Summary

Dorian always knew there was a Bad Ending coming for them. A Tevinter altus and a Ben-Hassrath agent--it was doomed, of course. He just didn't expect the Bad Ending to be quite that Bad. Unacceptable, really.

Rewriting history? That's the easy part.

Notes

Dedicated to doozerdoodles in the hope I think we all share that we will get to see a happy ending for undoes, which is one of my favorites. :)

World Without End

by Sorted

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Chapter 1

“Inquisition! Nehraa Ataashi-asaara meravas adim kata!”

Dorian snorted to himself, never mind the qunari warriors closing on them. So they’d found the viddasala, and she didn’t sound pleased. Naturally. I wouldn’t be terribly comfortable in her position, either.

“Hissrad! Now, please! Vinek kathas!”

Oh? Poor woman, you shan’t get...

“Understood, ma’am.”

And then there was nothing. No viddasala. No qunari. No enemies, no allies. Everything was muted and far off, and for a moment it felt as though someone had cast haste, because the whole world seemed to have frozen in time.

“Change of plans. Nothing personal…bas.”

The sharp sound of a weapon being drawn didn’t wake him up. He stood still, watching Lavellan leap back from the Iron Bull’s swing. A crossbow bolt whispered by his ear, and he watched a qunari sten fall moments before reaching him, sword raised to kill.

Everything snapped back into time, into sound, into hot, fast slashing, the Fade roiling at his fingertips. He must be very upset…or Lavellan was. He must be so very afraid, somewhere in there.

Their little party was now two mages—one better at healing than killing—and an archer against a bunch of melee fighters. And one of them was…one of them was…

Slash, block, duck—cast, cast, cast. Cast without stopping while leaping backward, throw fire half-blind with sweat in your eyes. Feel a tug on your arm, on your hip—doesn’t matter, the arm still swings, the leg still stands. Careful of your grip now, your footing. Blood makes things slippery.

“Mage…mage…blood could make him change his mind. Blood could bring him back to you.”

Cast, cast, slash, don’t listen, watch out! Barrier on Varric, just in time.

Warriors fell, but he didn’t. He bled too, but he wasn’t down because Dorian didn’t believe it, he really didn’t, it simply couldn’t…

And then that giant axe was arching toward Lavellan. She’s the one who crafted it for him, with Dagna’s help. Her feet were going out from under her. Nobody to block it, barrier just burned out, she’s going to die.

She’s going to die.

Stop him!

I can’t, I can’t, I...

She’s going to die!
Eyes wide, nothing but blind, cold horror in him, Dorian stretched his hand out toward him. A gigantic spike of ice shot from Dorian’s palm, slammed into the center of the Iron Bull’s torso, and drove him back, pinning him like a broken doll to the wall twelve feet behind him.

The dawnstone axe hit the floor with a clatter where its wielder had been standing.

The Iron Bull didn’t move. The ice was nearly as thick around as he was. It all but cut him in half.

In a strange and ringing silence, arrows clunked into skulls, fire tore through screaming horned figures, Lavellan staggered out of reach of one and turned and got him in the face with a lightning bolt. Then everything went still.

Dorian was already beside the Iron Bull—no memory of crossing the room—and the ice was vanishing into sparkling nothingness. The Iron Bull slid to the ground, into a huge mess of blood. The gaping hole in his—No. Dorian couldn’t see that. He could barely see anything. He looked only at Bull’s face.

“…Bull?” It came out as nothing but a whisper. Lost, confused… Dorian wanted to ask why, but their eyes met and he couldn’t say another word.

Three heartbeats passed—three of Dorian’s, for only his was beating—and that was all. Dorian looked into the face of someone he had come to think of as a part of himself—familiar, known, and vital to his existence. He expected to see cold, hard indifference, perhaps anger and hate in the face of defeat. Instead, he saw a distant echo of that familiar smile. A little upward quirk of Bull’s lips that said, as plain as words, good on you, big guy. There was more there, too, as the second heartbeat passed. Relief, maybe, and gratitude in that one eye that always saw too much. Then, on the third beat—something sadder. Sorrow, just a flicker of it. Bull’s lips tried to move, but there was no air to pull on, nothing to voice. Only the shape of a word.

Ka...dan.

Then it all faded, and in another moment everything that had been the Iron Bull was simply…gone.
“An’ if he’s not enough, there’s the bloody sh*tupid qunari!” The healers were wrapping up the stump of Lavellan’s arm, and she was half dazed with elfroot, but not nearly dazed enough to make her lose her vitriol. “Horrible giant backstabbing brutes. Should never have gone for that bloody nitwit lalliance. An’ we saved their asses, los’ abuncha people for it. The rotten, pishing Qun owes me big. Owes me a shquad of sholdiers, and a brilliant huge warrior, and an arm, and…and a damn fruit bashket!”

Dorian listened quietly, Lavellan’s regret falling into the silence in his head and slipping away, leaving not even a ripple in its wake. He watched over her, but he wasn’t really there. He was standing over a bloody corpse, wondering when he was going to feel something.

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Dorian closed the door behind him, finally alone in a rather pompous Orlesian suite, artfully designed to offend the tastes of the Tevinter ambassador as best it could. Lavellan wouldn’t have left him alone, but she couldn’t get away from the healers just yet. So Dorian slipped off, and now he was here, locking the door and thinking, *Now the tears will come.*

Except they didn’t.

He wandered over to the wardrobe and began methodically undressing. Every buckle he touched carried the memory of huge, gray, callused hands following these same motions, but he couldn’t seem to feel the image in his mind.

*Was it really him at all? Was it only the disguise beside me all these years?*

Dorian sat stiffly on the bed, then slumped to the side, face pressed to the cool sheets. Bull’s scent was there, lingering—reminding. His stomach clenched into a stone, but he still felt as though he was reaching for something too far away, something that was there but untouchable, lost beyond the hollow nothingness.

Mechanically, Dorian raised himself and looked around. He hadn’t occupied this room very long—had shared it for an even shorter time—so there was little of either of them here.

*Might as well start drinking, yes?*

He stood and walked slowly toward the wine cabinet, beside the vanity. Straightening with a bottle in his hand, he caught sight of his reflection and automatically paused to inspect himself. It didn’t surprise him at all to see a pale, exhausted shell of himself looking back blandly. He studied the visage with little interest for a moment, then reached for his comb. With movements so practiced they were second nature, he set his somewhat mussed hair back in place with quick strokes of the comb.

In that moment, everything seemed to stop—like before, but somehow worse. He remembered, he could see the memory, it was so clear. He saw himself exactly like this, and felt the heavy weight of Bull’s hands on his shoulders. He watched a memory reflection of Bull leaning over and around him, smiling as he kissed Dorian on the cheek. His skin tingled, remembering the scratch of Bull’s stubble, the warmth of his breath.

In that same moment, Dorian saw the light go out of that eye again, the taste of blood in the air.
The comb clattered to the vanity, then the floor.

He’s dead.

Finally, he felt it. The awful pain of loss came rushing up through the numbness and struck him, overwhelming everything in an instant. Dorian’s frame shuddered and his knees gave out. He crumpled, helplessly and gracelessly, to his knees, and as the memories flooded him—of years of friendship, of trust, of finally finding a good and gentle man and feeling so happy, so happy every time their eyes met, every time their hands brushed—Dorian simply…broke.

It was all a lie, and the Iron Bull was dead, dead at his hands, and Dorian’s heart was shattered.
Dorian stared at the pyre. The heat made his dry eyes throb, but he seemed to have forgotten the basic skill of *blinking*.

The pain hadn’t faded at all, but his body had burned itself out and was now refusing to channel his grief for a while. His mind was likewise paralyzed—stuck in an endless loop, replaying that final moment over and over. Each time brought a fresh doubt, another twist of the dagger in his heart. *Maybe I never knew him at all.*

Everyone else seemed to feel that way, too. They knew, now, that the Iron Bull had been lying all along, playing the part of their crass and caring friend while he never truly cared about any of them—only the Qun. Every one of his friends was devastated by this betrayal—no one more than Lavellan—and all tried to offer Dorian their support, as best they knew how. At the moment, that meant giving him his space as they all watched the sparks rise and drift away.

But it was all *wrong*. It *had* to be. The Bull had not looked up at him with a traitor’s malice—there had been no “other self” showing through the façade as death took him. He had been *him*, the Iron Bull, with sorrow in his eye and *kadan* on his lips. Because of that, Dorian couldn’t accept that the Iron Bull had never…never truly…

Somehow, the Qun had won, and oh, how Dorian *hated* the Qun.

Lavellan stood beside him, silent, not touching him but in easy reach if he should wish. When the flames died to coals, she turned to go with bitter tears hovering in her eyes. A glance up at Dorian, then back to the pyre. “I still believe he cared about us. All of us, Dorian. But…I suppose he cared about the Qun more, and that’s what he chose in the end.”

*But he didn’t choose at all.*

He was left alone with this thought, and suddenly it was all as clear as crystal to Dorian. Bull had never seen it as a choice, because he had never *known* choice. *Asit tal-eb*. Bound to the Qun, he had never chosen.

*That was why he grieved.*

He had obeyed. He hadn’t wanted to. But *want* had never been a cause of action for the…for Hissrad. The Iron Bull, he was sure, had known what *want* felt like, but he had never learned to act upon a want, to connect *wanting* with *doing*. His actions were always dictated. Truly, a perfect weapon.

When Dorian stopped him from killing Lavellan, Bull had been glad, relieved…and then sad, but by then it was too late. He couldn’t explain, couldn’t apologize, couldn’t come back and hold Dorian one more time. There was nothing left for him to do but die.

Remembering now, understanding now, Dorian knew with a black and unyielding certainty—*it was not all a lie.*

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After the funeral, Dorian did the most typical thing he could possibly have done—he shut himself in his room and got incredibly drunk.
As he peeled his face away from tear-sodden sheets to find his empty glass, Lavellan’s woozy words of regret resurfaced in his mind.

*The alliance.*

Now, Dorian remembered. He hadn’t been there, but he’d heard—Bull had nearly been declared Tal-Vashoth once, years ago. He hadn’t, of course, but apparently it had seemed for a moment that he wanted to save his little mercenary band, regardless of the Qun and his orders. That impulse, of course, would have meant a death sentence for the alliance, along with the reminder slipped in that the Qun wouldn’t *not* look kindly on such disobedience. So Bull had let it happen. *Asit tal-eb.*

The Inquisitor had been in high dudgeon over the whole thing, but she hadn’t insisted on saving the Chargers. She snapped at everyone for a week like it was their fault, but the fact was she thought she needed the alliance. Josephine had been browbeating her about diplomacy since she’d been named Inquisitor, and Cullen had made it clear their forces were constantly in need of shoring up, and Lavellan was just a backwoods Dalish girl with no idea how to run a world-saving military. So she’d reluctantly prioritized the stronger fighting force, trusting the Qun’s offer. She knew next to nothing about the qunari at the time, so she had nothing against them—not then. She’d been gathering a rather damning case against them recently.

Thus: *What if?*

Dorian quaffed another glass of wine and lolled back to the sheets, wondering. What if the Inquisitor had put her foot down and let the alliance burn and let the Bull become Tal-Vashoth?

*He surely would not have been pleased. He had no love for the Tal-Vashoth.*

But what if? If the Qun had cut him loose, would the time following that have changed him? Could he have learned how to choose? And if he did learn how to choose for himself, would he still have taken the Qun over everything else? After possibly years away from it?

The sorrow in his eye as he looked up at Dorian and breathed his last was all the answer Dorian needed to make possibly the most selfish choice of his exceptionally selfish life. And he absolutely didn’t care.
“Miserable, worthless Orlais,” Lavellan muttered through clenched teeth as they rode back toward Skyhold. Dorian had arranged his travel plans to match hers, at least that far. And perhaps a delay at Skyhold for a week or two before he headed North again. “Of all the bloody horrid trips to this bloody horrid shem city…” She scowled, her vallaslin crinkling into the pattern it got whenever she was angry. No one had dared tell her it looked like a bum on her face—not when she was already hissing mad. “Fenedhis lasa!”

It wasn’t the first time Dorian had witnessed the Herald of Andraste snarling an elven curse because she wasn’t very creative when it came to cursing in Common. “Come now, Inquisitor,” Dorian murmured, unable to summon the usual levity into his tone, leaving the words to sound hollow and too soft, “things can always be worse. As Sera would point out, at least it isn’t raining.”

Lavellan shot him a black look. “You get away with that right now because I’m rapidly losing people I love, and I mean to keep you as long as I may.” The way she managed to keep her voice hard and level even as tears broke free and made a short-lived effort to wet her cheeks was impressive…to the distant part of Dorian that remembered the things he used to care about.

He couldn’t bring himself to tease. “You never told me what…happened.” His eyes dropped to her missing arm. “What did he say?”

Lavellan’s vallaslin lost the funny pattern as her scowl flagged. Her eyes were lost. “He was…I don’t…” She sighed, then the buttocks came back in force. “He’s made himself my enemy, and I know what I and the Inquisition must now do. I suppose he chose something bigger over love.” She stared at Dorian. “Like Bull.”

Not like Bull.

“Love.” He echoed it hollowly.

“Well.” She looked ahead again, a little red around the nose and eyes, in spite of keeping nearly all the tears back. “It seemed…”

“Seemed.”

She glanced at him again. “You don’t think?”

Everywhere he glanced, Dorian expected to see the Iron Bull, riding with them, laughing, saying something wonderfully lowbrow, slapping Dorian’s back or just watching him with a smile, the way Dorian always pretended not to notice. But with every turn of his gaze, the road was empty, the sounds of travel were mundane and mirthless, and every hollow echo made him see it all again. The ice running Bull through like he was nothing. The light leaving his eye forever.

With a slow, deep inhale, Dorian locked himself down, blocking out those thoughts and refusing the swell of grief. He would not cry here. He swallowed. “And yourself?”

Lavellan let the lack of answer pass. “Hmm.” She laid her remaining hand upon the shoulder of the shortened arm. “I’ve thought about it these last two years and…I think so. But that doesn’t mean it’s fated to last forever. And it didn’t. It’s over, and I have to accept that.”

Dorian nodded. It was typical of her—a hard decision, but she was brave when it counted.
Dorian was not.

Not brave, nor wise, nor able to accept what had transpired and move on with his life. Perhaps —perhaps—if it had been only his own heart that had been shattered, he could have followed his usual course and spent a year or three too drunk to stand. That was how he usually addressed matters that brought him pain. But he had grown—even if only a little—from the young man who had first left Tevinter. And there was more than his own pain in the balance.

Because no matter how empty and broken he felt, the memory of one silent word possessed him —kadan. And he couldn’t hate Bull. He could and did hate the Qun, but not Bull.

Dorian’s protective streak wasn’t nearly as obvious as the Bull’s, but it was there and just as furious to defend the rare soul who fell under its purview.

That was why he couldn’t accept this and mourn. He wasn’t going to move on with his life. Tevinter could wait. He was going to save someone first.

He would fix this—at any cost.

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Dorian wasted no time at all once they reached Skyhold.

Dagna held the amulet and looked up at him—really looked, like she usually only looked at mysterious magical trinkets. “And the Inquisitor’s all right with this?” she asked. Her tone was so hopeful it almost overrode the question.

“She’d have come herself to reassure you, if she had known you’d worry. And, of course, if she were not quite so busy. I could go ask her to…”

“No no, not really necessary. You just surprised me, I guess. I was pretty sure I’d never get a look at this amulet of yours, and then to get the chance to make it work…”

“Can you?” He couldn’t put his full voice into the question. Everything hung on this. It was terrifying.


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“You’re in the library!” Lavellan paused in shock. Dorian set down the two books he’d come to fetch. “Fancy that. I heard you’ve barely stirred from the Undercroft all week. What are you and Dagna up to?”

“Oh, a terrible evil that will take even Tevinter by surprise,” Dorian answered with the closest approximation of his old smile that he could manage. “I must bulk up my arsenal. The Magisterium is not a place to enter unprepared…or unfashionably dressed.” Then, to forestall any further curiosity, “And you are not in your Commander’s office or company—a similarly odd happenstance, I’ve heard.”

Lavellan winced, which also did something comical to the lines of her vallaslin—almost like a duck, one on each cheek. Not as funny as the arse of anger, though. “Yes. Well.” She scuffed her way closer and perched on the arm of a chair—a very large, heavy chair that had appeared next to Dorian’s one day, and was often occupied after that. Not now, though. Now it was covered in a thin layer of dust, which puffed out into a little cloud when the boney rump of the Inquisitor landed
on it. “Cullen’s…a good sort of shem, I guess. Without that lyrium smell around him, he’s almost tolerable. And he’s been in this, heart and soul, for years now. He’s…reliable.” Safe, she didn’t say. Not a traitor.

That sadness hovered in her eyes again. The part of him that remembered feeling things other than emptiness and pain and grim determination gamely tried to tease, “And, as I’ve said for years, he’s rather strapping. Quite enjoyable to look at, in a quaint Ferelden way.”

Lavellan snorted and stuck her tongue out. “You think that if you like. It’s still pretty strange for me. You humans are so large and…hairy.” Dorian’s insulted sound drew the immediate, “Present company excepted, at least where such traits would be anything other than delightful, of course.”

“Well.”

“I don’t know. I’m getting used to it. Or just used to him, maybe, after all this time. And he’s sweet and strong, and lonely, I think, and that’s more important than what he looks like.”

He blinked, considering. “You may be the only person in Thedas to take an interest in our Commander in spite of his appearances, rather than because of them,” Dorian mused. He was getting itchy to get back to the Undercroft. If he could find the answer to Dagna’s question in one of these books…

She was watching him, and for a moment his stomach clenched, worried she was searching him, about to ask something he didn’t want to answer. But when she spoke, he relaxed. “I’m still mad. Really mad and hurt. But…he vanished two years ago, and he ended things even before that. Maybe, as bad as that last meeting was,” her shoulder shifted, not quite lifting the remains of her arm, “maybe it was the closure I needed. Or something.”

He couldn’t offer much of a smile, but what he did manage was genuine. “Then you’d best get back to the Commander’s drafty tower, Inquisitor.”

She gave him an arch look, but hopped down. She nearly left with that, but Dorian wasn’t surprised at all when she turned back. “Dorian?”

“Hmm?” He pretended to be half-absorbed in one of the books already.

“If there’s any way I can help you get past…I mean, you leave soon, I know, but…”

“You needn’t worry, my friend. I shan’t claim to be as far along as you toward finding someone new, but I promise you—I am absolutely determined to put this tragedy entirely behind me. As if it never happened.”

She gave a little half-smile. “Right. I guess…well, if I can help at all…don’t leave me out.”

She left with a little wave. As it turned out, Dorian never saw that particular her again.
Chapter 5

Four days later, Dagna set the amulet in front of him. “It’ll work.”

Dorian promptly forgot how to breathe. “It will?”

“I’m pretty sure.” Dagna gave him another long look. “I don’t know what good it’ll do. The Breach really did make all the difference, and there’s no Breach now. You won’t be able to use it with the precision it was designed to handle. You won’t be able to go forward at all. The best I could do was sort of…jerry-rig it to connect up with the amulet from the past—when the Breach was still there.”

“So if we face disaster and have no other way of averting it…”

“You’ll be smack dab back in hot water if you use this to get out of it,” Dagna sighed. “It can only get back to a time when Corypheus was still around. Either the creation of the Breach itself, probably, or it might also take you to the moment the past amulet was last activated, in Redcliff. Basically, it’ll drop you whenever it wants to. Without the Breach, you’ll have no control.”

“We did defeat Corypheus once before…”

“Right, but I wouldn’t bet too heavily on it working out that well again. You’ll change things if you go back—won’t be able to help it. And who knows what that’ll mean to the final outcome? You use this to avert the next end of the world, you might lose to the first one this time.”

The world ending again had been part invention, part guess. Lavellan hadn’t told him much about what Solas was up to, but she was treating the whole matter with the same sort of grouchy fear she’d often gotten when dealing with Corypheus. Dorian couldn’t imagine what the cryptic elf could be planning that made Lavellan worry so, and she had made it clear she wasn’t up for talking about it yet. He’d hoped that would pass before—well, before now. But his time—in this time—was nearly gone. He’d have to get by with what he already knew.

He didn’t know how much longer he could endure the emptiness. Every moment in Skyhold, everywhere he went, the sights and sounds and smells hurt.

The excuse had been enough for Dagna, anyway. Made things plausible enough that she could ignore caution and give in to her insatiable need to do the impossible. “It’s a last resort,” he insisted, because apparently now that Dagna had succeeded, she was able to question the whole idea again. “Only for use if we lose and the world ends. At that point, any chance to try again will be an improvement.”

“Well.” Dagna stepped back. “Tell the Inquisitor to come ask me if she has any trouble learning the spell.”

“I will, if I cannot help her with it,” Dorian lied. He was so good at lying, when he wanted to be.

He picked up the amulet—it felt heavier than before—and headed for his own room, not Lavellan’s. No one bothered him on the way, and Dorian tried not to gaze too long at the familiar faces—the people who wouldn’t be his friends any longer, if this worked. They’d see him as a dangerous stranger again.
He closed the door to his room, locked it, and looked around. He’d begun packing, but hadn’t made much progress while holed up in the Undercroft. Familiar things surrounded him in a familiar place—memories thick here, thick everywhere in Skyhold. Another thing he was giving up, leaving behind.

Dorian sat down at his desk and laid the amulet on it before him. He sat there, and looked at the thing, and weighed the price he was about to pay.

The fate of the world, naturally, was enough on its own. Placed against one life, even the possibility of losing that battle was not an acceptable risk. That he was lying to those he loved in order to endanger them all—well.

Then there was everything else—literally. Even Dorian’s own life, possibly. So many close scrapes the first time…there was no guarantee he’d survive again. Nor was he at all sure that he could save Bull from the Qun. It was entirely possible that, even if he managed to separate him from it, when the choice came he would still return to the authority he’d been raised under. Dorian was sure Bull hadn’t wanted to betray the Inquisition, but he still had. He might again.

And then Dorian would have re-lived years of his life for nothing. Another betrayal might break him beyond what he could ever recover from. Right now, as much as it hurt…perhaps. There was that chance. He couldn’t imagine it—a future where he had left Bull in the past and found another lover. But life had a way of bringing the unimaginable to pass. As proven by the fact that he ever went to bed with a Ben-Hassrath in the first place.

Yes, all things considered, this was perhaps the most foolish, indefensible course of action possible.

*Kadan…*

Dorian drew a deep breath and began to call the Fade through the waiting amulet.

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Startled faces all around, and there among them—Alexius! Dorian’s eyes flicked around the hall. *Redcliff, Oh Maker…* He released the barrier spell he was holding ready, prepared to cast the moment he arrived. *Dagna was sure it would be the Conclave.* Then Dorian remembered, and he snapped back into the moment and just barely managed not to stammer, “You’ll have to do better than that.”

The words came out as more of a reflex than anything else. The line only came back to him now because it had been repeated in tavern tales *ad infinitum* afterward. Or it would be, later.

And there was Bull.

*Oh. I loved him.*

How he’d managed to last this long and get this far without realizing this was a mystery so great it was comical, but there it was. The closest he’d come in his own thoughts was the way I feel about him. He’d refused to look deeper than that at what they had. It was always going to end, probably badly—probably spectacularly badly. As it had done. After all, Bull was Ben-Hassrath.

*That time. And…now, again.*

Only a lifetime of practice kept his façade in place.
Despite his successful entrance, Dorian couldn’t manage much involvement in the following confrontation with Ferelden’s king—who had styled his hair exactly like Commander Cullen’s, curiously. A Ferelden fashion statement, possibly—it had that trademark dullness Fereldens seemed so fond of. And how typical of him to notice such a thing when the Iron Bull was standing just over there, watching and listening and alive.

*Focus, Pavus. There’s a job to be done. You’ve just managed to travel through time—Maker, it actually worked—best make certain you don’t foul this up.*

His melancholy thoughts were interrupted—Alexius was taken away, and after a brief word between father and son…

_Felix._

“Dorian, I don’t suppose you’ll consent to come back with—ah!”

Wrapping his arms about his friend, Dorian all but crushed him in an embrace. It was so entirely _Felix_ of him not to tense up, even for a moment.

“No, I cannot go back, not yet. So of course, this will be the last time we see each other, and you’re going to be pragmatic about it, yes?”

The words were disinterested, but Dorian’s tone lacked any semblance of his usual levity. Felix, naturally, understood immediately. He returned Dorian’s embrace without reservation. Dorian kept his face pressed into Felix’s shoulder. If he looked at Felix, he’d surely lose control.

“How did it never occur to me that this would be one of the results?

“Pragmatism is all I have left, I’m afraid,” Felix answered gently. “Anything else would only waste time.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Dorian pulled back to meet the gaze of his only friend. There were so many things he’d never said to Felix, even knowing that time was running out. He hadn’t been brave; it was easier to think, _I’ll write him…later._ “Maker, Dorian, what’s the matter?”

Everything he wanted to say came out in one broken confession. “I wanted to…to thank you for your friendship. You’ve been better to me than anyone—often better than I deserved, I know, and as I cannot possibly tell you what you’ve meant to me, I wanted to at least…thank you.”

Felix just smiled and shook his head. “You speak as though I haven’t just as much to thank you for.”

He sighed. “Of course you would say that. Very well, lie if you must. We both know I can never repay you, yes?”

Fondness faded to sorrow, and after a pause Felix said, “Dorian…I know there is little you can do, but…watch over Father for me? I didn’t realize…everything he did was because of—”

“His own denial? Yes, I quite agree.” Felix just closed his mouth and gave Dorian a gentle look that forbade all levity. Dorian’s voice dropped, soft. “Leave him to me, my friend. Though I fear he’ll find me a poor substitute for his son.”

“I don’t know, Dorian. You made a fine brother.”
Right! Now chapters get longer (and slightly less miserable) so next update will be...Sunday? Let's say Sunday.
The road back to Haven was dull, as roads tended to be in his early days with the Inquisition—at least, during the long stretches without someone or something to fight. *Well. No time like the present to begin.* Dorian blinked and almost smirked to himself. *Maker, Pavus, you’re going to have to get over the stupid time travel jokes, or these next few years will be terrible.*

Dorian glanced over at the Iron Bull, riding a bit behind the others and giving a convincing appearance of disinterest, though Dorian knew he was studying the companions—perhaps himself most of all, as the newest and most potentially threatening. “So, Iron Bull,” he began lightly, “I understand you’re Ben-Hassrath. Allow me to extend my formal appreciation for your remarkable restraint in not binding me up and sewing my mouth shut.”

He even managed to keep his voice steady. *Well done, Pavus.*

“Oh, yes, there you are. Cheerful, filthy, oh…oh Bull…

“Hey, no problem. I’d be happy to tie you up later though, if you ask nicely.”

*Oh yes, there you are. Cheerful, filthy, oh…oh Bull…*

“Oh, I very much doubt *that* will ever happen.” It had happened. It would probably happen again. A lot, if all went as it should. “We evil Tevinter mages like to keep our hands free around the Ben-Hassrath. I’m sure you understand.”

“Sounds good to me. I bet there’s a lot you can do with those hands free.”

Dorian sniffed, turning his face back to the road. He was sure it came off as regally affronted, not fighting the light sting of threatening tears. “What a dreadfully uncouth insinuation. I suppose that’s what I get for being civil with a brute.”

“There’s more where that came from,” Bull called toward his back as Dorian rode on ahead. The laughter in his voice made Dorian swallow heavily. It had been so dreadfully long.

--

Haven was pure chaos upon their arrival. The Inquisition had already overburdened the available accommodations of the little village, and then they brought home a small army of mages. Roofs were out of the question for most of them, and tents ran out quickly. People were patching together tents from empty burlap sacks and ruined clothing, building ramshackle sheds out of anything that could be stacked. It amazed Dorian to look at it now and realize that the Inquisition had somehow survived these humble beginnings to become the most influential force in Thedas.

Dorian’s declaration that he was joining up went over about as well as before. The advisors were suspicious; Lavellan was grouchy.

*“Another shem,”* she grumbled, *“and now a Tevinter…”* She winced, seeming to feel Josephine’s glare at the back of her head. “I mean, my apologies, Lord Pavus. We appreciate any help you can offer. *I’d* just appreciate it more if there were a few more Dalish around to balance out all you… giants.”

“We aren’t all that tall, Herald,” Leliana observed in her quiet way, hiding a smile as usual.
The esteemed future Inquisitor snorted none too delicately. “I suppose. Perhaps I should be accustomed to shemlen; my clan liked them well enough. But I was the Keeper’s First—” She looked to Dorian again. “I think you mentioned being a scholar, of sorts? Yes, well, I spent all my time studying elvhen history and magic. So you’ll forgive me. This is still a bit of a shock.”

“Think nothing of it,” Dorian answered amiably. “I imagine you are happy to have Solas around, then? From what I gather, his knowledge of elven history is rare and extensive.”

Lavellan straightened, blinking. “Oh? I’d…barely talked to Solas. He seemed a little odd…and not-Dalish. I’ll have to ask him how he knows…”

She was trailing off into a mumble, which meant she wasn’t paying attention anymore—the advisors hadn’t learned that yet, but Dorian had, so he bowed to the room and departed.

Dorian had been forming a plan on the journey, and this was to be the first delicate step.

He’d originally expected to appear at the Conclave, which would have given him more time to ingratiate himself with Lavellan and get past her prejudices. Instead, he was starting with no more time than before, which meant he probably wouldn’t have her trust before the Qun contacted her. Lavellan wouldn’t begin to really like him and their friendship wouldn’t start to deepen until some time after they relocated to Skyhold. Being stuck in a nightmare future together had helped take the edge off her antipathy, but she’d been too nervous, at first, to open up much with any of the non-elves. This was all the same as before, and Lavellan hadn’t even asked his opinion about the alliance the first time, in spite of their growing friendship.

So, if he wanted to start swaying her away from the qunari immediately, he’d need an intermediary.

Of the elves present, Sera was…difficult. Lavellan had been charmed by her before Dorian even met them, and he remembered the two of them were quite, as Sera put it, “flirty” for a long while, despite some initial hesitation. Unfortunately, it hadn’t worked out the first time. Lavellan was “too elfy,” Dalish to the core, and she and Sera had gotten into many lovers’ quarrels as they tried to change each other’s minds. The breakup had been disastrous for both, but in the end they’d gotten along much better as friends, and Lavellan had started noticing Solas.

Dorian barely knew Solas, even after all this time. He’d managed to offend the elven apostate, somehow, nearly as soon as they met, and things had been hard to repair after that. He’d made some effort to discover what he’d said or done that was so insulting, but whatever it was had been thoughtless, and he could not remember. Then, of course, he’d started bedding the Bull, and Solas had always been thoroughly hostile toward him.

And that was, just possibly, Dorian’s answer. Solas despised the Qun. He would surely object to the alliance. Probably had done the first time too, but Lavellan was still more interested in Sera’s opinion at that point, and Sera thought all “people were people” and had no understanding of what the Qun really was. If Lavellan hadn’t lost time chasing Sera…

Of course, Solas had turned out to be their enemy, before. Dorian still wasn’t sure why, or if it was something that might change, if he and Lavellan started things sooner…but perhaps it didn’t matter. When Dorian had left his own time, Lavellan was already well on her way to forgetting him, with the Commander’s help. She’d had poor luck in love before—she could probably handle it again.

Maybe he was even doing her a favor. If he could steer her clear of Sera and keep her to one heartbreak instead of two, perhaps they’d all end up happier this time around.
It was cheating…probably.

Dorian had one memory from Haven that he’d later told as a tavern story, but when it happened—the first time around—he’d been the newest arrival at Haven, generally despised, and not sure who to share the experience with. Now, he had just the one.

She’ll like me eventually, he told himself. It’s not too unfair. After all, Sera treated everyone the same…as long as they weren’t too “magic-y” or “elfy” or “a piss-stuffed noble snob.” Dorian warranted some suspicion on two of those points, the first time—until Sera had declared him “not all bad.”

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“Sera,” he whispered from around the corner as she was about to enter the Singing Maiden. “Sera, come quickly!”

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“Wot?” The blatant suspicion was entirely expected. “Get back, you! Don’t you magic me!”

“I swear to you, Sera, I haven’t a single evil magical design upon you; you simply must see this! Hurry!”

“I swear to you, Sera, I haven’t a single evil magical design upon you; you simply must see this! Hurry!”

“Right, well…I’m watching you.” But curiosity won, as he’d known it would, and that was how he came to lead Sera to peek in the window of Seggrit’s house just in time to see the merchant drop his trousers and start meticulously inspecting his own arse in a little mirror.

“Mmf!” Sera’s eyes bugged with glee as she clapped her hands over her mouth.

“Mmf!” Sera’s eyes bugged with glee as she clapped her hands over her mouth.

“Shhh!” Dorian needlessly cautioned. “Watch.”

They did watch, with bated breath, as Seggrit produced a shiny little pair of tweezers and began to carefully pluck. His buttocks clenched with each hair removed, and that alone had Sera’s face beet-red with stifled laughter. But then, the coup de grâce—Seggrit had his leg up on the table, struggling to reach a very…intimately placed hair, it seemed. Suddenly, he overbalanced, tipped to the side, and fell half atop a chamber pot, which upended onto his shirt.

“My!” Sera stood straight as a ramrod and fled at top speed. Dorian jogged after her, and by the time he caught up she was rolling in the snow, screeching with laughter.

“Andraste’s knickers, Lord Magister,” Sera gasped when she could finally breathe again. “That was the best bloody thing I’ve seen since Cassandra’s tits!”

Dorian’s foot slipped on some ice—he certainly didn’t nearly trip from surprise. “What? When did you see—?”

Dorian’s foot slipped on some ice—he certainly didn’t nearly trip from surprise. “What? When did you see—?”

Sera winked, cackled some more, and bounded off.

“I suppose you’ve your reasons for staying with the Inquisition.” It wasn’t exactly a question. It was tentative, and Lavellan couldn’t quite look at him fully. Still nervous, of course.

Smiling in his most charming and benign way, Dorian shifted aside and sat down on a nearby barrel, placing himself just below eye level for her. There were other barrels nearby, should she choose. She didn’t. She stood, somewhat less fidgety, and listened to him explain his reasons for staying, his wish to help. She was chewing thoughtfully on her lip when he finished.
“Oh. All right…well. Nice to know you’re not here to capture slaves, at least. And, you know, we do need help. Badly.”

Dorian let the slave comment pass. “Believe me, milady Herald, you’ll have ample help in short order. Word spreads quickly, these are dark times, and you—well, you couldn’t come more highly recommended.”

She scowled. Dorian felt a twinge of nostalgia. “I don’t even believe in Andraste, and everyone keeps insisting she picked me! It’s utterly daft!”

“I tend to agree, but faith is a great motivator of the masses. I’d be willing to bet you’ll soon have people falling all over themselves to become your ally.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“By the way,” he added as she began to turn away. “Have you spoken with Solas today?”

“Solas? Not…today. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. I was merely curious if he had told you more about the Fade. He has such a fascinating perspective. And I do believe he enjoys talking to you….” Dorian kept his smile friendly and sincere. “It appears that way to me, at least.”

“Oh?” Lavellan blinked, and just the tips of her ears turned a little pink. It could almost have been the cold wind—but Dorian had spent years around her. He knew all her tells, by now. “Hm. I suppose I should make time to see if there’s anything more he can tell us about the Breach.”

“Indeed.” Dorian gave a gallant half-bow from his illustrious perch as she nodded to him and departed.

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Dorian had prepared himself to play matchmaker for Sera—anything to separate her from Lavellan. As it turned out, once she decided he was all right, it wasn’t nearly as difficult as he expected. He hadn’t really been observing them in the beginning, hadn’t realized how long it had taken Sera to warm up to the Dalish girl who thought she was cute and funny. All he ended up doing on that front was paying close attention to timing, making sure Sera was out of sight when the Herald stopped by the tavern. He nudged her toward Flissa and Scout Harding at just the right moments, and Sera happily…went.

But all his meticulous planning ended up meaning far less than one short mission. Lavellan invited Sera, the Iron Bull, and Dorian to the Hinterlands, where they soon found themselves attacked by a bear. Dorian had not realized how much he had improved as a fighter, nor how inexperienced Lavellan had been in the beginning, and he kept having to adjust for mistakes and missed timing by the others. This was also his first combat with the Bull at his side again, and he could barely remember to guard the others. His heart was in his throat every time the bear lunged at the qunari. The armor he was wearing was of no quality at all.

When it happened, it was so quick he didn’t quite see it all until it was done. The bear spun away from Bull and swiped at Sera, who had gotten too close. Lavellan cast a barrier on her, but it formed a moment too late. Sera was hurled back, blood spraying.

“Sera!” Lavellan’s distress was sharp, and before the injured elf could so much as twitch—while the Iron Bull was busy taking the bear’s head off with a massive swing—an overwhelming flood of rejuvenation and healing magic swept through her. Sera’s howl as she bolted upright and landed on
her feet with two arrows notched sounded like nothing so much as a startled wild animal.

“You! Wot you magicking me for?”

Lavellan drew up, halting her rush toward Sera to check on her. “What? I…you were hurt.”

“Keep your pissing magic shite to yourself, Spottyface! Potions! I got three right here!” She lowered her bow, scowling. “Piss off!”

Dorian’s stomach sank as he saw the genuine hurt flash over Lavellan’s face, but the Dalish girl got herself in hand quickly—even in the beginning, he’d admired her talent for getting control of her emotions, though there was no finesse to her concealment. She could stomp out her feelings to focus on what needed to be done, any time. So she did, they scoured the field, and on her order they moved on.

She led the party, and as much as Dorian knew at that moment that Sera had just done more to quash their burgeoning flirtation than he ever could—and he should just let it go and not try to help—he couldn’t stand to see Lavellan so sad.

He rode up beside her and remained there, quietly, for a long while. When he felt her finally breaking her stony focus on the road ahead to glance at him, he offered quietly, just loud enough for her ears, “It isn’t your fault, you know. Our dear little Sera has her fears, that’s all. I’m certain that, come tomorrow, it will be as though it never happened.”

The Herald scrubbed a hand through her tangled reddish curls. “Yeah. I hope so.” Then, after a pause, “Thanks…Dorian.”

A little ray of warmth slipped into his chest. How unexpected. She hadn’t called him by name the first time until…the journey to Skyhold, if he remembered correctly.

--

Sera’s ire at any magic thrown her way meant Dorian had to leave her to her own devices for a while, but the Iron Bull was different. He asked in advance what Dorian and Lavellan planned to do, and had them both cast barriers on him so that he could adjust to the feel of them and test their strength. The preparation made fighting with him go much more smoothly.

“You’ve adjusted remarkably well to having a mage watch your back, Iron Bull,” Dorian commented on their way back to Haven.

“Oh, so it’s gone past looking to watching, has it? Works for me.”

“It’s impossible to discuss anything with you!” There, that’s better. Getting back into the old high-and-mighty routine, now.

“Oh, pardon me. You wanted to talk? I thought you wanted to feast your eyes on this glorious physique.”

“Naturally. Who could resist ogling an overgrown, filthy brute clad in the most ardor-dampening trousers ever invented?” Dorian congratulated himself on getting the sarcasm in his tone just right that time.

“Hey now. I’m not just a body to quench your desires on, Dorian. If you’re going to undress me with your eyes, make sure to do it respectfully.” That came with the Iron Bull’s signature one-eyed wink, and the charmingly blatant grin that would never be seen on anyone of breeding. How
Dorian adored that grin…

Summoning thoughts of his least favorite classmate at his least favorite Circle, Dorian managed a passable imitation of the noise of disgust he’d so often directed at the Iron Bull the first time. “I assure you I will do no such thing.” With a sidelong glance, he added, “You are hardly clothed as it is. Had I any interest in your chiseled muscles, you’ve more than enough on full display already.”

As soon as it was out of his mouth, Dorian heard what the Bull would choose to focus on. He was not at all surprised by the sparkle of laughter in that eye, or the low, rumbling response, “Oh, really? I didn’t mention ‘chiseled muscles,’ specifically, but it’s good to know what you like.”

Dorian gave him a withering look for an answer. He didn’t dare trust his voice in that moment. He was far too familiar with the Iron Bull’s muscles and what they did to him—in both a figurative and a literal sense—and allowing those memories any room in his mind at the moment was out of the question.

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Much like the first time, Dorian spent most of his days in Haven helping to train the rebel mages for the assault on the Breach. Vivienne and Fiona were given the same task. Solas advised when possible, but he was often called away on missions. Dorian didn’t get his hopes up, however. Lavellan had nearly always preferred Solas and Sera, the first time. She liked to avoid most of the humans.

Of course, two mages and an archer didn’t do well in the field without someone who could take point. Lavellan was violently distrustful of Cassandra, and every time Blackwall stood too close she froze, staring like a frightened rabbit at his beard. Somehow, the Iron Bull managed to be less intimidating and thus was almost always her warrior of choice, and Dorian was glad and miserable at the same time. Glad for the chance to breathe easily and think clearly; miserable without Bull’s loud laugh ringing from the training grounds or the tavern.

When everyone was in Haven, Solas would come examine the mages’ progress. Dorian was careful to keep an eye out for Lavellan at those times—he didn’t want his poor rapport with Solas to harm her opinion of either of them. However, the quiet bitterness and sarcasm he was expecting seemed to have been delayed this time. Vivienne despised Solas’ “interference,” and the two got off to the same poor start that would never improve. Toward him, however, Solas was simply polite. They discussed magic and the Breach, and left it at that. Everything went…smoothly.

Dorian wracked his mind to understand it, when he was alone, but he didn’t think he’d really done anything so different, yet. Nothing that Solas would know about, at least. Unless he somehow knew Dorian was nudging the Herald his way and wasn’t bothered by the interference? But Dorian was certain that the Solas from before would have disliked any meddling, even well-intended. That relationship had never been up for discussion.

It made Dorian nervous. Things going well? Fine. Things going better than before when he had no idea why? Not so fine.

--

It got worse, too.

Solas and Lavellan were not butting heads nearly as much as Dorian remembered—if at all.

The first time, Lavellan had been less forward with him than with Sera—perhaps still smarting
from that experience. She had begun confiding in Dorian by that point, and from what she told him it sounded like Solas was also a little reluctant to return her interest. When he did, he was very private about it. Only one thing was obvious—things were rocky between them, at least for a while. Lavellan complained to Dorian about it once or twice, and it seemed that Solas’ low opinion of the Dalish had royally pissed her off. The Inquisitor’s temper, once roused, was slow to cool—though they did work past it eventually, Dorian thought. It just took quite a while before they could travel together in peace, without snapping at each other over the Dalish or magic or elves in general.

And now—almost nothing.

Unable to find a reason for it, Dorian tried Sera. “So…Solas and the Herald seem a bit…”

“Flirty? Yep.” Sera was perched atop a half-wall, not really listening to him as she scarfed down an entire loaf of bread.

“I imagine they don’t exactly see eye to eye on certain things. The Dalish, for example.”

“Mmmm.”

“Have you…heard anything? Any fights? Gossip?”

Sera gave him a squint. “Why d’you care?”

“And Solas is an elfy pissbag,” Sera nodded sagely. “Well, nope. No fights. He said something about the Dalish bein’ wrong, once, and she was all, ‘Oh, please share your wisdom, Hairpin.’ Then he was nicer and they got flirty, so I buggered off. Too bad, innit? He’s no fun.”

“…Hairpin?”

“Whatever.”

It took Dorian half a day with a text of elven language before he figured out what Sera had really heard.

He still had no idea why the ever-irascible Dalish girl had not bitten Solas’ head off for saying anything critical of the Dalish.

--

“So, you called yourself the Iron Bull, then called your company the Bull’s Chargers. Clever, I suppose.”

“Worked that out on your own, did you?” The Bull’s reply lacked anything dirty, so to make up the deficit the qunari let his eye rake very slowly down Dorian’s body, then up again with a smirk. Dorian controlled himself, kept his shiver at bay, somehow. “You have to keep the name simple, so the nobles get it. They pay us to fight, not to entertain at tea.”

“That I’d like to see.” He couldn’t quite keep his smile from showing. It was still a delightful mental picture the second time around.

“Mmm, I bet you would. Bet I could give you a show you would really enjoy…” Maker, what that pleased rumble always did to him. Dorian could feel it tingling across his skin.
Dorian cleared his throat sharply. “There’s no need to attempt to make *tea* salacious, surely.”

The Bull’s grin said otherwise. “Would have thought you were familiar with those kinds of tea parties, Vint.”

_Do not engage him on this, do not. Give him an inch and... “Oh? Did they serve tea at those parties? I never paid much attention to the refreshments.”_

The Iron Bull’s laugh was loud and full. Dorian kept his haughty look in place, but his stomach was fluttering with happiness at the sound. How he’d missed being the one to make the Bull laugh...

“Good on you, big guy,” he rumbled as the laugh faded, then reached over and gave Dorian one of those wind-knocking back slaps it had taken him a year to get used to. _Relax into it, but hold your balance, ready to recover._ It might have been Dorian’s imagination, but he thought the Bull looked a tiny bit surprised, perhaps even impressed, when he didn’t go sprawling but gracefully handled the blow.

And Dorian felt the warmth of that large hand on his shoulder for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

Normally at this point I’d say "weekly updates" but I don't know if you guys want to wait until Christmas for the end, so maybe bi-weekly from here on out. Sundays and Thursdays, kay?

PS: Thank you, commenters, you're all so sweet. :)


Chapter 7

As before, the Herald had to go Herald ing all over the country. Unlike before, her prejudice against non-elves was already beginning to soften. Dorian must have made a better first impression, and Lavellan seemed troubled by Solas and Sera prodding each other and failing to make friends. She soon began to bring either Solas or Sera on missions, not both. When she left Sera, she took Varric —she had warmed to him before anyone else the first time, too—and when she left Solas, it was Dorian. Thus, Dorian was invited on two missions he hadn’t been requested for the first time, and he was able to enjoy their first trip to the Fallow Mire, an experience he had once been delighted to miss.

The Iron Bull was there, of course. Lavellan was still hiding from the other warriors, and apparently the Bull, oh so skilled at reading people, had put that skill to good use and found ways to set the Herald at ease and win her trust. He’d done it the first time, too, and Dorian had been rightly suspicious of him for it. But time and familiarity and eventually quite good sex had pushed the Ben-Hassrath to the back of his mind. Now, however, every time Dorian looked at them, he remembered that the Bull’s friendship with the Herald was ordered by the Qun. Because everything that the Bull did was ordered by the Qun.

And the Fallow Mire was…well.

Dorian complained incessantly about the weather, but he had seen worse—would see worse again. Damp, cold Southern bogs were revolting, but the undead held no special horror for him. Not that he was tempted to take them home as pets, but he certainly was less repulsed than Sera, who made inarticulate noises of loathing through every battle. The undead, after all, were rather easy to take apart—literally—and they didn’t always stop attacking just because chunks of them fell off.

The challenge for him was to conceal his level of skill. He’d adapted to his companions’ less polished abilities by now, and these walking corpses were almost a joke. He experimented with the strength of the magic holding the spirits in thrall—while spinning about throwing barriers and fire to look busy—and found that he could snap the bond with minimal concentration.

Luckily, no one else seemed to notice the corpse archer off to the side that fell down on its own and never made it to the fight. Dorian checked his companions—still fighting, good—and raised the corpse back up again and sent it shambling over to another of the further-away undead, where the two tore each other apart just a little too slowly.

“Did anyone else see those two corpses fighting?” Lavellan asked after the fight was over and she’d caught her breath.

“I missed it,” the Iron Bull shrugged.

“I seen it,” Sera chimed in. “Was about to notch two for ’em when they went all splat-n-splashy.”

“If no one objects, I could try to duplicate that,” Dorian offered, sidestepping the question. “Or, I can continue the defense and elemental attacks, if present company is uncomfortable with necromancy.”

Sera scowled. “Creepy.”

The Bull scratched at his chin. “It’s…weird.”

Lavellan squirmed a little. “Uh…it’s sort of the exact opposite of the kind of magic I’m used to…”
“Point taken,” Dorian mildly answered, shrugging as though that closed the matter. If memory served, his necromancy wouldn’t be welcome until the battle of Haven—in other words, desperate times.

“No, wait,” Lavellan started, then glanced at the other two.

The Bull studied her, then heaved his giant shoulders in the qunari version of a shrug. Sera stuck her tongue out and glared at Dorian, but offered only, “Whatever.”

Lavellan turned back to Dorian with a certain official formality and replied, “We’ve got a job to do, and we won’t shun useful skills offered to aid us. That wouldn’t be very…Inquisition-y. I think.” Sera snickered, and Lavellan’s ear tips reddened. “Please use whatever works best for you, Dorian. Just don’t startle any of the team too badly, thanks.”

“Oh. Certainly. Thank you.”

After that, the fighting only got easier. Dorian experimented with how many corpses he could take down from a distance at once and how many he could control, but soon he was holding back in this, too. He suspected the others would find it odd if more than half the gaggle of corpses attacking them died at one time.

So he contented himself with practicing his barriers while knocking down undead that were slow to join the fray. The battles became shorter and shorter, their progress through the marsh quicker. When they eventually set up camp, no one was even particularly tired.

Dorian, for his part, still had plenty of energy to complain about the conditions as he slogged toward the higher ground the scouts had chosen for camp. The Iron Bull’s voice behind him startled him—mostly because it was very close. And purring.

“Better hike up your skirt, Mage Boy.”

Dorian resisted the urge to drop the corner of his robe he was already holding up—just to keep it out of splash range of the murky water. “I’m not wearing a skirt,” he shot back without thinking.

“You trip on that bustling…whatever, don’t come crying to me.”

A very witty comeback about the Iron’s Bull’s choice of clothing was on the tip of his tongue, and without thinking Dorian half-turned to deliver it with the appropriately regal expression. Unfortunately, a twisted root concealed under the water caught his foot, and instead of turning he pitched forward quite suddenly.

“Woah!” The Bull’s massive arm shot out and caught him around the middle as Dorian’s hands reflexively grasped solid muscles to steady himself. Oh. Solid, warm, strong, familiar…

Bull was laughing. “That didn’t take long.”

He effortlessly righted Dorian, but took his time removing his arm. Possibly he was waiting for Dorian to let go.

“Focus, Pavus. Take your hands off him.” That was a tree root, not my robes, you imbecile,” Dorian gasped. Take your hands off his arm. Now.

He felt Bull shift a little, bringing them…not closer exactly, but more settled into the positions they currently held. More…relaxed. So that his arm quite definitely was not needed to support Dorian anymore. But there it was, just lingering. It was so easy to imagine that arm tightening, drawing him gently back against Bull’s warm, solid body. It had happened before. Dorian had always…rather enjoyed it when Bull did that. He so desperately didn’t want to let go…
You are touching the Ben-Hassrath who betrayed you and tried to kill you.

*That* was enough. That helped. Dorian let go. No jolting back—that would make it obvious he’d been doing something unintentional. *Just take your hands back calmly, like they weren’t there too long at all. Like the whole thing meant nothing to you.*

Dorian thought he pulled it off rather well. That the Bull didn’t say anything more skipped his notice until five minutes later, as he was setting up tents. *Kaffas.* And Dorian hadn’t caught his expression. *What was he thinking?*

“For everyone’s information, I intend to use magic to dry off and warm myself, so if anyone objects to *comfort*, I recommend not sharing a tent with me.”

“Blegh! Keep your bleedin’ magic.”

“Heating magic? It doesn’t bother me, but I’m good. Don’t need it.”

Lavellan looked at the Bull and Sera and shrugged—perhaps a little regretfully, regarding Sera. “I wouldn’t mind some help drying off. You can share with me, she—I mean, Dorian.”

Thus, Dorian found himself sharing a tent with the Herald, which meant that he spent half an hour showing her how to do the heating spell without igniting the tent. There may have been some tendrils of smoke on a few of Lavellan’s attempts. But overall, Dorian was happy with the experience. Lavellan seemed even more at ease around him. He wouldn’t try to direct her choices yet, but perhaps in a few months, he could add his voice to those who disliked the qunari alliance.

*This is going so well I might even have extra time. I could get to know the Chargers themselves, perhaps. There may be opportunities to increase their importance before the time comes.* That was a novel concept. He had barely met the mercenaries before this.

Dorian still thought he’d need her to be listening to Solas as much as possible. But perhaps even that would go well. He could almost *talk* to Solas this time around. *Why* was still a mystery, but perhaps it didn’t matter.

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Back in Haven, Dorian appraised the mages’ progress. He and Solas got into an actual *conversation* about magic that lasted about five times longer than the sum total of everything they’d said to each other the first time. Solas dropped a casual comment about Tevinter and blood sacrifices somewhere in the middle, but when Dorian only answered with feeling that he hoped someday to see the Imperium rise above such faults, Solas simply nodded and let the conversation continue. Dorian thought about it later, though it didn’t catch his attention in the moment. He wondered if that was the sort of subject that would have derailed a conversation with Solas, before. But surely, he would never have said anything in favor of such things to annoy the elf?

Either way, the mages were nearly ready, according to Solas, and Dorian agreed. Then, he realized what would happen once they sealed the Breach. Then he spent the rest of the day trying to think of some way to help that particular battle go better.

Lavellan would surely still be named Inquisitor, no matter what happened. And she had saved a lot of lives the first time. But not all—and she’d carried the losses of Haven around like a personal failing for a long time, blaming herself and fighting all the harder, trying to make up for the few poor souls as if they had each been the might of a full army. Perhaps it was a Dalish thing—taking the Inquisition as a new “clan” of sorts, making every person within a part of her family, even if
she didn’t know or like them.

Whatever it was, Dorian hoped he could lessen that guilt for her this time. It wasn’t part of his primary goal, he just…didn’t want to see her so miserable.

Dorian’s clever plan, as it happened, was a little bit silly and a little bit of a lie and one small case of assault.

As the celebration was beginning, Dorian took a few select people aside—anyone half inclined to listen to him before spitting on him—and told them to bring the party up to the Chantry. When they asked why, he told them he had a large stash of alcohol hidden up there, and he’d share it with every Inquisition member who came. Word spread quickly—apparently Southern suspicions of Tevinter did not extend to free Tevinter alcohol—and many of those who arrived brought their own supplies, so it took a while before people started to wonder about this rumored fountain of free liquor. By that time, the alarm bell was ringing.

Oh, and Chancellor Roderick he trussed up in a closet to keep him from protesting the revelers invading the Chantry—that was the assault. Oddly, the indignity resulted in Roderick being far enough from the action that he wasn’t wounded, and he led the Inquisition to safety on his own two feet.

Nearly all the laypeople were in or near the Chantry when the fighting began, and Lavellan had far fewer innocents to worry about protecting this time.

The larger moments of the battle remained the same, and Lavellan still stayed behind to confront Corypheus, but when the displaced and battered Inquisition stopped on the side of a snowy mountain to take stock, Dorian was pleased to see that there were a few familiar faces he hadn’t seen again after Haven, the first time.

Roderick was hard at work trying to make him regret accidentally saving the cleric’s life, but no one was listening to him, so that was all right.

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That was the good part—the part that went better because of a little preparation. But it wasn’t what Dorian thought about as he huddled by a smoky, struggling fire in the snow.

The moment he heard the warning bells, he ran out of the Chantry to join the fight—almost cheerful about it, knowing what would happen and that he had probably already helped save people who had died before—and then he saw the army pouring down toward them.

And then he was fighting beside Lavellan, and the archdemon swooped down on them with its horrible scream.

And all of a sudden, Dorian’s stomach turned to ice.

There was Corypheus. The ancient darkspawn magister. The one they’d killed to save the world. And he was alive again, and just as determined to destroy everyone and everything…and he had that chance because of Dorian.

*Dear Maker…what was I thinking?*

In that moment, everything was *real* in a way that made Dorian realize he hadn’t quite believed any of it yet. He’d known it was real in his mind, but some part of him had felt so disconnected from everything—like this was all a pleasant dream he was walking in: *Of course I could never truly go*
back. Of course there was never anything I could do to change the past. This is what I get for letting myself feel something for a qunari…

Now, he looked around at the frozen mountainside and remembered what Lavellan had told them of her experiences after they left. That is what is happening to her right now. She’s struggling for life, alone, nearly freezing to death, slipping in and out of consciousness. And a darkspawn magister is gathering power to destroy the whole world.

In that moment, Dorian couldn’t believe himself. How could he have given such an enemy a second chance and put his dearest friends through this nightmare all over again—and so much more to come—all for his own selfishness?

Looking back, he was almost certain he hadn’t been in his right mind—not entirely. Grief had made him desperate, he could see that now. Not that a temporary insanity born of desperation justified what he’d done, really, but perhaps he could comfort himself with the hope that he would never take such a terrible risk again.

I’ll accept it this time, even if I fail and he dies again. And if I cannot accept it…I will take my grief and go home, and if it destroys me, fine. As long as it is only me.

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“Dorian.”

He was standing watch over Lavellan, who still slept. Not in an obvious way, for no one wanted him near the Herald, but he kept her in his sight just the same.

“Cole.”

The voice didn’t startle him, because it was familiar. More ethereal than the last time they’d spoken—the Cole he remembered had stopped appearing and disappearing in that ghostly way. Now, of course, he was back to his unsettling spirit-ways. Dorian, however, had long since stopped jumping when Cole spoke up from somewhere too close.

“She isn’t dying. She doesn’t even hurt, right now.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” he sighed. There was a long pause. Dorian thought perhaps Cole had left, but he didn’t bother to look around for him.

“Betrayed, beloved, battered, broken, but…”

“There is nothing you can do about it, Cole. You cannot help.”

“…No. You’re right. I cannot help. You are here to help yourself, and her, and him. Helping, harming, but either way hiding, fleeing, flying from facing…”

“Yes, yes, very good, you’ve got a perfect grasp of the situation. Well done. Now, the most helpful thing you can do is never speak of me or my thoughts again—not to me, not to anyone.”

“…Yes. It wouldn’t work, otherwise. I understand.”

“Excellent.”

Another long pause.

“I am sorry, Dorian. I don’t know if it hurt him.”
In the silence that followed, Dorian felt the emptiness left by the spirit’s departure.

“But I do,” he whispered to the snow.
Skyhold.

It was gratifying to watch the Herald lead the way with Solas close beside her. Dorian didn’t think they’d been so close the first time—but of course, at that time he was almost entirely focused on the snow, and how miserable it made him. Naturally, he still didn’t like snow, but he was used to it and knew how to line his boots to spare his feet the worst of the cold.

As the Inquisition travelled, Dorian found himself tagging close behind the Chargers. He watched, and he listened, and he got a general idea of who some of them were. The lieutenant was from Tevinter—Dorian had known that, but they had never spoken. It had been immediately clear to him that “Krem” was soporatus, and likely to be even less amenable to him than most Southerners. Not that Dorian had been looking to make friends, the first time. And then Krem and all the rest had been lost, and there ended his knowledge of them.

Of most note to him at the moment was Dalish, who was evidently…Dalish. He thought he remembered seeing vallaslin before, but he hadn’t realized it was one of the Bull’s boys. By the time he’d relaxed his standards enough to start spending his evenings in the tavern, the Chargers were gone. I must find out if she’s likely to infuriate the Inquisitor. If not, having a friend among the Chargers would surely affect her decision.

Lost in thought, Dorian was surprised by a booming voice right behind him, “That staff’s in pretty good shape, Dorian. You spend a lot of time polishing it?”

Dorian stifled his smile quickly and instead sighed with the tone that conveyed the same meaning as rolling his eyes, without actually being so plebian as to roll his eyes. Then, unable to resist, he haughtily replied, “I can handle my own weapon, obviously. Why? Are you offering to help me with it?”

That earned him another full belly laugh and slap on the back, which Dorian weathered with, he hoped, a self-satisfied smile rather than a delighted one. “All you need to do is ask, Vint,” the Bull answered, with an appreciative once-over.

“But do you know how to handle a Tevinter weapon?” Dorian pressed, all mock sincerity. “Have you ever even polished a mage’s staff before? I don’t know that I can trust your skills.”

Bull’s eye was sparkling as he kept pace with Dorian. “Can’t say that I have much experience with mage weapons, no. But I’m a fast learner, and these fingers,” he flexed his massive hands in front of himself, easily in view for Dorian, “are very skillful.”

“So you say,” Dorian hummed. Gazing at Bull’s hands conjured memories—very disparate memories. One memory made him nearly lick his lips, while another made him ill, remembering blood and a dawnstone axe falling from a suddenly slack hand. It was disconcerting to deal with
such opposite feelings at the same time, toward the same person. And flirting was supposed to be fun. Flirting with the Bull now was an odd experience, pleasure and yearning mingled with distrust and echoes of pain. Dorian was considering his next reply when the lieutenant glanced back at them.

“Don’t think the altus needs your coddling, Chief.”

The soporatus.

“Now now, don’t be worrying. Chief wouldn’t pick a new favorite Vint, you’re quite safe.” That was from Dalish, stepping lightly in the snow.

“She’s right, Krem de la Crème. Sorry, Dorian.”

“However shall I bear it,” Dorian deadpanned. Krem rolled his eyes—proof of his lower class, if Dorian had needed it. Only soporati could afford mannerisms so blatant. Ah well. No use being envious.

The Bull laughed aloud again, and the Chargers continued their banter—loud and rowdy and increasingly eager as they neared the interesting fortress they’d all soon be settling into and making their own. Dorian didn’t join in much, but he continued to tag along and listen. By the time they reached Skyhold’s gates, he had developed a deep fondness for the little band of misfits. They had that commoners’ charm that he’d tried so vehemently to resist, the first time. Now, knowing himself to be secretly fond of all things unrefined, Dorian couldn’t help liking the Chargers at once. He hoped, for the first time, that his efforts could save them, not only for his future with the Bull, but for their own sakes.

And, looking back, remembering the Bull after they had died—he understood a little better what the Qun had demanded of him. Why the Iron Bull had been so quiet, so slow to return to his cheerful façade. It gave Dorian much hope. They really meant something to him. I couldn’t see it at the time—I hadn’t known them. But some of this role of his was real—the part that cared for them. And perhaps…the part that cared for me, as well.

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Putting Skyhold in order was an enormous amount of work. It was weeks before most of them had time to do anything else—apart from the advisors, who were busy with their respective tasks, even when their desks were made of broken planks laid across large fallen stones from tumbled-in walls.

Dorian did not begin work on the library until living spaces were mostly set up. He’d been quicker to flee the hard labor the first time, but as much as most interpreted that to be his pampered noble side holding sway, it had truly been the furious demands of his inner scholar, desperate to begin research. Now, knowing how fruitless much of that research was doomed to be, at least with the materials available at present, Dorian didn’t bother rushing off to tomes and scrolls and instead worked on making rooms livable for many of the Inquisition’s people.

His help was not wanted, but it was needed and therefore accepted. By the time he turned his attention to the library, he had a lot more grudging approval from the servants than he’d had in the first beginning.

The Herald became the Inquisitor, and the Inquisitor became a frequent visitor to Solas’ rotunda. Dorian felt somewhat ashamed of listening in—after all, eavesdropping wasn’t the sort of thing an altus did himself, that was what servants were for—but he felt he needed to keep track of their progress. He was still waiting for the volatile disagreements about the Dalish. There was still no
Roderick, thank the Maker, returned to Val Royeaux, a supporter of the Inquisition. It almost seemed for a while that Vivienne might accompany him. Lavellan had, as Dorian understood it, only accepted Vivienne’s assistance very grudgingly—the first time and this time, too. Before, Vivienne had eventually made her disapproval clear in a perfectly Orlesian manner, and Lavellan had made her own position clear in her own way—with a lot of shouting and throwing things and spit. Vivienne had eventually taken to spending nearly all her time in Orlais as an “advocate” for the Inquisition in constant communication with Josephine and Leliana, because Lavellan had made it clear her presence would not be requested on missions unless she decided to stop being horrid toward Cole, Solas, and Sera.

This time, it seemed Roderick’s departure presented a tempting opportunity, but things had not yet become quite so plainly hopeless. She remained, as before, to make what she could of the opportunity, and Dorian made no effort to warn her that it was useless—at least as long as she insisted on declaring magic to be dangerous and vocally supporting the Circles and the Templars while belittling the Inquisitor’s favorite friends. Alas, even without foreknowledge, Dorian had seen the error of her ways the first time, but his well-intentioned suggestion that she curb certain opinions had been…frostily rejected. It seemed Vivienne would just have to resort to rearranging furniture again.

When Dagna arrived, Dorian was in the courtyard—the party she came with might have some books he’d sent requests for. He saw the arcanist dismount and felt a wave of nostalgia—some fond, some aching with the pain of those last days in his former Skyhold. It was surreal, in a way, to look at her and realize this person had no memory of what they had accomplished together—would never remember it, not like he did. Technically, everyone in the world was in the same position now, unable to remember what he could, but it felt more real with her. Dorian almost wanted to go speak to her—he didn’t even know what he’d say, only that he felt perhaps he needed to say something. As if some part of her would understand his thanks, or her own success. But after all, she didn’t know him—and she had things to set up in the Undercroft.

Then a sharp whistle pierced his right ear, and Dorian winced, turned, and saw Sera, grinning cheekily at the most talented arcanist in Thedas. Who was…blushing.

Maker.

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Once the advisors and Cassandra made her Inquisitor, Lavellan started to like them all much better. It wasn’t a power thing—no travels in time could ever change her that much, Dorian knew. Lavellan had no interest in power, but the fact that four shemlen made a public declaration of their confidence in her made her drop a wall or two and start to like them. She didn’t always like the job, but she was pragmatic—the problem existed, something needed to be done, the Anchor would help, and it happened to be stuck to her hand. No use crying for someone else to take the task that fate had apparently dropped on her.

The result, for Dorian, was that she now felt brave enough to take Cassandra as her melee fighter on missions, which meant that sometimes the Iron Bull was around Skyhold when Dorian was too.

It gave Dorian his first good opportunity to watch the Iron Bull watching people. He’d said from the start he was a spy, but most of them hadn’t been perceptive enough to see him in action—though Dorian was now realizing he had been actively watching at…all times, actually. There was an awareness about him that no one could see, not even Dorian, but if you were watching, you could catch the effect. Nothing surprised him. People popping up on his blind side, things falling
from the battlements, an accidental explosion courtesy of Dagna or Rocky or both—when everyone else jumped, the Iron Bull…didn’t.

Just about the only thing that could startle him was Cole, and that wasn’t really fair. He appeared out of thin air.

Cole, however, was gone at the moment. Lavellan found him fascinating and precious from the moment she understood his nature. He was an immediate favorite of hers, along with Solas, who she almost never left out of any mission. Now especially, for apparently the mission she was on was a personal one for Solas, and she’d taken her favorite spirit and Cassandra. Evidently the mission involved more magic and spirits, and Lavellan realized the Iron Bull would be very happy to stay out of it.

Of course, that didn’t mean Dorian sat around all day flirting with the Bull. The captain of the Chargers was busy with his boys, and Dorian had research—not the same research as before, however. There was no point searching for Corypheus’ true name—he wouldn’t find it. And there were no Venatori documents to decrypt yet. There was, however, a topic he’d been meaning to read more about, toward the latter days last time, but he’d never had the time. Now, he did.

Dorian began a detailed study of everything the South knew about the Qun.

Genitivi, naturally, was the only source worth reading on the subject. Orlesian authors were too condescending to bother getting their facts straight; Ferelden literature was nothing but wild folk tales; and Tevinter writings, though plentiful, were pure propaganda. Nevarrans hadn’t cared enough yet to put together a book on the subject, and Antivans wrote only of qunari physiology—how to attack and kill it or how to copulate with it. Dorian needed advice on neither subject.

Alexius had been ordered to work for the Inquisition, under guard—Lavellan had told him to his face that she’d personally prefer to execute him, but she wasn’t about to waste a useful resource. Dorian took to visiting him about once a week, ostensibly to trade notes and books and consult over whatever he was researching. Alexius barely spoke, so most of those visits were spent reading silently, merely keeping him company. It was clear his company was not wanted, but Dorian wasn’t doing this for Alexius or himself, so the tedious and unhappy visits continued.

In the evenings, he began to frequent the tavern. Not all the time—it wouldn’t do to appear to embrace the riffraff too quickly. But he looked forward to the nights he could spend pretending to hate Ferelden beer. He hoped to eventually be able to sit with the Chargers, but several of them were of their lieutenant’s mind regarding him, it seemed. But Dorian was patient, and drinking alone wasn’t so bad. He could watch Bull, after all, laughing and singing and being alive, and if the serving girl on his knee made Dorian ache with longing, well…he’d survived worse pain.

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“You are…the Tevinter magister, aren’t you?”

Dorian turned to the man speaking to him. He hadn’t noticed him arrive, between nursing his beer and surreptitiously watching the Iron Bull out of the corner of his eye. The fellow who stood before him now was one of the Inquisition’s soldiers, a rather strong, Ferelden-looking sort, not unattractive. And there was something oddly familiar about him.

Dorian sighed. “If you like. The distinction seems lost upon nearly everyone in the South.”

The man smiled. “Nearly everyone around here is afraid of you, Ser…Pavus, was it?”
“Lord Pavus is more accurate,” he remarked, “but in the interests of assuaging fear, never mind that.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of you.” The soldier smiled slowly, his eyes raking over Dorian. “Though you may be frighteningly handsome.”

Dorian froze. _Oh Maker, now I remember._ The incredible lack of subtlety—how could he forget? He’d had sex with this man, before.

Coming to the South, he knew things were different, but the reality of being approached so openly had still stunned him. And flattered him, truthfully, especially considering that he was indeed almost universally feared and hated so far. He’d spent less than an hour flirting with the fellow, then brought him back to his room and slept with him. It had been rough and hard, but that was all he could remember. He’d never seen this particular man again. There was one other, just as forgotten, whose face he couldn’t recall now, and the few memories he had of each encounter blended together until he wasn’t sure if this was the fellow who wanted to pretend to be a Templar or if that was the other one.

“You’re not the first to say so,” he managed to reply, his voice a little weak, lacking his usual full confidence. Hopefully the man wouldn’t notice—dull Ferelden, and all that. I don’t need to keep this the same, surely? Dorian couldn’t remember if his forgotten assignations with the soldiers had affected anything important. Had they brought him closer to the Inquisitor or Bull or harmed his friendships in some way?

Things had been changing so easily, Dorian had begun to feel uneasy about it. Now, he was trying to stick as closely as he could to his original path, and yet…he’d forgotten this entirely. And, at the moment, Dorian had absolutely no desire to go to bed with this stranger. In spite of everything, he was still in love, and he didn’t think he could stomach a replacement right now.

“Let me buy you another drink, Lord Pavus,” the man was saying. He’d edged closer, and Dorian suddenly remembered a hand brushing his thigh, moments before it happened. The conjunction of distant memory with the present was oddly surreal.

Dorian drew back, pulling his leg away. “That won’t be necessary. I’m far from finished with this one.”

The man’s eyes sharpened, but he smoothed things over with a smile. “As you wish, Ser. To the Inquisition then, eh?”

“Mm.” Dorian barely tipped his tankard, then shifted to angle himself away from the soldier.

Unfortunately, obvious signals were completely lost on this fellow…or they were being ignored. The man continued to chat him up, and Dorian began to make faster progress through his beer as he barely answered. He was moments away from just quaffing the rest and leaving when the man’s trail of conversation led to, “You look very strong, for a mage. I can see you haven’t neglected physical training. Your arms are beautiful…” Fingertips brushed lightly along the skin of his bare arm, slipping inward to the most sensitive flesh. “I imagine the rest of your body must be a wonder to behold.”

Firmly, Dorian removed himself from that touch. _Apparently Ferelden manners are called for in this case._ “It is that,” he agreed lightly, but with a hard edge in his eyes as he met the man’s gaze. “But I have no intention of showing it to you.”

The soldier straightened slowly, eyes black with contained anger. For a moment, Dorian braced
himself to meet a blow…but the man instead smiled thinly and nodded. “I see. Excuse me.”

Finally left to himself, Dorian contemplated the last of his beer with distaste. He was about to leave, when suddenly a slight, blonde girl popped up on his other side.

“Oh I dare say that was nicely done, and thanks for waiting until Chief was off with his lady. He’d be clucking his loudest right now if he’d seen that.”

Dalish.

“…Clucking?”

“You know, mother hen, clucking. Come have a drink with us.”

Thin little hands with a surprisingly strong grip levered him up and dragged him over to the Chargers. Krem merely nodded at him. Grim passed him a bottle. Dorian sniffed it first—then carefully pulled back. It was definitely not wine or ale, and he probably no longer had hairs in his nose. Blinking away the water that sprang to his eyes, Dorian leaned over to Rocky and asked, as quietly as he could, “What is this?”

Krem answered—loudly, from the other side of the group. “What’s the matter, Magister? Our drink not good enough for you?”

The entire company turned to stare at him in silence. Dorian was amazed they were even capable of such quiet.

Smiling politely, he answered, “I’m not at all certain this drink is good for you. But I appreciate the hospitality.” With that, he poured…well, some of the stuff into his tankard. Not very much at all—it smelled like it needed to be approached like whiskey, at the very least. It was very likely this was a sort of test or dare, and normally Dorian would never rise to such petty games, but he thought the Chargers warranted an exception. He raised the tankard to them and took the biggest sip he dared.

Whatever it was did not just burn the whole way down—oh no. It sat in his stomach and burned there too, and the breath he coughed out hit his eyes and burned there too, and it was several minutes before Dorian could see or breathe. His hands were covered in ice, which he was sucking on desperately, and his stomach continued to churn with fire. It was, without a doubt, a painful experience, during which the Chargers laughed, hooted, cheered, and slapped him on the back—nearly sending the drink back up and out. Dorian barely managed to keep it down.

Oddly, when the fire at last began to fade, the taste that lingered under it was curiously sweet and flowery, with a hint of spice that reminded him of the North, though he couldn’t place it. He tried to speak, still wiping his eyes, and found that his voice had been reduced to a whisper.

“I say…that’s not…not bad.”

The Chargers approved of this loudly. Dorian endured the onslaught of their joy—the room seemed to be tipping rather far to one side, at present. Things were still a little sideways when the Iron Bull reappeared. Dorian was not too sloshed to notice his entrance, nor the serving girl who got a fond slap on the bum and went her way with a giggle. Then he was closer, picking up the bottle and glancing from Dorian to the group. “Krem…” The tone was dark. The lieutenant seemed unfazed.

“He kept it down, Chief.”
Then the Bull’s face was inches from his own, his hands gently opening Dorian’s eyes wide as he peered into them. For a moment, Dorian forgot that this was supposed to be unusual for them—this touching business. He relaxed into the Bull’s hand on his forehead and the pulse point in his neck, smiling contentedly. It was only when he saw the flicker of surprise in Bull’s face that he remembered, and immediately drew himself together and pulled back. Bull let him go. “Yes yes, I’m alive, incredibly, no thanks to these assassins. What was that? Deathroot wine?”

“Maraas-lok,” the Bull answered. “Most humans don’t do too well with it.”

Dorian shot Krem a dirty look. “I can tell, thank you.” Krem just shrugged, looking a little too pleased with himself. Dalish took his hand and patted it soothingly, though her smile was far too cheerful to pass for any kind of sympathy.

“He did say it was good, though,” Rocky observed.

“The flavor, perhaps, not the part that tried to kill me,” Dorian shot back.

The Bull studied him. “And you kept it down?” Multiple affirmatives made him arch an eyebrow. “Well, that’s going to keep messing with you for a while. We’d better get you something to wash it down with.”

That was how Dorian found himself supplied with a free apology-ale of the very weakest sort, sitting next to the Iron Bull as the Chargers laughed and told stories and even slightly included him, making the excuse that “the Magister hasn’t heard it yet” when a story was shot down for having been heard too often.

It was the happiest evening he’d had since coming back to the past, even if it was hard, too. It was hard to look at these people who might still die, in spite of all his efforts. And it was hard to be so close to Bull, yet unable to lean against his warm, solid bulk when the room would insist on remaining a little off-kilter all night. Even knowing what he knew now, the way Bull used to make him feel…the illusion of safety, of being cared for—he missed it.

When the party finally broke up, Dorian found he could not quite walk straight, but he could walk. The maraas-lok gave him an odd, lingering dizziness, somewhat different from the usual effects of alcohol.

The door of the Rest shut behind him, and Dorian paused to take deep breaths of air. The next moment, the door opened again, and he heard the Bull’s deep voice behind him. “There you are. Come on, big guy. I’m walking you back.”

With a sigh, Dorian pushed away from the wall, then caught himself against it and steadied his balance again. He should probably act more affronted by the offer, but he knew the Bull would just banter back at him and shadow him all the way to his room, getting the job done either way. “Very well. Why don’t you offer me your arm to complete the picture of perfect gallantry?”

Without missing a beat—and without comment—the Iron Bull did.

Dorian hesitated, then smiled softly and took Bull’s arm, leaning against him. He was so warm… “This is hardly necessary,” he murmured, but he’d been so badly missing the freedom to touch Bull tonight. If it came up later, he could pretend he’d been drunker than he was.

“Eh, who said it needs to be?” They began to walk toward Dorian’s wing.

*Dorian Pavus, you really should know better than this, he admonished himself. Need you remind yourself yet again that he tried to kill you?*
At length, he remarked, “I truly did like the taste of that qunari poison you drink. After I’d survived the worst of its attempt to kill me, of course.”

The Bull chuckled. “You’re a tough guy, for a pampered Vint. Too bad you aren’t qunari.”

A delicate snort. “I beg your pardon, that is not a fact I regret.”

“Hey, you’d make a good qunari. I could see you with curved horns, matching that moustache. It would be hot.”

“Oh, but how would I maintain this moustache with stitching in my lips?” Dorian shot back, a little too much edge to his voice.

“Hmm, got a point there,” the Bull answered calmly. “The magic thing would be a problem. Even if you weren’t a mage, I guess I really can’t see you as a tamassran anyway, so maybe you’re good the way you are.”

Dorian took a minute to parse that. “So you’re saying…there’s no point in my being a sexy qunari if the Qun wouldn’t assign me a role as a potential sex partner for you; therefore, in deference to your own libido, you approve of me being a human, a mage, and a Vint?”

The Bull’s laugh rang out in the quiet courtyard. “Sure does sound like that’s what I meant.”

He shot the Bull a sidelong look. “Well, so long as we’re imagining me as a sexy qunari who isn’t a saarebas, we could just imagine you as the tamassran instead.”

The Iron Bull grinned. “Works for me.”

“I am speaking hypothetically here, you understand,” Dorian added. “We are not setting the scene for a sexual role-play right now.”

“Not right now, hmm?” There was that sly look. Dorian had seen it quite a few times, and never tired of it.

“No,” he smiled, “not right now.”

“Well, your call, big guy. But if you change your mind later, my door’s always open.”

They had arrived at Dorian’s room, thankfully, so he let that go without a promise or a denial, simply a “Goodnight, Iron Bull” instead.

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Dorian was able to persuade several of the Chargers to begin calling Bull “Tama” when he started, as Dalish put it, “clucking.” Once they understood the joke—though Dorian didn’t explain his part in it—Bull’s caretaking began to earn him many exaggerated replies of “Yes, Tama.” When Dorian was there, he couldn’t help smirking at Bull every time, and he got a knowing look in return that made heat pool in his belly.

Because apparently Dorian was stupid, stupid, stupid.
The Inquisitor came back from her mission—without Solas and in a terrible mood. She went around Skyhold kicking every wall she saw, until Varric commented that she was going to topple their very ancient fortress if she kept that up. She snarled at him, but Varric didn’t mind—he took notes.

Dorian tried to give her some space, at first. Then, she blew up at some of the once-rebel mages, apparently for putting elfroot in the wrong planter, and Dorian decided it was time to risk her ire. He waited until she was calm—calmer, rather, and attempting to sort through a stack of reports, meaning she was definitely bored—and then he showed up at her door with a bottle of wine a nice lady in Skyhold had made. (Well, she was nice to Dorian now—he’d helped put a roof over her head shortly after their arrival.) It was a mild berry wine, as close as one could get to what the Dalish generally drank, and he was reasonably sure Lavellan would appreciate it much more than he would.

She did.

Their relationship was better, but still not so warm that Dorian was welcomed with open arms when he appeared at her door. However, her cautiously friendly but guarded smile gave way to giggles after one glass. But after the second, the Inquisitor was beginning to mope. She was recounting the last mission in mind-numbing detail, and Dorian, having got the gist of it, decided it was time to relocate to the tavern.

The Iron Bull saw them come in but waited about ten minutes, giving Lavellan a chance to adjust to the noise and warmth of the place. Then he came over and invited them to join the Chargers—exactly what Dorian had been hoping for.

Lavellan accepted the palest ale Cabot had and decided to share the last of Dorian’s wine with Dalish. Dalish, Dorian suspected, had long ago grown accustomed to stronger drink, but she was sweet about it and even said it brought back pleasant memories. Soon, she and the Inquisitor were giggling and whispering in broken Elven to each other. Krem looked a little baffled. The Bull was just smiling.

And Dorian…really couldn’t believe how well that had gone.

Solas came back the next day. Dorian was on the battlements, quite out of earshot…for most people. He wondered if Solas would notice an eavesdropping spell—probably would. Instead, he restrained himself and just watched closely. Lavellan did not blow up and start shouting and throwing things. In fact, it almost looked like she was about to hug Solas at the end. Evidently they were doing…well. Very well.

“Looks like Solas and the Inquisitor are pretty into each other.”
The remark from behind him made Dorian’s stomach flip, but he managed not to jump.

“Going to send a little letter to Par Vollen about it?” he snapped.

The Bull raised an eyebrow. Dorian sighed.

“I apologize. That was…well, not wrong, but there’s no call for bitterness. I’m just…worried about her, that’s all.”

“What’s to worry about? They seem to like each other.”

Dorian glanced over, took in the Bull, standing there in a relaxed, non-threatening way. 
*Appearances.* Hisssrad was in there somewhere, waiting for orders, willing to obey them—no matter what.

“Sometimes liking isn’t enough, Iron Bull. Broken hearts are very painful. The Qun may not have mentioned that.”

Without waiting for an answer, he left. The old tears were threatening again…perhaps even more so because forgetting about Hisssrad was still just as easy as the first time, and Dorian knew why.

*I want to forget. To pretend I could have something impossible. I am as ruled by Tevinter as he is by the Qun.*

--

Although it would seem that reliving the past would put one in a position of great advantage, always knowing what was coming next, Dorian found it didn’t quite work that way, in practice. Indeed, he did know what would happen, but his memory was best when it came to larger events. For the rest—to him, it had all happened three years ago. Most memories only came back to him once he was reminded of them—in other words, the moment they happened again.

Lavellan stopped by, as she did nearly every day, and Dorian did not remember, until the moment he saw the letter in her hand, why this day was important. He drew in a slow, deep breath and wished he’d thought of this sooner. Given himself time to prepare.

*Father.*

He hadn’t even thought of it. Much like Felix, in a way—some events were not only buried under three years of memory, they were also things that he’d put to rest in his mind long ago. He was back in those days again, but his mind was still three years beyond all this.

But now he faced it again, and given the opportunity…

He *would* do this differently. He didn’t care what it affected. The last time he had seen or spoken with his father had been in the very same tavern in Redcliff. Nothing had passed between them since. Then his father had been killed, and Dorian realized he had never said goodbye. It was strange how hard that was for him, even though they had no real relationship for so long now. Still, the finality of death…

Now he had a chance. He had a father again, flaws and all—loved and hated at the same time. There would be no way to replace him, once he was gone.

Lavellan decided it would be a good idea to bring Solas and the Iron Bull with them—one because she hated to part from him, the other because she thought Dorian would be happier with his
company than Cassandra or, naturally, Blackwall—not that she ever brought him, if she could help it. The beard still frightened her.

Solas did not pull any punches about the Qun, and he and the Bull nearly tore each other’s heads off on the way to Redcliff. It was just like old times, for once. Except this time, Dorian was listening. Listening to everything the Bull said about the Qun. And while Dorian had always been more inclined to agree with Solas, now that feeling was more than just mental assent. It was gut-deep, visceral. He hated the Qun.

Dorian took deep, calming breaths as they entered the tavern and met Halward Pavus. Lavellan started shouting and throwing things when she realized what was going on. She tried to drag him away as quickly as she could—Halward had a barrier up, and throwing things was clearly useless. Last time, Dorian had let her, and he had not seen his father again since that moment. This time, Dorian laid a hand on her thin shoulder and smiled, asking her to give them a few minutes.

He did not fool himself that her compliance with his request meant the walls outside would be safe from ferocious elven kicking.

“Dorian, you surprise me.”

One more deep breath.

“Father. Do you care about me?”

A stricken look. “Of course I do, my son.” There were tears in his father’s eyes. “You are the only one in this world who matters to me.”

“Are you certain? Isn’t it just the name, the legacy of House Pavus that I represent that makes you concern yourself with me?”

His father looked…so terribly old. “Dorian, if we were stripped of our title today and became nothing in the world, you would mean no less to me than now.”

“Even if I will never change, in this?” He had to know.

Halward hesitated. “I have never understood, Dorian. Why you feel you must put this before everything else. Your family, your place in the world…”

“It’s more important than any of that. It’s who I am.”

“…So it seems. I still do not…truly understand. But…” Dorian held his breath until the room nearly began spinning around him. “Dorian, you do not know what it is like, to hold a babe in your arms and know he is yours. Your son. I am sorry if you never know it. Because then you will never know that I…that nothing could ever change my love for you.”

He couldn’t speak. His voice wouldn’t come out, not as long as he wished to keep the tears in. He had not expected such simple words to affect him so, and try as he might, it seemed he did not conceal his feelings well. Or his father perhaps knew him a little after all—well enough to see them.

Halward reached out and held him. “Dorian, I am so sorry for what I…planned to do. I never wanted to do it, but it was…I truly thought you would be happier. You would fit in the world, for once. It always gave me such pain, watching you become a man, seeing the future that awaited you in our world. Knowing that you would never be accepted…”
He drew back enough to meet his father’s eyes. “I am accepted here, Father. I know it is not what you had in mind, but I can be myself, here.”

Closed eyes, for a moment. Then Halward was searching his face again. “You are happy, with the Inquisition?”

*That’s…a complicated subject.* “I am…where I belong, Father. For the time being. And, after all, I am grown now. I need to find my own happiness and fight my own battles. It isn’t your task to determine what is best for me—not anymore.”

“That is…true, I suppose.” There were tears in his father’s eyes. “It is hard to let go. Another thing you may never understand, my son.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I suppose it does,” Magister Pavus agreed.

--

His father left, and Dorian got very, very drunk.

It had been possibly the best meeting they’d ever had, yet Magister Pavus still had to express his concern about Dorian’s “responsibilities” and “duty” to House Pavus and Tevinter. He was worried that if Dorian remained in the South for an indefinite period of time it would create political trouble he could not counteract. The problem was, it was a valid concern Dorian had no way of assuaging. He couldn’t exactly say, “Well, at least the next few years will probably pass all right—or if there’s trouble, you’ll manage and I won’t hear of it. Of course, then you’ll be assassinated, so you have a point there, I’m afraid.” To hear his father describe the sociopolitical situation, Dorian couldn’t help but wonder if his presence at home over the next few years could be the key difference that might save his father’s life. If the Pavus family had an active and present heir and ally in Dorian, eliminating Halward would be less beneficial to their enemies than if Dorian were effectively absent, with no known promise to return.

Yet even if that were true, he had to choose the Inquisition. They did need to save the world, after all.

While Dorian drank off the weight of that decision, Lavellan got wrapped up helping the helpless, running about doing a hundred little things that probably weren’t worth her time. Solas tagged along, unsurprisingly, but the Iron Bull remained at the inn. He was taking care of provisions and writing missives and such, but nothing that took him so far that he couldn’t stick his head in the room and check on Dorian occasionally.

It occurred to Dorian, sometime toward the end of the second bottle, that they were nearing the time he’d tumbled into bed with the Iron Bull…the first time around.

He was sure it was after Adamant, and definitely before Halamshiral. But there were a lot of smaller missions to keep track of, and all he could remember for certain was that they’d been in Skyhold, he’d been drinking, and he’d been irritated for months. Irritated with the brute, with the brute’s refusal to get angry back at him, and most especially with the brute’s massive muscles—the stuff of embarrassing lurid fantasies. Finally, he was irritated enough to make a very poorly thought-out choice that changed everything.

_Not quite everything. Not…one little detail.* Dorian took another drink. The burn of liquor was surely to blame for his smarting eyes.
It was becoming clear, lately, that this time would be different, despite his efforts to reproduce their initial relationship. The Iron Bull was still a disastrous flirt, but Dorian struggled to be as insulted by it as he once was. And sex? Dorian Pavus was an incredible man—he’d done the unthinkable and travelled in time—but he had no idea how he would conceal his feelings from a damned spy who, he well knew, would prove exceptionally good at getting him to drop his walls when they were in bed together.

Drink, think, and drink. How to achieve the same result—or better—with a different approach?

His defiance and sass had always turned Bull on…had worked very well for gaining his interest and keeping his attention. But in latter days, it had been more than that. And after all, why had Dorian fallen in love? It wasn’t from getting pounded into a mattress—he wasn’t that easy. It was the gentleness, the care, the unwavering, uncompromising respect. It was the part of the Bull that refused to even consider anything that would be less than very much wanted in bed. Because because he needed to know Dorian was happy. He was physically incapable of enjoying something that his partner was only tolerating…or worse.

That was what made the Iron Bull unlike any other man Dorian had slept with. He was respectful to a point that had confused Dorian at first. He was friendly and a good listener and never looked down on Dorian as a person, even after they’d done things in bed that…well, he’d done them before, naturally, but he’d always been treated differently afterward. Like he’d debased himself, and the man in question knew it, and knew he had a little bit of power over Dorian as a result.

The Bull was different. Better. With him, nothing was shameful—it was only pleasure to be embraced as often as possible or not-pleasure, to be cast aside and never mentioned again. Once Dorian had seen that, he’d been lost—though he’d spent the next two years denying it. Now, though—how to get back to where they were before?

Indeed, where were they, at least on the Bull’s side? Dorian couldn’t trust any of the closeness he’d felt before the…well, before. All he really had to go on was the look in the Bull’s eye as he died—proud of Dorian, of his kadan, and sorry to have hurt him. That moment was burned forever into Dorian’s mind’s eye, and he was as certain of it today as he had been then—but what of it? Sorry meant he had not wanted to hurt Dorian, but the Bull had never wanted to hurt anyone. Had he loved Dorian at all? And if he had, what about Dorian had inspired such feeling? And if he had not…

If he didn’t, then when he falls madly in love with me this time, the Qun will not stand a chance.

Dorian inelegantly gulped from the bottle. Of course.

“So how do you plan to make him, Pavus?” he mumbled into his chest.

Knock, knock. A gentle tap on the door before it opened. “How you doing, Dorian?”

He blinked up at the Bull glassily. “Wonderful. Why, don’t I look it?”

“Thought I heard you talking to yourself a second ago, that’s all.”

Dorian frowned. “That hardly justifies failing to compliment me.”

The corner of the Bull’s eye crinkled a little. “All right. You look wonderful, big guy. Good enough to eat.”

His head rolled to one side as Dorian contemplated the Bull from his seat on the uncomfortable bed. With very precise articulation, he asked, “Are you saying you would like a taste?”
The Bull’s chuckle was deep and, as always, arousing. “Think I’ve been saying that since we met. But not when you’re this drunk, Dorian.” That one-eyed wink again. “I want you to have a good, clear memory of it the next day, after all.”

With an elegant snort, Dorian dropped onto his side. “My memory is excellent. Perhaps too excellent. There are many things I would be happy to forget…” Then he frowned heavily, realizing he was mumbling into the bedcovers. Pushing himself up, Dorian sat back against what passed for a headboard. “Well, what are you doing, then, that keeps you so busy you cannot entertain me?”

The Bull shrugged. “I’m not that busy. I can spend some time chatting, if you like. Just no sex when you can’t walk in a straight line.”

With a thoroughly offended sniff, Dorian tossed his head regally, giving Bull a narrow-eyed glare that had made servants faint. “I beg your pardon, I most certainly can walk in a straight line.” He blinked rapidly in an effort to clear the haze from his vision. It didn’t work.

“Oh? Show me.”

Dorian let his lip curl disdainfully. “I don’t feel at all inclined to rise, at this moment.”

The Iron Bull laughed, and finally stepped fully into the room, shutting the door—but not locking it—behind him. “All right, big guy. Suit yourself.” He pulled up a rickety chair and sat. Dorian watched, very worried that the thing would snap into splinters. It creaked, but held. “So anyway, how you doing, Dorian? I know family stuff can be rough.”

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“Do you?” Dorian’s mouth twisted bitterly. “Do tell me all about your relationship with your father, Iron Bull.”

“Hmmm. Well, it’s possible I was conceived before he left, if the first round took. They’d probably have gone at least once more. Better odds that way. They don’t usually go for too long because they want to let the female rest, give it a chance to take. Of course, after that I may have seen him every day growing up or never again—don’t know.” The Iron Bull considered seriously before adding, “I guess you could say we’ve never argued, so it’s a pretty good relationship.”

Dorian stared at him. “Ah.” Then, with a frown, “So rumors of qunari breeding their offspring like livestock are actually not propaganda?” This subject had somehow never come up the first time. Dorian felt his skin prickle at the idea of one of his lewd adolescent fantasies being slightly less fantastical than he’s always thought.

“No, it’s true.”

“And…have you…?”

“Yeah. More often when I was younger. But they keep you in the rotation as long as everything still works.”

The image was…new. “You could have children. How many?”

“It isn’t the same, Dorian. You don’t know them and they don’t know you and nobody sees it as any kind of connection.”

“I realize that, but…if you are a—a father…” Try to learn to say the word without stumbling, Pavus. “How many children could you have?”

“Eh…not too sure. I never kept track of how many times I contributed. But, let’s see…if it took
“Yes, yes, your prowess is legendary in Skyhold and you no doubt have the virility to match. Please, just answer the question.” He rubbed delicately at his temple.

The Bull grinned but dropped it. “Well, six years of home-soil service after I reached maturity, before Seheron—they don’t breed there, and I went from there to reeducation to Orlais, so that would have been it. They usually call you in once or twice a year…”

“So…between six and twelve?” Dorian managed to shut his mouth, but his eyes were still wide and staring.

The Bull shrugged again. “To be fair, even the most virile don’t take every time.”

They sat in silence for a while. Dorian gazed at the bottle sitting on the nightstand and thought about grabbing it, drinking more, but it was rather out of reach and he didn’t feel like moving. Finally, he mused, “I wonder if they look like you. Do they inherit your horns?”

“Horns run in bloodlines mostly, yeah. They probably wouldn’t get mine, though. I heard when I was growing up that horns like mine only happen when both the male and female sires have them. I don’t really know how it works—the tamassrans have that stuff figured out, but it doesn’t affect strength or intelligence or anything important, so they don’t focus on it.”

“No vanity under the Qun, I take it?”

“That’s right.”

Dorian held back his laugh. In this time, after all, he had no evidence to the contrary—yet. But he most certainly had heard the Iron Bull bragging about his horns before. And as much as Bull had tried to act unaffected, admiration and enjoyment of his horns always made him secretly pleased.

No, Dorian couldn’t give away that he knew otherwise, but he could still play the curious skeptic.

“You mean to tell me,” he began very slowly, voice low and soft, expression gradually slipping from sleepy to sultry, “that you aren’t even a little bit proud of your horns? Of how broad and sharp they are? How straight…and thick…and hard…” He licked his lips, eyes wandering over the Bull’s horns before dropping back to meet his gaze with a hungry look.

“Uh.” Dorian didn’t need to check to know that Bull’s dick had thickened a little at that—but he glanced down anyway, just so Bull would see where his eyes went and know that he knew. Bull cleared his throat. “Hey, if you’re into that…”

“You’d be happy to accommodate, yes?” Dorian snorted. “As if you were doing me a favor. As if it wouldn’t drive you wild to have me gripping your horns, almost hanging from them as you took me, so that you were carrying half my weight with that strong, thick neck of yours.” He was practically purring, enjoying talking the Iron Bull to an erection. He hadn’t done this in ages…

But the Bull was watching him, eye intent. Yes, he was half-hard, and yes, when he spoke his voice was a deep growl, but he was also paying attention. “You been talking to the serving girls, Vint, or are you just really good at guessing?”

Dorian rolled his shoulders back and smirked. “I know men, Iron Bull, and you are one.” He let that statement linger, without elaboration, and cut his eyes down to Bull’s crotch again. Finally raising his gaze back to Bull’s with a lustful smolder, he all but whispered, “That looks
uncomfortable. Still think I’m too drunk to know what I want?”

The Iron Bull gave him a long, silent look before finally shrugging. “It’s more than being drunk. Look, I don’t know much about families or feelings or any of that crap, but I know you just had some shit to deal with and you’re not yourself. Doesn’t mean we won’t get around to that, eventually, but now…it just wouldn’t be right.”

His heart…ached. “Because I’m vulnerable, and looking for comfort, and you don’t want to take advantage.”

“Pretty much.”

His eyes were prickling again, his stomach a knot of misery and love and longing. “I feel it only fair to tell you, in full disclosure, that I would not act with the same scruples, were our positions reversed. I’m a hideously selfish man, when it comes down to it.”

The Bull smiled gently, shaking his head and standing. “Maybe. Or maybe you just need too much. I wouldn’t hold it against you, big guy.” He left, but only for a moment, and when he returned he put a pitcher of water on the nightstand and handed Dorian a full cup. “Drink this for a while. And call if you need anything. I’ll bring some food later.”

“Thank you,” he said, and then he drank the water and kept telling himself, *It’s just his orders. He’s doing it for the Qun.*

Dorian had to keep telling himself. He *had to.*
They were riding back to Skyhold, and Dorian was trying to plan for his next goal rather than dwell on the recent time in Redcliffe.

“Can we just invade Tevinter? I want to burn it.”

*So much for that.*

A deep chuckle. “The qunari wouldn’t mind.”

“A Ben-Hassrath secret revealed,” Solas interjected calmly. His eyes, though, remained on Lavellan, and they flickered with something amused, or perhaps fond. “What would an invasion accomplish, Inquisitor?”

A little elven growl rounded out into the word, “Nothinnnnng, probably.” She huffed. “But between Corypheus and *Magister* Pavus, Tevinter has got to be the most evil place in Thedas. Thus —*fire.*”

Dorian was tempted to remind present company that Tevinter was far more than those particular examples represented, but he sighed instead. *Probably best to wait until we’re a little friendlier before I try to explain the good side of the Imperium, this time.*

Solas glanced over at him thoughtfully. “There are certain ills rather…unique to Tevinter. I do not know of another place in Thedas where Magister Pavus’ actions would be considered acceptable.”

“That’s a fine way to look at it,” Dorian mused cheerfully. “The world is wide and open to me, filled with handsome men of every nationality…all ready to spit on me for my country of birth. But!” He smiled, “Not for my proclivities!”

Still smiling in that almost-invisible way of his, Solas replied, “I think some of them will be willing to adventure beyond prejudice. If you give them no reason to fear.”

Dorian stroked his moustache thoughtfully. “I must devise my strategies for wooing the men of Thedas, then.”

“I wish you luck.”

“I can help with that!” Bull called from behind them.

“…And *I* want to kill some magisters,” Lavellan grumbled.

Dorian did not roll his eyes; he kept them on the road, and only smiled a little. He’d always found Lavellan’s temper adorable, though it would not be safe to tell her so for quite some time.
“There are plenty of slaves in Tevinter who would probably agree with you,” the Bull observed. “The Qun takes in a lot of elves as viddathari.”

“The desperate will grasp at any relief,” Solas darkly answered. It occurred to Dorian, then, to wonder if his improved relationship with Solas this time was thanks to his deeper loathing of the Qun, since...well. He had always been suspicious of it—born and raised to caution and distrust. But he had been willing, perhaps too willing, to forget all that when his feelings came in conflict with it. Now, the way he hated the Qun...perhaps it was similar to the way Solas felt about it. Even so, he hadn’t discussed those feelings, so how would Solas know?

“True,” Dorian observed casually, “and those slaves would be the first to die in the ensuing chaos. If they didn’t starve first. Most of them have no idea how to provide for themselves. Kill their masters, and they die too.”

“Given them some credit,” Solas answered with a slight frown. “They are people. And survival is the strongest instinct of all.”

Dorian inclined his head. “Very well, suppose they survive. They would still suffer greatly. The poor and powerless always take the brunt of it whenever something goes wrong. And after all, even if you killed the entire Magisterium, whoever replaced that central power would be taking over a country accustomed to abuse and, at that moment, desperate for deliverance. It seems unlikely the new rulers would turn out to be better than the old ones.” He considered a moment and added, “Corypheus would no doubt thank you for it. All of Tevinter rallied behind him as their savior? What an opportunity.”

“Ugh!” Lavellan grunted. Then she smacked a tree branch that came within reach. The Iron Bull made no comment, but Dorian could feel his attention on the exchange. Hissrad, always listening.

“So it is better to simply leave things as they are, for fear of making them worse?”

“Not at all,” Dorian replied. “Tevinter is badly in need of reform. However, not every magister is the walking incarnation of evil, as you Southerners seem to think. Most of them simply go along with the way things are because it is all they know. Suggest change, and they will dismiss it as impossible. But show them otherwise—live at a higher standard, and push them to follow suit—and many in power will begin to see a better way. Eventually, they’ll outnumber and overpower the truly corrupt, and change can take place with much less slaughter and suffering for the masses.” This, in fact, had been the direction of his thoughts since learning he was assuming his father’s seat in the Magisterium. How to actually make the change he had so long dreamed of.

“Hm.”

Lavellan mumbled under her breath, “Nice and all, but I don’t get to burn anyone alive that way.”

“An interesting approach,” Solas admitted. “It does sound rather idealistic, but the proof is in the attempt, it would seem.”

“I mean to attempt it,” Dorian answered. “Once the world is safe, of course.”

“I hope you will succeed.”

“I think you should have let me kick your father.”

They rode on, and eventually Dorian heard the Bull’s enormous steed come up behind him. “So Dorian. It sounds like you’ve thought a lot about how to deal with your homeland.”
He smiled, sardonic. “Shall I outline the many stages of my plan for Tevinter reform so that you can send it all back to Par Vollen and the Qun can finally set a date for their next invasion? ‘Yes, right between Phase Four and Phase Five of the Pavus Reforms should do nicely, Ser Arishok.’ If you don’t mind, I’m not interested in inviting the Qun to experience Minrathous in the spring.”

“Too bad,” the Bull answered, as friendly as could be. “It’s pretty nice. That place in the Vivazzi Plaza, with the dancers? Even nicer when the trees are in bloom.”

Dorian opened his mouth and almost instantly snapped it shut. You’re not supposed to know about that yet, Pavus. He reworded: “If you wish to see an entire city turned pink, it’s nice.”

“Yeah…”

There was that warmth in his chest again, tugging and making him forget. Still, the subject had reminded him of something, and he couldn’t resist commenting. “It wasn’t in the Vivazzi Plaza, but there was a statue of a dragon in Minrathous. I remember seeing it covered with flower petals one spring. Turned nearly the whole thing pink. Can you imagine? A pink dragon.”

Lavellan giggled, reacting as most people would to something so ludicrous. The Iron Bull, however, got a glassy, far-away look in his eye. Dorian could just barely hear the low rumble in his chest that Bull had always insisted was a “happy growl,” not purring.

Dorian rode on, leaving the Bull alone with his thoughts…trying to swallow a swell of yearning—to be close, to be so close, head resting on that massive chest as Bull purred and stroked his limp, sated body. To be in that moment again, when he was sure Hissrad was never going to matter more than this.
The first thing Dorian found waiting for him in Skyhold was a letter. Apparently it had arrived shortly after they departed for Redcliff, but his correspondence wasn’t high priority enough to forward. Not that he should really complain, when he already knew the contents.

Felix was dead. Gone forever this time—so it was time to drink.

Dorian snuck into Skyhold’s wine cellars, then called in a favor with Josephine for another bottle. He asked Cole for “help” and got brandy—only because he’d been very specific that only brandy would help. Bought a bottle of some sort of piss from Cabot. And, in a stroke of luck, Cullen gave him another bottle of brandy that someone very Orlesian had given to him in an effort to capture his attention.

Sera gave him a bottle of mead without a word—just one incredibly bone-crushing hug that made Dorian suspect someone had told her about their little trip to Redcliff. He wasn’t at all surprised that she had noticed his quest to gather alcohol.

He drank the wine first, most of it while soaking in a hot bath to wash off the dust of Ferelden, then started on the better brandy—though by that time he was already feeling slightly less discriminating. In an effort to keep his drunk thoughts from becoming too morose too quickly, he got out of the cooling bath and wrapped himself in a heavy robe. He sat by the fire—thank the Maker he’d already lit it; as drunk as he was getting, Dorian really shouldn’t attempt to cast any spells—and he began the arduous process of getting some warm socks on his feet without tumbling forward to the floor.

Then, of course, there was a knock on the door.

“Oh, Maker,” Dorian grumbled, wondering who it was. If Lavellan had come to check on him, he was in no condition for a heart-to-heart…though he’d need to make an effort. She hadn’t really tried it last time, so it could be a good sign. Stumbling and weaving, he crossed to the door and opened it.

It wasn’t Lavellan.

“Well, well, Ser Magister. Drinking alone? I’d heard you might be.”

Dorian leaned against the door frame and frowned. “Who are you?” The words came rather slowly, each drawn out a little.

The next thing he knew, his face was pressed into the stone wall. The man was in his room, hissing into his ear. “Can’t bother to remember a commoner, even after drinking with him? Too bad, Magister. I remember you. Been waiting for you to get back.”

Hands shoved roughly into his robe. Dorian jerked, struggling to push away from the wall, but he
didn’t move quickly enough. The soldier pinned him. “Kaffas! Get your filthy hands off me before I fry you like a moth in a torch flame!”

A dark laugh, and a rough touch that continued to explore. “You’re a bit full of yourself, Ser Magister. You would have learned your place if you’d been in a proper Circle. Let’s do something about that attitude of yours, maleficar.”

A forearm around his throat cut off Dorian’s air and strangled his shout, and before the man had finished speaking, a hand was roughly grasping Dorian’s smallclothes.

“Ugh.” One way or the other, is it? I should have let him do it as before. This is not going to be pleasant. Dorian gathered himself, trying to breathe deep and slow. There were a few tricks he knew that would make this less painful—tricks he hadn’t needed in a long time, but in Tevinter, when one was young and had not yet learned caution…

He could try, at least. This drunk, offensive magic was too dangerous—if he fought back, he’d probably blow up the whole room. But if he lost control of a tiny barrier spell, the worst he could do was knock over some furniture.

Very, very carefully, he tried to focus. It was difficult—difficult to block out the stone wall against his face, the hands on his body, groping under his robe, the malicious voice whispering filth in his ear about what was to come. The soldier seemed very preoccupied with the fact that Dorian was a mage. This was probably the one who wanted to play Templar, then. He mentally shook himself. Ugh. Focus, Pavus, or he’ll make you bleed before he’s done.

The spell was nearly in place when the man moved his hand and began to shove dry fingers in…

Dorian choked, tears stinging the corners of his eyes. “No, don’t…” He hadn’t meant to beg, but…

The soldier said nothing, laughed, and pushed harder.

“Agh!”

The next moment, the hands, the body pinning him, and the voice in his ear were all gone—yanked back so fast Dorian wasn’t sure, for a moment, why he was suddenly sliding down the wall, unsupported. He tried to focus on his legs, but it was too late. He managed to half turn before he hit the floor…and look way, way up to see the soldier in the grasp of the Iron Bull. A twitch away from a broken neck.

“Sorry if I’m interrupting,” Bull growled. “Just checking something. Dorian—did you want what he was doing?”

Still stuck on the surprise appearance of the Bull, Dorian just blinked up at them. “What?”

“Did you want this guy to fuck you?” It was carefully articulated, Dorian thought, but the fact that he could understand the words didn’t help him much with the situation.

“Maker, no! What are you talking about? Where did you come—”

“That’s what I thought.” The Bull slowly shifted his hold on the soldier until he had the man in one hand, by the back of his neck. He shoved toward the door. “Leave,” Bull growled, his voice low enough to resonate through Dorian even at a distance. “Before I snap you in half like a twig.”

Wisely, the man did.
Dorian was still sitting on the floor trying to catch up with events when the Iron Bull was suddenly crouching in front of him, pulling his robe around him and gently lifting him to his feet, hands under his arms like he was a doll. “Come on, big guy. There you go. Get those feet under you.”

“What are you doing here?” Dorian murmured, still confused. The room was spinning, even though the Bull was moving him slowly toward his chair.

“ Heard from Sera you were getting shitfaced. Thought I’d come by and join you…or talk, whatever you needed. Your door wasn’t completely shut.”

“Ugh.” Dorian placed a hand over his eyes as he sank into the chair. When he opened them, the Bull was holding water out to him—to his complete lack of surprise. “I apologize for the…show.”

A carefully neutral expression, and a beat of silence as Bull studied him. “Nah, I’m sorry. I didn’t stop him right away. You weren’t exactly protesting when I showed up, so I thought at first that you’d invited him.”

Having drained the water, Dorian set it aside with a faint laugh. “So you decided to watch? You abominable voyeur.”

The Bull grunted, but gently. “Nah. I mean, if you ever want me to come watch you have sex with someone, I’d do it. But I didn’t mean to watch uninvited. I just…stuck around for a minute. Had a funny feeling, and I wanted to make sure you were okay. When you told him to stop and he didn’t…well, something told me you weren’t playing that kind of game.”

Dorian regarded the Bull. “Ben-Hassrath.”

“Yeah.”

*It doesn’t change how I feel about the Qun, but… “Thank you.”*

That little upward quirk to one side—how Dorian had always loved that smile. “Sure.”

He looked down and laughed at himself a little. Even as drunk as he was, he already wanted another drink. “I turned him down before our trip. I didn’t think he’d take it that badly, nor hold the grudge for so long. A miscalculation on my part. I should have known it was wiser to just give him what he wanted right away. Once would have satisfied him.” *It certainly did before.*

Bull’s expression had slipped back into that “listening face” that revealed nothing—and probably saw nearly everything. “You turned him down, huh? This time, too?”

Dorian snorted. “Is that of any significance? Is the Qun shocked to learn that I have some standards, after all?”

“Just my curiosity. So, if you turned him down, why weren’t you trying to stop him?”

He didn’t shake his head because the room was already shifting too much, but he shrugged slightly. “I’m rather too drunk at the moment. You’ve seen the very drunk attempt to control their own limbs, yes? Now imagine that same level of control over a fireball.” He chuckled. “I was doing my best to prepare to endure it; I had little concentration to spare for useless resistance.”

Dorian glanced around. “What’s become of my brandy?”

“What do you mean, ‘prepare’?”

The bottle was there—on the table, but somewhat out of reach. Dorian stretched toward it, shifted
in his chair, stretched again, and huffed at the apparent need to rise to reach it. “Oh, you know. Barriers. I have a lovely ice-infused one that numbs the area it protects. Very handy, and easy to cast too!”

There was a marble quality to the blankness of Bull’s expression now. “That’s what you learned in Tevinter, is it?”

“Oh yes. One should never engage in sex without some magical insurance. Even the best beginning can always take a poor turn. Not that I would put up with everything, mind you, but sometimes it isn’t worth the possible ramifications. Once one has agreed to a liaison, you know.”

It was possible Dorian was rambling a bit, perhaps slurring drunkenly. *What a charming conversationalist you are, Pavus.*

“Dorian.” The Bull did not touch him, but his gaze and voice were as gentle as he could make them. “I get it. You don’t have to worry about what I think. I’m not angry at you. I think it’s a damn shame you ever had to put up with that kind of treatment, that’s all. It isn’t right.”

Fluttering warmth in his stomach—love and longing and maybe also laughter, because he knew the Iron Bull was trying to calm him. If he hadn’t been, he’d have chosen much stronger words for Tevinter. “You are very good.” Dorian smiled a little, weakly. “But not every man is as forbearing as you.”

“Doesn’t matter what they’re like, Dorian. Doesn’t matter what they enjoy or what you want from them—something quick and casual or something more. None of that matters. When you tell a guy ‘no,’ that should always be the end of it.”

*I know that.* It was a petulant thought, and Dorian kept it to himself. He *did* know it, academically, but in practice…there had been times. Times when he’d told himself he wasn’t bothered by a touch he hadn’t really wanted. If it came with a touch he *did* want, well—nothing in the world was free. He had no defense for himself, other than “I got used to things being this way,” and that wouldn’t make anyone feel better right now. Instead, he nudged his foot forward, just enough to brush the inside of the Bull’s ankle. “And what happens when I tell a man ‘yes’?”

Bull’s grin was wide, but still gentle as he rose. “If you’re sober when you say it, he shows you a very, very good time.”

Dorian reached out and caught the Bull’s large, callused hand before he could move away. “And… do I need to be sober to ask you to stay with me tonight?”

He got a surprised blink for that, and a moment of being studied, with no attempt to conceal it. But Dorian didn’t waver or shrink or scoff. It was impossible to reproduce the way it had been between them the first time; it was also impossible to solve the riddle of what *would happen* or how to make things go a certain way. In this drunken moment, Dorian decided that the only thing that made sense was to come to Bull honestly, as he was now. The Iron Bull was a very accepting man—and if he was only a façade for Hisrad, well…Dorian would take that and hope to make it real later.

“Sure, big guy. If you want the company.”

“I suppose I do,” Dorian sighed, a little dramatically. “If you can bear to listen to sad stories until I pass out.”

“I think I can handle it.”

“Good.” Dorian smiled, then pointed to his cup. “Get me some water, will you? And there’s elfroot
in the top of the chest, there. You may have the brandy, if you like. It isn’t very good, anyway.”

The Bull chuckled and grabbed the bottle, taking a swig. “Ah! Good enough for me. Here.” He poured water from the pitcher, then found the elfroot. Dorian wouldn’t put that in his mouth just yet, but he’d swallow some before passing out.

“Now, if you’ll help me over to the bed, I shall tell you a story about Felix, whether you like it or not.”

--

Dorian fell asleep at some point, and woke up in his bed, the sound of soft snoring close by. Opening his eyes, the Bull was there, asleep in a chair at the foot of the bed, his large feet propped up on the bedcovers next to Dorian’s. On the bedside table there was water and elfroot, easily within reach, Dorian’s slippers were by the bed, the shutters were keeping the sunlight out, and the fire had been nicely banked. Not that a mage worried much about his fire burning away to ashes when such things were relit with little more than a thought—but it was the care in the gesture that made Dorian’s throat tighten.

Still, it wasn’t…what he once might have believed it to be. It was the appearance of gentle concern designed to engender trust so that he would lower his guard for a perceived ally. Ben-Hassrath. Do not forget.

That didn’t mean it wasn’t also real concern. The Iron Bull’s inner “Tama” was probably genuine, but it was still under the direction of Hissrad, who used the truth to manipulate people, all for the Qun. And knowing that didn’t make Dorian love him less. He’d happily fallen for the illusion once; even if he wasn’t quite fooled this time…Maker, he missed the illusion, and that was no better.

Dorian rested his chin on his arms on his folded-up knees and stared at the man sleeping across from him and breathed through the waves of longing, refusing to cry.

Mage…I can help, mage. I can make him truly love…

The whispers, for once, helped. Dorian snapped himself shut against sorrow and the voice of temptation, anger giving him strength to refuse anything that would dare attempt to possess a mage as brilliant and talented as himself.

In the restored quiet, he turned and sat on the edge of the bed, picking up the elfroot and downing it quickly, trying not to taste it as he pushed his feet into his slippers and rubbed sleep from his eyes. He heard the Bull shift and wake, the sound familiar even though it shouldn’t be—yet. Nonchalantly straightening his robe, Dorian offered the first casual, “Good morning.”

“Morning.” The Bull straightened in the chair, taking his feet off Dorian’s bed and cracking a whole host of joints. Dorian barely managed not to cringe. “How you feeling, big guy?”

“I’ll be quite my usual dazzling self within five minutes, once the elfroot does its work.” He ran hands through his sleep-tossed hair with as much indifference as he could muster. “And yourself? I’ve more elfroot if you like.”

“Nah, I’m good.” The Bull twisted in his chair, still crackling and popping.

Dorian gave him a dubious look. “Yes…you sound like someone going for a walk over bubbleweed. What could be better?”
The Bull chuckled and pushed slowly to his feet. “Must be getting old. I used to sleep in trees and fare better than this in the morning.”

“Too many energetic nights spent with charming companions,” Dorian commented dryly. “You’re wearing out.” Then, over the Bull’s laughter, he changed the subject. “Tea?”

A smile, perhaps a little surprised. “Sure. Thanks.”

So, after a little more stretching, the Bull sat again while Dorian boiled water and made tea, already feeling much better. He didn’t have fine china like Madam de Fer, but he had ceramic mugs, which would at least not ruin the flavor of the tea like tin would. He wished he had something edible to serve as well, but he hadn’t yet returned to the point where Varric was procuring rare treats from the North for him, so he simply handed the Bull a cup of tea and sat with his own.

“Here you are. My gratitude for your willingness to comply with my drunken whims. And a compensation for those chair-begotten aches. And…” he smiled thinly, “thanks as well for the assistance last night.”

The Bull sipped his tea, delicately holding the cup in a hand so massive he could probably have shattered it between two fingers. Dorian tried not to notice. “You remember that, huh?”

Dorian sighed dramatically. “My brilliance can be such a curse. Alas, my memory is as excellent as any of my other good qualities. And I do apologize for the distasteful scene.”

“Dorian, it’s not your fault some guy tried to force you…”

But Dorian interrupted with a wave, “Oh no, not that. I am well aware, though I still regret you had to see any of it. No, I meant my no doubt tedious drunken behavior afterward, and the rambling you must have endured. My naturally loquacious nature goes a bit out of control when I drink, I’m afraid.”

The Bull laughed gently. “I don’t mind listening to you tell stories, big guy. You’re not a bad drunk to be around. I’m glad I came by when I did.”

“Mm,” Dorian smiled brightly. “You play the hero quite nicely, I must admit. I suppose there’s no role under the Qun for ‘knight in shining armor’?”

The Bull shook his head, smiling. “We don’t need them much in Par Vollen. Under the Qun, forcing sex on someone just doesn’t happen.”

Dorian frowned. “Never at all?”

A shrug. “Those who might be inclined to try it are usually going Tal-Vashoth. The Ben-Hassrath either hear about it and re-educate them before it gets to that point, or they flee the Qun first. They have to get out of Qunari lands before they have time to start committing crimes, and most don’t make it. So no, rape just isn’t a problem under the Qun.”

He hummed. “Well, we can’t all be so fortunate. Sex in Tevinter is often a blend of pleasure and endurance, at least for alti. Consent is all about the balance between the two. Of course I have generally chosen partners who know better than to risk my ire. But then, in Tevinter an altus is always careful to protect himself and mind the company he keeps when drinking. Quite different from the Qun or the South, but I usually managed to enjoy myself safely.” Dorian considered. “Tamassrans do sound like a lovely alternative, though. Ah, well. I suppose even the Qun had to have at least one good idea.” He blinked. “The role, I mean, not the part where they’re all women.”
“Mmm.” The Bull’s grunt was noncommittal, but it registered in Dorian’s memory as a “not happy” tone, though it was subtle enough that he hadn’t picked up on it until he’d known the Bull much longer.

Then, a thought occurred to Dorian. “What would the Qun do about a man like me? Magic aside, I mean. What if someone has no desire for women?”

“Uh…there are aqun-athlok among the tamassrans…”

“Many?”

“Um, no. I’ve never actually seen one.”

“So—what then? I would not consider myself a woman, and only an idiot would assign me the role of a tamassran—I’m horrid with children.” Dorian tapped his finger against the side of his cup. “I’m very much a man, with a man’s desires, but I have only ever desired other men. The tamassrans handle sexual needs, but almost none of them could help me with mine…”

The Bull shrugged. “If they had no aqun-athlok available, they do have tools that can help…and if they decided it wasn’t working, I guess you’d be sent to the re-educators.”

Dorian scowled. “A less magical version of my father’s plan. Delightful.” Suddenly, perhaps somewhat belatedly, Dorian realized this whole conversation was rather…new territory for them. It had never come up in their…relationship, before, and perhaps it should not have come up now. What if talking about this put the Bull off, and they never grew as…close?

“Not that this is in any way your fault. You didn’t write whatever tome became the Qun, I gather.”

The Bull smiled slightly. “I wasn’t Koslun the last time I checked, no.” He pulled up a footstool and propped his bad leg up. “I know you probably won’t believe this, but sometimes re-education isn’t a bad thing. Serving a purpose is good. Helping people is good. If you can’t do that anymore, sometimes it’s better to be fixed than to lose your way.”

Seheron.

Dorian understood where the Bull was coming from, despite his personal loathing for the Qun. Still, he shook his head. “My preference for men doesn’t interfere with my ability to do something good for the world—at least not outside the Qun. It would only interfere with my ability to live according to a specific pattern, determined by the Qun.” He paused. “Or by Tevinter, I suppose.” He sighed. “The difference being, the Qun insists their system is perfect.”

The Bull seemed to consider this. “Tevinter doesn’t?”

Dorian had to grunt at that. “Well. They would probably claim so, but I think only the most deluded in the Magisterium actually believe it. No soporatus would call Tevinter perfect; just ask your lieutenant.”

The Bull shook his head with a smile. “Don’t have to.”

“Hardly surprising.” Dorian offered and the Bull accepted a second cup of tea. “But to your earlier point.” He leaned back, wondering how much the Bull was buying his appearance of perfect relaxation. “I think we both know many people who have found a purpose for themselves that serves others and accomplishes good—our Inquisitor being the most obvious example, and her tireless commitment to helping every poor soul she meets, all while saving the world.”
“True. But there are also many people who choose to serve themselves and harm others. We run into those a lot too.”

“Even so, it is possible to make better choices for oneself, and for the world.”

“All right—it’s possible.” Before Dorian could hope too much over the meaning of such an admission, the Bull added, “It’s also possible to live a good life on a path someone else chooses for you.”

“Depending upon the intentions of the one doing the choosing,” Dorian dryly observed.

“With individuals, yeah. Individuals can be selfish. The Qun can’t be selfish because it has no self. It’s all about the greater good.”

*And the Qun can be brutally unconcerned with the individual.* But Dorian wasn’t supposed to know anything, really, about the Iron Bull’s past on Seheron—not yet. And the Qun had yet to give him the orders that Dorian hoped would be disobeyed this time. So he could not comment for the Bull’s sake, only his own. He tried not to sound too harsh, but there was always a little bitterness when he thought of the Qun. “You’ll pardon me for my selfishness, then. I quite like being in command of my own magic—not to mention the capacity to speak.”

The Bull shrugged one shoulder, tipping his head as though conceding the point. Then he grinned. “I like talking to you too, big guy. Especially when you tell stories like that one about the time you and Felix snuck into that party you were too well-bred to be invited to, and both of you had filled your pockets with bananas…”

“Maker’s breath!” Dorian sat up, suddenly remembering that yes, he had told that one. “I’ll thank you not to repeat that to anyone, please.”

A friendly laugh. “Your secret is safe with me, Vint.”

*What an irony,* Dorian thought, *coming from a spy.* But he didn’t wish to belabor that point anymore, so he dropped that line of conversation and began to press for what other stories he might have shared without quite meaning to. It was an enjoyable, friendly morning—or it felt that way.

*Well played, Hissrad.*
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Those who take Vivienne more or less at face value and who like the person she appears to be may take issue with this chapter.

It was another short trip full of very long conversations. Nothing, after all, was within a day’s ride of Skyhold, so even the shortest mission meant hours in the saddle.

Solas and Lavellan were discussing something at length. Dorian hadn’t been paying much attention, but his participation was suddenly required when Solas turned to him and commented, “I have been told it is common in Tevinter to use spirits as servants. Is that not so, Dorian?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, common.”

“And yourself? Have you used spirits as servants?”

Something in Solas’ tone caught Dorian’s attention. A slight chill—almost indistinguishable from his usual distant politeness. He only noticed because he’d had so many more conversations with Solas this time. Dorian frowned. “I never personally bound one, no, but my family had two. I suppose they served me as well.” He paused. “Actually, perhaps it would be more accurate to call them slaves. We hardly paid them, after all.”

“A spirit would not have any use for payment,” Solas flatly observed. “If it did, it would be a demon.”

“Quite.” A thought nagged at his mind. “In Tevinter, spirits are considered amorphous constructs of the Fade—a natural occurrence, like a tree or a rock, just a part of the world around them. Binding them is considered a sort of…mechanical skill, in a way, like making a bow from a branch.” He was thinking out loud, a habit he really shouldn’t indulge with Iron…with Hisrad around. “I never had any reason to think otherwise, as the spirits themselves never offered a counter-argument. And yet I suppose…there is Cole, after all. Cole’s very existence proves spirits are capable of a higher level of consciousness than we thought.”

“Hm. I’m pleased you are willing to reconsider your point of view.”

“Cole is exceptional though, isn’t he?” Lavellan interjected. “I’ve never met another such spirit—not even counting the physical form. Sure, he talks strange, but the point is he talks. And he thinks about things and asks questions and gets ideas. It’s hard to believe unless you see it for yourself.”

“It is not so rare as you think, Inquisitor, but it does take a certain definiteness of purpose. Interacting with physical beings like us can help solidify a spirit’s purpose and, thus, its nature. Unfortunately, this world has more evil than good, and thus most people interact far more often with demons than with gentle spirits.”

“And if we can change them into demons, though our own faults, without any intent to harm…”

Dorian let the gap between himself and the other two grow again. Not that he was uninterested in the subject—he found it fascinating. In fact, he was sure he’d at least tried to discuss spirits with
Solas, the Fade expert, before, but it was so long ago…and he remembered nothing of the
conversation, except that it was short, so they likely hadn’t covered any interesting information.
How odd. Then again, if it had been before he’d gotten to know Cole—I wonder if I said something
that upset him. I certainly could have, at the time.

“Look at those two.” The deep voice didn’t startle him, exactly, but it sent a shiver of awareness
down Dorian’s spine, and heat across the back of his neck. “Getting pretty inseparable, these days.
Nice to know that smug little asshole has a weakness for Inquisi-butt.”

Dorian glanced ahead at the two elves, far enough off now that even with their long ears they
probably wouldn’t hear him or the Bull. They were still deep in conversation, riding so close they
were at risk of crushing each other’s legs between their horses’ flanks. No signs of beginning an
argument. Inseparable was a good word for it, Dorian realized. “If they get any closer, they’ll be
joined at the hip,” he commented. This is truly bizarre.

“Well, good. He needs to get laid, and she deserves some fun once in a while.”

“True.” Dorian considered them. Lavellan was clearly smitten, and Dorian was fairly confident that
Solas’ opinion now held as much weight with her as it possibly could. The only thing left to do to
strengthen the case against the qunari alliance, which would be coming up in a few weeks, was to
help her form stronger attachments to the Chargers.

The problem was, oddly, Solas. Lavellan had seemed to like the Chargers when she met them, but
she rarely went to the tavern these days. Solas had declined invitations to the Herald’s Rest, and
Lavellan went wherever he was.

“Speaking of fun, we should invite the Inquisitor for drinks when we get back to Skyhold.”

The Bull glanced at Dorian. “We should?”

Spine stiffening, Dorian realized how that sounded, but lifted his chin. He wasn’t about to look
cought out. “Why not?”

The Bull dropped it, shrugging, and answered the main point. “Well, worth a shot, I guess, but I
doubt she’ll come unless Solas does.”

“What if I got him out of the way at the right moment?” Dorian mused. “Then when he’s not there,
Varric can sweep in and charm her away for some Wicked Grace.”

The Bull grinned. “Now you’re starting to sound like a scheming Vint.”

Dorian shot him a superior glare. “I am a scheming Vint. Certainly a lot cleverer than present
company.” Not waiting for a response, he added, “You can help Varric get everyone together for
the game. Perhaps after, she can drink with the Chargers again. That should do her a world of
good. The Inquisitor needs friends besides Solas, after all.”

“I won’t argue that. Hmm. Sera and Blackwall should be easy, and I can convince Cass. Bet that
fine Antivan ambassador wouldn’t say no, either. Cole will come if I tell him to…Cullen might
take some convincing. Don’t know if Red will show, but I can try. Viv…yeah, probably not.”

He felt a flash of irritation. “Not even if you say ‘please’?”

With a laugh, the Bull shook his head, “It would be ‘please ma’am,’ and even then—no.”

Of course. “Ma’am.” Just yesterday before leaving, he’d been able to witness yet another
exchange between Vivienne and the Bull, with all the hallmarks of her mothering orders and him all respect and attention and obedience.

The irritation kept prickling. Dorian had traded barbs with Vivienne, much like before. He engaged her prodding at least half out of habit—he didn’t personally care about putting her down or making himself look splendid—or, more splendid than he already was. He had always suspected she did care about that, but with the scant time they spent together after Haven, it hardly mattered. He had learned long ago that one did not change Madam de Fer’s mind about anything.

However, he also had the benefit of hindsight, now, and he could observe her more clearly—partly because he was putting almost no real effort into bickering with her this time around. It had gotten old, and she would soon be mostly absent. In the meantime, however, there was the Bull, and the crass mercenary still became a chastised little boy at a glance from the First Enchanter, much to her delight, and…and Dorian had just realized why he was so irritated.

“You know she doesn’t really like you, yes? Madam de Fer is only civil to people whom she can use. You only qualify as useful to her ego, the way you let her order you around. It makes her feel powerful, having a giant muscled warrior obeying with a humble ‘yes ma’am.’ If you’d responded to her like Sera or Blackwall did, she’d have…” Dorian frowned and trailed off. He’d just met Bull’s eye and realized he was being quietly studied. There was nothing in Bull’s face to give his thoughts away, except that his expression was blankly attentive, which invariably meant he was thinking, quite a lot. His eye was sharp, too, and that confirmed it. But his interest seemed fixated upon Dorian, and that gave him pause.

“…You already know.” The Bull’s face remained the same—Dorian had only his instinct and long familiarity with the Bull to guide him, to let him sense that he’d hit on something. “You…always knew. You figured out what she wanted, and you became that…on purpose.” The light finished coming on in his mind. “You’re playing her.” And last time, he must have…and I never noticed.

“All right.” Just as blankly spoken. Revealing nothing. But the thoughts were still in there, and that eye was still focused on…on Dorian. Reading him.

Dorian frowned. “You already knew that, naturally. This isn’t about Vivienne. You’re…you’re working on me, right now, trying to figure me out.” When Bull didn’t answer, Dorian huffed. “Well, you could simply ask. I could save you time and just tell you whatever it is you’re wondering.”

The Bull kept staring at him for another long minute before he seemed to make up his mind. “All right, Dorian. You’re right. Viv wants power, so I give her what she wants and she lets her guard down. I’m just surprised you noticed.”

“I am an altus of Tevinter, Iron Bull,” Dorian commented flatly. “We are quite observant. It’s a necessity.”

“Yeah,” the Bull nodded, “but you’re also an altus of Tevinter, and you people can be pretty caught up in yourselves. Most Vints would be a lot more dangerous if they paid attention to everything, not just the stuff that affects them personally.”

A pause as he considered this. “That wasn’t a question.”

Still blank. “If I make it a question, you going to answer it?”

Dorian blinked, surprised into honesty. “I don’t know that I can.”
“Well,” the Bull rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, “let me know if you come up with anything.” Then, as if none of it mattered, as if Hissrad wasn’t dissecting him bit by bit, he smiled. “So when are we dragging the boss in for cards?”
Chapter 13

The library window afforded a good view of the courtyard, so Dorian spotted Lavellan crossing from the stables in plenty of time. “Solas!” he called down into the rotunda. The elf set his book down and looked up. “Might I borrow your expertise for a moment?”

“Of course.”

Perfect. He didn’t hear Lavellan below before Solas reached the library. With any luck, Solas wouldn’t hear her either, and she wouldn’t have time to call for him before Varric intercepted her with the invitation.

“What manner of assistance are you looking for?”

“Elven language,” Dorian answered amiably, leading the way to a table and an open book and notes. “This Orlesian author is quite sure of himself. I don’t know that he’s wrong, of course, but call it…a hunch.”

Solas bent over to look where he pointed and hummed. “Yes, I see.”

“If you don’t mind, what does this phrase mean?”

Dorian sat and began to take notes as Solas translated some Elven into Common and vice versa. The author, as he suspected, was often wrong, but not completely so. Many of his translations apparently had a tenuous connection to truth, but either fell short of the full meaning or took correctly understood terms and put them together wrong. He had a full page of notes in no time, and Lavellan did not appear in search of either of them.

There was only one thing Solas could not translate. It was a word presented without a translation—part of a list of terms given as examples of vowel combinations. It also had no context, and Dorian watched Solas pause and frown as he looked at it. “Too obscure?” he suggested.

Solas touched the page, still frowning. “It contains a root that has to do with ‘sight’—possibly far sight, but that is another phrase. And it appears to be a noun…” He shook his head. “I have never seen this word before. Judging by the author, I should not be surprised if he made it up.”

“Ah.” Dorian nodded, marked the word and left it, thinking nothing more of it.

When they were finished, he mentioned the Herald’s Rest, but Solas politely declined. So Dorian slipped off to join the card game, which was well under way when he got there.

Lavellan clearly had a few drinks in her already—she was all pink in the face and giggling. Dorian smiled, happy to see that even Blackwall’s frighteningly hairy presence had not prevented her from enjoying the company…even if he was seated as far from her as possible. Josephine was there, and had already gathered an impressive pile of winnings. The Iron Bull smiled at him and waved him over. “Take my place, will you? I’m going to use the rest of my coin on my boys. I owe them a round.”

“You have no wish to win back some of this,” Josephine clinked a few coins in a stack, “to spend upon your company?” She was all innocence, but Dorian could detect that sly look in her eyes. The Bull surely could as well.

“Nah. I’ll let Dorian avenge my defeat.” A big hand clapped down on his shoulder as Dorian sat in
the vacated chair.

“Quite the responsibility,” he remarked.

“As you wish. Lord Pavus is certain to be a formidable opponent.”

“Deal again, and don’t count me out just yet, Lady Ambassador,” Cullen cut in. “I’ve had all the opportunity I needed to figure out your tells.”

Josephine’s answer was coy, and her flattery was obviously designed to make opponents overconfident. Well—obvious to Dorian, and probably the Bull. Perhaps not to those whose lives and professions did not depend on reading other people. Dorian calmly halved his coin and placed one half on the table, ready to wager; he kept the rest out of sight, uninterested in being entirely fleeced tonight.

The commander, it seemed, was more easily duped and less self-preserving in the face of risk. Dorian thoroughly enjoyed watching him stripped, and did not bother turning his back, as Lavellan did, for the commander’s escape. Quite a handsome man, the commander. He hoped Lavellan would grow to appreciate him properly, when the time finally came. He deserved deep and sincere appreciation. If Cullen had been so inclined, Dorian might have been very good to him, the first time, and never gone to bed with a qunari at all. 

Ah well.

“Hey, boss! Come have a drink with us! On me!”

Lavellan turned from her chat with Varric and, to Dorian’s satisfaction, only hesitated a moment before smiling and heading over to join the Chargers. Dalish greeted her in Elven, and—to Dorian’s amazement—Skinner pushed a tankard toward her with a sharp, narrow-eyed smile.

Dorian remained at the bar, keeping out of the way while making sure Lavellan had a good time with the mercenary band. Josephine remained a while, and they fell into conversation about political relations with Tevinter, which taxed Dorian’s memory somewhat. She finally retired for the night, thanking him for the discussion, and Dorian intended to follow as soon as he’d finished his drink. Before he did, however, the Iron Bull appeared at his side, ordering another round for the Chargers.

Cabot grunted and began to fill a long line of tankards.

“The Inquisitor seems to be enjoying herself,” he observed mildly.

“Yeah, boss is having fun. It was a good idea, getting her out here with us. So hey,” the Bull turned toward him, leaning an elbow on the bar. “You going to keep drinking alone or come join the Chargers?”

“I was planning on retiring soon, actually,” Dorian answered.

“Suit yourself,” the Bull shrugged—with his ever-massive shoulders. “You want some company tonight?”

Dorian went still. It felt as though his heart even stopped. He didn’t breathe. After what felt like an eternal moment, he slowly looked up at Bull, his face blank with shock. Whether Bull noticed, however, he couldn’t tell, because in that moment he continued, “Because Devon over there has been watching you for an hour.”
Oh. Maker, he felt like a fool. Had he really been hoping…?

“My guess is, he was too shy to approach you while you were talking to Josephine. You stick around a little longer, though, and he’ll probably come join you.”

Swallowing, Dorian forced a smile. “Longer was not my plan. I’m making this my last round.” And with that, he tipped the drink back and finished it.

“Oh, well, want me to talk to him? Actually, I could probably just wave him over right now and you two could get out of here. I don’t think he handles conversation and long build-up that well, anyway.”

Dorian’s eyes scanned in the direction Bull had indicated, and sure enough there was a soldier over there who seemed to be sneaking glances his way—and he looked somewhat familiar, too. Devon, was it? “Too shy?” he guessed.

“In public,” the Bull explained, grinning slightly. “He’s a different story in private, though.”

That…fits. The other soldier Dorian had bedded had been like that, if he remembered—not very confident, until they were naked. Then… Rough. Bold. Almost greedy. He didn’t remember anything else, not even the name. He remembered liking it, at the time. But Dorian still had other memories that left him disinterested now.

“As delightful a prospect as that sounds,” he answered softly, “I’m rather tired, tonight.”

“Okay.” Bull gathered some of the drinks together, beginning to arrange them so his massive hands could wrap around as many handles as possible at once. “He’ll be there tomorrow night too. I think you have an admirer.”

“I’m certain you’re mistaken. He’s merely curious.” Dorian hesitated, then added, almost as a confession, “I hope I can turn him down more…successfully than the last one.” After last time, Dorian wondered if both his former assignations had been men who would not have cared much about his consent. If so, he hadn’t noticed at the time, because he simply had consented. The last one had given him reason to worry about refusing.

Gently, the Bull answered in the same quiet tones, “He won’t force anything. Don’t worry.”

Dorian glanced at him, wry. “I’ll take your word for it. You seem to know him rather intimately.”

“Yeah. He’ll be disappointed, but he’s okay. I know one of Red’s people who has his eye on him. Devon hasn’t noticed yet, though…been watching you too much. You sure you’re not interested at all?”

“Not in him,” was all he answered, meeting Bull’s eye for only a moment. There wasn’t much emphasis in the statement, not much of a hint. Maybe even nothing implied, nothing to pick up on. But the Bull had ways of noticing things that looked like “nothing.” No…not Bull. Hissrad.

“Goodnight,” he added, and turned away, not pausing to look back when Bull echoed the farewell.

The next day, Lavellan dropped by the library, a little groggy and rubbing mint balm into her temples, but smiling. “Morning! That was fun last night, wasn’t it?”

He smiled back. “I certainly made some memories to cherish. Regularly.”
She stuck out her tongue. “Ugh! You’re talking about Cullen naked, aren’t you? Big, oversized, hairy shem…not that I was looking!” Her eyes went wide, ear tips red.

Dorian laughed. “Of course not. Your tastes run in a different direction,” he said, glancing toward the stairs. She, possibly worried someone had come up those stairs, turned to look, but Solas wasn’t there. “Speaking of which,” Dorian added, “I ran into an Elven word Solas couldn’t enlighten me on. It wouldn’t be a clan-specific term, would it?” He drew out his notes and pointed her toward the unknown word. Lavellan leaned forward over the table and frowned, but her expression quickly lightened.

“Oh, that? That’s the, um…what do you shemlen call it? The part on the bow for aiming…the sights for the arrow? That’s not clan-specific at all. All Dalish bows have them.”

*Odd.* “Another ancient Dalish secret?” he half-teased.

“Of course,” she beamed proudly. “Dates back to the kingdom of the Dales, I think. But you’d have to ask an archer or craftsman to be sure, I don’t know as much about archery. But the Dalish invented them long before shemlen started using them. We invented many wonderful things in those days, and gathered much of our scattered history.” She paused in her glowing speech. “Wait…Solas didn’t know what it was?”

“He thought this Orlesian had made the word up,” Dorian explained.

Lavellan made a confused face. “How odd. It’s such a common word. But…I suppose Solas isn’t an archer. And he didn’t live in a clan…I don’t think. Hmm.”


“Oh! All right. I guess Leliana can wait. My head hurts a bit.” She sat as he poured her a cup from the kettle he’d been keeping warm with magic.

“No regrets, I hope?”

“Oh no, it was a lovely night. Not, perhaps, how I’d spend every night,” she glanced toward the stairs again, “but lots of fun. A weekly night for cards would be a fine idea, when we’re in Skyhold.”

“I quite agree,” Dorian smiled, handing her the tea. “Now then, what’s got you running up to speak to the spymaster today?”

“Hm? Oh,” she sipped her tea, “still following up on where all the Grey Wardens went. We might have a lead.”

That meant…*Adamant. And soon.*
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Remember the rating ;)

Adamant would be miserable, but Dorian was more worried about *after*. He wasn’t sure quite when, but he knew it was after Adamant that he’d started sleeping with the Bull. His current plans were heavily focused on how to reproduce that encounter as precisely as possible without… Maker’s breath, bursting into tears or something equally appalling, like accidentally snuggling afterward. He was also trying to step up the banter. He felt like it had been lacking, this time, but it was terribly difficult to remember to take “offense” at general lowbrow flirting, and it was *easy*, so easy, to genuinely lash out whenever the Qun came up.

True antipathy wouldn’t bring them closer. Dorian suspected the Bull had been attracted to his resistance, before, but only because it was never true, honest resistance—though he’d tried very hard, at the time, to believe that it was. Still, real anger would only drive the Bull away. He knew the difference, would be able to see it. Dorian absolutely *had* to keep his true feelings concealed.

At least his plotting to bring the Chargers into closer acquaintance with the Inquisitor had been working. Lavellan and Dalish had started training together, which soon meant Lavellan was training with all of the Chargers. She could hardly ask Dalish to overwork herself, after all, any more than she could cut her away from her company training to only work with the Inquisitor. Thus, Lavellan joined the Chargers’ drills, and she and Dalish compared skills and spells from their different clans—and various other sources, in Dalish’s case—and often left together laughing and tired.

Of course, once cleaned up, the Inquisitor inevitably found her way straight to the rotunda, but with such friendship between her and the Chargers, Dorian was no longer concerned about that. In fact, everything was working out perfectly, as far as the Inquisitor was concerned.

Lavellan wasn’t afraid of Cassandra anymore, Varric was a favored companion, and Sera was welcome company whose occasional sass for the Dalish was usually ignored with the calm tolerance of an adult ignoring a child’s insistence that they could fly. Even better, when “elfy” or magical things were the aim of the mission, Sera stayed in Skyhold—a much wiser course of action, this time. It kept the peace far better than Lavellan’s past insistence on bringing her paramour along wherever she went—thus causing even more unnecessary fights and further ruining their romance.

For his part, Dorian felt like he had finally become an official friend—some months earlier than before, if memory served. Lavellan began to stop by the library to say hello, being often so close by, and she even invited him to train together. The first time it was just them—throwing spells at each other, Dorian asking questions about Dalish spellwork and then offering advice to enhance speed and power. The second time, he too was sucked into the Chargers’ training, and he, Lavellan, and Dalish made a little mage cabal in the group.

They finished their training by pitting all the non-mages against the three mages, attracting a large crowd and quite a few bets on the outcome. The mages lost, but only because Dorian had to cover for his teammates, who needed to work on their coordination. And, of course, he couldn’t use
necromancy for such a match.

The fight, however, had still been close enough for the participants—and those who lost coin on them—to call for a rematch, so there were two more such battles within the next fortnight. By the end of the third one—still a mage loss—it was becoming clear to the most sharp-eyed observers that Dorian was practically being held back by his teammates. Not that Dalish and Lavellan were weak fighters, but neither of them were used to being forced to combine offense and defense into perfect unity. Both typically fought as support, with melee fighters to take the most pressing heat off them so that they could focus on offense, with brief pauses to defend.

Dorian, on the other hand, had grown up training extensively in dueling and had already fought a few in Tevinter. He knew how to combine spells so that they hurt the enemy and protected him with the same breath. Some of the onlookers began to push for Dorian to take on the Chargers alone.

When the idea was brought to his attention after the third mage loss, he scoffed. “It’s charming to know everyone has such a good grasp of my enormous talents, but there is a point where sheer numbers must overpower any mage, even myself. The Chargers could surround me as easily and often as they pleased, and they would always win once I couldn’t evade.”

“All right, Sparkler,” Varric spoke for the gamblers, small wonder why, “how about you against just a few of them? Or one on one?”

“Ha!” He laughed aloud and made no effort to hide it. “That would be just as unsporting, in the opposite direction. None of the Chargers alone would last long against me.”

“Not even Bull?” Lavellan suggested.

“Oh, Inquisitor…”

“Boss, please…”

“He wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Dorian stopped and turned to stare at the Bull, who looked back at him, shrugged, and grinned. “Is that so, Iron Bull?”

“Hey, not saying you can’t do some damage, big guy, but I’ve fought a lot of Vints. You can’t run forever.”

“Really, Iron Bull,” he smiled with hard eyes, “I have no intention of running from you.” On the other side of the Veil, Dorian felt frost gathering at his fingertips. Only years of practice and a strong will kept his emotions from drawing it through reflexively.

“Ha!” Varric turned to the onlookers. “The Tevinter versus the qunari! I’ve got ten royals on the mage, any takers?”

Lavellan grinned at him. “Looks like it’s time to put your magic where your mouth is, Dorian.”

With a glance, Dorian took in the gathering of spectators—a still-growing crowd. Lavellan’s bright smile, the Bull’s lazy grin—the one that was making him look like he didn’t mind either way, though there was something eager in his eye. Varric was assembling the gambling pool, and it seemed that Dorian was not considered a total lost cause. At least some in the rank and file of the Inquisition believed in him.
Sighing, Dorian tossed his head slightly. “Put a good barrier on him, won’t you, Inquisitor? I wouldn’t like to hold back too much.”

The Bull laughed his deep, full laugh. “Same to you, Vint. Let’s do this!”

They faced each other in the sparring ring, and Lavellan covered both of them in barriers. Varric was the showrunner, naturally, announcing to all within earshot the rules—which were minimal. Victory by forfeit or by one party unable to continue—generally accepted as unconsciousness, as neither of them should be seriously harmed. Dorian bowed low, with an elaborate Tevinter flourish, as was proper for a duel in his homeland. The Iron Bull saluted with his giant war hammer—no axe when sparring, but the weapon was still heavy, still dangerous.

“Begin!”

The Bull lowered into a fighting stance, hammer ready in front of himself, and Dorian knew instantly that this had been a bad idea.

*Change of plans. Nothing personal…bas.*

Tension shot through his body as Dorian crouched, backing up, staff in front of him. A giant spike of ice hovered in the back of his memory, but he shook his head to drive it away.

He shouldn’t have done that.

The Bull lunged forward in his moment of inattention, hammer swooshing through the air in a wicked arc toward his staff arm. Dorian threw himself back and away, making Bull narrowly miss, but the Bull’s turn was sharp and controlled, his feet still steady under him as Dorian’s balance wavered. *It was a ruse.* Hisrsa—Bull was lunging at him again, hammer turned to catch him in the chest or stomach, knock the wind out of him. Dorian saw it a beat too late.

The barrier took the damage out of the hit, but the force of the blow still emptied his lungs and sent him flying back several feet. He landed on one knee, half-spinning and catching his weight with the butt of his staff digging into the dirt.

*Hissrad! Vinek kathas!* The…the Hissrad came at him again, fast, not giving him a chance to gather himself, hands reaching in a way that would probably trap his arms *choke him break his neck* and get his staff out of his hands. Dorian gripped the haft tightly with both fists. His chest burned, but wouldn’t draw in air yet. Hisrsa’s shadow blocked the sun. Dorian threw force outward—a wall of the Fade knocked the qunari back several paces. But the mind blast didn’t send him flying, didn’t take him off his feet. He recovered fast.

*Damn it, Pavus!*

It bought him a moment—just the one moment he needed. With a desperate gasp, Dorian filled his lungs with air again, pushed to his feet, and scrambled backward. *Three-two-one,* quick and sharp, lightning bolts shot from the focus on his staff. The qunari was fast, though, faster than he should have been with all that bulk, *muscles, big shoulders, big hands*—the shots skimmed by his ribs as he dodged. One hit the dirt inches in front of his feet as he leapt back. No hits, but it bought him space. Space to think, to cast, to…to remember where he was.

“Nice,” the qunari grinned at him *mocking me, damn you* but no, it was familiar, the same tone and look of admiration. Just like when he was sweaty and shivering and bound in rope and aching, *aching…*
“Not nice enough, I should think,” he answered airily, almost managing not to gasp the words. “You’re remarkably light on your feet for such a giant lout. We should teach you to dance.” The last word, punctuated perfectly with a gout of flame. Just as perfectly dodged, damn it.

“Maybe I already know how,” the qunari grinned back at him, then charged.

Probably another feint. Dorian threw a wall of fire up in front of himself, but he should have known, should have remembered the Hissrad wouldn’t flinch. They had barriers on, they were sparring, and the qunari barreled right through the fire, horns appearing first, giving Dorian only a moment’s warning. He ducked and tried to sprint away.

Too slow.

The butt of the hammer cracked him in the back of the skull.

Dorian gasped and staggered, the world tipping out of focus, but he could feel the shape of his enemy, no, no, opponent close behind him. Another mind blast, this one stronger, so strong it rang loud in his throbbing head. Hissrad fell back and stumbled, but still didn’t fall.

“Kaffas!”

The qunari was laughing, crouching ready again. Dorian’s head hurt.

“Too big for you to knock around, Vint?”

Yes, so big, almost too big but so good, so perfect every time...

“I congratulate you on being terribly heavy,” he drew himself up, “and suggest fewer pies might vastly improve your figure.”

“Hey! Thought you appreciated my figure.”

“Now when did I ever say that?”

Lightning arched downward, branches of it splitting everywhere, and Hissrad tucked down and rolled to the side. The cage caught nothing and dissipated, leaving static snapping through the air.

“Vishante kaffas.”

Another laugh. “You thought that would surprise me? You’re forgetting something, Dorian. Even if I hadn’t faced Vints before, we’ve fought together. I’ve had time to watch you. You think I wouldn’t pick up on all those fancy gestures and shit you do with your hands and staff?”

Traitorous...!

“I see.” Dorian calmly placed the butt of his staff on the ground, stranding straighter. “I must have underestimated the observation skills of a qunari spy—how careless of me. Only the best for Par Vollen, yes?”

“That’s right,” Hissrad was grinning, sweat-covered muscles rippling, ready, bracing to attack again.
“Well, your forthrightness is most welcome. I wonder how the Qun feels about it?”

A fireball manifested out of nowhere and flew at the qunari. Eye wide, he threw himself sideways, narrowly missing it.

“My thanks for the tip,” Dorian continued, still standing in the same position. “As you may recall, I am an enchanter of the Tevinter Imperium, which means rather more there than it does here in the South. A certain amount of flair is only expected, but as you can see, I am well able to dispense with it, if necessary.” With a cold smile, Dorian summarized as electricity crackled around his arms, “I don’t need to use my hands to pin you to the ground and beat you to a pulp.”

“That’s right, Vint…” Spoken with laughter, mocking qunari enemy, “Let’s get serious!”

Then the Hissrad was leaping toward him again, movement quick, not direct—darting, weapon ready, but hands ready too, it could be anything. Dorian couldn’t read the attack, didn’t know what to expect.

But it didn’t matter.

The Hissrad was right on top of him, huge and close and finally moving for a grab, hands—and Dorian was not there.

He Fade-stepped across the ring, remembering only once he’d done it that he wasn’t supposed to know how to do that yet, but no matter. He spun around and threw a tightly-knotted ball of pure force at the qunari, the betrayer. It warped the air around it, but was still much harder to see than a fireball. And the spy had only one eye. If he saw it coming, it wasn’t in time.

The raw power slammed into Hissrad, throwing him to the ground. Dorian stood with hands still, staff unmoving as the qunari struggled up, light in that one eye that Dorian could see even from here. Impressed, intrigued, delighted maybe, like the Iron Bull’s eye when someone began to speak of dragons…

“That’s a new one—”

Ice. Ice cut him off, a pool of it forming under him. Dorian was careful, very careful with the ice. The spy was still getting to his feet, and when one has a bad ankle, one does not use that leg to raise one’s full body weight. The Hissrad was caught on one knee—his bad leg on the ground, his good one braced to stand on, but he was stopped suddenly as Dorian drew the ice up with his mind, encasing the bad leg he didn’t yet know about in a sheath of ice.

“Agh!” The qunari yelled. The cold would hurt that ankle. Dorian wasn’t supposed to know.

Like he wasn’t supposed to know that the Qun mattered more.

Fire, fire, fire.

Dorian advanced with slow paces, one fireball after another rocketing from him and hitting the qunari full in the face. Barrier. Oh well. It didn’t matter.

Understood, ma’am.

Fireball.

“Perhaps the Qun failed to mention…”
Fireball.

“…That is isn’t a good idea…”

Fireball.

*Change of plans. Nothing personal…*

“…To underestimate a *bas saarebas.*”

Fireball.

*Ka…dan.*

Lightning this time, a bolt right to the shoulder. The qunari jolted, grunting. It would hurt, even through the barrier.

Dorian was close, now, close enough to smell the smoke, the edges of fabric singed in spite of the barrier. Heat made sweat pour down those muscles, steam rising off him in the chill air. But Dorian felt no chill.

He swung his staff and it struck across the face, throwing *him* to the side. Then Dorian kicked, shattering the ice and taking the leg out from under *him.* The lingering pool beckoned, but instinct warned him away. Ice was too dangerous, he couldn’t control it right now. There was a massive spike in the back of his mind…

Dorian called the storm again, and lightning arched up, wrapped around thick wrists and a wide waist and pulled down, locking to the dirt. *Qunari traitor. Fight that.*

With an inarticulate growl, Dorian planted a knee on that massive chest, shoved the shaft of his staff against *his* throat, and pressed. *Down.*

*“Triumphus.”*

Heavy breathing that lifted him bodily as that chest rose and fell. A flex of strength, just once, testing the manacles, but it was useless. There was something like awe in that eye, something like the Iron Bull when Dorian sank onto his cock in one smooth motion. Something like the man he had wanted to believe was real.

For just that moment, he was real again, and Dorian’s hands were shaking with hate for the Qun.

Then, “I yield!” Loud enough to be heard, and there were whoops and cheers of acknowledgement from…around them. Somewhere. Dorian neither remembered the audience nor cared. The Iron Bull was staring at him like he stared at dragons, and Dorian swallowed, pulled back, rose, and released the spells.

The Bull didn’t move right away, and when he did, it was abortive as he grunted in discomfort. Without thinking, Dorian reached a hand down to help him up. Their skin slipped together, both of them drenched with sweat, and Dorian felt his whole body shake with the weight of the Bull. Then Bull was standing, still holding his hand, and only then did Dorian realize the shaking wasn’t stopping. There were tremors running through his whole body—exhaustion, the lightheadedness of mana drain, and something else. Something…frantic.

Barriers dissipated with a little tingle, and Lavellan was there, looking drained but impressed, maybe a little thrilled. Saying something about teaching her something, to which Dorian nodded,
eyes still on Bull. A slap on his back—Varric, and various other congratulations. Then, “Yeah boss, we’ll go get cleaned up,” and someone handed him a small vial of lyrium. Possibly he was looking a little spent.

He didn’t feel spent.

The Iron Bull met his gaze and it was almost comical how wide his pupil was. They were outside in daylight, for Andraste’s sake—cloudy daylight, but still. The Bull said something that didn’t quite penetrate the buzzing in Dorian’s ears, and jerked his head in a come with motion, so Dorian followed. He nodded to those who sought to engage him and swallowed the lyrium, which cleared the haze a bit, but all that did was bring the heaving, sweaty muscles of Bull’s back into crystal clear focus.

They entered the nearest door into the castle, walked down a narrow corridor, and Bull opened the first door they came to. Dorian followed inside without a moment’s hesitation, and the moment he was out of the way, Bull slammed the heavy door shut and shoved a crate in front of it. Crate… storeroom.

“Damn.” It was not said darkly. Bull’s deep voice was breathy, still dripping that awe that hadn’t left his eye—the pupil now appropriately swallowing the iris in the dingy room. “Dorian…”

It was a growl he knew, even if he wasn’t supposed to yet, and without thinking, Dorian reached up, grabbed a horn with one hand and the back of a thick neck with the other, dragged Bull down, and bit his lip.

In the space of a single heartbeat, Dorian was grabbed, spun, pinned to the stone wall, and kissed—hard. He returned the kiss with equal force, biting again and again as he kept Bull’s head within reach with an iron grip.

Big hands anchored his shoulders to the wall and were pushing down along his upper arms, trying to force them above his head and against stone. Dorian scrabbled to keep his grip, fingers slipping on sweat. When his hands dropped to Bull’s shoulders, he dug his nails in deep, leaving long scratches as his arms lost the contest of strength and were finally pinned.

Bull growled into his mouth. Dorian pushed out against the restraint and then shuddered, relaxing and moaning. He knew full well how much he enjoyed being pinned, but he also knew that direct pressure never got him out of that hold, knew that Bull would shift both his wrists into one hand to have the other free to touch.

When he did, Dorian immediately twisted his wrists and flattened his palms and yanked straight down, freeing his hands in one smooth motion. And, as they were now conveniently right between him and Bull, Dorian pinched both Bull’s nipples, hard, and when Bull jerked and gave a strained and surprised grunt, he shoved, switching their positions. One of Bull’s horns scraped the heavy wooden door as Dorian pushed him into it, bumping the carelessly placed crate.

Dorian reached up and braced a forearm against Bull’s throat and pressed. “Try to pin me one-handed, will you? I could throw you through this door with my mind.”

“Fuck,” Bull gasped, his throat bobbing against Dorian’s arm as he swallowed.

“Quite,” Dorian answered, his own voice rasping as he grinned sharply. With a glance to the side, he located an unlit torch set in the wall. It burst into flame, casting amber light and harsh shadows over them both.
In that moment, Bull’s hands flew up, grabbed his arms, and twisted. This time, Dorian spun, ending up with his arms secured behind his back, Bull’s breath hot against his ear. “All that power…felt it every time, every hit. You could bring this whole damn castle down around us, couldn’t you?”

Dorian smirked, twisting in Bull’s grasp, trying to maneuver his legs to get a good angle to kick. “Easily.”

The growl Bull answered with was half a groan of lust. Dorian almost had the position right… “Ah!” His whole body jerked as Bull’s teeth sank into his neck, and then he felt a hard shove bearing him down until he was bent over the crate.

“You’re leaking in your smalls, Dorian,” Bull purred on top of him, his weight heavy and pressing down hard. “I can smell it.”

The crate he was bent over was tall, and his feet were off the ground, which gave him less leverage. No matter. Dorian tightened his back and stomach and arched up, grinding his ass against Bull’s groin—unmistakably erect, had been probably since the fight. “I’m surprised you haven’t already spilled in yours,” he shot back, his voice as haughty as ever, even if he hadn’t managed to free himself yet.

Bull’s hips rolled forward. His voice shook. “Saving it…for you.”

“How kind.” He snapped his head back, but hadn’t quite chosen the right moment. He connected with Bull’s shoulder instead of his jaw—hardly painful for either of them.

“Nice try.” Panting. Cock still rubbing against his ass.


That drew a low, hoarse chuckle. “Don’t start holding back on me now, Vint.”

Quite compliantly, Dorian caught behind Bull’s knee with a foot and kicked out sideways, taking the leg out from under him as Dorian bucked up, throwing him off. Bull hit the floor with a grunt—landed right on his ass. Dorian was already straightening above him, cool and unflinching and ignoring the bruise he’d probably just given himself on the edge of the crate. He stared down at Bull and flexed both hands, and lightning wreathed his arms.

“Shit yeah…”

“Truly? Even at a time like this?” Dorian raised one foot and pressed the sole of his boot gently down on Bull’s cock where it tented his repulsive pants.

“Ungh! Fuck…oh yeah! Just…” Bull was breathing hard. Dorian dragged the tip of his boot up and down the length, and Bull was shaking. “Ahhhh, shit! Just promise, ngh, don’t…bust out in demons, or weird shit.”

Dorian snorted. Elegantly. “I have had sex before, Iron Bull. Clearly, I can accomplish the act without becoming an abomination.”

“Right…” Bull was rocking his hips up now, rubbing himself against Dorian’s boot. Dorian kept it in place for him.

“Anything else too scary for you?” A mocking lilt, as though speaking to a child.
A big hand touched his calf, ran up and down the muscle, but Bull seemed to be thinking, a little. “Blood magic,” he suggested.

“Which, as you already know, I don’t practice. Not even when my life is in danger.” Bull’s fingers were working into the muscle of his leg in a lovely way.

“Then…no dead things, I guess. That’s about it.”

Dorian did not roll his eyes, but his put-upon expression said as much. “Goodness, no. Corpses have a dreadful way of killing the mood.”

“Ha! Good one.” With that, Bull moved so fast Dorian could only yelp, lightning vanishing as he lost his focus. That big hand gripped tight around his leg, then pulled up and forward, taking Dorian’s feet out from under him. Yet, as he was falling back, instinct curling him away from the floor to protect his head, Bull sat straight up, reached out with the other arm, and caught him one-handed, arm at his back. When the world stopped moving, Dorian found himself in Bull’s lap, reclining against a massive arm, absolutely surrounded by muscles.

Then he was being kissed, rough and deep.

It was a simple matter to shift himself closer, sliding further into Bull’s lap. His legs were already splayed around Bull’s waist, so Dorian arched and wiggled a little and their clothed erections were rubbing against each other as he aggressively kissed back. Bull rumbled deep in his chest, his hand running up Dorian’s leg to caress over his body. A tug and a clink, then two more in swift succession, followed by a series of tiny pops—buttons. “Tear anything,” Dorian mumbled darkly into Bull’s mouth, “and I will immolate you.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Bull panted. His roaming hand found a couple more buttons and then the laces holding Dorian’s undershirt closed.

Frowning, Dorian pulled back enough to look down at himself. His robes were all opened, falling away from bare skin. Even his trousers were unfastened, though nothing was pushed aside—yet. “How did you…? First time, one-handed…without even looking?”

“Eh.” Bull’s answer was delayed as his mouth to Dorian’s throat and sucked a few hot kisses along one side. “Ben-Hassrath. Your fancy Tevinter shit looks complicated, but it’s nothing careful study can’t figure out. Like putting together a puzzle…in reverse.”

As Bull’s mouth travelled lower, beginning to lick down over his chest, Dorian dissected this. “So…am I to understand you have been undressing me with your eyes…all this time?”

“Yes.” There was a grin to his voice, and teeth scraping over Dorian’s nipple.

Arching an eyebrow, Dorian sat up so that Bull was no longer holding his weight, then pulled the large arms away so they were no longer wrapped around him. Bull was just glancing up inquisitively when Dorian hit him point blank with a powerful mind blast. Given that Bull was essentially at the center of the blast, it didn’t push him away. Instead, it slammed into his upper body and threw him straight onto his back. The impact knocked the wind out of him with a loud oof!

Instantly, Dorian was on his feet, and before Bull could attempt to rise, he stepped up toward the qunari’s head and planted a boot on one horn, pinning him to the ground. Bull groaned, neck straining. Dorian stood over him with his clothes hanging open. Bull stared up at him, reaching down to palm his cock. With a smirk, Dorian rolled his shoulders and shrugged out of his robes,
glancing down to watch Bull quickly tug his giant belt off and then touch himself. Dorian’s trousers were loose and open in the front, relieving the pressure on his cock, but that wasn’t what he wanted right now. His hand was creeping toward his own groin as he watched Bull grip his dick through the ugly fabric…

Then, again too fast to follow—Bull yanked his head to the side, then twisted, levering himself onto his side as he swung out and knocked Dorian off balance. Before he could recover, Bull tackled him around the waist and dragged him to the ground, and Dorian gasped and suddenly found himself buried under qunari muscles, with a hard cock pressed against his leg.

But his hands were free, and Dorian used the advantage. Reacting quickly, he reached down between them and got a grip on Bull’s cock, squeezing and stroking the length. Bull moaned against his throat, already adding to the collection of marks he’d begun there. His hips shifted, thrusting into Dorian’s hand. Dorian stroked and moaned and wiggled his leg up, pretending he was opening his legs and angling his hips closer.

The moment he had his knee in place, he grabbed the front of Bull’s only “clothing,” then he kicked. It took a lot of strength, but with a hard push right under Bull’s chest, he threw the giant off. In the process, the hated pants ripped right open.

Bull’s smalls were still wrapped around the base of his cock, but they had never been equal to the task when Bull was fully erect. Now, all that could really be said for them was that they kept him from popping out comically when the pants fell away in pieces.

_Can’t have that._

With a flick of his finger, Dorian directed a well-placed little flame to consume the tie on one side, and Bull’s smalls fell apart as well.

The qunari didn’t seem concerned, and it seemed he was going to lunge for Dorian again—an effort quickly halted with a small static cage. “There now,” Dorian murmured, approaching. “Didn’t escape that time, did you?”

Momentarily paralyzed, Bull could only grunt.

Dorian stood in front of him and carefully gathered his magic. He could cross the boundary of the spell without breaking it, but doing so without hurting himself was a delicate thing. Slowly, he eased one hand over the barrier. He could feel the humming vibrations of electricity resonating up through his arm and into his body—not quite pain, but rather intense just the same. Breathing hard, he touched Bull’s chest, slowly trailing his hand downward. The currents of power ran through both of them. Bull would feel it most wherever Dorian touched, so he took his time over the expanse of Bull’s body, letting the spell naturally weaken and dissipate. When it finally fizzled out, Dorian wrapped his hand around Bull’s leaking cock.

“How was that? It seems you enjoy being helpless in my grip, Iron Bull.”

“Fuck.” Able to move again, Bull chose to move closer. Dorian stroked him, nothing but Bull’s plentiful precome to slick him. “Fuck, Dorian,” he said again, hands coming to Dorian’s shoulders and caressing skin. “I’m going to pin you down and _conquer you._”

“I’d like that,” Dorian purred, thumbing over the head of Bull’s cock, “but I won’t make it easy for you.”

That seemed to be the signal—they both moved at once, an abortive mess of offense and defense,
leaving them grappling with each other, bumping into barrels and sacks as they wrestled. But it was only wrestling—Dorian did not use magic this time, and in a contest of pure physical strength, he was bound to lose. He got in a few hits—a punch to the chest, and a somewhat more effective elbow to the stomach, a few kicks, a stomp on Bull’s toes—but sooner rather than later, he ended up on his face on the floor, unable to move a single muscle.

Bull was panting in his ear, a grin in his voice, his cock rubbing Dorian’s ass—Dorian’s unlaced trousers having fallen down somewhat, nothing but smallclothes in the way now. “Dorian of House Pavus fights dirty! That’s a surprise. Bet no one would believe me if I told them you can scrap like a common street urchin.”

Dorian gritted his teeth to keep from moaning. He could just manage to push his ass up against Bull’s cock—not much, but enough to be felt. “You’re one to talk about ‘fighting dirty.’ Who’s fighting with his ludicrously oversized cock out, dripping all over his opponent?”

“Doesn’t have to be just me,” Bull laughed, a little breathless, and one hand snuck under Dorian’s hips, cupping him. His whole body jolted with the delicious touch. “Join me, won’t you, Lord Pavus?” The tone was almost perfect for an invitation to tea, but Dorian could hear the faintest growl in it as Bull’s hand worked into his smalls and touched him directly.

Body shaking, Dorian’s hips flexed to push him into that loose grip, but he still couldn’t move far. His voice was tight with the strain of holding back moans of pleasure. “For the record,” he panted for a moment as Bull stroked him, “if I had truly been fighting dirty, you wouldn’t be in any position to put that…ah! That…monstrosity you call a dick to any sort of use right now.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Bull rumbled, teeth on Dorian’s shoulder. “Why don’t I fuck you to show my appreciation?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Bull rumbled, teeth on Dorian’s shoulder. “Why don’t I fuck you to show my appreciation?”

“Yes why don’t you?” Dorian shot back, as lightly as possible considering he was still trapped between Bull’s cock and his hand, and all he could do was shift a little in either direction. “It seems to me you’re taking an awfully long time about it.”

“Well, there’s this bratty Vint who keeps kicking me…”

“Excuses, excuses.”

Bull laughed. Then the arms and legs pinning Dorian loosened. Immediately, he tried to buck against Bull’s cock, even as he twisted to throw an elbow back into his ribs, but Dorian went still with a sudden cry as Bull tightened one hand—he hadn’t let go of Dorian’s prick in the slightest. That squeeze remained constant, and every time Dorian twitched in a way that looked like it could become resistance, Bull squeezed just enough to pass beyond pleasure to discomfort.

So Dorian behaved. For now.

Bull rolled him over gently, and Dorian was surprised to feel fabric instead of the cold floor at his back. It felt rough, like burlap, but it was better than uneven stone. Then Bull left him entirely—except for the one hand that continued to knead along his length—and reached as far as he could to grab at a small box. Dorian thought he saw a candle in Bull’s hand, but he lost sight of everything when Bull came back and swallowed his cock without warning.

Body arching, it was all Dorian could do to remember not to slam his head back against the stone floor. He gasped and thrust his hips up into Bull’s incredible mouth—Maker he’d missed that tongue! Bull wasn’t delaying, for once—he was sucking Dorian off like his life depended on it, hands on Dorian’s ass squeezing and nudging him to thrust up. Finally losing the will to hold back
his moans, Dorian let his voice out and did—he fucked Bull’s mouth frantically, gripping his horns and then crying out as the pleasure crested and he spilled down Bull’s waiting throat.

He was just beginning to relax, a sigh of relief on his lips, when he felt a probing touch…and something was shoved inside him.

Dorian flinched with surprise. It wasn’t Bull’s finger, it was…not that thick, but longer. He squeezed and looked down, frowning. Then it hit him, and he pushed on Bull’s horns, throwing his head back. “Did you just shove a candle up my arse?”

That grin was answer enough, but Bull innocently added, “It’s tallow. It’ll start to melt in a minute.” Massive shoulder shrug. “This isn’t a food storage room. What else am I supposed to use to slick your sweet ass up?”

“Excellent question!” Dorian growled through his teeth, kicking Bull in the thigh. “Had you asked it a minute ago, I’d have told you that I can conjure a sort of lubricant that will certainly serve the purpose!”

“Oh good. We’ll use that too,” Bull cheerfully replied. “Actually, why don’t you show me?” He crawled closer and knelt beside Dorian, within reach. “Grease this ‘ludicrously oversized monstrosity I call a dick’ for me, big guy.”

As distracting and tempting as it was to have Bull’s erect cock right there, Dorian’s first thought was for his leg—Kneeling on stone like that, how many times have I told…oh. Grunting, he moved to sit up, swatting away Bull’s attempt to help. “Very well, one moment. I need to concentrate for this,” he lied.

The candle shifted inside him and Dorian froze, eyes wide. Then he did allow Bull to help him up as far as his knees—ignoring Bull’s knowing grin in favor of feeling the shifting candle. It was softening, making things slip a little, and Dorian had to clench to keep it in place. “Of all things,” he muttered. “Tallow. Ugh.” Then he held one hand out and began to make a show of concentrating, conjuring a slowly growing pool in his palm.

His plan was to keep Bull’s attention there, and it seemed to be working. Dorian couldn’t be sure it was genuine curiosity that held Bull’s eyes—it might just as easily have been that he saw Dorian expected the attention and decided to comply. It hardly mattered. What was important was that Bull thought all the magic was taking place in Dorian’s palm, until the right moment.

Suddenly, the slippery magical liquid was a giant puddle under Bull, and Dorian lunged at him. A hard poke could have made him slip; Bull went down with Dorian on top of him, and his immediate attempts to struggle were foiled by the slippery stone beneath him giving him no purchase or leverage.

Dorian fared somewhat better—apart from his hands, he was mostly untouched by the lubricant, and of course he was on top. He wouldn’t be able to pin Bull, though—not without magic. Instead, as soon as he had Bull on his back, Dorian scooted down, grabbed him by the balls, and put an end to Bull’s resistance with his mouth around the head of his prick.

“Shit! You sneaky little…” Bull trailed off in a moan as Dorian rolled and caressed his sac with warm, slick hands.

Not bothering to answer in words, Dorian began to lick—first over the crown, then up and down every side of the shaft, mapping the familiar features as though he were discovering them for the first time. Bull let him play, groaning as he enjoyed Dorian’s mouth, but not thrusting or grabbing.
him. *Naturally.* It had taken a while before Dorian had convinced him to do that. Bull was too considerate to push, even with the mood as combative as this.

*I missed this.*

Dorian sucked the head back into his mouth and pushed his tongue under the skin to run over the ridge directly. Bull shouted and tensed, whole body shaking as Dorian drove him to the edge. Then he dragged his tongue over the slit, firmly, and sank down, lips tight around the shaft.

A man of many talents, Dorian had learned to deep throat years ago—young and eager to impress. Of course, Bull easily exceeded even large human men. It had taken him a while to learn to manage Bull’s cock, the first time, but in the heat of the moment Dorian somewhat forgot to play the novice. Thus, he soon had Bull’s cockhead pressed to the back of his throat, his jaw straining. He swallowed and groaned and that was it—Bull shouted in surprised pleasure and came. Dorian sucked and swallowed the copious orgasm, also forgetting to choke on it, as he had the first time.

He only remembered when he pulled off and Bull raised his head to look at him, his lone eye wide with awed disbelief. Dorian panted, rubbing his aching jaw, then managed a weak glare at Bull. “If, perchance, the Maker *did* make qunari, he is one filthy-minded bastard.”

Bull laughed, loud and full, and reached for Dorian to pull him close. Dorian lay atop Bull and smirked. “Incidentally,” he added, “you had better do something about that candle before it’s gone.”

Still chuckling, Bull purred, “Oh really? Let’s see.” Then a massive hand smoothed down Dorian’s back and groped his ass.

There was warmed tallow dripping out of him, slicking between his thighs. Bull gripped the candle, probably by the wick, and pulled it out, then began exploring. At the first slick, probing touch, Dorian shuddered. Still, he gathered his superior expression and declared, “Delightful. I smell like trail stew. How enticing.”

Bull grinned and slid one finger inside him, and Dorian gasped. “You’re being sarcastic—that’s fine. Doesn’t matter to me. It’s all true.”

Hips shifting on Bull’s finger, Dorian panted. “You find trail stew…arousing?”

“On you, yeah.” Bull leaned up to rumble against his ear. “Makes me want to eat you up.”

“Metaphorically, I hope you—ah!” The second finger pressed inside him, and Dorian’s head fell forward onto Bull’s chest. Two of *his* fingers was where the fun started—two of Bull’s could be a little overwhelming.

“Mmm,” Bull hummed, the sound vibrating through Dorian’s entire body as he worked those fingers inside him, and Dorian was already hard again. He hitched his hips in little thrusts against Bull’s stomach, listening to the slick sounds of Bull fucking him with his fingers, opening him up. When Bull nudged a third finger against his rim, Dorian groaned loudly and bit him in his round, muscled chest. He was rocking back, now, more than thrusting forward, driving himself onto Bull’s fingers.

The third one pressed inside and Dorian writhed, whimpering. His hips shook. He latched on to a dark nipple with his mouth and *sucked*, working his tongue and nibbling a little. Bull’s chest shook with another growl—he’d always liked it when Dorian did that. It was partly the sensitivity, but mostly it was probably the pleasure he took in Dorian losing control and getting greedy, throwing
himself at whatever part of Bull’s body he could reach.

The first time, he hadn’t let go with Bull like this for at least a month…well, at least three weeks. _Oh well._

Nothing mattered anymore, nothing but Bull’s fingers stretching him and his scent and his too-hot body, skin to skin, and everything Dorian had been forcing himself not to think about. He wasn’t even fully aware of himself when he reached back and grasped Bull’s cock—no surprise, it was fully erect. Probably had never quite gone soft. Magic lubrication filled Dorian’s palm and poured over Bull’s groin, and then Dorian was pushing himself up, positioning Bull’s cockhead as he straddled those broad hips.

“Dorian, wait, you need to—shit!” Too late—he already had the head inside.

Pausing, Dorian planted a hand on Bull’s chest, throwing his weight onto it, then pinching a nipple, hard. “Presume to…tell me…what I can handle…will you?” he growled. Easing down, he took half the length before pausing again. “Pardon me, but fuck you, Iron Bull. Just because I haven’t…haven’t been with other qunari…doesn’t mean I’m too delicate for your brutishly oversized cock.”

Quite determined to prove his point, Dorian relaxed his legs and buttocks and sank down until he was sitting on Bull’s hips. “There,” he declared smugly, not at all caring about the sting of pain. What else mattered, when the Iron Bull was staring at him with such desire and respect? “Triumphus,” he murmured, grinning.

Dorian could feel Bull’s cock twitch inside him as the qunari let out a long, shaky moan, single eyelid fluttering half-closed. “Fuck,” he whispered, hands coming up to grip Doran’s hips.

“I intend to,” Dorian answered, voice shaking slightly despite his best efforts to remain aloof. “In just a—ah! M-Moment.”

“Take your time, big guy.” Bull rumbled, sounding a little overwhelmed. His huge hands were doing that _thing_ they always did—rubbing soothing circles that were almost guaranteed to feel wonderful and make Dorian’s whole body melt.

“I wouldn’t worry,” Dorian managed, even though his effort at a light tone sounded strained, even to him. “I can’t have much fun with you if you spill immediately. So never fear—I’ll let you catch your breath so you don’t embarrass yourself.”

A grin—a damned attractive one, as usual. “You little shit…”

“It sounds like a compliment, when you say it in that sort of tone,” he shot back.

“Maybe it is.”

“Well, good.” Dorian straightened, easing his weight back onto his legs…and Bull’s cock. “You should be certain to compliment me at all times, but especially a time such as this. I’ve no compunction about setting your balls on fire if you insult or displease me.”

Bull’s cock throbbed heavily again, and Dorian gave it a few gentle squeezes with his buttocks, testing his own comfort. Bull groaned heavily, his hands gripping more firmly around Dorian’s hips—that grip that could move Dorian any way Bull wanted, or just as easily give up control and simply touch and feel Dorian’s body. Whatever Dorian wanted, asked for.

It had been months since he’d felt the lingering ache of bruises from dull claw-tips.
Rising up, Dorian paused, just squeezing the head of Bull’s cock before he sank down again—one long slide that smoothly and beautifully stretched and filled him.

*Oh…I missed you.*

“Damn, you look good.”

Rolling his hips to glide smoothly up and down the thick shaft, Dorian put his feelings firmly aside and looked down at Bull with one eyebrow arched, unimpressed. “Try not to overdo it with your praise, yes?”

“Sorry,” Bull grunted as Dorian continued to lift and lower himself for long, uncompromisingly deep thrusts. “Not much of a poetic guy anyway. With you doing *that*…words are…nnh.”

Biting his tongue to bury his smile, Dorian added a little more speed and force to his downward strokes. “Well, you may talk with your cock, if you like. I know I can be a bit overwhelming, but honestly.”

He wasn’t even sure Bull had heard him, but when Dorian bore down for another deep thrust, suddenly the grip around his hips tightened and shifted, changing the angle he had been taking. It was too late to pull back. “Fuck!” Dorian gasped, hands clutching Bull’s wrists as that massive cock rubbed *hard* across the most sensitive spot inside him.

Bull growled, grinning at him. “One good way to shut you up.” Grunting, Dorian threw a tiny bolt of lightning at Bull’s chest, zapping him. “Ow! Hey, you told me to talk with my cock!”

Dorian glared, forcing his hips back to the previous angle and thrusting himself down onto Bull again. This angle, the one he’d originally chosen, was the best one for keeping his own orgasm at bay while working Bull up. There wasn’t really any way to *entirely* avoid his prostate with a cock Bull’s size spreading him open, but with minimal contact and a good, hard pace, he had sometimes been able to get Bull off first.

Unfortunately, Bull was right, and it took him a minute to think of a clever reply. “That was less like conversation and more like a rude interruption,” he finally snapped, driving his hips down extra hard that time.

“All right, big guy. You keep talking, then. I’ll just interrupt when I feel like it.”

Haughty as ever, Dorian huffed. “Beast.” Then he pulled himself up the length of Bull’s cock, squeezing extra tight the whole way. Then down again, full again, just to feel Bull’s fingers dig into his hips, claws beginning to push into his skin. His own hands slid over Bull’s, pressing down a little harder, and he shivered, breathing out a moan as he rode Bull a little faster.

It was wonderful how quickly his body remembered this. Apparently there was no such thing as being out of practice with qunari, at least for Dorian. He could feel every hot inch as he filled himself with Bull’s huge, slick cock over and over. True to his word, Bull kept shifting the angle on him—every time Dorian got a little too distracted by the friction. Bull’s cock was already grazing his prostate; it took very little to stroke it more firmly, Bull also began to hitch his hips up when he changed the angle, doing his best to pound into the place guaranteed to make Dorian lose his mind.

They moved like that, Dorian taking Bull’s cock hard and deep, over and over as Bull’s massive hands dwarfed his hips and guided the motion. Slick sounds, panting breaths, the occasional moan from one of them, but Dorian wasn’t about to let himself go completely. Not the “first” time, at the
very least. He focused instead on Bull’s pleasure, making him throb with need, his precome soaking Dorian inside. His own neglected cock was bobbing, untouched, and beginning to slap down lightly on Bull’s abdomen every time he bottomed out. Bull wouldn’t let that continue long—he never did.

To preempt him, when Dorian suspected they were both getting close, he took himself in hand. Bull groaned, staring. He had always liked watching Dorian touch himself, and Dorian made a lovely show of it. He stroked himself slowly, thumb playing around the head of his cock, tugging the foreskin back the rest of the way to expose the entire head. Precome spilled down his shaft and dripped onto Bull, who growled, braced his feet, and began to rapidly pound up into Dorian.

He could have put Bull in his place with magic, but Dorian found he was growing just as impatient, and Bull’s claws were digging pinpoint bruises into him as his cock drove hard against his prostate, and Dorian couldn’t quite help himself anymore. His hand tightened around his prick and he began to stroke himself hard and fast, still meeting Bull’s every thrust and taking him fully at a mind-erasing pace.

Skin slapping, voices raised, they hurled toward the end. Dorian felt his orgasm building, hot and tight inside him, overwhelming his restraint in a sudden burst of pure pleasure as he came, crying out and shooting across Bull’s chest.

Thank the Maker, Bull was not far behind. Dorian had just regained his ability to open his eyes when Bull shouted, slammed into him, and flooded his insides with seed. Dorian trembled, sighing with bliss as the warm spurts filled him. Maker, if he’d ever been tempted to pursue someone else instead, comparing this to boring old human orgasms was enough to make him repent of that thought.

It was difficult to resist the impulse to collapse forward on top of Bull, especially knowing how gentle his hands would be, exploring Dorian’s body as he recovered. But Dorian couldn’t trust himself with that, not yet. He’d surely end up cuddling.

Instead, he planted a hand on Bull’s chest and leaned his weight forward as he let the softening cock slip out. Then, again to preempt Bull, he reached back to check himself. His hand came away covered in semen that was spilling thickly out of him. Dorian held his hand up, staring at it. He couldn’t quite feign shock, but he could always manage disdain, so he went with that. “Ludicrous,” he huffed, then held his hand up for Bull’s inspection. “Is this some kind of trick? The second time? How much do you have?”

For answer, he got that deep, relaxed laugh, and big hands rubbing his sides, his legs, and—without any hesitation—his arse. “Do you want me to apologize for being qunari? Or are you just bitching?”

He glared, grabbed the burlap sack from the floor that had been functioning as something of a clumsy blanket to lie on, and wiped his hand off. Then he grabbed a nearby crate to help lever himself to his feet—a shakier prospect than he’d expected. His legs trembled dangerously, and Dorian realized that, however nicely he had adjusted, his body had been somewhat surprised by all this, after several months without. Refusing to collapse, he willed his legs not to buckle and managed to stand. Bull pushed himself up to sit back against the crate, and Dorian started to cast about for his clothes.

Of course, standing made even more of Bull’s spend trickle out of him, running down his thighs. Dorian felt it, turned to look back at Bull, and glared again when he saw Bull watching with heavy-lidded pleasure.
With utmost poise, Dorian gave him a withering look. “This is ridiculous,” he declared.

Bull spared him a brief grin before returning his eye to Dorian’s soaked arse and thighs. “No, this is hot.”

Dorian blinked at him. “Hot? I am covered in sweat, my hair is,” he reached up and groaned, “beyond all hope, I’m dirty from the training ring and this dusty, Maker-forsaken storeroom, I smell like cooked druffalo, there is spend all over me that will certainly begin drying before I can get to a bath, and you—you smell like some sort of…I have no idea what. And you think this is hot? Not disgusting?”

The grin only got wider throughout his speech. “First of all,” Bull held up one finger, “I smell like a sweaty qunari…with a human’s semen all over me.” That grin become utterly lewd as he said it. “Oh, and some of the tallow and your magical grease shit, whatever it was,” he amended quickly. Then he held up a second finger. “Second, we already established I like the smell, so that should come as no surprise. And third,” his eye raked over Dorian, voice dropping to a growl of appreciation, “you’re a gorgeous man who looks thoroughly fucked, and I’m the one who just fucked you. It does not get much hotter than that.”

A pause as Dorian wondered how to answer that. In the end, his usual confidence won. “Well, your imagination must be severely lacking, Iron Bull,” he pronounced.

As the Bull laughed at that, Dorian picked up his clothing. He hesitated to put it on, though. Not that these were his best robes—he had been training in them, after all—but he didn’t want semen stains all over his trousers. Looking around, he ignored the burlap sack—too coarse for this particular area of skin. Instead, he picked up the Bull’s smallclothes. He regarded the Bull archly, daring him to complain as Dorian began to wipe the spend from his legs and buttocks. He was not surprised when that single eye widened, watching him with a delighted smile.

It took quite an effort not to smile back as Dorian threw the stained smallclothes at the Bull—who caught them with one hand and began to slowly wipe Dorian’s semen off his chest with them. Dorian swallowed and turned his attention to his trousers, sliding them on and saying, “If you intend to preserve those as some sort of filthy token to pleasure yourself with later, I don’t want to know about it.”

“Eh,” the Bull shrugged with his Maker-damned giant shoulders, “not really my style. The fantasy thing, I mean. We don’t do tokens much under the Qun either…but I might be willing to try it out. Humans sometimes have pretty good ideas.”

Dorian’s gut clenched slightly at the mention of the Qun, but the head-to-toe tension he usually experienced didn’t come. Overall, he felt somewhat disconnected from the anguish that thoughts of the Qun inspired. He felt…light. Clean, as though purged of something cloying. He pulled on his robes and began to meticulously buckle everything together and straighten himself as near to perfection as he could. “Suit yourself,” he answered airily. Then he glanced at the Bull. “Get up and cover yourself, would you? Someone could come in here!”

“They haven’t yet,” the Bull observed, but he gamely moved to stand.

When the process required a bit of clumsy shuffling around, Dorian asked, “What’s the matter? Have I fucked all your coordination away?” He knew it was the ankle, but he still wasn’t supposed to know, and while Bull was effectively naked, he’d never taken his boots off. His trouser legs were even still tucked into the tops, a bit. Nothing to reveal the injury to his leg.

Bull tried to shrug, but he was using his arm for support and it didn’t work. Dorian quickly stepped
forward and didn’t so much offer his hand as just grab Bull’s other arm and brace both feet to help hoist him up until he was standing. Bull looked a little surprised at that, but patted Dorian’s shoulder in thanks and answered, “Yeah, big guy, more or less. You make my legs weak.” And, of course, the predictable one-eyed wink.

Trying not to feel disappointed that Bull hadn’t just told him the truth—what did you expect from Hissrad—Dorian tossed his head. “You’re not the first to say so.” Then he watched sidelong, fiddling unnecessarily with his robes while the Bull pulled up his crotch-less pants and tried to find a way to close the large, revealing hole.

They were baggy, but apparently not enough that he could pull the two sides together. Bull half-sat on the edge of a crate and grabbed his belt, attempting to use it to secure the awful pants, but he only had two hands, and not enough fabric. Finally, Dorian snapped, “Oh, just…here!” He grabbed the burlap sack and held two corners of it, then grasped each torn edge of the Bull’s ratty pants with each hand—pinching the loathsome fabric delicately between his fingertips. “Put the belt on now, it’ll hold this in place.”

“Thanks,” the Bull answered, and obeyed. When he stood, he looked rather ridiculous, with a burlap sack hanging down in front like a loincloth. “Hm,” he shifted. “Feels a little drafty.”

“Then tuck it into the hole in your vile pants,” Dorian ordered, making no move to help any further. “Or just deal with it, if you prefer, but a strong breeze could expose you at this point.” Then, forestalling further lewd comments, Dorian crossed to the door and shoved at the crate. “Now, I expect you to wait ten minutes before leaving, and not to breathe a word of this to anyone. Let me be perfectly clear—I do not want anyone to know that this happened.” It was far too early, Dorian was sure. Last time, the Bull had not kept things a secret for even twelve hours—to be fair, Dorian had left while he was asleep and hadn’t made any explicit requests for secrecy—but it had been at least a few weeks further along. Lavellan hadn’t minded, but it might be too early right now. There were too many variables to be certain. It was better to keep this a secret—not just for his own pride this time, but for the greater good.

“Hate to break it to you, Dorian, but everyone who saw us leave after sparring already suspects.”

Damn it. How obvious had he been? He couldn’t even be sure… “Well, then don’t confirm their suspicions. If someone asks, obfuscate and evade. Aren’t you Ben-Hassrath?” For once, somehow, the bitterness of the word didn’t quite make him sick.

With that, he peeked out the door and, seeing an empty hall, slipped out and shut it behind him.

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Dorian was in the bath and two glasses less sober before he let himself feel what had just happened.

It hurt—fucking someone you used to make love with had to hurt. He already knew that, had done it once long ago. He’d cried a lot, after, but he’d been young. He wouldn’t, this time.

It helped—maybe not the fucking itself, but the fight had been… he wasn’t sure. Very helpful, somehow. Dorian hadn’t even realized how much he’d been avoiding any thought of Hissrad’s betrayal and death. He’d been skirtling the memory, dark feelings gathering every time he refused to look at it, stamped down the pain, and buried it.

No more of that. He had let out a lot of accumulated anguish, but healing was a process, and dealing with this was something he was going to have to do over and over again. Probably complicated by the fact that sex had reentered the picture. And too early, at that.
It was all right. This would be fine. It wasn’t according to plan, but it would work out if he was careful.

“You would hurt less if you shared it with someone.”

Dorian sighed, not bothering to look over at his bed. “And how do you know that, Cole?”

“Because you know it.”

The memory of Lavellan—standing beside him before a pyre. Riding beside him on an empty, empty road. Stopping to talk in the library. Yes—even though they hadn’t spoken much, they had shared the pain. But he didn’t have friends like that anymore—not yet.

“I’ll…try, Cole.”

“No…you won’t.”

“…You’re right. I’m sorry. Just leave me with it for now, please.”

He could feel the silence change shape to an empty one, and Dorian wearily scrubbed his hair to finish up his bath.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There were more sparring matches—the audience demanded it, and Dorian was not one to
disappoint a cheering crowd. The betting became so heated after the third match that Dorian and
Bull both started to nag Varric about their cut of the profit, considering that they were the ones
providing the entertainments. Varric would “get back to them.”

The Bull hadn’t won yet, but that only increased the certainty of those betting on him that he had
just about figured out that Vint mage’s tactics. Dorian smiled and let them all think that. After all,
it was doing wonders for his popularity around Skyhold.

Things were no longer as fraught for him—he was able to face the Bull without the past (past-
future) slipping into and staining the present (present-past). Even Ancient Tevene doesn’t have
enough verb tenses for this. The Bull, for his part, obviously enjoyed the fights, the displays of
Dorian’s power. He made no secret of how turned on he was, but he never even hinted at their
previous encounter, and they did not leave the field in suspiciously close company again.

The Inquisitor apparently loved watching the fights. She enjoyed the sparring matches when they
fought together—Dorian was an honorary Dalish now, so that Lavellan could call the three of them
Vhenhellathen, “the People’s great struggle” or something like that. It was a team name, somewhat
belied by the fact that Dorian was human—thus, honorary Dalish. However, her own sparring was
apparently nothing to watching a contest between others and cheering them on. Every time Dorian
won, he got a little elf wild with joy jumping on him and throwing her arms around his neck. He
wasn’t bothered by it, especially not after Team Vhenhellathen finally beat the non-mages, and
Solas had shown up to watch. He not only got an armful of elated Inquisitor, but a flurry of kisses
all over his face. It was utterly mystifying to watch Solas fight back a smile as he tried to calmly
disentangle himself from the Inquisitor, all while his hands kept finding ways to gently touch her—
not lewdly, but certainly not with the disinterest of a mere friend, either.

And the members of the Inquisition grew closer…mostly.

Vivienne rearranged Lavellan’s furniture and got kicked in the shins for her trouble. Blackwall
spoke when spoken to, which was to say—not much at all. The business with the Wardens required
the Inquisitor to at least ask the nearest Warden what he knew. The conversation, such as it was,
essentially went, “You know where they are or what’s going on? No? No idea? Okay then.”
Thereafter, his presence was not requested any more than before, even during Lavellan’s
investigations and meeting Hawke’s friend.

The trail would lead to Adamant, and Dorian knew much of what would happen, but for him, at
least, it was only a large and very unpleasant battle. He and the Iron Bull had both been stationed
with different sections of the ground forces. Lavellan had taken Cassandra, Solas, and Sera to the
battlements, and consequently to the Fade. It had been the final nail in the coffin for her
relationship with Sera.

In the meantime, Dorian felt…obligated, perhaps, to pay the Bull a consolation visit after beating
him in a match—or, as Dorian chose to put it, “publically humiliating him in front of his men, his
employer, and all of Skyhold.”

Such was his explanation when he knocked on the Bull’s door, several hours after his second
sparring victory, and his superior tone as he strode into the Bull’s room like he owned it—though he had never been there before, this time around—had the very desired and expected effect. The Bull was purring, staring at him with a wide smile as he dropped his harness, deliberately stripping down. “Consolation, is it? I wasn’t feeling too bad about losing, but now that you mention it, maybe I could use an ego boost.”

“While I normally wouldn’t wish to feed your already considerable ego,” Dorian airily declared, eyes raking over the Bull’s skin, “it is only civil to compensate a man one has thoroughly beaten.”

A chuckle. “I could get used to your fancy Vint etiquette if that’s the rule.”

Dorian tossed his head. “However, as the victor, I determine the compensation.”

A broad grin. “I like a man who knows what he wants.”

“Then I imagine you’ll be delighted to hear that I have a very specific activity in mind with which to occupy our evening.”

“Yeah…tell me about it, Vint. Tell me what you want.”

“Well, it’s all rather dependent on your physical strength…”

Bull dropped his belt and rumbled. “Yeah?”

Dorian toed his boots off—he “just happened” to be wearing the loose, fancy, useless pair. “Oh yes. You see, I want you to pick me up, hold me up, and fuck me against the wall.”

“I can do that.” Off went the disgusting pants. Dorian answered by popping open the outermost of his buckles.

“Can you? I’m not a small man, as humans go…”

“Try me, big guy.” Then Bull lunged at him.

Dorian stood his ground and met those muscled arms and hands with a few well-placed punches and a good strong grapple, but again, Bull was bound to win quickly as long as Dorian abstained from magic. Within a minute, he found himself hoisted and tossed face-first onto Bull’s bed, and it smelled so much like him. Dorian moaned, wiggling to rub his groin against the edge of the mattress. Bull chuckled and quickly began taking apart his outfit. Dorian made a show of struggling—some token kicking and thrashing, but Bull easily immobilized him to the point of harmlessness, and truly, Dorian wasn’t that interested in combat this time.

When Bull had his smalls around his thighs, he freed one hand. “Okay, Dorian. You can make some of that magical crap for me, or I can go looking through my chest for some oil.” Almost before he’d finished speaking, his palm was overflowing with slick. Bull laughed, then stroked the seam of Dorian’s arse with that hand. “What is this stuff, anyway? It’s not like any oil I know.”

With a long sigh, Dorian relaxed for the first thick finger. “I’m…not certain, actually. I know how to conjure it, I learned when I was a young man, and then I made a few modifications to the spell over the yearssssssnnng….” He paused to draw in several gasping breaths as Bull found his prostate. “Ah, ah…I can…make it smell or taste like certain things, but as far as I know, it isn’t a real substance that exists apart from mahhhhh—magic.”

The second finger was rubbing around his rim already. “Hmm…can you make it smell like druffalo fat?”
Dorian was still a moment…then he pushed himself up on his elbows and glared over his shoulder. “Tallow?” He snapped his arm back and managed to catch Bull’s shoulder with an elbow—not a strong strike, but given the position it was the best he could do. “No, I cannot make it smell like tallow, and if you like greasy trail stew so much I’d be happy to shove a handful of candles up your arse, any—oh!”

That was the very thick second finger. Dorian allowed the shiver that ran through his whole body to dissolve his tension and leave his muscles as pliant as possible. He continued grumbling as he relaxed, “This is already the most ignoble of all the assignations I have engaged in during my long and base career with such. I was willing to overlook that, yet if you keep bringing your coarse, brutish ways to the fore, I will have no choice but to fuck an Orlesian instead, and they’re only tolerable when you gag them…oh! Mmm…” Dorian rocked his hips back onto Bull’s fingers a few times…then a few more. “Ahh…perhaps that’s what I’ll do to make you slightly tolerable—just gag you. That might…improve you…significantly…hah, hah…”

He felt the third finger lining up with the other two, now, but Bull wasn’t doing anything with it. Panting for breath, he pushed back, and when Bull held still, Dorian pushed harder, beginning to take the third finger. It wasn’t long before all three were spreading him, Dorian grinding on them to feel his body light up when they pressed into his prostate.

“N-Nothing at all, Bull? I expected s-some protest over the, the gag.”

Bull’s grin was plainly audible in his answer, as was his arousal, “Didn’t know you required a response, sorry. I was just enjoying the show. I’ve never had a mouthy Vint insulting me and yapping his disapproval while he fucks himself open on my fingers like he can’t get enough. It’s entertaining.”

There was a rather unfortunate pause as Dorian failed to come up with a retort for that. Finally, he just snapped instead, “Vishante kaffas, will you stop spectating and pick me up?”

The Bull would, with alacrity.

It was cold, with his bare back against a stone wall, but Bull was more than hot enough to make up for that. Positively massive hands braced under Dorian’s thighs and buttocks, holding him up. “Grease,” Bull grunted, and Dorian complied without arguing. He grasped Bull’s thick shaft and slick poured from his hand. Then he reached back up to hang on through a moment of awkward shifting before Bull got the head inside and proceeded to slide into him with one long, deep thrust.

“Oh sweet Maker, yes…”

Bull’s hands on his ass kept him spread wide, and his legs stretching to reach around Bull’s hips did much the same. Bull settled in and began to flex his hips up in a rhythm of steady thrusting, each stroke beautifully deep. Dorian felt like a child’s doll with a world of giant, flexing muscle in his face. He licked Bull’s chest, tracing the shape of his muscles as far as Dorian could reach—tasting the slightly different saltiness of qunari sweat.

“I’m not…” He had to pause, shaking and moaning as Bull gave him a few quick, shallow thrusts, right into that little bundle of nerves. “…Not too heavy, am I? Are you all…right?”

At first, his answer was a grunt. Then a pause in the thrusting as Bull shifted his hold. “You’re good. Heavy, but I’ve got you. Just don’t expect this to last too long.”

“Mmm.” Dorian slipped a hand down from one horn to trace the pointed tip of Bull’s ear. “Then please don’t hold back,” he murmured against that broad chest. “Fuck me hard, Bull. Fuck me wide
open and fill me…and I’ll come for you, from only your cock…and then you may put me down.”

“Ungh…” There was a grin in the sound, pressed to the top of Dorian’s head. “You’re sweet, Vint, you know that?”

Dorian would have huffed, but Bull started pounding him just then, so he wailed instead.

*So good at following orders…*

There was nothing Dorian could do but cling to the mountain of sweaty qunari as he was fucked out of his mind. Bull pounded up into him—no lead-up, probably no holding back. It was brutal.

It was perfect.

Dorian couldn’t think, couldn’t let his head get cluttered with pesky emotions he was still trying to compartmentalize, and if there were any demons trying to say something, he couldn’t even hear them. He also couldn’t last long, with Bull ramming his prostate over and over like that. As promised, he came before very long—teeth sunk into Bull’s shoulder, screaming and shaking and spattering both of them with warm, sticky mess.

Bull wouldn’t be far behind. Dorian rallied his strength to pull himself closer, pressing bodies together—mercifully changing the angle to spare his over-sensitive body. He stretched up and pulled Bull’s head down, but couldn’t quite reach his ear. No matter—qunari had good hearing. Dorian panted against his throat, little moans escaping here and there. “Yes, Bull…yes, so good…so big, so fucking strong…”

Breathy growls, a desperate urgency. No words, but Dorian understood. *Close.*

He moaned, long and deep. “You powerful beast…you could slay a dragon…and then fuck me on its smoking corpse.”

“Fuck!”

Claws dug into Dorian’s ass, Bull’s cock buried to the hilt and throbbing, pumping him full of seed. A few jerky, hard thrusts as Bull emptied into him—Dorian laughed weakly. He felt like he was floating.

They were both gasping for air, but Bull held on another minute. Dorian felt Bull’s muscles begin to shake, his arms trembling slightly as they kept him up. He tapped a flexed bicep. “Down, if you please.”

As if released from a spell, Bull slowly pulled out and eased him to the floor. Dorian held on to Bull’s arms, even as he leaned most of his weight back against the wall until he could trust his legs.

They managed to shuffle over to the bed, Dorian leaning quite heavily on Bull due to his uncooperative legs and back. Once there, they collapsed for a few minutes, legs hanging off the side as they caught their breath.

The first thing Bull said when he could speak was, “Damn…where did you learn to talk dirty like that?”

“What, the dragon?” *From you,* he thought. *And the first time you said it, I pretended to be insulted.* “Impromptu brilliance, as is my wont.”

“You know, boss promised after she and Hawke finish tracking down those Wardens, there was
that dragon we saw when…”

“No.” Dorian pushed himself up, taking a minute to let his arse adjust. “There is a significant difference between what I will say to get you off and what I will actually do.”

“Aw, that’s just mean. Teasing me like that…”

“Oh, enough of that.” He grabbed a corner of the blanket and began to clean himself off—the blanket was a mess already anyway, since the moment he sat on it. “You enjoyed yourself, as did I. There is nothing to complain about.”

“All right,” Bull sighed, sitting up as well. “But I should probably tell you that I’m going to fantasize about fucking you on a pink dragon.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he sighed before looking at Bull. “I despair of you.” Gathering his clothing, he began to dress. “But, I suppose you are entitled to enjoy a fantasy. It’s only fair, after you satisfied one of mine.”

“Oh yeah? The wall thing?”

Dorian shrugged, lacing up his trousers. “There are certain physical limitations. I haven’t been with anyone else who could manage it successfully. I am usually taller than other men, or at least of a height.” He pulled on his robes and began to buckle. “I had an exceptionally burly soldier once who could comfortably manage most of my weight while kneeling, against the headboard,” he nodded at Bull’s, as an example, “but I was too heavy for him to pin me to the wall for more than a minute.” Dorian turned, curling his moustache and smirking at Bull. “Thank the Maker’s dirty mind for qunari, I suppose.”

“Well, happy to help you with that, big guy.” Bull began to wipe himself off, finally, but apart from that he made no move to dress or cover himself at all.

Dorian smiled, then looked down. If one could get his eyes to move further down than that cock on full display, it was very easy to notice the gouges and knots around his ankle and lower leg. “Maker, what happened there?” He did not point—commoners pointed—but he nodded toward the old injury. “Did you step into a dragon’s mouth to see how sharp its teeth were?”

Bull chuckled a little ruefully. “That would have been better. Ah, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

With a glance toward Bull’s discarded boots, Dorian let himself appear to put the pieces together. “That’s the same foot as the boot with the metal casing around the ankle.” He stepped over to inspect said boot. “Is this a brace?”

“It’s decoration,” Bull answered, with what might be seen as a slight pout. Dorian arched an eyebrow at him. “All right, maybe it has a brace-like effect. Helps a bit in bad weather.”

“Oh? That,” he nodded again, “only troubles you in bad weather?”

A little shrug—as little as such massive shoulders could manage. “And if I’m on my feet all day, I suppose.” He smiled reassuringly. “Really, Dorian, it’s not as bad as it looks. But thanks for caring.”

“Caring?” Dorian scoffed. “I don’t care, I was curious.” Some lies felt more hollow than others. He wondered if Bull would see through that one. If he did, he probably wouldn’t guess the whole truth. “In any case, thank you for satisfying my curiosity. Sleep well.”
“You too, Vint.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh look, they did it again. XD
Chapter 16

Wicked Grace became a weekly event, thanks to the Inquisitor’s interest. She was becoming quite close to all who attended—except poor Blackwall, who still kept his distance out of respect for her obvious uncertainty about him.

Dorian had finished reading Genitivi’s works on the Qun and the qunari, as well as quite a few of the less trustworthy sources. What he was really searching for were firsthand accounts of qunari life under the Qun, perhaps written by viddathari who would comment on the things that those raised under the Qun would think nothing of. Or, if only he could find it, some copies of Koslun’s writings. Unfortunately, the Tome of Koslun was rather sacred, and the qunari didn’t all carry around pocket copies translated into other languages.

It wasn’t until Skyhold was preparing to march against Adamant that Dorian managed to acquire a new crate of assorted texts that contained, in a dusty, stained, unassuming little volume, some excerpts from the Tome of Koslun. It was handwritten, like a journal, and the Qunlat text was copied in an awkward hand that clearly was not accustomed to reproducing its characters. The translation was even patchier than the excerpts, leaving many words, phrases, and sometimes even whole sentences untranslated.

Dorian hoarded it in secrecy like a miser’s greatest treasure.

He was ill-equipped to continue the translation—he worried that asking the Bull about Qunlat words would seem out of character and suspicious. Besides that, what if he asked about a word that gave away his source? The Bull did not need to know what Dorian was researching. Given the nature of their relationship so far, it would be almost impossible to explain.

Still, there was enough in the already translated text that he could begin to extrapolate some useful concepts. It was a very encouraging development in his research.

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They were to leave for Adamant the next day, and final preparations were keeping nearly everyone busy. In the midst of the general hurry, Dorian found the Bull by the smithy, collecting some repaired weapons for himself, the Chargers, and apparently Blackwall. Dorian waited until he and Harritt had finished speaking, then approached the Bull.

“Oh, Dorian. How’s it going?”

“Ah…” He studied the armload of sharp metal. “Let me help you with those. I have something for you, but it can wait until you’ve a hand free.”

“Sure, big guy. Just taking these over to the barracks for now.” The Bull handed over a sword and two axes, wrapped in cloth. Dorian took them and fell into step beside the Bull.

There was silence between them for a minute, but not an uncomfortable silence. Not exactly the safe, companionable silences Dorian remembered from their later days, before, but all in all, not bad. And, advantageously, they were walking together—one’s conversation was generally safe from prying ears that way, no potential listeners remaining close long enough to get a full picture of the topic. Still, best to keep his voice down, though not suspiciously low—that would only attract curiosity.

“I was thinking,” Dorian began, in a fine-day-we’re-having sort of tone. “That business in the
storeroom was a rather unique experience—not a bad one, mind you, but one that perhaps could be
improved upon.”

“Oh yeah?” The Bull, or perhaps Hissrad, accurately perceived the correct, casual tone to answer
with—and the importance of being vague. “What sort of improvements?”

“Setting, for one,” he began. “And obviously candles would only be employed in the usual way,
involving candlesticks. But mainly I was considering the…unique enjoyment of hand-to-hand
combat, and how it could be revisited in that context without one side having too much of an
advantage. The best fights, after all, are the most balanced.”

“Hmm. I guess I can see that. I’m just too much sometimes.” Dorian narrowed his eyes at that
sneaky grin.

“Hardly. When I let myself use magic, you’re no trouble at all.” A bit of an exaggeration, but the
point was the same—he had a significant advantage with magic. “And when I ceased to use magic,
I imagine there was little challenge remaining for you to overcome.”

“You’ve got a point there.”

“So I was thinking of finding a way to give you a physical handicap, while I accept a no-magic
handicap, and then perhaps both of us could…enjoy the contest.”

They were nearing he barracks. “Hmm. I like this idea. A bit surprising, but still good.”

“Why surprising?”

“Oh, I just thought, after the last time we…talked, it sounded like you had what you wanted. I
assumed you wouldn’t be interested in more.”

For a moment, Dorian felt caught. Their conversation raced through his mind—perhaps he had
implied things he hadn’t before. After all, when he first started sleeping with Bull last time, he
hadn’t spoken about it much at all, if he remembered. It was just frustrated, angry sex and then an
effort to leave as quickly as possible, determined that was the end of it…and always succumbing to
his own libido and coming back for more a few days later. There hadn’t been any of this…
whatever he was doing right now. Planning future trysts?

Too late to take it back; you’ll have to make the best of it. Improvise, Pavus.

“I understand that is how your affairs generally go.”

“That’s right.”

He shrugged. “Well, my…engagements are usually a take-what-you-can-get arrangement, and if
more is available, one avails oneself until the other party is no longer agreeable to it.”

“Oh, I’m agreeable. Don’t worry about that.”

They entered the barracks, and the Bull began to rack the weapons. “I wasn’t the slightest bit
worried. Of course you are; who wouldn’t be?” Dorian handed over his armload with the air of a
king dispensing gifts of favor. Then, ignoring the Bull’s chuckle, he produced a fat, short jar.

“Here.”

The jar looked small in the Bull’s hand. “What is it?”
“It’s a salve—basil, mostly. For your leg. Clove, cinnamon, and turmeric are better for warming and relaxing, but such things are hard to come by in the South, so one must make do.”

If the Bull was surprised, he didn’t show it. With an easy smile, he said, “Aww, thanks Dorian. You’re a sweet guy.” Dorian’s arch look was answer enough to that, and the Bull laughed. “You’ll have to let me appreciate the gift properly when we get back from Adamant.” He finished with a one-eyed wink—which always worked, somehow. Perhaps it was the upward twist of the mouth on that side. The Bull didn’t let a little lost eye ruin his moves, and Dorian, Maker help him, had always been charmed by it.

“Yes, well. I will…look forward to it.”

“Works for me.”

Someone called “Chief!” then, and the Bull looked over and nodded that he was coming. “See you on the road,” he added to Dorian as he waved.

They departed for Adamant at dawn.

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The journey was more tiresome than most, mainly because everyone was travelling together, regardless of how well they got along. Vivienne appeared to be on a mission to make everyone hate her, with the possible exception of Cassandra, who seemed mostly confused by her. And, of course, the Iron Bull, who was as deferential as ever. Dorian, for his part, tried to ignore her—he’d had more than enough of coy insults in his lifetime by now, and even the familiarity of it that had once been somewhat comforting when he first joined the Inquisition had now worn off. He much preferred the comfort of horrible, lowbrow humor, Sera’s pranks, the Bull’s puns, and Varric’s ridiculous stories.

He did, eventually, make the slightest effort—not really for Vivienne’s sake, but because the Bull was the only one who would talk to her after a while, and if Dorian wanted to be anywhere near him, he’d have to endure her, a little. He challenged himself to find the most diplomatic and flattering way to suggest Vivienne change her tune when speaking to the Inquisitor, but it fell on stubbornly deaf ears. As expected, even her hopes of gaining political advantage through association with the Inquisition couldn’t make Vivienne see the folly of telling a Dalish mage that magic was dangerous and the Circle and Templars were good. Perhaps she wasn’t quite so politically skilled as she seemed to believe herself.

Solas was usually not far from Lavellan, but he and the Bull did manage to find themselves in close enough proximity to ignite another fight. Dorian’s chest ached when Bull mentioned the things he’d seen on Seheron. They had rarely spoken of that, before—it was too dark a time, best left in the past, and why would they discuss the details of their people’s war? The topic could hardly lead to a friendly conversation. He had no idea, yet, if that would change this time, but if it did, it would be hard. The flash of real pain in Bull’s eye, even through his anger, made Dorian want to sink the whole miserable island into the sea. Or, barring that, maybe he could set Solas’ leggings on fire for bringing it up.

Later, however, Solas said something else—something about how the mind protects itself from trauma. Dorian wasn’t sure the Bull saw what Solas was getting at, but he did—possibly. He mentioned it later, when they camped for the night and the Bull was nowhere near.

“You meant,” he ventured carefully, “that he chose to see the Tal-Vashoth as mindless monsters… so that he could deal with killing so many of them? And…perhaps also to help himself understand
why they committed the atrocities that they did?"

“It is possible,” Solas answered, studiously picking through his trail stew and eating the vegetables. Lavellan would be along shortly and would smile dazzlingly when he offered her the chunks of meat. “While we do not know the details, it is clear Iron Bull spent many years facing the horrors of war. While the Qun may reject some emotions, the qunari are not unfeeling by nature. One need only observe him with the Chargers to see that Iron Bull has many feelings—feelings that often do not survive such terrible circumstances.”

Dorian was silent a moment. “Perhaps they didn’t survive. He is Ben-Hassrath. What if all those feelings died on Seheron, and it’s only a performance now? What if no amount of effort can save what was lost long before we ever met?”

“How. Perhaps.” Solas studied him. “Much of it may be. But he was angry when we spoke of the Tal-Vashoth, and I do not think that it was a performance.”

“If any of his fondness for his men is in earnest, the Ben-Hassrath won’t approve. We’re all just bas as far as the Qun is concerned.”

Solas’ answer was interrupted by the arrival of Lavellan, who gladly added the extra meat to her own stew. Sera was not far behind, and whined loudly, “No fair! Who’ve I gotta get all snuggy-wuggy with to get seconds?”

Dorian smiled and sighed. “The snuggling will be quite unnecessary. Here you are—I’ve had enough of whatever this is, anyway.”

Sera grinned and grabbed and didn’t answer until her mouth was full. “Fankth, Do-ian!”

He smiled and nodded and retired to his tent. Tomorrow would be long.
Lavellan had fallen into the Fade, and even though he barely had time to breathe in this battle, Dorian was reminded again of the hideous risk of his choice. She’d come out all right before, but that Warden had not, and emerging whole from the Fade was quite a feat. Could she do it again, or would she not make it this time?

Whenever he found himself high enough on the walls to look around, he tried to locate the rest of the companions. He saw Sera, also perched high on the battlements and firing arrows near and far—and his gut clenched with alarm. *That’s different.* Sera wasn’t with the Inquisitor—good for her, and all, but who was in the Fade instead, then?

He couldn’t set eyes on the Bull, but eventually he heard a familiar bellow of battle rage— unquestionably the Bull, thank the Maker, he was safe.

Cassandra appeared to be missing, so that was the same, and Dorian didn’t even wonder much if Solas had gone again this time—with how close he stayed to the Inquisitor, he’d have fallen with her even if, for some reason, he hadn’t been in her vanguard.

But there was no time to track down each person individually—he had a battle to fight. It wasn’t until after their victory that he found out Varric had been the unlucky replacement for Sera, and the dwarf did not look happy about the experience.

Lavellan, oddly, did. Or, if not happy, precisely, she seemed somewhat thrilled by the whole ordeal. In Dorian’s memory, after Adamant she had been shaking with misery, waking from nightmares the whole trip back. Perhaps part of that was due to the final and untidy end to her relationship with Sera. Perhaps her dread of the Fade had been partly empathy with Sera’s fears. Perhaps this time, Solas’ confidence and reassurance had soothed the horror and made it all much more exciting than it had been before.

Dorian was making wild guesses, however, and there was simply no way to know. In the meantime, he was being brushed aside by the healers, who had no concern for his battle wounds because they were prioritizing the life-threatening injuries. The Dorian of the past would have explained to them very precisely that his dashing looks were a matter of life and death, for him, and they would know that if they’d ever been to Tevinter. Now, however, he understood that his pretty face was less important than a man’s life…though he was still entitled to privately worry a great deal about his poor, pretty face.

He had a broken nose.

A lovely bastard of a Warden had got him in the face with his gauntlet while Dorian was trying to locate the Bull and not paying enough attention. Now he was sitting out of the way in a healer’s tent, trying to summon his utterly sad healing abilities to bring the swelling down. He didn’t have a mirror handy and he was glad of it. Seeing his own face right now might make him want to cry.

“…more bandages? Iron Bull needs…”

Dorian was on his feet in an instant, locating and accosting the healer’s assistant before she could finish. “What happened to Iron Bull? Where is he?”
“Two tents over, ser, but…”

Dorian was already gone, bursting into the other tent only moment later.

Oh Maker. Thank you.

“Dorian, how’s it…oh.” The Bull saw his face and shut up, his eye wide at the sight—but not laughing, which was good for him. The sight of the Bull sitting there, obviously not dying, gave Dorian a sudden, overwhelming rush of relief. Any sass right at that moment would have earned the brute a wrathful tongue-lashing for the history books, or at least Varric’s books.

Deep breath. “What happened? Why are you here—you were injured?”

The assistant returned and interrupted, speaking to Bull before he could answer. “Now, ser, your hands, please.”

The Bull held them out, and Dorian could see that both palms and the undersides of his fingers were burned—badly. The skin was bubbled and even a little charred, but it had been washed and smeared with a greasy salve, and the assistant was beginning to wrap bandages around them already.

“Kaffas, what happened to your hands!”

“Rage demon,” the Bull shrugged.

“It burned your palms?”

The healer snorted. “Ser Iron Bull means to say that he decided to kill a rage demon with his bare hands—an admirable feat from a storytelling point of view, but…”

Dorian spoke through clenched teeth. “You killed a rage demon with your bare hands. Iron Bull, you incredible imbecile. They don’t simply look like fire, you know! They happen to be hot!”

“Hey, my axe was stuck in a pride demon and…”

“I absolutely do not care what your excuse is! You’re lucky you still have hands right now and…vishante kaffas! What are you doing to his hands?”

The healer sighed. “Wrapping them.”

“You can’t wrap them like that! You have to wrap each finger individually before wrapping the whole. Do you want his skin to grow together so that he can never use his hands again?”

To Dorian’s shock, she did not react with the appropriate amount of chagrin. “Ser, we’re running dangerously low on bandages, and we have much more severe injuries to deal with. This is the best we can do for now.”

For a moment, Dorian was silent—mostly so that he could refrain from saying something not-very-genteel to her. “All right, keep your bandages and return to the others. Iron Bull, you will come with me.”

Apparently neither of them wanted to risk another round of Dorian’s fury, because they obeyed. The Bull followed as Dorian led the way to his tent and held the flap back to let him inside. “Sit.”

The Iron Bull sat. His bulk filled half the tent.
Dorian dug through his pack and pulled out a shirt—a fine white linen shit, somewhat simple in design as it was meant to be worn under a few additional layers. He also pulled out his “hair-cutting whatever,” and in silence began to cut the shirt into strips.

“Uh. You really don’t have to do this, Dorian. A day or two won’t be enough time for my hands to heal over so much that they can’t be fixed…”

“Yes, just slice the new skin open to cut your fingers apart again—that sounds lovely, and not at all savage and unhygienic. Hold out your hand.” The Bull did, and Dorian began to carefully wrap each finger, including the short ones, with the strips of his shirt in neatly placed layers. He wrapped them firmly but left the tops of the knuckles uncovered. “You’ll be able to loosely hold things, but I encourage you to bend your fingers as little as possible, at least for a few days.” The Bull said nothing to that, just grunted acknowledgement, and Dorian continued in silence. Once each finger was wrapped, he gently wrapped around all of them. It was a tidy job, if he did say so himself.

“Thanks,” the Bull said, and when Dorian looked up he was just barely smiling, gently, but also studying Dorian at the same time.

“You’re quite welcome.” Dorian just managed to stop himself from placing a kiss on the back of Bull’s hand. He had the most ill-advised impulses sometimes.

“Your face hurt?”

Dorian moaned, and his expression of pain actually caused the throbbing to increase. “Yes, but I care little for that. What this could do to my profile…”

The Bull peered at him. “Looks like the bridge is straight, if that helps.”

“Yes…the moment it broke I grabbed it and reset it—a reflex, I suppose. But I couldn’t see what I was doing, so I’m not sure…”

“It’s fine.” The Bull smiled. “You got it straight. When the swelling goes down it’ll heal without even a bump.”

“You think so?” If he sounded pitifully hopeful, Dorian couldn’t help it.

The Bull chuckled. “I’ve seen my fair share of broken noses, Dorian. Krem’s broken his twice.”

“Oh?” Dorian thought a moment. “You can’t tell. His nose is…well, it isn’t mine, but it’s perfectly passable.”

“It’s not crooked and you wouldn’t have known if I hadn’t told you—that’s the point.”

“I suppose you’re right.” He smiled ruefully, which also hurt his face, though not quite as much. “I must look dreadful at the moment.”

“After all those demons? You look like the best thing I’ve seen all day.”

A surprised laugh burst from him, and Dorian shook his head—carefully. “It’s disgusting how charming you can be.” Then he stood and put everything away, opening the tent flap again. “Come on. Field debriefing should be soon. Our Inquisitor will have a lot to tell us.”

“Oh yeah? Why?” The Bull grunted, pushing himself to his feet and following.

“Didn’t you hear? She fell through a rift into the Fade.”
Kaffas. Bull’s sudden stillness made Dorian turn, and there was that shockingly blank face. Pavus, you...damn it. “She came back, obviously,” he added in a rush. “She sealed the rift and effectively cut off the summoning the Wardens were attempting. I’d bet good money her path through the Fade is now a trail of demon corpses, too. She’s fine, we won—nothing to worry about.” If it didn’t sound as flippant as it should have, it was only his concern for Bull leaking through, making Dorian reassure him a little too much, perhaps.

Bull blinked rapidly and nodded. “Sure. Let’s go.” It was a little stiff, a little blank. But now was not the time.

--

There wasn’t much time, in the aftermath of Adamant, but there was less chaos than the first time—they didn’t have a big new Warden alliance to organize this time, and Dorian wasn’t sure what to think about that. He hadn’t realized that Solas’ dim view of the Wardens would rub off on Lavellan, though he should have thought of that. It was Solas’ potential to influence, after all, that led Dorian to nudge her toward the elf in the first place.

And now they were without a large group of allies, which made Dorian nervous. Still, knowing what would eventually be revealed about their enemy, perhaps it was better this way. But the Inquisition would need to make up the difference in strength somehow…

The qunari.

That was not good, not at all. The advisors still pressured Lavellan about allies, he knew. And while none of them knew there was a deficit in their forces this time, last time they’d recently gained a bolstering group of allies and still Lavellan had felt that they simply couldn’t do without the qunari. That was a problem.

Worse still, if this whole endeavor was a success, they’d be proceeding without the qunari and the Wardens. This could have serious ramifications in their battle against Corypheus and the Venatori. Dorian would need to find other allies for the Inquisition.

Somehow.

Chapter End Notes

Hi y'all, it's summer and work is slow, so I'm probably going to change the update schedule to Tuesday-Thursday-Sunday. Kay?
Chapter 18

The Bull was not himself on the journey back, but he stayed with the Chargers and Dorian had few chances to speak with him. Lavellan and Solas were wrapped up in endless discussions of the Fade, which Dorian listened to with some fascination. Sera was trying to recruit Blackwall as an ally in her pranks against Vivienne. Cassandra and Varric were suddenly getting along a little better, much of the ire between them apparently having dissipated somewhere in the Fade. Cole was silent, flitting about with less purpose and more… nerves? Perhaps it’s something to do with his developing humanity. Dorian wasn’t too clear on how that had come about—he’d been rather too focused on research and finally succumbing to an infuriating qunari’s temptations at this point last time.

Said qunari pulled Lavellan aside shortly after they reached Skyhold, and Dorian found them (not that he’d been looking… much) by the training grounds. Lavellan was beating the Iron Bull with a stick—apparently not to his satisfaction.

“Come on, boss! I can’t even feel that!”

Vallaslin firmly set into the buttocks of wrath, Lavellan whacked, whacked, and then burst out, “I’m doing the best I can! What are you, a stone golem?” Then she gave him a flurry of smacks with the stick that couldn’t have been any more effective—she didn’t wind up for them properly. Dorian wasn’t sure if he should laugh or worry.

“Come on, stop playing patty cake and hit me!”

“Fenedhis lasa!”

The Inquisitor threw the stick at the Iron Bull and nailed him in the shin with a mighty elven kick.

It was the Bull’s good leg, fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately, because it didn’t seem to satisfy whatever painful goal the Bull was after. Instead, it left Lavellan hopping on one foot, spitting in Elven and scattered Common about stone giants and their heads filled with mud.

“May I offer some assistance, Inquisitor?” Dorian still felt like laughing, a little, but clearly something was amiss here, and he should really try to straighten it out before something irreparable happened between Lavellan and the Bull.

“Dorian!” It was the Bull who answered, obviously relieved. “Good to see you, grab the stick!”

In the pause while Dorian blinked, wondering if that was some kind of euphemism or if the Bull really meant the stick Lavellan had dropped, she spoke up, “Yes, Dorian, you do it. Put your giant, stupid shem arms to good use and beat some wits into this… dorflenalas.”

“I beg your pardon, my arms are quite—”

“But now!”

Dorian sighed. “What exactly are we doing, here?”

Lavellan picked up the stick and shoved it at him. “We’re beating him to a pulp. Hop to it.”

“What?”
“Come on, Vint, just hit me!”

With a shrug, Dorian raised the stick and slammed it into the Bull’s chest.

The next few minutes were...a unique experience, at least. The Bull seemed much happier with Dorian’s ability to raise welts, knock the wind out of him, and eventually send him staggering backward into a nearby wall. At the end of it, the Bull sighed, smiled, and thanked him, and Dorian, for once, couldn’t come up with much of anything to say to that. “Um...yes. You’re welcome. Any...time. I suppose,” he finally managed.

“Sorry to spring that on you.”

Lavellan, who had remained on hand to watch—and calm down a little, apparently—explained, “It seems the Qun believes fear is mastered through...pain, somehow?”

“Well, if it’s pain you wanted,” Dorian huffed, “there are much more efficient ways to achieve that. Ones that don’t risk blistering my hands.”

“The stick is important. It’s...hard to explain. Don’t worry about it, boss, I’m fine now. Dorian’s got good arms.” It was probably not his imagination that made that sound a little warmer than a disinterested compliment should.

Lavellan didn’t seem to notice. “Glad to hear it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have terribly important Inquisitor matters to handle...somewhere, I’m sure.”

Their Inquisitor departed, leaving Dorian to finally remember his original purpose. “How are your hands? You still have them bandaged, I see,” he observed.

“Yeah, they’re good, just keeping the new skin covered. A healer was able to speed up the process a bit once we got back. Thanks to you, it looks like I’ll get back full use of my fingers.”

Keeping his expression casual, Dorian twirled the stick idly, much as he would his staff. “I imagine you are somewhat...restricted...when it comes to more challenging tasks. Such as fighting?”

The Bull grinned. “Oh, it’s true. I can hardly grip anything with these mittens on.”

“Hm.” Dorian nodded, studiously hiding his smile—though perhaps not quite as studiously as he could have. “Then you should be careful not to injure yourself. I recommend rest. You should retire early, I think.”

“Thanks,” the Bull answered, clearly entertained by the artifice. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

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Dorian did have plain clothes, though no one would believe it. He had simple, loose shirts (usually not worn as an outer garment, but never mind) and one dull pair of trousers—nicely form-fitting, at least. He rather looked like a dashing sailor, he thought—a pirate, perhaps, in search of a battle and a prize to claim.

Such was his attire when he knocked on the Bull’s door to the ramparts, two hours after dark.

“It’s open.”

He entered, casual as could be, and shut the door behind him. “The civilized world invented locks for a reason, you know.” Dorian drew the bolt. “It’s rather savage to show such disregard for the
Bull grinned and rose from his desk to prowl toward him. “Oh really? Would you say it’s more or less savage than beating someone to a pulp before fucking them?”

“It depends who’s doing the beating,” Dorian aristocratically answered. “I can do anything with sophistication.” His assertion was punctuated by a *thud* as Bull pinned his shoulders to the wall. Dorian kept his expression cool as he glanced at a giant hand on his shoulder. Then, he had to crane his neck back to look up at Bull. “Mind your skin. You’re still healing.”

“I will. And you won’t use magic tonight—that’s the deal?” Dorian nodded, keeping his breathing even, though Bull was probably already aware of his increased heart rate. “Sounds good to me. You got a watchword?”

*Oh.* Of course he did. Before, they had discussed watchwords their first time together. It had been after they’d sucked each other off, while recovering for round two—Dorian’s first “ride” on the Bull. They’d been working each other out of the rest of their clothing, and Dorian had given the Bull his usual one—*Archon*—and the Bull had laughed and said if they were eliminating the possibility of *that* game, then his might as well be *Arishok.* And so they had been ever since.

And *that* Iron Bull had remained a servant of the Qun, and as much as Dorian loved him, he…he didn’t want to use *his* watchword any more. Something different, then—a fresh start. It would help him keep this separate, help him distance himself from that broken trust.

“I’m no stranger to them,” he murmured thoughtfully, studying Bull’s face as though it wasn’t any strain on his neck to do so. “Why don’t you give me one?” He said it with an aloof nonchalance, because the Bull had always found his confidence rather…invigorating.

Bull smiled and pulled back to give him a little space, more appropriate for talking. “Well, you probably don’t know much Qunlat, so how about *katoh*?”

“Katoh?” Dorian tried the pronunciation, filing the word away for later study. He’d never heard it before. *Fascinating.*

The Bull chuckled. “Close enough.”

Dorian scowled at him. “I beg your pardon. If you mean to imply I didn’t say it correctly, perhaps you should rethink that. A Tevinter accent could probably significantly improve the tonal qualities of spoken Qunlat.”

Bull rolled his deliciously massive shoulders and cracked his neck, grinning. “Hard to argue,” he rumbled. “Sounds pretty, the way you say it.”

With a demure smile that said *well, naturally,* Dorian shrugged, then lowered his shoulder, dropped into a crouch, and sprang forward, aiming for Bull’s stomach. He got there, but Bull saw him coming and nimbly hopped back, diminishing the impact of Dorian’s shoulder so that the wind wasn’t knocked out of him, unfortunately. That left Bull able to react, and Dorian felt thick arms wrap around his whole upper body. Before they could lock together, pinning his arms, he shot a leg between Bull’s, hooked his knee, and pulled forward, taking one leg out from under him.

The grip around him only tightened as they both went down, but Bull landed on one knee—the good leg, of course. Dorian wasn’t ready to fight quite that dirty, yet. Instead, he let his own legs go limp and dropped his full weight onto Bull just when their balance was most precarious. Even a strong man would have hit the floor. Bull wobbled, then righted them. Dorian’s skin prickled.
Refusing the temptation to let that thought distract him, Dorian kept moving. Bull was still trying to get a good grip on him, but without the ability to close his hands and grab, he had to rely on his arms. Struggling, Dorian was able to get one arm free even as his feet found the floor and he braced himself. He pushed, straightening his legs and partially standing as Bull’s arms dragged him down, but at the same time he twisted back and smashed his free elbow into the side of Bull’s face. Bull’s head snapped sideways, putting the broad side of one horn uncomfortably close to Dorian’s face as he brought his knee to Bull’s chest in a kick that lacked the power of a good wind-up, but still managed to free him. He jumped back, ready.

Bull turned to eye him as he stood, rubbing his jaw. “Nice.”

“For the record,” Dorian panted slightly, “if you do any damage to my face I will break your dick.”

A deep chuckle. “You are the one who just tried to break my jaw.”

Dorian did not roll his eyes, but his blandly exasperated tone conveyed the same dismissal. “Stop exaggerating.”

It was a good thing, actually, that he didn’t shift his gaze from Bull, because the giant lunged in that very moment, and if Dorian hadn’t been watching, he might have lost then and there. As it was, he saw the grab coming and threw his whole body into a block, forearms connecting as he threw Bull’s arm to the side and promptly followed with a reflex-quick punch to the stomach. Or it almost hit the stomach—Bull’s other hand blocked and caught his fist. If he’d been able to close that hand, he’d have controlled Dorian’s left arm and probably twisted and pinned it before Dorian could so much as blink. Instead, Dorian had time to pull his hand back—just.

Bull was swinging at him now, and Dorian’s full attention zeroed in on blocking and retaliating. He managed to keep Bull’s strikes from connecting—he had a little more time to track them, and Bull had slightly fewer options to attack with. He couldn’t very well punch forward when he couldn’t make a fist—that was a good way to risk breaking his fingers. So when he swung at Dorian, it was a hook, a sideways chop motion, or an elbow strike. Then, just when Dorian was getting tired and his footing was getting shaky from every impact—another attempted grab. Dorian twisted, half-caught, and stomped down on Bull’s bare foot. The hold loosened slightly, and he snapped an elbow back into Bull’s chest.

For a moment, he was free, and Dorian spun that around into an attack. Now Bull was blocking with his broad forearms, but he was still inching forward, making Dorian back up to maintain a safe distance. The realization flashed through Dorian as Bull threw off another attack—he was backing Dorian toward the bed.

Kaffas.

Snapping his leg up in front of him, Dorian kicked, and Bull, caught square in the chest, finally stumbled back again. However, he managed to get an arm under Dorian’s leg. He couldn’t grip it, which saved Dorian again, but he interfered long enough to ruin Dorian’s balance. Jerking away, Dorian stumbled against the table, catching himself.

Then Bull grabbed him.

Arms around him from behind, heat everywhere—Dorian head-butted backward and struck Bull’s chin with a crack that hurt his head and drew a tight grunt from Bull. No stopping, though—he only had seconds to keep his arms from getting hopelessly pinned, and Dorian was already twisting
and clawing to get free.

He felt Bull’s growl as much as he heard it. Bull was struggling just as much as he was, trying to get him pinned with only his arms and body. Dorian tried another foot stomp and missed—Bull dodged. Then he tried to kick, but he was stuck at a bad angle and could only hit Bull’s shins. Pained grunts told him the hits registered, but not enough for Bull to loosen his grasp. And he was trying to wrangle them both toward the bed again.

Thrashing, Dorian managed to get half-free—how, he wasn’t even sure. Perhaps sweaty, slippery skin aided him. He twisted partway around and grabbed the broad beam of one of Bull’s horns and dragged it forward and down, twisting Bull’s head and neck in the hopes that his grip would loosen. It really should have…but instead, after a moment suspended in time, Bull began to slowly straighten his neck back out. Dorian’s eyes widened and he threw his full weight into it, but Bull kept straightening his neck, almost lifting Dorian in the process.

Maker’s breath...so, so strong...

He knew already, of course, but it still never ceased to amaze Dorian.

Then it was both of them struggling, fighting, grappling with very little form until Dorian thought, for one elated moment, that he was breaking free. He yanked and kicked and all but threw himself away from Bull’s bulk...and crashed into the edge of the bed and fell onto it.

Instantly, Bull was on top of him, arms pinning him down, taking advantage of having an immobile surface to help him pin Dorian. “Sneaky...bastard...” Dorian managed to grit out. The only advantage he had now was his ability to grab, and only one of his hands could get as high as Bull’s throat. Not surprisingly, he could only wrap his hand around the front—enough to restrict, but without better leverage, he couldn’t actually choke Bull. His other arm was pinned at his side.

Bull shifted up further, putting more weight on him, and Dorian twisted that pinned arm between them subtly, waiting for the opportunity. Bull was working on getting Dorian fully pinned with his arms and body, and he didn’t notice when he got a little too close... “Shit!”

Dorian had him by the balls...and, as much as that was a handful, he could get enough of a grip with just one hand to have an effect.

“Surprise,” he grunted, barely able to fill his lungs properly with so much weight on his chest.

“Nah,” Bull rumbled, but his voice was strained. “I’m more surprised it took you this long to go for my cock.”

“I’m a gentleman,” he gasped. “Had to...give you a fair chance.”

“Because I don’t stand a chance with you groping me?” Bull smirked and nipped at his lips. “I like the confidence, big guy.”

With his most winning smile, Dorian purred, “Of course you do,” as he explored the Bull’s swelling cock through his wretched pants. He could barely move with most of Bull’s weight on him like this, but Bull couldn’t do much either without giving him a window of opportunity. To tempt him into taking that risk, Dorian gave up his hold on Bull’s throat. Still stroking his rapidly filling cock, he slid his other hand over the side of Bull’s face, fingers lightly tracing up to the point of his ear as Dorian reached forward as much as he could—which was just enough to let him brush his lips oh so lightly against Bull’s. The teasing hints of contact promised delightful, enticing kisses. When offered by a mouth as delectable as Dorian’s, they were very hard to resist.
Bull groaned and took the bait, kissing Dorian thoroughly, one of his bandaged hands clumsily dragging Dorian’s shirt loose from his trousers and sliding up under the fabric. Bull surely could not feel much through the wrapping, but he caressed Dorian’s stomach and then his chest as though savoring every inch of warm, smooth skin.

Kissing back hungrily, Dorian rubbed his hips up against Bull. Still eagerly caressing Bull’s cock, Dorian writhed, working his legs apart until they were spread, then wrapping them around Bull’s hips, which Bull allowed. Whether he was distracted or just approved of the direction things seemed to be going—it didn’t matter. The point was the result.

Dorian was losing his shirt, the buttons in danger of being popped in another minute, when he pulled back from the kiss, gasping for breath. The next moment, with quite a bit more energy than one might have guessed him capable of, Dorian stretched out a leg and snapped it back again, slamming his heel into Bull’s lower back, hopefully right into a kidney. The next moment, as Bull grunted and flinched, Dorian’s fingers teasing his ear suddenly closed into a fist, and he pulled Bull’s head hard to the side. The attack took him unprepared, and Dorian managed to shift Bull up and off him to one side just enough to make room—his other hand released Bull’s cock, pulled back in a fist, and punched hard straight into his stomach.

“Oof!”

Bull reached for him, trying not to lose his leverage, but Dorian was already thrashing, throwing his whole body against Bull’s in an attempt to get free. It very nearly worked—he got to the edge of the bed and his feet almost reached the floor before Bull got a massive arm hooked back around his middle. The next thing Dorian knew, he was practically flying backward. Bull flipped him in midair, and he hit the bed on his stomach. Instantly, he was pinned by a giant qunari body—legs on his legs, hands flat on his arms. Heat and pressure against his back as Bull threw himself on top of Dorian.

“Kaffas!”

“Nice try, Vint.” The tone was casual, but Dorian knew every nuance of effort and strain so well that he could easily detect it in Bull’s voice now.

“Are you implying I haven’t won?” Dorian scoffed as best he could while face down under a huge qunari, with his trousers being dragged inexorably down his hips. Their tightness and Bull’s bandages seemed to be impeding the process, but Bull was persistent, and Dorian’s ass was soon bare.

“You almost got away from me. That’s not the same thing as beating me into submission without using magic.” A thinly clothed but very erect cock slid into the crevice of Dorian’s ass and began to thrust slowly.

“I believe the original goal was simply to provide a more challenging contest.” Dorian couldn’t roll his hips even slightly, so he squeezed his arse around Bull’s shaft as best he could.

“Hmm-mmh, that’s true. I suppose it was a bit trickier to pin your shiny ass this time.” Bull shifted Dorian’s arms, working to keep him immobile while freeing one of his hands. For one brief moment, Dorian wasn’t quite as thoroughly contained, and he immediately started thrashing again. Bull moved quickly in response, and after a short scuffle, Dorian was pinned again. One of his arms had ended up squashed under his own chest, but Dorian couldn’t raise himself to free it because Bull had his other arm twisted against his back, a bandaged palm pressing him down into the bed with just enough pressure that Dorian couldn’t wriggle free without hurting himself. His legs were bent, Bull’s hard shins pressing down on the backs of his knees. Bull had managed to
free one hand, and he was palming Dorian’s ass, spreading him open.

“I was wondering how I was going to do this…but it looks like you took care of things already,” he observed, growling appreciation through an audible grin.

“Such arrogance,” Dorian haughtily replied into the sheets. “What makes you think I did anything for you? I might have just enjoyed myself with a well-endowed soldier earlier.”

He hadn’t, of course. He’d spent the last hour in his room fingering himself open and utilizing a few specially designed accessories to assist the process.

Bull bent down, and Dorian jerked and shuddered when all of a sudden there was a wet, hot tongue running over his rim, the tip just barely lapping inside. Then it seemed Bull was drawing in a deep breath. “Mmm, nope. No trace of anyone else.”

“Maybe I bathed. I know the concept is generally lost on you, but—”

“Yeah, you’re clean, but I’d still smell him on you if you fucked another guy. All I’m getting is that magic slick stuff. You recently been playing around down here with that stuff?” Another lick, long and slow, stealing Dorian’s breath and making his reply somewhat weak.

“Of course not.”

Teeth on the curve of his buttocks. “Aww, come on Dorian. I know you can lie better than that.” That tongue was back, pressing harder, probing inside, then leaving off just when Dorian was aching to feel it deeper. “I think…you took a nice, long bath…then you lay on that fancy little bed of yours and stuck your fingers in here and played with yourself. And I think you slowly, slowly stretched yourself as much as you could…while thinking about me, and how it could never be enough.” Bull straightened up. “Your sexy fingers just don’t compare to this.” With that, a hot, very hard, and very bare cock slid against his ass, nudging the rim of his hole.

Dorian’s deep breath shook as he trembled from head to toe. He swallowed. “And your dirty talk falls far short of reality, but I can be gracious and not make too much of a point of that. It is more expedient to simply show you, yes?”

Before Bull could wonder or ask or just tease more, Dorian gathered the spell in his mind. It was difficult to conjure where one could not see, but his senses of his own body helped. Bull, rocking slightly between his cheeks, suddenly paused. Things had become considerably slicker than a little spit had made them.

Dorian waited, listening as he felt Bull pull back a little and look down. Then, cool and aloof as a prince on his throne, he instructed, “Keep your bandages clean, if you please.”

“Yeah…” The tone was slightly awed, and then Bull’s cock was back, thrusting against him and getting liberally coated in the slick oozing out of Dorian’s stretched opening. “Damn…look at that. All soft and dripping for me. You sure know how to make a guy feel welcome.”

“Hospitality,” Dorian breathed, “is the mark of any civilized man.” He arched his back—as much as Bull’s controlling pressure let him—and rubbed himself against Bull in return. “The most gracious response at this time would be to fuck me.”

“Oh, but I’m a savage, remember?” Teasing notwithstanding, Bull’s cockhead nudged into the ring of Dorian’s opening.

“I’m…” His breath hitched, “certain you can manage enough civility…to shove that impractically
enormous cock inside me…fuck me wide open…and, eventually, soak me with your come.”

Bull’s answer was a long, deep groan as he obeyed, sliding his cock into Dorian with agonizing slowness and unrelenting pressure. Huge, hot, and spreading him just this side of too much. Dorian was shaking with it. Feeling Bull opening him with just his cock made Dorian weak with desire. When Bull was fully seated—Incredible—Dorian felt a rush of pure desire. He knew he was marvelous in bed, but Bull was just so large…and Dorian could still take him.

“So good,” he breathed. Then, in the pause—because of course Bull was still going to wait for him to adjust—he amended, “Arm…falling asleep.”

“Which one?”

“Oh.” Dorian twitched the shoulder of the arm pinned under him. “I meant this one, but both, actually.”

“You going to fight me if I let go to move you?”

Dorian snorted. “Yes. What did you expect?”

Bull laughed, and Maker, it had been so long. Something about Bull laughing when he was inside him always made Dorian feel breathlessly happy, a giddy sort of feeling like dizziness, wrapped in safety and peace.

Then Bull folded himself down over Dorian, and in one swift motion he released the arm he held behind Dorian’s back and wrapped that forearm around his throat instead, pulling up and back to cut off Dorian’s air.

If Bull was surprised by the shiver of need that ran through Dorian’s body or the fluttering tightness inside him as he clawed at Bull’s arm, he didn’t say anything. He also didn’t waste time, quickly shifting Dorian’s arms, one at a time, to his sides. Then, big hands wrapped over each arm, pinning it to Dorian’s ribs. Bull apparently could close his hands just enough for that much of a grasp. Dorian had no opportunity to use his arms, but as Bull was securing him he tried to buck his upper body off the bed, throwing his head back. His efforts didn’t seem to make any difference, and once Bull had him secured, he pressed Dorian back into the mattress, hard. All Dorian could do now was turn his head back and forth, and even that was difficult.

Casually, as though there had been no resistance at all, Bull asked, “Better?”

“Insufferable oaf,” Dorian grumbled into the sheets, trying not to grin.

“I don’t have a hand free to touch you, now, so you’ll have to make do with my ‘impractically enormous cock.’ Think you can come without touching yourself?”

He snorted. “The question is not what I am capable of, Iron Bull. You should be wondering whether you can make me come on your cock.”

Again, Bull laughed. “Well, I’m pretty sure I can, but let’s find out.” With that, he began to gently rock in and out of Dorian, grinding in tight circles to make sure Dorian was loose enough. Dorian breathed deep—he was going to get pounded so hard.
And he did, and it was good—so good.

In spite of the promise to make him come without touching his cock, Bull didn’t abuse his prostate directly—not right away. Dorian could feel the pressure of every thrust glide across that spot, but Bull began with long, deep thrusts instead. Dorian’s balls and thighs were immediately soaked with his conjured slick—he couldn’t very well judge quantity when he conjured it like this, and when Bull’s cock hilted inside him, it forced extra fluid to spill out in embarrassing amounts…had Dorian been inclined toward self-consciousness at the moment. Instead, he only felt a swell of lust, eager for Bull to fuck him senseless.

Unsurprisingly, Bull had observations to make.

“Damn, you’re full of this stuff. Ungh, fuck, Dorian…never fucked a man who was so wet and tight at the same time.”

“You ought to have sampled what magic has to offer before this. It’s, ahh…quite stimulating, in the right hands.”

“Mmm,” Bull rumbled, pushing fully into Dorian and holding there a moment, circling his hips against Dorian’s ass, his huge, heavy balls warm and pressed to Dorian’s. “Didn’t know what I was missing, I guess.” The shifting of his cock inside him made Dorian shake, gasping. Bull still held him there, wide open on his dick, and the circling motion began to rub Dorian’s prostate.

“Oh fuck…fuck!”

“Yeah…” Bull growled, leaning down. “But you know, Dorian…I don’t regret missing out. I like you being the one to show me all this magical sex crap.”


He expected it, but Bull’s next thrust—a hard stroke right into his prostate—still made Dorian cry out, quite loud even with the blankets muffling him. Bull chuckled, and the shifting weight must have been him leaning down over Dorian, because he could feel hot breath on his sweat-damp back. “That’s it…scream for me, big guy. Tell me what you want.”

Dorian grit his teeth and picked his head up. Taking a deep breath, he gave his most imperious and demanding answer. “I want your cock, you overgrown lout! Some time tonight, if you please.”

That got him a chuckle that was half a deep, gravelly growl, and a paradoxically sweet kiss to the back of his shoulder. “You got it.” With no more warning than that, Bull began to fuck him—fast, hard, and staggeringly deep. Their skin was slapping together, and if Bull hadn’t been holding him in place, he’d have been pushing Dorian up the bed. As it was, the ravaging thrusts were punishing both inside and out. Dorian had a vague thought that he’d have to do his research tomorrow lying in bed on his stomach—then that thought burst apart into white-hot bliss as Bull began to pound his most sensitive spot.

In very short order, Dorian was a quivering mess in Bull’s hands. The heat and pressure building in his cock were unbearable, but he bore it with desperate stubbornness. He couldn’t fight back anymore, but he could hold out to the very end and make Bull work for his every victory. The urge to come was building fast, and Dorian couldn’t fit two thoughts together. Still, he had a self-destructive streak a mile wide, and he could always half-kill himself with orgasm denial just
because he felt like being stubborn.

“Pretty mage…” The words were soft, almost whispered against the nape of his neck. “Pretty, pretty mmmmage.”

“Bull…” Dorian gasped, trembling in his giant hands as the sounds of wild fucking filled the room. “Bull!”

And it wasn’t begging, it wasn’t, but Bull’s cock was so hot inside him, and Dorian was so full and every thrust made him want to cry with pleasure, and it had always been like this and he loved…

“You’re so good, Dorian. The best, most beautiful man, you take me so well…you deserve to come, don’t you?” Bull murmured in a gentle, soothing voice even as his hips kept snapping forward at a furious pace, fucking and fucking and…

“Ahhhh-ah! Yes, fuck, oh! Bull!” Maybe it was begging. He’d always begged and it was fine because he loved…

A deep, long groan. “Yeah…I’m going to…to let you come, Dorian. You ready? You will come when I tell you to come, beautiful, because you’re good, so good…the best.”

Bull’s voice was all around him, inside him—everything. All he could feel was that voice, those hands, that cock spearing him over and over…Bull. I love…

“Please, Bull!”

The answer was a growl or a moan or some of both, and then Bull’s lips were pressed to the shell of his ear. “Yes, Dorian. Come. Come for me, Dorian, come now.”

“Oh! Bull, oh! Ahhhhhh!”

It was easy—just an inferno of pleasure spilling through him, and all he had to do was let it. Spasming in Bull’s hands, Dorian threw his head back, screaming as his cock spurted rapid shots of come all over the bed beneath him.

Incredibly, before he’d even finished he felt teeth in his shoulder, a deep growl, and then Bull slammed in all the way and Dorian felt every heavy throb and accompanying shot of seed as Bull came deep inside him, flooding him with his copious spend.

“Yes, fuck yes, Bull…” He was mumbling, not even really sure what he was saying as his orgasm faded, cock still dribbling onto the bed. “Oh, Maker, so much…filled with your come…so full…all for you, oh. Oh fuck. Amazing…mhh…Bull…”

Heavy breathing, panting…a slow slide as Bull pulled out, and Dorian whimpered, unhappily empty. He was laid down gently, then a quick ripping sound came from behind him…then Dorian cried out softly, ending in a moan as two dry fingers slipped into his soaked hole. It wasn’t even a stretch at all, now, and Dorian was so wet, semen spilling out of him around the fingers and running down between his legs…

“Your…hands…” he protested weakly.

Bull stretched out beside him, warm and close. He didn’t move his hand or do anything with his fingers—just left them where they were inside Dorian. It felt like an anchor—something physical grounding him in his fucked-out body.
“They’re fine. Got the bandages off.”

“But the…new skin.” He couldn’t think to express it any better than that.

“It stings a bit. It’s fine. Just breathe for me, Dorian.”

He obeyed without a thought, drinking in the scent of Bull and sex in a blissful daze. After several minutes—probably, he wasn’t tracking time very well just yet—Bull’s other hand began petting his hair. *Pity it’s wrapped,* Dorian thought, missing the feeling of claw-tipped fingers gently scratching his scalp. He sighed. The fingers inside him moved a little, shifting and stroking, and Dorian groaned. Bull wasn’t touching his prostate; he was almost certainly feeling to make sure Dorian was all right. Still, it was almost too much…and he loved it.

He didn’t bother restraining his whimper when Bull slowly pulled his fingers out, and in answer Dorian got a soft kiss on his temple. “Got to clean us up, big guy.”

“Mmh.”

When Bull returned, it was with a cloth and water basin, and Dorian let himself be manipulated freely as Bull wiped him down. Vaguely, he had the thought that he should probably insist on doing it himself—this was, once again, early for them, and Dorian had not begun to let Bull take care of him this soon last time—but by the time he’d gotten around to actually deciding whether or not he should say something, Bull was already half done. There seemed little point to making a fuss now.

Massive arms wrapped him up, under his legs and upper back, and before Dorian knew it, he was lifted bodily and hugged to Bull’s broad chest while soiled blankets were tossed aside and cleaner ones pulled over the bed. As Bull set him back down, Dorian sniffed. “That was a thoroughly unnecessary display. I *can* simply get up. You are aware of that, yes?”

“Sure, but this way I got to hug you,” Bull grinned at him, winked, and took the basin away. Frowning peevishly, Dorian still asked, “How is your hand?”

“Eh, it’ll be fine.”

“Show me.” The haughty command brooked no denial or delay, and Bull apparently recognized that, because he came back and held out his hand. Dorian examined the palm, barely brushing it with his fingertips. The skin was pale, almost white-gray, and ridiculously soft in a way Bull’s hands had *never* been. The creases were looking a bit purple with irritation, as were the fingers that had gotten messy. “This should still be wrapped. You shouldn’t have removed the bandages, Bull.”

“I’ve got some more, here…” He went to his trunk and produced a roll. “I’ll wrap it back up, and next time I’ll just stay inside you for a while, hmm?”

With a sniff, Dorian ignored the latter. The fact that he even *wanted* Bull to linger was an impulse he’d meant to fight off—he should be happy to separate once things finished. But after a time, he’d begun to enjoy lingering together in the aftermath, and it was difficult to remember not to expect that when he was incoherent from sex. “Let me,” he said instead, holding out a hand for the bandages. Bull shrugged and relinquished them, and Dorian pointedly ignored those shoulders. He was absolutely not going to ogle Bull right now; they’d only go again if he did, and he couldn’t have Bull thinking he was so irresistible that once wasn’t enough.

So Dorian sat up—gingerly—and neatly rewrapped Bull’s hand. Then he insisted on doing the other, because the bandages were looking a little tattered and damp with sweat. “There,” he
declared. “That will suffice.”

“Thanks, Dorian,” Bull smiled at him, putting what was left of the bandages away.

“Think nothing of it.” Dorian began to dress himself. He remained seated for most of the process and moved slowly, but he affected an air of general laziness about the task so it wouldn’t be so obvious that he could barely move. “Well, out with it—was that any sort of a physical challenge? Be honest.”

Bull grinned. “In a sense.” Dorian gave him an arch look that demanded explanation without a word needed. Bull chuckled and fetched Dorian’s boots so he wouldn’t have to cross the room to put them on. “It was a challenge to overpower you without crushing you. Hands usually help with that.”

His impulse was to huff at that, but Dorian reined his response in to a cool, aloof shrug. “I suppose I could say something similar of magic, though I wouldn’t call it a challenge. It does take a measure of control, however, to render you helpless without hurting you. Fortunately, I’m quite familiar with such control.” He straightened from putting on his boots and ran his hands through his hair, frowning. “I don’t suppose you have anything so refined as a mirror?”

“Sorry. I had a small one, but it broke. I just borrow from Stitches if I need a shave.”

With a put-upon sigh, Dorian slowly rose and took very careful steps—that hopefully looked casual and unhurried—toward the door. “Well. It is quite dark. Hopefully I can reach my room before anyone sees this utter mess.” He unlocked the door. “Oh…and congratulations on your success tonight.”

A smile. “Thanks.”

“You should expect to be thoroughly beaten the next time we spar, however.”


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He expected Cole to pop in during his bath again. Dorian’s emotional restraint had barely survived until he reached the privacy of his room. However, the spirit never appeared. Dorian was glad of it, in a way, and decided that some strong wards were called for, tonight. If he was less rested tomorrow, so be it; it was better not to risk dreaming right now. Demons, after all.
Chapter 19

Lavellan was gone the next day; she, Solas, Varric, and Cole left before dawn. Dorian woke a little later and heard about the sudden mission while he was gathering his materials in the library to take back to his room. Walking was...a challenge, but he'd had years to learn to conceal this sort of limp.

Dorian passed the morning on his stomach, reading, with a poultice on his arse. He spent some time searching through his qunari texts looking for the word *katoh*, but didn't find it. By afternoon, he was ready to make an appearance for food. There were a few muttered comments about “the prince” finally waking—no one had seen him earlier in the library—but Dorian ignored them, as usual. After all, he supposed he’d slept late often enough in his life to earn some criticism, even if it was misplaced today. Nobles didn’t rise early; they stayed up late at miserable society affairs. It had been quite an adjustment, the first time, for Dorian to learn to rise with the dawn. Now, it was a habit, but one he should probably not broadcast. Most of these commoners wouldn’t know to wonder, but the Bull might, and if Dorian’s personal habits were other than an altus’ should be, he could well end up in a note to Par Vollen.

In the afternoon, there was a letter for him brought by courier. Dorian blinked stupidly at the flamboyant handwriting before he remembered. *My amulet.* He set the letter aside. He’d have to write, again, to this self-important little influence-mongerer, and again be denied all attempts at bargaining. It suddenly occurred to him that he wasn’t sure what would happen, this time. Last time, the Bull had eventually learned of his efforts to get his amulet back. He’d gotten it, somehow, and made a gift of it. Dorian never asked how, but it was clear that some Ben-Hassrath contacts had been involved. *What if he no longer has those?*

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do. Unless he went to Bull about it now and asked for help, there wasn’t enough time. It was a little upsetting, perhaps...yet if he succeeded in getting the Bull away from the Qun and averting that betrayal, an amulet was a paltry price in comparison.

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The Inquisitor returned. Dorian found out because Cole appeared, well before the party reached the castle gates. “He’s thinking about you too, Dorian. Wondering, wanting, wavering, waiting. Why does it hurt to be together and apart?”

Dorian sighed and set down his book. “I suppose they are two different sorts of pain, Cole, each with their own reason.”

“But they both look like loneliness to me...and the loneliness together is worse than the loneliness apart.”

He paused. “Very well. You have a point.” Then Dorian frowned, studying the shabby spirit boy. “Interesting amulet, Cole. What’s it for?”

“It protects me,” Cole answered, earnest, touching the thing on his chest. “I cannot be bound.”

“Oh,” Dorian peered closer, “is it Rivaini? I’ve read of something like that. But why do you need it?”

“No one will make me a monster.”

That, apparently, was the full explanation, because Cole vanished after that. *This is...different.*
Dorian didn’t remember anything about Cole wearing a Rivaini amulet. Then again, he’d said something about not being bound, and Dorian didn’t remember that being a concern, before. Though there may have been a short mission…he thought he remembered the Inquisitor leaving for a little while, with the same people. He remembered thinking it odd, an unbalanced sort of party, and she hadn’t been that close to Solas yet. Varric and Cole she’d liked very much, but if Dorian remembered, things with Solas had just been starting at this point, and the attraction was rather awkward and shyly sidestepped for a while in the aftermath of her fallout with Sera.

Eventually, he got the full story. It wasn’t really “tavern tale” material, but after Wicked Grace one night, everyone was wondering why Cole was back to acting a little stranger than usual. Lavellan explained, and while Dorian found the whole thing fascinating, he couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for Cole. The spirit-boy he knew had been…very nearly human, when he left. This boy—had he already lost that chance?

Then again…

*She listened to Solas.*

He should probably be ashamed that he cared more about that tiny little fact than the fate of a person who never treated him with anything but the best intentions, but hope was stronger than shame at the moment—and Dorian already knew he was not a good man. Cole seemed content enough with his situation—who was he to say what was better or worse for him?

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The days in the library continued as before, but Dorian’s nights were no longer so solitary. He began to stop by the Bull’s room under cover of darkness more often than not, and the Bull, obligingly, was always alone. He never remained after they were done, no matter how he longed to. Whether the Bull would have been fine with it or not, Dorian needed the space, afterward, to deal with his emotions. Sometimes he drank and yearned for the past; sometimes he incinerated things as violently as he dared within his own room. At all times, he reminded himself that his enemy was the Qun, not Bull. Hate one and love the other, and believe that this time, things would be different.

Dorian’s routine was somewhat interrupted by a mission to kill some people and run errands for quite a few others in the Exalted Plains. He was quite surprised, at first, because Lavellan had been reluctant to part from Solas for most missions, lately, and Dorian had been on the road less frequently as a result. This time, however, she chose him instead—and Sera and the Bull, now that his hands were better—and only explained it when Dorian remarked that he hoped she and Solas hadn’t had a falling out.

“Oh no,” she smiled happily. “I just…” The Inquisitor’s ear tips pinked and she lowered her voice. “Do you think it’s a little much? I mean lately…I know people will talk anyway, but I didn’t want it to seem like we were…how do shems put it? ‘Joined at the hip’?”

“Hm. Must be a Southern expression.” Then Dorian smiled at her fondly. “You’ve grown quite close to him though, haven’t you?”

The blush spread down her ears to her cheeks, making her vallaslin stand out. “It feels so silly to talk about this. We have much greater concerns, after all.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but after all, we are proceeding on the assumption that we will win. Should we simply stop living until then? I rather doubt that’s even possible.” He gave Lavellan’s shoulder an affectionate nudge with his elbow. “The end of the world can bring people together, yes? So let it,
and enjoy what good you can.”

_You might even convince him to stay, this time._

She grinned. “Well, I haven’t exactly been denying myself.” Then, after moment of thought, “He has, I think…or it seems like he’s trying to. Or perhaps he isn’t as interested as I’d hoped. I…I don’t know. Do you think I’m being too forward?”

With exaggerated seriousness, Dorian considered. “Hmm. Well…I know men fairly well, as a general rule…” A dramatic pause, before his frown melted with a teasing wink. “And no. From what I’ve seen, your interest seems quite welcome. Solas simply…doesn’t impose himself on others, I think. At least, I’ve never seen him seek anyone out or ask things of others or do anything more than ask questions, really. But he seems happy with your regard, to me. Perhaps he simply needs some time before he will begin to make advances of his own.” Without being crass, Dorian managed to add a hint of salaciousness to the last part—an altus’ skill in subtlety, after all. Lavellan, to her credit, was not so dulled by her common upbringing that she missed the hint. Rather than blush again, however, she laughed and waggled her eyebrows—a considerably less subtle answer.

“I’d say I can’t wait, but I suppose I’ll have to. Don’t want to startle the halla.”

“How quaint. A Dalish expression, I assume?”

“Oh! Yes, with many applications. But this use may be the most common. Or perhaps my clan simply gossiped about romance more than all the other Dalish clans combined—it certainly always seemed that way.”

This led to a few stories about Dalish life, which Sera eventually expressed her boredom with. The Inquisitor, however, didn’t seem much bothered and simply dropped the subject to chatter with Sera about mischief and other topics. It seemed that, as friends, they found it much easier to take their disagreements less personally.

The chatter continued until the party reached a rocky barrier, beyond which lay their goal, apparently. The first step was the hardest—a nine-foot rock face. The Bull tossed his enormous axe up, then tossed Sera and Lavellan with equal ease. Dorian eyed this process without concealing his distaste.

He was about to state his feelings on the matter when the Bull laughed at him—clearly not needing things spelled out. “Hold on, Dorian. We’ll do it this way.” Then he grabbed the top of the rock and pulled himself up. Dorian was certain his face remained quite neutral, even if his pulse jumped up a few notches watching the muscles of Bull’s endlessly large back flex and strain with the effort. A flash of memory hit him—running his hands over those muscles, tracing the scars of Bull’s back as Dorian thrust into him…

“Come on, big guy.” The Bull was standing atop the rock now, moving to kneel.

“Wait!” Dorian probably should have complained about all this, but he didn’t want the Bull to hurt himself. “Here,” he reached up with his staff, wrapping hands tightly around the bottom while putting the top within the Bull’s reach.

“You telling me to grab your staff, Dorian?” The Bull looked entirely too delighted with this.

He sighed. “Just lift me up without tearing my clothing on the rock, you filthy brute.”

Laughing, the Bull wrapped both hands around the staff, just under the crystal at the top, and
Dorian hung on tight as he was lifted into the air. The Bull pulled him up, hand over hand, until Dorian could get his feet on the ground and stand on his own. At that, the Bull let out a loud *whoosh* of breath. “Damn,” he huffed, “you’re a lot heavier with your clothes on.”

There was a beat of silence in which Dorian gave Bull a Look—then two elven girls turned, wide-eyed, one beaming and one slightly open-mouthed, and Bull winced. “Oh. Oops.”

“Oops?” Dorian hissed. *Kaffas*—*what if it’s still too soon?*

“Sorry, Dorian.”

Sera burst into raucous laughter. Lavellan’s ears were completely red. “So…um, I’m trying to imagine some other reason one might pick someone up, ah, without their clothing…some sort of perfectly reasonable explanation…”

“Yeah, like jousting! Naked! A little *wham, wham, splat!* Popping corks together, that’s what!”

“I mean, I’m sure there could be another reason…”

“Could be, boss, but there isn’t.”

All eyes on him. Dorian spared the Bull his iciest glare, but he wouldn’t lie. No one who lied to Lavellan was kept around long. “In this particular instance…no, there isn’t. Now that we’re all agreed, onward and upward, yes?”

As no one else seemed prepared to move, Dorian started forward. Sera’s laughter continued, but the others followed.

“So…about ‘enjoying what good you can’…”

Dorian made a rather pointed inspection of his fingernails rather than roll his eyes or groan. More calmly than he felt, he answered, “If you wish to congratulate me on my ability to follow my own excellent advice, I must warn you that such accolades are slightly misplaced, Inquisitor. There is nothing *good* about a heretical spy-cum-mercenary captain as an intimate liaison. However, here in the South, one must often learn to enjoy what *bad* one can, and on that point you find me guilty as charged.”

From behind them came a loud snort. “Blah, blah, blah, oooh, I’m riding the Bull and gunna act all snooty about it so no one knows he makes my bits all quivery!”

“My voice is *deeper* than yours, Sera!” Dorian barely resisted the urge to turn and glare. “A falsetto is entirely misplaced here!”

The Bull chimed in—because of course he did—“Hey, who’s ‘bad’? That’s not what you called me when we were—”

“*Remember* how I specifically asked you not to talk about this? That still stands,” Dorian still refused to look back.

“But you said there was nothing ‘good’ about me. I’m being slandered here!”

Utterly put-upon, Dorian finally stopped, turned around, and with regal poise declared, “Fine.” He nodded coolly to each member of the group. “Sera, Inquisitor—the Iron Bull is, in fact, quite proficient in bed…despite being the most uncouth, unwashed man in Skyhold. Now, might we drop this subject and proceed with whatever vital task we are engaged upon?”
The Bull grinned at him—a salacious thing that was somehow a little soft and fond around the edges. Dorian turned away and continued walking to avoid looking long at that expression. Sera’s laughter followed, and Lavellan fell in step beside him.

After walking a little while, once Sera and the Bull had started talking of something else, Dorian felt a nudge against his arm. He looked down to see Lavellan smiling up at him. She winked, and very quietly said, “I’m glad.”

“Well.” Dorian smiled back and shrugged. He barely managed to keep himself from grinning like a fool—because it finally felt like their old friendship again, and he’d sometimes worried that he’d never get his dearest friend back, this time. And because, despite all his fears, she didn’t mind—even though it was sooner than before. “Thank you,” he added, and that was that—they continued on.

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They were not back in Skyhold a full two hours before Varric intercepted Dorian on his way to the Rest, freshly washed and groomed and ready for a hot meal that wasn’t trail stew.

“So, Sparkler, when can we expect the next sparring match between you and Tiny?”

“Goodness, Varric, give me a day or two to rest after two weeks of camping and fighting everything from madmen to irate wildlife.”

“Fair enough…if you plan to actually get that rest.”

“What else would I…” Dorian paused, altus senses tingling. He looked down, and sure enough, Varric was wearing the worst smirk Dorian had ever seen on him—since the first time he’d found out about him and the Bull. “Vishante kaffas,” he pronounced heavily.

“On the other hand,” Varric merrily continued, “if you and Tiny are going to be grunting and sweating together anyway, you might as well do it where we can all watch and bet on the outcome.”

“That is absolutely—”

“Hey, come on,” the voice from behind him—unmistakable, deep, and quite amused—made Dorian freeze, ramrod stiff. If he had been less practiced in these things, he’d have yelped and jumped out of his skin. “If people are interested, all they have to do is ask. We might be able to accommodate a small audience and a few wagers—”

“We will not accommodate an audience, fasta vass, don’t be disgusting!”

“Aww, you sure, Dorian? We could show all of Skyhold just how fucking gorgeous you are…”

Varric was grinning, obviously taking notes in his head. Dorian arched a fine eyebrow. “I’ll show all of Skyhold how ‘fucking gorgeous’ I am as I obliterate you in the training ring tomorrow. Thank you.”

He did not flounce away, but his poise was impeccable beyond the norm, which usually served well to remind the riffraff of their place.

Unfortunately, in this case it seemed to remind the Bull of an observation he shared with Varric in tones too low for Dorian to hear—resulting in laughter he very clearly did. It was crass and terrible of him and Dorian glowed inside. He’s bragging about me.
This hadn’t mattered to him last time. The Bull had teased and then gloated, and Dorian had been insulted but considered it his just deserts for sleeping with the qunari. Over time, he hadn’t felt as poorly about the whole situation, and he’d started to see the gloating for what it was—not driven by ego but by a desire to praise *him* to others.

Now, understanding that already, it was difficult to act affronted. Rather than try, Dorian took his regal leave.
They did indeed spar the very next day, and it seemed all of Skyhold turned out for the show. At once, Dorian realized that Bull wasn’t attacking him with any of his usual patterns—indeed, his aim didn’t seem to be threatening at all. He was trying to get close, however…

Oh. He wants to…

For a full ten seconds, Dorian toyed with the idea. Then he dropped his guard a little too long, let Bull get within reach, and found himself caught around the waist and dipped back, Bull’s other hand grabbing his staff arm and twisting it behind his back. For a frozen moment, Dorian was sure they looked almost exactly like a certain picture in a certain book he’d certainly kept well out of sight as a youth.

“Is this,” Dorian muttered through clenched teeth, “in any way connected to any kind of a wager… or are you just having fun?”

Bull grinned. “Can’t speak for everyone here…but no, no wagers I know of. And it would be fun, don’t you think…” He leaned close, hooked nose brushing along his sharp and beautiful jawline toward his ear to whisper, “Dorian?”

He probably should need more persuasion—or at least appear to. “Loosen your grip a little,” Dorian murmured instead, and when Bull immediately did, he threw the qunari off with a rather gentle mind blast, chased quickly by some showy bolts of lightning that seemed to just miss.

A moment later, Bull’s harness fell to the dirt, the straps severed by precisely aimed bolts. He aimed a broad grin at Dorian, eyebrows raised. “If you do anything to my clothing whatsoever, I will summarily obliterate you in the least arousing way possible,” Dorian announced, voice firm but too low to be heard by the crowd.

“Yeah, that’s it, big guy. Going to take my pants off next?”

Dorian twirled his staff, stance defensive. “Please, Iron Bull. Half the people here have already seen what you have under those hideous pants. We can dispense with the reminder.” Then Dorian spun sideways and threw fire. That should get Bull sweating heavily right away.

It did, but it didn’t keep Bull from lunging at him again, and Dorian had to time his dodges to create much narrower escapes than he otherwise would have. Every time it looked like Bull had a hand on him, he’d flicker away—clothing tugged a little looser each time, but not by Bull. Dorian used those moments to loosen his robes himself—just a little each time, so the onlookers would think it was Bull catching fabric and slowly messing him up, bit by bit.

Of course, Bull would have either ripped everything or somehow managed to get it all off at once with surprising delicacy, but Dorian was going for a rakishly half-dressed look, fabric thrown aside to offer just teasing glimpses of his smooth brown skin. Bull was the one barbarically half-nude. It was important for the titillation—don’t show everything right away, and all that.

Meanwhile, Bull was making each charge look terribly impressive—lots of grunting and a very great deal of flexing. Dorian was a little taken aback to discover that the ridiculous display was actually affecting him, as well. Not that he bought it for a moment, but…well, he couldn’t help finding Bull aesthetically pleasing, and in close quarters it was hard not to get distracted just looking.
Then Bull lunged for him again, and instead of jumping back, Dorian went up and slightly to the side. He caught Bull’s shoulder and spun himself up onto Bull’s back, wrapping his legs around his waist as he pulled his staff across the front of Bull’s neck and pulled up and back. Bull straightened; one hand flew to the staff as if to keep it from choking him, but he put very little effort into pulling it away.

There were hoots and whistles and calls of “ride that Bull!” from the crowd. Dorian ignored them, leaned forward, and took the tip of one pointed ear between his teeth. Bull growled loud enough for the sound to carry, and there was a deep, pleasured tone to the sound.

“Throw me forward over your head,” Dorian muttered around the shell of his ear. Bull grunted and obeyed, making the motion smooth. Dorian, ready for it, rolled forward so that he flipped and landed on his feet, and apparently he “snagged” his robes on Bull’s horn because they fell open to the waist when he stood straight again. The cheering jumped up a few notches. With a flashy pose, Dorian threw force magic toward Bull, aiming for his weapon. Bull obligingly let his grip loosen—Dorian had never been able to knock his hammer free before, and if he’d tried any harder, he could have dislocated Bull’s arm. This time, the weapon fell into the dust a little distance behind Bull, who made no effort to leap for it, instead choosing to dive at Dorian again. Feigning surprise, Dorian let himself be locked in those large, sweaty arms.

“Let’s get this out of the way too,” Bull murmured, then, leaning forward, he bit Dorian’s staff and yanked it out of his hands, throwing it away with a toss of his head.

“Perfect,” Dorian answered softly, biting back his smile. “Now—hold on to my robes.”

Bull’s grip shifted minutely—no one watching would see that his grasp was now on the clothing, not the body under it. Then, with an altogether unnecessary flash, Dorian dropped down and pulled free of his robes with the aid of magical slick suddenly covering his body, leaving Bull holding fabric—intact fabric—and also standing in a puddle of slippery stuff. Dorian kicked him squarely in the chest, and with no footing to speak of, Bull went down.

Now, in nothing but his tight, form-fitting breeches and boots, and with shining slick and sweat covering his nude upper body, Dorian tackled Bull, who let himself at least look momentarily pinned before he growled and rolled them over. They grappled with each other, Bull carefully not throwing his full weight onto Dorian—most probably because that would cover him too much and ruin the show.

Before Bull pinned his arms, Dorian managed to arch himself up toward the larger man, his back a beautiful bow, one leg teasing toward lifting and wrapping around the back of Bull’s thigh. Then his arms were immovable, stretched above him—his chest would look incredibly lickable right now—and Bull’s bared teeth were hovering over his throat. Ready to rip, to bite, or perhaps to lick and kiss and bite—whatever the onlookers cared to envision.

With all his altus’ skills, Dorian kept from grinning, but he had no doubt Bull could see the heat and excitement in his eyes. He twisted, making a show of trying to escape, and Bull gave a nice flex as he kept Dorian pinned. “Ahhh!” he cried out for all to hear, in his most alluring voice—the one he usually employed when saying things like “Harder!”

Alas, there was nothing decent left that they could really do from here, unless Bull very obviously released Dorian to continue the fight. Varric interrupted and proclaimed Bull the winner, and the crowd cheered louder than Dorian had yet heard as Bull got off him and helped him up. Dorian tried to feel some chagrin, now that the adrenaline was fading, over the fact that not only did all of Skyhold know they were having sex, but most of them now had a good visual reference for imagining it. Any regrets, however, were a bit distant for a number of reasons. It had been fun, he
looked delectable right now and more than a few in the audience were admiring—which was always a fine thing—but most of all, Bull was looking at him like he wanted to pick Dorian up and carry him off like they were in the very trashiest of smut novels.

The Dorian from the first time would have utterly rejected the very idea, with unfeigned horror, and any attempt to enact such a thing would have been swiftly stopped with violence.

Dorian as he was now understood, finally, that there really was nothing he needed to hide. And after all, the exit would be thematically appropriate for the fight…and everyone knew anyway…and people gave you less shit about things if you were appallingly brazen about them…and if he did allow it, he’d only be making it possible for Bull to be fucking him that much sooner…

Dorian strolled over to the Bull, still quite shirtless, and extended his hand, the picture of gracious defeat. “Finally triumphant, Iron Bull—I congratulate you.” Their hands clasped. Dorian smirked, meeting Bull’s heated gaze. “As the victor, I suppose you have the right to claim your prize…if you have one in mind.” Dorian let his eyes travel down Bull’s body and up again, warm with desire and promise.

The Iron Bull was a smart fellow, and he swooped in to pick Dorian up right on cue. Dorian bit back a grin, set dignity aside in favor of showmanship for a moment, and cried out as if startled, even as he wrapped one arm around Bull’s thick neck, anchoring himself firmly to his “captor.” Bull carried him from the field to whistles and catcalls, and Dorian fought down a blush as best he could and reminded himself that people would only bother him if he seemed embarrassed. They would very quickly learn not to mention the subject if he seemed inclined to flaunt things they didn’t really want to know.

Not that other people mattered at all when Bull kicked the door shut behind them and took advantage of their mutual shirtlessness to get them both naked in record time. Then Bull’s mouth was on Dorian’s neck, shoulders, chest, stomach, everywhere—biting and sucking marks all over his skin, making them dark, so they would show.

He didn’t really fight back this time, in spite of the lingering adrenaline from their little performance. The only aggression Dorian felt like showing this time was a rather eloquent shove that sent Bull onto his back on the bed, whereupon Dorian immediately climbed on top of him, straddling his hips and grinding cocks together as he leaned down to take Bull’s mouth in a hungry kiss. The kiss continued, Dorian rocking his hips and sliding their hands together, interlacing fingers that suddenly became slick, smearing magical lubrication between their palms.

They kissed much more, this time, for some reason. Bull’s fingers stroked inside him, twisting and teasing, and when he was stretched and relaxed enough, Bull sat up against the headboard so that he could keep Dorian close, keep kissing him as Dorian held Bull’s cock to his entrance and slid down, impaling himself, shaking and moaning into Bull’s mouth with the delightful stretch.

“So beautiful, Dorian. Love to watch you take all of me like that. Love to fill you up like this, the way you like it.” Dorian rolled his hips as he began to ride Bull. “That’s it…take it, take what you need, anything you need.”

Throat tight, Dorian arched his back and closed his eyes and began to ride Bull with a familiar rhythm—the angle and pace they had eventually discovered served them both very well when they wanted things to be irresistible, inexorable, each pushing the other higher, fast but not frantic. A long, hard fuck they were both in control of, neither of them helpless, but both overwhelmed by the end.

Was it strange? The Bull, this Iron Bull, had never done it this way with him before, but he picked
up on what he should do, for the most part. To put it one way, he didn’t know the steps, exactly, but he was still a good dancer. Was it strange, or was it exactly right? Was it the Iron Bull, caring more than Dorian had let himself believe for the longest time...or was it Hisrrad, watching and calculating more than Dorian had wanted to remember?

Dorian moaned as Bull kissed him again, and very firmly put it all out of his mind. Bull’s hands on his body, his taste, his cock filling Dorian so perfectly—it was enough. He would face the rest when the time came, not before.

For now, he rode Bull’s cock with daylight streaming in through the window and the hole in the roof, and he didn’t even try to keep quiet. They kissed and fucked, the pleasure building gradually, agonizingly, until it had swelled beyond either of their control and they came all over each other, a sticky mess Dorian summarily blamed on Bull and his qunari testicles as they were cleaning up. Then, with at least half the day left, they reappeared together for the midday meal.

Not, however, before Dorian sent Bull out with an aristocratic order to fetch his robes from the training area, Bull having been so “barbaric” as to leave them there in the first place. They were none the worse for the experience, however—apparently some kind soul had picked them up out of the dirt and hung them over a rock wall—“Oh? Not a training dummy the soldiers were hacking?”—and Bull had dusted them off fairly well on the way back. Dorian sniffed, inspecting himself. “Not ideal,” he pronounced, “yet considering the circumstances...better than expected.” He paused, blinking at Bull. “I’m rather at a loss—I have no complaints.”

The Bull laughed, loud and full. “Let’s go get something to eat, big guy. Then you can complain about the food and the ale and the tables and chairs and...”

“Yes, yes, all right, point taken. Come on.”

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Dorian spent the rest of the day in the library, translating a few Venatori documents first, then puzzling through his notes on the Qun. He managed sitting, for the most part—the discomfort was not so bad that he couldn’t choose dignity and appearances over soothing the ache. In fact, he rather enjoyed the ache. So much so that by evening, he was having trouble keeping his mind on the books instead of contemplating how desperate he would look if he went back to Bull tonight. How much shit he’d be given for that, weighed against the dull soreness that made him constantly imagine having Bull inside him again...and that weighed against the probable emotional damage of indulging in too much, too soon.

In the end, his cowardly heart sent him to bed alone, in his own chambers, not quite ready to throw himself into the sort of sex they’d have after fucking once and then cooling down for a while, apart. He remembered those days and nights from before, and he knew that the urgency would have been taken away by the first round. Same-day second rounds quickly became dangerously intimate—he had so many memories of luxuriating in Bull’s arms long into the night, both of them patient and indulgent after having taken the edge off earlier in the day.

He wasn’t ready for that. To resist it or to deal with it if Bull answered that kind of connection—this was hard enough as it was.

So Dorian went to bed, and there was a wooden duck there that made him sigh with nostalgia. He found a nice spot on a shelf for it and said a quiet thanks to Cole, who didn’t appear, but probably heard him anyway.

For the week following, they were both in Skyhold, and Dorian tried very hard not to show up at
Bull’s door every night. He managed to keep it to every other.

Then the Inquisitor came back from another short jaunt, and Dorian glanced down from the library one morning to see her chatting with the Bull by the training grounds. He thought nothing of it until later, when Bull mentioned that he’d be leaving with the Inquisitor at first light.

Their destination was the Storm Coast. The Chargers were packing their gear. The Qun had offered an alliance.
The Inquisitor was gone a fortnight. She took the Bull, naturally, as well as Sera and Solas. She asked Varric, but he said he’d had his fill of qunari in Kirkwall, and he’d stay behind, if it was all the same.

Dorian was uninvited so hard, Lavellan actually felt the need to stop by and apologize and explain, which she hadn’t bothered with last time. But this time, she wanted to make sure Dorian had come to the rather obvious conclusion, as she had, that a Tevinter mage was the last person they needed to bring to talk to the Qun.

He understood, of course—had understood the first time, too. The apology made it feel nicer. But knowing what was coming, fearing the results—that took all the niceness away and made everything so much worse.

Two weeks was a long time to live as a nervous wreck.

At first, he avoided the Herald’s Rest, knowing it would be too quiet without Bull and the Chargers, and it would only make his fears more pronounced. But after a few days, Dorian couldn’t handle it anymore. He found himself a corner and a dreadful Ferelden beer and just…pined.

The second night he did it, an elf wearing Circle robes came up to him. Dorian had no idea who he was. “Ser…or, um, Lord Pavus?” His voice was very deep, for an elf, and also very soft.

“Dorian, if you please.” He’d been saying it quite often, lately, trying to encourage people to stop fearing him. It was becoming a habitual response. Dorian sighed. “How can I be of service?”

The man blushed, smiling at some private joke. “Oh, service is not…that is. D-Dorian…my companions and I would be greatly honored if you would join us for a few drinks.” He gestured to a table with three other men—another Circle mage, and two laborers. Dorian thought one worked in the stables, and the other…possibly the kitchens?

Without betraying the slightest alarm, he shifted into readiness. Four—even with two of them mages—was no threat to him, really, but there could be others. An ambush. Send the harmless-looking ones to the front, have the soldiers waiting outside or nearby…

*Try to remember this isn’t Tevinter.*

It wasn’t, but there had, of course, been at least one ill-meant invitation, and Dorian was not keen to repeat that experience. Still, facing a possible attack with a charming smile was practically second nature. And after all, giving the appearance of trust was the best way to lure the enemy into making his move.

“I suppose a few new friends would not dim the evening, yes?” He smiled beautifully, rising to cross to the other table, following an elf who had gone incredibly red in the face.

The other three all stood, which made Dorian tense minutely at first, but as they mostly tripped over themselves to pull out a chair for him and offer him drinks, he shifted instead into a feeling of bemusement—still distrustful, but willing to wait and see what this game was.
“Lord Pavus!” They all greeted him, looking as though the Divine herself had approached their table.

“Really,” Dorian shook his head as he sat. “Dorian, please. And you are?” He turned to the man on his right, as the elf took a seat.

“Ivan, L—Dorian,” the man answered, smiling broadly. “I’m a baker.”

The elf spoke up, “Oh! Um, your pardon, I didn’t…um. I’m Niall. Circle, obviously, and this is my fellow apprentice Tomas.” A sandy-haired human nodded at him, also smiling.

The last man spoke up for himself. “Colin.” His smile was quite a bit more subdued, but still looked genuine. “Stable hand.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Dorian graciously nodded, not yet touching the ale they had given him. The baker was the one to answer.

“We’re honored to make your acquaintance, ah, Dorian. We’ve been watching your sparring matches for some time, all of us. You’re very good.”

“Wonderful,” the elf—Niall—gushed. “You’re an inspiration! Tomas and I have been training together, trying to duplicate what you do when you fight.” Tomas nodded.

“Truly? I’m flattered.”

“We all bet on you,” Ivan added, “every time. Never lost a copper until…last time.”

“Ah, my apologies. I hope you didn’t lose much…”

“Don’t apologize,” Colin cut in, but the words were not harsh, not with how his eyes were sparkling.

Niall nodded, Tomas turned red, and Ivan chuckled. “No indeed, Ser. We, ah…all of us, we enjoyed that particular match perhaps more than any other you have ever fought. We were quite…riveted.”

“Oh?” Dorian kept his expression open and friendly, but he was beginning to sense something here. Something was being conveyed with considerably less subterfuge than he was accustomed to—Fereldens—but he recognized it nonetheless. The question was only whether or not this negated the possibility of threat.

Ivan swallowed, licking his lips, and had just opened his mouth to continue when Niall spoke again. “Oh yes! We’ve been able to talk of nothing else since then! The sight of…” He broke off, flushing to match Tomas. “Um.”

Ivan, apparently a little more collected about the matter, continued. “I hope you will not think it too forward of us, but we were all quite…impressed. You have a beautiful fighting style, Dorian, but in that particular fight you were beyond beautiful. You were…”


Ivan cleared his throat. “Yes. And…to come to the point…we know, everyone knows, that you spend time with Iron Bull, usually. Normally, we would never intrude, but he’s absent at the moment and not able to, ah, entertain you. The four of us,” he nodded at the group, “wanted you to know that we are all great admirers of yours, and if you find yourself in want of any…”
companionship…while Iron Bull is away, we would be very, very honored.”

“What?” Dorian smiled. “All of you?” This was…new. Entirely. He wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“All of us…” Ivan began.

“Or any of us!” Niall cut in.

“Take your pick,” Colin murmured. Tomas just gazed at him longingly.

“That is to say,” Ivan added, “we’ve discussed our feelings of admiration for you, and we would all be delighted to please you in any fashion you like. If you prefer one of us, the others won’t complain, or if you wish for all of us, no one would dislike that. We only wish to serve your desires…if you would allow it.”

“If not,” Niall again burst out, “that is fine as well! We won’t be upset, we only wish to, um. Offer…um.”

“Our selves.” Colin, again softly.

“…For you,” Niall finished, still pink. Tomas leaned his cheek on his hand, gazing at Dorian with puppy eyes which Dorian, quite frankly, wasn’t sure how to handle. This all seemed so…honest and yet incredible. Where were these men last time? Dorian had never even met them; he barely recognized their faces.

Then again, last time he had really only trained alone, or with the Seeker.

Well, honesty for honesty, he thought. If he had any ability to read people, he was becoming quite certain that there was no ill will here. “Goodness, I really am very flattered. And grateful. I don’t think I’ve ever received such a generous offer. But…” Four pairs of eyes registered disappointment in varying levels, “I’m afraid I must decline.”

Tomas sighed as Ivan answered, “Well, we understand of course. Should you ever change your mind…”

“That is…unlikely. No offense intended.”

“Oh, we could never be offended with you!” Niall exclaimed.

“Never,” Colin added.

Tomas shook his head, while Ivan agreed. He also invited Dorian to remain and talk a while, if he wished, and Dorian, having no one else to pass the evening with, decided that would be fine.

Their offers were not repeated, but after several drinks, the subject of sex came up again—mainly due to Dorian’s curiosity over how well prepared they all were for what they had offered. As it turned out—more than amply.

Tomas still did not speak, but Niall was eloquent in describing his skill with his mouth, to which Colin agreed with a short affirmation. Then Ivan explained the significance of Colin’s approval—apparently his member was large enough to intimidate most. Dorian thought idly of the Bull’s cock and wondered how they compared. Probably the Bull would still win, he mused. Qunari, naturally. Then Niall began to talk of Ivan’s delightful talents in bed, which Ivan claimed were nothing to Niall’s. The two mages had recently—since their escape from the Circle and now safety in Skyhold
—begun to experiment with using their magic for pleasure, and on that topic Dorian had a fountain of advice. The mages listened with studious attention, and the non-mages listened with awe and obvious excitement. By the time the tipsy party broke up much later, Dorian suspected no one would be lonely or disappointed in bed tonight. They all seemed quite eager to comfort each other in Dorian’s absence.

Smiling, he rose and turned around to leave, and there was Varric, sitting with a drink and a pen and paper all spread out on his table, smiling up at Dorian with absolutely no shame.

Dorian closed his eyes. “Varric.”

“Evening, Sparkler.”

He opened them again. A glance showed…very few blank pages remained. “That’s a ridiculous collection of notes. What is a dwarf going to do with all that? It isn’t as if you can cast those spells.”

“Realism,” Varric shrugged, “and maybe some education for the readers. Just think, you could be the founder of the first school of sex magic in Southern Thedas!”

“Now how would I manage that,” Dorian asked in a silky voice, “when my name is entirely absent from your writings?”

Varric laughed. “Oh, have it your way, Sparkler. But I should warn you, the alluring mage from exotic, distant shores will probably have to end up giving his fan club some…personal instruction. It’s the only possible conclusion for the scene.”

“Clearly,” he gestured around him at the emptying tavern, “that is not the case. And—fan club?”

“Yes, your very own fan club, Sparkler. Congratulations, you’ve earned it.” He tapped his pen, frowning down at his notes. “Well…maybe the alluring, seductive mage could incite the orgy, but then turn to the massive, muscled arms of his strong, secret, forbidden lover…”

“Or,” Dorian stressed, “he could depart to his own bed, alone, resisting the sorest temptation of them all.” Varric hummed a question, grinning. “Killing the obnoxious dwarf, naturally.”

With that, Dorian left the Rest, Varric’s laughter following him.

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For the remainder of the Bull’s absence, Dorian was almost totally useless at research. He couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t relax—couldn’t sleep without a stiff drink to send him off. He played chess with Cullen and lost miserably every time, so much so that Cullen began to worry about him—once the game was over and his competitive side appeased. “Are you well? You seem out of spirits.”

Dorian could have lied as easily as told the truth or, for that matter, evaded the subject entirely. Instead, he smiled and fiddled with a pawn as he admitted, “I suppose I have been…distracted by a concern of a personal nature.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Cullen was so perfectly sincere. A younger Dorian would have been charmed, and a much younger Dorian still in Tevinter would have laughed at him. Now, Dorian simply felt honored to count such a man among his growing group of friends…again.

“No, Commander, I’m afraid not. If something comes to mind, however, I vow to avail myself of
your aid.”

Cullen nodded, accepting and understanding in a way that was utterly sweet. “We can play another game, if you wish to take your mind off of things.”

“I shall accept that, I think. Thank you.”

Cullen refrained from taking advantage of Dorian’s lapses in attention and strategy, this time; he still won, but not nearly as devastatingly as he could have.

_I am so very glad_, Dorian thought, _that she will have you by her side one day_. After all, no matter what happened with the Bull, Dorian would eventually return to Tevinter, and he took comfort in knowing Lavellan would be cared for by such a kind man. He hoped she would make him happy in return, and not vex him too much with her temper.

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Two weeks after her departure, the Inquisitor and her party returned.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if you were expecting the results of the Storm Coast! Does it really count as a cliffhanger, though? Update is the day after tomorrow. XD
Chapter 22

All of Skyhold was bustling with activity to prepare for the Inquisitor’s return. Dorian, for his part, was far away from all of it, holed up in the library, his stomach a block of ice. He was desperate to be down in the courtyard, waiting for their arrival, but more than that, he was terrified. All this time, all this risk—putting the whole world back in danger for one man—it could all be for naught, and he couldn’t bear the dread. If the Iron Bull was still bound to the Qun, Dorian had no idea what he could possibly do to sever that link. The Iron Bull he knew had not spoken much about it, but Dorian knew how deeply rooted his need for the Qun was. Dorian had come back and done this over because this was the only chance—unless the Qun itself cast him out, Hissrad would never leave it.

Now now, even if he’s still...you have so much time. Don’t dismiss the possibility. You’re a genius, Dorian Pavus, you can think of something.

And of course, there were whispers.

I could do it for you. I could make him...

“Don’t listen, Dorian!”

He didn’t jump, exactly, but he did drop the book he’d been pretending to read. “Yes, thank you, Cole. I’m quite aware, you have nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t worry. It’s you who worries the wounds and wonders—”

“No more, if you please,” Dorian cut him off. “I haven’t the fortitude for your riddles at the moment, I’m afraid. Stop by tomorrow, and you can alliterate to your heart’s content.”

“Krem is worried too.”

Dorian froze—heart stopped, breath stopped, everything stopped.

“Krem is...alive? And with them?”

“Yes... Chief’s laugh isn’t right, doesn’t hurt my ears like it’s supposed to. Least he fights all right, maybe a bit harder even. Got to get him a drink and a tumble, or maybe a dragon. Something’s wrong.”

Something wet splashed the dusty cover Dorian held, and he absently brushed droplets away from the leather before realizing where they came from. He lifted his hands to his own face and carefully wiped the tears from his cheeks, mindful of his kohl. “The Chargers are alive,” he whispered, voice almost too hoarse to say that much.

Silence. When he looked up, Cole was gone.

Maker’s breath...what now?

Lavellan kicked everything on the way to the stables. She kicked everything on the way to her chambers. Freshened up, she kicked everything on the way to the war room, and when she came out everything breakable had vanished from the grand hall, everything small had scuttled away,
and everyone with shins had moved as far out of range as possible. Face dark with the Vallaslin Buttocks of Wrath, she did not seem to notice, but proceeded outside again, where more of Skyhold bore the sting of the revered Inquisitor’s boot.

Dorian had worked up the courage to come down from the library and had immediately checked around to make sure all the Chargers were accounted for. Some of them greeted him, a little tired from the road—perhaps a little subdued in spirit, too, but then again there were no open casks nearby. He had just located the Bull and was trying to watch for a few moments to gauge his mood when Lavellan kicked her way up to him, and Gatt—the Qun’s Gatt—approached them.

Stomach once again ice for a brief moment, Dorian drifted closer, sick with dread. Gatt had appeared in Skyhold after the qunari alliance last time, and Dorian’s fears returned in a rush, seeing him again. However, in very short order he caught the words “no alliance between our peoples,” and Dorian’s legs went weak with relief.

The Bull’s face was expressionless. Lavellan had that hard look she got when facing something she absolutely did not want to accept. “How many people were on that dreadnought?”

Gatt shook his head. “You don’t want to know.” Then he was gone, and the Inquisitor turned to the Bull. She had to look far, far up to meet his eye.

“It was the right choice, Bull. I hate that we failed those people after promising to protect them, but…the Chargers are ours. We can’t abandon our own.”

“Yeah. Thanks, boss.”

She fidgeted a little. “I’m also…sorry. For what you lost.”

“Not your fault, boss.”

“Whether it is or isn’t.” She stopped there, hesitated, then reached out and grabbed his massive hand in both her tiny ones, slender fingers wrapping around his, thick and callused. “If I can help. Any way I can help. All right?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

She released his hand, and then the two of them turned as one to look at Dorian. He was, of course, by no means hiding, but he had thought himself unnoticeable, leaning against a stone wall, half hidden by ivy. He straightened in surprise at the sudden attention, and Lavellan shook her head, snickering. “Poor round-eared shems have the worst hearing, don’t they?”

The Bull just shrugged as the Inquisitor departed, patting Dorian’s arm as she passed him. Clearing his throat, Dorian stepped forward. “The Chargers are already making plans to begin draining whatever stock Cabot managed to acquire in your absence. Shall I see you in the tavern tonight, or after?”

There was something just barely hollow about the Bull’s smile. “Might be a little too drunk for much ‘after.’”

Dorian refrained from swallowing—Bull would notice. “Then I’ll see you at the Rest. Perhaps I’ll even be so kind as to buy you a drink to speed you on your way to intoxication.”

“That’s sweet of you.”

“Oh, think that if you like. I’m secretly devising an evil scheme with Sera to draw pornographic
images on your face once you’ve passed out.”

Rather than a loud, booming laugh, the Bull gave a low chuckle at that. Dorian expected another comeback—something that would find a way to pick up the hint of lewdness and turn it into a come-on, somehow—but the Bull just said, “Sounds good, big guy. See you later,” and left. His large, heavy hand waved once and did not clap Dorian on the shoulder.

Dorian stared at his retreating back. What was that?

When Bull had lost the Chargers, he’d suffered. He’d hidden it well from most—not perfectly, but well. Dorian had seen some of it and sensed that there was more, but he and Bull were only sleeping together at that point, and Dorian hadn’t known the Chargers personally at all. He’d felt a tug, urging him to offer what help he could, but that mostly amounted to sex and giving Bull his space to mourn in private. The empathy had been there, however, and it may even have been the beginning of Dorian feeling things he wasn’t prepared to admit.

It had never, ever been like this.

He’d expected this would not be easy, but he’d thought it wouldn’t be as bad as losing the Chargers. But this—Bull was barely even attempting his usual demeanor. As far as hiding his pain from others, Dorian was sure that even casual acquaintances would soon notice the difference. He had never seen Bull so…

Lifeless?

The voice that supplied the word wasn’t his own; it was grating and cruel. It even provided a vivid memory of Bull, dead, speared with ice—to give Dorian absolutely no credit. He would have gotten it without that, thank you very much, but despair demons were so single-minded. He blocked the voice out without bothering to answer. Despair never had anything clever to say.

It was the same that night, with the Herald’s Rest again crammed full of the Chargers and their captain. The Iron Bull was in his usual spot, surrounded by his usual “boys,” but it simply…wasn’t him. Dorian even bought him a drink, with a very put-upon air of a noble being entirely too generous to the common folk, but Bull only smiled at him, his lone eye empty of the spark of delight always present when Dorian got up on his “high horse,” providing the opportunity for Bull to tease him off it again.

Varric dragged him away for a while, and that somehow lead to Dorian being surrounded by his so-called “fan club.” In the midst of answering questions about how to better frame some of the spells he’d taught them, Dorian saw the Bull rise and quietly slip away—remarkable how a giant qunari could move so inconspicuously. Dorian saw him vanish up the stairs, and did his best at that point to finish the conversation and disentangle himself—politely—from the four other men.

As soon as he could, he left the tavern, resisting any other calls for him to join another conversation, card game, tall tale, or other revelry. The noise faded, and his quiet knock on the Bull’s door was hard to miss.

“Come in.” Dorian slipped inside. Bull was sitting on his bed, harness off, running a whetstone slowly across the edge of his axe, over and over. He didn’t look up. “Sorry, Dorian. I told you I probably wouldn’t be up for it tonight.”

He stayed by the door, leaned back against it. “You did mention you might be too drunk, but I’m quite certain you drank very little all evening.”
There was a pause, but the *shick* of metal on stone continued unbroken. “Good eye. Still…sorry. Maybe another night.”

“I didn’t come for sex, Iron Bull.”

Again, the response was slow. “All right.” There was no question that followed. Eventually—“Saw you with your fan club. They’re good guys.”

Dorian paused, wondering if the subtext to a statement like that was something the Bull was aware of. “…Yes,” he finally agreed, quietly. “They have a refreshing candor. And I can hardly fault them for their admiration of me.”

“Good for you, big guy.”

“Bull…I didn’t have sex with them, and I’m not going to.”

That didn’t elicit a response, apart from an eventual, “Oh. Too bad for them.”

Dorian desperately wanted to approach, to touch the Bull and find some way of comforting him, but he was in uncharted waters, now. Finally, he cautiously observed, “You are…not yourself tonight.”

For the first time, the smooth glide of the whetstone across the blade paused, and the Bull looked up at him, his expression frighteningly blank. “That’s right.”

“It’s because of what happened, yes? With the alliance?”

The Bull’s gaze slowly returned to the blade, but his hands didn’t resume their work. Dorian drew in a deep, careful breath. “I’ve researched what information there was to be found about the Qun, but I confess I don’t really understand what it all means. The…Tal-Vashoth, and why it’s so dreadful. Why they do what they do, why it seems they can’t control themselves without the Qun…”

“It’s more than that.”

There seemed to be nothing more forthcoming, so Dorian finally stepped further into the room, closer. “Tell me.” His voice was soft—perhaps *too* soft. “I’m very clever,” he added through a false smile. “I’m sure if you explain I’ll understand.”

The Bull gently set aside his weapon, then folded his hands. Dorian slipped closer and sank into a nearby chair, but the Bull’s eyes remained downcast. Dorian thought he would refuse, but just when he was about to ask again, the Bull sighed. “The Qun makes us who we are. Your role is your name, your name is your identity, and the Qun gives you that. It’s purpose; it’s everything. Without your role, you are nothing. That’s what it means to be Tal-Vashoth. I…don’t exist.”

Dorian drew breath to contradict that, but the Bull held up a hand, forestalling him. “Qunari are violent by nature. The Qun directs us, gives us our purpose. Without that, qunari lose themselves to their impulses. When we have no identity, no reason to live, we become consumed by our savage natures. That is what will happen, now. And I…I don’t want to hurt anyone.” Large hands twisted together. “So, Krem will take over the Chargers, and I’ll ask the boss where the most bad guys are right now, and I’ll go make the biggest dent in them I can—”

The Fade felt suddenly cold with the ice gathering around Dorian’s heart. “And, what? Die, just like that?” *This cannot be happening*. “Without even trying to live, you want to simply go and let some Venatori scum cut you down? Simply because you aren’t *Hissrad* anymore?”
Bull looked up at him, and his expression, thankfully, was no longer so horribly blank. It was... gentle. Sad. “I won’t hurt the people around me, Dorian. I won’t put them in danger.”

Stomach turning, Dorian fought to keep himself together in the face of rapidly rising panic. *I’ve gone back in time, I have put everyone in danger, just to save you... and you want to die anyway? Maker, is this some horrible joke?* “Bull.” Mind racing through what Bull had just said, Dorian desperately sought an answer. “You…you have a purpose, Bull. You have a name. You chose it for yourself. You’re The Iron Bull, captain of the Chargers. You…you fight for the Inquisition. We have to stop Corypheus. Isn’t that enough of a purpose? Saving the world?”

“I’m here because the Qun sent me, Dorian.”

“Yes, and now they’re gone, but you are still here. Does it really matter why, when we still need you? The Qun didn’t tell you what name to choose. They didn’t order you to form the Chargers or save Krem. You chose your own name. Your identity.” Dorian swallowed, desperately wanting to reach for Bull’s hand. “If you need a purpose, choose this one. The Inquisition.”

Bull slowly shook his head. “Choose.”

Dorian nodded. “A bigger choice this time, perhaps, but you have made others.” Then, an idea. “Think of it this way: you need a purpose, yes? To keep yourself sane? Very well—but do you really need someone else to give you that purpose, or do you only want someone to?” Bull’s eyes finally met his, and Dorian pressed, “When it comes to your sanity, does it really matter where the mission comes from, or does it matter only that you follow it?”

There was a long silence. Bull’s expression was troubled, and when he finally spoke it was to admit, “I...do not know,” in a tentative tone. “It’s sort of understood that the individual isn’t really capable of making good decisions that benefit everyone. They will always be swayed by their instincts. That is why we serve the Qun. The greater good cannot be corrupted by a momentary impulse.”

Now Dorian did reach forward, grasping Bull’s much larger hand. “Then let me give you a purpose for now, until you trust yourself to choose your own.”

Not sounding sure at all, Bull nevertheless said, “All right.”

“Good. The Iron Bull, you are to fight for the Inquisition with all the skills at your command, to protect others, to defeat Corypheus, and to save the world. That is the ‘greater good.’”

For a moment—nothing. Then, finally, a sigh. “I guess I’d better cancel that visit to the Venatori I was planning. That wouldn’t do the Inquisition much good.”

Dorian almost lunged forward to kiss him—he wanted to kiss him so badly. The relief was overwhelming. But Bull didn’t look happy; he looked resigned. So Dorian just squeezed his hand and let go, leaning back with a sigh.

But Bull still didn’t smile, and his eyes were back on the floor. “What is it?” Dorian asked.

A very slight, but massive, shrug. “I guess I’m still worried. We fight a lot of battles. What if I lose control? Even without a battle, I might start to slip into the madness of the Tal-Vashoth. I could hurt someone. Especially here in Skyhold—no one is on their guard against me here.”

*Ah.* This time, Dorian dared to rise and sit beside Bull on the bed. “If that’s your concern... I’ll watch you. I’ll keep an eye on you, and if you start to lose yourself... I’ll stop you.”
He got a rueful look for that. “No offense, Dorian, but I don’t know if you can.”

“I beg your pardon?” Dorian arched an eyebrow. “This from the man who has lost every fight against me…that was a serious fight rather than an erotic show.”

That got a small smile. “Yeah…but I’m pretty familiar with your spells. I’ve seen you do a lot of fighting, and I’m…I was Ben-Hassrath. I can get through most of your magic. And even if I couldn’t…” He sighed. “You’re powerful, Dorian, but I don’t know if you would actually do it. Even a moment of hesitation can be fatal at a time like that.”

He grew quiet. “You think I’d falter. That I wouldn’t strike down a friend.” Bull didn’t react to the term, even though neither of them had made any claim to that title yet. He simply looked at Dorian, who looked away, taking a deep breath. “As far as your familiarity with my spells goes, I can tell you that you have not seen my full arsenal, nor will you. I can keep a few spells to myself if you are worried you’ll find a defense for them—although I can also promise you that I have spells for which you have no defense.” He was trying not to see that giant spike of ice in his mind. “As far as the other point…” Dorian trailed off for a moment, choosing his words carefully. “I have done it before—killed someone I dearly loved…to protect someone else. And to protect myself, I suppose. I would prefer not to speak of it, but you can trust me when I say that I can kill you if you become a threat. And if you ask it of me, I will promise to do so.”

A long pause. Then Bull took his hand again. “I believe you.” Dorian looked up at him. “It would be…good to know.”

“Very well,” Dorian whispered. “You have my word.” What an odd world it was, he thought, to promise a man he would kill him when he had already killed him once.
Dorian was a bit hung over and had another delightful letter from the ever-sycophantic Ponchard waiting for him on his desk, refusing to return his stupid amulet, but it seemed that nothing could darken his day enough to dash the little ray of hope in his chest. He’d stayed with Bull through most of the night, drinking and talking about whatever they could think of. The Inquisition’s members, the invitation to the Winter Palace, Orlesians—anything. Almost.

They didn’t speak of home, or memories, or the past. Dorian hoped they would, in time; he had heard a few stories before, but not many. Before, they had had an unspoken agreement, it seemed, to leave their homelands out of their relationship as much as possible. Dorian never realized how much he’d missed learning about Bull until after he was gone. Now, with a second chance, perhaps he could know this man a little better.

Later. When the pain of loss was less severe.

An hour or so before dawn, Dorian bid Bull goodnight and headed directly for the library. Now he was drinking as much water as he could to ward off the slowly building headache as he pored through his research on the Qun one more time, comparing the vague descriptions of qunari roles with what Bull had just told him. He wasn’t comprehending the philosophy much better, but the concept of unquestioning obedience to one’s role was starting to fit. Dorian scraped a hand through his hair—he’d been up all night, it already looked dreadful anyway—and tried to assemble a plan of action. If this was the condition of Bull’s thinking and his upbringing, what could someone—a friend, say—do to gradually nudge him toward a measure of self-determination in his life?

As dawn began breaking, Dorian took his most pertinent research with him and headed back to his chambers. Halfway there, he happened upon Blackwall, who was creeping through the halls with what he probably imagined was a quiet tread. The moment Blackwall saw him, he made a hasty and utterly futile effort to hide a bouquet of flowers behind his back.

“Why, Blackwall,” Dorian greeted him genially, kindly keeping his voice relatively quiet in the early morning hush, “how surprisingly sweet of you. Though I must say, I prefer violets, but no matter this time.”

“What? You…” Blackwall’s brow furrowed and reddened. “Don’t talk such foolish drivel. I’d sooner let a demon take my head off than bring tokens to you.”

“Naturally,” Dorian smiled, completely undeterred. “But that does beg the question, doesn’t it?” At the blank look, Blackwall shifting his weight like he was thinking of just making a run for it, Dorian explained, “Who are those lovely lilies for?”

“None of your—”

“Business, yes. Rather predictable response, I’m afraid. Must I really point out that if you refuse to be forthcoming I have the power to spread endlessly embarrassing rumors throughout all of Skyhold?” Blackwall glowered. “Of course, if you told me in confidence, I’d be honor-bound to keep silent…”


“Ignoring that rather insulting doubt you cast upon my honor—I am so very gracious about these
the glowering and silence continued a full minute this time, but Dorian allowed about twice the usual length of a pause for his words to work their way through an exceptionally thick skull. At last, Blackwall huffed. “Fine. They’re for Lady Josephine, and there is nothing between us, so there’s nothing to tell. But I will break your arm if you mention this to anyone.”

“Well, if it’s only my arm and not my face…” Dorian laughed at Blackwall’s glare of fury. “Be easy, my good man, your secret is safe with me. Though I hope you’re quite mistaken about there being ‘nothing between you.’ Do let me know if I can help in any way. I certainly know quite a bit more than you do about secret affairs with unattainable nobles.”

Then he left Blackwall to ponder that idea, thankfully avoiding another pointless, blunt insult. I don’t remember him wooing the ambassador before. Then again, we never spoke, and before long he’ll be gone. Dorian considered that likely future, bearing in mind the holes they already had in their strength, though no one else knew it. I wonder if there could be some way to keep him from leaving. He is only one warrior, but who knows what allies he might eventually procure if he remains with the Inquisition long enough?

It occurred to Dorian to wonder if perhaps Vivienne might also be more helpful if she remained in Skyhold, but he was skeptical about that. Josephine had mentioned more than once that having her as a contact in Orlais was quite beneficial for their cause, and much less fraught than having her in Skyhold where she and Lavellan could mutually infuriate each other. In either case, it’s surely a moot point by now. Halamshiral was only a few weeks away, and Vivienne would not hear a word out of him unless it was an insult for which she had a witty rejoinder.

Dorian took his thoughts with him to his chambers and to his bath, although the relaxing soak after a night of no sleep was hardly helpful for an extensive round of thinking and planning. Soon he was drifting, barely awake, and the prospect of getting out of the tub and into bed seemed like more of a challenge than figuring out how to save the world—again.

As the most dashing and talented man in Skyhold, however, Dorian was bound to find a way. It may not have been his most graceful collapse into bed, but with no one watching, what did it matter?

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Lavellan was dragging him through the Western Approach again, and Dorian was trying to remember to be grateful that it wasn’t a bog or the wretched Emprise this time, but he was still uncomfortable enough to have a litany of complaints to voice, thanks to sand.

Then, there were Bull and Solas. Dorian had not had a chance to gauge Solas’ feelings on the failed alliance with the Qun and Bull’s choice, though he had reason to hope it would be relatively positive—certainly he could not be more critical than he was when the Chargers died and the alliance took place. But Dorian had never expected this…this concern. For that was what it was, he realized. The mental game of chess, the snide challenge of it all—it was a sort of kindness. He’d never seen anything like it from Solas last time.

Dorian had been watching Bull as discreetly as he could, trying to give him his space. Being declared Tal-Vashoth had affected him deeply, and Dorian was still unsure how to console him. Grief over comrades was comparatively easy; how would one grieve for one’s own self? He thought it would be best to give Bull some time—or he had thought that until Solas started prodding, and somehow it seemed to bring a little of the old Bull back to the surface as the game
went on. He got a little cocky, he taunted, he thought hard, and most of all Bull smiled. Even when he lost, he was smiling.

It gave Dorian much to think about.

Still, not much passed between them the first day. They camped that night in a cave, all gathered together at the back, with wards set at the entrance to fend off the nocturnal desert beasts. Then they met the draconologist the next day, and when Dorian saw the spark of excitement in Bull’s eye at the mention of dragons, he began to suspect that being given time and space for silent thought was perhaps the very last thing Bull needed. Maybe he needed, instead, to do something he loved—like kill a dragon.

Lavellan was marking up her map and talking to the professor while Bull leafed through some of his books, eyes wide as he murmured appreciation for the illustrations. He kept poking Frederic for details and stories about dragons, and Dorian eventually overheard a very quiet, mumbled question about the possibility of there being such a thing as a pink dragon. Dorian kept his smile from showing, but the fact that Bull was still thinking about that made him stupidly, stupidly happy.

Unfortunately for Bull, the closest they got to a dragon that day was a distant sighting as night was falling. Bull all but begged Lavellan to let them go after the creature, but it was in flight and rapidly vanishing, and they were all tired—except Bull, apparently. Instead, they made camp.

They would be sharing tents—there were no nearby caves this time, and Lavellan was grumbling about the stuffy heat in her tent the minute it was set up. But for Dorian, “too hot” was a very rare thing in the South. He thought the tents were a comfortable temperature, and with a huge, warm qunari sharing his, it would be just about perfect. And Bull was more like himself, since the dragon sighting—a little more cheerful, more talkative. Dorian almost regretted that they hadn’t chased the horrid beast down and nearly gotten themselves killed by it.

Then again, there were other things Bull enjoyed doing—if perhaps not quite as manically as he loved to fight dragons.

As Bull entered the tent after supper, Dorian was already bare to the waist, casually folding his robes. He had his back turned to Bull, and without looking back at him, Dorian remarked, “You know, I think this is the warmest place I have been to in the South, and it still doesn’t compare to Qarinus.”

Bull’s voice came from the entrance; Dorian didn’t hear him rustling through his pack—or moving at all. “Mm. Yeah. It’s too dry here. Not like…up North.” He cleared his throat. “I’m surprised you’re not having a fit about your skin.”

Dorian smirked, tossing his head as he glanced back over his shoulder. “Oh, Bull,” he hummed, “I’m clever enough to bring lots of extra oil to a desert, for that very purpose.” He held up a rather ostentatiously large bottle, then unstopped it and drizzled some of the contents into his hand. As he began to spread the oil up his arms, Dorian turned more fully toward Bull to better show off. As his hands began to smooth over his shoulders and glide down his chest and stomach, Bull’s eyes tracked the movement. “I’m happy to share, if you wish,” he murmured.

Moving slow, Bull unbuckled his harness. “This is new,” he remarked. Dorian hummed in question as Bull set the harness aside. “This seductive side of you. Usually you just tell me what to do. Or,” he added thoughtfully, “we beat the shit out of each other and end up fucking.”

“Yes, are you saying you don’t like me seducing you?” He let oiled fingers scratch through the line of dark hair below his navel, shifting where he sat on his bedroll and stretching his legs out in front of
For a long moment, Bull’s hands lingered on his belt, his eyes on Dorian. “No,” he finally answered. “I wouldn’t say that.” He flipped the buckle open.

Dorian smiled, deciding to play coy. “Iron Bull,” he began with mock innocence, “my hands are covered in oil, and I don’t want to stain my trousers. Could you help me take them off?”

Dropping his belt, Bull grinned and crossed the small, cramped space to kneel in front of Dorian, between his legs. “I can do that,” he answered, his voice dropping into the register that never failed to get Dorian hard. Then his giant hands were delicately unlacing the front of Dorian’s trousers, brushing “accidentally” over his clothed cock in the process.

Quite soon, Dorian’s trousers were unlaced and coming off, and he leaned back and pulled his legs free, slowly, one at a time.

His erection was outlined in his smalls, and Bull just stared. He didn’t move, and Dorian wondered if he was waiting for more instructions. Probably is. Rather than offer any, Dorian poured himself a little more oil and smeared it down his thighs, then lifted a leg to reach his shin and calf—in the process, revealing a teasing glimpse of his ass. By the time he’d finished with the second leg, Bull’s erection looked close to ripping a hole in his terrible pants. Dorian wondered if he’d slept with anyone else on the road to the Storm Coast. If not, his last time with Dorian was the most recent—which meant it had been weeks for both of them.

“How is your skin?” Dorian asked, eyebrows lifted in polite question. “Would you like to borrow some oil?”

Bull hesitated, studying his face, then nodded. He seemed to be paying more attention to nonverbal cues than usual. “Yeah, I’d like that.” Dorian gave his ugly pants a pointed look, and that seemed to be enough of a command. Bull dropped them and shuffled a bit to get them off entirely. With a smile, Dorian rose to his knees and took the bottle and drizzled oil directly onto Bull’s skin, across his shoulders and chest, enough to run in rivulets down his body. Then he set the bottle aside and moved close, hands coming up to gather the dripping oil and spread it over Bull’s skin with long, caressing strokes.

Dorian took his time and did a very thorough job. Bull was so very large, and rubbing oil all over him with human-sized hands took a while, particularly when one was careful to explore every scar, every crease, every hard muscle and soft swell. Eventually, Dorian moved even closer, his arms wrapping around Bull to smooth over the muscles of his back, mapping them by touch alone. This put their bodies very close, particularly when Dorian tried to reach between Bull’s shoulder blades. He let their bodies press together, oiled skin slipping in the heat of the tent. Bull’s cock pressed against his stomach, leaking onto his skin, and Dorian couldn’t help himself—he pressed his own erection against Bull’s broad, firm thigh.

The skin treatments mostly finished, Dorian simply started to rub his whole body against Bull, drawing low half-moans from that massive chest. Bull was breathing heavily into Dorian’s hair. “Tell me what to do,” he begged, panting. “Tell me what you need.”

The request was not lost on Dorian—Bull usually was very good at reading his desires. He always knew what Dorian needed; the only thing he asked for was consent, sometimes confirmation. Dorian didn’t like to think that Bull couldn’t even do this without the Qun’s orders…but perhaps he was just thrown off by the recent change in his life and trying to adjust to life without a role. Perhaps he needs some guidance, Dorian mused. “Why don’t you lie down?” he suggested with a teasing smile. “I’ve a mind to keep seducing you.”
With a rumble of agreement, Bull quickly lay back on the bedroll. Dorian crawled over him, eyes heavy-lidded as he examined Bull’s fully engorged cock. With a light touch, he lifted it to his lips and brushed an open-mouthed kiss over the crown, then licked down the shaft slowly. “Have I mentioned that yours is the largest cock I’ve ever taken?”

“Could have fooled me,” Bull answered, a groan in his voice as Dorian sucked each of his balls in turn. “You handle it like a pro.”

*After a few years of practice, I should.* “Natural talent,” he murmured against the head, then slipped Bull’s shaft into his mouth.

As much as Dorian loved to suck cock, Bull had always made it even better. There had never once been even the slightest hint that Bull was using him when he did this—not even on the occasions when Dorian begged, and Bull fucked his throat brutally. Even then, there was no sense that Dorian was inferior—no imbalance between them at all. He wondered, as he had lately been wondering, if perhaps some of that had been part of the illusion—part of Hissrad, just doing his job. This was their first time together outside of the Qun. He couldn’t help almost expecting it to be different, for some selfishness that had always been hidden to come to the fore.

When it didn’t happen, Dorian was both surprised and…not surprised at all.

Bull lay back and enjoyed his mouth with unconcealed pleasure, praising everything Dorian did in filthy detail. *Maker, how he used to make me blush,* Dorian recalled. Then he retracted part of that, realizing his ears were burning a little even now. But that was hardly surprising, after Bull gasped and said, “Fuck, your mouth. I can feel your tight throat around the head of my dick…feels so good, Dorian. So fucking tight, squeezing my dick like your sweet little hole does. Damn…I want to slide into you and watch my cock open you up all the way. You want that, big guy?”

Dorian could only whimper his agreement with his mouth stuffed with Bull’s cock, but he made it extra clear by shuffling around on his knees until his ass was within Bull’s reach. Then he closed his eyes, sucking on Bull’s thick shaft as he concentrated. He didn’t quite manage to conjure his magical slick inside himself this time, but it ran down the swell of his buttocks and trickled into the crack, and Bull saw and gathered it with his fingers and then one thick, rough digit was inside him, and that was all that mattered.

Bull was careful, taking his time before pushing the second finger in. Dorian didn’t need to tell him that it had been a few weeks; Bull just coaxed him open, and the lack of questions felt…like understanding. It wouldn’t have mattered either way—Dorian was sure at this point that Bull had no idea of even pretending to be monogamous with him or expecting that in return—but the feeling was more like *understanding* than disregard. Like Bull just *knew,* and the slow press and glide of his fingers in and out of Dorian was as soothing as it was arousing and unbearable.

For his part, Dorian luxuriated in the bliss of sucking Bull’s cock. He’d never been one to obsess over size or girth—in Tevinter, he took what he could get. Smaller men were easier to accommodate for a quick fuck in a hidden corner at a party, while larger men appealed to his daring side; Dorian always loved a challenge. But being spread unreasonably wide had never been a fantasy of his. Not with men he couldn’t trust, who might gleefully go too far and take pleasure in making Dorian bleed.

Falling into bed with Bull the first time had broadened his tastes somewhat, and as much as he’d denied any interest for weeks and eventually needed alcohol to smooth his own protests away, Dorian hadn’t slept with the qunari until he was ready for a qunari-sized experience. He had a spell ready at his fingertips the whole time, unbeknownst to Bull—prepared to zap him if the “brute” wasn’t careful enough for Dorian’s liking.
Of course he hadn’t used it. Not after Bull had proved himself the most patient, the most careful, and the most dedicated to Dorian’s pleasure of any man he’d known. He made it safe, and after his first experience, Dorian developed a rather unfortunate addiction to Bull’s size. He’d been very annoyed at himself at first. Then he’d fallen in love—Maker only knew when—and it was impossible to continue pretending he didn’t love the way Bull filled him. His mouth, his ass, his hands—he loved the way Bull’s cock was always just on the edge of too much.

And he loved the way Bull’s chest rumbled with pleasure when Dorian took him into his throat.

“I’m not going to last if you keep that up,” Bull groaned. Dorian’s thumb was rubbing circles into the base of his cock as his throat squeezed the head.

Dorian’s answer was to roll Bull’s balls in his free hand and moan. He forgot that Bull wasn’t aware of all the unspoken cues they’d once developed together—but it didn’t matter. Bull had always been a quick study, and he understood what Dorian wanted.

With a loud groan, Bull came in his mouth.

“If you were the sort of man to lose interest in me after one climax,” Dorian hummed, climbing up Bull’s body until they were face to face, “I’d never allow that so soon.”

Bull grinned, still panting. “Those guys don’t know what they’re missing. The second one is where it gets interesting.”

Humming, Dorian kissed him, slow and sensual, and then breathed against Bull’s mouth, “Bull…I’ve no interest in being empty right now,” in a chiding, teasing tone.

“Sorry big guy, I’ll take care of you,” Bull answered as his hand cupped Dorian’s ass a moment before thick fingers slipped back inside him. Dorian groaned and rolled his hips, fucking himself on those fingers as his cock slid against Bull’s stomach, leaving a damp smear. “Want me to eat you out?” Bull offered. Dorian managed to open his eyes a crack and study the man.

“If you wish to, you certainly may,” Dorian hummed, slowly grinning. “I would also be happy with your cock inside me, but whichever you prefer.”

Thankfully, Bull didn’t seem to be at a loss when given that choice. He grinned. “When it comes to fucking you, I usually prefer both, all of the above, and then some—not one or the other.”

“Likewise,” Dorian laughed, and he went with the movement as Bull shifted them, laying Dorian out on his stomach and then burying his mouth in Dorian’s ass. “Oh, kaffás, yes!”

This was another thing that had to be different the second time around, because there was simply no way Dorian could replicate his reaction the first time Bull had rimmed him. It was an application of oral sex that Dorian hadn’t, in fact, experienced before. He was aware of it. Men had wanted him to do it to them—rather undeserving, obnoxious men he had no special desire to please. He had thought about offering it to a few…but maybe just one, but had never quite dared. And there were whores, of course, who probably would have done it without a second thought, but Dorian hadn’t asked because they hadn’t offered.

Then Bull had simply done it to him early in their affair, and Dorian hadn’t known what to think. It was obvious, however, that Bull only did it because he loved the act and suspected Dorian would also enjoy it. He was right, and that was all there was to it in his mind—they both liked it, so they should do it. It hadn’t taken Dorian that long to get over his surprise, after all—not when Bull made it feel so good.
There was no way to fake that initial shock, so Dorian simply reacted with the ardent approval he’d learned to show. Keeping quiet was swiftly forgotten as Bull’s tongue teased his rim, then slid in deep, over and over, until Dorian was open and dripping and trembling with need. When Bull pulled back, his voice was an earth-shaking growl.

“Going to fuck you now, Dorian. Give you what you need…”

He was gasping against the bedroll, arching his back. “Yes, kaffas, fuck me, Bull!”

A groan, and then big hands grabbed him and…flipped him over. Dorian blinked, a little startled. He’d rather expected Bull to just mount him; now he was spread out under the massive breadth of qunari muscles, thick thighs pushing his legs apart as Bull kissed his throat. “I want to see you,” Bull mumbled, by way of explanation. “Want to watch your face as you take my cock…Dorian…”

He swallowed. Bull lifted his hips, his thick shaft rubbing between Dorian’s cheeks. “Yes, do it,” he breathed. “Give me your cock. Watch me while I take it…watch me feel you inside, so deep…fuck!” At his urging, Bull was obeying, the large, blunt head of his cock pressing hard against Dorian’s entrance. He felt his body slowly give way, relaxing with a sigh as Bull’s cock slid into him, stretching him until Dorian shuddered and choked on a moan. “Oh Maker,” he whimpered. “So big…so deep…”

One free hand, massive and rough, was stroking the side of his face. “So beautiful…prettiest man I ever saw…look how gorgeous you are when you’re feeling good…”

“Just for you,” he panted, voice weak as Dorian’s body throbbed, adjusting, but still aching with pleasure. “No one makes me feel as good as you do, Bull…oh!” He felt the hard shaft inside him throb at that, and Dorian writhed slightly. “F-Fuck me, damn it, I’m ready!”

If Bull wanted to say anything, it seemed he couldn’t. His answer was a wordless groan as he began to rock inside Dorian, hips rolling into a smooth rhythm, slowly fucking into him with long, deep thrusts.

The air was thick and heavy with heat and sweat, their bodies slick and skin slippery, every inch pressed together. Dorian could hear himself making thin, desperate cries of lust and pleasure as Bull fucked him, on and on, never hurrying, never rough—just an endless, slow fuck in their little tent. He could feel the weight of Bull’s gaze, and sometimes he opened his eyes a crack, but Dorian closed them again in a hurry every time. The look Bull was giving him…the admiration. It wasn’t love—or whatever he’d thought was love, before. But it was bare and hungry and awed, and if Dorian let himself meet that gaze he would come at once, unable to restrain himself.

Instead, he held on, wishing this would never end. Bull’s mouth sought his over and over, and Dorian returned each kiss passionately. He forgot about everything else in the world but this—the inexorable slide of Bull’s cock inside him, the bursts of pleasure that made his body weak, the scent and sound and feel of Bull…

“Kaffas, fuck! Oh, Bull, oh…!” Dorian had forgotten to keep his eyes closed. Their gazes met, and heat tore through him. His orgasm took him by surprise, left him breathless, and Dorian could only cry out, gripping Bull tightly and shaking as he spent himself between their bodies without the slightest touch to his cock.

As soon as he could think again, Dorian wanted to tell Bull to just keep going—don’t stop or pull out or slow down. He realized that Bull had already come once and probably would last quite a while yet, at this pace. It would keep Dorian on a knife’s edge, being relentlessly fucked long past orgasm—he might even recover his erection and come again before Bull did. It had happened in
the past past a few times.

And then Bull clutched Dorian tight against his body and drove in deep and, with a loud moan, came so hard Dorian could feel every pulse of seed as Bull emptied himself inside him.

Dorian gasped, clinging to Bull as rapid, hot spurts of semen filled him to overflowing. Groaning against his lips, Bull kissed him deeply, and Dorian answered the kiss with a whimper. Bull’s orgasm was long, even for him, but Dorian held him through it and stroked his face and body and kissed him, enjoying every throb of their joined bodies.

They were still kissing, slow and lazy, when it was finally over. Dorian breathed the hot, sex-scented air between kisses and enjoyed the lingering fullness as Bull stayed inside him through the afterglow. “So good,” he murmured, “That was so, so good, Bull. So wonderful. So good.”

Bull panted against his shoulder, “Think boss and Solas…are going to be pissed. No way they didn’t hear that.”

“Ah.” Dorian tried to summon a modicum of regret or chagrin, but he was too gloriously fucked to care. Instead, he buried his face against Bull’s sweaty chest. He didn’t want to think about cleaning up; he didn’t want to move at all.

It was Bull who finally moved, out of necessity. His cock slid free of Dorian’s body as he rolled onto his back. Dorian shifted with him, curling himself half atop Bull. A hand stroked his hair. “I’ll clean you up in a minute, okay?”

“Mmmm.” Dorian was drifting, barely awake. “Don’t. I can feel your seed leaking out. You’ve made such a mess of me.”

“You like that?” There was an audible grin in that sleepy rumble.

*Amatus…Amatus.* “Mm. Well enough.”

Too tired for anything else, Dorian happily fell asleep on top of Bull, just like that.

He would realize, in the morning, that they hadn’t done that yet—slept in each other’s arms. Even sharing tents, they’d always slept in their separate bedrolls. When they woke again and Bull teased him about drooling on his chest, Dorian would remember that all this was supposed to be new.

Tonight, it simply felt like home.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

So in my Lavellan playthrough, she didn't talk much to certain companions right away (little bit racist, you know) so most of Lavellan's chats with Bull took place in the tavern in Skyhold, right? And she never flirted with him one bit, but we were talking about the Qun this one time and Bull said his thing about "Plus, you folks have redheads. MMMM redheads..." And Lavellan just HAPPENED to be a redhead (ginger temper and all) and she was standing in front of a seated Bull and he was just like PURRING in the general direction of her chest...and Lavellan got very flustered and didn't have the dialogue option to be like, "Bull! WTF, I'm TAKEN, get your lust off me!" so she ran away blushing.

Bull, you randy bastard.

Anyway, back to the story. :)

Of course, there was a cost. They were in a desert, and cleaning themselves up the next morning was all the more difficult when water was scarce. Bull apologized—despite the mild protest, he’d planned to clean Dorian up, but he had fallen asleep as well and hadn’t wakened. Dorian told him not to mind it, though he did feel disgusting now, and he had to melt conjured ice to fill a small basin and wash himself.

When they emerged, Lavellan and Solas met them with flat stares, neither of them looking well-rested. Nothing much was said—Dorian knew Bull would apologize later, and he would as well, when he no longer felt the lingering ache reminding him explicitly of what they had listened to—but Lavellan set a merciless pace for their journey that day, and Dorian felt his punishment for keeping her awake with the...noise. Even Bull seemed to be struggling, muscles probably sore and aching, though Dorian couldn’t sympathize much when he obviously had the worst of it.

This was exactly why they had always only fucked in Skyhold. Maker's breath.

Unfortunately for the others, Dorian really didn’t regret it at all. Despite the harsh travel, Bull was almost completely back to his usual crass, violent, cheerful self that day. The flickers of melancholy were few; Bull was in an infectiously good mood. Even the Inquisitor finally stopped glaring at them, too pleased by Bull’s good humor to hold a grudge.

“...And then, as if it wasn’t bad enough already that the Keeper sent me into the shem village with him, Gharen insisted on dragging me into the tavern—which was not necessary for our trading at all—and he would not leave until he’d tried every single type of shemlen drink there was. And he made me try them too, and they were horrid, and somehow I ended up dancing with a shem girl.” Everyone turned to look at her, most of them with raised eyebrows. Lavellan winced. “Possibly on a table.”

Bull’s laugh was booming—probably attracting something toothed and clawed they would have to fight in a minute. Dorian laughed to, then teased, “Oh, poor you. Browbeaten and bullied into having a good time.”
“It was not a good time!” Lavellan kicked a stone that went scuttling off the edge of the cliff. “All I wanted was to get back to the clan and continue my studies!”

“Then why, Inquisitor, were you dancing?” Solas quietly asked, eyes sparkling.

She glowered. “I was…bored. Gharen was still drinking…”

Bull calmed his laughter enough to comment with a wink, “If I’d been there, I’d have helped you pass the time. Dancing isn’t the only way to make all those pretty red curls bounce.”

Lavellan gaped.

Solas frowned darkly, looking like he was about to do something very scary, possibly involving a spirit.

Dorian had to quickly stifle his expression of shocked insult. “Honestly, Bull. Maker forbid I even dream of superseding your undying love of all gingers,” he muttered. “I suppose I should be grateful you can spare a glance for me, despite the apparently inferior beauty of my hair.”

“Awww, Dorian, don’t sulk. Your ass more than makes up for it.”

He tossed his head. “I don’t have any deficiencies to ‘make up for.’ And your platitudes ring rather hollow when your eyes wander so quickly—” But the rest was lost in a yelp as Bull wrapped an arm around Dorian and pulled him against his chest, almost off his feet.

“Mm, they’re not wandering, big guy,” he purred right in Dorian’s ear. “I haven’t stopped watching this ass all day.” Bull’s other hand groped him, squeezing low and between the cheeks. Dorian bit back a moan, but couldn’t restrain the shiver. “Thinking about last night, and how you—”

“We can hear you, you know,” Lavellan cut in loudly. “We’re not shemlen.”

Bull chuckled, so very low, right in his ear. “We need to learn to be quiet, Dorian.” The soft rumble of a growl made Dorian quite sure he wasn’t speaking only of their present conversation.

“Speak for yourself,” he murmured, clearing his throat to keep the breathlessness out of his voice. “I am the very soul of discretion. You are the loudmouthed brute who declares private information at a volume typically reserved for ordering troops in the midst of extremely large battles.”

So he said, as dignified as could be, and Bull laughed as loud as ever, and Lavellan looked torn between wishing for fewer details and a small glimmer of relief at seeing Bull so much more like himself. But when they camped that night, Dorian let the affronted act fall away. Once they were in their tent, he pulled Bull close by his horns and whispered hotly on his lips, “More,” without a trace of haughty artifice.

There were probably a hundred reasons they shouldn’t.

Really, they should be too tired to even want to.

But they did anyway.

They did keep much quieter this time. Bull’s massive hand stayed clamped over Dorian’s mouth through almost the whole thing, muffling his moans and cries of pleasure as Bull slid into him with only the most basic preparation necessary. The loudest sound was the slapping of wet skin as Bull fucked him wildly and groaned softly when he spilled, filling Dorian with his thick seed again.
The aftermath was better, because Bull licked him clean this time, Dorian gasping and whispering that he was filthy, such a filthy savage, oh yes don’t stop, until Bull sucked his cock down and slipped a finger back into his stretched hole and made him come again, a weak dribble all Dorian had to give by that point.

Lavellan and Solas seemed better rested in the morning, so at least the effort to be quiet seemed to have paid off. Dorian, well-practiced at hiding certain forms of soreness, thought he was doing an expert job of not limping, but by late morning he noticed Lavellan shooting him some suspicious glances.

So perhaps he was limping a little.

That day, despite Lavellan’s lack of faith in the Maker, he seemed to be on her side, willing to punish Dorian a little for indulging his libido at the expense of others’ sleep.

In other words, they baited and caught the dragon.

Dorian was much less aware of his soreness while scrambling to survive, and if Bull was tired he didn’t look it at all. He kept charging the monster, making Dorian break out in a cold sweat every time. He kept accidentally casting extra barriers on Bull before the old ones wore off. And no matter how much he told himself that Bull needed to get a little bloodied to bring out his full strength, the coppery tang in the air was making Dorian lightheaded with panic.

Last time, Dorian hadn’t actually been present for this fight, but he had been regaled with the story endlessly. Bull had been there to kill the thing, and every detail of every moment had been preserved in his obsessive memory and recounted over and over in Skyhold. Thus, Dorian had the slight advantage of being able to anticipate the dragon’s attacks, which helped compensate for his other disadvantages. The dragon nearly stepped on Bull eight times, and Solas nearly got burned to a crisp when Dorian almost forgot to renew his barrier in time, but in the end they managed to kill it— with a sufficient amount of flair, Dorian thought—and no one was mortally wounded.

Even if he hadn’t participated in this dragon hunt last time, he had been present for a few others. Thus, Dorian was not surprised by Bull barreling up to him with a shout of triumph and wrapping giant hands around his waist and tossing him into the air like a child. Then, of course, catching him and kissing him not at all like a child.

It had been…a very long time since Dorian had had the unique pleasure of Bull’s company after a dragon fight.

Unfortunately for them, there were a few hours left in the day, and Lavellan still wanted to cover some ground, so at her insistence, Bull finally let go of Dorian—somewhat. He stayed close, laughing even more easily than usual, his hands constantly seeking Dorian without even the appearance of innocence. Beasts and other skirmishes called him away, but as soon as every fight was done he’d be back, palming over Dorian’s arse or just grabbing a handful, stroking fingers across his throat, squeezing his hips…hands always inching toward his chest, his stomach, his groin. Lavellan looked profoundly surprised and a little disturbed by the whole display, and she didn’t know the half of it. Only Dorian was familiar enough with the signs to know that Bull spent the rest of the day walking around half-hard.

Late in the day, Bull took to murmuring filth in Dorian’s ear—very appreciative filth, and quite flattering in his opinion of Dorian’s naked body, but still not something their elven companions wanted to be privy to with their excellent hearing—when they found a small pool in a gully and Lavellan decided to make camp a little early. It wasn’t even an oasis, just a ground spring between the rocks, but they found a sheltered spot nearby and made camp anyway. Once their drinking
water needs had been resupplied, Dorian announced his intention to bathe, which Bull protested loudly. Dorian, however, was adamant.

“Be grateful I’m not demanding it of you as well,” he warned. His past self would have, after all. It was only through long separation from his clean, polished, pristine life in Tevinter that Dorian had become more tolerant of the daily sweat and grime of travel. There was certainly a time in the past when the idea of having sex with someone who was already sweaty would be repugnant.

“You smell so good, Dorian, don’t wash it off…” Purred into his hair as Dorian attempted to keep Bull from stealing his bathing supplies.

He lowered his voice in return. “I won’t wash my robes…or my hair. You—go to that knoll we passed, on the other side of the ridge, with the desert grass. Wait for me.” He thought that would do for a safe distance—safe enough to spare their companions another pornographic concert, without going far enough that they couldn’t call for help if they were attacked.

Bull groaned, but obeyed. Dorian kicked himself slightly for giving such an explicit order—he didn’t want to take that sort of role with Bull in the absence of the Qun, but there really was no dealing with him in this condition otherwise. He wanted Bull to take control of his life and make his own choices, but… We might make an exception for dragons.

Dorian had a sneaking suspicion that encouraging Bull to make his own choices right now would lead to them fucking in the middle of camp, forcing Lavellan and Solas to either watch or flee.

Instead, he washed in the spring, rinsing away what felt like half the desert from the crevices in his skin. He ran wet hands through his hair to pull some of the grit out, but as promised did not apply any soaps. He knew he had been sprayed with a fine mist of dragon’s blood once or twice in the battle—his robes would bear the stains forever, sadly—and his hair was a little tacky with it. Well, no matter. Washing it now wouldn’t serve, anyway; I’ll wash it after.

The spring was also private enough, behind a rock outcropping, for a little self-preparation. Dorian knew even in a frenzy of lust Bull would never hurt him, but they’d both appreciate the expedience. Then he dressed himself in his blood-spattered robes again, leaving them as unlaced and unbuckled as possible while still keeping them presentably on for the short walk back to his tent, a goodnight to the Inquisitor, and then a slightly longer walk out among the rocks of the darkening desert to find Bull.

Memories of the other times he and Bull had fucked in the aftermath of a dragon fight filled his mind more and more as the camp vanished and the warm dark of the desert surrounded him. No, Dorian hadn’t been here for this one, last time, but there had been seven others—and then the archdemon-like thing that had certainly been part of their final battle. Every time, it was both a… memorable experience and sort of a blur, a wild night of passion, when Bull was his most unrestrained. It had been years since their last dragon battle, before he came back in time, and Dorian was already a little hard, thinking of how roughly Bull would mount him tonight.

Bull clearly heard him coming before Dorian could see him, because he rounded a giant rock and found himself scooped immediately into the massive arms of a very naked qunari. Bull was moaning and licking his neck and, Dorian knew, scenting him—breathing him in and filling his head with dragon’s blood, though in this time Bull had never explained the particular effect that scent had on him, and most qunari.

Dorian laughed, clutching a horn for stability. “You’ve started without me, I see.”

A groan. “Couldn’t stop thinking about it.” Bull’s mouth left the hollow of his throat and moved
up, kissing him roughly before burying his face in Dorian’s hair. “The fight, the power in her…she was incredible. And we took her down.” His words were an impossibly deep rumble by the end. Dorian shivered. I missed you like this.

“Yes, yes…well, I’ll have you know that I won’t brook any competition. So if you wish to touch me, you had best make sure I’m the one you’re thinking of, understood?”

“Mmmmm.” Bull pulled him close, groaning, one broad hand under Dorian’s ass, pulling him up and squeezing, grinding them together. “You bet I am. Thinking of you standing there with your staff held high, feet planted like nothing could move you, throwing lightning right into her fucking jaw…”

Dorian hummed, smiling, and interrupted Bull briefly for a heated kiss. Then, “Pardon me—do go on.”

But Bull was already pulling his clothing apart, undressing him in record time. Fingers pressed against Dorian’s entrance as soon as they possibly could, and Bull growled as they easily slipped inside. Dorian chuckled. “Yes…I’m ready for you. Just waiting for your cock…” He brought one hand to Bull’s erection, stroking him down to the base, then cupping his heavy balls with slippery fingers. “I need you to fill me. Fuck me, Bull…fuck me deep.”

“Fuck yeah,” Bull rumbled. The next moment, Dorian was on his back in the desert grass, writhing under Bull as they moaned into each other’s mouths. The kisses were passionate and sloppy, their hands were everywhere at once, and suddenly Dorian was somehow on top, rutting against Bull desperately as one of Bull’s huge hands grabbed his ass. Dorian moaned, ending in a gasp when Bull slid two fingers inside him.

Without hesitation, Dorian sat down on Bull’s hand and started to ride those rough, thick fingers. The stretch was just a little too much. He whimpered and loved it. Bull growled in response, the rumble of it felt in both their bodies just before he rolled them both over again.

Dorian caught himself on his hands and knees in the sand, Bull half-over him, half-behind him. He reached back with one hand to grasp his buttocks and pull himself open. He rolled his hips up against Bull’s cock—a rather crudely obvious invitation, but this was not the time for subtlety, Dorian thought.

Bull groaned, his face pressed into Dorian’s hair line at the nape of his neck. “Fuck, Dorian, fuck!” Then Bull shifted and entered him with one long, rough push. Dorian could feel him being as careful as possible, in spite of their haste, but there was no denying Bull’s size. His cock stretched Dorian so, so wide—even after years spent together and then lost, he sometimes couldn’t believe that he could take Bull without breaking. Even so…

“Kaffas…” Dorian’s voice trembled on a sob. It hurt. It was wonderful.

“Fuck!” Bull groaned, voice shaking. “I can’t…” He tried to pull back a little, but Dorian reached back and grabbed a horn. He pulled down, bringing Bull close. “I need to…s-slow down…” Bull gasped, but he didn’t sound convinced.

“No,” Dorian patiently corrected, though his voice came out somewhat hoarse. “You need to hurry up, I think.” He knew, though he wasn’t supposed to know, that this was only the beginning, and Dorian was terribly eager for the rest of Bull’s passion. Dragon blood or not, Dorian loved seeing Bull driven wild like this, loved feeling like it was all because of him. He rocked back as best he could, rutting onto Bull’s cock in short little bursts.
“Dorian…!”

“Oh yes Bull, yes.” He squeezed, pressed closer, pulled Bull’s arm around him, shivered. “I’m ready, fuck me, please!” Then he gasped and cried aloud as Bull’s hips began to piston hard, sudden quick thrusting making Dorian’s body sing.

“Dorian, shit! I…I don’t know if I’m…”

“Yes you are, you’re good, you’re so good, Bull.” He was already panting, sweat running down his arms, his prick achingly hard. Fucking under the stars like this…

“Katoh.”

Dorian froze—his heart stopped, his breath ceased. Bull’s big hands gripped his hips and pushed him away, and Dorian let him go without complaint. As soon as Bull’s cock was free, Dorian turned around, but he made no move to touch, only searched Bull’s expression. There was fear there, fear and something wild and a terrible strain.

*Kaffas, what’s wrong?* He didn’t ask that, however. In all their time together before, Bull had never used the watchword; Dorian had, but only once. Even so, he knew better than to ask, to push. There was a long pause as Dorian reined himself in, sealing away his own feelings and needs—none of that mattered right now. Finally, he took a deep breath and asked, “What do you need?”

Bull was sitting in the sand, his hands clenched into fists. “Space,” he answered at once in a strained voice. “Just…go downwind a little. The scent…” Dorian shifted immediately, drawing back and to the side so that the gentle night breezes moved from Bull to him and then away across the sand. “Thanks. Sorry. I can’t control…”

This was never a problem before. “Bull, I’m all right. You weren’t even close to hurting me. I can handle a much rougher fuck than that. I enjoy it, even. Especially with you.”

But Bull just shook his head. “It’s me, I can’t…” He heaved a deep breath through gritted teeth. “I need a few minutes.”

Dorian was baffled by all this, but far beyond that he was desperate to soothe whatever had upset Bull. Still—he had asked for time. So Dorian nodded. “Very well. Listen. I will go back and finish washing—thoroughly, this time. Then I’ll dress in something clean and come back. Will that do?”

Bull nodded.

Rising, Dorian pulled on the most necessary parts of his clothing quickly, then paused. “Throw me yours, too. I’ll wash them with mine. You won’t freeze out here in half an hour, I imagine?”

A quick headshake, and Bull tossed his atrocious pants over, along with his armor. He kept his weapon—necessary, given the possibility of wild animals.

With a nod and an, “I’ll be back soon,” Dorian left, returning to the camp.

The Inquisitor had retired, and Solas was on watch. He glanced up as Dorian returned, but asked no questions, merely watched as Dorian fetched his bathing things—again—and returned to the spring, tossing their clothing into the water and attacking his hair with soap. He didn’t bother with any sort of style, just lathered it as clean as he could, then scrubbed the clothing. It was poorly done, most likely, because he couldn’t very well see the bloodstains in the dark, but he managed a cursory cleaning nonetheless and then draped everything over the nearby rocks to dry. Then, dressed in a simple, clean shirt and trousers, he left everything by the spring and fetched a blanket.
from his tent.

“Is everything all right?”

Dorian paused. “I’m not certain.” Then, “But if not, it will be. I’ll see to it.”

Solas accepted this with a nod. “Let me know if I can be of assistance.”

“Certainly,” Dorian answered, then retraced his path out to where he’d left Bull.

Even though he expected it, it was an odd sight to come upon a naked qunari, sitting in the sand and leaning back against a large rock as he gazed out at the desert. Bull turned his head slightly to confirm that he’d heard Dorian coming. Continuing to respect Bull’s space, Dorian offered him the blanket rather than draping it around his shoulders, and Bull took it with a nod.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m good now.” Bull wrapped himself in the blanket, though Dorian doubted he needed any warmth. As he sat down beside Bull, the rock face they were leaning against instantly warmed him, still giving off heat baked into it by the sun all day. “Sorry again. I was the one wanting to fuck, and then…”

“Something outside of your control happened, for which you bear no blame,” Dorian interrupted. “If anyone has an apology to make, it’s more than likely me, considering that you were the one who needed to make use of your watchword. I can offer a general apology if you like, but if you feel inclined to describe the problem, I will gladly be more specific with my contrition.”

But Bull was already shaking his head. “You’re good, Dorian. It was all me. Just…crap in my head.”

After a pause, Dorian offered flippantly, “Oh, well then, perhaps it was your fault after all. Apology accepted, in that case.” Then, after another short silence, he sobered. “Care to discuss it?”

Bull sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, scratching a little at the strap of his eyepatch. “Not sure how to. I have had a few brushes with dragons before, and had a lot of fun with whoever was up for it afterward. I knew it would affect me, but…shit, I don’t know. Maybe it was the fight, maybe it was having you around.”

“Nearly everyone pales in comparison to me, it’s true.”

Bull smiled—faint, but genuine. “Pretty much.” Then he grew pensive again. “It was different, this time. It was good, and then it was too good. And I felt…like I was losing my mind. Like I was going mad.”

“Ah.” Dorian leaned back further, turning his eyes out to the sand. “And madness is…somewhat more of a concern these days.”

“Yeah.” Bull rubbed his maimed hand over the other arm. “It’s not all gone yet, to be honest. I need a bath too—you’ll probably be pleased. I need to get all this scent off.”

“You can borrow my soaps, if you like,” Dorian offered magnanimously. Then, he added, “I left everything by the spring, actually. We could go right now, if you wish.”

Bull seemed to consider this. “Yeah. Sounds good. I’m not getting much out of these stars right now, anyway.”
So they went. Dorian showed Bull which soap he was allowed to use and left him to it, going to fetch clean clothing for him. Solas watched, but made no comment, and when Dorian suggested that Solas could retire—he and Bull would be up anyway, might as well take watch—he agreed with simple thanks.

Dorian brought a torch over to the spring to help with visibility, and they both set to work doing some late-night laundry once Bull was thoroughly clean. Dorian’s earlier efforts were clearly incomplete. Then they laid the wet clothes out by the fire. If they weren’t dry by morning, half an hour in the day’s heat would finish the job.

“So,” Dorian began conversationally as he joined Bull by the fire, “will you be all right for the rest of our journey? We collected a not insignificant amount of dragon to haul back to Skyhold with us, and even I can smell it. Won’t it bother you?”

He got a slight smile as Bull shook his head. “About as much as the smell of a pie baking bothers Sera.”

Dorian placed a hand over his heart. “That much? I weep for you.”

That time, Bull laughed—softly, mindful of their sleeping companions. “All I mean is, it will be on my mind, sure. But I won’t lose control. It’s more than that. Today, it was the rush of victory after the battle, and,” Bull tipped his head toward Dorian, “some very desirable company.”

“Mmm. I am that, yes.”

“I won’t lose control, though. It was just…everything put together. I felt like I was slipping. I wasn’t sure it would be safe to keep going. For you.”

Dorian sighed. “For a man who has been rendered immobile by my magic on more than one occasion—a generally clever man, at that—you are remarkably bad at remembering that I am a mage.”

“No, I know;” Bull cut in quickly. “I know, and I get it. I know you can stop me if you need to. I just…would hate to ever get to that point.”

“We have a watchword,” Dorian observed, carefully neutral. Then, in the short silence that followed, he studied Bull. “You’re afraid you wouldn’t heed it.”

Bull spread his hands, rubbing their roughened surfaces together. “Using the watchword is one thing. It’s there for a reason. I’ve had people use it a few times—nothing bad. Just one of us got a little careless, had to stop and communicate better.” He looked at his palms, still open—carefully so, as if he were concentrating to keep them from curling into fists. “I have never ignored the watchword. If I ever did…I don’t know.”

Dorian considered this. “Yes, I can see how that would be unbearable.” Then, he thought a moment, looking over the camp and the dark desert around them. His most unrestrained nights with Bull had always involved dragon kills, but a qunari aphrodisiac didn’t truly change anything; it merely brought what was otherwise tempered to the fore. Granted, there had always been an element of Hissrad in that past—no matter what happened between them, the Qun was there, over them. Even so, Dorian did not believe that merely removing that higher law would make it possible for Bull to ignore the watchword. He had no real basis for this, knowing nothing, as yet, of what being Tal-Vashoth would mean for Bull—but Dorian still believed it. He believed Bull could go crazy with lust or battle frenzy or whatever, but he would never go mad, and he would never harm Dorian. That much was central to who he was. Bull might believe that he would lose himself, but
Dorian didn’t. He couldn’t.

Even so, such assurances would probably not provide much comfort now—and why should they? The fear of madness went far too deep for Dorian to touch. His trust would only give Bull more cause to worry. So Dorian chose another approach.

“I suppose, if you ever did fail to heed the watchword, it would be a sign of that madness you were so concerned about, yes?”

A slow nod. “Yeah.”

“All right. Just confirming. I did give you my word I would kill you if you became a danger. If we’re agreed, I will remember this as another indicator of such danger and, naturally, will extend my promise to take appropriate lethal action in such an event.”

Bull, in spite of his frequent dumb act, understood him perfectly—but he did so like to put things as plainly as possible. “So…I ignore the watchword, and you’ll kill me?”

“That is what I just said,” Dorian sighed, “with considerably more finesse.”

A long pause. “Thanks, Dorian.” Bull finally settled his hands on his knees. “I don’t think I’d want to live with myself after that anyway.”

Unable to comment on that, Dorian mused instead, “It will be a while before we have the opportunity to face another dragon, I should imagine. Perhaps in the interim I’ll work on devising a spell that can partially restrain you. A few additional safeguards would not go amiss—at least for a while. Then, we can enjoy ourselves without fear of going too far too quickly.”

Finally, Bull smiled. “Sounds good.” Then he turned that smile toward Dorian. “I’m starting to really appreciate the fact that you’re a mage, big guy.”

Heart stuttering, Dorian tossed his drying hair. “Nice to see you aren’t quite as slow as Blackwall, at least.”
Chapter 25

For the following month leading up to their trip to the Winter Palace, Dorian spent the majority of his time in Skyhold, while Lavellan was mostly absent. Naturally, therefore, Solas was also gone. Bull was in and out, often leading the Chargers on their own missions now that Lavellan was content to have Cassandra as her warrior in the field. Either Varric or Cole usually accompanied her, leaving Sera mostly in Skyhold—not, this time, out of heartbreak, but apparently just because as much as Lavellan liked her, she had low hopes for Sera and Solas ever getting along. Dorian liked having Sera around for her incorrigible ways and delight in all things crass, but as Dagna was also in Skyhold, he saw considerably less of Sera than he expected.

Blackwall still avoided him, convinced that Dorian was a pampered prince, and nothing had changed with Vivienne, so Dorian played chess with Cullen—when the Commander could be spared—and made himself useful to Leliana and Josephine. Both had their reservations about him, but he had skills they were not inclined to waste, and all three of them had much in common.

Still, the best days were when the Chargers returned from a mission before the Inquisitor did, and he might have a day or two of Bull’s company before they were sent off again. During one such visit, a moderately sized mirror appeared in Bull’s quarters, standing on a table up against the wall. It wasn’t a particularly fine mirror—who knew what sort of merchant Bull had acquired it from—but it put a halt to Dorian’s post-coital complaints about being unable to fix his hair.

Dorian chose not to comment on the mirror when it appeared; he simply made use of it the first time he had occasion to.

There were many such things that passed without comment. The fact that Dorian stopped leaving immediately after sex was not mentioned; nor had it been a thing they discussed last time. Alas, it seemed that Dorian still didn’t know how to talk about such things.

Instead, he made himself a little more comfortable in Bull’s room, occasionally forgetting an item of clothing or a book there. It was far too early, however, to begin showing up there just to sleep.

When the Chargers were around, Dorian spent some time with them and expanded his friendships. The colorful group was here to stay, and the more Dorian got to know them, the happier he was that they had survived. It would strike him, at odd times, that these people had died, once, and he would feel a sudden, sharp grief that he had missed the first time, because he hadn’t known them then—a most surreal experience.

When the Chargers were away, Dorian was still often in the tavern, especially if Varric was about and they could spend an evening buying each other drinks and bullshitting. Dorian wasn’t a renowned storyteller, but he held out hope for the day when he’d relate some true story from Tevinter that the dwarf who had seen everything wouldn’t believe. Varric also hauled Blackwall into these conversations as often as he could, declaring a “brood intervention” and stating mysteriously that he had to save Blackwall from himself before he reached the ultimate brood levels, from which there was no redemption—he’d tried for almost a decade, he said, but as far as who he meant, Varric was tight-lipped.

There was also Dorian’s fan club, most of whom were apparently recovering from their idolizing crushes on him and becoming friends—with the possible exception of Colin. Dorian was aware of the lingering glances the stoic man still sent his way, and he sensed that Colin would still be more than willing to go to bed with him. Dorian carefully did not encourage him, however, and Colin seemed to understand and respect that.
And a few times, Varric dropped in to take notes when Dorian was chatting with his “fan club,” and then Varric in turn roped in Blackwall, and they made a rowdier party than usual—though they only seemed loud in the absence of the Chargers. There was the night everyone did their best to find a female companion for Blackwall—a terrible failure, in the end, because Blackwall himself would not cooperate. Then there was the night when Dorian somehow ended up teaching magical pranks to the mages. He had a fine arsenal of them from his Circle days in Tevinter, even without using necromancy, which neither of the other two knew much about. The favorite was a little force glyph he taught them, explaining how to place it out of sight in a chamber pot or lavatory. Anything that hit the glyph ricocheted straight up, which made for some extremely messy results. His best success had been another noble brat in school—Dorian had cut his wine with concentrated pomegranate juice before a night of drinking. Partway through the second bottle, he’d been struck with diarrhea, and upon using the lavatory where Dorian had placed the glyph, he was…well, struck with diarrhea. From head to toe.

Blackwall roared with laughter, slapping the table. “Covered in his own shit! Best thing I ever heard!”

There was no immediate change in Blackwall’s behavior toward him after that, but Dorian was perceptive enough to realize that the Warden had finally begun to change his mind about the “Tevinter prince.” He was much more relaxed in Dorian’s company, and didn’t scowl every time Dorian spoke.

And the fan club mages vowed, upon pain of not being spoken to for a month, to never use the glyph unless someone very badly deserved it.

Before Dorian knew it, the Winter Palace was upon them.

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Halamshiral had been quite the infamous disaster last time. Celene and many Orlesian nobles had died, and the Inquisitor had barely managed to secure Gaspard’s allegiance. Lavellan had been incredibly sour about the whole affair before it even began. She and Sera had always taken such delight in pranking nobles and flouting those who took themselves too seriously, and then things with Sera had ended disastrously and Lavellan had been forced into the Grand Game with nothing but contempt for the whole thing and a bitter heart over not having someone at her side to share in that contempt. She’d taken Dorian, Bull, and Cole because a Tevinter magister, a qunari Ben-Hassrath, and a demon were her best chances at creating an absolute scandal.

This time, for whatever reason—possibly the much less fraught condition of her personal life—Lavellan was only a little annoyed by the prospect of the Winter Palace. She plainly stated her dislike for the pomp, her aversion to so many shems, and her general poor opinion of court, but beyond complaining about it, she seemed prepared to play her part—only as much as was necessary, of course, but the fact that she wasn’t actively trying to ruin everything was a massive improvement.

She took Solas, Cassandra, and Varric to the ball—still an eclectic and colorful group, but one that commanded some respect, or at least interest with the elite of Orlais. Or rather, two of them did—Solas got taken for a manservant, but apparently his advice and help were pivotal in guiding Lavellan through the risky business of court intrigue.

Everyone else travelled to Orlais with them, but this time, Dorian and Bull were left to their own devices while the big events took place. They took advantage of the available amenities to spend a long night fucking in luxury. Oddly, it seemed that Bull enjoyed it more than Dorian did. For Dorian, it was obviously delightful, and much closer to the sort of life he’d grown up accustomed
to. But at the same time, he had come to treasure the worn blankets and lumpy mattress in Bull’s room, where he had so many memories. So as much as he liked satiny sheets and thick carpet and fine wine and all the rest—and made sure to say so—he secretly longed to be back in Skyhold, complaining about the cold stone floor under his bare feet before Bull scooped him up and rolled on top of him in a bed that smelled entirely of Bull.

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Empress Celene didn’t die.

Everyone was surprised by how well the Inquisitor pulled through Halamshiral, but none came close to Dorian’s surprise. Celene lived, and Lavellan had even managed to find evidence that Briala had been her lover, and now everyone was somehow in the little elven Inquisitor’s power and forced to play nice together because she told them to.

Her unexpected success did not keep her from complaining bitterly the whole way back to Skyhold, however. Lavellan had nothing nice to say about Orlais, Orlesians, masks, fashion, politics, nobles, shemlen, cheese, court dancing, or the hat Solas had been stuck wearing at the behest of either Leliana or Josephine—both pointed to the other and refused to take responsibility whenever the Inquisitor started snapping at them about it. Even Solas took a slight dip in her favor, and Dorian was privileged to witness their first almost-argument. Lavellan couldn’t imagine what Solas saw in all that pomp to interest him, and his explanations didn’t seem to satisfy. Still, the disagreement fell far short of the quarrels they had the first time. Both of them were quick to cast aside their differences as unimportant, not significant enough to affect their feelings. It was strange to see, and yet Dorian could only guess that they owed the success of Halamshiral to Lavellan’s general happiness, of which Solas was a part—and possibly a little bit to Solas’ personal influence, specifically—so he could hardly be unhappy about the different way their relationship was developing.

*She may really convince him to stay, at this rate. Perhaps even turn him aside from whatever it was that made them enemies, before. I wonder why this has changed so much. It always seemed that their differences were quite impossible to reconcile...*

And last of the changes—Vivienne remained at Skyhold.

Dorian was at a loss to understand why, for her relationship with Lavellan was just about as bad as it could possibly be, but perhaps she had seen something in the Inquisitor’s success that convinced her there was hope yet, if she remained, to make something presentable out of the little Dalish mage. Then Dorian remembered another detail—he had spoken to her briefly, before, after Celene died, and Vivienne had seemed quite content with the empress’ death. So perhaps there was bad blood between them, and Vivienne had left to make something out of the absence of the empress. Now, she survived, so those prospects might not exist. He asked, during their journey, how she felt about the fact that they had saved Celene.

He had not expected, “The entire Empire breathes a sigh of relief,” spoken with every apparent conviction.

*Goodness, what a change of tune. “We’re not in court, dear woman. There’s no need for the honey.” Whatever happened to “her time had come”?*

But Vivienne insisted upon keeping up the appearance of sincerity. Not that Dorian was surprised—they didn’t get along, so why would she reveal her true feelings to him? And Lavellan had rescued Celene—Vivienne might be her outspoken critic at other times, but perhaps, this once, she’d decided to play on the Inquisitor’s side and see what it got her.
Not that it mattered—it got her ignored just as she had been since the beginning. If Vivienne wanted to make real overtures of peace, she should have come down to the tavern with everyone else.

Lavellan, in an effort to make a point about the drudgery of Orlesian court dances, decided to throw a dance at Skyhold upon their return to celebrate. The Herald’s Rest could not begin to contain the revelry, so much of the music and partying took place outside. There was a bonfire, and endless drinks, and a combination of common Ferelden music and some Dalish tunes, courtesy of a few visitors and a few other amateurs among the Inquisition’s rank and file.

Everyone drank and danced and was friends for one night—even Blackwall didn’t seem to scare Lavellan for once. Vivienne would have done well to attend, Dorian thought, but he supposed there were limits.

He took great delight in the commoners’ dances; he couldn’t even summon a sniff of his usual false disdain. He let Lavellan teach him the steps to her Dalish dances, and he danced with nearly everyone he knew and quite a few men and women he didn’t know at all, and—to the intoxicated amusement of all—he even pulled Blackwall into a dance. The Warden was very unwilling to go, but the chorus of hooting and laughter and shouted dares made him give in, and everyone fell over in drunken hysterics when Dorian dipped him as the music ended.

Best of all, however, was Bull. Dorian was not surprised by how nimble on his feet the giant qunari was, but it was still a sight to see him skipping among the dancers, deftly avoiding collisions. He took every opportunity to scoop Dorian off his feet into the air, and Dorian didn’t bother pretending to hate it.

Sometime past midnight, Lavellan stumbled over to where Dorian was just accepting a drink from Bull—with a smile he quickly concealed. “Got somethin’ for you, Dorian,” she beamed, then slapped a little cloth-wrapped object into his hand. “Bull said some Orlesian shit was bein’ shit and this is yours, so here you go!”

Dorian’s eyes widened as he unwrapped the object.

“My amulet.

“You got…how?” He looked up at her flushed, grinning face, red curls gone thoroughly wild around it.

“The shit-shem wanted some stupid favor. Easy.”

Bull cleared his throat. “You left a letter in a book you were reading. I could say I didn’t mean to pry, but…” Bull shrugged. “Ben-Hassrath. Well, at the time.”

Dorian shook his head. “I would never have asked you to trouble yourself with this, Inquisitor. I don’t want any special treatment…”

“Pft, special treatment? I do nice things for allllll my friends. I got Cole an anumet! Why shudn’t I get you one?” Then she tumbled forward and Dorian ended up with an armful of elf, and he wasn’t sure if he was catching her or getting hugged.

“I shud get everybody an…am…anam…I shud get everybody one!” Suddenly, her vallaslin wrinkled with worry. “Do you think Sera would even wear one though?”

With a sigh, Dorian smiled. “As long as it isn’t magic and it has something obscene on it, she’d be proud to, I’m certain.”
The Inquisitor giggled. “Good. I’ll get special ones for everybody special. This one was yours already, but you like it, right?” At Dorian’s nod, she sighed. “That’s good. Now… where’s my, where’s my Solas?” She beamed at Dorian again before righting herself. “He loves dancing, can you believe it? I was so worried he wouldn’t.” Then she was tottering away, toppling into Solas’ arms within moments as he appeared as if from nowhere to catch her.

Arching an eyebrow at Bull, Dorian finally took the tankard that had been brought him. “Hey, if you don’t want your mail read, don’t leave it lying around with a Ben-Hassrath in the room.” He shrugged, his distractingly large shoulders doing their usual excellent job of making Dorian forget what he’d been about to say.

“Well.” He took a long drink. “You needn’t have troubled the Inquisitor.”

“I didn’t, at first.” Bull eased himself down onto a crate that had been dragged out to provide seating around the bonfire. “Tried to scare it out of the merchant myself, but that little guy is a lot braver than he looks. Then I found out all he wanted was some little favor from Boss. It wasn’t a big deal.”

A favor? Dorian had never gotten that far last time. Ponchard had only insisted that he wouldn’t sell, and pushed to discuss things in person, but only with Lavellan present. Dorian had thought perhaps he was afraid of how a private meeting might go. Then Bull had produced the amulet as if from thin air, and as it clearly involved some sort of Ben-Hassrath connection, Dorian had not asked for details. “What was the favor?” He couldn’t help wanting to know.

“Oh, he wanted to join some Orlesian club or something. Just needed Boss to tell the club to let him in.”

That insufferable weasel. With that, Dorian put Ponchard from his mind. All that mattered was the end result—which somehow, against all odds, had come out the same, even if the events leading to it had been completely different. A comforting thought, Dorian realized, considering how much has already gone differently. They still had a darkspawn magister to face, after all, with an increasingly different set of alliances and their attendant forces.

With a sigh, Dorian offered, “Far be it from me to appear ungrateful. My manners are certainly better than that.” He bowed at the waist. “Thank you, Iron Bull.”

Bull replied, grinning. “Damn. I was expecting something with a lot more syllables, coming from you.”

Dorian managed not to laugh. His smile, however, was irreplaceably fond. “I have other means of expressing my gratitude. It need not always be verbal.”

“That kind of night, is it?” Bull’s grin widened.

“Why not? It is a party, yes? As a Tevinter, sneaking off to do something scandalous and naked is a cultural tradition. Passing the whole night without any nudity would be shocking.”

Bull’s laugh was gentle. He reached for Dorian, a large hand on his back pulling him in. “Hey, this isn’t Tevinter. No sneaking necessary.” Then he kissed Dorian, blatantly, in front of half of Skyhold.

Dorian didn’t know which was more surprising—the kiss, or the fact that he answered it without hesitation. And, if Bull had thought to make it brief, that was forgotten as Dorian chased his mouth and soon ended up in his lap, still kissing. It was slow, but simmering with passion, and Bull’s
hands were on his hips, and Dorian could feel just the slightest dig of claws through his clothing.

The first time, he would never have done this. It had taken him two years to get over his Tevinter habits enough to touch Bull in public, and kissing like this was still mostly off the table. Perhaps I shouldn’t be allowing… Bull pulled him in tighter, a muscled arm around his back, and Dorian stopped caring. They would be teased tomorrow, but he had eventually managed to learn the difference between teasing and mockery—here in the South, where there was a significant difference.

They broke apart for air, but didn’t go far. Being in Bull’s lap put them at eye level, and Dorian leaned his forehead against Bull’s. “I may have allowed that, but I am absolutely not taking my clothes off in front of the entire Inquisition.”

“You sort of already did,” Bull pointed out, still grinning wickedly. He liked to make sure Dorian didn’t forget that one play-battle of theirs.

Dorian pinched the tip of his ear for that. “I may admit to a minor display, but I haven’t any further interest in exhibition. I have so many admirers, you see. We shouldn’t torture them. It’s unkind.”

“So you want to disappoint them instead?” Bull’s hand was sneaking down toward Dorian’s ass. He grabbed the wide wrist and pulled him away.

“Maker, Bull, stop talking. We’re going to your room; that’s that.”

“Yes, Ser!”

With a locked door behind them, Dorian didn’t mind making a display. He didn’t mind peeling his clothes off, layer by layer—for an audience of one, with an eye bright with desire and admiration. Didn’t mind any of the inappropriate touching he hadn’t allowed in the courtyard. And he was more than willing to kiss until his lips were sore—couldn’t get enough, in fact. How had he ever convinced himself, so long ago, that he wasn’t interested in the muscled giant with the soft touch? Even after seeing that cock the first time—in camp on an early mission—he’d somehow deluded himself into believing he didn’t want this. Was it really so bad that he wasn’t wasting time fooling himself this time around?

“Bull…” He arched, on his knees, pushing himself back against the head, all lined up to enter him. “Bull!”

“Yeah.” It was panted, softly, against Dorian’s shoulder. Then again: “Yeah,” and a kiss—a wet, sucking kiss that slowly pulled a mark into his flesh. The spot throbbed when Bull released it, like his rim throbbed as Bull began to push inside him. “Yeah, Dorian.” He shifted his weight forward, one massive arm keeping him from crushing Dorian into the lumpy bed, and slowly, slowly eased in. “…Deep, right?”

“Mmmm.” That had been his request, and the Iron Bull never disappointed.

And it was deep when he pushed all the way in. As deep as he could possibly go. Dorian shook, sobbing. “Oh yes, yes-yes-yes, oh yes.” It was a whispered litany, over and over.

Bull did it again.

Powerful strokes, long and deep and unrelenting—not exactly slow, but not rushed. It was the kind of fuck that always made Dorian swiftly lose his mind, which was exactly what he needed. He didn’t want gentle or tender or slow. Bull had been showing some inclinations lately to take his time more, and Dorian wasn’t ready. Given too much space to think, he’d never be able to keep his
emotions in check. The only thing for it was to goad Bull into a hard fuck every time, wiping his mind so he wouldn’t have time to think or feel anything deeper.

It got wild again, tonight, just as he’d asked. Everything else faded—all he knew was Bull holding him, murmuring and growling and groaning, and the relentless, powerful thrusts of Bull inside him, all the way to the root every time. So deep.

Bull fucked him into the bed, his skin hot and sticky. And maybe Dorian had been joking about Tevinter earlier, but this wasn’t like that. It would never be like that. All those passionate trysts and furtive fucks had never been as good as this. No one could overwhelm him like this, pick him up and take him apart like this, and he’d never loved quite like this…

Hands on him pulled him up, lifting until maybe Bull was kneeling, leaning back, Dorian falling back against a massive chest, cradled in massive hands that held him as Bull thrust and thrust, fucking up into him so hard, so fast… Dorian made helpless, thin noises in the back of his throat that didn’t quite form groans because maybe he was losing his voice, and he arched and shook from head to toe and his head was thrown back on Bull’s shoulder and then he turned, seeking skin, and his teeth found a strong, stubbled jaw and Dorian bit.

A growl, at that, and then he felt the shudder start in Bull’s body, the hot pulsing of his cock, and Bull was coming—hard, heavy spurts of seed filled Dorian quickly, and he whimpered and clenched as Bull flooded him with his come, and then Dorian was coming too, his cock shooting rapid jets of semen over his chest and stomach as Dorian moaned and writhed and spent himself until he was utterly empty and sated.

They collapsed. Bull’s cock slid out, followed by an ample amount of seed spilling onto the bed. Dorian didn’t care. He’d be leaking all night, after that. Once, he would have complained. He would have been reasonably sincere as well, having mostly convinced himself that he disliked the excessive mess after fucking a qunari. He curled into Bull’s side now and contemplated his usual token complaints. He had been trying to at least maintain a semblance of aristocratic disapproval whenever possible, but there were many occasions when he hadn’t managed it at all—and even when he had, surely Bull had seen right through him. Dorian’s worry was always that being too honest or welcoming too quickly would cause Bull to pull away from him, but so far that hadn’t been the case. He wondered if Bull would have been as happy with honest enjoyment the first time—and he wondered if Bull’s response would have been true, or a deception…

Doesn’t matter. He isn’t Hissrad now.

Then he wondered if there was a limit—a point where Bull would kindly but firmly pull away, probably for Dorian’s own protection or some such nonsense.

Only one way to find out…

Pressing his face into a warm, sweaty pectoral, Dorian hummed with pleasure. “I would suggest you change the sheets to do something about this mess, but I’m still leaking…and will be most of the night, I expect. You’ve completely stuffed me, you beast.”

“I’ll take the lack of painful magical crap as a sign that you don’t really mind,” Bull answered, still breathing heavily.

“Mmmmm.” Dorian smiled and turned his face to press a kiss to Bull’s chest. “I’ll give you a better sign.” Then he shifted, propping himself up and slowly kissing up the broad flat of Bull’s chest until he could reach his mouth. Dipping his head, Dorian kissed him.
Bull rumbled into the kiss and smiled when Dorian pulled back. “You’re sweet.”

“Gratitude and manners, as I said,” Dorian replied with whatever semblance of hauteur he could muster when he was a thoroughly fucked mess. He stroked his moustache and twisted it into place, and that helped.

Bull’s chest rumbled with a growl—a very appreciative growl Dorian usually heard as a prelude to sex. He raised his eyebrows inquisitively; their sweat hadn’t even begun to dry yet. Bull grinned. “I like it when you do the prince act. I like it even better right now. You look so damn good all messed up like this.”

Dorian’s lips quirked. “Pardon me if I don’t start walking around Skyhold this way. I prefer my usual appearance.”

“Oh, I agree,” Bull nodded with deep sincerity. “You walking around like you own the world, all fancy and sparkling? Just makes me think about messing you up all over again. It’s hot.”

Dorian laughed. “How strange! When I see you in those dreadful trousers, I have much the same urge—to get you out of them with all speed. Ideally by using fire.”

“Aww,” Bull laughed as well. “Keep pretending you don’t like my pants, big guy. I know you just want a quick peek at what’s in them.” This, with a characteristically blatant waggle of one eyebrow. Dorian snorted elegantly.

“As if that were all I’m after—a peek.” He slid his hand down to rest atop Bull’s spent cock, ignoring the coating of drying seed as he gently stroked.

Another sharp grin. “You after more than that right now?”

Brushing his lips over Bull’s jaw, Dorian lightly teased, “Well…sadly, you wouldn’t be able to mess me up much…I’m already naked and filthy.”

“I could fix that,” Bull offered. “Could go get one of the tubs from downstairs. Bring it up here and give you a nice bath. Then you could get all dressed up again, do that stuff around your eyes and fix your hair.”

With a skeptical look, Dorian studied Bull. “You want me to get all dressed up in the middle of the night so you can thoroughly debauch me again, when I’m already lying here more than a little debauched as it is?”

One huge shoulder rolled slightly. “Just a suggestion.”

For several moments, Dorian considered this. In the past, he would have been royally offended at the ludicrous inconvenience. Now, it was a “suggestion.” Bull’s suggestion, one based in something he’d admitted to liking. It wasn’t a request, but maybe it had a little hint of wishing buried in there somewhere. And Dorian had planned to encourage Bull to learn to act on his own wants…once he began to discover them in the first place.

“Very well.” He rolled off Bull’s chest and waved toward the door. “Go get the tub. Never mind about water, I can see to that.”

Bull’s surprise was obvious, but he readily obeyed. Dorian filled the tub and heated the water as Bull then went to pick up a few of Dorian’s personal supplies from his room—after repeating back the detailed list twice to prove he didn’t need it all written down. As it happened, the Ben-Hassrath trained thoroughly in memorization, and Bull brought everything exactly as directed.
Then, in the middle of the night, and partially under the stars thanks to the hole in the ceiling, Dorian had a nice, long, hot bath.

It hadn’t been part of the original idea, but they both got rather into the whole production. Bull brought a bottle of wine back when he first returned with the tub, and Dorian relaxed and sipped it as Bull washed his hair for him. He hummed with pleasure at the gentle pressure of callused fingers working the soap lather through his hair, and tutted with regal disdain at the substandard vintage—though in reality it was adequate, which meant it was probably the finest wine in Skyhold.

The hair-washing seemed to please them both, so Dorian allowed Bull to wash the rest of him as well. It was…strange. Dorian had expected arousal, and there was some, but there was also an intimacy in it as Bull washed his body—an intimacy he would have embraced before the…betrayal, but couldn’t quite do so now. Not after all that had happened before, and not this early into their second try. Still, the giant qunari kneeling by the tub to gently cleanse the sweat and semen away…it tugged at Dorian’s heart. He ached. He wanted to let himself accept the tenderness. He wanted to believe it was finally genuine, this time. Perhaps even last time…

But no. Remember that he was Hissrad…then.

So Dorian didn’t embrace the intimacy, but he allowed it. And then he made Bull bathe as well, as he rubbed his hair dry and began the multi-staged process of putting his best face on.

Bull was done cleaning himself and had relocated to the bed to sip wine and watch as Dorian completed the process by styling his nearly dry hair. He was dressed in his most fashionable robes, though to Southerners the quality of them was mostly lost. Bull just thought they were “flashy”—in a “hot” way, considering what was to come next. But first, Dorian checked himself over. Hair—flawless. Makeup—perfect. Clothes, accessories, everything in the right place. He stood before Bull with perfect poise and an aristocratic superiority and sniffed. “Not that your opinion has any bearing on true perfection, but I trust you are suitably impressed?”

“Damn,” Bull breathed. Dorian’s jewelry caught the firelight and flashed as he half-turned. Bull was close to fully erect and making no effort to hide it.

“I wore something much like this to a very important party, once. In fact, I think it was the ball the Black Divine attended. Rather a disappointing evening, aside from that. No one fucked me in a quiet parlor or dark garden path that night. Such a waste.”

“Can’t have that,” Bull purred, setting down the wine and beckoning Dorian closer. Dorian took a few regal steps in Bull’s direction, but stayed out of reach.

“I suppose you’ve seen enough of high society to imagine me there—bored, of course, but captivating everyone with my undeniable wit and charm.” Bull hummed, his hand sliding over to lightly grip his cock. “What a pity that none of them knew what I was really thinking about…”

A huge grin. “Something dirty?”

Another step closer, and a wicked smirk. “Oh, very. I often entertained myself at such parties by imagining myself with the sort of man whose very presence in such a place would cause shock and horror. A dockhand or sailor I’d seen on the way there, or perhaps a ruthless bandit or a filthy pirate. They’d catch me in some barely concealed corner and fuck me without a care in the world. Or perhaps they’d swoop in and capture me, take me away to their lair and fuck me over and over again.” He closed the rest of the distance to stand by the bed, within arm’s reach for Bull. “I will even admit—there were not a few fantasies involving qunari.”
“Going to tell me about them?” Bull purred, but he kept his hands to himself.

“I will,” Dorian promised, “but only if you undress me. I put all this on, and I think you should take it off. Mind you don’t damage anything,” he chided.

“Wouldn’t dare.”

Dorian smiled as Bull’s hands rose and began to unfasten and unlace. “There were raids, at times. Of course, the elite of Tevinter were well away from any danger, but I did like to imagine being taken away by a horde of muscled giants. Or, there was the fantasy where I met a qunari sneaking around in the shadows—perhaps a spy, or perhaps he was left behind in an attack. That wasn’t important.” Bull finished opening all the clasps and buttons on his shirt and pushed it aside, but left it hanging dashing half-open. “I imagined he only knew Qunlat, so we couldn’t speak, but there would be an irresistible attraction between us—typical fantasy foolishness. We’d fuck wildly in the shadows; he’d be so incredibly huge. It would almost be too much for me.” Dorian’s eyes raked over Bull’s body as the hands working on his trousers skimmed over his growing arousal.

“Sometimes he’d vanish after, and I’d never see him again. Sometimes I’d imagine keeping him hidden for weeks. I’d sneak to him in the middle of the night, bring him food…and he’d fuck me until daybreak, until I could barely stand.”

Bull pushed his open trousers down just enough to reveal his silky smalls. Dorian tensed as that large hand promptly slid over his cock, stroking the silk covering him. “Was he any good?”

“Oh yes…he would have to be, or he wouldn’t have been worth my time,” Dorian teased. He pushed his hips forward slightly, into the pressure of Bull’s touch. “He was, as I said, very large…” Dorian leaned closer and grasped Bull’s cock, “…and he obviously had stamina, unlike most men I’d slept with. He hardly ever let me go after one round.” A long, languid stroke. Bull’s other hand, on his hips, pulled him closer, shaving his trousers further down his legs. “He was strong, and he could be very rough…but he never hurt me.” Dorian knelt on the bed and threw a leg over Bull’s lap, straddling him—gracefully, despite the clothing hanging from his ankles. “He just made me come, over and over, until I was a complete mess. I couldn’t get enough of him.” That last, he breathed against Bull’s lips before kissing him, deep and purposeful.

“Bet that feeling was mutual,” Bull rumbled into his mouth.

Dorian grinned, and rolled his hips forward to grind their cocks together. “Naturally.”

“Sounds like I have some pretty big boots to fill,” Bull growled, his hands gripping the rounds of Dorian’s ass and pulling him closer, grinding harder.

With a shudder, Dorian affected disinterest. “Bull, honestly. As if anyone wears larger boots than you do.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

The next thing Dorian knew, he’d been lifted bodily by the waist and set on his feet. He was standing on the bed, over Bull’s lap, as Bull pulled him in and licked over the silk-covered shape of his erection. Dorian gasped and braced himself with a hand on each horn, his body shaking as Bull sucked over the material that was rapidly becoming soaked.

He managed, however, to pull himself together enough to straighten. With his most regal bearing—uneven bed surfaces notwithstanding—Dorian casually observed, “You’d do better at that if you removed my undergarment. You can’t suck me off properly like this, yes?”
“I could,” Bull corrected. “But you probably don’t want to come in your panties, so…” He snagged
Dorian’s smalls delicately with his teeth and pulled down, exposing him. Dorian shivered as the
chill air touched his damp prick, but moaned a moment later as Bull took him into his mouth and
sucked all the way to the base.

“I don’t…panties…fuck!” Dorian’s legs shook, threatening to give way. Bull was working him into
a frenzy, no longer teasing or taking it slow. The slick heat of his mouth squeezed Dorian’s shaft,
his tongue rolling and curling around it. Such a genius…with that tongue…

“Thanks.” The chuckled word and the momentary reprieve from an onslaught of pleasure gave
Dorian just enough sanity to realize that he might have voiced some of that. At the same time, he
realized Bull was doing something—a moment later, when a thick, oil-coated finger caressed his
rim, Dorian understood. He also had no opportunity to comment—Bull swallowed him down
again, sliding his finger easily inside to play with Dorian’s prostate.

“Kaffas!” That was all—Dorian had no other thoughts. Bull’s mouth encased him in incredible
pressure and heat, sliding up and down his shaft fast, but not quite fast enough to finish him off.
Bull fucked Dorian with his finger at the same time, and Dorian’s balance wobbled as he groaned
and sagged forward in spite of himself. He was all but leaning fully on Bull’s horns, his hips
involuntarily working to thrust in and out. “Bull…more, just a little…please, I’m so close, I
could…”

“I want to feel you come, big guy.” Even as Bull spoke, the finger left Dorian, hands gripped his
hips again, and Bull lowered him. Rough fingers on his arse held him open as Bull pulled him
down, into his lap—straight onto his cock. Dorian felt the slightest moment of pause as the head
pressed his slick, soft flesh, and then his body stretched open and took Bull in. There was no wait
—Bull went all the way in with one seemingly endless slide, and Dorian felt the pressure on his
prostate send him into spasms. “Yeah, Dorian, that’s it. Let me feel you come on my cock.” One
hand wrapped around Dorian’s shaft again, stroking hard and fast, thumbing over the dribbling
head. “Show me that pretty face while you shoot all over me.”

“Ah…ah…yes!” Back arched, Dorian came, his cock spurting, as requested, all over Bull’s broad
chest. Bull felt massive inside him as Dorian’s body clenched his cock tight. It was perfection.

He went limp in Bull’s arms, but wasn’t pulled against a warm chest right away. Bull wiped
himself off quickly before wrapping Dorian in his arms—a good thought, Dorian realized. He’d
forgotten about the clothing he still mostly wore.

Leaning against Bull’s body—still full of his hard cock—Dorian mumbled with a slight slur,
“Sufficiently…impressed?”

The pleasure was clear in Bull’s murmured reply. “Mmmmm. Stunned is more like it, big guy. You
are the prettiest damn thing I’ve ever seen.” Dorian sighed. Bull’s lips brushed his forehead, and
he murmured into Dorian’s slightly mussed hair, “Take it easy. Get your breath. Sleep, if you need
to. I have a lot more debauching in mind for you.”

Dorian hummed sleepily. “Tell me.”

A soft laugh. “Well, when you’re ready for more, I’m going to fuck you again, nice and slow. I
want you to come on my cock, and then I want to stay inside you until you get hard again. Then I’ll
pin you to this bed and conquer you real good.”

Dorian laughed at that, giddy, against Bull’s skin. “There are only so many times a man can come
in one night, Bull. Perhaps the qunari have no such limitations, but we humans do.”
“You had a nice, long break after the first one, and you can have as long as you need right now. But I think I can get two more out of you. You did such a good job getting all dressed up. It would be a shame if I didn’t wreck you completely as a reward.”

For a moment, there was silence as Dorian considered this. Finally—“Well.” He swallowed. “How gratifying to find someone who demonstrates a proper appreciation for my brilliance.”
Chapter 26

A sunbeam of malevolent precision—surely a demon’s work—found Dorian’s eyes and woke him not long after dawn. Many, many hours before he wished to wake. He groaned, realized his mouth was open, and shut it, burying his face against warm skin—away from the saliva he’d never take responsibility for.

From head to toe, Dorian ached with the sweet pain of thoroughly used muscles. He didn’t need to check to see that his hair was a disaster, his makeup smudged or gone, and his skin decorated with red marks that would be darkening to purple by now. He’d had all these details described to him with great relish last night, before he fell asleep. The one difference that he could feel was that he was no longer painted with streaks of semen and trickling sweat—thank the Maker. Bull had been considerate as always and had cleaned him up as he hovered in partial consciousness, but it hadn’t been a full bath. Dorian probably smelled ostentatiously of the night’s activities.

His arse certainly still felt it, but then again it had probably only been a few hours since they’d finally stopped. He ached there too, but it was a dull ache accompanied with a rather loose feeling. Dorian’s cheeks heated. Qunari-sized experiences will leave that sort of impression for a while. How well he knew it.

“There’s the look,” a deep voice purred above him.

Dorian frowned and craned his head back. “I beg your pardon?” The last syllable almost got lost in a yawn.


He snorted, half smiling. “I take it you are satisfied with my thoroughly debauched appearance?”

Bull rumbled, a pleased growl, and one hand came up, a rough pad of his thumb stroking Dorian’s bottom lip. “More than satisfied, big guy. Getting a little riled up again, if you want to know.”

Wide-eyed, Dorian blinked. “After last night, and the number of times we…”

“Relax,” Bull laughed. “I’m not going to fuck you again. Although morning sex is a lot of fun too.”

He winked. Dorian’s heart tugged in his chest, fondly. “Nah, I have to get up and go train with the boys.”

“Mmh.” Dorian grunted with effort, struggling to push himself up, only to have his limbs rebelliously drop him back on top of Bull. “Kaffas,” he muttered.

Bull’s hands caught his shoulders. “You can stay here. You only got about two hours of sleep last night.”

Dorian shook his head. “You couldn’t kick me out if you wished it. But at present, nature calls.”

“Oh, you need to piss?” Bull straightened, lifting him almost bodily to shift them to the edge of the bed. Dorian huffed.

“Elegantly put, as always.”

“You bet. Come on, big guy.”
Dorian attempted to pull away and stand on his own, only to have his dignity take a blow when his legs buckled and Bull had to catch him again. He grumbled under his breath, but a few moments later they had almost reached the chamber pot, and it became obvious that Bull was not ceasing his helpful attentions. “I can urinate on my own, thank you,” he grumbled, his tone slightly disturbed.

“At the moment, I don’t know about that.” Bull wrapped an arm around his chest and held Dorian up, facing the pot. “There we go. No sweat.”

He blinked, wide-eyed. “Isn’t this rather…disgusting?”

“Why?”

Dorian did not roll his eyes, but he did close them with a slightly exasperated sigh. Naturally. He has an entirely different understanding of the word “dirty.” Opening his eyes again, Dorian bravely answered, “Fine,” and relented to the situation. If Bull didn’t care, why should he? After all, they had seen and touched so much of each other, what was something so mundane?

Still. It was new. We never did this, before.

“This is not at all arousing, I hope you realize. I have no interest whatsoever in sexualizing bodily waste.”

Bull laughed, his chest vibrating against Dorian’s back. “I know. This isn’t your kind of dirty.” Then, business dealt with, Bull essentially carried him back to bed.

Dorian lay back. He may not have the strength to stand, but he could always recline beautifully. “Quite.” He glanced over at Bull, then away again, dismissively. “All right, I’ve no further need of you. You may go attend to your other duties.” He waved Bull away, turning onto his side and grabbing a pillow—that smelled entirely of Bull—in an effort to go back to sleep. That it gave Bull a full view of his bare arse was only a secondary consideration.

Bull chuckled and leaned over the bed. A warm palm caressed Dorian’s buttocks as Bull kissed his shoulder—so sweet Dorian’s heart stopped a moment, not sure how to handle this. “You don’t have to tease, big guy. You’ll be on my mind all day, even without the reminder.” With that, he gave Dorian’s arse a gentle squeeze and went to clothe himself. Dorian swallowed and pretended disinterest.

Amatus…

Once Bull had departed for the training grounds, Dorian sat up—on one hip—and leaned against the bedframe with a sigh. “This cannot possibly be real,” he murmured to himself, eyes momentarily stinging. It took us so long to reach a point like this before and… He forced himself not to hide from the thought, And it was a lie even when we did. Perhaps there had been a kernel of truth in it somewhere, but that was what Hissrad did—take truth and build a deception out of it. Looking back, there was no way for Dorian to sort out what might have been true and what might have been deception. So all he was left with were the facts: There was tenderness between us, eventually—probably mostly a deception, and even if some of it was honest, it was not this soon, not even close. That left Dorian wondering, What is this now? It cannot be true, but he has no reason to deceive. And even if he had a reason, would he push things forward this much quicker?

Unlikely. The success of a deception, as Dorian had learned, relied upon the subject’s cooperation. That was how Hissrad worked—figure out what someone wanted and give them the pieces to put together until they believed they had it. The target did half the work for him.
But Dorian knew all that, now. He couldn’t possibly be that desperate to be fooled again. *So this cannot be a deception...can it?*

“I don’t want to be fooled at all. Not after that...”

*But you love, and you want to be loved more than ever.*

That much was his own realization. Then another voice whispered, *He won’t, mage. It’s a lie again, you know that’s all it ever will be...without my help...*

With a growl of irritation, Dorian began to draw a barrier glyph. “Damned desire demons, rudely interrupting. I’m trying to *think.*”

Unfortunately, even with a quiet mind Dorian couldn’t resolve the conflict of hope and doubt he was feeling. All he could be certain of was that he should not show his doubts. Whether Bull was being honest or trying to trick him, he should believe Dorian trusted him.

And Dorian so wished he could.

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Although it sounded like a daring prospect—going back in time to save his beloved’s life—the reality of reliving several years of one’s existence was turning out to be terribly mundane. Life became boring quickly when one already knew the outcome of most events. Research held no fascination when he already knew what he would find—precious little. The myriad little adventures Lavellan kept running off to didn’t excite him much—he’d either been there with her and done it already or he’d heard the reports afterward. To break up the monotony of months of re-living, Dorian did try to get himself invited along on a few missions he hadn’t experienced the first time. However, an accidental injury on one such trip quickly reminded him that he was trying not to change things too much. Losing the use of his right arm for a few weeks after a Venatori blade severed the tendons in his shoulder made that point quiet succinctly.

So Dorian stayed where he was meant to be and lived with a persistent feeling of *déjà vu,* and he tried to find ways to rekindle his interests without touching on anything that might change future events. He studied up on his Qunlat and Elven—the former without help because he still wasn’t telling Bull about it, the latter with minimal help when Solas or Lavellan was present to give it.

And then sometimes, something completely unexpected happened.

Blackwall disappeared.

When the news reached Dorian, it took him a few minutes to register what had happened—Blackwall had *left.* He was *gone,* and Dorian didn’t know what to make of it. Last time, he’d quietly kept to himself the entire time, and finally departed some time after their victory. Dorian had assumed he had simply gone when the job was done, and that he would do the same this time too. He was less of a stranger this time, and though Lavellan still didn’t seek him out, she was more comfortable in his company when everyone was in the tavern together. There were card games and laughter and drinks all around, when Lavellan wasn’t spending time with Solas. Dorian had thought that the improved relationship would not bring any harm, at least—and then Blackwall vanished.

When Lavellan returned from Orlais with the full story, Dorian was stunned.

*All that time...and I never knew anything about it.*
What was more—beyond the awful thought that he’d faced Corypheus alongside a murderer of children—was the fact that now, quite suddenly, the warrior was lost to them. As Dorian understood it, he would not be returning to the Inquisition and would shortly die for his crimes. Once word got around, most of the Inquisitor’s companions seemed content with this outcome—except Sera, who threw a fit, then threw some shit, then vanished for a while.

Lavellan was distraught, and it seemed not even Solas was providing much help this time. So, presuming just a little upon their growing friendship, Dorian paid Lavellan a visit. She was in her room, at her writing desk, but judging by the blotches and the fidgeting, she wasn’t thinking about reports. Her vallaslin had that peculiar twist it got when she was highly upset, and Dorian pulled up a chair and sat down nearby, rather than stand. He’d noticed that, even though they were much better friends now, Lavellan still tended to relax just a little more when he sat down and didn’t loom over her with his “giant shem” height.

“I dare say none of us saw this coming,” Dorian began, as gently as possible. “Even Sera was shocked, and she probably knew him best.”

A slow, sad nod. “We’re not really friends, but I thought he was all right. After a while. When you got used to the…beard. We somehow ended up talking a little over drinks, just before he left. I look back on it now and I think I see what he was trying to say. Then he turned himself in. It’s awful what he did, but…”

She paused, and in the long silence Dorian spoke up. “He seems to want to accept the consequences. A kind of atonement, yes?”

She reached for a drink—water, which was not what Dorian would have chosen, but Lavellan was still too much of a lightweight for that sort of remedy. “In my clan, we so rarely have to deal with someone who transgresses to such an extreme. There are times when the clan will cast out someone for their actions, but it’s so uncommon. And they only do it to someone who is unrepentant and cannot be redeemed. If the person is sorry and wishes to make amends, the clan always tries to find a way.”

Of course. Now it made more sense. To Lavellan, liking or disliking made little difference. The Inquisition was a sort of clan to her now—a family. And you didn’t always like or agree with everyone in the family—And I should know that very well—but you lived with them. You defended them. You gave them a chance. “You are the Inquisitor. I imagine you could find a way to free him, if you wished. He might then choose to live a repentant life hereafter—a better way to make amends, one might say.”

“I think he would, but…” She sighed again. “He’s a known murderer now, and if I have him freed, what will that say about the Inquisition? We harbor killers? The Inquisitor will get her friends or followers out of trouble, no matter what they do?” She blinked rapidly. “We’d have to risk innocent lives to do it, or use underhanded means. Our opponents would not turn a blind eye. I have the support of all those powdered arses in Orlais, but I know they’re all just waiting for an excuse. They don’t like the Inquisition; they like it even less with a Dalish in command.”

Studying her troubled expression, Dorian ventured, “But you wish to free him? To bring him back to the Inquisition?”

She looked up, frowning at the candle flame. “I don’t know. I hate to leave him to…outsiders. Yet he did not wish for any mercy. And Solas…” Her face fell. “He sees no reason to intervene.”

A spike of worry hit Dorian, but he didn’t let it show—only concern. “This hasn’t caused a quarrel, I hope?” It wouldn’t ruin his plans anymore if Solas fell out of Lavellan’s favor—Bull was already
free form the Qun. But she did seem so happy, this time. Had their relationship been the same as before, he would not have cared much if it met an earlier-than-expected end. But it was…different, now. They seemed closer, and happier, and Dorian found himself really beginning to hope that Lavellan would make Solas decide to stay, and she never would face heartbreak as she had in the previous future.

The Inquisitor shook her head slightly, and a curl popped loose from the strap tying the mess back. “We haven’t quarreled over it. I think…I think he just doesn’t understand. He’s been so much alone, he’s never had a clan. I never realized…ugh.”

“That doesn’t mean he cannot learn,” Dorian offered.

With a tight smile, she nodded. “I hope so.” Then, without fail, she was back to her responsibilities: “Sera is terribly upset. She and Rainier were so close. She thinks it’s enough that he’s sorry. I can’t really even try to explain to her how subjective her judgements are. She isn’t dim, exactly, she just…”

“She has a very narrow view of the world, very black and white. Quite typical, considering her lack of education. Yet one can hardly fault her for that, particularly when she’s so dear exactly as she is.” He smiled as he said it; Dorian always smiled over Sera.

Lavellan smiled too, but sadly. “She is dear, and a true friend, even though we are so different.” Then her smile faded. “I hate seeing her so sad. Yet…I cannot use my position to flout the law. And, most of all, he told me plainly that this was what he wanted.” She stood, and Dorian watched silently as she moved to her window and looked out. “Circumstances have placed me in a position where I must command armies and make decisions that affect the whole world. But I’ll not presume to command people in their personal choices. So.” She turned back, and there were tears shining in her eyes. “I may be able to save him, and I may even wish to, but I won’t.” Then, in a little burst of ire, she kicked the nearest wall before crossing back to Dorian. Silently, she dropped into her chair beside him.

Dorian contemplated gainsaying her. *One more ally lost.* And this one a front-line fighter. Not that he’d been invited to the front lines much, but they’d all fought Corypheus together. Would one warrior fewer turn the tide when that battle came? *Then again, we may have an extra mage…* Vivienne still hadn’t left for Orlais, and it was beginning to look like she never would, even if Lavellan still didn’t speak to her. She was finding things to do in Skyhold, playing the Game with those who visited, and probably making herself out to be much more vital a presence than she was. *If she joins us against Corypheus, perhaps we will be all right without Blackwall.*

He was a little depressed by the overwhelming pragmatism with which he contemplated the life or death of a man—a companion, even if he was not a friend. Yet what else could he do? Dorian hadn’t caused this dilemma; Blackwall had, and Blackwall had also been the one to refuse a friendship that might have made Dorian a more impassioned supporter of him now.

“I think only Cole will understand,” Lavellan added into the pause.

At that, Dorian placed a hand on her arm. “I understand, my friend.”

She gave him a grateful look and—to Dorian’s surprise—laid her head on his shoulder. “*Ma serannas, lethallin.*”
Chapter 27

The Arbor Wilds campaign arrived, and Dorian, knowing what would be discovered, wished rather badly that he could join Lavellan for this one. Sadly, Solas would get the honor, and two mages were plenty.

Well, three, actually, counting Lady Morrigan. Dorian didn’t stand a chance. Sad, really. He would dearly love an opportunity to talk to ancient elves…but their descendants probably had more claim to the privilege. He spent most of the campaign with a unit of the main army, keeping one eye on Bull and the other on Sera. She was vicious with her arrows, displeased even to be in proximity to so much “elfy, magic-y shite.” Last time, although she and the Inquisitor had been finished for a while, Lavellan had still brought her to the Temple. Dorian wasn’t sure if it was spite, at that point, or a lingering need to keep trying to make Sera appreciate her heritage, but judging by her behavior now, he was amazed they hadn’t killed each other before finding the Well, last time.

Even though Dorian didn’t get to go inside the Temple of Mythal, the Arbor Wilds campaign was a large and complex undertaking, and in the aftermath of it there was much to do in order to return to Skyhold and settle back into some sort of routine. Lavellan, Morrigan, Solas, Cole, and Cassandra beat everyone else back to Skyhold; Dorian returned with the rest of the army, in the company of the Chargers. He unpacked and bathed and wasted no time procuring a few bottles of passable wine—a luxury he always missed on the road. One did not hike around the countryside getting into battles with several liters of liquid in one’s pack—if he brought alcohol at all, it had to be a small flask of something strong.

Ah, Skyhold. Home is where the bottles are kept. Dorian chuckled, carrying his treasures up to Bull’s room and contemplating putting that on a placard outside his door.

Bull welcomed him with a smile. He’d been writing reports to no one, a habit he seemed to want to break, eventually, but not enough to fight the impulse very hard, just yet. He appreciated a distraction, though. And Dorian supposed they had time to relax now. He did not expect to see the Inquisitor until her advisors had finished with her, and said as much to Bull as they opened the wine—“How long do you suppose it will be before our poor Inquisitor is allowed to leave the War Room?”

Bull frowned. “I don’t think they have her in there, yet.”

“What, really?”

“I think she was out of Skyhold when we got back. Must have gone somewhere.”

Dorian straightened, pausing between pouring Bull’s glass and his own. “Come to think of it, Solas wasn’t in the rotunda.” He hummed. “Goodness, the advisors aren’t going to be pleased with her if she’s scampered off for a little tryst and made them wait in the aftermath of such an important campaign.”

“Eh, they’ll get over it.” Bull grinned. “She’s waited a long time for it. Let them go whisper Elven in each other’s ears and have a good time.”

Dorian hoped they would, very much. If he could accomplish something for Lavellan with this dangerous journey through time, he might feel a little more justified. Not that he regretted the trip, considering the outcome for Bull and the Chargers so far, but it did still feel horribly selfish at times. If he remembered correctly, they were now close to the time when things had ended
between Solas and Lavellan, yet so far there was no sign of trouble.

Dismissing those worries, Dorian smiled. “You know, Elven can be a surprisingly erotic language. They combine terms in such a flowery way, and when you start applying that pattern to sex, the result is…well.”

Bull turned his charmingly blatant grin on Dorian. “Didn’t know dirty poetry did it for you.”

But Dorian snorted. “Don’t misunderstand—I have never employed Elven erotica for self-pleasure. I’m merely saying it’s remarkably lurid. I’m not certain one could really enjoy it without laughing; it becomes terribly difficult to take seriously.”

“I get that with Tevene.” Bull winked.

“You’ve studied Tevene?” Dorian paused, glancing over the rim of his glass. This never came up before.

“The Ben-Hassrath wouldn’t be good for much if we didn’t speak the language of our main enemy,” Bull remarked matter-of-factly.

“How well do you speak it?”

Bull grinned wickedly at him. “Habeo voluptatem interius corpus tui, ubi mea mentula iaciat.”

Dorian nearly dropped his wine.

“How was that?” Still grinning.

With composure born of a lifetime of practice, Dorian arched an eyebrow. “Heavily accented.” Then he added, “And such words make you laugh?”

Bull shrugged his damnably chiseled shoulders. “Tevene doesn’t leave much to the imagination.”

“It’s a very precise language,” Dorian agreed—or defended, perhaps. “It’s very clear and specific, which has a certain appeal as well.”

“Oh? What I just said—that get you going?” The glint in Bull’s eye was a blatant promise. It was already abundantly clear that they were going to have sex at some point tonight, and Dorian would probably learn just how much dirty Tevene Bull spoke.

Dorian cleared his throat. “I didn’t say that.” Then, he quickly added, “What about Qunlat? I’ve never come across the topic, so I don’t know how the language handles it.”

With a knowing smile, Bull didn’t push his last question. “Hm. Pretty much the same way it handles everything—lots of metaphor. Or maybe not always metaphor, exactly, because we aren’t shy about saying what we mean. But words have layers of meaning. There’s a lot of subtext.”

“There would have to be, I should think,” he dryly observed. “Our dear Inquisitor shared with me your translation of that charming Qunlat battle cry you favor when anything draconic is trying to eat us.” He delicately took a sip. “The translation is much too long to be verbatim.”

Bull chuckled. “Yeah, some of it is implied. Like saying ‘Coming!’ You don’t need to say ‘I am.’ That’s obvious. And the context makes all the difference. Somebody calls you from a distance—‘Coming’ means something completely different than when you’re fucking.”

Rapidly losing interest in alcohol, Dorian smirked. With a graceful, sensual stride he crossed to
Bull and stepped into his space. He placed a hand on that massive chest, slid it down over Bull’s stomach, and cupped his cock through his pants. Then he tipped his head back to look up at Bull through heavy-lidded eyes and purred, “*Taarsidath-an halsaam. There. Does that context work?*”

Bull’s smile was hot, his hand moving to the small of Dorian’s back. “Now who’s got an accent?” he teased, then groaned softly as Dorian stroked over his concealed shaft. “So does that mean you get yourself off thinking about my dick when I’m not around, big guy?”

Pressing closer, Dorian dropped a kiss just below Bull’s collarbone. “I fail to see the purpose in thinking of anyone else’s dick, when yours is so—”

A sudden thumping on Bull’s door interrupted them.

Dorian grunted annoyance and glared at the door to the battlements, releasing Bull’s cock. Bull looked unmoved, but Dorian knew he’d shifted—hand free to reach for the nearest weapon, body ready for anything. With a sigh, Dorian patted Bull’s chest and went to answer the door.

Both of them dropped their guard the moment the door was open. Before he could even flinch, Dorian had an armful of elf, tangled red curls in his face, and within a heartbeat they both recognized their Inquisitor.

Sobbing into Dorian’s chest.

“My dear friend, what in the Maker’s world—?” He looked to Bull, who was clearly just as surprised, but moved quickly to shut the door and pull out a chair. If Dorian could get the distraught elf to move, he’d try to bring her over to it…

“I’m going to kill him!” the muffled voice bawled into Dorian’s shirt—and his heart fell. *So that’s it. Somehow, things had taken a bad turn and ended, just as before. Poor girl… I’m so sorry. I wanted this to go better for you… At the moment, it seemed to be going worse. But perhaps he just hadn’t been allowed to see Lavellan’s full grief the first time.*

Then she pulled back, and Dorian froze in shock.

Her face was red and streaked with tears—and utterly bare of her vallaslin. For a moment, he wasn’t sure it was her. “How did…what has…?”

“Oh Dorian, how *could* he?” Lavellan’s every word was broken with wet sobs. “I trusted him, and I was so sure we were…no, we were! He told me he loved me, and I believed him, and I even let him do *this*, and then…” Her voice cracked. “Just…” She threw a hand out in an angry gesture. “And he won’t even tell me *why*!”

Murmuring hollowly, Dorian guided her to the chair. He glanced at Bull, only to see a matching confusion, but Bull was quick to start pulling out the kettle and making tea. He’d surely have a stash of the Inquisitor’s favorite.

In the meantime, Dorian settled the heartbroken elf and sat beside her, still holding her hands, because she wouldn’t quite let him go. “It’s all right, it’s all right—we’re here. Take a deep breath…there. There’s no rush; we’ll wait.”

And they did—for several minutes, Lavellan just cried, unable to say much of anything. She leaned against Dorian’s shoulder and sobbed, and he held her and stroked her wild hair while Bull silently fixed tea, found her a blanket, stirred the fire, and generally made things comfortable. Lavellan was still sobbing when she accepted a steaming cup, but the tea seemed to clear her head a bit, and she began to speak more clearly—broken by frequent uses of the handkerchief Bull offered.
She described the whole trip, with frequent interruptions to talk about how perfectly in love they had been up to this point. She explained what Solas had told her about Dalish vallaslin, and broke down all over again when she related how she’d agreed and he’d removed it with a spell. Then her story became very confused. All Dorian could gather for certain was that Solas had ended their relationship without a word of explanation, and Lavellan seemed half-convinced that he hadn’t really wanted to—but Dorian had to believe there was at least a strong possibility that that was wishful thinking on her part.

Then her story broke down completely, leaving the Inquisitor sobbing again, repeating “What am I going to do?” and “I hate this, I don’t want to do this anymore, I want to go home.” Solas had pulled the ground out from under her, and Dorian didn’t know what to do with the broken pieces left crying on his shoulder.

She ended up in Bull’s lap, after a while, and the giant qunari cradled the tiny little elf girl as her sobs faded with exhaustion. Dorian took the opportunity of a minute to think and set up glyphs to push the Fade back. He wasn’t hearing anything, but she might, in such a state of anguish. Bull noticed what he was doing, and Dorian saw the moment he realized why. He tensed, glancing nervously at the potential abomination in his lap—but Dorian shook his head, laying a hand on his shoulder and murmuring, “A precaution. Don’t worry.”

The fact that Bull relaxed at that—without any real explanation—made Dorian’s heart swell, in spite of the situation.

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Dorian closed the door quietly behind himself and joined Bull on the battlements. “She fell asleep,” he said, reaching out to offer Bull the bottle he’d brought. Bull took it and smiled.

“Want me to carry her back to her room?”

“Mm.” Dorian shook his head. “No. I’d rather she didn’t wake alone.”

Bull nodded. “I can sleep on the floor.” He passed the bottle back, and Dorian took a drink. “You want to stay too?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Nah. I got her, if you want to go; but you’re both welcome.” Dorian nodded at that, agreeing.

There was silence for several minutes before he murmured, “I almost didn’t recognize her.”

“Yeah.”

Another pause. “I don’t suppose she’d let me kill him.”

“Probably not. She would have killed him herself if she wanted to.”

Dorian shook his head. “No, not him. Any ill-meaning stranger, certainly. But not him. Not even after he broke her heart.”

Bull hummed, thinking. “Maybe you’re right.”

The quiet night surrounded them; even the noise from the tavern sounded soft and distant. The wind around the ramparts was louder, more immediate. Dorian shivered in spite of himself.
Bull shifted closer and turned to block the wind. Dorian swallowed, but couldn’t help the warmth in his heart.

“Never seen a broken heart before,” Bull finally commented.

After a long pause, Dorian sighed. “Well, as you can see, it’s not just some charming Southern myth.”

“Hmm.” Then… “You ever had one?”

“What, a broken heart?”

“Yeah.”

Dorian smiled hollowly. “Who in our eclectic Inquisition does not know what it is to be broken in some way?” Then he added, “Dagna, perhaps.”

“Hm.” Bull was a solid wall at his side, no shifting or fidgeting; nothing to give away thought or feeling. “I used to think the Qun made us stronger. Especially when I first came South. I heard stories and tavern songs about brokenhearted people doing some crazy shit, and I just thought—damn, they go down easy without the Qun.”

He looked up at Bull’s dimly lit profile. “I take it your views have changed?”

“Looking back now…I saw a lot of Qunari go Tal-Vashoth on Seheron. Sometimes you could almost see it coming, Seheron being Seheron. But sometimes people who seemed fine just…vanished one day. I wouldn’t see them again until some big shitshow fight with Tal-Vashoth, and then they’d end up dead. Sometimes I thought I was pretty good for keeping it together through so much crap, when others broke over some tiny little thing.”

There was a hint of a growl in Bull’s voice, then. Dorian watched him. “…But?”

Bull looked down at his hands, rubbed them together briefly. Briefly, too, lingered over the stumps of the short ones. “Maybe there are no big things or little things. Something that seems small to me turns out to be the end of the world for someone else, and they break. Maybe loving someone and then losing them is really horrible…when it’s not just a tavern song about someone else.”

After lingering on Bull’s hands, Dorian’s gaze slid outward, over the vast empty space in front of them, way up here. “That’s true enough,” he finally said, softly.

“You going to tell me about it?”


Bull nodded, slowly. “Same reason I turned myself in after Seheron. I won’t be a danger to the little guys. Just the bad guys with swords.”

“Preemptive action to prevent yourself from breaking. Rather clever.” Dorian ran his hand over stone, feeling the cold of it, the faint scratch. “You might kill some people if you lost yourself. I, on the other hand…” He pushed magic through the cold stone until several feet of it glowed, radiating heat. “I could destroy the whole world.” It was only a murmur, but Bull had excellent hearing.

“Really? The whole world?”
“Given the right set of circumstances,” he qualified.

Bull hummed. “No offense, big guy, but I have a hard time seeing that. If there was something you could do that would really destroy the whole world, I can’t see you doing it, even if you were really messed up.” An enormous hand came up to rest between—and across—Dorian’s shoulder blades. “You’re a good guy, and you hold it together better than anyone.”

Dorian lifted his face to Bull’s, to that kindly smile he adored. With his own rueful smile, he tipped his head to the door to Bull’s room. “Have you ever seen her like this?”

_Hesitation._ The answer, of course, was _no._ Lavellan wasn’t as self-possessed as Dorian on a good day, but she was generally quite resilient. She lashed out a lot, but she weathered the sadder blows with the proverbial stiff upper lip, and she never fell apart. She wasn’t often vulnerable at all, at least as far as any non-elven friends could see. This was…unprecedented.

And it was much worse than the first time it had happened.

“You saying it was like that for you?”

He opened his mouth…and ended up shrugging instead. Then, after a pause, “If I did…” His voice got stuck a moment. He felt the gentle back and forth brush of Bull’s thumb over the nape of his neck. “If I did do something terrible, would you hate me for it? Would you wish, after all, that I’d been collared, my lips sewn shut?”

A slow exhale. “I don’t know, Dorian. Like I said, I can’t see you doing something like killing kids, no matter what happened.”

“Hypothetically then…” He made himself turn and face Bull, shifting closer as he did so that he wouldn’t lose Bull’s touch. The large hand slid to his shoulder. “No killing anyone.” Blackwall came to mind. “…Directly. But if I did something that put a great many people in danger?”

Bull was studying him, not even subtly for once. “Because some asshole fucked you up?”

_The irony._ “Because I didn’t see it coming,” he corrected. “Because I’m a selfish man, and not as strong as I thought.”

“So you put people in danger—then what happened to them?”

_I don’t know yet._ “Well…I did everything in my power to get them back out of it, I suppose.” Up to and including dying for it, Dorian realized—for that was still a very real possibility. Not one he thought about often, but simply having survived all these battles once didn’t guarantee he’d survive them again, he knew. It was easy to forget, when he remembered living through it all and winning, that they might still lose. Or they might win again, but Dorian could be killed in the process.

And that didn’t change anything. He’d joined this cause—oh, it felt like forever ago—ready to die to save the world. But saving the world and not Bull hadn’t been good enough, so here he was again, still ready to die to get it absolutely right this time.

Bull sighed. “Dorian, I’m not going to judge you for making a mistake in the past.” His other hand came up and rested on Dorian’s other shoulder. “I’m not going to change my mind about you. You’re a good guy. I think if you ever did anything I couldn’t live with, you wouldn’t be able to live with it either.” He pulled, bringing Dorian that last bit closer. Dorian rested his hands on Bull’s broad waist. “You want to talk, I’ll listen. You want to forget about it, I’m good with that too.”

With a long look, Dorian studied him. This felt…different. He couldn’t be sure, of course—_before,_
there had been no situation like this for them to discuss. Still, he sensed that Hisrad would have asked. Not directly, nor would he have pressured Dorian to explain in detail, but he would have found a way to inspire a more detailed explanation, surely. He’d done it with other topics, and Dorian had let him—hadn’t minded, really, talking about himself at length.

Bull had always been like this when it came to sex—take it or leave it, whatever you want. And he’d done a damn good job of *seeming* just as accommodating with everything else. But now, looking him in the face and realizing how genuine this moment was, Dorian knew there had been a difference. He wouldn’t have let something like this go, honestly and completely, when he was bound to the Ben-Hassrath.

He was changing. Somehow, he was living for himself after all.

*Maker, let this be only the beginning for him.*

“You may be right,” Dorian sighed, relaxing. “Thank you.”

“Sure, big guy.” Then, “You want to go check on the boss?”

Dorian patted Bull’s thick arm. “Yes, we’d better not leave her alone any longer.”
“So…you can turn into a dragon?”

Bull had been missing from his spot in the tavern. Dorian had found him, of all places, in the garden.

“How many times must I repeat myself? ’Tis a wondrous thing indeed, but not so impossibly far beyond your grasp, surely.”

Bull didn’t even blink at the slight. “What does it feel like?”

This is…new. I knew she could shapeshift, but a dragon?

“I couldn’t possibly describe it to anyone who does not know how to wear another creature’s form—least of all to one who knows nothing of magic.”

“Oh, come on! Give me something! Does everyone look like tiny ants? Can you breathe fire? Can you feel it inside before you spit it out?”

Morrigan rolled her eyes and regarded the qunari nearly twice her height with amusement and disdain. “I suppose it feels like raw power incarnate—the pure, physical reality of glory in every inch of one’s body.”

“Damn…” Bull had that glassy, far-away look in his eye already. Dorian cleared his throat lightly and approached.

“You must forgive the Iron Bull, Lady Morrigan. We’re all entitled to our hobbies, naturally, but his fondness for dragons is more of a passion, really.”

An equally superior look. “Is that so. I had heard that you fit that role, actually.”

Without even a blush, Dorian maintained his polite smile and breezed past the subject. “How does one learn to become a dragon, if I may ask? I’ve never heard of such a spell before.”

“Shit yeah, teach it to him! Dorian would make a great dragon!”

Morrigan’s lips quirked briefly, but she maintained her bored expression. “I think not. ’Tis an incredibly rare power. Even I, with many years’ practice in the art of changing form, could not have learned this except…” She stopped, expression suddenly turned sour.

“Yes? How did you learn it?”

“I suppose you’ll all hear about it soon enough from your Inquisitor.” She sighed. “A rather powerful witch calling herself Mythal taught me. Now I have the power to use in the Inquisition’s service, to defeat Corypheus, and then…who can know.” Her voice became quieter toward the end. Then, sharp again, she added, “But you can hear all the details from your leaders, not I. If you’ll pardon me.”

Dorian bowed slightly, but Bull followed after Morrigan. “Wait! One more question! What color dragon do you turn into?”

Smiling, Dorian didn’t wait around to hear the rest. He left them to find Lavellan—allowing Bull to annoy Morrigan in peace. He hoped a little fishing would turn up an explanation of this new
“Oh, Dorian. Perfect timing. Wine?” She stood from the papers at her desk with considerable alacrity and yanked a bottle of mild berry stuff out of a closet. Dorian would barely call her preferred drink “wine,” but he supposed that if his fondness for alcohol gave him a reputation that made him an ideal drinking buddy, he’d be that for her when she wanted one.

“So,” he began, after she rapidly drained her first glass and refilled, “I hear our new ally Morrigan has learned to turn into a dragon. In fact, I think that’s all I’ll be hearing about from Bull for a while.”

She managed a faint smile, too tight around the eyes to be real. “Yes, and we might stand a chance after all, thanks to that.”

“Excellent news. But how ever did she acquire such a skill?”

Lavellan frowned into her glass. “The voices…the elves from the Well of Sorrows directed her to an altar to Mythal. We went, and Mythal met us there…or the person who shares her existence now, I suppose. And she taught Morrigan how, I think.”

Wait… “You…let Morrigan drink from the Well of Sorrows?”

“I guess we haven’t finished reporting all the details of the Temple yet, but yes—she wanted to save whatever secrets the Well contained, she had no fear of paying the price…it seemed obvious.” Lavellan looked very unhappy about it—Not so obvious after all, perhaps? But that detail remained true.

Last time, the Inquisitor had been the one to drink. She had a jealous passion for her people’s secrets, and though she took the price very seriously, she apparently couldn’t bear to entrust such knowledge to a shemlen. She heard the voices ever after that, and even when Dorian left to travel back in time, she was still grappling with trying to understand them—and live with them.

“I rather thought you would have wanted to know whatever the Well contained yourself. It is your people’s history, after all.”

“I did, but…” Her teeth clenched around the name, “Solas was wary, and I thought perhaps I was not free to take such a risk myself. It is a shame to let a shem hear my people’s ancient whispers, but after meeting Mythal, I regret it less.” She looked up at him, eyes wide and sincere—face flushing a little from drink already. “It wasn’t anything like I would have expected, but it was her. The soul of Mythal herself! I can’t believe I met her.” She went on to explain Morrigan’s relationship to Flemeth, Flemeth’s history with Mythal, and the Well’s role and Mythal’s will—all things Dorian knew from before, and none of which explained why Morrigan could turn into a dragon.

Dorian remembered a different outcome. He hadn’t been there, but he’d heard about the dragon fight, and he’d witnessed the Inquisitor’s ability to summon the dragon for their fight with Corypheus. But in her account now, there was no mention of a Guardian—only Morrigan’s mother, and a new ability.

It was comforting, at least, to know that the outcome was the same—either way, they had a dragon to match against Corypheus’ corrupt archdemon. And perhaps things would be easier for Lavellan, not being affected personally by the Well afterward.
“The elven gods are real, you know…or they were real.” Lavellan was mumbling into her empty glass, now. “I always believed it, but it’s different now…different after you actually *talk* to one. They were real, and they’re gone now…they left us…” Her voice cracked, and she sniffed, eyes watering. “Why would they leave us? We need them…we’re no good at all without them…”

Gently shushing, Dorian slid closer and pulled her in for a hug. She cried, and it was obviously not really about the gods. So Dorian held her and kept her company—the best apology he could offer for putting her through this again.

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In the days that followed, Lavellan was less overwhelmed with grief; she took to releasing her emotions in bursts of anger, resulting in a great deal of kicking. Nearly everyone who tried to bring her less-than-wonderful news got kicked, including all three advisors.

Suddenly, Dorian was the mage of choice on every mission. Not that the Inquisitor came to ask him personally—but he didn’t take offense. She no longer visited anyone in the tower because she wouldn’t pass through the rotunda. So Dorian got messengers, or Lavellan caught him and Bull in the Rest and informed them of the next departure, and they spent plenty of time out of Skyhold altogether.

It was similar to before, although last time Dorian’s weeks and weeks of camping were largely spent becoming better acquainted with Cassandra, being there for Lavellan, and occasionally trying to coach Cole through the process of becoming a young man. Bull had joined them for two out of six missions, then—this time, it was Iron Bull for every mission, and Varric, Cole, and Sera were all equally favored. Cole was barely there when they camped, still flitting about invisibly, helping everyone from dying soldiers to the nearest wild nug.

Sera’s presence was a surprise. Dorian wondered, for a while, if Lavellan was still interested in her—perhaps wishing to be consoled? He decided, eventually, that that wasn’t it. Sera talked about Dagna constantly, and Dorian eventually realized that Lavellan wasn’t after her affections anyway. She seemed most comforted by Sera’s cheerful obscenity, and her complete disregard for the brokenhearted. Not in a bad way, either—Lavellan had others for support, such as himself and Bull. Sera helped by treating her normally, no more cautious of her feelings than she was of a beehive, and that, too, was a kind of support.

She needed all she could get. The Inquisitor was barely holding herself together. She threw everything into doing what needed to be done, pragmatic to core, but she was miserable. Everyone could see it, and to Dorian, it looked much worse than the last time. Half the time she couldn’t even summon her anger; sometimes, when they were following her through the countryside, he’d see her raise a hand to wipe surreptitiously at her face.

His best comfort was the foreknowledge that their dear commander was still waiting in the wings, ever-devoted, strong, and steady, and when she got through the worst of this pain, he’d surely make her happy.

So Dorian spent weeks camping—and sharing a tent with Bull. A small change. They had done it before, but in smaller doses, with enough time back at Skyhold in between that they could maintain certain camp etiquette, for the most part.

Weeks on end, camp became home; camp hygiene became the norm; and etiquette had to be redefined. A muffled fumble in the dark for relief was fine when they’d be behind thick stone walls again next week. After a month in tents, with no immediate return planned, sleeping beside each other was no longer restful, and hands were not nearly enough.
They were certainly not going to be enough tonight.

Dorian’s gaze had been wandering all day. Bull caught him at it more than once and grinned, flexing and winking with his one eye, but his gaze was just as hot in return. It had been damn near a month since they’d properly fucked, yet every night he had to try to sleep with Bull beside him, the rich, warm scent of him filling their tent, every inch of him right there, an easy arm’s reach away. Dorian was beginning to show bags under his eyes, to his utter and complete devastation.

Then they were trying to close a rift, and a terror nearly shredded Sera when Dorian’s barrier on her shattered early—his fault; he’d formed it badly due to his lack of focus. When Lavellan finally got the rift sealed, he apologized, but she gave him a Look that promised a little Talk would be coming, probably in camp that night. And so it was.

“So it’s lack of sleep?” Her expression was guessing at the entirely wrong reason for Dorian to be so tired.

“Lack of rest, I’m afraid.” Dorian cleared his throat. “To be quite frank with you, if Iron Bull and I were keeping each other up like that, you’d be kept up as well, as we demonstrated in the Western Approach. Thus, we’ve been…abstaining, as much as possible. Without becoming crass, the abstinence is beginning to make rest difficult for me. I can’t speak for Bull, but…”

“That’s…all right, I understand.” By the flash of pure sorrow in her eyes, Dorian had an idea who she was thinking of, and how well she might be able to relate. “All right, look.” She glanced around. “There’s something I can show you that will help. Come on.”

Curious, Dorian followed.

They were in the Emerald Graves, so after only a short walk, camp had vanished from sight. Lavellan found a spot between two hillocks, with a few ancient trees around. She stepped into the center of them, measuring the distance with her eyes, then pointing. “You need trees,” she began, “at least three. Six is better, if you can find a proper clearing with that many surrounding you.” She skipped over massive roots to touch one tree trunk. “You place an anchor spell in each.” Dorian watched her run through a quick Elven incantation, and a little silver shimmer threaded through the bark. “You do each one, and then there’s a glyph you place in the center—I’ll show you in a minute, let you practice the anchors first. Then you raise the glyph,” she motioned with her hand toward the sky, “high enough, but not too high or the barriers will break. Then you finish the spell—I’ll show you in a minute—and sulahn’neh! You’re surrounded in a sound barrier.”

“A sound barrier…of course!” Dorian was fascinated. “Why didn’t I ever think of such of a thing? Naturally barriers can be fine-tuned to block some things and not others—why not sound?”

“It’s just sound, though,” she cautioned. “You still need a relatively private spot, and it doesn’t hurt to set a few regular wards against animals and such, because anything can still see you and wander in.”

“It would be perfect if it could be set up around a single tent…” Dorian mused.

“Well, you fiddle with it if you want. This is a Dalish spell, so it needs trees. I don’t know how to anchor it with anything else.”

Dorian pressed his lips together to stifle his smile. “The Dalish came up with this, you say?”

Lavellan actually grinned at that, rolling her eyes. It was almost the first Dorian had seen of the old her since after the Temple. “We live in close proximity in aravels, which are no more sound-proof
than a tent. One of the less widely known duties of the Keeper and the First is to make a few of these barriers for the clan’s use, wherever we camp. They’re…always in demand.”

“Indeed.” He smiled broadly. “The things I’m discovering about the Dalish!” Then, “Thank you, my friend. This will be a great help.”

“Good to hear, and that’s all I need to hear about it,” Lavellan shot back. Dorian laughed, and the two of them went over the spell in every detail until Dorian could set up a perfect sound barrier on his own.

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He would definitely be able to reconstruct the spell for use in camp—Dorian was quite brilliant, familiar with many forms of spellcrafting, and he knew just the book to consult, and it was waiting for him back in Skyhold’s library.

In the meantime, it felt so good to have the Bull again.

It wasn’t the first time they’d done it outdoors, if this even counted. Bull had gathered up the most massive armload of blankets and bedrolls that his ever-massive arms could carry, and he’d done his best to cushion away all bumpy roots and rocks. And it wasn’t like they hadn’t seen each other lately—they’d been constant companions for weeks. It wasn’t even really the silly stuff, like stars and moonlight and an early summer breeze scented with flowers.

It was just…good to be together again.

They took full advantage of the sound barrier. Dorian let Bull know in his most vocal manner exactly how much he appreciated being speared on his quite considerable girth again. And Bull was neither quite nor sparing his praise of Dorian—nor gentle in his fucking. They went hard, and long, and very messy, as they had done before and would surely do again.

And when it was very late and they should have gathered everything up and headed back to camp to sleep properly sheltered in their tent, they lingered instead—lying close, sharing warmth, and talking of nothing.

“Apparently this is quite the norm for most Dalish. Of course, I shall soon have the spell modified for tent use.”

“Works for me.”

“This is still quite acceptable, in the meantime, however.” Dorian grinned. Bull smiled, his eye soft as he hummed in an agreeing tone.

“If you were Dalish,” Dorian wondered aloud, “and had to always have sex under the stars like this, where would you choose for your clan to live?”

“Where in Thedas? That’s a lot to choose from.”

“All right, I’ll narrow it down. Let’s say…choose from among the areas we’ve visited with the Inquisition.”

Bull laughed. “Can you do that? Isn’t everywhere we’ve been too cold for you?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t choose the Emprise.” Dorian shuddered. “But it was hot enough in the desert…”
“Not at night,” Bull pointed out. “And didn’t you say the Dalish need trees for this spell? Those are hard to find in the desert.”

“Hmm. Come to think of it, we’ve never encountered a clan in those regions. I wonder if that’s why?”

“Don’t know.” Bull shifted in what was probably a shrug, with the shoulder Dorian wasn’t using for a pillow. “Me, I’d probably go for the Emprise, though.”

“Maker’s breath, why?”

A slow grin. “Heard they have dragons, maybe out past that bridge we’re working on fixing…”

Dorian snorted. “You would find it erotic to imagine getting eaten while having sex.”

“Not that,” Bull defended. “Wherever my clan lived, that would be home. You don’t spend your whole life having sex.”

“Don’t you?” Dorian mumbled. “You’ve made a valiant effort to do so.”

Another chuckle. “Maybe, but even so, you need something to do with your days. I’d like a place with dragons to hunt. If I had to be Dalish, I mean. Nothing against them, but I’d probably get pretty bored with that life.”

“Hmm. I have to agree there.”

“So what about you? I’m guessing not the Emprise, and probably not the Fallow Mire…”

Dorian smirked. “Well, as a necromancer…”

“Yeah right, big guy. I remember what you had to say about that place and the weather when we were there.”

“I wonder if I could find a way to affect some sort of drastic change on that front,” Dorian mused aloud. “Crestwood, after all, is really quite pastoral now.”

“Bet they still get a rainy day now and then, though.”

“Hmm. I suppose it would have to be the desert for me, then. The first sand-dwelling Dalish clan, with this,” he waved at the sound barrier, “modified to use…oh, rocks or something, I imagine.”

“All that dry skin,” Bull hummed, glancing at him sidelong. “Your knuckles would start to get chapped again. The skin would probably even crack…”

Dorian winced. “Point taken. Perhaps a little cold could be tolerated for a more hospitable location.”

“Hey, I do a pretty good job of keeping you warm, don’t I?”

“Oh, but you’d be in the Emprise. Dragon hunting,” Dorian smiled.

“Mmm,” Bull grunted. “I don’t know…there’s a dragon around here somewhere too, right?”

“Among other things.” Dorian was fighting down a fond smile.

“Then, here is good. If you were here, I’d pick here, too. And if I were here, you wouldn’t get
cold. You’re good now, right?”

Swallowing a lump in his throat, Dorian answered in a light tone, “Skin to skin with a walking furnace? Yes, I’m tolerably comfortable.”

Bull turned a gentle smile on him. “Good.” And Dorian felt like crying, so he leaned up on one arm and kissed Bull instead.

They didn’t put it in the sort of words that went in Cassandra’s books, but Dorian got the message, even if Bull wasn’t entirely sure why the sentiment was important.

*If I could go anywhere, do anything—if I had the whole world to choose from—I’d go where you are.*

*I’d choose you.*
Chapter 29

“Thank the Maker—finally, a proper bath, a decent shave…”

“Aww, no more stubble? I like it on you, Vint. It’s hot. Makes you look rougher, little bit wild…”

Dorian snorted as they approached Skyhold’s gates. “Far be it from me to attempt to match you in the scruffiness department.”

Lavellan sighed. “Do you think they’ll let me bathe before they lock me in the War Room for a week of planning?”

“They would if you smelled worse,” Varric commented.

“You do have a remarkable lack of natural body odor,” Dorian commented. “Is it an elven trait?”

“Why do you think we always call you shemlen ‘foul-smelling’? And loud, for that matter.” She gently rubbed the long point of her ear, a little pink from the cold.

“Hey—we’ve been really careful about the noise, boss…”

“I meant in general.” Snapped, loudly, to forestall any further explanations. “To your point, Dorian—elves do have body odor, but since I began to live among you humans, I’ve realized that ours is mild by comparison.”

Dorian blinked. “I feel terribly insulted.”

“Hey, I like it,” Bull offered with a boulder-sized shrug.

The stable-hands were approaching as the party began to dismount, so Dorian left off any further discussion of personal odor and its varying appeals. The advisors were already descending on Lavellan, anyway. Dorian collected his pack and fell into step beside Bull. “Poor Inquisitor,” he commented, once away from the others a bit, “it appears that bath will have to wait.”

Bull chuckled. “Red will make sure the meeting is short. Not saying they won’t reconvene later, but Red can tell when she needs a break. Probably will have the bath waiting for her before boss even asks for it.”

“I should hire a spymaster,” Dorian hummed.

“You got a former spy—how’s that?”

Dorian didn’t falter or give any outward indication, but he felt his heart skip momentarily at hearing Bull mention it so casually. Lips tugging into a tiny smile, he glanced at Bull. “It will do.”

“Sounds good,” Bull grinned in return. Then he unlocked his door, and they both entered the room. And then Dorian stopped.

“Oh.”

Bull was still grinning, now watching him with a knowing look. “Forget where your room is, Vint?”

“My apologies,” Dorian managed, blinking at his surroundings in surprise. “I suppose, after weeks
of sharing a tent with you…”

“Forgot we don’t live together?”

Dorian shook his head, laughing a little at himself. *We did…long ago.* “Yes, I suppose I must have given up all hope of ever being rid of your smell.” He shot Bull a look. “You noticed on the way up, didn’t you? You might have said something.”

“I wanted to wait.” Bull dropped his pack with a smile and sat down on the edge of his bed. “I’ll say it now.” Dorian was just starting to sigh something along the lines of *It hardly makes sense to point out my error now, I’ve already discovered it*—when Bull said, “You can unpack here, if you want.”

He stopped, mouth open for a long moment before he remembered how to snap it shut.

There hadn’t been any offer, last time. It had just been a long process of Dorian falling asleep here more and more often, leaving more and more of his things, and eventually forgetting to keep his own room stocked with firewood, or anything else—even clothing. By the time Dorian went back to Tevinter, they were *de facto* living together without having ever made a deliberate choice to. Now…

Incredulity helped Dorian distill all his questions down into one, eventually.

“…Truly?”

“Yup.” Bull regarded him calmly, repeating once, “If you want.”

Slowly, almost cautiously, Dorian stepped forward. “I suppose you do have more space for a bathtub…”

“Could keep one here permanently, just need to call in a few favors.”

He kept moving closer. “You really would need to do something about the state of your roof…”

“I’ll patch it myself, tomorrow.”

*Don’t trouble yourself,* he wanted to say, and *Are you certain?* And a tiny little voice deep in his mind said, *Don’t trust, it’s a trap, why else would he ask?*

But if it was a trap, it couldn’t hurt him worse than… *Maker, was it really almost a year ago already?* And Bull wouldn’t offer unless he was sure, and very happy to “trouble” himself. So instead, Dorian just stood in front of Bull and looked down and simply said, “Very well then. I’ll unpack here.”

Bull’s smile spread over his face slowly, from the crinkle at the corner of his eye to the pull of the scar across his lip. “I’ll go get that tub.”

“I suppose,” Dorian placed a hand on the giant shoulder without the pauldron, “the tub might wait…a little while.”

Bull’s hand at the small of his back gently tugging him closer. “Yeah?”

“If, as you claim, you’re really so fond of my roguish look and ‘au naturale’ scent, as the Orlesians would say…”

A huge grin, and Bull pulled him close, buried his face against Dorian’s chest—and his robes, in
need of washing—and inhaled deeply. “Yeah. It’s pretty great.”

Dorian hoped he wasn’t feeling warm because he was blushing. Surely not. He smiled. “Then I suppose, rather than waste all this apparently coveted travel filth…”

Then Bull cut him off with a kiss—but not, surprisingly, quite the filthy, lustful one Dorian was expecting. It was short and sweet, and the Bull pulled back and looked at him again. “You remember that fantasy you told me about, where you get kidnapped by qunari bandits?”

“Pirates.”

“Yeah. Dashing villains, same thing.” Bull gave his terrible one-eyed wink. “How about you be the dashing villain and take advantage of me?”

“I can certainly do that,” Dorian murmured, but underneath was a tingle of awareness—A request. This is a real request. He’s asking me for something I’ve never even hinted at wanting. It was something Bull wanted, he was sure. “I ought to tie you up, I think. My prized captive.”

Bull provided the rope, and Dorian added a spell—it wasn’t quite unbreakable, but even Bull would have a great deal of difficulty snapping it. Then Dorian stripped his “captive” and lay him on the bed, bound wrists hooked above his head, and Bull watched as Dorian undressed.

“I’ve always wanted to have a qunari to play with,” Dorian smirked, lowering his voice a bit to make him sound a little more villainous and threatening. “You are going to be most entertaining, beast.”

“You will never get away with this,” Bull shot back, not making much effort to hide his grin. “There is a powerful, handsome mage who has claimed my dick for his exclusive pleasure. He will hunt you down, villain!”

It wasn’t a particularly serious role-play. They hadn’t set up a scene, really, and the lines were playful, with no conviction. And Dorian was only just getting naked; there was no touching, yet. If the mood were broken by something, it could be easily brushed past, probably without even interrupting the sex.

“Ha!” Dorian unlaced his trousers, the last significant clothing on him. “I am far too unscrupulous and desperately wicked to care for such threats of reprisal!” Test it—test it now, before things go any further. “Your lover can have you back when I have my fill of you, and not before!”

He knew Bull noticed, even if his expression didn’t flicker at all. He waited for the katoh, prepared to apologize for the term. Bull wouldn’t even be bothered by it, but Dorian still expected him to call a halt just to make sure there were no misunderstandings or one-sided expectations.

He didn’t expect Bull to smile—again, that slow, damnelly handsome smile—and answer mildly, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. My lover is a pretty jealous guy.”

Dorian felt heat swell in his stomach, along with a fluttery feeling. He smiled and approached the bed, purring, “Sounds like a character flaw.” His hands slipped over Bull’s hot skin.

“I think it’s sweet.” Rumbled just as softly. Then Dorian kissed him.

They were both a bit grimy from weeks of only streams or ponds in which to scrub off the worst of the blood and sweat—so certain activities were off the table for now. Bull, of course, wouldn’t have minded, but some things were a little too dirty for Dorian’s liking, even after years—and more years, before—of adjusting to rougher living.
None of those lingering hygienic considerations made him less eager for the weight of Bull’s thick cock in his hand. Mouth—perhaps later, after the bath. But Dorian gladly crawled on top of Bull and took hold of his thickening shaft and thoroughly molested him. He used his mouth on all the cleaner parts of Bull’s body, licking and kissing over the vast width of him. And, as long as he had stubble on his chin, Dorian decided to use it—and Bull groaned and throbbed in his hand when Dorian brushed his stubbled chin over the places he’d kissed.

“No, don’t try to resist me, my helpless captive,” he murmured, straddling Bull’s lap and pressing his own aching prick against Bull’s leaking shaft. He held their cocks together and rolled his hips—just enough sensation to tease.

With a deep, appreciative rumble, Bull watched him, gaze hot. “I like you like this.”

Dorian had to toss his head—he made it look like a vain, superior gesture, but he actually did have to. His hair was getting too long and had become difficult to keep styled, and now it was falling into his eyes. “Dirty, degenerate, and in need of a haircut?” he teased, still moving his hips fluidly.

“Nnh. I meant on top, but the look is good too. And the sass.” Bull chuckled.

“I’ll ride you tomorrow, if you like. When I’m less saddle-sore from the journey.”

“Shit yeah. Love looking up at you. Love looking down at you too—seeing my hands on you, watching you take my cock…makes me feel bigger. But looking up at you makes you look bigger, makes me feel sort of small. Makes you look so strong…it’s fucking hot.”

Dorian snapped his hips forward, pressing down harder. “I am strong. I am always strong, and I’m going to take my pleasure from you, and you are powerless to stop me.”

An empty threat, of course—if it even counted as a threat, the way it made Bull shudder with desire. The watchword was the one thing between them that Dorian had always trusted, even after coming back in time. He still did, and he knew Bull matched his trust.

“My lover.”

*Kadan.*

Maybe Bull matched him in more than that now, too.

“Shit, big guy,” Bull gasped, his hips jerking up to meet Dorian’s thrusts. “You’re so good. Yeah, that’s it. Damn…fuck me!”

Dorian moaned, sinking down to lie atop Bull’s sweaty bulk. He dragged his stubble over Bull’s collarbones and began to suck on a sensitive spot near his throat—not sparing the teeth. Bull would bruise if he was rough enough. And he kept thrusting his hips, stroking his hand over their leaking cocks. He felt the edge approach, tight and hot in his balls, and Dorian shifted to growl as close to Bull’s ear as he could, “I’m coming, Bull. And I’m going to shoot all over you. I’ll make you smell of me…of *this*…”

“Fuck, Dorian…!”

Dorian pressed under the ridge of Bull’s cockhead and felt him break. Semen spilled over his hand, his cock, shooting hard enough to coat his stomach, and Dorian moaned, loving it. Loving how much there always was, how this was just *Bull*, no effort to impress or show off—simply the reality of him, of his pleasure at Dorian’s touch.
He came himself not long after, adding to the mess between them. Delightful and atrocious—as everything about Bull was. And he thought Bull’s soft groan sounded like “Kadannn.”

Dorian lay atop Bull, breathing hard against his throat. “I rather think…I’ll have that bath, now,” he panted.

Bull’s answer was murmured against his temple. “Better untie me, then.”

“Oh, my apologies.” Dorian sat up, fumbling a moment before he found Bull’s wrists to unbind them. His efforts to check the skin were interrupted, however, when Bull wrapped him up in a giant hug and buried his face in Dorian’s disastrous hair and inhaled. Then, with a sigh, “All right. I can go get that tub for you now, big guy.”

“For us,” Dorian corrected. “You’ll be bathing as well, don’t think you can escape it.”

So it went—a bath for both of them, a rather protracted affair. When Dorian had returned to his usual sparkling self, they went down to the tavern for a meal, and many drinks. And there was no parting, no going back to his own room—just a return trip up the stairs with Bull, and then Dorian got Bull out of his appalling pants again. Now that they were clean, he very much wanted Bull in his mouth, and he sucked Bull enthusiastically, still wearing his robes and everything, even boots.

Then Bull asked—again, asked—“Going to let me get you naked too?” And Dorian graciously allowed it, and Bull undressed him meticulously and then rimmed Dorian until he begged and pleaded to come.

And after all that, they slept side by side, and woke together in the morning. Krem had Chargers’ business to go over with Bull, after his weeks of absence, but Bull collected an armload of planks and made Krem sit in his room and read everything aloud to him while Bull was up in the rafters, hammering away.

Dorian brought most of his essentials from his room, then stopped by the library to pick up the book on spellcrafting he’d wanted to consult and brought that along. He certainly could have worked in the library—it was quieter. But instead, he planted himself on Bull’s—and his, now—bed and read and took notes while half listening to Bull working and Krem trying to be heard over the noise.

That was where they all were when the sound of a distant explosion and a sudden flood of green light made Dorian look up. There was still enough of a gap in the roof that he could immediately see the color the sky had turned. He and Krem both rose and looked out; Bull had paused on his perch and could also clearly see the Breach in the distance.

Bull looked down at him and their eyes met.

“I think we had better go see the Inquisitor,” Dorian said slowly.

“Yeah.” Bull moved to climb down. “Sorry, Krem. We’ll finish this up later.”

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So it was time. Dorian remembered being nervous, before—and half certain he wasn’t going to survive. As much as all that was still valid, regardless of their success the first time, he felt oddly calm. Perhaps because, live or die, he knew Lavellan would win. With different allies, if she must; with a badly broken heart, if she must; she could and she would, and he told her so.

With her unmarked face, she looked strangely…younger. And her emotions seemed balder,
somehow—less guarded. “I hope you’re right.” She half-smiled. “It’s win or die trying, now.” Then she sighed. “Dorian?”

“Yes, my friend?”

She looked out over the road ahead—the road to Haven. “If I die, don’t let them spout any of their Chantry nonsense about Andraste returning to carry me to the Maker’s side, or whatever. I want to be returned to my clan.”

This was all…new. “I sincerely hope that won’t be necessary…” If Lavellan had had these thoughts before the battle last time, Dorian hadn’t been privileged to hear them.

“I know, and I hope I won’t have to send you back to Tevinter in an urn.” She shrugged a skinny shoulder. “Just in case.”

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In spite of such fears—and after everything Dorian had lived through all over again—they won. Not easily—it had never been easy—but they won again. With all that had changed, somehow, Lavellan still managed to save the world.

And Dorian nearly got himself killed. He fought harder than he’d ever fought in his life—harder, even, than the first time they had battled Corypheus. Because this time, the darkspawn magister was here and alive to threaten the world because of Dorian, and if he succeeded it would be on Dorian’s head.

So he fought with his full power, and when it was over, he rather gracelessly crumpled to his knees, blood loss making him weak and lyrium drain making the whole world echo around him, and he didn’t see the Inquisitor follow Solas, or the moment Solas disappeared—again—because he blacked out. He thought someone bloody and large caught him, but for the moment, Dorian let himself enjoy a well-earned swoon.
Chapter 30

Lavellan drifted through the celebration at Skyhold alone, again, and Dorian did his best to be there for her, but she deflected his attempted support and asked him about himself. He could see she didn’t want to talk about Solas, so he let it go. And eventually she slipped away, alone again, and Dorian felt so relieved that this adventure in time hadn’t destroyed the world, but also so regretful that he couldn’t find a way to spare her this sadness.

After the Inquisitor left, the party began to wind down. Those who wished to avoid the visiting nobles adjourned to the Herald’s Rest. Dorian sat with Bull, who was, perhaps, in a contemplative mood—he had been quieter than usual during this victory celebration, watching his boys, and Dorian played a game of cards with Varric for a while and left Bull to his thoughts.

When Varric retired for the night, Dorian contemplated his empty tankard and sat back, almost touching Bull, but not quite. He glanced at Bull and followed his gaze to the Chargers, who were currently breaking into a new song, apparently about Corypheus being turned into a pile of refuse.

“They really are mine, aren’t they?”

The question was so soft, Dorian would have missed it if he were not quite so close. He glanced back at Bull again. “Them? Well, they do call themselves ‘The Bull’s Chargers,’ and you are The Iron Bull, as far as I know. I don’t know of any other they could belong to.”

But Bull just smiled softly and shook his head. “I mean…they’re not just mine for a cover anymore. They really are mine…my boys.”

Ah. It was quite possible that Bull had never in his life had anything that was his. Even his name was just a tool Hissrad carried for the Qun—before. Dorian smiled and looked at the Chargers again—the motley group Bull had collected because he needed a position in the South to operate from…and more than that, because he had a giant soft spot for tough cases. “Yes,” Dorian said, just as softly. “I think you’ll find that, as far as they are concerned, they always were your boys.”

He nodded. Then, slowly, Bull turned and looked at Dorian. His gaze was searching, and as Dorian met it, he felt suddenly terrified, because if Bull asked, there was only one answer; he wouldn’t be able to lie.

But if he said it, and all this came to nothing, and Bull turned back to the Qun someday…

Without speaking, Bull lifted his hand and placed it, palm up, on the knee nearest Dorian. It wasn’t held out, didn’t insist upon being taken…but it was there. An invitation.

If he tried, Dorian could count exactly how many days lay between today and the day the Qun might call upon Bull again—if they wanted a Tal-Vashoth’s aid as much as they’d wanted a Ben-Hassrath’s.

If he betrays me again…

Well, it would kill him. And what did that matter, in the grand scheme? He’d die and be remade into something no one who now knew him would recognize—a man who could live out the rest of his days and do what must be done for his people. Probably a harsh man, once the wound scarred over. Probably an empty life, but those he helped would never know that, so what did it matter?

And until then, he could count the days. He could fill them with love and call it that proudly. He
could give something good to a good man who had never known such joy was possible; he could be better than he was for this man’s sake. Until the days ran out—and then, if he was betrayed again, he would die and leave an empty shell who would be able to always look back and say, “Once I was the happiest man alive.”

**Well. Everyone dies eventually.**

So, after a half-minute that felt like a year, Dorian placed his own hand in Bull’s—so much larger, even with bits missing—and as Bull’s hand curled around his and their eyes met, Dorian knew.  

**It will be worth it.**

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. Bull’s eye was so warm and full of *feeling*. And then they got up and left the tavern without another word, and they held hands all the way back to their room.  

There wasn’t anything fancy that night—no clever tricks in the pursuit of pleasure. Just Dorian in Bull’s lap, frotting against each other as they kissed. Everything he wanted to say out loud and couldn’t quite manage, Dorian tried to put into his kisses, into every reverent touch. Eyes and hands on Bull’s beautiful, scarred face, hoping he understood the answer.

**Yes. Yes, I’m yours too.**

They folded together after, fitting perfectly and falling quickly into sleep. Dorian pressed his face into Bull’s shoulder, determined to enjoy the massive arms around him for every minute he could have them, starting right now. Then, he heard Bull mumble into his hair, “*Kadan.*”

It was quiet, a little slurred, and Bull’s breathing was already even with sleep—and a few tears slipped from Dorian’s eyes and fell on warm gray skin. A memory of the last time he’d heard that…and a sudden rush of hope, too.

Bull had called him his heart before, but it had been while awake, with a soft explanation of the term—and then sex. Dorian had not doubted him at the time, but he always had since. It could have been a calculated move. It might have never been really true.

Like this—it changed everything. Falling asleep, mumbling secrets one hadn’t meant to reveal—maybe he didn’t even know he’d said it. But he had, and now Dorian knew it was true. Whatever it might have been before, it was true this time. Whatever he might choose to do about it in the future, **it was true right now**.

**--**

Bull’s roof was fixed. It had magically fixed itself while they were off saving the world, and the Chargers were all acting so very innocent and knowing nothing whatsoever about it. Bull bought them all drinks, Dorian finished packing up the clothing he’d left in his room when Corypheus had interrupted their plans, and just like that Dorian’s own room was little more than storage space for his extra books.

The week after that, Dorian came back to their room one evening to find that Bull wasn’t wearing his eyepatch.

Dorian had never once seen him without his eyepatch before.

Neither of them said anything about that, either, but they did spend half the night slowly fucking. And Dorian couldn’t keep from touching, tracing the groove left by the strap. And in the morning,
very lightly, he kissed the scarred brow above the missing eye—and they left it at that.

And Dorian hoped, and hope kept growing.


Vivienne departed almost immediately, back to Val Royeaux and her continuing pursuit of power. The Inquisitor did not see her off.

Morrigan slipped away when no one was looking. The Inquisitor kicked a barrel and then stopped worrying about her.

Sera wasn’t going anywhere, nor were the Chargers, and without Solas to pull her attention away, Lavellan practically lived in the tavern when she was in Skyhold. Dorian was usually there too, naturally, as long as Bull was, and he could see how much the rowdy, rude company improved the Inquisitor’s mood. Still, when they travelled—or when Josephine managed to tear her away for diplomatic duties—the shadow of misery still haunted Lavellan’s eyes for a very long time.

Cole was…around. At least, Dorian thought he sometimes still saw him.

The advisors continued advising—except for Leliana, who became Divine. Lavellan had always liked the idea of throwing away the whole system of Circles. Not that she considered it particularly her business—it was a shem problem—but as long as her opinion was demanded, she had no love for the Circles at all.

There was no longer a particular person in Skyhold whom Lavellan wanted to avoid, but she still found reasons to get away whenever she could—perhaps to escape all the nobles, to Josephine’s lasting frustration. Instead, she took up dragon hunting, to Bull’s overwhelming delight. Lavellan hadn’t troubled herself much with dragons before, apart from the one in the Western Approach. Dorian suspected she was terrified of them. But she’d been growing more confident since killing Corypheus, and after the first successful high dragon hunt, she began to make them something of a hobby. She always brought Bull, because he begged, and she always brought Dorian—to deal with Bull afterward.

As he had promised, Dorian had created a clever system of enchanted restraints that Bull could not break, allowing him enough freedom of movement for sex, but making him effectively harmless. Dorian still didn’t believe they were necessary, and he’d have preferred a rough, wild, uninhibited fuck after each dragon hunt. He barely counted it as a regret, though. There was too much gained, and too much to hope for—things that mattered much more than sex.

Varric started working on The Inquisitor Lavellan Story, and Cassandra started working on rebuilding the Seekers. Lavellan was more supportive than she had been the first time, Dorian thought.

Commander Cullen continued to serve, hard-working and steady. Dorian watched to see if he could spot the first signs of attraction between him and Lavellan—he hoped to see it, because it would indicate her broken heart was starting to mend, at least a little. As far as he could see, however, the commander respected and admired their leader, but he did not seem to cherish any other thoughts about her. And she did not blush at the mention of him or spend more time than usual in his company. She spent more time than ever with the Chargers while in Skyhold, which put her often in Dorian’s company too.

As dear a friend as she had become to him once, she was already that and more. Never having had a sibling, he couldn’t be sure, but if he had to put a name on it, he’d say she was like a little sister to
him now.

Once, when Lavellan was stuck at a “small diplomatic event” Josephine held at Skyhold, Dorian watched with growing fury as an Antivan noble accosted her with his ostentatious affections. The man was suave to a nauseating degree, and Lavellan may have learned not to startle every time a “giant shem” stood too close, but she still grew terribly stressed around too many of them at once. And this man was straining her already thin appearance of ease.

Dorian could see the growing panic in her eyes as clear as day. *How could that cretin be so blind?* With barely contained fury, Dorian began to pull on the threads of the Fade that he used to form his horror spell. He couldn’t throw the full spell at the man—the spectral skull erupting in the middle of the reception would give everything away—but he had ways of summoning fire that were more fine-tuned than an immolate spell, and he could proudly say the same for his necromancer abilities. He just had fewer occasions to use them.

So he sent a tendril of invisible fear toward the man, made it slither up his silk-clad leg and start to wind higher. He saw the man’s face grow pale, his eyes widen, his gaze begin to dart about…and within a few seconds, whatever he’d been saying died on his lips and he barely managed a bow before scurrying away. Lavellan was left looking a mixture of baffled and deeply relieved.

Not long after, Dorian snuck her out of the party to the tavern. They met up with the Chargers, had some drinks, but had the sense to vanish again by the time Josephine came hunting for her.

Several guest rooms were broken into at some point that night, or so one must suspect from the unexplained appearance of dung or old fish in several beds or clothing trunks.

None of the Chargers knew a thing about it.

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Last time, Dorian had stayed in Skyhold for about a year, then gone back to Tevinter. He’d written to Bull in his eleven months there, but always with the pretense of some work-related matter. The most intimate he ever let his letters become was when he decided to fill them with the spiciest filth his imaginative mind could invent—purely for the pleasure of imagining Bull getting worked up as he read them, of course. His signature had always been, “Regards (though a boorish lout of a mercenary hardly deserves them), D. Pavus” or some other insult.

This time…

Winter warmed, Summer cooled, dragons died, the people remaining in Skyhold carried on doing good work and sharing their lives, and then the seasons cycled through their changes yet again before Dorian finally made firm travel arrangements and set a departure date. When he at last got around to leaving, he realized the trip would be a much shorter one—perhaps a month. Barely time to see his family, though he intended to do so at any cost, knowing what was to come. Maevaris had been growing increasingly insistent, and he expected her to monopolize his time in Tevinter. Then he’d be back as an ambassador. The time had truly flown.

And even if it was only for a month, he felt sick at the thought of leaving. Sick—and afraid. When he came back, he’d only have a few days to see Bull again before…well. Perhaps the Qun wouldn’t seek aid from a Tal-Vashoth. Perhaps all chance of betrayal had already died long ago on the Storm Coast.

But if it hadn’t, and they offered him a way back, and he *took it*…
Dorian’s hands shook when he thought of it, frost on the edges on his fingers. So he didn’t let himself think about it.

“Hey.”

He looked up from packing. “Hello. Aren’t you usually leading the Chargers’ drills at this hour?”

“Gave the job to Krem. Thought I’d come help you pack, if you need it.”

Dorian snorted a short laugh. “To translate into Common: ‘Thought I’d come watch you pack, make comments about your smallclothes, and try to distract you.’ Is that accurate?”

Bull smiled. “Hmm. Don’t know. Usually I don’t have to try very hard to distract you.”

Dorian did not gape. Long-trained muscle memory made him automatically snap his mouth shut the moment a reply failed to manifest. Then, upon further reflection, he could only wryly admit, “Touché.”

He expected a laugh, but Bull’s smile was quiet. There was a quietness about him in general, actually—a stillness, as he moved and sat on the bed. “Got room in your trunk for a going-away present?”

Oh? This was new. “That would depend upon the size of the present,” he observed. If it’s a carved wooden cock that oddly resembles his own… “But I am fond of gifts, so I would certainly try.”

With a nod, Bull waved him over, and Dorian, curious, went and sat beside him. Bull took a deep breath—strange—and pulled out what looked like a large, gilded tooth and some chain. “Qunari traditions might not be your thing, but…” He shrugged. “Well, we don’t have many of them, so that’s good.” The tooth came apart in his hands, and Dorian could see that it had been split—a little unevenly, making one side lighter and a bit smaller than the other. Each had a length of chain.

“Amulets?” He sighed. “I suppose, with a tooth of this size, and the ‘Qunari tradition’ element, I needn’t wonder at the tooth’s origin?”

“Yeah.” A deep chuckle. “It’s a dragon’s tooth. It’s how we show that… I dunno. It’s special. They always say, So that no matter how far apart we are, we’re always together. I figured now was a good time.”

Chest suddenly, unbearably tight, Dorian struggled to draw enough breath to speak. His voice didn’t come out very strong. “Well, I won’t need space in my trunk for something I intend to wear, will I?”

Bull’s smile was suddenly warmer. “Guess not.” He held out the tooth. Dorian took his half. Hesitated. Looked up and searched Bull’s eye.

“I’ll be returning from Tevinter at some point.” Not long at all, really. “Do I give this back then?”

A slow shake of Bull’s head, mindful of his horns. “It’s not really something you take off, once you put it on. Um. Ever.”

His head felt light—his stomach too. Dorian was a little worried he might… well, not faint, but have some sort of dizzy spell, perhaps. So he did the only thing he could think of to deal with the overwhelming feelings that had taken him completely by surprise.

He launched himself forward and pulled Bull into a kiss that was tender, passionate—everything
good, the only right answer to such a declaration.

When they broke apart, he was panting, breathless. “Consider me distracted,” he gasped against Bull’s mouth. After that…

Bull removed his clothes for him before hanging the amulet around his neck, resting its polished surface on his bare skin. Bull’s amulet had a clasp, because even going over one horn at a time, the chain would have needed to be impractically long. The clasp was large and simple enough for Bull to do himself, but he let Dorian handle it.

Simple, is it? His hands were shaking. He laughed at himself for struggling with something so easy, and Bull laughed too, and then Dorian succeeded with a little triumphant exclamation, and Bull rolled him into the bed and his huge, warm arms.

For the next hour, Dorian forgot packing.

They were both soaked and exhausted by the end, but Dorian, being a Northerner, had a high tolerance for sticky heat, and he’d always been happy that Bull was very much the same. They lay together in sated bliss, Dorian draped over Bull’s comfortable bulk and stroking over the hard curve of the tooth. “Dare I attempt to guess which dragon unwillingly donated this?”

Bull’s voice held a soft rumble. “I think you won’t get it.”

“There have only been ten, Bull,” he snorted. “My memory is quite clear.”

“All right, bet you can’t get it in three.”

“Hmm.” Dorian smiled. “The Kaltenzahn?” Bull had loved it when she perched on the rocks high above them. He’d been dying to get at her again, but they’d all been a little awestruck for a brief —very brief—moment.

“Nope.” The grin in his voice spoke of extremely fond memories, though.

“The Vinsomer.” Bull had been a fan of that one since before Dorian joined the Inquisition. He’d been looking forward to going after her for almost a year and was as giddy as a schoolboy when Lavellan finally announced the hunt.

“Nope.” That one, with a happy sigh.

“Hmm.” Dorian was torn. The toughest dragon they’d killed was the Highland Ravager. But Bull had begged to go after the Ferelden Frostback. That one had been a clever one, but still not nearly as strong as many of the others. It had been the first one they killed after Corypheus. Then again, there was the Blighted archdemon…but Blight tended to ruin everything, including whatever beauty Bull saw in these creatures. Finally, he just guessed. “The Ferelden Frostback, then.”

“Aww, Big Tama? Nope, not her.”

“Well then it must be the Highland Ravager,” Dorian quickly concluded. Bull laughed.

“The bet was three guesses, so that’s cheating.”

“Hardly. And anyway, aren’t I—?”

“Wrong,” Bull cut in. “All wrong, none of those.”

Dorian pushed himself up on one arm. “All right then, Ser Mysterious, which one?”
The affection in Bull’s grin was almost unbearable. “The Abyssal High Dragon.”

Dorian blinked. He hadn’t even thought of that one. The one dragon they’d killed before facing Corypheus, simply because they were right there and that Orlesian was so damn insistent and it was hard to miss? “That was ages ago,” he murmured. They hadn’t even had victory sex afterward. He remembered their abortive attempt, and the rather miserable ensuing conversation. It was all not long after the Storm Coast and…

“Yeah. When we got back, I asked boss for this tooth. Thought I might need it, if things kept going the way they were.” A big hand cradled Dorian’s face. “You being the one guy I trusted to keep an eye on me.”

For a long moment, his throat wouldn’t work. Finally, Dorian pulled in a deep, shuddering breath and managed weakly. “Well. I may not be able to do that quite as well from Tevinter…”

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“My heart,” Bull murmured. “So, maybe not a big compliment, actually.”

Dorian sat up and levelled him with an unflinching look. “I beg to differ.” And he kissed Bull, hard and insistent, but melting after a minute into something much softer.

“Sweet guy,” Bull hummed against his lips.

--

Dorian managed one letter back to Skyhold, just after he arrived in Tevinter, but he already knew he wouldn’t be staying long enough to receive a reply. He’d missed many of the political preparations Maevar and he had made together last time, and was now left to catch up at a whirlwind pace. He was appointed ambassador before he knew it. Which, yes, meant his father’s enemies were probably plotting again. Unfortunately, last time he’d barely had a chance to hear that he’d inherited his father’s seat; he hadn’t stayed in his own time long enough to find out what exactly had happened, so he had no specifics, no way to warn his father now.

He carved out time for one visit home, and he tried to convince his father to leave Tevinter for a short time. He even went so far as to reveal that he suspected (knew) his life was in danger, but his father insisted he had to stay. There was a vote in the senate coming up, and…

Politics. His father was going to die for his damn politics.

And soon, Dorian would be the same. Fighting for reform, to cleanse Tevinter of centuries of corruption? He’d probably be in this position himself, one day, and he’d probably stay and face the assassins himself. Just like his father.

There were things he wanted to say, knowing this was goodbye. But try as he might, the words wouldn’t pass his lips, not when he was there, in his childhood home, face to face with his father. They had a bland, businesslike discussion of politics, the weather, and Dorian’s recent journey north and his upcoming return to the South.

The best he could do was write a note after he had departed, never to see his father again.
Father,

In the event that I do not have another opportunity to fail to tell you this, you ought to know that I love you. I shall probably never entirely forgive you, and there are still times when you make me angrier than anyone else could, but there it is. And so I remain,

Your somewhat begrudgingly loving son, Dorian

Shortly thereafter, Dorian began his return journey south, dreading his destination every step of the way.
Chapter 31

“Dorian Pavus when did you get here!”

He hadn’t quite finished turning around when a slender little elf slammed full-force into his chest, hugging him around the middle as if she could present some threat to his ribs. He blinked and laughed. The greeting was the same, but last time it had been after a year of absence. After only a month? He’d expected Lavellan to have missed him less.

“My dear Inquisitor, I promise I’ve just arrived, and I was most definitely on my way to find you. You seem to have found me first, however.” She kept hugging him. “All right, people are staring, you know.”

“Ugh, shemlen.” She pulled back, but kept his arms locked with surprisingly strong little hands. “Dread Wolf take all of them, I’m sick to death of their height and their loud voices and, and…ugh! I’ve had not a single elf for company this last month, and you’re the next best thing but even you were gone and now they want me to bother with their stupid politics again and I’ve had it!”

“What about Sera?”

“Sera doesn’t count, you know that. She’s louder than any of you and hates being an elf.”

“Dalish, then.”

A crumpled face. “I had to send the Chargers on a mission not long after you left. They haven’t been back to Skyhold since. I’m looking for them next, they’re supposed to meet us here somewhere.”

“Well, if this town has a tavern—which I’m certain it does—we can most likely find them there. Shall we?”

“Yes, let’s. And if you can tell me about your trip without mentioning politics, I’d love to hear it.”

They found the Chargers before Iron Bull.

“Look, just distract him long enough for us to move this thing, please?”

Lavellan made a face at Krem and tapped the dragon skull with her boot. Then she looked up at Dorian. “You distract him. I’ll help move this.”

Dorian sighed, but he didn’t protest—not when Bull was just inside, and he hadn’t seen him in a month, and very soon…

Bull was sitting at the bar, but facing outward, and his face lit up the moment Dorian walked in. Dorian smiled back, strolled over with his best swagger, and didn’t stop until they were a breath apart. Then he placed a hand on Bull’s horn, said, “Hello,” and pulled him down into a passionate kiss. He leaned back against the bar in the process, encouraging Bull to turn and pin him up against it, which he eagerly did.

In full view of the whole tavern, Dorian went right ahead and kept kissing Bull. If this was to be nearly the last time… Well. There was no more fear or shame, anyway. And he’d never have moments like this again, once he went home. So for the moment, given a silly excuse to indulge—he’d take it.
He kissed Bull until he was breathless, then he slowed and just kept on going. He might have forgotten his original excuse and never stopped until someone interrupted them, but it was Bull who pulled back first. “Hey,” he murmured, as Dorian kept trying to pull him back in.

“Hey yourself,” he moaned. “Did I tell you to stop?”

A deep chuckle—he could feel it resonating against his chest. “I won’t turn around and look, don’t worry.” Another kiss, this one quick and sweet.

“Ah…”

“Good distraction, though.” That terribly handsome grin. Maker, please don’t let me lose this again.

“I think they need a few more minutes, so…” He reached up, pulled down, and tried to start the kissing up again, but Bull didn’t bend down for him. Dorian was another moment away from giving up and turning his attention to Bull’s throat instead, when a big hand came up and cradled his face.

“Hang on a minute.”

“Why?”

Bull sought his eyes, his voice suddenly gentle and serious. “I want to talk about my feelings.”

“What?” Dorian blinked, confused. “Now?”

A slight shrug. “No, not right now. Later. I want to ask you to make some time for me.”

He swallowed. “To…talk about feelings.”

“Well, not just that…” A one-eyed wink. How he’d missed it… “But yeah. I want to talk about us. How I feel about you. What amatus means. All that.”

“Ah…when did you hear—?”

“You say it in your sleep. You have for a while.” His thumb rubbed Dorian’s cheekbone. “Look, I’ve always wanted only what you’re comfortable with. But if there’s something in your head that you don’t feel like you can say when you’re awake, that’s a problem. If you don’t want to say anything, that’s fine. But there are some things I should probably tell you; then you can make your call with all the information.”

Is he talking about the Ben-Hassrath? Could that be a part of it? Have they contacted him, and is he thinking of telling me? Or if that wasn’t it, was that more or less frightening? “I…”

“Surprise! Happy birthday, Chief!”

With the slightest, reassuring squeeze, Bull turned around, smiling. “Aww, you guys! You got me!”

--

They stayed in the tavern until Josephine found them and dragged Lavellan back to her duties. Then the party broke up, slowly, and Dorian led Bull back to his chambers, where he hadn’t even begun to unpack.
The days were easy to count, now. Not long, to return to the moment of betrayal. Of course, if the Qun did not even call upon him, Bull would have no opportunity to betray them again…but Dorian almost hoped that wouldn’t be the case. If they did call upon him again and he obeyed, even that agony would be better than this endless uncertainty. This longing to trust, but not quite knowing how; this lingering fear that haunted him. Even though he’d chosen to embrace the short time he had, there was a part of him—perhaps that part that couldn’t call Bull *amatus*. Not yet. Not when he still didn’t *know*.

So they had sex, in that way that felt almost like making love, but just the tiniest bit off, and Dorian tried to think of it as *the first time in a month* and not *perhaps the last time ever*. In spite of his efforts, every moment was branded into his memory with a clarity he knew would never fade.

Really, at this point, he almost expected another betrayal. It had been so long since he’d been truly happy, and even that had been an illusion—a *real* happy future seemed so improbable that deep down, he’d nearly accepted it. He dreaded it, but he still drowned himself in the Bull’s scent and touch like it was something he would never have again, and would spend the rest of his life—however long that may be—torturing himself with the memory of.

“You okay, there?”

Bull was watching him as he gently cleaned Dorian off—one of his favorite things to do, according to him. Dorian generously allowed it, even though it felt so much like love that it nearly killed him.

“Hmm?” He put together a perfect, sated smile. “Oh yes. To put it mildly.”

“You just seemed a little…off, is all.”

His first thought—“*But no less spectacular in bed, naturally.*” Or, he thought, there was always a ready excuse in the news of his father’s death. But instead, he simply took Bull’s hand. “I missed you.”

A slow smile, tugging on that scar, as always. “Missed you too, Vint.” Bull leaned down and kissed him. Then, “So about those feelings…”

He sighed to cover up the nervous flip of his stomach. “You haven’t been borrowing from Cassandra’s private library while I was away, have you?”

“Heh. Nope. Thought of this all on my own. Probably had it in mind even before that, but once you were gone, I started to realize some things. So this time—”

*Knock-knock-knock*. Then, without waiting, Lavellan called through the door, “Hey guys? I’m not coming in because you’re probably naked, but I have some snooping to do and I need some backup. I can ask Cassandra and Sera, maybe, if you really can’t.”

Which meant she already had Varric, naturally. Or there was another fighter, that boy with the daggers… *What was his name again? …Oh! Cole, of course*. Was he even around? Dorian wasn’t sure he’d seen him, but if someone needed help, he was probably there.

Either way, Lavellan needed more muscle and firepower than that if she was going to go get herself into danger again. “*Fasta vass,*” he mumbled, then raised his voice. “We’ll be out in ten minutes!” Quieter, “I suppose this will have to wait.”

Bull just smiled and rose. “No problem.” Dorian was almost certain he meant it, too.

The delay would be good, he decided. He didn’t know how to talk about his feelings right now.
However,

Whatever he’d thought this mission would be like the second time, Dorian hadn’t expected the pervasive, cold calm that settled over him once they began fighting and gathering clues about what was going on. The dread was still there, in the pit of his stomach, but over everything was a terrible detachment. There was nothing he could do now but wait for the inevitable.

That, and try to act normal.

He was watching Bull, too—some out of caution, and some out of cherishing as long as he could—and he noticed that Bull was tense. Not quite “jumpy,” but on edge, nervous. He didn’t remember Bull being like this last time, but then, he hadn’t really been paying that much attention.

He’s going to betray you again, mage. He knows it, you know it, only I can stop it…

A distraction—someone to immolate, Perfect, thank the Maker. But the Inquisitor’s team was too good, too efficient at this by now, and the distraction was soon gone.

They wouldn’t even notice, I could change him so quietly, make him love you forever…

“Are you at all concerned about fighting your people, Bull?” He hadn’t meant to prod, but he needed the conversation. And Dorian was…curious. What would he say?

Bull grunted. “I’m not Qunari anymore. Whatever they’re doing, I’m ready to stop.”

That…helped. That was very helpful. Not the words themselves, even, for they could always be a lie. But the lack of hesitation, and the tone—the unflinching statement of it, as a fact that no longer pained him. Even that could still be a lie. But if it was a lie, it was a remarkably well-told one.

“When this is over, I’m going to need somebody to hit me with a stick again.”

“I’ll schedule you a nice beating before bed, shall I?” And hope I have the chance to make good on it…

“Sure.” One-eyed wink, Maker, I love him… “But after the feelings stick, okay Kadan?”

Dorian hoped he wasn’t blushing. “We’re doing the names, are we?”

“Would you prefer ‘sweet cheeks’?”

“I need a drink.”

And then, all the superficial cheerful banter was cut off by the earth-shaking scream of a dragon.

Here we go.

Lavellan was making her high-pitched, not-happy-with-this-a-little-bit-scared-even noise. Bull’s eye lit up. Varric sighed and cocked Bianca. Dorian tried to remember to breathe.

“Inquisition! Nehraa Ataashi-asaara meravas adim kata!”

Dorian couldn’t hear anyone or anything else.

“Hissrad! Now, please! Vinek kathas!”
He was already looking at Bull. Watching. Ice, waiting just beyond the Veil…

“Not a chance, ma’am.”

Something inside Dorian, something hard and horrible, snapped. And the relief of it…he had no words, and no breath to speak with if he’d been able.

But the battle was upon them again, and this time, Bull was fighting with them. Dorian still nearly got himself killed—slow to react, vision blurry with warm water that had come from somewhere he wouldn’t acknowledge. The dawnstone axe was still held tight in those huge hands, as his love wielded it against the qunari warriors until the last one fell.

Then Dorian took a deep breath—and it felt like the first breath he’d taken in years—and managed, hoarsely, “Are you all right?”

Bull hung his axe at his back again and smiled at him. “Never better, Kadan.”

*It worked. Dear Maker, somehow…somehow it actually worked.*

“I’m glad to hear it…Amatus.”
Chapter 32

The rest of it—well, it was almost new to Dorian, really. He remembered so little from the first time. He’d registered almost nothing at the time, and then it was over, and he was still so in shock that none of it made sense, and in the time since, he hadn’t had concrete memories to draw from to figure any of it out.

Now…

The one thing he did know for sure was that Lavellan would meet and speak with Solas at the end of this. The details were starting to come together. They were dealing with an “agent” of the Dread Wolf of elven legend, which meant that either Solas had vanished after the battle with Corypheus to go somehow find an ancient elven god and start working for him—if he hadn’t been already—or…

Or Lavellan was going to be very, very upset.

That much, Dorian did remember. Her fury ran so deep she wouldn’t even tell them what had happened. But Dorian was beginning to have an idea what she might have discovered, and it explained many, many little things if he was right.

--

This time, Dorian was not alone as he held the Inquisitor’s remaining hand while the healers wrapped her shortened arm. The warm bulk of Bull beside him was soothing—and Dorian suddenly realized, I don’t know what will happen next.

For the first time in years, he had no idea what was coming. For the first time, too, he had a lover who would continue to live—a relationship. An honest one. This man beside him was…his. Whatever came next, Bull would be involved. Dorian’s future wasn’t his alone anymore. It was theirs.

It was terrifying, and too wonderful to believe.

“Right…listen, you two.” Lavellan blinked, head lolling. “Damn effroot. Okay.” She grimaced through a spike of pain as the healers tied off the bandage. “Get effrybody togeffer. Affer the…the council thing. Meet me in the…where the map is. Gunna have, have a little meetin’ of our own. Okay?”

“Sure, boss. We’ll be there.”

“In the meantime, my friend, get some rest. The Exalted Council will wait.”

“Damn right they will,” Lavellan mumbled, foot twitching like she was thinking of kicking something. “Damn shmren can wait all day."

And this time, when he returned to his offensively decorated room, he wasn’t alone.

“You doing okay, big guy?”

He looked up at Bull and thought, I can’t believe I get to keep him.

“Fine,” he managed a smile. “I haven’t lost an arm, after all. And it isn’t raining.”
But his perceptive former spy lover was still watching him, seeing through him. “You just seem a little off. Have been for a while.” A gentle brush over Dorian’s shoulder. “If it’s that stuff I brought up, we don’t have to talk about it. Don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Dorian surged into Bull’s space and pulled him close, hands resting on his enormous shoulders. “Amatus.” He reached up, and Bull leaned down, and Dorian softly kissed him. “It means ‘beloved.’ And I’ve been…afraid. I rather thought it would be unwelcome, for one thing. And more than that, I’ve always…wondered. If the Qun offered you a way to go back, I thought you’d take it, and I’d…lose you.”

“Hmm.” Bull nodded, then smiled. “Feeling better now?”

Dorian nodded.

“Good.” Another kiss, a little slower. “I figured something out.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah. Love isn’t starlight and gentle blushes. That’s…I dunno, a bunch of crap that doesn’t mean anything. Love is tougher. And it’s bigger than wants or needs. It’s a purpose.”

“Yes.” Not that he’d ever heard it put that way before, but… “I rather…like the sound of that, I think.”

“Good.” Bull grinned. “Want to get naked, Kadan?”

He laughed. “If you insist.”

--

Orlesians, Dorian thought. Orlesians and their overabundant gardens and their comical balconies and their foolish silks.

It wasn’t a fair thing to criticize them for. After all, if Dorian really hated the scent of flowers, he could close the balcony doors and shut out the night breeze. If he didn’t care for the softness of the bed, he didn’t have to consent to use it. There were several solid pieces of furniture upon which he could be just as effectively screwed.

No, he didn’t really blame Orlais—he didn’t even dislike the cool air brushing long curtains aside and caressing his heated skin with the scent of flowers by moonlight. It was just so…ridiculous. Beauty, luxury, and a passionate embrace, How cliché.

Bull’s lips pressed his temple, and Dorian shivered and then laughed softly, pressing back against him. Wonderful, the feeling of Bull’s hot skin, contrasting the cool night. Wonderful, the rough hands on his body, contrasting the soft sheets they knelt upon. Wonderful, the gentleness in every touch, even as his body strained to yield to the slow force of penetration, of something so large pressing deep inside him until he was full and they were as close as they could be.

And so much closer than that.

A clear smile in his voice, Bull murmured, “What’s funny?” He paused, balls deep, as Dorian breathed shuddering breaths and adjusted.

“Everything.” Breathlessly. Twisting to look up and back, finding a stubbled jaw with his hand and caressing scratchy bristles. “This. You.”
“I’m funny, huh?” Bull grinned. “What’s black and white and read all over?”

Dorian laughed at the question. “What?” He’d heard Bull tell bad jokes before, but at a moment such as this…?

“Your favorite dirty book, ha!”

Dorian groaned—or moaned. Then he laughed again, leaning back against Bull’s chest, feeling the massive shape inside him shift with the motion. “Oh…oh Maker, you absolute…”

But then Bull kissed him, and Dorian forgot what he was going to say.

Bad jokes… He twisted in Bull’s arms and kissed him deeper. Well, now it’s less cliché.

Not that the cliché things mattered. They could be in a back alley somewhere in the city with their pants around their ankles and it wouldn’t make the slightest difference to Dorian. They’d still be making love.

To his surprise, it wasn’t really that different from his memories—from what their coupling had eventually become, before the betrayal. The only change was that now Dorian didn’t just blindly trust what they were; he knew Bull loved him, and he loved Bull. He wasn’t waiting for everything to fall apart and for them to go their separate ways. Apart from that, though, it was all achingly familiar—the intimacy, the care in every touch, the inexorable swell of pleasure. The joy of simply being together.

It was the same.

So, after all, perhaps he really did love me, even back then. Dorian squeezed, just to feel the familiar deep rumble in Bull’s chest resonate against his back. I just…wasn’t his purpose.

Now I am.

“Hey.” Bull’s hand on his hip tightened slightly, the other one—caressing over his body—pausing at the same time. “I want to see you. All right if we move?”

I want to see you. Dorian shivered, gasping his wholehearted response: “Yes.”

Bull gently eased out of him, catching Dorian in his arms and keeping him close—a fine precaution. Dorian wasn’t even close to “all fucked out” yet, but he was terribly relaxed and shivery, and making sudden demands on his coordination might not have gone well. He felt Bull’s lips against his shoulder, parting in a grin. “Let’s use that.” He followed a pointing claw to the headboard, which was…

Well. It was Orlesian.

He’d noticed it before and thought how incredibly tacky it looked to have a padded headboard. It looked like a rather frilly extension of the mattress, really, and until now Dorian had wondered what would possess anyone to cover a perfectly good headboard in fabric.

When Bull scooped him up and knelt in front of the headboard, placing Dorian in his lap, it suddenly made sense.

Dirty-minded Orlesians.

It would have been quite uncomfortable to use any other vertical surface like this for long, but
Dorian found himself comfortably upright, leaned back slightly, and with an excellent view. “Oh,” he murmured as he watched and felt Bull slide his cock back inside him. Bull’s hands under his ass supported him—and gave Bull quite a lot of freedom of movement.

Dorian moaned and arched, eager for every inch of him, and his hands traveled hot, sweaty skin, tracing the myriad, familiar scars. As if by chance, too, he touched the heavy dragon’s tooth Bull still wore—the match of his own, a weight that had so quickly grown familiar on his chest. As his fingers brushed the tooth, he felt Bull shudder—only a little, but with Dorian in his lap, stretched and spread on his cock, even a little was noticeable. “Oh, you’re delightful,” he gasped, as Bull began to gently work in and out of him in smooth thrusts.

“Mmmm.” Bull hitched him up a little higher; thrust deeper. “You’re better, Kadan. You’re the best.”

Dorian shivered. “Oh, oh…so deep…you’re so strong…” His fingers just barely grazed the massive, hard muscles of Bull’s arms. “I love it,” he sighed.

Bull thrust a little harder. “Shit, Kadan. It feels so good, making you happy.”

Hands squeezed under him, making Dorian reflexively tighten around Bull’s cock. They both groaned, but Dorian’s melted into a chuckle. “Doesn’t this remind you of when we’d first begun, and I asked you to fuck me against the wall?”

Bull laughed softly. “It’s a little easier this time.”

Dorian sighed, a hand moving to touch himself, to gently stroke and squeeze. “You were incredible. The great beast who could hold me up and ravage me…it was amazing.”

“And then I told the boss and Sera about it on accident,” Bull grinned, his thrusts slowing enough to be almost languid.

“Yes, your discretion proved, ahh…proved to be exactly what I ex…expected.”

Bull laughed again. “Remember their faces?”

And Dorian had to laugh along with him, at that. Because he did. “Poor Lavellan, I think she spent months trying to forget that mental picture.”

Bull leaned closer, pressed their foreheads together. “Remember that time in the Western Approach when we pissed them all off by being too loud?”

Dorian kept laughing, nuzzling back. “Remember the time we went after the Sandy Howler?”

Bull, if possible, laughed and moaned at the same time, his hips moving faster, fucking harder into Dorian. “Under the stars, dragon blood in the sand, and they all bitched for a week that we were noisier than a dragon with ‘howler’ in its name.”

“Cassandra’s face!”

“Boss bitching about having been worried she hadn’t quite finished the job on the dragon…or it had come back to life.”

Dorian laughed, breathless, wrapping his arms around Bull’s thick middle and kissing his shoulder, his throat. “Oh, Amatus, I could never get enough of you.”
“Me too,” Bull murmured, lips brushing in his hair. “Wanted you all the time…it scared me sometimes. I’d never been hooked on somebody like that before.”

Throat tight, eyes stinging a little… “That is because you love me.” Rasping voice, weak attempt at bravado…all derailed by simple honesty.

“Yeah. I do.”

Whole body shuddering, Dorian clung to his massive lover. “So do I, Amatus. I will always love you.”

And Bull found his mouth at that, kissing him with the sort of uncoordinated, hungry passion Dorian was usually the one to be guilty of—after an orgasm or two, with another one growing maddeningly close. Usually, Bull was more restrained. In control. Not now.

Dorian panted into his mouth, “Yes, Amatus, yes! Give me everything, don’t hold back!”

The pace became frantic—almost too much. Perhaps it even was too much, but how could Dorian slow down now?

Teeth on his shoulder, groaning in his ear—Bull was close. Dorian was too, but he wanted things to be a little different this time. So, when he felt himself on the brink, he tightened his hand around the base of his cock, stopping himself from spilling. Usually, Bull was the one to deny him an orgasm, if they were playing like that, and it was difficult to keep his hand tight enough until the urge passed. Dorian tensed, writhing in the throes of the denial, broken pleas falling from his lips. Bull growled, gripping him with bruising strength…

Then Dorian felt it. The hard pulses of Bull’s orgasm, the thick seed filling him up—his whole body trembled, and he couldn’t look away. He watched Bull’s face, entranced by the ecstasy—bare and unconcealed, just for Dorian.

He trembled as Bull flooded him with his hot semen, hovering on the edge himself, everythrob of Bull’s cock pressing on his prostate—just barely, but just enough. Dorian clawed at Bull’s back, gasping, “Yes, yes, oh Bull, I love you. My love, my amatus, yes!”

When he came, he didn’t have to touch himself again, nor did Bull. With a cry of pleasure, Dorian simply surrendered, ejaculate spilling over both of them. Still inside him, Bull pulled away just enough to rub his cockhead against Dorian’s prostate. Crying out again and again, nearly screaming with it, Dorian shook in his arms, his cock continuing to spurt even after he should have been done.

When it ended, he collapsed with a sigh, Bull’s huge arms around him pulling him close. He didn’t pull out, and Dorian cherished the feeling of being spent, and yet still connected. “My love,” he murmured, wonder in his voice at the truth of it, the freedom to say it. The hope, for the first time—hope that this was not a passing lust or a doomed affair. This brash but kind man was his future.

“Happy, Kadan?”

“Oh yes. Utterly and completely.”

And there was no more need to lie; he truly was.

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Lavellan arrived straight from the Exalted Council, her sleeve pinned up over her shortened arm.
Grim determination was etched into every inch of her. Dorian knew the general gist of the bad news, but there had been no meeting like this last time. Or—well, perhaps there had been, while he was drunk and crying, and no one had told him.

Either way, it didn’t seem like Lavellan had revealed much to anyone, meeting or no, so from the first words out of her mouth, Dorian was stunned.

“Our former companion Solas is actually Fen’Harel. The ancient elven god.”

Pure, unbroken silence. Two advisors, one Divine, a Seeker, a dwarf, and elf, a shadowy presence, and Dorian and Bull all stared at her. Lavellan looked back at each of them in turn.

“To give you the short version, Solas seeks to restore the elves to their former glory. Apparently, the only way to do this will also destroy the world.”

Dorian could feel the tension radiating from Bull.

“I offered to go with him.”

“What? This…she never would have. She said he was our enemy!”

She looked up at Dorian. “I don’t want to help him destroy the world,” she quickly clarified. “But I don’t want him to be alone, either. And I do wish to see the elves restored. I want to find another way.”

“To get your shite elf-y glory back! I’ll pin your feet to the ceiling until you piss up your own nose!”

“Sera,” Lavellan answered calmly, “I know what you think of elves, but neither your way nor mine has any hope of a future. The Dalish are a fading memory; we’ll all be gone one day. And no matter how much you wish to be the same as everyone else, the humans will never give us place in their world. We’re corralled into alienages, blamed for every problem, and killed and enslaved and no one bats an eye. It would be nice if we could all live as just people to each other, but that simply isn’t our world.”

Sera’s muttered curses continued. Lavellan waited for silence before continuing. “I’m going to go after Solas. My goal is to save him, to…change his mind, or find a better way. I cannot let him destroy the world, but I consider killing him to be a last resort.” She took a deep breath. “I have also disbanded the Inquisition, so none of you are even remotely obligated to accompany me, aid me, or participate in this fight in any way.”

Disbanded?

“Well…shit,” Varric sighed.

“To add to that, I have no personal expectations of any of you. I won’t turn you away if you do wish to help, but I understand completely if you choose to leave. You all have lives to return to, other concerns of your own. And you all know the nature of my…relationship with Solas.” For the first time, her voice wavered, her eyes flickering downward. “The fate of the world aside, this is a personal matter, and no one else need be involved.”

Dorian’s eyes jumped to Cullen, but there was no hint of surprise there. Cullen wasn’t particularly good at hiding his feelings, and he didn’t look like he had any hopes that had been wounded. So it isn’t over for her and Solas…and she hasn’t begun anything with the commander. Two years apart, and she hadn’t moved on? Then again, they were much closer. Perhaps last time, she wanted to
move on; perhaps this time, she couldn’t give him up.

One thing, strangely, was the same. When Dorian left the previous Lavellan, she had made her peace with her broken heart and found the resolution to move forward. And now, though she clearly still had feelings for Solas, there was no trace of the shattered grief from the beginning, or the emotional fraility she had lived with for a long time after that. She was resolved, once again, and she was facing the future without doubt—she was just pointed in a different direction.

And it’s because of me. My meddling. The things I changed.

He glanced at Bull beside him. Could he regret it? Even if he should—could he? He had what he’d wanted. Bull was alive.

And Lavellan’s life was totally changed, as a side effect. Was that really so bad?

Which life would she have chosen? Would she have preferred one over the other? Solas’ plan is the same either way...

Lavellan dismissed the meeting, refusing to hear any answers to her announcement. She insisted that each of them take their time, and there was no reason to pressure decisions in front of everyone else. She would talk to them all when they were ready—to make plans together, or to say farewell.

“We should talk,” Bull murmured to him as they left.

Dorian looked up. “Now?”

“Yeah.”

“I only meant...if you would like to think about things before you make plans...”

“Don’t need to work out what I think. And I need you around for the planning.”

Dorian’s heart skipped. “Very well then.”

They went to their room.

“So. Solas is going to destroy the world, and the boss is on his side. Think we can stop them?”

Ah.

Dorian scanned the room with his magic for any disturbances, any listening spells, as Bull took off his harness and checked the room visually, without appearing to. Nothing was amiss, and Dorian sat in a frilly, silly chair. “To be fair to her, she did say she wants to stop what he’s doing—the ‘destroying the world’ part of it, anyway.”

Bull sighed, shaking his head as he sat on the edge of the bed. “She’s too close to this one. She can’t get a clear picture of the situation and make the right call.”

Entirely possible, but... “She wants to save someone she loves,” Dorian countered, feeling slightly sick. “Save him from himself, perhaps, but even so. Who else could even attempt it? If there is anyone alive in the world he might listen to, it can only be her.”

“Or, he could trick her into chasing bad leads to keep her out of his way. Or he could trick her into helping him more than she should. ‘Or’ a lot of things. He’s supposed to be a legendary trickster.”

“All the more reason she needs friends at her side—to help her see through whatever may come.”
One thoughtful eye studied him. “Dorian, I’m getting the feeling we’re not on the same page, here. Maybe we better try to get there before we worry about what we’re going to do.”

He swallowed. Glanced down at his hands. “I’m not saying her idea would be my first choice. I think even tracking him down and killing him is a tall order. But if she wants to try, I can’t tell her not to.”

“Why not? The fate of the world is on the table here. That’s too many people’s lives to risk for the sake of one man.”

The sick feeling was bubbling up, turning into a frantic urge to laugh—or cry. “You’re entirely right, of course.” He stared at Bull, feeling helpless. “I simply…understand her position. I understand it quite well, actually.”

A worried frown. “Dorian, what’s going on? You’re not talking about Solas.”

How well you know me. Bitter. Ironic. Wistful.

“Bull…there’s something…something I haven’t told you.”
Dorian wandered ornate halls and then garden paths, aimless. He passed people here and there, but he didn’t go seeking somewhere more private. The need to keep up appearances was all that was holding him together. After all, no use falling apart until he was sure.

Bull knew.

In broad strokes, he’d explained the truth. Not in detail, but the gist of it all. *I traveled in time. These last three years—I lived them twice. You don’t remember, no one does. You never left the Qun. This last mission…the Viddasala…to protect Lavellan…your death. I returned to Skyhold…the amulet…when we came back through the rift Alexius had created. Ever since then.*

Always a good listener, Bull had simply…listened. Then he’d said, “Okay. I’m…going to need some time.”

And Dorian had left him there, in their room. That was all.

He hadn’t thought long or hard about this; it had simply been something he knew he needed to do. He couldn’t explain to Bull why he understood Lavellan’s decision without telling the truth—or a very intentional lie. And whatever lies of omission he might have told these past three years—those, perhaps, were justified. He *could not* have told the truth until now, until he *knew.* Now, to begin deliberately lying—he couldn’t. And he couldn’t let Lavellan pay the price of his silence. Bull didn’t see her choice the way Dorian did; for that, she might lose him as an ally. She might still, but Dorian had done his best as her advocate. He owed her that much.

So now, after it all, he might lose Bull instead.

The thought was agony, but he wouldn’t face it. Couldn’t, not until he knew for sure. So he clung to public places to hold himself together, and over all that there was a numb sense of inevitability. What was done was done. There was nothing more to do. If he lost Bull, he lost him.

*At least he will be alive in the world, and free.*

When Dorian remembered that voiceless, dying whisper, that look of apology, that *Kadan*—he thought, *Well, if I’m to be broken-hearted either way, at least this way, he lives.*

It was tinged with an edge of panic. But it was still true.

A light footstep he could never even momentarily mistake for Bull’s drew his attention.

It was Lavellan. Short-tempered, redhead elf girl who saved the world. Lost her arm, lost her face—might lose much more yet.

*“Have you been making the rounds, my friend?”* He tried to inject some levity into his voice. It sounded hollow to him, but perhaps she wouldn’t notice.

*“Well, yes. But that doesn’t mean I’m here for your decision. I just wanted some company.”* She sat on a garden bench facing a fountain, and Dorian joined her.
“May I ask what the others are planning so far?”

“As long as it won’t influence your decision if I tell you.”

A dead smile. “My dear former Inquisitor, you haven’t the horns to influence my decision.”

She eyed him. Nodded. “Well, Varric’s the Viscount of Kirkwall, and there’s not much he can do about that. He says he’ll do what he can, be a connection, offer whatever resources he has, but he can’t come along in person. Same with Leliana—being Divine and all.”

“Friends in high places, at least,” he observed.

Lavellan nodded. “I don’t think Sera’s up for it, not really. If I need a Jenny for some Jenny-style trouble…but that’s all. I tried to find a way to explain it to her in terms she’d understand…but I don’t think there are any.”

“You’ll miss her.”

“Yes.” Lavellan’s expression was miserable. “For all our differences, she’s a wonderful friend. I love her. I wish our paths could remain close a little longer.”

Dorian wrapped an arm around her skinny shoulders. “What about…ah, Cole?”

She blinked. “Oh…I don’t know. I couldn’t find him.”

There was a pause. Dorian thought about the human lad he could remember, but there wasn’t much connection between him and the spirit he sometimes forgot, now. In the pause, Lavellan eventually added, “Josephine has to go back to Antiva. She might have stayed, but she’s too much of one for diplomacy and official methods. Without the Inquisition, she doesn’t have a formal position. She says her skills would not be helpful, and I suppose she’s right. We are going underground, in many ways.” A sigh. “But if we ever need a friend in Antiva, the Montilyet family will do what they can for us.”

“That’s something.”

“Yes. And I think Cassandra will remain. She isn’t fond of my decision…” Lavellan snorted. “When has she ever been? But she and Solas respected each other. And she is surprisingly supportive of my…feelings. I think she will continue to challenge me, but she shares my hope that he will…come around, or…I don’t know.”

“And Cullen?” Does he truly not matter to her at all? Has she really not seen him as anything more?

“Mm. Well, we don’t have an army anymore. He spoke of retirement, but he also wishes to help. I think he hasn’t exactly decided yet.” She leaned on him. “I haven’t spoken to Bull. And I’m not really asking you, at the moment. But I know you have to return to Tevinter, and I thought I’d just let you know that our best lead at the moment points to the Imperium. We may be headed your way.”

“Truly?” This was new. Or…perhaps it was the same, and he just hadn’t heard yet, last time.

He felt a nod against his shoulder. “We need new allies. And I don’t really have a plan, yet. I’ll need one.” She pulled back enough to look up at him. “But whatever you and Bull decide, I thought it might be relevant.” She made a wry face. “I may soon be heading north.”
Dorian brushed past the mention of Bull. “Well,” he ventured, with characteristic flippancy, “I’ve some marvelous northern cuisine you shall have to try. And as soon as we find ourselves in the same city, we must go shopping. I would adore the chance to dress you up in some properly fashionable clothing. You would look wonderfully exotic in Tevinter-style dress.”

Lavellan broke into a laugh. “You’re terrible. Here I am contemplating the fate of the world—again—and you’re going on about fashion.”

“True to form, my friend. When times are changing, we need to have a few constants we can rely upon.”

“Well.” She smiled. “That’s true. I’m glad of it. And you may rely upon me, Magister Pavus.” A pause. “Fenedhis, there’s a sentence I never expected to say!”

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Dorian avoided his room until evening. He didn’t want to impose when Bull had asked for time, but eventually he would need to sleep. If Bull had turned up in the tavern, he’d have gone back; when evening fell and he hadn’t, Dorian meandered back toward his wing, debating with himself and delaying. Perhaps he’d just drop in, and if Bull was still there, he’d grab a few things and take his leave…

He paced outside his own door, making up his mind.

Then, the door opened. My footsteps. Of course. “Dorian. Come on in.”

“I apologize, I didn’t mean to interrupt…”

“It’s fine. I was going to go look for you anyway. Come on.”

Everything in Bull’s face, voice, and bearing was as neutral as ever. Dorian would have much preferred he be distant or cold, if that was the direction this conversation was destined to go. The suspense was torture.

Bull sat down—not on the bed this time. On a chair. A neutral spot. Dorian chose another and joined him.

“So…I have a few questions.”

“Ask. I swear I will tell you the truth.”

Bull met his eyes. “Okay.” Then, “Were you ever going to tell me?”

It caught Dorian a little off-guard. He’d been expecting what were you thinking? or something of that nature. After a moment, he gathered his thoughts.

“I don’t know, to be honest. Until a few days ago, I hadn’t even thought about it.” Bull shifted, but his face remained neutral. Still, Dorian sensed the doubt. “I realize I had plenty of time to consider it and make plans, but…but you must understand. Until a few days ago, I expected you to betray us again. Foolishly, I see now,” he added quickly. “It’s no reflection on you. It’s simply…” He struggled for words. “It was so horrible. I was the one who killed you. I had to face the reality that the Qun meant more to you than I could ever understand. Even after you left it, I worried… And I’ve been so happy with you ever since. Part of me always felt that life would never grant me such happiness. So, I simply expected it to be taken away at some point. It still hasn’t quite sunk in.” He looked at Bull. “But when I realized Lavellan’s plan…I can’t help but understand her feelings.
And I couldn’t hide that from you.”

“Sounds like you weren’t expecting this plan.”

He shook his head. “It was different, before. She was ready to kill him. But then, their relationship had been much rockier to begin with.”

“You changed her relationship with Solas?”

A shrug. “Apparently.”

“What else did you change?”

Dorian swallowed. “I tried to meddle as little as possible. My whole plan was based on the memory of the Qunari alliance. You wanted to save the Chargers, but Lavellan thought she needed the alliance, and…you didn’t save them. They died, and you remained under the Qun.” A flicker crossed Bull’s face at that—something unhappy. “I knew she wouldn’t listen to me at the time, but I thought if there were others influencing her, she might make that choice differently. She had ended up in a relationship with Solas anyway; I simply tried to nudge her toward him and keep other distractions away. I thought his poor opinion of the Qun would help. And it did. And then, I suppose, they ended up spending more time together. They got along better than before…I suppose her attempted courtship of Sera—” Bull blinked. “—Oh, it ended terribly anyway. And it must have made her more…sensitive, or easily offended. I don’t know. It was only after the Qunari alliance that she began to spend time with Solas. After he vanished, she began to take an interest in Commander Cullen.” Dorian sighed, rubbing his temple. “When I try to explain it, it all sounds like a disaster, doesn’t it?”

“Hmm.” Noncommittal. His stomach churned nervously. “So you got between boss and Sera somehow, and the rest just worked itself out?”

“More or less,” he admitted. “I tried to create opportunities for her to spend time with the Chargers, as well. She barely knew them the first time. I thought she would be less willing to lose people who had become personal friends.”

“You were right.”

“It did work out that way,” he agreed. “Really, the fact that it all worked so well has been a large part of why I can’t quite believe any of this.”

A slow nod. “So, it sounds like you didn’t change much else.”

“I tried not to, but there are other things that simply…happened differently. I don’t know how. But I didn’t want to interfere. We had beaten Corypheus once, and it was imperative we find a way to do that again.”

“Yeah.” Big hands rubbed slowly together. “So, leaving aside that you gave that asshole another chance to destroy the world…” Steady, even eye contact. “What made you think my fate, Qun or not, was any of your business?”

Pain. Dorian couldn’t quite look up for a long moment. “We were…together. It wasn’t quite the same, but…I still loved you. I know that doesn’t give me the right to alter the course of your life, but…” He finally managed to look up. “I’ve always wondered what you would say. I couldn’t ask you then—you were dead. Imagine it now—if we were…what we are. But you were still Hissrad, right now…and a few days ago. I know you would obey, but I always wondered how you felt about it. How you would feel. Can you tell me honestly that you would kill me now, without the slightest
Bull blinked, sitting back. For a long time, he considered silently. Then, very slowly, “If I were still Qunari I would do as commanded. But…all this time with you, with the boss…I wouldn’t like it. If I had succeeded, I’d probably turn myself in for reeducation again, ask for the qamek. If you killed me to protect the boss…I’d be happier with that.”

Dorian’s throat, for a moment, was too tight to speak. He brushed dampness from his eyes. “That was what I thought at the time. As you died, I thought you seemed…glad. And perhaps sorry.”

A level stare. “If that’s so, you could have left me dead. I’m not happy that you put the whole world at risk just to save my life.”

A few more tears broke free. “I knew you wouldn’t be. Even at the time, I told myself it was an awful decision. But I was…I don’t know. I felt it more, after it was done—the battle of Haven is when it really hit me what I’d done. I’ve given everything since that moment to redeem my choice. And I fully admit it was unforgivable, and selfish, and I won’t even imply that you share any of the blame by saying that losing you drove me to it. I have no excuse.” Giving up any care for his hair, Dorian scraped a hand through it. “Another part of the reason this all still seems so unreal. How could I be rewarded with success after doing such a thing?”

“Mmm. Life can be messy. Some things are pretty fucked up.”

Vehemently, Dorian nodded. “The only thing I can say for myself is that I swore long ago that I would never do it again. I believed I would still lose you, and I determined to let you go this time, no matter how much it hurt.” He looked up, voice shaking. “It is still my decision. If you want nothing to do with me henceforward because of this, I will accept that.”

Bull’s eye was intent upon him—focused. After a long moment, he nodded. “I think that’s what I needed to hear.”

Dorian didn’t have words. He made a thin sound of desperation, straightening and leaning forward. Hopeful.

Slowly, Bull held out his hand. “Sometimes people fuck up. Sometimes they fuck up bad. You can’t stop that from happening. But if they get it, that’s the best outcome—knowing they won’t do it again.” Dorian tentatively touched his fingers to Bull’s hand, disbelief all over his face, surely. Bull smiled softly. “You’ve got ways of fucking up that are way beyond most people, and it’s weird as shit to have to forgive someone for saving my life, but…”

“You can’t be serious.” It was no more than a whisper.

“Dorian…Kadan. I completely disagree with what you did, but it’s already done. You won’t do it again. And I love you. Punishing you by calling this off won’t make anything better.”

In disbelief, in hope, in adoration he cried, “Bull!” Then he was in Bull’s arms, in his lap, being kissed and held close. A dream, surely—but one he would not ask to wake from.

Bull carried him to the bed, but when Dorian was lying in his arms there, he pulled back. “Dorian, hey.” Instantly, Dorian was all attention. “Listen. Whatever we do—with this Solas problem, or apart from it—I need you to promise me—”

“Yes. Anything.”

A crooked smile. “Listen to the promise first, Kadan.”
He snapped his mouth shut and nodded. Bull’s expression sobered.

“Look. We both live dangerous lives. You’re a magister now. I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m doing next, but it will probably always involve fighting something. One day, some asshole is going to get lucky, or I’ll get too worn out. People like you and me don’t get to settle down and retire.” He cradled Dorian’s face. “Whatever happens, you have to promise me that you won’t put others at risk for me again. No time traveling, and no other weird shit, no matter what. When the time comes, I want to go out knowing I helped people. I don’t want to worry that my death is going to put anyone in danger.”

Gathering himself, Dorian swallowed. “My love, if I outlive you, I will mourn you every day for the rest of my life, but I will never try to circumvent fate again.”

The gentlest kiss… “Okay, Kadan.”

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue next time.
Dorian sat in chains in a moldering ruin, barely conscious thanks to the drugs and enchanted bindings that kept the Fade locked out so hard he almost couldn’t stay in contact with his own mind. He sat and drifted and thought, *I really must get it through my head that my survival is no longer predetermined.*

And then he thought, *At least Bull will know his own death is safe, with mine already out of the way.*

And then he thought, ...

*Not yet, damn it! Not yet!*

Remembering how to live with no foreknowledge of events was quite the adjustment, particularly in Tevinter. Dorian thought he usually managed admirably, but he did slip at times. There were occasional moments when he risked too much. Mae wondered at him, at the flickers of folly when Dorian Pavus suddenly seemed to think himself invincible for no apparent reason. Usually, the risk paid off.

This time, it hadn’t.

His enemies had paid heavily in blood to bring him here, even with their surprise attack and their magebane and their traps. Whatever price they meant to gain from him, he’d already taken double in life. Given even a moment’s contact with the Fade, he’d take double his price again, perhaps leaving very few to actually collect on their captive. But that wouldn’t happen. Those remaining had learned from their comrades’ bloody demise, and Dorian assumed that he would not touch the Fade again from this side of the Veil.

Still, he continued to do any damage he could.

Every time they moved him—and they moved him every other day, as near as he could tell—he kicked and bit and, when possible, took a shot at emasculating his handlers. They paid him back double in pain, but he wasn’t the delicate magister they expected. He’d spent six years fighting for his life, for the lives of his comrades. He’d been bloodied before, and it seemed they weren’t quite willing to do the kind of damage that would be life-threatening. Not yet, anyway.

Another ruin, another cave, another abandoned dungeon. It had been perhaps a week. If he guessed their intentions correctly, he had very little time left.

He’d played with time, bent it and twisted it to his will, and yet he still could not make more of it when it was gone.

So Dorian reflected, and then the stone wall on the far side of the room suddenly exploded.

Dorian ducked to hide his face from the flying debris. He heard shouts outside the old abandoned mansion, the clang of armored feet rushing.

All that was secondary to the motley band of familiar faces appearing in the sudden flood of daylight.

“Dorian! You alive?”
He choked, then shouted, “Yes, no thanks to your rescue methods, you brute!” He was beaming as he shouted it, though.

Grim, Krem, and Skinner converged on the door to his prison, turning it into a choke point moments before Dorian’s captors yanked it open. Dorian didn’t see Bull or most of the others, but from the sound of it they were outside, covering the rear. Dalish was the first at his side—she didn’t even need to look to tell which restraints had to go at once. She grimaced as she touched them, but she worked quickly. Then Dorian had a lyrium potion and a staff in his hands. “I know you’re in poor shape, Messere, but we’d be most obliged for any damage you can do.”

“I can do some,” Dorian grinned, ignoring the rasp of his dry throat. Lyrium wasn’t water and didn’t help, but it brought the Fade rushing back to him, manifesting in gouts of fire.

Incinerating people had never been quite this much fun, he was sure. Particularly when it came to each of the bastards who had laid a finger on his poor, precious face.

The Chargers had been prepared for a snatch-and-run rescue—Dorian could tell that as the smoke cleared. As it turned out, however, there were fewer enemies left than the Chargers had been given to expect—which Dorian would take all due credit for, of course. As soon as the moment presented itself.

In the meantime, he collapsed.

He made it outside and got one look at the grotesque pants he’d never expected to see again, and injuries and exhaustion caught up with him—even as large, sweaty arms caught him. Dorian grimaced at his leg. “Ah. Broken after all, I suppose. I’d rather hoped I’d been mistaken…”

Bull’s deep voice was in his ear, but it was muffled, for some reason. The world was swimming, a bit. “Just lovely,” Dorian huffed, or tried to, “I’m going into shock.” He tried to lift his head to find Bull. “Be back with you shortly, it’s only a swoon, it’ll…pass…”

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Dorian had vague flashes of awareness, mostly of being carried in enormous arms or leaning against a chest that smelled of leather and sweat and steel and home. But he did not truly wake until later—how much later, he wasn’t sure. He only knew, from taking stock of his surroundings, that he was in bed, in what appeared to be an inn, and his injuries had been tended—by Stitches, it would seem. Unless the recipe for that particular poultice had started spreading around Thedas—Maker help them if it had.

And Bull was slouched in a giant chair next to his bed, asleep.

Dorian sighed, gazing at him. It had been months since his return to Tevinter. This was well worth a broken leg and a near-death experience.

As long as his nose wasn’t broken.

Then Dorian noticed the pattern on the chair, matched in the drapery, and he groaned.

Bull sat up instantly. “Dorian? You awake?”

“Ugh. Are we in Antiva?” he moaned.

“Surely. Are we in Antiva?” he moaned.

Bull was already leaning over him, playing tama and checking his eyes and somehow bringing water at the same time. “Yeah. Quickest way back out of Tevinter, and I didn’t want to hang
around too long. The Tevinter welcome wears off quick if you’ve got horns.”

Dorian sighed. “Well, there go my hopes for a decent drink.” Even as he said it, however, he accepted the water. He’d had barely enough to keep him alive for the last week, and what he’d had either tasted like rust or mud. Clean water, at the moment, was preferable to the best vintage.

“How do you feel?”

Dorian held the cup out for more, sighing. “Alive, thanks to you and your company. It goes without saying that drinks are on me tonight.”

“Maybe wait until tomorrow night.” Bull handed him the refilled cup. “Just rest here for now.”

He arched an eyebrow. “If you think you can order me about just because I have a broken leg…” But there Dorian trailed off. Bull was still watching him, but there was a shuttered distance in his eye. “Bull?”

“Hmm?”

Dorian was silent a long moment, examining his lover. Then: “I’m sorry to have worried you.”

“Wasn’t your fault.”

The corner of his mouth twisted wryly. “All right, let me rephrase.” He reached out and laid a hand gently on Bull’s massive one on the bedspread beside him. “I am sorry you were worried.”

Their eyes met, and for a long moment, they just looked at each other. Finally, Bull nodded. “Yeah. I was.” The admission seemed to crack through his blank exterior a little. Or, Bull was making an effort to stop automatically hiding his feelings. “I was scared.”

Dorian nodded, simply holding Bull’s hand. There was no need for reassurances; Bull knew very well that everything was all right now. Dorian just waited, giving him space to confront what he’d been pushing down.

“I thought it was already too late. Thought I’d lost you.” For a long moment, they just looked at each other. Then, Bull sighed. “I think I get it now, a little. How you felt.”

“When?”

“Before.” There was a significance to the word, a weight.

“Ah.” Dorian gently squeezed Bull’s hand.

“I just kept remembering the last time I saw you.”

“You mean our trip north?” The Chargers had travelled with him as far as the Tevinter border.

“Yeah. I just kept remembering one night, sitting by the campfire…and the way your face looked in the firelight, all shadows and gold, and I thought ‘I’ll never see him again.’ I thought that over and over the whole way. I figured we’d find your corpse, if we found anything, and I’d fuck up the assholes who killed you, and then…”

Dorian lifted Bull’s hand and kissed it softly. “Well,” he murmured against Bull’s knuckles, “never mind about that. I’ve survived, with your help. We needn’t dwell upon what didn’t happen. And I promise you, I will be much more careful from now on.”
“I’d appreciate that, Kadan.” His big hand wrapped around Dorian’s much smaller one. “I’m not ready to lose you.”

*I don’t think either of us ever will be*, he thought, but he didn’t say that. He pulled Bull closer instead. “Well. It seems we haven’t run out of time just yet.”

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They traveled south, from Antiva into Nevarra. Bull couldn’t cross the border and escort Dorian all the way home, and he worried that Dorian’s enemies would have sent reinforcements to track him down. So Dorian would reenter Tevinter from an entirely different border, and travel quickly and covertly, reappearing in Minrathous as if by magic. *That* should upset those who thought they’d gotten him out of the way.

In the meantime, the company avoided main roads in Nevarra. They took out-of-the-way back roads and camped to avoid cities and towns. As much as Dorian wanted the time to last, they moved quickly. He had political hell to unleash upon the Magisterium as soon as possible.

One afternoon, Dorian reined in his horse. Bull rode up and stopped beside him, following Dorian’s gaze. “Something up with that house?”

“No…” Dorian hadn’t stopped because the place looked suspicious. It didn’t look particularly beautiful, either. It was just a villa. Apparently empty, but not in terrible repair—so probably not long abandoned. It was completely unremarkable—just a house in Nevarra. And they were nearing the border, where they’d part ways. “It’s only…an idea.”

“Okay, hit me.”

“You can find work for the Chargers around here, can’t you? Now and again? Or within a reasonable travel distance?”

Bull shrugged. “Sure. Nevarra’s as good as anywhere. We have more of a reputation in Orlais and Ferelden, thanks to the Inquisition, but we’ve worked here too. Could always build up our clientele some more.” He studied Dorian. “Why?”

“I just thought…I could buy that villa.” He met Bull’s eye. “For the occasional short stay.”

A slow, soft smile. “Do you have time for holidays, Magister Pavus?”

“I can make time,” Dorian answered, and then heard himself and chuckled. “In the *traditional* way. By clearing my calendar for a few days.”

Bull grinned. “Hey, I guess I can make time too! No magic required.”

Dorian nodded, still smiling, and reached out to take Bull’s hand. “I’ll buy that villa, then.”

“Don’t let them overcharge you. The location is terrible,” Bull murmured, leaning close.

“Noted.” Kissing on horseback was an awkward feat—but Dorian was a man of many talents. He smiled. “Don’t *you* forget the address. Lummox.”

With that much agreed, they rode on. Together.
Thanks to all the lovely readers, especially those who took the time to comment, even when I didn't reply. (See my profile for an explanation/rant...rantsplanation of that.)

New (wildly different) story starts tomorrow. Different Inquisitor, different tone completely...but still Adoribull. ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!