



A Heaven to Reach For (Infinite Grace #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Ara is a festival for spring, for the return of clear skies, for beginnings.

People dance, drink, and decorate themselves in blue capes or ribbons, or, for the more bold, with aras blooms, which leave behind a blue stain when crushed.

A splash of this blue across the lips indicates someone is open to kisses, while a chain of the delicate blooms in their hair means they are open to more than kissing, whatever that may be.

It is a tradition older and perhaps stronger than the disapproving Church, yet it is still a surprise for Owin, one of the Duke's guardsman, to find the Duke's little priest-mage at the festivities.

Owin has long been captivated by the stern, awkward postulant with a habit of broadcasting his moods with sparks of magical energy.

Seeing Maschi's lips stained blue finally puts a name to the ache Owin carries in his chest whenever he thinks of the tiny mage.

But Maschi is young, learned, and pretty as well as nearly a priest.

Not meant for an older, battered guard with no faith or learning.

But Ara is a day—and a night—for love, and magic, and perhaps even grace, if that is to be found in the heart of one scarred giant.

When Maschi puts aras blooms in his hair and speaks of Heaven, Owin must make a choice; reach for his, or leave Maschi to dream alone.

m/m romance

Infinite Grace-

In a historical countryside of fields, and thieves, and greedy clergy, and displaced farmers, where dukes oversee the realm on behalf of a distant king and nobles sometimes turn a blind eye to the lives of the peasantry, ancient traditions and magic have not entirely given way

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EVERYONE, or nearly everyone, from the surroundings estates and farms had come to the village for the festival.

The streets were loud with music and singing as well as the tinkling of bells and the pounding of homemade drums as lovers found their way to each other and were cheered on by amused crowds.

The market was packed with stalls painted as blue as the spring sky, and everyone who passed Owin bore some token of the same color.

Ara was a fest for springtime, for the end of gray skies and the start of blue.

A day to dance and spend coin foolishly, to eat cakes or drink too much, and to ignore the work to be done—at least until morning.

But other people's hangovers were not Owin's business. He had only to avoid his own.

He was reaching the age where a night of drinking affected him more the next day than it used to, and he was due to rise early, so he was content to sip the ale he was offered as he made his way to the public house where his friends were no doubt already enjoying the sunshine.

The Duke was to ride in the morning to look over some of his land, which meant that, although the danger would be minimal, a guard or two would still be required.

Owin was tired, but he had volunteered knowing perfectly well his comrades would

be worse for the wear by daybreak.

His Grace would appreciate Owin's clear head nearly as much as Owin would.

The Duke himself was not in the village.

He did not, in his words, celebrate peasant, pagan sorts of things, but recognized that not even the Church could fully stamp out this tradition.

All across the farmlands of the south, people were occupied with planting and sowing, hard work that would hopefully lead to plenty.

Except for today. For one day, they would stop and celebrate the end of winter, and wear capes or hats of spring sky blue, or trinkets of pale blue polished stone, or mark designs in blue dye on cheeks and arms bared to the warming sun.

The dye took a few days to fade, but no one would mind.

And if a bottle of dye was too expensive, it was easy enough to steal a few aras blooms from the fields and crush them to keep some of their bright color for yourself.

A smear across the lips was to welcome kisses, but the flowers could also be worn about the face and head to indicate reception to more.

Some lovers found each other for the day, and others for much longer than that.

The bells would chime for all, at least until sundown, when the celebrations would slowly turn more private.

A day for sowing, the Duke had once said, years ago when Owin had been new to the area and the Duke's service. A jest Owin understood now, and appreciated as he

sidestepped a couple wrapped around each other in order to enter the sheltered alcove and garden in front of the Black Dog.

He regretted not taking the time to do more than splash water on his face to wash away the dirt from his travels when he spotted five or six of the Duke's other guards lounging around the tables in front of the pub, all of them in freshly laundered tabards, with ribbons of blue around their arms or feathers of blue stuck in their caps.

Owin sighed, although a moment later he was smiling again. He would rather be here than still in his shared room, trying to make something of his face.

Aubrey hailed him first, sharp-eyed even with emptied cups in front of him. "So His Grace has returned?" he called out, causing several of the others to turn to Owin and greet with him with cheers. "Where is Isaac?"

"He'd rather sleep, he says." Owin sank gratefully onto a bench near Aubrey, and exchanged his cup of ale for another, this one half-full.

Isaac was a good guard, but older, and often laid abed with the effects of past injuries.

But the Duke rewarded loyalty, and Isaac refused proper retirement, so Isaac continued to ride with the Duke.

Owin had not minded doing the majority of the work, but the journey had been long and they had pushed hard to be back in time for the festival; the Duke was expected to be in residence, even if he did not participate.

Then Owin had walked most of the way to the village before getting a ride from a farmer's family going in the same direction.

His hair was damp on his forehead and beneath his much dirtier tabard, his shirt was

sticking under his arms. He took a generous drink of someone's ale before turning to lean against the table and look over the crowd.

Denys, Aubrey's second-in-command, was in a chair with his hat over his face, perhaps sleeping already.

Bartlemeo was at another table, grinning at a server who was pretending to ignore him.

Next to him was Margaret, one of the Duke's more unusual choices, younger than Owin but steady in a fight.

At the end of that table sat a group of three; poetic Dahl, the ever-calm Wolfe, and one who was not a soldier at all, Maschi, in his mage's tunic of black and his brown priest's cowl, with not a speck of blue on him.

It was not unheard of for a priest or a priest-mage to attend the festival.

It was, as the Duke might point out, not a sin to enjoy the sunshine, or even to exchange kisses, though some priests might frown.

It was, however, unusual to see Maschi out with them, a cup in front of him, even if he did not drink from it.

Owin quickly moved his gaze to his ale then over to Aubrey. "The little mage is with us?"

"Wolfe and Dahl bullied him." Aubrey grinned slightly at the words, as if he had witnessed it. "They have no fear of him, which means they are fools or very wise."

Owin looked again in their direction. Wolfe was instructing Maschi on how to plait

his long hair, and Maschi was frowning but attempting it, frustrated sparks of magic in the air around him as he did.

That Owin could identify them as sparks of frustration was telling, but he kept it to himself.

He loved his friends but their teasing could be endless.

“I think they are wise,” he said at last, watching Maschi’s nimble fingers pick up the task, and the glimpses of Maschi’s skinny wrists as his sleeves fell back.

At first glance, there was nothing about Maschi to make anyone wary.

He was little, as Owin had named him, although most people were little to Owin.

Maschi had mussed, dark brown hair, chopped short, that tried its best to curl but settled into waves unless Maschi forgot to let one of the older priest-mages trim it for him.

His face was little. His nose was little.

His eyebrows were thin, though often drawn together in a frown over his eyes, which were intent, always, like a hungry falcon’s.

Maschi was young, somewhere between twenty and twenty-three, but seemed both younger and older depending on whether he was asked to discuss theoretical magic or something as earthy as this festival.

He ought to have been a proper priest by now.

Owin was fairly certain of that, if not the reasons for Maschi’s lack of vows.

Despite his age, Maschi was still under the tutelage of the Duke's priest-mages, which made him a lower-ranking mage, Owin estimated, without knowing much of the distinctions between mages, or priests, for that matter.

He was lower-ranking likely because of his manner.

Maschi held no modesty when it came magical abilities and training—his, or anyone else's—and spoke the truth when a craftier person might have kept silent.

In his defense, people did ask Maschi his opinion before he voiced it. But even the Duke had learned by now to only ask if he wanted an uncompromising answer.

For all that his judgement was valued by the Duke, Maschi himself was forever at odds.

The three priests who saw to the souls of those in the Duke's domain, two of them mages, were decades older than him.

He spoke of no family. A handful of the guards were near his age, and of those, it was mostly Wolfe and Dahl who sought him out and dragged him along with them from time to time.

There he would sit, awkward and serious, on the edge of their circle, and frown in confusion at the ribbing and jests that flew back and forth among the guardsmen.

Maschi was not a soldier of any description, and Owin suspected he was not a priest at heart either, because he did not speak of the Lord as other priests or postulates did.

It was more likely that there had been no other path for Maschi with his lack of family, and the mid-country accent still to be heard in his voice, and his stiff manner.

He would not be the first priest to quietly go his own way, and if Owin knew the Duke—and he did—the Duke was more than aware of it and was turning a blind eye, as he often did so long as the sins committed were not unforgiveable.

And when it came to sins, even murder was often smiled upon by the Church.

Not that Owin would say so aloud. Not even while safely in the service of a powerful man like the Duke, who was fond of Owin for his battered face and easy humor, and of course, for his sword.

Dahl was leaning in, and whatever his whisper was about darkened Maschi's cheeks and made Wolfe fall forward to laugh, ruining the efforts with his hair.

Maschi stiffened, as he usually did when he was the subject of a joke, but after a glance at the other two, he exhaled and merely sat, silent, with a slight curve to his lips.

Combined with his frown, it made him look lost and a bit lonely.

Dahl took care of that, picking up one of Maschi's hands and placing it back in Wolfe's hair. Whatever he whispered this time made Maschi blink rapidly.

Recalling where he was, and Aubrey's sharp attention, Owin finally looked away, concealing his surprise to find Steph next to him, pushing forward a basket of small cakes.

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Owin took one. He was ravenous, but had wanted to rest more before seeking out a meal.

“The trip to see the King,” Aubrey began, and Steph groaned.

So did Denys, not asleep after all. “Not on the day of the festival,” he complained. “Tomorrow.”

Aubrey gave in with a sigh, as though he wasn’t still thinking over their assignments. “Tomorrow.”

Owin made a face, not objecting to the journey, only that it came so soon after the last one, and he had yet to rest or even bathe. He took another cake.

“Stops for my cakes but does not even come in to greet me.” A light smack on his shoulder drew Owin’s attention up to Beau, the daughter of the pub’s owner, who loomed over him only because he was seated.

Her lips were smeared blue and she was smiling, so Owin raised himself up enough to kiss her cheek, and shook his head at all the calls and whistles he received for it.

For a moment, Beau’s gaze was somewhere else, and Owin followed it to Margaret, who was interested solely in her wine, it seemed.

“I think Beau was aiming for more, Owin,” Steph chided, leading Owin to sigh.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” remarked Aubrey, in a particular way, and briefly met

Owin's stare.

It was, of course, wise to be careful. The ways of the Church were ever-changing, and often twisted to suit the desires of clergymen Owin would never meet, much like the laws handed down by rulers Owin had never heard of.

But there were many sins that did not seem especially sinful, and this country had never completely given way to the Church, and the Duke was as reasonable a man as a noble could be.

Steph was simply oblivious to what would have been obvious to others, even though many of the other guardsmen were far less discreet.

Owin looked up to Beau again and winked. "The lady has her sights on something far prettier than my ugly face."

Steph scoffed.

Denys raised his head, then his hat, to peer at them both. "That face has rested on plenty of pillows, as I recall—including mine."

Steph jerked back in surprise and nearly fell from the bench. A laugh slipped out of Beau, who hurried away in the next moment, sliding up to the next table to place some cakes in front of Margaret.

Aubrey took a long drink, then put down his cup with a decided air.

"It's not a terrible face to wake up to," he announced, drawing a shocked gasp from Steph and a giddy sort of cackle from someone at the other table.

"Although, I must be honest and say that we were not often face-to-face the night

before.”

“Mary’s tits,” somebody swore from somewhere around them, disapproving or perhaps disgusted.

Owin gazed at Aubrey for another moment, his eyebrows likely up to his hairline, before Denys made a noise of outrage.

“I thought I was the only one. Owin, you stealer-of-hearts.” He grinned for it, and Owin fixed him with a look that was only mildly disgruntled.

Dahl had a hand to his throat like a startled and virtuous maiden, though he was anything but. “Don’t tell me—you were sharing a blanket for warmth.”

“No, that was me,” Bartlemeo offered, “though that really is all we did. Well, mostly.” He paused. “The nights were very cold, and he has very big hands.”

Owin straightened up. “And you’ve a sweet mouth, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Dahl clapped his hands together in excitement, ignoring the wrinkled nose of the server passing near him. “Isn’t it though?” he asked Owin. “I have often thought so.”

“Often?” Wolfe wondered, the quiet question nearly drowned out by Beau’s giggles as she left.

“The lot of you,” Margaret despaired, though in truth, there was much fondness in her voice as well.

“A guard’s life is often lonely, with few opportunities to marry, or partner,” Dahl responded breezily. “Who wouldn’t occasionally turn to a friend who is built like a tree?”

“A twice-broken nose, an ear swollen from too many punches, and countless scars are all easily overlooked if you’re after a companion for one night and your only requirements are friendly and large.” Owin smiled despite his words.

Wolfe broke the resulting silence. “Now I feel cheated. I’ve only ever known Owin’s kisses, though friendly is not how I would describe them.”

His smile grew when Dahl turned to gape at him. Maschi, between them, had also let his mouth fall open.

“Hear, hear,” added Aubrey playfully, drawing Owin’s attention back. “We should all pity those who have never experienced Owin’s kisses.”

If Owin had been eating, he would have choked. He coughed regardless, thinking of his dull brown hair, now matted with sweat, and the bashed-in bridge of his nose, and the misshapen shell of his ear, and his hands, big, certainly, but not elegant as Aubrey’s were.

“Perhaps today is the day someone else will discover them,” Denys suggested, gently enough to remind Owin of their younger years, and past, easy intimacies.

“From the sound of it, it’s far too late for anyone here.

” Margaret could not conceal her smile this time.

She did not mention herself, although she could have.

Though, then Owin supposed the two of them had done their share of drunken cuddling, which may have counted in the tally it seemed the others were making, but not kissing, which may not have.

Margaret looked sly. “Except possibly Steph.”

Owin pursed his lips but pointedly said nothing. Steph sputtered, and that was all it took to have Bartlemeo and Dahl roaring with laughter.

“Was it a very cold night for you too, Steph?” Bartlemeo asked.

“I was drunk, and I—” Steph, wisely, cut himself off, only to hiss at Bartlemeo. “It was no more than I did with you.”

Dahl laughed harder, pausing only to wipe a tear from his eye. “This is the best Ara in the history of them.”

“Am I the target of the day?” Owin wondered idly. “These were hardly secrets. I highly doubt that all of you are surprised.” He was a little surprised. None of them seemed that deep into their cups. “This is—mostly—far in the past.”

“There must be someone,” Bartlemeo mused, ignoring him, “aside from Maschi, I mean.”

Owin’s gaze went to Maschi without his conscious direction.

Maschi was still, his hands flat on the table, his head tilted as though he had been glancing back and forth between Dahl and Wolfe.

His cheeks were dark. His lips remained parted, perhaps the softest Owin had ever seen them.

But it was only for one more moment. Then he shut his mouth and scowled down at the table, and nothing short of divine magic could have taken the tension from his shoulders.

It was a joke at Owin's expense, not his, and it was not done maliciously, but Owin was too far away to explain it and doubted Maschi would listen to him if he tried. He and Maschi were not close in the way Maschi was with Dahl or Wolfe.

Wolfe must have had the same realization about Maschi's discomfort because he said something to him in a voice too low to be heard at the distance and patted his hand.

Or perhaps Maschi's discomfort was not about that at all, and Maschi was a young man, near to be a priest, who was shocked at what he'd heard.

Or perhaps Maschi could not believe so many people would seek out Owin for a bedpartner.

Owin did not make a dashing figure like Aubrey or Wolfe.

"No chance for you there, Owin," Steph remarked, with sympathy but also lightly, because it was only a joke among them.

"I did not expect there to be," Owin answered and doubted Steph would bother to read his tone.

Maschi looked up. He was still and severe and sharp, like an unhappy priest, after all... or a young man furiously embarrassed with nowhere to hide.

For that, Owin looked away first, to his ale and the last pair of Steph's cakes. He took one, merely to annoy his friend, and kept his eyes on that for some time.

HE could not be comfortable. Owin did not like think someone was angry with him if he had done nothing to deserve their anger, and liked even less feeling that one of his friends was upset with him.

But this was a different sensation altogether, something akin to guilt, although he would not have called it shame.

He had nothing to be ashamed of. It had not been his choice to start publicly discussing his past affairs—if they could even be called that.

And he refused to feel sorry for acts done with mutual comfort and pleasure in mind.

And yet, Owin was not at ease. He generally avoided priests, and his ability to read was limited and slow, so he wasn't knowledgeable of their Book or their rules about such things.

The little mage might not be a priest in his heart, but his education would have remained the same, and there was no telling if he knew or suspected that two of the priests tasked with teaching him were often found in each other's beds.

But if he condemned either the acts between men or the casual nature and number of those acts, then his friendship with Wolfe, to say nothing of Dahl, was odd.

Dahl was, at the moment, sitting at the opposite end of Owin's table, rather loudly flirting with nearly everyone who passed by. Aubrey had vanished with some bold creature, and Steph had left some time ago, seeking out trouble, if Owin had to guess.

Wolfe had gotten up the moment Dahl had left his table, off to parts unknown, leaving Maschi alone and still obviously unhappy at the center of a half-circle of empty cups.

Perhaps it was a different matter to know for certain that one's friends sometimes engaged in sinful behavior.

Maschi was a sheltered thing. He did not venture out into the world unless it was at

the Duke's command, and even then, he stayed among the priests or the guards.

He did not go to inns or wine shops, or even to the places in the village where, on days like today, there would be dancing.

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Owin imagined Maschi would be an awkward dancer, at least at first. He would likely not believe that anyone would want to dance with him, a notion which added to the ache that lived in Owin's chest whenever he thought of their falcon.

He would assuredly not believe it of Owin, who could never manage to speak to Maschi about anything but the Duke's business or their assigned tasks.

It was difficult, when that gaze was fixed on him, to not think of all the ways they were different, all the ways Owin was a man of action, not faith, and how Maschi had grown since his younger years, but still had bones that looked as fragile as reeds, while Owin was as bruised as a village bully.

The trick to learning about Maschi was watching him covertly, and listening when his friends talked of him, and, once or twice, catching him when he was ill or too tired to control his tongue.

Or, notoriously, being present when someone had put brandy in Maschi's tea and not told him until after Maschi had spent an hour extolling the virtues of experimentation and reason and explaining earnestly to Owin and everyone else that magic was as natural as the sunrise and the coming of winter.

Bartlemeo had assumed Maschi had seen him put the brandy in his cup and had been appropriately apologetic. Maschi had blushed for a sennight and never spoken of it again.

He would do that for this, as well. Owin had no doubt. And frown over it, in his way, until exhaustion or more hidden brandy unleashed his every thought on whoever

happened to be nearest.

Owin stood up with a sigh, and stretched to crack his bones before he picked up the basket holding the last cake and approached the other table.

His heart was beating fast, but there was no one to know but him.

He pushed aside some cups to set the basket down before Maschi's slender hands, and sat near Maschi but still at a distance.

Then he sighed again without looking over.

"I need a moment of quiet." He gestured loosely toward Dahl in explanation.

"You should have rested."

The low, yet fierce statement tricked Owin into turning, and he was instantly pinned by a pair of dark eyes. He had to swallow, then try to remember the subject of discussion, only to realize he could not.

"What?" he asked at last.

"Before coming here." Maschi's voice was husky and soft but his words were abrupt and direct. "It was a rough journey you had. And fast, to make it here in time for Ara. Isaac's presence also meant you had to work harder to help him. You should have rested."

Whoever had cut Maschi's hair last must have used a blunted razor. The fringe across his brow was terrible, and only made his stare harder to hide from.

"His Grace was impatient to be home," Owin said despite the apology that sprang

into existence on his tongue. “He was not the only one. People love the festival.”

Maschi blinked and reached up to the sweep his fringe back, though it immediately fell over his forehead once again.

“Oh.” His short tone did not necessarily mean he was angry or upset; that was how he nearly always spoke.

“I thought perhaps there had been danger. It’s a relief to know there wasn’t.

” His eyebrows came together briefly in a familiar, charming scowl that spoke of worry, not ire.

“His Grace should take more mages with him when he travels, whatever the King’s rules. ”

A paranoid but clever king had once banned the nobles from traveling with too many guards or too many mages to keep small armies from forming, and the law remained in effect. Although the Duke rarely brought his mages on short trips, or even that many guards.

“You have made that suggestion many times.” Owin put his chin in his hand while the ripples of thought and indignation passed through Maschi’s face.

“It is dangerous. For all of you,” Maschi insisted in dramatic bursts before expelling a breath. “He could at least bring better ones.”

Owin could not resist a smile. “Such an assessment of your peers.”

He received an even more intent study for that, until Maschi seemed to recognize that he was being teased. He eased down his shoulders, then looked away. “They are not

my peers. I am not a priest. They would not allow me to be.”

Again, words appeared on Owin’s tongue. But he swallowed down his questions about whether Maschi wanted to be a priest, because he did not want to hear the answers. He cleared his throat. “Your peers,” he repeated, deliberately, because Maschi’s lower status had to be a formality.

Maschi glanced at him but this time did not argue.

With that, Owin dared a compliment, or as much of one as Maschi would accept. “Aubrey might mention it to the Duke again, if prompted.” Prompted by Owin. “You’re not wrong about the rest. And I, for one, would not mind you with us.”

Owin had once fought five men by himself and lived to tell the tale. He still had to look away from Maschi’s sharp stare. “What?” He finally asked, his gaze on the air between the two tables and not one tiny, stern half-priest.

“I would stay out of trouble.”

The quiet words almost felt like an offer.

Owin turned to give Maschi a frown of his own. “No, you absolutely wouldn’t. But,” he inclined his head, “His Grace seems more amused than worried at the trouble you cause.”

A mistake.

Maschi tensed up again and hid his hands beneath the table. “I am very amusing.”

“I didn’t say I was amused,” Owin added, but had to be honest. “More terrified, usually.” Soon enough, Maschi was going to speak the truth to the wrong person at

the wrong time and get himself into real danger.

Maschi leaned forward earnestly. “I mean no harm to come to the Duke, or t...t...to any of you.”

Maschi’s stammer was usually a sign he was deeply bothered by something, or simply very tired.

Owin put a hand out to calm him. “It’s my job to be terrified, little mage. It helps me pay attention.”

Maschi was not calmed. A ball of greenish-blue light formed above his head, then sparked and exploded into dozens of flashes of light, there and gone. Several of the people nearby gasped. Some probably hurried away. Owin didn’t spare them a glance.

Maschi sat up and narrowed his eyes. “You aren’t terrified when the other priests are there.

” He took a deep breath, then let it out, and the feeling in the air, like the start of a storm, slid into nothingness.

Owin didn’t move despite that, staying close and watching Maschi blink away pained bewilderment.

“I know I... I know you....” Maschi took another breath.

“You all think of me as a strange child, but I thought you at least...” He turned his head and looked down, and when he finally spoke, his voice was as quiet as it ever was.

“You’re going to miss out on the festival you rode so hard to get to. Ara is...well, you know what it is for.”

Owin followed Maschi’s gaze to the strip of blue cloth tied around his thigh. When Owin raised his head, Maschi was already pushing himself to his feet.

He walked with deliberate, graceful steps to the other table, where he sat next to Dahl, who immediately welcomed him with the outstretched arms of a drunken friend and began to pet Maschi’s hair.

The confusion all over Maschi’s face at the action made Owin heave another long sigh and get to his feet.

He went into the pub, squinting at the darkness indoors, and purchased another ale as well as a tart liquor made from cherries, served in a cup so small it may as well have been a thimble.

He brought both back out into the sunshine and held the thimble before Maschi’s face until it was taken carefully in both of Maschi’s hands.

Dahl grinned up at Owin for the gesture. Maschi seemed even more confused than before.

“I dislike my friends being mad at me,” Owin explained to both of them, but particularly to one perplexed mage.

Maschi tipped his head back to study him. “Are we friends?”

The grave question was a surprise and all the more painful for it.

Owin stood for a moment, absorbing the blow, then nodded. “Yes. Perhaps not the

closest. But yes, I would like to think so.”

The smile, when it came, would have been enough to unseat him if he’d been riding.

It softened the line of Maschi’s brows, made his cheeks fuller and his eyes gleam.

Owin’s throat locked. He wondered foolishly when Maschi had become captivating instead of intimidating, although, in truth, Owin had been captivated for some time now.

Then the smile disappeared and Maschi’s gaze became unrelenting once again. “But I am not like your other friends.”

“No,” Owin answered before he could think better of it.

Maschi’s expression shuttered.

He lowered his head, then put the small cup to his lips and downed the contents in one swallow before setting the cup forcefully on the table. Startled, Dahl shot Owin a stern glance before turning his back on him to wrap his arm around Maschi’s stiff shoulders.

With little else to do now that he had once again made things worse instead of better, Owin took his ale and returned to the other table. He contained his sighs but thought some of his despair must have stayed in his face.

Beau appeared, her clothing askew, red marks down her throat, and patted Owin’s shoulder when he looked up. “You have hours until sundown. You’ll find someone yet,” she told him sympathetically and left him to wish he had stayed back in his room, after all.

EVENTUALLY, Owin went in search of food, but after that, chose not to leave his comfortable position in front of the pub for what was left of the afternoon.

The others came and went. Denys finally got a nap, his head in his arms while slouched over a table.

Wolfe reappeared, apparently untouched although appearances could be deceiving.

Margaret joined Owin for his meal before leaving for the dancing, Beau hopefully meeting her there.

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Madame Carel, who owned the pub, emerged to sweep empty cups from the tables and to take bets on the number of babies to be born that winter.

There would be no making of babies for Owin, but he had cheerfully offered some coin for the pool, knowing the wildness that would begin once the sun went down.

Ara might be a festival of sunlight, as well as spring and beginnings, but many people liked their tumbles to happen in the dark, when the lack of light could make even an alley seem private.

He closed his eyes for a time, drifting into sleep and returning to awareness when the sky had shifted to a much darker blue and someone had propped themselves up next to Denys's abandoned chair instead of sitting in it and had fallen asleep right there on the ground.

If Owin was going to find someone for a moment of fun, he ought to go soon.

But he stayed where he was, sipping ale and rising only to stretch or to find a place to piss, prodding at the ache in his chest without any hope of ridding himself of it, thinking of his own foolishness over and over, and the moment where it had seemed that Maschi had regarded him well before Owin had set him to worrying again.

Music carried through the air, louder than before, while Owin contemplated the effort and benefit of finding someone else, at least for the night, or for an hour. He had reached no conclusions when Dahl plopped down next to him, seemingly from nowhere.

Dahl's tabard was missing and his eyes were glassy. He pursed his lips. "You look so sad, Owin, and on such a day. Why are the people I care about inclined to melancholy or studiousness?"

Because he also cared, Owin did not ask Dahl where his tabard was, or where Wolfe was, usually to be found at Dahl's side. "It's a beautiful day, and I have food, and drink, and friends. Why should I be melancholy?"

Dahl harrumphed in an obvious, drunken way, and rested his cheek in his hand, half-falling over the table. "Why indeed?" He tapped his nose as if that meant something. "I'm on to you. Today, I finally understand... you, at least. Not everyone."

"You have had too much, Dahl." Owin would have joined him not long ago, but had a feeling it might make things worse if he tried it now.

"Yes," Dahl agreed. "But in the absence of... well... in the face of those absences, so what?" He likely thought he made sense. "You know... Owin... it has been a distressingly lonely day. Our evening does not have to be the same."

He arched his eyebrows hopefully.

Owin studied Dahl's messy curls and his full mouth, then looked over to the empty space next to him. He once more identified the ache that had been plaguing him for much longer than today, but with it, finally, the reason he still sat here alone.

He was a fool, but a polite one. "I'm sure it would be a joy and a pleasure, as it was before."

"But?" Dahl's pout was close to adorable.

"But," Owin agreed, "I don't think so."

Dahl continued to pout but not much more than that.

He also did not seem very surprised. He leaned even farther against the table, then said, “ Ah ,” in a tone of understanding, before repeating, “Ah!” but this time with shocked delight.

He straightened. “It seems the Flowers of the Festival have found our dear little priest.”

“ What ?” The question burst from Owin far too loudly, but Dahl did not seem to notice as he scrambled to his feet to cross over to Maschi as the mage slipped into the yard.

There was a careless smudge of blue across Maschi’s mouth, a stain that would last for a day or two even with scrubbing. Maschi was composed despite that, and how someone had clearly ruffled his hair.

Those more dedicated to the spirit of the day were often called the Flowers of the Festival, and it was too easy to imagine a group of young people dancing around a sweet-faced, if too thin, Maschi, and teasing him for his frowns and calling for him to join the fun.

It was easier still to imagine one of them gently holding Maschi’s chin while drawing their fingertips over his lips to paint them.

Blue stain on red or brown lips made dark reds or purples.

Maschi’s mouth was as bright and tempting as a berry.

He did not look kissed, for all that. Owin told this to his pounding heart.

Maschi nodded to whatever questions Dahl asked him and permitted himself to be dragged to the other table and his face inspected.

Dahl's grin was enormous, and his intention for Maschi to remain there, in public, with his lips marked and ready, was alarmingly clear.

Dahl glanced over to Owin, eyebrows up, and when Owin dragged his attention away from Maschi to look at him, Dahl winked before ducking down to plant a short, enthusiastic kiss squarely on Maschi's lips.

Owin drew in a breath.

Maschi's hands came up, then dropped. He stared at Dahl intently as Dahl pulled back, and it might have been how Dahl's smile slowly gentled, but after another moment, Maschi smiled in return and touched his fingers to his lips.

Dahl was a good choice, Owin thought distractedly, the music a whining hum at the back of his mind.

Dahl was someone Maschi liked and trusted, and that kiss had been friendly.

Anything else would be friendly as well, with Dahl.

With Dahl and Wolfe, Owin's thoughts added helpfully, although Owin had no basis for such an idea except the closeness of the pair.

The idea was ridiculous. Maschi was, in some way, regarded as a priest, who lived a lonely life. He touched his mouth now like someone new to kisses. He would not... They would not....

"Why, Maschi," Aubrey's voice carried through the din and the rush in Owin's ears,

“I see you’ve succumbed to the spirit of Ara.”

Hardly drunk, but with a loose grace that spoke of recent pleasure, Aubrey sauntered into the yard and straight to Maschi. Dahl moved smoothly out of his way, and Owin had a moment to blink before Aubrey was tipping Maschi’s face up and sweeping his thumb along his painted lips.

Maschi brought his hands up again, this time leaving them to tremble against Aubrey’s forearms. His eyes were wide as Aubrey took his time leaning in. He did not close them, though Aubrey’s kiss was soft and slow and made him curl his hands around Aubrey’s wrists.

There were others in the yard with them. Owin spared a glare for some of them at their vocal objections but was otherwise frozen. Aubrey eventually pulled back and swept a hand through Maschi’s hair before standing straight.

Aubrey was next to Owin only moments later, yawning and calling for a drink, not seeming to notice Owin’s distraction as he began to talk about the trip to see the King.

Maschi’s sideways glance over to them was there and gone.

Aubrey was a good kisser. Owin knew it well. Maschi might consider Aubrey a better friend. He was also a good choice if Maschi was going to take more from this day.

“Oh, hang the King,” Owin muttered despite telling himself all of that, and ignored the shocked, then thoughtful look Aubrey gave him.

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IT only grew worse from there.

Dahl kissed Maschi twice, apparently deciding that he needed to do better than the first. Steph appeared, seemingly just to press a quick, embarrassed peck to Maschi's cheek.

Denys was nearly as slow and torturous as Aubrey had been.

By the time Bartlemeo was done, ostentatiously urging Maschi back and cupping his cheek to kiss him breathless, the people around them had learned to silence their complaints or face two or three united, implacable guardsmen.

Wolfe was the real danger. Of course, it was Wolfe, who, without a trace of drunkenness as an excuse, swept his tongue into Maschi's mouth until Maschi made a small, startled, hungry sound that carried to Owin's table where Owin still sat like a stone, unwanted, and Dahl sank his teeth into his bottom lip but could not contain his whimper.

Those in the crowd not appalled or disgusted began to cheer, banging cups for drums, or shaking whatever bells they wore to show their approval.

Red and yellow sparks flew up into the air around the two of them, like traces from a bonfire. Owin surged to his feet at last while everyone's attention was elsewhere.

Inside the pub, it was dark but for candlelight, and there was not a spark to be seen.

Owin ordered wine and drank it, and thought it nearly the same color as Maschi's

kiss-swollen lips.

What an experiment for their studious mage.

What a way for him to discover he was wanted, and to realize how much the others cared for him.

As for Owin, they were barely friends. The little priest had said it himself.

The others were the ones Maschi felt closer to, and they would treat him well without Owin there to witness it.

Owin would stay inside, drink his fill despite his early morning, and find someone else with blue on their lips and no flowers behind their ear or in their hair.

That was a sensible, reasonable plan for a melancholy giant with an ache in his chest. Owin had never expected more, after all, and Ara was a day for beginnings. The rest he could deal with tomorrow when the ache was also in his head and he would be nicely distracted by it.

OWIN consumed a small bottle of a decent wine, and an even smaller bottle of something cheaper, and then tea, because Madame Carel clucked her tongue at him for his unusual frowns.

Some of the other guards came in and went back out, but did not seem to notice Owin at his lonely table, despite his size.

The servers passed to and fro around him, often as drunk as the customers, and it took Owin a while to notice the chains of tiny blue flowers some of them wore pinned in their hair, and which others kept in their apron pockets to hand out to anyone interested.

None of the guards had bothered with that, not even Margaret, who might have gotten away with it without much teasing.

But it would be a good thing for Maschi, Owin could not help but think.

Maschi, who was no fit priest, and should have family with him, and someone to keep his mouth soft and to draw more hungry moans from him and hold him back when his honest words grew too sharp.

He should wear a bloom or two in his ruffled, short hair, or tucked into his cowl, if he kept that aspect of his vocation.

Someone should see them there and answer his request, and take the little mage somewhere nicer than an alley or behind a tree.

Someone should take him to their home and keep him there.

Owin would have rested his forehead against the tabletop if he hadn't been so much higher than the table and could bend comfortably that way.

He slouched in his chair instead, determined not to go back outside until it was safe to do so, and was asking for brandy to put in his tea when a slender, soft-about-the-middle fellow with the stained hands of a dye merchant sat next to him and rested a hand on the band of blue around Owin's thigh.

Friendly and large was more than enough for some.

THE merchant, if he was one, pulled Owin to him before they were even out of the pub, asking to be pinned against the doorway and moaning before Owin had done more than press him still with his hips and his hands and exhale heavily beneath his ear.

“Not here,” Owin murmured, not nearly drunk enough to pretend he was elsewhere, that his friends might not still be outside.

He took the man’s hand to ensure he followed, and let him believe whatever he would; that Owin was shy, or concerned with what others might think.

Some caution, even on Ara after the sun was down, was always wise, and he might have agreed for that reason.

Owin didn’t particularly care which, except to wish for someone less obedient, which was unfair of him as well as impossible, and he swept them out of the pub almost recklessly before noticing that the tables out front were empty.

He stopped, inexplicably thrown, then realized his mistake a moment later when a slight figure rose from the chair Denys had used.

The figure swayed, though staggered was a better word, and dropped a cup to the ground that rolled into the shadowed places where the light from the lanterns did not reach.

Maschi’s cowl was rumpled and pulled loose around his throat.

His lips remained dark. His hair was a mess of soft waves and a small, thin chain of aras flowers, which hung crookedly from his crown and had been partly tucked behind one ear.

One of the blooms must have been crushed during the act, leaving a smudge of blue across his cheekbone.

His eyes were round and fixed on Owin for as long as it took Owin to catch his breath, which had rushed from him at the moment he had recognized those fragile

blue petals.

All the softness of Maschi's mouth was counterbalanced by the severity of his frown, his displeasure like something from that book the priests read so much.

He staggered again, as though a weight pulled him to one side, and Owin half-expected to see a sword in Maschi's hand based on nothing more than the pain in his expression.

But not even sparks rose up from him to challenge the lantern-light.

It was the second cup falling from Maschi's other hand that returned some of Owin's senses. The little priest—or not, not with those flowers nearly caressing his neck—was unsteady, and he seemed to tremble, though drinkers were usually hot, not cold.

Owin stepped forward to steady him and ask about the others—why they had left him there, why he had been drinking, why he had not continued to learn about kisses—or to take him home and put him to bed and to never speak of it, but Maschi moved his gaze beyond Owin to the man behind him.

Maschi's chin came up and he swayed once more, catching himself in time to prevent another stumble.

Always with Maschi, words appeared on Owin's tongue that he could not say. He had done nothing to apologize for, except to find Maschi even more of a temptation as he was, painted and furious and soft.

Then Maschi dropped his shoulders. "I see," he said quietly, perhaps not even to Owin at all, and pushed out a breath before turning around.

That nearly made him stumble, too.

None of their friends darted out to help him.

Owin clenched his jaw as he vainly searched the shadows for another guard.

But they were too busy drinking or fucking to help the little mage they had left alone with wine and a chain of aras blooms in his hair as if inviting someone to scoop him up and do what they would with him.

Which was a ridiculous thought. Of all of them, Maschi was possibly the most dangerous, and few would approach, much less harm, a priest, especially not one under the aegis of the Duke himself.

Maschi was an adult, if small, and if he fell into a ditch to sleep off his wine, he would be sorer but wiser for it.

He was Owin's friend, but not a close one.

It was not Owin's place to fuss over his wellbeing where he might be caught doing so.

"I have to go," Owin told the merchant anyway, already slipping his hand free. "Sorry."

The village after the sun had set on the day of Ara was a different place. There was still music and laughter and heavy breathing, but it was far away. Lanterns illuminated the streets yet left other spaces dark and private, and the tinkling of bells was rarer now, with hands otherwise occupied.

Maschi was not difficult to find, weaving clumsily between closed market stalls, his

hands clenched at the sides of his black tunic. Owin kept his distance until Maschi's foot caught on a stone, then he reached out and took his arm, stepping beside him a moment later.

Maschi glared upward, then lost his footing entirely, crashing, solid and warm, into Owin's side.

"Owin?" he breathed in disbelief, and left it to Owin to get him back on his feet and facing the right direction.

He curled his hand, which was surprisingly colder than the rest of him, into Owin's tabard, then snatched it back once he noticed. "I am taking you from someone."

Lantern-light was not enough to try to read Maschi's expression, and Owin could not tell his mood from his chilly tone. If that would even be possible; a Maschi full of wine was going to be a new experience for the both of them.

Owin side-stepped a direct response. "I should go to bed. Get some rest, as you said. I had long days before this and I have an early rise tomorrow." He did not think his tumble would have brought him much happiness as it was, and he would have had to walk home all the same.

"I can return with you. See to it that you don't decide to sleep in the mud somewhere, or in a pile of straw.

" He paused. "That is a small jest. Too much to drink makes us all long for sleep."

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“I am very tired,” Maschi agreed, each of his steps heavy and careless.

He was quiet for some time, turning his head once in a while as if to follow the noises coming from certain darkened places, but accepted Owin gently steering him forward every so often without a complaint.

“I took you from someone,” he said again, after long enough that Owin had nearly forgotten the first time.

“I don’t want to—no, that’s a lie. I shouldn’t lie. Lying serves no purpose.”

Owin glanced down to view the familiar frown in profile.

“I hear it’s a sin,” he pointed out playfully. “But it does serve a purpose on occasion. It can keep smart little postulates out of trouble.”

“I’m not... not a....” Maschi reached out to take Owin’s arm in an iron grip but plodded onward toward the road.

Owin was not strong enough to carry him far, much less the whole way, but he considered it more with each heavy yet determined step.

“I’m not ,” Maschi finished at last, firmly, and nodded.

“I took you from someone. It is Ara . You wore blue . You want .”

“It wasn’t a problem.” Owin did not lie.

He regarded the few flowers he could see from this side for long enough that Maschi's steps began to slow.

Owin reminded himself to take smaller strides to let Maschi keep pace with him.

"You are also wearing blue," he said at last, barely shoving down the question that followed the statement.

He swallowed, but the question rephrased itself to slip past his defenses.

"How many kisses did you collect today?"

The light of the rising moon showed they were alone on the start of the country lane. There was no one else to hear or notice the roughness in Owin's voice.

"Not enough," Maschi announced darkly, then dropped his head. "Dahl kissed me twice."

"I know." There was that roughness again.

"Do you?" Maschi turned, but couldn't peer at Owin and walk at the same time, and after some internal debate, seemed to choose walking. "Owin?" Owin's name still emerged from Maschi with disbelief, though slightly breathlessly now. "I am not sure I care for kissing. Or... not all kisses."

Owin took a deep, deep breath, then released it. It was what he had expected, with what he knew of other priests, and yet he was surprised. "Were those your first kisses, Maschi?"

Gentle though he was, he should not have asked. Maschi yanked his hand away. "You're going to tease me."

“No.” Owin shook his head to emphasize this. “No, I wasn’t.”

“You should.” Maschi crossed his arms. “I’m worth mockery. Everyone thinks so.”

Owin stopped him with one soft touch to his shoulder. “No, they don’t.”

Maschi angled his head up to give Owin a look that likely would have been devastating if the moon had been high enough for Owin to fully see it. “Yes, you do.”

“How can you think that?” Owin demanded, but the far-off clatter of a horse and cart, and a whistle from the driver as she saw them, made them both turn.

The driver turned out to be Marsilia, also in service of the Duke, who offered them a ride in the back of the cart, which Owin could not refuse when Maschi could barely stand upright.

But Owin thought of it once he had accepted for them.

It was a long walk they had taken together, and most of it in peace.

Likely the effect of the wine more than the moonlight or Owin’s company.

Owin told himself that as he put his hands to Maschi’s waist to lift him into the cart and discovered that Maschi’s body was buried within the depths of the tunic.

Maschi should have more fat to keep winter shivers and illness away, and a good, solid plumpness for someone, someday, to hold onto.

Owin would bring Maschi more food himself, if their friendship remained in the morning.

Maschi allowed that touch like all the others he had permitted from Owin today, and stared at Owin as Owin climbed in next to him. Up close and finally still, Maschi's eyes were wide and somehow bright. But when Owin met his stare, he jumped then looked away.

The cart began to move. After a while, Maschi slid onto his back to glare upward at the sky, his feet sticking out past the edge of the cart.

So much for the words they had exchanged. Maschi would undoubtedly be embarrassed in the morning and never speak to Owin again about anything but their duties.

But Maschi surprised him with a sigh. "The celestial bodies turn as they revolve around us. They might gaze down on places here where the skies are still light, where it is still Ara. There might still be a chance. Heaven is infinite. Grace must be as well, then, but I've never considered... Is it yet Ara, Owin? Please say yes."

Bemused but wishing he had an answer, Owin leaned back too, knees bent to let his legs hang over the side.

The blue sky of Ara was dark purple now, rich with stars.

He released a breath at the loveliness of it, not something he often contemplated, and wondered how it was that a hardened guard with much experience should be so aware of how close his hand was to the hand of the man next to him.

"Is Heaven up there beyond the stars, then?" he asked quietly, while Marsilia whistled and whispered to her horses.

He thought Maschi might try to tell him once more than he was not a priest. But Maschi turned his head to look at him and murmured. "They say so. It's very far

away. Too far.”

“Are you worried about your place there?” Owin turned his head for the question, then stopped to listen to his own breath and to catch the twinkling at the corner of his eye. He recognized the tiny spark a moment too late to turn to see its color.

“No.” Maschi sighed the word but did not add any others.

Strange that he had not turned away. Stranger that Owin could also not speak above a whisper. “I’ve never understood a longing for something far away and unknown, when there is much in this world to not only be longed for, but reached for.”

“Like who you were with. The man I took you from?” Maschi turned his head to the sky once again before sitting up. “Lying down makes me dizzy.”

Owin put a hand on his back to steady him before sitting up with him. “Some things are easier to reach for than others, especially for someone like me. What I would have done with him... it would have just been something fun and then over. You don’t need to feel guilty.”

“It is not guilt.” Maschi bit off each word, then rocked to the side and groaned when the cart hit a bump. “The wine wears off. I am beginning to feel how miserable I will be.”

Owin smiled despite everything. “There are solutions to that, if you come down to the guards’ common area tomorrow.”

Maschi took a long time to answer. His voice was soft. “No. No, I don’t think so.”

“We would not laugh at you, Maschi. Not meanly. We have all been in your place. Some will likely be worse off, as they drank all day.”

Maschi shuddered delicately beneath Owin's hand. "Always, you are gentle."

Owin's chest was tight. "Then come to the common area tomorrow. Trust me and join us."

"Tomorrow it won't be Ara anymore," Maschi answered, then hid his face in his hands.

He said nothing else, and when they finally reached their destination, he stumbled off the cart before it had even fully stopped in the stable yard.

If he had not stumbled, Owin might have left it there. The walking would have sobered Maschi up a bit, but Maschi was not used to drinking, and whatever it was in the day that made Maschi speak softly also made the ache in Owin's chest deeper.

"Maschi," he warned before trailing after him once again. Maschi turned to consider him, then nodded before continuing on his way with Owin behind him.

The rooms for the guards were near the stables and up a staircase. Some of the priests lived within the Duke's house itself. Maschi, it seemed, had a room in the Duke's home, not far from the stables, but down a set of stairs. Owin took his arm for those. Maschi let him.

Maschi's room was surprisingly big, but dark, with a few windows at ground level.

The shutters had been left open to allow light in but that also meant fresh, chilly air.

A lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain flared to life, with a shower of red sparks after it, and leftover pieces of charred wood in the fireplace began to smoke a moment later, before catching into flame.

The hair on the back of Owin's neck stood up, as it nearly always did when Maschi or one of the other mages lit a fire seemingly from nowhere. But the room needed the heat, so he said nothing.

A desk was full of scrolls and some large, probably heavy books.

Pieces of chalk as well as drawings decorated the floor.

Owin saw no plates of food or chests for clothing.

In front of the fireplace was perhaps the smallest cot Owin had ever seen.

It was just high enough to be more than a pallet and to keep all but the most determined rats and pests away.

Maschi pulled away from Owin to go to the desk, so Owin carried on to the bed, and the fire, and the place where there should have been a pile of logs and were instead only two. He added those to the fire then turned to study the figure drunkenly trying to straighten his desk.

"Do you have water?" Owin asked, but noticed the pitcher sitting on the room's only chair before he received an answer. "Drink some before you go to bed, little mage."

"What for?" Maschi wondered curiously, but dropped onto the edge of his cot to deal with his shoes. It took him a few tries to manage the lacing.

"You will want it. Trust me on this at least." Owin handed Maschi the cup once Maschi was done, and watched Maschi frown, and study first him, then the water, before taking the cup to drain it. When he was finished, Owin plucked the cup from him and set it down on the nearest surface.

Maschi stared at him, backlit by the fire, some normal color returning to his face at last.

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“The others let you live like this?” Owin’s tongue had decided to act for itself.

“Like what?” Maschi wriggled his stockinged feet. He had holes in his stockings. That was not the Duke’s doing. “Why would they say anything?”

“Because they are your friends.” Owin could speak severely and abruptly too. “You need new blankets—and stockings... and food. Is this some priest thing? Even you cannot fit on that bed.”

“Not a priest,” Maschi muttered, and pulled up his cowl to remove it, or try to.

Owin finally came forward just to keep Maschi from strangling himself.

The aras blooms tickled his hand, and he stopped to take those first, pulling on them gently so as not to yank Maschi’s hair.

The flower chain went on the desk, and only then did Owin come back to bury his fingers in the warm cloth of Maschi’s cowl.

He tugged, and perhaps misunderstanding, Maschi stood up.

He did not even reach Owin’s chin. He did not come close.

“Who else would fit in this bed?” Maschi asked seriously, apparently still worrying over Owin’s last comment.

Owin pulled the cowl over and off Maschi’s head and pretended he was not thinking

what he was thinking.

“Oh,” Maschi went on, as if realizing how his words might have been interpreted.

He peered up at Owin’s hopefully blank face, then dropped his head.

He reached for the belt around his tunic but Owin reached it first, and focused on untangling the knot instead of the clear words coming out of Maschi’s innocent mouth.

“I’ve never had anyone else in it. Which must be obvious to you.

” His voice hitched as Owin slid the belt free.

He did not raise his head. “I’m sorry I’m being a bother.

I ruined your evening with my childishness. ”

“You’ve assisted us all in worse situations,” Owin responded without thinking, staring with a certain amount of shock at his hands hovering over Maschi’s waist. “What was childish?”

Maschi scowled at Owin’s chest. “I said I was sorry.”

“There is nothing you did today that the others didn’t do.” Except for the flowers, but Owin couldn’t think of them without his throat tightening. “I never understand you.”

Maschi looked up at last. “Sorry.”

“Are you apologizing for me not understanding you?” Owin could not seem to move, although he was far from drunk and should have had no problem. “There are many

things I don't understand. You're the one people expect to know things."

"I do know things," Maschi confessed, brows drawn, his lips red.

"I know lots of things. I know... that you have a t... a temper, but you don't hold grudges.

I know you've had your nose broken, t... tw...

more than once, and your arm, and several of your fingers.

I know you have a sister and a nephew you speak of fondly, and that the other guards and the Duke respect you.

I know the others are happy to be assigned tasks with you.

" His frown did not lessen, not for one moment.

"I know you've slept with many of them. But none of them steadily, though I think you would like that, if they offered.

From the sound of it, you like to comfort as much as t...

tumble. Though you also seem to be good at that, if they spoke the truth. I am not surprised."

"You have been spending too much time with Dahl." Owin could not seem to make his heart be calm, or to stop his fool mouth. "I am muscle, not a poem." He settled his hands on Maschi's waist at last, closed his fists around yards of black cloth, but not Maschi . "He kissed you. Twice."

“And you have known him,” Maschi returned, a sharpened blade.

“All of them. You would not kiss me. Not even as Margaret did. You would not. I... I knew you would not. Yet I allowed myself to forget.” He closed his eyes and immediately swayed forward, dizzy with drink or exhaustion.

He opened his eyes again and kept his chin up, pinning Owin to the spot.

“That you do not want me as a closer friend, I understand. I am strange. I am trouble. And though I do not understand what most consider pretty enough to be beddable, I am not that, either, am I? Not like you. Not even today, when you might have had anyone.”

Owin wanted to put Maschi’s hand to his ear, to his nose, to help Maschi comprehend what his eyes apparently could not. But what emerged from him was something else entirely. “I find you pretty.”

The hoarse admission brought Maschi’s gaze to his once more, judging. “No, you don’t.”

“If you were not drunk, if it is the experience you are looking for, I would happily offer to help you. Here. Now.” The rasp stayed in Owin’s voice. “Although you would need a bigger bed.”

The judgement intensified, prickling the hair at the back of Owin’s neck as if Maschi had lit another fire.

Maschi tipped his face up higher, stained lips on display. “What would you do to me?”

“With you,” Owin corrected, hands twitching to pull Maschi that much closer. This

was wine. Or magic. Or grace. “Whatever you have thought about on this inadequate bed.”

Maschi dismissed that with a small toss of his head. “What have you thought about?”

Owin could not look away. “How soft your mouth is when you allow yourself to smile. Although, I think” –he hoped his rough voice made it clear that he did not tease—“I would have to train you to use it.”

Maschi dropped his head to Owin’s chest. “Owin.”

His hair was as soft as Owin had imagined.

“Because I am a bit of a brute,” he stroked the fine hairs at Maschi’s nape and marveled at Maschi’s shivers, “I imagine some buggery. Having you, on a much bigger bed.” Ara had put thoughts of this in Owin’s head so strongly they could no longer be denied.

Ara made him think of crushing aras blooms so that he could mark Maschi’s hips and thighs with smears of blue in the shape of his hands.

Owin would kiss Maschi on every splash of the color, for every splash of it, this Ara and all of them after, if Maschi permitted it.

Owin groaned. It was nearly too much to imagine after so long of not allowing himself to.

“I’d have to train you for that, too. You are rather small, mage.”

His answer was a puff of air before Maschi raised his head. His eyes were wide and wondering for one moment, then sorrowful.

“What would I do in that bigger bed once you are done with me?” he asked, composed except for the downturned curve of his mouth.

“It’s no wonder I’m not wanted. I am not suited to Ara.

I shouldn’t have...” He reached up to scrub his lips with his knuckles as if trying to remove the color, before giving up and turning away.

Owin let his hands fall while this newer ache settled into him.

“You are drunk, little priest. You should rest. Isn’t that what you told me?

” Because Maschi had watched Owin and worried, as if he also, unbelievably, held an ache in his chest. “Did you believe that only on Ara could you—” Owin did not finish the question.

Prickly Maschi would not understand. “It will still be Ara tomorrow,” he offered instead.

“Somewhere. That is what you said. Something to do with the infinite Heavens?”

“Always gentle.” Maschi answered mournfully, perching on the edge of his cot and putting his head in his hands once again.

“You think I am pretty,” Owin said aloud, a revelation that would take much longer to settle into him.

“When you are not drunk, you can find me, and if you still want me to, I will tell you what you will do in that big bed. Hang Ara.” Maschi lifted his head at that, frowning.

“Ara is but one day, and one day is not enough—would not be enough for.... When

you are not drunk,” Owin said again, heart racing.

“But if you don’t, come find us anyway. Your friends will want to see you. You are wanted, Maschi.”

Maschi exhaled his name, breathless and shocked. “Owin .”

Owin reached out, with thought, slowly, to let Maschi pull away if he wished, and when he did not, Owin softly pressed his fingertips to the smudge of blue high on Maschi’s cheek.

“You said we were not friends like the others.” Maschi scowled yet tipped his cheek toward Owin’s hand.

Owin did not contest it, just marveled at the falcon he was permitted to pet, the slow, sleepy sparkles of silver that escaped into the air around Maschi and which made Maschi’s cheeks warm with embarrassment.

“Sleep,” he reminded Maschi at last, hot with embarrassment of his own.

The Duke would laugh to see Owin tenderly and carefully tucking his troublesome priest-mage into bed.

On Ara of all nights, when sleep should have been the last thing on their minds.

Owin could not seem to feel disappointment over it.

If Maschi changed his mind, Owin still had the slow fall of Maschi’s eyelids as he stared at Owin with confused hope and reluctantly succumbed to sleep, and the thin, fragile chain of aras blooms that Owin cupped in his hand before he finally left the room.

AUbrEY was the only other one fit enough for riding alongside the Duke in the morning.

He looked tired, although not ill from too much indulgence, and not as if he had spent his night restless, as Owin had.

The Duke seemed faintly amused at them both, perhaps imagining sins that neither of them had likely committed, but he left them once they returned to the manor.

It was shortly before midday, the sky as blue as it had been the day before. Aubrey would follow the Duke for more discussion, so Owin stopped him then.

“The little mage should travel with His Grace more, when there is a greater chance of danger. He is sharper than the other two.”

Aubrey gave Owin a study that Owin did not flinch from, then nodded. “True. And only more true as they settle into country life and forget court intrigues. But the little mage can also cause problems.”

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“Which is why he should not have been left alone in the yard of a pub on the night of Ara.” Owin said it with a smile he did not mean.

Aubrey nodded again, slower. “He was not. Madame Carel was near and aware of him, and I planned to return before I went home.” The smile that grew on his face was meant. “But once he had wine in him, he would not be moved. Not by any of us .”

He clapped Owin on the shoulder while Owin considered that information in warm, silent awe, then headed for the kitchens for their midday meal.

Owin followed him in a daze, not the least bit mindful of what food he was given or what he ate.

He didn’t think much of anything until he returned by himself to the part of the yard devoted to the guards’ housing and comfort.

There was a wooden awning, near where they practiced with their weapons to keep their skills honed, and beneath it were benches and a table, where many of them often spent their days playing cards or talking.

Beneath that awning now, stiff and tense and somewhat pale, near the edge of one bench, was Maschi. Bartlemeo was in the midst of some tale, probably of his adventures of the night before, and Maschi was listening, or appearing to, with his hands pressed flat to the tabletop.

Owin spun on his heel to return to the kitchens, and returned with a loaded plate and a

cup filled with tea and some of Isaac's remedy for rowdy nights. He did not think he was noticed until he was close, and by then, even thinking of Maschi's gaze was enough to lock his throat.

Owin met that gaze regardless, eyebrows raised, before setting the plate and cup in front of Maschi's hands.

"The remedy too?" Bartlemeo wondered, approving, before continuing on with his story.

At another time, when he was less nervous, Bartlemeo's story might have made Owin smile.

Instead, he crossed over to Dahl and Wolfe's side of the table without comment.

Dahl appeared to be sleeping while sitting up, but cracked one eye when Owin sat down.

He looked over to Maschi, who stared into the cup curiously but finally took a sip, then back to Owin.

"Aubrey will be here in a while to discuss what we're to do. Enjoy yourselves while you can," Owin warned Dahl and Wolfe both, raising his voice for the others to hear as well.

Dahl groaned. "I didn't even get any remedy yet."

"You know how to get your own," Wolfe informed him without sympathy, but pushed his cup toward his friend a moment later. Owin would bet coin he did not have that some of Isaac's cure was in there. But he was not particularly interested in Dahl's well-earned headache.

The blue on Maschi's cheek was stark with his skin so ashen, though the drink would help with that. He had some shadows beneath his eyes, but not as much as he might have. He had slept. More than Owin had, very possibly.

"We all usually have some," Bartlemeo explained quietly to Maschi. "Well, those of us who have too much and then have the sense to fetch some." He said that part loudly.

Dahl growled sleepily at him. "They were a lovely pair, but it will take me a while to regain my strength."

"You're strong enough to walk to the kitchens if you are strong enough to tell us the story," Wolfe insisted, his tone as cool as ever. "His stories are always the same, Maschi, you don't have to listen."

"Yes, mine are far more interesting!" Bartlemeo contributed gleefully, then paused. "Although, if you wanted to share what you got up to outside the pub, or if you even returned home before dawn, we are a ready audience." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

Maschi shot a look to Owin that the others would definitely see.

Owin coughed. "They don't mean anything by it. They just want to know who has bragging rights for the best evening, and who gets to be teased for the next few weeks for having the worst."

Maschi looked at Owin for another few beats of Owin's terrified heart, then unfurled some of his frown. "I do not know yet which one I had."

Dahl let out a small, incredulous laugh.

Maschi was stern and unforgiving... or perhaps just a young man experiencing the

effects of too much drink for the first time.

“Owin,” he pronounced it crisply, a confused complaint, and Owin was standing before he realized it, and then walking around the table to sit next to him.

Maschi tipped his head back to scrutinize him.

He thinned his lips, still stained berry-red.

“You washed, but you did not sleep,” Maschi observed critically.

Owin presumed Maschi was aware of their audience, but let the others suppose what they would without bothering to address them.

He reached into the untied pouch at his belt and pulled out the drying chain of aras blooms to hold it cupped in his palm, for Maschi and no one else to see. “I couldn’t,” he explained simply.

Some of the chain had broken as the flowers had dried, but enough of it remained. That meant it was Ara today as far as Owin was concerned, at least a little. If that still mattered to Maschi.

“You are not like the others,” Owin said quietly. “Do you understand now? Not for me.”

Maschi frowned down at the flowers for a few moments more, then slowly lifted his eyes to meet Owin’s. “I would not be friendly about it, as they were?”

“I would not want you to be.” Owin was a fighter. Perhaps that was why a dangerous mage appealed to him so. “If I were to share a pillow on your bed, I don’t think I would want to leave.”

“You don’t want to be alone.” Maschi was terrible when he was soft.

Owin sighed for it. “No. Yes? Is that what you’ve thought about me all this time?

I always thought—” Last night should have proved to him that he would never know Maschi’s mind, not where Owin was concerned.

Maschi believed Owin was pretty and that said it all.

“I wouldn’t want to leave it because I’d be near you.

I am often near you, if I can arrange it.

All the watching you do, you never noticed that? ”

Maschi tipped his head that much higher, drawing Owin’s attention to his mouth until Maschi’s words finally sank in. “You don’t talk to me. Not like with them.”

Owin met that ferocious stare. “You don’t talk to me. Not like with them.” But he inclined his head to concede, “Not until last night.”

“You stir up feelings,” Maschi whispered, lips still on offer whether he knew it or not.

Owin sat with his amazement for as long as he could before Maschi would worry. He blinked a few times. “You desire me?” Maschi had said as much last night, but wine was wine.

“I want you,” Maschi corrected, clear enough to be heard across the courtyard. “But I know you do not...” He fell silent as Owin lifted the flower chain and tucked it behind the swollen shell of his ear.

Maschi's lips parted. He immediately pushed them together to flatten them, but they parted again, softening into a half-smile, as if suppressing happiness was something he had learned, not a natural part of him.

Seeing that smile let Owin breathe normally again, at least until Maschi raised his head to trail his fingertips around Owin's ear and then down the chain.

A single bloom fell to Owin's lap.

"Ara is over," Maschi observed gravely, tracing Owin's ear so lightly Owin struggled not to shiver. "But you ask anyway. And you're offering more than a kiss. That's what those mean. But I don't even know how to kiss you. Not how I want to."

"Do you think I care, as long as you reach for me?" Owin returned, not at all playful. He bent his head, bringing them closer together and making Maschi go still. "Kissing can also be taught," he added, deliberate.

Maschi did not fight his shiver, although it did make him glance around them, as if it had forced him to recall that they were not alone. But he focused his attention on Owin again in moments, intent and thoughtful.

With no change of expression or warning for Owin's heart, he leaned up to press his dry lips to Owin's before pulling away again.

"I am a diligent student," he informed Owin without mercy.

Yet he closed his eyes when Owin placed a hand against his cheek to guide him back for another and sighed and trembled before their lips even met.

His mouth was open, inviting, but Owin kept his kisses slow, savoring the sighs as Maschi leaned in for more, how Maschi followed when Owin pulled back, brow smooth, eyes still closed.

Maschi's hand settled on Owin's neck, colder than it should have been, but warming even before Owin tugged him close.

That made Maschi gasp, soft and open-mouthed against Owin's lips, then kiss him back with more confidence.

He rose up, his hands sliding to Owin's hair, and when Owin pulled him into his lap, Maschi stiffened with surprise before pushing forward again.

"Owin," he whispered, the word nearly a moan when Owin splayed his hands across his back.

Beneath the yards of cloth was Maschi, pressing himself closer when Owin was apparently too hesitant.

Owin tightened his grip to keep him still, but licked into Maschi's mouth to hear him make a hungry, shocked sound.

He felt a giant with how easy it was to hold one tiny, trembling priest in his arms. But he didn't mind. He thought Maschi enjoyed being held, and it was hardly a burden to do it. Owin would hold him up, or down, however he pleased, and take great pleasure in the service.

The noise in Owin's ears was not only the pounding of his heart.

He noticed it far later than he should have, and tore away from Maschi's sweet, yielding mouth to take in the sight of their friends banging the table with their cups and rattling whatever chains were nearby, as if this was still Ara but no one had any bells handy.

Maschi blinked his eyes open, and was gratifyingly slow to do so. His face was aflame and seemed to grow hotter still when Owin looked him over carefully and

stroked his cheekbone and the line of his jaw. But he smiled and closed his eyes again before tipping his face up in silent demand.

Owin caught a flash of sparkling red out of the corner of his eye, felt a tickle as the flowers fell and were likely crushed between them, even heard laughter as if Aubrey had returned, but he thought of nothing else in the world, or the Heavens, for that matter, as he bent his head to kiss Maschi again.

The End