The Beginning and the End

by Razikale

Summary

The Chantry has suppressed and persecuted the so-called aberrant sexualities for generations. Omega males and alpha females have been eradicated to the edge of extinction. Nature in Thedas has taken the path of least resistance: alphas are men, omegas are women and the majority of people are simply betas that don't want to get involved. But it takes exceptional men and women to save a world, can Thedas really complain that their unexpected heroes are surprising in more ways than one?

Or: I don't know why there aren't more A/B/O dragon age stories so I thought I'd take a stab at creating one. I'm hoping to branch from this pairing into a few others.

Kirkwall:
Isabela and Hawke both have secrets, the difference is that only one woman actually knows what she's hiding.

Notes

Bioware owns everything. No copyright infringement intended.
If you don't know about the omegaverse, google it.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Of course she is, look at how she carries herself!” Isabela’s laughing argument with Merrill could be heard across half the tavern.

“You mean that bit of swagger she has sometimes? It’s not always though. Oh, does that make you walk funny?” The elf’s eyes widened, shy about specifics but clearly spellbound by every word coming out of her salacious friend’s mouth.

“If you know what you’re doing,” Isabela grinned, enjoying her protégée’s blush, “But I meant the way she moves. All that confidence and command, like she knows the whole world will bend around her. She doesn’t just swagger, kitten, she struts.”

The Rivaini sailor’s eyes sliced through the noisy crowd to spot the subject of their conversation moving towards their table now. Not exactly strutting, but then, that’s much harder to do when weaving through a mass of drunks with half a dozen mugs of ale. It was always a miracle if she could cross the Hanged Man without getting into a fistfight over a misplaced pinch. Hawke set the drinks down, eyeing the two women with genial suspicion.

“What are you two talking about now?” The rogue could hazard a guess. By the flush of color on Merrill’s face and the coy dart of Isabela’s tongue over her lip, there could be no doubt they were talking about sex in some form.

“You, sweet thing,” the pirate purred, grabbing a mug and shooting her a wink, “More specifically, what you have between your legs.”

Hawke immediately looked down, as if she expected to see a small dragonling gnawing on her boot. A split second passed before her brain caught up and her friends could actually see light dawning as the red blush rose in her cheeks.

“Shit, Hawke, you really need to keep up!” Varric laughed, slapping the Fereldan’s shoulder hard enough to make the top inch of her ale spill out of the mug.

“I need to keep these two apart. Honestly, Isabela, must you fill her head with nonsense?” Hawke rolled her eyes but dropped easily into the empty spot beside the pirate. The dark skinned sailor all too happily slid in close, resting a palm flat on one thigh much higher than appropriate.

“A little imagination never hurt anyone, sweets. That’s what role-playing is all about.” Isabela leaned close to purr against Hawke’s ear, delighting in the shudder that followed her breath on the sensitive skin. The Fereldan laughed, snaking her arm around the sailor’s waist to pull her into her lap. Isabela chuckled as she received a chiding look, followed by a playful kiss. Hawke always surprised her; never embarrassed for long and—much to Aveline’s horror—she was anything but shy about the new and intensely physical side of their relationship. She’d even accepted the ‘no feelings’ rule with only minimal protest and fell quite happily into their constant, impulsive and downright scandalous routine of sex games.

“Good thing you don’t mind the reality.” Hawke finally pulled back from the kiss but didn’t release her hold on the woman’s supple curves. “Besides, if there’s an alpha woman in Kirkwall it’s definitely Aveline. Ow!”

“Don’t drag me into your whore’s disgusting conversation.” The guard captain flexed her sore fingers. Hawke was grateful that her armor took most of the blow but she could feel that her shoulder
would still be bruised.

“The battering ram certainly has enough muscles and armor for a small garrison but underneath all that body hair she’s still just a big girl. An utter romantic too. You saw her pining away over Donnic, just dying for him to sweep her off her feet,” Isabela took a sip of her ale, allowing for a dramatic pause before her punchline, “And then put her on all fours.”

“Really, Hawke? You had to pick her?” Aveline didn’t even bother responding to the pirate’s lewd comment; and she was doing her best to ignore the demonic twist of the woman’s smirk. The warrior could’ve dealt with her friend choosing anything—up to and including a threesome with Meredith and Orsino—better than the mutual molestation that went on between her and the exotic sailor.

“Is that what happened? I don’t remember it that way at all. I rather thought she chose me.” Even with the playful lilt in Hawke’s voice, she couldn’t quite conceal the note of pride beneath those words. It was hardly a secret amongst her companions; the two rogues had been dancing around each other for bloody years before finally falling into bed together. Varric had made and lost a fortune several times, betting with Fenris about when they would succumb to their incendiary attraction.

“Personally, Big Girl,” Isabela rolled the nickname around her mouth, enjoying the shape, “I’ve found it’s no fun picking and choosing. The best bits of life fall into your lap. Don’t they, sweet thing?” The pirate gave a deliberate grind of her hips, relishing both Hawke’s choked gasp and Aveline’s noise of disgust.

“Definitely.” Hawke looked up at her with that one expression that made her nervous, the one that was naked awe and affection and not nearly enough lust to be comfortable. That look tended to follow nights of debauchery and days of violence in equal measure, sneaking into her eyes without warning and threatening to slip past Isabela’s guard.

“And that’s where the best parts happen too. Eventually. I’m sure you’re hiding more than a few daggers in your pants, Hawke.” Isabela slid off the Fereldan’s lap, covering over her unease with a familiar, suggestive defense. No one noticed that her salacious smirk was a trifle forced around the edges.

“There you go again,” Hawke rolled her eyes as she reached for her drink, “No matter what she tries to tell you, Merrill, I’m not some rare hybrid. I’m the same as everyone else. Nothing special.”

Isabela took a moment to soak in Hawke’s glittering sapphire eyes, her melodious, easy laugh, the wild hair that defied control like it was expressing her very thoughts and that lovely, soft, talented mouth, glistening and curled into a cocky grin.

Oh, sweet thing, you are so wrong.
Hanged Man and these silky linens beneath her knees, from fumbling drunkenly at each other to this sober, deliberate, sensual war that was a silent battle of wills. Isabela was losing the fight. Every time she let Hawke get more of her clothing stripped away, each night that her curses turned into pleas, she was losing the war in inches and sighs and had never been more terrified or tempted by the surrender.

“Sucking Andraste! Don’t stop,” Isabela gasped, fingers releasing Hawke’s hair to splay across her ribs, clinging to balance as her quivering legs threatened to give in.

The woman was on some kind of damned mission!

Isabela’s legs ached, throat burning and lips dry from ragged breathing and screams that seemed to have dragged on the whole night. She’d lost track of the number of times her body had coiled and burst, waves of pleasure carrying away sense for minutes, the world fading from blinding white to pure black as her own cries echoed back at her. But the moment her soul returned from riding the storm, there was Hawke, gently easing her landing and then pushing her back towards oblivion.

“Fuck, Hawke! I-I,” the pirate groaned, the muscles of her stomach clenching as the heat built to explosive levels, melting out into her blood, “I can’t.”

“One more, Bela.” Hawke lifted herself halfway off the mattress, rising close enough to press hot open-mouthed kisses along her breasts, lavishing attention against her collar and throat, luring her closer until she could suck and nip just below the sailor’s massive golden earrings.

The scrape of teeth against her pulse point, echoing an instinct long forgotten, was more than she could take. Isabela felt a shudder course through every sinew of her body, unconsciously arching into the touch, pressing closer even as her inner walls clamped greedily down on the fingers that were driving her to new heights. It had been so, so long since anyone had pushed her this far, tested the limits of her body, driven her beyond the boundaries of her control so completely.

“Hawke!” Isabela’s final sound was more sob than groan and she crumbled, collapsing forward against the strong body holding her up. She gave into the relief, letting the cacophony of carnal pleasures rip her senses in every possible direction and not caring anymore that someone saw her unguarded, saw her break.

The undulating rhythms of her climax coasted along the crest and fall of Hawke’s fingers, following the slowing touch, savoring each final, languid caress. She was panting for breath long before she began to realize that she was pressed completely against her lover’s body. The intensity of her release had pitched them both flat against the mattress and her cheek was pressed to the other woman’s shoulder, nose and lips full of the taste of Hawke’s throat, the pulse of her racing heart enticing just beneath skin.

Hawke smelled like whiskey tonight, like most nights. But there were also traces of leather and iron, copper and salt. There was also—for some reason—bergamot, or something like it; a smell that was herbal, floral, aromatic and medicinal all at once. Isabela had always assumed it was something to do with being rich and getting to bathe daily but even when they spent whole weeks on Sundermount or the Wounded Coast, the scent never left Hawke’s skin.

The pirate felt fingers slowly slipping free from between her legs, a wet noise echoing the sucking hollow beneath her ribs. Slowly, hesitantly, Hawke wrapped both her arms around Isabela, each touch as careful and frightened as an artisan repairing some broken vase. She wasn’t sure if Hawke was worried about hurting her or terrified of damaging the fragile something that existed, unspoken, between them. Isabela’s common sense recoiled at the embrace, the tenderness and comfort of it, the weakness of wanting that warm security. Fortunately, her body was too wrecked to move just yet.
For a few minutes she could lay still and collect herself. She was still on top. Technically.

Isabela felt herself fading towards sleep and the last of her survival instincts rallied. She pushed herself away from the tantalizing relaxation of Hawke’s arms, trying to ignore the miniscule sigh of disappointment that slipped past the other woman’s lips. Hawke knew the arrangement, knew better than to try to make Isabela stay. The Ferelden rogue had gotten very good at suppressing the instinct to keep her lover in bed after their fun had ended. Only the smallest of tells betrayed that desire, like the way her fingers twitched to reach for Isabela when she retreated, or the sigh she could never restrain, or the hope that the pirate could see breaking apart in her eyes and fading away like a shipwreck getting swept out to sea. Isabela turned away, allowing Hawke whatever seconds of privacy she needed to put her mask back in place. When she looked back there was nothing but languid pleasure and tired pride on the rogue’s face; even half-asleep she was smirking.

“What got into you tonight?” Isabela slid off the bed and began the slow process of trying to find all her clothing. “Besides me, of course.”

“Just felt like making sure you were thoroughly satisfied.” There was that typical, nonchalant confidence that Hawke wore like weathered greaves.

“Is that so? Because it felt like you were trying to make sure I wouldn’t be able to walk out of here.” Isabela looked over her shoulder at the Ferelden, finding blue eyes unapologetically tracing every inch of her skin as it disappeared into clothing. The sheer intensity of that gaze was enough to make her fingers briefly fumble as she laced her corset, damn her.

“That would have been a bonus,” Hawke didn’t bother to deny the playful accusation, “But I was more interested in proving that I don’t have to be some mythic dual-gendered fantasy lover to fill your needs.”

Isabela paused in the middle of doing up her boots. She turned completely around, taking in the sight of Hawke sprawled unabashedly across the rumpled sheets. The riveting blue of her eyes had vanished beneath long lashes, hiding behind the guise of exhaustion, but Isabela could see the slight twitches at the corners, the line trying not to form between her eyebrows. Most of all, she could see that the deep, regular rise and fall of her chest had completely stopped, breath held in suspense. This was Hawke when she was worried, uncertain, momentarily stripped of all her bravado and cheek.

“Oh, sweet thing.” Isabela felt a stab of guilt, realizing the root of Hawke’s sudden insecurity. She moved back to the bed, sitting on the edge and stroking one thumb over the other rogue’s ravaged lips. The touch released a tremulous breath caught in Hawke’s throat and her lashes fluttered, eyes opening once more.

“You don’t ever have to worry about that. I was just having fun with Merrill. You don’t need to be an alpha,” you’re absolutely perfect, Isabela bit back the dangerous words before they could spill out. “If I get that desperate for a cock I’ll just bring Fenris into bed with us.”

“Maker’s morning breath! Don’t I get any say in that?” Hawke groaned, throwing an arm over her face as if she could block off the thought like a blow.

“Naturally, you can say whose name you want to be screaming first,” Isabela’s reply purred with soft laughter.

The sound rapidly turned into a startled cry when Hawke jerked upright, catching hold of the pirate and pressing her into the mattress. The two rogues wrestled across the bed, further destroying the already wrecked linens and filling the room with cursing laughter. When Hawke emerged on top they both knew it was because Isabela let her. She was willing to tolerate being pinned only because
it was a game, because she was mostly clothed and fully armed and because, well, sod it, because it was Hawke.

The Fereldan’s warm breath was stuttering in chuckles and small gasps for air, absolute delight curling the corners of her mouth. The sparkling azure that gazed down at Isabela was dancing with an infectious lightness, like bright waves catching the sun. She loved it when Hawke looked like this. All freedom and swagger, adventure and fun rolled into one beautiful, dangerous package. The pirate unconsciously reached up to brush strands of hair away from Hawke’s face, fingers tracing the shape of her cheek, the curve of her smile.

“Stay.” The demand burst out so suddenly that, for a moment, neither woman believed it had happened. That word should’ve been like a bucket of ice water thrown over fire, a plea that would send Isabela running faster than a horde of darkspawn on her heels. Except it wasn’t. Isabela’s breath hitched, a sensation like a trapped bird fluttering beneath her ribs. It wasn’t just Hawke’s body pressed along the length of her own that made the invitation so tempting, or the nearness of her lips already parted and simply begging to be kissed. It was the heat in her eyes, the darkening color that melted together a dozen silent confessions, promises and desires.

Stay.

That word on Hawke’s lips wasn’t a request, it was a command. Isabela could feel the way the Fereldan’s hands were shaking against her skin, straining to keep her touch relaxed when she clearly wanted to clench tight enough to leave bruises. There was such a thread of conviction behind the sultry breathiness of the demand, like Hawke knew that Isabela would eventually give in. Perhaps not tonight or tomorrow or the next thousand tomorrows but she would, one day. Terrifyingly, the pirate knew she was right. She could feel it in the warmth that was building in her chest instead of between her legs; her fingers were already twitching to catch hold of the slick skin pressed against her, to thread into that wild hair and pull her down into a bruising kiss until there was nothing left between them but the air they shared.

“Stay.” The word repeated against her ear, nothing but a whisper as Hawke planted soft kisses against tender skin, working down the column of her throat. Isabela let out a sigh that cracked into a moan when the rogue shifted above her, slipping her thigh into just the right spot and pressing and —Maker—Isabela hadn’t thought her body could take anymore but a surge of heat bloomed between her legs and she was already rocking forward against the touch, whimpering at the agonized sensivity, pleasure and pain rising in turn and coaxing each other on. She had been utterly spent but now there was an urgency in the roll of her hips, responding to the breath against her ear, the tickle of hair brushing her cheek, the smell of Hawke’s skin overwhelming her senses even as her shoulder tingled beneath the assault of lips and teeth.

Stay.

Isabela pushed up, rolling Hawke over onto the bed and shivering at the soft growl that accompanied the unexpected attack. The Fereldan hadn’t let go of her, moving her grip to her hips instead, urging the sailor’s body to continue the rhythm that was pushing her to the edge. Isabela could feel the impending explosion, in the quiver of her thighs and the clench of her stomach she knew that she was about to break and this time she wouldn’t have the strength to pull herself back together again. If she gave in then she really would surrender, she’d yield herself completely and fall into the power and comfort Hawke offered and never be able to pull back, like diving into the deepest currents of the sea and knowing you would never touch land again. She would stay. And staying once meant staying forever.

With a final burst of will, Isabela ripped herself away from Hawke. She rose so swiftly that she heard
the hem of her tunic tear in Hawke’s startled fingers. Her inner walls fluttered in protest and positively throbbed at the strangled groan that broke from her lover’s throat, an echo of her own frustration.

“Not tonight, Hawke.” The pirate hoped her voice sounded calm and confident, despite the strain in her throat and thickness of her tongue. She needed to leave before Hawke saw past her easy smirk and teasing wink.

“Shit, Bela,” Hawke’s curse was half a sigh as she accepted the inevitable, “See you tomorrow.”

“Sweet dreams.” Isabela was halfway out the window before she turned and allowed herself one last glimpse. Hawke was already drifting away to sleep, sprawled out like she’d been washed onto the beaches by a storm. She didn’t care that she was utterly naked or that her head was hanging halfway off the foot of the bed. Awake or asleep, Hawke dominated her space, filled the world around her and occupied it on her own terms.

Such an alpha. Isabela chuckled, dragging her eyes one last time over the familiar, naked curves before slipping out the window and into the night.
Hawke had always had an ear for languages. She’d been quick to pick up enough Orlesian and Antivan to recognize the phrase “dog-lover” and start a fight. She could order drinks in three languages and curse in four more. Now, thanks to the last hour of fighting alongside Merrill, she knew at least seven ways to say “drop dead” in elven. The dalish mage was in truly rare form today.

“Na din’an sahlin!” The shouted curse was swallowed up in the sound of thunder and someone’s screaming, abruptly cut short. Hawke ducked under a broad sword strike and swept up with both daggers, rolling to one side to escape the blood spraying from her enemy’s throat. She turned and spotted Isabela finishing off the last of the raiders before checking to make sure that Merrill’s victim was truly out of his misery. The steaming corpse was still twitching from the massive lightning charge but a quick glance confirmed his death had been instantaneous.

“Alright there, Kitten? You don’t usually play so rough.” Isabela rested a steadying hand on the elf’s shoulder, eyes darting briefly to Hawke with concern. The petite brunette was swaying on her feet, eyes unfocused, an incessant string of curses and complaints muttering beneath her breath.

“Fenedhis lasa, shem’alas, bastards.” Hawke recognized the last part, at least.

“I’ve been spending far too much time at the Hanged Man,” the Fereldan frowned, stripping off one gauntlet to press her hand against Merrill’s cheek. The elf was flushed but it was more than the excitement of battle. Hawke’s suspicions were confirmed by the feverish warmth of her friend’s skin.

“She’s going into heat.” Isabela immediately knew from the way the girl leaned into Hawke’s touch, a small, helpless whimper breaking her curses.

“I don’t understand. We’re still in Nubilis, she’s not due until Eluviesta,” Hawke protested in confusion, yanking her hand away from the elf like she’d been burned.

“I’m fine,” Merrill’s own objection was weak. She probably couldn’t even feel her body trying to move closer to the rogue.

“Maker’s sodding balls. Her cycle is early, Hawke, it happens!” Isabela caught hold of the little mage with both hands, pulling her away. “We don’t have time to give you a lesson on breeding, she needs to be somewhere safe. Now.”

“Right.” The Fereldan finally snapped out of her bewilderment, mouth setting into a thin line of determination. “It’s at least five miles back to Kirkwall. Thank the Maker she’s tiny.”

Of the two of them, Isabela knew that Hawke was the stronger. It was only logical that the taller rogue would scoop Merrill off her feet to carry her back. The woman was forever wearing herself ragged to make sure her friends were safe; this was just one more example of her insufferable helpfulness. Still, Isabela couldn’t deny a tickle of suspicion in the back of her thoughts as she watched the protective grip of Hawke’s hands holding Merrill so close, the soothing tone of her voice as she murmured quiet reassurances.

Perhaps the elf’s heat would help Isabela solve a few of Hawke’s nagging mysteries? A curious, eager smile turned her lips as she imagined the possible effects of Merrill falling into her mating fever. The consequences could be . . . exciting.
The mage was already trembling in Hawke’s arms, clearly fighting her own instincts and losing. Hawke had that effect. Merrill tucked her head under the rogue’s chin, turning in to catch the scent of her skin. The elf inhaled deeply, pressing close to the comforting smell, and Isabela didn’t know why, but she felt her smile suddenly disappear.

Merrill had gone into heat five times since coming to Kirkwall. Each one had taught her friends new tricks to help her through. The very first time had been ludicrous, everyone reacting like she was turning into an abomination. In fairness, a mating fever did share many of the same symptoms as getting possessed by a Desire demon: excessive flirtation, elevated sensuality, delirium, inappropriate touching of every possible kind, not to mention all the moaning. But that wasn’t an excuse for Sebastian being an utter prick and trying to exorcise her with the Chant of Light. Served him right that the elf stripped naked and refused to let even a sheet touch her burning skin. The Prince of Starkhaven ran out of her room and gave himself a concussion trying to get out the door without opening it. Isabela and Anders were the only ones that actually recognized what was happening.

Now, they all knew what to do.

The first priority was to get her to Anders’ clinic. It was safe, he had the ingredients on hand for making medicines that could keep the worst of the fever at bay and it was one of the only buildings in all of Darktown that no one (not even sex-crazed alphas) would attack. Of course, Varric and Aveline stood guard anyway, always ready and willing to scare off any bottom feeders that came sniffing too close. Isabela and Anders tended Merrill in person, taking turns sitting with the elf, applying cold rags and making her drink water to replenish the buckets of sweat that soaked the sheets. They also changed said sheets and tried—usually without success—to keep their friend at least partially covered. Sebastian scoured the markets and even the hills for herbs that they could burn all around the clinic. They needed anything strong enough to mask the scent of an omega in heat, as well as protect Merrill from the maelstrom of outside smells. Honestly, Darktown stank like a fisherman’s privy at the best of times, the confusion of breeding scents would just add a whiff of drunken brothel hangovers to the mix.

Hawke . . . Hawke simply vanished. Isabela only noticed the pattern by the third time Merrill went into heat and she realized that the rogue never once made an appearance. Not as a guard, not to bring supplies, not even to poke her head in and check that her adorable companion was surviving. She had assumed it was because Hawke was always busier than a wooden spoon on spanking night. If she wasn’t trying to keep her mother happy she was doing jobs for the Viscount, when she had a break from them she was up to her eyeballs in nobles’ requests and innocents’ pleas. If, by some miracle, she’d done everything Kirkwall wanted of her, she was beating her head against a wall trying to find some way of rescuing her sister from the Circle. Hawke was always busy.

Except, Hawke also always put her friends first. That nagging detail was what made Isabela pay attention during Merrill’s fourth heat and her fifth too. Hawke never came. The woman just disappeared for three or four days. She wasn’t at home and wasn’t at the Hanged Man, which only really left one other option. But no matter how many of the Blooming Rose’s professionals she charmed, seduced and bribed, Isabela simply couldn’t get anyone to confirm that Hawke had been sampling the wares. Typical Hawke, even the whores were loyal to her.

Today was no different. Hawke had heroically carried Merrill all the miles back to Kirkwall and then plowed through the crowded city streets straight to Anders’ clinic. Only when she could safely lay the Dalish mage down on an empty cot in the secured building did she dare to let go. Then, in the ensuing chaos, she disappeared.
"Where’s Hawke?” Isabela only noticed the absence after they’d finally managed to settle Merrill. Calming the elf involved stripping away her chafing clothes, wrestling her still and bathing every inch of her skin in a cooling balm. She had finally yielded, collapsing against the scratchy bedding and sucking down desperate gulps of air. Her eyes were still dazed, unfocused and surprisingly bright, like the color was lit by the same fire burning her insides.

“She said she was going to get Aveline and Varric.” Anders lit a bundle of herbs. The pungent smell stung Isabela’s nose but she realized it also helped her calm down, blocking the irritating scents that had been clinging to the inside of her nostrils like tar. Merrill’s breathing eased.

“There, Kitten, that’s it. Nice and slow. You’re safe.” Isabela dropped to one knee beside the clinic bed, stroking sweaty hair away from the elf’s flushed face. She was still radiating heat like a dragon’s breath and the whole clinic was full of heavy, smothering air. The sailor could feel the prickle of moisture along her own skin, beads forming on the back of her neck, trickling down her spine. Dammit, where did Anders go?

“Isabela?” Merrill’s usually emerald eyes were dark, pupils blown wide so that only an edge of green remained, a ghost of the woman within trying to hang onto her sanity. Still, that she could focus enough to speak was a good sign. The potions were kicking in.

“There you are,” Isabela crooned softly, dabbing a cold rag along her face, “Thought you might be off in the Fade teaching those Desire demons some new tricks.”

“I-I’m, Isabela, I’m so, so sorry!” The elf started to sit up, panic scything through the fog.

“Don’t be silly, you haven’t done anything wrong.” The pirate guided her friend to lie back down, gentle as handling fractured glass. Anything rough triggered too many instincts, fight/flight/fuck all tangled together and ready to explode into action at the slightest cause.

“But I- didn’t I,” Merrill’s face was already flushed, but now even her ears turned pink, “I tried to kiss her.”

“Yes, and it was quite adorable,” Isabela chuckled. She didn’t have the heart to tell the suffering girl that trying didn’t mean she’d succeeded. Lust-addled omegas weren’t the most coordinated creatures and she’d only caught the edge of Hawke’s mouth for a split second before the rogue escaped. It was barely enough time for Isabela to register the irritating surge of relief she felt on seeing Hawke jerk away so quickly. The reaction was hardly fair; after all, she knew first hand just how pleasant the other rogue could make Merrill’s heat. Even if she couldn’t provide everything the omega’s body craved, she could certainly satisfy the majority of her needs.

It’s not like I have any claim on Hawke. Isabela fought to find some rationalization, any excuse to explain why she recoiled from the thought of the two women together. I just wouldn’t want to miss any of the fun. There, that was it. It made perfect sense; Merrill was beautiful in her own, delicate way, and Hawke had looked quite delicious covered in messy armor and shivering elf. Letting both of them succumb to the mating fever might make for a fairly scintillating show. Particularly since Isabela wasn’t the type to simply sit and watch. The idea twirled playfully in her mind, shaping itself with Merrill’s moans and Hawke’s naked skin, muscles flexing sinuously beneath her hands, mouth leaving bruises –

“Where in the bloody Void is Anders?!” Isabela snapped her head harshly, shaking out the thoughts.

“Here, I had to put barriers around the windows.” Anders reappeared, rather miraculously, in the doorway.
“It’s too warm in here. I might as well be Andraste on her last day in Tevinter.” Isabela clenched her jaw to keep her complaints to a minimum. The room was getting insufferably hot and her clothing felt like it was stuck to her skin and there was absolutely no excuse for Hawke running off like she did. Omega cycles were uncomfortable for everyone, but they all held it together for Merrill’s sake. That damned woman had no right to go vent her frustrations at the Rose when she—unanimously voted the companion most likely to turn a battle into an orgy—was still here suffering.

“Isabela, if you were Andraste the Chant of Light would have to be censored,” the healer shook his head.

He set to work etching runes into the walls, a trail of frozen crystals following the tip of his staff. As the magical symbols glowed to life, the temperature immediately started dropping, the ice glyphs pulsing cold air all around them. Isabela took a deep lungful of achingly frigid breath, savoring the sting against her throat. The coolness raised goosebumps across her skin but did little to ease the warmth between her legs. That would take an ice bath, or, better yet, a few hours of quality time with a certain Fereldan refugee. Assuming the damned woman didn’t wear herself out at the Rose. Maker’s Ass, if she was exhausted it would be her own fault, and Isabela didn’t particularly care if there was nothing left of her lover but a mess of melted flesh and soaked sheets by the time she was done with her. In fact, she’d make sure of it.

A pathetic mewl from Merrill grabbed Isabela’s attention, dragging her away from her own distracting thoughts.

“She’s fading in and out.” The pirate watched her friend’s eyelids flutter. Once Anders’ drugs took full effect, she’d be able to sleep. It was the easiest way to endure a heat. Besides mating, anyway.

“I gave her a stronger dose than usual.” Anders knelt and checked the elf’s eyes, talking mostly to himself, “She was in pretty bad shape by the time she got here. Her fever always sets in too fast. It must have something to do with going so long without a partner.”

“Yes, well, I’ve tried to get her into the Rose for a bit of fun but she still thinks that means playing marbles with Sabina’s brat.” Isabela shook her head in despair. Anders was right; most omegas had a few days of weird mood swings and irritability to warn everyone what was coming, but Merrill’s heat tended to hit her like a bolt from Bianca and was almost as devestating. Being celibate had to make it worse. In Isabela’s experience that made everything worse.

“Daisy, aw shit, poor kid,” Varric announced his presence with his usual subtlety. He strode into the back room where they’d isolated the elf, tossing down a bag of supplies.

“ Took you long enough,” Anders chided, rummaging in the satchel for fresh rags and cleansers. Free clinics were perpetually short of the most basic materials.

“Bianca and I had to chase off a couple of nughumpers that were nosing around the entrance.” Varric caressed the stock of his crossbow affectionately. There could be a hundred naked omegas in heat and he wouldn’t look at a single one of them the way he looked at that bow.

“Always a few idiots,” Isabela rolled her eyes. “Once the Big Girl gets down here, even the rats will be scared away.”

“Yeah, the smell of alphas pissing themselves tends to have that effect.” Varric’s chuckle was gravelly and sinister, more a growl than laughter but infectious nonetheless. A heavy hand rested on Isabela’s shoulder, gently pulling her way from the edge of Merrill’s cot. From her position on the floor, the pirate actually had to look up at Varric when he spoke, “Get out of here for a spell, Rivaini. Anders and I can take first shift. You look like you’ve gone three rounds with an ogre.”
“Don’t be silly, Shortstuff, everyone knows it takes at least five rounds before I’m done for the night,” Isabela retorted. “If I get tired I’ll just sneak one of Anders’ stamina draughts.”

“Fat chance, he’ll need those for dealing with Fenris.” Varric shot the healer a wink. Fenris, Isabela had almost forgotten about the broody elf. He was smart to keep his alpha ass far away from Merrill when she was in heat, both out of respect for her and the desire to not have his best bits chopped off by his friends. He and Anders were a relatively new... something; rather like herself and Hawke but with more insults than flirting. When the mage eventually arrived at Fenris’ dwelling covered in the smell of a breeding heat, their relationship would undoubtedly explore some new territory very, very quickly.

“Hawke will need them more than I do. She always wears him down for me.” Anders carelessly corrected the dwarf’s assumption, the remark so casual that Isabela was certain she’d heard it wrong.

“Didn’t quite catch that,” she spoke in her usual languid tone, trying to keep the disbelief out of her voice. “Did you just say that Hawke is with Fenris?”

“Of course,” Anders nodded, utterly innocent. “Same as every other time Merrill’s gone into heat. She keeps him busy and takes the edge off.”

“She what?!” Raw fury yanked Isabela to her feet with a speed that only presaged battle. “That woman bitches every time I even joke about taking Fenris to bed and all the while she’s been polishing his knob? Maker’s sodding balls! Of all the selfish-! Right, I’m going to shove my fist so far down her throat that she’ll be shitting leather for a week!”

The ferocious tirade had already carried her across the clinic, building speed with every spitting curse. She burst out onto the streets of Darktown and hit a dead run, deaf to Varric and Anders shouting after her. Fenris. Fenris for Maker’s sake! She’d handled it better when she thought Hawke was off rutting through the entire Blooming Rose for four solid days. They’d been wrecking each other’s sheets for nearly six months now (and Isabela was absolutely certain of her abilities in that department) but the minute she gets a bit of fever in her nose she runs off to mount the nearest alpha with a pulse? Bloody hypocrite.

Must’ve been wrong about her, sodding idiot. Isabela snarled at herself, scaring a number of innocents out of her path as she barreled up the stairs into Hightown. Even if she had been right and Hawke had a problem she couldn’t keep in her pants, why go to Fenris?!! Some weird alpha connection? No. Isabela careened around the pillars of the market, swearing at the nobles that didn’t clear aside quickly enough. The answer was simple: Hawke got all hot and bothered about Merrill’s heat, same as everyone else, and went after the easy lay. But that should’ve been her. Three years ago and today.

Fine. Hawke wanted to screw someone else then she could, everyone else. But not until Isabela made it clear that the list no longer included her. And maybe kicked her so hard between the legs that she wouldn’t be able to sit on anything but a cushion for a solid month.

Fenris had never cared much about the security of Danarius’ mansion and the door was already cracked open when she arrived. The place always looked like it had just been attacked by a pack of drunken demons but, as Isabela made her way through the battered furniture and toppled décor, she couldn’t help envisioning a different kind of carnage. Violent banging accompanied by breathless grunts and curses led her straight upstairs to the main bedroom. Isabela wasn’t sure she’d ever been this angry, the knot of rage in her stomach so intense it felt like she was going to vomit fire and her fist was white knuckled as she reached for the door.

Before she could touch the handle, the wood burst open, a body sailing past her and nearly going
over the edge of the balcony if not for slamming into the railing instead. The wooden balustrade groaned and several pieces cracked ominously from the force of the blow. Isabela barely had time to register Hawke’s form, fully clothed and clearly injured before another person came storming out. There was a blur of black leather and silver light and a fist flying towards Hawke but the rogue rolled to the side just in time. Fenris’ blow went straight through the railing, shattering it into an explosion of splinters.

Isabela watched, dumbfounded, as Hawke clambered to her feet, spun out of the way of another punch and leapt onto the elf’s back. The warrior cursed and clawed at her but she locked her arms and legs (a grip that the pirate knew from experience was almost impossible to break) and refused to budge. Fenris slammed her against the wall, knocking down two paintings and Hawke let out a shocked gasp of pain but hung on. The rogue managed to snake one arm around her friend’s throat, alternating between a string of curses and assurances. Fenris grabbed at her, leaving angry red welts on her skin, but he was already losing air. It was less than a minute before the choke hold did its job and he collapsed to the ground, taking Hawke down as well.

“That’s it, just a quick nap. Maybe for both of us.” The Fereldan rolled off her opponent, sprawling on her back to pant for air. She didn’t even seem aware of the pirate’s presence until the sound of boots approaching drew her attention. She looked up at Isabela, immediately grinning to show her appreciation of the view.

“Hi.” Hawke’s hand fluttered in a weak wave.

“What,” Isabela caught the flailing arm, using it to pull the woman partially upright, “In Andraste’s busy knickers are you two doing?”

“He’s trying not to kill me, I’m trying not to die. Working well so far, I’d say.” Hawke winced as she pushed herself off the ground. She happily accepted Isabela’s hand steadying her at the waist, deftly slipping into the impromptu embrace and lacing an arm around the pirate.

“Yes, clearly a raving success. There are easier ways to handle sexual tension, you know,” Isabela smirked. The joke slid out naturally, her anger completely forgotten. Hawke and Fenris might be playing some bizarre games but she was certain they didn’t include any naked slap and tickle. There was a distinct difference between foreplay and fighting for your life.

“Not when he’s like this,” the Fereldan shook her head. “The only way to keep him from hurting anyone is to fight him into exhaustion. Which is not easy, I guarantee. You saw him right? It’s like a blood frenzy.”

“And this has something to do with Merrill’s cycle?” Isabela looked down at the unconscious elf, noting that the tattoos adorning his skin were still pulsing with an angry, silver energy.

“So it seems. Doesn’t even matter if she’s on the other side of the city. It’s like the lyrium in him can sense a mage going into heat. Fade and all that bollocks. Anders has been trying to figure it out but, so far, all we know for sure is that we have to keep him here.” Hawke allowed herself to lean against Isabela, savoring the brief respite. She happily accepted Isabela's hand steadying her at the waist, deftly slipping into the impromptu embrace and lacing an arm around the pirate. A deep sigh of relief rushed across her throat, sending a shiver in its wake. She let her fingers absently twirl in the short strands of Hawke’s hair, silently digesting this new revelation.

Magic and lyrium, two subjects even more mystifying than mating cycles and breed dynamics. Maker only knew what those Tevinter bastards had done to Fenris, he was as twisted up in his body as his mind. Alphas were already rather unpredictable and a bit dangerous when an omega was in heat, but what she’d just witnessed looked closer to an all-out rut. That was when people got killed.
And Fenris was uniquely equipped to do a lot of killing.

“You stay here the whole time until he goes back to normal?” The pirate cast her eyes around the depressing manor. Honestly, she thought Ander’s would want to clean the place up a bit just to prevent all the diseases he was constantly complaining about.

“When Anders comes I crash in one of the spare rooms. Flaming tits, I wish those two would just claim each other! It might make all this insanity a bit more manageable,” Hawke groaned in complaint.

“Hmm, not sure Fenris and Anders and sanity are ever going to work in the same sentence, sweetness,” Isabela chuckled.

“True. A bit like you, me and boring,” Hawke replied with an echoing laugh. Isabela’s smirk softened into a fond smile. No matter what else was happening, Hawke always had her sense of humor. The pirate could feel the shape of her lover’s smile against her shoulder, followed by the soft warmth of a kiss against her throat. Hawke tilted her face up to purr into Isabela’s ear, “Or chaste.”

“Maker forbid,” Isabela breathed, the words hitching slightly as teeth and lips worked along the edge of her jaw.

She’d been spun a dozen different directions by the rapid cascade of emotions in the last half hour and, distantly, she was aware that she should be frightened by just how much Hawke could make her feel. But, right now, all she wanted was to focus on exactly how she felt: the feverish warmth that had been clinging to her skin for hours now climbing to a steady burn, chills racing down her spine with every gust of Hawke’s breath, the knot low in her belly slowly tightening into a delicious tension that she knew would eventually burst free in melting relief. She tightened her grip in Hawke’s hair, urging her languid mouth closer and turning to catch the rogue’s teasing lips by surprise. The Fereldan hummed happily into their kiss, the soft vibration reaching all the way down to Isabela’s toes.

Even fighting for her life, Hawke looked amazing. Isabela recalled the shape of her lover’s arm when it was pulled tight in the sleeper hold, the muscles all flexed, tendons bulging all the way to her wrist. She dragged her fingers along the same path, feeling the heat and light dampness that undoubtedly covered every inch of her skin. A surge of greed spiked through her, craving the taste of salt on her tongue, wanting all that strength for herself. She was already reaching for the fasteners on Hawke’s armor when the rogue broke their kiss, a groan of protest choked low in her throat.

“Can’t, Bela,” Hawke rasped, breathless and clearly struggling with words. “He’s going to wake up any minute.”

“Then he can either watch or join in,” Isabela teased, half hoping that Hawke would agree. She knew better, of course, but a girl could wish.

“You are the most irresistible creature in the world,” the Fereldan laughed, fumbling to stop the pirate’s fingers from undoing anymore of her buckles. “If it was anyone else I know you could seduce the danger away but this is different. Until Anders is here, I can’t afford to be distracted.”

“Then I’ll just go and make sure Anders decides to come early, shall I?” Isabela deftly slipped one hand past Hawke’s blocking fingers and inside the unfastened part of her armor. The tunic beneath was soaked through and she could feel muscles shivering under her touch. Hawke bit her lip, stifling whatever surrender had almost poured out.

“He probably won’t be the only one.” The rogue sighed, close enough that the words brushed
Isabela’s lips. The grip on her wrist was a command as much as request and the pirate reluctantly pulled her hand back. She might not have, except for the heat in Hawke’s tone promising everything she wanted. With a deep breath and sultry pout she stepped away.

“Anders will be bringing some stamina potions. Make sure to bring one with you to the clinic.” She traced one finger from the edge of Hawke’s jaw all the way down her throat, spying the rapid flutter of her racing pulse with satisfaction.

“I think I’ll make it two.” Hawke’s response was hoarse and throaty, a velvet growl that reached across the distance and twisted the heat in Isabela’s gut. Not trusting herself to linger for anymore sensuous repartee, she gave only a sharp nod before turning to leave. She took the stairs two at a time and bounded out into the street with fresh, enthusiastic conviction. Merrill’s heat was definitely going to be interesting this time.

Chapter End Notes

Clearly, a setup chapter for something smutty. Thank you for your continued patience. Comments, questions, predictions and interdimensional rambling are all welcome.
Watch Me Burn

Chapter Notes

4K words of smut. Some plot but honestly, not much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The pendants on Isabela’s necklace chimed together as she dragged the cold cloth across her collar, dipping low to let icy water run between her breasts. Anders had refreshed the frost glyphs before he left and the room was cold enough that she could see her breath, but the fire under her skin didn’t seem to care. She looked down at Merrill, watching the labored breathing shake her whole body. The little mage was twitching in her sleep, lashes fluttering as her eyes darted to follow the fantasies that undoubtedly filled her dreams. For the dear girl’s sake, Isabela hoped there were some lusty maidens and scantily clad warriors involved. And cavorting, lots and lots of cavorting.

Just who would her innocent little kitten be dreaming about? Elves from her old clan, perhaps. A lover from the past, if one existed. Maybe even the denizens of Kirkwall? Fenris almost certainly; alphas and omegas could recognize each other any time of year. The rest of the population only clued in when a breeding fever or rut set in and suddenly a beloved, respectable merchant was arrested for getting too rough in the Rose and had to be hauled away with his pants still tenting. Ooh, the Rose! Merrill had been there enough times to have plenty of ideas, assuming she’d been paying attention. She tended to stare at everything at once, then squeak and hide behind the sailor if anyone spoke to her. No, as much as the girl loved Isabela’s tales of exotic debauchery, she’d probably prefer someone familiar and comforting. Someone who could be gentle and affectionate and—Maker Forbid—cuddly. Like Anders or Varric or . . .

Isabela felt a fresh surge of irritation curl her fist. Hawke. Damn her. She would probably be sweet and patient, all considerate and reassuring, romantic even. Everything she couldn’t be with the pirate, everything Isabela had expressly forbidden but could tell was lurking beneath the surface. So why the bloody Void did that bother her? The thought of Hawke with Merrill brought the same sudden spike of rage into her throat as earlier, when she was convinced it was Fenris knocking boots with her rogue. MY rogue? Where did that come from? Isabela blinked in surprise, looking around as if the subversive thought had been spoken by someone else rather than whispered in her own mind.

She had never been the jealous type. Unless it involved ships, of course; or treasure, or an epic battle victory, or perfect daggers, really great boots, that gorgeous hat she’d seen a noblewoman in Hightown buying the other day; but not people. She drew the line at being jealous over people. Everyone could do anything (and anyone) that they wanted, any way and as often as they pleased. Except for Hawke.

Unholy Asses! Isabela stood up and paced, putting some distance between herself and Merrill. It had to be the fever. The contagious heat was twisting her mind until she didn’t recognize her own thoughts, filling her head with ideas that started in screaming profanity but turned dangerously into whispered affection. She yanked open the backroom door, letting in more air but it was all too warm and heavy with the smell of burning herbs. Isabela couldn’t remember an omega’s heat ever doing this to her before, the sheer intensity of want swelling beneath her ribs and making every breath a chore. Merrill’s fevers had to be getting worse; that was the only explanation.
“Sweet thing, we really need to get you laid,” Isabela sighed, looking across the room at the helpless, suffering elf.

“Just what I was thinking.” The words arrived in her ear at the same moment as arms around her waist. Isabela startled, tensing for a heartbeat before melting back against Hawke. She wasn’t entirely sure whether to be pleased or embarrassed that the other rogue had been able to sneak up on her. The sure touch of hands gliding up her corset tipped heavily towards pleasure.

“What took you so long? Stop to save a litter of puppies from an Abomination?” Isabela tilted her head back against Hawke’s shoulder, feeling the other woman’s smile in the brush of their cheeks. She’d been expecting the Fereldan to arrive ages ago, each passing hour more of an eternity.

“Don’t be ridiculous, it was kittens and an ogre.” Hawke’s teasing reply wasn’t as light as usual, voice cracking at the edges to expose the breathlessness beneath. “I had to stop at home and get cleaned up. I didn’t want to show up covered in Fenris’ smell.”

“So considerate,” Isabela purred, pressing back against the welcome softness of Hawke’s body without the usual armor. “I do love it when you do half my job for me.”

Without further warning she spun in Hawke’s arms, tugging the woman’s tunic free from her belt and slipping her hands underneath. Her fingers met warm flesh, parted lips capturing Hawke’s moan as she pulled her close. The Fereldan eagerly returned the demanding kiss, roving hands torn in a dozen different directions by competing instincts. Isabela felt fingers in her hair, a palm hot against her breast, nails digging into her ass. Her own hands weren’t so confused, focused on the sole intent of finding skin, the need to feel it against her own. She pushed Hawke’s tunic up as high as she could, desperate not to lose the silky warmth her tongue had found. Hawke’s mouth was exquisite, sensitive, intoxicating in all the different sounds and shivers Isabela could coax from her lips. Hands clenching in her hair tried to guide the kiss, to gain some shred of control and that was exactly what she wouldn’t allow.

Isabela pulled back long enough to yank Hawke’s shirt over her head, pushing her down into the chair in the corner. She straddled the stunned woman’s lap, knees planted firmly on either side of her thighs, hands roughly grabbing those chiseled cheeks to turn her face up. The pirate bit her lip, stifling a gasp at the sight of crystal eyes turned utterly black, only a glint of blue left at the very edges like a midnight ocean lit by lightning. Control had come and gone. Strong hands gripped her thighs and slid higher, kneading the curves of her ass, dragging her close. Isabela didn’t even realize she’d been rocking against her lover, seeking relief for the ache at her core. Pressed so tightly against Hawke’s taut stomach, the next roll of her hips released the long-held moan that had been building in her chest.

She felt the glide of Hawke’s tongue across her breasts, gathering up the beads of moisture that glinted like gems on her dark flesh. The pirate arched into that touch, wordlessly begging for more. The scrape of teeth sent a violent shudder down her spine and she let go of her lover’s hair long enough to tug violently at the collar of her shirt. The laces gave way on the second try and cool air rushing over her exposed breasts had her nipples instantly tight and tender. Wet warmth engulfed one aching point, the lave of Hawke’s tongue burning and soothing all at once. The speed and force of her hips grinding forward had the chair rocking, creaking under the pressure of her rhythm but it wasn’t enough. The feel of Hawke’s mouth and hands, the smell of her skin, the lingering taste and tingle of her on Isabela’s lips and the delicious friction of clenching muscle arching against her throbbing core was all driving her crazy, but the need was always racing ahead, just out of reach.

A desperate keen broke past Isabela’s lips, turning into a burst of profanity when Hawke’s mouth switched to her other breast. The brush of a hand trailing up the inside of her thigh brought a
trembling sigh from the pirate, relief and anticipation speeding her breath. Hawke’s fingers glided over Isabela’s underwear, the feel of soaked cloth making her groan around the nipple between her teeth. With a dexterity born of practice, Hawke slid the material out of the way of her questing fingers, slipping through wet heat and muffling another moan against Isabela’s skin. The touch was too light, too playful, and the sailor felt a surge of impatient temper war with dread; Hawke was going to try to play games. She couldn’t do this to her. Not now.

Tangling her fingers in short, messy hair, Isabela yanked Hawke’s face away from her cleavage, the obscene popping noise echoing off the cramped walls. She made certain the infuriating woman saw the exact fire in her eyes before she claimed her mouth, pouring all her want into the punishing kiss. Hawke’s restraint broke, tongue slipping past Isabela’s lips at the same moment her fingers thrust up. The sudden invasion had her walls instantlyclamping down, greedily pulling the pleasure as deep into her body as she could make it reach. She could feel her wetness spilling over Hawke’s fingers, smearing against her naked stomach as her hips matched the urgent rhythm of her lover’s thrusts. She had to leave Hawke’s mouth, breath coming in short pants. Muttered curses fell from her lips, each one making the hand on her ass squeeze tighter, the fingers filling her curl.

“Maker, Bela,” Hawke moaned, trailing kisses on the sensitive underside of her jaw. The throaty rasp of that voice sent a shiver all the way to her toes. Hawke had a perfect voice for sex. “You look so amazing like this. Hot, messy, gorgeous. The sound, the feel of you.” Teeth scraped along the edge of her necklace and Isabela felt her inner walls fluttering, throbbing, each stroke rubbing the swollen spot inside her and firing sparks along her blood. “I never want to stop fucking you.”

“Shit, Hawke,” Isabela gasped, surprised to find there were any words that could break through the haze clouding her mind, weighing her tongue. She dug her nails tighter in Hawke’s hair, silently begging for all the pleasures that skilled mouth could give her.

“Let me, Bela?” The soft whisper was as much a command as a plea, “Let me fuck you forever. Never make me stop.”

“No! Don’t stop, don’t you dare.” The protest fell from her lips without even thinking, without realizing she was speaking at all.

“Couldn’t. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t,” Hawke confessed, just as breathless. “I need this, need you. Need to fuck you, need to feel you come.”

“Yes, fuck . . . Hawke, yes.” Isabela let her head fall back, spine arching as the first waves of release rolled out along her muscles, pulling her tight.

“Isabela,” Hawke leaned back to look up at her, eyes hungrily devouring every inch and second of her pleasure. Her thumb slid up through slick folds, finding the swollen nub and pressing in, “Come for me.”

The command hit at the same instant as the burst of fire that finally melted out of her belly, the knot untangling and threading rapidly through every inch of her body. Her mouth fell open in a silent scream, hips bucking like she was her own ship riding a storm. Hawke’s strength was the only thing that kept her from tumbling both of them to the floor, light touches of her lips echoing the slowing pace of the fingers buried in her heat. When Isabela finally felt her muscles go limp she sagged forward, melting against the feel of Hawke’s naked, shivering skin.

Not just shivering, Isabela realized; shaking. She slowly felt her senses return, head clearing as the delicious heaviness in her limbs began to lighten once more. She leaned back, just enough to see Hawke’s face. The woman was flushed, trembling, eyes unnaturally bright and fixed on Isabela like a pilgrim’s vision of the Maker. Her lips parted to speak but all that came out was a hitched breath,
words choking behind need. Isabela couldn’t help a faint smirk of pride from dancing across her lips, knowing she was the cause.

“Hawke,” Isabela had to pause, swallowing hard when the other rogue moaned at the mere sound of her name. “Did you bring that potion?”

Hawke gave a violent nod, fumbling in the pouch on her belt before freeing the dark vial. She fussed with the cork, trying to unstop it with one hand because she refused to let go of the sailor for even a second. Isabela’s chuckle purred low in her chest, taking the bottle and pulling the cork out with her teeth. She could feel Hawke’s eyes locked on her as she spat the stopper across the room and then tipped the potion into her own mouth. A sliver of confusion darted across the Fereldan’s face before Isabela tilted forward, pressing her lips to Hawke’s and letting the draught pour onto her waiting tongue. Hawke swallowed eagerly, licking into the pirate’s mouth to gather every drop before losing herself in the familiar duel of their kiss.

Isabela caught her lower lip, biting softly and tugging as she pulled away. She could feel the fatigue leaving Hawke’s muscles, still quivering in the effort to not completely fall apart. Just like Hawke, trying to be good even in sin. Isabela couldn’t wait to break that control completely, to have the rogue noble shatter under her touch, to give in utterly to the naked want that she could see burning behind her eyes. Her tongue twisted hungrily behind her teeth, ravenous for the taste of Hawke coming undone, the sweet sound of her name pouring over those kiss-bruised lips. With a feral grin, she slid out of Hawke’s lap, dropping to her knees.

One tug on the woman’s belt was all the command she needed, Hawke immediately lifting her hips and helping shed the cumbersome obstacle. Isabela dragged her fingernails up pale thighs, leaving trails of goosebumps along the tensing muscles. She leaned close, filling her nose with the mouthwatering scent of Hawke’s arousal.

The instant the smell hit her, Isabela realized what was different. It wasn’t Merrill’s heat, it was Hawke. Before, when the mating fever hit her elven friend, the infectious arousal had been a vague, generic thing; a lust that could be satisfied by anyone. Even controlled, if the pirate so chose (which wasn’t very often). That was before she knew the smell and taste of Hawke, the feel of her muscles flexing beneath the scrape of nails, the needy, panting sounds that filled her ears and made her gasp in echo. The diffuse desire suddenly had a target, specific and stubborn. The foreign jealousy, confusing thoughts, amplified need; all because she knew Hawke could give her what she wanted.

She looked up at the dazed rogue, noting the twitch of her clenching jaw muscles, the line furrowing her brow, the flare of her nostrils each time she tried to take a steadying breath. Her eyes were screwed shut, fighting for the last remnants of her restraint. She was a picture of tortured beauty and Isabela wondered if she had the slightest clue why she was suffering so much.

“My turn,” the pirate licked her lips.

Merrill couldn’t remember where she was. She didn’t know how she had traveled from snow drifts to burning woods to this rocking wooden deck. The smell of brine filled her nose; she tasted the sea and something even more primal, dark and delicious. The throbbing hollow in her core had finally stopped aching, shivering with pulses of ecstasy each time a heavy thrust filled her again. She couldn’t hold back the needy sounds that kept spilling out of her mouth, begging for relief, goading her lover to give her more. Her fingers scrabbled at the wet timber beneath her hands, knees scraping every time hips drove into hers.
Her throat was dry, tongue thick behind parched lips, making each of her ragged breaths sting. There wasn’t a drop of water left anywhere in her body, just the endless river that continued to run down her legs, wet sounds matching her mate’s driving rhythm. Bursts of lightning and fire coursed through her veins, ripping groans out of her breathless lungs. She could feel liquid heat splashing inside here each time she was filled, the mix of shared pleasure adding to her own flood.

She didn’t know who her mystery lover was, or how they’d found each other, or why it made perfect sense to be on her hands and knees being taken so completely. She just needed a little more, a little longer, the ravenous need within her clawed greedily at the edge of release. Questions later, answers if they mattered. All that mattered now was driving back against the delicious hardness, meeting every thrust with a slap of skin on skin that would’ve been scandalous if she could only remember why.

A long moan caught her ears, the tone familiar despite the fact that she didn’t know where she’d heard it before. Merrill raised her head, seeking out the sound and her mouth fell open at the sight that greeted her. She’d seen Hawke naked, briefly, when she visited Isabela at the Hanged Man and didn’t realize the two were having “private time.” That fleeting glimpse didn’t prepare her for the sight of the stripped rogue, slanted in a chair with her thighs wrapped tightly around a trademark blue bandana. The woman’s body was convulsing, arching towards her lover, fingers tangling in what raven hair she could reach, chanting Isabela’s name. The pirate’s leather clad hands dug into the slender curve of Hawke’s ass, controlling the rise and fall of the Fereldan’s hips rocking against her face.

Merrill wanted to go to her friends, to congratulate Isabela on finding her ship, to ask how in the Creators they’d gotten here and who she was with, but she couldn’t bear to leave the exquisite pleasure of the thick heat plunging into her. She turned to look over her shoulder, to urge her partner to hurry but the thought died on her lips when she spied sky blue eyes behind a shock of messy black hair. Hawke met her gaze, affording her a gentle, affectionate smile as she leaned down and pressed a kiss to Merrill’s shoulder. The plush curve of breasts molded to her back, hard points at each tip raising goosebumps on her skin.

The elf’s head was hopelessly spinning. Confused, excited, grateful, embarrassed; a cacophony of emotions that she could barely catch hold of through the haze of lust clouding her mind. She had Hawke behind her, inside her, but Hawke was over there, groaning under Isabela’s touch where she belonged.

“That’s it,” Hawke breathed against her ear, nipping at the sharp point before letting out another strangled whisper, “So good.”

“Please,” Merrill sobbed, not even sure if she was begging for a chance to think or for the heat pulsing in her bones to finally melt her away. Her body had no such confusion, grinding against the swollen knot teasing her entrance. Hawke was muttering in her ear over and over now, a litany of praise and need. So good, so close, don’t stop, please please please. Merrill buried her face in her arm, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes as she felt the pressure of Hawke’s knot pushing in, slow and steady, as irresistible as the woman herself. She whimpered encouragement, wordlessly begging. She was so close to what she needed, the fullness that would finally slake the insatiable hunger in her body. Fingers slid between her legs, seeking out the throbbing gem at the apex of her sex and rubbing tight circles that instantly had her hips rolling into the touch. Another surge of wetness flooded out of her, covering Hawke’s knot and letting it slip further in, stretching her beyond anything she’d ever felt before.

The urgent cursing was coming from two directions now, behind Merrill’s shoulder and across the deck. Two Hawkes nearing the breaking point. She turned her face, trying to focus through the
delirium that kept making her eyes roll back in her head. The only part of Hawke still touching the chair was the top of her shoulders, her whole body taut like the line of a bow, trembling to let free.

“Maker, Fu-!” Hawke snapped at the same instant that Merrill felt the knot slip the rest of the way inside. A long, guttural cry filled her throat, tearing free as her muscles clamped down, locking Hawke in place, milking her dry of an endless stream of seed. The splashes of heat pouring into her ignited the last fuse, a surge of euphoria washing straight from that throbbing, wet essence though her whole body and carrying her away. Merrill barely heard Hawke’s voice as it drifted softly on the breeze, sounding like she was far below the clouds where the elf was now floating.

“T-that,” Hawke’s voice shook breathlessly, struggling to remember how words worked, “That isn’t normal.”

Isabela grinned but didn’t stop cleaning the mess she’d made, lapping up the wetness that had smeared all over Hawke’s thighs. She hummed in agreement. Usually, she’d spend more time making Hawke wait, winding her up until she was nothing but mindless, quivering need. She didn’t have the patience this time, the craving for her taste setting a brutal pace that drove Hawke over the edge as quickly as possible.

“Maybe one stamina potion wasn’t enough.” Isabela winked as she reluctantly drew back, using one finger to gather up any lingering stickiness on her face and sucking it dry. She shot her recovering lover a wicked grin, “Or maybe I was just feeling generous.”

“And maybe nugs are flying over the Gallows;” Hawke’s chuckle was affectionate, if distracted. “But I meant that.”

Isabela furrowed her brow, following the tilt of Hawke’s chin to look over her shoulder. Merrill was thrashing uncontrollably on the cot, jaw locked in a rictus of silent pleasure, the customary dampness between her legs turning into a waterfall.

“Must be some dream,” the pirate tsked, getting to her feet to check on the mage.

“Does this usually happen?” Hawke wasn’t nearly together enough to pull herself from the chair, not yet. Her eyes were still dazed, chest heaving quite attractively as she fought to calm her breath.

“Not as I recall. But then, I don’t think anyone’s ever been knuckle deep, naked and screaming in the same room with her.” Isabela’s tongue flicked across the sharp of her teeth in a smile. She bent over the whimpering elf, pressing a hand to her forehead to test for temperature and muttering a brief curse at the fire that met her touch. She didn’t realize her mistake until lithe fingers shot up and wrapped around her wrist, pulling her hand down. Merrill, still unconscious, still writhing in the throes of an unknown ecstasy, smelled Isabela’s damp fingers and moaned. The slight tilt and rock of her hips turned into a hard thrust, rising into the air to meet nothing.

“I can’t even describe all the ways that’s wrong.” Hawke pushed herself to her feet, inelegantly taking the few steps necessary to bring her to Isabela’s side. “What’s happening?”

“She’s,” Isabela frowned, aware that there was no way to make this sound reasonable, “She’s reacting to your scent, Hawke.”

The Fereldan was silent for the space of half a dozen heartbeats, the only sound her still heavy breathing and Merrill’s occasional whimpers. The rogue ran a hand through the skewed strands of her hair, making them even more chaotic.

“That’s ridiculous,” Hawke sounded like she needed to convince herself. “I know she had a crush on
me a few years ago but I thought we took care of it.” The guilt in her voice was a tragedy in itself, as though it could be her fault that anyone found her attractive. Sweet Andraste’s Tits, with those eyes? That rakish smile and hard body? It was a miracle every omega in the city wasn’t throwing themselves at Hawke’s door the minute their heat hit.

“This isn’t about her heart, sweetness, it’s a drive situated much further south,” Isabela corrected with a flicker of amusement. Merrill obviously had good taste. Ambitious and improbable, given the horror in Hawke’s face, but admirable nonetheless. How could she explain? The elf’s body was reacting on instinct, recognizing Hawke as a solution to her torture, even if the rogue didn’t seem to fit the bill.

“It has to be the sex, Bela. We shouldn’t have . . .” Hawke’s chagrinned protest faded, words failing as she tried to describe what had just taken place. The bloom of color along her cheekbones was testimony enough to the fact that, even if she couldn’t say what had happened, she didn’t actually regret it.

“Let’s play a game then, shall we?” Isabela cocked one challenging brow, smirk curling the corner of her mouth as Hawke’s lips turned into the delicious shape of a question. “Hand me your tunic there.”

The pirate grabbed a bundle of burning herbs from the corner table and turned just in time to catch the piece of clothing flung at her. In the dim light, she allowed herself a moment to rake a languid gaze over Hawke’s form. Naked, save for the breeches pooled around one boot, the rogue stood proud, every inch as confident as if she were in full armor about to face a dragon. It was that calm self-assurance, the cocky valor that told Isabela her answers. But then her eyes drifted to the thatch of dark curls between her thighs, a graceful V and nothing more, and all her assumptions broke apart into questions once more. Hawke was never what she expected.

The bronze skinned sailor turned her attention back to the shivering mess of need that was wriggling in frustration on the cot. She held the herbs under Merrill’s nose, counting each breath as it grew deeper and slower, inhaling the calm that stilled her muscles. The cloth of Hawke’s tunic was rough in her hand and, for a moment, Isabela considered aborting. Adding to her friend’s agony, raising unanswerable questions about her current lover, confusing Hawke beyond reason; was any of that necessary? Maker’s Balls, when had she started to care? Setting her jaw, Isabela held the balled up tunic near Merrill’s face, barely prepared for the loud, keening cry of need that filled the room the instant the omega smelled Hawke’s scent.

The pirate staggered back, wrenching the shirt away from her friend’s clenching hands and quickly waving the incense near her nose once more. Merrill’s hips slowed their frantic bucking, her white-knuckled grip of the cot sheets gradually letting go.

“What in the bloody Void?” Hawke’s shocked murmur dragged Isabela’s attention back from the worrisome display. She tossed the Fereldan’s shirt back to her, a tacit suggestion. Hawke instantly complied, pulling the clothing on and fixing the rest of her disarrayed garb. Isabela’s tongue twisted in silent protest as the flesh she so longed to drag her mouth across vanished behind cumbersome leather and scratchy wool.

“You must still smell like Fenris.” Isabela hated herself even as the lie poured so easily across her lips. It was a reasonable explanation, that was what she told herself. Every bit as believable as the suspicions floating behind her thoughts but couldn’t be proven.

“I changed clothes,” Hawke protested weakly, tucking the tunic into her belt. The tilt of her smirk wasn’t as cocky as usual, doubt and confusion lurking around the corners of her eyes. If Hawke was gorgeous in the radiant glory of her confidence, she was heartbreakingly beautiful in these flashes of doubt.
“Well, next time we’ll make sure you take a bath.” Isabela closed the distance between them, helping
the other rogue close the laces of her collar. “And I’ll definitely be joining you.”

“Tomorrow night then?” The Fereldan rogue’s eyes glittered with dangerous delight, the color
sparkling like a hundred prancing Orlesians.

“The ginger tower herself couldn’t stop me,” Isabela smiled, fingers ruffling through the strands of
hair around Hawke’s cheeks. She pulled the rogue in for one last, familiar, promising kiss before
pushing her towards the door. Hawke’s raffish glance over one shoulder was the last thing Isabela
saw and, as she settled into the chair so recently vacated by the former refugee, she couldn’t help but
wonder how a simple smile from such a distance could reignite the fire in her blood.

Chapter End Notes

So, the goal here is obviously to create a worthy, scintillating experience. The challenge
is that after about the 3rd round of editing, the chapter loses all its sizzle for me. A bit
like knowing the outcome of a murder movie. That being the case, feedback would be
extra helpful so I can refine these scenes for maximum effect.

Also, even if this is a mostly PWP story, I’m hoping to keep everyone in character so
please let me know if anyone’s OoC.
Hawke limped down the stairs of Danarius’ manor. Her shoulder was in agony and the entire left side of her body was on fire where Fenris had cannoned into her. She lowered herself slowly to sit on the steps, dusting the crumbled plaster and shattered pottery off her armor. Three days into Merrill’s heat and Fenris was finally getting weaker. The berserker attacks weren’t as frenzied, his reflexes were slower, blows less bone-shattering. Thank the Maker. She was bloody exhausted. The only reason she was still on her feet was because of Anders’ potions and those couldn’t get rid of the cuts and bruises, the lingering soreness of overworked muscle and scratched flesh. Of course, that was all more to do with Isabela than Fenris.

The rogue grinned, licking the inside of her lip to find the lingering taste of blood. That woman was going to be the death of her. If not during those hours of mindless, abandoned effort to wreck each other senseless, then it would be by flitting through her thoughts at the wrong time, distracting Hawke from the next attack. Fenris almost got her twice today. Once when she twisted away from his blow and felt the fresh wounds on her back chafe beneath her armor, a piercing reminder of Isabela’s nails raking down the muscles, breasts pressed flush to Hawke’s own as she arched off the wall. The second time had no reason; she simply found her head filled with a vision of Isabela’s glistening lips parted wide over a moan, tangles of ebony hair caught between their mouths. She barely recovered herself to jerk back an inch from the boot headed for her nose.

“How is he?” Anders’ voice echoed in from the main entry, swallowed in the vast emptiness of the manor.

“Out for now.” Hawke rose from the stairs, wincing at the symphony of complaint the movement brought from all over her body. “His left leg took a pretty serious hit. He might have to be the bottom tonight.”

“Right, because that’s ever going to happen.” Anders rolled his eyes but shared her smile. It was good to feel the tension between them fading. He’d stopped being jealous of Isabela, she’d stopped giving a shit about all his lectures, they both agreed to try to keep Justice out of things. He still moralized about the mages for hours on end to anyone who would listen, and got a bit uppity anytime she showed up at the clinic needing healing for what could only be a pirate-related injury. But they were managing to be friends again. Especially now that they shared certain . . . vulnerabilities.

“I’ll leave him in your very capable hands,” Hawke winked as she started to walk past him. Then she paused, catching his arm to make him glance back at her.

She could read the eagerness in his eyes, sense the heat clinging to his skin after hours at Merrill’s side. The smell filled her mind with memories of dark skin writhing beneath her tongue, soft curves molding to her hands. She cracked her lips to take a steadying breath, fighting to keep control of her thoughts. This was important. She and Isabela were already dangerous enough together and the
traces of this breeding fever only made it worse. Hawke couldn’t even imagine what it was like for Anders with Fenris, the elf practically in rut and lost to anything but the screaming alpha that was burning all along his skin. She held the mage’s gaze firmly as she squeezed his arm. “Don’t get hurt.”

“That’s a bit pot and kettle, don’t you think? Particularly from the slutty pirate’s bed-warmer.” The healer’s teasing words echoed the insults they’d all heard a hundred times from Aveline.

“That depends. Who’s the slutty one, me or her?” The rogue frowned in mock confusion. Anders’ tired chuckle was short and ironic, rather like a dwarf they knew.

“I’d say you’re fairly evenly matched,” the mage shrugged before a serious thought pushed the smile off his face. “But we both know who’s more at risk here, Hawke.”

“My sex-crazed partner can’t magically rip my heart out of my chest.” Hawke cocked one brow, daring him to argue.

“Actually,” Anders took a deep breath, letting it out as a sigh before turning sad eyes back on her, “I think she can.”

Limbs that felt heavy as iron sank gratefully into a steaming bath. Hawke sighed as she rested back against the edge of the tub. There were serious perks to having Sandal around. Besides the armor and weapon enchantments, and endlessly creative conversations he had with his mabari best friend, there were these wonderful runes he crafted that let her have a hot bath in an instant, whenever she liked. Tub, water, magic-y glowing stone and presto! The perfect relief after a long day of fighting ogres, demons and rutting alpha elves.

Despite the decadent luxury slowly melting all the soreness and tension from her muscles, Hawke’s body was humming, alert and impatient. Just a quick soak, enough to scrub clean so she could be on her way. Straight to Anders’ clinic. A thrill raced down her spine at the thought. She glanced at the washroom counter, spying the handful of bottles she’d snagged during her last visit. Green for elfroot, red for heath elixir, yellow for stamina; she had her own miniature apothecary and suspected she’d need each and every one. If Isabela was in the same mood as the last few nights . . .

Hawke rose from the tub so quickly that her footing slipped, almost bringing her down again. She caught herself with the edge of a curtain, chuckling even as she mentally scolded herself. The pirate wasn’t going anywhere and she couldn’t afford anymore head injuries. With a more controlled speed, Hawke toweled off, rubbing hard at her skin to scrape away any trace of Fenris, fighting, and the smell that seemed to cleave inside her nose every time she left that manor. She shook her head, sending a shower of droplets in every direction before finger combing the rebellious spikes into a vague resemblance of order. It didn’t really matter, the short strands were Isabela’s favorite grip; any style would be destroyed long before the night's end.

Each thought of the sailor made Hawke’s heartbeat speed up. Her dulcet, beguiling voice, that voluptuous mouth, the intoxicating sensation of being surrounded by her. Hawke caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, a genuine, delighted smile plastered unabashedly across her face. She still didn’t know what universal contest she’d won, but the prize was hers for taking.

She stepped out of the bathroom, not even bothering to do up the belt of her house robe since she was heading straight for the closet. She needed something quick and easy to get off and on, but also durable. Her last two shirts ended up as casualties to impatience. Perhaps the leather vest.
“Now, that’s a sight worth waiting for.” The honeyed words washed over Hawke like a caress and she stopped in her tracks, turning to stare at the bed. *Don’t gawk, don’t gawk, don’t -!* The only way to keep her mouth from falling open was to clench her jaw so tight that a jolt of pain shot into her ear. She suddenly felt like she’d been sucking on wool for days, tongue sticking behind her teeth.

“Absolutely,” Hawke breathed, raking her eyes over the expanse of smooth, dark skin on display. The pirate’s only adornment was her trademark gold jewelry that glinted so enticingly in the candlelight. If Hawke had been knocked unconscious and dragged into the Fade she couldn’t have met a more tantalizing vision.

“Hawke, sweetness,” Isabela purred as she rose languidly on the bed, coming up to her knees but letting them slide open across the silk duvet, pure invitation. “Get over here.”

The Fereldan didn’t have to be told twice, closing the space between them in two long strides. Isabela met her at the edge of the bed, already reaching to shove the flimsy material off Hawke’s shoulders. The exotic woman moved like an animal; graceful and raw, seductive and primal all at once. That first meeting of skin against skin, sinew and flesh, muscle and curves molding into each other like pieces made to fit together; such sweet relief. Hawke let Isabela’s mouth swallow her sigh as they crashed together. She tangled one hand in the pirate’s loose hair, reveling in the feel of those silky strands loose around her fingers. The other hand glided a feathery trail down the small of her back, as delicate as an Orlesian sculpture. She felt a soft laugh under Isabela’s breath, tickled by the light touch. That turned into a full-throated purr of approval when Hawke slid lower, filling her palm with the generous curve of the sailor’s ass and gripping hard enough to leave her mark.

The thought of Isabela’s skin carrying her brand sent a bolt of molten arousal straight to her core. They’d left their mark on each other countless times; love bites, scratches, finger-shaped bruises. Hawke’s blood sang to her of more. She felt her mouth salivating in want of skin, a lick of salt against her tongue, the throb of a racing heart pulsing beneath her teeth.

“What the -?!?” Hawke tore her lips away from Isabela’s, gulping down air to try to calm the fire in her head, never mind the inferno in her body.

“What’s the problem?” Isabela teased, a note of laughing delight dancing beneath her words as if she sensed the Fereldan’s warring instincts.

“I just,” Hawke’s eyes fluttered shut as strong fingers cradled her cheek like a treasure, turning her face to plant wet kisses along her jaw, “I thought you’d still be at the clinic.”

“Mmmm.” Isabela’s low rumble might have been agreement or just a hum of approval at the way Hawke leaned so willingly into her touch. “Bossy Britches and her boy toy came to relieve me. Said that they’d take care of our kitten since we might get too,” the pirate’s tongue licked against the shell of Hawke’s ear, “Distracted.”

Even with the chaos igniting throughout her body, Hawke managed to laugh. Of course it was Aveline. The guard captain had never been shy about voicing her opinion of Hawke’s . . . thing with Isabela. She was utterly convinced the two rogues brought out the worst in each other and reminded them both of it frequently. Most recently, when she’d found them in the alley behind Anders’ clinic with Isabela’s hand down Hawke’s pants. Naturally, the pirate had made matters worse by pointing out that they had to come outside because when they had sex in Merrill’s room it upset the omega. Hawke was absolutely certain that Isabela did things like that just for the sake of seeing Aveline go speechless and purple.

“I’ll thank her tomorrow,” Hawke breathed. The scent of her lover’s skin filled her nose, a familiar mixture of ocean and alcohol, exotic spices overlaying musky tones. Cedar, cinnamon, brine,
whiskey, cardamom. Something sweet underneath the whole, threading through everything and weaving it all together. She pressed closer, seeking to fill herself with the intoxicating smell.

“After you’re done thanking me.” Isabela’s head tilted back, momentarily lost in the feel of Hawke’s face buried against her shoulder, lips and tongue seeking ever closer to her throat. The Fereldan’s mouth hit the taste of metal and growled in irritation. She lifted a hand to the elaborate necklace that encased her lover’s neck, vaguely wondering where to even begin searching for the clasp.

“Ah-ah-ah,” the sailor chided, prying those questing fingers away from her jewelry. “A woman has to have her glamour. And secrets.”

The way that last word hissed into her ear! Like wind whipping teasingly away down abandoned alleys. Hawke longed to chase after it, to ask, to beg Isabela to share all her secrets and mysteries and lay herself bare. She wanted to drink in every part of her, drown in the pirate’s sea, devour and possess her completely. What shreds of logic left in her mind screamed violently at her, remembering that none of that was part of their deal.

“Bela, this,” Hawke’s sentence was interrupted by a sharp gasp when fingers trailed expertly between her legs, “This isn’t us. Isn’t me. Something isn’t right.”

“Silly thing,” Isabela’s throaty chuckle rasped against her cheek, following the trail of her teeth, “It’s the breeding fever. You need this. We both do.”

“Need what?” Hawke’s tongue darted across her dry lips, unable to make sense of the spinning desires, fantasies and realities as they fractured within her thoughts. She’d been around omegas in heat before, nothing like this had ever happened. She’d never felt like she was suffocating under the weight of her lust, able to breathe only because she was pressed against her lover’s flesh.

Isabela’s lithe fingers threaded into the short hair at the base of Hawke’s neck, nails teasing over sensitive skin. The pirate’s pleased smile turned feral as she felt the shudders that followed her touch. She leaned closer, words like dragon’s breath against Hawke’s ear as she described everything she wanted from the rogue, everything Hawke was going to do.

“Oh, sweet fuck,” the Fereldan groaned, legs going weak as a knife of heat twisted in her gut. She dropped to her knees, fisting the bedcover to keep what was left of her balance. Soothing hands glided under her chin, over her cheeks, coaxing her to look up at the Queen of the Eastern Seas above her. A debauched goddess awaiting worship.

“Can you do that for me, Hawke?” Isabela’s mellifluous voice was cracking at the edges, the ache of need burning through. Just like her eyes; molten coals smoldering in demand. Hawke didn’t actually know if she could. She’d never tried. But, Maker’s Blazing Balls, she desperately wanted to. She nodded, too many words tangled on her tongue to find any voice.

Isabela’s lashes fluttered briefly, like feathers on a breeze, before opening once more. Hawke’s hands seized against the flesh of the pirate’s thighs at the sight of the naked lust blazing into her. She watched as the sailor positioned herself, gracefully slipping into place as if she were simply relaxing in a chair at the Hanged Man. One foot rested against Hawke’s shoulder, the bangle around her ankle chiming melodically with every movement of her leg. The other foot fell to the floor, spreading herself wide to Hawke’s hungry gaze. The Fereldan dove forward, not caring about grace or seduction or skill, just the roar in her veins demanding as much of the smell and taste of this woman as she could possibly get. She ran her tongue through the slick folds, up one side and down the other, sucking swollen flesh between her lips and exulting in every sound that Isabela couldn’t quite control as she worked closer to her prize.
The pirate’s core was already dripping, wetness spilling onto Hawke’s lips that made both rogues moan as mouth and heat worked against each other in tandem. She lost herself in the flavor of her lover; the salty tang and briny sweetness that poured over her tongue with every plunge into slippery, velvet fire.

“Hawke,” Isabela’s heel pushed against her shoulder, too gentle to shove her away but enough to get her attention, “Don’t tease.”

The noble just nodded, her gentle vibration making the muscled thighs in her hands spasm. Leaning back, she slid two fingers into the pulsing heat that welcomed her like it had been made for her touch. Hawke couldn’t hold back the low moan that crawled up her throat when slick walls clenched so hungrily around her. She curled her fingers, making sure to stroke along the swollen inner wall that made Isabela’s breath hitch with every pass. Before long she could set a rhythm, the building wetness easing each thrust. Two fingers became three and Isabela’s raspy curse urged her on. Hawke plunged in hard and fast, drawing her fingers out with a deliberate curl, catching each moan that broke on the pirate’s lips. Three fingers turned to four and Isabela’s hips bucked against her, rising to meet each thrust and draw her in ever deeper to the clasping heat of her body.

“More, Hawke,” Isabela moaned, whole body writhing as she let her lover set the pace. “Everything. Give me all of you.”

“Fuck, Bela,” Hawke gasped, feeling wetness course over her fingers, “I want to... going to... Going to give you everything.”

Her knuckles were already disappearing into pink, glistening flesh; half her hand, and she’d never seen anything like it. Toes were curling against her shoulder, simultaneously trying to push her away and pull her closer. Isabela’s fingers had gone white fisting the duvet but nothing escaped her mouth other than urgent pleas and hungry moans. Hawke took a long, steadying breath before tucking her thumb tight against her palm.

The thickest part of her hand pressed forward, feeling the pirate’s muscles shudder and begin to give way. The cry that fell from Isabela’s lips made Hawke panic. She started to pull back but a grip like iron instantly circled her wrist, holding her in place.

“Don’t you dare stop.” Isabela’s eyes were nothing but dangerously glinting obsidian. She’d risen on one elbow, determined to keep Hawke close. The Fereldan couldn’t resist leaning in, capturing a kiss from those panting, swollen lips. She felt the hand around her wrist let go, reaching up to thread into her hair as the kiss deepened, pouring wordless assurances of want back and forth across tongues.

Isabela fell away from the kiss when Hawke began pushing forward again. She kept a slow, steady pressure, working ever deeper into the tightness that refused to surrender a single inch of her fingers. She circled her tongue around the throbbing flesh of Isabela’s clit, sucking it into her mouth before letting go with a wet pop, her free hand rubbing over the engorged flesh in time with Isabela’s rocking hips. Hawke watched, mesmerized, as Isabela’s wetness frothed around her hand, easing the last few inches. With a sudden gasp, the breadth of her knuckles slipped inside. Isabela’s head fell back against the bed as her spine arched, fucking herself on Hawke’s fist.

“Fuck, Hawke,” the pirate moaned, hips rolling obscenely as she took in all that she could. Hawke roused from her hypnotized paralysis, twisting and thrusting her wrist in time with Isabela’s accelerating rhythm. She could feel each inch of herself sheathed in the woman, the flutter of her inner walls on every side.

“That’s it, Bela,” Hawke crooned, lips and tongue returning to the throbbing point at the apex of her sex. “Take it. Take it all.”
She could feel that Isabela was on the verge of breaking, losing their rhythm, bucking uncontrollably. Without warning, fingers tugged violently at her hair, dragging the noble to rise up the pirate’s body and meet her lips halfway. The feverish kiss was sloppy, interrupted by gasps and curses until Isabela couldn’t hold herself anymore. The sailor broke away, burying her face against Hawke’s shoulder as the final cascade pushed her over the edge. The feel of slick muscles trembling around her fingers echoed the quakes Hawke could feel rocking through Isabela’s entire body.

“-k!” Hawke couldn’t tell if Isabela’s cry was an expletive or her own name, just a percussive sound echoing off the bedroom walls. The pirate’s open mouth clamped down, teeth biting into the tender flesh of Hawke’s shoulder and an instantaneous burst of heat flooded her whole body, shaking her apart and sweeping her away into the same delicious destruction that had consumed Isabela.

Hawke collapsed against her lover, cheek pressed tight to the curve of the pirate’s belly, vaguely aware that she could feel every heartbeat and breath. She wasn’t sure she could move. Wasn’t sure when she should. Her free hand fumbled up Isabela’s body, finding limp fingers to tangle with her own. Hawke’s knees were chafed from the carpet and her back was sore in this position but the overwhelming sensation that flooded her being was a luxurious fatigue, sleep weighing her eyes and holding her in place. *Should’ve taken a stamina draught.* Hawke’s final thought chided her before everything faded black.
Isabela and the Heat Wave

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Isabela drifted back into her body with a lazy stretch of her sleepy limbs. An abrupt wince fully awakened her with a startling realization. Hawke was still inside. A sharp breath flared her nostrils. She rolled her hips, exploring the sensation of still being stretched, filled to the limit and joined to another. She hadn’t felt anything like it in so long. Hadn’t needed it in even longer. Not since . . . Isabela bit the inside of her cheek, willing the memories away.

Too late. A bloom of heat unfurled once more. Her muscles rippled, reacting to a primal instinct long lost but never forgotten. The pulsing movement must’ve roused Hawke, Isabela could feel the flutter of eyelashes against her stomach. The tickle was soothed by the rub of a cheek, then small kisses feathering an intricate pattern along the cleft of her belly.

“Sbela,” Hawke mumbled into her skin, words slurring as she cobbled her own shattered senses back together, “That was amazing.”

“For me, anyway.” The pirate’s chuckle felt like blades in her throat. How loud had she screamed? There was the taste of copper on her tongue, like she’d bit her cheek to hold back cries. She looked down at Hawke, the rogue was only partially sprawled on her body and mostly on the floor. It didn’t look comfortable but there was nothing in the Fereldan’s face but languid content.

“Me too.” That Hawke could still blush, after everything they’d done, was so adorable that Isabela momentarily wanted to sweep her up onto the bed and devour her with kisses. The pirate prided herself on being generous in the sheets and Hawke’s exquisite sensitivity was one of the things that made her such a desirable partner. The ability to get off on another’s pleasure was a rare gift. They stayed staring at each other for a long time; far too long, Isabela realized.

“If you’re planning on moving in we’re going to have to talk about rent, sweets.” Isabela gave a subtle roll of her hips to remind Hawke of their position, trying to ignore the jolt of heat that even such a small movement caused. The Fereldan’s eyes shot down, mouth moving wordlessly for a moment before simply spreading into a shameless grin.

“I can think of worse things,” the cheeky rogue shot back with a wink. A little of the audacity left her face as she tried to pull her wrist, stopping the instant Isabela felt a gasp cross her lips. A pulse of mild shock rolled up from her core, hips rocking to chase the sensation. The thickest part of Hawke’s hand was still inside her, pressing against the exact spot that her body was trembling in a war to protect or surrender. She could feel wetness trickling over the Fereldan’s knuckles, and a soft moan against her belly told her that Hawke felt it too.

Bed sheets twisted between her fingers as Isabela writhed, beginning a languid, rolling rhythm that let her tight muscles stretch once more, throbs of heat opening her up. The scrape of teeth and nails covered her inner thigh, tongue strumming across taut, flexing tendons. Hawke’s breath sent shivers over the flesh between her legs, a prelude to wet warmth laving through her folds. That wicked tongue of hers knew all of Isabela’s weak spots and wasted no time finding her favorite, showering the swollen nub with slow licks and sharp teeth and the long, hard suck that felt like it was pulling Isabela’s every sense to a pinpoint focus.

Could be worse things. Isabela clenched a knuckle between her teeth, biting down to hold back the far too soon, far too powerful groan building in her throat. To be filled like this was too much. It had
been so long but never like this, never before. Never Hawke. The smell and sound of her wrapping around the pirate’s every sense. The sweaty spikes of black hair spilling through her fingers, the strong hand gripping her hip, the low vibration of moans buried between her legs because Hawke couldn’t bear to pull herself away for even a second. The burning satisfaction of being so completely taken, full beyond the edge of reason, muscles straining to hold her in, pull her deep. Sweet Andraste, if it was a knot...Isabela’s groan got away from her.

She wrenched her eyes open, pulling away from visions far too dangerous. She fixed her attention on Hawke, only to realize reality wasn’t much safer. Dark blue eyes were staring up at her through thick eyelashes and the loose strands of black hair forever in her face. The predatory heat of that gaze, like a hunter fixed on prey; the unapologetic, raw demand of it sent a violent shiver up Isabela’s spine. The first rolling pebble before a rockslide. She fell back, consumed in a firestorm that arced from her center to every edge of her being, barely able to hear her own sweet cry of release as it mingled with her lover’s shuddering gasp.

She didn’t black out this time, vaguely aware of Hawke’s mouth and fingers easing her through the rolling aftershocks. Then, slowly, she felt the pressure of Hawke’s hand pulling free. The wet sound was too similar to the noise of Isabela ripping her dagger out of someone’s heart and she sucked in a sharp breath, waiting for the ache to fade. The bed shifted under her, an unsteady body climbing up to rest at her side. A glance to her right revealed Hawke laid out beside her, acknowledging that—even in the afterglow—the sailor couldn’t bear to be weighed down.

The weary Fereldan looked every inch the mess that Isabela felt. Sweat beaded along her skin, lips dark and lush, eyes blown wide but lidded, heavy with the instinct to close and lose herself in every other sense. An utterly wanton portrait of sin. Isabela’s lips curled into a lazy smile, rolling onto her side to press against the other rogue. She traced her fingertips over the livid marks that were souvenirs of her touch, small bruises and long scratches and the tiny red crescents of her nails clenching too tight. Love bites splashed color all over pale skin; a range from the soft pink shape of a kiss to angry, mottled bruises. Isabela brushed her lips over each mark, following the trail she’d blazed up Hawke’s shoulder and relishing every sigh that echoed her mouth’s caress.

Then, beneath one particularly large and lovely discoloration, her lips found a familiar, frightening wound; a pattern that filled her with an overwhelming war of horror and victory. That lingering taste of metal she’d ignored suddenly filled her whole mouth, bitter and sweet. Hawke hissed when Isabela’s tongue dragged over the bite, jerking away from the surprising sting.

“Shit, Bela, what did you do?” Hawke twisted her head, trying in vain to see her own neck.

“Don’t be such a baby. I’ve done worse,” Isabela chided, brushing away any concern. Except for the ones that lingered worriedly in the back of her mind. She hadn’t. She wouldn’t have. Hawke reached up to explore the new injury, fingers learning its shape and edge until she could finally make sense of the foreign pattern. Understanding washed over her face with a smug grin.

“You trying to claim me, Captain?” Hawke teased, clearly proud of herself for working out the connection. Isabela rolled her eyes at the Fereldan’s cocky laugh. It was too much to hope the other rogue would ignore this slip. Fortunately, she certainly knew enough ways to make her forget.

“Just going for a bit of authenticity, sweetness,” the pirate murmured, dropping her voice to the dusky, rich tone that always made Hawke’s pulse flutter. “You know how I like to be very, very,” Isabela’s lips hovered just above the other woman’s, each word teasing over her mouth, “Thorough.”

“Maker’s ass.” The pirate took Hawke’s breathless exclamation as proof that the hard, ravaging kiss had done exactly what she wanted. But then the rogue was chuckling again, smiling in that innocent, worrisome way as she rolled to mirror Isabela’s position. She propped her head up in one hand,
utterly at ease as she elaborated, “I’m glad we don’t have to mess with any of that shit.”

“Supernatural backides, you mean?” Isabela quipped. She tossed one leg over a slender hip, hooking Hawke close against her. Despite her playful smirk, she doubted that was what Hawke meant.

“That too,” Hawke agreed with a laugh. “No, I meant all the alpha and omega stuff. Breeding cycles, rut, mating bites. Seems exhausting.”

“It would be a nuisance,” Isabela hummed thoughtfully, smiling in relief that Hawke didn’t seem to want to explore the subject of the bite any further. She needed to work out an answer for herself before she could craft a lie.

“Is this what it’s like for them? The two of us over these past few days . . .” Hawke let the thought trail away, a dreamy smile overtaking words.

“We’re just collateral damage, sweetness. For them it’s much, much worse.” Isabela shook her head, an odd surge of pity weighing on her tongue.

“Flaming knickers. Then we have got to find someone for Merrill,” the Fereldan sighed, a groan of frustration lacing her words.

“I’ve tried. You’re the one who’s always saying no one is good enough.” A dark finger poked Hawke’s chest, accusatory and playful.

“That’s because all your ideas are for one night tumbles and assholes that just want to play a bit of naughty mage and Templar.” Hawke grabbed at the offending finger, capturing it against her breast.

“Ooh, that’s a fun one. She’d probably be good at it,” Isabela laughed, opening her hand to welcome the soft flesh against her palm.

“Merrill needs more than that. She deserves better.” Hawke’s voice went from weak to strong, mirroring the squeeze of the sailor’s fingers.

“Like what?” Isabela wasn’t terribly interested in the conversation anymore, but it was keeping them distracted while their bodies recharged. Pillow talk was hardly her amusement of choice; unfortunately it was sometimes necessary until she felt ready for another round. She shifted her hand, alternating from slow pressure to feather-light circles over Hawke’s breast.

“Merrill will fall in love before she falls in bed, Bela. She deserves someone that will take her home and keep her safe. Someone to protect her.” Hawke’s ability to argue so eloquently despite the distraction of her lover’s subtle attacks was impressive.

Someone like you. Isabel looked up from where she’d been watching Hawke’s nipple pebble so prettily between her fingers. The other rogue’s eyes had fallen shut, content to relax in the pirate’s arms and surrender to her whims. A melancholy pride slithered under her thoughts, understanding what Hawke probably didn’t even realize she’d said. No one else was good enough for Merrill because no one was as good as Hawke. No one could lead and protect and love like this stubborn, cavalier hero who’d unwittingly cobbled together her unlikely band of friends, leading them through death and back again.

“Then I suppose she needs an alpha.” Isabela watched Hawke’s face closely, alert for any clue, the slightest betrayal of instinct.

“Void, no!” Hawke’s bark of laughter was hardly subtle, nor the cringe of her eyes. “Alphas are all
“assholes.”

“And when did you get so judgmental? I always thought you were the live and let die type.” Isabela had never known Hawke to rule out entire groups of people. She usually preferred to hate them on an individual basis. She’d defend Tevinter malefics just for the sake of a good argument.

“I’ve met enough alphas to know they’re trouble. They’re always politicians and Templars and idiots with ridiculously huge weapons because they think size is all that matters.” Hawke rolled her eyes, flopping onto her back to glare at the ceiling. It took a surprising amount of irritation to lure her away from Isabela’s touch.

The pirate had no idea her lover had such strong opinions on the subject. Come to think of it, they had been butting heads with the dominant breeders an awful lot these past few years. Perhaps it was because alphas naturally ended up in positions of responsibility and power, or perhaps because it took someone like Hawke to clean up their messes. Fenris and Merrill were quick to let their friends know when one of Hawke’s jobs had them crossing paths with another of their kind, and it always seemed to be alphas causing the worst of the shit.

“What about Fenris?” Isabela’s thoughts wandered towards the white haired elf. He was certainly a handful. And then some.

“Exactly my point. That sword of his? That’s definitely some overcompensation.” Hawke shot her a quick wink like she’d read the pirate’s mind. “Fenris is a good friend. When we aren’t beating each other senseless for days to keep him from going on a homicidal breeding spree. He’s practically the bad alpha poster child: short tempered, aggressive, control issues, no discipline. If trouble had a package –.”

“Then his would still be twice as big.” Isabela rolled onto the Fereldan’s chest, pinning her just in time to feel the woman’s body shake with horrified laughter. The full-throated burst of sound was melody and gravel, free and enchanting; Isabela delighted in the echo that vibrated into her.

“You’re absolutely terrible,” the noble groaned, laugh fading into a wheeze. Hawke’s hands absently stroked up the pirate’s arms, creating intricate designs of goosebumps across her skin.

“Mmm,” Isabela smiled in agreement, “And I’m not even an alpha. They aren’t all like that, you know. There was a rather sweet one with those slaves I freed. A bit shy but absolutely refused to escape until she’d made sure all the others were safe.”

“Wait, ‘she?’” Hawke’s hands stilled their movements, grip tightening in surprise on the sailor’s arms. The lazy smirk that had curled one edge of her mouth turned towards serious.

“‘Yes, Lynvira, or something like that I think. Cute little thing, couldn’t have presented more than a year before.’ The pirate thought back, recalling a very shapely length of muscled leg and surprisingly delicate face. Tevinter bastards probably would have paid triple for her. She felt Hawke shift, the rogue lifting up to her elbows on the bed, raising Isabela with her. The Fereldan blinked at her, eyes narrow in disbelief.

“You’ve met an alpha female?” The question was so incredulous, so skeptical but still edged in wonder. She might as well have just asked if Isabela had a pair of Andraste’s knickers.

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“Of course, sweet cheeks. They’re rare, not imaginary.” Isabela started to chuckle but was cut short when Hawke sat the rest of the way up, gently pulling the pirate upright as well until they were seated facing each other.
“How is that possible? I thought the Chantry-.” Hawke frowned, puzzling through a dozen arguments. Isabela cut them off with a finger on the woman’s lips.

“The Chantry doesn’t have nearly as much control as they like to think. All whip, no chains,” Isabela smirked. “The Dalish need every child they can have, no matter what a Divine hag says. The Imperium simply went the opposite way; more alphas makes a stronger empire, or some rot like that.” There were few places better to be an alpha woman than in Tevinter. Few places worse for an omega man. All that foolishness about bloodlines and titles and seats on the Magisterium. An entire nation built on the principles of selective breeding, from nobles all the way down to slaves, and what was the result? The whole place was just plain fucked.

“Then they still aren’t common in the south.” Hawke’s vaguely disappointed conclusion brought Isabela back from her rather irritated rumination.

“Trust me, sweetness, wherever you find them, they could never be called common.” The pirate deliberately darted her tongue across her lips. “I’ve found they pop up in all sorts of odd places. One is a noble in Antiva, another runs a brothel in Nevarra. Most tend to stay on the move to avoid attracting attention, but it happens regardless. They’re,” Isabela paused, searching for the right words to describe the illusive, “Hard to ignore. I’ve met them in Cumberland, Treviso, Llomeryn, Val Royeaux, Denerim . . .”

The memory of Denerim was particularly distracting. The pirate unconsciously roved her fingers over Hawke’s naked legs.

“What are they like?” Hawke’s eyes sparkled with mischief, reading the wander of Isabela’s thoughts and hands. No hint of malice or jealousy in her voice, just that same playful amusement that always turned her lips in a smirk. Hawke’s fingers covered the pirate’s, guiding her questing touches to explore higher.

Like you. Isabela’s tongue twisted behind her teeth, holding back the words. The truth was a knot in her throat. The memory of the last alpha woman she’d met was particularly stubborn in clinging to the back of her eyes, filling her head with everything that was the same as this moment. Charming and brave, loyal and selfless. The ability to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders like it was just a drunk friend she’s helping stagger home. Just like you.

“Well, I only had the pleasure of knowing a few of them in the fullest sense,” Isabela drew out her reply, letting the unspoken meaning slip between the words as she leaned closer to her audience, “But they were exceptionally gifted.”

“I’d expect no less,” Hawke’s laugh was a rumble low in her chest, arms wrapping tightly around Isabela to draw the pirate into her lap. “But that means I have quite the problem, you know.”

“Does it?” The sailor inquired innocently, easily slipping into the familiar, intimate position. Hawke’s body always welcomed her like a lock to a key, all those lines and edges wrapping snugly around her, holding her in place.

“MmHmm,” the Fereldan confirmed, one hand cradling the back of Isabela’s head to guide the sailor’s mouth along her throat. She got a warning of the coming joke when the pulse beneath her teeth sped up for a split second, tendons taut as Hawke turned to whisper in her ear, “Because when I meet one of these unusual, unforgettable, gifted women, how am I going to explain that I have a pirate’s brand?”

“It won’t matter.” The answer slipped out before Isabela realized what she was saying, only the echo of the words burning in her ears. Her fists clenched in determination, coincidentally digging into
Hawke’s shoulders and eliciting a pleased sigh. “Like you said, sweets, that bollocks isn’t for the likes of us. Just don’t pick at it and the damn thing will go away.”

“Fine.” Hawke gave a petulant, protesting whine but the pirate could feel her smiling as they kissed. She pushed forward, pinning the other rogue against the sheets as their mouths fell into a more heated duel, bodies recharged and ready to begin again. It will go away. Isabela repeated the thought in her mind like a mantra, even as her mouth played over the fresh wound, tongue exploring each curve and divot of the bite. It has to.

Chapter End Notes

Forgot to say in the last chapter: comments are still welcome and highly appreciated. Keeping the characters on point and the story (aka sex) enjoyable depends a lot on feedback. Thanks for taking time to read and let me know what you thought!
Aftershocks

Chapter Notes

No smut this chapter. Time for some actual plot! Sort of. I wanted to take some time to get inside all the characters’ heads; like stretching in new shoes or something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Hanged Man was never empty on any night. Kirkwall had a constant supply of gamblers, drunks, cons and unfortunate victims all washing up on its bedraggled docks; and they all, somehow, found their way to this one dank sanctuary. There were inevitably those newcomers and slow learners who didn’t know that the large table closest to the bar was unofficially reserved for Hawke and her friends. Not that the Ferelden had ever explicitly staked a claim, or even voiced a preference for that location. It just happened that every time she walked in the door, Norah immediately bustled her and her friends towards that table. If other asses happened to be occupying the seats, she rousted them with a flurry of swats from her bar towel and repeated threats of getting cut off. Varric wasn’t sure if she meant liquor or their balls but no one ever stuck around long enough to find out. Hawke used to put up a weak protest at the special treatment but inevitably gave in. It was the best table, after all.

“I think it’s because she has a crush on Hawke,” Isabela mused, eyes making a languid catalogue of the barmaid’s attractions. That she could carry ten pints, shortchange drunks a silver or better without getting caught, and throw out rabble armed with nothing more dangerous than a wooden spoon all weighed heavily in her favor.

“More like her gold. Let’s face it: Hawke buys the most rounds any night.” Aveline had a surprising depth of cynicism beneath all that do-gooder shine.

“Only because she’s still terrible at Wicked Grace.” Varric shuffled the deck, getting his fingers limber for their game.

“I am not,” Hawke protested, a hint of offense rising in the color of her cheeks. “I’m just not as good as you two.”

“Don’t pout, sweet thing, it makes all your admirers jealous,” Isabela chided, one hand moving with a lightning reflex to catch Varric’s fingers mid-shuffle. She flipped his wrist, revealing the Angel of Death that had managed, by some convenient accident, to get stuck in his palm. Isabela tsked, disappointed by the shoddy execution of the cheat, but not the cheat itself.

“It’s early, Rivaini. Just wait.” Varric surrendered the card and deck to the sailor. Decades of expertly swindling with the best and worst of the gamblers in the Free Marches, and he knew he’d never matched wits against worse than the pirate captain.

“You see, Hawke, playing games is the same with cards as in bed.” Isabela deftly cut and shuffled the deck with one hand, her other trailing up the back of Hawke’s neck, making sure she had the other woman’s full attention. “You can play fair and make everyone happy, or you can play dirty and have all the fun.”

“So I’m not as good at cheating as the two of you,” Hawke corrected herself, leaning towards
Isabela’s tempting lips like she would catch a kiss. The split second of distraction was enough time for the Fereldan to snag the deck, stealing it free from dark fingers. The sailor gave them up without protest, a confident curl of her full mouth promising that she’d have control again before the night ended. Of more than one game.

“In bed or at cards? Which were we talking about?” Merrill looked back and forth between the two rogue women, trying to divine the secret conversation going on between sparkling blue and sultry amber. Isabela’s eyes had a way of trapping Hawke’s like shards of glass in honey.

“Don’t mind them, Daisy, they’re just being crazy. As usual.” Varric snapped his fingers, catching their attention. Games within games were all well and good, but they needed actual cards in their hands to start playing.

Hawke dealt out, fingers that were smooth and sure with traps and weapons strangely tended to fumble with the waxy surface of the deck. It was that awkwardness that tipped Varric ages ago to Hawke’s real game. The bets and trades went around; fifty coppers, knight of roses, a chipped opal, bottle of brandy, serpent of decay, silver ring, you can’t bet that, yes I can, it’s stolen, so is Fenris’ brandy. The game was more about the players than the cards and Varric knew these friends had learned as much about each other here at this table as in the heat of battle. He certainly had.

Fenris, sullen and spikey; the man with a lost past and sad eyes that made women positively melt. Varric privately thought it was a bit of a cliché, the tortured soul looking for a home routine, but damn if it didn’t work. Women love fixing things, after all. Too bad the elf’s taste ran towards getting blown apart instead. A vocal mage hater but still spent more of his free time in the company of mages than the Templars themselves. Well, one mage, anyway. Shit, what was it like when Fenris went to visit Anders at the clinic? Did small children cower under the tables in fear? Maidens offer to play naughty nurse? Did Fenris even visit Anders in Lowtown, or was theirs an exclusively depressing manor rendezvous arrangement? Varric had seen love/hate relationships before. He wasn’t sure he’d ever witnessed hate/hate like this.

Thinking of Anders, Varric cast his eyes over the mage. He tended to mutter under his breath constantly through the game. When it was a good hand he murmured old incantations and spells, playful bits of magic that had undoubtedly gotten him into trouble in the Circle years before. A bad hand led to darker thoughts, the old oath of the Grey Wardens whispered like a dying man’s last curse. How one man could be so altruistically helpful and passionately violent at the same time was enough to make the dwarf’s head hurt. He chalked all the contradictions up to Justice. Demons screwed with everything. Still, Varric couldn’t help wondering what the healer was like before he let pity offer up his body like a room to be shared.

Sebastien never joined them for these evenings. Gambling and drinking were both “corrupt vices of the flesh,” and damn if that boy couldn’t use some corruption. Too bad, he’d have to keep getting his kicks off untouchable Chantry virgins and all those suggestive portraits of Andraste. Maker’s Holy Bosom indeed.

“I’ve had that girl in my office five times this week asking if anyone has found her ring. It was an engagement present!” Aveline startled Varric from his musing when she thumped her fist on the table, making everything jump.

“Then this is your chance, isn’t it, Big Girl? Win it off me and you’ll make some maiden very happy. Which is what I’m sure your mother said for years when you were scaring off all the boys.” Isabela rolled her eyes.

She had so little patience for the guard captain and vice versa; Varric wasn’t sure if it was because they existed at opposite ends of the law spectrum or if it was something more fundamentally
personal. Something like the way Hawke cringed every time she was caught in another one of their arguments. Aveline made no secret of her bond with her fellow Ferelden; they’d escaped the Blight together, lost together, struggled and survived and conquered together. Isabela made no such claim, other than to fight back tooth and nail (well, lips and tongue) to prove that Hawke was free to choose her own diversions, and Hawke chose her every time. Varric didn’t envy the refugee-turned-aristocrat. Caught between a moral, righteous friend that she loved and respected, and the shameless, diabolical seductress to whom she was utterly lost. They fought so fiercely in front of her, did they even know they were fighting over her instead?

Aveline managed to leave Varric with two constantly conflicting opinions in his head. On the one hand, she was a hard ass like none he’d ever met before and his trigger finger got extra sweaty when she was around, expecting that, at any moment, she was going to yell at him like a recruit and make him do a hundred pushups. On the other, she was just the kind of hardboiled egg that anyone would love to crack into and find something soft beneath the shell. She’d make a great character for one of his novels. Not Hard in Hightown, that had a full cast already and she’d just make Donnen Brennikovic’s life too difficult. She’d probably overshadow him too. No, an Aveline character deserved her own story. One with lots of battle and honor and duty, for sure. And romance. Oh, yes. Varric felt a small smile creep over his face as he looked at the intractable warrior. Yes, she’d be perfect when she melted to putty in the pages of a romance. Couldn’t make her a guard captain, though, too obvious. Something with the same amount of danger and moral code . . . a Templar. Jackpot. Varric’s fingers were already starting to twitch for a quill and ink.

“Oh, that’s the bad one isn’t it?” Merrill held up the Angel of Death in worried surprise, like a lizard she’d found creeping in her cabinets.

“Not for you, Daisy.” Varric couldn’t stop his eyebrow twitching up ever so slightly, noting the three other angels in her hand. Even when he’d seen it a dozen times now, it never failed to surprise him. How in the Ancestor’s Asses did she do it?

“And Merrill takes the pot. I can’t even beat a Dalish,” Hawke sighed, throwing her cards to the table and signaling for another round. The clench of her jaw would’ve fooled most of their friends but Varric had learned to detect the slight differences in each twitch of her face. That wasn’t frustration flickering in the muscle, or a scowl held at bay, it was a smile she had to suppress. The dwarf didn’t have a coprolite clue how, but he knew Hawke always rigged the game in Merrill’s favor. She needed the money more than any of the rest of them and the noble made sure she got it. What sleight of hand or tricks of the deck she used, he couldn’t figure out. He’d never tried to cheat for someone other than himself. Mildly chastened but overwhelmed in a surge of respect, Varric was certain that Hawke was better at cards than himself and Rivaini combined.

“’I like big boats,’ it’s what she said, I swear!” Hawke repeated over the roar of disbelief and delight that rose up from the table.

When the night’s revelries progressed too far to bother with bluffing, they resorted to their second favorite pastime: bullshit without bets. Varric’s tales from tangling with the carta, Isabela’s exploits among the Raiders, Anders and his stories of traveling with the famed Hero of Ferelden; they were never short of adventures ripe for recounting and embellishment in the occasional spot where history had left life a bit boring. This latest sojourn of Hawke’s into the Fade was perfect grist for the story mill.

“You should have let me knock her out the moment we knew it was a Desire demon. Those two were bound to be nothing but trouble,” Aveline frowned, shooting a quick glare at the Rivaini sailor.
Isabela replied with a wink and blown kiss, well aware that anything she might say would get drowned out by the raucous noise of laughing protests on all sides.

“And miss our Queen of the Eastern Seas going head to head with a Desire demon? Not on Andraste’s own ass,” Hawke snorted. “Really, Varric, you’d have been proud. For a minute there I wasn’t sure who was doing the seducing. Then the damn thing went and started talking about rigging and mastheads and all kinds of sailor sexy talk.”

“I could’ve hit her then, too,” Aveline grumbled as she took a swig of her ale. Tightly wound prig that she was, the ginger battle-axe could drink with the best of them.

“Tits up, Big Girl. You got to stab me. Twice.” Isabela’s lazy chuckle dismissed the entire argument. Regret and doubts were for people that had no reason to look ahead. Isabela was always looking ahead. Primarily, this evening, she was looking forward to several more mugs of alcohol and collecting on all the silent promises Hawke’s fingers kept inscribing along her skin beneath the table.

“I’m glad I wasn’t there.” Merrill’s quiet voice chimed in. Her large eyes were unusually subdued, staring into her mug as if contemplating all the possibilities of life in her own liquid reflection. Isabela shot a quick glance to Varric, wordlessly warning the dwarf to make sure their friend’s glass didn’t get refilled again. The squat blonde nodded, his own concerned gaze roaming protectively over the elf.

“You couldn’t have been any worse than Anders, Kitten. The way he reacted to that Sloth demon?” Isabela’s eyes darted playfully to the healer. “Just swelled up and went all red, like he was allergic. Reminded me a bit of a second mate of mine, used to do the exact same thing anytime someone gave him nuts.”

“Justice is stronger in the Fade,” Anders tried to defend himself, brow and jaw both twitching in frustration, “He just doesn’t like it there, having to deal with demons.”

“I know how he feels, Blondie, I get the same creepy sensation anytime I have to go home and visit my family too.” Varric clapped the mage’s shoulder, upending a bottle into his mug only to find that barely a few dribbles were left.

“You’d have been fine, Merrill.” Hawke reached out a reassuring hand, squeezing the apostate’s arm. “You’ll be first in line with me on my next attempt to rescue naughty boys from their nightmares. I just thought that, after the week you’ve had, you could use some down time.”

“I should think all of us could, some more than others,” Aveline agreed, shooting a quick glare at Hawke and Isabela.

“Yes, I’m sorry about,” Merrill paused, clearly at a loss for words, “About that, too.”

“Don’t be, Kitten. It’s not your fault. Besides, it made for an exciting few days.” Isabela’s eyes roved happily back to Hawke, favoring her with a salacious wink just before a sharp pain in her shin signaled Aveline’s deepening disapproval. She clearly didn’t think a mating fever was any excuse for their episodes of impulsive hedonism. After all, what was their excuse for all the other times?

“I wish I could remember.” Merrill’s brow knit in innocent consternation, frustrated at being left out of what felt like a massive joke.

“You really don’t.” Aveline glowered at Isabela, a final warning in her eyes. One more hint, one more jest, one more flirtatious double entendre and the Guard Captain would find any one of a dozen pretenses to throw her pirate ass behind bars. The sailor wisely sealed her lips, for now.
“It’s just nice to have everything back to normal now. Our version of it, anyway.” Varric raised his drink in toast. The others echoed his sentiment and clanged their pints together, most finding their mugs too empty for sipping.

“Dry as a desert cleric’s shriveled bits. My turn to fetch.” Isabela was on her feet in an instant, reflexes far too swift considering the amount of liquor she’d imbibed. You could drown the pirate in a barrel of brandy and she’d still be able to duel a band of assassins.

“I’ll help,” Anders got up as well, swaying slightly with the sudden movement but no less eager to head for the bar. Isabela cocked one brow in quiet suspicion and the healer’s eyes briefly darted away, chin tilting down as he muttered what any gambler knew had to be a bluff. “It’s a lot of bottles for this crowd.”

The pirate didn’t question further but turned and crossed the short distance to the bar, her justifiably famous figure cutting a swath through the mob of drunks crowding the counter. The noise around the bar was such that verbal orders were a pointlessly futile endeavor; sign language had long since replaced any attempt at speaking. Corff spied the pirate lounging against the stained wood of the bar like it was her own ship’s rail and held up a three fingers in question. Isabela glanced from him to the table behind her, where Hawke and friends were falling into uproarious laughter once more. With a shake of her head she corrected him, four fingers. They’d easily wipe out another four bottles before the night was done. She felt the press of bodies around her giving way, letting one more person squeeze through like a belated birth. Anders landed against the counter, gripping it with both hands to hold his place against the tide of customers.

“Hawke came to see me earlier today, I’d wanted to apologize for that Fade mess,” Anders began, cut abruptly short when a stocky man with a beard like an untrimmed bush broke between them. Isabela watched, the beginning of a smile quirking at the bored edge of her lips as the healer try to communicate around the stubborn obstruction. Finally, the miniature hawthorn man got his drink and vanished back into the crowd, leaving Anders to try again. “It gave me a chance to give her a physical.”

“Oh, is that what they call it in medical circles?” Isabela leaned one elbow on the bar, facing the reddened mage. He wasn’t usually so easy to fluster. Must already be wound up from all the fun.

“I-I,” Anders had to clear his throat, unclogging the nervous stammer, “I noticed something.”

“Sweets, if you only just noticed that she has a fantastic pair of tits, that’s not my fault. You had your chance before I even came along.” The pirate’s wicked smile spread wider as she watched the man turn a deeper shade of red, rather resembling the color of the signs outside the Rose. Anders had never made a secret of the fact that he thought Hawke could do better than Isabela, subtly implying himself. Now that he was safely pigeonholed (ooh, what a delightful euphemism) by Fenris, he’d stopped acting like such a neglected, jealous girl. But Isabela couldn’t deny the rush of arrogant delight that always swelled her lungs when she got a chance to twist a dagger just a bit in the old wound.

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Anders’ flush turned angry, the line of his mouth far more serious than before.

“No? Pity. I could talk about Hawke’s tits for ages. Her armor really doesn’t do her justice does it? What a surprise, the first time I got all that drab leather undone and -,” the pirate’s lurid recollection was cut short by Anders’ angry snort.

“The bite, Isabela!” The healer clarified, a little louder than necessary. A few eyes turned to them but none from more than four feet away, the shout thankfully swallowed up by the surrounding din.
“Oh, come now. Surely you’ve enjoyed a little nibble from time to time?” Isabela’s flippant hand brushed off the concern, turning her full attention back to the bar and the bottles that were taking far too long to arrive. She was starting to feel parched. She always felt irritable when she was dry.

“Absolutely not.” Anders pushed closer, forcing into the pirate’s space until she had no choice but to acknowledge him again.

“That’s too bad. Our brooding bit of man-candy has quite the set of fangs.” Isabela straightened, folding her arms and tossing a glance towards Fenris. The white haired elf was displaying the sharp assets in one of his unusual and rare smiles, reacting to something either Hawke or Varric had said. Odd that he looked even more dangerous when he was happy.

“Yes.” Anders followed her gaze, momentarily lost in appreciating the view. Then he dragged his attention back to the sailor, twice as severe. “And because he’s an alpha I know better than to let him get those teeth anywhere near me. You can’t play with mating bites like they’re the latest feathered abomination from that toy box of yours.”

“Mmm, feathered abomination,” Isabela tested the phrase on her lips, smiling at the feel of the shape. “Sounds like an excellent name for a Circle whore.”

“Can you concentrate for two seconds?” The healer demanded, one hand flailing helplessly at the air as if he could bat away all of Isabela’s imaginative distractions.

“Not when I’m bored, and this is all terribly boring,” the pirate shrugged, unapologetic. Her eyes slid from Fenris to Hawke.

The woman held court at her table of friends like a ruler over a kingdom. There was a confident ease to her posture, relaxed and content on the surface but a coiled tension just underneath. She moved with languid, agile grace; herself and her environment always held in comfortable command. That she could so nakedly display any of the emotions that flitted so openly across her face! Her unrestrained, unabashed bark of laughter when Varric said something that made Aveline blush. The aura of friendly dominance as she and Fenris argued some trivial detail. The obvious, sincere concern when Merrill accidentally grabbed the wrong mug and took a long drink of Fenris’ whiskey instead of her own watered-down ale. Then more laughter, as they tried to help the choking elf breathe through her coughing fit.

"Just because you've fixed me up after docking a few bad sailors doesn't mean you get to be my sex guard, Anders." The pirate finally dragged her eyes back to the stewing healer. "Perhaps for you and Fenris a bite would mean something, but for the rest of us it's just a bit of pain and pleasure making things sweet. Like adding whiskey to your pint to get a proper kick. Or maybe a dash of lyrium to that blow job, in your case."

“Joke all you like, Isabela.” Anders’ disapproval was like blunt, cold metal on his tongue and in his eyes, a judgment that made Isabela’s mouth twist to fight a snarl. “But that bite means something. If not to you then certainly to her.”

Corff arrived just in time to stop the pirate from saying something stupid, or doing anything worse; like slit the healer’s condescending frown off his lips, or admit that everything he was saying had crossed her mind at some point in the last few days. Isabela gathered up two of the bottles, a brief glare reminding Anders of his supposed reason for having followed her at all. She stalked back to the table, wrenching a cork free to fill her mug before the bitter irritation on her tongue could find a way to let loose. She took a deep draft, letting the vile alcohol burn away the aftertaste of that conversation, the thoughts that she’d been desperately trying to keep under chains. The bite was just a lapse of judgment, a momentary loss of control. She’d succumbed to foolish instincts like that
dozens of times before and not once had they ever meant anything.

The arm that snaked around her waist was a familiar embrace, fingers spreading wide along her ribs to pull her close against Hawke’s side, offering silent comfort for her agitation. Isabela relaxed against the other rogue, taking another drink, trusting the heat of the liquor to wash through her and fight back the warmth that threaded from those fingers towards her chest. If it had been anyone else then the casual hold would’ve felt like a tether, an annoyance, an attempt to claim what she refused to give. With Hawke there was no tie, no chain weighing her down. The touch wasn’t possessive in the slightest but an unspoken reminder that she was wanted, that Hawke liked having the pirate there, at her side. It felt like a place to belong.

Isabela wrapped an arm around Hawke’s shoulders, using her free hand to tilt the Fereldan’s face towards her. Laughter and whiskey hit her lips before she closed the small gap between them, not sure why she felt the sudden need to be closer to the rogue but never one to resist such a pleasant impulse. To reward her perhaps, to thank her, to make silent promises of the night to come. To hear Aveline’s snort of disapproval, certainly. Not just because she wanted the reassurance of Hawke’s mouth against hers, the warmth and security of feeling the other woman’s enthusiastic surrender. Not because kissing Hawke felt like having a ship, like power and adventure and freedom was possible in every direction so long as they were together. Her head was starting to spin and she tightened her grip on the noble, feeling hands respond along her waist; holding her up, not holding her down. Lack of breath, Isabela assured herself, even as her hand slid down the contour of Hawke’s throat, slipping under the edge of her collar and grazing the healing wound on her shoulder, tracing each individual tooth mark. *It means something.* Anders’ words echoed uncomfortably in her mind. The bite, the kiss, this feeling in her chest that’s hollow and overflowing all at once, pulsing in time with the heartbeat racing beneath her fingers. *It will go away.*

Chapter End Notes

Everyone seem like themselves? Anyone sound batshit crazy? Let me know.
Wanted some time to explore Hawke and Isabela's dynamic beyond the limits of sex. Plus, some events in the game are just too important to skip over.

The bite didn’t go away. Not after days. Not after weeks. It scabbed and healed like any wound should, but rather than disappearing off Hawke’s pale skin, the dark scar remained; a perfect impression, a constant reminder. Isabela was careful not to pay too much attention, to never let the mark draw her eyes more often than any other part of Hawke’s naked body. She alternated between covering it with bruises from her mouth to hide the evidence and deliberately avoiding it, hoping it would go away if they both pretended it wasn’t there.

Hawke laughed it off, pointed out that she was covered in scars and that teeth marks added variety. She teased Isabela, said she’d always known the pirate’s bite was worse than her bark. With a lopsided smirk and sarcastic eyes, it was all too easy for the carefree Fereldan to almost convince Isabela it didn’t matter.

“Besides, the only people who ever see it are you and Anders,” Hawke reasoned, kneeling beside the pirate’s bed to find one of her kicked boots. The position put her shoulder and the bite mark within inches of the sailor’s mouth, right where it would be so easy to lean forward and feel the shape beneath her lips, taste the smell of Hawke’s skin still mingled with her own. She sat up abruptly, propping her elbow on one folded knee to watch as Hawk continued to scrounge for her clothing.

“Hopefully not in the same context.” Isabela wiggled one overly suggestive brow. She tried to imagine the two Fereldans twined together in the same sinuous position she’d only just enjoyed; it did not make for a pretty picture. Did Justice technically make it a threesome?

“Not on this side of a traumatic head injury.” Hawke’s face screwed up in disgust. The rogue enjoyed plenty of male company—Isabela rather fondly recalled the predatory gleam in Hawke’s eye when Jethann offered his services—but she drew the line at self-righteous martyrs that used the word “plight” too sodding much. And she didn’t seem to care for stubble.

“Ah, so next week, then,” the pirate teased, lightly thumping a knuckle against the freshly healing black eye Hawke had acquired. The Fereldan winced and swatted the hand away, rolling her eyes at the reminder. It was an ongoing joke at this point, the number of times Hawke used her head in exactly the wrong way. In actual battle she was like a wisp, vanishing and reappearing, slipping through an enemy’s grasp just before a blade slit their throat. She wasn’t the duelist that Isabela was, but she seldom left a fight with new wounds. Now, why couldn’t she apply those same skills in a pub brawl?

“Think Aveline will find out?” Hawke ran one hand through her rebellious hair, letting it fall naturally into the tousled shape that was reminiscent of an offended raven. It suited the mildly flustered consternation on her face, teeth worrying her lower lip as she contemplated the coming aftermath. Or maybe she was just trying to work out where her tunic went.
“Sweetness, there were three guards in the bar when you threw the first punch. Five more arrived when the chairs were flying. I think Captain Killjoy will definitely have a report first thing in the morning. She’s probably got it in her busybody hands already.” Isabela should’ve felt more worried about that fact, about the coming riot act they were sure to both catch, but all she could feel was the sinister glee of anticipation. She and the ball breaker hadn’t enjoyed a proper round of bitch and bicker in at least a week. It was adorable really, the way the woman somehow thought she could lecture either of them into behaving.

“Honestly, Isabela, can’t you keep her out of trouble for five minutes?” Aveline pinched the bridge of her nose, a gesture that everyone had become familiar with over the past few years. It meant that she was holding back the surge of fury that threatened to gnaw straight out of her eyes and set fire to the first person she looked at.

“You do remember this is Hawke we’re talking about, don’t you? If she isn’t in trouble, it’s because she isn’t breathing,” Isabela rested one shoulder against the bars of the cell. She rather wished that Hawke would get off her sweet ass and come agree with her, but the damned woman was laid flat out on a bunk, humming a tavern song and giggling to herself. Alcohol and head injuries didn’t go well together, yet they never seemed far apart. Like those ill-fated romances Varric so loved inventing.

“Yes, well she doesn’t need any extra help finding fights. The least you could do is try to get her out before the guards arrive.” Aveline’s attention drifted to the delirious Fereldan, eyes softening even if the line of her mouth was still as unforgiving as the edge of her blade.

“Why, Big Girl, are you suggesting that I should help a citizen of your city evade justice?” Isabela’s eyes lit up with delight. The pirate knew that she and Hawke were probably responsible for about a quarter of the disturbance reports forever adding to the early threads of grey in Aveline’s hair, but she’d never imagined the woman would be willing to turn a blind eye. If she’d thought that was even a remote possibility then she wouldn’t insist on hiding the other half of the crimes they committed. It was such a chore: covering tracks, repairing damage, seducing witnesses . . .

“I have three men injured from trying to apprehend the two of you! If you can’t stop Hawke from fighting, at least keep her from hurting the wrong people.” Aveline leaned closer to the cell, armored fist clenching one bar hard enough that it might snap.

“That’s fair. Past a certain point of alcohol she does get a bit clumsy with her fists. Odd, though, it never affects any of her other skills.” Isabela retaliated against the intimidation with her own strengths, pressing up against the iron, making Aveline’s hand nearly graze flesh. “And do you have any idea how much coordination it takes for a good bit of polishing mirrors? One wrong angle and someone’s getting kicked in the head. Of course, when she’s this drunk she bends like -,” “STOP,” Aveline growled, her other hand coming up to grip the bars. Just as Isabela expected, the warrior wasn’t paying close enough attention in her rage and accidentally grabbed almost four fingers’ worth of cleavage before recoiling in infuriated horror. “Just get her out of here and keep her out of any brawls until my men have healed. If I have one more guard injured trying to break up your messes, I swear to you, Isabela, for every day they’re off duty you will have a boot-shaped bruise on your backside.”

“You just can’t admit that you want to spank me, can you?” The pirate winked, a teasing lilt in her voice.

“Out,” Aveline repeated, unlocking the cell door and swinging it wide. Isabela gathered the drunken Hawke off the bunk and guided her to freedom.

“One of these days she’s going to make us stay locked up until you’re sober,” the pirate chided,
keeping a steady arm around Hawke’s waist. The Fereldan’s answering chuckle was as much a sigh as laughter, a soft purr that ruffled Isabela’s hair.

“I can think of lots of things we could do in a cell.” Hawke nuzzled against the pirate’s neck. She turned slightly to the side to catch a glimpse of gemstone blue eyes, far more alert and sober than they had any right to be.

“At least this time you didn’t punch any of the guards.” Isabela rose from the bed and pulled Hawke’s shirt off the top of the wardrobe where it had been flung earlier. The woman just couldn’t keep track of her clothing to save her life. Probably because she wore too much of it. Isabela had shrewdly dispensed with that particular mistake years ago.

“I can hardly take credit. You’re the one that brought the entire tavern to a standstill with a display of your . . .wits.” Hawke’s eyes moved deliberately to the pirate’s voluptuous chest, roving appreciatively over abundant, tantalizing flesh. “I’ve never seen a fight end that quickly. One man burst into tears.”

“The one on his knees? He was clenching the nose you broke.” The sailor rolled her eyes and shoved the tunic into Hawke’s hands. The other rogue’s unabashed grin disappeared behind a fumble of material for a moment, long enough for a serious thought to line Isabela’s brow. She wiped it away as soon as a shock of black hair emerged from the open collar. Sauntering back to the bed, the pirate snagged a half empty bottle of brandy from the end table before sliding back onto the rough sheets. She took a long pull of liquor and eyed Hawke, the next words turning her lips into a cunning smile. “I’m onto you, you know.”

“Oh?” The Fereldan didn’t bother to look up from fastening her harness into place. She might fumble and get tangled in the loose cloth of her shirt, stumble trying to get into her pants and curse when she pinched her fingers in her boot buckles, but when it came to her weapons her touch was always deft and sure.

“You only pick fights like that when some silk-knickered snob in Hightown is about to throw a party. Something your mother is dragging your ass into so she can show you off?” Isabela’s coy smirk widened as she saw Hawke’s fingers still, eyes lifting enough to reveal the slip of truth. “I just can’t figure out if you’re trying to get thrown into prison as an excuse to avoid going, or if you simply enjoy the scandal of showing up in fancy dress and a shiner.”

“A little of both, I suppose.” Hawke didn’t bother to deny the accusation, voice layered with the precocious defiance of a child caught being naughty. Oh, the trouble this one must have been as a sprog. Finally dressed, Hawke dropped back onto the bed, wresting the brandy away long enough to take a long draught. The way she swiped the back of her hand over her mouth, you’d think she was trying to get rid of more than the lingering taste of the Hanged Man’s ale.

“On the husband hunt again? I rather thought she’d given up catching that ship,” Isabela tsked, half in sympathy, half annoyance. She and marriage were old enemies. The thought of Hawke’s mother trying to market her off filled the sailor’s throat with bile, unpleasant memories rising on a tide of angry nausea.

“Yes, well seeing as she’s decided she can’t trim my sails in that direction,” Hawke paused long enough to savor Isabela’s bright laughter, beaming with pride that she’d used the correct nautical term. “Instead she’s shopping for herself; apparently I’m the window dressing.”

“And a bargain at any price,” the silken words slid playfully over the pirate’s lips. She caught the dart of Hawke’s eyes, a flattered awkwardness stealing her attention away for a split second. The Fereldan grabbed at the brandy again, covering her discomfit with a quick swallow. With a fast
enough chug of hard liquor, it was easier to hide the bit of rose coloring her cheeks.

“Anyway, these blighted things are about as bad as fighting through a dragon’s nest in the Deep Roads.” Hawke’s chuckle held an edge of irony, both women fully recalling that exact adventure. It took months to grow out all the singed hair. “So I liven them up as best I can. A few war wounds, the odd bit of offensive clothing, absolutely inappropriate humor wherever possible. I’m one disgusting bit of Orlesian cheese away from hiring girls from the Rose to go with me.”

“And watch as that improves your mother’s popularity amongst the eligible bachelors. Don’t forget: there’s a reason they stay in business in Hightown,” Isabela warned. The Kirkwall elite all reminded her of those bottles of Orlesian fizzy wine, corked up extra hard because the pressure of everything wanting release was always about to explode. Come to think of it, didn’t Serendipity do something special with corks?

“Maker’s blazing ass,” Hawke groaned, burying her head in one hand. “Nothing for it then. If I want to be absolutely sure of causing a scandal there’s only one choice.”

“And what’s that?” The sailor cocked one brow, suspicious of the humor laced beneath Hawke’s suffering complaints.

“I’ll just take you,” the other rogue’s wicked grin matched the glint of mischief in her eyes.

“You flatterer,” Isabela snorted, “I haven’t a thing to wear. Besides, my dance card for the weekend is already rather full. Drink, fight, bullshit with Varric, steal a few odds and ends, drink more.”

“Are you sure? I promise to make it worth your while. I’ll even get you the most expensive dress in Hightown,” Hawke coaxed, fingers trailing the outside of the pirate’s still naked thigh.

“And why would you want to do that?” The sailor didn’t bother to hide the purr of pleased laughter that followed Hawke’s tickling touch.

“Two reasons. One: I love the idea of a known criminal being the best dressed woman in a ball full of nobles.” Hawke reached out and brushed a handful of raven hair off Isabela’s shoulder, planting a soft kiss.

“And the other?” The sailor didn’t bother to hide the purr of pleased laughter that followed Hawke’s tickling touch.

“The more gorgeous the dress, the better it will look on my floor afterwards.” The Fereldan’s breath was right on her cheek, teasing, refusing to come any closer until Isabela said what she wanted to hear.

“I suppose I could clear a few hours for you.” The pirate gave a long-suffering sigh, bowing to the burdens of the universe. She could feel Hawke’s triumphant grin brush her cheek just before a quick kiss pecked her lips.

“Then it’s a deal. Hightown won’t know what hit them,” the Fereldan gloated excitedly, slipping off the bed. She turned at the door, still looking utterly disheveled and radiant as only Hawke could.

“Might be our last chance too. Mother says she’s met someone quite promising. Hopefully he’ll be there this weekend.”

“Go on, you sodding romantic.” Isabela tossed the cork from the brandy bottle at the retreating rogue. It bounced harmlessly off the closing door and the pirate settled back against her bed. Leandra Amell didn’t always strike her as the best mother in the world, but she’d certainly done something right raising Hawke.
Isabela paused outside Hawke’s door, the feeling of a snake making its nest in her stomach got worse with each passing second. She stared at the mahogany wood, as rich and unyielding as the breeding in the Amell bloodline and carved ornately to match. Odd to think that she’d hardly ever noticed it before. Usually, the pirate queen preferred to slip into Hawke’s room via the windows, a crafty surprise that never failed to earn a wry smile from the Fereldan rogue. On the occasions when they returned to the manor together, it was in such a state of fervent urgency that they ignored all obstructions; doors, furniture and, quite frankly, the squeaking servants.

Now this one door looked as formidable as the gates to the Black City itself. Isabela glanced back over the balustrade to the sitting room below. Aveline stood by the fireplace, a grimace of pain and helplessness contorting her brow. Varric was seated in one of the overstuffed armchairs, Bethany in the other. The dwarf hadn’t taken his comforting hand off the girl’s arm since she arrived with that Templar escort. None of them looked kindly on Cullen, recognizing his presence as custodian, not bodyguard. But he’d managed to get Bethany out of the Circle for today. For that, they would all tolerate his presence. The only sound that echoed off the massive hall was the snap and hiss of fire licking at wet wood and the tiny, almost imperceptible stutters of Bethany crying. It was heartbreaking, really, the brave face she’d tried to wear. Like everything else she’d suffered, the young mage took the pain as silently as possible and never for a moment protested the injustice. She didn’t surrender, she simply... endured. That took a very different kind of courage.

Wishing she wasn’t so damn sober right now, Isabela steeled herself and pushed open the bedroom door. The creak of wood sounded like the whole house mourning. The room looked huge for some reason, larger than it actually was. Isabela’s eyes fell to the familiar figure sitting on one edge of the bed, holding so still that she might vanish in a blink. It wasn’t the room that looked big, the pirate realized, Hawke looked small. It was as if, for the first time, life had beaten her down so hard she might not get up again. Isabela tried to remember any moment during the nearly four years they’d known each other when Hawke looked this lost.

They were supposed to be at a party tonight. The pirate’s attention drifted to the corner of the room where a tailored set of clothes had been delivered days before. They were supposed to be horrifying Hightown, wearing garish colors, drinking expensive wines and having a bit of quick, giggling fun in an empty study. But Hightown had been horrified for a completely different reason, and the special clothing they’d donned had been somber and black. The whole world could change so quickly and there was nothing left but trying to learn its new shape.

“I-,” Isabela, who had a witty retort, flirtatious remark and scathing insult for every situation, found her silvered tongue feeling more like lead. “I feel I should say something.”

Hawke’s head turned only slightly, barely enough to acknowledge her presence. The room was dim with just two candles guttering at either end, but still the shadows creeping along the walls paled in comparison to the darkness hanging beneath Hawke’s eyes. The color that had glittered and sparkled like sapphires, reminding Isabela of jewels ripe for stealing, now looked like aching bruises.

“I know you’re not good at emotional stuff.” Hawke looked back at the floor.

Damn the woman, even when she was miserable, she was trying to be considerate! Isabela knew that she hadn’t a clue how to be comforting, what to say, how to help or even how to hide the fact that all she really wanted to do was run from this room and get drunk until the taste of true sadness could be wiped away by shallow regrets. But that didn’t mean Hawke had to sit there being all magnanimous about it, a martyr to everyone else’s feelings. She deserved to be Marian for a few minutes, a daughter and not a hero; to have the freedom to be honest about herself, about what had happened.

“At least your mother loved you. Not everyone can say that,” Isabela prodded, stepping closer. The
familiar taste of bitterness rose in the back of her throat, making the words taste like ash. Another failing she could add to the list: doesn’t know shite of how to talk about mothers. Still, hearing Leandra’s last words had convinced the pirate that she’d judged the woman too harshly. No mention of money or family name, no last minute accusations or death bed curses. Isabela had no doubt that if she were to be at Hari’s bedside when she breathed her last, the woman would die with an insult on her lips. Leandra just wanted Hawke to know she was proud of her, sad to be leaving her alone when they’d both already lost so much. That had to be where Hawke got her overactive guilt complex; the woman was dying and apologizing for it.

“Mother was all I had left.” Hawke’s words sounded like they’d come from the deepest part of her being, spoken with the sad conviction of a fact repeated over and over until the pain lost its sting. There was the truth at the core of this misery; not just the loss but the sense of failure, the bewildering helplessness of losing all purpose. The Fereldan had spent the past years, probably her whole life, trying to take care of her family. Now they were gone, beyond her reach to protect. Who was she without them?

“You don’t really think that, do you?” Isabela sat down beside the other rogue, surprised to find the gentle argument lining up so readily on her tongue. Did Hawke really not know what she meant to others, the effect she had on everyone she met? Even the ones that tried to resist? Especially the ones that tried to resist. The pirate felt words catch in her throat when Hawke’s eyes rose towards her again, full of a trust and hope she could never deserve. That look was like twin rivers whipping through her stomach and chest, capable of sweeping her completely away. “Family’s not just the people you’re related to by blood,” she continued, doing her best to ignore the flutter of her pulse under that gaze. “There are other people who care about you. Like,” me, Isabela swallowed the traitorous confession, “Aveline.”

A cowardly finish, the sailor would readily admit, but cowards lived longer lives. She expected a sigh of disappointment from the bereaved Fereldan, a dash of heartbreak that would only add to the pain of her mourning. She did not, however, expect the faint sound of laughter that escaped with Hawke’s breath. Fragile and hesitant, the chuckle slipping past Hawke’s lips clearly took her by surprise as well.

“Aveline. She’s still down there isn’t she?” The noble looked up, nodding to the world beyond her door, the one she didn’t want to deal with yet.

“They all are. Merrill and Sebastien are busy pretending to clean things that aren’t dirty. Anders took Warden outside.” Isabela had seen how dejected the mabari looked the moment they walked into the manor. It was just like a Fereldan to insist on taking care of the dog.

“Tell them to go home. Please. It’s been a long few days,” Hawke’s eyes fell back in time, trying to calculate how so much could happen in so short a period, “For all of us.”

“Alright, Hawke. I’ll tell them to go.” Isabela went to the door, torn between being relieved at her chance to escape and frustrated that there wasn’t more she could do. Hawke took care of everyone and now, when she needed help, they were all at a loss.

“And Isabela?” The quiet voice calling after her stopped the pirate in her tracks, halfway out of the room. She turned just enough to indicate she was listening. A deep breath betrayed Hawke’s sudden nervousness, solidifying words that otherwise might not speak. “Will you come back?”

Isabela hesitated. She knew what the woman was asking. She knew exactly how much it took for Hawke to force that question out into the sucking void of this big, empty room. Confessing any sort of weakness didn’t come easily to the stubborn rogue. Admitting that she wanted—needed—anything from anyone else . . .
“Only for you.” Isabela glanced over her shoulder, shooting the nervous woman a quick wink. The sigh of relief that heaved through Hawke straightened her whole body, like she’d been filled with the strength to throw off the weight crushing her down. Isabela’s heart twisted, pain and pride tearing in opposite directions as this heady power pulsed in her chest. Hawke asked for help and she couldn’t say no. As she left the room and headed downstairs to talk to the other friends, Isabela felt a grim line set her jaw, aware of the fear burrowing through her thoughts and growing louder with each passing step. Being what Hawke needed was a mistake. Hawke needed more than she could be.

Chapter End Notes

As always, comments are appreciated. I'm grateful you readers are being patient as I get a handle on the characters and 'verse. If anything seems OoC or too out of line with canon, please let me know.
Hawke eyed the devastated crates that had been scattered across the warehouse floor. Boots, kettles and carved figurines of Andraste looking none-too-happy were kicked aside. The Sharps Highwaymen were a mess of blood smears and meat bags, some still sizzling like steaks on the fire. Sunshine could be scary when she was pissed. Ignacio, the leader, had taken one of Hawke’s daggers to the chest. The rogue looked down at his corpse with a grim, satisfied smile. “That’s what you get for being a little prick.”

Wait, was that what she said? Varric tapped his quill absently on the edge of the paper, trying to remember. He really shouldn’t have waited so long to start writing down all the crazy shit they’d been through together. Almost four years now and if it weren’t for the receipts, IOUs and death threats he’d probably have forgotten half of Hawke’s adventures. Of course, this was one of the small jobs, clearing Kirkwall of random gangs and scum. The big stories were seared into his memory. You just didn’t forget stuff like a crazy elf letting poison gas loose to foment a war between the Chantry and Qunari. Or a zealot sister trying to do the same. Come to think of it, everyone seemed to be trying to start shit with the Ox-men these days. Only person who wanted to stay completely clear of them was Isabela.

Rivaini would probably remember a lot of this story, Varric thought of the Raider with a smile. She was always with them for those harebrained attempts at scrounging coin. For the longest time it was always the three of them: dwarf, sailor and refugee, like the beginning of a bad joke. Getting into trouble, out of danger, thrown from shops or—on one memorable occasion—chased by a love-struck elf trying to propose for Isabela’s hand; they’d done a little bit of everything. He rose from his desk and headed down the hall of what passed for rooms at the Hanged Man. Cursing, whispers and a certain amount of spontaneously violent noise led him unerringly to the pirate’s door and he paused on the other side just long enough to ascertain what he’d be walking in on. The sounds were all distinctly feminine and he was loathe to catch Isabela and Hawke together again; last time had ruined him on feathers for weeks. Try managing a business when you’re looking at every single quill and wondering where it’s been.

The longer he listened Varric was certain he was only hearing one voice. Rivaini might be an absolute genius in creative debauchery, but even she couldn’t be too horrifying alone. He nudged the door open (because no one in the Hanged Man knocks, it just makes customers in every room panic and start jumping out the windows) and found Isabela pinning a body in her bed.

“New toy, Rivaini?” The dwarf stepped in, trying to get an eye on her victim. He didn’t recognize the man but all the denizens of Lowtown tended to look the same: scraggly and blistered, poor in that broken down way that bespoke a lifetime of bad luck. Ordinarily, being pinned under the famed Queen of the Eastern Seas would suggest a change of fortunes and Varric started to ask what lottery the poor sod had won. Then he noticed that the blighter was unconscious and Isabela was tying him down.

“Be a dear and get his legs, will you?” The pirate barely glanced over her shoulder, tossing him a length of rope.

“You know, if you’re that hard up for company, I’m sure we could find a better option than going out hunting for warm bodies. I mean, you haven’t even slept with half the guards yet.” Varric pointed out as he began fastening the unconscious man’s ankles to the foot of the bed.
“You’re talking bollocks, as usual.” Once her victim was completely secure, Isabela rose off the bed and gave a languid stretch of her shoulders. “This one’s been asking questions about the relic. Value and buyers and such. One of my fences tipped me off.”

“Ah, I see! A lead. That calls for celebration.” The dwarf rubbed his hands together briskly and pulled out the bottle of brandy that he knew the sailor kept stashed behind her wardrobe.

“We don’t actually know anything yet,” Isabela argued. A feeble protest as she was already grabbing glasses off the table.

“Yeah, but I’ve got a good feeling this time. Gambler’s intuition or whatever.” Varric sloshed the sweet smelling liquor into both cups and raised his in toast. The pirate hesitated only briefly, then clinked her mug against his.

“I’m close, Varric. I have to be. Three bloody years on this damned piece of wasted coastline,” Isabela sighed as the alcohol burned down her throat. “Once I have that relic I can finally be out of here. Back to the sea, the Raiders, back on a ship. Can you imagine?”

The faraway look in the pirate’s eyes showed a soul already out riding the waves once more, clinging to the edge of the wind. He knew that freedom, the siren call of escape beckoning its hearer to throw off burdens and boredom and wander a world without tether. The difference was that Varric could find that liberty without ever having to leave, all he needed was ink and page; Isabela needed to be chasing a horizon at full speed.

“So eager to leave, don’t you ever get tired of running?” He knew that the sailor’s feet suffered from a permanent case of traveler’s itch, but she’d seemed happy enough getting in and out of trouble in Kirkwall these last few years. Particularly these past months.

“I don’t belong on land, my wooly wonder. It’ll be better all-round once I’m free to return to my life. For me, for Kirkwall, for everyone.” There was the faintest hint of reluctance on those last few words. The pirate’s eyes had darted ever so slightly towards her drink, a waver that contradicted the conviction of her tone.

“Everyone, huh? That include Hawke?” Varric cocked one skeptical brow as he topped her cup. It wasn’t hard to read the Fereldan’s name in the line of Isabela’s lips.

“Especially Hawke,” the sailor confirmed. An edge of hardness slid into her face and words before she pulled it back, recovering her playful indifference. “It’s been fun, of course. She’s a lovely way to pass the time and a very quick learner. I’m sure she’ll make her future husband or wife particularly happy with that trick I taught her for —”

“She’s not marrying anybody, Rivaini. Bullshit yourself all you want, not me.” Varric set his cup down on the table, hard enough to force the pirate silent.

Varric had watched his refugee friend and this sailor together for years now. The moment they met in the Hanged Man he felt something change, like the entire universe had taken a sudden turn. Hawke took risks for Isabela in a heartbeat, went along with her plans, dove headfirst into whatever trouble the pirate had found without a second of hesitation. Where she’d pause, ask questions and think logically with any of the rest of their friends, there seemed to be a shortcut in her brain that went straight from Isabela to yes.

Varric had paid careful attention as what started off as an amusing, if chaotic, bond between rogues grew far beyond his expectations into something frightening. They weren’t just swapping bottles and daggers and bodily fluids anymore. He could hear them talking in hushed tones on the road, sharing
secret stories, laughing when no one else knew the joke. Since Leandra’s death Hawke had been letting her armor slip. Feelings were bleeding through cracks in her words and expression, in the way she reached for Isabela when no one else could seem to help. Hawke was losing her poker face, and she didn’t seem to understand she was betting on a bad hand. The more her eyes sought the pirate, the more Isabela looked to the horizon.

“Isabela is a great girl, but I think you’re likely to get hurt.” Varric waved one hand in a frustrated gesture, trying to convey the vague danger he could see wrapping ever tighter around his friend.

“That’s life, isn’t it? Everything hurts. Breathing, if you don’t do it right.” Hawke countered, refusing to let his serious tone penetrate her lighthearted, happy air.

“Pain is supposed to be a teacher, Hawke. It’s how we learn to avoid the shit that can kill us.” Varric was no stranger to learning things the hard way. Maker’s butt boils, he’d learned this lesson years ago but still had no idea how to save anyone else from the same mistake.

“Varric,” Hawke sighed, finally turning to look down at her well-meaning friend. “Isabela isn’t going to kill me. Not unless it’s actually possible to die from sex and I’m sure that’s just a rumor that the Chantry mothers like to spread to make everyone behave.”

“Okay, don’t say I didn’t warn you. And if I someone does find you dead in bed, naked with a shit-eating grin on your face, you better believe I’ll pay extra to make sure it’s open casket at your funeral.” The dwarf shot his friend a sly wink, willing to let the subject drop. He’d tried.

“She’s never going to want anyone else, Rivaini.” Varric kept his eyes locked hard on the pirate, putting a shape to the reality that they’d been avoiding for months now. If he could see it, then there wasn’t a nug’s chance at dwarf dinnertime that Isabela hadn’t noticed too.

“All the more reason for me to go.” The sailor gave a slight shake of her head, as if to dislodge worrisome thoughts. “I might be selfish and heartless, Varric, but I’m not cruel. I don’t actually want to hurt her. It’s just,” Isabela’s hand flicked at the air, brushing away distracting ideas, “Unavoidable.”

“Hawke has never played it safe. Least of all with you.”

He’d seen Hawke scale the walls of the Gallows to visit her sister. She’d gotten herself trapped by slavers just to free a group of elves. The woman had triggered a rockslide on the edge of Sundermount to wipe out a battalion of risen corpses. She had the kiss of sweet Andraste herself, dumb luck and quick reflexes and the ability to come through any tortures with little more than a story for every scar. She reached for danger the way others took solace in a bottle, like Templars and lyrium, or maidens and the smutty books hidden beneath their beds. No wonder she was addicted to Isabela.

“You know the shit of it?” Varric roused himself from such musings, startling the pirate from her own internal wars. “She knows you’re going to leave. Sooner or later.” He poured each of them another drink, the brandy bottle over half drained.

“It’s hardly been a secret, shortish. I told her from the beginning that I’m only here until I can get what I lost and put back to sea.” Isabela’s answer was just a touch more defensive than usual, brow and jaw both set as though waiting for attack. Varric waved the concern away, nodding because he knew she was absolutely right.

“All that talk about the ocean and ships and freedom. She knows that everything you want most means leaving her, and she still hasn’t tried even once to talk you out of it. Ancestor’s cracked asses,
Three years the pirate had been dragging Hawke’s ass up and down the Wounded Coast to chase leads for her relic. Fighting rogue bands of Raiders, plundering caves, getting lost in nests of poisonous spiders; usually for nothing better than a trunk of granny knickers or a crate of confusingly suggestive dolls. Granted, they made the best of such windfalls, scattering them in Fenris’ mansion, hiding them in surprising places throughout Anders’ clinic, or stashing a few in Choir Boy’s quiver for a later laugh.

“No, it’s just Hawke.” Could Isabela tell that her lips curled slightly at the corner when she said the woman’s name? Did she know that her voice softened the same way Sebastien’s did when he spoke of Andraste?

“Remember that, Rivaini.” Varric rose, going to the bed to watch as their hostage began to stir. “When the time comes and you get your chance to leave, remember that Hawke has never once held you back. So whatever you think you’re running from, it isn’t her.”

Varric crouched next to the waking man and slapped lightly at his cheeks. The dwarf couldn’t convince Isabela not to run. He doubted the sailor herself even knew why she felt so strong an urge to flee. But he could use his twisting, storyteller’s tongue to charm or frighten information out of this hapless prisoner. Maybe that could be a start to the answers she needed.

“Whatever you think you’re running from . . .” Isabela repeated the phrase, sarcasm bleeding through despite the fact that she could barely breathe. She’d have laughed if she didn’t need every extra ounce of air to keep her speed, boots kicking up a trail of dust behind. The Qunari made a pretty good start, right at the top of the list. Not to mention Aveline and all her guards and the prison cell she’d throw the pirate into for years on end if she had half a chance. Most of Kirkwall would probably cheer her on. And that wasn’t even taking into account the rest of Wall-Eyed Sam’s friends and his Tevinter buyers who’d be a touch stroppy about her having botched their deal and absconded with the relic once more. Served them right. Imagine, stealing what she’d already rightfully stolen in the first place!

Ostwick. From there she could catch a ship to Antiva. The Raiders frequented the Amaranthine and if her passenger ship were boarded she’d get that much quicker a shortcut straight to Castillon. Bastard. Even when he was in a different country he was ruling her life, pulling the strings that made her dance. Just like . . . Isabela clenched her teeth, sweat pouring off her cheeks as she wrenched speed from her aching legs, burning away thoughts of the past. It chased her like a ghost, stuck to her like the shadow on her heels.

Freedom was within her reach, just over the edge of this horizon, waiting where dead rock met writhing sea. Crystal blue lapping at the shore, crashing and dancing and drowning all her senses until there was nothing but the smell and sound and lightness of—Hawke. Isabela stumbled, one foot snagging a rock and she almost went down, regaining her balance and cursing as the pain shot up her ankle. That was going to cost her speed. She slowed, wincing slightly when putting weight on the twisted joint sent a sharp jolt of fire up her leg. Now this was just bloody ironic: every other damned person and thought and memory from her past gave Isabela the strength to run faster, chase harder after the freedom that she’d been fighting for all her life; but Hawke stopped her in her tracks. The pirate rested on a rock outcropping by the highway, rotating her injured joint and laughing softly beneath her labored breaths. Clearly, she’d gotten out just in time.

“Maker’s graces, stranger! Are you alright?” A worried voice called from down the road. Isabela
looked in the direction of Ostwick, spying a wagon making its ponderous way towards her, the driver standing urgently in his seat.

“A tumble and twist. I’ve had worse just getting these boots off fast enough,” Isabela shot back, brushing off the concern.

“No, I mean that!” The man pointed past Isabela. The instinct for survival in her head told her not to turn, not to look; to see was to know was to wonder. But her curiosity was too strong and the pirate faced back the way she came, the devastation of Kirkwall sprawling wide across the horizon. Belching pillars of black smoke climbed into the sky, spreading out in thick clouds that made the air even here dark and heavy. The whole city had to be burning. The wagon stopped alongside Isabela, she and the stranger both riveted by the silent nightmare. The sound of a shaking, awed inhalation perked her ears, barely able to pay attention when the driver spoke again. “Did you come from there? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Isabela admitted honestly, for the first time daring to wonder the same. “I left before the trouble started.” True, a wicked voice in the back of her mind cackled, But so not true. You started the trouble and then left. All a matter of timing.

“Oh, that’s a blessing. When I saw you running this way so fast I just thought that you were fleeing something awful.” The driver settled back down onto his seat, eyes focusing on her now but still flicking occasionally to the distant carnage. Isabela nodded unconsciously, agreeing with more than he could know he’d said. Something awful, so many awful things. She could remember each and every one. The sound of those chained slaves hitting the water. The screaming wood of her ship as the storm overpowered it. The screams of her crew.

Now Kirkwall would add to that list. She didn’t have to be there to know how Merrill’s arms would be bleeding, laced with the razor cuts that would unleash the full fury of the Fade from delicate hands. She could perfectly see Hawke and Fenris scything through enemy mobs, carving a path for innocents to escape, yelling orders and rescuing everyone too terrified to listen. Aveline and her guards; they’d be at Hawke’s side, naturally, but also spread throughout the city, trying to protect as many as they could. Who would the Big Girl fight beside, her Fereldan friend or the dashing Donnie? She could hear Varric’s graveled, roaring voice, shouting insults and threats and taunts over the roar of fire and battle. The dwarf would be perched somewhere dangerous, cooing to his crossbow and planning to write an epic adventure of the whole thing so long as they survived. Anders would be shouting about mages. He was always shouting about mages. Except this time he might have a reason. Isabela felt a lurch under her ribs. Would the mages be let out to fight for their city? Would they be locked in their rooms to burn with the rest? Bethany’s face drifted behind her eyes, full of innocent wonder and scandalized delight. She deserved better than this. They all did.

“Pardon me for asking,” the wagon driver’s voice prodded at the edge of Isabela’s awareness, barely able to draw her attention. “But if you aren’t escaping all that, why were you running?”

Why indeed?

Isabela had never dwelled on regrets or past memories. That sort of garbage was just barnacles on the hull, slowing you down. Waste of time when there were more pleasurable options at hand; mastering a swindle, besting an enemy, guiding a lover’s tongue to exactly the right spot. Still, in some rarely visited corner of her mind, behind the bloody battles and risky escapes and impossibly near-misses of death brushing the fringe of her sash, Isabela knew her mistakes. She knew each of them and where they fell in the fucked-up universal ledger, the price she’d had to pay for every single one. That was always in the past tense. Hindsight means seeing out your arse, or some bollocks like that. Point was, she’d never caught herself in the middle of a mistake, never been aware of straddling the line
between the shortsighted now and the long term later. Impulse, instinct, survival, reflex; that was what had gotten her through until now. And look where it got me.

Isabela pulled the relic out of the satchel on her back. Three years hunting for this thing. Nearly lost her hide sneaking it from the Ox-men in the first place. Lost her ship, her crew, her freedom; all for this bloody book. And now she had it. It was in her hands. Heavy, awkward, precious in that way only the price of blackmail can be. With this book she literally was holding her life in her own hands. And why? Because of Hawke.

Maker’s festering damnation. Sod Andraste with a rusted spoon.

“Look here,” Isabela raised her eyes to the cart driver, whom she’d almost forgotten. “I’ll pay you two shiny sovereigns if you get me back to Kirkwall at top speed.”

The driver looked at the distant plumes of billowing smoke. Then he looked at the sailor and she could actually feel his eyes crawling along every inch of her skin as he swept his gaze from top to bottom. “Two sovereigns and a kiss.”

“Deal!” Isabela laughed, leaping up into the dray. She could already imagine how Hawke would laugh when she told her this story. Adorable little fellow you’d think, shy and pious and all of that but you should’ve seen the demon in his eyes when he thought he had me over a barrel. Probably would’ve liked to have me over a barrel. The pirate wasted no time grabbing the shocked driver’s face in both hands and planting a searing kiss on his stunned mouth. Excitement was thrumming in her veins, heart beating to a nervous new rhythm. She made sure the man got his money’s worth, didn’t release her hold until she could feel the kiss curling his very toes. When she let go he collapsed into his bench, little more than a puddle of melted muscle and drool.

“Good boy,” Isabela grinned and took the whip from his numb fingers. Snapping the horses into action, she quickly prodded them to full speed, hanging onto the reins and bracing herself as the wagon bounced and bumped frantically over the jagged road. Kirkwall loomed dark and deadly on the horizon and Isabela could feel its ominous claws reaching out at her. She was racing straight into danger and chaos and a shitload of mistakes, she knew it. The difference was, this time, the mistakes were new.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, I'm going outside of canon but I always thought there wasn't enough information on Isabela's state of mind through the Qunari crisis. This is my take on why she acted like she did. Like/hate, agree/disagree? Let me know!
Bas, basra, basalit-an. The Qunari had so many different names for people, but they stopped just short of the most important one: *bastards*. That was the only word Isabela could think, the guttural hiss that spilled from her twisted mouth as she fought the arms holding her back.

“Stop this! Stop her! Get her out of there, Anders! Kitten, Varric, someone fucking *do* something!” The pirate wrestled and screamed but no one would listen. There were too many hands everywhere. She could break one arm free only to be seized twice as hard on the other side. Aveline’s grip was like iron around her waist, lifting her completely off the floor when the sailor thrashed too violently or reached for a weapon.

“Isabela, stop, please!” Merrill beseeched, attention torn between the infuriated pirate and the drama unfolding before them.

“*Ataash varin kata.* To the death.” The Arishok flourished his axe and sword, both weapons nearly as large as Hawke herself.

“If you insist,” the rogue replied with a grim smile. The first clash of blades made the whole room go silent, Isabela included.

This couldn’t be happening. The pirate watched in horror as the one person she’d been trying to help was pushed and chased around the floor like a mabari toying with a bloody mouse. She clenched both fists tighter on Aveline’s arm, knuckles going white as Hawke barely slid aside from blow after blow that could’ve split her in pieces. Fear and anger mingled in the bile that rose in the pirate’s throat, choking the rest of her protests, strangling her to the point of barely being able to breathe. The outrage was wildfire and hurricanes pounding in her blood. Hate for the Arishok that challenged Hawke, fury at Hawke for accepting. Most of all the gnawing, nauseating tumult of anger at herself for letting this happen.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. She had sauntered so confidently into this impasse. Trading quips with Hawke, relieved to find no resentment in the Fereldan’s greeting, nothing but warmth and gratitude and an almost incredulous wonder. For a few brief, fleeting seconds she’d been sure that everything would work out, that she didn’t have to run after all. In the confidence that beamed out of Hawke’s proud gaze, she’d been so certain that this time—*this time*—she was doing the right thing. *Suffering Andraste*, when had that ever worked for her?

If she could just get to one of her daggers. Either of the blades strapped to her back or the small throwing stilettos in her boot; she only needed one. One good throw, one chance to put down this horn-headed monster that refused to let her fight for her own life. Damn him and damn Hawke. Isabela could fight her own battles. She’d never once asked the Fereldan rogue to stand for her, just to have her back when things went wrong. And this was going so very, very wrong. The Arishok’s blade opened the armor over Hawke’s shoulder, a red bloom pouring over her arm, and the pirate could taste blood in her own mouth.

“Dammit, Aveline, let me help! I can’t let this happen.” Isabela wasn’t even fighting anymore, just begging, desperate to get free. She’d offer anything; make any deal to stop this doomed attempt at bloody-minded heroism.
“No.” The guard captain was like a statue, she didn’t take her eyes off the fight or loosen her grip even a fraction. There would be bruises across Isabela’s ribs, maybe even cracks. It would hurt to breathe for weeks to come but the pirate couldn’t begin to contemplate that distant future. There was no time except for the heartbeats between each swing, each near miss, each grunt of pain as Hawke pushed to the limits of her power.

The Arishok’s draw of first blood incited the rest of his men. All around the throne room the Qunari soldiers took up a primal chant, cheering their leader to victory. The sound was deafening as it rose on all sides and echoed off the vaulted ceiling.

“You are worthy, Hawke, but weak. You will fail and this city will submit. The Qun will bring the peace and order that your kind lack the strength to build.” The Arishok’s taunts weren’t loud, but the force behind his words made them carry. Frightened hostages on all sides whimpered, cursed, muttered prayers that hadn’t crossed their lips in years.

He was trying to rattle Hawke, to break her concentration. If he could make her angry then he could make her slip. The resolute focus in Hawke’s eyes wouldn’t be distracted, refused to flicker off her aim for even a second. Her speed was going to be his undoing, darting in and out of the perimeter of his guard and taking fresh blood with every strike. Her shoulder might be getting weak, but the blood splattered over her armor wasn’t just her own anymore.

“Your friends will be turned to viddath-bas; mindless souls, redeemed in servitude. They won’t remember you, won’t remember your death.” The massive Qunari warrior was relentless. Slow and steady, inescapable as storm clouds filling the sky.

“Like shit,” Varric breathed, his own fingers twitching with the barely suppressed urge to grab for Bianca.

“And your thief will face even worse.” The Arishok’s smile was terrifying when he saw the first waver in Hawke’s focus. A dip of one blade, a tilt in her stance; she was fighting the instinct to look around, to search for Isabela in the crowd. The predator had found a weakness.

“Don’t, Hawke,” Isabela shook her head, willing the rogue’s eyes to stay on her enemy.

“She will be given to the Tamassrans. A living lesson of the punishment that awaits all those who defy Qunari, who would profane our might.” The massive warrior’s grip was ready, his body coiled to lunge.

“Over my dead body,” Hawke spat, rushing forward. The rage pushed her too fast, too soon, blurred her instincts and reflexes before she could see the blade swinging forward.

“HAWKE!” Isabela bucked violently against Aveline’s arms once more.

“Hold her!” Fenris rushed to the guard captain’s aid, Sebastian and Anders too, as the pirate flailed and struck and thrashed to get free. Just a few seconds, just long enough for one blow. Bollocks, let the rest of these sodding soldiers rend her to pieces, it would be worth it to get one blade into this bastard’s throat, to pull Hawke to safety and watch him choke on his own blood.

Hawke dropped to the floor at the Arishok’s feet, his sword ripping free like pulling a skewer from roast meat. He towered over the rogue, making this woman who looked larger than life fighting dragons seem small and fragile. Isabela froze, mouth open, eyes burning from staring without a blink; her heart hammered in her chest like the stampede of a thousand feet fleeing death. No. The Qunari leader had his axe poised, ready for the killing blow and Hawke was just looking up at him, her expression a confusion of hatred and pity, caught as if by a divine epiphany.
“That one,” the Arishok pointed his sword straight at Isabela, never taking his eyes off Hawke, “Will belong to the Qun. She will belong to me.”

“No.” The Fereldan’s calm contradiction was louder and more terrifying than the war chant filling the air. Even from this distance, her eyes were so bright that they looked like she was lit inside with stars and dragon fire. Her lips curled back over a sudden, vicious snarl. “She is MINE!”

The words ripped free of her throat in a primal, brutal, visceral roar, the sound of a monster being set free of its chains. In a burst of speed and strength unlike anything Isabela had ever seen, Hawke was off the ground and slamming into the Qunari above her, forcing him back. His boots dragged against the marble floor as the sheer power of the attack pushed him like a stubborn boulder across the hall. Hawke’s daggers were lightning, glinting in the light, spraying blood, screaming as they ripped at metal and plunged through bone. She was a blur, a frenzy, impossible to track the stab and slice of her blades except by the guttural gasps and shocked chokes of pain, rainbows of crimson outlining every swing.

Then, as quickly as she began, Hawke stopped. She held still, panting, while the Arishok was still moving back, stumbling, falling, collapsing against the stairs; his torso was nothing but a cipher of gashes and bloody roses coming into full bloom. Hawke strode forward, poised above her quarry with nothing but righteous, unstoppable violence radiating from her every pore. She stayed her hand, lungs heaving, shaking from the effort of holding back long enough to grant the defeated his final words.

“We will return.” The Arishok’s eyes stayed fixed on her as each weakening pulse pushed the blood from his body. Hawke leaned down close, making sure he could hear her through the haze of death, the noise of his own heartbeat counting down his final seconds.

“You still won’t take her,” Hawke uttered the last words that this warrior would hear. The bite of her anger held them both in their unbreakable tableau until, in his ultimate surrender, the Arishok’s eyes rolled back in his head and the last breath shook wearily from his lungs.

The unexpected hero staggered back from her fallen victim, the weakness of her wounds only now showing in the imbalance of her movements, whole body wavering as she tried to stand still and scan the milling crowd. Everyone was moving at once, noise rising on all sides and flowing in different directions, a hurricane; and like Aveline had always said, Hawke was the eye of the storm.

“Hawke, you damned, ass-headed fool!” Isabela didn’t even realize she’d been released until her feet hit the ground, immediately propelling her across the room to cannon into the stunned woman.

“You came back.” Hawke’s face split wide into a grin of almost childish delight. The brightness of her eyes was still surreal, like magic and madness consuming her every thought.

“What were you thinking? You idiot! When are you going to learn you don’t have to fix every single blighted problem that falls at your feet?!” The pirate grabbed hold of Hawke’s stunned face in both hands, fingers fanned wide over sharp bones and brushing lips she could barely imagine breathing their last.

“Fenris owes me a case of wine,” the Fereldan giggled, arms wrapping tight around the sailor, leaning helplessly into her touch. “I knew you’d come back.”

“You always took the sucker’s bet.” Isabela felt a bubble of laughter swelling her chest. The mania of victory was taking hold, trying to push away all the dark feelings and ugly thoughts that preyed like demons on a helpless mind. She couldn’t tell if it was residual fear or anger or just the weakness of relief making her hands shake as she held onto Hawke, drawing the swaying woman close.
“I knew you wouldn’t leave us. Not all of us.” The Fereldan’s breath hitched like a confession on those last words. Doubt, denial and delight twisted into a single, superlative note of triumph, the same victory that was still shining in her eyes. “Maybe Aveline and Sebastian, but not Merrill. Not her or Fenris or Varric.” Hawke’s voice faded away on the list, falling to silence before she could finish.

*Or you.* Isabela knew the Fereldan wouldn’t say it out loud. She could see it in the way Hawke’s eyes tried to drift down, away from her, trying to conceal secrets that had long since spilled free.

“I didn’t do it for them.” The pirate forced that storming gaze to face her again, hands gentle but resolutely guiding Hawke’s attention up once more. “I did it for you. It was always about you.”

How could the confession of such a touching truth feel so angry? The words burned on her tongue, her stomach full of hot coals and threats. Isabela’s fingers were trembling with the effort of staying still, resisting the urge to shake this stupid, stubborn woman until sense fell back into place in her head. How could she not see what had happened? How could she not understand? Isabela came back. Because of Hawke. She did the right thing. Because of Hawke. The end result?

“You could’ve been killed.” Isabela’s mouth curled into a grimace like the very words were painful. She still didn’t know why that truth stung so bitterly on her lips, or why the thought of Hawke dying yanked out the breath in her lungs. But Hawke had done everything for her, had spent three years being nothing but the most perfect friend she could have wanted. Isabela knew that her fellow rogue deserved better than death at the hands of a horned bastard over the petty crimes of a desperate thief.

“I don’t care.” Hawke threaded one hand into Isabela’s hair, deliberately drawing her back from the thoughts that lined her brow. The Fereldan seemed to be growing strong again, miraculously standing tall and straight. Despite the blood pouring from her wounds she radiated the same power and confidence that had felled every enemy in her path. “If I have to fight a hundred of those horned bastards with nothing but a wooden spoon, I don’t care. I will. And I’ll win.” A familiar cocky tilt was pulling Hawke’s lips into a smile. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you, Isabela. You’re mine.”

The word fell from her tongue like an ancient mantra, a magic spell forgotten by all but the chosen few who knew its true meaning. It slid under Isabela’s skin and coiled around her every organ, twisting and flexing and experimenting with the power to choke her breath or leave her gasping. The bright ferocity in those electrified eyes refused escape, drawing the pirate impossibly closer until they melded together, the burning warmth of Hawke’s body melting them into one. When lips found Isabela’s she couldn’t hold back a surprised gasp at the blazing heat that spilled across her tongue, the startled breath giving way to a soft, delighted moan.

The noises from all around them faded into a dull roar. Raucous cheering, confused questions, cries of victory mingled with voices sobbing over the dead; all of it blended together and became the sound of storms lashing at a ship, waves crashing against the shore, her blood pounding in her ears. The entire room was spinning, dizzying, a hurricane with no hand at the helm. Isabela grasped at Hawke like a lifeline, her only anchor in the sweeping waves of chaos. The Fereldan hero felt like a god in her arms, powerful and unstoppable, unyielding except in moments like this when she became impossibly gentle and held her lover like a treasure she’d never hurt, never let go.

“’Bela.” Hawke broke away from the kiss, gasping for air, her whole body shaking from the trauma of fighting and the shock of victory. She was trembling and flushed and sweat beads on her brow turned into tiny rivulets on her cheek, wetting the darks strands of hair already matted to her face. Her lips were cracked, tongue rolling slow and heavy over the swollen, colored flesh but unable to find any relief. The inhuman brightness of her eyes held Isabela, commanding her to stay still, begging her to understand. She was swaying in the pirate’s arms, barely tethered to this world.
Hawke’s parched mouth was leaden, ungainly, struggling to shape words if they could even form in her mind. Reddened from blood and battle and the bruise of kisses, Hawke’s lips parted once more, determined to force out words. “Isabela, I-,”

Hawke went limp and, hard as she tried, Isabela couldn’t hold her up. They both collapsed to the ground and the pirate barely had a moment to roll out from under the other rogue’s body before chaos and panic enveloped them all over again. She rose to her knees, staring at the blank face lolling on the marble floor, a pool of blood seeping inexorably across pristine stone. Hawke was down.

Isabela eyed the wooden pillars of the second floor railing. With practiced familiarity, she found the scratch marks from the time she and Hawke stole a set of Aveline’s handcuffs. Some hapless servant had clearly tried to sand and polish out all the nicks and gashes but, so long as you knew where to look, they were obvious as nibbles on an Orlesian pastry. The pirate let her eyes drift lazily over the markings, trying to remember the exact order of events, each individual, breathless curse that echoed off these massive walls. It was rather harder than she would’ve thought, but then it could be so difficult to pay attention to details when Hawke did that trick with her –

“Are you even listening to me?!” Aveline stopped her pacing tirade right in front of the pirate, forcing her to focus on the present. The ugly present. Big Girl really could use a bit of eye kohl and time out of the sun. Honestly, with a complexion like hers she needed to avoid letting her temper get her so flushed; looked like those speckled plums from Nevarra.

“I’m trying my hardest not to, but you’re quite loud.” Isabela rolled her eyes, straightening off the wall with a sour scowl.

“If you had given us the relic to begin with we could have avoid this entire debacle!” Aveline picked up the thread of her reproach without missing a beat. It had been the same theme for hours now and the pirate was only mildly surprised that she had been able to rant for this long. Yelling at all those tinned up soldier boys had given her quite the impressive bit of lung power.

“Be fair, Aveline, none of us could have predicted the Qunari going nugshit crazy like they did and attacking the whole city.” Varric leapt in to Isabela’s defense. He’d been polishing Bianca so long that the wood was actually shiny enough to reflect his grizzled frown.

“They wouldn’t even have been here if she hadn’t stolen from them! You knew. Andraste’s Ashes, you knew all this time! If you had just told us!” The Guard Captain whirled from the dwarf back to Isabela, fists clenching angrily in the air like she couldn’t decide whether to rip at her own hair or throw the pirate over the balcony.

“The Qunari still would’ve tried to take her. They were honor bound to punish the thief, whether she returned the spoils or not.” Fenris was little more than a statue’s silhouette in the window, keeping a watchful gaze on the city below as victory and mourning raged through the streets. The noise was a remote din that barely filtered into the buttoned up manor.

“And Hawke still wouldn’t have let them.” Merrill’s voice was tired but sure. Curled on the floor and picking at bits of the carpet, the elf had refused every offer of safe escort back to the alienage. None of them would leave, not this time. In the pauses between Aveline’s ranting and Varric’s arguments, Isabela could just barely pick up the low murmur of Sebastian’s prayers.

“I thought I was done being shocked by your selfishness, Isabela, but you outdid yourself this time.” The redheaded warrior gave her a look that was disappointed parent, angered Divine and smug jail
keeper all rolled into one. The ultimate “I told you so,” aimed not just at the pirate but at the whole universe that she had been trying to warn.

“She came back, Aveline. That’s what matters.” Varric inserted himself between the guard captain and renegade, gesturing for Isabela to stay silent. That was just as well, the sailor couldn’t actually think of anything to say. All the insults, retorts, arguments and threats whirled away from her tongue, constantly shattered by the ever present worry about what was going on in the room just beyond. Broken apart because her anger and helplessness was spinning in too many different directions to point at only one person.

“No, that was what made it worse,” Aveline’s cold judgment bit like venom on a blade. The sting was twice as painful as it twisted in Isabela’s ears, echoing the one thought she’d been trying to avoid. “The smartest thing you did was leave.”

“Do any of you ever stop?” Anders’ tired voice broke the angry, stunned silence that had followed Aveline’s words.

“Blondie, how is she?” Varric was on the healer instantly, the others on his heels, crowding him with questions and demands. They kept trying to see over his shoulder into the open bedroom but the former warden kept himself in their way, deliberately blocking any view.

How deep was the wound? Can we see her? The blood, did she lose too much? Will there be an infection? Will she be alright? Did the blade hit anything vital? Was she awake? Will Hawke be alright?

“Yes, I think so,” Anders agreed, coming alongside the sailor to survey his patient. “But there is
something of a small... complication."

The healer pulled back the edge of the bedspread. Isabela’s eyes went first to the white bandages covering most of Hawke’s torso, her fists curling all over again as she saw the breadth and variety of damage the stubborn woman had managed to endure. The bloom of anger in her chest almost distracted her, nearly made her miss what Anders actually wanted her to see. It was only from the corner of her eye that she caught the difference, and then she stared, wondering how in the blazes she didn’t notice right away. Honestly, she knew every inch of Hawke, after all. How in Andraste’s holy tits could she miss that?

“Anders, if you call that ‘small,’ I really want to know what Fenris is packing in his scabbard.”

Isabela’s lips curled into a slow, sly smile. Sex and humor were twin shields and she deftly wielded both to buy precious seconds as her mind caught up to the surprising new shape of reality. New, impressive shape. Rather formidable looking, in fact. The pirate felt her tongue twist behind her teeth, longing to wet her lips.

Her head was full of the chaos of ricocheting reactions; surprise, confusion, curiosity, desire, excitement, more desire. But one thought stood out above all the rest: pure triumph. I knew it. In the way animals know the scent of danger, or a change of weather on the breeze, she knew the second she met Hawke that the woman was more than she pretended to be. An alpha. There could be no denying it now, not with the evidence standing so conspicuously at attention. Standing and throbbing, actually. Isabela’s brow arched as she watched one long vein pulsing down the length of Hawke’s newly sprouted appendage. A trickle of heat began to pool low in her belly, inexorably making its way further south.

The Queen of the Eastern Seas had hoisted flags to full mast in almost every port in Thedas, (knowledge she happily shared to educate Merrill and torture Aveline) and it wouldn’t be exaggerating to say she was something of a connoisseur. She could, with authority and experience, declare that skill was indeed more important than size. A ripple of anticipation shivered down her spine as she decided that Hawke could assuredly provide both. After all, the pirate already knew the woman had strength and stamina enough. She’d learn the rhythm very quickly, especially if she got a lot of practice.

She trailed one hand up Hawke’s thigh, smile turning into a wicked, feral grin as her stroke made the erect flesh twitch and shudder. Beads of liquid pooled at the tip and then began to trickle towards Hawke’s clenching stomach. When Isabela’s knuckles finally brushed the raging hard-on it pulled a ragged gasp from beyond the unconscious woman’s dreams. Oh yes, sensitive as ever. Isabela dragged her tongue over her lips, imagining she could taste Hawke’s arousal in the sweat laced air.

“She doesn’t need you molesting her in her sleep,” Anders scolded, pushing the pirate’s hand away. He pulled the duvet back over Hawke, ignoring Isabela’s irritated pout. The thick fabric was heavy enough to weigh down the stiffness but not completely hide it from view.

“She’d only be upset that she wasn’t awake to watch.” Isabela shot the healer a wink. Her gaze drifted back to the bulge resting beneath the bedspread, reminding her for all the world of a Satinalia gift waiting to be unwrapped. Repeatedly.

The sailor’s mind was already filling with ideas, visions of all the ways she’d help Hawke get acquainted with her true ‘self.’ They’d have to be cautious the first few weeks, of course, waiting for her injuries to mend, but Isabela was perfectly willing to be generous for a bit. Hawke had earned a few rewards. Besides, she’d go bloody crazy on bed rest without someone to keep her company. Then, once she was well, then it would be anything goes. The pirate might actually have to see about getting her money back from that year’s purchase at the Rose. Plus, Merrill was due her second heat
in a few months, wouldn’t that be –.

“Wait.” Isabela dragged her rapidly spiraling fantasies back into control. “She’s never once shifted before. Not even during Merrill’s mating fever. How is that possible? Why now?”

“I don’t know,” the healer admitted, running one hand tiredly through his disarrayed hair. “Aberrants-,”

“Don’t call her that,” Isabela interrupted with a sharp snap. The heat in her voice surprised even her but she felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickling in anger. The tension only eased when Anders winced and looked down in apology.

“Sorry, you’re right. Female alphas,” the mage corrected himself before he continued, “They don’t present at the same age as the males. It can be years later.”

“She’s twenty-five,” Isabela pointed out, mouth setting into a firm line of protest. She knew Hawke was twenty-five. She remembered very specifically the sparkle of delight she’d seen flashing in those bright cobalt eyes when Hawke rolled to face her and thank her for the best birthday she could remember. Your birthday, sweet thing? Oh, then we’ll have to do something extra special.

“Look, I don’t have any more information than you do, Isabela. The Chantry suppressed and destroyed almost all the writing that was ever done on ab—on atypical breeding classes. All we have are bits of cobbled-together rumor and gossip and a handful of total lies.” Anders clearly felt frustrated by his own lack of answers. One hand waved animatedly as he spoke, like he might force what he needed from the very air. “Maybe they don’t follow the same mating pattern as other alphas. Maybe a stressful life slows development. Maybe the fight with the Arishok triggered some latent instinct for dominance.”

Anders was mostly talking to himself, caught up in his own rant of facts and theories as he paced. So he didn’t notice Isabela’s face suddenly pale or the sharp suck of air she pulled in through clenched teeth. For a moment she was adrift at sea, the room tilting and rocking on all sides. The fight with the Arishok. Oh. Oh no. Her stomach lurched, twisting as if it could crawl up her ribs and break free. She could see the black pits of Hawke’s eyes drawing her in, swallowing her whole, lit with that supernatural fire like the Maker was forging diamonds. “You’re mine.” The words had been so simple but so sure, breathed against her lips with equal parts awe and iron. They’d made her heart stutter even then, a shiver of instinct speeding through her blood for a split second before she knew it had happened.

“ Anders, give me a minute, will you?” Isabela could barely force sound past her lips, the words coming out so quiet that she doubted the healer even heard. He did, thankfully; and more than that, he heard the strangeness of her tone, the uncertainty. She could tell he’d stopped pacing, was standing just behind her in fact, clearly torn about whether or not to speak. Never one to think of the Maker other than in blasphemy, Isabela was almost inclined to offer her own prayer of thanks when she felt the mage turn and walk away, granting her the privacy she needed.

Balls.

The pirate lowered herself gently to the edge of the bed. The duvet was pulled clear to Hawke’s chin and Isabela’s hand trembled as she reached for the edge. Fingers that were smooth and sure with weapons, cards, lanyards and lovers hesitated nervously over the stitched cloth. Suck it up, sailor. Isabela cursed at herself and, with a grind of her teeth, she yanked the material down. The bite was there on the side of Hawke’s neck. There had been so much else for her eyes to take in that Isabela had forgotten to look; for literally the only time in the weeks since it happened, she’d forgotten the mark. Now, her eyes were transfixed. Each individual groove stood out in pulsing, livid red; as if the
wound had come just today, not months ago.

This was my fault. Isabela covered her eyes, bracing her head in her hands as she fought the swell of nausea rocking through her body. She concentrated on her breath, listening to each uneven pull of air shudder past her lips. It all made sense now; the ferocity, the protectiveness, that burst of superhuman strength and the sheer unbreakable determination to keep anyone from hurting the pirate. To keep anyone from taking her away. “Mine.”

The bite was a mistake. Isabela had known that as soon as she saw it, realized it was hers. Even so, she couldn’t have known how big, how bad, how bloody stupid a mistake it would actually prove to be. Only alphas and omegas could claim and be claimed. And when they did? There was no going back. A mating bite was for life. Even if Hawke didn’t know she was an alpha, didn’t know what that simple mark could mean, her body knew. Isabela could still recall the taste of copper in her mouth, wondered if Hawke’s blood sang to her in new tones of ocean rhythm and whipping storms. The fact that it was an accident didn’t mean it wasn’t real.

A claimed alpha would fight to the death for their mate. Every. Single. Time.

“I didn’t mean for this,” Isabela groaned, looking down on the helpless, innocent rogue.

My fault. The thought repeated over and over in her head. If she hadn’t lost control, hadn’t decided to ignore all the evidence, hadn’t given into that damned instinctive urge that made ribbons of common sense, then none of this would have happened. Isabela could’ve accepted Hawke being a stubborn ass and almost getting killed on her behalf. It would be an ugly memory, but no more her fault than all the times the woman chose to get blinding drunk or start fights or chase demons down the street in nothing but her knickers and boots. Except this wasn’t like all those other times. Hawke didn’t have a choice. Instinct overruled reason and she didn’t even know that her mind wasn’t her own when the primal voice rose up inside her to defy the Arishok’s claim.

Hawke had paid enough times for Isabela’s mistakes. This was her mess to take care of now. She couldn’t undo the past but she could, at least, do the right thing for the future. And, like every other time she’d tried to do the right thing, it was going to cost a price. For once, she knew exactly what it would be.

Isabela leaned down over Hawke, pausing to take a slow breath, unconsciously trying to memorize the scent. Her eyes darted to the woman’s lips. How many times had they kissed now? Hundreds? Thousands? She knew every flavor and shape of that mouth; curling up in laughter, smiling at her across the room, screaming delighted obscenities to the Maker or making Isabela fall apart on silken sheets.

“I’m sorry, Hawke,” Isabela whispered, brushing her lips against the sleeping woman’s brow. She didn’t trust herself with anything more.

The pirate rose to her feet, turning away from what was now another part of her broken past. She was mildly surprised to see a silhouette in the open doorway; less so to recognize the stocky shape. The dwarf had watched silently, an impartial witness to the workings of fate. Isabela crossed the room, every step long and sure, confident in the decision she’d made.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Varric shifted his weight. He was still blocking the doorway but there was a tilt to his body, a readiness to yield. His voice had a note of resignation, like he had already decided not to fight her. Maybe he’d finally accepted that she was right.

“It’s not safe for her if I stay.” Isabela didn’t slow her pace, simultaneously pleased and disappointed when the dwarf moved out of her way. There’d be no obstacles. No arguments this time.
“She’d fight for you, Rivaini. She already has,” Varric called softly after her, the only fact that actually mattered.

“I know.” Isabela paused at the top of the stairs, turning just enough to catch the storyteller’s face from the corner of her eye. “That’s why I have to go.”

Chapter End Notes

On my first play through of DA2 I was absolutely devastated to find out that Isabela left Hawke after our hero fought the bloody Arishok for her life. This is me trying to find a way to justify that decision or at least make sense of it. If I missed my mark, or if you had a different impression, let me know.

As to Hawke's age: since Bethany is established as being born in 9:11, I figured Hawke's birth around 9:9/10. Going with the earlier date, I decided she'd be 25 during the Qunari uprising of 9:34. An argument could probably be made for making her as young as 23 or even much, much older, but I opted for the median.

In an unrelated note, (I don't know if I'm breaking rules by promoting another media site) for all the other Fem!Hawke/Isabela fans out there, I stumbled across an amazing video on youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZEDc8H3Id0
I'm pretty much in love with it.
With so many chapters devoted to Isabela's thoughts and feelings, it seemed Hawke was due some head time. I tried to avoid letting it devolve to pure angst. Please let me know if I failed.

All in all, Hawke decided she liked life in Kirkwall better when she wasn’t recognized by every third person on the street and heralded as the Champion any time she walked out her door. The one—and only one—time Bodahn had greeted her with a chipper “welcome home, Champion,” she’d nearly broken her fist against the mantle. Being publicly proclaimed a hero was even worse than being made noble. Now there were invitations, business deals and marriage proposals coming in from not two but three different countries. Ferelden and the Free Marches she could understand, but Tevinter? The Imperium just loved anyone that could whip a bit of Qunari ass.

Fame was completely overrated. It mucked up the social calendar, came with all kinds of unspoken political obligations, and made it almost impossible to start a good fight. On the plus side, she was mastering a whole new set of stealth skills as she slipped out of parties or stole across the roofs of Hightown to avoid everyone below.

Darktown was one of the only places that she could move with relative freedom and obscurity. Most of the time. There were, inevitably, occasions like this when she wasn’t so much freely moving as being dragged against her will like a defiant child headed for punishment.

“Anders, I don’t want to do this,” Hawke protested for what felt like the hundredth time.

“You aren’t going to do anything.” Anders refused to let go of her arm. She knew she could break free, but it would probably require breaking one of his bones as well; pissing off your only healer could have dire consequences. Besides, Hawke knew that her friend’s intentions were good, even if his methods left her feeling like an arcanist’s latest experiment. A failed one, at that.

“I should be keeping an eye on Fenris.” She switched tactics. The clinic was in sight now, doors sealed up like an ominous prison.

“He’s fine. You saw him last time: no frenzy, no fever madness.” The healer smiled at their success. It had taken over four years but they’d finally figured out how to keep the elf under control during Merrill’s heat. Other than knocking him senseless.

“I don’t like leaving him in the hands of a Templar.” Granted, Cullen wasn’t just any Templar and had proven himself both useful and circumspect. Unfortunately, a lifetime of keeping her sister safe from the Chantry’s trained mage hunters had simply left Hawke incapable of trusting their kind.

“They get on fabulously. I’m sure they sit around swapping stories about mages they hate and abominations they’ve slain and then do something terribly manly like compare sword sizes or polish their boots.” Anders’ rolled his eyes. He was no fonder of the Templar Order than Hawke herself, and he had far more reason for concern. But the sheer relief of finding out that blocking Fenris’ senses from the Fade could render him harmless during the mating fever clearly outweighed the risk of being exposed. Not to mention that Hawke was fairly certain the Knight-Captain already knew
about Anders. Probably Merrill too. Both mages were doing important work, helping the most
downtrodden people in the city, and the man was wise enough not to interfere.

A sharp scream made both the rogue and mage stop in their tracks, eyes darting to the source of the
sound just in time to see a body fall off the clinic roof. A stack of crates broke his fall, and probably
several bones as well if his wheezing groan was any indication. He dropped the rest of the way to the
ground and started to get to his knees, freezing at the sensation of something sharp pressed to the
back of his neck.

“Bianca is accurate and deadly up to a hundred yards, stinky. I catch you within that distance again
and you won’t even be able to roll away.” Varric growled, letting the arrow tip scratch skin. When
he judged the man sufficiently terrified, a boot to his ass shoved him along. It was rather pathetic to
watch him frantically limping away, but the smell of him as he passed made Hawke cringe. Stinky
indeed.

“You put traps on my roof?” Anders looked from the dwarf to the top of his clinic.

“Just some spikes and springs, nothing poisonous or messy. Boneheads are always thinking with the
wrong bits,” Varric shrugged, dark humor dancing in his smile.

“Alpha idiots,” Hawke sighed, rubbing at her forehead to dull the pain starting to ache behind her
eyes. She turned to Anders, determined to make one last attempt to escape this madness. “And that’s
what you want me to be?”

“I want you to be yourself, Hawke,” Anders gently corrected. The commanding grip on her arm
softened to kind reassurance.

“Oh dear, who have I been? Please tell me it’s someone pretty.” The Fereldan batted her eyes in a
mockery of confused innocence. The look always worked for Bethany.

“Pretty stubborn. At least that’s no different,” Varric snorted. He holstered his weapon and clapped
the rogue’s shoulder, ignoring the way she staggered under the blow. “Blondie’s right, Hawke,
you’ve been all twisted up and out of sorts ever since the Qunari shitstorm. Haven’t been able to
cheat worth a damn and the Madame tells me you haven’t been to the Rose in months.”

“Yes, well, always seeing Uncle Gamlen at the counter tends to ruin the mood.” Hawke decided to
shut down that entire line of conversation. Quickly.

She didn’t need questions about her sexual habits of late. Primarily because there weren’t any.
There’d been plenty of attractive options; that friend of Elegant’s, the elf serving drinks at the
Viscount’s dinner, the Nevarran with his delightful accent. A bit of flirting, a playful fumble under
the clothing, a few kisses and then . . . nothing. Gorgeous or not, drunk or sober, Hawke found
herself growing bored, cold, irritated by the gentlest of touches until all she could think about was
getting away.

“Just come in, sit down and see if anything,” Anders’ mouth wrestled with the shape of a few
different words before settling on the right one, “happens.”

“That’s a polite way of saying catch some fever and see if you sprout a dick,” Varric translated with
his usual tact.

“Oh goody.” Hawke let out a long-suffering sigh but followed Anders without any further
complaint. Varric slid the doors shut behind them and she fancied that she could just make out the
sound of him muttering to Bianca as he went back on guard.
The clinic reeked of burning embrium and nettles and the air was positively cloying. Merrill was in the back room, like always, sweating in the throes of her neglected breeding cycle. At least she was partially covered by the bed sheets for a change.

“You know, we could fix two problems at once if we just convinced Fenris and Merrill to get together,” Hawke quipped as she walked into the room.

“Do you really want to see that happen?” Anders was already cringing at the thought, distracting himself by checking the elf’s pulse and temperature.

“See? No, not particularly. But I’m sure I wouldn’t mind hearing some juicy details later,” the rogue grinned. She damned well wouldn’t be the only one uncomfortable right now.

“Suffering Andraste, you sound like-,” the healer caught himself before he finished. The guilty dart of his eyes was more than enough for Hawke to know what he’d almost said and the breath in her lungs twisted painfully for a few seconds before returning to normal. She’d gotten used to these small reminders long ago, the sudden stabs of agony that felt like fresh cracks running across her already fractured soul. Anders shook his head, apologies right on the edge of his tongue, bridled because he knew they would only make it worse. “Just try to relax, Hawke. And don’t think about it.”

Right. Don’t think about the fact that her drugged friend was being used as some bizarre kind of aphrodisiac. Don’t be prudish, sweet thing. A murmur of laughter teased behind her thoughts, the voice rising unbidden from her memories. Your nicest brothels try to keep an omega in heat at all times, it makes business much more exciting. Hawke squeezed her eyes closed, pinching at the bridge of her nose to relieve the tension of this damned headache. It felt like she’d spent the whole night drinking at the Hanged Man and then slept on Lowtown stairs. Which did happen every so often, but not last night. Not in, what, months? Maker’s manky breath, no wonder everyone was so worried about her.

The dim room was filled with the scent of incense, the tang of sweat bit on Hawke’s tongue with every breath and it was getting warm. Too warm. She reached for her tunic, unlacing the collar to find some relief for the choking sensation that was making it hard to swallow. She hadn’t been in this back room in over a year. Well, no, she felt a ragged chuckle tumble out. It would be exactly a year now, wouldn’t it? The memory slithered through her thoughts like fingertips teasing along her skin. She could feel a bead of sweat trickle down her cheek and the ghost of lips following the path. Isabela’s mouth could be delicate, teasing, insatiable. Hawke’s own lips parted slightly, hungry for that familiar taste. She could almost catch the scent of her, that salty sweetness laced with metal and spice. There were goosebumps and chills chasing across her every nerve, the bottomless pit in her gut rolling on itself, turning into a dull ache.

Isabela straddling her lap, pinning her to the chair. The pirate queen looking down with molten fire in her eyes, burning into Hawke, pouring the heat straight into her before their mouths even met.

Excitement boiled in Hawke’s blood, releasing in the helpless whimper that broke from her throat. She didn’t see Anders watching her, the confusion of suspense and worry knitting his brow. She leaned forward, bracing her head in her hands like she was sick at sea. Sick, feverish, gulping in shallow breaths to fight the aching need that was now pounding so hard it felt like her body would break. She remembered this feeling, this unstoppable, unquenchable thirst. The feeling of reaching for those soft curves with both hands, drinking her in through every inch of her skin. She knew the scent of the pirate’s desire mingling with her own, mixing together until the air was heavy with nothing but the smell and sounds of need. Isabela’s voice; purring, laughing, moaning sweet, indescribable profanities into her ear, taunting, praising, coaxing until Hawke could feel herself falling apart from nothing but the magic of the sailor’s lips.
Hawke groaned, jerking so violently to her feet that the chair crashed backwards to the floor. The room moved around her, rising and falling and trying to force her to her knees. She lunged for the door, fumbling the handle with numb, clumsy fingers.

“Hawke, what’s happened?” Anders followed on her heels, trying to catch hold of her arm. The rogue turned so fast that she nearly fell over, head already spinning and disoriented as her senses assailed her with the mixture of past and present. She caught her friend’s furtive glance lower, momentarily confused by the look before she remembered where she was. Then when and why.

“Nothing,” Hawke shook her head, focusing on Anders, noting the disappointment that flitted across his face. She could barely catch her breath but managed to force a small laugh across her lips, “No magic wand other than the one strapped to your back. Sorry. Just as well, I doubt any alpha could compete with that wood you’re packing.”

“Alright, Hawke.” Soft brown eyes offered her only warmth and sympathy, not fooled for a moment by her playful defense. “Thank you for trying.” The healer rested one hand on her shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze of reassurance as he studied her face. He was trying to see past her laughter; Anders was always trying to get her to open up and share. Damned fool kept trying it when she was sober, too.

“This place stinks like dead bears in a forest fire. I need some air.” The rogue gave a deliberate grimace of disgust, turning to leave before the mage could say anything more. She quickly retreated from the clinic, ignoring Varric’s curious voice trailing on the air behind her. Once she was sure she was out of sight, she broke into a run.

One thing Darktown had in plenty: back alleys and shadowed hiding places. Hawke raced down the first narrow passage, then another and another, taking random turns through the maze of dark lanes sandwiched between decrepit buildings until the smell of incense and heat (and mysterious hints of ocean) faded from her nostrils. She rested against a splintering wooden wall, panting for breath, aware that her heart felt like it was going to explode and the pain had nothing to do with her mad dash.

The tired rogue dropped to the ground, letting her head fall back to thump against the wall with a groan. Her collar was still unlaced and one hand instinctively slid under the loose cloth, finding with practiced ease the familiar wound pattern where her throat and shoulder met. The pulse of her heartbeat was still hammering right beneath her fingers. The feel of the scarred mark filled her with a mixture of bitterness and comfort. It was still there, that had to mean Isabela was alright. Didn’t it? The whole concept of the claiming bite still confused the shit out of her. She’d always assumed that the territorial behavior worked in favor of the dominant partner; alphas claiming omegas or betas or whoever they wanted so long as they could hold them down long enough to get their teeth in. She didn’t know it could work in reverse; that she could choose to be claimed.

Yours. She closed her eyes, picturing Isabela as she’d seen her that first day in the Hanged Man. She was all grace and blasphemy, cocky, brazen, a wanton display of skin and danger. The sly curl of her lips matched that wicked glint in her eye, defiance and intrigue sweet on her low, purring tongue. The fiery pirate left a wreckage of bodies in her wake, heartbroken or dead didn’t seem to make any difference to her. That carefree, audacious, lethal set of charms caught Hawke the moment they met, surrendering before the battle even began.

Yours. Hawke could’ve said it a thousand times, the truth caught on her lips every time they kissed, but Isabela’s rule always held her at bay. No feelings. She didn’t dare risk what little she had of the pirate in a foolish, desperate gamble to take more. Hawke never wanted anything Isabela wasn’t willing to give. But her body betrayed her, printing the confession in her own blood and flesh. Then
her mind fell to pieces, instincts taking control in a way she’d never felt before. Even now, when she tried to remember that day, she felt like a spirit watching from beyond the Veil, a spectator to her own possession.

She didn’t regret fighting the Arishok. Hawke still felt a grim satisfaction curl her lips when she remembered the feel of him falling before her. She would kill him a hundred times over and a hundred more like him to keep Isabela safe and free. But then she had gone and bollixed it all up. In the mindlessness of her rage, the overwhelming urge to protect what she treasured, Hawke crossed that dangerous line from yours to mine. She’d tried to claim what wasn’t hers. No wonder Isabela ran.

*Please, Maker, give me another chance.* Hawke tangled her fingers into her hair, worrying the short strands into knots that matched the twisting thoughts in her head. *I swear I won’t do it again. I won’t make that same damned mistake.* (She needed to learn to stop cursing in her prayers but was still new to the whole practice.) *I’ll never try to tie her down or make her mine. I won’t even tell her how much I love her.* Hawke could still feel those words when they were poised on her lips, the Viscount’s throne room echoing with noise, blood hammering in her ears, Isabela’s bottomless eyes drawing her in. She’d almost let the truth spill out, the excitement and victory and gut-wrenching cascade of emotions almost ripping them free. *I swear, if she comes back, she’ll never know.*

“You alright there, Champ?” Varric’s calm concern lured Hawke’s attention to the far end of the alley. The dwarf was approaching at a languid pace, strolling down the dark passage like he was out for a walk in a garden.

“I’m perfect. Ask anyone!” Hawke called back, tossing him a breezy salute. No strain in her voice, no crack to her smile, nothing but the familiar armor of her smirk, unreadable as an Orlesian mask. She’d perfected this defense.

“Sure, and I’ve got a beach house in Orzammar,” Varric grunted, looking down at her with one cocked brow.

He might not be able to see past the shield of her face, but he didn’t have to. His gaze fell to Hawke’s hand, still hovering on her shoulder beneath her shirt. The dwarf had spent enough long nights drinking with Hawke or dragging her home and pouring her into bed to have heard every slurred doubt and angry regret that she ordinarily kept buried beneath lock and chain. She saw the flicker of comprehension in his eyes and, while it made her bristle, there was no point in hiding what he already knew. The storyteller folded his arms, assuming the stance that Hawke had come to think of as ‘patient counselor.’ It beat the shit out of ‘romance expert,’ at least.

Varric let out the long, rumbling sigh that was always a prelude to something either wise or cynical before he spoke, “It’s not your fault you know. Feelings don’t go away just because they’re inconvenient.”

“No, but they have to be controlled, Varric. Mine just about turned me into an animal, and not the cuddly kind you want to take home to play with the kids,” Hawke retorted, shooting her friend a scowl when she saw how quickly he nodded in agreement.

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“Sure, slobbering at the mouth, chewing on the furniture, humping everyone’s legs—no, wait, that was some guy at the Rose last month.” A glimmer of triumph flashed in Varric’s smile when Hawke couldn’t help chuckling, relaxing into the comfort of their repartee. “You fought for Isabela and saved her life. I wouldn’t call that particularly monstrous.”

“I didn’t do it for the right reasons. I did it because my mind had decided to take up occupancy somewhere between my legs. And the side effects weren’t quite so fun as usual,” Hawke’s mouth
grimaced in distaste, “What was I going to do next? Hit her over the head with a club and drag her home?”

“With Rivaini’s stubborn skull I think you’d better use a war hammer.” That was two laughs he’d gotten now. All Varric ever needed was a willing audience and Hawke hadn’t realized how much she needed the relief. The dwarf always knew how to bypass her defenses, how to make her actually listen. “Look, Hawke, you heard what Fenris said about all that. A bit of mating challenge, some dominance issues and a spike of rut all rolled into one. Not the kind of thing you want to have happen around the in-laws but not so unusual for an alpha.”

“I don’t care what’s normal for an alpha. That wasn’t normal for me,” the Fereldan shook her head, refusing the overly simplified attempt at comfort. It was her first honest statement, a sincere feeling that didn’t need to hide behind a joke. Varric was one of the only people that could make her drop the act.

“Sooner or later you’re going to have to reconcile those two.” The dwarf offered his simplest, surest advice before climbing back to his feet and extending a hand. Hawke took his arm, letting him haul her upright before giving her answer.

“Not at this rate.” She looked off in the direction of Anders’ clinic, chalkling up one more failure. Nearly a year of trying to make her alpha side manifest again and there hadn’t been so much as a twitch. “A bit redundant anyway, isn’t it? It’s not like I have to worry about protecting her anymore.”

Hawke’s wry laugh sounded hollow echoing off the alley walls. She turned to wind her way back through the maze towards home, glad that Varric couldn’t watch her face to see the regret gnawing behind her eyes. She’d give anything for another chance to fight alongside Isabela, to cover the pirate’s back and work together in that smooth synchronicity that had come so naturally to all their rhythms. They moved perfectly in tandem, flowing around each other like water. She’d never adapted so easily to another body in her space, never felt so thoroughly complete. Since then something was always missing.

“Hawke,” Varric caught her attention, the grave tone of his voice declaring that he had one final bit of counsel to impart before he could let the subject drop. She looked down at him, brow tilted in expectation. “Just remember you weren’t the one that started all this.”

One stocky finger waved in the air, gesturing briefly but unmistakably towards the mark on Hawke’s shoulder. Instinctively, her own hand reached to rest over the bite, bunching the fabric beneath her fingers.

“I know, Varric. But I’m the one that can’t let it go.”
Isabela hadn’t even stepped off the cargo ship before she remembered why she hated Minrathous. The scent was all wrong. Too much blood in the air, and stagnant fear—which is mostly piss. Docks should smell of the sea; fresh fish catch, aged wood, seagull shit, exotic spices and everything slowly rotting from the dankness of ocean air seeping into every nook and crevasse. The capital of the Tevinter Imperium just managed to smell like death. Shocking.

The sailor rolled her eyes and hoisted her rucksack, marching down the gangway without a glance at the many whistles and cat calls that heralded her arrival. At least some things were universal. Making her way along the docks she saw a group of chained slaves waiting to be boarded; human chattel for trade. Elven, actually. The first time she’d set foot in this port, Isabela hadn’t cared about the silent slaves being shuffled about like so much cargo; perhaps she’d just been trying not to notice. Now, however, every pair of frightened green eyes was Merrill, and every defiant curse sounded like it was spat in Fenris’ voice.

She pushed past the loading docks, muscles coiled tight, teeth gnashing, focused only on getting away from the sour reminders of her past. Then a familiar smell hit her senses. Briny, pungent, with just a hint of sweetness. Isabela followed her nose along the fishmonger stands, mouth watering as she drew closer to the tantalizing scent. She passed over a dozen stalls before she found the makeshift counter covered in spiny black treasures.

“How much?” Isabela began fishing coins from her purse. The last few ventures had been risky but profitable, and even if she left the ship on less than amenable terms, the captain was fair enough to let her keep her share. In return, she let him keep all his bits.

“Oh! Uhm, 20 coppers.” The boy behind the stand blushed furiously as he tried to hold eye contact with the sultry pirate. It was cute; in an awkward, pubescent “he’s going to jack off over this later,” kind of way.

“One for here, three for the road, keep the extra.” Isabela flipped the kid a silver with a wink. He looked like he could use a few good fantasies.

She inspected the display of shuddering mollusks, so fresh their spines were still twitching. Twenty coppers was a steal. The damn things were a silver each anywhere on the Waking Sea. Still, she remembered the night she and Hawke indulged, the other rogue never having tried the luxurious treat.

“I’m Ferelden, Isabela. If we get too adventurous in our cuisine we end up with poisonous mushrooms in the stew!” Hawke protested, eyeing the wriggling meal with ill-concealed unease.

“Stop being such a coward. You’ll like it, trust me. Here.” Isabela deftly slid two fingers into the opened shell, scooping out the gold flesh and holding it to Hawke’s mouth. The other rogue hesitated, eyes full of suspicious doubts and questions. The pirate refused to argue further, one eyebrow tilting up in a silent challenge. With a sigh of resignation, Hawke squinted her eyes shut and let the fishy prize slide past her lips. She grimaced for just a moment, trying to comprehend the texture and flavor filling her mouth. Then she swallowed, eyes fluttering open in delighted surprise. Isabela’s lips were already turning upward in a smug curl of victory. “Well?”
“It’s delicious,” Hawke admitted, licking her lips and then suddenly pressing forward to steal a kiss from Isabela’s mouth. The pirate barely had time to respond to the surprising, delightful assault, catching the flavors that darted across her lips and tongue before Hawke pulled away with a blush. “It reminds me of you.”

The taste of the ocean. Salty and sweet, clean but aromatic. Isabela took a deep breath of the opened shellfish before slipping her fingers inside and pulling a piece of pulpy, succulent flesh free to pop in her mouth. She sighed, licking the trail of liquor off her fingers. Would Hawke ever eat this delicacy again? Ever indulge in the rich flavor and then flush that adorable pink because it reminded her of a onetime pirate lover? If only it tasted a little more like leather and soap, had just a hint of bitter metal beneath the sweetness. Then maybe it could remind her of Hawke as well. Not that she needed any reminders.

Isabela shook herself from the memories, nodding thanks as the boy handed her a sack with her extra purchases. She’d happily cut each one open for a snack as she made her way across the chaotic city.

Unlike anywhere else in Thedas, the Circle at Minrathous had no guards or sentries. In an empire run by magisters, templars didn’t even exist. That didn’t make Isabela feel any safer as she made her way towards the imposing bastion of magical learning. Who needs swords and armor when everyone around can just turn you into a pile of smoking ash from a hundred feet away? She noticed a few confused looks darted at her, plenty of furtive glances and more than one open sneer of disdain. Ignoring them all, the pirate strode confidently through the front entrance and stopped only when enough protesting yelps from the servants managed to summon someone who seemed to be in charge.

“Can I help you?” The grey haired woman that blocked Isabela’s path looked like she had come with the building. Probably high priestess back when the place was still full of dragon statues and absolutely ruined carpets.

“Yes, tell that peacock Pavus to stop gelling his hair and get down here. I’d hate to get bored and start seeing how many abominations I can make.” Isabela glanced over to a group of apprentices clustered on the far side of the entry, all of them trying desperately not to stare. There were definitely a few Desire demons salivating at the edge of the Veil.

There was a stubborn standoff for several long, silent seconds and Isabela fancied that she could hear the woman’s ass squeaking because it was clenched so tight. Then, with a forced smile, the Grand Servant Commander and Bootlicking Mistress (or whatever titles these people gloried in) gave a nod and ushered the pirate into a nearby study.

Left alone and impatient, Isabela went straight for the crystal decanter on one end table and splashed several fingers of something golden into a glass. A quick gulp made her gag and she cursed as she coughed on the fiery syrup. Why did snobby people always think liquor needed to be as nasty as a medicine? She’d been itching for a real drink for weeks at sea. Itching for a lot of things, actually. The pirate frowned and turned her attention to the shelves of books on all sides. And probably not a single one with naughty pictures.

The gnawing frustration was getting worse. Most of the time it was a dull ache, a vague sensation like skipping a few too many meals. Then there could be a sudden twist in her gut, the kind that threatened to drop her legs out from under her if she didn’t do something. An expert on the many and varied flavors of longing, Isabela had easily identified the familiar beat of desire as soon as the first frisson threaded beneath her skin. A quick stop in a tavern found her plenty of volunteers, all eager to
lend a hand and other more interesting parts. The stench of old ale and rat shit in the alley with her back against the wall felt like home. Until it felt wrong. All wrong. Prickling skin, racing heart, body recoiling like she’d taken a blow and she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get the smell out of her lungs, the bile out of her throat.

It had been the work of a second to draw her dagger. She didn’t even have to scratch skin before the drunken sod was scared enough to weigh anchor and run off, leaving the pirate alone and confused in the squalid back street. Convinced that it was nothing more than drinking a bad bottle of rum, Isabela went back into the tavern and washed her mouth out for the rest of the night. She crawled into bed at dawn, alone; just herself and the promise that she wouldn’t let it happen again.

Then it happened again. And again. And then bloody again. An Orlesian silk merchant. The elf with gorgeous hands. A barmaid in Wycome, that soldier in Rialto, a whole night in the brothel at Llomeryn. She’d tried dozens of looks, shapes and styles of indulgence. It wasn’t the same every time; she didn’t feel panic or revulsion with every hand or mouth that she lured to her touch. That was when it was worse because she didn’t feel anything; nothing but her insides tying themselves into frustrated knots, tension and anger coiling in her throat until all she could do was curl her whole body into a fist and curse. Nothing slaked the craving and it was only getting more persistent, more desperate and impossible to ignore. Thankfully, was already on her way to Minrathous before the worst began.

Isabela felt a surge of relief when she heard the study door creak open; not just a welcome distraction from unpleasant thoughts but the actual prospect of a solution.

“You wanted to see me?” The dark haired magister looked at her with obvious surprise and no little amount of distrust.

“Please tell me that’s some awful enchantment disguise and not a permanent situation.” Isabela stared at the man. He looked a bit like the mage she’d come to see but, Maker’s left nut, he looked awful! It hadn’t been that long, had it?

“I’m sorry?” Now the distrust was simply giving way to offense, the first threads of insult lining around his eyes. The same eyes, certainly. And ridiculously full head of dark hair. But surely he’d been taller . . .

“Father! There you are! How do you still move so quickly?” A second mage burst into the room, clearly flustered and his robes rather disheveled from a run. His attention was fixed on the older man for only a moment before noticing the room’s other occupant and he burst into an astonished grin.

“Isabela, you minx!”

“Now there’s my handsome demon,” Isabela laughed in relief and let herself be gathered into a massive, swinging hug. Strong as she remembered too. Mages didn’t usually worry too much about physical power but this one! He put his vanity to good use. Really a waste of muscle to just be twirling that staff about.

“You know this woman, Dorian?” The older mage looked on the excited reunion with no small amount of bewilderment. He almost looked rather pleased. Which was not a reaction Isabela was used to seeing in parental figures.

“Of course! This is Captain Isabela. She’s,” Dorian paused, eyes darting to the sailor long enough to catch the nearly imperceptible shake of her head, “An old friend.”

“I see.” The elder Pavus’ eyes went back and forth between his son and the scantily clad pirate, forming his own conclusions. Isabela knew she wasn’t imagining it now, he looked downright
delighted. Like he wanted to clap his boy on the back and shake his hand. “I’ll just leave you to it then. Lovely to meet you, ah, Captain.” He was backing towards the exit, waving away any further attempts at explanation and then he was gone, slamming the study door with wholly unwarranted enthusiasm.

“I didn’t know daddy was still checking up on you,” Isabela teased, slipping out of the mage’s arms.

“He came to hear me debate in the Lower Floor. To be honest, I don’t think he was all that impressed. Not until he saw you, anyway,” Dorian admitted with a cheeky wink. He sauntered to the end table and poured himself a thimble’s worth of the noxious liquor and barely wetted his lips. Probably the only way to tolerate that piss.

“Don’t go flattering, sweet cheeks. I’ve got a month of sea salt caked in my hair and the stink of several dozen sailors stuck on my skin,” Isabela scoffed, following her friends’ lead and dropping onto the decadent sofa.

“There you go, making me jealous again.” Dorian fanned himself dramatically. “All Father saw was a beautiful woman touching me. You could’ve just sodomized the Black Divine with your boot heel and he’d still be delighted.”

“Your father or the Divine? I have heard stories, you know.” Isabela allowed herself a genuine smile, relieved to find that despite his rise in status, the cocky Vint hadn’t really changed. He returned the warm expression, their past dealings ancient and brief, but enough to forge a bond that still felt comfortable and secure even now.

“I know you aren’t just here to trade delicious flirtations and gossip, fun as that may be.” Dorian could never manage a truly serious expression, but he set his drink down and focused on the pirate with the intensity of concern. “What’s wrong?”

“The magic stopped working,” Isabela stated flatly, her smile vanishing into a grave line.

“That can’t be. The runes are made of the same stuff as what’s been holding this building together. That magic lasts for generations, you can’t have worn it out in-,” Dorian batted his hand about distractedly, trying to pull the number from thin air.

“Five,” Isabela helpfully supplied.

“Five years,” the mage nodded, shooting her a grateful smile before he remembered his argument. “No, it’s quite impossible. Those spells were perfect.”

“They were then but trust me, they aren’t anymore.” Isabela felt a rumble of irritation beneath her words, threatening to become dangerous. With a frustrated growl she snapped open the fastener on her necklace and tossed it onto the table. For an instant Dorian went pale, then a heated flush bloomed up his dark skin. Beads of sweat instantly began to form along his perfectly combed hairline and his jaw muscles worked furiously for several seconds before his mouth finally came unstuck.

“Kaffas.” His curse was foreign and familiar at the same time. “You’re going into heat again.”

“Just finishing actually,” Isabela corrected with a short bark of bitter laughter. “It’s been so bloody long that for the first day I thought it was something harmless, like a sodding plague.” She grabbed Dorian’s glass and, disgusting or not, downed the rest of the drink. Still awful, but it helped burn away all the cloying words and fears that were twisting her tongue. It wiped away some of the aggravating memories of elusive release, the knife edge of pleasure that tortured her for days but never cut through the pain.
“Isabela,” the mage’s brow furrowed, concentrating on each careful word. “The magic didn’t stop working, you broke the spells. I warned you that could happen. I told you that if you took a mate your cycles would return to normal.”

“That’s bollocks!” The sailor burst to her feet in a fit of protest, not entirely sure whether she found the accusation frightening or just plain offensive. “You know my stand, Dorian, I don’t belong to anyone but myself. No one claims me.”

“Yes, yes; no marriage for the fierce, defiant pirate queen.” A flippant toss of Dorian’s hand waved away the very idea. “A mate is a different matter entirely and you know it.” He stood, forcing Isabela’s snapping eyes to look up at him. “You may not wear the mark, darling, but I can smell it on you. Your body has made a choice and laid claim. It’s up to you to decide whether or not to play along.”

“Absolutely not. Cast the spell again,” Isabela demanded, the natural authority of a captain bleeding into her command.

“It won’t work.” The mage shook his head, genuine sympathy creeping into his eyes. He did truly know how she was suffering.

“I can’t live like this, Dorian,” the sailor groaned, remnants of fever prickling along her skin and making her thoughts come and go in waves. “It’s so much worse than before. This last heat almost got me killed!”

Truthfully, it got three other men killed. Just because she was overwhelmed, miserable and nearly delirious in her bunk didn’t mean her daggers were any less deadly. Any crew that mistakenly thought she might be easy prey swiftly paid the price. She barely stayed her hand in time to keep from slitting the captain’s throat. Small wonder he was so eager to see her leave. The breeding fever was a foreign feeling after so long without its aching, stifling heat. The last time had been years before, a mating lust that very nearly cost her command. After that, she’d made straight for Tevinter and a mage that was rumored to be able to help omegas hide their nature.

“Yes, the cycles can be much worse in your position.” Dorian picked up the stripped necklace and traced his fingers on the inner edge, verifying his memory of the runes.

“My position?” Isabela scoffed. Upright, dragon style, lotus bloom—the pirate had yet to meet a position that she couldn’t make work to her advantage.

“You didn’t complete the bond,” he explained absently, then tossed a quick nod to her bare skin, “As you pointed out, you don’t wear the mark.”

“I never will.” The pirate clenched her jaw stubbornly.

It was easy to be so determined as long as she thought only of alphas and omegas, of breeding cycles and mating claims, but didn’t let herself think in specifics. So long as she didn’t think of Hawke; of strong arms carrying her across the room and hot breath trailing between her breasts, laughter tickling her belly or that cool voice in her ear teasing her to molten insanity. She didn’t dare remember the taste of salt and copper on her lips or the sweet cry that echoed forever in her ears when Hawke gave herself over. A betrayal of warmth bled through Isabela’s bones and she shook herself, forcing away the dangerous memories. That was the past, this was the future.

“Prepare to be miserable then, my dear,” Dorian sighed, practically reading her thoughts as he refilled his glass and brought another for her. “You started the process; you can’t walk away in the middle like it’s a party that’s suddenly gotten dull. Your body is never going to let you forget what’s
“Fine.” Isabela tossed back the sticky liquor in a single gulp, refusing to let it make her cough again. Despite what everyone always assumed, she actually could control her desires. She could control every aspect of herself; she had to, because that was the only way to keep anyone else from seizing the helm.

“Fine?” Dorian repeated, openly incredulous.

“I’m the only captain of this ship, sweet thing.” The pirate nodded decisively. She’d navigated tougher waters than this. Granted, right now it felt like sailing a tempest with a hangover and no crew, but she didn’t become Queen of the Eastern Seas by backing down from a challenge.

“Wait.” Dorian stopped her before she could head to the door. “Let me strengthen the runes on the necklace. The magic can’t prevent heats anymore, but those spells can still block your scent. Maybe if you can’t smell her on you,” the mage watched Isabela long enough to see the subtle clue in her eyes that confessed he was right about her chosen’s gender. He turned his attention back to the necklace to hide a smile, “Then perhaps you’ll be able to find a bit of relief with other company when necessary.”

“I love that you know me so well,” Isabela beamed, leaning against the sofa to watch over the man’s deft fingers as he worked.

She’d liked Dorian from the day they met. It might’ve been because those were his rebellious, black sheep days and she’d found him at a brothel in the elven quarter, happily dancing with a particularly handsome man’s hands on his ass. She could’ve been reacting to the natural affinity of omegas, instantly sharing the sympathy of being dealt one of life’s more fucked up cards. Ultimately, however, Isabela loved his stubborn pride. To live openly as an omega man, that took spirit, it took strength. He was arrogant by breeding, vain by nature and utterly, unapologetically himself. Anyone that didn’t like it could go suck an electric staff.

“Do you know what alpha and omega actually mean?” Dorian absently inquired, not taking his eyes off the lacework of signs beginning to glow inside gold.

“Pain in my ass?” The pirate hazarded, smirking at the mage’s ironic chuckle.

“They literally mean first and last, the beginning and the end. When you put them together it means forever.” Dorian’s dark eyes stole a quick glance up at her, measuring any reaction to the words.

“Well, that’s a wonderfully romantic and utterly depressing thought. I might need to get drunk tonight just to forget it.” Isabela rolled her eyes, mouth contorting in distaste.

“It just means you have plenty of time to figure things out.” Dorian’s voice had dropped soft and low, the murmur of a consoling parent. His hands delicately slipped the necklace back around Isabela’s throat, clipping it into place with a proud, affectionate flourish. “Take care of yourself, Captain.”

“You too, handsome.” Isabela slid into the mage’s arms for one final embrace, planting a quick kiss on his cheek like the brother she should’ve had. Or naughty cousin, at least. Then, because Dorian really did understand her, he let her leave without a word.

Chapter End Notes
The story needed a Tevinter mage and I just couldn't resist throwing in an Inquisition cameo.

I hope this chapter unraveled a few major questions about Isabela, as well as more of the alpha/omega dynamic. If the facts are still too vague or mysterious, please let me know so I can clarify later. Thanks all!
“But, I don’t understand.” Merrill’s sweet bewilderment broke the raucous noise of the Hanged Man once more. “Why is it the Serpent of Sadness? Can serpents even be sad?”

“Not with you around, Daisy,” Varric chuckled and shook his head. There was an affectionate wonder in his weathered smile, always amazed at the bizarre places the little mage’s mind wandered. No wonder she kept getting lost in the city, she needed a ball of string inside her own head.

Hawke loved watching her friends in this, their most natural environment. Even Sebastian had started joining them for the weekly games of Wicked Grace. He didn’t actually gamble, of course, but he was a merciless watchdog and amazingly gifted at catching the exact moment anyone cheated. Wickedness would always be revealed by the Maker’s Light, treachery betrays itself, honest victory is its own reward, and on and on and on. Hawke was privately convinced that the Chantry brother simply remembered the tricks of his more dissolute days.

“You’re the Champion, right?” A voice that sounded like it had been dragged through broken bottles demanded Hawke’s attention and she looked up, noting that the speaker didn’t look any better than he sounded. He smelled like dried fish and rotting wood. A sailor, without any doubt.

“What gave me away? The fancy armor? My heroic bearing?” Hawke darted a smirk at Varric, it was his damn fault that this kept happening after all. Him and his stories. Although, perhaps this time he wasn’t to blame. “Or maybe it was the barmaid I saw pointing me out for you?”

“I’ve been looking for you; have some information that might be worth good coin.” The sailor’s greedy smile was a story in itself. An ugly one that probably involved someone getting assaulted in a back alley and left for dead.

“I just love a good sales pitch.” Hawke gave Anders a slight nod, silently telling him to make space at the table for their surprise guest. If nothing else, it promised a diverting few minutes of entertainment and she’d been holding a terrible hand.

The mariner looked around the table of friends, clearly enjoying his moment of suspense. There was a blend of pride and menacing delight in his face as he leaned forward. “I know where that Raider is, the one that screwed you over.”

Hawke’s first instinct was to point out that the screwing had been fairly mutual, but the look of sudden panic in the eyes of everyone at the table told her that it wasn’t a good moment for levity. Andraste’s spanked ass; she wasn’t sure any of them were even breathing, all just watching her.

“I see. And how would you know that?” The Champion leveled a long, appraising look at the seaman, allowing herself only a fleeting moment to wonder if Isabela had screwed him over too. She quickly rejected the thought. The pirate might have absolutely no morals, values or shame but one thing she’d always had was taste. If this fellow had crossed her path, it was never naked.

“We sailed out of the Nocen on the same schooner, dropped anchor in Antiva City and I saw her catch a brig heading right back out onto the water. I know the ship, it travels the same route this time every year.” The sailor slapped his hand excitedly on the table, like laying down the winning cards
on a massive pot. His excitement faded somewhat when he saw that no one else seemed to share the enthusiasm. The Champion remained silent, watching the gears spin behind his eyes. Darting his glance around Hawke’s friends, the man suffered a moment of confusion, edging towards frustration. “Don’t you understand what I’m offering?” He demanded. “The ship comes all the way to the Free Marches. You could know where she’s going to be and when!”

“Oh, that I understand,” Hawke assured him, grabbing the bottle from Fenris and filling her own mug. “What I don’t understand is what you expect me to do with that information.”

“Look, everyone knows what happened here,” the sailor dropped his voice, like he was imparting a dangerous secret. Everyone knew, but apparently no one wanted to talk about it. “This whole place got bugged and none took it worse than you. I figure you know where to find her then it might be a good chance for a bit of payback. Or, if that’s beneath your Championess,” the title twisted on his lips with a mocking sneer, “Then for the right price I can make sure she never gets off that ship at all.”

“Now you’ve got my attention.” Hawke brightened, pleased to finally have an answer. She heard Varric mutter a worried string of curses beneath his breath but a quick tilt of one eyebrow was enough to shut him up. Satisfied that he wouldn’t try to interrupt, Hawke turned back to the mariner. “What’s your name?”

“You’re looking for Spit-wash Piet.” He was looking pleased with himself again. All but salivating at the thought of coin. Probably figuring out how many drinks and whores he could spend it on.

“That’s your whole name? Not very colorful for a sailor,” the Champion tsked, disappointed at the lack of creativity. What happened to all the roguish, descriptive names from Isabela’s stories?

“Spit-wash Piet,” the sailor admitted, face darkening just a touch as he mumbled the full name.

“That’s more like it,” Hawke smiled. The smile that didn’t reach her eyes. The one that charmed nobles but made her friends start to twitch and shift away.

The Fereldan rogue took a swig from her cup and handed it to Anders, as if to share. Then she spun, both arms darting forward, catching a handful of filthy tunic and another clamping down on the scream that never cleared Piet’s lips. She dragged him out of his chair and slammed him onto the table, cards and drinks flying before any of her friends could grab them. She could feel his throat flexing and trying to shout beneath her grip and she tightened more. A snap of her wrist sent his only weapon clattering to the floor. It took less than the space of a breath and Spit-wash was shaking from the shock of it, staring up at her in total terror.

From the corner of her eye Hawke saw Varric pull Bianca, an eloquent warning to any other seamen in the tavern that might think of stepping in. Everyone buried themselves in their own drinks and games and conversations, the usual noise resuming and growing even louder as all the customers desperately tried to ignore what was happening. It was business as usual for the Hanged Man.

“I said you’ve got my attention, Spit-wash.” Hawke leaned down, baring her teeth in a growl. “Trust me, you didn’t want that to happen. I know who you are now, which means that if I ever want to, I will find you. Listen carefully, are you listening?” She eased the pressure on his throat just enough for a strangled burble of affirmation. “If anything happens to Isabela, on sea or land, I will track down and kill everyone who had a hand in hurting her and that list will always start with you.”

“But-!” The protest turned into a choked squeak, Hawke clamping her fingers tighter on his air again.
“I won’t care if you actually did it or not. I won’t ask questions or look for answers. I will simply find you. Are we clear?” She released hold of his throat, straightening up but keeping him pinned with nothing more than her eyes.

“Crystal, Champion,” Piet rasped, gingerly holding his bruised windpipe.

“Good. Off you go,” Hawke stepped away, giving the cowed sailor a clear line of escape. He was up and off the table in a second, rushing for the door. “Oh, and Spit-wash?” A wicked grin tugged at the Champion’s lips as she saw him freeze, not even daring to turn around. “Try using actual water next time.”

Laughter rocked across the Hanged Man, the natural burst of relief that comes from knowing no one is going to have to make a statement to the City Guard tonight. Hawke dropped back into her chair, gathering the scattered playing cards and shuffling them back into a playable deck.

“My, that was exciting!” Merrill giggled, hands clapping together like she’d just seen a wonderful magic trick.

“Sure, in a ‘piss your pants a little’ kind of way,” Varric agreed, signaling for Norah to bring towels and a fresh round of drinks. Hawke’s friends had all subtly eased away from the table as soon as they saw the flicker of danger in the Champion’s eyes, but only the dwarf had managed to save his mug as well as himself.

“I’m surprised she didn’t kill him.” It was hard to tell whether Fenris was impressed or disappointed with the turn of events.

“So am I.” Aveline was pleased, but also looked suspicious. She arched one skeptical brow to her fellow Fereldan, waiting for the silent question to penetrate.

“Dead men make lousy messengers.” Hawke breezily shrugged away her friend’s scrutiny. Corpses were a great message in themselves, but some stories spread better with living mouths. And the only people that gossiped more than sailors were dowagers and novelists.

“You want people to know they can’t make money off Isabela.” Anders was the first to grasp her intent.

“Rivaini has enough people after her ass already. Doesn’t hurt to thin the numbers.” Varric followed as well.

“Something could happen to her out there. Something we’d never know.” For all Aveline’s force and candor, she could be surprisingly gentle at times. Never moreso than when dealing with the sensitive subject of Isabela. She spoke the hard reality with an apology in her eyes.

“I’d know.” Hawke’s reply was just as soft-spoken but behind the words was solid rock, an absolute conviction that wouldn’t waver.

“Then I’ll help you kick that idiot’s ass. And anyone else’s.” The guard captain’s mouth set into a line of determination, quirking only at one side with the curl of affectionate humor in her words.

“But he said he could help you find Isabela.” Merrill’s brow was knit, still stuck on untangling the events from two conversations before. “Don’t you want to know where she is?”

“She isn’t here. That’s all that matters.” The Champion shrugged one shoulder, tossing off a burden she didn’t need to carry. And when she is here, that will be all that matters too. Hawke had to take a slow breath, forcing back the surge of emotion that always threatened to rise in her throat when
thoughts of “if” and “when” went too far. That damned scumbag sailor had set off a wasp’s nest beneath her ribs and the chaotic hum fluttered between blood and bone.

“You miss her, don’t you?” It wasn’t really a question. Not with Merrill’s wide, green eyes so poignantly mirroring the sadness that gnawed beneath Hawke’s thoughts. She was frighteningly good at that. The elf always seemed to know when Isabela was slipping across her mind. “Delltash. I can’t believe she’s been gone over two years. It still feels like she just left.”

Hawke slid an arm around Merrill’s delicate shoulders, silently wondering how the little mage could so perfectly echo her own thoughts. “She’ll be back,” the Champion assured her. A teasing lilt came into her voice as she continued, “How could she possibly stay away from you?”

The elf beamed up at her, delighted as much by the compliment as the prospect of her friend’s return. Merrill’s eyes filled up with the conviction radiating off Hawke. It was a belief so certain, so sure, that it had transformed from hope to fact. Anders believed in justice, Fenris in freedom, Aveline had duty and Sebastian, the Maker. They all paled in comparison to Hawke’s faith. Hawke believed she would see Isabela again.

Isabela couldn’t remember ever being unhappy in a brothel. The play of colors, the seductive looks and tempting displays; it was a spectacle of want and pleasure and she’d always happily let herself fall into the spell. Now, however, she woke with muttered profanity and felt nothing but irritation chafing under every inch of her skin like sandpaper and gravel. She yanked on her clothing, eyes raw and tired in the morning light and the smell of sex permeating the air only made her stomach roll.

She didn’t remember which of the willing whores she’d taken to bed last night, nor how long they lasted before she kicked them out in frustration. The prickling, impatient anger slowly percolating behind her eyes had started two days before. She knew what it meant. It was the fifth time now. She’d finally learned to recognize the early warning signs of her breeding cycle working its way towards fever. The pirate hadn’t even waited for the ship she was sailing with to reach port, just grabbed her things and dove over the rail at the first sign of land. That the closest city turned out to be Ostwick was a twist of fortune that she couldn’t decide whether to bless or curse the Maker for providing. It was lucky, because she knew the owner of this brothel, remembered him from his days as an employee. He was always happy to provide her with extra amenities for old times’ sake. It was horrific because she was in the Free Marches.

Kirkwall was just down the road. Barely more than a day away. Less on a cart or horse. As if her traitorous instincts could detect Hawke’s proximity, her thoughts wandered constantly in that direction. Fantasies and memories fused together into one in the feverish workings of her mind, escalating the heat that crept ever more painfully into her blood. Each successive mating cycle had been getting worse, lasting longer, shattering her mind and overwhelming her senses until remembering her own name became difficult because the only one that hovered on her tongue was Hawke.

Spanked Andraste, at this rate she was going to end up as bad as Merrill. Which was utterly unfair since the Dalish mage had been abstinent for ages and the pirate anything but. Years of fucking her way across Thedas and the only satisfaction Isabela had found was the relief of shoving her partners away when they were done. In heat it was just worse. Threads like burning lyrium lacing under her skin, coiling her body like a bow, muscles tight as if to grip the very edge of release. It never came. Her body could shudder like she was at the heart of a quake and wetness might run down her thighs but the ache didn’t stop, the fire wouldn’t wash away. All that tension and lust shaking her apart but
not once taking her to the high she needed.

Isabela strolled out into the main parlor of the brothel, noting the pieces of discarded clothing and one forgotten coin purse. *Hope he got his money’s worth.* She snatched up the minor prize. At least this visit wouldn’t be a total loss. A banging noise whipped the pirate around, dagger already in hand to face any threat. A muffled curse was coming from behind the bar. No one was usually up at this time of morning, not even the servants. Dawn was a cruel hour to everyone in a brothel. There was more thumping and the clatter of bottles and cups. Isabela leaned over the counter and spied only a shapely backside, clearly feminine, both by the form and in the sound of the voice still muttering profanities.

“Lost something?” The pirate inquired, chuckling when her voice made the woman startle and hit her head on the underside of the bar again. The stranger crawled back slowly, rubbing at her sore scalp and darting a look at the wooden counter that promised she’d be back later; with something sharp. Then her attention shifted past the inert enemy and fixed on Isabela. The slow smile that crept across her face was . . . *Well, now.* The sailor felt a spark shoot straight down her spine.

“Sorry if I woke you.” The woman had just enough grace to attempt an apology, even if her eyes were clearly delighted by the pirate’s unexpected company. “No one in this place is ever awake to make tea in the mornings and I’m buggered if I know where to start looking for pots. Think a pint will do?” She held up a metal tankard that looked like it had been used to hammer nails in its previous life. The stranger frowned at the mug as she got to her feet, clearly doubting its potential.

“I think it’s better suited for something stronger than tea.” Isabela rested one elbow on the bar, leaning forward at the perfect angle that she knew, from experience, accented all the right curves. That the other woman’s eyes fell precisely where she wanted was her first victory, the dusting of pink that rose across her cheekbones was the second. Then she dragged her gaze back to Isabela’s face, lips turning up into a mischievous grin.

“Good point,” the stranger agreed, scowling at the mug like it had thwarted all her plans. “Nothing for it then,” she sighed, but there was a sparkle in her eyes as she turned to a row of bottles, “Whiskey it is!” She grabbed the most expensive brand with such practiced ease that it had to have been her intention all along.

Isabela was a swift judge of character. As she watched the woman pouring drinks into two glasses she came to several quick conclusions. That casual, confident demeanor was unmistakable. She was clearly comfortable taking liberties and her whole manner subtly promised that if she didn’t own this place, she was probably fucking whoever did. Since Isabela knew the owner, (and his preferences) she knew this lovely creature couldn’t be warming his bed. A business partner then? Or just a favorite client? She certainly had the bearing and look of money. The pirate scraped through her memories from the previous night and she was vaguely sure the woman had been a customer. A regular, in fact, since several of the girls fussed her with affectionate familiarity.

“So,” the impromptu bartender handed Isabela her drink, a sly twinkle in her eye, “Come here often?”

Isabela couldn’t help chuckling at the obvious, terrible, yet perfectly appropriate line. It was just the sort of thing Hawke would –*No.* She shook off the thought before it took hold. She fixed her gaze on the woman before her and let her lips part into a smile, “I should hope that everyone here does.”

“True. But you aren’t from around here are you?” The question was spoken with such certainty that Isabela felt a thread of suspicion tighten her hands. She didn’t like people recognizing her. Castillon still had thousands of eyes combing the seas for her. The pirate was just about to counter with a few questions of her own when the stranger breezily continued, “Detre said he had an old friend coming to visit for a bit. Sounds like he’s quite fond of you.”
“Oh? And just what did my old friend tell you?” Isabela felt herself beginning to relax.

“That you could suck a man’s teeth out in a kiss and then turn around and sell them to a blood mage.” The laughing reply held nothing but open admiration. She was clearly someone who could appreciate a scandalous reputation.

“Nice to know he hasn’t started spreading lies.” The pirate wasn’t sure she liked how easily she felt comfortable with this woman. She was usually wary and inclined to keep the upper hand in any flirtatious games. The stranger was slipping past her guard, catching her by surprise with looks and sounds that made the warmth under her skin feel smooth and liquid instead of harsh. It might’ve been the nearness of her heat. Or perhaps her mating cycle had decided to play yet another new trick on her overwrought senses. Either way, the sailor felt emboldened by something more than drink when she extended her hand, “I’m Isabela.”

Rather than accept the gesture, the taller woman hoisted herself up and over the bar, landing with an impressively agile grace on the other side. Isabela added strength and dexterity to the list of her new quarry’s assets. Gallant as well, when she offered a small bow and kissed the pirate’s hand.

“I’m Elyn, Isabela, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Elyn finished her lavish gesture, a mockery of etiquette that was actually more charming than the real thing. When she released Isabela’s hand and straightened up, the pirate’s eyes made a sweep of her full form.

“So I see.” The sailor’s brow quirked up in amused surprise as her gaze lingered below the woman’s belt. That explained a lot. Alphas really should stick to looser trousers.

“Sorry.” Elyn immediately sat down on one of the barstools, crossing her legs to try and cover the arousal. “Detre deliberately triggered some poor omega’s breeding fever this week. Makes things a trifle awkward but he gets to charge triple for knotting, greedy bastard.”

“You mean there’s an omega in heat and you’re not trying to hammer through her door with that?” Isabela pointedly looked down again. Even in her politer posture, it was obvious the alpha could do some damage.

“Ouch. That’s just . . . ouch,” Elyn cringed at the mental image and shook her head. “Firstly, the fellow that paid top coin for that privilege is still up there. Secondly, you’re making a lot of assumptions. Alphas don’t have to rut every omega that crosses their path. And ‘she’ is an elven omega male. Not really my taste.”

“Oh really? And just what sort of flavors do you like?” The pirate propped her chin in one hand, genuine curiosity warring with the baser desires that had her eyes wandering appreciatively over the alpha woman’s form.

“I prefer my own kind.” Elyn took a sip of her whiskey. The coy reply was open to a number of interpretations. Human, female, wealthy even; but Isabela trusted her instincts.

“Other alphas,” the pirate guessed knowingly.

“Yes, if we’re not going to bother being too specific.” A harried, frustrated sigh filled in the rest of the answer. Alpha males pairing with each other was already incredibly rare. Isabela wasn’t even sure enough alpha women existed to satisfy a same-sex leaning in their breed.

“What a pity,” the pirate pouted, leaning closer until their shoulders brushed. She lowered her voice to a purr, “Here I had thought we might have some fun.”

As soon as the teasing words left her mouth, Isabela realized she wasn’t just playing a game. She
wanted this, wanted to see if the alpha could deliver on all the promises in her hungry eyes and cocky smile. The sailor had tried every other possible partner except this, the one closest to what she knew her body wanted. (To be fair, the breed was bloody rare and she hadn’t had a chance until now). Maybe with the right shape to fill the void, the right combination of strength and curves and confidence, maybe she could finally silence the burning, sobbing hollow that kept trying to devour her from within.

“There you go making assumptions again.” Elyn shook her head and set her cup down on the bar. The gesture was so final that Isabela actually wondered if she was being refused. The alpha got to her feet and Isabela felt protest like a dull throb beneath her ribs. Then, instead of turning to leave, Elyn closed the distance between them. One arm slid around the pirate’s waist, pulling her flush against an unmistakably hard body. A shock of chills raced down Isabela’s spine as she felt a breathy chuckle against her ear “Just because I prefer armor doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy silk.”

“And silver tongued too,” the pirate sighed in relief, smiling as the sensation of being wrapped up in another began to soothe the ache under her skin. “Come along, Charmer, let’s see what else that mouth of yours can do.”

In the grip of the hands lifting her off the floor, the caress of lips pressing hungrily against her own, Isabela felt a thrill she hadn’t thought possible anymore. She was genuinely excited. Power and want radiated off this woman and she greedily drank it in. The cool assurance, laughing pleasure, need trembling beneath control. It was all so right. So familiar. Just like . . .

Hawke.

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me! There's a point to this, I promise!

Also, I posted this in a bit of a rush so if you see errors, please forgive me; I will correct them later.

Finally, everyone's comments have been amazingly helpful and encouraging. Please don't stop!
I have a crazy few days coming up and I really hope to get the next chapter done soon but it may not be until early next week. Be patient with me. And drop a line or two of your thoughts so I can keep the story alive in my head.
Isabela had never fought an enemy as savagely as she warred against her body now. All of her senses, which should’ve been lost in delirious, carnal thrall, refused to surrender. She was caged in her own flesh, trapped in an acute awareness of every sensation that had bled from pleasure into pain. Rivulets of sweat seared like venom, burned like frost. She could feel each individual bruise where fingers had dug into her, stinging pinpoints and aching spans as hands scrabbled to hang onto slippery skin. Her muscles quivered and screamed, shaking with the fatigue that threatened to rip flesh from bone. Her core was throbbing from the stretch of Elyn filling her, but every thrust left her feeling emptier than the last.

She couldn’t stop, wouldn’t yield. She arched into the agony, drawing it ever deeper in, desperate to make the torture sweet. The touch was wrong, too hard or too soft, hands unable to match the rhythm of her body as it writhed to break free. The sounds in her ear were harsh; even breathless and moaning the voice was too polished, too low and dark. Not the dulcet purrs and soft, rasping whispers that echoed all the way into her dreams.

“So beautiful,” the memory stirred within Isabela, her gasp shuddering at the pleasure that rippled through her sex.

“The way you move, you feel,” Hawke moaned, lashes fluttering as she fought to keep her eyes fixed on the pirate straddling her body. “So fucking perfect,” her murmur fell into a breathless chuckle, “Perfect for fucking.”

Even on the edge of coming undone Hawke could laugh. The sound always lingered under her words, hid tucked in the curl of her smile, danced in sparkling blue. Her eyes. Holy slapped asses, those perfect, deep, oceanic eyes. Watching her, devouring her as surely as hands and mouth but utterly insatiable. Hawke’s eyes drank her in greedy gulps, worshipped Isabela like a god; spoke eloquent demands, lurid fantasies and naughty jokes even from across the room.

“Let me give you what you want.” The pirate felt another coil of tension roll over inside her; wires stretching everywhere, toes and fingertips, breasts and breathless lips, pulling so tight she had to surely rip apart. “Take it. Take anything, Isabela.” Hawke’s mouth hot against hers, urging her towards that inevitable crash. “Take everything.”

“Sodding Maker bloody fu-!” Isabela’s choked curses tangled with a cracking sob, rending her throat and tearing the air out of her lungs. The spasms seized her whole body, shaking and shattering apart but she couldn’t break with it, couldn’t break free. She was tethered to the knot in her belly; the coiling, twisting, clawing demand that writhed like dragonspawn inside of her but wouldn’t be
loosed. The hollow, sucking void pulled her down, dragged her into the despair of emptiness like an anchor dropping to the bottom of the sea.

No. Isabela snarled, fingernails leaving angry red welts on pale shoulders as she clenched her muscles. The burst of raw pain blooming up from between her legs screamed at the abuse but she refused to slow. She could feel the cock inside her starting to soften and she rocked her hips, squeezing, coaxing the smolder of sated pleasure back to a fiery need. *Not again.* She’d not be denied, not even by herself. Wetness trickled down her thighs every time she moved, the mixed release smearing over flexing muscles and Isabela wouldn’t have been shocked to look down and see blood staining their skin and sheets. Even then she wouldn’t give in.

“Isabela,” Elyn groaned, hands digging into the flesh of her ass to try to hold her still. “Stop, please, you have to—*Holy Maker*—Stop!”

Strong arms pushed at the pirate, lifting her away, sliding free of her body with a wet sound that left only the same emptiness within. The alpha didn’t pull away from her completely though. Elyn held her against her skin, kept the sailor in her lap, pressed close to her chest until she could feel Isabela’s stifled, resigned sigh.

“Someone else might be flattered,” Elyn’s words were slow and thick, breaking over lips still swollen and heavy, “But that’s three times now and I can tell you aren’t enjoying this. I don’t think I’m helping.”

“Tits and ash,” Isabela growled, disentangling herself from the woman’s arms and getting to her (albeit shaky) feet. She stalked over to the wash basin, grabbing the rag and dragging it angrily across her skin, ready to be rid of the smell of frustrated need and wasted sex. Her whole body was screaming at her and it wasn’t even the first day of her heat. Sucking Andraste, this was going to be a damned nightmare. The knuckles of one hand went white gripping the edge of the dresser, refusing to let her legs buckle to the weakness that seemed to come and go in waves.

“You’re that Isabela, aren’t you? The one from Kirkwall.” Elyn’s voice was a complication of questions, worried and curious all at once.

“How do you know that?” Isabela whipped around, a dagger drawn from her boot and eyes narrowed to pinpricks of sharp focus. Tired, feverish and disoriented by the tricks of her body, she still wasn’t about to be taken in a trap. Castillon didn’t know she was an omega, he couldn’t have planned a trick so elaborate. He wasn’t the type for complicated plans anyway, he just ordered people to die and it happened; someone else always had to clean up the mess.

“You were saying the Champion’s name,” Elyn explained, voice gentle and eyes more patient than accusing. “A lot.”

“You know Hawke?” The pirate lowered her blade slightly. Surprise and confusion mingled on her tongue as she shaped the familiar name. When was the last time she deliberately said it out loud?

“Not personally, no, but Kirkwall’s just a piss away. I’ve heard the stories,” Elyn shrugged, her eyes sweeping over the sailor with a newfound glimmer of awe. “You are her. The one Hawke fought the Arishok to save.”

“I was,” Isabela corrected, nostalgia hollowing her voice. “But that was a long time ago. We were different people back then.”

*Bullshit.* The pirate knew every shape and flavor of a lie, particularly any which crossed her own lips. Hawke never changed, she didn’t need to. Isabela wasn’t actually sure whether she herself had
changed either, didn’t even know if she could. She leaned back against the wood bureau, damp rag all but forgotten as it dangled from her fingers.

“I can see it’s obviously none of my business.” Elyn had the courtesy to look away. She busied herself on the bed, plumping pillows and straightening the blankets as if she intended to lay back and take a nap.

“But?” Isabela prompted, watching her with wary intrigue.

“But what?” The alpha looked up at her, caught off guard by the question.

“Usually when people say something is none of their business there’s always a ‘but,’” the pirate elaborated, tossing the rag back into its basin with slightly more irritation than a cleaning cloth deserved. “Then they follow it up with some homespun bit of wisdom that’s all rainbows and chocolate and reduces all the problems of the world to a few simple lines.”

“Really? That must be a useful trick.” Elyn seemed genuinely delighted by the concept. She chewed her lower lip, the cogs and wheels of her mind spinning to find any idea that matched what Isabela described. After a minute or so she gave up and sighed, “I’m afraid I genuinely haven’t got a clue. I just don’t want to be the stranger in your bed with her on your mind. No winning that fight. I mean, I enjoyed myself and all, but it clearly wasn’t getting you anywhere.”

“That’s my fault, not yours. You put in an excellent performance,” the pirate assured her with a wink. Truthfully, she was impressed; even after their three intense rounds, the alpha hadn’t shifted back. Her length had softened but apparently refused to depart. Hoping for an encore, perhaps.

“You know Kirkwall is just down the road.” Elyn settled back on the bed, giving her worn body a languid stretch before propping her arms behind her head. “If the Champion is who you want to be fucking, why not just go visit?”

“It’s not that simple.” Isabela immediately batted the idea away, shaking her head before it could even begin to slip into her thoughts.

“Oh shit, did I just do the homespun rainbows bit? Sorry,” Elyn ducked her head in apology but there was a glint of pride in her eyes. She was learning a new trick. “Does Hawke have the same...Issue that you’re dealing with?”

Issue. Isabela scoffed internally. That word made it sound like a dispute between a couple of Orlesian merchants.

“I don’t know,” the sailor admitted. Elyn’s question was one that hadn’t crossed her mind. For three years Isabela had been driving herself mad trying to escape any thought of Hawke at all. She had hardly been successful, but she’d kept herself under control. Wondering about the Champion’s sex life—who, where, how often, how good—would definitely push her over the edge. Questions like how Hawke would be during rut, which omega’s fever would catch her attention, who was the first to intimately know the exact feel and heat of being filled with her seed. “She’s an alpha,” Isabela spat, angry with herself for letting her mind wander such a dangerous path. “I’m sure she’s having a fine time fucking her way through every Hightown noble’s bedroom and servants’ quarters.”

“Your opinion of my kind is truly flattering,” Elyn rolled her eyes. Then she suddenly sat up, stunned. “Wait, the Champion of Kirkwall is an alpha? That can’t be right.”

“Trust me, sweets, I know my tackle,” Isabela chuckled as she wandered back to the bed. Her legs
were too worn to keep standing and the only chair in the room, well, she wasn’t sure she’d care to sit on anything in a brothel that couldn’t be washed in lye.

“I have friends in Kirkwall. If Hawke was an alpha woman I would’ve heard.” Elyn continued to argue, the spark of excitement in her eyes promising that she wanted to believe what she was hearing.

“Because of your preference?” Isabela arched one knowing brow.

“Because there are so few of us. It’s news,” the other woman corrected, tone chastising. “And an alpha woman as the Champion of Kirkwall? That would be huge. The Divine would shit so hard she might finally get that stick out of her ass.”

“What about you? You’re openly alpha.” Come to think of it, the pirate was a bit surprised that she’d never heard of Elyn before. Four years in Kirkwall and not one voice of gossip whispered of the lovely woman with something extra just up the road in Ostwick.

“My family has a lot of Chantry pull, and all my siblings are beta and omega. Father would sooner move to Par Vollen than give up an alpha heir for carrying on his legacy.” A trace of bitterness distorted Elyn’s features, betraying resentment that must have been a lifetime in the making.

“Hawke might not have those things, but she has money and fame. She’s one of the three most powerful people in that city. If she decided to bugger a druffalo in the middle of the Hightown markets no one would be able to stop her.” Isabela chuckled at the mental image even as it unfolded on her tongue.

The Kirkwall pearl getters would absolutely do their nut. Flaming ass, the Champion would probably do it just to get a rise out of everyone. Then again, Isabela remembered Hawke when she was nothing but a destitute refugee. Even then the woman did whatever she bloody well liked. No one had ever been able to stop her, she radiated an authority that warned anyone who got in her way that they’d fail.

“Entertaining as that would be to see,” Elyn’s wry voice summoned Isabela back from the past, “I guarantee we would’ve heard about it here. Stories about the Champion have spread everywhere. Maker, I’ve heard her name mentioned at parties in Orlais. Not once has anyone whispered even a hint that she’s an alpha. If she is, she’s hiding it incredibly well.”

“Hawke is terrible at keeping secrets,” Isabela scoffed.

The Fereldan rogue could certainly charm anyone she liked, and lied reasonably well; but the truth had a way of bleeding out her eyes so long as you knew the color of her thoughts. The pirate could recall dozens of times that Hawke had tried to deceive or surprise her but she always gave herself away with a nervous spark in her eyes, a twitch of laughter in her jaw. The secrets she cared about the most were loudest in her silence, the gaps in between words as other answers slid through her thoughts before the fake one passed her lips.

“You’ve seen her present?” Elyn’s brow furrowed as she continued to come at the puzzle from all different sides.

Isabela nodded. Like she’d ever forget. “The day of the battle with the Arishok.”

“Ah! That’s it then,” the alpha snapped her fingers, delighted to have solved the mystery.

“What is?”
“Not all alphas present the same,” Elyn elaborated, certainty smoothing the lines of her face and tugging her lips back into a smile. “I mean, have you ever known two men whose cocks reacted identically?”

“Yes, a set of twins with a traveling carnival. They did a fascinating act with drums,” the pirate smiled fondly at the memory. Growing up in Rivain all but guaranteed she’d seen everything.

“I’ll just bet,” the other woman chuckled, tapping Isabela’s knee to make her pay attention again. “The point is: you can’t expect female alphas to all be the same. And we’re certainly different from our male brethren.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed some advantages.” The sailor brushed her fingers up the inside of Elyn’s naked thigh, barely ghosting a touch at the tip of her length, smirking at the answering twitch. The alpha could be ready again in a matter of minutes, particularly under a skilled hand. Isabela was surprised to find that she felt no reciprocal pulse of desire, no stab of twisting need. The insatiable longing inside herself had quieted. Either subdued by her curiosity about their subject, or relieved just by Hawke’s presence in her thoughts. It was the first time in years that she allowed the rogue to occupy her mind without resistance, poring over memories without the cursed sting of anger and regret.

“Some alphas stay present all the time.” Elyn quirked an eyebrow down at herself, the smile at one corner of her lips nearly smug. “Maybe we’re more comfortable with ourselves, maybe we didn’t buy all the Chantry’s ‘aberrant’ bullshit, maybe we’re just hornier all the time.” She winked to the sailor, a kindred spirit. “I only know that I feel more like myself this way.”

“Hmm, or you like feeling more of yourself.” Isabela slid her fingers under the flared head of the alpha’s swelling flesh, the hitch in Elyn’s breathing a small victory.

“Most of the alphas I know only present when an omega is in heat or they’ve hit their rut. Trust me, you do not want to be around the first time an alpha female goes into rut. Scares the fuck out of everybody,” the woman chuckled at some private memory. If Isabela’s attentions to her lower half were distracting her, she gave no sign other than by the occasional pause or flutter of her eyes. Her face was relaxed, smile enjoying every teasing touch as she continued her lesson, “Some shift only at will. I understand mages have to master that trick if they want to avoid being made Tranquil.” A dart of annoyance crept across her brow at the thought, but it vanished just as quickly. “And then there are some I’ve heard of that never present at all. They never show their full nature unless something important enough overwhelms reason and gives their instincts full control. It has to be stronger than a mating drive or even a challenge for dominance. It would have to be – ,”

Isabela stilled her hand, aware that Elyn had abruptly stopped herself. She looked up at the alpha, scanning the hints of pain that were eating across her face. There was a frown creeping across her lips, a wince in the corners of her eyes, cheek bit in on one side to hold back whatever words had almost come.

There are times when the mind and body both know something crucial is about to happen. Senses unfurl, time slows, awareness is stretched to its very extreme, trying to hold everything in place and reach ahead all at once. Isabela was acutely aware of the almost comical tableau for this moment; dressed in everything but her smalls with a naked woman in a brothel bedroom, one hand wrapped around the hardening length of Elyn’s cock, the other clenching scratchy sheets. She could run now, leave before she heard something she’d never be able to un-hear or forget.

“What?” The pirate prodded, voice sounding soft over the increasing volume of her heartbeat in her own ears.

“It would have to be fundamental to who they are. It’s bigger than life and death. It’s a part of their
identity that goes deeper than anything they can control. That kind of alpha would only present when something touches a defining part of their very being.” Elyn looked away, granting Isabela privacy to absorb what she had to say.

The sailor was silent, staring at—of all things—the cock still twitching beneath her fingers. It felt safer that way. She didn’t dare look up and let the alpha see the memories flashing across her eyes.

“Something like an enemy threatening to take away their mate?” The quiet question echoed loud in the still room.

“Something like that. Yes.” Elyn’s reply was just as soft, almost an apology for the fact.

Isabela took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, dragging her eyes back up to the alpha’s and riveting her in place with a gaze like a sword at her throat.

“Now you know why it isn’t simple.” With a single shrug she gathered up the entire conversation, all its attendant complications and memories, and forced the truth back into the shadows once more.

“Maybe,” Elyn wasn’t quite so willing to dismiss the subject, “But I think you’re making it harder than necessary.”

“Am I now?” Isabela’s wicked smile flashed sharp teeth. She knew exactly how to end this uncomfortable conversation and all its meanings. She dragged her hand along Elyn’s stiffening length, a deft flick of her thumb over the head earning a pearl of wetness. “I’d say it’s just about right.”

“Maker,” the alpha gasped in surprise, her forgotten arousal pushing back to the center of attention. She reached for the sailor, roving touches along her skin eager to return the favor.

“Don’t,” Isabela growled, trying to push the woman away. Any caress would only make her suffer. She needed to focus on something other than the heaviness in her heart, the weight of old pain and new answers sinking like lead in her belly. The dull ache of want throughout her body couldn’t begin to touch the sucking hollow under her ribs and she needed to fill it with something else. Anything else. The sound of Elyn’s breath catching and speeding up was a start; the feel of her raging need, the rhythm of her flexing muscles as she rolled into Isabela’s touch. She could lose herself in this.

The alpha was too strong to push away, agile fingers combing raven hair away from Isabela’s face and a hot whisper hit her ear. “Say her name.”

“No.” Isabela winced, squeezing her eyes shut like she could block out the sound of that command.

“Who are you thinking about? Who are you touching?” The breathless voice was persistent as the heat of a forge, melting away her fight.

The pirate managed only a hollow groan, a sound of pure despair. She sped up her touch, gathering the slickness spilling from Elyn’s tip to smooth the hungry glide of her hand. She could make the alpha come undone and it would be enough. She’d forget everything else and walk out of here and not think about it ever again.

“She’s who you want, Isabela. Just admit it.” Elyn had released hold of the sailor, not touching her anywhere but with the words against her ear, sending chills down her spine.

Isabela could feel her whole body rising towards the release on the tip of her tongue. Just the shape of it promising more relief than she had felt in years.
“Stop pretending.” The alpha’s ironic command was truth turned inside out. Her voice was nothing but a whisper, a sound that could almost be another’s. “Let it be her.”

The pirate felt warmth between her thighs, a hand hovering just beyond touch, radiating heat against her throbbing core.

“Tell me,” the words echoed in time with the need pulsing inside of her.

“Tell me, Bela” echoed perfectly with the ones that rose up inside.

“Tell me,” pleading, coaxing, promising,

“Tell me what you want.” Offering everything.

“Hawke,” Isabela choked, crashing forward, burying her face against skin, hiding the raw grimace of pain that came when the confession ripped out. The name breaking free from her tongue was finally permission and her mind turned inward, wrapping herself completely in the past. Hawke. The smell of dagger polish and leather. Sure fingers slipping through her folds. Moans like music rising and falling with every touch until it felt like they were performing a symphony together and the demons themselves had to stop and listen. Plush mouth and teasing tongue playing across her skin, timing each lavish kiss with the thrust of her fingers, parted lips swallowing every gasp.

“Hawke, please, fuck -,” Isabela gave up muffling her cries, letting the name pour out like a prayer over and over again. There was no Maker, no Andraste, only Hawke and the sound of her was sweeter the louder it grew. “Only you, fuck, Hawke,” her words were shattering like the rest of her, falling apart as she scrabbled for the strands of thought. “I need,” she lost herself as long fingers drew another groan from deep within, letting her breathe only enough to pant, “You, Hawke, I need you.”

Her inner muscles began to quiver, and then to seize and Isabela sobbed. Tears pricked at the edge of her eyes as her mouth fell open with an enraptured moan. This time, when her body broke she felt a sliver of herself climb free, a rivulet of pleasure with Hawke’s name on her lips drawing the heat out of her soul.

It wasn’t much. Isabela could admit that to herself as she sagged back against Elyn’s patient strength. It was barely a dribble of water on a smith’s forge but it was more than she’d tasted in years. She’d trade her lifetime of anonymous, screaming pleasure for the sweetness, the sheer triumph of that scant release.

The sailor was just drawing back from the other woman’s body when she realized Elyn hadn’t gotten the same relief. The poor alpha’s cock was still rock hard and the color of the swollen head looked painful. The rise and fall of her chest betrayed panting breaths, struggling for calm. Undecided as to whether she needed to thank the woman or apologize to her, Isabela smiled; she knew a good way to do both. She licked her lips and leaned deliberately lower, ears catching the absolute stillness of Elyn holding her breath. A sudden, loud knock on the door startled them both.

“Shit!” Elyn jerked back on the bed, putting space between herself and the dagger that had so magically appeared in the pirate’s hand.

“Mistress Elyn?” A voice that worried had to be a servant.

The alpha quickly put a finger to her lips, begging Isabela not to give her away. The line between her brow was nervous, but there was mischief in her eyes. Her smile had a trace of teeth biting into her lower lip, excited by the game. The sailor silently scolded herself for overacting and slid her weapon away.
“Please, mistress!” The servant continued, this time with a jiggle of the locked door handle. Not a common practice in brothels and Isabela realized Elyn must’ve had the foresight to throw the bolt before they got too distracted. Which meant she knew this was going to happen. She quirked a curious eyebrow at the woman, who was trying to hold her breath to keep from giggling. Evading watchful domestics was practically a competitive sport in most wealthy families.

“Whoever is in there, please, I’m begging you! If the mistress isn’t at her sister’s engagement luncheon we will both spend a month in the stables.” the pained whine could only be experience. This had definitely happened before. “Please, Lady Trevelyan, if your father has to come down here again -,”

“Alright! Maker’s saggy ass! Alright!” Elyn heaved a peevish sigh as she climbed off the bed and began dragging her clothing on.

“‘Lady?’” Isabela teased, watching the naked alpha dress herself with a rushed, impatient violence. It was particularly ironic when she was trying to get her pants on.

“Alpha women can be ladies.” The playful reply shot back at her, along with a mildly reproachful glare. She was clearly inclined to blame the pirate for her current wardrobe difficulties. It didn’t help that Isabela was chuckling.

“Of course they can, sweets,” the sailor agreed. “I was just thinking that you aren’t the most ladylike thing.”

“I’m wounded!” Elyn gasped, scowling down at the trousers that wouldn’t pull up over her erection. With a final hard shove that made Isabela cringe in sympathetic pain, the alpha managed to get her pants fastened. The poor woman had to pant for a few seconds, biting into her lip to hold in the curses that so obviously wanted to burst free. Then she managed to calm somewhat, breathing through the discomfort until she could straighten up once more. Her eyes caught the sailor’s and her mouth curled into a wicked grin. “I mean, look at me.” The broad sweep of her hand encompassed her still naked torso covered in sweat and sex marks as well as the bulge that looked like it was threatening to erupt out of her pants. “I’m as ladylike as they come.”

“Nice try, sweet thing. I’ve seen you come,” Isabela teased, earning the noblewoman’s laugh. She rose off the bed and favored her temporary lover with a brief kiss. She knew she didn’t actually have to say goodbye. Elyn smiled, licking her lips before giving a short nod; she got the message. She yanked the door open with half of her clothing still in her hands. The woman seemed to take exquisite pleasure in the shocked yelp of her servant and the bright blush that devoured the poor girl’s face.

“Right, let’s go play tea with Ostwick’s inbreeders!” She shooed at the servant, refusing to listen to her complaints about nudity, propriety or any mention of her mother being outside. Elyn was halfway out the door, cursing good naturedly at any attempts to make her put on clothing when she suddenly turned. She paused, fingers tapping on the doorframe as she considered some dangerous new idea.

“You know,” she began, and Isabela had no idea why she suddenly looked both devious and sincere, “My family has an order of wine from Orlais waiting in Kirkwall. I’m sure our drivers wouldn’t mind if you happened to hitch a ride on the cart.”

“Of course, because why wouldn’t I waltz right into the city I’ve been avoiding for three years like it was tainted with the blight?” Isabela rolled her eyes, folded arms warding off the suggestion.

“Your call,” the noble shrugged, not inclined to push further, “But the farther you run from a
problem, the sooner you end up right back where you started.”

“Homespun, you ass,” Isabela chided, a thread of warmth still managing to sneak into her voice.

“I know. I think I’m getting the hang of it!” Elyn grinned, then ducked out the door. She didn’t even wait to see if the pirate was going to follow.

Chapter End Notes

Yes! That's right, Isabela officially gets to screw every one of the DA heroes. I had to give her the complete collection. Besides, I'm enjoying this whole cameo thing . . .

As always, I'm super eager to hear any thoughts or comments you lovely people would care to share!
Aveline had helped Hawke stagger home after any number of bad nights and foolish choices. The guard captain had dragged her friend out of brawls in the tavern, peeled her out of quite a few compromising positions and rescued her from countless problems with enthusiastic admirers and enemies. This was still a first.

“I should take you to Anders’ clinic. At least let me send for him,” Aveline fuzzed. The concern in her voice was rather adorable, in an authoritative way. Like she was telling someone to put down a weapon so she wouldn’t have to thrash them mercilessly.

“I’m fine, Aveline. It was one blow to the head. Trust me, I’ve taken worse.” Hawke pulled the cloth way from her temple, noting that the bleeding seemed to have slowed. Why did head wounds have to be so damned messy?

“Not from me.” The guard captain forced the staunching rag back up against her friend’s face, guilt gnawing through her words.

“True,” Hawke had to admit that much. She was fluent in Aveline’s sparring skills, well aware of how carefully the woman checked her blows when they trained together. This was the first time she’d ever felt the full force of an unrestrained attack and it certainly had caught her by surprise. Up the side of the head. Thank the Maker their blades were blunted. “It was a clean hit though.”

“It was too strong a reflex.” Aveline was absolutely determined to feel awful about this.

“I surprised you,” the Champion countered.

“I shouldn’t have been distracted!” The burst of anger was a hundred frustrations hitting boiling point.

Hawke stopped. Not just because they’d nearly reached the front door of her estate but because she needed Aveline to actually focus on her. All the years they had known each other, she’d never seen the woman like this. She was always so composed; cool and efficient about her duties, but the rogue had noticed small signs of anxiety wearing through. Her armor and weapons gleamed like they’d been polished for hours on end, probably during sleepless nights. There was a harried feel around the edge of her eyes, nervous worries making her usual confidence flicker. Distracted was an understatement.

“You have a lot on your mind. Maybe you should take a few days off.” The Champion knew her gentle suggestion would get brushed away, but she had to try.

“No, absolutely not. I’ve already had to shift the duty rosters four times. We’re eternally short-handed and Brennan is still learning how to substitute for me as captain,” Aveline started listing facts like she was building a criminal case. “There have been complaints about cargo being stolen on the docks and a rash of cutpurse thefts in Hightown. You know a Qunari has come back to the city? There was nearly a riot. Kirkwall is in no condition to deal with unrest. I can’t take time off. Really, three weeks would be nice but we have to cut it down to two. And not Orlais, it’s much too far away. Somewhere closer, like Cumberland, or Highever.”

“Aveline!” Hawke couldn’t contain her laughter anymore. She grabbed at the warrior’s shoulders,
shaking her slightly to make her stop. “You’re going to go to Orlais. With Donnic. For three weeks.” She felt a bit like she was spelling out rules for a stubborn child. “You deserve to enjoy yourself, Aveline, you’re getting married.”

“Maker’s name,” the redhead took a shaky breath, “I am. I’m getting married. I never thought this would happen.”

“Even when you went out and bought a carving of copper flowers? Or tried to find livestock for your dowry?” After the role she’d had to play in getting the two guards together, Hawke felt she’d earned the right to tease.

“Aright, very funny.” Irritation had a wonderful way of bringing Aveline back to her usual self. “I suffered quite enough for all that foolishness. Between Varric insisting on telling the story to Donnic, and then you and Is-,” she bit off the name before finishing, guilt creeping into her expression.

“I know, Isabela and I sneaking into the guard barracks and scattering pressed marigolds all over his bed was just a bit evil.” Hawke happily finished the story, brushing off her friend’s concern. Three years and they all still got nervous even mentioning her name, like she was some demon that might be summoned from beyond the Veil. As if it was that easy.

“The flowers I could tolerate, but the goat!” Aveline’s face still went flush with horror at the memory.

“To this day I have no idea where she found it. Do you have any idea how hard it was to sneak that thing into the Keep? Goats do not like windows.” It really was amazing the lengths Isabela would go to just for the sake of torturing the prudish guard captain. Even Aveline had been impressed. They stood in amused silence, each lost in their own version of the memory.

“Will you be alright?” The redhead’s voice filled up with warm concern, the tilt of her head asking so many questions at once. Hawke sighed and ran a hand through her hair, glancing at her front door and feeling a twinge of disappointment that her injury meant she was going to bed sober. Would she be alright tonight? Tomorrow? In the swiftly approaching future when their lives would shift again, having to make room for a different shape in their friendship?

“It’s a scratch, Aveline.” Hawke decided to start with the easiest answer. The next few were a bit harder. She met her fellow Fereldan’s worried gaze and pressed on, “And you’re happy with Donnic, so I’m happy for you. Maker’s boils, you’re getting married, not leaving me for another country.” She realized, too late, that her attempt at a joke was a little too close to home, intensifying the sharpness of Aveline’s anxious frown. “And, no matter if you’re already a nervous, distracted wreck, the wedding isn’t for a week yet. Plenty of time for you to realize you should be marrying me instead.”

At least that joke hit its mark, turning Aveline’s severe mouth into a genuine smile. She’d learned years ago to put up with the rogue’s teasing, flirtatious nature. Hawke’s playful charms were a way of life; they let her get a rise, throw people off, win people over or change the subject completely. And in the case of the guard captain, it was a way to express sincere, friendly affection. Once Aveline understood that, she’d stopped being upset or confused by the seemingly inappropriate behavior. It was a bit disappointing, actually; Hawke rather liked the way she used to blush. These days the woman usually just hit her. Or, as on this occasion, favored her with a long-suffering but fond laugh.

“You’re a good friend, Hawke.” The guard captain really didn’t need to say more.

“And you’re going to be a beautiful bride,” Hawke smiled. That got her a blush, and an embarrassed
scoff of protest. Delighting in the reaction, she leaned closer as if to impart a secret. “But no wearing white.”

“You!” Aveline huffed, shoving Hawke out of her space and towards the front door. “If I didn’t already feel bad about hitting you in training, I’d knock you upside the head.”

“Get the other side, that way I’ll be balanced,” the Champion laughed, spinning once as she waltzed away. The front door was already opening, the warm glow of a fire lighting Bodahn’s silhouette. He was nearly magical in his ability to know when anyone was on the doorstep.

“I’ll come check on you tomorrow. Get some rest, Hawke.” Aveline turned to head back to the Keep.

“Sweet dreams, Guard Captain Hendyr,” the Champion called after her with a grin before finally crossing the threshold and letting the evening end.

Ordinarily, Hawke wouldn’t be home for hours yet. A sparring session with Aveline would be followed by drinks either with Varric or Fenris, games with Merrill or just long, time-wasting hunts to track down Anders and drag him back from whatever new stupidity Justice had gotten him into. The mage was losing it, she was certain. He just didn’t look right.

“You’re injured, serrah.” Bodahn’s greeting offered nothing by way of surprise or concern. He was quite used to the mistress of the house coming in at odd hours with a variety of unpleasant souvenirs. The loyal dwarf simply made sure there was always a full stock of medical supplies and plenty of soap for scrubbing blood out of the carpets. Often times, it was the servant who had to point out wounds Hawke hadn’t even noticed. The Champion could swear she heard “you’re bleeding” as often as “welcome home.”

“I’m fine,” Hawke assured, looking around for where to toss the bloody rag in her hand. “But I’ll be taking an early night. You and the others should do the same.”

“Shall I tell Orana to keep any supper warm?” Bodahn tactfully took the soiled cloth from Hawke before she could do something typical like throw it on a table.

She tended to start stripping off her gear at the front door, particularly when it was messy. A trail of muddied boots, sweaty armor and blood-spattered weapons usually fell in her wake as she made her way to the stairs. Tonight it was just the heavier layers of her clothing; boots, socks, long coat, belt. Stripping away all the trappings of her daily, public life felt like it let her sink back into her own skin.

“No, thank you.” Hawke shook her head politely. She wasn’t hungry. That was unusual in itself since her workouts with Aveline always left her exhausted and ravenous. There was a gnaw in her stomach that felt a bit like hunger, but, for some reason, she didn’t want food. The same way she could feel that, despite heading for bed, she wouldn’t be able to sleep.

The sparring session had gotten her too wound up. The Champion was sure of it as she mounted the stairs, stomach coiled up in knots and a trace of dizziness creeping on. She hadn’t taken a head blow like that in quite some time. Hawke made a mental note to visit Anders in the morning if the feeling didn’t pass; maybe it really was worse than she’d thought. She tugged at the collar of her tunic, annoyed at the sensation of the material weighing her down. She’d strip the duvet off the bed tonight. Just cool sheets and naked skin. Maybe that would help her settle down, to escape the edginess eating at her, the prickly complaints running over every inch of her body.

For Maker’s sake, one stupid head blow and she felt like she’d just come from a battle! Hawke shook her head in aggravation. It was all the stress. Dealing with Meredith and Orsino, trying to keep
Kirkwall at peace, worrying over Bethany; it was a lot to deal with on any given day and being Champion meant that every problem was her problem. Barely a week went by that she didn’t think about just giving up, letting the city fall into the madness so obviously chewing at the edges of order. Just run away. The idea was tempting and all too familiar, making Hawke chuckle as she entered her room. Maybe Isabela had the right idea all along.

“Hawke.”

The Champion stopped dead in her tracks, hit by shock more powerful than anything a mage could cast. She stared at the apparition by the window. Dark, sultry, dangerous in all the most alluring ways. Hawke’s blood pounded in her head and there was only one tiny, confused voice of thought beneath the paralysis in her mind. It said that she hadn’t gotten hit that hard.

Isabela didn’t have a plan. From the moment she’d realized her feet were taking her to Kirkwall, she’d had no thought beyond her objective. Hightown, the upper story window of a particular manor, a bedroom she’d been in so many times that she could still see the candlelit walls behind her closed eyes. She didn’t think past getting there, didn’t imagine how it would feel to stand in this familiar space.

The moment her feet hit the carpeted floor, her senses nearly overwhelmed her with the rush of noise and memory. Luxurious sheets gliding beneath skin, lips that traveled her body like they could write a sonnet on every inch, the smell of soap and leather, dark blue eyes ravishing her before hands even began to touch and then touching, gripping, stroking and . . . Buggeration. Isabela’s head swam. Fevered blood that had been burning through her veins for days now suddenly coalesced, flooded to the pounding heat between her thighs. Desire hooked into her belly like a demon stirring to life and she bit her lip, barely stifling a tortured gasp.

The pirate rested a steadying hand on the end table as she desperately tried to cut through the lust fogging her head. She knew this wasn’t going to be easy. When was it ever simple? But it was too late to change her mind. Even if she wanted to, she knew her feet wouldn’t be able to carry her from this room. Not today and hopefully not for several days after. A trace of her old self smirked, wondering how long it would be before she’d be able to walk normally again once she was done with Hawke. If she was ever done.

Being in this familiar room, surrounded in these haunting smells, it was like syrup and thunder controlling her thoughts. Her tongue twisted hungrily behind clenched teeth, longing for a taste of everything lingering in the air. Iron, armor polish, fine cotton, expensive wine, traces of blood and honey. A dozen flavors filled her nose and she breathed deep, drinking every last one until she found that final note: the spiced, clean scent of warm skin. That fragrance scythed through everything else and was just so unmistakably Hawke.

Churning arousal turned into a dizzy whirlpool, consuming the omega’s every sense. She’d thought she had another day, perhaps even two, before succumbing to the worst of her heat but her body clearly had other ideas. Like it knew where she was, the breeding fever rose to full force. The swell of demand threatened to buckle her legs, trembling as her core turned to molten fire.

The faint sound of footsteps caught her ear, each one ringing in her head like a black powder explosion. Hawke. She was coming—not yet but she will—Isabela shook herself, trying to slow her heart beat to keep time with the approaching feet. There would be questions. She knew that much. Answers meant talking, feeling, breathing long enough to think about something other than fucking. Andraise’s holy tits, so much fucking. Her sex shuddered and wept at the thought and she clenched
her thighs tight, seeking some relief for the ache trying to shred her mind.

There would be accusations, blame, guilt, anger, sadness, more questions. The pirate was vaguely aware that she wanted to deal with all of that too, that Hawke deserved better than her vanishing and returning without a single word. She’d tried to think of what to say. For three years, when she dared to let her mind visit Hawke, she couldn’t begin to imagine any way to explain what had happened, what had to happen. She really never made it beyond Hawke’s name. Now it was worse, her usually clever tongue dry and slow as she tried to wet her lips.

A plan wouldn’t have mattered. Isabela realized—the moment Hawke stepped into the room—that she was never going to be prepared for the effect of seeing the other rogue again. A chaos of excitement electrified her senses and she could barely breathe, aware only of the need pounding between her legs, in her chest, heart hammering as she drank in the captivating sight. That casual frame of curves and sinew, housing such power, so strangely vulnerable as she stood silhouetted in the open doorway like a vision from beyond the Veil.

“Hawke.” The name tugged free of her lips without permission. A reflex of the tongue, pulled out of her by the same instinct already trying to move closer. Isabela balled her fists, nails digging into her palm as she fought for what was left of her will. The raveling tension held her in place, a thread of control stretched to its limit between them; she could feel her quivering nerves pulled so tight they might sing.

The Fereldan stared at her, ocean eyes swallowing her whole. A maelstrom swirled in that wide gaze: surprise, confusion, wonder, disbelief, pain, hope, longing; emotions that Isabela had forgotten could paint themselves so eloquently in color. Answers and excuses broke apart in her throat, creating a knot she could barely swallow. She had to do this right. She couldn’t just throw her abandoned lover up against the wall and ravish her senseless. Couldn’t pin her pale body to the floor, take her in and -

“Balls.” The tension snapped and Isabela was across the room in a blink, grabbing hold of the stunned woman’s collar and dragging her into a hungry, fevered kiss. The intoxication of Hawke’s mouth drew her in; full lips parted, beckoning, begging for everything she wanted to give. A glide of tongue welcomed her and she pressed forward, chased the teasing touch, twirling until she coaxed a moan from Hawke’s throat and the hum of it tingled on her lips.

Fingers threaded into the pirate’s rampant hair, cupped her neck, a gentle hand trying to slow the kiss, to savor the sweetness of the moment and draw it out. Not this time. Isabela had already waited too long. Impatience scrabbling in her skin reached for the fastener of her necklace, yanked it open, flung the heavy gold adornment away. The air around them immediately warmed, waves of heat and need rolling off Isabela’s body, filling the room with demands.

“Isabela,” Hawke’s voice broke on her name, overwhelmed in a sudden flood of desires and instincts she couldn’t begin to understand. Her flushed mouth glistened so prettily, the pirate couldn’t resist catching the succulent curve of her lower lip, nibbling until she earned another long groan, “Bela, fuck.”

“Exactly,” Isabela breathed her reply with a purr of laughter. She wanted to feel guilty, to feel bad for manipulating the woman so deliberately; but more than that, she wanted to feel Hawke.

Mercifully, the alpha seemed to feel the same. Fingers sank into the flare of Isabela’s hip, crashing their lips and bodies together again, trading hungry caresses and small, needy gasps. The pirate raked at the waist of Hawke’s trousers, tearing apart ties and buckles in the hurry to reach her prize. Her first greedy caress against slick folds broke their kiss, both women choking back whimpers at the feel of fingers meeting silky, wet heat. The ample slickness that greeted her made the omega swell with
pride. She’d done this. Her lips, her body, her scent made Hawke this excited. She could smell the thick fragrance of lust rising, coating her fingers, following every stroke of her hand. Isabela’s mouth watered for the heaviness of that arousal.

Hawke rested her forehead against the pirate’s, hot breaths puffing against her cheek as she shuddered and ground against the lost pleasure of Isabela’s touch. The Champion’s hands tugged clumsily at the sailor’s scant clothing, growling in frustration as the warmth of flesh stayed so elusive. Isabela trailed her fingers higher, finding the swollen nub that begged for attention, a single hard point amidst so much softness.

“Maker, Bela,” Hawke panted, hips jerking when she began drawing circles over the sensitive ridge. The Ferelden’s hands were still clenched on white fabric, fisting the material so tight that Isabela could feel the seams starting to give way. She didn’t give a sodding damn. The sooner she was naked the sooner she’d feel Hawke, damp skin and heat, flexing muscles splayed out beneath her just trembling for relief.

A heavy twitch beneath her fingers echoed in Isabela’s sex. She could feel Hawke’s clit getting harder, swelling, pushing forward to meet her touch. The thickening flesh rose into her hand and she purred approval, wrapping around the growing length, shallow strokes urging the shift to quicken.

“Wha-,” Hawke tried to pull away, shock mingling with a thread of panic as her body seemed to betray her.

“Don’t,” Isabela hissed, fingers twisting tightly into messy hair, refusing to let her move. She felt the woman tense further, instincts winding up for an unknown fight, and the pirate had to remind herself who she was dealing with. She gentled her touch, coaxing the alpha’s lips with repeated kisses, soft and yearning. “Don’t think about it, Hawke,” Isabela murmured; voice too low to reveal the cracks in her plea, “Don’t think at all. Just feel.”

She felt Hawke’s surrender in a sigh across her lips and she held her lover’s eyes, focused only on the abyss of blackness that grew deeper as she resumed her rhythm. Hawke’s shaft was hot against her palm, soft skin gliding beneath her fingers, pearls of arousal leaking onto her hand each time she brushed her thumb over the swollen tip. The Champion could barely hold her gaze, eyes trying to roll to heaven in silent prayer every time Isabela squeezed in exactly the right spot.

Hawke’s hips bucked once, a short hungry thrust that followed the pirate’s touch, but just as quickly she stilled, muscles shaking as they wavered between pushing forward and drawing away. Isabela couldn’t read anything but naked desire in her lover’s eyes, focused only on the abyss of blackness that grew deeper as she resumed her rhythm. Hawke’s shaft was hot against her palm, soft skin gliding beneath her fingers, pearls of arousal leaking onto her hand each time she brushed her thumb over the swollen tip. The Champion could barely hold her gaze, eyes trying to roll to heaven in silent prayer every time Isabela squeezed in exactly the right spot.

“Hawke.” Isabela’s breath shook, trying to form words across a leaden tongue and tingling lips. “Please, Hawke.” The omega had never begged except in a game; never let genuine need bleed into her voice in shades of weakness and craving. Never like this. The aching thirst of her body would drop to her knees and weep if it meant having Hawke.

“I-,” the Champion’s eye winced shut, struggling to hang onto the threads of her mind through the madness raging across her body, “I shouldn’t, I-we can’t -,” the words fell from her lips in a nonsense of confused protest. She couldn’t even finish, couldn’t begin to tell the pirate what was wrong with this moment in time. It didn’t matter, Isabela was beyond hearing.
“Just a few days,” the pirate implored, desperation whining into her voice. “Nothing more, Hawke, I swear.” She pumped her hand along the alpha’s cock again, feeling the heavy twitch of desire that surged beneath her touch. Hawke wanted it just as badly. Isabela could feel the need pulsing in her grip. She leaned close to her lover’s ear, savoring the thrill of shivers that wracked the woman’s body as she breathed, “No claims, no bites or knotting. No promises. Just you. Fucking me. That’s all I need.”

“Isabela,” the Ferelden’s moan was more longing than argument, a prayer that broke from her tongue like it burned. Her name sounded so sweet on Hawke’s lips, even when it was torture for them both. She could feel Hawke’s body making her decision, hips rolling, surging forward, seeking the tantalizing heat of the pirate’s fevered skin.

“That’s it, sweetness,” Isabela’s groan became a gasp when she felt the alpha’s cock deliberately pressing against her. The omega hooked one leg over her lover’s hip, spreading herself to welcome the warm excitement of that hard shaft throbbing against her, able to feel every inch rubbing through the thin fabric stuck to her swollen sex. “I need this, need you.” She wasn’t even aware that words were still spilling from her lips. Hands palming her ass pulled her tighter against the pleasure of each grinding thrust. Hungry kisses followed the arch of her throat as her head fell back in a moan.

“Hawke,” Isabela tangled her fingers in chaotic strands of short hair, breathless voice breaking into a cracked, desperate whine, “Hawke, fuck me.” She nearly sobbed in relief as she felt strong hands lifting beneath her thighs.

She rose up the Champion’s body, arching into her, rocking against the hardness now pinned between them. Isabela gripped Hawke’s shoulders and sought her lips, wrapping herself around the Ferelden, enveloping her in passionate demand like she had so many years before. The breeding fever boiled in her blood, rising to a delicious, shivering burn in any inch of skin that touched her alpha. Every heated throb between her legs filled her head with fantasies, poured words onto her tongue that she couldn’t even begin to shape so she buried them in hungry kisses against the plush luxury of Hawke’s mouth. *Fuck me. Fill me.* The hungry ache in her core was weeping out, trickling past the edge of her smalls to paint her thighs, smearing with every stroke of Hawke’s shaft. *Maker, Hawke, take me.* She groaned at the feeling of being dropped onto the bed, her alpha’s body following without breaking contact and now she could feel so much more of her, all the slick skin and shuddering muscles. Isabela had never allowed lovers to take this position, to take such control, but now she melted beneath strength and power unlike anything she’d ever known. Only Hawke could do this to her and she pressed up to capture panting lips once more. *Only you.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know it’s mean to end there but the chapter was getting too long! The rest is on the way, I promise. Getting the right energy between these two can be ... difficult. Hopefully I got it right and this chapter as well as the next few live up to everyone’s expectations. Any opinions so far?
Give Me Fever (pt.2)

Chapter Notes

NSFW. The whole chapter. You've been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hawke’s few strands of spinning thought shattered with each press of the pirate’s body writhing beneath her. Isabela. Her whole being was filled with the wonder of it. It was a dream, an injured hallucination, a demon from beyond the Veil here to destroy her. Hawke truly didn’t give a sodding damn which. Isabela was back. In her arms, in her bed, in her every sense like a spell.

The pirate’s sinful mouth captured her ear; soft lips, sharp teeth and ragged curses all working in concert to send shivers down Hawke’s spine. Her curves rose and arched like the rhythm of the seas, slow swells and rough surges. Salt and fire scalded Hawke’s tongue as she pressed hungry kisses down the column of the sailor’s throat, licking at the light sheen of sweat that covered Isabela’s every inch. The flavor was almost as heady as her scent flooding the air. Holy Andraste, that delicious fragrance. Intoxicatingly familiar and new all at once; a blend of sweet and sharp, promise and demand. Hawke took it in with deep pants, lungs aching like she hadn’t breathed in all the time they’d been apart.

Desire rolled off Isabela’s dusky skin, clung to the inside of Hawke’s nose, screamed to her of broken moans and wet, shuddering heat. Heat. The alpha’s instincts were louder than thought. Omega in heat, in need. Hawke felt heavy pressure between her legs, pounding in her cock.

Her hips bucked selfishly, clenched teeth catching a hiss when the tip of her shaft bumped against soaked cloth and swollen flesh. Isabela’s breath hitched and leather clad legs slid higher around Hawke’s waist, buckles biting into her naked skin. The sailor’s powerful thighs were a vice, holding Hawke in place as the omega rocked up into her, seeking that same pleasure again. The undulating rhythm was pure instinct, primal and greedy, matching the insatiable fierceness Hawke tasted in the sailor’s kiss.

Fuck.

Fill. Take. Her world had devolved to base commands and every one of them tangled around Isabela. Hawke swallowed the desperate sounds spilling from the omega’s plush lips, finding the exact stroke that made sharp gasps pant into her mouth. Fingers raked through the sweat-damp strands of her hair and twisted, nails biting into flesh, and the alpha’s gut tightened at the feel of Isabela’s desire turning savage. The urgency of Hawke’s hips intensified, need approaching the edge of punishment. The omega’s every touch forced her to move faster, press harder; frustrated by the barrier that still separated them both from what they wanted, but unable to break apart.

The alpha’s cock ached to feel her lover from within. To be sheathed inside the clinging velvet that burned like a furnace between Isabela’s thighs. Heat. Intertwined sounds of their breath and mingling scents were creating a nearly suffocating thickness in the air. Fuck. Hawke was getting dizzy, aware of nothing but the growling hunger filling her mind, rumbling in her chest. Take. She wanted to make Isabela take every inch of her throbbing flesh, plunge herself to the hilt and rut until the omega
was filled to overflowing. Wanted to make her break apart. Make her scream. Make her mine—

—NO! Hawke’s whole body shook as she roared the instinct down. Not again. Not this time. I’m onto you, you bastard. It took all her strength to stop moving but she needed to hold still, to take back the control that threatened to break free. Isabela’s urgently rocking hips weren’t helping. The omega wouldn’t let her pause, small groans and nipping teeth demanding attention. Hawke ground her jaw, grimaced at the agony of warring desires ripping her apart. She drew a deep, shaking breath against her lover’s skin, forced her body to remember what was at stake.

With the last of her will, Hawke gathered the woman in her arms and launched them over, twisting until her back hit the tangled sheets and Isabela pinned her like prey. The startled omega stared down at her, confusion naked in her eyes and tinged with a seed of doubt. She had the most irresistible mouth, Hawke decided. Dark and full and absolutely begging to be kissed. Her lips were even more inviting now, glistening and parted over questions she couldn’t shape. Hawke lifted to offer reply in a soothing kiss, indulging in the plush caress of welcoming warmth. She could feel her lover’s worried tension melting away beneath her lips. The pirate’s mouth curled into a smile as she teased the alpha’s tongue before darting back.

Isabela straightened up above her and Hawke’s body instantly tightened in protest of the loss. Her muscles coiled to follow, but a dark hand splayed wide across her chest to stop her from moving. The omega held her down with her eyes even more than that touch as she shifted over Hawke’s lap. There was a bright sparkle of laughter in her sultry gaze, playful but stubborn. Hawke was mesmerized, caught breathless by the look that had haunted her dreams. With stunning clarity, she realized that for the first time tonight she was truly seeing Isabela. Not a fantasy or demon, not an omega in need. Isabela; as decadent, lethal and captivating as on their first night.

The pirate’s coy smile turned wicked, spreading her thighs wide to welcome Hawke’s shaft pinned beneath her sex, only a thin strip of sodden fabric between them. She gave a deliberate rock of her hips, dragging over the length, drinking in the Fereldan’s long groan. Hawke dug her fingers into the curve of Isabela’s ass, wordlessly begging her not to stop.

“You just wanted me to do all the work.” Isabela’s voice was low and breathy but not as broken as before, not shaking on the edge of pleas. The muscles flexing in Hawke’s hands were addictive and she squeezed tight, pulling the woman down even harder on every grinding stroke.

“Always on top,” Hawke managed to push words between short gasps, panting at the building pressure. She felt like a child repeating a lesson; right down to the pride that swelled in her chest when Isabela’s face lit up in approval.

“That’s right, sweet thing,” the pirate purred as she leaned down, nipping at Hawke’s ear before she whispered, “Except later, when I’ll be on all fours.”

Hawke groaned at the painful surge of need that throbbed in her cock as she tried desperately not to imagine exactly what Isabela wanted. The omega’s sultry laugh faded away as she straightened again. The delicious friction of her rhythm paused and Hawke had to bite her lip to hold back a growl of warning. She forced her eyes open, concentrated on Isabela’s hand slipping between them. The alpha felt only a brush of knuckles and a twisting wrist just before the sound of tearing fabric filled in the gaps. The pirate removed her torn undergarment and held it up for a deliberate moment, long enough for Hawke to see the utterly ruined state of the soaked material before it was tossed aside.

“Oh, fuck.” The first touch of Isabela’s naked sex dripping against her cock almost made Hawke come undone. Her hips bucked up, seeking to plunge into that enticing heat but the angle was wrong. Soft, swollen flesh slid over her length and she could feel every contour as it dragged over
her hard arousal. The broad head of her cock caught Isabela’s clit and the sensitive ridge gave a sharp twitch, fresh wetness coating Hawke’s shaft.

She wasn’t going to last long. Sodding Maker, she wasn’t going to last at all. The slippery smooth heat ran back and forth over her length, squeezing pulses of fire at her base. Hawke needed a distraction, she needed to focus on anything else. She stared determinedly at the far wall but her vision wouldn’t move past Isabela, the way her parted lips curved into a gloating smile as she watched Hawke trying to hang on.

“That’s it, Hawke,” Isabela’s silky rasp was like the caress of velvet along her skin. The alpha screwed her eyes shut, tried to block out the sights and sounds that were going to be her undoing.

Fingernails raked up her torso, bunched up the rough fabric of the tunic she’d been too busy to strip off. Warm hands palmed her breasts, kneading the full curves. Then fingers captured the stiff peaks, rolled those aching points until Hawke couldn’t hold back her panting cries. Pinches and twists sent sparks of need straight to her pulsing cock and the twitching length couldn’t hold it all in. Her flushed tip was leaking excitement. Each stroke of Isabela’s glistening folds milked it out and Hawke felt like her shaft was weeping from the sheer pleasure of it all.

She had to open her eyes, had to see the thick, translucent pearls as they trickled onto her stomach. That was her, what Isabela was doing to her. Hawke could feel the warm strands clinging to taut muscle, dribbling across her skin with each roll and flex of her hips. The sailor seemed equally lost to desire but there was a sinful gleam to the fire in her eyes, lapping up the sight of Hawke’s body succumbing to her touch. Dark fingers slid across her shivering stomach, gathering up the beads of sticky arousal that had pooled on her skin.

She watched, transfixed, as the pirate raised her hand to her nose, lashes fluttering closed for a long second as she savored the scent of Hawke’s lust. Her honeyed eyes were dark flames when she fixed them on the alpha. The sailor riveted her gaze before darting her tongue out to take a taste. Hawke grunted as the pressure tightened in her gut, pounding down her cock. Then Isabela took those fingers between full, pouting lips, arched back in pleasure and let out a trembling, bone-melting moan. Hawke’s vision blurred, every sense rushing to the explosion in the base of her cock that burst free of the tip in thick white streams. Her whole body bucked, jaw clenched too tight even to curse as spasms ripped across her muscles, grabbing every ounce of strength to pour into the pulses of heat racing up her shaft and splattering across her skin.

Her mind was nothing but sizzling sparks in a void so she never actually saw the look of wonder on Isabela’s face. She never heard the pirate’s sweet, lingering sigh as if she’d gotten her own relief just from seeing the alpha come undone. And she never felt the tenderness in Isabela’s thumb brushing over her breathless lips, trembling from more than want.

Isabela had good reasons for wanting to make Hawke come first. For a start, she needed to take the dangerous edge off the alpha’s tension. She also wanted to be sure Hawke knew the rhythm to move with her, remembered the language of their bodies together. Not to mention that making the alpha climax once meant that she’d last longer once she was inside Isabela, and the sailor felt her inner muscles spasm greedily at the thought. Most of all, the best way to prevent getting tied was to make an alpha’s knot form before they started rutting. She could feel the hot bulge of it starting to swell up beneath her sex even now.

All good reasons, Isabela was certain. But all utter bullshit. She could justify herself with a hundred excuses but Isabela had wanted—needed—to watch Hawke come undone. Once the pirate gave
herself over to chasing her own pleasure it wouldn’t stop, she wouldn’t be able to care about anything else. She wanted, at least once, to see Hawke break apart beneath her, watch her face and body contort in that euphoric agony. For a few minutes, even the painful ache of emptiness in her core stopped mattering, the fever faded to the very back of her senses as she witnessed Hawke’s bliss.

Every muscle stood out in stark relief, fingers bruising the pirate’s backside as her hips bucked like a ship hitting rock. Hawke’s head fell back, exposing her throat in a tantalizing line. Her clenched jaw released only a staccato groan, broken by grunts and gasps that accompanied each white eruption bursting from her tip. The thick streams splashed as high as her breasts and Isabela trembled like she could already feel that heat filling her insides.

Hawke’s shattering release was visceral, fierce and intense. Between Isabela’s legs it felt like the alpha’s body had crested a tidal wave. She had never seen a lover make surrender look more like victory and it was absolutely, unbearably . . .

“Beautiful,” the pirate whispered as she dragged her thumb over Hawke’s panting mouth. Foreign excitement fluttered beneath her ribs, terrifying and irresistible. She had thought she’d shredded that part of herself, torn it to pieces over three years of fucking anything warm and trying not to see this perfect face on every unfortunate partner. Not so easy, apparently.

Isabela cursed the loudness of her heart hammering in her ears. Bloody heat couldn’t just be about sex, could it? No, it had to be a damned mating cycle. Her body had to punish her for not taking what it wanted and now it was twisting up her emotions as well. Hawke made her feel safe, important, powerful in all the right ways. Suck Andraste, when she flipped us over? Isabela felt a shiver rip down her spine, reawakening the ache of desire in her belly.

The emptiness was back, throbbing angrily at such neglect. The omega’s body felt like it was suffocating under cotton and leather, clothes chafing her flaming skin. Isabela knew she had precious few seconds before the alpha was completely recovered so she quickly slid off the bed. Hawke’s low rumble of protest made her heart skip a beat but she couldn’t get distracted. The pirate wrestled her corset and blouse off, hands starting to go numb as all her blood drained towards the pounding moisture between her thighs.

The boots were worse and Isabel cursed. Her clothing was perfect for a quick come and go, but bloody impossible when she wanted more. Like now. Now she needed so much fucking more. Every inch of her was screaming for Hawke’s hands and mouth, for the feel of slick skin sliding together and stoking the fire between them. She needed to pour her heat into that willing flesh, take Hawke inside and wash away the pain of this aching hollow that was devouring her to the bone.

“Bela,” the low note of her name was heavy and dark like rich rum, calling the pirate’s attention to the bed. Hawke had stirred, the absence of her lover’s scent and warmth dragging her rapidly back to her senses. She was shivering like someone who’d been thrown from a fire into ice melt and Isabela felt twin pangs of pity and pride twisting in her chest.

“Here, Hawke.” The pirate barely recognized her own voice climbing up through the choke of need in her throat.

She kicked her boots free and was back on the bed, her sigh of relief mingling with Hawke’s as the alpha’s scent welcomed her back. The Fereldan’s body immediately rose to greet her, strong arms wrapping tight around Isabela’s waist and dragging the sailor into her lap. The sweet, velvet caress of Hawke’s lips against her throat made Isabela lose sense of herself for a few seconds, threading her fingers into damp strands of black hair and guiding that torturous mouth up her neck. She was brought brutally back into her own skin by the painful scratch of rough fabric brushing the sensitive
peaks of her breasts. Isabela tightened her hands in the alpha’s hair, ripping her away and glaring down at the tunic that had stubbornly remained in place all this time.

“You’re overdressed.” She’d meant the words to sound like a warning, a threat that she’d tear the shirt apart with her teeth if she had to. Her voice cracked with impatience though, desperation bleeding through in a whine.

The sound worked on a primal level; Hawke moved to yank the clothing off so violently that Isabela heard the material tearing as it ripped over her head. A bubble of laughter swelled in her throat, watching the alpha wrangle with the cumbersome cloth until she finally jerked free in a storm of mussed hair and torn fabric. Her eagerness was almost heartwarming. Then Isabela’s eyes were pulled away from Hawke’s face to a familiar mark on her shoulder. Any hint of laughter shattered as the pirate stared at that livid reminder of their past.

The scar hadn’t even faded. Three years should’ve turned it white with age but each individual wound remained dark. Even against flushed skin, it stood out like a beacon. The pirate had known she’d have to face this reality. She expected anger; at herself, at Hawke, at the mark for not vanishing when it should’ve. She was even prepared to face guilt and regret, seeing what had driven her away but also dragged her back again. What she hadn’t expected was the traitorous turn of her thoughts, corrupted by instinct. The glimmer of pleasure was almost wicked, and her mouth curled in smug satisfaction. Hawke hadn’t been able to forget her; the bite was proof of that. Just as the pirate herself hadn’t been able to forget.

Isabela’s mouth ached to seal over that mark, to explore every ragged edge and kiss the tender flesh until it colored in the shape of her lips. She vividly recalled the sensation of soft skin caught between her teeth, tingling lips and the shuddering cry that filled her with triumph. Her jaw clenched, craving that taste just once more.

Once would never be enough. The pirate shoved that tempting instinct down, catching Hawke’s face in both hands and holding her captive to a searing kiss. Isabela buried her desires against the other woman’s mouth, washing away the need for skin and copper in the luxury of lips and teeth. Only when that agile tongue twisted with the sailor’s own, darting against the roof of her mouth and teasing short, delighted moans from her throat, did she finally relax into the demand of Hawke’s body. The alpha held her close, every inch of skin seeking to share the fever but also urgently grasping her hips, trying to nudge her towards the relief they both needed.

Isabela rose on her knees, positioning herself directly above Hawke’s aching shaft. She swiveled her hips, letting her folds rub the swollen tip and spill wetness over the length. Hawke was already panting, hands kneading the pirate’s ass, urging her down. The alpha’s hips bucked, trying to find passage into the tantalizing heat just beyond reach, but the broad head bumped and slid against her opening, unable to find the magic entrance. Hawke’s grunt of frustration stabbed Isabela’s gut and she reached between them, grasping the cock in one sure hand.

“Let me.” She could feel the alpha’s excitement twitching in her fingers, throbbing like a heartbeat. Isabela guided it to the tight ring of her sex, lowering herself onto the hard swell of flesh.

“Oh, holy fu-,” Hawke’s buried the rest of her curse against Isabela’s breast, the vibration of it humming through her whole trembling body.

The pirate bit her lip, stifling a cry at the sensation of her soaked folds parting over the broad head. Three years of taking everything from a pinprick to a flagpole, how could she possibly feel so tight around Hawke’s thickness? The omega shuddered, her answer shaking into her with each pulse and flutter of greedy inner walls drawing the cock inside. The heat had her wound like a spring, silken muscles coiled and ready to draw every inch of Hawke into herself, aching to milk her dry.
The tip of Hawke’s shaft finally slid all the way in and Isabela groaned, relishing the stretch. Much as she wanted to savor the sensation, to drag every second to eternity and memorize the feel of Hawke splitting her apart, forcing her body to open, the thin thread of Isabela’s patience had snapped. With a hard jerk of her hips she took the rest of Hawke’s length at once, the excruciating mix of pain and pleasure ripping a cry from her lungs.

The alpha echoed with a gasp, one hand tangling in the loose waves of her black hair, silently warning her to hold still. They both needed a moment to breath, to adjust to the overwhelming relief of finally—finally—having what they wanted. Isabela rolled her hips, exploring the fullness of Hawke’s shaft, the heavy pressure pounding along her inner walls. A small shockwave washed through the pirate’s body, a taste of the ecstasy to come.

Filled as she was, the omega soon felt need clawing like a demon at her insides. It wasn’t enough. She needed friction, movement; she needed to feel Hawke fucking her until they both came undone and filled her with those thick ropes of seed that she’d watched splatter across the alpha’s skin. That damp stickiness smeared against her stomach as she began to rise and fall in Hawke’s lap. Slips of heat spilled continuously between her thighs, smoothing the glide of each thrust until the pirate had reached a hard, fast rhythm.

The room echoed with the sound of slapping flesh and wetness; ragged moans, sharp hisses and gasped profanity filling the air with shameless pleasure. The alpha wordlessly coaxed Isabela on, mouth lavishing attention across the generous curves of her breasts, lips and teeth raising the tender points to rock hard arousal. Each nibble and suck on the stiff peaks sent jolts to her throbbing sex, inner walls clenching and rippling in demands she couldn’t keep up with, couldn’t quite catch.

Isabela barely held back a sob of frustration, the burn in her muscles telling her she couldn’t do more. She couldn’t satisfy the raging need by herself. Hawke was there, with her, inside her; mouth and hands on her skin and short thrusts of her hips rocking up to meet Isabela’s punishing rhythm. But it wasn’t enough. The omega could feel her partner holding back, shaking from the effort but refusing to take control. A tangle of anger and despair choked Isabela’s breath. She had to give in, they both did. She tugged at Hawke’s hair, dragging the alpha’s attention off her breasts, whimpering slightly at the rush of goosebumps that pebbled across her skin where that warm mouth was torn away.

“Hawke,” Isabela’s voice cracked on an urgent groan, “I need-.”

Just the sound of her words made the alpha’s cock give a powerful throb, hips bucking up sharper than before and Isabela lost her thought.

“Tell me, Bela,” Hawke breathed against her neck, nipping up her throat, tasted the omega’s low keen vibrating on her tongue. “Anything.” Her tone was raw, like she’d screamed battle cries and death threats and all that was left was this fierce sound that married prayer to command.

Isabela caught the curve of Hawke’s soft lip between her teeth, biting until she felt the woman stiffen. The hands that had been so strong but tender against her flesh suddenly dug in, leaving a fresh pattern of bruises that the pirate knew would ache deliciously for days to come. Convinced that she had the alpha’s full attention she yanked sharply on her hair, thrilling at the growl that climbed up Hawke’s throat.

“Would you just fuck me already?” Her voice might’ve broken on the demand, but the sailor knew the challenge bled through in her eyes, in the arch of her brow daring the woman to deny her.

Hawke’s dark gaze flashed like storm clouds and the rumble of thunder rose in her chest. Isabela didn’t have time to glory in her victory. The alpha dropped back on her elbows, planted her heels and then her whole body thrust up, slamming into the pirate so hard that she couldn’t stay upright.
Isabela barely caught herself on her arms before a second punishing buck of Hawke’s hip shattered her hold and she collapsed against the alpha.

Hawke didn’t miss a beat, back crashing down to the messed comforter so she could wrap both arms around Isabela. Powerful hands held the omega’s body firmly in place as she continued to drive up into her with every inch and ounce of her strength. The pace was brutal, nearly a punishment, and Isabela couldn’t breathe, could barely catch a gasp between the loud cries and strangled moans that each forceful plunge broke from her lungs. The pirate fisted the bed covers, knuckles turning white as she tried to brace herself to meet the rhythm. She couldn’t. It was too fast, too hard, too full, and the muscles all over her body were firing in spasms as she fought to hold on. Isabela felt herself starting to shatter, ripples and twitches coursing through her like the beginnings of a quake. She strained towards that release, buried her face against Hawke’s neck to hide the tears she felt welling at the corner of her eyes.

She was so close, ready to give up the last shred of her control if it meant finally coming apart with Hawke. With. Her inner walls gave a violent, desperate shudder. Fuck, she wanted that. Wanted to feel Hawke shatter with her, to have the alpha fill her with every ounce she could take and then keep going. The desire ripped so sharply through her body that Isabela couldn’t even shape words. She wouldn’t be able to talk anyway, not without breath, not without even a second to pause the long note of bliss rising on her tongue. The pirate’s mouth fell open, releasing the sound like it could relieve any of the pressure threatening to explode out. Her lips filled with the taste of Hawke’s skin, the pulse of her racing heartbeat tingled on the omega’s tongue and she greedily latched on. The smell and feel of the flesh beneath her mouth told Isabela exactly where she was, what she was doing. Tiny jagged dents welcomed the caress of her mouth, Hawke’s heart hammering even harder beneath her lips and tongue.

Fingers grabbed at her hair, not pulling away but holding her close. A guttural, tortured cry of pleasure filled the room and Isabela felt Hawke’s shaft swell thick and then burst within her walls, hot streams and splashes pouring into her depths. The pirate’s body instantly responded, clamping down around the spilling cock, drawing out Hawke’s pleasure to make it her own. The fullness spread through her, overflowing and breaking free until Isabela felt herself torn loose of her body and she barely kept from sinking her teeth into a familiar pattern of flesh as she screamed her release into Hawke’s skin.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay. I blame no one but myself and the evil trolls kicking me underneath the desk. Hopefully this chapter was worth the wait! Even though it’s all basically smut, I’d love to hear thoughts and comments. I’m also open to suggestions/predictions on where the story is going to go. I have a strong outline in my head, but I leave wiggle room for fun extras.
“Sweet fucking Maker!” Isabela’s groan mixed ecstasy and exhaustion, arching into Hawke and trembling in relief as streams of hot seed splashed into her again.

There couldn’t be an ounce of liquid left in the alpha’s body; it felt like the pirate’s need had milked her of every drop. A mixture of their shared wetness spilled out, escaping with each shudder and squeeze of her inner walls. Despite the steady trickle that ran down her legs and added to the already soaked mess of the sheets, Isabela felt deliciously full. Finally sated for now, she curled into Hawke’s embrace.

This side-lying position was all that their screaming muscles could manage after so many hours of being worn to ruin. It was practical; necessity even. But that didn’t erase the gentle threads of pleasure that laced the pirate’s smile as she savored the sight of Hawke’s face drifting back from bliss. She could feel the alpha’s hammering heartbeat and instinctively moved closer, every inch of their skin connected until her own breath and blood moved at the same speed as her lover’s.

The arms that held her were weary from fatigue but also hesitant. Isabela could feel Hawke go completely still for the space of a few heartbeats before she dared to speak. The Champion’s voice was so quiet that Isabela almost missed the doubtful whisper, “You don’t have to go?”

“Sweet thing, I couldn’t go anywhere even if I wanted to,” the pirate sighed, her eyes growing heavier by the moment. Hawke’s stifled breath sounded too much like a chuckle and Isabela jabbed the woman in the ribs, erasing her smug smile. “Stop looking so bloody pleased with yourself. I meant the fever. It can come back anytime and I might need to molest you in your sleep.”

“Sounds fun,” Hawke laughed, seizing hold of the pirate’s offending hand and securing it tightly between them.

Isabela could have jerked away, but the grip felt oddly reassuring. Hawke slid their interlaced hands between her breasts, the softness of pressed curves cradling her in warmth. The omega could just barely feel the low beat of Hawke’s heart beneath her fingers. That relaxed rhythm matched the gentle glide of a hand trailing up and down her back, long soothing strokes like a lullaby. Before she knew it, Isabela was humming in quiet contentment against Hawke’s neck.

She needed to be close to the alpha for when the fever rose again. That was what Isabela told herself as she melted into Hawke’s embrace. The first shadows of sleep were creeping over her mind, weighing her thoughts with delicious, leaden fatigue. She couldn’t move if she wanted to. What would be the point? The demands of the mating cycle would draw her right back again; it was only a matter of hours. Besides, Hawke’s bed was comfortable. Even if there was a massive wet stain. As if the Champion had read her thoughts, Hawke slid on the bed. Having the woman’s body shift away from her grasp brought a whimper of profanity from Isabela’s lips, and she mentally cursed even more at the relief that swelled in her ribs the moment Hawke pulled her close once again. In a dry spot.
It’s the heat. The pirate promised herself, swearing rebuke. That was the only reason she needed to feel this close to the alpha, to find her own scent lingering on the other woman’s skin, unaccountably warmed by the fragrance. Breeding cycles were all about the senses; smell, touch, taste, sound. That was why she wanted to feel the comfort of Hawke’s arms holding her, needed to hear the beat of her heart, slowing down but constant and strong. That was the only reason she wrapped herself around the other rogue, tangling their limbs and bodies together like braided rope. That had to be why, when she felt a tender kiss against the top of her head, she wanted to return it, wanted to – Oh sod it! Isabela groaned inwardly at herself. She wanted to fucking cuddle.

She was never going to live this down. Fever or not, she just knew Hawke was going to have a wiseass comment in the morning. They had never been that kind of touchy-feely and the bloody woman was going to absolutely glory in her weakness, Isabela was sure of it. She could practically see the teasing grin already. Odd that it didn’t make her angry, though.

Hawke never makes you feel weak.

A dangerous, traitorous voice that had been needling beneath all her other thoughts prodded at her now, taking advantage of the helpless lethargy in her mind. The truth of it was irritating but calming at the same time. Even if they were drunk, covered in blood, surrounded by enemies or floundering off the edge of the docks, they were always laughing; none of it mattered because she was with Hawke. The brash Fereldan didn’t just make Isabela feel safe, she made her feel strong. Sodding tits, when they were together? Isabela felt bloody invincible.

The pirate brushed a light kiss over the Champion’s sensitive lips. The whisper of sweetness across her mouth was worth any playful teasing come tomorrow. Let Hawke make a joke. Isabela would just threaten to cut her dick off and take it away for personal use. Toy like that only needed the proper bit of stuffing, right? The sailor smiled as she tucked her face into the hollow of the other woman’s throat, inhaling the fragrance that spread warmth through her whole body. The smell of salt, leather, metal and soap was mingled with heavy spice, the freshness of Hawke’s skin branded with a sailor’s scent.

“How long will it last?” Hawke’s question lured the pirate away from the edge of dreams.

“I wasn’t checking a clock, sweets,” Isabela chuckled, enjoying the Champion’s huff of vexed patience. “But I think five rounds was your record tonight.”

“I meant your heat,” Hawke clarified, but there was no hiding the note of tired pride in her voice. Truthfully, if that little monster between her legs hadn’t finally started to shrink, Isabela had worried they were going to fuck each other to death. Three years provides an awful lot of pent up frustration.

“I don’t know,” the pirate admitted, throwing her mind back to unpleasant memories. “The last few were stretching from three days to five, then to nearly a week.” She vividly recalled the prolonged agony, the panic that set in on the fifth and sixth days as she doubted her sanity would ever return. She shivered, silently grateful when the Champion instinctively squeezed her tighter to stave off fear. Never one to let the past or future ruin a perfect moment, Isabela shook off the chilling worry. She tilted her head up to tease Hawke’s lips with a coy smile, “That was before I had you to fuck me senseless though.”

“Happy to be of service.” The alpha’s smirk carried the cocky confidence of utter sincerity. No ulterior motives, no protracted strategies, nothing but the pleasure of reveling in impulsive delights. Just like before, like nothing had changed.

It was so easy, when Isabela looked at that familiar, blasé smile, to let the years fall away. No abandonment, no Arishok, no bites or claims or confusion. It could be just her and Hawke, like they
always had been. *Always wanted to be.* The pirate’s mind tried to twist into treachery once again and her breath caught in her lungs, momentarily trapped by the surge of panic and hope. When had there ever been hope? Isabela cringed, squeezing her eyes shut until it felt like she’d managed to strangle that dissident voice in her thoughts. The sooner this damn fever ended the better.

“Don’t you worry, sweets.” The pirate forced herself back to the safety of a flirtatious purr, freeing one hand to rake through Hawke’s tousled hair. “I’ll make good use of you, as long as I’m here.”

She’d meant the promise to be playful, a hint of everything to come for the next few days. (Both of them, for days.) Instead, the words turned her tongue to lead, barely able to force them out across the tingling, abused flesh of her lips. The whole room felt like a cold breeze had gusted through. This time, when Hawke pulled her closer, the alpha couldn’t hide her own shiver. *“As long as I’m here.”* That phrase scythed through the sex-laced air and hung heavy as the first words of a mage’s curse. Isabela felt a slow, controlled whisper of air rush past her cheek; a sensation that could only be a sigh in disguise.

“You don’t have to go,” the Fereldan sleepily repeated, and this time it wasn’t a question. In the fragile notes that twined certainty and prayer, Isabela knew that Hawke meant more than just tonight.

Dreams were beating at the edges of Hawke’s mind, trying to lure her down into the sweet darkness of sleep. She fought off the languor weighing her eyes, the slow paralysis bleeding into her limbs. Even if it was just for a few more seconds, another minute, she wanted to stay present in this reality, wanted to etch it into her mind. Isabela’s breathing had evened into the slow, deep rhythms of dreams and if Hawke’s muscle’s weren’t so broken and exhausted, she’d be trembling from the sheer wonder of it. Isabela was asleep beside her. In her arms. Tangled in the mesh of limbs and heat that bespoke bodies unwilling to part, the pirate had drifted into the Fade and left Hawke as guardian of all that remained on this side of the Veil.

Tempting as the call of sleep might be, no unconscious fantasy could compare to the reality she held, ethereal but unbreakable at once. Pale moonlight bled in from the window and caught slivers of skin, outlining Isabela in an otherworldly glow. Hawke let her eyes soak up the pirate’s features, trying to memorize every line and twitch. Full lashes were the same thickness and color as raven waves of hair that obscured her cheek. Hawke didn’t dare brush the strands away, worried the slightest touch might shatter this vision. The pirate’s lips were always a luxurious, full temptation, but now they were even darker, swollen from spending her attentions on Hawke’s mouth and skin. The scent of cloves and cedar filled the Champion’s nose and she inhaled the familiar smell. Notes of iron and aromatics laced with the fragrance Hawke knew so well, they confused her senses but also filled her with an unmistakable feeling of being complete.

*Isabela.* The Fereldan pressed a light kiss to the sleeping woman’s brow, little more than the tickle of a feather against skin. Relief and gratitude flooded her in equal measure and the Champion briefly realized she’d probably have to start attending Chantry services after this. Sebastien would absolutely lose his mind. Of course she’d bring Isabela along, if possible; that would make it *far* more bearable. If possible. If she stayed.

Hawke felt her arms start to tighten, muscles coiling like she could keep a treasure so long as she held on hard enough, long enough. A faint sound tripped over Isabela’s lips, caught somewhere between a mumble and sigh. The Champion deliberately loosened her grip, apologizing with delicate brushes of her fingers along the sailor’s smooth back. Hawke kissed Isabela’s shoulder, then her neck and cheek, each flutter of lips a gentle promise. She couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—do that again.
Isabela didn’t belong to her, even if her body seemed so convinced otherwise. A brief stir between her legs dragged Hawke’s attention down. Fortunately, her spent cock couldn’t manage any more than a weak twitch before falling still once again. Hawke stared at the soft length, wondering that it didn’t fill her with any reaction beyond amusement. For three years Anders had been trying to get the alpha to manifest. Every spell and potion and trick in the book. The healer had been so well-intentioned, convinced that if Hawke could just accept and come to grips with her alpha self —literally, she supposed—then she might move past the anchors of Isabela’s absence.

The mage was going to be pissed. All his efforts wasted when all it took was one sultry pirate popping up in Hawke’s bedroom to help the alpha not only accept who she was, but what she was bloody glad to be. Isabela in heat called to her on a level so visceral it transcended thought. The alpha had salivated and quaked at the scent of an omega’s need but she’d been able to hold back. There was an even sweeter pleasure in proving to herself, to Isabela, that she was more than those instincts. She didn’t want a fucking omega. She wanted the pirate that had captivated her from the moment she laid eyes on dark skin and an alluring smile wreathed in whiskey and danger.

The memory dragged another hard throb down the length of her shaft and Hawke twitched a tired eyebrow. That’s going to get annoying. She glanced down. Was it possible to just glare the errant member into behaving? Maker’s balls, how did men put up with these things all the time? Being able to satisfy Isabela’s heat, to fill her need and experience the indescribable shared pleasure of getting lost in each other; that was surely worth the wardrobe inconveniences looming in her future. But Hawke wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to deal with her every thought and desire playing out so obviously in her pants.

Her frustrated irritations vanished when the pirate muttered sleepily against her skin, a mumble that sounded suspiciously like her name. Isabela’s leg hooked higher over the Champion’s hip and tugged her close, refusing to let even a thread of air between their pressed bodies. Hawke melted into the demand of that embrace. Even in her sleep, Isabela refused to lose her grip on the Fereldan. The pirate was a conqueror by nature, and she’d be damned if her latest prize slipped away to thoughts or distractions beyond herself. The fever in her body might have been sated but the greed remained.

Hawke shuddered, the instincts buried beneath control twisting and fighting like a nest of snakes trying to find escape. Giving in would only destroy everything she’d fought for. Three long years she’d waited for this chance. Arguments with Aveline, lectures from Varric—sympathy from Fenris of all people! No damned voice growling in her ribs or throbbing in her flesh was going to ruin it now. Isabela came back because she was in heat. That meant that she would leave when it was over. The reality of that truth felt like a warhammer hitting her gut but Hawke refused to deny it.

I promised. Hawke rested her forehead against the sleeping pirate’s, sharing the slow breaths that passed across her lips. The sweetness of being so close tasted like absolution. Isabela had come back. Whether for days or weeks or only hours, Hawke wouldn’t question. She just filled her hands with supple flesh, drank in the low contentment purring from her lover’s lips and promised—herself, and Isabela and the Maker that she wasn’t even sure she believed in—that she wouldn’t waste this time. She wouldn’t make the same mistakes. The dark skinned pirate deserved to be as free as the ocean she loved. Hawke would sooner scrape her own skin off with a dull, rusty blade than deny the woman her happiness.

“I know better, Bela.” Hawke muttered, trailing her fingers over the smooth line of a cheek. She’d had time to plan for this moment, to think of all its flavors and permutations. Even if she couldn’t have predicted everything—like the shaft between her legs being so bloody stubborn—she still knew exactly what she wanted. The Champion’s thumb dragged across the curve of Isabela’s mouth, relishing the softness and faint sigh that followed her touch. I will never try to make you mine. Hawke leaned down and stole a sleepy kiss. But I will always be yours. The emotion choked in her
throat, stinging her eyes before she pushed it away, determined to cherish the sweet relief of Isabela’s lips. There was no pain like love, but Hawke would sooner die than let the pirate know that truth.

Chapter End Notes

Coming close to the heartbeat at the center of the story here so I'm really hoping the emotions come through clearly. Please let me know if anything seems OoC or just inconsistent with the rest of the story so far. Everyone has been really great with commenting and I appreciate it!
Riding a Storm

Chapter Notes

Smut and feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Isabela seldom woke up next to a warm body. A staunch believer that a lover’s use was over when the screaming was done, the pirate never stayed beyond the time it took to gather her weapons and steal a few valuables on the way out. Even when drink and fatigue got the better of her, she was always awake before dawn, panicked by the lapse in judgment and quick to get free of any stranger’s arms.

It was disorienting to wake without a burst of adrenaline telling her to flee. More so, when she realized she was enjoying the warmth of sunlight on her cheek and felt nothing but languid comfort in the body holding hers. It took a few tries to open her eyes against the late morning light, but the sight that greeted her was worth the effort. Hawke was still lost in dreams, the corner of her mouth twitching with the ghost of a smile. Probably being a coy smartass even in her sleep.

Last night’s marathon of sex had taken the bite out of Isabela’s fever, leaving a low hum of tension coiled in her belly without the overwhelming despair of need. For now, at least, she could concentrate on reacquainting herself with the woman that had haunted her across Thedas. Teasing the stray strands of hair away from a sculpted cheek, she dragged her thumb over the fine edge of bone. Not a line on her face. None of the frowns, furies or tears had been able to leave their mark. Perhaps she shrugged off the ravages of time the same way she ignored pain? No, Isabela smirked as she rested her finger against the soft curve of Hawke’s lip; she just laughed them away like all the other enemies she’d never fear.

The sheet was rucked halfway down the Champion’s body, fevered skin needing the respite of cool night air. Isabela drifted her hand up the shapely contour of Hawke’s waist, mapping the interplay of muscle and bone beneath her fingers. A low note of pleasure rumbled in the sleeping woman’s chest, following each light caress.

“Sailing is like sex.” Isabela clearly recalled Merrill’s look of wide-eyed wonder as she hung on the pirate’s every word like prophecy. “Do it right and there’s no feeling in the world like it.”

She had offered the comparison so casually, one of a dozen metaphors and scandalous thoughts she loved pouring into the elf’s kittenish mind. As she played her fingers along Hawke’s skin, however, the pirate felt that perhaps she’d been toying with a much deeper truth. The right partner, the right touch, and not even the freedom of the open sea felt so full of promise. Perhaps that’s what was always so tempting and torturous about Hawke: she reminded Isabela of commanding a ship. Here—the pirate interlaced their legs, one hand gliding up her lover’s arm—limbs as sinuous and strong as any sail line pulled tight. The rise and fall of her breasts were canvas sheets swelling in the wind. Hull, spars, yardarms; bones beneath muscle that could quake and tremble but weather the most violent storm.

Then there was the helm. Isabela’s smirk spread into evil delight as her hand drifted lower. Hawke’s shaft was already starting to thicken and rise before her fingers brushed the sensitive skin. Total control with the touch of a hand. Hawke’s eyelids fluttered at the sensation of Isabela gripping her
cock, and a slight huff of sleepy confusion parted her lips. A gentle squeeze followed by long, deliberate strokes built those surprised sounds into a single, steady note and the alpha was rock hard before finally managing to force her eyes open.

“There you are, sweet thing,” Isabela cooed, dipping forward to greet her lover with a brief kiss.

“Morning.” Hawke had never been a morning person. Her mind was struggling to wake up, despite the fact that her body seemed more than ready to start the day. Isabela chuckled at the feel of the shaft that twitched so eagerly in her grip.

“I thought I’d have to start without you.” The sailor continued her lazy fondling, relishing the contrast of soft skin and hard flesh. Hawke bit her lower lip to hold back a startled gasp when Isabela’s thumb circled her tip.

“That’s,” the Champion panted, nostrils flaring as she tried to keep her breathing even, “That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“Come now, Hawke,” not right now, Isabela mentally corrected, the thought playing out across her lips in a wider smile. “You’ve had three years to learn your rudder. You can’t mind me getting a feel for it.”

“Three?” Hawke winced, swallowing a moan when the first drops of arousal slid onto the pirate’s fingers and smoothed her strokes. The Fereldan was really keeping admirable control as she continued in a ragged tone, “Bela, I’ve never even seen the damn thing before last night.”

“What?” Isabela stilled her hand, searching Hawke’s face for the waiting punchline. The alpha’s eyes were a trifle blurred from the growing distractions of her body, but the bright color was crystal clear. Not a single flash of laughter. “Did you just piss with your eyes shut? You presented three years ago, Hawke.”

After the battle with the Arishok. Isabela held back the rest of the memory, a stab of guilt slicing through the hints of arousal that had been pooling in her blood. That could kill the mood nearly as quickly as picturing the Big Girl naked.

“So I’m told,” Hawke agreed with a chuckle. “You should’ve heard Anders trying to describe it to me. I managed to block out everything except ‘red and veiny,’” her groan of pain confessed an almost spiritual torture. “You know I had nightmares for months that the bloody red lyrium we found in the Deep Roads was growing out between my legs?”

“Oh, sweets.” Isabela couldn’t help a soft laugh breathing beneath her words as she leaned close and caressed the Fereldan’s frown away with her lips. She resumed her rhythm along Hawke’s shaft, catching the hitched gasp that spilled onto her tongue. The pirate nibbled one tender lip before smiling, “This is a magic all its own.”

“Starting to get that,” the alpha grunted, stomach muscles flexing in time with Isabela’s fingers.

The pirate nudged Hawke onto her back, pushing the sheets the rest of the way down so she could observe every throb and shudder of the flesh in her hand. Small wonder the alpha was so sensitive! Three years without shifting. The thought filled Isabela with a selfish swell of pride. The foreign flutter beneath her ribs felt dangerously close to the thrill of capturing treasure from enemy ships. When did one lover become such a prize?

“So no pleasure cruises at the Rose, then?” The pirate coaxed another trickle of arousal from Hawke’s tip and she wet her lips, almost catching the taste on her tongue. “Not a single brief and
clumsy tumble with some lucky noblewoman that you could ruin for life? Not even a bit of spit and polish all alone?"

"Not once," Hawke shook her head violently, squirming as much beneath the pirate’s seductive gaze as her touch. Her cheeks had taken on a lovely flush, the rosy color spreading all the way down her neck and blooming across her breasts. Fingers that had been clenching sheets suddenly freed and grabbed for Isabela’s hair, pulling the sailor down into a kiss that swallowed Hawke’s groan. When she pulled back the Champion was even closer to breathless, but there was a cunning sparkle in her eyes as she sighed, “I must’ve been waiting for the best.”

That warm blue color gazing up at her through dark lashes made the flutter beneath Isabela’s ribs suddenly feel like she’d taken a hammer blow. A frisson of guilt threaded down her spine, drowned by the burst of relief that stole her breath. All this time her body wasn’t the only one stuck in the past. It shouldn’t have made her so happy, so gratified to know that a part of Hawke belonged to her. Isabela’s eyes darted to the scar on the alpha’s shoulder, raking over the flesh that was mottled to the shape of her own lips. The heat simmering in her blood was beginning to prickle under her skin again, fever licking hungrily along every nerve.

“I’d say you’ve waited long enough.” Hawke’s eyes turned dark at the sound of Isabela’s voice dropping into a purr, “And we have a lot of catching up to do.”

Without pausing the languid strokes of her hand, the pirate slid down on the bed, planting small kisses and feathery touches along pale skin. The alpha’s muscles shivered and flexed beneath her mouth, torn between rising into the teasing torture and writhing away. How many times had she blazed this trail with her tongue? Followed the carved lines of muscle down Hawke’s stomach, swirled around the hollow of her belly, wrung gasps from the woman’s lips when she plunged into the shallow dip; she could do it with her eyes closed, had repeated every touch and taste in a hundred restless dreams.

Then she felt the graze of throbbing heat against her cheek and Isabela’s lips curled into a smile. Hawke’s hand hovered near her hair, uncertain about what was about to happen and how to respond. Isabela decided to make her intentions perfectly clear. The pirate licked a slow, smooth trail up the pulsing vein of Hawke’s shaft, from the base that burned with the heat of her latent knot, to the flared head that jumped when she flicked the sensitive underside with her tongue.

"Is-ah! Maker!" Hawke jerked when the sailor repeated the motion, faster this time and with a hard suck right at the tip. The fingers suddenly gripping Isabela’s hair didn’t try to guide her mouth or push her down but were actually tugging, trying to pull her away. The alpha struggled to shape words out of the sounds filling her throat, "You d-don’t have to do that."

"Of course I do, sweet thing. Can’t have someone else be your first,” Isabela’s grin faltered slightly when she heard her own words. The bloody heat was taking over again, twisting her thoughts and tongue to ideas she’d never once allowed. The pirate was quick to catch her senses, confident smile back in place as she clarified, “They might do it wrong.”

Before her mouth could get her into any further trouble, Isabela took Hawke between her lips. The taste of salt and heat immediately flooded her senses, dark and heavy; much more powerful than the delicate flavor she was used to plundering from Hawke’s silken core. The pirate hummed, recalling the feel of that fragrant warmth on her tongue. She’d have that too—she promised herself—before she was done she’d have her fill of Hawke, all of her.

Isabela had never been sure which was better: discovering the weaknesses and thrills of a new lover, or mastering one body until she could hear every shudder and sigh before it came. In the throbb of the swollen shaft filling her mouth and Hawke’s broken moans, she found the perfect blend: old lover,
new pleasures.

The pirate could feel fingers in her hair fighting the urge not to fist the rampant tresses. Hawke was all but shaking from the effort of not giving in. Isabela reveled in the power of the moment, fully aware that she could never take this control from the alpha, it was only given. But Hawke gave it to her, without hesitation or question; just as she’d always given the sailor anything she wanted. Everything she could.

There wasn’t supposed to be emotion choking her throat, or warmth prickling the edge of her eyes as Isabela felt Hawke starting to unravel beneath her touch. The shards of sapphire locking onto her should’ve been full of naked lust, not awe and devotion that felt like she was flaming Andraste reborn. The pirate blocked out the sight, focused only on laving her tongue around the pulsing shaft in her mouth and sucking until the trickles of excitement became a stream. Hawke barely managed a guttural curse of warning before bursts of hot liquid poured into her throat. Isabela concentrated on the taste of the alpha’s release, the feel of the cock jerking against her tongue. The wet need pounding between her legs was familiar, safe; not dangerous like the swell of pleasure in her ribs when she heard Hawke groan her name. Then a clumsy hand managed to brush her face, stroking haphazardly like her cheek was some holy relic, and Isabela barely managed to swallow a burst of emotion before she released the spent cock and surged up.

She captured the Fereldan’s lips, a hundred curses and confused adorations caught on her tongue as she tried to make sense of the feelings stealing her breath. Hawke’s mouth and body rose to welcome her, enfolding the sailor completely in warmth and want. The desire pulsing between her legs was barely an echo of her hammering heartbeat and Isabela knew, instinctively, that they were dangerously close to a terrifying line. The heat had reached fever pitch, bending her body to demands she’d never imagined and not a shred of protest or logic seemed to matter. The scar on Hawke’s shoulder throbbed beneath Isabela’s fingers, her own skin aching in time, longing for the dull pain and sweet relief of sealing the claim. The alpha was hers already; she had waited, had a body that would answer to no other touch. As the two lovers twisted across the bed, Isabela couldn’t remember why it was such a bad idea. Why she couldn’t take Hawke’s knot, give herself deeper and longer than she ever had to anyone. It was Hawke, wasn’t it? Who else would she ever want? Who else was so perfect in her arms, against her lips, part of her life?

“Hawke! If you’re still in bed then you must be dying!” A loud voice broke through the intoxication of desire and need.

Isabela felt Hawke go tense beneath her touch, then sag into the ruined bedsheets with a frustrated groan of defeat. The pirate had never in a million years thought she’d be grateful to Aveline for anything, but as shreds of sanity seeped back into her mind, she knew she’d never be able to thank the woman enough. Nor would she ever be able to explain why she felt so in debt. Isabela gathered herself and pushed up from Hawke, just a few inches of distance restoring acres of her sanity.

“I don’t suppose she’ll just go away?” Isabela quirked one eyebrow. She trusted her confident, demonic streak to mask the turmoil behind her eyes.

“Not Aveline,” Hawke shook her head and reluctantly rolled off the bed. A whisper of smug pride curled Isabela’s mouth into a smile as she watched the Champion stumble on numbed legs for a few paces. Clearly, she wasn’t the only one affected so brutally by this accursed heat. The Fereldan fumbled into her house robe, scant material barely covering the bulge between her thighs. The shock of being interrupted had eased Hawke’s arousal somewhat, but she was dangerously close to exposing herself with a single, errant thought.

“Don’t take too long,” the pirate winked. The fabric over Hawke’s shaft gave a needy twitch,
making the sailor smile and the alpha only shot her a reproving glance before leaving the room. Isabela dropped back against the disheveled sheets, giving into the ragged, panicked breaths and racing heartbeat she’d barely managed to contain. It wasn’t enough that this fever wanted to kill her; it obviously wanted her to destroy Hawke as well.

Aveline was Hawke’s oldest friend. They had fought Darkspawn side by side, escaped the Blight, crossed the Waking Sea in the guts of a waterlogged hold to find refuge and a future in Kirkwall. Maker’s sodding bones, in a few days she’d be standing beside the woman as she got married! None of that changed the fact that this was absolutely the last person in all of Thedas Hawke wanted to see.

The stubborn guard captain still had a list of Isabela’s crimes as long as her sword. She’d find out about the pirate’s return soon enough, that wasn’t the sort of news that could be kept secret. There’d be rage, arguing, probably a few attempts to throw the woman in jail; Hawke felt a sharp spike of anger at the thought. No, now was definitely not the time for that kind of trouble.

“Captain Aveline to see you, serrah. She was quite adamant.” Bodahn darted the Champion an apologetic glance. His eyes drifted just past her to the upper story; a brief, telling look. She and Isabela had never been good at being quiet. Bless Andraste for the discretion of dwarves.

“Thank you, Bodahn. Would you please ask Oranna to put together a tray for later? And then perhaps you could take her and Sandal to the markets for the day.” Hawke didn’t have to spell out her instructions any more explicitly. Relief washed over the stocky man’s face, eloquent in silent gratitude as he hurried off to comply. There had only been a handful of times in her past with Isabela that they managed to completely shatter decorum—right on the stairs, no less—but Hawke didn’t want to risk any further trauma for her rather fragile servants. They’d put up with enough.

“You’re standing, that’s good,” Aveline observed, her eyes making a rapid catalogue of her friend’s appearance. Hawke subtly widened her stance, praying the loose robe provided adequate cover. The guard captain had a tendency to notice even the smallest anomalies. And there’s nothing small about it. An absurd giggle nearly escaped her but Hawke managed to hold it back. She bit the inside of one cheek, forcing her face to maintain cocky—shit, I’m not good at this—composure.

“Fereldan head, remember? Hard enough to make dwarves want to mine for ore.” Hawke strolled to the sideboard, pouring a quick shot of liquor. She needed to burn through the rough scratches in her throat, the coarse rasp that betrayed hours of brutal use. Isabela always did have a weakness for Hawke’s voice, particularly when she tried to put anything she was feeling into words. Last night the pirate absolutely reveled in the confusion of lust and profanity that she ripped from Hawke’s mouth. Holy bones, it was a miracle she could talk at all. A heavy twitch between her legs warned the alpha to not let her thoughts wander so dangerously. She quickly threw back the shot of whiskey, hoping the heat would mask any flush on her cheeks.

Hawke could feel the pinpricks of sweat beginning to bead along her hair and skin. Did the whole house smell of sex? Maybe it was only clinging to Hawke’s nose, filling up her lungs each time she tried to breathe. She was starting to feel the chafe of raw nerves like she had the night before. Her senses complained about the weight of her robe, the suffocating warmth on her skin, the pulse that was growing louder and moving south. Isabela. Hawke realized, in a flash of clarity, that she was reacting to the intensity of the heat. Which meant the omega was probably starting to suffer as well. Or growing impatient, at the very least. Mating cycles really didn’t like being interrupted.

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright? You look feverish.” Aveline narrowed her eyes, concern
turning into suspicion when her poor choice of words made Hawke nearly choke on a laugh.

“I’m fine. I just didn’t get much sleep,” the Champion insisted. Lying to the redhead never went well, best to stick as close to the truth as possible. Except the truth was a naked pirate upstairs in her bed. Hawke concentrated on holding her friend’s gaze, not letting her eyes betray her by darting away or—worse—rolling to heaven at the thought of Isabela’s bronze skin framed in the light silk of her sheets.

“You must need some fresh air. This house is stifling.” Aveline tugged at her own collar, casting a reproachful glare around the innocent room. “Come with me to the training yard, you can take the men through their drills.”

“Not today. I’m not really feeling up for it.” Hawke backed towards the stairs. Her feet were itching to race and only the last shreds of her survival instinct held the urge in check. The guard captain’s brow arched in surprise, questions already turning her mouth into a frown. The Champion needed a distraction. Quickly. “Take Warden, the men are far more scared of him anyway.”

The mabari tilted his head at her quizzically, an expression of doubt and suspicion almost identical to Aveline’s. Man’s best friend indeed. Hawke silently cursed the intelligence of the breed.

“Hawke, what’s wrong with you today? Did I hit you that hard?” The guard captain took several wary paces forward, not taking her eyes off her friend’s strange behavior.

The Champion opened her mouth to frame a reply but the words that answered most certainly weren’t her own.

“Andraste’s saggy tits, Hawke!” Isabela’s furious voice echoed off the walls. “Just tell her so you can get your ass back up here!”

Hawke whipped her head to the upper floor, half expecting to see the pirate standing naked on the balcony. She wasn’t, fortunately, but the irritation in that shouted demand promised it might happen at any second. Dragging her eyes back to Aveline, the Champion braced herself for an explosion that never came.

“She’s back.” The warrior’s measured response was difficult to read. Disbelief and disapproval warred for control of her expression. The redhead pinched the bridge of her nose, holding her temper with several slow breaths before she dared to speak again, “How long?”

“Last night,” Hawke admitted, watching for the burst of anger that she knew had to be festering beneath Aveline’s calm. As if it made the situation any better, the Champion couldn’t help adding, “She’s in heat.”

“Heat?” That certainly grabbed the guard captain’s attention. “She’s an omega?”

“Surprised me too,” Hawke nodded. Whatever enchantment Isabela had used to hide her nature had truly worked well.

“Then you—?” Aveline couldn’t stop her gaze from drifting down, nor hide the question that hung unspoken. The alpha didn’t need to reply. She simply straightened up into a normal stance, the flimsy robe easily outlining the swell between her legs that she’d tried to conceal. The redhead’s eyes widened then shot straight up, staring at the ceiling like she was imploring the Maker.

The Champion had expected any number of reactions out of her fellow Fereldan. Shock, confusion, anger, disappointment, a variety of muttered expletives and threats; all of those would’ve felt normal in this moment. Not the dry chuckle that escaped with Aveline’s sigh.
“That certainly explains a lot,” the guard shook her head, fixing her gaze on Hawke once more. “Another fine mess she’s dragged you into. You’re just going to get hurt again.”

“It wasn’t her fault.” The Champion wasn’t certain if they were talking about three years ago or today. Either way, her answer would be the same.

“She nearly got you killed, Hawke! You don’t think straight when she’s around.” The frustrated line on Aveline’s brow could’ve been carved with a chisel. “That woman has always been a selfish slattern and she’s never going to change.”

“She doesn’t have to!” Hawke’s temper flared, straightening her into a pose that made most enemies drop their weapons. “I liked what we had before, it was perfect for us.”

“Perfect? Hawke, she left you for dead after you fought for her life.” Anger and pity made strange bedfellows on the guard captain’s tongue.

“I survived,” the Champion shot back. From the corner of her eye she kept watch on the upper doorway, silently praying that Isabela couldn’t hear. The last thing she needed was for the pirate to know just how badly Hawke had been shattered when she woke and found the woman gone. Isabela didn’t do love and she sure as shit wasn’t going to put up with clingy.

“She’s only going to do it again, Hawke. She’s going to take whatever she needs from you and run away.” The redhead’s voice lost its passion, hollowing like she knew she’d already failed.

“I don’t care.” The Champion felt like her whole body was hardening into armor, impervious and inscrutable. “I never said she had to stay. She can go anytime she likes.”

“Hawke—,” Aveline started to reach for the rogue’s arm, a stab of sympathy in her eyes. Hawke refused to accept it. She took a step back, fists curled so tight that she could feel her nails leaving crescent gashes in each palm.

“Just because you’re getting married doesn’t mean you can demand poetry and romance for the rest of us. Love isn’t for everyone, Aveline.” Hawke would never forget the sound of Isabela’s sigh as she imparted that lesson years ago. She should’ve listened better.

“Alright.” The redhead held up her hands in surrender, backing towards the entryway. “You’re a grown woman, Hawke. You know what you want.”

The final words landed like a sucker punch. Hawke inhaled a sharp breath through clenched teeth, willing the pain away. Lying to Aveline still didn’t work, not even when the rogue was trying to lie to herself as well. She turned and stormed back up the stairs, a maelstrom of noise and emotion hammering through her veins.

Isabela was waiting for her, poised in the center of the room with her arms folded impatiently. She’d been listening, she had to have been. There was a quirk of challenge in the tilt of one brow, silently demanding. All of Aveline’s accusations and warnings writhed in Hawke’s mind, wrapping around the naked woman, wreathing her in a halo of bitter danger.

What I want.

Without a word, Hawke seized the pirate and dragged her into a hungry kiss, pouring all her anger and hopelessness onto Isabela’s lips. The sailor responded like she understood the language, drinking in everything Hawke offered and answering with her own confusing intensity. The bed was only a few feet away but the alpha deliberately moved in the opposite direction, her lover following without question. The need to be close was turning into an all-consuming urgency. Maybe this was all they
could be, all she would ever have.

Hawke landed Isabela against the wall, soaked up the heat of her body with every inch of skin they shared. The omega’s hands tore at the fabric of her robe, seeking more. These few days might be as much as Hawke could ever hope to keep. The Champion spun her lover around, pressed close against her back to feel the shiver of excitement and goosebumps racing down her spine. She wanted to hold the woman so close that their bodies ceased to matter, flesh melding into one.

Isabela arched back against Hawke’s pinning weight, a breathless moan breaking free when teeth caught the sensitive curve of her ear. This was what Hawke needed: the feeling of her lover’s want, the demand coiling between them like tension on a spring. She wanted to lose herself in sumptuous warmth and flesh, to drive away thoughts of the future or past with only a perfect present.

Hawke angled her hips, driving up into Isabela with a deep thrust, cries echoing each other around the room. She needed this, needed the clinging velvet heat, the gasps and moans, the feel of pliant muscles welcoming her with pleasure. Hawke needed to know she could leave a mark on the pirate. Not in teeth or scars, but in desperate touches and every breathless kiss. She needed to be sure that if this was her only chance, the exotic sailor would never forget. Most of all—Hawke buried her face against thick strands of damp black hair—she needed to keep Isabela from seeing the raw truth stinging her eyes.

“She can go anytime she likes.” Isabela blocked out the words and focused only on the unyielding wall she was pressed against. The cold of it raised goosebumps down her stomach, stung the tender points of her breasts. She rocked back against Hawke, meeting each thrust and wordlessly urging her on. This was easy, it made sense. The feel of the thick length plunging into her heat and firing waves of pleasure through her body could almost wash away the bruise in her chest.

“She almost got you killed.” The truth filled Isabela’s mouth with a bitter taste and she barely realized she was biting her own tongue, holding back curses that had nothing to do with sex. She couldn’t avoid hearing the conversation and now she couldn’t forget, couldn’t ignore all the voices piling up behind her thoughts, each of them screaming that Aveline was right. Left you for dead. Just going to get hurt again. Another mess.

“Fuck, Hawke,” Isabela gasped, startled by the fingers that slid down her belly and dipped between her legs. That skilled hand hadn’t forgotten a single inch of her body and instantly found the hard bud between swollen folds. Isabela’s hips jerked, trying to match Hawke’s pounding rhythm from behind but also grind forward against the circling pressure on her clit.

Another mess. Isabela couldn’t keep the words from clawing at her mind. That skilled hand hadn’t forgotten a single inch of her body and instantly found the hard bud between swollen folds. Isabela’s hips jerked, trying to match Hawke’s pounding rhythm from behind but also grind forward against the circling pressure on her clit.

This would end. She dropped her head back against Hawke’s shoulder, closing her eyes and trying to will her body to overcome her mind. The fever would end and all these cursed thoughts and feelings would go away. Isabela dug sharp nails into the alpha’s hip, urging her to move faster, harder, deeper until nothing was left of the pirate but a shaking, broken mess. Another mess. **Fuck.** **Fuckfuckfuckfuck.** Isabela didn’t hear the words spilling out of her, matching Hawke’s rhythm. Every
thrust felt like the shaft was pummeling her front wall, forcing pleasure into her and it was nearly enough, fast and rough and finally more than her chaotic thoughts could process. Release tore through her like a hot blade ripping her open, erasing everything. Hawke’s cry in her ear sounded like a wounded animal and the alpha tumbled over the edge right with her, both of them trembling and spent against the wall.

Isabela shivered in the aftershocks, feverish skin chilled by every gust of breath over her neck. Everything had gone still. Nothing mattered except the feel of Hawke’s body pressed against her and the unraveling tension bleeding out of them both. It was perfect. She and Hawke were perfect together. So long as this was all they wanted.

Chapter End Notes

That actually winds down the sex for a while. Hopefully it was enough to tide everyone over for the next few chapters. Dealing with a lot of complicated emotional concepts here, not least of which is a pathological level of denial. Please be patient with our heroines as they try to sort out a shitload of baggage in a world without Prozac.
All Good Things . . .

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t three solid days of rutting. Maker knows they wouldn’t have been able to survive that. The fever ebbed and rose like Isabela’s own beloved tides and would leave them with hours of calm to rest before they got swept away again. Each morning and evening Oranna prepared a tray heavily laden with foodstuffs that Bodahn cautiously crept up the stairs and left outside the bedroom door. At least, Hawke really hoped that was what was happening. The last thing anyone needed was for a hungry Isabela to yank the door open and give Sandal an eyeful. “Enchantment” might take on a whole new meaning.

During rests, their bodies sated and content, the two rogues slept, ate, washed, and whiled away endless hours filling in the blanks of the last three years. The pirate had stories of stealing cargo in Treviso, ferrying a noble’s daughter away from an arranged marriage, narrowly escaping the embattled waters around Seheron, duels on the docks of Bastion, Ayesleigh and Carastes. Hawke delighted in each impossible tale, not caring in the slightest that they were probably about as true as anything that Varric ever put down on paper. He and the sailor had both always agreed that facts should never get in the way of a good story.

Hawke, for her part, entertained Isabela by recounting the bullshit that had engulfed her life. Doing work for Meredith during the day, then turning around and undoing it all under the cover of night for Orsino. She kept the fragile balance of Kirkwall, teetering on the razor edge of tension that was constantly threatening to rip the whole city apart. Then she blew off steam by horrifying the Hightown gentry with scandal at every ball they insisted on inviting her to attend. Isabela nearly choked on a piece of fruit when Hawke recounted taking Fenris to one of Elegant’s parties after he’d lost a bet; he wasn’t allowed to say a single word as she spent the whole evening introducing him as a fashion consultant, dragon trainer, and even an Orlesian intimacy specialist.

For three days and nights she filled her mind and senses, maybe even her soul, with nothing but Isabela. Hawke finally felt like the void of the last three years wasn’t going to suck her inside out anymore. She woke on the fourth morning and was surprised to feel nothing but calm when she saw the space next to her empty. The nearly forgotten sensation of lightness between her legs confirmed that the mating cycle had run its course. Rising partly on an elbow, the Champion easily spotted Isabela. The pirate’s back was to the bed and she was already halfway dressed.

“I didn’t want to wake you. You looked sweet drooling on yourself.” The sailor didn’t even have to look over her shoulder to sense Hawke’s gaze.

“The only person I drool on is you. And occasionally Anders when he uses a sleep spell to put me to bed.” Hawke sat up, resting an arm on one knee as she watched the other woman continue to dress.

“Now there’s an image I don’t need.” Isabela finally turned around and shot Hawke a salacious smirk. Her eyes drifted appreciatively over the Champion’s body, carelessly half-covered in a sheet. Hawke tried to divine the thoughts behind that playful gaze, to understand the glints of emotion that flashed past like the slippery fins of darting fish.

“Where will you be sailing?” The Fereldan gave up any hope of reading Isabela’s mind. Her moods, desires and the silent threats and blasphemies that sometimes lingered on the tip of her tongue, certainly; Hawke had no trouble knowing those. But the Rivaini sailor’s mind was as intricate and confusing as any temple puzzle and easily twice as dangerous.
“I haven’t decided yet,” Isabela shrugged. The tiny breath of hesitation before her answer was almost as telling as the fact that she turned away rather than say more. Hawke felt a spike of excitement speed her heart.

“If you’re not in any rush, you could always stick around for a little while.” The Champion knew it was a long shot but she’d always liked testing her luck. “Aveline’s wedding is coming up; having you there would definitely make it memorable.”

“Yes, the bride trying to dance with her boot still lodged up my ass would be hard to forget.” The pirate’s shoulders eased slightly as she let out a rich purr of laughter.

“The Hanged Man has better whiskey these days; it tastes like rat droppings instead of horse piss,” Hawke continued casually, “I’m sure Corff would love to see you back. He made excellent coin off all those idiots that hung around the tavern hoping you’d get drunk and drop your standards.”

“‘Standards,’ hmm? Is that what you call them?” Isabela teased as she rummaged through a drawer of Hawke’s smalls. The sailor’s own pair had been ruined beyond salvage.

“Then there’s Bethany.” Hawke saw the pirate freeze, no doubt anticipating some argument layered with guilt. Before the pirate could turn defensive, she pushed on, “She’s always asking for things to read and she doesn’t like anything I buy. Honestly, Bela, you’ve ruined her. No one can find naughty books like you.”

“She was well on her way to corrupt long before I came along,” Isabela’s light chuckle was tinged with pride. She turned and leveled a fond gaze on the Champion, eyes warm but ultimately unconvinced. The way she folded her arms already warned Hawke that she wasn’t buying any of these reasons. “Lovely as all those things sound, I have one of the most powerful men in the Felicisima Armada after me. Coming back at all was dangerous, staying would simply beg for trouble. The bastard probably has spies scattered across this entire city just waiting to send word of my return.”

Castillon. Hawke bit the inside of her lip. She’d never even met the man and she could still feel her fingers curling for want of a dagger when she heard that name. It was bad enough that he was a slaver, that he exploited Isabela’s needs and tricked her into committing a wrong she’d sworn to never repeat; but now he was also the reason she had to hide. He was a specter chasing her across Thedas without ever leaving the decadent, lazy safety of his own home. He had to be stopped.

“So don’t make them wait,” the idea burst out of Hawke all at once.

“What?” Isabela sounded just as incredulous as the Champion felt, but the pieces were quickly falling together in her mind. You want the dragon’s horde? You have to trick the dragon into leaving the nest.

“Find some of his bootlickers before they find you. Send them back to their master with fresh scars and show him you’re done hiding. He’ll have to come after you.” Hawke explained, leaning forward eagerly as she felt edges of a plan like grabbing a weapon in the dark.

“You make that sound like a good thing.” The pirate wasn’t exactly sharing her enthusiasm. Still, her brow was arched up in doubtful curiosity, studying the woman before her and the madness that was tumbling out.

“You can either let him catch you by surprise somewhere at sea with a crew full of strangers that will turn you over to save their own skins, or you can lure him here. You could be prepared to face him on familiar ground with allies to help.” Hawke was starting to feel excited in an entirely different
way. This was more than just convincing Isabela to stay; this might be an actual chance to solve the problem once and for all.

“This isn’t a religious warrior with an honor code, Hawke. Castillon will sail in with a hundred cutthroats and mercenaries and gut everyone without stopping to ask for names.” The pirate sounded like she was patiently reminding a child of some fundamental lesson, like how to breathe.

“It’s a bad idea to try to gut a blood mage. Merrill has mastered some new tricks that even make Justice want to wet his pants.” Hawke got to her feet, wrapping the sheet haphazardly around herself before she flashed a wicked grin, “Or whatever demons do when they’re scared.”

“For all I care, she might have learned to make everyone sing the Ballad of Nuggins naked and set themselves on fire. I still don’t want her or anyone else getting caught up in this. Castillon is my problem. No one else needs to pay for my mistakes.” Anger was bleeding into Isabela’s voice and eyes, a stubborn flame that promised she’d take on the whole world and piss on its ashes.

“Is that all you’re ever going to see? Isabela, we’ve spent years protecting strangers, fixing problems that have nothing to do with us; all for a city that didn’t even want us in the first place! We’ve always taken care of each other first, you’re no different.” Hawke ran a frustrated hand through her hair, the chaos of strands echoing her own spiking emotions. Threads of panic were starting to slip beneath her thoughts as helplessness wound tighter around her throat. “Do you really think Varric, Merrill, Fenris—shit, even Sebastian—wouldn’t fight for you?”

“They don’t need to bother,” Isabela shook her head and began to turn away, “It’s not worth the trouble.”

Hawke darted forward, catching the pirate and swinging her back around; she refused to flinch when the sailor’s reflexes shot a punch straight for her eye. Isabela caught herself, stopping just short of landing the blow but barely holding herself in check.

“You’re worth it!” The Fereldan had her hands wrapped around dark arms, gripping with bruising strength just to keep from shaking sense into the damned woman. Why couldn’t she see what was right in front of her? “You’re our friend,” and so much more, Hawke could feel the confession pushing forward, ready to break free on the next burst of heated emotion. She swallowed the choke of words, controlling them even if her temper was getting away from her. “Why do you have to be so bloody stubborn? You don’t have to do everything alone!”

“Yes, I do,” Isabela shot back, eyes suddenly hard. With a frightening twist of speed she broke Hawke’s grip and shoved the woman backwards a few paces. Rather than needing space, the pirate followed, crowding her, pinning her against a pillar of the bed. The corner of the post bit into the Champion’s back but it was nothing compared to the sharpness of Isabela’s glare. “I do everything alone and I’m the only one that suffers; I can live with that. I fight my battles, I take my chances, I die on my terms. No one else. No one dies for me. No one gets hurt.”

A jolt of clarity shot through Hawke, like getting struck by one of Merrill’s errant lightning spells. The angry glow in the pirate’s eyes—molten gold trapped in amber—was about more than this argument. They weren’t talking about now or tomorrow. They weren’t even talking about Castillon. Behind the glinting danger in Isabela’s gaze, Hawke saw the past; ugly and painful as the Arishok’s blade.

“Isabela,” the name breathed out like a prayer, all her own rage and frustration washing away. The sailor’s expression softened, for a brief second her glare seemed to melt and let the underlying emotion bleed through. The warmth of it felt like the first spring thaw and Hawke could have basked in that alone forever.
All at once Isabela jerked away, pulling back like she’d been on the edge of a cliff. She shook off the moment like a dazing punch, putting a safe distance between herself and Hawke before she dared look at her again. The warmth was gone, lost behind an armor that looked terribly familiar. Hawke recognized it from her own expression in the mirror. The pirate had accepted her fate.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Hawke,” Isabela’s voice was almost strong enough to mask the weariness underneath. “But it’s a terrible idea. That last thing anyone wants is me hanging around Kirkwall again.”

“I don’t give a shit.” Hawke straightened off the bedpost. She didn’t close the distance between herself and the pirate but she squared her stance, refusing to back down. “What do you want?”

“I want,” Isabela hesitated, apparently confused by the storm of answers that rose up on her tongue. She closed her eyes, a line furrowing her brow as she struggled to put her thoughts in order. Even when she relaxed and fixed her gaze on Hawke again, there was no clarity behind the color. The pirate let out a tired sigh. “I want a drink. Something cheap, terrible and enough of it to drown in.”

“Sounds like the Hanged Man to me,” the Champion chuckled, not even slightly surprised. After a fight, before a fight; drunk, sober, angry, lost—there was no one place that called to her and her companions as reliably as the Lowtown tavern and its simple pleasures. Bad alcohol and stupid choices might be just the balm both of them needed to soothe their chafed emotions. Hawke grabbed her tunic before she offered, “I’ll come with you.”

“I think you’ve done that quite enough over the last few days.” A hint of the sailor’s old self flashed in a cheeky wink, tongue darting playfully across her smirk. There could be no confusing that answer. It wasn’t an outright refusal, subtle enough that it was almost a request, but it was clear: Isabela didn’t want company. Hawke nodded, dropping her clothes and sitting back down on the edge of the bed.

“Promise me,” Hawke saw the pirate suddenly stiffen, wary of any thoughts of commitment right now, and quickly pressed on, “Promise me you’ll at least think about it?”

“Alright, Hawke, I will. Just give me some time.” Isabela turned away. She left with the same air of confused tension that the Champion remembered from years before. That very first night; the pirate had almost the exact same haunted expression in her face when she fled the bedroom to go find the soothing familiarity of bad decisions in a bottle.

Hawke lay back on the bed, prepared to hand herself over to desperately needed sleep. As the toll of the last few days and words grew heavy on her eyes, she couldn’t help but wonder how it was possible that everything changed so much, yet nothing actually felt different.

To say that people were surprised to see Isabela storm into the Hanged Man would be an understatement. They gawked, gasped, and then rapidly trampled over one another to get out of the way of the woman that burst in like a tidal wave. She could feel every eye latched onto her; glares burning into the back of her head, lust clinging to her skin like mud she couldn’t scrape off. The pirate heard their whispers too; some hushed in awe, others drunk and loud. They rose around her and followed every step with murmurs the same way they used to dog Hawke’s heels.

That’s her, the sailor. The thief. Captain Isabela’s back, oh shit.

Isabela went straight to the bar, ignoring everyone. Corff was there in a second, all but sweating in
his eagerness to greet her. “Welcome back, Captain! Bottle or mug?”

“Room,” the pirate shook her head, waving off the whiskey he was already uncorking. “Preferably my old one, I know where the bad spots are in the mattress.”

“Of course. You’ll be staying then? Wonderful!” The man’s enthusiasm could only be tied to the number of patrons Isabela could feel crowding at a safe distance, all eager to catch a glimpse. *Maker, would you look at her? No wonder the Champion fought. Think she’d fancy a—no probably not.*

“I don’t know yet.” The sailor tossed a handful of coin onto the counter, enough to cover a week. If she decided to stay. *If.*

“That won’t be necessary. Master Tethras pays rent for that room as well as his own.” Corff shoved the money back towards her, albeit with a look of longing.

“Oh, does he?” Isabela glanced over her shoulder to the stairs, half expecting to see the meddlesome dwarf already standing there with his arms folded and that same sly grin on his face.

“Ever since you left. Said he didn’t want you coming back here and ending up in a room any closer to his suite. Something about noise and company.” The bartender maintained a studiously innocent expression. It would’ve been perfect, except for the twitch at one corner of his mouth trying to become a smirk. The pirate allowed her own lips to curl up ever so slightly. Varric only started complaining about her “noisy company” after she took up with Hawke.

Three years of rent on a room. That was a hefty sum to put up as stake, but the dwarf had always had an amazing gambler’s intuition. He had bet that she was coming back and he’d won. The only question now was, what did he hope to collect? Somehow, she doubted it was only coin.


Isabela felt the hushed horror creeping up her skin, trying to crawl into her head. She remembered well enough, thank you. The point of being here was that she needed to forget.

“Then take that to cover my drink and tell me when it runs out.” The pirate nodded to the coins she hadn’t bothered to sweep up and reached instead for the bottle still in Corff’s hand.

She turned on the room, catching dozens of eyes in a single sweep of her gaze and daring any of them to say another word. The stunned tavern fidgeted nervously, pretending to be interested in their drinks and tables and the fascinating world of their own fingertips. Isabela silently made a list of the faces that didn’t look away quickly enough, looked too hungry or looked like problems waiting to happen. She’d deal with all of them later. For now, she strode across the wood floors like it was nothing but another rat-infested dock. It wasn’t until she vanished upstairs and down the hall that noise began to hesitantly filter back into the air.

Her room was exactly the way she’d left. Possibly a trifle cleaner. The pirate closed the door and deftly jammed the lock like she had a hundred times before. Privacy was hard to come by in a place like this. The bottle in her hand sloshed invitingly, promising to wash away all the eyes and words that left such a noxious taste in her mouth. First things first.

Isabela set the bottle aside and grabbed hold of the heavy wooden bed frame. It took a few pulls but she managed to slide it away from the wall far enough to slip into the space between. Four panels over, two up from the floor. There it was, so subtle that it blended in with the knots and whorls but, if
someone knew what to look for, they’d just barely be able to make out a carved notch that didn’t quite fit with the wood grain. The pirate slid her dagger point into the catch and pried out the tightly stuck (yet strategically loose) board. She reached in and startled both herself and the rat that had apparently thought to make this his home.

“Off, you little blighter.” The sailor swatted at the rodent and then withdrew the dusty box from its hole. Years of solitude and darkness hadn’t weakened the metal clasps and they sprang open the moment she twisted a pick in the mechanism just right.

“Locked in a strongbox, tucked in a secret panel, hidden behind the furniture?” A voice interrupted her before she opened the lid. Isabela looked up, slightly annoyed but mostly impressed to find Varric standing in the open doorway. She really underestimated him sometimes. The dwarf tossed an arch glance to the lock of her door, clearly disappointed in her attempt to keep him out. He strolled forward and rested against the bed frame, nodding to the box in the sailor’s hands, “I’d say there must be something pretty valuable in there if you wanted to hide it that well.”

“Varric, you furry little fiend, how did I know I’d be bumping into you soon?” Isabela rose from the space between the bed and wall, deftly sliding out to accept a robust hug.

“I heard you were back, Rivaini, had to see for myself.” Varric leaned back, looking up at her with the sort of pleased pride that was usually reserved for a perfect shot from Bianca or a winning hand of cards.

“I know that look, you’re seeing money. If you’re expecting me to pay you back for this room, you’ll be waiting a while. I’m a bit short.” Isabela slid out of the dwarf’s overly strong arms and dropped onto the edge of the bed. She set the box down as casually as possible, hoping Varric would forget about it with a few properly placed distractions. Talk of gold usually worked.

“Please, I’ll make a fortune off the stories that are sure to happen now that you and Hawke are back in the same city,” the storyteller laughed, sitting down beside her. Right on the other side of the box.

“But if you’re worried about coin, I can help you fence whatever’s in the chest. Sure to be worth something.”

“No, actually, it isn’t.” Isabela resisted the urge to slap her hand down on the lid. “Just a few trinkets I didn’t have time to collect before I left.”

“Oh! Very convincing, I almost believe you. C’mon, what is it? A few Deep Road gems that you snuck out in your cleavage? An enchanted ring or two? I’ve got it!” Varric snapped his fingers excitedly. “The fingers and teeth of other Raider captains you’ve killed.”

“Sweet stuff, this box wouldn’t be able to hold them all,” Isabela laughed. The tension that had been aching between her shoulders since she first woke up was starting to bleed away. Her stomach had started tying itself in knots the moment her mating cycle ended, when she realized the fun was over and it was time to face actual decisions. The charming blonde always did know how to make her relax.

“Alright, I’ll make you a deal.” Varric could sound like the most dangerous kind of demon in the Fade when he started negotiating. “Show me what’s in the box and if I can’t find a merchant who’ll pay you at least a sovereign for whatever it is, then I’ll buy it for two.”

“And if it’s worth more than that?” The pirate cocked one brow, amused but rather impatient with this particular game. It was comfortable to be here, bantering and playing with her fellow rogue as if no time had passed. But she really wished he’d forget about the damn chest.
“You said it was just trinkets,” the dwarf protested.

“And you don’t believe me,” Isabela shot back. They could do this all day.

“Then I guess you’ll have to open the lid and show me. C’mon, Rivaini, I’ve played cards with you enough times to know when you’re bluffing on a bad hand.” Varric’s eyes glinted with the same clever trickery that she knew far too well. There was no way she was talking, teasing or distracting her way out of this.

“Fine,” the sailor sighed. Bloody dwarves and their stupid, stubborn heads. She lifted the box, spun it to face Varric and—with a flourish worthy of an Orlesian artiste—opened the lid. Isabela watched her friend’s eager eyes dart to the contents; then his brow wrinkled in confusion, much as she’d expected. She was already putting her story in line, coming up with lies believable enough to justify what he saw.

“Very funny, Isabela.” The storyteller cast her an annoyed, slightly reproachful glare. “Letting me make all that fuss for an empty chest. What happened, the rats already get to it?”

“Empty-?” Isabela turned the case so she could see inside, stunned to find absolutely nothing within. That was impossible. The wood and metal were all intact; the lock was still in perfect order. No one could have found it, not when it was hidden so well. Besides, the room hadn’t been occupied. And wouldn’t thieves have taken the entire chest? Why bother leaving it behind still locked?

“What was it?” Varric’s innocent question tugged at her attention. The pirate shoved away her confusion, as well as the disappointment beneath her ribs.

“It was nothing,” Isabela shook her head, trying to convince herself more than him. “Nothing valuable.”

But valuable wasn’t the same thing as important, was it? That was one of those damned lessons she’d had to learn during her time with Hawke. Sometimes what mattered couldn’t be measured in coin. Good times, making friends, making memories, having fun; none of that could be weighed out and counted in gold. Maybe that was why she’d been in such a rush to get up here. She’d put off drinking herself stupid in favor of getting the chest out first, which was just bloody ridiculous.

After the conversation with Hawke, and all the words and reminders that she saw in every Lowtown stone and stare, she’d just needed to let herself remember. She needed to touch a piece of the past that didn’t hurt. Something from before all the impulsive mistakes and messes that brought the whole world tumbling down to chaos. Back when it was all still so bloody simple.

“You going to stick around this time, Rivaini?” Varric’s voice gently nudged the sailor back into the present moment. She shot him a suspicious look, aware that he only turned tender and patient like that when he already knew something bad was going on in her head.

“I haven’t decided yet,” she repeated the exact same reply she’d given Hawke. It was the same one she kept telling herself because there were only two answers and she was torn in half between them. The dwarf was silent for a while, chewing over her response. Then he nodded, like some general deciding on a plan for battle.

“You know what I think?” He hoisted himself off the bed and turned to her.

“I’m about to,” Isabela’s lips curled into a smile. Varric had never once been able to keep his opinions to himself.

“You left that little treasure here because you planned on coming back. You always knew you
weren’t going to be able to run forever.” He had that knowing sparkle in his look again, working out tricks and traps and smug in the assurance of victory.

“What a load of bollocks,” Isabela rolled her eyes, grabbing the bottle of whiskey off the table and yanking out the cork. “It was nothing valuable, I couldn’t take it with me and now it’s gone all the same.”

She wasn’t entirely sure why those arguments all made the ache in her chest feel like it was growing deep enough to touch bone. She took a hard swallow of liquor, drowning the foreign pain in one far more familiar.

“Believe what you like, Rivaini,” Varric shook his head as he rummaged in one of his deep pockets. “But some things don’t go away that easy.”

The glint of sunlight fracturing through glass caught her eye. Isabela stared at the dwarf’s outstretched hand, the intricate, miniature ship still resting safely in its snug bottle cocoon.

“You bloody ass,” the pirate groaned, realizing how completely she’d been played. Try as she might, she couldn’t put any real anger into her glare as she took the treasure from his palm. It was lighter than she recalled, and felt infinitely more delicate. She dragged her eyes back up to her friend’s, the question undoubtedly clear in her gaze.

“It took me a few months,” he admitted with a shrug. Then his face split into a grin and he laughed, “I said you hid it well, Rivaini. Not perfectly.”

Chapter End Notes

Really trying to get past the emotional stuff as quickly as possible here, people. Be patient with me. One more chapter and we should have the heroines back to their happy-go-deadly lifestyle.

Putting so much of my own interpretation and spin on their relationship and the reconciliation at the beginning of Act 3, I’m really looking forward to hearing everyone’s thoughts.
Isabela's Regret

Chapter Notes

Starting off with a canon scene from the game. With my own twist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Isabela had never been an unhappy drinker. Impulsive, flirtatious, and occasionally violent, but never mean or maudlin. Not like the fellow on the other side of the bar counter making such pathetic noises weeping into his ale. She darted her eyes over to the annoying display, vaguely realizing that he might’ve been crying because his balls still hadn’t recovered from her boot. He really should’ve known better than to try and pick a fight first thing in the morning. There were rules about these bloody things. Everyone deserved to have at least one solid drink under their belt before any fists started flying and he’d been stupid enough to accost her right at the base of the stairs when she came down.

Most of the idiots had gotten the message on her first night back in the Hanged Man. Drunks that thought they could play a bit of grab ass, petty halfwits that wanted a sliver of revenge for wrongs they imagined she’d caused, and especially the little pricks who had a grudge against Hawke and thought they could take it out on her; they all learned very quickly that the Raider Queen was in no mood for putting up with any of them. Eight managed to limp away with minor wounds but another five weren’t so lucky. Isabela’s temper was on a hair trigger and reaching for a dagger was almost as soothing as grabbing a bottle.

Right now the bottle was the better option and she took a long drag, hoping to burn off the bitter taste of doubt on her tongue. The air in the Hanged Man shifted slightly, the rhythm of the whispers changing speed and intensity as they rapidly flowed across the room. She knew what that meant; Hawke had arrived. Flaming balls, the pirate didn’t even need the cues from the rest of the tavern to know when the woman walked in, she’d felt it the second Hawke opened the door. Mating cycle or not, her body could sense the Fereldan through a stone wall. A conflicted surge of excitement sped her pulse even as her stomach twisted on itself.

She’d asked Hawke to give her time to think, and damn the woman if she hadn’t given her just that. Three whole days of nothing but time and space to wrap her mind around the idea of staying to fight instead of going back on the run. Under any other circumstances, the choice would be obvious: gut the bastard and get on with life. Except, whenever she tried to imagine how the battle might play out her mind stuttered and fell back in time. A surge of completely alien fear clenched her ribs and there was nothing but the smell of blood and smoke in her lungs. The memory of Hawke going pale when the Arishok’s blade sliced into her, the impossible burst of livid rage that Isabela could swear clawed straight out of her own skin and flooded into the other woman, the panic that choked her when she finally—finally—had Hawke safely back in her arms and she simply collapsed.

Isabela took another drink. The Champion was coming towards her now, speed belying the eagerness that those sparkling blue eyes worked so hard to conceal. The rogue’s face was hidden behind her usual cocky mask, only a hint of a smile curling her mouth as she leaned against the counter.

“How have you been?” There was genuine concern in the question, but also the lilting note of
humor. Hawke had clearly been staying abreast of the pirate’s activities.

“You don’t have to keep checking up on me. I’m fine.” Isabela was more than aware that the vicious bar brawl from a few nights before had reached the Fereldan’s ears. Either by Varric or Aveline, Hawke had to have heard about it. Since then, the pirate had caught brief hints of her presence. Just a few seconds, only long enough to see that her friend—friend, lover, almost-mate, what the fuck are we?—was safe and then leave without disturbing her.

“I’m just here for the rat flavored whiskey.” The Champion’s hesitation was minute, but telling; as were the tiny points of color that appeared on her cheeks whenever she knew she’d been caught.

“Right.” Isabela felt a smirk tugging at the corner of her lips as she watched the bright color in Hawke’s eyes completely betray the lie. She still hadn’t figured out how to hide that. It was rather endearing. The pirate abruptly cut off that ribbon of thought and looked away. The Fereldan didn’t seem inclined to say more and the pressure of silence was like a question waiting to be answered. Isabela sighed, “Remember what you said after the mess with the Qunari?”

Without looking at her, the sailor felt Hawke stiffen. Oh, she remembered. Probably as clearly as Isabela herself. Not all the possessive nugshit that was pure alpha talk, she could ignore that as easily as her own shivering reaction; bloody instincts trying to bugger things up. It was the first part that she couldn’t get out of her head.

“Fight a hundred of those horned bastards . . . I will. I’ll win. . . Never let anyone hurt you.” That wasn’t just alpha, that was Hawke. Wise ass opportunist that she was, at the core of her being was nothing but an altruistic need to protect others and help. But she’d managed to let those good parts of herself get tangled up with a sodding raider on the run from the worst of her own kind.

“I’m proud of you for doing the right thing,” the Fereldan deftly skirted the most dangerous part of Isabela’s question.

The right thing? When has that ever fucking worked for me? A spark of anger ignited beneath her thoughts once more, a vague flame that began to burn hot and bright the closer she narrowed in on the true source of the rage.

“It may have been the right thing but it was also the dumb thing,” she argued back bitterly. Returning to Kirkwall like she could actually make things better might have been the worst decision she ever made, and not just for herself. “The relic was mine. I should’ve kept running.”

“I couldn’t have saved Kirkwall without you.” There was such sincerity in Hawke’s words, like she actually believed that.

“Bullshit. You could’ve stormed the Keep and slaughtered all those Qunari if you had to.” At least you wouldn’t have had to face any of them alone. “You and Aveline. I mean, look at her—she’s a woman shaped battering ram.”

Hawke could’ve fought the Qunari and saved the city, and Isabela would’ve had the relic to give to Castillon, and this whole bloody mess wouldn’t even exist. Kirkwall would be no worse than it was before, Hawke would be safe, and she’d get a ship and— what exactly? Sail off as if nothing had changed? Come back and convince Hawke to join her? There wasn’t a chance of that on this side of the Veil. Probably not even beyond.

Isabela pushed off the bar. She closed the distance between herself and the Fereldan, as if that space were the only reason Hawke didn’t understand how none of this could work. “The fact is,” her words felt like the draw of a bowstring, death on the edge of a choice, “You and I have nothing in
common anymore. You’re a Champion, and I’m just a lying, thieving snake.”

The blow struck true, but only at the last second did Isabela realize she’d never been aiming for Hawke at all. Like a serpent swallowing its own tail, she felt the anger curl in on itself and vanish in a choke of pain that left only the hollow space it used to fill. The silence spun out for several heartbeats as both women absorbed the bitter words. Then Isabela’s ear caught a breathy chuckle and she looked up in surprise.

“I’ll bet there’s a heart of gold in you,” the Champion laughed, brushing off the harsh judgment like so much dust. “We just have to dig it out and sell it.”

Despite herself, Isabela could feel a smile twisting the edge of her lips. It was just like Hawke to reach for a joke when anyone else would’ve given up. The pirate found herself trapped in the stare of piercing blue eyes. Gentle but insistent, Hawke’s gaze sliced through her armor, peeled through every layer of protest and defense and—with little more than a quirk of one impatient eyebrow—declared them all to be bollocks.

“Whatever you think you are, I still care about you.” The Champion’s hands curled like she was resisting the urge to reach for Isabela, touching her with the warmth of her words instead. A hint of conflict lined her brow, but whatever thought had crossed the Fereldan’s mind was quickly dismissed. Her expression was calm and assured as she continued, “It must have been hard to give up the relic and I appreciate it. Whatever comes, you have my support.”

Isabela couldn’t deny the bolt of surprise that hit her spine on hearing the pledge. How many times had she had to practice that phrase so as to deliver it without a single wince or crack in her voice? The pirate scanned Hawke’s face for the slightest twitch or hint that would expose a lie, but even her eyes promised that she was telling the truth. The woman really would let her leave if that was truly what the sailor wanted. That foolish selflessness was almost enough to make up Isabela’s mind. The final straw, the very last argument that won her over without even being spoken, was when she realized that Hawke was holding her breath.

“Well, perhaps it’s time to stop hiding,” Isabela sighed, drawing out the torture of her words. She cast her eyes around the room as if the answer was somewhere on the walls, then she locked her gaze onto the Fereldan, relishing the explosion of excitement she saw. The pirate’s smile turned wicked as she cocked one brow before adding, “And I do miss the trouble we used to get into. Tell you what, I’ll be here if you need me.”

She’d barely turned around to hide a smile before a hand caught her arm and spun her back to face the elated Champion. Isabela felt a strong grip wrap around her waist, pulling her close enough to feel the brush of Hawke’s delighted, relieved laughter. The curl of her smile was close enough to kiss but the pirate found herself distracted from that temptation by the riveting eyes holding her own, the color so flooded with words that she thought she might drown before deciphering a single one.

“And what if,” Hawke’s mouth really was trying to drive her mad, breathing words right across her lips with that same amused cadence, “I said I needed you right now?”

“Don’t waste time do you, sweets?” Isabela’s chuckle rolled easily into a purr, reaching to toy with the short hair on the back of Hawke’s neck and enjoying the faint shiver she felt beneath her touch. Three days hadn’t been quite enough to recover from their marathon tryst, but if the Fereldan was eager and willing, Isabela was never one to say no.

“Good, we’d better hurry.” Hawke pulled back without bothering to take a single kiss. The pirate wasn’t sure whether she felt more offended or confused. A hand wrapped around hers and tugged, the other rogue already heading off in decidedly the wrong direction.
“Is my room not good enough for you anymore?” Isabela warily followed Hawke out into Lowtown. She’d readily admit that the noble’s bed was much nicer, but there was something to be said for convenience. Running like this through the streets of Kirkwall was hardly her idea of foreplay.

“What?” Hawke looked genuinely bewildered as she looked over her shoulder at the pirate. Then understanding dawned across her face with a surprised grin and she laughed, “Bela, we’ve done things in the sodding Deep Roads that would’ve made darkspawn blush, I’m not about to care if there’s some straw sticking out of the mattress.”

“Then why are we not anywhere near that mattress?” Isabela demanded, adding just the right touch of a pout to her disappointed expression. She silently gloated when Hawke actually stumbled and then had to fix her eyes straight ahead to keep their pace.

“Because that’s going to have to wait, we’re nearly late as it is,” the Fereldan replied, picking up even more speed.

“Late for what?” The sailor had no trouble keeping up with the race but the prickle of hairs standing up on the back of her neck suddenly felt like she was running into a trap.

“Aveline’s wedding!” Hawke’s excited answer was accompanied by a quick flash of a grin.

This time it was Isabela that stumbled but the hand on hers stopped her from falling. The insistent tugging forced her to keep up, even though her legs suddenly felt numb. The Big Girl’s wedding.

Oh, balls.

“Are all shem weddings like that? I thought they’d be stuffy and boring.” Merrill was so excited she was bouncing with every step. From the moment Hawke arrived at the base of the Chantry stairs with the returned Isabela, the elf hadn’t left her exotic friend’s side.

“Boring is usually the goal, kitten. Exciting parts aren’t supposed to happen until later.” The pirate smiled affectionately down at the petite mage as they followed the rest of the procession to the feast. All of Hawke’s companions managed to afford her a brief greeting after the ceremony; a curt nod with less hostile growling than usual from Fenris, Sebastian gave her a quote from the Chant with a warm smile, Anders just told her to come to the clinic later because “Maker only knows what kind stowaways you’ve picked up in those ports.” Only Captain Man Hands herself hadn’t said anything, but, in fairness, she’d been quite distracted.

“But how did they train the birds to all take off and fly over like that?” Merrill alone had been absolutely unrestrained in her enthusiastic welcome. Isabela had never realized how strong the elf was until she’d felt the delicate arms wrap around her hard enough to crack ribs.

“They’re pigeons, Daisy, I think flying over people and shitting is pretty much the only thing they know how to do from birth. Hatching. Whatever.” Varric gestured vaguely at the Hightown pavers beneath their feet, each decorated in testimony to Kirkwall’s birdlife and their clearly unsanitary diet. To be fair, it was quite perfect that the midday bell happened to ring out right at the beginning of the ceremony, forcing all the attendees to take cover and avoid an impromptu shower of . . . good luck.

“He’s right, kitten. If birds could be trained to shit on command they’d have been weaponized back during the Exalted Marches. It was just a bit of good timing.” Isabela had personally been delighted to note that those ridiculous headdresses the Reverend Mothers wore made a particularly easy target.
“Oh, then the nug? Was that some kind of symbol?” Merrill continued trying to unravel the mysteries of the strange rituals.

“Sure, it means someone isn’t getting the supper they wanted.” Varric couldn’t hold in a bark of laughter. The squealing animal had raced past their proceedings, several servants right behind and one cook with what looked like a lovely gravy splattered all over his clothes. Everyone always underestimated those little blighters. It was funny when the nug went by, and bloody hilarious when it doubled back and went right through Donnic’s legs. Not sure who squeaked louder.

“Poor man,” Isabela chuckled lightly, her mind going to the exact same moment as Varric’s. “No wonder he had trouble with the vows. Though with Aveline standing there he probably couldn’t remember his own name.”

“He didn’t need to worry about his name; it was hers he had to get right.” The dwarf had never heard human wedding vows before. Still, even he knew that swearing by “the most Holy Aveline to love this woman, Andraste, for the rest of my days,” wasn’t going to quite fit the bill. Fortunately, the groom caught the slip once everyone started snickering.

“She looked lovely though, didn’t she? I didn’t know she had a dress, did you?” Merrill’s gaze fixed on the happy couple ahead.

“I didn’t. And now I’m wondering what other surprises she has in store for Donnic.” Isabela tossed the brunette a suggestive wink that made the elf blush but giggle happily.

Aveline had indeed become quite shockingly attractive for the day; her loose fitting shift managed to look both dignified and delicate at the same time. With her hair down and neatly decorated in a very nearly feminine style, the towering ginger woman was surprisingly beautiful. Of course, she’d always been naturally striking. Fist, sword, shield, remnants of a skeleton’s thigh bone—she could make use of any weapon at hand. Today, however, she didn’t look equipped or inclined to beat anyone within an inch of their life. That made Isabela feel a bit more optimistic.

The wedding procession made their way through Hightown to the Keep and then below to the guards’ barracks. It was hardly the most festive atmosphere but Aveline’s men and women had obviously gone to great lengths to set up the celebration of romance amongst their own. The food and decorations looked like the sort of thing people had scrimped, saved and slaved over for at least a month; not ornate or lavish but nauseatingly heartfelt. The air of the massive common space was positively rife with sincerity and good wishes.

“Did we have to hold the feast here?” Fenris looked around the room with a disdain very close to Isabela’s own thoughts.

“Hawke offered her manor but the main hall was too small.” Varric grabbed two goblets of wine off a table and handed one each to the pirate and disgruntled elf. He got a smaller mug of ale for Merrill. Everyone kept a protective eye on the mage’s alcohol intake, particularly after the incident with the sack of potatoes.

“Mine’s bigger,” Fenris pointed out, glaring at the milling bodies and happy smiles.

“Don’t be so sure, sweets. Hawke’s is one of the largest I’ve seen.” The deliberate inflection in Isabela’s voice made her meaning clear and Varric immediately choked on the war of wine and laughter in his throat.

“Maker’s ass, Rivaini, don’t leave much to the imagination do you?” The dwarf wiped at the dribbles of claret caught in the hair on his chest.
“I dress this way for a reason, sweets. Or haven’t you noticed?” Isabela shot the blonde a wink but her attention was mostly on a figure moving towards them. Hawke hadn’t stopped smiling since they left the Hanged Man together. She looked almost as radiant as the bride herself.

“A blind corpse would notice you, Isabela, and probably make a joke about being stiff.” Varric also spotted the Champion’s approach and grabbed another cup of wine for her.

“What are we talking about?” Hawke took the drink, eyes roving happily over the band of miscreants.

“Imagining stiff corpses,” Merrill helpfully supplied. “Oh, and Fenris and Isabela are arguing over whether yours is bigger.”

“That didn’t take long,” the Champion darted a slightly reproving glance between the two, failing to mask the tinge of embarrassment and pride mingling on her cheeks. It really was delightful to make her blush so easily, and she looked lovely with that color blooming across her face. Rather like the way she looked right before succumbing completely to a perfect touch.

“Neither did you at first.” Isabela slipped an arm around Hawke’s shoulder, tickling the hair at the nape of her neck. “But you found your stamina, eventually.”

“Are we talking about manors still? Only I think I’m a bit lost. Does someone need a stamina potion?” Merrill looked back and forth amongst all her friends’ faces, searching for clues.

“Probably later, Daisy, but let them worry about that. Come on, I hear music.” Varric took the mage’s arm and led her towards the guards’ mess where pipes and lutes were striking up a lively melody.

Fenris wandered off a few seconds later, muttering about finding something stronger to drink and barely hiding the smirk that threatened to ruin his frown when he left the two women alone. Relatively alone. It was difficult to remember that there was a whole crowd of people (mostly guards) surrounding them in the revels of a wedding feast. When Hawke smiled like she did now, eyes fixed on the pirate like there was no one else in the world, Isabela could almost believe it was true. But then, that was how Hawke affected everyone. When her attention was fixed on you, you were all that mattered; the intensity of her gaze and the sincerity of her passions promised that she gave her all for every person that needed her.

“So tell me,” Isabela lost the war and averted her eyes. It was just too hard to face everything Hawke offered without wanting to return the promise. The pirate took a drink of wine to grease her tongue and she felt the alcohol warm her voice, sliding back into comfortable territory with a sly glance. “Just how heartbroken are you now that Aveline’s made her guard dog a permanent pet? No more rusty hinges on her.”

“She kissed me once, Isabela, on the cheek,” Hawke protested with a long-suffering sigh, an argument she’d repeated many times. “Besides, she’s too much like an older sister. I’d no sooner lust after her than Bethany.”

“Mmm, now there’s a fantasy I’ve enjoyed a few times.” The pirate let a sultry smirk curl her lips. “Bela!” Hawke gaped in mock horror. Nothing Isabela said could ever shock her anymore but she tried to pretend.

“Oh, don’t be such a prude. She’s adorable. And the only thing better than one Hawke would have to be two.” Isabela quickly spun away from the clench of fingers that promised to have revenge for
such a wicked joke. Damn Hawke for knowing her ticklish spots.

“For the first time I’m actually glad that she’s in the Gallows. Safe from your evil clutches.” Hawke easily slid to one side and cut off the pirate’s escape, catching her once more. Isabela couldn’t fight the laughter rising in her throat, the happy release of excitement that rushed through her whole body when she felt the Fereldan’s lithe arms wrap around her.

“You’ve been in my clutches often enough, sweetness, I don’t recall ‘evil’ being the word you used.” The pirate’s deliberate purr came in a lower tone and she felt Hawke’s grip tighten out of an instinctive reflex. She could feel the buckles and belts of the Champion’s favorite armor biting into her back, no doubt leaving small indentations through the cloth.

“Probably because by that time I couldn’t even talk.” Hawke’s breath on her ear was taunt and invitation wrapped together. Isabela’s mind was rapidly running through her options. The entire barracks was swarming with bodies and festivity, guards were naturally nosy and there wouldn’t be any chance of privacy anywhere in these lower rooms. The rest of the Keep on the other hand . . .

“Tell me, does the Viscount’s office still have that gorgeous desk?” Isabela turned her head enough to feel Hawke’s mouth brush the corner of her lips. She smiled at the Champion’s soft exhalation of surprise.

“Nice and empty these days since there’s no one around to sign papers.” Hawke gave a slow nod.

“Now that’s a pity, such a lovely piece of furniture really should be put to use.” The pirate twisted free, sauntering backwards slowly; the sway of her hips could offer far more temptation than anything words suggested.

“Already up to your tricks, Isabela?” The strong voice cut through their air of seduction like a sword through demon slime.

“Aveline,” the pirate turned her attention to the approaching bride. She didn’t loom with quite such an intimidating aura today, draped in soft fabrics and flowers rather than armor and weapons. Still, she radiated power and the familiar “don’t fuck with me,” vibe that Isabela had grown to expect. The sailor had been thinking for some time about what she could say when face to face with the redhead. She hadn’t come up with much. “Congratulations and all that. Sorry I didn’t have a chance to pick up a gift for your special day. So, tell you what, I’ll give you something I know you’ve been dying for.”

“If you’re about to make a lewd suggestion-,” Aveline’s eyes narrowed, fully prepared to hear something horrific from the pirate’s lips. Isabela quickly waved her off.

“Don’t be silly, you’ve got the man meat for that now. Trifle boring if you ask me but that’s your taste. No,” the sailor squared herself, “I mean you can take a swing. Full force, no dodges or blocking. I know you’ve wanted to lay me out cold for years, and not in the fun way. So, Big Girl, here’s your chance.”

Aveline looked in surprise back and forth between the pirate and Hawke, clearly convinced a trap was being laid. Isabela simply stood her ground, relaxed her arms and met the guard captain’s suspicious, doubtful glare. She just prayed the woman wouldn’t aim straight for her nose. The pain she could deal with, it was the bloody nuisance of getting the thing to heal properly that always made it such a bother. She’d very nearly had her profile ruined twice before and didn’t care to risk it again.

The redhead must have finally realized that Isabela was completely serious because a smile slowly spread across her face. Hawke tensed, fighting her own impulse to intervene as Aveline balled her
fist and cocked back. The pirate kept her eyes open as long as she could, watching the blow barrel towards her like the swing of a Hurlock warhammer and at the last moment she flinched, squeezing her eyes shut to block out the inevitable pain. Rather than the bone-crunching slam of knuckles hitting her face, Isabela felt only a tap against her forehead; a light rapping like someone wanted to knock sense into her skull.

“Not everything is about you, slattern.” Aveline made the insult sound almost affectionate. “Least of all today.”

Isabela let out a sigh of relief she hadn’t even known she was holding in. The redhead’s gaze had none of its usual calloused impatience; just a gentle tolerance that promised they could have peace, at least for today.

“Why, Ball Crusher, are you getting soft on me? Careful, you’ll make the new husband all jealous,” the pirate winked over at the groom who was watching from a distance with nothing but innocent curiosity. Aveline looked over her shoulder at him as well, a warm smile relaxing her militant features.

“If I put up with you before I suppose I can do it again,” the guard captain shrugged and extended her hand. Isabela took the peace offering, shaking with a solemnity usually reserved for contracts and duels. Then Aveline used her grip to tug the pirate in close, voice turning dark as she growled quietly into Isabela’s ear. “But if you hurt her again there won’t be anywhere in Thedas you can hide from me.”

The warning was whispered so quickly that the pirate almost thought she’d imagined the whole thing. Aveline had already released her grip and was smiling at Hawke, turning away to resume her role in the festivities. Only the chill of her threat remained tingling down Isabela’s spine. The redhead was a good friend, which meant she could make a terrible enemy. Who would be a scarier hunter, Castillon or Aveline? Shit, at least the Raider asshole had other business distracting him. If the ginger battering ram ever had a reason to come after her it would be like a religion.

“Are you alright?” Hawke reached out and braced the pirate with one hand on her arm. The touch served to jerk Isabela out of her thoughts and light her face with a smile once more.

“Perfect. Now, I believe you were going to give me a tour.” She slid one arm around the Champion’s waist, reveling in the fiendish smirk that curled the woman’s lips.

Bran Cavin wasn’t a bad man. Granted, he was a consummate politician with both race and class biases that would make Orlesian nobility look progressive. He also had a bit of a weakness for cross-dressing prostitutes. But in terms of actual malice or crime he was still pure. He attended Chantry services regularly and donated more than the average worshipper (though that might have had something to do with his conscience and the prostitutes). His snobbish elitism didn’t preclude acts of generosity and he had been quite charitable to the alienage, albeit from a great distance for fear of getting any Darktown filth on his impeccably tailored clothes. He was dedicated and organized, devoted to duty and—by extension—the city of Kirkwall. His ambitions were modest and his narcissistic sense of self-importance stayed safely in check.

All in all, not a bad man. Certainly not deserving of any demonic tortures or divine rebuke. There was no reason for him to be punished by the sight of the Champion of Kirkwall bent over the Viscount’s empty desk, a half-naked pirate pinned beneath her. So he didn’t. What he did find, however, was the door lock jammed shut. Bran cursed as he fiddled with the key, one arm still full of
the papers he needed to stamp with the city seal. It took half a dozen frustrated twists and kicks at the
door before the mechanism came unstuck and he was able to gain entry.

The office was stuffy from lack of air and there was a faint smell that he couldn’t place. The
Seneschal dropped the papers on the desk and opened both windows. Noise from below filtered up,
the wedding revelries carrying through on the night air. Bran rested his hands on the flat, polished
wood for a few seconds before muttering a tired curse. He stretched once and neatly stacked all the
papers in order of importance, pushing them to the side of the desk where they could wait until
morning.

The weary man strode out of the office with the same dignified, determined pace that he always kept
in case anyone was watching. A natural instinct for arrogance kept his chin up and eyes forward,
regardless of any noises or distractions that might try to twist his attention. That was why he never
noticed the two women hidden behind the office door when he closed it. Nor did he hear them slip
out and sneak as quietly as possible in the opposite direction down the hallway.

The Champion and pirate were down the stairs and heading back to the barracks before their stifled
laughter dared to break free.

“Maker’s balls!” Hawke’s curse caught on her chuckle. “That was close.”

“Yes, I was.” Isabela spied a servant leaving one of the storage closets and sped up. She caught the
almost invisible door before it closed and dragged the Fereldan inside.

The dark room smelled of laundry and cotton and the pirate found a fistful of clean linens on the
shelves that she shoved Hawke up against. She could feel laughter vibrating against her lips as she
traced up the Fereldan’s throat, a lovely duet with the speeding heartbeat pulsing beneath her touch.
The feel of Hawke so pliant beneath her hands, eager and willing, hungry as ever; how had she
thought she could walk away from this? Fingers carded through her hair, urgently tugging the
attentions of her mouth to the hungry lips waiting to be ravished.

It was more than the sex. Isabela hummed into the kiss, welcoming the teasing trade of caresses as
soft and warm as the flesh she knew had to be dripping for want of her touch. It was the laughter, the
excitement, the energy; being with Hawke could be a high like seizing an entire enemy fleet. The
Champion’s gasp spilled across Isabela’s tongue when her fingers slid expertly through all the belts
and buckles of her armor, worming into the scant space between leather and leg. There was the
comfort of it, the familiarity of the smell and feel of Hawke’s body, the welcoming, wet heat that
greeted her touch. The feeling of making this sinewy, strong frame shudder from head to toe and
moan so sweetly in her desire was intoxicating, but so was the power of being able to make her
smile.

“Hawke,” Isabela tore her lips away from the kiss, suddenly breathless from the confusion of needs
and doubts assailing her mind. She slowed her touch, not stopping, but only easing the Champion
through gentler waves of pleasure. Blue eyes struggled to fix on her, desperately trying to put the
pirate’s needs above her own. Just like always. The sailor cursed silently at herself but met that gaze.
She had to know. “What do you want?”

It was a question as dangerous as a barrel of gaatlok. Hawke had been so reserved in her arguments,
so vague about anything that involved the two of them together. She wanted to help, wanted Isabela
to stay, but she hadn’t once said what she was thinking or why. This woman had been in love with
her once and the thought terrified the pirate almost as much as the fear of losing her.

“Isabela,” Hawke wrestled to push words across her numbed tongue. Fingers clenched in long
waves of raven hair as those darkened crystal eyes bore into her. “You. This. What we had before,”
a choked moan broke her thoughts when Isabela’s fingers picked up speed, stoked by the fire in that rasping voice. “We’re good together, Bela. Fuck, so good.” Hawke’s eyes squeezed shut, head falling back against the shelves as her lips parted over increasingly ragged breaths. The tantalizing line of her throat was more than the pirate could resist and she pressed forward, open mouth devouring the skin that was still so beautifully mottled from her attention days before.

“Just this?” Isabela’s teeth grazed the soft flesh of an ear, words sending a riot of goosebumps across Hawke’s skin and making her hands fist tighter in hair and cloth. She slid her fingers lower, dipping into the silken heat that had been so hungry for her.

“Fuck yes.” The Champion’s whole body arched into her, inner muscles clamping down urgently, trying to draw the teasing touch even deeper. “Just you, Isabela.” The name broke across her lips in a groan that was nearly pain. “Holy ass, please.” Hawke never cared if she sounded needy, if she had to beg. She happily surrendered everything to her lover with a level of trust that made Isabela feel unworthy.

“Just this,” Isabela repeated, confidence only slightly dented by a nameless regret. “This is how we’re good.” This was simple, it was easy. This she could do. “Fuck, Hawke, I want this too,” she murmured against the shaking woman’s ear. “I want you like this.”

The pirate sealed her lips over Hawke’s, muffling the building moans as she neared her breaking point. Silencing herself before she could dare let slip the final word that almost broke free. The fluttering, velvet heat around her fingers gave a tight spasm, clamping down so hard she could barely move and a flood of warmth trickled down into her palm. She swallowed the desperate, shattered sounds of Hawke’s relief, soaking them in to be stored away with the rest of her treasures. Easing the woman through her climax with gentle strokes, Isabela pulled back from the kiss and rested against Hawke’s cheek, wondering how her own pulse and breath could be racing so hard when it wasn’t even her that had come undone. The Champion was mumbling between soft pants for air, whispers that were never meant for anyone to hear. Curses mostly, interspersed with the pirate’s name over and over again. Blasphemy had never sounded more like praise.

*Just this,* Isabela found Hawke’s lips once more, drinking in those profanities with only a hungry smile, *Forever.*

When the wedding feast began to run short of wine, Varric and Fenris went off in search of fresh supply. They were just reaching the upper floor above the barracks when a loud litany of gasped swearing stopped them both short. Two sets of eyes fell to an inconspicuous door that might have been unnoticeable except for the way it thumped and shuddered so rhythmically in its frame.

*Bloody Andraste, fuck yes.* The inflections of a Rivaini accent were unmistakable, even breathless as they were. The dwarf and elf exchanged glances.

“Well, looks like everything is finally back to normal.” Varric clapped his hands together happily before he and Fenris went—smiling—on their way.
Sorry for the delay, people. Lost a furred member of my family and it was hard to think about anything else this week. Hopefully, the story doesn't suffer too much from my distraction.
Some things really never changed. The stale scent of piss and death that clung to every paver on the roads of Lowtown all the way to the docks. The shifty, suspicious glances of refugees and criminals that couldn’t understand why the Champion of Kirkwall would be in their slums. Free Marchers throwing insults because they hated Fereldans for no reason other than the fact that they were a convenient excuse for their own pathetic lives. Gangs of thugs eager to leap out of the shadows and prey on anything that moved about after dark. They all even had that same adorable expression of horror in their eyes when they realized who they were attacking and how buggered they were.

The blood mages were new though. Really, how bad had things gotten that there were just packs of the damned fools lurking around every corner and bursting into abominations any time someone looked at them funny? Isabela curled her lip in disgust as she shook a mysterious ooze off her daggers. That definitely wasn’t blood.

“I just love what your friends have done with the place.” The pirate cocked one eyebrow over at Anders.

“They’re fighting back against injustice and oppression.” The mage scowled at her, kneeling to search one of the corpses for any sign of identification.

“Last I checked, we weren’t the enemy.” Hawke sheathed her own weapons, her voice losing a little of its amused tone. She sounded like she’d been stuck in this same fight for years.

Isabela found herself wondering how long it had been like this. She’d heard rumors while she was away; whispers of the atrocities being committed in Kirkwall, the sad state of mages and Templars at each other’s throats and an entire city caught in the crossfire. She’d simply assumed it all took place behind the closed doors of the Gallows or out on the rocks of the Wounded Coast where escapees had to be recaptured. She hadn’t pictured the streets and alleys of the city awash in blood magic and desperation. Perhaps that was as much a symptom of denial as ignorance. It was just all so . . . dismal.

“I think I preferred the old fashioned bastards we used to fight around here.” Isabela gave her back a leisurely stretch. “A few carta thugs, occasional tangles with the coterie, those delightful fellows with the absolutely ridiculous names. Who was that last one we cleared out of the warehouses? Sounded like some awful disease.”

“Kanky Hammertoe,” Varric supplied with a gruff rumble of laughter. “That was a fun one. You took his boots as a souvenir, didn’t you, Hawke?”

“No, Varric, that was you.” The Champion shot her dwarven friend a knowing wink. “Something about wanting to send a message to the Carta. And maybe some fungus.”

“Can we stroll down memory lane later? This whole place reeks like a mortalitasi’s crypt.” Anders shouldered his staff and pressed on towards the silent space that housed the harbormaster by day.

“Vivid, Blondie.” Varric’s mouth contorted into a grimace as they all followed. The four friends stopped above a heavy circle of metal embedded in pavers. Steam and dank heat rose from the grate and carried the sounds of activity from underneath. “It sure as shit isn’t going to smell any better.
down there. Remind me why we’re doing this again?"

“Because it will make a great story?” Hawke suggested, gambling on her cheeky smile. The confident declaration would’ve worked, except Isabela and Varric were both far more fluent in bullshit than she could ever be. The Champion knelt and pried up the edge of the grating, revealing the passage below. There was an undeniable glint of excitement in her gaze as she looked back up at everyone, eyes momentarily resting on Isabela longer than anyone else. “Because down there we can find one of Castillon’s little spies and send a message of our own.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten that saving one backstabbing pirate mattered more than protecting hundreds of helpless mages.” A dangerous flash of blue pulsed in the veins on Anders’ face, Justice contributing his two coppers’ worth of opinion.

“I’m sorry, were you not with us three minutes ago when half a dozen of those blighters jumped out of the shadows and started summoning demons? They’re about as helpless as a Qunari battalion,” Isabela scoffed.

“Something you’d know a lot about, wouldn’t you?” Anders shot back, bristling.

The runaway warden was even more insufferable than Isabela remembered, and a dark twitch in Hawke’s eyebrow subtly betrayed her own growing impatience. The pirate harbored no illusions about Anders’ opinion of her or her mistakes, they’d done little other than argue about it over these past few weeks. Now the mage’s peevish criticisms were getting tiresome. It was a bit like being pecked incessantly by an annoying but feeble parrot. Nug balls, that damned bird Jackdaw kept had been bad enough.

“I didn’t ask you to come.” Hawke straightened up, forcing the mage to focus on her and not the sailor. There was something utterly captivating in watching the usually blasé Champion reveal the steel and fire under all that calm. The Fereldan’s mouth was a firm line but not unfriendly, reaching to rest a hand on the blonde’s shoulder. “I haven’t forgotten the mages, Anders. Maker’s breath, my sister is still stuck in that cesspit of a prison. But that’s a war that may last for years yet. Let me finish a few other battles first so that we have all the allies we need.”

The effect was remarkable; the man visibly softened beneath the gentle words like a tranquilizing spell had been woven into her voice. He pressed his own hand over Hawke’s, a subtle squeeze and nod confirming that he understood. Isabela had never grasped the nature of their bond and this moment was no different. Was it Hawke’s general sympathy towards mages because of her sister and father? Was it respect for his heroic past? Maybe it was simply the loyalty that was forged from saving each other’s lives repeatedly. Granted, he was a handsome enough man; and that trick with the electricity spell was quite delightful. Still, ever since she’d returned, Isabela had trouble seeing him as anything more than a condescending, pain in the ass zealot. To think he used to be such fun!

“Right, now are going to sit down and weave daisy chains or get on with this shit?” Trust dear Varric to get down to business. Isabela cast the dwarf an affectionate smile that he pretended not to notice, replying with only the barest hint of a wink.

“He has such a way with words,” Hawke laughed and swung onto the rickety ladder that descended into the shadows below.

“Yes, well, so do you when you’re properly inspired.” Isabela followed, more than aware of the view she was providing if the Champion ever happened to look up. A slightly startled inhalation told her the exact moment Hawke’s eyes wandered upwards.

“I’m definitely feeling inspired.” The Fereldan’s laugh was a little too high pitched, cracking in an
eloquent description of her exact thoughts. She dropped the last few feet to the ground and reached up to guide Isabela the rest of the way down, hands lingering on her waist a little longer than was necessary.

“Good. I look forward to hearing all about it.” The sailor shot a smirk over her shoulder.

“You cannot be thinking about sex right now.” Anders sounded almost as judgmental and impatient as Aveline. Worse, actually; the Big Girl had mellowed a little now that she was getting pounded like a cheap steak.

“No, sweets, I’m thinking about sex later. There’s a difference.” Isabela gave the mage a patient, if pitying, glance. The faintest brush of a touch on her arm silently advised the sailor not to pursue the argument further. Searching Hawke’s face only revealed worry in the depths of those epic blue eyes, almost all of it tangled around her gaze towards the blonde healer.

“We’ll take point. Varric, watch our backs. Anders, you get the rear.” The Champion nodded to each companion.

“How appropriate.” Isabela simply couldn’t resist the jibe before she obediently fell into pace alongside the Fereldan. A coarse roll of laughter behind her promised that at least Varric got the joke.

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The disused passage beneath Kirkwall’s docks was a secure haven for refugees, criminals, and anyone else too dangerous or insecure to risk the exposures of daylight. Hawke ignored the whispers that fluttered behind her, murmurs of “Champion” and “dog lord” muttered with equal frequency and suspicion. She’d been down here often enough over the past seven years that no one usually gave her trouble, but they all still looked on her as a foreigner in their world. She used to be one of them, when she first arrived in Kirkwall with only the clothes on her back. But she’d risen above that. In an effort to protect and provide for her family and friends, she’d accidentally made a name for herself that no longer fit in with these skulking silhouettes that lurked beneath city pavers like ghosts of a cursed past or future.

“Cheery, isn’t it?” Isabela’s melodic insouciance rang off the cavernous tunnel walls. Faces and eyes turned at the noise, watching the strangers pass but not daring to challenge.

“Like Satinalia with the family. Which doesn’t speak well for my family, does it? Flaming tits, I actually remember my mother giving me a tunic that looked almost exactly like what that poor sod is wearing.” Hawke nodded to a man huddled over sputtering coals. She barely managed to keep her smile in check until she heard Isabela’s lovely, caramel voice burst free in a ripple of laughter. Maker, she’d nearly forgotten the perfection of that sound.

“You’re still a terrible liar,” Isabela chastised, cocking an eyebrow like she dared Hawke to deny it. The Champion shrugged one shoulder, perfectly willing to accept the accusation so long as it made her lover happy. “So tell me, just what is going on with the moody mage? I thought Fenris would’ve fucked the stick out of his ass by now.”

“Ah, well.” Hawke darted a glance over her shoulder at Anders. He was far enough away that he couldn’t overhear but Varric wasn’t, so she prudently lowered her voice. Besides, that gave her an excuse to slide closer into the pirate’s space as they walked. “He and Fenris aren’t actually doing that anymore. Justice has been causing trouble and I think our dear, fugitive slave lost his patience.”

“Really? And he always seemed such a tolerant sort.” The sarcasm in Isabela’s voice could’ve cut
metal. Still, there was an almost sympathetic glimmer in her eyes. “No wonder he’s turned into such a judgmental prig. Jealousy is not an attractive look on that one. Any chance we might patch things up? Get him back to rainbows and blow jobs and off my sodding ass?”

“I don’t know. Anders told me he wants to split from Justice. I can’t help but think Fenris might be part of the reason.” Hawke’s whisper was too quiet for anyone beyond a few inches to hear. The mage had taken her into his confidence and asked for help, she was loath to betray that trust. Then again, he wanted her to muck through sewers for crystallized urine and fight into a dragon infested mine to gather some damn rocks; no way was she doing that without at least one ally that she could be sure was sane.

“Then do hurry up with that. At this rate I’m going to kill him before the Templars get their chance.” The pirate’s scowl promised she was only partially joking.

Isabela’s irritation was certainly understandable. Hawke had yet to see Anders spend even a day in the sailor’s company without trying to start a fight. He had been like that with everyone lately. Maker, he’d accused Aveline of having the city guards spy on him! It was a miracle the redhead didn’t break his face for even thinking such a thing.

Hawke wasn’t sure which came first: Justice’s bursts of temper and righteous indignation, or Fenris calling off the pseudo relationship they’d found mutually beneficial for so many years. It had been months now and Anders had only managed to descend even further into the isolation of his mission and paranoia. She could clearly picture him in the darkened clinic on the night she went to visit, right after Varric told her what had happened.

“Buggeration. Anders, is that you or Justice?” The Champion strolled into the back room that her friend mockingly called home.

He was bent over the rickety writing table, scribbling furiously with that familiar, worrying brightness in his eyes. For a few seconds, he continued as if he hadn’t heard her at all, muttering occasionally beneath his breath as he tested phrases and cursed when none sounded right. Then the unholy energy faded and his expression cleared somewhat, allowing him to fix his attention on Hawke with welcome and surprise.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone.” He straightened up, fussing the mountain of scattered papers into something resembling an orderly pile. At least his smile looked genuine.

“So I see.” Hawke couldn’t help chuckling at the ink that stained his fingers, robe and at least part of his face. He just couldn’t break the habit of rubbing one temple when he was trying to think; this evening the skin and even part of his hair was tarnished with a massive black smear. The Champion dropped casually onto the threadbare cot that looked like it hadn’t been slept in for days. The bottle of wine she’d brought along was as much for herself as him. “I thought you might like to talk.”

“Talk?” Anders’ eyes widened like a kid being offered a puppy. He immediately grabbed a chair and sat across from her, leaning forward eagerly. “Yes! That’s what I’ve been trying to do, to get people talking about what’s going on. It’s bad enough that no one wants to hear, but now even the ones who know are staying silent, pretending everything is fine. Abuses like these feed on secrecy and the longer the victims remain quiet, the more power the Templars have. The chapter I’m working on-,”

“About Fenris, Anders.” Hawke held up a protesting hand before she was lost in the deluge of his words. “Flaming Andraste, I would’ve thought getting dumped might put the manifesto on hold for a night or two.”
The mage’s look of sincere bewilderment almost made her doubt Varric’s information. The dwarf was known to exaggerate his stories from time to time to make them more interesting. No, he wouldn’t do that with their friends. He might gossip like a spinster aunt but loyalty won out over titillation. There was no faking the lines of worry around his frown when he’d come to Hawke and told her that Fenris was through with Anders’ madness.

“Don’t confuse feelings and fucking, Hawke.” The blonde’s words were a twisted echo of the same thing he’d been telling her for years. A sad smile confirmed that he felt the irony. “Most mages spend their whole lives without anyone warming their sheets. It’s not the end of the world if I have to do the same. Besides, I’m better off not sharing my body with someone that doesn’t care about anything besides himself.”

“Four years is a long time for it to have been nothing but stress relief.” Hawke had trouble believing a relationship lasted for so long on purely carnal attraction. Either they were both terrible at finding other partners or they got off on the arguments as much as the sex.

“No reason to make it more than it was,” the healer’s chuckle wasn’t even bitter. “The minute I stopped being interested in gratuitous, time-wasting pleasure there was nothing left. Surely, you of all people can relate to that.”

“No, actually, I can’t.” The Champion curled one fist until the knuckles went white, nails digging red crescents into her palm as she resisted the urge to smack that presumptuous smirk off his face. This was supposed to be about him, not her.

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” Anders leaned back, folding his arms like a magistrate. His eyes bored into her, daring her to challenge the assertion. When she didn’t even flinch, he had to look away with a sigh. “You know they’re practically identical. Fenris might be more angry and violent where Isabela was just impulsive and lewd, but they’re the same sort of person. The difference is that I never fooled myself into thinking we were going to be anything more.”

“That and Isabela had amazing breasts.” Hawke artfully dodged around the subtle accusation in his words. She didn’t come here to talk about the pirate, the past, or herself in any way. She just wanted to help her friend because he had to be in pain. Odd then, that he was the one smiling.

“Hawke.” Anders unfolded his arms and his voice was surprisingly gentle as he bent forward once again. “It was easy. It was fun. When it stopped being either of those things, it was over. That was what I expected. Didn’t you?”

“From you and Fenris? Yes, I suppose so. But with more explosions.” The Champion combed a handful of messy hair out of her eyes, hiding the sting of old scars beneath her trademark smirk. The mage nodded, understanding the unspoken part of her answer. Humor wasn’t just Hawke’s weapon of choice; it could also be a white flag. The blonde willingly accepted the truce, letting the subject drop as he grabbed two cups from a shelf and poured out wine for them both.

“Life doesn’t stay easy. Here’s to fighting when it’s hard.” Anders raised his drink in a toast.

“Mm-hmm, that was you and Fenris all over, wasn’t it? Hard and fighting.” Hawke grinned, clinking her cup against her friend’s in happy agreement.
dead rat. The most exciting moment was certainly the rather inspired adaptation of a fire trap that very nearly caught them all unawares. There were . . . casualties.

“I really think I might have to cry.” Isabela stared forlornly at the smoldering damage.

“Not like it was your hair, Rivaini,” Varric argued, brushing the last sparks off his duster.

“No, yours is far more fun to run my fingers through and now look at it.” The sailor’s stubborn pout refused to budge. She trailed one grief-stricken hand over the singed blonde curls, sighing at the wiry sensation that had replaced downy fluff.

“It’ll grow back. You’ll just have to settle for fondling Hawke’s short and curlies until then.” The dwarf patted Isabela’s hand consolingly before he pried her fingers from the tangle of his scorched chest hair.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Varric. Even I know yours are nicer,” the Champion teased as she finished disarming the last trap trigger.

“Are you sure the man we want is here?” Anders ignored the entire conversation, glancing down yet another seemingly endless passageway.

“Our old friend Martin assured us that at least one of Castillon’s moles slips down here after dark,” Hawke shrugged, pushing on without hesitation.

“Oh, right, because the guy selling deathroot toxin is such a model of decency.” Varric had a natural gift for blending sarcasm and cynicism until they were absolutely indistinguishable in his rough chuckle. Apparently, he wasn’t entirely fond of the former raider running a poison shop just a few doors down the hall from his suite in the Hanged Man.

“Maybe not, but he’s still scared Isabela is going to gut him.” Hawke smiled at the pirate, nothing but honest delight and pride warming her gaze. That naked admiration always made Isabela’s chest tighten uncomfortably, but it was harder and harder these days to pull her eyes away.

“Little prick, telling me where to find the relic but leaving out the bit about walking into a warehouse full of Vints and ox-men.” The sailor let the memory wash back over her thoughts, raising the rumble of a growl in her throat.

“Yes, but now he’s your bitch. Just the way you like men like that.” The Champion dropped her voice slightly, a subtle gesture indicating suspicious noises ahead.

“Sweets, men like that are always someone’s bitch.” Isabela drew her daggers, shooting Hawke a wink.

Only someone listening for it would detect the tiny sound of Bianca’s spring winding back, a coil of tension like the excitement speeding each of their hearts. The pirate felt a shift in the energy of the air around them, the hairs on her neck tingling ever so slightly with the charge of magic. All the time they spent bickering and teasing with each other was little more than warm up for the real fun. Hawke had been right; this was what their friends did best. Anders might be a pain or Sebastian a bore, but damn if a good fight couldn’t bring them all together.

“Oh, looks like we’ve stumbled onto a party.” The Champion sauntered brazenly into the cavernous room at the end of the tunnel, surprising a dozen heavily armed mercenaries. The sheer, flagrant mockery of her tone actually left them all too stunned to react for several heartbeats. They were frozen for a few more as they processed exactly who had wandered into their dangerous den. Then they were simply shocked because she was smiling.
“That one, towards the back.” Isabela pointed her dagger at a swarthy man with a mouth that reminded her of rat lips. His weapon was too expensive, his scars too varied and the flash of recognition in his eyes on spying her all betrayed his identity. “He has to be Castillon’s man.”

“Right. You heard her, kill everyone else.” Hawke relayed orders to the two men who’d taken up flanking positions.

“That isn’t actually what she said-.” Anders didn’t get a chance to argue further before the horde of fighters gathered their wits and rushed to attack.

“You wouldn’t consider dying, would you?” The Champion’s challenge would never win points for inspiring fear, but the burst of laughter it earned from all her allies brought flashes of worry into every mercenary’s eyes.

Isabela had almost forgotten what it felt like to fight alongside Hawke. The grace and flow of it was like a dance; the other rogue’s dagger, boot or elbow always slid perfectly into the spaces her own attacks left open. The way they moved around each other without even having to look, as if the Fereldan was an extension of her own body. It was nearly as good as their sex. Except with a lot more people involved; which could also make things fun, particularly with this band of friends. There was such noise, all the energy, an absolutely maniacal, irreverent joy that filled the air over the din of clashing blades and banging armor.

“Come here and give Bianca a kiss!” Varric’s laughing taunts rose over the ruckus, each merry insult marking another perfect arrow sailing into flesh. “One more for the dwarf!”

“Want to see what’s under these robes? Suck on a fireball!” Even Anders seemed more like himself in the heat of battle, giddy triumph enlivening his voice and making him twirl about like one of those Orlesian acrobats.

“At least it’s not boring.” Hawke pressed her back to Isabela’s. They were trapped in a tightening circle of enemies that had realized there’d be no winning unless the Champion and pirate were taken out of the equation. Even without seeing the other woman’s face, the sailor absolutely knew Hawke was grinning.

“Someone needs a good spanking.” Isabela felt her own mouth curl into a matching expression of malevolent glee.

“Oh, please say it’s me.” The Champion’s bright ring of laughter echoed off the walls as she darted forward, a singing strike of metal through air abruptly ending in a wet gurgle and the sound of lifeless meat hitting the ground. No more than a split second and the pirate felt Hawke’s armor pressed against her back once more, comforting and secure. The Fereldan’s breath was heavy but still she snickered, “One more for me.”

“Somebody order a shot in the face?” Varric’s shout was scant warning and both women ducked before a sudden barrage of arrows raked through the crowd around them.

Isabela had never had much of an interest in crossbows but damn if Bianca didn’t just get her knickers wet. She rolled beneath a lunging attacker and stepped perfectly out of the way of a sword that had been aimed quite rudely for her liver.

“Oh, that was pitiful,” the pirate tsked, deftly demonstrating proper evisceration technique.

The number of mercenaries was rapidly thinning and Isabela spotted Castillon’s man edging towards an escape. Just like a rat. She flipped over the idiot who made the mistake of letting her catch his
arm, flinging him to the floor and hearing Hawke finish the job without missing a beat. They really did work so well together.

“You’re mine!” Isabela leapt forward, slamming the fleeing man straight into the wall.

The snitch cursed and thrashed beneath her hold, the pirate watching over one shoulder as Hawke and the others mopped up the final remnants of that luckless army. It was hardly a fair fight. A dozen mercenaries against four Kirkwall friends? No, next time they’d need at least twenty or more to even the odds.

“I was just getting warmed up,” Hawke pouted, looking around at the inert bodies as if she hoped one might rise and continue playing. Then her eyes fixed on the man desperately writhing in Isabela’s grip and her gaze electrified with wicked ideas.

“Castillon will hear about this! Kill me and he’ll still know!” Rat-boy’s voice cracked, trying to sound brave and spiteful but utterly strangled by panic. Or maybe by Isabela’s arm across his throat.

“Think we should test that?” Hawke traced one dagger down the line of his neck, right against the artery throbbing with his racing pulse. The pirate caught her lover’s eye, relishing the gleam of creative malice. How many people ever got to see this side of their Champion? The truly, decadently, evil streak that came out to play these games. It always made Isabela positively shiver.

“It would be fun to send him back in bits. Perhaps starting with his tongue?” The sailor mused, feeling the false courage leave her captive in a whimper. She leaned towards Hawke, a tempting smile on her lips. “But I think you and I have better things to do with our evening. Let him run back to Castillon with his pants all wet. I’m sure the message will get through.”

“It’s your lucky day, Snivels,” Varric grabbed the man’s arm, dragging him away from the pirate’s clutches. “You get to leave with all your parts. Oh! And you get to see that.”

The dwarf’s laughter faded into the roar of blood in her veins as Hawke tugged Isabela into a teasing kiss. Little more than a taste of what was to come, (Flaming Andraste, she had so many ideas about that) the playful indulgence would have to tide both of them over until they could wind their way back to the surface. Or just until they could find a convenient cranny for ditching their companions.

“I’d say this was a good night.” Hawke’s fingers glided through the chaos of hair that spilled over the pirate’s shoulders.

“Sweetness, we haven’t even started.” Isabela reached down, palming a handful of leather-clad flesh and delighting in the hitched breath that rushed across her lips. Neither of them even heard the rapid, staggering footfall of the fleeing messenger racing gratefully to his escape.

“I saw a storage chest I want to check. How about you go loot the bodies?” Hawke reluctantly let go of the sailor, offering a lopsided smile full of future promises.

“I love it when you talk dirty,” Isabela purred, favoring the Champion with a wink before she sauntered away.

The pirate turned her attention to the bloody corpses that scattered the rocky floor. Chipped weapons, blood soaked armor, handfuls of copper, silver and rubbish. Every coin mattered, and Hawke had never forgotten the ethics of being poor. The sailor glanced up at the other woman rummaging in a container at the top of the stairs, brightening as she clearly found a few treasures of her own.

Champion, noble, refugee and rogue; Hawke never changed. A sharp burst of pride beneath her lungs shortened Isabela’s breath, reminding her just how happy she was to know that truth.
Fun as it is to write smut and sexual tension, I really love getting to put Hawke and Isabela back into action too. Plus, the other companions deserve an occasional appearance. I'm sure everyone already knows what Hawke found in the storage crate so don't worry, that's coming up soon. In the meantime, feedback, thoughts and suggestions are all still welcome and appreciated!
A Rivaini Talisman

Chapter Notes

My favorite Fanfic cocktail:
2 parts canon dialogue
1 part smuttiness
Characters on the rocks
Serve with a twist
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shemlen were terribly confusing. After living, working and adventuring with humans for so many years, even counting a few as her closest friends, Merrill didn’t feel any closer to understanding them. However, she was gradually starting to realize that wasn’t her fault. Perhaps she couldn’t understand people because they didn’t understand themselves.

They hated things that didn’t actually exist. Anders was forever glaring at Templars he’d never even met, which meant he really was only angry with their uniforms and that didn’t seem fair. Their armor looked quite nice and did its job well enough and didn’t deserve to be hated just for being shiny. It was always very shiny.

Their beliefs were strange too. They said the Maker and his prophet taught love above all else, then they demanded that the most faithful of their worshippers forsake such a bond with any other. Sebastian talked about Andraste like a woman he could see and touch, the only one he’d ever want; yet, when he thought nobody was watching, Merrill saw his eyes lingering on the temptation of skin or curves that were entirely made of flesh. It was too sad to be real lust, more like the way warriors in her old clan used to regard the stumps of arms or legs they’d lost in battle.

Then there was the way they said things they didn’t mean. Or they made words mean something they weren’t supposed to. Aveline did that a lot. She always sounded angry. Listening to Hawke’s jokes, winning battles, even when she was trying to admit that she was in love; her mouth managed to make everything seem like a problem she only needed to hit enough times to fix. It was especially confusing when she and Isabela were fighting. They traded such insults! Words and names that Merrill didn’t understand, except that they sounded horrible. Marble tits, rum-drenched hag, ball-crusher, two-bit whore, frigid cow, poxy tart, bitch; at least she knew that last one. What never made sense was the fact they’d both end up smiling before it was over. Varric assured her that it was just their way of enjoying each other’s company, which meant that they were actually friends. So now she tried to be happy for them anytime they started yelling.

Isabela, at least, she understood. Mostly. She told naughty stories without a hint of shame, insulted people she didn’t like, enjoyed pleasures in their every form, and never once pretended to be anything other than what she was. Merrill glanced over at the sailor sauntering at her side. How did she walk like that? It had to take practice. The bronze-skinned woman had such a sly, easy smile, like she’d just stolen something sweet (she had probably smeared it all over her body too, given most of her stories). But even she had her mysteries.

Now, more than ever, Merrill found herself puzzled by her dear friend. Something about her was
different. Yes, they’d found out she was an omega but that wasn’t actually anything that had changed; it was just a fact that had always been present that they’d never known and now it was hard to decide if that had made her different or if they all only thought she was. Thinking about it tended to make Merrill trip over her own feet. She had to stop walking entirely if she dared to think about Hawke being an alpha. That was . . . well, it was a bit of a dangerous picture that tended to pop up rather rudely in her dreams from time to time and make her feel awkward around the woman for days after. Honestly, she’d gotten past her crush on the teasing Fereldan a long time ago. Besides, Hawke was taken. Claimed, anyway. Well, sort of. That was one of the puzzles.

Merrill glanced ahead, watching the Champion nudge at Aveline, playfully needling her for details from OrLais. She could clearly remember what it was like when Isabela and Hawke were lovers years ago. There’d been a constant thread of suspense, knowing that at any moment they might do something wonderfully inappropriate and exciting. Since the pirate’s return, however, that tension had a new flavor. Neither woman could ever be called shy but there was a nearly nervous energy to the way they acted around each other.

They laughed and flirted like before; deliberately raising scandalous blushes on every companion’s face any chance they could. Only last week Isabela was smugly bragging to Sebastian how Hawke was a tiger in bed and the poor man looked like he was going to set himself on fire. The Champion took offense at the suggestion that she was limited to a mattress and proceeded to list off the many varied pieces of furniture in her manor that had been put to creative use. Merrill kept meaning to ask Isabela about the balcony railing. Did that even count as furniture?

That all felt normal enough but there were other times it didn’t. She’d noticed that occasionally they’d both speak too quickly and about entirely different things, avoiding looking at each other. They always seemed to be talking, often without any words at all. There was a complicated language of lips, eyebrows, glances and breath that left Merrill utterly lost; half the time she couldn’t tell if they were flirting, arguing or about to play a horrific prank on everyone present. It all felt very mysterious.

Still, one explanation had been nagging away beneath the mage’s thoughts for quite some time. The longer she watched them dancing back and forth between practiced seduction and guarded jokes, the stronger her suspicions grew. Fenedhis, if it were anyone other than Hawke and Isabela it would’ve been inarguable.

“I think they’re mated.” Merrill leaned forward eagerly, confiding her secret. The result was instantaneous and awfully messy. She didn’t know Varric could spit that hard, or that a mouthful of whiskey could cover the entire table like it did.

“Shit, Daisy, I told you to warn me before you try telling jokes!” The dwarf pounded against his chest, trying to clear out all the choking fluid that had gone down his windpipe.

“What’s funny?” Merrill was momentarily distracted by surprise but she shook it away, focusing back on her primary subject. “Look at them, Varric, they haven’t stopped touching all evening.”

In fact, it was a wonder that they managed to go through so much alcohol since she couldn’t tell when the rogues took their hands off each other to drink. The Champion had pulled Isabela into her lap during the last game of Wicked Grace and since then the constant trade of teasing caresses had grown ever more brazen and intimate. For entire minutes they forgot anyone else was present.

“Yeah, well, it’s Hawke and Rivaini.” Varric glanced at the two women and shrugged. “They’d be naked on the floor of the tavern right now if Aveline weren’t sitting here. Battleaxe probably has her foot on Hawke’s boot to keep her from moving.”

The storyteller made a valid point, Merrill had to admit that. Sex had been the most constant thread
in the pirate and Champion’s relationship, even back when they weren’t sharing a bed. There was
sex, drink, acts of violence and money; those were the common interests that had always bound the
two rogues together. In that order, too. Creators help the world when they found a way to combine
all four.

“But they’re talking, Varric,” Merrill persisted.

Granted, that usually meant an exchange of ever more salacious whispers and suggestions that
would lead to one of them jumping up from the table and dragging the other away, but that didn’t
feel like what was happening tonight. The two had been slipping their own quiet words into the gaps
of the louder conversation rolling back and forth around the table. Fenris and Sebastian would be
arguing at one end, but the pirate’s face would break into a radiant smile over something Hawke
was murmuring into her ear. Aveline could try to demand the Champion’s attention, but it was
useless because Isabela kept whispering her own playful distractions that stole the Fereldan away.
Then there were moments of nearly sober (impossible, but the only word for it) interchange,
something sincere and earnest passing between them for fleeting seconds before they devolved into
laughter once more.

“But that wasn’t what brought them together, was it? They didn’t even know,” Merrill protested
helplessly. It mattered so much more than it should. It was such a romantic idea. An alpha and
omega finding each other without ever knowing that’s what they were? It was enough to make her
believe that the stories she’d learned at the Keeper’s knee were true, that their kind was special and
meant for better things than just mindless reproduction. She worried her lower lip, watching her two
friends lost in their own private world. “They look like they’re in love.”

“I think Hawke likes you, Isabela,” Merrill volunteered, suddenly full of the confidence of fact. It
was as easy as announcing that the sky was blue and Qunari were big.

“You think so, do you?” The pirate’s lighthearted reply was full of amused affection, laughter
dancing on the edge of her voice like she was simply waiting for a punchline. The elf glanced over at
her, noting that there was a cocky tilt to one eyebrow as Isabela’s eyes drifted from the Champion
down to her.

“She looks at you all the time,” Merrill elaborated. Of course, everyone looked at the sailor so that
wasn’t too surprising. But Hawke didn’t look at her the way the rest of them did. “And then she
looks embarrassed and pretends she’s busy with something else.”

“That sounded terribly true. And awfully sad.

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looks embarrassed and pretends she’s busy with something else.”

“I can hear you, you know,” the Champion called back to them, pausing long enough to cast a
reproachful glare over one shoulder. Except, rather than focusing on Merrill, her eyes drifted
immediately to Isabela and she suddenly cleared her throat, whipping her head back around. She
wasn’t quite quick enough to hide the points of color that lit her cheeks.

“See?” The dalish mage giggled, delighted by the evidence. She looked up at the pirate, expecting to
see one of her trademark smirks of smug victory. Instead, there was a distracted air about her face;
neither troubled nor pleased, just . . . uncertain.

“Hmm. I’ll have to think about that.” The darker woman’s attention moved irresistibly back to the figure of the Champion, gazing after her the way she might study a trap that needed to be undone. Merrill decided that maybe Isabela didn’t understand people so well either. That made her feel better.

Hawke had a marvelous way of captivating attention anywhere she went. Probably because she spent most her time surprising people; wandering into a den of lyrium smugglers, breaking up gatherings of blood mages, or simply arriving at noble banquets half-dressed and entirely drunk. She really couldn’t enter a room without making someone gasp, draw a weapon or just plain swoon. The crowd of the Hanged Man was no different, despite the fact that Hawke came there almost every night. *And then some*, Isabela smiled to herself as she watched the Champion walk in, completely indifferent to all the eyes that followed her across the tavern.

The Fereldan’s gaze was fixed only on the lone figure at the corner of the bar and brushed right past anyone else. The pirate wasn’t conceited enough to pretend she didn’t like that, didn’t like knowing that Hawke was there for her. An entire city eating out of her hand but Kirkwall’s Champion didn’t give a nug’s pitiful shit for any of them when her attention was on Isabela. Tonight her eyes were positively electric, sparkling like she’d been hit with a lightning spell. Of course, the chaotic spikes of her messy hair rather amplified that impression. Her confident smile might be reserved, but everything else about her betrayed naked excitement. It was amazing that she could bluff so well at cards when she wore her emotions so easily on her face.

“Surprise!” The Fereldan’s voice was melodic with an alluring delight as she held out her hand to Isabela, unfurling her fingers like magic might break free. Her enthusiasm was infectious and the pirate felt herself tensing in anticipation of something wonderful as her eyes fell to the offered prize.

“Er . . . I see.” Isabela bit the inside of her cheek, brow knitting as she tried to find a balance between twin surges of confusion and laughter. She couldn’t possibly be serious.

“Sometimes people get things for other people they like.” Hawke’s head tilted a fraction, the way her mabari sometimes did when he was confused, but her smile was undaunted as she continued, “This is the part where you say thank you.”

“I know that, you goose. Don’t you know what this is?” Isabela took the necklace from the Champion’s hand. It felt like she was holding a piece of her past. Maker’s spotty ass, the damn thing looked exactly like she remembered. “It’s a Rivaini fertility talisman. These petal-like shapes represent . . . certain fleshy bits.” She traced the carved lines, one corner of her mouth tugging up into a suggestive smile as Hawke’s attention followed her finger. “And this protrusion is . . . well, just look!”

Honestly, it was about as subtle as sitting on someone’s face. Ironic too, given that the design incidentally happened to be the perfect symbol for a woman like Hawke. Isabela’s eyes roved over the other rogue, amusement rising up and warming her gaze. The better part of four days really wasn’t long enough to get fully acquainted with all of the alpha’s advantages. But neither had she minded enjoying Hawke’s more familiar skills and pleasures since. The best of both worlds, really.

“You’re an expert on Rivaini talismans, are you?” The Champion teased, not even slightly perturbed by the revelation.

“My mother was a Rivaini seer. Or, rather, she pretended to be.” Isabela unconsciously toyed with
the trinket. She hadn’t even thought of Hari since—balls, why was it always Hawke that dredged up the past? The bitch had certainly been a clever con; Isabela had to give her that. “She knew enough about the old tribal practices to put on a convincing act. She used to hand these things out to women all the time.”

The mention of her mother chased a little of the cheekiness out of Hawke’s smile. A sliver of worry actually darted behind her eyes before she got her expression under control again.

“I knew it was a little crude,” the Champion admitted, slightly less confident than before. “I just thought you would appreciate it. You like . . . vulgar things.”

“Well, yes, books with bawdy poetry and pictures to illustrate,” Isabela agreed easily, her smirk a deliberate reminder that she wasn’t the only one who liked those things. “But this is . . . something else.”

The pirate looked down at the necklace. How many had she watched her mother sell over the years? There was never a shortage of desperate girls, each eager to pay coin and buy a dream. The carving was jagged when she rubbed her thumb over the symbol, wondering how something so deliberately crude could look like hope. Hawke didn’t say anything more, simply waited expectantly, her silence as clear as a question.

“Rivaini women would wear these so that their wombs would be fruitful and their marriages blessed with many children,” the sailor explained the old superstition. She turned, pacing away from the bar, suddenly uncomfortable under Hawke’s gaze. “Or when they wished for—,” a breath caught in her throat, horror creeping up her spine as she realized what was about to cross her lips. “Love.”

Love? Love?! Where did that come from? Where in the fucking Void did that come from? She couldn’t draw a breath, didn’t dare turn around; no flash of flirtatious wit offered to save her from the suffocation of that word weighing on the air. Even if she could snatch it back, her tongue felt traitorously heavy, unwilling to shape a single sound that might change the stillness surrounding such a thought. A knot of tension ached between her shoulders, turned her stomach over on itself with a sensation like dragon wings beating beneath her ribs.

Maybe it had to be said. Maybe she had to find out where that concept fit into any of their days and nights together. Maybe she had to be sure that nothing had changed, or that it had, or—shit, she couldn’t even decide what she wanted. It was up to Hawke. The pirate doubted that she’d ever be able to answer any of those questions but she needed answers all the same. She needed Hawke’s answer.

Isabela felt each of the Champion’s calm steps that followed her across the room, stopping only a few paces away. Bloody say something. Anything. Anything was better than listening to her own racing heartbeat and wondering just how the Fereldan was going to respond. Like the challenger who drops a gauntlet, there was nothing she could do but wait.

“Who needs love?” Hawke’s airy reply shrugged the idea away, mockery softened by a teasingly petulant tone. Isabela could almost hear the woman’s lips pouting as she continued in a seductive sigh, “I was just hoping for plain old lust.”

Leave it to Hawke to know just the right thing to say. The pirate’s breath escaped her in a throaty chuckle.

“Lust,” Isabela repeated, shoulders sagging in relief. It was relief, wasn’t it? Certainly not because she’d expected to hear something else. Not because she’d thought—. She straightened up, suddenly grateful that Hawke’s clever wit had provided her with the perfect distraction. She could all but feel
playful eyes dragging along her curves and she cocked one hip, a sultry curl twisting the corner of her lips. “Lust I can manage.”

Isabela didn’t have to look behind her to know that the Champion followed as she headed upstairs. Just like she knew Hawke was smiling.

That’s just not sodding fair. The pirate cursed internally when she felt herself melt into Hawke’s arms. The door of her room hadn’t even closed before she was enfolded in warmth and iron, leather and a confident grip. It shouldn’t be possible for her body to respond the way it did to Hawke, a low level hum of excitement at all times that threatened to turn into soaking desire between one second and the next. The Champion hadn’t even waited for her to turn around; grabbing soft curves and tugging the pirate flush against herself, letting the force of their crashing bodies slam the door shut.

Agile fingers deftly loosened the laces of her corset, alternating between tickling grazes and hands fanning wide along her ribs. Hawke’s mouth against her neck parted in a grin, a brief gust of laughter raising goosebumps along dark skin when the Fereldan felt her lover’s breath already growing heavy and fast. Isabela wanted to blame it on instincts, on that damn claiming bite and her body’s traitorous campaign to make her finish what she started. She shuddered to think what would happen without Dorian’s spells, the magic that held so much of her omega nature at bay. (She shuddered because Hawke’s hands were steadily climbing higher, hot but soft as they kneaded through the fabric of her tunic.)

It had always been like this though. The positively electric charge that passed between them when they first met, the ever building attraction that was bloody years of playful torture, and the indescribably sweet relief when they finally gave in. It never went away, no matter how many times they fell into bed, or slammed into walls, or just bloody fucked against sacks of grain on a deserted dock. All it took was a word, a touch, sometimes nothing more than a deliberate glance, and the pirate felt the sharp twist of arousal pouring heat into her blood.

“Isabela,” Hawke drew out the syllables of her name, a hiss against her ear. “You have the most amazing breasts.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” the pirate’s decadent laugh turned into a sigh when she felt the other rogue’s hands dip under cloth. Fingertips artfully stroked the sensitive underside of her breasts, drawing ever narrowing circles around ample curves.

“I want to spend hours just on these,” Hawke continued, ignoring her lover’s taunt. That lovely voice had already dropped to a lower register, climbing up from the shadows where she kept everything greedy and dangerous and irresistible. Did the Fereldan even know the effect that sound had on her? Did she hear Isabela’s breath stutter and quicken with every word that whispered against her ear? Hawke was far too lost in the explorations of her hands, the luxurious feel of smooth flesh and the tiny shivers that followed her touch. Words and hands combined to weave a spell around both their senses. “I could cover you in kisses, lick and taste every inch, suck until you come, screaming, from nothing but my mouth.”

Like a tease of everything she described, the Fereldan’s fingers circled the twin, aching points of Isabela’s breasts. The sailor bit her lip to hold back a moan but couldn’t help arching forward, silently seeking more. Hawke rolled the stiff peaks under her thumbs, seemingly interested only in the sensitive flesh that pebbled so enticingly beneath every feathery stroke.

“Hawke,” Isabela managed to force the rumbling growl on her tongue into the shape of words. “If
you don’t bloody—*ah! Shit!*

The sudden, hard pinch from both hands at once made her whole body buck, jolted by the fiery pulse that shot straight between her thighs. Her hips rolled, grinding back against Hawke, seeking any contact, any friction.

“See?” The Champion’s amusement was too happy, too bloody smug as she chuckled into Isabela’s hair.

“Not this time, sweetness.” It took the full force of a pirate’s stubborn will, all the arrogance that went with being the self-proclaimed Queen of the Eastern Seas, for Isabela to tear herself away from Hawke’s touch and spin around.

The Fereldan’s eyes widened when the scantily clad body pinned her against the door, but any sound of surprise was lost in a commanding kiss. A gasp parted Hawke’s lips and Isabela pressed her advantage, plundering the warmth and softness of her lover’s mouth. The Champion’s hands had lost their teasing grace, rushed and fumbling in the urgency to strip away the barriers between them. Arm bands, daggers, sash, shoulder guard, bandana, more daggers; the pirate might wear little in the way of clothing but that didn’t mean naked came easy.

Her layers were nothing compared to Hawke though. Irritation rumbled past Isabela’s lips, dragging an answering moan from the Fereldan’s throat. The Rivaini sailor skillfully worked her way over Hawke’s armor, undoing the endless tangle of buckles and clasps with growing impatience.

“Bloody Maker, have you been adding new ones?!” Isabela’s frustration finally ripped her away from the delectable kiss. She spent her entire life halfway to naked and she managed to get stuck with a lover that she could barely touch without a chisel and shears!

“Just two,” the answer was breathless but laughing. “Have to keep you on your toes.”

“Really, Hawke?” The pirate tilted one eyebrow with a challenge. She found the last two fasteners, pulling them free with twin, metallic snaps before she leaned forward, nipping at the beautifully flushed curve of the Champion’s lip. “I can think of much better places to be.”

The momentary confusion in those brilliant eyes was utterly priceless, as was the ragged whimper that Hawke couldn’t control when Isabela began to sink to her knees. She kept her gaze locked on the Fereldan’s, relishing how the colors in her expression changed with every inch that the pirate slid down her body. From sapphire blue to cobalt to indigo, Hawke’s eyes grew steadily more consumed in deepening lust.

Bless Andraste’s shapely backside, the Champion’s lower gear was infinitely easier than her chest pieces. A few deft flicks of her fingers and Isabela had the greaves and guards stripped away, running her hands up the shape of each muscled leg before catching hold of the hem of Hawke’s breeches. With all that metal out of the way she could pick up trace notes of her lover’s scent, the earthy fragrances of heated skin and thick desire. Her tongue darted across her lower lip, releasing a hum of satisfaction at the taste that was filling the air.

With a single tug, Hawke’s breeches gave way and pooled at her feet, the Champion quickly kicking out of the cumbersome cloth. Isabela didn’t notice, she was too delighted by the sight of naked flesh so clearly aching for her touch.

“No smalls today?” The pirate let out a faint laugh of surprise, trailing her hands up the inside of Hawke’s thighs, smug at how quickly those strong limbs spread wider in invitation.
“Took a gamble,” the Champion’s voice cracked when fingers barely drifted along the cleft of her sex. A deep breath fought to master control of her sound once more, daring even to risk a smirk. “I figured it was a good gift, sexy jewelry and all.”

“A fertility talisman isn’t sexy, Hawke.” Isabela couldn’t hold back the deep chuckle that rolled off her tongue. She slid into the slippery heat of her lover’s folds, groaning at the ample wetness that immediately coated her fingers. However much Hawke overwhelmed her body with need, it was an intoxicating rush of pride and relief to find she had an identical effect.

“We’re—oh Maker, Bela,” the Champion lost her words when an expert touch found the sensitive bundle of nerves throbbing within swollen flesh. The stiff ridge pulsed beneath Isabela’s fingers as she drew quickening circles. Hawke’s hips rolled against her hand, matching the rhythm. Then the cocky swagger was back in her eyes again. It shouldn’t have been so damn charming that the Fereldan rogue’s parted lips spread into a smirk once more. “We’re having sex, aren’t we?”

“Not the same thing, sweetness. You need to learn the difference.” Isabela tried to make her sigh sound patient and weary but there was no hiding the sparkle of mischief in her voice. She stilled her fingers—ignoring Hawke’s pained sound of protest—and dipped forward, tongue circling Hawke’s navel before trailing lower. She painted slow, intricate designs down scant inches of skin before teasing through trimmed, dark hair. She stopped right at the edge of the glistening folds that she could feel radiating heat and tilted back, looking up at Hawke’s flushed, desperate face.

“That is sexy,” the pirate pointed out, lips curling on one side. “The sound you make when I do this,” two fingers teased against the tight ring of Hawke’s entrance, drawing a needy gasp from the woman’s throat, “is sexy.”

She had a point to prove but it was getting harder to concentrate. The way Hawke’s hips bucked and rolled forward, chasing her touch, the tiny stifled sounds that broke free from her panting lips, the hands carding through her hair with silent pleas and promises; Isabela couldn’t resist. She thrust up into the slick heat that was positively begging to be filled, clinging velvet immediately wrapping around her fingers and pulsing with need. “You, Hawke,” the pirate’s own moan mingled with her lover’s, words muffled as she pressed hungry kisses along the smooth plane of her belly, nipping at jutting hip bones. “You are the sexiest thing I have ever seen.”

“Fuck, Bela,” Hawke whimpered, squeezing her eyes shut to hold onto vanishing threads of control. If her face wasn’t already colored with the heat of desire then the sailor’s words would’ve turned her cheeks livid red.

“That’s the difference, sweetness,” Isabela agreed, laughter purring up from her throat. “I can fuck anyone, that’s sex.” She curled her fingers, stroking the swell of sensitive flesh along Hawke’s inner wall.

The lesson was getting away from her, thoughts and senses interweaving into something she wasn’t entirely sure she understood yet. The Champion’s ragged gasps and rising moans quickened her touch, consuming her attention. She could feel aching pressure in her gut, the twisting desire that howled for release, Hawke’s as much as her own. With a sigh like relief she pressed forward, groaning at the taste that met her lips. A long, heavy swipe of her tongue parted flesh and found the jewel that stood out, hard and twitching, amidst soft folds.

The fingers tangled in her hair tightened, Hawke’s breath coming in pants as she melted even more completely into Isabela’s touch. There was slippery wetness and heat everywhere: against her lips, under her tongue, trickling down her knuckles, making a damp stain between her own thighs. Her mouth and fingers worked in rhythm, forcing Hawke’s body past the edge of control, past the twitches and fight of muscles trying to keep up and into the inevitable crashing spasm of total
betrayal. She felt silken flesh ripple and then clamp down around her like a vise, quivering like the rest of the Fereldan’s body as she tensed and shuddered. Isabela tightened her grip, sealed her lips, and sucked. Hard.

“Isa-ah!” The climax ripped Hawke’s voice to pieces, sending it every direction in a shattered gasp. The pirate kept time, mouth and fingers moving in tandem with the bursting release and then following the rise and fall of aftershocks that coasted through the pale body shaking beneath her touch.

Only when she felt Hawke’s trembling hands soften in her hair did she pull away. She looked up, struck by the perfect beauty of the sight that met her eyes. The Champion’s head was still tilted back against the door, throat exposed as she panted for breath, chest heaving in a way that would make any man for a hundred miles need to go take private time. The mess of feathery black hair—which hinted at restless nights at the best of times—was damp with sweat, sticking around the edges of her face and positively screaming of tumbled bed sheets and thrashing pleasure. All in all, a perfect portrait of a job well done. Isabela smiled as she slowly rose.

Hawke let out a soft groan of complaint when the pirate’s fingers slipped free but the sound was quickly replaced by a hum of contentment when Isabela’s mouth found hers, pressing languid, soothing promises against her lips. Despite the heat and demand simmering through her veins, the Rivaini felt no need to rush. What had always felt like a waste of time with other lovers, a trap or an attempt to invent bonds that would never exist, felt safe with Hawke.

These moments of calm between the storms of need were as comforting and secure as the ability to laugh in the throes of passion. For all the fun of battling wills in bed and playing games of seduction, there was a freedom to their intimacy. Neither of them had anything to prove and there was never any doubt that they would both get what they wanted. That confidence made it easy to relax. She could actually enjoy the simple pleasure of Hawke’s warm body, the nimble hands holding her, the Fereldan’s scent and taste filling her senses, slowing breath passing back and forth between them.

“So,” Hawke’s voice was like the drag of velvet along her skin. The Champion licked her lips, smiling as she savored the lingering flavor and feel of Isabela’s kiss. The dark swirls of sultry temptation in her eyes hadn’t changed, but bright pinpoints were scattered through the color like diamonds, flashing with intrigue. “That wasn’t fucking?”

Isabela felt the chuckle bubble up from her chest and fall free without warning. Of course Hawke would want to continue the argument. It just wouldn’t be her if she wasn’t being a stubborn, mischievous wise-ass.

“It was,” the pirate conceded, allowing herself a languid stretch before she wrapped her arms around the other rogue’s shoulders. “But I wanted to fuck you because you’re you, not because you gave me an obscene necklace.”

“Obscene?” Hawke repeated, gaping in a mockery of shock. “Alright, Captain. You know so much about sexy, I’m going to teach you the real meaning of obscene.”

Isabela’s startled gasp gave way to laughter as the Champion lifted her off the ground.

“Sweet thing, you are welcome to try,” she purred the invitation against Hawke’s parted lips before they crashed together, falling onto the bed.
The end is in sight! I can't actually believe it. Just a few more chapters! Thanks to all of you who've been so gracious and supportive with your comments and feedback, I'm grateful.
Bethany Hawke adored her sister. They were so completely opposite in so many ways that there was no chance of ever trying to make them compete or compare to one another. Where Bethany was shy and meticulous, Marian was brash and cavalier; one sister as gentle as a feather, the other more reminiscent of a tempest made of liquor and teeth. The young mage had spent most of their time in Lothering either keeping to herself or visiting the Chantry to hear stories. During those same years her older sister hunted wolves and spiders, bested every one of the village boys in combat, made coin gambling in the tavern and racked up a scandalous tally of bed partners. Marian protected her little sister from the Circle and Templars. Bethany protected the eldest from their mother.

There was much to admire in the older Hawke. She had an undefeatable confidence, a cocky approach to life that was always willing to wander up to the biggest bastard of any problem and take a swing. She was generous, happily handing out the kind of praise and affection that could make anyone feel like they stood a foot taller in the world. Some of Marian’s best traits bordered on dangerous: the sense of justice that dragged her into fights with total strangers, her selflessness offering up time, coin, blood and soul to others in need, the loyalty that couldn’t walk away from friends, even when they’d become enemies.

Of course, Bethany was more than aware of her sister’s flaws. Out of twenty-six years, she’d spent at least ten trying to keep Marian from getting herself killed. The rogue was impulsive, reckless, and almost arrogant in her constant flirtations with death. She was irreverent and wholly amoral, perfectly happy to rob a Chantry if it got her enough coin to pay a whore. She was sarcastic and suffered from the affliction of a wit too quick to ever stay silent. The number of times she’d had to drag Marian away before her mouth got both of them attacked! The older Hawke had never once met a pleasure that she didn’t want to excess; drink, risk, victory, and obviously sex.

Never once, in all her years, had the young mage thought that Marian might be cowardly, or just plain stupid. But those were the only two possible explanations for what Bethany was hearing right now.

“Lust? You actually said ‘lust’?” She demanded, staring in open, shocked irritation at her sister.

“What would you expect?” Hawke shrugged helplessly, a hint of laughter slipping past her smile.

“An excellent question. Obviously you couldn’t tell her that you’re in love with her. That would be ridiculous.” Bethany sighed, rubbing at the frustration behind her eyes.

“Isabela never wants to be tied down. I won’t do that to her.” The rogue was absolutely adamant, a stubborn set to her jaw promising that she’d sooner chew through her own tongue than admit her feelings out loud. To Isabela, anyway. Here, in this small cell that was practically a prison, with the one person who knew her better than anyone else, Hawke didn’t bother to hide the truth.

“Are you sure, sister? I know what she told you years ago.” The mage put deliberate emphasis on the time frame, a reminder that it had been almost four years since the one—and only one—conversation Hawke and Isabela had about feelings. “But since then she’s claimed you, or you’ve let yourself be claimed,” Bethany quickly amended, seeing the protest forming on her sister’s lips. She didn’t know much about mating bites but she was certain that, in either case, the scar on Hawke’s shoulder meant more than either of them pretended. “Isabela came back for you.” She’d had heard the story over and
over. The templars and mages gossipping about it was almost as good as the version Varric wrote for her. “She came back twice, Marian. And she is the one that brought up love. Do you really think that lying to her now is a good idea?”

“I didn’t lie,” Hawke folded her arms, voice turning ever so slightly peevish. She sounded exactly like she had as a child when she got caught breaking rules she didn’t like. (She didn’t like any of them). Just like then, when she felt cornered the rogue went on the offense. The mischievous curl to her lips promised she was about to be very offensive. “I really was just expecting a good bit of headboard banging. I did hope that maybe if she liked the necklace enough she’d do the trick with – Ow!”

“You are impossible.” Bethany shook the magic off her fingertips, satisfied that the spark had effectively silenced her sister’s rude thought.

“So is the trick.” Hawke’s smirk was positively incorrigible, but at least it chased some of the darkness from her eyes.

Her good-natured, lighthearted willingness to laugh at everything and anything—especially the things that would make anyone else insane—was one of Bethany’s favorite traits in Marian. But, Maker’s Breath! It could be frustrating at times. For all her experience and worldly ways, Bethany knew that there were some areas where her sister was almost painfully naïve. That silver tongue of hers could seduce the knickers off a Divine, but when it came to actual romance she was an utter fool. A stubborn fool, which meant that making her see reason could take a fair amount of cunning.

“What was it you two were doing at the docks the other night?” The mage tucked her legs beneath her on the bed, leaning back against the wall as if they were teenagers trading gossip once again.

“She was teaching me the constellations for navigating at sea.” Hawke couldn’t possibly imagine the innocence of the smile that graced her mouth at that memory.

“And you said you read her some of these books you brought?” Bethany glanced at the stack of material her sister had dumped on the end table.

“There was a collection of dirty limericks she quite liked.” That snickering laugh was a story in itself. One that would undoubtedly make a fortune for Varric if he ever managed to capture it on paper.

“And that nasty twist in your back after fighting with the cultists in Lowtown, all better?” Bethany continued sweetly, keeping her face a perfectly guileless mask. The rogue was good at sensing traps but the right tone of breezy curiosity could slide past her suspicions undetected.

“Much. Isabela has a salve from Rivain that works wonders. Burns like dragon spit and I’m pretty damn sure she was using her elbows more than her thumbs, but it hasn’t bothered me since.” Hawke gave a long, deliberate stretch; obviously meant to show off her mobility, but it really only managed to make her look even more like a contented cat basking in the sun.

“So, to summarize,” Bethany quirked one smug eyebrow as she began ticking off facts on her fingers. “In the last month you’ve gone stargazing, read poetry to each other, enjoyed sensual massage, and now given her jewelry as a gift.”

“It was a lewd fertility talisman!” Hawke immediately protested, horrified by her sister’s interpretation of events. She’d realized the danger too late.

“It was a necklace you thought she’d like, sister,” the mage shot back just as quickly, refusing the argument. “Face it; the two of you are turning into something out of one of Varric’s romance serials.”
“You’re forgetting the copious amounts of blasphemous screaming.” The rogue’s lopsided grin couldn’t quite mask her doubt.

“You’ve never read Varric’s novels,” Bethany waved off the objection with a smile of her own, pleased to see her words were getting through.

Hawke always dealt so well with the unexpected; she could roll with any punch and still come out on top spitting blood and laughing. She wasn’t quite so comfortable with hope. It was one virtue that the younger sister knew set her apart from her sibling. Of the two of them, Bethany had always been the one that believed in the good in people, trusted that right would triumph, and never once—not even from within the prison of the Circle—gave up her faith that everything would work out for the best. Hawke preferred to avoid hope and concentrated instead on rigging the game.

“So,” Marian’s voice took on a more playful pitch, “Are you trying to tell me I should ask her to marry me? Because I was planning on being on my knees later and—Ha! Missed!”

“Not by much,” Bethany nodded to the wall where a tiny scorch mark was only an inch from her sister’s ear. She probably singed her hair but who would ever be able to tell? The mage silently commanded her face back into a serious expression, pushing aside the entertained but juvenile mood that was so easy to fall into with her older sibling.

“I am trying,” the younger woman continued, “To remind you that not everything is up to you alone. I know you think you’re giving Isabela her freedom, that so long as you stay silent she’ll never feel trapped.” Bethany slid to the edge of her bed and rested a hand on her sister’s. “But you’re taking away her right to choose. If being here has taught me anything, it’s that everyone deserves a chance to decide their own fate. That’s freedom too.”

She could immediately tell that Hawke was struggling not to get distracted by mention of her captivity. The rogue’s brow betrayed pain and she had to be biting her tongue to hold back the familiar litany of regrets. Bethany had forbidden her sister from apologizing anymore. What little time they had to spend together wasn’t worth wasting on the past. All those foolish “ifs” and “whys” couldn’t change the present beyond ruining an otherwise happy visit. There were always moments like this, when Hawke very nearly slid into the mire of her anger and guilt, but she shook off the dark feelings like dust and her eyes cleared from their pain.

“I’ll think about it,” Marian promised, her smile unguarded and genuine for a change.

“Good,” Bethany gave her sister’s hands a final squeeze before letting out a massive breath of relief. It was good to have the serious subject put aside for now. The mage turned her attention to the new stack of books Hawke had brought for her. “Now, which of these was Isabela’s favorite?

**Templar’s Rise, The Orlesian Box, Maker, Hear My Cry, Mastering the Taint.** Both sisters couldn’t help dissolving into laughter as they reviewed the titles. As they began comparing the cover art, Bethany silently observed the nervous but excited spark that had begun to creep into Hawke’s eyes. Glittering like the first, faint star at night, the twinkling light was foreign and familiar all at once. Hawke was daring, in the smallest, most hesitant of ways, to hope.

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*Flag flying at half-mast? Does your soldier not stand to attention? Does your dwarf shy away from the Deep Roads? Come to Jorman’s Apothecary and ask for our Special Sauce. Our Special Sauce is infused with the essences of fifty-two herbs. It’s completely natural, completely safe, and ABSOLUTELY EFFECTIVE. You will never feel the same again!*
Isabela could barely hold back a loud burst of laughter as she perused the ridiculous letter on Hawke’s desk. It looked like she’d kept it for quite some time; no doubt for pure comedic value. The hilarious offer probably provided a much needed respite between all these other tedious petitions for gold or favors. Trying to sell male enhancements to a woman was already priceless, but to an alpha? The irony couldn’t have been more delicious smeared in whipped cream. Isabela wondered just what the people at Jorman’s Apothecary would think if they found out that “the man other men want to be” was actually a woman. She was rather tempted to wander down and tell them—in detail—all the ways Hawke’s soldier could put an entire garrison to shame.

The pirate grabbed a stylus, deciding that the preposterous sales pitch could use some illustration. A cheeky smile spread across her lips as she sketched a limp mast in crude ink, tongue peeking out between her teeth as she painstakingly put a tiny drawing on the sagging flag. A “flower” that Hawke would certainly recognize.

The talisman hadn’t left her neck. The lightweight accessory felt unfamiliar amidst all her trademark pieces, and tended to tickle where it lay just above the cleft of her breasts, but knowing it was there gave her a strangely warm sense of satisfaction. The seductive pirate was used to getting all kinds of gifts from admirers. There were the sweets that looked pretty but tasted like candlewax, reams of sincere and terrible poetry, and all kinds of gaudy jewelry that barely fetched its own weight in copper when she turned around and sold it back at market. Hawke’s gifts were different; they confessed what she knew of Isabela, and how often the Rivaini sailor was in her thoughts. The talisman might be crude, but it was from her homeland and funny in a vulgar sort of way. So much better than the drunks that wandered up to her in the tavern to tell her that they had a present in their pants.

The pirate absently rubbed the pendant between her thumb and finger, as if she hadn’t already memorized every edge and groove of the design. She had decided it didn’t matter that Hawke hadn’t known what it meant. Because, even now, Isabela wasn’t entirely sure that she knew either. The gleam of excitement in the Fereldan’s eyes when she’d offered the gift, the languid contentment when it rested between their naked, sated bodies, the pride that danced across her smile when she saw it on Isabela’s neck the next day; it clearly meant more than sex. Ironic, for a fertility talisman.

Isabela frowned, pushing away those distracting thoughts. Whatever it did or didn’t mean, Hawke had refused any talk of love. Which should have made the pirate happy and relieved, and it did—on some level—but it also left the confusing pain like a bruise beneath her ribs every time she thought of the other rogue’s laughing rejection of the idea. She wanted to believe that was just the pitiful whining from her omega nature, pining for a mate. She didn’t dare remember the exciting rush of warmth and completeness that had always accompanied Hawke’s presence, long before any idea of mating pairs and breeding claims tainted their relationship.

Now wasn’t the time. The pirate shook off the confusion and doubts, reveling in the glory of a victory she could almost taste. They were so close. Everything had worked out better than she might have imagined and now there were only a few scant obstacles between her and total freedom. As she shuffled through the Champion’s correspondence, Isabela barely realized that she had no trouble thinking of Hawke and freedom together.

Hawke didn’t remember anything from her walk home. She’d grudgingly tramped the route from the Gallows back to her estate so many times in the last seven years that she didn’t even notice the steps anymore. This evening, her mind was even more distracted than usual and many of the residents of
Hightown wisely crossed to the other side of the street when they heard her muttering beneath her breath.

Bethany was right. Damn it. They didn’t disagree often, but when they did the younger woman was always right. Maybe it was being a mage; maybe she learned things in the Fade—or in those books of their father’s—that gave her the wisdom that seemed so disproportionate to her years and experience. The rogue knew she was going to have to talk to Isabela. Really talk. The thought made a stab of ice spread from her chest through all her veins but fear wasn’t enough of an excuse.

Until this morning Hawke would’ve sworn that she was keeping her secrets to protect Isabela, to give the pirate what she wanted, to make her happy with easy pleasures and no commitments. Now, seen through the lens of her sister’s view, the Champion was glaring angrily at the truth. She’d been protecting herself just as much. If it was selfish for Isabela to want to be free, it was just as selfish for Hawke to use lies that might make her stay.

Her thoughts went round and round; Bethany’s words and Isabela, Isabela and love, love and fear. If she were the sort to over think these things she might take a dagger to her own neck just to cut off the problem. But then, it wasn’t her mind that was making her crazy, was it? Hawke raked one hand through her hair like she could push away the inner noise, absently entering her home. She was immediately paralyzed by a burst of sensations humming to life.

The tingle running down her spine felt like danger, but it melded with a simultaneous rush of warmth beneath her skin, swelling into a sigh that filled her lungs. In the deepest nooks and crannies of her thoughts instinct unfurled into a happy purr, pushing aside all other distractions. Isabela. Over the past weeks she’d gotten used to this feeling, but there were times it still caught her unawares. Just like the woman that caused it.

“Ooh, what’s all this?” The mischievous excitement in that low, seductive tone immediately brought a smile to the Champion’s lips. As did the sight of a familiar figure standing over her writing table. Hawke’s eyes wandered up legs sheathed in leather to the smooth inches of bare, bronzed skin that vanished beneath white cloth, the temptation of shapely curves barely concealed by skimpy cotton. Her grin felt positively feral. Isabela showing up unexpectedly always meant something fun was about to happen.

“Oh, look who’s here!” The Champion tried to fake a sound of surprise but only managed to hit notes of amused delight. “Time to change the locks again.”

“I knocked this time. Bodahn let me in,” Isabela turned with a smug but charming smile. There was an excited gleam in her eyes and she strode across the floor, eager with news. “Guess what? Castillon’s in town. And I’m not waiting around for him to stick a knife in my vitals. We’re going to get him before he gets me.”

A thrill of exhilaration raced through Hawke’s veins, heart skipping time as blood pounded in her ears like an ancient war drum. Castillon was here. He’d taken the bait. It had happened far sooner than she expected but what did that matter? They could finally finish him for good. Every inch of Hawke’s body tightened, muscles winding for battle at the very sound of that name.

“We’re going to surprise Castillon? I love surprises.” The Champion’s chuckle was sarcastic, but she could feel her eyes growing dark, the sinister promise of pain bleeding into her smile.

“Unfortunately, Castillon’s holed up somewhere in Kirkwall. I haven’t been able to find him.”

Frustration created lines around Isabela’s mouth, her scowl momentarily making Hawke’s mabari whine. The irritated disappointment left her sultry features as another coy plan crept across her eyes. “I do know where Velasco is, however. That’s his right hand. We just have to make him tell us
where Castillon is. Somehow.”

“What a plan! Your scheming ability puts me to shame,” the Fereldan sighed, remembering—once again—that the pirate wasn’t very good at playing a long game.

“Well, I haven’t worked out all the kinks,” Isabela protested, mouth pouting in a way that threatened to distract Hawke completely from the problem at hand. The sailor paced, much the way she might on the deck of her ship when enemies were on the horizon and her crew murmuring discontent. “Step one, we go to Velasco. Step two, something exciting happens. Step three, profit!” She seemed genuinely satisfied with that vague strategy, until she saw Hawke’s face. The pirate held her arms out in an exasperated demand, “Well, do you have a better idea?”

“We could hit him until he talks,” Hawke suggested. Sometimes the oldest methods were the best. Oh, if they brought Aveline along? The man would crumble on the first punch.

“You’ll just end up killing him.” Isabela shook her head, the amusement in her eyes hinting that she wouldn’t ultimately object to such an outcome.

“If we kill him and search his body we might find something.” The Champion wasn’t quite ready to let go of the idea. The thought of gutting any of these bastards, from the lowest flunky all the way up to Castillon himself, already had her fingers clenching for want of a blade.

“Or we could find nothing and get nowhere,” Isabela argued back. Andraste’s flaming tits, when did she become the reasonable one?

Hawke folded her arms, staring at the carpet as her mind created and canceled dozens of plans, one after another. Drug Castillon’s lackey and use the antidote as blackmail. No, Antivans had a strangely stubborn code of honor; he’d die with a smug grin on blue lips. Follow him around Kirkwall until he led them to his boss. With their luck, the blighter wouldn’t actually have to report in for a week or better. Bribery was out; gold meant little when betrayal promised painful (and by no means instant) death. Aveline’s guards were useless since no crime had been committed; plus, they were about as subtle as a horde of rampaging druffalo. Slowly, one option rose through the cracks of her mind. It made Hawke horribly nervous, but was also the only idea that she couldn’t argue away.

“Castillon wants you,” the Champion spoke slowly, as if she needed to taste every word before it formed. “Why not let Velasco bring you to him?”

Isabela’s brow furrowed for a moment, clearly intending to call bullshit on such a ludicrous plan. Then the light of understanding filled her eyes and a surprised smile crept across her face.

“And then you follow me? Ooh, that’s clever.” The pirate took a few steps closer to Hawke, amber eyes glowing with a malicious enthusiasm. “I was going to suggest challenging Velasco to a riddle game and making ‘Where’s your boss?’ one of the riddles. This is so much better.”

Was it really? Hawke felt like a pit was widening in her stomach, pulling at her thoughts and senses, trying to suck her inside out. Using Isabela as bait. It would work, but it could go wrong in so many ways. Handing her over to the men that wanted her dead, to any man that might touch her, hurt her. Hawke had to steady herself with a deep breath, forcing her fists to uncurl. This had been her idea from the beginning. Taunting Castillon, making him come here, luring him into a trap; all of it was the Champion’s strategy to win her lover’s freedom. What if it didn’t work? What if it cost her life? What if—Hawke bit her cheek to fight off a shiver of fear—she couldn’t keep control and went into that mindless, monster state that she had with the Arishok? She might save Isabela only to frighten her away.
“On second thought, this is too dangerous.” Hawke needed more time to think. There had to be a better way. Something that didn’t involve risking Isabela or falling into the bloody rage that threatened to overtake her the second anyone laid a finger on the pirate. Her heart was already hammering against her ribs at the very thought. *I sodding had this under control!*

“She can’t suggest a bold and exciting plan and then just . . . back out! Ugh!” The sailor’s noise of disgust matched the irritation lining her brow. “All right, look,” Isabela calmed herself, holding Hawke’s eyes with a patient but determined gaze. “Velasco spends his nights at the brothel. When you change your mind we’ll go look for him.”

There was extra emphasis on that “when.” Not an if or maybe. When. The pirate was absolutely certain that Hawke would come around. Isabela strode past her, heading for the front door with an indomitable stride like she was about to head into battle single-handed. That stubborn streak of hers was what had the panic in Hawke’s stomach ratcheting up to a whole new level, her heart threatening to climb up her throat and burst free. Isabela was used to doing things alone, but she couldn’t—*mustn’t*—do this. Hawke caught the pirate’s arm before she was out of reach, stilling her with a touch that took every ounce of her strength to keep gentle.

“I’m ready whenever you are.” The promise was firm and supportive, but laced with the barest edge of apology for her hesitation. This had been her plan and it was time to see it through, even if it got dangerous. Hawke wasn’t sure what frightened her more, the other enemies that might threaten Isabela or her own unfamiliar nature asserting itself. In either case, the Champion was absolutely adamant that only one thing mattered: she wouldn’t lose Isabela again.

Chapter End Notes

Just 3-4 chapters left now! (And I'm pretty sure at least two are going to be smut). The light! I see the light! Bless Andraste's Glorious Ass.

This was the first time I got to play with the dynamic of the two sisters together, hopefully it sounds in character for both of them and their relationship.

Anyway, thanks again to everyone who's been taking the time to provide kudos and comments, the story definitely would've stalled out without you guys.
Hawke could feel Varric and Aveline’s eyes riveted on the back of her head as she slowly descended to the main parlor of the Blooming Rose. One-hundred-thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven. She kept her gait calm and her posture relaxed, wandering up to the bar as if she hadn’t just handed over the love of her life to a gang of mercenaries and slavers with a laugh. The brothel air was thick with the smells and sounds of sex, coin, and a hundred petty miseries. Patrons haggling prices, Madame Lusine haranguing some poor servant, whores exchanging hushed whispers and giggling secrets as they continued their elaborate circus show. Hawke tapped the bar, signaling for a drink.

One-hundred-sixty-seven, one-hundred-sixty-eight, one-hundred-sixty-nine. Sixty-nine. Even in the privacy of her thoughts, she heard the number make Isabela snicker.

The Champion’s companions followed her closely. From the corner of her eye she spied their anxious glances, the silent language of confused worry passing between them. The bartender slid a tumbler of whiskey over and Hawke nodded thanks, tossing the drink back in a single gulp that would’ve burned if she didn’t already feel like her insides were on fire. She regarded the cup in her hand, surprised to see that it wasn’t shaking or dented from the tension in her grip. Hawke would’ve sworn that the trembling nerves wracking her entire body had to be making her quiver like a naked maiden in a blizzard. But her hands were sure and her breathing steady. Not at all what she felt inside.

Two-hundred-thirteen, two-hundred-fourteen, two-hundred-

“Aren’t we going after them?” Merrill finally piped up, shifting nervously from side to side like she could barely hold back from giving chase.

“Not yet.” Hawke’s lips stung when she spoke, already bruised and sore where she’d had to bite down to keep herself in check.

“Are you sure you’re alright with this, Hawke?” Aveline leaned close, making sure the quiet question wasn’t overheard.

“Why not? It’s like playing hide-and-seek. You know how Isabela enjoys her games.” The Champion managed to force her mouth into a smirk despite the constant, aching pain in her jaw from trying to hold back a snarl. Small flashes of crimson kept bursting behind her eyes, trying to cloud her mind.

“Oh! I love hide-and-seek!” Merrill’s excitement actually cut through all the festering fear and rage in Hawke’s thoughts long enough to create a real smile.

“Rivaini only likes games where she can cheat,” Varric’s chuckle had its usual graveled mirth but there was a harsh edge to it as well, much like the set of his eyes. They all knew—well, perhaps not
Merrill—that this particular gambit had terrible odds. But there was a massive payoff at the end if everything worked.

Two-hundred-seventy-one, Two-hundred-seventy-two, seventy-three.

“Then it’s a good thing we’re all cheating with her, isn’t it?” Hawke tossed a handful of copper onto the bar to cover her drink, a sly quirk of humor tugging at her lips. “She’d like that idea: everyone cheating together. Sounds like a big orgy.”

Aveline’s noise of disgust was reply enough and the Champion managed a small, smug laugh as she headed for the door. It was reassuring, the whispers of Isabela’s cheeky voice in her head; echoes of seductive purrs, glimpses of ebony hair spilling into her face, or the cocky smile and wink that refused to be intimidated by any threat, no matter how big and pointy. Those were the touchstones of calm in Hawke’s mind, the only thoughts that she could cling to as the storm of vindictive rage kept building in her bones and threatening to overturn reason.

Two-hundred-ninety-eight, two-hundred-ninety-nine.

Hawke stepped into the humid night, skin crawling beneath the stifling weight of the air. Three hundred. Five minutes was enough. It was an eternity of its own, and the Champion felt her spine snap straight as she finally gave her body permission to chase. The nerves that had been clawing beneath her skin hummed like plucked bowstrings, wound up and kicking her senses into overdrive.

It was late enough that Hightown was quiet, the only noise coming from behind them in the Blooming Rose and even that was muffled by the heavy door. Hawke cast her eyes rapidly over the open quarter, darting across shadows and stones before a single glint of color caught her attention. Red. She snatched up the piece of cloth, the rough texture familiar between her fingers and the smell of sea salt and warm skin immediately filling her with a trembling sigh.

“This belongs to Isabela.” Hawke tucked the arm band into her belt, setting off determinedly.

She wasn’t even sure how she knew, but her feet were following the invisible trail. A pull like danger tickled the edge of her awareness, constantly tugging her across the cobblestones, through a dizzying string of turns that would’ve spun her around if not for the sense that something was just there, there beyond reach. This is Isabela’s trail. It was a smell, a feeling, a sound scraping beneath what she could actually hear. The rest of the world fell away to muted noise and dull colors and the only brightness lay fixed ahead.

“How does she know where we’re going?” Varric’s voice sounded like it came from beyond thick walls, barely penetrating the rush of blood in Hawke’s ears. They’d already turned to head down to Lowtown and her companions were hurrying to keep up.

“She’s an alpha, Varric.” Merrill’s reply was simple, almost incredulous that she had to explain something so obvious.

“Yeah, but she’s never done shit like this before,” the dwarf cursed when Hawke leapt over the side of the stairs that descended to the docks, all her companions having to race to keep from losing her completely.

Isabela’s leading me to the docks. The Champion felt a grin tug at one corner of her mouth. Of course. Sharks wouldn’t wander far from the ocean, would they?

“She’s never needed to track her mate before,” Merrill whispered as quietly as possible, no doubt hoping to keep the words from reaching beyond the dwarf’s ears. Foolish, really; right now Hawke
could hear everything from a drunk vomiting in the back alley behind the Hanged Man to a sea shanty drifting up from one of the ships in the harbor. Sounds were sharp and irritating, the air a chaos of aggravating smells and colors that didn’t fit, didn’t look right.

Occasionally, amidst the detritus that scattered the street stones, a single item would snatch at Hawke’s eyes, glowing like a beacon. A bent lockpick, fragments of coral, an empty poison flask; even pieces of torn leather, or a single pebble sang to her in the rich, familiar notes of spice and whispered threats. Each one got picked up and added to the collection, a pouch full of treasures worth absolutely nothing but indescribably priceless.

They were getting close, Hawke could feel it. If she concentrated she could even see the scuffed dirt where boots had been dragged unwillingly. She spotted a tiny spatter of blood on one wall, smiling as she recognized that Isabela must have briefly forgotten to play along with the ruse. What did her captor do to earn that punch? If he touched her—the anger that Hawke kept to a dull throb behind her eyes roared up once more and she had to take a deep breath, clawing at the red mist that continually threatened to descend.

In that split second pause, a loud yell rose from three different sides and the Champion’s head snapped up, spotting enemies and blades pouring out from the shadows. The damn cultists. They had to pick tonight to set up an ambush?

“Let’s make this quick!” The Fereldan’s shout was directed as much at the attackers as her companions, darting forward to slip past the first slashing blades.

There were nights she was patient, when she gave would-be assassins and brain-washed enemies a chance to come to their senses and run away. Sometimes all it took was a little pain to make zealots and thugs see the error of their ways. Not tonight. Hawke’s reflexes were as sharp as her daggers, swift and merciless. She slashed and cut with unerring accuracy, each blow landed with deadly force, aimed only for the kill. The wet sound of ripping flesh and interrupted screams climbed all around them, filling the night like the smell of blood and bile.

None of the bodies crashing to her feet allayed the escalating fury, the naked vindictiveness that fueled her strikes. These blighters were costing her seconds, minutes; time that Isabela was trapped, helpless—well, no, she’s never once been helpless—one of the Followers of She was caught unawares by the sudden bark of Hawke’s laughter, the last thing he’d ever hear. They would pay. The alpha in Hawke was snarling, trying to drown out any trace of humor or thought with its own rabid hate. She’d make them regret, make them suffer. Down, you bastard! A surge of nausea ripped through Hawke’s gut and she missed a swing, leaving herself wide open as she struggled to rein her instincts back under control.

The arrow shot past her so close that its feathers burned her ear. The last of the cultists, who’d had a blade poised to thrust right into Hawke’s gut, staggered back from the force of Bianca’s hit. When he collapsed the last sound on the quiet air was his sword clattering to the stones.

“Maker’s Breath, Hawke, I didn’t think you were going to leave any of them for the rest of us.” Varric approached the panting Fereldan, shouldering his crossbow.

The Champion looked back across the pier. The number of bodies wasn’t so surprising; this particular cult had a wide following of incredibly suicidal believers. What left Hawke stunned was the realization that neither Aveline nor Merrill had even drawn their weapons. Both women were simply staring at their friend with mixed expressions of awe and worry. She’d wiped them out. All of them. By herself.

“I’ll try to make sure you get a few more next time.” The chuckle felt like boulders on Hawke’s
tongue. No one else laughed. Only Merrill was willing to come close enough to actually touch the
Champion’s arm, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

“It’s alright, Hawke. We’re going to find Isabela. She’ll be safe and everything will be just fine.” The
soothing words calmed her slightly, as did the warmth and patience in the mage’s tone. Both were
ripped away by the sudden sensation of hair standing up on the back of Hawke’s neck.

“She’s over here,” the alpha growled, lunging for a doorway that was almost hidden in an alcove of
walls. The massive storeroom opened onto a landing below and Hawke managed to make herself
stand still, waiting for some clue of what they were walking into.

“Why don’t we work something out? If you’re good, I’ll tell Castillon to go easy on you.” The slimy
voice carried up and echoed off wooden rafters. Hawke’s fingers balled into fists, hearing every note
of arrogant lechery in Velasco’s tone.

“Contrary to popular belief, I do have standards.” Tired annoyance had never sounded more
beautiful. Isabela. She was safe, strong, and clearly feeling fully like herself if the bite in those words
was any indication. Hawke crept towards the railing, keeping every step silent. She could make out
the pirate’s figure pacing back and forth on the floor below, her daggers missing but the tension in
her muscles begging to be unleashed in violence.

“You’re going to do whatever I want,” Velasco straightened off the wall, enraged by her casual
dismissal. He crossed the distance between them, no doubt trying to look intimidating. “I
own you!”

All the fire and rage that had been burning Hawke from the inside out suddenly vanished, turning as
cold and hard as ice. No one owns Isabela. Her spine stiffened and she took the last few steps
forward, catching the dark skinned sailor’s eye. Isabela visibly relaxed as soon as she saw the
familiar figure, a sinister smile twisting her lips.

“You sure about that?” The pirate asked in a voice so sweet it had to be pure poison.

“You!” Velasco followed his captive’s gaze to the upper story, immediately spying the Champion
and her friends. “I knew the bitch was up to something! Kill them!”

This time Hawke let her companions join the battle. In fact, she dodged and slid past every sharp
blade and swinging mace, daggers intent on a single target. Velasco had lunged to catch hold of
Isabela, desperate to maintain his one advantage, but the pirate’s kick sent him flailing backwards.
Hawke barreled into the stunned Antivan, slamming him to the floor with one dagger at his throat
and the other knocking away his pathetic attempts at defense. It would be so easy to just press down
a little harder, to let the sharp edge break skin and then tear deeper. The Champion’s grip began to
shake from the strain of not giving into that siren song of blood and revenge.

“Flaming balls! I thought I was going to have to listen to him all night.” Isabela was beside her in a
heartbeat, scowling smugly down at the captured man. She was alright. She was alive, and safe, and
even when she was frowning there was that sparkle of wicked amusement in her eyes.

“Sorry, bumped into a few old friends on our way down.” Hawke felt like the words were each a
tenuous handle on reality; a lilting lifeline that kept her tethered to now, to herself, to Isabela. She
allowed herself to steal a quick glance at the pirate. There were no obvious signs of injury and her
carriage was still that same deliciously nonchalant “fuck you” to the universe at large. But there was
an odd feeling in the way Isabela’s hand rested on her shoulder, like the sailor needed that touch to
reassure herself of something. Or maybe she was trying to reassure Hawke.

“The docks are a good place for that sort of thing. All kinds of scum in these parts.” The pirate’s lips
turned into a smile now, kneeling down so that her shoulder brushed Hawke’s as she ran a calculating gaze over Velasco. From the corner of her eye the Fereldan studied her lover’s profile, marveling at the way the shadows etched her face with graceful but merciless lines, turning the usually soft and sultry features into deadly threat.

“Did he hurt you?” The Champion finally voiced the one question that meant the difference between life and death for the hapless victim beneath her blade.

“He doesn’t have the balls,” Isabela dismissed the idea with a scornful laugh. Even when she was being harsh the pirate’s voice had a teasing quality, an ease that made danger feel warm and seductive.

“Good,” Hawke let out a breath of relief, passing her spare dagger to the sailor because she desperately needed one hand free. She cupped her fingers behind Isabela’s neck, pulling her forward, letting the heat of the pirate’s lips burn the ice and fear out of her veins.

The Fereldan felt a hand on her jaw, not pushing away but changing the angle, allowing the sailor’s parted mouth to respond with equal fervor. A scrape of teeth against her lower lip had Hawke suddenly tasting copper. It was in the air all around them, filling her nose, but all she could imagine was salt and heat against her tongue, and the gasp that would ring in her ear when she set her teeth against a throbbing pulse. Twin instincts were clawing ferociously in the alpha’s belly. She needed to protect Isabela, to feel that she was safe, to see and touch every inch of dark skin to be sure that nothing had happened, that nothing could take her away. Hawke’s fingers buried deeper in the black tangle of Isabela’s hair, and she felt the pirate’s answering moan all the way down to her toes. The desperate urge to drag the omega to this coarse wooden floor and forget about everything except how to breathe each other in fought the boiling venom that still thrashed behind her thoughts, the growling demand to rip apart everyone who’d laid a hand—an eye—on her mate.

Not mine.

Not anyone’s. Hawke’s frustrated groan only incited Isabela to deepen the kiss, eager to capture any further sounds that spilled between them. She doesn’t belong to anyone but herself. The Champion had repeated that mantra so many times she expected it was etched in the very bones of her skull. She forced her hand to soften against Isabela’s neck, to glide down and away from the commanding hold and simply rest gratefully against her collar. Likewise the kiss, Hawke wrestled with her own naked greed until it surrendered, slowing the fevered war of lips to nothing more than a silent exchange of assurances instead of demands. She could feel Isabela’s protest in the grip of the fingers on her jaw and the lash of her tongue, but gradually the pirate succumbed, melting into the gentler, coaxing touch.

“You know, we might still be able to negotiate.” The voice was slightly strangled but still unctuous and irritating. Velasco’s interruption broke the two rogues apart and Hawke’s growl of frustration made him flinch even before her eyes turned murderously back on him. The Antivan couldn’t move beneath her blade, but he was cringing like a man who’d grovel on his knees in a second. “I’m sure we could work out something mutually beneficial in all our interests, yours and mine. And perhaps Castillon wouldn’t even have to know—.”

A single flick of Hawke’s wrist silenced the revolting offer. The man was dead the second he set foot in Kirkwall anyway; the Champion’s blade was just the final touch. A smooth slice across his throat was cleaner and more painless than anything he might suffer from Castillon. Hawke rose off him, shaking the blood from her dagger.

“Typical man: has a blade at his throat and still thinks with his prick,” Isabela scoffed, standing as well.
“Then we can be sure he died happy, can’t we?” Varric teased from his position reclining against a crate. He and the other two companions had mopped up Velasco’s entire company without breaking a sweat and had simply been watching this last scene unfold with mixed reactions of awkwardness, delight and narrative interest. Hawke could tell from the glint in her dwarven friend’s eyes that this was going to end up being an entire chapter.

A quick conference revealed that Castillon was on his way and would undoubtedly arrive shortly. That left them a little time to look around and see if they couldn’t find out a few of their enemy’s secrets. Revenge was a national pastime for Antivans but business was still their strongest passion. Even with Isabela as bait, the merchant prince almost certainly had other reasons for being in Kirkwall. Merrill and Varric went to the upper floors while Aveline suggested checking the office, cursing at the locked door.

Hawke was just about to start searching bodies for a key when Isabela caught her arm, holding her in place as much with the touch as her gaze. The pirate’s amber eyes could flash from warm honey to fiery coals, and right now both were burning into Hawke, melting the armor that protected her chaotic thoughts.

“Are you alright?” There was no tease in her voice, no playful laughter or flirtation.

The Fereldan wasn’t sure she’d ever heard Isabela’s tone stripped of every defense and laid bare. She sounded young and vulnerable, aged and weary; her whole life of war and survival bled into that fragile question like she was facing a battle she couldn’t win. Hawke recognized the notes of naked worry, but worry was akin to fear and fear only made it harder to fight back the instincts gnashing in her head.

Isabela was scared and she had to do something, had to protect her. She’s scared of you, you moron! Hawke seized hold of the violent thoughts pounding through her blood. Even if she wasn’t like other omegas, she had to be able to tell when an alpha was losing control. Why did she stand so close, then? Why was she taking the risk of touching her? Why, against all reason, did the pirate reach up and brush her fingers over Hawke’s cheek, tracing the curve before landing on her lips like she could coax out her answer?

Isabela wasn’t scared of her. A tickle of surprise slid out between Hawke’s thoughts. She was scared for her. The Champion raised her hand to capture the pirate’s, threading their fingers together before pressing a kiss to the back of her leather-clad wrist. Just the simple feel of the other woman’s touch, her calming scent, did wonders to chase all the senseless urges away, the dangerous part of her nature yielding and shying back into shadow.

“I’ll be fine,” Hawke promised. She couldn’t be any more specific than that. She’d had years to prepare for a moment like this. It was going to be different this time. This was her chance to prove that she was better than an alpha, and that Isabela was never just an omega to her.

Fine.

That was a bloody dangerous word. It was the Orlesian mask of answers, a deception no matter how gilded. Isabela fancied that she knew lies even better than she knew winds and ways to kill. She knew, before Hawke even opened her mouth to speak, that whatever the Fereldan was about to say was going to be a hopeless attempt at evasion. You just can’t lie, sweetness. The pirate kept her sigh to herself, allowing only a patient smile to curl her lips as she nodded and pretended to believe what she’d been told.
Hawke wasn’t fine. The Champion’s eyes were hard as gems and glittered with the brightness of sharpened blades. Isabela had felt the small beads of sweat forming on her cheek, the dampness in her hair, the trembling tension coiled through her whole body during those seconds when they’d touched. She was struggling. Desperately. Hawke was losing control of her instincts and the ache beneath Isabela’s ribs reminded her with every breath that it was her fault. If not for her, the claim, the relationship that was supposed to be fun and easy but spiraled out into this chaotic mess, the Champion of Kirkwall wouldn’t be clenching her fists so tight that her arms shook. There wouldn’t be low growls constantly rumbling up from her chest.

There wouldn’t be a scar in her side from a blade nearly ripping her guts out. Isabela’s stomach twisted on itself. She’d traced the ugly mark over and over again; eyes, fingers, mouth, and not once did she hear blame or regret in Hawke’s sigh. There was never a trace of bitterness in her laugh when lips tickled the sensitive skin. When the pirate tried to ask about it, even began to think of how to apologize (she was absolutely terrible with apologies), the other woman always gave her that same lopsided smile and teased that it was her favorite scar, her favorite story, her only chance to spend a solid week in bed. She had a hundred different jokes all meant to wipe away any mention of pain. Isabela wasn’t so sure that perfect laugh could survive another such wound. She wasn’t sure either of them could.

The documents they found were the first glimmer of hope. The big girl nearly creamed her knickers, of course, positively salivating at the proof of such heinous crimes being planned in her city. Hawke didn’t seem terribly impressed. They’d known all along that Castillon was a slaver. Where he chose to find, capture and sell his slaves wasn’t going to make one shred of difference in the Champion’s overarching goal of slicing him up like a Wintersend roast. It wasn’t even a noble, altruistic need to balance the scales of justice on behalf of the innocent. It was a pure alpha drive to see him torn to pieces, and Isabela felt fingers of ice creeping around her heart as she recalled the last time she’d seen that look in Hawke’s eyes. The slaver’s contracts and reports were her one chance to keep that nightmare from repeating all over again.

Before Isabela could reach for the Champion, to ask her to stay calm and trust that the pirate knew what she was doing, they all heard heavy footfall echoing off wood planks. Castillon had arrived. And not alone, by the sound of it. She shot a look at Hawke, trying to gauge the alpha’s impulses on a scale from one to suicide. The frigid calm that had settled over the Fereldan’s features was not a good sign.

The five friends strolled calmly out of the office. Isabela could actually feel Hawke bristling the second they laid eyes on the expensively armored and obsessively groomed man standing in the middle of the landing. The pirate’s eyes darted around the crates and along the upper floor, immediately spying a dozen heavily armed guards. Anyone that knew Antivans would bet that wasn’t even half the force lurking in the shadows. Castillon turned to greet them, arms spread wide like he was reuniting with a long lost cousin.

“And Velasco told me you were all tied up. A lovely present just waiting to be opened. I see he’s paid for that little mistake. What a pretty smear he makes,” the Antivan tsked, eyeing his right hand’s corpse. If Castillon felt any regret for the loss of a loyal ally, he gave no sign as a smile crossed his features once more. “Well played, Isabela, crossed and double-crossed.”

“You want to talk?” The Rivaini sailor stepped forward before anyone else could speak. “Maybe we should talk about these documents. Slavery in the Free Marches? They’re not going to like that.”

It was satisfying to see the smug bastard’s face fall when he recognized the papers in her hand. Even better to feel entire seconds pass without Hawke drawing her weapon. She was willing to wait. This could work.
“Get to the point.” Castillon’s mouth settled into a hard line. The surrounding ranks of his men all crept closer, answering the first hints of danger in their master’s tone. Isabela steeled herself. This wasn’t going to be an easy sell.

“Give me your ship, and your word to leave me alone, and you can take these papers and go.” She laid out the offer. It was a solid angle. Everyone knew that all she’d ever wanted was a ship, right? None of them would suspect . . .

“If you want the ship, can’t we just kill him and take it?” Hawke demanded. The impatience in her voice was annoyed. That was good. Irritation was better than blind rage. The Champion’s objection gave her a chance to look over her shoulder at the other rogue. Surprise had sucked some of the venom out of those jaded blue eyes, murder giving way to confusion.

“You don’t just kill a man and take his ship. That’s crude and amateurish!” Isabela scoffed at the idea like she was personally offended. “How will he tell everyone how I bested him if he’s dead?”

“What happened to getting rid of Castillon?” Only someone who knew Hawke would hear the thread of betrayal in her voice. The flash of hurt in her eyes. Isabela clenched her fists until her fingers shook, holding back the impulse to pull that wounded face close, to explain in urgent whispers and kisses that Castillon didn’t matter. Only one thing mattered.

“I am getting rid of him. Through peaceful means.” Not getting you killed. Isabela held her ground, refusing to let the weakness show through. Not risking the only decent thing that’s ever come into my life.

“Coming from her, that’s priceless.” Castillon’s mocking voice wasn’t helping. The pirate had been trying to hold Hawke’s gaze, silently pleading with her not to do anything stupid. The minute the Antivan spoke those cut diamond eyes started turning dark with vicious ideas.

“I saw the ship docked in the harbor, Castillon.” Isabela summoned every ounce of ruthlessness and want that she could dredge up from the depths of her most treasured experiences. Tall masts, billowing sails, and carving through fierce whitecaps like tossing in the sheets with a passionate lover. “She is splendid.” The pirate could feel her lips going dry, visions of riding the ocean contorting into memories of Hawke’s body beneath her. The smell of sweat replaced sea brine and distant gull cries turned into the keening notes that filled the air above their bed. Isabela’s eyes darted once more towards the Champion; guilt, longing, and apology tangling together before she jerked her attention back to Castillon with renewed determination. “I want her.”

“Give me the documents and you can have the ship. And you will never hear from me again.” Castillon took a step forward, willing to accept the bargain. Isabela expected to hear a growl from the alpha behind her but there was nothing, only silence. More than silence, it was the sound of someone sucking in words.

“Swear it,” the sailor demanded. Pirates had an honor code all their own. The same law that dictated Isabela couldn’t kill him and take his ship, also mandated that any oath be kept. If Castillon swore and then betrayed his word, he’d lose all respect in the Armada. The sheer number of men lining the walls and railing promised that.

“I swear it on my mother’s grave,” the Antivan vowed with a hint of smile. Old bird probably died of shame. He straightened once more, all business. “Give me the documents.”

Isabela glanced over her shoulder, finding Hawke’s eyes and wordlessly begging for permission, begging her to understand. This was her chance to end the problem without bloodshed, without anyone getting killed. Doing the right thing had never been a good bet for her. So this time, this one
time, she might be able to do the wrong thing for the right reasons and have it work out for the best.

“You’ve made your decision, Isabela. Do as you wish.” The Champion gave a single, sharp nod. The tension radiating off her every wound muscle wouldn’t allow anything more.

Isabela could see telltale twitches in her jaw, clenching fists, the hard lines around her eyes as Hawke fought to hold herself in check and let the pirate do whatever she wanted. Even if it meant striking a bargain with the worst scum in Thedas. The Fereldan had destroyed every slaver that dared set foot in Kirkwall for the last seven years. Isabela felt a stab of guilt twisting in her gut. In forcing the Champion to stand idly by as this deal was being made, was she asking Hawke to betray herself? Was keeping her safe from harm worth destroying a piece of what made her so special?

Isabela squared herself and held out the documents, praying she’d made the right choice.

“The ship is yours,” Castillon smiled as he took the papers from the pirate’s hand, expression turning smug as he cast an appraising look over her from head to toe. “Let me say, my dear, that you would make a remarkable ally for any man able to tame you.”

If he just hadn’t spoken! If the asshole had kept his mouth shut, taken the documents and walked away! Then maybe Isabela wouldn’t have felt her own tenuous control completely snap. Any man. Any man. The sheer, condescending arrogance of it! The same proprietorial bullshit that she’d escaped from her husband, had spent her entire life avoiding because omegas were nothing more than possessions to be shown off. And she’d almost been willing to let him walk away? She’d nearly forced Hawke to sacrifice one of the traits that made her noble and brave, and let this bastard go off and ruin countless other lives. Even if Isabela felt like the kind of lowlife that could live with that deal, she couldn’t do it to Hawke.

Isabela fixed her eyes on the glittering blue shards watching her from a few yards away. There was the beginning of a question rising in the twitch of Hawke’s brow. She must’ve heard the comment as well, the set of her jaw angry but still waiting. She was willing to let the pirate make her choice. That was why Isabela knew what she had to do.

“No man will ever tame me,” the sailor snarled and lunged forward.

Her dagger caught Castillon in the shoulder and she ripped the papers from his hands, diving for cover as arrows sailed down from every side. The rush of charging bodies and exploding crates was a blur, a tempest of chaos washing over the landing. Isabela dashed from hiding, dashing across the battle like lightning through a cloud, rent metal and wet screams falling in her wake. She landed flat against a wall, catching her breath in the shadows as the battle continued. Half the warehouse was on fire, both from Merrill’s enthusiasm and the panicked flailing of men who’d been set alight but didn’t know that running wildly into crates and pillars didn’t help put out the flames.

“What in the Void did you do?” Hawke’s breathless question came from one side, the Champion flattening herself alongside Isabela as one of Bianca’s barrages skewered everyone within five feet. The pirate glanced over, a smile creeping across her face as she took in the Fereldan’s wide grin and glittering eyes. No trace of betrayal or rage, and not the slightest hint of alpha. Just the usual, maniacal delights of violence and mayhem. Just Hawke.

“Exactly what I wanted,” Isabela shrugged helplessly. Honestly, at this point, what did anyone expect?

“I’m glad.” The Champion leaned over and planted a quick, playful kiss on her cheek. The sweet peck was praise and promise combined, and Isabela was vaguely stunned to realize that if she weren’t already flushed from battle, that simple compliment would’ve colored her face.
There weren’t enough words to describe the swell of relief that threatened to crack her ribs just from seeing the Champion safe and smiling. What else mattered? Isabela watched with a familiar tingle of affection and excitement as the other rogue laughed and darted back into the fray. The pirate chuckled as she heard taunting insults and screams announcing Hawke’s progress across the room.

Isabela was quick to follow the Fereldan’s lead, slipping back into the battle like a greased up eel. The smell of blood, fire and sea was her element; with every lunge and parry of her blades she felt even more invincible. So the night hadn’t exactly gone as planned, but—nibbled tits!—it was still better than she’d expected! Fun too.

The sounds of pain and raging commands from the Antivan side of the fight were nothing compared to the noises Hawke’s companions could make. Aveline was yelling at Merrill to switch spells before the whole warehouse collapsed on them, all the while pummeling three men with her sword, shield and iron-cased breasts. Big girl really did know how to use her assets. Merrill, meanwhile, had that delightful way of shrieking happily anytime she hit one of their enemies, like it always came as a surprise. If she weren’t so busy dealing with each successive wave of attackers she’d clearly be excitedly calling for everyone to see what a pretty color that last fellow’s hair was burning. Above all of that was the endless litany of Varri’s barbaric and creative taunts. Nug-sucker. Short stick. Son of a whorish druffalo. Nature’s crusty cockup. The insults rained down like Bianca’s arrows.

Isabela couldn’t see far in the smoke and press of bodies but she had a constant sense of Hawke’s location. By groans that ended in abruptly wet splashes and lighthearted curses dancing gleefully through the din she could track every step the Fereldan took, and on whose groin. Soot covered the sailor’s already dark skin. A sheen of sweat was itching and tickling, raising goosebumps whenever someone missed a swing and hit her with nothing but a gust of air. The prickling sensation that suddenly ran down her spine was far sharper, nearly a shiver, and Isabela felt her already tense muscles stiffen like lanyards in a storm.

The pirate turned a quick circle, hunting for the threat that had set off her warnings but there was none near her. Which meant it wasn’t her. She looked up, eyes burning but suddenly cutting through the hazy morass of battle, finding Hawke as much by instinct as sight. The Champion was on the far side of the fight, dueling with four attackers—show off, Isabela shook her head—pressing them inevitably towards the edge of the landing until they’d have to choose between water and blades. (A seemingly obvious choice, until you remember this is Kirkwall harbor where rats have been known to fall off the pier and climb out as abominations).

Then a ripple in the flow of battle caught Isabela’s attention, jerking her eyes to the side where a familiar figure was cutting a swathe towards the Champion. Castillon. The pirate felt a stab in her chest like a frozen dagger. The cold fear screamed that she should’ve gutted him with the first blow. Even with his shoulder injured he was a deadly menace. With his documents lost and cargo vanishing in plumes of smoke, he was far more intent on revenge than survival and with a true predator’s instinct he’d homed in on Hawke.

Isabela shoved her way forward, dodging swung limbs and weapons as much as she could without slowing, refusing to be stopped by grazing swipes of blade and the sting of cuts. Hawke needed to look up. Couldn’t she bloody sense the danger? No, Isabela realized with a burst of bitter regret, the other rogue wasn’t under the control of her alpha instincts anymore. She was just Hawke again; and the woman herself was a skilled, lethal fighter but she needed the edge. She sodding needed to look around and see what was coming!

The pirate spun out of the way of a slamming hammer, cursing as she lost a second. The whole room felt like it was filled with molasses that she couldn’t cut through in time. Castillon was already only a few steps away and he had his weapon out. The others hadn’t noticed. Aveline was holding off any
of the Raiders that tried to get close to Merrill, and Varric’s sights were aimed higher, picking off other archers from the rafters. This time Isabela would be the only one that saw. *Not this time.*

Yelling wouldn’t do any good. The sound would be lost amidst the cacophony of pummeled metal and roaring flames. It would cost her precious breath that she needed to push forward, to wrench the last burst of speed out of her screaming legs. This couldn’t happen. Not after everything they’d done, *she’d done*, to keep Hawke safe. Castillon’s sword was rising up, every inch taking hours but still moving faster than she could match. The Champion had finally felt something wrong, only beginning to turn and see the peril swinging down.

Isabela threw a dagger square into the gut of a raider in front of her and leapt as high as she could, feet catching his shoulders as he crumpled to the ground and she lunged off, sailing over heads and swords. Both hands were wrapped tight around her weapon handle when she crashed into Castillon, the blade plunging so hard between his shoulders that she felt bones cracking on either side. They both staggered forward, Hawke narrowly escaping to one side before Isabela slammed her adversary into the wall. Ripping her dagger free brought a grotesque spasm from Castillon’s body and his hands scrabbled helplessly at the wood, unable to make a single sound beyond the squelches of vanishing breath.

The pirate couldn’t be sure how close she’d hit to his heart, or how soon the blood filling his lungs would give him a quicker death than he deserved. Isabela forced the Antivan around, holding him up by his shoulders as his body began to sag like a bag of rocks. She wanted to watch, wanted to be sure of the exact moment he left this world and his sorry ass went to be a demon’s plaything on the other side of the Veil. He was an arrogant, mercenary, selfish, abusive, conniving prick. She could’ve overlooked all that. But he’d dared to even *think* of laying a hand on Hawke. Isabela grabbed the ridiculously overrated chisel of his jaw, forcing him to focus on her. She wanted him to see his mistake. *No one goes after Hawke.*

“She’s mine,” the pirate hissed. A malicious sneer of satisfaction twisted her lip when she saw understanding flash across his eyes, then the light faded out completely. Isabela stepped back and let go, Castillon’s body dropping to the floor at her feet. Right where he belonged.

She took a deep breath, turning to search for Hawke. Her eyes quickly found the familiar flash of sparkling ocean and let out a breath of relief. Only when the Champion crossed over to her did Isabela realize what had happened. What she’d said. *Mine?* She felt an undeniable rush of heat burning beneath her cheeks. When did that happen?

“Thanks, you saved my ass.” Hawke swiped at the sweat trickling down her face, seemingly oblivious to the startling epiphany creeping across Isabela’s thoughts.

“Well, I am fond of it.” The pirate barely understood what she’d said until the other woman gave her a curious look. Isabela’s survival instincts instantly rallied, recovering her poise. She slid a hand up the back of the Champion’s thigh, resting against the curve that fit so nicely in her palm. “It really is quite a fine specimen.”

“Come on,” Hawke laughed, swatting Isabela’s molesting touch away. “Let’s finish this mess.”

The moment the Champion turned away she took a grateful breath, desperate to slow the racing pulse of her heart. *Mine. Right. That’s just stupid territorial bullshit.* Isabela scowled at herself as she rejoined the battle, never once letting Hawke get more than a few feet away. She couldn’t quite erase the nigging voice beneath her thoughts that pointed out possessiveness wasn’t an omega instinct; that risking her life to save another had nothing to do with breeding impulses. No, that urge had come from a different part of herself, a deeper pit of emotion than she could ever remember, rising up to fill her entire being.
She isn’t mine! Isabela snarled internally at the traitorous, persuasive voice, the one that had her eyes constantly darting to find Hawke as they fought side by side. Try as she might, the pirate couldn’t deny warmth spread through her chest each time she caught the gaze that glittered like gemstones through the haze. And there was no argument for the way Hawke’s smile made it feel like there was nothing but the two of them, and that was exactly as it should be.

She’s not mine. The stinging words were nothing compared to the sharpness of the sudden truth that followed. But I want her to be.

Chapter End Notes

This is pretty much how I wish the scene with Castillon actually went! I never liked that Hawke had to choose between killing a slaver and Isabela getting a ship. Forgive me my selfish head-canon indulgence. Hopefully, even in deviating from the game events, everything stayed plausible and in character. Thoughts?
Isabela hadn’t ordered a single drink. She’d been sitting in the middle of the Hanged Man for hours now without once looking towards the bar. Norah had come by a few times with different mugs and bottles but the pirate just waved her off, thoughts too far away to even offer her usual ribald comment or salacious wink. Every so often the sailor would climb to her feet with a frustrated curse under her breath and head for the stairs, but she never made it more than a few steps before returning to her seat. She alternated between resting her elbows on the table while watching the door, and leaning back in her chair to gaze at the ceiling like she was hoping the planks would crash down and put her out of her misery.

Sober might not be the best way to do this. Isabela caught herself staring at the tavern entrance for what felt like the hundredth time. Sagging asses! She didn’t even know how to begin dealing with this. The irony, no absurdity, of it already had her half inclined to run. But she’d tried that before and it didn’t work. Besides, the thought of leaving now? That was the only option that sounded even worse than staying. For the first time all her selfish instincts for survival couldn’t make up their mind about what would kill her first. Right now, good coin wagered it was just sitting here waiting.

After vanquishing Castillon and looting a massive score off his cargo she should’ve been celebrating. She should’ve still been drunk in bed, honestly. With a couple of well-muscled deckhands and a delightfully flexible serving girl. Or with Hawke, at least. The Champion was obviously just as confused as Isabela felt when they parted without a single sultry wink or suggestive groping. Much as she would’ve liked to join Hawke in a night of carnal revelry to mark their triumph, she didn’t trust herself. From the second her mind and body clicked into a single, synchronized agreement about what they wanted, Isabela had felt like the world shifted on its axis and no one had the bloody courtesy to tell her which way was up.

She’d needed time to think. So far, the only conclusion she’d reached was that thinking was terribly overrated. Also, that the Hanged Man really needed to stop serving whatever drink it was that had people vomiting in the back alley like clockwork. All sodding night! Not a wink of sleep and she was quite sure the noise was the reason. Certainly not the fact that her head was going round and round in so many circles that, even flat on her back on the bed, the room spun like the center of a hurricane.

Feelings. Spank Andraste with a wooden spoon. She had feelings. For Hawke. The one person that probably needed this kind of mess even less than she did. They’d been so adamant about their agreement. Keep things simple: no strings, just sex. Not even a monumental balls-up like a claiming bite had changed the rules. Hawke had been perfectly happy to pick up right where they left off; nothing but light-hearted mayhem, sweaty fun, and the unspoken certainty that this was all either of them needed. But then, a lot of things had gone unspoken, hadn’t they?

The Champion hadn’t once, in the weeks since Isabela returned, asked her to stay. Not when the
omega’s heat ended and they hatched this crazy scheme for freedom. Not in the early hours of the morning when the pirate was only a word away from curling back up against the other rogue’s warm body and letting sleep chase away the consequences. Not when Isabela and Merrill talked about the open seas and adventures waiting to happen, when the sailor caught Hawke’s expression from the corner of her eye but couldn’t divine the shard of emotion that distorted the usually crystal blue tones. Not last night, when there was a ship within reach and all it would take was one selfish decision from either of them to change the course of their lives. Hawke didn’t ask Isabela to stay. Conversely, the pirate had never been more convinced that she didn’t want to go. If there were any gods, they had to be laughing their asses off.

Isabela took a deep breath, not quite realizing why until she felt a familiar tug at her senses, a warmth in her lungs that threatened to escape in a sigh before she bit it back. The pirate straightened in her chair, eyes shooting to the door seconds before it opened on a figure that seemed to marry swagger to a waltz. Hawke’s gaze never failed to light up when she spotted Isabela, and she moved directly to her table, an easy smile growing wider with every step.

“You . . . you’re here. Good.” The pirate hoped that sounding surprised might cover for the nerves tightening in her throat. Right, brilliant start, babbling like a virgin in a brothel. Isabela got a strangle hold on her fumbling tongue before she dared to continue. “I wanted to talk to you.”

If I can remember how. Or think of what to say. From the moment Isabela could talk, she’d learned how to charm or cheat her way out of almost every problem. The right words could get her into a noble’s vault, or some lovely thing’s knickers, and out of the consequences of being caught in either one. Only Hawke could ever leave her speechless.

“Don’t you have a funeral to attend?” The Champion teased as she slid into the chair beside Isabela.

“What?” The sailor blinked, puzzled for a breath as her mind bucked and struggled to shift with the changing wind. “You mean Castillon’s?” She couldn’t hold back a sarcastic laugh. “I hope the cleansing blaze of the funeral pyre rejects his vile, sagging ass.”

Hawke’s answering smile wiped away the distractions of doubt and worry clogging the pirate’s thoughts. Just like that, with a smirk and playful jibe, everything felt normal once more. Something may have changed, but it certainly wasn’t Hawke.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” Isabela smiled, relaxing back into her seat. “Saves me the trouble of having to go look for you. I wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.” If she’d had to try to list all Hawke’s favors, all the different ways this Fereldan rogue had gone from useful stranger to priceless friend and beyond, they’d be there until the Maker’s ass was back in the Black City. The pirate could only offer a genuine smile and hope Hawke heard the sincerity and affection in her voice as she sighed, “I’m glad you walked in here all those years ago.”

“You’ve been a good friend,” Hawke leaned forward, resting a hand over the pirate’s and giving a squeeze. If she noticed Isabela’s breath change for a heartbeat on that word, friend, she gave no sign. But a demonic suggestion twinkled in her eye when she continued in a lower tone, “And a constant source of excitement.”

“Oh, you do know how to flatter a girl.” Not for the first time, Isabela blessed her whore mother for at least passing on the dark Rivaini skin that so helpfully disguised a blush. She wasn’t sure if it was the flirtation of Hawke’s comment, the relief of not having been banished into the Void of “friend,” or the way the Champion’s thumb was so gently brushing over the back of her hand and skillfully evoking a hundred other memories of touch. Something was making it quite difficult to concentrate.

“You know, I just came from Aveline and she says Kirkwall has impounded Castillon’s ship.”
Hawke’s casual comment sounded like an innocent change of subject, but her eyes had a darting, devious glint of excitement. It was the exact look she had when she was about to sneak up on an enemy or lay down the winning hand.

“I hope they like mustard-colored satin. The man had an obsession.” Isabela shivered, recalling what she knew of the Antivan’s terrible taste. Really, the number of people that actually looked good naked and wrapped in yellow? Very, very few.

“The interesting thing,” Hawke completely ignored the pirate’s decorating critique, “Is that he owed some large debts to traders and merchants here in Kirkwall. There’s been quite a few complaints over lost cargo and nulled contracts.” Try as she might, the Champion could never actually look innocent. Particularly not with the smug hint of triumph tucked in one corner of her smile. “They want to liquidate his assets to recoup their losses. They’ve claimed the ship, Isabela. It’s going to be sold for a song.”

“A bawdy one, I hope.” Isabela tried not to let the wince of pain bleed into her eyes. Even if she’d willingly given up her chance at the gorgeous vessel she’d seen in Kirkwall harbor, it was torture to think of it being handed over to some Free Marcher fishermen.

Frustrated by the pirate’s lack of comprehension, Hawke gripped both of Isabela’s hands like she could physically drag her into the idea gripping her mind. The enthusiasm was contagious, if confusing, and the sailor found herself holding her breath as the other woman leaned forward, voice lowering to a secretive thrill. “We can get your ship, Isabela.”

“You want,” the pirate spoke slowly, testing the words in her thoughts and on her tongue, “To buy me a ship?” It was so unexpected, so very far from anything she could’ve imagined hearing today, that the only option was to call bullshit. Isabela darted her eyes skeptically over the Champion, lips curling up on one side as she shook her head. “Sweetness, if you have that kind of money to throw away on a gift, then Varric and I definitely need to be taking more coin off you at cards.”

“Don’t think of it as a gift,” Hawke brushed the objection aside, as if that were the only reason any of this might sound crazy. “Think of it as an investment.”

“In what?” Try as she might, Isabela couldn’t find the slightest hint of a punchline anywhere in the other woman’s face.

“In everything. You. The future.” Hawke must have felt the tiny spasm in the pirate’s hand because she rushed to continue as flippantly as possible. “It can be my ultimate escape plan. Maker knows I’ll need one after I finally lose my mind and trap Meredith and Orsino naked in a room together until they either kill each other or fuck and get it over with.”

“Yes, I could see that.” Isabela didn’t particularly want to see it, but it was rather unavoidable once Hawke planted the seed. Hate sex did have its limits after all. She shuddered and shoved the image away, studying her companion’s expression once more. “And what about until then?”

A flicker passed over the Champion’s face, too fleeting to recognize. The echo of it left a shadow in Hawke’s eyes but still refused to yield any secrets. Her grip on the sailor’s hands released, pulling back as casually as possible, but Isabela felt the inches of distance like a fortified wall between them, blocking something important from slipping through.

“I suppose some return on my coin wouldn’t hurt. Other Marcher nobles maintain merchant fleets. I could be the first with my own pirate armada,” the Fereldan grinned, obviously delighted by the idea of yet another way to scandalize her peers. There was a brief pause, almost a hesitation, and her smile faltered before stretching wide once more. “Knowing you, your adventures are sure to turn a
profit. So long as you came back every now and then to give me my share . . .”

The thought drifted off into the air uncertainly, but Hawke’s gaze was sure. She didn’t look away, didn’t blink, didn’t give any sign at all that she didn’t mean exactly what she’d said. Except there was more that she wasn’t saying. Isabela could see it in the pulse that was racing hard on the side of her throat. The twitch of muscles straining to hold that confident smile in place.

“Trying to get rid of me?” The sailor challenged playfully, trusting the low timbre of her voice to mask the thickening tension in her throat. Hawke wasn’t the only one that knew how to hide behind a smile. Maybe that was the problem. They were both too good at this dance.

“I’m proud of what you did last night, Isabela,” the Champion’s answer was softer, more reassuring. She probably didn’t know that in those gentler tones it was easier to hear the emotion underlying her words. There was pride, certainly, and affection, but notes of melancholy bled through as well. “But I don’t think making the right decision should mean giving up what you want.”

What I want. Isabela barely held back a burst of ironic laughter. Hawke still thought that meant a ship. She had no idea . . . But then, how could she? When had she ever given the Fereldan any reason to think that in a choice between her and a ship, she wouldn’t already be halfway out to sea the second she had a chance? And why did Hawke have to be so bloody noble about it all the time? The damned woman was always putting everything and everyone ahead of herself; Isabela couldn’t tell if she was just being generous or if she really didn’t care what the pirate did. They were stuck in this stalemate, like duelists with daggers a breath away from death and neither of them dared to move. One of them had to be willing to blink.

“I know what I want, sweet thing.” Isabela looked across at the Champion, the sincere gaze and warm smile waiting so patiently for her to make a decision. Now, what about you?

“I’d need a new crew,” Isabela toyed with the idea as it took shape. “And I’d like to have someone like you on board.” She silently awarded herself a victory when Hawke’s eyes grew wide. “Someone I can really trust, who has my back, no matter what happens.”

“Exploring the world and getting away from all this?” The other rogue’s gaze turned dreamy, like she could already feel the kiss of ocean breeze. There was a breathlessness to her voice, edging on excitement, as she focused on Isabela again. “I’m game.”

There wasn’t even a hint of mockery or deception in her tone. She meant it. She wanted to go. Isabela couldn’t quite keep the surprise from twitching across her face.

“It would be you and me chasing that horizon.” Isabela rested her elbows on the table, falling easily into the same carefree vision. A life at sea together; plundering ships, following the wind, swimming in exotic waters, and driving the rest of the crew to the brink of madness with the noise they’d make all night. The perfection of it filled her with a sigh that she didn’t even try to restrain. “I can’t think of any place I’d rather be.”

They both knew a hundred reasons why it was a bad idea. Hawke couldn’t just leave. She was Champion of Kirkwall, a city barely holding itself together with sweat and fingernails. Bethany was still in the Gallows, Anders was arguing constantly with himself, and Merrill was talking to a mirror. (Isabela wasn’t sure which of those facts was most troubling). Despite all of that Isabela could see, in the eager sparkle of Hawke’s eyes and the determined set of her jaw, that if she wanted the Fereldan to leave with her, she would. Just like she knew that she would stay, if Hawke only asked.

“It’s funny,” Isabela mused, surprised as much by the turn of her thoughts as the ease with which they were reaching her tongue, “Now that I think about it, getting a ship just doesn’t seem that
important. Everything I care about is here. You’re here.” Hawke’s look of confusion wasn’t quite what she’d expected, and the pirate couldn’t help faltering slightly. Balls, I’m bad at this. Isabela shook her head, looking away. “I . . .uh, I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me.”

“I’m making you uncomfortable. I’ll just leave.” And, like always, there was Hawke assuming it was her fault. Again.

“No, don’t,” Isabela immediately protested, the urgency in her voice stopping the other woman like a freezing spell. She probably wasn’t even willing to breathe. The pirate clenched her fists, forcing her tongue to work. “I need to say this. If I don’t, it will never get said.”

Hawke leaned forward, deliberately catching Isabela’s eye with her own worried gaze. When she spoke her voice was quiet, a twist of sympathy and support. “What’s going through your mind?”

“I think I . . .” Isabela hated the crack in her voice, the nerves that were shaking her thoughts apart and making the right words hard to find. Oh, sod it. “I think I’m falling for you. Just tell me, Hawke, if I have a chance with you.”

She had once. Years ago. There used to be gaps in Hawke’s armor, raw emotion bleeding through in eloquent hesitations, naked longing in the color of her eyes. She’d rebuked, ignored and denied that confession of feeling in every way possible and now, when all she wanted was to see even a ghost of its memory, Isabela couldn’t find her way past the steel in Hawke’s gaze.

“Didn’t you say love wasn’t for you?” The Champion cocked a skeptical eyebrow. The question wasn’t asked with any cruelty, more an objection than actual mockery.

“I know what I said and I know why I said it.” Isabela felt a rumble of irritation at the back of her throat, frustrated as much with the past as the present. She pushed the useless feeling away, throwing aside yet another weapon she’d stupidly been clinging to all this time. “You were right. I wasn’t afraid of love. I was afraid of being loved.”

Only the soppy spinsters that were addicted to Varric’s romance serials would ever assume those two were one and the same. Love was catching the edge of a tempest, the rush of riding a wind as fast and far as it could take you. But being loved? That meant being the storm. Isabela had left so very much wreckage in her wake. To be loved involved trust and fear, disappointment and heartache. There was always failure and suffering. Maker knew she’d already failed enough times, and Hawke had been the one to pay. The stubborn woman just took the pain. She drank it in, like those carnival performers that lit swords on fire and then swallowed them whole without a wince. That was Hawke, almost greedily accepting the tortures for all this time.

Everyone had their limits.

When the Fereldan hadn’t replied for the space of a dozen hammering heartbeats, Isabela had to accept that she had her answer. She let her eyes fall away, aware that even if she couldn’t see past Hawke’s armor, the other rogue would almost certainly see past her own. The sound of an inhalation caught the pirate’s ears and she froze, willing her blood to stop pumping.

“I’ve waited years for you.” Relief and victory mingled in the sweet tones of Hawke’s sigh. It wasn’t a poetic or ostentatious declaration. It was a simple statement of the one fact that supplied all the answer Isabela could ever need.

“Thank you.” The pirate could feel her breath trembling as it escaped across her lips. “For waiting.”

“It was worth it.” Like the words were their own magic, the metal in Hawke’s gaze vanished. All the
armor that had adamantly kept Isabela at a distance melted away, leaving only the fire of emotions that threatened to consume her without a single touch. The adoration she saw there was warmer than just lust, it was the banked coal of steadily fed affection that would set the world ablaze if anyone ever dared get in its path. It was the devotion of thousands of worshippers at the feet of Andraste, the passion of an army plunging into war, the prayer of a dying criminal on the edge of redemption. It was love; in its purest, most perfect, and undeniable form.

The pirate felt a choke of relief catch in her throat and she shoved back from the table, turning away before she completely lost control. She glared at the flames in the hearth, willing the heat to burn off the prickling moisture behind her eyes. Hawke loved her. All this time and she hadn’t let herself see it, hadn’t been brave enough to accept what the blithe, fearless rogue had been willing to give her right from the start.

Isabela felt the other woman rise and cross to her so she turned, facing head on everything that she’d refused to see. Hawke paused, that same split second hesitation of a duelist waiting to see if the last move had been too dangerous a risk. This time Isabela didn’t hesitate. She closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around Hawke and burying her face in the comforting scent of her skin. That heady, dark, metallic, but undeniably clean fragrance was better than an ocean breeze at dawn.

“You were always worth it, Isabela.” The Champion’s breath rushed against her ear, arms squeezing tight but shaking from the effort of not breaking her in half. Right now, Isabela couldn’t imagine a better way to die and her smile wasn’t even subdued by the press of Hawke’s lips.

They’d kissed hundreds—perhaps thousands—of times. Somehow, this still felt like a first. In the slow caress of Hawke’s lips, the tender cradling touch of her hands, the rise and fall of breathless sighs; this was a sweetness that had never been touched by fire. This was the first time Isabela knew the taste of Hawke’s mouth as a reward in itself, no salacious promises or teasing touches. This wasn’t a light game meant to lead to something more. It was just the two of them lost in each other, in the wordless confessions that could pour back and forth across their tongues more eloquently than words.

It was intoxicating. The richness of warmth and softness was nothing compared to the intimacy, the expression of trust and longing and prayers answered that made Isabela dizzy as each successive wave of deeper emotion threatened to pull her under like a tide. This was what neither of them had dared to want. Isabela’s sigh poured across the Champion’s lips and elicited an echo just as aching and sweet. The pirate unconsciously tightened her grip against Hawke, willing them both through any coming storm.

Chapter End Notes

It would be pretty hard to beat my beta reader's reaction of "Jesus tapdancing Christ fucking finally!" but I'm also keen to hear everyone else's responses. With or without expletives. Your choice.
Hawke cursed when a bead of ink dribbled off her stylus and splattered on the page below, effectively ruining three words. She crumpled the paper and tossed it aside. This was the fifth time she’d tried to write this letter to the overseer at the Bone Pit, and she still hadn’t managed to concentrate long enough to tell him that she’d taken ownership of the mine. She would be scribbling out the explanation and then in the middle of a sentence, a word, she’d suddenly think of the miracle from hours before and feel stunned all over again.

Everything was seared into her memory; the graceful line of Isabela’s jaw when her face tilted up in greeting, the way the firelight caught the dark skin of her cheek and made it glow, the flicker of doubt in her eyes when she looked away. Hawke could still feel the ghost of fingers clenching at her, clinging to her like a lifeline, a confession as relieved as the sigh that swelled and broke across their kiss. Her own hands unconsciously flexed, longing for the warmth, the comfort of Isabela’s body melting into her own, shuddering with emotion like they’d just escaped death.

Parting from Isabela had been nearly impossible. Every fiber of her being wanted to stay in that moment, that embrace, until the rest of the world went down in flames. Unfortunately, in Kirkwall that tended to feel like it was about to happen every time someone sneezed. There were still reports to give Meredith, and a secret meeting with Orsino, and she needed to see Cullen to find out what was really going on because she didn’t trust the other two as far as she could kick them. Fleeing on a ship with a pirate queen had never felt more tempting.

Isabela had reluctantly pulled back from Hawke’s touch, drawing away from procrastinating fingers that only wanted to prolong their time. The Champion could come up with a dozen excuses to put off everything else. She would gladly ignore all her responsibilities in favor of describing, in the painstaking detail of hands, skin and whispers, how completely and for how long she’d been lost to this swashbuckling rogue. But the pirate had other (apparently better) plans.

Fingers threaded into short hair at the base of her scalp, a gentle but undeniable command and Hawke obliged, tilting aside to let Isabela’s lips past her cheek. Hot breath tickled the choppy strands around her ear and she reflexively moved closer, chasing the needles that shivered down her spine.

“Go do your hero things, sweetness. I’ll be waiting when you’re done.” Isabela’s low words sounded like an affectionate assurance and seductive promise twisted into one. The warmth that swelled in Hawke’s chest mingled with a spike of heat that shot much lower and the Fereldan’s body trembled in a conflict of responses. A light scrape of teeth against the shell of her ear barely warned her before another shudder followed Isabela’s murmur, “The city can have you for now, Hawke. But tonight? You’re all mine.”

Mine. Hawke bit her lip, a small moan still escaping when she heard the word echoing in her
thoughts. How could something that felt so dangerous in her own voice sound irresistibly right in Isabela’s?

A tickle at the edge of her senses made Hawke smile. It felt like waking in the night with the soothing comfort of a lover still near. There didn’t have to be a touch or sound, barely even a scent, but in the portions of the mind that dwelled between thought and dream, she found Isabela’s presence and happily soaked it in. She turned to the open window, seeking the fragrance of exotic sands and spice on the evening breeze.

“Expecting someone?” A voice like liquid smoke caught Hawke by surprise, jerking her around to the doorway. Isabela eased the door shut behind herself, lips turned up on one side in an unmistakable twist of amusement.

“You came in the front way? That’s a bit boring for you, isn’t it?” The Champion teased as she got to her feet. Saunter met swagger in the middle of the room and Hawke forced herself to stay still with Isabela only inches away. Tonight wasn’t a headlong rush towards naked skin and sweat-laced moans. The charge in the room felt different, languid to the point of reluctance.

“Perhaps. But I like giving your neighbors something to talk about for a few days.” The pirate began stripping off the smaller pieces of her wardrobe, pretending not to notice how Hawke’s eyes followed her every move. The Fereldan’s hands easily joined in the familiar dance, undoing sheaths and harnesses, finding the surprising multitude of weapons concealed on the other rogue. With Isabela, it wasn’t so much undressing as disarming.

“The whole street always knows when you’re here, Bela,” Hawke argued. She pulled the sailor’s shoulder guard away, trailing her fingers over skin that was just a bit lighter and softer from life under leather and steel.

“And whose fault is that?” Isabela countered with a wicked tilt of one brow.

She tugged the bandana out of her hair, letting the raven strands spill free over her shoulders, gliding like silk over Hawke’s hand. The Champion loved the feel of that hair. The thickness of it, the way it cascaded between her fingers, the softness when it skimmed her cheek. Hawke combed through the long tresses, working ever higher until her thumb brushed Isabela’s jaw.

“Besides,” the sailor’s sultry voice was falling in and out of a whisper, torn between the touch at her cheek and the temptation of lips she could almost taste. “I thought Bodahn should have some warning. Wouldn’t want him coming up here to wake you in the morning, would we?”

Hawke tilted away just before Isabela could catch her mouth. Not yet. She pressed a kiss to the corner of pouting lips, then her jaw. Feathery caresses followed that elegant line until she reached the tender skin just beside Isabela’s ear, listening to the pirate’s breath quicken.

“You’re staying the night?” The Champion had wondered—had hoped—but she needed to hear it. The thought of being able to hold Isabela through her dreams, of waking up to see this perfect face resting on her pillow once more? It was enough to steal her voice, words cracking like ice about to shatter.

Long fingers slid up Hawke’s shoulders, a hand cradling the back of her neck as Isabela mirrored her position. “All night.” The pirate’s seductive assurance tickled Hawke’s ear. “Maybe tomorrow night too. And every night after that.” Isabela punctuated each coy promise with a kiss. Hawke could feel the shape of that luscious mouth turning into a smile. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with me now, sweetness. Like a bad tattoo.”
The sigh of relief that burst out of Hawke shook them both and the pirate leaned back, brow twisted in a question of worry. The Champion was learning the subtle signs of doubt in this infamously confident woman, the threads of uncertainty that sometimes bled into her jokes. Hawke tilted up and pressed her lips to the anxious furrow, soothing away any concern. She couldn’t help lingering, inhaling deep the scent from Isabela’s hair. Sea air, rum barrels, wet sand and cloves. She held the fragrance in herself as long as she could, let it spread through her like wine in her blood.

“We’re going to need a lot of ink then,” Hawke finally let her breath out in a chuckle. “I’ll wear your name on every inch of my skin.” She found the warm amber of Isabela’s eyes, awed that she could spark the glow of tenderness and pride that she saw there. “Of course,” the Fereldan continued, mouth curling into a smirk, “I think we should probably start with my ass.”

A dulcet laugh rolled off the sailor’s lips, a rich purr that vibrated into Hawke’s body where they touched. “Silly thing,” Isabela shook her head, smile flashing with intrigue. “There’s only one place where it matters.”

The cryptic comment was instantly clear when Hawke felt a hand stroking down the line of her neck. Isabela’s fingers slid under the collar of her house robe, finding the rough pattern of scars and drawing light circles over the familiar, jagged wound. Hawke’s shoulder began to throb, a dull ache of longing as the omega’s mark pulsed to life. A burst of heat surged beneath Isabela’s hand and Hawke reflexively tightened her fists, fighting to hold back. She knew that the pirate’s touch was too delicate to be an invitation. The grazing movement of fingers hesitated, reflecting the questions Hawke could see flickering in her eyes.

“Then I guess you’re stuck with me too.” The alpha reached up and covered Isabela’s hand with her own, pressing it firm over the scar. She felt the faint puff of a caught breath release across her lips, mouths barely a word away from each other. “I’m yours, Isabela. As long as you want me.”

“I want you.” The pirate’s answer was immediate, firm as the grip of her fingers tightening against Hawke’s shoulder and hair. She surged up and caught the Champion’s lips, plush caresses coaxing her sighs into a moan. “I want you, Hawke, so much.” Isabela’s words drifted across Hawke’s tongue. That groaned confession was affection and desire twisted together, coupled inseparably like lovers, like everything that the two of them were as the kiss stole breath and thought.

The velvety sweetness of Isabela’s mouth was a torture to leave. Only the temptation of more could lure Hawke away as she began tugging at the laces of the pirate’s bodice. The ties came free, loosened cloth spilling apart beneath heavy breasts. The Champion trailed kisses over dark skin, open mouth savoring the luxurious feel of that flesh beneath her tongue but she didn’t let herself linger. She dropped lower, lips pressing against the thin fabric of Isabela’s chemise. Fingers carded through Hawke’s hair, torn between keeping her close and pulling her away long enough to strip the frustrating barriers between mouth and skin. She didn’t give the pirate time to decide, already kneeling and gliding her palms over the sensuous shape of her lover’s hips, inch by inch until she found her goal in leather and metal.

Realizing there was a purpose to Hawke’s teasing, the sailor released her grip on the woman’s hair. There was a whisper of ruffling cotton and then the sound of fabric fluttering to the ground. Hawke caught a glimpse of the bundle of white fabric landing a few feet away and willed her fingers to work faster. She cursed beneath her breath, wrestling with the endless fasteners that held Isabela’s boots in place.

“I hate these every bit as much as you hate my armor,” the Champion groaned, barely noticing the way her chaotic spikes of hair brushed Isabela’s bare stomach and made the pirate giggle.

“You love my boots,” the light laugh accompanied fingers combing through those black tresses once
more, tickling the shortest strands on her neck.

“I love how your legs look in these boots,” Hawke corrected, delighting in the triumph of her victory when she finally got all the buckles undone and stripped the cumbersome leather away. She ran her hands up the back of toned calves, dragging her nails higher on Isabela’s sensuously curvaceous thighs, cataloguing every inch of gloriously exposed skin before turning her face upward once more. She was immediately transfixed by the pirate’s eyes gazing down at her.

In their many nights (and afternoons, mornings, tea times, and even the occasional midday meal interruption) together the Fereldan had grown used to the ravishing beauty of desire in Isabela’s face, expressions of passion that lit fire behind the dark honey of her eyes and painted elaborate scenes of debauchery in her smile. What she’d never seen was raw emotion. Hawke felt a lurch in her chest, her heart starting and stopping all over again, death and life in a single second. The naked affection reached out to her, unguarded and undisguised.

“Isabela . . .” Hawke wasn’t even sure what she’d planned to say, she just needed to feel the name on her lips, to relieve the pressure building beneath her ribs. The Fereldan dropped her face, resting her forehead against the muscles of her lover’s stomach, absently gratified to feel them tremble.

The thin strip of fabric that Isabela considered knickers was all that was left between her and Hawke. The Champion’s mouth was inches away and the tantalizing fragrance of arousal was coating her nose, drawing water around her tongue. Instinct drew her closer, brushing her nose against the dampness that had already formed on the front of Isabela’s small clothes. Her tongue darted out, dragging hard and deliberate over the darkened material. The taste of cotton and lust washed into her mouth and Hawke couldn’t hold back a groan of pleasure. Isabela’s hips rolled towards her, seeking more. The Fereldan was eager to oblige, thoughts of the thousands of ways she planned to devour this woman already making a happy hum rumble in her chest. She had all night. Tonight, and tomorrow, and for countless nights into the future.

Hawke stripped away the final barrier between herself and that thick, heady scent—almost had the flavor on her tongue—when she felt the hands playing through her hair suddenly tighten. The tug wasn’t a request and she followed the command upward, finding the pirate’s parted lips irresistible as she was drawn back in for a kiss.

Nimble fingers captured her own, guiding one hand to the back of Isabela’s neck. The necklace. Hawke felt her whole body tense, like the moment of paralysis before release, an anticipation so deep it held her breath captive. The pirate led her lover’s fingers to the clasp but then let go, concentrating instead on the supple curve of Hawke’s lower lip. The invitation was clear, the decision up to her.

The Fereldan sucked in a deep breath, drawn from Isabela’s mouth, and flipped the catch on that heavy gold adornment. The clunky necklace fell away, shed to the floor with a dull thump and echoing gasps as the magic broke with it, Hawke’s senses awash with Isabela in all her glory. She reached to cradle the exposed dark skin, fingers instinctively drawn down the line of the omega’s neck, tracing the fluttering pulse that seemed to race ahead of her touch. Isabela’s scent wasn’t as strong as during her heat, but there was an undeniably darker tone laced through the fragrant warmth and spice that Hawke knew. There were sultry hints of honey, liquor, and fire; the Champion’s mouth was already moving to find the taste, to sear it on her tongue.

She planted open kisses against the underside of the pirate’s jaw, down the line her fingers had blazed, growing lightheaded as her world narrowed to spin around this intoxicating woman. The essence of her filled Hawke’s senses; the feel of silky hair brushing her face, fingers on the back of her head gently coaxing her further, the light, panting breaths in her ear that turned into a moan when her lips found the spot where that enticing scent seemed richest. The curve where neck and shoulder
joined was soft flesh over taut muscle and a rapid heartbeat that pounded excitedly under Hawke’s mouth.

“Hawke.” Her name on the pirate’s lips was years of agonized patience breaking apart, a rasp of need so thick it barely scraped past Isabela’s tongue. The Champion felt pride like an explosion in her chest when her lover tilted to one side, arching her neck in silent offering.

Alpha instincts coursed through her muscles, speeding her heart. The primal demand to match the omega’s claim roared in her blood, to finally seal the bond that had existed since before Isabela’s teeth ever broke skin. But underneath and alongside that need, laced through it, was another just as strong: to soothe the tension she could feel coiled throughout the other woman’s body. Isabela’s muscles were all curled tight, bracing for pain. The thought that she might cause her lover that fear, that she might ever risk hurting her, steeled Hawke’s resolve.

Isabela’s grip clenched, a noise of protest caught in her throat when Hawke pulled away, leaving nothing but a kiss of promise against her neck. The confusion and disappointment in the pirate’s eyes made her heart ache. She offered tender smile, fingers trailing reassurances everywhere they touched, scattering kisses over Isabela’s face until she felt the anxious lines soften into pleasure once more. The sailor melted into Hawke’s body, accepting her lover’s unspoken answer. It wasn’t no. It was only not yet.

Deft fingers slid under the scant cloth of the Champion’s robe, snaking through the layers to find skin. Hawke pressed towards the warm touch, welcoming Isabela’s attention. Those hands seemed to ignite fires each place they traveled, pouring fresh heat into the flow of her blood, heartbeat pumping faster and harder and echoed by the low pulse that had begun to throb in her core. The dull ache had been torturing her all day and grew into a twisting knot of need once the pirate was finally in her arms. Now it spiked, sending a sharp jolt through her whole body that was followed by a violent shiver; Isabela had slipped the robe completely off.

The pirate’s gaze raked up her naked form, from the fabric pooled on the floor to the assuredly damp flesh between her thighs. Those eyes traveled lazily up her stomach, savoring every muscle and rib before lighting on the curve of her breasts, the colored peaks stiffening without so much as a breeze. Isabela continued her appreciative sweep of the Champion, tongue gliding across her lips when she flicked her gaze to Hawke’s mouth, clearly tempted to end with that prize. The feel of those smoldering eyes was almost a caress in itself, and when they finally met Hawke’s own they glittered with triumph and wonder.

“My pretty thing,” Isabela murmured, whispers of awe in her voice echoed by the reverent touch of her hands.

There was no fevered clenching of fists, no lewd groping with laughter or muttered curses as they vied for control of an embrace. Isabela’s body fit perfectly against Hawke’s, planes of muscle and fleshy curves matching in all the right places, molding into one. The energy between them, usually so very visceral with needs and demand, was intoxicatingly languorous; tempests mellowed to a gentle waft.

Instead of nails raking between her shoulders there were fingers etching feathery designs along her spine. Hawke knew exactly what her lover’s hands could do; their agile skill at springing locks, the strength and speed to slit throats in a blink, the wicked cleverness that could wring every last breath out of her throat in a scream. Yet, when she felt those same hands rest at the small of her back with no intention beyond enjoying their closeness, Hawke had never felt more like she might shatter beneath their touch.

The bed was less than five feet away and still it seemed like an infinity to cross. Amidst the trade of
kisses and caresses, refusing to let a hair’s breadth of space between skin, Hawke shuffled them an inch at a time. Every purr in Isabela’s chest and swipe of her tongue made the Champion wonder if they’d make it before her legs turned to jelly. She would’ve thanked the Maker when she felt the bedclothes brush the back of her knees, but her mouth was a bit too distracted. And then Isabela tilted just right, sealing their lips with a searing heat, and Hawke would swear the pirate sucked every thought right out of her head.

The lovers crashed onto the bed, a duet of sighs and relieved laughter filling the air as their bodies laced together into a familiar knot. Arms and legs tangled, furling and unfurling over and over in a dozen new shapes and angles to find the deepest press of flesh, the closest they could be. Isabela’s knee slid perfectly between Hawke’s and the Champion groaned at the feel of slippery arousal smearing over her thigh. It never failed to amaze her that this gorgeous woman could want her like this, that she could make Isabela’s body melt into the streams of desire that painted her skin. She instinctively reached for the flare of shapely hips, eager to guide the pirate into the rhythm they both needed.

The loss of silky heat on her lips was a tragedy, and Hawke tried to chase the missing kiss. Her groan of complaint turned into a startled grunt when the graceful limbs wrapped around her suddenly tightened and pitched them both sideways, much like she remembered feeling in the roll of a ship on bad water. The spinning world righted again and Hawke caught herself on her elbows, staring down in shock at Isabela beneath her.

Soft curves arched up into her weight, exploring the feel of her lover’s body in this new position. Isabela’s lashes fluttered like ruffled wings, eyes vanishing as her lips curled in delicious satisfaction. “Like this.” The pirate’s alluring purr was too quiet to differentiate between plea and command.

Isabela tilted up, her heavy-lidded gaze dark with visions of slick skin and writhing pleasure. Hawke couldn’t frame words for a protest, for the doubt that filled her with something akin to panic the moment she found herself atop this overwhelming but fragile prize. Plush lips tugged at her senses, luring her back to the attentions of a kiss. Artful hands gently coaxed the Champion to rest closer, raking through choppy hair, gliding over and over again along her spine until she had no choice but to relax as her quivering muscles melted into the touch.

“I want to feel you, Hawke,” Isabela whispered into her lips, barely more than the prayer of sinners. The sailor emphasized her meaning beyond question, hooking one knee over Hawke’s hip to draw her as deep into the embrace as two bodies could meet. The impact of what she was offering, the sweetness and wonder of Isabela surrendering herself completely . . . Hawke had to tear away from their kiss to gasp for air and fight the dizziness that threatened to spin her mind beyond control.

The Fereldan reared up, desperately seeking the seconds and space she needed to cool her blood. It felt like black powder was sizzling in her veins, throwing off sparks everywhere Isabela’s body met hers. The pirate rose on one arm, lips already parting in complaint as she sought the lost press of skin. Hawke caught the hand that was reaching for her, weaving their fingers together instead.

“I’ve waited years for you, Isabela,” the Champion repeated her assurance from earlier that day, concentrating on the tender emotion that formed a pool of calm in her thoughts. She kissed each of the sailor’s knuckles, and then nipped at the underside of her wrist, mouth twisting into a mischievous smirk. “You can be patient tonight.”

Isabela’s flushed lips turned into a pout but she silently yielded, lying back against the rumpled blankets, eyes fixed on Hawke with dark intrigue. The Fereldan sat back on her heels, pausing to catch her breath and simply stare at the treasure spread out before her. Raven hair cascading across her pillows, silky skin painted in candlelit tones of gold, kiss-swollen mouth curled up ever so
slightly with an invitation that made Hawke’s tongue feel like leather.

The pirate was all richness and decadence, a lavish seduction sculpted out of flesh and desire. She was like those opulent Orlesian paintings of gorgeously displayed women that were supposed to symbolize some higher ideal, but here there was no attempt to be anything more. She was pure want; the kind that demanded anything and everything without any shame or apology, the carnal expression of passions that couldn’t be spoken—couldn’t be felt—without touch.

So Hawke touched.

She pressed her lips to the inside of Isabela’s raised knee, trailing her free hand up the shapely muscle of her calf, shifting to scrape her nails along the back of the pirate’s thigh and wishing she could capture the resulting moan to press in a book. Fingers and mouth began a calculated assault, gloring in every shiver and sound she could tease from her lover’s skin. Teeth and tongue traveled Isabela’s inner thigh, deliciously quivering muscles straining to hold still as she sucked at the tender skin. Tendons flexed against Hawke’s lips, urging her towards the swollen folds that glistened so enticingly at the edge of her mouth.

“Ever-fucking love of Andraste, Hawke!” Isabela’s growl cracked with a groan when taunting lips changed direction, deliberately avoiding even the slightest brush against her overheated sex. The pirate’s frustrated curses were overtaken in a sigh as Hawke crept higher on her lover’s body. Searing kisses inched up the line of Isabela’s belly, tongue tracing the cleft of muscles and delving into the dip of her navel.

The ragged pants that fell across the pirate’s parted lips had her breasts subtly swaying with every breath. The hypnotic rise and fall matched in time with the undulating roll of her hips, hungry for friction, seeking relief. Hawke dragged her tongue between those supple swells flesh, savoring the thready whimper stifled behind Isabela’s bit lip.

The pirate had lost her war to remain still. Her body writhed beneath Hawke, twisting to follow—to deepen—each teasing touch. The Champion kept her eyes on her lover, catching every twitch of arousal and pleased murmur, guided by the soft notes of need and fierce clenches of fingers laced with her own. Isabela was fighting to hold herself together, to rise with the escalating bursts of excitement without shattering from the despair of relief just beyond reach.

Hawke chided herself for the smugness of the smile curling her lips, trying to feel bad for the gloating pride that absolutely reveled in her lover’s want. She swirled her tongue in the dip at the base of Isabela’s throat, collected the coalesced beads of sweat that had been trickling down a slender neck. Goosebumps raced ahead of her touch, trailed in the wake of her mouth.

The pirate’s head fell back and Hawke nipped at the sensitive skin exposed beneath her chin. That touch of teeth was punctuated by a sharp curse, Isabela arching under her lover’s weight. Hawke moaned, captivated by the feel of barely restrained demands trembling in flesh. She couldn’t do this much longer. Dark fingers were already fisting the duvet so tightly it would tear at any second, fighting the violent urge to grab hold of Hawke and take charge. Omega or not, she wasn’t used to being out of control, being denied.

The Champion felt her breath hitch for the space of a heartbeat as she contemplated everything this notoriously selfish woman was willing to give, the depth of feeling that brought them to this moment. Hawke dragged their interlaced fingers to her mouth, planting a hard kiss to the back of Isabela’s hand before letting go. The pirate had waited, they both had, and—Holy Maker—it had been long enough. There was no patience left anywhere in her being as Hawke poured the flood of her need into the lush warmth of Isabela’s mouth, bruising want and tender emotion melding them together.
Her fingers snaked between their bodies, finding the swollen folds of her lover’s sex already slick and open. She cupped her palm over searing heat and softness, smiling when the pirate ground forward, hips rolling eagerly into her touch. Isabela nipped at her lips, erasing any smug expression with a sharp warning not to tease. One long drag of fingers parted soaked flesh and momentarily froze their kiss, twin moans savoring the wetness that instantly painted Hawke’s hand.

With the torturous adorations of foreplay finally put aside, Isabela released the bedcovers and filled her grip with skin. A triumphant sound of pleasure rumbled in her chest as her hands roved Hawke’s body. She clung to the Champion’s shoulders, carded through her hair, glided over sweat damp muscles, palmed full breasts. The feverish touches consumed Hawke, triggering jolts of heat that all flooded to the pounding pressure in her core.

Fiery kisses ravaged her throat, lingering over every inch to spread mottled, mouth-shaped bruises. Isabela found the tender skin where she could taste a hammering heartbeat and lavished it with attention, a happy hum vibrating on her lips. The sudden scrape of teeth made Hawke’s body buck, hips snapping forward selfishly and the pirate rolled up into the pressure, a satisfied groan clawing free of her throat.

“Fuck, Bela,” the Champion grunted, fighting back the rut that threatened to overtake her at any second.

She slid her fingers over the tight ring of her lover’s entrance, whining at how quickly the muscles blossomed open and tugged at her, hungry to draw her in. A lithe leg hooked over Hawke’s hip, pulling at her as insistently as the hands fanned across her back, dragging her closer. Her body succumbed, crashing down to meet skin on skin, one arm barely holding her above the writhing mess that Isabela had become. Hawke sank her fingers into throbbing heat, moaning at the feel of soaked, silky flesh immediately clenching around her, the grateful gasp that contorted the pirate into a taut bow.

The pulse of Isabela’s sex opened her wider with every stroke, slips of arousal spilling out to smear between wrist and thighs. The rough patch on her front wall was already swollen, tiny convulsions rippling around Hawke’s fingers when she stroked against it. Hips forcefully rose to meet her thrusts, begging for more. The Champion quickly added a third finger, losing her rhythm for only a moment when the sailor’s keen of pleasure wrenched at the knot of desire in her gut. Velvety inner walls shuddered and stretched, streams of excitement trickling over Hawke’s hand until breathless gasps were joined by a sound of sucking wetness as they echoed obscenely around the room.

“I-I,” As soon as Hawke tried to speak Isabela’s lust-blown eyes fixed on her. She went speechless, trapped in the smoldering coals of that gaze. The Champion fell headlong into bottomless depths awash not just in desire but tenderness, a devotion that made her heart feel like it could explode.

“Fuck—.” The broken curse was not Hawke’s most eloquent moment. She buried her face in the pirate’s tousled mane, no longer able to bear the flood of emotion that threatened to choke her throat. All her passion was forced into the heat of her mouth against Isabela’s skin, scattering kisses over her jaw, capturing the soft flesh of her ear, coaxing ever more lovely sounds from parted lips.

“Beautiful,” Hawke found her words once more; nothing more than a broken rasp. “Maker, Bela, you’re so beautiful.” She couldn’t stop the awed praise as it spilled out. “So perfect, I can’t believe. . . How did I ever—?” The question trailed off into a moan when she felt the woman’s hips jerk out of time, inner walls fluttering like they’d been caressed by her voice. Isabela’s soft pants and tightening hands urged her on. Hawke was grateful that her face was tucked into the pirate’s hair, her smile hidden as she understood what her lover wanted. Her thrusts picked up speed, angled against the tender spot that made broken whimpers and groans build into a single, desperate note of need. Then
she kept speaking.

“Isabela.” Hawke seared hot kisses over skin and hair, each sound that brushed the pirate’s ear causing another hard spasm around her fingers. “Isabela.” That precious name fell from her lips over and over again. It was a mantra of longing on her every breath before a single sigh turned into a whisper. “I . . . I love you.” Those ultimate words broke free without permission, cracking on her voice like a wall collapsing into rubble.

The massive hole ate through what was left of her scant discipline and she gasped against Isabela’s neck, repeating the confession like the litany of a prayer. With the dam burst, raw emotion poured out of her without restraint, finding shape on her tongue. I love. Want to give. Only you. Need to be. Everything. Anything. With. For. You. Always. Promises Hawke didn’t even know had been stored up beneath her thoughts spilled off her tongue, each one richer and more fervent than the last.

Isabela turned and captured her mouth. Maybe to drink the adorations straight from her lover’s lips, maybe to silence the utterances that were too painfully sweet to hear. In either case, Hawke met the press of her kiss. She was immediately stunned by the heat of it, breathless from the intensity as if Isabela had gathered up all her words and poured them into this single, passionate reply.

She could feel the pirate teetering on the brink of her climax. The heel digging into the curve of her backside matched with the roll of the pirate’s hips, wringing all she could from every thrust. There were trembling sounds that Hawke could taste rising in their kiss, the bruising grip of hands, rippling spasms of muscle clenching at her fingers. Isabela was clearly seconds away and yet refusing to give in. The sinuous shape that writhed beneath her was warring towards and away from release all at once. Fingers twisting in her hair couldn’t decide between holding her captive to a kiss or ripping her away.

A grunt of bewildered protest slipped from Hawke’s mouth as the pirate broke from her lips. There was a violent tension in the other woman’s body, instincts and will fighting to break each other apart. She was waiting for something. There was a wordless demand for more in her eyes and the Champion felt a helpless burst of confusion, unable to discern the plea.

“Tell me, Bela,” Hawke begged, her fingers never once slowing as she desperately tried to coax her lover past the brink of control. “Tell me what you want.”

“You,” Isabela’s choked gasp sent a surge of fire straight to Hawke’s core. A hand tangled in her hair and guided the Champion to one side, towards the elusive prize of unmarked skin. “I need you.” The confession was barely more than a rumbling groan as the pirate’s body twisted beneath Hawke. The scent of that flesh was making her mouth water, the fragrance of spice and metal coating her tongue with one breath, within reach of her lips; it was a torture unlike anything she’d ever known.

Not yet. Hawke’s jaw screamed in pain as she clenched her teeth tightly shut, hissing out a groan of agony, fighting to wait just a few more seconds. She knew it was close. Could feel it.

“Please,” Isabela gasped, rocking into Hawke’s touch, more wetness spilling down her hand.

“I need,” the sailor repeated her plea. Clutching fingers drew her lover’s mouth closer to the irresistible curve of flesh. She could taste the racing pulse that all but begged for an alpha’s claim. Not just any alpha. “You, Hawke,” the urgent longing of Isabela’s words broke into a sweet cry at the barest edge of teeth scraping her neck. The pirate tilted her face to brush lips against the Fereldan’s ear, voice nothing more than a breathless confession as she whispered:

“I need to be yours.”
Hawke’s mouth was already pressed to skin, muffling her strangled sob of relief. She set her teeth against the smooth, inviting skin of her lover’s shoulder, a swell of satisfaction filling her ribs when Isabela arched into the touch. Lissome hands tightened their hold on her; a silent promise that this time Hawke wasn’t getting away until they’d finished.

The Champion angled her fingers, every stroke hitting the perfect spot that sent a riot of shudders through the rest of Isabela’s silken core. Her thumb found the throbbing bundle of nerves at the top of her lover’s sex, flicking over the swollen peak. A spasm tore through Isabela, losing the rhythm as she tried to keep up with the rapidly building pleasure wracking her body. Hawke braced her wrist against her hips, plunging hard and deep, painting circles with her thumb. With the right thrust she pressed down against that pulsing ridge, matching the force of her fingers hooking up into Isabela’s most sensitive place and the pirate’s breathy moans coalesced into a loud, exultant cry.

Now.

The muscles that convulsed around her, flooding her hand in wetness as Isabela trembled and bucked, were the last permission Hawke needed. She tensed, jaw bearing down as her teeth broke skin. All at once her mouth was full of copper and salt, a flood of heat and pleasure cascading through her entire being like she was caught in the same cresting ecstasy as the body thrashing beneath her. Isabela’s cry shattered and turned into a howl, nails raking a fresh pattern of scratches down Hawke’s back as they quaked and clung to one another, riding out the crashing waves that washed away everything except each other.

Fire lapped though Hawke’s veins and coalesced into a flood in her belly, a pounding pressure that surged ever lower until she couldn’t hold it anymore. Throbbing heat spread from her core and grew, the desperate ache finding relief in every second it poured out of her until she felt like her whole body had burst free. Her muscles quivered from the force of the release that spilled out with jerking thrusts, draining all thought and sense except for the bliss that coursed into her from Isabela.

Hawke collapsed against the pirate, their bodies matching inch for inch in shivering flesh and sweaty skin. She pulled her mouth free to gasp for breath, air tinged with the taste of blood when it crossed her tongue and filling her with an instinctive, overwhelming, impossibly right surge of euphoria. Mine.

Only when Isabela’s hips gave a languid stir did the alpha realize: she’d shifted.

Chapter End Notes

I know, 6K+ words and we’re STILL not done with the sex! (Cue the maniacal laughter! Bob, Bob? Shit, someone wake up Bob to cue the laughter.)

Anyway, weird as I know it feels to offer opinions on graphic content, I am shyly eager to hear everyone’s thoughts. Hitting a different vibe for these two felt like it took 80 million edits to find a proper balance between emotions and sex.

Hope it was worth the wait and the read!
Isabela couldn’t tell where she ended and Hawke began. There was only a blurred awareness of heat and goosebumps, sweat-slick skin that felt the same everywhere they touched. Pounding hearts and ragged breath married so perfectly in time that the pirate couldn’t be sure whose pulse it was hammering beneath her ribs, throbbing in the sting of her shoulder. Shoulder. The bite. Isabela’s parted lips turned up into a smile. That was definitely hers. It was Hawke’s, but it was hers, because it meant that she belonged to Hawke and the sodding, ridiculous contradiction of it all actually managed to stutter her breath with a chuckle.

Either the sound or the feel of that nearly nonexistent laugh brought a stir of movement from the other rogue. Isabela felt the mouth against her neck shift. Soft warmth pressed into her shoulder, soothing the sharp pain of those jagged marks down to a dull ache. Hawke covered the wound in feather-light kisses, apologies without the slightest hint of regret. Isabela could just barely make out the curled shape of her lover’s lips and was absolutely certain that the woman was smirking. It was that impossibly pleased with herself expression that the pirate knew so well, the one that she could never decide if she wanted to knock away with a fist or ravish in a kiss.

The attentions from Hawke’s mouth rapidly began to change in mood. Lips opened wider, pressed longer, drawing rushes of heat and dark color to fill all around the broken skin. A low vibration spread from the other woman’s chest and right into Isabela. The rumbling sound was somewhere between a purr and a growl, and it tugged at her own breath until it slipped out in a contented sigh. She recognized that sound; knew how it fit with the firmer, deeper feel of lips savoring her newly marked flesh. If every kiss was a word it was always only one: mine.

The thought, the touch, of that claim sent warmth rippling through Isabela until it reached all the way to her toes and made them curl. She arched her neck, offering her own silent echo. **Yours.** It rang in her head, coursed in her blood, bloomed like coals coming to life inside her chest. A second burst of heat followed just as quickly, fiercer and flavored with a delicious twist of excitement. It made the pirate tighten her grip on Hawke, fingers clenching at slick skin almost on the border of pain. **And you’re mine.** Isabela shivered in greedy pleasure, but it was the answering groan of approval against her neck that created such a swell of pride she thought it might crack her ribs.

The Champion’s mouth found hers and Isabela could taste shaking breaths, the pent up need in hot, rough swipes of Hawke’s tongue. She loved these few seconds: the thrill of power that came from knowing the right touch, even the right sound, would be enough to shatter whatever was left of Hawke’s infuriatingly patient control. Isabela would never tire of it; savoring that the famed Champion, an alpha unlike any other, could be so completely undone by want. For her. She flicked Hawke’s tongue, tempting her deeper into the kiss before nipping forward, the touch of teeth just right to elicit a graved groan and sharp roll of her lover’s hips.

Hawke’s excited movements changed their angle, shifting oddly before Isabela suddenly felt the press of stiff flesh twitching against her thigh. A gasp of surprise was stifled between their lips and
she reached down, deliberately sliding under the curve of Hawke’s hip until her fingers brushed an unmistakably hard, pulsing length. The alpha instinctively thrust towards her touch, whining into their kiss as Isabela’s hand wrapped around her.

“Is that—?” The Fereldan’s breathless question fell into a throaty keen, eyes wincing shut when a deft stroke dipped through the wetness pearled at the tip of her cock. Isabela didn’t even bother trying to fight the grin shaping her lips as she felt her lover’s stomach muscles tremble and clench. Nor did she suppress a grunt of protest when Hawke rose away from her, lifting enough to stare between them and verify with her eyes exactly what her body already knew. “Is that supposed to happen?”

The innocent confusion was so endearing that Isabela actually felt a stab of pity for her bewildered mate. My mate. Isabela turned the phrase around in her head again, staggered to find that—rather than filling her with panic or regret—there was a burst of exhilaration in her chest. It felt like seeing the white flag go up on a massive treasure ship. The alpha was hers. All of her. Right down to the swollen cock twitching in Isabela’s grip and everything that meant. The pirate’s sex fluttered greedily, longing for the feel of Hawke buried within her all the way to the hilt.

A firm but gentle touch against Hawke’s shoulder nudged her lover to rise further, following until they were both sitting upright. The Fereldan reluctantly rested back on her heels, knees nestled within Isabela’s spread thighs. It was barely even a foot of space between them but the pirate felt a surge of complaint ache beneath her ribs, growl catching in the back of her throat. Pale hands gripped the small of her waist, desperate to keep hold of her the way drunks cling to a bottle, and Isabela smiled in relief. It wasn’t just her. It was the primal need for a tether, an unconscious protest of losing the press of skin because it felt like a piece of their own bodies being torn away. In a way it was. Isabela rested her palm over the mark on her lover’s shoulder, assuring her racing pulse that Hawke was close, right within reach. The growing hollow in her belly gave a vicious twist; close wasn’t enough. Nothing was enough without. . .

Her attention fixed on the length of flesh standing erect between the alpha’s thighs. She took the straining shaft in her hand once more, a sharp suck of breath through Hawke’s teeth proving just how achingly sensitive she was. The sticky wetness that clung to her fingers told the omega that her mate had already come once; her inner walls giving a jealous clench at the thought. But the way the shaft throbbed in her palm, heavy and solid as iron, promised it was far from done. Rather than being eased by her release, the swollen flesh looked like an agony of need. An almost angry flush colored the tip, beads of fresh arousal leaking over her fingers. A tickle of suspicion under her thoughts moved the pirate’s hand, sliding down to find the telltale heat and bulge of a knot beginning to form.

“I think we might have done things a bit backwards,” Isabela admitted, a wicked glint of amusement slipping into her smile.

There was a reason mates were chosen and marked during heat. A physical tie sealed the connection, bodies joining together until flesh, scent and blood accepted each other’s claim. Primal urges tended to get a bit pissy and stubborn when the rules were broken. The last three years had more than proven that. Not only had she reversed the natural order by biting the alpha first, now she and Hawke had finalized their bond outside of a breeding fever. Small wonder their confused instincts and bodies were rushing to catch up.

“It just wouldn’t be us if we didn’t do it the hard way.” Hawke’s voice was uneven, tight with the effort of forcing out words, but there was no mistaking the cadence of laughter on her breath.

Isabela wondered if anything truly shocked the other woman anymore. Get challenged by an Arishok, find out a friend talks to demons, sprout a new appendage without warning; the Fereldan
rogue took it all in stride with that same cocky smile that promised she’d make a great story out of everything later. A bloom of warmth filled the pirate’s lungs, affection swelling out in a sigh as she leaned in and brushed Hawke’s lips.

“I like the hard way.” She deliberately stroked the alpha’s length, purring as it gave a heavy twitch in answer. This might not have been the preferred sequence of events but it certainly promised every bit as satisfying a result.

“I—Bela!” Hawke’s playful, smartass reply was ripped off her tongue when a skillful thumb dragged against the sensitive underside of her swollen tip.

“You were saying?” Isabela’s brow quirked up in a taunting challenge. Gathering Hawke’s trickles of wetness in her palm made it easier to glide the length, but also more difficult to concentrate on anything besides the feel of that flesh in her hand. The heat pooling in her core was steadily increasing, threatening to become a river that would utterly ruin the bedspread.

“I definitely think I could get used to it,” the low reply was equal parts purr and laughter.

Even when her words passed over raw lips and a dry tongue, voice dragging like wet velvet from the need in her throat, Hawke managed to sound smooth. That cocky ease was infuriating and irresistible all at once. It created a spark of evil in Isabela as she leaned forward, her smile only a teasing breath out of reach. If there was anything she loved more than Hawke’s dashing confidence, it was knowing how to shatter all that poise into splinters.

“Good,” the pirate murmured, carefully staying just beyond the touch of Hawke’s lips. One hand on her mate’s claimed shoulder, the other on her aching cock; Isabela had never imagined such a heady feeling of power, or the infinite tenderness that went with it. “Because I warned you, Hawke.” She rested her forehead against the alpha’s, the whole world consumed in crystal sky and stormy seas. “Tonight you’re all mine.” The words rolled so deliciously off her tongue they could’ve been coated in honey. “Every—.” She swirled her thumb over the weeping slit at the tip of Hawke’s length. “Last —.” A long smooth stroke savoried the contrast of soft and hard, the glide of skin beneath her hand. “—Inch.” The pirate’s fingers wrapped around the alpha’s swelling knot and squeezed down, seducing a deep groan to climb into the air.

For a brief second Isabela saw the pit of desire swell up in Hawke’s eyes, a consuming explosion of darkness and heat. That staggering burst of instinct threatened to surge forward, pin her to the mattress and fuck her into oblivion; and the pirate couldn’t think of a single reason to object. Maybe it was the omega instinct to be taken, or the primal need to join with her mate as deeply as possible. Or maybe it was just that, even while drowning in lust, Hawke’s gripping hands stayed so gentle at her waist.

“You aren’t in heat,” the Fereldan objected, cracks of worry fracturing her gaze. There was that tenderness the omega felt in her mate’s touch. The need to be strong completely subjected to her will to protect. That was how Hawke loved.

“I don’t care.” Isabela forcefully shook her head. This wasn’t just about breeding and claims, instinct and fucking. Alpha, omega and sodding heats be damned; she’d wanted this woman since before either of them knew or understood any of it.

The space between them suddenly felt like too much. Isabela tightened her hand on Hawke’s shoulder, using the other woman’s body to pull herself up to her knees. Every sparking nerve, every fiber of her being wanted to be closer. She let go of the alpha’s cock, a whine of complaint quickly silenced when she moved forward to erase any gap. Isabela slipped her thighs to either side of pale hips until she straddled Hawke’s lap.
The thick heat of the pulsing shaft was pinned between them, painting both of their stomachs with beads of excitement every time it twitched against smooth skin. Strong arms immediately welcomed her without question, the feel of Hawke’s body against her own a perfect marriage of summer rain and winter fires. Everything that was glorious and warm, cool and refreshing, safe and beautiful—that was Hawke. In the soft sigh that swelled the other woman’s chest, Isabela knew that she felt just as right to her mate.

“Hawke.” The pirate dragged her hand from a scarred shoulder up to cradle that delicate jaw while she purred, “My sweet thing.” She adored the way her lover’s breath trembled from just hearing those words. “Nothing you ever do could hurt me. That’s my job, remember?”

A roll of laughter burst off Hawke’s tongue, the unexpected jibe easing tension out of her hands and eyes. Isabela couldn’t deny herself the temptation of those soft lips when they curled up into a smile, enjoying the lingering, lighthearted hum. She could feel Hawke’s doubt slowly vanishing in the slow trade of kisses, melting ever further into their embrace. Flicks of tongue across the pirate’s lips began to grow more insistent, slipping into her mouth to twist away her breath. Isabela had to summon all her strength to pull back. She barely resisted when Hawke’s mouth gave chase, a tiny whimper almost the omega’s undoing.

The disappointment of losing Isabela’s kiss made those dark blue eyes flutter open once more, fixing her attention on whatever the pirate might need. The color of Hawke’s gaze and the subtle rock of her hips were telling in themselves, silent confessions of the desire that had wiped away fears and questions. But the sailor wanted to be absolutely sure. She shifted in Hawke’s lap, spreading wider, smearing slick heat over the alpha’s swollen knot. The hands on her back immediately dropped lower, palming the curves of her ass to hold the omega tight against hard flesh.

“Is that a yes?” Isabela couldn’t help gloating, lips spreading into a fiendish smile. The answer came in a deep roll of Hawke’s hips, the length of her shaft dragging along the pirate’s sex and luring a moan from the back of her throat.

“When have I ever been able to say no to you?” The Fereldan’s grin was no less smug. A second stroke of that cock matched the grip of hands making her grind down. Hawke’s knot slid through soaked folds, catching against the stiff bundle of nerves that sent a violent tremor through Isabela’s entire core. Repeating the move and falling into a rhythm quickly had both women clutching at each other, white knuckled and gasping.

Isabela’s inner muscles quaked like they were going to suck her inside out from the want, the desperate ache to be filled. She instinctively began to disentangle from Hawke, to turn and bend into the position that had been bred into omegas for thousands of years. It had never been one of her favorites. The damned posture reeked of weakness and surrender; two things she’d never done well. But it was different with Hawke. Everything was always bloody different with her. During her heat there had been an entirely visceral thrill in allowing Hawke such liberties, trusting her completely and devastated by the intensity of pleasure that created.

Before Isabela settled into the submissive pose she felt protesting hands pulling her back. There were objections in Hawke’s face again; concern and doubt and the repeated shakes of her head filled the pirate with a nauseating roil of frustration and despair. She said yes, dammit! What did she have to do to convince Hawke that she wanted this? The bloody woman’s noble streak was actually going to cost Isabela her own selfish desires, and that was fucking not going to happen. The pirate opened her mouth to argue, to coax, to damn well threaten if she had to, but before she could make a sound Hawke silenced her in a kiss.

Isabela instantly read the raw desire on the alpha’s lips; the rough heat of it intermingled with
sweetness. Longing and promises blended with the faint tremor of a deeper need. The hands on her waist guided Isabela closer, subtly hinting at her lover’s thoughts. The pirate let out a breath of relief, elated to find Hawke wasn’t denying her but simply asking for something more. Sodding tits, they communicated so much better when they weren’t using words.

Isabela slid back onto her mate’s thighs, enveloped once more in the all-consuming warmth and scent of shivering skin. She snaked her arms around the Fereldan’s neck, trailing a hand through the choppy mess of her hair. Hawke’s sigh swelled against her breasts, pebbled points pressing into soft flesh, breath raising goosebumps down her throat. Their bodies fit together perfectly and Isabela shivered, anticipating how much better it was about to be. The girth of Hawke’s shaft gave a heavy pulse against her belly, perhaps sensing the same thing.

The alpha’s hands tensed on her hips when Isabela tilted towards her ear, lips brushing the sensitive shell. There would be finger-shaped bruises in her flesh tomorrow but it was beyond worth it to feel Hawke’s breath catch, waiting for her to speak. Isabela’s playful smile curled her words as she whispered, “Is this what you want, sweetness?”

A guttural moan was all the reply she needed. Coupled with the hands that reached down her backside, gripping the curves of her ass, Isabela knew her answer. She rose, just enough to position herself directly over the straining cockhead. The flared tip nudged up at her folds, slippery with their combined arousal. A small circle of the pirate’s hips painted the tip with more of her own wetness, not because there wasn’t already an ample flood to ease their coupling, but to feel Hawke’s groan vibrate through them both.

The Champion muffled her tortured sounds against Isabela’s shoulder as the omega slowly sank down. A riot of pleasures ripped her attention apart; the stretch of muscles parting around that broad head, Hawke’s lips ravishing her skin, her sex quivering for more. She wanted to thrust down, to feel the entire length of her lover splitting her apart. Hawke’s hands wouldn’t let her, their firm grip controlling the pace and only easing forward a little at a time.

Isabela was beginning to feel lightheaded with need. The Fereldan was scattering love bites all over the tender flesh of her throat, seemingly oblivious to the urgent pulse in her core that was making the pirate try to rock down, begging to be taken. It took an eternity and Isabela didn’t bother to mask her gasp of relief when the alpha was finally buried deep between her thighs, the swollen knot nestled tight against her clit. Yes.

Hawke reversed direction, pulling back out. NO! The pirate’s every muscle went tight, clenching down to prevent the loss of that exquisite fullness. Then the alpha was pushing back inside, forcing a moan from her lips. The next thrust was just as slow; a deep, luxurious rhythm that refused to waste a fraction of an inch, any single second of their being joined together.

Isabela tried to take control, rolling her hips to coax her lover into a faster pace. But any time she pushed too hard, too quick, the alpha simply stopped moving. Hawke would go completely still and an iron grip would likewise hold the pirate in place. She was caught, helpless under the tender onslaught of kisses urging her to relax, to trust that she would get everything she wanted.

After the fourth stubborn pause and persuasive caress of lips Isabela cursed herself and yielded. With a quiet choke of need she surrendered control and focused only on tightening her grip, keeping her mate as close as possible as she fell into the languid rhapsody of Hawke’s affection. Having finally given herself over, the pirate concentrated on everything she could feel. Heavy pressure pulsed against her inner muscles every time she was filled, shocks of lightning bursting in her core when the flared tip dragged against her swollen front wall, each plush graze and tender sting of Hawke’s lips marking her throat. Isabela’s head fell forward, mouth filling with the dark smell of leather and clean
tasting skin.

There were no words. No shouted curses or whispered affections. The entire room echoed only in mingling, ragged breaths and the wet sounds that punctuated Hawke’s rhythm. Even the abused bedsprings were silent. The awed stillness, a slowly building pressure, all the caresses of hands and lips so intimate that Isabela was certain her body was beginning to glow; it was like a spell, a magic all its own. Her mind drifted in the space between dreams, floating outside herself yet tethered to Hawke’s every touch. She could feel the desire in her core giving greedy spasms, milking slips of excitement out of the throbbing shaft as it plunged into her. Sticky strands of arousal leaked from the alpha’s cock, mixing with her own trickling heat. The combined fluids escaped each time Hawke withdrew, lathering between their skin.

Rather than coiling with need, Isabela’s body was steadily unfurling. The bursts of ecstasy as she felt her mate reach her deepest places kept spreading further, lasting longer, breaking over her senses with the ever stronger tide that would drag her away. The pirate was dissolving in those molten waves, inch by inch. Hawke’s lingering, heavy thrusts were nothing but liquid pleasure pouring in, determined to make her overflow.

Empires rose and fell, stars went dark, and the Maker returned to the Golden City in the time it took for those cascading ripples of warmth to reach all the way through Isabela’s writhing flesh. It was a decadent eternity before she felt tingling euphoria suddenly crest, pooling at the base of her skull. The threads of it pulled taut, tying together muscles and breath, nerves and blood; her body coalesced into a single, symphonic note and Isabela arched into Hawke, head falling back into bliss.

Long rolls of aftershocks quivered through the omega, dragged out by her lover’s rocking hips, sweetened by soft kisses scattered over her shoulder. The excruciating strokes of Hawke’s shaft plunging into her had reduced to the barest of movements, keeping her filled. Her pulsating thickness stayed buried between Isabela’s thighs, almost as deep as it could go.

Almost.

A savage pull tugged at her belly. The pirate didn’t think it was possible to recover from a climax so quickly and return right to its edge all at once. Hawke’s knot rolled against her soaking entrance, catching in the tight ring and making the most delicious moans break across the alpha’s lips as clinging muscles tried to suck it in.

A primal spike of demand flared through Isabela’s body, hooking in and twisting the deepest desires until she couldn’t keep still. She pushed down, urging Hawke to keep going, to sink her knot and claim every last inch of her mate’s body. The surging arousal burning through her veins had to be contagious, the Fereldan groaning as she started to instinctively grind up into dripping heat. The movements were primal and uneven, raw with needs that were willing to cross into pain. Isabela leaned in close to Hawke’s ear, whispering praise and encouragement that kept breaking into pieces with her gasps.

Fingers carded through the pirate’s hair, tangling in wild tresses and pulling. Isabela was too focused on the stretch burning between her thighs, the muscles that were already rippling from fullness but still demanding even more. She’d swear Hawke was swelling even thicker within her walls. The alpha needed to come. A sudden shiver sent goosebumps down Isabela’s spine as she wondered how much would spill inside her, how much she could take. The promise of molten silk against Hawke’s knot had the pressure in her length pounding faster and harder than ever. All of it. The greedy decision came from Isabela’s entire body at once. She was going take all of Hawke.

“Bela,” Hawke’s grunt of her name barely escaped gritting teeth, the jagged sound hitting her ear like broken glass. The pirate didn’t care, not until the hand in her hair gave a fierce tug. “Wait!” The gasp
was so frantic that Isabela couldn’t tell if it was a command or a plea.

“Fuck waiting, Hawke,” the omega panted back with a violent shake of her head, refusing to still her hips. They’d done things Hawke’s way all night. It was beautiful and perfect and overwhelming in all the right ways, but she was absolutely sodding done. Isabela bit at the sensitive part of her lover’s ear and dug her nails harder into flesh, sharp warnings of what would happen if the damned woman didn’t hurry up. Patience could go fuck itself, fast and rough and—oh, holy tits—every bit as deep as Hawke was going to be.

The alpha had both hands in her hair now; working feverishly to pull at her but the harder she pulled, the tighter Isabela buried herself into the nook of her shoulder. She’d sink her teeth in all over again if she had to, just to keep Hawke from stopping. The memory of metal and salt on her tongue tore a soft whine from her throat.

“Bela, please,” the broken words begging in her ear bordered on whimpering. Isabela could ignore any threat or command, but not that sound. She loosened her grip on the alpha, following the fingers that guided her up and back from Hawke’s shoulder. “Like this,” the Fereldan murmured, cradling Isabela’s face in one hand. The pirate found her eyes locked with Hawke’s, the darkened color lit with glittering constellations. She saw as much as heard when her lover spoke again. “I want to see you.”

The whispered explanation made Isabela’s breath hitch, cursing internally at her heart until it caught back up to speed. Fuck the Maker with a rusty shank; no one should be able to cram that much emotion into so few words! So long as Hawke could see her mate’s face she could watch for signs of doubt or pain, but she would be able to see pleasure as well. Isabela read the secret thoughts in the intensity of those devouring eyes. Beneath the protective instinct a deeper current of need bled through, one so unapologetically selfish that it sent a thrill of pride racing down the pirate’s spine.

Hawke wanted to memorize everything that was about to happen, was going to carve it into her mind like the scar on her shoulder. She wants to watch—Isabela could barely contain a throaty moan when she was overcome with the realization—Wants to see me take her knot. A sudden shudder wracked her core, forcing the note of excited pleasure past her lips.

Hawke’s lashes fluttered at the omega’s heavenly sound and the sensation of silken heat squeezing around her. When her eyes found Isabela again there was no breaking away. The alpha’s hands returned to clutch firm curves. This time, as her hips moved and knot ground up against the slick, tight opening, her gaze swore there would be absolutely no stopping. The omega’s urgent rocking ceased, focused only on telling her muscles to soften, to yield. It felt impossible, not with the way her core kept clamping down in spasms, desire too feverish to relax for even a moment and let her lover in.

Don’t stop. That feels—Sodding Maker. Isabela couldn’t tell if the words were in her head, her ears of falling from her lips. She only knew her mouth was a cracked desert from the sounds that kept spilling out, broken cries and needy mewls that would’ve horrified her with anyone else. She wasn’t with anyone else. So good. Ash and tits. . . Feel it. . . . So close.

One hand dragged down Isabela’s thigh, pulling it up, guiding her leg to hook around Hawke’s waist. The shift in angle made the pirate hiss as she was opened wider. Her other leg quickly joined the first, crossing her ankles behind the woman’s back. Hawke’s strength coiled and flexed beneath her, cradling her with absolute confidence. She felt the pure power and control in the alpha’s hands holding her, shaking not from effort but restraint. Thank the Maker this was her mate because the omega knew she had lost that fight years ago.

Isabela’s voice gave way to a trembling groan as Hawke lowered her, letting the pirate’s weight sink
even further down. She felt her sex stretch, sharp aches and heat concentrated around the hard flesh spreading her muscles. Inside. The top of the alpha’s knot was—Flaming tits, yes, inside—splitting her apart. Just knowing that sent a flood of arousal down the omega’s inner walls. The wet heat softened her muscles, seeping all around Hawke’s shaft, and then lower to flow over the aching swell caught in her entrance.

Pants became curses as the arms around Isabela’s waist tightened, pressing her down. The pirate tried to yield but her hips circled and jerked, muscles torn in a war between forcing the strain of Hawke’s knot away and taking it completely in. Anything other than this torture of halfway. The alpha doubled her grip, holding Isabela still as she swiveled and ground into her opening, lathering their combined arousal before a steady, hard pressure stole the pirate’s breath. Her jaw clenched tight, instinct screaming of the echoes of skin between her teeth, nails clawing at Hawke’s back as the alpha drove up into her.

Like that, oh shit yes. . . So deep. . . Almost. The stretch was unlike anything she’d ever known, spreading wider until Isabela was absolutely certain something would tear. She didn’t care if it did, didn’t care if it bloody killed her, she wanted her mate inside.

Please, ohfuckplease. Take. Me. Isabela knew she was the one talking now, a shattering litany that was getting louder. Take everything. Hawke. . . fuckHawke, fucking please, ple—!

Her muscles didn’t make a sound when they bloomed fully open, but there was a slick clicking noise that felt louder than an explosion as the knot finally slipped all the way in, immediately locked in place by Isabela’s quaking, exultant walls.

Tears prickled behind the omega’s eyes and a ragged sob tore out of her throat. Her core fluttered along Hawke’s entire length, trying desperately to tighten around so much fullness and pounding pressure. The groan from the alpha when Isabela squeezed fully open, but there was a slick clicking noise that felt louder than an explosion as the knot finally slipped all the way in, immediately locked in place by Isabela’s quaking, exultant walls.

Oh fuck. Hawke was going to come. Isabela didn’t think her body could get any tighter. She needed to feel her lover’s release, needed it like she needed her own. In the years of her heats, when they were at their very worst for want of her chosen mate, she’d never let herself feel this. She’d never craved to be taken so completely, to give absolutely everything of herself until there was nothing left but the hollow that could be filled by another. Could only be filled by Hawke.

This time, Isabela knew exactly what she was doing when she pressed her lips to the skin of her lover’s shoulder. The alpha’s cock gave a heavy throb, echoing in a breathless gasp against Isabela’s ear as she found the jagged marks she had left so long before.

Isabela. The pirate barely recognized that this time the sound came from outside herself, a hoarse rasp in her ear as Hawke’s entire body began to tremble. Soaked, clinging velvet and thick, hot iron both pulsed frantically when the omega set her teeth perfectly into their scars. There was a split second pause as she carved this moment into her memory, gloried in the perfection that ravished her whole being. Yours. Isabela staked her claim on her mate, once and for all.

The instant teeth broke flesh there was a flood of heat. Not just in the copper trickling over the pirate’s tongue, but deeper in her core than she’d ever felt. For an instant Hawke’s knot swelled impossibly wide, then a shuddering explosion raced from there to the tip of her cock, spilling out in thick streams. The sticky ropes splashed Isabela’s inner walls, setting off a riot of spasms. Her whole body seized, filled with Hawke’s pleasure. Shockwaves crashed through her like stars exploding from her belly, in her bones, her eyes, and—best of all—behind her teeth.

Their first shared release was like a dam bursting; both of them gasping, struggling not to drown. But
rather than fading towards a quivering, exhausted afterglow, Isabela felt her body suspended. She
rose and fell with pleasure flowing through her, swelling and ebbing like breakers. An ocean of bliss.
The tide rushed back and forth between them. Her pulsing sex milked every ounce she could drag
from Hawke’s knot, and the alpha’s hot, twitching bursts painted her inner walls, making them ripple
and grasp over again.

Isabela unclenched her jaw, mouth fumbling up skin to find her lover’s breathless lips. Their loud,
inarticulate cries of relief had been disjointed, ecstasy impossible to capture in one shape. Now,
amidst the trade of kisses and gentle waves of euphoria, words broke free; flowing between them in
gasps and sighs.

_Can’t believe_

_Should’ve done that_

_Always wanted_

_So long ago_

_Waited so long_

_Everything I want_

_All I can give_

_From_

_For_

_With_

_Fuck, just you_

_Take it all. Have it. Have me._

Yours became mine became yours all over again, lines blurring until they vanished. Instincts bled
together. All the primal urges melded into one, filling them both with a single conviction: they were
together. Together, they were whole.

Neither of the lovers remembered how they ended up laying on the bed. On their sides, limbs
interwoven and their bodies still joined, they faced each other with slowly spreading smiles.
Aftershocks stirred between them, curls of pleasure that sweetened languid kisses and the soothing
stroke of hands. Arms grew deliciously heavy, sated in the afterglow, but they couldn’t stop
touching. A shared sheen of sweat coated weary muscles, offering an addictive smoothness to the
glide of fingers over skin. Those silky caresses, their indolent rhythm, the gentle swells of breath
shared across lips; it was all hypnotic. Everything about these minutes—_hours_?—felt like the place a
body dwells between the world and a dream.

“That was,” Isabela paused, searching for words, and then chuckled because there weren’t any.
“We’re never going to be able to just fuck again, are we?”

For some reason, the conversation she’d had with Merrill about sex (one of the many) kept drifting
across her mind. _I don’t ‘make love.’ What I do is only skin-deep._ That confident assertion had made
sense at the time. It had been true, back then. But now? This? Hawke went down to her bones and beyond. The cavalier rogue had found parts of Isabela that she didn’t even know existed, had wound herself into each and every one. The pirate never would’ve imagined such a thought spreading contentment across her lips.

“Of course we’ll fuck.” Hawke’s voice was as hoarse as the pirate’s, both of them sounding like wood washed up from a shipwreck. The Champion followed the argument with her most famous, lopsided smile. “There will be times when we’re fighting and horny. And when we’re drunk. Or when we just want to liven up one of Aveline’s dinners with some noise from the guest room.”

“While she still has one,” Isabela countered with a raspy laugh. “That’s going to be a nursery any day now.”

“Aveline has too much to do as Captain of the guard. She’d never start a family until she was sure it could be safe in Kirkwall.” Hawke slid a hand down the pirate’s back until it reached the tempting curve of her ass, palming that shapely, taut flesh to pull her lover as close as possible.

“Mmmm,” the low note that hummed on Isabela’s tongue could’ve come from the demanding touch or just provided a lazy agreement. “Pity. A litter of ginger-haired soldiers would rain terror through this city. Are we sure she’s not an alpha?”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” The Champion slit a lazy eye open.

“I didn’t know with you,” the pirate immediately countered, one hand brushing sweat-soaked strands away from her lover’s cheek.

“Yes, but I’m special.” Hawke’s smug grin deserved to be tossed violently across the room, but Isabela found herself fondly brushing her lips against it instead.

“Yes,” she agreed, voice softer and lower than before as emotion crept over her tongue. “You are.”

Silence filled the room as they lingered in kisses, only the faintest sounds of lips and breath slipping into the air. A flood of warmth (they’d both lost count of how many) spread through Isabela as the cock nestled between her thighs shuddered and spilled once more. At this rate she was beginning to wonder if the tie would ever release. Hawke’s knot showed no signs of softening, and the taut muscles below Isabela’s navel had begun to curve outward. The pirate rested her hand on the swell, exploring the fullness. Cock, knot and seed. A subtle frisson of pride shivered down Isabela’s spine. She’d taken everything. All of Hawke.

“You don’t have to leave.” The Champion’s sudden words left her lover bewildered. Was there a conversation she didn’t remember?

Hawke’s cheeks turned such a pretty pink as she realized her impulsive outburst wasn’t the persuasive, romantic argument she’d intended. Muscles clenched in her jaw, twitched in her neck as she resisted the urge to bury her chagrin in Isabela’s hair and skin and wait for the foolish words to evaporate on air. Instead, Hawke’s eyes found the warm depths of Isabela’s and she drew a deep breath, steadying herself to try again.

“When we get the ship,” the Fereldan rogue clarified—not if, when—“You don’t have to go. We can hire the important crew on retainer. And as far as the others, a few rounds at the Hanged Man will fetch all the deckhands any ship could need. Some extra time would be good to negotiate prices with the harbormaster, and figure out what cargo is worth carrying. Besides, we’re in the storm season now so it’d be best to wait at least a month or two.”
“Hawke,” Isabela interrupted what was quickly becoming a rant. For all the authority in her voice, the Champion was clearly flustered. It was rather adorable. She leaned up to press a soft, soothing kiss on Hawke’s lips, waiting until she felt the nervous tension melt away before drawing back to smile at her mate. “My sweet thing,” she trailed her fingers over a perfectly sculpted cheek, possessive and awed in a single breath, “I’m not leaving until you’re on the ship with me.”

A rush of relief hit Isabela’s cheek in a sigh, all the tension bleeding out of the alpha’s body as she pressed deeper into her lover’s embrace. Hawke tucked her nose under the pirate’s chin, breathing the scent that made the world and all its wrongs vanish. A dark hand combed through short hair, marveling at the comfort and trust of such an intimate, vulnerable embrace.

The pirate felt a bubble of irony beneath her breath, rolling off her tongue in a light, astonished laugh. She had thought she could resist this brash, sly, reckless woman; that she could stay in control. Hawke had taken command of her without either of them even knowing. Not with any strategic assault or deliberate plan, but almost by accident. Like water wearing through rock, the most patient and powerful force of nature. That was Hawke.

Isabela tightened her arms around her mate, a grateful sigh slipping over her lips. She had always loved the water.

_Omega_

_The End_

Chapter End Notes

Whew!
Finally!
Thanks to all you amazing people who patiently stuck with me through this ride. I'm grateful and guarantee the story wouldn't have been the same without you.
The wind of the Frostbacks was always sharp and cold as daggers. In the upper ramparts of Skyhold it stung like a million needles on skin and found its way through even the densest layers of clothing. Ideal for the heavy drills and sweaty training of a novice army. Torture for the soldiers that had to keep watch at night. The Inquisitor, who frequently found herself pacing her balcony after midnight and chilled as much by the air as her thoughts, had surreptitiously arranged with the quartermaster for flasks of warm, spiced wine to be made available to the guards posted on the battlements overnight. Not so much as to blur their vision or reflexes, but enough to make them stop praying for Corypheus’ army just because death would put them out of their frozen misery.

Despite the biting air, or perhaps in defiance of it, the Champion of Kirkwall spent almost all her time at Skyhold on a parapet overlooking the courtyard below. Elyn found the woman easily enough, vaguely wondering if she’d bothered to explore any of the rest of the hold or simply spent all night staring up at the stars from this balcony. In the days since Hawke’s arrival the Inquisitor had been trying to form a clear picture of the Champion. Reading Varric’s book and hearing his stories was barely a thirsty sip while the woman herself was a deluge. Harnessed perhaps, like broad bursts of lightning channeled into a single rod, but unmistakably a force to be reckoned with.

Thank the Maker she’s on our side. Elyn allowed herself a small smile as she strolled down the steps towards the now familiar figure. She knew the Champion sensed her presence, even if she didn’t turn around. Neither of them cared for the formalities and rituals of rank. Hawke seemed to despise her famed reputation and title almost as much as the Inquisitor was growing to hate her own. Strange that up here, closer to the scar in the skies, it was easier to relax and forget the task of saving the world for a few minutes.

Hawke’s only acknowledgment of company was shifting slightly to one side, the empty space a simple invitation. Elyn rested her elbows on the stone, looking out over the courtyard below. Maker’s balls; the place was a mess. She couldn’t tell if half the people running about were practicing drills or flying into fits of panic. Given what they were learning about the enemy they faced, it might be both.

From the corner of her eye, the Inquisitor regarded her ally, envious of the almost placid confidence in her expression. Did that sort of calm come from having already fought and killed every possible enemy in her life? Or just from accepting that there would always be more? Not for the first time, Elyn noticed that the Champion wasn’t actually looking at the hold spread out beneath them. Hawke’s gaze was fixed to the east, so lost to the distance that the Inquisitor wondered if the other woman was seeing through the mountains and across all of Ferelden, clear to the Amaranthine Ocean. The vague smile tucked in one corner of her lips seemed to suggest that she could.

“I’ve heard you had family and friends in Kirkwall. Where are they now?” Elyn tried to keep her tone casual, free of the smirk that wanted so badly to creep across her face. Even with all the gossip and Varric’s creative bullshit, there were some things she doubted ever made it into the stories.

“When the wardens began acting strangely I had my friend Aveline take my sister out of the Free Marches,” Hawke supplied. She glanced over at the Inquisitor, eyes bright with a sly awareness. She knew exactly what Elyn was asking. In fact, she looked like she knew even more than that.

The Inquisitor waited, arms folded, and one brow cocked in a question that didn’t have to be spoken.
out loud. The Champion chuckled and turned around, resting her back against the parapet. She relaxed against the stone like it was a counter in her favorite tavern. The ease and command of her aura needed only a pint of ale and a barmaid to flirt with.

“Isabela and I never believed in being tied down. When I had to go into hiding, she understood. We’ll see each other again.” Hawke’s simple shrug married calm acceptance with the sort of iron conviction that one usually saw in Qunari zealots. “Until then she’ll be having fun. But hopefully not too much fun.”

Elyn thought back to the pirate she’d met in Ostwick. It was rather difficult to imagine her putting any restraint on her indulgences. Then again, it had been something of a shock to meet Hawke in person and detect the subtle notes of a mated alpha. Whatever opinion she’d formed of Isabela in their brief encounter had clearly fallen epically short. There wasn’t even a sliver of doubt in the Inquisitor’s mind as to who had claimed the famous Champion.

“I hope the two of you don’t have to be apart for long.” Trevelyan looked away from the other alpha, back towards the same mountain range that blocked Hawke’s view of the sea.

“A relationship with a notorious pirate has its advantages. We see each other more often than most people think,” Hawke darted a conspiratorial nod to the courtyard below, particularly the area where a familiar armed figure was slashing the shit out of a dummy. “In fact, I saw Isabela before coming here. She said to send you her regards.”

“She did?” The Inquisitor knew there was no keeping the surprise from her voice. The note of disbelief was probably safer than the suspicion uncoiling in her thoughts.

“No, actually, what she sent were some suggestions of tricks you might want to use on me. She seems to think you need to be ‘pinned to a desk and pounded like a stuck door’ by one of your own kind. Or some words to that effect.” Now the dancing laughter in Hawke’s gaze was utterly unmistakable and it only glittered more brightly at Elyn’s slightly blanched expression.

“Ah, then I suppose she really did tell you everything, didn’t she?” The Inquisitor ran a hand through her hair, at least moderately chagrinned at being caught out. She tried to convince herself it was only the startlingly forward innuendo that created a slight flush to creep up her neck, but there was no denying that the mental picture Hawke painted was terribly beguiling as well.

“She has this terrible habit of being nosy with my papers,” the Champion’s sigh sounded like she was complaining about a poorly housebroken pet. “She found Varric’s letter with your name and burst out in laughter like the time Anders lost a bet and had to chase a greased nug through the tavern.”

“So, naturally, you made her explain,” the Inquisitor nodded. Sensible enough. And she’d never once assumed the pirate had any reason to keep their brief but thorough introduction private. Still, there were certain basic rules of etiquette when it came to mates. Elyn stole a quick glance at the other alpha and steeled herself. “I didn’t know who she was when we met, Hawke. If I had, if I’d known that she was taken . . .”

“A woman like Isabela can’t be taken,” Hawke immediately interrupted, but with amusement rather than offense. “She gives herself. How much and with who is her choice.”

“And you’re alright with that?” The Inquisitor knew she should just be silent and grateful that her fellow alpha didn’t want to rip her throat out, but shocked curiosity got the better of her.

“I know what I have with Isabela. No one else can take that away.” The Champion’s gaze grew
wistful once more, the soft shape of her smile so contented that it would make the portraits of transfigured Andraste seem bitter.

“You are a very lucky woman, Hawke.” Elyn turned back to look at the hold spread out beneath her once more. What must it be like to know where you stand and who stands with you? Better yet, knowing that the one person you wanted and needed most would always be there? The Inquisitor wasn’t sure if it was her own insecurity or a dash of jealousy that created the sad hollow beneath her ribs.

“So are you, from what I hear.” The Champion bumped her shoulder once, a playful echo of the mischief in her eyes. “If things don’t work out with whoever it is you’re busy pining over, I’ll keep the offer open. Isabela spoke very highly of you.”

With a final, knowing smirk, Hawke headed off the battlement, leaving the Inquisitor alone. Just her and her thoughts and the icy wind. Maybe she could be lucky. Lucky like Hawke. Maybe when the world was in chaos really was the perfect time to try something impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-DONE!

End Notes

Each writer’s spin on A/B/O is a little different, I hope the details of mine will become clear as the story unfolds but, if not, feel free to drop me a "hey, asshole, this makes no sense" comment and I’ll try to explain. On that note, feel free to criticize/compliment/castrate -whoops, wrong word - anything you like. I’m new to Ao3 and this dynamic so I’m really interested in feedback.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!