GODS OF ANTIVA
by spicyshimmy

Summary

Sequel to MUD AND SAND, originally written on the Dragon Age Kinkmeme. Sailing off into the sunset isn't exactly the same as sailing off into Antiva. Hawke and Anders still have much to sort out, both in and out of their new leather trousers. After two weeks on the open water, Anders never wanted to see a foamy wave-cap again.

Notes

A few little details from various pictures by Naiadestricolor over on tumblr worked their way into this one. And Syberfag's "porn brainstorm" helped beyond the telling in various naughty-bits scenes.

After two weeks on the open water, Anders never wanted to see a foamy wave-cap again.

He wouldn’t have minded the sea-birds, the smells of salt and sweat, the quick breezes or the black, cool nights, but the bouts of seasickness—which came without warning and passed without cure—made it difficult to appreciate the wind in his hair or cooling his skin. He was a man better suited for leaning over window-sills than over boat-sides; a coastline that changed hourly and a vessel that bobbed heavy with its illegal, breathing cargo day in and day out was almost as appalling as the sight of qunari dreadnoughts on the horizon, when the captain of The Siren’s Call steered them dangerously close to Seheron on their way out of Minrathous port.
That was days ago now. The craggy line of qunari land had long since faded into the distance—the horizon behind them, instead of the one glittering with the setting sun far beyond the ship’s prow—but Anders knew from personal experience that qunari never disappeared. They always were, and never stopped, right up until the moment they died—and probably even after that. Their certainty, their Qun, was no less confounding on a boat than it was on solid ground.

But it was the continued experience of sailing that wore Anders down, not the sudden moments of peril, like the squall they hit five days out, complete with the splash of the waves and the lash of the ropes. An instantaneous threat—the sort of storm that brewed just out of sight and broke without warning—was something Anders was accustomed to simply because Tevinter living had been sewn from the very patchwork of such storms. Qunari dreadnoughts or ambitious magisters, power-hungry archons or lightning crackling straight toward the mainmast—Anders knew how to keep his head down, how to hold onto something sturdy and try not to get himself caught in the crossfire.

Whether it was wrought by the arcane or the natural made little difference. Fearsome acts of raw power came in many forms, and weather was a magic all its own—just like qunari gaatlok.

Anders would have been happy enough with only those pesky details to hound them, the captain’s steady hand on the wheel or her sharp voice calling orders: belay the starboard or hoist the hardtack or whatever it was she said that the members of her crew managed to understand and carry out.

Being becalmed, however, felt too much like not running for Anders’s liking. Every idle breeze, every hour the mainsail didn’t swell with favorable winds, was an hour Anders had no purpose on deck, nothing to occupy his time with—save to contemplate the sunburn on his nose and the rollicking of his innards, the glare of sunlight off the inching waves. And, yes, the foamy wave-caps above them, sloshing lazily against the hull of the ship.

That wasn’t to say the pirate lifestyle didn’t offer its small pleasures. Some people fit right in—the way they did in a gladiatorial arena or in a private garden, wielding a broadsword or a wooden stake. Despite sunburn or rollicking innards, there was a thrill involved in watching those people do what they did best—adapt, to whatever cause needed them most, which in this case involved lots of rigging and even more half-nakedness.

Hawke’s sunburn wasn’t getting any better. It was worse than Anders’s, which trapped and held the heat well enough, and required a cool washcloth slapped over his eyes at night to keep the temperature down. It made his eyes puffy, but Hawke’s back was a network of pink slants and red strips of untreated flesh that flaked and peeled as it burned anew.

Anders had tried to heal him after the third day, but Hawke waved him off, in the middle of winding fresh rope from his elbow to his shoulder with a few blunt sweeps, frayed cord resting between thumb and forefinger, ignoring—as always—his collection of blisters.

‘Let me guess,’ Anders had said. ‘You’re as good at sailing as you are at gardening. Is there no end to your list of talents? Will you be assassin next, or perhaps wealthy merchant? I’d like wealthy merchant.’

‘Better to be a master of one really useful skill,’ Hawke had replied with a meaningful look, and left Anders to trot after him down the length of the galleon, avoiding deck-swabbers and plank-bearers as he went.

Master, Anders thought. Not exactly a word without its hidden meanings. The wind picked up from far across the water, and the mainsail swelled full as a pregnant belly in its final month.

From the crow’s nest, the captain let out a wicked call, and Anders forced himself to think about
Hawke instead of the sudden burst of action on-deck, all hands to the portmanteau or whatever it was the crew was currently about.

Except thinking about Hawke wasn’t without its hidden meanings, either.

There was little room to think about one man on a ship crowded with cats—it had been rats and cats before, but after the first week ended, only the latter remained, a gladiatorial match of their own enacted in miniature, down below deck—and slaves, free only in the sense that they were no longer beholden to a single master. Instead, they were beholden to life itself: to the galleys, to the whims of the weather, to the fate of the tide, to wherever Captain Isabela saw fit to land them at last, and however personally their masters chose to take their bids for freedom.

All that possibility made Anders’s head ache. Or perhaps it was the glare of the noonday sun off the water coupled with the shifting shade of the mainmast. Anders stepped delicately to one side, back into the fall of its shadow, and puffed a few stray locks of hair out of his eyes with a heavy breath.

Somewhere else, by the ship’s wheel, broad hands steering their course against the strength of the sudden wind, Hawke simply was, the even keel of his breathing so much steadier than the tide. Anders twisted in place, leaning against one elbow, to watch him sweat and glisten, and to watch the wind itself brush fingers through the hair on his brow.

Thinking about Hawke had its moments, and Anders nurtured every inappropriate one—though he wasn’t able to nurture what came after that, such as action, a touch here or a shiver there. The ship was full, heavy and slow with its burdens, and though its captain wore no pants—offering a dusky expanse of thigh instead, nearly as golden as the jewelry she favored when the sunlight hit it just right—there wasn’t much for Anders to do, save for tend to those slaves who were hurt, checking in on familiar faces and unfamiliar patients.

That was what Hawke had meant by being a master of one skill, Anders supposed. And there was need for a healer aboard, to stem the spread of possible fever, and look after the few sullen individuals who’d escaped by the skin of their skin itself.

Anders dropped his chin against the palm of his hand—it smelled like brine, just the same as everything else aboard the ship, salt working its way in under his fingernails and along the sea-baked cracks in his cuticles—and prepared himself for an enjoyable pause in the shade spent appreciating a man who was too busy manning the deck to man him.

But Hawke had other plans. As always.

He held the wheel with one hand and gestured with the other below-deck. Time for work, Anders realized—as though what he was doing in the sun, trying to steady his unhappy stomach, could be considered ‘play.’

Taking the steps that led below was a mixed blessing. It carried Anders out of direct sunlight, but there were no cool breezes to rifle through his hair and stir the thin fabric of his plain traveling robes. When Anders thought about the clothes he’d left behind—feathers and silks, gold filigree clasps and the precious delicacy of his chiffon night-robe—he felt a wave of misery threaten to crash over his personal hull, foamy caps and all.

It was wrong to feel such an attachment to simple possessions. Anders only ever remembered them on a particularly bad day, vomiting up hardtack over the stern of the ship, or being rocked out of sleep by a summer squall, the boat’s plank-walls creaking all around him like the digestive groans of an enormous sea-beast.
The only beast below-deck these days was the elven slave Captain Isabela had picked up before their departure. He had a shock of white hair, a down-turned mouth, and deeper furrows in his brow than even Hawke, racing across the deck amidst the driving rain of a storm. Because of that—and in part his elven heritage—it was impossible to guess his age. Anders barely recognized his features, since he made it difficult to get a good look at him: curled on a pallet of straw in the corner of the quiet room that bordered the ship’s larder, face hidden behind his shoulder and the menacing, spiked pauldron it bore.

What Anders did recognize without question and without pause were the white tattoos that marked his body, scrolling over his throat, his arms and his back in a mockery of Dalish _vallaslin_.

Anders knew those tattoos, just like he knew a man who enjoyed mocking the customs of other races by applying them to his slaves. He even had the coin to sear lyrium beneath a person’s skin, though to what end, Anders couldn’t bring himself to guess. _For fun seemed the most likely reason; because he could_ was another.

Danarius was a long way away, back in Minrathous, drinking sweet wine and using his slaves as footstools. It wouldn’t do anyone good to conjure his presence by divining his pursuits. Too many people spent too much time thinking about Danarius.

Anders no longer wished to be one of them. But with one of Danarius’s slaves in the hold—or one of his ex-slaves, if such a category as ‘ex-slaves of Danarius’ even existed—it was impossible not to think of him.

It had been a while since he’d seen this slave in particular amongst Danarius’s daily retinue; after a seasonal trip to Seheron, there’d been some gossip, faces switched out, lyrium tattoos missing—but all that was never Anders’s interest and never his concern. The other slaves glistened in oil just the same, and Anders always did his best to avert his eyes.

_Fenris_, Danarius called him. His little wolf.

For the first week, he snarled at anyone who came near, despite the tang of metal and blood that hung in the air around him, or the obvious wound in his side he’d been trying to conceal.

‘Stubborn little lamb,’ Captain Isabela had murmured once, over a dinner of rusty ale and hard slices of preserved meat. ‘I was _hoping_ he’d make a good first mate. Now I’m just hoping he’ll survive the journey with all his pretty elven limbs in one piece.’

‘Anders will take care of it,’ Hawke had replied, reaching over to thump him companionably on the back.

It was the most contact they’d had in days, Hawke’s palm warm between Anders’s shoulder-blades. After that, there was nothing for Anders to do but agree, and tend to his patients with the same sense of magic and preservation as always.

Maybe the elf was hoping his wound would fester and he’d die. That was the future Anders had threatened him with, hoping to rile more of a reaction than the _tch_ he received, the elf’s wide eyes green and listless in the swinging lamp light.

He’d contracted fever in the second week, exactly as Anders had feared, and that was all the impetus Hawke had needed to finally hold him down while Anders tended the wound in his side. The task was twice as difficult as it should have been, beating back the raging infection that had settled in his blood before healing the suppurating wound. The elf had shouted and cursed, bright veins of lyrium flashing blue in the ship’s darkened hull, but Hawke had held him steady. There was no fighting the
power in his arms, the practicality in every muscle.

Now that the worst had passed, Hawke seemed to be of the opinion that Anders could handle a follow-up visit without assistance. As though the elf wouldn’t be more dangerous if Anders’s magic took, seeking revenge for his treatment with the strength of a fully-healed body.

The ship’s planks creaked beneath his boots—a welcome change from sandals onboard, considering the slop of the waves and the scurrying rats, at least before they’d gone extinct—as Anders made his way down the narrow corridor, past the packed holding quarters and the larder, the captain’s quarters and the galley. Anders knocked on the door, secretly hoping there’d be no answer, and that he might return above deck to enjoy the sight of Hawke manning the helm, sunburned shoulders fading to bronze in the coming days.

‘Enter,’ called a voice from within.

As always, the Maker smiled on Anders—right before he spat in his eye.

Anders ducked beneath the lintel, a globe of pale light sparking to life in the palm of his hand. It was dark in the makeshift sickroom, and Anders didn’t like feeling those green eyes on him from the shadows, keen as a hunting cat’s—which made Anders the mouse.

He’d seen for himself how that worked out aboard The Siren’s Call. The cat always won in the end, especially in close quarters, with no scurry-holes to hide in.

The elf had propped himself up in a corner, knee bent against his chest, one armored hand covering his side. His breathing was labored, the sort of uneven rhythm that made Anders feel uncomfortable, but at least it was steady. When he saw Anders—or rather, the light in Anders’s hand—his fingers jerked reflexively, metal talons dragging lines into the wood floor.

There were a lot of those, pale flakes and scores rent in uneven lines by the side of the bed and all over the wall.

‘Feeling better?’ Anders asked, lowering his voice. ‘I thought I’d have another look, see how you’re coming along. With a wound like that, I’m afraid it takes more than a single burst of healing magic to put things right again, especially after they’ve been wrong for so long. Maybe if you’d let me see to it sooner… But there’s no use dwelling on the past, is there?’

‘Another look’ is unnecessary,’ the elf said, perhaps not realizing that the clenched line of his jaw, not to mention his hand lingering clutched and brittle against his hip, suggested otherwise.

Anders had too much experience with stubborn patients to let them get the better of him. Most people thought if they could deny injury for long enough it would finally make them invincible, but if the technique hadn’t worked for Hawke, it wouldn’t work for another slave. Especially not one who knew the way of it so much better than a stubborn Fereldan who’d never accepted the title in the first place.

‘Listen,’ Anders said, then paused. Fenris’s eyes flickered—half in recognition, half in challenge. Anders supposed a lie or two wouldn’t hurt, something to even the playing field. Even the most infamous of archons enjoyed introducing themselves; they liked to hear the sound of their own name on their own lips, and there was no reason a slave or ex-slave would be any different. ‘…Do you know how awkward it is not having anything to call you? Listen, elf just doesn’t have the right impact.’

The elf’s dark brows descended, full lips narrowing as he frowned. Anders knew that look; he was
attempting to discern whether this was some sort of trick, without all the artifice Anders employed to
do the exact same thing.

Anders did his best to appear innocent—at least, as innocent as an ex-magister aboard a ship of his
former slaves could appear, which wasn’t much.

‘I am called Fenris,’ the elf said at last.

‘Now, was that so hard?’ Anders asked.

‘Yet you already know it,’ Fenris continued. The click of his armored gauntlets sounded less like the
scurry of tiny rat paws and more like the slicing of furred mandibles or giant pincers, the last,
grotesque enemy in one of Anders’s favorite stories. He wasn’t the sort of slave who needed a
weapon because his body was his weapon, a concept Danarius had long since given up on trying to
make Anders understand. The idea made more sense now that he knew Hawke—but Hawke was a
master of his own weapons, while Fenris’s was currently damaged, desperately needing to be re-
forged.

It stank of fever in the hold; if only there was a way to open a window and let in some fresh air.
There was more a cool breeze could do for a wounded man than all the elfroot in the world, and a
healer’s hands were only as good as a patient allowed them to be.

Fenris observed the ball of light in Anders’s palm warily, but Anders refused to let it wink out.

‘It’s been a while,’ Anders said casually. ‘I didn’t think you’d recognize me. I’d ask you how you’ve
been, but the poorly-healed flesh wound speaks for itself.’

Fenris snorted. Anders couldn’t help but feel like a contestant in a gladiator’s ring himself, one of the
pre-fight shows, a dancing jester riling the crowd. When he breathed in too deeply he could still
smell the rot on Fenris’s skin, and the flush of fever on his cheeks, and the flush of lyrium below that.

Anders longed for the simple, clean scent of Hawke’s salt-stung flesh, rain-water and sunlight in his
hair, but Hawke had other plans.

Anders had to wonder if he’d fostered them all along. Hawke was so clever; he’d seen first-hand
how useful it was to have a healer around.

‘Why do you bother with this charade?’ Fenris asked at length. His voice slurred, and Anders
scooted closer. ‘The Fog Warriors could not kill me, and now, neither can a magister.’

‘Ex-magister,’ Anders corrected.

‘No.’ Fenris’s eyes flashed, as bright as the lyrium had during the worst of his struggles. ‘Once a
magister, always a magister. That is the way of it.’

‘Same thing for a healer, and a ne’er-do-well—but not a slave, I’m told,’ Anders replied, just as
Fenris slumped forward. Unconsciousness like that was deeper than sleep, and admittedly useful for
a spirit-healer who didn’t have a veteran soldier’s convincing arms to keep a fighting elf down.

It was necessary to take the golden opportunity, and Anders did, crouched by his side as Fenris
twitched and grunted but didn’t wake, mending muscle and bone below his blood-soaked leathers.

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When Anders arrived on deck later, Hawke was in the middle of issuing commands to a few scruffy
members of the crew, pointing and gesturing and commanding like a first mate, or maybe even more than that. If Captain Isabela had been just a hair less confident—not quite so excellent a pirate—then Anders would have let it slip she might have a future mutiny to worry about.

As it was, Anders enjoyed watching that confidence until all orders were given and Hawke’s little sea-faring army scattered to do his bidding, while the sound of Isabela’s laughter filtered down from the rigging.

‘We’re about two days to the west of Antiva,’ Hawke said. ‘And you have blood on your cheek—right here.’

One callused forefinger brushed over Anders’s cheekbone. Anders shivered at the touch, while the wind blew his hair everywhere and swept someone else’s fever-stains from his skin.

‘Antiva,’ Anders repeated. ‘Sunny Antiva?’

‘Bloody Antiva,’ Hawke confirmed.

Anders couldn’t help but notice that relations were currently strained between them, pulled tight like a well-lashed rope across straining cargo and crates. That was because there was no privacy, and so many little tasks to be done over and over again, so many people standing between them and a proper moment, so many duties that came with freedom that one almost forgot what freedom was in the first place. Anders mimicked the touch, thumb against the raw skin on Hawke’s cheek, and Hawke allowed it, before he glanced away to the horizon, shielding his eyes with the palm of his hand and the shadow it cast.

‘Leaving Tevinter at last, and I’m headed toward the one place more dangerous than the Imperium.’ Anders crossed his arms over his chest, the blood finally cooling on his face. There was no point in scrubbing it off again, not with seawater, which was salty and sandy and stung Anders’s sensitive skin. ‘I’m beginning to think you’re a dangerous man, Hawke.’

‘And I’m beginning to think you’re a good healer,’ Hawke said.

‘Maybe we’re both right,’ Anders told him.

‘Let’s hope we aren’t both wrong.’ Hawke started for starboard—at least, that was what Anders thought it was, though he got it and port mixed up, not to mention aft, which Anders was thoroughly confused about. How they all fit together, why they all mattered, shouldn’t have factored into a comfortable life devoid of sunburns, the comfortable life Anders wanted to be living. But there were no parasols or palanquins on The Siren’s Call, and Anders held a length of rope steady while Hawke tied a few devious knots at the other end, presumably to keep the entire ship from falling apart. ‘Besides, you act as though Ferelden isn’t dangerous these days. Haven’t you heard there’s a bit of a Blight on?’

‘Darkspawn, magisters or Crows.’ Anders winced as the rope chafed his smooth palms. ‘Tell me again why those are my only options…?’

‘Don’t forget the wounded ex-slave in the hold who hates your healing touch,’ Hawke replied cheerfully, grinning with too much teeth.

Oceanic life suited him, in the same way all hardships suited him. He was no delicate blossom nestled amongst flowering trellises, blooming in the palest light of evening, nurtured by a fussy elven gardener’s tender hand. He reminded Anders of prickleweed, and made Anders feel the same way, a spiky knot burrowing deep in his chest.
Then, in the middle of Anders’s in-depth study, Captain Isabela called for him, her voice sweeping broad across the deck.

‘My new master calls,’ Hawke said, grinning again, and left Anders alone on deck in the fading sunlight, waiting for some sign of shore.

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Shore came two days later, just as Hawke said, after too many nights spent sweaty and cramped in the hold. Anders missed his canopy and his silk sheets, his collection of fluffy pillows, and the fresh figs and grapes and yogurt and honey that appeared in bowls in his study, with a magic all their own.

Mister Wiggums the Second yowled from beneath Anders’s narrow hammock, where he’d taken up residence after the first day aboard. He wouldn’t be coaxed out for love or dried fish, but he’d nip at Anders’s fingers in the night sometimes if he let his hand trail over the burlap side, which was how Anders knew the poor old thing was still alive.

He’d almost suffered worse than Anders on the voyage, nearly enough that they came close to clearing up the issue of Mister Wiggums the Third’s succession in line.

The others were scattered happily or unhappily about the ship; Ser Pounce, Ser Trounce and Ser Flounce were the keenest ratters, and prowled the hull and the galley devotedly, even long after the last of the rodents had given its final death rattle. King Cailan had weaseled his way into Captain Isabela’s quarters and sometimes into her corset, a fact that made Anders wish he was smaller and fluffier than usual. He’d seen neither hide nor hair of Lady Talia Lyonne and Garren, but they’d last been spotted mewing pitifully at Fenris’s door, upset by the injuries they sensed, the stink of blood and sweat and leather.

Anders had no idea how he was going to get them all off the ship—or whether it would be fair to, considering how well they’d settled in. They, at least, could be assured of a comfortable living situation in the future, so long as they kept their teeth sharp and their claws sharper, while Anders’s future held no such guarantees.

Hawke had been clever enough not to make any promises. *Come with me,* he’d said, and *the ship needs a healer.* It had all been far too easy, looking back; Anders was the one who hadn’t requested clarification, and it wasn’t Hawke’s job or his duty or his place to offer any unbidden.

Still, Anders couldn’t make himself regret the decision. When he thought of his lonely villa, the naughty mosaics and the marbled floor and the unbroken vases without Hawke there to fill the long halls and the empty silences, Anders knew he’d made the right choice—even if that meant he hadn’t escaped Tevinter for the same reasons as Hawke, or for the right reasons *period.*

‘Antiva City,’ Captain Isabela said, as Anders made his way above-deck at last. She was leaning cross-armed on the railing, a light breeze stirring her dark curls, just beneath the sea-blue scarf.

The few belongings Anders had brought with him were packed neatly into a battered leather satchel he’d taken with him the day he’d escaped the Circle. His pillow and Mister Wiggums the Second rested neatly on top, while Ser Pounce-a-lot was perched on his shoulders, sharp nails digging in through fabric and skin for balance every time Anders took a step. ‘She’s no Llomerryn, but she’s got an incomparable…’

‘…Stench?’ Anders supplied, as the scent carried on the warm wind smacked him straight in the face. It smelled like dead fish and rotting leather, both lying out in the sun under the docks and steeping in the bilge. It must have been blended on purpose, a new form of torture they hadn’t yet
discovered all the way in Tevinter.

‘—I was going to say charm,’ Isabela said, turning with a smile, lips curved easily at the corners. Her warm gaze passed from Anders to a point just over his shoulder, where Hawke was clambering out of the starboard hatch. Fenris followed in his shadow, movements stiff and awkward, holding none of Hawke’s easy grace as he pulled himself up on-deck. Hawke offered him an arm, but he didn’t take it, and Anders steadied himself on nothing more than the railing of the ship, near the cut-away for the gangplank. ‘You know what that smell is, don’t you Anders?’

‘I’m trying not to think about what it is, actually,’ Anders said, swallowing pre-emptively.

‘It’s leather,’ Isabela said. She walked slowly toward him, long legs clad in boots that went all the way up to her thighs. ‘Have you ever seen Antivan leather? I mean the real stuff that feels like butter under your hands. It’s softer than skin, and almost as nice to touch.’ Anders swallowed again, but for different reasons, as she reached out and tapped his chest with a pointed finger. ‘You should look into it. If not for yourself, then one of those two strapping lads. Otherwise, why even come to Antiva at all?’

‘For the people,’ Anders replied tartly.

‘Just as dangerous as the daggers,’ Isabela said.

The stockrooms and warehouses along the dock were bustling, the buildings beyond tiled in red and baked in the sun, the same pale pink as the flush-powder on a magister’s cheek. Gulls scattered above them, diving toward open barrels, chased away by pikes or angry fists, and Anders thought he recognized a few of Antiva’s famous tanneries spilling wretched waste into the already colorful waters, black tar and brown slush eddying just below the oily glint of the water’s surface.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ Isabela asked.

Beautiful hadn’t been Anders’s first choice.

‘It’s…something,’ Anders replied.

He would have said more, but Hawke had come up behind them, folding his arms over his chest. Anders leaned back against his elbow and mourned every, littler loss: there was no tantalizing whisper of silk on rough-spun cotton to accompany the motion, to highlight the gesture, or to pretend it was a secret shared between only the two of them. He felt Hawke’s muscle jerk at the touch, then relax, and the flare of hope Anders harbored in his belly evaporated like the sweat on an elf’s feverish cheek.

‘It’s a pleasant change to look at a city for the first time from above-deck, instead of chained up in the hold,’ Hawke admitted. The way he said it, Anders almost felt personally accused, as though Hawke thought he was responsible for something Caladrius had done.

Anders’s participation in the whole affair wasn’t the same—Anders knew that, and Hawke had to know it, too—but the planks beneath them creaked and the chaos of action aboard the ship interrupted Anders’s private look, while the men made to weigh anchor in the first free port they saw.

‘I’ll be staying on here a few weeks, I think,’ Isabela said, stretching and yawning, bothering only at the last second to cover her mouth with her weather-cracked fingers. ‘It all depends on who I run into and who’s already dead. But I need a new pair of boots and a few stiff drinks, especially after all that business with the qunari. Qunari and magisters,’ she added, shaking her head. ‘I hate going that far north.’
‘What about Llomerryn?’ Anders asked, peevish once again. ‘It’s north, too.’

He had no high magister collar or private barge accompanying him, full of slaves and dainty treats and personal bodyguards, but he had spent more than half his life enjoying the balmy Tevinter weather and soaking up the murderous Tevinter atmosphere. It was in his skin, under his nails, possibly steeped into his blood the same way the smell of leather steeped into the salty air of the Antiva City docks. Anders hadn’t been a part of it, except for the fact that he almost still was.

He knew no one was insulting him outright by insulting Tevinter proper—although sometimes, he didn’t know what he knew and what he didn’t, why he was here, if he was too old to make this serious a change so late in his life. He had to remind himself that couches were comfortable and fresh fruit delicious, that silks were soft against the skin and exotic feathers magnificently ticklish, but a gilded cage still had bars.

Anders squinted into the haze of smoke and tannery fire. There weren’t any bars in Antiva, if only because people slit throats well before they made any official arrests.

‘Showing off your geographical prowess?’ Isabela asked, with a look somewhat lower than Anders would have pegged that particular attribute.

‘Just proving a point,’ Anders replied. ‘Or…trying to. Or something.’

Isabela chuckled, warm and low; all her smiles were beautiful, but Anders was beginning to feel the same way about them as he did about the ocean, tossed helplessly by their whims for too long to appreciate the spontaneity anymore. ‘Llomerryn’s different,’ Isabela explained. ‘By which I mean it doesn’t count. Oh, there’s no need to be so peevish. You don’t have to worry about a thing, duckling—everyone has the same reaction when they first see Antiva. There’s those who can stomach it, and those who can’t.’

‘And Anders has a weak stomach,’ Hawke added, before leaving with his captain, taking his place at her side by the helm.

That left Fenris and Anders alone together by the starboard—or the port, or the aft, but even without a name Anders still knew it was somewhere—both of them buffeted by cheap winds and sultry smells. Fenris wrinkled his nose, and Anders pretended he didn’t see the way Isabela appreciated every inch of Hawke’s muscle like he was a well-built skiff just aching to be taken out for a sail.

Hawke didn’t sleep with his masters. At least, he wasn’t supposed to.

‘What’ll you do in Antiva, I wonder?’ Anders asked Fenris, while the elf held a gloved hand—still streaked with his own blood—over his nose. Perhaps he found the scent of his own pain preferable to the scents of Antiva proper, every scaly fish glistening, every belch of smoke vomited from a tannery stack.

‘What will you do?’ Fenris returned.

Anders did his best to look less chastened than he felt.

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There weren’t any tales of famous healers in Antiva, if only because their services were never required. Undertakers, yes; healers, no—and that said everything about the city right there. They might as well have put it on vellum and used the slogan for tourists.

Some of the best romances were written with sunny Antiva as the backdrop for danger, intrigue,
passion and adventure, yet Anders still couldn’t help but think of the minor characters, the ones with no names—\textit{guardsman} or \textit{chantry sister} or \textit{sailor} or \textit{assassin}\textemdash who lost fingers or tongues or heads with alarming frequency, in order to remain true to the essence of the city-setting.

Anders wondered, briefly, which was worse—the Imperium with its spells and treachery, or Antiva with its poisons and daggers. One smelled of fish; the other of leather. In the end, there might prove to be no difference at all, save that Anders was no one in the midst of countless, potentially volatile strangers here, while at least he had a reputation back in Tevinter.

Even if it wasn’t a good one, it was his.

‘I’ll show you all the best watering holes,’ Isabela promised, flicking a copper into the outstretched hand of the dockmaster by her side. ‘Are you \textit{sure} you don’t want to stay on my ship and guard my property, Fenris?’

Fenris said nothing in reply, punctuating his silence with a moody stare.

Hawke, on the other hand, was all smiles and quick eyes, long looks cast across the docks. Anders could only imagine him sizing up secret alleys and back-doors, escape routes in case some fresh ship of slavers suddenly swarmed him.

They didn’t, but Anders felt a faint chill creep down between his shoulders at the prospect nonetheless.

He could comfort himself—if not Hawke—with the notion that neither of them was alone this time, and that made all the difference. \textit{Alone} was usually how Anders had been caught by the templars, before he got lucky, or smart, or some combination of both; alone, too, was how the slavers had taken Hawke, how every captured creature found itself at wit’s end, backed into a corner with no friendly face or helping hand or future hope.

It was possible they were too far from alone now—Anders would have been happier if it had been just the two of them, instead of the two of them and Isabela, and Fenris, and cats, and a host of newly freed slaves who probably wouldn’t make it one week before they were hauled in again and shipped right back to Tevinter. Anders wouldn’t spoil the odds by betting on it, but he knew enough of the way Thedas worked to have his doubts, and to avoid thinking about what came next.

He wasn’t their master any longer. All his responsibilities had slipped free on the tides like so much flotsam, faded into the foam, swallowed by the deep.

Anders knew precious little about Fenris’s circumstances, but he’d experienced enough of his personality aboard \textit{The Siren’s Call} to guess he didn’t have many friends, before or after his days as Danarius’s featured pet. For whatever reason, Hawke had taken a liking to him—the same way, Anders guessed, Fereldans generally took a liking to wild, injured mabari, enjoying the flush of pride when the personality match was a suitable one—and on some unspoken agreement, Fenris had followed them off the ship while Isabela saw to the rest of the slaves.

Anders could just imagine how she’d dealt with them: giving each an appraising look and a parting slap on the ass. She’d say something about the tide and about freedom and about leather, and that would be the end of it, as far as Anders was concerned.

Hawke liked Fenris and Isabela liked Fenris and Hawke and Isabela liked each other, and for now it seemed that they were sticking together—whatever that meant—for personal benefit, but also for lack of anything better to do, like the tangles of seaweed that got hauled up on deck. Batted about on the waves, those bits and bats of unwanted refuse clung to each other, sticky and needy and
somehow less alone—though in the end Isabela always tossed them back overboard, never to be seen again.

‘Whistle if you see any templars around, would you?’ Anders asked with a lightness he didn’t feel, a laugh that didn’t touch his eyes. ‘Big swords, round helmets that look like giant thimbles, lots of shiny armor—you know the type. They don’t have to hide because nobody stops them when they haul someone in.’

Isabela was the only one who laughed at his feeble attempts at a joke. ‘Don’t you fret, sweet thing. The Circle of Magi can’t mix a drink to save their skirts. They aren’t on the list for where we’re going.’

Anders felt like asking if he might have a look at that list—particularly when Hawke gave an appreciative snort—but he suspected it existed only in Isabela’s wicked mind. Wanting a look at that might come later, once the rush of adrenaline had worn off and Anders realized he was back to a life on the run, but for the time being his location hadn’t caught up with him, despite the Antivan colors and the Antivan smells. It was more like a dream—neither bad nor good—or perhaps a vacation, which was generally a hearty mix of both.

‘Maldicion!’ someone shouted from overhead. A bowstring twanged, and there was a clatter of arrows against the red-tiled rooftops, just above the open street near the alley Isabela had chosen.

Hawke’s eyes followed the commotion, broad shoulders squaring at an angle that made it impossible for Anders to see over them.

‘What’s happening?’ Anders asked instead, attempting to manipulate the quiver in his voice so it sounded lusty and enchanted, instead of somewhere on the wrong side of an outright whine.

‘One man has tried to kill another,’ Fenris replied—not exactly the person Anders had been hoping to draw into a dialogue, but he suspected it existed only in Isabela’s wicked mind. Wanting a look at that might come later, once the rush of adrenaline had worn off and Anders realized he was back to a life on the run, but for the time being his location hadn’t caught up with him, despite the Antivan colors and the Antivan smells. It was more like a dream—neither bad nor good—or perhaps a vacation, which was generally a hearty mix of both.

‘An assassin?’ Anders asked, as Isabela kept the pace ahead of them; no street-side scuffle or murder attempt impeded her progress, but since she molded the weather to her whims on a regular basis, Anders supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised. ‘Do you think it’s the Crows?’

‘Don’t get your hopes up,’ Isabela laughed. Of the four of them, she was the only one who wasn’t gawking like a tourist; when a chip of broken tile fell onto her shoulder she brushed it off, giving the struggling shadows cast from above a wide berth. ‘A Crow wouldn’t have missed.’

Another harsh Antivan curse pierced the air, and Anders heard more footsteps approaching, soft leather boots moving swiftly over old, crumbling tiles. A few of them sloughed off and shattered in the street below, hard-baked clay suddenly brittle with the impact.

Hawke’s shoulders tensed. For a moment, Anders stopped straining to see, and focused on the sunburned strip of skin at the nape of Hawke’s neck, where his shirt-collar hung loose at the back. His dark hair was sweaty, and curling at the ends where it wanted cutting. If Anders pulled the shirt down just the barest inch lower, he knew he’d find a familiar constellation of freckles at Hawke’s right shoulder—but he’d also draw a few questions about why he was undressing Hawke in the street, especially from Hawke himself.
At present, it seemed best to avoid that sort of attention.

‘Reinforcements,’ Fenris observed, continuing to narrate the action even though no one had asked. ‘For the target. Bodyguards, I expect. They’re driving the assassin off. I wonder if *that* will be enough to save their jobs.’

Anders shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun off the rooftops. He could see them, bodyguards and assassins indistinguishable from one another, clad in colorful leathers, bare brown thighs and high boots, the flash of silverite daggers and the quick cut of light swords.

Antiva was a long way from Tevinter. Anders attempted to remind himself that the impulses were the same, but the manifestation of those impulses was so different they might as well have been in Orzammar, sweating not from the ribald Antivan sun but the blast of ruddy heat from a dwarven forge.

Anders dropped his hand again and looked away, fanning himself loosely, fingers curling in the still air.

‘First rule of Antiva, boys,’ Isabela said, stopping short in front of a set of diamond-patterned windows, three of which had been boarded up. A swinging plank over the door read something about *falcon* in Antivan, the paint already peeling, one corner singed from an old fire. Just like with the Crows, Anders doubted these falcons had anything to do with real birds.

The telltale strains of a lute drifted through one of the broken windows, nearly drowned out by raucous laughter and the clamor of men calling for more ale. In the distance, over the rooftops, the assassination attempt was concluded with a strangled cry and the crunch of a body crashing into the streets below, but Anders was past the point of caring about the final chapter in that particular story.

Instead, he felt weak in the knees, and not just because he hadn’t found his shore-legs yet. He wasn’t built for this—for sea-faring adventure and near-assassination attempts the moment he stepped onto the docks of a foreign city—but it had been years since he’d enjoyed a spot of good ale, and the smoky sawdust ambiance of a place dirty enough to go with it.

Tevinter liked its wine, but it was all drunk at parties, in someone’s garden or their atrium or, on the rare occasion, ensconced at their private vineyard for the weekend. Anders hadn’t been in a real taproom in years, sweaty walls with a dark streak of mysterious origin here and there, bloodstains on the tables, its patrons never certain whether they’d just stepped on a pebble or someone’s tooth. He felt his heartbeat in his throat just thinking about it, and reached to adjust the clasp on his collar, metal as warm as the flush on his skin.

‘Oh, I know *that* look,’ Isabela said, setting her shoulder against the door to push it open. ‘And it’s my pleasure to introduce *The Falcon’s Roost* to someone who’ll know how to appreciate her.’

Hawke lifted the swinging sign out of the way, ducking underneath it, and Anders followed, and Fenris too, though there was a moment of indecision at the last, where the elf’s bare foot paused before the change in height over the threshold. Anders saw his toes curl, but the trail Hawke blazed and the gravity he inspired was too much to ignore. They were both pulled after him like a littler dinghy in the wake of a galleon, and the fresh heat of the dockside disappeared behind them, replaced by a blast of humidity and laughter like a slap to the face, a second door made of sweat and sound they hadn’t thought to open.

The lute continued for a few idle moments, but it didn’t finish its current stanza before one sour note signaled its subsequent silence. Anders heard the twang of the string as it broke, the laughter subsiding into nothing more than held breaths. All that was left was the creak of chairs and tables and
floorboards as everyone in the room turned to stare at them.

Anders had thought his taproom days were long over, but he knew from experience that so much attention was never a good sign.

‘Hello, boys,’ Isabela said. ‘You missed me that much, did you?’

Anders stepped closer to Hawke’s back. He tried to remember how to distract himself with a swift breath, all the smells and warmth from his shirt saltier than usual but still maintaining hints of lye-soap and bare skin, but a tankard of ale clattered to the floor, distractingly loud. A chair or two scraped along the scattered sawdust, a few of the taproom’s patrons rising to their feet. They had such a fine collection of scars and stubble and sour expressions—not nearly as many teeth amongst them as scars, in fact—and Anders touched Hawke’s elbow, just enough to feel Hawke’s skin twitch beneath his fingertips.

There was still something there. Anders just didn’t know what, or how to name it, especially not in such an unfriendly crowd.

‘I have a feeling they aren’t about to throw her a ‘Welcome to Antiva’ party,’ Anders murmured.

‘Maybe this is how Antivans celebrate,’ Hawke replied. ‘With a blade to your throat or an arrow in your eye. Makes sense, from what I’ve heard.’

‘I wish we hadn’t been invited, then,’ Anders said, and Hawke nodded once, while Isabela grabbed an abandoned drink and downed it in one gulp.

‘Oh, that’s rich,’ she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘Changed the brew here, have you? A girl’s gone for a few short months and she barely recognizes anything when she gets back. Oh, Castillon, don’t give me that look—of course I still recognize you. Don’t I even get one itty-bitty hug?’

‘Isabela,’ the man in question replied, his cumbersome Antivan accent slurring on a half-drunk tongue. ‘There’s more than a hug in store for you, if you’ll only step closer.’

‘Ah ah,’ Isabela tsked. ‘You know I wouldn’t dream of it. Not until you buy me a drink first. You know I’m not that easy.’

‘Easy enough—’ Castillon gestured with two knife-worn fingers; his friends, or his lackeys, or his hired hands, or just a few enterprising strangers currently at his table, lurched to their feet, assuming what Anders could only guess was a proper bar-room ambush formation. ‘—when you’re dead.’

‘Now, Castillon.’ Isabela heaved a heavy sigh, one hand against her chest, the other on her hip. From where Anders was standing, she seemed to be enjoying the attention—growing bigger, not smaller, with every advance and every threat. ‘You did miss me. You’ve even been waiting all this time for me to come back. And I’m sure you’ve been thinking about this for an awfully long time. But can’t you see it isn’t going to work? Not when I have backup. And just look at how strong and virile they are.’

‘Thank you,’ Anders said. Flinty, hardened eyes—ranging in color from dinged coin to ale dregs—turned to focus on them, Hawke and Fenris mostly, and Anders cleared his throat. ‘But you can speak for yourself. I’m not virile at all, and besides which, my friends and I have never met this woman in our life.’

‘Cute,’ Isabela said. ‘At least tall, dark and Fereldan knows the rules. Price for passage doesn’t come cheap, not on one of my ships, and not with so much bloody cargo.’ She shifted in place, arms
crossed, but Anders knew she’d reach for one of her daggers the moment Castillon reached for one of his.

Anders gauged the distance to the nearest table, how much strength it would take to put his shoulder behind it, topple the damn thing, and use it as a full-bodied shield.

All casters needed something to hide behind, in order to get a word—or a spell—in edgewise.

‘You knew about this?’ Anders hissed.

Hawke shrugged. ‘More or less. She’s a pirate captain, Anders. Enemies in every port.’

‘Didn’t think you might warn me about it beforehand?’ Anders asked.

‘Didn’t think you’d come if I did,’ Hawke replied.

‘Castillon thinks I owe him something for a job we did together a while back,’ Isabela explained. ‘What can I say? He just can’t let the past stay in the past, and he’s always had an…interesting idea of what constitutes payment.’

‘Your throat slit and your heart on my plate,’ Castillon said.

‘There.’ Isabela gestured loosely, a quick movement designed to toss everyone in the taproom—armed to the teeth and already on edge—straight overboard into sudden, frenzied action. ‘What did I tell you?’

Then, pure chaos broke out.

Isabela moved like water, unsheathing twin daggers from over her shoulders and stabbing the nearest man once in the arm, and once in the gut. She used that leverage to leap onto Castillion’s table, where she kicked him square in the jaw and sent the man sprawling backward, scattering half-empty tankards and breaking two chairs as he went.

Castillon’s men didn’t like that very much, nor did they appreciate it when Isabela hurled a miasmic flask at her feet, disappearing an instant later in a cloud of oily smoke. Even Anders couldn’t see her after that, though he could hear her laughing, followed by the snap of bones breaking in half, and the indignant cries of those who’d been too stupid or too proud or too drunk to run while they still had the chance.

Only a bare few had taken that lucky option. If Anders squinted, he could see them clustered behind the counter with the tavern master; they wanted to keep their heads just as much as they wanted to see for themselves what came next, and they bobbed up and down over the rise of the bar like nugs from their warrens in springtime.

‘The bitch has friends!’ Castillon’s man roared, a blunt-faced fellow with a formidable beard. ‘Don’t just stand around and wait for them to stick you!’

Anders’s field of vision jerked around as Hawke grabbed him by the arm, overturning the nearest table with the flat of his foot, and sending a pitcher of ale straight into some poor bastard’s head with a hollow clang from both sides. It was the same plan Anders had come up with only moments ago, although he knew from the way the taproom floor shook as the table pitched over that he wouldn’t have had the strength to pull it off alone.

‘Stay here,’ Hawke said, thrusting Anders down behind the solid wood. A hint of wicked humor flashed through his eyes, no doubt enjoying the notion that he could talk to Anders like a trained
mabari, or at least an equal now. ‘And try not to light my arse on fire. We wouldn’t want anyone to know we’re traveling with an apostate, would we?’

From the leather bag around Anders’s shoulder, Ser Pounce-a-lot let out a miserable yowl, effectively cutting off any sharp retort.

Hawke was already gone, diving into the fray, ducking and weaving through the crowd’s kicks and punches. He brought his hand up to grip the back of a pirate’s head, then slammed it forward to meet the wall with a sickening crunch; a rogue with a pair of mean-looking sickle daggers leapt at his back and Hawke turned quickly, blunt elbow smashing sideways into the man’s face. The dumb bastard dropped his weapons, howling, and Hawke punched him square in the nose for good measure; blood spurted down over his mouth, through his fingertips—and his attack turned into a retreat at about the same time he buckled to the floor, playing dead like any other animal with instincts for survival.

It wasn’t the first time Anders had watched Hawke fight. But the first time had been from a high box in the amphitheater, too far to smell the blood, or hear men’s skulls knocked together, the thick, wet sound of someone’s knife being used against his own flesh. A bright spray of arterial blood splashed the walls from Isabela’s corner. Hawke glanced her way just once, to make sure she wasn’t the one caught against a blade.

Then, he went back to his carnage.

He was and wasn’t the same man Anders knew; his actions didn’t match his reluctance in the ring, the noble Fereldan who wouldn’t fight his unwilling opponent. None of Hawke’s skills went to waste in these close quarters; there was a fresh streak of someone else’s blood across his nose, and his shirt was damp from where someone had spilled his ale while attempting to flee.

The other side had started it. But they were outmatched, and as long as Anders didn’t know why they’d started it, he had no idea which side to route for—not even his own.

Also, he hated the smell of blood.

A bright flash of light from the corner caught his attention, and a familiar pulse of arcane energy hummed through the air. It jolted straight under Anders’s skin, right beneath his fingernails. He’d forgotten all about Fenris, he realized with a throb of awkward guilt—not that it was anyone’s place to remember him, but there he was anyway.

Recovering from a fever, emaciated and unarmed: even as a bodyguard trained by one of the Imperium’s most exacting magisters, Fenris was the worst candidate for a barroom brawl at this particular juncture in their lives. And here Anders was, a healer—his healer—doing nothing at all to drag him out of harm’s way.

Anders searched for him, lifting his head above the edge of the table, but he was forced to duck back down an instant later, when someone’s boot shot directly toward his face. The light in the corner flickered once, then held. Anders sat up, pressing his eye to a round knot-hole in the wood instead, squinting and sweating—but at least he could see.

Fenris was a glowing blue wraith in the distance, barely visible in the midst of a passel of raiders who’d cornered him. Magic tingled, sparking answering electricity at Anders’s fingertips, but he held back, remembering Hawke’s counsel.

Anders was an apostate in Antiva, not a magister in a questionable position of power, and he didn’t want to make any enemies.
At least not any more of them—the ones Isabela had made for him already.

There were too many witnesses in the taproom for him to let loose with a helpful volley of bright, scorching fireballs. Even if the impulse to help was there, he managed to quell it easily enough.

As Anders watched, Fenris lunged forward, clawed hand passing clean through the nearest pirate’s chest, fingers shimmering with arcane light on the other side of his body. Dark blood bloomed outward from the point of contact; the man was dead before he hit the floor, the only possible option when someone’s arm passed through your lungs. After that, Fenris was on the move once more, blowing past the first corpse on his way to making a second.

Fenris is special, Danarius used to say, though Anders had always assumed that meant Fenris glistens so nicely or I really like tattoos. Now, he knew the truth: that Fenris wasn’t the sort of bodyguard who needed the giant sword Danarius always made him carry. That, like so many other things in Tevinter, had been a prop for show, no more necessary than Anders’s feathers or one of Caladrius’s golden rings.

‘Well,’ Anders murmured, reaching to stroke Ser Pounce’s head beneath the flap of his bag. ‘He can’t hate me as much as I thought. At least he never tried to do that, not even when I was healing him.’

Isabela’s high-spirited laugh echoed through the tavern, audible over the pained grunts of her fallen enemies, the impact of metal on leather and men shouting, quite unhappily, as they scrambled to get away from Fenris on one end and Hawke on the other, overturning all the taproom’s tables and chairs as they went.

They were winning this fight—three tired strangers fresh off a long boat trip, pitted against an entire room full of unfriendly pirates and disrupted drunks, and it was only a matter of time before everyone saw how the tides had turned.

At the center of the room, Hawke grabbed two men who tried to flank him; he used their own momentum to crack their heads together. It was a pattern of carnage that Anders was beginning to notice, and one he couldn’t help but appreciate. Anyone who found the nerve to approach Hawke reeled away seconds later, with bloody noses and split lips if they were lucky—though more often than not, they weren’t.

‘I think you’d better yield, Castillon,’ Isabela called, from over an enormous tapped keg. ‘Unless you want your legend to end right here. I can think of a few colorful ways for you to go.’

‘This isn’t over, Rivaini bitch,’ Castillon replied. Anders marked his location—or thought he did—in a far corner of the room, behind a barricade made of benches; Hawke moved after the sound, but a billow of fresh miasmic smoke caught him mid-way. Anders heard a door blow open before the smoke made him sneeze and choke, and by the time the sticky swirls had cleared, Hawke waving a hand through the thick air in front of his face, Castillon was gone, along with whoever was still capable of following him on foot. A few men remained, groaning and clutching their broken bones, cursing the Maker and lamenting the day they were born.

‘That’s just his pet name for me, the dear little lamb,’ Isabela said, melting out of the shadows. She’d re-sheathed one of her blades, but she kept hold of the other, poking the tip against her fingernail, cleaning out a speck of blood from underneath. ‘Men are all the same. Once they care about you, they never know the right way of showing it.’

Anders leaned his sweating forehead against the equally sweating wood. He shouldn’t have allowed the idle words of a pirate queen with enemies in every port to get under his skin like blood under her
nails, but they rang true nonetheless, at least until he managed to catch his breath.

Hawke wiped a bloody hand over the back of his mouth, doing his best to clean off a spatter, but the color stayed on his beard. He poked at a loose tooth with his tongue, then spat; when his posture eased, the rise and fall of chest took a few moments longer to steady.

He’d done what he had to, same as always. Anders’s throat felt dry, and if his nose hadn’t been full of miasmic residue and bloody stink, literally bloody, he would’ve had the stomach for a good, stiff drink.

‘Everyone all right?’ Hawke asked, the corner of his mouth quirking. Someone groaned by his feet, and he sighed. ‘No; I wasn’t asking you.’

‘All right?’ Isabela twirled her off-hand dagger against her palm. ‘Darling, I’ve never been better.’

‘It is done,’ Fenris added, as though that was an answer to Hawke’s question.

Anders rose from behind the felled table, steadying himself against the rough-hewn wood. Tables in Tevinter were made of marble, usually, great slabs of polished wood, or even tiled, inlaid with chips of colored glass. When a man put his palm against them they didn’t give him splinters, and when a loose flake of slid its way into the soft flesh of Anders’s thumb he yelped, then sucked at it until the throbbing stopped.

‘I’ve been injured,’ he muttered around the finger. ‘Wounded in battle. But not to worry—at least Ser Pounce-a-lot is all right. Isabela, was all that really necessary?’

‘I thought I told you,’ Isabela said, chuffing him under the prickly chin with a crooked forefinger. ‘I’d take you to all the best watering holes—and I did, didn’t I? If you don’t get into a bar-fight within the first ten minutes of landing in Antiva then you’re doing it all wrong.’

Anders swallowed. He checked to be sure everything was still in order, his earring still in one piece, his collar still straight, his cat’s ears still fluffy and soft, with no nocks taken out of them by a stray projectile. ‘What a lovely gift,’ he said, everything ship-shape. ‘I’ll have to return the favor sometime.’

Isabela flashed her teeth, the golden stud beneath her lower lip winking at him. ‘Ooh, goody. I just love presents.’

Anders looked to Hawke, not for sense—since there was still the pall of a warrior hanging over him, dogging his every movement, that same cloud Anders saw in the eyes of some of his gladiators when the fight was ended but the heat still up in their blood—but for something familiar, even if there was only the haze to greet him. Hawke’s eyes were foggy, distant, but he swallowed, throat bobbing, and turned to face the bar itself, the tavern master still cowering behind it.

‘Do you have rooms above?’ Hawke asked.

The tavern master nodded.

‘Excellent,’ Hawke continued. ‘I’d like to have one—dirtiest you’ve got, and no windows. I’ll keep the place safe for a discount on the fee.’ Isabela cleared her throat. ‘Did I say one room?’ Hawke continued. ‘I meant two. Two of the dirtiest rooms you have, preferably not joined, no door between them.’

‘Better,’ Isabela murmured.
'Done,' the tavern master said.

'Looks like we’ll be bunking up,' Isabela added, while Hawke offered a hand to help the tavern master back to his feet, and righted a few of the spilled tankards on the bar-top while he was at it. Anders watched him from the corner of his eye, unable to stop watching him—he moved on after that, ranging across the room, setting tables and benches and chairs back where they belonged, hauling injured men to their feet and getting them into their seats, putting fresh tankards of ale into their hands. It took a certain kind of man to make such a mess and then go to such lengths to clean it up again, and Anders crossed his arms over his chest, drumming his fingertips against his elbow, not sure how he felt about observing such a phenomenon as displayed by this particular man.

Ferelden sensibilities were one thing. Even Ferelden stubbornness had its charms and its places. But Ferelden recklessness was something else entirely, and the combination of all three made for a dangerous companion indeed, and an even more dangerous lover.

'What do you suppose it’ll be?' Isabela added, tapping the corner of her mouth with one bloodstained fingertip. 'I’d be happy with any of you—or maybe we can switch after a few days, keep things fresh—'

'No,' Anders said, squaring his pack over his shoulders. 'We are not keeping things fresh. I don’t even think this place knows what fresh is.'

Isabela pouted and smiled at the same time—a subtlety of expression that might as well have been one of the great miracles of Thedas. 'But sharing is so much more fun,’ she said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. ‘Who knows—maybe you’ll change your mind, once you get curious.’

'I think I’d rather see what sort of bed I’m sleeping in first,' Anders told her. ‘Or not sleeping in, as the case may be.’

*

The upstairs of the Falcon’s Roost was just like its downstairs, only with fewer barrels of ale, while the rooms smelled of other people’s sweat all the same. The ceiling slanted down to the corner, a wall where a window had been, once—but the stained glass was boarded up from the outside, and no light filtered its way in. There was a big crate in the middle, with two smaller crates beside it, and a glum, stubby candle on a piece of putty in the center; the bed was narrow, with a gray blanket and no canopy, and Anders covered his mouth in horror when he realized the pillow had moth-holes, the mattress itself streaked with yellow stains.

'These aren’t the conditions Pounce is accustomed to, I’m afraid,’ Anders said, just as Hawke stepped through the door, shutting it with a creak of rusty hinges.

Hawke leaned back against the knob, arms crossed over his chest and legs crossed at the ankle. ‘Poor Pounce,’ he said. ‘But he’s still young, isn’t he? I’m sure he’ll get accustomed to it eventually.’

'We aren’t going to stay.' Anders tried to make it sound like anything other than a question, but Hawke’s heavy, quirked brow was answer enough. ‘…But it’s so smelly here.’

'And smellier, once the tannery gets going,’ Hawke agreed. ‘Still, in case you hadn’t noticed, I don’t have any money, you don’t have any contacts, and Fenris doesn’t have a clue.’

'What about Isabela?’ Anders asked.

'Isabela has everything.’ Hawke shrugged, one shouldered, making the door behind him rattle in place. ‘What can I say? Some people have all the luck.’
‘It’s a shame that they’re so greedy,’ Anders said, wishing he could crawl into a cozy leather pack like Ser Pounce-a-lot, and not poke his curious nose out for anything. ‘They should leave some over for the rest of us.’

‘Pirates,’ Hawke agreed.

Anders swallowed, throat suddenly thick in the close, musty air of the room. It probably had more to do with the hot Antivan sun than how Hawke was looking at him, brown eyes kindled with a familiar heat.

An answering spark flared to life beneath Anders’s skin, coiling low in his belly. He tugged at the makeshift bandages wrapped around his sleeves, needing to look away but unable to avert his eyes.

All he’d wanted was a minute alone with the man, and now he was scrambling, searching for an escape, anything to avoid bearing the full brunt of tension in the room on his own two shoulders. But—as per Hawke’s request—they’d taken a room with no windows, and the only door was blocked by Hawke’s shoulders, broad and easy under their leathers.

Some men enjoyed fighting, as foreign as the notion was to others. Rarer than those were the men who were made for it, muscle and bone knit together as keen as the natural instincts beneath—the kind it took some champions years to learn in the ring, suffering blow after blow, rescued only by a patient healer and not insignificant bouts of good luck. Hawke had known those instincts from his first battle—and Anders still didn’t know where he’d honed his skills, who’d taught him or how he’d taught himself.

That lack of knowledge—coupled with what knowledge he did have—was a combination that had Anders trapped now, one of so many reasons why he couldn’t look away as Hawke crossed the distance between them, floorboards creaking beneath his bootfalls. Anders hoped Isabela wasn’t listening in at the door with a metal cup pressed to the boards; with any luck, the tavern master hadn’t just given them separate quarters, but had also put her on the other side of the taproom, to eavesdrop on other people’s rare instances of privacy.

Anders had been watching, but he still wasn’t ready for it when Hawke took hold of his arms, above the elbows, fingers clasped hard around the soft muscle in the same place Anders had once worn slim golden bracers.

‘I take it this means we won’t be switching up living arrangements like Isabela suggested,’ Anders murmured, face slanted upward, a mix of hopeless and helpless by equal turns. Hawke smelled of sweat and the salt from Isabela’s ship, of sun-baked cotton and sharp Antivan ale, of splintered wood and sawdust. His shirt-collar was open, and a strip of burned skin visible beneath the dark hair of his chest, a familiar scar crossing the flesh more pink than red.

‘Not unless you keep talking,’ Hawke said.

‘That might happen anyway,’ Anders admitted.

‘Might it?’ Hawke’s thumb traced the fabric of Anders’s sleeve thoughtfully, thin and damp with brawl-sweat. ‘You don’t say.’ Then, brow close and nose even closer, he crushed his mouth against Anders’s, warm lips with just a hint of eager teeth—and talking quickly became a less attractive proposition than whatever Hawke was doing with his tongue.

Anders gave a muffled, grateful whimper of appreciation—not a word, just pure sound, still capable of saying everything—and surged forward against Hawke’s chest, freeing his arms to wind them around the sun-burnt back of Hawke’s neck. He was a difficult person to sink into, the well-shaped
tone of his body more like marble than flesh. If it wasn’t for the heat radiating off his skin, or the rough prickle of his beard as Anders’s mouth opened under his, it would have felt close to embracing a garden statue.

There were rumors of magisters in Tevinter who did just that. Anders had never investigated them; some mysteries were better left unresolved. But he understood the impulse, in an abstract way, to love something so sturdy and unchanging, without all the quick wit and the subtle moods and the unpredictable whims of a real man, with real feelings and, presumably, real weaknesses. Anders had never seen Hawke display the latter, though he was clumsy when it came to certain accessories kept around the house, but he must have had them.

He’d been captured once, after all.

It was the unpredictability that mattered most—the moods and the wit and the whims appeared like a storm cresting the prow of The Siren’s Call, but the questions unasked and unanswered were more like the jagged rocks of a narrow pass, dangerous enough to pierce even the finest ship’s hull.

Anders’s mouth parted. He meant to gasp, but Hawke’s tongue swiped against his teeth instead. Anders could taste blood and hardtack on his lips.

Then, Hawke’s arms dropped to Anders’s waist, cinching him in at the curved small of his back. Anders couldn’t feel every inch of him through his clothes—that was the decadent privilege of silk, and chiffon and brocade, other clever fabrics so light as to be almost inconsequential—but when Hawke pushed his hips against Anders’s, he left little room for imagination.

Hawke took every possible advantage, against everyone, here and everywhere else, slicking Anders’s lips wet and soft and tingling. Anders was almost ready this time when Hawke lifted him off the floor, boots trailing against the uneven boards as the backs of his calves bumped against the sagging edge of the bed.

Their bed. For the time being—as long as they managed to keep the room.

‘Mm,’ Anders murmured, fingers rifling through Hawke’s hair at the back, tangling where it started to curl. One of those curls sprang damp against the tip of his thumb, and he felt the shiver jolt down over the nape of Hawke’s neck, far below muscle, yet deeper than bone. ‘There are stains.’

Stains, plural, more than one marking of unknown origin on the blankets and the mattress. Anders didn’t want to be fussy, but the complaint had simply slipped out. Clasped in the security of Hawke’s embrace, he’d allowed himself to forget their surroundings, imagining ocean breezes blowing in off the vineyard, and a cool, stone floor below their feet, sheets slippery and smooth and sweet to the touch, sewn for pleasure, ideal for clinches and trysts.

Most important of all, Anders had pictured his own bed, made up for him every morning and turned down for him every night, the mattress aired out and beaten once a month to keep the feathers fresh.

The grim awakening of the bed-frame groaning—the puff of dust and dirt that rose from it with impact—was serious indeed. If Hawke hadn’t been there, broken nose still splashed with someone else’s blood, the stiff press of his erection rubbing against Anders’s dick through his robes, he might have started to scream.

No one would have heard him—or rather, no one would have cared. Just another taproom massacre, a daily occurrence, a crime all clever, enterprising individuals would know not to stick their noses into until the screaming stopped and somebody needed to clear the bodies out.
Hawke huffed into his mouth. Anders suspected he might have been laughing. ‘Well if you want, we can go at it on the floor, but I don’t think that’s any cleaner,’ Hawke said. ‘Besides, it may confuse your darling kittens.’

Anders groaned, the sound well-timed as his back hit the mattress, Hawke’s weight winding him as he straddled Anders’s waist. The bed-frame creaked again, even more ominously, all four posts jiggling back and forth with the motion of Hawke’s hips.

There was a brown water-stain on the ceiling, the exact shape of a map of Ferelden after the Orlesian occupation. Anders missed his canopy, the beads looped into the top, the flickering lamplight beyond, the scent of burning oil and pale, unobtrusive incense, jasmine flowers under the moonbeams. Looking up at Hawke was preferable to any of that, even with the faint trail of sweat beading at his temple and along his brow, but it became more difficult to see him when Hawke braced his forearms on either side of Anders’s head, mouth at his throat, nipping the thin skin where it masked his pulse.

Anders turned his lips against Hawke’s hair and shut his eyes. This was good, he told himself—there were so many things about it that were, without a doubt, better than anything he’d ever known. The press of Hawke’s palm against his dick was the sort of promise desire demons wished they had in their hoard of temptations, the gesture he’d been anticipating for two long weeks trapped on a pirate ship, filling his angry belly with stale biscuits, trying to convince himself the mold was green Antivan spice. Every saucy glance Hawke threw Isabela’s way on-deck, every careful, thoughtful touch Hawke spared for Fenris below-deck, and every moment of silence, Anders standing in the shade Hawke cast, listening to the sound of the waves beating against the hull and the sound of Hawke’s breath against the beating of his pulse in his throat, was momentarily forgotten with the press of their two bodies together.

It was possible, sometimes, for pleasure to snuff out resentment and uncertainty. Especially when it was this strong, blood racing hot at Anders’s wrists and temples, a stray lock of hair falling loose over his brow.

And maybe Hawke knew that—but what he was planning, what he wanted beyond a good fight and a better fuck, remained a mystery. Anders couldn’t set the man on his lap, open as a new book, or read between the lines he gave, far too clever for his own good. Or far too clever for Anders’s good, all his more pressing physical needs aside.

What he wanted and what he needed weren’t always one and the same.

The skirts of his simple robes rode up past his knees, over his thighs, bare skin against the rough-spun cotton of Hawke’s equally simple trousers. Anders felt the tickle of leather laces on the insides of his legs as Hawke brushed his thumb over the tender flesh there, pale but flushed, then turned him at his hips. Anders propped himself up one elbow, face dangerously close to the lone, tatty pillow.

‘Hawke,’ Anders said. ‘I think there’s rat droppings on this—’

A finger swiped down over his ass, against the clenched swell of muscle just beneath, tickling his balls and making him gasp. Wherever the pillow had been, whatever rodents had been living in it before their arrival, Anders still used it to muffle the sound that came next, along with the arch of his hips backward into the air.

Being wanted was succor enough, balm for any lonely soul. Hawke wouldn’t have been able to touch him this way if he didn’t want to, because Hawke no longer had to do anything he didn’t want. If Anders couldn’t understand his other desires—wanting to stand at the ship’s wheel while the rain drove against his skin; wanting to finish the fights someone else started in a wretched Antivan
taproom—then at least he understood this one, rocking back against one of Hawke’s rough fingers, half-twisted on the narrow mattress so he could see him at his work.

Anders always watched. From gladiator ring to taproom brawl to his work in another man’s garden or on another woman’s ship, all the way to these more private moments, when both of them were finally watching each other.

Except, Anders thought with a hiccup of desire, Hawke wasn’t watching him. Hawke was watching his ass.

Head bent, brow furrowed beneath shadow, Hawke’s shoulders were square, the salt-cracks on his bottom lip worsened whenever he bit down onto it in pleasure. Anders reached up to touch the harried flesh, fingers sparkling despite themselves, warmth from Hawke’s breath mixing with the warmth from his magic.

There were few things a man could make manifest naturally. This, despite all the warnings in Thedas about magic, was one of them. Even a good fuck had too much build-up; whether the flirtation lasted long weeks or mere hours, the need for preparation was still a constant.

Not so with spirit healing.

When Hawke nipped after Anders’s thumb, Anders let him suck at it, whatever ale-soaked table it must have tasted of now. If he didn’t know better, he might have said Hawke liked the taste—but Hawke smiled even when he wasn’t happy, and with his eyes hooded, pupils blown wide with want, there was no quick flash of white teeth against his dark beard to betray what he really felt, if it was a funny joke or just raw instinct.

Anders’s thumb curled against Hawke’s bottom lip; he bit his own soon enough when Hawke thrust inside him, just the head first, but the spread of his legs wide enough to make things easier. Anders forgot everything, frustration and fear and freedom itself, bowing his head against the pillow, smelling only his breath caught on the fabric and his sweat caught on his skin.

He came more quickly than he would have liked—they hadn’t done this so much that Anders didn’t want to pretend, if only for a little while longer, that his stamina was on par with his powers of persuasion—but Hawke followed soon after, falling heavy against his back.

Hawke’s breathing didn’t scatter even when he fought, even when he was clinging to the rigging in the midst of a wild-storm, even when a saarebas collar was fitted around his neck and an unpredictably inspired magister was holding the chain at the other end. But it did go wild in the moment right after he spent himself, run ragged along his throat, from somewhere buried deep in his chest. It skirted along the back of Anders’s neck and ear and down his jaw and tickled through his hair, just as Hawke’s heartbeat pressed somewhere between the blades of Anders’s shoulders, heard easily through one layer of slim cotton and one of cracked leather.

‘And here I was beginning to think you didn’t like me anymore,’ Anders murmured, his voice light as a wisp of smoke from a guttering candle, or the prickly feather-down stuffed into the pillow, currently mashed under his face.

‘I wouldn’t say I ever liked you,’ Hawke admitted, but there was something hidden in his voice—like the jeweled eyes in all the statues of Maferath—that sparked bright and warm.

‘Oh,’ Anders murmured, pretending the sting went deeper than he felt. ‘Don’t flatter me so, Hawke. I had no idea you were such a poet.’
‘Fereldan,’ Hawke said, with a half-shrug—as if to say, what did you expect? ‘It’s in our blood. Can’t help expressing ourselves. We’re all wild dog-lords in the end. Howling at the moon, running in packs…’

‘Well,’ Anders said, waving off a yawn, ‘if it’s a Fereldan show of affection, I suppose I should be grateful you didn’t start barking.’

Hawke whuffed obligingly, then rolled over, one arm catching Anders around the chest. It wasn’t the post-coital snuggle he’d been hoping for—more like an uncomfortable weight keeping him pressed to Hawke’s side as he rapidly drifted into unconsciousness, but Anders wasn’t ready to start complaining again.

Soon. But not yet.

Instead, he sighed, wriggling against Hawke’s chest until he was more comfortable, in a position where he could watch Hawke’s dark eyelashes fluttering against the dusky expanse of his cheek. It was early, but he supposed a late-afternoon nap was in order after weeks of not sleeping aboard a pitching ship, then participating in a tiresome tavern brawl straight off the boat.

If anyone had earned a little respite, it was Hawke—and right after Hawke came Anders. It was a short list, but that made the order of their names easy to remember.

‘This was all a ruse to get me into bed, wasn’t it?’ Anders asked, his voice pitched to a gentle whisper. ‘This bed, I mean. This awful, terrible, no-good bed.’ Hawke’s urgency made that much more sense now—it had less to do with the weeks they’d spent apart and the need such denial built, and more to do with how difficult it was for Anders to be miserable about dirty linens with a pleasant ache still throbbing between his legs.

Hawke didn’t open his eyes, but his lips twitched up at the corners. Then, he let out an enormous fake snore, breathing ale and hardtack right into Anders’s face.

Below them, underneath the bed, Ser Pounce-a-lot was living up to his name, attacking the dust bunnies before they grew any larger, gained sentience, and smothered the current inhabitants of the room in their sleep. Anders closed his eyes—just so he wouldn’t have to look at the room anymore—and tried to drift off to sleep with the same ease Hawke had pretended to, cheek pressed against Hawke’s chest.

* 

Anders woke alone, trapped in the same dank, windowless room in which he’d fallen asleep. Even without the rocking of a galleon beneath him, his stomach lurched.

He’d hoped the details of his current lodgings had been exaggerated by an unpleasant dream.

But there were bruises on his thighs that said otherwise, as well as a purpling thumbprint against the inside of his pale arm, beneath a rolled-up sleeve. Anders brushed his fingers over it in wonder, then pressed his hand over his mouth, stifling a sigh, and also trying to block out all the smells.

There was no sense in lingering on the imagined romance of a rendezvous when his dastardly companion had slipped off and left him for greener pastures. Anders rubbed his neck, popping a stiff joint from sleeping partly on the thin pillow and partly on a hard man, one who refused to be there when Anders woke up. It was impossible to guess the hour, since Hawke had so helpfully declined a room with any sort of view, but the noise from downstairs had picked up again since their untimely arrival.
Anders could hear another lute, as well as some poor fool on a three-stringed fiddle, accompanied by a lip-horn’s distant strains as they drifted up through the floorboards. There was a loud thrum of indistinct voices mumbling below; the noise was punctuated every now and then by a sudden, often unhappy laugh, though Anders wasn’t able to hear the jokes that preceded them.

Hawke was gone. That much was an obvious detail he could deduce on his own, the same as picking up on the rough blanket or the dent in the mattress his body had left behind. How long he’d been gone was another matter, and one Anders had no way of determining. The bed was already cold; for all Anders knew, he’d been abandoned not a second after he’d fallen asleep.

Judging by the character of the ruckus from below, the day had faded from evening into true night. That left all sorts of time for Hawke to get into trouble, unaccompanied—and unsupervised. Anders pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, attempting to clear his head, pushing them in deep until blossoms of white sparked hot along the lids. It didn’t do much to clear his head. Instead, his eyes were sore when he finally dropped his hands, and he had the beginnings of a headache just behind them, sharp little pinpricks in the shadows.

At least his cats remained a constant. Pounce had curled up at the foot of the bed, and Mister Wiggums the Second was sitting indignantly on top of Anders’s leather bag, as though he found the rest of the room too awful a reality to contemplate.

‘I’m with you, Mister Wiggums,’ Anders said. He was greeted with just a twitch of a mottled whisker and an unimpressed sniff, before he found it in himself to stand, still curious despite himself. He wanted nothing to do with The Falcon’s Roost or its patrons—who may or may not have been out in the streets plotting bloodthirsty revenge. But his stomach was as empty as his room, and Anders was forced to think practically at last. He no longer had his villa, where a basket of fresh-baked rolls or a bowl of grain dotted with split figs and beaded with thick honey was only a vague gesture away.

Since he wouldn’t be returning there anytime soon, it made sense to start preparing himself emotionally for a future of stained bedspreads and rat droppings piled in the corner, a pillow that had until that morning been nothing more than a nest for clever rodents.

Anders ran his fingers through his hair, brushing it back where it had come loose during the afternoon’s activities, tying it free from his face. His fingers fumbled on the cord—it was flimsy and spun of gold thread, one of the little luxuries he’d kept with him—but he managed to tie it tight, wincing at every tug against his scalp.

He was in the middle of trying to smooth the wrinkles from his robes when there was a sharp tap at the door.

‘I’m decent,’ Anders called, wondering at the source of Hawke’s newfound sense of modesty. ‘At least, on the outside. Nothing I can do about my thoughts, I’m afraid.’

‘Don’t I know it,’ Isabela said as the door creaked open, her ample silhouette leaning sideways on the wall, backlit by a swinging lantern in the hallway. ‘Personally, I have a lot more fun when my outsides match my insides, but I don’t know if you’ve got the legs to pull this look off.’

Anders stared at her thighs—which was probably the reaction she’d wanted to inspire in the first place—then lifted his chin with a sniff and a swish of his heavy skirts. ‘If anyone’s got experience in wearing no pants at all,’ he told her, ‘it’s probably me.’

‘Fair point,’ Isabela said, stepping into the room. The flat heels of her boots clicked against the
floorboards as she sashayed forward. ‘But if you ever wanted to compare notes…talk about the feel of the breeze rushing up your backside…I’m just in the next room over.’

Anders smiled, once against despite himself—which was how he was doing everything, these days: despite what few better instincts he had, despite the comfort he craved, despite the sympathy he lacked. He had to purse his lips to prevent it from going on too long, or turning into an outright grin. Isabela might take it for a leer, and there was always the slim possibility that what came after that could make Hawke murderously jealous. ‘Ah, that breeze... Hawke doesn’t know what he’s missing, going about in trousers all the time.’ Anders brightened, raising his voice to be heard over a drunk who’d stumbled up the stairs, groaning and lurching his way through the hall. ‘Speaking of Hawke—’

‘Down in the tavern,’ Isabela said, tossing an idle gesture over her shoulder. When she lifted her arm, Anders could see a long, red welt on the underside. One of Castillon’s men had must have caught her with their knives after all. She was good, better than good, but she wasn’t invincible. Anders’s fingers twitched at the sight of the wound, though it didn’t seem to bother Isabela. ‘My afternoon delight gets all grumpy if you don’t feed him regular meals.’

‘How can you tell?’ Anders asked, stubbornly warding off any images of Isabela stripping to her smalls with Fenris, of all people—especially before supper, which was gossip-worthy even in a place as obsessed with breaking the rules as Tevinter.

Anders would have sooner taken up with a bereskarn. At least the animal had a chance of wanting its belly rubbed.

‘Call it a pirate’s intuition,’ Isabela replied. ‘Or just…a keen sense of hearing?’

‘You listened,’ Anders said.

‘I heard,’ Isabela corrected, wagging one graceful forefinger. ‘There’s a difference. You didn’t make it easy not to hear, either. Not that I’m complaining. It’s all that Antivan air—all that Antivan leather… You can’t help but feel communal. Right before you wake up with a dagger between your eyes, that is.’

Anders swallowed, fastening the final button at his throat, fingers brushing against the prickle of unshaved stubble just beneath. Without his usual collection of salves and lotions and oils, to make his skin smell as sweet as it was soft, the hairs were sharper than ever, almost meaner somehow. He felt as coarse as the taproom looked, not necessarily as hardened as its collection of drunkards and assassins and unimaginative criminals, but certainly not a delicate Tevinter lily blooming in a patch of Fereldan northern prickleweed, wither.

‘I’ll try to keep that in mind,’ Anders said. ‘Was that a warning or a threat?’

‘Don’t I keep telling you not to worry?’ Isabela crouched by the bedside, extending her hand palm-out for one of the cats to sniff at. Pounce poked a wary head from underneath the frame, accepted the gesture—along with the beauty of the woman offering it—and rubbed his head against her knuckles while Isabela giggled. ‘Ooh—it tickles!’

‘I didn’t know you were a cat person,’ Anders said.

Isabela rocked back onto her heels. ‘I’m a tickle person, actually. Doesn’t matter to me who’s doing the tickling, so long as there’s tickling involved.’

‘My life motto, actually,’ Anders murmured.
‘I know,’ Isabela said. ‘We’re more alike than you think, only I’d never be caught dead in a skirt again.’

Anders swished them for her benefit, heavier than he preferred them; they were well-made, but far too plain to prove a point, especially to a pirate with no pants above a full Rivaini taproom. Isabela laughed, then clapped—but, just like Ser Pounce-a-lot, she grew bored quickly with the attention and the distraction. Soon enough, she straightened, running her fingertips over the dusty boards blotting out any light from outside the window, then turned, crossing her arms under her chest and cocking her hips at yet another angle. She had a whole slew of them, like the secret language of tea leaves Rivaini seers read at the bottom of an earthenware cup.

‘Now, I know I came here for something,’ Isabela continued, tapping the stud beneath her bottom lip. ‘And it wasn’t just to flirt. But what was it…’

‘Hawke?’ Anders offered.

‘Right! Of course.’ Isabela’s smile lit the room better than the half-hearted candle on the crate-table; it was followed by a wink and a clap to Anders’s shoulder, her sun-perfumed body brushing past him on her way back to the door. ‘He wants us all to meet in the taproom. That’s what it was. Apparently, we have a job tonight.’

‘A job?’ Anders asked, scurrying after her. He remembered to close the door behind him, and heard the latch fall into place; whatever happened next, the epic battle between rodent and feline forces in the empty room, was up to the hands of fate, but Anders wasn’t worried, since Pounce was a clever cat, with a natural gift for tactical onslaught. ‘…We?’

‘Hawke’s a good sort,’ Isabela explained, leading the way through the straightforward hall, past the vomit-stains on the wall Anders could see more clearly now that the lights were lit in the wall-sconces. ‘Fereldan sensibilities always go so well with Fereldan muscle, don’t you agree? Like having a loyal pet… It was a deal we worked out back in Tevinter. One good scratch deserves another.’

‘Yes—about that scratch,’ Anders began, gesturing toward her arm. ‘And all the other scratches, come to think of it. Is that going to happen often?’

‘Oh, duckling,’ Isabela said. ‘This is Antiva.’

Anders had to admit, that explained everything.

The taproom downstairs was even more crowded and flush and ripe than it had been earlier in the day; the chaos of the fight had been forgotten, and ale was flowing fast and free, music and laughter warring to be the loudest underneath the high, water-stained ceiling. Everyone in the place looked the same as before, some of them sporting black-eyes and cracked front teeth and split lips and bruises; maybe some of them were the same people, back to the old routine, the memory of their injuries knocked clean out of their heads by one of Hawke’s balled fists.

‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ Isabela stopped short as someone spat a tooth onto her boot. She kicked it free, and Anders stepped on it, not quick enough to avoid its path; he felt the sharp incisor digging into the sole of his foot through the leather before he toed it aside, skittering underneath a nearby table.

‘Define ‘wonderful,’” Anders said.

‘Usually I try not to,’ Isabela told him. ‘But for your sake? I’ll make an exception. I usually just think of it as being alive.’
Anders managed to duck underneath a precariously-balanced tray of sloshing tankards. ‘Don’t you mean staying alive?’

‘No,’ Isabela replied. ‘It isn’t the same thing at all, you cheeky little thing, you.’

Anders would have pushed the conversation further if he hadn’t noticed Hawke was at the bar, with Fenris beside him; the former was drinking, while the latter looked like as out of place as a dwarven beard in the Fereldan Circle. Isabela drew up between them, and Anders chose to close in on Hawke’s other side, his back and one hard-muscled arm at eye-level. Hawke didn’t turn around, and Anders huffed against the back of his neck, so at least the sweat-damp hairs there noticed him, and prickled with gooseflesh in reply.

‘Isabela,’ Hawke said. ‘So good of you to join us.’

‘For this job,’ Anders added. ‘The one we’re doing. …Why are we doing it, again?’

Fenris’s brow darkened—if such a thing were possible—just over the square set of Hawke’s broad shoulder. ‘Because we cannot all have wealthy magisters keep us as their spoiled pets,’ he said.

‘Well put,’ Hawke replied.

Anders snuffed, before immediately regretting the action. ‘Can’t we?’ he asked. ‘Even if it’s what most of us here are used to?’

‘Hang on.’ Isabela leaned over the bar, snatching Hawke’s drink for herself and taking a swift, long pull. Anders wished he’d been quick enough to think of that first, just a little fire-flavored piss-water to steady himself for the string of absurd explanations and impossible instructions he predicted were soon to follow. ‘Anders, have you been holding out on me? Kept as a magister’s pet—that’s a story I need to hear.’

‘You have no idea the sorts of things Anders got up to back in his summer villa,’ Hawke said, wiping the foam of his ale off the bristles of his beard with the split knuckles on the back of his hand. He’d turned to face the room, one elbow resting against the bar, and Anders saw it the moment the ale got into the raw skin, the wince Hawke covered with an idle grin. ‘Chasing his slaves through the house, playing Fereldan Dog Lord and Loyal Mabari…’

‘Not nearly as much as I wanted to,’ Anders muttered, just as Isabela said, ‘I knew I liked you.’

‘Tch,’ Fenris said, and looked away, into the unfamiliar and unfriendly crowd.

Anders felt the damp stains of sweat against the side of his throat, fingertips pressed to the pulse beneath his jaw. A game of sharp, sleek darts had started up in the far corner, and with each ping and whizz of the feathered projectiles, the subsequent thud in the soft wood of the board, Anders’s heart beat that much quicker.

‘Too bad most of that won’t come in handy tonight,’ Hawke continued, lifting his tankard for another drink. ‘Nothing too serious. A merchant—Vincento—seems to be having some trouble with his stock and a local street gang. Just knock a few heads together, leave our calling card, collect the money they would have stolen, and we pay the rent for a week. Don’t you just love Antiva?’

‘I liked it better in books,’ Anders said, scuffing his boot against the floor, ‘when I couldn’t smell where the leather came from.’ Something rolled round beneath his toe, then crunched. Anders couldn’t bear to look down and see if it was another tooth wedged into the cracks between floorboards. ‘You’re sure we can’t upgrade to, I don’t know, a room with a window?’
‘Window’s just an extra door for someone to climb in through and slit your throat,’ Hawke said. He met Anders’s eyes over the stained rim of his tankard, as if to remind him of all the ways their first little tryst could have gone differently. ‘Less pleasant than what you’re used to, but we’ve got to be practical here.’

‘Are you planning on having so many enemies that becomes a real issue?’ Anders asked.

‘I hear the Antivan people tend to take things personally more often than not,’ Hawke replied.

‘And we’ve already made quite the first impression,’ Isabela added.

‘What if they come in through the doorway, then?’ Anders knew he was digging in his heels, making an issue of something that didn’t necessarily need to be one, and still he couldn’t help himself, watching it happen more than he was making it happen. It was an awful room, and not just because someone had thoughtfully coated it in a layer of filth before letting them move in.

Hawke of all people should have understood what it was like to wake alone in a dark, walled-in space, more like a prison than personal living quarters. The hull of a slaver’s ship was almost the same as the Circle’s solitary cell, hidden under the cellars where no one would come looking, not even the local rats.

At least on a slaving ship Anders would have been chained to other prisoners.

Hawke shrugged. In spite of the many useful talents he displayed, every trick he kept up his sleeve, he couldn’t read minds—not even one as open as Anders’s, spread bare like a book, just begging him to stroke its vellum pages and cross-check between the lines. ‘East wall faces onto the street. If we can’t fight through the door, I’ll break it down.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Isabela said, thumping the counter soundly with the flat of her palm. Then she winked at Anders, presumably so he could feel even more confused about whose side she was really on.

‘We should move on,’ Fenris said, joining the conversation only to end it. His shoulders twitched, neck bending at an unnatural angle while he stretched.

Anders wondered whether the lyrium beneath his skin troubled him. In the brief amount of time they’d known each other—beyond the confines of Danarius’s grounds, where Anders studied the tiles or the fashions or the desserts to distract himself from all the slavery—he’d never known Fenris to be still, not unless he was unconscious.

And even then he shuddered and spasmed like a Rivaini puppet on strings.

‘Vincenzo’s wares wait for no man,’ Hawke agreed, sliding his empty glass across the counter. ‘At least the money he’s set to pay us won’t. And it’ll be hard setting up another job, if word gets around we botched this one.’

‘Are you sure you want me to come?’ Anders asked, falling into step as the others straightened, as Isabela ran her palm along the boning of her corset and Hawke patted the leather flank of his jerkin and Fenris’s fingers curled against his palms. ‘If I can’t use my magic, I’m not going to be very useful.’

Hawke slung an arm around Anders’s shoulders in reply, the warm weight of his muscled grip going a long way toward settling Anders’s doubts. ‘We could always use a healer.’ He rubbed a sore muscle in Anders’s back with his thumb, while Isabela fingered the pommel of her left dagger thoughtfully. ‘And if you keep to the shadows, I don’t see why you can’t launch a few fireballs to
back us up. Just watch the beard, would you? I’ve got no desire to let anyone see my face too clearly, either.’

*

They trickled toward Antiva’s bazaar district, an open, tiled courtyard framed by red-domed municipal buildings and a few narrow villas made of old marble; Anders noted in particular the lacy iron-work balconies that bore flowering vines, dotted white and purple and pink. From what Anders had read, all that was left of Antiva’s royal family were dozens of merchant princes, each with a valid claim to the throne, more coin than sense, and the eager blades of the Crows to perform their constant dirty work.

Given the connection in Antiva between commerce and nobility, visiting the bazaar was akin visiting the royal palace, though the latter had long since fallen into disrepair, while the former—even at night—was busy enough, at least along the main stretch. Mummers and jugglers, men with torches, a few enterprising stall-managers yet remained despite the crook of the pale moon in the sky; Anders dodged sweets and glass baubles as they were shoved under his nose, pretty as they were, trying to forget he didn’t have the coin.

It was only once they broke away from the main street and down a crooked alley that the darkness pressed in, the laughter and the music fading. Anders wrapped his arms around himself, palms pressed hard against the sharp points of his elbows. It didn’t help him to feel more calm, but he was alert.

What he wanted was Hawke’s arms around him, but Hawke was distracted preparing for the job, and his gaze never wavered from straight-on, from forward. He’d taken a well-notched broadsword from someone at The Falcon’s Roost, no doubt one of his victims in the afternoon’s brawl, but the heft was making him frown.

‘Give that to me,’ Fenris said, in a tone that made Anders realize he wasn’t the only one who’d been watching Hawke’s scowl deepen in the moonlight. ‘Better to fight with no weapon at all than one that displeases you.’

‘I could teach you to fight like me,’ Isabela murmured, creeping through the dark like a lean alley cat. ‘You’d have to learn how to use two little knives instead of one big one—some men have trouble with that concept, but something tells me you aren’t one of them.’

‘I’ve got quick hands, if that’s what you mean,’ Hawke said, wiggling his fingers. Anders did his best not to glare, not at the sword in Fenris’s all-too-capable hands nor the wicked smile flashing across Isabela’s face. ‘Vincento’s stall’s up here. If we take a position in the alley and across the street, they’ll never see us coming.’

There was a narrow alcove up ahead, where a long skeleton of a wooden stalls waited, stripped of its awnings for the night. In the sliver of moonlight that had pierced the thick cloud cover rolling in from over the water, Anders could see Vincento’s wares chained up tight in large lockboxes. From a distance, they almost looked like coffins.

‘Until it’s too late,’ Anders added, just so he could have something to contribute. His palms were beginning to sweat, and when he wiped them against the front of his robes, he felt that spark of nerves, that promise of arcane heat.

‘That’s the general idea of an ambush,’ Hawke said. ‘And here I thought Tevinter prized itself on how good everyone is at that.’
‘You can’t believe everything you hear about Tevinter,’ Anders reminded him, at which point Isabela pouted audibly, with a sigh and a *drat!*

After that, Hawke held up his hand for silence, and the others spread out, Isabela blending into the shadows like she was a shadow herself, Fenris’s hair pale but hidden around a far corner. Anders could just make out the shape of Hawke’s shoulders across the way, on the other side of the alley, but then Anders had practice with searching him out in the darkness, while Hawke had practice with manipulating view-points to his advantage. Whatever he saw, whatever he was planning on seeing, he’d be the first one *to see* it, and Anders chose to watch him instead of the nothing that surrounded them, a tactical decision that would hopefully pan out.

It had been a while since he’d lain in wait around a shadowy corner to waylay an enemy—and even then, he was better accustomed to using a little electricity to charge a templar’s silverite. The memory of those days made him shrink, crouching down against a brick wall, which still held the afternoon’s heat.

The roughness of the crumbling brick scraped against his cheek. He was the only one breathing obviously, no sound or sight of the others, not even a glint of moonlight off metal from where Hawke still had his sword. He didn’t need it—just like a mage didn’t need a staff—but Anders couldn’t see how it wouldn’t help. No matter how poorly it was made, it still had a sharp side and a pointy tip. In Hawke’s hands, it would make the point solidly enough.

Anders’s hands, on the other hand—ha, ha—wouldn’t stop sweating.

The streets of Minrathous were never safe at night—they weren’t safe during the day, either, not even in full sunlight, with a whole crowd of witnesses—but Antiva City had templars instead of magisters, and the excuses Anders knew best didn’t work on the former half as well as they did on the latter. Men like Caladrius could be charmed, but the steely gaze behind a helmet’s narrow eye-slits rarely ever afforded the same courtesy. You could flirt with a templar—Anders had done that countless times—but you could also flirt with *danger*, and the results were generally the same.

Noise down the alleyway startled him; he scraped his jaw and the lobe of his ear as he turned, too quickly, looking for a sign from Hawke in the dark. The clank of heavy boots was more noticeable than the scuffle of leather on chipped cobblestone; it took a long moment for Anders to resolve what he was hearing, to scrub the sweat off his palms again, to realize they were dealing with common street thugs instead of armored law-enforcers. No pale, polished armor gleamed in the moonlight; there was only the occasional glint off the crooked curve of an unsheathed dagger, and the coarse whispers of one thief to his fellow, the clang of a pommel against a chest-lock.

Anders tried to think of what Hawke might say—emerging, tall and broad as vengeance itself from the depths of his cul-de-sac. It would be something cheeky but also ominous—‘No respect for subtlety these days; doesn’t *any* of you know how to pick a lock?’—before he scattered them with a single blow, using a stall-front as a shield to bash them backward, in the direction they came.

If Anders imagined it was happening to someone else, each action in accordance with a pre-determined script, he forget to sweat, at least for a time. The hushed whispers and the hissed curses that filled the alley were by no means subtle; the job was beneath Hawke’s capabilities, but everyone had to start somewhere.

It was just that Hawke would have made an excellent start as a merchant prince—and merchant princes were wealthy, had rooms with enormous picture windows, dining each night on Antivan delicacies while they lounged on their couches, foreign lovers in their arms.

They also had their throats slit while they slept. Anders touched the bob of his, clammy fingers
against unpleasant stubble. When he swallowed, he felt his pulse skip and shudder—just as Hawke
hefted his weapon, tossing it loosely in his hand, stepping out into plain sight.

Some people had to hide around corners. Some people needed barriers, blockades, walls to set up
between them and the rest of the world. But Hawke didn’t, no matter what weapons his opponents
carried, no matter how well-beaten their armor.

‘Forgot the keys to your wares back home, did you?’ he asked. ‘Because I wouldn’t want to think
something illegal was going on here. Like, for example…a robbery?’

It wasn’t the line Anders had written for him, but it served its purpose well enough.

One of the thieves called him something naughty in Antivan; Anders knew he’d have to ask Isabela
what it all meant later. Then, there wasn’t time left to ruminate on the little details, as a slew of
daggers were unsheathed, and Isabela threw a miasmic flask into the mix, glass shattering, smoke
covering everything.

Anders had only been in Antiva City for a day—less than a full day, even—and already he’d been
involved in two deadly fights. It wasn’t that the Imperium didn’t have the same dedication to ruthless
murder; it did, and how, replacing daggers with blackened shade talons, each slew of arrows
streaked in corpse gall rather than Crow poison. But Anders wasn’t a duelist; he didn’t appreciate the
terms involved, the kill or be killed mentality. He only ever stunned templars, pulses of lightning
coursing through their flesh, carried along the hot shell of their armor.

None of these men—none that Anders could see, a limb or a weapon piercing the thick smoke that
bowed from Isabela’s broken flask—was even wearing armor. At least not the kind that glinted in
the moonlight, begging for a quick shot of electricity to fry their suits. Leather was the watch-word in
Antiva, from the buttery boot material Isabela swooned over to hard-boiled plate laced together to
cover a man’s vulnerable torso. Even the lowest criminals of the undercity were proud of their
national export.

Hawke had counseled fireballs, but Anders’s experience of dark scuffles in tucked-away alleys
called for a finer touch. Flames could be effective in their own way, but they also cast light on what
needed to remain hidden in the dark. The last thing their silly ambush needed was for this lot to catch
sight of their faces and make things personal.

Anders already had enough trouble reconciling himself with the idea that Isabela could start fights
simply by walking into a tavern and saying hello. It wasn’t a skill he was keen to pick up, even if it
was one he was encouraging, allowing the alarming trend to continue.

But it all happened so quickly amongst these people—men and women of action, of fists and back-
kicks, of steel-plated bracers and leather greaves.

Hawke grabbed a man’s dagger from his belt and plunged it into his shoulder, leaping back behind
the stall before he could lash out in retaliation. Isabela was invisible in the distance, but judging by
the grunts of pain and the heavy thud of someone’s body meeting a brick wall, she wasn’t also
intangible. And Fenris’s tattoos flickered in the dark, arcane lines of bright heat scrolling over his
skin, then flaring to life to obscure his features.

Anders could see their scope of their narrow battlefield clearer after that, watching Hawke use his
stolen dagger to stab a grasping hand through the palm. One of the thieves cried out in fear, and
Fenris rushed him, moving more like a wraith than an elf, a blue ghost of solid lyrium. Or not solid
lyrium, as the case went.
Anders didn’t blame the man for being afraid. He was afraid, just a little, despite knowing whose side he was presumably on.

Fenris had that effect on people, even when he wasn’t charging them like a nightmare from the Fade. It was what Danarius liked best about his precious pet; in the summers, he always trotted Fenris out at fancy parties to watch the archons wet themselves while he poured their wine.

Anders had never been invited to sit at Danarius’s high table—amongst the bearded blood mages gossiping like Circle apprentices—and so his smallclothes had always remained dry.

After seeing for himself what Fenris was capable of, no weapon other than the clench of his blue-white fist, Anders was forced to suspect that Danarius had been verging on insane all these years, rather than simply eccentric. How could he possibly have slept in the same house as an elf who might literally remove his heart from his chest?

For that matter, how could Isabela share a room with him?

A small, wet sound trembled in the air, just above the noise of steel against steel, Isabela’s daggers and Hawke’s new sword. Anders winced preemptively as the man in front of Fenris fell, leather torn from leather, flesh rent from flesh, the crunch of splintered ribs and the splatter of ripped muscle.

Not everyone felt burdened by the necessity of keeping their opponents alive. Anders had known it before, when he’d seen Isabela cut a man’s throat in the Falcon’s Roost ear to ear, but he’d hoped it had been a spur-of-the-moment thing, a reaction to being cornered unexpectedly, a you-or-me instinct that Anders could, in essence, always understand.

It wasn’t. But Anders couldn’t afford to dwell on it now.

Hawke was backed into a corner, having attracted the bulk of the thieves’ attention. A big man was an even bigger target, whether he could manage the attention or not, and now he was surrounded in the stall, locked in on all sides, without the necessary room to maneuver his larger weapon. Anders had seen him overcome worse odds than three to one before, but always as a spectator.

He’d never been in a position to help, palms sparking, blood coursing hot from the life-vein in his wrist.

Anders flexed his fingers, the knuckles on his left hand cracking. Instead of fire, he turned his thoughts to ice, feeling the cold settle deep into his bones, hoarfrost glittering over his nails and fingertips.

The man on Hawke’s left lifted his sword unseen, and Anders blasted him with a wintery gale, slipping an arm and shoulder free of his hiding place to make sure it carried through. The thief’s body shuddered to a halt, his fingers frozen to the blade and his arms shackled high in the air. Hawke’s other two assailants turned in horror, and Anders froze their feet to the ground, shattering their cheap daggers into icy shards of useless metal.

‘Demons!’ shouted one of the last men standing. His gaze wasn’t on Fenris, crouched like a hunting spider; if Anders closed his eyes, he could imagine the click of his armored gauntlets like hungry mandibles as he waited to devour his prey.

No; Fenris was too obvious. He had a body, at least, whereas magic didn’t, and every spell that ricocheted off the crumbling brick walls and splintered stall-wood was more evil to a man than a glowing elf void-bent on removing vital organs from his enemies’ vulnerable chests.

Isabela laughed, clear as a chantry bell amidst the smoke and carnage. ‘Demons? Don’t you just
Hawke took him by the back of the head and Anders froze his lips shut before he could scream. An unkind act, perhaps, and the blistered skin there wouldn’t thank him for it later, but it was still better than letting the man be silenced in other, more permanent ways.

‘Vincento has protection, do you understand?’ Hawke asked, taking care to keep to the shadows of the stall, where only the outlines of his face—heavy brow and perfect, square jaw and bristling beard—could be discerned. ‘Try this again, and we won’t be so gentle.’

He shook the man by the back of his collar, suggesting he look around and observe his comrades, most of whom were still groaning. Some of the ones nearer to Fenris were notably quiet, a fact that escaped no one’s attention.

Two casualties, Anders noted, that couldn’t be healed; a collection of broken legs and broken noses, deep gashes from Isabela’s twin blades, torn leather chest-plates, swollen lips and missing teeth and shattered jaws. Fresh, cool ice beaded along the curve of Anders’s palm and melted with the heat from his flesh and blood, dripping like sweat onto the torn-up cobblestone below.

At least Antiva didn’t pretend injuries meant nothing. They were something a man suffered once—not a state of being, wounds garnered day after day in the sandy ring, and healed night after night to ready their owners for fresh, constant pain.

Yet at the same time, Anders couldn’t help but feel that honesty was equally disingenuous, albeit coming from a craftier angle. The ice shards slid down his wrist and back into his sleeve, and he shook his hand loose, clenching and unclenching his fingers, trying to ease the tension in his knuckles.

‘You with the Crows?’ one of the men groaned. ‘Vincento doesn’t even have protection—’

‘From the Hawks he does,’ Hawke replied, wiping the blood on his palm onto the relatively clean pauldron of the man in front of him. ‘Try not to do this anymore, will you? I’m just as keen never to see your ugly faces again, and I’m sure my companions feel the same way. Isn’t that right, companions?’

The veins of lyrium that shaped Fenris from the crown of his head to the flex of his foot—white against the flicker of blue—pulsed once in answer. Isabela tossed another miasmic flask high into the air and caught it again in her quick fingers, while Anders kept his head down, pressed against the wall behind him.

‘When I was on the field, we always answered our missives with a yes, ser.’ Hawke sighed. ‘I suppose it’s too much to ask for in the back alleys of a port city, capital or no. Come on.’

Just like that, he came around the corner, warmth blowing past Anders like no more than a sultry Imperium breeze. He didn’t stop to catch Anders by the shoulder and tug him on, to thank him for the ice spells or to ask for any healing. Isabela followed, and Fenris too—not the ghost he’d become, but the ghost he’d been before that, quiet and dark as a midnight shadow—and Anders was caught up in their wake, a little skiff pulled along behind them, doing his best to keep from sinking because of the undertow.

Demons, those fools would tell their contacts, their friends, even their enemies. Anyone who could listen would hear about it—not the knock of their thick skulls together by Hawke’s strong hands, or the slice of Isabela’s deadly, curved daggers. They might tell a story about a ghost, but only one that was conjured like a demon by another demon’s ally, the sort of person who lingered in back alleys.
conjuring brittle ice from the Fade. A mage.

An apostate.

Antiva City had seen worse; it would see worse again, maybe by tomorrow afternoon, certainly by
tomorrow evening. And gossip never lasted the day, not unless someone was murdered in the nude
or there were tentacles involved, or Grey Wardens from a far-off city. Anders was used to being the
center of gossip, that silly healer who didn’t know how to scold his slaves or hold his Agreggio, who
left parties drunk and cheerful and harmless and laughing, who refused to be called on until noon the
next day.

That night, the taste of Antivan ale lingered in the back of Anders’s mouth, a slim burn coursing
rough along his throat. His boots fell quietly against the broken street, allowing Hawke to lead him
back to the Roost.

* 

Hawke fell asleep quickly and easily, worn out from a night of thug-hunting and law-breaking—law-
enforcing, too, in a manner of speaking; he was doing what he could, and Anders did understand the
necessity of action in a city where anything else encouraged strangers to help you quit breathing. But
Anders wasn’t so lucky, unable to keep his eyes shut for more than a few, unpleasant seconds.

Instead of sleeping, Anders listened to every bump and thump from the taproom below, the distant
strains of a lonely lute as someone else remained as awake and melancholy as he was. Probably not
for the same reasons—Anders’s circumstances were specific, and therefore alienating, even when he
lay down in the narrow bed at Hawke’s side and tried to adjust to the steady rhythm of his breathing.

At least he was sleeping in the bed this time. Anders had never watched Hawke sleep before, and it
seemed an intimate gesture, an obvious peace-offering, a meaningful familiarity. Confidence,
perhaps, that Anders wouldn’t harm him while he was vulnerable—or lack of confidence that
Anders could pull something like that off even if he wanted to.

He didn’t want to—whether Hawke knew it or not—and after a few long moments spent with his
back pressed against Hawke’s chest, Anders turned instead to face it, cheek buried against his
collarbone, forehead to his throat.

Hawke had taken off his leather chest-piece earlier, setting it on one of the crates instead of tossing it
on the floor; that was a detail that meant he’d been a soldier once, and preferred to be tidy with his
things, or that he didn’t trust one of the cats not to piss on it in the night. He didn’t know yet that
Anders’s cats were too well-behaved for that sort of thing; the only one who pissed indoors was
Cailan, and that was a detail Isabela would discover soon enough whenever she checked up on her
ship.

Until then, Cailan was safe, and Anders less so, though still pressed against Hawke’s broad chest,
one hand hovering in the air over his hip.

The laces at the collar of his shirt were loose, one of them fallen free from its proper loop. Anders
rubbed his face against it, feeling the frayed leather of the cord rolling along his cheek, and the chest
hair beneath that—which Anders didn’t kiss, even if his lips came up against it, a few warm, slow
breaths. Hawke made a noise in his sleep, a huff like a weary mabari having an unpleasant dream,
and Anders slid his hands up Hawke’s flanks, searching for blood-stains that came from his wounds,
not someone else’s. His shirt was damp in spots from blood and sweat, but there was nothing serious,
despite a few tender bruises that made his muscles twitch beneath Anders’s touch.
The backs of his knuckles were split open again, and his right thumbnail cracked down the middle. Anders held one of his big hands in both of his smaller ones, running a fingertip over the uneven edge, and tried to conjure the will and the strength and the bravery to call on his magic.

For a long while, it didn’t come. His heart and his instincts fought it when they should have embraced it, each pulse of spirit healing that should have been simple and natural as breathing—steady as the rise and fall of Hawke’s chest, bumping into Anders’s chin. But even in the privacy of their room, the window boarded up, dust and dirt smeared over the glass, with Hawke sleeping and the door bolted and their crate-table levied in front of it just in case, Anders couldn’t bring himself to feel safe.

It wasn’t just Antiva. It would have been the same anywhere else, Orlais with its cheeses and powders or Ferelden with its dogs and mud, the Free Marches or Seheron or Rivain. Nowhere else was like Tevinter, and while that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, it wasn’t necessarily a good thing, either.

Anders bit his lower lip until it stung, then released it, relaxing the tension in his jaw, sucking in stale air and Hawke’s scent through his nose. He pressed himself closer along the length of Hawke’s body, trying not to squeeze his hand with his fingers, which still felt cold.

He knew what he was doing; he knew how to do this. And a healer did come in handy—Hawke said it himself.

The whispers from the Fade weren’t always a lure from a demon cast into the darkness, waiting for a careless bob or bite. Sometimes they were meant to help. Sometimes Anders meant to help.

At last, arcane heat spread through his hands, knitting thin skin to thin skin over each of Hawke’s knuckles, and closing the split in the keratin. Hawke’s hand twitched, then fell limp again, fingers just barely curled. When he rolled over, he took Anders with him, splayed uncomfortable but close over his chest.

Anders didn’t pull away. He looped one leg around Hawke’s knee instead, and gripped a handful of the covers on the other side of him, while Hawke breathed loudly against the shell of his ear.

There were few people Anders trusted enough to sleep with. The fun that might be had before sleep was another matter, but when it came to disentangling respective limbs, tucking private bits away and laying heads on pillows, drifting off sweetly into the Fade, Anders couldn’t do it. It was a relic of the past, one of his few, long-lasting instincts for survival. Just because a person did wonderful things with their tongue by the light of the moon didn’t necessarily mean they wouldn’t go wagging that tongue later, seeking the favor of the chantry for turning in an apostate, no matter how much they’d enjoyed magical enhancements, Anders’s favored electricity thing. Even when that particular worry was no longer an issue—no templars to curry favor with in Tevinter—neither wily magisters nor desperate slaves made for comforting bedfellows.

The former was the life he was returning to—harried sleep and a thimble-headed enemy around every corner. Hawke sometimes treated Anders like a gilded fool, one of Hadriana’s beautiful simpletons, painted from handsome crown to well-turned foot in gold leaf, but Anders knew better than any of them how to live as a fugitive.

His captivity hadn’t been a matter of months, like Hawke’s, and his unique abilities hadn’t been given to him past adolescence, like Fenris. Being a mage was his entire life; it could be hidden for days or weeks or years, but once the cat was out of the satchel, it would always be the first thing anyone would see. They wouldn’t look at the dragon-claw in Anders’s ear, or the plain embroidery on his robes and think about what kind of man he was. They’d see only the danger, and ask
themselves why he wasn’t in the Circle.

Even a lawless place like Antiva had one of those—and even the most well-meaning stranger might turn him in, for his own protection.

Anders felt his chest grow tight again, fingers twisting in the sheets. Despite the warm, solid weight of Hawke against him, the brush of his healed knuckles against the thin fabric at Anders’s hip, it was difficult to feel protected.

There were other, less savory truths about the Imperium, many of them as far from the concept as safety as possible—but the books had never lied about their treatment of mages.

This was no bargain Anders haggled in the bustling Minrathous bazaar. He knew better than this, knew how to get the most for the least; his time in Tevinter had made him an expert at barter, before he’d handed his life over to a half-promise made by a half-stranger. Handsome or no, his body was still vulnerable—and even that wouldn’t have been so terrible, if Anders knew why Hawke wanted him here, or even what Hawke wanted at all.

Over the curve of Hawke’s shoulder, Anders could see the shadowed corners of the darkened hovel they’d chosen to shack up in. It smelled of ale and damp wood, but Hawke’s clean sweat and the scent of the sea overpowered everything else. Despite that, when Anders closed his eyes, he couldn’t imagine he was back in his own chambers, where the smell of the ocean rolled in off the bay, mingling with the sweet tang of his overripe grapes in the vineyard. There were no gentle breezes to buffet his face, cooling his skin after a night’s exertion with his own hands to replace Hawke’s.

Now he had Hawke, and Hawke’s hands, but no soft night-winds, no luxurious silken sheets, and no familiar pillow. He’d left that in his bag, not wanting it to pick up any communicable diseases from the bed they’d rented.

Hawke huffed and shifted closer, beard rubbing rough against Anders’s cheek. Anders turned their faces closer, the corner of his mouth against the corner of Hawke’s, and Hawke stilled.

What he really missed were his curtains, Anders decided, thoughts growing heavy in the stillness of the room. The way they’d danced in the wind, the way they’d shifted under his fingers, silky gauze to wrap his hands around as he undressed in the open air, to slip over his palms, to blow free outward over the grounds. Anders had never owned something as beautiful as those curtains before. Now it was likely he never would again.

He didn’t miss the sharply chirping birds that used to wake him every morning, clamoring for seed from the old gardener’s palm. But even those had been beautiful, in their own way, their delicate plumage gleaming in jewel-bright colors. Somehow, they always matched the seasonal flowers, so that Anders had to assume the garden-slave kept them on purpose—kept things keeping more kept things, slaves for slaves in a network of cages so vast it was difficult, on the good days, to remember the bars at all.

Anders couldn’t ask about it now, one way or the other. He’d just have to hope the old elf was happy with his freedom, and didn’t resent Anders for taking him away from his life’s work, the one thing he could call his. The very soil beneath his toes, or the bark beneath his palms, clipped bushes and guided trellises and seeded grapes.

When Anders finally did slip into the Fade, he dreamed of the villa, looming dark in his mind, its hollow rooms like empty caverns without his household slaves to fill them. In the dream, Danarius took it as a second lodging for his elvhen lovers, and spent the days running through the garden in the nude while he played *Dog Lord and Loyal Mabari*, just like Anders always wanted.
It wasn’t a peaceful sleep.

* 

Anders woke to the sound of the Antivan Watch hammering on the door downstairs. He couldn’t separate the commotion from the pounding of his own heart, skin slick with sweat from his nightmares, not to mention sleeping beneath Hawke and the covers all night and then all morning, while the Antivan sun rose higher in the sky and baked the taproom walls.

Hawke had since disappeared—what else?—but the covers remained for Anders to knead and twist in his hands, listening through the floorboards for the source of the sudden upheaval.

Any knock might have signaled the arrival of templars, alerted to the demons in the street. The very floorboards heaved, and there was shouting down below—a few meaningful crashes—then more shouting, this time in the street. Anders waited, biting his lower lip until the split from the sea-breezes opened again, and a bloom of fresh blood burst along his tongue.

He didn’t hear bootfalls on the stairs or approaching through the halls. The shouting faded into the distance; the tragedy, this moment of justice or vengeance or whatever it was, belonged to someone else.

It took a while longer than a morning raid—over as quickly as it had begun—for Anders’s pulse to calm. He lay back—in the space left by Hawke’s body, if not the warmth—for some time longer, as though he’d never have to rise, or leave the comfort and safety of the blankets, in a bed still messy from last night’s rest. He dozed in and out, dreams tangled with waking heat and waking fears, eyes fluttering open and shut as he eked every last inch of peace he could from something worn too thin already, then finally accepted it was time to get up.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light—as he stretched his toes and arched his back and twisted around on the thin, unforgiving mattress—he realized there was a lumpy, shadowed shape braced on the pillow Hawke had vacated. He dropped his arm to the side of it, elbow crooked, cheek braced on the palm of his hand; swift, drowsy-eyed inspection revealed it to be a basket, and Anders drew back the covers at last, in order to inspect the mysterious offering.

It wasn’t every day that little baskets appeared on Anders’s pillow. Not anymore.

Anders blinked, rubbing the sleep out of one squinty eye. There was a small pile of figs inside, clustered amidst a clump of sweet purple grapes. The former were round and black, some of them much smaller than the ones Anders had purchased from the market in Tevinter, but when he brushed his thumb over their skin they seemed soft, just firm enough not to be overripe. The touch of his fingers left glossy streaks along their dusty bodies, and he polished one of the figs against the front of his robes before turning it over like a jewel in his hand.

Only one man in all of Antiva knew how Anders felt about fruit in the morning, and how he felt about figs in general. Hawke might have disappeared, but at least he’d taken pains to make sure Anders didn’t waste away in misery and longing without him—or at least without breakfast.

Downstairs, someone was bellowing something about how the Dark Wolf would rise again. Anders ignored it, biting into a fig—his fig—and chewing slowly. His stomach growled in appreciation; the basket was nearly empty by the time he was finished, much of his mood improved if only because he was no longer hungry.

Hunger hadn’t been an issue in Minrathous, at least not to someone of Anders’s standing. He missed the fresh Fereldan rolls—the slave who’d figured out the recipe might do well in one of the Antivan
bakeries, if she managed to get that far—but the Antivan figs and the Antivan grapes weren’t half bad. Food always tasted better when a man was desperate for it, although that was also how a man made himself sick more often than not.

Anders left a few grapes over and one fig, not because of good manners or fine breeding or appropriate etiquette or even personal shame, but because he didn’t want to explode. When he was finished, he felt heartened enough to leave the room, to find the washroom and the pump and the piss-bucket, all of them in varying shades of brown.

That was another thing he missed: private baths. He missed the hot rocks and the steam and the deep tub, set into the floor and inlaid with pretty, glinting tiles, but the privacy was sacrosanct; the privacy was the most important factor, just above the clean, hot water.

‘I was hoping I’d catch someone in here,’ Isabela said from the doorway. Anders turned, mid-splash in murky water, to find her standing against the frame, arms crossed, drumming cracked fingers against a bare elbow. Anders’s hair dripped onto his shoulders, robes tied around his waist, bare chest and shivering hairs and all.

Isabela waved.

Anders waved back.

‘And here I thought that lock would actually work,’ he added, wiping the suds out of his stinging eyes.

Isabela twirled a pick between her fingers, just quick enough for the metal to flash as bright as her teeth when she grinned, then popped the thing back between her breasts, buried deep in her bodice. ‘Don’t mind me,’ she said. ‘Just pretend that I’m not here. Clean whatever you like—and don’t forget all the crevices.’

‘I was just finishing up, I’m afraid,’ Anders told her, which was true. He twisted the gold-flecked length of leather cord between thumb and forefinger, wet and darker than usual, pulling his hair back off his face with one hand while attempting to scrape the soap and the water off his chest with the other. He didn’t trust any of the towels in the Roost, just like he didn’t trust the sheets, the floorboards or the crates or the bed-frame or the walls.

It had been a long time since Anders had last kept his boots on while washing up.

‘Pity.’ Isabela pursed her lips sadly. ‘I’ll have to catch you earlier next time. Do you need help drying off your back?’

‘I prefer my back wet,’ Anders said.

‘Now that’s one I’ve never heard before,’ Isabela replied, eyes glinting. ‘I like it. A bit of fun in the water never hurt anyone, though.’

except for when they drown, Anders thought, but kept that to himself, flicking droplets of water off his shoulder, out of one ear. ‘Don’t tell me we have another job already,’ he said instead, checking to see how soggy his robes were before rolling them back up, shimmying into his sleeves and leaving the top few buttons of his collar open. ‘Because I want a pair of trousers first. …And a drink.’

‘Drinking in the morning? No wonder I like you,’ Isabela told him, tugging him forward by one of the buttonholes at his throat. ‘Well, all except for that bit about trousers. Do you want a leather pair? The sort that rubs together while you walk, and feels all smooth on the insides of your thighs?’
‘I’ll take the sort that doesn’t make me look like a dangerous apostate,’ Anders muttered, voice hissing low. ‘Leather, cotton, burlap—I don’t care.’

‘Oh, so you like it rough?’ Isabela gave him a once over while they descended into the taproom proper, a damp mage the Antivan sun hadn’t yet been given a chance to dry off, and a pirate captain with a stubbornly singular imagination. It was the start of a fine joke, the sort Anders would have laughed at—but only if he was reclining on a low couch, reaching out to a full bowl of fruit, popping an already-peeled grape into his mouth. ‘Well, it’s not a surprise. Given the look of Hawke, anyway.’

Anders cleared his throat—he couldn’t argue, and he didn’t want to, either—and allowed the first, faint beginnings of a grin to play over his lips. It made him feel twitchy, an expression he hadn’t indulged in since the first storm off the Seheron coast, almost as if the necessary muscles had atrophied on the boat ride, from clenching his jaw so tightly while he slept.

‘He left me fruit this morning,’ Anders said. ‘Figs. On my pillow.’

‘How sweet,’ Isabela replied.

She gestured him to a nearby table—which was funny, because Anders had figured she preferred the bar, the better to gossip with the tavern master—but he found Hawke and Fenris were waiting for them there, Hawke clean and fresh and already sweating. He was wearing a red scarf around his neck to keep his chest from burning right where his shirt fell open, as though he’d never learned to tie up his laces properly, and Anders resisted the urge to fuss with them as he slid in along the splintered bench, wincing dramatically, bumping his knee against Hawke’s under the table.

Hawke bumped him back. Fenris glowered. Isabela leaned in cross-ways, too close to one of Fenris’s armored pauldron’s for Anders’s comfort, and didn’t bat a single, long lash when one of the spikes came dangerously close to her face.

‘Well,’ Anders said. ‘Isn’t this gathering…cozy. You weren’t joking when you said you liked picnics, were you?’

Hawke sighed and chuckled; then, he stretched an arm around Anders’s shoulders, tugging him in close, thumb brushing against clenched muscle. ‘Sh,’ he suggested—without so much as a good morning or a you’re welcome or a how did you like my thoughtful present? It was almost as though he didn’t think such a gesture mattered.

But it did matter, to some people more than others, even if they weren’t as important as all the strangers gathered in a half-crowded Antivan taproom.

Anders glanced around the room, to determine which of those strangers Hawke had a current, vested interest in. A chatty fellow in the table behind theirs belched while he regaled his companions with fine Antivan gossip, and Isabela pointed him out using only her eyes.

They were eavesdropping now, however obviously.

Anders wanted his drink more than ever.

‘Say something funny, Anders,’ Hawke suggested. ‘You’re good at that.’

Anders gave him an appraising look, while Hawke glanced back only half-way. It was the sort of request that made Anders feel about as used as he was wanted, or needed, one of the two things capable of appeasing him in the face of so obvious a ploy.
‘Did I ever tell you how Caladrius lost all his hair?’ he asked, mind spinning like a miller’s wheel and grinding his thoughts into little more than loose grain. The key to real humor was spontaneity, which meant that being called on to supply a joke often spoiled the very nature of the thing. But Anders had spent years sequestered in Tevinter, forced to socialize with tragically humorless magisters; all his best stories had been left untold, if only to protect their feelings when they weren’t appreciated. It was the work of a swift moment to find an appropriate anecdote, dusting it off like an old tome from the library in a study he no longer owned.

‘Poor man had the misfortune of getting into a duel with another magister—no don’t laugh yet, Isabela,’ Anders continued, flapping a chiding hand in her direction. ‘But Instead of killing the poor fellow, he struck Caladrius with a bolt of lightning, right on the top of his head. I did what I could at the time, poultices and salves and the like, but his luxurious locks fell out bit by bit after the ordeal, until there was nothing left on that tortured scalp. He was bald as a shiny apple from that day on—cut down in the prime of his youth and suddenly very interested in the import of polish.’

Fenris stared, his upper lip curling; Anders checked the table to make sure a dead mouse hadn’t fallen out of his mouth while he spoke, then poked his teeth with his tongue to see if any lingering fig seeds were stuck between them. At least Isabela threw her head back, letting out a cackle of pure delight; her obvious disadvantage—she was the only one of them who’d never met Caladrius—seemed to matter little in terms of her amusement. Hawke joined her soon after, slapping the table with an open palm, and squeezing Anders’s shoulder.

*Well done,* the touch seemed to say, and Anders allowed a glow of pride to warm him, almost as good as a steadying pull of golden ale.

After being ignored for so long—kept around for what he could do, rather than for who he was—Anders couldn’t remain in a sour mood. Not when his day had begun with figs, when he was the only distraction these people could think of, all of them but Fenris laughing at something clever he’d said. It wasn’t like a well-practiced Imperium line, playing the fool for a passel of magisters at a wine-tasting: hot air and low couches and willing slaves keeping each glass topped up, while Anders acted like a child amidst the adults, accepted solely because he made a regular idiot of himself. There were different brands of laughter, just like there were different brews of ale.

Anders liked this one.

He leaned into Hawke’s shoulder, cheek rubbing against rough cotton, and even though no one would look twice at them for that, the detail still meant more than the strangers who didn’t notice, or didn’t care.

Then, attention switched from him and from their table to the conversation behind them. Anders’s moment in the sun faded, and he poked at a splintered scour in the wood beneath his thumb while he listened in with the others, over the fading chuckle Isabela was still nursing.

‘You heard how they ended the Blight in Ferelden?’ the chatty fellow said, satisfied by the size of his audience, the crowd that had gathered at his table while the rag-tag crew on the benches nearby kept their noses down, laughing at their own jokes. ‘Everyone imagined it’d go on for years, but you know Fereldans. Cut and run, or cut someone off at the pass, and this time, they chose the latter.’

Anders ran his tongue over the sharp points of his incisors, then the flat ridges of his molars. Hawke’s arm was still around him, fingers rubbing restless patterns against the sore muscle in his shoulder. His interest in the topic at hand became clear as a bit of polished glass—something Anders hadn’t seen since boarding *The Siren’s Call* in Tevinter.

It was rare to have news of Ferelden this far north, but rumors of a Blight anywhere had a way of
ensnaring the collective attention of all Thedas. It wasn’t the sort of topic the archons wasted much
breath on, but a Blight somewhere else did mean new slaves for the Imperium households, slavers
capitalizing on the panicked, the displaced, the disenfranchised and the forgotten. It explained
Caladrius’s recent trips—and his recent profits.

But this wasn’t just any Blight. It was Fereldan, just like Hawke, the motions of his hand betraying
more about his intentions than the rest of his body, calm and sturdy on the bench.

Isabela’s eyes flicked to Hawke’s face, then away again, studying a group of mercenaries near the
bar.

She had keen eyesight, that woman—a pirate’s clear gaze, even in the midst of a storm. She must
have been wondering the same thing as Anders: if Hawke was thinking about returning to his
homeland now that the Blight was over at last. It would be chaos, there, and destruction, abandoned
farmlands and burned countryside, the perfect setting for apostates to slip unnoticed through the
 cracks.

Except the Fereldan Circle was also there, and Anders didn’t know what was worse: the templars
around Lake Calenhad, or a whole Deep Roads full of ravening darkspawn.

‘Well of course they put an end to it,’ said another man with a whiskey-rough voice. ‘They’ve got
the Grey Wardens down there, don’t they? The only surprise is what took them so long to be done
with the job.’

‘Rumor has it they were…waylaid,’ said a third, spinning his dagger on the table. Anders could see
its blade flashing out of the corner of his eye, just to the right of Hawke’s ear, winking in the hazy
taproom light. ‘I heard it was by the Crows.’

Isabela kicked Anders under the table when his eyes stopped wandering and widened. Hawke raised
his eyebrows, shaking his head just slightly, while Fenris made a noise in the back of his throat like
Lady Talia Lyonne—right before she coughed up a hairball onto Anders’s best Vol Dorma throw
rug.

‘Now, whose story do you think this is, anyway?’ the first man asked—Anders had taken to thinking
of him as Chatty—grabbing the reins of conversation back from his companions. They didn’t appear
to be the appreciative audience he’d been looking for, a bit too drunk and unruly for that, but at least
they hadn’t slit his throat or vomited in his lap yet. He should have realized how lucky he was. ‘Do
you imagine I do not know that already? My own cousin’s husband is one of the Crows.’

The man with the dagger snorted, then spat something dark and sticky onto the floor. ‘You think that
will impress in Antiva City? My cousin himself is a Crow. I need no husband as a go-between. He said
there were contracts offered for the lives of the Fereldan Wardens, back when all this trouble
began—but the assassin they chose failed at the task, and passed into the realm of poor tavern stories.
As you can see from…this mess.’

‘Hah!’ said the second man. ‘You are both fools. Only a true Antivan Crow can know their business.
Lucky for you, we just so happen to have one in our midst.’ Anders couldn’t turn to look over his
shoulder—Hawke’s hand was still there, cautioning against any sudden movements, giving him a
meaningful squeeze—but he imagined the speaker taking a bow, listening to the scrape of his stool as
it was pushed back. ‘And what is more, I can tell you candidly that the assassin in question no longer
works for the Crows. He is what you might call…a defector. If I could find a man willing to buy me
another drink, I might wet my throat and tell you what I have heard about his journeys with the
Warden.’
There was a fresh scramble of chairs, soft leather boots scuffing against sawdust and uneven boards as a few members of the gathered crowed rushed the bar. Anders could see that from where he was sitting, and he could also see the tavern master dive for cover, before he realized the sudden flurry of activity wasn’t a fresh bar-fight breaking out.

Anders snuck a glance at Hawke, to see if anything could be read in the furrow of his brow or the glint in his eyes, the very corner of his lip caught between his teeth. But if he was at all affected by the news from Ferelden, he played his thoughts and his feelings as close to the leather breastplate as ever. There was no secret to be gleaned from his expression, save the obvious fact that there were secrets hidden there. Knowing Hawke, they’d stay hidden; his face didn’t even soften in the shadows of night, pressed into the sag of a lonely old pillow.

‘Well, that’s it, then.’ Isabela sighed, stretching her arms over her head. For a moment Anders thought he saw a telling gleam in her eyes, easier to read than the flinty glimmer of gold in Hawke’s gaze, but it faded like sunlight reflecting off a sovereign. ‘All anyone’s going to want to hear for the next week are war stories about the boring old darkspawn. I thought I’d gotten away from all that.’

We’ll just have to make our own fun,’ Hawke said. There was a flourish of excitement in his voice Anders didn’t trust, though that didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate the flush of heat it offered—swift as it was, and brief, now that Anders had other things to worry about.

Like the sight of Fenris standing alongside Hawke, as though this was something they’d worked out beforehand.

‘There is no shortage of work for men—’ Fenris began.

‘And women,’ Isabela yawned, covering her mouth with the back of an armored hand.

‘—men and women who know how to wield a weapon,’ Fenris continued, unflustered. He spared a look over his shoulder, though how he could see anything clearly over those pauldrons, Anders couldn’t imagine. Then, he spared a look for Hawke—something Anders recognized as a question, the pause that came before the need for approval. Instinctive. Curious. Anders looked at Hawke the same way far too often. The figs in his belly settled funny, and grumbled. ‘…I am told these Crows make it so.’

‘What he’s saying is that Vincento’s spread the good word about us,’ Hawke said, rubbing the back of Anders’s neck. It was a rogue’s tactic, not a warrior’s—making all his ideas sound so logical, all Fenris’s softer looks seem so inconsequential, just because they came alongside obvious physical pleasures. Anders accepted it anyway, ear against the thrum of Hawke’s pulse. ‘Our crew’s in the protection business now, Anders.’

‘Good thing, too.’ Isabela spared Anders a companionable wink. ‘Since Anders was only just telling me how he needs a set of trousers to squeeze his ass when you can’t be there to do it for him.’

Fenris cleared his throat—another hairball, Anders supposed—and Hawke had the gall to laugh heartily at the joke. ‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he said.

‘Right after you finish saving every poor, harried shopkeeper in Antiva City just for attention, you mean?’ Anders asked.

When he glanced up the length of Hawke’s arm to see his face, he was familiar as ever—and just as remote. For a moment, he seemed impossibly tall, even more impossibly broad, so far beyond Anders’s ability to reach that Anders felt as stiff as one of Hadriana’s statues—the ones of slaves she kept in her front garden, twisted and unhappy and almost beautiful in their pain, stationed along the
front path to her summer villa by the shore. She kept them clean, no flowers at their feet, set into the stone walkway to greet her newest arrivals, especially the retinues of slaves her friends brought with them for long week-ends. They made the hair on the back of Anders’s neck stand on end, even on a warm, sunny day, but he knew how they felt—frozen, immobile, trapped by the needs and the limitations of their own bodies, carved into one emotion from sundown to sunrise.

It would have been easy to reach out and steady himself, one hand on Hawke’s hip—and Anders did that, but it solved nothing, not even the warmth through the thin fabric of his trousers, the tell-tale sign of the skin and muscle beneath. There was a scar nearby, just above Anders’s fingertips, but knowing about it was a lifetime away from seeing it. And seeing it was another lifetime away from learning why it was there, if it still hurt, if the memory of the wound still plagued the man who bore it.

‘Building a reputation,’ Hawke said, ‘is sort of like building an amphitheater. The first stones are never that impressive. All the guts and glory come later.’

‘Oh, he’s good,’ Isabela said, while Hawke and Fenris cleared out, and Anders knew she was right just as much as he wished she wasn’t.

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It wouldn’t have surprised Anders if Hawke had chosen to march up to the guildmaster of the Crows straight away, showing off his credentials, putting his second-in-command in a full body hold, and joining their ranks as a late-in-life recruit shortly thereafter. He didn’t—he was too invested in the idea of building a reputation from the streets up first—but Anders couldn’t always tell if that meant he should feel lucky or not, waiting for the other boot to drop.

Still, there was a lot to be said for the money Hawke earned, and the pair of soft kid-leather trousers he bought Anders their second night. He stood too close, unfurling them in their room above the taproom, while the lute strummed insistently down below, and Anders had his first chance to appreciate the feel of true Antivan leather as it rubbed between his thumb and forefinger. It was smooth as butter, just like Isabela said; the fit was tight, if lacking in the ventilation Anders was accustomed to.

‘Won’t be as easy to get under your skirts now,’ Hawke said, nodding when Anders offered to turn around slowly and give him the full view.

‘Not in practice,’ Anders agreed. ‘But in theory…’

The way Hawke undid the laces at the front afterward, loop by loop, left nothing to be desired—or everything to be desired, depending on what angle you were coming from. By that point, Anders had no choice but to face it straight on, letting Hawke lift him toward the bed, leather pulled taut around his knees.

They weren’t Perivantium silks, but they rubbed against the inside of Anders’s thighs all the same, and he and Hawke almost ruined them before Anders ever had a chance to wear them in public, Hawke tugging too hard to get them down off his calves again.

That was how you knew nice clothes were worth what you paid for them. When someone couldn’t wait to get something off you, it was as clear a sign as any of how good you looked wearing it.

Afterward, the bed-frame groaning with the strain of their activities, Anders managed to untangle himself and lift the trousers off the floor. They were new, the one nice thing he still owned beside the earring he refused to get rid of, and he wasn’t going to let the dirty floor and the dirtier rats spoil that
for him so quickly. He at least wanted Isabela’s thoughts while they were still in prime condition.

‘Do you like them?’ Hawke asked, raised on one elbow, his breaths already steady as ever. Like being becalmed at sea, Anders thought, only pleasanter, if about as frustrating.

‘Do you?’ Anders returned, holding them up to his hips in the darkness. He wiggled once for good measure; Hawke’s expression never changed.

‘I should think by now that would be obvious,’ he said.

Then, he rolled over onto his other side and fell asleep, worn out from a day of knocking heads together, of knocking Anders’s head against one of the bedposts.

He didn’t insist or even suggest that Anders accompany them after that, trousers or no, despite his theories on healers and how useful they were—and despite how Anders had managed to be just as clever with his ice-bolts as Fenris was with his murderous fists, or Isabela with her dancing daggers. When Hawke came back from a job with a purpling bruise on his cheek or a split lip, some bleeding wound in his flank or an array of cracked and bloody knuckles, Anders sat in his lap and healed them for him then, removed from the dark Antivan streets, two parts grateful and three parts furious.

‘Are you sure it’s a good idea to set yourself up as a direct threat to the most powerful assassination guild in Thedas?’ Anders asked one night, mending yet another broken rib by dim candlelight.

‘Think of it like a courtship,’ Hawke replied. ‘How else am I going to get their attention?’

‘You know,’ Anders said, ‘when you asked me to run away with you, I was thinking…balmy beaches of Llomerryn, a little tribal hut by the shore, fertility rituals by the summer bonfires. Not antagonizing the Crows in the heart of Antiva City.’

Hawke grinned. ‘Now, Anders. Where’s your sense of imagination?’

‘If you ask me,’ Anders said, knowing full well Hawke hadn’t, ‘the minds that conceived of this city could do with a little more of my imagination and less of someone else’s.’

It was on the tart side of good humor. Anders knew it, and Hawke seemed to know it too, since he fell silent after that, stroking the smooth leather over Anders’s thigh beneath his big palm. As though Anders was the mindless animal here in need of placating.

Perhaps that was what his behavior had earned him—but that didn’t make it fair.

He shared drinks with the others downstairs, displaying no better constitution for it than ever, and learned to eat the dried, salted meat that was in favor with Antiva City’s poor; no one seemed able to approximate a good Ferelden roll, however, and Anders wouldn’t be coaxed into eating more bread after he nearly chipped a tooth on the first stale piece.

‘You’re supposed to dip it in the spiced oil first,’ Isabela said, with a fond tut. From where she was sitting, she could still find it funny that Anders had almost given himself a smile like a hollowed Feastday gourd man, instead of a tragedy on-scale with the Blight in Ferelden. ‘Or wine, I think. If it’s wine, you’re supposed to feed it to your lover.’

Her gaze passed to Fenris, chewing moodily at his own dinner. Anders told himself there was lyrium in his teeth, too, giving him the edge to eat rock-hard foods without so much as flinching.

Isabela was pissing on the wrong tree there. Jokes of mabari dominance aside, Anders couldn’t imagine what she saw in him.
But Anders wasn’t one to judge, these days. His attention wasn’t where it might have been once, on Fenris’s large green eyes or Isabela’s bountiful bosom. His focus was always drawn elsewhere, whenever Hawke entered a room and especially when he left it, the spaces he filled and the spaces he didn’t. And Hawke, in turn, never looked at anyone else—unless he pinned them as an enemy, which they usually were.

Enemies garnered most of Hawke’s attention.

Likewise, it was difficult for Anders to pretend he didn’t notice the purple bruises dappling Isabela’s left arm like a marbled sleeve, or the cut beneath Fenris’s leather-and-plate, wedged neatly between his third and fourth rib. He was a good healer, a rare one, but that was a fact which no one seemed inclined to appreciate anymore, with only Hawke willing to undergo treatment. It was as if the others had forgotten Anders was capable, useful, the first man called when something went south in Minrathous.

When something went south in Antiva City, Anders got tipsy, told terrible jokes, and looked sinful in a pair of leather trousers.

Being a spirit healer and looking sinful in a pair of leather trousers were both callings. Anders only wished he could enjoy both at the same time.

Hawke didn’t feel it necessary to let Anders in on what went down when they disappeared after supper—and sometimes before it—never returning before dawn’s gray fingers twitched lazily across the sky. He dropped into bed like a stone when each job was over, his arms at least finding Anders in the dark before the first snore passed his lips.

It was difficult to feel resentful while pressed up against Hawke’s sleeping chest; but it was also difficult to sleep, imagining all the dangers they got up to, the enemies they were making behind locked doors, in secluded alleys and beneath iron-wrought balconies. Anders could smell the danger on Hawke—he always could, but it was cleaner in Tevinter, kept at bay or at arm’s length, part of a promise unfulfilled, and a man whose actions Anders could monitor, demanding company on strolls or neighborly visits or fussy little errands.

Now, Hawke smelled of Isabela’s miasmic flasks, of other people’s sweat on other people’s leathers, of their blood and his blood and Fenris’s lyrium pulse. His fingers and palms held onto the tang of pommel metal while he slept, long after he’d eased his grip, and sometimes his hands twitched in his sleep, as though he dreamed he was still holding his weapon. Whenever Anders pressed his nose and his mouth against Hawke’s throat he could smell him through the rest, beneath it, but the more he smelled the other things the more he realized that was a part of Hawke, too.

Hawke liked the attention. He liked the risks. He liked it when Anders kissed him long and slow on the mouth, with a bit of tongue, and he even liked it when Anders healed him—not the sort of person who thought needing it made him any less capable, any less strong. But as for the rest, he was a combination of so many strangers Anders never knew where to begin—and so he didn’t. Or couldn’t. Or both.

They began to hear rumbles, rumors of Hawke’s exploits in the Roost’s taproom. And suddenly it became clear that Hawke wasn’t the only one with information on the group’s exploits. Anders could eavesdrop on a nearby conversation while the others were out living their gossip instead of catching up on it, and learn more about what the man he slept with every night was up to than that man was willing to tell him outright.

‘Have you heard anything about this group called The Hawks?’ an unshaven man asked the tavern master, while Anders sat in the corner enjoying a late breakfast of ale and gray eggs. Hawke and
Isabela had left early to do reconnaissance at the docks, promising to stop in and visit the rest of Anders’s cats along the way.

Wherever Fenris was—lurking upstairs in his lair like an animal sick with the Blight, or terrorizing thieves in the Roost’s back-alley—Anders didn’t dare give it a second thought. That would be too much like uncorking a gift wine in front of the giver, and thinking about the elf too much might summon him like a demon from the Fade.

Casually, Anders took a sip from his tankard, turning his ear toward the conversation at the bar and fiddling with the sharp curve of the dragon-claw where it swung against his pulse.

‘Hawks?’ the tavern master asked. He stuck a dirty rag into an even dirtier mug, swiping the dead flies from its tin belly. ‘Yes—I have heard whispers, here and there. But…I cannot say that’s the bird you should be concerning yourself with in Antiva City, my friend.’

The unshaven man spat, doing a great deal to ruin Anders’s appetite in the process. ‘Maker spit on the Crows,’ he said, revealing an apparent death wish. ‘Their threat is obvious. Earn enough coin and keep your head down, the Crows will find some other carrion to feast on. But these Hawks…’ he drummed his fingers against the counter. ‘No one knows what they really want. They are never in the same place twice—chasing off thieves one day, then stealing a merchant’s galleon the next. One of them murdered Rudulfo’s man in midday! You should have seen the corpse they left—a hole where his heart should have been? They have no methods. They have no…decency.’

Anders scraped the tines of his fork against his metal plate, staring thoughtfully down at the lines in the yolk. This was what he’d been worried about, but there was no telling Hawke anything; warnings only made his eyes flash once, only inspired him to do the very thing you were warning him about. The only thing he feared—and even then, fear wasn’t the right word for it, just the threat of minor inconvenience—was being taken back into slavery.

The cut of an assassin’s dagger, silent arrows tipped with Crow poison or an ambush in the streets like the one they’d seen on their first day in Antiva City: none of these things mattered to a man like Hawke. They were all dangers other people looked over their shoulders for, something Hawke could handle with the heft of a stolen weapon or the strength in his shoulders, kick down like a boarded door in the night or catch around the throat from the narrow slant of a secluded back alley.

Maybe he was right. But he was only one man, and the Crows would hear about the Hawks soon enough, would find it less of a petty annoyance and more of an outright challenge. Anders had his doubts as to whether three people alone could take on the entire assassin’s guild.

Even adding a fourth, a few hasty fireballs and lightning-bolts from the Fade, would make little difference.

‘I suppose you have some way to prove all these incidents are linked?’ the tavern master asked, with a raised brow.

The unshaven man hesitated, throat bobbing up and down where he swallowed. ‘Not—not proof, exactly…’

‘Maldicion,’ the tavern master said. Even at a distance, Anders could see him rolling his eyes. ‘Live in the city a bit longer, friend. You’ll learn what happens to those who make wild accusations.’

His loyalty had less to do with the solid coin Hawke paid him every evening and more to do with Hawke’s broad shoulders, his quick fists, the troublemakers he tossed out the door and onto the streets every night. The fights he had started, and the fights he’d stopped.
But it took more than that to buy a man’s continued loyalty, not just in Antiva City, but everywhere. Anders had no way of predicting how long even the barest of good will would last, the tavern master setting his tankards along the bar in an uneven row, Anders’s eggs congealing on his plate, amidst flecks of spice and twinkles of fat.

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Hawke returned for a brief siesta that afternoon, wiping the sweat off the back of his neck. ‘I need a bath,’ he said, but made no move to take one, instead sitting on the edge of the bed, with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands clasped loosely together.

Anders recognized the position, the easy grace of his posture—like a true soldier, he never allowed himself to slouch—and dropped what he was doing, idly teaching himself Antivan from a naughty picture book Isabela had let him borrow. ‘But don’t muss the pages,’ she’d warned. ‘I went through a lot to steal this one, and don’t think I don’t want to re-read it for years to come.’

‘I’ll just run you a nice, hot one, then,’ Anders said, sitting by Hawke’s side. The physical reality of his presence reminded Anders of dropping anchor—he still didn’t know exactly where he’d taken port, the precise rules or unexpected dangers of the locale, but he relished the idea of something solid again, something he could lean on. When he did lean on Hawke, against the slant of his upper arm to his elbow, Hawke allowed it, though he stank of the docks and the tanneries, skin hot as the sun. ‘I’ll throw in some oils and light some incense and ready the soft, fluffy towels for afterward and—oh, wait. I’d almost forgotten I can’t do any of that. Shall I get you a bucket with some brown water, instead? Perhaps an old molar or two bobbing around in it to keep you company?’

‘Don’t you just love Antiva?’ Hawke asked.

Anders ran his hand over the stained knee of Hawke’s trousers, waiting for Hawke to return the favor, to trick his thumb up along the inseam of stitching and leather. Hawke did, true to form, knuckles grazing the top of Anders’s thigh, and Anders shivered despite the humidity, the close air of the room always stuffy and warm, the sweat on Hawke’s skin making it even worse. When he rested his chin on Hawke’s shoulder it came away damp, and Anders wrinkled his nose and sneezed, which made Hawke chuckle.

‘What a funny question to ask,’ Anders said. ‘It’s almost as if you don’t know me at all.’

‘Almost,’ Hawke agreed.

Anders picked at a loose thread, torn by action Hawke had seen the night before, or by kneeling on the splintered docks with Isabela all morning, watching shipments come in or marking street thugs in the easy sunlight. ‘So,’ Anders began casually. ‘Where were you all morning?’

‘What a funny question to ask,’ Hawke repeated. ‘It’s almost as if—’

‘Devious, foolhardy acts of brazen recklessness in public with only a self-serving pirate as backup,’ Anders said. ‘You smell like you’ve spent hours rolling about in a tannery, which you might have, for all I know—it would explain the need for a bath, and the dirty knees, and the good mood. What I meant was why were you there all morning, and what were you looking into?’

‘Boring, really.’ Hawke leaned forward without warning, kissing Anders’s temple. Anders almost let it distract him, but the eggs that morning didn’t settle in his belly nearly so nicely as fresh figs, an expense and a luxury Hawke only indulged in once a week. All the other days felt less and less special because of the one day that was, and Anders had no idea how to spread that feeling from day to day, to make it last longer than the figs themselves. ‘Nothing so interesting as that book you’ve
been reading. I can’t understand a word it says, but I suppose I don’t have to, what with all the pictures.’

‘Stop trying to distract me,’ Anders said.

‘Why?’ Hawke asked. ‘Is it working?’

It was, but his ego was just big enough these days to match his burgeoning reputation. And his burgeoning erection, which Anders’s fingers brushed against in a heated, accidental sort of moment, gripping the hem of Hawke’s shirt, holding him close and pushing him away with equal measures of insistence.

Those contradictory impulses were all Anders knew how to feel anymore. He wanted to stay behind, safe and sound and locked away above the taproom like a Circle mage in a high tower, and he also didn’t want that, never wanted it again. But articulating the point of contention was even more difficult than figuring it out in the first place, sorting it piece from complicated piece, not all of them fitting together to explain the puzzle. There was no reason for Hawke to understand it if even Anders couldn’t—except Hawke was supposed to know these things, to sense them just as easily as he felt the sudden jump of Anders’s pulse every time he came too close, squeezing his shoulder or resting a hand on his hip.

‘I was a Tevinter magister, you know,’ Anders reminded him. He wanted it to sound tart, a little cheeky, but instead it came out sad, a truth they both shared, something that would never again mean the same thing as before. ‘For a long time, actually. Years and years.’

‘No,’ Hawke said. ‘Were you really? Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me you kept slaves.’

‘Ha ha,’ Anders said. He had to resist the urge to crawl into Hawke’s lap, slip between his muscled thighs and rub against him until the impulse to perform increasingly dangerous tasks for coin disappeared from his mind, and his heart. But Hawke wasn’t the sort of man to forget himself that easily. If he were, Anders wouldn’t have liked him so much. ‘What I mean is—I know how to look after myself. Haven’t you heard that a Tevinter magister’s favorite hobby is dueling in the streets?’

‘I don’t seem to recall you doing much of that,’ Hawke admitted. He ran his fingers up the inside of Anders’s thigh, thumb and healed knuckles brushing over his dick through the leather. He was a master of subtle distractions, hot breath and gentle touches undoing Anders’s resolve the way Anders had undone the buckles in his fine silk robes every night, knowing Hawke was watching him from the garden. He’d been able to take his time then, and Hawke was still able to take his time now, the same way he slipped a lace from its loop, inch by slow, bare inch. ‘Eating figs and lounging about reading naughty poetry, maybe. Going to fancy parties and flirting with bald men and laughing at everyone, including yourself…’ Hawke turned his face into Anders’s cheek, lips soft against the prickling blond hair that had cropped up since his last shave. His hand dipped lower to cup Anders’s balls. ‘Not to mention getting drunk and handsy with your favorite slave in the atrium—’

‘Hawke,’ Anders said. He wasn’t proud of the tremor in his voice, the way it hitched on a snag buried deep in his chest. But the first step in proving himself capable meant holding the line, wherever he needed to draw it, guarding it with the same efficiency Hawke displayed over his countless barriers and borders.

Anders was no longer the sort of man who could be put off by a fancy bauble or a new pet cat. He knew about poultices and plasters, covering wounds up instead of healing them outright.

Hawke sighed, a low rumble, followed by the bob of his throat as he swallowed. Anders felt it like a hot Antivan breeze, warm and wet against the shell of his ear. ‘I meant it when I said it was boring.’
‘I’m used to boring stories,’ Anders told him. ‘I’m also good at pretending I think they’re fascinating.’

Hawke rested his head against the wall, a line of sweat disappearing under the collar of his shirt. ‘Savio says there’s a brothel down the street having a bit of a mercenary problem. The men won’t pay, or they won’t leave, or something like that. I don’t have all the details, and I don’t need to.’

‘Oh, Savio says.’ Anders pressed his fingertips into the thick muscle at Hawke’s lower back where it was always knotting up, tensed beneath his leathers and grateful whenever Anders soothed it with a touch of arcane heat. ‘Now it all makes sense. …Did you say a brothel?’

‘The tavern master’s name is Savio,’ Hawke clarified, with one of his flickering grins that always made Anders feel like he was being laughed at. ‘At least, I think it is. Be a bit awkward if it wasn’t, since that’s what I always call him. Sadly, we can’t go in—not unless you want to spoil the element of surprise. It isn’t that kind of job. But if you want to spend the night crouched behind a pile of brothel refuse in the back-alley with me—’

‘—I do,’ Anders said quickly, before Hawke could change his mind. Then, he tossed his head like a prize Orlesian warhorse. ‘Work or no, if you think I’m letting you visit a brothel all by yourself…’

‘I wouldn’t be by myself,’ Hawke said. Anders could feel him grin at his throat, teeth nipping the delicate skin over the life-vein. ‘I’d have Fenris and Isabela with me.’

‘You’re right, that’s so much better,’ Anders replied. Finally, he allowed himself to grip Hawke’s shoulder, hand twisting in the loose fabric of his shirt at the back. He’d made Hawke see his point. There was no need to press the issue—to demand an explanation for why he’d been kept back at all, if it was that easy to argue himself free again.

Hawke shifted his weight to pin Anders to the mattress, his desire for a quick bath and an even quicker nap apparently forgotten in the wake of other, more pressing desires.

Staring up at him, the sweat on his brow and the lines in his forehead, the sharp, clever glint in his eyes and the swell of his upturned mouth, Anders felt as though Fenris had reached a ghostly hand through his ribs and squeezed his heart.

But it was only Hawke in the room with him, Hawke’s palm flat on his chest, Hawke’s thumb rubbing at a nipple beneath the cotton weave of his shirt.

‘Weren’t you going to bathe?’ Anders continued, reaching up to smooth Hawke’s damp, dark bangs from his face.

Hawke shrugged, settling his weight over Anders on the bed. ‘There’s no sense scrubbing down before you’ve gotten good and dirty, first,’ he said.

Regardless of the other patrons above the taproom, what they must have thought or what they were trying not to think about, the tickle of Hawke’s beard at Anders’s throat was enough to make him start to laugh.

*  

The job at _The Maiden’s Bower_ turned out just as boring as Hawke had warned it would be, which wasn’t fair, since every story that had a brothel in it was always so much more fun than that.

The mercenaries were more talk than action, more belch than they were fight. Isabela drove them into the streets from her undercover location—wearing a disguise that involved very little by way of
cover—where Fenris and Hawke made sure their exits were effectively blocked off. A few well-placed jets of ice courtesy of Anders’s sparkly fingertips—followed by a sliver of raw lightning down the mercenary leader’s blade and up his wrist—was more than enough to make short work of the lot. They scattered, cursing in Antivan, after Isabela had severed a few purse-strings instead of going straight for the tendons. And all was right as summer rain in Antiva City commerce.

It was as cutthroat as it was satisfying. Anders could understand Hawke’s attachment to the rush of adrenaline that came after a good fight, though his ran cold rather than hot, ice still clenched in the palm of his hand.

He was less understanding about the gratitude of the Bower’s workers. They clustered happily around Hawke, Fenris, and even Isabela, feathers in their hair and scarlet corsets emphasizing their bountiful assets. Their painted nails and perfumed skin only drove home Anders’s filthy state: scruffy, hair tangled at the back, and a black stain streaked from elbow to shoulder on his sleeve. He’d stepped in a puddle of something tacky in the alleyway, and it clung to the heel of his boot even now, squelching whenever he took a solid step.

Hawke stumbled back to the tavern with more than a few tokens of admiration tucked into his belt—flirtatious notes inviting him to call again, two silk handkerchiefs, and an Orlesian lace garter that Anders both admired and hated on sight.

‘Might look good under your robes,’ Hawke said, with a twinkle in his eye. ‘That is, if you were still wearing them.’

Anders confiscated the thing later that night, stuffing it into his satchel, right beneath his pillow and ample collection of cat fur.

Isabela was waiting for him when he woke the next morning, like one of the narrow bolts of sunlight that managed to filter in through the greasy glass and the boards covering the lone window. ‘Rise and shine, you naughty little apostate,’ she said, reaching over to the basket she’d appropriated—the one Hawke had left on his pillow—to pluck out a grape and peel it with her teeth.

It was fig day. Fig day was sacred, more divine than any polished chantry templar. Anders rolled over and nearly fell off the bed, scrambling to sit up and untangle himself from the sheets at the same time.

‘Isabela,’ he said, halfway through a distressed hiccup and a post-coital yawn. He could feel the loose laces of his trousers underneath the dirty blanket, the tangle of his smalls, the flush on the inside of his thighs and the little bruises, too. Sometimes he liked to count them—one by one as he healed them, eating his figs and his grapes one-handed—before he headed off to the bath. ‘To what do I owe this latest invasion of privacy?’

Isabela popped her peeled grape between her lips and squished it with relish. ‘The skills the Maker saw fit to give me, I suppose, as well as a healthy sense of curiosity. Besides which, I was hungry.’

‘There are eggs downstairs,’ Anders said.

‘I’m sick of eggs,’ Isabela replied. She leaned back on her crate, stretching her arms in front of her, flexed fingers slotted together, before she shifted and lifted her arms high above her head, like a cat finding some new way to be comfortable on a windowsill. ‘Sleep well? I always do, after a night of…exercise.’

It was too early in the morning to play along, Anders suspected. His stomach rumbled, and he managed to pull his legs free, to lace up his trousers and stumble over to the crates. Isabela slid the
basket closer to him, and he checked to make sure she hadn’t eaten everything, forefinger hooked over the edge, peering inside.

‘Your precious figs are all present and accounted for,’ Isabela said. ‘Well? Are you waiting for an invitation from me? They’re your figs. Eat up, because we’ve got business to take care of.’

Anders forgot to swallow—or even chew—before he tried to reply. ‘Business?’ Hawke hadn’t said anything about it the night before, but then Hawke’s tongue had been otherwise occupied, and Anders suspected he enjoyed making his companions improvise. Fly by the seat of their trousers—even Isabela, who had no trousers at all. Then again, Isabela had her own troubles in Antiva to consider. Anders didn’t savor the idea of blundering into another meeting with Castillon in their down-time, a hapless fireball-throwing accomplice participating in someone else’s blood-feud—not the same way Isabela was still savoring her grape. ‘Hawke’s business, or your business?’

Isabela giggled. ‘Our business, silly. That’s what it is now that we’re finally working all together.’ She clasped her hands, while Anders choked down his figs, unable to enjoy them the way he preferred, lazy and half-naked in bed, with a cat purring beside him, eyes closed, pretending he was somewhere else. ‘Oh—and one of your laces is done in the wrong hole. Mages are so cute when they try to wear pants.’

Anders finished his figs and redid his laces, accepting Isabela’s help with the task the same way Hawke accepted all the gratitude from the Bower’s girls. Then, with nothing hanging out to be sliced off by the first roguish dagger in the vicinity, Anders followed Isabela downstairs.

The few windows in the taproom below that weren’t boarded up had been flung open, to get a little of the late morning air in before the afternoon baked all that freshness away, and the dragon claw practically hummed with delight when the sunlight hit it, Anders squinting and shielding his eyes from the glare.

The busy streets of Antiva City were deceptively peaceful, even despite the crowds down by the docks. At any moment—and Anders knew this from experience—an assassination might take place, or a street robbery, or the start of a new city-wide war if one idiot bumped shoulders with another and took offense to it. Fishermen were selling their fresh fish and costermongers rolled their barrows of mussels from one end of the main street to the other, shouting about how delicious they were, when in fact everything they were trying to sell looked like fever snot.

‘Hawke and Fenris aren’t coming?’ Anders asked, wiping the sweat off the back of his neck, from underneath the fall of his hair.

‘Hawke and Fenris are on the other side of the city by now,’ Isabela said, licking her thumb and testing the direction of the breeze. Then, she giggled again, looping her arm through Anders’s and tugging him off down one of her favored side-alleys. Antiva City had a whole network of them, complete with dirty deals and even dirtier tomcats, a few mangy ones that would have been cute after a good, long bath. Rats as large as kittens and just as fearless scurried under their feet, squeaking whenever they got their tails caught between bootfall and cracked cobblestone, and Isabela actually waved to groups of rogues planning their robberies around sharp corners, tucked away in private cul-de-sacs.

Anders did his best not to think of Hawke and Fenris working together—with the same precision and fit and comfort as a shield and a sword worked together. So much better than a shield and a staff. The collaborative process was different for two warriors than it was for a warrior and a mage; the former involved a primal understanding of knocked heads and cracked skulls and broken bones, while the latter involved tactical support, guesswork, operating in tandem and in conjunction but never actually together.
'What’s the matter, Anders?’ Isabela asked. ‘Templar got your tongue?’

‘That’s not what templars go for, actually,’ Anders sighed.

‘Pity,’ Isabela said.

‘I know,’ Anders agreed.

They stepped out of the shadows of close buildings, of dusty clay and unflowering vines, right into the bazaar district Anders recognized. It was even more teeming in the full light of day, though there were fewer blazing torches and mummers in masks. ‘Well,’ Isabela said, ‘as long as you’re better at subterfuge than your big warrior friends, I can’t imagine this won’t be all sorts of fun.’

Anders squinted down at a bowl of unrecognizable fruits. ‘I’m good at subterfuge, actually,’ he replied. ‘After all—I did used to live in Tevinter.’

‘I know,’ Isabela said, snagging him one of the glossy, round things before disappearing into the crowd. ‘And that is what I was hoping for.’

Their first mark was a wealthy merchant in a pale silk doublet with slashed sleeves, bright colors peeping out beneath the muted palette. Anders tugged at a loose thread at his own sleeve, thin fabric over the elbow, as he listened to the man complain to his shop-girl about a rival tailor, whose prices continued to undercut his own.

‘As if that woman has not caused enough trouble already,’ he muttered, fingers rifling over his bottle-brush mustache. ‘Her son has been visiting my daughter of late. And if you think I mean he stops by for a harmless spot of tea every now and then… Well, you aren’t using your imagination. The whelp shimmied up our drainpipe in the dead of night last week. That family is a menace on the good name of Antiva City.’

Isabela ducked down another row of stalls before she gave them away, shoulders shaking with hidden laughter. ‘Drainpipes,’ she whispered, polishing another stolen delicacy on her corset before tossing it Anders’s way. ‘How quaint!’ Anders managed to catch the fruit without squashing it against his chest, just as he came to an epiphany about the nature of the work Isabela had in mind.

They were eavesdropping, a talent that came as naturally to Anders as any simple spell for healing. It was no small wonder Isabela had needed him for this task—both Hawke and Fenris drew too much attention, each in his own way. In order to get the really good stuff, it was important to be an unremarkable person, without white vallaslin and a surly expression, or shoulders so broad you cast your marks into the shade. The simpler a person, the smaller, the more unnoticeable, the better they were at listening in on other people’s conversations, which meant Anders—in his leather trousers and home-spun shirt—was the perfect companion for the task.

It seemed something of a back-handed compliment when he looked at it like that, but it was still nice to be useful for something.

‘No one gets any credit for a proper shimmy these days,’ Isabela added. She picked up a painted mummer’s mask from the stall next to them, holding it over her face. It was the precise, soft green of the sea when it foamed, mouth, lips and eyes detailed in gold. The disparity between the mask’s still features and Isabela’s sparkling eyes beneath made Anders laugh uncomfortably, waving at her to put the mask away.

‘Tell me about it,’ he said. A dozen lifeless faces stared up at him, white features frozen in mirth, their sharp teeth bared or their long tongues wagging. He fingered the red lips of one with feathers
set around the brow, purple and gold fluttering gently in the breeze. ‘I take it you aren’t going to tell
Hawke about the unhappy man with the deep pockets, then?’

‘That is worth more gold than you have,’ the mask-merchant snapped, watching as Isabela lowered
the prize from her face.

‘You’re right,’ Isabela said to Anders, picking up another mask, this one with a sad, downturned
mouth and little sapphire tears. She held it up to the merchant, then let that one free too, moving on
through the gathering crowd. ‘I never make it my business to interfere in matters of the heart. If she
ever gets tired of the lad—and I hope she doesn’t, it takes tremendous strength in the thighs to make
love to a drainpipe before you’ve even got to the woman—then she can start locking her window at
night. Either way, it isn’t our problem, and he’ll probably crack his head open from falling before a
spoil-sport like that shells out for Hawke to do it for him.’

‘You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear someone say that.’ Anders sighed, turning his face
up toward the sun, regretting it when sun-spots lingered in his eyes afterward. ‘Those exact words, in
fact. It isn’t our problem.’

Isabela laughed loudly, steering them past a sizzling stall, where a man was frying flatbread drizzled
in oil and red sauces, with some kind of white cheese melted on top. It smelled like heaven, but
Anders had only just finished his breakfast.

Still, if this sort of good food existed in Antiva City, Anders had to ask why they’d punish
themselves by sticking to the Roost, eating dried-out strips of sausage and bread that could crack a
man’s jaw just as deftly as Hawke.

‘Believe me, lambling, I understand.’ Isabela glanced over her shoulder, to make sure Anders was
still following close. ‘You think it doesn’t chafe my knickers when Hawke won’t squeeze a few
extra sovereigns from a ripe goose? Or when he offers to help someone without pay, just because
they’re crying, or living on the streets, or an escaped slave or something? It’s enough to make a
woman want to rearrange that face of his—and it’s such a good face, Anders.’

It was impossible to tell from the merry tone of Isabela’s voice whether or not she was in earnest, or
if she was just looking for another jolly laugh. Anders suspected it was a little of each—par for the
course when it came to dealing with Isabela. She never chose one or the other when she could enjoy
both, which in her world was everything.

The impulse was admirable, especially when its execution proved flawless. But it was unfair to
people who ended up with neither, or just one thing they could no more explain than they could
understand.

Anders worked his empty hands together, ignoring the smells of flowers mixed in with the smells of
roasting meat, hot oil on hot flames, hot sweat beneath fine leather and swathes of pretty silk.

They continued through Antiva City’s infamous bazaar, the colorful awnings only half as vibrant as
the patrons shopping beneath them. By the time the sun had gone from a corner of the courtyard to
directly over their heads, Isabela and Anders had overturned gossip about a rash of robberies, discord
in the banker’s guild—which had turned into an assassination attempt in the nearby bank—and a
woman whose son had run from the Crows a fortnight ago, and hadn’t been seen since.

They also heard about an art dealer’s affair with the blacksmith two streets over; a wealthy
noblewoman clad in green chiffon, with emeralds in her hair, had discovered her husband’s bastard
living in The Maiden’s Bower; and a young couple, blissfully in love and just as thick-skulled, were
planning to elope on the new fleet of vessels commissioned to sail south for the Free Marches.
Isabela didn’t discriminate when it came to snooping. Each conversation was equally important; she gathered every fresh glimmer of news like a magpie hiding shiny stones in its nest.

‘It’s all part of keeping your finger on the pulse of the city,’ she explained, eating a cup of shaved ice topped with fresh fruit. Catching the look on Anders’s face, she grinned, tonguing a dribble off the side of her paper cup. ‘Right—I forgot I don’t have to lie to you. I love gossip and I’m bored to tears with listening to Savio. The man doesn’t have even one tiny scandal to his name. These lot have nothing else. Try this, would you? I think it’s a bit of a plum.’

She popped the purpling fruit in Anders’s mouth before he could protest—not that he would have, since eating frozen fruit off the fingers of a beautiful woman in the height of Antivan summer was more like the vacation he’d pictured once. Even if Hawke was nowhere to be found.

Anders could tell him all about what he’d missed later, the fun in the sun, the melting ice and the tart plum’s blood-colored flesh, once he and Fenris had finished hacking at things with their swords and tearing up the broken cobblestone.

‘So?’ Isabela asked. ‘What do you think?’

‘Mmm,’ Anders obliged her, so loudly that no fewer than three shopkeepers turned to stare at him, then roll their eyes, as if to say: tourists.

They were coming to the end of the long, open courtyard now, where the stalls grew thinner and the crowds less fashionable. Anders searched for what could have drawn Isabela this way, before he caught side of a bearded man with a round belly, managing a booth of trinkets. He was sharing a conversation with a blond man in leather armor, who’d kept to the shadows of a nearby alley.

‘Ooh,’ Isabela said. ‘Trinkets.’

‘I do love trinkets,’ Anders agreed, touching his dragon claw as a subtle confirmation.

‘There’s no use for them,’ Isabela added, sidling closer, poking through the figurines at the far corner of the stall: women with grotesque bosoms and tiny porcelains from somewhere even further than Par Vollen, burnished rings in a basket with chips of colored glass, a few fake dragon scales and golden chains, sun-shield symbols that made Anders’s throat tighten. There were pendants that looked like the heads of arishoks and the heads of Andraste and also like dwarven forge-hammers, all sorts of crows in varying shapes and sizes, even the occasional fertility charm that made Anders and Isabela giggle together, then look up, then look away. ‘And that’s why I love them so. All the things you don’t really need, but get your hands on anyway—what do you say we buy Hawke one of these?’

She held up a thick bronze torc, the round nubs at the end each shaped like a phallus, head straining toward head.

‘If it’s a charm for virility, then Hawke doesn’t really need it,’ Anders murmured, eyes glinting, all the gossip making him feel cheeky.

Isabela’s expression sparked like a struck flint in return. ‘Hmm, and his neck might be too thick for it,’ she agreed. She ambled, stepping backward, lazily closer to the man in charge and his friend, still holding onto the band of grooved metal. ‘But it looks like it might be Rivaini. He could always stretch it wider in his big, strong hands…’

The rest of what Isabela was saying faded away into so much idle chatter, just as she intended, and Anders did his best—while pretending to survey a dazzling array of Antivan leather cuffs and anklets
—to focus on the conversation taking place just behind her.

Sunlight glinted off ruddy blond hair; its owner leaned forward, into the shade of the slanted stall-roof above. ‘I know what I have heard,’ he said, twirling a polished ring between his dagger-notched fingers. ‘And that much lyrium would be worth a fortune—more than a fortune, more gold than the guildmasters themselves have ever seen before.’

The merchant snorted, rubbing the swell of his stomach, attempting to scratch it beneath a thick doublet. ‘Worth a fortune, yes,’ he agreed. ‘But only if he is taken alive, is that not so? The price is for a retrieval, not a murder.’

The blond shrugged; his leather armor was as scored and cracked as his hands—which Anders took to mean he was likely a mercenary, likely a dangerous one, while Isabela cooed over a bit of blown glass, and a stone carving in the shape of a wyvern’s claw. ‘You could make this into another earring and give it to him,’ Isabela added, brushing in close, one of her hands cinching tight around Anders’s elbow—as if to say listen. As if he wasn’t listening already. ‘Then you’d match. I think it’d be sweet.’

‘Why else do you think they did not involve the Crows?’ the mercenary asked. Isabela’s breath skirted hot over Anders’s throat, his pulse, the sweat beading atop it. ‘Just paid in gold when they arrived, for information and for freedom to do as they please without interference. They had enough to make the guildmasters look the other way, and leave the rest of us in the dark. All the hard work we do, every dagger at our throat, when one glimpse of a staff turns that loyalty to meaningless lies.’

The mercenary spat—people were always spitting, as if they didn’t know how disgusting it was—and the merchant sighed. Anders sighed, too. ‘Beautiful craftsmanship,’ he said, grabbing for the torc again. ‘But matching can be so tacky, don’t you think?’

‘Tacky?’ Isabela touched the countless necklaces at her throat. ‘Why would it be tacky? I think it’s cute.’

‘But,’ the mercenary continued, ‘it kills two birds with one stone. Once this…lyrium ghost is out of our nest, these Hawks will go with him. They have been a thorn in my side longer than I prefer to suffer little fools who think they can make it big in Antiva.’

‘But, the gossip was good, for a time,’ the merchant replied. ‘You have to admit, at least it was interesting.’

‘Interesting enough, if you prefer such a story.’ The mercenary leaned back into the sun, fingering a scar on the side of his neck, just beneath his ear. ‘Yet all such stories come to the same end, no? Enough talk. If I do not leave soon, I will miss the action entirely.’

From somewhere inside her bodice, Isabela fished out a few pocked silver coins, still warm from her skin, and tossed them onto the table, between a belt-buckle with the face of Andraste in the center and a length of heavy gold chain. ‘For the necklace and the claw,’ she said. ‘This one’s in love—we’ve been looking for hours for the right present, and you’ve really saved us.’

‘Come again,’ the merchant said distractedly with a wave of his fat fingers. His mercenary friend was already melting into the crowd, just one more leather jerkin amidst thousands, and Isabela followed with Anders sticking close by, holding metal and stone tight in his sweating hand.

Anders could still imagine himself offering these silly baubles to Hawke—Hawke, who didn’t appreciate petty trinkets the same way someone like Isabela did—and the accompanying snort of humor, the quirk of Hawke’s lips, the flash of white teeth against his beard. There’d be a line, a good
one, better than anything Anders could come up with, but that didn’t stop him from trying anyway. A collar, Anders? And here I thought you weren’t a dog person.

No; Hawke wouldn’t wear an earring, and after his experiences with real chains instead of pretty accessories that only looked like them, he probably wouldn’t wear anything around his neck that felt like a collar, either. Not in one of Thedas’s free countries, where the only slaves were kept in high towers, where everyone else wasn’t forced to see them.

But slavers had come to Antiva City—sent there by Danarius to reclaim his lost property. There was no other explanation. He wanted Fenris back, a possession worth his weight in the lyrium stitched into his skin; Hawke was with him, a companion, an ally, a stubborn Fereldan bastard, and Hawke would try to make his stand.

Their stand.

And Anders could only give Hawke his ridiculous present if he found him in time, jostled from shoulder to shoulder in a city full of rowdy, merciless strangers.

*

Waste no time laying claim to whatever you treasure, Danarius had said once. Otherwise, you might as well have lost yourself.

Anders remembered that little lesson over the gossip and laughter of the crowd. Words to live by, the sort that even managed to seem convincing at the time, for someone who didn’t know how to hold onto anything or anyone else.

Yet sometimes, the things a man prized couldn’t be measured in those terms, or even kept at all. Sometimes, those things roamed the side-streets and back passages of Antiva City looking for other people’s problems to solve, for noses to break, for coin to buy fresh figs once a week, and to pay the rent on a vile room with no windows, not even overlooking a dirty alley.

Isabela tracked their mercenary easily; the route they took was erratic and difficult to follow and also agonizingly slow, but Anders told himself a man that invested in the outcome wouldn’t be late for the main show, and he was moving as quickly as he could, given the circumstances, and the busy streets.

The city changed around them, from bustling hub to abandoned shortcuts to hot, late-afternoon docks. Anders scanned the distant boats to determine which was the slaving vessel in question, wondering how they’d missed it, how Isabela had missed it—then realized it wasn’t important, since he didn’t recognize them anyway. He didn’t care or didn’t mind who had come, so long as they failed.

And they would fail, if they went up against Hawke. That was what Anders told himself, the comforting and stubborn lie he believed as Isabela reached out to yank him behind a barrel so their quarry wouldn’t grow suspicious.

The mercenary slowed now that they’d reached the docks, and was pacing the eastern warehouse district with a restless anxiety. They watched him, aimless as Anders felt, just as impatient. Then, someone whistled sharply from out of sight, and the mercenary took off running, well-worn boots kicking up dust. Anders craned his neck while Isabela kept a firm hold on his shoulder; there was a commotion in the furthest warehouse, near to the water, a repurposed tannery with windows boarded up same as the others, and a door streaked black with old grease. Anders could see a few hard-faced men in stained leathers prowling the deck of a nearby boat, but they didn’t seem dedicated to their search.
‘Crows,’ Isabela whispered. ‘Like flies to shitpiles, really, the way they feast on carrion. You’d think they’d have something better to do—princes to murder or chantry sisters to intimidate. Sometimes I ask myself what Antiva’s coming to—before I remember how fun the place is.’

All eyes were on the warehouse—or rather, what was being carried out within it. Anders couldn’t see Hawke or Fenris, the former’s familiar, sunburned arms or the pulse of blue lyrium heat from latter, despite how he searched, with eyes less keen for the glare of lowering sunlight over the still waters of the bay.

That could only mean they were trapped within, cornered and surrounded by a host of enemies Anders and Isabela couldn’t hope to count from their vantage point. Crows outside, slavers within, and an unknown number of mages, the apprentices Danarius sent to warn and reclaim, who coincidentally didn’t know how to negotiate.

‘…Shit.’ Isabela cursed twice more, once in rowdy Antivan and once in vengeful Rivaini. ‘I thought Hawke knew better than to let himself get cornered.’

She directed this last toward Anders, as though he should be held responsible for Hawke’s recklessness, or his lack of training. Little did she know that was a quirk he’d stepped off the boat with, a frustrating habit of doing everything except what was expected of him. He was always so clever, up until the point when he wasn’t, blundering into a vase or an ambush with the same startling lack of grace or felicity—and no one could predict those moments of error, mostly because they didn’t want to believe Hawke was capable of basic human weakness.

‘He does know better,’ Anders said, with more conviction than he felt. He tucked the stone claw into his shirt pocket, hooking the torc necklace through Isabela’s belt. His hands shook with nothing to hold onto, no polished wood staff to conduct energy and heat and arcane fire. He had to flex his fingers to steady them, to remind himself what they could do, before squeezing them into fists. ‘I mean—I thought I knew that, too.’

‘You don’t have to know everything, I suppose,’ Isabela said, looking at him askance. Most of her attention was still on the warehouse, but she was capable of splitting her focus, even if Anders wasn’t.

‘Yes,’ Anders agreed. ‘Because what I don’t know so rarely tries to kill me.’

Isabela tutted, then got to her feet, still crouched low, ducking down a side-alley. ‘Come on—there are two ways into every warehouse in these parts. That’s the beauty of a smuggling port.’

What Anders decided he loved about Isabela—more than her humor and her good sense, the way she didn’t mind if he stared at her breasts and how she was happy to share a good dessert of melting ice and sour-sweet plums—was that she knew when to ignore the tremor in someone’s voice, not just when to call attention to it.

That left Anders to focus on the spells he knew, the fireballs he prided himself on, blades of ice and the memory of lightning, and the other magic, spiritual and calm, for whatever came after the initial blast, to heal all the fool muscle and shattered bone. Anders’s palm trailed against a sandstone wall for balance as Isabela circled them through fish gutteries, stinking to the skies in the hot afternoon sun; he swallowed to keep anything he’d eaten that afternoon from coming back up the wrong way. But the stench—like the belches of smoke from the tanneries—provided ample distraction from his thoughts. He was grateful for each barrel stocked full of staring fish-heads, their open mouths and beady eyes following him when he passed.

It might have been a little bit selfish, but Anders had always imagined the first trouble they’d run into
would come from the templars. He’d thought about it on the long nights he couldn’t sleep, whenever The Siren’s Call pitched and rolled under his feet; he’d been able to picture so clearly their silverite helms and the sharp hum of their swords slicing through the air, the clank of their bootfalls, the weight of their sun-shields. He’d known—and he’d hated—that he’d be the first one fleeing after they made port, the first one whose old life and current position started to bite at his heels.

When templars were involved, it was never a matter of if, always a matter of when, and later was only a bare variant of sooner than you think.

But there’d been Isabela’s trouble with Castillon to distract them first thing. Danger dogged their footsteps like a loyal pet; it wasn’t sun-shields seeking Anders because he was an apostate, but mercenaries and pirates, raiders and thieves, looking to settle a past grudge, or forge new ones with the so-called Hawks, their work in Antiva City’s restless underground.

Danger itself was a common thread, something to tie them all together: Isabela fleeing her old enemies, Fenris fleeing his former master, Anders fleeing the long reach of the chantry, its brands and its locks. And Hawke had been caught up at the center somehow, fleeing something Anders didn’t yet understand, something he couldn’t yet name.

It was easy to forget the wary slide of Hawke’s eyes to the rooftops, how stiff his shoulders had been braced on his first day in the city, while Anders was still leaning against him for support, knees wobbling weak as bilge-water. He fought well and laughed it off after, casting a lengthy shadow; all he had to do was crack one of the joints in his neck or pop his knuckles against the palm of his hand, and every cut-purse nearby found themselves choking on their own tongues, on fear and promise and warning. Anders had assumed Hawke was adapting to free living just as easily as he’d adapted to being a slave; from soldier to gladiator, from family man to lone hire-sword, from the Imperium to free waters to Antiva City.

They’d all let Hawke take charge, just because he was so good at it. Even Isabela had seen the lucky odds in that gamble, hardly a gamble at all.

Anders had chafed at the rules, at how easily Hawke came up with them; he’d bridled at his precarious position of party apostate almost as much as he’d loathed being locked up in a dirty room, kept hidden, out of sight. But even in his most indulgent flights of fancy—which usually involved boarding the next boat bound for Llomerryn; there was always somewhere else better than here, always some other city that offered some better freedom—he’d never dreamed that Hawke might actually need him, or that this would be the sign of equality Anders had been waiting for and avoiding all along.

Anders covered Isabela’s approach as they swept past the rumbling backside of a tannery, its fat, black pipes sloshing refuse down into a sludgy gulley. Anders didn’t know how they’d done it, but they’d managed to come all the way around to the back of the warehouse, near a pair of old cellar doors fastened by a padlock. Isabela drew a set of thin, metal lockpicks from her belt and got to work, fingers moving in measured increments, while Anders repeated old spells and new ones, whispers from the Fade beneath a fine layer of healthy sweat.

‘Isabela—’ Anders began, no more than a murmur.

‘If you tell me to hurry up, I’ll probably put these right through your pretty brown eyes,’ Isabela told him, not looking up, her lockpicks clacking together long and sharp and pointy at the tips.

‘A little haste wouldn’t go unappreciated—that’s all I’m saying,’ Anders amended. ‘All I was going to say, before you—’
'Ah,' Isabela said, a happy sound, followed by a pointed click. The bolt fell open and the hunk of metal slithered free, and she toed the door away, kicking it aside with a twitch of her bare hips. ‘You were saying?’

‘You work fast,’ Anders said.

‘Life’s short enough. Why waste time?’ Isabela replied.

It was dark and cool the moment they slipped into the cellar, Isabela landing first with silent bootfalls, Anders coming down less gainfully in her wake. He heard the creak of floorboards above him, pounding footsteps racing overhead, a few meaningful crashes; he imagined Hawke fighting just as he must have the first time the slavers came for him, and all the unpleasant futures that awaited him this second time—the idea of Fenris and Hawke in Danarius’s retinue, the look on Danarius’s face or the light in his eyes when he recognized the broad Fereldan warrior kicked to kneel front of him.

Tevinter would always have its healers, a few meek men kept like lap-cats on the pretenses of generosity, of indulgence, of amusement, those who did their masters’ bidding just as well as any other slave. They’d see to Hawke’s wounds if Anders wasn’t careful, only that was his place now—a small purpose in the grand scheme of things, but at least he knew he had one.

Muted shouts and more scrambling footfalls made the narrow floorboards creak, dust filtering down below, into Anders’s hair and onto his skin. He snapped his fingers for a ready fireball, and Isabela picked the second lock with only the barest, palest of flames to light her way.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ she said, an instant before she found the mechanism and unwound it with a practiced flick of scanty metal. ‘I don’t need to see to feel my way around. I could do this in the dark—or blindfolded. Ooh, kinky.’

Anders felt pulse after pulse of humor and anxiety, of relief and fear, Isabela’s sweet voice and kind words a distraction meant to soothe and calm and also to prepare him, to keep him on the right side of useful. When the door swung open at last, they knew they’d have no more cover, nowhere else to sneak and skulk, nowhere to hide. Isabela bumped her shoulder against Anders’s, the metal torc knocking into his hip as she moved.

‘You look after your room-mate, and I’ll look after mine,’ she whispered, hot in his ear. ‘And if you don’t keep up your end of the bargain, I’m coming after you once I deal with all these pesky little slavers.’

‘Pesky and little aren’t exactly the words I’d use to describe them,’ Anders whispered right back, one of his hands next to hers on the door.

‘But sweetling, that’s all they are,’ Isabela replied.

She didn’t wait to count to three, or ask him if he was ready. She pushed the door open instead with a heavy creak of old hinges, and Anders followed, heaving it off the floor and bursting out into the warehouse proper.

Isabela wasted no more time—true to her words, as much as she ever was—and broke a miasmic flask into skittering shards and swirling smoke on the floor. Anders called upon an arcane shield to protect himself from choking on the residue, from letting it cling to his lashes and eyelids and blind him where he stood. Oily tendrils slid slippery over the half-translucent sides; Anders could see scattered bodies, fallen slavers, hire-hands still clutching their weapons, and dark scorched-marks streaked over the dirty floorboards, the sort of chaos Hawke often chose to leave in his wake.
Afterward, Hawke always checked their pulses, tied up their wrists behind their backs, and left them for the Antivan Guard to find later. He’d set them down, nice and neat, just where he’d found them, like a child who knew how to clean up his toys as well as he knew how to break them.

But Anders didn’t care about those who’d already fallen; he was a healer, yes, but there were limits to his focus, the limitations placed on magic by the men who wielded it, making it privy and prey to each self-centered emotion. Casualties would matter later; Hawke mattered now.

That Hawke hadn’t fallen yet was important—Anders would have recognized him, broad shoulders slumped, looking invincible even when he was chained or brought down. Even when he was outnumbered and outmaneuvered, he was never outmatched.

He was, however, backed into a far corner, shielding Fenris’s body with his own. Fenris was hurt; Anders could taste blood and lyrium on the air more than he could faded leather and fresh fish, and the crackle of magic sang above the rest, the hum of lightning as it snapped crooked and swift through the shadows of the warehouse’s high-ceiled room.

It was no open Minrathous street, beneath the tall, black spires of the distant Imperium circle, where archons and other politically-minded magisters taught their apprentices to understand the principles of blood magic—rather than how to obey the templars, and serve mankind by denying themselves the power to harm it.

Hawke held a blade steady in one hand, arm bent and guarded, but the other was limp and hung at a funny angle, without its usual strength. Anders knew even through the sheen of Fade-magic and Isabela’s smoke that it was broken. There were shouts from the rafters, where Isabela was taking care of a few well-positioned archers, but the magister keeping Hawke and Fenris backed into a corner—in a corner of his own, fine robes and raised staff and bald head—couldn’t be shaken by a few underhanded tricks, or any of the clever distractions a rogue had in her impressive armory of decoys and daggers.

Caladrius was too single-minded in a battle for that. When a man had an ego as large as his head was shiny, piercing his confidence took more than an ambush of two, one pirate and one healer.

The only thing Caladrius would answer to now, so deep in the thrall of his own blood magic and his perception of easy victory, was another magister. A challenge he would recognize, a threat he’d know.

Spells against spells, swords against swords. That was the only sort of fight that was ever fair—even when one side was so much better trained than the other, at least it wasn’t the same as sitting down to play Diamondback when the card-thrift across the table was playing Wicked Grace.

Anders scrambled for an abandoned staff, wrenching it from the limp grip of one of Caladrius’s fallen comrades. It fit in his hands, even though his palms were sweating still; despite how long it had been, the shaft of wood slid into his grip like a handshake from an old friend, and Anders held tight.

‘I’ll try not to light your beard on fire, Hawke,’ Anders called, an interruption of Caladrius’s concentration as much as it was a lover’s promise. ‘But my Tevinter battle magic is a bit rusty these days—so hold onto your trousers and try not to get in my way.’

Then, as Caladrius twisted round to look at him, he loosed a volley of fireballs from the head of his borrowed staff.

Caladrius’s shield flickered under his surprise at exactly the right time.
Anders had always dreamed of dueling in the wide Imperium streets, the freedom of magic unleashed in the open air and beneath the hot sun, not from behind cover or in musty libraries, regulated and restricted as all that was. He never thought he’d be good at it, but he imagined he was anyway, his rivals fleeing with their skirts tangled around their ankles, their hair singed, their mustaches outright burned, their cries of defeat ringing in his ears right before he retired to a private bath with a handsome friend or an archon’s pretty daughter, someone to keep him company and tell him how impressive he was at the same time. It was a fantasy he kept with him even after he saw the aftermath of the real duels, blood sticky and dark, shades still burbling hot, a mess of twisted flesh and steaming sulfur, each nightmare conjured from the Fade to rend suppler, smaller bodies, to feed their hunger with a battle-feast. Anders knew the dangers, the limitations, the blood lost and the blood spilled, the scars left on the earth and the scars left on skin.

He’d never had his chance, because he’d never wanted to accept its consequences.

But one little duel, in the confines of an Antivan warehouse, amidst crates of old tanning lye and ash, was just what the healer ordered.

He didn’t have time to enjoy the alluring distraction of his own fantasies for long. Caladrius summoned a host of black-clotted shades with a thump of his staff-butt against the warehouse floor; Tevinter magisters were always doing that. Their wicked, impossible bodies surged boneless from the ground, then advanced toward Anders, trembling hands stretched toward him in a child’s gesture of hunger and longing.

_We only want to rip the flesh from your bones_, they seemed to say, five blind heads bobbing as one. The lurching sway of their approach was hypnotic.

Anders bit the corner of his lip, already knowing there was no cover to protect him from such an assault.

It was a nightmarish sight for any man—enough to conjure the worst dreams of even the most experienced and ruthless magisters. But Anders had been born a Circle mage; his nightmares were all of templars. Caladrius couldn’t call on the chantry with a bang of his polished yew staff, and though Anders was afraid, it wasn’t the ruinous kind of fear, the sort Caladrius hoped to inspire, the sort meant to debilitate.

Anders drew in a deep breath, then swept his staff in a wide arc. Glittering shards of crystalline ice rained outward from its head, rising from the ground where the shades made their approach. Ice froze anything, really, but especially qunari and sulfurous wretches; Anders’s spell froze Caladrius’s Fade-army in place, talon-fingers still outstretched. Their blackened bodies glittered, but they also provided cover, a wall standing between them and hiding Anders from view.

‘This is quite the welcome, Caladrius,’ Anders called, remembering something one of his old tutors Karl Thekla had taught him, back in the Circle before he’d run away. Even the most dedicated enchanter couldn’t concentrate through the sound of Anders’s voice at its cheekiest. It hadn’t been the lesson Karl intended, but it was one Anders took to heart anyway. ‘Are you sure you didn’t miss me?’

He breathed heat on the frosty tips of his fingers, recalling warmth to his body for another round. Those shades were still a threat, and Isabela hadn’t yet managed to rescue Hawke and Fenris from their corner. The real strength of elemental magic lay not in its separate parts, but rather combining spells to increase their effectiveness. The cold could petrify an enemy in its tracks, but in time the shades would begin to thaw, melting ice peeling from their hot bodies, rage building to break them free.
Anders blasted the nearest frozen statue with a fist of rock. It shattered into a litter of sharded pieces, too small even to be used in an earring as a trophy.

‘Is that the healer?’ Caladrius asked, his dry voice drawn high with nerves. A bright burst of flames erupted against the shade at Anders’s far-left, and the sudden heat made his cheeks feel too warm, a fall of loose hair brushing soft over his skin. ‘Why don’t you come out so I can see you better?’

But Caladrius had miscalculated the density of Anders’s ice, and his own shade crumbled into a heap, bubbling and melting, its blade-sharp hands reaching for Anders even as it sank back into the floorboards, into the cellar, into the earth below. Anders shook off a shiver, hair at the back of his neck prickling.

Somewhere in the distance, another of Isabela’s miasmic flasks broke with a crash, her telltale laughter ringing above the shouts of pain and anger that she left in her wake. The sound warmed Anders like one of Caladrius’s fireballs, settling in the depths of his stomach like a hot toddy on a cool Tevinter night. He peered around one warped, ice-streaked shoulder; Hawke was fighting man to man and blade to blade, fighting as he was born to fight, the clang of weapons a rhythm as predictable as the strumming of a taproom lute.

Anders wasn’t alone—and not just because he was surrounded by wretched shades.

‘Why—do you have a wound that needs tending?’ Anders asked, blowing another frozen body to smithereens with a blast of stone. He spun the staff in his hands, acclimatizing himself to the weight and grip of a real weapon again. Healing was hands-on work, the one specialization that didn’t require a staff’s amplification. He’d carried a slim dagger in his belt for a time, before realizing it was an accessory for blood mages, instead of a simple fashion statement. He knew where all the life-veins were, so presumably the dagger might have been useful if he turned it on other people—but he also knew that a weapon in untrained hands was as dangerous to its owner as it was to an enemy. A staff was different. A staff was just an extension of a mage’s arm, a mage’s reach. ‘Don’t tell me you singed off your eyebrows this time, Caladrius. I don’t know—wouldn’t it be better not to have them? Then your entire head would match.’

One of the slavers near Hawke screamed, before the sound shattered, just like stone knuckles breaking over a wall of ice. Anders chanced another look their way—just in time to see the man choking on his blood where he’d fallen. Hawke had thrust his own spear through his throat.

When he saw Anders watching, he winked, but the playful gesture didn’t have its usual effect. Anders was too mindful of the awkward swing of his broken arm, the bleeding gash above his eyebrow, and Fenris crouched behind him. They were the wounded guarding the wounded, and Isabela didn’t share their talent when it came to a straightforward melee. Neither did Anders, for that matter.

The rescue would have been so much more effective if their positions had been switched, Anders caught by a host of templars and Hawke breaking their ranks and breaking their bones to keep him safe.

Perhaps that was why it had been so easy to imagine. Any scenario that made Anders out to be the hero was too grim to contemplate.

‘Come now, healer, you’ve always been a clever sort,’ Caladrius said. Fire flared against the protective wall of Anders’s frozen shades, and the one closest to him shivered, breaking half free, lunging toward him with two long arms tracing a wide arc through the air. White lighting pulsed from the tip of Anders’s staff, frying the demon where it slouched. His heart was pounding at the speed of his reaction, and the deep scores in the earth where the shades had already been vanquished,
floorboards burnt bloody and black. ‘If you’ve followed the trail, then you must know why I’m here. It’s certainly not because I have your taste in slaves.’

‘Funny.’ Anders hooked his staff around the last shade, sending a bright crackle of chain lightning in Caladrius’s direction. It was a blind shot, a warning volley, enough to light the room and check the shadows, not meant to take the man down. ‘I don’t see any slaves here. Are you sure you’re not in the wrong warehouse? That would be embarrassing.’

Beneath the crook of a frozen elbow, Anders glimpsed Caladrius as he dove behind a barrel to avoid being fried like a gray breakfast egg. His face was impassive when he peered back over the wooden rim—confused, but not concerned.

Even when confronted with reinforcements, a chatty healer who’d suddenly decided to fight, Caladrius’s pride would never allow him to acknowledge the possibility of undignified defeat.

‘Danarius sent me for the elf,’ Caladrius explained, as though he was lounging on a couch by a solstice fire, inspecting the fresh polish buffing his nails. ‘His property, you’ll recall. It’s none of my business what you do with yours. I even tried to explain as much to your mad Fereldan dog over there, right before he attacked.’ Slowly, Caladrius straightened, smoothing the wrinkles from his skirts. ‘But you were always reasonable, healer. Surely you’ll see the wisdom in this. Give me the elf, and you have my word, the rest of you can go free.’

_Free_, Anders thought. A rare concept anywhere in Thedas. He’d yet to determine whether or not people really knew what it meant, or what it was supposed to mean. As much as he relished the idea, his vision might have been warped, the same as his reflection in the melting puddles of half-water and half-ice on the warehouse floor, or the way his nose looked enormous when he caught sight of it in the curve of a round templar’s shield.

‘It can’t be easy for you, can it, Anders?’ Caladrius continued, giving Hawke behind him a wide berth. The clutter of barrels and crates made for clever blockades, and Hawke was occupied with his own battles, anyway—though Caladrius wasn’t the sort to leave any opening, to turn his back on a potential enemy. Anders he faced outright—magister to magister, a familiar volley of friendly words obscuring personal resentment and a touch of boredom. His tone reminded Anders of every dull evening-party conversation he’d suffered during his time in the Imperium. ‘What are you wearing? Trousers, on a magister? You must be suffering.’

‘You know what they say,’ Anders replied, thumb sliding against the burnished wood at the head of his staff. ‘When in Antiva, try the leather.’

‘For however long it lasts, I’m sure,’ Caladrius said. He kicked a dagger out of his way; it skittered across the floor, as far from the center of action as possible, so none of his enemies would be able to make a grab for it. ‘But once it starts to chafe—once the Crows catch up with these fools—where does that leave you? There’s still room for you in Minrathous, Anders. We mourn the loss of a good healer practically every day. And I heard Hadriana’s looking into taking up your old place—such a lovely view, not to mention the garden…’

If Anders closed his eyes—which he couldn’t, not while they were tracking Caladrius’s every movement—he could almost recall the breath of fresh air against his cheek, the smell of sun-warmed grapes in the garden over the scents in his bath-oils, still clinging to his skin. He could almost feel the slide of silk on his palms, or hear the flutter of gauzy drapes with each whispering breeze, the chirping of the infernal songbirds flitting from blossom to blossom, the hum of fat bees and the taste of honey drizzled over figs. Having those things every day wasn’t worse than denying yourself six days out of seven, pretending one indulgence was better than a thousand. The latter made indulgence a rare thing, yes, but not all rarity was preferable, especially when the opposite was possible, and the
opposite was abundance.

Anders blinked. His eyes burned. He’d been staring at Caladrius for too long, not to mention the glistening shine of sweat off the arc of his head.

‘I paid the templars here to look the other way,’ Caladrius added, sighing. ‘And it wasn’t cheap. I’d rather donate to your charity, Anders. I’ve a new set of robes from Marothius with your name on them.’

‘What color?’ Anders asked.

‘Blue,’ Caladrius replied. ‘It’s in season.’

‘High collar?’ Anders asked.

Caladrius smiled, the same smile he wore when he saw that a slave had all his teeth, that he wasn’t missing a finger or a testicle or something that would cause him to garner lower odds in the ring. ‘The highest,’ he said.

Anders traced the open laces on the front of his shirt with his free hand, the one that wasn’t clutched around a shaft of already sweaty wood, cold and hot from lightning and ice bolts in equal measure. Hawke’s shirt fell open the same way, simple and often, a frayed cord of leather tucked against dark hair and a pale scar. It was no stiff brocade with a shock of glossy feathers, sleek and blue-black under the sunlight, silvered clasps down the center with chipped jewels inlaid in the metal.

Anders didn’t believe in sacrifices. He didn’t believe in the importance of discomfort, that it built character or improved a personality—especially not one that was already so set in its troublesome ways. And it was impossible to have things, possessions, pretty ones, when you were on the run; leaving always meant leaving something behind, until at last everything you’d owned and everything you’d wanted was stripped away.

But Anders wasn’t the only one running. Running toward something, he’d thought, was different from running away from it; the similarities were what made him balk, what caused him to accept Hawke’s charity as much as he’d accepted the protection of the magisters. He hadn’t wanted to run again. He hadn’t thought he was ready.

‘I don’t know,’ Anders said. ‘I’ve always thought green or black was more my color.’

Caladrius called up his shield the moment Anders favored him with a roaring fireball, but it was a moment too late; it flickered and faltered against the heat, losing its struggle to maintain unbroken cover, and Anders supposed he’d finally managed to live up to one ideal—to know what it was like to duel another magister, staff-to-staff. Not exactly swordplay. Not exactly spirit-healing, either. His palms were hot and his heart pounding in his temple, mana draining, strength gone with it, but he thought he heard Caladrius screaming, the scrape of bootheels on splintered floorboards, the squelch and crunch of shade-flesh and shade-bones and Isabela’s laughter, Hawke’s even-keeled breathing.

The flames at Anders’s fingertips flickered, then burned brighter than ever, then burned out. The spell was over, and so was its momentum, strong enough to carry Anders through one of the stupidest and best decisions of his life, and deposit him straight into the unsteady aftermath, knees shaking.

Then, Hawke sagged at Anders’s side, lips pressed against his brow. Anders blinked sweat out of his eyes, waiting for his vision to clear; Caladrius was nowhere to be seen, but the warehouse was on fire, shadows lurching beneath the narrow beams, all the way up to the windows near the high
ceiling. The flames sought air to feed them; just like everything else in Thedas, they hungered in their quest for strength. But there was a difference, Anders told himself—there had to be. What a man wanted, and what his instincts told him, and the waning gravity he shared with another, two bodies holding each other up for one long, uncertain moment.

‘Isabela took Fenris,’ Hawke said at last, unwilling to move, or perhaps unable. Anders didn’t think he cared about all that, turning his face against Hawke’s jaw, smelling the singe of ash above the blood and sweat he’d grown so used to.

‘Did I light your beard on fire?’ he asked.

‘I managed to dodge the fireballs all right,’ Hawke said. ‘But you didn’t make it easy.’

‘You wouldn’t like it if I did,’ Anders told him, before he clutched Hawke’s sleeve in his free hand, and dragged them both out through the cellar door.

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Isabela had Fenris sequestered in their room upstairs, sitting crosswise on his legs to keep him from getting up. She was pretending to buff her nails with a bit of scored steel when Anders came in, but he could see the tight concern on her face, as well as the way she’d braced her weight on one foot against the floor, to keep from adding to Fenris’s discomfort.

He had a wound in his chest and another at his stomach, where a slaver’s dagger had bit clean through the leather straps and thin plate of his armor. Anders, sweaty and stinking of fire and smoke, knelt on the floor to heal him, and Fenris—who pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, sharp fingers rifling through his hair—for once didn’t lash out. His lyrium pulsed in time with his heartbeat, matching the swift eddies of healing magic Anders sent into his muscles, stitching the torn flesh back together. At some point during the process, Fenris lost consciousness, and that made the work quicker.

It also explained the lack of protest.

When Anders finished, his fingers were stained with blood. Isabela gave him a damp, dirty rag to wipe them clean again, but red had seeped in under his nail-beds, staining the whites a faded pink.

‘You look dead on your feet,’ she murmured—which, in the common tongue of Isabela, was the closest to thanks Anders was going to get.

Isabela made him feel lucky. Fenris didn’t see the need to be grateful, much less acknowledge that he should.

‘Not just yet,’ Anders replied. He swabbed the back of his neck with the cleanest part of the rag. ‘I’ve still got things to do, I’m afraid.’

A familiar light kindled in Isabela’s eyes. ‘I’ll bet you do.’ She glanced toward Fenris, slumbering peacefully amidst the new stains on the bed linens, stains he’d ignore despite or because he was responsible for them. ‘Just try and keep the noise down. You wouldn’t want to make a girl jealous, now would you?’

She nudged him out the door with a firm pat on his rear, before Anders could tell her that for once making other people jealous—with or without Hawke’s able body—was the last thing on his mind. Not when Hawke had sent Anders to Fenris first, then stumbled into their room alone, presumably to pass out from the pain, or continue doing naughty things with his arm that would make the bone set as funny as the bridge of his nose.
He was a Fereldan through and through—stubborn as the mabari they prized, but often not nearly as clever.

Anders braced himself to expect another half-conscious lump in bed awaiting treatment. Perhaps he should have known Hawke better. Or perhaps half the fun, half the despair, half the thrill and half the pleasure, was that he didn’t.

Hawke was sitting up, back squared against the wall with his arm dead at his side. He’d tried to remove his boots and failed—the left one dangled uselessly from the end of his foot, long legs stretched across the mattress. If it hadn’t been for that arm, the dried blood on his forehead and the singed fabric of his trousers, it might have been any other day in Antiva City, Hawke weary from his daily exertions, not so weary that he didn’t look up whenever Anders came in.

It was the little things, Anders thought—not the marble tables or the glass chips in the tiles, not the blush-colored curtains or the sweeping views from the picture windows, candle-wicks set in oil-lamps and vases no one paid any mind to, a whole host of fat, painted bodies ignored and unappreciated in an atrium or a wide hall. No; it was the half-angled looks, slanted side-long and sometimes careful, sometimes careless, sometimes by accident and sometimes with purposeful heat. It was the touch of a thumb against a sore muscle, or a basket of figs left on an abandoned pillow.

‘Afraid you’d get the blankets dirty?’ Anders asked, eyeing Hawke’s boot.

His eyes had been open, but at the sound of Anders’s voice Hawke twitched, blinking as though he’d been caught off-guard, napping during his night-watch. The sharpness of his gaze was clouded with pain, and as Anders came closer he could hear the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

‘You’re the one…always complaining about stains,’ Hawke replied. He managed to kick off his boot, a dull thud on the bare floor, then winced as the movement jostled his bad arm.

‘Stop that.’ Anders tutted, a gentler sound than the tart voice he normally adopted with disobedient patients. He tucked himself onto the bed at Hawke’s good side, and reached to take his arm with pale fingers that shook from exhaustion.

Spirit healers were trained to work at a low output for hours on end, in order to conserve their energy in the event of future accident. The enormous flare of arcane power he’d put into defeating Caladrius at the warehouse had all but drained his wells of mana. Now, he was nigh on tapped out, not a tankard half-full or half-empty situation, just the bare dregs of power he needed to heal the man he should have seen to first.

Anders had called on his emergency reserves to heal Fenris, and that was what he did with Hawke now. But eventually, all wells ran dry.

The magic was still there; it simply came more slowly, like a soldier’s aching muscles squeezing out the final retreat. Hawke shifted, brushing the thick muscle of his thigh against Anders’s knee. Anders closed his eyes, knowing the way of Hawke’s body by touch, which was also by heart.

His palm fit against Hawke’s neatly, giving him something to hold onto as the magic began its work. The fracture was a clean break, with only a few stray, shattered bits of bone lodged in the tissue at Hawke’s forearm. For the first time, he groaned while Anders put him back together, fusing the crack and mending the joint where his shoulder had been dislocated on impact. Anders lifted his hand high against Hawke’s collarbone, easing the swelling from the torn tendons even as he healed them each to each, and each in place.

Hawke’s hand spasmed, fingers moving one by one against the back of Anders’s knuckles. He
wanted to slump against Hawke in relief, but he couldn’t just yet, because his work wasn’t finished, not with how slowly he was moving. A healer’s work never was, so long as the people he knew—the people he chose to stay with—insisted on putting themselves in harm’s way.

Anders refocused, squinting beyond his bleariness, searching out the open gash above Hawke’s left eye. He shifted positions, straddling Hawke’s hips at the waist so he could apply a soothing touch to his brow, mending the skin and wiping the half-dried blood off with a brush of his thumb.

‘You’re a mess,’ Anders murmured, fingers tangling in Hawke’s dark bangs. It had been a while since he’d examined Hawke’s face from this close, the lump of broken bone in his nose and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes—the ones that came from always smiling and never laughing. He was covered in his own blood, as always, and blood that had once belonged to other people, sort of like a blood mage himself, only without the ability to read and warp minds.

It was other things he read and warped—such as the desire Anders felt, the need and the longing, every petty instinct that helped and hindered his escapes. If Hawke didn’t grasp their meaning, he at least knew they were there, and he held them so simply in the palms of his broad hands, the same way a warrior knelt to the soil in a thriving garden. As though coaxing things to grow was the same as wielding a weapon.

There was satisfaction in the depths of his brown gaze, and something else that made Anders’s breath ball and stick in his throat, like blood congealing, like coils of miasmic smoke.

‘You should look in a mirror,’ Hawke said, winding his newly-mended arm around Anders’s waist from behind. Anders knew that instinct; he was testing it, flexing his fingers against Anders’s thigh, spreading them wide, thumb all the way at his hip. ‘And you stink like a castle-at-siege.’

‘Such a poet,’ Anders said.

‘Fereldan,’ Hawke reminded him.

The rhythm was familiar, almost routine. There was something to be said for doing things the first time, and something else to be said for getting the chance to do them again. The same, but different; determining and offering new meaning in the old refrain.

Anders’s hand strayed sideways, fingers pressed against the pulse at Hawke’s temple where it beat trapped beneath his skin. There hadn’t been any templars in the warehouse that day, but Caladrius and his whispers had come near enough to building another cage for him, pretty as it would have been, and pretty as he would have looked inside of it.

It felt like his Harrowing—only without any sword-wielding templar waiting for him to fail on the other side of it. He’d seen the trap and passed the test and resisted the temptation, not for the first time.

Or maybe it just hadn’t been the dilemma he’d anticipated.

Anders sat back on the balls of his feet, backs of his thighs balanced on the sturdy muscle just above Hawke’s knees. It hadn’t been so long ago that Anders was able to send him away—for his own good, no less—but that was letting go. Protecting someone, fighting to protect them, was more like holding on, fingers fitting against familiar grooves in a friendly old staff.

Hawke grunted, stubbly throat bobbing where he swallowed. ‘You’re staring, Anders.’

So he was.
Anders had his reasons—he liked Hawke’s face, rearranged as it so often was, hidden beneath the tan and the sweat. He could imagine what it used to be when Hawke was younger, even if he’d never know for certain, the proud jaw beneath the dark bristles of his beard, and the relaxation he never allowed, not even while he was sleeping. Anders held onto that face, palms against hard cheekbones, Hawke’s expression swathed in the shadows Anders cast over it. Usually, Hawke was the one who cast the shadows, who fell over Anders’s body and pressed him down into a private darkness, not lonely, but eager and breathless and hungry, and not without a touch of physical desperation.

Now, Hawke’s eyes glittered in the darkness Anders cast—like the spells he’d cast, to keep Hawke safe.

‘I don’t like it here,’ Anders told him. ‘Not here, Antiva, specifically—the ale’s fine and the market’s even better, and the trousers are comfortable. No—what I mean is anywhere that’s got templars, anywhere with a Circle looking to reclaim wayward apostates.’

‘That’s everywhere except the Imperium,’ Hawke said.

At last, Anders pitched forward, brow against Hawke’s brow, tip of his nose against Hawke’s nose. They breathed together into the close air, not enough space and too much space between them.

‘I know,’ Anders murmured.

Hawke’s hand steadied at the small of his back, blunt fingers slipping under the loose cotton hem of Anders’s shirt. His thumb rubbed the bare stretch of skin he found, and it prickled in response, gooseflesh spanning wider than the spread of Hawke’s hand. Then, confusion tightened Hawke’s features; their closeness meant the subtleties of the expression were impossible to miss.

‘Anders,’ Hawke said. ‘Do you think I’m an idiot?’

‘No,’ Anders replied. ‘But I do think you’re Ferelden.’

‘You’re a poet yourself,’ Hawke told him. He patted Anders’s thigh, the worn and weary motion that meant so many things, and none of them easy to determine.

But Hawke didn’t make it easy. Anders wouldn’t have liked it if he did.

‘I traveled for years with wayward apostates,’ Hawke continued. As he spoke, his hands never stopped moving, callused paths lining Anders’s skin, split fingertips hitching against smooth leather. ‘They didn’t want to be caught, either.’

‘Were they?’ Anders asked, sliding his hips closer along Hawke’s thighs.

Hawke shook his head, his damp hair brushing over Anders’s brow. ‘Not by templars.’

It would have been easy to believe in it—another one of Hawke’s promises, and one he didn’t truly offer. Anders hadn’t asked for clarification once before; he knew he’d make the same mistake again if he wasn’t careful, and there was enough to worry about already: like who Danarius would send next, if he’d come after Fenris himself, or whether the Crows would also come after them, slavers and assassins and templars to watch out for, not to mention the occasional, accidental mercenary, the sort of danger you never saw coming and couldn’t predict. Demons, darkspawn, unexpected Blights this far north, taproom drunks and Isabela’s nautical enemies, not to mention incensed qunari or feisty dwarves or Fenris turning on them.

The free world was full of dangers, more dangers than it had freedoms.
'You’re good at avoiding templars, are you?’ Anders asked.

‘How about you avoid them, and I fight them,’ Hawke offered. ‘I’d be good at that.’

It sounded fine in theory, but there was something more to it than that, something Anders was still missing. He searched for it, in every tired line drawn taut on Hawke’s face, the age he showed and the age he didn’t, a secret held in his crooked mouth and the flash of his white teeth when he bared them, one of the front ones up top all bloody. Hawke licked at it, then pushed it with his tongue to see if it was loose, and Anders remembered how he stood to the last in that darkened warehouse, refusing to hand Fenris over, refusing to betray himself to the slavers a second time. Just because he was better at running and at hiding and at making stands than Anders didn’t mean it was easy, or pleasant, or something he didn’t dream about, slavers around every corner and behind every grease-palmed mercenary, hidden in every taproom and every dark alley he passed. Hawke was always looking—Hawke was always looking for them, and they didn’t shine in the sunlight or wear bright insignias on their chests, either. They could have been anyone.

‘Hawke,’ Anders said, softly, right up against his ear so he couldn’t pretend he didn’t hear it, ‘are slavers your templars?’

Hawke huffed; Anders wondered if he was pretending to bark again, that old mabari gag, a currency shared by only the two of them. An in-joke, something no one else would have thought was funny, but they did, and Anders bowed his head against Hawke’s shoulder and laughed. Hawke held him steady until he stopped, which happened suddenly, no energy left for anything more than steadied breathing.

But he could feel it building, replenishing itself, the will to heal tangled with the will to protect, just like they were tangled together now, and not only in the physical sense.

‘I won’t let them take you, either,’ Anders promised.

Hawke kissed him.

Whether it was to make him shut up or seal the deal or a little of both, acknowledgment and stubbornness in the same action, it didn’t matter. Anders raked his fingers through Hawke’s hair, from his temples all the way to the base of his skull, and pushed him down on the bed, and covered him with his body. Hawke surged to meet him, that sudden strength he displayed when Anders thought he had nothing left to carry him, like the prow of a ship meeting the crest of a wave. They couldn’t do much, but bone-tired and frantic weren’t always mutually exclusive; the body was capable of impressive feats of contradiction, and Hawke’s body was one of the best there was. Anders’s was, too, or he was able to believe it when it was this close, when he drew strength and heat from the thick muscle, when he pressed himself into Hawke’s chest and wrapped his arms around Hawke’s shoulders.

Hawke’s erection dug against his ass. Anders could feel it rubbing through the thin leather, Hawke’s legs spread to fit Anders between them.

If they were going to be trapped, they might as well be trapped together. Dicks trapped, bodies trapped—their lives were even trapped in the room itself, safe and dark behind the boarded up windows, while the hem of Anders’s trousers rode down over his ass. He missed the ease of his skirts, how simple it would have been to pull them up over his thighs and be all naked where it counted most, but sometimes those little things that stood in the way made for beautiful friction and perfect texture.

For a while, the distance imposed, what couldn’t be seen and what wasn’t shared, made flirtation
Anders pushed Hawke’s shirt up over his bruised chest, the familiar expanse of shivering hair and time-marked skin. He felt flesh on flesh, the connection he wanted, and Hawke reached to do the same, balling the fabric in his hands, tugging until Anders was free of all the things that didn’t fit him.

‘Anders,’ Hawke said, mouth crushed against his jaw, ‘are you keeping rocks in your pockets?’

‘No—I’m just happy to see you,’ Anders replied, while Hawke tugged something free from the tangled fabric of his shirt—the claw from earlier, the one he’d kept, the one that meant so much at the time before it ceased to mean anything, and was forgotten in light of duels and shades and heroics.

It wasn’t flashy like the bronze of the torc, just a well-worn patina of something old and unwanted. Hawke steadied one hand against Anders’s thigh but held the carving against his other palm, pressed in tight with his thumb.

Anders wondered whether Hawke would like it, and what it would mean if he did—that Anders had picked the right gift; that Anders had someone he knew well enough to pick a gift for.

There had never been a chance for gift-giving in the Circle. And when he’d made it as far as Tevinter, all Anders’s gifts had been to himself, trinkets of congratulation for successfully escaping the chantry’s tyranny. He hadn’t thought of someone else in a long time, and never as much as he thought about Hawke, the easy weight of his arm as he slung it around Anders’s shoulders, or the brief warmth in his eyes when one of his smiles touched something deeper.

‘What is it?’ Hawke asked, curiosity getting the better of him as Anders wiggled in his lap. His hands dipped to the laces of Anders’s trousers, tugging them free while he still held the stone.

‘It’s a claw,’ Anders said, lips pressed to the corner of Hawke’s mouth, where his beard was softer than it looked. He wouldn’t be able to explain the origin of the present—the trinket stand he’d run across with Isabela, and how he’d spent his cut of the Bower job on a two-headed torc and a silly, sentimental carving. It had all been much funnier with the double penis involved, the humor to obscure and even ease the truth of the impulse—that Anders was thinking about him; that Anders was always thinking about him. He brushed their chests together, warm skin against warmer skin, and hitched his hips up, helping Hawke to work his trousers down over his ass. His cool fingers brushed the sensitive skin of Hawke’s earlobe. ‘I suffered a bit of heatstroke in the marketplace, and thought maybe we could match.’

Hawke snorted, and Anders waited patiently to be thrown down, for Hawke to use his warrior’s balance and skill to roll them so Anders was underneath him, back flat against the mattress.

The moment never came. After tugging Anders’s trousers free of his calves, letting them slither to the floor atop Hawke’s lonely boot, he pulled Anders back into his lap, so close that Anders had to spread his legs at the knee, wrapping them around Hawke’s waist.

Hawke made a low sound of pleasure at that. Anders felt a flush of pride in his hot cheeks at the unspoken praise for his instincts, not to mention the inarticulate praise for his body. He hid his smile against Hawke’s temple, watching as he slipped the stone claw beneath his pillow. For later, the gesture seemed to say, and Anders was only too happy to agree as he rocked simple, slim muscle against Hawke’s erection through his trousers. His smalls had gotten all bunched up in the tussle, introducing new and not entirely unpleasant methods of friction.

There was something to be said for undressing this way, hungry and needful, never quite making it delicious—until it was time to put an end to sly looks and forced mystery.
all the way out of your clothes. It had been years since Anders had felt so young and so foolish, both at the same time, instead of one or the other, and never for the right reasons.

Hawke had stashed oils beneath the bed, tucked up against the wall where a curious cat wouldn’t knock one over and poison itself. He prepared Anders right there in his lap, thick fingers working their way inside while Anders gasped and shuddered, rubbing the length of his erection against the trail of dark hair that grew on Hawke’s abdomen, below his navel. Their hands brushed together, and Anders’s fingers came away slick, enough to trail a few glossy paths over Hawke’s dick in return.

*One good scratch, Isabela would say, deserves another.*

When Hawke pressed the tip of his cock against Anders’s ass, the tight ring of muscle contracting where he entered, Anders wrapped his arms tight around Hawke’s familiar, broad shoulders, burying his face against Hawke’s familiar, sweaty neck.

They did it right there on the edge of the bed, Hawke’s feet braced against the floor, trousers around his knees while Anders held his face, his arms, his waist, hips rising and falling without clear rhythm. Their heads dipped together, Hawke’s uneven breath hot against Anders’s collarbone, hidden in the crook of his neck. They were both exhausted, worn out from the day’s exertions and other, less visible tolls the slaver attack had taken on them both. Anders traced the shape of Hawke’s bruises with his fingers, the tender, purple flesh easing to green and yellow at the outskirts, the faded colors, the wounds now past.

The folly of the Imperium was that no one trusted each other enough to work together. Anders had lived next to Danarius for years, had attended all of Caladrius’s parties, had gossiped the night away with Hadriana—but he’d never known any of them beyond their ambitions, not the way he knew Hawke, Isabela and even Fenris.

‘I love…your figs,’ Anders said into the hollow of Hawke’s collar-bone, voice ragged as the robes he’d worn on the voyage to Antiva City.

‘I know,’ Hawke replied. He tugged Anders’s hair loose from its tie, fingers tangling in his hair.

They made quick work of each other after that, Hawke’s rapid, shallow thrusts meeting the determined grasp of Anders’s knees, pressed too hard into his flexing sides. He was strong, and Anders took advantage of it, but he was mindful of the bruises even as he inflicted his own. And that was how it should be—what injuries they bore, and didn’t mind, because of one another.

Anders came with a cry, squeezing his eyes shut so tight that white flowers bloomed like lightning sparks against the backs of his eyelids, before all faded into darkness again.

Hawke wasn’t far behind. He muffled each noise against Anders’s skin; he wound his arms tight across Anders’s back, not holding him still, but holding him steady. Then, they tumbled to the bed together before Hawke’s breathing had even steadied, Anders slumped toward their sagging mattress, dragging his lover with him, listening to Hawke grunt and wince at the impact. But it was a necessary precaution—since Anders didn’t relish the idea of toppling backward onto the floor once he fell asleep, cracking his head open, dying happy.

Hawke came with him easily, Anders’s leg crushed beneath his flank, his trousers still bunched low around his legs. Anders’s right arm was also pinned beneath his weight, and Hawke’s face was pressed to his neck, nose digging against the sharp rise of bone and thin skin that stretched from the base of his throat to his shoulder. Gradually, his pulse faded from a dull roar to a quiet murmur, the pace Anders recognized, and needed, and craved. Anders shifted closer to him, greedy, already feeling the black arms of the Fade reach up to meet him.
He sank gladly into their embrace, though it wasn’t as warm as Hawke’s body or Hawke’s breath. The last sound he heard was the gentle cadence of Hawke beginning to snore, as the two of them finally slept together.

* * *

It was the splintering sound of the moving barrel—they propped it in front of the door in the night as a makeshift barrier, one stage more advanced than a latch and a lock to keep them sleeping safe—that woke them both, one after the other. The scrape of wood against wood wasn’t anything like the burble and hiss of a shade rising from the floorboards, and there were no heavy, clanging bootfalls, the clank of armor and the clatter of swords unsheathed, shields banging against shields as templars flooded the hallways.

Anders didn’t have to wrack his mind for a quick list of everyone—everyone other than thwarted magisters and dutiful templars—who might want them dead. Castillon’s men came to mind, but Castillon hadn’t seemed that subtle; the Crows, on the other hand, picked locks so easily and so well, and the soles of their Antivan leather boots were whisper-quiet, noiseless as the fall of dusk.

Anders struggled to sit up, and Hawke put his body squarely between Anders and the door, pulling his borrowed blade out from beneath the bed—where he hid it with all the oils and the fig basket, the latter empty every day of the week but one.

Those were Hawke’s possessions, all he owned and all of them weapons, but none wielded so effectively as the sword now weighted in his hand. Anders’s palms were hot and empty, sleep sticking in his eye, throat dry and ribcage tight over his lungs; from his perch at Hawke’s back, braced between him and the stained wall, he heard Hawke’s pulse pounding evenly below his shoulder, below the scatter of dark freckles, as trustworthy as ever.

So Anders didn’t panic, even if he wanted to. No matter the daggers drawn to slit their throats, they were ready together, both stubborn enough not to let the other down.

A splay of dark shadow fell into the room from the half-lit hallway; the door swung inward, nice and easy and slow, butting quietly against the displaced barrel, while the shadow lengthened until there was nothing but shadow to fill and swallow the slant of lamplight. Then, it slipped inside. It was impossible to tell whether its owner was big or small, warped by a clever manipulation of light against the darkness, and darkness against the light.

A master Crow assassin could do all that and more. Anders waited for the hiss of metal drawn from leather, his fingers splayed against the small of Hawke’s back rather than holding his arm and hindering his first strike.

‘I admit it,’ a thick Antivan accent said cheerfully from the doorway. ‘There are days—no, nights, usually—when I do so love my job.’

Hawke’s arm shifted at the elbow, sword drawn forward, every muscle coiled as a cat’s on the prowl: poised in the very moment before action, the tipping point of instinct and impulse and pure movement and bated breath and no sound. It was wonderful to watch him at work, and terrifying, like being caught in the eye of one of Isabela’s favored storms, somewhere in the protection of that storm’s chaos while knowing, at any moment, you might be torn apart by its wild strength. But—somehow—the danger had lost its edge, not because Anders knew Hawke’s weaknesses, all the places he was injured and what scant fears he bore, but because they had and could work together. They were working together even now, Anders’s fingers sparking with ready lightning.

‘No, no, please—do not get up on my account,’ the accent continued, more accent than it was voice,
thicker and more ebullient than even Castillon’s charming drawl. ‘You are in the middle of something, no? I would rather not interrupt. So—continue as you are, and I will sit here upon this barrel until you are finished, and enjoy the view in the meantime. What do you say to that?’

‘I say I’ve got a mage in here who’s about to cook you like a Feastday goose,’ Hawke replied. ‘And he’s very handy with his fireballs.’

‘Thank you,’ Anders whispered.

‘Credit where it’s due,’ Hawke replied. ‘I’m partial to those fireballs, myself.’

‘Ah! And there are balls, as well—flaming hot ones,’ the accent said. ‘How remarkable! Though I still feel this was almost my lucky night. Ah, but not everyone wishes to share, not even in Antiva. And here I thought it might be a sign—from the Maker himself, perhaps—a reward for having been so good for so long. But…no; no, Antiva City is never so kind, not even to its favorite sons. Not even a light in the room to better see you by—’

‘Until the fireballs start flying,’ Hawke said. ‘Which might be sooner than you think, given the nightly interruption, the lock-picking, and those daggers you’re carrying.’

Anders heard no squeak from the floorboards, but he thought he heard the gentle slide of leather on leather, a whisper-soft sound he was starting to recognize after so much time spent in sunny Antiva and wearing its skin-tight breeches. He thought he saw the shadows shift, too, as the accent cleared its throat. ‘Ahaha—yes, well, can you blame me? This is Antiva, after all. To come here unarmed would be more foolish than the alternative—whether or not you attempt to kill me and whether or not you succeed is rather akin to a handshake, in this cozy corner of Thedas.’

‘Come a little closer, then,’ Hawke said. ‘I’d love to shake your hand.’

‘And scorch me with your mage’s fireballs,’ the accent agreed. ‘Yes—yes, I know. I am aware of it. It has happened before. …Does your mage by any chance have a stately bosom, as ample as it is wise?’

Hawke never glanced away from the source of the voice—he was too clever for that, too sharp with his instincts—but his muscles did shift along the plane of his lower back, tightening and tightening again, as if to commiserate with Anders, as if to ask him why do these things always have to be so complicated, not to mention downright weird? Anders rubbed the tight knot underneath his thumb in agreement.

‘No,’ Hawke said finally. ‘He doesn’t. But he has a fantastic ass and an enormous…nose, and that more than makes up for it.’

Thank you, Anders traced with his fingertips, the letters invisible and steady against the tense muscle in Hawke’s back.

The accent gave a snort that elegantly turned into a wicked chuckle. ‘Too true; too true. I find that an enormous nose makes up for any number of flaws. And you know what they say about big noses, yes? …But I forget myself. In truth—I did not come here to compliment you on your taste in lovers, as fiery as that taste may be.’

‘Is that so?’ Hawke leveled his blade. Anders prepared a blast of ice, fingertips glistening with spiky tendrils of frost—because the accent expected fireballs, and it was good to keep such shadows on their toes. ‘Mind if I ask what you did come for, then? As you’ve already realized, I’m not the sharing type.’
No, you Fereldans rarely are,’ the accent agreed. There was a note of something wistful in his voice, but it winked out like the flame of a guttering taproom candle, doused by grimy taproom ale. ‘For… that is your accent, is it not? I have only just returned from her distant shores, full of frozen mud and slobbering dogs. I hear the voices of your countrymen in my dreams even now, barking orders—aha, just a touch of Fereldan humor for you, as a gesture of good will.’

‘Ha ha,’ Hawke obliged.

‘I forget myself again,’ the accent said, more quickly. He took a step further into the room, halting when Hawke shifted in bed, leaning forward on the balls of his toes. The blade must have had something to do with the reaction, and the broad shoulders, and the hard, white teeth Hawke flashed when he smiled. ‘Let me dispel your worries and finally introduce myself—I am known as Zevran. Zev,’ to my friends, of which I have so many these days. I had heard that there was in this very establishment a man who considers himself no friend to the Crows. There are even whispers that he has proven himself a considerable thorn in their feathered sides. Curious fellow that I am, I wished to meet this man for myself—to see if he is indeed as sharp as they say.’

In the corridor, someone lit a torch. The light was weak, but it was enough for Anders to make out a slender, booted calf and leather armor skirts, the fall of pale blond hair and a pointed ear. An elf, then—though that alone wasn’t much to go on. An elf named Zevran, Zev to his many friends, who knew too much and talked too much for his own continued well-being.

‘Ah, Savio,’ Hawke said. ‘Gossips like an Orlesian noblewoman in his free time, doesn’t he?’ He hadn’t put down his sword, nor would he move to give Zevran a clean look at Anders behind him, using one broad shoulder as a full body shield.

‘Savio will sing for gold, the same as any man,’ Zevran said. ‘He has a lovely voice, when given the chance. But—perhaps you mistake my intentions. I am not here to confront you.’

‘You broke into our room,’ Hawke pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Zevran admitted. The faint light flickered over his shadowed face as he glanced toward the door. ‘That. Well, you may call it a force of habit, if you like. Your room has no windows, so I was forced to approach the old-fashioned way.’ He clasped his hands in front of him, the soft sound of palm against palm familiar in the dark room, worn gloves dirty and raw with constant use. ‘And, in Antiva, when you are polite enough to knock, you rarely receive a polite invitation in return. So let me say this: my only quarrel in the city lies with the Crows. If I can ally myself with men of a similar mind and a certain strength of arm, then would it not be in my best interests to do just that?’

Hawke was silent, the back of his head tousled and unreadable in the darkness, but Anders could easily imagine the look he wore: the furrows in his brow growing deeper, the quick curve of his mouth turned downward, as he tried to read the offer for what it was, what it wasn’t, and what it could be.

‘You want to work with us?’ Hawke said finally.

‘Ah! Just so,’ Zevran replied.

‘But we don’t even know you,’ Anders began, right before there was a clatter of plate-mail from outside the room that made his blood run cold, and he fell still at once, digging his nails into the narrowed, dimpled small of Hawke’s back.

‘Ow,’ Hawke said.
‘Ow,’ said a second voice, just outside the door. ‘Watch it—I didn’t even do anything to you.’

‘I don’t like large men in armor prowling around outside my bedroom door unless I’ve expressly invited them,’ Isabela said. ‘Now keep still like a good boy. I wouldn’t want my other hand to slip.’

‘Is that another knife?’ the voice asked, with just a hint of a plaintive whine.

Anders swallowed around the thick lump of relief that had risen in his throat. Thank the Maker for Isabela, not to mention Isabela’s deft skill in finding unexpected hiding places for her clever collection of daggers.

But his moment of gratitude was short-lived, interrupted when Hawke dropped his sword. It fell to the floor with an unruly clatter. Anders lifted his hands to Hawke’s shoulders in alarm, soothing the warm skin, brushing his knuckles over the sweat beading at the nape of his neck. The tension in the air reminded Anders of the way the skies had darkened over The Siren’s Call before a squall hit, only this time, Anders didn’t know the storm’s source. He hadn’t seen it coming on the horizon. All he could do was wait, fingers tracing sigils and love notes against Hawke’s skin as the light approached their half-open doorway.

Then, Anders saw a toe, followed by an arched ankle, a lengthy expanse of leather boot and a golden thigh, burnished by an unsteady glow.

Isabela knew how to make an entrance.

She nudged the door aside with her foot, knocking their barrel over in the process; she had a lantern in one hand, the source of the helpful light, and a tall, young man in blue-and-silver armor in the other, one of her gilded daggers at his throat. As the lantern swung, Anders caught sight of Zevran’s face at last, skin tan as Antivan leather, with a full mouth made for laughing, and a scrolling tattoo done in black ink up the side of his cheek.

He had a long nose, himself.

Anders looked to see whether Hawke had taken this opportunity to steal a glance at their intruder, to size him up, then size him down. But Hawke’s attention had shifted focus, fixed on Isabela’s captive—the young man still sputtering, but possessed of enough good sense not to struggle in her grip.

There was something about his face that Anders recognized, in close balance with what he didn’t, but the former tugged at him like a sharp hook at the end of a lure, tackled with tasty bait, mean blade beneath the promise of a lovely treat. He had a fall of black hair, and a handsome, open face; his blunt jaw marked him immediately as a Fereldan, though his pale cheeks and chin seemed naked, flushed, with no dark hair to cover it. He was a stranger, clean-shaven and straightforward and angry at being caught, yet Anders found himself imagining what he might have looked like with a beard.

‘Carver,’ Hawke said, in a voice as hollow as the hull of Isabela’s ship, now docked empty in the bay, with only a few cats skittering lonely through the darkness to man it.

‘Garrett,’ Carver said.

‘Garrett?’ Anders asked.

‘Brother,’ Carver elaborated, and Anders tried to understand what he suddenly knew. ‘I thought you were—’

‘Dead?’ Hawke asked. His voice was carefree and light, but he slumped back against Anders for
support, the fight drained from him at last at the sight of at least one family member returned from the
grave. Magisters could call shades from the ground, demons and shambling corpses to their aid in
battle, but they were never so ruddy, always in a more advanced state of decay. Some men feared a
different sort of animated corpse—and at least Hawke knew what fear was, if only in a roundabout
way. ‘Funny—seems like there’s a lot of that going around.’

‘A brother,’ Isabela said. She didn’t lower her dagger, but took the opportunity to look Carver over
nonetheless. ‘I thought you were a bit too handsome for a soldier.’

‘A Grey Warden, actually,’ Carver said.

Isabela shrugged. ‘Whatever. The armor all comes off just the same.’

‘Oh, no, no no, my tumultuous pirate queen,’ Zevran said. ‘It has been proven already that my dear
friend Carver does not take that armor off. I fear it is too much like a turtle and its shell—there is
nothing but armor, nothing else underneath. Despite the breadth of his shoulders and his ample
height, there is only the codpiece—a tragedy they mourn in Ferelden even now, or so I am led to
believe.’

‘Zevran?’ Isabela asked.

‘Elf,’ Carver confirmed.

‘We know each other,’ Isabela added happily.

‘Yes—know each other,’ Zevran agreed. ‘If you take my meaning, and I am certain you do.’

‘Does everyone here know somebody except for me?’ Anders glanced around the room, then
thought about the people he knew—Danarius and Hadriana sprang to mind, and the vengeful spirit
of Caladrius haunting the warehouse where he’d fallen—before he accepted the bounty of luck that
meant they hadn’t shown up, too.

Hawke patted his hand idly, distractedly, a searching gesture, almost as if he would have preferred
reaching for his sword, still looking for a fight that hadn’t come and a blow that hadn’t fallen.
Zevran’s daggers were still sheathed, and Isabela’s still weren’t, and Carver’s face was still red, and
Anders and Hawke were both still naked, nothing more than the threadbare covers draped between
them and their audience. A flush crept up Anders thighs and over his stomach and chest and back
when he saw Hawke’s trousers tangled around his ankles; he didn’t mind showing off a little, or
being caught this way, not under other circumstances.

But ‘stark naked’ wasn’t the best way to introduce yourself to any potential in-laws. Even if they
were supposed to be dead.

‘The others—’ Hawke began.

Carver shook his head, a bare fraction of an inch, and not just because Isabela’s dagger was still
pointed at the life-vein beneath his jaw.

Hawke cleared his throat, deep in the back, echoing through his chest. Anders rubbed one of his
freckles, thumb against skin, and felt the flesh prickle and jump as Hawke neither thanked him for
the gesture nor shrugged him away. It wouldn’t have been enough confirmation once, but now,
Anders suspected that it was.

‘Well,’ Hawke said at last. ‘Aren’t you going to come over here and give your not-dead brother a
hug?”
‘While you’re still in bed with some bloody exhibitionist?’ Carver snorted. ‘No, thank you. Besides —I’ve got a dagger trained on me.’

‘Still clinging to your excuses, as always,’ Hawke said.

‘Still taking whatever chance you have to show off,’ Carver replied.

‘Still listening in from the outside instead of getting a room of your own,’ Hawke added. ‘Some things never change.’

‘Don’t look at me.’ Carver shifted; the clanking of his armor made Anders twitch every time, so that he was forced to focus on what wasn’t familiar, the blue fabric against the worn silverite, the lack of a sun-shield or square-topped helmet. ‘I’m the Grey Warden here—you’re the hand-for-hire. An assassin in the bowels of Antiva—’ Zevran cleared his throat, perhaps to indicate he took some offense to the way Carver said it, ‘—or a Grey Warden of Ferelden. Now there’s a hard one, isn’t there? Never thought you’d live to see the day.’

Carver faltered. Hawke didn’t. ‘No,’ Hawke agreed. ‘Never thought you’d live to see the day, either.’

‘Well!’ Zevran said, clapping his gloved hands together loudly. ‘What a touching reunion this has been! It brings a tear even to my eye. …Or perhaps that is merely the sting of old poisons and the stench of new tanneries. One can never tell—and perhaps, one never needs to, either. So! Shall those of us still naked dress themselves—slowly, and in the light, if you please, for the benefit of the audience—while those of us holding daggers to the necks of Grey Wardens hold other things instead? Then, when all that is finished, we ply Savio with coin to give us the drinks that are sorely needed—drinking, being merry, holding daggers and other things beneath the table, remembering what it was like to be so naked, and thus becoming the fastest of friends?’

‘I…do like the way he thinks,’ Anders admitted. ‘Sort of. If he’s saying what I think he’s saying. He makes it difficult.’

‘Ah, my new and very naked friend,’ Zevran said, ‘I have often wondered what Thedas would be like, if only I was in charge of the pertinent details.’

Carver snorted again, then winced as Isabela tightened her hold—just before she released it, and him. He rubbed at his throat, big hand against the bob as he swallowed, keeping a wary distance that Hawke tracked with his keen, bright gaze. ‘I don’t wonder.’

‘No,’ Zevran agreed. ‘You never do. And that, poor Carver, is your trouble entirely.’

‘You are all loud,’ Fenris said from the doorway. ‘You will bring this place down around our ears with so much chatter—if our enemies do not find us first.’

‘Who is this charming fellow?’ Zevran asked.

‘Finally,’ Anders said. ‘Someone I know. Hello, Fenris. We’re all having a party in here.’

Fenris snorted—being known and wanting to be known weren’t one and the same, and Fenris never balked at making his thoughts on such matters clear as day. Even when it wasn’t day, not yet, the darkest hours just before dawn, moonlight not strong enough to peep through the boards and shine through the grime covering the windowpanes. Anders shifted in place, knees against the mattress, while Hawke knotted the blanket around Anders’s waist, covering him up from hip-bone to hip-bone. Then, he rearranged his own smalls, tucking himself into his trousers, a man dedicated neither to order nor to peace but to action. In one direction or another. Always.
‘I could go for a spot of Savio’s ale right now,’ he said. ‘I’ll need it, if I’m going to have to suffer through the story of what ripe accident made my little brother a blighted Grey Warden.’

‘Zevran does tell all the best stories,’ Isabela agreed.

‘Sadly, this one is without the naughty-bits of which you are so fond,’ Zevran said, with a pained sigh. ‘But I shall do my best to make them sound naughty by design—through clever use of lascivious tones and even more lascivious nature.’

Hawke tossed Anders his trousers and his shirt, as Anders untangled Hawke’s from the bedpost and handed it over. Their fingers brushed together, and Hawke fished for something underneath his pillow, something small, tucking it into a pocket. Anders pretended he hadn’t seen the gesture, glad for the dim light in the windowless room as it hid his blush.

‘Two elves, a pirate, and a Grey Warden walk into an Antivan taproom,’ Anders said, watching their retreating backs—watching as Carver paused to glance over his shoulder and flinched at Hawke’s continued scrutiny, just the same as everyone else. ‘Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.’

‘They’re ambushed by two fugitives from Tevinter,’ Hawke said. He hooked his arm around Anders’s shoulders, corded muscle warm against the nape of his neck. ‘Glistening oils are involved. Everyone knows that old punch-line.’

*  

There were no glistening oils in the Roost—unless you counted those produced by its sweaty patrons—but there was Savio’s usual array of throat-burning whiskey and chewy brown ale. Zevran chose one of the round tables in the corner, with a clear view of the door, quick eyes half-lidded but always sharp; Anders suspected there was more to his story than he’d let on upstairs. But it seemed rude to inquire after a man’s past before he’d even gotten a drink in him, and before he’d told all the stories he wanted to, the fun ones rather than the educational.

Zevran and Carver shared the tale of the Fereldan Grey Wardens; Carver’s part began with a joining ceremony outside Lothering, and Zevran’s sometime later, at a failed ambush attempt in the cliffs of the bannorn.

‘You attempted to kill this…hero?’ Fenris asked. He hadn’t touched his ale, but held his armored fingers tight around the tankard’s belly, as though afraid someone might snatch it from him while he was distracted by idle conversation. ‘And he took you into his confidence, knowing that?’

‘He took him into more than his confidence,’ Carver muttered, right into the rim of his cup.

Both Hawke and Zevran laughed at that, though the latter seemed more generous, and also more fond. Anders was still too distracted by his study of Hawke’s brother to join in; with half his face hidden behind a pint, it was easier to sneak long glances, and map the similarities Carver shared with Hawke along with the differences, each one as obvious as fresh tiles scattered in the gout of an old mosaic. Carver had blue eyes, and Hawke’s were deep and brown as the ale in Anders’s glass; Carver wasn’t the sort to grow a beard, and his stubborn chin and even more stubborn jaw were milky and bare, pale skin mottled and flushed the more he drank, with a mouth that showed every disappointment rather than every swift or subtle smile.

After Zevran joined—not literally, he was careful to point out, since the taint did nothing for a man’s complexion, even if it did improve his stamina—his account and Carver’s converged, piece by piece, or tile by tile. It was all too Fereldan at times: werewolves in a Dalish camp, long furloughs into the dwarven Deep Roads, and abominations at the Circle Tower.
Hawke’s hand found Anders’s knee under the table at the last, and squeezed against the shiver that threatened to creep over Anders’s skin and under his leather.

The Tower hadn’t been his home for many years. He might have recognized the hallways and the rooms, a few stairwells here and there, or a slant of shadow in the cellar while he was sneaking through it in the night. He might have recognized most of the faces within those hallways and rooms, the beards and the noses and the frown-lines. But he wouldn’t have recognized desire demons running rampant, jewelry and naked breasts and wide mouths and long nails, flesh as cold as a blast of battle ice. He’d been too busy with demons of his own, the magisters who commanded them.

He rubbed his thumb over the split backs of Hawke’s knuckles, nothing so smooth as a spirit’s breasts, and laughed at each of the proper moments.

All the characters were good, not quite people because Anders hadn’t met them; still, they were what kept Anders hooked when normally he’d be drumming his fingers against the table and sharing bored looks with Isabela, commiserating wordlessly that neither of them was the current center of attention. An apostate whose Mother was a dragon; a Senior Enchanter Anders only remembered by reputation; a _sten_ from Par Vollen; an Orlesian rogue who was also a chantry sister; King Cailan’s bastard brother; a living golem with a dire sense of sarcasm; and a dwarf who smelled like the farting backside of a bog.

‘Worse even than the Blackmarsh,’ Zevran confided, leaning across the table. ‘You have no idea what I have saved you from, dear Carver. All the jewels of Amaranthine are nothing compared to that of Antiva City.’

‘Let me get this straight,’ Hawke said, after Carver had dutifully re-enacted their last stand against the Archdemon, deep enough into his cups that the story was no longer like pulling teeth to prevent jaw-rot. ‘I just want to make sure I’ve got all the details. There were **three** Grey Wardens traveling Ferelden.’ He held up three fingers, one with a broken nail, and black dirt and sword-polish caked around all the cuticles. ‘One of them became king. One became the Hero of Ferelden. And the **third** one…was Carver. Do I have that right?’

‘Lofty talk from an ex-slave,’ Carver muttered.

‘It’s just an observation,’ Hawke replied. The lines in his brow had eased, and there was an easy slant to his mouth Anders had only glimpsed a handful of times. He was trying not to laugh—the ale had something to do with it. Not being alone anymore was another likely factor. Relief, gladness, confusion—and none of it was something he could share in more than a twitch of a grin, mostly hidden by the bristles of his beard. ‘For someone who grew up so **tall,** I’d think it’d be hard work to find other shadows long enough to stand in.’

‘And yet, he manages the task with remarkable efficiency, is that not so?’ Zevran asked, with an appreciative leer. ‘A pity he will not turn that stubborn nature to more…**attractive** pursuits.’

When the table jerked under Anders’s elbows, he didn’t know whether Carver had kicked Hawke, or if Zevran was doing something naughty beneath his armor, just out of sight. Isabela caught his eye with a cheerful wink, and Anders allowed his gaze to drift across the taproom, seeing what other raiders and thieves had chosen _The Falcon’s Roost_ as their nightly watering hole.

A flash of silverite armor caught his attention by the far end of the bar, and Anders’s heartbeat skidded through his ribs, toppled just as easily as the barrel that guarded their door in the night. Armored men, two of them, bare-headed, helmets set at ease on the bar table—but even at a distance it was impossible to mistake the sword-and-sun flare emblem stamped across their twin breastplates.
Anders found Hawke’s leg on the bench beside him and squeezed, rasping his thumb over the plane of relaxed muscle there.

‘How long are you planning to stick around?’ Isabela was asking, as Hawke glanced casually through the room. Anders knew when he’d seen them, shifting to angle his shoulders as a shield.

‘Well,’ Zevran said, ‘as you may have heard me mention, I have some…unfinished business with the Crows. I cannot say how long exactly it will take me to pluck their feathers and send them screaming to the skies; after so much anticipation, such pleasures should be allowed to last, no? Feather by feather, pluck by pluck… And so on.’

‘When we heard about The Hawks, I—we decided we’d better get a move-on before all the action was finished,’ Carver added. He cleared his throat, half-choking on the dregs of his ale.

‘Always did have trouble keeping your drink down—didn’t you, Carver?’ Hawke asked, while at the same time he rose, tugging Anders with him.

The templars at the far end of the room didn’t even look over.

‘I suppose I could stick around for a bit, if things are going to get exciting,’ Isabela said, toying with her new necklace. It was the torc they’d bought together in the market, Anders realized, and the look suited her far better than it would have suited Hawke. ‘You never know when you’ll need a good getaway galleon in port, all ship-shape and ready to sail—with a few good ratters on deck, to boot.’

‘Danarius will try again, when news of this defeat reaches him,’ Fenris cautioned. He tapped his sharp index finger against the side of his untouched tankard. ‘To forget that would be…inadvisable.’

‘Where are you going?’ Carver asked, finally noticing Hawke’s graceful disentanglement from their shared table.

Isabela laughed—loud enough to set Anders’s pulse at ease; not loud enough to draw the attention of the thirsty templars—and laid a friendly hand on Carver’s plated arm. ‘Those two can’t keep their hands off each other, little lamb. It’s best if you don’t ask for details, though I’m sure you’ll hear all about it later.’

‘Ah, romance.’ Zevran sighed, leaning back in his chair. ‘Antiva City is the place for it. Danger and excitement and so much tight leather—how envious I am!’

‘Bet the Commander’d buy you a pair of those leather trousers,’ Carver muttered, watching Hawke as though he thought his brother might disappear somewhere beyond the stairs. ‘He’s given you leather everything else, hasn’t he? Eugh.’

Anders turned into the shadow of Hawke’s embrace, one of his heavy arms slung over Anders’s shoulders, as they made their way to the second floor—leaving everyone else behind as vanguard, as blockade, as cheerful taproom patrons with stories to tell and coin to waste, and not as apostates sharing the same taproom with two unknown templars. Zevran rubbed one thumb against the back of his fine gloves, and Carver ordered another round of ale, and Isabela giggled in Fenris’s ear, and lamp-light glinted sharply off the steel shoulders of the templars at the bar, heavy swords remaining sheathed at their sides.

The friends Anders knew at Savio’s best table would watch them all night, until—drunk and half-pissing themselves—those two wayward templars finally stumbled out into the night, down the street
and back to their barracks. And the room Anders shared with Hawke seemed less awful now, a safe- 
haven and not the hiding hole they crawled into to bury themselves at the end of each long day. 

When the door creaked shut behind them, Hawke slid the barrel into place, and both of them laughed 
at how futile the gesture was, what it meant that they indulged in it anyway.

*

Later, Anders undressed for Hawke the way Hawke liked it best, from a far distance across the 
room, in the shadows of the slanted roof. The laces at the front of his trousers were stiff and he had to 
bend over to step free of the leather, and Hawke whistled, sound that pierced the dark silence of his 
watch and flushed Anders’s chest, skin too warm beneath the loose cotton of his open shirt.

‘Quite the adventure, wasn’t it?’ Anders asked. ‘Are you always so exciting?’

‘Only on fig-days,’ Hawke replied.

Anders crossed the room more slowly than he wanted to, climbing into Hawke’s lap and waiting for 
him to roll the hem of his shirt under his fingertips, to push the last stretch of fabric away. There 
weren’t any wounds to heal, none that Anders could see, but when he shifted his weight over 
Hawke’s thighs, Hawke sighed, the same reaction he had to arcane warmth and a side of spirit 
healing after a back-alley free-for-all.

‘Admit it,’ Anders said. ‘You like trouble, which means you like Antiva.’

‘Have to stick around now.’ Hawke tugged something from his front pocket, twirling it between his 
fingers before he moved to put it under the pillow, safe, away. ‘You’ve no idea the sort of trouble 
Carver gets into on his own. Big lad. Big head. Big nose he can’t keep out of things. He’ll find 
himself an archdemon here, too, and if I don’t stick around, he’ll take all the credit. Besides,’ Hawke 
added, resting both empty hands callused against Anders’s hips, ‘I need to earn some extra coin 
now.’

‘To buy me a nicer bed to sleep in?’ Anders asked, leaning in to kiss the damp hair at his temple. ‘To 
bribe the templars to stay away?’

‘To find a chain for that ugly claw you gave me,’ Hawke replied, and pulled Anders down to the 
stained mattress with him.

END

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