, sucking converts to them and bleeding the city dry in the doing. Bad things were happening in the north, too; Starkhaven and Tantervale were lousy with apostates… and nasty ones, at that. Everywhere, there were murmured suspicions of blood magic, and demons under every pillow.

Naturally, there were those who said such talk was rubbish; nothing but Knight-Commander Meredith seeking to make her hold on Kirkwall even more iron-clad. If Viscount Dumar had half the balls of the average weasel, he’d shake her up and tell her to mind her damn place… yet there were stories.

No one could deny that.

Come sundown, every tavern seemed to hold a dozen men who knew a friend who had a cousin whose sister said she’d had a run-in with a blood mage. They were getting cocky, people said, making forays into respectable ways of life what had nuffin’ to do with filth like that. If it came to it, the templars should crush the lot of ’em. After all, everyone knew what had happened in Ferelden during the Blight. Whole Circle fallen… annulled. Gone to demons, every last dog of them—and darkspawn were basically blood mages, weren’t they? The Chant said something along those lines, or such was the version of it distilled through a couple of pints of ale and an evening full of bellyaching. So, it stood to reason, didn’t it?

Teach the mages their place… the rest of it would follow. Obvious when you thought about it.

Tobias started to watch his step more carefully.

Oh, most of it was nothing more than malcontents. What with the number of Fereldan refugees who’d stayed on in Kirkwall instead of going home (or ‘back where they came from’, as the usual parlance had it), there was plenty of ill-feeling about, and Meredith’s zero-tolerance policies ensured it was directed at mages. Maybe there was a little dinner-table gossip in Hightown—tsk, tsk, terrible thing, state of the world, what was it all coming to?—but the vein of ugly discomfort beneath it all wasn’t down to any one thing. The city groaned under the strain of multiple tensions, and yet the eyes of all nations remained on the piddling little barbarian country that smelled of dogs and ox dung.
and, somehow, had managed to choke off an entire Blight.

Orlais was jostling like a randy goat, apparently. People said the empress was furious, incandescent at the unbelievable gall and sheer blind luck of a place she regarded as little better than an abandoned colony. Some said there would be a war… which would mean more bloody refugees coming across the sea.

Somehow, *that* seemed to be the fault of mages, too.

Leandra worried. Tobias suspected she’d have kept him under lock and key if she could have, which hardly eased the pressures at home.

Gamlen, whatever his faults, did seem to genuinely care for his sister—unless it was just the guilt talking—and Tobias sometimes wondered if that was the only thing stopping him from dropping a few choice hints to the templars. The first time he caught himself thinking that, he rubbed his forehead and told himself he was getting just as paranoid as bloody Anders.

No, he’d be fine. He had… connections.

He’d been careful, played his cards close to his chest ever since they got off the damn boat. Aveline, despite their rather terse relationship, was still an occasional visitor to the house—more for Leandra’s sake than his, Tobias thought, though he didn’t begrudge it. There were bonds there… even loyalty, of a kind. Without her, they probably wouldn’t have made it out of Ferelden alive, and without him, she definitely wouldn’t be where she was today.

So, with allies like her, and more importantly like Varric, who could have sold fleas to a dog and made a profit, he knew he was protected. To a degree, anyway… as long as he didn’t push his luck. Not like Anders, who—as Varric had grown fond of complaining in recent weeks—cost him almost as much in bribes to keep safe as Merrill.

The clinic was still running. The healer was, as everyone knew, always there for those who needed him.

*That* was what bothered Tobias the most. It was almost as if the stupid bastard wanted to get caught.

He went down there, sometimes. Days he could afford the time, or nights when he’d only otherwise have ended up slouched in Varric’s suite, putting away far more ale than was good for him. And he had kept that promise… mainly. He didn’t drink so much. Hadn’t, in weeks.

Life was shit when he was sober.

Still, he’d go… spend a few hours rolling up bandages or boiling something green and sloppy, and watching Anders move methodically through his duty of care to all those patients. So focused, so strong, so… determined. It was like he was pushing towards something, reaching for some goal that Tobias could neither see nor understand.

It didn’t seem to be about the pure, unselfish joy of helping people. Maybe he felt that—Tobias couldn’t have said—but, from where he stood, it looked a lot more as if Anders was trying to lose himself. He worked until he could barely stand, barely string two words together, and he just brushed away any questions or concerns.

“You’ll do yourself a mischief if you don’t slow down,” Tobias warned, the one evening he was able to corner Anders about it.

They were as alone as they were going to be; a woman who’d just been delivered of twins, and a
child with ulcerated wound on his leg took up two pallets laid on the floor, their respective relatives crowding around the bedsides. These days, it was comparatively unusual for Anders to have patients staying overnight. He said it meant things were improving. The refugees might be working out as a more permanent fixture than most of Kirkwall’s citizenry would have preferred, but at least their shanties had started to resemble a kind of organised chaos. A better class of desperation, he’d joked.

Tobias had smiled, glad to see him quipping after the blood and panic of the woman’s difficult labour. Glad, too, to think about something other than the red, wrinkly babies swaddled up in clean cloths. He remembered when Carver and Bethany were born, and his father had taken him in to see them for the first time. He’d held Tobias’ hand, guided it up to touch first one tiny face, then the other… told him how special it was that he was now a big brother twice over, and how these little ones would look up to him and learn from the things he did.

He remembered Bethany’s hand, no bigger than a silver piece, clasping his finger, and her mouth flexing as eyes that looked like black buttons in the lamplight swivelled towards him, unfocused but curious.

In turn, the memories led to others. Another hand, mottled and gnarled, that flung his sister’s body down like a wet rag, a discarded and broken toy.

Tobias hadn’t been able to stay, to watch the damp smiles and the tired laughter, or the proud face of the woman’s husband as he gazed down lovingly at the three of them. He’d retreated to the back of the clinic, found something busy to do with the coppers and the fire, and tried to pretend he was useful.

When Anders came over to join him, hollow-eyed and even paler than usual, Tobias hadn’t been able to stop the admonishment popping out. Anders just shrugged. He’d taken his coat off to play midwife, and there was still blood on his shirt, though his sleeves were pushed up to the elbows and his arms scrubbed clean.

“It’s Justice,” he said, his voice low enough not to carry across the dim, cramped quarters. “That’s all. He forgets about limits. About bodies. He never understood that humans have needs. Like, uh, sleeping,” Anders added hurriedly, glancing down at the wooden bench between them, and its array of clay pots and copper pans.

Tobias smiled grimly. “As if I thought you meant anything else….”

It wasn’t a sharp barb. Anders let it slide without comment, though Tobias was sure the texture of the air between them shifted. It was there, that undeniable tension, there all the time, and yet they were supposed to pretend it wasn’t. Tobias hated it, but recognised that—if Anders wanted to make things into a choice between friendship and bitter stalemate—he’d play the model of chaste amity.

Well, almost.

And there was always The Blooming Rose. The Antivan, Esel… he was eager, encouraging, and discreet. The judicious gift of certain salves and potions had cleared up the only obstacle to Tobias’ continued patronage and—even if it wasn’t enough—it was something. He needed that much. A night or two a month to bury himself in a hot, yielding embrace and a cloud of perfumed sin… and someone who didn’t mind what he mumbled into the bedclothes when they fucked.

Tobias shook his head. “You can’t keep on like this, though. I mean, if I knew healing, I’d—”

Anders chuckled wearily. “You?”
“I’d help,” Tobias said, a trifle reproachfully. “Properly.”

Help. Huh….

Anders never wanted him to do that, did he? Always keeping him at arm’s length, refusing to talk about the Underground, or the people he knew in the city’s grimmest, darkest quarters… or the places he went on those moonless nights, just before The Gallows burst out in uproar over some prisoner’s miraculous escape.

Tobias wasn’t stupid. He just wished he knew whether he was being shut out because Anders wanted to protect him… or because he didn’t trust him.

He shrugged. “Well, I could learn how to do something, couldn’t I?”

The tired smile on Anders’ face lingered, curiosity touching those dark eyes. The way they creased at the corners enthralled Tobias, and he blinked hurriedly, feeling small and exposed and stupid.

Anders had said healing couldn’t be learned. Not from scratch. He’d said you either had it or you didn’t… and Tobias had been reasonably convinced that he didn’t. Not like Bethany.

Over on the far side of the clinic, one of the new babies made a small, weak gurgling noise, too quiet to be a real cry. Tobias glanced over at the scene, watched the woman cradle the child to her breast, holding it close and soothing it while her husband held the other.

“I could try,” he murmured.

Anders said nothing. Eventually, the night grew quiet and soft, and Tobias found himself a spare pallet and a blanket, and settled into a lean, uncomfortable sleep. He thought he heard Anders stir in the dark once or twice; mumbled cries and the sound of him shifting on his narrow bed, behind the ragged old curtain.

Tobias lay still, and counted the breaths until the movements seemed to settle. The shadows folded in, and everything was silent again.

Come the morning, he didn’t ask about the dreams. It was a Grey Warden thing, apparently, and more than that he didn’t need to know.

All the same, they joked, for a little while after, about Tobias learning how to heal.

Eventually, on one of those not especially busy mornings—when it was raining hard, plastering Kirkwall’s dust and grime to the city walls like a lacquer of unpleasant memories—Anders made good on it.

The clinic was virtually empty. The last batch of runaways and waifs had gone on their way more than a week ago, leaving Anders devoid of ‘assistants’, and evidently the weather was bad enough to keep even Darktown’s denizens holed up in their tunnels. Everything felt damp and chilly… everything except for the pool of warmth in the palm of Anders’ hand.

He’d summoned a small sphere of pale blue light, its surface crazed with a dancing veil of shapes and patterns, like a film of oil slicking water, and now he held it out to Tobias, nodding encouragement as he did so.

“Go on. Touch it. See how it feels.”

Tobias gingerly extended two tanned, callused fingers, and touched the surface of the sphere. It was
just light, just energy. Nothing solid about it, and yet he felt its resistance, felt the strength of the magic… Anders’ strength, he corrected, and the vast weight of his power, like a blazing line of molten steel pouring straight in from the Fade itself.

He tasted something metallic and bitter, and the hairs rose on the back of his neck, and on his bare arms. Being in the same room as Anders when he used magic was… overwhelming. Maker knew, it was bad enough being within a seven foot radius when he cracked open a can of lightning on whatever band of thugs or mercenaries had fallen foul of someone wealthy enough to pay for their removal, but this…. 

He could have stared into the little ball of light for hours. Could have stood there, drinking in the way it felt, and the gentle throb of energy emanating from that pale, herb-stained hand. It was oddly intimate, this sharing of power, as if Anders was allowing him to touch something private, something delicate… something that only mages could understand.

Tobias had never thought of magic like that before. It was a part of him, yes… it was within him, an essential component of the way he sensed the world, but it seemed different now. It tasted different. And, for the first time since Bethany died, it was something that connected him to someone else, instead of isolating him. That was a strange feeling.

Anders talked about all the aspects of healing. There were ways to take away pain, to soothe and calm and comfort, and ways to induce sleep and stillness, and those all drew on one set of rules. The meat of it—the mending broken bones and closing up cuts and holes in heads—that was more complex. There was no point in trying to regenerate anything if you didn’t know how it was supposed to go back together, for a start. It took study, and book learning, and more glances at the insides of dead people than was generally considered sanitary or proper. Beyond that, you needed to be strong.

All healing, he said, was strength. That, and control. It didn’t surprise Tobias to hear it. He was all too well aware of Anders’ self-control, and the fact horseshoes could have been bent around it. Tobias wondered if he’d been as good a healer before Justice, but he didn’t like to ask.

“I-I can’t,” he protested, shaking his head nervously when Anders first wanted him to try a practical exercise. “What if I blow your arm off or something?”


He tried. Absorbed everything Anders said and, after hours of effort, managed to manifest a fizzling squib of energy that didn’t turn into ice, flame, or a spirit bolt the moment he blinked.

“Good!” Anders beamed encouragingly. “That’s it. Concentrating?”

“Ngh,” Tobias managed, through gritted teeth.

The small, pulsing orb of light between his palms flickered, and the feeling of still, soothing warmth against his skin began to cool. He ground his teeth, trying to put into practice everything Anders had so patiently explained, but this wasn’t like the kind of magic he was used to wielding.

Tobias tensed his legs, pushing his feet firmly into the floor, braced for an impact that wasn’t going to come. Magic used to defend himself—fire thrown to fell an enemy, or the force of spirit energy used to stun or knock back opponents—that was predictable. You could feel it, throw yourself against it, and let the waves of its catharsis break around you.

This… this was hard.
He frowned, breathed slowly, and grew ever more aware of the swell of power surging within him. That wasn’t new. It was as familiar as the pulse in his veins and, as he drew on it, pulled it up from the core of his being, it beat with an age-old pattern.

He closed his eyes, listening to Anders’ voice. He was so calm… a low, melodious tone that Tobias could have listened to forever.

“Good. Don’t let it go. Control it… remember, healing is about focusing, about building. You can’t just unleash yourself. Remember how we talked about structure.”

It was almost a distraction. Too easy, with his eyes shut, to let himself lapse into thinking about that voice buzzing against his skin, murmuring his name as its owner kissed his neck, or whispered soft entreaties and encouragements into the night.

Tobias’ palms burned. His arms felt hot, full of long, liquid lines of fire, and he knew that was wrong. Healing was meant to be cool, strong, slow… he was losing his grip. He blinked, caught his breath, his mouth full of the taste of greasy electricity and bitter, stagnant air and, moving quickly, he pushed his hands out in front of him. Twin bolts of energy ripped from them, leaving his vision full of white-hot after-ghosts.

“Shit!”

There was a clatter of tables and things going flying as Anders jumped back then, as Tobias was still rubbing the blue spots from his eyes, rounded to stamp out the flames.

“Oh, I’m sorry!”

“No harm done,” Anders said brightly, scuffing a boot over the scorch marks on the wooden floor. “Maybe we should take a break there.”

Tobias shuffled awkwardly and mumbled an apology.

It would be the last time he tried to heal for a while.

Anyway, what with the current climate, learning more magic probably wasn’t a good idea. He stuck to not using it as far as he could, and allowed life to fill him up with its grey, shapeless edges.

Leandra was pleased. She had him playing messenger boy, to and from the viscount’s office every third day… writing letters, sending letters, fetching letters. So much bloody paperwork, and all about the estate, naturally.

Gamlen was taking a keen interest, quite possibly because he thought he’d be moving up in the world with them. Tobias was tempted to roundly disabuse the old bastard of that notion, but it would have Caused A Scene, as his mother told him. No one could pronounce capital letters like her.

He wondered, sometimes, what had become of the impulsive girl who’d thrown away the whole life of nobility and privilege mapped out for her, and chosen to run off with a dusty-footed, penniless apostate. He didn’t remember his mother ever seeming to yearn for the kind of world she’d left behind, but maybe she had secretly missed it. Tobias wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

Still, there was no point dwelling. She was just worried about his safety, he knew… and with good reason. Rumours kept buzzing through the city about raids on dens of apostates. Badly copied, misspelled leaflets papered the walls in the markets and bazaars, sputtering bitter, jingoistic proclamations by a furious citizenry against the curse of mages.
Even Varric had to admit that the things Anders talked about in The Hanged Man were beginning to sound less paranoid.

Tobias took to sitting with his back to the wall when he drank with the dwarf, gaze fixed on the door. Most nights, Anders didn’t come, and it would take a couple of pints to loosen him up and stop him thinking that something must have happened. A stupid impulse, given that they usually knew not to even expect him.

Fenris took the city’s shifting mood in stride, at least.

He’d sprawl at Varric’s table, curled around a bottle of wine, and snarl about how the world would be better off with mages choked at heel. Tobias knew of the darkness and pain that had forged such uncompromising hatred, but it didn’t stop him getting irritable.

“If we’re all so appalling,” he snapped, in the middle of one of the elf’s particularly vicious speeches, “why don’t you find some more congenial company?”

Fenris stopped, mid-rant, and met his glare head-on. A long, difficult moment passed, the thick silence that hung between them, overlaying the noise from the bar, broken only by Varric making a show of refilling cups and calling loudly for another pitcher.

The elf’s jaw clenched and unclenched slowly, though those startlingly bright eyes never wavered. Finally, he blinked, the great sweeps of dark lashes brushing his cheeks as he inclined his head ever so slightly.

“I… apologise, Hawke.” The words clanged to the table like lead weights, and Fenris’ brows drew together. “You are not… every mage.”

Tobias snorted. “No.”

He raised his mug, swirled a mouthful of ale, and realised how good it felt to score a point against someone like Fenris. One little chink in that shell of brooding self-righteousness. He swallowed and, not for the first time, thought how phenomenally good-looking the elf was. If it wasn’t for the lyrium brandings, the semi-permanent scowl, and the occasional thin line of a scar, he’d be almost too pretty for a man. It was a special kind of pretty, though, Tobias reflected. Pretty like a fine blade, ground down to a hard, wicked edge.

He grinned and kicked out a foot, striking Fenris on the ankle. A lesser—or slightly more sober—man might have feared having the beating heart ripped from his chest, but the thought didn’t occur to Tobias. He nodded at Fenris’ empty bottle, cuddled protectively in the crook of one gauntlet-less arm.

“Wanna ’nother one?”

It was almost the start of a beautiful friendship… but not quite.

He went to The Rose later that night, pushed a purse of coins into Lusine’s talons, and downed a double whiskey while he waited for Esel.

Same grubby, faded little bedchamber, same smell of musty curtains and rose oil… same smiling face, framed by wisps of blond hair escaping from a hastily scraped back ponytail.

Tobias didn’t leave him time to speak. He smelled of mint leaves and scented soap. Very freshly washed. Tobias wondered, for a few fleeting moments, about Esel’s previous encounter, but he pushed the thoughts away. No point dwelling. No need to think about anything outside this room.
Esel allowed him a kiss, as the clothes fell like winter leaves, briskly discarded. Tobias pulled Esel’s hair free of its bindings, raking his fingers through it before he buried his face in the warmth of the other man’s shoulder.

It was embarrassing, this need of his. The whore held him, kissed his cheek, stroked his face… told him how handsome he was. Tobias’ chest clenched convulsively, and he held on, burying himself in Esel’s arms instead of his body. He wanted to be touched, fucked, made love to… but he didn’t know how to ask. Not here, and not from him.

Instead, he spooned up close behind Esel on the bed, took him deep and slow and, with his eyes shut tight, almost believed it was real enough to hold onto.

“So, life is good?” Esel asked conversationally, once he was finished.

They lay under the stale-smelling coverlet, him flat on his back with his arms behind his head, and Tobias hunched a little to the side, eyeing the smooth planes of his chest like a hungry dog.

“Hm?”

“Life is good, for you? I hope so.”

Tobias shrugged. “Can’t complain.”


He reached across the bed, trailing his fingers down Tobias’ arm, and gave him a cocky little smile. Tobias shrugged again, mildly irritated by the contact, and yet aroused.

“S’not that simple,” he mumbled.

Esel leaned over and kissed his shoulder, hand slipping south, tracking down over his belly, down to the edge of the coverlet.

“I just… I wish things were different,” Tobias murmured lamely. “That’s all.”

Esel made noises of soothing encouragement, in between kissing his chest. Those lovely, honeyed words tumbled from him as his hand closed around Tobias’ shaft, squeezing out a little bonus thrill and the chance of an extra couple of silvers. He was such a handsome man, such a lover… surely, he could have anyone he wanted.

Tobias frowned glumly, then twitched the coverlet aside and pushed Esel’s head down to his crotch.

Pretty words, but they didn’t feel remotely true.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Tobias has to deal with bureaucracy, and an invitation is extended.

“It’s a letter from Carver!” Leandra cried gleefully, waving the grease-smudged envelope like a pennant.

Tobias, unshaven and hungover, squinted muzzily at her from his seat at the rickety table by the fire.

“Hnngh?”

Gamlen sneered. “He doesn’t want money, does he?”

Tobias slipped his uncle a bloodshot glare. The old fart was just as worse for wear as him this morning, though for somewhat different reasons. Where Gamlen was nursing a black eye and two fractured knuckles as a friendly warning not to welsh on debts to ‘One Punch’ Riley, one of the old city’s more tolerant numbers runners, he had been sampling the delights of Hightown until the small hours.

Fenris might have said that all Tevinter wines were made from the blood and tears of slaves, but it wasn’t stopping him, Varric, and Tobias from methodically drinking their way through the remaining contents of Danarius’ cellar. It had been much more fun than he’d thought, too… the weekly diamondback nights at the mansion were becoming something of an event.

“He talks all about the training,” Leandra said, unfolding Carver’s letter reverentially as she crossed the dimly lit room. “Oh, my poor baby… he’s still not enjoying the food…. Do you think I should send more dried beef and seed cake?”

Tobias grimaced. “Don’t templars have their unshakeable faith and self-righteousness to keep them feeling all full and cosy?”

She frowned and pursed her lips. “Don’t talk about your brother that way. If you’d let him have more say in that expedition of yours, he wouldn’t have run off to join up the way he did.”

Gamlen sniggered, then winced and pressed a hand to his swollen eye. Tobias gaped, not completely able to believe what he was hearing.

“If I—? Mother, it was you who didn’t want him to go. As I recall, you begged me to leave him behind. Right there, in front of Bartrand and everyone. Even whatsat, that merchant’s idiot son… Sandal… right, even he was laughing at poor old Carv.”

She flicked him behind the ear in passing—the sharp snick of a fingernail cracking against his skull—and he flinched.

“Ow!”

Should have expected it, he supposed. It was worse when she had a thimble on. He reached up and rubbed the sore spot, with a reproachful frown at his mother.
“That is not the point,” Leandra said coolly. “Anyway, he needs more socks and smallclothes. You’re going past the market, aren’t you? You can get me some wool.”

Tobias sighed. “Yes, Mother.”

“Thank you, dear. And don’t slouch.”

He groaned.

Carver’s letter didn’t say much about the state of affairs inside the order, though he alluded to divisions in the ranks. Tobias had been hoping for a whisper of gossip, a sniff of rumour concerning Meredith. People said she and First Enchanter Orsino weren’t even bothering to keep up a pretence of civility these days… not that Tobias had a great deal of familiarity with matters concerning the Circle.

As far as he was concerned, the Circle still held the dark and oppressive taint his father had painted it with, not to mention the suspicion associated with authority. Tobias had been brought up to fear it, and even now—though he was aware that things were more complex than his assumptions allowed—he found he still thought of the Circle mages as ‘them’.

The things Anders had talked about didn’t exactly help alter his opinions.

The healer had never shared much of his past—as with everything else, dragging the information out of him was like getting blood from a stone—but he’d mentioned enough. Templars who played petty, cruel mind games with their charges or, in some cases, indulged less subtle sadisms. Beatings… rapes.

Tobias supposed he must have looked horribly shocked at that. He recalled the coy reassurance with which Anders had shaken his head and said he’d been lucky… only to go on and, in the very next breath, talk of a whole year spent in solitary confinement. Tobias couldn’t imagine it. He didn’t want to, either, and he’d burned at the… well, the injustice of it.

Anders had just smiled thinly and changed the subject, and Tobias had known from the slightly strained look on his face that he was having trouble keeping himself under control. Well, himself, or Justice. It still seemed to Tobias that there was a distinction between the two, and that—whatever Anders said about the greatest scholar finding no division of their thoughts or feelings—the healer and the spirit were separate entities.

He wondered, sometimes, if he just told himself that—made himself believe it—because he needed to think Anders was a man, the same as him… the same as anyone. Stupid, really, Tobias reflected. It would have been easier to pretend he really was the abomination Fenris and Carver had both called him. A monster, a… thing, instead of an imperfect human soul, capable of love and crying out for it, railing against the loneliness and the fear.

Tobias blinked, aware of having broken his own rule. There was a four-letter word there he didn’t allow himself to touch on, and he pushed it away, choosing to focus instead on cold, decent practicality.

He didn’t know what it was like for Anders. He couldn’t conceive of what it must be like to live with memories of the Tower like that, knowledge like that, and to have an awareness—a living, sentient consciousness—such as Justice sharing the same head. It was a wonder the man hadn’t gone crazy, Tobias supposed, and the thought snaked a chill along his spine.

It had been a while since he’d been to the clinic. He should head down there, make sure everything
was… all right.

As ever, there were errands to run first.

Letters had to be taken to the viscount’s office, papers to be delivered for copying and then copies to be picked up and brought to the notary…. The whole song and dance irritated Tobias beyond measure, but Leandra never seemed happier than when she was talking about the estate. She’d get a nostalgic sort of look in her eyes, and drift off into some rambling story of something that had happened when she was a girl, and her voice would lose that hard, sharp edge it so often had these days.

So, he did what had to be done.

He trod a path through the bazaar with a light cloak about his shoulders and his eyes fixed on the paving stones, quite content for no one to recognise him, and made his way up to what Varric quaintly described as the gold-arsed end of town.

Seneschal Bran wasn’t in much of a mood for small talk when Tobias finally arrived in his office.

He snorted at the sheaf of papers tossed onto his desk, and didn’t even bother to look up.

“Serah Hawke again, isn’t it?”

Tobias propped a hip against the ornately carved desk and smiled sardonically down at the burnished crown of the older man’s head.

“The very same. If you don’t mind, Seneschal, I’ll wait while you sign the receipt.”

Bran glanced up at him, quill stilling in his ink-smudged fingers, and an expression of intense suspicion on his square, sharp-featured face.

“Did you bribe your way in here again? We have due process for the submission of—”

Tobias shrugged. “I got bored waiting.”

They both knew he dropped a couple of sovereigns to skip past the queues every time he came here. He wasn’t the only one… though, admittedly, most of the well-heeled gentry who clogged up the viscount’s waiting rooms with their petitions, complaints, and appeals were not also known to have had quite so much personal involvement with Kirkwall’s seamier districts.

Tobias suppressed a small smile at the thought of some of the chinless wonders he’d seen downstairs getting their pretty little hands dirty with the blood of slavers and Carta thugs. If his reputation did precede him, it certainly seemed to make the clerks that little bit keener to allow him access to the inner offices. That wasn’t a bad thing, was it?

Seneschal Bran narrowed his eyes. The older man took little trouble to disguise his dislike, though Tobias wasn’t sure whether it stemmed from personal or political motives.

“I don’t see why the Amell estate is so important to you,” Bran said, unfastening the tie that held the papers. “It’s a crumbling ruin. Wouldn’t someone like you do better to pour that new-found wealth into a more, ahem, impressive prospect?”

Tobias arched an eyebrow, but kept his face locked into the same default mask of mildly sarcastic nonchalance. So, that was it, was it? Plain and simple distaste for the nouveau riche dog-lord getting his sticky fingers into old Kirkwall. He watched the seneschal thumb through today’s batch of papers
—yet more notarised copies of the deeds, the will, and sworn statements from Gamlen renouncing
his claim to the estate, and disputing the legality of the gamble he’d lost it on in the first place—lip
curled as if the parchment was sticky.

“Maybe. Still, say what you will about the old place,” Tobias added airily, tilting his head just
enough to start making out some of the other papers on Bran’s desk, “but I rather think I’ll settle in
well. When we finally get there… of course.”

The seneschal exhaled a short, stiff breath, and hastily pulled a blotter over the exposed paperwork.
Tobias smiled, fairly certain he’d caught sight of an imperial Orlesian seal. Interesting. Bran scrawled
a hasty receipt on a blank piece of parchment and signed it with a flourish.

“Here.” He pushed it towards Tobias. “Get that stamped. You know where. You’ll receive
notification when the viscount’s office has officially logged and reviewed your request.”

“Again?” Tobias sighed wearily. “This is third time we’ve submitted the sodding paperwork.”

“It’s due process,” the seneschal said smugly, meeting his gaze directly for the first time. “And there
are some distinctly dubious aspects to the case. One could argue the rightful owners are in fact—”

“If you say those bastard slavers,” Tobias snapped, his veneer of sardonic calm well and truly
fractured, “by Andraste’s tits, I will spike your hand to this bloody desk.”

Seneschal Bran rose slowly from his seat, eyes twinkling with a not altogether pleasant humour, and
that broad face set into a predatory smile. He wasn’t a bad-looking man, Tobias had to admit, as far
as bureaucrats, or men old enough to be his father, went… and part of him

did enjoy getting to lock
horns on these visits.

“Ah, yes.” The seneschal bit his lower lip thoughtfully, his voice caressing the words like the hilts of
weapons. “One almost forgets. Serah Hawke, whose righteous anger awaits the unjust of Kirkwall,
wherever they are to be found. Foe to slavers, swindlers, and bandits, and champion of the
subjugated. You have such a fondness for the dispossessed, don’t you, messere?”

His sarcasm dripped like honey on the air between them. Strong sunlight, slanting through the leaded
glass windows of the chamber, threaded golden highlights through his dark auburn hair, and picked
out the scattering of freckles on his redhead’s skin.

“And not just the refugees,” Bran went on. “That, I could understand. Solidarity, and all that… but
it’s more, isn’t it? Seems there isn’t a minority in this city you won’t associate with. Elves, criminals,
known Raiders, foreign fugitives—”

Tobias sighed inwardly. Aveline had told Fenris his occupancy of Danarius’ mansion had not gone
unremarked, either by the guard or the rest of Hightown. He set his jaw, refusing to give away any
glint of recognition.

“—even apostate mages,” the seneschal said smoothly, that golden-brown gaze lancing into him with
the accuracy of a well-guided blade.

Tobias felt the corner of his left eye twitch, and stifled the urge to swear.

“I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about,” he said, flexing one shoulder into a nonchalant
shrug. He cleared his throat. “You, uh, you should open some windows in here, let the air blow
through. It’s really very stuffy. Can’t be good for a person.”

Seneschal Bran’s expression didn’t change, though his jaw tightened just a little.
“Take your receipt, serah. Your claim will be revised and reviewed in good time and—when it is possible—you may even receive your audience with Viscount Dumar. Your mother… she keeps well, yes?”

The sudden transition of tone almost threw Tobias further off-balance.

“As well as can be expected,” he said, letting all the references he could have made to Lowtown and the old city slums hang, unsaid, in the air.

“Good. Then I must not keep you. Good day, Serah Hawke.”

Tobias bowed his head stiffly, the gesture just shallow enough to fall shy of proper respect.

“Seneschal.”

Naturally, there was more waiting in line to do. More paperwork. More clerks and desks and the infernal scratching of nibs on parchment…. Eventually, Tobias wearied of being made to jump through hoops. He leaned ostentatiously against a wall outside the notary’s office, cleaning his fingernails with the point of his very plain, very well-used dagger. All the nice, respectable members of the gentry, and the representatives of guildhalls and merchants’ companies who passed by the hallway stared at him, eyes wide and mouths pursed. Eventually, the clerk came running out to see the common thug who was putting the wind up his well-heeled clients.

Tobias got what needed signing signed, and listened to the blithe assurances that the appeal would be processed with the utmost haste and diligence.

They couldn’t parcel him out of there fast enough. He was merely surprised that no one tried to make him use the back door… he supposed the keep must have one.

It was late afternoon by the time he slipped down into the Undercity, navigating the maze of tunnels and ruined passages as easily as if he was one of the poor bastards who actually lived there.

Even the smell didn’t seem as bad as it used to. He wondered whether he ought to be concerned by that, but there was actually something comforting about it.

Tobias whistled cheerfully to himself as he picked his way through to Anders’ clinic.

As ever, the lantern was lit, and knots of people passed in and out of the wooden doors. The dim, pungent air held traces of sawdust, sweat, piss, blood and vomit, along with the scent of herbal liniments and boiled elfroot, and Tobias couldn’t stop the smile creeping over his face.

There was so much about Kirkwall that he hated. It was a pig of a city, rife with crime, cruelty and casual violence. He loathed its double standards, its blind eyes and uncaring, corrupt systems. He loathed the way the city-states of the Marches, by their very nature, felt more selfish than Ferelden ever had. There was no sense of national identity, none of the muddy, squint-eyed pride that his home country had… and Tobias missed that more than he’d ever expected.

Still, it seemed strange to him that—amidst all the demons, the politics, the bureaucracy and the cheap, nasty gang wars that ripped through Kirkwall’s -underbelly—this should be the one place in the whole damn town where it felt most like he belonged.

Stupid thoughts, he told himself, as he edged around two women arguing outside the doors. Stupid, hopeful thoughts tied up with all the stupid, hopeless things he kept wanting… and kept coming
back for.

You’re a fool, Hawke. And you don’t learn, do you?

It surprised him to spot a familiar face in the middle of the clinic’s busy thrum. Not Anders… Tobias’ eye was drawn to him immediately, of course, the pale figure at the centre of the throng, blond hair pinned at the back of his head, a few loose strands tucked neatly behind his ears, and a tired smile on his face. The whole place tasted of the bittersweet, metallic tang of his magic, the way frost rimes the very air in winter.

There was another figure, though… standing in front of him, hands on her hips, dark hair spilling down the curve of her back, her white tunic a stark contrast to the deep brown of her skin.

Anders glanced over Isabela’s shoulder, acknowledging Tobias’ approach with a slight nod and a widening of his smile. He turned his attention back to her and—with a glint of mischief in his eyes—raised his voice just enough to draw Tobias in on the meaning.

“Just don’t come running to me next time you pick up one of these diseases,” he said, handing over a small, squat clay pot.

Tobias was familiar enough with the type, and the contents. He’d had a jar or two of ointments for unpleasant rashes from Anders although—thank the Maker—he’d never caught a dose of anything nasty enough at Lusine’s to warrant dropping his trousers for a full inspection.

Isabela took the pot and arched one thin brow coldly. “Isn’t that the point of magic?”

Anders just grinned as, with a haughty sniff, she tossed her hair and strode from the clinic, sweeping past a crowd of waiting patients with all the arrogant grace of a woman who hadn’t just had her smallclothes around her ankles. Still, Tobias thought, nodding in response to the icy glower she gave him on her way, it wasn’t as if Isabela was often far from that state.

He tried not to think about that time in the Deep Roads. There hadn’t been a repeat of it, although she had propositioned him once or twice… the way she did everyone. He hadn’t put much store by it.

Anders, now wiping his hands on a wet rag, snorted with ill-concealed amusement. Tobias caught his eye and, for one brief moment, wondered if he’d— no, he wouldn’t have. Would he?

The fleeting visions of white skin against dark, twisting bodies and panting breath—riven with all those ale-drenched stories of the whorehouse in Denerim, and the debauched promiscuity of Anders’ early apostasy—ripped a raw, gaping wound of jealousy through Tobias’ chest. It was sudden, violent, and unexpected, and he gathered from the broad grin that spread over Anders’ face that he must look shocked.

He blinked, wrinkling his nose as if he was merely contemplating the practicalities of Isabela’s visit.

“I don’t even want to know,” Tobias said laconically, which got another grin from Anders.

Maker, that smile….

The familiar ache of desire plucked at him, and he did his best to ignore it. He smiled back, and stepped aside to allow a woman with a small child wrapped up in her shawl to pass, already clamouring for healing and attention.

Anders shot him a regretful look and jerked his head towards the back of the clinic, where the usual
rank of boiling pots and anonymous assistants were making up potions and poultices.

“Sorry, Hawke. I don’t suppose you could…?”

Tobias nodded. “Sure.”

“Thanks. I won’t be long. It shouldn’t— yes, I know,” he added, addressing the woman with the child. “No, it’s not… he’s not going to— look, if you’ll just listen….”

Tobias edged away and left Anders to deal with her panicky entreaties. He looked tired again, but when didn’t he?

It was just as the shadowy, untraceable Elias had said: the people were getting used to his presence. They had taken the Darktown healer to their hearts, yes, but their loyalty bore the price of expectation. Maybe Anders had gone to the slums to hide… but they thought they owned him now.

Tobias greeted one of the anonymous assistants—a girl of about thirteen, this one, pale-faced and struggling to wield the copper full of boiling spindleweed—and tried to make himself useful. Even after all these visits, he still knew little about herbs and poultices, however hard he’d tried to learn.

He occupied his hands with stirring and lifting and pouring, as directed by the thin, nervous girl-child—even her bitten fingernails and ink-stained, scholar’s hands seemed to shout ‘Circle runaway’—and watched Anders work through his patients.

He’d said, once, that Karl was the reason he’d come to Kirkwall… that his letters had told of concerns for the safety of mages in the city.

Anders still bore the scars of that night at the chantry, Tobias suspected… still held on to the guilt of not having been able to save his former lover, and the pain of Karl’s betrayal. He didn’t speak of it—they’d never spoken of it in any detail, though there was much Tobias yearned to ask—but the signs were there. Maybe he’d sought penance in the work he was doing here. Maybe he was just trying to blot out everything.

Maybe, next to his great cause, beside the whole whirling torrent of ideals and desperation, memories of someone like Karl stopped mattering.

Tobias wondered, and yet knew he wouldn’t ask. He remembered when the spectre of Bethany’s death stopped preying on his every waking moment. There had been the guilt at the fact he’d let it happen, when—just like his mother said—he should have protected her, should have saved her, and then there had been the guilt over daring to feel less guilty. It was a strange and vicious cycle.

They’d talked about the Circle, when they were children, him and Bethany. She’d gone through a phase of wondering what it was like, and almost beginning to imagine it could be preferable to a life on the run. Tobias had thought that quite possible; somewhere safe, where you didn’t have to worry about where the next meal was coming from, or hide from templars… where there might be other people like you. Malcolm had knocked those notions out of them soon enough. Whenever the Circle had been mentioned in his hearing, his expression had grown tight and dark, that smiling mouth thinned to a taut line, his blue eyes grown hard and uncharacteristically cold.

Tobias shook the thoughts, packed them away for another place, another time, and worked on in companionable silence until Anders was finished.

He came over once the clinic emptied out a bit, nodded to the skinny girl-child, and gave her the brass key that opened the cupboard on the far wall. She smiled, scurried off, and went to deal with dishing out salves and potions to the walking… well, if not wounded, then at least moderately itchy.
Obviously a healer of promise herself, Tobias decided, noting the approval with which Anders watched her go.

He sniffed, scrubbed one stained hand over his hair, and raised an eyebrow at Tobias.

“So, how are you, Hawke?”

Tobias shrugged. “Can’t complain.”

“No?” Anders cocked his head to the side. “You look a bit rough.”

“Well… it was a heavy night. You should come by the mansion sometime. Boozing, gambling… proper boy stuff,” Tobias added with a grin.

It raised a smile from Anders, albeit a slightly wan one. “I thought you were supposed to be laying off the sauce.”

“More or less. But I’m weak.” Tobias shrugged slyly. “I need you there to keep me in check.”

Anders winced. “I doubt Fenris would welcome my presence.”

“Oh, he needs to lighten up a bit.”

“Mm. It surprises me that you still… associate with him. Or he with you. The, er, mage thing doesn’t…?”

There seemed to be something slightly odd in Anders’ tone, but Tobias struggled to identify quite what. He wrinkled his nose.

“Wee-ell,” he said slowly, “I don’t know. He never mentions it. I suppose we have a… tacit understanding. I think, had I endured what he has, I’d probably think the same way.”

Anders’ expression stiffened and darkened. “You don’t think his hatred is dangerous, not to mention irrational? He’s like a wild dog, snarling at everything… he’s barely capable of control. I just—”

His mouth snapped shut abruptly, and he shook his head, obviously unwilling to say whatever it was he wanted to.

Tobias’ frown deepened. If he hadn’t known better, he’d have said Anders sounded jealous. Of course, that was ridiculous. Utterly, completely… daft.

“You just what?” he prompted.

Anders shrugged, his gaze dropping to the floorboards as he crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

“I… worry about you. From time to time. The things you do, the people you—no, forget it. Sorry. It’s not my business.”

Tobias tilted his head to the side, curiosity piqued by Anders’ sudden tight-lipped quiet.

“I know you and Fenris don’t see eye-to-eye,” he said, carefully probing the silence. “But I don’t think he’s… well, y’know… he’s got reasons to be the way he is. We all have.”

“Have we?” Anders said hollowly, staring at the floorboards.
Tobias cleared his throat, uneasy at the tension on the other man’s face. He hated it when Anders was like this; he didn’t know what he was supposed to say, what he wasn’t supposed to say… nothing he did seemed to be right.

“So, uh, we… we haven’t had much chance to talk in a while,” he said, not allowing himself to admit that he’d been avoiding Anders a little, as if he really could lull himself into some kind of numbness. “H-how are things?”

_How are you?_ It was what he meant. Justice… the whole situation. There just didn’t seem to be a way of asking that didn’t sound awful, as if he was checking whether the insanity had kicked in yet.

Anders snorted, but he sounded more tired than actually irritable.

“Oh, you know… everything’s great. I just love what Knight-Commander Meredith’s done with the city.”

Tobias winced. That bitterness, roiling on the edge of his words, sounded strained and tight, as if he was fighting to hold on, to keep control. Tobias glanced at him, not liking what he saw. Anders’ fixed, pinched glower was unfocused, his anger apparently directed inward, a struggle within himself… a struggle with Justice, Tobias supposed. He wondered what that felt like, having the spirit’s thoughts and feelings interlaced with his—did a creature of the Fade actually have feelings? —and how hard it was to identify the different consciousnesses within your own head. It scared him, the thought of what it must be like to lose yourself that way… but it wasn’t his problem, he reminded himself.

“Curfews, midnight raids on mages’ families.” Anders curled his lip, as if the words themselves tasted foul. “Everyone I know, forced into hiding so they won’t be made Tranquil.”

No matter how he tried to hide it, his breathing was speeding up. He cleared his throat, a frown passing across his brow as he shook his head, evidently trying to steer himself away from the things to which he wanted to give vent.

Tobias noticed the white arrow of his throat flutter a little where it rose from his coat, and the hand that he lifted to his hair—smoothing down those errant few strands that always seemed to be poking free—appeared to tremble, albeit almost imperceptibly.

“Anders,” he began, aware something more than the usual must be wrong. “Wh—?”

“I-I had templars here the other night. Practically on the doorstep.”

“What?” Tobias frowned, jerked into sharpness by a sudden, cold lurch of fear. “They were after you?”

Anders shook his head again. He looked up, met Tobias’ gaze, and that moment of emotion slid away once more, tucked beneath the glib, glassy façade that he seemed to hide so readily behind.

“Me? No, not specifically. They were just checking the refugee camps. There’s a whole shantytown out there in the tunnels. But… it’s not like this place is a secret. It’s only a matter of time, I suppose,” he added, sounding strangely contemplative.

Tobias watched his brow tighten, and wondered if he was imagining the sense that Anders might be weighing something up, as if the prospect of arrest by the templars was a factor in some kind of fated game of chance.

Dread clasped his heart in a dry, rough grip, and squeezed.
“Shouldn’t tell me things like that,” he mumbled. “I might have to lock you up to keep them off you.”

_Shut up. Stop talking, right now… oh, sod. Still, could have been worse. I could have said tie up._

Unbidden, tantalising thoughts pricked at his mind, and Tobias shoved the sinuous shapes away, back into the dark spaces reserved for his solitary, silent nights.

Evidently distracted from whatever he’d started to think about, Anders gave him a small, sad smile.

“Well, they’re not so much interested in _me_ as destroying my kind and all I represent,” he said, though the glossiness had started to fail, and his face darkened. “Meredith’s out of control. Even her own people have been talking about it. I don’t suppose you’ve…?”

“Carver?” Tobias shrugged. “We just had a letter from him, as a matter of fact. He doesn’t write much, but I have been getting the feeling things are… strained within the order.”

Anders nodded slowly, and he looked fleetingly apologetic, as if he regretted bringing up the name.

“I’m not surprised. Things just keep getting worse, and the templars just keep—”

Whatever had happened had him more rattled than he was admitting. There was that nervous hair-smoothing thing again, the faint quiver in those long, stain-smudged fingers. Before Tobias realised it, he’d stepped closer, reached out and laid his hand on Anders’ sleeve.

“If they want you,” he said, his voice low and steady, husky against the quiet of the almost empty clinic, “then they’ll have to come through me.”

Anders blinked, and a look of incredible peace touched his eyes. It didn’t last long, but it softened his face immeasurably, and seemed to melt away the distance between them.

Not for the first time, Tobias fought the urge to pull the other man into a hug. It didn’t have to be a full expression of anything—no grinding passion, no desperate heat—just the simple warmth of an embrace. He wanted to feel Anders’ head on his shoulder, and to hold him until the world started to seem like a safer place… however long that took.

It wasn’t his right, though. He couldn’t demand it. And now Anders was looking down at the hand on his sleeve, and Tobias just knew he was going to move away, and it was going to hurt like a knife to the gut when it happened.

It did.

Anders extricated himself delicately, shook his head, and cleared his throat.

“You’re at as much risk as I am,” he said, not quite meeting Tobias’ eye. “I know you said Carver wasn’t in the business of ratting out family, but if—”

He broke off, staring at the floorboards with a pinched, worried expression.

“What?” Tobias cocked an eyebrow, hiding the ache of loss behind a mask of scepticism. “Not worried about little old me again?”

Anders smiled wearily, raising his head to meet Tobias’ gaze, and shrugged.

“Maybe,” he admitted. “A bit.”
The wide, triumphant grin that spread over Tobias’ face earned him a reproachful look from Anders, tinged with the playful wickedness he didn’t think he’d ever get enough of seeing. It faded, though, and Anders’ face grew serious… solemn, even.

“This is your fight, too,” he said softly. “One day, the world must see us as people, not just mages. You believe that, don’t you?”

The question took Tobias aback, and he shot a nervous glance across the clinic. The girl-child apprentice was still dishing out salves and potions, though all but the last few patients had left.

“Hawke?”

Tobias blinked guiltily. “Well, yes. Of course I—”

“Then help me make it happen.”

He stared. There was such a wash of belief in Anders’ face, of impassioned conviction and bright, pure idealism, that Tobias wasn’t sure how to respond. He swallowed heavily, unable to see much beyond the dark eyes fixed on his, twin pools of need and… trust?

It was almost too much. He didn’t know where it had come from, this moment, but he was terrified of letting it go. He nodded clumsily.

“Mm-hmm.” Tobias cleared his throat hurriedly. “I mean, I… yes. Anything you want me to— anything I can do.”

Anders smiled, and that subtle curve of his lips sent shivers skittering through Tobias’ flesh. He wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue, prepared to pledge everything he had to any cause Anders wanted to name.

It wouldn’t have been a choice. It was as easy as breathing. So much easier than having to say his chaste goodbye and walk home to a cold bed, wondering whether why they kept doing this to themselves, when it was all so bloody stupid.

“I know you’ve been asking questions,” Anders said softly. “About the Underground.”

Tobias supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised. Despite its size, Kirkwall really was a peculiarly small town sometimes. He curled his lip.

“Mm. Didn’t turn up many answers, though.”

Anders shrugged dismissively. “Don’t take it to heart. They’re very secretive. That is, we… Look, you’ve done a lot for mages in this city. The boy, Feynriel, and all the others you’ve helped instead of turning in. I know you mean well, Hawke, and you’re a good man. We need people like you.”

He fixed Tobias with a deep-eyed look, as if there was some sacred meaning to the words, but all Tobias could hear thrumming in his veins was I need you. It wasn’t quite what he’d said—maybe it wasn’t even what he meant—but it was close enough, for now.

A small smile curved the corner of Anders’ lips, though it didn’t seem to reach as far as his eyes.

“There’s a meeting in three days. In the Undercity. I won’t say where but, if I take you with me…?”

Tobias nodded fervently. He didn’t know whether it was an expression of trust, or whether he’d passed some clandestine test or something. Frankly, he didn’t care.
“Yes! I mean—”

Anders’ smile grew a little firmer. “Right, then.”

And so it was decided.

Later, back home in the quiet of his bunk, with Gamlen snoring in the next room, Tobias would wonder whether Anders was manipulating him intentionally. If so, it was cruel… and he didn’t seem like a cruel man. Of course, people would do damn near anything for something they believed in, Tobias reflected.

He knew he would.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which Tobias finds himself summoned to high places... and decides to turn it to his advantage.

Chapter Notes

Not dead! Sorry for the long wait. More regular updates should be happening again now. I hope.

“Sorry, what?”

Tobias stared groggily at the liveried messenger. The man shifted his weight uncomfortably, and kept glancing over his shoulder as if he expected to be jumped at any minute. It wouldn’t really have been that surprising; people dressed like him didn’t tend to last long in Lowtown. Tobias blinked a bit, but it didn’t make anything any clearer, or get rid of the unpleasant furry sensation on his tongue. He frowned.

“What?” he said again, glaring at the messenger. “Me? Why?”

The man’s wiry legs, encased in pale hose, bobbed a bit as he took a step backwards on Gamlen’s narrow porch. The smell of tar and salt streaked the air, along with the filth of the alleyways, and the messenger looked decidedly unused to such a piquant atmospheric bouquet.

“His lordship, the Viscount Dumar,” he began, flaring his nostrils and then wincing, “has requested your presence specifically, messere. You are the one known as Serah Hawke, are you not?”

Tobias ran a hand through his hair. It had been a late night—a job down by the docks, escorting a dwarven nobleman free of the city, and free of the agents of King Bhelen, who apparently had something of a grudge against his house. Tobias hadn’t asked for details. He didn’t give much of a damn about dwarven politics, though Varric had been quite interested. They’d run into about half a dozen heavily armoured mercenaries, and then another fifteen or so Carta thugs, in on the chance of a profit, before Lord Whatshisface was safely ensconced on the first boat to Rivain. For a while, it had almost felt like old times, but his head was still throbbing this morning, and a long cut marked his left arm. Ruined a perfectly good leather bracer, those bastards had. Tobias had meant to head up to Hightown this morning and find a replacement... only to find himself disturbed by this peculiar summons.

“Well, yes,” he said doubtfully, “but whatever it is, I didn’t do it.”

The messenger stared blankly at him. Tobias sighed, painfully aware of Leandra industriously sweeping out the grate in the room behind him, and absolutely, definitely not trying to listen in.

“Look, is this about the claim to the Amell estate? Because it’s about bloody time something got
settled there. Still, I didn’t think they normally sent—"

“I’m here to request your presence, serah,” the messenger said tersely, “and that is all. At your earliest convenience.”

Tobias glanced up at the bright, clear blue sky, and winced.

“Balls. All right, all right… fine.”

“Thank you.”

It didn’t take long to grab a few effects, run a washcloth over his face, and push aside his mother’s twitters of worry with outstretched hands and wide-eyed promises that everything was fine.

Tobias made his way to Viscount’s Keep and, by the time he was jogging up the polished marble steps, his headache had all but worn off, and he managed to dredge up a jaunty tune to whistle in time for his arrival outside Seneschal Bran’s office.

“Morning, Seneschal!” Tobias exclaimed cheerfully, as one of the clerks opened the heavy, iron-bound door and ushered him inside.

Bran glared from behind his desk. “Serah Hawke. You’re very cheerful today.”

Tobias shrugged, hands obstinately rammed into the pockets of his leather breeches. A soft grey linen tunic with gold embroidery at the neck had replaced his usual jerkin, and usefully disguised his wounded arm.

“Well,” he said, making a show of studying the coat of arms on the wall opposite, “it’s not every day a man gets personally summoned to see the viscount, is it? I wondered if it was in response to our numerous letters regarding the—”

“There is more in life than that damn estate,” Bran snapped, with uncharacteristic bluntness.

Tobias blinked in surprise and, taking in the fire in the older man’s dark eyes, decided to rein in his urge to bait him further.

“Oh?”

The seneschal rose from his chair and paced around the desk, gesturing to the door at the far end of the office.

“You will recall your former dealings with the qunari,” he said, as he motioned Tobias to walk with him. “And you are… aware of the delicacy of the situation regarding their presence in Kirkwall?”

Tobias nodded slowly as they strode the length of the room. “Ye-es, but I don’t see—”

“That is what Viscount Dumar wishes to discuss with you.”

The seneschal rapped smartly on the large door before them, its rich wood covered with bas-reliefs and intricate heraldic carvings. A muffled voice within barked ‘Come!’ , and sudden panic assailed Tobias.

The actual Viscount? Now? Here? Him? What in the Maker’s name was he supposed to say, or do, or… was this some sort of trap?

The door opened, and Tobias followed Bran inside. The viscount’s office was quite possibly the
most impressive room he’d ever seen: a vast expanse of thickly carpeted floor, high white walls hung with paintings and draperies, and great, hulking pieces of furniture in carved dark wood. Everything seemed designed to a scale bigger than the normal human frame, as if men of power were truly of greater stature… and yet the figure of the viscount himself, as he stood with his back to them, facing one of the tall window that looked out towards the sea, was rather less imposing than Tobias expected.

Viscount Dumar turned slowly, allowing the fine silks and opulent fastenings of his clothes to catch the light, the slim circlet upon his bald head enclosing the pale skin like thorns around a white-petalled bloom. For a man so curiously devoid of colour—and everything about him did seem to be described in black and white, with only the subtlest shadings of grey—his eyes were startlingly bright. His gaze lit on Tobias, twin points of blue ice in a taut, sharp-featured face.

“Ah. Seneschal. Thank you.”

Bran bowed, and Tobias followed his lead, only for the viscount to wave away the gesture of respect with one narrow hand.

“Please… there is no need to stand on ceremony here. Seneschal Bran has disclosed to you the reason for your presence, Serah Hawke?”

Tobias blinked. “Er, the, um… the qunari, I believe, my lord. But—”

Bran shot him a reproachful look, his barely concealed distaste almost bubbling over.

“Even you must be aware of it, Hawke. There are concerns within the city that the qunari influence is no longer contained.”

“Was it ever?” Viscount Dumar’s voice held a tired melancholy as he cast a lingering glance at the window, and shook his head. “Kirkwall has tension enough between templar and mage, but these qunari…. They sit like gargoyles, waiting for Maker-knows-what, and everyone goes mad around them. Nearly four years I have stood between fanatics. And now this!”

He gestured contemptuously at the desk, and its litter of books and papers, several marked with heavy wax seals and written in an intensely formal hand that Tobias couldn’t even begin to decipher, especially upside down and from more than two feet away. He cocked an eyebrow and cleared his throat.

“Well, your lordship, don’t keep me in suspense.”

The viscount glanced at him with apparent surprise, those icy blue eyes inscrutable. People called Dumar weak-willed, Tobias reflected, but right now, he didn’t look it.

He peered superciliously at Seneschal Bran, and nodded to the door.

“Leave us.”

Tobias stared, half-expecting the seneschal to actually implode on the spot. Bran drew himself up to his full, and not inconsiderable height, and stalked past, his footsteps soft on the thick, opulent rug. He backed out of the room, and the almost soundless way he shut the door behind him seemed far louder than any amount of slamming possibly could. Dumar exhaled wearily.

“You see my dilemma, serah? Meredith at my throat, Orsino at my heels, and a city scared of heretical giants.” He folded his arms and turned back to the window, staring out across the bleached rooftops. The black shape of a gull arced against the sky. “Balance has held because the qunari ask
for nothing. Even the space in Lowtown was a ‘gift’ to contain them. But now....”

“Now?” Tobias echoed, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Now,” Dumar continued dryly, “the Arishok has requested you, messere. By name, no less.” He looked over his shoulder, and fixed Tobias with that sharp, clear gaze. “What did you do?”

A tight, prickly silence spun out between the two men. They both knew what the viscount referred to, no matter how he played it for innocence.

Funny, Tobias thought. He’d not been accorded this degree of respect before, and neither had he asked for it. His sole involvement in the ‘qunari situation’, as the viscount’s office seemed determined to call it, had been through the merchant, Javaris, and his clumsy attempt to manipulate the Arishok into parting with that precious explosive… and those few skirmishes along the Wounded Coast, including the embarrassing incident with the viscount’s son. Of course, that had been hushed up, hadn’t it?

As Tobias recalled, all he’d done for Saemus Dumar was drag him home by the hair, kicking and screaming the whole way like the puling little brat he was. It had been another mercenary job, jostling for coin… and it hadn’t mattered any more than that. The viscount had never even met with him personally to say thank you, and he hadn’t expected it.

Perhaps he’d been naïve. He supposed he had, in thinking that the fact the outlanders were qunari didn’t matter. As far as Tobias had been concerned, it wouldn’t have made the slightest difference if it had been dwarves, elves, or moon-men… he was used to just being pointed at the task in hand and told to get on with it, and that wasn’t a problem. Business worked like that.

This, though… this smelled like politics. Tobias shrugged dismissively.

“What can I say? It seems I make an impression, my lord.”

His pulse quickened a little as the viscount’s expression grew dark. This was a dangerous game to dabble in, he knew, and it wouldn’t take much to overplay his hand.

Viscount Dumar arched one sparse grey brow.

“Yes,” he said, in a bone-dry tone. “In any case, Serah Hawke, it appears you are meant to have influence above your station.”

Tobias kept his face carefully blank, as if the insult had simply passed him by.

The viscount moved to his desk and traced his fingers thoughtfully over the edges of a thick parchment.

“You are aware,” he said, glancing up at Tobias, “that a treaty does exist between Kirkwall and the qunari?”

“Yes, my lord.” Tobias permitted himself a small frown; the expression of a soldier not quite ready to question orders, but prepared to pretend he didn’t understand them. “Have they dishonoured it in some way?”

Dumar shook his head. “No. No, they have… well. That’s just it.”

Wide shafts of light poured through the windows, lancing off the viscount’s thin circlet, and touching the sheaf of papers on his desk. He inclined his head, his brows drawn into a frown.
They claim they’re waiting for a second ship, but it has been three years. They want something else, and I wish I knew what.” He folded his arms across his thin chest, and rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. “Honestly? I don’t think I’ve yet heard two direct words from the Arishok… other than his rather deliberate phrasing of ‘begone’.”

Tobias allowed the corner of his mouth to curl into a smile. He was finding, contrary to his expectations, that he rather liked Viscount Dumar. The smile faded as the older man glared at him, lips tight and thin, and impatience lighting his eyes.

“You are amused, messere? It does not amuse me to find myself playing messenger. Whatever ‘impression’ you made on the Arishok, your duty here is clear. Kirkwall cannot afford these tensions, and I cannot afford to see this city brought to the brink of chaos by these blasted qunari! So, you will speak to the Arishok, Serah Hawke. And you will give him whatever he needs to keep the peace. Can you do that for Kirkwall?”

There was as much desperation as irritation in the viscount’s face. Tobias wasn’t sure whether to be surprised or delighted. Still, the warm glee of having an advantage—and holding it, pressing it close to his chest like a blanket of wonderful security—filled him, and he let his smile return, broadening wolfishly and entirely without subtlety.

“Oh, I’m sure we can come to an arrangement, my lord.” He cleared his throat, summoning every ounce of available nerve. “You, er, may be aware of my family’s petition, regarding the old Amell estate in Hightown?”

It was possible the viscount was actually appalled by his audacity, but he looked rather as if he’d expected it. He gave a resigned, somewhat exasperated sigh.

“Yes, yes… you will have your estate, messere. Seneschal Bran intimated you would bargain in such a manner. The paperwork will be placed directly in your hands, provided the city can count on your support.” Dumar paced a couple of steps towards him, his dark clothes making his skin seem even paler, and those bright eyes bore into Tobias’ gaze. “Do I make myself clear?”

Ah, this was familiar ground. Tobias nodded.

“As crystal, my lord.”

“Good. We have a deal, then, do we? Or do you wish to extort further promises? Gold, perhaps? The hand of some ridiculously wealthy noble heiress?”

Tobias almost winced at that, though he retained control, and kept his face impassive.

“No, my lord. Just the estate, I think.”

Viscount Dumar snorted. “If you’re sure. Now, serah… the Arishok awaits. You will have what you are due once you have proved yourself willing to serve your city.”

Tobias bowed. “My lord.”

It still didn’t feel real when he was summarily dismissed from the viscount’s presence, and had the stones of Hightown’s walkways back under his feet.

Part of him wondered whether the whole thing could have been a set-up, but he chalked that up to spending too much time around Anders. Thoughts of the arrangement to come in just a day’s time—the alleged meeting of the Mage Underground that he was to attend—returned to needle him, and Tobias frowned as he climbed the steps towards Fenris’ door and knocked on the peeling wood.
The elf was at home, as he usually was in the daytime. The door creaked open, and he blinked blearily at Tobias, wincing in the sunlight.

“Hawke? Isn’t it a little early for you?”

“Practically midday,” Tobias said cheerfully, briskly pushing away all physical acknowledgement of how attractive that rough, sleep-sodden voice was, and following the elf inside. “Anyway, I’ve got a job for you.”

Those green eyes narrowed beneath the tousled shock of white hair.

“A job?”

“Mm-hm.” Tobias leaned against the least mouldy-looking piece of wall and smiled as he surveyed Fenris’ rumpled shirt and breeches, so different to the shell of armour he usually hid himself behind. “I need your understanding of the qunari mind. Probably best if you wash up a bit before we leave, though. Don’t worry; I can wait.”

Fenris curled his lip into something very like a snarl. “Now? You presume a great deal.”

Tobias shrugged. “Maybe. I presume you may be interested in why your favourite mage has been personally requested for an audience with the Arishok.”

The elf already had his mouth open—probably to make some comment about the phrase ‘favourite mage’, which Tobias took far too much pleasure in tormenting him with—but it snapped shut again at that, and Fenris looked genuinely surprised.

“And why,” Tobias continued brightly, “this may very well lead to the reclamation of my noble estate and sizeable fortune. So, are you in?”

Fenris eyed him suspiciously, which was no mean feat, when Tobias was of the opinion that the elf took every breath as if he thought it was laced with arsenic. Eventually, he nodded.

“You… are a very surprising man, Hawke.”

Tobias smiled suavely. “I try.”

He thought, as he waited for Fenris to get ready, about swinging by The Hanged Man to pick Varric up, but decided against it. This was probably one exchange that didn’t need chronicling.

So, with Fenris washed and garbed in his dark, sylph-like armour and those fearsome gauntlets, and Tobias as well-dressed as he could afford to be, they set off to meet with the Arishok.

It was not something Tobias did lightly, or enjoyed much. The qunari compound gave him the creeps, and there was truth in what Viscount Dumar had said. The simple fact of their presence in Lowtown made people act strangely. The small yet significant numbers of so-called converts didn’t help, either. The whole thing tasted wrong, Tobias thought, and the way the qunari looked at outsiders made his skin crawl.

_Bas._ That was their word for ‘thing’, Fenris said. Formless, purposeless… the unimportant mass of existence that fell outside their precious Qun. Tobias wasn’t sure he liked being counted as part of it, but he didn’t put up a fight.

The Arishok, in all his granite-faced, gold-shrouded glory, was just as bubbly and outgoing as Tobias remembered him. The whole meeting was a verbal wrestling match of double meanings,
riddles and ambiguities. He was just glad he had Fenris with him; the elf’s experience of life in Tevinter and Seheron had lent him a useful perspective on the qunari and their worldview, and more ability with their language than Tobias possessed. It showed willing, though... respect, and a preparedness to at least appear to be meeting the Arishok on his own terms.

It didn’t make anything much clearer, right up until the words ‘poison gas’.

*Oh, balls*…

Tobias didn’t understand the qunari. He didn’t understand why anyone would store poison gas in what was ostensibly a civilian compound, much less what the Arishok meant by ‘allowing’ it to be stolen. Allow? What, as some sort of test? He got the distinct feeling the whole thing was some sort of game to the qunari, and he didn’t like it. He didn’t like it all.

But, what were they supposed to do? Ignore the threat and let whoever was responsible blow up half of Lowtown, either through ignorance or malice?

It was an ugly kind of crime, Tobias decided, sleeve wadded up and covering his mouth as he fought his way though the greenish clouds that cloaked the alley. It hadn’t been hard to find. Poison that turned the air to burning acid, clogging and clawing at the eyes, nose and throat… how in the Maker’s name could those qunari bastards just sit there and *allow* this?

The Arishok had as good as given them directions, practically set them up in the middle of this scene as if they were actors, players in some puppet theatre and—if it hadn’t been for the people who called these streets home—Tobias would have told him to shove it.

As it was, he was sorely tempted. Fenris had latched the last of the three barrels, they’d scouted out the old warehouse behind which the poison had been left, and done their best to calm the hysterical knot of people gathered at the mouth of the street. It wasn’t enough. A couple of guardsmen from the market patrol, alerted by the chaos, had come to investigate and helped push back the rubber-neckers, forming a cordon and talking of evacuating three or four streets around the spillage. Word was being sent to Guard Captain Aveline… which hardly filled Tobias with confidence.

He wiped his streaming eyes, his lungs sore and screaming with every breath, and inwardly swore that—once the estate was seen to, Leandra was comfortable and looked after, and he had the last of the proceeds from the Deep Roads treasure officially signed over to him—he was getting the fuck out of this pisshole of a town.

A woman sat sobbing on the ground, her arm around her young son as he heaved and wheezed.

“You should take him to Darktown,” Tobias said gently, hunkering down beside the woman. “There’s a healer there. He can—”

Her head snapped up and she glared at him with tear-stained, red-rimmed eyes, her fingers clenching protectively on the boy’s skinny shoulder.

“I know exactly who you mean,” she spat. “And we don’t want no bleedin’ Fereldan charity. ’Specially not from the likes of filthy mages! Bloody animals!”

She dragged the child to his feet, the brass symbol of Andraste that hung at her neck swinging against her dark skin, her hand bunching up the back of his shirt.

“Come on, Jorry. We’ll take you home, and Mama shall make you hot sage tea.”

The child’s coarse, phlegmy breathing rattled against Tobias’ ears, and he got slowly to his feet as he
watched them go, a frown tightening his brow.

He wasn’t sure if it was worse that the perpetrator was elven.

They found her after the gas cleared. She wasn’t the only casualty—an old man had collapsed at the door of his home, while a woman and her baby had choked in another stairwell—but she alone was obvious for her placement. As if she was a clue, meant to be found. A wretched, sore-riddled creature, ragged and painfully thin, stretched out on the floor at the back of one of the warehouses, blood caked around her nose and mouth and a badly misspelled pamphlet clutched in her hand. She’d probably thought she’d be safe enough from the gas back there… if she’d even meant to avoid it.

Tobias carefully unfolded the paper and skimmed the text. It was pure hyperbole, ranting about the corruption and the filth of the city, and how they would all be cleansed, and how the downtrodden would rise and overthrow their oppressors. Dangerous, he thought… but not as dangerous as the words that had started to fly, even before he and Fenris left to take word to the Arishok, and the viscount.

*Bloody elves. You know how many of ’em are turning convert to that sodding qunari cult, don’t you? Yeah… wouldn’t be at all surprised if it was one of them bastards putting ’em up to it. Well, they ain’t got the brains to organise it themselves, have they?*

It seemed sensible to get away before Fenris lost his temper and ripped someone’s entrails out.

They didn’t discuss it. There didn’t seem to be a need to… or perhaps the possibilities were just too dark. Uneasiness stalked Tobias’ every step, and the feeling that he was being pulled along on strings someone else was controlling grew ever heavier.
Tobias Hawke attends a meeting of the Mage Underground... and begins to wonder whether he might not be getting in too deep.
Tobias emerging unscathed from the Lowtown debacle was only to be expected, his perennial good fortune just some kind of slightly annoying peccadillo. The healer rubbed his forehead with herb-stained fingers and frowned, looking troubled. “It, uh, it was the qunari?”

Tobias shrugged. “Maybe. Directly, indirectly—I don’t know. I don’t think I know anything anymore. Just that I’m sick of this bloody place. As soon as the estate’s settled—”

“Huh.” Anders’ hand dropped to his side, and he smiled grimly. “That again?”

He gestured to the door, and Tobias followed him out into the tunnels. Darktown stretched ahead of them into the night, perilous and labyrinthine, and yet somehow peculiarly comforting.

“No, really,” Tobias protested. “It’s happening. It’s finally happening, at last. All the paperwork, it’s all in motion… the viscount himself signed off on it, right in front of me.”


“Mm-hm. Mother’s claim was legitimate, it was just snobbery and politics stopping it. I may have made a few suggestions. Requested it as my payment for stepping in on the gratlock problem, and his lordship was happy to oblige. Well, I say ‘happy’… heh. Still, you know the Arishok requested me by name?”

He let himself preen, caricaturing his pride for Anders’ amusement… only the healer wasn’t laughing. He was still staring, and a hollow sort of look touched his eyes. He blinked, and it passed, but left Tobias unsettled all the same. A rat darted along the footing of the nearest packed-earth-and-timber wall, and vanished into the piss-fragrant shadows.

“No,” Anders said quietly. “I didn’t know that. Going up in the world, aren’t you?”

The words seemed to lack emphasis, and Tobias didn’t know how to respond. He shrugged diffidently.

“Well… a bit. Maybe. Anyway, you know the story there. It’s Mother who wants her childhood home back, not me. Not that I’d complain about getting out of Lowtown, but….”

He let the words trail away, too aware of Darktown surrounding them. Here and there, a couple of bodies were visible at the edges of the tunnels and undercrofts; most of them were probably just sleeping. Compared to what most of these poor bastards had, Gamlen’s hovel was palatial.

If Anders thought the same, he didn’t say so. He didn’t say much as they walked, and Tobias just followed where he led, his unease growing as they took twist after turn through the Undercity.

Anders led him up one of the old stairways under the docks, and through a dark network of alleys, each one offering barely a glimpse of moonlight. The air was rank with old piss and filth. Tobias realised they’d most likely come this way so he wouldn’t recognise the route, though he guessed they were probably at the back of Lowtown, right down in the far reaches past the bazaar.

Anders seemed oddly quiet right up until they turned out of the last alley, into a narrow street at the end of which stood a small stone-built tenement, the windows pitted into its worn face like the cells of a honeycomb. There were shrouded lights in several of the windows, but a lone candle burned on the sill of one room, at the bottom of the building. He almost flinched at the feel of Anders’ hand on his arm.

“Hawke?”
Tobias glanced down at the pale fingers resting, unclenched, on the sleeve of his tunic.

“Hm?”

“Don’t… I mean, don’t give them too much,” Anders murmured, his hand falling back to his side. “D’you understand? The people you’ll meet in here, they’re hard-pushed. We’re all… well, we all have to do what we can, but… don’t share too much of yourself at first. All right?”

Tobias smiled, rather touched by the worried look on the healer’s face, and that charmingly insecure protectiveness he seemed to be showing. Of course, he wasn’t entirely sure whether Anders was feeling more protective of him or the Underground itself, but it was nice to dream, even if just for a minute.

“I’ll be careful,” he promised, allowing his smile to curve just a little wider. “And I won’t talk to any strange men.”

Anders laughed softly, that taut look on his face broken in a moment of surprising warmth as his gaze softened.

“Oh… it’s a bit late for that, isn’t it?”

Tobias chuckled, and followed him across the empty street, feeling oddly exposed in the dimness. He squinted, trying to find his bearings, but he didn’t think he’d ever seen this part of town before. If he had, it had either not been worth noticing, or it looked so different in the dark as to be unrecognisable. Definitely somewhere between the bazaar and the docks, he decided. It could almost feel like the back end of the alienage district, except there was very little sound and, if there was one thing about the elves, it was that they were noisy buggers in their own backyard. Any time he and Varric had swung by to check on Merrill, he’d always noticed the constant buzz of noise and life and colour, from the candles kept burning around the vhenadahl tree to the squalling of babies in overcrowded rooms, and the eternal dramas of lives being lived on doorsteps.

No, this was altogether somewhere more contained… more secret.

Anders hunched into the doorway, pressing himself up against the wall, and rapped softly on the peeling wood. After a few moments, the door opened just a little, and there seemed to be the scuffle of movement within.

“It’s me,” he said quietly.

The shadow-shrouded shape within mumbled something Tobias didn’t catch, and Anders nodded.

“Yes, that’s right.” He glanced at Tobias, something that looked very like nervousness colouring his face, and smiled weakly. “My friend.”

A hard, dry spool of want and anxiety—desire mixed in equal parts with gratitude and trepidation—unfolded in Tobias’ chest, and looped itself around his heart. He’d known, intellectually, the risk that Anders was taking by bringing him here tonight, but it hadn’t seemed real until now.

He blinked, and tried to make out the shape hidden in the shadows. There wasn’t much point. The door closed, then there was a noise like a chair being scraped over a wooden floor, and it opened again, just wide enough to admit them.

He followed Anders, holding his breath as he edged into what turned out to be a tiny, cramped hallway, unlit except for the reflected glow of a fire and candlelight coming from an adjacent room. The shape behind the door proved to be a cowled figure in a rough brown cloak, who moved behind
him to bolt and lock the entrance.

“Come,” the figure said, and reached up with one thin hand to push back its cowl, revealing a woman with a thick fall of grey hair and a face pinched into hard, gaunt lines.

She looked at Anders, then Tobias, and he took her inscrutable expression to mean she disapproved of his presence. Her eyes were a truly dark blue, almost violet, and there was evidently some question in them as Anders met her gaze.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Honestly it is. Um… Hawke, this is Mistress Selby. She’s probably done more for mages in Kirkwall than anyone over the past five years. Selby… I’ve told you about Hawke.”

“Yes, you have.”

She turned that powerful gaze on Tobias, and he did his best not to wither beneath it. She’d been one of the ones at Anders’ clinic, that night he’d overheard them… the matronly influence trying to keep the peace. Tobias recognised her voice now, but he wasn’t sure why it held that slightly disparaging tone—something a bit beyond the level of suspicion he’d have expected from these people—so he made an effort to be as polite as possible.

“Mistress.” He inclined his head. “I’m pleased to—”


With that, she turned and made her way into the adjacent room, leaving Tobias deflated and looking to Anders for support. Anders just shrugged.

“Come on,” he murmured.

Tobias stifled a sigh and followed him. It wasn’t as if he could do much else.

He didn’t know what he thought he’d find in that poky, stuffy little room. Wild-eyed rebels, perhaps, all sharing that impassioned zeal that Anders was given to, or maybe dark, serious types with their faces hidden, like some secret brotherhood… possibly with its own funny handshake. He wouldn’t have been surprised.

What he got was a rag-tag group of people standing around the fire or sprawled on a handful of chairs and stools. Some wore cloaks or cowls, as if they’d had to walk a long way through the city to be here, and some looked as if they’d just rolled in off the street. Merchants, labourers, clerks and menials… it seemed the Underground drew from all walks of life.

And, naturally, every single one of them turned to stare at him. Tobias willed himself not to shrink under their gazes, grateful for the way Anders stood in front of him, angled to the room with his chin up, his face impassive.

There were maybe fifteen people crammed into a space not much larger than the main room of Gamlen’s place. Aside from the assorted chairs, stools and crates being pressed into service as seats, there were few furnishings; just a couple of rough-hewn wooden shelves on the damp plaster walls, and the swollen, misshapen belly of a fireplace in worn cob and mud-brick. The smell of soot and dirt, and tired, unwashed bodies hung heavily in the stale, crowded air.

A short, wiry man with short-cropped dark hair and small, dark eyes rose from his stool and, thumbs in his belt, surveyed them both openly.
“This is the one you spoke of, then, Anders?”

The voice was familiar. Tobias recognised it from the night at the clinic, and his listening through the tattered curtain.

Anders nodded. “Yes, Gethyn.”

That meant it was likely the shadowy Elias—the man who never seemed to exist when you wanted to ask a question about him—was here somewhere, too. Tobias wondered which of the gathered apostates and sympathisers he was, and almost missed the sour look that Gethyn was busy giving him.

“Mage?” he demanded.

When Tobias looked nonplussed, Gethyn raised his left hand, holding it slightly cupped. With a brief flash, two inches of flame bloomed in his palm, dancing just above the skin. He sneered as he let it die, lips bent in a thinly veiled challenge.

Tobias sighed inwardly. Great… do we whip them out to measure now, or later?

He met Gethyn’s gaze unflinchingly, and lifted his right hand. Allowing the power to swell within him took a moment’s concentration—not that he was about to let that show—and he’d been keeping it choked back for so long that it felt strange, like tongues of whispering ice under his skin. Tobias flexed his fingers, and allowed the coruscating blue flickers of magical energy to wrap themselves around his hand, twirling and spinning until they became a ball in the centre of his palm.

There was silence, the soft crackle of his magic audible in the quiet. He held himself perfectly still for a moment. Then, a log popped on the fire and, abruptly, he snapped his hand shut, extinguishing the light.

“Mage,” he confirmed.

Mistress Selby came bustling forward, tutting disapprovingly.

“Gethyn,” she chided, “stop it. Serah Hawke has been vouched for. That should be enough.”

“It is enough,” chimed in another voice—a deep, rolling voice that could only have belonged to one person.

Tobias’ gaze swivelled at once to the man in the corner. He couldn’t believe it had taken this long to notice him. He should have stood out immediately: broad, muscular, and dark-skinned, with a predatory air about him. Rivaini, Tobias suspected, as the man rose to his feet. Close-cropped dark curls framed his face, all proudly arched nose and flared cheekbones, and his smile was wide and bright.

“Anders.” He nodded in greeting, grasping the healer’s arm, wrist-to-wrist, in a gesture that seemed, to Tobias, to smack more of familiarity than the desire to express formal respect.

Anders returned the nod. “Elias. Keeping well?”

“Well enough.” That big smile widened even further. “And, of course, Serah Hawke.”

Tobias stood his ground as the taller man took his hand and shook it firmly. Eyes so dark as to be pupilless pools raked succinctly over him, the reflected firelight glimmering across their surface, and left him feeling vaguely uncomfortable.
“Elias Creer. I'm pleased to meet you at last. Your name seems to be on the very air in this city, messere.”

Tobias arched an eyebrow. “Really? Like the chokedamp?”

Creer laughed. “Hah! Very good… though I believe there have been a few other nasty vapours around of late, haven’t there?”

Tobias’ hand was still caught in a vice-like grip. Word of the gratlock thing had apparently travelled fast, and he wasn’t sure he liked that kind of notoriety. He did his best to look nonchalant, and lifted one shoulder in a careless half-shrug.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that Kirkwall has its own complex bouquet,” he said, as Elias finally relinquished his hand. “Lots of different flavours of stink.”

The Rivaini laughed again, and something like a dark shudder slipped between Tobias’ shoulder blades. It wasn’t revulsion, precisely, or fear… he couldn’t identify it. Creer didn’t feel like a mage, though it was admittedly hard to tell, given Anders’ presence in the room. Seeing past him with that strange cobweb of senses—the silver threads of magic that quivered in response to one another, and laid their tongues against power wherever they found it—was difficult at the best of times, and right now it felt as if the healer was burning bright enough to blot out the sun.

Tobias just smiled, and it looked like Elias was going to say something else, but Gethyn—clearly an agitator, that one—was pacing by the fire, and snapped out an irritable complaint.

“So? Everyone here? Are we going to get a move on?”

“Peace, Gethyn,” Mistress Selby said sternly.

She’d brought in two jugs of cheap wine, and Tobias found himself being passed a small clay mug, into which some of the scummy, dark liquid was poured. It seemed to be a tradition. He glanced at Anders, took aboard his slight nod, and followed what everyone else was doing.

The fire’s deep light flickered over Selby’s eyes as she spoke, and her words sounded like some kind of oath or dedication. Those gathered all raised their cups, and turned solemn stares towards her.

“In memory of those who have fallen,” she intoned, “to those who still stand, and to those who shall come after us, for whom we fight. For as long as we draw breath, we shall not submit.”

There was a chorus of murmured assents, and each mage and sympathiser present drank. Tobias did so too, and found it was rather like swilling warm vinegar. He swallowed heavily, tried to disguise his wince, and glanced around the room. Some of those gathered looked as if they might be familiar, somewhere beneath the cowls and hoods. Faces he’d seen in the market, or knew vaguely as part of the backdrop to the city.

Over by the fireplace, a skinny woman swathed in a brown cloak peered back at him from beneath the hood she hadn’t lowered. A glimpse of preternaturally pale green eyes made him wonder if she was elven, but Tobias knew better than to stare for too long.

Anyway, the meeting seemed to be grinding into gear.

“What news, then?” asked one of the men, fair-haired and with sunken, pinched cheeks. His accent seemed faintly Orlesian, and the soil of travel rimed his clothes. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week, and he downed the rest of his wine in one swift swallow. “I’ve been back barely a day.”
Gethyn snorted bitterly. “More raids, Luc. Two so far this week. Last night, it was a house in the foundry district. A man killed trying to prevent the templars from taking his daughter, and she wasn’t even a mage. All they had was a report from a neighbour… most likely lies made up over some minor quarrel. This is what happens when those bastards don’t even wait for evidence!”

The blond, Luc, curled his lips around a growl of distaste. As Selby leaned over to top up his cup, a look passed between them that caught Tobias’ attention. Lovers? Or just co-conspirators? He wasn’t sure, but he was curious. Was there even a difference, in a group of people who seemed to know each other well enough to pick up on a dozen different kinds of verbal shorthand?

A man who hadn’t spoken before—well-dressed, heavy-set, and with thick, reddish whiskers on his chin—grunted and shook his head, flabby cheeks juddering as he moved.

“Hmph… they’ll cover that up, mark you. Just like they do the bloody magisters.”

He crossed his arms over his red velvet doublet, and Tobias tried to get a closer look at the gold signet on the smallest of his thick fingers. His accent was foreign, too… not that far-flung, but not native Kirkwall. Somewhere else in the Marches, maybe?

What magisters?

Tobias narrowed his eyes. He wanted to ask, but got the distinct impression that he was being watched, and everything from his curiosity to his expression was being quietly evaluated. He glanced at Anders, hating the desire within himself to cling to the healer, and also very aware of the distance he’d left between them. Anders stood a good four feet away, the half-empty cup of wine held in one pale hand, his face motionless as he watched the room.

Tobias felt Elias Creer’s gaze on him, and bit his tongue.

“We never had proof of that, Master Temmen,” Selby said, eyeing the fat merchant warily. “Until we do—”

“Bah!” Temmen’s fleshy lips wrinkled in distaste. “We all know it’s true! Meredith just sees fit to overlook it, because the Imperium’s up to its filthy neck in black market lyrium, and her men are the bastards keeping the trade running! If I had a sovereign for every bloody Tevinter who owns a mansion in Hightown, not to mention the sodding slavers working right under the Guard’s nose—”

“Ah,” Elias said smoothly, “but you’re right.”

Temmen stopped mid-sentence, his chin still wobbling slightly, and looked perplexed. Creer unfolded lazily from his chair, and rose to address the room.

“Have we not been seeing this worsen, year on year? Every week there’s some new gang of thugs prowling the city. The slavers our good Master Temmen mentions… the lyrium smugglers—both those with roots in Seheron and Tevinter, and the dwarven-led operations—not to mention the home-grown activities of our own dear Coterie, and their ever-present war with the Orzammar Carta.…”

He paused, and cast a very brief glance in Tobias’ direction. Tobias kept his face carefully blank. The slavers he and Varric had run out of the old Amell estate aside, his previous association with Athenril and her band of smugglers was common enough knowledge to anyone who knew his reputation, but he wasn’t prepared to have either of those things held up for scrutiny.

It was like the elf had always said: they worked on supply and demand, they didn’t trade in flesh—whores or slaves—and they weren’t in the business of making enemies if they could avoid it. All right, it hadn’t been respectable work, but it had been clean enough, at least amid Kirkwall’s filth.
The fact Athenril had gotten cocky and pissed off both the Coterie and the Carta was beside the point… as was the fact that, after the third time she cut him out on deals he’d earned a fair share in, Tobias had seen no problem with selling a few choice secrets out from under her. Not his proudest moment, perhaps, but it had paid good coin, and bought the Coterie off his back for a little while to boot.

He wondered how much Elias knew… and how much he was willing to tell.

“We must ask ourselves, brothers and sisters,” the Rivaini continued, encompassing them all in a gesture of spread hands and wide eyes, “where does it end? The City Guard are laying on more patrols, fine… but they’ve been mired in corruption for so long, that reform won’t happen overnight. Knight-Commander Meredith claims her templars act for the city’s best interests—that it is mages who are responsible for every breakdown of public order—but, we ask, will she blame us for everything? Every crime, every transgression… every sneeze out of turn… where does it end?”

A few of the cloaked figures shuffled uneasily, but just as many of the gathered members were staring at him, nodding and murmuring assent.

“You preach to the converted, Creer,” Luc said darkly. “Even in Orlais, they whisper Meredith wants only power.”

Mistress Selby shot him an enquiring look. “Were you able to make contact?”

The fire crackled, and its deep, sharp shadows raked at the walls.

Luc nodded. “Yes, but Val Royeaux is a tinderbox. The whole of the Heartlands feels it… ripe with pressure. The Divine has moved against a war with Ferelden, but no one knows how long the Empress will stay her hand, if Queen Anora doesn’t curb her ambitions. She is less blunt a politician than her father, but not by much. Her trade treaty with Nevarra, and the powers she has granted the Grey Wardens… they make for tense times.”

“Bugger the griffon riders,” piped up an elf in the corner; a bony, shaven-headed creature in ragged trousers and a grubby shirt, his feet bound with strips of dirty cloth over rough wooden pattens. “The Blight’s over. No one cares if they get the whole dog-lord country as a reward. What about the movement there? The Orlesian Underground is the only—”

“The Orlesians,” Luc snapped, “are hanging by a thread. There is as much ill feeling against mages there as there is in the Marches. I did not even dare to get near Montsimmard. Between the templars and the Wardens, it is far too heavily watched. Everyone we knew there, they’ve all gone… fled into the Dales or across the Gamordians. There’s still something of a front active there, but they can only do so much. In Val Royeaux, everybody talks of the Fereldan Circle’s annulment… some idiots even say mages started the Blight itself.” He curled his lip, and spat onto the damp, musty rushes that strewed the floor. “In the two weeks I was there, six apostates were drawn and quartered in the Cathedral Square. So, our contact holds out little hope for any co-operative action. Right now, they are simply doing what they can to help their own.”

A stunned, despondent silence fell over the room. Tobias, still smarting a little from the ‘dog-lord’ crack—not to mention the image of apostates being torn limb from limb—struggled to keep up. He hadn’t followed events back home much… nor had he known there were groups like this elsewhere. Still, that stood to reason, didn’t it? Co-ordinated efforts across nations… mages rising up against injustice, and standing against the abuses perpetrated by people like Knight-Commander Meredith.

It was a wonderful idea, so why did he suddenly feel so uneasy?
“The Divine’s agent still does nothing, then?” Elias asked coolly, folding his arms. “I understood the First Enchanter had made a petition.”

Luc shrugged and shook his head. “Still waiting. I don’t think it will come to much... maybe a public address, a few words on benevolence and charity. After the Fereldan annulment, the Libertarian cause is all but lost in Orlais. Even Enchanter Clairveaux—many of you will remember his outspoken support of a free Circle—now publicly condones the vigilance of the templars.”

A ripple of discontent ran around the room. Tobias wasn’t familiar with this Clairveaux’s name, and his ignorance shamed him. He couldn’t help feeling, had Bethany been there, she’d have been intrigued. Their life had never featured much to do with the politics or study of magic—beyond Malcolm’s instruction in controlling power and resisting temptations—and their father had never encouraged discussion of the Circle, or even much in the way of anything that lay beyond the basic precepts of keeping oneself alive, and one’s head down.

In practice, most of what Tobias knew had come from Werner, the old apostate in Athenril’s employ, who’d escaped the Kirkwall Circle with enough bitterness to fill a barrow, and an in-depth knowledge of telekinetic and force spells... for which Tobias had been surprised to discover a mild aptitude.

Still, all this business of who said what, and who stood where left him nonplussed. He began to wonder if Anders’ precious Underground wasn’t more of a gossip club for the embittered and slightly paranoid, but then Luc shook his head again, that pinched, gaunt face a sharp blade of defiance.

“In any case,” he said briskly, “there is the matter of sea passage. The Raiders are making it more difficult than ever. I say Orlais is no longer a viable route from the Marches. We are far better advised to rely on Anders’ contacts in the Vimmarks.”

Tobias pricked up his ears, his gaze falling at once on the healer. Anders just nodded, like he’d been expecting Luc’s words, and the shoulders of his tatty coat rose and fell with a weary sigh.

“It’s possible,” he said, as the room’s attention turned to him. “There are still merchant caravans covering the mountain and coast routes, but we can’t risk moving as many as we did before. And, with the state Starkhaven’s been in since the coup—not to mention the unrest in their Circle—that’s still not much of an option. I had word from Elinor, in Ostwick; they’ll help as long as they can, but it costs more, not to mention needing papers...”

He eyed the merchant, Temmen, meaningfully, and the man blustered.

“What? Ah, well, yes. Yes, but it takes coin, doesn’t it? Getting seals copied, signatures forged...” He shrugged dismissively. “We’ll just have to send fewer. Those we can’t get out first off will simply need to wait, or pay their own way.”

Tobias’ gut clenched as he was struck by the sudden sensation of the floor pitching beneath him. It was Anders, he realised; he blinked at that all-too-familiar lurch of power, and saw several other mages in the room wince.

“No,” Anders said, and it was the hollow echo of Justice’s anger that swelled beneath the word. He took a breath, evidently struggling for control. “No... we do not back away from helping people, simply because it becomes more difficult. They need us now, more than ever. Would you deny them?”

“Anders is right, Master Temmen,” Selby said pointedly, anger etched into the lines of her face. “At
this moment, I have four children in my house, not one of them more than twelve years. Would you see them turned over to the templars for want of a couple of sovreigns? No… we’ll see to passage to Ostwick. It’s safer than Orlais, and it don’t take no fussing with boats. That’ll do for now.”

“I’m merely saying,” Temmen protested, “that some will have to wait, or that maybe our efforts should be focused on those who are already outside the Circle’s reach, hm? After all, when the templars are growing ever more vicious, is there sense in antagonising them?”

“He’s got a point,” someone else chimed in—the elven woman Tobias had noticed before, still hooded, as if she didn’t want to risk showing her face fully. “It’s the ones who’ve broken out that bring all of us to danger. I say we help those born free stay free… show the world we can live alongside the rest of ‘em without trouble. Let those who’ve fallen foul of the templars work it out themselves.”

The meeting nearly broke into uproar at that point, several voices overlapping each other, and cries of anger and disbelief mixing with those of frustration and support.

That was the crux of it, Tobias realised: the root of the argument on all its levels. Mages were not just one group. They were, their gifts notwithstanding, people… in all their chaotic, jumbled imperfection. Whether they were good, weak, strong, wicked, or as morally ambivalent as the average, non-magical slob, they would never fit into simple categorisations.

He leaned against the wall, watching the room divide into bitterly entrenched camps. Those who feared Meredith’s reprisals—or who longed for a quiet life, or were simply worried about the logistics—argued against the Underground’s resources being poured into helping ex-Circle apostates, while those who had known life beneath the templars’ heels were incensed at the very prospect of not helping.

“Why not let ’em run on their own, eh?” the elf asked. “That’s all I’m saying.”

Anders glared furiously at her, and the firelight couldn’t quite wash that hint of blue from beneath the paleness of his skin.

“Do you even know what it’s like?” he spat, his voice chased through with that hushed, awful tension, the cracked prism of his iron-hard control clenched around everything fighting for release. “How hard it is to get away in the first place? You run because the alternative is unbearable, because if you don’t you’ll forget what the sky looks like, and you’ll die withered up in their bloody prison. You risk everything, and you run and you run… and they still find you. They take your blood, keep you chained by it—and it’s not blood magic when they do it, is it? Oh, no. They use it to track you like a rat, and they won’t stop, and you know they won’t. You wake, every morning, and that first second you open your eyes is bliss because, just maybe, you’ve forgotten and you think you’re free… only then you remember. So the first thing you do is run again. And it never stops.”

The hair rose on the back of Tobias’ neck, and the stale air tasted metallic. Anders glared at the elf, and the ragged shoulders of his worn coat were hunched like some angry, moulting crow. Every eye in the room was on him as he lifted a hand and pointed at her, his mouth bent into a hard, bitter curl.

“Think about that next time the templars march into your alienage, Selene. Next time they come to take some helpless child. Does it feel like justice then? Does it? Does it feel like justice to all those people rotting in The Gallows?”

“There’s no smoke without fire,” the elven woman protested, as the volume of the argument rose. “You can bet some of ’em done what the templars said they done—you really want to risk your lives springing blood mages and abominations?”
“If you believe everything the templars feed you, you’re a fool!” Anders snapped. “Our duty is to those who can’t help themselves… the ones Meredith’s people abuse every day. Will you turn your back on them simply because they’ve endured things you’ve never had to know? Will you stand by—try to tell yourself it’s not your problem—when almost every mage in Kirkwall who dares to speak out ends up made Tranquil?”

Tobias bit his lip. He could see the trembling in Anders’ hands… and he was pretty sure everyone else could, too. The elf backed down, looked away, and mumbled something about ‘bloody Fereldans’, which struck Tobias as eminently stupid. He thought Anders might actually lose it completely then, but Elias entered the fray, his voice smooth and conciliatory, rolling over the ructions like honey.

“We have never made a distinction between those living free and those who flee the Circle,” he said calmly. “But, by the same token, directly moving against the templars is dangerous. That’s true, and no one will ever be asked to do more than they are willing to do. It is not for us to put anyone in danger, who does not accept the risk willingly… even where our goal is to help our brothers and sisters. I trust I make myself clear?”

The few dishevelled murmurs of assent didn’t seem like a consensus.

From his corner near the fire, the shaven-headed elf hooked his arms around one scrawny knee, and glared at the rest of the gathering. “She wouldn’t dare do that anyway, would she? I don’t think she would. They’ve got to have a reason for using the Rite.”

Gethyn—who had been suspiciously quiet for too long, Tobias thought, sitting and watching everything with those beady little eyes—scoffed dismissively.

“Oh, and you know for certain what she would and wouldn’t do, do you? We can’t put anything past Meredith. Especially while the Grand Cleric refuses to speak publicly on the issue. I wouldn’t be remotely surprised to find that Anders is right. The very fact the templars are prepared to perform the Rite on fully Harrowed mages—an act that the Chantry itself declares illegal—should tell us enough.”

“We don’t know—” someone began, which brought a chorus of dissent.

It was true. No Harrowed mage should be made Tranquil, under any circumstance. Tobias wasn’t that well-versed in the fine print of Chantry statute, but there had been a fairly vocal few evenings in The Hanged Man when the subject had come up. Anders said the law was clear: a mage’s Harrowing was final. It meant he’d demonstrated his capability to master himself and his gifts, and no one could take that away. It conferred rights, such as mages had them. Membership of the Circle, and its protection; you were its responsibility from that point on and, if you succumbed to demons or the temptations of forbidden magic, there was no Tranquillity. Only death, and the swift blade of some well-trained templar magehunter.

Whatever Meredith was doing—or whatever was happening on her watch—there was no excuse for that. No excuse for what had happened to Karl.

Tobias bit the inside of his lip as he thought of it. Was that was this particular anger boiled down to? Or was that one dark, private wound just a part of something larger?

He shot a glance at Anders, watching the tension in his frame, the almost petulant hardness in his face as he argued with one of the better-dressed women. Another merchant, by the looks of it, Tobias decided, as the healer muttered a cuss and rolled his eyes in exasperation.
Tobias wondered if things were always this bad. The very nature of the Underground probably meant feelings were usually running high, and it seemed unlikely they ever just got together for a nice chat over a pot of tea, but were they always at each other’s throats like this? And was there always this sour, cold taste of fear in the air?

Elias waded in again before things got too vituperative, those large, broad palms held up in a gesture of peace… ever the ringmaster, Tobias thought warily.

“Peace, my friends… there’s no sense in quarrelling over this tonight. It’s true—it is true,” he added, raising his voice over the last dregs of protest, “that many Harrowed mages have been made Tranquil in the past year. We know this, but we cannot prove that it is born of a political motive. Yes, it is against the Chantry’s laws, but when their only response is to ask whether concerned citizens would rather see what they call ‘troubled’ mages executed instead of given the Rite, how can we proceed? Besides, as long as the Chantry makes the laws that govern its own templars, we have no recourse, and neither does the Circle. It is injustice, but it is an injustice it is foolish to challenge. Doing so only serves to make us too visible. Should we risk exposure so? Let us strike instead where we can effect change.”

It settled the room, but the ill feeling still hung thickly over everything. Anders had slumped back ungraciously against the wall, his face set into what Varric usually termed ‘Moody Rebellious Scowl Number Four’, and a couple of people let loose disgruntled murmurs regarding the uselessness of the viscount, and how there was no government in Kirkwall except the poxy templars.

Elias folded his arms and nodded, waiting for the calm to settle.

“To business, then,” he said, with a glance at Mistress Selby, “and the matters of finance.”

It was grim stuff, discussing the minute details of how to get people out of the city. A lot of the information was couched in vague terms, and it all sounded like a hidden, coded language. Tobias assumed it was so no one ever knew all the addresses of the safe houses, or the names of every ship’s captain or caravan trader who could be bribed, but he knew he was still hearing a lot.

There were references to plenty of places he knew, names that were familiar… and it became apparent to him just how well threaded through Kirkwall’s underbelly the Underground’s sticky fingers were. And yet, the calmness with which they discussed it—six children, three female apprentices, one of whom Selby implied was carrying the result of a templar rape, two apostates who’d been on the run from Starkhaven for months, and two mages from the Kirkwall Tower, recently escaped—suggested a fluidity of routine, and the practiced ease with which these people faced an almost impossible challenge.

Each one would need papers, just to be safe. New clothes, supplies, food, money… a pathway smoothed ahead of them, at least until they learned enough to blend in with the world. The pregnant girl was getting near her time, but it was too dangerous for her to stay in Kirkwall. It was all about getting them as far away as fast as possible, apparently.

Tobias had questions, but he didn’t dare ask them. Anders’ words about phylacteries echoed in his mind, and he wondered exactly how the templars used them. Was it really blood magic? How far did it reach… and how far did someone have to run before he was out of their range, if he ever was?

Naturally, the sticking point was still coin. Temmen seemed to be the Underground’s chief finagler of shady paperwork, and he never stopped whining about the cost. Things were starting to get tense again when Tobias cleared his throat.

“When do you need the money?” he heard himself say.
It was completely against his better judgement, but it was too late. The words already were out, and people were looking at him inquisitively… not least Elias Creer.

“I’m sorry?” The Rivaini arched one heavy brow. “Serah Hawke, did you…?”

“You heard,” Tobias said flatly. “How much, and when?”

Master Temmen stared, then glanced at Elias, because everybody here seemed to do that before reaching a decision.

“W-well, I… I….”

Elias shrugged. “Arranging passage to Ostwick for this trip alone will take the best part of two hundred and fifty sovereigns, if we are to move them all, but—”

“I can get you twenty tomorrow, and another sixty by week’s end, if it helps. I’ve… had a lucky run,” Tobias added dryly.

It was true enough. Also true that he’d had plans for the money but, next to standing in this dim, stuffy room, listening to people argue about saving the lives of children and sticking one to that mad bitch in The Gallows, they paled a bit. He’d explain it to Leandra later. Sort of, anyway.

*Probably best leave out the bits about the illegal mages and the plotting to overthrow the accepted social order.*

Elias gave him a suave, smooth smile that didn’t quite seem to reach his eyes.

“That is… most generous of you.”

Tobias wrinkled his nose. Well, in the Rivaini’s shoes, he’d have been suspicious too, he supposed.

“Let’s just call it a gesture of good faith. I hope it helps.”

Elias inclined his head. “Indeed, Serah Hawke. Indeed.”

Tobias felt a number of other gazes on him, and he didn’t much like it. They were like needles against his skin, inquisitive and sharp… except for one, but he didn’t quite dare to meet Anders’ eye just then, and focused instead on the dying embers of the fire. No one had bothered to feed it, or bank it up, and a white-crazed mantle of ash had settled thickly over the log that had all but burned up at its centre.

After some more chewing at details, and more tense, impenetrable discussion, the meeting ended with another draught of greasy, vinegary wine, and a wooden plate being passed around. Tobias supposed he should have expected that. People gave what they could. He even noticed the elves chip in a silver or two apiece—more money than most of them saw for a day’s work—and the better-dressed, like Temmen, tossed down a couple of sovereigns. He followed suite, in addition to his sizeable pledge, and noticed Anders contributing a small leather pouch that clinked softly.

After that, things started to break up. Some of the attendees embraced each other before they left, huddling together in knots of twos or threes, tensely murmured words passing between hooded faces. The one known as Luc left first, huddled up against the night and stealing away into the darkness.

Tobias wondered where he went, curious about that shrouded traveller. He found himself at the edge of the room, set apart and all but abandoned. His gaze sought Anders, and found him standing by the fire, in close conversation with Elias. He couldn’t make out what they were saying, but the Rivaini
was smiling slightly, and Anders didn’t look all that pleased. The healer shook his head, then leaned forwards and murmured something, and Elias’ smile stiffened, then faded. He nodded, and glanced over to Tobias, giving him a respectful nod and another tight smile.

“Serah Hawke. We will be thankful for your generosity.”

*Will be,* Tobias noticed. *As in, ‘when you do it’ instead of just talking about it. Well, fair enough….*

He batted the smile back, just as guarded and hard-eyed as Elias, and it came as a tremendous relief to leave that poky, warm little room.

Tobias let out a breath as, their last goodbyes said, he and Anders stepped from the tenement, back out into the street.

“Well,” he said, as the night breeze ruffled his hair, drawing a slight shiver from him, “it was certainly interesting.”

Anders just smiled thinly, and looked away down the length of the alley. A couple of hooded figures passed into the shadows, and Tobias noticed the candle being extinguished in the tenement’s window. It was almost as if the whole meeting had never happened.

“And that Elias,” he added thoughtfully, watching the way Anders blinked at the sound of the name, “he’s… an impassioned speaker.”

Anders nodded. “Mm. He believes very strongly in the cause.”

Tobias glanced at him doubtfully. “Mages?”

“Freedom,” Anders said, hugging his arms around his middle as if that awful coat wasn’t protection enough against the night… although it wasn’t even that cold.

“Yeah?” Tobias frowned. “Not really the same thing, is it?”

Anders shrugged. “Sometimes. Elias is a Resolutionist. Thinks we should all live free, because we’re no more dangerous than anyone else. I think he has a point. I mean, you don’t need magic to kill someone, do you?”

The moon’s thin sickle slipped from behind a cloud, and for a moment its pale light dappled them both. Tobias screwed up his face.

“No-oo… that’s true. However, the average nutter with a knife, while he can kill you, can’t yield his soul to a demon and take out three streets’ worth of people in a fiery pit of death before someone stops him.”

Anders gave one of those soft, tired laughs and shook his head. “You sound like Karl.”

That took Tobias aback. He stopped, his feet scuffing against the dry stones. Anders walked on another couple of paces, then turned to look back at him, outlined in dim, blue-tinted light. He smiled, and the night breeze caught at the feathers on his coat.

“What? He always said mages needed some element of control. Supervision.”

“My father used to say the same,” Tobias conceded, willing his legs to move again, if for no other reason than that it brought him closer to Anders. The city seemed so still and quiet… he could almost believe they were completely alone in these streets, islanded entirely in the darkness. “But he said the
Circles were the wrong way to do it.”

Anders nodded. “Exactly. Most of the people who turn to forbidden magic do it because they feel they have no choice. If they weren’t treated like cattle, or threatened with execution at every given —”

“Then it would only be the ones who crave power that do it,” Tobias teased gently. “Like in Tevinter.”

Anders grimaced. “You’ve been playing cards with Fenris again, right?”

“I told you, you should come along. Boys’ nights,” Tobias added with a grin, falling into step neatly beside him as they crossed one more sidestreet, and elbowing the healer in the ribs. “It’s good fun.”

Anders bowed with the friendly jab, and snorted.

“I refuse to believe every mage in the Imperium uses blood magic,” he said, a trifle archly, though a hint of amusement touched the words. “Whatever he says.”

“He is biased, I’ll grant you,” Tobias admitted. “But still….”

He looked thoughtfully at Anders as his smile faded, and tried to match this man—with his careworn, ragged humour, the trails of laughter buried beneath all that dry solemnity—to the angry, wounded words that had left him in the meeting.

“Anders?”

“Hm?” He blinked, and glanced at Tobias, his face lit in thin planes of blue-painted light that made him seem ethereal, picking out every sharp line and angle.

“What you said, in there… about running. About how the templars take your blood…?”

“Oh.” Anders’ expression darkened. “Yes. The phylacteries. Sorry about that. I was… well, you know how I get.”

He smiled weakly, but the moonlight washed any attempt at levity away.

“The templars still have yours, then? Your phylactery?”

The word felt unfamiliar to Tobias, as strange and unpleasant as the idea itself: a vial of blood kept as a leash, ready to yank an unruly mage to heel.

Anders nodded grimly. “Yes. I’ve tried to go after it a couple of times… they store them in the Circle Tower itself, when you’re an apprentice, then ship them off to Denerim once you’re Harrowed. Hundreds of them… thousands. All kept in Chantry warehouses. They move different batches around now and again, so it makes it harder for anyone who might be trying to find theirs. I thought, when I was in Amaranthine, I had a chance at it, but it didn’t work out.”

“When you were with the Wardens?”

“Mm. I begged Commander Caron to let me go, just to see if I could… well, of course, he wouldn’t. Bastard.”

Tobias frowned. “What did you do?”

“Ran away,” Anders said simply. “You know, that’s… sort of my thing. The information turned out
to be false, anyway. Found myself almost walking into a warehouse full of templars. Got out by the skin of my teeth, only to find Caron had tracked me down himself. And he was not a happy man.”

Tobias’ frown deepened. He recognised that tone of understatement, just as clearly as the fact Anders had hardly ever spoken of his time with the Grey Wardens, and always changed the subject at the first possible opportunity if reference to the order came up.

He turned his head towards the other man, catching the stale whiff of elfroot and sweat that nestled in his coat, and watched the thin streaks of moonlight stain that sharp, tired face. Fear closed around his heart.

“So, theoretically, they could still—?”

Anders shrugged. “Maybe. I think I got out of Amaranthine undetected. They… well, they won’t be looking for me, anyway. Of course, Kirkwall’s templars don’t need to know your name before they run you through. Just being an apostate’s enough.”

He was descending into that self-pitying melancholy again. Tobias felt it, and he detested it. He was going to say something—some prod or prompt to bring Anders back from the edge—but the healer looked at him and smiled ruefully.

“You know that, though. Better than me, I suppose. You’ve been running your whole life… and they’ve never caught you.”

Tobias winced, the Underground’s prejudices and debates still a little too fresh in his mind.

“That doesn’t make a difference,” he said earnestly. “All mages need to be treated better, like more than just… just vessels, defined by our magic. Doesn’t matter if we’re living free or captive. You’re right: the world needs to see us as people.”

He fell silent as his own words echoed around him, slightly embarrassed by how fervent he sounded.

Anders’ eyes softened, creasing a little at the corners as he smiled.

“Hmm. You should watch that. People’ll be saying I’ve corrupted you.”

Tobias clenched his jaw as the air positively creaked between them.

Chance’d be a fine thing, you sod….

Anders looked away first, still smiling faintly.

“Thank you, by the way.”

Tobias quirked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“You know. Offering what you did… it’s a lot of coin. I didn’t expect you to do that. I mean—”

“I did it because it’s right,” Tobias said stiffly. “No other reason.”

He meant that, he realised. Believed it, truly… even before he saw the fleeting look of pleased admiration and tender pride that crossed Anders’ face. He averted his gaze, too, glancing hurriedly at the worn, pitted walls of the alleyway as he cleared his throat.

A badly printed flyer had been pasted up nearby. Tobias couldn’t make out the words, but the crooked lettering was of a familiar type. It would either be complaining about mages or refugees, and
quite possibly advertising the benefits of whatever citizens’ militia was on the brink of pouring out of Lowtown this week.

“Well,” he said, with a nonchalant shrug, “it doesn’t matter. I’ve got the money, or I will have, once I’ve seen Varric. That antiquities dealer he was talking about is in town, did you know? All the way from Orzammar, and beside himself with joy over those last things from the thaig.” He shot Anders a guilty smile. “It’s like you said. I’m a wealthy man now, right? Moving up in the world.”

Anders snorted and shook his head, that sad smile still wreathing his lips.

“Well. I didn’t know. So, he’s paying good money?”

“Well. All over-excited about dwarven history and primeval relics… offered Varric a fortune to finance another expedition, so I’m told.”

Anders winced. “You’re not going to—?”

“Well, Varric told him exactly where to go.” Tobias shook his head. “Anyway, you wouldn’t get me down there again if you paid me. Don’t care how much.”

The healer’s face relaxed, and he looked peculiarly relieved.

“Well. Good.”

Tobias frowned. “Why?”

Anders shrugged and, not quite meeting his eye, gave him one of those faint half-smiles. They were reaching the first stairway that led back down towards Darktown, and their feet echoed against the hard-packed dirt that bridged the boards.

“Well, the Deep Roads aren’t any fun,” he said dryly, narrowing his eyes as he peered into the shadows. “Besides, I thought we’d lost you the last time you went down there. I’d… rather not have that happen again.”

Those dark eyes caught his gaze as Anders glanced up at him. Tobias swallowed heavily, hating all these silent, twisted, hidden things. He wanted to hear it properly, just once. Wanted it more than anything. He wanted to hear Anders actually say what he meant… and he wanted them both to be honest.

Of course, that would change everything, wouldn’t it?

And so, he just grinned, and nodded towards the cross-street that lay past the old stairway.

“Well, I can cut back by the bazaar from there, can’t I? I should get home… make sure Gamlen hasn’t already gambled away the estate deeds again.”

Anders nodded slowly. “Mm. Second left. It’s late; be careful.”

Tobias exhaled a long, low breath, and watched it mist on the air between them.

“Well, I am,” he said softly, as he turned to go. “Night. Anders. And… thanks.”

The quiet ‘goodnight’ the healer bade him hugged like shoulders like a whisper, and Tobias held his breath as he walked away, letting the sound of his footsteps fill up the shadows.
Leandra was beside herself with glee over the estate. She couldn’t stop re-reading the papers they’d received from the viscount, and every time she did, she touched the seal like it was the face of an old friend, and beamed happily.

Tobias hadn’t seen her smile like that since before they left Ferelden.

“We should start right away,” she declared brightly, arms akimbo as she stood by Gamlen’s rickety writing desk, the papers spread out before her. “There’ll be so much to do, so many things to arrange… can you take me to see it?”

“Hmm?” Tobias, sitting at the table with a mug of spiced tea, hadn’t really been listening. “See what?”

She rolled her eyes. “The estate! Honestly! There’ll be so many fabrics to consider… curtains, carpets, not to mention measuring for furniture. I wonder if your grandfather’s chairs are still there? When I was a girl, he bought the most marvellous dining table and fifteen chairs. Antivan walnut, with painted panels on the backs. Each one of them showed something different—”

Tobias winced. “Mother….”

“—like hunting scenes, and famous battles or assassinations… well, they were Antivan. They were absolutely magnificent, though, and whenever we had people to dine—”

“Mother!”

“Hm? What is it, dear?”

Tobias sighed heavily, and cupped his mug with protective fingers. He’d got back late after the Underground meeting, and had a run-in with some daft gaggle of would-be thugs who’d tried to mug him on the way. One silly sod had actually said ‘beware the wrath of the Crimson Hand’ as he pulled a knife… at which point Tobias had cussed in irritation, and then knocked all three of them flying with a well-placed Fist of the Maker. He’d legged it while they were staggering and yelling (very observant, street gangs these days, he thought: ‘Look out, he’s a bleedin’ robe!’), and made it home unfollowed and in one piece, which was a pleasant change.

All the same, he hadn’t expected the throb of glee he’d found in himself. It had been… exhilarating, to use his power like that. He hadn’t had to think about it for a second. Just let it out, let it spill like anger and retribution, and it had been good.

This morning, he felt tired and stretched too thin, and he kept thinking about all those shrouded faces, and the dark rumbles about Meredith, and mages made Tranquil, and… all those things Anders had said about blood, and phylacteries.

He peered up at Leandra. She was looking at him expectantly, blue eyes wide and her hair oh-so-neatly combed. For as long as he could remember, she’d started every day clean and bright as a new pin. The drudgery of cleaning and keeping house wore through her as the hours dragged on, and soot smuts or stripes of grime would mar her apron, but she’d always wash up again come sundown. Tobias remembered how, when he was a little boy, he’d curl up on her lap by the light of one fat tallow candle, and breathe in her smell of lavender water and soap as she read to him. Not so often, once the twins were old enough to crawl or toddle but, back in those early days, there had been some precious times when it was just the two of them.
He rubbed his forehead wearily. “Mother, the place has been used as an illegal slave pit for the past Maker knows how many years. It’s a broken-down, filthy wreck. We’ll have to get someone in to clean out the… mess… and probably fume it all out for a couple of weeks before you even start thinking about—” He waved a hand in the air vaguely, a little lost on the practicalities of playing house. “—carpets. Whatever. As for there being anything left, I-I… I don’t think you should get your hopes up.”

“Oh.” Leandra furrowed her brow, and he couldn’t bear that look of disappointment crowding over her face. “No, of course, you’re… you’re right, I’m sure.”

Frustration clawed at him, but the years of parental conditioning were already winning out. Tobias stifled the irritated groan he wanted to give, and knocked back the rest of his tea. Its lukewarm perfume cloyed the back of his throat; he’d never realised how different the stuff tasted when he wasn’t drinking it hungover.

“I’ll stop by and see what I can find out,” he promised as he stood up, pausing to lay a hand on her arm and drop a brief, perfunctory kiss to her cheek.

She smelt of soap and fresh linen, with just a hint of lavender, and she smiled gratefully at him.

“Thank you, darling.” Her hand covered his, her red, lined knuckles standing proud, as did the delicate traceries of veins that were beginning to rise under her skin, and she squeezed his fingers.

“Are you going out already?”

Tobias smiled tightly. “I won’t be long.”

“You were back awfully late last night. I worry about you, you know… never knowing where you are, or who you’re with. You’re not still running around with that pirate girl, are you?”

A new frown began to sweep over her face, and he winced again. Leandra had only met Isabela once, when she’d dropped by on her way to the docks as part of that eternal quest for a new boat. Tobias suspected she’d just wanted to see where he lived, and he hadn’t managed to hustle her out quite quickly enough.

The two women had exchanged perhaps ten words, five of which had been Leandra saying ‘Goodness me, aren’t you chilly?’. It was just one of the many reasons he preferred to keep the people he termed friends as separate as possible from his home life.

“I was never—” He broke off, unwilling to even broach the discussion with her. “No, Mother. I’m not. I just need to see a man about some business, that’s all. Picking up a couple of payments from Varric, and… maybe a few other errands.”

Leandra’s mouth crumpled into a thin, censorious curl.

“Well, as long as you’re back for supper. I managed to get some neck of lamb. There’s dried peas left, so I thought I’d make a lamb and pea stew, like we used to have. That’ll be nice, won’t it?”

He nodded, and his smile wasn’t entirely forced.

“It will. Do you need anything while I’m out?”

Leandra shook her head. “No. Just… don’t be too late.”

“I won’t, Mother,” Tobias assured, and he let the door close quietly behind him.
It was a pleasant day. One of those ones where the sky was crisp and blue, and a light breeze tugged at the white wisps of cloud, trailing them above the flat roofs of Lowtown like paper kites. Somehow, it made Kirkwall look cleaner, as if that pale wash of sunlight could douse all the filth away. Unlikely, of course…but a nice thought, Tobias supposed.

He was finding he rather missed Fereldan weather. Back home, the year would have been getting much colder by now. In Lothering, they even used to have proper snow in the winter. In Kirkwall, it just got misty, and rained.

His first stop ought to be The Hanged Man, he decided, although it was still a little early for Varric. Even if he was up, Tobias reasoned he would probably be occupied, either conducting a little business, or penning his latest epic. Lately, he’d taken to serialising some of his more lurid stories in pamphlet form, together with provocative illustrations. *Seven Veils of Seheron* was Tobias’ current favourite, being the amorous adventures of a plucky and resourceful slave girl who escaped from her bondage and found love with a dissipated, swashbuckling pirate captain.

He suspected the two main characters drew more than they ought from Fenris and Isabela, albeit in somewhat disguised and gender-reversed roles, but hadn’t dared bring the matter up with either of them…particularly given some of the rude bits Varric had written. Not until the resolution of the story was published, anyway. Tobias would have hated for Fenris to kill the dwarf in a fit of outrage before he found out whether the slave girl managed to wed her captain, or if they fell foul of the wicked first mate’s plan to betray them both to her original captors.

“Morning, Corff!” he said brightly as he walked into the tavern.

The innkeeper was swabbing a rag half-heartedly over the greasy bar. He looked up and nodded briskly.

“Mornin’, messere. He’s in his suite. Would you like Nora to bring you something up?”

“Hmm, I don’t know. What’s good this morning?”

Corff looked faintly nonplussed, and glanced over his shoulder towards the kitchens, from where the smell of something greasy being fried to a uniformly crispy kind of brown was emanating.

“Fry-up,” he said, after a moment’s apparent consideration.

Tobias nodded sagely. That basically meant anything left over from yesterday that neither smelled too rotten, or could crawl out of the pan unaided, all mashed up and served as fried hash, slathered in butter and with some kind of meat product—probably made of something unspeakable, and just as thoroughly fried—on the side. His stomach rumbled traitorously, and his mouth started to water.

“Two, please. And some small beer?”

“Right you are.”

He grinned, and made his way through the empty bar towards Varric’s suite.

Morning light lanced through the high, small windows that pierced the passageway, and picked out all the imperfections in the scarred, rough-hewn wood of doors and wall panelling. Aveline—on the rare occasions her high-and-mighty captainship deigned to join them down here—expressed disbelief that, even after the Deep Roads, Varric chose to continue calling this place home.

Tobias smirked to himself as he rapped on the dwarf’s chamber door. All right, perhaps he was a little hard on Aveline, given everything she reminded him of, but one thing was definitely certain.
She didn’t understand the simple, blissful pleasure in somewhere that just felt *right*, never mind the sawdust on the floor and the drunken brawls on the doorstep.

From within the suite, there came a noise suspiciously like someone falling over a chair, followed by a muffled curse.

“All right, all right… what?”

The door opened, revealing a rather frowsty-eyed Varric, hair a little awry and chin unshaven, his shirt open to the navel and ink staining the right cuff, along with both his hands. He frowned as he peered up at Tobias.

“Hawke? Maker’s breath… I think I preferred it when you were drinking. Never used to see you until a respectable time of day.”

Tobias pressed a palm to his chest, and affected a hurt look.

“You wound me, Varric. To the very quick.”

The dwarf narrowed his eyes. “Huh. You want your money, right?”

“Yes. But I *have* ordered you breakfast.”

Varric snorted. “All right. Come in. I was just putting the last few touches to—”

“Can I read it?” Tobias asked eagerly, brushing past him into the small, yet comfortable set of rooms. “Do they get away in the end? Or do they have to kill the first mate? I hope they get away. This is *Seven Veils*, right?”

The differences in Varric’s suite during the day and the night hours always amazed Tobias. When he threw it open for guests—when he held court, sitting back in that heavy chair of his, carved with dwarven runes and accented with gold leaf that, unless you rubbed *really* hard, you’d never know was paint on top of brass—it seemed so opulent and luxurious. There were all the knickknacks from Orzammar, the signifiers of House Tethras’ wealth and prestige, and the shelves full of little curiosities he’d picked up on his travels. The long table they sat around would always be groaning with wine and ale, and beeswax candles burned in the ornate wall sconces.

This morning, everything looked very plain. The table was bare, and Varric had obviously been working at the large, battered wooden desk under the far window. It was overflowing with papers, great drifts of them falling to the floor in various stages of screwed-up discard, and others stacked in large, haphazard piles.

Varric smiled. “If I didn’t know you better, Hawke, I’d swear you were just a sappy romantic at heart.”

He shut the door behind them, and gestured to one of the more comfortable, thickly upholstered chairs by the fireplace, where a small fire was smouldering dimly.

Tobias smirked. “Maybe I am. You know me: it’s all moonlight, roses, and poetry… in between the bloodletting and violence.”

“Well, a man has to have his vices,” Varric said dryly. “Sit down. Our friend from the Diamond Quarter was with me last night. Very pleased with his purchases.”

He shambled over to the screened off portion of the chambers that housed his bed, and the more
secure of his trunks and chests. As the scrape and clank of things being unlocked—and the mellifluous music of coins clinking—drifted over towards him, Tobias wandered between the fireplace and Varric’s desk, tempted to sneak a quick peek at what he was writing. Thick, black lines of redaction marked the papers, version upon version scored through and rewritten in the dwarf’s broad, drunken-spider-scrawl. Tobias tipped his head, and thought he made out the word ‘nipple’.

“And you can see that when it’s finished,” Varric reprimanded, crossing the room with two large leather bags in his ink-stained hands. “It’s rude to read a story before it’s ready. Like looking at a woman without her rouge on.”

Tobias shrugged. “Mother always says only fast girls wear rouge.”

“True.” Varric smiled nostalgically. “But never so fast they’re impossible to catch.”

Tobias scoffed, and the dwarf gave him a genial smirk.

“Well, you don’t worry about that, I know. But I suppose the same applies in your case… or at least an equivalent.” Varric cocked his head to the side. “Or are you always the one who does the running?”

“Hilarious,” Tobias said, with teasing acidity. “I think my sides just split.”

Varric set the bags down on the small table, where they slouched and made very encouraging clink noises.

“Oh, now, don’t pout. Come and count your beans.”

A knock at the door presaged the arrival of Nora, bearing two plates of fried… something… and a pitcher of weak beer.

She was, as always, bright and cheerful and faintly flirtatious, and Tobias noted the alertness with which her dark eyes flicked over the coin pouches, and probably calculated their approximate weight, and value. Sharp girl, that one, he thought.

She retreated, with Varric eyeing her backside in the none-too-subtle manner his height allowed, and they ate as they discussed the money, and what the buyer had paid for which pieces.

“So, overall, more than we expected.” Varric nodded at the purse as he chewed a particularly recalcitrant lump of gristle. “Less Isabela’s cut, once it’s all divided, your share works out at just shy of seven sixty-two. Seven hundred and sixty-two sovereigns, thirty-seven silvers and four coppers, if you want to be precise.”

“You’re joking.”

Tobias arched his brows, and let his fork droop in his hand as he reached out to loosen the neck of the nearest bag. His fingers dug into the supple leather, groping hungrily at the outlines of the coins within, and a grin spread across his face.

“Really?”

“May the Paragons strike me dead if I lie,” Varric said solemnly, then shrugged. “Or… I don’t know. Some crap like that.”

Tobias peered into the purse, shovelling in another forkful of fried hash as he regarded the dull glint of gold with happy satisfaction. Burnt, buttery crispness burst on his tongue, and there was enough
money on this table to move out of Lowtown, start setting the estate right—

*And save an awful lot of mages’ lives.*

He swallowed, but the ambrosia of burnt crunchy bits and greasy amalgams of mushroom and bread sat heavily in his throat. Where in the name of Andraste’s flaming crotch had that thought come from?

What he’d pledged to the Underground was one thing, based on the money he expected to have, and what he knew he could earn in his usual line of work. Granted, his particular brand of problem fixing relied too much on bounties and good old-fashioned extortion to be as lucrative as smuggling had, but Tobias lacked the patience—and the manpower—to mount any serious kind of threat to the Coterie’s stranglehold on the coast.

Oh, he might still dabble a little—a man had debts to pay, and a lifestyle to finance, after all—but knocking against the territories of two-bit operations like Athenril’s, or the outcast qunari who were squirreled away in the cliffs was one thing, while seriously running his own professional racket would have been quite another. In any case, what Varric termed ‘the import-export market’ wasn’t stable income all year, but *this*… this, added to what he and the dwarf had already split from the treasures they’d sold, was a sizeable chunk of cash indeed.

It was almost worth Bartrand leaving them for dead in the dark.

Almost… but not quite.

“So, what are you going to do with your share?” Varric asked, taking a swig of his small beer.  
“Aside from looking at it like you want to marry it?”

Tobias grinned and patted the purse. “Oh, the usual. Get blind drunk and spend too much time at The Rose, I imagine.”

Varric chuckled, and peered at him over the rim of his cup. “Hah… I don’t think even *you* can whore your way through that much money, Hawke.”

“You’re probably right.” Tobias allowed himself a self-deprecating shrug, and raised his own flagon of beer. “Not without a couple of small breaks, anyway. You know, to change horses, so to speak.”

Varric winced. “That… gave me images I did not want to contemplate.”

Tobias chugged back a long draught of the greasy, bitter ale, and grinned afresh. “Well, you did *ask.* No, I think maybe I’ll treat myself to a few little toys, too. New boots, new dagger… might even start buying some fancy clothes. I’ll need ’em, now I have my own noble estate.”

The dwarf looked at him in surprise. “Oh? Reconciled to the idea, are we? I thought you weren’t interested in being Lord… whatsis.”

Tobias grimaced. “Technically, there’s no proper title. And, if you’re being precise about it, it’s Mother’s estate. But… yes, I suppose I’m getting used to the idea. I think I might even like it.”

He downed another swallow of his beer, and gave Varric what he hoped was an encouraging smile, at which the dwarf winced again.

“You know, Hawke, it’s funny. I *know* you’re a good liar. I’ve seen you do it. So, how come that sounds almost as believable as Fenris talking about kittens and rainbows?”
Tobias grinned at the image, and shook his head. “All right, so I don’t want it. I never did, you know that. But… Mother does. It means more to her than I ever thought.”

He shook his head wearily and stood his flagon down, fingers toying idly with its glass-jewel-encrusted stem. Varric liked his tableware to catch the candlelight, even if the rubies weren’t real.

“Hm. Tell me,” Varric began suavely, steepling his beringed fingers before him, “when you and Carver, ah… reconnoitred the mansion—”

“Broke in, yes?”

Varric smirked. “I’m just curious: did you actually leave anyone alive to report back on the mess you’d made, or d’you think the bodies are still rotting in the cellars?”

Tobias screwed up his face. “Don’t…. I don’t know. I don’t even want to think about what we’re going to find. Bloody place is going to be a money pit, I just know it. Don’t suppose you know any good renovators?”

Varric shrugged. “I can get you some names.”

“Please. It’s going to be a nightmare. Not to mention, I have no idea what I’m going to do for income.” Tobias picked up the flagon and swished the last inch of ale thoughtfully around its pewter innards. He stared moodily over at the low-smouldering fire, and frowned. “She wants to move in as soon as it’s fixed up. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m all for getting out and letting the Void take Lowtown, but… moving up to the hill, it’s going to impact on business, isn’t it?”

Varric regarded him coolly, and arched one sandy brow. “You don’t think your good name does enough of that already? You attract a lot of attention in this town, Hawke.”

Tobias pulled a face as he knocked back the last of the beer. “Huh. And whose fault is that?”

The dwarf spread his hands, palms up, in a gesture that might have looked like innocence on someone else.

“What can I say? I simply report the truth. After all, you do get results.”

Tobias sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know. For two pins, I’d leave this city. Go back to Ferelden, maybe. If it wasn’t for Mother… still, I don’t know. Maybe I can take some of this coin, put it into a legitimate business. What do you think? Any good openings?”

“For someone of your qualifications?” Varric grinned.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Tobias furrowed his brow. “I’ve worked! Granted, mainly farm labour, which there’s not a precious lot of in Kirkwall, but— I have skills,” he protested, his indignation only mildly exaggerated.

“Of course you do,” Varric soothed. “Largely in, uh, persuasion. And the niceties of the import-export market.”

Tobias groaned. “Fair enough. No one’s going to hire me, and taking me on as a business partner is a reasonable equivalent to spitting on the Coterie’s boots. I see your point.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not so bad. I’ll ask around.”

“Would you?”
Varric smiled lazily, a picture of solicitousness. “Of course I would, Hawke. You know I can’t stand to see you cry.”

Tobias wrinkled his nose and looked for something to throw at him, but the dwarf just laughed.

“All right,” he averred, “maybe I am feeling sorry for myself. But you haven’t had to listen to Mother going on about curtains and chairs and Maker knows what else…. She’s going to be heartbroken when she realises what a state that place is in.” He glanced up at the window, and the way the light had broadened out, the sounds of life and the bustle of the city drifting through the single grimy, cracked pane of glass. “Speaking of which, I should get going. I’ll leave you to finish your story.”

Varric inclined his head graciously. “All right. I ought to get it done. Want to get started on the next one, really.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” He leaned back in his chair, his face settling into the faint smile that usually meant he was about to say something devastating. “I have this wonderful idea for an epic. Moody, impetuous hero faces impossible odds, an idealist pitted against a steel-hearted regime he has no hope of defeating; battle to change society’s very core, dramatic struggles at great personal cost… you know.”

“Hmm.” Tobias’ lips twitched. “Sounds a bit like someone we know.”

“Does it?” Varric’s expression didn’t change. He didn’t even bother to pretend. “Hmm. How is Blondie, anyway?”

A small itch of discomfort began to work its way between Tobias’ shoulder blades. He could have sworn the dwarf knew all about last night… about the Underground, the money, and every single tiny detail. He shouldn’t do; what was there in the backbiting of apostates and mage sympathisers to interest Varric’s network of eyes and ears? His interests lay squarely with the merchants’ guilds and craft halls that, between them, had enough nefarious underbellies to keep anyone occupied. No, the only profit for him in making it his business to know about the mages would be if he was planning on selling information to the templars… and that, Tobias reminded himself sharply, was not Varric’s style. For a start, the templars weren’t the sort of people to keep any such contacts quiet or casual. They liked to believe they owned their informers, trading on the kind of religion-soaked fear and awe they could induce—particularly in a place like Kirkwall.

It might have been a good ten years ago, but the city still acknowledged as an open secret exactly what had happened to the old viscount… and why Dumar was so very careful to stay on Meredith’s good side. No, Varric was far too smart to get himself embroiled in that kind of mess.

Tobias realised that the dwarf was waiting for some kind of response, and flexed his shoulders casually. His arm was all healed up, so he was back to wearing his familiar, comfortable leather jack and a pair of bracers, and despite the warmth of the room goosebumps began to rise on his skin.

“Fine. Or as near to it as he gets, I suppose.”

“Still worrying about him, then?” Varric enquired, the acuteness of his gaze belying his genial tone. Tobias fought the urge to squirm in his seat. Ordinarily, he didn’t particularly mind Varric making those small, pointed observations, but today they felt a little closer to home than usual.

“Perhaps you should tell him you’re going to write his ballad. Might cheer him up a bit.”

He started to grin before he realised Varric wasn’t smiling, and Tobias felt his lips curl into an, ugly
half-discarded sneer.

“Mm. Trouble is,” the dwarf said quietly, “you get into these rebel outlaw things... it’s all very romantic, but the hero nearly always dies at the end.”

Tobias felt his face stiffen, and tried to pretend it was nothing. He blinked, and swallowed heavily.

Varric sighed, and leaned his elbows on the table. “Ah, well. Perhaps I ought to stick to lurid tales of denied passion and fervid adventure.”

“Mm,” Tobias managed. “Maybe. Still... you’ll be able to afford someone to write it all up for you. Can’t be bad, right?”

The dwarf smiled, and that slight hint of awkwardness that seemed to hang between them began to fade away, like mist in the morning sun.

Tobias bade his farewells, promising to drop by the suite that evening for a jar or two, and buckled the moneybags securely about his person. He didn’t much relish the thought of going through Lowtown with that much coin on him, and decided to make his first port of call one of the banking houses on the edge of Hightown. Ordinarily, he didn’t much care for what was basically an Antivan system—and, at its most essential level, involved handing his money over to someone else to guard—but the di Bordi were a wealthy clan, with strong ties to the Crows... which meant they could afford the kind of security that came with qunari mercenaries and iron-bound deposit boxes with enchanted locks. According to Varric, the di Bordi employed a number of Formari enchanters for that specific purpose.

Tobias had to admit that, on balance, the bankers promised a great deal more safety for his money than the squeaky board beneath his bunk, back at Gamlen’s place.

They could have moved out by now, he supposed. He thought about it as he walked, letting his feet chew away at the stones, and his gaze rove over every flicker of movement in the sunlit streets. The stretch between The Hanged Man and Hightown’s southern end was moderately pleasant, in the main, comprising wide, paved walkways, with the great pale cliffs of buildings rising up all around, their frontages riven with cracks and cloaked with ivy. Here and there, windows peered down onto the streets, some with dark sheets of glass glinting like squinted eyes, and in other places lines of washing stretched between the tiny balconies, flapping like pennants of drudgery against the stale air.

They could have. He could have put the very first coins he and Varric had divided between them after the Deep Roads into some small, shabby tenement in Lowtown. Could have exchanged Gamlen’s hovel for two rooms in a labourers’ boarding house, or somewhere a little further up than the old city slums, and still had enough to live comfortably on for a while. It would have been a risk, but he could have done it... only Leandra hadn’t wanted to, had she? Of course not.

Gamlen, for all his faults, was family—as she was so very fond of saying. Besides, that place had been home since they lurched off the boat. She’d shut herself up in there to grieve for Bethany, for losing Carver to the templars... and for him, Tobias supposed, when everyone had thought he was dead.

He blinked, unwilling to think even for a moment of those long, dark months beneath the ground.

I thought we’d lost you.

A light shiver traced his spine at the memory of Anders’ words, overlaid somehow with the agony of relief in his mother’s face when he’d come home. Tobias shook the mixed up, jumbled memories
away. They were false, anyway. Gamlen’s place wasn’t home. Kirkwall wasn’t home. Ferelden was... Lothering, and the wheat and barley fields, waving under a fat, golden summer sun, and the way he and Carver would run through them, legs pinwheeling as they hurdled the stalks in great, leaping, shrieking bounds.

All those things that were lost, and could never be replaced.
Tobias left the Antivan banking house several pounds lighter, and plagued by both a nagging sense of unease and a much more obvious frustration.

The di Bordi had treated him like a refugee, which admittedly he was. His accent marked him out as Fereldan, fair enough, and he knew he didn’t look like most of their upmarket clients, all swathed in velvet and fancy trousers. Well, sod them. Sod the lot of them. They wanted him to be a scummy little dog-lord bastard? He’d be one.

He’d taken undue delight in talking as loudly as possible, putting his feet up on the table, and generally making an arse of himself until the snotty weasel of a man running the front desk had been about ready to have him thrown out… and then he’d dropped a pouch of five hundred sovereigns in front of him, and watched the greasy shit nearly choke on his own tongue.

Tobias had found it almost as gratifying as his performance at the notary’s office, but he was still profoundly irritated, and sick of Kirkwall’s crap.

He knew he ought to head along to the Amell estate, try out the big iron key he’d been given… see if the slavers really had stayed gone. He half-suspected the viscount’s office would have slipped a message to some gang or other and, as soon as he opened the door, he’d be killed where he stood. Then, Dumar would be down one problem, and it could all be chalked up to a terrible accident. The thought made him smile darkly as he walked, and he didn’t really know why he took the turnings he did, or let his feet guide him along Hightown’s western edge, where the merchants who skipped on their market licenses spilled out into the sidestreets, and the nobles walked quickly with their noses in the air, pretending that they were on their way somewhere much more sophisticated.

Tobias glanced up at the narrow strips of sky visible between the towering crags of buildings, the black blots of galleries’ undersides shadowing the street. Not the perilously crowded, heavily leaning slums of Lowtown, but not grand estates with gardens and courtyards, either. The edges of Hightown were not half as salubrious as the central part of the district. Here, the middling sort made their homes: the comparatively cramped merchants’ and master craftsmen’s houses… the people who’d earned their right to the guildhall banquets, but still weren’t top table material, and most likely never would be.

He knew his way from there. When he was working for Athenril, they used to come up in this direction from the old barracks passages, delivering certain goods to certain people. The market—which catered so adeptly to the nice, refined tastes of nice, refined citizens—needed an out-of-sight artery right down to the docks… and that wasn’t all the itches this part of Hightown dealt with, either.

Tobias passed a string of gaudy lanterns hanging from the upstairs balcony of one house, their blatant advertisement winding around the creeping vine that cloaked the walls. Fewer passers-by here, and...
most of those who were about were trying to make out they were just cutting through. Another few paces—familiar ground, familiar steps—and more lanterns lit his way, shining out like beacons.

As he drew to a halt before the brothel, Tobias told himself there wasn’t any harm in it. He had more money than he’d dared hope the last of the relics would earn… surely there was no harm in spreading the wealth around a little?

The Blooming Rose very rarely slept. Its double doors, set back beneath a shady colonnade, were lit by another lantern, a candle flame dancing within its red-painted shade. Always there when needed, Tobias thought bitterly, as he watched the candle’s blurry shadow leap and jump.

Even in the daylight, when the building’s chipped façade was lousy with cracks and the shadows of damp and rot, the promise of that familiar, plush interior called to him. And, he supposed, a little while wouldn’t hurt.

An elven woman in a dirty dress stood nearby, leaning against one of the scuffed, graffiti-riddled columns with one bony hip cocked.

“Have you got the time, lover?” she called, displaying a gappy rank of yellow teeth.

Not one of Lusine’s girls, Tobias noted. Not in that state… and she’d be missing a damn sight more teeth if the Coterie boys caught her on the Rose’s turf.

He started to make for the doors, but she pushed away from her tired old stance by the column, and lurched towards him.

“I said, ’ave you got the time? Come on… suck it off for half a silver, mister? I won’t rook you like that ol’ cow in there will, neither.”

Tobias grimaced. Maker, she was cheap. He shook his head, not dignifying the poor bitch with a response, but she wasn’t easily dissuaded.

“Now, look… you ain’t gonna get a better deal. Gimme a quarter, then. I’ll show you a nice time, yeah? C’mon you tight sod… I got a baby at home needs feeding.”

She reached out, grasping at Tobias’ arm, and the rolling stench of old sweat and cheap liquor wafted over him.

“I said no,” he snapped, pushing her firmly away. “And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get out of here before someone sees you. Understand?”

She tottered backwards, though he hadn’t thought he’d pushed her that hard, and clouded, unfocused eyes narrowed to slits as a venomous snarl split her face.

“Pig!” she shouted, and spat at him.

Her aim wasn’t good, and the gob of saliva hit the stones by his boots, one wet, dark little star in the dust and detritus.

Tobias blinked as she turned and, gathering up all the dignity of a ruffled alley cat, stalked away to the far end of the colonnade, where she immediately started accosting another passer-by. He sincerely doubted the part about the baby. Anyway, if she did have one, she wouldn’t for long. Kirkwall had a way of beating the hope and the potential out of anyone too weak, or too unlucky, to thrive in its thrashing, ugly mire. It was just a shame that tendency so often took innocent lives.
He shook the lingering threads of sympathy from his mind, and entered the whorehouse.

Inside, the atmosphere was quietly convivial. Quintus was keeping bar, chatting to the girl Tobias recognised as Sabina—an acid-tongued piece whose bastard brat ran wild all through the building’s lower floors—and there were few clients around, except for three young men he suspected were off-duty templar recruits. They might be able to shed their armour, but there was something about the close-shorn hair and the faint echo of a heel-click every time they moved that marked them out. He looked twice, though he didn’t mean to do so. Another day, and any one of those lads might have been Carver.

Tobias turned away, dipping a hand to his pocket and readying his best suave smile as Madam Lusine hove into view, like a small schooner enveloped in powder and pink-and-purple velvet.

“Well, well,” she said smugly, “look what we’ve got here. ’Aven’t seen you in a while, my dear. Life treating you nice, is it?”

“Can’t complain,” he said, dropping a short stack of sovereigns into the thin, hard palm that immediately opened before him, and wondering if she knew about the estate. Probably, he supposed. That kind of gossip travelled fast, especially in her line of work. “I’d like—”

“I’m afraid we’ve had a change of personnel.” Lusine’s fingers snapped shut over the coins even as the words left her over-painted lips. “Your Antivan friend don’t work here no more. Ungrateful little whelp, I say. I don’t know… you feed ’em, clothe ’em, then they runs off to the first soft bed what opens up in Hightown.”

“Oh.”

Tobias blinked. It… didn’t matter, of course. He’d barely been thinking about Esel. A whore was just a whore, and it didn’t make a world of difference when all he wanted was an itch scratched, but he’d been availing himself of the Antivan’s services for months. They’d never, ever talked of anything outside that faded, stuffy little room; they hadn’t truly known each other, or been friends, or anything like that… but he had grown used to the man.

He cleared his throat. “Well… maybe I’ll just have a drink to start with.”

Lusine inclined her head. “As you wish, I’m sure.”

She stepped back, gesturing him into the expanse of the lounge, and he nodded politely before going to settle himself at the bar, and ordering a carafe of wine.

Somewhere, someone was playing a fiddle. The low, inexpert melody threaded its way through the gentle chatter, and the throaty laughter of the two girls who were chatting up the incognito templars. The smell of the rose oil that perfumed everything in the place tickled at Tobias’ nose as Quintus placed the wine in front of him, and he stared morosely into its watery, ruby depths.

It would be a first, he supposed: sitting here on a threadbare velvet stool, drinking sweet wine instead of brandy, and walking out again with his trousers still laced. Proof he didn’t need this, perhaps. Proof there was more to him… more to life than these bursts of calculated hedonism, these tiny cuts in the side of a long, aching balloon of pressure.

Still, the imprints of pleasures past blossomed on Tobias’ skin, the remembered delights he associated with this place—with that smell of musty, faded roses—and he chewed on his bottom lip, thinking ruefully of a pale, pliant body beneath his, and a tail of dirty-blond hair to pull on as he growled his frustrations out at the uncaring walls.
Whatever else he had or hadn’t been, Esel had been a good lay and that, Tobias decided, deserved the sombre memorial of a silent toast. He raised the glass to his lips, drank deeply, and knew he wouldn’t leave without his money’s worth. The question was, who?

He peered into the mirror behind the bar, ignoring the slightly hangdog, guilty-looking man who peered right back at him, and eyed up the available talent. Slim pickings, this time of day. Stupid time to come, he supposed. He didn’t know why he had.

Tobias determined he should probably ask Lusine for an introduction… and that would mean finishing the wine first, so he had time to ball up his courage. He frowned, and turned his attention back to the carafe. It wasn’t strong stuff—thirst-quenching instead of leg-wobble-inducing—and he smiled faintly as he thought of Anders’ admonishments about his drinking… and about that night, after they left The Hanged Man, when he’d been so fucking drunk he’d thought he could force it all just far enough that the momentum of the desire that hung between them would carry everything.

It hadn’t worked then. It might never work, he supposed. It definitely hadn’t washed with Anders.

*You’re a pushy bastard when you’re drunk, aren’t you?*

His smile widened at the memory of the words… at the memory of brushing his lips against that stubbled cheek, and the terrible, awkward stalemate they’d forged amid the tar-damp alleyways. Tobias tried to tell himself he didn’t mind it, that being Anders’ friend was enough, but that was a paltry, thin lie. All he’d been doing was waiting, and now he was scared he’d forgotten what it was like not to be waiting for Anders… waiting for someone who couldn’t give him what he wanted.

*Can’t? Or won’t?*

The traitorous thought filtered across Tobias’ mind as he took another swallow of wine. The Underground meeting—Anders’ precious cause, his beloved ideals, which were good and right and important, yes, but weren’t the only thing in life—was too close, too recent. He’d be seeing the healer again tonight, as they’d planned. Giving him the money. It would be more money than he’d promised: a big gesture, Tobias had decided. A grandiloquent expression of his commitment to things… but not just because he wanted Anders’ approval. No. It wasn’t that. It was important. There were lives at stake, and principles, and he did believe in them, and—

*Oh, fuck.*

—he suddenly felt very small, and selfish, and stupid.

Tobias drained his wine and, without looking, poured a fresh one. The ballet of hands, glass and carafe was easy to remember, easy to fall into again. He tossed the sweet liquid back. Here he was, a rich man, with money in an Antivan bank and the key to a noble estate in his pocket, along with the best part of three hundred sovereigns—Maker only knew when he’d carried that much coin on him before—and the Viscount of Kirkwall knew his name. He’d been in ancient places under the earth and defeated demonic horrors… he’d killed a fucking *ogre*, hadn’t he? Yes. And here he was, chugging back cheap plonk in a bawdyhouse, feeling vaguely horny because he thought he ought to, and thinking wistfully about a man who’d lecture him six ways from Wintersend if he actually knew he was here.

It made sense, Tobias supposed, in a dark and ironic sort of way. Stuck in a life he hadn’t chosen, in a city he didn’t like and didn’t want to stay in, shackled to his mother’s name and yet manacled to the underworld by the reputation he’d built simply trying to provide for her. Then there was Carver—and his betrayal still stung, however successfully Tobias might have pretended otherwise—and bloody Meredith and her bloody templars….
One more level of frustration really just seemed like poetic justice, didn’t it?

* Justice. Oh, bloody bollocks….

Tobias poured himself one more glass of wine. He’d long suspected, if there *was* a Maker in the way the Chantry described Him, then He had a really vicious, unpleasant sense of humour.

He frowned as he realised he’d already demolished the carafe, and he was about to ask Quintus for another when a voice cut across his thoughts.

“Well, now… what’s a man like *you* doing in a place like *this*?”

Tobias blinked at the horrendously awful line, dripping as it was with knowing sarcasm, and turned to find a slightly built elven man leaning on the bar beside him. A cascade of red hair fell to his shoulders, and the biggest pair of deeply, impossibly blue eyes Tobias had ever seen stared out laconically from a keen, narrow face.

As far as he was aware, most elves had pale eyes. He’d seen some in incredible hues—greys so cool as to be icy, or bright golden ambers, and even that pale blue that verged on lavender—though the majority seemed to be green, either in soft, leafy shades like Merrill’s, or with that hard, shimmering quality that Fenris’ had. You saw some that weren’t much to be impressed by, of course, and some that were dark and drab, but he’d never come across a gaze so saturated with a sheer vividness of colour.

Beyond that, the elf wasn’t bad looking. He was a little effete for Tobias’ taste, perhaps, draped in an embroidered tunic with matching breeches, the neckline cut to a deep ‘v’ to show off his delicate bone structure and long, pale neck. Long-fingered hands—equally fine, though tough and lean instead of soft and pampered—peeped from the wide cuffs, and they swished showy arcs through the air as the elf spoke, like white birds in flight.

“I know that’s a *frightful* thing to say… but Madam said you were, shall we say, at a loose end? Or *looking* for a loose—”

“Just enjoying a quiet drink,” Tobias said quickly, raising his glass. There were some puns even he wouldn’t stoop to, though he rather liked the way the elf’s face cracked around a filthy grin, in preparation for the crudeness of the joke. “D’you want one?”

That broad, earthy smile settled into an expression of well-practised gracious acceptance, and the elf slipped sinuously onto the stool beside Tobias, just close enough to brush a knee against his thigh.

“Don’t mind if I do. I *am* on my day of rest, after all.”

Tobias smirked, and waggled his empty carafe at Quintus, who obligingly refilled it and provided an extra glass.

*Absolutely. And I’m the Emperor of Orlais.*

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “Hadn’t got anywhere better to be, then?”

The elf’s smile broadened lazily. “Oh, I have several kettles in the fire, you know. But I *always* like to keep *all* my options open.”

Tobias snorted and took a swallow of his wine. “Mm. I bet you do. I bet you’re a *very* busy boy.”

This was familiar ground, albeit cheap and a little marshy. Still, he thought, as he eyed the elf
critically, he could do worse… and he had always wondered whether the things people said about them were true.

That bright, striking gaze lanced him and held him firm, and the elf slowly raised his glass. He took a sip of wine and swallowed deliberately, every flicker of the moment suggestive to the point of indecency, and then he shrugged.

“Well, it’s like I always say: why work if you’re not working hard?”

Despite himself, Tobias chuckled. “Why indeed.”

The elf shuffled closer on his barstool, leaning forwards conspiratorially. As he moved, the smell of rose oil was pricked through with something deeper and heavier, like a perfume of sandalwood and oakmoss, and Tobias found he rather liked it. He rather liked this silly, tacky banter, too: much more fun than the brisk, businesslike exchange of assent and coin.

“So, tell me: are you working hard, serah?”

“I have been,” Tobias said, studying the sharply delicate features, the planes of cheekbones and nose and the swells of a firm-lipped, narrow mouth. Below that, the elf’s long neck segued into a narrow but firm body, hugged pleasingly by the gaudy clothes he wore, and Tobias found he rather liked it. He rather liked this silly, tacky banter, too: much more fun than the brisk, businesslike exchange of assent and coin.

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“Really?” The elf’s pink, pointed tongue wet the very centre of his lower lip. “Well, it just so happens I know the perfect cure.”

Tobias grinned. “I thought you might. D’you think you’d let me in on your secret?”

The elf knocked back the rest of his wine, and those stunning eyes glimmered.

“Honey, I’ll let you into anywhere you want to go. Want to go up?”

He did, Tobias realised. More than he’d thought he would. All those notions of sobriety and chastity—lovely though they’d been—were thin and nebulous now, burning away like mist beneath the heat of a new adventure. Besides, he supposed—if he was going to donate so much of this newfound wealth to charitable causes—he might as well enjoy just a bit of it first. Just a little bit. Just… just to take the edge off things.

He drained his glass and set it sharply back on the well-polished bar, pausing only to stifle a belch.

“Yep. Hey… what’s your name?”

Tobias wasn’t sure why he asked, why it suddenly seemed important that he knew before they went upstairs. The elf blinked, and looked faintly surprised.

“Jethann.”

He didn’t ask Tobias’ name; instead, he slipped sveltely from the stool and flashed a tempting follow-me-fuck-me smile before turning to lead the way up to the first available room.

Tobias eyed the small, neat, tight arse being so provocatively dangled in front of him, and followed obediently.

He’d never been with an elf before. Oh, he’d heard a pile of rumours about them… bendy, randy
little buggers with insatiable appetites and huge endowments. Jethann seemed to live up fairly well to the stereotype, too. He stripped them both with tidy, swift efficiency—businesslike, almost—and grinned broadly as he wiped a wet cloth, scented with rose oil, over Tobias’ body in long, sweeping strokes that were just a little too professional to be truly sensuous.

“My, my,” he said, curling his fingers around Tobias’ length as he knelt before him. “Aren’t we a hardened adventurer?”

Tobias smiled mirthlessly. “Anyone ever tell you that you try too hard?”

Jethann peered up at him with those impossible, unreal eyes, like pools of ink laced with pure wickedness.

“Darling, in my line of work, too hard is rarely a problem.”

Tobias snorted, and knotted his fingers into the fall of soft red hair. There was something about watching those eyes stare up at him while Jethann sucked his prick that made him feel powerful… invincible, almost. Daft, he supposed, because he wasn’t the one in charge. That much was evident from the beginning. He was an audience, although a necessary participant in the elf’s performance—not that he was about to complain. For a start, it turned out that quite a lot of those rumours about his kind were true.

Jethann was certainly extremely flexible, extremely enthusiastic, and very highly skilled. He took Tobias’ pleasure effortlessly in hand and carried it with him to the very brink of ecstasy, where he teased and taunted, mouth and hands goading him almost to a peak over and over again, only to coax him back from it with coquettish laughter.

Tobias sat back on the bed, its musty coverlet yielding up that familiar, worn scent of roses, and leaned against the piled-up pillows. For someone who claimed to be on his day of rest, Jethann didn’t seem to mind doing all the work. That blasted oil the house used—smelled of roses, even had roses painted on the damned bottle stopper—duly applied, he climbed aboard cheerfully, and left Tobias his large, beautifully proportioned rod to minister to as he began his leisurely ride. It was no hardship.

Tobias watched, entranced, as the glossy head pouted towards him with every stroke, then receded back into the silk-sheathed stiffness that felt so good against his palm.

The elf’s pliant body flexed and tautened, big blue eyes widening as he said the things Tobias was meant to want to hear. He tried not to laugh at ‘Ooh, it’s so big’, but couldn’t quite summon up the effort to tell Jethann to stop. Instead, he let his shoulders sink into the pillows, and rocked his hips, chasing the pleasures the whore offered with lazy hunger.

Of course, the pace didn’t stay slow for long. The rising trot became a gallop—a great, loud, bed-crashing, groin-thrashing, groaning thing—and ended with Tobias sprawled out under him, fully spent, sticky and somewhat shocked, both at how good it had been, and how much he’d needed it.

Jethann stretched his arms luxuriously above his head, gazed down at him, and smiled.

“Well,” he said, peering smugly at Tobias’ chest, “look at the mess I made of you! Even on your chin.” One long finger swiped across his jaw, then went to those grinning, pouting lips. “Mm. And you’re all sweaty. Poor shem. Just one minute, and we’ll clean you right up.”

He patted Tobias’ arm companionably—rather as one might praise a hound or a horse for a job well done—and wriggled his hips a little before, with another of those cheerful smirks, he clambered off the bed.
Tobias winced a little at the sensation of being so suddenly abandoned. His cock wavered uncertainly in the air, which felt oddly cold on slick, sensitive flesh. He opened his mouth, but didn’t see much point in saying anything, so just lay back and watched Jethann’s lithe form skirt the room, gathering bowl and washcloth, and allowed his fingers to briefly skate through the wet trail on his chest.

Funny, he thought, how he didn’t feel anything at all once that brief, searing flash of euphoria was over. Not even shame or embarrassment. Jethann was good like that. No apology, no reticence… all that fierce, feral elven pride—like Fenris had; the determination to snatch life by the balls, the product of too many unremittingly tough, thankless years. Pleasure taken where it was found, and advantages scraped from adversity.

Jethann swayed provocatively back to the bed, carrying a bowl of tepid water that Tobias just knew would smell like greasy roses. The elf smirked languorously at him, batting those colossal blue eyes like a girl who knows she’s pretty enough to get her own way.

“You just sit tight and let me take care of you, hm?”

He set the bowl down and wrung out the cloth, the sweeps it made against Tobias’ skin softer this time, yet still not tender. Tobias looked up at the cracked ceiling, and let his gaze pick out the edges of a bloom of damp on the plaster. Maker take him if that didn’t actually look like a rose, too… although he supposed that, after a while, everything did.

He frowned at the feel of Jethann’s lips on his ribcage. The elf was leaning over him, washcloth still in hand, trailing open-mouthed kisses down towards his belly. It was rather nice, but Tobias nevertheless nudged at the auburn head with an open palm.

“Hey. You don’t have to do that. I’m done.”

He could, he supposed, have gone again. Part of him was curious about Jethann’s heavy girth, and how undoubtedly well he knew how to use it, but taking something like that was an intimidating prospect and, in any case, Tobias wasn’t sure he wanted to lie here any longer. That sense of anti-climactic ennui clung to him like a shroud, not so much a feeling of regret as of boredom.

The elf glanced up and shrugged. “No? As you like… but Madam said to treat you properly. She says you pay well. Quite the valued customer,” he added, fingers toying coquettishly with the trail of hair below Tobias’ navel.

“Oh?” Tobias stifled a snort.

Sure. One of the few idiots to come in here who’s played both sides of the Coterie line. She still thinks, one day, she’ll get some pillow talk worth selling out of me. Huh. The old bag can dream….

“Anyway,” Jethann added, those teasing fingers dancing over Tobias’ belly, “is a man not entitled to enjoy his work?”

Tobias smiled, but not with a great deal of sincerity. “Oh, absolutely. Of course, you, you cheeky little bleeder, are on your ‘day of rest’.”

Jethann sat back on his haunches and laughed—really laughed, a truly delighted sound that bubbled from within him. His eyes sparkled, and his whole face seemed to light up.

“Ah! I like you. Really, I do.”

He patted Tobias’ thigh, then swung his legs off the bed, burrowing his toes into the threadbare rug
at the side of it as he leaned his weight back on his hands and regarded his client with a little less circumspection than before.

Tobias watched the way that soft red hair fell against one pale shoulder. It was neatly combed and pinned, so as to set off the long, pointed ears and, despite Jethann’s exertions, there didn’t seem to be a strand out of place. He didn’t sweat much, either. Was that an elven thing? Tobias wondered. He didn’t feel entirely like a human man to the touch… he was smoother, sleeker, and lighter, the way a cat was different to a dog.

“So, tell me,” Tobias said, as nonchalantly as he knew how, with the pangs of recently abated lust still flickering through his body, and warring with that strange, melancholy unease, “uh… what did happen to Esel?”

Jethann widened his incredible eyes. “You didn’t hear? Oh! Quite the coup.”

“Was it?”

“Mm.” The elf pursed his lips conspiratorially. “Landed himself some rich merchant. Few tugs and a good, hard screw, and the fool offered him a paying job as valet and companion, I believe they’re calling it. How sweet. Lucky little bitch. I’d scratch his eyes out myself if I got the chance.”

He said it glibly, as if catering to an expectation, and he didn’t look all that jealous. Tobias frowned.

“So…?”

Jethann waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, he got lucky. It does happen. Whether it lasts is another matter. Hope it serves him well, is all I say. Of course, one day I shall have a valet of my own. And a mansion. Orlais, I think. Cultured, sophisticated… it’ll be divine.”

“You will, huh?” Tobias raised an eyebrow.

What is it with everybody wanting mansions and estates? Am I the only one in this city who could quite happily do without one?

Jethann’s eyes glittered with amusement. “No. Of course not. I know my place. But I can still dream, can’t I? Unless there’s a law against that now.”

His hand fell to the bedspread, and traced the faded embroidery, his smile growing small and tucked as he looked away. Tobias wondered if he was Kirkwall born and bred—the alienage, perhaps—or if he came from somewhere else. What kind of life did someone have to have to bring them to a place like this?

He shrugged. “Not that I know of.”

“Well, then.” The elf looked up and grinned suggestively. “Now, how about we unsheath that sword of yours again, hm? I bet I can show you—”

Tobias shook his head. “No. Thanks, but no. I should go. I… have things I should be doing.” He allowed himself a brief, and rather more genuine, smirk. “Boring, mundane, tiresome things. Are you on in the evenings?”

“Half the week,” Jethann said airily. “The rest of it I’m available for… friends, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh. Right.”
Tobias did know what that meant: the private gatherings on the house’s uppermost floor, where patrons left a great deal of gold at the door, and very little whisper of what went on inside ever escaped. The few rumours that did make it out made the stories back home—about the perversions of Orlesian nobles during the occupation—seem tame.

He nodded, and pretended to take it all in stride, while privately suspecting that he was probably the most boring fuck Jethann had been forced to endure in months. A small, bitter wave of embarrassment began to gnaw at Tobias’ insides, and he wished he’d not bothered to make small talk, or maybe never even given in to these stupid, selfish urges in the first place.

“Do you ever—?” Jethann began.

“No.” Tobias cleared his throat. “No, I uh… I’m not much of a one for parties.”

Those ridiculously blue eyes deepened a little further, and the elf chuckled.

“That’s a shame. You should try it. We’re deliciously depraved… you might even enjoy being corrupted.”

Tobias wrung a smile from his unwilling lips. “Maybe. Maybe not. Thanks, anyway. I… I should go.”

He eased himself awkwardly off the bed, amazed—given everything they’d just done—at how uncomfortable Jethann’s scrutiny could make him feel as he gathered his clothes from the floor, and surreptitiously checked the weight of his scrip. The money was still there, untouched, just as he’d known it would be. Lusine ran too tight a ship to allow any kind of petty buttock-and-twang stuff to queer her operation.

Jethann still just sat there, naked and uncowed, as Tobias dressed. He tried to avoid eye contact, and muttered a clumsy farewell as he let himself out and hotfooted it down the plushly carpeted stairs.

He managed to dodge Lusine on the way out, thanks to the distraction of one of the drunken incognito templar boys busily throwing up into a potted plant, and took a deep breath as he escaped, blinking in the unexpectedly bright daylight, back into Hightown’s shabby fringes.

Tobias sighed, and rubbed a hand over his forehead.

He should go and see to the estate, he supposed. Couldn’t put it off any longer. He just had to take a look, if nothing else.

Maybe contemplate some curtain measurements.

He wrinkled his nose at the thought as he started to walk. The sun warmed his skin, burning away the whispers of caresses and lip-prints. He felt better for it, he supposed… a few tensions eased, a moment snatched back from the day.

He wondered if Fenris was at home. He usually was, and the mansion wasn’t far. Tobias contemplated dropping by, in case he might be up for a scavenge through the bones of the Amell estate. It would be nice not to have to do it alone… only, no, because the estate had been a slavers’ haunt for years.

Hmm. Perhaps not such a good idea.

He wasn’t sure. On the one hand, he and Fenris would be practically neighbours once Leandra got them moved in. On the other, the elf seemed barely more stable than the first time they’d met—that
blood-soaked, vicious night when a simple job had become a complete free-for-all, with Tobias stuck in the middle like a patsy—and he was still too much given to fits of snarling, righteous anger at the mere whiff of Tevinter involvement in anything. Dragging him through the belly of a place that had served as a hub of the Imperium’s abominable trade hardly seemed fair… or sensible, although Tobias reminded himself that the entire sodding city had been a slave port, and even the architecture still screamed it.

No, if Fenris was to leave his slavery behind him, he was in the wrong place. Squatting in his old master’s mansion wasn’t doing him any favours, but it wasn’t just that. It was this place itself… bloody Kirkwall and its vile, insidious grip on people.

Tobias hunched his shoulders as he walked. Fenris should leave. Go somewhere new. Start over. He should leave. He should have been firmer with Leandra, back when they first got off the boat and found the guard had closed the city gates. He’d said then, hadn’t he? Let’s go somewhere else. There’s got to be other cities. Oh, no… she’d had to be determined. Kirkwall was their ancestral home, Kirkwall was where they had family.

The bright, clean streets of central Hightown spilled around Tobias, and he scuffed a boot irritably at the paving stones, through which only a few small weeds dared poke their leaves.

Bloody place. Everything rising up like cliffs, like teeth, like the great white bones of some desiccated creature, and that’s all it was: the stain left by an old and filthy empire, long faded from its power.

He walked, and walked, and didn’t even know why he was heading towards the chantry.

Tobias had never considered himself religious. Not properly so—not the way his mother was, with her pillow book of quotes from the Chant, and bits of inspirational sermons from generations of Divines. She believed. Even if she struggled with the pain and the tumult of the Maker’s so-called plan—the plan that had involved depriving her of her husband, her home, and her daughter, and left her living in a slum with her wastrel brother—she believed in something beyond this world that, in some ineffable way, made sense.

He supposed she took comfort from the litanies and the trappings of religion as much as the belief itself but, whatever the truth of that, it helped. He wished he could do the same.

Tobias knew, as he slipped past the chantry’s gilded doors (standing open at this time of day, to symbolically welcome all comers into the heart of the Maker… or some such crap), that it was stupid. He shouldn’t be here. The whole place was crawling with templars, and he had no business going inside.

It was quiet, though. Only place in Hightown that wasn’t filled with chatter, unless it was just before a service, and the great and the good of the district were milling about in their finery, waiting to see and be seen.

The only sounds of voices were the quiet murmurings of the sisters, and even those were filtered dimly through the dusty, candle-hazy air. Tobias peered up at the enormous statue of Andraste that dominated the chancel, flanked by silken banners emblazoned with her holy symbols, the flawless bronze of her skin looking almost lifelike in the flickering reflections of the eternal flame. The smells of oil and incense coiled through the air, and he glanced nervously at the other statues that lined the nave. There were smaller versions of the prophet, their pedestals crusted with the melted wax of dozens of votary candles, effigies of other figures from her legend, and—somewhat less popular with the penitents—even one of General Maferath. Tobias suppressed a shudder as he thought of the sights those unblinking bronze eyes must have seen. It wasn’t surprising he felt as if they were
staring at him.

He stole softly to the rack that held candles and tapers, and pulled a handful of sovereigns from his scrip, keeping them tucked tightly into his palm until he could drop them, hidden, into the donations box. Flamelight flickered over his face as he took one soft, smooth cylinder of wax and, kneeling before the graven prophet, lit it from one of the other candles already burning. He held it as it warmed in his fingers, and stared into the core of the flame, unsure of what he was supposed to feel.

His thoughts trailed back to that night—so long ago, and yet still so very fresh—that he, Varric and Carver had come here with Anders, expecting to find another mage. Tobias resisted the urge to glance up at the gallery where it had happened. He’d been back since, a few times. They’d got the bloodstains out. But, all the same, it was just over there, where Karl had died, and he’d found himself fighting a pack of templars beside a man who was… well, whatever Anders was. It had been the start of everything, hadn’t it? The night he’d realised how deep the cause ran. As if he could have denied, after that, how bad things were in Kirkwall. The mages, the qunari… bloody Meredith, and the Chantry’s strange mix of political tendrils in unexpected places, and yet complete and obstinate neutrality where it counted.

Blue and white spots began to sear Tobias’ vision, and he dripped a little wax onto the pedestal before he set his candle down, fixing it to the stone as one tribute, one plea, among many.

If there was a Maker, and His heavenly bride could entreat Him to turn His face back to the world, then there was only one thing Tobias wanted. He didn’t know how to ask for it, or what you did with it if you had it, but peace seemed like a really nice idea.

He breathed deeply, inhaling the smell of beeswax and wood polish and incense, and felt a flush of warmth ghost over his skin.

There were a few other people around, but just a couple of penitents and lay brothers. Low voices drifted down from the sanctuary, and Tobias heard footsteps creak against the boards. He slipped into one of the pews, absently rubbing his candle-greased fingertips together before he folded his hands and leaned on the dark wood.

He’d never really held onto more than the fragments of the prayers and canticles of his mother’s teachings, and all those primers he’d learned to read from. None of the things he remembered really matched the way he felt, or offered comfort for the worries and fears that plagued him. Instead, Tobias closed his eyes and thought of Bethany, the way he did when the world turned quiet, and of his father, and hoped—somehow, vaguely—that they were both at peace, and knew how much they were missed, and loved.

He wasn’t sure if it was proper praying, doing that, or thinking of his mother, and Carver, and even Gamlen, with the fervent hope that things might all be all right. Only children thought that worked, he supposed: clutching the thoughts of everyone they loved close to them, reaching out for the hope that they would all be happy, and depositing responsibility for that wish in the lap of some distant god, like the figure of the ultimate grown-up.

You never know. Maybe it works.

His lips moved soundlessly over a garbled, misquoted bit of the Canticle of Transfigurations, and Tobias squeezed his eyes tight shut, trying not to hear the piping, pious voice of seven-year-old Bethany as she knelt at the side of her bed.

…and please look after Mother, and Father, and my big brother Tobias, and even Carver, unless he nails my braid to the bed again, and keep us safe and protect us….
If there was a Maker, He was different to the Chantry that purported to act in His name. He had to be. Malcolm had always been clear on that, despite his distaste for the Circle, and the templars, and the things that some corners of the Chantry preached against mages. There was good in them, he’d said. Most of them, anyway, and no one should hate anyone just for what they were, priest or mage. Hate was what made wickedness in the world, as the Chant itself taught.

*With passion’d breath does the darkness creep.*

*It is the whisper in the night, the lie upon your sleep.*

Besides, the Fade was real. Spirits and demons walked there, and the darkspawn were certainly real enough, so who was to say there wasn’t truly a god who had wrought the Golden City?

Tobias wasn’t sure whether he wanted to believe it, or even if he *wanted* any kind of truth. Maybe just hoping was enough. Hope and love: they were two of the only things that mattered, weren’t they?

The last words of Transfigurations fell from his lips, and they stilled as he furrowed his brow, aware that he had more than just his family on his mind. The Underground, and the reasons it existed; the darkness that swathed this city, the filth and corruption and poverty, and all the other things he tried not think about on a daily basis because, if you dwelled on all the injustice in the world, you’d go mad….

*Keep him safe. Please.*

Tobias opened his eyes, and the stars of candle flames burst before them, dizzying in the thick, stultifying air. The full idiocy of the image struck him then: an apostate, begging for peace, protection, and maybe even forgiveness in the very building that housed those who’d see him locked up.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid….*

He blinked, aware of footsteps on the stones close by, the sound of armour fitments clinking, and cold terror coursed down his spine. *Templar.* The thought set off a reaction so instinctive, so impulsive that Tobias could barely clamp down on it before it was too late. Power crackled under his skin, making the air taste metallic and sharp. He wanted to turn, let force and fire burst from his palms and burn a path before him, despite the fact that, his whole life, he’d been taught to keep his magic hidden. He’d grown so used to hiding it he hardly needed to think about it, yet now it took all his strength to stop the beast from tearing out, and—

“Serah Hawke? It is you, isn’t it?”

*Oh, sod.*

Tobias’ shoulders stiffened at the curious brogue in the voice, and he quickly unclasped his hands. Not a templar. All the same, bloody typical, he thought. He couldn’t even get a few moments’ peace and privacy here, of all places.

But, nevertheless, *him…?*

“My lord,” he said, dredging up his best obsequious smile as he turned in the pew, and faced His Royal Highness, Prince Sebastian Vael of Starkhaven… flanked by Grand Cleric Elthina herself, no less, *and* wearing that incredibly shiny suit of brilliant white armour.

Tobias felt his face set into a rictus, and his stomach clench around a hard knot of wanting to be anywhere else but there.
“What a pleasant surprise,” he managed, rising to his feet and acknowledging the grand cleric with a polite incline of his head. “Your Reverence.”

He’d met the woman once or twice before; she’d had quite a lot of personal involvement with the refugees when they first flooded the city and, of course, she had tried to convince him not to take the bounty on the Flint Company mercenaries offered by the prince-turned-holy-brother standing beside her.

Tobias wasn’t sure if she remembered that. It had been over a year ago, though the woman’s hard-eyed stare suggested she had a long memory.

That the princeling himself should remember Tobias’ name, however… that was odd. It was not at all usual, in his line of work, to find clients of Vael’s sort remembering your name, much less actually approaching you once the work was done. They didn’t like reminders, he’d always supposed; the unpleasant recollection that, when they wanted someone killed, some other bugger had to deal with the mess.

Elthina was watching him steadily, and a flare of worrisome concern burst in Tobias’ chest. This did not bode well. Not at all.

“We were just talking of you,” Sebastian said genially, fixing him with those very striking, piercing blue eyes. “In a roundabout sort of way, at least.”

“Oh?” Tobias blinked, briefly and uncomfortably reminded of the blue eyes that had figured slightly earlier in his day. From whorehouse to chapel, then accosted by priests and royalty… if I’d known, I’d have worn my best shirt. He glanced nervously at the Grand Cleric. “Um. Good things, I hope.”

“I hear a great deal on many subjects,” Elthina said evasively, though a smile touched her lips. “Will you walk with us, Serah Hawke? We were just returning to my chamber.”

She gestured towards one of the upper galleries, and Tobias’ gut clenched.

“I, er… um….”

Set-up. Got to be a set-up. What do they want with me? Not likely to be tea and biscuits and a chat about the floral arrangements. Oh, fuck…. How do you say no to the grand cleric?

“It’s certainly the Maker’s providence to find you here,” Sebastian said, without a trace of irony or sarcasm, as Tobias slipped from the pew. “I was saying to Her Reverence only a moment ago that you performed the task I asked of you admirably.”

“Taking down the Flint Company?” Tobias prompted, not entirely sure whether they were both talking about the same thing.

His Royal Shininess called it a ‘task’; Tobias called it a complicated, messy bounty. He remembered the best part of three weeks spent trailing around the Wounded Coast, rooting out a bunch of thugs and bandits who called themselves mercenaries. All in all, thirty-six men had been killed, including one whose actual liver Fenris had ripped out and shown to him as he died.

Very, very messy.

Tobias had offered to split the proceeds between Fenris, Varric, and Anders, and his quarter of everything they looted from the camps—plus His High-and-Mighty-Princeling’s actual payment—had not really made up for having to endure Fenris and Anders being at each other’s throats the whole time. He recalled realising that he’d underestimated the elf’s hatred for mages in general… and
apparently for Anders in particular.

It had been a rather fraught trip around the coastline.

“Yes,” the princeling said gravely as they progressed towards the staircase, his handsome face pinched into a frown. “You destroyed those murderers. You had my gratitude for that… you still do.”

Tobias opened his mouth to say something about fees having been paid and it really not being a problem, but Sebastian evidently hadn’t finished. The wooden treads creaked under his sabaton, and he shook his head wearily.

“I don’t know. I thought it would end there. None of those men remain, yet—now that I know who sent them—it’s harder to see their deaths as justice.”

“Death is never justice,” the grand cleric reproved, though not unkindly.

He blinked. “No. No, of course not, but….”

Tobias frowned. The job was more than a year old, and his memory of the details was sketchy. All the same, despite his temptation to point out that mercenaries were like crabgrass, and rarely eradicated by lopping off the top stems, something prickled at the back of his mind.

“Wait, sorry… you found out who hired them?”

“I did,” the princeling announced bitterly.

He turned at the top of the stairs, the silken banners emblazoned with the symbol of the holy flame giving him the kind of regal backdrop that Tobias suspected he might practice poses for in the mirror.

He didn’t look very happy about it, at any rate. Elthina ushered them into the chamber, and Tobias glanced around at the jewel-like paintings on the walls, the thickly piled rugs and cushions, and the dark wooden furniture whose every ornate curlicue gleamed with polish. A vase of blue flowers stood on the desk, and light streamed in through a stained glass window set high into the cream-coloured stone of the wall.

So much for a pious life of poverty and penance.

“Please, gentlemen.” The grand cleric gestured graciously at the array of seating the room offered. “Sit.”

She lowered herself into the high-backed chair behind her desk, and Sebastian sat in a chair to her right… a position it looked as if he occupied often. Tobias settled tentatively into the chair nearest the door, and suspected he’d been royally ambushed.

When he’d taken the bounty His Royal Piquedness had offered, he’d seen the friction it had caused between Sebastian and Elthina. He’d heard the story of how Starkhaven had fallen into strife and chaos, with some far-flung Vael cousin being deposited on the throne—presumably the worst class of weak-chinned, fluff-brained, dribbling noble idiot—and the last of the legitimate royal line had fetched up back in Kirkwall, where he had been affirmed as a lay brother a decade before, dispossessed and hungry for revenge.

Of course—as he remembered Anders pointing out, halfway up the coast path, while they waited for Varric to disarm some clumsy trap—the flip side of the sovereign was simply that it was politics. Noble families tussled for control all the time, and Sebastian had already relinquished his birthright in
favour of his Chantry vows. Words like ‘true heir’ and ‘usurper’ were effectively just a matter of opinion.

Tobias had quirked an eyebrow at that. And that’s Justice, is it?

He recalled Anders shrugging and scuffing a boot in the sand. Justice doesn’t take sides. If the Vaels were really murdered, then no, it’s not right... but d’you think they’ve always been completely fair and honest? Starkhaven’s elite has always been tied to the Chantry by a short tether. I bet they’ve got their own skeletons hidden away.

Now, Tobias considered the man who sat before him. Sebastian’s white armour—liberally emblazoned with heraldic devices and probably about as much use in battle as a sugar sword—definitely indicated he had not put aside the outrage of his family’s destruction and returned to a peaceful life in the Chantry. And yet, here he was, at the grand cleric’s right hand. This union unsettled Tobias immeasurably, despite the fact that, ordinarily, he wouldn’t have given a stuff about the details of the fall-out from the Flint Company’s massacre, or whether Sebastian’s desire for revenge endangered his vows and put his immortal soul into peril… or whatever.

As far as Tobias was concerned, any moral wrangling on a client’s behalf, especially this far after the event, was none of his business—as long as it didn’t affect him being paid, in full and on time. Likewise, he didn’t care to know what had started the antagonism between the two sides. It was usually money, or power, or perhaps some kind of personal grudge. Either way, he dealt with the problem, got his coin, and everyone went on their way. Such was the nasty, mean, brief life on Kirkwall’s meat market of an underworld.

The only times Tobias had been confronted with the kind of rueful, big-eyed face Sebastian was pulling now were the occasions some daft sod had bitten off more than they could chew and wanted something called off because the Coterie, or maybe the Red River boys, had wind of it and were making life unpleasant.

The princeling tipped his chiselled jaw line, those admittedly beautiful blue eyes shaded with regret.

“I… I have learned that the Flint Company were hired by the Harimanns, a noble family of Kirkwall—and firm allies of my parent… or so we thought. It’s hard to believe they could betray us like this.”

Tobias felt his face stiffen, caught between the princeling’s sad, angry expression, and Elthina’s mild, yet unblinking gaze.

Oh, sod. Politics.

He edged his weight back uncomfortably in the hard wooden chair, and wet his lips.

“Hm. I see. So, you know them well?”

Sebastian shook his head. “Not terribly. Lord Harimann used to be a good man, but he became rather strange in his dotage. He died some years back, and his daughter, Lady Johane, took over the running of the family’s estates. Apparently, she’s become quite reclusive of late.”

Tobias nodded slowly, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of his gut. He didn’t consider himself superstitious, but he could have sworn Andraste herself had guided his steps to the chantry today, purely for the pleasure of having a bloody good laugh at his expense.

“And you think she was behind the coup?”

Sebastian shook his head, and the fitments on his shiny white armour clinked gently. Tobias
frowned. Surely someone who wandered around dressed up to the nines like that, while professing to be a pious brother of the chantry, wasn’t simply being pretentious. Perhaps it was more an armour of perception: a shell donned so that the wearer could hide behind its protection, shrinking from too much inquisitive scrutiny.

In that case, I want one.

His Shininess sighed. “I don’t know. I have no idea what makes someone turn to outright murder like that. Money? Power?”

Tobias suppressed a smirk. Yes, those… or a good pair of boots, a meat sandwich, or looking at somebody the wrong way in a crowded tavern. Welcome to the real world, Your Majesty.

“They’re the usual suspects,” he said instead. “And this is why the cycle of violence never gets broken….”

“You jest,” Elthina said mildly, “but it is the truth.” She turned to the princeling, her gaze growing harder. “You see what I meant, Sebastian? Give this up. Dedicate yourself to the Chantry, as you swore, and lay aside your armour again.”

She began to reach out one thin, heavily veined hand, and Tobias’ gaze followed the complex ballet of subtext in the way Sebastian’s head turned slightly away, and the cleric’s fingers curled, then stilled.

A pained frown crossed the princeling’s face. “I… I shall. Nothing would make me happier. But I must see this finished first. I must know what drove Lady Harimann to this madness.”

“It certainly wasn’t very discreet,” Tobias admitted, before he even realised he’d spoken aloud. He blinked, finding that unnerving twinset of blue glares on him again, pinning him to the chair against the room’s scent of beeswax and pious living. “Uh… I mean, it’s odd that she should allow herself to be tied to the Flint Company. If I may ask, how did you discover—?”

The grand cleric’s lips pursed, like the back end of a duck with a lemon up it, and Sebastian’s expression hardened, just for a moment making him look like a man who really did deserve to be wearing all that showy armour.

“It was not easy. It has taken a great deal of time, and coin, and it was not a journey I would care to repeat. The information you brought me from the leader of the Flint Company helped a great deal.”

Tobias winced. All they’d had off the thugs was a few grubby bits of paper and the name of the barker who’d set them up with their most recent job. Only, that meant—

This silly sod’s been buying his information from the Coterie. Oh, bugger… that’s all I need.

“I see,” he said, as calmly as he could manage. “So, now, you intend to do what, exactly?”

Sebastian gave him a surprisingly suave smile, all full mouth and velvety eyes, and Tobias blinked, inwardly cussing the way it made heat pool in his belly. The realisation that had been sneaking up on him ever since the princeling dragged him out of his pew curdled into a sense of totally unsurprised dread.

“Oh. This is why everyone’s looking at me, isn’t it?”

Sebastian’s smile widened. “I had meant to write a letter to you this very evening. The Maker’s grace saw fit to bring you to me instead. Surely, this is a sign.”
Tobias suppressed a grimace. *Signs and visions. Oh, good. That’s just peachy*…

“Your reputation speaks for itself, serah,” Elthina said, fixing him with a gently disapproving frown. “But, you aided Sebastian once before, and if this allows him to make peace, then it is the Maker’s work. You have, I believe, taken on lesser causes.”

He winced. “Will all due respect, Your Reverence, this isn’t a cause. This is politics.”

“Please,” the princelings broke in, “I have nowhere else to turn.”

*Well, I doubt* that…

Tobias was about to quip that problem fixers like him were ten a copper in any disreputable Lowtown tavern—and maybe find some way to excuse himself—but Sebastian leaned forwards, looking so terribly earnest.

“Just help me confront Lady Harimann. I cannot go to see her alone. I shall need some… security. Someone whose skills and diplomacy are both well-honed. Of course, I shall see you amply rewarded.”

Tobias’ ears pricked up at the same instant his heart sank.

Still, if he was to be placed over a barrel, he supposed he might as well be getting paid for it. He sucked his teeth thoughtfully.

It was an opportunity he’d be a fool to pass up. On the one hand: noble family, potentially powerful enemies if crossed. On the other: Prince of Starkhaven baying for revenge, distinct possibility of routing said family, no survivors, *therefore* a certain degree of looting said family’s noble estate could be quite likely.

*Who knows? Maybe they’ll have an Antivan walnut dining set they don’t need anymore. Or curtains, or perhaps a nice couple of side tables*…

Tobias bit his lip. “We-ell… all right. Flattery *does* get you everywhere with me. I’m in. But tell me… how low-key do you want to keep this, uh, confrontation?” He glanced between the princelings and the grand cleric, both of them apparently trying to pretend they didn’t know what he meant, and cleared his throat as he leaned forwards, propping his arms on his knees. “By which I mean, how heavily armed would you like to be when we go to see Her Ladyship? Because I know just the people… only they’re not all that subtle.”
 Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Tobias accompanies Sebastian to the Harimann mansion, and is forced to reveal a truth he would rather have kept private. (Also, mild caveat for violence. Not much, especially by my standards, but it's there.)

The Chantry courtyard was filled with bright sunlight and, as Tobias made his way down the great, sweeping steps—walking with a certain degree of discomfort at the side of the Prince of Starkhaven—the paving stones seemed almost to glimmer.

“Your associate,” Sebastian said, peering inquisitively at him. “You said he doesn’t live far from here?”

“No.” Tobias gestured to the turning that led to the swankier end of the Hightown estates…and Danarius’ mansion. “This way.”

“Ah.”

Booted feet echoed crisply against the stones, and Tobias caught a number of passers-by glancing at them. A couple of city guards seemed to notice, too, and he wondered how long it would be before the news filtered back to Aveline. Oh, she still watched him, he knew…watched out for him, she said, and he suspected it was on his mother’s request, although Leandra would never have admitted it.

Bloody women, always conspiring….

Of course, it might have had something to do with the fact that, since leaving the chantry, Sebastian was sporting a large, curved bow and an elaborately tooled quiver of arrows at his back. Tobias hadn’t expected that. If he’d thought about it at all, he supposed he’d assumed princes used swords and shields, like they did in children’s stories. Bethany had owned a book like that when she was little, with woodcuts of valiant heroes slaying dragons and…ogres. He blinked, but the memory that rose—so well-worn now, like a polished stone grinding against the inside of his head, instead of a whetted flint—barely made him stumble.

The princeling cleared his throat. “So, I, uh, understand you have come into the ownership of your family’s estate since last we met? Allow me to congratulate you, Serah Hawke. The Amells were always a fine family, a credit to Kirkwall’s noble—”

“Really more my mother’s relatives than mine,” Tobias said curtly, as they turned from the wide expanse of the courtyard into the shadier streets that opened out into the estates’ approach. “My father—”

—was an apostate—

“—was Fereldan,” he said instead, allowing the slightly bent shape of the truth to pull omissions around it like a silken cocoon.

Tobias gritted his teeth. He had no problem with lying, and he was good at it. However, with every
passing week, he felt just a little more bitter at denying everything Malcolm had been, every grain of his history and motivations.

*It’s hanging around with Anders that does it, I bet.*

That was what Varric would have said, he supposed, and he had to choke down a small smile at the thought of the dwarf’s genially dirty grin.

*Idealism, Hawke… it’s like the clap. Spread by proximity, and burns like hell.*

Just one throwaway line over beer in *The Hanged Man* and, at the time, it had made him blush a little. Not that Tobias was happy admitting, even as concepts, that the conjunction of Anders and venereal disease had the power to do that to him.

He pushed the thoughts away, and realised that Sebastian was still looking at him, as if gauging an appropriate response.

“He’s… no longer with us, then?” the princeling ventured.

Tobias blinked. That accent really was interesting: all lilts and burrs. It was like every consonant was just waiting for a passing vowel to grab hold of and rough up, maybe even grope a little. He shook his head.

“No. We left when the Blight started, but Father died a few years before.”

“Ah. I’m sorry,” Sebastian offered, as they passed beneath a white colonnade. “Both for the loss of your father, and your homeland. Starkhaven was fortunate to see almost nothing of the Blight… I suppose the whole of the Marches got off lightly, with the exception of—”

“The refugees, yes.” Tobias nodded, squinting in the dappled sunlight. “We have *tried* not to make too much of a mess.”

“Oh, I-I didn’t mean—”

“No.”

Tobias glanced up at the tops of the colonnade’s columns. They were decorated with a frieze of intertwining leaves. All very new, very fresh, very modern, he thought. Of course, a lot of the architecture around the estates was like that; either newly built, making ostentatious use of dwarven craftsmen and showy materials, or brand-new designs chiselled over the top of the old Tevinter ones. Better a twining vine than a row of shackled slaves, and all that.

There was another courtyard here: small, shady, and sedate. A tiny fountain stood in the centre of it, less bubbling cheerfully than burping quietly to itself and churning out brackish water from rusted pipes. On three sides of the courtyard, old houses reared up, their great, cracked façades speaking of generations’ worth of threadbare, dishevelled nobility, the painful burdens of both upkeep and decay inscribed across their stonework.

*Old families, old houses… years and years and years of it, just stretching out into nothingness. Yuck.*

Fenris’ door lay on the other side of the courtyard, the walls of the mansion cloaked with a heavy, obscuring growth of creepers. Tobias nodded towards it.

“You’d, uh, probably best wait here,” he said, shooting a sidelong glance at His Royal Shininess and his incredibly heraldic armour. “My… associate is a rather private man. Let me talk to him before I
The princeling frowned, but nodded. “Very well. And I— I do appreciate this, Hawke. Truly.”

Tobias squeezed out a thin smile, and crossed the courtyard. He hated these buildings, with their hulking frontages rearing up so high they could almost block out the sky. They all seemed to have tiny windows, too; barely little chinks of light in so much grey and white stone, marked with years of decay.

He chewed at the inside of his lip as he stood by Fenris’ door, and—as he tugged on the bell-pull and heard the mechanism within creaking sonorously into life—Tobias considered quite how best to phrase this one.

_Fenris! You look bored! Want to come assassinate a noblewoman?_

No, maybe not.

Inside, the bell chimed. He wondered what the elf was doing in there. Drinking? Brooding? Both?

_So, there’s this dynastic coup going on in Starkhaven. They’re paying well…._

That was better. Not great, but better.

_Maker’s balls, it’s past noon. He’s going to be drunk and ornery, isn’t he? Oh, this is going to be delightful, I just know it._

It was hard to hear much through the heavy oak, but Tobias thought he caught the sound of the inner door opening, and he stepped back as he waited for Fenris to greet him, thumbs stuck in his belt loops, and his most ingenuous smile plastered to his face.

The door creaked slowly open, revealing a suspicious—and apparently sober—Fenris, peering at him from the mansion’s shadowy interior.

“Hawke.”

That low, gravel-washed voice drew the word out, somehow managing to inject it with half a dozen different inflections. Why was he here, what did he want, and what was he looking so damn cheerful about, for starters, Tobias guessed. He widened his grin.

“Fenris! You look well.”

That much was true. Without that protective shell of armour—clad in simple breeches and a shirt open enough at the neck to show the winged lines of lyrium brands descending from his throat to his chest—there was something much more vital and alive about Fenris. A kind of alert intensity lingered in those pale green eyes, too, and Tobias wondered if he’d caught the elf in contemplation; perhaps poring over some of Danarius’ old tomes, or planning some great and mysterious revenge. Or, equally possible, devising new strategies with which to whip everyone’s arse on Diamondback night. Tobias already owed him a tally of some eight sovereigns, and was fairly convinced that Fenris was an even more vicious as a card player than he was as a warrior.

One dark eyebrow arched sardonically as the elf wrinkled his nose. “And you smell like a whorehouse.”

Tobias’ genial grin didn’t flicker, although he struggled to quash the sudden rush of thoughts about Jethann. He’d rather hoped the whiff of rose oil had worn off, but maybe the sharp sense of smell
was an elven peculiarity, like the lack of body hair, or the eye colour, or the—

—size of that thing…. I wonder if Fenris—no. No, no, no. Don’t even think about it.

Maybe, Tobias reflected hurriedly, it was just a peculiarity restricted to Fenris.

He shrugged. “I could say it’s a new cologne, but you wouldn’t believe me. Anyway, so a man gets bored sometimes. It really doesn’t matter, does it?”

An odd look passed over Fenris’ face. “I merely meant—”

“Look, awkward thing,” Tobias cut in, pressing the unusual advantage of having somehow surprised the elf; he could gloat about that later. “But it’s business. You remember last year, that thing with the Flint Company? The bounty?”


“Same, uh, patron. Over there, by the fountain—no, don’t look—and he just found out some noblewoman hired the company to do her dirty work. Wants to confront her over betraying his parents, whole messy business… but wants a little back-up, if you understand my meaning? Yes?”

Fenris scowled, that shock of white hair falling forwards as he tilted his head, and those shimmering eyes narrowed.

“C’mon….” Tobias shifted his weight from foot to foot, allowing the movement to imply a little more anxiety than he really felt. “Are you in? You should come and meet him, anyway. You’ll want to get a look, if only for the laughs. I swear,” he added, leaning in conspiratorially, “you can see your face in his armour, it’s that shiny. And white. White. On Andraste’s cheek, I’m not lying.”

Fenris regarded him suspiciously and swayed back just a little. Tobias suddenly felt a little more sensitive about that whole ‘whorehouse’ crack, and stepped nonchalantly back, leaning an elbow on the vine-and-moss-covered balustrade that fringed the porch. He dredged up another small smile, trying to ignore the pricking lances of embarrassment and self-consciousness.

“He’s paying well,” he added helpfully. Well, he assumed the princeling would. He had before, and there was no way Tobias was going to admit he’d effectively been railroaded into this particular commission by the grand cleric.

Fenris’ eyes grew a little narrower.

“Do you intend to bring the abomination with us?”

“No.” The corner of Tobias’ lips jerked into a quick, involuntary smile. “But I’ll tell Anders how much you miss him when he’s not around.”

“Huh.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be a good split. You, me, maybe go pick up Varric if he’s around… that’s a three-way cut on the money, plus whatever you might slip into a pocket, and—”

The elf’s face tautened. “I am not a thief, Hawke.”

“Never said you were,” Tobias countered smoothly. “So? What d’you say? Beats sitting all alone in the dark in there, doesn’t it?”

Fenris sighed laboriously, although the tell-tale curl at the corner of his mouth, no matter how very
slight it was, suggested his interest had been piqued.

“Some of us actually enjoy our solitude,” he chided, his face deadpan.

“Yeah, yeah… I’ll tell His Royal Shininess you’re not interested, then, shall I?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Tobias grinned. “Thought not. I’ll wait for you out front.”

The elf nodded, and shut the door.

As Tobias wandered back over to Sebastian, he allowed himself a very brief ponder upon the matter of Fenris changing his clothes, and held the thoughts up against his oh so recent explorations of the male elven form.

Funny, he thought, how different Fenris was to Jethann. All right, so slavery, and whatever it was that Danarius had done to brand the lyrium into his flesh—Anders reckoned a blood ritual, and had been known to comment darkly that it was a kind of magic that left unpleasant marks on people, inside as well as out—probably wasn’t comparable to alienage life. That was reputedly unpleasant, yes, and short, brutal, hard… all those things that he was familiar with hearing in disaffected tavern diatribes. Still, it was strange that, of the two elven men, one should so shroud himself in pride and secrecy, and the other should fly so far from social convention.

*Still, you have to wonder how far down the lyrium goes….*

He flashed a grin at the princeling, who was looking at him expectantly.

“Your associate will be joining us then?” he asked, voice ineffectively hushed against the stonework.

Tobias nodded. “Mm-hm. Just give him a few minutes. And, uh, just so I’ve mentioned it? He has… tattoos, let’s say.” He gestured loosely in the air, fingers describing the curves and patterns of Fenris’ brands. “In fact, he’s quite striking, generally speaking. Not, er, not like most elves you see in Kirkwall. But—”

“He’s elven? Oh. I mean, I… I didn’t expect that.”

Sebastian seemed suddenly wary, and Tobias suspected he knew why: “striking tattooed elf” usually equated to “unstable reactionary painted up to look like a Dalish and screaming about wresting his birthrights back from the human bastards”.

“Just, uh, try not to stare,” he suggested, giving the princeling an encouraging grin. “All right?”

Sebastian surprised him then. He smiled back; a disarmingly charismatic arrangement of terribly white teeth, stunning blue eyes and—Tobias stifled a disbelieving groan—actual, Maker-sworn dimples.

“I will endeavour not to make a fool of myself,” he promised, in that lusciously lilting brogue.

He was an extremely attractive man, despite the daft armour. Tobias smirked, and allowed his voice to drop to a low, seductive purr.

“Oh, I’m sure of that, my lord. It seems to me a man like you is always… in control.”

It was barely more than playful flirtation, glib and effortless, but it had bugger all effect on the princeling, and Tobias supposed that was typical. He seemed destined to be surrounded by
handsome men who were all either oblivious to his attentions or too messed up to respond to them. Or, more likely in Sebastian’s case, were just not inclined to be interested in the first place.

He sighed inwardly. Well, the rumours were that, before his affirmation in the Chantry, His Royal Shininess had been quite the dissipated wencher… and apparently only wenches. Seemed that about summed it up, anyway.

*How dull.*

Sebastian had turned his head, and was frowning at the paving stones.

Tobias blinked. That was a look he’d seen elsewhere; that blend of regret and grief, tinged with self-loathing but coloured over hard with anger and—in that brief moment—it confused him.

“Huh. Not as controlled as you might think,” the princeling said bitterly, shaking his head. He glanced at Tobias, those blue eyes worn from velvet smoothness to troubled clouds. “And please, not ’my lord’. Sebastian. Elthina is right; I laid aside all that I was born to when I was affirmed. As a brother of the Chantry, I… I don’t know. What she says is true—I am betraying my vows by persisting on this path. But, if it was your family that had been murdered, Hawke… everything you knew ripped from beneath your feet… could you stand idle? Could you turn your face from justice?”

Bloody wonderful. He chooses now to have a moral dilemma. Great. If we’re really lucky, he’ll drop to the ground and have a life-changing vision.

“Er….” Tobias cleared his throat, uncomfortably lanced by the transparency in the man’s manner. There was an intensity to him: a burning, passionate zeal that struck seemed both dangerous and, in some odd way, humbling. “No,” he said eventually. “No, I couldn’t. I understand why you need resolution to this, m— Sebastian. Although, you must realise… confronting this Lady Harimann may still not give you answers.”

Sebastian inclined his head, and he appeared genuinely grateful. Tobias supposed—after a year of digging for information, with Elthina nagging in his ear about vows and duties—he was probably glad of speaking to someone who didn’t immediately brand him a selfish fool.

“Thank you. I-I know, but… I must do this. I have prayed over it for a time, and I do believe that—if I can just know why—then I can go on with my life. Maybe I could even learn to forgive.”

“Fu—” Tobias bit his tongue hurriedly. “Um, forgive? That’s… magnanimous.”

The corner of the princeling’s mouth curled, and a sneakingly wicked look flitted across his eyes. “I said *maybe*, Hawke.”

Tobias was about to formulate a response when, from across the sun-dappled courtyard, the sound of a heavy door opening distracted him and Fenris emerged from the mansion, fully armoured and with his greatsword slung across his back. The light glinted on the wicked metal of his gauntlets—claws for a feral creature—as he squinted at the surrounding houses, as wary and disdainful as a cat.

“That is your—?”

“Don’t stare,” Tobias murmured gently, as the elf’s gaze fell on Sebastian. “He can be a little sensitive about his looks. And… quite a lot of other things, really. But you’ll pick that up. And he certainly wouldn’t dream of killing you until he’s been paid. Right, then,” he added brightly, rubbing his hands together and raising his voice as Fenris loped across the stones towards them. “Quick stop at The Hanged Man, grab Varric, and we’ll get this done, shall we, gentlemen?”
Fenris nodded silent assent, and Tobias turned on his heel, heading for the nearest shortcut to the
district’s mouth.

“Varric?” Sebastian echoed, perplexed. “The… the dwarf you mentioned? Wh…?”

“Not far,” Tobias called cheerfully, glancing back over his shoulder. “Oh, and where are my
manners? Sorry. Fenris, Sebastian. Sebastian, Fenris.”

He smiled, delighting for a brief moment in the looks of critical suspicion his companions were
giving each other, and proceeded to lead the way to The Hanged Man.

Varric, as things turned out, was more than happy to join them, as it meant a legitimate excuse to get
out of a meeting with an envoy from the Merchants’ Guild. It was apparently something to do with a
coalition of surface dwarves forming a union to improve the lot of traders outside Orzammar. As far
as Tobias understood it, “going top-side” had always meant losing one’s caste and position—which
were of vital importance in dwarven society—although, with things opening up so much under King
Bhelen, those who had always been at the bottom of the dwarven heap were starting to buck the
oppressive traditions of their forebears. It had been making substantial political, and economic,
waves.

“Ugh,” Varric grumbled as their unusual ensemble cut back up through towards Hightown, heading
for the Harimann mansion. “It’s not as if I even care. I’d be happy living my whole life without
seeing the inside of the Commons. Bartrand was always the one who talked about going back to
Orzammar. Me? Hah. You’re never getting me underground again, not as long as I live.”

“I second that,” Tobias murmured, brief but intrusive visions of the Deep Roads flickering at the
edges of his mind. He shivered as he pushed them away. “You hear anything about your beloved
brother recently?”

Varric snorted. “No. Trust me, if I do, you’ll be the first to know. Not that I think Bartrand’s stupid
enough to show his face in this town again. Still, I’m working on tracking the son-of-a-bitch down.”

“Good.” Tobias glanced at the rag-tag party he was leading, and grinned. “Well, this is nice, isn’t it?
Everyone’s got a grievous thirst for revenge to nurse.”

The princeling looked surprised, then faintly affronted. Fenris curled his lip, and Varric just scoffed.

“Well, I can think of better ways to make new friends, but you’re right… it’s good to share hobbies.”

They didn’t talk much as they made their way to the Harimanns’ house. Tobias wasn’t sure if it was
his sense of humour or the sense of mild foreboding that put a damper on things but, either way, it
was peaceful enough.

The mansion stood in one of Hightown’s quieter corners. Very upmarket. There were even a few
trees dotted about, boughs nodding quietly in the warm afternoon breeze, their bark inscribed with
the genteel graffiti of upper-class youths’ entwined initials.

*Place must be crawling with illicit trysts after dark. Makes a change from street gangs, I suppose.*

Sebastian changed as they got to the house, he noticed. He walked taller, his shoulders and his jaw
set square, the mild sense of indecision about him evaporating like mist. It wasn’t even anger, Tobias
decided, but more a kind of determination; a solemn, intrepid resolve to exact… well, to exact justice.

His thoughts flashed briefly to Anders, though he knew it wouldn’t have been a good idea to try and
bring him onboard for this. Too much involvement with the Chantry, and too little notice, and… and
Tobias really wished he was there. As they mounted the steps that led up to the mansion’s grey stone façade, all cloaked with thick green ivy, the hairs on his arms rose, and his mouth turned dry. Something felt wrong.

Something felt very wrong indeed.

The princeling couldn’t raise an answer at the door. No servants, no voices within. There was no response at the back, either, so Varric picked the lock and let them in. Tobias felt it as soon as he stepped over the threshold. Something had happened there, and it had left a residue behind it; dark, bitter, and foul.

The cold tendrils of a vile presence touched him and, as Sebastian prowled ahead through the still, silent rooms, voicing his perplexed concern that it should all be so quiet, so deserted, Tobias shuddered.

Varric glanced at him suspiciously. “What?”

“Do you feel that?”

The dwarf shook his head. “Feel what? I mean, this place is creepy, but—”

Tobias frowned. “There’s more here than things that go ‘bump’ in the night and funny-looking paintings. Something’s… off.”

Varric’s brow furrowed, and his gloved hand curled protectively on Bianca’s stock. “What, you mean like… off, as in—”

“Off,” Tobias muttered, glancing at the figure of the princeling, pacing ahead of them through the deserted hallway.

Candles burned in sconces on the walls, through jumping, shuddering slices of light to the dark floorboards and thick rugs. The kitchens they’d come in through had been neat and orderly, as if the last meal of the day had been served and the servants simply hadn’t got up to do breakfast yet, but this… this was weird. All the doors were tightly shut and locked, and there was nothing so obvious as the dim, oppressive wall of silence that shrouded the house.

Silence… except for the whispering. It was there, right on the edge of Tobias’ hearing, right on the edge of existence. Not words, not anything with real meaning, just… something.

“Oh, shit,” Varric said, curling his lip. “You mean ‘off’, like… that?”

Tobias nodded. “I think so. I can feel something, anyway.”

“Great. Just great.”

Despite their having tried to stay quiet, the princeling had obviously heard them, because he looked back over his shoulder, all wide-eyed inquisitiveness.

“Is there a problem, Hawke?”

Tobias glanced at Varric, who shrugged.

“No. No, just—”

Fenris had been prowling a little further along the corridor, investigating the locked doors and stagnant rooms. He stopped, haloed by the candlelight, and glared back at Tobias, his head tilted
slightly to the side, not so much like a bird as a snake contemplating striking.

“You suspect dark magic, do you not? I would not be surprised. This whole place reeks of demons.”

The princeling’s eyes widened further—Tobias suspected he’d never seen anyone whose gaze quite so much merited the epithet of “limpid”—and he blanched.

“Demons? No, that’s not possible. It can’t—”

“I think it is,” Tobias countered. “I think it’s a possibility we should be prepared for. In fact—”

“Well, how would you know?” Sebastian demanded, looking between him and Fenris.

The elf glowered, and Tobias sighed deeply.

“I’m an apostate, all right?”

The princeling stared and, though he was clinging to that abundant charm of his and trying to pretend he wasn’t alarmed, Tobias was all too familiar with the look of mingled revulsion and fear that crossed his face. Sebastian opened his mouth to speak, but Tobias cut across him.

“Yes. Well, now you know. And, not that I’m in the business of threatening the people I’m working for, but… just so we’re clear? Breathe a word to the grand cleric, or anyone, anywhere, and I’ll say you knew when you hired me the first time.”

He held the man’s gaze steadily, hoping the way his pulse was thudding wasn’t obvious, and tried to ignore that horrible feeling this place gave him, like something wet and slimy was crawling up the back of his neck. Sebastian opened and shut his mouth a few times, looking a little bit like an incredibly pretty fish, and Tobias took the advantage of his royal silence.

“I also know how to buy a dozen witnesses to support that claim and, moreover, to swear on the Maker’s holy balls that you wanted to find a blood mage to put you back on Starkhaven’s throne. So, rat me out, you’ll go down too. I’m just saying.”

He kept his tone even, low, and reasonable, and was pleasantly surprised by the fact that, after the initial moment of shock, Sebastian seemed to pull himself together and respond in just as calm a manner.

“I assure you, Hawke, that would never have been my intention.”

“Really,” Tobias said dryly. “And here was me thinking the Chantry was all for the containment of mages.”

The princeling’s gaze seemed to harden, a flash of iron in those blue eyes, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

“Perhaps this is not the time to discuss it.”

It was the most sensible thing Tobias had heard him say since they met. He nodded.

“I couldn’t agree more. Shall we?”

They pressed on, though the peace and the alliance between them both felt tenuous.

He wasn’t expecting the things they found.
Every member of the household seemed to have found their own private insanity. Lady Harimann’s daughter, Flora, was the first they discovered: sprawled across half a dozen empty casks of wine, drinking herself into a stupor in a kind of thirst that knew no slaking. Sebastian seemed truly distraught at seeing her in that state, so quick to say she was normally a temperate, demure girl. She got violent when he tried to take her cup from her, lashed out with a well-aimed kick in the kneecap, and called him a whoreson bastard. Tobias wasn’t even sure she knew who the princeling was.

She passed out not long after, and they carried her to the pantry, where they set her on her side among the cheese wheels and jugs of very off milk—suggesting, whatever had happened here, it must have been going on for a while—and locked the door.

Tobias wrinkled his nose, trying to get the smell of piss-soaked velvet and vomit out of his throat, and nodded at Sebastian’s litany of disbelief.

“She wasn’t in her right mind, that’s all. Whatever she was seeing, feeling… it wasn’t real. Demons do that. They trick people; give you what you think you want, and drown you in it. We’ll probably see worse before this is over.”

The princeling stared at him with a mix of apprehension and vehement, angry indignation, then stepped back and jerked his head towards the stairs that led to the next floor.

“Then lead on, Hawke. You know what you’re dealing with better than I.”

Tobias wished he had as much confidence in himself.

All the same, it could have been worse. The other surviving Harimanns were all ensnared in their own fantasies of avarice, one consumed by a madness of lust, the other a passion for gold. Neither was particularly edifying, but both were rapidly cured by a swift knock on the head and being safely bound and locked in closets, to be dealt with later.

Sebastian stared, aghast, as Tobias kicked the door shut on Lady Harimann’s half-naked son, who was still babbling about gold and jewels and the glory of precious, shiny wealth.

“That’s it?” The princeling seemed almost disappointed. “You’re just going to leave them there? I thought—”

“They’ll be fine. For now. Anyway, they’re nothing but playthings for whatever’s doing this.”

Tobias glanced along the length of the chamber they stood in, noting dryly the fine walnut dining table at its far end.

*Sorry, Mother. Doesn’t look like that’s coming with us.*

Most of the household’s gilt and plate was heaped up in the middle of the floor, and Tobias noticed Varric picking up a small, embossed golden charger to examine. He looked away, so he legitimately didn’t see it slide into the dwarf’s pocket.

“Does the house have an undercroft?” Tobias turned his attention to Fenris. “Danarius’ mansion does, right? Most of the old places around here have cellars, old passageways…. If we’re going to find this Lady Harimann, I’ll bet that’s where. Somewhere dark and quiet, where no one would disturb anything.”

Sebastian stared blankly at him, and he sighed.

“We haven’t found her anywhere in this mess, right? And there’s no body. The servants aren’t in
evidence, meaning there’s no one left to clean up, so…? Stands to reason it’s her that’s responsible for this.” Tobias sighed again, growing impatient at the princeling’s confusion. “Look, demons don’t just pop out of nowhere. They have to be summoned… allowed to take control. All this?” He flung out an arm, gesturing to the chaos that had befouled the house. “A mage can’t just do this by not concentrating for five minutes!”

The man didn’t understand. Tobias knew that, and he knew it was pointless to lose his temper, despite how much they were seeing appalled him. It might not have been blood magic, but it was the next best thing. The woman’s children—lost in those demon-twined fantasies, prisoners in their own heads—weren’t mages. They didn’t feel like mages, didn’t feel possessed. They were food, toys… things to keep a larger hunger occupied, and it was that he could feel, the dark presence prowling somewhere beneath the mansion’s shell of opulence.

He shuddered, half-tempted to say they should pull back and bring in… well, what? An advanced guard of templars to cleanse the place? No. The stink of demonkin all over everything meant that Lady Harimann herself must be an apostate—and wasn’t that sweetly ironic: all this money, and she still turned her craft to evil—and, though Tobias had no qualm about turning someone like that in, there was still a principle involved… and a hearty dose of practicality.

*They get her, they’ll find me. Not worth it.*

Whatever happened, they were on their own, unless he sent someone to fetch Anders, but that would mean running all the way to Darktown and back, and there was no guarantee he’d either come at all, or arrive in time. In any case, Tobias wasn’t about to risk being a man down while he waited to find out.

He was right about the cellars.

It should, he supposed, have given him a little thrill of victory. Instead, every sense he possessed was full up with revulsion and horror, like his own skin was trying to peel itself off, just to get away from all the dark, prickling things that screamed *demon*.

They found Lady Harimann grovelling in front of a shrine, of sorts. She’d clearly thought she’d known what she was doing, that building a prison for the thing she summoned—all decked out with runes and warding glyphs and bright, shiny objects, at odds with the dark, damp, gloominess and the smell of dank wood and earth—would keep it happy, keep it contained.

She’d been a bloody fool.

It wasn’t Tobias’ first desire demon. Kirkwall’s high proportion of demonic possessions and mages dabbling in forbidden knowledge—or possibly his own propensity to find himself in the middle of those darker corners of the city—had seen to that. All the same, the creature still disgusted him.

She, inasmuch as they had genders, took the form of a beautiful woman; a body of voluptuous curves and strong, sensuous lines, but made into something other, something impossible, by the artistic license the demon had granted itself. She was naked, but for some elaborate golden jewellery, and *that* seemed real enough. It chimed as she moved—on feet that never quite touched the ground—and it seemed to please her to make her own music.

The skin wasn’t human. The whole body was cast in tones of purple and indigo: fire-chased perfection, glimmering with flames and veins of silver. Horns rose from her head in great, curving sweeps, their ridges thick and dark, and the blazing eyes that she turned on him were pupilless, like pools of light.
Perfectly moulded lips moved at a speed fractionally slower than the words. At first, Tobias wasn’t sure whether everyone was hearing the same thing but, as the demon tried to beguile them, the way it had Lady Harimann—no longer a noblewoman bent on political scheming and hungry for gain, but a wracked shell shackled to this creature’s whim, thirsting with incurable greed for the sake of greed itself—he realised what was happening.

Oh, the demon spoke all right, in those beautiful, mellifluous tones. It gave them honeyed words that explained everything… words that caressed the desire in all of them, and nudged at Sebastian’s lust for vengeance; even prompted the hunger he’d once had for the throne.

But then there was the other voice. Tobias was fairly sure no one else could hear it. There wasn’t even much of it in the first place, just the faint buzz of a murmur. It was the kind of voice that sometimes leached into his sleep… the kind of voice his father had always trained him to block out, because you couldn’t even let them speak, not if you wanted to stay safe.

It wheedled, though, and it wasn’t like just hearing words he could simply ignore. It pulled at him, gave him feelings and sensations that chased through his flesh—the whispers of what it would be to have what he wanted.

*I can give you that. All these things… everything you desire….*

He tried to wrench himself away from that nagging yearning, and from the sneaking promises of fulfilment. His mother’s face, wreathed in delighted smiles because she was truly, genuinely happy, and proud of him. Clothes that were warm and comfortable, and didn’t have patches or the memories of bloodstains on them. A house that wasn’t a hovel, but wasn’t a cold expanse of stone, either… and—

*No!*

—a warm fire, roaring in a wide grate, against the flickering light of which—

*Get the fuck out of my head!*

—pale arms moved to embrace his naked body, and kisses brushed his skin like vine leaves. Soft laughter rippled over him, bringing with it a sweet, ineffable sense of peace, and the faintest whiff of boiled elfroot, and Tobias supposed he should have given some signal before he struck.

It would have been sensible. Instead, he just surged forwards, full of anger and spite and outrage, and power burst from his palms in a great wave that he barely controlled. Light and ice split the air, the sheer volume of energy leaving him sick and dizzy in its wake, and with no time to recover.

Fenris reacted first, springing into battle with that easy, terrible violence of his, his blade ending Lady Harimann’s attempt at retaliation before she’d managed to choke out more than a limp fireball.

It left the rest of them to tackle the demon, Tobias pinning it with ice, force, and sheer bloody-minded determination, while Sebastian and Varric rained arrows onto the creature. It was flesh enough for them to do some damage, at least and, once the Harimann woman was dead, Fenris flung himself at the demon in a whirl of rage and lyrium.

It screamed as it crumpled, finally, to the cellar’s damp floor, but Tobias wasn’t sure whether it was more in pain or frustration. He felt it when it happened, though, like a blade right through his head.

The whole fight left him shaky and wet with sweat, and silence fell over the group as they stood, looking down at the bloodied bodies before them.
Tobias glanced at the princeling, expecting him to run off and throw up in a corner, but he was oddly calm. Tight-lipped and hard-eyed, Sebastian lowered his bow and went to Lady Harimann’s body. He knelt and, one hand extended and cupped above her lolling head, he began to pray.

Tobias stared, then shot a sidelong look at Varric, who returned it with equally awkward suspicion. Fenris had bowed his head, dark brows drawn into a solemn scowl a little different from his usual frown, so Tobias just held his breath and waited for the quiet litany of pleas for forgiveness and peace to pass. It was difficult, however; he really wasn’t sure where to look.

As His Royal Shininess straightened up, Varric cleared his throat.

“We, uh… we probably ought to go and let the others out. Make sure that’s everything.”

Sebastian nodded soberly. “I… I didn’t think it would be like this. I never wanted—”

Tobias turned smartly and started to make for the steps leading back up from the cellar, unwilling to meet that distraught, fractured gaze.

“Nobody ever does,” he said, a trifle brusquely. “Leave her there. It’ll be a shock enough for her children. They can come get her when they’re ready.”

He felt the waves of Sebastian’s cold disapproval slap against the back of his neck, but didn’t turn. None of the others spoke, and Tobias’ feet thudded dully against the creaking wooden treads.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Tobias extends an invitation... and Anders is possibly ever so slightly jealous.

There was a lot of cleaning up to do. The younger generation of Harimanns were confused, disorientated, horrified... all those things that, had he been slightly less battle-sore and exhausted, Tobias might have felt some sympathy towards.

As it was, he let His Royal Shininess handle it, along with Varric lending his substantial persuasive weight. He and Fenris spirited themselves off to the kitchen, out of plain sight, and Tobias winced when he heard Flora giving vent to huge, squealing wails of tears.

Something clinked on the table, and he looked up. Fenris had found a bottle of wine, and was removing the stopper with the tip of his gauntlet.

“Neat trick,” Tobias observed.

The elf shrugged, his eyes slightly narrowed as he glanced towards the door.

“You seem... shaken,” he said, sloshing wine into one of two delicate polished horn cups he’d found and pushing it across the cluttered surface.

“Just tired,” Tobias assured him. “I hardly ever use magic. It’s easy to forget how much it takes out of you.”

He stifled a yawn. If it hadn’t been for Sebastian, and the stink of demons everywhere, and the fact the family were nobility—and probably a dozen other things—he’d have volunteered to send for Anders. The girl sounded as if she was having hysterics and the whole family, such as was left of it, could probably use a healer. More than that, they were frightened enough to pay well.

Too risky, though, he decided. Let them brave Circle fees if they wanted, and the questions that would go with it, or find their own hedgemage.

Fenris frowned. “You are sure you should not go up there? Perhaps, explain—”

“No,” Tobias said shortly. “Best not. Anyway, I’ve never been able to cope with women crying. S’my whatsit... anathema.”

The subtle curl of a dry smile touched the corner of Fenris’ mouth, and Tobias toasted it with his cup. It seemed to be the elf’s equivalent of a booming, thigh-slapping laugh, and he rather liked being the one to put it there.

“Still,” he said, raising the cup to his lips, “I feel sorry for them. Losing everything in one blow like that. Shakes you up. Reminds me of running from Lothering.”

He didn’t know why he’d said that. Stupid, really. He watched Fenris fold slowly into the chair opposite and fix him with a considering stare, those shimmering green eyes as inscrutable as ever.
“You told me once that, when one stops running, one takes a deep breath, looks around, and begins to build anew.”

Tobias smiled mirthlessly. “Did I? You shouldn’t listen to me, Fenris. I’m full of bullshit.” He took a swallow of the wine, winced, and peered into the cup. “Maker’s balls! That’s… that’s not bad.”

It was good stuff, but he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Fenris had an excellent eye for selecting the best out of any given rack of dusty bottles.

“Even so,” Fenris said carefully, still watching him over the rim of his cup. He sipped, swallowed, and was motionless for a moment, savouring the wine. “That is what you have done… what you are doing, is it not?”

Tobias shrugged. “Suppose so.” He narrowed his eyes accusingly. “You didn’t take my advice. You’re still squatting in Danarius’ mansion, and you haven’t even cleared the rubble off the floor. Have you?”

The elf flexed one shoulder dismissively, and the delicate plates of his armour shifted like the back of some scaled beast. The dim, dusty light that filled the kitchen glanced off his hair, and Tobias sighed, more in resignation than irritation.

“Listen, I… I need to take a look through the estate. For Mother. You know, see what needs doing, whether there’s anything left that’s salvageable, or… I don’t suppose you’d like to tag along? I mean, knowing what went on there, if you’d rather not—”

Fenris nodded shortly. “I shall. You are right, Hawke.”

He set his cup down on the table with a soft clink, and Tobias blinked owlishly at it.

“Am I? Oh, good. Er… what?”

“It is hard to begin afresh when you are alone. Old habits… old grudges… they linger. To build a new life requires allowing oneself to—I don’t know how best to say it….”

Tobias arched an eyebrow. “Come down off your high horse and admit you need friends?”

The elf gave him a withering look, but it wasn’t filled with any true approximation of anger or malice. In fact, there was something rather restful about it, as if—after the filth and corruption of the Harimanns’ cellar, the desire demon, and Lady Johane’s bloody corpse—things were getting back to normal.

He grinned. “I’m glad you think that, anyway. And, if Danarius does make a move against you… well, you’ll let me know, right? I’d hate to miss out on the fun.”

The vaguest sliver of a smile passed over Fenris’ lips as he poured them both another cup of wine, and Tobias smirked. There was a grain of truth to it: he owed the elf enough to stand beside him, if the day came that his old master sent more than useless bounty hunters who couldn’t track their way out of a feed sack.

He grinned. “I’m glad you think that, anyway. And, if Danarius does make a move against you… well, you’ll let me know, right? I’d hate to miss out on the fun.”

The vaguest sliver of a smile passed over Fenris’ lips as he poured them both another cup of wine, and Tobias smirked. There was a grain of truth to it: he owed the elf enough to stand beside him, if the day came that his old master sent more than useless bounty hunters who couldn’t track their way out of a feed sack.

The thought made his smile widen, and not just at the prospect of gutting a few more slavers. It was good to think of Fenris being really, truly free.

“Indeed. And we will drink to your good fortune, Hawke. To… beginning to put aside the past, perhaps.”
Tobias nodded, and they raised their cups, and the wine really was quite good. He realised, as he slugged it back, that Fenris had a point, though whether the elf had meant to drive it home, he wasn’t sure. Still, it was true, wasn’t it? He’d been so caught up in one way of thinking, one way of being, that he wasn’t living the life he’d made for himself… he was still waiting for it to begin.

And there’s only so long you can wait for anything.

Tobias frowned at the tabletop, fingers tracing half-hearted patterns against the smooth sides of the cup.

He was still frowning when the clink of armour fitments heralded Sebastian’s appearance in the doorway, followed by Varric’s heavier footfalls.

“If you’re done hiding, Hawke,” the dwarf said, with only a slight edge to the words, “we should probably go. Before anyone decides to press charges.”

Tobias glanced up, gaze moving quickly from Varric’s look of mild irritation to Sebastian’s pale, tight expression. “Right. Can do,” he agreed. “Fenris?”

The elf rose gracefully from his seat. Tobias considered taking the opportunity to press His Royal Shininess about payment, but he didn’t look like a man who’d take well to questions concerning money at that particular moment. He blinked, and seemed to register Tobias’ presence in the room for the first time.

“Lady Flora and her brothers are resting. I must go to the chantry, arrange for a healer to be sent. Then there is the matter of… funerary arrangements, and the proper explanations must be presented to the viscount’s office, the guard, and—”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Tobias said smoothly.

“But I’ve said I’ll take care of everything,” the princeling protested. “It is the least I could do, after —”

“Yes, absolutely… but I’m sure the family won’t want all the, uh, unpleasant details splashed over everything, will they?”

Sebastian frowned. The dusky light filtering through the kitchen’s small windows glinted on the whiteness of his armour, throwing every thin highlight and highly polished fitment into sharp relief.

“I will not instigate a tissue of lies,” he said coldly. “And I shall assume that you did not just suggest it.”

The atmosphere thickened a little, and Tobias was aware of Fenris shifting his weight ever so slightly.

Varric cleared his throat. “Oh, now… lie is such a strong word. Why not, ah, ‘rendition of events’? Hm?”

“Exactly.” Tobias rose from the table, downed the rest of the wine he was still holding in one hand, and smiled encouragingly. “Just smoothing out the details for the greater good. It’s probably something you should talk to the grand cleric about… certainly before going to the guard. Believe me. I know the Captain, and she’s a very busy woman. In fact, you know what? I could accompany you, if you like. You never know. Might help.”

He thought, for a moment, he was getting away with it. That insistent rhythm, the comforting beat of
a voice, a suave smile… it worked with people who were a bit rattled, people who’d just had the kind of shock that—if he was honest—Tobias had to admit that people often had in his company. Things blowing up, or bursting into flames, or people stabbing each other… it was the kind of mess that followed him around.

He thought, for a moment, he had His Royal Shininess as easily moulded as that, right in the middle of his palm.

Unfortunately, he was wrong.

Sebastian blinked, then narrowed those lovely eyes and glared at him.

“I will not be manipulated, Hawke. But… I do see your point.” He sighed, and shook his head wearily. “Rest assured, I meant what I said: I have no intention of turning you in, apostate or no. You have done me a great service, and I thank you for that. You have served the Harimanns, too… though I doubt Lady Flora is in much of a state to see you are rewarded. No, I shall indeed speak with Her Grace, and see what might be done to preserve the family’s reputation, despite Lady Harimann’s crimes. Her children have already suffered enough. If you would prefer, you may accompany me to the chantry. You will see, I trust, that you will have no reason to doubt my word.”

There was flint and steel underlying that delicious brogue, and Tobias suppressed the urge to wince and look shamed. He’d never felt quite so grubby for protecting his own skin before but, he reminded himself, he didn’t know this man, and it was dangerous to believe the promises of wealthy patrons in pretty armour.

He inclined his head. “Very well. I meant no disrespect… my lord.”

Sebastian gave him a look laced with annoyance and acute awareness, but said nothing.

Well, well… canny little thing, aren’t you?

They’d killed a good few hours inside the mansion, and the rest of the day had all but slipped away without them. The cool of evening bathed Hightown’s stones, casting shadows alongside the creeping ivy, and painting over the cracks in the houses.

Fenris peeled off first, saying he planned to head back to the mansion, though Tobias noticed he took a sidestreet that led to the west end of the market district instead, up near the dwarven traders’ hall. He assumed the elf had reason, both for the destination and the lying, but noted Varric watching him go.

Varric himself made his excuses before they got to the chantry courtyard, and muttered about getting back to his suite and making sure there weren’t any guild envoys hiding behind the curtains.

Tobias nodded. “See you a bit later?”

“I expect to,” the dwarf said with a smile. “You’re buying the first round!”

He grinned at Varric’s receding shape, and traipsed after Sebastian as the man strode purposefully up the great avenue towards the imposing sweep of white steps that led towards the chantry’s massive, gilded doors.

“You can wait here,” Sebastian told him, all clipped consonants and brusque politeness. “If it pleases you.”

“Take your time.”
Tobias didn’t argue, allowing himself to be parked unceremoniously beside one of the bronze votary statues of Andraste. He watched the armoured figure stride away, towards the galleried landing and the grand cleric’s chambers, and then glanced up at the Holy Prophet’s graven face. It glimmered softly under the candlelight, and her expression was probably meant to be one of sorrow at the fate of her people, combined with the holy zeal of the Exalted March, and the ethereal otherness that came with being the Maker’s bride.

From Tobias’ angle, it looked quite a lot like trapped wind.

He leaned against the panelling and picked at the seam of his bracer. He was going to need another new pair. New boots, too… good ones. Good, solid Fereldan boots. He’d have to go and see if Lirene’s import shop had anything in stock. She was still doing a good trade, last he’d heard, and everything she’d done for the first waves of refugees had built her a good and loyal clientele… even if some of the locals had objected. One or two gangs had taken a couple of pops at burning her out. Of course, Tobias reflected, it was unfortunate how tricky something like that was. Bunch of daft Marcher boys try to run a Fereldan business out of town, and end up running screaming into the night with their trousers on fire.

Funny, really.

A small smile crossed his face at the memory. Still, Lirene had been very grateful, and the lifetime discount came in handy.

She had also been the first one to give him Anders’ name, he remembered. Well, not name, but the vague suggestion of where to find the elusive healer of Darktown. He wasn’t sure if that was something else to be grateful to the woman for or not.

Tobias would, he reminded himself, be seeing him tonight. Handing over the money for the Underground… and the substantial extra coinage he’d decided to give. He couldn’t tell if it was the prospect of just seeing Anders, or surprising him with the gift that sent a little shiver of pleasure through him. Maybe both, and how stupid was that?

He took a deep breath, inhaling all the dusty, rich, thick scents of the chantry: polish, dark wood, beeswax, tallow, flowers, stale incense… and that particular smell that seemed to come from sanctimonious women, like over-starched cloth and white soap.

Something had to give. Sooner or later, anyway. He knew that. They couldn’t—he couldn’t keep on like this. It was the whole thing; Carver, squirreled away somewhere in The Gallows, pretending his life’s vocation was to twat straw dummies with his sword and wear stupid armour, while Leandra twittered about trying to refeather a nest that had been empty for years. And were they meant to take Gamlen with them to the estate? Oh, she was so keen on all those things she said about family…. Tobias stifled a groan. She probably would want to, wouldn’t she? Share her good fortune and keep her kin together.

Maker bloody well preserve us….

Distaste beat a bitter tattoo at the back of his throat as he thought of that scrawny old bastard lording it over everyone. Not to mention, with Uncle Gamlen along for the ride, they’d be lucky if the money lasted longer than a blink, and there wasn’t another loan shark or numbers runner on the doorstep, ready to repossess everything they owned before they’d even moved the furniture in.

Tobias winced to himself, and watched the sisters and occasional penitents moving silently around the pews. It had been restful in here earlier, just allowing himself to stop, and breathe, and think.
Only, nothing seemed beyond the touch of being Hawke, did it? Even in a moment’s peace and prayer, someone had wanted his attention, wanted a problem fixed. And that was all he was good for, wasn’t it? Here, in this town, he was a hired blade, a temporary solution… and he was sick of it. Tobias had never thought he’d long for the studied anonymity of life in Ferelden—their quiet life in Lothering, always overshadowed by the possibilities of discovery and flight though it had been.

He remembered, once, Malcolm saying they should go to Denerim, or Highhever, or some other city. A family with three mages in it was hard to hide, and they might have disappeared better among the bigger crowds, if it came to it. Leandra hadn’t wanted to—she’d wanted open country, and broad skies, and wholesome food on the table, even if there wasn’t much of it. Tobias recalled half-overheard snatches of arguments, cross words hastily hushed, and his father’s resigned relenting, bowing as he always did to the wishes of the wife he’d adored… and allowed himself to be ruled by.

True enough, he supposed, that if they had gone to a city, there would have been slums, and gutters, and some Maker-forsaken little tenement even worse than Gamlen’s hovel. They’d been lucky, really, for all the deprivations of life in the armpit of nowhere.

He missed it more than he’d ever thought possible.

Tobias blinked and looked up at the sound of Sebastian’s sabatons on the stones of the nave. The prince looked pinched and pale, his jaw tight and those terribly distracting eyes cloudy and hooded. Seems safe to assume Her Grace was a bit cheesed off, then.

Tobias licked his lips as he eyed the moneybag dangling from Sebastian’s hand.

“Here,” the princeling offered, holding it out as he drew to a halt beside the graven Andraste that Tobias had, in deference to his patron’s apparent piety, stopped actually leaning against. “Your payment, Serah Hawke. And my thanks.”

Tobias took the bag, weighing it with practised fingers. Nice. About thirty sovereigns, by the feel of it. Extremely generous, even after the cuts were divvied up. He nodded his thanks.

“I’m glad I could be of help.”

There was a beat of silence, and the soft echoes of their voices whispered across the nave. In a side-chapel, someone coughed, and there was a squeak of a chair moving on flagstones. Tobias studied the other man’s tired, bruised frown, the chiselled lines of cheekbones and delicately defined patrician nose, the fullness of lips pulled into a drawn, set curve… and gave himself a good, hard mental kick.

Leave it alone. Just go. Just turn around, right now, and walk out. Because this is not your business, Hawke. You have the money. Now, go.

He cleared his throat. “It’s, uh… difficult to face the reality of a betrayal like that, I know. I’m very sorry, for what it’s worth.”

Sebastian glanced up, and as he met Tobias’ gaze, those clouded eyes began to warm a little.

Oh, you idiot…. Leave him alone. Stop fiddling and just go. Now.

“I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised,” he said quietly, and that burr of an accent caught at the words, made thicker and lower by the tail end of whatever emotions the man was battling. “It’s just that it had been so long since I was a part of that world. Perhaps I’d forgotten how far greed like that can drive a person.”
Tobias shrugged, wondering a little at the complex and shifting patterns of guilt, doubt, fear and anger that were so very plain on Sebastian’s face. He’d always thought the nobility were trained to keep their feelings hidden.

“Well,” he said, wrinkling his nose, “a throne and an entire city-state. People have killed for less. Much less. You should see the state of Lowtown the morning after payday on the docks.”

The princeling shook his head, and Tobias doubted he’d even heard the words. He supposed they had, perhaps, been a little ill-chosen. After all, the desire demon had said things that he hadn’t expected… touched on Sebastian’s old yearning to rule; something he was supposed to have put behind him, something he wasn’t meant to want.

And we all want things we shouldn’t, don’t we?

Sebastian sighed. “I… I feel like I’ve bathed in filth that will never come off.”

“Wash behind the ears,” Tobias said, before he could stop himself. “I find evil usually gets stuck there.”

The princeling blinked, and stared at him, apparently more in surprise than appalled disgust. Tobias bit the inside of his lip.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to… that is, I know what you mean. I don’t exactly deal in the highest strata of society. But it does go, that feeling. Eventually,” he lied, meeting those incredibly blue eyes. “And the words of demons are nothing but flames. That’s what my father used to say, anyway. It’s only when you dwell on them that you let them burn. Choke ’em off, give ’em nothing to feed on, and they die out. They don’t matter.”

He cleared his throat and looked away, mildly embarrassed at having—for some unfathomable reason—shared that little nugget.

“You are a man of surprising contradictions, Hawke. But… thank you. It sounds as if your father was indeed a wise man.”

Tobias shrugged, and frowned at the carvings on the end of the nearest pew. He couldn’t make out whether they were supposed to be grapes or ears of corn. Something signifying the bounty of the Maker’s munificence, anyway. It made him think, for one silly, quick moment, of Harvest back in Lothering, and the village dance, the year he’d spiked the cider and Carver had gone behind the barn with the feed merchant’s tarty daughter. They’d both been in terrible trouble, but it had been worth it, albeit in different ways.

He raised a hand and scratched awkwardly at the back of his neck.

“Look, er… I appreciate you’re either a priest or a prince, or possibly both, but I really need a drink and, y’know, you’re welcome to join me. If you want.”

Sebastian’s face softened, some of the despair and tension leavening out into just plain resigned melancholy.

“As a man, I’m technically a Brother in Faith, not a priest,” he said, a weak smile dimpling his cheeks a little. “Though I suppose the other part’s true. And I’ve certainly not taken any vows that preclude alcohol… at least not to excess.”

Tobias grinned. “Well, the night is young.”
Sebastian’s smile widened a little.

He offered Tobias a chance to wash up a bit before they left, though the experience of chantry charity—warm water, clean cloths, and a lay sister who listened to Sebastian’s ‘rendition of events’, as Varric might have called it, with wide and credulous eyes—was a trifle uncomfortable.

‘Encountered a skirmish’? Really? Maker’s cock, we need to watch this one. Too bloody good at lying by half. . .

The Hanged Man was filling up by the time he and Sebastian got there. Any other bar, and Tobias would have told him to change out of his armour and into something at least halfway inconspicuous, but it didn’t much matter. For a start, everyone who counted would already know who the princeling was and, secondly, if chairs started flying, it was probably better that there was some modicum of protection between the brawl and the possibility of injured royalty.

“This way,” he said, motioning to the back stairs. “Varric has a suite. Probably not as nice as you’re used to, but—”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sebastian said cheerfully, looking around at the rough wooden tables, the already none-too-fresh rushes, and the nightly crop of mercenaries, thugs, thieves, tarts, and ne’er-do-wells occupying the bar. “There was a place just like this back home… and have you ever been in Antiva City?”

Tobias couldn’t help the upward arch of his eyebrow. “No, can’t say I have.”

The princeling grinned, and it was a surprisingly lecherous one. Tobias jolted as he realised the bastard had actually slapped him on the back.

“Aha! If you ever get the chance, you definitely should. It’s quite a place!”

“Huh. I’ll… bear that in mind,” Tobias said carefully, as they made their way into Varric’s suite.

It was already fairly busy. The dwarf was holding court, and knots of people—humans, some of the less respectable dwarven traders, and even a sprinkling of elven mercenaries with money to burn—stretched from the centre of the chamber to the corridor, each one of them with a drink in hand. The buzz of conversation lapped around Tobias, tugging and pulling at him like waves, because that was how Varric did what he did in this town. A word in an ear, a little gossip or slander-mongering and a few well-placed tall tales, and he had half the city slipped into place as part of his complex network. People knew people, who knew people, and whatever Varric fed them filtered through until it became a truth, or a half-truth, or something that, somehow, everyone was just aware of; the way the whole of Lowtown knew Tobias Hawke was a name worth enquiring for if you wanted something done.

Tobias often wondered what the dwarf got out of it. He had certainly never paid Varric for his services, unless you counted the money he’d put into the Deep Roads expedition, but it would surely have been easy enough to find another business partner. That didn’t make him special.

No, he reckoned Varric just got off on the power. All that manipulating people, playing the whole city off itself like some elaborate clockwork toy… it amused him and, for whatever reason, Tobias amused him too.

It wasn’t a comforting thought, but it reminded him how well worth it staying on the dwarf’s good side was.

Could be worse. At least I actually like him.
“Hawke!”

He turned at the sound of his name, and grinned as Varric came squeezing through the crowd, tankard in his hand, beaming cheerfully. The smell of grease and ale and hearth-smoke came wafting up as the knots of people parted, and brought with it the undertone of stew and fresh bread.

Tobias nodded, his stomach beginning to rumble traitorously. He’d forgotten it had been so long since he last ate… not that Lowtown life tended to make one overly used to regular meals.

“Varric.”

“Ah!” The dwarf’s grin widened even further, amusement dancing in his broad face as he looked at Sebastian. “And Choirboy! Wonderful.”

“Choir—?” Sebastian started, but Tobias shook his head.

“There’s no use fighting it,” he said quietly. “Everyone gets a nickname. Argue with ‘Choirboy’ and you’ll be stuck with something much worse.”

The princeling arched an eyebrow as Varric eased himself out of the crush.

“You don’t have one. I’ve only heard him call you ‘Hawke’.”

Tobias grinned. “Ah, yes… but I’m special. Besides, it’s hard to spread spurious stories about someone when you have to stop to explain the nickname.”

Varric slapped him on the back and raised his mug in a salute. “Come on, come on… come in. You too, Sparklefingers,” he added, chuckling wickedly.

“Hey!” Tobias narrowed his eyes. “I thought we talked about that….”

Varric just laughed, and Tobias studiously ignored the princeling’s enquiring look. They followed their host into his lair—past the gaggles of gossips and preening hangers-on—to the slightly more private part of the suite, where the table was laid with wine, ale, and food, the fire was roaring, and candles smoked in their sconces.

“Hawke!” Merrill bounced out of the chair she’d been occupying, and waved excitedly at him, nearly spilling her half-empty cup of wine down the front of her tunic. “Oh, it’s nice to see you. I haven’t seen you in ages!”

It had probably been less than two weeks, but Tobias supposed time went more quickly for someone with the elf’s attention span. She came over in effusive, ungainly bounds, and hugged him tightly, beaming with delight.

“Merrill,” he countered, trying to lever himself backwards before she actually broke his spine, and grimacing at the feel of wine sloshing down the back of his neck.

Beneath the curling linework of her tattoos, her skin was flushed, and those huge, leaf-green eyes glimmered with intense brightness. Tobias sniffed, and wrinkled his nose at the sharpness of cheap booze that rolled off her.

“Isabela’s been teaching me a new card game,” she said, raising a hand to her mouth to stifle a small belch. “Oops, pardon. I think I’m winning. Who’s your friend?”

Andraste’s dimpled arse….
He winced, and gestured to Sebastian.

“Merrill, this is Sebastian Vael. We’ve… been doing some work together. Sebastian, this is Merrill. She’s, er, Dalish,” he added vaguely, as if that might go some way towards explaining the… well, the *everything* that was Merrill.

The skilfully disguised look of surprise that flickered over the princeling’s face suggested that he hadn’t expected to be introduced to another elf, much less one as giddy and cheerful as she was, but Tobias supposed the contrast would affect anyone who’d recently spent time in company with Fenris. But for the pointy ears, it was hard to believe they were both even tangentially of the same race.

In any case, Sebastian recovered well, and began to make a polite greeting, but Merrill was staring at his breastplate, her head tilting curiously from side to side.

“Ooh,” she said, lips bowing into an almost perfect circle. “Ooh, you are shiny, aren’t you?”

Varric’s fingers closed on her arm, and he reached out with the other hand to remove the cup from her. “Come along, Daisy. *I told* you not to play the Rivaini for drinks, didn’t I?”

“But I was *winning*,” she protested, as he led her through the throng.

“Wicked Grace,” Tobias explained, glancing at Sebastian.

“Isabela?” he enquired.

“Ah. Yes. Another of my, uh, associates. It’s a strategy she has.” Tobias smiled ruefully, far more familiar with the ploy than he really wanted to admit. “She sets the ante for the loser buying the next round, then lets you win the first three draws. Once you’re well-oiled, she ups the stakes and takes you to the cleaners. Next thing you know, she’s got every penny you had, and the shirt off your back.”

Sebastian grinned. “The voice of experience, I see.”

“Hah.” Tobias pulled a face. “Just don’t play cards with her. Trust me on that one. Or at least stick to Diamondback.”

He lifted a hand and waved to the familiar, dark-haired figure seated at Varric’s table. Isabela smiled broadly, cutting a deck of cards in one hand, with one of Varric’s glass-studded goblets in the other. Her gaze fell on Sebastian—a look of open appraisal and appreciation—then she tilted the goblet at Tobias, and waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

He groaned, and was rather grateful that she seemed too occupied by fleecing her next opponent—a heavy-set, tattooed man whom Tobias had seen around the tavern often enough to think he’d know better—to come and introduce herself.

“That’s…?” Sebastian asked.

Tobias glanced over his shoulder and nodded as they edged through to the far end of the suite, where Varric was pouring drinks and beckoning them to a trio of comfortably upholstered chairs.

“Yep.”

“She looks a bit like a—”
“Lot of things,” he interjected, before Sebastian could say anything impolitic. “But she’s dependable enough, and I consider her a friend. Besides, a word of advice? Think carefully about any comparisons you make. Legality is pretty much a fluid term in this bar.”

He caught the momentary tension in the princeling’s face—that suggestion of a man who could easily be riled to an inflexible, self-righteous anger—but it flickered away quickly, replaced with a surprisingly worldly grin.

“She looks a lovely young woman,” Sebastian said, without a trace of irony beneath those rolling, burred consonants.

Varric patted the back of one of the chairs invitingly, and proffered a tankard of something that, Tobias knew from experience, would be completely and utterly unlike dwarven ale. He took it, sniffed, and recognised the pleasant, honeyed sweetness of mead.

“So, Hawke, you remember you were asking about openings in business? I think I found you one.” Varric grinned, thrusting another tankard at Sebastian. “C’mon. Sit down, have a drink… I’ll tell you all about it.”

Distracted, Tobias cast a dubious look around the edge of the room. Stupid, really, he told himself. Anders wouldn’t be here yet. He’d still be clearing the clinic out.

He shook himself, smiled graciously, and sat down.

It was more enjoyable than he expected, just sitting and sinking a couple of tankards in convivial company… even if Sebastian and Varric seemed strangely dissonant companions. The princeling was different, though, away from the sunshine and the white stone walls of Hightown. He seemed relaxed, cheerful, happy to laugh and smile even at the more ribald bits of humour—yet something guarded always lingered, deep behind those lucid eyes. He talked, very briefly, of the events in Starkhaven; of the coup, and the chaos and unrest that Goren Vael’s ascent to the throne had caused.

Varric positively lapped it up, of course.

The business opportunity the dwarf offered was intriguing, too: an Orlesian merchant of dubious morality and even looser credentials, who’d bought an old Tevinter mine north of the city, and was struggling to make it work.

Not bloody surprising. If it’s got a name like ‘The Bone Pit’ and the locals won’t go near it, there’s probably a sodding good reason.

Tobias—quite possibly due to the influence of his second tankard of mead—agreed that it did sound like an option worth exploring, and he promised to go and speak with the man the following day. Varric nodded approvingly.

“Y’see?” he said, mug pausing on the way to his lips. “You’re going to be a legitimate businessman in no time.”

He guffawed as he downed his drink, and Tobias sneered, albeit with a certain degree of affection.

“That’s what you do, then?” Sebastian asked, looking pleasingly flushed in the firelight. “When you’re not fighting demons? You—”

“Fix people’s problems,” Tobias said dryly. “You know. Problems like yours, or like this… what’s it? Hubert?”
Varric nodded and swilled a mouthful of mead. Over at the table, the tattooed man howled in disbelief as Isabela slapped down a run of cards and cackled triumphantly.

Tobias shrugged. “Well… least I can do is talk to him, isn’t it?”

The princeling appeared thoughtful for a moment, then gave a small, strange smile, like he’d just solved some kind of puzzle.

“I see. So, you would do that—deal with whatever is stopping production at the mine—and then all those people working for him can go back to their jobs, and provide for their families?”

Tobias stared. “Er….”

*Nah, I would do it so the poncey foreign bastard pays me. I don’t give a stuff what his workforce do.*

Somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to phrase it quite that way, not with Sebastian suddenly looking so peculiarly hopeful and… impressed? Yes, that was it. The princeling actually looked *impressed*.

“Yeah,” he said, with a shrug. “Near enough.”

Sebastian nodded approvingly. “I see.”

Tobias bit his lip, and swilled the rest of his mead around the inside of his tankard. The air felt hot and thick, and he had the strangest sense that the man was going to ask if he could come along.

*Fuck… he doesn’t think we’re doing the Maker’s work or something, does he? I couldn’t bear it. I really couldn’t….*

“Very worthy. If, er, if you should ever need my assistance, in whatever form I can—”

*Oh, Andraste’s flaming twat… I don’t believe it.*

Tobias swallowed a groan as Varric sat forwards, interest and utter delight gleaming on his face.

“She would be thrilled,” he said suavely, ignoring the glare Tobias shot him. “Wouldn’t you? A *Princely Adventure,*” he added, in that particular, far-eyed way he reserved for gauging prospective book titles. “I can see it now. In fact, hold on… I wanna write this down.”

The suite was definitely becoming oppressive. Tobias slouched in the opulence of his padded chair, and found that the scratchy, velvet-like fabric made the backs of his arms itch. He drained his tankard, and cast an eye around the chambers, only half-listening to Varric interrogating Sebastian for potential plot points and details to embroider.

“No, he’s not twenty feet tall,” Sebastian protested. “And he doesn’t have claws for fingers. Goren was always a rather dumpy boy, as a matter of fact. Pudgy, and a bit slow-witted.”

Varric squinted. “He eats babies, though, right? And farts fire?”

He’d already produced a pencil from somewhere on his person, and was jotting something down on a scrap of parchment. Tobias dreaded to think of the details.

Sebastian laughed incredulously. “You’re not serious, I hope….”

“Oh, come on,” the dwarf pleaded. “At least pretend to be interesting, Choir Boy!”

Tobias chuckled, shaking his head when the princeling looked to him for back-up. He leaned
forwards and let Varric pour him another tankard of mead. It was strong stuff—that sweetness masked a kick, and he promised himself he really would make this his last one—but it did seem to wash the taste of filth and demons out of his mouth.

He let the conversation lap around him, half-heartedly listening to Varric trying to make Sebastian say that Starkhaven was an exotic wonderland of dusky, nubile beauties and virile swashbucklers, instead of just another inland city-state. So far, it wasn’t working, but Tobias didn’t doubt that, after another couple of drinks, Varric would have something worth twisting out of the man.

Movement at the suite’s door caught his attention, and he glanced up, the mug stilling on his lips as he spotted a figure making its way through the thinning throng, shoulders hunched and ragged like a moulting crow.

Anders paused for a moment, scanning the room, and for those fleeting few seconds he seemed to be a totally alien creature, entirely at odds with the bar’s grubby squalor. He’d shaved, Tobias noticed, though his coat looked wet, and his hair was dampened to dark gold by what must have been a late rain shower. The light of the fire, and the candles, bathed him in an amber glow—encapsulated him, almost, like he was totally set apart from everything.

Tobias grinned. He knew by now it was pointless to resist or question that wash of joy that flooded him—like a real, physical warmth in his chest, just at the sight of the man—even though he was aware of its futility.

“Blondie!” Varric called, beckoning him over. “Good to see you. Drink?”

Anders saw them, heard Varric, nodded, and started to cross the suite. He looked exhausted, worn thin, but his smile was genuine… at least until he got closer, and saw Sebastian. Wariness touched his face then, combined with curiosity, and a touch of something a little darker.

“Ah, the gang’s all here,” Varric said cheerfully, peering across the chamber, to where Isabela was raking in her next round of winnings, and Merrill appeared to be asleep on one of the couches. “Except Broody, and Aveline… only she’s not really—”

Anders gave Tobias a questioning look, his posture stiff and trepid.

“Ah. Yes.” Tobias cleared his throat, and gestured with his half-empty tankard. “Anders, this is Sebastian Vael. You remember? The… er… from Starkhaven, with the….” He coughed, not particularly willing to dredge up the matter of the Flint Company right at that moment. “Sebastian, Anders.”

He didn’t mean it to sound so brusque. It just seemed like a good idea to give His Royal Shininess as little information about the healer as possible, only Tobias heard the way it came out: like Anders was just some other associate, someone who didn’t matter… someone who was intruding on a moment between friends. It probably looked like that, too, with the three of them sitting here, swilling mead, laughing and talking under the fug of warm air and firelight.

At that moment, the princeling stood, smiled, and offered a greeting in that lovely brogue of his, to which Anders replied with a terse and monosyllabic grunt. Tobias took a mouthful of mead and tried not to wince as Sebastian folded awkwardly back into his seat.

“I remember you,” Anders said, his voice positively arid. “Your bounty, anyway. We never met, but I was with Hawke when we fought the Flint Company.”

There was something almost possessive in the way he said it; something that brought a tiny thrill to
life in Tobias’ veins, though he tried to ignore it, and— while the princeling’s attention was
distracted—he mugged frantically at Anders to shut up. The healer either didn’t see, or ignored him.

“I… see,” Sebastian said, obviously a little wrong-footed. “Well, I am most grateful, I can assure—”

Anders sniffed coolly and, peering down at the other man with disdain, crossed his arms over his
chest. “Is that supposed to be Andraste’s face on your crotch?”

Tobias’ mead nearly shot out of his nose.

“What?” Sebastian blinked, looking vaguely alarmed.

meant to be Andraste?”

Sebastian glanced reflexively downwards, but recovered quickly. “It’s not a belt-buckle. I mean, yes,
it’s Our Lady, but it’s a heraldic— My father had this armour commissioned when I took my vows
as a Brother in Faith.”

Tobias swallowed very hard, the back of his nose and throat on fire with the pain of alcohol sloshing
where it wasn’t meant to go, and tried desperately not to laugh. He didn’t even dare look at Varric,
although the strangled breathing suggested the dwarf was struggling to hold on, too.

“Huh.” Anders simply lofted an eyebrow, his composure complete. “Just doesn’t seem awfully
respectful, that’s all. I mean, I’m not sure I’d want the Maker to see me shoving his bride’s head
between my legs every morning.”

That did for Varric. He spluttered, guffawed, and thumped the table, and Sebastian turned a wide,
blue-eyed look of surprise—and even slight amusement—on Tobias.

Well, well… not even offended, are you, Choirboy?

A half-smile that might have been a defence mechanism, or might have meant that he was just
slightly impressed, curled the princeling’s lips. He shook his head incredulously, and looked as if he
was about to dredge up a witty retort, but Anders didn’t give him the chance.

“Anyway,” he said crisply, “I’ll go and get a drink. Please, don’t let me interrupt any further.”

And, with that, he turned and swept out, leaving a stunned silence in his wake.

“I… don’t think your friend likes me,” Sebastian ventured, which set Varric off into another wheezy
chuckle.

“Ah, forget it,” he said, shaking his head. “Blondie doesn’t like most people. The Chantry thing’s not
working in your favour, though. I’ll give you that.”

Tobias glanced sharply at the dwarf. Unexpectedly congenial company though the princeling had
turned out to be, there were things he didn’t need to know, and things it wasn’t safe to tell him.

“Oh, he’s not a believer?” Sebastian enquired, leaning forwards for Varric to top up his tankard.

Tobias drained the last of his mead, wincing at the remnants of it he’d almost expelled by
unconventional means, and shook his head, declining a fresh pour.

“Not as such,” he said. “He’s just had a few bad experiences. But he’s a good man. A good friend.
Um, if you’ll excuse me a minute…..”
He saw the look Varric gave him as he got up. It was impressively complicated for someone who’d put away as much drink as he had that evening; a mess of vague reproach and concern, coupled with curiosity and a knowing leer. Tobias chose to ignore all of it, and made his way out of the suite and down into the tavern’s main bay.

Anders was leaning on the bar, cupping a clay mug of wine. Nearby, Corff was dispensing homespun wisdom to one of the slightly more sodden regulars and, further towards the door, an argument was breaking out between two dockworkers about someone’s sister-in-law… or possibly the disputed results of a game of Wallop. It was hard to tell.

“What in the world was that all about?” Tobias asked quietly, slipping in beside Anders, and propping his arms against the rough, greasy wood of the bar.

He breathed in and—somewhere between the sawdust and beer and hints of old vomit—caught a whiff of elfroot and soot, and something else. Some light, clean fragrance, like a good quality soap.

It was nice. And it told Tobias something about what coming here tonight—about what his pledge to the Underground, perhaps—had meant to Anders… or it might have done. It could be very hard to unpick the meanings behind many of the things the healer did. Tobias wanted to believe it was for him, though. He wanted to believe it very much.

Anders didn’t turn to face him. He just shrugged and glared at his cup.

“What?”

Tobias snorted. “You know. You, and… and His Royal Whatsit, just now. You were a bit—”

“He’s a hypocrite,” Anders said crisply. “Don’t you think?”

“W—”

He looked up then, real anger blazing in those dark eyes, though his voice stayed comparatively hushed. “I remember last year. This is the same man who paid us—all right, paid you—to take down those mercenaries as retribution for his family’s deaths, and then shilly-shallied all the way back to the chantry?”

“Ye-es,” Tobias began, sensing a trap he was about to blunder into. “But… I thought you believed in blood for blood.”

The hum and buzz of the tavern seemed to grow louder, sucking at the air between them, filling everything with sound and the chaotic thickness of life. Over by the door, the argument was heading towards a fist fight, and Corff sighed wearily, reaching below the bar for the hefty blackjack he kept under there.

Anders grimaced. “Vengeance is one thing, but this is different. Is he even bothering to think about what’s right for his city? To put himself above his own desire for retaliation?”

Tobias opened his mouth, words hovering on his lips that—as he started to say them—suddenly felt unkind. *So it’s about the difference between Vengeance and Justice, is it?*

He knew it was something that bothered Anders; he’d spoken of it a few times before in Tobias’ presence, but it had seemed an abstract thing, a concept that tugged at him after half a cup of wine and a long day. There was a line between justice and revenge that, once crossed, was forever blurred… and the thought of losing that distinction frightened Anders. Tobias had an inkling of how much, but he wasn’t prepared to try and confirm it.
Something’s happened, hasn’t it? Something’s got you rattled, and you won’t tell me what it is, even if I ask, because you’re a stubborn bastard, aren’t you?

He swallowed, and wet his lips, taking refuge in teasing. “Well, that’s politics for you. And there was me thinking you were just jealous of his sexy foreign accent.”

Anders snorted, though it didn’t sound as bitter as it might have done. “Accents, hm? No.” He shook his head, and took a sip of his wine. “I lost mine a long time ago, and good riddance.”

Tobias frowned. “You had a—?”

“Well, that’s politics for you. And there was me thinking you were just jealous of his sexy foreign accent.”

Anders glanced up, brow furrowed.

Near the door, the first punch was thrown, and one of the men went careening into someone else’s table, spilling pints and generally annoying people. A roar of encouragement went up as the sprawled docker struggled up and attempted to barrel back towards his attacker, only to be pulled down and nutted in the forehead by a somewhat irate dwarf who—from his padded jack and facial brand—looked suspiciously like an off-duty Carta thug.

Tobias and Anders exchanged glances, then the healer picked up his wine and they moved quietly to an empty table in the far corner of the bar, tucked almost out of sight in one of the damp recesses close to the kitchen. A greasy tallow candle burned in a shallow sconce on the wall above, oozing wax and the acrid smell of fat into the thick, smoky air.

“Anyhow,” Tobias said, sliding into one of the rough wooden chairs, and taking care not to actually touch too much of the table, “maybe he is a bit of a hypocrite, but he had work going, and he’s good for the money. Not to mention,” he added, raising his gaze to Anders’ face in a fit of mischievous near-cruelty, “well… he’s pretty easy on the eyes. Don’t you think?”

A muscle flickered briefly in Anders’ jaw as he sat down. He blinked, then looked faintly appalled. “Hawke, you—”

“Oh, come on, don’t say you didn’t notice. Those eyes… and the voice, not to mention the cheekbones. He’s rather sweet, isn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Anders’ lips thinned as his fingers worried at the sides of his cup. “I haven’t licked him.”

Tobias spluttered, but couldn’t deny the delicious wash of glee that rampaged through him.
He grinned lazily, savouring the deliciousness of it all. Over by the door, Corff was breaking up the fight, and the docker was nursing a broken nose. The Carta dwarf looked like he was going to get a free pint out of it.

“Ah, well. Me neither,” Tobias said, and sighed in theatrical resignation. “Hmm. Probably won’t get a chance, either. Not only is he sworn to the Chantry but, apparently, he was quite the ladykiller before he reformed… and nothing else. Still, a boy can daydream, right?”

Anders shook his head, radiating incredulous disapproval, and tutted. “Tell me about this noblewoman, then,” he said, cupping his mug protectively. “What, you’re strutting around Hightown slaughtering the great and the good at random now?”

Tobias smirked. “Lady Harimann,” he said quietly, not that it was likely anyone who cared could hear them. “Turned out she’d done a deal with a demon. Her family, in exchange for putting her puppet on the throne in Starkhaven. It was a bit messy.”

Anders’ eyes widened. “He took you in there to face a demon that had possessed an entire family?”

It was difficult to meet the hard, angry look on his face. Tobias frowned.

“He didn’t know that. And it wasn’t really…. Look, it wasn’t that bad.”

“You could have—” Anders bit the end off the word, his voice low and sharp, and pressed his lips tightly together.

Tobias folded his arms across his chest and regarded the other man thoughtfully. There were a dozen snide, teasing things he could think of saying, but they all felt just a little bit cruel.

“I’m all right,” he said softly. “Really, I am. We took it down. It wasn’t a problem. And… I’m a big boy, Anders. I can cope.”

Anders gave him a withering look. “I know that. I don’t—I mean, I imagine he knows now, though? Hmm? About you? About…?”

He twitched his fingers lightly, and the gesture distracted Tobias. He’d seen Anders do it once before, on one of those raucous, bright evenings in the suite, when he’d mentioned his past… Amaranthine, and the Grey Wardens, and the legendary epithets those fearsome heroes of Blight legends earned.

Sparklefingers! Varric had crowed, utterly delighted with the name. Seriously? Wonderful! But, since you’re already ‘Blondie’, why don’t we call Hawke—

Not a chance, Tobias had said, shutting that one down before it even got started. It still occasionally came back to haunt him, just as it had done when he and Sebastian had arrived in the suite.

All the same, that brief flash of memory felt warm, full of laughter and wine, and at odds with the sudden intensity on Anders’ face. Tobias cleared his throat.

“Yes. All right, yes, he does. But I don’t think Sebastian will—”

“He’s a sworn brother,” Anders hissed, leaning fractionally closer… close enough, even across the table, for Tobias to catch the smell of herbs and wet dog that clung to his coat, and that smart, pleasing fragrance beneath it. “D’you really believe he won’t let it slip? That’s dangerous, Hawke.
Too dangerous.”

“Well, what was I supposed to do? Run away?”

“Maybe, yes!” Anders winced. “No. Oh, sod… I don’t know. I just…. Well, he better be trustworthy. For his own sake.”

Tobias smirked as Anders lolled sulkily back in his chair. “Did you just make a thinly veiled threat against the Prince of Starkhaven?”

Anders looked tired, but a trace of that wonderful, wicked grin of his curled at the corner of his mouth as he shook his head. “Maybe. But only on account of you.”

Desire unspooled lazily in the pit of Tobias’ gut, and wrapped itself around him, tugging and yearning. Desire… and more than that. Having this man so close to him—so close and yet not nearly close enough—so concerned for his well-being and safety… and all wrapped up in jealousy and protective longing.

He knew, in reality, it was probably a lot more to do with Anders worrying about the Underground than Tobias’ own anonymity as a mage, but it didn’t stop his chest from twisting on the spikes of possibility.

Tobias had seen faces, heard names. If the templars took him, who knew how long he’d withstand torture? He supposed it must have crossed Anders’ mind although, looking at him now, it was hard to believe it could have done. Everything felt just a little bit too personal.

“I’ve got something for you,” he said, glad of the chance to change the subject.

Anders frowned. “Oh?”

“What I said I’d bring. Only… a bit more. Here.”

He pulled the coin pouch out from his jerkin and pushed it across the rickety table, watching the way those long, white hands cupped its weight. Anders’ frown deepened as his fingers dug into the leather, and he glanced up, alarm staining his eyes.

“Hawke… are you sure? This is a lot of coin. It—”

“It could do some good,” Tobias cut in. “So take it. Please?”

He still had hold of the bag, and he pushed it further into Anders’ grasp, their fingers brushing as he did so. For such a small action, it seemed to crackle with energy, that simple touch full of a galvanic power.

Anders pressed his lips together tightly, his attention never leaving Tobias’ face.

“Thank you.”

Real warmth bathed the words; the same sweetness that leached into those dark eyes, and washed the concern and alarm away.

Tobias swelled with silent, silly pride, a little ashamed at how intensely Anders’ gratitude touched him. He allowed his hand to leave the bag, and let his fingers flex against the grubby tabletop.

“You, uh, you look good, by the way,” he murmured shyly.
Anders blinked, and Tobias gestured vaguely to his own chin, indicating the clean-shaven skin, the neatly slicked back hair, and all those other little details that were becoming more enticing by the second.

“Oh.” His gaze shifted to the tabletop as he finished secreting the coin purse in his coat, and the faintest hint of a pleased flush touched those pale cheekbones. “Thanks. It’s, er, it’s Selby’s naming day. A few of us took her out to celebrate.”

“Ah.”

Tobias swallowed, feeling the dull weight of stupidity clang in his gut as he watched Anders fiddle aimlessly with the half-empty cup of wine he obviously wasn’t going to finish drinking.

*You see? It’s not always about you, is it?*

*That’ll teach you to make assumptions, smart-arse.*
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which Tobias experiences an itchy comeuppance, and finds himself in a vulnerable position.

*(Warning for frank discussion of genitals.)*

Anders left soon after. Tobias wasn’t sure whether it was anger, embarrassment, or just the irritation of the whole mess. He wanted to find out, but the healer had been so quick to get away that following him just felt wrong. He wanted Anders to confide in him by choice, damn it — to trust him and, yes, want him, as a friend and so much more — instead of trying to tear the answers out of him. Only, he had so many doubts… so many sudden, painful uncertainties.

Anders had taken the money happily enough, hadn’t he? Somehow, at the back of his mind, Tobias felt worried by that. He’d taken the money and slid off early, back out into the darkness, and to the life he evidently had out there. And, oh, yes, quite a life, wasn’t it? All those people in the Underground whom he called friends, and with whom he shared things like nameday celebrations, and the secrets of saving lives and raising rebellion.

*Uh-huh. Quite clearly it’s him that has the jealousy issues, and not you.*

Tobias rubbed a weary hand over his eyes, and tried to believe it was merely the exertions of the past few days taking their toll. He made his excuses to Varric and His Royal Shininess — who was apparently making a very passable attempt at drinking the dwarf under the table — and headed home, telling himself that this leaden fatigue was the result of using so much magic. He wasn’t accustomed to it, or to being the centre of so much obvious attention.

It had, he supposed, been a crazy week. First, the qunari and their deadly gas… not so much the theft itself, or the lunatic who had appeared so neatly to be responsible, or even the idiocy of the qunari in setting a trap with that kind of bait in the first place, but the fact it was all so clearly part of something else. The dead elf in the warehouse, and Javaris’ sudden departure smacked of something too easy, too convenient to be true, though Tobias had, oddly enough, believed the little snake when he’d sworn he had nothing to do with it. He probably hadn’t. It probably was just a disaffected elven fanatic… and there were enough of the little buggers running around both Lowtown and the qunari compound for it to have been possible. That was what he’d reported back to the viscount’s office, anyway, and they’d seemed happy enough. He’d got his payment, which was the main thing, and the immediate threat of Lowtown imploding had been quelled. That should be enough. It usually was.

Tobias hadn’t mentioned Javaris, or the mercenaries he and Fenris had killed to get to the dwarf, out there on the coast road. No point, really.

Fenris, though… He’d be the one to find out about things, wouldn’t he? If there was truly something in all this elven fanaticism and rebellion stuff.

As he meandered thoughtfully through the grimy, moon-stained streets, Tobias considered that. He made a mental note to find a way to put the questions to the elf; preferably one that wouldn’t involve
Fenris deciding to take offence and potentially either calling in his gambling debts, or ripping his liver out.

Then, of course, there was the Underground itself. Tobias had been so caught up in being invited to attend the meeting that he’d not given as much thought to the qunari debacle as he should have done, and now he wondered if he’d missed something. They’d all known about it, hadn’t they? What had Elias Creer said… something about ‘nasty vapours’ on the air?

Tobias hadn’t trusted the Rivaini. He didn’t know much about the Fraternities of Enchanters, at least not the way Anders did, and he’d had even less interest in reading about the so-called secession of the Resolutionists from the Libertarians, or any other off-shoot of politics. Nevertheless, it all seemed to fit too closely together, and he didn’t like knowing that the Underground regarded him with such suspicion.

He wondered if that would still be true after his sizeable donation, and how long it might be until Anders would invite him to attend another such gathering… if he did.

Tobias bit his lip and aimed a kick at a lump of loose mortar on the ground of the alleyway he was currently cutting through. It scudded off into the shadows, and the cool air felt smooth and bright on his bare arms.

They probably all knew about Sebastian and the Harimanns by now… the Underground. Word travelled fast in Kirkwall, especially on wings of blood.

He frowned as he wondered just how many members of that shadowy clique had darker associations. Some of those people he’d met there, they weren’t all desperate and powerless, or motivated purely by the kind of righteousness that Anders was. No group of people ever had such simple motives, and Tobias found himself thinking of Gethyn, the dark-eyed little firebrand who reeked of nervous exasperation and, as he paused at the end of one darkened cross-street, Tobias paused to absent-mindedly scratch and rearrange his crotch. He’d been itching for a while, and there was no one around now, not even a mugger or idle street gang.

He decided he didn’t want to think about the Underground. He didn’t want to think about the Harimanns and the desire demon, either, but those thoughts kept on slinking back too, just the same. He wasn’t drunk enough, he decided, vaguely regretting the feeling he got ever since Anders had admonished him about his drinking: that actually getting properly hammered was somehow letting the healer down.

He quickened his pace as he got nearer to home, and grimaced at the sight of a familiar figure skulking along the outer row of the houses, near the tenement block on the corner.

*Bloody man breathes like he’s stealing the air…. Don’t know how he does it.*

Gamlen looked up at his nephew’s approach and gave him a smile that was half a sneer and half pure resentment.

“Oh. It’s you.” He started up the first couple of steps towards the hovel, wringing the advantage of height from the movement so he could peer down superciliously at Tobias. “Out on the piss again, were you?”

Tobias glanced at the coin purse Gamlen was making a poor job of hiding inside his coat. The smell of cheap ale rolled off him, and those weaselly, blood-shot little eyes did nothing to dispel Tobias’ mental image of his uncle as some kind of surly mongoose.
“Little bit. You won tonight, then, did you?” He nodded at the ill-disguised purse. “Can’t have been cards, in that case. Cock fight? Or boxing? I suppose it’s good you can’t stand the sight of blood. If you ever stood near enough the front to get spattered, Mother would know where you’d been.”

Gamlen scowled. “I don’t have to take this from you, you little—”

“What?” Tobias asked wearily, mounting the steps in two easy strides that not only brought them level, but made his physicality painfully obvious against the older man’s thin build. “Go on, Uncle. What?”

Gamlen glanced nervously over his shoulder, towards the darkened house and its closed shutters. “You’ll wake your mother. Got your key?”

Tobias sighed and brushed past him to unlock the door.

If civility had not been becoming quite so much of a problem, the two of them might have shared a moment’s camaraderie, sneaking in like rebellious boys beneath a watchful matron’s roof.

The fire was already out, Leandra evidently having gone to bed some time ago, and everything seemed dark and still.

The two men parted company and shuffled to their respective rooms, and Tobias stifled a deep sigh as he shut the door, not bothering to light a candle. He waved his fingers and, with the briefest flicker of concentration, a small orb of light winked into existence, piercing the room’s dimness with a thin, bluish glow.

Tobias watched a timber beetle scurrying busily across the wall as he pissed, then toed the chamber pot back under the bed with a wince. Peeing didn’t normally sting.

He supposed he’d have to track His Royal Shininess down in the morning, too… see if Sebastian had been serious about hanging around. He doubted it—probably just the drink and the adrenaline talking—but it could prove interesting, all the same.

*Oh, yes, absolutely. A fitting companion, now I’m on first-name terms with the viscount ….*

*Andraste’s tits, how did it all come to this?*

Tobias smirked to himself as he stripped to his smallclothes. Definitely a crazy week. The craziest. Still, they had the estate deed now. That was what his mother had wanted, and if it made her happy it was worth it.

As for Prince Charming and his ridiculously shiny armour… well, *he* could probably be gently dissuaded, though Tobias wasn’t sure whether he actually wanted rid of Sebastian that much. After all, he thought, as he slipped under the covers and allowed the ball of light still hovering in the air to blink out, if his presence drove Anders so far up the wall he was tap-dancing on the ceiling, he’d get down on bended knee and beg the man to say himself.

Tobias smiled happily into the darkness, but the smile didn’t linger. It was too easy to relive that lovely little moment of glee in the tavern when he’d believed—even if it was just for a while—that Anders had shaved and dressed up for *him*. The fragility of a hope that could be so eagerly crushed was too painful, and yet he couldn’t leave it alone.

It wasn’t a good thing. He knew that, and yet he kept coming back to it, playing the scene over and over in his head as punched his pillow into shape and lay awake in the quiet of his bunk. Gamlen was already snoring and snorting on the other side of the wall, and Tobias found himself taking
refuge in the memory of Anders’ delicious display of territorial anger.

He’d found it profoundly exciting, because it proved—it had to prove—that there was something there and, however strenuously they were both trying to be good, the cracks in the façade were widening. Anders had to admit that much, surely, and maybe from there it wouldn’t be such a big leap to start breaking down his whole defence of lonely martyrdom.

It was good fantasy material, anyway. Tobias could easily picture being in The Hanged Man of an evening, chatting amiably in Varric’s suite... maybe Sebastian was there and, contrary to his apparent proclivities, being a bit flirtatious. Maybe it was Jethann, from the whorehouse. Didn’t matter; they both had similarly incredible eyes although, in the private space of Tobias’ head, Sebastian had a better body. No daft armour, just a slim cut tunic and breeches, showing off all the best bits.

Anyhow, there’d be some ribald banter, some casual touching, a few lingering looks, and then Anders would roll in, stone-faced and thin-lipped, those dark eyes flashing with fury. There’d be angry words, punches thrown, and then it was all too easy to picture Anders in that charged, livid state of jealousy, the power crackling off him like it did when they fought side by side, up on the coast road or something... that faintly metallic taste, and the heat that always lingered in Tobias’ mouth long after the scrap was over.

Maker, yes....

His hand slid beneath the thin woollen blanket as he recalled every detail, wiped it clean and pressed it to the fantasy, making something new from those cast off moments. How it would feel to have Anders slam him against the wall, kissing him with a breathless, passionate anger, goading his body with ruthless caresses.... No, actually: both their bodies, sweat-slicked and desperate, working towards the same cathartic elation in some anonymous imaginary bedroom. Anders touching him, fucking him, whispering perfect endearments into the nape of his neck, all hot breath and rough hands, pinning and biting—and where had that come from?

Fervid fantasies and surprising yearnings aside, it was easy for Tobias to hoard those scraps of enjoyment, to hold in the ragged breathing and the small whimpers, and muffle his pleasure against the pillow as he handled himself to a rough and uncompromising peak.

Nevertheless, once he was done, he felt inevitably hollow and faintly grubby, and all the warm thoughts leaked away, leaving him only with empty, absent places.

Besides, if anything ever did happen between them, it shouldn’t be immediate. It couldn’t be, he supposed, despite the intense agony of frustration. The kind of walls Anders had put around himself needed time to be disassembled—brick by brick, if necessary. Tobias just wished there was an easier way to make the stubborn bastard believe he wanted to be there for that; to get Anders to really, truly trust him, and perhaps even realise he didn’t need protecting.

That was what he was doing. Tobias was sure of it. His mind raced, trying to fill in all the gaps, pushing sleep right back to margins of possibility, even as tiredness seeped into the core of his enervated flesh. Anders was trying to protect him from the complications of it all: from Justice, and from the Underground, and from all the mess and the thankless bitterness.

It had to be that, because otherwise it meant the healer didn’t trust him or, worse, didn’t want him... and that wasn’t allowed to be true.

Of course, his continued resistance might not be a lack of trust, Tobias supposed, or even a conscious intention to keep him held at arm’s length. It could just have been a shred of sanity. Anders knew
himself—knew Justice—better than he did. Perhaps he also knew that wanting something didn’t
make having it a good idea… and that led to all those very quickly quashed thoughts about
abominations and possession, which Tobias vigorously dismissed.

It wasn’t like that. He wasn’t like that.

It could happen. They could make it happen… make it work.

Anyway, all the received wisdom about spirits and demons came from the Circle, and therefore the
Chantry. It stood to reason they would try to paint everything in shades of horror and demonic chaos;
it made an excellent excuse for their attempts to maintain a stranglehold on power, and on mages.

Tobias was aware he was consciously rationalising. Yes, there were dangers… mages could be
dangerous. Anders was dangerous—as the smoking stumps of several bandits on the Wounded
Coast, not to mention numerous street gangs, outcast qunari who’d remained annoyingly uncooperative,
and a handful of assorted petty thugs and Carta employees could have testified to, had they still had the ability.

And yet, mages were people, not mere vessels, or weapons.

Sometimes, he thought of Bethany, and the way she’d tried to fight the darkspawn as they fled from
Lothering. They weren’t memories Tobias liked to linger amidst. Maker knew it had taken long
enough for the bloody nightmares to stop.

Still, it mattered. They’d fought, all of them—Carver, fresh from Ostagar, knackered and already
wounded, Bethany with her eyes wide as saucers and her hands clenched around flames, and him,
half-blind with terror and fury and flinging lightning at the kind of monsters he’d never believed
existed outside of bad dreams or bedtime stories. She had been so brave, and yet she hadn’t stood a
chance. Malcolm had never taught them to fight with magic, never taught them to defend themselves
in any real way except by running, and she’d paid for that.

It had been a horrific, impossible ordeal… and yet, had either of them turned to demons? Had
Bethany reared up against that ogre, the wrath of blood magic rising from her in vile, terrible flails?
Tobias winced from even imagining it.

Maybe she’d have survived if she had.

He turned over, the thin mattress creaking beneath him and Gamlen’s reedy snores echoing through
the wall by his head. On nights like this, it was too easy to see the wet blood glistening blackly on
the parched earth, too easy to hear the screams of those not as quick or as lucky as they had been…
too easy to see his sister’s body thrown at his feet, torn and broken and lifeless.

She had deserved so much more. Not a captive half-life, a prisoner or a templar slave, the way
Anders spoke of, but as a person—a woman in her own right.

He wanted to talk about that, Tobias realised. He wanted to tell people. He wanted to talk about
mages, and politics, and power… and he wanted to be a part of changing it all.

With that in mind, he wanted to go and see Anders—and yet he didn’t quite dare to think of it. Not
just marching down there, demanding to sign up for the revolution. Not like that… though that’s
what it was, wasn’t it? That was what would happen, eventually. If people like Creer were involved,
if the only way to challenge the templars was to disobey… well, the Chantry itself would ensure that
all-out war was the only option.

Maker… why is it all such a mess?
Tobias stifled a groan and flung an arm over his head, then burrowed down beneath the stale-smelling blanket. The trouble was, he’d rather thought that, when he turned over all that coin, Anders would have at least mentioned inviting him to another meeting of the Underground. He’d said nothing about it, however, and Tobias couldn’t help taking that personally.

He was being an idiot, he told himself. If he thought about it from Anders’ perspective, he knew bringing someone like him into that close-knit, dangerous world was difficult. It would have been like him turning up to meet one of his old Coterie contacts with His Royal Shininess—or, Andras’s tits, even Aveline—in tow. When people operated outside the law, they needed to know they could count on those they were asked to deal with… and he had yet to earn that trust from the Underground.

If he really thought about it, Tobias supposed he should have been grateful for Anders showing as much faith in him as he already had, but that only led to a night of vacillating, worrisome thoughts, and fears that he’d somehow done something wrong.

He wanted the Underground’s acceptance desperately, he realised … and not just because it was probably almost the same as gaining Anders’ acceptance, though perhaps that was part of it. Or, all right, most of it. However, nonetheless, the things they did, the lives they saved: Tobias believed in that.

He believed in the need to change the way people saw mages, and to quench that tendency of the Chantry’s to brand them all as dangerous, or cursed. Magic wasn’t a curse, no matter how many times he’d thought so as a boy; it was a gift. Admittedly, a gift he’d most likely have chosen to be rid of if he could—especially when Kirkwall was so full of unpleasant prejudices—but a gift, all the same. Surely, no one who’d been healed down in Anders’ clinic could argue with that, and if the templars, or that mad cow Meredith, could only actually see that….

But, dreams like that were a long way off, weren’t they?

Changing the world never happened overnight, anyway. Whatever great upheavals and violent revolutions occurred, people were people, and they trickled back into their old, familiar ruts soon enough.

*Look at the elves, for instance. One great moment of glory, rising up beside Andras’s rebellion, then smacked back down into the dirt.*

*Nothing ever changes* that much.

No. Things didn’t change, and the time just creaked slowly by.

Finally, Tobias fell asleep on that thought, and tumbled through worrisome, unsettling dreams, perfumed with the memories of demons and the possibilities of so much more.

He pushed through the next few days in a tangle of apprehension and faint discomfort—as much mental as physical.

Fenris was as good as his word regarding dealing with the estate and examining the state the slavers had left it in… which was pretty much as appalling as Tobias expected.

The place was a desecrated ruin. It was huge, yes, but almost everything above the ground floor had been left to rot, while the slavers had kept their base of operations in the cellars. There were a handful of tunnels, too—storage, he supposed, given that most of them were filled with crates and mouldy old sacks—although Fenris didn’t seem so sure.
“You are aware that there could be secret passageways here, are you not?” the elf asked, prowling through the mess with his shoulders hunched and his eyes narrowed.

He never did stand up straight, Tobias noticed. Always bowed over a bit, like he was waiting for someone to try and hit him. He wasn’t sure whether it was even something Fenris realised he was doing—a last vestige of Danarius’ abuse, perhaps—or maybe it was a physical thing, and beneath that protective shell of armour there lay terrible scars, along with the lyrium brands.

*No idea. Can’t help wondering how far down those brands go, though.…*

Tobias grimaced. “Please don’t say that. I don’t think I can cope with any more surprises.”

Fenris made a small noise in the back of his throat that was almost like a chuckle, and the dusty, dirty shafts of light thrown by the high widows glinted on his pale hair as they made their way back up to the main floor.

There was, of course, no Antivan walnut dining set. There was little furniture left to speak of, except the hulking, worm-ridden chifferobes and chests in which he and Carver had first found evidence of Gamlen’s fraud.

*Ah, yes. That time we went breaking and entering together. Happy days. Where does it all go?*

Tobias eyed the rotten fringes of tapestry still clinging to the cobweb-cloaked walls, and thought wistfully of his brother. Carver ought to be here for this. He should be *part* of it, not cooped up in The Gallows, not being one of *them*.

There wouldn’t be any going back, though. And that hurt. It hurt to know Carver had chosen a path so diametrically opposed to everything Tobias was, everything he stood for… and that, so far, he hadn’t regretted it.

There had been another letter. Leandra cooed over them all, and didn’t seem to notice the edge on the words that Carver directed at him.

*It’s nice to find my place, to be part of something bigger than me… bigger than you, even, brother.*

Tobias had never meant to occlude him. He hadn’t even known Carv felt like that until it was too late—and how thick did *that* make him?

“You will probably not be able to clean that,” Fenris observed, peering down at a particularly bloodstained rug. “I think perhaps gutting everything and starting afresh is the best idea.”

Tobias nodded dully. Varric had been right; there were a couple of rotted corpses still left down in the undercroft. Not *much* of them left after the rats had been at work all this time, but still… he’d have to see about getting that dealt with.

*“Yeah,” he said absently, squinting up into the wide, high mezzanine of the main hall. The estate was certainly a big chunk of stone. There was an enormous, sweeping staircase that, properly refurbished, would look fantastic, not to mention impressive marble fireplaces, a wealth of bedchambers, a library, dining chamber, kitchens that looked like they could butcher and cook a dozen oxen at a time.…*

*I don’t want this.*

*“Varric said he had a recommendation for a steward for you,” Fenris said, apparently feeling far*
more talkative than he usually did.

Tobias wished he could return the favour.

*I don’t want any of it. It’s too big. Too much. I... I think I just want to go home.*

“Mm.”

*I only wish I knew where it was.*

They poked through the rest of the rooms in a cursory kind of way, picking up anything looked saleable and closing doors on the worst damaged chambers. By mid-afternoon, the smell of damp plaster and mould had worked its way so deep into Tobias’ throat that it was the second most uncomfortable sensation he was experiencing.

Fenris shot him a suspicious look as he tried to surreptitiously scratch himself, and pretended not to notice. They had just finished making a brief examination of the small courtyard garden at the back of the house—little to it except weeds and overgrown vines, although there was a pleasant cupola and what looked like a fountain, somewhere under the rampant greenery—and Tobias was sweating lightly from the effort of scrambling through briars and over masonry.

That, he told himself, was why he itched. No other reason.

Later, after he’d left Fenris in Hightown and returned home to obediently report every infinitesimal detail of the excursion to Leandra, Tobias started to suppose that—just maybe—there might be a problem.

All the usual squabbles aside, the climate of the city was still pretty nasty. Lowtown in particular had an atmosphere of consistent spite, and every spoiled pail of milk or overturned cart seemed blamed on either mages or the qunari. Tobias supposed it was sensible for the Underground to be keeping a low profile… and maybe Anders just thought he was better off out of it.

Five days after the night at the tavern, Tobias was still stewing quietly in doubt and discontent, not quite prepared to venture down to Anders’ clinic.

One very good reason for that—besides his unease at the thought of talking to the healer about the Underground—was the itching, which was now accompanied by an eye-watering stinging every time he pissed, and a rather alarming discharge.

He was, Tobias realised, going to have to get it seen to.

Naturally, there was no question of taking it to Darktown. This was no quiet, discreet, trousers-buttoned request for redblossom ointment. It needed proper healing… and proper examination.

*I am not dropping my keks in front of Anders for a full inspection. I’d rather die of it.*

Um… can you die of the clap?

There were probably other healers in town, anyway. Paying Circle fees—though more affordable for Tobias than it had once been—was not an option. He wasn’t going anywhere near The Gallows; it was crawling with templars. Still, he was certain there must be somewhere else to go. He just wasn’t sure where, or how you asked without potentially putting yourself at the notice of the templars, and then it would probably all get back to Anders through the Underground’s grapevine anyway, and… shit, it was embarrassing.
Tobias ended up slinking back to the Rose, full of the intention to bluster and complain and demand not only a healer, but also his money back.

What actually happened involved having his privates thoroughly inspected by Madam Lusine and—when a woman like her, with a face like that, was peering at his tackle with her shrivelled up pout and narrowed, shrewd little eyes—well, Tobias quickly became convinced that death would probably have been preferable.

He stood, breeches and smallclothes around his knees, in the warmth and comfortable opulence of her private chamber. It was set back on the Rose’s first floor, a quiet space amid the house’s rowdy chatter… although Tobias wasn’t sure that the bookcases and ostentatious paintings lining the walls didn’t have peepholes cut into them. He wouldn’t have been remotely surprised if that had proved to be true.

A hearty fire blazed in the marble fireplace, its dancing light catching on the velvet-upholstered armchairs that stood opposite Lusine’s large, dark wood desk and yet—despite its heat—Tobias felt distinctly chilly.

In a strange and spurious way, the room reminded him of the grand cleric’s chamber in the chantry, and he fought the urge to laugh at that, aware it was a bad idea when the madam of the house was at eye level with his… pikestaff.

Lusine sucked her teeth thoughtfully as she straightened up.

“Ooh, that does look nasty, my dear.”

His fingers curled defensively on the edge of the ornately carved wooden table behind him. A bowl of strongly scented roses with deep red, dusky flowers sat in the centre of it, and they yielded up a heady, musk-threaded perfume, while the smooth bevel of the table’s pie-crust corner dug into the back of his thighs.

“Yes, well, I—” Tobias coughed, and started again. “I mean, I… haven’t been anywhere else, so—”

“No, quite.”

She tipped her head to the side, her mouth wrinkled tersely like a stewed prune. He could positively feel himself shrivelling under her gaze, and then she nodded, having had a moment of apparent consideration.

“Well, seeing as it’s you, Serah Hawke, I think I can help you out. I don’t want you telling tales, mind. Don’t want every grousy beggar coming in ‘ere thinking they’ve a right to what they ain’t.”

Tobias bristled. “I wasn’t concerned about that, so much as—”

“I’ll clap it for you. Deep breath, now,” she said crisply, and he didn’t know why, but he found himself obeying anyway.

Lusine rolled back the fripperous sleeves of her pink-and-purple frock and crossed to the other side of the table. He turned to follow her with his gaze, and she smiled wolfishly as she patted the polished surface. The waft of her thick, heavy perfume and the scent of the roses enveloped him, and Tobias winced as he realised what she wanted.

“Come on. Sooner it’s dealt with, the better, don’t you think, my dear? Pop him just here.”

She turned to the bookcase, and her bony fingers moved briskly over the leather-bound volumes,
selecting a tome apparently at random. Tobias stared as she clasped it to her bodice, then pointed sharply at the table.

“Come along! Quicker it’s done, quicker it’s over.”

The book was large, and rather thick, bound in dark, mottled leather with gold lettering on the spine. Tobias couldn’t make out what it said, but he doubted it was full of civilised aphorisms and quotes from the Chant.

“Uh, I don’t know about—”

“Nonsense,” she said briskly. “Now, don’t be such a baby.”

_I can’t believe I’m doing this_…

Tobias sighed, and moved to position his length on the table. He flinched as Lusine made a small censorious noise, then picked up the bowl of roses, pulled the lacy cloth out from underneath it, and slipped the fabric under his cock. It lay on the neat little protector, looking rather red and fat, the tip weeping with thick, noisome fluid that capped something slightly green and definitely unpleasant, and it itched like hell. He gritted his teeth, wincing at the combination of her scrutiny, the symptoms themselves, and the bite of the air on his abused flesh.

“There,” she said, apparently satisfied. “You can hold on if you want.”

He gripped the edge of the table, the smoothly curved wood feeling warm and cool at the same time as the world started to pitch and lurch around him. This hadn’t been a good idea. He should have just swallowed his embarrassment and gone to Darktown.

_At least I’d have got Anders in my pants once before I died._

Tobias squinted, unable to watch and yet afraid of closing his eyes completely. There was a look of terrible calm on Lusine’s face, all businesslike efficiency as she tilted her head to the side, pursed her lips, then lifted the book and slapped it down, hard, flat across his penis.

It was the single most painful experience of his life. Even the cusses he bellowed didn’t come out as whole words, just raw, garbled wails of pain.

He bowed double, sweating and fighting retches, as everything south of his waist appeared to melt into flames. Tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes and gouged trails down his cheeks as bile rose in his throat. He barely even noticed Lusine drop the book to the table, cross to the door and then slip out for a few moments.

Tobias spent the fleeting seconds of privacy giving vent to a loud sob. He wasn’t sure he dared peer down at his privates. Judging by the pain, he was convinced he’d find them mashed beyond recognition.

Lusine returned before he’d fully investigated the damage. She had a small, pale elven girl scurrying obediently at her heels: a tart, judging by the gaudy pink frock and the long, glossy blonde ringlets. She had pale amber eyes and a very pretty face, not yet ruined by life and, for one fleeting moment, Tobias almost succumbed to an unbearable swell of embarrassment at her walking in on him like this —weeping, with his cock out, and _that_ hardly being at its most attractive. Pus had splattered across the lace cloth protecting the table, discharge daubing the wood and also the book Lusine had used to clap him with. Fair enough, it had removed the blockage that had been making it so difficult to pee, but he could have wished there were easier, less agonising ways of doing it.
Shame and humiliation welled up in him, and Tobias rubbed the back of his wrist brusquely over his face and tried to breathe.

“Wh—?”

Lusine waved a hand, gesturing to the girl to approach him. “Gabrielle? See to our gentleman, would you? He’s been clapped. Full works, and don’t spare nothing. He’s a dear friend to this house.”

The girl nodded, and came towards Tobias like he was some kind of raging beast. She spread her small, delicate hands, and fixed him with that soft, sweet amber gaze. She couldn’t have been working here long, he supposed; she’d be far too popular.

“It is all right, messere,” she said quietly, her words rich with a pronounced Orlesian accent. “It’s all right. I am going to heal you. Deep inside, where the infection is, so he doesn’t come back anymore, yes? Potions and salves, they will only take away the burning. You need this to be completely cured.”

As she spoke, she flexed her slim fingers, and a gentle shimmer of light enveloped them. Tobias’ eyes widened, and a sudden ache of fear burst high and tight in his throat.

“Y-You’re a mage?”

He tried to make his surprise sound real. Well, it was, but not for the reason it should have been. Maker, did they know? Did Lusine know? He’d always been so careful… virtually no one in the city was aware of his secret, except for those he considered friends, and maybe a total of eight people whom he’d worked with during the time he’d spent in Athenril’s employ.

Quickly, he snatched at the moment of terror and brought his reactions as far under control as he could when it still felt like his tackle was about to drop off. He had to shield himself, he knew… hide his own power from her, pull it all in like his body was a shell, his soul caught behind its brittle walls, and no sniff of the Fade on his flesh.

Tobias swiped his tongue across dry, clumsy lips. “Well, I-I suppose it’s all right. Magical healing…it’s the best you can get, isn’t it?”

“That it is.” Lusine nodded. “Come along, now. You come and sit by the fire, Gabrielle will heal you, and then we’ll all have a nice little drink.”

Well, drink sounded like a good idea, at least.

Tobias nodded tentatively, still leaning heavily on the table, and very unsure as to whether he could actually walk.

He hobbled over to the armchair Lusine patted, and winced as she spread a blanket out on it.

_Andraste forbid I should make a mess on the upholstery._

The elven mage-child took his arm and helped him while he waddled, breeches around his knees, and every breath of movement was blinding agony.

_All your own bloody fault, isn’t it? Stupid sod… couldn’t keep it in your pants, could you? Couldn’t leave well enough alone. Whores and cheap booze, and where does it get you? Shouldn’t have happened, not with the amount I paid…._

The litany of reproach and regret pounded inside his throbbing head, and above it all hung the
memory of Anders’ admonishments, which had never before rung with such bitterness in Tobias’ mind. He was sure, if he even survived the death of his crotch and all the attendant agony it was bringing, he’d never be able to look Anders in the face again.

*He’ll know. They’ll gossip… he’s going to hear all about this, and he’s going to know just what a dirty little sod you are. Of course he wouldn’t touch you. Why would he? You spend all your time getting bladdered and fucking whores. Why would he want you?*

Fresh tears prickled at Tobias’ eyes as he lowered himself into the scratchy, velvet-upholstered chair, the soft blanket bunching up beneath him. The fire’s warmth bathed his legs, washing up to his hot, burning thighs, and he stifled a whimper as Gabrielle touched his arm.

He was fairly sure she hadn’t recognised him for what he was. He could barely feel her, which meant she wasn’t that powerful. And she wasn’t expecting him to be a mage, which definitely helped.

He glanced up as she leant over him, her pretty face locked into a well-trained expression of neutrality. If he disgusted her, she wasn’t showing it.

Gabrielle smiled encouragingly. “It won’t hurt, I promise.”

She lied. It did.

Every pulse and spark of her magic hurt—a ruthless, sharp feeling deep inside him—and what hurt worse than the magic was the holding back, the effort of trying to shield himself from her.

Tobias wasn’t sure whether it worked. He saw no sudden flinch in the elf, no moment of realisation as she looked up and nodded to Lusine.

He peered from watering eyes at the madam, and then squinted at Gabrielle.

“Is it…?”

“All done. There, now,” Lusine said warmly, as the mage retreated behind Tobias’ chair, wiping her hands against her frock. “Isn’t that much better?”

He took a breath. The burning was gone, and the itching, and even most of the pain of the clapping itself… so, yes, it all probably was better. So much better, in fact, that he was able to think clearly, and to realise just how vulnerable a position he’d put himself in.

*You stupid sod….*

Lusine gave him a tiger-sharp smile. “You’ll join me in a drink, of course, Serah Hawke?”

She gestured to a decanter of brandy and two glasses that stood on a small sideboard near one of the bookcases. Tobias frowned. He hadn’t noticed them there before… how many people had been in while he was sitting here with his tackle out?

“I, er—”

“Good.” Lusine glanced up at the mage, who was still hovering near the back of the chair. “That’ll be all, Gabrielle. You run along now, there’s a good girl.”

The elf bobbed a curtsey, pausing for a brief moment by the door as she looked back at Tobias. A look of mild, fleeting confusion darted over her face and, one hand on the door, she hesitated,
seeming to consider saying something before she blinked and, silently, slipped from the room.

Tobias rose enough from his chair to pull his smallclothes and breeches up and, feeling a little more secure once he’d tucked himself away, watched Lusine pouring them both a glass of brandy. The smarting and the throbbing had begun to wear off, and the warmth of Gabrielle’s healing was still sluicing beneath his skin, crackling in his joints and nerves.

“I am sorry, of course,” Lusine said, eyeing him levelly over the glass she passed him. “Naturally, it happens from time to time. Jethann works a lot of our… exclusive evenings. Wealthy clients, with sophisticated tastes and, uh, few inhibitions.”

Tobias nodded bitterly. He’d heard all about the private parties on the house’s uppermost floor. They didn’t interest him. At that moment, he’d gone off sex in pretty much all its forms.

“Oh, good,” he said darkly. “I caught noble clap. Well, I suppose that’s something.”

She chuckled, and folded into the chair opposite his, her drink clasped protectively in one thin hand. “I’ve always admired your sense of perspective, my dear. Stay a little while, hmm? Have a nice long bath. Soothe yourself. I’ll send someone up, gratis, if you like.”

Tobias curled his lip. He wanted to refuse outright, but the Rose had much better plumbing than Gamlen’s place, and the prospect of a long soak in a hot, stone tub, instead of a scrub down in lukewarm water in front of the fire did have its advantages.

“All right.”

She smiled. “Good. You know… I’ve always thought you and I understand each other very well.”

Tobias sighed. He should have known, he supposed. Lusine never did anyone favours unless she thought it would get her something in return. She’d been trying this kind of crap on him since the first time he met her… and yet he owed the bitch now, didn’t he?

He knocked back a mouthful of the brandy, and scowled at the fire. “You know I only ever give you crumbs, Madam.”

“I’m a beggar at your banquet, my dear.”

“Heh.” Tobias doubted that sincerely. “Fine. All right, let’s see….”

He frowned, thinking back over the past month’s crop of rumours, whispers, and general snippets of information. The Rose was a Coterie operation, though the house was strictly neutral turf, and Lusine herself kept up a pretence of non-involvement that was extremely strict.

Still… everyone needed to catch a break now and then.

Tobias took another swig of the brandy, its honeyed roughness a welcome heat on his tongue. “There’s a ship due to dock in Kirkwall at the end of the month. Rivaini vessel called the *Mauraya*. She’s meant to be carrying silk and tea, but the captain’s into running stolen jewels, and he’s bringing them to someone in Hightown. Don’t ask who,” he added, glaring at her. “I don’t know, but I think it’s someone in the Keep. A clerk, maybe… maybe one of Dumar’s advisors. Someone with a leg-up in the administration, anyway, which is why the Coterie doesn’t know about it.”

Lusine swirled her brandy glass, and the golden liquid danced in it, catching hold of the firelight and letting it burn, deep at its tawny heart. “And you do?”
Tobias shrugged. Drinking with Isabela had its advantages… especially when he was able to match the information to things he overheard from Aveline’s office.

“I have my sources.”

“Go on,” she said, completely still but for the movement of her fingers on the glass, and those sharp eyes that followed Tobias’ every breath.

He bit his lip. “Thing is… the guard does know. The Guard-Captain’s planning on arresting the Rivaini captain and his contact when the exchange is made. If someone was to, y’know, just… happen upon the merchandise before then—”

“They might make off with some pretty rocks and a smuggler captain’s loyalty?” Lusine enquired delicately, arching one thin, grey brow. “How’d you come by that, then? Your old acquaintance with Guard-Captain Aveline?”

Tobias tapped his fingers against the side of his glass, staring nonchalantly into the brandy’s amber depths. “I see her from time to time. I hear things. She’s a friend of my mother’s… and we left Ferelden together.”

Lusine wrinkled her nose. “Oh, I’ve heard the stories, my dear. Makes me wonder if your loyalties aren’t… divided?”

“Not really.” Tobias snorted. “I’ve got bugger all to be grateful to her for, and she’s never made allowances for me. But, if that doesn’t meet with Madam’s approval, how about the whereabouts of Javaris Tintop?”

She looked sharply at him, her façade of dispassion slipping for a moment. “You know where that two-faced little bastard went? We heard he was dead.”

He leaned back a little in the chair, the brandy beginning to take the edge off the remaining pain, and allowed himself a smug smile. “Yeah, I know. Headed up out of Smuggler’s Cut, making for the road to Tantervale. Had it in mind to become a used boot salesman, as I recall… if you know what I mean.”

Lusine’s thin lips pursed into a sneer. “You killed his men? All of them?”

“Well…” Tobias flexed a shoulder. “I was a bit ticked off. And they did start it. Plus, I had help.”

“Ah, don’t you always, though, my dear?” She fixed him with an odd, unpleasantly searching look. “Quite the little coterie of your own you’ve got, isn’t it? One wonders why you didn’t go to that healer of yours to get this nasty problem fixed.”

Tobias tensed, though he did his best to disguise it. Lusine jutted out her chin as she made a show of inspecting her brandy glass.

“He’s very good, from what I hear. A lot of my girls have been, from time to time. For… you know… or if they get themselves in trouble. Very clean work, I must say. We haven’t had one die yet. He does better than that old hag in the alienage, I’ll give him that.”

Tobias said nothing, and just clenched his jaw. The fire popped and crackled to itself, and he felt mildly sick. He wasn’t sure if it was the brandy on top of pain and an empty stomach, or the thought of Anders hunched over a succession of whores’ cunnies, treating diseases and hauling out brats before they had a chance to be full-grown.
“Figured you’d want to know,” he said, staring fixedly at the flames. “That, and I’m too good a friend to add to his woes.”

She laughed softly, but it was a rough, sharp sound and, as Tobias glanced up at her, he had the horrible feeling that she knew. She knew everything, he felt sure… knew his hopes and dreams, his fears and deepest desires.

Of course she did. The Rose was her house, and everything got back to Madam sooner or later. His mind fled guiltily to all those months of paying for the company of the Antivan with the blond hair and the pale skin… Esel, who had been so terribly accommodating, and still so very far from enough.

“I’m sure you are,” Lusine said dryly, her gaze fixed on him like a snake. “So… you’ve no interest in Javaris, then?”

Tobias shook his head. “No. I dealt with the qunari. They don’t want him, and I don’t want him. The guard does, and I’m sure the Coterie does, as do his many creditors. He’ll be a good way away now, but easy enough to find, I bet. Do what you like. Turn him in to one or the other, or make money of ’em both, Madam. I don’t care. I just don’t like being manipulated… as I’m sure you recall.”

Lusine’s expression shifted almost imperceptibly, and she inclined her head. “No. Of course you don’t, serah.”

“So? Are we even now?”

She smiled, and drained her glass, licking her lips as she swallowed. “Oh, my dear Serah Hawke… I do so enjoy our little chats. Don’t you?”

Tobias nodded grimly. He took the offer of the bath, though, and allowed himself to be sent up to a small but pleasant chamber, which held a large tub of steaming water, already drawn and—obviously—scented with the cloying stickiness of rose oil.

There was a whore, too: a stocky man with close-cropped dark hair and a lop-sided smile. Tobias gave him five silvers Lusine didn’t need to know about and sent him out, then relaxed into the warmth water and stared at the cracked ceiling.

It was a pleasant chamber, although the carpets and drapes were still, like most of the Rose, a little musty. Like most of his life, he supposed.

He dressed slowly afterwards, handling his privates with a degree of careful tenderness. His cock looked almost normal—testament to the usefulness of healing magic—though it was still sore, and the echoes of the elven apostate’s work still hummed under his skin, like an uneasy remnant of a foreign taste or smell.

Tobias left the brothel and cut through towards Hightown’s market, where he spent an hour trying to locate the merchant whose name Varric had given him. It seemed like a good idea at the time. If he was going to feel this horrible, he might as well take some of it out on somebody else.

Finally, he found the man: an Orlesian with plump jowls and hooded eyes, who seemed less concerned by whatever his workers had found up at the old Bone Pit mine than the fact they’d downed tools and refused to go back in.

“You can expect nothing else, I suppose,” Hubert said, turning his head and spitting onto the flagstones. “Putain refugees. I mean, they’re cheap to employ, no? But you pay for it every other way.”
Tobias folded his arms and stared at the man. They were standing in the shadow of the red awning above his stall. Boxes and trunks were piled high, goods spread out on the table that stood beside them, and Hubert’s girl—an elven wench with a low-cut blouse and curly red hair of a rather attractive auburn hue—was doing her best to sell a piece of Orlesian silk to a haughty-looking woman in a green dress.

The buzz of chatter and the cries of stallholders—though refined, compared to the sprawling chaos of Lowtown’s bazaar—filtered through the air and coloured the world. Scents of tea and spices mingled with the smell of dust and grit and stone, and the sunlight caught at the bright colours of the merchants’ banners as they flapped against the crisp strands of sky.

“So, what do you say, hm?” Hubert wheedled. “You do a little deal for me? I’ll make it plenty worth your while.”

Tobias snuffed. “What if I want more than a one-off fee? Does this place turn over a decent revenue?”

The Orlesian shrugged. “Ah, who’s to say, when the workers won’t go in? I tell you, messere, the burdens I have to contend with—”

Tobias scowled, his patience wearing thin. “Look, it’s been a long day. I’m tired, my temper is short, and it burns when I pee. Don’t test me.”

The man stared but, to his credit, recovered quickly. “Well, I suppose—”

Tobias leaned forwards, his arms still folded, aware of the presence of his physicality… and with absolutely no compunction over using it like a weapon.

“Way I see it, right,” he said, his tone low and even, and injected with a thoroughly false cheerfulness, “there’s a lot than go wrong with an operation like yours.”

The merchant’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Now, look—”

“No, I mean it. Lyrium smugglers, the Carta and the Coterie both sticking their nose in where you don’t want it….” Tobias sucked his teeth thoughtfully. “That’s not even mentioning the other two-bit operations in this town, or whatever else you’ve got roaming those tunnels. Might be that what you need is a partner, not a fixer.”

Hubert sighed wearily and held up his hands. “All right, all right. Fine. You clear the place and get those lazy swine back to work, we’ll make a deal.”

“Close.” Tobias grinned cheerfully. “But I’ll take, let’s see… thirty sovereigns down payment on the job, too.”

“What? You’re crazy!”

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“What? You’re crazy!”

“Just protecting my interests, my friend. You pay up front and, if everything goes to plan, you’ll get twenty pieces back once I have the deed in my hand and my first month’s profits in my pocket.”

The Orlesian glared violently at him, fat fingers almost skirting towards the concealed blade he undoubtedly kept at his belt. “This is extortion!”

“No,” Tobias said patiently, flexing his shoulders ever so slightly. “Extortion would be if I told you I wanted a hundred gold up front, plus a majority share in the mine, then—in my capacity as a fellow Fereldan refugee—convinced your workers not to go back on the job until I’d been paid. But I can
see how you’d be confused.”

Hubert scowled and muttered something that sounded very much like ‘dog-lord bastard’.

Tobias just smiled sweetly and waited for the money.
Chapter 15

After the day Tobias had been having, heading to The Hanged Man felt like going home.

His crotch was still sore, he was knackered, and all he really wanted to do was sleep for a week in a warm feather bed, but—since the only other option was going back to Gamlen’s, where there was a distinct lack of feathers, not to mention the added inconvenience of Leandra’s fussing—he decided there was absolutely no harm in a swift half or three before retiring. Besides, he rather wanted to forget the past few days completely.

Tobias slunk into the tavern and made for Varric’s suite, following the sound of drunken laughter and someone playing a particularly shrill pipe whistle.

Oh, Andraste’s tits. Not minstrels. Please let there not be minstrels….

There were minstrels. The doors to the suite stood wide open, and their performance spilled into the adjoining chamber. A man, with the offending pipe whistle, sat cross-legged on the floor, his vividly patched clothes contrasting with his shaven head and thick, dark moustache. A girl in matching colours—jewel-like reds and purples, her dress artfully cut to show off her shape without exposing too much skin—danced beside him, holding a tambourine in one elegant hand, and managing to catch the coins people threw into it as she jiggled.

Tobias edged around the crowd, many of whom were clapping in time, and headed towards the end of the suite that held Varric’s table. The fires were roaring, and the whole place smelled of sweat, beer, and meat stew.

The dwarf was, as usual, holding court, and Tobias noticed Fenris slouched at his right hand, a bottle of wine cradled protectively in the crook of his arm. It surprised him to see Anders there too and, even as a smile began to curl his lips, he stopped dead and stared.

What in the Maker’s name is she doing here?

Of all people, he certainly hadn’t expected to see Aveline sitting at Varric’s table, nursing a pint, and Tobias almost turned around and walked straight out again, but it was too late. He’d been spotted.

“Hawke!” Varric called cheerfully, lifting a goblet at him. “I was hoping you’d be in.”

Just my bloody luck….

Tobias swore inwardly, but plastered a smile to his face and moved over to join the throng. Discomfort aside, he still noticed the way Anders glanced up at the mention of his name, and that brief moment of gazes meeting and fleeting smiles touching faces that otherwise pretended blankness did warm him, however much he wanted to ignore it.

“Evening,” Tobias said as he arrived at the table and, folding his arms, jerked his head in the direction of the travelling minstrels. “They staying, are they?”

Varric grimaced. “I owed somebody a favour, all right? Here, get that down you. After the third one, it doesn’t seem so bad.”

He poured a measure of something that looked greasy and dark into one of his flashy glass goblets, and pushed it along the table.
Tobias took the drink and tried not to waste time wondering how it would mix with Lusine’s cheap brandy. He knocked back a mouthful as he folded to the bench, taking the empty seat one down from Anders, and was pleasantly surprised to discover it tasted faintly sweet, with a hint of perfume, like dark Antivan wine.

He slipped a glance along the table towards Aveline, and raised the goblet at her.

“*Mon capitain,*” he said teasingly, tossing off a haphazard salute. “Haven’t seen much of you recently.”

She eyed him suspiciously over her pint, the fingers of one large, broad hand perched delicately over its rim, as if she was afraid someone might try and spike her with something when she wasn’t looking. That wasn’t likely, and not just because it was Varric’s suite. Even before her rather unorthodox promotion to Guard-Captain, Aveline had been an easily recognisable—and very formidable—figure in Lowtown. Now, she might have a different insignia on her chest, and her armour might be a bit shinier, but that didn’t mean as much to the tavern’s clientele as the sword at her hip… or the continuing legend of her reputation. Tobias would have wagered that at least three of the sodden regulars in the dimly lit bar out front would swear they’d once seen her knock a man’s teeth out with just her forehead.

“No.” She narrowed her eyes, but there wasn’t so much hostility in her face as weary resignation. “Well, are you surprised? You’ve been generating enough chaos to keep me busy, and confined to my office.”

Tobias raised his brows and tried to affect innocence. “What, me?”

Aveline’s gaze reminded him horribly of his mother’s. She had that same gift for spearing him on twin shafts of bright honesty… and that was a horrible place to be.

“You know perfectly well what I mean, Hawke. Everything you’ve been up to; and it’s been more than just scraps in the back alleys and a few dubious imports recently, hasn’t it? All that business with the Merchants’ Guild and those traders from Orzammar, now the qunari and their poison gas—that business with the Harimann estate—and *every single time,* your name always seems to crop up.”

“Oh, play nicely, children,” Varric admonished, as Fenris cracked open another bottle of wine. “Don’t make Papa come over there and spank you.”

Tobias grinned, aware of the snort of laughter at his elbow. He slipped Anders a glance, enjoying the bright-eyed mirth on the healer’s face.

“You’d enjoy it far too much,” Tobias told Varric laconically, without quite looking away.

Anders’ smile spread into a flat-out dirty smirk, and he shook his head disbelievingly, burying the grin in his cup of wine.

For all the abuses it had suffered over the past week, Tobias’ groin still managed a half-hearted contemplation of tightening, and he grudgingly returned his attention to Aveline.

“You’d enjoy it far too much,” he said lightly, smiling innocently at her terse sigh.

“I’m glad I have been,” she snapped. “And not just for your mother’s sake. How is she, anyway? I’ve been so busy, I haven’t had much chance to call in. I know she was finding it hard, what with Carver gone, and—”

*Yes, Mother’s beloved baby, who is twice the son I’ll ever be, off fulfilling his shiny new duty. Thank*
Tobias winced, his good humour fading a little. “She’s all right. Worries about him, but then she would anyway, whatever he was doing. It’s good, really. Gives him the chance to be his own man.”

He peered into his goblet, because it was better than trying to lie while looking at Aveline’s face, which was altogether far too full of strength and independence, and memories which he never wanted to relive again.

“She’ll be better once we get out of Gamlen’s place. Won’t be long now.”

“Yes.” Aveline sipped her ale thoughtfully. “That’s another thing. I heard about the estate… and your new connections at the viscount’s office. The Keep’s been buzzing ever since you stormed in there. I’d have come to watch the fireworks if I hadn’t been out inspecting patrols.”

He smiled uneasily. The suite’s fatty candlelight was ripe with soot and smoke, and the noise of the minstrels’ performance was becoming increasingly intrusive.

“There, uh, there weren’t really fireworks. You know how many times we lodged that paperwork? I mean, if Seneschal Bran didn’t have it in for me—”

“You got it, though, right?” Aveline hunched her shoulders, and the dark reddish brown of her cloak and neckerchief—like the rich auburn of her hair, a sharp contrast to her highly polished guardsman’s uniform—made her seem vivid against the thin veneer of opulence in the suite; a further emphasis of the fact that she belonged here even less now than ever. “The estate? They’re hardly talking about anything else in Hightown. You’ve turned the whole place on its ear, and you haven’t even moved in yet.”

Tobias grimaced. “You’re well-informed. That’s your job, though, I suppose.”

“Yes, it is. And don’t think I can look the other way if you do something stupid,” she said, her voice low and her tone aridly serious.

Oh, go and preach to the beggars, you patronising cow.

“Wouldn’t expect you to,” he said dully, fingers tapping at the gaudy glass stones on the side of the goblet. “Anyway,” he added, looking up at her dispassionately, and raising his voice just enough to encompass the rest of the table, “I’m a legitimate businessman now. Well, practically. Worked out a deal on an interest in a mine north of the city, just this afternoon.”

“Oh?”

Varric broke off from whatever he’d been talking to Fenris about, and shot Tobias a look of surprise. “Really? You struck a deal with Hubert? And you didn’t kill him?”

Tobias wrinkled his nose. “You could have warned me about what an annoying git he was.”

“Must have slipped my mind,” Varric said, with an unimpeachable smile.

Tobias snorted, and gave a brief, slightly cleaned-up summary of the business proposition Hubert had offered him… neglecting to mention the bit about the threat of extortion.

“So, all you’ve got to do is clear it out?” Aveline looked uncertain. “But you don’t know what’s down there, do you?”
Tobias shrugged, chugged back the rest of his drink, and stifled a belch. “Listen, how bad can it be? After the sodding week I’ve had, it can… it can be bloody demons, or— or things made out of rocks, or whatever. Doesn’t matter. I bounce, me. Bounce right back. Bam,” he added, slapping a hand flat on the table for emphasis.

“That’s not bouncing,” Anders pointed out helpfully. “That’s just going ’splat’. It would probably be better if you didn’t do that. You know… when fighting unknown foes?”

Tobias turned to give him a withering look, but he was smiling that unconscionably attractive smile, laughter dancing in his eyes, and there wasn’t much use in pretending to be cross.

He chuckled dryly and looked away, and let his attention drift to the round of top-ups Varric was making with his pitcher.

It must be obvious to everyone, he supposed, as he held up his glass for a refill. How things were… the way he just sat here, making pathetic puppy-eyes at a man he couldn’t manage to bed. They were probably all laughing at him behind his back and, as Tobias considered that, the frustration and embarrassment welled up in him, and the suite’s smoky warmth started to burn against his cheeks.

The minstrels were still playing, and the conversation had moved on apace without him. Varric was furnishing them with a highly embellished tale allegedly about Isabela’s latest attempt to con a ship out of some poor unsuspecting buccaneer… which had apparently resulted in a bar brawl that had engulfed half the docks.

Aveline snorted. “Yes. I know. We had to dedicate four shifts of men to clearing up the mess.”

Tobias slumped back in his seat, drank, and was, just for once, happy to be ignored. By almost everyone, anyway.

He glanced up at the sound of Anders delicately clearing his throat, and he tried nominally not to breathe in the scent of boiled elfroot and wet dog that clung to that sodding coat, or to watch the long, pale fingers idling on the rim of a cup still half-full of the same wine it had held all evening… or to meet those dark, inquisitive eyes.

“Still, you smell… nice,” Anders said dryly. “Rose oil again?”

Oh, bloody wonderful.

Tobias stifled a groan of frustration, and braced himself for the inevitable lecture, even as he willed the tide of a blush not to crest his cheeks. Out of everything, the very last thing he needed was for Anders to find out exactly how he’d spent his afternoon.

“No. Almost definitely not. Well… maybe.”

Sod it.

It was a difficult thing to admit, this business of not being able to lie to him. All Anders had to do was give him that look, and Tobias somehow found the truth spilling out of him, the omissions and the half-fibs tripping over themselves as they scuttled away like beetles.

He wanted to say it wasn’t the healer’s business, and it wasn’t… but they were friends, weren’t they? If that was true, he had to be able to take the kind of gentle ribbing from Anders that he would have done from Varric, or even Carv, if he’d still been around.

That didn’t make it easier, of course.
“Ah.” Anders nodded sagely. “Doesn’t look like it was much fun. You look… peaky. You all right?”

“Yes.”

The word was out too fast, a clipped and desperate response that meant the exact opposite of what it said, and Tobias quickly realised he’d given himself away. He snuck a sidelong look at Anders, watching the slow, considering, tight-lipped nod as the healer took a swallow of his wine.

“Hmm.”

Tobias winced. “‘Hmm’? What’s ‘hmm’?”

Anders sniffed eloquently, lowering his voice as the table erupted into another ripple of laughter at one of Varric’s jokes.

“Is it clap, drip, or hot itch? Because two of those just need a salve, but—”

Oh, Maker….

Tobias closed his eyes, willing himself not be hearing this.

“—otherwise the infection can really take hold, and you’ll just feel worse, not to mention complications, so—”

“I’m fine,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You don’t look it,” Anders retorted quietly, still in that same infuriatingly calm, soft tone, looking straight ahead all the while, as if they were simply talking about the weather. “You’re pale, sweaty… walking like a hobbled goat. And don’t try to bullshit me, Hawke. I see enough cases in a week that I can tell one from thirty paces. Look, I know there are worse places than the Rose in the city, but all the same—”

The discomforted embarrassment congealed itself into a blade of nausea that speared Tobias’ gut, and he put his goblet down abruptly.

“Anders, I’d really rather not talk ab—”

“Well, that’s tough, isn’t it? Because if it’s clap and it hasn’t been treated—”

“It’s been treated,” he snapped. “All right? I… I’m fine.”

There was a beat of silence. Aveline appeared to be explaining to Fenris why the matter of his occupancy of Danarius’ mansion was a cause for concern among Hightown’s residents—not for the first time—and Varric was busy brushing away her complaints with a suave hand wave and a barrel of jovial excuses.

Anders frowned. “Ooh. So, clap, then? And you went back to—?”

“This afternoon. Yes.”

“And you saw Lusine about it?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Ah. Did she get Gabrielle to—?”
Tobias blanched, then tried to hide his surprise… and then realised how pointless that was. His shoulders slumped.

*Shit. Shitting, fucking, bloody…. She’s part of the Underground, isn’t she? There isn’t a sodding mage in this town that he doesn’t know, and he’s going to hear all about it. Every single bloody detail. Oh, hell. What did I do to deserve this?*

“Yes. She fixed it,” he said abruptly. “Lusine owed me a favour anyway.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but it was good enough. At least they were square now, and that was what counted. Heat climbed steadily up the back of his neck, and humiliation scalded his cheeks.


*You’re enjoying this, aren’t you, you bastard?*

Tobias gritted his teeth and said nothing, fingers tapping against the sides of his goblet while Anders appeared to reflect on this new knowledge.

“You know, if you want me to—”

“No!” he blurted. “No. Maker, no, I… Look, it’s fine. All right? It’s all… fine.”

“If you say so.” Anders smirked as he went back to his half cup of wine. “All the same, I admit I’m… surprised.”

“By what?” Tobias asked bitterly. “My boundless stupidity? My selfish hedonism in the face of all common sense?”

He turned to glare at the healer, bruised and chastened by Anders’ evident enjoyment of this particular torture. Anders just met his gaze calmly, with a quick flick of those dark brows, and an infuriatingly smug curl at the corner of his mouth.

“That, yes… and the fact you have to pay,” he said mildly.

Tobias gritted his teeth again, harder, and scowled. A self-satisfied smile twisted Anders’ lips and, ordinarily, Tobias might have found some delight in that. It was, however, difficult to do when all he really wanted was to smack the man in the jaw.

*You are, you smug sod. You’re a twenty-four carat bastard… and I still wouldn’t change you for the world.*

“No lecture, then?” he managed, unclenching his teeth just enough to scrape the words out. “No telling off because I might have given the game away? Revealed myself? Revealed myself to be an apostate, I mean,” he added, as Anders opened his mouth in a preparatory leer.

Anders shrugged, the feathers at his shoulders shifting like soft sand, and the grubby smile faded. “Is there a point? You’ll do what you’re going to do. Even if I think it’s a bad idea, I can’t stop you.”

“Oh.”

Tobias slouched back in his seat, trying not to show how deep that one cut. It stung like a rejection, and yet packed with it the dull, aching thud of disappointment.

*S’pose it doesn’t mean I should stop trying, though,” Anders said eventually, in a contemplative sort
of tone. He took a sip of his wine and shot Tobias a sly grin. “Come by the clinic tomorrow. I’ll, um, get you something to deal with the bruising.”

“Hmph.”

He chuckled to himself as he wrapped his fingers around his cup. “Well, ‘thank you, Anders’ would be nice, but never mind.”

Tobias glowered at him and, further along the table, Varric let out a guffaw of laughter at the punch line of one of his own stories. It had apparently been a good one; even Fenris was smiling… though that could potentially have been the wine.

Tobias finished his second drink and reflected on how strangely pleasant and convivial the evening was, despite the caterwauling of the minstrels, and this odd gathering of people who, in the main, could barely stand each other. He wondered why Anders was there; whether it was his bloody-minded stubbornness, or the kick he seemed to get out bating both Fenris and Aveline that had prevented him from leaving.

*Maybe he was waiting for me.*

Tobias tried to shake those thoughts, to lock them up and tuck them tightly away where they couldn’t do any further damage, but it was too late.

Nevertheless, they sat, and drank, and talked, and the evening passed well enough. It was certainly better than being at home, or being pressed under the weight of paperwork to do with the estate, or any further errand-running for Viscount Dumar.

He was almost feeling good when Merrill lurched into the suite, wide-eyed and rain-spattered, scattering chairs and patrons alike in her wake.

“Daisy?” Varric was the first out of his seat, the laughter dying on his face as he looked at her. “What’s wrong?”

The elf lurched across the room towards them, the firelight glancing off the tattoos that criss-crossed her face and making them look like fresh and vivid scars over skin whitened by fear.

“Oh, thank the Creators,” she murmured, those great leaf-green eyes flitting over the assembled group. “Hawke… I was looking for you everywhere….”

Tobias had already risen, and he gestured to her to sit, noting the way those long, thin hands were knotted in the shapeless grey cloak she had wound around her skinny frame.

“Well, you’ve found me. What’s so urgent? Sit down and—”

Merrill shook her head. “I can’t. You’ve got to come. Now. Please.”

He frowned. She was breathing hard, and he guessed she’d gone to Gamlen’s house first, found he wasn’t there—*that’ll have pleased Mother, no doubt*—and then run almost all the way to the tavern. What reason could she possibly have had for that? She looked frightened, but unhurt, and if there’d been serious trouble breaking out in the alienage, some hint of it would probably have spilled over. Proper riots were few and far between, but Merrill had been living there long enough not to get excited about a minor scuffle. That meant something bad was happening.

*Oh, great.*
“Come where?” he asked, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder.

Even beneath the voluminous cloak, Tobias could feel her shaking, and he glanced back at Anders. He apparently understood, rising to his feet and coming to Merrill’s other side, looking her over with that quick efficiency he reserved for patients.

“What’s happened, Merrill? What d’you need Hawke for?”

“The boy you saved from the slavers and brought to the People. The mage. He’s dying.”

Her words were breathy, panted whispers, but they cut through the suite’s thick air like steel. Tobias was faintly aware of the sudden silence… that intense quiet that comes only from a large group of people all trying to pretend they’re not listening to something that doesn’t concern them.

“All right, you gawpers,” Varric said loudly, ushering the nearest group of rubber-neckers towards the door. “Party’s over. Everybody out. My friends are tired, and I need my beauty sleep. Go on. Move it!”

He set to clearing the suite—which went much quicker once Fenris unfolded behind him and glared at a few people—and barring the doors, while Tobias tried to coax an explanation from an increasingly tearful Merrill.

“What do you mean, dying? How can he be—”

“Hawke,” Anders reprimanded softly, taking the elf by the elbow. “Merrill? Is Feynriel still with the Dalish?”

She sniffed and nodded. “I’ve been up at the camp all day. Keeper Marethari sent for his mother, but it’s not helping. He’s… he’s trapped in a nightmare. He can’t wake, can’t control his powers. Marethari said Hawke might be his last chance. I came to get you as quickly as I could,” she added, looking imploringly at Tobias, unshed tears trembling in her eyes. “Will you help him?”

Well, there wasn’t much refusing that.

Tobias sighed, aware of the weight of five gazes on him, and a whole breadth of expectation. “Fine. Let’s go. Sundermount, you said?”

She nodded, though the relief washing over her face didn’t push away the fear. Things were obviously bad indeed.

“I’m coming with you,” Anders stated flatly.

Tobias glanced at him, but the words were an undeniable refusal of any possible challenge. The thudding of leather packs and the creak of a chest opening in the corner of the suite heralded Varric bringing Bianca out from her velvet-lined resting place, and the dwarf all but cooed as he caressed the crossbow’s stock.

“Well, you never know, right?” he said, looking up with a fleeting trace of guilt on his face, like a man caught scratching himself in polite company.

“For once, I agree with Varric.” Aveline drew herself even further to attention than was her normal default posture, and tossed Tobias a steel-eyed glare. “It’s not safe to travel the coast paths at this time of night. Anyway, if you’re going to cause havoc, I might as well be there to keep an eye on
you... just like old times, right?"

“Right,” Tobias echoed, not sure that this was a good thing.

It’s turning into quite the little social party, isn’t it?

Alone amongst his companions, Fenris hadn’t bothered to make a declaration of his support. He was simply waiting by the door, his face a taut mask except for his eyes, which glimmered with the anticipation of a hound scenting blood.

Tobias patted Merrill gingerly on the shoulder. “Right, then. Shall we, um, shall we go?”

There didn’t seem to be much point in suggesting anything else.

It was a long, dark, chilly route up to the Dalish camp. Several times, Tobias felt foolish for carting the others along with him. If what Merrill said was true, there probably wasn’t much anyone except Anders could do for the boy... although he did like the idea of having friends with him when he stepped into the camp. The Dalish were extremely standoffish at the best of times, and the handful of occasions he’d been there—despite the cordial hospitality with which the Keeper had received him—had always left him wondering whether he was going to come away with all his limbs intact.

Merrill explained more of the story as they walked, relaying Keeper Marethari’s words, and what she’d seen for herself as they tried to help the boy.

Feynriel’s gifts were complex. Of course, no mage was ever merely a mage; everyone had his or her own degrees of talent, and in different areas. Anders was a spectacular healer, Merrill—the blood thing excepted, Tobias thought with a shudder—excelled at drawing on the power of the earth around her, and Bethany had possessed an affinity for ice and water, like their father, while he was basically good at smashing stuff, and useless at anything intricate or complicated. Naturally, talent, as with so much in life, was not fair.

However, few could do what Feynriel could.

“He... I don’t know... he changes the Fade,” Merrill said, a trifle breathless as Kirkwall receded into the night behind them, a nest of vipers and winking lights in the gloom, and the mountain reared up ahead. “Forms it around himself.”

Tobias frowned as his feet bit into the sandy, scree-laden path. “That’s what everyone does. Even non-mages. When you dream—”

“No, I don’t mean like that. It’s... it’s an incredible power. He doesn’t just dream, he shapes it. Makes it real, inside the Fade. Makes it happen,” she insisted, thin fingers worrying at her cloak. “You can feel it. I felt it, when it started, and Marethari was so worried... only it was getting better, and then it started getting so much worse, and—”

“What are we meant to do about it?” Tobias asked bluntly, intending to stop her going into another panic. The reproachful look Anders shot him suggested he’d probably been a bit too blunt, so he tried to minimise the damage. “I mean, how am I going to be able to help?”

Merrill turned those great, quavering eyes on him, and he was unsettled by the way the darkness played across her face, throwing strange patterns of light and shadow over her skin, and obscuring the specifics of the pinched, guarded expression she wore.

“The Keeper has an idea,” she said quietly. “But we can’t do it alone. Anyway, Feynriel trusts you. He talks of you often, says how much he owes you for saving him from the slavers, and for not
turning him over to the Circle.”

Fenris had been striding along in long-legged silence, but he snorted at that.

“Hm. Even though it would have been the better place for him?”

Anders scowled at the elf. “The fact you can even say that demonstrates you’re either ignorant beyond belief or crueler than anyone credits you for. I never have worked out which.”

Fenris curled his lip, the thin moonlight glinting on his hair, and tracing the lines of his brands in an eerie bluish grey. “You know nothing of cruelty, mage.”

Whoops. Best stand back and wait for the explosion, then….

Varric sighed wearily as Anders drew breath for what would probably have been a particularly vitriolic riposte. “Ladies, please. Enough. You know, this is why you two never get invited to the swanky parties. At least, not at the same time.”

The healer relented, his mouth snapping shut with a taut kind of finality, though he did glower quite impressively. Fenris muttered something that might well have been in Arcanum, but said nothing to the rest of the group.

Tobias wondered whether he ought to have weighed in, but he wasn’t entirely sure he disagreed with Fenris. Maybe Feynriel would have been better off in the Circle… unless he’d have died there anyway. In that case, rather a free death than one in fear and imprisonment, he supposed.

The first suggestions of Dalish campfires were beginning to leaven the darkness on the ridge ahead of them. They’d made good time, and without running into any trouble.

Tobias wished he could believe that augured well for whatever would come next but, as the lean figure of a Dalish scout—complete with longbow and haughty frown—appeared to melt out of the rocks and move towards them, he found he doubted anything would be that simple.
They were taken at once to the Keeper’s aravel, and more than a few of the clan emerged to watch them. Evidently, Marethari had been awaiting their arrival, Tobias decided, though he wondered if she’d expected him to bring quite so many people with him.

The camp was a different place at night. A huge fire burned at its centre, making shadows and glancing swathes of orange light dance against the packed dirt and the great, dark shapes of the landships. Several elves sat on the steps of their aravels, watching the interlopers with quiet, hard-eyed interest. The most striking thing about the scene was its silence. Despite the number of people, the only sound in the camp appeared to be the crackling of the fire. Not even night birds seemed to come this close to the Dalish.

It was the boy’s mother who came out to greet them, her thin frame wrapped up in a dark brown shawl and her face shrouded with worry and anxiety, visible even beneath the faded lines of her tattoos. The shadows cast by the aravels’ sails fell thickly over her, and her eyes—of that very pale, elven green—seemed to leap from the darkness, sharp as blades and wet with unshed tears.

“Serah Hawke!” she exclaimed, reaching out to him with one work-worn, thin-fingered hand. “Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come. Ma serannas,” she added, turning to Merrill and clutching her arm; thanking her for bringing him, Tobias supposed.

“It’ll be all right, Arianni,” Merrill assured, patting the woman’s hand. “You’ll see.”

That sounded like false optimism, but he didn’t like to say so, especially when the woman looked at him, her lips trembling and her cheeks pale.

“You’ve done so much for my Feynriel already, messere. I can’t tell you how grateful I am… how grateful he is. I know it. He hasn’t wanted to see me since he came to the People, but I know. My friends have told me, and Keeper Marethari—”

She stopped as her voice cracked and the tears began to spill, making it painfully apparent just how bad Feynriel’s condition must be.

Arriving just in time for the deathbed scene, Tobias thought bitterly. He forced out an unwilling smile, uncomfortable with the woman’s palpable fear and grief. Merrill put her arm around a now sobbing Arianni, and nodded towards the heavy curtain that hung across the door to the Keeper’s aravel.

“Go on.”

Tobias nodded, and moved towards the small rank of steps, Anders at his shoulder and the others following close behind.

“I don’t know what they expect me to do,” he muttered, just loud enough for the healer to hear. “Yell really loudly in his ear? Give him a good shake?”

Anders snorted, but the look he shot Tobias was dark. “If he is unable to control his powers, that might not be the issue.”

Tobias winced. “Mm. Thanks. I was trying not to think about that.”

Inside, the aravel was surprisingly spacious. They really were like ships, Tobias supposed; smooth-
shelled, dark husks, windowless and curved like hulls. There was more opulence—more in the way of furnishings, and brightly coloured rugs and hangings, with thick furs on the floor and walls—but he still had to fight not to be reminded of the boat he’d spent so many unpleasant weeks on from Gwaren.

Keeper Marethari stood in the centre of the dim, candlelit space, her white hair bound back and her green robes hanging loosely around her arms and shoulders, with the glint of a golden amulet hidden within the deep, cowl-like folds the fabric formed. A carved wooden screen lay to one side of the aravel, next to a large, heavy, iron-bound trunk that was probably both of human make and even older than the elven woman herself. The light-fingered magpie in Tobias wondered what interesting treasures it might hold, but the majority of his attention was occupied by the slender figure on the bed opposite. He heard Anders draw a long, soft breath between his teeth, and then the feel of it all suddenly hit him… like dark rain under his skin, crawling and pulling.

Feynriel lay motionless—a slip of a boy, with no trace of elven grace or delicacy in his gangly, adolescent limbs—yet his power crackled in the air like the greasy static of a lightning storm. He’d been undressed and placed beneath blankets and furs, his head supported by a large, dark red pillow, and his single braid of blond hair lay pale across the fabric, like a newly cleaned wound.

His eyes were the worst thing. They were open, unblinking… like dead eyes, staring out from a waxy, slack face. Someone had tucked a small rag toy beneath the blanket, so old and tattered that it had long since lost its colour and most of its identifiable shape, yet it was still nestled close to the boy. A toy drum sat on the foot of the bed, discoloured and missing one beater.

Discomfort prickled at Tobias’ spine, and he felt goosebumps rising on his bare arms. Behind him, Fenris padded in through the doorway, his posture guarded but politely reverential—or at least as close to it as he ever got—while Aveline and Varric crowded by the curtain. The aravel was comfortably spacious, after all, but not big enough to accommodate everyone.

“Serah Hawke,” Marethari said, her words quiet but heavily accented. “Thank you for coming. I… did not expect so many.”

She glanced over his shoulder at the others, as Merrill edged her way through, her arm still protectively around Arianii. Tobias shrugged.

“I have loyal friends.” He tried to pass it off with a cocky grin, but the dim little room was choked with the feel of magic, behaving in a way it shouldn’t do, with the dark promise of demons prowling beneath it. The attempt at a grin stagnated and died on his lips, and he nodded at the boy’s unmoving form. “Is he…?”

Marethari shook her head. “His lips still fog a mirror, but that is all. We must act quickly. That is why I sent for you in the manner I did.”

Arianii, still sniffing wetly, left Merrill’s side and moved to her son. She smoothed his hair and tugged at the blanket, as if she were tucking in a sleeping babe. Her fingers brushed against the little rag toy, and her shoulders began to shake with renewed sobs.

“What is somniari. One who has the power to shape the Beyond. The People once had magics of that nature, and they were very powerful. I believe Feynriel is a throwback to those times; what we call a Dreamer, and he is the first in two ages to survive.”

Tobias furrowed his brow. He wanted to know why it was so rare, but his mind felt slightly fuzzy,
and then it was Anders’ voice he was hearing, not Marethari’s.

“So, he’s trapped in the Fade—sorry, the Beyond—and you think he can be reached through his dreams? Guided back here?”

The elf nodded, the wariness in her expression giving way to a cautious willingness to answer.

“I believe so. Arianni has brought his childhood things. We’d hoped his mother’s presence might be enough, that all this might anchor him some, but… no. There is an old Dalish ritual that I think is his last hope. It involves sending someone Feynriel trusts to guide him home.” The keeper tilted her chin, a flicker of pride crossing her face, beneath the tawny, faded marks of her tattoos. “A long time ago, we had the knowing of that—of sending anyone into the Beyond, even those without magic—but so much of our knowledge is lost.”

Marethari winced a little as she said it, as if admitting that truth pained her. She blinked, and fixed Tobias with a grave look that made his stomach clench.

“Feynriel trusts you, Hawke. And—”

“And I’m a mage,” he finished, as the pieces slotted neatly into place. “Which makes this that much easier. Right.”

A thin kind of tension hung on the air in the cramped aravel, as so many different faces turned to watch him. Tobias clenched his jaw. This was definitely going to go down in the diary as one of his more memorable days—and for every single wrong reason known to man.

How in the name of Andraste’s arse cheeks do I get myself into these things? I don’t remember pissing on the statue of any particular god. Never stole from a collection plate, or kicked a beggar… I’m not a bad person. Am I?

Beside him, Anders shifted uneasily, the pauldrons of his coat damp and spiky, like ruffled hackles.

“I’ve heard of rituals like this. They require at least three mages, and a great deal of lyrium—” He glanced sidelong at Tobias, his discomfort evident. “—or some other source of power.”

Marethari’s expression tightened. “There will be no blood sacrifice, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I meant no disrespect,” Anders said defensively, though Tobias saw the way his gaze shifted to Merrill for the briefest of moments. “I apologise, Keeper.”

Marethari inclined her head and let out a long breath, returning her attention to Tobias. “I believe I can perform the ritual, if you will consent to it. But it must be tonight. Feynriel has little time left.”

The atmosphere was getting worse. That breath of magic crawled over his skin now, lodged itself in his mouth and nose… a dark and shapeless sense of thick, crowded time, full of unseen things and horrible possibilities. Tobias suppressed both a shudder and a lurch of doubt. This felt like a bad idea, and yet he couldn’t refuse. Not after the way he’d been brought here, and not with Arianni looking at him like she was all of a sudden, standing by her son’s bedside with her thin hands worrying at each other, her face bleached of colour.

“Please, messere?” she prompted, the candlelight picking at her swollen, red-rimmed eyes. “Will you think on submitting to the keeper’s magic, if it means saving my son’s life?”

Oh, sod it....
Tobias sighed brusquely. “Yes. Yes, I… I’ve had dealings with the Fade before. I’m certainly willing to try.”

Her face crumpled into a look of heartfelt relief, and she came towards him jerkily, her hands extended. “Thank you! Thank you, truly. You have been so kind to us, serah…. Kinder than we had any right to expect.”

Tobias winced uneasily as Arianni took hold of his hand, clutching it between her hard, dry palms, and began to weep anew.

Marethari cleared her throat and looked meaningfully at Merrill. “Arianni, why don’t you go and warm yourself by the fire? This has been such a long and difficult day for you.”

“Oh. Oh, of course, yes….” The woman blinked, looking flustered until Merrill took her gently by the shoulder and led her out of the aravel, muttering encouraging things about nice hot bowls of soup.

As she passed Tobias, Merrill glanced up at him, and her eyes grew deep and wide. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

The weight of all those assembled gazes sat heavily on him, and Tobias disliked the feeling. He shrugged, turning back to the keeper as the women left.

“Yeah, well… not often you get to ‘submit’ and still come out the hero, is it? Ow,” he added, barely aware of Anders having kicked him until he glanced down and saw the healer’s dusty boot snaking back across the floorboards.

If Marethari had noticed, she didn’t say anything. She’d moved to the wooden screen, and was rummaging behind it, bringing out a large bronze disc, two beaten bronze bowls, and a large leather pouch.

“We will need to begin at once. I cannot stress how much your help means, but we cannot delay.” She glanced across the aravel, eyeing Aveline and the others with as much uncertainty as Tobias had ever seen on her. “Perhaps your companions would prefer to—”

“Wait.”

Varric held up a hand, and Tobias realised how quiet the dwarf had been up until then. It wasn’t like him at all… and he couldn’t recall ever seeing Varric Tethras stunned into silence before.

“So, you’re sending Hawke into the Fade, to drag this kid out of a nightmare?” Varric curled his lip. “I’m no expert, but there are demons and whatnot there, right?”

Marethari nodded. “It is dangerous, yes.”

Tobias glanced over his shoulder, readying a look of cheerful assurance. “I’m a big boy, Varric. I’ll manage.”

He didn’t look appeased. In truth, Tobias was hardly crazy about the idea, either, but there wasn’t much alternative.

“This ritual,” Anders said, addressing the keeper as she began dragging the iron-bound trunk across the floor, the bowls and the bronze disc balanced on top of it. “Can you send more than one person? If… if you were going to—”
Marethari straightened up and surveyed them critically. She gave Tobias a thoughtful look, and then the smallest hint of a smile curved her lips.

“They are indeed loyal friends, aren’t they, serah? Yes,” she added, nodding at Anders. “It is an old and powerful magic. It does not act on a person, but on a place. What I shall do here will make this space a gateway. For a limited time, it will draw aside the mist, and allow passage into the Beyond.”

“You’re talking about tearing the Veil,” Tobias said, aware of how slow and stupid he sounded, and yet shocked all the same. “On actual purpose?”

The keeper nodded, her hands busy setting the bowls—and a number of other, smaller implements she’d drawn out—into what appeared to be a complex arrangement on the top of the trunk.

“Well, I have to admit,” Varric said, cutting through the gravid silence with forced jovialness, “I’m a little fascinated.”

Marethari smiled. “Ah. I don’t think one of the durgen’len would take well to such a journey. Abelas.”

“No? Ah, nuts.”

Tobias snorted, despite himself. Typical Varric… drawn by the promise of bloodshed and otherworldly horrors. He turned, and looked at Fenris and Aveline.

“Listen, I don’t expect anyone to do this, but—”

If you want to, don’t let me stop you… please?

The words hung unspoken on the air. Fenris narrowed his eyes.

“I have no wish to enter the Fade, although….” He winced, and looked uncertainly at Marethari. “If the power of lyrium is required, I may be able to assist.”

She looked confused until he pulled off one gauntlet and flexed his hand for her, his face growing tight as the brands that criss-crossed his flesh flared blue. Tobias stared. That was definitely unexpected.

Marethari murmured incredulously under her breath, reaching out to touch Fenris’ arm, though her fingers stopped halfway. She gave him a solemn look, and nodded, a surprisingly humble gratitude on her face.

“Ma serannas.”

“Fenris—” Tobias began, because he felt he ought to say something. He knew using the abilities Danarius had forced upon was uncomfortable for the elf, if not outright painful… perhaps Feynriel’s plight had hit more of a nerve than he’d let on.

Fenris shook his head irritably, refusing to comment. The curtain across the doorway swished as Merrill reappeared, looking enquiringly at the ranks of stern, serious faces.

“Is it going to begin?” she asked, eyes widening as her gaze moved to Marethari. She gave Tobias a small, awkward smile. “I’m coming with you, of course. Keep you safe,” she said encouragingly… which Tobias somehow didn’t find all that heartening.

“And you have my blade,” Aveline put in, drawing herself up as far as she could without hitting her
head on the aravel’s beamed ceiling—presumably in an attempt to disguise her nervousness. “If you need it.”

Tobias nodded hazily. None of this somehow felt quite real. It was as if everything was a part of the mildly scratchy, fuzzy feeling at the back of his mind.

“Appreciate it,” he said quietly. “Thanks.”

Anders stood, alone, in the middle of the floor, looking worried and conflicted, the fingers of his left hand worrying at his right wrist.

Tobias shot him a questioning look. Of course, he’d want to come too, wouldn’t he? Leaping to my defence. Any minute now. Probably.

“Anders?” he prompted, feeling suddenly a little lost.

The healer swallowed heavily. “I… I don’t really want to,” he murmured, looking taut and panic-stricken. “I mean, I’ve tried to avoid the Fade since Justice. I worry what it could bring out in me.”

Oh.

Well, those sounded like ominous words. Tobias pressed his lips together, his memory prodding him with insidious recollections of the night at the chantry, when he’d seen Justice in action for the first time. He tried not to let himself think too deeply on it.

“It’s all right. I understand. Why don’t you—”

“But this won’t be easy,” Anders blurted, giving him a solemn frown. “You will need help, and I don’t know if….”

He trailed off meaningfully, his brief glance in Merrill’s direction not half as subtle as he apparently thought it was.

Oh, yes. Great time for the mage rivalry. Perfect.

Tobias crossed his arms. “Fine. If you think you can keep Justice in check, I’d value your help.”

Anders nodded mournfully.

Merrill, apparently oblivious to his suspicion, went to help Marethari with the preparations. There were a lot of herbs involved, Tobias noticed. Jugs of water were fetched, and poured into the bronze bowls, together with small pieces of resin and a few scatterings of something that looked like bark. Those who would be entering the Fade were encouraged to sit on the floor, in a rough circle beside the bed on which Feynriel lay, and a line of chalk and salt was inscribed around them. The bronze disc was placed in the middle of the floor, and Marethari set a mage-fire to burn upon it, conjuring a brilliant blue flame from thin air and feeding it small discs of charcoal until it grew fat and smoky. Merrill knelt beside her, watching intently as each bowl was held over the flame in turn, until the water began to heat and the smell of the herbs began to rise.

Anders sniffed, and peered with interest into the bowl. “That’s Black Sampson, isn’t it?”

Marethari nodded cautiously, obviously not keen on sharing any details with a human.

“It is,” she said curtly. “There are many parts to the ritual. The herbs are but one.”

“I met a Dalish mage in Amaranthine,” Anders said thoughtfully, as she made another pass with the
bowl over the flame. “I kept asking her to tell me more about her people’s magic, but she never did. S’pose I shouldn’t have made those remarks about her tattoos,” he added, apparently half to himself. “Is that splintweed?”

Marethari arched an eyebrow as she crumbled a pinch of dried leaves into the bowl. “Yes. But now we must have silence.”

“Sorry.”

Anders shut his mouth and sat back on his heels, looking oddly like a chastened schoolboy, Tobias thought, stifling a smile as he glanced at the healer. He was clearly intrigued, though—even more so than Varric, who sat hunched up in the far corner, Bianca propped against his knee as if he expected to be shooting at demons before the night was out.

Marethari said nothing, instead fixing Tobias with a solemn stare as she set the second bowl down again, the smell of resin and herbs rising thickly with the curls of white steam and blue-tinged smoke.

“Before it begins, you must know this: dreamers like Feynriel have great power in the Beyond. They attract powerful demons, though most prove too frail of mind to survive a complete possession. A dreamer-abomination would be near unstoppable… and you understand what this means?”

Tobias nodded stiffly. It had been obvious from the start, and even more so when the boy’s mother had been sent so unceremoniously from the aravel.

“I… won’t let him become a danger,” he said carefully.

Marethari nodded, apparently satisfied. “I wish you luck. Now, if you and your friends are ready…? Remember, trust nothing but your own selves. You will all face temptation.”

Tobias glanced across the circle at the three uncertain figures. Aveline had shed her breastplaste, sword, and shield, and looked as if she felt naked without them, while Merrill seemed pale and frightened, and Anders had that inward sort of expression that seemed to mean he was either thinking, or trying to ignore Justice.

“We’re ready,” Tobias said, wishing he actually believed it.

Marethari began to murmur a stream of quiet words. Merrill tossed a handful of charcoal and herbs onto the flames, and Tobias felt the world starting to grow hazier.

The smell of whatever they were boiling in those bowls itched in his nose, at once bitter and sharp and acrid, and yet with a sweetness to it. He wanted to cough, but he also wanted to listen to the keeper’s lilting Elvish chant, because it was so smooth and lyrical, like the movement of rounded pebbles in the bottom of a crystal stream. Like a song, he realised, but a song without music or melody. A dirge murmured to the elven god of the dead, the one who walked the Beyond and guided spirits to their rest. It was… oddly beautiful, Tobias thought, and he was very dimly aware of Fenris standing in the candlelit gloom, holding a bottle of bright blue liquid, with his hands just beginning to glow.

It enveloped him, then; the kiss of the Fade, like falling asleep and waking to something perfect. It was cool cotton and warm spring air, and the silent breath of a moment’s bliss, and it sang to the power beneath his skin.

Tobias inhaled sharply, hardly aware of closing his eyes, and yet he must have done, for as he opened them again, the world receded. The aravel was gone. Marethari was gone. The smell of herbs and burning charcoal was gone, and he was standing in a great, dusty bowl, like an amphitheatre of
some kind. Everything had a shrouded, fuzzy feel to it, like the grainy quality of a dream, and as Tobias turned, surveying this strange place, a stale wind tousled the dust at his feet.

“I’ve never done this before. Is this normal?”

He turned again, spinning almost in a full circle at the sound of the familiar voice. Aveline—fully armoured, her sword and shield on her back—stood close by, squinting uncertainly at their surroundings.

Tobias grinned. “About as normal as it gets. Don’t look at the sky. You’ll get a headache.”

She did, of course, and winced almost immediately. Nothing in the Fade was quite as it ought to be. Most things were poor facsimiles of the mortal world, and details such as the horizon were very badly copied, in this case leaving an undulating line that seemed to pull and suck at a person’s eyes, never changing and yet always shifting around them.

“Ugh!” Aveline recoiled. “It’s not like this when I dream!”

“That’s because this isn’t a dream,” Merrill said, materialising beside her, as if she’d just come skipping through a door. “This is where dreams come from. Are we all here?”

Tobias frowned, and turned once more, relief filling him at the sight of a slightly blurred shape with feathered shoulders.

“Ah. There he— oh.”

The figure that faded into being before him was… well… it was Anders, but not Anders. His movements were far more direct and rigid than usual and, when he raised his head, the face that Tobias saw had been made frighteningly foreign by its blankness. There was no Anders there; no pale look of worry or reticence, no spark of a smile or fleeting moment of wit. The shroud-like wisps of the Fade’s air clung to him like wet sand, and veins of blue light crazed his skin.

“A-Are you all right?” Tobias managed, trying to pretend it didn’t scare him.

The eyes that swivelled to meet his were not human eyes. They were pupilless, opaque shells of electric blue, dancing with fire.

“Hmm.” The voice wasn’t Anders’ voice, either. Oh, it was using his mouth, but there was something else there… some dark, rolling boom that felt distinctly unfamiliar. His head tilted to the side, and he appeared to be surveying the world around him. “I had not thought to return in such a way. Still, it is good to feel the breath of the Fade again, not the empty air of your world.”

“Huh.” Tobias cleared his throat. “So, er, Justice, I presume?”

The spirit nodded, easily closing the few steps that lay between them. Tobias couldn’t stop himself from staring at those veins of light, like cracks in a sculpture, or loose threads holding an old coat together.

Anything but looking at the eyes….

“I am Justice,” it announced. “Anders has told you of me.”

Tobias swallowed, his tongue feeling thick and heavy. “He… certainly has,” he said carefully.

The power rolling off the spirit made his skin—or the memory, or the dream of his skin, whatever
this was—feel like it was crawling with ants. He wondered how in the Maker’s name Anders stood it all the time… if it was even like this for him.

I don’t want to know what it’s like, having that inside your mind. I don’t even want to think about it.…

Justice tilted Anders’ head to the other side, in a curiously bird-like motion, and seemed to be regarding Tobias thoughtfully.

“You are Hawke,” he stated.

Tobias nodded uncertainly, unsure why this should be a point of such apparent interest. “Yes.”

“Hm.”

Justice appeared to consider this for a moment, then turned and nodded to Merrill and Aveline.

“Come. I feel Feynriel’s mind straining. We will not have much time.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Merrill called, bobbing a clumsy little curtsey as, without further comment, Justice strode off into the Fade, wearing the pretence of Anders’ body like a coat.

Tobias shuddered, and followed obediently.

It would have been all too easy to get lost in the Fade, turned around by the ever-shifting landscape… a place of sand and doors, where there were no real directions, no real movements of time or space. Tobias had heard it said that the Black City stood at the centre of the Fade—its corrupted, withered heart, tainted by the sin of mankind—and that, wherever you looked, you would always see it. Whenever you went, the Fade rearranged itself around that central point, a lynchpin of chaos and darkness that stood as a permanent reminder of human frailty.

He wasn’t sure he believed it. Certainly, no twisted spires stuck up against the strange, clouded horizon, and no ghosts of old sins seemed to make themselves visible in the featureless, blurred landscape. The blank sands shifted, though. As they followed Anders—Justice, he corrected himself—the world around them began to change, and the shiver of power against Tobias’ mind, like the smell of salt on a sea breeze, told him the Fade was not responding to his presence. It felt odd, that; a sensation of being a visitor instead of a participant in a world where, so often, he’d walked as a dreamer, and felt its forms shift and pull around him.

Tobias glanced nervously at Merrill. “Can you feel that?”

She gave him a sober nod. “Mm. So quiet. It’s like nothing here even notices anyone else. They’re all focused on Feynriel.”

He grimaced. It wasn’t a pleasant thought.

Aveline squinted, discomfited, at the landscape around them. Sand was turning to stone with every step, walls growing out of the ground and rising up around them like the soft creep of encroaching moss… every moment that wasn’t a moment, but a blink in fathomless time, building one more piece of a dream that belonged to another soul. Doors that seemed to hover just beyond the edge of sight shimmered before vanishing while, underfoot, flagstones had begun to bloom like flowers.

“I feel like I’m being swallowed,” she murmured, stepping slightly closer, so that she was walking in between the two mages. “Swallowed by someone else’s mind.”
Tobias shrugged, eyeing the buildings that were taking shape around them. Up ahead, Justice had stopped and appeared to be staring at something. Exactly what was anyone’s guess.

“You’re not far wrong,” he said darkly. “This is Feynriel’s doing all right. The Fade isn’t usually so… orderly.”

Aveline looked down at her feet, her sturdy guardsman’s boots now resting against sharply delineated flags, complete with cracks and the occasional crop of weeds. She frowned and shifted her weight experimentally.

“It’s like Hightown,” she said, sounding distinctly nonplussed. “I’ve done that patrol a hundred times. It’s… it’s the route from Viscount’s Way to The Gallows.”

Ugh. Wonderful.

“Stands to reason, I suppose,” Tobias said grudgingly, as a horribly recognisable shape began to take form ahead of where Justice was standing, gushing forth from the ether like a silent cloud and piercing the not-quite-sky with its ugly silhouette. “Feynriel was afraid of being turned over to the Circle. We’re… we’re all afraid of it,” he admitted, the words slipping from him with quiet unease.

As they drew up to where Justice stood, the shifting finally ceased, the dream enveloped them completely, and they were standing in the courtyard of The Gallows. It was empty, devoid of the usual clutches of templars, and the massed ranks of Tranquil selling their wares, but the details were quite complete. Every frieze, every architrave and pilaster… every barred window and iron gate, and every dark bronze statue of slaves huddled in despair.

“How cheery,” Tobias said, glancing around them. “Isn’t it? Isn’t this nice?”

Justice turned towards the heavy gates that marked the entrance into the compound itself… somewhere Tobias had never been, and had not even the slightest inclination to go.

“Our presence has been observed,” he remarked, as the dream seemed to flicker, and a shapeless shadow formed behind one of the great columns of The Gallows’ walkways.

Tobias knew what it was before it began to coast towards them, gradually assuming the ragged form of a shade. Why demons didn’t make the effort to appear at least a little bit more aesthetically pleasing, he never knew. This one was a particularly nasty specimen; like a bipedal cockroach wrapped in rags and hanks of old meat, its shiny carapace swaddled in cloth-like folds, and its arms like sharpened twigs, held in front of it the way a bird tucks in its wings.

There was no face to speak of, nor legs. They never seemed to bother to do legs. The light of unnatural eyes — rather like the pits of fire currently burning in Anders’ face —glimmered from within the shadowed recesses of the cowl effect but, when it spoke, the creature’s voice oiled its way right into Tobias’ mind without the effort of any actual mechanics of speech.

“Well, well… it’s rare to see two forgotten magics in one day. The Fade is usually such a slow place. Not many surprises,” it said dolorously, the hint of a languorous yawn behind its words. “Yet this one potential.”

“A demon of sloth,” Justice observed, distaste dripping from the words. “It exists to make men forget their purpose and their pride. Do not relax around it!”

The demon waved its twig-like fingers in lazy dismissal. “Call me Torpor. I trust you’re here for the mage, Feynriel, yes?”
Tobias said nothing, concentrating on ignoring the sense of heaviness that tugged at his limbs. He didn’t want to fight the thing; outright challenge would only risk them being noticed by more demons, and he would much rather not have had this expedition turn into an all-out war.

“Why would you want to know what we’re here for?” Merrill blurted, and Tobias winced at her inability to just shut up and stand quietly. “It might not be that, anyway.”

Yes, that’s us. Just out for a nice stroll in the Fade …

Torpor appeared to ignore her, though the pretence was shallow. The demon was working on them all, Tobias knew. He’d encountered more potent examples of its kind, however, and the fuzzy-headed sense of tiredness that tugged so insistently at him began to lift as he refused to succumb to it. The demon pulled back, trying another tack, its demeanour now wheedling and seductive.

“I merely wish to help,” it oozed. “The dreamer’s presence is disrupting our world. Two of the most powerful demons in this realm are vying for control of him. You will need help to defeat them.”

Tobias bared his teeth. “Thanks, but I came equipped.”

Torpor’s low, rumbling chuckle — a sound drawn deep from its ferreting in his mind, Tobias suspected, which was not comforting — sounded very like his father’s.

“You cannot trust them, these mortals you bring with you. And it is such a burden, isn’t it? Just relax, and listen to the proposal I would make. All I want is to secure my position against my own kind. I am no warrior, no fighter… would that I were, I might restore some balance here.”

“Do not listen to it,” Justice snapped. “Creatures such as this prey on your trust. It lies!”

Really? You think so?

Tobias sighed irritably. “We’re not here to make deals. We’re just here for Feynriel. And we won’t be bringing him to you, so don’t bother asking.”

The demon wavered a little, seeming momentarily uncertain, and then annoyed.

“You would heed this tiresome little spirit?” it demanded, indicating Justice with a furl of its fingers. “I ask only what it has already taken: a willing merger with a human host.”

Justice positively quivered with indignation. The light spilling through the Fade-held version of Anders’ flesh grew brighter, his face contorted into an expression of outrage that looked unnatural on him. Tobias swallowed heavily, wishing he’d never allowed the healer to make this trip. Would he still be Anders when they got back?

“This is a creature of complacency!” Justice howled, glaring furiously at the demon and then, just as suddenly, turning his anger on Tobias. “Of injustice! My kind and this have been opposed since the beginning of time. I will not let you treat with it!”

Tobias blinked. All right, so he’d never been entirely comfortable with knowing about Justice, but he’d never actually been frightened of the spirit before … never believed that it might really tear his head off because it disagreed with him. Yet, those terrible, inhuman eyes blazed, and it was so hard to separate the rage in that face that was not quite Anders’ from the memory of seeing templars virtually torn in half with the full force of his power … and that roiled on Tobias’ tongue: a metallic, bitter taste, crackling with the spark of potency.

Torpor tasted it too, he imagined, and the demon seemed to jostle impatiently, like a hungry dog,
though it gave the impression of being lackadaisically unfazed.

“One wonders,” it said dryly, as Justice continued to scowl at Tobias, “what manner of human wanted to merge with a prig like that?”

Yes. Doesn’t one.

Tobias didn’t take his eyes from the raging, twisted visage he’d rather thought he knew quite well.

“I have no intention of it,” he told Justice quietly. “Do you want to do the honours?”

The spirit looked confused; an expression Tobias wasn’t used to seeing on Anders’ face. He sighed.

“Fine.”

He concentrated, biting down hard on his lip until the feel of his power coalesced, magic crawling and sparking in his flesh. The crackle of energy began to swell around his fingers, brighter and purer than it ever was in the waking world and, as Tobias raised his hand, he felt the ripples of the action spread. Everywhere, in every corner of the courtyard, every whisper of the dream that saturated it, more demons were waking. They tasted it, smelled it… felt it, and they came spilling from the cracks in the unreal stones as he released the first bolt of energy, a violent wave of force that sunk itself into Torpor’s ragged frame. The demon squealed, recoiling and almost seeming to shrink as the magic splintered around it. He’d been right, Tobias realised: not a powerful creature at all, though that didn’t stop the demon fighting back.

He ducked, feinting and then diving left as it leapt on him. More magic burst through the Fade’s thickened air; Justice and Merrill, both striking out against the demons that now seemed to be everywhere, flowing towards them like a river of darkness, drawn by the promise of power. They were small things, and mainly insubstantial—little more than sprites or wisps, in some cases—but even the tiniest creatures were annoying, like a horde of mosquitoes whining and biting.

The fight was messy, chaotic… drawn out into a protracted, awkward struggle that felt as if it would never be over until they’d cut down every creature in the Fade. Aveline was at their centre, a whirling force of steel and shield striking and pummelling. Amazing, Tobias thought, what the simple force of will could achieve. She believed hitting them with a sword would work and, here, the sword was an extension of her, a part of the way she saw herself, and so it did work. He supposed it was probably best not to frame it to her in exactly those words, in case she started thinking about it too deeply.

Finally, it was over. The dream of The Gallows was as solid as ever, which meant Feynriel—and all those big, unpleasant demons that were so terribly interested in him—had either not noticed their presence yet, or just didn’t care. Panting lightly, Tobias ran a hand over his hair. There should have been blood all over the place, but there wasn’t. The shades didn’t even have the decency to leave corpses where they fell, and he hated that. It left him feeling unnerved, as if the whole thing was incomplete.

He glanced at the others. Merrill looked strangely focused—far more solemn than she did most of the time, as if she’d aged twenty years in ten minutes—and Aveline was as pale and unsettled as Tobias expected her to be as she sheathed her sword. She peered at the dull shine on the blade as it slid home, her brow wrinkled, as if she too would have preferred the honesty of blood.

Anders… Justice … was completely composed, which was a stark and frankly unpleasant contrast to the ferocity they’d just witnessed from the spirit. There was a joy he seemed to have in ending the demons that Tobias disliked intensely; it wasn’t even the roar of victory, the bloody mist of battle… it
was like balm being poured into a hollow wound, as if every death fed some kind of internal score.

He found himself glaring at Justice, squaring up to the spirit wearing the borrowed body it should have had no damn right to, and snapping irritably.

“That would have a bloody sight easier if you could have shut up and let me handle it!”

The electric blue of his eyes dimmed slightly and, for a moment, Tobias almost thought they might turn dark, but there was no trace of Anders in the spirit’s perplexed, stilted response.

“It would have demanded the dreamer’s soul in payment,” Justice said, in that rolling, deep tone that had a slight unnatural echo hanging from it. “You acted well to end it, and I fought beside you.”

“Fine, but if we’d just lied to it, we wouldn’t have had to fight any of them at all!” Tobias growled, raising his voice further than he meant to. “Maker only knows how many more of the bastards smelled that dance. We’d better get a sodding move on before we’re knee-deep in every poxy demon in the fucking Fade, hadn’t we?”

Justice actually took a step backwards. Inasmuch as what he did with Anders’ face was recognisable as human, the spirit seemed bewildered but, when he spoke, a tremor of resentment moved beneath the words.

“I… could not let you parley with such a creature. It is wrong. And you would have… lied?”

He tilted Anders’ head to the side, still frowning in confusion, and Tobias suppressed the urge to shout, swear, and kick things. For a start, most of the blocks of stone in the immediate environment might not be real, but he’d certainly feel it if he smashed his foot into one.

“Yes! Lying is good! Lying makes life a lot easier! You, of all people, should bloody well know that,” he spat, even though he knew he wasn’t even talking to Anders.

You probably can’t even hear me, can you? You’ll never know about any of this. Just wake up with a sore head and wonder what we got up to. I hate you sometimes.

“Hawke,” Merrill said gently, placing her hand on his back.

Tobias stiffened. Whatever was real, or not real, or any combination of the above, he could feel her touch through the leather of his jerkin, and he nodded crisply.

“Right. Yes. Feynriel. Let’s go.”

They moved on in silence.

Of course, there was logic to the dream… at least of a kind. Feynriel’s mind had created the form of The Gallows, and so the things ensnaring him must have lain within it, or so Justice said.

Tobias nurtured a few misgivings about following the spirit but, as they edged ever deeper into the boy’s envisioning of the place — full of side passages, imposing doorways, and forbidding, heavily barred windows — he supposed he was grateful for Justice’s presence.

They came up against few other demons of significance. Oh, the things were distinctly there, snuffling about as a constant pressure on the fringes of his mind, but they were rats at a banquet… the ones that were too weak or cowardly to engage in the tussle Feynriel was caught at the centre of. Only a couple of them attacked; blind spirits of rage and hunger that only knew that they’d sensed life, and were infuriated by it. They were dispatched quickly, and everyone kept moving.
Tobias had never been deep inside The Gallows, and he had no idea how accurate Feynriel’s rendition was. Justice seemed to know the way, and he wondered just how many times Anders and the other members of the Underground had sortied into the fortress. He knew they had, even if the healer never spoke of it, and Tobias found — perhaps because of Justice’s presence, and the roiling, constant annoyance weltering in his own chest — he resented that fact more with every passing second.


Perhaps Justice was simply following the scent of demons. That seemed equally possible, especially given the fact that, the deeper into the dream they drew, the more distinctive the pressure against Tobias’ mind became. He felt them, yet wasn’t sure if they felt him. Perhaps they were preoccupied, or perhaps he was beneath their notice.

One can hope, I suppose.

Either way, he didn’t look forward to finding out what was at the end of that oppressive sensation of dark, sinister hunger.

“This way,” Justice stated, gesturing towards a large door that stretched the entire height of the opposite wall, opening like a wound from the corridor’s blank stone wall. “A creature of great iniquity lies within.”

Great iniquity? You can’t just say ‘sodding big demon’, then?

“Oo-oo-ooh,” Tobias quavered, unable to resist, as his fingers curled around the cool iron ring of the handle.

He glanced over his shoulder, momentarily amused by the look of disapproval Aveline and Justice were sharing — probably the only time he’d ever seen Anders’ face have anything in common with the guard-captain’s — but the levity didn’t last.

Something felt wrong. Light enveloped him, and the world seemed to turn soft at the edges, and as Tobias spun, reaching for the door he’d barely stepped through, it was no longer there. Nothing, in fact, was where it had been—and he was entirely alone. He swore, and scrabbled at the stones that were no longer the stones of The Gallows, but the mellow bricks of a dappled courtyard.

Marethari was there, standing beneath a tree in full, sharp green leaf. At first, Tobias thought something had gone wrong enough for her to have followed them into the Fade, and visions flashed behind his eyes of demons pouring out into the aravel, swarming the Dalish camp and leaving none alive.

The keeper, however, was not herself. She had her arms raised, her voice ringing out clearly as she made some speech or other. Snatched words about ‘pride of our people’ and ‘blood of the Dales’ caught Tobias’ ears, even as the fibres of the Fade twisted and nudged at him, and he found himself enveloped in their weft. He was part of Feynriel’s dream, part of the fancies the demon was feeding the boy.

Something else felt different, too. Tobias looked down at himself in dismay. Dark robes hung from his frame, and he touched… hands that were not his to them, puzzled at the heavy folds of fabric where there should been nice, tough, dependable leather. A wide sash encircled his waist, and he fingered the insignia, grimacing as he realised what it meant.

Oh, fuck. I’m the sodding First Enchanter?
It seemed that a part of Feynriel’s mind—that not given over completely to the dream—was fighting back, casting the only anomalous thing here into the role of opposition, waiting for him to argue back against the demons.

*Well, chin up. Only time you’re ever going to find yourself in a dress, so you may as well make the most of it!*

Tobias frowned. Other shadowy figures peopled the courtyard: other elves, and Dalish, so perhaps Clan Sabrae? Some of the wispy profiles he wandered amongst seemed familiar enough, but he was hardly on first-name terms with most of them.

Tobias stopped pondering when he saw Feynriel. The boy was standing beside Marethari, and the power practically hummed off him, turning the air to a steady thrum. He stood still, his eyes glassy, his face a blank mask of acceptance, and he seemed to be listening to everything the keeper was saying, nodding his head from time to time in agreement.

“Though his features may mark him as human,” the Marethari-creature continued, clapping its hand to Feynriel’s shoulder, “this boy is of our blood. He came to us to learn his heritage… to release to us a power as ancient in lineage as our race….”

*Uh-oh. This doesn’t sound good.]*

Tobias edged through the crowd. Most didn’t seem to notice him, but the few faces that turned his way soon lost their semblance of elveness. They were demons—weak, snivelling little thralls of things, bowing and scraping before the two here that had real power—and they retreated at the sight of him, hissing and glaring with their blank, dead eyes.

He bared his teeth at the nearest one, which seemed to be considering putting up a fight, and allowed a thin crackle of magic to coalesce around his hand. The creature snarled, but pulled back and slunk away, leaving him to face Feynriel, and the demon with its claws sunk into his shoulder.

It glared at him, oily flames leaping in eyes that were so unlike Marethari’s it was a wonder Feynriel could ever have been fooled.

*Amazing what people are prepared to believe.*

“Feynriel?”

*Ugh. I wouldn’t sound good as an elf. Or look good. And are robes really this draughty?*

The boy blinked and looked uncertainly at Tobias.

“First Enchanter? What are you doing here?”

“Yes,” the demon in Marethari’s skin grated, tightening its hold on Feynriel’s shoulder. “What, indeed? Would you take this young man to the Circle, traitor? Shut him away from life, rather than let his talent burn free?”

A soft sigh seemed to run through the heavy air, like the shifting ripple of silk.

*Ah, so that’s what you want….*

The dreamer’s power, unchained, uncontrolled; blazing like a flame that would light up the Fade, and raze the mortal realm to ashes. The feeling of hunger, of teeth whetted on the furious hope of an idea, tore at Tobias’ mind.
He held firm, held out his hand, and hoped fervently that he was about to say the right thing.

“Is this what you want, Feynriel? To turn to the old magic the Dalish forgot?”

The boy’s brow crinkled, his eyes clouding for a moment. “I… I know you,” he murmured, beginning to move away from the demon, until it dug those thin fingers deeper into his shoulder, dragging him roughly back towards it. “You’re—”

“The Circle wants you to submit, child!” the demon growled. “They would chain you, bind you, burn the soul out of you. Are you not better than that? You are our scion, our hope… you are bringing Dalish magic back to the world!”

It glared at Tobias as it spoke, Marethari’s mouth moving out of time with the words, and those black, featureless eyes blistered with dark fire. Tobias bit the inside of his lip.

*Happy thoughts, maybe?*

He could feel it now. A powerful, violent presence—hard and glassy, like polished stone—pressing in on him; probing the boundaries of this insolent interloper. It took a great deal of his power to resist, and he succeeded in holding it off simply because it was so focused on Feynriel, and on defending its prize from the others of its kind. A demon of pride, he decided, trying to needle the boy’s insecurities and secret hopes.

“With you at our head,” the demon purred, lowering its mouth to Feynriel’s ear, “we will take back our land, our dignity… our immortality. You will be the saviour of your people, boy. Don’t you want that?”

It bared its teeth at Tobias in a self-satisfied challenge, daring him to try and tempt its toy.

*Huh. There are two ways this could go. One is definitely not pretty….*

“This one would stop you,” it whispered. “The Circle comes to take you. See?”

Feynriel shook his head slowly. “No… no, Serah Hawke saved me from the Circle. They don’t know about me. They’d never…. Why would they send the First Enchanter here?”

*Hah. Screwed this one up, didn’t you, Ugly?*

Tobias shrugged. “The Circle doesn’t want to stop you, Feynriel. All the mages should work together. Bring freedom for everyone, elf or human… or both, like you. Don’t you think? A brave new world.”

The boy started to brighten at that. “Can… can I do that?”

“I’m sure you can.” Tobias nodded enthusiastically. “Just ask Keeper Marethari how you should use your magic.”

The demon pulled its lips back in a hideous grin of triumph, at almost the same moment as Feynriel’s look of wonder began to fade. He shook his head, seeming troubled and confused, as if trying to recall something important through a mist of murmured lies.

“She…. You said these things—the things I can do—they’d been lost for generations,” he said slowly, turning to face the demon. “You said we would need to control them. That I—”

“You will!” the demon protested, the shell of Marethari’s form flickering slightly as it tried to
maintain its grip on the boy. “You are our hope, Feynriel. You—”

“You said it was too dangerous,” he murmured, and then glanced at Tobias. “Why is she telling me to do the things she said would hurt people? Why?”

“Don’t listen to him!” the demon snarled, grabbing at the boy as he twisted away. “The Circle will bind you, trap you, take you away….”

The claws of a dozen demons began to scrabble at the fringes of his borrowed body, but Tobias held his ground. Feynriel was in front of him now, his pale eyes wide and full of fear, the glassy indulgences of pride and selfish hopefulness slipping away like rags.

“What’s happening to me? Tell me!” he pleaded, reaching for the heavy folds of Tobias’ robes.

Tobias moved to catch him by the shoulders, but the boy was insubstantial, like a reflection or a spirit himself.

*Not all of him, then. Just one piece of the dream. Bollocks.*

“This isn’t real,” he told Feynriel, with as much gravity as he could muster. “Do you understand? You need to wake up.”

The boy shook his head frantically, looking around the courtyard with wide, panicky eyes. The shadowy figures of other elves were moving, their forms changing as they shifted; no longer clanmates and friends, but attenuated, prowling demons, their bodies collations of shadows and hunger as they caught the scent of power fragmenting.

“Wake up, Feynriel,” Tobias repeated, feeling the fibres of the Fade shifting around his own body, taking away the fiction of Orsino’s robes, and finally starting to give him back his own form, and his own voice. “Wake up.”

Feynriel’s eyes widened even further, his mouth slackening in alarm, but it was too late. Everything seemed to change again, in that swirl of light and the plunging, nauseating fall of the world blinking.

And then, the boy was gone, and Tobias was back in the dream of The Gallows. The others were there, and he turned to reassure them—though he had no idea whether they’d even noticed he was gone, because who knew how time moved in the Fade—but they weren’t looking at him. Justice, Merrill, and Aveline were all staring past him, and all but the spirit had an expression of horrified shock.

The sensation of vile, concentrated power burned up Tobias’ spine, and he winced at the feel of the demon reaching out, tasting his mind.

*I’m going to regret turning around, aren’t I?*

He did.

The pride demon had every reason to pretend it looked like someone else. Anything else, really. It was massive, like some monolithic, scaly ogre, all spikes and club-like limbs, but with a dozen eyes set into its pointed head, as black and shiny as beetles.

“Yuck,” Merrill murmured.

Justice blazed with predictable anger, apparently infuriated by the mere fact of the demon’s presence.
“Destroy this creature!” he demanded.

Aveline just looked pale and nauseous, and Tobias sympathised. He rubbed his forehead wearily, tired and sore from being caught at the centre of so many different flavours of magic. The Fade itself, the demons, Justice’s incessant burning ire… everything hurt, and everything took so much effort, and all he wanted was just to lie down and—

_No. Because that’s demons again, isn’t it? Maker, I’ll be glad to get home…._

“You took my dreamer from me,” the demon rumbled, in an altogether darker and more unpleasant tone than it used to simulate Marethari; a sound like the buzzing of flies and the creaking of rotten timber. “You will pay!”

“Woul…” Tobias said dryly, dropping into a defensive half-crouch.

The thing looked far too much like an ogre for his liking. Memories that had been behaving themselves better than they had for years started to surface, and their bitter taste made him itch to see some blood spilled… though preferably not his own.

The demon chuckled raspily. “You think it that easy, mortal? You have the arrogance to assume you can merely fight me? You assume you have allies?”

Tobias frowned. It… did seem harder to move than it ought. And no one else was exactly rushing to his aid.

_Oh, shit._

“And what would it take to turn you, hmm?”

It spoke, but the voice grew low and soft, and the words seeped into Tobias’ mind without passing through his ears. He closed his eyes, fighting it, but that was a mistake, because you are Serah Hawke, are you not? The problem fixer, the man the low- and high-born alike come to when they want their dirty little troubles mended. You always knew you were too big for Lothering, too big for Ferelden. No… no piss-poor little barbarian mudhole for you, messere. They all need you, don’t they? Need your wit, your expertise. Your skill. You’re clever, aren’t you? Quick and ruthless, and I can make sure you get everything you deserve.

_Why wait? Why content yourself with crumbs? This estate… the old Amell house… it will be a palace, and you the prince at its centre._

The jewel-like glimmers of bright colours flashed in the darkness of Tobias’ mind. Huge rooms festooned in tapestries, filled with people. Parties, balls… all the things Leandra wanted to bring back from her halcyon childhood. Fine clothes, good food, and his mother, smiling as she hung from his arm, propelling him past successions of noblemen: smiling, because _he_ had made it possible. _He_ had provided for them all, and restored their name. _Made_ it happen….

_I hate parties._

Tobias forced his eyes open, aware of the demon’s irritated hiss. He felt dizzy and groggy, like the world was swaying around him.

“No matter,” the creature purred. “You are not alone.” It gestured to Merrill, with a flex of one claw that almost seemed tender. “This little elf, with her innocent face. She already knows the power of an offer such as mine. That much, I can see….” Its dark, shiny gaze roved over her, like the scuttling of a dozen insects. “So? Would you take what I offered the boy? Scion of the Dalish? Saviour of
elvenkind?"

Merrill blinked. “C-Can you… can you do that?”

Tobias groaned inwardly. Wonderful. Great job, Merrill.

“I am the greatest of my kind!” the creature snarled. “Whatever tricks your little pet has taught you will pale in comparison.”

“Merrill!” Aveline protested, as the elf moved forwards.

“Bring the power of the Dalish back to the world,” the demon crooned, as Merrill drew closer, her eyes oddly unfocused. “Give your people back their dignity, their honour… the Eluvian is only the first step…”

What’s an Eluvian?

Merrill turned and gave him a helpless look, her eyes wide and her lips trembling, and Tobias knew he’d lost her.

“I… I cannot put you ahead of the fate of my people,” she stammered. “I’m sorry, Hawke.”

“Traitor!” Justice bellowed, as the world flashed white, and the dream began to splinter.

The demon roared, and charged.

It was a hard, vicious fight, all the bitterer for the fact Merrill anticipated so many of their moves. Tobias even found himself hesitating to strike her, afraid of what a death in the Fade would mean. Would she wake Tranquil, or perhaps not even wake at all? The thought of inflicting either fate on someone as irrepressibly alive as Merrill seemed incredibly wrong but—when she threw him to the ground with a spell that felt like a fist of solid rock—he managed to get past the issue.

Like the demon—which they finally felled, with Justice roaring out his rage and vindictive fury in a wall of searing blue flame—she didn’t leave a body behind. She just… went… and Tobias had to struggle not to dwell on the questions that followed.

“What in the Maker’s name just—”

“Shh.” He held up a hand, silencing Aveline’s indignation. “There’s no time.”

“But Merrill—”

“That demon could have had any one of us,” he said shortly. “Now, it’s done. Leave it, and let’s just find the boy and get the hell out of here.”

Tobias didn’t wait for her response. He hunched his shoulders and stalked away, scowling at the subtly shifting walls around them.

Wherever the rest of Feynriel was hiding, his dream was starting to fracture.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which Tobias faces Feynriel in the Fade.

It seemed logical, Tobias supposed, that two chief components of Feynriel’s nightmare should be pride and desire. He was, after all, a young lad, and of an age to be keenly shackled by such impulses… though the boy’s most closely guarded yearning was nothing like what Tobias expected.

This whole ‘stepping through doors and losing myself’ thing is getting seriously old. And why have I got tits? Oh, Maker, no….

He had taken Arianni’s form, and the dream placed him between Feynriel and his father, the mostly absent Antivan merchant. The demon impersonating Vincento was doing a good job of it, Tobias had to admit, and spun out wonderful-sounding futures, in which Feynriel would travel with him, help manage the business, and have the wealth to do whatever he pleased.

“I can’t wait, Father!” Feynriel exclaimed happily, clutching a pen between forefinger and thumb as he sat at a writing desk in the comfortable little shop the demon had created. “It’ll be perfect.”

His gaze fell on Tobias, despite the best efforts of the demon leaning over his shoulder, and he frowned slightly.

“Will Mother be coming with us?”

The demon glared at Tobias, and he shrugged laconically, too tired of this whole charade to do much more than note that the creature’s soulless black eyes suited the image of Vincento rather well.

“You mother never loved you,” it growled. “She wanted to keep us apart. She didn’t want us to be happy. She wants you to go back to the alienage… and you know how you hated it there.”

Feynriel looked confused. “Mother?”

Ugh. I will never be able to get the image of him calling me that out of my head. This is worse than that time me and Carv tried smoking cloutweed….

“I think you should go with your father,” he said, wincing as Arianni’s voice spilled from him. “You always wanted to know him better, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” the boy said doubtfully. “I did. But… Father… why did you never write?”

The demon clapped him affectionately on the back. “Well, I did, my boy! Many times. If your mother kept the letters from you, I can’t be responsible. I told you… she is a bitter, bitter woman. She never wanted—”

“No,” Feynriel said dreamily. “She wrote to you, but you never wrote back.”

Clever boy, Tobias thought. Perhaps Feynriel was stronger than Keeper Marethari had given him credit for; even if he wasn’t aware of it, part of him was sniffing out the weakness in the dream, and
starting to turn it back on the demon.

The creature narrowed its eyes, and the jolly, smiling false face flickered a little.

“Ah, but I was travelling,” it said, waving a hand evasively. “The life of a merchant is not an easy one. But, come… practice your letters. See how good you are getting?”

The walls of the shop began to waver slightly. Tobias eyed the changes curiously. A weaker dream, or a weaker demon? There didn’t seem to be as many hangers-on gathered here, eager for the creature’s crumbs. Maybe the earlier battles had scattered them… or maybe this particular demon disliked competition more intensely.

It snarled soundlessly at him over Feynriel’s head.

Tobias edged forwards, feeling distinctly uncomfortable in, once again, the wrong body and the wrong clothes.

“Your mother loves you, Feynriel,” he said, drawing closer with each step. “The Dalish love you. Ask your father where he was when the slavers took you. Did he come for you then? Did he come to see you were all right?”

“I was away!” the Vincento-shade snapped. “It was impossible. I… sent a letter. A… gift.”

“No, you didn’t,” Feynriel said mildly, frowning slightly. “It was Serah Hawke who saved me from the slavers. And… and you would never even have talked to me if it wasn’t for him, would you?”

“That’s not your father, Feynriel,” Tobias murmured. “And you know it, don’t you? You know you’re dreaming.”

The demon scowled at him. “Bitch!”

Tobias wrinkled his nose, briefly intrigued by the feel of a different face, and different muscles, even if none of it was real. “Now, dear,” he said, briefly enjoying the lilt of Arianni’s voice, “not in front of the child.”

The world pitched and spun again, and Tobias decided he really, truly missed the dependable aspects of the mortal world. Particularly those nice, comforting things like up, down, and sideways. Directions you could trust, instead of all this wild thrashing, and the feeling of reality bucking about like an angry donkey.

The room dissipated around them, and Feynriel faded before he could so much as grab at the boy, which was frustrating. Just as before, the vision the demon had made faded, and Tobias found himself back on sandy stone—equally unreal, but slightly more familiar—with Justice and Aveline close by. The spirit was already shifting into a defensive stance, power flaring through the shell of Anders’ flesh.

“Hawke!” Aveline started forwards. “What—?”

He shook his head and turned from her, still disorientated by the unnerving shifting of his body back into its usual form.

“This isn’t over yet,” Tobias said, nodding at the demon that had unveiled itself before him.

It had taken the basic shape of a woman, but paid little heed to the technicalities. He raised an eyebrow.
“Nice tits,” he said, surveying the voluptuous, purple-hued flesh, the gold-tipped talons, and the jewels spilling over the creature’s bare skin like a wave of molten metal, “but really not my thing.”

The demon bared its teeth angrily, fixing him with a gaze of livid fire, though the voice that purred in his mind was smooth and gentle, like a tart’s well-modulated murmurs.

“It is just as well. His desires were so… boring.”

The creature tilted its head to one side, full lips framing the words at an odd, distorted tempo. The voice was beautiful, Tobias realised, though he’d known it would be. He’d expected it; expected this whole rush of sudden want and yearning, because it was the way these things worked… and it seemed so odd that something so very perfect could offer anything shy of bliss.

Just like the Harimann place. Great. I was almost running out of nightmare fuel.

“The approval of an absent father,” the demon said sardonically, “and a mother’s love? Pfft. No… no fun at all. But, I wonder, what ache throbs deepest within you?”

It began to draw closer, the words spooling out like caresses, and Tobias took a step back.

“Hands off,” he warned, as the feel of the demon’s presence licked at him.

He was prepared—well-practiced, even, after the creatures of pride and sloth, and the repeated skirmishes the Fade had held for them—but he was tired, and the demon did have power… power which you crave, don’t you? Because power makes it all so much easier. And you want an easy life, I know. Poor thing. So much running, so much hiding… so much loss.

Tobias gritted his teeth. He half-expected to see his own family: Bethany and Carver at each other’s throats again, Leandra in silk and pearls, and Malcolm, risen from the dead and reunited with them all. A little cottage, like the place they’d lived in Lothering. Some nondescript, dull village, full of small perfections and the solace of security.

But the past is the past, isn’t it? You know that. Besides, you seek something new. Something brighter… something better.

He winced. He didn’t want to see. He didn’t want to feel it; to have that small part of him believe it was true, or that it could be true, but it was so terribly hard to resist.

Gold is pretty, but its glimmer doesn’t last. Still, coin feeds the world, doesn’t it? All your fun, all your little toys… fine wines, good whiskey, nice clothes. You know how good you look in deerhide, don’t you? Supple, smooth leather against your skin, the warm burn of liquid amber on your tongue, and a pair of strong hands against your flesh. Life is good when simple things please you, yes? Yessss. And it’s so easy to have all that you could possibly desire….

Tobias braced himself. He knew what would come next. He hated himself for it: this weakness, his predictable vulnerability, and the fact he almost wanted the demon to tempt him with it, no matter the falsehoods and the lies.

He held his breath, and opened the window, allowing the sweet spring air to fill the room. There was still a chill to it, but the sun had long since burned the frost away, and the cottage could do with an airing. Perhaps, after breakfast, it would be worth throwing on a thick cloak and wandering into town. The first imports of the season would be filtering down from Denerim, and it was early enough in the week that there might even be fresh fish on the stalls.

He stretched, luxuriating in every tiny pop and crack of his muscles, and grinned as he glanced over
his shoulder at the rumpled bed. Anders was still snoring lightly, not much visible of him beneath the
blankets except for a mop of blond hair and part of one shoulder. He shifted and mumbled at the
draught from the window, and Tobias smiled as he passed the bottom of the bed, watching him drift
into wakefulness.

“Mmm…. What are you doing up?”

“Getting breakfast,” he said as Anders sat up, scratching at his head and stifling a yawn.
“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Well, it is chilly.”

Anders smiled that lazy, wicked smile of his, all sleep-smutted warm skin and bleary, honey-dark
eyes. “True. You should come and warm up. Probably.”

Tobias grinned playfully. “Probably,” he agreed, slipping back into their bed, and into his lover’s
comfortable embrace.

Anders pressed a soft kiss to his forehead, then pulled back to look at him, his smile growing hazy
and small. Tobias’ fingertips traced the line of his unshaven jaw, and they drew close, happily
tangled in each other. Outside the window, birds sang. Anders smelled of warm spice and sleepy
musk, and his laughter rippled across the blankets like the rustle of silk. The pillow felt cool beneath
Tobias’ cheek, especially compared to the heat of the lips on his neck, and there was the distinct
possibility of protracted, lazy lovemaking in the imminent future, leading to a late breakfast and a
dearth of fresh fish… probably. Not that it mattered. It was just the two of them, after all. No one
else, unless they chose to visit friends or family: they lived free of intrusion and interruption.
Completely free. Theirs was a peaceful, quiet life, set back even from the rest of the village. No
demands, no responsibilities… no pressing urgency to do anything but what they chose. And, right
now, Tobias chose to—

“Fuck off!” he yelped, lurching away from the creature, panting hard and fighting the fantasy.

The images fled from his head with painful speed, leaving behind the cold ache of a warm embrace
suddenly lost, a flame abruptly snuffed out, and Tobias stifled a whimper.

The demon merely smiled.

“You would do well not to underestimate me,” it said smoothly. “But know this: if you take away
my pets, I’ll take away yours.”

Tobias glanced behind him at Anders—Justice—and Aveline, just as the demon extended one
graceful hand towards her. It wasn’t real. It messed with a person’s mind, that was all… and it stays
in your mind, right? They don’t see it. They don’t see my dream, and I can’t see… oh, shit. This is
going to be Merrill all over again, isn’t it?

“Your noble knight,” the demon cooed, its gold-tipped fingers tracing a suggestive spiral through the
air. “What would she do to reclaim what she has lost?”

“Don’t listen to it, Aveline,” Tobias warned, aware of the shake in his voice, and attempting to
conquer it.

He turned to her, just in time to see the ashy pallor of her skin, and the slackness of her mouth. It was
as if she’d—
—seen a ghost.

There wasn’t much ethereal about the figure that emerged from behind the demon. The creature raised an arm, like a dancer introducing a new step, and he moved forwards, his gait easy and natural, his armour clinking gently.

Tears glistened in Aveline’s eyes. “Wesley?”

He looked a damn sight better than he had the last time Tobias had seen him. No terrible injury, no darkspawn corruption; a tall, broad, handsome man with piercing blue eyes and a head of glossy black hair. His templar armour caught the reflections of the demon’s fire-chased skin, but he seemed real, and vital, and… alive.

The demon sighed, and it sounded more like a breath of triumph than the sad sympathy it seemed to be aiming for.

“You spent your whole life trying to be the chevalier your father wanted, but the one thing you chose for yourself, and the darkspawn took him. That’s not fair, is it?”

The words swaddled themselves in the air, the atmosphere thick and unyielding as Wesley and Aveline stared at each other.

Tobias inhaled sharply. Quite apart from the fact of the demon’s presence, everything he’d ever heard in a chantry or had read to him from Leandra’s prayer books told him what he was seeing couldn’t be true. The dead might pass through the Fade, but they went to the Maker’s side… didn’t they? Unquiet spirits might linger, perhaps, and Wesley had died a horrible death.

Tobias knew that; he’d pushed the knife in himself.

He blinked, struggling to hold onto the reminder that this wasn’t real. It was a demon’s trick, a manipulation of the Fade just like the dreams that tapped into Feynriel’s power. A mage might be blinkered by their own mind, but this was just a coarse attempt at fooling Aveline with something obvious, something as physical as this realm could be… and she wouldn’t fall for that.

The trouble was, as he looked at her, Tobias could see the pain and the yearning in her eyes. She wanted to believe it, and that was the danger.

He opened his mouth to snap a warning at her, try to pull her from this path, but there were no words. His tongue felt dry and thick, and it somehow seemed wrong to come between them. That was a stupid thought, and Tobias flinched from it, forcing himself back to that moment on the scorched, Blight-scoured plain south of Lothering, when Wesley lay dying and they’d had no time to spare for him.

He remembered the resistance of weakened flesh beneath his blade, and the look on Aveline’s face as she’d knelt by her husband’s side, clutching his hand and holding his breastplate up, baring the place for Tobias to strike.

Now, there was no blame or recrimination in Wesley’s face; just love, and the sweet sadness of longing.

“Is it you?” Aveline murmured, making Tobias feel like an interloper.

Wesley nodded, catching her hand against his breastplate. “I’ve been waiting for you, love.”

Tobias felt his upper lip curling into a sneer. He glanced at Justice, who was staring haughtily at the
demon, and wondered fleetingly what the spirit made of this scene. Power crackled around him, but the opaque blue that obscured Anders’ eyes—together with Justice’s rather inexpert management of human expressions—made it almost impossible to guess what he really thought.

Not much help, then. There’s a shocker.

“Aveline.” Tobias raised his voice above the shade—vision, phantasm, whatever he was—of Wesley and his soft murmurs, and folded his arms. “You don’t really believe this, do you? It’s a demon. A demon in Wesley’s skin, but—”

She blinked and shot him an unfocused, confused look. Tobias sighed inwardly. It was all there in her face, in just that one small moment: the difference between knowing a thing to be false, and yet believing in it. Wanting to believe, he supposed.

Wesley touched her shoulder and, at once, Aveline snapped back to face him.

“All your doubts started when we met this apostate, didn’t they?” he murmured, jerking his head towards Tobias. “It’s his fault, love. All of it.”

Uh-oh….

“The creature is trying to turn you, woman,” Justice intoned. “This is not real. Hawke killed your husband. You know this.”

Tobias winced. Yes. Thanks. That’s… that’s incredibly helpful. Thanks a lot.

It was on a par with how foul Anders had been to Aveline when they first met. As soon as he’d discovered her husband was a templar, it was wall-to-wall sarcasm and crude, catty jokes about sex games and the impact of pious chastity on the libido. Tobias had been forced to take the healer aside and explain the story of the flight from Ferelden, and the precise circumstances of Wesley’s demise, but it hadn’t helped much. He had to admit, Anders had a decidedly nasty streak to his nature… quite apart from Justice’s total obliviousness.

“If it hadn’t been for him,” Wesley said quietly, taking Aveline’s hand in his, “we’d have made it out alive. We’d have been free, my darling. Kill him. Kill him now, and everything we lost will be restored.”

Tobias scowled. “Oh, come on, Aveline! You’re not seriously going to fall for this?”

She wasn’t listening. She raised her hand, touched her husband’s cheek… and the broken, agonised look on her face speared Tobias’ chest like a blade.

“It is not the form she wants,” the demon said, smug and sinuous, buzzing in his ear like a moth. “It is redemption.”

Tobias spun, glaring at the creature as its little puppet-shade danced, drawing Aveline close. She breathed a long sigh, the subtle tracks of tears wetting her cheeks.

“I failed you, Wesley,” she murmured. “I failed myself. If that moment could only be changed….”

A moment was a moment, of course. Wherever it came, whatever it meant; this one slotted into place with an almost audible click of precision, and Tobias swore under his breath. He’d lost her, and the demon had won.

“I told you, didn’t I?” The creature chuckled, its ripe, warm laughter rippling through the air like
wine. “You want me, you come through her!”

The world shifted and pitched again, a blinding flash of light marking the place where Aveline’s dream was stolen from her, and with it her sentience. She was a puppet, a blind and unknowing weapon as she slashed and pummelled, a blow from her shield sending Tobias sprawling, scudding along the stones. He heard his name, called in a yelp of alarm that sounded strange wrapped in the timbre of Justice’s voice. A bolt of magical energy burst in front of him, sending splatters of blue searing his vision, and the roar of fire that rose up, defending him from Aveline and her possessor, reduced everything to shadows and neon-traced echoes of shapes.

He spat, tasting blood, and staggered to his feet, weighing back into the fight as Aveline swung at Justice’s head. She was easy enough to dodge if you were quick, but she was nimble, and she never seemed to make the same mistake twice… or to tire. The demon itself didn’t make anything easier. It seemed to treat the whole thing like entertainment, laughing shrilly as it rained vicious attacks on them, a never-ending whirl of spite and sparks.

Tobias fought until the weariness dragged in his bones like lead, his fingers shaking and his vision blurred. They came then… the keening, prickling feel of a hundred lesser spirits and demons, sniffing inquisitively at these traces of life, and power. He held firm, ignoring their whispers and their constant probing, but wondered what would happen if the fight lasted until he couldn’t resist anymore. Would he die here, and cease to exist beyond this place? Or would he be aware of lingering, even as his body withered, his soul lost in the changing paths of the Fade? Maybe he’d become an abomination, and Fenris or Varric—or maybe Marethari herself—would end him neatly on the floor of the aravel.

He didn’t realise what was happening at first, when Justice grabbed him by the back of his jerkin, and virtually flung him to the ground. Then, Tobias felt it: a great rise of magic, stronger than the demon’s power, and stronger than all the things it had done to Aveline. It was wider than the sky, deeper than the ocean, and more terrible than the most violent fire. He kept his head down—a part of him amazed at the fact that, though this was the Fade, the dust and grit of the flagstones below him had coated his chin and lips—and then there was the weight of another body above him, shielding him, and the scent of elfroot, soot, and singed feathers invaded Tobias’ nose.

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, and tried not to hear Aveline scream. It was over quickly, and drowned out by the noise the demon made as Justice destroyed it—pretty damn effectively, judging by the sounds Tobias heard—but it lingered in his mind.

Would she wake? He wondered. He hoped so. She wouldn’t be Tranquil, the way he feared Merrill must be, if she’d woken at all, but what did a death in the Fade do to someone who wasn’t a mage? Would she go through the rest of her life never dreaming, never feeling, never truly living?

Tobias felt the weight lift off him, and he pushed himself up on his hands and knees, spitting and cursing. It all felt so bloody real, right down to the gritty, scraped elbows and the throbbing joints, and he began to question all the things the Chantry taught. Maybe thinking of the Fade as a dream—as the seat of all dreams—was wrong. Maybe it was more real than the mortal world, or almost so, and he couldn’t help thinking of something Merrill had once said, about how the Dalish saw the Beyond as simply another country, where the dreamers were guests, and the spirits natives, with a culture and society of their own.

I’m so sorry, Merrill….

He staggered to his feet, glancing suspiciously at the blasted landscape. There was no sign of the battle; no sign of Aveline, or the demon. The stones seemed weaker, blurrier… as if Feynriel’s dream was fracturing even further, allowing the raw Fade to seep in between the cracks. It shrouded
everything, made it feel clouded and thick, until each breath seemed to ache with the feel of a thousand spirits sighing into it.

Tobias shuddered, then flinched at the feel of a warm hand on his arm. He looked up, and found Justice staring at him in apparent confusion. The long, pale, calloused fingers gripping his arm twitched lightly, and then withdrew, Anders’ hand falling loosely to his side, and those crackling, livid cerulean eyes unreadable shells in a face that seemed so painfully unfamiliar.

“Thanks,” Tobias managed hoarsely.

Justice nodded, seeming to regain some measure of confidence. “We must find the boy. He will be at the centre of this place; the centre of his dream.”

“Right.” Tobias watched unenthusiastically as the spirit headed off with that awkward, determined stride, and wished fervently that he’d stayed in bed that morning. “And then there were two,” he muttered to himself, rubbing his dusty, grit-coated elbow, and following in Justice’s wake.

He was right, of course. They found Feynriel deep in what would have been The Gallows’ central tower, pacing relentlessly amid the shivering ghosts of a wide chamber, its walls already fraying into nothingness.

The boy turned at their approach, his blond braid swinging wildly as he shook his head, throwing his hands up to protect himself as he caught sight of Justice.

“No! No more demons!”

Justice flared brightly, a scowl creasing Anders’ face. “I am no demon, boy! How dare—”

“It’s all right,” Tobias said quickly, holding up a hand. “Justice, I’ll… well, just let me talk to him, all right?”

The spirit didn’t look pleased, but he acquiesced. He stood, still scowling, like some sort of watchdog as Tobias stepped towards the boy, one hand extended.

“Feynriel?”

“Don’t come any closer! Please!”

“It’s all right.” Tobias stopped, waiting for the boy to calm. “You know me, don’t you? You recognise me?”

Feynriel shook his head again, his pale eyes wide. “S-Serah Hawke… but I can’t be sure. I can’t be sure of anything. Please… I can’t spend another moment in this place! All I hear is screaming. Everywhere, the nightmares of people dying, fleeing, gnawing their own arms off trying to escape….” He hugged his arms around his middle, hunching over as he stared at the ground. “It’s a world of monsters,” he murmured, “and they all want me. You have to help me escape. Help me die.”

Tobias recoiled. It had been one thing to promise Marethari he would do this, but it was quite another to have the prospect face him so baldly. And yet, his fingers went of their own accord to the dagger at his belt, and its smooth, braided hilt seemed somehow even more solid, more comforting, despite the flickering breath of the Fade around him.

“Do it,” Feynriel whispered, one hand fumbling with the neck of his shirt, pulling the laces loose to expose the pale arrow of his throat. His eyes were wide and staring, round as marbles, and his whole
The body seemed to shake. “Kill me.”

Tobias hesitated, frowning. “If I kill you here, I only destroy your mind. You’d become Tranquil.”

Feynriel blinked rapidly, his hand relaxing and his long fingers curling themselves around his throat. “I was afraid of that for so long,” he said, almost thoughtfully. “I can’t even remember why.”

Slowly, Tobias’ fingers moved away from his blade.

“No. You don’t have to let this consume you, Feynriel. What you can do is special. Dreamers like you… they control the Fade, and the dreams of people in it. Look at this.” He nodded at the vaulted chamber in which they stood; cracked and dissipating now, but still very real, and enormous, bigger and more detailed than the finest public rooms of the viscount’s palace. “You’re doing this. All of it. You have so much more power than you realise. And you’re so much stronger. You saw through the demons, didn’t you?”

Feynriel looked frightened and taut, as if he wanted to flee. Not much point, of course, Tobias thought; not many places you can run from yourself.

“I see why the Chantry fears us,” the boy murmured. “I’ve heard tales of magisters who stalked their enemies and used their own dreams to destroy them.”

Out there, in the wild places of the Fade, things stirred. More spirits and demons alike were moving, scenting the dreamer. Tobias wasn’t sure how long they’d have before something else rose to try and claim Feynriel for itself… and he doubted he had enough strength left to defend him.

“Then be different,” he said quietly. “Make your own path.”

“I…” Feynriel shook his head, but he seemed less frightened, less unsure. “I think you’re right. I must master it, find someone to study under. The Dalish do not have what I need. Perhaps… Tevinter?”

Tobias shrugged. “Perhaps.”

He felt a slight bristling along his spine, as if Justice’s circumspection at the idea had actual, physical weight, but the spirit said nothing, and Tobias fought the urge to glance over his shoulder.

“Yes.” Feynriel nodded slowly, and seemed to brighten. “Yes…. The Fade feels different now. I see the stitches, the seams holding it together. I feel as if I could wake at any moment. There is a way out. I see it!”

He smiled, bright and beautiful, and lifted his hand, as if he was touching the air itself. Tobias shivered at the feel of the power that rippled over him, around him… through everything. The dream of the chamber flickered, then faded like ragged tails of smoke chasing across the sky and, as a pale glow suffused the place Feynriel stood, Tobias squinted and turned his head. He made out the shadow of a shape; of the boy just… moving through the very fibre of the Fade, like he was part of it, like he was making his own doorways in the world.

Then, as the light faded, Feynriel was gone, and the chamber was gone, and Tobias found himself standing alone in the blank, desolate plains of the Fade.

Only… not quite alone.

He turned, every inch of him aching with exhaustion and the long-suppressed panic of fighting for his life, which now finally threaded through his flesh like cold rain, and he drank in the sight of the
figure standing nearby. Tobias sighed, because even squinting really hard didn’t completely obliterate the veins of crackling fire and the glowing, inhuman eyes, and he wished he’d never let Anders do this. He wished… well, a lot of things, he supposed. And, as Justice strode over to him, announcing that their work was done and Hawke, weakened as he was, should be returned at once to the mortal realm, Tobias found his chest tight and sore, his mind full of hazy, half-lingering dreams, and his body trying to collapse under him.

Leaving was almost like falling asleep, but not quite.

Tobias awoke in the aravel with a start, his vision spotted with white and blue, and his gut heaving. He clenched his teeth, groaned, and shut his eyes, lying still until the dizziness started to pass.

The smell of Marethari’s herbs lay thick and heavy on the air, and the whole room seemed to hum with the song of lyrium. Something cool and wet touched his forehead, and he cranked an eye open, gazing up into the keeper’s solemn, lined face.

“The boy lives,” she said softly, wiping the washcloth she held over his cheek. “You appear to have accomplished something I did not truly believe possible, Serah Hawke.”

“Oh.” Tobias’ eyes started to close again, just as his stomach heaved anew. “Good. Um, does anyone have a—?”

“Bucket,” Marethari supplemented calmly, helping him sit up enough to make use of the receptacle someone shoved in front of him.

Tobias spat, coughed, retched again, and gratefully accepted the cup of water the keeper passed him. He blinked, growing gradually aware of the flurry of activity around him. Three elves he hadn’t seen before—all women, about Arianni’s age—were flitting about the aravel, all laden with cloths and bowls. One of them removed the bucket and handed him a fresh washcloth, and as Tobias followed their movements, he saw Feynriel sitting up in the bed, Arianni cupping his face in her hands and thoroughly getting in the way of the women’s tending to the boy.

Tobias glanced down at the floorboards. The chalk circle was smudged, the need for the binding rite obviously now lessened, and he frowned as he looked at the places Merrill, Aveline, and Anders had occupied. There was no sign of Varric or Fenris either, and he looked nervously at Marethari, afraid to ask what had happened.

“Your friends awoke a time ago,” she said gently. “They are well, and waiting for you. We have set aside a tent for you, just outside, by the fire. You’ll be too tired to return to the city tonight… and we owe you at least a little hospitality.”

Tobias nodded groggily. “Thank you. Uh. Is…? I mean, are they…?” He stopped, and frowned, unsure how to say it. “Merrill?”

“My First is fine,” Marethari said, a touch of acid in her words. “As are they all. You did not harm her. If anything, perhaps what happened has helped her realise we are none of us immune from the temptations of demons.”

“Mm.” Tobias grunted, and took another crack at sitting up. “Apparently not. Still, no lasting damage?”

Marethari shook her head. “She is resting. You should join them. Do the same. We will look after Feynriel and, in the morning, plans will begin for his future.”

Tobias straightened laboriously, waiting for the floorboards to stop spinning beneath him. He
frowned at the keeper. “He needs help if he’s to control this. I might know some people—or know someone who knows some people,” he corrected, “who can get him somewhere that can happen. Will he be all right for now?”

She narrowed her eyes, giving him a strange, serious look. “I believe so. You think Tevinter is his best hope? I had… entertained that notion.”

“I think it’s worth a shot,” Tobias said guardedly.

In truth, after what he’d heard about the Imperium, he didn’t much like the idea of sending anyone there but, if it meant Feynriel had a chance at life… well, there was no mandate demanding he become a power-hungry blood-magic-wielding magister, was there?

*We just won’t mention it to Fenris. It’ll be fine.*

He took his leave of Marethari, and slipped from the aravel before Arianni managed to tear herself away from her son’s bedside and intercept him.

Just as the keeper had said, a hazel bender tent had been set up for Tobias and his companions: a three-sided canvas shelter near the great fire. It loomed between the aravels like a pale sail, a beacon in the night, and he made for it on tottering, unsteady legs.

“Hawke.”

Tobias blinked. He hadn’t noticed Varric standing near the side of the tent, apparently enjoying the night air.

“Varric,” he returned quietly.

The camp seemed much emptier than it had when they arrived, though it was hard to know whether that was because it was late, or because the excitement they’d caused was over.

The dwarf looked thoughtfully at him, eyes glittering in the thin threads of firelight.

“That was some creepy-ass shit you pulled back there. You know that, right?”

Tobias shrugged and grinned mirthlessly. “Mm-hm.”

“You look terrible.”

“I’ve felt better,” he admitted. “But we did it. The boy’s safe, at least for now.”

Varric nodded slowly. “Huh. You realise I’m going to want to hear all the details when you’re rested, right? It’d make great material. No?” He chuckled as Tobias grimaced. “All right. Go on… go rest. You look beat. Oh, Fenris left, by the way. I guess he wanted to brood somewhere in private… or maybe avoid the questions about his, uh, expertise with lyrium.”

Tobias hesitated. The night’s coolness prickled against his arms, and the memory of the elf surged behind his eyes: standing there with a lyrium potion in his hands, his whole body alight like some slender ghost, raw with terrible power. He shuddered.

“I bet. And Merrill?”

“Sleeping.” Varric glanced reflexively at the tent, his features lanced with a brief moment of surprisingly tender concern. “Daisy looked pretty rough herself. Blondie, uh, gave her a little something to help her rest. Aveline too,” he added, waving his thick fingers in an approximation of
the ‘Sparklefingers’ gesture that Anders sometimes used.

Tobias smiled thinly, recalling the banter and the hilarity of the tavern, and all that business with nicknames.

“Right. And you…?”

Varric flexed his shoulders, somewhere beneath the thick leather of his coat. Bianca, cradled in the harness he wore across his back, creaked softly as if joining in the conversation, and he smiled.

“Eh, we’re going to take the air a little while longer,” he said quietly, glancing at the darkened shapes of the camp, and the shadows lengthening away from the beacon of the fire. “Between you and me, I don’t feel much like sleeping right now. Not here, anyway.”

Tobias understood that, if nothing else. He nodded, and clapped Varric on the shoulder, hoping his unspoken gratitude was plain enough. The dwarf snorted gruffly, and he supposed that was all the answer he could hope for.

Inside the dim, grainy, blue-grey dimness of the tent, bedrolls had been laid out. Merrill and Aveline occupied two, both sleeping that deep, unmoving sleep of the magically assisted. Thin bands of light glimmered palely across both their brows, and soft echoes of firelight caught against the packed dirt that floored the tent. A further two empty bedrolls lay beside a pile of stuffed sacks, and a fifth sat next to that, with Anders perched cross-legged on it, watching the women sleep. He looked up as Tobias entered, and gave him a small smile.

The shadows painted wide planes across his face, gouging out every hollow and sharpening every angle, making him look tired, as if the skin was stretched too thinly across his bones. All the same, Tobias caught his breath, and they watched each other for a moment, the quiet of the tent almost oppressive. After what felt like an age, he cleared his throat, and padded over to the unoccupied bedroll, lowering himself awkwardly to the rough fabric, and taking the woollen blanket that had been laid atop it in his fingers.

“Good to see you, er, back to your old self,” Tobias said, fiddling with the selvedge of the blanket, because it was easier than actually looking Anders in the eye.

The healer snorted softly. “Mm. Well, I did say I wasn’t sure what would happen.”

“Do you remember it?”

The air inside the tent was cool, but not as cold as outside. It felt thick and strained, and the feel of the sleep spell Anders had left on Merrill and Aveline seemed to prickle at Tobias’ flesh, like the distant song of lyrium that had perfumed the Fade.

“Mostly,” Anders said, sounding a trifle doubtful. “It’s… odd. Are you—?”

“Knackered,” Tobias said shortly, slouching back against the pile of sacks behind him.

They seemed to be filled with straw, presumably for use as extra padding against the chill.

Anders smiled tightly. “I know how you feel. Do you want me to…?”

He wriggled his fingers half-heartedly, though he looked too tired to heal a grazed knee, never mind the pounding agony and thudding fatigue searing Tobias’ flesh.

“No.” Tobias shook his head as emphatically as he had the energy for. “Thanks, but no. No more
He glanced sidelong again at the women, frowning slightly. It was probably good for them both to rest. There were things there that needed to be talked about, however unappealing the prospect. Tobias’ gaze lingered on Aveline’s tall, broad form, her body somehow no less powerful at rest, without the heavy breastplate, arm- and shin-guards she wore. It was hard to forget her striking him down, even if none of it had been—

—real? Or was it? How do we even judge whether the Fade or the mortal realm is truer? Maybe they’re two sides of the same thing; maybe this is the pale reflection of the Fade.

I don’t know. I don’t even want to know. I just want… I want to sleep.

He sighed, aware of the rustle of cloth and feathers as Anders moved beside him. His coat was damp from the night air and the dew, and it had started to give off that familiar wet-dog aroma.

“Rest, then,” Anders suggested, as he leaned back on his hands, stretching his legs out in front of him, slouchy boots spattered with a generous layer of Sundermount mud and grit. “Sleep, if you can. You’ll feel better.”


“It’s different when you’re dreaming. You know that. Anyway, you’re in safe hands.”

“Am I?”

He turned his head, finding Anders—that whole other bedroll, in fact—a little closer than he’d expected. The slim dapplings of firelight that reached into the shelter lent just a hint of colour to the blue-washed dimness, but Anders’ face still looked pale enough to be ghostly, his eyes two dark, shadowed sockets in a haggard skull.

Maker’s arse… I’m supposed to sleep here, next to you?

“I think so.” Anders shrugged. “I don’t see any demons sneaking past this close to Justice, anyway.”

Tobias winced. “Mm. He does seem to have an aversion to them, doesn’t he? Still, I guess I’ll take that in the comforting way I’m going to pretend you meant it.”

Anders smiled; a real, genuine one this time, and the light caught softly at the movement of his mouth. Tobias looked away, speared suddenly by the cold places dreams had left inside him.

He relaxed, as far as he could, and they sat in silence, side by side. Tobias watched the reflected firelight catching on the compacted dirt at the mouth of the tent, and allowed its dancing light to lull him, until his breathing slowed and sleep began to cradle him gently. The very last thing he was aware of—before falling into a blissfully dream-free slumber—was his head slipping to the side, and the coarse, springy feel of feathers prickling his cheek.

He didn’t give it much thought, and fell asleep wondering why the pillow in his room smelled of elfroot, soot, and old tallow grease… and why that seemed so very comforting.
When Tobias woke, everyone was gone. He’d been left alone in the tent, tucked up under two blankets and, on first waking, he felt a shudder of chagrined embarrassment at that, tinged with a strange kind of nervousness.

Odd, he realised, because it wasn’t as if he was unused to being alone. Yet, now, he felt… exposed. Almost afraid. He sat up, strafing his fingers through his hair and wincing at the taste of his own tongue, and surveyed the empty tent. Thin morning light filtered through the gaps in the heavy canvas, and the sounds of the camp came from outside the flap, quiet and unobtrusive, yet unmistakable.

Tobias glanced down at himself, thankful for being fully clothed, and wondered where the others were. Had they already gone back down to the city? He knew Merrill never remained long among her clan—bad blood, he thought, momentarily appalled at the awfulness of the pun, until the sudden recollection of the Fade stilled his humour.

Maybe she and Aveline had both snuck off at dawn, too ashamed of their betrayals to face him.

He rose, stiff and aching, and tried to fold up the blankets. Every muscle protested at the movement, and his head had apparently been stuffed with rags. Tobias grimaced, swore to himself, and wondered why Anders hadn’t stayed. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He’d been… Justice had been… well… it had all been an experience, hadn’t it?

Tobias winced again, the blankets slipping from his fingers as he remembered in sudden, acute detail—untrammelled by the bone-shaking tiredness of last night—falling asleep with his head on Anders’ shoulder, his mind still half-wreathed in those terrible, tortuous things the demon had fed him.

Oh, Maker… I don’t talk in my sleep, do I?

It wasn’t a prospect he wished to contemplate. Neither was exactly how visible his dream had been to the others. Had he been stripped as bare as Aveline, or had the demon done its work inside his mind, painting the pictures there and just showcasing his shame with words, the way it had done with Merrill? Either way, he supposed, they all knew now. Anders knew, irrefutably, in a way that had nothing to do with all the months of flirting and drawn-out compromises, and Tobias hated himself for that.

He shivered, then looked up as a face appeared at the mouth of the shelter, dragging him unceremoniously from his guilty reverie.

“Oh, you’re awake!” Arianni exclaimed, rushing in with a wide, bright smile, and moving to seize his hands. “I’m so glad. I wanted to thank you personally, serah. We owe you so much. Feynriel’s up. He’s eating, talking… the Keeper says there may even be a way he can learn to control his abilities, if he could find somewhere to study, and that’s all thanks to you! I never imagined you would do us such kindness, I truly—”

“It’s all right. Really.” Tobias blinked, keen to extricate himself from the elf’s clammy grasp. She was already starting to make his head hurt. “Uh… yeah. Tevinter. It won’t be easy, but… I should speak with Marethari. There’ll be arrangements we need to make.”

Arrangements Anders needed to make, he corrected mentally. Getting Feynriel to Tevinter unchecked, let alone finding somewhere safe he could study—without the threat of blood magic or
power-crazed magisters seeking to abuse his gifts as readily as any demon—was going to be a real
test of the Underground’s power, if it was even possible.

Still, Arianni didn’t see it like that. All she saw was her son, alive, and she was effusively grateful.
She ushered him to the Keeper’s aravel at once, mentioning that his ‘friend’ was still there, speaking
with Marethari, and would no doubt be pleased to see him up and about.

Tobias suspected he looked confused when he stooped to pass through the doorway, and found
Varric sitting at a small table with the keeper, apparently deep in conversation, and taking notes on a
neatly folded piece of parchment.

“So, let me get this straight, this Elgahn guy killed the sun? The actual sun, right?”

“Elgar’nan,” Marethari corrected gently, the light of amusement twinkling in her face.

“Elgannan, right.” Varric waved his pencil dismissively. “And this—”

“Mythal.”

“—Mitthal rises from the sea and convinces him it was a bad idea—”

The keeper chuckled and shook her head indulgently. “Mythal showed to Elgar’nan the folly of his
anger. At the touch of her hand, he understood his lust for vengeance had led him astray, and he
vowed to undo the wrongs he had wrought.”

“Ah!” Varric exclaimed, pointing the pencil at Marethari, eyes narrowed in eager anticipation. “They
knocked boots, right?”

The elf laughed—a warm, throaty, rich sound that Tobias was sure he’d never heard from her before,
or even expected to hear.

Varric glanced up at him, and beamed widely.

“Hawke! You’re up. That’s good. I was getting a primer in Dalish mythology.”

“You’re honoured,” Tobias observed, as Marethari stood, swiping at her eyes with the back of one
knuckle, and mopping away her laughter.

*I will never cease to be amazed by the people that dwarf can charm.*

“I don’t believe I have ever met one of the *durgen’len* with quite such an aptitude for stories,” she
said, gesturing him to a seat.

“Thank you, Keeper.” He shook his head. “I should, uh, really be getting back. I—”

“Blondie headed back down to the city before first light,” Varric said helpfully. “Muttered something
about, ah, making arrangements. Left this for you,” he added, proffering a folded scrap of parchment
in his fingers.

Tobias took it, frowning, and peered down at the hastily scribbled words.

3 Ts, midnight. At least 250, if you can.

“Bugger,” he muttered, then glanced apologetically at Marethari. “Sorry. I mean, it… I know what it
means. He’s arranging what he can for Feynriel. If it’s successful, I’ll meet with someone at… a
place… tonight, and bring… the necessities. We’ll make a deal. If not, then we’ll have to find
another way.”

She nodded solemnly, all traces of her laughter forgotten. “I see. Is there anything we can—?”

“I, er, I don’t think so,” Tobias said diplomatically, folding the parchment into the pocket of his breeches. Not unless you happen to have two hundred and fifty sovereigns lying around the place, anyway. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. Feynriel’s all right this morning, is he?”

“Well indeed,” Marethari said, though a trace of unease seemed to linger in her eyes. “The entire clan appreciates what you did for him, Serah Hawke.”

Tobias inclined his head politely, and squeezed out his best effort at a smile.

Funny, he thought, how people were always complimenting him most when he felt like death warmed over.

He looked enquiringly at Varric. “Did the others…?”

“Left early too,” the dwarf confirmed. “Fenris last night, Merrill and Aveline a little after Blondie. He made me promise to see you back safe,” he added, with the smallest hint of a smirk coiled in readiness at the corner of his mouth.

Tobias arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Did he? I wonder if that’s good or bad.

Still, for all the smirking, that was exactly what Varric did.

They took their leave of the camp, and headed back down into the city. The walk was, Tobias decided, a great deal more pleasant in the daytime. A light sea breeze crested the air, meeting the fresh, sharp smells of the mountain, and the hard land that lay further away from Kirkwall’s stranglehold on the sea.

There must be farmland back there, he supposed. Eventually. Once you put the docks and the crowded ledges of cliffs behind you, and started to travel north, past Sundermount and past all the old Tevinter mines and gravel pits, there must be lush places. He’d thought about trying to convince Leandra to move out of the city completely, away to some small village or market town somewhere between here and the Vimmarks, but she wouldn’t hear of it. The Marches were dangerous country, she’d said, and Tobias had been very hard pressed not to burst out laughing.

After their flight from Lothering, with Ferelden burning to ashes around them and darkspawn at every turn, after the Deep Roads, and his years of spitting teeth and shedding blood for smugglers… and she was concerned about rumours of bandits and sheep rustlers?

Besides, she didn’t want a peasant’s life again. He knew that, however hard he’d been trying to avoid the knowledge. Not even a comfortable tenant yeoman’s life. Tobias supposed he had to admit that he wasn’t exactly great farming material… but they could have got by, he was sure.

Maybe. If it wasn’t for the bloody estate.

She had it in her eyes now, more than ever, like a girl with her heart set on a pretty necklace. Every single day, the first light of dawn seemed to sparkle on diamonds for her.

Tobias sighed loudly as he walked, the breeze ruffling his hair, and Varric shook his head reproachfully.
“Hawke, please. You’re breaking my heart. It’s actually physically painful.”

Tobias grinned. “Sorry. Just thinking.”

The dwarf eyed him critically. “About the Fade? What was it like, anyway? I didn’t get much out of the others. Daisy looked upset, though.”

High overhead, a gull wheeled and screamed against the wide, crisp blueness of the sky. Tobias shrugged.

“Huh. It’s the Fade, that’s all. Nothing more or less. It’s boring and predictable and full of demons. They get into your head… show you the things you want to see, try to make you forget yourself. That’s how they get in.”

“Ah. And they did, right? Get in?”

“Merrill was tempted, yes,” he said guardedly, frowning down at his boots.

Each step crunched on the gritty, sandy ground. The path, such as it was, was fringed with the dark green, weedy plants that clung to the salt-stained, sour air up here. Embrium, Tobias noticed, and something that looked a little bit like a herb Anders had called bindwort. He wondered, briefly, whether he should cut some and take it along to the clinic, but he imagined the healer had his own sources and, in any case, Tobias wasn’t entirely sure there weren’t weird protocols about it. ‘Such-and-such only to be gathered in moonlight by a barefoot virgin’, and all of that business.

He blinked, aware that Varric had asked him a question.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, tempted how? And don’t pretend you didn’t hear me.”

Tobias winced. “A pride demon. Made her believe she could be the one to save her people… saviour of the Dalish, if she gave it the power to help her.”

“Oh. And Aveline?”

“Saw her dead husband walking. Dreamed of redemption for failing to save him,” Tobias said shortly, suppressing a shudder at the recollection of Wesley’s all-too-real appearance. “The life they’d wanted… the life they should have had, I suppose. She blames—blamed, I mean, in the Fade —me, because I… well, because of what happened in Ferelden. Y’know. If it hadn’t been for meeting me, then the two of them might have got out alive.”

“Or died trying,” Varric said dryly. “I thought her husband was already as good as dead when you found them?”

“Mm-hm.” Tobias squinted at the pale jewel of the sun, glittering in the unclouded sky. “Didn’t make it easier, though. You know what I did.”

“Ah. Yes… there is that.”

There was silence for a few moments, broken only by the crunch of their footsteps. Kirkwall loomed up ahead, a series of jagged dark shapes slowly growing clearer, the way a painting yields the surprises of hidden details to curious scrutiny.

Tobias was aware of Varric watching him. The dwarf’s gaze settled on him like a weight, and he
cleared his throat uncomfortably, determined not to answer the question until—or, perhaps, if—it was asked.

“And you?”

*Bugger it. Can’t leave anything private, can you?*

He shrugged. “I beat it. Didn’t succumb. So—”

“Right, and…?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Tobias said briskly, keeping his eyes fixed on the swelling vista of the city.

The closer they drew, the more he could see: plumes of smoke from countless chimneys, forges, and Maker only knew what else. Towers, crenellations, walls and the seething pits of the city gates, and plenty more besides.

*Kirkwall: City of Infinite Surprises*.

*Of course, some of them are much less surprising than others.*

“So, you’re really going to send that boy to Tevinter? You and Blondie?”

Tobias wrinkled his nose. “Blondie and the Underground,” he corrected mildly. “I’m just helping. But yeah… seems like it’s the only chance he’s got. I mean, I don’t know whether he’ll make it or not. I hope so. *I hope* he doesn’t end up a ravening abomination, or a blood-crazed magister or anything, but… well, what else can we do? If the Dalish can’t help him, and the Circle would kill him before they even bothered to try—”

“Would they?”

Tobias grimaced. “He’s an apostate. And, if he’d fallen into a sleep like that there, do you think they’d have tried anything like as complicated as Marethari’s ritual? No. It would have been a sword in the chest and ‘good night, magey’ without even blinking.”

Varric chuckled quietly, then shook his head when Tobias frowned at him.

“Sorry. That’s not funny, I know. It’s just… you two sound more alike every day.”

“Wh— oh.”

Tobias shut his mouth curtly, and glared at the horizon.

*Bloody Anders….*

He and Varric parted company at the edge of Lowtown, the dwarf protesting the need for a long hot bath and a stiff drink, and Tobias admitting that he ought to check in on Leandra.

She was, as he could have predicted, fuming. He got the ‘you’re a grown man now, and I don’t expect to know all the details of your life, but it wouldn’t kill you to tell me when you won’t be back, because you know how I worry’ speech and, about halfway through, he was mildly appalled to realise that she assumed he’d been at a whorehouse, or possibly with a woman. It seemed probable that, in Leandra’s mind, there was little difference.

“…I mean, it’s not as if it’s easy to bring people back here, I know,” she was saying, gesturing hopelessly to the hovel’s shabby walls, “and I can’t imagine you’d expect a woman like that to—”

Leandra gave him a withering look. “Your friend,” she said crisply. “The girl, with the….”

“Isabela,” he supplemented, wincing at his mother’s vague gesticulations in the area of her chest, and trying to convince himself that she meant the distinctive jewellery the Rivaini wore.

“The… pirate girl, yes.”

“She’s not a pirate,” Tobias said wearily. “Not really. Pirates have their own ships. Can’t be a pirate without a ship. And, anyway, she’s not—”

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” Leandra shook her head and gave him a tight, tired little smile. “You’re home now. Would you like something to eat? I expect you’re hungry.”

Tobias opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again as the sullen, empty feeling in his stomach prodded him into realising she had a point. He was tired, hungry, and wrung dry after the past couple of weeks. What with the Fade, and Feynriel, and the qunari and their bloody problems, Viscount Dumar and his manipulations—not to mention that whole business at the Rose—the days had been bleeding into each other in one great, faceless mess of chaos. It felt like the whole city wanted a piece of him, and Tobias longed passionately for the knife-edge security of working for Athenril. At least, among the smugglers, he’d been able to stay in the shadows. He liked that. He liked people not knowing his name.

It was so much bloody safer.

Still, he managed to put most of his troubles from his mind, and he sat at the rickety little table with his mother, listening to her news and the hopes she had for the estate. She served him hot tea and leftover barley stew, warmed and salted with a little dried pork, with a piece of relatively fresh bread on the side, and talked cheerfully while he ate. Another letter from Carver had arrived while he’d been out, and Leandra insisted on showing it to him.

Tobias read it obligingly, and smiled when she cooed over every little mundanity and gripe Carv had scribed down. He swallowed heavily, the thick and rather viscous barley stew forming a lump in his throat.

“Do we know how long it’ll be until he gets his knighthood?”

Leandra shook her head, folding the paper carefully as she tucked it away, nursing it as carefully as a newborn babe. She kept all the letters, Tobias knew, stored like holy relics in an inlaid wooden box in the bottom drawer of Gamlen’s writing desk.

“No. It may well be at least another year, maybe two. Well, there’s so much training, isn’t there?”

Tobias snorted, dropping his spoon into the blessedly empty bowl and reaching for the bread.

“Can’t imagine there’s all that much to sticking a sword in their hands and pushing them out of the door,” he muttered, swiping the sop around the bowl.

Leandra tutted reproachfully. “That’s not true. I mean, there’s so much to it, isn’t there? The Knight-Commander runs a very disciplined ship. And say what you like, but I’d rather he goes through as much training as possible before they let him loose out there. I dread to think of what he’ll face.”

She shuddered, genuine revulsion and anxiety lining her face, and Tobias stopped chewing, the bread sagging unheeded in his fingers.
“What? People like me?”

Leandra winced. “No, darling. That’s not what I—”

“People like Father? Bethany?”

He shouldn’t have mentioned the name, he supposed. Tobias’ gut tightened as he watched his mother pale, her lips growing thin and pursed, her eyes lanced with pain.

“You don’t have to be like that,” she muttered, looking away and brushing invisible crumbs from the tabletop with one worn, red-knuckled hand.

Interwoven threads of rage and pain spooled in his chest, and yet he couldn’t seem to bite back the words.

“People just trying to stay out of the Chantry’s way, though? Is that what you mean, Mother? Because bloody Meredith—”

“Darling—”

Tobias sighed abruptly and reached for his tea. Leandra made a small, irritated sound in the back of her throat, and he wished he’d never said anything.

“I have to go out again in a bit,” he said, frowning at the pitted, well-scrubbed surface of the table, the wood almost bleached with its daily cleanings.

Gamlen had certainly never kept the place so tidy.

“You’ve barely been back,” Leandra said reproachfully, fingers cupped around her own tea. “You’ll wear yourself out.”

Tobias shook his head. “I need to see a man about some business, that’s all. Won’t be long. D’you need anything? I can call by the market.”

The tea seemed weak and tepid, with an aftertaste like silage. He swallowed it down anyway, and watched his mother’s face crease into a dissatisfied scowl. The dusty, grubby light that filtered in through the hovel’s small window fell with uncaring cruelty on her face, showing every line and every faded, papery plane of her skin. Her hair had grown brittle as it greyed, and her eyes dull and listless.

He wished he could believe it was just Kirkwall that it done it to her, and not the Blight, not losing the twins… not him.

She shrugged. “I don’t think so, dear. Oh, wait. No, if you’re going to be in Hightown, you could call into the draper’s. Master Linnabeck had some fabrics coming in I wanted swatches of. There was a green linen, with little white flowers on, and some nice thick velvets. He’ll have them put by for me, so you don’t need to worry. I was thinking about curtains, and upholsteries. You know. And some new clothes,” she added, eyeing his leather jerkin critically.

Tobias glanced up, wary of that analytical expression, and Leandra smiled indulgently at him.

“Well? Look at you. It’s about time you smartened yourself up.”

He said nothing. He liked the way he dressed. Besides, nice thick velvet wasn’t much good at stopping blades… not that he could say that much to her.
“You dress like a barbarian,” Leandra chided, her voice falling back into a set of old, familiar rhythms that almost made him smile. “I suppose, next thing I know, you’ll have a ring through your ear and a gold-capped tooth. Mind you, running around with that pirate girl—”

*Oh, by the Maker’s hairy arse crack, woman...*

“I’m not ‘running around’ with Isabela, Mother,” Tobias said wearily, and drained the rest of his tea. “I don’t even—”

He broke off abruptly, and set the mug down on the table. He didn’t know why the words wouldn’t pass his lips. The sky wouldn’t crack in two, and fire wouldn’t swallow the world… and yet he didn’t say it. Couldn’t say it.

“She’s not my type,” he muttered instead, pausing as he stood to give Leandra a quick peck on the cheek. “I’ll see you later, Mother.”

She nodded and waved him away absently, with a quiet little “hmm” of assent.

He looked back over his shoulder once as he left the house, and she hadn’t moved. Just sitting there… quiet and still.

Tobias wasn’t sure why that unnerved him so.

He tried not to think of it while he busied himself with the day’s errands. First, he dutifully collected Leandra’s swatches from the draper’s, then ran by a couple of merchants and old business contacts in the bazaar, and stocked up both on supplies and gossip. After all, Varric wasn’t the only one who could keep an ear to the ground.

There didn’t seem to be much going on. Lowtown was talking mostly about the qunari; the poison gas thing had not exactly endeared them to the city, and rumour had it a few headstrong groups of would-be militia wanted to see them burned out of their compound and sent back to Par Vollen.

*That’ll be messy.*

Still, Tobias supposed, it made a change from mage-bashing.

Hightown was buzzing with more genteel gossip, much of it about His Royal Shininess… who apparently hadn’t buggered off back to Starkhaven. Tobias found that peculiar in the extreme, and wondered precisely what it was about Kirkwall that—despite the city’s manifold imperfections—seemed to compel people to hang around.

He shrugged off the idle curiosity and, with the day slipping away around him, took time to pay calls and draw in a few favours. Vincento, the Antivan merchant, was just one of them.

It was his own fault, Tobias told himself. If the man had just taken a little more interest in Feynriel—shown just a little more willingness to help the boy, instead of shying away from his responsibilities—it needn’t have come to anything.

Still, the shouting didn’t break out until Tobias himself was almost out of earshot and—whistling nonchalantly as he walked away, the pouch of coins he’d lifted from the merchant’s unguarded trunk jingling in his pocket—he allowed himself a small smile, and the warm, fuzzy glow of virtue.

He stopped off at the di Bordi’s banking house and made a sizeable withdrawal from his own account before heading home, the weight of the coin purses he carried making every step seem longer.
Leandra was cleaning when Tobias got back. Gamlen was nowhere to be seen, but that wasn’t unusual. Maker only knew where he spent most of his days—like a rat scurrying about between dark holes and dead things, Tobias thought.

He set the leather bags down on the clean-scrubbed table, and enjoyed the smiles that came over his mother when she got to see her linens… even if did mean she wanted to talk about curtains, furniture and upholstery again.

She was eager for him to appoint a steward, to start the renovations and prepare for moving into the estate—and she was, in Tobias’ opinion, altogether far too keen on him taking up the interest in the mine. He wished he’d never told her about any of it.

“And what’s the man’s name?”

They were drinking tea again. It was a ritual she had—a way of chaining him to a chair with kindness, and stripping him of his defences—and Tobias couldn’t refuse it, even if he was fairly sure tea would start leaking out of his ears if he stayed home too long.

“Hm?” He swallowed heavily. Bloody stuff still tasted like silage. Maybe it was the water. “What, Hubert? The Orlesian?”

“No.” Leandra shook her head impatiently. “The steward. The one your friend—”

“Oh. Feddic. Bodahn Feddic… he’s a merchant. ’Bout as respectable a pillar of the Merchants’ Guild as Varric is, but it might work out. He was on the Deep Roads expedition,” Tobias continued, ignoring her wince at the mention of that particular escapade. “Owes me a favour or two, and Varric reckoned he’d be a good choice. We give him leave to store some goods in the cellars, he’ll probably be amenable to overseeing the work and the running of the place. Should get a good deal on supplies and materials, too, and Maker knows we’ll need them. Still trying to find a good stonemason… not to mention someone to look at the staircases.”

Leandra tutted reprovingly. “Oh, I can’t think it’s as bad as all that. It’s—”

“Been derelict for years,” Tobias interrupted. “Not to mention the slavers. They’re not exactly good tenants, Mother.”

She made another small grumble of reproach, and sipped her tea. “I don’t want to think about that,” she muttered into her cup, and Tobias stifled an exasperated sigh.

She never did, did she?

“I’ll get it sorted out,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“Of course you will, darling. Still…” Leandra shook her head, frowning slightly. “I’m not sure I like the idea of having our home acting as some merchant’s warehouse.”

Tobias snorted. “It’s big enough, isn’t it? There’s only you and me.”

“And your uncle,” she added crisply.

Tobias winced, but managed to keep the stream of invective he wanted to spout constrained to an internal rant.

“Yes,” he managed through gritted teeth. “And Uncle Gamlen. Of course. And Carv, when he visits. I’m sure Meredith lets them out every so often to go for tea and buns.”
“Oh, honestly….”

“Well? Anyway, the place is bloody massive, Mother. I don’t think it’d impact on anything to lease a room or two.”

Leandra’s frown deepened, and he supposed he couldn’t blame her for her reservations.

“I don’t know what people will say,” she muttered. “That’s all.”

Tobias gritted his teeth, and swallowed down the urge to snap at her. There were, in his opinion, far worse things than having Hightown look down their noses at the old Amell estate’s new occupants.

Besides, sitting on all that spare room… what else was he supposed to do with it?

“Thought I might take a bath,” he said, sneaking a sidelong glance at her. “Before I go out later. That all right with you?”

She nodded, her long fingers still delicately framing her cup, and her face set into a speculative sort of look, like her mind was still dallying down the corridors of her childhood home.

Sometimes, he wondered if there might come a time when she wouldn’t return.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Of course, dear. Fire’s up, you can heat some water. Or do you want me to—?”

“I’ll manage,” Tobias said swiftly. “Really.”

He patted her hand as he rose from the table, and went to stash the leather bags of gold under his bed before fetching the household wooden tub and bucket, and heading off towards the pump in the square outside.

Tobias bathed, then helped Leandra with the dinner—another of her thick, lump-strewn stews—and tried his best to avoid any conversation about the estate, or the templars, or anything else even faintly contentious.

“So, where are you going this evening?”

He cringed inwardly, and gritted his teeth as she ladled stew into two bowls; a third sat on the table, awaiting Gamlen’s return. The fire was burning cheerfully, banked low so as not to smoke too much, and a few candles cast warm, dancing light into the muggy little room. Outside, dusk had settled, and the whoops and yells of children running through the streets had just about given way to the sounds of men returning from the docks and warehouses. A dog barked and, somewhere, a woman called out shrilly.

“Just out,” Tobias said blandly, avoiding Leandra’s eye. “I’m meeting someone, late. Business.”

She huffed disapprovingly. “Is it dangerous?”

“No. Shouldn’t be.”

Stew slopped into the bowl, and the smell of hot barley tugged sluggishly at Tobias’ nostrils.

“I thought you were giving all that up. You said you were.”

“It’s nothing to do with Athenril,” he said—and that was the truth, whether she believed it or not. “Or the Red River boys, or anyone else.”
“No?” Leandra didn’t sound convinced. “Well, it’s not to safe to be out all night. I just wish you’d —”

“I can look after myself, Mother.”

Most of the time. Unless I’m drunk and there’s more than three of them.

She narrowed her eyes. “I know, but I’m still entitled to worry. And I will. When will you be back?”

Tobias shrugged. “Late. I don’t know. Depends on… well, on the arrangements.”

“What arrangements?”

Maker’s breath….

“Whatever arrangements have been made,” he said, as patiently as he could manage. “I’m… helping someone, that’s all.”

Leandra nodded slowly. “A mage?”

“What?”

Tobias stopped, bowl in his hand, and blinked owlishly at his mother. He hadn’t expected her to jump to such an accurate conclusion… and he hadn’t expected the steel in her tired blue eyes when she looked at him, demanding an answer with quiet tenacity.

“That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it? That’s why you’re so bitter about the Knight-Commander all of a sudden.”

“Huh.” Tobias scoffed, trying to defuse the inevitable and awkward questions. “Well, I was never exactly her biggest fan, but—”

The protestations died on his lips as his mother stared at him, looking so awfully weary and disillusioned. She shook her head.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

The protestations died on his lips as his mother stared at him, looking so awfully weary and disillusioned. She shook her head.

“Your father would be very proud, I’m sure.”

He held back the response, telling himself the bitter tone in her voice was just worry, just tiredness… no matter what else it felt like.

Leandra dropped the ladle back into the cookpot, and her warm, raw-boned hand rested briefly on his wrist before she picked up her own bowl and moved away.

“Be careful, though, won’t you, darling? Promise me?”

Tobias nodded. “Yes. Mother, I…”

He stopped, hearing the familiar shambling tread of weaving footsteps coming up to the door.

Always at the most inconvenient bloody time!

“That’ll be your uncle,” Leandra said mildly, setting the bowl down on the table and moving back to serve another. “Come along. Eat up, before it gets cold.”
The door opened and Gamlen shuffled in, smelling of sour wine. The intertwined light of the candles and the hearth picked out every wrinkled line and crumpled angle of his form, and he glowered at Tobias.

“Oh. Gracing us with your presence this evening, are you?”

Leandra sighed as she served her brother’s meal. “Can’t you both just be pleasant to each other for once? Is that too much to ask?”

Tobias eyed his uncle coolly as the older man shucked off his coat.

“Not for me,” he muttered, crossing to the table and taking a seat beside his mother.

Gamlen grunted something intelligible and came over to join them, pausing to toss a loaf of bread on the table before he sat.

Tobias watched it drop and settle, like a spinning penny coming to rest, the hard, soot-smudged crust making a dull scrape against the wood. Evenings like this, he supposed, the estate and all the responsibilities and privileges it entailed really didn’t sound so bad.

Dinner was predictably awkward, but Leandra’s icy peace-keeping avoided all-out verbal warfare.

Tobias grabbed a few hours of sleep, and left the house late. The full, greasy sluice of moonlight across Lowtown’s dirt-packed streets made everything look muted and unreal, with the occasional thin silver highlight running like water down the line of a roof or wall.

The hunched black shapes of bodies in doorways barely stirred as he passed. A cough or two, the mumble of someone considering waylaying a foolish night-time traveller—until they saw the blade in his belt and the determination in his gait—and that was all.

It didn’t take long to get down to the docks, where torches burned at the mouths of the alleyways, and life spilled out into the streets.

Tobias headed straight for his destination, glad of the thin cloak he’d thrown on before he left the house, and the defence it provided against prying eyes.

The Three Tuns was not one of the most salubrious taverns that lined the docks, but neither was it one of the worst.

Most of the clientele were Port Authority men, of dubious morality and a vituperatively bureaucratic turn of mind. The labourers and dockhands tended to drink elsewhere, with a few exceptions, so the Tuns generally boasted a relatively quiet and restrained atmosphere. This was probably enhanced by the fact that Fat Molly, the landlord’s wife, would beat the living snot out of any man who disturbed her house… or the quiet little operation she ran upstairs.

A hefty woman—of the kind who resembled a statue of some infamous barbarian king, but sculpted mainly from sausagemeat—Molly was the force behind the Tuns and the three things it was known for: strong beer, unloaded dice, and cheap, clean women. There were only a couple of girls who worked out of the tavern, but they offered one of the few places in Kirkwall the Coterie didn’t have a cut in and, as far as Tobias knew, because of that, there wasn’t a guild or company in the city that felt the irresistible urge to piss Molly off.

It made her place a very good, very quiet, very safe place to meet… unless she didn’t like the look of the person you were meeting. Molly could be very particular about anyone who resembled a guild man.
Fortunately for Tobias, as he slipped into the well-lit, smoky bar, pushing the hood of his cloak back, the very last thing he looked like was a respectable, well-upholstered thief. He’d spent a great deal of time at the Tuns during rough patches in Athenril’s employ, when dallying anywhere the Coterie had tendrils hadn’t been a good idea, and that lent a genuine warmth to the smile with which Molly greeted him.

“Well, well! Look what the bleedin’ cat dragged in!”

He grinned as the immense woman beamed at him, frizzy brown curls springing from the loose bun at the back of her neck and standing out from her head like a halo.

“Evening, Molly.”

“Serah Hawke… well I never. I ’eard you was too good for us now,” she chided teasingly, leaning on the pitted wooden bar, a dirty dishrag slung over one shoulder.

Tobias spread his hands wide in a gesture of innocence, and eased his way through the comparatively genteel crush of bodies.

The quiet buzz of conversation and the clatter of plates and mugs filled the stale, warm air, and candle smoke wreathed the firelight. At The Hanged Man, a fight would probably have broken out by now or, at the very least, one of the regular drunks would be being sick over somebody.

“Me? Never, Molly! Where’d you hear that? It’s all lies.”

She cackled, her thick lips spread flat over yellowed stumps of teeth, and the wattle of her neck wobbled.

“They say you’re moving uphill, boy. Be your piss washing down to wet us next, won’t it?”

Tobias shook his head. “Not if I can help it, Moll. Still, funny old life, innit?”

Fat Molly’s laughter subsided into a squint-eyed look of intrigue, her mouth still twisted around a smile.

“Aye,” she said dubiously. “That it is. So, what you ’avin’?”

“Your best rot-gut, my dear, if you’d be so kind.” Tobias flashed her another grin. “And one for yourself. Leave the bottle? I’ll be meeting a friend.”

Molly nodded, and set two practically clean glasses down in front of him. She produced an unlabelled bottle of thick, dark green glass, uncorked it, and pushed it across to him as Tobias slid a couple of silvers towards her.

He remembered, before the Blight, back in Ferelden, when ale was no more than a couple of coppers a pint, and a bottle of spirits could be bought for less than half a silver. Sure, the price of everything had changed—refugees, plagues, darkspawn and Maker only knew what else had seen to that—but it still stung, and Molly set her rates high even given local standards. The price of impartiality was pretty damn steep, he guessed.

Nevertheless, he thanked her, and took the glasses and bottle over to a small, empty table in a quiet nook near the fire. A candle stood on the rickety table, burning low in a clay saucer. All that remained was to wait… and, ideally, not to drink too much of the rough, faintly brown liquid that Tobias suspected Molly probably brewed in a bathtub.
He watched the door for a while, and drank a couple of short measures of the… whatever it was. The familiar, comforting burn at the back of his throat made the memory of Leandra’s lumpy stew and awkward questions a little more distant, but midnight still seemed to be a long way off.

The tavern was too far from Hightown to reliably hear the chantry’s midnight service bell, but close enough to the docks to catch the ships’ mid-watch bells ringing out. Their solemn chimes drifted up—audible in the general stillness of the night—and, as if on cue, a hooded figure slipped into the tavern.

The clutches of patrons had begun to thin out, which made him all the more conspicuous. Dark folds of heavy fabric hung over a short, thin frame… not the man Tobias had been expecting to see, he realised. No shabby coat, no damp fringe of feathers; and yet whoever it was clearly knew why he was there.

The figure paused for a moment by the doors, surveying the tavern, and then headed straight for Tobias. His steps slowed as he drew closer, and a pair of lean, tanned hands rose to push the hood of his cloak back a little way, revealing a narrow sliver of a face.

Oh, great.

Gethyn Drummer slipped into the seat opposite Tobias, and propped his elbows on the table.

“Serah,” he said, surveying Tobias coolly with those hard, black eyes.

Tobias inclined his head. “Nice to see you again.”

The other man, his hood still mostly covering his face, gave a small, eloquent grunt that suggested he really didn’t agree with that statement. “Hmm. Do you have it?”

Tobias poured out another measure of Molly’s rotgut for himself, and one for Gethyn.

“Is it arranged?” he asked, pushing the glass across the table.

Gethyn snorted irritably, but took the drink. “We don’t ask questions,” he muttered, knocking it back in a business-like manner. “Neither should you.”

Tobias shrugged. He supposed he shouldn’t be sitting here with his head uncovered, either, being so easily identifiable. Rather, he should have swathed himself up in fourteen yards of black silk, and pretended to be part of a street gang.

Bloody paranoid… and they say Anders is weird. Huh.

“Sorry,” he said lightly. “I haven’t done this before.”

“No.”

Gethyn held out the glass, and Tobias topped it off, then downed his own shot and poured another. Whatever Molly made the moonshine from, it was strong stuff: the pleasant tug of light-headedness pulled at him, and what flavour the liquid had warmed his every breath.

“I still want to know, though,” he said quietly, peering at the other apostate. “Call it curiosity or genuine concern, but… I want to know the boy will be safe.”

The stub of candle burning on the table between them guttered, and a thin trail of wax began to drip from the saucer to the greasy, scarred wood.
Gethyn exhaled slowly, and glared at Tobias from within the folds of his cloak. “Of course he bloody will. D’you think this is the first run we’ve arranged?”

“No. But he’s not like most others, is he? I bet you don’t send many to T—”

“Shh!” Gethyn glanced urgently around the bar. “Are you stupid, or what?”

Tobias stifled a snort of laughter. “Andraste’s tits, man… who’s going to hear, or care, in here? I thought that was the whole point of—”

“Just be quiet, all right?” Gethyn whispered, leaning across the table.

The flickering candlelight painted shadows inside the folds of his cloak, making his eyes glitter dangerously, and shading hollows into his thin cheeks.

The smile fell from Tobias’ face, and he slumped back in his seat, raising his glass to his lips like an old habit.

“Fine,” he mumbled. “Sorry.”

There was a shuffle of movement near the front of the bar: a gaggle of men weaving unsteadily out of the door, homeward bound in the late dark. Molly wished them a loud and effusive farewell, and went back to wiping mugs with her dirty dishrag.

From upstairs, there came a few muffled giggles and the thump of a door closing.

“He did say you’d probably ask,” Gethyn said quietly, raising his glass to his lips. “Our mutual friend. He’s been busy. And yes… you’re right. Not many birds who fly that far north, if you know what I mean. That’s what’s made it difficult.”

“And expensive,” Tobias added. “Yes?”

“Yeah. So… do you have it?”

Beneath the table, Tobias’ fingers flexed on the coin purse. In total, he’d managed to cobble together nearly four hundred sovereigns—far more than Anders’ note had asked for, and far more than his last contribution to the Underground’s efforts. Obviously, getting Feynriel to Tevinter would be more difficult, and more expensive, than moving a whole group of apostates via the Ostwick road.

He only hoped it would work.

“Yes. When does he go? The boy. Because of his mother… it’ll be hard on her,” Tobias explained, as Gethyn narrowed his eyes.

“Hmph. Friend of hers, are you? Wondered why you took such an interest in this.”

Tobias winced. “I take an interest because he could be any of us,” he said, lowering his voice. “Besides—”

“They all could,” Gethyn said darkly. “And you would be best advised to learn how to keep things like this short and clean, messere. You understand?”

“Fine.” Tobias scowled. “Just tell me when it’ll be.”

Gethyn’s glare grew harder, and he hunched further forwards, brow heavily furrowed as he tugged his cloak tighter around him.
“Within the week,” he said quietly, his voice a low rasp beneath the tavern’s bustle. “That’s all I’ll say.”

“It isn’t much.”

“No, and there’s good reason for that,” Gethyn spat. “We don’t know you. I don’t trust you. But our mutual friend does… more fool him. You’re only here because he said you’d be good for the money. So, are you?”

Scorn and ire positively oozed from his words, every line of his body set into a silent challenge.

Tobias shrugged minutely, trying to ignore the humiliating wash of angry recrimination in his veins. He should have known where he stood, he supposed.

“I have to be, don’t I?”

Gethyn’s eyes narrowed, his face a beaten quire of copper between the rough wool cloak and the jumping candle flame.

“Our friend made the deal,” he snapped. “You don’t like it, you talk to him.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it. I just want to know what’s going to happen to the boy.”

“Maker’s cock….” Gethyn’s face twisted into a grimace of distaste. “I told you. That’s not the way we do things. It’s safer the fewer people who know. Why don’t you just—”

“I want to know,” Tobias said quietly. “And then I’ll give you what I’ve got.”

He met Gethyn’s angry stare unflinchingly, and waited calmly for the twitching of the other man’s thin lips to subside.

“Fine,” Gethyn muttered. “I mean, he’ll probably tell you anyway, won’t he?”

He hunched forwards, leaning further than ever across the little table, his words whispered like a dark chant.

“He’ll go via Antiva, in a merchant’s train. Don’t ask how we arranged it. There’s protection all the way—two of ours will be travelling with them—then there’s a man in the north who deals with safe places. I can’t say more than that.”

Tobias nodded thoughtfully. Incognito apostates planted in baggage trains, networks of safe houses and lynchpins of organisation… well, the Underground really was a vast and sprawling network, wasn’t it?

“I see.”

Gethyn snorted. “Hm. Dunno why you didn’t just wait for the pillow talk. Come on, then. You got it or not?”

Tobias blinked, bridling a little on that moment of surprise that shouldn’t really have been surprising at all. Gossip, naturally, spread its tawny fingers through everything. No great wonder that half of Kirkwall thought he and Anders were screwing—and yet it felt like an insult, like an attack on one or both of them.
The Underground would use it against Anders, he supposed, when they turned on him. And they would turn... at some point. He didn’t doubt that.

He eyed Gethyn curiously, trying to find a chink in the man’s armour of prickly irritability, and found himself rewarded only with another scowl.

Tobias pushed the bag under the table, nudging it against the apostate’s knee. “There.”

“How much?” Gethyn asked, as his fingers closed on the purse and he pulled it eagerly into his lap.

“Three hundred and eighty-six,” Tobias murmured. “I can get another thirty tomorrow, but no more than that for a while. Is it enough?”

Gethyn nodded curtly, making a manful effort at disguising his surprise. If he was impressed, he didn’t show it. “Hm. It'll do.”

He knocked back the last of his drink, and rose from the table, the coin purse effortlessly concealed beneath his cloak.

“I suppose our friend might be right about you,” he added, looking down his nose at Tobias. “He says we can trust you. He says he trusts you. ’Course, I ’spect your kind stick together, don’t you?”

Tobias arched an eyebrow. “Oh? Do we?”

“Mm. Bloody dog-lords,” Gethyn said shortly, tugging his cloak around himself and glancing towards the tavern’s door.

From behind the bar, Fat Molly was eyeing them suspiciously. She nodded in Tobias’ direction, and he inclined his head, returning the gesture evenly.

“Yes,” he said, with a small, thin smile. “I expect we do.”
There were only a few gaggles of people in the clinic when Tobias arrived. A woman sat on one of the pallets, jogging a baby in her arms, though the child seemed too weak to be doing much more than keening softly. Anders was with her, peeling back the shawl that wrapped the child, his face lined with concern.

He didn’t notice Tobias’ arrival; just carried on examining the infant. He lifted it from its mother’s arms gently, its scrawny body dangling limply between his hands, and it began to cry more loudly. He tried to hush it, tried to soothe it with the gentle pulse of healing magic, blooming forth from his palm in a glow of soft blue light, but the tiny lungs heaved out a great wail, and Anders frowned, looking worried as he passed the babe back to its mother.

He went to the back of the clinic, where the coppers were boiling, and fetched one of the girls. She came quickly, carrying what looked like a jug of cauldre, and an extra blanket, which she wrapped around mother and child, speaking quietly to the woman as she led her away.

Anders stood there, alone in the pale chaos of the clinic, one hand on the back of his waist, the other swiping over his hair as he watched them go. He rolled his neck, his back evidently stiff and sore, and he looked so disquieted that Tobias wanted to call out to him. He didn’t, because there were two dockhands close by who were soon clamouring for the healer’s attention, and an old woman complaining in shrill tones about pain in her hands.

But, as Anders turned to address the next of his patients, he caught sight of Tobias waiting by the door, and shot him a small, weak smile.

It wasn’t exactly a burst of sunshine and roses, but it was better than nothing. It showed, maybe, that he was all right—or at least as all right as he ever was—and that started to calm a few of Tobias’ nerves.

He’d worried that the Fade had been a mistake. He shouldn’t have let Anders do it, and he was afraid of what it might have caused… as if Justice had caught the scent of freedom, and now couldn’t rest.

Oh, there was more to it than that, of course—a great deal more—but Tobias wasn’t prepared to dwell on it, just as he refused to examine all the reasons that drew him down here, into the Undercity’s dankly beating heart.

Anders was dealing with the old woman and her crabbed, twisted, arthritic hands. Tobias nodded to him across the tangle of patients and linens and ailments, and then went to the back of the clinic, where he smiled at the boy manning the coppers—the most recent runaway, apparently, and still new to the work—and lent what little skill he had.

Watching boiling pans and stirring the scummy green roil of herb parts, or rolling bandages and pegging up wet sheets and squares of washed dressings never really felt like doing much. Tobias nursed the fond hope that he might actually learn enough to be useful, in time, but the names of the different herbs never seemed to stay in his head, and he struggled to tell the difference between many of them when they were fresh, much less anonymous dried green powders, or boiled wet sludge. None of the things Anders tried to teach him seemed to stick, either, and Tobias was afraid of trying even the simplest healing spell again, in case he did worse damage than scorching a few floorboards.

So, he contented himself with the messy, menial things. He stirred coppers, dealt with wet linens,
strained herbs, and sluiced out pisspots and bowls filled with all manner of unpleasant fluids… and, at the centre of it, Anders worked on.

There was something off about it today, though, Tobias noticed. He was doing less actual hands-on healing, as if he wanted to keep a distance from the patients themselves, and yet he looked even more tired than usual.

The afternoon wore away at him and, by the time the clinic was growing quiet, emptied but all of the sickest—and, with the year turning cold and hard, there were more than there had been of those—Anders looked paper-thin and exhausted.

“That’ll do, Neryn,” he said with a small smile, dismissing the young, wide-eyed runaway from the rank of coppers, the fires banked down now and the herbs all emptied out and duly worked into plaisters or salves. “Just pop some more wood in the braziers, would you? We need to keep everyone warm. I’ll finish up here.”

The lad bobbed an obeisant bow and scampered off. Tobias smirked at the retreating figure, and shot Anders an enquiring glance.

“Not particularly talkative, is he?”

The healer shook his head, and the faint smile still clinging to his face turned solemn and melancholy. “No. But then you wouldn’t be, if you’d been through what he has.”

“Circle?”

“Mm.” Anders nodded absently, and gave Tobias a thoughtful look. “I didn’t think we’d see you down here today. You look tired. Thought you’d rest after the business with the Dalish.”

Tobias shrugged. “I got some sleep. More than you, by the looks of it. Is everything…? You know, with Feynriel?”

Some focus seemed to seep back into those dark eyes, and Anders nodded again, more firmly this time.

“Yes. Thank you for following through. I knew you would.”

Tobias basked in the warmth of pride. “Well, you knew the coin was there if you needed it. I said that much.”

“Saying and doing are different things… for a lot of people, anyway. Gethyn made the handover this morning. It’s arranged, and the fact we could put the money down is thanks to you.”

Anders’ voice was low, in deference to the other people around, but each word seemed to buzz its way straight into Tobias’ head, as soft and insidious as a whisper in his ear. He swallowed heavily, and wet his lower lip.

“A merchant caravan, right? Then a safe house somewhere in the Imperium? How—”

Anders chuckled, lines of tired amusement creasing his eyes. “Gethyn said you were curious. Yes… we have a contact in Minrathous who arranges things. A few in other places, but no one tends to stay anywhere for long. It’s not safe. Tevinter isn’t safe, generally speaking, but I think it’s Feynriel’s best chance. And you helped that happen.”

Tobias squirmed a little under the sudden warmth in the healer’s face—the swell of pride and
gratitude and respect that, all at once, was both wonderful and frightening. It made him feel vulnerable to be the focus of so much.

“Still,” Anders said, tipping his head to the side, that familiar tone of light, dry sarcasm perfuming the word, “I don’t know Gethyn was that struck on you ignoring all the rules.”

Tobias sniggered. “No. Mind you, why should he trust me? As far as the Underground knows, it’s only you vouching for me, and apparently they already think that’s because — I mean … .”

He winced as he pulled back on the words. Damn. It was hard to remember, when it was so easy to talk to the man, that there were things he shouldn’t say.

Anders’ expression grew a little more distant, though the hint of a smile still touched the edge of his lips. He seemed to be thinking of something that either amused or saddened him — or possibly both — and then he shrugged, tossing Tobias a rueful glance.

“People talk,” he said simply.

Tobias watched his face, watched the guarded light in his eyes, searching for some suggestion of what he was really thinking, but Anders had himself locked up far too tightly. That frustrated him. It stung, too, coming so hard on the heels of the Fade. Tobias took a slow, deep breath, and tried not to remember the sweet spring air wafting through the window of a cottage that wasn’t real, or the warm, soft laughter of a man who probably couldn’t even be that happy.

He cleared his throat, pushing them both back into calmer waters before the stilted, choking waves of things that were too difficult to address pulled him down.

“Could be worse,” he said lightly. “You could have taken Merrill along to a meeting or three. I bet they’d just love her.”

Anders snorted, and a brief but beautifully sunny grin split his face. “Maker… no. Although, if it would sway her from some of those ideas of hers, it might be worth considering.” The smile faded, replaced with a melancholy frown, and a certain tightness around his eyes. “Blood magic’s never right. I mean, power corrupts, but in that case it’s not even the power … it’s what it opens the door to.”

Tobias watched a strange, speculative look settle over his face, and wondered at how mercurial his moods seemed to be when he was tired. He wondered, too, just how far he could push Anders when it came to conversations of Merrill and demons… and exactly how far Justice himself differed from their kind.

The spirit’s hatred of demons in the Fade had surprised Tobias, and made him curious. After all, it seemed too simple to say that his kind and Torpor’s were different from each other the way that vices and virtues were. Wasn’t a virtue running unchecked just as dangerous as a vice? What was unmetered justice, except the warped face of Vengeance that Anders feared so much?

Part of Tobias suspected that that itself was nothing more than rage, but he didn’t want to linger on the thoughts, because they led to dark and frightening places and, besides, Anders was a lot of things… but abomination wasn’t one of them. Tobias believed that more strongly than he believed anything and, as he looked at Anders in the clinic’s subdued quiet—with just the odd handful of sick and scared people huddled up on the pallets, and the Circle runaways ladling out soup and small comforts—the healer never seemed more human.

Anders blinked then, as if forcibly dragging himself away from some distracting chain of thoughts,
and gave Tobias a weak smile, like a thin shred of sunlight on a winter morning.

“Anyway,” he said, a teasing note lingering in his voice, “they will be suspicious of you, won’t they? It’s just… well, you. Hob-nobbing with the nobility. Personal meetings with the viscount, old friend of the Captain of the Guard….”

“Aveline?” Tobias wrinkled his nose, and the texture of the air between them thinned a bit. “We’re not exactly friends. She tolerates me for Mother’s sake, I think, and the fact we left Ferelden together, but that’s all. Anyway, after last night—”

Anders nodded sympathetically. “I know. I know, but you can see how it looks.”

“How it looks?” Tobias frowned. “Can’t say that I can, no. Why?”

The healer looked uncomfortable, like he wished he’d never said anything. Across the clinic, on one of the pallets, an old man coughed; a great, chest-deep wheeze, hauling phlegmy gasps on weak lungs and rattling in the breaths he struggled to take. Anders glanced up, and there was a flicker of worried resignation in his face, like he knew exactly how little he could do for the man.

A muscle clenched briefly in his jaw, and he returned his attention to Tobias with a minute shrug that made the feathered shoulders of his shabby coat rustle.

“You know what I mean,” he muttered, looking vaguely apologetic. “You’ve seen who we are. It’s not just people like me, or Gethyn, or even Selby. Many of the Underground are merchants, guildhall members… a few are even minor gentry. They risk a great deal doing what they do. But, for someone to have too much involvement with the guard and the nobles? That’s asking for trouble.”

A cold ache scythed through Tobias’ gut. “What, you think I’d—?”

“No!” Those dark eyes locked quickly onto his, and Anders shook his head emphatically. “No, I don’t. I don’t think that for a minute. I’ve trusted you with my life before… I would again.”

His gaze seemed to melt its way right to Tobias’ core, and he felt his cheeks begin to warm. A frown pinched Anders’ brow, and he looked sheepishly at the dusty floorboards between them.

“But they won’t see it that way. Even with all the coin you’ve dropped… or maybe because of it. I don’t know. Just… just be careful, is all I’m saying. It takes time to win people around.”

“Mm.” Tobias folded his arms, and tried to resist the urge to say something snide. “I want to, though.”

Anders glanced up enquiringly. “Oh?”

It was true. His zeal hadn’t lessened in the weeks since the meeting, however full up they’d been with other crises vying for his attention. It seemed a little silly to say it—especially standing here, with the dregs of Kirkwall’s population wrapped in blankets and wheezing into a dark, cold night lit by smoky braziers and greasy tallow candles—but everything since that evening had just convinced Tobias further. The demon at the Harimann place, the Dalish ritual… it all meant the same thing. Mages would never be free from the hatred and fear inculcated by those whom the Circle failed, and Kirkwall was a perfect example of why Circles never would work. There would always be those who sought power, and those who couldn’t control what they already had, and trying to herd them all together like identical cattle only exacerbated the problems.

Not all mages were created equal, and magic was a curse and blessing in different measures… and of different strengths. To pretend otherwise—and to pretend that it could be locked up—was ridiculous.
Someone needed to show the world that.

However, those were big, shiny, glamorous words, and they were all wrong in this quiet, poky, decidedly unglamorous place… even with the enquiring look on Anders’ face, and the almost irresistible urge Tobias had to pledge everything to him all over again.

He shrugged as nonchalantly as he could manage. “Well, there are plenty more Feynriels out there, aren’t there? Maybe not all with those kinds of powers, but… people the Circle are failing. People who don’t want to live their lives shut in like cattle. And, if the way Meredith’s been running things is any indication, it’s only going to get worse.”

Something dark sluiced behind Anders’ eyes, and he nodded fervently. “You’re right there. Do you know how many mages they turned Tranquil last month? The Rite shouldn’t even be used on a Harrowed mage. The templars are invoking it over and over, just to silence anyone who steps out of line. If someone doesn’t—”

He stopped abruptly and took a deep breath and, just for a moment, the air itself seemed to flex against Tobias’ skin. He frowned. “You all right?”

Anders smiled weakly. “Too tired to talk politics, that’s all.” He took another long breath, centring himself, and ran a hand over his hair, smoothing down the errantly frizzy bits that always seemed to stick out, whatever he did. “Don’t know why you hang around here… I can’t be much company.”

Tobias shook his head. “You know perfectly well, you bastard.”

“Anders grimaced incredulously, which made him smile, and Tobias followed his glance around the clinic. The apprentice, Neryn, was sweeping the day’s rushes out of the side door, which might possibly do something about the pervading smell of piss and old vomit that always mouldered away in the clinic, even beneath the regular cleanings and the astringent-smelling little dishes of copal incense.

The healer shook his head, and moved to finish off hanging the coppers upside down over the benches, evidently deciding the two of them had dallied enough.

Tobias followed, helping him lift and turn the heavy pans, and check the stoppers on some of the big stoneware jugs in which herbs were quietly macerating. The fire still glowed softly beneath a mantel of ash, and the smells of the newly made plaisters, the tinctures and powders all twisted together in one woody, green, sharp scent that made Tobias’ nose itch. Three thick stubs of candle guttered in saucers on the workbench, and they threw a dozen different shadows around Anders as he worked, pale hands like ghosts in the darkness.

“Watching you,” Tobias said, lowering his voice a little as they overturned the biggest copper, sluicing out the last of the dregs it had held, “makes me think everything’s all right, even when I know it isn’t. You always look so confident, so… focused. Dedicated.”

Incredible, beautiful, powerful… I could go on.

Anders winced. The last of whatever noxious weed had been boiled in the copper spattered to the ground in dark green droplets, and Tobias sighed tersely, realising that was yet another thing to add to the list of stuff he shouldn’t have said.

“I wanted to talk to you, anyway,” he said, as they set the pan on the slatted bench. “To apologise for
forcing you into the Fade like that. I should have known how uncomfortable it would be, and—"

Anders shook his head emphatically. “No. I couldn’t have just stood by and done nothing. I couldn’t have let you… well… you know.”

_Die like an idiot? Face demons alone? Kill Feynriel?

He could have meant any of them, Tobias supposed, though he decided to hope for the second option.

“Do you, uh…? D’you remember it?” he asked, as casually as he could. “I mean, what was it like? With— well, with _him_ in charge like that?”

Anders pulled a sour face, and it was hard to tell whether it was really such a deeply unpleasant memory, or if he just didn’t want to talk about it.

“It’s hard to explain. I told you before that there’s no way to tell where Justice ends and I begin. His thoughts are mine, his… reactions….” Anders trailed off and shook his head, frowning vaguely. “It’s difficult to… you know. I’d stayed out of the Fade since we merged. I don’t much like being a passenger in my own skin. Still,” he added thoughtfully, worrying at the cuff of his coat with one hand, “I suppose Justice feels like that every day. Shackled to my body and every decision I make. No wonder it’s become a prison for him.”

Tobias bit the inside of his lip, eager to find something to say, but not sure what possible response there was to that. Were things really that bad inside the healer’s head? He wondered if Anders talked about it to anyone else. He probably did. Maybe. Selby, and those elusive friends of his in the Underground that Tobias wasn’t quite prepared to admit being so jealous of… but did it help? How did you talk about something that half your own mind was the subject of? It wasn’t exactly like he could get any privacy, or mutter about Justice behind the spirit’s back.

Like always, Tobias found himself shying away from the practicalities of the thoughts. He was afraid that, when it came down to it, he didn’t _want_ to know, if wanting to know was too much like staring into a hopeless darkness. He didn’t want to believe there was no way out.

Silence had fallen between them again, and that was never a good thing, however comfortable and natural it felt. It was a deceitful sensation, he supposed, because there was no clear, familiar honesty here to base that kind of comfort on, and pretending that there was—pretending they understood each other, or that anything about this was fine—was a foolish, naïve thing to do.

Tobias cleared his throat, one hand rising to scratch awkwardly at the back of his head. “Look… about all that, though…. Did I…? In the Fade? When the demon—” He broke off, an exasperated sigh drowning the words. “I just mean, if I said anything, or if—"

“I don’t remember,” Anders said softly.

He turned his head, looking at the copper pots and their round, shiny bellies, buffed to a dull shine by dint of so much scrubbing and elbow grease… just like the lies that lay between the two of them, Tobias thought, and all the effort _they_ depended upon.

_Oh, Maker. I did, didn’t I? Oh, shit._

“Well, um—” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “I suppose that’s all right, then, isn’t it? I mean, they get into your head and— and….”

“Yes. It’s all right. Please,” Anders added, his tone purposefully mild, “don’t worry. Let’s just—”
Forget about it? Pretend it didn’t happen? Maker’s breath, you’re a piece of work….

“—let’s just leave the Fade where it is, shall we?”

He turned abruptly, and set to straightening up the disorder of the most recently used pallets. Tobias followed meekly, searching out whatever scraps of something useful he could be doing. Further down the rows, the old man was coughing again, and Neryn was still sweeping, working up the room with his broom; scrubbing now, and dislodging Maker knew what from between the boards.

“All the same,” he said thoughtfully, glancing at Anders, “you were the only one who didn’t turn.”

A small, lop-sided smile tugged at the healer’s mouth. “Well, nothing like being possessed to keep you on the straight and narrow, right?”

Tobias smiled mirthlessly. He didn’t like hearing Anders talk that way, but he knew better than to complain. Still, it wasn’t just that, he felt sure… or maybe it was. Maybe he was a fool, trying to read meaning into every tiny crease and wrinkle in the things between them.

He flinched then, surprised by the sudden warmth of Anders’ hand on his bare arm as he reached across the narrow breadth of the pallet. It was just a brief touch—a gentle, comforting squeeze—but it made goosebumps rise on Tobias’ flesh, and sent the pulse thudding in his throat.

“You should go and talk to them both,” Anders said, meeting his eyes steadily. “Especially Aveline. I mean, Merrill was hardly a surprise, although I do hope it taught her something about demons, but… Aveline won’t understand how it happened. I expect she could do with you telling her it’s all right.”

Tobias gazed blankly at him, just drinking in the tiny details of his face: the dark smudges of fatigue beneath his eyes, the thin crows’ feet forming at their corners… the little gold-and-brown filaments of beard growth on his cheeks. He found himself noticing the strangest things. There was, for example, an infinitesimal dent right at the very tip of Anders’ nose. It only appeared visible close up and, from a distance, apparently served to make the nose itself look more defined… an element of that haughty, chiselled angularity of his, Tobias supposed. He noticed it, though, and noticed the squareness of his chin, and the uncommon width of his mouth, and virtually anything else that didn’t involve the guarded, complex warmth in his eyes.

There was affection there—plain as day, bright as starlight—but it was chained up, choked back, and Tobias wanted, all at once, to bury himself in the healer’s arms, and to run so far away from him they’d never see each other again. He could still feel Anders’ touch on his skin, as if his fingers had burned into the flesh.

“You’re right,” he said dully. “Thanks.”

Anders shrugged. “Hey. You did a good thing. And you’re a good man, Hawke. A brave man.”

Tobias shook his head. “No. I’m just frightened of failure. Thank you, though. I mean that. For… all of it.”

They looked at each other for a moment longer, and his fingers flexed against the air, as if he might have reached for Anders’ hand or arm—until he thought better of it, smiled weakly, and turned to go.

Anders didn’t stop him, though, however slowly he walked on the way to the door.

He wouldn’t have done anyway, Tobias supposed. Maybe he never would. Maybe all they would ever do was keep skirting around each other, avoiding every intimacy like it was some kind of
weakness; eternally coming to the brink of something, and always pulling back.

He hated it… hated Anders, almost.

Almost, but not quite.

The walk to the alienage was enough to let the mental recriminations and spite work themselves out, and the repetitive thud of boots on dirt-packed streets brought Tobias as much solace as it ever had.

Lowtown smelled of salt and tar, like usual, but there was a coldness in the air. The year was definitely turning, and it would be harder to find work, harder to buy food… harder to do everything. That weary restlessness rolled again within him. Tobias hated Kirkwall winters. He supposed they would have been worse if the weather got as bitterly cold as it used to in Ferelden, but there was something unremittingly bleak about the cool, damp drizzle and the grim way the city just seemed to squat there, waiting for the spring.

Too much waiting. Everything is always waiting, like we’ve been holding our breath for the past three years. Are we ever going to breathe again?

Merrill wasn’t hard to find. She was shut up in the little hovel she was so damnably proud of, and Tobias tried to avoid the looks he got from the alienage elves as he slipped through the dirty, foul-smelling streets of the district, making his way to her front door.

Oh, a few of them mistook him for a client—Maker knew there were more than enough whores here to put the Rose out of business—but several recognised his face. There were plenty of thieves, pickpockets, petty thugs and smugglers, too. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered within the alienage walls, where he was just another human to be scowled at and avoided. They scattered from his path like ants, all huge eyes and pinched, dirty faces, with the same hard, blank look on them as people wore in the Old Town slums.

He could see the light of a candle seeping through the ill-fitting shutters, and he rapped quietly on the peeling wood of her door. It opened after barely a few moments… as if she’d already known he was coming.

“Hawke.”

Merrill stepped back meekly from the threshold, dropping her gaze as she motioned him inside. She looked awful: red-eyed and lank-haired, her skin pale and papery. Tobias ducked his head and followed her into the shack, wincing a little at the smell of mould and damp. It was worse than Gamlen’s place, though Merrill had a lot more books. They spilled out of the few wooden shelves she had, and covered every available surface. Some were even drying in front of the pitiful little grate she had—evidently she’d been treating them for mould or paper mites or something, for a little pot of liquid and a brush sat on the table, while four volumes had their pages spread out in the meagre warmth the fire afforded.

Tobias tried not to think about what might be in them. Knowing Merrill, they could just as easily have been fairytales, or distinctly nasty texts on Tevinter blood rites.

She stood in front of him, her hands clasped and her head bowed, and she didn’t meet his eye when she gestured vaguely around the room and told him to make himself comfortable.

Tobias sighed. He’d been hoping he’d stay angry enough to yell at her. He’d been angry, in the Fade. Damn it, he’d been angry when he woke, and angry with her all the day after, and… and then he’d been distracted by the things that had to be done if Feynriel was actually to be saved, instead of
just being given a reprieve from his powers and somehow, on reflection, Merrill’s wanting to save her whole clan—her people—hadn’t seemed like the worst thing in the world to be tempted by.

And now, she looked so bloody miserable and so utterly, completely crushed that it hurt him just to see it. He shook his head.

“Look, Merrill—”

“You have my apologies,” she murmured, staring steadfastly at the floor with those great, leaf-green eyes. “It’s… easy to forget that one cannot bind demons with words.”

“Merrill, it really—”

She looked up at him, her face filled with grief and regret and disbelief, and the words started to spill out, the apologies piling on apology in a tumultuous babble.

“It’s just I… I can’t believe I turned on you. Ma serennas. I mean, I-I’ll understand if you can’t forgive me, but… It was a shock, you know? I didn’t think it could possibly happen like that. I’ve been so careful in all my dealings with spirits until now. To make such an obvious mistake… I’m so sorry!”

He couldn’t help it. A grin slid slowly across his face, and she looked affronted and confused.

“You’re… why are you smiling?”

Tobias shook his head. It was just so much better to hear her prattling than it was to see still, serious, reserved Merrill, with her stiff gestures of apology and serious, heartfelt words.

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “Honestly. I forgive you.”

“You do?” She looked genuinely perplexed. “But—”

Tobias shrugged. “I know the power demons have… what it’s like to w— to want something that much. For what it’s worth, it got you with the promise of saving your people. There are worse things to give into, aren’t there?”

Merrill’s wide, clear face crumpled into a frown, and she hugged her thin arms around her middle, digging her fingers into the thick tunic she wore.

“Maybe, but… well, it was pride, wasn’t it? Wanting to be their saviour because I— because of everything that happened before I left. That’s not exactly selfless.”

“It’s redemption,” Tobias said carefully, thinking of Aveline and the handsome face of Wesley, offering her an impossible, better life, far off in some perfect version of fate. “Everyone wants that.”

Merrill exhaled deeply, and seemed to visibly deflate, her shoulders growing hunched and rounded. She bit her lip thoughtfully and frowned.

“Would you like some tea?”

Tobias didn’t really want to say yes—especially given the fact that what passed for tea in the alienage was usually the leaf of some peculiar straggly herb, and tasted like blackberries washed in mud—but she clearly needed it, so he agreed.

They ended up drinking small, scalding cups of the stuff while sitting together on the blanket-strewn divan that served as Merrill’s bed and, apparently, impromptu study area. There were more books,
more papers… and some of them were indeed written in what looked like Tevene. Tobias didn’t try
to decipher it, and steadfastly ignored the temptation to ask her, or to say anything about Feynriel’s
new life.

“It frightens me, though,” she said, her voice a small, shallow whisper. “It takes so little for a mage to
fall, doesn’t it?”

Tobias leaned back against the rough plaster, with its musty, homely smell, and swigged the vile tea.

“What made you give in?”

Merrill sighed deeply and shook her head. She had her knees tucked under her chin, her arms linked
around them, and her half-empty cup dangled from one thin hand, the dregs of the liquid sloshing as
she shrugged.

“It felt like… like every word the demon spoke reached out and pulled at my heart,” she said,
frowning. The fingers of her free hand touched her chest, resting lightly against the deep russets and
green of her Dalish clothes—because she still looked like one of them, even if the clan had all but
cast her out. That troubled Tobias, though he didn’t want to admit it. “Do you know what I mean?”

He nodded stiffly. “Mm-hm.”

“That’s it,” she agreed, taking a speculative sip of her tea. “It reaches right inside you. Makes you
think things. Makes you see them. I didn’t want to believe it, but I just… had to.”

Tobias suppressed a shiver, and tried to stop the memories of that night crowding back in his head.
The further away he got from the Fade, the more the dreams grew blurred at the edges, and the
harder it was to separate the fantasy of that little cottage from the image of Justice wearing Anders’
body like an old coat.

Merrill leaned across him to put her now empty cup on the small table beside the bed, its uneven leg
wedged up with a small chock of wood that looked like it had fallen off one of the shutters. As she
did so, he smelled the delicate, green, woody fragrance that she had about her—like soap and some
hint of the forest that even Kirkwall’s grime couldn’t fully erase—and the sleeve of her tunic pulled
back just enough for him to see the thin, pale brown lines of scars on her arm.

He held his breath, and tried not to think about it.

“Did you have the same trouble?” she asked as she settled back down. “Aveline didn’t say much, but
I got the impression—”

“Mm.” Tobias nodded curtly, not really willing to discuss it. “Yes, there were… well, there were
plenty more of the bastards.”

“You got through it, though,” Merrill observed, with a trace of something that sounded a lot like
envy. “You didn’t—”

“There are some things that can’t be real. Aren’t there?” Tobias drained the last of his tea, and stared
fixedly at the flaking plaster and cracked wooden supports of the far wall. “That’s how you know,
right? How you protect yourself from demons. We all learn that.”

There was a beat of silence. He knew Merrill was looking at him in quiet consideration; he could feel
her gaze on him, her chin propped on her knees, her wide eyes slowly picking him apart and
evaluating every piece of him. She never had been half as naïve as people thought she was, had she?
He’d known that since the first time he saw her use blood magic… and he remembered it still: the
dark, bitter swirls of power, coursing and whipping around him.

He owed his life to it.

“The Keeper taught me that, in the Fade, you must believe nothing but yourself,” Merrill said slowly, balancing every word. “Everything there is a lie, or a trick, or a trap. You are the only real thing.”

Tobias snorted softly. “Everything’s an illusion. Even what you think you want.”

She shrugged. “You can’t trust the things they show you. I knew that. I knew not to trust... I don’t know why I did.”

*Because there are some things you’d give up anything for, even when you know it’s a terrible idea. It could mean burning the whole world to ashes, but you still wouldn’t say no... couldn’t say no. Not in that single moment, if it was offered, because it’s like it’s not a choice at all.*

He swallowed heavily, the muddy taste of the tea thick on his tongue, and said nothing. There was nothing to say... nothing he wanted to say to her, anyway.

In the corner of the room, beneath its sheet of oiled canvas, the elven mirror Merrill was working on repairing glimmered faintly in the dim dustiness. The thing had made Tobias uneasy from the first moment he saw it, and Merrill wasn’t keen on talking about it, except to say it was an artefact that Marethari had given her. It was about five feet high, like one of those ornate cheval glasses they sometimes had in the market in Hightown. Orlesian imports, with curlies and brasswork all over them... only the glimpses he’d caught of this looked much older, and much less shiny.

Tobias turned his attention away from it, and wished he could shake the feeling that the thing was watching him.

“Well,” he said, in a vague attempt at dry levity, “as long as you’re worried about it. I mean, that proves you’re still sane, right?”

Merrill frowned. “What?”

“The demon thing. You know it’s crazy to trust them, and you shouldn’t, and yet you do it anyway. As long as you know how daft that sounds—”

Merrill elbowed him in the ribs reproachfully. “Hawke! It’s not the same. Well... not quite. Anyway, all magic is dangerous. It always attracts... attention. You said it yourself: all mages know that, and we all have to learn to defend ourselves.”

“Yes, but... oh, never mind.”

*We don’t all have to end up slicing our wrists every time we want to cast a spell. There’s a difference between power and possession.*

He didn’t say it, didn’t go off into the tirade that he knew Anders would have done. There was no need. The elf was a stubborn bitch at the best of times, and if she wouldn’t listen to Anders, Tobias strongly doubted she’d listen to him. Besides, he’d never been comfortable dishing out edicts on how other people should live their lives, or taking up the mantel of determining what was right and wrong... however uncomfortable her magic made him feel.

Merrill sighed deeply. “I disappointed you, didn’t I? I disappointed myself. I should have known better, and I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I’ll make sure of that.”
Tobias marshalled a small smile, and patted her arm.

Maybe she was right. Maybe it wouldn’t.

Maybe believing in yourself was enough for some people.
There was a commotion going on at the Keep. Apparently, some minor lord—a weedy, pale-faced creature with ruched knee-length pants and very little chin—had been kept waiting to see the viscount longer than he felt was acceptable, and the sound of his displeasure carried through the main reception hall like the quacking of an injured duck.

Tobias recognised one of Seneschal Bran’s clerical minions trying to calm the man, while several of the other well-heeled plaintiffs and appointees muttered in disapproving consternation. A couple of the guardsmen on duty stood by the doors, looking bored, and as if they rather hoped they’d get a chance to throw the irritating sod out on his ear.

Tobias smirked as he hugged the outer edge of the chamber, slipping past the opulent tapestries and well-polished wood, leaving the drama to attract the attention and quietly making his way down the corridor towards the barracks chambers.

It was surprisingly easy to get into the insula of the guardroom. Admittedly, Aveline had been keeping a tighter ship than her predecessor, and a number of the small storerooms, side-chambers and other quiet, dark corners that had previously housed ‘liberated’ contraband, dice tables, or any of the other myriad sidelines guardsmen had enjoyed under Captain Jeven’s rule had been cleared out. That meant there were fewer people hanging around in the rabbit warren beneath the keep—more boots on cobbles, as Aveline said, as if Kirkwall’s simmering tensions could really be quelled by the presence of a few patrols—and thus fewer people to notice an interloper… right up until Tobias got nearer to the wardroom, anyway.

“Oi, what you doin’ down here?”

Tobias halted on the last step of the staircase that led down to the open area from which the mess, bunkrooms, and wardroom itself led off, his shoulders tensing involuntarily at the sound of the loud, gravelly voice.

Under Jeven, the City Guard had been frequently corrupt and occasionally sadistic, though there had been enough honest men and women to make Aveline’s reforms possible. Nevertheless, his involvement with Athenril’s operation had seen Tobias fall foul of the flatfoots far too often, and he’d spent many a busy night pelting down darkened streets and alleyways with the thud of studded boots in hot pursuit. The man who now darkened the doorway beside which the duty roster was pinned up—a great big bear of a fellow, with his armour half-fastened, a stained rag in one hand and a very serviceable shortsword in the other—was a stranger, but his type was horribly familiar.

And yet you’re not that petty little thief anymore, are you? No more dark nights, no more oilskin packages stashed under barrels on the dockfront. No more scufflehunting and cold, uncomfortable meets at low tide.

You’re an independently wealthy man of means. The viscount knows your name, and you are a personal friend of the Guard Captain… however inconvenient that is for her.

The thought made him smile, and he straightened his shoulders, meeting the man’s eye with a cocky grin.

“Me? I’m here to see the Captain. In her office, is she?”

Tobias gestured to the heavy, iron-bound door that led off the far corner of the insula, and readied to
take a step towards it. Of course, the guardsman moved at precisely the same moment. Over his
shoulder, the sounds of voices and the quiet bustle of movement bubbled from the break room, and
the man’s broad face creased into a frown, the sword lifting almost imperceptibly.

“Just a minute. The Captain’s not to be disturbed. We don’t just let anyone walk around down here,
you know.”

Tobias glanced over his shoulder at the empty corridor, and the rank of neat, well-polished, tightly
locked doors.

“No,” he said. “Evidently.”

That earned him a proper scowl, but he couldn’t wipe the grin off his face.

*No… no more dank little dockside deals. And you miss them, don’t you?*

*Never knew there was so much to be said for running full tilt across a rooftop in the dark, waiting to
see whether you’re going to get a blade through the ribs and a mouthful of broken teeth.*

“Name?” the increasingly terse guardsman grunted.

Tobias’ smile widened ever further. “Hawke,” he said, watching the flicker of recognition in the
man’s expression, and the way his sword suddenly wavered to half-mast.

“Oh.”

Tobias gestured to the door again, and raised his brows enquiringly. “So, she’s in, is she?”

*Amazing what one little word can do, isn’t it? Amazing who knows your name.*

*And… it’s amazing how it doesn’t even feel like it’s anything to do with you, isn’t it?*

The guardsman nodded hesitantly, then lurched towards the door as Tobias began to cross the floor.
His boots clicked gently against the tiles—an old Tevinter mosaic, by the looks of it, with the
serpents of some forgotten magister or noble family’s crest picked out in dusty shades of long-worn
grey and green—and the guardsman practically flung himself in Tobias’ path.

“I’ll, er… I’ll just give her a knock,” he said apologetically, hauling himself into some semblance of
attention as he strode past and rapped smartly on the outer door of the Guard Captain’s office.

Tobias fought to contain the urge to snort with laughter, reminded of nothing so much as an
overgrown puppy eager to protect its master. He wondered whether Aveline knew she inspired this
kind of loyalty in her men… or what in the Maker’s name they thought she needed protecting from.

*Surely not little old me. Surely?*

He pondered the idea as the guardsman announced his presence and, judging from the pained look
the man developed at his captain’s muffle response, Tobias supposed he was clear for entrance. He
smiled brightly, denying the temptation to say something caustic about devotion to duty, and allowed
himself to be ushered in by the zealous guardsman, ducking under one heavy arm as the man held
the door open for him. He glared at Tobias through narrowed eyes, and the smell of leather polish
and starched shirts seemed to rise off him like a gritty haze.

“Serah Hawke, Captain!” the guardsman boomed abruptly, just as Tobias stepped into the room.

The parade-ground crispness of the words cut into Tobias’ nape, and he flinched before he could
stop himself, silently cursing the bastard for it.

The room wasn’t large—at least, not large in the way the clerks and notaries’ offices upstairs were—but the big, ornately carved desk and chair at its centre, and the rows of bookcases and shelves flanking the walls served to make it look smaller. The tiny, high windows didn’t help, allowing only a few chinks of grubby daylight to filter down onto the stacks of papers and the rows of immense, cloth-bound books and ledgers.

The whole room stank of dust and parchment, with undertones of leather and metal polish, old socks, and pipe tobacco… which struck Tobias as odd, because Aveline didn’t smoke it. Such was the strange bouquet of power, he supposed, for much of Kirkwall was run from this overstacked room.

Things were so crowded that, at first, it might have been easy to miss the tall figure in gleamingly well-polished armour and dark russet cloth that stood at the far side of the office, near one of the towering shelves. She had her back to them, and she didn’t speak.

The guardsman ripped off a salute, but she barely seemed to notice him.

“Very good, Corporal.” Aveline muttered, not bothering to turn around, and simply lifting a gloved hand in acknowledgement.

Tobias frowned. Something didn’t feel right. Perhaps, for all the fun he’d been privately making, the Guard Captain’s lapdogs had good reason to be protective of her.

“Ser…,” the guardsman began.

Aveline straightened up as if a string drew her spine, and at once she started to look more familiar to Tobias. Her broad-shouldered frame was leant as equal weight by the armour she wore as by that painfully sharp military bearing of hers and, as she turned to dismiss the man, her face was a taut skin of stern authority.

“Thank you, Corporal.”

“Yes, ser,” the man said meekly, heels snapping to attention before he retreated back to the insula, closing the heavy door behind him.

The thick wood moved silently on its hinges, yielding only a quiet click as the latch snicked into place and, at that sound, Aveline let out a long sigh.

She seemed to sag on her feet, and her shoulders appeared hunched beneath her broadly padded leather and plate armour, though the russet cloak she wore still hung in long, perfectly neat folds down her back. It occurred to Tobias that he’d barely ever seen a hair out of place on the woman since they’d come to Kirkwall… as if she waged as stern a war on dirt and grime as she did disorder. And yet, now, she looked pale and haggard. Dark smudges were worn in beneath her eyes, and every freckle lightly scattered across her cheeks seemed to stand out darkly against skin that looked papery and dry.

He hadn’t come expecting to be angry with her, he realised. That had all pretty much dissipated after he’d spoken with Merrill… and Anders. The healer’s words tugged at Tobias—that Aveline, of all people, wouldn’t understand what had happened in the Fade—and he found himself feeling unexpectedly sorry for her.

“Aveline,” he said, by way of clumsy greeting.

She bowed her head, not quite meeting his eye. “Hawke. I thought you might come. I… I hoped you
would. I wanted to say I, well, I apologise for leaving the camp like that.” She bit her lower lip, rubbing one gloved hand across the elbow pad of her other arm as she shook her head. “I should have at least had the courage to stay and say I was sorry for… you know.”

“Trying to kill me in the Fade?” Tobias supplemented, knowing even as the words left his lips that his intended brittle sarcasm would come out twisted and unpleasant.

It did, and they both winced. He shrugged and cleared his throat, wishing he hadn’t made himself sound like such a prick.

“Well, uh… y’know. It’s all right. That’s what demons do. I… I thought I should come by, just so —”

“Thank you,” she said, a little too brusquely.

She looked away, frowning at the dark, wide boards of the floor. No Tevinter mosaic in here, Tobias noticed. Or, if there was, it had been deemed sufficiently inappropriate to be covered up years ago. There were plenty of places in the city where the old rulers’ marks had been hacked away: friezes and reliefs of slaves or blood rites replaced with innocuous vines or flowers, and statues of magisters with their noses and faces chiselled off, still waiting some officially sanctioned replacement to be carved. It was a wonder, when he thought about it, that the great bronze monoliths in The Gallows—the statues of collared and despairing slaves—hadn’t been torn up and melted down, but he supposed it would be sacrilege.

Whatever else it was, Kirkwall was not a city foolish enough to pretend its origins had never happened.

“Look, Aveline… are you all right? You don’t look quite… um… yourself,” Tobias hazarded cautiously.

He was wary of saying anything. Being nice to Aveline was, frankly, a bit of a tar pit. He remembered giving her a gift, a year or so ago: a shield he’d found (well, all right, looted from a bandit camp on the coast path, not that it made any difference), which was embossed with the face of a lion, and some Orlesian motto that, according to Varric, recalled the story of Ser Aveline, the famous chevalier. He’d thought she’d like it or, at the very least, be pleased he’d thought about her.

All it got him was a mouthful of sternly worded reproach and the drawn-out story of how she’d resented all her father’s plans for her… didn’t like the name, never wanted to be a soldier, hated anyone referring to the whole chevalier legend. It was a colossal mistake, and one Tobias had been careful not to repeat.

Aveline looked suspiciously at him, her eyes narrowed. They seemed sunken, deeper set in her face than usual, as if she was physically shrinking back from the world. She certainly didn’t look like she’d slept since the Fade.

“It’s just a bit cold,” she muttered, glancing at the small woodburning stove in the corner of the office.

No fancy fireplace this close to all the paperwork, Tobias supposed. And what a terrible shame it’d be if all these records of crimes and punishments went up in smoke….

Aveline’s sandy brows knitted as she stared at the stove’s black belly, presumably greased and polished by one of the barracks’ elven lackeys that morning. Tobias wondered idly if she’d put as much effort into cleaning out the ranks of the servants as she had the guards themselves. He hadn’t
 realised it before knowing Merrill, with her alienage connections (however tenuous they were), but elves really did get into everything… and no one ever stopped to give them a second thought.

“Is it cold in here?”

She blinked, and looked uncertainly at Tobias. As usual, his arms were bare but for his bracers, and he shrugged apologetically at her. She must, he thought, have been wearing at least three layers of shirt and padding beneath her breastplate… and winter wasn’t quite upon them yet.

“I’m having trouble staying warm,” Aveline admitted, dropping her gaze to the floor, her voice growing uncharacteristically small and hesitant. “Ever since the Fade, and that… thing… inside Feynriel.”

Tobias folded his arms across his chest. So, here was the crux of it.

He could, he supposed, have told her to keep her chin up and not think about it, and maybe drop by the house to see Leandra. He was tempted to, in all honesty… and yet he had the worrying feeling that Aveline wanted to talk to him. A mage’s perspective, he guessed, allowing himself a small moment of pride in that. Just for once, he knew something she didn’t.

He raised an eyebrow. “Any ill effects, then?”

Aveline shook her head, as if she was trying to dislodge an uncomfortable thought. She moved slowly to the desk—Jeven’s desk; one of the few things she hadn’t gotten rid of, and Tobias wasn’t sure why that was. A series of intricate knotwork designs roped the edge of the thing, curling down around its legs, which ended in cat-like paws. It looked Orlesian, in his opinion: frilly and fancy, far beyond anything practicality demanded, despite the heavy, dark wood. Maybe it had been a gift to the old captain, or maybe it had been imported, the way so many of Kirkwall’s noble families hoarded foreign curiosities… like Antivan walnut dining chairs, Tobias thought ruefully. He suppressed a shudder.

“I don’t know,” Aveline said quietly, trailing her gloved fingers along the edge of the desk, skirting past the piles of papers and documents that rested on the dark wood. “It keeps drifting back. I can feel the… the ‘want’ of it.”

Very little sound came through the thick door, but Tobias could make out the shuffling of footsteps on the tiled floor: the movements of guardsmen going out on and returning from patrols, people checking the duty rosters, and maybe the soft murmurs of voices. He hoped they weren’t gossiping about her. That would have been the last thing she needed.

He sniffed philosophically. “Well, it was strong. Had to be, to turn you, didn’t it?”

He meant it as a kindness, but she just grimaced.

“Strong’s not the word.” Aveline shook her head again, her face still screwed up in distaste. “I can deal with strong. It wasn’t…. I mean, it took a memory I was at peace with and it just…. well, you know what it did, don’t you? You were there, and I saw what it did to you.”

Tobias blinked rapidly. He hadn’t really wanted to think about that. He flexed one shoulder dismissively. “Oh. That. Yes, well, it wasn’t—”

“No. I saw. I… I was there, and I felt it. Yet you resisted, didn’t you, Hawke?”

He winced reflexively. Tobias wasn’t sure how much of his own temptation had been visible to the others. He remembered the vision, yes—in painful, aching clarity—but he’d thought it had been like...
Merrill’s: just words, just things the demon did to his mind, and safely located in his mind. It was the way it happened for mages… wasn’t it?

“It was only words,” he said doubtfully. “I mean, yes, it… it was…. Uh. Did I say something, then? I mean, it was like with Merrill, wasn’t it? You didn’t actually see—”

Aveline shook her head, but her gaze lingered on him, sad and oddly focused, like there was something new about him she hadn’t seen before. She looked… sorry for him, he realised, and he hated that. It would have been easier to take anything than it was to accept her pity.

“Well, it was saying things,” she said carefully. “You know. Asking what you wanted, trying to tempt you. All those things about gold, and… well, you remember, right?” She arched her eyebrows, obviously not eager to repeat the demon’s words precisely.

Tobias recalled them all too clearly. The words, and the things it had dangled in front of him.

*Supple, smooth leather against your skin, the warm burn of liquid amber on your tongue, and a pair of strong hands against your flesh.*

Not just any hands, though. *His* hands. *His* touch, *his* kiss… and it had all seemed so horribly real. Wonderfully, maddeningly, agonisingly real.

Right now, the dark heaviness of the Guard Captain’s office seemed to make the room feel smaller than ever, and the smell of paper and dust seemed stronger, and Tobias really just wanted to be anywhere else.

Anywhere at all.

Aveline folded her arms across her breastplate, seeming awkward and uncomfortable as she avoided looking at him. “We didn’t see any visions, not like…. I mean, you just stood there. It said something to you, and it got closer and closer… whispering. I thought you’d strike it, but you didn’t.”

*And you think I should have done? Or that you should have?*

If she had an opinion, Aveline didn’t voice it. She just recounted what she’d seen in a quiet, even tone, as if she was trying to rationalise it, even now. Tobias wondered at that. It was like trying to read words in the stars; why would she even still be making the attempt?

Somewhere out beyond the office’s door, a couple of guardsmen were talking and laughing, their voices muffled and the words inaudible, just echoes against the barracks’ thick walls. She didn’t look up, didn’t give any indication of having heard them.

“You went all still,” she said thoughtfully, “like Merrill did, and I knew you were seeing something the rest of us weren’t, and then….”

Tobias wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He didn’t want to ask, and the word came out small and choked. “Then?”

“It was the way you said his name,” Aveline admitted, not quite meeting his eye. “Just one word, but… well, it was enough.”

He said nothing, and fought against the sensation of heat rising to prickle at his neck and jaw. She lifted her gaze to the coat of arms that hung on the far wall—Dumar’s badge, Tobias thought, as he’d seen it in the rooms the Seneschal and his notaries used—and frowned at it.
“So, I... I know you understand how I... felt, when I saw— well, when it did... whatever it did.”
Aveline cleared her throat awkwardly, her gaze faltering back to the floor as her frown deepened thoughtfully. “You know what it’s like to have someone you love used against you.”

Tobias opened his mouth to argue, but found his throat dry and his tongue rough against the inside of his lips. There were no words of protest, because they’d only have been lies.

And now, here he was, naked as a newborn babe, and bare as a fool.

“I....”

“That’s what it did,” she said coolly, suddenly fixing him with that no-nonsense, level-eyed stare of hers. “Wasn’t it?”

Tobias withered under her tired, shadow-laden gaze. She looked exhausted, and confused, and he knew there wasn’t really much point in saying anything.

And there is a small, comfortable cottage, in a quiet little place where there are no wars, no templars... no darkspawn or Wardens or refugees clamouring for attention. There is just them, and there is him, and he kisses Tobias softly, because they have all the time they could possibly want. There is the heat of his lips, and the coolness of the pillow, and the smell of his skin... and the look in his eyes when he smiles.

There is all of this, and the yearning reaches out from his heart with tendrils as thick as vines, until it aches in his chest and his arms and his fingertips, until he is choked and dizzy with how much he really does want it, and just realizing that is terrifying.

Tobias swallowed heavily and frowned at the floor.

“Mm,” he murmured, as non-committally as he could.

Aveline sighed, but he didn’t look up. He heard the gentle creak of leather and the clink of her mail and fitments as she moved around the desk, her arms hugged tightly across her middle, and propped her hip against one ornately carved edge.

“You know, I thought I was at peace with what happened. I really did. I mean,” she added, glancing up briefly, her eyes shaded with a quiet, stern kind of regret, “I miss Wesley. Of course I do. And... and I wish things had been different. I wish that—”

Aveline broke off, and the words she hadn’t said hung far heavier in the stilted, thick air of the office than anything she had chosen to say.

Tobias shifted uncomfortably, unwilling to admit how bad she’d already managed to make him feel, without raising the spectre of her husband’s death. It was too easy to remember that moment, kneeling in the blood-stained dirt, with his throat full of the smell of decay, watching the film of sweat on the templar’s pallid skin as he begged for death.

No one should have had to die like that, but it had been better than leaving him there; better than letting the darkspawn tear him apart, or allowing their corruption to bleed through him until he turned into Maker only knew what.

Even so, Aveline didn’t think that way. She hadn’t then, and she didn’t now... not deep down. He knew that. He didn’t expect her forgiveness, though he’d expected her to be enough of a soldier to understand that he’d done her a favour—and it was better him, wasn’t it? Better that he’d put the knife in Wesley’s heart, rather than make her do it. Nobody should have to do that for someone they
loved… and, unbidden, the memory of the night at the chantry came flooding back behind Tobias’
eyes.

He should have seen then, he supposed, that Anders had loved Karl. The way he cradled him as he
died, the shock and anger in his tears… but he hadn’t been thinking clearly; blood pounding from the
templar ambush, the shock of Karl’s complicity in it—that they could use a Tranquil like that, and
that the man had truly seemed to believe it was somehow for the best—and, really, it was just the
way it had been when Wesley died. A rush of chaos and quick, clumsy decisions… had he even
truly thought about it?

Several times, Tobias had told himself there was no other option. Not with Karl, not with Wesley.
There hadn’t been, but it still felt like an easy answer, an amelioration of what they’d had to do. All
the finer points of the memories were lost, anyway; Karl’s death was shrouded in the blood and
confusion, and Wesley’s in the horror of the flight from Ferelden, and the rawness of Bethany’s
death and Leandra’s screams.

Nothing’s ever fucking simple.

It must have felt that way for Aveline too, he supposed. She and Wesley had been fighting since
Ostagar, and the things they’d seen there didn’t bear thinking about, either. Still, that one loss must
have overshadowed everything, the way Bethany’s death had for him; the one dark wave that came
back in the night, over and over for the best part of a year, until the Deep Roads, when fresh
nightmares came to push out the old.

He’d wondered, briefly, why the demons of Feynriel’s dreams hadn’t shown him Bethany. He
struggled to really imagine what it had been like for Aveline—to see Wesley as he had been, as he
should have been—and yet to know that he was dead.

Such was the essence of a lost loved one, he supposed; to take the maybe and the might-have-been,
and hold it close against the fire of all knowledge and clear fact, because those things didn’t matter…
ot next to the memory of what had been. That was how the demons got you, wasn’t it?

He felt guilty, in a way, he supposed. His dream—the beautiful, perfect serenity of a life he could
never have—had been nothing to do with his family. Nothing to do with Bethany, or Carv, or
Leandra’s happiness. It was selfish and, next to Aveline, whose single desire had been redemption
for that one thing she believed she’d failed in—not the pain of a lost love, but the shame of a death
she hadn’t prevented—he felt grubby and profane.

A difficult, weighty silence had settled between them, and Tobias ventured a look at her. A wisp of
red hair had escaped from her ponytail, and it hung over the band she wore around her forehead,
reaching almost to the middle of one pale cheek.

It was hard for him to feel sorry for Aveline. She made everything difficult, and she’d so resented the
ways he’d tried to be kind. She’d always been there, ever since the day the world had crumbled
around him, always ready with some disapproving comment or stern scowl… always griping about
the work he did, or the people he met with, the places he frequented.

Almost like a spare version of Mother, really.

He cleared his throat. “Look… if it makes you feel any better, I don’t think there could be a better
reason for reacting like you did. I mean, if you’re going to give in over anything, let anything turn
you… better it’s something good, right?”

Aveline raised her head. She didn’t look happy.
“Good?”

“You know what I mean. It got to you because of good things. Because of… love,” Tobias said awkwardly, uncomfortable with both the word and the sentiment. “Redemption. That’s a purer motive than power, right? Maker, even Merrill gave in because she wants to save her people. You can’t blame someone for that.”

Aveline looked wearily at him, her face shaded with fatigue and concern. “Perhaps not, but if that’s what mages have to contend with….”

She trailed off, her brow furrowing anew, and her gaze slid back down to the floor. He couldn’t make out whether she didn’t want to look at him, or truly couldn’t.

“What?” Tobias prompted, worried by the unsettled look in her eyes.

Aveline shook her head bitterly. “Well, it makes me less opposed to The Gallows, for one thing.”

Her words fell into a deep, perilous silence, and he blinked, uncertain he’d really just heard them.

“What?” he repeated, his voice husky with the effort of holding back the invective he wanted to spill.

How in the Maker’s name could she say that? Was she blind? No, she wasn’t, was she? She was just stupid and afraid, like every thick-headed peasant and every cruel, small-minded little nothing who blamed mages for all the dark in life. Tobias knew he should have expected it. He did expect it—every day, every week, waiting on the folds of fear and the possibilities of being caught just being alive—but he hadn’t expected it from her.

“Less opposed,” Aveline repeated, eyeing him carefully… almost as if she thought he’d blow up and start flaming fireballs. “I’m not saying—”

She straightened up, no longer leaning against the desk, though her arms stayed crossed defensively over her breastplate, and she moved behind the desk as Tobias strode towards it, the weight hanging uncertainly on her back foot, almost as if she thought he was going to start flinging fireballs. Oh, he wanted to… he wanted to yell and shout, but garrison walls frequently had ears, no matter how thick the stone and the ancient wood. Instead, he drew breath, and his words were low, short strikes against the air.

“You think the answer is locking us up?”

“I didn’t say that. But—”

“You think,” he said, leaning forwards, his palms flat on the warm wood of her desk, the orderly piles of paperwork rustling as he brushed by them, “that I should be locked up?”

Aveline winced, as if that was exactly what she was saying, but she just didn’t want to admit it.

“I-I don’t know,” she murmured, shaking her head. “No. But… but who could resist that? To live with those… those things getting at you all the time. I don’t see how anyone could resist it. Anders didn’t, did he? He even seems quite proud of the fact.”

There was a core of something in her voice that Tobias hated. Something judgemental, and laced with fear and suspicion. It roused a clear, dark anger in him, and he snapped a response without even thinking.

“That’s different.” Tobias frowned, a little annoyed by the way he leapt so immediately to the man’s
defence. He almost bit back on the words, unwilling to let them out, but it was too late. “Anyway, that’s not what we’re talking about.”

“Isn’t it?” Aveline’s eyes were muddied with tiredness and the shades of uncomfortable thoughts. She shrugged, and her guardsman’s plate clinked gently. “Anyway, Merrill aches for some sort of bargain. That’s obvious. And what I felt… what that thing did to my head… No. What happened in the Fade leaves me no choice but to think that either mages are wilful in a way I can’t understand, or… well, just not mortal.” She looked apologetically at him. “I don’t find either thought comforting.”

Tobias pushed away from the desk, anger clouding the back of his throat like smoke. If he said anything else to her, he wasn’t sure it wouldn’t end in shouting. How could she say that? She’d benefited more than most people from his magic… not to mention Flemeth’s deal. Not so quick to condemn mages when they were saving her life, was she?

Aveline sighed. “Look, Hawke—”

He could feel her gaze on him. He gritted his teeth, hoping she wouldn’t try to back her way out of what she’d said.

“Don’t bother, Aveline. You’re entitled to your opinions.”

“That’s not what—”

“Forget it.” Tobias shook his head briskly. “You’re not the only one who thinks that way. And you’re right: mages do have to be strong. But believing every mage is just waiting to fall is like believing every citizen is just waiting to commit a crime.”

He glared at her, and she met his eye sullenly. Tobias grunted an acknowledgement.

“All right, yeah. Fine. Kirkwall might be a bad example. But we’re not the enemy. For Andraste’s sake, even Feynriel managed to get his powers under control, with a bit of help. D’you really think shutting people up is a better alternative to educating them?”

Aveline set her jaw, her eyes narrowed, but said nothing. The breath leaked slowly from Tobias’ lungs, and he knew it was pointless to fight. Not now, not over this… not like this.

At this moment, in this room, there wasn’t a damn thing he could say that would change her mind. And he’d come here to let her know he forgave her for what had happened—wasn’t that a laugh?

Yeah. Bloody hilarious.

He sighed wearily. “Let’s just forget it, shall we? I’ll leave you to it. You’re busy.”

After an awkward moment of silence, Aveline nodded slowly. Her expression eased, as if she was glad to have the excuse to cling onto, and he supposed it was foolish to expect anything else.

“Mm. I… I should get on. Thank you, though, Hawke. For… for what you said. Perhaps,” she added, her voice rising a little in pitch as he moved to the door, “perhaps you could let your mother know I’ll be round later this week? I… I’ve been meaning to call in, and—”

“Sure.”

Tobias nodded without bothering to turn around. He acknowledged her simply with a wave of his hand as he moved to the door; the both of them as far apart as they’d been since the very first.
Chapter 21

He left the Keep in a blind fugue of anger. One of Seneschal Bran’s minions—a thin, pale little clerk clutching a scroll embossed with Viscount Dumar’s seal—scurried out to intercept him, thrusting the papers towards him with a breathless litany of how terribly important they were.

“Bugger off,” Tobias snapped, stalking his way down the corridor.

The clerk kept wittering on. It was something to do with the qunari, and diplomacy, and some delegation or other… building bridges, appeasing the Arishok…. Tobias didn’t care. He hadn’t forgiven the qunari bastards for the poison gas business—or, more precisely, for setting him up to watch him dance through it all. They’d wanted to see how he handled it, what he did, how he coped… like it was all a game, and never mind the people who’d choked to death, or the fact that half of Lowtown could have been blown sky-high.


“Not interested,” Tobias grunted, pushing his way past the clerk and out into the main foyer.

A few of the fat-cheeked, well-heeled patrons and plaintiffs turned to gawp at him, and one of the guards near the doors tightened his stance, but Tobias scowled a path through the lot of them. He wanted to be out of the stultifying opulence of this bloody place, and out of Hightown, and out of sodding everywhere.

He half-contemplated going to the Rose, but the all too recent memory of what he’d caught there put him off, despite the enticing prospect of soft towels, hot baths, and a friendly hand to ease his frustration. It wouldn’t change anything, anyway. No, because nothing ever seemed to change… no matter how hard Tobias tried to convince himself that it did.

Well, maybe that wasn’t strictly true. After all, things would change for Feynriel now, wouldn’t they? That was something. Off to the wilds of Tevinter, and Maker help the poor bastard then.

Tobias shook his head as he walked, dislodging the thoughts and leaving them like streaks of dust along the high, white walls. Everything was full of familiar rhythms; turnings and cross-streets taken without thought, and he realised that he probably knew Kirkwall better than any place he’d ever lived before.

His whole life, the family had moved on with depressing regularity, putting this town or that village behind them as quickly as the whisper of suspicion settled around their door. Malcolm had been careful to the point of paranoia, not that anyone could have blamed him. Lothering was supposed to have been the place they’d call home indefinitely, or so they’d all hoped; small, but not so small they’d have neighbours breathing down their necks, and with enough trade traffic moving through to keep both news and population fresh. The Chantry might have had a presence there, sure, but the local templars had mostly been a fairly even-handed bunch… and it should all have been so perfect. It should have worked, should have lasted. It almost had, hadn’t it?

And now, he moved through this hard-hewn stone of a city like a fish slipping through ripples. He knew the cobbles, and the pavements, and the taverns, and the whores… and he still didn’t feel quite like he belonged.

_What a bloody laugh._
It was ironic, Tobias supposed, and yet he couldn’t help thinking of Anders. All the things he said, especially when he was really giving vent—about how mages had to rise up, how the whole order of things had to be overturned, the world shaken out of its sleep until people truly saw what was wrong with everything—all seemed to make such perfect sense. Tobias found himself believing the words more and more, and not just because it was Anders who said them. Well… not entirely.

He glanced up, still frowning, and found himself at the junction of the old mansion gardens and the back end of the courtyards behind the bazaar. A high, mortared wall curved away to the right, marking the boundary of some noble’s overgrown garden—one of the houses that went unoccupied for most of the year, probably while the family sunned themselves in Antiva or Nevarra—and the smell of rampant honeysuckle and stocks lanced the air. The shapes of buildings crowded against the sky, and Tobias gritted his teeth. He didn’t want to go home. He didn’t want this life.

He turned sharply, hugging the wall as he crossed behind the rambling old houses—and yes, he’d learn these secret little places too, wouldn’t he, once Leandra got her way and got them moved into the estate—and picked his way to the other end of the interwoven courtyards.

Danarius’ old mansion huddled at the edge of the estates, past the mossy, cracked edifices of fountains and broken pavers. Very few finely dressed ladies and gentlemen promenaded in these streets.

Funny, Tobias thought, as he rapped on the peeling wood, and leaned his shoulder against the cool stonework, waiting for Fenris to rescue him from his thoughts. Funny how, when you got close, you could see how weathered the white stone was, and how deep the weeds grew in the cracks between the paving stones. Funny how close Hightown was to the slums, even in a city where the hierarchy of peaks and terraces was so strictly observed—and the piss really did wash downhill in Kirkwall, that much was true—but oh, Maker, on days like this it felt as if the hypocrisy was thick as fog, and he was half-afraid he’d gag on it, that it’d strike him like chokedamp and he would just drop dead in the street, clawing at his own throat as he gargled his last.

Should have gone to the Rose, shouldn’t I? Needed to. Need it. Need something, anyway…. 

He was still lolling against the wall, scowling at the world in general when Fenris cracked the door open.

“Hawke,” he observed, with that familiar blend of mysterious inflections.

“Fenris,” Tobias batted back, though he never could manage to imbue a single word with so many things.

Today, it was ‘why are you here’, with hints of ‘I’m not sure I want to see you’, ‘what do you want’, and ‘you look terrible’… or so Tobias decided. He never had been sure whether he was reading the elf right.

Those pale green eyes narrowed, and a small crinkle appeared briefly at the top of Fenris’ nose. A moment of stiff, full silence followed, and Tobias cleared his throat uneasily.

“So, um…?”

Fenris jerked his head towards the dank interior of the mansion, the hallway illuminated only by the thin threads of daylight bravely making it through the few small cracked and clouded windows.

“You’d best come in.”

He turned and stalked off, not waiting for a response. Of course, he never waited for anybody, so it
was hard to take it personally.

Tobias stepped inside and closed the door behind him, trying to adjust his nose to the mansion’s pervasive smell of damp, rotten cloth and stale air. Although… either it was his imagination, or it didn’t seem as bad as it had done. He took a few surreptitious squints around as he followed Fenris to the centre of his nest—the suite that had probably once been Danarius’ library and withdrawing rooms where, for all Tobias knew, the elf had waited on his master, and been subject to the manifold dark whims at which he’d sometimes hinted.

He suppressed a shiver as his feet echoed on the cool flagstones. There was, to his mind, such a thing as keeping the past too close.

All the same, it looked as if Fenris had been doing a little housekeeping. The air smelled fresher, and there seemed to be slightly less broken furniture and bits of masonry strewn around the mansion’s hallways. The room into which he led Tobias—decked sparsely in old but mostly intact wooden chairs and tables, and a couple of trunks that looked new, standing beneath windows that were, for the first time, fully unshuttered—was much more hospitable than usual.

“This is… nice,” Tobias said carefully, eyeing the old wine stains on the walls, from the elf’s numerous bottle-flinging episodes. “You’ve changed things around.”

Fenris grunted, and flung himself into one of two chairs strewn with cushions that sat across from a low wooden table. Tobias lowered himself into its companion, taking mental inventory of all the things that had changed since the last Diamondback night Fenris had hosted.

“Finally won enough coin off Varric to refurbish, then, did you?”

One dark brow flicked almost imperceptibly, and the elf’s long fingers curled on the carved arms of the chair. He wore simple woollen leggings and a clean, but faintly threadbare shirt: his usual comfortable, indoor clothing, and yet he always seemed to give the impression, even in those informal garments, that he could be armed and armoured in moments. There was an air of readiness that clung to the elf, and Tobias always had found it mildly unsettling. Fenris crossed his left leg over his right knee, and fixed him with an unblinking stare.

“I chose to be more comfortable while I await Danarius’ next move.”

“Oh.”

Not really putting the past behind you, then, I see.

Tobias didn’t like to say so aloud. The weight of Fenris’ gaze felt oppressive, and he struggled not to let his discomfort show. Silence settled in between them, as if they were both determined not to be the first to show the weakness of breaking it.

Really, really just should have gone to the whorehouse. I’d have got a much nicer reception….

“You think he’ll—?”

“He will never stop,” Fenris said darkly. “He wants his property back… whether I am attached to it or not. Preferably the former, I imagine. I would be less entertaining to torture, were I already dead.”

Those pale green eyes narrowed again, and he scowled at the floor violently enough that Tobias was surprised it didn’t melt a hole in the stones.

“Well, it’ll certainly be interesting,” he said dryly. “And I do like a challenge.”
Fenris blinked, his gaze flicking back to Tobias’ face, his expression momentarily one of puzzlement. Tobias smirked. He found it amusing that, even now, Fenris struggled to understand the concept of his protection. Not that, if Danarius was half as powerful or as ruthless as the elf said, it would necessarily do either of them any good, but still… his word was his bond.

“What?” Tobias shrugged, his hands spread in a gesture of innocence. “Didn’t I say, after everything you’ve done to help me out, I’d make sure I had your back when that bastard came sniffing around? I’m distinctly sure I said it. You weren’t drunk, were you?”

Fenris curled his lip, but the surly sneer became a smile. “I suspect you were,” he remarked coolly. “But… thank you. I appreciate it.”

Tobias nodded, satisfied with the admission, and for a moment the two of them fell silent. An open bottle of wine stood on one of the low tables, dust riming its neck and its label yellowed with age. Tobias could almost smell the expense of it from where he sat, and caught himself wondering just how much coin the vintage might fetch. Everything was slow this time of the year. Kirkwall was drawing itself in for winter, and the dwarven merchants who thronged the city weren’t much interested in pricey wines and poncey trinkets but—come next year, come the summer—there’d be nobles from Antiva and Nevarra, and some of them were quiet ardent collectors. They paid silly money for the strangest things. Tobias had occasionally been asked to supply certain… novelties… during his time with Athenril, and old booze had always been a favoured weakness.

The thing was, it was amazing how many sickly children could have been treated, how many mages given safe passage across the mountains, just with one little bottle of wine.

He frowned, wondering where those thoughts came from. He never used to think like that. He’d never thought like that when he sat here with Fenris before, methodically demolishing Danarius’ cellar, and laughing while the heat of the fire bathed his face, and their card games rolled to high stakes and slippery losses.

“Why are you here, Hawke?” Fenris asked, breaking the quiet with measured, flat tones.

“I—”

The elf rubbed his knuckles thoughtfully, slowly, against his palm, watching Tobias with those pale eyes, his mouth still bent into an echo of distaste.

“Do you expect me to pander to your insecurities? Tell you that you did the right thing for the half-blood boy?”

A muscle clenched briefly in Tobias’ jaw. He felt it leap, and looked away from that hard, shimmering gaze. If they’d been playing at cards now, he’d probably have had to go home without his shirt.

“I wanted to say that I appreciate what you did,” he said, staring at the floor, which, if it had not been recently swept, at least did not appear to have accumulated any more layers of dusty grime. “I had no right to ask you to take part in Marethari’s ritual. I had no right to expect you to use your abilities the way you did… but I’m grateful.”

He’d seen Fenris’ lyrium brands glow before: usually in the heat of battle, when he flashed bright white and blue, then quivered and vanished like a ghost, moving faster than any living creature should, and cleaving men down with a blade that looked too heavy for someone as lithe as him to even lift.
If Tobias hadn’t been a mage, he suspected he’d have found it terrifying. Fascinating, maybe, too—but terrifying. As it was, Fenris’ abilities made him dizzy and blind, and filled his head with wet linen and the taste of metal. He wondered, as he sat here now, how hard it would be to wake the lyrium in the elf’s skin. He couldn’t quite stop himself from looking up, his gaze tracing the lines on Fenris’ throat, and maybe he even stretched out a little with his senses, seeing if he could taste the lyrium’s bitter song.

He blinked guiltily, unsure whether Fenris felt it. Did the brands give him a mage’s sensitivity? It seemed unlikely, and Tobias had to admit to a mild curiosity over what it was like to feel the physical presence of lyrium without having it hum in your blood. There was a science to the stuff, as much a mystery—the dwarves’ trade told that—but Fenris and his strange, geometric scars… that was a whole different enigma.

Anyway, Tobias didn’t really want to dwell on the lyrium, intriguing though it was. That way led to memories of the Deep Roads, and the weird shit they’d found down there, and also to more recent recollections of the Dalish camp, and the Keeper’s dim aravel. It was hard to forget Fenris standing behind her, with his body glowing white and a flask of brilliant blue burning in his hands, as the Fade tugged at Tobias’ mind, and the world seeped away around him, and he had fallen into dreams… dreams that had been so painful, and so vivid.

Fenris cleared his throat. “It was your fault,” he observed coolly. “Your fault that Merrill succumbed to the demon. I was surprised it was not still in her when she woke.”

Tobias winced at unbidden visions of a Merrill-abomination rising in fury, with the horrible power of blood magic whipping around her like black vines, but the wince was quickly replaced by a frown. “Pardon?”

Fenris seemed impassive. He shrugged artlessly, his mouth a slight curve of distaste. “You should have killed him. The boy. He was a danger, and he will remain so.”

Well… you don’t mince your words, do you?

Tobias sighed, and rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m not having this argument with you,” he said flatly. “All right? I’m grateful for your help, but it’s done, so don’t—”

Fenris grunted. “Hm. You sought me out, Hawke. Did you think I would praise your actions? I merely hope you will be happy with the monster you create. Do not imagine Tevinter will leave the boy… unmarked.”

Tobias, forehead still propped in his hand, squinted at the brands that snaked down the elf’s throat. If he hadn’t known better, he might have wondered if that was a joke. Maybe it was. Admittedly, it could be hard to tell with Fenris.

“It’s the best option Feynriel has,” he said, repeating the words sullenly, just like he’d repeated them to himself, over and over again, ever since he’d pushed the money into Gethyn’s hands. “It was all we could do.”

The curl of Fenris’ mouth deepened, like he found the conversation itself disgusting. “I do not know why you choose to discuss this with me. I imagine you and the abomination share… similar views. Go to him if you wish to dream of the delights Tevinter has to offer.”

Tobias sighed inwardly, trying to swallow down the familiar irritation that plagued him when Fenris started this.
“Anders is not an abomination,” he said dully, the words blunted with repetition. “And he—”

“He would have done well to be born in the Imperium,” Fenris continued, his tone laced with bitterness. “As would you, I’m sure.”

“Oh?” Tobias snorted. “Maybe. No Circle. No templars,” he added, half to himself. “No running and hiding.” He raised his head, squinting as he glared at the elf. “You know, you and I want the same thing, Fenris. We both want to be free of all this. We want fresh starts.”

The elf said nothing. The dimness of the broken, cracked walls seemed oppressive, the mansion’s damaged shell casting shadows across the floor between them. Fenris shifted in his chair. His feet were bare, Tobias noticed: long, low-arched feet, and raw-boned toes with thick, bowed joints. A couple of small scars marked the rough skin, and the faint glimmer of lyrium brands peeked from beneath the bottom of his leggings.

They really do go everywhere, don’t they? Poor bastard.

Fenris took a long breath, turning his face away as he stared accusingly at the floor… or possibly deep into his own memories.

“I do not want a fresh start,” he said eventually. “I want an end to what I already have. I want to finish this.”

Tobias sighed tightly. It was hard not to recall a conversation they’d had before, when Fenris had admitted to him that he didn’t know how to begin anew, how to make a life when he’d never had the experience of having one of his own. It bonded them, in a strange way, Tobias supposed. Fenris knew nothing except slavery and the repudiation of Danarius’ ownership, and he knew bugger all except running and surviving… only that wasn’t really true.

No matter how much it felt like it, it wasn’t true, because every time he tried to believe it was, years’ worth of old memories would come bobbing back to the surface. He’d see his father’s smiling face as Bethany took her first toddling steps, or remember smelling hot pork pies on market day in Lothering, or jumping naked into the river up past old man Barlin’s field with Carver… and then doubling back to nick Carv’s clothes before he got out, and Leandra giving them both a thorough scolding when they got home, wet and, in Carv’s case, highly embarrassed, and— And he’d remember that there had been, even if just for a little while, a life that was theirs.

All gone now.

Now, there was nothing but trying to keep going, balancing safety and survival; being defined by what he was, and living under the burden of it.

Tobias closed his eyes, suddenly tired. He didn’t remember thinking about magic so often in Lothering. All right, it had always been there—always the “don’t show it, never tell, never use it” of Malcolm’s teachings—but it had never been at the forefront of his mind the way it was here.

Kirkwall took everything, he decided. Took it, screwed it up, and pushed it into black and white… made it all simpler than it should have been, made it all more intense. Made you think that there was only one way to do things, only one way anything could possibly turn out, and wasn’t that ironic? The templars’ hold on power—Meredith’s ambition and desire for control—felt like it had leaked over the entire city, staining it all with the same greyness, and making everyone think the same rigid, stale, narrow thoughts.

“It won’t change anything,” he said, glancing at Fenris. “Think about it. All the running, the
hiding… the fighting. Say he does come here. Say you fight him, and you win. Will it all actually end if you kill Danarius?”

Fenris looked up sharply, his mouth curved in mild disdain, and then an odd look seemed to pass across his face, like a blend of anticipation and bitterness.

“We will have to see, won’t we?” the elf said dryly. “Perhaps. Perhaps not.” His fingers flexed against the carved arm of the chair, as if he was picking at the pattern in the wood. ”Perhaps some other magister will decide I am a worthy quarry. Mages scent power like dogs do offal. Scrabbling and dribbling,” he added, wrinkling his nose.

Tobias bristled slightly. “We’re not all power-hungry demon-lovers, you know. And I doubt every single mage in Tevinter is a crazed psychopath… I mean, not all mages use blood magic.”

Fenris glared at him, head snapping up immediately, his fingers whitening faintly against the arm of the chair.

“In Tevinter,” he countered, his voice low and dangerously level, “magisters do anything they must for power. Those who do not subjugate others are themselves beaten down… controlled, devoured. They will do anything to survive, anything to win dominion over each other. It never ends. That is the nature of mages.”

“No,” Tobias protested. “No, that’s just—”

He stopped abruptly. That’s just human nature. Somehow, that didn’t seem like a helpful point. He shook his head.

“That’s not true everywhere, though. I mean, if we didn’t have the Circle, we wouldn’t have to be like Tevinter. No one’s saying blood magic isn’t dangerous, or wrong, or that—”

“Mages are mages,” Fenris growled. “If you do not keep a fire in check, it will consume a whole house. To argue that the fire might govern itself is to pretend it does not wish to burn.”

He slumped back in his chair, glowering at Tobias, all his poise and elegance momentarily fractured.

“You have so far proved yourself different from the mages I have known before, Hawke… but it cannot change what you are. It cannot change what you sent that boy to become.”

Tobias let out a breath, all his arguments and protestations suddenly deflated and defeated. It no longer seemed to matter whether this really was all about Feynriel and the Dalish, or about the Underground, or Danarius, or just mages in general. Between Aveline telling him he should be locked up because he wasn’t really human, and Fenris effectively saying he’d either signed Feynriel’s death warrant, or taken the first step on the road to creating a monster, Tobias was fervently wishing he’d never gotten himself involved in any of this.

“Look,” he said, before the silence swelled up between them and threatened to coax him into breaking it with words he might regret, “let’s just… let’s not talk about this anymore, all right? I didn’t come here to argue with you, Fenris.”

The elf narrowed his eyes. “No?”

Tobias ignored the dig. “Let’s talk about the Bone Pit job. Are you on for that? I want to do it soon, before Hubert starts thinking he can beat me down on the payment.”

In truth, he was eager to change the subject and, while he had no great wish to head into the old mine
—it was underground, after all—the venture did promise to be profitable, and to put some much-needed distance between him and the Dalish.

“Anyway,” he went on, “it’ll be easy. Just scout through the mine, clear out whatever’s got the yokels rattled… it’s quick coin. Will you come?”

Fenris appeared to consider the prospect for a moment. “If it is as easy as you think, why has the merchant not paid some other fool to investigate? You know why they call it the Bone Pit, don’t you?”

Tobias shrugged. “Well, not specifically, no… but it doesn’t matter, does it? It’s probably just smugglers. Qunari renegades, or some two-bit street gang who want a shiny new hideout.”

A dark look filtered over Fenris’ face. “In the time of the Imperium, they used to throw slaves off the minehead. Thousands of them died there.”

Tobias felt his carefully controlled expression of nonchalance begin to stiffen.

Oh, sod. Does this mean more demons?

It always meant more demons. Kirkwall seemed to be built on a solid bedrock of slaves’ bones, and if he’d been a religious man Tobias would have been convinced that the whole city was overdue a priest’s blessing… or maybe just razing to the ground.

He smirked, affecting an only partially successful shrug of unconcern.

“Well, it’s not like we can’t deal with a few ghosts. Give me a day to get the gear together. I’ll cut you a good share. C’mon,” he added, wheedling as Fenris sneered doubtfully.

From outside the mansion, beyond the high, tiny windows, faint sounds of the street could be heard: unusual, really, for this end of the city. Even Hightown’s quiet, disregarded plazas of forgotten decadence were generally unmarred by the thrum of life, but there were people, all the same. Footsteps, voices—the plump quack and high-pitched giggle of an upscale courting couple, Tobias suspected. He spread his hands wide and fixed the elf with his best convincing grin.

“Have I ever steered you wrong before, eh?”

Fenris took a breath, but didn’t get a chance to speak.

“Not often, right?” Tobias put in quickly. “Not often at all. So… what d’you say? Big, fat ten percent? Yes? Plus all the intrigue and glamour of whatever we might find down there? Diamonds, rubies—”

“Unlikely.” Fenris shook his head and exhaled resignedly. “But, all right.”

“Good.” Tobias sat back, slapping his palms against his knees. “Day after tomorrow, then? Say, meet you midday by the postern gate?”

The elf nodded reluctantly, and Tobias wasn’t entirely sure whether it was the strength of their uneasy friendship that had him agreeing, or just the possibility of cold, hard cash. Maybe it was simply curiosity.

Either way, as he left the mansion and sloped idly back towards the general direction of the market, he was grateful for it. No matter what nasty surprises the old mine undoubtedly held, Tobias was looking forward to the prospect of a job… and a fight. Something to blow the cobwebs out.
Something to get the blood pumping, and his head back into the game.

Aveline came to the house that night.

At first, he thought she was there to apologise, but it was soon clear she was merely visiting his mother. Leandra received her with open arms and her usual cheerful smile, and that made Tobias feel very slightly sick. She didn’t know about the Fade, of course. He hadn’t said anything, and there was no sense worrying her by trying to explain now.

So, he quietly absented himself, and left them to talk. It was already dusk, and the fire burned brightly, with a couple of candles pushing back the shadows. Aveline, as usual, had turned up in her uniform, and he was fairly certain the armour had actually been welded to her skin. Caught in the candlelight, she practically glowed red and gold, like the silken glimmer of a Chantry sister’s robe. He almost smelled the incense.

Leandra poured tea, and they talked about the who-said-what of the keep’s gossip, and discussed details of city ordinances and plans to do with the blasted estate… and he slipped quietly from the house, not bothering to take a cloak, despite the evening’s chill.

It was almost dark. Tobias didn’t really look where he was walking.

He wasn’t going to go to The Rose, he told himself. He was going to break off all those bad habits, and stop doing all the things that he did to plug the gaps in life, and make himself believe there was something keeping the days greased and turning that was more than just the fear of stopping… because that was what it was, wasn’t it? And it wasn’t even Kirkwall that had done it to him.

Oh, the city did screw people up. Made you tread water, made you stagnate in the same old sewer… too many hills and terraces, too many rigid hierarchies and stupid protocols. There never seemed to be a way out of anything, and so you just reached for the nearest thing to plaster over the irritation.

Everything was about ticking through the days like clockwork, like some bald-toothed cog locked in repetitive motion.

Even his footsteps seemed to echo with measured, unbreakable rhythms.

Some little prick jumped out of the shadows at him not far from the Chantry courtyard; Tobias could hear the muffled sound of the quarter-hour bells, just as clearly as he heard the shuffle of inexpertly silenced feet on the flagstones. He sighed inwardly, and sidestepped as the assailant lunged, then extended a leg for the cloth-swathed figure to stumble over. It was both gratifying and depressingly predictable to watch the would-be cutthroat sprawl face-first onto the cracked pavers.

Between the darkness and the loose, heavily draped clothes that were apparently de rigueur for street criminals these days, it was impossible to tell the age or gender of the figure, though the surprised “oof!” sounded either like a woman or a young boy. Tobias brought his foot down across the prone body’s back anyway; hard enough to shake the kidneys up a bit, but not hard enough to break much. A blade skittered from pathetically flexing fingers, and he stooped to snatch it up, and to unceremoniously grab the back of the cloth-masked head.

The would-be mugger whimpered and mewled a bit… and smelled like lavender water and old sweat. Tobias exhaled wearily as he placed a knee in the small of what felt like a rather skinny back.

“How many of you?” he asked, eyeing the dark spaces of colonnades and doorways.

It was a redundant question, really. A proper gang would have been on him at once… and this poor specimen probably wouldn’t have passed the initiation for one, anyway.
Well, maybe the Dark Spire lot. Are they still going? Haven't heard anything in a while. Oh, Hawke, you're so out of touch!

The not-terribly-talented-cutthroat mumbled and wriggled, and a distinctly feminine voice managed to spit out a few profanities. Tobias knelt harder on her and, tossing away the worn, thin-bladed knife he'd confiscated, pulled up the sleeve of a flailing right arm.

“No mark, then,” he observed, peering at the thin band of grubby, pale, but unblemished skin. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you really don’t have the skills of an… independent agent. At least think about joining a gang. One of the small ones. You could be the one who gets picked off first in an ill-advised ambush.”

He got off her, and she scrambled to her hands and knees, coughing and gasping—and still swearing. He picked out the words “arrogant bastard” and “gut you like a fish”, and he grinned in the coolness of the night’s breeze.

The girl glared at him, all that was visible of her face just the narrow strip between her brows and the bridge of her nose, the rest of her anonymous beneath the drapes of cloth. They were probably blue eyes, Tobias decided, though they looked dark in the gloom. Dark and full of hatred, hunger, and viciousness. She crouched, like some scared, cornered beast, and he was both ashamed of himself and physically, vitally alive, revelling in the feeling of his body, and his reflexes, and everything that it was to sense, and fight, and breathe. He felt powerful, without magic—without even thinking about needing magic—and that was something he’d always treasured.

But there was something else, he realised. He looked down at her, and envied her. It wasn’t just pity, or black humour, or the sudden, electric moment of having had a knife pulled on him and avoiding it with such blessed, easy, elastic grace… he missed this. More than he’d cared to admit.

The streets were quiet. Hightown was sleeping, and those who weren’t were decent enough folk to be quiet and discreet about it. Up the hill, the chantry was carrying on its own muffled internal rhythms and, spreading out below it all, the rest of the city kept beating like the dark, grim heart it was.

The only sound here, in this lonely, pressed-in little spot, was the girl’s ragged breathing, and the moment seemed to stretch to eternity.

Her knife lay on the stones, its blade glimmering dully in the shreds of second-hand light cast by the moon and the occasional lantern. Tobias stretched out his foot, and toed the thing back towards her, sending it scudding across the pavers.

“Go on.” He nodded back towards the bazaar, and the warren of streets that led off from it. “Bugger off. I’ve got enough to worry about.”

He turned, feeling quite the roguishly magnanimous gallant as he made to walk away, the night air still crisp in his lungs.

He thought she’d crawl off and lick her wounds. He thought she’d be cowed. He didn’t think that, her knife in her hand again, she’d spring up and come after him, roaring like an angry ox. He didn’t think at all… just as he didn’t think in the blink of a moment in which, turning fluidly, he drew his dagger like a whisper of silk, and met her in full collision.

Tobias was rather glad of the darkness. It made it harder to see her eyes—he still couldn’t tell whether they were blue or brown, and it was never going to matter now anyway—and harder to see the way the cloth moved against her mouth as she tried to gurgle out some dying curse. Warmth
spread over his hand. She sagged, and the knife clattered from her fingers a second time.

*She really never was any good at this. Poor kid.*

He pushed her away, bending briefly to wipe his dagger on her loose clothes before sheathing it and glancing along the empty streets. There was no one around. No guard patrol, though one probably would be by later—Aveline’s many reforms had seen patrols rolled out right to Fenris’ forgotten corner of the estates, and even as far as some parts of Lowtown—so it would be sensible to get moving.

Tobias wiped his hands absently against his breeches, and then glanced down at his front, and muttered a cuss. The suspicion of something that might be a bloodstain shimmered slightly in the gloom, and he touched his fingers to the leather of his jerkin.

“Sod it,” he said, to no one in particular, and walked away from the crumpled corpse on the flagstones.

He’d told himself he wasn’t going to go to The Rose… and yet he found himself there anyway.

The same porticos and colonnades stood like broken ribs, with the same vines and ivy scrambling up the same dirty-white, cracked walls, and the same strings of lanterns slung between the windows, glimmering down on the same grubby streets. The same broken flagstones, the same tired old whores pacing the alleys… the same jaded, dirty little corner of Hightown, pushed into the shadows and quietly ignored.

No wonder he felt at home here, Tobias supposed.

It was a slow night. Mid-week often was. No one stopped him or greeted him as he entered the bar at the front of the house, heavy with its smells of cheap perfume and musty upholstery. Near the far door that led off to the kitchens, two women were leaning on one of the tables, each cradling a mug of grog as they talked quietly. Their voices stilled as he walked in, glancing up to see if he was worth approaching. On one of the plush seats beneath the staircase, an elven girl with red hair was making up to a fat man with a grey beard and a blue velvet doublet. She even giggled coquettishly when he groped her breasts.

Tobias caught Quintus’ eye before he’d even made it halfway across the room, confused for a moment by the way the big man’s face stiffened, and the meaty hands engaged in the futile task of polishing grubby mugs came to a sudden halt on cloth and pewter.

Catching sight of himself in the mirror behind the bar soon solved that query.

*Oh. Right.*

There wasn’t much blood on him, but it was enough to be noticeable. Tobias peered guiltily at his jerkin, and gestured vaguely at himself as he looked up at Quintus.

“Took the pretty route here,” he said as he reached the bar. “Bit of local colour, that’s all. Not looking for trouble.”

Quintus’ eyes narrowed, but he seemed to accept the story.

“Right you are, Serah Hawke. Should I tell Madam that you’re—?”

“No,” Tobias said quickly, his fingers flexing involuntarily on the bar’s greasy surface. “No, thanks. I just… I just want….”
He faltered, feeling suddenly a little light-headed, as if he couldn’t remember how he’d come to be here, or what he wanted.

“A bottle of whisky and a nice, hot bath?” suggested a familiar voice. “Makes everything better, dear. Usually.”

Tobias glanced up wearily at the mirror, watching Jethann’s reflection sashay towards him. He hadn’t seen much of the elf since the encounter that had led to his… little problem… and while it was pleasant to see a familiar face, he couldn’t deny that this felt immensely awkward.

“Ah. Er—”

The elf leant casually on the bar beside Tobias, his lithe body decked in tight breeches and loose, flowing linen shirt. His red hair hung down to his shoulders, and a scent of sandalwood and rose oil seemed to rise like a heat haze from his skin. He smiled in a display of dextrous, well-practiced, and yet still rather appealing charm.

“Maybe a little beef stew and some crusty bread? Or cold mutton?”

Tobias frowned. The Rose didn’t usually lay on food for customers who weren’t staying all night. The elf seemed aware of his confusion, and shrugged cheerfully.

“Well, I owe you a little something, don’t I?” He flashed another winning smile. “A little treat or two. Just a small token of apology.”

Quintus had gone back to polishing mugs, and smirking behind his bushy moustache. Tobias scoffed.

“What… an ‘I’m sorry I gave you the clap’ hamper?”

The elf didn’t even bat an eye. The corner of his lips curved gently, and he nodded to Quintus.

“I’ll take care of him. No need to bother Madam when she’s busy. Hot water, bottle of brandy, and a few nibbles to number four? You can take it off my tips,” Jethann added, lowering his voice a little, with a great deal of the swish and flounce gone from his words. “All right?”

Tobias wasn’t sure if the elf was talking to him or Quintus but, somehow, he felt himself being gently, easily guided away from the bar, and towards the staircase. Jethann’s hand rested lightly on his arm, and his skin felt comfortingly warm.

The pervading smells of rose oil and cheap perfume, old curtains and white soap all seemed to blend and swirl around his head, and he allowed the elf to lead him… blindly, resignedly.

There just didn’t seem to be much point in protesting.

“I killed a girl tonight,” Tobias said dully, as Jethann shut the door of one of the larger bedchambers behind them.

It had a small window, shuttered and hung with heavy red drapes, and a rather battered paper on the walls that repeated the over-used motif of vines and roses, this time in shades of brown and faded red. A large wooden tub stood at the end of the room, beside a washstand and low table, but it was the bed that Jethann drew him towards: wide, and covered with an array of embroidered throws and blankets, presumably to disguise the darned sheets and threadbare canopy. The familiar sounds of occupancy from the room next door—thuds, giggles, and a few grunts—echoed, muffled, through the thin walls.
“Really?” Jethann said absently, like it was an answer to a comment about the weather. He stopped in front of Tobias, those impossibly big, impossibly blue eyes widening in mock reprobation as he surveyed the bloodied leather jack. “My dear… you have been in the wars. I hope nothing vital got scratched.”

Tobias shrugged resignedly. “Nah. She tried to spring me, but she didn’t get far.”

“I’ve heard most people don’t,” Jethann purred, stepping closer, his hands moving to the first of the jack’s buckles.

Tobias stayed still, pliant… numb. There was a good couple of inches difference in height between them, but he liked the closeness of Jethann’s face as he worked. With his eyes downcast, the gentle puffs of his breath fanned Tobias’ throat. He smelled warm, and rich, and not at all like the rest of the city.

*I wasn’t going to do this again. I wasn’t even going to be here.*

“I’ve been hearing an awful lot about you recently, as it happens,” Jethann added, raising those searing eyes for a brief moment of effect. “The alienage is alive with stories of the shem who went to the Beyond and back for the People.”

He pulled the jack’s first strap free of its buckle, and the fitment jingled lightly. Tobias glanced up sharply, a frown already embedded in his brow, and the icy wash of dread spilling through his stomach.

Fuck. So much for my low profile.

Stupid, he supposed. Marethari might have been prepared to keep his involvement quiet, but Arianni had probably been blabbering her relief and gratitude all over the place… *daft cow*. He narrowed his eyes.

“Oh? I wouldn’t have imagined you spend much time there.”

The elf lifted one shoulder in an unconcerned shrug, his fingers already moving to the next buckle.

“I have *family* there,” he said, grimacing over the word as if it tasted foul. “A pale, dull slug of a wife, and her hideous mother.”

“Wife?” Tobias echoed, unable to keep the sharp burst of disbelief from his voice. “You?”

Jethann wrinkled his nose and slapped Tobias’ stomach playfully through the dyed leather. “I keep my options open, my dear. I always have! Besides, it was an arranged match. We were children, practically… but that isn’t my point, and don’t you dare try to deny anything.” He leaned closer, his eyes pools of vibrant, terrible fascination, and his soft pout curled into a harsh smile. “I heard what you did. I didn’t know for certain you were—”

‘*One of those’? Yeah, I’ve heard that before. Mage. Robe. Freak.*

Tobias swallowed hard, his tongue feeling thick and his throat dry. “I don’t like people knowing,” he said shortly. “It can lead to… complications.”

That much was true: complications for him, and for more other people than he dared to contemplate. A dozen different ways this conversation could end were already playing out in his head, and he didn’t like the way most of them sounded. All right, so Jethann probably wasn’t likely to report him to the templars—Maker knew Lusine had enough apostates of her own under the Rose’s roof—but
Tobias didn’t like the smug curve of the whore’s smile, and he wasn’t convinced that he’d shy from blackmail.

Jethann’s smile widened as he pulled open the third buckle of Tobias’ jack.

“Well, your secret’s safe with me, dear. For what it’s worth,” he added, fingers tugging at the tough yet supple leather, beginning to bare Tobias’ chest to the room’s warm air, “I think it’s exciting. I mean, there have been rumours about you for years… but knowing for sure is different.”

Unease crawled between Tobias’ shoulder blades, and the air seemed to stick to his skin like wet sand. He sneered, trying to paper over his discomfort with sarcasm, but everything felt dry and forced.

“Rumours?” He snorted. “Gossips’ whispers. Probably all bollocks, anyway.”

Jethann’s smile widened further, and he pulled the jack open, his clever fingers tugging the leather aside with a strength of grasp that belied his gentle touch. The buckles jingled softly, and Tobias felt oddly vulnerable.

A knock on the door interrupted whatever the elf had been about to say—if there would indeed have been words—and two girls entered, laden down with buckets of hot water, a platter of food, and a bottle of Antivan brandy. Tobias didn’t pay them much attention, except to notice that one looked tight-lipped and worried. Jethann waved them over to the tub imperiously, and seemed almost annoyed by their entrance.

“And who kicked your grandma?” he demanded of the pale, tight-lipped one.

She shook her head violently, and the other girl answered for her.

“He’s here,” she said, the words a coarse stage-whisper in a flat Kirkwall accent. “They’ll be startin’ before long.”

Jethann narrowed his eyes. “Shh! Go on… get on with you.”

“Wh—?” Tobias began to frame the question as the girls prepared the bath, but the elf didn’t leave him much opportunity to ask anything.

Long, talented fingers stroked his face, wove themselves into his hair, and caressed his throat. Jethann leaned close and kissed him—a real, sweet kiss that tasted faintly of almonds. The tenderness came almost as a surprise, but it was too pleasant to resist and, somehow, the whole notion of refusing the embrace seemed to ebb out of Tobias’ head, his thoughts fuzzy and the tickle of magical power rising under his skin.

It was, he realised dimly, the first time he’d ever kissed a man who knew he was a mage. The first time someone who knew had still wanted to touch him.

As the door closed quietly behind the girls, he pulled back and frowned at the elf. Jethann just smiled angelically, and Tobias realised he didn’t want to question… he didn’t want to question any of it. Not when it was as easy as this, and it was so blessedly easy. It was easy to shed the rest of his clothes, and easy to climb into the tub, like sinking into a blissful pool of quiet.

“We get more in than you’d think, you know,” Jethann observed, setting a small dish of oil on the low table beside the tub. “Ones who live free, ones who’ve just broken out… ones on the run. I suppose it can make for a lonely life.”
“Mm.” Tobias grunted noncommittally, still unsure of how to navigate this new feeling.

All right, so a handful of people knew. People he’d fought with, people he’d worked alongside. This was different. As Jethann dipped the washcloth into the dish of rose-scented oil and began to apply it to his skin in gentle, massaging circles, Tobias caught himself examining the elf’s movements, seeking out something new in his touch, as if he expected to find hesitancy or revulsion there.

“’Course,” Jethann said, lifting Tobias’ arm gently by the wrist, and massaging oil into the sun-browned skin, “we get templars too, and a fair few Chantry brothers, not to mention sisters and mothers. Equal opportunities, I always say. Come one, come all… as it were.”

He smirked, and Tobias couldn’t help grinning.

It was so awfully easy to lie in the hot water, watching his flesh pinken and the steam curling up from his skin as the little gobelets of rose oil floated and bumped against the tub’s scummy sides. It was easy to relax into Jethann’s touch, too… easy not to think about the dead girl on the flagstones, or about Feynriel becoming a magister, or about Fenris screaming as molten lyrium burned its way into his flesh. It was easy not to think about all the things that went wrong, even when his intentions weren’t all that bad to start with.

Jethann hummed slightly; just a soft, gentle noise, right on the edge of hearing. He hummed, and dipped the washcloth in the little dish of silky-smooth oil, and rubbed gently at the knots of tension and guilt and rage that tied Tobias’ back so tightly. His hair fell forward a little as he worked, and his eyes grew half-hooded.

Maker, he really is lovely.

“I think they’re wrong about you, though,” Jethann said quietly, moving around to begin tracking the cloth from left to right in pleasingly repetitive motions over Tobias’ chest.

“Mm? Who?”

His touch was light and yet so reassuring, and the bloom of power seemed to follow it beneath Tobias’ skin, like something in him ached to respond in a way he’d never responded—never allowed himself to respond—to anyone.

He wondered what that would be like… whether it was even possible. Having magic, as his father had always taught him, was to keep a part of yourself locked up, always. Malcolm’s teachings had been strict on that point. Tobias had never once let that side of his nature go completely, not even when he’d come as close as he ever had to truly losing control. Even in his most vulnerable moments—the times of nakedness that went far beyond just skin—he’d never let that part out. He didn’t know if he could, he realised.

Can you? Magic in the sack? It wouldn’t be safe, surely…. Even the tiniest mistimed fireball would do way more than just kill the mood.

It was an enthralling thought, though: making love like a mage. Maybe other mages already knew all the tricks. Maybe, when two of them were together—

Maker…!

The elf shrugged and dipped the cloth back into the little dish of oil.

Tobias’ frown deepened, and the bathtub suddenly seemed like a much less safe and relaxing place. “What p— Do you mean who I think you mean?”

Jethann dropped the washcloth into the tub. It splashed into the water like a limp fish and floated there, a pale and bloated thing. He leaned forward, as if he was afraid of being overheard, and his expression seemed oddly subdued.

“I may not be a mage,” he said quietly, that blue gaze almost circumspect, “but I do know what it is to be an outsider. I believe you and I have mutual friends…. People who help people?”

Tobias leaned back against the edge of the tub. “That’s who I thought you meant.” He squinted suspiciously at Jethann. “So who’s been bad-mouthing me?”

The elf wrinkled his nose. “That’s a strong word. I just… heard… that your involvement with the Dalish hasn’t gone down too well in certain quarters. That’s all. That… certain people… are worried you’ll bring too much attention to their work. We’re talking about a man who likes to keep himself hidden, after all.”

Tobias nodded slowly. Elias Creer, no doubt.

He wasn’t surprised. It had been a while since Anders had invited him to a meeting of the Underground—not least, Tobias suspected, because the healer had been having his own disagreements with his so-called friends. Oh, he hadn’t said anything, because Anders never said anything. No, Maker forefend he should actually tell anyone what was going on… but they had seemed to close ranks. It had been irritating for Tobias. His money was readily accepted—snatched up, even, the way Gethyn had so gladly taken the gold for Feynriel’s safe passage—but his attempts to ask questions were treated with scorn and annoyance. And it wasn’t just because everyone was safer if they kept secrets, either… or was it? Maybe he had expected too much, too soon, from his tentative involvement with such a sensitive organisation.

Presumably, Jethann was right. Presumably, Anders himself had been referring to the same thing when he’d teased Tobias about his ‘hob-nobbing with the nobility’.

Just be careful. That was what he’d said. Not that it was wrong for the Underground to be suspicious of an outsider—especially one throwing gold around like water, and so pathetically keen to be accepted into their ranks—but… all the same. It was frustrating, and he still had the niggling sense that, somehow, he was being played for somebody’s fool.

He just hoped it was Anders’, and not Elias Creer’s.

Tobias sighed. The bathwater was cooling rapidly. Jethann’s fingers twitched uncertainly; the first piece of uncertainty he thought he’d ever seen in the elf. Still, whatever Jethann’s motives in telling him this, it didn’t feel safe to discuss it any further.

“Didn’t have you pegged for a sympathiser, that’s all,” he said, watching those blue eyes widen incredulously.

“Darling,” Jethann chided, taking up the washcloth again, “I’m made of empathy. Charity is my single weakness.”

Tobias snorted derisively, and the elf flicked the cloth playfully over his nipple.

“Well, all right… so maybe I don’t like what the Knight Commander’s done to this city. And maybe I don’t think people deserve to be treated badly because they’re different.” His face grew almost serious for a moment, the mirth in those blue eyes beginning to dim. “Maybe I’ve seen enough of
that to judge a little more lightly."

Tobias smiled, and it was a ridiculous, stupid, awkward thought to have, but he couldn’t help wishing he could repeat those words to Anders, just to show him there were people in the world who thought right, whatever it felt like sometimes.

Yeah. Can’t even picture how to start that sentence….

He wanted to say something, maybe thank Jethann for that brief burst of faith, but all the words he could think of felt foolish and clumsy, so he reached out one wet, rose-scented hand, and gently cupped the side of the elf’s head, guiding him close.

“You, uh, you don’t mind this, do you?” Tobias murmured, just before he touched those soft, pliant lips.

Jethann chuckled gently. “Of course not.”

“Good.”

He still tasted of almonds. Tobias kissed him thoroughly, slowly; luxuriating in the lazy sensuality of a warm mouth and warm air against his cooling, moist skin.

He got out of the bath, and let Jethann wrap him in soft towels. He reclined on the bed and picked at the plate of cold meat, bread, cheese and apple slices, washing it down with Antivan brandy, while Jethann lay beside him, idling along his body with lazy mouth and hands.

Once his leisurely meal was finished, Tobias worked up the enthusiasm for a much more energetic bout. Usually, he’d been content to let Jethann please him—and it wasn’t as if the elf lacked either repertoire or creativity—but, tonight, there was something profoundly exciting about just having him in the simplest, most direct manner possible.

It wasn’t merely the desire to truncate any pillow talk, either… or, at least, it wasn’t entirely that. Jethann had, all things considered, always been pretty good about it, never prodding for details Tobias didn’t want to share, or asking clumsy questions and casting around for crumbs to send back to Lusine.

Tobias didn’t flat-out trust him, but nor did he distrust the elf and, damn it, maybe he really did have a little honest affection for him. Maybe, he thought, as he pinned Jethann’s hands above his head and set about trying to nail him to the mattress, that was as much love as the world had to offer him.

Maybe that was enough.

“Unf!” Jethann exclaimed, pushing his ruffled red hair out of his eyes and surveying Tobias from the wreckage of the bed. “Well… quite the endurance athlete, aren’t we? All better?”

Tobias lay on his back, shoulders dug deep into the thin pillow, the rime of sweat on his skin turning the scent of rose oil sour. His breathing was still fast and shallow, but the bite of triumph and pleasure had washed from his blood, leaving a sense of hollow dissatisfaction only slightly numbed by sensation.

“I didn’t think you were complaining.”

The elf treated him to a sultry, self-satisfied smile as he pushed back into a cat-like stretch. It was always difficult to tell whether he enjoyed it as much as he seemed to; Tobias liked to think so, though he was under no illusions about his own prowess.
“There’s a… directness about you that I like,” Jethann said, patting his knee. “And now I know just how a blacksmith’s anvil feels. Why don’t you bring that hammer over here again?”

He crawled across the bed, dropping kisses to Tobias’ thighs, interspersed with happy little sounds of interest, but Tobias had already started rolling over, reaching for the bottle of brandy.

“Bugger,” he announced, on discovering it was almost empty.

Jethann sighed, and rolled onto his back, falling against the covers with a soft thump. “Been there, done that. Have you ever tried an Orlesian Canary?”

Tobias swalloed the last dregs of the brandy, frowning in confusion that seemed marginally hazier than normal.

_I wasn’t going to be here. I wasn’t going to do this. I wasn’t going to drink like this… oh, sod it._

“A what?”

“Canary,” Jethann repeated, staring at the ceiling. “It’s a type of wine. It… it has bubbles. You hold in your mouth and, well, you give your friend an Orlesian kiss. It feels amazing.”

Tobias let the empty bottle fall to the floorboards, and wondered how it was physically possible, in that instance, to suck someone off without drowning.

“Huh,” he said instead. “Why… why is it called ‘canary’?”

Jethann shrugged. “I don’t know what the word means. It just sounds like ‘canary’. It’s not like I read labels,” he added, turning his head to look thoughtfully across the bed. “Do you want to go again, or not?”

It was tempting. It was so tempting, after the past few days, and the Dalish, and the painful rejections and accusations of people he’d wanted to think of as friends… but Tobias shook his head. It was already late—later than he’d meant—and he was drunker than he’d intended to be.

Already, the guilt was rippling back under his skin, flooding in where those precious few flashes of freedom had been.

“Nah. I… I can’t.”

“Bet you could,” Jethann said, eyeing his crotch with an interested half-smile. “If I just—”


The elf waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, all right. Be boring, then. Call it a crown, seeing as it’s you.”

Tobias swung his legs out of bed and groped for his breeches before digging around for a few coins. He tossed two sovereigns onto the pillow.

“One for you, one for Madam. Take a couple of hours off on me.”

Jethann snorted, though one slim hand shot out to grab the money. “Trying to buy up all my time already? Jealous thing.” He smiled lazily as he sat up, looking thoroughly dishevelled and really quite lovely… at least until he fluttered his eyes and pouted. “Next, you’ll fall into fits of pining for me until you’re simply beside yourself. You’ll know no rest at all until you spirit me away to a sun-soaked palace in Antiva, so you can have me all to yourself… you beast, you.”
Tobias chuckled, but the smile stuck to his face, half-formed and not quite as easy as it should have been.

“Take care,” he said, squeezing Jethann’s ankle briefly before he stood, pulled on his breeches, and set to picking up the rest of his clothes.

When he got downstairs, he saw the place had filled up, which meant it was easy to slip out of the front door without catching anyone’s eye. He recognised a few faces—merchants, one of the Formari traders from The Gallows, and a selection of upstanding citizens who were all doing their best to ignore each other, alongside the Rose’s more honestly seamier denizens—and, for a moment, Tobias was almost convinced he caught a whiff of soot and elfroot. He nearly froze at that. Encountering Anders here would have been a hundred times worse than the night he’d bumped into Gamlen, especially with his hair still damp from the bath, the scent of rose oil still on his skin, and—Tobias suspected, as he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind the bar—a sheepish countenance that said he might as well have had ‘freshly fucked’ painted on his forehead in rouge.

He shuddered, and pressed on, out into the street.

_Bloody Anders. Finds his bloody way into bloody everything. Wouldn’t have gone to talk to Aveline if he hadn’t told me to. Wouldn’t have had to hear her tell me I should be locked up in the name of public safety… that I’m not fucking human. Well, sod Aveline. And sod him. Sod everyone._

_Yeah … ._

He stopped in an alleyway at the corner of the square, and held onto the wall until the cobblestones stopped spinning, and his late supper stopped threatening to make a re-emergence.

There were no more girls with knives on the way home. No more death. When he got back to the house, Aveline was long gone, and the fire was cold. The light of a candle came from under Leandra’s door, and Tobias crept to his bed with his breath held, praying she wouldn’t come out to check on him.

She didn’t. He climbed into bed, put his head under the stale-smelling pillow, and tried to pretend he couldn’t hear her crying.
The Bone Pit wasn’t all that far out of town. Clearly, Tobias decided, the Imperium had foregone preserving any pretty vistas in favour of reducing cargo costs from the quarry, and the network of mines and caves that ran off from it. Besides, the smoke that Kirkwall’s Foundry District belched out easily masked any unsavoury smells of industry that might have wafted in. They could still see the smog laying over Lowtown’s terraces like a grey shroud as they left the city behind them: him, Fenris, and Isabela, plus a couple of bulky lads she’d shown up at The Hanged Man with.

He hadn’t been sure he’d wanted to cut her in on the job, but she’d pouted and dropped heavy references to a shipment coming in at the week’s end that, with the guard’s recent arrests of certain smuggling cartels—Tobias couldn’t imagine where the Coterie’s spy had found his information, naturally—was wide open for interested parties to take a share in.

He’d been tempted; he could admit it. He still had plenty of contacts, after all… still knew where to shift hot merchandise, and the right people to fence things further afield than grubby tavern back rooms.

It was a good offer. She knew it, and she knew that he knew she knew it. So, he’d sighed, and agreed to take her and her boys along.

Typical Isabela. She always did know how to strike a deal.

Nevertheless, it gave Tobias a feeling of old times, and he clung to that, just as tightly as he clung to the morning’s brightness, and the feel of the cold air on his skin. The smell of a fresh challenge seemed to hang over everything. It tasted like warm steel and a cold salt breeze, and he pulled it right down into his lungs, eager to savour it and hold it tight.

They were quiet as they walked, taking an old cut up past the cliff path towards Hubert’s mine, leaving the lower terraces of Kirkwall spread out below them, spilling from the city walls like the teeming of dusty beetles. Beyond the jagged shapes of towers and roofs, and the great hard line of the Keep, the ocean daubed a band of hazy greyish blue that met the sky, and a couple of ships coasted lazily against it. Tobias squinted as he looked out across the horizon, a little amazed at how warped and strange the perspective seemed from up here. The coastline cupped a natural harbour, and layer upon layer of the cliffs seemed eaten away, pitted and wounded in the truest sense… just as the name of the place suggested.

Sundermount rose at their backs, though he didn’t turn to look towards it. He had no wish to let his mind drift to the Dalish camp, or any of the other weird things hidden up on those slopes. Instead, he walked on, leading his little group along the rough, sandy path. It was cold, but not properly cold. Not a proper winter at all, in his opinion. He’d never thought it would be the case, but he missed Ferelden mud, and rain, and even snow. Satinalia was less than two weeks away, and it didn’t feel right without at least a proper thick frost on the ground.

“I’m surprised Anders isn’t with us,” Isabela said cheerfully, increasing her pace a little to saunter beside him. “Would have been useful, wouldn’t it? Bring the healer along when you’re poking through forgotten underground ruins?”

Tobias winced. The last time he’d been underground with her had been the Deep Roads, and he had no wish whatsoever to recall it.

“Well, we’re not intending to be down there long. We’d better not be, anyway,” he added,
narrowing his eyes. “I didn’t bring a change of smallclothes.”

Isabela grinned happily, the weak sunlight spearing off her jewellery. “Oh, well. Maybe you won’t need them. You never know your luck, after all!”

One of the bulky lads she’d brought made an obligatory ‘hur hur’ noise, and Tobias rolled his eyes. “Still,” he said, ostensibly to himself, “it might seem like a long trip….”

Fenris snorted. “Longer still if we had the abomination to lecture us throughout. I would rather take my chances with whatever is down there than listen to another diatribe on the woeful lot of mages.”

He still said the word with the same kind of disgust as most people might reserve for having dog shit all over the bottom of their sandals, but Tobias chose to ignore it, and to concentrate instead on the slow, rhythmic thud of feet on the sandy ground. Isabela peered back at the elf, her lips lightly pursed, then elbowed Tobias sharply in the ribs.

“Ow. What?”

The breeze licked around his shoulders, and it lifted her hair slightly where it cascaded from beneath the cloth bandanna she wore.

“No, really….” She lowered her voice as she looked sidelong at him. “Is he all right? Anders, I mean. Especially after that business at the Rose?”

Tobias frowned. “What business?”

The Rivaini’s expression flickered from surprise to salacious glee. “Oh! Oh? You didn’t—? I thought you were there last night.”

A deeply uncomfortable sensation, like the slow percolation of dread and nausea, filtered through his gut. “Who said I was? Why?”

Isabela waved a hand impatiently. “Oh, you go with Jethann. So do I. I was there for breakfast this morning, and you know how word gets around.”

“Hnnmm,” Tobias mumbled, looking away as he tried not to simultaneously recall the taste of the elf’s skin, and the feel of Isabela’s fingers digging into the back of his neck as he thrust grimly against her in the dark. His frown deepened. “What… what about—?”

“Lusine threw him out, apparently,” she confided, leaning a little closer as they walked. “Anders. He was supposed to be taking care of one of the girls, but something went wrong. He didn’t do it, or wouldn’t do it, I don’t know. Jethann didn’t know.” The conspiratorial tone faded a little from her voice, and she looked briefly concerned. “I just hoped he wasn’t having problems. You know… more than usual.”

Tobias glanced over his shoulder. He couldn’t tell if any of the others had overheard. Isabela’s big, stupid, brawny lugs were talking amongst themselves, and Fenris was glaring up at the cliffs as if he could scowl them into submission. He probably could, Tobias decided, if he was given long enough. The breeze still tasted of salt, but somehow everything was bitter.

Obviously, he knew what Anders did for the girls at the Rose, and at half a dozen of the cheaper, less pleasant brothels in the city… not to mention plenty of women from the slums who, married and unmarried alike, had found themselves on the receiving end of unwanted male attention or, sometimes, simply couldn’t bear the burden of another mouth to feed. It was just that actively
thinking about it made him feel slightly sick. And the thought that Anders had argued with Lusine—over anything, much less *that*—was unsettling, because Madam liked to get her way, and people who didn’t cooperate tended to find the Coterie breathing down their necks.

“When… when was this? Last night?”

Isabela shrugged. “Yeah. Late. I don’t know when, exactly… but it was quite the gossip this morning. Madam was livid, apparently. When Jethann said he’d seen you last night, I just assumed —”

“No,” Tobias said distantly, staring at the gritty path, littered with small stones and the glimmer of mica among the rough sand.

“Oh. Because I thought you and Anders—”

He wished she’d shut up, but tact and restraint weren’t exactly Isabela’s strong points.

“—Or,” she corrected herself speculatively, “should I say, you, Anders, and Justice? I mean, I was curious about that. It must be exciting. You know what they say: two’s company, but three’s better, right?”

Tobias grimaced. “I don’t think whoever said that had a Fade spirit in mind.”

“No?” She shrugged. “Whatever you say. I just thought you were quite interested in his, uh, spear of righteousness. That’s all.”

High above them, the sharp black shape of a gull wheeled against the sky, like an embroidered motif picked out on watered silk. The quiet gnawing of waves against the ragged shoreline tugged at the air, and Tobias groaned through gritted teeth.

“‘Spear of—?’ Isabela, I swear, if you don’t stop it—”

“What?” She mugged at him, barely stifling her giggles. “You’ll spank me? Promise?”

He sighed wearily. “No. Anyway, we’re not…. It isn’t like that.”

“It isn’t?” Isabela echoed, that curl of mirthful mockery still on her lips. “Really? You could have fooled me. You’re practically panting every time you see him, and he looks at you like he’s never seen biceps before.”

“He doesn’t,” Tobias muttered automatically, then paused as he glanced out across the ocean. Small caps of white dotted the dark, grey-green waves, and low clouds chased across the hazy sky. They were nearing the mine now; the big, burly lads were getting skittish, the way horses start to shy at the scent of a strange dog on the breeze. He frowned, and peered suspiciously at Isabela. “Does he?”

She laughed, and the sound was like a clay mug shattering. Her mouth spread into a wide grin, the pale glint of a blade against her dark skin, and she shook her head slowly.

“Hopeless. Bloody hopeless…. Hey, maybe he thinks you’re too good a person, so he’s not willing to, uh, smite you.” Her grin widened even further as Tobias pulled another face. “Ooh, that *would* be a shame, wouldn’t it? Everyone deserves a good smiting now and then. Matter of fact, I could use one right this minute….”

~o~O~o~
Tobias could cheerfully have throttled her by the time they arrived at the Bone Pit… especially when he saw the welcome party waiting for them.

He’d arranged to meet Varric up there: it had seemed sensible to have a cart, maybe a couple of the Carta hired hands the dwarf was on such easy terms with, and other such things as came in useful when one was clearing out a suspicious—and potentially lucrative—area. After all, if Tobias’ suspicions were correct and it was slavers or lyrium smugglers hiding down there in the tunnels, scaring the workers off, then there was no sense whatsoever in just turning their merchandise over to the authorities. Not at the price that stuff sold for.

So, Tobias had expected to see Varric on the ridge above the mine face, and he’d expected the ox cart with the whining driver complaining about being kept waiting, and he’d expected the two heavily armed dwarves who sat nearby, idly throwing dice on a conveniently flat rock… but he hadn’t expected Anders.

“Hawke!” Varric called out as he strode to meet them, every inch the merchant prince in his cuffed leather boots, wide-lapelled coat, and heavy gloves, his gold chain and earrings glinting in the sunlight. Bianca sat across his back, her brass fittings just as highly polished as his jewellery, and he gave Tobias a disarmingly wide grin. “You’re late. And with so much company.”

“The more the merrier, that’s what I always say,” Isabela chimed in brightly, nodding her head at the lunks she’d brought with her. “Mostly. Anyway, I heard about this little trip, and I just couldn’t resist. You know, there was a brothel on the sunny side of Antiva City called The Bone Pit.” She craned her neck, peering past Varric to the worn duckboards, overturned carts and debris evidently abandoned by the fleeing workers, and the eerie crevasse of the mine’s opening itself. “Hmph. Wasn’t a bit like this, mind you….”

Tobias blinked hurriedly. He hadn’t been listening. He’d been looking past the dwarf, and the cart, and not even at the mine’s entrance, but at the lone figure standing away to the side and staring out towards the thin slip of the sea that was visible between the rocks and the rise of the quarry’s steep sides. The salt breeze ruffled the feathers on Anders’ appalling coat, and caught at his hair, teasing a few strands loose so that they whipped across his face. He looked pale, tired, and surly, his whole face crumpled into a blank kind of frown but—in the instant just before Varric called out, just as they were coming down the approach path—he’d turned and looked up, and a weak recognition that was maybe even something close to cheerfulness had seemed to wash through his expression. They’d looked at each other—felt each other, Tobias thought to himself, immediately chastising his own brain for coming up with such stupid, insipidly sentimental crap—and, just for a few seconds, it had been lovely.

And now… now Isabela was grinning at him again, and he just knew she hadn’t missed the look that had passed between them, and he sneered as he turned awkwardly away from Anders, even though the healer had already begun to walk towards them, crossing the distance in slow, loose strides, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his coat.

“Didn’t think you’d mind if Blondie tagged along,” Varric said, with something serious in his meaningful nod that Tobias gathered alluded to whatever had happened last night at the Rose.

“Always worth having a healer on hand, right?”

From somewhere behind Tobias, Fenris scoffed loudly. He ignored the elf, and nodded his agreement, forcing himself to concentrate on the task in hand, and to take a quick inventory of what they had, and how they were going to approach the job.

Varric had procured a map of the mine and its associated shafts from the foreman, who’d apparently last been seen in the Hanged Man, quivering behind a pint and muttering about ’orrible noises in the
The general consensus was—as one of Isabela’s boys put it—that this was merely what Hubert got for relying entirely on a workforce composed of ‘dog-lords bastards what was all superstitious and fick as pig shit’, but he shut up after his captain waved one of her daggers under his nose and pointed out that Hawke was a dog-lord bastard, and might just rip the arms off anyone who defamed his homeland.

Tobias decided that his reputation evidently preceded him, because the threat seemed to be taken relatively seriously; he wasn’t sure whether he was really that imposing, or whether Isabela’s lunks were just dumb enough to believe the stories Varric told about him.

Who knows? Maybe it’s both….

The little strategy huddle broke, and, as they began to get the hired thugs and the gear together, Tobias caught Anders’ eye for the first time. He’d been hanging back, deliberately absenting himself from the discussion and barely coming near the others. Now, he stepped slightly closer, deigning to dip his head in greeting. He seemed… ethereal, somehow. Apart from the rest of them, like he wasn’t fully concentrating on the world.

“Hawke.” His mouth twitched briefly before he spoke, the word falling from it as lightly as an afterthought.

“Morning,” Tobias said brightly, trying to make the word sound casual—too casual, he thought, cringing at his own clumsiness. “Um… afternoon?”

Anders smiled, but it was a weak, vacant expression. He looked terrible: unshaven, unwashed, and as if he hadn’t slept in a week.

“You all right?” Tobias asked quietly, not really meaning to, but not really able to avoid saying anything, either.

The healer shrugged. “Mm. Long night, that’s all.”

Tobias caught himself taking a deep breath, trying to find the familiar tang of boiled elfroot, soot, and wet dog beneath the salty air… trying to place it against that fleeting moment at the Rose, and embarrassed by it. He cleared his throat, wary of letting on that he knew anything about the problems Isabela had mentioned.

“Uh… I didn’t know Varric was bringing you. I mean, it’s no bad thing, obviously, but—” He lowered his voice, anxious of the wind snatching it away and leaking his words to the others. “It’s underground. I know how you feel about that.”

Anders glanced up and, very briefly, Tobias rejoiced in the warmth of gratitude in that lean, hard-worn face. It was, however, quickly subsumed by the realisation that Anders looked even worse than he’d thought: paler than usual, drawn, and with dark circles and heavy bags beneath red-rimmed eyes. His lips were dry and peeling, his skin dull, and his hair looked greasy and lank.

“Figured it was sensible to have a healer on hand,” he said, his voice quiet and burred with a dry kind of roughness. “Just in case. I stayed at Varric’s suite last night, so… he suggested I tag along, and it seemed like a good plan. You don’t mind?”

“Never.”

“Good.”
Tobias coughed gently. “You, uh…? Were you drunk? I thought you said Justice—”

“He doesn’t. It was a very, very bad idea.” Anders smiled mirthlessly, and squinted across the stony ground towards Isabela. “You know I, um… got myself in trouble last night?”

The big, brawny lads were unloading torches, ropes, sacks, and assorted other bits and pieces from the cart. Varric clearly had no intention of being caught unprepared for anything… certainly not after the Deep Roads, Tobias thought with a shudder.

He nodded tentatively, watching Anders’ face for any suggestion of the truth behind the tale. It was blank, mask-like; as if there wasn’t anything left in him. He looked at a point a few inches to the left of Tobias’ shoulder when he spoke, his eyes unfocused.

“She was only fifteen, at most. Nearly five months gone, though she was hardly showing at all. Skinny little thing. Hadn’t said anything to anyone, because she was afraid Lusine would throw her out. She… she wanted to keep it. I said it was too late, and anyway, I wouldn’t do it if she didn’t want me to, and… and the old cow was furious.”

Tobias winced, his head full of things he didn’t want to think about, and his fingers itching on the empty air as he fought the temptation to reach a comforting hand to Anders’ sleeve.

“Well, that was the right thing to do, wasn’t it? I mean—”

“Well?” Anders exhaled sharply, a bitter breath puffing between his cracked lips. “I stormed out in the end. Said I didn’t care what she threatened me with. But she’ll only have someone else do it, won’t she? Elina, from the alienage, or old Mrs. Slope, who can’t even see the end of her own nose. And that girl… she’ll die, and it’ll be my fault. And… and it’s not right.”

He frowned slightly, his face tightening with that particular inward look that spoke of Justice moving beneath the surface. Tobias had learned to identify the marks of inner struggle, like the dark switches of a fish under murky water, and they usually preceded Anders making his excuses and going home; scurrying back to his bolthole like a rat running through the shadows.

Only, instead, he was going into an unpredictable and probably dangerous situation… and, for the first time since he’d known the man, Tobias found himself wondering if Anders could truly manage it. He seemed dislocated, unfixed, and that was frightening, when any lapse of his usually ironclad self-control could be so potentially destructive.

And there is no way to say anything at all about it without it sounding like I think he’s crazy. Great.

Tobias cleared his throat, awkwardly groping for something to say.

“Uh… You did what you thought was right. No one can blame you for that, can they? And— well, I could talk to Lusine, maybe. I mean, once she’s calmed down—”

“Oh,” Anders said, looking up, his eyes beginning to clear a little as he met Tobias’ gaze. “Yes. Of course. You’re quite the regular there, aren’t you? I almost forgot.”

There was a dry edge to his words; something that, in someone who didn’t sound so tired, could easily have been mistaken for bitter malice, and his upper lip curled slightly as he resumed his snideness.

“Madam’s valued customer. Especially now you’re better off. Nothing but the best in aged Antivan brandy and well-trained tarts for you, eh?”
It stung. There was no denying that. And yet, Tobias swallowed the immediate flush of humiliation and shrugged, looking steadily into those dark-ringed eyes.

“Sometimes,” he said dully, not sure where this sudden, sullen impulse to be such a complete bastard came from. “I mean, I do like nice things. Not the girls, though. There’s this elf. A redhead. He’s got the most amazing—”

“I’m sure he has,” Anders said, his tone practically arid. He glanced over his shoulder, to where Varric and the others were inspecting the mine’s entrance. “Well… shall we?”

Tobias frowned. “Are you sure you’re—?”

Anders had already turned away. “Yes,” he said, the word tightly clipped.

But you’re not, are you? You’re not all right at all.

~o~O~o~

It wasn’t too bad to begin with. Tobias didn’t know much about mining—as far as he was concerned, men went down and stuff came out, and somehow a lot of people made a lot of gold in the process—and, at first, he thought the whole of the Bone Pit would be like the open pits and quarries that marked the front end of the site.

He wasn’t really expecting how small, dark, and tight the tunnels would get as they worked deeper into the labyrinthine passages, and he certainly hadn’t pictured the gloom, the dust, the dampness, and odd sounds that lurked in the shadows.

“They say,” Varric began conversationally, as one of Isabela’s boys ventured ahead a few paces with a torch, the oval of firelight illuminating great, scarred walls of rock and the pitted frames of timber supports, “that there are all manner of little demons and imps and whatnot that live in mines. They’ll steal your tools if you whistle, drop rocks on your head if they don’t like your face… that kind of thing. Very superstitious bunch, miners.”

“I thought dwarves had a different religion,” Fenris said, padding behind him with his shoulders even more hunched than usual, and casting wary looks at the packed dirt and stone above them. “Don’t you venerate the earth or something, instead of fearing demons? And isn’t there something about ancestors?”

Varric shrugged. “How in the hell would I know? Topsider my whole life, my friend.”

The Carta dwarves snickered, and one of them turned around to give Varric a gap-toothed grin before nodding at Fenris.

“Paragons never did shit for me,” she said, her voice the only marker of her gender, apparent for the first time beneath shapeless padded armour, a leather helmet, and the heavy black brand on her cheek. “What do I got to thank ’em for? The Stone ain’t looked after me, either. I’ve done all that myself.”

Tobias chewed the inside of his lip thoughtfully as a little desultory discussion between dwarves, elf, and humans filled up the dank passageway. As far as he could see, most gods served the same purpose, and he thought briefly of His Royal Shininess, clinging to his Chantry vows and the saintly odour of piety… hiding behind it for comfort and succour. Maybe he really even believed in it. But what good did that do him? Gods, religions… they were either there to keep people in check, or to keep people believing that they were valid, and safe, and that it was all right to ignore everything in the world that wasn’t safe. Even the dwarves, with the Stone at the centre of their culture… it wasn’t
the same Stone for rich and poor. Tobias might never have been to Orzammar, but he knew that much. Their whole world was based on strict castes and classes, as immutable and immovable as the rocks around them. They didn’t need the Chantry, because being a dwarf was practically a religion in itself.

And these superstitions… who needed those? Why fear shadows and strange noises in the dark, when you didn’t even need to be a mage to know that demons were real?

He suppressed a shudder, and glanced towards Anders. He hadn’t spoken since they entered the mine. He walked stiffly, his eyes alert and his gaze darting to every shadow, every corner… like he was waiting for something horrible to happen.

Well, it usually does when he’s around me. Guess I really know how to show a man a good time.

The prickle of anticipation ran down Tobias’ spine, an unscratchable itch between his shoulder blades that grew worse with every crunch of footsteps on the gritty soil. He lengthened his stride, moving to the front of the group, listening to their movements behind him and yet feeling as if he was being drawn deeper into the mine, his face fanned by a warmth that seemed to come from deep within the darkness.

“Who wants to play *I Spy*?” Isabela said after a while, eliciting a chorus of groans. “I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with—”

“Rock,” Varric said shortly. “The answer is going to be ‘rock’, Rivaini.”

She pouted. “It might not have been.”

Tobias took a deep breath. The air was stale, foul… hot. The torch that Isabela’s lad was carrying guttered and went out, to a series of curses and complaints. He started fiddling to relight it, but hadn’t got halfway through the task before Anders had pulled a bright ball of magelight from the air. It cast an eerie, pale glow around the tunnel, highlighting the fading echo of panic on his face—a look that Tobias felt strangely comforted to see, because it matched his own lurch of terror so well.

Ever since the Deep Roads, darkness had felt so much heavier. He caught Anders’ eye briefly, and knew that he understood that feeling, and knowing that helped just a little bit.

He cleared his throat. “Let’s get those torches lit. We’ll want all the visibility we can get. It’s not smugglers… if it was smugglers, or slavers, or even those bloody qunari outcasts, we’d be seeing more mess down here. There’d be bottles, or noises… *something* to show where they’d been.”

“Hawke’s right,” Isabela agreed, though he wasn’t entirely sure why she felt she had to say so. “You two—get those lights up!”

The female Carta dwarf looked nervously up and down the tunnel, her face lent a greenish hue by Anders’ magelight, and her eyes were like dark saucers.

“If it ain’t that,” she said tentatively, “what *is* it?”

The smell of sulphur flared against the rocks as Isabela’s boys struggled with their dwarven matches, finally coaxing two fresh torches into flame.

Tobias tilted his head, peering into the blackness ahead of them.

“Dunno,” he said. “But let’s hope it bleeds.”
The first hints were the bodies. Some of Hubert’s workers, probably—and quite possibly a few other unfortunate souls—reduced to dismembered, charred pieces of flesh, with the whitish ends of bones poking out through piles of scorched meat, and other, older skeletal remnants crushed to powder beneath them.

“Something feeds here,” Fenris observed darkly, wrinkling his nose at the sour smell that hung in the air.

The torchlight glimmered on his pale hair, shadows shivering against the rocks that surrounded them. Varric said something dry about messy dining, but Tobias wasn’t listening again. He was aware of Isabela’s lads looking scared and sullen, and the Carta dwarves getting shifty, eyeing up the way they’d come—and any other possible exits to dash for in a hurry—and he was very aware of the pallid, sweaty cast to Anders’ face.

Dark. Dark and heavy and thick, like it’s choking you and you can’t get out… you’ll never get out. Never get out again. Maker… pull yourself together! Don’t need both of you curling up in the corner, gibbering….

“Darkspawn do that,” one of the brawny lunks said, his fingers whitening on the torch he held, and his eyes glittering like nervously flitting chips of quartz in his craggy face. ‘They pull people apart an’ eat ‘em. What if the miners broke froo into the Deep Roads, eh? Whole place could be swarming with the buggers….”

“Darkspawn don’t eat people,” Anders said quietly. “The taint sustains them. They do… horrible things… but not this. This was something else.”

The lunk narrowed his eyes. “How d’you know what darkspawn—”

“He spent a long time in Ferelden,” Tobias cut in. “That’s sort of what we do there. Dogs, cheese, and Blight lore. All right?”

The man looked slightly sulky, but he shut up, even if there were a few stifled mumbles. Tobias was fairly sure he caught the word ‘robe’. It wasn’t the time or place to do anything about it, however, and he motioned towards the fork at the end of the tunnel, where the stale billow of air spoke of another ventilation shaft, and possibly the junction of another cut back up towards the surface.

“This way. Whatever it is, it’s bigger than a deepstalker, so let’s keep our eyes open.”

They found it right down in the mine’s guts, well past the main shafts and chambers. The Bone Pit had grown and changed over time, a grossly attenuated tangle of tunnels and hollowed-out places, and there were all manner of shafts sunk down from the quarry levels, honeycombing the entire place. According to Varric’s map, they led out eventually to the other side of the cliff, where rumour had it that a series of ledges and cuts led down to the shore, making the mine—like so many others in the area—a prime site for smugglers and slavers.

Businessmen like Hubert spent a great deal of coin on paying people like Hawke to clear such places out, and, in many cases, it wasn’t worth the smugglers’ trouble to come back too often… but, in this instance, it looked like the last cartel to try their luck had met a very nasty end.

They unearthed another feeding site, or killing ground, or… something. It was hard to tell exactly what it was through the number of bits of limbs and splintered bone. Several bodies, quite well decomposed, littered a small cavern, and there were a number of weapons either broken or discarded
and half-rusted, half-buried in the filth. Varric toed through the mess, and gave his opinion that—
whoever the poor bastards had been—they’d died armed to the teeth. The discovery of a huge haul
of lyrium, a little further back, packed into a hollow that had been cut from the rock, seemed to
suggest that they hadn’t been killed for their stock.

“Huh.” Varric wrinkled his nose. “I owe you a beer, Hawke. Looks like there were lyrium
smugglers down here after all. There’s crates of the stuff back here. Potions, dust… gotta be at least
three hundred pieces’ worth, in market prices,” he added thoughtfully, with the kind of look on his
face that spoke of brief but intense mental arithmetic.

“Much more than that, if you know who to sell it to,” Anders said, his tone bitter and hollow. “Half
of the tunnels under the bloody city were built by smugglers. I’m not surprised to see nests this far
out, too. I bet people like Hubert turn a blind eye.” He looked up, throwing a baleful glance around
the group. “You know the Chantry finances it, don’t you? It’s the templars. They crave the stuff, and
if they get cut off… well. Not much they wouldn’t do to get it. They get addicted. Drives them mad.”

The Carta dwarves fidgeted awkwardly, and Isabela’s boys didn’t look much happier. Fenris
muttered something about it being ‘no great wonder, given that templars are tasked with keeping
mages in line’, and Tobias fought the urge to start smashing heads together. The darkness down here
felt thick and cloying, and the lyrium was probably the source of the mild prickling he felt beneath
his skin. He wasn’t unfamiliar with its call: the hum that was just a little too disturbing to be called a
song.

“Let’s just get on with this, shall we?” he said brusquely, pushing his way past the others, and
pushing on towards the acrid sourness that, he fervently hoped, was the way out.

A little after that, they found ventilation shafts, and the site of an older part of the mine that had once
extended even further down. Warm air belched up from it, up towards the rocks and ledges that
arched away, leading towards the surface… and something else seemed to curl up from the depths,
too. There were low, echoing sounds, like growls or deep, roiling breaths, and it caused some
consternation amongst the party. Isabela’s boys started muttering about darkspawn again, and Varric
had to get sharp with the Carta dwarves when the male started to panic.

Privately, Tobias thought the dwarf had good reason because, as soon became apparent, the thing
making the noises turned out to be a dragon.

An actual, Maker-sworn bloody dragon.

A fucking big dragon, made entirely of talons and horns, and teeth almost as long as a man’s arm.

Tobias didn’t waste precious minutes on speculating how it had got down into the mine, although
later—once the screaming and the fire and the whole potentially-imminent-death thing was over—it
seemed logical that it had come in through the cuts from the rear side of the cliffs, probably from the
higher reaches of the mountains, and been drawn to the warmth in the mine’s lowest pits. From there,
it had risen to feed… and possibly to get annoyed when it couldn’t get out.

Either way, it wasn’t in the best of tempers when it confronted them. They fought it on a ledge of
solid, flat ground at the neck of the cavern it seemed to have made its home, with torchlight glaring
off the quartz in the walls, and gouts of flame lighting up the tunnels.

It was a hard fight, too. Hard enough to make the memories of killing an ogre seem like child’s
play… not that Tobias made the comparison at the time. He was busy drawing the creature along the
cavern, trying to make it stretch its neck out until he could get in one good force blast and slam its
head against the rocks.
Unfortunately, a stunned dragon proved to be an angry dragon, and one not without the use of its wings. It tried to take off, and the sheer strength of the movement knocked most of them flying. A few good shots from Varric—and the nasty little explosive canisters Bianca was packing—tore a hole in one wing, but as the beast came down it got a hold of one of the Carta dwarves, and she ended up tossed across the floor in two pieces.

Isabela danced distraction while Fenris went for the dragon’s underbelly, his lithe, white-blue form a smoke of lyrium and danger that ghosted against the darkly burnished scales. Anders worked its head, bolt after bolt of magic popping at its eyes to keep it blind, while the rest of them followed the elf. Tobias could almost taste the power that flared from his brands, and he was grateful for the steel in his fist, relying on it more than his own magic as he rushed again at the dragon’s massive body.

It wasn’t impenetrable. It couldn’t be. If Nevarran dragon-hunters had brought the bastards to near-total extinction, logic said you could kill them. It was merely a matter of perseverance.

Of course, that wasn’t a comforting thought… particularly when Fenris went flying across the rocks, his sword flung from his grasp, and blood pouring from his nose. Tobias yelled for him, aware of one of Isabela’s boys going down too, and aware of the terrible scream the dragon gave—a roar of such condensed fury that he suddenly wondered whether it was the only one of its kind down here—but there was little he could do. His whole world had been reduced to the greyish-red scales and thrashing body ahead of him, with the rank heat of the creature’s breath and its occasional flames toasting the stone beneath him. The stale air burned his bare arms, and the smell of singed hair filled his nostrils. A flare of light behind him made him turn, and he could see Anders—a slim, fair figure lined with electric blue, wrapped in a haze of terrible power—as he worked on Fenris.

Tobias bared his teeth in a grim smile. If the elf lived, he’d be really pissed off about that.

*If any of us live, mind you….*

With that thought, Tobias gripped his dagger with renewed force, thrust it into the meat of the dragon’s inner thigh—aiming for its softer parts, unshielded by the tough scales on the outer side of its body—and dragged it as far as he could, opening up a long wound that gushed thick, bright blood. The creature’s roar made the rocks shake and, as the great horned head swung around to face him, he balled up every last fibre of his power, pulling the greatest force magic he’d ever known from the utmost pit of his ability.

It felt like he’d ripped his own body into pieces, and he heard Isabela swear as she was knocked on her back and winded, caught in the peripheral blast of the spell, but still… a full-grown dragon’s head could hit the ground much harder than he could hit *it*, and it bought them a few seconds. Varric howled with glee as one of his arrows took out the dragon’s left eye and, with the mutilated socket bleeding copiously, it struggled to fend them off.

Tobias had the killing blow, if such a thing could be delineated amidst the messy, torturous business of bringing the beast down. His dagger could barely tear deeper than the skin, but Fenris’ sword—a far bulkier weapon than he was used to although, he found as he picked it up from where it had fallen, much lighter than it looked—proved the perfect depth of blade. It was just a matter of avoiding the crippled beast’s last dying flames, and piercing through the back of its skull. Repeatedly. And messily.

Not quite the dramatic end the bards would have people believe, Tobias thought, as—weak-kneed and with a patter of unexplained little lights dancing at the edges of his vision—he half-climbed and half-fell off the back of the beast’s neck… only to find that everyone was watching him.

He swallowed heavily, aware of how thoroughly drenched he was in sweat, and glanced over his
shoulder at the enormous corpse. The smell of blood hung over everything in the cavern; even the rocks looked wet with gore.

Panting, Tobias jerked his head towards the dragon. “Is that pissing thing actually dead now?”

“Pretty thoroughly, I’d say,” Isabela observed, wiping the back of her wrist across her forehead.

Like the rest of them, she was smoke-streaked, bloodstained, and knackered. And they were the lucky ones. Tobias looked to the rock behind which Anders had dragged Fenris, but neither was there. The elf had staggered to his feet, and was surveying the aftermath. Tobias held out a hand, offering him his sword back.

“S’lighter than I thought,” he said, noticing the unsteadiness with which Fenris came forward to take it, clutching at the blade like it was the only anchor in a bobbing world.

“It is well balanced,” he croaked, his face sheened with sweat, and those pale green eyes unfocused. “You… finished it.”

“Don’t sound surprised.” Tobias tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace, his lungs burning for air and his head still spinning. “S’what I do, isn’t it? Isn’t it, Varrie?” He turned to the dwarf. “Kill unexpectedly aggressive things that are bigger than me? S’my… wotsit… thing. Thing I do.”

Varric gave a short, bitter chuckle. “Huh. Yep… this is going to outdo that ogre story, for sure.”

Tobias nodded hazily, trying hard to hold onto what was real. He suddenly seemed so incredibly thirsty, and he tried to wet his lips with a parched tongue.

“You all right?” he asked Fenris, squinting with concern at the elf’s blurry face. “You were—”

Fenris’ mouth tightened, his eyes growing cool and guarded in spite of his evidently lingering injuries. “Yes. I’ll be fine.”

“Anders,” Tobias murmured, half to himself as he turned, peering around the cavern.

The familiar flare of healing magic called to him through the puffy clouds of this swift and overwhelming fatigue, though he stumbled a little bit on his way across the blood-slick ground. Voices jumbled in Tobias’ ears, and he winced at the sight of the Carta dwarf’s corpse. Varric stood next to her surviving comrade, his hand on the dwarf’s shoulder.

“What d’you want to do, Leske? We could take her back.”

“Nah.” The Carta dwarf shook his head, his face a curious mix of sorrow and complete pragmatism. “What’s the use in that? Leave her here. With the Stone.”

Varric nodded. “All right. Is there… anything specific you need to do? I don’t know, a pile of rocks, or a prayer, or—”

“Huh? How the rut should I know?”

“Well, don’t ask me. You were born in Orzammar, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but….”

Tobias left them to it, and moved unsteadily to where Anders was healing one of Isabela’s boys.

“’nything I can do?” he offered.
Anders glanced up, his expression oddly impersonal, and nodded curtly at the ground. “Sit down. Before you fall down. I’ll get to you in a minute, once I’ve set this leg.”

Tobias opened his mouth to protest, only to find that he was already obeying.
It took a long while to get back out of the mine. There was the matter of healing the injured, scouting out the rest of the tunnels and ensuring everything was clear… and then looting everything worth taking from the lyrium smugglers’ den, and the corpse of the beast itself.

Varric swore he knew a guy who could see it dealt with properly—naturally, the guy knew a guy who knew a smith who said he could work dragonbone, dragonscale, and all the rest of it—so they spent an age wrenching as much as could physically be butchered from the dragon. Tobias found it odd, and maybe a little unnatural, to watch the thing being stripped down to its component parts. It smelled terrible, too.

Anders commented quietly that it was the sulphur; something to do with the fumes dragons could produce inside their bodies, and then ignite and expel as fire. Somehow, Tobias wasn’t remotely surprised to find he knew that.

“Did a lot dragon-slaying when you were with the Wardens, then, did you?” he asked, mainly to take his mind off the fact Anders was touching him; those cool, impersonal hands running over his arm, healing up the scratches and abrasions that, somehow, were the worst he’d managed to walk away with.

“No. I read it somewhere,” Anders said distantly, as his healing magic flowed between them. From one body to another, Tobias thought, trying to pretend that the smell of warm copper enveloping him and the soothing tingle of power under his skin were just business, and not the potent and symbolic intimacies they felt like. He does this for everyone. Don’t be stupid.

He does it for the whores, and the beggars, and… and even Isabela, whenever she catches something nasty.

He blinked and swallowed heavily, trying hard not to think of that fleeting, broken-off story about a Fereldan brothel and a chance encounter. A runaway mage… a different man. Dark limbs wound around pale skin, and the crackling bloom of electricity between them. Was it stupid to feel so envious of her?

“I did a lot of reading when I was at the Vigil,” Anders added thoughtfully, the flare of pale energy that reflected back across his skin making his cheeks seem gaunt and his mouth look thin, until the hollow shadows around his eyes were the darkest, widest point of his face. “There was a huge library. About half as big as the Circle Tower’s, probably… but with more variety.”

“Hm.” Tobias winced a little, first at the feeling of his skin knitting, and then at the sensation of Anders wiping the remnants of blood away with a cloth. “Somehow, I thought what you lot did was more about thrashing darkspawn than curling up with a good book.”

“You’d be surprised,” the healer said mildly. “I suppose Commander Caron just preferred to keep me where he could see me.”

Tobias opened his mouth to prompt further, intrigued by this rare mention of Anders’ former life—
and the Orlesian commandant he’d clearly disliked so intensely—but, as if he’d realised that he’d accidentally let something slip, Anders smiled weakly and dusted his palms together.

“There,” he said, with the air of a man drawing in on himself, and drawing a line beneath the subject. “All done. We can get out of here now, right?”

“Best idea I’ve heard all day,” Tobias agreed. “Soon as we’ve finished getting all the gear back up top. Um… maybe you could go on ahead? Check it onto the cart for me? I’ll follow on from back here.”

Anders looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, shadows of fatigue etched around his eyes, and then he nodded.

“If that’s what you want.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Tobias assured him. “Got to make sure these crooked bastards don’t try to skim on me, haven’t I?”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Anders’ mouth. It was plain that he knew what Tobias was doing but, despite that, he seemed to appreciate the gesture… and he took the opportunity to leave the mine’s stifling, muggy darkness behind him with such alacrity that Tobias was almost surprised not to see him break into a run.

Then again, by the time the jobs were done, Tobias was feeling pretty much the same way himself. The awareness of ton upon ton of rock over his head made his back itch and his head feel light, and a constant sweaty dampness marked his palms. All in all, it took hours just to haul everything back up to the surface and get the cart packed and, by the time they were ready to start heading back into the city, the sun had already half set.

The air was cold—laced with a hint of heavy frost—but Tobias still drank it in like it was nectar. He loitered at the mine’s entrance, waiting to see everyone was out safely, and then fell with relief into line at the back of the group, just behind a very morose, very tight-lipped Fenris.

Anders was sitting on the back of the cart, his head bowed and his feet swinging as the oxen lumbered into motion. The reddish cast of the dying sunlight touched his hair gently, while the breeze ruffled his coat.

Tobias watched him until he raised his head again, turning his face to the last of the light.

Maker’s breath... would I stop feeling like this if I could? I know I’m tired—we’re all tired, and battle-sore, and there was a fucking dragon, which you don’t see every day and I am not telling Mother about—but... but it’s more than that.

It’s more than anything.

He let out a deep breath, forcing the air from his lungs, and grew suddenly aware of Fenris, still padding stiffly beside him, and still scowling.

“How d’you feel?” Tobias asked, entertaining a mischievous streak of cruelty. “That was a nasty blow you took. Cracked a few ribs all right, not to mention your head. Lucky we had a good healer on hand, wasn’t it?”

The elf glared at him, his pale green eyes darkened by the sunset, and his white hair flaming to gold.

“I have withstood worse pain. My life with Danarius saw to that.”
Ahead, the cart’s wheels sang with creaky regularity, and several pairs of feet crunched in mismatched rhythm along the gritty path.

“Yes,” Tobias said, with implacable cheerfulness, “but, this way, you don’t have to waste time recovering from it. That’s useful, isn’t it?”

Fenris growled softly; a grumble of frustration and annoyance that he barely bothered to hide before the wind snatched it away.

“If you expect me to prostrate myself with gratitude before the abomination, Hawke, you will have a long wait.”

Tobias shrugged, unable to entirely stifle his smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it. I was just saying, that’s all. Just… thinking aloud. Really, though,” he added, glancing at the elf and his blood-spattered armour, “really seriously… I wanted to know you were all right.”

Fenris snorted, but his rigidity seemed to ease just a little. “I will be sore for a while,” he said, glancing gracelessly in Anders’ direction. “But I am alive.”

“Well,” Tobias began, “that’s—”

“Next time you chose to embark upon some reckless folly,” he added sharply, “I will be doubling my rate of pay.”

Tobias grinned. “Oh, Fenris… really? And here I was, thinking you just tagged along because you liked me.”

The elf scowled at him and, ahead of them, the cart driver tickled his whip across his team’s shoulders.

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The walk back to the city was long and painful, and it wasn’t even over once they had Lowtown’s worn, familiar streets under their feet. The cart had to be taken to Varric’s warehouse, the goods unloaded, everything tallied and counted, then shares worked out and profits calculated.

Tobias shifted his fair share of heavy sacks, crates, and barrels, then slumped against the rough wooden wall, his eyes half-narrowed, and let the dwarf get on with business. It was funny, he thought: the place was little more than a barn, right on the edge of the foundry district—tucked between two manufactories, and almost impossible to notice from the outside, like a narrow and unimportant splinter wedged in amongst the smoke and grime—and yet Varric had never had an ounce of trouble with thieves or vandals.

He watched his friend bustling about the place like a beringed, hairy mother hen—a hand on a shoulder here, a pat on the back and a quiet word there—and watched the assorted lackeys and employees dancing attendance. Most of the people who worked with Varric were Lowtown rats; many were either ex- or almost-ex-Carta (Kirkwall, as a port city in the wake of King Bhelen’s reforms, seemed to be a good place for those escaping Orzammar politics and, by extension, the long fingers of the crime cartels), small-time smugglers, or alienage elves with quick hands and knife scars. And then there was Varric himself at the centre of it all: the spider in the web, the puppet-master, with his quill and parchment and his mind like a steel abacus.

Tobias folded his arms across his chest, rolled his neck and winced at the sore and cracking muscles,
and glanced along the wall. They were all just waiting now. Isabela’s lunks were sitting on upturned crates and looking gormless while she cleaned her fingernails with a wickedly curved dagger; Anders was leaning against a wooden column near the door, his face turned wistfully to the thin falls of light that ventured through the high, small windows… and Fenris was keenly watching Varric. The elf’s green eyes were narrowed, his upper lip slightly pinched, and dried bloodstains still marked his face and armour.

In a funny sort of way, Tobias wanted to smile. It gave them a strange solidarity, this waiting. Lining up, sore and beaten, waiting to be paid… it was like the end of a long day of farm labour back in Lothering, and he remembered standing in line with Carver, the back of his neck hot and itchy with the day’s sun on it, sweat drying on his shirt as they all waited for their pay. It had been a sort of rite of passage, he supposed: you did the work, got your coin, and spent most of it on ale with the same mouthy, ribald bunch of morons you’d been working alongside all day.

Of course, back on old man Barlin’s farm, no one had ever died. Not like the dwarven woman whose bloody, two-piece corpse still kept flashing behind Tobias’ eyes. They had just left her in the end; there wasn’t much else they could do. He’d been surprised at how little she looked like a real person any more: just two lumps of scorched armour with meaty, fleshy parts poking out.

The other dwarf, Leske, seemed to have taken it far too well, like maybe he was used to not feeling anything, and accepting death and horror with simple, mechanical compliance. Tobias supposed that meant that at least some of the things he’d heard about life in Orzammar for the casteless were actually true. Either way, Leske was the first to get a big bag of coins as Varric started divvying up the payroll, and those of the rest of them still hanging around straightened up like dogs awaiting meat.

“All right,” Varric said, checking off a last note in his ledger. “So, that’s expenses settled… less forty-five silvers cart rental, plus the driver’s tip…. Good thing we pulled in a nice haul, otherwise cutting this five ways instead of four would’ve hurt.”

Isabela smiled. “I just knew you liked having me around, Varric.”

“You’re the sunlight in my noon, Rivaini,” he replied, not looking up from the parchment. “Rance? Pay the lady.”

A dwarf with sandy red hair and slightly runny blue eyes shambled nervously up to Isabela, and presented her with a large coin pouch that jangled encouragingly. She grinned as she weighed it in her hands.

“Ooh! Can I have that knife we found on that dead smuggler, too? Well, what was left of him. You know. The one with the red stone in the hilt?”

Fenris made a small, irritable noise in the back of his throat, and Isabela wrinkled her nose at him.

“What? It was pretty.”

Yeah, pretty…. Tobias smirked. Isabela knew a good deal when she saw one—and a rare stone. The dagger she referred to had been pretty much all that was left on one particular pile of smoked meat, but it was very likely an old Tevinter piece: runed hilt, black leather sheath, and a perfect ruby set into the pommel. If it hadn’t been so impractical for actually stabbing people with, he’d have nicked it for himself.

Varric winced and shot him a quick glance. Tobias shrugged.
“Why not?” he said, ignoring the pull in his aching shoulders. “There’s plenty of goodies to go around, and that’s not touching on the lyrium, or what we make off the dragonbone. Anyone else want anything specific?” he added, turning to look at the others.

Fenris snorted. “Just the coin. I have no use for the rest of it.”

“Fine. Anders?”

The healer blinked and looked up guiltily, then shook his head. “What? No. No….” He frowned. “What are you doing with the lyrium? I mean—”

“It’s not going to the Chantry.” Tobias said decisively, aware of the prickly silence that settled after those words left him, and the various odd looks he received from the assorted faces that turned towards him. “And not to the bloody dust-sniffers, either. That’s final.”

A few of the assorted mercs and lackeys shifted nervously, glancing at Varric. The dwarf’s face had ‘Really, Hawke?’ etched into every feature, but he said nothing.

Tobias knew it was a ridiculous proclamation to make. The idiocy of it—squinandering profits that were potentially enormous, just for the sake of an ideological point—hung heavily in the air, but he refused to back down.

The truth was, there probably wasn’t a smuggler in Kirkwall who would have batted an eyelid at selling lyrium to the Chantry’s back-room dealers. Everyone knew there were well-established routes in stolen and illegal imports; that was how Orzammar stayed wealthy. Oh, fine, so officially the Divine did deals with legitimate suppliers, and there were notable and very lucrative trade treaties drawn up that carried vast political weight. It was all perfectly above-board, and the Chantry took in pure supplies, and held to its position that—via whatever religious codswallop they pedalled to convince themselves of their own superiority—the lyrium became the clean, sanctioned, blessed waters of the Fade.

That way, it kept things nice. It kept the templars doped and under control, and it gave them the edge on mage-hunting. And you had to be a fool to think that system worked across the whole of Thedas, without a single corrupt Knight-Captain, quartermaster, or merchant.

Anders had told him what it was like in the Ferelden tower. If you knew who to talk to, you could get lyrium—potions or raw dust. Some mages who’d studied in big cities struck up contacts and managed to sneak small quantities in; some templars played fast and loose with their supplies, or were happy to dabble in their own shifty deals. And, of course, if anyone was ever caught, it was all blamed on the mages, because they lusted after the power lyrium could provide… instant evidence of rebellion and insurrection, Anders had said. He’d heard rumours of people being made Tranquil over it, though he hadn’t shared details, and Tobias hadn’t pressed for them.

In Kirkwall, he doubted that the mages had that kind of freedom. However, The Gallows was full of traders, full of quiet corners to whisper in… if you had the stones to do it in front of so many templars. No, here it was about the templars themselves: the corrupt ones inside the Order, and the ones who’d either left or been thrown out. They always ended up drifting between Lowtown, Darktown, and the docks, scratching a living like roaches and prepared to do anything for the fixes of dust they needed. Usually, they didn’t last long without the Order to keep them patched up. The addiction that the Chantry had inculcated in them took hold and tore them apart from the inside and, if they knifed some poor sod in the street, or robbed some unlucky merchant’s stall, well, that was merely a demonstration of their failure to meet the Order’s standards of moral rectitude.

The thing was, they—and the trade in black-market lyrium that they kept so very buoyant—meant
easy gold. And no one in their right mind walked away from that.

Tobias blinked and glanced at the assembled faces. Leske was looking at him liked he’d just fallen off the boat from Stupid Town, and Varric had assumed an expression of polite, studied blankness which meant that, while he disagreed, he knew better than to actually argue.

“It’s not going to the templars,” Tobias repeated, eyeing both dwarves steadily. “Not on the books, and not off them.”

Varric sighed, and made another mark on his list. “Fine….”

“Then what do you intend to do with it?” Fenris enquired, his voice a low drawl coloured with a slight hint of disapproval. “There are crates of those potions, Hawke. A great deal of power. If you mean to supply the Ma—”

“I’m sure Hawke knows exactly what he intends to do,” Anders said sharply, and Tobias had to bite back his surprise.

He rather liked the feeling of Anders jumping to his defence, but the shimmer of pleasure faded fast as the healer and the elf both proceeded to glare violently at each other, and then turned, as one, to look expectantly at him.

_Huh. Nothing I can say here that isn’t going to piss someone off, is there?_

True, he supposed that the Underground could get a lot of use out of that much lyrium… although Tobias wasn’t entirely sure what they’d do with it. The idea of gifting the potions to Anders for use at the clinic had seemed both honourable and logical, although he said he preferred to avoid the use of lyrium unless it was absolutely necessary, on account of the things it did to Justice. Tobias wasn’t sure he wanted to know the details, but he supposed that, if he gave the stuff to the Underground instead, he would probably end up being responsible for more than a Fade spirit coping an attitude.

_Not that I mind the idea of helping bust a few mages out of the Gallows. That’s fine. Of course, no one’s ever told me how they actually do it. Do they kill templars? It’s easy betting Elias Creer doesn’t mind cracking a few skulls to get what he wants…._

The silence stretched into awkwardness, and Tobias’ head filled with rampant, incongruous, piecemeal thoughts of the shadowy meetings he’d attended with Anders; all those people, brought together at such risk and united by such terrible conviction. The crates of lyrium _could_ serve a bigger purpose, couldn’t they? And he could make it happen.

_They’d have to start taking me seriously then. No more errand boy. No more guilting Anders’ little pet out of some handy coin. Maybe somebody would actually start telling me what’s going on. I mean, it’s not like it’s easy to be part of something so secret that you don’t even find out about half the meetings until they’re over._

He gritted his teeth, ever so slightly aware—as he had been since they carted the bloody crates out of the mine—of the lyrium’s soft, semi-distant hum.

“I said,” Tobias repeated carefully, “that it’s not going to the Chantry, or the dust-sniffers. All right? We have to arrange the sale of the rest of this stuff, too, so can we just get the coin dealt with first? You’ll all get your cuts on the rest of the merchandise when Varric and I do, like always.” He spread his hands wide, forcing a nonchalant smile, and turned to the rest of the group. “What? You don’t trust me? Come on….”

Varric snorted. “Of course we do, Hawke. Pure as the driven mud, that’s you.”
They left the warehouse, each weighed down with their own bag of payment. Isabela was the first to peel off, heading towards the docks with a hearty goodbye and a promise to come by The Hanged Man soon.

“I’d come have a drink with you now,” she told Varric regretfully, jerking a thumb over her shoulder at the tired, sore-looking lunks, “but I told these idiots they could drink The Dog and Dagger dry if we came back in one piece, and I’d like to be there for the fight they’ll probably start.”

The dwarf chuckled. “Heh… Last time you and your boys went on a bender in Lowtown, I heard it took Aveline three weeks to clean up the mess.”

Isabela wrinkled her nose. “That’s an exaggeration. Anyway, that part of the market was ancient. Positive tinderbox. Could have gone up at any time.”

Varric shook his head. “Don’t ever change, Rivaini.”

“I’ll do my best,” she promised, bending to give him a playful kiss on the top of the head that, just for a moment, rendered him both blind and deaf.

Tobias was rather glad that the rest of them got away with a simple wave and a few blown kisses.

“She never does come near here, does she?” he remarked, as they went on their way, passing by the very tall, very tightly locked gates of the qunari compound.

“Can you blame her?” Anders muttered, squinting at the large, broad, grey-skinned qunari who stood by the barred portal.

The creature—because, in all honesty, they looked so far removed from human that Tobias struggled to think of them as men—was evidently aware of them, but he didn’t acknowledge their presence. He stood with his massive arms folded across his bare chest, his monolithic face set into a blank scowl directed at the wall opposite his post, and he never seemed to blink. The heavy, curling horns, the tilted, pointed ears, and the wide swatches of bright red war paint—or whatever they called it; it probably had some word with too many consonants in to describe it, Tobias thought—smeared across his back and shoulders really didn’t do much to dispel the notion of a threatening, foreign being… although he had to admit that Isabela wasn’t the type to get jittery around the strange.

If anything, he was mildly surprised that he’d never heard her crack a joke about what screwing one of them would be like, but saying so right now somehow didn’t seem like a good idea.

Anders frowned as he gazed towards the compound, his face sallow and washed-out, and words still tumbling from him as if he wasn’t thinking about them.

“Anders visibly flinched, as if someone had passed a rotten fish under his nose. “That’s what the Circle does. Takes children away from their parents and tries to remould them. Tells you all you are is ‘mage’… holds that frame up to you, then chops off all the bits that don’t fit in. That’s not
“Perhaps some benefit from it,” Fenris said tartly. “Besides, the Qun does not seek to impose a single form. The tamassran allocates to each kossith the role that fits them best, and encourages them to embrace it. Is it any wonder many choose that over the privations Kirkwall offers them?”

“You were a slave!” Anders protested, his voice rising in pitch as he stopped walking, his boots scuffing to a standstill in the dusty alleyway. “How can you pretend you wouldn’t mind having your every action dictated by the bloody Qun?”

Fenris shot the healer a narrow-eyed look. “The qunari would say that demonstrates the arrogance of basra. To so value independence, and ignore inefficiency.”

“Yeah, because it’s not as if you wind him up deliberately, is it, you bastard?”

Tobias shook his head. “Not every convert is from the slums,” he said conversationally, drawing to a halt by Anders’ side, and ignoring the warning look that Varric threw him. “Look at Viscount Dumar’s son. He was well in with the qunari.”

And he kicked and screamed all the way home… I still have a scar on my leg where the little sod bit me.

Anders puffed out an indignant breath, his eyes clouded with something that looked more than a little bit like the tumult of Justice shifting behind them.

“It’s not… no,” he muttered, his frown deepening as he tried to collect his words and push them out in the right order. “That’s the same, though. Not dispossessed, but just as much a prisoner. He wanted a new life, and that’s what the qunari give their converts, but it’s just exchanging one prison for another. They don’t let you think… find your own answers. That’s wrong.”

He blinked rapidly, and Tobias started to extend a hand to usher him back into the idea of movement, but Anders looked at the gesture like it was a weapon, and so he let his fingers curl on the air, and waited until it seemed natural for them both to start walking again.

Varric and Fenris were waiting at the mouth of the alley, the compound and the tar-bitter smell of the docks receding away behind them, although the elf didn’t seem keen to let go of his entertainment.

“Have you truly examined the Qun?”

“Have you?” Anders snapped.

“Yes. Much of it might surprise you.”

Tobias caught Varric’s theatrical eye-roll, and suppressed a snigger. Predictably, Anders didn’t find any of it funny.

“Surprise me? Really? Which bits, exactly? The parts where they force submission out of people with qamek, or the parts where they neuter mages and keep them in pens?”
A rising thread of hysteria had begun to colour his tone, while a sardonic, bitter sneer had crept onto Fenris’ face. Beyond the alley’s mouth and the dry, pitted walls off which the encroaching argument was bouncing, the evening had grown dark. Workers were heading home, wrapped up against the cold air, and a night breeze snaked across Lowtown’s narrow squares and streets, rifling the inexpertly copied posters tacked to the sides of buildings.

“Have you seen what they do?” Anders demanded, squaring off to the elf, his eyes no longer distant, but fully and sharply focused. “Really seen?”

Fenris lofted his brows, meeting the mage inch-for-inch until it felt as if the sliver of air between them had swelled up, tense and distended like a pocket of highly flammable marsh gas.

And, any minute, we’re going to have flames and people screaming…. 

Tobias cleared his throat, but neither of them were listening to him. Varric sighed gently and peered against the wall behind his shoulder, checking it for anything unduly grubby before he leaned against it. He shot Tobias an “I told you this would happen” look, and crossed his arms.

“Yes,” Fenris said, a harsh burr to his voice as he drew out the word, glaring at Anders. “They cut out their tongues. One wonders why, doesn’t one?”

Anders positively quivered with outrage. “I’ve seen them with their mouths sewn shut! Collars, leashes, blinkers… it’s revolting. They’re treated like beasts, kept chained up, they don’t even—”

“They have no control,” Fenris growled, his stare unwavering, even as Anders faltered on his words, and clenched his hands into fists, as if to disguise the pale shimmer of blue that flickered quickly across his knuckles. “And they acknowledge this.”

Tobias coughed loudly, anxious to break the pair of them up before either actually exploded. “All right, fine, the qunari aren’t exactly broad-minded. But, y’know, they stay in their compound, and —”

“Many saarebas would choose no other way,” Fenris said quietly, glancing briefly at Tobias. “They would die if they were to be turned loose.”

The air in the alleyway suddenly seemed to feel heavy as lead and colder than a midnight privy, and Tobias struggled to swallow past the lump in his throat.

He doesn’t know about that. Don’t tell him about that! Maker’s breath, just don’t…. 

It had been more than two years ago. One of Varric’s eavesdroppers had passed along the information that a Chantry sister wanted something discreetly delivered, and Tobias had thought it would be letters, or lyrium, or… well, anything except a bloody qunari mage. He’d led the… the whatever you called it out through the sewers and into the mountains, only for a bunch of qunari trackers to show up, whereupon unpleasantness had occurred, and he, Varric, and Fenris had been forced to kill the lot of them. Tobias suspected the Arishok knew, just as he suspected that the bitch who’d planned it all had known exactly what would happen. Naturally, she’d disappeared not long after, and all he could get out of the Chantry was some rubbish about her being on a sabbatical of reflection somewhere in the northerly Marches.

The thing was, he wouldn’t have minded if, at the end of it, the qunari mage had taken off his collar and his shackles and shambled off into the proverbial sunset, free to make a new life for himself somewhere… wherever giant ox-men with no tongues could do so, presumably.

But he hadn’t. He’d knelt down in the sand, next to the bodies of those who’d chained and abused
him, and he’d burned himself to death with his own fire magic. And it hadn’t been because he couldn’t control it, or because he was a tainted demon-puppet, or any of the other things the qunari bastards had accused Hawke himself of before they attacked.

The saarebas had calmly, rationally chosen to set himself alight, and Tobias had woken in a cold sweat from nightmares about it for months afterwards.

He swallowed again, hard, as he looked from Fenris to Anders.

*Don’t tell him. I can’t let him think I did that. It wasn’t my fault. I thought he’d run, I swear.…*

“Look,” Varric said genially, breaking his silence, “I bet we’re all hungry. Why don’t—”

Anders’ mouth twitched, a stream of half-shaped mutterings pouring from him, caught under his breath like covert expletives.

“…barely any better than blood magic. S’mind control. Sick. It’s sick… and every last one of you is responsible. Oppressors….”

“Anders,” Tobias warned, eyeing Fenris’ tensing shoulders and stony expression. “Come on. Varric’s right. Why don’t we all just head to the Hanged Man, eh?”

“Have you even heard a word I’ve been saying?” Anders demanded. “Did you listen to—”

“Anders,” he added, as guilt twinged lightly at him, “no one’s saying that things aren’t wrong. It’s just that… you don’t have to take everything so personally.”

The elf’s lip rose in a half-snarl, the hint of teeth and vitriol buried behind a breath that Tobias cut across before it could even be fully drawn.

“Enough! Maker’s cock… can we just go for a drink? Anders,” he added, “no one’s saying that things aren’t wrong. It’s just that… you don’t have to take everything so personally.”

The air seemed to groan under the weight of the atmosphere that so quickly formed, and Tobias cringed inwardly.

*Oh, sod. I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean—*

It would have been hard to try and phrase it more stupidly. He knew that from the first thick boiling
of anger in Anders’ face, though the rage was just a whisper behind his eyes; a flicker quietly drawn behind a veil as the curtains came down and that scowling, impudent expression was replaced with a flat mask of sullen ire.

“Indeed,” Anders said dryly. “Well, I shall just try to keep my delusions of persecution to myself, in that case.”

Tobias winced. “I wouldn’t call it that, but—”

“I would,” Fenris said abruptly, scowling out over the dusk-laden buildings. “If the boot fits….”

“The only boot here,” Anders muttered, “is the one that I’m going to ram into your—”

“Children, please.” Varric put a gloved hand to his forehead and affected a wearily pained expression. “Please… enough. Papa has a headache.”

With equally poor grace, Fenris and Anders both shut up, and the four of them managed an awkward walk towards The Hanged Man. Anders excused himself before they got there, mumbling something about being tired and being bad company, and Tobias desperately wanted to grab his sleeve and make him stay, but he wouldn’t even make eye contact and—without so much as a parting shot—he retreated into the night.

Bugger. Shit, fuck, bugger, damn.

Tobias supposed he could have gone after him. He wanted to. He wanted to do pretty much anything except what he ended up doing, which was slumping in Varric’s suite with a large mug of grog, ignoring the hubbub from the bar, and realising—for the first time since he’d come up from the mine—just how much every single part of his anatomy hurt.

“You should go easier on him,” he told Fenris, as they both sat on opposite sides of Varric’s table, watching the dwarf mingle and, no doubt, starting to put together the first version of the ‘Hawke killed a dragon today’ story.

The elf frowned, and raised his tankard to his lips. “The abomination?”

“Don’t call him that,” Tobias said, almost reflexively. “Yes. He saved your life in the mine, didn’t he?”

Fenris snorted. “That is an exaggeration. My wounds were not that severe. Besides, he did it because you required him to. Not because he is a good man.”

Across the suite, Varric was grinning broadly and talking to a woman in a green dress, his hand on the curve of her waist as she bent low to reach his level. Tobias swilled the rest of his drink around his mouth and swallowed it in a single gulp that he almost immediately regretted.

“And are you a judge of good men now, Fenris? Because I seem to recall having to explain the concept of friendship to you. Remember? That whole idea about trusting people, and accepting that they don’t always want to—”

“You cannot trust him,” Fenris said, his words laced with an uncharacteristic urgency.

Tobias glanced up in surprise. The elf looked slightly drunk, as he often did by this point in the evening; his eyes were dazzling, of course, but less hard, less intense, and the curl of his mouth had softened.
“No?”

“No,” Fenris repeated, leaning forwards earnestly. “The people he associates with… they are dangerous.”

Tobias lofted an eyebrow. “‘Dangerous’? Coming from you? Mr. ‘Claws on my Gauntlets, Kill Seventeen Mercenaries Before Breakfast’? Really?”

The elf exhaled softly as he sat back in his chair, his expression partway between resignation and bitterness.

“We do not always choose what we are,” he murmured. “But we should be able to control what we become.”

Tobias stared at him for a moment. To his left, the woman Varric had been talking to let out a high-pitched peal of laughter.

“That’s… profound, Fenris,” he announced. “I don’t know if I’m drunk enough for profound.”

Fenris grunted from inside his tankard, the metal muffling his breath. “Knowing you, Hawke, it won’t take long.”

Tobias grinned, strangely comforted by the jibe, and reached for the bottle in the middle of the table… with only the briefest passing recollection of Anders’ admonishments about his drinking.

~o~O~o~

The first thing he did in the morning—after dodging Leandra’s concerned pestering with a few mumbled lies about a “spot of bother on a job for a merchant”, and an assurance that the blood on the clothes he’d left out for laundry wasn’t his—was head down to the market.

Hubert was easy to find: manning his stall with his customary façade of false opulence and cheer, and groping the backside of the elven girl he employed when she had her hands full and couldn’t fight him off. He saw Tobias coming, and broke out a wide, greasy smile.

“Ah, messere! So, I hear already from my foreman that you did the job. Indeed, your dwarven friend sent over the account not an hour ago,” he added, indicating with a wave of one hand a sheaf of papers tucked under the strongbox, a freshly broken wax seal on their edge. “No trouble, I take it?”

Tobias glanced across the market at the sea of other traders just beginning to bark their wares. It was chilly, and the crisp air made the colours of cloths and banners stand out brightly against Kirkwall’s muted stonework. The sky was a sharp blue, and thin wisps of cloud chased across it like stained rags.

“There was a dragon down there,” he said bluntly, meeting the merchant’s glassy, insincere gaze. “A large, very angry dragon. There’d been some smugglers, too… my guess is they woke it up. But that’s the monster your workers were scared of—and with bloody good reason.”

Hubert’s mouth grew slack, his lips moving soundlessly as his eyes widened.

“A… a dragon?” he managed at last, grimacing and putting a hand to his forehead, hunching in on himself as if he wanted to keep this news from the rest of the district. “Sacré coeur d’Andraste! What did I do to deserve this, eh? Where did it come from? It’s not true what they say, is it?”

Tobias narrowed his eyes. “What who says?”
Hubert looked up at him with a fleeting flicker of guilt, quickly masked by glibness. “What? No, nothing. Not… not anything at all, really—”

Tobias leaned heavily on his hands, allowing the breadth of his shoulders to cast a shadow over the merchant’s table. Hubert’s redhead girl glanced over at them, looking fleetingly worried before she went back to serving a customer.

“Do not try to screw with me,” Tobias said darkly. “D’you understand? We had one death down there, and it could easily have been worse. If I find out you knew what was in that mine and didn’t tell me, so help me I will rip your sodding arms off and make you eat them.”

The merchant’s jowls wobbled desperately. “I didn’t know!” he protested, raising his hands. “I swear! I mean, you hear stories, maybe… I figured it was smugglers using the tunnels, putting the word about to stop people poking around!”

Tobias exhaled slowly and straightened up. Hubert was Orlesian, and a bloody snake, but somehow he couldn’t raise the impetus to argue any more. He scowled wearily at the man.

“I want my fucking money. And I want twenty percent on the top of it, and that agreement we talked about, all drawn up nice and tight and clear.”

Hubert’s cheeks shrank, and he winced in exactly the same way he might have when telling a customer he simply couldn’t knock any more off the price he was asking. “Now, messere… I am but a small trader….”

“Bollocks,” Tobias said flatly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, so that the dagger sheathed at his hip was angled ever so slightly towards the merchant. “We had a deal. The deal did not include dragons.”

Hubert’s mouth turned down at the corners, and he wrinkled his nose. “Oui, but— I mean, I have the paperwork, and everything is agreed, but I cannot just—”

“Twenty percent on the top. Or,” Tobias continued nonchalantly, “I will go and tell every cheap Fereldan worker in this city that there is a nest of dragons down there and, because they are all a superstitious bunch of dog-lord bastards, you won’t get a single one to work for you, and you’ll have to pay two-thirds over your usual rate to get local labour. Does that sound fair?”

Hubert’s dark gaze congealed into a look of cold hatred. “You drive a hard bargain, Serah Hawke.”

Tobias smiled thinly. “Oh, I’m just getting started, my friend. Like I said, there were smugglers down there at one point. I’m sure Knight-Commander Meredith would be fascinated to know who owned the spot where they were keeping their contraband lyrium.”

“Maudit enfant de chienne….” Hubert grumbled, and spat on the ground, scuffing his boot irritably at the stones.

“Twenty percent?”

“Ten!”

Tobias grinned crookedly. “Eighteen.”

“Twelve percent,” Hubert growled. “And I’ll up your stake in the mine to forty. Take that, or I’ll report you to the Chantry.”
The grin began to solidify on Tobias’ face, though he masked it well.

*Shit… didn’t think that one through, did I? He can’t know. Practically nobody knows about me, except people I’ve— Isabela’s boys wouldn’t have said anything, would they?*

*Mind you, I guess it depends how much coin you throw around. No one has secrets forever in a town like this…. *

Hubert folded his arms, tipping his head back so he could manage to look down his nose at Tobias.

“I’m sure the Knight-Commander would rather take the word of a respectable merchant over a *petit escroc* like you. Besides, everybody knows you associate with that Fereldan hedgemage in Darktown. Your kind always stick together, no?”

Tobias stared levelly at the man. “Hmm. If you know *that*, I bet you also know how many other friends I’ve got in this city. You really think you can threaten me like some scared little boy just in from the pumpkin farms?”

It wasn’t an entirely idle boast. If the merchant tried anything, they both knew he’d have to be sure the templars would roll out before Tobias—or any of Varric’s elusive little helpers—could get to him… and that was probably pretty good motivation to keep anyone on the straight and narrow.

All the same, Tobias’ pulse beat a quiet tattoo of anxiety at the base of his throat as he stared Hubert down, counting in his head how long it took before the man finally gave up and, exasperated, threw his hands into the air.

“All right, all right… fifteen percent. *Merdique con!*”

“Oh, good. We have a deal.”

Tobias smiled and held out his hand, which Hubert shook bitterly. He stood over the man and watched him sign and date the paperwork, and count out the coins and, finally, Tobias walked away from the market with a goodly weight of gold in his pockets, and the promise of some kind of regular income from the mine in future. Admittedly, it also landed him with the headaches of keeping the place going—and Hubert had made it abundantly clear that he would also get the responsibility of keeping the workers in line—but it wasn’t a bad pay-off. It eased some of Tobias’ worries about the estate, which still loomed large ahead of him, and the myriad of bills, cleanings, refurbishings, and running costs that the bloody place was going to incur.

Still, he felt positively cheerful as he crossed Lowtown. By mid-morning the sky was so bright that it made his eyes water if he looked at it for too long, and yet Tobias couldn’t quite resist the temptation. Standing on top of the old crenellated wall that marked the top of the dockyard district, he could see all the way across the harbour to the Twins, and their dull bronze patina—he’d always wondered whether it was maintained by magic, or by teams of really unfortunate workers—glimmered in the sunshine. Ships moved in slow diagonal patterns, working through the business of docking, unloading, or departing, and he breathed in deeply as wistful thoughts tugged at him once more.

*You can go anywhere from a busy port. Sail to Antiva, Rivain… go so far north there’s nothing but sweltering jungles, or blistering deserts. Do they have those up there? I bet they do.*

…I don’t like the heat much.

*Could go back south. Back to Ferelden. Not Lothering, maybe, but somewhere else. Somewhere not far from Denerim; some little village, some patch of muddy fields where there’s a good tavern and…*
...and what? Farm labour? A living to be made fleecing wealthy travellers who pass through, or pinching stuff off mail coaches?

Tobias sighed, feeling the edges of the fantasy fade. There was no life for him there; not the way it had been. That had all gone when Malcolm died. And what would he do in a city? Probably little different to what he did in Kirkwall, he supposed. After all, most places weren’t that dissimilar. There’d still be guards, and templars, and priests: the Chantry, and its laws. And there’d still be smugglers, thieves, and mercenaries… and it wasn’t as if he had experience at doing anything else. At the end of the day, he was little more than a *petit escroc*, just like Hubert said… if that meant what Tobias thought it did.

*Import-export*, he thought ruefully, letting the salt-and-tar smell seep into his lungs. *That’s me. All I’m good for; moving things around and knocking out the competition.*

It wouldn’t change, that was the thing. He couldn’t believe that it would, anyway. Not yet… maybe not for a long time. Even there, on top of the docks, with the whole open blue-grey of the sea stretching off past Kirkwall’s dark, bleak cliffs, to where a fine white mist coated the horizon… even there, it was as if he could see no further than the city, and he hated every grubby brick of it.

_Because if I want another life, I’ve got to make it for myself, haven’t I? Anyone who’s like me; we have to take the risk. Do it, and damn the consequences… as long as we stay ready to run._

_Funny, really. So many people talk about being scared of mages, but I don’t think they ever know how frightened we are every bloody day._

Tobias blinked, reluctantly letting go of the tails of a familiar dream—a piece of escapism, nothing more—and hopped down, heading towards a quiet and shadowy crossing at the edge of Lowtown’s dockside quadrant.

He found what he was looking for two sidestreets down from one of the cheaper-looking warehouses; little more than a nook of an alley, carved into Lowtown’s yellowed architecture, and from which every track and pathway through the surrounding buildings was visible. From the warehouse doors that opened further along the street, men came and went, carrying crates and sacks that bore both Kirkwall import marks, and the stamp of an Antivan trading company. The smell of lanolin, dust, and grease overlaid the sharpness in the air, and no one even spared him a second glance as he sidled up to a small door and knocked gently upon its peeling wood.

The bolt scraped, a key rattled, and the door opened a few inches, affording no view of what was inside, save for shadows and a vague shape within them.

“Yes?” asked a female voice, apparently irritated by the intrusion.

Tobias smiled cheerfully. “Morning, Mistress. I’d like a word, if you’ve got time.”

The door opened further, and Selby scowled at him.

“Serah Hawke. Here’s a surprise. What d’you want?”

He let the smile stay fixed on his face, and tried not to think of how much she reminded him of a bitterer, more angular version of his mother.

“Wanted to have a word with a friend of yours,” he said, as she crossed her arms over the front of her high-necked, dark blue dress. “I have something I think you’ll all be interested in.”

Selby’s lips thinned, and she glanced past him to the alleyways beyond. “Anders not with you?”
“Uh… no.”

She frowned, and Tobias did his best not to be unsettled by the assumption that they were always together; especially not after the way they’d parted last night.

_I should have gone to see him first. Maker, I hope he’s all right._

Selby sighed tersely and stepped back, beckoning him hastily inside.

_Yep, nothing like keeping your underground resistance and its safe houses nice and inconspicuous. And this is nothing like it…._

The house was narrow, but clearly extended up over at least one more floor. Tobias found himself in a small, dim room, with table, chairs, and a large wooden dresser taking up much of the space, and a stove burning at the back, with a kettle on top of it. To one side, a slim staircase hugged the whitewashed wall, and a pile of darning—shirts and child-sized socks, by the looks of it—sat discarded on the table. The room smelled damp, but it was warm, and a few bunches of dried herbs hung from the ceiling, along with a thick braid of garlic. Four pairs of boots—at least two of them men’s—had been kicked into a pile by the door, partially obscured by a heavy cloak hanging from a hook on the wall.

“Was you followed?” she demanded, her deep blue eyes narrowed to slits. “It’s careless, just marching down here like this. We don’t usually—”

“No, I know,” Tobias said calmly. “But I seem to keep missing the party invites. Funny, that.”

She shut her mouth abruptly, chewing on the inside of her bottom lip as she looked him up and down.

“Where’s Anders?”

Tobias shrugged, and attempted to mask his growing level of concern. “Clinic, probably. He mentioned where to find you once before, but he doesn’t know I’m here. I think he thinks you’re all suspicious of me,” he added sweetly, as the woman’s frown began to slowly lessen.

“Hmph. I haven’t seen him in a few days. Not since the last meeting. It was… awkward. Is he all right?”

Tobias watched her carefully. The few times he’d met her, Mistress Selby had seemed such a stern disciplinarian, and yet he had a strong sense of how close she and Anders evidently were. It didn’t seem like him to go to ground so completely, hiding even from her.

“He… he’s had a rough few days,” Tobias admitted. “I think. One of the girls at The Blooming Rose was in trouble, and he wouldn’t see to her. I hear Madam got quite cross. And, yesterday, we were up at the mines outside of town. It was… busy.”

Selby scoffed. “Yes, I’d heard that.”

_Oh, great. The stories begin. I’m going to kill that dwarf._

“Is it true?” she asked, after a moment. “The dragon?”

He nodded, and she sucked her teeth.

“Huh. I’ve heard they’ve been seen in Ferelden. Maybe it’s the Blight what brought ’em back.”
Tobias shrugged. “Dunno. The one we met’s pretty thoroughly dead, anyway.”

Selby regarded him thoughtfully, and the small kettle that stood on the stove began to whistle.

“Tea?” she asked, with a lift of her thin, grey brows.

“Please.”

“Sit down. We can talk.”

~o~O~o~

They sat at Selby’s table, beside the pile of darning, drinking watery tea while Tobias recounted the occurrences at the Bone Pit, and the dead smugglers, and the manner by which he’d come into possession of a large quantity of lyrium. Slowly, she seemed to lose the worst of her distrust, and to recover from the fact he’d simply turned up at her door.

“You want to just hand it over?”

Tobias lifted one shoulder in an uncertain kind of semi-shrug, and traced his fingers over the handle of the sturdy earthenware cup she’d given him. “Well… yeah. There’s crates of the stuff. I don’t use it. Anders says he doesn’t touch lyrium if he can avoid it, because of— well, y’know.”

He took a mouthful of his tea, and watched the cool, even way that Selby regarded him. He wasn’t sure what she thought about his awareness of Justice. How much did she know? He wondered whether Anders had told her about the Vigil, and Warden-Commander Caron, and maybe the story of how he’d come to merge with the spirit in the first place.

All those things he won’t tell me.

Jealousy prickled a little at Tobias as he considered it. Sitting here, drinking tea with this woman who was just enough like Leandra to unnerve him, he couldn’t help feeling faced with the fact that she—and probably a lot of other people—had known Anders longer than he had, and no doubt knew him better. They were people the healer trusted, people he’d shared secrets with that Tobias wasn’t privy to… people he might well have talked to about all manner of things.

Tobias shifted slightly in his chair, resisting the urge to ask whether Anders had said anything about him. He cleared his throat.

“Look… I know you’ve only got his word that I’m worth trusting. But I haven’t done anything wrong so far, have I?”

Selby said nothing, and lifted her tea to her lips, which only made Tobias redouble his efforts.

“I’ve shown I’m willing. Gold, time, muscle… whatever you need. We all want the same thing, don’t we? A better lot for mages? So let me help. Properly. Let me in… let me be a part of it.”

He could hear the burgeoning reek of desperation in his voice. Selby just sat quietly, her cup balanced delicately in her hands as she chewed her lower lip.

“A lot of Kirkwall knows who you are, you know,” she said eventually. “And plenty of people wouldn’t be surprised to learn what you are, either. You’re known for what you did for that Dalish boy… and what you and that dwarf friend of yours do for Anders. We both know the Coterie would have dunned him and left him dead in the sewers by now if he hadn’t got protection.”
She took another slow sip of her tea, and Tobias smiled mirthlessly.

“Varric can be very, uh, persuasive.”

“Oh, I’m sure. ’Course… you’ve spent a lot of time at the viscount’s office, ain’t you? And you got that fancy estate as a reward.”

Tobias’ eyes widened. “What? Oh, come on…. That bloody place was my mother’s family home. Her wastrel brother gambled it out from under her. It’s been a derelict wreck for years!”

Selby pursed her lips. “Well, you can see how it looks, can’t you? We have to be careful.”

Tobias tightened his grip on his cup, pressing his palms to its warm sides and trying to quell the rising tide of frustration.

*If this is how the bloody Underground treats everyone who wants to help, then mages are totally sodding shafted!*”

“I thought,” he said slowly, with careful and exaggerated calmness, “that you lot wanted to make things change in this city. I thought you got mages out. Out of The Gallows, out from under Meredith’s boots. Now, if that’s not true, or if you don’t want my help—”

“Your brother’s a templar, isn’t he?” Selby asked nonchalantly.

“Not yet.” Tobias winced. “He’s training, though. Yes. We… we don’t talk anymore. He writes sometimes. Says things are difficult inside the Order. Plenty of them don’t agree with what Meredith’s been doing… and some think she’s not doing enough.”

Her deep blue gaze drifted slowly over his face, examining every flicker of discomfort he was sure he clearly registered. Maker, just *thinking* about Carver was uncomfortable, let alone actually talking about the fragmentation of their family.

“And which side’s your brother on, hm?” Selby enquired. “Does he pity you, or think you’re a monster from the Void?”

*Ouch….*

Tobias tried to hide the fact she’d made him flinch, but he suspected he wasn’t very successful.

“Bit of both, I think,” he mumbled. “He resented us. Me, our sister, and our father. All mages. He was always left out… and he hated that I made a life for us here. Not a good life, maybe, but… I did something. Don’t think he’s ever forgiven me. Not for any of it.”

The heat of embarrassment began to warm his cheeks, and he buried his gaze in the last of his tea, listening to Selby set her cup down in its saucer.

“With what we do… you know what happens to templars who get in the way, don’t you?”

Tobias blinked, unwilling to look up. “Mm-hm.”

“Well? You know—if you want to throw in with us—you have to understand that what we do ain’t pretty. It’s bad business, Hawke. Ugly, messy business.”

He curled his lip bitterly. How long had he been in Kirkwall now? How long since the first night following in Athenril’s footsteps across a shadow-shrouded dock, waiting to lift the cargo off a boat that shouldn’t have been there? How long since the first theft, the first shake-down, the first street
thug he’d killed in a fight?

“I know a bit about that,” he said, raising his eyes to hers.

She nodded gravely. “Aye, I know you do. That’s what makes you hard to trust, boy. Hard to watch Anders trust you, and all… but he does. And you’ve done your part well so far, I’ll grant you. But —”

“But?”

Selby sighed and shook her head. “Things is changing,” she muttered. “I don’t know if— oh, never mind. You’ve got determination,” she added, giving him a dubious look. “I’ll give you that. Look… be at Hamren Osgood’s warehouse tonight. Look for the candle. Elias’ll be there. Bring a sample of the stuff, and have the rest ready to move out.”

Tobias smiled, mildly appalled at the degree of relief that washed through him. Should he be so invested in her approval?

“All right. What—”

“Don’t ask questions,” Selby snapped. “The less you know, the better. That’s the first thing you gotta understand, my lad. You don’t want to know. All right? All of us… we’re just pieces of the puzzle. We do our bit, and we don’t ask for more than that. It’s enough. That’s how things get done, and how people stay alive.”

He drained the rest of his tea and stayed quiet. They talked a little more—Tobias learned virtually nothing from it—and then Selby sent him on his way, and he found himself halfway to Darktown before he thought how odd it was that the Mage Underground should be so like the bloody Qun.

Chapter End Notes

The reference to lyrium as the blessed waters of the Fade is courtesy of the fantastic Gene Dark, in The Sons of Dreams (sequel to Death and the Maiden; check it out for some wonderful material on the templars, Chantry, theology, science - and more!

As ever, big thank you to all those reading, reviewing, following etc. - I am horribly busy at the moment, but your comments and appreciation really cheer me up. :}
Chapter 24

Tobias spent much of the rest of the day on errands in Hightown. Slow progress was inching away with the estate; Varric’s guildmate, Bodahn, had proven to be quite the astute manager, and had already employed stonemasons and carpenters to get the building’s infrastructure habitable. They were making enough inroads that, Tobias had been assured, it would be possible to begin plastering and painting soon after Wintersend, if the weather was dry.

*Oh, good. How thrilling.*

Naturally, Leandra had been ordering trade catalogues from dozens of merchants. She had grand plans for furnishing the place—bringing everything back to the way it had been when she was a girl—and he felt consumed with apprehension at the mere thought. At least, he told himself, paying for it wasn’t such a pressing worry. With the haul from the Bone Pit, and Hubert’s generous contributions, he could afford for her to have all the fabric swatches and flowery, sycophantic letters from commission-seeking Orlesian cabinet-makers that she wanted.

He just had to try not to think about how much more good the money might have done elsewhere.

There wasn’t much going on in town. Tobias kept his ears open, like he always did, and he found a few familiar faces in his travels. Eline Rennick—‘Elegant’, as she’d been known when she used to work the Lowtown bazaar, because most doxies who hawked two-bit potions and snake oils didn’t wear silk petticoats while they did it—had made a good marriage. Freed from the drudgery of work by snaring herself some middle-aged merchant, she enjoyed spending her afternoons swanking around the courtyards and promenades in her best new dresses, offending the city’s great and good with her broad Kirkwall vowels, and her low-cut bodices.

She seemed pleased to see Tobias, anyway, and she was full of gossip. *That* was one thing you could find just as much of in Hightown as the darkest pits of the slums, he supposed. Elegant—he couldn’t stop calling her that, especially now she was powdered and doused in lavender water, with a blue silk ribbon around her neck and a roll of lace in her hair—had heard rumours about murders. *Murders*, she said, leaning forward until the pale, trembling flesh of her breasts threatened to spill out of her gown.

Tobias had snorted, because this was Kirkwall. People killed each other over stale bread. Cabals of Tevinter slavers and renegade blood mages riddled the sewers and hidden corners like woodworm in an old trunk. All the same, Elegant said, she’d heard about a woman going missing, and nothing being found of her but a hand. She pouted when Tobias didn’t look impressed, and she couldn’t have known he was thinking about the Bone Pit, and the dead dwarven woman they’d left down there to rot alongside the decomposed, charred corpses of the lyrium smugglers and the least fortunate of Hubert’s workers.

He said his goodbyes, assuring her it was probably only an isolated incident—didn’t the same rumoursmiths say this woman’s husband had likely as not done her in?—and took his leave.

The sun turned thin in the afternoon, and a cold breeze rifled through the air. He wanted to go down to Anders’ clinic, to talk about the lyrium and the stupid things he’d said the night before, which he hadn’t meant and had come out all wrong… but, equally, he didn’t want to arrive at the meeting in the healer’s company. Tobias was, he told himself, irrationally angry with the man, which was easier to admit to than being angry with himself.

He thought about the Rose, and their Antivan brandy, and Jethann’s beautiful eyes and wicked
mouth… and it was tempting, but not tempting enough. Besides, Tobias wasn’t sure he could face the thought of the elf having just heard the first stories about the dragon. He’d mug and flounce and paw at Tobias’ arms, tell him how impressive his “weapon” was, and he didn’t want to hear any of that. He still hurt from the fight; everything still hurt, despite Anders’ healing, and everything still smelled just a little bit of the damp shadows at the back of the cave.

So, instead, he went to Varric’s warehouse, secure in the knowledge that his friend wasn’t there—he’d be at the Hanged Man by now, probably, holding court in his suite, so everyone knew where to find him—and glared at anybody who looked like they might be curious as to why he was removing six bottles of lyrium from the crates at the back of storage bay.

~o~O~o~

The warehouse in which the Underground was meeting wasn’t much like Varric’s. It was a wide, desolate kind of space, dusty and unkempt. That night, Tobias walked around the block twice before he was really sure he had the right place, and that was stupid. He’d been here before, albeit with Anders, and he knew what he was doing… but it just felt so different.

It was dark, cold, and wet. Rain swirled in soft spirals from a vast, gunmetal grey sky, seeping into every crack and ravine between Lowtown’s close-pressed buildings. Tobias wore a hooded cloak to blot out the worst of the chill, but every time he glanced up, he could see the thin whips of rain slicing down through the narrow gaps between the flattened roofs. The alleys were sodden. Finally, the telltale candle appeared in a small upper window of the warehouse building, and he joined a few other dark figures sneaking their way to the meeting. They seemed to melt from the shadows, appearing like ghosts, and no one met his eye as he moved with them to the rough wooden door.

Tobias hung back, waiting his turn, aware of the weight of the lyrium potions he carried in a bag across his chest. The damn stuff had been itching at his senses all evening. He didn’t know whether anyone else could feel it; didn’t know how many of these people were mages or just sympathisers.

Don’t know anything about anybody… never realised how dangerous that is.

That was a lie, he reflected. He knew. He’d always known. And, when he’d come to these things because Anders had asked him to, he hadn’t cared. The notion of danger hadn’t seemed real or important… but it did now.

The warehouse’s door was opened for the two people ahead of him. As Tobias stepped forward, he saw Selby’s dark blue, iron-hard eyes glitter in the darkness. A candle burned faintly within, her outline picked out in amber-hued shadows.

“You got the stuff, then?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Still want me to come in?”

She scoffed, and motioned him inside, stepping back to let him shuffle through the narrow space.

It wasn’t at all like the first meeting he’d been to. There was no fireplace, no small, warm room full of people who all believed in the same thing. Instead, there was a wide, long, draughty space, the darkness punctured by a couple of torches on the far wall, and knots of people clustered beneath them. Tobias headed over, convinced the shadows had a physical presence that he could feel on his skin, and as he entered the flickering pools of light, he made out the first couple of familiar faces.

Elias Creer was immediately recognisable. Tall, broad, and standing with his hands on his hips, a gaggle of acolytes around him, all apparently engaged in some intense, serious debate. He looked up
at Tobias’ arrival, and smiled brightly.

“Well, well! Serah Hawke!”

Tobias’ heart plummeted towards his boots as Creer moved to greet him, the acolytes splintering away in his wake.

“Indeed,” Creer went on, as he clapped Tobias enthusiastically on the back and pumped his hand vigorously, “it is a pleasure to see you here in one piece, messere… especially after your recent adventures. The Dragonslayer walks among us, no?”

Tobias winced. “I… wouldn’t say that.”

Creer either didn’t hear him or chose to ignore him, and, still with his hand on Tobias’ shoulder, turned to beam again at his abandoned acolytes. They hadn’t strayed far, of course. Tobias recognised Selene, the blue-eyed elven woman, and a couple of other elves in hoods and loose clothes not entirely unlike the garb the street gangs were wearing these days. He cringed at their scrutiny, and just about managed a polite smile.

“Well… I have something I’d like to talk to you about,” he said, aiming the words for Creer alone. “Did Mistress Selby mention…?”

“Of course.” The theatrical sparkle dropped at once from Creer’s face. “This way.”

He turned from the group, leading Tobias to a corner of the warehouse, then up a small set of steps, to a gantry that—during daylight hours, and when the warehouse was in proper service—no doubt served as a foreman’s post. There was a wooden table, two chairs… a candle lantern. Tobias thought privately that Elias Creer always seemed to get himself the choicest spots.

From up here, they could see across the dark floor below. The torches that had been put up served as little islands of light, and Tobias was able to watch the shadowed figures crossing between them. He wondered at that, for a moment. The way they moved, forging paths through the darkness, travelling with purpose and quiet grace… like a game of chess, or maybe like the allegiances and solidarities that the Fraternities formed within the Circle. Plenty of people here tonight knew something about that, didn’t they? And, for mages both escapee and born free, the politics that came with the Enchanters’ little splinter groups still had far-reaching consequences.

Tobias shivered, despite his cloak. He’d pushed the hood back: no sense hiding. People knew his face, knew his identity… knew what he was. That felt liberating, in a peculiar way, although he was almost sure he could feel Malcolm’s ashes spinning in the ground.

“So, Selby tells me you found some goodies down in the dark,” Creer said, fixing him with an expectant look.

Tobias reached into the bag across his chest and drew out a small bottle, its heavy glass almost humming beneath his touch. He passed it over wordlessly, noting the way Creer didn’t seem to shrink from the lyrium. Was he even a mage? If he was, he was far more adept at hiding his power than anyone Tobias had ever met. He could sense nothing from the man, except the vague kind of unease that Creer always engendered in him. He was like something coiled, ready… a perfectly poised and honed creature full of potential, and his sheer sense of waiting calm unsettled Tobias.

Partly, it made him want to respond on the most basic level, to rear up and lock horns, diving into the most immediate kind of territorial pissings. And, partly, he wanted to slink away, because his father’s voice rang loud in his ears, telling him that no good ever came of attracting attention to yourself…
especially when you had something to hide.

“How many?” Creer asked.

Tobias gave him the numbers: how many crates, how many bottles, the likely strength and provenance of the stuff.

“Reckon it might have been smuggled in from a dwarven broker. There was something that looked like an Orzammar stamp on one of the crates, but it was hard to tell. Still, good stuff. I’m planning to keep, say, twelve back for Anders’ clinic. I don’t think he really wants it—he doesn’t use the stuff—but I figure it’s worth keeping in the lock-up for emergencies… as long as no one knows he’s got it.”

Creer nodded slowly, removing the complex little wire cage over the bottle’s stopper, and twisting the cork from its slender neck. A light crackle of power chased Tobias’ skin, raising the hair on his nape. He cleared his throat.

“The, uh… the rest of it, I think you’ll probably get more use out of. It must take a lot of energy to break people out of The Gallows.”

He knew by the way Creer’s dark eyes suddenly centred—as if his attention had been drawn by some aberration on the far wall—that he’d struck a point. Creer sniffed the neck of the bottle and winced, then delicately extended a finger into it, withdrawing it again once the very tip was shimmering wetly.

“That’s true. It does. We… do frequently have need of things like this,” he said carefully, pausing with the taste of the lyrium en route to his lips. “Although many of us would wish that recourse to such powerful magic was not necessary.”

Tobias nodded succinctly, while the memory of how it felt to slam a dragon’s head against solid rock—using only the sheer, brutal force of his own mana—tore in vivid flashes through his muscles. He still ached, still burned with the after-effects of that battle.

Does it feel the same when it’s templars?

He blinked, wishing he could push the thoughts away. He’d used magic in fights before; smashed bandits into rocks, blinded mercenaries with well-placed arcane bolts, even tossed out the odd fireball to even up the odds. There had been the business with the demon and Lady Harimann, and that whole thing with the Dalish… and, Maker, it wasn’t like he hadn’t killed templars before.

That night at the chantry came rushing back then—the recollection of how badly Anders had wanted to save his friend, and the strength of his horror when he saw what Karl had become.

And what he did to the templars who found us there….

Tobias struggled to keep his face blank as he recalled the screams that came from metal mouths, and the terrible, obliterating swirl of Anders’—Justice’s—rage. So much blood. Metal, and blood, and the smell of burnt copper in the air. And yet… there hadn’t been a choice, had there? If they hadn’t done what they had, the templars would have killed them, or thrown them in The Gallows, and—well, it was no choice at all.

It’s necessary. It shouldn’t be, but it is.

“I understand that,” he said quietly, watching Creer put his finger to his lips.

He felt it then: that small, silent shudder of power, like a bright, coiled snake. It whispered mage, and
more than that… a vast ache of magic seemed to tug at the air, rippling beneath unseen bonds.

Creer licked his lips slowly, his eyes growing briefly unfocused. Tobias blinked again, uncomfortably. The Rivaini was a damnably good-looking man, but it was more than that. It was something to do with the way the air itself stiffened between them; the ebb and the pull of magic, and the dark places inside Tobias that it touched.

So. You are a mage after all… but what kind are you?

It wasn’t the killing, he realised, as he watched Creer recork the bottle. Death had ceased to shock him a long time ago. No… not the killing. That was a hazard of life—of this life. The thing was, there was a difference between what he and Anders had done at the chantry—what he’d done to so many countless mercs and thugs—and what happened when the Underground purposely tried to break someone out. It was the difference between collateral and intentional damage, killing because you had to and killing because you believed the bastards deserved to die.

It's the difference between being a crook and an assassin. A murderer.

I've made my peace with one… I don't know if I want to find it with the other.

“Well,” Creer said, raising his brows. “It’s a fine gift, Hawke. You’re sure you want to give it?”

Tobias nodded with barely a breath of hesitation. “Yeah. It’s… important. The Gallows, I mean. Getting people out. You are still doing those runs, aren’t you?”

“Now and then,” Creer admitted. “Not as often as we were. It has become too dangerous. Meredith doubled the guard on the prison, so every run is a gauntlet, much worse than it was when we started. Even with enough lyrium to fuel a full frontal attack on the place, we would lose more than we’d gain, and it is… concerning… to consider the punishments that those we left behind would face.”

Tobias frowned. The other man’s candour surprised him, though he appreciated it. However, what good was everything he was handing to the Underground if it didn’t set mages free? He’d turned over hundreds of sovereigns to pay for forged papers, supplies, and safe passage for runaways—how in the Maker’s name could Creer possibly justify abandoning all of that work?

“Yes,” he began, “but… I mean, you can’t just leave people in there. Especially when they’re so vulnerable. If you have the means to get them out—”

Creer smiled slowly, the torchlight glimmering on his cheekbones. “Ah. I do believe I detect a hint of our friend Anders in your words, messere. Of course. I understand you two are… close.”

There was nothing awkward in the way he said it; just the briefest of hitches before the word. Tobias didn’t even know why he found himself scowling defensively.

“Well, I happen to think he’s right. It could be any one of us that gets put in that place. If Meredith had you chained up down there, wouldn’t you pray for rescue?”

Creer set the lyrium potion down on the little wooden table. The glass clinked against its rough surface, and Tobias felt its hum against his skin. He twitched his fingers irritably as Creer shrugged.

“Indeed. However, you must realise that, sometimes, there is nothing we can do. All that remains for those we are too late to help is an end to the pain.”

Karl’s crumpled body flashed through Tobias’ mind: that, and the whirl of feathered pauldrons and blood-spattered bitterness that had been Anders, running into the night.
“That,” Creer continued, catching his gaze with a hard, intense stare, “is the bitter edge of our quandary. It is no longer enough to save one mage, five mages… it is no longer about individuals, Hawke. We have to ask ourselves, what will it take until they see that incarceration is not the answer? Not the rescue of a few. The only thing that can prove how useless locking mages away truly is, is to show them how flimsy their so-called ‘security’ measures really are.”

Tobias baulked at the utter conviction in the Rivaini’s face, and gritted his teeth. “I’m pretty sure the people desperate to be broken out of that shithole wouldn’t see it like that.”

Creer merely shrugged again. “And if we all die trying? No one has won anything. No… there is a war coming, Hawke. Make no mistake. But,” he said, smiling suddenly, and yet with a tired, resigned sort of look, “your generosity will help many people. We will speak again before you leave; I’ll arrange the collection of the goods, and we will see you rewarded, in some form. You… you are repairing and furnishing your family’s estate, yes?” He waved a hand dismissively as Tobias opened his mouth to protest. “You will need a carpenter, an upholsterer… we have a surprising number of guildsmen in our ranks, you know. And Master Temmen can, no doubt, fix you up with almost anything at less than two-thirds of market price.”

“That’s really not—”

“Nonsense,” Creer said, still smiling as he rose from the table. “We look after our own, Hawke. We always do. Now, I believe we are keeping people waiting. Come!”

And, with that, he was heading back down towards the main floor, the lyrium potion swiftly swept up and tucked into his pocket.

Tobias sloped back down the steps after him, not entirely sure why it felt as if the deal he’d just done was dirtier than anything Athenril had ever paid him for. He flinched at the feel of Creer’s hand slapping him heartily on the shoulder.

“And look!” He smiled warmly, gesturing across the torchlit warehouse floor. “No sooner spoken of than he appears! The wolf in the fable. Anders… it’s good to see you.”

The healer glanced up, caught in one of those pools of warm light, halfway through the act of running a palm over his hair to wipe away the rain.

Tobias winced. Stupid of him, of course. He’d known how likely it was that Anders would be here tonight, how probable that he’d have to find some way of acknowledging his attendance without admitting that he’d gone behind his back, but… he hadn’t been prepared for the weary, dry look on his friend’s face.

“Elias.” Anders nodded to Creer. “Hawke,” he added, the word curiously devoid of inflection, and accompanied by an odd, faintly suspicious look in those dark, guarded eyes. “I see you’ve had a lot to talk about. I’ve just been having a word with Selby.”

Creer squeezed Tobias’ shoulder—an uncomfortably proprietary sort of grip, coupled with a broad, bright smile—and nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes? Good. Isn’t it grand? You brought a true helpmeet to us here, Anders, you really did. Now, if you’ll excuse me a moment…”

And, with that, he moved away into another knot of people, slicing a path through the dispersed little groups; the islands of allegiances and alliances that Tobias had noticed before. He didn’t notice them now. He was watching the echoes of disapproval, concern, and suspicion dance behind Anders’
impassive expression. To anyone who didn’t know him, the only real hint of his discomfort was the
tight line of his mouth, and that could have been attributed simply to tiredness. He did look tired.
Fuck it, he always looked tired, and Tobias was noticing that more and more these days. Every time
they met, it niggled away at the inside of his chest… how tired Anders looked, as if defeat was
edging in on him, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Nothing he’ll let anyone do about it, more like.

There was a lot Tobias wanted to say, but he didn’t have the words for it, and it wasn’t the time or
the place and, anyway, he wasn’t sure Anders wanted to hear it. They got by like this, on not talking
about anything, but the fiction was getting so much bloody harder to maintain.

“I, uh… y’know,” he said, gesturing uselessly at Creer’s retreating back. “Few bottles for you, in the
clinic, and the rest for—”

“I don’t use them.”

“—well, no, but… just in case.”

“Oh.” Anders crossed his arms, the tatty pauldrons of his coat rustling like a threadbare bird. He
glanced after Creer. “Did Elias say anything about The Gallows?”

Tobias bit the inside of his lip, unsure whether anything he said would be perceived as taking sides.

“He, er, he said it’s harder to get in there now. I figured the lyrium potions might help.”

Anders nodded slowly, but he didn’t look as if he agreed. “Yes. Maybe.”

“Well, I thought—”

The healer nodded absently, like he wasn’t really listening, and that was hard to bear. “Hmph. He
doesn’t think we should still be doing those runs. You know, they say the templars have closed off
one of the tunnels. There’s still other ways in, but… what I can’t work out is how they knew. We’ve
always been so careful.”

Tobias groped for something to say, and ended up with a strangled, non-committal sort of noise.

“Uh-huh?”

Anders looked wearily at him. His eyes were ringed with dark circles, the skin there blooming to
greasy, bruised hues with what was either lack of sleep, or the pressure of Justice… or maybe both.

If he was about to say something, he thought better of it, and glanced over to where Creer and a
handful of the others were beginning to pass around cups of the cheap, bitter wine that usually
marked the meeting’s official beginning of business.

Anders turned wordlessly and made his way across the warehouse’s dim floor, his boots scuffing on
the dusty boards. Tobias followed, watching the reflections of the torchlight on his dirty blond hair,
and trying to isolate the smell of soot and elfroot against the gloom. It was harder to do, he realized.
Anders was no longer islanded in his mind, no longer separate from all this, from these people…
from the chaos building under the city’s grim exterior.

Maybe that’s why I’m frightened for him. Is that what this is?

He didn’t have time to contemplate it further. He could hear Creer’s voice—the words ‘dragon’ and
’glorious’ were being put far closer together than Tobias would have liked—and, sure enough,
people had started looking at him.

He smiled weakly, and shot Anders an embarrassed glance, only to find the healer smirking at him with an odd mix of derisory amusement and pride on his face.

“…our very own slayers of mythic monsters!” Creer finished, grinning widely.

Tobias accepted the small cup being pushed into his hand by an elven woman with large, amber eyes, and did his best to ignore the tittering and curious stares. He recognised some of these people—a few merchants, a very minor clerk from the Keep, and one of Aveline’s guardsmen—but plenty of the others were strangers to him.

“It really wasn’t that dramatic,” Anders said quietly, as Tobias noted the space that had been left around both of them: a small ebbing in the flow of people. “It was… messy, more than anything.”

“And loud,” Tobias added, with a small smile as he glanced at his friend, remembering the way those torrents of power had coursed around him, the sheer volume and strength of his magic enough to stifle the air itself. “It was loud, too.”

Creer laughed, and turned the full wattage of his smile on Tobias. “You know how The Bone Pit got its name, surely?”

Behind him, Mistress Selby was making the rounds with the rest of the cups, and a flask of wine. She wasn’t the most cheerful looking woman at the best of times but, at that moment, she might as well have been sucking a lemon.

Tobias wrinkled his nose, recalling Fenris’ words. “They, uh, they used to throw slaves off the minehead in the old days, didn’t they?”

Creer smiled; a thin crescent of triumph. “It was called the Maharian Quarry then. The old Tevinter overseer used to cause slaves to be lined up over the pit, then have each of them push the one ahead over the edge.” He held up his hands, miming a gentle shove forwards. “An inventive cruelty, don’t you think? Quite horrible. They say the man kept a pack of dragonlings, and they would tear the poor unfortunates apart before they hit the ground. Of course, the creatures were meant to have been killed off after the Imperium pulled back… but, I suppose, that beast you did away with might have been a lone survivor. Hidden away, growing fat on lazy smugglers, until our heroes made an appearance.”

He laughed, looking around the group until a few other reluctant chortles were drawn from people. Tobias wished they wouldn’t join in.

“Well,” he said awkwardly, “the dragons are back, aren’t they? Been seen from the Frostbacks to Orlais now, so who knows? It’s a whole new age. Not as extinct as anyone thought.”

Creer’s smile lingered, growing hard at the edges. “No,” he said. “Of course, there is such an advantage in having an enemy believe you are dead.”

His gaze moved slowly from Tobias to Anders, his eyes cloaked with a strange, almost predatory expression. Tobias felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise, caught between an instant, stupid impulse of protective anger, and curiosity at the way Anders merely cleared his throat and, for some reason, looked chastened and embarrassed.

Selby appeared at Creer’s shoulder then, pouring wine and looking stone-faced. That her dour expression was enough to prick the atmosphere that had been forming between the three men said something significant, and Tobias suppressed a shudder, watching with concern as Anders moved
away, going to lean against a wooden pillar nearby. Creer just smiled to himself.

Selby went through the same grim intonation that marked the beginning of every meeting—the memorial to the dead, and the vow to fight for the living—and, for the first time, the words turned Tobias cold inside. He’d never really understood it before, he realized. Not truly. Oh, he’d thought he had… but he’d been wrong.

This wasn’t about disorganised disobedience. It wasn’t about getting people away, or even just being angry at the way mages were treated, and complaining in dark corners.

What was happening here was conscious, deliberate planning; plotting against more than just Meredith, or the iron fist with which she ruled the city.

Creer was right. This was about a coming war.

Tobias stayed quiet for most of the meeting, but he learned a lot. The people who spoke the most were the usual suspects: Temmen, the merchant, and Gethyn, the sharp-faced little firebrand with the attitude problem; Selene, from the alienage, and a handful of other regular conspirators.

I recognise them, and I know what they’re going to say before they say it—because they’re always saying the same damn thing—but does that mean I’m one of them now? It doesn’t feel like it. What do they even see when they look at me? The gullible idiot with the money and the guilt complex? Huh… wouldn’t be surprised….

The blond man whom Tobias had met at the first gathering he’d ever been to—Luc, with the Orlesian accent and the dark tidings from across the border—had been killed somewhere near Ostwick. That was one of the first pieces of news. Something to do with information being passed to templars, or part of the Templar Order: The Seekers. Rumours were running thick, and apparently none of the escapees he’d been accompanying had got away. It was unclear if they’d been taken back to the Circle, or summarily executed; maybe there wasn’t a difference between the two.

Beyond that, as ever, there was politics. Something about elections prior to the rebuilding of the Fereldan Circle, and the suggestion that its new council of Enchanters would be mostly Orlesian, given the foothold Orlais—and its Grey Wardens—had in the country now. A few people cast sidelong looks at Tobias when this was mentioned. He said nothing. What did he know about Fereldan’s Circle, anyway? Something had happened there during the Blight: blood mages, or demons, or something. The entire place had been torched, so people said. The Grey Wardens might or might not have had something to do with it but, of course, if you believed the bards, the Grey Wardens had something to do with everything. In the past few years, there had been a concerted effort to make the Wardens into Fereldan folk heroes—the Bastard Prince and the brave, beautiful daughter of Teyrn Cousland, fighting alone against impossible odds—but, in Tobias’ opinion, the whole bloody lot sounded fishy.

He’d never seen any of it firsthand. Carv had talked a bit about Ostagar. Not much, because they’d fought over him going in the first place—why in the name of Andraste’s arse d’you want to join the army, you stupid prick?—and then the whole thing had gone so completely tits-up after the king’s forces were routed, but he’d come back with battle wounds, and that stupid tattoo, and the gleam of triumph in his eyes, like he’d proved something to himself in the middle of the blood and chaos. Not long after that—barely long enough to get Carv patched up and calm their mother away from an imminent apoplexy—the hellishness of the whole thing had become apparent, and darkspawn started streaming up the valley and… well, after that, they ran.

There hadn’t been the time to take the scenic route, and Tobias had only caught up with the stories once they were already halfway to legends. The Bastard Prince—if that’s what he had indeed been
—disappeared; some said executed by Queen Anora. The fabulous Lady Cousland, whose beauty and glory the bards just wouldn’t shut up about, had died in the final battle against the archdemon, and Teyrn Loghain along with her. There was a statue to him in Denerim, apparently. Tobias wondered what the Hero of River Dane would have made of the influence all the Orlesian Grey Wardens had on the place now.

Funny. There was a war to keep the bastards out, and now they’re back in... but for our protection. Allegedly.

Of course, the ins and outs of Fereldan politics didn’t much matter to the mages of Kirkwall and, the Orlesian influence aside, conversation moved swiftly on.

Because no one gives a shit about the dog-lord backwater. No... of course not.

Tobias sipped his wine and listened quietly to the overlapping, proselytising voices. There had been a new appointment in one of the Nevarran Grand Clerics’ seats: a member of the powerful Pentagast family, several of whom were already high-ranking templars. Somebody made a comment in a dark tone about ‘keeping it in the family’, and someone else spat on the floorboards in disgust.

There was a lot of discussion of whether this made certain movements of mages less safe. Passages across the Marches and across the sea were discussed; some places were worse than others, some more expensive, and everything—just like always—was couched in that secretive, semi-coded language that made it so bloody hard to understand. Tobias swilled his sour wine and wondered, with equal sourness, when someone was going to touch him for a few hundred sovereigns... but nothing seemed to move that way. Even without all the pieces of the puzzle, he could see that they were arguing in circles, and it soon came back down to ideals and politics.

Apparently, the College of Magi in Cumberland had recessed for an indeterminate period, and the Secession of the True Libertarians, as Creer called it, had been labelled an unconstitutional heresy by two of the Fraternities, and a high-ranking Knight-Commander.

“Just what the Loyalists would have us believe!” Creer fumed, causing the short, fair man with the weatherbeaten complexion—who had just delivered this report from his sources on the coast—to flinch visibly. “It is clear what must come. By ignoring our voices, the Fraternities push us to action! And the templars… if they silence the College, they must know what will happen!”

“The Divine has yet to move on the issue,” said a slender elven mage, wrapped in a heavy woollen cloak. “I’m sure we’ll hear something soon.”

“Aye, and should we live on promises of bread and jam?” Creer pulled a face. “If the Divine was truly against this subjugation, she would have spoken before now. She would have acted against those who have silenced Clairveaux and the other Orlesian sympathisers. No… we cannot assume we have any friends in the Chantry.”

One of the other hooded figures shifted uneasily. “The Grand Cleric’s not that bad. I-In fact, plenty of people in the Kirkwall Chantry—”

“Kirkwall’s just as corrupt as anywhere,” Anders spat, speaking up for the first time since the badgering about safety of escape routes across the Vimmarks. “Probably more so. Meredith’s got the whole thing in her pocket. There might be the odd one or two people on our side, but that’s not enough!”

Tobias sipped his cup of wine, watching that hard, angular face light up with the familiar current of
bitter, irritable zeal. Anders seemed to come alive when he was angry; angry at the Chantry, the templars, the poverty, the crime and the disease… angry at the sodding dirt, as if his anger changed anything.

“And the Grand Cleric’s no better,” the healer continued, his voice rising steadily. He was apparently oblivious to Selby raising her hand, as if to put it on his arm, and his wine was sloshing dangerously close to the rim of the cup as he gesticulated. “She does nothing! She’s weak, useless… I don’t know if she’s blind to what the templars are doing, or if she’s part of the corruption. Do you know how many mages they’re making Tranquil? Mages… people who’ve passed their Harrowing. Not apprentices, not apostates. Meredith is using the Rite to silence anyone who disagrees. That is what’s going on in that bloody Tower, and—”

“You’re just sensitive to it,” one of the other hooded figures said: a woman Tobias didn’t recognise, with fair hair, green eyes, and ruddily tanned skin.

“Sensitive?” Anders repeated, outrage quivering in his voice.

Tobias winced as he drained his cup. This did not look like it was going to end well… and would it ever, if the Underground couldn’t progress beyond this sniping, bitching confrontation? He glanced at Creer, expecting to see irritation in the Rivaini’s face, but he seemed oddly placid, as if he had no reason to disapprove of this fragmentation among the ranks.

The woman shrugged. “Well? You was in the Fereldan Tower, right? We all know what happened there. Sometimes, there’s reasons mages get made Tranquil. Rebellions, demons… Maker only knows what they was up to in Ferelden before the Annulment.”

Anders had turned pale—the kind of pale that went hand-in-hand with quiet, deep fury, and the gentle whisper of blue light crackling across his knuckles. Tobias winced again, as did a couple of other mages in the room. The feel of his power shifting was like being hit in the back of the neck by a sock full of wet sand, and it made everything taste of copper.

“I wasn’t there then,” he said stiffly. “I don’t know. Yes, all right, sometimes it’s used to stop demons, or after a rebellion—maybe they’ve done it in Starkhaven, I don’t know. But what they’re doing here—what that bitch is doing—it’s wrong! It’s not about magic. It’s about politics. Power. It’s about Meredith grinding us all down. It’s about people like Alrik—”

The name was unfamiliar to Tobias, but it had a visceral effect on the room. Faces were pulled, words were murmured… and Anders raised his voice, determined to continue his rant despite it, and despite Selby now firmly taking hold of his sleeve.

“Anders—” she began calmly, before he shook her touch away.

“Have any of you even been to The Gallows? Have you stood in that bloody courtyard and just looked? There’s more of them every day! I’ve been watching and every single day there are new Tranquil, selling their bloody wares! They’re good mages, too. People I know passed their Harrowing. People who’ve done nothing wrong but voice their opinions. Libertarians, even broad Aequitarians—that’s what they’re doing to them. And don’t you dare tell me I’m just sensitive to it! Every single bloody one of us should be sensitive to it!”

Energy practically crackled off him. The torches guttered, and people shuffled their feet. The fair-haired woman shrugged, her mouth pursed into a tight line.

“Yeah, well….”
“He’s got a point,” snapped Gethyn, who had been uncharacteristically quiet for most of the meeting, except for chiming in with the odd muttered assertion. “We ain’t talked about The Gallows half enough. What about Leorah, Willen, Edda… all those people? We going to leave them there?”

There was more foot-shuffling, and more faces were turned away. Tobias watched Anders take a drink from his cup, his hand trembling, and then grimace as he struggled to swallow. He looked pale, sweaty… frightened. Gethyn glared at the gathered figures, his narrow, dark eyes blazing in the torchlight.

“Well?” he demanded. “What are we gonna go? Are we leaving ’em there? Is that how we do things now? Wring our hands and shout about how awful it is, what the Divine isn’t doing in Orlais, or how we think the Fereldans are getting done over… only to do nothing in our own back yard?”

Elias Creer had remained quiet for much of the exchanges, only speaking to pinpoint questions or underscore facts; absorbing the information as it was relayed from various sources with terse nods of his head or twitches of his lips. Now, he met Gethyn’s gaze firmly, his deep voice rolling over the group with a smooth, authoritative weight.

“It’s going to be harder than it ever has been to get anyone out. We can’t use the same way, and there’s a good chance the templars will be expecting it. If—”

“There’s Smuggler’s Cut,” Gethyn said, working his hands together anxiously. “There’s other ways. And so what? They can’t keep double watch every night. Not forever. We’ve waited long enough since last time, haven’t we?”

“We all know it’s hard to wait,” Creer began, casting his gaze around the group, garnering sympathy from the others. “But—”

“What if Anders is right about that sick bastard, though, eh?”

Tobias lowered his cup and glanced at his friend. The healer still looked pallid, but impassive now, as if his mind was elsewhere. On hearing his name, he blinked, and for a moment he seemed so vulnerable, as if he was at the mercy of some unpleasant memory. Brief flickers of expressions played across his face, then slid away beneath a tight-wound mask of concentration.

“We need to know,” he said stiffly. “Whether I am or not, we need to know. If what Alrik’s doing can be proved… if there’s any shred of evidence, we’ll have something to take them down with.”

Tobias frowned, his curiosity only heightened by the way that almost every other person in the room appeared to be pretending that they were at another, totally unconnected, meeting. He half-expected some of those still wearing their hoods to start whistling nonchalantly as well as avoiding eye contact.

Who the fuck is Alrik, and why does he make people so nervous?

His interest was matched by a dull kind of resentment simmering within him—because, of course, it wasn’t as if Anders would have told him about any of this, was it? Not as if he was worth confiding in, or being told half as much as the strangers of the Underground—but, Tobias decided, this was definitely something worth pursuing. His pulse quickened as Creer sighed wearily and shook his head.

“I cannot conscience asking anyone to do this thing,” Creer said solemnly, hands on his hips as he gazed at the grubby floorboards. “It could be suicide. Of course we want to spare our friends from suffering, but dare we risk everything we have worked for?”
“I don’t believe it, anyway,” said Selby, averting her gaze as Anders gave her a look of heartbroken betrayal. She shrugged. “I’m sorry, Anders. I don’t. Every mage? No. It don’t make sense. I think Alrik’s a sadistic shit, yes… there’s rotten eggs in every barrel. But I don’t believe every templar is like him, or that even the Knight-Commander would sanction a plot like that. It’d raise too many questions.”

“You’ve seen it happen,” Anders protested. “You’re seeing it now! All those people…! And what he did to—”

“I know,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “I know. But… it’s dangerous.”

Gethyn scoffed loudly. “So what? Being a bleedin’ mage is dangerous all by itself, and how many of us asked for that? I say we do it. I’ll go. Who else?”

“Me,” Anders said, not missing a beat, though he was still looking at Selby, reproach staining his face.

Creer sighed again. “I cannot stop you, gentlemen, I know, but I can certainly suggest—”

“I will,” Tobias said, hearing the words as if his voice was coming from some semi-distant, echoing chamber. “I’ll go. Into The Gallows, right? That’s exactly what I wanted… doing something real to help.”

Gethyn scowled at him. “It’s not a bloody parade.”

Tobias lofted an eyebrow, readying a sarcastic response, but Anders cut in before he even had his mouth open.

“Shut up,” he muttered and, for a moment, Tobias wasn’t sure whether the healer was talking to him or Gethyn. Anders glanced at him, frowning deeply, his face a hard-edged curve of indecision and suspicion. “Hawke….”

The word was a whisper, a soft, tenuous thing that cut into Tobias like a knife. Dark eyes met his, full of wariness and concern, and he wanted to take hold of Anders by his tattered, feathery shoulders and shake the stupid right out of him.

Don’t you dare try to tell me I can’t do this. I’m as much a mage as you—as any of these people. This is my fight. My decision. And it’s not about you.

…well, mostly.

Maker’s cock, what have I just said I’ll do?

An elven woman—the one with the huge amber eyes, who’d passed the wine around earlier—weighed in at that point, fixing Tobias with a pale stare that was oddly unsettling. Her eyes were hard and flat as coppers, the rest of her face impassive but for a mouth drawn up like a tight bow, and he couldn’t help thinking of Jethann’s hypnotic gaze. They were odd like that, elves: those beautiful eyes, and yet you never knew what was going on behind them.

“Is it true, though?” she asked, her words clipped with the briskness of a northerly Marcher accent. “Your brother. He’s one of them, isn’t he?”

Tobias shrugged, though the current of discomfort that moved through the group was palpable.

“Not technically,” he said. There was no point in denying it, obviously, although the distinction
didn’t seem to make any difference to this audience. “He’s in training. But he hasn’t ratted me out… that counts for something, doesn’t it?”

The elf snorted, screwing up her face. “You expect us to trust to that? He ought to prove his worth. If you’ve got someone inside, why are we not using that?” She turned to Creer, her eyes widening even further. “Elias? Why haven’t we been making use of this?”

The Rivaini spread his hands, appealing for calm, but Tobias didn’t feel terribly forgiving.

“Because ‘this’ is my brother!” he snapped. “He’s a man, not a resource… and, frankly, Carver’s a bit of a prick. I trust him to keep my back because of our mother. Beyond that… I don’t know what he’d do if they questioned him. As it stands, he’s a recruit. They don’t ask recruits many questions about anything. We… we don’t speak. We don’t see each other,” he added, growing increasingly uncomfortable with airing information that felt much more personal that he’d imagined it would when he started talking. Tobias shoved his thumbs through his belt and shrugged petulantly, scowling at the floorboards. “He knows nothing. I intend it to stay that way.”

Creer nodded, apparently satisfied, and gave the elven woman an encouraging smile. “You see, Bethan? Just as it was said.”

She muttered something under her breath, but Tobias didn’t catch it—or the implications of Creer’s words—through the sudden jarring of memories that her name set off.

Bethan. Bethany….

Maker… what would she have made of all this? Of me?

He felt a small, brief rush of light-headedness—so stupid, here and now, after so long; it wasn’t as if the memories would ever go completely, but he’d grown used to them being silent ghosts, not roaring in his ears—and it embarrassed him. When he raised his head, still blinking, it seemed like everything had been decided. A few people were giving him odd looks, but Master Temmen was talking about the next safe shipping date—his chin wattle wobbled when he spoke, and his balding pate glimmered greasily in the torchlight—and it seemed as if the meeting was moving on, and drawing to its close.

Tobias found himself caught up in that; caught in the networks of people, and their unspoken bonds and allegiances, and somehow he managed to be kept there, listening to Temmen talking about forged travel docket (oh, it was important, and yes, of course, he was Hawke-who’d-worked-for-Athenril, so naturally he knew a man in the Port Authority Offices who could be bribed to stamp anything put it front of him), while he watched Creer and Anders move away, up the little staircase to the overseer’s gantry that afforded the only privacy the warehouse had to offer. Tobias couldn’t make out what they were saying, but Anders seemed to be scowling a lot, and Creer had ceased his warm, superficial smiling. Gethyn stood at the bottom of the steps, arms folded, glowering.

Like the world’s shortest, grumpiest guard dog. Liable to piss on people’s ankles before he bites them, I wouldn’t wonder….

~o~O~o~

The meeting ended with more sombre words and bitter wine, like usual. They dispersed by dribs and drabs: rats scurrying tentatively back out into the streets, each eager to dissociate themselves from the others.

Tobias waited by the warehouse’s doors. It was still raining. Cold, sharp stings of it, pelting down
against the hard-packed dirt. The air smelled of frost and ice, and deep, ragged clouds sat across the
dark sky like shadows. Few stars, and no moon tonight. The air pinched his cheeks, his breath
coiling in spools of white in front of his face as he pulled his cloak around him. His shoulders relaxed
as, after another couple of figures passed by, familiar footsteps scuffed against the floor.

“You didn’t need to wait,” Anders said.

Tobias didn’t turn his head. He didn’t really want to see the expression of annoyance that, judging by
the tone of his voice, he suspected would be on Anders’ face.

“Nope,” he said instead. “But I thought I would.”

The healer sighed. “I didn’t think you’d be here tonight.”

Tobias kept his gaze fixed on the wall of the building opposite the warehouse. It was an old store of
some kind: a small, squat affair with crumbling render and a lop-sided roof. “No,” he said quietly.
“You’ve done your best to keep me out of it, haven’t you?”

“I—” Another sigh, followed by the weary scuff of footsteps. “If you can’t see why, Hawke… then
you’re blind.”

Tobias smiled mirthlessly. Oh, we both know I am. That much is true. Blind to every last little thing I
don’t want to admit I can see. And that works for you, doesn’t it? Oh, yes. It’s all to your benefit, you
bastard.

“All right,” he said, glancing over his shoulder. “So I’m getting pally with the guard, the nobility…
my brother’s a sodding templar. If they catch me, they’re going to burn me for that alone, and screw
the Underground. Anyway, d’you think I’d give anything up?”

Anders stood with his shoulders hunched, still shrouded by the shadows from within the building,
caught between the inside and outside—two kinds of darkness, perhaps—with the rain pattering at
the cobbles, and the torches being quietly extinguished within. He shook his head sadly.

“You wouldn’t want to. But you don’t know what they do.”

I’d die before I gave you up. You know that.…

“Oh? If it’s that bad, who says anyone can be trusted? You, Selby, Gethyn… Creer. Aren’t we all in
the same boat?”

Anders gave him a glum look as he stepped out of the doorway, and peered at the rain beyond the
warehouse’s covered porch.

“Yes, all right… maybe we are.” He let out a breath that coiled on the air, wreathing his lips with
white, and the tired, resigned look on his face said he wasn’t prepared to push the argument any
further. “Ugh. It’s wet.”

“And cold,” Tobias offered, by way of a temporary truce. “Walk you back to Darktown?”

Those dark eyes narrowed. “Why?”

He smirked, the corner of his mouth twisting with the temptation of cruelty.

What, are you worried I’ll try and kiss you goodnight? I’ve learned that lesson.

“If I’m going to break into a prison with you,” he said instead, leaning over to make the words a low,
conspiratorial stage-whisper, “I want to know what we’re up against.”

Anders winced, but didn’t say anything. They began to move off into the damp, dark alleyway, walking shoulder-to-shoulder, each huddled into his own protection against the weather, and the healer wrinkled his nose.

“The Gallows won’t be the weirdest thing we’ve ever done.”

“And probably the most illegal,” Tobias added, which did at least raise a small smile. “So…? This isn’t just another run to get some people out, is it? I heard Gethyn mention names. And this templar you spoke of… Alrik?”

That name definitely had power. It made Anders’ jaw twitch, like he was clenching his teeth, and it sent shadows skittering over his eyes. He tucked his chin down into the stiff collar of his coat, the bedraggled feathers sticking up in clumps, and a corona of raindrops clinging to his pulled-back, unwashed hair.

“He’s one of the worst,” Anders muttered, as they crossed an alley lit only by the light thrown back from a lantern hanging outside a cobbler’s shop at the end of the street. Everything was elongated: the shadows, the threads of yellow-orange light… even the pauses in the healer’s words. “Cold-blooded as a lizard.”

Tobias frowned as their footsteps punctuated the silence, each muffled tread on the wet ground shot through with the beat of the rain. It was getting harder, and trying its best to turn to ice. The cold air stung his nostrils, and his eyes had started to water.

“So…?”

“He’s one of those that thinks no mage is safe,” Anders said, scowling at the labyrinth of alleyways and sidestreets ahead of them. They were working through Lowtown’s back cuts; narrow, dark, dangerous streets that he seemed to know like his own palm, and he glared at the shadows, as if daring something to leap from them. “That we’re all just vessels for demons. He’s spoken out before—said that the Harrowing is useless, because our corruption is ‘inevitable’. But, in the last couple of years, he’s gone beyond talking.”

Tobias was following him now, half a step behind, his frown deepening as he assessed the information. Anders cut behind the north end of the slums, and he realised that they weren’t far from the place where there’d been the incident with the qunari gas. It looked like people had started to move back in over the past few weeks, though the damage that had been caused in the fight—and in the ensuing riot, after Lowtown’s denizens had heard about the dead, and started blaming it on mages, elves, and ox-men—was still evident.

“Beyond how? He’s responsible for Harrowed mages being made Tranquil?”

Anders shook his head irritably, glaring straight ahead as they walked, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his coat. “It’s more than that. Alrik’s a sadist. Likes to… experiment. Find out what will push a mage past breaking.” He scoffed bitterly, his breath misting ahead of him. “Of course, if he can do that, it makes the Rite of Tranquillity legitimate. You see? No one could go to the Grand Cleric and say that Meredith is using the Rite to silence anyone who speaks out, because they’ll just tell you that—in the case of a few regrettable malcontents—it was necessary. ‘Drastic measures’. ‘A merciful alternative to execution for crimes they were unable to control’. Hah!”

A stray cat, all damp fur and long, skinny legs, jumped lightly down from a rooftop close by, landing on a couple of broken barrels piled up by the back of the crowded, crooked walls. They both glanced
towards the movement, but the cat darted away into the shadows and, as if in response, the half-rain half-hail increased in its intensity for a brief burst, scattering beads of ice against the dirt that turned almost at once to slush. Anders blinked, his face drawn into a tight, pained frown.

“We’ve tried,” he said quietly. “Elias wrote. Selby… so many letters. The Grand Cleric claims neutrality. _Impartial._ I don’t believe it. She’s either a fool, or she’s as up to her neck in it as the rest of them.”

“I… didn’t know,” Tobias admitted. “That it was—”

“What? So widespread? So _organised_?” Anders snorted. “Alrik has a plan. There have been rumours about it for months. It’s not enough just silencing the dissenters anymore. There’s too many. The three mages Gethyn spoke of, they’re all Libertarians and—more than that—they’re all Enchanters.”

“En—?”

“Mages who’ve taken on apprentices of their own,” Anders explained impatiently. “I know one of them. Leorah. She was an apprentice at the same time as me, back in Ferelden. Only… while I was running away, she was being a good little mage. Toeing the line. Passed her Harrowing at a very young age, and took her first apprentices early. What Irving used to call ‘an exemplar among his students’. Pompous old—” He stopped short, and shook his head again. “No. It doesn’t matter. She was lucky to escape the Annulment. Left to join the war effort at Ostagar, so she missed the rebellion at the Tower, and ended up here… but, of course, they don’t believe any Ferelden mage is clean. They’ve just been _waiting_ for a chance to trip her up. The other two are Kirkwallers. Moderate Libertarians who spoke out… Edda was one of the ones who raised concerns about Alrik in the first place. And look where it got her.”

The rain slacked off as suddenly as it had worsened, leaving Anders’ bitterness echoing dully around the brickwork. He glanced up, his face pale and sallow in the darkness, and then took a sharp right turn, leading Tobias through a shortcut behind what smelled unpleasantly like a tannery.

“You see why we can’t just leave them there.”

“Yeah.” Tobias quickened his pace, eager to keep up, and eager to ask why Creer was so ready to leave mages to rot… though he doubted it was worth putting those words to Anders. For all his disagreements with the Rivaini, it certainly seemed like there was something complicated going on between them—something that Tobias wasn’t sure he liked the look of. “So… that’s Alrik’s plan? Turn the dissenters Tranquil and make sure all the Enchanters are tame ones, approved by the Chantry instead of the Fraternities?”

Anders stopped suddenly, turning to face him. They were in the lee of the tannery’s bulging rear wall, the yard behind it filled with the foul vapour of the trade—worse even than chokedamp, though possibly not quite as lethal—and it soured the air.

His eyes were shadowed, his face steeped in darkness, and there was a terrible quality of stillness to him in that moment. The night breeze rifled the shoulders of his ratty coat, and though the feathers moved softly, Anders seemed to hold his breath.

“I wish it _was_ just that,” he said quietly, the words escaping through gritted teeth. “It’s not. He won’t stop until he’s neutered every last mage he can. _Every_ mage. People like him… that’s the only way they think we can be allowed to live. Like shells. Husks. No feeling, no dreams….”

His voice sounded hollow, threading through the darkness like a dry whisper. Tobias suppressed a
shiver, trying to hide his sudden nervousness behind cynicism.

“Huh… every single mage? That’s… that’s impossible. Think of the paperwork.”

Anders snorted—a small, bitterly dismissive sound—and turned away, moving on again… stalking off with his shoulders hunched, one sharp barb tossed back at Tobias like a discarded bone.

“Of course. I forgot. You think I have delusions of persecution.”

Shit.

Tobias bit his tongue, and lurched after the healer. Somewhere close by—in another of the tight-shuttered yards—a dog roused itself and started to bark.

“I never said that!” he protested, reaching out to grab Anders’ arm just before they got to the end of the alley. His fingers closed on the rough, damp fabric of that worn-out coat, and the third-hand light from a tenement on the square ahead of them spilled out across the cracked bricks and pavers. “I… I don’t think that.”

He felt Anders tense up. So much tension, all wound into dense, sharp coils inside that lean frame. His head was slightly bowed, but he cast a wary glance at Tobias from beneath his lashes, his face set into that familiar petulant glower, his eyes clouded and his mouth pulled tight.

“They’re working on a deliberate plan to turn every mage in Kirkwall within the next three years,” he said, quietly and bluntly, not quite making eye contact. “Alrik’s at the head of it, but he’s not the only one. It’s his project. His… ‘solution’, he calls it.”

The words puckered with hatred—more hate than Tobias had ever seen Anders reserve for templars, which was saying something. He looked down at his hand, where it rested on the stiff, unyielding elbow of Anders’ coat, and realised how loud his own breathing seemed, and how narrow the alley appeared to have become. Raindrops pattered against their shoulders, and their breath misted on the air as they stood, sharing the same shadows.

“Three years?”

Anders nodded. “That’s what people say. People who died getting the information to us.”

Tobias’ fingers slid from his coat, his hand falling uselessly to his side. “Maker….”

It was hard to shake the thoughts that had begun to pummel his brain. Would Carver…? No. It didn’t bear thinking about.

All those people….

“It’s not just about getting people out,” Anders said in that same quiet, low tone. “It’s about getting proof. Stopping this. Stopping Alrik. He has to pay. He has to pay for what he’s done, what he wants to do—”

Tobias swallowed heavily, not thinking about his words until they were already out of his mouth. “That sounds like Justice talking.”

“We are the same,” Anders snapped, his voice growing louder with the anger that ran under the words—anger that flared suddenly in those dark eyes, glinting in the half-light. He blinked, his breath coiling white on the air as he exhaled. “I mean, there’s no difference. And it’s my passion for the cause that drives him. I thought you understood that.”

“I do.” Tobias frowned. “And I believe in it… I believe in you, but—”
Anders looked up at him sharply. “I won’t give up this fight, Hawke. You know that. And, sooner or later, everyone is going to have to choose a side.”

That familiar blaze of defiance and ire burned in his face, in his voice, and Tobias’ mouth turned dry. He wished there was moonlight, a cloudless sky… something that would lighten the shadows and let him fall into those dark eyes.

“I thought you knew whose side I was on,” he murmured.

A small crease appeared between Anders’ brows, made as deep as a crevasse by the darkness, but the anger seemed to fade and, very briefly, he seemed lost and unsure.

“Yes,” he said softly, as the cold rain pattered around them. “You’ve made that clear enough.”

Tobias frowned, trying to pierce the dimness and scour his face for any sign of reproach or discomfort.

If you want me to back off, you only ever had to say… but I can’t believe you do. You don’t want that… do you?

The air rippled with the ghosts of their breath, and that familiar, aching tension settled in again around Tobias, knotting his shoulders and his stomach, and making his head feel light.

“I’m… I’m with you,” he said quietly, trying to seek out Anders’ eyes in the dark. “You know that. Not just because you’re my friend. Because we believe in the same things. We want the same things.”

And, Maker, we do, don’t we?

After a moment that stretched out longer than an age, Anders inclined his head.

“I had… hoped… you’d say that.”

Hoped? You didn’t know? How in the name of Andraste’s pimpled arse can you not bloody know?

Tobias bit the inside of his lip, and held his breath. When Anders raised his gaze, he swallowed heavily, and his throat felt tight and thick.

“There isn’t much that’s good about this city,” Anders said softly, his voice plucking insistently at the base of Tobias’ gut, “but you’re one of the few bright lights left. Thank you.”

Tobias felt himself colour, surprised by such a sweet, poetic turn of phrase… and not a little unnerved. He shrugged.

“I do my best. Anyway… I can hardly let you go alone, can I?”

Anders smiled, and it was a small, slightly wry twist of his lips, his face moulded by the shadows as he lowered his gaze again.

“Gethyn’ll be there. Maybe a couple of others.”

“S’not really the point,” Tobias said, breathing in deeply as the mild, green scent of boiled herbs and soot pierced the rain and the mud. “Anyway, it’s important. You’re right.”

A small sound, somewhere between a soft chuckle and a weary sigh, left Anders’ lips. They seemed closer, somehow, and the air seemed to hum just a little as Anders looked up at him, chin slightly
lowered and his words quiet, his uncharacteristic reticence shrouded in the gloom. Rainwater shimmered very lightly on his cheeks, and Tobias ached to reach out and wipe the droplets away.

“I’ve always feared being made Tranquil,” Anders said, his voice little more than a whisper. “Now more than ever.”

The words hung between them, brushing Tobias’ face like a lover’s feather-light touch. Of course, he told himself, Anders meant this alleged plot. Whatever it was this Ser Alrik was doing, or…. Only, he could taste every other nuance the words held, every other implication, and they burned in his chest. Anders held his gaze for just a little longer than necessary, and there was such a look in his face, traced through with hunger and hope and frustration.

He felt it too, Tobias knew, was certain, and the idiocy of the whole thing made him want to scream. What was the bloody point in being afraid of losing the ability to feel, if you never acted on your feelings in the first place?

He wet his lips, a prickle of sweat breaking out at the base of his spine and in the hollows of his palms.

“Listen, I—”

“You should go,” Anders said, turning away abruptly, and Tobias noticed for the first time that his hands were clenched into fists, his knuckles standing pale and proud.

“But…."

Anders cleared his throat awkwardly, and Tobias wanted so badly to protest, but the moment was already gone, nothing throbbing in the air between them except the embarrassment of a missed opportunity.

Maker’s breath… sometimes I think I hate you more than you hate yourself. And yet we still keep doing this, don’t we? We still keep on and on, and this is starting to feel like it’s normal—and it’s not fucking normal… not at all.

“It’s late. I need to get back to the clinic,” Anders continued, apparently addressing the wall behind Tobias’ left shoulder. “Come by tomorrow if you want to know more about Alrik. We’ll make the run in two days’ time. And… thank you. I mean it, Hawke.”

Tobias shook his head. “It’s nothing. We’ve taken down a dragon, right? Don’t see there’s much that can stand in our way.”

Anders gave him a sad, tired, empty look, and smiled weakly. “That’s what Karl used to say… except the bit about the dragon. But Alrik broke him, just the same.”

Oh. Right. Well… fuck. That makes sense.

A plummeting kind of chill tugged at Tobias’ stomach. “Alrik was the one who…?”

“Mm.” Anders nodded. “Let’s just say I’ve seen his work first-hand. I know what he did… what he does to push mages into the arms of demons. The Gallows isn’t just a prison, Hawke. It’s a living hell. There are places the Veil is so thin— well. If you’re very unlucky, you’ll see.”

“Ah?” Tobias watched the grim, introspective look settle on the healer’s face, those tight-clenched hands thrust into the depths of his pockets. “Right.”
He knew there was more he should say. He didn’t want to leave things like this, to make his awkward farewells and traipse back to Gamlen’s place while Anders peeled off back to the tunnels of Darktown with nothing changed and just the darkness of The Gallows to look forward to… but he didn’t have the words for it. He didn’t know how to reaffirm his loyalty, his support—or how to say a single damn thing about Karl.

So, he let Anders push him away with that tightly controlled, crisp ‘goodnight’, and he left the alleyway to walk back across the west side of the slums with the rain seeping into his scalp, and the burn of shame chilled on his cheeks as the night grew ever more bitter.
“Really, Hawke?” Varric raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

Tobias nodded solemnly. “Really.”

They were in the dwarf’s suite. It was mid-morning; thin, cool light fell through the high windows, papers were strewn over the table, and a plate of mystery meat stew was congealing gently on the edge of Varric’s desk. Tobias leaned his hip against the ornately carved wooden table and, arms folded across his chest, fixed his friend with his best expression of imploring charm.

“What? You got something in your eye?”

Tobias pulled a face. “Forget it… Look, will you? That’s all I want to know.”

Varric pushed back in his chair, his breakfast forgotten and his ink-stained shirt dishevelled. No doubt he’d been working late again; a sheaf of papers amid the desk’s clutter was covered in his familiar hand. He rubbed his forehead, and looked up at Tobias with incredulous concern.

“I still don’t quite believe it…. You’re serious? The Gallows? Meredith’s back yard?”

“I know.” Tobias held up his hands. “Look, I know it’s risky.”

“Risky? Hawke, it’s downright suicidal!”

“Which is why I’m asking you.” Tobias broke out his very best shit-eating grin. “Come on, Varric… there aren’t many people I could trust for something like this. Aren’t you with me?”

Out front, Corff was cleaning up. The bar had seen quite a bit of action last night—two stabbings and a punch-up, all told—and it had apparently ended with the guard being called out. Tobias was almost sorry he’d missed it.

The rhythmic sloshing of bucket and mop grew louder as Corff worked his way up the hall, and the movements of a few other patrons who paid for rooms—and were even, in a couple of cases, brave enough to venture out of their lairs for mystery meat stew or fry-up in the mornings—made a muffled kind of backdrop to the suite’s stillness.

Varric drew the silence between them out to the very last strand of ease, his heavy, broad features locked into a serious and contemplative expression; the kind he usually only got when he was trying to find a good synonym for ‘nipple’.

He narrowed his eyes. “This is all Blondie’s fault, isn’t it?”

Oh, shut up, you short-arsed, perspicacious bastard.

“Will you do it?” Tobias repeated, ignoring the question. “Just tell me.”

The dwarf sighed theatrically. “He pulled that moody rebel thing on you, didn’t he? I knew you couldn’t take it.”

“Varric!”
“Fine… fine, I’m in. But if I die down there just because you went goo-goo for a tortured scowl and a ponytail—”

“I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about,” Tobias said briskly.

Somewhere outside the door, Corff began to whistle tunelessly as he sloshed water over the floorboards. Varric raised an eyebrow and leered… something he truly was disturbingly talented at doing. It had to be a natural gift, Tobias decided. A horrible, terrible gift.

“You sure, Hawke? Because the maidenly blushing says otherwise.”

Tobias bridled, wishing he could deny the heat rising in his cheeks. There wasn’t much point in trying, though, so he settled for a dirty grin and a shrug.

“Oh, my dear Varric… this blushing? Not maidenly. Not in the slightest, I’m afraid.”

“Please…” The dwarf held up his hands, nodding to the cherry wood cabinet that sat in pride of place on top of the dresser at the end of the room. “No details. Bianca is very sensitive.”

“I wouldn’t dream of offending her ladylike sensibilities,” Tobias promised, glancing towards the crossbow’s resting place.

She was an amazing piece of machinery—he’d certainly never seen another like her—but it was hard not to find Varric’s anthropomorphizing of his weapon faintly worrying sometimes.

At least she doesn’t sit opposite him for breakfast. He does keep the display case kind of near his bed, but… no. I don’t want to think about it.

“So?” he asked, dragging them back on point.

Varric sighed heavily. “All right. Fine. Who else is playing along with this crazy plan?”

Tobias lifted a hand and scratched idly at the back of his neck. “Well, aside from me and you, there’s Anders… and at least one of the mages from the Underground. Don’t worry,” he added quickly. “They’re trustworthy. Gethyn knows what he’s doing, at least as far as this is concerned, and as long as he doesn’t think you’re going to rat them out, there won’t be any problems.”

The dwarf fixed him with a deadpan stare. “Really? Oh. Goody.”

“C’mon, Varric…. Look, there’s only a handful of people I’d pick for this. It’s a short list.” Tobias winced. “Um… I didn’t mean that like a dwarf joke.”

“Sure, Sparklefingers.”

Varric grinned dryly at Tobias’ scowl, then shook his head wearily, turning to pick up a measure of wine from his desk. He swilled the watery liquid around the inside of the pewter vessel, the thin morning light catching at the red glass stones that studded the cup.

“Well,” he said eventually, wincing as he swallowed, and giving Tobias a critical look, “I guess there’s not too many others you could ask except me. Isabela’s not exactly discreet—unless it suits her—and I suppose you’d rather not have Broody plastering mages to the walls.”

“Exactly.”

“Hmm.” Another few turns of the cup, and Varric frowned at his wine. “What about Daisy?”
Tobias grimaced. “Blood mage. That… could be awkward.”

“Huh.” The dwarf raised his brows. “And you think every last one of your new friends is squeaky clean?”

That took him aback. Tobias opened his mouth to argue for the integrity of every mage, every sympathiser, and every worn-out face he’d seen in the ill-lit warehouse the night before… but the folly of that soon struck him.

*You have a point, Varric. I have to give you that.*

Of course, he wasn’t about to actually say so. He shrugged nonchalantly.

“What we’re doing is important.”

“We?” That earned him a smirk; arid humour spreading across his friend’s broad face. “You’ve finally paid your dues, huh?”

Tobias pushed away from the carved table and paced a little way across the suite, irritated by—if he was honest with himself—how true those words might be.

“It’s important,” he repeated stubbornly. “They’re torturing people to death in there. There’s mages—*enchanters*—incarcerated just because they’ve spoken—”

“—spoken out against Meredith,” Varric continued, rolling his eyes skyward, “something something oppression, something something templars are all nug-loving bastards, something… something something. Am I close?” He rocked back in his chair, still holding his now-empty cup of wine, and tapping the heavy gold ring on his index finger against the side of it, raising a dull *ting* sound against the pewter. “Oh, Hawke… don’t pout. I tease because I care. Really.”

The memory of Elias Creer’s face tugged at Tobias’ mind—that, and Gethyn standing guard like a sour hound—and he struggled to dredge up a smile, instead glaring stonily at the dwarf.

“I’m not saying it isn’t dangerous, or stupid. I’m not saying it isn’t a terrible idea, but—”

“But you’re going to do it anyway,” Varric said, sighing as he set his cup back on the desk. “All right, all right…. Fine.”

“Really?”

Varric snorted. “Don’t look so surprised. I said I would. I mean, I don’t *agree* with what Meredith’s doing. I don’t know if I believe this stuff about turning every mage in the Marches Tranquil, but… yeah. You need me, I’ll tag along. It could be worthwhile.” A light, yet not entirely pleasant smile settled on his lips as he studied Tobias. “Just tell me when and where, and we’ll kick some ass. All right?”

Tobias nodded vigorously. “Thank you. I mean it, Varric… this— Well… thanks.”

He broke off, the words he wanted to say somehow cloying and dying on his tongue. For all their friendship—everything they’d shared over the years, and everything Varric had done for him, whatever the reasons behind it—he suddenly felt too awkward, like trying to voice any of it would choke everything.

He wondered if he should have asked Varric at all… it wasn’t a thing for outsiders, what they were planning to do, but then Tobias couldn’t be sure whether *he* was still an outsider or not and, anyway,
there was more to it.

_I don’t want to die. He’s right: taking the templars on in their own house is crazy. Doesn’t matter how many times the Underground’s done it before. Creer probably has a point—it’s too dangerous. Why in the ever-loving fuck did I say I’d do it?_

_Oh, right. Yeah. I remember._

Outside the suite, the slap and splosh of Corff’s mop continued in its rhythmic motion, and Tobias tried to ignore the sense of foreboding that pulled at him.

~o~O~o~

It was almost mid-afternoon before Tobias headed down to the clinic to prise some more information out of Anders.

He wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to try. The awkwardness that came with being around the man aside, he was worried it would come off like back-pedalling, like he was having second thoughts about what he’d promised to do, and that wasn’t really accurate. Besides, did he really need to know anything about Alrik other than the fact he was a sadistic shit? The evidence of the mages they intended to free—if they were still there, and hadn’t been summarily executed, made Tranquil, or otherwise disposed of in the meantime—would give the Underground everything necessary to move against him.

All the same, Tobias still went down into the tunnels. He wanted to know more, mostly because he couldn’t quite shake the recollection of the fury and hate in Anders’ voice when he’d said the templar’s name… and because of Karl.

He found the healer cleaning, crouched by the clinic’s doors and sluicing dirty, bloody-looking water out of a large copper. Anders looked up at his approach, and gave him a small, tired smile.

“Need a hand?” Tobias asked by way of greeting.

“You could lift the other side of this,” Anders said, straightening up and nodding to the copper.

“Sure.”

Together, they man-handled the pot back through the clinic’s doors and past the rows of pallets, laundry bins, and low rickety tables. Only a few of the bed spaces were occupied—two old women, an elderly man with a hideous, sucking cough, and a younger man lying on his side, motionless beneath the blankets—but a gaggle of walking wounded appeared to be awaiting Anders’ attention.

“No assistants today?” Tobias asked, helping him lift the copper back onto the hook by the hearth.

Anders shook his head. “They’ve gone. Only her. Saryha. Came here yesterday… I think I might have thrown her in at the deep end,” he added ruefully, glancing towards the tall, yet very thin girl who was trying to sort the patients into some kind of order.

She had a long black braid and an anxious expression, and she might as well as have had ‘Circle runaway’ stamped on her forehead.

“Did she come out of The Gallows?” Tobias asked, keeping his voice low.

“No.” Anders shook his head. “From Starkhaven. We interrupted—that is, we _caused_ a caravan to be interrupted. They’ve been transferring mages regularly for months. There’s a lot of tension. It’s
possible the Circle there will rebel.”

He spoke quietly, mildly… as if his mind was elsewhere. It might have been, Tobias reflected, and he frowned as he looked at the girl.

“What, like—?”

“I don’t know.” Anders shrugged. “Ferelden was a one-off, I think. I hope. But… it’s hard to say. The secession has changed a lot of things.”

He patted the side of the copper thoughtfully, as if he’d reminded himself of something important, then he shot Tobias a small smile.

“I know you’ve got things you want to ask. Give me a few minutes?”

“Yeah. Can I…?”

Anders gestured vaguely to the sheets and linen bandages that hung from clotheslines at the back of the clinic, drying in the stale, residual heat from the fires. Tobias nodded resignedly—somehow, he always ended up rolling bandages when he was here—and watched the healer move away from him, readying to get back to work.

He watched Anders while he busied himself with the laundry, too. Watched him work through the patients with bad coughs, sore joints, fevers, poxes, haemorrhoids and all manner of other minor complaints. Winter did seem to bring out the agues, although it was by no means as bad now as it had been in previous years. Just after the Blight hit, when Kirkwall was knee-deep in refugees… that had been the worst of it. Like Anders said, he saw fewer starving children these days. More pregnant women, and more poxed whores, but not quite so many deaths, especially among the very old and the very young. Tobias had said maybe that meant he was really doing some good, but he’d just smiled that distant smile of his that was so obviously a plaster over some burst of hyperbole Justice was trying to spew, and said nothing.

The girl, Saryha, came over at Anders’ instruction and started trying to do something with the pot of herbs steeping on the workbench. The pan was clearly too heavy for her to lift so, done with pulling the bandages off the line and rolling them neatly, Tobias went to help her.

“This is embrium, isn’t it?” he asked, prodding the sloppy green mess with the distinctively sharp smell that they decanted into one of the conical sieves.

She shrugged, her eyes wide. “I don’t know, ser. I’ve never done anything like this before. Only seniors were allowed to use the potions laboratory at the Tower.”

“Oh.” Tobias smiled as kindly as he could. “Well, why don’t you go and get those bandages, just from over there, and I’ll give you a hand with the plaisters.”

She shrugged, her eyes wide. “I don’t know, ser. I’ve never done anything like this before. Only seniors were allowed to use the potions laboratory at the Tower.”

“Ah.” Tobias smiled as kindly as he could. “Well, why don’t you go and get those bandages, just from over there, and I’ll give you a hand with the plaisters.”

She looked grateful for the intervention though, in all honesty, he wasn’t sure he’d helped much. The poultices they made up together were wet, greasy, and rather lop-sided and, when Anders called her over with two to apply to an old man’s scrappy chest, he looked like he was either going to shout at her or burst out laughing. He settled on a weary shake of his head and a glance across the clinic at Tobias, who shrugged innocently.

Well? What am I supposed to do? I’m no expert. Last healing spell I tried almost set the floor on fire.

Later, when the walking wounded had been dispatched and the overnight patients made comfortable, Anders brewed a pot of tea—it turned out Saryha wasn’t even sure how to do that—and lowered
himself wearily into one of the chairs that sat around a small table at the back of the clinic, near the workbench and the banked-down fires.

“What’s in this?” Tobias asked, lifting his cup to his lips and sniffing it curiously.

Anders had stretched his legs out, his slouchy boots crossed at the ankles and his body low in the narrow wooden chair, like someone had just crumpled him up and left him propped, discarded there. By contrast, Saryha sat neatly, her posture stiff and her hands curled around her tea, though she still looked like she needed permission to drink it.


Tobias took an experimental sip. It certainly tasted better than the clinic usually smelled… although that wasn’t saying much.

Over in the corner, one of the elderly women was trying to attract attention without actually raising her voice, clicking her fingers and clearing her throat. Anders glanced in her direction, a look of pure oh-for-the-love-of-Andraste-what-now skimming fleetingly across his face before he nodded at Saryha.

“Bedpan,” he muttered shortly. “I’m sure she’d prefer it was you instead of me. Over there. Cloths on the right. Check her sores while you’re at it, would you? Thanks.”

The girl looked horrified, but she rose clumsily to her feet, muttering her acquiescence and facing the full terror of the task ahead of her with, Tobias thought, considerable bravery for someone who’d never been out of the Circle in her life.

“Bossy,” he chided gently, smirking at Anders as he sipped his tea.

It wasn’t at all bad, actually; light, but mellow, and fresh. Something of the colour of freshly scythed grass lingered in the liquid, and Tobias was reminded briefly of summers in Lothering, when the farms paid for labour and the village boys stripped to their shirts—and sometimes beyond—to work with the sun on their backs.

The healer gave a small, tired chuckle. “I know. I’m horrible. That poor girl… I think she misses the Tower. Never had to mop up so much piss in the library, I’ll bet.” He took a mouthful of his tea, and regarded Tobias with half-hooded eyes. “So?”

Tobias shrugged, curling his fingers around the warmth of his cup. “Tell me about Alrik,” he said quietly, watching the inevitable tension pinch Anders’ face at the mention of that name. “You said he believes all mages are corrupt, that he tortures people to—”

“Yes.”

“How did you find out?”

Anders turned his head to the side, peering along the clinic as if to make sure they couldn’t be overheard. If they kept quiet, it was unlikely: his small collection of geriatrics were either deaf, sleeping, or studiously trying to ignore Saryha attempting to help the old woman use a metal chamber pot.

Something tight and dry lingered in that careworn face: like the place hate would be if he wasn’t so tired, and so bowed under the weight of regret.
“Karl wrote to me. He used to… write. A lot. Once I was at the Vigil, I could send word, say where I was, so that made it easier. He said there were templars like Alrik.” One long-fingered, herb-smudged hand rubbed idly at the side of his cup. “I thought, when I came here, we could do something about it. I didn’t know the rot went so far.”

Anders sipped his tea, his throat working slowly as he swallowed, and his gaze fixed hazily on a point somewhere beyond the centre of the table. Tobias watched him—watched him with an intentness that ached to his core—but said nothing.

“Karl used to write a lot about the templars here, about all the problems… the number of blood mages they unearth. He was worried. I—” He smiled bitterly, shaking his head. “I thought I’d get here, just break into the Tower or something… find some chink in it all… I didn’t. It was impossible. I was right here, in this bloody city, and I couldn’t even get across the lake to see him.”

His expression hardened, the flicker of anger in his voice not a sharp edge of irritation, but the pull of Justice beneath it, swelling and pitching under the current of the words.

“So, I fell in with the…. You know. And Elias, he was very… good to me.”

Tobias said nothing, though the back of his neck prickled slightly. He wanted to know what it was Creer and Anders had talked about before—what it was the Rivaini had on him that made him look so pale and worried.

In the darkest, loneliest corners of the night, Tobias had to admit he’d wondered if they were ever lovers. The thought stung like second-hand whiskey, and he wanted very much to believe it couldn’t possibly be true, but the possibility was there.

“I’d seen some of the things that happen in that place on the first couple of runs we did,” Anders said quietly, staring at the tabletop. “Selby’s sister… that was before my time but, Maker, they still talk about that. It’s systematic. Not just anger, not just frustration… there are some of those bastards who’ll push you and push you until they break you, and then use the pieces for fun. It made me sick. We saw a girl—I don’t know, no more than fourteen, maybe—strapped to a rack. There must have been more than one of them. I don’t know how many. She’d been down there for days, maybe weeks. They’d come back again and again, use her a little bit more… might have been the same ones, might not. I don’t know. Maybe they took turns, drew lots or something. Wouldn’t be surprised. It was like she was meat, not even a person….”

His face twisted around the memories, revulsion staining his eyes as he brought his cup to his lips. Tobias watched the faint tremble in that pale hand, and tried not to let his imagination fill in the gaps in the things Anders obviously needed to say.

Across the clinic, Saryha was still struggling with the elderly woman, who was not being a cooperative patient, and had begun to berate the girl… probably more because of the lack of privacy than anything she’d really done wrong.

“I carried her out,” Anders said softly, apparently oblivious to the commotion. “Poured everything into her, but she died just as we got to the docks. I hadn’t seen a haemorrhage that bad since the battle at the Vigil.”

He blinked, cleared his throat, and, with another swallow of his tea, frowned as he tried to get himself back on track.

“I suppose it was last year that we had the first report that named Alrik. Edda, the woman Gethyn knows, she snuck a letter out. She’d been writing it all down, writing down everything she heard,
everything she saw. There’d been another couple of rotten bastards we dealt with—Miden, Hettle, those two spring to mind—but that was about power. Beating, raping, tormenting… you put people in charge of other people and tell them they’re superior, and it’ll happen. It used to happen in Ferelden, though everyone said it didn’t. It wasn’t common, like here… but you always knew there were certain templars you didn’t cross, didn’t let yourself be caught alone with.”

Anders broke off, pressing his fingers over his eyes for a moment. When he looked up, blinking again, he seemed so tired, so papery.

“I’m sorry. I… I can’t remember what I—”

“Anders,” Tobias prompted gently.

The smell of urine filtered through the air as—with a great deal of fuss, flailing of elbows and complaining about her modesty—the elderly woman finally got to relieve herself. They both ignored it, though he did feel a moment of pity for Saryha, who looked mortified, even while she was holding the pot.

Anders nodded slowly. “He’s different. It’s not just about power… it’s political with him. Edda’s letter… he believes he’s right. She wrote in great detail about what he did to people. How he treats it like science. And there’s plenty who follow him. He has friends in the Order: Knight-Captain Kurrid, for one. He’s ancient, but if he kicks off any time soon, it’s three to one Alrik will replace him. He toadies to Meredith something rotten… that’s what worries me. We don’t know how far advanced this plan of his is, but it’s possible he could already have taken it to her, to the Grand Cleric…. I know how far-fetched it sounds, but it could be real in a matter of months. It could happen.”

Tobias frowned. “And Creer won’t move on him?”

Anders pulled a face, guilt flitting through his expression as he rubbed at the rim of his cup. “Elias doesn’t see it as a reality. He thinks Alrik’s a loose cannon—dangerous, yes—but he doesn’t believe Meredith would ever implement anything like that. Or the Grand Cleric. It would mean tearing up all the Chantry law regarding mages, the Circles, and Tranquillity itself. The Rite is supposed to be a last resort, not a punishment. Some people choose it rather than face the Harrowing—some have it forced on them, because the Enchanters know they’ll fail—but it’s not a way of subjugating anyone who misbehaves. It’s not supposed to be, anyway. If you break the rules, they punish you—lock you up, execute you if they can prove you’re a danger—but they can’t just do that. And what Alrik does… his… experiments….” Anders winced, his mouth twisted in revulsion. “That’s just wrong by anyone’s standards.”

Tobias frowned, the awkwardness welling up in him, and yet throttled by burning curiosity. “He, uh… he did the ritual on Karl?”

Anders nodded stiffly, his face clamping into mask-like blankness, betrayed only by the wounded scars in his eyes.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I knew something was wrong when the letters stopped. Went to Elias… hoped he was in solitary or something. They did that to me, once, in Ferelden. Says something, doesn’t it, hoping that’s what’s happened? Of course, you know what… well. I should have done something before. I came to this bloody place because he— I let him down.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Tobias murmured, resisting the temptation to reach for the pale hand that lay upon the table, fingers twitching lightly to some internal rhythm of guilt and regret. “You tried to help him, and—”
Anders shook his head. “He was caught because of me. The letters. The…. After what happened, I wanted to know why. Couldn’t leave it alone. I did some digging… found out Alrik was the one who did that to him. I— well, I went looking. It served me right, I suppose.”

Across the clinic, Saryha managed to drop the full bedpan. She muffled a shriek, the metal clanged, the old woman looked embarrassed, and one of the elderly men applauded as piss splashed over the floorboards.

“Went looking?” Tobias echoed, his brow furrowing. “What—?”

Anders flexed his fingers, a dismissive little flick of his hand as he shook his head. “You were in the Deep Roads at the time. I… I wanted to know what had happened. We didn’t have Alrik’s name then, but I knew there had to be something behind it. So I went behind Elias’ back. Managed to buy a lot of information on the courtyard. People said Karl had been speaking out, getting on the templars’ nerves.” The healer smiled sadly. “Trying to go through the proper channels, I bet. Bloody optimist. He’d have thought, even if it got him in trouble, that would make other people take notice. He talked about it in the letters. I… I should have acted sooner.”

He sighed deeply, apparently not even noticing Saryha’s frantic clean-up attempts on the other side of the room.

“I got in there. Bribed my way in. Bribed one of the green recruits to tell me what I wanted to know. I was going to kill him. Alrik, I mean… for vengeance,” Anders added softly, his face oddly blank, as if the sheer weight of the memory pressed the emotion from him. He curled his lip, repeating the word, like he hadn’t believed it the first time he said it. “Huh… vengeance. Not that it would have done Karl any good, and he wouldn’t have approved anyway, but… I didn’t get him. Slippery bastard. And so arrogant! He stood there and said to my face that we were all abominations in waiting. That we’re aberrations, in need of control. I nearly had him, but he caught me with a cleanse, and it wiped me out… didn’t know it would hit Justice so hard, but apparently it does. I ran. Still,” he said, his voice tightening as he pulled himself back together, adjusting his position on the chair and peering speculatively at his half-cup of cold tea, “he was out of commission for a few weeks, at least… and he never saw my face. I like to hope they still don’t know I’m me.”

Tobias blinked, confused, and still somewhat stunned by the tale. “Wait, you actually tried to…?”

“Yes,” Anders said simply, those dark eyes meeting his with an unsettling coolness. “I wanted him dead. I wanted him to suffer the way he makes mages suffer. They said—the people I spoke to when I tried to find out about Karl? They said you can hear the screams from the dungeons halfway up the fortress. They torture, humiliate… degrade you until you’re less than human, then push you over the edge, and punish you for it. That’s what Alrik wants to do to all of us. Neuter us, make us tame.”

His breathing had started to quicken, a hardness entering his voice, and Tobias started to worry.

“It’s still illegal,” he said dubiously. “Isn’t it? It’s immoral, anyway. Enough evidence, and someone will have to take notice. Anyway, I can’t think every templar’s like that. If—”

“They’re not.” Anders shook his head. “That’s just it. If we can make all this public, there will be people who see how wrong it is. And I hope there will be those in the Order—and in the Chantry—who won’t stand for it. That’s where the revolution should come from. It’d be better for everyone. Elias doesn’t agree, of course.” He shrugged, toying with his empty cup. “And I dare say he’s got a point. There will be those who refuse to see the truth unless we make them. But that shouldn’t be our first line of offence.”

Tobias bit the inside of his lip. Dramatic as all the polemic was, there was something about this talk
of war and revolution that worried him. He cleared his throat.

“Um. Yeah. You and Creer,” he said, letting the words dangle awkwardly, because he had no idea what to actually do with them. “Um. I mean, he seemed to, uh….”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know. Some of the things he said to you last night… and what you said just now: they don’t know you’re you? What…?”


Tobias cocked an eyebrow, and he smirked, shaking his head in wistful self-deprecation.

“Seven times, I ran from the Tower in Ferelden. Once from White Spire, but I was only there briefly. They almost didn’t catch me, that first time in Lattenfluss. That’s where I’m from,” he added, with a small smile. “Originally.”

It wasn’t much, but it was more than Anders had ever said about his homeland, and the gesture of sharing it seemed important somehow to Tobias.

“Really?”

“Mm-hm. Long time ago, that. Still… nothing like a serial escapist to piss the templars off. Making them come out in the rain and the mud to pick you up, having to cart you all the way back.” Anders grinned sheepishly. “They hated me. But….” His grin faded, replaced with a pained look in his eyes. “Well, of course, escape is punishable, but not by Tranquillity, unless they could prove you’d dabbled in something terrible, or been corrupted. But, then there was the Wardens. And the way I left… it wasn’t exactly noble. That’s what Elias was talking about.”

“Oh?” Tobias tried to keep his tone neutral, but his curiosity was killing him. “What happened?”

Anders shrugged, avoiding his gaze. “Lots of things. One day, I’ll tell you all about the Vigil properly. I’d have to, if you were going to understand. Long story short, there was a battle. Big, bloody… Horrible. Commander Caron left some of us defending the keep and took the others to… well, to deal with the source of the problem. I never knew much of what was going on in that place, but I’m not even sure I believed what I did hear. The point is, we were besieged. We took heavy damage. A lot of people died, and… well, as far as anyone in Ferelden knows… so did I.”

“You?” Tobias frowned. “What, you faked your own death?”

“Mm-hm.Switched clothes with a dead guard, then burned the body so they wouldn’t recognise me. The worst part is that I did it before the battle was won. They were all still fighting and… and I was running away,” Anders murmured, staring guiltily at the tabletop. “I killed a couple of templars, too. I probably didn’t need to, but I was so afraid they’d track me down. I needed them not to be looking. They still have my phylactery, as far as I know. While they don’t have a reason to be looking for me, I’ll be all right. But— the way it happened at the Vigil… what I did was… was bad.”

His voice faltered, his lips closing with finality on the words, and Tobias wanted more than anything to wash that away.

“Well, if you hadn’t—” he began, reaching for amelioration, but Anders shook his head.

“I tore those men apart. I… Justice… we… I don’t know. It was all new, and I didn’t know what had happened until it was over. I lost control. I was afraid of it happening again. I had to get away,
so I— I did what I did at the battle. And it was all right, until that night at the chantry, when Karl….”

He trailed off, cleared his throat, and took a deep breath. “When I killed Karl.”

*Oh, Maker, Anders… don’t do that to yourself, you idiot. You can’t do that to yourself. Please.*

The memories of the first time he’d seen Justice’s fury burst out played vividly in Tobias’ head. Searing light and violent energy, and men’s throats and bellies split open with the force of magic and anger, and blood splashing the stones, soaking the silk banners emblazoned with the Maker’s Eye.

“You helped him,” he said earnestly, pressing his hand flat against the table, the wood rough beneath his fingers. “What happened wasn’t your fault.”

Anders gave him a wan little smile, his eyes still distant. “You have too much faith in me. You really do, Hawke. Still… I don’t doubt they’ll work it out sometime. Then it’s just a matter of whether I can run before they find me.”

Tobias clenched his jaw, unwilling—unable, even—to hear those words and not have every muscle in his body rebel against them.

“We’ll take Alrik down,” he said, glaring at Anders as if he could frown him into not talking this way anymore. “We will. And we’ll see this end. I promise.”

Anders blinked, raising his gaze to Tobias’, his eyes hazy and a look of faint surprise and gratitude touching his face.

“You’re a good man, Hawke,” he said softly, reaching across the table. “Truly. And I… I’m more grateful for your friendship than you could know.”

Tobias’ heart beat light for a moment, and he opened his mouth, finding the words vanishing on his tongue as those long, herb-smudged fingers touched the back of his hand. Anders squeezed his wrist gently.

“Thanks for letting me talk,” he said, with a brief, rueful smile. “It… it does help, actually.”

“Good,” Tobias managed, as Anders took his hand away, folding his fingers around his empty teacup and averting his gaze again.

He tried not to feel it like a sense of loss, a chill on his flesh, but it was too late.

Later, when he left the clinic—once they’d discussed the minutiae of where and when to meet, the fact he’d roped Varric into coming along, and the names of the other mages who’d be joining them—Tobias walked slowly back towards Lowtown.

It was a horrible feeling, but he couldn’t quite escape the sense that the things Anders had said had been confessions… the outpourings of a man who wasn’t sure he was coming back.

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A/N: My continued and heartfelt thanks to those of you reading, following, favouriting, alerting, commenting etc. It really is appreciated, especially when things are a bit difficult. I've been doing little more than drive-by updates recently, having been very busy but, as I've posted over at feastingondreams dot com, I'm currently facing a slight snafu with housing. Which is fun. I'm grateful at this point for these stories, and the momentary escapism of playing with templars and revolutionary mages, instead of gnawing my own limbs off with stress. So, thank you for reading, and do feel free to comment! :)
Chapter 26

Tobias slept uneasily that night. He passed the morning in preparation for The Gallows run and, for some reason he chose not to examine too thoroughly, decided it would be a good idea to spend the afternoon with Leandra.

She didn’t seem to be sure why he was there, following her through her chores and errands like a puppy, but she didn’t complain. If anything, she seemed to appreciate it, and Tobias was glad of the fact… even when she had him traipsing around Hightown with her, calling in at dressmakers and fabric shops, and holding her shopping while she fiddled around with curtain samples.

Well… mostly glad.

They were standing in Madame Lilienne’s Fine Orlesian Imports, a small covered shop under one of the colonnades to the north side of the market. Outside, a cold breeze filtered through Hightown’s white stone walls, and the chantry bells had just sounded the ninth hour. Madame Lilienne—a round, heavily powdered woman about fifteen years or so younger than his mother—had just disappeared to the back of the shop to fetch a bolt of dupion Leandra wanted to see. The whole place was crammed, floor to rafters, with fabrics, frocks, boots… and not even proper boots, Tobias noted. They weren’t the kind of things you could walk far in: everything was soft calfskin, with tiny little buttons down the sides.

On the dark wooden counter sat Madame Lilienne’s large and probably very comprehensive accounts ledger—the best people in Kirkwall bought Lilienne’s dresses, Leandra had been keen to tell him—and, beside that, an immense bronze inkwell. For some reason, the inkwell was cast in the shape of a cat flanked by two pigeons; he had no idea why.

The wall behind the counter was decorated with a painted silk paper, and Tobias stared at it while his mother talked. He nodded mechanically in between trying to count the little grey flowers on the pale green background, as a vague attempt at staving off imminent insanity.

“…and I never knew that, after all that,” Leandra continued, her voice hushed as, fingers flicking through a table full of fine linens, she peered towards the back of the shop, checking to see if she could be overheard, “that Madame Lilienne is a second cousin of the Comtesse de Launcet. Imagine that!”

“Really?” Tobias said faintly, adjusting his grip on the basket he carried. In addition to two previous dressmakers and an Antivan silk merchant, they had already visited the wallpaper merchant, three separate weavers, an ironmonger for a new coal scuttle, two cookpots, and a set of replacement hinges, a bootmaker, and a man who sold some sort of new-fangled knife-sharpening machine. Only that last item on the list had even remotely interested him, and Leandra had been annoyed with him when he asked the man if it worked on weaponry bigger than a vegetable knife. People would talk, she’d said.

Thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five…. Why is there so much lace in here? Why does there need to be so much lace? She doesn’t even wear lace. Damn. Lost count. All right. One, two, three….

“Of course, I knew Dulci when we were girls. She used to get so homesick for Churneau; it was so sad. I think her husband was nice enough, though. I was a bridesmaid at her wedding. You know, he was related to your great-aunt Mirena on his mother’s side, though of course that was a bit of a thorn, because then they had that terrible business with their little boy….”
“Hmmngh?” Tobias managed.

Voices drifted through from the back of the shop: Lilienne berating her serving girl, by the sound of it, for misstacking the shelves.

“Well, yes,” Leandra confided, leaning closer, though her gaze was back on the linens, her hands moving over the dyed and printed fabric with a strange blend of reverence and efficiency. “I don’t think Emile was much younger than you. They found out he had… hmm-mm. Of course, he went to the Circle. Awful for poor Dulci. Her only boy. I think the girls grew up to be a bit of a handful. Anyway….”

Tobias blinked, the little grey flowers dancing before his eyes.

Oh, well, no… obviously. Fucking awful. Worst thing that can happen, having a child that has “hmm-mm”.

He clenched his jaw, pressing his teeth together rhythmically and trying to suppress the urge to scream.

“I might ask her to tea once we’re settled,” Leandra said thoughtfully, cutting across the tail end of her own story, the people and places that littered her memory discarded like trailing ribbons. “That’d be nice. I always remember that summer we were so into Caprice, and she completed her set before me. I was so jealous! I don’t imagine she has anyone to talk to about poor Emile.”

Tobias managed a noncommittal grunt as Madame Lilienne emerged again, carrying a fat roll of deep blue silk shot through with turquoise thread. She walked like a duck, he noticed, and a slim elven girl skittered along behind her, carrying a rosewood sewing box and another roll of cloth, with a measuring tape draped around her slim neck.

He didn’t recognise her at first—didn’t recognise her at all until she looked straight at him with those hard, flat amber eyes.

Great. The sodding Underground gets bloody everywhere….

Leandra and Madame Lilienne immediately began discussing the silk dupion, and the dressmaker was clearly pushing her into having some sort of gown made from it.

“Oh, but it is very dear,” Leandra demurred, glancing at her son. “What do you think, darling?”

“Hm?” He blinked again, wishing very much that he’d stayed at home, or at least taken shelter in the comparative safety of Varric’s suite and got drunk before heading off to meet his doom. Anything would have been better than this. “Oh, go on, Mother. If you like it, have one. It—” Tobias glanced at the roll of silk, and at Madame Lilienne’s almost entirely spherical face, pink with anticipation and rouge. “—it’s nice. The… blue. Matches your eyes. Go on, it’s my treat.”

Leandra’s face split around a wide, beaming smile and, much to his surprise, she hugged his arm, almost causing him to drop the basket.

“Oh, darling! That’s so sweet of you. All right… I will! We’ll have to see about getting you new clothes, as well, of course, before we move in. Honestly, you look like an ox-hand sometimes….

Yes,” she said, turning her attention deftly to the now excitedly smiling Lilienne. “Yes, I think it’s lovely. And the bodice gathered, you think? Like the dress you showed me before?”
The conversation descended into frills, flounces, darts, and pleats, and Tobias let it fade out as he watched the elf, Bethan, studying him with a carefully guarded expression. Lilienne snapped her fingers at the girl—it was time to take Madame ‘Awke for measurements—and she bowed her head as she handed over the cloth tape.

“Madame h’is so lucky to ’ave such a generous son,” she offered obsequiously, and Tobias’ face stiffened as he heard her speak.

The night before last, in the dim-lit warehouse, when she’d faced Anders down and demanded answers from Elias Creer, this girl’s voice had been broad Marches and flat vowels. Now, as she scraped and carried for her mistress, her accent was clipped and primped, aping the well-modulated preciseness of the upper crust.

It should have been funny, but he didn’t really want to laugh. He just smiled faintly as Madame Lilienne escorted Leandra away to a curtained fitting room, and the elf continued to pretend she didn’t know him.

*Stupid, really. It’s like every single one of us is pretending to be somebody else.*

~o~O~o~

It was probably the desire not to pretend anymore that, shortly after he’d carried Leandra’s shopping home and eaten a very bland bowl of turnip stew with her and Gamlen, saw Tobias sitting on a plush barstool in The Rose.

He’d been in two minds about coming. It was still fairly early in the evening, and the place wasn’t crowded—a few of Lusine’s girls were draped over a couple of off-duty guardsmen and a couple of fat-jowled merchants—and Tobias kept telling himself he was fine for a drink and a quick screw before catching a few hours’ sleep. After all, why not? It had been too long since the last time, and Maker only knew if he’d get another chance.

*Might end up run through by templars before dawn. May as well enjoy myself now.*

The trouble was, as he sat there nursing his small glass of brandy, Tobias found himself struggling to work up the enthusiasm. Oh, it wasn’t lack of interest—he wanted to—but a kind of grimness clung to the impulse. He glanced around the fringed velvet opulence of the lounge, watching the pretty girls in various stages of undress, and the handsome men who lingered in the doorways. There was a slender, dark-skinned boy with a long braid of black hair in the corner of the room. Over by one of the potted plants sat a muscular blond with breeches so tight they might as well have been painted on and, leaning on the railing halfway up the stairs—like he was some kind of lord surveying his domain—was a very attractive young man with a mop of deep chestnut hair. Tobias watched his reflection in the mirror behind the bar, intrigued by his quiet stillness, but he couldn’t decide if he wanted him or not.

“Jethann ain’t on tonight,” Quintus said, as he refilled Tobias’ glass. “But he said, if you was to come in, I should tell him. He’ll see you anyway, he says.”

“Did he?” Tobias stared absently at the amber liquid. “That’s good of him.”

Quintus wrinkled his nose, making his impressive moustache rustle. “You want me to…?”

Tobias downed the shot of brandy. “Yeah. Thanks.”

The barman refilled his glass, and left him staring glumly at it while he collared one of the passing girls to relay the message.
Tobias didn’t have to wait long. Jethann didn’t come down to the lounge; he told the girl Quintus had sent to inform Serah Hawke that he was ‘welcome to attend’, and Tobias dutifully trudged up the carpeted stairs, slipping past the beautiful chestnut-haired boy on his way.

“Want to make it a party, ser?” the young man asked, turning to give him a wide, crooked grin, his voice heavy with broad Ferelden vowels.

Tobias looked up, hit heavily by that sudden breath of home. The lad had green eyes, slightly darker than his, and a scattering of freckles dusted his cheeks.

“Me an’ Jethann get on right well, ser,” he said, leaning back on his elbows, his long, slender body thrown forward. “And I bet two of us could take better care of you than one. Anyway, if you’re who I think you are, stands to reason it needs more than one man to handle you, am I right, ser? You’re Serah Hawke, in’t you? I’ve heard all manner of things about you, ser,” he went on, not allowing space for a reply. “Don’t think I’ll ever believe some of ’em unless I see it myself…."

Tobias winced. It was a whore’s patter, nothing more, but it still set his teeth on edge and—for some stupid reason he attributed mostly to the novelty value of the idea the lad suggested—that made him want to fuck the mouthy little shit, if only because doing so would shut him up.

Anyway, if I die tonight, it won’t matter how much gold I spend before I go, will it?

He jerked his head towards the landing, and the door that led to the room Jethann was using. “All right. If he says yes. Don’t s’pose I mind.”

You lying sod, Hawke. ‘Don’t mind’? You’ve only ever dreamed about this before. And look at him! He’s lovely.

He was lovely. He said his name was Will, and he followed Tobias obediently up the stairs. A faint fragrance of rose oil clung to his clothes, suggesting they were freshly laundered.

Jethann certainly didn’t seem to mind. He came to the door barefoot, in a loose shirt and linen trousers, smiling widely as he flung his arms around Tobias’ neck.

“My dear!” the elf exclaimed, giving him a warm, friendly kiss on the mouth. “It’s been an age! Beastly creature… I thought you didn’t like me anymore. Come in, come in…. And what’s this? Oh, it’s a party, is it? I could have guessed it would be you,” he added, smirking at Will. “Temptress. Are you plotting more wickedness? This little harlot has the naughtiest mouth this side of Val Royeaux, you know…..”

He grinned as he took Tobias’ wrist, drawing him across the threshold, and the smell of booze laced his breath. Those incredible blue eyes shone like wet stones and, as the door shut behind the three of them, it seemed so very easy for Tobias to pull Jethann close and kiss him again, until the taste of the brandy he’d drunk was almost drowned in the taste of wine on the elf’s tongue. He felt Will’s hands on him too, stroking his arms and shoulders, and it suddenly became extremely important to strip away the clothes between them.

Tobias tugged impatiently at the linen that swathed the elf, brushing off his titters at this unusual desperation, and then turned his attention to the Ferelden boy.

“Such a rush,” Jethann cooed, kissing the back of his neck as he pulled open Will’s shirt. “Slow down, and—”

“Can’t,” Tobias said, unbuckling the boy’s belt. “Don’t have all night. I just—I need…..”
He faltered on the words. He didn’t know why. He didn’t even know what he wanted to say, but somehow Jethann knew. Jethann knew to kiss him again, and then to pull away and kiss Will, and make it all right to want this, to want to watch them, to be part of it… to be alive, and warm, and to touch.

It didn’t take long until the three of them were on the bed, sprawled across the predictably threadbare covers that, naturally, smelled of musty roses. Tobias’ head spun in a way that had very little to do with the two glasses of brandy as he stretched out, allowing two hot, wet mouths to work their way down his body, his fingers buried in two warm tangles of hair. Will really did have a wicked mouth, and the novelty was intoxicating. Watching the two of them work at his flesh was something Tobias had never experienced. Being caught between two tongues, two sets of busy lips, had him clenching the coverlet in his fists, panting with need and yet unable to look away.

They shared the fruits of their labour between them, exchanging messy kisses as he lay there still seeing stars, and he knew it would be a sight that would stay with him for years… if he lived that long.

“Good to know that dragon didn’t scratch off anything vital,” Jethann murmured as he crawled up the bed, trailing kisses along Tobias’ chest. “I always knew you had remarkable powers of recovery….”

Tobias grabbed a handful of soft red hair and kissed the elf hard, mostly because he didn’t want to talk about the dragon, partly because he wanted to taste himself on that beautiful mouth… and partly because, Maker damn it, he’d missed the swishy little shit.

Jethann was grinning when he pulled away, bright-eyed and smug. He dragged Will up between them, and Tobias lost himself a little in the sheer indolent joy of touching, kissing, and stroking the boy while Jethann fucked him. He knew it was a show for his entertainment, but it was pleasure too… pleasure, and an easy kind of affection. They seemed to like each other, and enjoy each other—really enjoy, even if the amount of noise they made was probably just for his benefit—and Tobias was so grateful for that.

He was grateful for Will, too; for being there, between him and the elf, filling up the silences with his exaggerated moans and “ooh, yes” noises, and making this precious sliver of time so much more simple.

Tobias had Jethann after, and, with the elf’s long, supple legs locked around him and the Fereldan boy lying beside them and smiling, he thought it would be easy to forget how scared he was. He didn’t expect it to come flooding back with such intensity as he gazed down into those beautiful blue eyes, watching Jethann’s cheeks flush and his mouth bow around well-practiced gasps of praise.

It was fear that burst out of him in that fierce, ragged climax; fear that chilled the sweat on his skin as he lay between the two men, staring up at the shadowed ceiling and thinking that, before long, he should go home and get ready to face the night.

“Well!” Jethann exclaimed, looping an arm across Tobias’ chest and reaching lazily past him to pinch Will’s nipple. “This is the busiest day of rest I’ve had in a long while, I must admit.”

Will scrunched up his face, carefully pulling his leg out from beneath Tobias’.

“Liar. You done them Orlesians on All Souls Day. You know… Lord Whatsit’s son, and his sister. You weren’t meant to be working then.”

Jethann rolled his eyes. “Oh, piss off and fetch the washcloths, you little dog-dick. You know what I
Will cackled and clambered out of the bed. He had an extremely nice arse, but Tobias didn’t bother to take more than a cursory glance at it as he moved across the room. Beside him, Jethann pressed close and let out a small, contented sigh. Tobias didn’t know quite why it made his chest feel tight and cold, or why he sat up so quickly, muttering about needing to make a move.

“How much?” he asked, wiping himself down with the cloth Will provided.

Jethann shrugged, his red hair sliding against the pale skin of his shoulders.

“Let’s call it three all in, shall we?”

Tobias laced up his breeches and pulled a handful of sovereigns from the pouch at his belt. Will grinned as he peered at the flash of coins.

“Ooh! He is a good tipper, in’t he?”

Tobias couldn’t get home fast enough. He’d meant to sleep before leaving Gamlen’s house and heading out into the dark, but it was hard to do. He was gut-churningly nervous, and that didn’t happen often. It hadn’t happened in a long time, because he just didn’t think about it. He hadn’t thought seriously about the Bone Pit… and his assumptions, while not totally incorrect, had turned out to be woefully inadequate.

Naturally, it wasn’t like there was going to be a dragon under The Gallows, but there would be templars. That much seemed pretty inevitable.

He lay there, watching the ceiling the same way he’d done in the whorehouse—all right, not exactly the same way, because there were no pretty distractions here, not even ones he felt bad about using—and waiting until the slums had grown silent, and the slim sliver of the moon was halfway across the sky. Then he rose, dressed in his darkest, toughest leathers, slipped on the pair of supple hide gauntlets he’d oiled and laid out that morning, and strapped an extra knife to his thigh.

In arranging for the transport of the lyrium, as promised, Tobias had made sure to keep back the bottles he’d promised Anders, and also a few extra for tonight’s little excursion. He tucked them into a bag hung across his back, and their silent thrum made his spine itch. He hated using potions, but if it meant the difference between coming back and not coming back, he was prepared to put up with the rush of nausea, the headache, and the spinning sensation that came with them.

He stole out of the house, aware of every creaky floorboard and squeaky hinge, and slipped into the night’s chill, blanketed by the thick, frost-rimed dark.

He knew where he was going. He barely needed the glimmer of magelight he let creep around his fingertips, highlighting the crooks and crevices of the narrow cross-streets and alleys through which he wound. The air tasted like snow, though it would probably fall as needles of cold rain. As he walked, Tobias thought idly of his last winters in Ferelden, before the Blight. There was always dancing in the tavern, and Leandra never wanted him to go, because Carv and Bethany would want to go too, and she didn’t approve of that. It used to push back the night, though: candles, lanterns, laughter… someone playing a fiddle jig.

One year, he and Carver had sneaked out and got blind drunk. Carv had thrown up in a horse trough and, for the kind of reasons that only ever make sense when you’re three sheets to the wind, Tobias had decided that stripping him naked and leaving his stained clothes in a pile by the front door before
putting him to bed would negate any possible suspicion from their mother.

It had not worked. Moreover, they’d woken her up coming in, and she’d been furious. He remembered spending what was left of the night in a nearby farm’s pig shed while she tended to her still-retching precious baby, and she’d threatened to wallop him with a broom if he dared come back before he’d sobered up.

Winter was different up here. The annums were different—everyone went to more Chantry services, definitely—and it was to do with much more than the weather. There was no snow, much less mud… and people even wrote the calendar differently.

Tobias was much more literate than the vast majority of Fereldans who grew up in places like Lothering. Malcolm had seen to that. He was used, however, exclusively to the Common tongue. The tendency Kirkwallers—and, for all he knew, the rest of the Marchers—had to use Tevinter names on the calendar was confusing, and it had taken him a long while to adjust. He still didn’t feel comfortable with their strange, foreign words, or the way they wrote their tallies… any of it.

And yet you still refuse to think you could leave. You’re an idiot, Hawke.

You could, you know. Just go. Get up and go somewhere far away. If not back to Ferelden, then somewhere completely new… but you won’t, will you?

Not yet. Not while you’re still waiting, still hoping… still stuck on everything that keeps you here.

You prat.

~o~O~o~

He met Varric at the edge of Lowtown. The dwarf looked faintly apprehensive but, with Bianca strapped to his back and his coat buttoned tight against the cold, his determination seemed to outweigh his uncertainty.

“You owe me for this,” he muttered, nodding a greeting.

Tobias smiled mirthlessly. “Think of it as research. You can write it all into a story later. The Naughty Jailor or something.”

Varric snorted as they crossed behind the dim shape of a warehouse’s stone wall. “Given what you told me happens in that place, Hawke, I think you might be sick.”

Tobias shrugged, making for a narrow street that led towards the old barracks and, from there, the slipway down into Darktown. “Well, you’ve gotta laugh, right?” he muttered. “Otherwise the bastards win.”

Varric shook his head. “Whatever. I’ll get onto it after I finish Hard in Hightown II.”

“Oh?”

“Even Harder,” the dwarf explained, a thin trickle of moonlight bouncing off his knowing smile.

Tobias grinned. “Unbelievable. And no one’s sued you?”

“Nope.” Varric frowned. “Well, not successfully. So far.”

Their stifled sniggers echoed faintly off the stones as they made for the slipway, descending into the Undercity via a long, steep, and not terribly trustworthy set of steps.
Here, their presence became more noticeable, if not actually noticed. Away from the chill of the entrance into the first tunnels, the shapes of sleeping bundles started to line the walls. People, dug into their little niches and hollows, might or might not have seen them pass. Few looked up; even fewer probably cared, with the exception of those who were undoubtedly eyes for the Coterie, or any of the smaller cartels.

Tobias caught the eye of one elven man, little more than a skeleton wrapped in rags. He stared at the human and the dwarf passing by him, his wide, pale lavender eyes as cold and vacant as ice, and his expression was one of purified hostility. The occasional stubs of light that came from carefully guarded torches or tallow candles—no one in Darktown liked to pass the night in complete pitch blackness, on account of that making it easier for someone to shiv you and steal your stuff—was barely enough to see by, and as they turned away from the main pathways, Varric swore under his breath.

“Don’t look at what you trod in,” Tobias said over his shoulder. “We’re nearly there, anyway.”

Varric caught up in a few strides, scuffing his boot awkwardly with every step. “Not so much what,” he muttered. “Think that one might have been a who.”

It could well have been, but it didn’t merit further investigation just then. With the tunnel that led to the clinic at their backs, Tobias led Varric along another byway, down another set of steps, and past a rickety wooden frame that, once, had apparently held some sort of pulley system. A set of marks was scratched into the wood, and Varric frowned at the pattern.

“Smugglers?”

“Yeah.” Tobias nodded, the word almost wistful as he glanced at the woodwork. “The cut we’ll be using leads down into the old sewers. Athenril showed it to me ages ago. I didn’t know there was a way to The Gallows through there, but apparently there is. That’s Gull Company,” he added, pointing at the sigil. “D’you remember? They took this patch over after the Coterie pushed the Black Spire gang out… until Regan Gull got herself killed by those qunari, anyway.”

“I remember. Seems not everybody gets on as well with the Arishok as you, hmm?”

Tobias pulled a face as they squeezed past the jagged, worm-eaten timbers. “Wouldn’t put it quite like that myself.”

“No? Last I heard, His Horniness wanted another audience with you. Something about the way you handled that poison gas business….”

“Huh,” Tobias grunted. “If he wants to talk to me about that, I’m quite willing. I’m sure there’s lots of Fereldan words for ‘arsehole’ that he hasn’t heard. Yet.”

“It’d definitely be an education,” Varric agreed, wincing a little at the smell of rot, mould, damp, and filth that engulfed them as they emerged into an even narrower tunnel. “But, then, you do go out of your way to foster diplomacy in this city, Hawke.”

A glimmer of torchlight ahead, just past the curve of a dripping, somewhat slimy wall, told Tobias they’d almost arrived. He smirked.

“That’s me. Charm and grace personified.”

~o~O~o~

Gethyn and Anders stood close to the entrance of the old smugglers’ cut, a couple of leather packs at
their feet. A heavy, square metal cover sat over the entrance to the passageway, rusted and patched with damp chunks of moss, or algae, or whatever the greenish, greasy stuff that seemed to grow over everything down here was. Tobias didn’t know, and he didn’t fancy touching it in order to find out. Either way, the cover had the same Gull Company mark scratched onto it, along with a few other worn smugglers’ signs. He didn’t recognise those—probably before his time, he supposed—but, back in the day, the sheet of metal would have been hauled away and block and tackle rigs, like the one they’d squeezed by to get here, would have been put in place to move illicit hauls quickly and quietly.

The sewers didn’t get so much traffic from Darktown these days, mainly because of the refugees thronging everywhere, and perhaps also because the Coterie—in getting so greedy about pushing out the smaller companies—had such a large share of the pie that they’d grown lazy and complacent. They barely bothered to hide their crimes anymore, and most of Kirkwall didn’t seem to care.

The two mages were talking in quiet undertones, Anders with his arms folded tightly across his chest, the ratty feathers on his shoulders sticking up in ruffled spikes, and Gethyn holding a torch in one hand and jabbing the forefinger of the other in the general direction of the tunnels.

Tobias cleared his throat. “Um… evening.”

They stopped, glancing up at his approach, and Tobias tried not to notice the way the torchlight picked out the gold in Anders’ hair. He looked pale and determined, and vaguely twitchy, though not as twitchy as Gethyn, who scowled violently at Varric.

“How the sod is this?”

“A friend,” Tobias said smoothly. “All right?”

“I told you this was private!” Gethyn seethed, glaring at Anders. “What you got to go bringing outsiders in for?”

“Hawke’s not an outsider,” the healer said, his jaw tight and his words clipped. “And Varric’s safer than almost anyone.”

“Varric Tethras,” the dwarf added, smiling cheerfully.

“Tethras?” Gethyn’s scowl started to fade. “I know you. Well… I know of you….”

“Ah, everybody does,” Varric said nonchalantly, with a dismissive wave of one gloved hand. “Sooner or later.”

“I’m surprised you’re joining us,” Anders said. “Not that I’m complaining, but—”

Varric raised his eyebrows. “Blondie… really? Taking the templars on, right in Meredith’s back yard? It’s so insane, I couldn’t say no.”

Gethyn muttered something under his breath, turning away to peer along the tunnel. Besides the way Varric and Tobias had come, there was only one access point into this dank and disgusting little hollow, and it seemed highly unlikely anyone would follow them into it of their own volition… but the mage still looked nervous.

“It’s necessary,” Anders said, his voice curiously lacking in emphasis. “Dangerous, yes, but—”

“We’ve taken this risk dozens of times before,” Gethyn said pointedly, adopting that annoying self-righteous, haughty tone that Tobias had heard plenty of times before from Anders. “We’ve put our
lives on the line to save just one mage… you think you’ve got the right to do less when there’s summink that threatens all of us?"

Tobias winced. He’d outlined the gist of Alrik’s alleged plan to Varric, but not quite with the dramatic terminology that the Underground favoured. Fortunately, the dwarf just smiled cheerfully and spread his gloved hands wide.

“Me? No… believe me, friend, I’m a supporter. Just ask Blondie.”

The corner of Anders’ mouth twitched tersely and he looked away, arms still folded.

“Leave him, Gethyn,” he muttered. “We have to move, anyway.”

The other mage’s scowl intensified to improbably melodramatic proportions, and he turned away with a muffled grunt, thrusting the torch ahead of him. Its ragged light bounced off the damp walls, and threw burning shadows back over his sharp, angry face.

“Come on,” Gethyn grumbled, his eyes like hot coals as he gestured towards the cut. “Let’s get going. And if you tell anyone about this passageway, dwarf, I will personally carve another two feet off your height. Understand?”

Tobias moved past him to give Anders a hand with the metal cover, and they shared a brief eye-roll as Varric turned his smarmiest grin on the rebel.

“Oh, your secret’s safe with me. Honest. Say… what do they call you, anyway?”

“Varric,” Tobias warned, as he closed his leather-gloved fingers on the edge of the cover. “Leave Gethyn alone.”

The mage turned that gimlet scowl on him, and Varric just shrugged. Tobias settled his grip on the cover and, on Anders’ count, they began to drag it back. Despite the rust and the mossy, slimy growth, it had clearly been well-used and, after the initial grunt of effort, it began to slide fairly easily. After a few minutes’ work, the passageway beneath was revealed: an eight foot drop down to the disused tunnel below, from which emanated a foul, stale smell, slightly worse than the usual slow-death-and-effluvia stench that Darktown had about it.

“Lovely,” Tobias remarked, peering down into the darkness.

Anders went to one of the leather packs and withdrew a coil of rope, which he set about fastening to the mouth of the cut.

“There aren’t enough of us to leave someone as cavy, so we’ll have to be lucky. Quick, and lucky. We take this tunnel east until it hits the old dock wall, then there’s a break north, and we get into the smugglers’ runs. That’s where we’ll find Jarrod, Mina, and Ranulf.”

“Those tunnels go right under the lake?” Varric asked dubiously. “Doesn’t that… I don’t know… defeat the purpose of building your prison to be totally inaccessible?”

Gethyn scoffed. “Lyrium smugglers built those runs,” he said with a bitter sneer. “Built ’em to serve the templars. Templars prob’ly paid for them. They go right up under the fortress, right into the basements, so the rutters don’t have to be without their little extras. What the Chantry gives ’em ain’t enough. Not once they’re addicted. They crave the stuff… drives ’em mad.”

Anders tugged at the rope’s fastening then, satisfied, tossed the rest of the coil down into the darkness. It landed with a soft splash at the bottom of the tunnel, and Tobias grimaced.
Oh, good. That sounds simply delightful. And it’s really, really dark. This... this just couldn’t get better.

“Right.” Anders glanced at the other three, his face pallid but his eyes sharply alert. “We should be as quick as we can. When we get to The Gallows itself, we’ll have to stick together; it’s a labyrinth, but the building’s footprint is square. We go up two levels—anyone in the deepest part of the Pit we can’t help anyway—and we should find the cells. Even if they’re pulling double guard duty, it’s late, so any templars we come across probably won’t be too alert. They patrol the corridors, and there’ll be fixed guards by the cells themselves. We’ll have to be on our toes and, remember, it’s all stone. It deadens sound, but echoes carry. We’re quick, we’re clean, and we don’t give any bucket-head the chance to raise the alarm. Clear?”

Tobias nodded, his pulse jumping a little with the excitement. He told himself it was adrenaline, nothing more. Not bloodlust, not the thrill of the chase… and certainly not how good Anders looked when he was giving orders.

~o~O~o~

They paced through endless narrow tunnels. It could have been miles, hours, ages… all Tobias knew was that it stank, and his well-patched boots were not as well-patched as he’d hoped.

Gethyn went on point with the torch, Varric trudging along behind him, and Tobias and Anders followed, the healer keeping a small orb of pale light spinning above their heads. It warred with the torch’s flame, painting splashes of colour-stained illumination on the dank, rough walls. Originally, the sewer tunnels had been carved from solid rock, hollowed out beneath the city the same way the harbour had been made: hewn by magic, finished by slave labour.

“So, uh….” Tobias cleared his throat awkwardly, simultaneously trying to attract Anders’ attention and stifle the noise. “This, er… evidence?”

The healer blinked, glancing at him like he hadn’t really heard the words. “Hmm?”

“These people. They’re going to be able to prove what Alrik’s doing?”

Anders shrugged, which surprised Tobias. People who were pitting themselves against stupid odds and the serious likelihood of dying horribly on the end of some wanker’s sword of so-called “mercy” probably shouldn’t be quite so laissez-faire about the potential for success in the idiotic things they were attempting to do.

“What?” he prompting, turning towards the other man as they walked, feet splashing dully in the filth with every step. “What? I thought—”

“Words won’t turn the tide on their own,” Anders said quietly. “But if we can prove anything… if we can find evidence of Alrik’s plan, I’m taking it straight to the Grand Cleric. She won’t be able to claim neutrality then.”

There was a peculiar trace of smugness within the hollow tone of his voice, but how could he be smug at a time like this, when everything was so bloody uncertain? It was almost as if he wasn’t entirely there, Tobias thought… though he could quite understand someone wanting to absent themselves from sloshing through miles of filth.

“Right,” he said dubiously.

Anders glanced at him, squinting in the dimness of the tunnel’s foulness, and curled his lip. “You smell of roses.”
Tobias inhaled sharply, surprised—because who could smell anything in the sludge of shit and mud and Maker alone knew what else was down here?—and smirked uncomfortably. “Oh?”

“Mm.” Anders turned his attention back to the ill-lit path in front of them. The pale glow of magelight glimmered on his hair and threaded thin streaks of bluish-white across his cheeks. “Condemned man’s last fling, was it?”

*Why do you do this? Does it make you feel better? Or d’you just like watching me squirm?*


*There. Happy now? Got something to laugh about, have you? Something to giggle over with the voices in your fucking head?*

Anders shrugged mildly, the ragged shoulders of his coat rustling against the wet echoes of their footsteps.

“I understand that,” he said quietly. “I miss it.”

And, with those small, gentle words, even the anger writing itself across Tobias’ mind faded away, and he found himself with his mouth open, chewing on silence while the stink of the tunnels coated his tongue.

Up ahead, just past the oncoming bend in the river of filth, the brief flare of a torch swiped through the darkness. Gethyn stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled and, after a beat, a returning whistle sounded.

Anders let out a breath, his feathered pauldrons sagging in something that looked a lot like relief. “That’s the others. Good. Come on… let’s get a bloody move on.”

Tobias shut his mouth. He couldn’t argue with that.
Jarrod, Ranulf, and Mina were waiting, huddled in the dankness, shrouded with cloaks and hoods. Gethyn made brief, terse introductions, but the shadows hardly made for helpful identification. All Tobias really managed to establish was that Mina was a tiny dark-skinned elf who barely even spoke to say hello, while Ranulf was a large, red-haired man with a scruffy beard, bad teeth, and a near-impenetrable Starkhaven accent, and Jarrod was a wiry Kirkwaller wrapped up in more loose-fitting linen than the average street gang thug. The only part of him visible from beneath the layers of dark cloth was one narrow, grubby hand, knuckles standing proud under deeply tanned skin as he held the smouldering torch.

“Let’s go,” he said, thrusting it towards the break in the tunnel that—through another series of ladders and old smugglers’ cuts—led to the lyrium runs of which Gethyn had spoken so scaldingly. “Losing time.”

Tobias gritted his teeth and tried not to meet Varric’s eye, aware from the stunningly eloquent quality of the dwarf’s silence that he not only still thought this was a terrible idea, but was convinced that they were going to die in the company of complete imbeciles.

Who knows? He might well be right.

Tobias tried to keep a mental map going as they walked. It was a skill he’d learned, or perhaps just honed, over years with Athenril’s operation: you always needed to know where you’d been, where you were going, and at least two different ways to get out of where you were. Problem was, there weren’t ways out of the smugglers’ tunnels. The cuts had been dug under the lake itself, and they had few dog-legs, twists, gullies, or turns. They weren’t the rabbit warrens gangs dug into up in the cliffs or old mine works, easy to defend, and easy for the unfamiliar to get lost in. These were simply business-like channels, connecting point to point with only a few corners and bends in between. It made him feel exposed and, much worse than that, it made him uncomfortably aware of the several tons of water and stone above their heads.

The tunnels were narrow, smelly, wet, and hot, and the dank air seemed thick and oppressive. Tobias tried to breathe normally, but the torch flames provided less illumination than he’d have liked, and everything was so incredibly close. Dark, heavy, hot… like the tunnels were squeezing him, and the grainy quality of the shadows was seeping into his flesh. Sweat broke out on his palms, his lower back and underarms already wet, and he became aware of his hoarse breaths echoing on the damp rock.

Tobias glanced at Anders, dimly aware that the healer was breathing with the same tight, shallow rhythm. He stared ahead, his dark gaze apparently fixed on Jarrod’s torch flame. Tobias wanted to say something to him, to murmur some kind of companionable comment about incredibly unpleasant this was, but the realisation that Anders had done this so often before stopped him; like it was a testament to how much this meant, he supposed. How much the Underground would do to see mages saved… and how much Anders would do for the Underground.

He gritted his teeth, and trudged on in silence.

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The entrance to the fortress itself was a little anti-climactic. Jarrod hung back with the torch, and Ranulf jemmied open a wooden trap door at the top of a rickety ladder. They climbed up, one by one, and emerged into what looked like a disused service corridor. Sacks and crates lined the end
wall, and a door led off to the left, the rest of the space nothing but grey, square masonry. Gethyn pulled Tobias up, and sneered as he nodded at the walls around them.

“Welcome to the Gallows, Hawke.”

Tobias pulled a face. He wasn’t sure whether the slight skin-crawling discomfort he felt was to do with a genuine atmosphere of unpleasantness, or whether he was simply imagining it but, either way, the belly of the fortress felt like a vile, angry, bitter place. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but it seemed so… empty. Like the whole place had been wrapped up, swaddled in silence and choked with oppression.

He leaned down to help Varric up the ladder, and the dwarf grimaced as he was pulled up, squinting along the bare length of the corridor. If Tobias hadn’t known better, he’d have said his friend had suppressed a shiver, too.

“What?” Varric asked rhetorically, brushing down his coat and adjusting Bianca’s seat on his back. “No armed welcome party? No lanterns made out of mages’ skulls? I’m starting to think the stories were exaggerations.”

Tobias smiled mirthlessly, but the Underground didn’t appear to get the joke. Mina scowled at Varric, and stalked off with Gethyn at her side, the other two following closely. Anders winced at the dwarf as the tails of torchlight lengthened along the walls, shadows tugging at the cool, clammy air.

“You’d better hope we don’t meet the welcome party,” he said dryly. “Come on. Best stick together.”

The healer seemed quiet as they walked… a terse kind of silence, almost, though Tobias noted the soft, irregular breaths that whistled between his lips every so often, and the way his gaze continually flicked to the walls, watching the torchlight dance on the stonework.

Of course, he wasn’t exactly comfortable, either. None of them were. The sense of expectation lingered over the group: a hard, determined anticipation too finely whetted to be dread, because it wasn’t about fearing what could happen, more tensing in the face of its probability. Tobias squared his shoulders and tried not to think about anything too deeply, instead snatching glances at Anders’ tight, pinched face, and the way his lips moved soundlessly as he walked.

Great. The perfect time to have an argument with the voice in your head, Anders.

He wanted to say something, but how did you broach it? A quick nudge in the ribs and an “I see your Fade spirit’s acting up again, then?” No. That wouldn’t help.

Probably, Tobias suspected, nothing would help. They were a long way down, and everything felt dark, dank, and solid. The stones sat over them like the sealed mouth of a tomb, and the knowledge that somewhere above these empty tunnels the fortress itself stretched up like a black bone against the sky, housing scores of mages, shackled like shattered, broken prisoners, was hardly comforting.

They turned a corner, slowing as Ranulf scouted ahead, then beckoned them on through the shadows once he had the all-clear.

“The cells aren’t far ahead,” he said, his accent muddying the words almost as much as his muffled whisper. “We’ll need to be on the lookout for guards, though I doubt there’ll be many this time o’ night. If we’re lucky, we’ll see no one until we get to the ditches.”
Tobias arched an eyebrow. “Uh, ‘ditches’…?”

“What they call the cells they leave you in to rot,” Ranulf explained, curling his lip bitterly. The torchlight glimmered against the red of his beard, his eyes little more than pinpricks of angry reflection in the gloom. “They throw you far enough down, you never see sunlight again. I’d be surprised if the templars themselves know every passageway down here.”

The tugging memory of the Deep Roads turned over in the recesses of Tobias’ mind, and sweat prickled in the small of his back. He was having a hard enough time not thinking about the vast weight of stone above them, and he hadn’t got over the tunnels under the lake, either. He swallowed, his tongue feeling dry against the roof of his mouth.

“Ah. Right.”

“We called it ‘the pit’ at Kinloch Hold,” Anders said quietly, his voice oddly soft and distant, like he was still somehow dislocated from the task at hand. “The main cells were ‘the box’; that was where they put you when you misbehaved. But there were deeper levels underneath. No one knew how far the chambers went down. The Pit could have gone on forever. They said, if you got put in there, you’d die, because the templars wouldn’t remember how to find you again. Right under the bones of the tower… back to the Avvar days. Buried with the ghosts and the demons.”

Tobias saw the look of unease that passed between Mina and Jarrod—that kind of mild, uncertain embarrassment that Anders sometimes seemed to cause in people—but the initial flare of protective irritation he felt petered out when he glanced at the healer. He looked… wrong. His eyes had grown glassy, his skin pallid to the point of ashen, and his breathing seemed shallow. Anders frowned, his brows pinching lightly as he appeared to reach for a memory he couldn’t quite touch.

“In White Spire, they called it… I can’t remember. Noir…? The dark place. They’d shut you down there, but there was still a little light. Not like the Hold. It was pitch black there, and you could smell the lake…. No way of knowing night from day.”

“It sounds like quite a story, Blondie,” Varric said, keeping his voice hushed, and yet forcibly stuffed with cheerfulness as he leaned in to elbow the mage in the arm. “You’ll have to tell me all about it sometime. Hey… we get out of this alive, I’ll buy everybody drinks, huh?”

Anders blinked, then nodded tentatively, seeming to latch back onto the present with a little more ease. “Yes,” he agreed, glancing sheepishly at the others. “That… that’s a good idea.”

Tobias caught his eye briefly, and he wished he knew how to condense everything he wanted to ask into that one fleeting moment, and those few cramped inches of airspace. It was over too fast, though, and he had no way of knowing if Anders was all right, if he could cope with this and—perhaps more importantly—if he was going to stay in control long enough to avoid getting them all killed.

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They saw blessedly little in the dark corridors. Tobias was aware of heavy doors, barred with iron, and some caked with rust. He didn’t want to speculate on what might go on behind them, or whether the cells beyond had occupants.

A tiny stone staircase, twisting and barely wide enough for one person—presumably intended to be easily defensible, he supposed—led to another level just like the one below. They pressed into the dog-leg of the stairs, drawing into a sudden and silent knot when Jarrod signalled hearing a noise. Sure enough, the distant clank of metal echoed faintly against the stones and, torch quickly doused
with a convenient ice charm, all seven of them stood stock still, holding their breath in the dark.

Tobias’ pulse beat rapidly, each thud of his heart against his ribs seeming to echo through to his forehead. He closed his eyes as the faint whisper of sound receded, the thick and oppressive quiet rolling back in after it. That was one of the worst things about this bloody place, he’d decided: it was far too damn quiet. There should have been people screaming, crying out… making some kind of sign of their suffering. But there wasn’t. There was just silence. Total, complete, complicit silence, and it made him feel sick and giddy.

He caught his breath again at the feel of movement beside him, only realizing as Ranulf’s fingers twitched around a small flame to relight the torch that it was Anders, standing close beside him. The rough sleeve of his coat brushed Tobias’ arm, and he peered critically at the healer, trying to discern some sign of sanity in his face.

Gethyn motioned towards the corridor and they moved out again, the pack of them scurrying through the shadows like rats, hardly daring to breathe.

The mages they were here for should be close by, Jarrod said. There was no way of knowing precisely which cells, but they at least had a general idea, and the benefit of experience helped gauge the places the templars were most likely to keep people. That was what Tobias clung to, anyway, because every second spent in this place felt more like blind madness.

The next corridor held signs of occupancy. It was still dark and narrow, dominated by the heavy, barred doors, but a couple of the torch sconces looked to have been recently used, and a small table with two rickety chairs sat lopsidedly at the far end. Tobias stifled a shudder; it was hard to imagine unlucky pairs of templars stuck down here on guard duty, whiling away the empty hours with rounds of Wicked Grace and Three Card Bluff.

Ranulf pointed to the far end of the corridor, silently signalling the need to stay alert. There were templars here… somewhere.

Tobias gritted his teeth. If the tower’s footprint was, as Anders had said, basically a square, then everything they’d walked through was mirrored on the other side of the building, and it stood to reason that patrols would cover the whole square. It would just have been a damn sight easier if they were timed… or predictable in any way. Gethyn moved forward, his narrow frame tight and his shoulders hunched, his whole body projecting a tense kind of determination.

“They’ll be here somewhere,” he muttered, nodded to the end of the corridor. “Dwarf, you stand cavy. Mina, take the other side. You see one of those nug-fucking bastards, you take them down. Quick and quiet. Understand?”

The little elf nodded and padded soundlessly behind them, melting into the shadows that pooled by the dark walls. Varric didn’t look pleased at being addressed purely by his race, but headed over to stand guard by the top of the corridor all the same. Ranulf, Jarrod, and Gethyn splintered off, each taking one of the massive, barred doors, and Tobias looked to Anders, unsure what he should do.

“Here.” The healer beckoned him over to the fourth of the six iron doors that lined the space, his pale, stained fingers already laid against the corroded metal. “They have enchantments on them… stops anyone breaking out. But, if you know how, you can—” Anders winced, a light flicker of blue enveloping his hands as he pushed against the door, eliciting a creak of protest from the iron. “— ouch… you can unlock them. There. Check the hatch.”

Tobias reached up to where he pointed, sliding back the narrow strip of metal that, fastened with a dark iron latch, covered over an aperture through which, he supposed, prisoners could be observed
and have their meals passed to them… assuming templars actually fed their prisoners. Anders was shaking out his hands, his face a rictus somewhere between discomfort and nervousness.

“Anyone there?” he asked as Tobias pressed his face to the aperture, trying to see within.

The cell was dark. Not just dark… as if it was scraped out of the shadows, blacker than tar and just as suffocating. The air inside tasted foul—metallic and dirty—and Tobias could identify the feeling of templars’ magic on it.

It had always struck him as odd, the way the Chantry gave them a free pass, fed them lyrium to enhance their use of what was essentially plundered magic: artificially roused in those who weren’t mages, in order to control those who were.

All the same, he’d learned to hate the feel of it. That clinical, raw taste, with all the power of lyrium and none of the human feeling that made it possible to live with… because how else did you deal with the entire Fade breathing down the back of your neck? They didn’t have that. They didn’t understand. Their so-called cleanses and protective enchantments… they tasted like metal and violence.

He pushed himself back from the door, the lingering print of the metal and the power humming within it stinging against his forehead.

“No,” he managed, shaking his head. “No one in there.”

“Damn.” Anders glanced across the corridor at the others. “Anything?”

“One in here,” Jarrod said, jerking a thumb at the door he stood beside. “But she’s dead.”

Anders was already moving across the stones, the same crispness in his step as he had at the clinic. “Are you sure?”

Gethyn was moving too, but there was a different swiftness in his gait. “Is it—? I wanna see.”

He hoisted himself up to the door, peering through the narrow hatch for a moment before he dropped down again, shaking his head as he turned away.

“It’s not Edda. And I don’t think even you can fix that, Anders.”

The healer stopped in mid-stride, and Tobias found himself horribly curious, yet not really wanting to see the body. Had she starved, become corrupted? Or were the templars even more directly responsible for her demise? The tang of death stung his nostrils as Jarrod slid the hatch shut and, beckoning Mina to follow, they moved on to the next set of doors.

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They found the mages they were looking for about two-thirds of the way around the square run of cells. There were no guards, and yet the prisoners didn’t cry out for help or show any sign of understanding that they were being rescued until Ranulf had actually started jemmying the doors open.

Tobias helped with that. Most of his career with Athenril’s operation had, at some point, involved the grunt work of moving large, heavy objects, though at least this time he could apply a judicious Maker’s Fist to the obstacles without worrying about exposing himself as an apostate.

The metal creaked and groaned as—with the templar enchantments lifted—Tobias set a force spell
across the lock, digging the weight of his power into the iron and heaving until its very fibres tore apart.

“Not exactly subtle, Hawke,” Varric muttered, his gloved fingers playing along Bianca’s stock as he watched the shadowed corridor behind them.

Tobias smirked around his gritted teeth, sweat slipping down his spine. Metal was, for some reason, always hard to perform any kind of magic on; he had no idea why.

“You know me, Varric,” he managed, as the door buckled and gave way, allowing Ranulf to squeeze in and drag out the first of the prisoners they’d found. “I don’t do things by halves.”

The dwarf snorted, and Tobias stepped back to give Ranulf and the filthy, bowed bundle of rags he dragged with him a little room.

“It’s Willen,” the Starkhavener said, as the mage dangling from his arms lifted his shaggy, matted head, squinting at them with weak, unfocused eyes.

He would have been a tall man, had he been able to stand upright, but he seemed limp as grass, his robes—once richly patterned in shades of grey and green—heavily soiled and stained, and a torn blanket hanging over his shoulders. Heavy beard growth, perhaps a good couple of weeks’ worth, covered his cheeks and chin, and the stink that rolled off him was worse than the gutter outside The Hanged Man the morning after payday on the docks. Tobias tried not to gag, but it still wasn’t as bad as what they’d done to the man’s hands.

“Willen?” Gethyn went to him, hunching down in front of the thin, haggard face, trying to coax some kind of recognition from the mage. “Willen, it’s me. We’re getting you out. You, and Edda, and Leorah. But we’ve got to move fast, all right? Come on….”

Mina, Jarrod, and Anders were already working on the other two doors, and Tobias knew he needed to help… but he couldn’t stop himself staring.

They hadn’t just broken Willen’s hands. They’d destroyed them.

Every bone, every joint had been crushed, twisted… mangled, until all that remained were the two bent, bloodied, shrivelled things that protruded from the ends of his sleeves.

*Couldn’t even do him the favour of cutting the sodding things off. Maker’s cock, if I had the time, I’d be sick….*

There wasn’t the time to waste, of course, so Tobias choked back the bile and disgust, and went to work on the next set of locks. Varric had a point: it wasn’t the quietest, most discreet way to break anyone out. He couldn’t understand why the guard patrols hadn’t come running. Surely there were templars down here. There must be. They’d heard the distant clank of metal, seen the posts they must usually occupy; what was going on?

The other two mages seemed in slightly better shape than Willen, but only marginally. Edda proved to be a small, round woman who looked Rivaini, her black hair twisted into a once-neat coil at the back of her neck. She was just as filthy and soiled as Willen, but Gethyn still hugged her tightly as he pulled her from the cell, the perpetual sharpness in his features coalescing into a blade of anger at what had been done to her and the others. She touched his face as she hung from his neck, murmuring words too dry and shallow to be heard, her lips cracked and her throat evidently parched.

While Tobias and Anders worked on the last door, Jarrod conjured an ice spell and patiently helped wet the prisoners’ mouths with small blocks of the stuff. It seemed to help.
The last to be freed, Leorah, was a skinny elven woman with a dirty fall of blonde hair. She seemed to have fared better than the others, though she frowned in confusion as Mina helped her past the buckled iron door, and she the faces of her rescuers.

“Anders?”

Tobias recalled him having mentioned her, but he hadn’t expected the elf’s look of utter shock as she stared at the healer, her pale blue eyes—that very elven blue, which almost seemed to shimmer under the torchlight—wide in her gaunt, dirty face.

The tiniest of smiles flitted around Anders’ mouth.

“Hello, Leorah.”

His hands hung loosely at his sides, his fingers twitching lightly, and he had that ashen cast to his skin again, along with the particular tautness that spoke of a struggle to keep control. Tobias imagined Justice probably wasn’t responding well to being confronted with such explicit evidence of templars’ mistreatment of their charges.

Walled up in the dark, ankle-deep in their own shit and piss, no light, no water… Maker, I’m getting the urge to take this out on the next templar I see, and I haven’t got a Fade spirit in my head….

For someone who’d just been rescued from a prison cell, the elf didn’t look terribly pleased. She tried to stand unaided, and ended up leaning heavily on Mina instead.

“I— I didn’t… didn’t know you were here,” she managed, the words croaky and uneven as she stared at him, her expression laced with something that looked rather like suspicion.

Tobias doubted she knew about Justice, given that Anders had said they’d been apprentices at the same time, and he’d run from Ferelden long before the Annulment. He wondered why someone from the healer’s past should look at him with quite such a degree of wariness, but there really wasn’t the opportunity to question it.

Anders’ smile widened slightly, though it still didn’t seem to touch the rest of his face. “You know how it is,” he said mildly. “Rebels, resistance fighters… people like me always have to end up somewhere, right? Bad boys.”

Those words clearly had meaning between the two of them. She looked away and, even through the dirt and the dishevelment, Tobias saw something very distinct in her expression. It was no more than a whisper, an echo of a memory… but it was there.

Oh. Right. He didn’t mean he knew her. He meant “knew” her.

Right. Well. That’s… that’s fine.

And it was. It was honestly fine. It didn’t even hammer too intensely at Tobias’ brain that Anders could be so very blasé about someone to whom he seemed to have been close. There was no reason he should mention it, of course, no reason it should affect anything.

“The… the others,” Leorah croaked, tugging at Mina’s sleeve. “The girls. There were two girls. Did you find them?”

Mina frowned. “What girls?”

“Th-they brought two others down here today. Alrik… Alrik came. He took her. The… the youngest
one. Not long ago. When I heard people outside my cell, I thought it was him. I thought…."

She faltered, the words dying away and those large, pale elven eyes—the kind her people so often hid their thoughts behind, as hard and unreadable as moonstone—turned to pools of visceral terror.

“Take her back,” Anders said quietly, addressing Mina with the same firm, calm tone he used in the clinic. “All of them. Get them out as fast as you can. Go now, and get them to the safe house. Gethyn? Gethyn… Alrik’s here. Tonight.”

Tobias felt the bitter tang that seemed to solidify in the air at those words. Gethyn’s spine straightened, his eyes narrowed pebbles in his dry, hard face. He nodded, and a wordless kind of communication filtered through the group… but clearly not everyone was in agreement. Ranulf frowned, his shaggy brows drawn low over scowling eyes.

“Don’t be a fool, Anders. Come on. We need to leave. Now. We have what we—”

“‘What we came for’?” Anders sneered, but it was that all-too-familiar current of Justice’s anger swelling beneath the sound of his words. “They’re people, not commodities! And if that bastard is here—”

“Your hate blinds you!” Jarrod protested, holding the torch high as he supported the mage, Willen, with his other arm. “Would you risk everything now to go after him? Who knows how many templars he has with him? And how would you even find him? Ranulf’s right… don’t be a fool.”

The healer’s face was a mask of ice-cold fury, his mouth tight-lipped and his cheeks drawn in, like someone had just given him half a lemon to suck on. Tobias felt the familiar pull of dread in the pit of his gut.

*Keep your mouth shut, Hawke. This isn’t your fight. The Underground don’t trust you enough for you to wade in on something like—*

“I thought we were supposed to be here rescuing mages,” he heard himself say, the thinking part of his brain cringing as the words left him. “And don’t we want evidence of everything Alrik’s doing?”

Ranulf and Jarrod turned thunderous scowls on him, but he shrugged, slipping a sidelong look to the broken, battered mages who stood beside them. Willen, particularly, looked more like a corpse than a man.

“Present company excepted,” Tobias said quietly, “but fresh blood’s about as good as proof can get.”

He didn’t dare look at Anders, afraid of how much of Justice he might see, but Jarrod’s expression was damning enough. He was glaring at the healer, the coarse hood and loose linens he wore hiding most of his face, and yet leaving his eyes—and the angry fear that lingered in them—blatantly exposed.

“It won’t be about blood,” he muttered. “It’s about Vengeance.”

Those words surprised Tobias. He wanted to know how much of Anders’ constant struggle those in the Underground were truly aware of; the delicate balance between spirit and corruption, and the long fall into chaos that he so feared.

He didn’t know how to ask, of course, and there was no chance to do so, anyway… especially as, at that moment, a scream echoed through the stone walls.

Tobias felt it jar in his blood: that pulse of adrenaline, that moment of decision that goes far beyond
logic or reason. He didn’t even need to look at Anders to know that he felt the same, as did Gethyn, though it was Varric who voiced the moment for all four of them.

“Well,” the dwarf said, his thick fingers dancing easily across Bianca’s stock, supporting the crossbow’s weight as he reached for one of the dastardly little pouches at his belt; probably containing either a poison with which to tip his bolts, or those nasty little glass vials that shattered on impact, and made life so much more unpleasant for the recipient. “That sounded like a blood-curdling scream. I’m assuming that—flying in the face of all that’s sane and sensible—we want to run towards it, right?”

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It happened with a split moment of indecision: a crack that wrenched the group in two with an almost audible tearing. Ranulf—apparently entirely against his better judgement—left Mina and Jarrod to get the three imprisoned mages back out the way they’d come, and joined Tobias, Varric, Anders, and Gethyn as they plunged through the dark corridors, heading towards the sound of those horrible screams.

It didn’t take long to find the source. Tobias had suspected that, if the cells the mages called “ditches” ran around the edges of The Gallows’ square footprint, there would be a honeycomb of other, nastier chambers at the centre. Storerooms, nightsoil pits… and other rooms. Places people didn’t go, and didn’t talk about, and didn’t want to think existed. Places that sadistic bastards like Alrik made their homes.

He wished he hadn’t been right.

And it’s not even like rats, is it? I mean, sure, rats’ll eat corpses—they’ll eat your toes before you’re dead if you lie still long enough—and they spread disease and fleas and filth… but not like this.

This makes rats look clean as Chantry sisters.

It was a large, square chamber. Vaulting to the ceiling suggested that, once, this room and the series of old stores and alcoves from which it led off might have been part of the fortress’ lowest undercroft, but whether the ditches had grown up around it, or predated it, Tobias had no idea. He didn’t think much about it, either, seeing as the wide, dim space—blank grey stone lit with a number of candles, guttering in heavy iron holders that stood on the floor instead of being secured in sconces—was full of templars.

They hadn’t bothered to bolt the doors. They probably had no need to; after all, who was going to police the jailors?

The chamber was bounded by a set of wide, iron doors that stood slightly ajar, so that—with ghastly poetic aptness—the symbol of the Maker’s Sun embossed onto the metal seemed split in two, framing the scene within. Hidden from immediate discovery by both the shadows and that heavy, ornate portal, Tobias had plenty of time to make out what was happening… and he wished he hadn’t.

The air felt hot against his skin, rife with damp, and though there had only been a few short screams, he could still hear the whimpers of coming from the chamber ahead of him: small, broken cries threading through the thick, oppressive silence.

It’s why it’s so quiet here, isn’t it? They don’t cry out, because they know what happens if you attract attention. They know what happens to anyone who makes a sound....
This was clearly Alrik’s special place. Ranulf had doused the magelight that had guided their steps, and the candles inside the chamber were few, but Tobias didn’t need light to know that the darkness speckling the stones was probably as much blood as shadow.

There were eight, maybe ten templars in the chamber. All of them wore full armour, including those faceless box helms… all except the man Tobias immediately realised was Alrik himself. It couldn’t have been anyone else: the way he moved was the strut of a showman, a bantam in its narrow scrape, king of this foul little place and everything he surveyed.

Candlelight glimmered on so many shiny sets of armour, so many richly embroidered sashes… and it positively danced on his silvery chestpiece, and on his bald pate, pink and gleaming.

And, at the centre of it all—the focus of this little game, holding Alrik’s attention the way a mouse captivates a cat—there was a girl. Her hands were bound, a length of rope securing them above her head to a hook mounted on the ceiling, evidently just a little too high for her feet to comfortably rest on the floor. She twisted and squirmed, but couldn’t get purchase, the toes of her leather slippers pattering helplessly on the flagstones.

She couldn’t have been more than fourteen or fifteen: a short, plump girl with dark skin and thick, jaw-length black hair that hung in matted tangles. Tears and snot mingled on her face, her mouth twisted around desperate, animalistic cries. Her blue robes were torn and muddied, and fear crackled off her like electricity.

“Please,” she kept saying, “no… please! Please, I didn’t—”

Leorah had said there were two girls, but there was no sign of the second. Tobias winced as he realised that meant they had to put her out of their minds; as far as he knew, she was already dead. Or worse.

He watched the bald templar prowl towards the girl, extending one gauntleted hand and closing his silvered fingers over her cheeks, pinching the puppy fat of her face as she whimpered and tried to twist away. Alrik merely tilted his head, like a bird watching a worm, and a thoroughly unpleasant smile curved his thin lips, his mouth a line partially obscured by a neatly clipped grey beard.

Everything about him seemed dreadfully precise… as if he had no tolerance for disorder, for chaos or chance.

Tobias glanced over his shoulder, finding his own dark thoughts reflected in the faces of the Underground mages. This wasn’t about evidence anymore. This whole place was so steeped in wrongness—the stink of it lay on the air, as oppressive and cloying as the stale smell of decay—that he wouldn’t have batted an eye at blowing the whole lot to pieces. What else did these bastards deserve? And what else could be done to a system of chains and hatred, where fear was so deeply ingrained on both sides of the divide?

“You’re a liar, little girl,” Ser Alrik said, his cold, nasal voice filling the chamber, though the words themselves had curiously little emphasis.

Tobias’ fingers itched with the desire to rain fury down on every last templar in there—every last templar in the world—because, at that moment, hating them seemed so horribly easy, and what good could ever come of amelioration? They deserved death, and they deserved destruction. It was all they offered mages.

He knew Ranulf and Gethyn were with them: both men stood tense, ready but holding back, unsure what to do. That was fine; Tobias was used to sliding easily into the role of coordinator.
“I didn’t do anything wrong, ser!” the girl cried, wriggling frantically like a bait-hook worm, fresh tears coursing down her face. “I swear it!”

“Now, that’s another lie,” the templar said evenly, menace lacing his voice. “What do we do to mages who lie?”

The tread of metal sabatons on cold stone echoed past the iron doors, and Tobias looked to Varric. The dwarf’s cool, calm expression—that business-like focus he had before a fight—was a relief, especially as he knew just how unlikely the next ten minutes were to go according to any kind of plan.

*You’re insane, Hawke. There’s almost a dozen men in there. Armed, dangerous… fuck knows how many more upstairs. They’ll kill you. All of you.*

*But you can’t back out, can you?*

...And, *even if you tried, you couldn’t get him away from this.*

Tobias bit the inside of his lip as his gaze moved to Anders.

*Should have known. Too much. He can’t— Justice can’t cope with this.*

Inside the chamber, the girl’s sobs had redoubled. She was blubberyng about just wanting to see her mother, wanting to know she was safe… the hard, sharp thud of a metal gauntlet across a cheekbone put a stop to that, and the whimpers and protestations were replaced with frightened, raw cries.

Two worried faces watched Tobias from the shadows—Ranulf and Gethyn, waiting for a word—and, while Varric silently slipped something from his pocket into Bianca’s repeater chamber, Anders seemed not to be breathing.

He stood still, his mouth slightly open and his eyes wide, lips moving over stifled, inaudible words as sweat beaded on his forehead. Tobias shivered, the taste of magic running cold and bitter across his tongue. His skin tingled with the sheer weight of Anders’ power, and he had no idea how the healer was holding it back. Gethyn and Ranulf had noticed, too, and both men looked uneasy... like sheep locked in a stall with a tiger.

Tobias tapped two fingers softly against the chest of his jerkin, then pointed to the chamber doors. There was no way this was going to end well, but they might at least go into it with some semblance of a plan. He pointed to Ranulf, signalling that he should take the left flank, Gethyn the right, and fire—or as near to “fire” as he could mouth and mime—would be a good way of making use of the element of surprise, and leave *him* room to throw out a few force spells.

Anders blinked, and the dark gaze that met Tobias’ was crazed with blue… the same pale, shivering luminescence that lined his hands, clenched into knotted fists at his sides. He raised his brows in silent question, and Tobias lifted one shoulder in a shrug. He pointed at Varric, indicating with fingers spread like a volley of arrows that he would stay back and cover the centre of the room while Gethyn and Ranulf held the flanks. A jab of a finger at Anders, then at himself, and a few hand signals universally understood by most smugglers and street gangs to mean “and then we kick the shit out of them, preferably as hard as possible” outlined the admittedly fuzzy remainder of his plan.

*Hey… I never said it was a good idea, did I?*

The healer inclined his head, his skin pale as moonlight, cheeks made gaunt as blades by the shadows. Perhaps, Tobias told himself, it was his imagination—whetted by this keen, tight moment: the moment just before they all did something reckless and stupid and *alive*—but Anders hardly
looked human at all. His chest ached briefly, clenching around the ground-in want he harboured for the man. It had been so long now that he could hardly remember a time he hadn’t felt this way; as if he was waiting with every breath, and breathing was such a necessity that the waiting seemed normal. All the aches and frustrations had drawn out into dark threads that wound through everything, snaring and binding him closer to the fabric of a life that had Anders in it, but not in the way that he wanted.

All of this… fighting, bleeding, rushing into danger together… it should have made everything easier, but it didn’t.

The look that passed between them as Anders raised his head—the fire of Justice’s ill-restrained fury trembling so very visibly behind his eyes—swelled with need and repression, gratitude and shared, righteous anger, focus and intense determination… and a hundred other things, but it wasn’t enough.

*It’s everything, but it’s not enough. It never will be. But I’d still die for you.*

Inside the chamber, Alrik gave the girl a backhander with his metal-encased fingers. His voice carried easily against the stones, the wheedling, nasal tones more like those of a merchant or guildsman trying to do business than a military man barking orders but, somehow, all the more menacing for that.

“You tried to escape,” he said, sounding almost genial as the girl spat blood onto the flagstones by his feet. “You know what happens to little mages who don’t toe the line around here, don’t you?”

“Nn-nn,” she moaned, keeping up her litany of pleas, no matter how pointless they clearly were. “Don’t… don’t make me Tranquil! I-I’ll do anything….”

“Oh, yes. That’s right. Once you’re Tranquil, you’ll do *anything* I ask.” Alrik loosed an unpleasant little laugh, like the genteel chuckle of an insincere dinner guest. “Silly girl. Do you think we need the Rite for that? Morwen,” he added, beckoning to one of the templars, “come here. Cut her down. I want you to hold her for me. On your knees, mage.”

Tobias held two fingers up, keeping the others in check as the templar Alrik had called over pulled a dagger from his belt and cut the girl free, forcing her to kneel on the bloodied stones. She could barely hold herself up, swaying with the punches she’d already taken, and convulsed with wracking sobs of terror and panic. The templar held her by the hair and by the shoulders, and the jagged circle of men shifted, a few edging forwards with the clear expectation that each would get his turn with their master’s little toy.

*At least she’s got her hands free. Right, then. Deep breath, Hawke… it’s been fun.*

Tobias dropped his hand, nodding to the others in the split second before he swung out from the shadows, clanging his way noisily past the embossed metal doors.

“Oh, dearie me,” he announced, his dagger drawn and the swell of power already blooming in his left palm. “Naughty, naughty, eh, ser?”

Alrik wheeled around, bald pate gleaming and icy eyes flaring with outrage.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What is the meaning of—”

“It’s the Divine,” Varric said dryly, stepping out behind Tobias with Bianca cocked in his gloved hands. “She’s come all the way from Orlais, personally, just to tell you what a jackass you are.”

As entrances went, Tobias had to admit that it was one of their better ones. The first of the templars
nearest the doors started to make a move towards them, and he heard the familiar crack of Bianca’s firing mechanism, closely followed by a thud as the man fell to the ground, gargling, with a feathered bolt protruding from the tiny gap between his high-collared chestplate and his box helm.

Sadly, there was no time to congratulate Varric on the damn fine shot, because that was the point at which the entire Void broke loose.

Alrik, a pale column of icily composed rage, drew his shortsword and opened his mouth to bellow an order… and fire engulfed the chamber, racing in thick, searing billows along the edges of the room. Ranulf and Gethyn pushed forward, each forcing gouts of flame before him, tongues of red and orange scorching the ceiling, burning the stones, and dragging screams and yells from the templars caught in its path.

More arrows ripped through the air, the bolts pitting and dinging from stone and metal as Varric kept up the volley and Tobias pelted forward, his intention to grab the girl and get her out of harm’s way. She was screaming—which he couldn’t really blame her for, he supposed—and he didn’t even make it halfway to her before a templar cut across his path: a big man, heavily armoured, and wielding a very large sword.

Tobias ducked, feinted right, and caught a punch to the jaw that somehow he hadn’t really expected. That ill-fated night at the chantry aside, he’d never really fought templars before, and he’d stupidly expected them to fight fair… but this one certainly didn’t. He struck out, his blade glancing off the heavy armour and—as fire and arrows and the blinding, metallic heat of magic and fury danced all around him—the symbol of the Sword of Mercy on the templar’s breastplate filled his vision. He could taste blood.

The cleanse hit then: one of the bastards had got up, recovering from the initial surprise of the attack, and thrown out the biggest aura he could. It hit every mage in the room hard, and Tobias felt the stones pitch beneath him, his gut churning and his head turning to cotton stuffing as every muscle he possessed seemed to grow weak and watery. The templar he faced hit him again, and he stumbled, dropping to the fire-warmed flags with his vision blurring.

Alrik was screaming the order to kill them, predictably enough—as if the suggestion might have been novel to any of the templars in the chamber—and Tobias heard the smashing of glass that preceded one of Varric’s sneaky smoke grenades going off. He took advantage of the moment of obfuscation, dragging himself across the floor and moving in search of the girl. She wasn’t where she’d been and, blinking through the gritty smoke and the ash, he saw that Anders had her. He’d pulled her to the side of the chamber, where he had her in a corner and was standing guard over her, his hands raised and his face… well, it wasn’t his face. Blue light crazed his skin, his eyes flushed with that blind, opaque haze, and Tobias was horribly reminded of everything they’d done for the Dalish boy… and of Justice inside the Fade, wearing the memory of Anders’ body like an ill-fitting coat.

Tobias pushed himself up on weak, wobbly arms, his dagger clutched in his fist. Did the templars’ cleanses affect Justice? It didn’t look like it. He turned, catching and parrying a blow from another templar, using the bigger man’s body weight to throw him off balance and cannoning him away into another of his comrades. Another place, another time, and Tobias supposed he’d have laughed at the way the buggers went down like ninepins.

He didn’t laugh, though. Across the chamber, a templar swung his sword at Anders, clearly expecting him to still be under the effects of the cleanse. Anders dodged the blade as if it was nothing more than a fly, then caught the templar’s sword arm with one hand and twisted…. The bone snapped like kindling, and Tobias couldn’t help wincing. Then the healer’s other hand came up,
palm against the blazing sword motif on the templar’s chest, and something horrible—more horrible than Tobias had ever envisaged magic could be—seemed to happen right inside the air itself.

It felt like the world started turning inside out. Every breath, every thread of energy—the kind of energy a mage could feel every second of his life, running through all there was in the world—seemed to burn and boil, and the great, pulsing weight of Anders’ power roared through it.

Tobias’ teeth ached. He hadn’t seen this happen since the night at the chantry… the night Karl died. This was Justice unchained; uncontrolled, and yet more than that. If such a thing was possible, this was even more intense. Wilder, angrier… crueler.

He heard the templar scream. It was the death cry of someone whose last moments were filled with complete and excoriating agony, and the corpse that fell from Anders’ grasp was withered and broken.

It stood to reason, of course: to know how to heal a body, you had to know how it was supposed to go together and, once you knew that, you also knew how to take it apart from the inside out.

Tobias felt his head start to come back, his body beginning to respond to him again as the nulling effect of the templar’s cleanse started to wear away. They had to take the bastards down before anyone did that again… particularly as at least one of them had seen what Anders had done, and was fool enough to yell a warning.

Abomination.

The word had a visceral effect.

Tobias lurched to the side, avoiding the big templar from before, who apparently had no qualms about trying to kick mages’ legs out from under them. Just before he pitched back into the fray, focused on finding the weak points in the wall of embossed metal before him, he saw—or, perhaps, felt—the wave of furious anger, power, and vengeance that poured from his friend. Light seared the chamber, electric blue and blinding white, and it was the swelling boom of Justice’s voice that shouted over the chaos, daring the templars to transgress again… warning them that they would pay, that they would never touch another mage again.

Either Ranulf or Gethyn had managed to break out another firestorm spell, for flame tickled the chamber’s ceiling, and fire burst behind Tobias, throwing the templar attacking him off-balance for a moment. He made the most of it, driving his dagger into the gap in the armour beneath the man’s arm, forcing the blade in as far as the hilt. A yell, muffled and echoing beneath the faceless helmet, told him he’d struck flesh, and he dragged the knife as far as he could, even as he was forced to close his eyes against the screaming wall of light and magic that flashed against the stones.

Images seared themselves onto the back of Tobias’ eyelids, beaten there through the darkness and the panic. Templars went down. He didn’t see how many. He was still fighting, and they were still throwing out their ghastly cleanses. Every one of them felt like drowning in sand… and yet there was Anders, in constant motion at the centre of a whirling spiral of blue fire, scything and gouging, beating back every blow the templars tried to land on him.

Tobias concentrated on his own problems, and tried not to let the dark, metallic taste of all that wild, vengeful power choke him. It made it hard to think, hard to see anything past the blue glare of Justice’s rage, and the screams of the men who died around him, torn, bludgeoned, and scalded with the bolts and flames that tore from hands Tobias was more used to seeing heal than kill.

Anders wasn’t even throwing fireballs. The flames and sparks that he let fly were pure, condensed
heat: the fire inside the white-hot blade of lightning, tinged blue at its edges with electricity. The whole chamber reeked of heated metal and burned flesh, and yet Tobias still caught himself recalling Isabela’s distant words… foolish recollections of electricity and sex, and his equally foolish jealousy over a past Anders might never even have had; a man so far removed from the creature that fought beside him now.

Tobias looked away from the healer as another of the templars bore down on him, yet he still carried behind his eyes the imprint of that familiar face, twisted in a howling snarl of rage. Tobias pushed out, closed fist taking with it the weight of his own power: a force spell that knocked his assailant to the ground. He stomped heavily on the prone templar’s kneecap, hearing the crack of bone under the graunch of metal. They needed to finish this quickly, he thought, or they’d be arse-deep in reinforcements. It didn’t make the act of killing a man much easier. Not in the midst of all this.

One of the bastards got him, eventually. Tobias was barely aware of it at first; a hot, full pain in his back, at which he lashed out, catching the templar behind him in the neck with a lucky dagger strike. He didn’t feel anything else, and there was still a fight going on, every dying second of it an ugly, bitter knockdown. Tobias managed a rough force spell, throwing the last three templars against the wall, hard enough to wind them despite their armour. One didn’t get up again, and he saw Ranulf stand over him, the big man reaching down to complete the job, the way a farmhand might wring a chicken’s neck.

Ranulf glanced up, and Tobias didn’t understand the revulsion on his face at first… not until he looked across the chamber. The stone floor was streaked with blood and soot, and dead templars lay bent and broken and, in more than one case, in pieces. He couldn’t see Alrik. Something that looked like a hand lay in the middle of the floor: bloody meat from a sundered stump.

“Hawke,” Varric called, from the side of the chamber nearest the doors.

Tobias turned, half-expecting the reinforcements he’d been afraid of coming from elsewhere in the fortress. Exactly how far did sound travel down here? And how used to screams were people? Surely the extent of this messy, chaotic brawl couldn’t be passed off as one of Alrik’s peccadilloes?

He saw Gethyn by the doors, one hand on the embossed iron as he leaned, panting and wide-eyed, his face scarred with horror and streaked with ash.

Slowly, silence began to descend on the world again, humming back into the places between the ringing in Tobias’ ears. Was it over? It didn’t feel over. He could hardly feel anything past the thudding, snarling roil of Anders’—Justice’s—power, beating and screaming at the air and making the magic burn under his skin.

He looked up, looking for the healer… and found him, stalking down the centre of the room, his movements jerky and unnatural, his eyes glazed with the fire of lyrium, and blood smeared across his clothes, face, and hands.

The girl was still crouched in the corner, still drenched with terrified sobs. As Ranulf moved, Anders spun around, fingers half-curled over another bolt of that savage energy, lips pulled back across his teeth.

*Shit… we got the monster out, now how do we put it back in its box?*

Tobias hated himself for thinking that word, but it had never seemed more apt. Even the Underground mages were looking at Anders as if he was something demonic: this creature of blood and terror, slaking itself with the torn bodies of enemies.
He moved slowly towards his friend, trying not to look at the corpses that littered his path. The heads were clean off three of them; Tobias couldn’t even be sure where they’d gone. Parts of the chamber walls were missing blocks of masonry, too: some of those bursts of energy had been powerful enough to gouge out the stone, and chunks of it had scudded across the floor.

“Anders,” he said, though it seemed to get no reaction from the man. “Anders… it’s done. It’s over. Anders?”

The healer’s head snapped up, and those blue-glazed eyes, burning like molten stars, glared in Tobias’ direction.

“It is never over!” the spirit boomed and, through he was using the healer’s mouth, Anders’ voice only seemed laid over the words, with all the fuzzy distance of the ocean echoing inside a shell. “They will all die! I will have every last templar for these abuses! Let them come! Let them come, and I will take them all!”

Oh, sod….

Tobias raised his hands soothingly. “Yes, fine, but—”

The flares of light slicing through Anders’ flesh seemed to grow brighter, sharper, as if the body that contained the spirit might burst apart under the weight of his anger. The girl, still crouched on the ground among the corpses and the bloody chunks of masonry, flung her arms up over her head and squeaked in a damp explosion of terror… which probably wasn’t clever.

Anders looked down at her, as if he was seeing her for the first time, and it seemed so odd to see that face look at the cowering figure without an ounce of compassion or sympathy.

Tobias started to move more quickly towards him, hand outstretched. The sheer strength of the power emanating from the other mage made his skin crackle, and he found he could barely speak, his tongue feeling flabby and loose. It was important to get between Anders and the girl, though; he knew that, though he didn’t dare think, even to himself, why it mattered so much.

“Anders. It’s over. They’re dead. We need to go. Now.”

Anders—or Justice, or whatever combination of them was currently in charge—wasn’t listening. He turned on Tobias as he drew nearer, and it was Anders’ face that snarled at him, contorted in rage and anguish… Anders’ face, except for those blank, glaring blue eyes, like searing orbs of fire crazed with veins of lightning.

“Every last one of them will feel Justice’s burn!”

The words echoed with the vengeful howl of a voice that wasn’t human, and the hair stood up on the back of Tobias’ neck.

Abomination.

It had never seemed truer. This person—this thing, spattered with blood and baying for retribution—wasn’t the man he knew. This wasn’t anything he’d seen outside of the kind of nightmares he woke from in the dark, cold and drenched with sweat.

And yet… he was still in there. If they truly were merged—if it was the way Anders said it was, and not possession the way the Chantry taught it—then he was still in there, watching from behind Justice’s mask of fury.
Tobias squared his shoulders, refusing to back down.

“Get away from me, demon!”

He blinked. He might have been thinking them, but the words weren’t his. The girl—bloody stupid bitch, he thought—was rising up from her terrified cower, her hands held up in front of her as if she thought she could really challenge Justice.

The spirit propelled Anders’ body towards her, turning the full force of all that wild wrath on her, and Tobias swore under his breath. He glanced towards the doors, motioning Ranulf and Gethyn to get out before any more templars arrived… and maybe before they saw any more of Anders’ loss of control. Neither mage seemed to need telling twice; for a big man who’d fought a dozen templars with as much power and determination as an angry bull, Ranulf looked very near to browning his smallclothes. Gethyn just looked ill, and he didn’t quite seem able to tear his gaze from Anders as he backed out of the chamber: staring and staring until, finally, he darted away into the shadows. Footsteps receded against the stonework, and only Varric remained to guard the door. One look at the dwarf told Tobias he wasn’t going anywhere… no matter what happened here.

Justice swelled under Anders’ skin, looming over the girl and positively vibrating with ill-restrained outrage and ire. Wisps of dirty blond hair, streaked with blood and ash, had escaped from their bindings, clinging to blood-spattered, sweaty, pallid cheeks as the twisted mockery of Anders’ face was thrust into hers.

“I am no demon!” Justice snarled, the dark edge of power and rage pulsing beneath the words. “Are you one of them, that you would call me such?”

Her hands curled in on themselves, momentary bravado forgotten as she cringed away, shaking and terrified. Magical energy flared a violent blue in Anders’ palms, and Tobias was sure he caught the scent of singed flesh. She might have backed down, but Justice was on her now—like a dog with the scent of blood in its nose—and he made one last attempt to intervene.

“Anders!” Tobias said urgently, lurching forwards with his hand outstretched. “That girl is a mage. She’s no templar. She’s a mage. We rescued her… d’you remember? We rescued her from Alrik. From… being made Tranquil. And things."

His hand met the wall of energy that surrounded Anders like a shroud. It had the kind of greasy, thick tension to it that precedes a violent storm… violent and unpredictable.

Justice raised his head, as if scenting his presence, and Anders’ lips pulled back into a growl, those eyes that were both his and not his narrowed into bright, scowling slits.

“She is theirs!” he snarled. “I can feel their hold on her.”

“She’s the reason you’re fighting, Anders,” Tobias protested, emphasising his name… his name, not the spirit. He had to be in there somewhere. “Don’t turn on her now.”

The girl snivelled. “Please, messere…. I’m sorry! I—"

Oh, do yourself a favour and shut up, won’t you?

Tobias gritted his teeth. It was too late. He could see it in the way Anders’ body tensed, in the way the tendons stood out in his throat, and that strangled cry croaked between his lips, part growl and part wail of despair. The hum of his power—that dark, heavy cloud that held the whole chamber at its centre—was louder than ever, almost unbearable in its intensity.
He pulled his arm back, that appalling coat spattered with blood, the feathered pauldrons clumping with dark, sticky stains, and that sharp, violent light welled in his hand.

*Oh, Maker’s sodding balls... Anders, don’t make me do this...*

The girl screamed. Tobias was fairly certain he yelled, too. It burned when he grabbed hold of Anders’ sleeve. So much energy, so much power... no wonder the poor bastard struggled to keep it inside him. He felt it scald his palm, then knock him backwards, pain pouring through his flesh even as Anders pulled the power inwards, dragging Justice’s rage and torment back into the prison he’d made for them.

Everything turned white and painful. The world was fleetingly bright and searing, and the smell of magical energy burned the air. Tobias winced, blinded by the after-shocks of light in his eyes. He blinked, saw Anders balled up on the ground nearby, arms wrapped around his head as he rocked and moaned... and the girl, crouching beside a blackened patch of scorching on the stones.

She looked up at him with wide, terrified eyes, her breaths shallow and panting.

“Get out,” he said, unable to hear his own voice properly through the ringing in his ears. “Go on. Bloody **run**. Find the others!”

She did. He hoped she’d catch up with Ranulf and Gethyn, or that maybe Varric would take care of her... he didn’t know. Couldn’t see. Couldn’t do anything much except attempt to catch his breath and try not to be sick.

He crawled across the floor to Anders, his tongue not wrapping itself around words properly, and his left hand cupped uselessly to his chest. It had already begun to blister, the palm turning pinkish white and puckered, and it hurt... although Tobias was aware that, all things considered, it could have been quite a lot worse.

“Anders,” he murmured hoarsely, rather hoping that it would **be** him who looked up, and not Justice. “C’mon. We... we need to go. S’over. It’s... thing.”

He wanted to reach out, to shake the healer’s shoulder as if waking a troubled sleeper, but the pain in his hand warned him against it, and Tobias hated that. He hated being afraid of this man... being afraid of what he could do.

“No.” Anders raised his head, turning wild, red-rimmed eyes on Tobias, his face deathly white and wet with sweat. “Maker, no... I-I almost... Did you see what I—? If you hadn’t been here....”

He sounded terrified, appalled; his word were little more than whispers, his whole frame crushed and crumpled, dry leaves and ashes where, just a few moments ago, there had been fire and indefatigable, frightening strength.

“I was,” Tobias murmured, his head spinning lightly. “And you didn’t. It’s over. Now let’s move.”

He started trying to get to his feet, and trying to get Anders to his feet too, not that he was cooperating. He looked down at the burns on Tobias’ palm and grimaced, muttering something about needing to get away.

Tobias nodded—they **did** need to leave—but he wasn’t really expecting Anders to just pull himself upright, then lurch away, his steps echoing erratically on the stones as he made for the chamber doors. Pushing past Varric—who had apparently been picking over the corpses—he broke into a run just before he turned the corner, and then he was gone.
Tobias swore.

“Great,” Varric said, from the corner of the room. “So… if you’re finished, we should probably take what we need and leave now, you think?”

Tobias blinked, still mostly lost in confusion. Varric sighed, and nudged the body he stood beside with his foot.

“This is what’s left of Alrik. You want to see if he’s got anything on him?”

Tobias nodded dumbly and staggered across the chamber. He knelt by the templar’s broken remains, trying to avoid looking at those cold blue eyes. Even dead, there was something unpleasant about the man, as if he was glaring into the afterlife, daring the Maker to judge him. A large, jagged wound split his neck—clearly not done with a blade, and clearly Anders’ very enthusiastic handiwork—and the smell of blood hung thick and coppery on everything.

Tobias rifled through the scrips and pouches on the body, and glanced at the other templars An—Justice had cut down, their faces obscured by those horrible, box-like helms, with nothing but slits in them. They’d frightened him when he was a boy. His first sight of templars had been men with steel bodies, their voices booming, inhuman echoes from within metal mouths.

He couldn’t shake the nagging feeling at the back of his mind that, if he pulled the visors off them now, they wouldn’t have faces at all. Either that, or one of them would be Carver.

Stupid, he knew, because Carv hadn’t got his knighthood yet. It would be soon, yes, but…. There was training and all manner of other hoops that recruits were put through, and… and why did he feel so bad about this?

“Hurrying up would be nice,” Varric commented, glancing past the doors. “I don’t know how much longer we’ll have the luxury of privacy.”

“All right, all right,” Tobias muttered, groping his way roughly through Alrik’s effects, and swearing at the pain of his hand.

He pulled the dagger from his belt and cut free the templar’s coin purse, because there was no sense in seeing it go to waste, and also took both scrips, and the leather document wallet tucked inside his breastplate. A brief squint at the papers inside seemed to suggest they might be relevant—letters and edicts that bore Chantry seals, by the looks of things—but there wasn’t time to examine anything too closely.

He got to his feet, and followed Varric from the chamber, dredging up just enough magic to light their way as they moved quickly back the way they’d come.
Chapter 28

Getting out of The Gallows was harder than getting in, which struck Tobias as sickly ironic. The shouts started to burst against the stones as he and Varric ran through the corridors, tracing their steps back to the old service route and the trapdoor down into the lyrium runs. There were no words, just echoes of alarm: templars giving chase, cell doors slamming, and feet thudding in the hallways.

*Shitshitshitshitshit….*

They found evidence of the others’ escape on their way; fresh scorch marks lined some of the walls, and the body of a lone guard lay crumpled in one corner of the corridor. Tobias shot a look at Varric, but the dwarf shrugged, and they hurried on. Hard to know who was responsible for the dead templar, or even whether Anders had run this way. Tobias hoped so, though; hoped he’d got out, maybe caught up with the others. Maybe he had. Maybe he was all right… and maybe the girl was, too.

They found the others just at the point where the trapdoor led down into the smugglers’ tunnels, but it wasn’t what Tobias had expected. A gout of fire greeted them, whooshing along the service hall and warming the stones. He swore—almost as loudly as Varric—and leapt to the side, yelling that it was them, and what the fuck did anyone think they were playing at?

“Sorry!” called a voice Tobias recognised as Gethyn’s, though the mage sounded shaken.

As the after-burn of the fire faded from his vision, blue spots giving way to the dimness of the corridor, Tobias realised just how badly things had gone.

Ranulf was holding the trapdoor up while Jarrod and Mina eased the women—and, Tobias was pleased to note, the plump, whimpering wreck of the girl they’d rescued—down the ladder, but the big man had one hand clamped to his eye, blood running down his face, matted in his red beard.

Gethyn darted forward to meet them, looking frantically along the length of the corridor, as if he really thought there’d be a cadre of templars in their wake.

“Get moving,” he said tersely, ushering them to the trapdoor. “Quickly.”

Tobias frowned. “Where’s Anders?”

Gethyn shook his head, his dark, narrow face screwed up into a pinched scowl. “He ain’t here. He might’ve gone another way, or he might be trying to hold them off. Either way, we have to move.”

The possibilities were too horrible to contemplate, and Tobias already had his mouth open to say something hopelessly idealistic about not leaving without him. He stopped as his gaze slipped to the bloody pile of flesh by the wall, crumpled beneath the arcs of soot staining that spoke of how hard the mages had been forced to fight to hold their ground.

“What—?”

He knew what it was. Deep down, he knew. He’d seen it before. That tell-tale twisting of skin and body, corruption blooming out from the centre of a person until it boiled and bubbled, turning flesh to filth and horror. There was nothing there now but a pile of rags and burned meat, obscene in its grotesque malformation.

“Willen,” Gethyn said quietly, following Tobias’ gaze. “He turned. I dunno what those bastards did,
but… he just went crazy. Brought a bloody demon down on us. Nearly took Ranulf’s eye out. We had to— well. You can see what.”

He nodded brusquely at the mess, his expression a flat mask of distaste, perhaps more at the fact that a mage yielding to blood magic only proved the templars right, rather than any kind of revulsion for what he’d had to do.

Tobias said nothing. He didn’t know what to say. By the trapdoor, the girl was wailing again, dissolving into paroxysms of panic as she half-fell, half-slid down the ladder. Mina was trying to help her, but seemed to be struggling, and Gethyn swore under his breath.

From somewhere else beneath the fortress—somewhere locked away in these grim, stone corridors—came the sound of shouting, and then screams. The mages’ heads snapped up, each of them straining their senses against the damp, warm air, and each avoiding the gazes of the others… because there was nothing they could do. Somewhere within these walls people were screaming, people were dying, and they were simply going to turn tail and leave. It wasn’t a good feeling, but even Tobias had to admit that there was no other option.

“Bet you that’s Anders,” Gethyn said, his voice dark and yet tinged with something that sounded almost like pride. He stalked across to the trapdoor, slipping his wiry body down to the ladder below, and paused to glower along the corridor one last time. “Bet you he’s giving those bastards what for.”

Tobias felt his flesh turn cold, the sweat that slicked his limbs like ice against his skin. He reached out one last time, desperate to feel the familiar print of Anders’ power somewhere inside the fortress, but everything was clouded. Mana seemed little more than a distant memory. He was exhausted… broken, burned, injured, and too tired for words. Too tired for magic.

Varric nudge him in the back with Bianca’s stock. “Hawke. Come on.”

The crossbow butted against the glancing stab wound above his hip, and Tobias winced, properly aware of the injury for the first time. Varric was right, of course: there was nothing he could do for Anders at this point, whether he’d already run from the fortress, or run back into the teeth of it, choosing to throw himself at the templars and give the others the chance for escape.

That sounded horribly like something he would do, and Tobias was fixated by the fear of it, so much so that he was hardly conscious of making his own way down into the lyrium smugglers’ tunnels, helping move the rescued mages—and the poor girl who was virtually hysterical by now—as quickly as possible through the gloom. He felt wrenched in two, as if his mind had peeled away from his body, unable to accept that he could be abandoning Anders this way (if he, in fact, was), and yet unable to think of anything else except the contorted, snarling hatred of Justice’s anger. Dead templars filled his vision, their bodies twisted and mauled, and Anders—Justice—had taken such strutting, proud glee in it all, crowning himself with death like it made everything worthwhile.

Had it? Had killing Alrik helped anyone? Had it made it up for what the man had done to Karl?

Tobias didn’t know. He doubted it.

And yet, maybe that’s what this was about from the beginning.

He stumbled in the dark tunnels, righting himself with a wince and a cuss, and fixing his gaze on the torch that Jarrod carried, as if the single bright flame could burn away all the shadows that clung to him.

It couldn’t, of course. As the Underground limped back beneath the lake, bowed and bloodied,
Tobias was fairly sure he’d never feel light or clean again.

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They took the mages they’d rescued to Selby’s place. She was waiting up, ready to receive them—ready to whisk everyone in through the back door that abutted one of the warehouses, away from prying eyes—and ready with hot water, clean blankets and clothes, and tea sweetened with rum and honey.

Tobias helped Mina settle Leorah, Edda, and the girl—whose name, as she managed to stammer in response to Selby’s quiet but firm requests, was Ella—while Gethyn relayed what had happened.

Selby tutted, her blue eyes narrowed as she poured hot water from an earthen jug into a large, copper bowl, setting out washcloths for the women and fetching a cake of soap before she turned to the messier business of tending to Ranulf’s injury.

The Starkhavener sat on a wooden chair by her fire, holding a cotton pad she’d given him to his eye. He’d been lucky: the wound was just above the eyeball itself, so only the blood trickling from it had blinded him. He would recover, though not without an impressive shiner, a few weeks of squinting and, most probably, a scar that would start a hundred conversations. Selby pulsed little breaths of consternated air through her teeth as she hunched over him, dressing the wound. Her frown deepened when Gethyn explained about Alrik’s death.

Tobias was in the process of handing sweet tea to the templar’s former victims, and he saw Ella’s bottom lip wobble at the mention of the man’s name. She dissolved into tears and—exhausted as he was—all he felt as he looked at her was incredible weariness, and the vague sense of panic that always assailed him in the presence of crying women.

“Um. There, there,” he tried, patting the filthy sleeve of her robe gingerly. “Drink up. It’ll help.”

She sniffed heavily, her round little face streaked with tears, snot, and ash, and grabbed at his hand across the table.

“You saved me, messere,” she managed damply, the fingers of her other hand cupping the mug of tea tentatively. “I didn’t thank you. But you did… you saved my life. I thought they’d do to me what they did to Jenlyn. I heard it. I heard all of it… he said he would. We just wanted to see our families! They wouldn’t let us write, and my mum’s been so ill….”

She lapsed into tears again, though her grip was like iron on his wrist. He sat awkwardly, unsure what to say to her—what could be said that would heal the things she’d been through?—and too tired to try and find answers.

Somewhere at the back of his mind, Tobias knew they’d done something stupid. The hushed tones in which Selby, Gethyn, and Jarrod were arguing supported this suspicion; as if they really thought no one else could hear them. Their voices buzzed in and out of his head, consciousness lapping around him like light surf, and he couldn’t feel sorry that Alrik had died screaming. The only reason they’d gotten into the fortress without having to fight their way through so many guards was the fact that Ser Alrik had invited those guards to play with his toys… and it was a sophisticated game.

He waited until a prisoner had been locked in for a while, whatever their original infraction—attempted escape, like Ella, or perhaps insubordination or so-called subversiveness, like Edda or Leorah—and then he took them out, one at a time. Beatings, rapes… he presided over horrors inflicted by groups of men, because that made it harder for any of them to be disciplined.
Oh, one sadist—one cruel templar, one naughty jailor—could be brought up before the Knight-Commander and made an example of... but how did you punish ten or twelve men, all of whom had different patrol duties, different responsibilities within the fortress? None would grass the others up, because they all knew the same about him. No... from the minute they joined in, those men belonged to Alrik just as surely as his prisoners did. His, to do what he wanted with: to break, and crush, and, finally, to turn Tranquil, causing them to lose their outrage, their indignance at his abuses.

Tranquillity, Ella said, made the people he'd already hurt his pets. He broke you first, then leashed you. He'd told her everything he intended to do to her... every agony and humiliation she would suffer, just as her friend had suffered: the corpse in the other cell. Tobias swallowed heavily as he recalled the discovery.

“And then you came in,” she murmured, alternating between damp sniffs and delicate sips of her tea. Though she was still clutching his wrist, she seemed a little better and, when she looked up at him, her dark eyes appeared a little less clouded. “Andraste herself put you all in that room tonight, messere. I know it. And the way you faced him down...! I'd never seen anyone talk to him like that.”

Tobias managed a small smile, recalling Varric’s line about the Divine and jackassery. The dwarf had not accompanied them to Selby’s place; Gethyn had made it abundantly clear that he wasn’t welcome... not trusted enough, despite what he’d done that night. He hadn’t seemed to take it personally, though the look on his face as he watched them go before turning to head back to the Hanged Man had suggested that he was worried. Tobias suspected he was going to get a serious lecture about his involvement with the Underground, and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

“We do our best,” he said, watching her sip her tea, her hand only shaking a little.

Ella swallowed, her eyes growing hazy as she seemed to peer into the distance, her face shadowed with the weight of all-too-recent memories.

“I’m glad they’re dead,” she whispered, though she didn’t seem entirely convinced of that fact. Guilt perfumed every word, hanging heavily in her voice and staining her face with regret and uncertainty. “Maker forgive me, but I am glad. I... I don’t know what I’ll do now. My mum....”

Her gaze latched onto his, dark and wide and full of terrible hope, and Tobias felt his chest clench. He shook his head regretfully.

“You can’t go home. You’ll stay here tonight, with the others, and then passage out of the city will be arranged for you, as soon as it can be done. You’ll have to go somewhere new... don’t worry, you won’t be alone. And we’ll make sure you’re as safe as possible. You’ll have money. Maybe—” He cleared his throat, inwardly cursing the idiocy of what he was about to say, and yet somehow unable to stop himself. “—look, maybe I can keep an eye on your family and, once we know where you’re going, I can help them find you. Get them out of Kirkwall... make sure they’re safe.”

For the first time, Ella’s expression was lit with something other than fear and horror, and her mouth fell open.

“Really? Really, messere? Would you do that?”

She gripped his hand tightly, and Tobias shrugged. He hadn’t got a clue why he’d said that. All he wanted was to sleep for a week, to fall into the blessed oblivion of nothingness. Maker, maybe that might even stop the insane drumming in his head: the pulses that echoed to every breath with the question of whether Anders was still alive.
He nodded, aware that he was probably lying to her. She’d said her mother was sick; the woman might already be dead, or about to have her door kicked in and templars run her through because they suspected her of harbouring her escapee daughter. Even if she did survive the aftermath of this little escapade, he couldn’t possibly guarantee to reunite them… but… well, it was worth trying, wasn’t it? Worth paying their passage to Rivain, or Orlais, or wherever the Underground sent Ella.

At least, that way, someone would be getting out of Kirkwall, even if he couldn’t leave.

The girl was blabbering her thanks, and he shook his head, eager that she stop it, because there was nothing to thank him for yet. Over by the fire, Selby seemed to be getting annoyed with Gethyn, which wasn’t terribly unusual, but also didn’t make for a good atmosphere in the poky, stuffy room.

“…so kind to me,” Ella was saying, still steadfastly refusing to take the hint about shutting up.

“You’re not like that other… I mean…. The way he— It was so horrible! What… w-what was that thing, anyway?”

Tobias frowned absently. He’d been trying to eavesdrop on Selby and Gethyn’s hushed muttering and, for a moment, he didn’t even realise what Ella meant. As he saw the fear in her face, comprehension opened up in him like a yawning void, and he felt his expression grow stiff and disdainful. He didn’t mean it to—how was she to know everything else that Anders was, if she saw only Vengeance?—but he couldn’t help it, and he couldn’t quite manage to sympathy for the girl’s obvious fear.

“Hey! He’s not a ‘thing’, he’s—” Tobias faltered, wincing. He didn’t have an explanation… not one Ella would understand, anyway. He shook his head, averting his gaze as she looked curiously at him. “He’s a very, uh, troubled man. But, without him, we wouldn’t have been there tonight. We wouldn’t have….”

He let the words trail away, suddenly unsure just how good their nobly intentioned rescue really had been. The girl didn’t seem bothered. She’d let go of his hand, and was drinking the rest of her tea. Further along the table, Leorah and Edda had finished theirs, and were starting to ready the cloths and clean clothes, so he excused himself, not exactly overburdened with the wish to help the women out of their soiled garments.

Tobias moved across the room, nodding curtly at Ranulf, who’d been patched up and was still sitting by the fire, holding another mug… this one full of something rather stronger than Selby’s honeyed tea. A heavy bandage crossed his face, holding more padding in place over his eye, and blood had already begun to seep out into the dressing in tiny spots. The firelight danced in the red of his beard and hair, but the big man’s features sat bleakly beneath the reflection of the flames.

Selby, Gethyn, and Jarrod had retreated to the far corner of the room, still muttering between themselves. Tobias caught the sound of Elias Creer’s name on their lips, and he wanted to know more, but Ranulf tipped the mug towards him, snaring him with a melancholy sigh.

“Makes you wonder what it was all for, eh?” He shook his head bitterly, staring into his mug as his accent looped its way warmly around the words. “We can’t go against them now. With Alrik dead, what are we? Murderers. All the evidence in the world won’t mean a thing. Everything we’ve got… it’ll just be seen as lies to prove ourselves right.”

Tobias bit his lip. Evidence…. Of course. He’d nearly forgotten that. He fished inside his jerkin, wincing at the pull of the movement through his back, and dragged out the battered leather wallet and purse he’d taken from Alrik’s body.

“Here,” he said, brandishing the wallet. The Underground mages glanced at him, the clink of coin
and the rustle of Chantry parchment evidently cutting through their own internal disputes. “Um. I, er, I took these… thought they might be important. Some of the papers… I haven’t looked, but I think they’re letters, edicts or something… there’s Chantry seals on some. And there’s this,” he added, tossing the coin purse at Gethyn, who caught it with a look of faint surprise.

Selby crossed her arms, her face pinched into a haughty glare. “Well. Ever the opportunist, ain’t you, Hawke?”

He shrugged, and passed her the wallet. “We did what we had to do, Selby. And Alrik won’t hurt anyone else.”

Her eyes bored twin wells of recrimination into him, and he knew the words sounded hollow. There would be retribution for what they’d done. Alrik’s death wouldn’t go unanswered, and Ranulf had a point: nothing anyone could say now would ameliorate the fact that a group of apostates had broken into the Gallows and torn nearly a dozen templars to pieces.

They had done nothing but cement the very thing the order wanted people to believe: that magic was dangerous, and all mages were potential killers.

“And what about Anders?” Selby demanded, still glaring forcefully at him, instead of the documents in her hands. “Where’s he, eh?”

The rush of guilt burst its way through Tobias’ chest, but it wasn’t him who spoke first.

“I told you,” Gethyn said. “I don’t know. We didn’t see him leave. Don’t know if he stayed to take another crack at ’em, or went out another way. He was… out of control.”

“Aye, and you left him there!” Her eyes blazed, that hard face condensed into white-hot anger. “You left him!”

“He went— he got bad,” Gethyn protested, shifting from foot to foot and trying to lower his voice, with a glance at the women across the room, carefully washing the worst of the blood and filth from themselves. Selby had promised them hot baths in the morning. “You know. Like what they say he done at the Vigil. What he did to Stroud’s men.”

She huffed irritably, turning her face away. “I told him… didn’t I say? I said it was too dangerous. I tole him what Elias said about it all. He don’t never listen….”

Tobias looked between the two of them, recalling the things Anders had confided in him that night at the clinic: those words he’d been afraid were confessions.

*I tore those men apart. I... Justice... we.... I don’t know. It was all new, and I didn’t know what had happened until it was over. I lost control.*

He’d never realised how intense the spirit’s rage could be, or how hard it evidently was for Anders to keep it focused, instead of just letting Justice give in and spray his ire over everything. He hadn’t imagined it would come so close to injuring an innocent… or that Justice would extend his hatred of templars to the mages who bore the imprint of their systems. Ella was so young. Of course she was a product of the Circle; what else could she be? Could Justice really not distinguish between her and a free mage?

*If you hadn’t been here....*

Tobias closed his eyes and took a breath, feeling the guilt and the anger wash through him like salt water. He had been there, but it shouldn’t have made a difference. Anders was strong. Strong
enough to control Justice… strong enough to make it out of the Gallows alive. He had to have been.

“You need that hand seeing to,” Selby announced, as Tobias opened his eyes. The world swam around him briefly, made dull and grainy by fatigue. He frowned, glancing down at his burned palm as if it had nothing to do with him. She cocked one thin, grey brow. “Anywhere else?”

He started to say that he was fine, but she gave him a look that brooked no resistance, so he admitted to the couple of scratches he’d accrued. Selby nodded, as if he’d somehow proved her right, and pushed up her sleeves, passing Alrik’s wallet to Gethyn.

“Sit down. And take that thing off. Jarrod, fetch us a clean cloth and some woundwort ointment, would you? Gethyn, look in there for anything we can use, and see how much coin that is. Mina, love… there’s more blankets in the chest. I ‘spect you ladies’ll want to rest now, won’t you?”

And, with that, Selby took charge, the mistress of her domain. As Tobias stripped reluctantly to the waist and sat in front of the fire, letting her patch up the narrow wound on his back and spread some foul-smelling balm on his burned hand, he considered just how like her Anders was when he was in the clinic. Had he learned it from her, this calm efficiency? Did she use it to mask the same inner turmoil as he did?

He winced at the cold bite of ointment and cloth on his sore, tender places, and tried to stop thinking about Anders being caught by templars, or trapped under the Gallows, succumbing to the corruption that lingered in the stones the same way poor Willen had.

“I reckon Anders got out,” Jarrod said, knocking back a half-mug of the same grog as Ranulf was drinking. He glanced at Tobias, his expression one of total fatigue, threaded through with bitter disillusion. “I bet he did, and I’ll bet he’s back at the clinic now. That’s where he’d go, innit? You should probably track him down, Hawke. Make sure that… thing… hasn’t got the best of him.”

“He’s not a—” Tobias began, the words tripping mechanically from his tongue, but Jarrod cut across him.

“’Course,” he said, shaking his head as if speculating on a sudden realisation, “if that happened, we’d know about it, wouldn’t we? Power that mad sod’s got in him… he’d take half the Undercity out if he went.”

Tobias swallowed heavily, wincing as Selby’s tough, thin fingers jabbed at his flesh, securing a knot in the bandage that would around his waist. “He’s not mad.”

“Yeah, he is.” Jarrod snorted dismissively, and gave another weary shake of his head. “But he’s never been a liability before now. His control… it’s going. And, one day, it’ll be gone completely.”

“You shut your mouth,” Selby snapped, straightening up and tossing Tobias’ jerkin back to him. “You got no idea what you’re talking about, Jarrod.”

The mage shrugged. He glanced at Tobias, his cowl loose and his face devoid of judgement, and drained the rest of his cup in a single swallow. “You should find him, Hawke. He’ll need you.”

Busy with the straps and buckles of his jack, Tobias opened his mouth, but there were no words on his tongue. He looked from Jarrod to Selby, but she’d turned away from him, moving to read over Gethyn’s shoulder. Mina had taken the women upstairs to claim bunks and blankets, and Ranulf was still sitting before the fire, snoring gently through his beard.

“I…. “
Tobias faltered once more. He wanted to believe that so much… to believe that he’d go to the clinic, and find Anders there like he was all the time, and that it would be all right somehow. He wanted to believe that he’d be greeted with open arms… that what he’d done within the Gallows’ dark stone walls made everything a little better and a little brighter… but that wasn’t true.

Everything was so complicated, and he was so fucking tired.

He fastened the last of the buckles and stood, brushing himself down with his one good hand.

“I’m gonna go and try to find him,” he said, avoiding the eyes of the other mages. “I’ll try the clinic… if he’s not there, I can speak to Tomwise and Allyn, and the other tunnel rats. I’m sure he’s fine. Let me know if there’s anything… well, you know.”

He gestured vaguely, and Selby nodded.

“Be careful,” she said, and that was really the only farewell Tobias got before he let himself back out into the embrace of Lowtown’s night air.

He didn’t mind. Not really. He was fairly sure he was never going to feel like he belonged among the Underground.

Although, the occasional comforting lie might have been nice.

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It was good to be topside again, he had to admit. Kirkwall’s air wasn’t exactly fresh, though at least the breeze that came in off the water cut through the worst of the stink.

The darkest part of the night had worn away, though Tobias reckoned there were still a good few hours until dawn. Stars pierced the sky, and the bent sickle of the moon had slipped beneath the silhouettes of towers and walls that made up the city’s stark, grim outline.

He stole a cloak from the washing line behind some poky little poulterer’s yard, wrapping the coarse brown fabric over his shoulders both in defence against the air’s chill, and to disguise the amount of blood that still covered him. Fair enough, Darktown didn’t really care about bloodstains, but Tobias had no wish to actually look any more suspicious than was necessary.

He wanted to keep everything as calm as possible when he caught up with Anders, too… because he had to believe he would. Had to believe he’d got out, and that he was all right.

And yet, as Tobias headed down to the Undercity, every shadow seemed to hold the breaths of memory in it; the echoes of dying templars, and the fear that had swelled in him as Justice rampaged in blood.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t seen Anders kill anyone before… they had both dealt their share of death and, Maker knew, there had been times Tobias had found the blood-pumping thrill of combat more of an aphrodisiac than he liked to admit. He remembered fighting bandits on the coast, watching Anders strike men down with fire, sparks, and ice, and being so caught up in the action that he’d ended the battle with a bloody nose and breeches so tight it felt like his balls would drop off. He was uncomfortably aware of the dubious moral connotations of those reactions… but what had happened under the Gallows was a whole new level of bloodshed.

Tobias didn’t want to believe what Jarrod had said. He didn’t want to believe it might be true: that Anders was slipping, and a little more of him was being eroded every day, until all that was left would be Vengeance… warping him, and warping Justice. He didn’t believe it, he told himself. It
had been the templars, the atmosphere of the fortress—and who hadn’t been affected by it? Tobias had felt himself: that thinning of the Veil that came with blood and death. How many mages had died down there? How many had been tortured until their minds broke, driven to the arms of demons, like Willen, or made too weak to resist Tranquillity… like Karl.

He wondered how much Karl had factored into Anders’ rage at Alrik. He’d sworn to kill the man once before, after all; maybe he’d simply been waiting for an opportunity like the one tonight had provided.

*Maybe he planned it.*

Tobias shook his head as he picked his way down the old barracks stairway, slipping into the dank shadows of the Undercity, and trying to leave thoughts like those behind him.

No… Anders hadn’t planned it. He’d barely been hanging onto enough control to stop himself decapitating Ella, much less been able to stick to any kind of rationale. It had been blind rage—the most dangerous kind of anger—and, while that couldn’t be dismissed, given everything that he *was*, and everything of which he was capable, it didn’t make him a sly, canny murderer. Sure, he’d probably revelled in Alrik’s death, but everything that had happened was a demonstration of the loss of control… not the welcome embracing of carnage.

The more he told himself those things, the more Tobias believed them and, as Darktown wrapped its familiar stench of rot and piss and filth around him, he moved grimly through the tunnels, determined to find the healer.

It was quiet. Most of the people huddled against the walls of the tunnels stayed there, either ignoring him or pretending to do so and, as he slipped from the wider routes to the ill-lit, narrow runs, Tobias quickened his pace.

A couple of dwarves—casteless, by their brands, and ex-Carta, by their dark leather armour, which bore the mark of the Red Spire gang—peeled out of one the alcoves and started following him as he got about halfway to the clinic. Tobias sighed laboriously, the sound of his breath echoing through the dimness. A very few torches lit the walls, and a little third-hand moonlight seeped through some of the grates and vents that pock the tunnels, giving the whole place a dappled, streaked kind of light… as if, down here, not even the darkness was clean.

“Don’t,” he said, slowing to a halt and listening to the sound of not-quite-footsteps behind him: the sound made by people trying too hard to be quiet. “Really. It’d be better for everyone if you didn’t.”

“Gi’s yer purse,” one of the dwarves grated. “Or Nurn here’ll gut ya like a nug.”

Tobias groaned and turned around slowly, drawing his knife. The burns on his left hand still hurt, his back ached from the glancing blow of the templar dagger, and he really didn’t need this. The dwarves’ faces leered hungrily at him from the gloom, greasy, sallow features capped by unwashed braided hair. Their eyes glinted with greedy hunger… and just ordinary hunger, because most of Darktown was hungry, especially at this time of year.

“Look,” he began, letting the thin threads of light glint on his blade, and reaching down deep inside himself for the last reserves of magic, hoping fervently that he had something—*anything*—left. “I don’t have any coin. You can either believe that, or believe that I will make the next five minutes very unpleasant for you both, if you don’t back off. Understand?”

One of the dwarves curled his lip and started saying something about cocky surfacers, but the other’s expression changed immediately, concern replacing the challenge in his eyes.
“Oh, sod. Hey, Dank… leave him. Let’s just… let’s not, all right?”

The first dwarf looked annoyed at the interruption, but his companion tugged urgently at his arm, and muttered into his ear. Tobias did his best to maintain an intimidating posture, despite the pain screaming in his muscles, and the fact he was frighteningly aware that there was no way he could possibly even dredge up the limpest of fireballs. He had nothing left at all, and this would go badly if they attacked. Very badly indeed.

He held his breath, and picked out the word ‘dragon’ from the dwarf’s mumbling. Apparently, Varric’s stories were already spreading. He was Hawke, the Dragonslayer, and he would have been surprised if, by now, the dragon hadn’t been eighty feet long and had six heads. He tried not to laugh, though the relief that burst through him when the thugs stood down was irrepressible.

The first dwarf grimaced and, with a comment about not wasting time on lousy topsiders, allowed his friend to defuse the standoff. Tobias held his ground until they melted back into the tunnels, and then he let out a long breath, sheathing his dagger again.

Bloody Varric… I owe that dwarf a drink.

Tobias wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, and set off through the tunnels again.

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The lantern burned above the clinic’s door, though its dim, yellowish light seemed deceitful and cruel. There was no comfort here, no security. The healer was decidedly not in, either, as Tobias discovered after rapping on the locked door and, finally, rousing a sleepy-looking and very confused Saryha.

She got worried when he explained that he was looking for Anders, though her worry was overlaid with a veneer of snippiness: she didn’t seem pleased about being left with the overnight patients, though Tobias suspected she was managing quite well. For all the culture shock that she’d experienced in being transported from the bookish quiet of the Circle’s library to the mess and chaos of the clinic, she was proving to have immense strength of character… and she didn’t shy from cleaning up piss, either.

He promised that, as soon as he found Anders, he’d make sure he came down here to relieve her, and he assured her that, no, everything was fine. It was a blatant lie, but what else was he supposed to say without worrying her unnecessarily?

She shut and barred the doors again, and Tobias stood in the light of the lantern, fatigue pulling at him with a thousand weighted tongues, wondering where in the Maker’s name Anders would have run.

Unless he never ran. Unless they got him… no. No, can’t think like that. He must have got out. Must have done….

He headed down one of the tunnels that led in the general direction of the docks. There had been some flooding here earlier in the year, and part of the wall had slipped, crumbling in a mess of mud and rotted mortar. It had been shored up with supports and boards, and a few of the timbers had symbols carved into them: dwarven runes, Tobias noted, most of which seemed to be graffiti in varying degrees of profanity, along with the old Kirkwall Rebels’ mark, daubed in cracked and muddy red paint. He wasn’t sure what it meant. The symbol had lost most of its original meaning in the city, but maybe some gang or other had claimed it… probably one of the loosely termed militias that wanted to drive mages out and reclaim Thedas for so-called ‘normal’ people. You heard them
spouting their claptrap in the market sometimes: magic was corruption, and not even the Chantry
could control it. He agreed about that last part—Maker’s balls, Anders would have agreed too; you
didn’t have to be a Resolutionist to see that the templars couldn’t keep a lid on every last mage, or
that their iron fist was half the problem—but the whole idea of trying to get rid of magic was
ridiculous. It was like trying to ban wind. Magic was a part of life, a part of the fabric of the world…and
the sooner more people understand that the way mages understood it, Tobias thought, the sooner
they might stop viewing them as monsters.

The tunnel was getting dark. He ignored the familiar tug of fear that this sparked within him—ever
since the Deep Roads, it had been hard to abide the unbroken shadows—and pushed on, trying to
coax a glimmer of magelight from his fingers. It hurt, which was unusual: normally, it was just a
swelling of warmth from his fingertips, but Tobias had pushed himself so far that even this simple
spell stung, like salt rubbed across dry, abraded skin.

He winced, and swore to himself as his little ball of anaemic light wavered, and then went out.

*I need sleep. Just… sleep. For about a month.*

Tobias shook out his sore fingers, holding his breath as he strained his ears against the dim quiet.
There was someone there, but was it Anders, or just another tunnel rat? He edged further past the
remnants of the flood debris and subsequent slippage. It seemed like somewhere Anders would go, if
he didn’t trust himself to go back to the clinic. He’d run to his bolthole—to the security of these
tunnels, despite their hated darkness—but he’d hide himself away from people… and there were no
rough sleepers here, no huddles of the destitute and dispossessed.

*Either that, or he’s gone to the docks and he’s already on a boat to Rivain.*

The thought struck Tobias coldly. Would he have the money for that? Would he really do it? He
wasn’t sure but, if it did prove true, he knew he was quite prepared to track the bloody man across
the entire sodding world. That knowledge, bare and unmistakeable in his head, both shamed and
irritated him, but he couldn’t deny it.

Tobias wet his lower lip with an uncertain tongue, fingers hovering over the hilt of his dagger.

“Anders?”

Something scuffled in the shadows. Tobias pushed his senses against the darkness, and felt
something so familiar that it poured through him like silvered rain. Relief almost overwhelmed him:
*Anders was* alive. He couldn’t feel much—his tiredness obliterated most of his awareness, like
having his head stuffed with rags and his nerves bound beneath thick leather—but it was there all the
same… that sharp, bright, metallic power, shimmering like a hundred tiny lights sparkling on glass.

He’d never realised it before but, beneath the sheer strength of it, Anders’ power felt so fragile.
Brittle, almost.

Tobias pulled another orb of light from the air, gritting his teeth against the ache it engendered in his
flesh, and let the pale little ball wobble uncertainly on his fingers as he moved through the last few
feet of the tunnel.

It came to a dead end in a slide of mud and rock, evidently the remnants of an older slippage, and it
was this into that Anders was huddled, curled into a ball and turning away from the feeble light that
hovered over Tobias’ hand.

*Templar blood still marked his coat, his face, hair, and hands, and his skin was smeared with dirt and
soot. He winced, shielding his face with his hand, fingers spread and palm out towards Tobias, who*
fought the urge to flinch at the gesture. It was a little too easy to recall what those hands had so recently done… and exactly what Anders was capable of.

“Go away, Hawke.”

His voice sounded thin and weak, as much fatigue weighting the words as Tobias felt in himself. He drew to a halt a few feet in front of the healer, gazing down at him wearily, and tried to will his heart not to break.

“No.”

Anders let out a terse, irritated huff of breath, refusing to look him in the face. He hunched his knees up further, curled in on himself with his side pressed to the muddy rocks.

“Anders….” Tobias began, really not sure where to go from there. He knew that nothing he could say could give the man back what he’d had before Justice; nothing he could do could replace the loss of control, the mastery of himself that was slipping away from him, opening him up to such terrible, violent vulnerability. He sighed, and crouched down in front of the healer, still allowing him his distance, the way one might approach a strange dog. “Look… you can’t stay out here. Come on. Come back to the clinic, at least. Selby’s worried.”

Recognition of that name tightened Anders’ face, but he closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I can’t. It’s not safe. I can’t be around people. I—”

Tobias frowned. “The girl’s fine. Her name’s Ella. She got out, with the others, and we took them all to Selby’s. She’ll see ’em right,” he added, thinking maybe the part about Willen becoming an abomination wasn’t worth mentioning. “You saved her.”

Anders scoffed dryly, though the sound was a pale, thin scrape across the air, and the weight of despair hung heavily in his throat. “Saved her? I nearly killed her. I came so close! I nearly—” He broke off and sniffed wetly, turning red-rimmed eyes to the rough-hewn roof of the tunnel. “It’s all gone wrong,” he said, with an oddly resigned kind of bitterness, though he still didn’t meet Tobias’ eye. “Justice and I… we’re a monster, same as any abomination.”

Tobias winced, stung by those words as if they were something physical, some palpable barb or thorn embedded in his skin. Anders looked as if he was going to cry, all the pieces of himself strung together by ever-loosening threads, his every breath traced with despair.

“No,” Tobias protested, shaking his head, and surprised to find anger burning in his chest, along with the pain of empathy and that deep, physical ache that Anders somehow always managed to raise in him, just by the very fact of his presence, and his being so completely bloody impossible. “No, don’t say that…”

“Why not? It’s true.”

The tunnel’s dimness, and the weakness of the light Tobias had conjured, made the shadows seem like live things, thronging his face and painting hollows and valleys into his dirty, pallid skin. Those dark eyes were voids in wide, inky sockets, and Tobias struggled to reconcile the thin, broken man before him with the creature of fury and vengeance that had ripped Alrik’s throat apart. He couldn’t, he decided. They weren’t the same. It was ‘he’ and ‘I’, not ‘we’. And yet, as he crawled across the tunnel’s filthy floor—stones and half-rotted splinters of wood digging into the knees of leather breeches—to grab Anders by the arms, forcibly dragging him into an upright sitting position by the sleeves of that appalling coat, Tobias couldn’t avoid seeing the blood on his hands and face. He
it smelled of grime and death, and his ridiculous feathered pauldrons were matted and clumped, his whole body apparently little more than bones and rags.

“It isn’t,” he said, and though he wanted to sound forceful enough to banish all this angst and fear from Anders’ face, he knew he wasn’t. The words came out in a small, frightened breath, and Tobias suspected they sounded more like a plea than a refutation.

It wasn’t true. It wasn’t… all right, so Justice was capable of terrible things. Vengeance, unchained, was a dreadful creature… but Anders was still there. He was still fighting for control, still capable of it, and that had to mean something. It did mean something. It meant everything.

Anders flexed against his grasp, head tilting away from him as Tobias tightened his hold, forcing him to look, forcing the eye contact that he seemed so desperate to avoid. “All right, so you were out of control, but—"

“No.” Anders resisted, trying first to pull his wrist away, then turning his head. His mouth twisted, the words coming out thin and tight. “You have too much faith in me. I almost—"

“But you didn’t.” Tobias shook him, hard, and made Anders look back at him, despite the raw ache that those dark eyes raised in him. “You heard what I was saying and you knew, in your heart, that you had to stop. And you did.”

He wanted to shout, shake some sense into that broken, hurting head, but he kept his voice low, kept the words trimmed to calm, stern tones. It seemed to help. Anders’ face grew slightly less taut, as if he was listening instead of just shrinking away from the sound of another human voice, but the tension in his body didn’t lessen.

“You were the only thing that kept me from murdering an innocent girl,” he murmured mournfully, his gaze slowly tracking Tobias’ face, both of them cloaked by the shadows and barely lit by that weak ball of fading light. “Without you, I’d never have known who was there until it was too late.”

Tobias loosened his grip on the healer’s arms, suddenly uncomfortably aware of how hard he’d been holding on… and aware of this new, dark thing that bound them. Gratitude and resentment seemed to be warring in Anders’ eyes, and he wasn’t sure how to deal with either.

“Anders, you’d never have—"

“Yes. I would. I could have… and I nearly did. Very nearly.”

Tobias’ fingers flexed against the worn sleeves of Anders’ coat, the fabric rough beneath his fingertips. He winced at the scrape of it against his burned palm, but shook his head. It didn’t seem possible that so much destruction—so much death, so much cruelty, so much raw, terrible power—could lie within this man, and yet Tobias felt it. He felt it in every breath, every heartbeat… every pore of his skin, drinking it in like bitter gall.

“You didn’t, though,” he repeated, drawing his hands away, reluctantly relinquishing his grasp on the man. “You didn’t.”

Anders lowered his gaze, frowning, and then he reached out and, so slowly, took hold of Tobias’ injured hand. His mouth bowed downward as his fingers moved gently, deftly, over the burns.

“I did this, didn’t I?”

Tobias swallowed heavily, unable to speak. He didn’t want to say yes, because that was admitting, underlining, all of Anders’ destructive potential… but it was true. It was just as true as the fact that,
even now, even when both of them were squatting in this filthy tunnel, covered in blood and the smell of death, Anders’ touch set his skin alight.

He tried to pull away, to disguise the severity of the burns, but it was Anders’ turn to hold on, refusing to let go. Tobias smiled weakly. Typical, he thought: so much of the time they’d known each other had been about both of them being too bloody stubborn. Too stubborn to let go, and too stubborn to move away. He watched those long, dirty fingers—the beds of Anders’ nails ingrained with the reddish-brown of templars’ blood, and streaks of pink and red marring the pale skin—move over his flesh, but there was no pulse of healing magic, no soothing glow of light.

The healer was ostensibly still looking at their hands—that ballet of touch and withdrawal, insistence and refusal—and he shook his head slowly. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and quiet, little more than a choked whisper.

“How can I fight for the freedom of mages, when I am the example of the worst that freedom brings?”

Tobias winced. His chest ached dully, as if his heart could fold itself in two; screw itself up like a paper ball, just to get away from this man and his impossible words.

What choice have you ever made that was the choice of a free man, love?

It didn’t seem fair. Everything Anders had ever done—merging with Justice, burying himself in the slops of Darktown—it was all for them. All for the mages, and the cause, and the fight…and now he felt guilty for failing them?

Tobias drew in a deep breath, and shrugged.

“Well,” he said, forcing a dry, arch sarcasm into the words. “You are everything that good little apprentices are taught to fear, as I understand it. Maybe you could travel. Give lectures?”

Anders glanced up, his eyes dull and his chin dimpled, though there was recognition buried deep in his gaze. Tobias sighed.

“All right… you’re right. Mages are dangerous. We can be. You just have to make yourself the proof that we can control our powers.”

And, oh, put like that, didn’t it sound simple?

Anders’ chin dimpled further, his lips moulding into one crumpled line. “I don’t know how,” he whispered, his eyes turning wide and dark in a face drawn to pale, papery distance. “I… I don’t…” He trailed off, shaking his head again, Tobias’ hand finally falling from his fingers. “What if I can’t? What if I hurt someone? I-I can’t heal anymore. Not like this. What if—”

He was beginning to fall away, losing himself in the flight of those thoughts and the bloody spiral of his fear. Tobias cursed inwardly, trying to find a way to break through the fixation, to get his attention again, but the healer’s expression had grown glassy and distant.

“Fenris was right,” Anders murmured. “I’m better off dead. If I died, everyone would be safer, wouldn’t they?”

“Stop it.” Tobias scowled. “Anders… stop it.”

I am going to gut that fucking elf. I’m going to cut the lyrium out of his skin and make him bloody eat it….
“It’s true,” the healer maintained. “I wouldn’t… we wouldn’t be a danger. A-and it might be Justice who rose from my corpse, might’n’t it? My friend, and not that… that creature of vengeance. That would be—”

Tobias shook his head, desperately trying to brush the words away like they didn’t matter, like he could pretend they were meaningless. “Bullshit. Come on… enough. You need to get back to the clinic. All right?”

Anders blinked owlishly, giving him a wide, pupilless stare that, in the gloom, seemed both unearthly and strangely hypnotic.

“I can’t do this,” he whispered.

“You can,” Tobias said, his gaze tracing the tendrils of dishevelled, dirty blond hair that, partially escaped from their bindings, had fallen to frame the healer’s gaunt, bleak face. “You’ve already proved that much.”

Anders looked at him for a moment in the weak, wavering light that barely seemed to hold the shadows back.

“Help me?” he mouthed, the words almost inaudible against the darkness.

Tobias felt himself crumble from the inside out, barely able to breathe through the rushing in his ears. The weight of uncried tears pulled at the bridge of his nose, and he hurt for Anders—hurt in a way he never had before, not even when he’d watched Bethany die, or Malcolm retreat into the grim fall of illness.

“Always,” he managed, choking out a whisper as Anders lowered his head, his shoulders convulsing with a poorly disguised sob.

*Oh, Maker, don’t… don’t start that. You’ll set me off.*

“Come on,” he murmured, taking hold of Anders’ elbow and trying to get both of them up off the filthy floor of the tunnel. “You need to rest. Sleep.”

Anders shook his head, resisting with the petulance of a frightened child.

“No. Not… I can’t let go again. I-I can’t….”

Tobias wrinkled his nose, pretending he couldn’t see the gleam of wetness on those thin cheeks. “Well, all right. But you still need a bath and a fresh shirt. Come on. Up!”

That firmer tone seemed to work. He half-coaxed, half-dragged Anders to his feet, wincing afresh at the aching throb of his own battle scars, and catching his breath when the healer seemed so desperate to be near him.

“Hawke,” Anders murmured, the word somewhere between a question and a plea, his hand resting on the buckles at the front of Tobias’ jerkin.

It was hard to tell whether he was just trying to hold himself upright, or if the way his body inclined closer spoke of a need to be held, comforted… and all those other things that Tobias wanted so bloody badly, and yet knew he couldn’t take. Not now, anyway. It would have been taking advantage, and he wasn’t about to do that to Anders. Certainly not in the state he was in tonight.

“Come on,” he said softly, taking hold of the upper part of Anders’ sleeve, and squeezing the arm
that lay beneath the stiff, blood-splattered fabric. “Let’s get you back.”

Anders nodded, but he seemed unfocused, as if the sharp edge of his self-loathing and anguish was suddenly blunted, the fire falling from him to leave him bare to the unadulterated, crushing exhaustion he must be feeling. Tobias smiled mirthlessly: he could understand that.

He propelled the healer back through the tunnels, grabbing his arm every time he stumbled, and trying not to trip over himself. They were, he decided, probably a horribly comical pair... both staggering along like drunks, weary and covered in blood, with the pathetic little orb of his magelight fizzing about their heads like a fly. He never quite managed to let go of Anders' coat and, from time to time, the healer muttered small protestations. Tobias wasn’t sure if they were directed at him or Justice but, as they picked their way through the darkness, back to the better-lit runs and the lantern that burned above the clinic’s doors, he grew almost used to Anders' mumbling.

They stopped outside the doors, and Anders caught hold of his wrist just before Tobias rapped on the peeling wood. Under the yellowish light of the lantern he looked slightly less ghoulish, slightly less inhuman, but the full extent of what he’d done to himself was apparent. The skin beneath his eyes was puffy and bruised with tiredness, and lines seemed etched into his cheeks and forehead, as if he was still seeing the bodies of the men he’d slain in front of him. He probably was, Tobias supposed, and he wasn’t entirely sure whether—when one of those men had been Alrik—it was worth feeling guilty over at all. He didn’t know anymore; all he knew was the beat of his own fatigue, thudding inside him as if every heartbeat was an effort. Anders’ fingers scraped the soft skin on the underside of his wrist, but even that didn’t seem quite real.

“I don’t deserve this,” Anders murmured, looking at him with haunted, bloodshot eyes. “Everything you’ve done.... I have no right to ask—”

“Bollocks.”

Tobias was dimly aware that, perhaps, this was not the height of tender declarations of support and friendship. He didn’t care, however. He was too tired, and scraped too raw by all the hurt in those dark eyes. He pulled his wrist from Anders’ grasp and squeezed the healer’s fingers, hoping that—somehow—that small gesture might carry with it at least a few of the things he couldn’t say.

He knew it wouldn’t be enough, but at least it was something and, for once, Anders didn’t even resist. His lips parted slightly, and his gaze wavered for a fraction of a moment before he swallowed hard, his throat bobbing uncertainly.

“W— Will you stay with me? Please. I... I don’t want to be on my own. I—”

“Stay?” Tobias echoed. “Tonight?”

“Just for a while,” Anders pleaded. “There’s plenty of beds. I just— I don’t want... I mean, I... can’t.... Please. I just don’t want to be left on my own. I know Saryha’s there, but— but she doesn’t understand. Please?”

*Oh, Maker*....

“Oh of course I’ll stay.”

Anders’ eyes softened, relief and tiredness pooling on the healer’s face. Tobias stifled a sigh, torn between frustration and the deep, aching need to—somehow, Maker only knew how—protect this man, and soothe away all the fear and pain.

“Thank you,” Anders murmured, and he practically sagged on his feet, so much of that tight-wound
frustration and panic sluicing out of him.

~~O~O~O~~

Saryha didn’t seem to have gone back to sleep since Tobias had knocked last time. She let them in, clasping her hands over her mouth at the state Anders was in, though she’d already set one of the fires and started heating some water. Her practicality was welcome… unlike the stares of a few of the elderly patients, who were waking to the commotion as Tobias dragged his friend into the clinic.

“You see to them,” Tobias told the girl. “I’ll look after him. He just needs to rest. It’s fine. Really, it’s—everything’s fine.”

She gave him a disbelieving look, but didn’t linger to argue. Tobias impelled Anders towards the ragged curtain at the back of the clinic that marked off his little scrape, ignoring the murmured protests about him really being all right.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on,” he muttered through gritted teeth. “Let’s get you settled. You need to sleep.”

This time, Anders didn’t even try to argue.

His little rat-hole was much the same as Tobias remembered it: wonky chair with a broken leg, narrow little pallet with a few blankets and stack of books on the upturned crate beside it; a trunk with sheaves of paper upon it, and an ink well and quills, along with a jar of sand and a pen-knife, wrapped in a small square of sacking. It wasn’t much, but it was Anders’ private space, and it was heavy with the sense of his presence. The scent, the feel of him seemed to linger on the air, and Tobias tried his hardest to ignore it.

He peeled the evil-smelling coat off the healer, who remained limp and pliant, and apparently only partially conscious. It was as if Tobias’ promise to stay—to watch over him, and make sure everything remained safe—had flipped a trigger somewhere, cutting off the flow of all that terror and panic, and leaving room for the fatigue to knock him flat.

Beneath the coat, Anders wore a heavy linen shirt, which had escaped the worse of the blood spatter, apart from at the front. His vast array of pouches and vials hung from a heavy belt around his hips, which was easily removed, although Tobias had to step nearer to do it. He moved close behind Anders, reaching around him to unclip the wide buckle, and carefully drawing the belt away. They really were terribly close, he noted, and the healer’s scent—that rumpled, well-worn tiredness, tinged with smoke and sweat, beneath the grime and the blood—reached out and tugged at Tobias. He inhaled deeply, and folded the coat and the belt across his arm, his free hand moving irresistibly to Anders’ shoulders. Tobias felt the warmth of his flesh through his shirt, and the tension that knotted his muscles. He pressed lightly, digging his fingers into one solid shoulder, the action partway between a caress and gentle guide. Anders was more lightly built than him, but Maker… every last little part of him was sinew and muscle, so tough it was as if he’d been fashioned out of bone instead of flesh.

If he bent his head now, leaned just that little bit further forwards, Tobias knew he could press his lips to the back of Anders’ neck. He’d thought about it so many times: thought about tasting the spice and the sweat of his skin, losing himself in the smell of his hair, and how everything would be so warm and enveloping…. He’d never thought it be quite like this, though. He’d never thought there’d be all the dried blood, and the mud, and the rime of old fear, and he knew he mustn’t do it, however much he wanted to, or however much it felt like Anders needed human contact.

Tobias fought for breath as Anders relaxed under his touch. A soft ‘oh’ left the healer’s lips—barely
more than a sleepy mumble as he allowed himself to be propelled towards the pallet—and it was almost too much to bear.

Anders hit the cot with a thump, and from the look on his face he’d just blanked out completely. Tobias supposed that was for the best. He knelt down and unlaced those heavy, slouchy boots, tugging them off one by one to reveal a grubby pair of socks. Anders’ big toe poked through a hole in the left one, and—for some reason—the sight of that made Tobias’ chest clench around a blade of pure agony. It was so stupidly typical of him, wasn’t it? To give everything he had of himself…and yet not even darn his own bloody socks.

Tobias choked all the things he wanted to say—all the things he wanted to feel—down into a ball at the pit of his gut, and bodily lifted Anders’ legs up onto the pallet. He winced as his back twinged and his hand complained, then shook out the blanket that lay folded at the end of the bed and covered the prone body before him over. Anders had already lolled onto his side and seemed to be barely conscious. Whether it was true sleep or just sheer exhaustion was a different matter, Tobias supposed.

He allowed the backs of his fingers to rest for a brief moment against one stubbled cheek, and told himself it was to see if the skin felt hot to the touch. It didn’t. He stroked Anders’ jaw softly, and then dragged himself away, out into the cool breadth of the clinic, his head spinning and his legs trying to give out beneath him.

*You need to rest, Hawke. Sit down, before you fall down. And stop being such a bloody fool.*

Tobias breathed deeply, his head full of The Gallows and its stinking undercrofts, and the wide, terrified eyes of a screaming girl. Alrik…. Well, Alrik was dead, and seven kinds of shit were probably going to spill out of *that* sack in the morning.

It occurred to him, as Saryha came over with a bowl of hot water, a blanket and a washcloth, and wordlessly took the bloodstained coat from his grasp, that Darktown probably wasn’t going to be safe for Anders anymore. He was too well-known around the city—the Fereldan apostate who lived in the sewers—and, whether the templars pinned Alrik’s death on him or not, every mage, potential mage, or potential apostate sympathiser was going to have a hard time once the order started seeking revenge.

*Maker… Kirkwall itself probably won’t be safe. Not for any of us, if Meredith really gets the bit between her teeth. Shit….*

Tobias washed his hands and face gingerly—he’d had a chance to clean up a bit at Selby’s, but it was going to take a scalding hot bath and an hour’s worth of scrubbing before he felt like half the grime was off him—and thought fuzzily of what he ought to do.

There was no easy answer, and certainly no solution he knew he could convince Anders of, so he took the blanket and made his way back to the healer’s little nest.

He was snoring softly, but that was all right, because it proved he was still alive, and not actively being consumed by demons. That meant Justice was still in there, Tobias supposed: damped down and under control, until the next time he broke out, splintering a little more of Anders into pieces as he went.

Tobias wrapped himself in the blanket and settled down at the foot of the narrow pallet, with his back against the wooden wall. It wasn’t comfortable, but he was too tired to care, and he didn’t much like the idea of sleeping on the cots in the clinic. Call it Fereldan superstition, but too many people had died on them. Besides… he wasn’t about to leave Anders’ side. Not tonight.
He fell asleep on those words, bone-heavy fatigue rocking him with its cold, dull fingers. Even so, Tobias’ sleep was fitful. He dozed in bouts of shallow, unsatisfying sleep and kept waking, listening for Anders’ voice, or any odd noises that shouldn’t be there.

He expected nightmares, or wakefulness, only there was nothing. For all Anders’ protestations about not wanting to sleep and potentially relinquish control, he seemed fine. Once, Tobias craned up to peep at the bed and make sure the healer was still breathing, only to find him stretched out on his back, hair tousled and tangled and face lightly flushed, one hand thrown decorously above his head and drooping off the edge of the pallet. The other was clenched in the blanket, which he’d managed to throw half-off, and the trousers and shirt Tobias had left him in were rumpled… even the socks were working their way off.

He knew he looked for longer than he should have, prurient though it felt. All the same, he didn’t dare get up. Didn’t dare scoop up Anders’ extremities and tuck them back into bed, or touch him while he listened to the soft rhythm of his breathing.

Tobias hugged the blanket tighter around himself, trying to trap the warmth between it and his stolen cloak, and wished for sleep. He didn’t remember it coming, but when he awoke again the light was stained a dirty sort of yellow-grey, and he guessed it must be past dawn.

He stifled a yawn and screwed his face up in defence against the comparative brightness—not that Darktown ever got more than third-hand daylight anyway… which meant someone must have been up to light a few candles.

Which meant—

Tobias blinked. Anders was not in his bed. The blanket had been pulled across it, and a bowl of water that smelled faintly of soap stood on the crate beside the pallet. On closer inspection, he saw that it contained yesterday’s bloodstained shirt, which had apparently been treated with some sort of greenish herb, rubbed into all the spatters before being left to soak.

Huh.

Tobias peeled the blanket off himself, groaning and wincing as his stiff, cramped muscles protested any and all forms of movement, and folded the thing before he left it on the foot of the bed.

He limped into the clinic, bleary-eyed and with furry teeth and throbbing head—worse than any bloody hangover, he thought, ruefully contemplating the fact that, usually, feeling this bad was at least preceded by some form of pleasurable indulgence—and squinted at the rows of beds and tables.

The fires were up, bubbling coppers full of linens and the day’s first batch of herbs, and Saryha was bustling along the line of bed-ridden patients, handing out dishes of what looked and smelled suspiciously like oatmeal. Tobias’ gut flipped, despite the fact he knew he needed to eat. Food seemed like a horror beyond all description, and the only thing he really wanted was a hot bath and another, softer place to sleep.

“Good morning,” Anders said, causing him to turn, halfway through the act of scrubbing at his face with the heel of his palm.

He looked… better. He wore a clean shirt and trousers, his hair damp and slicked back, his skin pink with scrubbing and a drying cloth still in his hands, evidently from his recent bath.

The tiredness still lingered in his face, of course. That, and everything else that had been there last night—the fear, the horror, the guilt and pain—but it was lessened, the way the morning can wipe
away the terror that hides in the night’s smallest, cruellest hours.

“How are—”

“I’m fine,” Anders said crisply, although without much emphasis. His eyes seemed guarded, but he looked hard into Tobias’ face, and Tobias wished he knew what he was searching for there.

“Good,” he said meekly. He didn’t believe it, but at least Anders was up to lying again, instead of having his every vulnerability laid as bare as it had been last night.

“Thanks for staying, Hawke. For… for everything.”

The words were barely a murmur, but they felt honest.

“Not a problem. Are you sure you’re—?”

“Yes.”

“Mm-hm.” Tobias peered at him sceptically. “Will you be all right?”

Anders shrugged and glanced around the clinic. “I’ll have to be, won’t I? People’ll start showing up soon, and I can’t just—”

“Bugger them. Bugger everybody. Will you be all right? I mean it. Last night, you… you had me worried,” Tobias admitted, lowering his voice. “Not because of what happened. Some of the things you said….”

“I’m all right,” Anders repeated patiently. “Really. It could have been a lot worse. It’s… I mean, it’s thanks to you that it wasn’t.”

Tobias frowned. He didn’t want gratitude. “But—”

Anders shook his head, tossing the towel into a hamper and moving to a nearby chair to pick up his coat, which—Tobias assumed—Saryha had worked a minor miracle on. There were damp spots on it, but it had been meticulously cleaned, and barely any bloodstains were visible at all. A strong waft of elfroot, peppermint, and Old Maid’s Ease drifted over to tickle his nose, and Tobias watched Anders belting the coat around himself, fingers moving deftly over the collar, turning up and adjusting the worn fabric’s rough edges.

It was like armour for him, Tobias supposed: his defence against the day, and the hordes of patients who would soon be arriving.

“You’ll let Selby know you’re all right, won’t you?” he said, his voice a little croaky from the roughness in his throat.

Anders smiled mildly. “Mm-hm. I’ll go and see her later. You should probably go and get some rest. I do it mean it, though,” he added, those dark eyes rising to meet Tobias’, and holding a bruised, tentative warmth in them that made his stomach clench. “Thank you.”

His smile softened a bit at the edges and, before Tobias had time to protest, he found himself being hugged.

It was a sudden, awkward, wonderful thing: his arms were full of Anders, and he felt just as warm and smelled just as good as he did every time this happened in Tobias’ mind… and that gave rise to the horrible feeling he might actually be dreaming. His arms clenched convulsively around the man,
his face pressed fiercely to the faintly damp, feathered ruffs of the appalling coat, and Tobias inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of herbs and soot and spice, as if that could expunge the memories of blood, grime, and fear.

He thought, for a moment, he felt Anders tremble a little, and he raised his hand, laying it soothingly on the back of his hair. It was slightly coarse beneath his fingertips, a little damp and rough… but warm. The warmth of Anders’ body seemed to seep through everything. His breath grazed Tobias’ neck, and that was warm too; so warm, and laced with so much promise.

Tobias pulled back slightly, searching his face for some hint of explanation or acquiescence. Anders’ gaze seemed deeper than an ocean, and full of just as many uncharted things, and yet Tobias had never wanted to kiss anyone so much in his life.

Anders wanted it too. That much was virtually palpable: the need rose off him like a summer heat haze as they began to incline together, faces at first just gently turning, each towards the other, then leaning closer, so very slowly.

Tobias could feel the other man’s breath on his lips—lips that ached and burned with a keen, physical eagerness, a desperation almost beyond endurance—and he hardly dared breathe for fear of breaking this perfect momentum. He didn’t care whether Saryha was watching, or what the elderly patients thought. He didn’t care about anything. His pulse thudded dully, and the world closed in until there was nothing but this, nothing but the moment at which, finally, their lips would meet in that small, inadequate start to the expression of the things that lay between them.

Anders’ fingers skimmed his cheek, the smallest suggestion of a sigh breaking from him as—

*Maker, no. No, no, no. Please… it's not fair….*

—he pulled away, wrenching himself calmly, and yet so decisively, from Tobias’ arms.

It hurt. It hurt with a gut-churning, crushing, devastating pain that seemed to burn a core right through his chest.

“Anders…”

The healer shook his head.

“You’d, um, you’d better go,” he said, his voice rough as he stared at a point on the wall about a foot to the left of Tobias’ arm. “Your mother will be worried. I know she… she worries… about you. And you, er, you’re exhausted. You… uh.”

He tugged awkwardly at the front of his coat, straightening it ineffectively, and swallowed heavily. Tobias blinked, not quite able to believe this was actually happening.

“You’re throwing me out?”

“No.” Anders shook his head emphatically, but he was still staring at the wall, defiantly avoiding Tobias’ gaze. “No, I just… I think you should go. Thank you, though. Thank you for… everything.”

“Anders—”

He reached out, thinking that if he could just touch the stupid bastard, it would be real, and there might be something to build from, but Anders swayed away from him, shaking his head.

He murmured something, half under his breath, and though the shape of the word sounded like
‘don’t’, it felt like ‘please’.

Tobias clenched his jaw as his hand dropped uselessly to his side. “Right. Fine. So, you’re throwing me out, and I don’t even get a bath?”

Sarcasm didn’t even start on the road to helping vent his frustration. The whole thing was unfair to the point of making him want to punch something… a wall, or possibly Anders, who was still standing there awkwardly, wincing and looking embarrassed.

“Hawke, don’t. I… I just need— I need some time,” he murmured, his face taut and a pinched little frown on his brow. “I’m sorry.”

“Time?”

Tobias gave a dark cough of laughter. Did the witless bastard even know how long it had already been?

He knew Anders must be struggling with Justice—and there was no doubt far more he had to contend with this morning than just the problems of personal attractions—but, Maker’s holy balls, this was so far from fair that it was a wonder the world hadn’t turned inside out.

Tobias shook his head, scowling bitterly. “Fine. I’ll see you. Take care, all right?”

Anders nodded, still refusing to look at him, and anger blistered in Tobias’ throat. He was sick of mixed signals, sick of being picked up and put down again, apparently at whatever messed up whim Anders was currently indulging, and sick of the frustration.

He turned and stalked from the clinic, not sparing a glance behind him, and his fugue didn’t lift until he hit Lowtown.
Chapter 29

Leandra was out when Tobias arrived back at the house, and Gamlen was nowhere to be seen, which was a blessing. He was pretty sure he couldn’t have coped with the old goat’s snide commentary on top of everything else, and he relished his privacy as he hauled the wooden tub off the back of the door and set it in front of the fire. It took two trips to the pump to fetch enough water to bathe properly and clean his gear, but it was worth it.

As he sat naked in the grubby, tepid bath, the fire’s warmth licking at the edges of the tub and gnawing the chill from the air, Tobias squeezed out a washcloth and scowled at the soap, as if it was somehow to blame for everything. He scrubbed every part of himself, the darkness behind his eyes still stained with flashes of light and fountains of blood.

He soaked his body until the heat faded from the bath, and tried not to think about the cricks in his back and neck that he’d accrued from sleeping in such a bloody awkward position. Mostly, he also tried not to think about Anders, and how that infuriating, impossible bastard was so… well, bloody infuriating.

It was hard to stop thinking about him, though. Everything he’d done, everything he was… how afraid he’d been, and how he’d changed the whole shape of Tobias’ world in the few moments he’d been in his arms.

You’re never going to own up to it, though, are you? You and me… it’s all there, but you just won’t let it out. Why? Are you afraid? D’you think you’re protecting me? I don’t need protecting. Not from you. I don’t want protecting.

Maybe it just wasn’t enough. Tobias didn’t want to believe that, not after everything. So much flirtation, so much promise and potential and gut-wrenchingly provocative possibility! He knew Anders wanted him. It was there in every look that passed between them, every supposedly innocuous word and gesture. It had been there since the beginning—unmistakeable, like it had been the night in The Hanged Man, when Anders had been so rude to Sebastian Vael. Hard to believe, Tobias thought, that he’d so relished it then; that he’d revelled in that fit of sulky, angry jealousy over His Royal Shininess, and thought it meant that Anders cared.

Maybe it did. But it didn’t change anything. A dozen princes, a hundred whores… none of it would mean anything next to the things that really mattered to Anders: his precious cause, and his beloved Underground. They were what fuelled him—what fuelled Justice—and fuelling Justice, in turn, was what propelled him.

Tobias groaned, and let the cloth fall damply to the floorboards beside the tub. The Underground…! They thought Anders was mad. Dangerous. The cracks were already showing; Creer and his Resolutionist cohorts were focusing more and more on the politics, not the personal. They talked about mages as a single entity, a brotherhood—acting for the good of everyone, for every mage—but did bugger all for those individuals who were trying to escape. The whole movement was breaking up, creaking under the weight of increasingly violent politics… just as Anders himself was starting to — no, not crack, Tobias corrected himself. He was struggling, clearly, but… he wasn’t mad. He needed support. He needed someone to help him.

So why the fuck can’t it be me?

Everything was going wrong. It was all such a fucking mess, and here he was, picking it all apart like a lovestruck fool, and ignoring the single greatest factor that coloured everything: maybe, just
maybe, he couldn’t help, and that was what kept Anders shying away.

He didn’t want to believe it, didn’t want to think it could be true, but the possibility was there nonetheless, and Tobias was forced to admit—especially after the Gallows—that the extent of Justice’s power was terrifying. Maybe there was no working past that, no way of being with the man behind the spirit’s mask.

He was still hung up on trying, though. Still hung up on worrying about that infuriating, impossible, incredible bastard, no matter how many time he pulled away, or how many times he made Tobias want to throttle him.

After everything that had happened, there was no turning back, even if there was no going forward.

*And where does that leave me? In the middle of the lake, with no fucking boat, that’s where. Oh, by the Maker’s pimpled arse… I could kill that man.*

*I hope he’s all right, though.*

Tobias sighed glumly, then dunked his head to rinse his hair and got out of the tub, drying off and slipping on some old, comfortable clothes as he turned his attention to his gear. Anders would be fine… for now. He had Saryha with him at the clinic, and Selby was primed for taking charge of him, which she’d probably do as soon as she got the note Tobias had sent her via one of the Underground’s couriers in Lowlown. He smiled mirthlessly as he imagined Selby striding into the clinic, scattering bandages and patients in her wake, and bundling Anders up in all of that sharp, uncompromising, protective loyalty of hers. Tobias was glad the healer had her as a friend, even if he wished Anders would let him half as close as he did Selby.

The memory of the night before pricked at him then… stripping Anders’ bloody coat from him and slipping him into bed, then dozing fitfully on his floor, feeling like some kind of thief in the dark, intruding on his fear and his privacy.

Tobias scowled to himself, wishing it wasn’t so easy to remember the bloodshed, or what Alrik had been doing down in the fortress’ pit… and wishing that, given everything that had happened, he wasn’t still quite so full up with memories of the way Anders had felt in his arms.

*You already know you’re a fool, Hawke. No need to be an idiot as well.*

He swore under his breath as he tossed his blades and a pot of polish onto the table, next to the handful of letters that had been waiting for him when he came in. Gamlen had already opened most of them. He thought his way of steaming the seals with a kettle and lifting them was sneaky, but he was either too incompetent or too lazy to ever soften the wax and stick it back properly. Tobias was half of a mind to show him how to do it right, but he didn’t want to encourage the old fart. Anyway, it didn’t matter. It wasn’t as if there’d been any coin in them. They were mostly to do with the estate: bills and reports from the joiner, mason, and cabinet-maker Bodahn had arranged. He’d been invited to go and view the progress they’d made on the main part of the house—kitchens, cellar, main hall, library, bedrooms… and that was more than enough, Tobias thought, appalled to discover there was actually an additional wing to the place, plus gardens and an undercroft—and, apparently, Bodahn was trying to sell him a number of ‘interesting artefacts’ that would ‘complement the interior décor’.

Tobias hadn’t been aware that there was going to be décor, although he supposed he should have expected it. Leandra would have her way; there would be rugs, and drapes, and upholstery, and fine china and delicate chairs that you didn’t dare sit on too heavily, and he would quietly suffocate beneath it all.
Leandra was still threatening him with a new wardrobe. She was more cheerful these days, and kept saying things that worried him; things about ‘moving up in the world’ and ‘befitting ourselves better’.

Tobias was developing an absolute horror of her trying to make him wear ruched breeches and velvet coats.

He was sitting at the table, cleaning his daggers, when she came in. At first, he thought the look she gave him was because of that—she disliked the grease and the inelegance of weapons on the table they ate at—but the paleness in her cheeks and her drawn, worried brows soon painted it as more.

Tobias put down the blade and polishing cloth, frowning as he looked up at her. “Mother?”

Leandra’s mouth bowed into a circle as her gaze found him, and she closed the door behind her, leaning heavily against the wood.

“Oh, darling… I’m glad you’re here. I heard the most horrible thing while I was out!”

Tobias was already out of his chair, and his heartbeat quickened at her words, though he tried not to let it show. “Everything all right?”

She shook her head, reaching out to take his hands and holding tight to them with her worn, slender fingers. Her eyes, blue and wide as summer skies, seemed hollow with fear. “They’re saying there was a rebellion in the Circle! People were murdered, and there were fires…it’s horrible! I’m so worried for your brother. D’you think I could go to the garrison and ask if he’s all right? No, he wouldn’t want me to do that, would he?” She pursed her lips, answering her own questions and making Tobias feel even more useless—and even more treacherous—than he had to start with. Not that she noticed. “I mean, if something had happened, they’d let us know, wouldn’t they? Oh, I can’t stand it, though… my little boy!”

Tobias bit the inside of his cheek until it hurt, focusing on that small, dark star of pain.

“I’m sure he’s all right, Mother. Take more than a few scuffles to shake Carv up, wouldn’t it?” He tried to smile, to reassure her, but his head was full of dead templars; bodies whose helmets he’d been too afraid to peer beneath. “What… what exactly did you hear?”

Leandra shook her head, as if details and facts were an annoying irrelevance. “Everyone was talking about it in the bazaar. They say a handful of mages escaped, and a Knight-Captain was killed. I don’t know much else, but I did see a detachment escorting that Formari trader to the Gallows. I suppose it’s for their own safety, isn’t it? If things are flaring up, there’ll be a lot of anger towards mages. Even the enchanters.”

She turned her gaze away from his face when she said that, he noticed. She never did look him in the eye anymore when she said ‘mage’, not that she said it often.

Kirkwall had changed her, Tobias supposed, because he never remembered her being so ashamed of magic when his father was alive.

Leandra drew her hands out of his, and moved away, unpacking her basket of shopping with a weary sigh.

“Well, anyway,” she said, shaking her head resignedly, “I don’t suppose there’s much we can do. I just we hope we hear something from Carver soon. And you shouldn’t stay out so late! It can’t be safe…. I saw Aveline’s new patrols in the square, but the guard can’t be everywhere, especially after dark…..”
Yeah, and thank Andraste for that.

Tobias suppressed the urge to make a rude comment about Guard-Captain Mage-Hater and her interfering clampdown on the coast roads. It was costing the Coterie money which, in turn, cost everyone else money, too. In the past month alone, raids on port vessels had been down by a third, and hundreds of sovereigns’ worth of goods had been seized. Word in the dockside taverns had it that some of the Raiders who haunted the coast were thinking about upping sticks and heading elsewhere. Tobias only hoped that the loss in corrupt revenue would be noticed by the city’s elite—who, naturally, profited just as much from the black market trade as the pirates—before Aveline managed to clear things up so much that the entirety of Kirkwall went broke.

“I need to work, Mother,” he said, as a nominal sort of protest to the nagging she’d settled into as she set a series of irregular, hoary vegetables into a bowl, ready to wash and peel.

*Oh, good. Turnips.*

Leandra tutted, and he knew what was coming next, although at least giving her this well-worn ground to pick over offered a distraction from worrying about Carver.

“It’s not work, though, is it? You do this here, that there… your father always said, have a trade, make some connections. And—”

*Yes, because that was really easy when we moved around all the time, running out of every village we settled in, just in case the templars caught wind of us. And Lothering… Lothering was positively overburdened with opportunities for learning a trade, wasn’t it, Mother? I could have been a blacksmith. Or a potato-picker. Or… oh, wait, no. That was it.*

He gritted his teeth, and said nothing.

“—you’ll certainly need to think about the people you spend your time with, once we’ve moved into the estate.”

Tobias exhaled slowly, keeping a firm and heavily controlled grip on his temper. Leandra shook her head as she tied her apron around her waist, and tucked her neatly combed hair behind her ears.

“All I’m saying, darling, is that you need to think about how things affect you socially. I mean, those elves you’re friends with… they’re a bit… well, *odd*. Aren’t they? Don’t you think?”

He bit down on a smirk. ‘Odd’ was probably the mildest thing he’d heard Fenris described as in a long while. It fitted Merrill, though. He shrugged.

“They’re good people. And we’re all odd to someone, aren’t we?”

Leandra tutted again, her reproach heavy this time, though she didn’t look at him, still busying herself with whatever set of chores she’d decided needed doing in order that she not think about Carv. It looked to Tobias like she was planning on making a stew.

“I don’t think so, no. Not… well. *You* know. And that pirate girl of yours… I haven’t seen her around much.”

She sounded almost hopeful at that. Tobias pulled a face.

“Isabela’s still trying to find a ship. She thought she had a chance at a cutter out of Amaranthine or somewhere last month, but it didn’t work out. She’s, uh, she’s not my—”
Leandra held up her hands. “Oh, far be it from me to pry, darling. It’s your life. I just… well, you know. You’ll want to meet someone on a similar social level, that’s all.”

Tobias winced. At times like this, he really wondered if his mother was still all there. It was as if she’d slipped backwards in time to some forgotten corner of her youth, where she was talking to some other young girl with social-climber parents and a butterfly brain fixed only on husbands and dancing.

Not that I’d say no to a nobleman’s son with a fine chateau and a great big, uh, coinpurse.

Probably.

There was no sense in arguing, of course, especially when Leandra was dwelling so hard on Carver… just as there was no sense in trying to say that, whatever the rumoursmiths in the city tried to make of it, the so-called ‘rebellion’ in the Gallows had been a rescue.

No, it was better she didn’t know anything about that. He didn’t like deceiving her the way he was… but it was better than trying to bear the look she’d have on her face if she knew even half the truth of what he’d done.

With that in mind, Tobias sighed and nodded dully. “Yes, Mother.”

~o~O~o~

He still felt frustrated, sore, and unsettled. Nothing seemed to take the edge off it, and this inability to concentrate properly annoyed him, because it quickly turned into a busy few days.

Tobias started with meeting the steward and the workmen at the estate, to approve the progress they’d made. To be fair, the place was looking a lot more liveable, and he could see the grandeur some of the larger rooms must once have had. He liked the library best, he decided, although he wasn’t sure why they really needed one. It was a nice room, though: small stone fireplace, panelled walls (mostly intact, with only a few restorations needed), and a west-facing window that would catch the full fall of the sunset. Bodahn waved his hands around a lot and talked about the shelf space, and the number of volumes they would hold, and how he had a remarkable deal on an entire series of fascinating histories by one of the Chantry’s best-known scholars, complete with the most interesting little illustrations.

“I like the pictures!” piped up Sandal, the man’s idiot son, and possibly it was his open, cheerful countenance and completely guileless enthusiasm that had Tobias caving in and saying yes, all right, he’d take them, and he was sure they’d be a fine addition to the collection.

Collection? I don’t have a collection. Mother has a few prayer books and whatnot, and we buy the occasional almanac… other than that, the only books I ever have are the dirty ones of Varric’s, and that’s only because he gives me free copies to show off.

A sudden and yet very amusing vision of filling all the acres of dark wood shelves with various permutations of Hard in Hightown crossed Tobias’ mind, and he stifled a snort.

He was still chuckling slightly to himself when he left the estate, and almost collided with a courier in Viscount Dumar’s livery. Tobias’ gut pitched towards his boots the moment he saw the man, and his mood did not improve when a scroll bearing the Dumar seal was thrust towards him.

“Important business, serah,” the courier said, shifting from foot to foot impatiently. “Glad I found you here, else I’d have had to scour the whole city for you. Like as not could’ve taken all day.”
He cleared his throat meaningfully. Tobias blinked, looking up from breaking the seal on the letter, and rolled his eyes.

“What? Oh. Fine.” He pulled a couple of silvers’ tip from his purse and tossed the coins at the courier. “Thanks.”

“Much obliged, ser,” the man chirped, touching his thumb to his forehead as he pocketed the silvers and turned tail.

Tobias curled his lip at the figure retreating across the white paving stones. The sun glinted weakly off the high, pale bones of the buildings, and he still couldn’t feel at home here.

He folded the brief, curt letter in his fingers, and tucked it into his jerkin.

Well, well, well… I don’t like this one tiny bit.

He was summoned to the viscount’s office, it seemed. And by Saemus Dumar, of all people.

Not my favourite heathen. Wonder what the little shit-bag wants?

Given that he was already more than halfway to the Keep, Tobias could hardly refuse, so he swallowed his displeasure and trudged up to the top of the town, with no idea why he was supposed to be there, or what in the Maker’s name the viscount’s son wanted.

The last time Tobias had seen the boy, he’d been forcibly dragging him back to the city, and Saemus had been merrily spitting bile and vitriol, because he didn’t want to go. He’d wanted to stay with the qunari, and Tobias didn’t know whether that meant he’d been indoctrinated in some way, or whether it was a case of a noble brat desperate to piss off Daddy, or simply that—next to the kind of life of privilege and stultifying ease that so terrified Tobias himself—the Qun had looked like a good option.

In all honesty, he didn’t much care. It wasn’t his problem. He’d been tasked with providing the safe return of Dumar’s son, and that was what he’d delivered. Signed, sealed, paid for. The politics weren’t his problem.

Of course, this was Kirkwall. Politics were everybody’s problem.

Two years ago, Tobias had run foul of that when that ice-blonde Chantry bitch, Petrice, had set him up. He’d underestimated it all at the time; underestimated her, and the strength of anti-qunari feeling among certain disgruntled elements of Kirkwall’s citizenry. The city had been ridden hard by the influx of refugees, the run-off of the Blight and the Ferelden civil war, and the unrest that had seeped over from the rest of the Marches, not to mention Orlais. They needed someone to blame, and if it wasn’t mages then it would be dog-lord refugees, or grey-skinned heathens.

That hate—that viscous, palpable scum that settled over the city’s disenfranchised and coated their poverty—was easy to use. Dangerously easy for someone like Petrice, and the radical fringe elements she represented. She would have let him die, and claimed it as murder; claimed it as a catalyst to set Kirkwall in flames, as long as it meant the qunari burning too. Tobias might not have been the most devout of men, but even he was fairly sure that wasn’t a particularly Andrastean thing to do.

Fair enough, he’d thrown a curve in her plan, though it hadn’t ended the way he’d imagined. Sometimes, he still dreamed about the qunari mage, kneeling in the sand and immolating himself… burning on the coals of his own magic, but not because he was afraid, or couldn’t bear to go back to the compound; because he’d believed he deserved it, that it was the only natural, inevitable end. That
frightened Tobias.

*And they say mages are all demons in waiting. Huh. We’re not the bloody monsters.*

*We never have been.*

~*o*~O~*o*~

Weak sunlight glimmered on the bronze and marble that seemed to decorate everything in the Keep’s vicinity and, as he entered the enormous, impressive sweep of the building’s first hall, Tobias was hit with a gust of warm air. They kept fires burning to stave off the cold, and the whole place somehow seemed to smell of woodsmoke and stale velvet. The guards on duty by the doors slouched in their shiny livery, and the usual roster of plaintiffs, well-heeled nobles, gentry, and merchants all crowded into the wide rooms, waiting for the seneschal’s clerks and notaries to deal with their respective pieces of civic business. Licenses, legal actions, trading charters, inter-guild matters… the bureaucracy of running a city was never-ending, and it made a goodly part of Tobias hunger nostalgically for the simplicity of a smuggler’s life. Everything was easier when all you had to know was when the ships were coming in, and how much you could sell the contraband for.

Maker, some days he even missed Athenril, no matter the poor terms they’d parted on, or the number of times she’d screwed him out of his fair share of the loot.

“But I demand to see the viscount!” piped up a man in a red doublet, not far to Tobias’ left. He was balding and rather skinny, but a wattle of skin shook beneath his chin like the comb of an irate bantam cock. “I will have my case heard!”

“Yes, messere, of course,” promised a clerk, clutching a leather document wallet under one arm, and trying in vain to usher the man towards a side chamber. “If you could step this way for just a moment….”

_Huh. Busy day today, then. The pricks are out in force._

Tobias skirted the knots of people, suppressing his mix of distaste and sardonic amusement. He disliked coming to the Keep intensely. Having the estate to his name made no difference; he was never going to fit in up here, among the silks and the embroidered finery. He didn’t want to, of course. This never had been his world, and it never would be. Not if he could help it.

He wound his way through the throngs of fat-jowled, indignantly clucking plaintiffs and officious-looking hangers-on, aiming for the sweeping marble staircase that led to the upper floor. Another of the harassed-looking clerks was trying to control a young nobleman who apparently didn’t feel he was receiving a sufficient degree of attention.

“Messere, _please_ stop kicking the wall….”

Tobias jogged up the steps, his boots snapping sharp little taps against the stone, soon lost beneath the murmur of conversation.

He had to show the letter with the Dumar seal on it to a handful of different guards but, eventually, he was let through and given leave to go up yet another staircase and along a narrow corridor lined with aged oil portraits.

Just past the wan and mournful face of Perrin Threnhold, the former viscount, his effigy now pushed into this dim and forgotten corner, Tobias came to an ornately carved wooden door. He rapped on it, and found it swung open beneath the weight of his hand.
Great. Not creepy at all.

He gritted his teeth and entered the small privy chamber.

“Ah, Serah Hawke. Thank you for coming.”

Something about the tone in that voice made Tobias’ heart sink, and he squinted warily around the chamber. There were no guards, no clerks… just Saemus Dumar, sitting behind a wide and rather ugly wooden desk, which was strangely undecorated with the kind of curlicues and ornate twirly bits that characterised most of the furnishings in his father’s office. In fact, the whole room had the dusty, cluttered and yet oddly functional air of a space that had been pressed into use against its original purpose.

Huh. Wonder what he’s up to that needs running from an old broom cupboard.

Saemus—neatly dressed in a smart green doublet and fine hose, after the Orlesian styles that had been growing fashionable lately—seemed to be sifting through a number of stacks of paper, but he pushed them aside as Tobias entered.

“Please,” he said, gesturing to a chair that stood against the wall, next to a shelf groaning beneath the weight of several leather-bound tomes, “sit down.”

Tobias shook his head, instantly suspicious of the hospitality, awkward though the young man’s manner seemed to be. “I’m fine. Wasn’t expecting a summons from you, I must say. My lord,” he added, the words injected with a calculated lack of emphasis.

Saemus looked pained by the appellation, and Tobias suppressed a smirk, remembering all the idealistic claptrap the boy had been prone to spouting about the pressures and imprisonment of his position. But then he shook his head, and a terrible clarity of sadness crossed those sharp, bright blue eyes.

“I admit,” he said carefully, his light, beautifully-modulated voice not quite managing to disguise the tension behind his words, “I am pleasantly surprised to find you came. I… appreciate it, given that we did not originally meet under, uh, auspicious circumstances.”

Tobias allowed himself a small smirk.

That’s putting it mildly. You bit my sodding leg, you little git. Drew blood and everything. I have a scar the size of a silver to this very day.

The viscount’s son cleared his throat and looked away, straightening the edges of his paperwork with one thumb. Tobias supposed he might have been embarrassed by the memories. Or, just as likely, he wanted some other grubby bit of business doing and—as people of his class often were when calling on the services of people like Tobias—he was embarrassed by the messy, inelegant solutions his dirty work required.

Go on. What is it this time? More fanatics in Lowtown? Mobs baying for the blood of mages in the Foundry District? Or is it nobles up in arms because their elven servants keep converting to the Qun and leaving them short-staffed for dinner parties?

Saemus’ gaze picked urgently at the room’s dusty panelling, as if he hoped to find answers in it, and he seemed to be unwilling to say what needed to be said. Tobias crossed his arms slowly, hoping this wouldn’t take all afternoon. It wasn’t as if he really had anywhere else to be, but every minute in Hightown was starting to feel like a penance.
Still… there was something interesting here. The boy looked different to the way he had when they’d first met, up on a wild, wind-lashed bit of the Wounded Coast, with him so desperate to run off and join the qunari, and Ginnis Winters and her bunch of Nevarran mercenaries so desperate to collect on the bounty for preventing him from doing so.

She’d been a hard bitch, Ginnis. Tobias had never really felt able to regret her death, though he supposed it could have been avoided. He’d meant to find the brat before she did—that had been the whole point of heading up there early, with Fenris and Isabela at his back—but it had ended up a whole lot messier than he’d hoped. Ginnis had killed the qunari Saemus had been with, and would probably have been quite happy to return the boy to his father in a box… or at least minus a few teeth and a pint or so of blood. She should never have mouthed off like she had, though. The way she talked, she was no better than the Tevinter slavers, and the minute things went that way, Tobias had known he hadn’t got Fenris on a short enough leash to prevent bloodshed.

They’d all been paid, though. At the time, that had been the main thing.

“I didn’t realise it was you, you know,” Saemus said, his words spooling out to fill the awkward silence. “You… obviously, you were the one who… who brought me back, and—”

Yep. The one with the leg scar. From the biting.

“—I don’t think my father ever thanked you personally, did he?”

Tobias shook his head. “The seneschal paid the bounty, but I understand His Lordship was very pleased.”

Saemus’ pale cheeks tightened, his mouth folding into a compressed line as he nodded vacantly. “Yes. He… he didn’t understand. Nobody really—” He sighed abruptly, and ran a hand through his shock of dark hair as he looked up at Tobias. “You were the one who dealt with the incident in Lowtown. The poison gas.”

Oh, Maker… this again? This is going to be about the bastard qunari, isn’t it? I don’t have the sodding time for this….

Tobias nodded slowly, trying hard to keep a lid on the frustration bubbling within him. The boy looked like he was really struggling with something; his was the face of a person torn between things they wanted to say, and things they wanted to forget. Regrets seemed to dance in his pale eyes like moths, and when he spoke again he sounded so very sad.

“Your handling of the matter was admirable, Serah Hawke. Diplomatic, even. You… did not apportion any blame to the qunari. You kept things, shall we say, calm. Quiet. I… I remember that you were much the same when… when you brought me back. Not like that woman. The one who murdered Ashaad.”

And there it was: the break in the sadness, the thorn in the centre of his words. Bitterness laced Saemus’ voice briefly, and Tobias blinked, unsure quite what he was supposed to say.

Ginnis Winters, in her customary twisted way, had implied that the boy was an admirer of more than the qunari’s spiritual values. ‘Crossed a line’ or something, she’d said, hadn’t she? Tobias hadn’t thought much about it at the time, though he had wondered, given the state Saemus had worked himself into at the death of the qunari he’d called his friend.

Had she been right, though? Maker, was that even possible? Tobias had no idea, but he was a little curious. What did the Qun say about relationships between qunari and… not-qunari? It seemed odd
to think of the specimens he’d seen in Kirkwall having any kind of intimate connection with anyone. Anyway, didn’t their word for everything that wasn’t qunari basically mean ‘thing’?

You’ve got to wonder, all the same. Hulking great big, muscle-bound… well, yeah.

Hmm. Are they that big all over?

“She was cruel,” Saemus said distantly, glancing up at him again. “You… I do not think you are, messere.”

Tobias blinked, dragging his mind out of the gutter and back to the matter at hand. “Um. Thank you?”

“My point is this. The whole city knows what happened in Lowtown,” Saemus said, running his thumb down the edge of the stack of papers on the desk. “The repercussions have already begun. So far, the people blame the fanatics who set the explosion, but it is known that the formula for the gas came from the compound. My father is concerned that this may lead to further increases in tensions with the kossith, and I believe he is right.”

“They did set the formula up to be stolen,” Tobias pointed out.

“Because the Arishok is aware how many basra covet the secret of gaatlock!” Saemus snapped, quickly holding up his hands in apology, and recovering his calm. “I’m sorry. But you must see how important it is we don’t allow things to deteriorate. With the kossith confined to the city, and numbers of viddethari growing, relations are getting worse.”

You know, I think they just make some of these words up….

Tobias arched an eyebrow. “And you want me to do what, exactly?”

“I would like you to meet with the Arishok again, serah. Please,” Saemus added, as Tobias grimaced. “He was impressed with how you handled the incident before… and that you did not allow the merchant, Javaris, to escape justice.”

Tobias winced. “That wasn’t really me. The Coterie—”

“Nevertheless,” Saemus continued, with exactly the same tone of voice and exactly the same dismissive wave of his hand that Tobias had seen in his father, “you showed the kossith that people in this city are not all without honour. I have been trying for some time to convince the Arishok to send a delegation to treat with my father; something official that we can build on. I… I know I have no place in politics, especially if—”

He broke off abruptly, but Tobias didn’t pause to consider the words left unsaid. He was too busy trying to imagine a qunari peace delegation.

“Seriously? You want me to go back to the Arishok, and ask him to send men here, to speak with the viscount?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head incredulously, gazing at the heavy leather books on the shelves, and the dusty wooden panels that lined the room. No wonder Saemus Dumar was hiding up here, away from public scrutiny and the note-taking of the seneschal’s clerks.

“But I don’t see what—”
“The Qun sets value upon actions, clarity of purpose…. You have demonstrated your skill and your honour, serah.”

Tobias winced, suddenly unable to stop the scenes from the Gallows—Maker, scenes from the whole time he’d spent in Kirkwall—playing themselves over in his mind. He knew what he was. It didn’t bother him, not really, but… it still felt odd to be spoken of this way.

Yeah. Honour and integrity. That’s me.

“To the Arishok,” Saemus went on, “this carries weight. Your opinion—your support in the matter of talks—will count for something in the eyes of the qunari. Please… visit the compound and speak with the Arishok. I do not agree with many things my father believes, but in this I think he’s right: the tensions in the city continue to rise. Talks can only help matters, and now is the right time.”

Tobias bit his tongue. As far as he’d been concerned, his involvement in the whole thing had been over. The qunari had their magic powder nice and safe, and—if they were actually surprised that the city’s restlessness over their presence was reaching fever pitch—then they took even less notice of bas, or whatever they called non-qunari, than it first appeared. And that, in Tobias’ opinion, was foolish. It was their insularity, their stubbornness, that would tip Kirkwall into an all-out fight if they weren’t careful.

He knew something about stubbornness… particularly how destructive and how sodding frustrating it was.

“Fine,” he muttered gracelessly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Saemus Dumar smiled widely, and pushed a roll of parchment with his seal stamped upon it across the desk. “Excellent. I had hoped you’d say that.”

Tobias sighed as he took the paper, and glowered at the viscount’s son.

Great. Now I’m a glorified errand boy, as well as a street sweeper and a thug.

If I could only tell Mother half of what I get up to in order to keep her in food and curtain fabric, she’d be so proud.

~o~O~o~

Tobias trudged back to Lowtown with the parchment stuffed in his jerkin and a frown lodged on his brow.


There was going to be no way around it. Another audience with the Arishok looked inevitable, despite the fact that he had no wish whatsoever to get involved.

He supposed he could impose upon what little Fenris had of a good nature, and see if the elf would accompany him to the compound. His command of the language and understanding of qunari customs helped tremendously, although Tobias was still curious as to where all that knowledge came from. Fenris never had been very open about his past… something about falling in with Fog Warriors in Seheron, after escaping from his old master, not that he’d actually explained what a Fog Warrior was. After a while, Tobias had grown fed up of trying to prise the answers out of him and, with the elf growing increasingly drunk and prone to smattering the conversation with grumbled digs at mages and magic in general, he’d been happy to let Fenris keep his enigmatic shroud of mystery.
Still, he could get the story off Varric sometime, he supposed.

In fact, it was Varric’s suite at The Hanged Man he was heading towards. Going home held no particular appeal, and Tobias was damned if he was going to march down to the qunari compound like a lamb to the proverbial slaughter. Anyway, he needed a drink, and he didn’t want to go to the Rose.

The sunlight was stretching out into the last threads of afternoon by the time he got there. Tobias slouched into the bar, nodded moodily at Corff, and skirted a handful of patrons who were arguing loudly about an allegedly rigged Wallop match.

He knocked briefly on the door of Varric’s suite, pushing it open even before the echo had finished sounding.

“Hawke,” Varric observed from behind his writing desk, glancing up as Tobias stomped into the room. “Huh. You look positively chirpy.”

“I’m having a bastard of a day,” Tobias announced, throwing himself into one of the generously padded chairs. “I need a drink.”

Varric gestured to the carafe of wine on the table, standing on the crushed red velvet runner amid a collection of cups, goblets, and scattered books and pamphlets. “Help yourself. I’m fine, by the way, thank you for asking.”

Tobias grunted as he leaned forward to pour himself a cup. “Of course you are. You’re always fine.”

The dwarf arched an eyebrow. “I am? Oh, well, that’s good to know.”

Tobias smirked. It was testament to their friendship that he could march in here and be a dick like this, he supposed, especially given that this was the first time they’d seen each other since parting after the Gallows. That barely even merited mentioning, though he could see the fatigue still lingering in the dwarf’s face.

The wine wasn’t bad; a little dry, with a taste like berries and cinnamon. Tobias peered suspiciously into the cup as he slouched back in the chair, wondering what it was and where it came from. It reminded him of the stuff Fenris brought out from Danarius’ cellars, but Varric wasn’t usually given to laying on expensive Tevinter vintages for the gaggles of people who swarmed his suite every night.

“This is good stuff,” he observed, watching the dwarf scrawl across a series of pages, adding signatures and notes to what looked like letters and contracts.

*Everyone in this bloody city is pushing a mountain of paper. And it all seems to end up causing work for me. Funny, that.*

Varric grunted, but didn’t turn around. “Yeah. I, uh, I’m glad you showed up. I figure we might have a little cause for celebration.”

“Oh?” Tobias arched his brows as he took another swig. He still didn’t drink as much as he used to—as much he had before he’d promised Anders he’d cut down—but he was missing it more these days… and what point did there seem to be in keeping faith with anything the healer had asked of him?

“Yeah.” Varric laid his pen down and leaned back in his chair, frowning lightly. “I did have a little piece of news. A rumour, more than anything. You, uh, might not want to be near anything
breakable when I tell you, though.”

Tobias took a long swallow of his wine. “Hmm. This sounds good.”

“A little bird tells me Bartrand might be coming back to town.”

He snorted, falling into an eye-watering fit of coughing and spluttering. “Bartrand? Here? Back in Kirkwall?”

Varric shrugged, and leaned an arm on the back of his chair. A hardness lingered in his expression—cold, and utterly immovable—and Tobias found himself heartened by it. He’d often wondered if, should that two-faced bastard ever show up again, Varric’s sense of familial loyalty might get in the way of some good old-fashioned revenge, but the look on the dwarf’s face suggested not.

“I’ve had an ear out for him this whole time,” Varric said, his ink-stained fingers playing along the carved back of his chair. “He went to Rivain, probably because he knew I couldn’t track him there, but… just recently? Seems he’s been calling in loans in Kirkwall. I think he’s coming back. He still has a house in Hightown, and I can’t think of a better market than here for that trinket he stole.”

Tobias screwed up his face. “Would he really risk it, though?”

“Bartrand?” Varric snorted. “I think we both know what he’ll do for money.”

“Huh. Fair point.” Tobias eyed his friend dubiously. “So… you want to go and see him? I mean, I’m not complaining if you do, you understand. I’ve missed Bartrand. And we have so much to talk about!”

A hard little smile curled Varric’s lips, and his eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Bianca’s been pining for him too. I figure we should be ready to welcome him to the neighbourhood the second his boat gets in. Thought you’d want to tag along.”

“Oh, yes.” Tobias smiled mirthlessly. “I love a good welcome home party.”

It was true. Even on top of everything that had happened beneath the Gallows, and with the bitterness of bloodshed still fresh in his mind, he couldn’t deny that the prospect of getting even with that treacherous sod was appealing.

He watched the dwarf over the rim of his cup, but if Varric had any qualms about planning revenge on his brother, he must already have worked through them. He was inscrutable as he laid down his pen and turned to consider Tobias.

“Well, that little piece of good news aside, Hawke… what’s the matter with you?”

Tobias arched his brows, mouth full of wine. “Hmm?”

Varric shook his head reproachfully. “Come on. You can tell me.”

Tobias shrugged and, setting his now-empty cup down, picked up one of the books that lay on the table beside the carafe, suddenly eager for something to hide behind. It had an extremely plain cover, and he had to flip it open to read the title printed discreetly on the flyleaf.

*Sinnes of a Sister: A Chantry Girl’s Tale*

He curled his lip. “Nothing.”

“Ah.” Varric nodded sagely. “*That* nothing.”
“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I couldn’t possibly say,” the dwarf said flatly, sarcasm dripping from his words.

Tobias snorted derisively, pretending ignorance. He leafed through the first few pages of the book, pausing to pull an appalled face. “Oh, Maker’s balls, Varric…! ‘She pressed her lips to the soft fruit of Hypermia’s desire, sweet nectar searing her kiss, and dove into the silken depths…’. Really. That’s just—”

“Immensely profitable,” Varric said smugly, and shot him a lecherous grin.

“Isn’t it blasphemy?” Tobias wondered aloud, flicking through to the end of the chapter, and wondering whether the position on page eighty-four was in fact physically possible for two women… and how Varric would know about it, if it was.

“Only a little bit, though you’d be surprised how many copies that sells. Don’t worry,” Varric added, his smile turning mischievous. “Next time, I’ll be sure to add in a couple of strapping sailors for you.”

Tobias smirked, but didn’t look up from the book. “Hmm. How about something historical? A mighty Nevarran dragon hunter despoiling a captured virgin prince, or a Chasind warlord, locked in battle with a rival warrior? You know… all oiled up and wrestling?”

Varric tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Huh, that’s not bad.”

“I try,” Tobias said demurely, raising an eyebrow at what Sister Elara was getting up to in the confessional in chapter fourteen.

“Prisoner of the Barbarian King,” Varric said, ostensibly more to himself than anything. “Hmm. No. The Captive Heart. Now, that I like….”

“Glad to be of service,” Tobias muttered, flipping back a couple of pages to scrutinise a scene with four votive candles and a string of prayer beads.

“Of course,” Varric said speculatively, “if not a dragon hunter, or a barbarian warlord… how about a surly outlaw?” He swivelled around in his seat, glaring meaningfully in Tobias’ direction. “A moody, tortured soul… I don’t know… maybe a revolutionary, set on effecting monumental change, yet finds himself pitted against unbearable powers that he can’t possibly hope to overcome, and—”

“Hahaha. Ouch, my ribs. Oh, the pain,” Tobias added solemnly, placing a palm on his side for emphasis as he looked up from the book. “Don’t, Varric.”

“Oh, come on, Hawke… where’s your sense of humour?”

“Evaporated,” Tobias said shortly. “There’s already talk in town about Alrik. They’re painting it as a rebellion, from what I hear. You know what that means. You know Meredith’s going to do.”

“So… what?” Varric narrowed his eyes. “You feeling guilty?”

“No!” Tobias shut the book, suddenly less interested in Sister Elara’s amorous exploits, and set it back on the table, his hand automatically straying to the carafe of wine. He frowned, almost rethinking it for a moment, then poured himself another cup and, grabbing it, slouched back in his chair. “No,” he said again, his mind full of dead templars who hadn’t been Carver, and apprentice girls forced to their knees. “That bastard deserved to die, but….”
He took a long gulp of the wine, taking its spicy fragrance back over his tongue and letting it warm his throat as he swallowed. Varric said nothing, and just continued to watch him in that unnerving, slightly annoying manner that said he had opinions he was probably going to share.

“Are you all right?” Tobias asked, a little more brusquely than he’d meant to.

When they’d parted, Varric heading back here and him carting the rescued mages to Selby’s place, along with the rest of the Underground, he knew he’d been distracted. He hadn’t checked in with Varric like he should, and while he knew the dwarf was more than capable of looking after himself, Tobias was also aware that they both knew exactly why he’d been so preoccupied.

“Me?” Varric splayed the fingers of one broad hand to his shirtfront. “Oh, I’m fine, Hawke. I’m always fine.”

Oh, sod….

Tobias winced. “That’s not what I—”

Varric waved his hand dismissively. “I know. But, uh… really. Our mutual friend? Is he…?”

“Anders is—” Tobias stopped, because ‘fine’ was a lie. He shrugged, staring glumly at the table and its luxurious velvet runner. “I think he’ll be all right. I mean, I hope… I don’t know. I’m worried about him.”

Varric cleared his throat and shifted in his chair; an uncharacteristic display of awkwardness. “Yeah. So, uh, you know I hear things, Hawke. I… happened to hear you stayed at the clinic, after—”

Shit, you really have got eyes everywhere, haven’t you? Bloody dwarf.

Tobias shook his head, his mouth bowed into a bitter curve.

“He didn’t want to be on his own. I wouldn’t, either. Not after that. Nothing happened,” he added bitterly, glancing up at Varric’s politely impassive face.

Behind that mask, it was hard to tell whether his friend was laughing at him or worried for him… or both. Tobias looked away, peering up at the narrow window, where the film of dust and grease that coated the cloudy glass made it look like the sunset was pouring in through treacle.

“Huh.” The dwarf pursed his lips and looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he winced, evidently trying to find some delicate way of phrasing something, which, where Varric was concerned, was not usually a good sign.

Tobias slouched deeper into his chair, propping his chin on his palm, and lofted his brows. “What? What’s ‘huh’?”

Go on. Have a bloody laugh. I’m just glad my life amuses you, arsehole.

Varric shook his head. “No, no, I just…. Really? So… nothing happened? All right. But—and I’m speaking as a concerned friend here, you understand, Hawke—why the hell not?”

That’s right, bastard, rub it in. Thanks, Varric. You’re a real pal.

“You saw the state he was in. I— Anyway, it’s not… it’s not like that.”

“No?” The dwarf’s forehead sprouted a series of incredulous furrows. “You could have fooled me.”
“It’s about time someone did,” Tobias tossed back with a smirk, though he could tell from his friend’s expression that a little light banter wasn’t going to cut through this particular conversational iceberg. He sighed. “Fine. He… I don’t know. He says he needs time. I would have thought he’s had plenty, but—Oh, sod. I don’t know,” he said again, suddenly feeling rather small as he rubbed his hand across his face, trying to ignore both Varric’s gaze and the heat rising in his cheeks. “I… I don’t….”

“Maybe you ought to take the hint,” Varric said quietly, shrugging and holding up his hands in defence as Tobias glared at him. “Come on… I’m just saying. I mean, maybe—just maybe, you understand—this persistent desire of yours to get involved with the possessed mage? It might be dangerous. There. That’s it. I’ve said my piece… Hawke, don’t look at me like that.”

Tobias scoffed sourly, a dozen different responses running through his head. He knew Varric meant well—he assumed so, anyway—but it was hard to fight the impulse to shoot him down, to snap back as he so often did that Anders wasn’t mad, wasn’t dangerous, wasn’t… wasn’t all those things that were starting to look disturbingly true.

“He’s a good man,” Tobias said petulantly, clinging to his loyalty like a life raft. “You and I both know that. He’s just… dedicated. And he”—

“—has a grumpy Fade spirit that lives in his head and likes to rip templars into teensy-weensy pieces,” Varric supplemented helpfully.

Tobias scowled darkly at him.

“What? I’m just saying…. You know, maybe it’s not a good idea. That’s all. Maybe, before you do anything you might—”

“Regret?” Tobias wrinkled his nose. “Hmph. Chance’d be a fine thing. Anyway,” he added slyly, as Varric let slip a rueful grin, “in all the time you’ve known me, have I ever given you the impression I’m turned off by crazy?”

Varric’s grin slid into dry laughter, and he shook his head. “All right, all right… have it your way, Hawke. I just think you should be careful. Blondie, too, come to that. I… I wouldn’t want to see either of you get hurt.”

“Aw. I’m touched. And here was me thinking you were just jealous of my affections.”

The dwarf grimaced. “Sorry, Hawke. I know I’m damn near irresistible, but you’re just too high maintenance for me.”

Tobias grinned, relieved to have got things back onto a more comfortably flippant level. Or so he thought. The hoots and hollers of revelry echoed through from the bar—it sounded like the docks had discharged its workers for the evening, and plenty of them had arrived with coin in their pockets and fun on their minds—and Tobias was addressing the remnants of his wine when Varric fixed him with a disarmingly keen-eyed look.

“Are you going to talk to him, though?”

“Hmm?”

The dwarf smiled lazily. “Blondie. You’re not just going to keep on like this, are you? Because it’s getting ridiculous.”

Tobias blanched, swallowing his wine too quickly, and struggling to stifle a cough as it hit the back
of his throat. “Keep—? Wh—”

“Talk to him,” Varric repeated slowly. “Use your words, Hawke.”

He seemed amused by the way Tobias cringed, the cup tilting in his fingers and a stricken look of horror plastering itself to his face.

“Var-ric! I’m a man. I can’t just… say things.”

The dwarf tutted behind his teeth. “Tch. That’s not an excuse, and you know it. But I mean it, Hawke,” he added, his expression turning solemn as he leaned forward in his chair, linking his thick fingers together, “you should talk to him. After all, there’s something you don’t realise.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Varric nodded earnestly, giving his best semblance of a concerned friend. “While you two are pining over each other like a pair of horny toads, the rest of us actually have to watch it.”

Tobias narrowed his eyes and scowled at the chuckling dwarf, mouth half-bowed around something suitably abusive as he tried to pretend he wasn’t really as embarrassed as he felt.

The trouble was, Varric actually had a point.
Chapter 30

The following week was not the easiest of Tobias’ life. With the news from the Gallows spilling out through the city in ill-contained rumours and bursts of misinformation, Kirkwall seemed gripped by an even darker sense of rage and distrust. Citizens openly called for a clampdown on mages, whether it was outraged nobles getting up on their hind legs and clucking in the Keep, or gangs of angry men and women in Lowtown picking fights and causing trouble. Hatred ran in the streets like floodwater, and every mage with half an ounce of sense went to ground.

In the old town slums—behind the bazaar and not three streets from Gamlen’s place—a woman whose ten-year-old daughter had been taken to the Circle six months ago had her door kicked in and horribly misspelled graffiti daubed across the side of her house in shit and cat’s blood. An elf who was known to have a sister in the Gallows was killed in a fight down at the docks, and for a day or so it looked as if a riot might break out in the alienage. It didn’t… thanks in part to Aveline sending extra patrols to lock the centre of the district down. Tobias wasn’t sure how he felt about that, though at least it stopped the elves from doing anything stupid. He slipped in at one point to check on Merrill, and found her white-faced and frightened in her house, trying to pretend that everything was normal and her city life was still a grand adventure.

She’d been living a strange, cloistered existence for a while; he noted the books spread all around her dark, cramped rooms, and the chair pulled up close to the smoky fire. She was working on something, but she wouldn’t tell him what, and she closed the door to her bedchamber hastily when she welcomed him in, like there was something there he wasn’t meant to see. He couldn’t tell whether it was elven propriety or a real secret, but he contented himself with knowing she was all right… as far as people who did deals with demons ever were. They drank tea and talked about nothing much. She clearly missed her clan, especially Marethari, though she insisted she liked the alienage, and he was disinclined to argue with her.

When Tobias bade her goodbye, she hugged him and planted a kiss on his cheek, and told him to take care. He nodded, said he would, and privately worried about her with renewed unease. When he left, cutting back across the dirt-packed square, in the shade of the leafless vhenadahl that stood black against the wintry sky, a young man with a long braid of deep golden hair threw a clay jug at him and shouted something abusive about shems making whores of elven girls. Tobias gritted his teeth and headed for the gates, eager to be out of the whole bloody place.

One thing about Fenris still squatting in Hightown, he supposed, was not having to wade through the alienage to get to him.

Of course, that wasn’t to say that the elf was easy to deal with, and Tobias waited as long as he could before broaching the whole qunari thing, hoping vainly that things might somehow calm down in the city, and perhaps make Fenris a little more amenable to a casual jaunt with a mage.

It was a foolish hope, and it turned out to be a waste of time: this wasn’t the kind of anger that was going to fade away fast.

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The city was still a mess—just stopping short of open rioting and chaos, but utterly rife with tension—two days later, when Tobias made his way up to Hightown, and the rotting shell of Danarius’ mansion.

He needed to do what Saemus Dumar had asked of him, and he needed Fenris, but just stepping out
of his own front door was nerve-wracking. Rumour had it a girl had been killed near the old barracks, because someone had claimed she was an apostate. Templars had been sent for, and it was unclear whether they’d done the deed or been beaten to it by a lynch mob, but either way the word on the street was that the girl hadn’t been a mage at all, and no one was safe.

Tobias didn’t know if the story was true. He wouldn’t have been surprised, he supposed: the air tasted metallic, like violence crowded on a waiting ledge, every inch of the city’s brickwork packed with expectation and grim potential.

It was either going to get worse before it got better, or they’d be lucky and see the city slip back down somehow from boiling point to its usual angry simmer.

Tobias hoped fervently for the latter. Of course, he didn’t find much sympathy in the corner of Hightown that housed his friend’s grubby little squat.

“I heard what happened in the Gallows,” Fenris observed, as they sat in the cool dark of the mansion’s old kitchen, a plate of cold mutton and a bottle of wine between them. This was apparently an early dinner, and Tobias supposed he should be grateful for having it shared with him, even if the glare he was getting from the elf was rather ferocious. “You cannot possibly be surprised.”

Tobias winced. This was one set of stories he’d much rather not have had doing the rounds. Maker only knew how embellished and horrendous they might become, not to mention the whole issue of the Underground not welcoming that kind of attention.

“You weren’t there,” he said, stabbing a piece of mutton with his fork. “You didn’t see what those bastards were doing. Anyway, where did you hear what—”

“Varric.”

“Hmph.” Tobias chewed thoughtfully and reached for his wine. He supposed he could count on the dwarf to keep quiet about what needed to stay hidden although, if it came down to it, he’d much rather have let a handful of colourful lies about his involvement continue to circulate than have Anders, Gethyn, or the others implicated in anything. He supposed it was too late to argue. “It’s done with now, anyway.”

“Yes.” Fenris narrowed those pale green eyes, the light from the candles burning on the sideboard bathing his face in warm, flickering orange. “But you can’t think the Knight-Commander won’t act.”

Tobias downed half his cup of wine in a gulp that really just insulted the vintage and shrugged. “I’m sure she’s already plenty of people executed or made Tranquil by now. Bitch is always itching for an excuse. Frankly, short of annulling the entire Circle, I’m not sure what else she can do.”

“Then you are a fool,” Fenris said evenly. “Do you want to see a war?”

“No, but….” Tobias turned the cup in his fingers, rubbing his thumb along the dark, polished edge. It was an elegant, delicate thing, made from horn and ebony and inlaid with some kind of shiny, shell-like stuff in a pattern of diamonds that ran around the swell of the vessel. Danarius might have been a cruel tyrant, but he’d certainly had nice taste in crockery. “Something has to happen. Things are changing.”

“And you believe the best way to effect change is violence?”

Tobias snorted. “Coming from you, that’s rich! No. No, I don’t, but… when you’ve been trying and trying, and nothing else has worked, what choice d’you have but something more direct? Andraste
didn’t get anywhere by asking the Imperium nicely.”

Fenris’ expression flickered briefly between dry amusement and stolid disbelief, and he curled his lip. “Then you want a rebellion. An insurrection of mages. Will you rise up against the Chantry, cover half the world in fire? What does that prove, except everything you already claim is untrue?”

“What, you mean a rebellion just proves that we’re dangerous? No. It proves we can be, yes, but so can anyone!”

“Ah.” Fenris nodded, but a smirk played against his lips “‘Beat a dog long enough, and eventually it will cease whining and bite you’?”

Tobias looked reproachfully at the elf across the rim of his cup. “I’m Fereldan. We don’t beat dogs.”

Fenris’ smirk gave way to what, for him, was the equivalent of a grin, and he shook his head, the candlelight catching at his pale hair.

Even as little as a year ago, Tobias supposed, there was no way they could have talked politics like this. Not without everything devolving into an argument, or Fenris just locking himself into a flat refusal to accept that not every mage behaved like a magister.

He was right, though, at least to a degree. If all-out rebellion was what the Resolutionists wanted, it was going to alienate a lot of people. So much of Thedas still bore the echoes of the Blight and the instability it had brought, and rumours from Orlais hinted at a certain degree of dissatisfaction among the nobility. Tobias hadn’t kept up much with what was going on in Ferelden, but some people said the license Queen Anora had granted the Grey Wardens was merely letting the Orlesians in by the back door. War might have been unlikely, but it never did to forget how easily things could escalate… just like Kirkwall’s qunari problem.

The city was on a knife-edge, and it had been for so long that people were beginning to think this kind of tension was normal.

Tobias was grateful for Fenris’ help, however. Grateful enough to steer the conversation back to the shallows before they got stuck talking in circles about mages, and freedom, and what it meant to deserve to be treated like a person.

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They met down by the docks the following morning, and headed up to the compound together, feet crunching on the gritty ground, and the cold air pinching at their lungs.

The compound was not Tobias’ favourite place. It was dusty, crowded, and yet the qunari didn’t even have the decency to seem uncomfortable or irritable with each other, the way normal people would have done when pressed together in a confined area.

Everything had its place, and every qunari had his function. Even the converts—most of them elves, and all of them dressed in the same shapeless tunics—moved about the place with apparent purpose, busying themselves with chores and tasks in which they appeared to be totally immersed. It was all far too organised, and it made him think of the things Anders said about the Tranquil, and how much they frightened him.

Fenris didn’t seem to mind it. Tobias often wondered if, privately, the elf had considered conversion. There was a difference in seeming comfortable and actually seeming at home in the place, however, and he certainly noticed the way Fenris’ gaze roved around the compound, trained with a warrior’s alert keenness on every tiny detail of terrain and every broad, grey-and-bronze body.
The Arishok wasn’t exactly cheery, although that was predictable. The aftermath of the business with the poison gas appeared to have convinced him of two things. First, that Kirkwall was a seething mass of corruption and horror—a view with which Tobias wasn’t entirely inclined to disagree—and, second, that the elven fanatics responsible were idiots, given that their people converted freely to the Qun, and, as they were already corralled in alienages and accorded no rights under human law, they had little to nothing of their inferior culture left to defend. Tobias wasn’t eager to get into a debate about any of it; he stuck firmly to the facts and tried not to get accusatory over the fact the Arishok had set him up to dance in the first place. He’d done what he’d said he’d do, and he’d prevented Lowtown having a crater blown into it, largely because he lived there, and also because all the other people who lived there too hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

Beyond that, everything had the flavour of politics and ideology, and he considered that parleying ideals with a people who sewed the mouths of mages shut wasn’t really worth his time. He was happy to let Fenris do much of the talking, even if the elf and the Arishok mainly seemed to communicate through riddles.

The subject of the delegation and the possibility of talks didn’t go down too well to start with, though once Tobias tossed Saemus Dumar’s name around a bit and implied that this was an opportunity to bring enlightenment to the otherwise terminally corrupt dullards of Kirkwall’s nobility, and therefore the city as a whole, the Arishok seemed more interested in the idea.

Fenris worked hard at that, and Tobias gave up trying to follow what he was saying. His voice, in all its gravel-burnished richness, made the qunari words sound exotic and fascinating, instead of like an ox clearing its sinuses, and—against the dusty beigeness of the compound’s sand and wood, with the weak, wintry sun lancing through a grey sky to touch him in pale bands—the elf did cut a very impressive figure.

Perhaps the Arishok thought so too because, after a great deal of wrangling, they wrung an agreement from him. A delegation would go to Viscount’s Keep, and matters would be discussed… not least how the city could help get the qunari back to Par Vollen, and ease the burden of their being stuck here in the meantime.

Yeah. And not kicking off a war while they’re at it is just gravy.

Tobias let out a deep breath as they left the compound, the heavy gates closing behind them with a deep rattle.

“I owe you one,” he promised Fenris, at which the elf merely shrugged.

Who knew? Maybe it just might make the city a better place.

Perhaps. And, for my next trick, getting Orsino, Meredith, and Elthina around a table to play a friendly game of Wicked Grace and abolish the Circle of Magi.

Yeah. Right.

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It wasn’t long after midday that he called on Varric, slipping into The Hanged Man on his way back from the market, where a woman had been standing on a box and yelling—albeit in a very impassioned way—about the Maker’s curse being on mages, and how their filth and wickedness corrupted the world. Something about women going missing, body parts showing up under bridges… as if it couldn’t just have been an ordinary nutcase.
“You look beat,” Varric observed cheerfully, as Tobias sloped in. “Pint?”

Tobias nodded. “Been to see the Arishok. I wasn’t born to be a politician.”

The dwarf signalled to Nora with a wink and a grin. “Oh, I don’t know. You’re pretty good at the lying and cheating part, when you want to be.”

“Huh. Normal lying and cheating, maybe. Not this.”

“Sit down, Hawke. Tell me all about it. Did you tell His Horniness all those interesting Fereldan words for ‘asshole’?”

Tobias grunted, but flung himself into a chair anyway. He didn’t really want to pick through it all, though he knew he wouldn’t get a choice. People would hear about it sooner or later, anyway; people heard about everything.

Varric was fascinated to hear of the attempts the younger Dumar was making at diplomacy, and he laughed more than anybody probably should have done at the concept of a qunari peace delegation. Nora brought beer, bread, butter, and meat—it was very likely cold beef, but it was greasy and slightly grey, so it was hard to be sure—and Tobias’ stomach surprised him with a ravenous growl. He ate, and talked with his mouth full and gesticulated with greasy fingers, and, eventually, he felt better about most things.

“Well….” Varric sat back, shaking his head. “There are elements in the Chantry who won’t like it.”

Tobias scoffed. “Just because they can’t cope with losing a few bums on pews to conversions? What’s Elthina going to do, anyway? She never takes action on anything.”

“Eh, maybe you’re right.” Varric peered thoughtfully at him over the rim of his mug. “Still, I don’t know… even Choirboy seems a little prickly around the subject of the qunari and—excepting mercenaries and anyone else who’s tried to kill him—you know how big he is on that whole ‘forgiveness and tolerance’ deal.”

“Sebastian Vael?” Tobias grimaced, pausing to suck the meat grease off his thumb before he reached for his beer. “I thought he was safely tucked up in the chantry again.”

“Off and on,” Varric conceded. “He still comes in here from time to time. I think he’s hoping you’ll notice him and ask him to go bandit-hunting again.”

Tobias groaned. “Not if he keeps praying over the dead bodies. I can’t put up with that.”

The dwarf chuckled, and Tobias cocked his head to the side, debating whether he should really ask the question he wanted.

“Speaking of people who’ve been around…. Have, um, have you seen Anders?”

The smile faded from Varric’s face, and he tapped his heavy golden rings against the side of his cup, fixing Tobias with a weary stare.

“No. Haven’t you been down to the clinic?”

Tobias bit the inside of his lip, shaking his head vigorously. It had been over a week since the Gallows, and the night at the clinic, and he didn’t want to admit that he was afraid of going back… afraid of seeing Anders the way he’d been that night, unless he was allowed the chance to help make it right.
He would have shouldered every burden the healer shared with him, but Tobias wasn’t sure—no matter how worried he was for the man—he could take being pushed aside again.

“I haven’t seen him,” he said, avoiding Varric’s gaze. “I saw Selby in the market, day before yesterday. She said he was doing much better, but we didn’t get a chance to talk. No one’s talking right now. The way things are, the whole damn Underground’s gone into hiding. Nobody wants to risk being seen, or meeting anyone, or…. You know, nothing’s safe. Nowhere is… is safe, so—”

He broke off, taking a swig of the dark, bitter beer and brushing the back of his hand absently across his mouth. Varric was watching him carefully, fingers still tapping quietly against his mug.

_Damn it, Varric. You know what I mean. Is he safe?_

“You don’t even see Collective men anymore,” Tobias mumbled. “I don’t think I’ve seen a Mages’ Collective mark anywhere in Kirkwall for at least six months. I… I don’t usually ask this kind of thing, ’cause… ’cause you’ve got your business, Varric, I know, and….” He shifted in his seat, squirming against the padded upholstery and trying not to meet the dwarf’s eye. “I don’t want to put you in an awkward position, but—”

“You wanna know about the bribes for the clinic.”

Tobias exhaled, relieved that he didn’t have to voice it, but still tense at the subject itself. It had been preying on his mind, with the state of the city the way it was. Anders himself had once said it would only be a matter of time before the templars routed him out—Maker knew they’d come close a handful of times already—and, up until now, he’d been lucky.

Well, it was partially luck. The rest of it was a combination of the fact that the templars generally didn’t give a shit about Darktown, and the fact the clinic was actually doing a good job at keeping much of the mess and human detritus off the streets, Tobias supposed. That… and everything Varric had done to keep their mutual friend safe.

The dwarf sighed, brows raised as he stared resignedly into his mug. “I’ll level with you, Hawke. The way things are right now? It’s… not helping. I can keep the small gangs off his back—that’s not a problem; all they want is back-pocket change—but Blondie draws a lot of notice. Bribing a couple of templars to look the other way is one thing… I don’t know how many more I can pay off. It’s not about the money,” he added quickly, raising a hand to quiet Tobias before he’d even finished opening his mouth. “It’s just that it’s hard to bribe people who are more scared of someone else than they are hungry for your coin. And… then there’s the Coterie.”

“I thought—”

“Ah, it’s nothing.” Varric waved the words away. “Just a few more rumblings about protection. They’re pushing their luck, but I don’t see it’s in their best interests to sell him out.”

Tobias frowned. “Not while he’s patching up half of their runners and keeping their whores clean for free, no. But—”

“It’s nothing,” Varric repeated. “I got Edge keeping an ear to the ground. For now, I think Blondie’s safe enough… though I could wish he’d find better digs.”

He smirked dryly, and Tobias returned the expression with a small snort.

“I know what you mean. I s’pose, knowing the tunnels like he does, it gives him chance to run, to disappear before they can catch him, even if they do make it as far as the clinic, but… it’s not exactly healthy.”
Varric nodded, his smile fading to a softer, curious kind of look. He drained the remnants of his beer, tongue probing between his teeth as he swallowed. “Look, Hawke… If you’re that worried about him, maybe you should—”

“I’ll go down there,” Tobias assured, though he didn’t quite meet Varric’s eye. “I will. I’ll… I mean, I….”

The dwarf sighed and shook his head. “All right. Sure.”

Tobias slouched in his chair as he finished his beer. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to see Anders, or didn’t want to help… but maybe Varric had been right after all. Maybe he should have just taken the hint.

“Anyway,” he said, eager to change the subject now he had Varric’s assurance that, despite the city’s worsening attitude to mages, the clinic’s safety was more or less intact, “you hear anything about Bartrand yet?”

A glittering, dangerous smile spread across the dwarf’s face, and he leaned forward, setting his mug down on the table.

“You know, I’m glad you asked me that….”

Tobias had long suspected that all the brains in the Tethras family tree had gone to Varric. Not only was Bartrand stupid enough to have written to some of his old contacts in Hightown, it really did seem like he was planning on coming back to Kirkwall. Servants had been taken on and, according to Varric, had already begun opening up his house. The preparations were being made discreetly, but they were still being made… he could be in town in as little as a few weeks, allowing time for the voyage.

It would be easy enough to keep an eye on the port schedules, and Varric already had one of the scullery maids on his payroll. They would know the minute Bartrand docked in Kirkwall, and the minute he closed his front door behind him. And that, Tobias thought, was enough to put anybody in a good mood. The waiting game that came before the opportunity for sweet revenge was a little frustrating, but it wasn’t like he was unused to dealing with that.

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Sunlight pooled on the rough, plastered walls and dirt-packed streets of Lowtown, the district hazy in the aftermath of a morning’s heavy rain.

Tobias had spent much of the day dealing with matters relating to the estate, and to a very discreet contract he was undertaking for a merchant who didn’t feel moved to pay port fees or Coterie tolls on a shipment of Antivan brandy. Arranging the collection point, the little boat to scull out and meet the cargo vessel, and the cart to move the goods to somewhere safe in Lowtown had not been difficult… nothing taxing.

Taxing. Heh. Smugglers’ humour. Just like the old days, isn’t it?

He wasn’t sure he liked the thought of becoming a complacent old man, sitting around and dreaming about the glory days of his misspent youth… but he was still young, wasn’t he? Still in his prime, Tobias reminded himself, as he headed to the bazaar to find Hubert and check in on his interest in the Bone Pit mine. So far, the bloody place hadn’t paid him a penny, though he’d been landed with dealing with the work force, on account of them mostly being Fereldans.

The merchant was as irritating and shifty as ever, but it was a nice day, and Tobias refused to let any
of it mar his mood. Hubert eventually yielded to a little light intimidation, and parted with a small handful of sovereigns that was probably about forty percent of what he owed his so-called partner… but it was something.

Tobias weighed the coin purse in his hand and, as he tucked it into his belt pouch, couldn’t quite shake the feeling that it would probably be well spent in Darktown.

He left Hubert with one final glare and started the walk down there, pretending to himself that it didn’t feel like walking on splinters. For every part of him that had missed seeing Anders in The Hanged Man, missed the Underground meetings and the hours spent in the clinic, rolling up bandages and boiling pans of herbs, there were plenty of reasons Tobias didn’t really want to go.

He knew it was stupid. Anders needed a friend—any mage in this city did right now, and him more than most—and, if Tobias couldn’t put his frustration aside and simply be that, then he knew he didn’t deserve to be anything to the man at all. It just wasn’t as simple as that in practice, especially when he could still almost feel Anders’ breath on his lips, in that one bittersweet moment when the need had been palpable between them… and then it had felt as if the whole world was being ripped away.

*Don’t be so melodramatic, Hawke. Really. Pull yourself together.*

The clinic was surprisingly busy when he got there. The influx of winter chest and throat complaints had led to a lot of coughing and hacking, and a lot of elderly sick people. The usual mothers with babies and fathers with big, nervous hands on their children’s shoulders were dotted around the place, and there were a couple of labourers from the Foundry District, still stained with soot and singeing. One of them had a bloody gash on his hand—deep, and wide, and rather nasty—and the other clutched a bloodstained cloth to his head. Both of them were elven.

Tobias couldn’t see Anders at first. Saryha was the one dealing with the labourers, fetching bowls of hot water and clean towels, and directing the one with the hand injury to sit with his arm raised while she washed the other man’s wound. For a girl who’d spent her entire life in the Circle, she was adapting impressively, he thought, though the looks that murmured among the patients were clear. There was uneasiness here: a sense of confusion, because where was the healer, and why was he not healing? Tobias wondered how many of them had heard garbled rumours about the Gallows, or been left afraid by Anders’ manner in recent weeks. After all, even he had to admit that his friend’s… problems… had been growing ever more obvious.

Tobias caught himself thinking of Anders’ words the night of the Gallows trip. *I am the example of the worst that freedom brings.* He couldn’t believe that; wouldn’t believe it. The worst that freedom brought was cruelty—Fenris would have the first to harp on about that—and, whatever else he was, Anders was not a cruel man.

And, as Tobias considered that, there he was. He looked up, catching sight of that familiar figure across the clinic, his movements tired and stiff as he came to Saryha’s side, carrying bandages and potion bottles.

Anders laid a hand on the girl’s shoulder, and they exchanged an earnest few words that Tobias—still lingering by the wooden doors, as if he was afraid to go in—was too far away to hear. She looked worried, but determined, and he understood why when she pushed her sleeves back and laid her hands on the elf’s injury. Light bloomed around her fingers, pale echoes of bluish-white that danced against her dark skin, and her face took on that focused expression that Tobias had seen so often on Anders.

In contrast, he now seemed… empty. He stood there at her side, watching with a weary, unfocused
look, and his whole being seemed faded somehow, as if he was a blurred copy of the man he’d been.

Tobias’ chest ached dully, folding itself around the memories of some of the first nights he’d come here, back before the Deep Roads expedition. He’d come, drawn like a moth to a candle, fascinated by all the life and power in the healer… and, yes, it had all been simpler, hadn’t it? He’d wanted Anders, and thought that was all it needed to be: an attraction that had thrilled him by appearing to be mutual, and deserved acting upon as enthusiastically as possible.

He remembered coming here the night he’d learned Bartrand had fixed a date for the expedition to leave… coming down into the dark with some loose idea of seduction, of wanting something more than a trip to the Rose, and wanting, just once, to see laid bare for him all the beautiful things behind Anders’ wonderful, wicked smiles.

Only, it would never have been just once, would it? Tobias had thought that, perhaps, it had been that night he’d realised how much more than ‘once’ he wanted, but that wasn’t true. As he stood in the clinic now, watching Saryha heal the elf with her gentle, steady hands, and watching Anders’ pale, herb-stained fingers clench on her shoulder, he felt the weight of all these long months pile up on each other, pressing down on him. It had been years. Fucking ages… and he’d mired himself in it so deeply, hadn’t he? Like a sheep caught in waist-high mud, that didn’t even have the sense to stop struggling.

He watched Anders smile, squeezing the girl’s shoulder as her magic flared brighter. He could feel it. Her power was nothing next to the great metallic bloom that Anders was able to raise, but there was a studious kind of purity to it, like the clean scent of fresh paper and ink. She reminded him very slightly of his father, Tobias supposed; Malcolm’s magic had always carried with it that dusty feeling, like leather-bound books. Maybe it was a Circle mage thing, something to do with learning that way. He didn’t know. All he knew as he looked at her, and at Anders—standing there with pride and fatigue and regret etched so clearly into his face—was that he’d spent so very, very long knotting himself ever more deeply into his desire for this infuriating, impossible man, that he couldn’t even remember the point at which he’d fallen in love.

And now… now everything was falling apart, and the whole city was going to hell around them, and it hurt just to look at him, because every look made Tobias remember the way Anders had been a week ago, and how he hadn’t been able to do a damn thing to help.

Saryha finished the elf’s healing, dropping her hands to her sides with a soft gasp. Anders patted her back, murmured something in her ear, and turned to the labourer with the injured hand. He didn’t use magic; he bathed and sewed and packed the wound with a dressing, but at least he seemed focused and steady, even if he looked tired.

It was Saryha who noticed Tobias first, skulking as he was by the doors, and the little dishes of copal that were meant to cleanse the air and at least try to hide the worst of the stink. The sharp, astringent scent of the incense made his nose itch, but it was better than pus, piss, and blood. She waved at him, and looked over to Anders, but he was busy with finishing up his stitching on the elven labourer’s hand and, as Tobias moved over to them, he felt awkward and ungainly.

“Hello, messere!”

Saryha smiled, and it broke his heart just a little bit to see that she was starting to develop that same worn thin look as Anders had, born of deprivation, constant fatigue and struggle.

Anders looked up then, too, dark eyes shadowed with a fleeting and circumspect warmth that quickly gave way to uncertainty.
I need time. What was that supposed to mean, anyway? Tobias wondered if he should even have been here, and a sudden sense of guilt picked at him. Knowing what he knew about Anders, he should never have tried to push things, never tried to force a response from him… but that familiar tension was already aching in the air again, and Anders nodded very slightly, dropping his gaze as he tied off the labourer’s bandage.

“Hawke.”

“Anders.” Tobias cleared his throat. “I, uh… I—”

“Checking up on me, are you?” the healer asked, straightening up and brushing his hands against his coat as Saryha ushered the patched-up labourers on their way, and moved to greet a woman with a young boy in tow, his thin body wracking each time he gave a great, rattling cough.

“No.” Tobias shook his head.

“Seems busy.” Tobias observed, glancing around the clinic as he slipped the coins into the healer’s narrow palm. Nearby, the little boy coughed, the breath heaving in him as he hacked and spluttered.

“‘Embrium,’” he told her, “and a hot poultice. We can start there, make him comfortable and see what we can do to help the fever.”

Even his voice seemed thin and faded, though there was no mistaking the core of control left in him. Anders was locked up tighter than Tobias had ever seen him, and he ached for the man who’d been able to sit in Varric’s suite, nurse a half-cup of wine and make dirty jokes about templars while grinning those wonderful, wicked grins.

“Can I help? That’s all I… all I wanted to do,” Tobias said quietly, as Anders gave him a hollow-eyed look, seeming disconnected for a moment before he nodded, and pointed to the bubbling coppers at the back of the clinic.

 There’s a pot of blindweed to come off the boil. Strain it, and mix it one part to three with the hog’s lard mixture in the big grey bowl. Then add about half a dram of the splintwort tincture—it’s on the shelf—and mix until it’s cool. Can you do that?”

Tobias fought the urge to rip off a salute. “Of course.”

Those dark eyes met his briefly, as deep and troubled as pebbles of volcanic glass, and Anders slipped him a small, gentle smile. “Thank you. I know what it’s like out there now. You didn’t have to come.”

“Yes, I did,” Tobias said quietly. “But I didn’t have to leave it so long.”

The thin, bruised-looking skin beneath Anders’ eyes tightened a little, and he lowered his gaze, though the uncertainty that coloured his face didn’t seem to last long.

“It’s all right,” he murmured. “I… I’ve had time to think, I suppose.”
Yeah? All the time you needed?

A spear of selfish hope prodded at Tobias’ chest, but he bit down hard on the words. He wanted so badly to know what Anders meant by that, but now… huh, now wasn’t the time. It seemed sickly ironic, he thought; they never had time, did they? Or privacy, or any of the things that would have made this easier… and yet Anders was still watching him, still holding half a dozen different expressions locked up in his face.

Maker, I should have just stayed away…

Beside them, the child coughed again, so hard this time that he retched, bending double and vomiting over Saryha’s feet. She whimpered, and looked wretchedly at Anders.

“Um…”

He sighed. “I’ll get a mop.”

Tobias hastened to the back of the clinic, and left them to it.
Chapter 31

He didn’t begrudge helping, though it took up almost all of the rest of the day. It was hard to tell how time passed in Darktown, except by the rate at which the candles burned and, given that those were mostly the cheapest, hardest tallow, the passage of hours could be misleading.

Tobias prepared ointments, salves, poultices and other assorted forms of messy, pummelled, boiled and macerated herbs. He watched Anders and Saryha work their way through the ranks of patients, and he rolled bandages, fetched and carried, and generally attempted to make himself as useful as he could, despite his intense awareness of being a mage with exactly zero talent for healing.

His mind wandered a little as he worked… as it usually did. He found himself thinking about the estate, and the plans for the future, and Bartrand, and yes, about Anders. About the Underground, too, and Creer and Gethyn and Selby and all the others. About Meredith, and the Circle, and whether what they’d found on Alrik’s body would actually prove anything, or get the Grand Cleric to act. It pained him to admit it but, that night, Tobias hadn’t even bothered to read the papers he’d taken from the templar’s corpse. He remembered thrusting them at Selby before he left to find Anders, and he knew there had been letters in there; documents that bore the Chantry’s seals and Maker only knew what kind of evidence… and he hadn’t even looked.

When he got a chance to see her again, he’d ask Selby what was happening, and whether there’d been any possibility of taking the testimony of the mages they’d rescued to the Grand Cleric. That had to count for something, didn’t it? All that they had to say… and all the bruises and scars they bore.

Maybe it wouldn’t matter. Maybe, with Alrik dead, it would be easy for Elthina’s people to sweep the entire thing under the rug, allowing him to become some kind of scapegoat for it all, as if there weren’t plenty of other sadistic bastards who behaved the way he had. It was difficult to know, but Tobias clung to his dark suspicions, even as he realised how very negative he was being. It was Anders’ influence, he supposed; this inability to trust that Elthina could do anything right, or even find her own arse with both hands and a well-drawn map.

He wished he could see the world the way his mother did. Leandra still believed in things like the sanctity of the Chantry and concepts such as law and order and “the right thing”, but Tobias couldn’t remember the last time he’d indulged in that luxury.

He glanced up from wiping out the wet, smelly interior of one of the coppers, and caught sight of Saryha across the clinic. She looked completely exhausted, but she was ushering the last of the day’s walking wounded out of the doors, and he realised how late it had grown. Anders was fetching clean blankets, settling those who were bedded down for the night—the old, the weak, and one heavily pregnant woman who had a mild fever and a cough, but kept complaining that she was honestly fine and didn’t need to be here—and depositing the assortment of soiled bandages and linens ready for wash. He smiled wearily as his gaze met Tobias’, shambling over to him with the armfuls of grubby cloth while Saryha dealt with the stragglers.

“I’ll get a clean copper,” Tobias said, because one was needed and because it was sensible to get the linens in while there was still hot water… and because he didn’t want to analyse too carefully why he was still here, or why the thought of leaving and walking back to Lowtown seemed so very unpalatable.

*Comes to something, doesn’t it, when this shithole is one of the few places in the city that feels like home.*
“Didn’t mean to keep you so late,” Anders said, dropping the pile of dirty linens and helping him right the large pot that had been draining beside the fire. It still smelled faintly of the elfroot that had been boiled in it earlier: the same smell that clung to him, beneath the interlaced patterns of different salves and herbs, and the staleness of a long, grubby, difficult day.

Tobias shrugged. “It’s all right. If it helps, then—”

“Thank you.”

He kept his eyes focused on the dark, discoloured belly of the pot, preferring that to the complicated things he knew he’d find if he looked into Anders’ face.

*It shouldn’t be so fucking complicated. Should it? It shouldn’t. It shouldn’t be this sodding difficult.*

“I’ll, uh… I’ll get the water.”

Tobias made a performance of pouring out the heated water, the ache in his back, shoulders, neck, and arms from hours of repetitive action and lifting making him grit his teeth as he continued trying to avoid Anders’ gaze.

*It shouldn’t be this sodding awkward, either. Maker’s cock! I didn’t want it to be awkward. I just wanted— I mean, I still want…. Oh, sod.*

He ventured a glance at the healer, taking in the worn, crumpled look he had about him, so far removed from that neatly darned, crisp figure who’d come down to Varric’s suite in the evenings, and while away hours constructing elaborate revenge fantasies with the dwarf; boiling the Knight-Commander in oil, or dipping Bartrand in molten gold. Tobias missed those nights, missed that man… missed those wide, wicked smiles that seemed to hint at so very much.

And now, here they were, staring at each other across a copper half-full of hot water, and Tobias found himself gripping the wooden laundry paddle he held tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

“I wanted to, um… to say I was sorry,” Anders murmured, the herb-smudged fingers of one hand rising to worry at the cuff of his coat. “Sorry for pushing you away like I did. I know y-you only wanted to help, and you [**did**] help. You’ve… you’ve done so much. Those papers….”

His fingers plucked more earnestly at the stiff, threadbare fabric of his coat, as if he was caught between trying to adjust his sleeve and actively attempting to pull it off, and he blinked rapidly, his gaze slipping to the side.

Tobias frowned. “What papers? The ones from—”

“Alrik. Yes.” Anders lowered his voice, glancing reflexively down the centre of the clinic, where the elderly in-patients were jovially harassing the expectant mother with assorted old wives’ tales, unsolicited advice, and discussion of baby names. “Selby was down here yesterday. She said you found letters. He’d written to the Knight-Commander. We have it all in writing… all the things he wanted to do… but Meredith said no. The Grand Cleric— They wouldn’t stand for it. Not yet, at least. He was denied.”

The look on the healer’s face suggested he wasn’t sure he believed it, or maybe that he was disappointed by the news. Tobias’ frown deepened. It certainly did take the wind out of the sails of those who’d been so convinced that Alrik was the harbinger of an all-out war… and few had been so vocal as Anders in their belief that his plan could be real. Still, this was a good thing, wasn’t it? It *should* be a good thing, surely.
“Well, that’s positive, isn’t it? I mean, maybe they can still be reasoned with. We know there are some moderates left in the templars, so—”

“Yes,” Anders admitted, although something guarded lingered in his eyes. “You’re right. You were right, when you said they weren’t all like him. They’re not. And… well, it’s one more rotten bastard down, isn’t it? That much was worth it.”

Tobias nodded slowly. Of course, from Anders’ point of view, being proved wrong wasn’t so much the matter of the dent it had put in his pride, but the fact that everything that had happened—the deaths of the templars, of Willen, and very nearly of Ella—had been for nothing. The potential for negotiation with the Chantry opened up plenty of possibilities, but also threw a sizeable rock in the path of the revolution… whatever form it might have taken.

_The Resolutionists won’t like it. Bloody inconsiderate of people to start being reasonable when you’re about to blow them up in order to prove a point._

Across the clinic, Saryha was about to slide the bar down over the inside of the wooden doors. She paused, glancing over to them with brows raised in enquiry.

“Should I finish locking up, messere?”

Tobias blanched, and Anders eased away from him a little, as if their merely standing there by the copper had been something to be ashamed of.

Am I staying, she means. Curling up on your floor to watch you sleep again.

_Not that I wouldn’t, but I wasn’t planning on it… unless you ask me to stay. And you won’t do that, will you? At this rate, you’re never going to. And yet I still show up, don’t I? Because I’m a fucking idiot. Come on. Ask me. Please._

The familiar tang of bitterness stung at the back of his throat. Days like this, it felt like nothing would ever change at all, and Tobias couldn’t even find it in himself to be amused at the fact that half of Kirkwall had probably assumed they were already sleeping together.

Anders cleared his throat, fixing Tobias with a gentle, imploring look that was about as easy to refuse as any sentence of Leandra’s that started with the words ‘Darling, could you just…’.

“Stay for a cup of tea or something, before you head back?”

Tobias’ mouth folded around a lop-sided smile that felt like a welcome defeat. It wasn’t exactly an impassioned, desperate plea for him to never leave again—and it certainly wasn’t an invitation to an endless night of debauchery—but, in his mind, it meant that Anders wanted to spend a little longer with him. It was a quiet, simple request for time together, and that meant a lot.

“Sure,” he said, watching those soft brown eyes crinkle at the corners, suffused with the warmth of Anders’ brief, slight smile. “Thanks.”

It felt like something had changed, but Tobias wasn’t sure what… and he wasn’t sure he wanted to question it, either.

~o~O~o~

He ended up sitting at the small, rickety table at the back of the clinic, nursing a cup of tea while Saryha did the rounds with a bedpan and Anders checked on the pregnant woman. Tobias watched him; watched the uncertainty that still hid at the back of his movements, the circumspection with
which he touched her.

He was afraid. That much was obvious. Afraid of Justice, or Vengeance, because who was to say what the spirit was anymore… afraid of what it could become and, by extension, the ways it might warp him.

Tobias sipped his peppermint and goldenrod tea, and tried to think happy thoughts about mages who lived long, comfortable lives. He tried not to think about the pointed little jokes Varric made about ‘apostate rebel’ not being a career choice with a good retirement plan. Most of all, he tried not to think about the way Anders had looked in the dark of the tunnels, with magelight splashing pale streaks across his terrified face. Tobias’ chest ached with a keen, physical desire to make sure that he never, ever looked that way again.

Apparently satisfied with his patient’s progress, and with spoonfuls of cough elixir duly administered, Anders moved from the woman’s bedside to blow out a couple of the candles near the doors. He crossed the clinic by way of a few minor, passing chores, and paused to crouch and fiddle with something near one of the broken wall panels that leaned rakishly, its lower end bulging and cracked. Tobias frowned, at first assuming it was a rattrap, until Anders straightened up, brushing his hands against his coat and looking oddly pleased with himself. He seemed aware of the attention, because he glanced up and smiled, and it was such a fresh, honest look. Tobias tightened his grip on his cup and tried to will himself not to react, but it was too late. As the healer sauntered over and sat down, seeming so much more at ease than he had done earlier in the day, every detail about him burned itself into Tobias’ brain. The clumped, ragged feathers at his shoulders, the bags under his eyes… the smudges on his hands and the mess on his boots; none of it should have made him look as good as he did.

“What was that?” Tobias asked, grasping desperately at something to say, though he could hear the slight huskiness in his voice, chafed and grated with this near-constant waiting. “Rat trouble?”

He thought about mentioning Merrill’s reaction to the first time she’d encountered what alienage elves called “city rabbit stew”, but Anders shook his head.

“No. Well, not really. Just putting out some milk. We had a little over and it would only have turned, so I thought it might be worth a try. I miss having a cat around,” he added by way of explanation as he reached to pour his tea. “I have seen a few about, though mostly I think the people down here scare them off… or maybe eat them.” He peered into the distance, his nose wrinkled in momentary distaste, then he blinked and squeezed out a small, bright smile. “Anyway. You never know, right?”

Tobias realised his cup had stopped halfway to his mouth, and he’d merely been watching Anders over the rim of it, an indulgent half-smile on his lips as he pictured him trying to coax one of the skinny, flat-headed feral maniacs that strayed in Kirkwall’s streets into the clinic for a bowl of milk and an ear-tickle.

“Nope. You never know, indeed.

“True,” he said, as diplomatically as he could manage.

Anders’ smile widened, some of the heaviness lifting from his face as, for a moment, it looked as if he might actually laugh.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said quietly, suddenly dropping his gaze to the tabletop, those long fingers toying awkwardly with the patchy glaze on his chipped brown cup. “I admit, after— Well, I didn’t expect that you’d….”
He trailed off, feathered pauldrons rustling weakly as he gave a resigned shrug. Tobias sipped his tea and sniffed reproachfully.

“I told you. It’s all right.”

He watched Anders over the rim of his cup, like that little clay vessel was some kind of shield between them that he couldn’t quite manage without. A muscle flicked in the healer’s jaw, and Tobias frowned, residually angry with him for not allowing himself just that small speck of forgiveness. The frown melted away as Anders glanced at him, though, replaced with a smile that hid a whisper of melancholy at its corners.

“Thank you,” Anders murmured, his gaze turning deep and warm. “For everything you did. Really.”

“It’s nothing. You… uh.” Tobias cleared his throat gently, aware of the tension pooling between them like honey, making the air thick and sweet. It wasn’t ever going to be enough, this waiting, but it had been going on so long there was almost a comforting familiarity in it; a dance whose steps they both knew so well, even when they both ached to break out of the pattern and run, barefoot, from the ball. “You matter to me. You know that.”

He waited for the inevitable moment when Anders’ gaze would harden, or he’d blink and look away, hiding himself from the danger of having to admit that, yes, he felt it too… but he didn’t blink. He didn’t look away. The very faintest flush of colour—less a blush than just a healthy pallor—crept into his cheeks, and the suggestion of a smile curved his mouth. His lips parted slightly, as if he was about to say something… and then it was gone, both of them distracted by Saryha coming to sit at the table, her backside thudding against the chair as she collapsed into it, puffing a sigh through her lips. She was a nice girl, and clearly an eager and able assistant to everything Anders did at the clinic, so Tobias felt rather bad about wishing the ground could swallow her up in an immediate and fiery pit.

He noted the slight tightening in Anders’ face, too, though he poured her a cup of tea and asked a brief couple of questions about the patients. Saryha assured him everything was fine, and gratefully accepted the cup he put before her. If she noticed the atmosphere she’d walked into—unlikely, given how exhausted she looked—then she chose to ignore it, and Tobias turned his attention back to his tea, holding the tepid, fragrant liquid in his mouth before he swallowed, trying to let the light, astringent, minty flavour wash away all the temptations he had to let out a huge wordless yell of frustration.

“…should probably make up a few extra, just in case,” Anders was saying. He knocked back the rest of his tea and made to stand up, waving a hand at Saryha as she moved to follow. “No, no. You sit. Rest. I’ll get it. Perhaps, um… could you give me a hand, Hawke? Before you go.”

_Hmph. Yep. ‘Thank you for everything’, sheep’s eyes over the tea, and then it’s ‘carry this barrel’ and ‘wash this copper’ again, closely followed by ‘shouldn’t you be getting home? Go on, sod off.’_

_Right. Fine. Great._

Tobias grunted his assent and stood up, his back aching as he followed Anders to the boarded over little alcove at the rear of the clinic that served as a lockable potions cupboard. The injuries from that night under the Gallows had faded—the dagger wound on his back had barely been more than a scratch to start with, and hardly hurt at all, while the burns on his hand had responded well and were now little more than dry, cracked sheaths of skin—but he still felt them. He still felt the exertions and the reverberations of that night… and he knew Anders did, too.

He watched the healer pull the key from his belt, unlocking the narrow door and edging into the
cramped space. Darktown wasn’t quite as rife with refugees these days, but it still had the largest concentration of criminal scum in Kirkwall, and it wasn’t just the grain alcohol that Anders needed to keep under lock and key.

“About four bottles should do it, I think,” he said absently, from within the cramped depths of the store. “Now, where…? Tincture of embrium, Hawke. Can you see it?”

Tobias sighed under his breath, and squeezed in behind him. The rows of bottles—dark glass stoppered with heavy, waxed corks—glinted and clinked in the shelves, and the close, stale air heaved with the smells of a dozen different herbs and preparations. Over the top of it all, there was the smell that always seemed to cling to Anders: that whiff of boiled elfroot, soot, and the miasma of wet dog that rose from his ridiculously feathered coat.

“Tincture of embrium?” Tobias raised an eyebrow. “So this wasn’t just an elaborate ploy to get me on my own?”

Anders snorted, running his fingers over the bottles as he checked the labels. “No. But… I do wish we could have a chance to talk.”

He turned his head slightly, blinking with that kind of mild uncertainty in his face that so often seemed to signify Justice plucking at his mind, and Tobias swallowed hard, caught between the feeling that he should back away from this whole mess… and the undeniable impulse to push just that little bit further.

“Talk?” he echoed. “You can talk to me now.”

He moved his foot, letting the battered, crooked wooden door swing shut behind them, trapping them both in this cramped space that suddenly seemed to grow so much darker, though their way had only been lit by a little second-hand candlelight to start with. The breath seemed to catch slightly in Anders’ throat as he looked towards the rough wood that trapped them here. Tobias snapped his fingers, pulling a dim sphere of light from the air. The whisper of magic rippled between them, carrying with the faintest scent of warm bread and leather.

The magelight’s pale glow streaked Anders’ cheeks and hair, and caught at all the worried, tense places in his face, though he looked nothing like he had a week ago. He shook his head, a small, mirthless smile on his lips as he turned, ostensibly peering past Tobias’ shoulder at the ranks of potions and bottles.

“Hawke….”

The word should have sounded like a warning, but it came out too soft for that, too laced with consideration. It traced a shiver down Tobias’ spine all the same, and the idiocy of this moment struck at him: the pair of them, hiding in the dark, hiding from everything, and yet still contriving time together. It was so unutterably stupid… but, with that wounded, fragmented look on Anders’ face, like the whole world was a maze he couldn’t hope to negotiate, it was hard to stay irritated with him.

He said nothing, waiting for the weight of the silence to pull words from the healer. Anders lowered his gaze as a frown knitted his dark brows, and his fingers twitched lightly, impatiently, at his sides.

“I wish I didn’t want this,” he murmured, the words barely making it past his lips. “I really do.”

Ouch.

Tobias clenched his jaw and tried to pretend that didn’t hurt. Was it so awful, then? This thing that
lay between them? The smell of the herbal preparations, and the light, itching hum of the small stack of lyrium potions at the back of the shelf scratched at his senses, but they were as nothing next to the things Anders did to him.

“Oh,” he said, hiding behind the word, a nonplussed grunt.

“It’s so complicated,” Anders protested, shaking his head again, still frowning at the dusty, dirt-packed floor. “It’s never been this— ugh! I… I don’t…. You saw what I almost did to that girl. You’ve seen what I’m capable of.” He looked up, suddenly accusatory, his gaze biting into Tobias’ face. “How can you still—?”

“You know why.”

Anders winced and started to turn his head, averting his gaze, but Tobias stood his ground. The time for pretending was over.

*No more games. No more lies. You wanted to talk? You can start by fucking listening.*

“Because I care about you. *You,*” he repeated, tilting his chin, catching Anders’ eye and refusing to let him look away. “The man you are. You know that. You know I—”

“You shouldn’t,” Anders muttered, his brows drawn low and his mouth a hard curl of regret. “I can’t…. I mean, I don’t want to hurt you. I—”

“I’m a big boy,” Tobias said dryly. “I keep telling you I’ll cope.”

Anders screwed up his nose, looking for all the world like someone had passed a dead fish in front of him. “That’s not… I mean, I don’t know— I don’t have the *right,* Hawke. If… if I let myself, I….”

He shook his head once more, swallowing the words as a look of such resentful sadness swept over his face. The little ball of magelight that hovered above their heads quivered, and Tobias didn’t quite manage to stop himself from reaching out, his fingers closing on the stiff, rough fabric of that awful-smelling coat. Anders glanced down at his hand, but for once he didn’t move away and, when he raised his gaze again, the lost, mournful, hungry look in his face gouged a wound right through Tobias’ chest.

“I’d need you so much,” he whispered, the pale light painting voids of shadow on his face. “I don’t have the right to ask that of anyone. That’s why I hold back… why I’ve held back for so long. You can’t—”

“Anders.”

Tobias didn’t know why he let that name slide from his lips. He didn’t know what he thought it would achieve, or what he meant by it… just that he needed to say it, to reach out as clearly as by the touch of his hand, still loosely curled on the stiff fabric of Anders’ sleeve.

“Don’t,” Anders murmured again, biting his lip, his face pinched and tight. “Please. I—”

Tobias leaned closer, barely inches between them now, the smell of boiled elfroot and the mustiness of Anders’ patched coat mixing with the acidic hint of sweat and grime that clung to them both, and the tar-stained, grit-laden scent of Kirkwall’s dark heart.

“Anders.”

Just one word, barely cloaking a breath; he could hear the need and frustration swelling in his voice.
For Anders, the sound of his name, echoing with the ache of everything that had been so long suppressed, seemed to have a palpable effect. He blinked rapidly, his lips parted around a soft, trembling exhalation, and yet he started to move away.

“I—I’ve tried to hold back,” he murmured, turning his head again so he could shy from Tobias’ gaze. “I truly have….”

“Have you?” Tobias tightened his grip on the healer’s sleeve, intent on keeping him here in this cramped, crowded space, among the glistening glass bottles and clay pots of foul-smelling ointment. He couldn’t stand the thought of him running again, the way he’d been doing since the first time they met.

Anders almost flinched… was that apprehension, or real fear? Tobias clenched his fingers on the rough, well-worn fabric of his coat, its years of patching and resewn seams barely holding together.

“Have you really?” he said again, pressing for an answer.

From beyond the rough-panelled, ramshackle walls and the leaning, overcrowded shelves, out in the clinic, there came a burst of laughter. Some of the patients were in good spirits, it seemed, still chatting and joking amongst themselves, and it served as a reminder of just how little privacy there was here.

Anders shook his head dumbly, and Tobias’ raw, guilty sympathy started to give way to irritation. His pulse hammered at the base of his throat, his head heavy and the blood rushing in him as they stood here: so close, teetering on the edge of all the things that he wanted so badly to pull out into the open… and yet was so afraid of breaking. He swallowed heavily, his tongue rough against the roof of his mouth, and wished Anders would stop looking at him with those wide, hurt, disconsolate eyes.

“Because you’ve never once told me to stop. Oh, you back off… tell me you can’t… but you still flirt, Anders. You still…. Y-you mix things up, just enough to make me think you might—”

He broke off, ashamed of what he was trying to do, the things he wanted to say. It was too late, though. They were already half-said, hanging heavily in the air, ripe and bursting.

“I’m still a man,” Anders murmured. “I still….”

“So am I,” Tobias snapped, hating the petulance in his voice, but unable to hold it in check. “I mean —”

“I know.”

Anders looked positively wretched, a deep line of indecision and regret worn into his forehead, his brows pinched together and his whole face drawn tight with this breathless, torturous need. Just sharing the same air with him seemed to make it hard to breathe… and yet Tobias wanted him to look up, wanted to see his eyes again, and wanted every ounce of that bitter complexity.

“Then stop this,” he pleaded softly. “One way or the other, all right? Because it isn’t fair.”

And it wasn’t. Oh, they were still so close…. He could almost taste Anders’ breath on his lips. The healer hadn’t looked up, and he’d gone perfectly still, but for the rapid, staccato blinking of his eyes. His lashes seemed dark against the unhealthy pallor of his skin, the twitches of his still-lowered eyelids like the shallow sleep of an uneasy dreamer. The magelight bobbed above them, catching with its pale threads at the gold in his hair.

It gave Tobias a fleeting pleasure to sink the proverbial knife in deeper, though he hated himself for
“If you tell me to leave you alone,” he said, dropping his words to a barely audible whisper, “then I will. Just say it. Go on. If you tell me you never wanted it, that you don’t want it now, then I’ll—”

Anders exhaled sharply; a half a breath quickly caught in his throat, reined back in like a disobedient child.

“Stop it,” he muttered weakly. “Please…."

“Then say you don’t want me,” Tobias challenged, his voice a low burr, the warmth in it spiced with frustration. “Say you don’t want this. Come on. Just say it.”

Anders raised his gaze, those dark eyes glassy voids ringed in shadow, like great pools of need hollowed out of the hardness in his face.

_Come on. Admit it. Maker’s teeth, I don’t care how anymore. Hit me, kiss me, but just fucking admit it… please?

Anders’ lips moved, like he wanted to argue or protest, but the only sound that left him was a croak of a breath—hard to tell if it was a groan of frustration or a cry of defeat—and then he was moving… determined, hungry, unstoppable.

He closed the distance that separated them as if it meant nothing. Those long-fingered, white hands grabbed Tobias’ shoulders, and Anders shoved him back against the shelves and the grubby, flaking plaster they were nailed to, the full force of his weight behind the action. It happened before Tobias expected—before he was ready, as if he ever _could have been ready for it—and in one electrified moment, he suddenly had Anders’ body pressed against him, and that beautiful, warm mouth on his.

_Oh…."

He’d been waiting for it so long that it was hard to believe it was real.

Thoughts dissipated, melting from that first glimmer of disbelief into the breathless, incredible potency of the fact it was _happening_, and Tobias barely noticed the pain shooting up his back from the half-healed stab wound jarring against the rough wooden shelves. Bottles and jars clinked and wobbled, threatening to tumble down around them like shards of rain. The itchy, warm presence of the lyrium swelled, and the air seemed hot enough to burn.

As kisses went, it was complicated, intense, and galvanic—a crush of dry, rough lips, and stubble scratching at his chin—and yet there was something in that simple contact, that long-awaited, ached for embrace that sang through his every nerve, like a small, bright star suspended against the sheer, suffocating heat of suppressed desire given vent.

His back ached dully where he’d thudded against the shelves, and a loose nail jutted out from the wood, somewhere around thigh height. It dug into Tobias’ leg, just one of the hundred tiny things that seemed so significant in that heightened, breathless moment. The mingled scents of boiled elfroot, herbal powders, soot, tallow, lard and sweat, and the wet-dog smell of the awful coat enveloped him, run through with the undeniable warmth and spice of Anders’ skin… and the hot, metallic echo of his power. The shelves around them creaked gently, and their breaths came in full, choked gasps as the pressure of desire deepened the kiss, turning that desperate meeting of lips to a hungry union of mouths, all at once insatiable, frenetic, and yet strangely uncertain.

He groaned his approval as the firm, wet heat of Anders’ tongue touched his, a thread of fire that was complete and absolute in its passion. The hardness of the other man’s body against his—a not
inconsiderable weight, despite Anders’ lighter build—served only to intensify everything still further, but Tobias could feel the tension in his frame, as if he was afraid... even now, fighting against all the irresistible impulses that drew them together.

At last, Tobias found his strength and kissed back. He caught Anders’ cheek in his palm, and held him firm when he seemed to want to pull away. The smallest husk of a sound, like a whimper of defeat, broke between them. Tobias wrapped his other arm around Anders’ shoulders, held him fast, and slowed the pace of their kiss, allowing him time to breathe if not to escape.

Not yet... not after all the fucking waiting.

Those ridiculous feathered pauldrons tickled the underside of his bare arm, surprisingly soft, and the coarse fabric of the appalling coat itself chafed beneath his grip as Anders shifted. He didn’t break away, though, and he didn’t resist. Far from it, in fact. He pressed closer, and Tobias shivered a little at the feel of him, the warmth of his body hidden by all those layers of rough, heavy cloth, yet still so easily detectable, with the need and desire crackling off him like sparks.

Tobias felt long, cool fingers rise to cup his face: dry, rough skin and gentle caresses. Slowly, the wet heat of tongues and desperation gave way to the uncertain warmth of parted lips, hot breath, and the prickle of an unshaven chin rubbing against his. Bodies tight together, fused by heat and want, he rocked against Anders, feeling the answering warmth of his form: an unyielding, enticing mirror.

Eventually, Tobias realised that, not only was he hard enough for the confines of his breeches to be painful, he was also fairly sure he’d forgotten how to breathe. Tiny stars littered his vision, and the magelight had sputtered and broken, leaving them both in darkness. He didn’t care. He growled softly into Anders’ mouth, lips seeking just one more embrace before they parted, and Anders did not disappoint. As his thumbs stroked broad fans along Tobias’ cheekbones, he pushed back hard, pressed him flat to the shelves again, and took his breath in one long, renewed, sweeping kiss.

It lasted until they were both panting, gulping at the hot, stale air, and Tobias clutched at the rough seams and hard edges of Anders’ coat, just trying to hold himself upright. Anders nuzzled into his jaw, forehead pressed against his cheek and hands resting on his shoulders, fingers digging into the leather of his dyed hide jerkin.

I’m dead. I’ve died, and this is the Fade. This is the biggest, purpliest desire demon ever, and I don’t care. I don’t care, as long as I never wake up. Oh, Maker, don’t let me wake up....

Tobias breathed deeply, inhaling the scent that clung to the dirty blond hair tickling his nose, and wrapped his arm around the warmth of Anders’ tense, taut form. The dry remnants of the burn on his palm scraped painfully against the back of the terrible coat, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore, except this; except them. Anders’ breath puffed against his skin, raising shivers and intense prickles of desire where warmth met sweat, and heat met softness, and Tobias held him tighter, closing his eyes so he didn’t have to consider the fact that, at some point, reality might have to seep back in between them.

It came all too quickly, of course. From the clinic, the sound of voices and the clatter of bedpans... and then Saryha’s voice, surprisingly near to the cupboard that held them.

“Messere?” she called uncertainly. “Messere, I’m sorry, but I need some help....”

Tobias screwed his eyes shut even tighter, biting down hard on the urge to yell and cuss, while Anders let out a desperate groan through gritted teeth. He pressed his forehead against Tobias’ neck as he leaned into him, apparently trying to will the rest of the world to go away, and those long-fingered hands folded into fists over the buckles of his jerkin.
“Just a minute!” he called back, his voice slightly croaky and his tone snappish.

Tobias couldn’t help grinning, even as Anders started to lever himself away, and he stroked the back of that warm blond head.

Well, that ought to convince everyone we were fucking in here….

His vision was blurred when he opened his eyes, spotted with stars and smears of blue in the grainy half-light. Anders stared apologetically at him, guilty and wide-eyed, his lips damp and slightly reddened. He looked every bit as wicked and wonderful as he used to, those nights in Varric’s suite, though there was no cheeky smile here, no glib façade.

“It’s all right,” Tobias promised, though he wasn’t entirely sure what ‘it’ was.

“This is a terrible idea,” Anders said softly, his hands still resting on Tobias’ jerkin, fingers flexing a little against the supple leather as the sound of clattering coppers and the pregnant woman’s coughing filtered through from the clinic.

Tobias shook his head gently. “No, it isn’t.”

“Hawke—”

He bit his lip as those dark eyes rose to meet his, as full and vivid as wide-blown flowers nodding their heads at the last days of summer. Fear twisted a cold blade in his chest, and he lifted one hand to Anders’ jaw, fingers half-curled on the hope, the promise of a caress.

Don’t do this. Don’t bring me this far, just to take it all away. I couldn’t bear it. I truly couldn’t—

“I can’t do this,” Anders murmured plaintively, though the words were barely audible beneath thick, needy breaths, and he made no effort to pull any further away.

“Yes, you can.” Tobias rubbed his thumb along the hard, warm line of Anders’ cheekbone, his lips aching for just one more touch. “If you want. Do you want to?”

He didn’t really want to frame the words, he realised. The possibilities were too frightening. Here he was, with this infuriating man against him, desire branding his flesh like hot coals… and yet, if Anders told him no, he’d go without a word. He would probably never forgive him—or himself—but he’d go, and it would be the end of everything. He’d never felt more vulnerable.

Anders shook his head: an infinitesimal, stifled movement. His stubble scratched at Tobias’ palm, and those long-fingered hands flexed against his chest. “I—”

“Messere!” Saryha called again from the clinic, and a murderous look flickered behind Anders’ eyes.

“Let me come to you,” he said, smoothing his hands over the green leather that encased Tobias’ chest. “Tonight, once I’ve— Let’s find somewhere. What d’you say?”

Tobias blinked, unsure he’d really heard those words, or really seen the glittering, focused desire in Anders’ face.

“Wh…?” he managed, his mouth dry and his tongue flabby. “Uh….”

“Here’s no good.” Anders glanced towards the ramshackle door, leaning heavily on its hinges and barely affording them any privacy at all. “Neither’s your place. Tavern. I’ll come, soon as I can. I promise.” He grinned suddenly, the whites of his eyes and his teeth pale flashes in the gloom, and his
whole face lit up with that luscious, beautiful wickedness. “We can… talk. If you like.”

Tobias’ brain finally kicked into gear, and he squeezed out a lop-sided, incredulous smile. The whole world had apparently fractured, and nothing made sense anymore, but it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter one tiny bit.

“Not the Hanged Man,” he murmured, his hands slipping from Anders’ coat as they parted, briskly brushing themselves down and attempting not to look like two furtive youths who’d been grappling in the bushes. “Ten Bells, by the docks. D’you know it?”

Anders nodded. “By the Port Authority office?”

“That’s it. I’ll… I’ll wait there.”

Tobias felt oddly small and nervous as he made that promise, perhaps because he was aware that he would have to leave here, have to walk away, have to make his way through the night and wait for Anders to follow… and to believe that he would.

He was terrified of being wrong.

Anders nodded again, as if he was reassuring himself. “Right. I— Midnight? Ish. I think. I….” He gestured hopelessly towards the clinic, the patients, and whatever chaos Saryha had got herself into. “I’ll try.”

“Try” isn’t “promise”, love. Please. Don’t set me up to fall. I’ll break if you do.

Tobias knew better than to argue, so he nodded and tried to will his breeches to slacken. Anders reached clumsily past him, grabbing at the bottles on the shelf behind him, and he held them up with a sheepish grin.

“Tincture of embrium,” he said, edging past, towards the door.

Tobias snorted softly, wincing as Anders pushed the crooked wood aside, and the second-hand candlelight from the clinic seeped back in to sting at his eyes. The bastard had probably known where they were the whole time.
Chapter 32

It didn’t feel real. None of it really felt like it could have happened, but Tobias found himself out in the tunnels of Darktown anyway, picking through the night’s detritus and the huddled bodies of the destitute with the biggest, most ridiculous smile on his face… and the taste of Anders’ mouth still on his.

He’d slipped out of the clinic while Anders helped Saryha get one of the elderly men back into bed. Her cries for help had come because—too proud to shit in a bedpan—he’d wanted to get up and use the chamberpot, and then he’d got stuck. Tobias supposed he should be grateful for it, in a way. Without the interruption, he wasn’t sure he would ever have managed to prise himself out of Anders’ embrace. He still sort of wished he hadn’t; the world felt cold and his arms felt empty, and he didn’t really want to be doing anything except kissing that impossible, infuriating man.

He was heading for the stairway that led up to the old barracks and, from there, to the docks and The Ten Bells tavern, and he clutched at the hope that Anders would do as he said and meet him there; clutched it to him like a worn, faded rag. He wanted to believe it was true, wanted to believe that they could meet there and pick up where they’d left off, or at least work out what this new development meant, but it was hard to feel secure in anything after so long spent chasing in circles.

Tobias’ footsteps quickened as he hit the dirt-packed alleyways of Lowtown, following the salty, tar-stained breeze that rolled in off the docks. It was dark; late, but he couldn’t be quite sure how late. He squinted up at the cool, star-pricked sky, the sickle of a thin moon hidden by wisps of cloud and, as if on cue, the Chantry bells pealed out ten o’clock.

Back in Lothering, the chantry only used to ring its bells for services, and for the start and end of the agricultural workday. Between dawn, noon, dusk and midnight, you were pretty much on your own, such was the standard of rural time-keeping, and he had to admit that the city ways had their advantages.

Two hours seemed like a long time to wait, though.

The Ten Bells, like a lot of the taverns on the dockside, stayed open later than most of the Lowtown bars, and almost as late as the Hightown brothels. The intention was to catch the smugglers, night-blades, sailors and rum-runners on their business, and to provide both booze and beds where needed. As such, the Bells was a basic but well-stocked inn, with none of the impartiality or convivial cheekiness of Fat Molly’s place, and none of the nosiness of places like The Hanged Man. The Coterie had eyes on it, and a stake in the profits, as far as Tobias knew, but that didn’t worry him. Not tonight, anyway.

He slipped through the door and into the dimly lit tavern, his skin chilled from the night air and his eyes screwed up as he adjusted to the light of thick tallow candles, and a single lantern burning on the bar. A girl with thick curves, red hair, and heavily ruched skirts nodded at him in greeting as she passed by with two mugs of ale in her hands, and gave him a gap-toothed grin.

“Evenin’, serah,” she said cheerfully. “Get you what you fancy?”

_Unlikely_, Tobias thought, before reminding himself that was catty and slightly mean. He nodded, glancing around the rather quiet bar… not many people in, and the surge of activity that came on the docks after the Port Authority men were long gone, and after the guard patrols had been by, wouldn’t happen until later.
He nodded. “Brandy. Antivan, if you’ve got it.”

Her brown eyes widened a little—*ooh, big spender here*—and she nodded towards the bar, where a large, fleshy man with an impressive red moustache was pouring beers for a couple of seedy-looking gents in thick cloaks.

“You’ll want to talk to Da’, serah,” she said, the Starkhaven lilt in her voice growing more pronounced. “He keeps it in the back.”

The man looked up at Tobias’ approach, and mirrored his daughter’s glimmer of surprise at the request. He looked pleased by it, though… and Tobias realised why when he heard the price.

*Maker’s balls! Bloody Coterie and their bloody profiteering….*

“Fine,” he said, reaching for his coin purse and letting the dagger at his hip be noticed, both by the barkeep and the two men at the end of the bar, who were already peering in his direction. “Leave the bottle. I… I’m waiting for a friend. And I, uh, I need a room, too,” he added, as casually as he could manage.

Did he? Was that how tonight was going to end up?

His stomach wobbled at the possibility, and it amazed him that it could seem so fast. It wasn’t fast. He’d been aching to be with Anders for so long, and Maker knew—if it was going to happen—it had better come hard on the heels of that little interlude at the clinic. It better happen fast, before Anders had a chance to change his mind, or to convince himself once again that his denials were some noble method of saving them both pain.

*Let me come to you.* That was what he’d said. That… implied something, didn’t it? Anders had been the one to say it should be a tavern. He wanted privacy. He wanted—well, he wanted what they both wanted, Tobias supposed. And kisses like that couldn’t really be denied. He ran his tongue over the back of his teeth, the memory of that embrace still fresh enough in his mind to make his skin prickle and his cock twitch.

He glanced at the men at the end of the bar as the innkeeper went to fetch his brandy. Everything about them screamed Coterie, though their faces weren’t familiar, and Tobias smiled thinly at them, hoping his show of coin didn’t attract too much attention. That was the last thing he wanted tonight.

“He y’are, serah,” the Starkhavener said, standing a green glass bottle and two scuffed pewter mugs on the bar, along with a heavy brass key. “You’re in luck. We’ve a nice wee chamber free. Second from the right, down the back there. Yours ‘til the sixth hour tomorrow.”

“We’re. Thanks.” Tobias slid a handful of coins across the bar, pocketed the key, and took the brandy and mugs to a table in the corner of the tavern, where he could sit with his back against the dingy wall, and watch the door.

~*O*~

He slouched there for what felt like endless hours, his back wedged into the corner and his fingers curled protectively around his mug. The greasy candlelight picked at the bottle’s fat shoulders, turning the dark green glass to gold, and Tobias wasn’t sure he could bear the waiting.

*He won’t come. He’ll be at the clinic now, telling himself he can’t leave his patients. The pregnant woman’s probably gone into labour, or someone’s dying, or Saryha can’t manage on her own again, or… or something. It’s always going to be something.*
It certainly felt like it. If it wasn’t templars or revolutionaries, it was the grim mundanity of life itself, and all the boring details and responsibilities that they both had to tend to.

Tobias wrinkled his nose and knocked back his second small glass of brandy. Its familiar, comforting burn scored the back of his throat, but didn’t quite eradicate the ghost of Anders’ mouth on his. He held it there like a shield, he supposed, desperate to etch those beautiful moments into his memory, in case they ended up being all he ever had.

In the distance, drifting down from Hightown, the faint toll of the Chantry bells called midnight. Tobias frowned as he counted the strikes, and the tavern door failed to open.

Anders wasn’t coming. He poured himself another shot of brandy, and tried to quash the last stubborn little bits of hope that burst in his chest, because it was easier to believe he wouldn’t come than to think he might and just keep on waiting… always waiting.

*I’m not being fair. He said he can’t. He was right when he said I have no idea what it’s like, with Justice. I don’t. Is it worth him driving himself mad, just because of what I want? Do I want to do that to him?*

The rationalisations didn’t help. Tobias stared glumly at the brandy, waiting for the drink he’d already taken to start warming his limbs and giving him that comforting, slightly dizzy head. He was annoyingly sober, he realised. Either that, or kissing Anders had made him feel drunk enough that the booze didn’t make a blind bit of difference.

It was still fairly quiet. The Coterie boys were still there, another few dockers and runners had come in, and the bar had started to fill up to the point that Tobias was beginning to wonder if it would really provide as much privacy as he’d hoped. He stifled a yawn. The long day—and everything it had brought with it—had started to catch up with him, but he wasn’t ready for it to be over. Not by a long shot.

Over by the bar, a couple of the dockers were talking quietly—some exchange that shouldn’t have been happening, Tobias guessed, watching the unsubtle passing of a coin purse between them—and the door creaked open. The barmaid passed by his table, wooden tray in her hands, and he squinted past the ruched folds of her skirt to see a weary-looking figure step through into the tavern.

Tobias tensed at once, picking out the details, recognising every single one as it swam into focus: the stupid coat, the stubby ponytail, the slouchy boots and the worn-out look…. He felt a broad, stupid grin seeping over his face, but there wasn’t much he could do about it.

Anders edged into the tavern furtively, his eyes narrowed after the darkness outside. He glanced around the bar, his gaze finding Tobias on its first sweep of the room, and he smiled softly. That small, simple expression kindled more warmth in him than Tobias knew what to do with, and he couldn’t have tried to rein in his grin if he’d wanted to. Anders started to cross the room, his strides measured and almost a little tentative. He looked tired, Tobias noted, but that ragged anxiety had gone from his face, leaving behind it only a little tightness and uncertainty. Had he shaved? He did look tidier, definitely, and as he drew up to the table, some hint of a sweet, spiced scent seemed to cling to him, beneath the tavern’s greasy tallow-and-straw bouquet, and the wet-dog smell of his coat.

Tobias felt suddenly foolish for not taking the opportunity to call for a basin or a tub and scrub up a bit. Maker, if they *did*… how long had it been since he’d had a proper wash? The thoughts paled away quickly, embarrassment sinking beneath his own mental chastisements, because it wasn’t as if anything was a foregone conclusion. Yes, he *wanted* to—by Andraste’s flaming crotch, he wanted to—but, after everything, was it going to be as simple as that? One desperate, cathartic kiss and, *bang!*
everything was fixed, they could just throw themselves on the nearest mattress and go at it?

Even so, he could hardly deny the desire that burned between them. It was written plainly in Anders’ face as he stood there, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, biting his lower lip and looking mildly worried. Tobias couldn’t deny the things threading their way across his mind, either: the things that had occupied his dreams for far too long, and the fantasies that had warmed his empty nights.

“S— uh. Sit down?” he offered, falling over the simplest of words and feeling like a complete fool as he pushed the so far unused mug across the table.

Anders looked at the bottle of brandy and arched one brow reproachfully.

“Boozing again?” he asked, amusement playing beneath the words as he lowered himself into the chair opposite Tobias’.

Tobias shrugged. The rough wooden table, with its years of pitting and scratches, and its dark patina of spilled beer and other, probably much less salubrious stains, seemed like a very inadequate barrier between them.

“I was starting to think you weren’t coming,” he said quietly, tearing his gaze from Anders’ to fill his mug with a tiny measure of brandy.

“Justice was… difficult,” Anders said, those long fingers curling around the scratched pewter. “But I wasn’t going to let him stop me again.”

Again?

Tobias glanced up as he set the bottle down, and met a hard, deep determination in those beautiful dark eyes. Candlelight suited Anders, he thought; it touched him gently, and eased some of the weariness away from his face. It softened him with loose shadows, and picked at the warmth in the blond of his hair.

Being able to look at the man like this was good, too… being allowed to watch him, to look at him with open appreciation and no fear of reproach. In fact, Anders returned his gaze in exactly the same way and, as they sat there, quietly devouring each other across the table, Tobias felt a flush rising in his cheeks. It was ridiculous, he told himself—he was no innocent, and this was no sweet, naïve crush—but he couldn’t help himself. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at him the way Anders was looking at him… if they ever had. After all, nothing really felt quite this way before.

A knowing curve touched the very corner of Anders’ lips, his eyes full of lust and promise and, beneath the table, the weight of his boot nudged at Tobias’ ankle.

The breath caught in Tobias’ chest then, and the air seemed to crush itself against his skin in some strange, sudden realisation. For the first time since he’d left Lothering—the first time in many years, in fact—there was someone he wasn’t paying to want him, someone who actually desired him. The fact it was Anders—the fact it was someone whom he wanted just as much—seemed to circumvent all known laws of probability, and Tobias still wasn’t sure how to cope with the intensity of this mad, reciprocal… thing.

It felt so unreal that it was hard to breathe.

“I, uh, I got a room,” he said, inwardly cursing himself for how stupid and awkward that sounded. “For if we wanted—uh. For… privacy. I mean—”
Anders smiled, and it was one of those wonderful smiles, all full of wit and wickedness. “Privacy would be good,” he agreed, his voice low and mild. “For… talking.”

Tobias’ gaze followed every muscle of his face, tracking every sliver of cynicism and double entendre. “Yeah,” he managed, trying to ignore the heat that was pooling in his cheeks… and in his crotch. “We need to—”

“We should have talked a long time ago,” Anders said demurely, clearly enjoying the game. “Shouldn’t we? I’m sorry I kept putting it off.”

Tobias shrugged, realising how aware he was of the air on his skin, and of the confines of his jerkin. His lungs ached, and his head felt light. “You had your reasons.” He studied Anders carefully, watching the intentness in his face, and that hungry gleam in his eyes. “And, er, I guess we’ve both had time to, you know, think about what to say.”

“Oh, yes,” Anders answered without breaking eye contact, and the table almost seemed to shimmer between them, as if this incredible tension could scorch the air, like the heat haze over a desert. “I’ve had dozens of conversations with you in my head.”

Wow. All right. Enough. I can’t take any more.

Tobias swallowed. His mouth was dry. His tongue still tasted of brandy, and he’d never felt this drunk before, though the booze wasn’t to blame.

“D’you want to…?” He jerked his head towards the back of the tavern, where a narrow corridor led to the few rooms the Bells offered.

They were mostly used for particularly clandestine smuggling business, low-level Coterie meetings, and hot-bunking for dockers and other people whose affairs left them little time and money to fritter away on luxuries… but, right now, all Tobias wanted was somewhere set apart, somewhere quiet and private. He wouldn’t have cared if it was a hole in the ground, as long as there was a door they could shut.

Anders lifted his mug, that faint look of uncertainty still clinging to his face as he knocked the brandy back in a single gulp. He swallowed without a trace of discomfort—testament to the drinker he’d once been, Tobias supposed, before Justice started dictating all the pleasures he wasn’t allowed to enjoy—and nodded.

“Maker, yes.”

~o~O~o~

Tobias was frightened of falling as they made their way to the room, and frightened of dropping the candle he got from the barmaid, greasy rivulets of wax pooling in the brass saucer that held it. The flame wavered in front of him, and his knees felt weak, but the brandy barely seemed to have touched him. Nothing seemed to touch him as he led Anders to the room, and possibilities ached in the air. Neither of them spoke.

He closed the door behind him, leaning against the heavy wood and feeling its grain beneath his palm, like that could ground him in the moment. The candle trembled in his grasp.

The room was small and sparsely furnished, with just a wooden washstand, a rather inexactly repaired end table that held a stub of candle and a tin plate, a chair, and another small table that might
be used as a desk.

That… and the bed. The bed stood against the middle of the far wall, its rough-hewn timber frame polished by the years to a dark honey colour, making the wood hard to identify. Tobias wondered why part of his brain was suddenly so interested in establishing whether it was ash, oak, or something else, and he supposed this desperate searching for some kind of displacement of thoughts was down to nerves. He did feel nervous. And vaguely nauseous, actually.

The floorboards were bare and slightly dusty; more than slightly, in the corners of the room and along the bottom of the furniture. The place looked like it needed another maid, and he supposed it was probably just the innkeeper and his daughter. He’d never frequented the Bells often enough to know their backstory… just that they paid their protection, and a tithe of the profits to the Coterie as well.

A small window, shuttered and barred against the night, was set into the wall opposite the bed. Tobias couldn’t help imagining the golden sunlight of early morning flooding through it and, oh, Maker, he wanted that. He wanted the whole night, and the day that would come after it, and the day after that… and every day that followed it.

He caught his breath as a droplet of wax dripped off the candleholder, hitting his fingers with a brief, sharp sting, and pulling him away from his tangled thoughts.

Anders smiled at him and, wordlessly, took the candleholder from his grasp moved over to the end table, and set it down atop the tin plate. The dim glow pooled out, filling most of the room and softening the edges of the shadows, and Tobias tried to count his breaths, willing his pulse to calm and the world to swing back to some semblance of reality.

It would have been wrong to say he’d dreamed of this moment. The thoughts that had kept him occupied, and frustrated, and clinging to the last shreds of hope had all been easier fantasies. He’d pictured flawless kisses, passionate clinches, hard, energetic fucks and tender intimacy… but not this. Not this strange, silent kind of awkwardness, with Anders standing there in the candlelight, half-shrouded in shadows and golden softness, his lower lip drawn in like he was afraid, and yet every bit of him tight with anticipation and desire.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t come?” he asked, his voice barely grazing the air.

Tobias winced, wishing he hadn’t said that. He didn’t want there to be any hint of distrust between them, any breath of fractured faith. He shrugged. “I don’t know. I wasn’t sure.”

“No?” Anders started to cross the room, the feathers at his shoulders each lined with a soft corona of candlelight, and each step seemed heavy with the last of his uncertainty. Whatever he might have said to the contrary, it was clear nothing about tonight had been easy for him. “Why not?”

Tobias’ fingers twitched lightly at his sides, itching to reach out, hungry to hold him again. He couldn’t drag his gaze away, though just the act of looking was too much.

“I was afraid,” he said quietly. “Afraid you’d think it was a mistake, or… or you’d find some reason to stay away. I don’t know.”

Anders shook his head as he drew nearer, bringing with him that scent of soot and elfroot, and that light spice that lay beyond it. “Hm. It’s a bit late for that, isn’t it?”

“It’s hard to tell with you.”

Perhaps that was a low blow, but Anders didn’t seem to mind. He smiled sadly, his steps creaking on
the worn floorboards. “You can’t say I didn’t warn you, Hawke. I’m probably not going to be good for your health, you know.”

Tobias shrugged. “So?”

Anders’ melancholy little smile broke into a grin, and that was enough for him. Tobias pushed away from the door to meet him, closing the last remaining inches between them, and sliding his hand alongside Anders’ jaw.

Those dark eyes softened, growing hazy and deep the way he’d wanted to see them do for so long, and Tobias leaned in slowly, gently, making every facet of the movement count. A brief, tremulous breath broke against his lips, and he felt Anders’ touch on his arm, fingers sliding up to circle the curve of his bicep, skin-to-skin and palm to warm, solid muscle.

If their first kiss, back in the clinic, had been a desperate catharsis, a volcanic release of desire, this was a carefully considered proposal; a lip-promise weighed and meticulously executed. Lips touched delicately, softly: just small, repetitive brushes of exploration and negotiation. He felt Anders’ other arm slide around his waist, and felt long fingers rise to stroke his nape. Shivers of pleasure trailed Tobias’ spine, and he let his approval burst against Anders’ lips in a soft, low moan.

Slowly, the kiss deepened into a gentle rhythm. Everything was exploration, negotiation… the lingering, subtle exchanges of enquiry and permission. It was intoxicating, yet comforting, and Tobias lost himself a little in how easy and natural it felt.

Of course, the sweetness didn’t keep the heat at bay entirely and, before long, the sheer weight of need was lapping around them again.

His fingers knotted themselves in Anders’ hair, beginning to tug it free of its binding as his lips ground against that full, hot mouth. He tasted of mint leaves, Tobias realised: a delicate framing to the weight and heat of his power, every pulse of it beating in the kiss. In anyone else, it would have scared him—too big, too wild, like the whole breadth of the Fade, untamed—but this was Anders. There was that underlying spice, that distinct taste and heat and solidity that, somehow, was him… and nothing could ever, would ever, diminish that. Nothing at all.

Tobias shivered a little at the feel of those long fingers caressing the back of his neck, and pressed closer, annoyed by the stifling confines of clothes. He wanted Anders to feel the lines of his body, to know that he was the cause of all this insistent lust, and to be aware of every flicker of flesh as Tobias hardened against him. It was a gnawing ache of want, of wanting everything all at once; to tease with soft, chaste kisses, to tear at each other with lovers’ hunger, to fuck hard and rough, and sweet and slow… to bury himself in Anders’ body, and to find out what it was like to give himself over completely, too. Tobias’ head spun with it, and his lips cleaved to Anders’ again, eager and impatient.

“Maker…!” Anders muttered as they parted, both breathless and flushed. He grinned widely, his wrists crossed behind Tobias’ neck as he let out a small, delighted laugh.

Tobias couldn’t help grinning in return, partly because Anders’ smile was so bloody infectious, and partly because this still didn’t seem real. A few hours ago, he’d been sluicing out coppers and resigning himself to a lifetime of being the healer’s general dogsbody. Now, here they were, and, for the second time that night, Anders had taken his breath away and kissed him senseless. After so very long—all that time filled up with waiting and wanting, and trying to quash the threads of frustration—the fact that it had taken so little to get here should have stunned him, Tobias supposed. He should have been amazed at how easily they’d fallen into each other, how quickly they’d moved from the clinic to this tiny room, and yet he wasn’t.
After all, not a single part of it had been easy. He could feel the last traces of that tension in Anders’ shoulders, and see how hard he’d fought to be here in those beautiful, hazy eyes.

The appalling coat was stiff and rough, but Tobias slid the hand not looped around Anders’ shoulders beneath its lapels, seeking to unfasten it and to find the telltale buttons and laces of the clothes beneath. Anders grinned afresh, leaning back a little to make it easier for him.

Oh, Maker…. Come on, hands. Don’t fail me now. Stop shaking.

“Justice doesn’t approve of my obsession with you,” Anders admitted, as if sharing a secret.

Tobias’ fingers stilled briefly on the first of the buckles he’d encountered. “Oh?”

Obsession? Is that what this is?

He let the corner of his mouth curl a little. Even at his most unnervingly intense, Anders’ enthusiasm still made his gut flip… almost as much as the thought of Justice having an opinion did.

“He believes you’re a distraction.” Anders smiled timidly and reached down to undo his coat. “It is one of the few things on which he and I disagree.”

“Ah. Really? That’s… um. Right.”

Tobias cocked a wary eyebrow. Intoxicating as this moment was, he still found the concept of Anders’… extra passenger, so to speak… unnerving. To think of Justice there, all the time, watching and experiencing life in a world he had no place in, watching—

Oh, Maker. Watching us. That’s just creepy.

He tried not to think about it. That got a little easier when Anders divested himself of the appalling coat, breaking their embrace to shuck it off completely and toss it onto the nearby chair, leaving just his shirt, trousers, and the assortment of belts and scrips at his hips. Tobias obliged with eager fingers to help remove those inconveniences, and maybe he was a distraction—or maybe Anders was—because it was too damn easy to fall into kissing him again.

At last, with the laces of his shirt loosened and his mouth reddened with kisses, Anders tugged the heavy linen over his head, and Tobias was rewarded with his first glimpse of pale flesh, unclothed so damn slowly as the fabric rode up over belly, abdomen, chest… finally to be pulled off in a tangle and dropped to the floor.

They’d backed over to the bed or, more accurately, Anders had somehow managed to back him towards it—elegantly, he thought, because he hadn’t even noticed it was happening—and Tobias folded to the lumpy, sagging mattress as it nudged him in the backs of his knees. He sat down heavily, staring up at that lean, sallow frame, and it was hard to breathe through the tightness in his throat and the hum of want in his blood.

Anders was lighter built than him, but not by much. Darktown showed on his body, though: the rawness of his elbows and shoulders, with joints so close to the skin, and the rangy spareness of his flesh that came more from deprivation than nature. It didn’t matter. That wasn’t to say Tobias didn’t notice it; he did, and every proud rib and hollow clavicle dug at his heart, because in his ignorance he somehow hadn’t thought it was this bad.

It all goes to them, doesn’t it? All the money for food, and medicine, and bandages… everything goes on your patients, and you still put milk down for cats. Oh, love, when did you stop believing you deserved as much as them?
He didn’t want Anders to think he was shocked or put off, but that wasn’t the only reason he reached out. Need propelled Tobias’ hands as he palmed his way over the slim, firm planes of Anders’ body, caressing the lines of his ribs, and learning the lees and peaks of his flesh. He was beautiful: warm, strong, and so eager. His back arched with each touch and he ran one long-fingered hand through Tobias’ hair as he smiled down at him, short, blunt nails strafing his scalp.

Tobias carried on his exploration, entranced by the feel and the scent of Anders’ skin, and the promise of everything that lay beneath his heavy trousers. He folded his fingers over their waistband, shooting a sly smirk up at the healer before he pressed a warm, hard kiss to an interesting spot about two inches above his navel, where the skin dipped ever so slightly, pulled in around a small crescent of white, puckered skin: the last trace of something that, once, must have been a bad injury. Anders pulled a breath over his teeth, and Tobias glanced up, silently questioning.

The fingers wound in his hair gave a gentle tug, and the corner of Anders’ mouth curled. “Genlock,” he said, by way of explanation, his voice husky and a little cracked. “Deep Roads, back when I was with the Wardens. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Seems you end up finding all my scars.”

Tobias had no idea what to say to that… and he didn’t trust himself to speak when Anders was looking at him that way, so he just grinned and slid his hands up Anders’ back, enjoying the play of flesh beneath his fingers. He let his touch wander happily, lips dawdling a pleasant progress across the twin rosy peaks of small, neat nipples, then down the soft, lean lines of ribs, and the pale, smooth plane of Anders’ belly. He was incredibly responsive, flexing at the slightest touch as if every sensation was new.

Maybe it was, Tobias supposed. Maybe it all felt different with… Justice on board. He didn’t really want to think about it. He didn’t really want to think at all. This was too long-awaited a moment to load down with anything except feeling… except being.

He ran his tongue over the salt-sweet line of Anders’ breastbone, rearing up from the bed a little bit to reach, pushing into him with an insistent need to feel, to kiss, to touch.

Anders shuddered, fingers digging into his shoulders, body trembling at the touch, and Tobias voiced a small, happy moan, letting the sound reverberate against the healer’s skin. He couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face as Anders whimpered softly, and delight filled him at the prospect of how incredibly easy it would be to make this man writhe with pleasure, using just his tongue.

Anders looked down at him, lips slightly parted, and shook his head incredulously. “You’ve got far too many clothes on,” he chided, tugging at the shoulders of Tobias’ jerkin. “Come on. Off.”

Tobias grinned and rose from the bed, happy to help him shed the thing, and eager to divest himself of everything else. Their mouths met again, kisses wrapped around kisses in ever-present hunger, as if neither of them could really manage not touching the other. Fingers fought with fastenings, and Tobias grunted in frustration, because there were too many buckles, too many fiddly obstacles for hands that could have been better employed elsewhere, but it didn’t matter, because finally he was bare-chested and Anders was looking at him with open admiration, that wicked mouth curled into a hungry leer.

“Maker’s cock,” the healer murmured, allowing an appreciative breath to puff through his lips as the dyed hide jerkin hit the floorboards. “Look at you…..”
Tobias arched a teasing brow, and tried to pretend that the light, skimming touch against his chest didn’t make his nerves stand up and sing.

“Hmm?”

“You’re gorgeous… you know that?”

The words—the roughness to Anders’ voice, the trace of some other man, some other time so much freer and riper than this—squeezed a grin from Tobias, and those lean, clever hands worked in swift, eager strokes across the planes of his chest. He pushed back against the touch, encouraging it, as if Anders could learn him by fingertips alone, and heat seemed to run in channels of fire in the places their skin met.

Anders liked muscles, he decided, as those long fingers curled around the swells of his shoulders, and another kiss joined their mouths. He certainly seemed to, although Tobias wasn’t sure if it was the muscles themselves, or the general solidity of another man’s body. That was something he’d always enjoyed; the feel of hardness, and the mirror of angles… a body like one’s own, and yet unlike.

“Oh,” he murmured softly, as Anders broke from his mouth and began to kiss his way along his jaw.

Tobias caught at the back of his head, knotting his fingers in the tangle of mostly unbound dirty blond hair. It wasn’t that long—perhaps just a little more than jaw-length—but it was warm, and the smell of boiled elfroot and soot seemed to fill the air between them, along with whatever oil or herbal water Anders had splashed on himself before he came here. The fact he’d done so—the effort, however brief, he’d taken over his appearance, readying himself for this meeting—was oddly exciting to Tobias.

“Fuck,” he muttered, at the feel of Anders’ mouth trailing down his throat, the soft heat of his tongue creating tiny shivers of pleasure on wet, sensitised skin.

“Gimme a minute,” Anders said, somewhat muffled, and they both snorted and spluttered: a silly, warm, intimate humour that bloomed so sweetly between them.

As the laughter faded, his lips latched to stubbled skin once more, and Tobias caught his breath, his head rolling back and his eyes fluttering closed. Strong, lean hands took hold of his shoulders—keeping him steady, keeping him grounded—as that beautiful mouth moved lower.

Anders’ teeth grazed his collarbone, his breath a hot knife on the scooped hollow of skin there, tongue darting out to flick at it as his mouth passed along its path. Tobias voiced a quiet moan and licked his lips, as if he could taste the salt of his own skin… as if Anders’ every touch was his touch, his kiss, and the boundaries between their own experiences, even their own bodies, could begin to blur.

Anders’ tongue slipped, wide and wet, down his chest, and then those pliant, warm lips closed around Tobias’ left nipple, and he gasped hoarsely.

His breath hissed between his teeth, his back arching involuntarily into the embrace. He pushed his fingers into Anders’ hair, and those dark eyes rose to meet his, full of so many different things. There was lust there, and hope, and even a strange, guarded kind of nervousness.

Tobias swallowed, his throat feeling tight and rough. He didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to give Anders any opportunity to panic or back out… but there were things he couldn’t leave unsaid. He knew that, though he had no idea how to say them.
Anders straightened up, as responsive as ever as Tobias reached for the waistband of his heavy trousers, his hands trembling a little as he began to work at the fastenings. Anders barely seemed to be breathing at all, the slender planes of his stomach drawn tight. Tobias glanced anxiously at him, fingers still clumsy on the ties of the thick fabric, and he was consumed with fear that Anders might be about to tell him to stop.

“This—” Tobias broke off, hearing the choked roughness in his voice, and cleared his throat, trying to make himself sound as if he wasn’t about to die of want and panic. “Um. This is all right, isn’t it? You’re…?”

“I’m fine,” Anders assured him, his eyes glistening in the candle’s sphere of warm light. They seemed so dark, like voids of desire, and yet full of so much heat and affection. “Touch me? Please.”

Tobias’ mouth turned dry, his throat bobbing as he tried to locate and form a response beyond ‘mmmmrghgh’. His hands were clumsy suddenly… for all his deftness, all his lockpicking and light-fingered skills, it was all he could do to free Anders from the confines of his clothes. The fact the man was apparently hard as a rock didn’t make it easier, but did prove that they had one more thing in common.

“S’almost like you’re pleased to see me,” Tobias observed as the heavy trousers slid past Anders’ knees.

Already bending over to wrench off his boots and trousers, Anders glowered up at him, the heat in his eyes enough to sear skin.

“Shut up,” he muttered, a flush rising along his cheekbones. “Hypocrite.”

Tobias wanted to say something clever in response, but all the blood had rushed from his body, pouring into that one concentrated part of his anatomy, that achingly hard, impatient part of him, and his head was nothing but stars and breathless anticipation.

“Point taken,” he mumbled, and set to shedding his own belt, boots, and breeches.

It was a slow, awkward process—more an inelegant peeling of the leather than the quick drop Anders had managed—and he couldn’t stop staring at the healer, fingers tripping over themselves while he gawped at every new exposed piece of skin. Anders caught his eye, caught in exactly the same curious prurience, and they shared more smiles and more warm, sweet laughter… which almost served to paper over the unease.

~o~O~o~

Getting naked had never been so nerve-wracking. With the shedding of his last garments, Tobias’ confidence seemed to fall away, and he was pinned on the strength of his desire, tied to this breathless, nervous need that kept him light-headed and hardly able to put two words together.

He was painfully aware that it had been a long time since he’d been with anyone who didn’t work for Madam Lusine, and it felt fleetingly odd not to be among the threadbare curtains and rose-scented mustiness of the rooms at the Rose, being stripped and washed without even having to think about it. He had to think about this. He couldn’t not think about it, because every glimpse of Anders’ body—his slim hips, his rough, bony knees, and the pale line of a scar that ran down the outside of one slender, golden-haired thigh—made his mouth dry and his hands itch, and there was so much Void-taken awkwardness!

Anders was the one to break it. He made everything so much easier, just with that subtle, warm smile
of his, and the weight of affection in his eyes.

With both of their smallclothes tugged off and discarded, each bared for the other and stranded between vulnerability and power, Anders pulled him in for another kiss. Tobias lost himself to it for a while... just the giddy intensity of sensation and closeness, until he was intensely, inescapably aware of their bodies pressing together, arousal and need mirroring each other in the places they met.

He slid his arms around pale shoulders, fingers digging into the knotted muscles of Anders’ back as his hips flexed, his aching cock seeking the velvet weight beside it.

Anders smiled, and reached down to wrap one hand around both their shafts. His touch made the breath turn to fire in Tobias’ lungs, and he stroked so slowly, so lazily, matching the rhythm of their kisses to those firm, long movements.

Tobias groaned, pressing closer, heat and want welling up in him. Anders tasted so good, felt so incredible, and that grip...! He shivered, gasping as an unfamiliar sensation swathed him. Not just Anders’ touch, not just the silken steel of his cock moving against Tobias’, but the feel of something more, something—

“Andraste’s twat! Wh-what was...?”

“Mmm. Like it?”

Tobias managed a strangled groan of assent, hips twitching needily as his cock nudged deeper into Anders’ grasp. He peered down between them, fascinated by the sight of their bodies so close, their lengths pressed so neatly, so beautifully together, wrapped in that talented hand and sheathed in a gentle pulse of shimmering light.

Magic. It felt... warm, he realised. Comforting, yielding, and just a little strange, like vibrations humming through his flesh, pleasure singing right into the root of his balls.

Anders kissed the corner of his mouth, gently, as if he needed to be coaxed, convinced....

“You’ve never been with another mage, have you?” he asked softly, amusement dancing in the words.

Tobias shook his head, still staring down at his groin. “Nn-nn. Wh...?”

“Shh.” Anders tilted his head, and dropped another kiss to his lips, as subtle as a breath of wind. He grinned. “You’ll see. It can be so good, I promise.”

Tobias didn’t doubt that for a minute. He swelled under Anders’ touch and, with a whimper, reached for his free hand, tugging him towards the bed.

They fell onto the covers together, caught in a tangle of limbs, with the hot, urgent pressure of bodies meeting and mouths panting against each other. His lips stung from so many kisses, but he didn’t want to stop. In that moment, Tobias didn’t care what it meant to be a mage touching a mage. He didn’t give a thought to magic, or position, or repertoire. He even gave up worrying over whether he stank too badly. All that mattered was that he had Anders’ lips on his again. He thrust erratically against the incredible, supple hardness of another cock, his own caught against the perfect vice of thighs and bellies, and it was too good, too fast.

He held on, pressed close, wanted it... wanted everything. Nothing but the pleasure and the pressure, and the feel of this man in his arms, where he should have been since the beginning. His breath rattled in the warm, gasping place between their mouths, a cracked moan of need breaking from him...
as Anders’ teeth scraped the point of his chin. The heat of his lips seared a path down Tobias’ throat, and all he could do was tip his head back, offering all he had and everything he was.

That hot, beautiful mouth brushed close to his ear—Anders was everywhere, was everything—and a ragged, sweat-stained growl wormed its way into Tobias’ consciousness. They were together… moving together, utterly united, and it was all going to be over far quicker than he’d intended, at this rate. He grabbed, grappled, desperate to touch every part of the man on top of him, hands skimming spine, shoulders, thighs, arse, arms… everything he could reach and everything he could hold onto as they rocked and slipped together.

It took a moment before Tobias realised what he could feel blooming between them, and he opened his eyes, frowning in consternation at the shimmer of light that lapped against his skin. He could feel it pulling against him, buzzing in his flesh: the warmth and the familiar silvered pulse of magic—Anders’ power, in all its magnificent, transcendent strength, with that hint of copper and fresh bread—and the answering swell in his own body, rippling through him irresistibly.

It scared him. It was more than he’d ever felt, more than he’d ever done with anyone who knew what he was, let alone who shared the same gifts. He was afraid of letting go, frightened of relinquishing the control he was so used to keeping over himself… afraid of letting his power out.

Tobias gritted his teeth. Every nerve seemed to throb in time to the silvered kisses of light that bathed him, and the places they touched sent up soft, silent sparks. Chests, hips, bellies, legs—and cocks, slick and hard and slipping together in this endless, rhythmic dance—everything was so good, and it was even better when he let go, let his own power flow like the breaths that they shared between kisses.

Anders felt it. He gasped, then smiled, and held tight to Tobias as he thrust against him, letting the magic roll between them until they were shrouded in it, wrapped in the yielding warmth of it as it burst between them, the ripest of forbidden fruits crushed against their skin.

“I’m gonna—” Tobias began, though it didn’t want it to end.

Anders reached down between them. “Not so fast,” he murmured, closing his thumb and forefinger firmly around the base of Tobias’ cock. “Not yet.”

He squeezed, and Tobias groaned as the unbearable pressure swelled, then subsided. Anders kissed his cheek, dropping soft, small words of encouragement against his skin as he brought him back from the edge. Tobias relaxed, allowing him to take charge, but he let out a small moan of disappointment all the same, his hips jutting hungrily against Anders’ hand.

“Greedy,” Anders chastised playfully, brushing another light kiss against his mouth.

Tobias parted his lips, snatching at the all-too-brief contact, wanting to breathe him in, draw him close… wanting everything, all in one hot, searing moment. His eyes closed at the feel of Anders’ mouth on his neck, the heat of his breath raking the sensitive flesh, but it didn’t last. He was about to mourn the loss when he realised Anders was heading lower, working his way down the planes of his chest, his ribs, abdomen, hips, stomach, and—

OhfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckingMakeryes….

He twisted, a little embarrassed at the whimper that broke from him in a raw, desperate expulsion of need, but it was impossible to tell whether Anders had even heard it. Of course, then that incredible mouth engulfed him, and there was nothing but wet heat, and the dark, needling pleasure that swooped so low over him that it folded him up in black-feathered wings and choked away all sense
of anything but how fucking good it felt. Nothing but the simple, beautiful ecstasy that wrung him dry with its intensity.

It was hardly the first time he’d been sucked off, but Anders was mind-blowingly good at it. Tobias lifted his head a little, peering down the length of the bed at the tousled blond head framed by his thighs, the perfect symmetry of flared cheekbones and hollowed-out cheeks, and that beautiful mouth wrapped around his shaft. The candlelight jumped and shivered against Anders’ pale skin, picking at his imperfections and burnishing him in gold.

He seemed to like being watched while he did it. His breath hit Tobias’ groin in short, ticklish bursts, almost like laughter and, when he raised those dark eyes, there was such a look in them… so much tenderness, and lust, and so many more things besides. The intensity of it frightened Tobias a little, but he reached out anyway, fingers lightly touching those frizzy tendrils of dirty blond hair.

Anders moaned around his cock, sending throbbing shivers through his flesh. He cupped Tobias’ balls in one hand, his touch light yet expert, while the distinct pressure of a thumb massaged the sensitive strip behind them, and edged gently back, towards less well-explored territory.

He was relentless, ravenous… ruthless, and apparently not prepared to rest until he’d wreaked all kinds of havoc on Tobias’ body. Not that Tobias himself was complaining. He gave himself over to it, letting Anders have the control he wanted and yielding to the incredible pleasure he offered.

It was impossible to hold on indefinitely, not that Tobias minded. As Anders quickened his pace for the last time, he let go of everything, every semblance of control and shred of reticence, and roared his release into the thick quiet. If there had been noise filtering through from the bar, he hadn’t heard it. He hadn’t taken the slightest notice of anything outside this room since they shut the door behind them and, right now, the whole world could have faded away for all he cared. The moment of his release filled him up in a way he only ever remembered magic doing before; everything melded into one great, cresting swell, full of stars and screaming energy, until he broke upon its edge, and lost himself in the storm. Anders didn’t let go of him once.

After that, silence. The creak of the bed beneath them, the ragged noise of their breathing—even the soft, wet sounds of Anders’ mouth, as he traced a series of shudderingly intense licks and caresses along Tobias’ slick flesh—slowly filtered back into the world as if through a wall of water.

Tobias shivered at the sudden feel of cool air on his shaft, and caught his breath as a small kiss popped at the crease between his groin and thigh. He smiled blearily, and reached out to thread his fingers through Anders’ hair, which now hung loosely—and perhaps a little lankly—around his face.

Anders leaned into the contact, propped on his elbows and grinning back at him with self-satisfied amusement. Tobias let his hand trail down one lean cheek, enjoying the feel of freshly shaved skin beneath his palm, his thumb reaching to swipe gently at reddened, wet lips, and he tried to formulate an entire sentence, admittedly without much success.

“That… I mean, you…. Yeah. Uh. D’you — d’you want…?”

Anders’ grin widened as, pushing himself up on his arms, he began to ease his way up the bed. Tobias edged his legs out of the way, trying to shift as far as he could to allow space for them to share.

“Bit late, really,” Anders murmured, pressing close to him.

Tobias looped an arm around his shoulders, free hand already dipping to investigate what Anders meant. His mouth bowed pensively as he encountered softening flesh, already spent.
“Oh.”

Anders tipped his head and nipped playfully at Tobias’ earlobe.

“You have no idea what seeing you like that does to me,” he murmured, sliding an arm across Tobias’ chest and rolling over, so he lay partially atop him.

Tobias grinned stupidly, washed with an outrageous sense of pride and fulfilment. “Seriously?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Huh.” Tobias’ grin widened and he stared, starry-eyed, at the wooden shutters on the far wall. “Wow.”

A smothered chuckle burst against the hollow of his throat, and the dishevelled mess of Anders’ hair brushed his cheek, hanging down over his face as they met for another slow, tender kiss.

Tobias tasted himself in it; that soapy, musky intensity, perfumed with the metallic hint of magic… his power, and Anders’, he realised. The two of them, mixed up in each other, until it was hard to tell them apart.

Right now, he rather liked that idea.

It lasted a long while, just laying there in a gentle kind of intimacy that seemed almost strange… as if they’d been together for ages. Tobias supposed they had, in a stupid kind of way. All that time, thinking about this, straining and fighting against it: maybe it had just been the next best thing to actually doing it.

He tried handling Anders a bit, hoping to coax him into another round, but he seemed to struggle to get it up, and finally pushed Tobias’ hand away with a smile, a kiss, and some muttering about ‘later’.

There was, Tobias realised, the option of that. There would be other times, other nights… other embraces. This wasn’t just the culmination of their teasing and flirtation; this was a beginning. That thought thrilled him, and he could hardly wipe the grin off his face.

“I’ll hold you to that,” he murmured. “I mean it.”

_Seriously. That was incredible and everything, but I still want the chance to drive you crazy._

And he did. He wanted to tease, touch, kiss… fuck. He wanted mouth and cock and hands and bodies and everything, until Anders exploded just the way he had, hitting the highest reaches of pleasure, and then lying there exhausted after, body pinging like cooling metal.

Anders gave a small, contented sigh and settled against him, legs all tangled up in the blankets and his chin resting on Tobias’ shoulder. Tobias adjusted his position, accommodating him without complaint. Without thinking, he reached up and brushed the hair from Anders’ forehead, tucking the loose strands behind his ear.

Anders gave him a drowsy smile, eyes soft and hazy. He looked younger, Tobias decided. Less careworn. It occurred to him that he didn’t know exactly how old Anders was anyway, but he decided it didn’t matter enough to disturb the peacefulness of the moment by asking.

“You’re going to stay… right?” Anders murmured sleepily. “Don’t go.”
“I’m not going,” he promised, stroking his toes down his lover’s shin.

My lover….

Tobias turned the words over in his mind, and smiled smugly to himself. They felt right. They felt good.

Anders mumbled something that sounded like ‘elbows’ and rolled over, taking most of the blanket with him, burrowing down in it as the night’s cool air pierced the warmth they’d created. He wedged his spine against Tobias’ side, and seemed to be asleep in seconds. He didn’t snore, didn’t fidget… a man used to sleeping in company, Tobias decided, stealthily nicking part of the blanket back and snuggling down beside him.

He pressed a kiss to the back of Anders’ shoulder and, tentatively, let his arm slide around his waist, hand folded loosely against his belly and fingertips just skimming the crest of blond curls he found there. So many times, he’d thought about this, and yet it felt so different to the way he’d imagined.

He’d never thought, for a start, that Anders would have taken charge the way he had. In Tobias’ mind, he’d always needed coaxing, reassuring… even though he’d heard all the gossip about those allegedly scandalous days of debauched promiscuity.

A smile curled his lips as he considered that. Anders’ breathing deepened out, a steady rise and fall, and Tobias allowed himself to edge a little closer, breathing in the scent of his hair. That whiff of elfroot, redblossom salve and soot, all mixed up with sweat and the grime of Darktown. It shouldn’t have started to get him hard again, but it did.

He supposed there’d be time to explore some of those stories he’d heard Anders tell. Tobias had to admit his curiosity had been well and truly piqued by some of them… most of them, in fact.

And then, there was the single, inalienable truth that tonight had brought him: this wasn’t just fucking. And it changed everything.
He didn’t sleep much. The whole night was a sort of pattern of gentle awakenings, as if he needed to keep checking it was all real, and Anders was still there, still next to him.

Some time in the early hours, Tobias woke again. The tavern bed’s thin mattress kept creaking beneath him, and the tangle of limbs and knees they’d lain in had left him with stiff, sore joints. He heard a soft chuckle, and realised Anders was awake too. Lips brushed the back of his neck, and he smiled sleepily into the darkness.

“Hello.”

“Mm.” A small kiss popped against the back of his ear. “Hello, gorgeous.”

Tobias stretched, pleased to discover a welcome warmth, and a very welcome hardness, pressed against him. Anders rubbed his hip, and he caught his breath when the soothing pulse of healing magic bloomed against his skin.

“Oh… that was nice.”

Anders chuckled again, and his hand slipped delicately around Tobias’ waist, fingers skimming his skin and trailing the whispering prickle of magical energy behind them.

“Fu… oh, that’s—Fuck!”

Tobias caught his breath, tensing as the gentle pulse of magic grew sharper, a crackle of jagged pleasure chasing across his flesh. He leaned back into Anders’ embrace, feeling that talented hand splay against his belly, leaving him pressed between the hard lines of the healer’s body and the
warmth of his palm. Sparks danced under those clever fingertips, and they bit into Tobias’ skin in breaths of fire, fizzing away into nothingness a scant moment later, but leaving the most intriguing ache of excitement behind them.

“Ooh. That… that’s the electricity thing?”

“Mm-hm.”

Anders’ fingers drummed a small, cheerful tattoo on the very base of his stomach, the tiniest spark of magical energy earthing itself against the crest of his pubis. Tobias’ cock, already hardening again, twitched in direct and immediate response. He groaned and caught his lower lip between his teeth.

“Ah! Maker’s breath… do it again?”

Anders laughed softly as his touch traced back up Tobias’ torso, sparks dancing behind it.

“You like that?”

“Mmm. S’good. Please?”

A choked, raw gasp left him as the crackle of sparks kissed his skin, nimble fingers scraping sharp blue fire across his chest, first tugging lightly on a nipple, then lathing a line down his body. The sparks flared a bright, searing turquoise in the darkness, brief but virulent, and printed jagged outlines of dancing light on the shadows that echoed behind Tobias’ eyes.

He growled roughly, jerking against the sudden jolt that burst beside his ribs. Warmth filled him, his skin positively humming beneath that coursing, ticklish flicker that was somewhere between pain and pleasure.

“Too much?” Anders enquired gently, planting a kiss on the point of his shoulder.

“Nn-nn. More… please?”

A dry chuckle rippled against his skin.

“Another time.”

Tobias pulled a face in the darkness, but he was too full of pleasure and of the prospect of further lechery to really sulk. He rolled over and, notwithstanding the bumps of knees and elbows and the awkward clashing of bodies—made pleasantly intimate by the soft laughter that passed between them—it was deliciously easy to draw Anders close. Deliciously, comfortably easy to wrap his arms around him, and slide into his embrace in return… and to lie there, braided together, as Anders pressed a gentle kiss to his mouth.

“I owe you something,” Tobias murmured, reaching down between them. “Make a light? Wanna see your face.”

Anders let a soft breath huff through his lips—it was hard to tell if it was pleasure or disbelieving laughter—but he pulled a little ball of magelight from the air and sent it spinning above them, throwing a sudden pool of pale illumination over them both. It was a stale, unnatural kind of light with little of the warmth of candles, but Tobias rather liked the way it hit Anders’ body, lengthening him out and turning his eyes to dark, glittering shadows.

He took his time, working slowly down the bed, easing his path with kisses and slow touches, unearthing every bit of the man from the blankets like a prize. Anders lay back and enjoyed himself,
his pleasure as vocal as a two-crown whore—but apparently a great deal more genuine—and, as before, he seemed so sensitive to every tiny touch.

Tobias tipped his chin slightly and pressed a kiss to Anders’ taut belly, enjoying the way he flinched, as if even that small contact was a surprise. He tugged the last drapery of the covers away, exposing the hard cock that had been such a tempting weight against his collarbone, and almost caught his breath at how fucking beautiful it was. It stood to reason, of course: this was Anders, and everything he was, everything he did, held beauty in Tobias’ eyes. He bent his head again, tracking slowly towards the object of his desire, taking so much damn time that Anders swore and squirmed against the rumpled bedclothes.

Tobias had always felt there was something deeply fulfilling about having another man’s cock in his mouth. It wasn’t just the feeling that, by that act, he held the other so completely—though that much was true—but it was also a gift of beautiful, intense pleasure, and it spoke to a raw hunger in him that was only assuaged by that particular silken stiffness, that heat and taste and intimacy….

Once, when they were boys, he and Carver had had a particularly vicious fight; sibling resentment boiling up, nothing more. Tobias couldn’t even remember what had kicked it off, but he did remember Carver calling him a cocksucker. Being a vindictive little bastard, as he recalled, he’d lit on the revulsion in his brother’s face and—instead of admitting how much the word hurt—he’d snatched it back and reclaimed it… used it. Yes, he’d said, he was. He fucking loved it. Loved doing it, got off on it, and frequently got the favour returned, which was more than Carv could claim he managed to do with that shrivelled-up strip of jerky between his legs.

It had been a thoroughly liberating, exultant moment, and totally worth the fraternal punch in the gob that resulted.

Now, Tobias revelled in the way Anders felt in his mouth. His heat, his taste—so much salt, sour and faintly acrid, and yet warm and wonderful and powerfully intense—filled up everything, and wiped away the weight of the world. He felt Anders’ fingers in his hair, on his shoulders… light, eager touches that encouraged rather than guided him as they fell into a companionable rhythm. Tobias lost himself to it, lost himself to the pleasure he could feel building in his lover, building like an inescapable pressure until the shakes and the trembling started, little glimmers of magic dancing across Anders’ skin once more. It didn’t take long, once he let the reins of control start to slip, and Tobias could feel it in him: how tightly he held himself all the time, and how much the lonely emptiness between this and the last time he’d been touched must have hurt.

He muttered Tobias’ name once—his first name, not just ‘Hawke’—fingers brushing in a fumbling touch through his hair, and then that was it. Anders arched against the mattress, taut as a bowstring, a series of dry little whimpers spilling out and falling together, falling into one long gasping cry. Tobias buried himself in it, filling himself with that pleasure and the gift of giving it, focused completely on coaxing Anders through his last shuddering sighs… and reluctant to give up his prize once he was done.

“Oh,” Anders murmured weakly, his head thudding back against the pillow and his knees splayed out, hands held half-curled in the air, hanging from his wrists like he’d forgotten what to do with them.

The air smelled of sweat and semen, and also of that warm-bread-and-copper scent, with each whisper of magic still lingering like a crackle of dry leaves in the shadows.

Tobias smiled a glossy, delighted smile, swelling with pride and completion, and he stroked Anders’ belly.
Anders flexed his fingers, beckoning him wordlessly, and it was so delightfully easy to crawl back up the bed and settle into his arms, as if it had been this way forever. The little ball of magelight had long since fractured and dissipated, leaving them in shadow again, so Tobias leaned over and pulled a flame from the air, snapping his fingers across the candle’s burnt, curled wick. The softness of the light gilded the man beneath him, and Anders’ smile was satiated with a beautiful, warm haziness. He reached up to stroke Tobias’ hair, running his thumb over the hardness of cheekbone and jaw, his lips parting slightly as if he was about to speak… though no words left him. Deep behind his eyes, perhaps there was a whisper of the spirit stirring, and Tobias tried not to think about it.

Like this, spent and completely relaxed, Anders seemed so happy, so free… and yet it was in that total relaxation that his otherness became visible. His power—the feel of it, so heavy and wild, coursing within him—was like the intense humidity of a summer sky swelling to thunder, and its weight seemed a physical thing, something Tobias could feel pressing against his skin with all the prickling foreboding that preceded a storm. It wasn’t him, of course. It was Justice, and the unnatural union between Fade and flesh. Tobias wondered, if he could feel it now, whether it was like this for Anders all the time… like this, but more so. Surely nobody could stand that. He wasn’t sure he could.

It stopped mattering so much, though, when he leaned down and brought their lips together again. Partially, he did it because he wanted more than anything to kiss Anders, and partially because he was afraid of his fear showing in his eyes.

“Hm,” Anders said; a happy little noise in the back of his throat as they parted.

Tobias leaned in again, kissing Anders’ cheek, hairline, neck… hiding himself in the idle serenity of these touches, and losing himself in the scent and taste of his lover until he half-forgot why he was hiding at all. In turn, Anders’ touch trailed lazily down Tobias’ body, still learning him by shape and sensation; what he liked, what he needed. They seemed melted together, warmth pooling between them and burning the edge off the chilly air.

“I love you,” Tobias whispered, the words crushed like a guilty admission against Anders’ cheek.

He hadn’t meant to say it aloud, not yet, and a sudden pitch of fear pricked at his insides, as if that gentle murmur could tear this whole moment apart. He closed his eyes, his parted lips still resting against the salt-spice of Anders’ skin, and the world was nothing but a hot shadow that smelled of his scent.

Anders let out a quiet, slow breath, and his arm tightened around Tobias’ shoulders.

“I know.”

Of course he did. Tobias let himself breathe again too, smiling a little against the warmth of Anders’ skin, and the warmth of a shared knowledge, a shared secret finally unleashed.

“I-I love you, too,” Anders murmured. “More than I ever thought—” He exhaled once more, a shorter sigh this time, like the choked-off whisper of a laugh and, when he spoke again, his words were laced with that familiar dry tone; that arid shell that he hid behind. “You know, I’ve dreamed of this.”

“Oh?” Tobias wasn’t sure whether he meant ‘dreamed of’ like a wish or a prophecy, but he didn’t want to ask for clarification. “Have you?”

“Mm. Lots of times. But this is normally the part where I wake up. All—”
“Sticky?” he suggested helpfully, running his hand up the sharply undulating line of his lover’s ribs.

“No!” Anders snorted, jabbing him in the shin with screwed up toes, even as he twisted beneath the touch, his own fingers moving to trace the curve of Tobias’ arm.

They didn’t seem able to touch each other enough tonight; the dance of candles and shadows hid hunger in the darknesses between them.

“Frustrated,” Anders said pointedly, nestling closer with the sound of a smirk in his voice. “That’s what I meant. I mean, I—I’ve thought about you so often. About this,” he finished, rather sheepishly, his fingers half-curved on the back of Tobias’ shoulder, his short, blunt nails skimming the skin and raising shivers of pleasure behind them. “Every time we flirted, every time we—well… you know. I wanted to, so much.”

Tobias kissed his temple. “Me too. So… you thought about this, eh? Entertained impure thoughts about my person? I’m shocked. Scandalised. And intrigued… tell me more.”

Anders laughed, and he grinned. Lying there, tangled up in each other, there didn’t seem to be anything that was too stupid, too embarrassing to talk about—and they’d certainly had more than their share of daft moments.

“Sometimes,” Anders admitted warily. “A man needs dreams, doesn’t he?”

“Mm-hm.” Tobias pressed another kiss to the coarse mess of his elfroot-and-tallow-scented hair. “I thought about it, too. All those long, cold… lonely nights… just lying there and thinking of you. Thinking about touching you, kissing you….”

He felt Anders’ breathing deepen, felt his body shift, and the gentle flexing of fingers against his arm.

“Aching for you,” Tobias went on, the words buzzing against Anders’ skin. “Aching to feel you in my arms, in my—”

“Did Varric write this for you?”

He spluttered, and they both fell into laughter; such easy, beautiful laughter. He rolled onto his side, pulling Anders close once more, mouths drawn together by mutual consent and need, and lips clinging to each other long after the kiss itself was over. He tasted a little stale—Tobias supposed he probably did too—but, beneath that, he was like mint and copper, with the sweetness of warm bread and the salt of a shoreline breeze.

As Tobias tried to catch his breath, still bound up in dizziness and quiet disbelief, Anders made a small, soft noise in the back of his throat… something a little like a huff of pride.

“The thing is,” he whispered, fingers trailing the length of Tobias’ arm, “I’m still scared I’ll wake up. Aren’t you?”

Tobias hugged him tighter.

“I love you,” he said again, the words stronger and brighter now, even though saying them still made him feel so scared. “Asleep or awake.”

Anders tensed against him for a moment, then the breath leaked from him in one long, contented sigh.

“Mmm.” His voice was soft, small… a whisper buried against Tobias’ throat. “I like that.”
“I mean it.” Tobias tilted his chin, tipping his head to try and meet Anders’ eye, his hand splayed out on the bony shoulder blade beneath his palm. “Whatever happens, whatever— No matter what,” he corrected, his first thought, *whatever you are*, suddenly seeming like a horrible thing to say. “I love you. I will, I mean. Always.”

Anders loosed a quiet little noise that might have been a wearily cynical laugh, or possibly an appreciative sigh.

“You’re a good man, Hawke,” he murmured, stretching luxuriantly in Tobias’ arms. “And I love you too.”

Tobias blinked. They were such beautiful, perfect little words… yet something sad seemed to linger in Anders’ voice. It was hard to identify; hard to concentrate on, come to that, because his brain appeared to have turned to mush, and his skin felt too small for the rush of blood and exultation that ran through him. Nothing seemed to exist except this moment, and the echo of all that was wonderful in it.

He was still trying to piece together what it was that had bothered him when Anders slipped a stealthy hand beneath the blankets and scored a softly shimmering touch across his belly. It was magic, but not sparks… something cold, like ice, but it frittered away too quickly; just a feeling, like an echo of coolness on his skin. Against the warmth of the blankets and their entwined limbs, it was a surprise that took his breath away, and Anders grinned happily.

“I don’t believe this. You’re a mage. Have you never, *ever* done this? Not even by yourself?”

Tobias, somewhat preoccupied by the goosebumps and distracting shivers that those talented fingers were plying over his midriff, failed to manage an entire sentence.

“I— ooh. Not really a… much—ah, that’s cold—thing… privacy,” he managed, as Anders skilfully eased him onto his back and, kicking the covers off, rolled over to lean across him.

“Huh,” he said, gazing down at Tobias consideringly, with that infernally wicked smile on his lips and a lazy, thoughtful kind of seductiveness in his eyes. “I thought you’d covered all the basics of the primal and elemental schools.”

His fingers skimmed over Tobias’ chest, barely making contact with the skin as he traced out the pattern of some complex rune that then hummed into life, kissing coolness into the flesh but fading so quickly, becoming nothing more than an aching tingle.

Tobias gritted his teeth, wildly excited not only by the sensations themselves, but the look on Anders’ face as he touched him. He had a point: being with another mage was incredible. Someone who knew what he was, who shared in it… someone who wasn’t afraid, and with whom he didn’t need to hold back. Magic had never felt like this before; never felt like something special that he shared with someone, a bond that could be beautiful.

“Yeah.” Tobias arched up into the coldness that whispered against his chest, the tiniest flickers of ice frosting his skin before Anders’ touch—that wonderful touch that seemed half reverential and half barely restrained lust—wiped them away. “B—but I… oh, Maker… I wasn’t just using them… mmm… for wanking.”

Anders smirked and flicked at his nipple. “You don’t know what you were missing out on.”

Tobias tried and failed to stifle a whimper, his whole body apparently wired to respond to the healer’s lightest touch. “Ah! Yeah? I… I bet being in the Circle leaves you with a lot of time to…”
polish your staff.”

The last thinking part of his brain wondered if he’d crossed a line—that mentioning the Tower might somehow wake Justice, or pull Anders out of the delightful mood he seemed currently in—but it just earned him another grin and, in that grin, Tobias thought he saw the man his lover had once been.

“You’re not wrong, I’ll give you that.” Anders raised one dark brow, his eyes crinkling at the corners as his grin deepened. “After all that time in solitary, it was a wonder I couldn’t see my face in the end of it.”

Tobias spluttered, and Anders trailed his fingers lower again, the smile falling gradually from his face and leaving just the dark, bare places in his eyes.

“Show me,” he said softly, tracing the outline of Tobias’ hipbone. “Show me how you like being touched. I want to learn everything. Everywhere.”

The candle guttered, its warm pool of light jumping, just as the whole world seemed to lurch when Tobias tried to breathe. He tried as hard as he could to look suave and experienced, but he knew he didn’t sound it when he reached for Anders and pushed his fingers into the loosened mess of his dirty blond hair.

“Only if you do, too. I mean… I want… I want that too. I wanna know how to drive you wild.”

Anders smiled softly and leaned down to press a kiss to his lips. “Pfft. You can already do that. But I’ll show you the ice thing. That’s nice.”

~o~O~o~

They took their time. It was part gentle, sensuous exploration, part rigorous academic study, and Tobias had never done anything remotely like it before, nor known anyone who treated sex as something that was simultaneously so fun and yet so worthy of concentration. Anders asked questions of him… and not the ones he was used to being asked, such as “you like that, don’t you?” or “how long did you want me for?” Anders wanted to know how he liked to be touched—pressure, speed, rhythm; did he like the excitement of building up to roughness, or did he want to be tortured to indescribable heights of pleasure with slow, calculated caresses? What about this, or here… was it fun to be tickled?

Tobias had never considered himself shy, but the total openness the man had—the ease with which he took Tobias’ hands and placed them on himself, demonstrating, exploring, teaching—was almost intimidating. He was frightened of trying out the tricks Anders had with ice and sparks, nervous of his own limited finesse with magic, but Anders encouraged him, pressing Tobias’ hand to his ribs and holding it there as the magic flowed between them.

“That’s it. You’re doing it.”

Ice became stars, humming under his skin and frosting the ends of his fingers, blossoming like the rime of crystals on leaves where they touched. He burned hot, burned cold, felt the whisper of magic’s silver-gold breath threading the air, making flesh a vessel for so much more than spirit.

He overdid it a bit, Tobias suspected, biting his lip as he saw the reddened, chilled place on Anders’ skin that his touch left behind. The healer didn’t seem to care, though; he groaned, fidgeted, kissed harder… touched more. Everything was hands and mouths and their low, united panting, a concert of movement and contact until Tobias felt himself shivering on the edge once more. Anders lay halftop him, one bony knee between his thighs and one hand wrapped firmly around his cock, the other
tracing out some new glyph on his chest. He could do it without looking, occupied as he was with lightly biting Tobias’ lower lip, and the criss-crossed warmth of magic melted into the cool tingling of ice, that then faded in the furnace of his touch. Tobias let himself open out, let his own power flow through his body… through to the places he touched his lover, and he let them swell out into blooms of yawning, coruscating fire. It wrapped them both up, swaddled them and did not burn, and he smiled as Anders moaned against his neck, shuddered, and then brought a hand down to tap sparks against his thighs.

Tobias was exhausted by the time he finished. It had been a long day to start with, made infinitely longer by all of this—not that he was complaining, naturally—and the added exertion of magic he was so unused to using turned his limbs to jelly just as effectively as Anders’ proximity liquefied his thoughts into a single thread of desire.

“Fuck,” he muttered, as pinpricks of blue spotted his vision, his fingers still clumsily closed around Anders’ flesh, his movements halted by the intensity of his own pleasure.

“You’re a poet, my love,” Anders murmured dryly against his cheek, sounding taut-drawn and eager for his own completion.

Tobias turned his head, catching his lover’s mouth against his in an off-centre gasp of a kiss that was broken by breathless laughter, and refocused himself on giving as much pleasure as he could. He was tempted to crawl down the bed, take Anders in his mouth again and never let him go, but there wasn’t time and he wasn’t even sure he could move. It ended instead in a rough tug, his kiss almost choking the air out from between them as Anders pulled him closer, fingers digging into his back and one leg hooked around his hips.

The moment at which Anders let himself go felt stronger than the last, and Tobias tasted the steel-smell of magic humming in the air, meeting something a little bit like the odour of charred linen as the candlelight shuddered, threatening to plunge the room into darkness.

For a while, neither of them spoke; they just lay there, braided together and trying to catch their breath. Eventually, Anders was the first to carefully extricate himself and roll onto his back, where he stared up at the ceiling with a glassy, partially vacant look.

“Ooh,” he said.

Tobias tucked his arm under his head, half-heartedly wondering where the pillows had gone. There had been some at some point, but with the state the bed was in now, it might as well have been trampled by a cadre of qunari.

“Ooh?” he echoed, watching the weakening candlelight pick at the sweat-darkened gold in Anders’ hair.

“Mm-hm.”

Anders reached lazily for his hand and pulled it up between them, threading his fingers through Tobias’ and inspecting his knuckles thoughtfully as he rubbed his thumb across them.

“This is funny, isn’t it?” he said, his eyes heavy and the sound of sleepiness cloaking his voice. “After, you know… holding back so long.”

“Funny?”

Tobias didn’t mean to keep repeating the things he said, but he found himself suddenly afraid Anders would say this was too fast, too much… that it shouldn’t happen again. He hadn’t realised how
frightened he was of that, but the fear opened up in him now. It had clearly been hard enough for him to wrest tonight from Justice’s grasp. Would the spirit allow them anything more? And, if he didn’t want to, had Anders any chance of forcing him?

Anders shrugged, still playing with his hand. “It seems strange, that’s all. Not bad, not that, but… I didn’t want to tie you down. Y-you should have a normal life, not have someone like me complicating things.”

Tobias wrinkled his nose ruefully. What had ever been normal about his life? He almost said as much, before the thought nudged him that his struggles had not been the same as Anders’; that, yes, he’d known what it was to be an apostate, a criminal… but he’d never known the Tower, or the Wardens, or any of those other things that Anders kept hidden away in himself, shrouded like private horrors.

Tobias tugged lightly on Anders’ hand, drawing him onto his side and, from there, back to the gentle fold of an embrace. The air seemed chillier now his flesh had dried and cooled, and he suddenly wanted it to be very cold in the room, so that it would seem merely sensible for them to snuggle close and pull the blankets up around themselves.

“But I like complicated,” he said, watching the indecision and fatigue war with the affection and fear in those beautiful dark eyes. “And what was that about tying me down?”

Anders sniggered, his thumb still chasing the peaks and valleys of Tobias’ fingers with a gentle, deft touch. “Oh, I see. You like that, do you?”

Tobias smiled wryly, plagued by a sudden but insistent recollection of Jethann calling his tastes boringly, pedestrianly Fereldan. He shrugged. “Dunno. Never tried it. But… in for a silver, in for a crown. I bet there’s a lot more you’ve got left to show me, Mr. Debauchedly Promiscuous Runaway, Snatching Pleasure from the Jaws of Captivity. I’ve heard the stories!”

Anders groaned, turning his face in toward Tobias’ chest. “No, you haven’t.”

“Well… all right, but I’ve heard that there are stories,” Tobias conceded. “And I have a vague idea of what some of them might be about.”

Anders laughed again—that beautiful, easy, loose laughter—and shook his head. “Oh, Maker’s teeth…. Is this about The Pearl again? Honestly….”


Anders snorted, both of them grinning in the refuge of this playfulness, hiding away from the weight of seriousness and melodrama. All the same, the smile stiffened a little on Tobias’ face as his mind leaned towards thoughts of the stories he had heard, largely concerning the Denerim brothel and a certain mutual friend. Anders seemed to pick up on that. He didn’t know how—didn’t know whether it was written on his face, as if the lines of worry on his forehead were visible in the half-light, or if the visions that suddenly streamed through his head were that obvious—but the healer knew.

“You’re not jealous, are you? About Isabela?”

Tobias winced, trying to gouge the insidious pictures from his mind’s eye.

“No,” he lied. “Course not.”

“You can’t be jealous over Isabela,” Anders said confidently, still playing with his hand. “She’s like a side dish. She comes with the meal.”
Tobias frowned, uncomfortably reminded of that awkward encounter in the Deep Roads; too uncomfortably reminded, in fact, to even bother making a joke about steamed cabbage. “Hmmm. Yeah. Whether you order it or not, in my experience.”

Anders seemed surprised. “Ooh. Did you…? Really? I’m surprised she hasn’t been crowing *that* all over Lowtown.”

His tone was oddly neutral, and Tobias’ frown deepened as he peered at the complex little ball of contradictions in his arms. Anders had behaved like a jealous lover around him in the past—that excitingly blunt rudeness to His Royal Shininess, for one thing, not to mention his chastisements over all those visits to the Rose—and yet he seemed strangely unconcerned by this admission.

“It was in the Deep Roads,” he explained, not sure whether he felt it necessary to justify it more for himself or Anders. “We all thought we were going to die down there, and… I don’t know. She kept on. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. It was best forgotten about, frankly.”

Anders didn’t meet his eye, but the corner of his lips curled. “Took advantage of you, did she?”

Tobias grimaced. “Yes, actually. I wouldn’t have— I mean… well, frankly, I don’t *like* women. Not like you do,” he added, mumbling the words as if he could hide his insecurities between them.

Anders did look up then, his face shadowed by the candlelight and his eyes dark and wide-blown, soft as petals and yet sharp as blades. He was still smiling, but it was an intrigued, curious smile, and he tilted his head a little to the side.

“Don’t you? What, not at all?”

“Nope.”

“Not even… y’know? The soft bits?” Anders raised his brows suggestively. “And the curvy bits? The curvy bits are nice.”

Tobias fidgeted, slowly growing aware of how uncomfortable he was without a pillow. “Nah. They’re… I don’t know. It’s not the same.”

That earned him another smirk.

“I thought that was rather the point,” Anders observed mildly. “You know. They’re *different*.”

“I like… hard,” Tobias murmured coyly, “more than soft.”

“Oh, I rather gathered *that*. In fact, I think I’m getting a pretty, uh, *firm* picture of what you like.”

Anders’ smirk broadened into a filthy grin, and it melted anything that had remained of Tobias’ reticence. It was a wide, world-weary, knowing grin, free and full of hedonistic determination; a smile that said, if so small an expression could say so much, that life was short and pleasure rare, and that every grain of this moment counted.

Tobias watched the candlelight glimmer on those dark eyes, and watched the way Anders’ mouth curved itself around that loose, eloquent smile, and it seemed as if his heart broke just a little.

“It didn’t mean anything,” he said, even though he knew he didn’t have to; that he *shouldn’t* say anything, probably. “Isabela. Except for the fact she was horny as a toad, and we all thought we were going to die.”
There had, he supposed, been better excuses for grubby indiscretions, and he thought Anders was going to laugh at him again, but he didn’t. The smile faded from his face, and he just frowned, and looked so terribly sad.

“I remember when the news broke… what they were saying.” He let go of Tobias’ hand, letting it fall from his fingers like a bad memory. “Everyone thought you were lost. It must have been horrible.”

Tobias nodded mutely, the memories half-heartedly batting at his head, and was surprised to find that Anders’ arm curling around his neck should feel quite so warm, and quite so comforting.

“I wish I’d gone with you. I mean, I could have—”

“No. Wouldn’t have asked you to do that. Not knowing what you said, about the way it felt. You don’t do well in dark, heavy places… and I think I understand that now.”

Anders smiled softly. “Hmm. Something else we have in common, right?”

“S’pose so.” Tobias hooked his ankle over his lover’s calf, rubbing his heel gently against the taut line of muscle he found there. “I won’t see you put anywhere you can’t get out of. Not ever.”

Anders smiled distantly, his gaze drifting past Tobias’ earnest expression to the far wall, where shadows danced on the cracked plaster. “You’ll be there if the templars ever catch me, will you? Burst in to save me and break my chains?”

He didn’t sound like he was entirely joking. Tobias frowned, not prepared to indulge one of these bursts of melancholy… not now, and not like this, when they were still wrapped up in each other, still so warm and sated and painted with the comfortable echoes of bliss.

“Yes,” he said bluntly. “They won’t take you while I’m still breathing. I swear—”

“Don’t.” Anders murmured, though his expression wasn’t that of a man who really seemed to object to hearing such effusive declarations. He ran his fingertips lightly through Tobias’ hair, thumb grazing the outer rim of his ear as he did so. “Don’t promise what you can’t keep to, love.”

Tobias’ frown grew entrenched, a sulkiness entering his voice as he sought to pull Anders closer to him, wanting him head-to-toe, skin-to-skin, as if nothing could ever come between them.

“I’m not. I mean it… I believe in everything the Underground’s doing—you know that, and you know I’d want to be a part of it even if it wasn’t for you—but you mean everything to me. I’d die before I let anything happen to you.”

Anders stared at him with half-lidded eyes and half-parted lips, his face caught between the softness of shadows and the gilded blur of candlelight. He blinked, and once more seemed about to say something that died before it made it past his lips. Then, for just a moment, he seemed to pale a little, and his eyelids fluttered as he was blinking back tears, but his eyes were dry. His hand tightened on Tobias’ nape and, when he finally spoke, his words were hushed.

“I never wanted you involved. I told Elias… I said I didn’t want to bring you in. I-I was afraid, and I still am.” He drew a breath, his gaze never leaving Tobias’. “The templars… this city… Maker, I would drown us in blood if it meant keeping you safe.”

Tobias tried not to stare, but they were so close, so wrapped up together that there was nowhere to run, and no escape from the unflinching, desperate look in Anders’ face. He couldn’t decide whether he found it more exciting or terrifying, though his body was apparently broaching the question for
him, and he was painfully aware of his pounding heart and the light-headed, pitching dizziness that this man could somehow induce in him.

“I don’t like knowing that about myself,” Anders murmured, “but it’s true. You know the things I’ve done. You know what I’m capable of.”

Tobias nodded awkwardly. He couldn’t tell what the healer wanted to hear from him, so he said nothing and hoped that this embrace—this intensity, this moment that bound them together—would be enough.

“And you’re still here,” Anders mused, the fractured look on his face beginning to fall away, though his dark brows were knotted in confusion.

“Still here,” Tobias confirmed, running his fingers down the narrow path of his lover’s spine. “So… no rivers of blood just yet?”

Anders smiled weakly. “If you insist.”

“Good.”

Tobias kissed his forehead, and they parted long enough to rescue the pillows from where they’d been strewn, to untangle the blankets and settle back down together, listening to the late-night silence of the tavern.

It embarrassed Tobias just a little bit to think how easily they might have been overheard earlier, though the walls and the door were fairly stout, and no doubt the inn’s patrons had their own business to occupy them. Besides, it wasn’t as if hearing two people fucking was that uncommon in most of Lowtown’s dockside establishments… or in most of its alleyways and courtyards, come to that. The thing was, he somehow found that it did bother him a little, as if this time should be so completely sacred, so special that no one else should even exist, much less impinge upon it. He wanted the world to shrink in on itself, until it was just the two of them, and he could really, truly believe that nothing else mattered.

Somewhere, though, the building’s old joists and struts were creaking, and while the door had been barred for the night and the fires banked down, someone was still moving about. The creak of stairs, the thud of a chamber pot…. As Anders burrowed down beside him—still touching, staying closer than he had before, perhaps with the thought they might continue this ridiculous pattern of fucking and dozing all night, until they were both too wrung out to continue—the candle burned itself out, and the darkness lay over Tobias like a sheet, soft and full.

He glanced over at his lover, but Anders remained a mystery; just a boundless shape huddled into the covers, already asleep and slumbering too deeply to even be snoring.

Tobias tucked his arm under the thin pillow, and frowned to himself. He was tired—bone-achingly tired—and maybe that was what made this seem so strange… and it was strange, wasn’t it, for something so perfect to worry him so?

He closed his eyes, breathing in deeply to catch the smell of their mingled sweat and pleasure, and the hint of soot and boiled elfroot that still underpinned it.

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They made love again, late in the night, when—if it hadn’t been for the tavern’s thick wooden shutters—the last of the moonlight would have been silverying the sky. Tobias half-woke, uncomfortable and nursing cramped elbows and sore legs, and rolled over… only to find himself
lying across part of Anders’ back. In turn, he wriggled and murmured a bit, rising to wakefulness in response to the touch and, before Tobias could apologise and try to shoehorn himself back into the other side of the bed, Anders was purring happily and touching him with clever, warm fingers that were incredibly deft for someone so sleepy.

He shifted across the thin mattress, accepting Tobias’ weight above him, pulling him close as they rolled together, bodies fitting so neatly against each other that they might as well have been sculpted for the purpose. Tobias groaned at the sheer luxury of skin on skin, chin to toe, and buried his face in Anders’ neck, latching his mouth to the salt-sweet soft spot beneath the point of his jaw, and relishing the small, happy-hungry growl that it earned him.

With no candle to light their way, the shadows enfolded them completely. He could see almost nothing, but that only served to make the sensations more intense. The sharpness of sweat—both of them, hot and stale and mingled with each other—and the heat of skin and flesh combined to sear them both as they rocked together. Anders hooked his legs over Tobias’, pulling him closer still, those long, slender hands gripping and clasping every bit of him that came within reach as he murmured a soft, profane litany into the heavy, stagnant quiet.

The words fell around Tobias’ ears like petals as he bared his teeth against his lover’s throat, his tongue beating a pulse against the damp, stubble-prickled skin. Beneath them, the bed groaned with that same insistent rhythm, and its slow seesaw creak filled his head, driving him on.

They switched around at some point, though he wasn’t sure how it happened. He had Anders’ mouth on his—seizing him in some hungry, demanding kiss—and then he was being rolled over, falling onto his back, his swollen cock slapping against his belly in an agony of abandonment before Anders settled over him, his weight and his warmth and his touch like a balsam and a furnace all at once.

He made it faster, rougher… ended it with a shiver and a stifled cry that broke against Tobias’ neck at precisely the same moment he was, himself, gritting his teeth and groaning out his release. Wetness pooled between them, and Anders’ small cough of laughter tickled his cheek. He laughed breathlessly, too, mostly at how unbelievable it was that they were so in tune, so perfectly timed together. That had never happened before. Not ever… not with anyone.

They hadn’t spoken, Tobias realised. They probably didn’t need to, although he wished he could see the look on that beautiful, gleeful face. He wanted to see Anders’ dirty grin, and his look of self-satisfied accomplishment… and he wanted to kiss him again.

“Maker,” Tobias muttered, shuddering a little as Anders settled down again, rubbing against some of his more tender places in the act of getting comfortable.

“Mmm,” he agreed happily, his voice a husky, sleep-roughened murmur.

Tobias glanced at his blurred, dark outline. He wanted to articulate it—to say aloud how amazing it was, how… that had never happened before, with anyone, and was surely proof of their stunning, perfect, cosmically-sanctified union—but it occurred to him that Anders didn’t seem to think it was such a fluke.

“That was… really good,” Tobias mumbled lamely, unsure how awake Anders still was.

A lean hand reached back to pat his thigh companionably, before Anders pulled the blankets tighter around himself.

“Mm-hm. S’nice, isn’t it?” he murmured, drowsily running his words together. “I couldn’t bear to
lose this. I’d tried to forget it, but there’s nothing else close to it, is there? Feeling like this. I’d rather
die than be Tranquil. If… if you stop feeling, you’re already dead.”

And, with that, Anders appeared to drift back off to sleep.

Tobias stared into the shadows, unfamiliar patterns of uncertainty and confusion twisting within him.
No “I love you”, no tender little goodnight kiss. He knew it was a traitorous thought to have, but
maybe feeling had been all this had been about. Was he really more than a helpful reminder of what
it was to be human? A feast for an appetite too long starved?

He’d never thought he was the insecure type, but now he wanted to wake Anders up again, just to
hear his voice and to hear him say it was all right. A dull, resentful kind of jealousy gnawed beneath
Tobias’ ribs, and he caught himself thinking about Karl. He had no idea why, but suddenly he
couldn’t help it. Karl, Isabela… and all those nameless, faceless lovers Anders had enjoyed. How
many of them had he cared for? How many had he slept with like this, falling into lulls of
comfortable slumber between the bouts of passion? Tobias wasn’t naïve enough to believe it truly
mattered—he knew Anders had loved before, and knew that didn’t colour this love, this time—but it
made him painfully aware of his own inexperience.

He told himself that it didn’t mean anything. Tonight, Anders was here. He belonged here, and they
belonged to each other. Karl was dead, and the templars were no more than absent, shapeless
bogeymen.

Tobias let out a long breath, and rolled onto his side, curling up close beside Anders and allowing his
hand to rest softly on the shallow curve of his waist. He listened to the rise and fall of his breathing,
and smiled when he felt that narrow body wriggle slightly beneath his touch, a comfortable “hmm”
escaping Anders’ lips.

As the tiredness and the ache of over-used muscles and chafed skin bore Tobias back to the promise
of the Fade and the dreams within it, he heard Anders stir a little, and mumble a word.

Hawke.

Tobias smiled sleepily, comforted beyond all reasonable measure by that small recognition.

In the morning, he was sure he’d start to think about some of the other things Anders had said… and
some of the other things that they still had to address, not least the fallout the Underground would be
facing after Alrik’s death, and the fact that, with the city in the state of chaos that it was, Darktown
was sure to be crawling with templars again any day… if the entirety of Kirkwall didn’t erupt into
open war first.

They won’t take you while I’m still breathing. I swear—

He’d meant it, whether Anders believed him or not. And he was pretty sure Anders meant the whole
“drowning everybody in blood” bit, which concerned him, and yet enthralled him in a way that he
didn’t find entirely comfortable.

But, for now… for now, everything was all right. Tobias was warm, thoroughly spent, and so buried
in feeling so good that he couldn’t find space in his head to believe in the world beyond this room.
Not now. Not until tomorrow.

He edged fractionally closer to Anders, and dropped a kiss to the back of his shoulder, close to the
spot where—before the candle had burned away—he’d learned there was a small, thin scar. Just one
of many, and Anders hadn’t said where it had come from. Just one of his perfect imperfections,
which Tobias found himself wanting to count and cherish.

They didn’t have all the time in the world, and maybe he couldn’t defend Anders against every threat he faced, but he would make what they did have matter. That much, he *could* promise.
Chapter 34

The morning found them both heavy-headed, wreathed in slumber. They'd slept until well past dawn, cocooned in warmth and satiation, and Tobias began to crank his eyes open with a certain degree of reluctance, aware of the fact that greyish morning light was filtering through the shutters… and also that Anders was awake beside him.

He blinked a little, his face crushed against the pillow and his brow wrinkling as reality swam back into focus. Although his mind was still clinging blearily to sleep, this was not the province of dreams. It was all real. It happened. It finally bloody happened….

The fragmented night just past seemed like a beautiful collage, and the whole insane rush of it—everything from those breathless kisses at the clinic to this desperate plunge between the sheets—sat jumbled together in Tobias' mind. He felt almost dizzy when he tried to hold on to the pieces. He'd done it, though. They had done it… everything he'd been afraid of them never facing, never admitting; all those shadows had been swept away. No more lies, no more games. His head filled with deliciously recent memories of Anders' wickedest smiles, deftest touches, and sweetest words. Their traded promises and declarations, wrapped up in sweat-stained whispers and frightened honesty, and the kisses that followed them… lip-promises that couldn't be broken. It had been more than Tobias had ever dared hope, and it had meant more than he'd ever known it could to be with someone who was like him. He still wasn't over that. Was it always this way with two mages? Maybe it was just the two of them, and the shared intensity of their magic was an extension of the bond they had—a bond so much greater than Tobias had ever shared with anyone.

His gaze settled on the rough plaster of the far wall, and he wondered if Anders knew he was awake. His mouth tasted stale and foul, he needed to piss, and he needed to bathe, but he didn't really want to move. He wasn't sure if he was nervous or not, though the idea of being so seemed silly.

It's a bit late for that, isn't it?

"Morning," Anders said quietly, sounding slightly distant.

Tobias smiled at the wall. "Morning."

He rolled over and found Anders lying on his back, gazing up thoughtfully at the yellowed plaster of the ceiling, his hair spread out in tangled knots on the pillow and the blankets—the greater proportion of which had somehow ended up on his side of the bed during the night—pooled around him. He looked as if he'd been deep in thought.

Hmm. Not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

The grubby light that slipped through the shutters didn't flatter him, but it didn't matter. Every hard angle, every old scar, half-healed bruise… every shadow beneath his eyes and every hank of unwashed hair seemed to Tobias to be, if not perfect, then at least completely, utterly right.

Anders hadn't acknowledged him beyond that initial word, but he turned his head then, glancing at Tobias with an odd look on his face, just as distant and preoccupied as his voice had sounded. His brow was creased into a small frown, but after the briefest of moments that melted away. His whole face seemed to soften as his gaze traced Tobias' body, partly bared as it was by the lack of bedcovers.

Tobias flexed his toes and dug his shoulder into the thin pillow, feeling rather exposed and yet
enjoying the attention.

"So," he said, aware of his smile growing slightly wobbly at the edges as Anders drank in the sight of him, "are… are you all right?"

"Hm?" Anders blinked, then gave him a small but warm smile, still tinged with a little of that strange distance. "Oh. Mm. It's just… odd, that's all. I can barely feel him."

"Who, Justice?"

"Shh. Yes."

Tobias arched an eyebrow. Was Anders really afraid of naming the spirit? Frightened of calling him out? And was it even possible for Justice to shrink away inside him, burned out by the passion they'd kindled?

He grinned slyly. "Maybe we embarrassed him. Or he's sulking. Or offended. Scandalised, even."

To his surprise, Anders laughed gently at that. He lifted one hand from his nest of blankets, letting it fall lazily against Tobias' chest, and stroked a line beneath his collarbone with the backs of those long, clever fingers.

"Mm," he said, smiling sleepily. "Shocked to the core by the depravity of human lust."

Tobias smirked. Anders stretched, the way a cat luxuriates in a warm patch of sunlight, and Tobias' smiled widened as he surveyed the long, lean body so delectably framed by the covers. A thigh there, with a glint of hip, an arm and shoulder, a portion of chest… that happy, contented face. Anders was half-wrapped in the blankets, and yet the rough wool seemed less to clothe him than intensify his nakedness, his body like jewels against silk. Just looking at him squeezed the breath from Tobias' chest.

"It's… possible, I suppose," he managed, as Anders chuckled happily to himself.

"We should test the theory," he murmured, dark eyes half-closed. "Stringently. It could be a discovery of tremendous import for magical science."

"Absolutely," Tobias agreed, reaching out, unable to resist the temptation of touching him. He let his fingers skim the length of one long arm, finding the hardness of Anders' shoulder to cup against his palm, drawing him close, holding him tightly. "We should investigate all the possibilities. Really, really thoroughly."

Anders wriggled into his arms with a small, happy noise, palming his way over the planes of Tobias' back.

"You're chilly," he observed, his voice buzzing pleasantly against Tobias' neck.

"You steal the covers."

"I do not," Anders retorted mildly, despite still being wrapped in plenty of evidence to the contrary.

"All right. Warm me up, then," Tobias suggested, letting his hand travel south, dawdling along the ridges of Anders' ribs and the pleasantly cupped valley at the base of his spine.

Anders just snorted and burrowed closer. His touches were subtle and affectionate, and the tiniest glimmer of magic seemed to whisper within them.
It was slow, lazy… something Tobias was entirely unused to experiencing. Rarely, if ever, had he spent a whole night with a lover, naked and in bed, and actually sleeping. A whole night, followed by this unhurried waking, devoid of responsibility and free from any pressures, any constraints… time to just be.

It was beautiful, and incredibly relaxing, and a little part of his mind was rather surprised to find that—instead of latching back onto each other like alley cats, fuelled by fervent desire—he and Anders both felt the tug of sleep pulling them back. Those gentle touches stilled into a quiet embrace, and Tobias barely even realised he'd been dozing until the muffled grunt of a snore broke through the quiet in his head. He blinked, aware of a weight on his shoulder, and a by now rather more pressing weight on his bladder.

Anders had fallen asleep on him, and Tobias didn't dare move. It was an uncomfortable position, but worth it, and he found himself reminded of the night they'd spent at the Dalish camp, when he had been the one to fall asleep with his head pillowed on the shoulder of Anders' appalling coat.

Funny, really. They had meant so much to each other for so long—done so much, shared so much—that this almost seemed out of sequence. The intimacy between them now felt familiar, incongruously flushed with the thrill of something new, and Tobias struggled to reconcile the rush of it with the deep-seated, oddly comforting relief it gave him.

Somehow, everything seemed right with the world as long as he was lying here with his lover dozing against him. It didn't last, of course. Anders snorted, twitched, and Tobias turned his head to watch him start to stir. Sable lashes brushed pale cheeks, that long, straight nose wrinkling as if it was being tickled, mouth screwed into a crunched up curl… Tobias couldn't stop himself from grinning.

"Oh." Anders scrubbed the back of his hand over his face and winced sheepishly. "Did I go back to sleep?"

"Mm. So did I. It was nice," Tobias added, privately amazed at how little either of them were saying. Those big questions still beat in his head—what happened next, whether Anders would suddenly say he (or Justice, assuming the spirit was not permanently silenced) regretted it, and how exactly life would change to accommodate this new and beautiful reality—but actually getting the words out seemed like a complete impossibility.

At that moment, Anders' stomach growled.

"I'm hungry," he announced, with what sounded like faint surprise. "And I really have to pee."

With that, he sat up, disentangled himself from the spool of blankets, and got out of bed. Tobias watched him move around the room, entranced not just by this first long, daylit look at his nakedness, but by how at ease Anders seemed. No, not seemed… was. He was completely free of self-consciousness as he reached up to scratch at his head and run his fingers through his lank hair, scanning the room for the chamberpot until he spotted it beneath the bed and hooked it out with one foot. He cleared his throat, toed the pot to the side of the room and—Maker damn it to the Void!—the man even managed to relieve himself with a degree of grace and elegance.

There was nothing awkward about this for him, Tobias supposed. Nothing new in the mundanities of the morning after, or negotiating the boundaries of each other's space. Of course, he knew he shouldn't be surprised. Anders had known plenty of other lovers… real lovers, sharing their bodies and their secrets with him by choice, not because he had a personable manner and a stack of sovereigns with which to buy their time.
Tobias couldn't help but be filled with admiration, in a strange way; admiration that nestled uncomfortably close to those fleeting tongues of jealousy and insecurity.

"I'll see if I can find some breakfast," Anders offered, picking his trousers off the floor as he ran his other hand down his abdomen, and wrinkled his nose. "And maybe get a tub. I think I'm welded solid. Not to mention I smell like a tart's wash rag."

He flashed Tobias a brief but disarmingly cheeky grin, and stepped into his trousers, cinching his belt tight around his bare waist. He wasn't wrong about how badly they both needed to bathe, but Tobias still felt disorientated by the ease with which Anders slipped through the steps of this dance. He knew he should get out of the bed, but his movements all seemed clunky and difficult, and Anders had pulled his shirt on even before Tobias' feet had hit the floor.

"Don't worry," he said, pausing at the room's stout door, his fingers on the iron handle. "Won't be a minute."

Tobias dredged up a smile, but he couldn't hide the disconcerting lurch he felt as Anders slunk out of the room. He might as well have been going to Rivain, rather than just the bar, and Tobias knew it was ridiculous… but he couldn't help himself. This morning, the whole world felt different, and he wasn't used to it yet. He didn't have Anders' level of comfort with waking up in strange bedrooms, replete with the wreckage of the night before, but he supposed he was going to have to learn.

He slid out of bed, luxuriated in a lengthy piss, then opened the shutters and the room's small window, stealthily emptied the pot out of it and tried to tidy the remaining discarded clothes and ransack bed so the room looked fractionally less like it had been hit by a storm. It still smelled of stale sweat and sex, and Tobias had to admit that he almost missed the permeating odour of rose oil. No pretences here, though… and, to be honest, he did much prefer Anders' scent to the sickly perfume of Madam Lusine's house. Infinitely so, in fact, especially now he was truly learning it. Not just the bouquet of grime and soot, elfroot and lard, redblossom ointment and the green, pulpy aroma of macerated herbs, but the smell of his skin, his body… the way it felt to be wrapped up in him, to feel his breath and his heartbeat, and the pulse of magic in his blood.

Tobias started, blinking the intrusive thoughts away as he heard movement beyond the door—footsteps, and the sounds of the tavern's early work being done, because not everyone's life had slowed to a static crawl last night—and he reached for his breeches, intending to at least cover his modesty before anyone came in. Unfortunately, with the recent memories of tangled bodies, heated kisses, and pleasure that had filled the night stretching out to blind him, all he succeeded in doing was to drop the breeches he'd been trying to pick up, then trip over the chair and stub his toe on the bed frame.

"Maker's cock!"

Tobias gritted his teeth, swearing under his breath as he tried to get at least a little bit dressed. Blissful though it had all been, he was beginning to wonder if being with Anders was really going to be good for his health… albeit not for the reasons the healer had warned him about.

~o~O~o~

Anders returned soon after, bearing washcloths and a jug, a plate of cold meat, cheese, and bread, a bottle of wine with two mugs, and an air of triumph at having convinced the innkeeper's daughter to let them have a wooden bathtub.

She dragged it in, half-full of mildly tepid water, and stomped off in a distinctly doughty humour, apparently oblivious to Anders' poorly concealed snigger as he kicked the door shut behind her.
"I think she's jealous," he said, raising his eyebrows suggestively. "Or, possibly, they're not used to patrons who enjoy good hygiene."

"It is Lowtown," Tobias conceded.

Anders grinned, and the sight of that look on his face made Tobias' heart swell. He was a different man this morning… the man he’d been in those fragments of moments before, hidden in wicked smiles and offhand comments. But, right now, there was no Justice rising to choke him down, to curb his glee or hush his laughter.

"Ugh." Anders had spread his haul out on the bed, and was shaking water from his fingers after testing the temperature of the bath. "Far too chilly."

He pulled a face, then rolled up the sleeve of his shirt, plunged his arm into the tub up to the elbow, and squinted. It was barely more than a moment or so before a couple of small bubbles erupted on the surface, tinged with the unmistakeable glow of magical energy, and the freshly heated water began to steam gently.

"There." Anders grinned as he straightened up. "I have my uses, don't I?"

"Oh, I know that."

The grin became a lecherous smirk. "Hah. Does that mean you want me to scrub your back?"

Tobias pulled his shirt off slowly, enjoying the way Anders' gaze hugged the lines of his body. He couldn't remember ever feeling so desired, so truly wanted or accepted by anyone. Even this morning, with the intensity of the previous night lessened just a little, the edge between them ground down very slightly, it still made him feel dizzy.

"Let's share it," he suggested, his mind already plotting fantasies about fucking in the warm sway of the water.

Anders smiled beatifically. "Mm. Just a minute."

He wetted a cloth and set to cleaning them both up a little before they got into the tub, rubbing away the dried traces of pleasure and running a healer's softly charged fingertips over the occasional scratch, frost-mark, or swell of a bruise or love-bite. Tobias protested a little about the eradication of a mark about the size of a copper on his chest, close to his right nipple.

"Leave that. It doesn't hurt."

Anders glanced slyly at him. "Oh, I see. You like hickeys, eh?"

"I… I didn't say that," Tobias demurred, though he knew from the look on the other man's face that —whatever he said at this point—teasing, and quite possibly more love-bites, were extremely probable components of his future. He gave in, shrugging sheepishly. "Fine. Yes. Maybe. I… I'd like to keep a couple of… mementoes. I've waited a long time for this, and I want to hold onto everything. Everything you give me," he finished, mumbling slightly, because grand and romantic things were a lot easier to say in the dark.

Anders stared thoughtfully at him, a faint smile on his face as he folded the washcloth. "Best not let the water get cold," he said, the mundanity of his words not doing a damn thing to hide the warmth in his voice.

Tobias clambered into the bath, and Anders joined him, bringing the wine and the two pewter mugs.
They drank a little, splashed each other in playful idiocy, kissed, and finally fell to just relaxing, draped against each other in the warm water. It was wonderful to rest like that, even if it rather curtailed too much industrious scrubbing. Tobias didn't care; he was too absorbed in the weight of Anders leaning back on him, arms splayed out along the edges of the tub, and his every care and worry apparently melted away.

Tobias ran his fingers along one loose-jointed arm, enjoying the feel of wet skin turning dry in the cool air, flesh growing chilly above the warmth of the water line.

He knew that this couldn't last forever. This wonderful night—well, it wasn't night any longer. All around them, morning had long since broken and the day was happening. He couldn't ignore it indefinitely. Before long, they'd have to clear out of the room, and... and what then? Tobias' first thought was that real life would seep back in, but was this not real?

He rested his head against Anders', his lips pressed gently to the roughness of damp hair, breathing him in and smelling the water and soap on him. This man—this wonderful, impossible, dangerous, desperate, vulnerable man—was his. Finally. This morning, life had changed in one of the sweetest conceivable ways; Anders was a part of it now, a part of that 'real' life in a way Tobias had barely dared ever hope he could be, and that meant that everything was different.

_Isn't it?_

It felt as if it should be. And yet, Tobias was aware that they were going to have to part. Anders would head back to his clinic, no doubt, and _he_ would have to slope home and deal with his mother's pointed mutterings about "staying out all hours", and then there would be errands and people to see regarding the estate, and contracts and rumours to scope out, and all the other mess of daily life.

But... daily life would change, wouldn't it? Somehow. Somehow, everything would change, because it had to. It had to incorporate this new, beautiful thing, and make it real and irrefutable, and... and Tobias hadn't realised how thoroughly frightening he found that concept.

_Andraste's flaming tits, I really didn't think this through, did I?_

"What are you up to today?" Anders asked suddenly, sounding half-asleep but still mildly interested.

He'd finished his wine, and was idly heating up the water with a succession of tiny fireballs that puffed from his fingers and plopped into the tub, extinguished immediately by the water, but still dissipating in little twirls of bubbling energy just below the surface.

"Not much," Tobias admitted. "Got a few people to see. Small stuff. A few shipments of silks and spices are due in... that kind of thing. Isabela got me a contact on the ship's crew, so I need to talk to one of the Coterie boys about shifting the stuff once Chauncey's got it ashore."

"Profiting off the avarice of the wealthy?" Anders asked wryly, and Tobias wasn't sure whether it was just sarcasm, or a little bit of Justice somewhere in there too.

"Someone has to," he said, stroking his lover's arm. "And at least I'm not up at the Keep again."

"I heard you got summoned. What did you do this time?"

Tobias grimaced. He told Anders about the request from Saemus Dumar, and the plan for the qunari peace delegation, and—though he might have skimped on retelling how much he'd depended on Fenris' help in orchestrating the entire thing—Tobias expected it when the healer snorted derisively.

"Hah! If _that_ works, Dumar will have to declare you Champion of the city."
"Ugh, don't…!"

"Chhhampion," Anders taunted gleefully, rolling the word around his mouth. "I could see it happening. It's a Marcher thing, you know. They do like their heroes."

Tobias winced. "I'm not—"

"Oh, hush. You'd love it. Feted at every turn, piled with gold and gems… and you do deserve something back from this city. Think about it. Over the past couple of years, you've put down more bandits, crazed murderers and lunatics than the guard has in over a decade. Dumar's probably gagging to give you a knighthood, or a lordship or something."

Tobias couldn't see his face properly, but Anders sounded amused. The sarcasm oozed between his words, and he chuckled lightly to himself.

"Build a big statue of you in front of the chantry. Can you imagine that Vael prick's face if they did? Hmm…." You really don't like His Royal Shininess, do you? I wonder if it's more than the stupid belt buckle that does it.

"I don't want a statue," Tobias said, shrinking both from the idea of his being immortalised in marble, and the thought of bringing Sebastian's Andrastean codpiece into the conversation. "Or a title. Don't be awful. It's bad enough hearing Mother go on about titles. She thinks it's 'unfitting' for us to have the deed to the estate without one."

Anders snorted, wriggling a little in the cooling water. "Lord Hawke," he said defiantly. "Or would you be, if she was Lady Amell? It was the Amells' title, wasn't it? Just… carrying it on down the family line, like they do."

His odd tangle of sleepy teasing and anti-elitist bitterness was strangely endearing, though Tobias still wished he could change the subject.

"I don't know. It's not as if her family were ever proper nobility anyway… minor gentry at best. They hardly held any land outside the city, and they weren't exactly blue-bloods."

"Few nobles ever deserve anything they have," Anders declared sullenly, as if it was a depressing truth rather than a biased opinion. "Born with a silver spoon up their backsides, and all they ever want is more money, and more power. More of them should have to earn their titles."

Tobias bit his tongue. So much for "I can hardly feel him", then.

"I don't want one," he repeated needlessly. "I didn't want the bloody estate, either, but I'm still knee-deep in carpenters and stonemasons. And curtain samples. I'm not even sure the bloody place has that many windows."

Anders chuckled dryly and turned his head so that he could rest his cheek against Tobias' shoulder, the water lapping at the edges of the tub and threatening to overflow with the movement.

"Lord Hawke," he mused, refusing to let the teasing go. "I don't know, it is a bit boring, isn't it? Maybe we could find something better for you. Something more… fitting."

Tobias arched an eyebrow. He recognised that tone of voice. "Oh?"
"Mm-hm. Something… skill-related. 'Marquis of Massage'? 'Palatine of Pleasure'?"

"Stop it."

Anders just grinned. "'His Most Proficient Excellency, the Baronet of Blowj—'"

"I said stop—"

"Teasing!" Anders yelped as Tobias wrapped his arms around him, splashing and tickling, and growling playfully into his ear.

"I'll have you hauled off to the dungeons," he warned, as the healer squirmed.

Anders raised an eyebrow, turning in his arms with wet hair plastered to his forehead and eyes glittering. "Ooh. Chained up to await your whims, hmm?"

Tobias shook his head disbelievingly. "Honestly… what is it with you and chains?"

Reluctantly, he let Anders go, and reached for the washcloth that hung on the side of the tub. His skin was already beginning to prune, and at some point, however little he liked the idea, they were going to have to get out.

"I don't really have a thing about it," Anders said, looking at him over his shoulder, a disarming clarity in his face. "I do quite like it, though. I suppose sometimes it's nice to choose to be a captive. Consent to it. You know, if you feel safe… it can be very restful to give up control like that. I haven't done it often—not for a very long time, actually. There haven't been many people I trust enough."

Tobias' mouth felt dry. He hadn't expected such honesty, or such seriousness.

"Oh," he managed. "Um… Well, yeah, I suppose—"

"Have you ever tried it? Being tied up?"

He shook his head, the washcloth drooping in his fingers. "Er… no."

"Well." Anders smiled brightly. "That's something we can have a go with sometime. If you like. It might be fun. What d'you think? Fun is good, right?"

"Um… yeah. I mean, trying things is… good."

Tobias winced, embarrassed at the lameness of his words, and also at what felt like his inexperience. Jethann's teasing seemed closer to home than ever, but Anders wasn't looking at him as if he was boring.

"Water's getting cold, love," he prompted, before he rose and stepped out of the tub.

~o~O~o~

They lay on the bed, blankets around their shoulders for warmth, and picked through the simple breakfast Anders had scraped together. It wasn't much—the bread tasted faintly of socks, the wine was both watered down and sour, and the cheese was as tough as old boot leather—but it didn't really matter. Watching him eat was a joy; he really did seem hungry, and he seemed to enjoy the food, wolfing down huge chunks of bread and cheese, and licking his fingers greedily.

Tobias liked him like this, he decided, though he wasn't sure how far to believe what Anders had said about Justice. He certainly appeared freer of the spirit than usual, though that familiar tension
had already started to leak back into his face, and Tobias doubted that his original plan of using bedroom antics to permanently subdue Justice would work. No one could have that kind of stamina.

Anders hadn't pulled away from him, though. Whatever arguments or conflicts were raging inside him—or would rage, once Justice got over his mortification—right now, he still seemed happy, and that was enough for Tobias.

"So," he said quietly, nudging Anders' bony foot with his. "How do we play this?"

Anders frowned, peering at him over a heel of bread, still chewing. "Play what?"

"You know." Tobias gesticulated vaguely with spread fingers, then gave up and shrugged. "This. I mean, what happens next? What do we…?"

"Hmm?" Anders just arched his brows and looked a bit blank, though his expression was tempered with a small hint of impatience. "What do we what? Tell people? Do about your strings of other lovers? Write in our daily journals?"

"Don't tease. I mean—"

Anders shrugged. "It's no one's business but ours. I thought you were… open… about your tastes. If I'm mistaken, then—"

"No! Maker, no, I didn't mean that," Tobias said hurriedly, stung by the hard look that was creeping into his lover's face. "I mean, Mother doesn't really… know, at least I don't think she does, but—"

"Ah. I see. Right."

"No," he said again, catching Anders' arm. "That's not what I meant. Shit, I'm terrible at this…. What I meant, was… well… how do we…?"

Outside the room, movement beyond the hallway suggested the day's chores were under way: the muffled sounds of barrels being moved, and potmen calling to each other. The window let in a chorus of noises from the docks, and it seemed to Tobias to be the strangest place in the world to be lying naked on a bed, trying to have a conversation he felt ill-equipped for, and scared of addressing.

Anders fixed him with a look that was halfway between sad resignation and open mockery. "I think we have to just see what happens, don't you? Because if you were planning on proposing, it's just that I don't see myself having a big Chantry wedding."

Tobias tried not to flinch. He felt a little embarrassed, yes… but he hadn't expected Anders to make fun of him. The bastard had an unflattering mean streak at times. And yet—although he would never have admitted it, and probably hadn't even realised it until the healer made that jab—just maybe, deep down, the thought of standing before an altar with the man he loved appealed to Tobias just as much as it confused and terrified him. He swallowed heavily, trying to push those images away, filing them under "impossible" and "ridiculous", along with all the fantasies he'd had about the two of them running away and finding some peaceful idyll in a little village somewhere; just one tiny cottage, one warm bed, and nothing but fields and hillsides as far as the eye could see.

Just dreams. Not even real.

"That's not what I meant," he mumbled. "And you don't have to be an ass about it."

"Sorry." Anders rubbed his foot alongside Tobias' ankle. "I just… I don't see what you think should
change. What can change. We both have our own lives. We're just... in each other's a bit more. I
know it isn't going to be easy—nothing about this place is easy—but we'll find a way to make it
work. All right?"

Tobias nodded grudgingly, disliking the sense of being treated like a recalcitrant patient. "But—"

"We'll make time to be together, love," Anders murmured, leaning in to kiss his cheek. "I promise.
But let's take it carefully, at least for now."

Tobias grunted his assent, not sure he trusted himself to speak. He didn't really want to take anything
slowly. He wanted to freefall into this, but he understood Anders' reticence. It was hardly as if either
of them had much flexibility in their lives; Anders had the clinic, and he was still stuck at Gamlen's
place, at least until the estate was habitable... and what then? The mockery still stung, but Anders
had a point. Whatever it held, the future wasn't likely to include a nice wedding party, a union
blessed by the Grand Cleric, and a house in Hightown, free of interference from Meredith's templars,
or the general mage-hating populace of Kirkwall. And, tempting though it was to suggest they fled
together in search of some beautiful, perfect life deep in the Marches, untouched by any of the mess
of this bloody city, Tobias knew there was little likelihood of prising Anders away from his clinic, or
the Underground. Besides, where could they go that the same problems wouldn't touch them?

They were stuck. Just as much so now they were together as they had been when they were apart,
though Tobias had to admit that together was preferable.

He supposed little would change, in real terms. Varric and the others would no doubt find out sooner
or later—and that didn't matter; there was no need to actively hide anything—so there would be that
to deal with, but they still had to carry on with life. More bloodshed, more hard graft, more waiting
for this tinderbox of the city to catch fire, and waiting to see where the ashes landed.

It wasn't a satisfying thought, but Tobias supposed it was better than nothing.

"I do love you, you know," Anders said quietly. "And this... this is more than I ever thought—no,
more than I hoped I'd ever... I don't want to mess it up. And I don't want to hurt you, or risk—"

He broke off, suddenly tight-lipped, and Tobias glanced at him curiously.

"Well... you know," Anders said vaguely, staring across the room at the little unshuttered window,
and the pale streak of sky barely visible through it above the crowded, flat walls of the docks. "I
meant what I said last night. I'd do anything to keep you safe."

It was hard not to simply stare at him, to drink in that narrow, worn frame, and dwell on every little
piece of him. He looked so solemn, with that small frown working itself back onto his brow, his
sharp profile cutting into the room. Tobias tried to believe it was his affection for the man that made
him feel the way he did in that moment, and not the recollection of Anders' "drowning everybody in
blood" speech, because that seemed an unhealthy thing to find exciting, and yet....

"I love you too," he said, which made Anders turn his head, and the fathomless, tangled adoration in
those dark eyes tugged at Tobias' chest. "And I don't believe you will hurt me," he managed, his
voice wobbling just a little. "I trust you. I trust you, and I think we'll be all right. You and me.
Always. Right?"

Anders might have said he didn't want a proposal, but the look on his face—and the soft, hazy smile
he gave Tobias as his evident surprise yielded to flattered pleasure—said otherwise. He even blushed
just a little bit, a rise of colour touching his cheeks.
"'Always', hm?" he echoed, a subtle tone of hopefulness in his voice.

Maker's balls... that is the most adorable thing I've ever seen in my life. Makes kittens sitting in teacups look like darkspawn eating people's faces. How can he even do this to me?

"Yes," he said, trying hard to keep his voice even. "Weren't you listening?"

The look in Anders' eyes softened with an indelible warmth. "Always," he repeated, the word barely more than a whisper.

His lips parted slightly in a wordless yet desperate request, so Tobias leaned over and kissed him. The delicious, whimpery moan that Anders made when he did so seemed to hum through his whole being, and he wrapped the arm he wasn't resting on around his lover's shoulders, pulling him close. The feel of Anders' fingers digging into his back—and of that lean body pressing against his in a medley of cool skin and insistent affection—was almost too much, but Tobias wanted him to remember this moment. He ended the slow, thorough kiss with a brush of his lips against Anders' cheek, and one more sweet murmur in his ear, taking careful note of how the words seemed to make him physically shiver.

Anders' throat bobbed and, just for a moment, his eyes might have looked damp, but he disentangled himself and sat up, his back to Tobias as he swung his legs off the bed.

Maybe I imagined it.

There was no imagining the fact they had to leave, unfortunately. The necessity of dressing in their grubby clothes, with the prospect of heading out into the cold morning looming ahead of them, made for a tense silence over the respective pulling on of smallclothes and shirts.

Tobias cleared his throat. "So, uh... you'll be going back to the clinic, I suppose?"

"Mm-hm." Anders nodded. He'd washed his hair sketchily in the tub—not very thoroughly, and Tobias was already regretting not taking the chance to do it for him, because it would probably have been fun—and it was still wet as he slicked it back and tied it in his usual manner. "I've been neglecting my patients. Even if I don't do as much as I did before— well, you know. It's still something."

"You do a lot. Darktown couldn't cope without you."

Anders smiled mirthlessly. "I try. What about you? Off to the docks to fleece the Port Authority out of their fees for this shipment?"

Tobias chuckled. "Something like that, yeah. I'll, um... I might be at Varric's tonight. If you wanted a drink, or...? I could meet you somewhere else," he added, perhaps a little too hastily, trying to backpedal as he spotted the look of amusement on Anders' face. "Or just come to the clinic, if you need a hand, I mean. I... I did think I might look in. Or if you're going to be busy, I could always just—"

Anders grinned, but it was affectionate mirth instead of cruel mockery, and Tobias' heart seemed to flutter like something out of a trashy Orlesian romance.

I never knew that actually happened. I thought it was just a thing in books, but it's not. He looks at me like that, just in that certain way, and it's like a fucking medical event. I'd say I need a healer, but I already know that... I need this one.

"I don't know if I'll be able to," Anders said gently, "but I'll come to The Hanged Man if I can. Not
just so you can show off, mind you… I will expect that drink."

"Promise," Tobias agreed.

"All right. And we can… do this again soon, can't we?" Anders added, taking in the room with a subtle glance as he laced up his shirt. "I'd like that. It's been good to, uh, spend time with you."

The sentence started innocuously, but he soon split into another wide, dirty grin, and Tobias smirked in sympathy. Last night—this morning—had been about so much more than sex, but it was hard to find a way to say it that didn't reduce everything to body parts.

"It's been better than good," Tobias said quietly.

Anders met his gaze, warmth shining in his eyes. "I know."

After a moment, he looked away, apparently pushing himself to loop his belt around his hips, and Tobias tried to focus on the buckles of his jerkin. There had seemed to be too many of them last night, when he was struggling to get his clothes off, and it was disconcerting to find it was no easier this morning. The simple task of doing up his clothes seemed fiddly and cumbersome, like he might as well as have been trying to build a replica of Kirkwall Gate out of toothpicks.

That strange silence had settled over them again; a dense silence, and yet not awkward, because it was actually remarkably comfortable to be with Anders and let quietness enfold them both… and that was new. It was, Tobias realised, a new kind of intimacy. Comfortable silence that settled in the places where, before, all that tension and frustration had been creaking between them.

He liked it. He liked it a lot, and he was surprised by how effortless it felt.

He didn't want to go, though. He didn't want to ever leave, or to let this beautiful slice of time end, and the comfortable silence suddenly felt tense again, as if they were both holding onto it, reluctant to relinquish it.

"Hey," he murmured, as Anders was buckling his belt.

The little crease of tenderness in his face when he looked up—eyes soft, lips slightly parted, his whole manner unguarded and so very intimate—made Tobias grin all over again.

"What?"

He wasn't sure what to say… he'd forgotten what he wanted to say, in fact. Everything seemed lost in the mellow haze that hung between them; this ridiculously perfect feeling that he knew couldn't possibly last and couldn't possibly be real. And yet here he was, just standing there grinning like an idiot.

"Er…. I… I don't know. I just—"

Anders smiled, his fingers moving deftly from the buckle of his belt to run across the assortment of bags and pouches that hung from it, checking each in an inventory of light touches. "Ah. Right."

Tobias couldn't stop watching his hands. He knew what they felt like now. He'd had Anders' touch map his body, felt himself gripped and stroked and held, tickled and caressed, coaxed, soothed, scratched and pinched. He knew their warmth, and the touches of healing magic, of sparks and ice and warmth that flowed in them. He was also fairly sure that he'd never be able to look at Anders again and see any simple action—be it picking up a mug or rolling a bandage—without some kind of eroticised overlay.
Anders slipped on his coat, fastened it around him and turned up the collar, and Tobias watched every little movement.

*Strapping on your armour for the day. Please be careful out there, love. Please.*

He glanced up, catching Tobias' eye, and moved purposefully across the room towards him.

"C'mere."

Tobias barely had time to raise an eyebrow before Anders had pulled him close. He cupped Tobias' face between his hands, his grip firm yet tender, and kissed him slowly, thoroughly… a long, drawn-out embrace of sweet, strong, unshakeable closeness.

It took Tobias' breath, left him weak-kneed and light-headed, his whole body crying out for the warmth of skin-on-skin, and the sybaritic, voluptuous pleasures of the long, wonderful, timeless night just past. His fingers flexed on Anders' sleeve as they parted—or, rather, as Anders pulled away, his hands still on Tobias' cheeks, thumbs gently stroking the unshaven skin.

"Thank you," he said quietly, solemnity lingering in those dark eyes, and mingling with such enormous affection. "And be careful, won't you?"

Tobias nodded. "You too."

"I will."

His fingers picked awkwardly at the rough fabric of Anders' coat, the hardnesses of seams and worn edges only serving to remind him of the skin below.

"Anders…."

"I have to go, love. So do you."

The sheer weight of want unspooled between them, wrapping Tobias in its hazy, fuzzy folds. He didn't want to go, and he knew Anders didn't either, and yet they both *would*, and it felt a little like the world might fall away after that… stupid though the thought was.

Tobias pulled him back, and into a warm, tender hug. No kiss this time, no cleaving together of flesh-hungry, sensual longing; just a tight embrace, and the fiercely protective yet sweetly gentle clinging of two men, each reluctant to let the other go.

"I'll see you again soon, love," Anders promised, his breath hot on Tobias' neck. "Tonight, or tomorrow. Take care."

His hair still smelled of sweat, despite the soap. Tobias pressed his face to it, and nodded. The feathered pauldrons of the appalling coat tickled his chin.

"Mm. All right. You too, you hear?"

Anders nodded as they parted, his fingers trailing down the back of Tobias' arm, then curling briefly around his hand and squeezing before he let go, and backed reluctantly away.

And that was it. One final parting, and the bittersweet ache of watching Anders leave their little rented room—slipping quietly out of the door, leaving their oasis of calm and bliss behind him—and Tobias was alone.

He let out a long breath, and found it almost seemed to echo off the walls.
Well, Better go and try to do something constructive with the day, hadn’t I?

The thought was a good one. It was exactly what he should do.

It just seemed really, really difficult to put into action.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The morning after the night before, Tobias adjusts, and Leandra has plans for interior furnishings... and him. Meanwhile, Varric is having far too much fun.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks as ever for the good wishes, kind words, follows, reviews, kudos etc. I'm healing well and trying to fit slightly more regular updates in between other deadlines. I'll get there eventually. : )

By rights, the daylight should have felt different. Tobias was almost convinced of that fact. The entire city should have seemed altered—the streets cleaner, the sun brighter—and everything should have been right with the world from the second he stepped out of the tavern's door.

He felt different. He was several sovereigns lighter, but full to bursting with a dozen embarrassingly warm and fuzzy emotions… not to mention having been so thoroughly, deliciously fucked that he couldn't keep the smile off his face.

The whole world should, he thought, feel different. It should have rearranged itself around him, glittered a little with new possibilities and beautiful things… but Kirkwall was still Kirkwall. Not even the sharpness of the morning sun could do anything about that, though maybe it made the shadows a little deeper, and reminded him of all the things that could hide in the night's embrace.

Unfortunately, the docks still smelled like the docks and, as he rounded the corner and left the Ten Bells behind him, Tobias was mildly disheartened to see two dockhands arguing violently on the quayside, while a third was being rather noisily sick by the gangplank of the cargo ship they were no doubt meant to be unloading. He looked very hungover. A man with Port Authority livery on his tunic—presumably a clerk, clutching a scroll probably full of inventories—was yelling at them and calling for a supervisor. Pallets full of sacks with the Kirkwall import mark daubed on them in red paint stood nearby… grain, Tobias thought, grimly considering how much the price of bread had gone up in recent months.

Things should have been calming down after the Blight. The world had faced the brink of disaster and been pulled back from it, and that should have counted for something. It didn't seem to, but it should have done.

He knew the stories that had come out of Ferelden were most likely half bullshit—the bards had been hard at work forging impossible tales of heroism concerning the Grey Wardens and Loghain Mac Tir, and Tobias didn't believe the vast majority of the things he'd read—but the fact that the darkspawn had been pushed back should have been enough.

The Blight had destroyed everything he'd known. Not just Lothering, but the whole identity of the country. The Ferelden Tobias had been born in—the muddy brown-and-green little country known
only for its dogs and stubbornness—was scorched and gone. In its place was a mess of conflicting stories and carefully nurtured soon-to-be-legends. Everything was refugees and inflated costs, since the farmland had mostly gone up in smoke and the exports were down. The only thing running higher than food prices was the tension with Orlais.

He hated it. Hated knowing that, if he went back, nothing would be the same. Hated that his country was so changed, so disfigured by the scars of the past few years… yet he'd never considered himself patriotic.

He wasn't even sure what it was he missed so badly, or to what it was that he wished he could return.

Tobias chose to avoid the scrum of the dockfront, and took the stairway that led via the old barracks route. He'd have plenty of time to get to the meeting with his contact, away from prying eyes. As he jogged down the rough wooden steps, he wondered if Anders had come this way when he left the Ten Bells, and the insistent smile that wouldn't quite leave his face grew a little wider.

It was still hard to believe it had happened. It had, though. It had happened, and the world was still turning.

Tobias thought of his boyhood; his first crushes and early confusions, and the terror that had gnawed at him when he'd begun to realise that more than magic made him different from the few friends he'd managed to make.

The very first time he'd touched another boy, he'd felt like this… as if everything should have stopped, or split in two and had a whole new world emerge from it like a butterfly from a cocoon. It hadn't, of course. Everything had gone on as before, and he'd stumbled through the middle of it with his heart racing and the thought pounding in his head that he had done a thing that was supposed to be so important, and yet he was no different than he had been before. There was no colossal explosion, no blinding sheaf of stars.

He'd found it comforting, then. He'd realised it didn't matter, that it was all right to be the way he was, as long as no one found out about his magic.

In truth, the magic had always been so much more of a worry than the discomfort he'd felt when he realised that the boys he knew and so desperately wanted to be accepted by—the boys he'd have grown up with, if his family hadn't moved around so much—were starting to take an interest in girls. Tobias had always felt so utterly desolate at the realisation he couldn't be a part of that. He'd thought, for so long, that he was alone… but he had been, hadn't he? His boyish loves, his hungry fumbles; none of them had really been about more than physical warmth. He'd longed for, but soon ceased to expect anything more.

Now, though… this. Maker, was he crazy for throwing himself so enthusiastically into it all? Maybe. Maybe it was desperation that seasoned his affection for Anders. A desperate need to be accepted, to be loved, to be absolved of everything he carried inside himself.

Tobias couldn't tell. To find someone who knew, and who understood, was something he'd never really believed would actually happen. And yet it had, and he didn't care how much of a fool he was, or how dangerous it could end up being for both of them.

This morning, his world was the same, and Tobias looked on it with the same eyes, but the possibilities it held had been blasted wide, wide open.

He made his way to the appointed meeting place, and leaned against a wall to wait for Chauncey, watching the dull waves loll beneath the grey sky with a faint smile clinging to his lips.
Tobias' day passed slowly, however much he tried to pack into it.

The whole business with the Coterie and the goods shipments went fairly well. There was a profit in it, and a little illicit thrill of danger, which finally dragged his mind out of the bedchamber and into the daylight, at least for a little while. Even so, he knew he was merely running by rote... plotting the pick up point for the goods, marking the signals that would be given, making his assurance that the guard patrols would be absent—

*Thank Andraste and her frilly drawers for Aveline. The good Captain has no idea how useful she is to me.*

—and, finally, looking forward to the run itself. He had to admit that the past few weeks hadn't exactly been quiet, and nor had he really been staying out of trouble, but this... this was familiar. It was comforting, in its own strange way.

Tobias considered heading down to Darktown to stock up on anything he might need in the way of supplies or repairs, but he dismissed the thought before it had even fully formed. He wasn't *that* desperate for new wristguards, blades, or bootlaces, and he certainly wasn't going to crowd Anders' front door like a clingy puppy... even if the world did seem to have a hole in it that exactly matched the healer's dimensions.

*So stupid to miss him! Isn't it? I mean, we had all that time, and it's actually kind of nice to be on my own again, in a strange sort of way, because it feels like I can think without my head turning to mush and my heart falling out, but...*  
*...shit.*

The rationality with which he'd looked at the world earlier seemed completely gone. Now, he felt as if he'd never settle to anything again; like he wanted to punch a wall and scale a mountain, or possibly go to bed and sleep for a week. Everything and nothing, all at once.

He wasn't sure he liked it, and yet every time he started to question the way he felt, Tobias would remember the little room at the back of the Ten Bells. His head would fill with the memories of Anders' touch and all those romantic whispers, and he'd be hard pressed to stop himself from grinning like a fool as he paced through the bazaar.

A shyster at one end of the market was trying to sell holy relics—pouches of Andraste's Ashes, chips of petrified wood from her pyre, cheap little bronze discs with symbols of the Maker's Eye on them —and, nearby, another lunatic with a box to stand on and a big mouth was yelling about how the Marchers had to rise up to protect their lands. Run off the refugees who wouldn't leave, send 'em back where they came from, throw out the mages and the qunari... all the usual rabble-rousing invective. The worrying part was how many people were listening.

Tobias kept his head down and moved through the bazaar as quickly as possible without actually breaking into a run. The wind was cold—as cold as Kirkwall got, anyway—and the sky seemed grim, threatening rain. He wished it would wash some of these idiots away, and he wondered whether Saemus Dumar's planned conference could possibly work. Who knew? Maybe it was just crazy enough. Maybe the qunari were ready to listen to reason... Maker knew, if the Arishok's attitude was anything to go by, they didn't want to be stuck in Kirkwall any more than Kirkwall wanted them here. And that was a thing, wasn't it? There was more to it than His Horniness had been prepared to admit so far, Tobias was certain.
He supposed he should bring the matter up with Fenris at some point, although then he wondered why he was thinking about it—what did he plan to do, send the entire qunari compound packing, all by himself?—and Anders' teasing came back to haunt him. Statues outside the Chantry, lordships and keys to the city. It didn't bear thinking about.

Champion. Huh. Fuck that. I don't want to get involved. I never wanted to be this involved. Maybe there's still time to get out. Go somewhere else... somewhere new.

He entertained a brief but pleasant vision of sailing out of Kirkwall with Anders at his side—the two of them eloping to the warm, sultry shores of Rivain or Nevarra—but it didn't last, and it was a stupid idea.

Something to hold onto, though, isn't it? Something to think about.

Tobias took the steps up to Gamlen's house—still hard to think of it as "home"—two at a time, the recollection of Anders' laughter making him cheerful as he let himself in the front door.

The smell of soap hung in the air. Laundry day.

Bugger. I should have remembered that....

"Oh! Hello, darling."

Leandra looked up from the wooden tub and washboard that occupied the table, her hands wet, her hair slightly frizzy, and her cheeks pink from the exertion of trying to scrub the filth out of Gamlen's shirts.

"Mother."

Tobias almost faltered on the word, caught by the sight of her in that single, small moment. She seemed surprised to see him, and it felt as if he was looking down a tunnel, seeing her as she'd been years ago. As if he'd just come in from work, with Malcolm not far behind him, and she was bright-eyed but tired, waiting for them both with her chores spread around her and the twins getting under her feet. Walking back into that little hive of domestic chaos was always the best part of the day... but it wasn't the same here, now. No Malcolm, no Bethany, no Carver. No Lothering, with its green swells of fields and fresh, dung-ripe air. And Leandra was not the woman she'd been when he was younger. There were lines on her face, her cheeks sunken and her hands ridged with veins. She was older, and more tired than Tobias had ever known her. Even the smile she gave him seemed thinner and more fragile than it had once been.

"It's nice to see you. You were out late," she observed. "I don't think I heard you come back at all last night, did I?"

Tobias' gut pitched a bit, but he took a slow breath in, purposefully not rising to her bait.

He could tell her, he supposed. Tell her, right here and now, about Anders... where he'd been and why it had mattered, except he knew the story wouldn't come out right. What could he say? You know that healer with the blond hair? The one who's been driving me crazy since we got here? Well, we finally got a room, and it was the best night of my life.

No, perhaps not. It would sound... wrong somehow. Cheap, or frivolous, like it had been a bit of fun and nothing more—but what was he supposed to say? How in the Maker's name could he convey what it had meant, or how it had changed things? Frankly, he wasn't sure there was a way to say it that didn't involve something along the lines of "Well, we finally did it. Good for us."
Tobias was beginning to appreciate just how absurd their relationship and its grossly attenuated tensions must have seemed to everyone else, though he still hadn't forgiven Varric for the "horny toads" comment.

Leandra, though... oh, Maker. Telling her was going to be a different experience entirely, and Tobias didn't know where or how to start. His whole body seemed to be curling up from the inside, his pulse pounding at his temples and his tongue turning dry and thick.

"Um. No," he said, eventually, eyeing Leandra carefully. "I was... busy, and it got so late I thought —"

"Oh, of course," she said, too quickly, plunging her hands back into the washtub. "Anyway, you're a grown man now. Still—"

And there it was: that little raised glance as she peered up at him again, pinning him to the wall with those sharp blue eyes. He knew exactly what it meant. It was a look there was no fighting against, no disobeying. He felt his shoulders tense.

"— I'm sure, once we get settled in, it'll be so much easier for you. Won't it, darling? Much more convenient. You won't have to run around the city all the time. You'll have everything where you need it. And," Leandra added, returning her attention to the laundry with an iron-hard smile on her lips, "we'll even have a proper social calendar again. Wouldn't that be wonderful? I can't remember the last time I gave a nice dinner, and I'm so looking forward to catching up with old friends. We'll be doing things right for once. Won't we?"

Tobias managed a sickly smile and a noncommittal grunt of assent, despite feeling as if his stomach had just dropped about three feet towards his boots. He knew exactly what she meant. New clothes, new furniture, new hairstyles... all that bollocks was only the beginning. Shopping for tapestries and knick-knacks. Giving parties and dinners for women she hadn't seen in more than twenty-five years, pretending to be old friends when all they really wanted was to gawk at the inside of the estate and see if all the rumours were true. Everyone knew the story of Leandra Amell running off with the penniless Fereldan apostate. The only reason, as far as Tobias could see, that "society" would have anything to do with them was sheer fascination. They were the dancing bear, the ferret on a tether, the organ-grinder's monkey... the freakshow to be ogled at by the city's primped and powdered wealthy.

He hated it. And yet, a small part of him knew that the money mattered. The coin he had behind him—albeit that most of it was now tied up in that Void-taken pile of stone and mortar—was the one thing that stopped Kirkwall's nobility laughing outright in his mother's face.

The money kept everything civil, kept their precarious social status intact... damn it, even kept the templars away from asking awkward questions, because unless the city tipped over the brink into total anarchy, not even Meredith was going to piss all over Hightown's toes.

Everything was so tied up together, tied up in coin and obligation, and it made him feel sick. That Leandra was so bloody thrilled was the worst thing. Doing things right, she said. He struggled not to wince. He knew what she meant, what she was working up to saying. First, the curtain shopping. Then the dinner parties. Next, she'd start bride-hunting, and he knew she wasn't going to listen when he protested. He just knew it.

Maker's teeth, it's all going to be a huge fucking mess, isn't it? "Here you are, darling, here's a pretty, eligible heiress with an Orlesian name and a great big dowry. Now you don't have to go skulking about in Lowtown to get your kicks. Isn't that lovely? Run along and make Mother some grandbabies...."
She probably thinks I was with Isabela, or—does she know about the Rose? Ugh, I bet she does. Oh, Maker, what she must think I get up to…!

The thoughts trilled incessantly in his head, but Tobias said nothing. He just wilted a little under her pinioning gaze, and excused himself to collect his letters from Gamlen's rickety desk.

He was intensely grateful for the note that had arrived from Bodahn, informing him that the work on the estate's interior carpentry and stone had been completed, and asking if he would be able to inspect it and discuss the requirements for the next phase of refurbishment.

Tobias didn't want to, but it beat spending any longer than was absolutely essential at Gamlen's place.

"Mother?"

He turned back to where Leandra was still working through the laundry, the repetitive slaps of wet clothes against the washboard filling the room. She looked up, and he swallowed heavily.

"Do, uh, do you want to come and see how things are getting on at the house? I'll be heading up there this afternoon. I know you said you wanted to see about—"

She smiled broadly. "Oh, yes. Thank you, darling. I'd like that very much."

Tobias nodded. He'd thought she would.

~o~O~o~

Golden sunlight sluiced through Kirkwall, though it was diluted a little by the clouds. The weather was still relatively cold, the breeze sharp, though spring wouldn't be all that far behind. It seemed to come earlier here than it ever had in Ferelden.

The streets they passed through were still crowded, though in a different way to the morning bustle. No more crowds of people going for the marketplaces and bazaars, or dockers heading for their work; now, children played in Lowtown's dusty sidestreets while women pegged out their washing, and two kinds of elves moved through the city. Those who were servants on errands jogged quickly and purposely, with that fluid, light-footed elven stride, and the others shuffled with their eyes downcast, presumably en route to the alienage. A few—very young and generally very pretty, in dresses that looked like cheaper versions of the fashionable ones girls at Lusine's house wore—loitered on the same corners as the human women, sharing sips from stone bottles and laughing at the passers-by. It would be a while yet until trade picked up for them, Tobias supposed, unless any of the dockworkers got off early.

Leandra threaded her arm through his elbow as they walked, and he marvelled at the way she just seemed not to see Lowtown; as if it passed before her like an inconsequential mist. She had that fixed look on her face… the same polite rictus with which she ignored anything she didn't want to see or hear.

He envied her that.

As they moved uphill, the whores were replaced with a different kind of promenading: the well-dressed young men and women of Hightown were starting their gentle strolls through the white-paved streets, peacockling about in their fancy clothes. One young woman with elaborately curled hair piled on top of her head had a tiny dog with her—some fluffy little creature no bigger than a large rat—and she held it by a long blue ribbon attached to its collar. Tobias became infinitely better disposed towards the animal when it stopped to pee against the Chantry noticeboard.
He and his mother didn't talk much. He'd noticed that they never did now. Not truly. Not about anything more than what was on the surface. Probably the last real, in-depth conversation he'd had with her was the one where she broke down crying and told him it was his fault Carver had gone off to be a bloody templar. The one where she said she blamed him, for that and for Bethany's death. For everything.

He wasn't sure how much she'd meant it. Sure, terrible words could come out in anger but, in his experience, those were normally the truest ones of all.

Tobias missed feeling as close to her as he once had—she was his mother, after all—but he was scared of pushing any further… frightened of knowing what she really thought. He had a horrible feeling that he never had known her as well as he'd believed he had, or maybe that, actually, he knew her very well indeed. Either way, he wasn't about to beg for another conversation like that one.

Bodahn was already at the house when they arrived; his note had said he'd be there taking inventory of the remaining tasks and materials, and he was his ostentatious, effusive self… particularly in greeting Leandra with a spiralling bow and many flowery epithets. She liked being "madam" and "dear lady", even if, in private, she was prone to calling the dwarf "that funny little man".

Tobias had to admit that the place was looking a damn sight better than it had before.

The entrance hallways was still piled with timber and workmen's tools, but a couple of intricate iron sconces had been installed on the wall, ready to hold candles, and two large wooden benches—replacements for similar furniture that he recalled seeing, albeit in pieces, when he and Fenris had last picked through the main rooms—stood near the doors. The windows were still boarded but new leaded glass panes were, Bodahn said, due for installation in a few days' time.

The main hall looked breathtaking. The huge iron chandelier had been repaired, refinished, and hoisted back to the ceiling, and the repairs to the staircase were complete. The new carpet for it that Leandra had ordered was rolled up and propped in a corner, ready to be laid once the fitting rods arrived and the rooms had been painted. The windows in here were bare but had been repaired and cleaned, and light flooded through them, falling down on the newly polished stones in great, bright shafts.

Tobias glanced at his mother. The look on her face made his chest feel full and tight: so much sadness and pleasure and gratitude, all mixed together. She chattered eagerly to Bodahn about the coming deliveries of furnishings—her precious silks, tapestries, curtains and cushions and Maker alone knew what other crap—and even the way she moved changed once she was inside the house. Her gestures became grander, her steps lighter, and Tobias saw how she must have been as a girl… how she must once have known how to fill a space as grand as this, and how to spin and twirl through the frippery of life in such a house.

He still found it too big, too empty. All the cushions and Antivan walnut dining sets in the world wouldn't change that. He liked the look of the fireplace, though. The mantelpiece had been replaced with an extremely large block of marble—Rivaini, apparently—and a new grate had been installed, which looked capable of burning half a tree at once.

At least it'll be warm in the winter… though this bloody place is going to cost an arm and a leg to heat.

He nodded vacantly and made assenting noises as Bodahn guided them through the rooms and the inventories. His son, Sandal, was of course also present, and Tobias glanced down at the boy while Leandra and Bodahn were wittering on about the choice of paint colours in the library. Sandal beamed at him cheerfully, apparently unaffected by anything beyond the world inside his own head.
"Enchantment," he said quietly, with a knowing nod.

"Yeah," Tobias agreed, looking at the vast numbers of shelves the carpenters had supplied, and the twiddly carvings on the delicate desk and chair that stood to one side of the room.

Leandra had ordered them from an Orlesian import merchant; a ladies' writing table, she said. The desk had several gilded compartments on it, because apparently it was important to have a place for visiting cards from people you intended to receive, visiting cards that were to be given to other people, and visiting cards from people you didn't intend to receive, as well as compartments for actual letters.

"Enchantment," Tobias muttered dryly.

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Upstairs, Leandra was a little more reserved, her memories clearly weighing on her heavily. He had to remind himself that this had been her childhood home, and that—whatever else had happened over the years, and however much she sometimes irked him—his mother's relationship with her family had not been entirely easy. He wondered how she'd left things with them… she never spoke much of it, and usually deflected conversation away from those years.

She chattered now, though, showing him which chamber had belonged to Gamlen, which had been hers, and talking wistfully of how things had been arranged when she was last here.

Some of the old furnishings had been salvaged, although the slavers had destroyed or neglected to dissolution mostly everything but the most solid or functional pieces. A few armoires, chests, and bed frames survived intact, and four particularly ugly paintings had somehow weathered the carnage. Two of them were landscapes, showing the prettier side of Kirkwall and the paths towards Sundermount, and two depicted large, chintzy vases stuffed with garish flowers. Leandra was thrilled by them… apparently she remembered her mother buying them in an auction when she was a girl, which kicked off a long and rambling story about a family holiday to Starkhaven, and how her father had once considered purchasing a property there.

Tobias tried to pretend he was listening, and let his thoughts drift to tonight, and the hope that Anders would come to The Hanged Man. He was wishing they'd arranged to meet somewhere else, partly because he wanted the healer to himself—no single night was ever going to be enough—and partly because it was fairly evident that Varric and the others were going to learn the truth… whatever the truth was. That he and Anders were together now, he supposed, for all that "together" meant.

We are, aren't we?

The timing still felt wrong. It felt disorientating, and Tobias was still caught between feeling like they'd been lovers for an age, and feeling like it was all so incredibly new, which it both was and was not.

He just knew he missed Anders, and that he wanted to make up for all the time they'd spent together that had been wasted on meaningful looks and desperate pining. He wanted to leapfrog it all and make a real life, because Maker knew nothing was ever guaranteed, especially with Kirkwall's political climate as it was.

"What do you think, darling? I mean, it only seems right, really, doesn't it?"

Tobias blinked awkwardly. "Er…"

Leandra was talking about the bedchambers, he realised, as his mind scrambled to catch up. They
had been following Bodahn's survey of the furnishings and craftsmanship, and she was saying that she intended to have her old room—her childhood room at the back of the house, which looked out over the gardens. It was smaller than the main bedchamber, and had been entirely gutted and used for storage by the slavers, but she had apparently taken that quite well, and had decided that it was merely an opportunity for a different colour scheme and a brand new set of furniture.

Meanwhile, Gamlen would have his old room—Tobias was pretty sure he didn't recall saying the old fart could live with them, but apparently his opinion wasn't important—and Tobias himself, as was fitting, would have the master bedchamber.

"Fitting? Fitting for who? Oh, Maker's blood… fitting for the heir to the fucking title. That's what you mean, isn't it? The chamber I'll have for when… oh, Maker. I don't want it. I don't. I really don't. I don't— I can't.

He didn't say it aloud. It wouldn't have made any difference. She was already halfway into the bedchamber, still not listening to him.

"You see, look, this was your grandparents' chamber," Leandra said fondly, casting her gaze around the room, and moving to examine every new cornice and carving. "I think they'd be delighted to think of you having it now. And it faces east, of course, so you have the morning light…"

He sighed and followed her into the room. It wasn't unpleasant. Large, wide… there were rather attractive mouldings around the ceiling and cornices, though the smell of fresh woodwork sat strangely against the dust and dirt that still smeared the walls. There was a fireplace with a large hearth; a stone mantel, rather plain and very unlike the fancy one downstairs, though the fire would kick out a lot of heat, and he supposed he could do worse than to have a chair in front of it, and curl up beside it on chilly winter evenings. Better than huddling up in blankets at Gamlen's place, trying to stay warm and avoid the rainwater dripping through the ceiling.

Some of the furniture in the chamber had survived the ravages of both time and slavers, and been repaired by the carpenters: a huge wardrobe, an iron-bound trunk, and what had to be the biggest bed known to mankind.

Tobias was sure he remembered seeing it last time he was here, and telling Bodahn that it didn't need to be repaired and that he'd buy a new one. And yet, there it was, an immense thing crafted from heavy, dark wood, with carvings of fruit and flowers all over the posts and the frame that had previously been draped with moth-eaten, mouldy red velvet.

"You'll need new curtains and a canopy, of course," Leandra continued, running her fingers wistfully over the carvings. "It was red before. Lovely, rich Orlesian red velvet. Mother and Father had a big brocade quilt, and there was a trim in gold… I'm sure I can get something very like it. You know, your uncle and I were both born on this bed," she added, turning to look at him as if this should enthral and impress him.

Ewww. Can I have a new mattress?

"Uh… really?" Tobias managed, glancing at the rest of the room's expanse.

There were more huge windows—windows big enough to make him feel vulnerable, given how easy it would be to drop down from the roof onto the balcony outside and crash through. Still, he supposed they'd also provide a reasonable means of escape if he needed it. Funny… even now, with wealth behind him (admittedly wealth that Leandra was making steady inroads into spending), he was still making contingency plans in case the templars came.
Tobias had no idea whether money would actually prove a reasonable defence against Meredith's men, if it came to it. This whole business with the estate was putting him in an ever more visible position in the city—as if his dealings with the Viscount's office hadn't already done that—and he knew he was playing with fire. He supposed he just had to hope he wouldn't get burned.

"It's strange," Leandra said, still musing over the carved bed frame. "I always thought that my children would…. Well, you know…." She trailed off, but he was profoundly aware of what she'd meant. She'd thought her own children would be born on the bloody thing as well—something else that she no doubt blamed him for. He hated the way that, ever since they'd come back to this bloody city, she'd seemed to regret the choices she made…and seemed to blame him for them. Tobias supposed he should have expected it. Malcolm wasn't here to be shamed for being what he'd been—a mage, a Ferelden, a commoner—but he was, and he was definitely his father's son.

He winced, trying to hold the sudden wave of pain inside his chest. It had been a long time, and perhaps they'd never been as close as they might have been, but Tobias hadn't missed his father this much in years.

Leandra smiled sadly at him, and he wished he could give her the comfort he thought she wanted. It was a big bed, though. In a big room. He stared glumly at it, and found his thoughts drifting to Anders. That would be one good thing about this place, Tobias decided. Somewhere they could spend the night together without having to worry about an innkeeper turfing them out in the morning. Sneaking in past Leandra might be an issue, but it was a large house—large enough to get lost in, perhaps.

His mind dallied pleasantly in imagining the cold floor scattered with thick rugs, a fire roaring in the grate and furs on the bed…the two of them snuggled together beneath warm drapes and bedcovers, and Anders lying against him the way he had last night, so relaxed that his bones seemed to have melted. He was lovely like that, when he felt safe and free, and Tobias wanted to give him so many more hours of that feeling. A lifetime, if it was possible.

That was all he wanted. All he could ever have wanted. It was definitely the only thing that was ever going to make being tied to this place worthwhile…but as Tobias' gaze turned back to his mother, she gave him a worryingly bright, encouraging smile, and his stomach clenched anxiously.

"Still, you know… in time, I'm sure there'll be more little ones, won't there?"

_Oh, Andraste's flaming crotch…._

She had been born on this bed, she had thought her children should have been born here, and now she expected that his _would_ be.

_Fucking wonderful._

Tobias' mouth felt dry, and Leandra just kept smiling at him.

"Mother, I—"

"Oh, now, I don't mean _yet,"_ she said, hushing him with a wave of her hand. "But… well, once we're settled, we can start thinking about things properly, can't we? Lady Vollard has a daughter just a few years younger than you, and _they_ haven't been doing so well since her husband died—all the money was from his family, you know, and of course they were from Tantervale originally, so all the land went back to his brother, I think it was. Now, I'm not saying you'd have to settle for a match on
Tobias’ head pounded, and it felt as if his pulse was trying to break out through his neck. How could she be so bloody dense? Was it cruelty? Did she mean to keep going on and on and on until he broke down and just shouted at her that he didn’t want this?

"Look, Mother, I can’t—"

"—but one thing they did have," Leandra continued, apparently oblivious to his discomfort, "was the most fascinating fountain in their garden at the summer estate. It had a sort of mechanical piece on the top, and it… I don’t know how they did it, but it rotated, you know, so the waterspouts sort of criss-crossed each other. So clever. I believe the man who designed it was from Nevarra. Funny country, though of course I suppose they do go in for complicated contraptions, don’t they?"

Tobias mumbled a few non-committal responses as she wittered on, but his thoughts still thundered in his head. He was eager to get out of the upstairs chambers and speak to Bodahn, and he rounded on the dwarf at the bottom of the vast stone staircase.

"Bodahn?"

"Yes, messere?"

The dwarf almost seemed to shine with anticipation, from his neatly braided beard to his highly polished boots. As far as his former employment as a (non-Guild) merchant went, Tobias didn’t trust Bodahn as far as he could throw him, at least in terms of offering reasonable prices on goods that hadn’t belonged to dead men. However, the Deep Roads expedition had proven his bravery, skill, and loyalty—by a certain definition, anyway—and Tobias had no doubt in the wisdom of his choice. Bodahn would be his steward. He and Sandal would live here, and he felt sure he could trust them with almost anything… especially given the boy’s gifts. A father as devoted as Bodahn would have no wish to draw the templars’ attention to his son, and Tobias was already mostly convinced that the dwarf was both fully sympathetic to the Underground, and trustworthy enough to be taken into their confidence.

"About the tunnels," Tobias said quietly, one eye on Leandra as she gazed out of the windows towards the gardens. There was still a lot of overgrowth to cut back, but much of the debris had been cleared, and the carpenters had fixed up the old gazebo. If there room for a fountain, he had no doubt they were going to end up with a mechanical Nevarran one.

"The tunnels the slavers used, ser?" Bodahn raised his sandy brows. "I have the plan you asked for right here, drawn up all nice and clear."

He handed over a roll of paper, which Tobias took quickly, nodding his thanks. The dwarf gave him a tight smile, shrewd understanding clearly marked in his eyes.

"Very sensible, ser," he said. "Worth knowing every twist and turn down there. For storage."

"Storage. Yeah."

"Indeed, indeed." Bodahn nodded, his thumbs hooked in his belt and his gaze travelling to the flagstones beneath their feet. "We had the boys look everything over, as you asked. Had some stout doors put in. You wouldn’t want anyone using them for… nefarious purposes. There’s some tunnels down there as stretch nearly as far as Lowtown."

Tobias tucked the map safely away in his scrip. "Yes. Of course, they’ll be—"
"Good for storage," Bodahn cut in, nodding again as he looked at the floor.

Tobias smiled. "I knew you'd appreciate that, Bodahn. I knew we'd think alike."

"Oh, on this, ser," the steward replied, glancing briefly at Sandal before looking up to meet his employer's gaze, "most definitely."

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It was still fairly early when Tobias got to The Hanged Man. He knew Anders wouldn't get there until later—if he came at all—and he was seriously regretting their arrangement to meet there. Either the anticipation or the disappointment felt like it might kill him.

He tried his best to look nonchalant as he entered the bar and, with a nod at Corff, headed for Varric's suite. The place was still quiet; just a few hardcore barflies settled in for the evening on rickety stools, and Nora pushing a mop half-heartedly around the floor.

Tobias had almost convinced himself this would be a totally painless experience when he pushed open the door and slipped into the suite… and heard Isabela's familiar throaty chuckle.

Shit.

It wasn't uncommon for her to be there, of course, but somehow he hadn't expected it, at least not tonight. Wasn't she supposed to be seeing a man about a boat? He was sure Chauncey had said something about that, but he couldn't remember properly… had he really not been concentrating all day?

Tobias girded himself. He had no objection to seeing her, damn it. Isabela was his friend. The fact she'd fucked the man with whom he was desperately, perhaps embarrassingly in love shouldn't matter. It had been a long time ago, and it wasn't as if it had been important. Maker, she'd fucked him as well, and they didn't let that cloud their friendship. It would be fine, he told himself.

Unfortunately, as he moved into the suite's convivial warmth, with its friendly tallow candles and faint smell of fried meats, Tobias was only too aware of what he was likely to be letting himself in for.

"…which was news to me," Varric was saying, sprawled across his favourite chair with a goblet in one beringed hand, the glass gems on the vessel's rim glinting in the light. "Still, I suppose that's what I get for staying so far away from the Merchants' Guild. They gossip like fishwives, but every so often something shows up that's worth taking notice of, so,— Hawke! Ah, the wanderer returns. Have fun at the estate?"

"How did you know— Never mind," Tobias said, shaking his head. "I forget. You have eyes everywhere."

"In the back of my head, up my ass, and on my elbows," the dwarf agreed, raising his goblet in a cheerful toast. "I hear it's all coming along nicely. Your mother must be pleased. Have a drink; I don't think the Rivaini's finished everything yet."

Isabela was pouring herself a generous measure of wine from the highly decorated pitcher in the middle of the table, and she paused to throw Varric a sneer before giving Tobias a welcoming grin.

"You look pleased with yourself," she remarked, filling another goblet and setting it on the table for him, and giving him a thoroughly appraising look as she did so. "Very pleased. It must be the nicest house ever."
"It's… getting habitable," he said, eager to take his first swallow of the wine in the hope that it might make him feel slightly less like he had an itinerary of the previous night's adventures scribed on his forehead. "But why do I get the feeling you bastards are only interested in the wine cellar and the guest rooms?"

Isabela and Varric exchanged looks of exaggeratedly injured pride.

"Us?" Varric touched his free hand to his chest, thick fingers splayed against the open neck of his shirt, and the gold chain that lay against his skin. "Your compatriots? Friends? We who have fought and bled at your side? Hawke, you wound us."

"Damn right," Isabela added, from within the rim of her goblet. "Anyway, Fenris still hasn't got through all the Tevinter stuff in Danarius' cellar. You'd be hard-pushed to compete, although I can recommend an excellent wine merchant…..."

"Yeah, sure." Tobias slouched into one of the vacant chairs, stretching his legs out before him. "Well, you'd better get your orders in quick, or Mother's going to have spend every last sovereign I have on quilts, curtains, and bed canopies. Which reminds me… silk. Chauncey sent you his best regards."

He groped in the pouch at his belt, bringing out a small cut of the coin from the day's profits and tossing it across the table to Isabela.

"It's all set up; I'll pass the rest on when the deal's done. We're moving the stuff tomorrow night."

She caught the pouch and nodded her thanks. "Good. Chauncey's always been such a useful boy," she said, her smile turning into a leer.

Varric grimaced. "Emphasis on 'boy', no? I thought he was younger than Edge."

"Not that young," Isabela protested, wrinkling her nose. "Anyway, he's a quick learner. Very quick, actually."

The dwarf groaned, and Tobias took a large mouthful of his wine, determinedly not thinking about what sort of thing Isabela liked to teach her lovers… or about the tricks he'd been learning from Anders.

The conversation fell to its normal rhythm, veering into almost serious territory when they touched on topics such as the tinderbox climate of the city—the guard had been called to break up a handful of disturbances in the vicinity of the chantry, apparently; Kirkwall's citizens were getting decidedly restless on the matter of mages, qunari, and the price of bread—and a suspicion Varric had that his brother was on the move again.

Tobias held his own, managing to contribute and even pay attention to what his friends were saying… though he did keep glancing up at every sound that might have been the door.

"You're jumpier than a priest in a cathouse tonight, Hawke," Varric observed, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Anything you want to tell us?"

"What?" Tobias looked up guiltily from his second glass of wine. "No! I mean, no…. It's just… well, with the way things have been, it— oh, look, there's Merrill! Evening, Merrill!"

"Hello!" The elf beamed, obviously pleasantly surprised to be so warmly greeted as she slipped into the suite.
In truth, Tobias couldn't ever remember being so glad to see her. She looked rather thin and tired, though she still had the same wide, cheerful smile, and her eyes were as bright as ever.

"How are things in the alienage?" he asked, pouring her a glass of wine. "Sounded like it's been a bit rough. We were just talking about how things have been in town...."

He cleared his throat awkwardly. There was no easy way to talk about the fact that the attack under the Gallows had kicked off a lot of the city's tension in the past weeks, especially when he didn't dare admit the extent of his involvement... even to his friends. They might well have known—he assumed Varric did—but there was no way he could speak of it. That wasn't the way the Underground did things.

"People are getting quite nasty," Merrill said, cupping her goblet in two hands. "It's not very nice. I don't think they even think it's the elves' fault, but they're still behaving as if it is."

"Shit always runs downhill, Daisy," Varric said, refilling his goblet and passing the pitcher to his left.

"But—"

"By which I mean," he explained kindly, before she could make an observation about the debatable efficiency of Kirkwall's sewerage system, "most of the idiots in this town would rather pick a fight with an elf than they would with the qunari."

"Oh." Merrill nodded. "Well, yes, I suppose so. There was quite a fuss today. The hahren's nephew wants to convert to the Qun. There's a big argument about it. Is it true the qunari are having a conference with the Viscount?"

Tobias grimaced. "In a way. Saemus Dumar's trying to broker something. I don't know... it might help, or it might end badly."

She wrinkled her nose and took a big sip of wine. "There are some very nasty pamphlets going around. I saw one in the privy today. Horrible things about the qunari, it said. It had a Chantry symbol on it, but I don't think it can have been real. I thought the Chantry was supposed to be about peace. I just think it's good that most of the elves in the alienage can't read."

Tobias drained his goblet, and wondered ruefully if the anti-qunari feeling in the city—particularly if the issue of conversions to the Qun spilled much farther beyond the alienage and the slums, where those poor bastards would take any chance at a better life—would be enough to distract the Chantry's attention, and that of the templars, away from mages. Not that he was eager to see the Arishok's people thrown off the proverbial cliff in order to take the pressure from his own back, but... well, he didn't have much love for their kind to start with. Not given what they did to their mages.

And that's almost exactly what Anders would say, isn't it? I mean, he'd probably be a bit stronger about it, but... Maker, is it wrong for me to agree with him?

"You look good, Hawke," Merrill said, suddenly turning the conversation away from its darker paths. "You look, I don't know, happy. That's nice."

"Hm?" Tobias glanced guiltily at her, but her smile was totally guileless.

Isabela grinned. "You know, it's funny... I said almost exactly the same thing the minute he walked in. He does, doesn't he?"

Oh, shit.
Tobias cleared his throat meaningfully. "He is right here, you know."

Varric leaned over and topped up his goblet. "Yeah, and he's been remarkably cagey about the whole thing. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was one of those romantic entanglement things."

"What?" Tobias was appalled to find a prickle of heat starting to rise in his neck. Was he that bloody obvious? He winced. "No… I just— Wait, why am I being interrogated?"

The dwarf set the pitcher down and shrugged, spreading his hands wide. "Oh, c'mon. 'Interrogated' is such a strong word. Think of it as friendly curiosity."

Tobias narrowed his eyes. He could smell the set-up here, but he didn't know quite how it had happened. The door opened, and he cursed the way his head immediately lifted, his gaze seeking out the figure he was waiting to see outlined in the candlelight.

No such luck. Nora came bustling in with a fresh jug of wine and some spiced flatcakes, placing the plate in front of Varric with a knowing smile and something that looked very like a flirtatious wink. Tobias tried to hide his awkwardness in his goblet, but he suspected he wasn't very successful.

After the barmaid left, he felt the weight of three gazes upon him, and he was aware of both Varric and Isabela struggling to contain their mirth.

"What?" Merrill asked innocently. "Did I miss something?"

Varric coughed and took a mouthful of his wine. As the evening had worn on, the whole suite—though it was quiet tonight, the door closed against unexpected visitors and signalling that the Merchant Prince was, for once, not holding public court—had grown warm to the point of stuffy, the roaring fire and generous candles heating the thick, scented air.

"Do, uh, do you know Nora's cousin, Daisy? She's got a cousin, right here in town. Her and her pa came down from Starkhaven… they run a little place near the docks."

Tobias closed his eyes. Well, that was just wonderful. Why wasn't he surprised? He brought his goblet to his lips, drawing the sweet taste of the wine across his tongue, and tried to maintain what little dignity he had left.

"Of course," Varric continued, "you know, the girls see each other a lot… you know what gossip's like in this town. Everyone knows where everyone else is going—"

"And coming," Isabela said, widening her eyes at Tobias.

He groaned. "Oh, by Andraste's flaming cu—"

"I don't understand," Merrill said, smiling genially. "Was it something important?"

Tobias wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or slide under the table. The wine had loosened him up, but he was still too sober not to be embarrassed. The fact his head was now full of Anders again didn't help, and didn't stop him wondering just how much noise they'd made last night. Oh, Maker… and the way Anders had laughed at the girl—Nora's blasted cousin—when she brought in the tub! The bloody Void could take the entire population of Kirkwall, and their sodding cousins.

Isabela leaned forward, her ample and jewel-bedecked cleavage resting on her folded arms as she fixed Tobias with a look of salacious intrigue. "Come on, Hawke. You need to tell us. We're all desperate to know what it's like. You know? You, Anders, and Justice? Hmm, I've always said three's good company."
"Oh!" Merrill let out a delighted little sound as Tobias blushed and stared daggers at the smug Rivaini. "Really? You and Anders got it all sorted out at last? Oh, I am glad. No wonder you look so cheerful! That's... that's nice."

He snorted. It was nice. Well, that was good. He was glad of that. He glowered at his friends, and entertained beautiful thoughts of murdering them all, or at least applying a solid force spell or three to the sides of their thick skulls.

"I'm not talking about it," he said resolutely. "It's between us, and no one else. Sorry, but you're all going to have to get your pervy little kicks elsewhere."

"Well, speaking of pervy—" Isabela began, grinning broadly.

"Don't you dare," Tobias warned, pointing a finger at her, though it was very hard to feel she was taking him seriously, especially when even he could see the said finger wavering a bit. He hadn't even had that much to drink. "I mean, it's not... well, it's isn't. So... don't."

She spluttered, and fell to full, rich laughter. Varric chuckled, and then looked expectantly at Tobias. "So, Blondie swinging by tonight? Explains why you couldn't take your eyes off the door."

"It's an assignation," Isabela said, stage-whispering to the dwarf behind her hand. "A lovers' tryst. We should give them privacy."

Tobias did his best to say nothing—at least, nothing incriminating, and nothing outright threatening her personal safety—but Isabela's widening eyes and full-on wicked grin pricked at his defences, and he felt himself start to crack.

"That is not what— I mean.... Oh, sod."

He gave up, sighed heavily, and went back to his wine with a dismissive and rather rude hand gesture. She clapped her hands and laughed, and Merrill still looked confused.

Anders is going to kill me. I'm going to be murdered by an angry, embarrassed mage who didn't want all this to be dragged out in public.

Still, I suppose it doesn't matter. They were going to find out sooner or later, and they're our friends.

That much was true. They were his friends, and they were Anders' friends, and now—by some strange alchemy that Tobias found new and intriguing—they were, indeed, "our" friends.

He wasn't used to thinking of things that way.

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It was almost midnight by the time Anders did arrive. Tobias was slightly drunk, and had nearly given up waiting for him, his reaction to the sound of the tavern door now more a reflex than a nervous tic.

He still looked up, though, and still grinned like an idiot when that tired, narrow frame slipped into the suite, worn thin and looking bedraggled from the night's rain.

Anders smiled when he saw him, and it felt a little bit like being touched by sunlight. Tobias wished he could have had an opportunity to warn him about the inevitable good-natured mockery that was coming, but the expectantly grinning faces that suddenly turned to meet the healer probably gave the game away on their own.
Anders raised an eyebrow, just as Isabela raised her goblet and wolf-whistled him.

"Well, hello, lover-boy! Couldn't keep away, then?"

Anders sighed wearily and gave Tobias an admonishing look. "Really? Did you tell everyone?"

"What? No! I didn't say anything, I swear! They… they interrogated me," he protested, as Isabela sniggered uncontrollably, and Varric developed a sudden coughing fit.

Anders rolled his eyes. "You're all children," he said, moving nonchalantly across the suite with his tattered pauldrons rustling as he shucked the gloves from his hands. "I don't know what you think is so amusing."

"Hey." Varric shrugged, grinning broadly. "We're just happy for you, Blondie. It's nice. It's… sweet."

Tobias winced, glaring at the dwarf and his evil grin. Isabela wasn't much better, leaning against the back of Varric's chair with one hip cocked to the side and her arms folded across her chest. Her smirking gaze danced between Tobias and Anders, and she raised her eyebrows in a gesture that was both rapaciously suggestive and disturbingly wistful.

"It's interesting. Go on, now, don't hold back on account of me. I'm sure you want to greet him properly."

Embarrassment rose hotly in Tobias' cheeks. He envied the dry, weary look that Anders shot in Isabela's direction—so calm and unflustered. Personally, he just wanted to punch her. She carried on grinning, regardless, and he didn't dare contemplate what was going on behind her eyes.

Merrill, now curled into a chair near the fire, and already a couple of drinks in, swung her legs lazily, her heels scuffing at the floor as she regarded them with her head tilted to one side and a dreamy smile suffusing her face. "Well, I think it's lovely! Everybody knew you liked each other. I just didn't know humans were so funny about it. I mean, if you were Dalish, the Keeper would have just made offerings to Mythal and Sylaise… well, all right, maybe not Mythal in your case—" she added, wrinkling her nose briefly in apparent thought, "—and sent you off into the forest for your bonding, and that would have been it. Easy!"

She nodded to emphasise her point, and took another large swig from her mug, so that all that was visible of her was two huge leaf-green eyes and a series of black braids above the pewter rim.

Tobias didn't like to say so, but the Dalish method of consummating affection seemed distinctly appealing in that moment. He rather liked the idea of running off into the woods with Anders, away from all the stares and the sniggering, however well-intentioned it was.

All the same, he frowned in confusion. "Why not M—"

"Mythal is the mother goddess," Anders said quietly, reluctant amusement shading his face. "Sylaise is the hearth keeper. They ask her blessing for a happy and peaceful home, and Mythal's for…." He cleared his throat, arching his brows meaningfully. "Uh, fruitfulness. In the, er, marriage."

"Oh." Tobias winced, feeling embarrassment twist his stomach into a complicated knot. "Right. I… see."

He stood up—rather more clumsily than he expected to, barking his chair against the floor, which wobbled a little under his eyes—and he found himself standing face-to-face with Anders, bathing in the curious expression he wore. It was one part weary resignation, one part mirth, and several other
parts things Tobias was a little frightened to identify. Affection, annoyance… but also need, hunger, and gratitude, as if Anders really, truly wouldn't rather have been anywhere else in this moment.

Tobias wanted to ask him how he knew that about the Dalish. Most of all, he wanted to keep looking into his eyes, and he wanted to be alone with him somewhere they could laugh about this, and kiss away the awkwardness.

"Hello," he said, feeling the weight of those heavy looks on his back.

Anders let out a short, soft snort of laughter and shook his head.

"Oh, fine."

He tossed his gloves onto the table and, smirking gently, turned back to Tobias. There was a hint of a question in his eyes as he moved close, folding his fingers over the buckles of Tobias' leather jerkin.

_of course I don't mind. Fuck it, I want them to see._

_Not… everything, though._

Somehow, it was extremely easy to find himself being kissed, and to find his hands clenching onto the sleeves of Anders' coat, as if their audience didn't matter in the slightest.

They did matter, of course. And this was ridiculous. Tobias could hear Isabela's gales of raucous, delighted laughter, Merrill's hoot of surprise, Varric's snorted amusement and comment about "Hawke always needing to be the centre of attention". Embarrassment flamed in his cheeks. And yet, the supple pressure of Anders' mouth on his—a firm, warm kiss that stated so absolutely, so unequivocally that this was _them_, this was what they were to each other now—seemed to make the room blur around him. It became a vast, noisy, stifled nothing, and Tobias' fingertips touched his lover's cheek as Anders pulled away, dark eyes impish and a self-satisfied grin on his face.

The grin dissipated into a simple look of smugness as the healer turned to their friends and—against a smattering of light applause from Isabela and a very giggly Merrill—said:

"Right. There you go. Happy now? Can we all just have a drink in peace?"

~o~O~o~

Once the inevitable ribbing and tittering was over, it was lovely to sit near the fire, warm and happily mellow, and watch Anders without censure or guilt. Tobias had given him the drink he'd promised he'd buy him, and they had shared so many long, beautiful, meaningful looks. It felt liberating, and he was fairly sure Anders felt the same way.

He looked happy. He was playing Wicked Grace with Isabela—all right, _losing_ at Wicked Grace—and grinning… and flirting with her a little bit, although it was harder than Tobias expected to feel jealous. He could see the differences in the way Anders was with her to the way he was when _they_ were together. He knew there _was_ a difference now… knew so emphatically how it felt to have that man touch him in ways that expressed so many things.

Tobias thought about the estate, and the large, empty bedroom with its immense carved bed, and how much he wanted to fill it with someone who mattered.

At the back of his mind, Leandra's none-too-subtle hints about the social role they would be stepping into picked at him. Tobias knew the time was coming when he'd have to talk to her, and explain to her the things he should have told her years ago. The fact they'd never seemed important or relevant
then seemed so strange now, and he tried to tell himself that—next to what was happening in Kirkwall, or next to the wars and sieges and famines that tore at the far-flung reaches of Thedas—who he chose to spend his nights with still wasn't that important… but the truth of the matter was that nothing seemed more real than this.

He was in love, and it was absolutely everything that every sappy poem or turgid bardic melody had ever promised. That, and more; something deeper, something more urgent and more all-consuming.

After a few hours, the main tavern had all but emptied, and it was time to start heading home. As Varric put it, he didn't care where they went, but he was going to bed and they couldn't stay here.

Isabela volunteered to walk Merrill back to the alienage, and they headed off into the night, Merrill's clear, light voice following hesitantly in the second verse of a song Isabela had been teaching her. It was called *Twenty Maidens Set Sail for Ruthven's Rock*, and—as far as Tobias could tell—not one of them made it there intact.

"Are you heading back to the clinic?"

Anders nodded. His cheeks were slightly flushed, his eyes shiny—perhaps Justice had allowed him to drink without challenge, though why that would be so Tobias couldn't have said.

"Mm-hm. You're going back to Gamlen's?"

"Yeah."

"Shall we—?"

"Mm. I'd like that."

Anders smiled. It was nice to walk out of the tavern with him—as they'd done plenty of times before, though always under the weight of that frustration and hampered eagerness—and to feel the cool air and the light patter of thinning rain upon their skin.

The moon was half-full. They didn't talk much as they paced through the pitted streets, though Anders did slide his hand into Tobias' and squeeze gently, holding onto him until they parted at the top of street that led back to the Old Town courts and alleys.

"Well… this is it, isn't it?" Tobias eyed the healer wistfully. "Goodnight, I guess."

Anders dipped in to give him a kiss that tasted a lot like wine, and he leaned into it, enjoying the deepening of the embrace. He could smell the echoes of the bar's tallow candles, its miasma of sweat and old beer… and he could smell Anders' coat, and Anders' skin, and he wished so badly that this could be another night of freedom and bliss.

"Goodnight," Anders said when they finally parted, with a small smile that seemed slightly sad.

"'Night," Tobias murmured, reluctantly letting go of his hand.

He hadn't mentioned the estate, or the tunnels beneath it, or any of the big, serious, ominous things he wanted to talk to Anders about. He *did* want to talk about them, but he also wanted to see the look the man had had on his face tonight, when he smiled and laughed and seemed so much more… well, 'human' felt like the wrong word, felt like a cruel word, but it did fit.

"Oh," Anders said, pausing to look back over his shoulder. "Um… there's a meeting. Three nights' time. I didn't know if you'd see Selby before that. Her place. She wanted me to make sure you
"Right." Tobias nodded, a little taken aback at what felt so much like telepathy it unnerved him. "Er, thanks."

He didn't really trust himself to say anything else, and Anders didn't seem to expect it. He'd already tucked his hands into the pockets of his coat, and started to move away into the shadows.

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