Ghilan'him Banal'vhen (The Path That Leads Astray)
by FoxNonny

Summary

There are lives and timelines where Mahanon Lavellan does not become Inquisitor. This is one of them.

That doesn't mean that he and the Iron Bull never meet.

-(Or, more simply, "Mahanon Lavellan becomes one of Bull's Chargers a few years before the Conclave AU."

Notes

This is potentially one of the MOST self-indulgent things I have ever written in my life, but it's been over a year and a half now (probably longer) and I haven't been able to get the idea out of my head.

This is largely set-up for another fic that I also haven't been able to get out of my head for about that long. I just... really love these boys a lot and with a new Dragon Age coming out it's like getting a second (or fifth, or sixth) wind to tell more long stories in this universe. So sue me.

(Please don't, I don't have money. Please leave comments and tell me you like my fics.)
Basically, I blame Sam for this. Sam, if you're reading this, it's your fault. And Stitch and Tiny and Alex's. And TheRealMnemo's and GrimSister's. Also everyone who has ever given me validation about Mahanon. I blame y'all. I hope you like this thing.

(ALSO for anyone here who's here because they like my other Iron Bull/Dorian/Mahanon fics, don't worry I promise I'm gonna finish Triangle and add more stories to G-D-C soon now that I'm finally off school, thank you all so much for your patience ily <3)
It takes about five minutes of examining the bodies, the partially-obliterated mountain path, the rock pile, the displaced and trickling puddles of water that once made up a wide and strong creek before the rock fall crashed into it, and the scorched earth around the whole mess before Bull starts to put together some kind of picture of what happened to the Baron's men.

It's a fascinating fucking picture, even with a few pieces missing.

"Magic," Rocky growls again, rubbing the scorched earth between his thumb and finger as Bull reaches down and yanks another crest off a slightly charred corpse. Rocky's been muttering about magic since they got to the site, and it's a fair (if fucking obvious) point - Bull can still smell ozone on the air, like he's in the middle of a thunderstorm, even though the sky is just slightly overcast and there hasn't been a storm all day. "Bet those highwaymen had a whole contingent of apostates, probably running off from Kirkwall."

"They weren't highwaymen," says Dalish, coming back down the path from where she scouted ahead with a furious look on her face.

Bull straightens up, wincing - the mountain is fucking cold, and the hike up here has caused his bad leg to cramp up. "You found something?"

"The Baron fucking lied, is what I found," Dalish hisses. "He didn't send his men out to track down highwaymen - there are fresh aravel tracks up the road. There was a clan here."

Bull sighs and rubs his forehead. He's not surprised - the Baron was a twitchy bastard, and seemed willing to pay a lot for a simple recon mission. But the Chargers needed new equipment and a ship out of the Free Marches, and none of that was going to come cheap. Still.

"Any Dalish casualties?" He's only half listening to the answer, picking around the bodies to the other side of the blast radius. The news about the aravels filled in some of the last gaps, but there's still a piece missing... maybe two...

"Didn't look like it," Dalish says. "This is the only path up - whoever did this must have given them enough time to get away."

"I didn't think clans had that many mages on hand," Krem says, frowning as he pockets a very fine-looking dagger clearly looted off the corpse he's just finished examining.

"It would have only taken two," Bull says, glancing up at the mountainside and back down at the path again, squinting his single eye at the muddy ground. "Maybe one, if that one was being really ambitious."

"One mage against a dozen armed men?" Skinner asks dubiously, tossing a bloodstained coin purse from palm to palm.

Bull turns to his crew, pointing up to the cliff face beside them. "Looks like there was a small stream coming down through the rocks feeding into this bigger creek here, which would have weakened the cliff face. Hit the right place with a real powerful bolt, you could trigger a rock fall - which they did. Scorch marks right at the top there, see? That takes care of half." Bull gestures to the mangled remains caught under the rocks. "Also hits the creek, causes the path to flood, gets everyone nice and wet. Lightning travels through water; another lightning bolt, and you've fried whoever's left standing. So, maybe two mages, 'cause the individual strikes would have taken a lot
of power and precision. Or one mage who's probably dead, possessed, or has a real bad headache right now."

Bull turns back to the path and spots drag marks coming out of the mud to the left of the path, into the trees and shrubbery. There.

"Damn, that's smart," mutters Krem, as Bull carefully follows the tracks off the path.

"Still say it was a bunch of mages," says Rocky. "At least five. Maybe more. Definitely possessed, this is abomination work all right."

Bull kicks aside some brambles, wincing as the thorns bite at his legs, and smiles grimly as the final piece slots neatly into place.

Curled up around a charred and split staff is the still body of an elf, his vallaslin nearly lost beneath the blood drying over his cheeks and mouth from what looks like a very broken nose. There's an arrow jutting out from his shoulder, the thin leather of his tunic stained with blood and mud. His nut-brown skin has a distinctly grey cast to it and he's cold to the touch when Bull reaches down to take a closer look at his hands, which are scarred and blistered in lightning patterns. Bull's best guess is that the elf dragged himself across the ground to this hiding place before exhaustion or blood loss took him. Hoping the right people might find him, or fearing the wrong people would find him first.

"One mage," Bull calls over his shoulder. "Should've put a bet on it."

Bull pulls a rag out of his pocket and gingerly wipes some of the blood from the elf's face, half expecting the body to suddenly warp into a demon (wouldn't be the first fucking time). To his relief the body stays the way it is as he gets a clearer look at the mastermind behind what was, he's willing to admit to himself, a fascinatingly smart bit of tactical work.

He's young, though Bull knows elf's ages - especially long-lived Dalish elves - are hard to pin at a glance. Aside from the lines of pain and exhaustion still drawn up around his eyes and mouth the elf's skin is smooth, if freckled across the cheeks and forehead. He doesn't look like he was the kind of man who could calculate the quickest and most efficient way to dispatch a dozen men in the space of mere minutes. There's something about his full mouth, the uplifted set of his brow, and the dark curls damp with sweat, blood, and mud that seem to suggest, if anything, a kind of gentle innocence.

He could have made for a damn fine Ben Hassrath, Bull finds himself thinking, and shakes his head. He saw a lot of weaponized innocence in Seheron. He doesn't like to think too much about it on this side of the world.

There's a tsk from a few feet behind him, and Bull doesn't have to look to know Dalish has joined him. "Damn, that's just sad, that is."

"I guess the clan lost their Keeper," Bull says, stowing the rag back in his pocket.

"No, see those marks?" Dalish points to a series of etchings running along the base of the elf's shattered staff. "Apprenticeship markings. He was probably the clan's First."

Bull opens his mouth to make a joke about job openings, and closes it again. As much as the Chargers trade barbs with one another, they all know what sore spots are off limits. "He wasn't possessed, was he?"

"I don't feel any demons," Dalish says, crouching beside Bull. "You know what I do feel, though?"
"What's that?"

"Life. Boy's not dead yet. You might have wanted to do a more thorough check." Dalish smirks. "Or were you fearing he'd turn all growly and scary on you?"

Bull frowns and presses his fingers to the elf's throat, not dignifying Dalish's (thoroughly accurate) assessment of his behaviour with a response. Sure enough, he feels the weak flutterings of a heartbeat - a bit too fast, and a bit too shallow, but it's there. "Huh."

"It might be doing him a kindness to make it quick for him," Dalish says, though she doesn't sound too convinced of her own argument. "That was a lot of magic to channel, and his clan's not around to take care of him..."

It would, Bull knows, be a fuckton of trouble on their part to try and haul this misplaced little mage from the brink of death, no matter how interesting he might be. No matter how much Bull might want to ask him how long he had to think of the rock fall plan. No matter how much Bull might admire the kind of willpower it would take to face down almost certain death to give one's people enough time to escape unharmed-

"Stitches!" Bull calls, and Dalish gives an audible sigh of relief.

- The Baron is already well into a bottle of Antivan red when his steward leads Bull and Krem into the sitting room, fingers twitching on his goblet as he sets it aside to wave them forward.

"Did you find them?" The man's eyes dart from Krem to Bull and back again, and he licks at the fringe of his wine-stained ginger moustache. "My men?"

"They're dead," Bull says, folding his arms. "We've left the family crests with one of your servants."

"All of them? Those-" the Baron snatches up his goblet again, taking a long drink. He narrows his eyes at Bull over the gold rim of the cup. "Er, I don't suppose the uh- the bandits gave you much trouble-"

"No bandits at the scene, my lord," Krem says coolly.

"Or elves," Bull says.

The Baron chokes a bit, putting the goblet aside again and mopping at his mouth with his sleeve. "Elves, er- I don't- I didn't say-"

"Nah, but it would have been convenient, wouldn't it?" Bull says. "Assuming if there was a Dalish clan up there that had just been attacked, none of your men returning, sending up some scary-looking mercs to scare the rest of them off? Maybe have us take care of whatever - whoever - might be left?"

"Better to send mercs and private protectors of your household than the town militia, best not to make things too public," Krem says. "After all, isn't your cousin the Viscount of Bastion?"

"I-"

"And didn't the city of Bastion just secure a trading deal with several significant Dalish clans?"
"I didn't-

"It'd be pretty embarrassing if the Viscount's cousin was caught harassing and attacking a Dalish clan after all that," Bull says. "Maybe your cousin would be a little less generous with his allowance, invitations to fancy parties, buying lumber from your people, if he knew what you got up to on the weekends."

The Baron cuts Bull a hard glare that immediately weakens into contrition at the look on Bull's face. "You don't understand, they were-

"Look, I'm a busy guy, and if you're gonna waste my time spinning some story about how the elves were just so mean to you, I might as well go and have that conversation with your cousin," says Bull. "Or."

"Or?"

"Double," says Krem.

The Baron's eyes bulge. "Double?"

"Double, and you foot the bill for our ship to Orlais," Bull says. "I'm gonna guess you want us to leave the Free Marches as soon as possible, yeah?"

The Baron grips the arm of his chair, his face going through what looks to be several stages of grief and anger before finally settling on resignation. "Fine. But I want you gone by sunset. Tonight."

Bull grins. "Done."

"You know," says Krem quietly as they leave the estate, purses significantly heavier than when they entered, "if you hadn't pushed your luck with the ship, we might've gotten to stay another night at that inn."

Bull claps a hand on Krem's shoulder. "We'll find you another barmaid, Krem. Bastion's not too far from here. You'll have more selection."

"Fuck off," mutters Krem, knocking Bull's hand off even as a blush rises in his cheeks. "I was thinking of having a bath, that's all. A nice hot bath."

"With company?"

"With soap. Make it so folks can stand being downwind of us." Krem's nose wrinkles. "Not that soap's ever helped you much in that respect."

Bull barks a laugh. "Spoken like a man who doesn't want his cut of the bonus."

"I'm just saying. Skinner's gonna be right pissed, and you know it."

"Yeah, well, Skinner'll have to cope. And anyway," Bull drops his voice, "I don't think bringing our uh, guest into town would've been a good idea."

Krem grumbles, but doesn't disagree.

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The Chargers have already set up a camp outside town by the time Bull and Krem arrive, with Rocky and Grim in the process of getting a robust fire going.
"We sort of figured you'd get us kicked out of town," Rocky calls cheerily from the pile of kindling, pulling out a pouch of suspicious-looking powder. "Most of us, anyway. Were we right?"

"Yeah, and if you throw that shit on the fire and blow us all up I'll have your ears," Bull says with equal cheer.

Rocky puts the pouch away with a pout. "Just wanted to test it. Skinner, you owe the rest of us a copper each."

"I don't have the money," Skinner says sourly.

"You do now," says Krem, holding up the heavy bags of coin. "Sorry, not as good as bed and bath, I know."

Skinner eyes the bulging purses for a long moment and finally shrugs. "I suppose it'll do."

Bull, seeing that Stitches' tent is already up, leaves Krem to count out shares and slips inside.

Despite the sun's low position in the sky the tent is well-lit, a glowing crystal hanging overhead from a top pole. The crystals appeared in everyone's sleeping rolls one Satinalia, and though Dalish still claims she'd had no part in their creation or distribution, she was quite happy to explain to anyone who asked how they worked.

Stitches has his cot set directly beneath the crystal as he carefully bandages the unconscious elf mage's magic-burned hands. Dalish hovers nearby, watching the work with tight lips. Under the unnatural glow of the crystal the elf still looks worryingly ashen and corpse-like, but it's a testament to Stitches' skill that he's looking better on the whole. His nose has since been realigned (and Bull can only be grateful on the elf's behalf that he was unconscious for that process), the last of the blood wiped from his face, the arrow removed, and his shoulder bandaged. His tattooed chest visibly rises and falls - slightly, and a bit raggedly, but he seems to be breathing easier.

"I've done just about all I can for him," Stitches says, not looking up from his work. "If he wakes up we can get some elfroot in him, maybe a little lyrium, and that'll put some colour back in his cheeks. Until then..."

"It's good work," Bull says, nodding his approval. He looks the elf over again, frowning. "Dalish, I'll be the first to admit I don't know shit about vallaslin, but the stuff on his face looks different from what's on the rest of him, yeah?"

"I noticed it too," Dalish says quietly, coming to stand beside Bull. "The vallaslin on his face is honouring Mythal. The rest... I think it's a variant of Andruil, but Creators, it's not like any style I've seen."

"Does that mean anything?"

Dalish nods, and shrugs. "Yes, well- maybe? I thought he seemed a bit odd when we first found him, to be honest. He doesn't look like the Dalish typical of the clans I know of around these parts. My best guess is that he was gifted to the clan during the last Arlathvhen."

Bull looks at Dalish. "He was what now?"

"I- I've heard from other Dalish-" her face twists into a pained expression, "-that when some clans have more than two or three mages, they- they actually seek out other clans, or wait for the Arlathvhen - when all the clans meet up - and they just... settle them in other clans. They don't always abandon us- er, them. I didn't- well, I don't think I wanted to believe that was true, but..."
Bull puts a hand on Dalish's shoulder. "Sorry."

"It's just... it was nice to think that maybe it wasn't personal," Dalish says quietly. "That's all."

There's nothing Bull can say to help with that, and he doesn't try.

"So they weren't even really his people," Bull says after a moment, hoping to pull Dalish out of her own painful memories and back to the matter at hand.

"Technically we're all the same 'People'," Dalish says, with pained distaste. "But I don't think he was born to the clan, no."

*Interesting.*

Bull gives Dalish's shoulder a squeeze, drops his hand, and crouches beside the cot across from Stitches. The elf's dark hair is dry now (though still caked with mud and blood in places), his wild curls spilling across his forehead and over his very long, pointed ears. This close, Bull can't help but notice the elf's long dark lashes, nor can he help his curiosity about what colour the elf's eyes might be.

*He's cute,* Bull thinks, quirking a half-smile. It's a strange thing to think about a half-dead elf with a broken nose who just single-handedly killed a dozen men, but hey. Bull prides himself on having a wide range of tastes.

"What are his chances, realistically?" Bull asks, his eye tracing a path along the twisting and knotted tattoos spilling down over the elf's chest and shoulders.

Stitches shrugs. "Could go either way. The evidence tells me he's going to pass sometime in the night."

"That's where Rocky, Skinner, and Grim've put their gold," says Dalish.

Bull nods. "So that's the evidence. What about your gut?"

Stitches bobs his head noncommittally. "I'd say he's got a fighting chance. Maybe fifty-fifty. He's made it this far, yeah?"

Bull gets to his feet. "Alright, then. Who's taking bets?"

"Grim's got this one," Dalish says.

"Right," says Bull. "Five gold says he wakes up before noon tomorrow."
Chapter Notes

Tag on this chapter for violence and such intense social awkwardness I felt like I was transported back to high school oh... oh man. Proto pre-Inquisition Mahanon is an awkward and very flawed person.

Also this chapter is long as fuck because pacing is what? What is pacing. Who is she, I don't know her.

As always I thrive off comments and kudos, thank you so much to everyone who's commented so far and I hope you don't mind me updating so quickly!!

Also also, if you've never read one of my Mahanon fics before, there's a pretty good overview of his birth clan and parents in O M'anam... I hope everything here makes sense regardless. Anyway. I will stop rambling now.

EDIT: I'm a sucker for emotional character songs and I've got a whole-ass playlist for this thing now so hey, here's a song for the chapter: Waving Through a Window because man is this song ever a Mahanon mood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One day earlier

Mahanon has never once thought he would make a particularly good or effective leader. Unfortunately, this view seems almost universally shared by the clan he's destined to lead one day.

If you were to ask Mahanon his own opinion on the matter, which no one ever has, he would happily outline a prepared list of reasons why making him the Keeper heir apparent of Clan Lavellan is by all accounts a terrible fucking idea. For one thing, Mahanon has never really thought of himself as much of a people person, preferring books and quiet and solitude to large gatherings (though this might be because the large gatherings he finds so utterly nerve-wracking tend to be populated with peers eyeing him with mingled pity, annoyance, or resigned acceptance that they'll have to call him "Keeper" one day). Mahanon keeps a careful count of his personal failings; too short, too nervous, too awkward, too different. The last can't really be helped, though there are certainly some among the Lavellans who would think otherwise.

Mahanon spent his childhood growing up within the small and distinctly removed Sliabh clan. It was a warm and accepting place that utterly failed to prepare him for a broader, more public life. The Sliabhs kept to themselves and their ways, with little interaction with other Dalish clans, never mind humans. The discovery of Mahanon's magic ability came as a hard blow to the remote community, which already had three mages within their midst. If Mahanon had been more of a hedge witch and less of a full-fledged mage, they might have tried to keep him. Mahanon once overheard the Keeper saying as much to his parents and spent the next three weeks trying to suppress his abilities, until he accidentally brought a full lightning strike down in the middle of camp with a sneeze. Mercifully no one was hurt, but his fate was sealed; he was offered up at the next Arlathvhen to clans in need of Firsts, and taken in by the large and far more social Clan Lavellan.
Customs dictate that Dalish elves fully shed their previous clan identity when moving on to a new clan, an especially important practice for mages destined to lead the clans they are gifted to. As Keeper Istimaethoriel has said to Mahanon time and time again, "One cannot lead with half a heart."

And Mahanon tried, at first. He really did try. He liked the Lavellans, and still loves them like family. But it did not help that the nature of being a First often kept him sequestered from other members of the clan. He rarely participated in activities with the other children, too busy learning traditions and medicines and magics from the Keeper. He was shy and homesick, not as grateful as the clan expected him to be, and he kept tripping over his own tongue and lack of knowledge regarding broader social practices.

His first realization that he'd entered a very different kind of clan came when he told the other children about his parents: his two fathers and his mother who all lived and loved happily with one another. This had garnered many odd looks and hushed whispers, and it was a shock to discover that the world held far different expectations regarding love and family than he'd grown up knowing. There were few elves like him in the clan, ones who felt attraction for members of the same gender, and while they were loved and accepted by other Lavellans there was still a sense of otherness, that Mahanon could not begin to understand. He kept his attraction to men to himself, and soon learned to keep everything else about himself to himself as well, for fear of more whispers. More sideways looks.

His general hurt turned briefly to anger in his teens; a quiet, simmering sense of unfairness spurred on by abject loneliness. Mahanon was never really one to rebel much, happy to stew quietly in his emotions if it meant avoiding conflict. However, when the time came to receive his vallaslin, he had a single moment of pure isolation-fuelled mutiny that many in the clan have yet to forgive him for. The clan vallaslin artist marked his face with Lavellan dedications to Mythal, as expected. He then found and paid an ex-Dalish artist to mark the rest of him in the fashion of his birth clan. It was an extremely rash, extremely permanent symbol of rejection, and though Mahanon is old enough now to recognize how childish it was, he's not entirely sure he regrets doing it. For the first time it felt as though he was taking charge of his own othering, and there was power in that.

So there are some in the clan who are bitter about Mahanon's position as First, and Mahanon quite honestly can't bring himself to blame them for it. It absolutely did not help that only months after Mahanon was inducted into the clan, one of the clan children was revealed to also have magic. This past winter, another child from that same family started showing signs of magic too, leading to the very unhappy conclusion that they would have to give the child up at the next Arlathvhen.

Mahanon told the Keeper outright, months ago, that if it meant that the children could stay with the Lavellan clan he would happily give himself over in their stead. This offer was not at all well-received and led to very familiar hour-long lecture about the nature of responsibility that Mahanon could at this point recite from memory.

But Keeper Istimaethoriel is not a slow woman, nor was she blind to the problems presented by the situation. So in the hopes of proving Mahanon's value as a First and mending the relationship between him and the clan, especially him and the family whose mage children his presence automatically displaced, she put him in charge of leading trade negotiations with a small village close to Bastion. They'd just finished a very successful round of negotiations with Bastion's viscount in partnership with two other large clans, and their presence was largely well-received in the area.

She assured him that it would be an easy enough task. He would only be leading a small
representative group - three hunters and a warrior to protect the aravels, a few merchants and their families. A smaller group, she reasoned, would make it harder for Mahanon to disappear into the crowd as he was wont to do, and force him to socialize with the clan members - and force the clan members to socialize with him.

This, at least, was the plan.

- The walk down the mountain to the town gates is as awkward as it is quiet, with both states informing one another in an utterly hellish negative feedback loop.

Mahanon focuses on the ground, occasionally glancing up at the trees for a change in scenery. The merchant at his side, Aerantil, takes no notice of this, or of Mahanon in general. Usually this would suit Mahanon just fine, but he knows part of the test set to him by the Keeper in this endeavour was to connect. To talk. To bond. So far Mahanon has managed to do none of these things with any of the clan members sent along with him.

It would be easier, he can't help but think again for about the hundredth time this trip, if the Keeper had allowed Alaine to accompany them. Alaine was one of the few members of the clan who seemed unaffronted by Mahanon's quiet nature and nervous ways. Despite their wildly different temperaments, the two of them at least have some fundamental things in common. Though Mahanon likes neither attention nor the pressures of social gatherings, he's always had something of a fascination with the human world, especially admiring how people can go completely unnoticed in large cities and towns. From the time Mahanon first met Alaine, she'd always expressed a hunger for something beyond the expectations of the clan. Alaine was protective of Mahanon when he was first gifted to the Lavellans, and given that she was older, taller, and fiercer than he was by far with a penchant for swinging a greatsword around like a baton, there were few who were willing to challenge her on it. Even despite Mahanon's sequestering and general awkwardness, they'd formed a close friendship.

Which was exactly why the Keeper kept Alaine back, Mahanon knows. He could have hidden behind Alaine's affability (and giant sword), and the point of the exercise was not to hide.

As they come to the base of the mountain Mahanon pauses, making a small happy noise as he recognizes the plant sprouting up from the bed of the swift-running creek along the trail.

"Spindleweed," he says by way of explanation, stooping to collect a few sprigs and grateful to have something, anything to say. "Always good to keep some around, I've read that humans use it nearly as much as-"

Mahanon looks up and stops. Aerantil has continued walking without him, leaving him to spout extremely boring facts about comparative horticulture to the wind and no one else. He presses his lips together and slips the spindleweed sprigs into his pouch. Hoping his dark skin might cover for the heat rising in his cheeks, he follows after Aerantil, doing everything in his power not to bring his pace above a brisk walk to catch up.

The town gates are imposing, if a bit rustic. The wall around the town seems made up of fallen cedars, untreated save for having the branches lopped off and the tops roughly sawn into sharp spikes. There are two armoured humans standing aside the gates, both men, who step forward with suspicious eyes and ready spears as Mahanon and Aerantil approach.

"That's close enough," growls the guard on the left, an older man with greying stubble and a deep sneer. "We're not taking no apostates on, especially not any knife-ears."
Mahanon winces at the slur and opens his mouth to respond, but Aerantil cuts in smoothly. "We mean you and yours no harm. We merely wish to speak with your town's leader. Our understanding is that the Baron is open to trade."

Mahanon bites his tongue and settles back, conscious of the weight of his staff on his back. As First, it was his job to initiate parlay with humans - not Aerantil's. He tries to rationalize it as a protective act on Aerantil's part; after all, the guards have already identified Mahanon as a mage and, in their limited view, a possible threat. Perhaps it just makes more sense for someone without magic to talk the humans down.

Mahanon knows that this is utterly wishful thinking on his part. But wishful thinking has kept him from abject despair and disappointment so far, so he holds his tongue and lets Aerantil talk. "He's open to trade alright," says the left-hand guard slowly, looking from Aerantil to Mahanon and back again with narrow eyes. "He's particular about the source, though."

"We've just concluded business with his cousin, the Viscount of Bastion," says Aerantil. "Surely that speaks to our credentials."

The right-hand guard snorts. "If that's true, then maybe."

"We-" Mahanon starts, but Aerantil cuts him a hard look that stifles his words in his throat. He knows - he knows - that he could and should stand up for himself. He's certain the Keeper sent Aerantil along specifically because of his acerbic, prideful nature and general ill-will; Mahanon is far from the first to fall on the wrong side of Aerantil's personal ledger, and few would fault him for putting the merchant in his place. Some might even praise him for it.

But... he can't. He can't make the words come out, and if he could he knows they'd be little more than whispers. So again, he keeps his mouth shut.

"We have documentation of our dealings with the Viscount," says Aerantil. "We request but a moment's audience with the Baron. If this is not possible, we will be on our way."

The left-hand guard rolls his eyes and slings his spear back over his shoulder. "I'll let the Baron know you're here. Hope you're prepared to wait a bit; he's a busy man."

"Of course," says Aerantil, with half a bow. Mahanon tries not to make a face; very few in the clan would even consider nodding to a human, never mind humans with such obvious disdain for their kind.

The wait for the guard's return is almost unbearably long, and if Mahanon weren't so on edge he'd happily slip into daydreaming, a habit that the Keeper assured him would be the death of him one day. It's hard to let his mind wander with the remaining human eyeing him and Aerantil both with such intense dislike. If it were his decision, he'd already be halfway back up the mountain, writing the whole endeavour off as a lost cause.

He tries not to think too hard about the fact that, well, it really is his decision, at least in theory. The Keeper made it very clear that the clan members joining Mahanon on this trip were to treat him as her equal and follow his direction. He cannot imagine how Aerantil might respond if he told him he was calling the negotiations off, though, no matter how intense the uneasiness growing in his heart.

When the guard finally returns, it's with another armoured human - though immediately Mahanon can spot a distinct improvement in the quality of the newcomer's clothes and mail over the gate
guards. Not the Baron, and not a merchant. Mahanon frowns.

"Aeran-" he tries, but Aerantil steps away from him with a congenial smile. "Andaran atish'an, human."

The guards by turn grimace or snicker at the Elvhen greeting, but the newcomer bows with a polite smile of his own. His eyes seem far too cunning for Mahanon's liking, though, and his unease deepens.

"The Baron sends his regards," the man says. "I'm Captain Loren, of the Baron's personal guard. The Baron is busy at present, but wonders where he might send his merchants to trade with you directly. Can't help but notice you're not exactly pulling a cart."

"With your approval, we'll have our people bring wares down here to the gates," says Aerantil.

"No need for that," says the Captain, waving a hand. "We're happy to make the journey to where your people are camped."

It's a casual gesture that could be utterly benign, but Mahanon's uneasiness turns to downright alarm as the Captain's hand falls to his sword, resting the palm of his gloved hand on the pommel. One of the guards grins.

"We'd prefer to trade in town," Mahanon says, his voice surprisingly firm. The three humans start a little like they forgot he was there, and Aerantil - though clearly furious - seems to have a touch of consideration mingled with his anger.

"The mouse speaks," remarks the Captain, and one of the guards laughs. Mahanon winces - it's far from the first time he's been called a "mouse," a moniker that's become popular for him even amongst his own clan. "Well, I'm afraid the Baron has concerns about what effect your presence might have on the townsfolk. We don't get a lot of your kind around here, see. Might be a bit dangerous. We wouldn't want there to be any misunderstandings."

"We quite understand," says Aerantil, and for a wild moment Mahanon genuinely considers slapping his hand over the merchant's mouth and dragging him away, but the damage is quickly done as he continues to say, "you'll find us a half an hour's walk up the mountain path."

"Excellent," says the Captain with a broad grin, still drumming his fingers on the pommel of his sword. "You can expect our people before noon."

Mahanon glances at the sword and back up to the Captain, who's watching him now, his smile twisting into an outright smirk.

Mahanon tries to wait until they're at least somewhat out of earshot before voicing his concerns. To be safe he speaks in Elvhen as he leans over to Aerantil and hisses, "Are you insane?"

"You and your damned nerves nearly ruined this for us," Aerantil snaps back in Common, though he keeps his voice low as well. "Just be thankful I saved negotiations. Mythal willing, we might get something out of this foolish journey."

"Those weren't negotiations," Mahanon says, hands clenched. "Creators, Aerantil, that man was no merchant, and I doubt he's sending any along. They're just looking for sport."

"They wouldn't dare," says Aerantil, lifting his nose. "The Clans are protected along this coast now, the Viscount of Bastion-"
"Isn't here," Mahanon cuts in. "That agreement was hardly more than a symbolic gesture anyway, do you really think small towns removed from the larger city states will hold to it? Who will hold them accountable if we were to 'disappear'?

"Even if that were the case," Aerantil says, waving Mahanon off, "they do not know we've come in reduced numbers. Only a fool would try to attack a full clan."

"It happens every other day," Mahanon says through gritted teeth.

"Enough," says Aerantil. "I will not argue this with you. If you wish to have us abandon this on account of your paranoia, it is your right. I have said my piece."

Mahanon clenches his jaw and wills himself silent, knowing there's nothing he can say to convince Aerantil, no proof beyond his bad feelings.

The walk back up the mountain is, if possible, even more quiet and more awkward than the walk down.

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The Lavellans are quite happily settled in the clearing off the path where Mahanon and Aerantil left them this morning. It appears that one of the hunters went out while Mahanon and Aerantil were gone and has returned with several rabbits, which some clan members have occupied themselves with preparing. A few of the merchants' children have set up some kind of game by the trees, running in circles and laughing, and it all seems so peaceful that Mahanon could scream.

"Aneth ara," calls the warrior, Elliret, hailing them over as Mahanon and Aerantil top the rise. The other merchants and hunters look up as they approach, save one of the hunters, Tashen. Mahanon feels the familiar upwelling of sick guilt and shame he gets whenever he's anywhere near Tashen - Tashen's children are the mages who should, by rights, be Firsts, and are instead at risk of being sent away. Because of Mahanon. "Good news?"

"The humans have agreed to trade with us," says Aerantil. "They will be sending their merchants up to meet us before noon."

"Sending them up?" asks one of the other hunters, frowning. "We're not meeting them by the gates?"

"Saves us a walk, at least," mutters one of the merchants.

"The Baron thought our presence might frighten the townspeople," Aerantil says, a statement that's met with a round of derisive laughter from the elves, as well as a few remarks of "shem'len."

"And what says our First about all this?" Mahanon's stomach drops as Tashen speaks, even as the other elf continues dressing his rabbit, his eyes set on the task. "Mahanon seems very quiet."

Mahanon feels the familiar crawl of anxiety turning him rigid as all eyes fall on him, strangling his words and making him feel both unpleasantly hot and dreadfully cold at once. He swallows. "I-

"Speak up, da'len," calls one of the merchants. Several clan members smile, clearly biting back laughter.

Breathe, damn it. Mahanon clears his throat. "I- I think we should leave."

It's fascinating, feeling the abrupt shift in mood as the relaxed and easy atmosphere of the camp
vanishes. Fascinating, and also makes Mahanon wish he could throw himself off the side of the mountain to escape it.

"You want to leave," echoes Elliret, more confused than anything else, though Mahanon can already see the familiar looks of irritation and disdain twisting the faces of other clan members.

"Our First believes that the Baron plans to attack us," says Aerantil, sounding almost sympathetic, as though repeating the words of a very small child. Mahanon's anxiety quickly turns to humiliation as several clan members trade knowing glances. "I personally saw no evidence of this when we spoke to them."

"We never spoke with the Baron directly," Mahanon says, desperate to prove his suspicions, to make them see. "We never spoke with the town's merchants, either, just the guard and guard captain. They wouldn't let us meet closer to town, they wanted to know where we were settled-"

"Humans are suspicious by nature," Elliret says with a sigh. "We cannot expect them to act otherwise. There is a risk, of course, allowing humans to come here, but that is why the hunters and I are here. We can prepare to meet whatever threat might be coming."

"I don't know if a warrior and three hunters will be enough," Mahanon says. "No matter how skilled."

"Mahanon-" Elliret starts.

"Peace, Elliret," says Tashen, still quietly working away. "Mahanon is our First, is he not? We are sworn to abide by his wisdom. If he says we must go, then go we must."

Even as the urge to throw himself off the mountain intensifies to a near-breaking point, Mahanon can't help but admire how Tashen could make such a weapon out of an apparent show of support.

"Is that your final word on the matter, First?" Elliret says to Mahanon slowly, brows lifted. "You wish us to go?"

All eyes on him, again, and Mahanon wants nothing more than to say yes. He knows - knows - that the Baron means them harm. He knows staying would put the clan in danger. He knows.

He also knows that leaving would be its own kind of failure. They'd return to the rest of the clan in quiet contempt, and there'd be more whispers about Mahanon's failure as a leader, how he was too nervous and flighty to do the basic task of dealing with humans, and the Keeper would have to think up another way to prove Mahanon's worth because Mahanon just couldn't manage to do so himself. The thought is nearly as frightening as the idea of an impending attack.

Leaving would be the right thing to do. But ironically, Mahanon is far too much of a coward to do what everyone else would surely consider to be an act of utter cowardice.

"I think," says Mahanon slowly, "that we should... do as Elliret says, and- and prepare. Pack up as much as we can, prepare the aravels for travel. We can see at least a quarter of an hour's travel down the mountain path, so- um, we could keep a watch. If the humans coming up the path don't appear to be merchants willing to trade, we'll go. If not, then- well. We won't."

Some of the tension eases even as Mahanon's anxiety intensifies.

Wrong. This is wrong!

"I think that's a fair solution," says Elliret with a nod. Mahanon wishes he could enjoy the rare
gesture of approval. "Alright, we all heard him - let us prepare."

- 

There are many decisions that a person makes over the course of their lives with the ability to completely change the course of their own destiny - there are few that decide the course of history.

Mahanon, of course, has no way of knowing that in another life, a life where he'd been just that touch brave enough to make an unpopular choice, the decision would have eventually resulted in him being in the exact wrong place at the exact right time - a temple sacred to shem'lens, during a time of political upheaval, overhearing the cries of an old woman and racing in to discover the source.

Regardless, Mahanon has always been correct about one thing: ultimately, he was never meant to be the Keeper of Clan Lavellan.

- 

Mahanon paces as the clan members pack, knowing better than to offer to help - the merchants and hunters are particular about their belongings and aravels.

He checks his staff, his personal supply of elfroot potions and lyrium - only two of each, and he cannot bring himself to ask the merchant in charge of the clan potion stores for any more. Not while people are still muttering about his paranoia to themselves.

He wanders to the top of the path again, though this is also quite fraught. He would honestly just camp himself here and wait, but Tashen has taken it upon himself to keep watch, and Mahanon has not the heart today to spend any longer in Tashen's direct company than strictly necessary. So he keeps a respectful distance, his attention focused on the path, and they do not acknowledge one another.

Nothing. The path is clear. Mahanon nods to himself and turns away, pausing to check the small sheath at his back where his father's dagger is secured. Mahanon could truly only imagine what Deimne of Clan Sliabh would have to say about all this, and has to force away the thought to clear the lump in his throat.

"Mahanon."

Mahanon looks over at Tashen, alarmed. Tashen has not directly addressed him in years.

The hunter is staring down the path with a deepening frown, slowly taking his bow down from his shoulders and preparing to string it. Mahanon follows his gaze, heart plummeting as he sees movement, sharp eyes picking out details as the shapes approach. Even in the dim light of the overcast day, light still catches metal. Glints off armour and weaponry.

"A dozen," says Tashen quietly.


Mahanon turns back to the clan, heart dropping further as he takes stock of their progress. There's still far too much left to do for them to get any kind of real head start, and aravels travel slower than men, no matter how heavily armed the men might be.

"We need to-" Mahanon starts, and realizes that no one is paying any damn attention to him. It's more an instinctive stab of anxiety that causes it, rather than any kind of strategy on Mahanon's
part, but the fork of lightning that strikes down right in the centre of camp and the accompanying rumble of thunder quickly fixes this. "Everyone. We need to go now. I'd like Ywin and Gil to take the children and start ahead-"

"What are you talking about?" Aerantil says with a scowl, smoothing the static from his hair - the lightning struck closest to him.

"Mahanon was right," says Tashen. Though it's a sentence Mahanon hasn't heard in a good long while, he can't really bring himself to savour it much. "There's a dozen armed men approaching. The humans have chosen treachery."

A ripple of fear spreads through the camp, spurring some of the elves to return to their work on the aravels, albeit at a much quicker pace.

"They'll be upon us within the next quarter hour," Mahanon continues. "Ywin-

"How do we know these 'armed humans' aren't just a forward guard?" Aerantil asks, folding his arms. "We could always-

"Aerantil for once in your fucking life, shut up," Mahanon snaps, feeling another bolt of lightning crackle through him. It doesn't strike, but the sparks wrapping about his arms are clearly visible, going by the way Aerantil steps back nervously. "Ywin, Gil, take the children and go. Anyone who cannot fight and is ready to leave can and should go with them. If there's anything that can be left behind then leave it."

"We can't leave the aravels," Elliret says, even as Ywin and Gil start gathering the children. "It would be suicide to try to make the journey to Wycombe without them, especially with the children. We need more time - even just five minutes."

"I know," says Mahanon, gathering himself up for the next bit. This was his decision, after all. His choice. His responsibility to make it right, somehow. "The path narrows down the mountain a ways. I'm going to go down and- and um, delay them."

"You-" Elliret's eyes widen, and he draws his sword. "I'll go with you."

"No," says Mahanon firmly. "I want every hunter and warrior available to guard our people on the journey back to the clan. Every one. I can hold them off - maybe thin their numbers a bit, if I'm lucky."

"We can't let you do that," says Tashen quietly. "You're our First."

"I think we all know I'm hardly irreplaceable," Mahanon says sharply, and sighs. The old bitterness, the hurt - it's not going to matter soon, and it isn't how he wants to leave things. "Ir abelas, Tashen. But as your First, it's my duty to protect the clan. I intend to do that."

Elliret looks at Tashen expectantly, and Mahanon thinks he knows why. Of anyone, Tashen - the one who would have the most to gain if Mahanon were to fall, the most to lose if Mahanon were to stay - could convince Mahanon not to do this.

Tashen is silent. After a moment, he drops his eyes and walks away.

Mahanon swallows, but there's no time to think overmuch on it. "Elliret, I'm trusting you to guide them all back to the Keeper. Her word is your word, now."

"I'll tell her what you did here today," Elliret says, putting a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. "The
Clan will not forget this, lethallin. Come back to us, if you can."

Mahanon puts his hand over Elliret's and nods, swallowing a little harder now. He does not trust himself to speak.

It's an odd feeling, turning away from the clan and towards his likely death. But if he's going to do this thing, he might as well do it right. He squares his shoulders, takes his staff in hand, and sets off down the mountain path - first walking, then running.

He downs a draught of lyrium as he goes, tossing the empty phial over his shoulder and taking a brief moment to steady his nerves as the extra magic courses through him, sparks now flickering through his hair and trailing from his fingertips. He opens his eyes, surprising himself with a wry smile as his anxiety morphs into a flash of hot rage.

*You will not get past me*, he thinks, even as comes to the top of the narrowed part of the path, staring down the approaching men. With his staff in hand and small threads of lightning coursing over his skin, standing between these *shem'len* and his people, for a brief moment Mahanon finally feels like a proper First.

The Baron's Captain leads the group, and though he holds up a hand to halt them about twenty feet from where Mahanon stands, he seems far more amused than intimidated.

"Have you come to lead us to your people, Ser Mouse?" the Captain says. "We've come on your express invitation, after all."

Mahanon's ear flicks back, picking up the distant sound of canvas in the wind, a slight groan of wood and wheels. *The aravels are moving.*

"Of course," says Mahanon slowly. "I would only ask that you leave your weapons here. My people might get the wrong idea. Wouldn't want there to be any misunderstandings, after all."

The men laugh, and though it's a small movement, Mahanon notices the Captain lift two fingers at his side. There's a telltale creak from the behind the first row. *Crossbows.*

"Well you see," says the Captain, "the Baron has asked me to collect a tithe on his behalf. For trespassing on his land, you understand."

Mahanon tilts his head, wondering just how much time he can squeeze out of this exchange by playing stupid. "I was not aware your Baron owned the entire mountain. What sort of 'tithe' would you ask of us?"

"We were thinking some of those goods you were so generous in offering up for trade, maybe some coin." The Captain grins. "Of course, a little time with some of your fine knife-ear women would be appreciated as well."

"Or men," adds one human. "Not like we can really tell the difference with you lot anyway."

There's a round of laughter at this, but Mahanon isn't really paying the humans much mind anymore; something far more useful has taken up his attention.

The path narrows along the mountain in this spot due to several factors. There's a large, overhung outcropping of rock jutting out from the mountainside over the path, for one thing. What Mahanon did not notice before is the significant flow of water trickling from the rock into the creek below, the little waterfall causing the stream to buckle out into the path with increased volume. If the waterfall starts where Mahanon suspects it does, right at the top, and if it's wormed its way through
"I'm sorry, are we boring you?" the Captain asks, sounding significantly less amused now.

Mahanon returns his focus to the humans, trying not to let his sudden swell of giddy optimism show on his face. *Creators bless me, I might actually be able to do this.*

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to hurt my people," Mahanon says, letting his magic build. For this to work, he'll have to be quick. Too quick, too quick by far, to do this safely. "Please turn back. I don't want to take any lives today."

It's true. As thrilled as he is that he has even a single sliver of a chance here, he does not relish the idea of killing anyone, never mind a dozen men. No matter how obnoxious and cruel they might be.

The Captain smirks. "I think we'll take our chances, little mouse."

"You don't ha-" Mahanon starts, and the Captain closes his fist.

Mahanon's magic shield is quick enough to catch the arrow that would have buried itself in his eye, but not the one that slams into his shoulder, punching through his thin leathers. The force of the arrow knocks him back onto the ground, the pain washing through him a moment later and stealing the breath from his lungs. It's more instinct than thought that guides his hand, lifting his staff to the sky and calling down a powerful bolt of lightning with a deafening thunderclap.

The bolt strikes true, the lightning coursing along the paths burrowed through the ledge by the waterfall, sundering the rock into deadly boulders that crash down into the creek and instantly flood the path. It's all too fast, too big for anyone caught under the ledge to escape, and the horrific sound of screams cut short with the screech of fractured metal and crushed bodies is overwhelming.

But there's no time for thought or horror, and Mahanon is already tossing away another empty phial, licking lyrium from his lips as he lifts his staff again.

Too fast. Too soon. Too much. No time to recover from the last casting, and this one has to be of equal or greater strength. Mahanon squeezes his eyes shut against the pain, and casts.

This bolt is not called down from the sky so much as it's ripped from Mahanon's very essence, crackling through him with white-hot anguish. His scream mingles with those of the remaining humans as the bolt strikes the remains of the creek, and with the steel and iron of the guards' armour providing an added conductor for the lightning... well, it's all very quick.

Mahanon's vision clears slowly as he struggles to suck air into his lungs, every last nerve screaming in protest as he forces himself up onto his knees. His staff looks about as fucked as he feels - split and charred - and his mouth tastes coppery with blood and lingering electricity.

But he's alive. He was not expecting to still be alive.

Pain-addled and exhausted, Mahanon reaches into his pouch with a violently shaking hand and pulls out a phial of elfroot, hauling the cork out with his teeth and nearly choking on it as he drinks. The pain ebbs only slightly, but it's enough for him to get his broken staff under him, pushing himself up onto his feet. The world tips and goes black for a moment, but he leans his weight onto his staff and wills himself steady. His shoulder throbs.

He did it. *He did it.*
He turns back up the path - he thinks it's up, he thinks it's the right direction - with only one thought on his mind; a half-delirious image of him rejoining his clan, having saved his people. Having finally proved himself. Finally, perhaps, assuring the Lavellans that they could one day be proud to call him "Keeper-"

His feet go out from under him, jarring his shoulder as he hits the ground and causing him to retch in agony. He doesn't understand how or why this happened until a force flips him onto his back, and his vision momentarily fills with the horrific, half-burned face of Captain Loren before a gloved fist slams into his nose.

The explosion of pain is utterly blinding, and he does not know how he manages to cling to consciousness even as the Captain reeled back for another punch. He knows, instinctively, that the Captain can and will beat him to death if he doesn't do something. He also knows that his staff is shattered, his dagger trapped under his back, and his options are fatally limited.

He hears a whisper from a place beyond, a cloying and cajoling tone that somehow manages to sound like every friend Mahanon ever wished he had.

"Would you like some help?" the voice murmurs into his ear, and tears spring to Mahanon's eyes with the force of his own need as time seems to slow, waiting for his response. Waiting for him to give in.

Mahanon breathes, utterly conscious of the air in his lungs, as if he can feel the very passage of oxygen into his own blood. He reaches up, his hands meeting the flesh of Captain Loren's face.

"No, thank you," Mahanon croaks, and forces the very last of his energy into one final crack of lightning.

It isn't much, but it's enough. The Captain collapses with an anemic roll of thunder, his body falling mercifully to the side of Mahanon and not on top of him.

"Suit yourself," the voice mutters, clearly disappointed, and Mahanon feels the presence leave him.

Alone. Very, very much alone.

Mahanon feels his consciousness start to escape him and tries desperately hard to stay alert, knowing intrinsically that he's fighting a losing battle. There's no question of catching up with his clan, no future there now. He cannot walk, can only barely breathe. There's just nothing left.

Senselessly, but driven by the last vestiges of thought and instinct, Mahanon manages after several weak attempts to roll himself over onto his front. Open-mouthed gasping from the effort, the blood from his broken nose spilling down over his lips and into his mouth, he drags himself inch by painful inch off the path. The pain of his magic-burned hands scrabbling at the mud and gravel, skin splitting open and bleeding from the effort, is so over-shadowed by the agony of his broken nose and punctured shoulder so as to be nearly negligible.

He only stops when his vision completely abandons him, taking the last of his focus and willpower with it. Collapsing onto his side, he grips the remains of his staff tightly, his final tether to anything physical, anything intrinsically real, and begs his heart to keep beating.

His last thought before the pain and exhaustion takes him is that no matter how well his clan might remember him for it, he really, truly does not want to die.
The first thing that comes back to Mahanon as he wakes is pain - not the agony of before but an all-over dull throbbing that makes him wish he couldn't feel fucking anything at all, thank you very much. He tries to burrow back into that comforting oblivion, but the world seems eager to call him back, and ultimately he gives up trying to fight it with a low groan.

He starts to hear sounds - very familiar sounds at that. The gentle rustle of canvas, mid-morning birdsong, a soft breeze. He forces his eyes open, and is momentarily fascinated by how much his eyelids hurt. He didn't know that was even possible.

A tent. Not a Dalish tent, that's obvious right from the get. He blinks as his surrounding come into focus, including that of an incredibly large shadow looming in the corner.

He sucks in a sharp breath that turns into a pained cough as the air abuses his lungs, and if he'd been able to actually move he would have been off the bed and poised to fight in an instant. As it is, he can do nothing but jerk back and try to contain his panic, heart battering at his sore ribs, as he takes in the sight of the biggest, most frightening man he has ever seen in his life.

The man is enormous; even sitting, Mahanon can tell the man would be easily seven feet tall standing, not counting his large rack of dragon horns. Mahanon's eyes flick from powerful tattooed biceps to hands bigger than some tree stumps, even with the missing fingers, to massive thighs decked in what appear to be, of all things, striped pantaloons, back up to the man's heavily-scarred face; a hooked nose, full lips set in the midst of a close-cropped beard, one mass of scars where an eye should be covered by an ornate eyepatch, the other eye staring hard right back at Mahanon with an intense intelligence that, if anything, frightens Mahanon more than everything else about this man put together.

Frightens him and, because Mahanon was clearly hit very hard in the head indeed, causes his already-rapid pulse to pick up in a way that can't entirely be attributed to fear.

Then the man grins, wide and terrifying, and barks out a laugh like rolling thunder.

"Grim," the man calls, pulling aside the front flap of the tent. "Me'n Dalish just won the pot."

Mahanon has no idea what this means and isn't sure he wants to find out. He tries to push himself up onto his elbows, tries to make his limbs move in any sort of helpful fashion, and growls in frustration as all his body will allow him is some pathetic, futile thrashing.

"Hey, easy there," says the giant, holding up a hand as he notices Mahanon's pitiful flailing. "You're gonna- well, I was gonna say hurt yourself, but it looks like that ship's already come and gone, yeah?"

The man's voice is far more soothing than it has any right to be, and even as his brain screams at him that he's very obviously in danger, he finds himself relaxing. Like an idiot. An idiot that could happily listen to that voice reassure him or say anything at all, really, for hours.

"Who-?" Mahanon tries, and wheezes. His throat is so dry he half expects to start coughing up dust.

The man shakes his head and unhooks a water skin from his belt, crouching with a wince at Mahanon's side and even slipping a hand under Mahanon's back to help him sit up and drink. Mahanon tries to tell himself that this simple touch doesn't leave him utterly flustered, and is actually thankful for the wash of sudden intense thirst that distracts him from... other types of thirst, as he eagerly chokes down mouthfuls of warm water.
"I'm the Iron Bull," says the man, and Mahanon glances at him sidelong - the name is fucking apt. "We sort of scraped what was left of you up off the mountain yesterday. Congrats on being alive, by the way."

"Thanks," Mahanon manages hoarsely. He coughs. "I'm M-Mahanon."

"Nice to meet you, Mahanon," the Iron Bull says with a grin, reaching out to shake Mahanon's hand before seeming to think better of it. Mahanon glances down and notices, for the first time, the bandages wrapped tight around his hands and shoulder. "That's Stitches' work - he's who you really wanna thank. Ah, fuck, reminds me."

Bull produces a bottle out of seemingly nowhere, uncorking it and handing it over to Mahanon. "He's out gathering herbs right now - apparently there's a bunch of spindleweed along that creek back by the path? Anyway, he told me to give you this if you woke up."

There's a small part of Mahanon that questions the wisdom of accepting mysterious liquids from strangers, especially giant horned men with eyepatches and pantaloons. He would give it a sniff first, if he was in a position to be smelling anything - though his nose does not feel as catastrophically out of place as it did when it was first broken, it's still quite sore and, he's certain, very swollen.

Still, he reasons, if the man - the Iron Bull - wanted him dead, there were easier and faster ways than poison. He drinks; gingerly, then eagerly as he tastes elfroot and lyrium on his tongue, the potion slowly banishing the throbbing pain and filling him with life and colour as he swallows it down. When he's finished he's still sore, still feels like he could sleep for a week, but death's door seems much further from him now than it did even moments ago.

"Good stuff, yeah?" Bull says, watching him. "The guy's not even a mage, he's just that talented."

Mahanon blinks and sits up fully now, his mind slowly starting to clink back into gear in the space afforded to him by the lessened pain. He looks Bull over with fresh eyes. "You're Qunari."

"Yep," says Bull. "Ever seen one of me before?"

"Er- no," Mahanon says, deciding that illustrated covers of sordid erotic books found in the back corners of human markets definitely did not count in this regard. Best not to think about any of that right now. "Is- is everyone else here, er, Qunari?"

"Stitches" did not sound like a Qunari name, to the best of Mahanon's limited knowledge - but then, neither did "the Iron Bull."

Bull laughs, a kind of gentle chuckle that makes Mahanon suddenly very conscious of the fact that neither of them are wearing shirts right now. "Nah, we're a pretty diverse mercenary group - humans, elves, a pyrotechnic dwarf, and me."

"Mercenary," Mahanon echoes, and frowns. "Did... the Baron hire you?"

"I mean, yeah," Bull says, but waves a hand as Mahanon's face tightens. "Don't worry, we're not handing you over to him or anything like that. He fucked with us a bit, lying to us about what we were hired to do, so we're happy fucking with him a bit. You're good."

"What were you hired to do?" Mahanon asks, still a bit uneasy.

"Well, the Baron got pretty antsy when no one from his personal guard came back," Bull says. "He told us there was a camp of highwaymen up the mountain. I think he thought if your people were
still around they'd attack us on sight, and figured we'd kill them right back if they did. That shit with the rocks by the way - impressive work. Rocky thought there was a whole flock of mages running around, but nah, just one ruthless little elf, yeah?"

Mahanon's eyes drop, even as he tries to smile at the compliment. "Ruthless" is not a term he'd ever once thought might describe him - he's pretty sure if anyone suggested as much back home they'd be laughed out of the clan. He's not entirely sure he likes it; at the end of the day, whatever those men had planned to do, they were still people. Bad people. But still.

"Hey," says Bull quietly, and when Mahanon looks up, the Qunari is looking at him with an odd mix of understanding and... consideration. Like he was expecting a very different reaction from Mahanon. "We do what we have to do. If you're gonna do it, you might as well do it right."

The sentiment feels familiar enough to be true. Mahanon meets the Qunari's single eye and, after a moment, nods.

"Do you know where your clan was headed?" Bull asks. "Not to poke any sore spots, but I've got to admit I'm a bit curious about what happened there."

Mahanon explains as quickly as he can, keeping light on the details. Bull listens quietly, his face betraying very little of his thoughts. Even without going too deep into things, Mahanon can feel the same familiar awkward humiliation having to admit that no one would listen to his concerns about the Baron. That they honestly could have - should have - left sooner. It seems so obvious now.

"Wycome," Bull says when Mahanon finishes, as if that's the only point worth picking up from his story - and maybe for Bull it is, Mahanon can't honestly tell. "Well, we're headed up to Bastion next, but we could try getting you caught up with your clan members-"

"They'd be days away by now," Mahanon says, shaking his head. "I wouldn't want you to go so far out of your way on my account. I can make my own way-"

"Sure you can," says Bull with cheerful skepticism. "Try doing a few cartwheels for me right here, right now, and you might convince me."

Mahanon narrows his eyes at Bull, trying for a glare. The Qunari just raises a brow at him, and Mahanon gives up. Bull's right - he wouldn't make it two days on his own, in this condition.

"Tell you what," Bull says, scratching at the base of one of his horns. "Why don't you come with us up to Bastion? We've got food, we've got room in our tents, and we've got swords. Get all healed up without worrying about fending for yourself, you know? And hey, when you get to Bastion, you could get a message to your clan, or... figure out what you want to do."

Mahanon looks up sharply at this. Bull smiles, and Mahanon suspects he got a lot more from Mahanon's story than just the part about Wycome.

"Thank you," Mahanon says quietly. "I'd appreciate that."

"Easy enough for us, and it's always fun having fresh blood around," Bull says with a shrug. "Besides, you just won me a significant chunk of coin, so hey. Call us even."

"You bet on me?"

"Fuck yeah - at pretty hefty odds, too." Bull grins. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I just-" Mahanon stops. It would sound far too self-pitying to admit that he just can't imagine
"I'm gonna see about rustling up some food for you," Bull says, getting to his feet with obvious effort. Mahanon's gaze briefly falls to the metal brace around Bull's right ankle and back up again - if Bull notices, he doesn't comment on it. "We're hoping to get out of here in the next hour or so; we really did piss off the Baron last night, so we should probably get out of tantrum distance as soon as we can. I know you're probably still a bit tender, so don't worry, we'll take it slow. Worst comes to worst I can probably just carry you again, you're about as heavy as a sneeze."

"I can walk," Mahanon says quickly, and blinks. "Uh. Again?"

"I mean, yeah," says Bull, with what on a man with two eyes might have been a wink. "How d'you think you got down that mountain?"

Mahanon does not know what to say to this and can only hope that Bull, with his seemingly wicked-sharp insight, does not read too accurately into the way Mahanon's staring at him.

Still grinning, Bull slips out of the tent.

As Mahanon falls back against the cot, mind spinning, the only clear thought in his head is that of course, of course, he'd be unconscious the one and only time a man like that decided to pick him up and carry him anywhere.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to mention here that I don't think the Lavellan clan as I've written them are like... bad people if that makes sense? And I hope I didn't give that impression. I'm very protective of the Dalish and I think the clan hierarchy as it is... interesting. Basically always read to me like a small town - good for some people, awkward and terrible for others. Hope that makes sense.

Also oh my God I'm having so much fun writing this thank you so much for enabling me, I really hope people are enjoying it ^_^
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Once again, FoxNonny has put off packing, showering, generally preparing for travel and God help me, sleeping and has instead decided to update a fic. Because priorities, am I right?

Pray for me, I'm an idiot.

Some tags on this chapter for very very very much in passing mentions of transphobia and homophobia (Krem's backstory comes up), and a lot of shellfish. Also, some mutual RESPECT and a bit of PINiNG because nnNNNGH I just LOVE BULL AND MAHANON A LOT GOD HELP ME WHEN DORIAN EVENTUALLY SHOWS UP I'M GONNA EXPLODE

(which will definitely be more of a next fic thing than a this fic thing, I don't want to make any false promises, though I do plan for a little bit of Dorian because I love him, also I'm rambling and should stop)

Please feel free to follow me on my Twitter at @FoxNonny. It's a locked account because I'd prefer that my professional life and my fandom life have some separation, but I'm gonna approve basically anyone who follows me, so. Woo!

THANK YOU SO MUCH TO EVERYONE WHO'S COMMENTED SO FAR, I REALLY LOVE AND APPRECIATE IT AND IT MAKES ME WANT TO WRITE THESE ASSHOLES MORE. This chapter was weirdly hard to get through and I did a lot of fine tuning, deleting, and rewriting, so I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Bull's Chargers," as the mercenaries seem to be called, manage to find some clothes for Mahanon that aren't covered in mud or blood. They're a bit big for his small and skinny frame, but he makes do, and probably says "thank you" a few times too many given the amused looks passed between the mercenaries.

As Bull promised, the Chargers are an eclectic group - loud and cheerfully antagonistic with one another, trading quips and bets far faster than Mahanon can keep up with, his head still spinning over the extremely bizarre left turn his life seems to have just taken. He feels that horrible crawl of awkward shyness strangling his vocal cords in the face of the friendly onslaught, and is extremely relieved when Bull pats him on the shoulder and promises to hold off on introductions until they've made camp for the night.

No one will let him help pack up the camp, nor will they let him carry anything other than what's left of his personal belongings. Mahanon, though feeling about as useless as a lump, suspects this is because he probably looks the way he feels - like a stiff wind might knock him over if he's not careful.

"We rescued your staff too, but..." Bull hands him the split and charred remains with a grimace. "Don't know how useful that's going to be for you. If you wanted to keep it for sentimental reasons
though, I get it."

Mahanon takes the staff with a nod of thanks and a sad half-smile. He made this staff himself, with the help of one of the craftsmen and the Keeper. Three months of polishing, perfecting the balance, carving runes and finding the perfect materials to channel his storm magic. A line of copper was even worked through the heart of the staff from tip to tip to conduct lightning. The remains of that copper wire are now melted into the oak splinters and blackened beyond repair.

There isn't a lot of room for sentimentality in a nomadic life. Even so, as the Chargers finish packing up, Mahanon finds a quiet corner of the clearing and carves off a small token from the ruins of the staff - a medallion-shaped round of oak, partially blackened, bright copper spilling over the lightning runes and apprenticeship markings. He slips this into his pouch and, with a few words to Mythal, buries the rest of the staff in the underbrush.

"It's about five days' walk from here to Bastion," Bull says once the camp is packed. "Let's get going. Chargers, roll out!"

"He says that every time," Stitches murmurs under his breath to Mahanon, who grins.

"Chief, I'm putting in a request for horses when we get to Orlais," calls Krem. "We've got the coin for it."

"Walking builds character," Bull says, hitching his pack onto his shoulders with a wince. "But I'll think about it."

The quipping and griping continues as they get going down the road to Bastion. Mahanon says nothing - it's not like he has anything to contribute - and tries not to think too hard about how naked he feels, walking around without the reassuring weight of a staff slung over his shoulder. He touches his father's dagger at his hip. Worst comes to worst, he can channel some magic through it; and, failing that, it's got a pointy end for a reason.

He's tense at first, feeling that usual awkward weight of social expectation, desperately searching for something clever to say. Waiting for someone to look at him sidelong, or to try to make conversation with him out of pity while he chokes on his words and struggles to get his tongue untied enough to respond in kind.

After a while he starts to notice, however, that the Chargers don't seem to expect anything from him. They're quite happy chatting amongst themselves, and seem equally happy to leave him be. It's not the same as being ignored for having put his foot in it, or being the odd one out - Stitches occasionally leans over to clarify comments and inside jokes the other Chargers make, or to ask him how he's doing, but doesn't seem to expect any kind of grand sweeping statement in return beyond a smile, a grateful nod, or a simple "Fine, thank you."

It's been a long time since Mahanon's been able to walk with a group of people who expect little to nothing from him. He still can't fully relax, not really, but he does feel a bit lighter for it.

Eventually the road meets up with the wide thoroughfare tracing the trade route from Bastion to Wycome. Mahanon pauses at the crossroad. The clan won't be taking this route, of course, preferring the relative safety and privacy of the wilds. He knows a lone bedraggled elf, and a staff-less "apostate" at that, would be as good as dead walking the thoroughfare solo.

Even so... even so.

"You alright?" Stitches asks.
Mahanon turns to see that a few of the Chargers have noticed his hesitation, watching him with mingled looks of curiosity, confusion, sympathy, and sombre irritation — but that last one is Grim, so Mahanon doesn't take it too personally. Of course there's Bull right at the front, that piercing single eye seeming to see right through him.

Mahanon swallows, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks, trying very hard not look as nervous as the sudden attention is making him feel.

"Sorry," he says, wincing as the apology comes out as hardly more than a squeak. "Sorry, I'm- it's alright, thank you."

Bull nods and, thankfully, turns away to start walking again, the rest of the Chargers following suit. Stitches pats Mahanon on the shoulder as he passes by with a reassuring smile.

Mahanon lets himself have one last look down the thoroughfare to Wycome. Then, with a definite shake of his head, he turns and joins the Chargers on the route to Bastion.

- Krem elbows Bull and holds up a hand with four fingers raised, tapping the tip of his index finger against his chin twice with raised eyebrows.

Bull's made a point of teaching anyone in the company long enough how to handspeak. It's easy enough to convince people how damn useful it is, and none of the Chargers would disagree - from passing messages across noisy bars to having tactical conversations in hiding places with bandits about, it's definitely come in handy.

What Bull won't tell them is how handspeak was a matter of life and death in Seheron, and the idea of leading a company of fighters without the ability to communicate without making noise honestly gives him cold sweats. They don't need to know, and Bull's not exactly inclined to share.

Of all of them, Krem's the most proficient with it - though Bull suspects Grim is far more fluent than he lets on. Handspeak's just about the only way Grim converses with anyone, and even then he keeps things brief.

Bull glances back to see Mahanon staring off to the east, probably distracted by the faint glimmer of ocean off on the horizon. Bull looks ahead and nods.

What's your read? Krem signs. Haven't heard him say anything but "thank you" or "sorry" all day.

Bull snorts at that, but shrugs. Shy.

No shit.

Quiet. Bull thinks a moment, then adds, Smarter than he lets on... or smarter than he thinks he is. Can't tell.

Dangerous?

Bull doesn't respond immediately, taking another look back and covering it with a stretch and a twist.

He needn't have bothered. Mahanon's still staring at the ocean, a bit of a dreamy expression on his face. Bull's lips twitch at this. In general, he's not a fan of letting the mind wander - it's an easy way to get very dead very fast, no matter how safe you might think you are. Still, it's nice to see the elf
lose a bit of that pinched, cagey expression he'd been wearing since stumbling out of Stitches' tent that morning, if only for a little while.

Then Bull notices Mahanon's ears twitching, clearly catching on ambient noises or pitches and lulls in the conversations around him. So, maybe not quite as lost to daydreams as Bull thought.

Bull's rapidly finding that Mahanon is almost comically easy to read; he's not ready to let his guard down just yet, but if the elf actually is some sinister double agent masquerading as an anxious little Dalish elf, he's either the best fucking liar Bull's ever met or the very fucking worst.

Bull turns back to Krem, who's watching him with a keen look.

_Dangerous_, Bull confirms. _Not to us, probably. Loyal. He likes us so far._

Krem raises a brow at this. _I think he likes you._

Bull smirks and nudges Krem, who nudges him back. Yeah, he'd noticed that too. _Very_ easy to read.

Bull's pretty sure he's got the measure of Mahanon, and it all seems straightforward enough: smart but shy, devoted to his people but unsure of his place. Likes big burly Qunari mercs but then, who doesn't? The only thing Bull hasn't fully sussed out yet is whether Mahanon's eyes are more of a grey-blue, or a grey-green. There's really no need to go digging any deeper.

Bastion's another four nights away, though, and it's not like there's much else to do or think about. Mahanon surprised him this morning; that didn't happen too often to Bull these days. Bull was expecting Mahanon to be colder, or far more self-aware - there's a lot you could do with a quick intelligence, an innocent face, and the ability to hurl lightning at people, and the fact that Mahanon seems oblivious to his own assets or unwilling to use them as such is a point of intrigue for Bull. That sense of loyalty, too, well. Bull's a big fan of loyalty.

Bull almost laughs aloud, realizing what he's doing. _I'm fucking recruiting, aren't I?_

It's a bad idea, and Bull tries to dismiss it out of hand once he realizes it's in his head. He's already got a mage, and it's hard enough keeping uppity templars from getting too twitchy about it when they take jobs close to cities and circles. Two would be begging for trouble.

For another, though they've barely spoken since the morning's conversation, Bull gets the feeling that Mahanon hasn't strayed too far from the forest and his clan before. Going from that environment to a travelling band of hardass mercs seems like a fucking stretch, no matter how quickly and efficiently Mahanon could take out a dozen guards. No matter what kind of assets he might have.

The big one though, and the one that does force Bull to drop the matter, is that Mahanon isn't some wandering misfit in need of a crew and purpose like the rest of the Chargers were when Bull found them - not really, anyway. He has a clan, and a role within that clan, set to him basically from birth. It's a familiar enough situation that Bull feels an odd crawl of dread at the idea of Mahanon abandoning it, becoming an outcast. Apostate.

_Tal Vashoth._

The elf might not like his place, might not even be well-suited for it, but at the end of the day it's still a _place_. Bull doesn't want to know what it might say about him if he were to tempt Mahanon away from that.
He also doesn't want to know what it might say about him that there's a small part of him that still wants to try.

They diverge off the main thoroughfare as the sky starts to take on that early-evening violet hue, following what looks like little more than a deer trail down to the east.

Mahanon feels a little prickle of excitement as the air starts to fill with that sea-salt scent. He likes the ocean. There was never really much occasion for his clan to make camp along beaches - too exposed, often too well-travelled, and sand tends not to mix well with aravel wheels. Even so, every so often on the occasional warm spring day or hot summer night, families and small groups would break off from the main camp to explore the coastlines.

Once, about six years back, Alaine convinced Mahanon to sneak down to a sandy cove with two sacks of Aerantil's best mead slung over her shoulders. They finished the mead between the two of them (with Alaine taking the lion's share) and fell asleep in a messy drunken tangle. The Keeper's stern lecture the next day had not combined well with Mahanon's extraordinary hangover, but he suspects of the two of them he fared better than Alaine - her hangover was no less pronounced, and as punishment for the stunt the Lavellan weapons master had her run through all her usual drills three times over.

Still. It had been a good night, and Mahanon remembers it fondly.

He keeps expecting the Chargers to stop in a clearing or in the lee of one of the large dunes starting to rise up around them as they follow the path, but Iron Bull presses on until the dunes part and they're met with the sight of a long, sandy shore. There are a few logs scattered about, some old planks from older shipwrecks, but otherwise the beach is utterly deserted.

Deserted, and beautiful. The waves sparkle in the evening light, the ocean and sky seeming to stretch into infinity before them. For a moment all Mahanon can do is stand and stare, a little breathless.

"Thought we might pitch up here for the night," says Bull, slipping his pack off his shoulders with a relieved grunt. "Tired of waking up with pinecones up my ass."

"Wait 'till it's sand up your ass," mutters Krem, but it's a very mild quip - he seems a bit enchanted with the scenery too. "Right, let's get a fire going. I- Skinner, where're you going?"

"Food," Skinner says, setting off for the ocean with a hungry gleam in her eyes.

"What- er, what can I do?" Mahanon asks, wrenching his eyes away from the ocean and swallowing his nerves as best he can as everyone else starts to set about assembling the camp.

"You can sit and let me take a look at you," Stitches says firmly, pressing Mahanon down onto a nearby log. "We should have stopped an hour ago, you've still got quite a bit of healing to do."

"I'm all right," Mahanon says quickly - though now that he's sitting the aches start to catch back up with him, his nose giving a particularly obnoxious throb. "I just- you've all been so kind, I don't want to take advantage-"

"You're not," says Bull, shaking out a large canvas sheet. "Just let Stitches do his thing, we've got this."

Mahanon presses his lips together as Stitches checks the bandaging around his shoulder and hands,
still feeling utterly restless. In clan life, there are few sins greater than sitting about when there's work to be done. If you don't have a task, it's common courtesy to ask every Elder in turn if they require assistance before even thinking about standing aside - never mind sitting. No one rests until everyone can rest. It's one of the few social expectations that seem universally Dalish - Mahanon remembers the Sliabhs conducting their affairs this way. With the Lavellans these principles were ironclad.

And here Mahanon is, sitting, as the people who went out of their way to rescue and shelter him bustle about unaided.

"I could collect firewood," says Mahanon. "Or I could- I'm happy to do everyone's dishes tonight. After we eat."

Bull pauses at this, as do Rocky and Krem - the latter two with very eager expressions.

"Would it make you feel better if we let you do the dishes?" Bull says slowly, very obviously trying not to laugh.

Mahanon doesn't even care. "Creators, yes."

"Chief-" Stitches starts.

"Stitches, this man is a guest with us Chargers," says Krem grandly, stepping forward. "Who are we to deny his request? If he wants to scrub my bowl tonight, I say he's welcome to it."

"You're bad people," Stitches says, pointing at each of the Chargers in turn. "Very bad."

"No, please, I'm just grateful I can contribute in some way," says Mahanon, already feeling a bit less useless. "And I really do owe you all."

Stitches shakes his head. "If I worked this damn hard to keep you alive and you keel over for the sake of manners, I'm going to be very annoyed."

Skinner returns about half an hour later with a frightening amount of shellfish in a bulging net to tremendous applause from the Chargers. Mahanon watches with utter fascination as Skinner directs another fire to be stoked and rocks piled into the heart of it, Dalish surreptitiously aiding in the quick heating of the stones with a flick of her "bow." They bank the flames and pile seaweed over the hot rocks and coals, layering shellfish and seaweed one atop the other until a very strange thatched pile forms.

"Give that about half an hour," says Skinner, sitting back on a log with a self-satisfied smile. She pulls out a dagger and expertly shucks an oyster, gesturing to a sizeable pile at her feet with the tip of her blade. "These are good now, though."

The Chargers descend on the oysters with hungry gleams in their eyes. Mahanon watches, almost forgetting that he's part of all this as well, far too distracted by the spectacle of the mercenaries attempting with various degrees of success to shuck their own oysters.

"Everyone's gonna need Stitches and stitches by the end of the night," mutters Bull, taking a seat on the log beside Mahanon. It takes Mahanon a moment to realize the Qunari is talking to him. "You ever had these back with your people?"

"Once or twice," Mahanon says. "They were easy game for the hunters if we were by the sea and needed something quick, but they don't keep well on the road, and it takes a lot to feed a hungry clan. I was absolute shite at shucking them, myself."
"You just need practice," says Bull, starting in on his own little pile of oysters.

"Not as badly as I need my fingers," Mahanon says.

Bull laughs, the sound making Mahanon feel a bit warm around the tips of his ears. "Fair enough. Here." Bull pops the shell of the oyster in his hand and preps it with a quick swipe of his dagger blade, then offers it to Mahanon.

"Oh," Mahanon says, that warm in his ears spreading to his face. "Thank you, I- are you sure-?"

"Your hands are all bunked up and Stitches'll kill me if he has to reattach a finger tonight," Bull says, pressing the oyster into Mahanon's palm. "You're not too good at letting people do things for you, huh?"

Mahanon doesn't know what to say to that, so he tosses the oyster back instead. It's good - salty and a bit sweet, fresh in a way that you can really only get from seafood. It's enough to distract him from his thoughts for a good long moment as he closes his eyes and savours the flavour.

When he opens them again Bull is still watching him, already starting on his next oyster, and Mahanon suspects the question posed to him wasn't entirely rhetorical.

"Honestly, I... it feels the exact opposite, sometimes," Mahanon says slowly. "When you're Keeper, or First, there's sort of a- a distance afforded to you, I guess. You're prioritized. People are supposed to do things for you, to an extent. Not like human royalty or anything, but for some clans they lean into the hierarchy a little more than others, I think."

"Leaders have a tough job," Bull says, slurping back an oyster and tossing the shell over his shoulder. "You do the job better if you're not worrying about the little stuff."

"I think I'd rather be doing the little stuff," Mahanon mutters, and winces. "That must sound terribly ungrateful, or- or cowardly."

"Well, you didn't exactly ask for your lot, yeah?" says Bull, carving into another oyster. "Not sure if you're obliged to be grateful for something you don't want."

Mahanon almost remarks that he wishes Bull would tell his clan that, but bites it back. He's already worried he's said too much. "I just can't help but think someone else might be better suited, or that I might be better suited helping, instead of leading. It seems a bit strange that just because a person is born a certain way their lives are automatically decided for them."

"'Being born a certain way' sure is one way to describe that shit," Bull mutters with a visible shiver, handing Mahanon another oyster. Mahanon takes it without thinking, watching Bull's face carefully. "Personally I think your people have it a bit backwards, putting all your mages in charge."

"How does the Qun handle mages?" Mahanon asks. "I've read a few different accounts, all of them contradictory and very unlikely-sounding."

Bull drops his gaze to the sand with a frown. "I don't think you want to know."

Mahanon gets a bit of an odd shiver himself, and sips his oyster. Perhaps the accounts weren't quite as unlikely as he'd hoped.

"So, 'the Iron Bull,' then," Mahanon says, breaking the silence once he's swallowed his oyster down. "I read that the Qunari name their people with, er, job titles, rather than specific names?"
"Well, we all kinda give each other nicknames, or else it gets really confusing pretty quick," says Bull. "But you're right."

Mahanon watches Bull twirl his knife and work through his oyster, waiting for more. When more is not forthcoming, he prompts, "Are- er, is your name secret?"

Bull snorts. "I mean, technically you're spot on. Almost."

Mahanon feels his ears flick off-kilter: one up, one down. Bull catches sight of this and snickers. "Okay, so Dalish was right about that being a Dalish thing, not just her ears going crazy."

"They're not 'going crazy,'" Mahanon mutters, touching the tips of his rebelling ears and coaxing them back to a less confused position. "It's perfectly normal, thank you very much. I don't know how other races can ever tell what one another is thinking without ear language."

"Ear language."

"It's a thing. Believe me, you can say a lot with an ear flick and a raised eyebrow."

"I'll keep an eye out for that." Iron Bull eats another oyster, his face unreadable as he stares into the fire. "Well, I guess you could say my position's a bit unique right now."

Mahanon's not sure what intrigues him more, the "unique" bit or the "right now" part. He goes for the former. "Unique?"

"Mm." Bull gives Mahanon the next oyster with a shrug. "Probably a story best kept for another time."

Mahanon has to strangle his curiosity to keep from prying more. He's read all sorts of things about the stoic and aloof nature of Qunari. So far, Bull seems about as far from aloof as a man can get, but Mahanon's starting to suspect there's a bit more strategy behind Bull's friendly demeanour than the Qunari is letting on. Mahanon puts his walls up by not talking, by withdrawing, retreating - some people, he's noticed, do the exact opposite: saying everything to distract from the fact that they're really not saying anything at all.

Mahanon realizes that he's staring at Bull, and that Bull is staring right back at him. For a very strange moment, Mahanon feels a bit like he's seeing his own reflection - being considered and examined as much as he's considering and examining.

Bull smiles, and Mahanon smiles back. For once, he doesn't feel the need to shrink back and cringe away from such intense scrutiny. Maybe because there's a world of distance between being looked at and being seen.

Bull gently toasts Mahanon's oyster shell with his own and they both swallow the shellfish down in tandem. They don't say another word until Rocky gives a strangled yelp on the other side of the campfire, having thoroughly impaled his palm on the blade of his own dagger.

Skinner declares the rest of the shellfish ready not long after Stitches finishes bandaging up Rocky's hand. Mounds of clams, crabs, crayfish, and mussels are bundled up in hot seaweed and carefully parcelled out, the scent of the steaming hot meat making Mahanon's mouth water.

"Here," says Stitches, dropping a bundle in Mahanon's lap. "And look at that, no dishes."

"Bless him, he actually looks a bit sad about it," Krem says with a grin as he cracks into a crab leg.
"Maybe there's something else I can do-" Mahanon starts, but stops abruptly as Bull puts a hand on his shoulder (thankfully, not the one that took the arrow).

"You can relax, is what you can do," says Bull. "Every man-"

"And woman," Dalish and Skinner cut in.

"...yeah, fair; every man, woman, and otherwise according to his or her or their ability. I think I got basically everyone covered in that one. Anyway, that's how we do things around here. You just about kicked it yesterday, I think you can give yourself a day off or two."

Mahanon doesn't argue - mostly because it's very hard to think with Bull's massive hand still providing a nice warm pressure on his shoulder. "Oh. Alright."

"Good boy," Bull murmurs, quiet enough that Mahanon's not sure if Bull actually said it or if it's just the result of some fucking extremely wishful thinking. Bull squeezes his shoulder and Mahanon finds himself forgetting how to breathe, never mind think-

There's a sudden, very strange little *ka-pow* noise under his right hand paired with the smell of burning wood. Mahanon snatches his hand up to see a lightning-shaped scorch mark in the log, as well as several tiny shards of glass from where he managed to electrify a few clumps of sand.

Praying no one saw this (and deciding to ignore the quiet laughter from the Qunari beside him indicating that at least one person did, damn it), Mahanon shakes his hand out and sets about arranging his seafood bundle with very carefully focused interest. He's both a bit relieved and a little glum when Bull finally takes his hand back to get started in on his dinner.

Everyone is far too busy eating to carry on any sort of real discussion, shells and bits of seaweed tossed carelessly aside as the Chargers plow through the pounds of shellfish. Mahanon spends a good five minutes trying to eat with something like grace or decorum before giving up and ripping into his food like everyone else, cracking open legs and claws and noisily sucking out the tender meat from every last nook and cranry. It's a bit disgusting, the slurping and sucking noises around the campfire paired with the cracking of shells, but immensely satisfying too. Oddly, Mahanon almost feels a bit closer to everyone for it - hard to worry about what everyone else thinks of him when they're all covered in bits of shellfish and sucking brine from their fingertips.

Mahanon leans back on the log when he's done, tossing the last of the seaweed and shells over his shoulder and cleaning up with a quick shake of his hands. The grease instantly disappears from his fingers, leaving his skin dry and clean.

"Neat trick," Bull says.

Mahanon still not sure he's entirely recovered from his last interaction with Bull, but having a full stomach certainly helps to steady him. "You get pretty proficient with little cleaning spells when you're constantly on the move."

"Must be handy." Bull holds his hands out to Mahanon. "Help a guy out?"

Mahanon flicks his fingers and in a moment Bull's hands are clean. The Qunari grins, holding his hands up to the firelight. "Damn, I could get used to that kind of magic. You drink?"

"Sometimes."

Bull pulls a sinister and ancient-looking massive brown bottle from out of nowhere, popping the cork with a grin. "Good. Alcohol's a great social lubricant. Want some?"
"Chief, with all due respect, if he drinks that Qunari poison he'll drop dead in the sand," says Stitches. "At least let him heal fully before trying to kill him."

"I'm sure it's not that bad-" Mahanon starts.

"It is," says everyone else around the fire - save Grim, who just shudders, and Rocky, who shrugs.

"Here, have some of this," says Krem, tossing Mahanon a long leather waterskin that Mahanon suspects does not contain water.

Mahanon catches the skin with a grateful nod and, expecting something like the rougher meads and berry wines the less capable brewers in his clan cook up, takes a full swig.

He manages not to spit it out or choke, but it takes all his willpower and effort to wrestle his body's natural reactions to tasting something so foul under control so he can finally swallow. He can't quite contain the dismayed wheeze that escapes his lungs when it's finally down, or the tears that spring to his eyes as the burn of the alcohol crawls right up the back of his throat and into his head, causing his thoughts to scramble and setting his ears fluttering.

The Chargers, of course, are doubled over in laughter at his distress. After a moment, once he's certain he isn't going to throw up or die, Mahanon starts to laugh too.

"Like a champ," Rocky says, wiping away tears of mirth. "I don't think I've ever heard an elf make a noise like that."

"Come on, send it around," Dalish calls, and Mahanon happily corks the skin and slings it her way. "Maybe don't try to shoot the whole thing in one go next time."

"Sorry," Mahanon rasps, and coughs. The stuff is vile, but he can already feel it working - his various aches smooth over, and his limbs start to feel pleasantly heavy.

"Alright," says Bull, taking a swig from his own bottle and following it with his own hacking growl and shudder. Mahanon is suddenly very grateful for Stitches' intervention - he's not sure he would have been able to handle something that even the giant battle-scarred Qunari finds rough. "We all know each other's names by now, but let's have a round of introductions. I'm the Iron Bull, these are my Chargers. Bull's Chargers. S'in the name."

"Really expanding the narrative there, Chief," Krem says, taking the skin from Dalish and having his own small swig.

"We think Grim there is a runaway noble; I'm betting some kind of lost king," Bull says, pointing across the fire. Grim, predictably, just grunts, even as Mahanon regards him with renewed curiosity. "Rocky likes blowing shit up, so watch out for that."

"The Chief encourages me to follow my passions," Rocky says. "He's nice like that."

"I'm not nice," says Bull. "Anyone who says I'm nice gets fired, you know the rules. Right, you've met Stitches, he makes sure we don't all fucking die. Veteran of the Fifth Blight, he is."

"The Blight?" Mahanon says, leaning forward despite himself. "Did you ever-?"

"Meet the Warden? Nah, not really," says Stitches, taking the skin from Krem. "Saw her once travelling through one of the killing fields, and again outside Denerim. Tell you what though," Stitches nods to Mahanon, taking a swig from the skin, "she was like you, a bit. Liked throwing lightning around."
Mahanon's ears prick up at this. "She was a storm mage?"

"Is a storm mage, last I heard," Stitches shrugs. "She still works with the Wardens and keeps in touch with the king."

Mahanon already knew the Warden was an elf - he heard enough stories about her over the years, whispers that a whole shem'len country owed their lives to an elf. It was an exciting notion, even if she wasn't Dalish. The idea that he has even the slightest thing in common with her is a bit mind-boggling.

"Alright alright, speaking of elves," Bull points to Skinner. "Skinner there took issue with some humans trying to hunt elves for sport in her alienage. She's a bit testy, but you're already on her good side, so I wouldn't worry too much."

"Nice work with those shems," Skinner says to Mahanon with a flip of her knife and a truly terrifying wink.

"And of course we've got Dalish, who's- well, Dalish," Bull says. "We uh, I guess we don't really get too creative with the nicknames around here."

"I'm the Chargers' resident archer," Dalish says.

"'Archer'," Krem repeats slowly, adding exaggerated air quotes.

Dalish has been something of an awkward curiosity to Mahanon ever since he first laid eyes on her - a Dalish mage in a group of mercenaries, seemingly with no clan to speak of. Whatever the story is there, Mahanon is sure it's not a comfortable one.

"There were a few too many mages in her clan," Bull says, clearly picking up on Mahanon's hesitance. "So she got sent out."

"My Keeper wanted me to see the world, that's all," Dalish says stiffly.

"Sent out..." Mahanon tries not to let his dismay show on his face. He's heard about this sort of thing, clans who decide they can't wait until the next Arlath'vhen and decide not to chance journeying closer to civilization to locate another clan. "That's- they'll have to answer for that at the next Arlath'vhen, that's against all our laws and creeds on the matter. I'm so sorry."

Dalish regards him with a long look, then turns her gaze away. "Hardly matters now."

Mahanon wants to argue that it does fucking matter, that he'll shame her clan himself when they next gather for being so cold and reckless, but he knows the end of a conversation when he hears one.

"Right, moving on," says Bull, rubbing his hands. "Finally we've got Cremissius Aclassi, the Krem de la crème, if you will."

"I will not," Krem growls. "Chief thinks he's real clever for thinking that one up."

"Alright, maybe a bit more Krem sur," Bull says with a grin. "Krem's my righthand man and the only 'Vint worth knowing, if you ask me."

"If you ask the Chief, maybe, not if you ask other 'Vints," Krem says. "They don't take too kindly to deserters."
"You were in the army?" Mahanon asks.

"For a while, before they found out I'd faked my papers," Krem says. "It was either stay and be executed or sold into slavery, or run. They came after me, too - wanted to make an example of the 'silly girl who thought she could play soldier.' That's how Bull lost his eye, actually, so don't believe him when he says he isn't nice."

"I'm not nice," Bull grumbles.

"You're right, putting yourself between a flail and a complete stranger was the cruel monstrous act of a perpetual hardass," Krem says with a roll of his eyes. He frowns, looking at Mahanon. "You alright?"

Mahanon realizes, a bit belatedly, that he's smiling. Beaming, in fact. Which, going by the odd looks, is likely not the reaction the Chargers were expecting from him.

"Sorry! Sorry, I mean that's completely fucked-up and terrible - what the army did, and Bull losing an eye, I just- you remind me of my- in Common I think you'd call him an 'uncle?' My father's brother."

Krem's eyebrows shoot up towards his cropped hair. "I- really?"

Mahanon nods. "From my birth clan. He was a warrior, like you. My birth clan - things like gender and who you shared your bedroll with, it didn't really matter the same way it seems to matter to everyone else. Gender was never assumed at birth. It honestly took me a while to wrap my head around tying that kind of identity to what shape a person's body was after I'd left, never mind how people tend to treat people like m-"

Mahanon stops short, gripping his knees. He's never said it out loud, not since leaving the Sliabhs. Alaine knows, always sort of knew, but they never really talked about it. There was that one boy from the village they passed through not long after his sixteenth summer, but they never really talked about it. There was that one boy from the village they passed through not long after his sixteenth summer, but that- well, there wasn't a lot of talking, then. Just a few knowing glances and a very quick and quiet fumble in the trees. They hadn't even traded names.

"Your clan doesn't know you like men," Bull says quietly.

Mahanon blows out a long breath. "I mean, they probably know. None of you seem particularly surprised, and you've only known me for less than a day. But it doesn't... come up, as such."

Bull puts his hand on Mahanon's shoulder again. Mahanon looks at the ground, eyes prickling a little and hoping the wind will change so he can blame it on the smoke.

"The Chief was the first one to treat me like a real man," Krem says quietly.

"Because you are a real man," Bull says.

"Shush, I'm making a point. We're all a bunch of assholes here, but we know what's important, and what isn't. Hell, Skinner and Dalish chase skirts with the rest of us - save Stitches, who doesn't chase anything, and that's all well and good too. Pretty sure Grim's got about as many stableboys as barmaids pining after his grumpy ass, and the Chief-

"Likes variety," says Bull with a grin.

"We'll call it that. Point is, you're good here."
Mahanon bunches the fabric of his borrowed trousers in his fists, focusing on keeping his breaths steady. It would be just like him to make a complete idiot of himself by breaking down and openly weeping in front of a crew of mercenaries after one drink and a few kind words. He nods.

"Aw, give the poor mouse some swill," says Rocky, elbowing Grim, who grunts and takes a long swallow from the skin before tossing it over.

"It's- it's just um, smoke-" says Mahanon, fumbling the skin and nearly dropping it in the sand. Bull catches it and presses it into his hands. "Thanks."

"I like that," says Krem, nodding as Mahanon forces another mouthful of the liquor down with a hard shudder. "'Mouse.' That's not, like, derogatory, is it? For elves, I mean?"

"A bit," says Dalish, shrugging. "It's usually 'rat' though. Mice aren't quite as despised, I don't think."

"Mice are smaller. Nice and quiet. Clever." Bull says. "We had a few trained ones back in Seheron - they'd pass messages, sniff poison out in food, that kind of thing." Bull nudges Mahanon's knee. "Pretty cute, too."

Mahanon's heart flips a bit at this, and he looks up at Bull despite himself, knowing full damn well his eyes are still stupidly wet. Bull smiles, patting him on the back, and Mahanon smiles back.

"'Mouse' is less of a mouthful than your name, that's for sure," says Skinner with an approving nod. "Short. Simple. I like it."

"You people and nicknames," mutters Stitches, shaking his head. "You can't just go around calling people 'Mouse,' he's barely been with us a full day."

The Chargers look to Mahanon, clearly gauging his reaction.

It's odd; he feels like he should hate the name. It's not the first time he's heard it, after all - whether whispered in corners by doubting clan members, or hurled at him by mocking humans. "Ser Mouse," the shem captain Loran called him. It certainly wasn't a compliment then.

But this; it's different, this. It's not a condemnation of his quietness, his awkward shyness. The Chargers don't seem to mind nor care. It's an acknowledgement. Acceptance. Grim is Grim, Dalish is Dalish, Mahanon is quiet, and small.

And... clever, maybe. That's certainly news to him.

"Cute," maybe, or so Bull just insinuated. Maybe. The Qunari's hand is still resting on Mahanon's back, and Mahanon knows if he thinks too much about that he's going to get distracted and maybe zap a few more pockets of sand into glass by accident.

Maybe it isn't such a bad thing after all, to be a mouse. The Chargers don't seem to think so, at least.

"I like it," he says, his voice a bit rough, and he tells himself it's just the burn of disgusting liquor still lingering in his throat. "'Mouse.'"

"Alright, then," says Krem, lifting a hand in a lazy salute. "Nice to meet you, Mouse."

"Nice to meet you all, Chargers," Mahanon says, and grins, and laughs.
*jazz hands*

ALSO PEOPLE CAN PRY ACE!STITCHES FROM MY COLD DEAD HEADCANON HANDS
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

YEP I'M UPDATING AGAIN, this time not at 3 am so hopefully it's a bit more convenient for folks. Some quick notes:

- BEASTDRIPS (ON AO3 AND TWITTER) DREW SOME INCREDIBLE FUCKIN ART OF MAHANON FOR MY BIRTHDAY LAST WEEK AND I'VE BEEN SCREAMING ABOUT IT EVER SINCE. I've linked it to the bottom of the chapter so you all can admire him, BeastDrips made him look so damn perfect it's unreal. Please send Rob some love on Twitter and also?? He's writing an amazing backstory fic about his Adaar Inquisitor that will absolutely break you, which you can check out here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/17273852/chapters/40622240

- After posting this chapter I'm gonna quickly update a thing because I'm gonna be fancy and separate this fic into *parts* (no worries I'm keeping it all in the same place, it's just for narrative purposes). So if you see a "part one" or "part two" randomly show up, that's why. I probably didn't need to explain that, but hey.

- Please feel free to follow me on Twitter at @FoxNonny, it's where I'm most active these days! It's a locked account but I'll accept basically anyone who wants to follow me tbh.

- OH RIGHT so I have an ongoing playlist for this fic on Spotify - it's far from refined (seriously we've got soundtrack music, girl pop power ballads, techno Irish music, it's wild) and subject to change at any moment, but if you'd like to follow along you're welcome to (it's actually somewhat in order now): https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0Gqm8OKQkEf1OIHt3yVPPhw

- THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO'S SUPPORTED THE FIC SO FAR, your comments have made me extremely excited to write more! If you like Mahanon and wanna read what he's like as Inquisitor, I also have a series of canon(ish) ficlets covering that here: https://archiveofourown.org/series/603103

- Also, I promise I'll finish "not a straight line but a triangle" at some point. I promise.

The next day of travel goes by smoothly. They do encounter other travellers on the thoroughfare - once, much to Mahanon's intense unease, even passing by a small group of steel-clad templars. Dalish seems utterly unbothered by them, even as one narrows his eyes at her "bow." Mahanon, staff-less, is sure he's drawing far less suspicion than Dalish, but he keeps his eyes fixed to the ground and prays to the Creators that his anxious expression doesn't give him away.

However, Mahanon's noticed that people who look of a mind to start some trouble tend not to try to start it with a group of battle-worn mercenaries - especially when said mercenaries feature a seven-foot Qunari at the head. The templar glaring at Dalish stops glaring when he notices the Iron Bull watching him and picks up his pace to catch up with his fellows.
Mahanon knows it will be a different experience going back down the other way. Even if he finds a staff and proper equipment in Bastion, the journey to Wycome will be a sticky one. He's resigned himself to cutting through the wilderness and avoiding the easy walk of the wide trade road. He has a much higher chance of coming off the better in a fight against a bear or a pack of wolves, rather than a phalanx of templars. After all, to his knowledge, bears and wolves have yet to master the use of magebane in combat.

Still, he tries to tell himself all that second day that his apprehension about the journey to Wycome is entirely based on how dangerous the journey is likely to be. He tells himself, quite convincingly, that that's why the thought of parting with the Chargers in Bastion causes such a sharp pull in his chest, like a sudden kick.

The morning of the third day, Stitches declares him healed up enough to start pulling his own weight. Mahanon offers his services a little too eagerly, and allows Rocky to continue piling weapons and cookware into his pack and arms until Krem notices Mahanon's shaking legs about to give out and smacks Rocky upside the head.

"He will actually try to carry all that shit, and Stitches'll have to fix him up all over again," Krem scolds, rescuing a very relieved Mahanon out from under the weight of the equipment. "Mouse, you have to learn how to say 'no' to these bastards."

"I'm happy to help," Mahanon says, grateful to be able to breathe again. He eyes Krem's bulging muscles with envy. "How do you get to be so strong anyway? Do you wrestle druffalo in the off-hours?"

"Only when we're bored," Krem says with a grin. "Nah, just training with the Chief. Qunari can get pretty passionate about their exercises."

Mahanon has seen a bit of the training already; last night Bull and some of the other Chargers took some time a little ways away from camp, close enough though that Mahanon could hear the clash of practice weapons, dull thuds, and frequent curses. Mahanon itched to join them - it reminded him of the clan warriors training in the mornings and evenings while Mahanon practiced his staff work. He could still feel his body trying to heal itself though, aided by Stitches' fine work, and knew well enough that rushing into things would only make the healing take longer.

But he's better now. Still a bit tired in the bone-deep way that follows an overextension of magic, still sore around the shoulder and face, but on the whole he's starting to feel like himself again. Even his nose, a bit crooked now, has mercifully returned to normal size - though there's still some spectacular bruising under his eyes, which he's sure is hardly any more fetching than wandering around with a swollen nose was.

Not that he cares how he looks; particularly how he looks when he finds himself under the watchful gaze of a certain one-eyed Qunari. That would be silly. There's that journey to Wycome to keep in mind, after all. They would all part ways in Bastion, and that would be that.

It's about halfway through the afternoon of that third day that Mahanon - carrying a reasonable amount of camp items on his back, smiling to himself over the latest quip in a stream of easy ribbing between Bull and Krem and listening to Rocky try to rope Grim in on helping him play some kind of prank on Skinner while Dalish and Stitches compare notes on elfroot varieties - well, Mahanon finally admits to himself that it's not the potential danger of the journey to Wycome that's worrying him about these upcoming goodbyes.

It seems silly to become so attached to these relative strangers, people he's only known a few days. But it's impossible not to notice as they walk along that somehow, recovering from a near-death
experience in the company of these abrasive, hard-eyed mercenaries, he feels far more comfortable, far more at ease with himself than he has in weeks.

Months, even.

Years, probably.

The thoroughfare descends into a valley marked by enormous rolling hills that cast long shadows across the road, shortening the day. They make camp early in the evening, Stitches showing Mahanon the literal ropes of pitching the tents. The style is just dissimilar enough from the canopies and aravel extensions Mahanon's familiar with that it takes a few tries before he gets it, but Stitches is a patient teacher, and Mahanon's determined to learn - even if his first try does collapse on his head in front of everyone, prompting a round of friendly laughter at his expense.

He stalls at the edge of the camp as the Chargers take up their practice weapons for some quick sparring. His fingers twitch at the idea of running through his exercises, but it would be a bit stupid to try to practice the usual pattern dances and forms without a staff. And anyway, as friendly as the Chargers have been, he's still not quite ready to insert himself in their affairs without an express invitation-

He just manages to catch the wooden pole lobbed in his direction before it smacks him in the face.

"You coming?" Bull calls, already turning away to join the others. It's not really a question. Mahanon grins.

He finds his own corner of the glade they've staked out for sparring to work through his warm-ups, grateful for the chance to really stretch and move. It hurts, but it's a good ache; a healing ache. The borrowed clothes impede his movement a bit, the loose fabric catching and bunching annoyingly as he starts to work through the first of his usual patterns. As grateful as he is for the loan, he's certainly looking forward to getting some clothes that fit in Bastion.

He frowns as he spins the pole (the balance is completely off from what he prefers, and he feels an ache for his shattered staff), doing a bit of mental math and realizing he's coming up woefully short. He doesn't carry much in the way of personal coin - he was damn lucky he had a few coins in the small leather pouch on his belt that day on the mountain. So, fine, he can forgo new clothes if he must, if the Chargers are generous enough to let him keep this set. He can hunt well enough, so while the prospect of lengthening the journey by foraging and prepping game doesn't appeal much to him, he won't starve.

But weapons, new leathers, lyrium and healing potions, sending a raven to Wycome to let the clan know he's still alive - that would all cost. A decent staff would just about clear him out at this point.

He pauses, drawing a hand down over his face. At the very least, he reasons, if he manages to make it back to the clan, no one could ever again reasonably accuse him of lacking commitment.

Mahanon hears a solid thump and a round of laughter, and looks over to see Krem flat on his back with a scowl on his face. Bull stands over him, slinging an enormous practise sword over his shoulder with a wide grin.

"I warned you about that low guard," Bull says, offering Krem a hand up. "It works on idiots, not people with training and momentum on their side."

"It works on people who aren't giant Qunari assholes, you mean," Krem says sourly, rubbing his
"I'm just saying, I know a 'Vint move when I see one. Again?"

"Let me breathe a moment, will you?" Krem catches sight of Mahanon watching them and, tilting his head, adopts a sly smile. Mahanon grips his pole a little tighter - that look can't mean anything good for him. "Why not spar with Mouse a little while? See what he's made of."

Mahanon swallows. Magic is one thing, and a thing he's very good at indeed. Actual combat? That's an entirely different beast.

Bull seems hesitant too, though his face is completely unreadable as he looks Mahanon over with that keen-eyed stare of his. Then he grins. "Yeah, sure. Only if he's up to it."

"Of course," Mahanon finds himself saying, like an idiot. Apparently the part of his mind that shuts down whenever Bull looks at him a little too long or grins that stupid cocky grin has made the decision for him.

He joins Bull in the heart of the glade, the grass trampled and kicked up with dirt under his bare feet. He's already sweating a little in the warm spring breeze, and there's no way he's going to be able to move properly in the loose shirt he's wearing. He strips it off, tossing it out of the way.

Skinner whistles, and with a flush Mahanon realizes the Chargers have all cleared off to the sides to watch.

Mahanon looks up to see Bull watching him, eye clearly following the branching knots of Mahanon's vallaslin as it spills down across his chest and hips. It's almost like a physical touch, Bull's gaze, and it takes quite a lot of determination on Mahanon's part not to shiver. He spins his pole back into first position at his side, left arm raised to guard.

Bull smirks. "No magic, now."

"No magic," Mahanon agrees.

Bull nods and, faster than a man his size should be able to move, takes up his sword and swings.

Mahanon dodges it, smacking the blade with his staff as he moves to try to knock Bull a little off-kilter. He spins and follows through into an easy jab - but Bull is already there, recovering from his miss far quicker than Mahanon expects, catching the pole with his hilt and nearly wrenching it from Mahanon's hands. Mahanon follows the momentum and turns it into a roll, coming up with a low swipe at the backs of Bull's knees. In the back of his mind he can hear the Lavellan weapons master scolding him for the maneuver, even as Bull just manages to sidestep the swipe.

Bull stabs forward and Mahanon deflects with a rigid block in the Lavellan style almost as an apology to his weapons master. He realizes a moment too late that the stab was a distraction - Bull turns into the motion and brings the sword up and down again, catching Mahanon while he's still in that rigid stance. Mahanon swings his pole up into an overhead block just in time to catch the blade, but the pure force behind Bull's blow drives him to his knees and reverberates through his hands and arms right through to his shoulders, threatening to shatter his bones. He bites back a shout. He's going to be feeling that in the morning, for certain. He just barely manages to keep hold of his staff; an impressive feat, given that his right hand has gone utterly numb from the impact.

"Oof, that wasn't smart," says Bull with a sympathetic wince, taking a step back and planting the tip of his sword in the ground. "You okay?"

"Yep," Mahanon says, voice tight as he gets back to his feet and shakes out his aching arms.
"Aside from having a mountain fall on me just now, completely fine."

"You're lucky I wasn't going full strength, Stitches'd kill me for breaking you again," Bull says cheerfully. "That block's no good. You're taking all the force onto yourself, and you're just not built for that shit."

Mahanon flexes his numb hand experimentally, grimacing - not just from the pain. There really isn't much he can do about being small and skinny. "What would you recommend?"

"You don't mind me giving you some pointers?"

Mahanon looks up. "Why would I mind?"

"People get particular about their fighting style," Bull says. "It's a pride thing. They don't like being told that the moves they've been drilling day in and day out aren't working for them."

"You clearly know what you're doing, and if there's something I can improve I'd rather know than not know," says Mahanon, a bit puzzled. "I like learning."

Bull smiles a little at that and shoves his practice sword firmly in the dirt. "Right then. Toss me the staff." Mahanon does, and Bull catches it easily with a little snort. The pole is laughably short for him, barely coming up to his collarbone. He gives it an experimental spin. "You know, you almost got me with that low strike you did. If you'd had a blade on the end, that could have taken out my hamstrings."

Mahanon scuffs at the dirt with his foot. "It was something from my old training. A different style."

"From your birth clan?"

Mahanon nods. "I had four years' training to unlearn by the time I was with the Lavellans. It still slips out sometimes."

"Because it's natural for you." Bull mimics the rigid Lavellan block Mahanon tried earlier with a frown. "Did your- er, I don't know who's in charge of training for clans-"

"Weapons master."

"Right, did they try to incorporate what you already knew with their methods?"

"Creators, no," Mahanon says. "Caetril is strict with his training. He told me the staff work I learned with my birth clan was, um... well, there wasn't a lot of power or strength behind it."

Caetril also called it "unrefined forest scrapping," among a few other more colourful phrases. Mahanon has never taken offence to Caetril's harsh criticisms - the grizzled weapons master has been like this with every clan member he trains, so much so that Mahanon would be far more worried if Caetril had been kind to him.

"He's right," Bull says. "And I bet his style is a lot more form-based, yeah? Stable stances, direct contact, hard blocks?" Mahanon nods. "That's the problem. He's been trying to train you into something you're not. You're small, you're quick - you're never going to have enough power in a swing to do any real damage through brute force."

Mahanon, still aching from the blow Bull brought down on him, is more than inclined to agree. He can't imagine ever hefting that amount of weight and momentum.
"Those stances too - they're slowing you down. You have to think about them, it's harder to disengage. It's not playing to your strengths."

"Strengths?" The question comes out before Mahanon can stop it and he has to fight the urge to smack himself. He's not trying to fish for compliments, for reassurances, especially not from Bull. It's just not what he's used to hearing.

Bull doesn't seem put off by Mahanon's uncertainty - in fact, his eye is a little too sympathetic, a little too knowing, as he answers. "Fuck yeah, strengths. Like I said - small and quick. If you were to actually fight in a style that's suited for you, you could get to be real fucking quick. Big guys like me swinging giant swords and axes around, we don't go down easy when we're hit, but it takes us some time to get our own punches in. Gotta build that momentum up."

"You weren't exactly slow," Mahanon says dubiously.

"Believe me, with some real training? You could be a fuck of a lot faster than me. Fast enough that you don't get hit - deflect, dodge, aim for the weak spots, like this." Bull brings the staff up into Mahanon's overhead block. "Say someone does what I just did - instead of trying to take it all on, redirect that energy." Bull demonstrates slowly, tilting the pole to the side and following into a full rotation with a pivot. "If you do that, the end of the staff comes up like this, and with a staff blade? You could go for the neck while your opponent's trying to get his footing back. Here, give it a go."

Bull tosses the staff back to Mahanon and picks up his sword. Mahanon swings the pole up into the block, his arms aching at the stretch on stiff muscles.

They go through the block a few times, and Mahanon finds himself picking up on the technique faster than anything the weapons master has tried to teach him over the past decade. It makes sense, moving like this. It feels comfortable.

"If you start thinking in terms of leverages and deflects - just keeping things moving - it'll start to get nice and intuitive, which is what you want for combat," Bull says. "Here, I'm gonna try it at the same strength as last time. Ready?"

Mahanon nods, though it takes a monumental effort not to cringe apprehensively.

Bull swings, and Mahanon brings the pole up to block. This time, though, he pivots the staff on the point of contact, directing the blade away from himself. The momentum drives the pole into a spin that he follows, turning on his heel as the staff end comes to a halt inches from Bull's neck. It all happens very fast, and he still feels the force of Bull's blow rattling up his arms, but it's significantly lessened. It's all just so much easier.

Mahanon almost drops the damn pole when he sees how widely Bull is grinning at him, but he blames his heart for that one - hard to keep a firm grip when your pulse up and quits on you for a moment.

"Very nice," Bull says, even reaching over and ruffling Mahanon's hair. Mahanon can't bring himself to be annoyed about it; he's grinning too. "You could probably yank someone's sword away from them with that. Ooh, you should talk to Skinner actually, she does some amazing kicks that you could work in."

"You need to be flexible to do the kicks well," Skinner says, getting to her feet with a stretch. The other Chargers stand too, their impromptu break clearly over now as they start to take up their practice weapons again. "You flexible, Mouse?"
It's nothing but pure, mad confidence that possesses Mahanon to do so, but he looks Bull dead in the eye when he replies.

"Yes," he says. "Very flexible."

Bull, if possible, grins even wider.

All but whistling to himself, Mahanon slings the pole over his shoulders and joins Skinner in her corner, where he proceeds to have his ass ingloriously handed to him over and over again by the fierce city elf for the next hour.

- Bull rubs his temples, grateful for the steady light from Dalish's crystal as he reads through his hastily-scrawled notes from the past few days.

They'll be in Bastion tomorrow some time after noon. He won't be meeting with his contact until the next day, but it takes a while to encrypt a full report, and he doesn't want to spend his first night back in civilization bent over sheafs of parchment for hours on end. No, he plans to spend tomorrow night drinking, bathing, sleeping - maybe even finding some company to help him take advantage of having a decent bed and a door with a lock.

Mahanon comes to mind as he thinks this because of fucking course he does - his large expressive eyes, full lips, and (thank you, Skinner) demonstrated flexibility. But more than all that, there's his unassuming intelligence and obvious hunger for everything: for knowledge, for acceptance, and yeah, for Bull. Doesn't help that he's also got a sweetness that Bull kind of wants to sink his teeth into, in an extremely literal sense.

Bull shakes his head.

The elf has been on his mind for most of tonight (and tonight only, he tells himself, mentally editing the past few days of thought processes into something a little less incriminating). If all goes as it should tomorrow they'll be parting ways soon. Bull is fine with this.

It's just a shame, really, because Bull can tell Mahanon's really picking up on the new fighting techniques he and Skinner have been teaching him. In a few months he'd be a force to be reckoned with even without his magic. And Krem seems to like him. The two of them pranked Rocky back this morning by setting the dwarf in his sleeping roll adrift in a nearby pond (Dalish had helped by freezing a dwarf-sized ice flow in the pond water to place him on - the dwarf didn't wake up until he was well away from shore. According to Krem it was Mahanon's idea, though he said this while a sopping wet Rocky was threatening to blow up anyone involved, so Bull can't be sure).

Smart, loyal, eager to learn - these are all some of Bull's favourite qualities. The more time Mahanon spends with them, the more he seems to abandon that shell of uncertainty and self-detriment. He laughs more easily, has started trading jokes and barbs in his own quiet way, and he doesn't shrink into himself when people look at him the way he did that first day. Bull can't help but wonder what kind of man Mahanon might become if he were to stay a few more months - how many facets there are left to find, how much more Mahanon might grow into himself and his potential.

A shame, but Bull tells himself it's for the best. Mahanon has a path; he has people. A place.

"Chief, can we talk?"

Bull leans over and pulls the canvas flap of his tent aside, letting Krem in. "I thought you were out
"hunting with the others."

"They've got it under control - and anyway, Rocky's tried to set me on fire twice now, so I'm gonna let Mouse deal with that particular fallout for a bit. Speaking of."

"Speaking of?"

"Mouse. We're keeping him, yeah?"

Bull bites back a sigh. One of the reasons Krem is such a fucking excellent second-in-command is his uncanny ability to give a voice to most of Bull's quandaries and dilemmas. It's downright spooky at times. "You want me to recruit him?"

"You want you to recruit him, don't pretend otherwise," Krem says, folding his arms. "You like him. If anything, I'd say you've got a soft spot for him."

"I don't have soft spots," Bull mutters, shuffling his scattered scraps of parchment into something like an organized pile. "We've already got a mage."

"I didn't realize we had a limit on very useful people who can toss lightning around," Krem says, lifting a brow. "You were saying weeks ago how we needed some fresh blood, and he's got a good head on his shoulders."

"He's also got a clan to get back to," says Bull.

"A clan that left him to die on a mountain," says Krem. "Chief, you know as well as I do that if his people really fucking needed him to be their First, they wouldn't have let him take the hit. He doesn't exactly seem excited about going back. I can't say I blame him."

"We're mercenaries, Krem; not an orphanage for wandering misfits."

"With all due respect Chief, I'm pretty sure that's exactly what we are."

Bull rotates his shoulders, wincing as a few joints pop. He's been sitting for too long. "I'm not going to recruit him."

"But-"

"If he asks, I'll consider it. If he asks. And no, I don't want you to try to recruit him yourself," Bull adds with a stern look, seeing wheels turning behind Krem's eyes. "He has a responsibility to his people. If we make it too easy for him to give that up now, he'll regret it later. Understand?"

It's a genuine question, not a test. As much as they joke around, Bull doesn't bring the cudgel of command down on his people's heads unless absolutely necessary, and his people respect him for it in turn.

Krem eventually nods, and though Bull can tell he doesn't agree with him, he gets the reasoning behind it. "Alright, Chief. But you know of all of us, you're going to mope the most if he leaves."

"Even if I did mope, and I don't, I'll get over it," Bull says, waving Krem off. "Go on, I've still got work to do. Make sure Rocky doesn't actually blow Mouse up, or none of what we just discussed will even fucking matter, yeah?"

Krem salutes with a wry look and leaves the tent. Bull has approximately ten seconds of peace before Dalish pushes the flap aside and pokes her head in.
"We need to talk," she says sternly.

"You know, I'm seriously going to reconsider having an open tent policy if it means I can get some fucking work done," Bull says mildly, putting aside his notes again. "What's going on?"

"You're not considering recruiting the First, are you?"

Bull does sigh this time, long and loud. "Right, okay, fine. What's your side of it?"

"My side of it? Aside from the fact that he has a clan who wants him, a family to return to, you would have to be genuinely insane to turn apostate by choice right now," says Dalish, her hands on her hips. "You've seen the templars on the roads, they've all got their backs up. That boy is about as subtle with his magic as a brick. If he gets caught I doubt they'll bother inducting him in one of their Circles, it'll be the brand for sure."

The back of Bull's neck prickles at the thought. Magic and mages, it's not shit he likes fucking around with on the whole. But the dead-eyed look and flat voices of the Tranquil disturb him too, on a more personal level. The idea of that little lightning storm behind Mahanon's eyes going out - it's a sickening notion, no matter what Bull thinks of magic in general.

"You could always teach him to be a bit... less," Bull says. "If I were even considering taking him on, that is, which I'm not saying I am. You've made it this long."

"Because I learned to hide it young," Dalish says. "That level of control is something you have to practice, and it hampers you. I wouldn't have been able to do what he did on that mountain, I don't have that kind of access to the Fade anymore. You wouldn't be able to pass him off as an archer. Anyone even remotely sensitive to magic would know what he is in a heartbeat. The treaties between Dalish and Chantry are shaky at best and often broken by jumped-up templars looking for easy marks, but his people would do a better job protecting him than we could."

"You think he'd be safer trying to travel the road to Wycome alone? What are the chances his clan will wait for him, even if he does manage to get a message to them?"

"I don't know," Dalish says, a thread of pain in her voice. "I'm the last person to put stake in a clan's dedication to their mages. You know I appreciate this life and the chances you've given us, but... I can't imagine anyone choosing it on purpose. Not if they had a home to go back to."

And yes, that's the rub right there, the real question: does Mahanon need the Chargers? Enjoying their company and wanting to be one of them are entirely separate things. Bull can still hear the whispers of Tal-Vashoth, of bas, lingering in the back of his mind.

"I'll tell you what I told Krem about a minute ago," Bull says. "I'm not going to recruit him. But if he asks, I'll consider it. Believe me, I think you have some very valid fucking points."

Dalish drops her gaze. "I can't tell you not to consider taking him on. I'll ask, but I can't demand it. I know that."

"And I get why you're worried," says Bull. "I'm listening."

"I know, Chief." Dalish bites her lip, clearly looking to say something more, but instead shakes her head and leaves the tent.

Bull rubs his temples again, lips pressed tight together. He can hear laughter in the distance, picking Mahanon's out amongst the others. The Chargers, his Chargers, returning from their hunt.
The Qun does not believe in situations with no correct answers or choices - it's seen as self-defeating to even begin to think that way. It was easier when the right choice could be decided by what would be best for the Qun. Out here, within his own strange patchwork world of individual *bas*, the Chargers as a whole, his Ben Hassrath work; the demands of the Qun play but a small part, and can't be relied upon as a strict guide. He doesn't even know how the teachings would begin to apply.

It doesn't matter. He doesn't have to choose until Mahanon does. There might not even be a choice to make after all.

Bull doesn't know if he's relieved by that thought, or...

The city gates of Bastion are familiar to Mahanon, though it feels like a lifetime ago since he saw them last, rather than a matter of weeks.

It's not the biggest human city he's encountered, but it's big enough that he feels that familiar thrill of delightful anonymity. You could walk the streets for days, even looking as visibly out of place as he does, and still meet people who do not know or recognize you. He does notice that the Chargers seem to garner a bit more attention than the Lavellan delegation had. He decides this is largely due to Bull. Qunari are a far rarer sight than elves, even Dalish elves, and his massive size demands a certain amount of notice.

"Alright, I'm setting you all loose," Bull says, turning to the Chargers. "I'm setting us up at the Blackened Hearth, so we can all meet up there later. Try not to spend all your coin in one place."

"Yes, mother," Krem says, grinning.

"Ah, fuck off and have fun," Bull says. "Mouse, you're welcome to join us at the inn tonight. It's not the nicest place in town, but they know us."

Mahanon doesn't know Bastion well enough to come up with any other options. And at any rate, he's not eager to part with the Chargers just yet, so he nods.

"Right. Oh, one more thing." The rest of the Chargers part as Bull rustles in his pack, until it's just him and Mahanon standing in the corner of the market. "Ah, here we are. Take this."

He pulls out a hefty-looking pouch and hands it to Mahanon, who accepts it without thinking. "Er, thank you? What is it?"

"Your cut from the Baron job," Bull says, slinging his pack onto his back with a grunt. "Been meaning to give that to you for a few days, but hey, better late than never."

Mahanon, in the midst of opening the pouch, hauls hard on the drawstring to close it when he catches sight of the coin inside - more coin than he's ever held in his life.

"What? I- Creators, I can't take this-"

He tries to hand it back to Bull, who rolls his eye and easily shoves it back against Mahanon's chest, closing his massive hand around Mahanon's for good measure.

"The way I see it, you basically did the work for us," says Bull. "You took out the guards, we didn't have to fight your people, and we got to blackmail the Baron into paying us double. You also helped me win that little bet, which was fun. You earned it. And hey, now you can actually afford to find your clan - you could even buy a horse, if you wanted. Not a good one, but you know."
Serviceable."

Mahanon's ears go a bit numb at the thought of carrying this much money. This much freedom. That's what Bull's giving him. "Bull-"

"Don't make me tie it to you, I'm real good with knots," says Bull, and fuck if that isn't a sentence Mahanon's going to be thinking about for far longer than he probably should. "Take it."

Bull lets go of his hands, and Mahanon keeps the pouch held close against his chest. There's something about that firm tone that Mahanon just can't argue with.

"Thank you," Mahanon says again, staring at Bull.

Bull pats him on the arm, nearly knocking him over. "Watch your pockets around here, lots of cutpurses looking for an easy mark. See you tonight?"

Mahanon nods again, not trusting himself to speak. He doesn't move even as Bull walks away, still too stunned to think.

Eventually he manages to drag his thoughts back together and secures the pouch onto his belt. He casts a little charm over it - anyone who tries to take it, cutpurse or no, will suffer a nasty shock for their troubles.

Mahanon sort of remembers where the rookery is from his last visit. It was close to the library, which he remembers far more vividly. He'd stared wistfully at the building as the rest of the delegation carried on through the streets, nearly losing his Keeper in the crowds when he realized he'd paused a moment too long. He heads in that direction, thinking. Thinking very hard indeed.

He can imagine it all far more clearly now, bolstered by the endless possibilities granted by the weight of coin at his side. He could, as Bull suggested, buy a horse. That would certainly make the journey easier - he might not even need to send the raven, he could just catch up with his clan before they move on from Wycome's outskirts.

It's an incredible thought - him, Mahanon, reluctant First and clan outlier, thought to be very nobly dead. Riding up to the Lavellan camp in new clothes, with a new staff, having survived. Having saved his people from shem'len aggressors. Having risked life and limb to return to them. Having finally proven himself.

He imagines Alaine pulling him into one of her fierce, tight hugs, maybe hitting him upside the head for worrying her. Elliret, beaming at him - "Come back to us, lethallin," he'd said, and Mahanon will have fulfilled that promise. The Keeper, looking on him with one of her rare proud smiles. Tashen-

Mahanon pauses, almost toppling as a large man behind him smacks into him.

"Sorry," Mahanon says. The man curses at him and continues on. He starts walking again, a little slower now.

Tashen. Tashen's children. No matter how incredible Mahanon's story, how miraculous his survival, how triumphant his return... well, these things wear off, in time. Mahanon has had his moments before - he once managed to save some of the clan's children from a nest of giant spiders they wandered into a few years back, and things had been good for a while after that. But these moments never seem to make up for the underlying problems. His shyness. His otherness. The cold truth that his presence, taking up the position of First, forces out other Lavellan children who have a home in the clan that he has never felt a part of.
He'll hear that nickname "mouse" again, but it won't be out of fondness. The Lavellans do not want or need a mouse as their First. Already he can feel some of his confidence wilting a bit at the thought.

Quite without his conscious thought or direction he finds himself standing outside the rookery already. The din of the cawing ravens is incredible, even from out here in the streets.

Mahanon stands there in his ill-fitting clothes, the large pouch of coin resting on his hip, and only one thought, one question in his head: First, or Mouse?
LOOK HOW PRETTY HE IS AHHHH. anyway thanks for reading, I know nothing about combat save my own sparse staff lesson training, feel free to roast me in the comments below. love you all!
Bull is sitting pretty fucking comfy in the Blackened Hearth's common room and half an ale down by the time his Chargers start filtering in from the streets or down from their rooms. It's been a productive afternoon, if not particularly exciting - his report is ready for tomorrow's handoff, he's taken care of the general sums-keeping, given all his various weaponry some proper upkeep, had an actual hot bath, booked a ship to Orlais for his crew, and has even managed to catch the eye of a very pretty serving girl. A redhead, as an added bonus.

Krem's the first one at the table as per usual, looking clean and relaxed and having given his short-cropped hair a quick loose shave, a few stray hairs still lingering on his ears. Within moments another ale appears in front of them, the serving girl giving Bull a bold wink as she swishes away to tend to another table.

"Charmer," Krem mutters, taking a swig of his ale. "Leave some for the rest of us, yeah?"

"Can't help my natural magnetism," Bull says, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied smile. "So, how was the market?"

"Restocked the general supplies, picked up a few new toys - nothing big, but I thought having some caltrops on hand could be useful." Krem looks up at the ceiling pensively, licking ale from his lips. "And you know, I heard the strangest rumour in the streets."

"Did you?"

"Mm. Apparently - and this is just hearsay, mind you - but apparently the Viscount's cousin led a raid on one of the Dalish clans the Viscount only just secured a trade alliance with."

"No shit."

"Someone else mentioned that they saw one of the elves from that delegation wandering the streets looking all sad and lost and alone, so I mean. Must be true."

"Damn," says Bull, not bothering to hide his grin. "That must be real fucking embarrassing for the Viscount, if the rumour gets back to him. He probably wouldn't be too happy with his cousin about that."

"I didn't think so, no."

"And being that this is just a rumour, I'm sure you didn't spread it to every vendor you spoke to."
"Me, sir? Never. Not every vendor."

"Krem only spoke to vendors on the left side of the street," Dalish says as she comes to join them, looking very smug indeed. "I was working the right."

"You know, there's something to be said about subtlety," Bull says, raising his brow. "But good work. Maybe the Baron won't be in a position to go elf-hunting next time a clan wanders past his town."

Krem toasts to that, and Dalish pouts until a bottle of mead is placed on the table in front of her.

"Thanks, love," Dalish says, looking up at the serving girl from under long pale lashes with an inviting smile.

The redhead flushes, her full mouth parting into a wide grin. "You're- er, very welcome!" She nearly smacks into another patron as she scurries away, casting wide-eyed looks over her shoulder as she goes.

"Hey," says Bull, with no real annoyance. "I saw her first."

"Not my problem if you can't keep what you catch, Chief," Dalish says with a self-satisfied smirk, taking a long sip of mead.

Bull shrugs. He can't argue with that.

Over the next quarter hour or so the rest of the Chargers trickle in, all with various stories and complaints from their afternoon. Bull keeps a watch on the door to the street and the stairs to the rooms, telling himself he's not looking for anyone in particular. After all, there's a chance that with the gold Bull gave him (his own doubled cut from the Baron job - he can afford it, and he wanted to be sure the elf had every possible option open to him before making any decisions) Mahanon could be a good ways back down the thoroughfare by now, travelling with horse speed. Bull doesn't think it's in Mahanon's nature to cut and run without farewells, but he's been wrong before. Not often. But it's happened.

He glances from the door to the stairs again and there. There he is. Mahanon, just stepping down onto the landing, eyes narrowed as he scans the crowd.

It really makes a difference, Bull thinks, what a few hours back in civilization can do. The clothes Mahanon's picked seem to fit him in a way the robes of the First he'd been wearing when they found him hadn't quite, the way his borrowed mercenary outfit hadn't at all. Sturdy but flexible leggings, a short-sleeved cotton shirt under a sleeveless tunic, and matching leather bracers and greaves - a combination usually sold with a cuirass as well, which Bull suspects Mahanon left in his room with his things to blend in better with the casual atmosphere of the common room. All in practical browns and greens, perfect for the road and far more subtle than mages' robes would have been.

He looks good. Really fucking good.

Krem spots Mahanon too and waves him over with a grin. "Oy, Mouse!"

Mahanon's gaze lands on their table and his face lights up with a smile.

"Did you get a message out to your people, then?" Stitches asks, once Mahanon reaches them.

Mahanon's smile slips for a moment, but he recovers quickly. "Er- yes, I did, actually. They told
me the raven should reach Wycome within a few days, and well- we have ways of getting messages to each other. They should know I'm alive within the week, probably."

"That's good to hear," says Dalish. "You'll be leaving tomorrow then?"

"You'll be having some drinks with us first, I hope," says Krem, pulling out the chair next to him. "Get a nice hangover going for the journey."

"I'd like that, but um-" Mahanon clears his throat. "I was actually wondering if- Bull, could I speak to you for a moment?"

Bull throws back the last of his ale and gets to his feet. "Sure. Let's go somewhere we can hear ourselves think, yeah?"

Bull can feel Dalish and Krem's eyes on the back of his neck all the way to the stairs. He ignores it. There's still a few ways this conversation can go.

He lets Mahanon into his room and closes the door behind them, locking it for good measure. It's a reflexive thing - Bull knows better than to rely on mere locks for security, but it's one less variable to worry about.

Mahanon is looking over the array of weaponry when Bull turns around. He's frowning slightly, pensive. Always thinking. Always at least halfway stuck inside his own mind.

Bull folds his arms. *Time to knock you out of your head a little.*

"So, I get it," he says. "I caught the hints. You want to ride the Bull."

"Mm, yes," Mahanon says absently, still staring at the weapons. Then his head snaps up and he whirls around. "Wait. *What?*

"Can't say I'm not interested," Bull says casually, leaning back against the door with a smirk. "Just wondering if you know what you'd be getting yourself into, that's all."

"I- that's not-" Mahanon stops. "You're interested?"

Bull raises an eyebrow, and looks Mahanon up and down for good measure.

"Ha," Mahanon says, staring at Bull with a charmed smile. He shakes his head. "I'm. No, that's not why I'm- *Creators.* You're a very fucking distracting individual. Damn it."

"Take your time," Bull says, thoroughly enjoying himself.


*There it is.*

A part of Bull's mind - one that oddly sounds a little like Dalish, and a little like one of his old Ben Hassrath handlers - is already saying no. There are so many reasons to say no. From Dalish's side, there's the obvious: They already have a mage. Templars are harder to sway or pay off these days, far less forgiving. Mahanon has a place, has a home. Bull was kidding earlier, but there's the very real chance that Mahanon doesn't honestly know what he's getting himself into. Five days of peaceful travel is a poor sample of a mercenary's life.
The Ben Hassrath side - well, Mahanon is a mage. An unpredictable, unbound mage, and a powerful one at that. And Bull likes him, already likes him far more than he should. Just as he likes all his Chargers, is far more attached to all the bas under his command, than he should be. Mahanon would be yet another point of conflict. Another easily exploitable weakness. And the elf is far too clever for his own good, even if he doesn't know it yet. There are few things more dangerous in the world than a powerful weapon with an equally powerful mind.

Mahanon is watching Bull carefully, anxiously patient, clearly trying to read him. It's a bit intense sometimes, Bull's found these past few days, being on the receiving end of Mahanon's curious scrutiny. He's not really used to people focusing that sort of attention on him, especially bas. Attraction, yeah, he gets that a lot, but when Mahanon looks at him like this - like he's some kind of puzzle Mahanon's trying to take apart and piece together again - well. It's different.

Because Bull understands why he makes such an effective Ben Hassrath - he's almost impossible to miss, but very hard to see. Few people would even suss out that there's anything worth examining beyond the surface so quickly, fewer still would care to try. Very few. His Chargers understand him well enough to like and respect him, but the way Mahanon sees him - tries to really see him - well, no one's really looked at him like this since- 

*Since Vasaad.*

Bull starts up from the door to cover his flinch, walking over to the desk and pulling out the chair so he can keep his face turned from Mahanon's for a moment.

There is no thinking about Vasaad. He can't. He won't allow it. But for a moment there Mahanon reminded him of- just a little, he almost reminds Bull of- 

*Vashedan. Fuck. Fucking fuck.*

Bull sets his face and turns, taking a seat in the chair. Mahanon is still watching him. If he's noticed Bull's inner crisis at all, it doesn't show.


Mahanon blinks. "I beg your pardon?"

"To me." Mahanon's eyes go very wide at this and Bull smiles, grateful for the opportunity to banish the shadowy jungle from his mind and focus on the present. "Tell me why I should hire you, Mouse. List some qualities."

"Oh." Mahanon nods and settles into a formal stance, straightening his back and lifting his chin. "Of course. Well, as a mage-"

"Can't have an apostate in my crew," Bull cuts in, drumming his fingertips on the arm of the chair. "We work on Chantry lands, for Maker-fearing people. I do sometimes have fighters with special abilities, though. Like Dalish, my archer - pretty sure you two've met."

"Right," Mahanon says slowly. "Er, forget what I said just now. As- as a, um, trained fighter with some very special abilities, I feel I'd be an asset in combat. I read and write in Common and two dialects of Dalish - not sure how useful the Sliabh dialect would be to you, but I thought I'd mention it - and I know my sums to, um, I believe it would be equivalent to somewhere between a journeyman and master's level by merchant's guild standards."

Bull's brows shoot up at this. "Huh. Really?"
Mahanon nods eagerly. "One of my fathers was... well, he should have been a grandmaster merchant, honestly, but because he was an elf he was sort of placed in permanent apprenticeship to a grandmaster until he met my parents and decided to join the Dalish. He taught me from a very young age. I kept up with it as much as I could with the Lavellans."

"That could come in handy," Bull says, meaning it. Handing off the basic accounting to someone else would certainly free up a lot of time. "Go on."

Mahanon blinks. "'Go on?'"

"You heard me."

Mahanon's face twists into that pained, anxious expression Bull's come to know very well over the past few days. Bull is unmoved. If there's one thing he's determined to do, it's to make Mahanon understand his own value.

"Alright," Mahanon says reluctantly. "I- I can hunt well. I can take orders, but I like to think that if I believe something is worth saying, I'll say it. I, um- fenedhis-"

"You're a quick learner," Bull offers.

"Creators, don't help me," Mahanon mutters, clenching and unclenching his hands. "But- fine, yes, alright, you could say that. I'm- I'm pretty good at avoiding notice. I think. It's what I prefer, anyway." Mahanon breathes. "At the end of the day, I'm quiet, I'm quick, and whatever task you set me I'll find a way to get it done. That's what I'm offering."

Bull considers it.

"If you're serious about this-"

"I am," says Mahanon firmly.

"-still, there's something you should know." This isn't a conversation Bull's had with many of his recruits, but... well, Mahanon's smart. Inquisitive. He'll ask, at some point, Bull's sure. He tells himself he's not just delaying his own choice by another few minutes. "You asked me what my title was, under the Qun."

Mahanon nods, sharp eyes lighting up with curiosity.

"I'm a member of the Ben Hassrath," Bull says. "Technically I'm supposed to be playing myself off as Tal-Vashoth, but honestly, doesn't seem like most bas can tell the difference anyway, and I'm not too comfy with the title. We're- sort of the enforcers, I guess you might say. Police, spies, that sort of thing-"

"And you're a spy," Mahanon says, with absolute certainty. "I thought so."

"Did you, now?"

"I mean- I've never heard of Ben Hassrath, so I didn't have the specifics, but- you're always thinking, aren't you?" Mahanon says. "Playing off this persona of, you know, big rough merc-"

"Point of order, I am a big rough merc."

"-fine, whatever, but still. It seems like there's always something else going on in your head. I just didn't know what it was exactly, and this- who you are, what you do, it makes sense."
"I guess it takes one to know one," Bull says.

Mahanon blinks. "I'm not a spy."

"You might end up acting like one," says Bull. "Sometimes I ask my Chargers to collect information, or spread it around. I send it back to the Ben Hassrath. We're headed back to Orlais - lots of weird jobs set by rich fucks who don't keep their mouth shut around big dumb mercs-" Bull gestures to Mahanon "-or quiet little elves. Would you be comfortable doing that?"

Mahanon bites his lip. "The information I'd help you collect... stupid question, probably, but would it be used to hurt people?"

"Sometimes," Bull says honestly. "And sometimes it'll be used to help people, too. You know, a pretty significant amount of your time as a merc is gonna be spent hurting people either way."

There's a flicker of uncertainty in Mahanon's eyes at this, but he recovers quickly. "If you hire me I'd place my trust in your judgement, whatever you ask me to do. As I said before though; if I think something needs to be said, I'll say it."

Bull's mouth twitches at this. You're gonna keep me on my fucking toes, aren't you?

"That works for me." Bull leans forward. "Are you sure about this? You can take the night before sending another raven, make sure this is what you really want."

Mahanon blinks, his ears flicking into that off-kilter stance - one up, one down. "Another raven?"

"To let your clan know you won't be meeting them in Wycome."

"Oh." Mahanon looks down and smiles, a bit sadly. "I see. No, I've- I've already done that, actually. The message I sent today, if it reaches them, well. They'll know I'm not coming back."

Bull frowns. "What?"

"Please don't take that as gross overconfidence," Mahanon says quickly, looking up again. There's a bit of a sheen in his stormy eyes that he quickly blinks away. "I've already made that decision, whether you take me on or no. If not with you, I'll try with some other mercenary crews, or perhaps take up residence in the alienage and look for work here. I love the Lavellans like family. I do. And I know they deserve a better First than me."

"You're selling yourself short," Bull says.

"I'm not," Mahanon says. "You're a leader, Bull. You lead your people. You would know that the cohesiveness, the effectiveness- the happiness of a group is contingent on the confidence they have in the one who leads them. Once broken, there's little chance of regaining that confidence."

"It can be done-"

"It can be, but only if both parties are willing, and- well, as my Keeper would say, 'One cannot lead with half a heart.'" Mahanon's expression tightens, clearly pained, but the moment passes. "All these years I've been trying to make myself into the First, the Keeper the Lavellans need me to be, and I can't. Even if I could master the fakery, it would still be false. I've thought it over and over again, perhaps for longer than I realized I was thinking it. They deserve better. Perhaps, so do I." Mahanon smiles. "I'm a free man, and I'm at your disposal. Or not. Either way, I won't be going back."
Bull leans back in his chair.

He tries to imagine it - Mahanon signing on with another mercenary company, carefully navigating the interviews to find apostate-friendly crews. Living in the alienage and dodging templars, maybe putting his knowledge of sums to work as a merchant's apprentice. He could do it. Bull knows far better than to underestimate the elf at this point. But it wouldn't be where Mahanon belongs.

*He belongs with his people, in his place,* that voice at the back of Bull's head hisses. *Are you willing to turn him Tal-Vashoth?*

But Bull wouldn't be turning Mahanon Tal-Vashoth - Mahanon already did that himself. And Bull-damn it, Bull wants to see what will happen next. What kind of man this could make Mahanon into.

Because he and Mahanon are similar, and they're not. Similar enough that the hidden questions in the corners of Bull's mind, the ones he doesn't dare ask consciously, the ones he banishes alongside the memories and doubts; he might be able to answer some of those questions, by seeing what straying from the path might do for Mahanon... or to Mahanon.

"Alright," Bull says.

Mahanon's brow lifts hopefully. "Yes?"

Bull gets to his feet and stretches. His shoulders are still fucked from hunching over the desk all afternoon. "We'll work out contract details tomorrow - I'm willing to pay a bit extra if you're willing to take on some of the company sums-keeping, but I want to drink way more than I want to negotiate that shit right now." He holds out his hand. "Welcome to the Chargers."

Mahanon beams, and Bull has to bite back a smile. *Fucking precious.* "Ma serannas, Bull-Chief. Thank you."

He takes Bull's hand and shakes it, his hand almost entirely disappearing in Bull's palm.

"Krem's gonna be thrilled, he loves being right," Bull says, rolling his eye. "Watch yourself tonight, the Chargers have a real bad habit of trying to kill new recruits by drinking them under the table. Upside, you probably won't have to buy any of your own drinks."

"I'll keep that in mind," Mahanon says, grinning as Bull moves to leave. "Er..."

Bull looks back. Mahanon hasn't moved. "Hmm?"

"I just- I was just wondering, I guess-" Mahanon dithers for a moment, then growls "fuck it" and says, "Earlier, when you said- when you said you were, uh, 'interested.' Were you just kidding then, or...?"

And here is where Bull should draw the line. He knows that. Fully fucking aware, especially if he's taking Mahanon on.

"Should," though. It's a very different concept, "should," from "want."

Bull should. He doesn't want to.

"Nah," says Bull. "I don't kid about that shit."

Mahanon swallows hard. He's looking down, to the side, anywhere but at Bull. "Because- I mean
it's probably pretty fucking obvious, but I'm... interested. As well."

"Uh huh," Bull says.

He steps into Mahanon's space and takes the elf's pointed chin in his hand, tilting Mahanon's face up towards his.

Mahanon breathes in sharply but meets Bull's gaze, lips parted and eyes wide. This close, Bull can count Mahanon's freckles, can see that there's both green and blue in his grey eyes. He can even feel the elf's heartbeat battering against his knuckles.

"Hm," says Bull, stroking the pad of his thumb along Mahanon's narrow jaw, and Mahanon's pulse jumps under his skin. Nervous. Incredibly nervous.

"Should" and "want" battle it out in Bull's head, but ultimately it's Mahanon's rabbit-fast heartbeat that decides the matter for him. There's no rush, after all.

Bull smiles, and pats Mahanon on the cheek. "Sorry. It'd be pretty unprofessional of me to take you to bed."

Mahanon's expression falls comically flat, ears flicking flat back. "Un- what? Are you fucking serious?"

"Yep, super unprofessional," Bull says, pulling back his hand just in time to avoid getting zapped by the irritated sparks coursing through Mahanon's hair and spilling from his fingertips. "You're a Charger now, remember? Professionalism is very important to us."

"Horseshit."

"That's 'horseshit, sir.'"

"You-" Mahanon folds his arms. "What if I start tomorrow?"

"You'd still be working for me. No way around it. Pretty tragic, honestly. We could have had a lot of fun together."

Mahanon makes a noise in his throat like an angry cat. "You know what? I've changed my mind. I rescind my application, I'll find another mercenary crew-"

"Too late, you're stuck with us," Bull says cheerfully, turning back towards the door. "Come on, Mouse, let's go tell the others the happy news."

"Bull-"

"It's 'Chief,' remember?"

Mahanon calls him something that definitely isn't "Chief" but follows after Bull, trailing sparks as he goes. Bull just grins. They've got time. Mahanon's not going anywhere just yet.

Yeah, Bull thinks, all inner conflict aside, this is going to be fun.

- 

Mahanon only just manages to get his sparks under control by the time they reach the common area, forcing himself to calm the fuck down even as his heartbeat still batters against his chest. He doesn't know if he's more disappointed or relieved by Bull's - rejection? Was that even rejection? It
didn't feel like rejection. At any rate, if Bull had taken him up on his offer tonight, Mahanon's pretty certain his heart would have actually exploded. Metaphorically, literally, one or the other or more probably both.

Bull is... interested. He said so. With everything else going on, every twist and decision Mahanon's had to make over the past week, well. That's quite enough to be getting on with. For now.

Still, Mahanon narrows his eyes at the Qunari's broad shoulders as they navigate their way back to the Charger's table. "Professionalism" my ass.

"Hey, everyone shut up for a second," Bull says to the table. He reaches back and pulls Mahanon forward, clapping him on the back for good measure (and thoroughly knocking the wind from Mahanon's lungs in the process). "Mouse is sticking with us. New Charger! Don't break him too badly, we're shipping out tomorrow at two bells past noon."

The reactions are mixed but largely positive. Rocky and Grim seem far too preoccupied with their card game to care, Skinner and Grim beam at him and pound the table with their half-empty flagons. Krem immediately leaps up and smacks Mahanon's shoulder (and Mahanon resigns himself to the affectionate bruising he's going to wake up with tomorrow morning). "Right on, Mouse! Let's get that barmaid back over - mead for you, or ale?"

"Er, whichever is cheapest?" Mahanon says, finding his own grin as it starts to sink in. He gets to stay with these people, with Krem, with the Chargers. With Bull, whatever that turns out to mean.

"Fuck cheap, we're celebrating. Now, where-?"

"I'll get it," Dalish says, scraping her chair hard back from the table. She doesn't look at Mahanon, but her face is flat as she stalks off to the bar without another word.

Krem's smile falters a bit at this, but he pats Mahanon on the shoulder again. "Well, alright then. That's settled I guess."

"Don't worry about it," Bull says, leaning down to murmur to Mahanon. "Dalish has some baggage about the whole 'First' thing. I'll go talk to her."

"No," Mahanon says, watching Dalish as she makes her way up to the bar. "No, I should talk to her. We work together now, don't we?"

Bull doesn't answer. Mahanon glances up to see Bull gazing down at him with a very soft, affectionate smile.

Mahanon's heart flips at this, but he forces a frown. "That's not a very professional way to look at me. Sir."

"Probably not," Bull says.

Mahanon rolls his eyes and follows after Dalish, ignoring Bull's chuckling.

Dalish is glowering at the oak of the bar when Mahanon joins her.

"I don't need-" she starts, then stops when she sees Mahanon. "Ah. I thought you were Krem."

"I wish," Mahanon says, stretching out his arms and pretending to flex. "I'd probably fill out these leathers a lot better."
Dalish smiles weakly at this, but returns her gaze to the bar top.

Mahanon swallows. It seemed like a good idea moments ago, charging up here to fix things. He's just realizing now he has no clue how he plans to make things right. "Dalish-

"Garas quenathra?" Dalish asks, her voice quiet. Why are you here?

Mahanon blinks, suddenly hit with a very strange wave of emotion. Her dialect isn't far off from the Lavellan tongue, and it's oddly comforting to hear someone speak his language. Comforting and bittersweet, reminding him of everything he's given up.

"Ma... melava halani," Mahanon responds slowly. You helped me. He continues in Elvhen. "I felt I would do far more good here, than there."

"You had people- our People," Dalish says. "And you abandon them."

"I know," says Mahanon. Dalish's lip curls. "Dalish- I was never a Lavellan. Not really. And if I went back-"

"Banal nadas," Dalish says, shaking her head. Nothing is inevitable.

"-if I went back, one of the two Lavellan-born children whose magic manifested after they took me in would have been sent away," Mahanon says. Dalish looks up at this. "I couldn't- not after my family was broken apart because of my magic, because of our traditions, Dalish- I couldn't be the cause of that. Not unless I was very sure I would be a good First to them. And I wasn't."

His voice breaks a little on this, and his gaze drops. It hits him in waves, the real grief of writing that letter this afternoon. There were not enough pages of parchment to capture his apologies, his well wishes. For Alaine, for Keeper Istimaethoriel, for Tashen- even for fucking Aerantil. They were still family, at the end of the day, and he knows there's a very real chance he'll never see any of them again.

Mahanon's eyes fill, and he pushes the tears away impatiently. Later, he thinks. Later, when he's drunk and alone in his room, he knows he'll have a good and proper weep over all this. Not now.

Dalish sighs, and he feels her hand on his cheek. He looks up.

"Mala suledin nadas, da'len," she says.

Mahanon smiles ruefully. "I know."

Dalish tucks a stray lock of his curly hair behind his pointed ear, and smiles back. "I suppose it'll be nice to have someone to gossip with. None of the others speak our language, and I know it bothers the fuck out of the Chief when he can't tell what people are saying around him."

Mahanon's smile turns into a sharp grin at this. "Oh, does it?"

"Mm." The drinks appear in front of them and Dalish starts gathering them up with Mahanon's help. She glances at Mahanon sidelong. "I'd be careful there, by the way. His biggest scars aren't carved in his skin."

Mahanon glances back at their table. It all seems quite relaxed - card games and drinking, Skinner and Krem getting into some kind of fierce debate if their animated faces and gestures are anything to go by. Bull seems quite invested in the conversation, but Mahanon gets the prickling feeling that the Qunari is watching him and Dalish all the same.
"What sort of scars?" Mahanon asks quietly - in Elvhen, just to be safe.

Dalish purses her lips. "It's not my story to tell, and I know little of it. Does 'Seheron' mean anything to you?"

Mahanon wracks his brain, going by bits of scattered news and borrowed glances at books and maps from the Lavellan clan's infrequent visits through human cities and towns. He vows to visit the library again before their ship tomorrow. He knows the Lavellan and broader Dalish legends going back centuries, oral histories passed down since the days of Elvhenan. That knowledge is invaluable to his people, but less applicable in this broader world he's thrown himself into. "It's a place, isn't it? Up north? Ongoing war, of... some kind."

Dalish nods slowly. "The 'Vints and the Qunari have been scrapping over it for a good long while now, and it's been an ugly, honourless conflict. The Chief was there. We all know to give him his space when the fog rolls in. More than that, I can't say - just thought I'd warn you."

_Fog? Yes, Mahanon will absolutely be visiting the library in the morning. "Thank you, I'll keep it in mind."_

Dalish squints dubiously. "Well, good."

They bring the drinks back to the table, and it's only as Mahanon sits down in the chair offered to him between Krem and Bull that he realizes he's holding an entire bottle of mead with no extra cups provided. _Mythal'enaste- I'll go back-"

Krem puts a hand on his shoulder and pushes him back down in his chair. "That's for you, Mouse. Go on, enjoy yourself."

"Oh." The bottle feels _very_ heavy all of a sudden. "Fuck."

The Chargers laugh, and Bull plucks the mead from his hands, taking a long swig straight from the bottle.

"Excuse you," Mahanon says, snatching the bottle back.

"Just helping out," Bull says.

Mahanon takes his own drink, watching Bull watching him. Bull's gaze travels from his eyes to his lips to his throat and back again with very keen interest. The mead is a far cry from Aerantil's best stock, but it's sweet and an easy swallow. He pulls the bottle away and licks his lips, his eyes still locked on Bull's.

Across the table and quiet enough that neither Bull nor Mahanon hear, Dalish leans over to Krem and murmurs, "One month."

Krem shakes his head. "Nah, Chief likes him too much. Six months, give or take."

"Five silvers says you're wrong."

Krem puts out his hand, and Dalish shakes it. "Five silvers it is, then."

Oblivious to this, Mahanon turns back to the table, feeling very warm indeed.
"mala suledin nadas" = now you must endure

Also eyyyyy starting to thread in some Bull backstoryyyyy wassuupppppp
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A short chapter but!! Hopefully a good one!!

As always you can follow me on my Twitter @FoxNonny - it's locked but I let basically anyone follow me, especially if you leave nice comments on fics ^-^

Also! You can follow the playlist for this fic here: Path That Leads Astray (sorry for the long-ass URL, I still don't know how to hyperlink in notes - EDIT: I DO NOW FUCKERS THANKS STITCH!!). By the end of the chapter we're at about the "Break Free/Where No One Goes" point, because I like to be about as on the nose as goddamn possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Another mage?"

Bull's ready for this question so he doesn't flinch, despite the Ben Hassrath's tone. "Uh-huh."

The man sitting across from him raises a brow. Bull only knows him by reputation - Katus, or "the one who brings death." Few would suspect that this half human, half elf man dressed in servant's clothing and stationed in the Viscount of Bastion's estate is one of the Ben Hassrath's most proficient assassins, but Bull can see it. The man's face is friendly and open, but his eyes are utterly cold.

"Should we call you 'Arvaarad' now?" Katus asks. "You're so certain you can keep these saarebas under control?"

Unbidden, Bull's mind is flooded with the images of Dalish and Mahanon, treated as they would be under the Qun: lips and eyes stitched closed, masked, collared, and leashed. If his face were still at the mercy of his emotions, he might have grimaced. As it is, he pushes the thoughts aside, fully aware of the cognitive dissonance. He's always supported the Qun's method of containing and controlling mages, in theory - he's just glad he's never had to know any of them personally beforehand, that's all.

"Dalish is about as disciplined as saarebas can get - fuck, more disciplined than most karasaad," Bull says, even as he remembers a particularly entertaining moment from the night before - Dalish, on her second bottle of mead, standing on a table and belting the lyrics to an old Dalish war ballad while Mahanon wept softly into a deeply disconcerted Grim's shoulder.

"And what about this new recruit," Katus mutters, rifling through Bull's report. "'Mouse,' was it?"

Bull nods. "He was just about dead when we found him. I figure the fact he didn't call on a demon to help him speaks to his self-control."

"Perhaps no demon offered," says Katus. "Saarebas are always at risk."

"I agree," says Bull. "And I watch the bas-saarebas in my company closely. But it's common in the South to have a few apostates on-crew - only the Chantry-dedicated mercs, the fanatics, keep them
out. No one would buy a qunari heading up a crew of Chantry-devotees, even a Tal-Vashoth."

Katas regards Bull coolly. "My superiors warned me about you, Hissrad."

Iron Bull's lips twitch into a half-smile. His reputation tends to precede him. "Oh?"

"They said you could talk your way into, out of, or around anything," Katas says. "An excellent quality for a Ben Hassrath agent... or the very worst."

Bull shrugs.

Most agents, he knows, don't have to sit through these assessments - it's meant to be a simple hand-off, sometimes as easy as slipping a report into the right person's pocket in an open marketplace. Not Bull. The conditions set by the reeducators regarding Bull's reassignment include these evaluations. Bull maintains that he's grateful for this, happy to have his peers checking in on his progress. He's pretty sure if he tells himself this enough times he'll eventually start to believe it.

Katas stares at him for another long moment, then straightens the pages of the report and slips it into his satchel. "I will make a recommendation here that the agent you meet with six months from now should expect a detailed half-year evaluation of the new bas-saarebas under your charge. I personally find your willingness to recruit such individuals concerning, no matter your reasoning."

"Understandable," Bull says, and it is - if he didn't know Mahanon or Dalish, if they were just faceless bas, he might think the same way. "I'm headed to Val Royeaux. We'll probably work our way up the highway from there, take the jobs as they come. It's in the report."

Katas nods. "Someone will make contact with you when your ship docks. One more question."

Bull tilts his head. "Hmm?"

Katas narrows his eyes. "A rumour has reached the ears of the Viscount that his cousin, a local baron, attacked a Dalish clan. If I'm not mistaken, the very Dalish clan your new... recruit is from."

"Huh," says Bull.

"Given that the Viscount just secured a trade deal with the Dalish in this region, he is quite out of sorts over it," says Katas. "That would have been the sort of information the Ben Hassrath might have been able to leverage. Contain, and reveal at a more... convenient time."

Bull says nothing. He's aware of this - the Ben Hassrath could have sat on that for years, and used it to destabilize the region when it suited them. Potentially just before an invasion.

"If I were to trace back the origins of these rumours," Katas says, "would I find you at the source?"

"No," Bull says. Truthfully, ish. "I don't think the survivors of the Baron's attack would have felt much need to protect him from the fallout of his actions, and the thoroughfare is a big road. They could have encountered any number of people heading up to Bastion along the way. Mahamouse's appearance back in the city probably wouldn't have helped. He's pretty distinct - people would have wondered what he was doing here without his clan."

Katas's lips thin. "Unfortunate. Well, we will do what we can with what we're given."

Bull knows a dismissal when he hears one. Pretending he isn't as relieved as he feels to leave the company of a fellow agent, Bull rises, salutes, and walks away, half expecting to feel a knife slip between his shoulder blades the moment his back is turned. At the end of the day, you just can't
trust a man called *Katas*, any more than you could trust a man called *Hissrad*.

The fact that Mahanon manages to drag himself out of bed before the noon bell is, he assesses, one of his most impressive achievements in his life so far.

There's a bottle on the nightstand labelled "Drink Me" in Stitches' writing, and though Mahanon plans to avoid any liquids served in bottles for several years at least, he trusts Stitches' judgement. It tastes vile - everything tastes vile, everything *hurts* - but after a few moments the room stops spinning, and the sunlight pouring in through the windows doesn't burn his eyes quite as much.

He might have survived the night, if it was just the bottle of mead. Bull's healthy chug out of the bottle did actually save him in that respect, so by the time he finished he was pleasantly drunk but still coherent.

Then there'd been... rounds. Something parcelled out in very tiny cups. He'd had no idea why the cups were so tiny and was quite amused by them until he drank what was in them and realized that the Chargers were, in fact, genuinely trying to kill him.

He has no idea how he managed to get into his room last night. He vaguely remembers someone tucking him into bed - a very large someone, with gentle hands - but he's not sure how much of this is wishful thinking.

But this wistfulness does jog his memory a little, and he remembers his vow to visit the library before their sailing. With an entirely woebegotten sigh, Mahanon slowly gathers his things and gingerly makes his way out of the room.

Mahanon is a forest elf. His large eyes are not meant for direct sunlight, as he sees best in low light. He has his own supply of herbs for headaches brought on by the glare of the sun that he chews constantly throughout the summer to cope.

The day is thankfully somewhat overcast, but even so Mahanon finds himself shielding his eyes and squinting as he drags himself through the streets of Bastion, ears pressed back against the overwhelming noise of the market.

*Never again*, he thinks desperately. *Creators, Mythal- end my fucking suffering and I will never drink that much again.*

There is no response from the gods. No mercy on that front. Mahanon trudges on.

The library is a blessed sanctuary when he eventually stumbles in - cool, dark, and mercifully quiet.

Quiet, until a voice shouts: "Elves! *Elves!* In *my* library!"

Mahanon reflexively covers his ears, both to block out the sound and hide the offending points. "Um. Sorry?"

A wizened old human male in ancient librarian's robes shuffles around the end of shelf, squinting at Mahanon. "Sorry? What for?"

Mahanon frowns. It's a good question. "You mentioned... elves."

"Yes!" The man wrings his hands, grimacing. "Brownies and sprites dancing on the encyclopedias,
putting them all out of order in the night, kicking up the most awful dust- I just won't have it, I will *not*.

Mahanon drops his hands, staring. "Brown- I'm sorry, what?"

"Da, for the love of the Maker, please get back in the office!"

A young woman appears carrying a stack of old tomes, dropping them on a nearby desk and hustling over as the man continues to ramble on.

"Alysen, I keep saying- you never listen to me, I keep telling you we need to start setting out milk and honey- it's the only way to satisfy the People-"

"*Maker*, Da, I told you to stop reading those fairy stories," the woman - Alysen, Mahanon can only presume - says, coming over to shoo the man back into the shelves. "You'll scare off the good ser here-"

Mahanon, still wrapping his head around the "milk and honey" bit and suddenly craving lunch, is far more amused than scared. Even so he doesn't move, unsure how to proceed until Alysen returns.

"I'm so sorry about that," Alysen says, shaking her head. "I swear we're not prejudiced, we just received a shipment of children's books from- honestly I'm not entirely sure where they're from, but they've got some very strange ideas about your people. Three feet tall, winged, sort of obsessed with making shoes- Da's been very taken with them, and he gets a bit confused sometimes."

"We're not *that* short," Mahanon finds himself saying, knowing his own diminutive height is hardly making a helpful case in this regard. Alysen herself is at least half a head taller than him.

Alysen sighs, rubbing her temple. "I don't know what to tell you. We get books from all over, seeing as this is a port city - some of the stuff that comes in is a bit... strange."

"That's good news, actually," Mahanon says. "I was wondering if you had any reference books regarding- er, Seheron?"

Alysen frowns and turns, waving Mahanon on to follow her.

"Seheron," she echoes. Mahanon keeps close, head swivelling to take in the towering shelves around him. "We have a few atlases covering that area, are you just needing a map?"

"I was hoping for something a bit more comprehensive," says Mahanon. "Relatively up-to-date - I hear there's a war going on?"

"For about the past four hundred years," Alysen says dryly. "We did recently finish a few translations of a Rivaini scholar who toured that part of the world - I believe his second book has a sizeable section on Seheron. It's new, so it'd cost you about ten tokens."

Mahanon blinks. "Tokens?"

"Yes- you are familiar with library guild practices, aren't you?"

Mahanon is not. Though he's snuck into a few human libraries over the years, he's largely either been chased out or too shy to actually take out any books himself, never mind learn the system. "I'm a bit new to this, actually."
Alysen glances back over her shoulder, and for a moment Mahanon is half-expecting her to ask him to leave. But her eyes are kind, even sympathetic, and there's no animosity in her tone as she explains. "When you check out today, we'll ask you to buy some tokens - as many as you want, but at least ten to cover the cost of loaning out this book. When you decide to return it to this or any other guild library, you'll get your tokens back. If the book has taken some damages, we might keep some of your tokens so we can afford to recopy it or mend it. It's not uncommon, and we don't shame people for it so long as they don't try to haggle us over it."

Alysen pauses, running a finger along the spines of the books on the shelf before her. "At any time you can trade in your tokens and get some coin back - we keep about thirty percent, so if you give us, say, ten silvers today, you'll get seven silvers back when you trade in. That's how we can afford to keep this going."

She pulls out a very new-looking tome bound in shiny fresh leather with a triumphant smile. "Right, here we are. Da copied it himself - he may have some funny ideas about people, but you couldn't ask for a clearer or more accurate transcription."

Mahanon takes the book with a grateful nod, immediately riffling through the pages. There are a few maps and illustrations breaking up the endless pages of dense text, but it seems like exactly what he's looking for - his eye catches on several references to the Qunari, even a passing mention of the Ben Hassrath.

"It's perfect," he murmurs.

"That's what we like to hear," says Alysen, smiling. "Is that everything, ser, or was there anything else you wanted to see before leaving?"

Mahanon almost says no, thank you; that this is fine, everything he needs, really. But he remembers that he's no longer a First, no longer has appearances to keep up or people he might confuse or disappoint. And it's an awfully big library. It's a heady thought.

"I have some time, I might just- explore a bit, I think," says Mahanon. "If that's alright."

"More than alright," Alysen says. "Take your time. We have reference books, manuals, atlases, a full fiction section - all the latest Tethras novels, they're very popular in these parts. Anything you're particularly interested in?"

Mahanon turns to look at the endless shelves around him, feeling delightfully overwhelmed. "Everything."

- 

Mahanon's pack is significantly heavier by the time he makes his way to the docks, but he's feeling far better than he did this morning and happy to shoulder the extra weight of the books. It occurs to him that in Orlais, there are likely to be more libraries - maybe libraries in every major city. The idea of having so much available for him to read, so much to learn, is... well, it certainly puts a spring in his step, despite the weight.

"You look happy," Krem says as Mahanon joins the Chargers by the docks, the air thick with the scent of sea salt and old wood. "Rocky was pretty sure you'd still be sleeping off last night's indulgences."

Mahanon shudders. "No amount of sleep would have saved me. Thanks, Stitches, by the way. Whatever was in that bottle really took the edge off."
"Don't thank him," Rocky scowls. "Bastard could make a full and proper cure if he wanted."

"What is life without consequences?" Stitches shrugs. "If my job is to make sure you all live into a ripe old age, I'm not about to hand you something that will encourage vice and excess."

"Rich words coming from a man who nearly drank a whole keg to himself last night," says Krem.

Mahanon's still listening to the banter, but he's watching Bull, now - the Qunari hasn't said anything since Mahanon arrived, nor has he looked anywhere other than the horizon, a slight frown tracing the deep lines and scars riddling his brow.

"New staff?"

"Yes," says Mahanon, tearing his eyes from Bull to turn to Dalish. He slips the staff off from his shoulders and hands it to her. "Tried me ages to find one with the right balance."

"And a pointy end," Dalish notes, flipping the end of the staff up to admire the steel blade at the base. "Excellent quality - you've got a good eye. Unpolished, though?"

Mahanon ducks his head at the compliment, but he nods. "I've got my own modifications I'd like to make to it before adding a finish. I figure there'll be plenty of time at sea to fiddle with it."

Dalish hands the staff back. "Well, if I ever need adjustments made to my... bow, I know who I'll come to."

"You ever been on a ship, Mouse?" Skinner asks, looping an arm over Dalish's shoulders. "A real ship, I mean. Little Dalish fishing boats don't count."

Mahanon shakes his head. "Never been at sea."

Skinner grins wide at this. "Oh, that's so unfortunate for you. Stitches, something tells me you'll be going through a lot of that green stuff you make."

"Green stuff?"

"For seasickness," Bull says, joining the conversation for the first time as he finally turns away from the ocean. "Happens to almost everyone their first time out. Fuck, Krem still gets pretty green around the gills, and he's been on plenty of ships."

"If man were meant to spend that much time at sea we'd've sprouted fishy tails a long time ago," Krem mutters.

Bull still seems a bit distracted, and Mahanon wants to ask if he's alright. Somehow, though, he gets the sense that the question either won't go over well or will be utterly deflected by one of Bull's cheerfully guarded smiles, so he keeps it to himself.

There's a whistle at the end of the dock. A swarthy-looking sailor starts ushering the mingled crowd into smaller rowboats to take them out to the massive ship moored a little ways out in the harbour.

Mahanon, quite despite himself, looks back at the city behind him. From here he can see the gates and, down the shore and a little beyond, the long pale line cut into the surrounding hills marking the thoroughfare.

"It's not too late if you want to stay," Bull says quietly, as the Chargers gather up their packs. "You
haven't signed anything with me yet. No one would hold it against you."

Mahanon considers it. There is a very real thrill of anxiety that courses through him at the thought of boarding that ship. If he changes his mind an hour out on the ocean, there will be no turning around. No going back.

But no. He's already made this decision - at some point he's going to have to stop second-guessing it. He squares his shoulders and turns away from the city. "I'm good, but thank you."

Without another backward glance, Mahanon adjusts his pack and takes his first few steps off dry land. No going back.

- 

There's always a shuffle and stall once the ship is boarded; Bull's used to the procedure by now. Dump your packs in your bunk, gather on deck for the captain's ground rules, then wait another half hour or so for the crew to get their shit together and set sail.

Captain Janar is a broad woman with short cropped hair and enough scars to rival Bull's personal collection. Bull prefers sailing with women; they tend to be less likely to mess with the people under his command. Six weeks at sea is a long time to spend in the company of people who can't be trusted not to treat anyone who isn't a burly human male like shit.

Sure enough, Janar touches on this in her initial speech.

"You're all guests on my ship - think of it as a privilege that can be revoked at any time," Janar says, her booming voice carrying across the deck despite the underlying growl. "You might have noticed we've got some eclectic crew and passengers. Anyone gets a mind to start fucking with people on account of personal differences, I get a mind to start tossing people overboard. We clear?"

Bull grins. His kind of woman. If Janar wasn't very clearly involved with the ship's bosun, a very pretty dwarf woman who can't seem to hide her affection for the captain in every passing glance they share, he might have made some very polite offers to the captain regarding how they could while away some hours on this particular voyage.

Janar waves everyone off. "Alright, stay out of my crew's hair and find something to occupy yourselves with. If you need to puke, do it over the side."

"Maybe you should stake out a spot now before it gets crowded," Bull says, nudging Krem.

"With all due respect, Chief, fuck off," Krem says, already looking a bit grey. The ship sways very slightly beneath their feet, and Krem shudders. "Fuck. Fine. You have a point."

"I'll send Stitches over with some of that green shit," Bull says, patting Krem very gently on the back.

Krem nods, lips pressed tight together, and quickly beetles off towards the bow without another word.

By this point the Chargers have scattered along with the rest of the passengers, so Bull does a quick round to check where everyone's at. Rocky's already napping in his bunk; Grim, Skinner, and Dalish have set up an achingly long strategy game on deck that Bull knows is likely to keep them occupied for days; Stitches finds Krem before Bull finds Stitches and is already trying to get as much of his seasickness cure spooned into Krem as he can between Krem's helpless heaving.
It takes him some searching before he finally finds Mahanon - the elf has managed to tuck his tiny frame into a small alcove formed by some stacked boxes pressed close against the rail of the forecastle deck. He's clearly absorbed in his book, a shiny leather tome that looks very new. The Rivaini name along the spine is familiar to Bull, though he can't quite place it.

"What're you reading?" Bull asks, leaning up against the boxes.

Mahanon starts and nearly drops the book, slamming it shut. "Um. Porn."

Bull stares at Mahanon, who keeps his eyes locked on his knees, a deep flush staining his freckled cheeks.

"You're gonna stand by that answer?"

"I think I am, yes."

"Okay then."

The ship gives a long creak, nearly drowning out the shouts of the sailors as they pull up the last of the moorings, canvas sail billowing out as it catches the wind. Distantly, Bull hears Krem heave another pathetic retch.

"Is he going to be alright?" Mahanon asks, unfolding himself from his hiding place and straightening with a stretch.

"His stomach usually settles by the third day out, but he won't be himself again until we dock," Bull says, shaking his head. "Poor fuck. Glad to see you're still standing after last night."

"Yes, well, someone was kind enough to keep putting water in my hands between drinks," Mahanon says, smiling up at Bull. His cheeks are still a bit flushed, wild curls blowing freely in the breeze. "Thank you for that."

Bull shrugs. "Would've been a waste, losing a new recruit to drink before we've even signed you on properly."

"Right," says Mahanon slowly. "Strictly professional."

"Strictly," Bull says with about as much solemnity as he can muster. It isn't very much.

Mahanon grins and looks away, biting his lip a little.

For a moment - standing here in the fresh sea salt air, the ship starting to pick up momentum as the sails catch a good wind, flirting easily with Mahanon - well, things are good. Once things are settled and Mahanon's found his place in the crew, Bull's got half a mind to drop a few professional standards, if Mahanon's still interested.

And if Bull were truly a free man, that would be all well and fine and good.

Then the leash snaps taut, and Bull remembers his conversation with Katas this morning.

The Ben-Hassrath have looked into members of his crew before - Grim has an entire file tucked away somewhere that Bull's only seen a few pages of, and they researched Krem extensively when it was clear how much affection Bull had for him. In the eyes of the Ben-Hassrath, each Charger counts as a potential threat to Bull's loyalty.

And Mahanon is saarebas, bas saarebas, double-damning him. "What possessed you" would be a
very real question the Ben-Hassrath might ask, if Bull were to sleep with him.

Bull almost thinks, fuck it. Fuck it entirely, fuck all of it, because this elf is getting under his skin and he's far too okay with it but at least he knows that, at least he's aware. Why not just lean in, accept it, get it out of his system, do whatever he needs to do?

It's always a torturous balancing act: pulling away from the Qun, embracing the freedom afforded to him by this life and all the good things that come with it, always tempted to take that final step. Find his own fucking purpose.

Then he remembers Seheron, the brutal mindless savagery of the Tal-Vashoth. His own roiling anger and madness that lingers far too close to the surface for comfort.

A leash, yes, a leash is what it feels like - a leash wrapped tight around his throat, the only thing holding him back from that plunge. Choking him as much as it saves him.

The ship banks hard, pointing the nose south, and the swaying of the deck rousts Bull from his thoughts. Mahanon's looking at him again, warm grey eyes sharp and keen.

"Are you alright?" Mahanon asks softly.

This whole thing, Bull thinks wearily, wouldn't be a problem if he didn't like Mahanon as much as he does.

But he smiles, and it's easy to smile for Mahanon - everything aside, there's still the fresh ocean air, the warm afternoon ahead of them, and with the speed of the ship beneath them it's easy to feel like they're escaping somehow. Leaving it all on shore, far behind them, miles upon nautical miles between here and their next set of problems.

"I'm good," he says, and it's basically true.

Mahanon's eyes narrow a bit, clearly unconvinced, but they're both distracted by a shout from down the deck. One of Janar's sailors points to something just off the bow.

Mahanon and Bull turn to look, and Mahanon laughs in delight as a dolphin leaps out over the waves, an entire pod weaving and playing in the wake of the ship. Mahanon balances his elbows on the railing and leans out over the water to get a better look, and Bull quickly grabs Mahanon's shoulder to keep the excited elf from tumbling over the side. It's a pretty incredible change from the battered and broken First he carried down a mountain only six days ago.

Six months, Bull thinks, watching Mahanon rather than the dolphins. What are you even going to be, in six months?

Chapter End Notes

END PART ONE
If anyone was to look for Mahanon, First of Clan Lavellan, they'd be hard pressed to recognize him in Mouse of Bull's Chargers.

A few months of mercenary work and training with Iron Bull and Skinner have started to change his physique - though still quite slim, there are fine cords of muscle forming along his arms and thighs. His hair is a little longer, and he's taken to pinning or braiding parts of it back to keep his curls from getting in his eyes during combat. He hasn't worn mage's robes since joining the Chargers, dedicated to his disguise as a regular mercenary - though the staff at his back positively hums with magic, carved in intricate knots and curling patterns with copper carefully woven into the divots.

But it really isn't his appearance that has changed the most. It's the way he holds himself these days - straight-backed and keen-eyed, no longer cringing away from notice. Though still quiet, and a little shy, and more often found with his crooked nose in a book than not, there's a sense of certainty that was never present in Mahanon Lavellan. A sense of self.

Of course, one would also be hard pressed to recognize him given the inch-thick layer of slime and gore covering him at present.

"Bad luck, Mouse," Krem says sympathetically as Mahanon pushes the corpse of the giant spider off of him, trying not to gag. "That's why you want to try to get out from under it before going for a belly cut - these fuckers tend to be a little juicy."

"You didn't get any in your mouth, did you?" Stitches asks, hauling his sword out of the last spider's head and grimacing as the many legs twitch and spasm in response. "Poisonous shit, you know."

Mahanon takes up his staff and stands, sloughing spider guts from his face as he shakes his head. "Don't think so. Up my nose a bit, maybe."

"Probably not so good for your skin, either," says Skinner, wiping blood off her blade onto a hairy
spider's leg. "Why don't you do that thing- shake your hands, whoosh, clean?"

"That works for small messes," Mahanon says miserably, combing viscera from his hair and giving up when he pulls out the half-digested body of a small rodent. "This is... not a small mess."

A rag is pressed into his hand, and he looks up to see Bull grinning down at him. "Fuck, that's disgusting."

"Thanks, Chief," Mahanon mutters, using the rag to get the worst of the spider gore off his hands and face. "Hope you don't want this back."

"I absolutely the fuck do not," says Bull, lifting a hand to pat Mahanon on the shoulder. He clearly decides against this and goes to pat Mahanon on the head instead, before noticing the state of Mahanon's hair and giving up. "Yeah, you need a bath."

"If they even let him back into town," says Dalish dubiously. "I think you can be hanged for that sort of thing in Orlais."

"There's a creek nearby," Mahanon says, slinging his staff over his shoulder with a sigh. "If no one minds, I think I'll go jump in it."

"In this weather?" Stitches says. "We're pretty high up in the mountains here. You're likely to freeze."

"I'll manage," Mahanon says, turning and walking out of the cave. "At any rate, if I freeze, at least I'll freeze clean."

Even in the summer, there are small drifts of snow scattered about as Mahanon makes his way through a patch of ambitious woodland to the creek. They're a way's up above the tree line, but these pines don't seem to know that. Mahanon admires their tenacity.

He emerges on the other side of the woods onto a long gravel bank bordering the creek. The stream is glacially fed, if the frigid clear water is any indication. Mahanon glances up at the stormy sky above. The clouds have been threatening to burst all afternoon.

It's tempting to wait and hope for a rainfall before they get back to town, but the spider ichor... well, it's starting to get sticky. And it reeks.

With a resigned sigh, Mahanon strips off his worn leathers and tunic, and forces himself to wade into the creek.

It is, of course, fucking freezing, the cold causing his pulse to jump and quicken to compensate. He won't be able to stay in for long without risking illness, he knows. Gritting his teeth, Mahanon drops to his knees and dunks his head in the water, working quickly to wash the worst of the slime from his hair.

I should really let Dalish give it a trim, thinks the one part of his mind that isn't screaming at him to get out of the water. Dalish has been threatening to take her shears to his hair for a few weeks now. Mahanon doesn't mind the length - he likes to think it makes him look a little wilder, a little more free. The Keeper never would have approved.

He comes up with a gasp, shivering as cold water drips from his curls onto his shoulders and down his back.
He thinks of the Lavellans every day, of course - where they are, what they might be doing. By now they would have certainly declared one of Tashen's children to be the new First in his stead. He wonders what they must think of him, if his letter ever reached them. There's always the chance that it missed them entirely and they still believe him to be dead. Perhaps that would be better, in some ways.

He pulls his clothing and armour into the stream for a quick vigorous scrubbing with the sand and gravel. The leather is oiled to be water-resistant, but won't do well if it's soaked for too long. Neither will he for that matter, at these temperatures. He has just enough lyrium left to cast a quick spell to dry off, warm himself, and finish cleaning up without bringing a headache on.

There's a clatter of armour from the nearby trees, and Mahanon's ears - numb with cold - flick to pick up the noise. He wasn't expecting the Chargers to join him. Suddenly grateful that he decided to keep his leggings on, Mahanon shakes off the worst of the water and starts to make his way back to shore. At this point they've travelled together long enough that nudity would barely count as a minor scandal - he's certainly seen Rocky's bare arse far more times than he'd like. But he's sure there would be endless hours of jokes about cold water and shrinkage, and he's already provided the Chargers with enough ammunition for good-natured ribbing for one day.

He's a few steps from shore when the source of the noise emerges from the trees, and he freezes - well, he stops. It's not the Chargers.

They're templars.

Five of them, all clearly travel-worn and tired. Two of them take no notice of Mahanon and immediately beeline for the water slightly upstream, pulling out empty waterskins. The other three pause, staring openly at Mahanon.

The breeze picks up and Mahanon shivers. He can't stay this cold much longer - already he's starting to lose feeling in his fingers and toes.

"A bit of a chilly day for a swim, isn't it?" says one of the templars, tilting his head.

Mahanon forces a smile, taking a few more steps towards shore and willing his heart to stop skipping and pounding against his ribs. "Giant s-spiders, up in the cave. Got a bit messy."

The other templars trade knowing looks, but the more inquisitive one just frowns. "Didn't know there was a clan in the area."

"I'm w-with a mercenary crew," Mahanon says with difficulty, his jaw seizing up as another cruel bite of wind hits his frigid skin like a hard slap. "Doing a job f-for one of the- the local lords."

"Spiders or no," the templar says slowly, advancing, a hand going to the hilt of his sword. "Not a smart idea to go bathing up here without a fire nearby. You'll catch your death."

Mahanon takes a few steps onto the gravel shore, wishing he hadn't left his staff and potions belt uncovered- he could have at least hidden them better, but if he could just-

The templar reaches his things first, planting a mail boot onto the carved haft of his staff and pressing it into the gravel and mud, a sneer forming on his lips. "Unless you're not someone who has to worry about such mundane concerns as cold."

The other templars start to gather close, a few of them pulling their swords. The speaker takes a few steps forward with his own sword drawn, slowly driving the point towards Mahanon's chest. Mahanon, realizing the man does not intend to stop, stumbles back into the freezing water just as
"Go on," the templar says, smiling. "It'd be a neat trick, wouldn't it? Warming yourself up, drying yourself off, all with a little wave of your hand and the favour of a demon."

"I'm n-not a mage," Mahanon says, shivering violently now. It's becoming nearly impossible to think, the cold worming its way into his head and turning his blood to ice. "C-could you just-

"'Just' what?" the templar says. "It's a half hour's walk back to town - you won't make it very far in those wet clothes anyway. The way I see it, you're better off just letting the cold take you here, nice and quick. Or you can show us that you're exactly the cursed little apostate I think you are, and we'll make it even quicker."

Mahanon does a quick calculation. No lyrium on him, so he'd have to rely on the magic that comes easiest to him - storm magic. Lightning. Without a staff. While standing in a foot of water. Not a good idea on the best of days, even if he had enough energy to shield first.

And these are templars, all standing there waiting for him to make a move. They'd dispel his magic in an instant if he was suicidal enough to try it.

There's a whisper on the wind, blessedly warm- no, hot, raging hot. Begging him to let righteous anger fill him up, banish the cold, blast these stupid shem'len, leave their charred corpses little more than ash on the mountain wind-

Mahanon squeezes his eyes shut. *I'll thank you to fuck off now.*

"You're going to die," the demon murmurs, and it takes every ounce of willpower on Mahanon's part not to lean into the heat. *They're going to kill you, and for what?*

"Fuck off," Mahanon growls, this time saying it aloud as his eyes snap open, staring the templar in the eye. "I'm j-just a fucking merc, leave me be."

"Then what's this?" one of the other templars asks in the midst of rifling through Mahanon's potions belt, pulling out his last draught of lyrium.

"Juice," Mahanon tries lamely.

"You really think we're idiots, don't you?" the templar snaps.

"As a m-matter of fact-"

"Hey!"

Mahanon nearly collapses with relief at the sound of Bull's thundering voice, the feeling paired with utter satisfaction as the templars turn and step back in visible alarm when they see the enormous Qunari barrelling towards them. Bull is intimidating enough when he's in a perfectly good mood - Mahanon has yet to see anyone successfully stand their ground against him when he's annoyed. And he seems very, very annoyed indeed.

Krem follows close on Bull's heels, drawing his sword as he goes, and while Mahanon is certainly grateful for their timely arrival he can't help but feel a flush of embarrassment at needing the rescue in the first place. Or he would, if he had enough blood circulation going with which to flush.

"This is not your concern, ox-man," the templar says, keeping his sword levelled at Mahanon's chest.
"You've got your swords pulled on one of my men," Bull says, his eye glittering with rage. "I'd say that's pretty fucking concerning."

"Then you're aware that you're harbouring an apostate?"

"I'm aware that I've got a pretty big fucking ax on me right now, and you're between us and a member of our crew," Bull says, taking down the ax in question and baring his teeth. Krem brings his own sword up, his eyes sharp and lips pressed thin. "You might want to ask yourselves if this is worth the lives it's gonna cost you."

Any other time, Mahanon would enjoy the sight of Bull flexing his enormous biceps like this, all burly and commanding, especially on his behalf. But there's not an ounce of heat left in him to get hot-blooded over it, so he shivers pathetically instead and hopes the templars will clear off.

"You want to talk about lives?" the templar hisses, suddenly reaching out and grabbing Mahanon by his sopping hair and hauling him forward out of the stream. Mahanon stumbles, almost impaling himself on the templar's sword. Krem starts forward but Bull holds up a hand to stop him. "His kind just destroyed a fucking city, and you ask me if it's worth trying to protect the rest of us from his evil? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't make the world a little safer right now."

His grip on Mahanon's hair tightens and he hauls Mahanon's head back hard, pressing the sharp edge of his blade hard against Mahanon's throat. Mahanon feels a cold trickle down his neck and can't tell if it's water or blood.

"Because," says Bull with deadly quiet, "if you kill him, none of you are leaving here alive."

Mahanon stares up at the cloudy sky and feels, on the whole, very fucking foolish. Of all the ways he thought he might die, half-naked, freezing cold, dripping wet, and having his throat slit by a jumped-up templar... well, it's certainly not as heroic as he would like, is all.

But if anyone could scare the fuckers off, make them reconsider, it's Bull. So Mahanon closes his eyes, and trusts.

There's a few more achingly cold seconds as Bull stares down the templars, before the templar holding Mahanon throws him to the shore in disgust. Mahanon doesn't have enough left in him to catch himself, collapsing onto his knees as his head gives a hard throb where the templar yanked his hair.

"The world's at war now, ox-man," the templar says. "If not us today, it'll be an angry mob tomorrow, after what's been done in Kirkwall. We'd have been doing him a favour, just slitting his throat. In some places they've taken to burning his kind alive, and I imagine there'll be plenty of people around here who'd like to do the same."

"The world is always at war," Bull says flatly. "And I'm sure there are just as many people wanting to throw your kind on the pyre as mages. Or has the Chantry stopped driving up taxes on the poor to fund your little lyrium trade?"

The templar makes a feral sound in his throat, but signals to his men. Warily they retreat, clearly reluctant to turn their backs on Bull and Krem until they've slipped into the trees and well out of reach.

The moment the templars are gone from sight Krem darts forward, pulling Mahanon upright. "You okay, Mouse?"

Mahanon tries to nod, though he's shivering violently enough now that he's not sure the gesture
translates. He pulls his bundle of wet clothes and armour to him. "They took my- my last bit of lyrium."

"'Course they did," Bull mutters, as Krem produces a cloak from out of nowhere and wraps it tight around Mahanon's shoulders. "Poor addicted fucks. Can you still-?"

Mahanon closes his eyes and wills himself to concentrate, to find that inner wellspring of power, that connection with the Fade. It's a little like trying to read the pages of a book while someone is jiggling it around in front of him, but he manages to pull together just enough focus to define, and cast.

He dries instantly, hair springing up into its usual wild curls without the weight of water holding it down. His clothes and armour dry too, though he knows he's going to have to give the leathers some serious care to repair the damage. He's still freezing cold, however, and given that he's only just barely proficient with fire and heat spells on a good day, he knows there's nothing much he can do to change that now without lyrium.

"Stitches m-might have been right," Mahanon says, struggling to pull his shirt on with shaking hands. "About this being a b-bad idea."

"It's likely you've got a pretty hefty 'I told you so' coming your way," Krem says. "Bad luck about the templars."

"S-sorry," Mahanon says.

"Not your fault," Bull says, leaning down and untangling Mahanon's tunic from his armour before passing it to him. Mahanon accepts it with a grateful nod. "Something to think about, though. If something big's just gone down, I'm not sure how safe it'll be for you and Dalish to go wandering off on your own without backup."

"That's why we came to find you in the first place," Krem says, glancing back over his shoulder. "Looks like there's some chaos at the crossroads and someone got a bit twitchy."

Mahanon gives up on trying to properly lace up his tunic with his frozen fingers and moves on to his leathers. "You were worried about me, Chief?"

Bull shrugs. "Didn't want to have to train another sumskeeper."

"Aww," say Mahanon and Krem in unison, and Bull rolls his eye.

"Keep that on you," Krem says, securing his cloak around Mahanon's shoulders. "We don't know what's going on yet, so you might not want to wave that staff of yours around."

Mahanon nods and, with a resigned sigh, takes up his staff and activates one of the runes set into the haft. The staff phases out of view - a simple bit of runework that Mahanon spent two months saving up for to afford. Rune magic does not attract templar notice as much as his own magic seems to, though there are drawbacks; the effects of the rune only last an hour, and the rune has to be carefully and painstakingly charged before it's useful again. "The templars mentioned Kirkwall-"

"I heard," says Krem, frowning. "It's been a mess for ages, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was really only a matter of time before that particular powder keg exploded," Bull says with a grimace, though it seems a bit forced - there's an etch in his brow that seems unrelated to matters of Kirkwall. "Either way, the sooner we get back to town, the better. Are you good to walk,
Mahanon gets to his feet - a bit shakily, still miserably frigid, but slowly starting to thaw now that he's dry and wrapped in Krem's cloak. "Yes, Chief."

"Good man," says Bull, reaching over and clapping him on the shoulder. "The others probably think we're all dead by now - let's go prove them wrong before they run off and split our shares amongst themselves."

The crossroads outside Val Moraine are where the winding mountain passes intersect with the main road to the Imperial Highway - a busy juncture on a normal day.

Mahanon can see the commotion for himself as they make their way down the mountain pass. The crossroads are swarming with activity, and he can even pick up the distant sound of bells ringing in Val Moraine on the wind.

"Creators," Mahanon murmurs.

They join the rest of the Chargers on a bluff overlooking the mess, all of them looking pale and grim.

"Someone report," Bull says, folding his arms. "I'm assuming someone's gone down there to get a sense of the situation by now."

"Aye," says Dalish quietly, looking stricken. She's nervously stringing her staff with an actual bowstring, hands shaking as she works.

"Chief, if what they're saying down there is true-" Stitches rubs a hand over his face. "There was a rebellion in Kirkwall last night. An apostate blew up the city's Chantry with some kind of magic and everything went to shit, that's about as much as I heard. Sounds like the Knight Commander went a bit mad afterwards."

"News is spreading fast," says Skinner, sitting very close to Dalish. She puts a hand on Dalish's knee. "Don't know the details, no one does, but it sounds like other Circles are rebelling too."

Mahanon feels numb again, but not with cold. He's never thought much of the Chantry or its Circles for obvious reasons. It always felt a bit removed from his world, aside from _shem'len_ attempts at imposing the Chantry's teachings on his People. This... there is nothing at all removed about this.

"Fuck," says Bull, pinching the bridge of his hooked nose. "Well, nothing's official until the paperwork goes through. We're likely gonna see a few pocket rebellions along the way, but it's not war until both sides say it's war. What's the hold-up down there?"

"Logjam," Rocky grunts. "The Circle in town closed up at noon for some kind of confab, but the local earl's kid is one of the senior enchanters so the templars have been ordered to sit and wait until they're done before busting in there. So you've got scared fucks getting out of town because they think the scary mages are gonna blow shit up, and scared fucks trying to get into town to figure out what's going on."

Bull turns to Dalish and Mahanon, his mouth a thin line.

"There's gonna be a lot of skittish people between here and our client's estate, never mind the inn,"
he says quietly. "We already had one templar run-in today. Town might not be safe for you, but I don't know that staying out here is going to be any safer."

Dalish, who glanced at Mahanon with alarm at the mention of templars, shakes her head. "In town it is better. I imagine there are plenty of apostates fleeing civilization for the wilderness right now - we'll look far less suspicious walking the other way."

Bull nods. "Alright. Just to be safe, I'm gonna ask both of you to take magebane before we go in. Make sure everything's locked up tight so we don't have any surprises."

Mahanon tries not to grimace. There isn't much appealing about magebane on a good day; taking it right before wading through a crowd of people looking to lynch someone like him, well. It's not a pleasant thought.

But having a stray spark betray him to said crowd is also not a pleasant thought. Neither is the idea of putting the Chargers in a position where they'd have to defend him again. So he takes the draught of magebane Stitches hands him and, with only a scant half-second's hesitation, downs it.

Magebane itself doesn't taste exceedingly terrible - sort of like a viscous, grainy nettle juice - but it's still a hard swallow, with everything in his mind and body shouting at him to spit it out. From the moment the potion touches his lips Mahanon feels the last dregs of his magic leech away from him, a cold and notable absence taking its place. It feels like forgetting the name of a close friend; like there's some knowledge that's just missing, and it always takes him a moment to fight the instinctive panic it causes.

Dalish just shudders after taking hers like she's tossed back a hard drink, but seems otherwise unaffected. Mahanon clenches his trembling hands, willing himself to calm the fuck down. It'll come back. You'll be fine.

"Right," says Bull. "Let's roll out."

Not bound by wagons, horses, or carriages, they're able to skirt the worst of the mess at the crossroads, but it still takes some careful navigating to push through towards the town. Mahanon's ears stay pressed flat as they go, and he keeps his hand tight around the hilt of his dagger for comfort.

He's never been around so many confused and panicked people at once - there's shouting and clamouring as people share news and rumours. Mahanon hears, in turns, that the "Champion of Kirkwall" blew up the Chantry himself while riding a dragon; that it's all a Qunari conspiracy (he glances at Bull when he hears this but the Qunari's face is, as ever, unreadable); that the Hero of Ferelden herself led the defence of the Kirkwall Circle against the templar massacre; that the Circle's Grand Enchanter turned into a horrific giant corpse monster out of despair and that the Knight Commander withered and twisted into a crimson statue upon defeat. Mahanon stops short at that one - the man sounds very convinced of his facts - but Skinner shoves him forward, and they keep moving.

The closer they get to town, the mood shifts from excited and anxious babblings to genuine fear. It seems many families are in the midst of evacuating before the Val Moraine Circle "pulls a Kirkwall"; likewise, there are those fighting to get in claiming to have family members in the Circle or the templar order.

At one point a man stumbles towards them with mad eyes, pointing. "Apostate! Someone call the guard, there's an apostate there!"
Mahanon's heart skips and he glances back at his staff, fearful that it might have become visible. But no, there's nothing but a slight shift in the air to indicate its presence.

"Apostate!" the man shouts again, lunging forward and pointing his accusatory finger at... Stitches. "Look, he's got potions on his belt!"

"I'm a healer, you nugshit," Stitches scowls. "Clear off, will you?"

"Apos-!"

There's a boom of thunder as the skies finally break, and rain comes plummeting down in force. There are a few screams and shouts of dismay, followed by a scramble as people scatter to find shelter - including their madman.

Mahanon realizes the Chargers are all staring at him with weary looks, everyone soaked in mere seconds by the downpour.

Mahanon puts up his hands. "Wasn't me, I swear."

No one looks entirely convinced, magebane or no.

The town guards seem just about as confused as everyone else, barking orders back and forth and trying to organize people into some sense of order.

"We're actually not sure if Val Moraine is closing its gates or not," one guard says to what appears to be a noble's footman - he's wearing fine silks and an Orlesian mask. "If you could tell the comte to stay where he is, it's probably safest in his carriage anyway-"

"Unacceptable," the footman sniffs. "My Lord has business within your little village."

"It's a town, actually-"

Bull shoulders the footman aside and holds up an iron crest for the guard's inspection. "We're on contract with Lord Grantaire, and we want to be out of your way as soon as possible. Care to help us out?"

The guard nods with pained relief. "By all means."

Things within the town are hardly any calmer. The bells have stopped ringing, but there's an uneasy fervour in the air as people scuttle into their homes and businesses close and lock their doors.

"There's no official curfew," Mahanon hears a city guard explain to a merchant as they pass, "but it's probably not a bad idea to stay off the streets for now. Just until we know what's going on at the Circle, you understand."

Mahanon glances at the Circle tower looming at the edge of town in the same district as the marquis' main estate, as well as the massive Chantry overlooking the town from its place at the top of the rise the town is built upon. From what Mahanon has gathered, Val Moraine is the largest settlement in this part of the mountains, providing a centre of commerce and power for the surrounding peaks. The townspeople seemed very comfortable with their mage presence only yesterday - there were even some Tranquil selling Circle goods in the marketplace, though the sight of their blank faces made Mahanon's blood run cold.

It feels like a completely different town, today.
The mood is no better when they reach the inn. The common room is buzzing with nervous energy, conversation lost to speculation. I hear the Divine is planning an Exalted March. I hear Val Royeaux voted to annul all Orlesian Circles. I hear Starkhaven's declared war on Kirkwall. I hear they're going to start hunting Dalish clans for harbouring apostates.

Mahanon flinches at that one, but he's not surprised - it's not the first time he's heard humans suggest this, even before whatever the fuck happened in Kirkwall.

"Right, I'm gonna get cleaned up and go collect our coin," Bull says. "You all get the afternoon to yourselves, but stay close and don't cause trouble. Keep an ear out for any new developments - if things go tits up, get the fuck out and meet up at the bluff. Understand? We're not fighting any wars here."

A round of nodding, then the Chargers split off for their rooms.

Mahanon leans back against his door once it's closed with a long sigh of relief. It's far from quiet - the walls are about as thin as a parchment slip - but at least it's something. Something between him, his staff (currently shimmering back into visibility), and his magic (slowly trickling back into his veins), and everything out there: templars and madmen, mobs and impending war.

There's also, bless every fucking Creator, a fire going in the hearth. Mahanon shivers as warmth seeps back into his skin and bones, chasing off the last of the mountain's chill.

He drops his things just aside the door, though this time he does find a shirt to throw over his staff just in case someone comes barging in. Exhaustion catches up with him as he crosses the room and takes a hard seat on the straw bed, gripping the sheets and blankets tight in his fists.

The Lavellans will be alright. He tells himself they'll be fine. They can avoid human settlements, and the Keeper is wise; she always keeps an ear to the ground to see what the world of shem'len is up to. They'll hear about Kirkwall, and they'll retreat into the wilds, and they'll be fine.

The Chargers, however.

Mahanon looks down at his hands, pressing his lips tight together. Most people he's encountered so far in the shem'len world seem relatively ambivalent about apostates, especially in the murky grey area of the law that mercenary groups tend to trudge through. His inability to completely hide his magic hasn't been much of a concern up till now.

But if there's a war coming... by virtue of his magic, he and Dalish have already been assigned a side. But Dalish can pass. He's not sure he can. He might cause the Chargers - might cause Bull, who doesn't particularly care for magic on the whole - more trouble than he's worth.

Mahanon hangs his head with a sigh. No matter where you wind up you're still something of a burden on people, aren't you?

There's a knock at the door that causes Mahanon to nearly jump out of his skin. He shakes his head at himself as he gets up to answer it. Well, self-pity isn't going to fucking help now, is it?

Mahanon opens the door to find Bull on the other side.

"Mind if I come in?" Bull asks.

Mahanon's hand flexes on the doorknob as his heart jumps. Even after two months, he's still never quite prepared for Bull - exposure has not yet stopped the full-body electric response that Bull seems to elicit within him by sheer virtue of existing in the same space. It's... problematic,
especially given that the Qunari is still an enormous flirt, while seeming utterly determined to maintain a "professional" distance that Mahanon's pretty sure is going to drive him absolutely insane one day.

But for today he keeps his face under control, or he tries at least, and he steps aside to let Bull in.

He goes to his desk as soon as the door is closed, sorting through scattered papers. "If you're here for the accounts, I finished updating them last night. Grantaire's payments are penciled in, so if anything changes it'll be easy enough to fix."

"I'm not- you did them last night?"

Mahanon nods, straightening the pile with a tap on the desk and turning to hand them to Bull. "Couldn't sleep."

"Huh," Bull says, taking the papers. "Don't know if the Chargers have ever been this on top of our paperwork. But no, that's not why I'm here."

A truly evil part of Mahanon's mind presents him with several possibilities regarding the purpose of Bull's visit, each of them involving very little in the way of clothing and at least one of them involving the misuse of a riding crop. Mahanon shoves these thoughts aside as hard as he can. "Oh?"

"Yeah," Bull says. That etch is back in his brow, Mahanon notices, which certainly helps to squash whatever remaining fantasies are playing out in his head. "This afternoon... that all could have ended pretty fucking badly."

"Oh." Mahanon's gaze drops to his feet. It all echoes his worries from mere minutes ago a little too closely; he half expects Bull to tell him that he's far too much of a liability to keep on. That he'll have to leave. "I really am sorry about that, I- I never want to put any of you in a position where-"

"Hey," Bull says, holding up a hand. Mahanon stops. "That's not what I'm saying. I just came to see if you were alright."

Without thinking, Mahanon touches his throat where the templar threatened to slit it open. Sure enough, there's a thin rough line where the blade cut into him.

It was close. And yes, he suspects those five templars are going to show up in his dreams tonight, driving him back at swordpoint deeper and deeper into that freezing water. If Bull and Krem hadn't arrived when they did, he's certain he would have been killed.

But he forces a smile when he looks up at Bull, pressing his hands into the pockets of his tunic to steady them. "I mean, I'm a bit embarrassed on the whole, but you know. I'm fine. Just means I owe you a rescue, that's all."

"Uh-huh," says Bull.

"You know, if ever you're surrounded by- well, templars aren't my strong suit, but some evil mages or whatever."

Mahanon stops talking abruptly, pleasantly interrupted by Bull pulling him into a tight and very unexpected hug.

His body reacts faster than his mind does, just about melting into Bull's embrace. There's something about being in Bull's arms that feels right to him, deep down in his core, past his idle
fancies and desires. He turns his face to press his ear against Bull's bare chest, Bull's heart thudding with level strength against his skin. Mahanon's pretty sure he could happily be held like this for the rest of his fucking life, honestly.

"We've got your back, you know," Bull says, voice rumbling against Mahanon's face and chest, and it takes enormous effort on Mahanon's part not to instinctively start purring in response (Bull still teases him about his twitchy ears, Creators only know what he would make of his purr). "Whatever's going on out there. You're one of us, yeah?"

Mahanon nods, not trusting himself to speak. He's still not quite used to the easy acceptance of the Chargers, even after nearly three months of knowing them.

"Also," says Bull, a bit more gravely, causing Mahanon to tense. Bull relaxes his hug just enough to tug at the point of Mahanon's ear. "I'm gonna start docking a copper off your pay every time you apologize for something that isn't your fault."

This surprises a laugh out of Mahanon, even as he bats Bull's hand away. "I don't apologize that much."

"Believe me, you'd be broke in a week," Bull warns, letting him go and stepping back. He looks thoughtful for a moment. "Well, if you don't want me docking coppers, there's other ways to train you out of it."

Mahanon swallows hard at that, feeling his cheeks burn. It's probably- that's probably not what Bull means, but- "Such as?"

Bull just grins. "See you at dinner, Mouse."

Mahanon watches him go, rooted to the spot as the Qunari ducks on his way out to avoid scraping his horns against the top of the doorframe and closes the door behind him.

Mahanon nods. Yes. The Iron Bull is absolutely going to drive him completely insane. It wouldn't be as much of a problem if he weren't also a little bit in love with the fucker, but that's a thought that he's so far managed to bury very extremely deep indeed, and he's not about to start pulling it out to examine now.

So instead Mahanon flops onto his bed, thunder and rain pounding away outside, and falls asleep for a nice long afternoon nap imagining all the ways Bull might conceive of trying to "train" him out of apologizing too much (with at least one strategy involving a riding crop).

- Bull's still smiling to himself as he flips through Mahanon's carefully-written accounts - the penmanship is a bit rough, written with a quick and nervous hand, but it's far neater than Bull's at the end of the day, and the numbers add up.

He sets the accounts aside, getting to his feet with a stretch. There's still Grantaire to see, and not many hours left in the day. If the noble will even receive him, given how tense things are down that end of town.

Bull's smile fades.

This afternoon, that was- close. Far too close. If the templar had been in a more daring mood...
He sees, for a moment, Mahanon's pained face. The way the elf closed his eyes. Trusting Bull to save him.

And briefly, another face comes to mind. Stumbling back, turning, pain and acceptance reflected in silver eyes that stared right into Hisrad's-

Bull gives his head a firm shake, rubbing his temples.

It was close. Close enough that the rage started prickling under his skin, threatening to fill up every part of him and wipe out every last thought in his head. He meant what he said to the templars - if they'd killed Mahanon, he wouldn't have left a single one of them alive. Not just because Mahanon still, even months later, still reminds him of...

*No. Not going there.*

There are key differences, after all. Vasaad was Qunari through and through; a better and more dedicated Qunari than Hisrad was, in most respects.

(That was something the re-educators insisted on - who he is now, the Iron Bull, never met Vasaad and so has no reason to think of him. Vasaad was Hisrad's loss. Hisrad's burden.)

And he was never attracted to Vasaad in a sexual sense. In fact, it's a little disconcerting to feel the two growing impulses jumbled up with how he feels about Mahanon - he sometimes wants to sit down with a few drinks and talk with the elf for hours, tell him everything, get his take on it all because despite being so damn easy to read, Mahanon never seems to say what Bull expects him to say. And sometimes, he wants to tie Mahanon up in very pretty little knots and take his time making the elf come undone again and again until the ever-spinning wheels of his mind finally slow and he fucking relaxes for once.

It's more confusing than it should be.

But sometimes Mahanon will look at Bull a little too keenly, or he'll ask a question that actually makes Bull fucking think for a good long few minutes, and there will be flashes of Vasaad in it.

No, not flashes of Vasaad. Flashes of how Bull - how Hisrad felt about Vasaad. There's a difference.

He doesn't like Mahanon because the elf reminds him of... well. He likes Mahanon because he likes *Mahanon*, just for a few of the same reasons why he and Vasaad had been-

Which is honestly worse. It would have been far more convenient if his attachment were just due to the ghosts of the jungle still clinging to him. He was partially expecting this to be the case when he took Mahanon on, figuring the feeling might fade in time. Expecting Mahanon to mould into a comfortable category, blending in seamlessly with the other members of his crew.

This hasn't happened yet. Bull's starting to suspect it's not going to.

Bull strips off his battle-stained pantaloons and pulls on a fresh pair, well aware that the effort is going to be wasted in the rain and mud. Still, he figures Lord Grantaire will prefer the soils of the town to spider guts.

It's been nearly three months. He's halfway there. Three more months, and he'll hand over a report to his superiors that could be summed up in a few sentences: Dalish *saarebas*. Ex-Dalish, now. Clan Lavellan, previously Clan Shlee-
Clan Shlee-uv? The fuck?

Bull's going to have to find a subtle way to get Mahanon to spell that for him. Anyway.

Intelligent, but unsure. Dangerous, but loyal. A good recruit, but unremarkable on the whole - aside from the magic, which Bull will assure his superiors he's keeping a very close eye on.

He'll hand in that report and, with the eyes of the Ben Hassrath looking the other way, he'll sit Mahanon down with a few drinks and maybe they'll talk for a while. Whether rope comes into the picture later on, well. He has his preferences, of course, but he'll leave that entirely up to the elf.

- The news comes in around sunset, just as the Chargers gather to eat - Bull drops a little extra coin for a private dining room to grant them some level of privacy, and after some debate they decide to risk allowing Mahanon to cast a silencing spell on the room.

"Seems like the Val Moraine Circle's opened back up for now," Bull says quietly. "The official story is that the mages closed up out of fear that a mass annulment was going to be called, but it's more likely they were debating going rogue themselves. Seems everyone's decided to toe the line for now. The templars aren't too happy, but with the earl's kid in there they aren't going to risk giving the mages a reason to revolt."

"And Kirkwall?" Krem asks.

Bull sighs. "A mess, and there's more news coming in by raven every hour. You know how it is. Anyway, best I could piece together, that Champion guy was involved for sure. A friend of his caused the explosion, and the Champion went running off to defend the Circle after the Knight Commander used the incident to call for the Right of Annulment."

"What is this... 'annulment,' anyway?" Mahanon asks uneasily, feeling a little behind. He's been catching up as best he can, trading out books at every library they pass by and hungrily devouring as much information as possible, but he keeps tripping over gaps. "My Keeper once told me it gave the templars the right to slaughter all mages in a given Circle, but that can't..." He trails off as the rest of the Chargers regard him grimly. "Oh. That's a bit fucked, isn't it?"

"A bit," Dalish echoes distastefully.

"Alright, what about this 'Champion' then," Mahanon says, eager to move on. "We heard bits and pieces, travelling around like we did, but I don't think I ever got the full story."

"Go on, Chief," says Krem, suddenly grinning broadly as he turns to look at Bull. "Tell Mouse how the 'Champion' got his name, won't you?"

Bull blows out a long and weary sigh, taking a sip from his tankard before saying, "It's not that good a story."

"Oh, I don't know," says Skinner, showing a few too many teeth as she grins. "He always sounded very heroic to me. And I hear he's into elves."

"Who isn't?" Bull shrugs, and Mahanon is determined not to read as much into that as he so very dearly wants to. "Fine, alright. Garrett Hawke, big ol' Champion of Kirkwall, got the title because our Arishok at the time went a bit... off-script."

"Your Arishok was involved?" Mahanon says, leaning forward. "Why was he in Kirkwall? I
thought he was permanently stationed in Seheron."

Mahanon realizes what he's said about half a second after it comes out of his mouth. He's conscious of a few eyes on him, but none quite so piercing as Bull's narrowed gaze.

"Been reading a lot of books, Mouse?" Bull asks softly.


Bull stares at him for an uncomfortably long moment, then leans back in his chair. "That's another copper you owe me, and I am keeping track. The Arishok was stuck in Kirkwall because of a bit of a misadventure with a pirate and book. Anyway. Arishok gets it into his head that he can convert the whole city, which goes about as well as you'd expect it to. This Hawke character decides to do something completely suicidal and challenges our Arishok to single combat on behalf of Kirkwall."

"And wins," Krem says, with obvious relish.

"Yeah, and he won, and it was real fucking embarrassing for all of us back home," Bull says sourly. "He wasn't our best Arishok, alright?"

"You knew him, did you?" Stitches asks.

Mahanon is grateful - he's dying for more details, but he's already slipped up once tonight, and he's far too afraid of revealing just how much he knows. Or, more like, how much he thinks he's pieced together from his research and Bull's carefully crafted campfire stories.

"Yeah, a bit," Bull says, shrugging. "Worked with him up north. Too much wisdom where he needed intelligence, and too much reliance on intelligence where he should have been a bit more wise. You couldn't ask for a more devoted follower of the Qun, though - he could've put some members of the priesthood to shame."

Mahanon notes, with interest, that Bull says this without any kind of admiration; more like dull, forced respect.

"And now the Champion is rebelling against the Chantry," says Skinner. She grins. "Hot."

"Aren't you Andrastian?" Dalish asks mildly.

"I don't give a shit, is what I am. The Chantry didn't do shit when shem nobles raided the alienage - just kept trying to convert us so we'd give them our money." Skinner stabs a bit of meat on her plate with a vicious thrust, bringing it to her mouth to eat it right off the knife. "If the Champion wants to kick up some fuss, he's more than welcome to."

"Which, meanwhile, is going to make life a whole fuck of a lot harder for the rest of us," Rocky grumbles.

Bull nods. "Pretty much, yeah. The contract is all tied off with Grantaire - I say we get the fuck out of the mountains and make for Lydes, maybe head up north across the water at some point. Check in with some of our regulars, keep to nice big cities where no one'll look at us too closely, play it safe until we know what the scope of this shit is gonna look like."

"We might actually manage to catch the tail end of summer somewhere we can enjoy it," Krem mumbles, prompting a round of good-natured snickering from the table.

"The 'Vint thinks it's cold up here," Stitches says, smirking. "In summer."
"Adorable," Dalish says.

"So we're in favour, then?" Bull says. "For the sake of Krem's delicate constitution-"

"Fuck off, Chief-"

"-we get the fuck out of the mountains and try not to get on the wrong side of any angry mages or templars. Sound good?"

There's a general loud murmur of assent, and the Chargers return to their dinners.

Mahanon is one of the first to finish eating, and while the temptation to loll around with the Chargers and drink more is there, he's also down to the last few chapters of one of his books. If he manages to finish it off tonight, he can make a library run before they set out tomorrow and grab something fresh for the road.

"I'm turning in," he says, pushing his chair back. "Er, I'll be taking the spell down as I go, so bear that in mind. Don't say anything too incriminating."

"I think I'll join you, actually," says Bull, standing as well. "Got one fuck of a report to write."

Bull is silent as they make their way back to their rooms, though Mahanon has his uneasy suspicions as to why Bull is accompanying him.

They get right up to the door of Mahanon's room before Bull speaks.

"So," Bull says, his voice entirely too casual. "You seem to know a bit more about my people than you did when we first met."

Mahanon nods. "I did some reading."

"I figured."

"I promise I wasn't prying, I just- I thought-" Mahanon sighs. "I just wanted to get a better sense of things. Everything. Not just you and your people."

"I'm not worried, Mouse," says Bull, "and you shouldn't be either. You didn't know much about me or the Qun before signing on to work with a Ben Hassrath agent; it was smart to gather some information so you'd have some idea of what you were getting into. It's what I would've done - fuck, that's basically my job. I'm just a bit curious what you were reading about, that's all."

Mahanon wrestles with himself for a moment. Only a brief moment. Having this knowledge has certainly helped him understand... certain things, a bit better. Not everything. But some things. But it has felt a bit wrong, somehow, knowing things without Bull knowing he knows them. Or suspects them.

Some of what he knows, or suspects, he doubts Bull will appreciate being brought up candidly in a public hallway, however. One can be truthful without being specific.

"A bit about the Qunari, and Tevinter," Mahanon says. "You mentioned Seheron that night on the beach, when we talked about mice, so. A bit of that. A lot of that, actually. I'm sorry you went through... any of that."

"Three coppers," Bull says, with a twitch of his lips that might have been a slight smile. "Speaking of messes. Seheron definitely qualifies."
Mahanon nods. "I'm very glad you're here now, and not there."

This time Bull does smile. "Yeah, me too."

Bull turns to walk away, and Mahanon should let him go. He should.

"Bull," Mahanon says, and Bull pauses. Mahanon swallows. "Chief, I mean. If you ever wanted to talk, about- well, anything. I'm here, if you need someone to listen."

For a moment Bull doesn't move, and Mahanon is absolutely certain he's overstepped. Fuck, he's pretty sure he overstepped about five steps ago.

Then Bull turns back, his face filled with some emotion that Mahanon can't for the life of him pinpoint or read. It's soft, whatever it is.

"Thanks," Bull says gently.

He seems to hesitate a moment, then reaches up and touches Mahanon's cheek - so softly, just barely brushing Mahanon's skin with his fingertips.

Mahanon's breath catches. He's certain he's never been touched so tenderly.

The Bull is walking away from him, back to his room, and it's over so quickly that Mahanon can't be sure it even happened.

He waits until he hears Bull's door slam shut before lifting a hand and, with his own fingertips, tracing over the spot where his skin still tingles from Bull's touch.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: in my official game timelines I have like... cycles based on class (all warriors, all mages, all rogues- just kidding I suck at rogue specs), so going by my own canon Marian should be Champion instead of Garrett, but I dicked myself over in chapter three by going with my mage Warden instead of my warrior so welp. This is what we're doing now. It'll honestly probably be less confusing for me in the long-run.

None of this was necessary information, but it's 3 am and I'm very tired and rambling. Can't wait to wake up tomorrow, reread, and find all the typos.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

holy fuck I'm tired but look!! a chapter!!
as always come follow me on my twitter at @FoxNonny for endless shenanigans.

The library is very quiet when Mahanon visits the next morning.

He's not surprised; the library is attached to the same small university complex that connects to the Circle tower, and it doesn't seem as though the paranoias of yesterday have alleviated much. He was eyed with considerable suspicion just for walking in the general direction of this part of town through the market this morning, and while he feels positively naked without it, he's glad he left his staff back at the inn.

He doesn't have much time - the Chargers want to leave by mid-morning, and he's eager to get going himself. But it'll be several week's travel to Lydes through the mountains and out onto the plains, even with horses and wagons. That's a lot of time he could spend learning about chantries, templars, and circles so he's prepared for whatever happens next over the coming months.

He has a dense tome tucked under his arm promising a detailed history of the Chantry (and boasting an "inclusive and sympathetic" look at the Exalted Marches in the Dales, which Mahanon took note of with a skeptically raised brow) as well as a much lighter collection of "forbidden romances" (to distract him from obsessing over whatever the fuck happened last night between him and Bull, that touch he's revisited in his mind again and again desperate to parse meaning from it), and he's got just enough tokens for one more book when he hears furtive whispering a few shelves over. His ear flicks, and he catches a few words - "trade," and "brotherhood," as well as a frightfully fascinating "overthrow."

Mahanon frowns. It's really none of his business, but... well, there could be something interesting there.

He's discovered over the past few months that he's actually quite good at collecting information; people rarely notice his presence, and those who do rarely assume he's listening even if they do take note of him.

That first week at sea with the Chargers, Bull took him aside for a quick primer on spying for him. They sat on the deck as the sun set and the stars came out, Bull quietly running through the basics as Mahanon itched to take notes. He'd wanted to; he'd even brought out a pencil and some scraps of parchment. Bull saw this and laughed.

"The first rule," Bull said, putting a hand on Mahanon's as he started to dutifully take down Bull's words. "Never leave a paper trail if you can avoid it."

Most of what Bull told him that night was sort of an extension on common sense; situational awareness, people's behavioural patterns, little morsels of Ben Hassrath training that Mahanon eagerly absorbed. He was mostly surprised by how practical it all was. He may have very mixed
feelings about the Ben Hassrath from what he's learned so far, as well as the Qun itself, but there's something to admire in the simplicity of their approach.

It's certainly fraught sometimes, doing this work for Bull. Before ever passing information on, he tries to imagine what the Qun might do with it - the good and the harm it could do. There are things he's held back for lack of certainty - conversations between servants just trying to get by and sharing quiet gossip about the nobles they serve, murmurs regarding harmless love affairs that could cause enormous scandals if the information were to surface just by nature of who's involved; humans with elves, peasants with nobles, men with other men and women with other women. He's sure the Qun could put such information to use. He's just not sure if he wants to be responsible for allowing people's lives to be toyed with in such a way.

But these whispers do not sound like idle relationship gossip. And if Mahanon hears something worthy of bringing to Bull, it'll give him an excuse to speak to the Qunari before they leave. Maybe in private, so he can get some sort of lay of the land between them before they're back on the road again.

He tells himself that it's passion for the job and not pathetic desperation on his part that leads him to drift a little closer to the voices, padding quietly across the old oak flooring of the library. Bare feet, while not the most comfortable choice for mountain walking and fighting, is superb for this sort of thing. He's careful of where his shadow falls as he creeps along - something he wouldn't have thought of even a month ago.

(Mahanon wonders, sometimes, if he wouldn't make a decent spy himself, with Bull's help and training.)

He carefully peers through the shelves to see a group of four lavishly dressed men, sitting at one of the research tables and huddled over an array of parchments, a few books stacked at one man's elbow as he carefully pens some sort of letter.

"-shouldn't be doing this here," one of them - a man in long blue robes - moans.

"Where would you rather we do it, on the steps of the Chantry?" one of the others, a man with an impressive moustache, snaps back in an undertone. "Back in the tower, with the templars breathing down our necks?"

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this at all," says the blue-robed man. "Maybe we should just lie low until-"

"Lie low?" hisses a man with his back to Mahanon, wearing a black cloak and with long, silver hair cascading over his shoulders. "Can you not see that this is our time, Jean? We must liquidate now, have enough capital so when our Tevinter allies look south, we'll be the brotherhood worth treating with. We're the only fraternity whose values truly align with theirs. Our brothers in Halamshiral-"

"I'm telling you, there's no way," says the blue-robed man - Jean, Mahanon can only assume. "They'll be checking the ravens-"

"It's in code for a reason," mutters the writing man, still scribbling away at his note.

"It will still be suspicious, and there are far too many eyes and hands between here and there for my comfort," says Jean. "Leonard-"

"I'm not travelling to Halamshiral, are you insane?" says the moustached man. "The roads will be crawling with templars looking for a fight, not to mention bandits. You should go yourself, if
you're so worried. If you weren't such a-

"Such a what?" says Jean, lifting his chin proudly. "I have family here, you know. I'm not just some lily-livered academic who-

"Stop," says the silver-haired man suddenly, holding up a hand.

Mahanon feels it a moment too late - a slight hum in the air, the slightest vibration, only apparent now that he isn't listening to Orlesian squabbling. A detection spell. And if he's hearing it-

Even if there were time to run, he can't - his feet suddenly lock to the hardwood as a petrification hex hits him like a wave, leaving him stunned in place as the silver-haired man sweeps around the corner of the shelf. His lip curls in disgust as he takes Mahanon in, looking him up and down with marked disdain.

Mahanon swallows, clutching his books to his chest.

The hex relaxes as the silver-haired man grabs Mahanon roughly by the forearm, dragging him out from behind the shelf and hauling him up in front of the other men. "The standards here must be dropping, look at this: A rat in the library."

Jean groans, while Leonard and the writer sneer, and Mahanon's mind casts back again to that night on the ship with Bull.

"The best way to get out of trouble is to play to people's assumptions," Bull told him, leaning back against a stack of crates with a wince - Mahanon's noticed Bull seems to suffer from aches if he sits for too long unmoving. "What do people tend to think of you? Humans, especially."

Mahanon's ears flicked back as he grimaced. "Mostly that I'm an idiot."

"Exactly," Bull said, nodding. "You're an elf - humans are going to assume all kinds of shit about you. You're small, kinda scrawny, you look about as threatening as a nug-

"Wow, thanks-

"Nah, but it's good though. You could get away with playing scared and stupid real easily, and most humans aren't just going to believe that - they're going to want to believe it. So let them. You'll be surprised what people say and do when they don't think you're a threat."

Scared and stupid, Mahanon thinks, as the silver-haired man shoves him forward. Got it.

"I'm so sorry, sers," Mahanon says, letting his lip tremble as he cowers, his eyes on the ground. "I didn't mean to interrupt-

"What did you hear?" Jean says, his voice high and tight. "Maker, I told you all-

"Oh, shut up," snaps Leonard. "It's just a fucking elf."

"An elf who should know better than to eavesdrop on his betters," the silver-haired man says coldly. "The man asked a question, knife-ear. What did you hear?"

"I didn't understand it," Mahanon says, hugging his books close. "I just heard brotherhood and I- I thought maybe-

"Thought maybe you could turn us over to the Chantry?" Jean says. "Have us all branded, is that what you thought?"
"Look at the markings, idiot," Leonard says, gesturing to Mahanon's face. "He's Dalish, they still worship their little pagan bedtime stories."

"Which does raise some questions as to why a Dalish would be wandering around a library," the writer says, frowning.

"I'm not Dalish anymore," Mahanon whimpers, burying his fierce irritation at his Creators being referred to as "little bedtime stories." He's banished me, because-

He lifts his hand, letting a tiny ball of lightning form in his palm.

The mood instantly shifts - the suspicion is still there, but the men largely relax. He's given them something, he knows. If all else fails, they can hand him over to the templars to be dealt with. It's a gamble, giving them even this small advantage, but Mahanon's willing to take the risk.

"My master sent me here to collect his books," Mahanon continues, thinking of the silver-haired man's conviction that their fraternity aligns with "Tevinter values." It's a good call; the mages trade a round of satisfied glances, with Leonard smirking in a way that makes Mahanon's stomach turn. "But when I heard you mention a brotherhood, I thought you might be mages, like me-"

"Not like you," Leonard says, narrowing his eyes.

"No, no, of course," Mahanon says, dropping his gaze again and biting back a flash of anger. The sheer arrogance of these men. "Er- proper mages, I mean. I just thought I could help. With the rebellion, and everything."

"Who is your master?" asks the silver-haired man. "Might he be sympathetic to our cause?"

Mahanon shakes his head. "He's a chevalier - not very prosperous. He often threatens to give me over to the templars if I don't complete my work to his liking."

"So you're looking for a means of rebelling against your master," Leonard says distastefully.

Mahanon shakes his head again. "I might wish I was indentured to someone else, ser, but I know my place. I just don't want to be made Tranquil if I'm found out."

"Of course not," the silver-haired man says, putting a hand on Mahanon's shoulder, his voice suddenly cloyingly sympathetic. "Where is your master headed to next?"

"Montsimmard," Mahanon says, thinking back to an Orlesian map he'd been considering taking out only minutes ago. "I think. We're going west for certain, anyway."

"Varden, you can't possibly be thinking-" starts Jean.

"I'm thinking we might have a solution to our problem," says the silver-haired man, Varden, giving Mahanon a little shake. "Tell me honestly, elf - do you read?"

"Only a little, and not very well," Mahanon says, ducking his head to cover his smirk as the humans swallow this without a second thought. "Said the elf, holding two books, standing in the middle of a fucking library - bloody shem'len. I'm sorry."

"No, that's quite perfect, actually," says Varden. "If I'm not mistaken, the quickest way to get to Montsimmard is by the Imperial Highway, which should take you through Halamshiral. Would you be willing to deliver a little message for us, elf?"
"If it helps the cause," Mahanon says, trying for a sort of subservient fervency. It seems to work on everyone save Jean, who buries his face in his hands.

"Wonderful," says Varden. "Hugo, add a note to our message that, uh- what's your name, elf?"

"Aerantil," Mahanon says instantly.

"Aerantil," Varden echoes, as the others snicker at the Dalish name. "Yes, add a note that Aerantil will be aiding the fraternity in this matter. Which will look very bad for you, little elf, if your master or any templars read this letter, so I'd very much suggest keeping it to yourself."

Mahanon nods, adjusting his face to look fearful.

"Et après?" the writer asks, his quill pausing on the page as he glances up at Varden.

Varden huffs a short laugh. "Après, ils peuvent faire tout ce qu'ils veulent avec le lapin, à condition qu'il ne puisse pas nous dénoncer."

The writer smiles and continues his work. Mahanon, wishing he spoke even a little Orlesian, looks back at Varden.

"Not to worry," says Varden, patting Mahanon's hair, and Mahanon's grip on his books tightens as he struggles not to wrench himself away from the man in disgust. "Just clarifying how the brothers in Halamshiral should reward you for your service."

"Oh," Mahanon says, forcing a smile. "That's very kind, thank you."

Varden smiles back indulgently, and for a moment Mahanon is sorely tempted to let a lightning bolt loose on the lot of them. "Now, you'll be taking this to a warehouse at the very end of Champs-Victoire with a symbol of a coiled snake carved into the door. There should be someone there to let you in if you go after sundown. Knock three times, show them your magic, and say 'fidélité à jamais à Thalsian.' Understand?"

Varden has Mahanon repeat the phrase again and again while the writer finishes the letter and folds it up, sealing it with a wax crest. He hands it to Jean, who holds it close, eyeing Varden uncertainly.

"Are you sure about this?" Jean says doubtfully. "Giving this message to an elf?"

"An elf who knows his place," Leonard says. "Good elf servants can be very loyal, you know. I read somewhere that there's something in their biology that makes them more suited to serve."

"That's from Carius's studies," Varden says. "They've all but banished his work this far south, such a shame."

"Even so..." Jean says.

"Even so, it's either we give the letter to the elf, or you risk the roads to deliver it to Halamshiral yourself," says Varden. "Your choice."

Jean grimaces, but finally hands the letter to Varden. "Fine. But I don't want my name dragged into it if it all falls apart."

"Aerantil won't let that happen," Varden says, tucking the letter into Mahanon's tunic. "Because Aerantil knows that if he fails, he'll have earned the ire of our fraternity, and if he betrays us he'll
be lucky if the templars only make him Tranquil for being involved with us at all. Isn't that right?"

Mahanon, feeling a little guilty for dragging Aerantil's name into this no matter how little love was lost between him and the merchant, nods. "Y-yes ser."

"Good lad," Varden says. "Off you go, then. Try to convince your master to get to Halamshiral as quickly as you can."

Mahanon nods again, even bowing a little. "Yes, sers. Thank you again."

"Just remember, there's quite the reward waiting for you if you do the job right," the writer says with a smile, and Leonard chuckles.

Mahanon tries to look excited about this, even as he wonders how long this little conspiracy can possibly go undiscovered with such terrible liars at the helm. "I truly cannot wait."

-

Bull folds his arms. "Pretty sure I said last night that the plan was not to get on the wrong side of any angry mages or angry templars."

Mahanon shrugs, though he has the grace to look a little guilty. "Oops?"

Bull sighs.

They're standing in the driest corner of the stables as the Chargers load up the last of the supplies into the wagon and their saddlebags. Bull was right on the edge of sending someone out to make sure nothing had happened at the library when Mahanon came tearing in with... this.

The Ben Hassrath in Bull knows how good this information is, this opening. Back when he'd been climbing up through the ranks, this kind of work would have been the sort of thing that could get someone promoted, especially given the timing. News of an Orlesian mage fraternity allied with Tevinter would be invaluable to Bull's people. So easy to exploit.

But this- fuck, ignoring for a moment the danger involved in all this, it's exactly the kind of thing Bull was hoping to avoid: something that would draw Ben Hassrath attention to Mahanon. Something that would expand his report on Mahanon beyond the basics of "ex-Dalish mage."

It would put Mahanon at risk, in every sense.

"The message isn't cursed," Mahanon says in the wake of Bull's silence, offering a sealed letter to him. "I checked. Just plain old ink and parchment."

Bull takes the letter, looking it over, and almost rolls his eye. It's shoddy work - the seal is far from tamper-proof. He pulls out a sharp pocket knife and opens the letter with a practiced swipe, scanning the contents. It's in code, yes, but the cadence is familiar, and after a few read-throughs he recognizes it as a variant of a cipher popular with some Tevinter agents up in Seheron. His mouth twists at the thought.

"You said they mentioned trade?" Bull says.

Mahanon nods. "The man in charge, Varden - he said that it's time to start liquidating, that they need to build capital. If I'm bringing this to a warehouse-"

"Heavy on the 'if' there, Mouse, I haven't said yes."
"Fine, on the off-chance that I'm bringing this to a warehouse entirely at your pleasure, I'm assuming that means they've been trading goods of some kind to fund their fraternity that they're planning on selling off en-masse," Mahanon says, folding his own arms back at Bull. "Maybe lyrium? I doubt it's legal. I'd bet anything that's what the message is - instructing their crew in Halamshiral to start the process of dismantling the business and building up their gold stores to prepare for a larger rebellion."

"And the message probably ends with instructions to kill the nosey elf messenger," Bull says, glancing through the cramped and curling coded script again. "I'm guessing 'Aerantil' is you?"

"Technically, he's a merchant," Mahanon says with a grimace. "But for now, yes. I thought - if you could break the code, maybe replicate it, we could rewrite the message to something a bit less murder-y. Maybe even something that could allow me to take a look around, figure out what it is they're trading."

"That's risky as fuck," Bull says, even as he starts to pick apart the mechanics of the code in his mind. It would take him a few hours' study and referencing to get the feel of it, but he could do it. It really isn't that tough a code to crack. "I could also rewrite it to read that your Orlesian pals sent a Tal-Vashoth messenger instead of an elf-"

"No, the only way into that warehouse is with magic," Mahanon says, shaking his head. "I have to prove I'm a mage at the door. It has to be me, or another mage. And unless your people have started allowing mages to become members of the Ben Hassrath..."

Bull frowns at the dig, but he gets Mahanon's point. If the Ben Hassrath want this information, they'll have to get it through Mahanon.

"What's your motive here, Mouse?" he asks, watching Mahanon carefully. "I get playing sympathizer to get out of trouble, but why risk your neck going beyond that? I know you're not doing it out of loyalty to the Qun, and if it's for me, well. You've already given me some great intel here, you don't have to do anything else."

Mahanon blows out a breath. "I've no love for the circles or the Chantry and no intent on doing them any favours. However, if the system is crumbling and the mages are looking to rally behind a given leadership, I'd rather that leadership wasn't a bunch of shithead Orlesians with aspirations of becoming the next Imperium. There are plenty of elves in and out of the circles who would suffer if the world resettled with men like that at the helm." Mahanon makes a face. "By the way, if you ever come across any books written by a man named Carius, let me know so I can set them on fire. Just for my own satisfaction."

"Noted," Bull says. He recognizes the name - there were plenty of believers in Carius's work on the Tevinter lines up north. "But the Qun doesn't necessarily work that way. We might find out that these fuckers are trading people, and I'll write up my report for my superiors, and it may turn out that letting them continue what they're doing best serves the Qun. It's not always about justice."

"An alliance between Orlesian circles and Tevinter would only strengthen the Imperium's influence in the south and expand their networks," Mahanon says, raising a brow. "I doubt your people would want that."

He's right, of course. Bull knows the Ben Hassrath would want this alliance to fail, ultimately. In a broad sense, for very different motives, he knows Mahanon's goals in this matter align with the interests of the Qun. He was just hoping Mahanon might not figure that out.

You're really not much better than those Orlesian fucks if you keep underestimating him, Bull
chides himself.

As a Ben Hassrath, the way forward is clear: Let Mahanon deliver the message and gain what information he can. The rewards very obviously outweigh the risk involved.

But as Iron Bull, knowing that even experienced agents have met their ends trying to complete far less risky tasks than what Mahanon's proposing, feeling that six-month report breathing down his neck and desperate to keep it as short and innocuous as possible and Mahanon being utterly fucking unhelpful in that regard, it's... fucked, is what it is. Entirely fucked.

It's a double-edged blade. He knows that presenting this information to the Ben Hassrath could gain some much-needed favour with them - maybe he'll be subjected to fewer evaluations when he hands in his reports. The leash could get just that little bit longer.

And risking Mahanon could prove to them that he's not taking any special interest in any of his bas, especially a bas saarebas.

Bull grinds his teeth and says, "Alright."

Mahanon perks up. "Really?"

"Don't look so fucking happy about me agreeing to send you into a stupidly dangerous situation," Bull says wearily, tucking the letter into his pouch. "If I can work out the code, and if you're willing to take on some extra work learning the ropes of infiltration before we get to Halamshiral so I know you won't get yourself killed, then fine. I get to call it off at any point, though, and you're not allowed to so much as flick your ears at me if I do. I'm not losing one of my men on a completely optional mission, no matter how shitty these Orlesians are."

"If it helps they are deeply, incredibly shitty," Mahanon says. "But thank you, for letting me do this. For trusting me."

He looks so damn earnest that Bull has to look away, rubbing at the back of his neck. Big fucking elf eyes. "Yeah, well. We'll see how it shakes down when we get to Halamshiral."

Mahanon breathes like he wants to say something else, but a whinny at the mouth of the stables interrupts them. Bull glances over his shoulder to see Rocky struggling with his saddlebags as his horse dances away from him.

"I keep telling him he's gotta approach the damn things from within their sight lines," Bull mutters, shaking his head. "Anyway, anything else you wanted to talk about?"

He looks back to see Mahanon looking at him with a bit of a stuck expression, and Bull- well, he doesn't know, but he has his suspicions about what might be on the elf's mind.

Bull's playing hot and cold, a bit, and he knows it, even if he doesn't mean to. Last night got a bit... it's not like he said anything, or really did anything, but there's a lot to read between the lines, and-

Damn it, how much do you know?

How much could Mahanon surmise from whatever the fuck he read about Seheron, about the Qun? Not much, Bull thinks, if Mahanon's still looking at him like this. Like Bull is someone worth wanting.

There are so many questions he wants to ask, and so many answers he wishes he could give Mahanon. But not yet. Not right now. He can't even ask Mahanon to be patient without giving far
too much away.

So he braces himself, with no plan for how to field whatever Mahanon's about to ask him, but Mahanon just smiles and drops his gaze.

"No, that's it, I think," Mahanon says softly.

It's an enormous relief, and Bull is fucking grateful, but there's no way to express that now.

"Well, alright then," Bull says.

He walks off to help Rocky with his horse, leaving Mahanon standing awkwardly in the shadows of the stable behind him.

-

Horseback riding is still something of a novelty for Mahanon. The Lavellans were a big enough clan to own some harts that mingled with their halla herds to carry messengers and scouts, and Mahanon learned basic riding skills from the herdspeople. The harts didn't have the same intelligence as the halla, but they were intuitive - spirited if they doubted the competency of their rider, but steadfast and noble if you gained their trust.

Horses, Mahanon has decided, are exceptionally stupid. He remembers a time when he was scandalized to see how humans trussed up their mounts with so many straps and bindings and methods of control. Now, he's fairly certain that a horse will willingly wander off a cliff unless given a good prod in the other direction.

"Come on," he mutters, as the plodding little gelding under him wanders off the path to nibble at the scraggly weeds sprouting between the trees for the fifth time this afternoon. He hauls at the reins with a wince. He really doesn't want to hurt the damn thing - he'd even insisted on outfitting his horse with a bitless bridle - but the horse doesn't seem to acknowledge his existence unless it's forcibly reminded of it. "That's probably poisonous to you anyway, you can't be that hungry."

The gelding snorts and ignores him.

"You know what the problem is," Skinner says, pulling up alongside Mahanon. The other Chargers have paused to witness Mahanon's struggle with snickers and smiles. Bull's even halted the wagon to watch with a shit-eating grin. "You're so skinny the poor beast is confused. Probably thinks you fell off a few miles back."

"Thanks ever so," Mahanon mutters sourly, leaning down over the horse's neck to give the beast a tap on the side of the head. "Excuse me, ser. Some of us would like to get going again before nightfall." The horse flicks an ear at him. "That's very rude, you know."

"Need some help, Mouse?" Bull calls. "I'm pretty handy with a riding crop."

_of fucking course you are._ Mahanon's hands tighten on the reins, and he wills himself not to start flushing. "I'm fine, thank you."

He gives the reins another hard tug. This time the horse's head rears up immediately, its muscular neck smacking Mahanon neatly in the nose.

He acknowledges the round of good-natured laughter at his expense with a wave and a bow, wincing as he gingerly touches his nose. It's not broken again, thank the Creators, but it's certainly sore.
"Alright, let's keep moving," Bull says, still grinning. "I think the horse won that one, if anyone's keeping track."

It's amazing, Mahanon thinks, how much one can simultaneously want to shock a man with a solid bolt of lightning and kiss his stupid grinning face all at once. Given that neither of the two options are particularly good ideas, Mahanon guides his horse back into line behind the wagon and settles into an uncomfortable, sore-nosed brood for the next few hours.

The winding road down to the Imperial Highway is well-travelled, and it's a good indication of how quickly news has spread that every group and lone traveller they pass by share the same tight-faced expressions, all quite grim and worried. Mahanon keeps his staff hidden under the saddle blanket, but for all the suspicious expressions slung his way regardless, he almost needn't have bothered. It's nothing personal, however - everyone is eyeing everyone else warily as they go. As little as he thinks of his horse, he's certainly grateful for the speed and height afforded to him by horseback. It's hard to feel too intimidated by a warrior's glower when it's set at the height of his elbow.

They travel this way for several days, making camp at night well into the forest off the roads and being careful with their fires. They keep a rotating watch going. Once on Mahanon's watch a very small group of what the Chargers later decide were likely bandits creep close to their camp, only to take account of the size of the group of Chargers and, more intimidatingly, the size of the Chargers' leader, before quickly creeping back off in the opposite direction.

At least, that's what Mahanon assumes happened. Krem shakes his head when Mahanon relays the story the next morning.

"Mouse, no offence, but have you ever seen what you look like in the dark?" Krem says with a shudder. "Nothing but a big pair of glinting eyes, it's honestly fucking terrifying. They probably thought you were a demon."

"That's not-" Mahanon looks around at the other Chargers as they all start nodding. "Hey, fuck off now, there's nothing wrong with my eyes!"


"Mine aren't as scary as Dalish and Mouse," Skinner says. "Not as big, not as flashy, not as demonic-"

"We don't have demon eyes!"

"It's fine, da'len," Dalish says, patting Mahanon on the shoulder as the other Chargers snicker. "Shem are wimps. Imagine being so chickenshit as to find someone like you remotely scary."

"Thank-" Mahanon starts, then scowls as his mind catches up with Dalish's words, resulting in another round of laughter from the Chargers.

That night he borrows Skinner's looking glass during his watch, holding it up to his face in the dim light, and nearly drops it as he sees two enormous glinting orbs blinking back at him from the darkness. The Chargers have a point. It is at least a little fucking terrifying.

Four nights into their travel, Bull comes and sits with Mahanon as he settles in for his watch.

Mahanon glances over as Bull arranges himself with a low grunt next to him. There's a mighty chance it's all in his own head, but it's certainly felt as though Bull has been avoiding him these
past few days - not freezing him out or ignoring him entirely, but Mahanon's noticed they've never spent a single moment alone or even in close physical proximity to one another since leaving Val Moraine.

"Alright," Bull says, as if picking up the threads of a conversation they'd only just been having moments ago. "I think I cracked it."

Mahanon leans in, all confusion at Bull's... whatever the fuck is going on with the Qunari, anyway, he shoves it to the back of his head. "The code?"

"Yeah, I-" Bull glances over at Mahanon and starts. "Sorry, but fuck, that shit's spooky."

Mahanon quickly looks away, scowling as he shields his eyes from Bull with his hand. "Well, excuse my extremely useful ability to see in the dark. What did the message say?"

"Basically exactly what you figured it would," Bull says. "It's not specific what the assets of the fraternity are, but given the context clues it's safe to say the shit's not legal."

"I don't really care much about legality, honestly," Mahanon says. "Just what it's all being used for."

"Yeah, they seemed pretty excited to pitch in with the 'Vints," Bull says. "They also had plans for you."

"Oh?"

"Nothing specific, but the general gist wasn't pretty. Or particularly survivable."

"Ah." Mahanon's mouth twists. "Well, that was to be expected, wasn't it?"

Bull doesn't say anything, and Mahanon looks over to see him frowning. Staring into the shadows between the trunks and boughs of the trees around them but not really seeing anything.

"You don't have to do this," Bull says quietly. "Get involved, I mean."

Mahanon lets his head fall back, his eyes on the fat sprinklings of stars above them, tree branches cutting shapes of spindly limbs and crooked black fingers out of the night sky. "I know it's not really my fight, but if I don't do anything-"

"Then these idiots sell off their assets and make shit tons of gold and the Imperium probably won't give them a second thought anyway," Bull says. "We don't know how big their network is, how widespread their ideology is, how big of a threat they are - nothing. There's a good chance they're small fry, not even worth the risk."

"I know," Mahanon says. "And doesn't not knowing just drive you insane? If there's even the smallest chance that they're- what?"

Bull's not staring into the forest now, but at Mahanon. Smiling a little.

"Nah," he says. "You just remind me of an old friend I had, that's all."

Mahanon sits up, trying not to look as curious as he feels. "A friend?"

"I mean, you don't have to sound so surprised," Bull says dryly.

"That's not what I-"
"I know, I'm just fucking with you." Bull elbows Mahanon, nearly toppling him over. "Yeah, a friend. We were deployed to Seheron at the same time."

"Was he like you?" Mahanon asks. "Ben Hassrath?"

"He wasn't Ben Hassrath," Bull says. "He had the head for it, but not the heart. You have to care the right way - care deeply enough about specific things, that you're willing to not care about other shit. Caring should just fuel what your mind is working through, not hijack it. He let his heart do the thinking for him a lot of the time."

"You speak of him as if..." Mahanon says, trailing off.

Bull looks at him for a long moment, then his gaze returns to the trees. "Yeah."

"I'm sorry-"

"Six coppers." Bull holds up a hand against Mahanon's protest. "Don't argue with me, I heard you apologize to the horse this morning for interrupting its nap."

"He looked exceptionally grumpy about it," Mahanon mutters. "Even so, Bull- Chief-"

"You care," Bull says. "I know you care. I know you want to do something about all this crazy shit that's happening out there, I get it. Trust me, I get it. But is it really worth the risk to you? I'm asking your head, not your heart."

Mahanon hugs his knees close to his chest, shoving his hair back from his eyes with minimal success, the curls slipping between his fingers.

"Right now, as we're sitting here, there's an entire country where people exactly like me are kept as slaves," Mahanon says slowly. "And that's just where it's legal. When I told those Orlesians in the library I was indentured to a chevalier, that I had a master, they didn't bat an eye. We're not seen as people, not really. And if the stories and cycles of history that I've read and recited and memorized have taught me anything, it's that massive unrest in the shem'len world usually leads to further trespasses against my people just out of sheer rage regarding our continued existence. It's also taught me that our fights and struggles, the ones that matter, are rarely noteworthy enough to sing songs about or record in detail. Just relegated to footnotes." Mahanon turns his head to look at Bull, who's watching him with - as usual - an utterly unreadable expression. "I don't mind being a footnote, I really don't. But it's a simple question, really. I know of some Orlesian mages with power - in wealth or in influence and how much of either, we do not know - who do not see people like me as people. These mages intend to curry Tevinter support so their ideas might gain traction here in the south. By some luck I'm in a position to royally fuck with them. Do I pass up the opportunity, and let that footnote go unchallenged? Personally, I'd rather not let them off quite so easy. So to answer your question, yes, I think it's worth the risk."

Bull nods - slowly, and with clear reluctance, but he nods.

A curl falls into Mahanon's eyes. Bull's hand lifts as if he intends to push it aside, and things sort of freeze for a moment - Mahanon, a hand lifted to deal with his hair himself, pausing as he sees Bull's hand hovering in that space between them. Hoping Bull might bridge that gap, touch him again, and then Mahanon would know that night in Val Moraine wasn't some sort of half-remembered dream or a momentary fluke. That he's not just imagining this strange tension between them both.

Bull lets his hand drop to his side, and Mahanon tucks the stray curl behind his ear, and it's as
if the scant few seconds' pause never happened.

"Alright," Bull says, very softly, and Mahanon wonders... well, it's fucking dumb to wonder, but he still does; if this is how Bull speaks late at night to someone sharing his bed, his voice a low rumble that's barely more than a sigh. "We'll work out some way to get you in and out again, then. Something safe."

"Yes," Mahanon says, tilting his head back to look up at the stars again. "Safe. Safe is good."

"Mhm," Bull says. "Safe is real good."

Somehow, Mahanon gets the strangest feeling that he and Bull are telling the exact same lie.

Chapter End Notes

*Mahanon's views on horses do not necessarily reflect my own*

ALSO LOOK IT'S BEEN LIKE.... SEVEN YEARS SINCE I FINISHED FRENCH IMMERSION. I APOLOGIZE IN ADVANCE FOR ANYONE WHO IS FLUENT AND REMEMBERS HOW OBJET DIRECT/INDIRECT WORKS.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

holy fuck I re-wrote this chapter like... five times. sweet fuck. it's been a week.

Song rec: Storm King

Which is where we're at on the playlist btw, if anyone's following along - I'm sorry it's constantly shifting and always subject to change but I mean, it's basically a musical outline of the fic which is also shifting and subject to change sooo (which also technically means there's spoilers on there but in a really esoteric sense).

I'm gonna have some detailed lore notes at the bottom for anyone who's really, really interested in Dalish dialects. Also, I got to work in some tidbits of some of my favourite dialogue from the game in this chapter sO. This fic continues to be entirely, entirely self-indulgent. Hell the fuck yes.

Also, major major thank you to Ardeiidae for helping me with the French last chapter, which I'm gonna go back and fix after updating this. You are an absolute blessing.

Comments fuel me and give me life, and I love all y'all <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a few more days of travel the twisting and winding mountain passes give way to lower foothills. The days become warmer and longer, no longer cut short by mountain peaks stretching so far above them, and the atmosphere starts to take on a far sweeter late summer air as opposed to the sharp cold snap of the mountain breezes.

Despite the tension of the roads and passersby, every bit of news painting a deeply grim picture of world affairs, the journey itself is fine - almost pleasant. They adjust their travel to suit the hot days; rising before dawn to make the most of the cool morning hours, and pausing a few hours after noon to wait out the hottest part of the day before pushing on to nightfall. These rest hours are largely spent stretching, napping, or otherwise lazing about. No one seems inclined to do much with the sun beating down, making everyone sluggish and thirsty. Training is either done in the early morning or in the cool twilight hours before sleep.

Bull takes Mahanon aside some afternoons to work through plans for Halamshiral, quietly discussing some basics of subterfuge and infiltration. Mahanon is, as always, a quick learner - though his big honest eyes make Bull nervous for the elf. He still can't lie for shit, but if all goes well, he shouldn't have to.

"It's true that the mages in Val Moraine asked you to deliver a message," Bull tells Mahanon one afternoon, leaning up against the welcome shade of a broad oak tree. "And I'm assuming it's true that you want to help mages, if not these ones. That's the best way to lie, honestly - you just tell people the truth."

"That's sort of fucked up," Mahanon says, grimacing as he wipes a bead of sweat from his brow. As insufferable as the heat can get in the afternoon, Bull can't help but notice how well the sun
suits Mahanon. His skin has darkened further to a deep golden brown, his face, shoulders, chest, and arms all generously freckled. The sun has even lightened portions of Mahanon's dark hair so threads of gold wind through the curls that Dalish keeps threatening to cut.

Bull doesn't have much of an opinion on the matter of Mahanon's hair - tries not to, anyway - but there's something appealing about the idea of tangling his fingers up in those curls. He could get a good grip, given how long it is now - maybe tug Mahanon's head back, keep him nice and controlled, tease with lips and teeth and tongue and finally taste that copper skin, get the elf's pulse pounding against his mouth as he sucks a few good marks along his throat-

But Bull's getting distracted.

"I guess it's a bit fucked up," Bull says. "But it's just sort of how people are, yeah? What you think is true and what I think is true could be completely different things. The only real difference between lying and telling the truth is how much you believe what you're saying is true."


"Really breaking new ground on the puns there, huh," Bull says dryly. "Yeah, you gotta be careful twisting your head in knots like this. But it's a real helpful way to look at things when you're doing this kind of work. Makes it easier. We're all natural born liars, one way or another. We start by lying to ourselves, and kinda just go from there."

"Doesn't it bother you, thinking that way?" Mahanon asks. "Conflating truth and lies, assuming no one is being honest with you?"

"You're making it sound like a moral thing," Bull says. "The world isn't separated between liars and honest people, Mouse. It's the intent. You don't like being dishonest, so if you were to start twisting the truth a bit I'd probably assume it's for a good reason. Same with the rest of the Chargers. We're all pretty fucking straightforward with each other, and it works." Bull grins. "We're also all a bunch of fucking liars in our own respects, and that works too."

"But people can justify anything to themselves," Mahanon says. "You can intend to help people and let that intention drive you to do terrible things."

"And now you're getting philosophical again," Bull says, reaching over and rustling Mahanon's hair - in a friendly way, mostly just to bug him, and not because he was just thinking about getting his hands in those curls. Mahanon rolls his eyes and bats Bull's hand away, but his full mouth quirks up at the corner as he clearly struggles not to smile. "How do you judge people, Mouse? By what people mean to do, or how they go about doing it?"

"I try not to judge, at all," Mahanon says. "I'm in no position to-"

"Why not?" Bull asks. "You're an objectively good person- don't look so fucking surprised, holy shit, did you murder a guy without telling me or something?"

"No, I just-" Mahanon swallows. "I mean technically I have actually killed people before-"

"No one who wasn't trying to kill you back as far as I know, so like I said. Objectively decent. How would you judge... oh, let's say that mage who blew up the Kirkwall chantry. I bet his list of justifications was as long as the Chant itself. Whether he was right to do it is gonna be a lie to some people, and a truth to others."

Mahanon thinks for a long moment - really thinks, eyes narrowed slightly, a little frown set between
his brows - before finally shaking his head. "I don't know where I stand on that one, it's not my world. But some things are just right and wrong, they just... are."

"It's your world now," Bull says. "That apostate kind of went and made it everyone's problem, which I'm guessing was the point." He looks at Mahanon, tilting his head. "You really believe that, huh? The whole 'good and evil' shtick?"

"I like to think I can form a nuanced opinion, but... yes, to an extent," Mahanon says slowly. "Why, don't you?"

"It's less 'right and wrong' under the Qun, and more 'good for the people' versus 'bad for the people,'" Bull says, shrugging.

Unbidden, a brief flash of a school comes to Bull's mind - the humid heat of the jungle, the smiling faces of young children in one of the few places they could feel safe on the war-torn island, and-

Bull closes his eye. "Nah, you're right. Some things are just wrong."

He opens his eye to see Mahanon watching him carefully.

_It's the heat_, he thinks irritably. _The South has no right getting this fucking hot._

"But while we're waxing philosophical, there's a bunch of Orlesians to fuck with," Bull says, rubbing his hands together. "Let's get back to it."

The days press into weeks as they connect with the Imperial Highway and continue on into the plains proper. The highway is perfect for blending in - extremely busy and cramped with everyone from peasants trudging along with ramshackle carts and tired horses to nobles with carriages and a full complement of guards. It's close enough to civilization that the Chargers briefly consider staying in a few small towns along the way, despite the risk of the broader conflict catching up to them.

And the conflict is catching up day by day, there's no doubt about that. They pass by a few scuffles on the road as they go, even helping to rescue a merchant caravan from being caught right between a large group of brawling abominations and templars from a nearby town.

"The templars called for an annulment of the Circle last week," the merchant tells them later, passing kegs of ale to the Chargers as thanks for their protection. "Those abominations were once the last few survivors who managed to get out before... Maker, it was terrible."

The Chargers decide to stick to camping after that.

As they near Halamshiral, Bull notices that Mahanon seems more lost in his head than usual - which is pretty fucking impressive, given the elf's penchant for daydreaming. He doesn't seem too happy, but Bull doesn't blame him. Between the mage-templar conflict and the upcoming appointment with a dangerous Tevinter-loving fraternity, it would be natural to be a bit nervous.

Mahanon doesn't seem nervous, though, for once. Contemplative, maybe.

_Sad_, Bull realizes, a few days out from the city, watching Mahanon's face as he gazes absentely out over the plains around them. _Definitely._

"I reckon it's about three more days from here to the city proper," Stitches says that night as they set up camp.
Mahanon, who finished setting up his tent a good long while ago and has been staring off into space ever since, doesn't look up as he says, "Two and a half, actually."

"One of your books tell you that?" Skinner asks.

Mahanon glances up, looking startled to realize he's halfway into a conversation. "Um. No, sorry, it's just- I've been here before, that's all."

"What, really?"

"Mhm." Mahanon looks away. "Long time ago. Sorry, I'm just going to- I'll be in my tent, I think."

Without another word Mahanon turns away and disappears into his tent, tying the front flaps over for good measure.

The Chargers share a few glances and shrugs - they're used to Mahanon's occasional nervous moments by now. They've become fewer and further between over the months, but Mahanon's still usually the first to leave a large, loud gathering, still tends to disappear into the shadows unless coaxed into conversation by someone else or made bold by drink, and largely keeps to himself and his books most afternoons. He's become far more social on the whole and far less fearful-looking and painfully anxious than the First he'd been when they all first met him, but at the end of the day, a Mouse is still a Mouse. Just as Grim is still Grim, Skinner is still Skinner, Dalish is still Dalish, and so on.

And speaking of Dalish, Bull notices the elf frowning at Mahanon's tent with a bit of a sympathetic expression. Despite whatever tension existed at first, the two mages have really bonded over the past few months - which is great for them and shitty for Bull, because sometimes they'll whisper to each other in Elvish or whatever and start snickering at people (usually Bull) and it honestly drives him up the fucking wall.

Still, Bull finds himself ambling over in the elf's direction. Somehow, he gets the feeling it wouldn't hurt to have a little Dalish insight right about now - in every sense.

- 

Mahanon of Clan Sliabh raced through the camps of aravels, slipping quickly and nimbly between elves carrying goods and setting up market stalls, some cursing in unfamiliar dialects in his wake.

Several months shy of eleven summers, Mahanon was smaller than most elves his age and those younger still. Even with his hair very recently cut quite short to prepare him for the Arlathvhen, with his large eyes and heart-shaped face people seemed to have a hard time distinguishing his gender - an alien concept to him, even after his da had tried to explain broader social practices to him before their arrival. The idea that one could guess such a personal thing as gender by simply looking at someone...

But Mahanon wouldn't have to worry about that much longer, he was certain.

The Sliabh camp was set near the outskirts of the larger gathering, just how they liked it - close to the trees and with their aravels cloistered tight together. Mahanon's pace did not slow as he rounded the corner into their camp. He barreled into his family's tent at full speed, just managing to avoid slamming into his da full-force but sending the tall city elf's papers scattering regardless.

"Ab'las," Mahanon panted, immediately stooping to help gather his da's accounts. "Ab'las, ab'las, ach fuair ir amach."
"Trade speak, *vhenan,*" said Fionn gently, his eyes sad as he took his papers from Mahanon. His eyes were always sad, these days. "Remember? The other clans don't speak our dialect, you need to practice."

"*Ach ir-*" Mahanon started, relenting with an irritated grumble as Fionn raised a pale brow at him. "Da, but I *don't* though, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I found a way to fix things!"

Fionn frowned, setting his papers aside. "Fix what?"

"Fix- fix this," Mahanon said, waving a hand to encompass the tent, the camp, the Arlathvhen - everything. "You won't have to send me away, I don't have to leave!"

Fionn's face contorted briefly with pain before settling, but there was no mistaking the deep sorrow in his eyes as he shook his head. "Oh, *da'len-*"

"No, listen to me, please," Mahanon said, struggling to keep his own voice from breaking. This was why he couldn't leave, couldn't understand why anyone would even suggest it, didn't anyone see how miserable it was making his family? They all showed it in different ways - his *babae* Diemne was even more quiet than usual, his *mamae* Taoirse kept disappearing for long hunts, and his da Fionn often looked as though he was holding back tears, and it was all because of him, Mahanon, but he could *fix* it. "There's a way, I knew there had to be a way-"

"Believe me, love, if there was anything we could do-"

"But there is! The humans know how to take away magic, Da, and if we go to them-"

Fionn's face changed in an instant from poorly-contained sadness to utter terror, his skin turning grey as he seized Mahanon by the shoulders.

"Who told you that?" Fionn asked, his voice tight. "Who have you been talking to?"

"*A-an ceann eile*" Mahanon started uncertainly, then corrected, "the other children, Da. We were just-"

"Was it only our People, or were there *shemlen* there?" Fionn asked urgently.

"Just us, I swear."

Fionn let out a long breath and pulled Mahanon close, wrapping him in a tight embrace. "Those little shits. Make- *Creators,* I thought-"

Mahanon pressed his face into his da's chest. There was still a part of him that feared these moments were numbered, that he might not have escaped this living nightmare, but- no, he'd found a way to fix it, he was certain. "It's true though, isn't it? The humans can take my magic away?"

Fionn shuddered, his voice forcibly steady as he said, "It's... not nearly so simple, love."

"I know the *shem* don't like us, but if we explained- Da, without my magic I could stay, couldn't I?" Mahanon felt his eyes fill as they so often did these days, but- no, he was brave, he was going to be brave and he was going to *fix* this. "I don't need my magic, I don't *want* it, and if they can fix me-"

"No, *da'len-* *Creators,* no," Fionn said, sounding quietly horrified. "We would never let that happen to you, there's not a single thing about you that needs fixing. Even if it could be done without- even if it were possible. We would never do that to you."
Mahanon pulled away from his father, staring up at Fionn. "But- but the humans can-"

"Mythal'enaste, child, you have no idea what they would do to you," Fionn said sharply, his face white. "So just- just stop, please. We're trying to keep you safe, to give you a future- I need you to understand that."

"But I-" Mahanon's voice shattered. "Da, please- I just want to stay with you, with-

He was crying now, all thoughts of bravery utterly gone. They couldn't- they wouldn't really make him leave, they couldn't, Mahanon couldn't begin to imagine a life beyond his clan, his family - the quiet shadows of the forest, the soft baying of their wolfhounds catching the scent of prey, the cool evenings spent with his da learning sums and reading stories while his *mamae* and *babae* dressed the spoils of their hunt, and after they ate Mahanon would spring up from where he sat on the forest floor to join his friends and cousins as they chased fireflies until well past dark. They couldn't ask him to leave, they couldn't...

Fionn sighed and reached out to him, taking Mahanon's hand. Mahanon considered pulling away, considered trying to hurt his father to show him some ounce of his own pain and fear, but... he couldn't. It wasn't in his nature, and he knew his da was hurting too.

Fionn sat them both down on a nearby cot, cradling Mahanon close and stroking his hair as he wept.

"The humans... have a way of taking magic away, yes," Fionn said slowly, eventually.

"Then let me-"

"No," said Fionn again. "It doesn't just take your magic away, it- it would destroy you, love. Everything about you that is good, and alive - your heart, your spirit, your soul - it would take that too. It's a horrific thing to do to a person."

"I don't care," Mahanon said fiercely, balling his fists in the soft cotton of Fionn's tunic. "I'll do it, I just want to stay, I don't want to be a mage, I don't want to leave-"

"I know," said Fionn, his voice rough. "*Vhenan*, we don't want you to leave, either."

"Then please let me do this, let me get rid of it, please." Mahanon's voice hitched. "I hate this, Da, I hate magic, I-

"Da'len," Fionn said gently, and Mahanon dissolved into a fresh wave of sobs. Fionn disentangled himself from his son, just enough so he could lean back a little and take Mahanon's face in his hands. Mahanon's eyes were far too wet to see anything clearly, but even with blurred vision he could make out the trails of tears over Fionn's cheeks as well. "Listen to me. Your magic is a gift."

"No it's not," Mahanon cried.

"It is, and so are you," said Fionn firmly, with a very shaky smile. "Everything about you is a gift, and we- we're not meant to keep gifts, are we? We're meant to give them away. No matter how badly we might want to keep them."

"It's not fair," Mahanon said, hating how childish he sounded.

"No," Fionn agreed. "It isn't. But our People need you; there will be a clan there tomorrow who truly needs you, and they will be so, so lucky to have you with them."
"But- they'll let me write, won't they?" Mahanon asked. "They'll let me see you sometimes, and Mamae, and Babae-?"

"You know that's not how it works, vhenan," said Fionn. "You won't be a Sliabh any longer. You'll have a new family, a new clan - you'll be a First, most likely, and a Keeper after that. It would be selfish for us to try to split your loyalties. You'll have to let us go, just as we'll have to let you go."

Mahanon turned away from his father and buried his face in his hands. He couldn't, he couldn't...

There was a rustle of canvas as one of the opening flaps to the tent was brushed aside, and Mahanon looked up to see his mamae, Taoirse, step in. He straightened in an instant, quickly wiping the tears from his face with his sleeve.

Taoirse was fierce and brave, sharp-eyed and quick, forceful in her convictions and sometimes cold; she was nicknamed Fen'asha, wolf-woman, by the members of the clan, and the description was quite apt. Though Mahanon's looks clearly favoured Taoirse - from the shape of his face to the curls of his hair right down to the same grey eyes - they were about as unalike in temperament as a mother and son could be. He knew his mamae loved him fiercely, but he couldn't help but feel a bit shy in her overwhelming presence.

His mamae took in the scene before her - her son's tear-stained face, Fionn's distress - and for a moment, Mahanon thought she might turn on her heel and walk right back out again. It was well-known that the Fen'asha was far more comfortable with a bow in hand and a mark to bring down than she was with regards to matters of the heart.

But instead she put her bow aside, and quietly came to sit on the cot next to Mahanon.

"Mal'enfenim," Taoirse said simply. You're afraid.

Mahanon looked down at his hands and nodded.

He felt a touch of calloused fingertips on his chin, lifting his face up, and with a little daring he glanced up to meet his mother's eyes.

She looked at him for a long moment, then smiled. Just slightly. And though it was very deeply buried, Mahanon could see a flicker of the vast warmth of his mamae's love for him in her cool grey eyes.

"We are too," she said in heavily lilted Trade speak, and leaned over to kiss his brow.

Mahanon spent the night in his parents' bed, something he hadn't done in many years, trying to draw as much comfort from their presence as he could. He refused to sleep - sleep would shorten the scant hours he had left with his family, with his parents, his people, and he had nothing but fear and sorrow for the dawn to come.

But the dawn did come, and they were early to rise; before they met with the other clans, Mahanon had to be formally given away by the Sliabhs. He would be leaving everything behind; his clothes, his training staff, his few possessions. His new clan would provide his necessities in the fashion of their people, whoever they might be.

Mahanon felt hollow as he packed away his things into his family's aravel, but he was determined not to weep; he'd cried plenty yesterday, and had silently wept into Fionn's shoulder for most of the night. There was no use for tears now. It would only make things harder, and it wouldn't change what was going to happen.
He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to see his babae, Diemne, standing behind him. Diemne was small for a male elf, like him, and his skin was the same nut-brown hue. Though he was as deadly as his bonded partner in a hunt, he had little of Taoirse's cold fire. He was quiet and thoughtful. When he did speak it was often to soothe a dispute - or start one with his dry, understated wit.

It never really mattered to Mahanon which of his fathers was truly his by nature; even once he was old enough to understand that there was a reason he had Diemne's dark features and not Fionn’s pale city elf looks, it still felt entirely true that he was a product of all three of his parents equally.

"Here," said Diemne, handing him a small woven-leather sheath.

Mahanon took it, feeling the weight of a perfectly-balanced blade. It was smaller than a hunting dagger - little more than a pen-knife, truly, though it seemed much bigger in Mahanon's small hands. Mahanon drew the blade from its little sheath and recognized the quality of the steel in an instant, the blade and hilt inlaid with silver knotwork that was distinctive to the Sliabh clan.

Mahanon's throat tightened. Diemne had spent years teaching him to whittle and carve in their clan's knotwork fashion, and while it was a satisfying way to pass the time, he wasn't particularly gifted with the craft. He always thought he'd have more time to practice with his babae over the coming years, more time to grow into the more advanced techniques. Now, there was no time at all.

He tried to hand the dagger back to Diemne, but the other elf shook his head. "To take with you."

Mahanon frowned. "I'm not supposed to bring anything with me."

"I know," Diemne shrugged. "Which is why I'm giving you such a very small blade. A sword would be much harder to hide, don't you think?"

Mahanon smiled despite himself, his heart lightening a little. It didn't solve any of this, it wouldn't undo what was about to happen, but... it was something to hold onto. Some small part of who he was.

He sheathed the dagger and threw himself into his babae's arms, hugging the elf tightly. "Ma serannas."

Diemne took a long breath, then lifted his arms to hold his son close, a hand resting on Mahanon's head. "Emma fáilte romhat, da'len. Dareth shiral."

Mahanon squeezed his eyes shut. "Dareth shiral, babae."

Over the next hour he said his formal farewells to the Sliabhs - his family, his friends. He tried to forgive, in his heart if not aloud, the third youngest mage of the clan as they whispered an apology to him. Their eyes were full of guilt for a circumstance that they'd had no hand in creating other than by virtue of being born a few years before Mahanon. Even so, Mahanon found it very hard not to resent them for it.

He tried to make his final embrace with his mamae, babae, and da last the lifetime they should have had together, but all too soon the Keeper put a hand on his shoulder and led him away. The last he saw of his parents they were holding one another close, Fionn turning to bury his face in Diemne's shoulder, and Taoirse - for the first time in Mahanon's memory - struggling to hold back tears.

With the weight of Deimne's dagger belted around his waist, hidden under his clothes, Mahanon
promised himself he would see his family again, no matter what clan he was given to. There would be another Alrathvhen, after all. He would be grown then, probably. A grown elf could slip away from his clan for a few hours to find a cloister of aravels close to the forest, he was sure. He would run to the aravel he knew best and his parents would surely be there to welcome him home.

Well, Mahanon is quite grown, now. And there is another Arlathvhen on the horizon - scheduled to commence next year. But Mahanon won't be there.

Mahanon sits back against his sleeping roll in his tent, taking another long swig of his share of the merchant's ale. It's a categorically stupid decision, getting drunk right now, and he knows that - the morning is going to hit him like a hammer straight to the face, and he's going to regret letting his emotions get the better of him. But even so.

The entire heart and soul of the Arlathvhen is sharing knowledge. Mahanon knows this is equally true of recent discoveries, ancestral myths, and the lost histories of his people as it is of idle gossip. Perhaps his parents will have the discipline not to ask after him, to hold to the tradition of fully relinquishing any familial ties to one who has been gifted to another clan. Still, he knows it's likely that some story of his departure will get back to them - either that he died heroically, or abandoned his people out of cowardice. Neither of these stories, he knows, would bring his family much comfort.

Mahanon can't imagine what his parents would think of him now. If they were even to think of him at all.

He drinks.

The front flap of his tent billows suddenly, in three distinct waves. Someone's trying to knock on the canvas as if it's a door.

Frowning, Mahanon sits up and sways, giving his head a good shake. It's dark out already - he's been in here, lost in memory and drinking, for a little longer than he thought.

He loosens the ties of the flap and pushes it aside to see Bull crouching there with his usual amicable expression.

"You shouldn't drink alone," Bull says, eyeing the near-empty bottle in Mahanon's hand. "We've got a good fire going out here."

"I'm alright, but thank you," Mahanon says, giving Bull a little toast with his bottle and moving to pull the flap over again.

Bull catches his hand. Mahanon's heart jumps in his chest - his hand is completely engulfed by Bull's, the Qunari's calloused skin warm and rough against his own.

"It's cute that you think I'm giving you a choice, here," Bull says, and there's a commanding sort of edge in his tone that's both playful and... fuck, Mahanon's not nearly sober enough to win this one. "Mandatory fun, Mouse. That's an order."

Mahanon drops his gaze. "I'm not good company right now, I don't think."

"I know. Halamshiral, yeah?" Bull asks. Mahanon's about to protest that he's not worried about the Orlesians and their stupid fraternity when Bull continues, "This was the last place you saw your family. Your birth clan. Right?"
Mahanon looks up.

Bull smiles. "You're not the only one who can do a little digging into people's pasts, you know."

"You talked to Dalish," says Mahanon.

Bull grunts. "I mean, yeah, but it takes all the mystery away when you say that. Anyway. I get it."

Bull pauses and shrugs. "Actually, maybe I don't get it - we don't stay with our parents under the Qun. Don't even know who they are. But your parents meant a lot to you."

Mahanon nods.

"Look," says Bull, and not for the first time Mahanon finds himself marveling at how such an enormous, brash individual can sound so incredibly gentle when he wants to. Can be so incredibly gentle. It's so fucking disarming and Mahanon has no defense against it, especially while sad and a little drunk, damn it. "We try not to get up in each other's business much around here, but everyone's got their shit, and we get through it together. Just how it works. So you're gonna come drink with us if I have to yank you out, sling you over my shoulder and carry you over there, and that's that."

Mahanon narrows his eyes. "You wouldn't."

"Mouse, I abso-fucking-lutely would," says Bull, breaking into a wide, dangerous grin. "Try me."

Bull readjusts his grip on Mahanon's hand as he says this, his rough fingertips trail teasingly over the sensitive skin of Mahanon's wrist as he does so, and Mahanon has to grit his teeth to bite back a full-body shiver. For a moment, for a wild moment, he does consider trying Bull on this one. Testing him. Making him fucking follow through for once.

"Fine," Mahanon bursts out, his voice not entirely as steady as it should be. "Fucking-fine, you win."

Bull's grin sharpens. "I usually do." He straightens, wincing as his metal brace makes an unpleasant screeching noise as he moves. "Fuck, gotta fix that later."

He hauls Mahanon up to his feet. Mahanon just barely manages to avoid faceplanting into Bull's chest, but he finds his balance after a moment with Bull's help.

Bull, who's still holding his hand.

Mahanon stares a little stupidly at Bull's hand wrapped around his own, then up at Bull.

Bull, without missing a beat, lets go and claps his hand on Mahanon's shoulder instead in a gesture that is... friendly. Just friendly.

Well, I'll take it, Mahanon thinks glumly.

"Come on," Bull says, steering him towards the fire. "Hey, I've got a question."

"Mm?"

"How the fuck do you spell Shlee-uv, anyway?"

Mahanon snorts. "Well, for one thing, it's Sliabh."

"That's literally exactly what the fuck I just said."
"No, no, listen-

The Chargers don't acknowledge them as Bull drags Mahanon over and sits him down on a crate close to the flames, other than Krem raising his bottle in Mahanon's direction and Dalish offering a friendly smile. Mahanon's grateful; the few times he managed to find some quiet time away from the Lavellans, his return was always marked with a few sideways glances and mutters, as if his desire for solitude was meant as a personal slight. Occasionally there were well-meaning attempts from other clan members to draw Mahanon in, attempts that always felt awkward and forced and drove Mahanon further into his anxious silence.

There's a freedom to just exist with the Chargers. There's space for him to be present, to be quiet, or even just disappear entirely.

So he melts into the background, taking a sip of his ale, and he listens.

"Alright Stitches, your turn," Krem says, turning to the healer. "First thing you're going to do when you get to Halamshiral, go."

"Eat something that isn't game or hardtack," says Stitches instantly. "One of those nice, slow-cooked Orlesian meat pies - they do something weird with the filling, it's almost sweet? I get cravings for it sometimes."

Grim signs something that Mahanon can't quite make out - his afternoon lessons with Bull have included learning handspeak, but he's still only on the basics, and he's hopeless if the hands move too fast.

Stitches nods and claps his hands. "Yeah, currants - thanks Grim, they put currants in with the meat. Sweet and savoury."

"Bet we could rustle up some hot cocoa, too," Bull says, and Stitches nods enthusiastically. "Get some big ass guimauves melting right in there."

"There was that place near Cumberland that put hot peppers in with the chocolate-"

"Oh fuck yeah, sweet and spicy-"

"Can we stop fucking talking about food," Rocky groans, a hand on his stomach. "I've had enough jerky to dry out my damn innards."

"Alright, grouch," Krem says, tossing a clump of dry grass at the dwarf. "What're you looking forward to then? And someone pass Mouse another ale."

Mahanon glances down, a little startled to realize his bottle is empty. Dalish hands him another with a wink and a kiss on the cheek, before settling back down on the blanket she's sharing with Skinner.

"My wants aren't good conversation for polite company," says Rocky with a stretch.

"But seeing as we're not polite company," Bull says with a grin.

"Well, let's just say it's been a while since I've had a good round of knocking boots," says Rocky. "A man's got needs, you know."

"Not just men," says Skinner.
"Yeah, but it's not like you're suffering much, are you?" Krem says with an arched expression.

Skinner shrugs and loops her arm around Dalish's waist. It's well-known among the Chargers that the two women often share a bed. "I guess not. Maybe if you ask nicely one of these fine men will help you out, Rocky."

"Not my bag," Rocky grunts. "No offence, gents. Anyway, it's dangerous shitting where you eat."

"Charming," says Dalish coolly, wrinkling her nose. "I expect we'll be losing most of you to the brothels when we arrive, then?"

Rocky, Krem, Bull, and Grim give noncommittal shrugs, and Mahanon drinks his ale. He's discovered over the past few months that he's really not the brothel type. He went with the others once, just once, more as a personal experiment than anything else. He ended up sitting in a corner having a nice and decidedly non-sexual conversation with some of the workers before calling it a night and heading back to the inn.

Before, with the Lavellans, Mahanon often wondered what it might be like to just walk in to that sort of establishment and spend the night with a complete stranger. He couldn't say he wasn't tempted by the services offered at the brothel - he'd certainly caught the eye of a few men working that night, as well as some patrons who seemed quite flatteringly disappointed that he was off the menu, so to speak. But he noticed he was finding himself drawn to very tall, very well-muscled, larger men, and absentmindedly wondering if it might feel just similar enough that-

And once Mahanon realized he was thinking that way, well. The night was essentially over for him.

He's well aware that sleeping with a prostitute while imagining them to be someone else is common enough to potentially be considered a backbone of the industry, but it just doesn't seem right or fair, somehow. Honestly if anything it feels a bit creepy to even think about consciously.

It's just hard to find much interest in other men when there is a singular man that every last part of him seems determined to want despite his best efforts. And he knows Bull has no such qualms and has felt neither hurt nor jealous that Bull has spent nights with other people in brothels and at the inns. It would be irrational and unfair to be either of those things; and anyway, Bull flirts with everyone.

But that's the thing. Bull flirts with everyone, seems happy to sleep with just about anyone. Just not Mahanon, apparently, despite whatever interest he admitted to all those months ago.

Mahanon thought, at first, that Bull might have been waiting for a less fraught moment, and he'd been grateful at the time. Everything was so confusing that night in Bastion, right after making one of the hardest decisions of his life. That space to breathe, as badly as Mahanon wanted Bull even then, had been a mercy.

Three months though, now. And with Bull being... frustrating. In every sense. Mahanon can't tell if Bull has changed his mind, or- well, Mahanon has no fucking clue.

He knows he should move on past this silly fixation. Even if Bull did finally take him up on the offer, he's pretty certain that Bull wouldn't feel the same way about him as he feels about Bull.

(And he tries, very hard, not to think too much or too long on how he feels about Bull.)

But maybe that would be alright. Maybe it would be enough to share Bull's time, his space, his bed. He could live with that, probably. It would still be far more than he has any right to hope for,
far more than he's had in the past.

Mahanon realizes he's lost the flow of the conversation and blinks a few times, willing himself past the fog of ale to concentrate on what's being said (though he takes another long swallow to chase away his lingering yearnings).

"-what did you say it was like again, Chief?" Rocky is saying, laughing a little. "'Seeing a healer?'"

"See, this is why you *bas are so damn miserable all the time," Bull says, shaking his head. "Completely backwards attitudes on all this shit. All this running around and panicking over how and when you're gonna get your kicks. The Qun gets that people have needs; the tamassrans see to those needs."

"The- wait, your priests?" Mahanon asks, struggling to keep up. Sex and romance was not something the reference book on Seheron covered. Mahanon just assumed the Qunari were similar to most races in that respect, aside from the lack of family units.

"Yeah," says Bull. "Anytime anyone gets a bit frustrated, you go to the tamassrans, they get you sorted out. It's a good system - keeps shit from getting messy on the front lines."

"So you only sleep with your priests?" asks Dalish. "What if you're sweet on some comrade-in-arms?"

"Qunari aren't sweet on anyone," Krem says. "Isn't that right, Chief? All heartless bastards - well, can't even say that. At least a bastard knows who his mother is."

"Hey, we love our friends as much as any other race, we just don't sleep with them," Bull says. "Like I said, that shit gets messy. Qunari try not to *do* messy, as a rule."

"Doesn't have to be messy," says Dalish, resting her head on Skinner's shoulder.

"Yeah, well, not everyone is as enlightened as you two, I guess," says Bull. "But nah. No romance, no marriage. Nice and clean."

"Wait, but-" Mahanon says, still feeling two steps behind and- well, also feeling the ale, quite a bit. "So... you've never really made love, then? You know, connected with someone in both body and- and, um, soul?"

The Chargers stare at Mahanon in stunned silence for a long moment. Then, abruptly, everyone bursts into raucous laughter.

"I mean, fuck, Mouse, have you?" Krem asks, still snickering as he uncorks another ale for himself.

Mahanon struggles with himself for a moment, but eventually caves to the laughter, joining in with a few good-natured chuckles at his own expense. "I- alright, fair point. I retract the question."

Bull shakes his head with a wide grin, but he doesn't say anything. In fact, he's quiet as the conversation moves along to what Skinner's most looking forward to in Halamshiral - a bath, which devolves into a long, involved conversation about bathing and hygiene that takes up another good half hour.

Pleasantly drunk and cozy in his bedroll later that night and utterly dreading the dawn, Mahanon nevertheless stays awake a few precious minutes longer to mull over the conversation.
He should take it as terrible discouragement, what Bull said: he doesn't sleep with friends. The Qun does not "do" romance.

Someone ought to inform half the erotica writers in Thedas on that score, Mahanon thinks absently, but that's another matter entirely.

But he's not discouraged - stupidly, probably far too optimistically, but if anything it adds another little spark of hope to the embers smouldering quietly in his chest.

Maybe Bull didn't change his mind. Maybe the confusing switchbacks of the past few months - Bull flirting and pulling away, those brief moments where Mahanon could swear, could swear there's an entirely "unprofessional" element to how Bull looks at him, no matter what the infuriating Qunari might say - maybe it's confusing because Bull is... well, "confused" seems unlikely, and a bit insulting. But maybe pondering. Maybe thinking about it. Maybe uncertain.

Mahanon understands uncertainty - Creators, it might as well be his specialty. And he's potentially flattering himself far too much to think that there's even a chance that Bull is uncertain about anything to do with him at all, but he's drunk and sad and hopeful and happy and impatient and wanting, all at once.

He can wait, is the main thing. Until Bull makes himself clear one way or another, he can wait. For now.

Chapter End Notes

I was so, so fucking desperate to write in that "SO YOU'VE NEVER MADE LOVE" dialogue from the game cause like... every time I play through it I just imagine Mahanon walking away from the conversation like "holy fuck lavellan could you be CHILL for ONCE IN YOUR LIFE" and having a tiny crisis in the corner of the tavern over it for at least half an hour.

OKAY SO

I mingle a lot of Irish shit in with my little OC clan, the Sliabhs, because it's what I'm familiar with (for the most part - I AM NOT FLUENT AT ALL in Irish Gaelic, I just know bits and pieces) and there's aspects of Irish language in DA Elvhen anyway ("solas" for example means "light" in Irish). So for a fun example regarding how I make the dialect, Diemne's last line to Mahanon: "Emma fáilte romhat, da'len." I couldn't find "you're welcome" in the Elvhen language references (just wait, someone's gonna come into the comments down below with receipts like "IT'S THIS AND IT TOOK ME THREE SECONDS TO FIND"). In Irish, "you're welcome" is "tá fáilte romhat". As far as I can tell, "emma" in Elvhen usually seems to correlate with "you" or "your" (I know the devs developed Elvhen as a cipher, not a constructed language, but I'm dealing with what I've got here). So, in my very rough cobbled translation into this "dialect", we combine to get "emma fáilte romhat."

Did anyone want/need that explanation? Probably not. BUT YOU HAVE IT NOW.

Anyway you're all lovely and I hope the chapter was Good.
Chapter Notes

I already alluded to apologizing for this on Twitter, BUT: I have never read Masked Empire, so everything about Halamshiral here is pieced together from wikipedia articles and My Own Head.

Also, just so you're prepared, this chapter is a MESS of some of my favourite dumbass tropey plot points in any good self-indulgent fanfic. Ye Have Been Warned And Alerted.

Song rec: "Must be Dreaming" by Frou Frou (aka Imogen Heap but ya know)

You can follow the playlist here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Halamshiral is enormous, and ancient.

Mahanon can feel it in the bones of the city, buried under Orlesian architecture - there's a pull here, something that touches on the most innate parts of his mind and magic. It makes it all the more galling to see the gilded Orlesian plaster covering every inch of the buildings, walls, streets, and archways - the overall shape of the city feels familiar to Mahanon, but the gaudy attempts to cover up the remains of the old Elvhen society that once called this place home for generations are far too jarring to ignore.

The Arlathvhen was largely held in the open plains outside the city, so as a child he never had a chance to wander the streets of Halamshiral freely. He couldn't appreciate back then, as he does now, how refreshing it is to walk into a large city and be surrounded by people who look like him. Not exactly like him, of course, he's far too Dalish for that, but even so. Every which way he looks, there are elves; manning merchant stalls, beckoning customers into smithies and tanneries, chatting to one another in the streets... Mahanon suddenly feels a rush of mingled envy and resentment, that shem'len get to experience this sort of thing all the time without a second thought.

It would almost be surreal, this image of Elvhen society outside the alienages and clan life, if it weren't for the presence of armed human guards every few blocks or so, as well as posted reminders about the laws of "peace" the elves are expected to abide by. The High Quarter of the city looms large over the rest, reminding all who walk the streets who truly rules this land.

Mahanon pulls his headscarf a little tighter around his face, narrowing his eyes. There's nothing he can do about the larger injustices at work here - the iron-fisted control exerted over the city elves by unworthy shem'len, the perversion of their home by Orlesians trying to plaster over the true Elvhen nature of the city. But he is a little glad, at least, that his purpose in this city involves fucking with Orlesians. It's a small comfort, but he clings to it all the same.

The headscarf was Bull's idea. They're not planning on staying in the city longer than two nights - which was, truthfully, their plan initially, as they're still aiming to get to the far friendlier and more familiar city of Lydes as soon as they can.
"If you assume people are watching you from the first moment you're in unfamiliar territory, you'll never be surprised," Bull told Mahanon that morning. "It could get messy if someone sees you coming in with a bunch of mercs before you hand off the message. No reason to give them any reason to doubt you."

So before entering the city they wrapped Mahanon's head in a style Mahanon's seen in illustrations of Rivaini Seers, obscuring everything but his eyes. Skinner pointed out that he could easily be passed off as a woman this way and there was some debate about putting him in a dress before they realized that not a single member of the Chargers owned one.

(Mahanon could have sworn he heard Bull mutter "shame" under his breath once this was revealed, which sent Mahanon down a very distracting path of thoughts indeed.)

The Chargers all know about Mahanon's little mission by now, and a few have even volunteered to help. The letter has been painstakingly recopied with some important alterations - not by Bull, or Mahanon, but by Grim.

"He's got the fanciest handwriting out of all of us, and he's a damn good forger too," Bull told Mahanon as they watched Grim work. Grim just grunted.

The changes to the letter are as short and simple as Bull could keep them. Instead of being quietly disposed of, Mahanon is to be given a sample of the product to bring back to Val Moraine.

"I kept the language vague enough to cover a whole bunch of trade goods," Bull said as he carefully removed the fraternity seal from the old letter and set about gently warming the wax over a candle flame so he could affix it to the new one. "There's always the off-chance that they're dealing in, like, fresh fish or something, but this was the best way I could think of to get you out okay and give us an idea of what we're dealing with. It wouldn't make sense to kill you or hurt you if you're bringing something back the other way, and it gives them a justification to keep you alive outside of 'hey, we just really like this elf in particular,' which would look a bit weird." Bull grinned. "Not that you're not likeable, Mouse."

With Bull's skilled hand and care, the fraternity seal was expertly applied to the new letter; the wax looks as though it was poured directly onto the parchment in the first place.

They make their way through the city now to an eclectic traveller's quarter squashed between the broader elf-controlled sector and the human-dominated High Quarter. Everything feels uneasy, like a powder keg set close to a roaring fire. It's in the way everyone looks at one another; though for once, the tension does not seem strictly mage-templar related, for which Mahanon is grateful.

Once they've stabled their horses and rented their rooms at the inn Bull pulls Mahanon, Stitches, Skinner, and Krem aside; the other Chargers are on standby, but won't be part of the operation unless something goes tremendously wrong.

"The smaller the group, the better," Bull explains. "Honestly, even just by the letter I can tell this fraternity doesn't have a real spymaster at the head, so I doubt they're gonna have anyone watching the streets. Still. Better safe than shitty."

Skinner is sent out that first night to watch the building and get an idea of numbers. She comes back to the inn just before dawn, yawning widely as she quietly reports to the Chargers over breakfast.

"Three went into the warehouse at sunset, and three left two hours after midnight," she says, washing a bite of sausage down with a swig of ale. "I stuck around longer to see if anything else
would happen. Very boring."

"Satellite warehouses like this one aren't usually leadership or management hubs," Bull says. "So you might have one or two higher ups who manage shit - fuck, three is more than what I expected. If anyone else is there it's gonna be low-level workers who've got to straddle that fine line between getting gold and getting arrested, so you know. Not the most loyal employees. If shit goes tits up and we come in swinging, I doubt they'll be paid enough to feel it's worth taking us on."

The plan is simple enough; they'll make for the warehouse an hour after sundown. Mahanon will go on alone, pass along the message, get the sample, and hopefully get the fuck out. If he doesn't come out after a quarter of an hour, Stitches will show up at the warehouse posing as Mahanon's chevalier "master" following after him. If everything goes to utter shit, Bull and Krem will come in as back-up and they'll fight their way out.

The most frustrating thing about the mission, honestly, is the day-long wait leading up to it. To limit the chances of being seen by the wrong people Mahanon is instructed to spend the day at the inn, instead of out mingling with the city elves in the streets. No strolling the market or visiting the library for him. Instead, he spends the day trying to focus on reading; when that doesn't work, he paces like a caged wolf.

He's honestly not very worried about the danger of the mission itself. Cautious, yes, but not worried. It's only one night of espionage, after all - Mahanon's certain he can handle it.

He wants to do it right, though. Wants to prove that he's capable. That he can keep up.

The wait is boring enough to drive him nearly insane, and it's with great relief that he hears a knock on his door half an hour after the sun's gone down. He opens it to let Bull in, carrying a tray of food and an assortment of little phials.

"Krem and Stitches'll be here in a moment," Bull says, setting the tray down on Mahanon's bedside table. "Skinner just came back - apparently the same three guys from yesterday showed up today, which is nice and convenient of them. Nervous?"

"Not really," Mahanon says. "Not very hungry, though."

"Too bad," Bull says. "You've got about seven different antidotes to get down before we go, and believe me, you don't want to take them on an empty stomach. It'll just come right back up - and that's if you're lucky. For some folks it goes shooting out the other end, if you catch my meaning."

Mahanon eyes the little phials with trepidation, but pulls the tray into his lap and starts in on the meat pie. Stitches was right - it is sweeter than the meat pies Mahanon's used to eating, with little raisins and currants mingled in with the gravy. "Antidotes?"

"Fuck yeah antidotes," Bull says. "Covers most common poisons, paralytics, truth serums - that kind of thing. Last I checked the most popular truth serum in Orlais is this 'veris' bullshit, you can smell it from a mile off. If they slip you something that smells or tastes kinda floral, that's probably it."

"I'm not planning on eating or drinking anything they give me-""You could get backed into a corner, and you might even wanna let them feel like they've won on that count. Remember, a person who thinks he's got the upper hand is a comfortable idiot. Nope, keep eating."

Mahanon, in the middle of putting aside the second half of the meat pie, sighs and continues
shovelling meat and pastry into his mouth. "You've been poisoned before, I take it?"

"Oh fuck yeah," says Bull, grinning. "Lots of times. I've actually built up a tolerance to most shit. Makes me a real tough fucker to kill."

"The giant great axe probably helps too," Mahanon mumbles through a mouthful of meat pie. He gestures to his head. "And the horns."

"Well, now you're just flattering me," Bull says. "But yeah. Tough motherfucker on the whole. Which reminds me to remind you - if things start going pear-shaped, don't hesitate to call us in, yeah? One of the human Ben Hassrath converts I worked with would name these kinds of missions after gemstones; diamond, emerald, sapphire, and so on. Know why?"

Mahanon swallows his pie. "It'd be nice to have, but it's not something you desperately need?"

Bull beams. "Exactly. This information we're after - it's valuable shit, but at the end of the day, you're more valuable to me than whatever we might get out of it. Understand?"

Mahanon pauses as he scoops that last mouthful of pie onto his fork, but forces himself not to look up - *just nod, keep eating*, and he does, and he definitely does not wonder if Bull realizes what he just said.

Because Mahanon is probably reaching here- probably, *absolutely* more like- but there is, to him at least, quite a significant difference between the phrase "you're valuable" and "you're valuable to me."

*All his Chargers are valuable to him,* Mahanon tells himself, and it's not a rebuke; it's nice to hear either way, that Bull thinks so highly of him. *Don't make it into something it's not.*

"So if something goes wrong, don't try toughing it out," Bull is still saying. "Get the fuck out, and if you can't get out, make some noise and we'll come running."

Mahanon chases down the last bit of pie with some water before responding, "Yes Chief."

"That's what I like to hear." Bull gestures to the phials. "Straight up: those antidotes can get a bit rough. Best way to treat them is like shots: take 'em as quick as you can, one after another. I lined them up best to worst for you - believe me, you'll wanna work up to it."

Mahanon makes a face. "I hate shots."

"Oh, I know," Bull says unsympathetically. "You can always back out."

Mahanon narrows his eyes at Bull. Defiantly, he reaches for the first phial in the row, uncorks it, and tosses it back.

Whatever he was expecting the antidote to taste like, he's way off - it's got a hard burn like liquor but sort of a sour, sticky taste on the whole. Mahanon grips the tray hard to keep himself from retching, unable to repress a full-body shudder. "Fuck- started at the wrong end."

"Nope, that was the right one," Bull says, sounding far too fucking amused for Mahanon's liking. "One after another, Mouse, they don't get better with age."

Glaring openly now, Mahanon works his way through the phials. It's awful work, but he has to admit, Bull was right about the food. He can't imagine how his body would have handled the antidotes on an empty stomach.
The last one is, as promised, the worst - not the worst tasting, but it's dense and slimy, a little like swallowing a live slug. Mahanon just barely manages to get it down through sheer white knuckle force of will, though by this point he's a bit teary-eyed and absolutely nauseous.

"It'll take a few minutes for that to settle, so give yourself a moment," Bull says, taking the tray from Mahanon's lap and putting it aside. He takes a seat on the bed next to Mahanon, causing the mattress to dip significantly (which does not at all fucking help Mahanon's state as his balance is momentarily thrown off). He pulls something very small wrapped in parchment from his pocket and hands it to Mahanon. "Here, this'll help."

Mahanon's not sure he's willing to put anything in his mouth ever again at this point, especially anything Bull gives him, but he unwraps the parchment to see a chocolate truffle.

"They had a whole stall in the market," Bull says. "We brought some back for you. It'll help with the, uh, aftertaste."

It's less the taste than the slimy texture that's still lingering, and Mahanon suspects Bull knows this. After only a brief moment of hesitation Mahanon pops the truffle into his mouth. He's never had much of a sweet tooth, but Bull seems to have chosen a chocolate according to his tastes: dark and bitter, with a fresh mint filling that cleanses his mouth and chases off the last of the foulness from the antidotes.

"Say 'thank you, Chief,'" Bull says.

Mahanon rolls his eyes. "Thank you, Chief." He swallows and adds, "Sadist."

"Yeah, well," Bull shrugs, nudging Mahanon's arm. "You're kinda into that though, aren't you?"

Mahanon's ears flick, and he tells himself his face flushing like this is a result of the antidotes, and not the fucking asshole Qunari sitting next to him. He tries to sound breezy and casual as he responds, "Maybe a bit."

"A bit."

And it's just as Mahanon's seriously considering dumping the last of his water on Bull's head that there's another knock at the door, and Bull gets up to let Stitches and Krem into the room.

About twenty minutes later they make their way down along "Champs-Victoire" (and Mahanon wonders what the street might have been called originally, in his language, before the Orlesians slapped their own title on it). They pause about five blocks from the warehouse district.

"We'll follow after you and stay within range," Bull says quietly. "Stitches'll be closest behind - remember, if anything goes wrong-"

"You'll hear a nice big roll of thunder, I promise," Mahanon says.

Bull puts a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. "You sure about this? Gemstone, remember?"

Mahanon thinks of the smug faces of the Orlesians in the library, the Orlesian "artistry" papered over this city, his People's city, the guards on every corner - it's not a difficult choice to make.

"I'm sure," he says.

Bull nods, and lets him go.
Mahanon checks to make sure he's still got the letter on him, touches his father's dagger where it rests under his clothes for luck, and sets off down the cobblestone street.

There are still plenty of people milling about Champs-Victoire this time of night, but the crowds thin out and finally disperse as the habitable buildings and shops become long, squat warehouses. The district is rife with scents - leather from the tanneries, sawdust from the carpentry and wood processing buildings. He catches a whiff of something herbal on the wind; tea, he thinks, or maybe an apothecary.

Finally he reaches the very last warehouse in the row. It's draped in shadow, tucked in between a much taller warehouse beside it and the city walls, but with clarity of night vision Mahanon can easily make out the coiled snake symbol on the door from a block away.

Right, he thinks, allowing himself a single, brief shiver of nerves before continuing forward. Let's get this done.

He looks both ways before crossing over to the warehouse. Complete confidence would look suspicious, he knows, so the more he gives in to his anxiety - for once - the better. He shakes out his hands on the threshold, rocking on the balls of his feet, before giving the door a solid three knocks.

It's an ache of a wait before his long ears pick up the sound of footsteps on the other side of the door, and a small hatch in the wood slips aside revealing a pair of glittering pale blue eyes that narrow dangerously upon seeing him.

"Go away, little rabbit," a voice hisses through the hatch, which starts to close.

"Wait, uh- fidélité à jamais à Thalsian," Mahanon says quickly, his mouth clumsy on the unfamiliar language. He raises his hand and calls up his magic, letting threads of lightning wreath around his palm and weave through his fingers.

The eyes blink, and the hatch slides shut.

For a moment Mahanon feels oddly disappointed and relieved - it's a failure, yes, but not a failure on his part, and it certainly saves him some trouble. Then there's a slide of iron and wood as a lock thunks out of place, and the door swings open.

Mahanon has just enough time to process his success before a hand takes a firm grip of his upper arm and yanks him inside, slamming the door shut behind him.

That grassy, herbal smell is far more prominent in here, and it's familiar in a way that Mahanon struggles to place even as he's dragged along down a corridor further into the warehouse. It almost smells like elfroot, but... off, somehow. Almost rancid.

The man hauling him along comes to a halt in front of another door. He knocks once, briefly, before throwing it open and shoving Mahanon through.

There are two other Orlesians there, sitting at a table in what looks like a foreman's office. They look to be in the midst of an enthusiastic game of cards, and seem utterly bemused to look up and find an elf in their midst.

"Wassat then, Chasty?" says one of the men, leaning back in his chair. "A present?"

"It's Chastain, and I'm not sure," says the man holding Mahanon's arm coolly. "He knew the passcode, and he's an apostate."
"Interesting," says the other man at the table, who seems to have more of his wits about him than his companion. "Care to explain yourself, rabbit?"

"I-I was sent here by the mages in Val Moraine," Mahanon says, ducking his head. "Mages like you, I mean. They sent me along with this."

He pulls out the letter and hands it to Chastain, who takes it with a deep frown. Mahanon watches from the corner of his eye as the Orlesian inspects the seal.

"You look it over, Robert," Chastain says, leaning over and sliding the letter across the table to his alert companion. "You've got better eyes than me."

Robert picks up the letter and squints at the seal, turning the parchment over and over again in his palm and even holding it up to the light of a nearby oil lamp for good measure.

"It's certainly our seal, and it hasn't been tampered with," Robert declares confidently. "Let's give it a read."

Mahanon shifts his weight from one foot to the other as Robert cracks the wax seal and scans through the contents. He's certain it's only been a few minutes, but even so...

"You look nervous, elf," the relaxed man at the table says, tilting his chair up onto its back legs as he stares at Mahanon. "Somewhere you've gotta be?"

"So sorry, messere," Mahanon says, trying to sound contrite. What comes out sounds bitingly sarcastic to his ears, but the Orlesians don't seem to notice. "It's just my master's expecting me back, you see."

"Well, we wouldn't want to keep your master waiting," says Robert, folding the letter with a satisfied jerk of his head. "This is most excellent news. Did our brothers in Val Moraine specify if they wanted a processed sample, or the raw product?"

Mahanon's mind stutters a moment, but his mouth is quick enough to cover with a response. "I was just given the letter and told to pass back whatever you give me, serah."

"Very well," Robert says, standing with a stretch. "We might be able to kill two birds with one stone here. One moment."

The Orlesian sweeps out of the room, leaving Mahanon with Chastain still eyeing him suspiciously, and the man at the table just... eyeing him.

"You sure your master needs you back so soon?" the man at the table drawls, rocking his chair forward and back as he looks Mahanon over. "I can think of a few things I could use your help with. Personal things."

Mahanon clenches his jaw and keeps his gaze fixed on a far wall, struggling to keep his irritation from showing. *Scared and stupid, scared and stupid. He'll come looking for me, ser."

"Is he in the trade?" the man asks, his chair creaking obnoxiously under him as he leans back again. "I hear up north some people rent out their... assets. Think he'd be interested in some kind of arrangement?"

"Knock it off, Blanchard," Chastain says shortly. "We're working."

"Hardly working, and it's damn boring work," the man says. "I'll slip you a copper if you come sit
in my lap, elf. Just 'til Robert gets back."

Mahanon can't help the dangerous tilt of his ears, flat back - a warning sign for anyone with even a passing familiarity with the Dalish, but he doesn't expect these Orlesians will pick up on it. He ignores Blanchard's wheedling by focusing on that damnably familiar scent. It has to be an elfroot variant, and it's tickling some hazy memory at the back of his mind, but he just can't quite place it-

Robert comes back into the room and gives Blanchard a disgusted look - Blanchard's been spending the last few moments tutting and clicking his fingers at Mahanon as if trying to coax a stray cat.

"The red lantern district is two streets west of here if you're so desperate," Robert mutters, giving Blanchard's tilted chair a little kick. Blanchard throws himself forward to avoid flipping over backwards, nearly smacking his face into the table. "Here, rabbit."

Robert hands Mahanon a small cloth bundle, which Mahanon immediately slips into his belt pouch with a thrill of victory. He's done it. Now he just needs to get the fuck out-

"And this," Robert says, holding up a bar of pressed... something. It's not dissimilar to the dried fruit bars the Lavellan foragers used to press en masse for travelling days, but Mahanon can't pick out any individual fruit chunks. It's an odd green-brown colour, and the fibres of whatever it is are so finely processed Mahanon can't make out what it's made from. All he knows is that that herbal smell is overpoweringly strong now, along with that awful rancid note. "Take a bite."

Mahanon's look of startled confusion is very real as he looks up at Robert. "Sorry?"

"As a reward for your good work," Robert says. "And so you can report back the... effects, to our brothers in Val Moraine. I'm sure they'll want to know that our stock is worth its weight in gold."

It comes crashing into Mahanon, then, exactly what he's looking at. What he's been smelling. Why it's so familiar, but so hard to place. Hazy memories of midsummer ceremonies drift through his mind, like smoke-

Oh, no. Oh, Creators, please no.

"My master-" he tries weakly, but Robert takes his hand and presses the bar into his palm.

"I'm sure you will find a way to explain yourself to him," Robert says. "You'll enjoy this - I've added a little something extra to this one."

This latter comment is directed at Chastain, and as Mahanon reluctantly brings the bar up to his mouth, he gets a waft of something that smells a bit like flowering lilies and roses. Veris. Bull was spot on, and Mahanon can only pray that the antidotes will be enough to counteract both the truth serum and... everything else.

He takes a small bite of the bar, barely a scraping. It's mealy and waxy, dissolving into a fine grainy mush in his mouth that tastes mostly like dirt. If he's lucky, it won't really hit him for at least a few minutes-

"You can have more," Robert says. "You want to make sure you feel it, don't you?"

Mahanon grits his teeth. Bull told you to let them feel like they've got the upper hand. He and the others are right outside. They'll just have to deal with whatever shape you're in when you get out of here, and that's that.
He steels his nerves and takes a full bite, swallowing the mouthful as soon as it's soft enough to go down, as if chewing it less might save him from its effects.

Robert smiles. "Good. I just have a few questions for you, then you can go."

Mahanon nods, wrapping up the rest of the bar in the offered waxed cloth and slipping it into his pouch. "Of course, ser."

"Were you really sent here by our brothers in Val Moraine?"

"Yes," Mahanon says instantly - it's an odd slip of a statement, as if compelled from him. He blinks. The truth serum. He's damn lucky that he could answer Robert's first question truthfully, but he's wary now as Robert speaks again.

"Did you read the letter?"

"No, ser," Mahanon says, which is also true. He never read through the contents directly.

"Did anyone else read the letter?"

"No," Mahanon says, just managing to catch the "yes" before it can escape him. It feels not dissimilar to the sensation of catching oneself mid-trip. Thank the Creators the antidote still works.

"Do you truly intend, to the best of your abilities, to bring these samples back to Val Moraine?"

"Of course, ser," Mahanon says, the urge to tell the truth sitting like an awful itch at the back of his mind. Manageable, but still intensely irritating.

"Oi," says Blanchard. "I've got one - do you think I'm handsome, elf?"

Mahanon's lip curls, and it's a relief to allow the truth serum free rein as he responds, "Fuck no. Ser."

Robert and Chastain share a laugh at a scowling Blanchard's expense, and Mahanon's grateful for the distraction - the tips of his ears and fingers are starting to get a bit numb, and he knows he doesn't have long.

"Alright, that's good enough for me," says Robert with a satisfied jerk of his head. "Send him back out, Chastain. We've got a lot of work to do over the coming days."

"Are you sure we should turn him loose?" Chastain says. "He's going to be a mess in a few minutes, you saw how much he took."

"He said his master would come looking for him," Robert says dispassionately. He waves a hand, and with a crackle of magic Mahanon feels the muted compulsion of the truth serum lift. "Remember, elf - say anything and we'll hand you to the templars faster than you can sneeze, understand?"

Mahanon nods, and the entire room nods with him. He gives his head a firm shake.

"There it is," Chastain says. "That's faster than the last batch, isn't it?"

"We'll discuss it when you return," Robert says. "Get him out."

Mahanon loses track of things a bit as Chastain guides him back down the hallway, and then quite suddenly he's standing outside the warehouse door.
He rubs his eyes, staring at the coiled snake. *Should I be knocking?*

No, he knocked already. The knocking bit is done.

He puts his hand in his pouch to find the letter and finds instead a wrapped bit of waxed cloth and a small cloth bundle and yes, *yes*, it's all done now. Right. Alright. He turns away from the door.

The next bit is just walking - walking, not knocking - and he's pretty sure that's something he can do.

He breathes, and for a brief moment, everything smells like *home* - the fresh scent of upturned underbrush in the wake of bare feet and aravel wheels, the unpleasant reek of wet fur as the great wolfhounds return from the hunt. He pauses on the cobblestones, tears in his eyes. *Fuck,* but he misses the forest.

*No, keep going. Walking. You need to walk.*

He squares his shoulders and walks very quickly, but it's odd because even though *he's* walking quickly, the buildings around him don't seem to be shuffling past fast enough. The street stretches in front of him. *Focus. Focus. Focus.*

"*There you are.*"

Mahanon blinks, and suddenly Stitches is beside him, sounding very posh and cross - no, very posh and cross, and Stitches is usually neither of those things. Confusing.

"*Some servant you are, wandering off into the streets at night,*" Stitches growls, grabbing Mahanon's forearm and setting off down the street and it's all *very* fast now. "*I've been looking for you everywhere.*"

"*Prosh,*" Mahanon says.

Stitches cuts him a look that seems equal parts annoyed, sad, and nervous, and Mahanon's sure there's a *word* for that but he's struggling to remember words as a general concept, at the moment. Which is terrible. He really likes words. He hopes they'll come back.

"*Are you alright, Mouse?*" Stitches asks quietly either a minute or an hour later. They're still walking. "*You had us a bit worried there, stumbling about in the street like that.*"

"*Worried,*" Mahanon says, grabbing Stitches' arm. "*That was the word! Thank the Creators.*"

Worried. Yes, exactly the word. Also, exactly how Stitches looks right now.

"*Fuck,*" Mahanon says. "*I remember- oh, it's only going to get worse, actually. Fuck. I need to talk to Bull.*"

"*You're talking to him,*" says Bull.

Mahanon looks around. They're in a side alley, now, and Krem and Stitches and Bull are all here, which is very convenient because he has something very extremely important to tell them.

"*Somniaridahl,*" he says, spreading his hands open wide. There. He's explained.

The others stare at him.

"*Is... that a word?*" Krem asks.
"It's- it's a- it's an elfroot," Mahanon says urgently. "But not like, you know, **elfroot**. We use it only for ceremonies, and not that many ceremonies, because that would be- it would be awful. I don't like it. And they've done something **terrible** to it, I didn't even recognize it, look-"

Mahanon roots in his pouch until his hands close on the waxed cloth, and for a moment he forgets why he needs it. Also, what he's doing here.

Then he looks up and Bull is still looking at him so he looks down and remembers, yes, right, **this**. He pulls out the bar.

"Stitches-" Bull says, but Stitches has already taken the bar from Mahanon and is unwrapping it. Or was unwrapping it. It's not wrapped anymore, and Stitches makes a noise that's halfway between a laugh and a groan. "The fuck is this, and is Mahanon fucking okay?"

**Mahanon.** Not **Mouse.** It feels a sort of way, hearing that, and so does Bull's hand on his shoulder, and he doesn't remember when Bull's hand wound up there but he's also pretty certain that it's supposed to always be there, so it doesn't really matter, actually.

"Did they make you eat this?" Stitches asks, raising the bar.

Mahanon nods. "**Veris** - like you said, Bull. **Chief**. **Chief** Bull."

"The fuck," Bull says again, his grip on Mahanon's shoulder tightening. Not hurting. But tight. Krem is very quiet and his lips are pressed very thin but his eyes are doing something interesting, looking from Bull to Mahanon to Bull's hand to Bull to Mahanon-

Mahanon stops watching Krem's eyes. They're making him dizzy.

Stitches sniffs the bar and shakes his head, wrapping it back up again. "Well, good news - pretty sure Mouse is going to be just fine. Never thought I'd see this shit again - it was very popular with the soldiers during the Blight. We called the herb 'stipule' in Ferelden - 'stipple' on the streets."

"It's a drug?" Bull says.

"**Somniaridahl,**" Mahanon repeats, resting his head on Bull's arm. It's nice. Steady.

"I imagine the elves have their own uses for it, but yes," Stitches says. "And a relatively safe one, as far as these things go. Clearly they've found a way to make it a bit more... uh, potent. It's got a slow release when it's eaten, so Mouse'll be like this for at least the next few hours. Tomorrow might be a bit dodgy too."

"But he'll be okay?"

"Absolutely - no hangover on this shit, no long-term effects from a single use. He'll mostly be hungry and tired and a bit- well, loopy, but he'll be perfectly fine."

"I'm already perfectly fine," Mahanon says, lifting his head. "I did- I brought the thing out, and I gave it to you, and it's all fine."

"You did good work, Mouse," Bull says, and his voice is that tone of gentle that Mahanon just wants to wrap himself up in like a fucking **blanket**. "Let's just focus on getting you back to the inn, yeah?"

"So **Orlesian,**" Mahanon mutters, letting Bull steer him out of the alley and onwards, because the buildings seem to move faster when other people are doing most of the walking bit. "Taking
something that's ours, and- and fucking it up and making it bad, can't keep their hands to themselves-” Mahanon catches sight of his own hands and jumps. "Mythal'enaste, I have so many fingers. Too many fingers."

"Permission to make fun, Chief?” Krem asks, and his voice is smiling. "Now that we know he's going to be alright."

"Not until Mouse can fend for himself," Bull grunts. "Not fair game, otherwise."

"Aww."

"S'alright, Krem," Mahanon says sadly, still staring at his hands. "There's just- so many fingers. That's all."

"Chief, I'm begging you-"

"Tell you what," says Bull. "When we get back? You and Stitches can tell everyone what's going on."

"With quotes?"

"With quotes."

"Someone should probably keep an eye on Mouse," Stitches says as Krem makes a happy little noise. "Just until he's uh... settled. I once had a soldier go wandering off into the bog because this shit had him so turned around - he was halfway stuck in a quagmire when we finally caught up to him."

"Yeah, I've got it handled," Bull says. "I've got to start taking down a report from him anyway; or as much of one as I can get. I'll look after him."

This means something, Mahanon thinks - tries to think. It maybe means something the way the hand on his shoulder means something the way Bull saying his name, actually, maybe means something. But it also probably doesn't mean anything at all.

It's just nice to know that Bull doesn't mind how many fingers he has.

(Too many, to be precise.)

- It is a fuck of a lot harder to subtly herd a completely blitzed-out elf back through the streets of Halamshiral and into the inn without attracting unwanted attention than Bull would prefer. He considers just slinging Mahanon over his shoulder, but the elves in the streets are already looking at him, Stitches, and Krem a bit askance. He gets it - two humans and a giant Qunari dragging a clearly fucked-up little elf along with them just isn't a good look.

They only get stopped once by a muscular city elf a few buildings down from the inn, who steps into their path with a hard look.

"You alright, cousin?" the elf asks carefully. "You know these gents?"

Mahanon nods enthusiastically, leaning into Bull's side - toppling more than leaning, but Bull catches him. "They're friends! And I work for them. Also, you've got very pretty hair."

The elf touches her tightly-coiled black curls as Mahanon says this, but her expression doesn't
"We're here on a job," says Bull. "Someone overindulged a bit. We're just trying to get him to bed. I've got a few elves on my crew - I can send 'em out to vouch for us, if it helps."

The elf purses her lips and folds her arms, but she nods. "Alright. I'd like to talk to them. We might not have much freedom here, but we look after our own. Lots of _shem_ fucks in the traveller quarter think of us as free game. You'd better not be one of them."

Once inside the inn, Krem and Stitches split off to find the Chargers and explain the situation to Skinner and Dalish. Bull takes Mahanon up to his room. The stairs are a bit tricky, but they manage it, and it's with a sigh of relief that Bull finds Mahanon's room key on a chain around his neck and gets them inside.

Mahanon blinks for a moment, looking around the room. "Huh. Where the fuck are we?"

"Back at the inn," Bull says, locking the door. "How're you feeling, Mouse?"

"Odd," Mahanon says, gripping his head. "Why would anyone do this to themselves on purpose, the whole- everything, it's all _moving_."

"People do weird shit to relax," Bull says. "You should sit down."

Mahanon looks at Bull with startling clarity, and for a moment Bull thinks he might be starting to sober up.

"If I move," Mahanon declares firmly, "I will die."

Well. Never mind, then.

"Fair enough," Bull says, and scoops Mahanon up into his arms. He expects some resistance to this, or at least a little complaining, but Mahanon just curls in close and tucks his face into Bull's chest, his breath warm and steady against Bull's skin.

Bull carries Mahanon over to the bed and puts him down as gently as he can. Mahanon is very pliable and quiet as Bull arranges him, just watching him placidly with a bit of a dreamy expression.

"You're nice," Mahanon says suddenly.

"Not this shit again," Bull grumbles, patting Mahanon on the arm before straightening and casting a searching eye about the room. The food tray from earlier has been taken away, but there's a full jug of water and some cups on the dresser. He goes to retrieve it. "I'll let you off the hook 'cause you're a bit fucked up at the moment, but calling me nice is a firing offence. Remember?"

"If you recall, Ser Qunari, I was given a truth serum tonight-"

"And an antidote."

"-even so, you keep saying I'm a shit liar," says Mahanon, pointing stubbornly at Bull. Bull raises an eyebrow at this as he sets the water down on Mahanon's bedside table and starts pouring him a cup. "So what I'm saying is, you're a nice man, and you should- you should listen to me when I tell you that, because it's important. You are... _good._"

"_Vashedan_," Bull mutters. "I don't think _I'm_ high enough for this conversation. How's your grip?"
"Tha's not a very- not a very *professional* question," Mahanon says, frowning. "You and your fucking- your *not*-fucking professionalism, is what."

"Okay," Bull says. "I'm gonna take that as 'no, Chief, I can't hold a cup of water on my own, will you please help me.' Sure, no problem, Mouse."

He steadies Mahanon's head and balances the rim of the cup against Mahanon's lips, waiting for Mahanon's hands to come up to guide the cup before tilting it - accidentally waterboarding the poor guy probably wouldn't help much at this point. Mahanon manages to get half the cup of water down before he starts to push it away.

"Good," Bull says, putting the cup aside. "That'll help."

"You don't have any gross weird shit that could make this stop?" Mahanon says a touch miserably, gripping the mattress as if expecting it to be jerked out from under him. "It's not fun. Can't think. *Ugh.*"

"Lemme know if you're gonna be sick," Bull warns. "And... no, sorry Mouse. It's like with booze - some shit you just gotta ride out. But I'm gonna stay with you to make sure you're okay, yeah?"

Mahanon blinks at this, then smiles. "Nice."

"Stop that," Bull growls. There's a chair in the corner, thank fuck, so he pulls it over to Mahanon's bedside and takes a seat. "You try to sleep it off. I'll be right here."

Mahanon frowns. "Right there?"

"Uh huh."

"All *night*?"

"Probably, yeah."

Mahanon shakes his head. "No, you can't, that's- no. Bad."

"Bad?"

Mahanon gestures to... something, Bull's not really sure what he's aiming at, but he seems pretty incensed. "You- your back and shit. Your leg. You'll be all- it'll hurt you, being in a chair all night."

"I've slept in worse conditions," Bull says dryly. He's not sure how he feels about Mahanon's all-too accurate predictions - he knows his body gets stiffer than a plank of wood if he sits for too long, but he's not super cozy with other people noticing this. "I'll live."

"No, no," Mahanon says, putting his hands up. "Okay, I'll- I'll take the chair, you take the bed. It's only fair."

"Mouse, look me in the eye and tell me you can hold your balance long enough to manage sitting in a chair."

"Then I'll sleep on the floor-"

"You're not gonna sleep on the fucking floor."

"Then-" Mahanon makes a *very* interesting noise of frustration, something between a growl and a hiss, his lip curling up over one of his sharp incisors. Bull blinks. He's never seen *that* before. He's
guessing it's a repressed Sliabh thing, and his mind very unhelpfully starts wondering what other noises Mahanon might make when his control slips. *Not the time, definitely not the fucking time.* "Then you take the bed, and I'll take the bed, and- and we'll both just take the bloody bed."

Bull sighs. "It's not a very big bed."

"We are adults, we are- grown ass, professional men, and we can manage this," Mahanon says, and it's a clear struggle to get the words out, but he seems very determined. Adorably determined. "This is a good solution. I am very wise for thinking of it."

"A good solution," Bull says. "Not sure it's a good idea."

"You're being- what- fenhedis, what are you afraid of?" Mahanon says. "Do I- do I make you nervous, Ser Iron Bull? Are you afraid I might seduce you?"

Mahanon flops back into what Bull suspects the elf thinks is a seductive sprawl, and immediately starts to roll off the mattress. Bull just manages to catch him before he faceplants on the floor.

"The bed moved," Mahanon says, only looking a little chagrined as Bull steadies him.

"Uh huh."

"Everything's moving," Mahanon continues. He puts a hand on Bull's wrist, looking up at him with stupidly big, sad eyes. "Everything's moving, all the time, except you."

Bull stares at him. Mahanon stares back, tilting his head and pressing a freckled cheek into Bull's arm.

"I know what you're doing," Bull says.

"Glad one of us does," Mahanon murmurs wearily, but he doesn't break his gaze.

Bull works his jaw for a moment, but- fuck. Fucking- fuck.

With a defeated grumble, Bull pulls a folded blanket up off the end of the bed and wraps it tight around Mahanon's shoulders and arms - at this point he's not sure he trusts Mahanon with full mobility, and Mahanon doesn't seem to mind. He slides onto the mattress and predictably, his mass takes up most of the room. With a shuffle, he lifts Mahanon into his arms and deposits the elf in his lap, blankets and all, cradling him close. "There. Happy?"

Mahanon nods, pressing his face into Bull's chest. "Mmm."

"Good. And just so you know, training those big sad eyes on me to get your way? That's not always gonna work. I'm gonna build up an immunity eventually. Like with the poisons, remember?"

"Tough motherfucker."

"Exactly. So, you know. Just warning you in advance." Bull absent-mindedly smoothes some of Mahanon's curls back from his face.

Mahanon shifts a bit, cuddling in closer. "You're very smart, Iron Bull."

"That's nice."

"And very stupid, too."
"That's- uh. Not so nice."

"Not in the head, you're mostly always very smart in the head," Mahanon yawns, patting Bull's chest. "Here, though. Here, is a bit- I don't know. I really don't know, fuck. I have no idea. Every time I think I do, I don't."

"Well, that makes two of us," Bull says, grimacing. "Is this really the line of conversation you wanna go down? In this state?"

Mahanon sighs. "You're right. You're not- you're not in the right state of mind for this. Wouldn't be fair."

"I'm not in the right state of mind?"

"Mhm." Mahanon closes his eyes. "I'm here, though. Here. And- and you know that. I'm here when and if you want me - not right now, but in general. You know?"

Bull lets his head fall back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling. "I know, Maha- Mouse."

"Well, good." Mahanon shifts again. "You're very comfortable."

"Fuck yeah I am," Bull says, grateful for the change in topic. "Big manly arms, right?"

"I mean, yes, but-" Mahanon, much to Bull's dismay, pokes Bull in the stomach. "Comfortable."

"Holy fuck," Bull says mildly. "Maybe I will make you sleep on the floor."

"Nooo."

"Don't be rude, then."


"Well, that's more like it." Bull allows himself to stroke Mahanon's hair - just carefully. They're well beyond any plausible deniability right now, anyway, but he's hoping he can keep this contained to the strange fragile dark of the night. "Have a good sleep, Mouse."

Mahanon turns his face and slowly goes limp and relaxed in Bull's arms, his slight form becoming heavy with sleep.

Bull starts to drift off himself, when he's startled by a low rumbling from Mahanon. For a moment he thinks the elf is growling, and wonders if he's having a nightmare or something.

It takes him a moment to realize - no, not growling. Purring. Mahanon is fucking purring.

Bull relaxes back, the slow rumble of Mahanon's purr against his chest... it's comforting. Stupidly comforting. This is all so fucking stupid.

And so is Bull, probably. Definitely. Not in the head, as Mahanon assured him, but other places-well, in other places, his intelligence is very much up for debate.
SO THE FIRST TIME I SMOKED WEED-

Legit tho, it was a trash fire, and I pulled on some aspects of that trash fire for Mahanon's experience here (in case anyone was wondering what the real-world analogue for "somniaridahl" was). It was a bunch of us dumb teenagers in a park in the rain at night, I choked on my first hit and because I have so many allergies everyone thought I was allergic and dying and someone almost stabbed me with my epipen until the weed finally kicked in and I calmed down enough to breathe. Then we walked back to my friend's house (which, btw, is when I smelled my childhood - like Mahanon), but their parents were very strict so we had to be very quiet and all they had to eat was unsalted stale corn chips and craisins which I combined because I thought it would taste better and the moral of the story is kids: don't do drugs. Or if you're gonna do drugs, make sure you do it in a way that doesn't absolutely suck.
Mahanon wakes up feeling... warm.

It's summer, so this isn't exactly a revelation in and of itself. Everything feels a bit dreamlike and strange still, and he's really not sure how awake he truly is. But there's light shining bright against his unprotected eyes, and he's slowly starting to feel things - the coarse weave of the blanket wrapped tight around him, an unfamiliar weight on his back and around his hips, and bare skin under his palm-

His eyes fly open.

This is a mistake - he's immediately blinded by the sun beaming through the window. He blinks tears from his sore eyes and waits for them to clear, very conscious now that there's a large, breathing body beneath him and desperate to see what the fuck- who the fuck-

Eventually the spots clear and Mahanon starts to make out an expanse of grey, tattooed skin. He chances a look up and sure enough even from this angle Mahanon can see a familiar pointed chin and a rack of massive dragon horns.

The weight on his back shifts slightly, and Mahanon realizes it's a hand- Bull's hand. And it's Bull's arm wrapped around his hips, holding him close.

Mahanon manages to keep all of his screaming internal, but it's a near thing. He can already feel his heartbeat skittering away from him at a rapid pace.

His first thought is the most pressing one - *What the fuck happened last night?*

The second, *If I slept with Bull and somehow managed to forget the whole thing I'm going to assume the Creators have entirely forsaken me.*

"Morning," Bull says suddenly, following with a low chuckle as this causes Mahanon to jump. "Easy, Mouse. You're all good. How're you feeling?"

Mahanon's thoughts are utterly scrambled, is how he's feeling, and this isn't helped by the fact that he can *feel* Bull's voice rumbling through his massive chest in a very distracting way. Bull starts to stroke his back, too, maybe absent-mindedly, and that doesn't fucking help either, no matter how relaxing it is.
Creators, but Mahanon wishes he could relax into Bull's touch right now.

"I feel a bit... strange," Mahanon says uncertainly, his voice rough, and it's true - beyond the massive internal crisis he's undergoing waking up in Bull's arms like something out of his unlikeliest daydreams, he still can't quite shake that odd, dreamlike feeling. The world around him bleeds at the edges slightly, and he seems to be losing threads of thought as he goes. "Very strange."

"Well, you seem a lot more lucid than you were last night," Bull says. "How much do you remember?"

Mahanon frowns, trying to think. "I went into the warehouse, and I- there was the trade-off with the Orlesians-" Mahanon's face twists, remembering Blanchard's leering. "Fuck Orlesians."

"Sounds about right. Then?"

"I remember- bits, but- they probably didn't all quite happen the way I'm remembering them," Mahanon says. "They had- they're making some sort of drug-"

"Somniaridahl," Bull says, and Mahanon lifts his head, staring. Bull looks down at him and grins. "You said it about ten times last night. Don't worry, I didn't suddenly learn Elvhen overnight. You and Dalish can still gossip about me, your secrets are safe."

"We don't gossip," Mahanon mutters. "Much."

"Uh huh."

Bull straightens, and Mahanon puts out a hand to steady himself - just one hand. Most of his body is trapped in a very tight wrap of blankets from his shoulders down.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Bull says, as Mahanon struggles to free himself. "You were pretty out of it last night, and I was worried you'd go wandering off. Or fall off the bed again."

"Again?"

"Mhm. Here, let me-" Bull leans in to rescue Mahanon from the blankets. They're still very close - there really isn't enough room on this bed not to be - and Bull's hands are gentle, and he smells invitingly good. Warm, and masculine, and... and all Mahanon wants to do is curl himself back up in Bull's arms, shove the Qunari down against the mattress and bury his face in Bull's neck. Breathe deep. Maybe chase this dreamy state a little longer, catch a few more brief moments of closeness, pretend that Bull wants him in his arms as badly as Mahanon wants to be there.

Mahanon realizes that he's stopped moving, letting Bull finish untangling him on his own, and that the Qunari is watching him closely with that single piercing eye.

"Sorry," Mahanon says distantly. "I suppose I'm still a bit off."

"Sure," Bull says.

Mahanon bites his lip. He vaguely remembers- he's not sure, but he sort of thinks he remembers- "Did I say anything last night?"

"Oh, you said a lot of shit," Bull says with a broad grin, negotiating himself around Mahanon to swing his legs off the side of the bed. "Krem's gonna be an asshole about it this morning probably, but in his defence it was hilarious."
"Joy," Mahanon says wearily. "But I mean- did I say anything-"

Mahanon stops, because he's not sure he actually knows what he means. Or if he does know, then he's not sure if he really wants to hear the answer.

"Hey," says Bull, putting a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. "You were real fucked up, Mouse. Only a dick would hold you to anything you might have said. I sure won't."

"Right," Mahanon says. He offers a weak smile. "Thanks for that."

Bull pats him on the shoulder and stands, stretching with a long groan. "Well, I'm gonna see if we can't get some decent breakfast in us before hitting the road. Take your time, but if you're not downstairs in about a quarter hour I'll be sending a search party."

Mahanon just nods, and waits until Bull leaves the room before collapsing back onto the mattress again.

Because he does remember some of what he said last night. Some of it. Maybe. And of what he remembers... he meant all of it.

And Bull probably knows that he meant it.

Mahanon puts his hands over his face, pressing his fingertips into his forehead. This double speak, double think - whatever it is they're doing, this odd fucking dance, circling around and around and back and forth and never really getting anywhere - it's driving him slowly mad. And maybe he is mad, for thinking it's even happening in the first place.

The bed still smells like Bull, a little. Mahanon still smells like Bull, a little - a ghostly, lingering scent in his hair and on his skin. Catching the edge of his awareness every time he moves, and just as quickly gone. So quickly it might as well not be there at all.

He could put a stop to all this, he knows. He knows that. Bull is a good man; if Mahanon took him aside and told him to stop, told him to back off and stop- just stop, Bull would in a heartbeat. He knows he would. And maybe things might be a bit strange for a few days, but they're both adults. Mahanon could nurse his sore heart back to health and they could really just be... professional. Friends. Professional friends, with nothing else lingering around the fringes of that relationship.

But even now, every time he catches the slightest hint of Bull's scent on him, his heart leaps. He thinks of the weight of Bull's arms around him, holding him, and can't fucking remember the last time he felt so stupidly safe, so stupidly close with someone. Someone who challenges him, who seems to like being challenged by him, who asks and listens and asks again because he seems truly curious about what Mahanon has to say.

He'd rather have this, whatever this is; these strange half-moments of half-truths, saying nothing and everything and pretending that it's nothing. What it means to him is entirely his problem, not Bull's.

If it gets out of hand, I'll say something, Mahanon vows, letting his hands fall away from his face. I'll do something. I'll put an end to it, somehow.

There is, he knows, a very real chance that it's already out of hand. That he's already too far gone.

But Mahanon tells himself this is the last of the somniaridahl talking, and tries not to think about what Bull told him of the nature of lying only a few days ago: how all liars start by lying first to themselves.
They're loading up the horses and wagon within the hour, and Mahanon's back in the headscarf. Bull seems pretty certain that Mahanon's not in any danger, and that the Halamshiral cell - if it's even any larger than the three men - would be largely centred within the more human-friendly High Quarter.

"Still," Bull says, adjusting the cloth over Mahanon's ears. "Never hurts to be careful."

"It's a good look for you, Mouse," says Skinner. "Very pretty."

Mahanon rolls his eyes as he tugs the lower half of the scarf up over his mouth and nose.

"D'you think that fraternity's got legs elsewhere, Chief?" Krem asks quietly, leaning in close. "Just wondering how closely we should be watching our backs for the next while."

"It could just be Val Moraine and here, but I doubt it," Bull says. "Still, a secret- Circle, fraternity, society, whatever, with any kind of wits about them never would have sent their message off with some random elf to begin with, no matter how dim they might think that elf is - no offence, Mouse."

"None taken," says Mahanon, his voice muffled by the scarf. "I was playing very dim."

"Exactly. See, I get the sense that they're trying to swim in much bigger ponds than they've got the gills for. The step from drug-running to negotiating with a foreign power to help overthrow a whole-ass religious system's kinda... ambitious." Bull shrugs. "Worst case scenario, they somehow figure out that they got played and we walk into Lydes to find a mess of Crows looking to collect a hefty bounty on Mouse's curly head."

Mahanon's hand goes to his hair reflexively to check that his curls are all tucked under the scarf as Krem says, "That's a pretty shitty worst case scenario."

"It's also pretty fucking unlikely," Bull says. "It could be months before the Val Moraine folks get a chance to chat with these guys, and I doubt their first question is gonna be 'hey, what happened to that elf we sent you?' Even if it is, all they have is Mouse's face and that he's a mage - no name, no affiliation, no idea who he might be working for. We'll be careful, like we're always careful, but I think we'll be okay." Bull grins and hefts his travel pack over his shoulder. "And anyway, anyone who wants to fuck with my crew will have to get through me first, so."

Bull heads off for the wagon, and Mahanon returns to what he was doing before the headscarf came out - finishing saddling his stupid horse.

"You alright?" Krem asks, as Mahanon checks the tie on the girth strap and secures it with a practiced hand. Only months ago he'd struggled with the basic knots - now he's pretty sure he can do it in his sleep (and might have even done so once or twice on some of those horrifically early mornings). "Last night was uh. You were a bit-"

"Addlepated?"

"I was gonna say 'right fucked up,' but sure." Krem grins. "Still worried about how many fingers you've got?"

Mahanon groans. "With some thought and reflection I've come to the conclusion that I possess a perfectly reasonable number of fingers."
"Good to hear. I was gonna drop by your room to make sure you were alright, but it seemed quiet in there. Figured you must have conked out hard."

"I did, I think- it's all a bit hazy," Mahanon admits. "Bull stayed with me."

"All night?"

"Mhm." Mahanon tests the tie strap with a sharp tug. Satisfied it won't come loose throughout the day, he glances back to see Krem counting something out on his fingers and muttering under his breath. "What?"

"Nothing, just- how long have you been with us now, Mouse?"

Mahanon thinks for a moment. "About three, three and a half months. Why?"

Krem's face twists. "Damn. Well, nothing. Just worried I might be about to lose a bit of coin, that's all."

"Why?"

"No reason." Krem pats Mahanon's horse and turns away. "Looks like people are starting to mount up. We should get ready to do the same, yeah?"

"Who did you bet with?" Mahanon persists, even as Krem walks away from him. "Krem. What did you bet on?"

Mahanon's horse turns its massive head and huffs warm hay breath directly in Mahanon's face, causing the fabric of the scarf to billow about his ears. It sounds suspiciously like a guffaw.

"Oh, fuck off," Mahanon mutters, shoving the horse's head away and swinging himself up into the saddle with a beleaguered sigh.

- There's a light breeze to cut the heat of the sun as the Chargers turn their mounts and wagon onto the Imperial Highway. It's a short trek to Lydes - three days if they hustle, four if they take their time. Bull's got a very interesting report for the Ben Hassrath burning a hole in his pocket, so he keeps them moving at a speedy clip.

He notices Mahanon slow behind them briefly, staring out onto the plains just beyond Halamshiral. Bull wonders if instead of the broad, empty grasslands and distant settlements and villages, Mahanon might be seeing a sea of aravels, sails and banners flapping in the light summer winds.

The elf gives his head a shake and picks up his pace to catch up, and Bull gives no indication he noticed the pause other than what he hopes is an understanding and friendly smile the next time he catches Mahanon's eye.

The corners of Mahanon's eyes crinkle warmly back at Bull, his mouth still hidden by the scarf. He quickly looks away.

Bull's attention returns to the road, but the back of his neck prickles, and he glances over to see Krem on the other side of the wagon. Staring at him.

He leans back so his hands are out of Mahanon's sight and signs, *What?*

*Nothing,* Krem signs back, still giving him a very strange look.
Bullshit.

Yes. Bull shit.

Bull scowls. That wasn't a question.

Not my fault it was the answer.

Bull can't really argue with that. Even so, he dismisses Krem with a hand gesture far more universally understood than the nuances of hand speak.

The days pass easily, settling back into an easy rhythm. Bull fleshes out his report and prepares it for a dead-drop in Lydes - he's not sure who's working the city these days, but they should pick up his report within the week. He frames Mahanon's involvement as strictly utilitarian, and it's easy enough to do. The bas saarebas stumbled upon the information, inserted himself out of an emotional attachment to the cause, and Bull made use of the situation to gather information for his people. It's easy. Detached.

He's written reports like these before, emphasizing the usefulness of each of his crew - he's had to do it to justify his closeness with Krem, his harbouring Dalish, his trusting Stitches... each of these relationships, he's explained away as if each person under his charge are tools. Because they are. Parts, not people. That's how it works.

He divorces this - tries to divorce it - from the nights he spends around the fire with the Chargers. From his side conversations with Krem and how the kid seems to get him, how they lean on each other from time to time. He can describe Skinner's skill with a blade and her exploitable temper and share an ale with her at the end of the day. He can pass along Rocky's progress with creating his own explosives and how he's been guiding the dwarf away from anything too close to the gaatlok formula and laugh with him (and at him) like he's any other boss observing the eccentric efforts of his charge.

He can hold Mahanon in his arms for hours, feeling that warmth and closeness and acceptance even just once, even just for that one and only fluke of a night, knowing the bravery and intelligence it took for Mahanon to do what he did, and discount all of it. Treat it like a clever machination on Bull's part, manipulating the passions of an impressionable but useful sentimentalist. Call Mahanon bas saarebas instead of his name, either of his names, any of the names he might actually respond to. Bull can do these things.

And if it's uncomfortable at all, if it hurts, well. Suffering is a choice, and he can refuse it. In theory.

The days are growing shorter in these last dying weeks of summer, so it's just about dusk when the Chargers halt the night before reaching Lydes and break out their training equipment. Bull's ready for it - hours of sitting in a wagon, though easier than trying to manage hours of riding (never mind finding a damn mount that could accommodate him), has his muscles all cramped up and knotted. He can see Mahanon glancing at him from time to time as they start in on their usual exercises with a careful expression - not pitying, not even sympathetic, which is good because fuck knows Bull doesn't need any of that shit. But certainly trying to gauge how much pain Bull might be in.

Well, good fucking luck, Bull thinks, pointedly ignoring a stab of agony from a knot in his left thigh as he squares off with Grim. He'd be a pretty shit Ben Hassrath if he couldn't manage pain.

Exercise and training is real good for taking the mind off shit. He keeps focused on technique, on fixing forms and giving pointers. It's always gratifying to see his Chargers develop under his
watchful eye, come into their own technique.

Bull's passed off most of Mahanon's training to Skinner, and he's glad he did; the fluid, free-form style of Mahanon's birth clan is a good complement for Skinner's city elf, guerrilla-style technique. He's taken to Skinner's martial arts form with, if not ease, then speed and hard work with excellent results. He still gets dumped on his ass more times than not and suffers Skinner's gleeful teasing with good humour, but Bull can tell the exercise and practice is starting to settle into muscle memory. It's fun to watch when the two of them really get going, an odd dance where few hits actually land but the movement is constant and lightning-quick, showing off incredible reflexes and flexibility.

The flexibility is about where it goes from being fun to watch to being outright distracting, so Bull keeps his eyes front today and focuses on his own sparring.

In fact, he's so focused on his own shit that he's caught a little off-guard when Grim signs for a time-out and takes a seat, only for Mahanon to take his place.

"Skinner sent me over," Mahanon says, twirling his practice staff easily. "Said she wants a break and some entertainment, so."

"Huh," Bull says, glancing over at Skinner. He catches her nodding to Grim, who shrugs, and Krem's scowling at the both of them for some fucking reason. Bull narrows his eye. There's a conspiracy here, he's certain, but he's not sure he wants to know the details. "Let's be entertaining, then. No magic."

Mahanon swings his staff back into first position, raising an arm to guard with a little grin that's just a shade short of cocky. "No magic."

Bull nods and lunges forward into his first attack.

Mahanon is gone, quick as a shadow, dodging daringly close under Bull's arm and coming up to strike from behind. Bull follows through on his lunge to pivot into a whirling attack, nearly catching Mahanon in the side of the head with the flat of his blade. Mahanon bends hard back to avoid the blow, catching his balance with his staff, before he propels himself up into a round kick that snaps hard into Bull's ribs.

It's a good kick - in a bar fight, or against a softer opponent, it could do some real damage. Bull will definitely be feeling it later. It might even bruise. But for now, against a reaver-trained Qunari with what feels like more scar tissue than skin these days, it's about as debilitating as a bug bite.

Bull grins at Mahanon and nods to acknowledge his hit, but Mahanon squints in clear annoyance. He knows his kick didn't really do shit.

Good. Come get me, then.

Bull goes in for an overhead strike, but Mahanon is already moving - a low swipe that Bull is ready for, stomping sideways to catch the pole under his boot. Mahanon just manages to snatch it away, turning the fumble into a neat roll. Too late, Bull realizes Mahanon's just slipped into his blind spot. A kick to the ribs might not hurt too bad, but if he goes for the bad leg - as he should - that'll definitely put Bull off his game. Not enough to take him out entirely, but enough to make it a harder fight.

Bull swivels to catch him, anticipating the blow to his leg - too late to stop it now - but it never comes. Instead, he sees Mahanon clearly stumbling to change tactics halfway, breaking his
Bull's lip twists. Taking advantage of Mahanon's uncertainty he lets his practice sword fall into his left palm and sweeps it under Mahanon's legs, shoving the elf's shoulder hard with his free hand. Mahanon nearly flips, falling hard on his back with a pained *ooof*. Bull presses Mahanon into the grass with a solid boot on his chest, stabbing the point of his practice sword next to Mahanon's head as he looms over the elf.

"You hesitated," Bull says softly.

Mahanon opens his mouth to say something and Bull puts a little more weight on his chest. Mahanon's breath comes out as a gasping wheeze, and he nods reluctantly.

Satisfied, Bull steps off and offers Mahanon a hand up. Still struggling to get his wind back, Mahanon takes Bull's hand and lets the Qunari haul him to his feet, his cheeks flushed with exertion and a little shame.

"You're not doing anyone any favours by going easy," Bull says. "Not me, and definitely not you. If you hold back here it'll catch up to you on the field. I'm a real tough guy, I can take a good hit."

Mahanon bites his lip. "I didn't mean-"

"I know. I know that you know going for the leg would've fucked me up a bit more than usual. But fuck, Mouse, how the fuck else am I supposed to learn?" Bull leans on his practice sword, giving Mahanon an appraising look. "You were real fucking close to teaching me something today, something that might've made me better on the whole. Sometimes, learning shit is gonna hurt. I thought Skinner would've kicked your ass enough times to teach you that by now. Don't flick your ear at me, I'm making a point."

Mahanon touches his offending ear. "Sorry."

"Twenty-seven coppers."

"Not for the ear-"

"I know." Bull yanks his sword out of the dirt. "Come on. Again. And if you hesitate I'm absolutely going to beat your ass - and before you get any ideas, it won't be in a fun way."

Mahanon's eyes flare at that, and Bull takes advantage of his fluster to go for his kneecaps. Mahanon leaps out of the way, getting a proper hold on his staff and shooting Bull a glare. Yes, flirting to distract is a low blow, but he wants Mahanon to come at him with everything he has. Everything.

Mahanon's lip curls over his sharp teeth and he snakes forward with a little hiss, *finally* playing offence. Bull parries easily, but Mahanon counters by locking his pole into the crossguard of Bull's practice sword. He doesn't have the arm strength to wrest it away, but he's able to twist forward and slide the pole hard up towards Bull's chin. With a blade on the end, that'd go right into the jaw and through the head. It's a deliciously dirty move.

So is ducking one's head to catch the pole with one's horns, which Bull does. Bull twists the crossguard of his sword, wrenching the pole from Mahanon's hands. The pole flies free, and Bull's about to complete the move to bring the point of the sword up under Mahanon's chin when Mahanon-

Well what he does, is he jumps on Bull. More accurately, he *jumps* Bull. Very suddenly, quite
unexpectedly, the elf climbs Bull like a fucking tree - wrapping his legs tight around Bull's torso, an arm around his shoulders. For a brief second Bull thinks Mahanon is going to try for an extremely unconventional method of distraction, and honestly Bull would be- like, fuck, they definitely shouldn't, especially with all the Chargers watching, but if Mahanon's this determined-

Then he feels a hard, leather-wrapped point dig into the skin of his throat - Mahanon's dagger, still sheathed, pressed tight against his jugular.

Bull's not stunned. Absolutely the fuck not. He doesn't get stunned - at this point he's pretty sure between Ben Hassrath training and the nightmare of Seheron he doesn't have any of the muscles or mental functions necessary for being surprised.

But there's an elf in his arms coiled close around him like a lover, pressed so tight together that he can feel each heaving rise and fall of Mahanon's chest against his own. Close enough to kiss, but those thunderous eyes are narrowed dangerously, the points of Mahanon's teeth exposed in a silent snarl, his dagger at Bull's throat.

Well, he wanted Mahanon to give him everything.

And it shouldn't feel like a realization to think that no, Bull wants Mahanon to give him everything. And Mahanon wants to give him everything - there's frustration and hunger in Mahanon's eyes that goes well beyond this little sparring exercise. This is a fucking dare. Bull pushed, so Mahanon's pushing back. Hard.

Bull is, distantly, very fucking grateful for the loin guard he wears during combat. The loose pants he wears, though excellent for movement, would do nothing to hide how he feels about all this without the guard's help.

Another time, another place, Bull would honour what Mahanon's asking for here - honour the challenge by taking him on properly. He'd explain all the rules so Mahanon could understand what he's really getting himself into and then slowly take him apart, take everything Mahanon's willing to give up and really, truly earn that surrender. That submission.

But the Chargers are here, and Bull's still got a charged-up elf straddling his midsection, already slipping partway into a mindset he might not fully understand.

"Nice work," Bull says quietly - gently, just for them. Just for this fragile space between them, what little of it there is. He puts a hand on Mahanon's back, rubbing a thumb along Mahanon's spine. "Real nice."

Mahanon blinks, that fierce, desperate look fading from his expression. His iron grip on Bull slips momentarily as he seems to realize exactly what the fuck it is he's doing and Bull catches him, helping him find his feet again.

Mahanon swallows and steadies himself, looking up with an attempt at a carefree grin. "Caught you that time, didn't I?"

"Fuck yeah you did," Bull says. "How did it, uh-"

"How did it feel," Bull is in the middle of asking, because it's what he asks every Charger once they've learned a new move or adjusted their technique. How does it feel, how does it sit in the muscles and the bones, will this work? Is this something you want to continue with?

Mahanon knows the question, and probably the answer too. Some of that expectant need and hunger creeps into his eyes as he waits for Bull to finish asking.
I dare you, he seems to be saying without saying, staring at Bull. I fucking dare you.

Please.

Bull almost takes him up on the challenge.


Mahanon holds his gaze for another long moment, before finally looking away. "No doubt."

Bull offers a hand, and Mahanon shakes it. It's fine. Good.

The Chargers, for once, seem to be minding their own fucking business as Bull rotates his arms, gearing up for another round as he beckons Rocky over to spar. He's grateful.

Bull's been accused of many things over the years, rightly or wrongly. He's never been accused of cowardice. Who would even dare, even if there were a shred of truth in the claim? And there never has been. Ever.

And yet. And fucking yet.

It would be so much easier if he could explain the problem to Mahanon - he's sure the elf would understand. He would probably be far more understanding than he should be; "No, it's fine, Chief - you run along and tell your Ben Hassrath everything you know about me so a foreign power can keep a record on me forvermore, I don't mind." But that would make this thing between them real, and it would make Bull a liar - the wrong type of liar - to leave it out of his report.

If Bull were still with his people, this whole - whatever this is, it could be sorted out easily. He thinks a little longingly of the tamassrans as lies in his bedroll that night, trying to distract himself from that challenge in Mahanon's eyes, his sheathed dagger at Bull's throat. This is a need, a craving, and one that could be filled and fixed and cured without complicating things, if the proper resources were available to him. And right now, they're not.

Two more months. Just over two more months, until he hands in the report on Mahanon. And after that?

This isn't just about fucking. It was never just about fucking. Bull's not sure he has any fucking idea what he's doing, or thinking, and what's worse is that he's not sure he cares.

But right now, lying in his bedroll with the memory of Mahanon's weight on him, the elf's eyes and teeth and daring - right now it's at least mostly about fucking, and that's something that he can take care of. He'll find some pretty face in Lydes to spend the night with to take the edge off, clear his head a little, and he'll be able to hand in his report on Mahanon without any uncomfortable footnotes.

Two and a half more months. He'll manage. They'll both just have to manage.

Lydes is a good-sized town with modest applications of Orlesian resplendency - still gaudy as fuck compared to Ferelden or the Marches, but not as ostentatious as Halamshiral. A trading town with a focus on practical goods, it's an excellent place for a group of mercs to hole up in without hassle, even a group as eccentric as the Chargers. The enormous market square at the heart of the city plays host to delegations from all over - Fereldens and Marchers, Nevarrans and Antivans, Tranquil
and chanters, city elves and Dalish, surfacer dwarves and Orzammar representatives. Bull even
spots another pair of qunari horns in the crowd and can't help but clench his fists reflexively as he
takes in the mercenary outfit the qunari is wearing. He doesn't know of any other Ben Hassrath in
the area - there's no way this fucker isn't Tal Vashoth.

But, functionally, so is Bull. The Tal Vashoth catches his eye across the crowd and offers him a
nod and a commiserative grin. Bull salutes him back with a friendly smile, his stomach turning.

I'm not you, he thinks, as the Vashoth turns back to his compatriots. I will not ever be you.

Lydes is a busy enough trade hub to have a few offices to manage merc groups and independent
sellswords looking for work. As the Chargers carry on towards their usual inn, Bull swings by one
such office to get the word out that the Chargers are back in town. It's late enough in the evening
that most shopfronts have started closing up, but the clerk snuffing out the candles in the office
window quickly relights them when he sees Bull coming.

"It's been a while," the clerk says, closing the door behind Bull as he comes through. "The duke
himself asked when you'd be back through town next."

"Nice to be wanted," Bull says, ambling up to the counter. "Lemieux, wasn't it? You were just an
assistant last time we were here."

"I've been given a few more responsibilities since then," says the clerk proudly. "Did you want to
take a look through the listings, or-?"

"Not tonight," Bull says. "Just want to get registered, see who bites. We're in our usual spot."

"I see." The clerk takes a seat and pulls out a fresh registration slip, his eyes fixed on the paper as
he adds, "The duke's wife asked after you as well."

Bull grins. "Yeah?"

"Mm. I'm sure the duchess will be quite delighted to hear you're back in town."

After getting the paperwork all sorted it's a quick jaunt to the dead drop and back before Bull
finally joins his Chargers at the inn. Rocky and Grim are already playing cards in the common
room as Bull makes his way through and up the stairs to his room, where an enormous basin of
steaming hot water awaits him, thank fuck.

He takes his time getting cleaned up. The rough, road-weary merc is a look, sure, but the smell
definitely isn't for everyone. He's hoping to cast a nice wide net tonight - the common room
certainly looked busy enough to provide a variety of potential bedmates for the evening.

And if his mind keeps wandering back to a particular potential bedmate, a really fucking bad idea
of a potential bedmate with pointy ears and stormy eyes, well. That's what Ben Hassrath training is
for. Compartmentalization. He can do that.

So it is that by the time Bull descends back into the common room the Chargers have all grouped
around a table laden with food and drink, with two empty chairs. A quick count leaves Bull one
curly head short of a full crew.

Huh.

Bull sits and starts loading his plate with roast vegetables, potatoes, and thick slices of roast meat,
glancing around the table and catching up on the various conversation threads.
"-old news by now," Stitches is saying to Rocky with a shrug. "Seems like most of the mage-templar panic has blown over for the time being - no one's accused me of being an apostate recently, anyway. Besides, Lydes has always been very relaxed about these sorts of things."

"Helps the nearest Circle isn't so near," Rocky says. "I say we stay here for work 'til the Chantry sorts its shit out. It's nice to spend time in a city where not everyone's got their asses clenched so tight all the time."

Grim and Krem are having a fierce and quick-fingered handspeak debate about something half under the table, so Bull can't quite make it out. No matter. He looks over at Skinner and Dalish, who are in turn watching something happening at the bar, leaning in to murmur commentary to one another.

"I just think he looks boring, that's all," Skinner says, wrinkling her nose.

"Not boring, sweet," says Dalish. "Look at that smile."

"Simple."

"Simple is fine for a quick tumble."

"He looks like it would be a very quick tumble." Skinner makes a brief wet noise to punctuate her point. "In and out."

"Ugh, Skinner."

Curious, Bull follows their gaze to the bar. It's busy, with plenty of men who could easily fit Dalish and Skinner's assessments.

Mahanon is also at the bar, solving the mystery of the empty chair to Dalish's left, and he looks good. Distractingly good. He's definitely cleaned up for the evening, dressed in a fine tunic cut low to show off the Sliabh tattoos curling over his chest. His hair is down, curls falling into his large eyes as he smiles in that polite, uncertain way of his... up at the man currently standing next to him, leaning in close for what looks like quite a friendly chat.

Bull blinks. Oh.

This guy has to be the one Dalish and Skinner are gossiping about, and, yeah. The man has a sweet (and real fuckin' simple) smile and a handsome face: square jaw, straight nose, broad shoulders, russet hair. He's average height for a human male which still gives him some significant height on Mahanon, but he's respectful about it - no looming to try for dominance or intimidation, and he gives Mahanon his space despite his clear interest in the elf.

And fuck is the man ever interested. His eyes are fixed on Mahanon's face as they talk, occasionally drifting to the tattoos and the long legs before shooting back up again with a chagrined wince. Bull can't blame him - the leggings Mahanon's wearing lace down along the sides of his thighs, showing a tantalizing line of skin that- well, it draws the eye, is what it does.

Mahanon's obviously flattered by the attention, and judging by the quick glances Mahanon sneaks from under his eyelashes at the man's broad shoulders and well-muscled arms, Mahanon's at least curious about the man, if not outright attracted. Why wouldn't he be? The man's got classic good looks. Bull's certain he's caught sight of similar-looking men in the illustrations of the romance books Mahanon likes to read when he thinks the Chargers aren't looking.

Bull carefully pours himself an ale. This is good, is what it is. It's a solution Bull didn't even think
of, which- well, that was a glaring oversight on his part, and one he kicks himself for. Sure, Mahanon's never gone for one-night tumbles before - Bull gets the feeling that fleeting liaisons with strangers are about as far from Mahanon's preferred taste in sexual encounters as one could get - but, well. Other people have eyes, and Mahanon is- objectively, very objectively, he's-

Yes, this is good. A very neat removal of temptation. And, hey, maybe it means that Mahanon's given up and moved on from his interest in Bull, which would also be a convenient solution. Some problems are considerate enough to solve themselves. Not many, but some.

Bull glances at the man again, and Mahanon, then back to his plate. He starts eating.

The guy does look boring as fuck, though. Attractive, if you're into that kind of handsome chevalier look, but boring. Bull knows what Mahanon looks like when he's thinking, or when something catches that spark of curiosity and sets his wheels spinning. Bull doesn't see any of that happening here. It's small talk, gentle flirting, the usual common room chat-up.

Which would be fine if Mahanon was the kind of person who fell into bed with people more often. But he doesn't, and this guy doesn't know that, wouldn't know how lucky he is quite frankly, and... well, it would just be a shame if he ended up wasting Mahanon's time by underwhelming him.

(Well. He probably won't waste much of Mahanon's time, at least. Bull agrees with Skinner's assessment on that one.)

But it's not Bull's call and it's none of Bull's business. He refocuses his attention on his food and the table conversation, and doesn't look up even as he hears Mahanon's gentle laughter clear from the bar and wonders what in the fuck a guy who seems blissfully unburdened by excess thoughts might have said that was so funny.

Mahanon rejoins the table a few minutes later, his cheeks flushed and a little smile on his lips as he takes a seat. The smile slips as the attention of most of the Chargers immediately converges on him with their usual tact and subtlety.

"You gonna fuck that guy?" Rocky asks first.

"Don't fuck him, he's *boring,*" Skinner moans.

"He's got a very nice face - most of his teeth too, I'm guessing?" says Dalish.

"Not a bad idea, blowing off some steam," Krem says. "You definitely deserve some fun with the week you've had."

"Here, this'll keep you from picking anything up or passing anything on," Stitches says, handing a now deeply-crimson Mahanon a small vial of murky-looking liquid that Bull knows well. "Brewed up a fresh batch this morning, knowing what everyone's like when we roll into town. That should cover you for about twelve hours, give or take."

"Or give *and* take," says Rocky with a chuckle, "depending on his stamina-"

Mahanon makes a loud, distressed noise and buries his burning face in his hands, sparks trickling through his curls and dripping onto his shoulders. "*Fenhedis,* all of you, we just- we were just talking!"

"It certainly looked like a very *stimulating* conversation," Dalish says sweetly, and Mahanon groans.
"Doubt it," Skinner mutters. "Men like that tend to let their looks do all the talking. Boring."

"Seriously, I really don't think he was interested-" Mahanon says weakly, and is cut off by a round of dubious groans from the Chargers as well as a balled-up napkin tossed at him. "Honestly!"

"At least take the potion," Stitches says. "Right now, before you forget. Just in case."

Mahanon considers the vial for a moment and, with a roll of his eyes, uncorks it and shoots it back. The Chargers give a cheer and Mahanon sinks low in his chair, hiding his face in his hands again. "You're all- this is- ugh."

"Look sharp, Mouse," Krem warns. "Incoming."

Mahanon straightens abruptly as the man approaches the table. Close up, the man is as handsome as he was from afar, and- well, yeah, there's no great spark of unexpected intelligence in the guy's eyes, but... fine. He does at least seem nice.

Mahanon deserves nice, and good-looking, and simple.

Bull keeps his eyes on his ale and takes a nice big swig as the man leans over and whispers a room number to Mahanon, even putting a hand on the elf's shoulder and giving it a quick squeeze.

"Oh," says Mahanon, sounding genuinely surprised.

"No obligation, of course," the man says. "But I'll keep the door unlocked, if you want to, uh. Talk more."

"Good way to get all your shit stolen," Skinner mutters. The man gives her a blank look, and she toasts him with a sharp grin.

"I'll... keep it in mind," Mahanon says, carefully noncommittal, but he offers the man a friendly smile. "It was nice to meet you."

The man nods and gives the Chargers an awkward little wave before setting off for the stairs.

"Oh, he seemed lovely," says Dalish. "Go on, da'len, I'll cover your share if you want to follow him."

"I'm, um-" Mahanon tilts his head, drumming his fingertips on the table. "I don't know. Huh."

"Nice face, clean, respectful- probably the best bet in a place like this," Stitches says. "Are you waiting for a better offer?"

Mahanon keeps his gaze fixed forward, but his ear flicks at that. "He was very nice, I just, um. Don't know if he's my type, I suppose."

"What is your type, then?" Rocky asks. "Besides, you know. Men."

Mahanon's finger-drumming on the table picks up speed, his ear flicking again. "I- hmm."

"Chief's been quiet," says Skinner. "Bet he thought the shem was boring too."

Bull laces his hands behind his head, leaning back in his chair. "Eh. Hard to tell from a glance. Seemed nice."

"Not like you to hold back an opinion, Chief," Krem says quietly.
Bull shrugs. "What's there to say? It's up to Mouse who he tumbles, yeah? He could do worse."

"'He' is sitting right here," Mahanon mutters. He glances at Bull sidelong and breathes in as if to say something to him, then purses his lips and looks away again. "Well, I've got a drink to finish, at any rate. Then, I don't know. We'll see."

The conversation moves on quickly after that, and it's all very relaxed. Mahanon sips his mead and jokes with Dalish and Skinner as dinner is finished and the pile of plates whisked away, and Bull works through his ale and chats with his people and scans the room for his own distraction for the evening. There are plenty of pretty faces, some already turned his way. A wink would be enough to garner an invitation - nice and quick and clean and painless. He holds off for now, his mind drifting, playing a strange bout of mental tug-of-war as he keeps coming back to-

Because he's honestly not bothered by the idea of Mahanon sleeping with that man. Sex is sex. He's never understood human jealousy in that regard - under the Qun it's so entirely divorced that the idea of getting one's knickers in a twist over who's fucking who and when and how seems so trivial as to be laughable.

So he has no real fucking clue why he can't let it go. This is a good thing, and so much better that Mahanon might not just be waiting around for Bull. It's just... Bull knows Mahanon, that's all. Knows that Mahanon likes a little romance, likes a little manhandling, likes a little danger, probably all of these things a lot more than a little. Knows that Mahanon would never ask for what he really wants unless he's given the space and freedom to, has to have it coaxed or teased out of him. And it doesn't have to be Bull, probably shouldn't be Bull, but if Mahanon is so sparing with who he sleeps with and when, Bull just... wants the people he spends his time with to give him that care and attention. Wants someone to admire every inch of Mahanon so thoroughly that he'll stop looking so damn surprised when people express interest in him. Wants someone for Mahanon who'll at least try to calm that spinning mind of his, instead of just grappling for their own pleasure as these kinds of hook-ups tend to and leaving things at that.

But, well, fuck. It's just one night and it doesn't really matter, in the end. It'll be fine. It's just sex. Then suddenly Mahanon is standing, the first to retire - as always. "Well, I'll see you all tomorrow."

"You gonna go put that man out of his misery?" Rocky asks. "He's probably worked up a good frustrated sweat by now."

Mahanon laughs. "Over me? I doubt it."

The moment Mahanon's out of earshot, Dalish sighs. "He still doesn't think very much of himself, does he?"

"Well, maybe this'll boost his confidence a little," Stitches says. "Help him figure some shit out."

"If he doesn't die of boredom," mutters Skinner. "If he was really looking for a good time, there's at least three other men in this room alone who'd probably be worth a go."

"But he never really looks, does he?" Dalish says. "Really, have any of us actually seen him try for someone? What would that even be like?"

"'Excuse me, ser,'" Rocky says, mimicking Mahanon's accent and careful way of speaking. "'I don't mean to interrupt, but might I interest you in some elf?'"
The Chargers laugh, and not unkindly. Bull remembers to join in a split second late. It's not an inaccurate mimic of Mahanon as a person, after all. But- well, it's hard to reconcile with Mahanon's far too keen-eyed stare and searching looks, his occasional bursts of boldness. Telling Bull again and again, sometimes directly, that he's interested. Never pushing until pushed, then pushing back with everything he has, and waiting so fucking patiently-

And sometimes, not so patiently. Bull touches his neck where Mahanon shoved his dagger against his throat yesterday. Challenging him. Pushing back and asking, and? What now? Do you want this or no?

Bull notices that Krem isn't really laughing either, just watching Bull.

"I think I'm gonna turn in, too," Bull finds himself saying, pushing himself up to his feet. "Lots of shit to do tomorrow."

Some of the eyes Bull caught throughout the evening follow him as he goes, pretty faces turned towards him and waiting for some sign, some invitation. Bull keeps his gaze fixed forward. He's not entirely sure what he's intending to do, here, but his current plan involves going back to his room and meditating until his brain finally goes dark and quiet, or drinking until the same effect is achieved.

He reaches the top of the stairs and turns the corner, and spots a familiar slim figure leaned up against the door to his room.

Bull's pulse doesn't leap, but it flickers, something like relief and trepidation in equal measures tingling at the back of his scalp. He doesn't blink or check his stride, but he does allow himself to frown a little as he approaches the door. Mahanon's eyes glint in the low light as he watches him, shifting aside as Bull fishes his key out from his pocket to allow him space to unlock the door.

It's all very quiet, as Bull lets them both into the room, closing the door over behind him but leaving it very slightly ajar. Mahanon takes a quick glance around the room before turning back to Bull, but he's still very close. He looks up at Bull, not saying anything, just searching his face. His single eye.

The silence has already gone on too long for Bull to play this off as anything but what it is. Still. A good Ben Hassrath would tell Mahanon to leave. A really good Ben Hassrath would convince Mahanon that Bull was never interested in him in the slightest, would take Mahanon's thoughts and twist them around so thoroughly as to rewrite an entire four month's worth of memories and leave Mahanon wondering how he ever could have mistaken the situation so entirely.

Mahanon's clever, but he trusts Bull and doubts himself. An absolutely fatal weakness that Bull has to exploit.

Bull remembers the Tal Vashoth in the marketplace and clenches his jaw. This fine, fine line he's straddling, that leash that keeps him from tumbling into madness - there's no other path for him, here. Freedom is a seductive fucking lie. Every Tal Vashoth he's ever met and fought and killed has taught him that, again and again. Every one.

Except...

Bull has been noticing it all damn night, but really strikes him now - Mahanon looks good. Deep sun-kissed skin and loose, free curls, his shape filling out with fine muscles from moving and fighting in ways that finally suit him. Even now, staring Bull down (and he really is staring him down, despite Bull's significant height advantage on the elf, which is impressive in and of
itself), his gaze is steady, back straight and shoulders squared.

Mahanon chose to be free, and seems to be taking every advantage freedom is affording him.

Bull wonders, absently, if he's even a match for that kind of courage.

"That man seemed nice," Bull says.

"He was," Mahanon says. "He was very nice when I told him he should find someone else to spend the evening with."

Bull breathes, feeling some terrible, roiling satisfaction at hearing this. *Fuck.* "Mahanon-"

"I need you to be clear with me, please," Mahanon says, his voice shivering a little even as he stands straight and tall. So fucking *brave.* "If it's a no, then I need to know that it's a 'no.' If there's some reason why it's not now - a *real* reason, if you give me some shit about professionalism I might just set something on fire and that something *might* just be you - then, alright, I can wait. And if it's a yes-" Mahanon breathes. "I'm not expecting anything, I'm really not. I just need to know what you want, if you even want anything." Mahanon swallows and finally breaks Bull's gaze. "And if you don't, um, I'd appreciate it if we could pretend this never happened, and I was never here, or that I was momentarily possessed-"

"Hey," says Bull softly, and Mahanon shuts up. "Is this what you really want?"

Mahanon looks up sharply at that. "Are you fucking joking? Bull- fuck, Chief-"

"*Bull,*" says Bull firmly. "Here, talking about this shit- it's Bull."

"Bull," Mahanon echoes gently, and Bull actually flexes his hands to hear it because- fuck, he wants to hear Mahanon say his name like that, over and over, loud and soft and breathless and begging- "I think you know damn well what I want."

"Tell me," Bull says, letting a reckless edge line his words.

Mahanon's eyes go wide at this, his lips parting, that charged look from yesterday flooding his face.

He takes a hesitant step forward, but his eyes never leave Bull's, and his voice is deliberate and honest as he says, "I want you to fucking devour me."

Bull just manages to catch a primal growl in his throat at this, and it's all he can do not close the scant distance between them right there. Only one thing holds him back, one scant thread of the leash, and if it didn't- if it didn't have the potential to break this thing, to hurt Mahanon, he wouldn't even-

"The Ben Hassrath are investigating you," Bull says, his voice coming out in a frustrated rush.

Mahanon's face slips blank for a moment as he's clearly thrown by this. "Wha- because of the fraternity thing? I didn't think they knew about that yet."

"They don't," Bull says. "They like to keep track of people who are working for me, especially if- well, they don't like that I've hired another mage on. They want to know why I'd take that risk."

Mahanon processes this for a moment. "Fuck."

"Yeah."
Mahanon shakes his head and looks up at Bull, frowning. "You... should you even be telling me this?"

"No," says Bull.

"Mythal'enaste," says Mahanon roughly, a few sparks winding through his hair. "Why-?"

"Because," Bull says, "you need to know that I can't-" Bull swallows that thought before he can finish it, and continues with, "-that not everything can stay in this room."

Mahanon just stares at him, and Bull finds himself- can't fucking help himself, as he reaches up and takes Mahanon's face in his hands, scarred flesh and missing fingers a sharp contrast to Mahanon's dark and freckled features, his soft smooth skin.

"You can walk away, Mahanon," Bull says quietly, tracing a thumb over Mahanon's cheek and feeling the elf's breath shudder over his hands. He quirks a rueful smile. "Maybe find yourself someone to bed who can give you everything you want, and without adding- you know, like, twelve other things to worry about."

"Only twelve?" Mahanon says faintly, putting a hand over Bull's. "Seems a low estimate."

"You're the numbers guy, so I'll trust your math on that one," Bull says. "I mean it, though. This is probably a really fucking terrible idea."

"Oh yes," Mahanon says, and Bull can tell he's thinking through it - measuring, weighing the outcomes, the risks, the wheels spinning and turning behind those incredible eyes. "Fucking terrible."

Mahanon slips out of Bull's hands and brushes past him. Bull lets him go, quickly putting up a solid wall between the painful drop in his chest and his thoughts. No, this makes sense. This is better, of course Mahanon wouldn't- yeah, alright, this is the ideal outcome, and this saves them both a shit ton of trouble and Mahanon so much disappointment in the long run, probably-

Bull hears the door close and the lock turn behind him, and closes his eye briefly before turning.

He's not expecting to see Mahanon standing there on this side of the door, looking up at him expectantly.

"Bull?" Mahanon says in a small voice, as Bull just stands there. He's clearly still half-expecting Bull to reject him.

Well. Fuck that.

Bull surges forward, lifting Mahanon right off his feet and pinning him hard against the door as he finally, finally meets Mahanon's full, honey-mead lips in a crushing kiss. And as Mahanon squirms in Bull's grasp to wrap his long legs around Bull's waist, his arms around Bull's shoulders, pulling him desperately closer as his body arches to press hard against Bull and kissing him back hard with a needy gasp, Bull has never felt so fucking relieved.
YOU WON'T BELIEVE! HOW MANY IMPORTANT THINGS I PUT OFF TO WORK ON THIS CHAPTER! PRIORITIES!

Pretty fuckin' classic song choice: "Every Other Freckle" by alt-j
And the playlist link.

CONTENT WARNINGS ON THIS CHAPTER ARE AS FOLLOWS (YOU MIGHT HAVE NOTICED THE RATING WENT UP - IT DID SO FOR A REASON):
- A long and exhaustive conversation about consent and kink negotiation for what is, in the grand scheme of things, a pretty vanilla scene. EVEN SO, explicit consent is my kink, so deal with it. If you wanna skip to the smut, it's about a third of the way down.
- General content warning for power exchange dynamics - full dom/sub, with subspace and such.
- Restraint/binding
- Edging/orgasm denial
- Oral sex, rimming
- Passing mention of belting/spanking - doesn't happen (yet) but thought I'd mention it because it's mentioned
- Anal sex
- Lots of biting/painplay
- Sensory deprivation in the form of magic suppression (questionable uses of magebane)
- Anxiety during sex that is lovingly and carefully worked through
- People with very little experience in the bedroom diving headfirst into (pretty light) BDSM, would not suggest trying that at home (hence the five hours of kink/consent negotiation beforehand - still!).

Really hope I haven't forgotten anything major, it is 3 am and I'm a little loopy. Oh, also - please do not take your info on BDSM from fanfic and bring it into the real world!! I tried hard to make sure this was all safe/sane/consensual/accurate, but like. Research is good. Play safe y'all.

This chapter is LITERALLY just - all smut (like emotional smut, but still). So if that's not why you're here feel free to skip to the next chapter.

But like, I know y'all. This is an Iron Bull fic. I *know*. Still, for those few souls who ain't about this shit, I salute you and I'll see you back here next chapter for cuddles and aftercare and conversation (and maybe a lil more smutty stuff, we'll see).

ALSO THANK YOU TO STITCH FOR REMINDING ME THAT THE WORD "HARNESS" EXISTS, AND A NOT SO THANK YOU TO TINY FOR REMINDING ME THAT "TURGID" EXISTS AND BEASTDRIPS FOR REMINDING ME THAT "BULBOUS" EXISTS

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Mahanon clings tight to Bull as the Qunari kisses him utterly breathless, his heart hammering against his throat. Mahanon gives him everything he has, his own need and desire driving him as he moves with Bull, his thoughts swirling so fast they're little more than fragments of feelings. It's really- they're really, they're both-

Bull's arms are so tight around him, his kisses hungry and tender and sometimes sharp, teeth closing on Mahanon's lower lip with his rough tongue following with a quick swipe to soothe the bite. Mahanon can barely keep up- fuck, he's really not very experienced, has no idea if he's any good at this, is half worried that Bull will laugh at his fumblings and change his mind-

Bull presses forward between his legs with a roll of his hips, the sudden pressure punching a desperate whine from Mahanon as the fabric of his leggings drags against him. He's already hard and he knows Bull can feel him, can taste it in Bull's grin, and it only serves to fluster him further.

Bull shifts his grip so he's supporting Mahanon's weight fully in his arms and on his hips before stepping away from the door and back, back a few steps to sit hard on the edge of his bed. Mahanon straddles Bull's lap, letting his hands explore every inch of grey skin he can reach, every new touch and texture a revelation to his fingertips. Bull chuckles against Mahanon's lips as his hands inevitably find Bull's horns, tracing the line where skin gives way to rough keratin and further, right along the broad rack.

"They make for great handholds," Bull murmurs, his own hands smoothing down over Mahanon's back and finding the hem of his tunic. "If you need something to grip onto later."

"I'll keep that in mind," Mahanon gasps, already sounding- fuck, so stupidly wrecked, but the promise of "later" and Bull's hands sneaking up under his shirt, rough hands and fingertips trailing over the bare skin of his back- it's overwhelming, really, terribly hard to focus or think or breathe with Bull doing these things to him.

"Lift your arms," Bull says. "I want to see you."

Mahanon does, instantly - Bull's voice has that edge again that makes Mahanon sweat, imagining all the things Bull might demand of him. He's hoping if he shows how quickly he responds to that tone, Bull will use it more, ask for more, really take charge-

Bull pulls Mahanon's tunic off over his head and tosses it away, taking hold of Mahanon's shoulders and pushing him back just enough to examine Mahanon's *vallaslin* in the low candlelight. Mahanon shivers under Bull's scrutiny, already missing Bull's lips, his face tingling from where Bull's short-cropped beard and moustache rubbed up rough against his skin.

"Fuckin' gorgeous," Bull murmurs, and Mahanon's heart flips. He doesn't realize he's looked away and dropped his eyes at this until Bull takes the point of his chin and forces Mahanon to meet his searing gaze. "Gorgeous. Fuck, have you ever really looked at yourself?"

"I-" Mahanon tries, and swallows, melting under Bull's intensity. "You- you think-?"

"Uh huh," Bull says, his voice softening. He pulls Mahanon close again and kisses him deeply, tempering that heat and hunger into something so- fuck, it's firm and gentle and reassuring and fiercely *wanting* all at once, so much so that Mahanon's breath catches in his throat. "You're fucking exquisite. Wanna taste every one of your tattoos."

Mahanon can't help it - he glances down at his hips, where the curling knots of *vallaslin* cascade down past the hem of his leggings. Bull laughs again and presses his lips to Mahanon's ear to
murmur, "Every one."

Which just about undoes Mahanon right then and there.

Bull shifts his thighs apart, forcing Mahanon's legs to spread wide over his lap, and makes a satisfied sound deep in his throat at Mahanon's flexibility. His hand snakes up into Mahanon's hair and tugs, forcing Mahanon's head back until he's arched back, Bull's tight grip riding a delicious fine line between pain and pleasure that makes Mahanon squirm in Bull's grip.

Bull's lips brush the line of Mahanon's jaw, teasingly soft, and Mahanon's breath escapes him in a needy whimper. Bull smiles against his skin and his mouth travels lower, first kissing along his throat, then licking a long line from the hollow of Mahanon's collarbone to the tip of his chin. Mahanon, caught and held firmly in Bull's grasp, his hair tangled up in Bull's vice grip, can do little more than shudder and twist in Bull's arms as Bull teases him, utterly incapable of controlling his body's reactions to Bull's touch. Bull's kisses turn hungry again, biting and sucking along Mahanon's collarbone, and Mahanon surprises himself with a humiliatingly loud moan as Bull's teeth sink into his shoulder. He claps a hand over his mouth to silence himself, feeling his face flush utterly crimson.

Bull growls into his neck and takes hold of Mahanon's wrists, twisting suddenly to flip them both. Mahanon finds himself shoved flat on his back against the mattress, his wrists pinned on either side of his head in Bull's vice grip, the Qunari towering over him. Mahanon meets Bull's gaze and tests Bull's grip on him with a gentle tug, and grits his teeth against another embarrassing whine as Bull holds him fast. He's not going anywhere, doesn't want to go anywhere, and being held like this - held down like this -

Bull sits up abruptly, releasing Mahanon's hands, and helps Mahanon back up. That dangerous look in Bull's eye is gone, as is the edge in his voice when he speaks next, and the whiplash makes Mahanon's head spin. It feels a little like being abruptly dumped out of a dream.

"Sorry," Bull says, his hands smoothing down over Mahanon's shoulders. "You with me?"

Mahanon blinks rapidly, focusing on Bull's touch. "I- yes, I am. Fuck. Why did we stop, did I-?"

"Fuck no," Bull says, pulling Mahanon close into a tight embrace. Mahanon tucks his head in under Bull's chin, still feeling a bit spun out. "I just want to make sure we're on the same page, here. And if we are, well, we've got to talk some shit out before we do anything else. Just to make sure we're being safe."

Mahanon blinks, his heart jumping. He pulls back to look up at Bull. There's a distant part of him dying at the idea of admitting what it is he wants with Bull, from Bull, but in this room and in Bull's arms-

"I want you to take charge of me," Mahanon says, and even that admission takes work, feels as revealing as taking off another layer of clothing. Bull's eye darkens, and Mahanon adds, "You... want to take charge of me."

"Uh huh," Bull says, the heat in his voice making Mahanon shiver. "Which means we have to lay down some ground rules."

Mahanon nods. He's read about this sort of thing - with, he imagines, various degrees of accuracy in the writing. "I don't have a lot of, er, first-hand experience-"

"I figured," says Bull, tracing his thumb along Mahanon's chin. "So we're gonna be slow and smart
about this. Take it one night at a time. Yeah?"

Mahanon's face momentarily jumps into a grin at this - *one night at a time*, suggesting this might-it might not be their *only* night, that Bull might want more- even just more of this- "Yes, that seems- yes."

"So tonight," Bull says, slipping his arm under Mahanon's legs and lifting him into his lap, cradling him close. "I want to hear you - every noise you make, every shiver, every squirm; I want it. If I have to tie your wrists to the headboard so you can't hide yourself behind your hands, well."

Mahanon sucks in a long breath at this, his cock jumping almost painfully in his leggings. "Creators, *please.*"

"I also want you to give me everything - control, worries, thoughts - I want to tease you until I know you've surrendered it all to me, and I won't let you come until you do," Bull says, all very matter-of-factly, even as Mahanon tenses from head to toe at the very thought of how Bull plans to "tease" him. "If you don't want that, we don't have to go there. We don't have to do any of this if-"

Bull grunts out a startled laugh, and shakes out his arm. Mahanon realizes that he's got sparks spilling out of nearly every pore onto Bull, as well as larger threads of lightning occasionally sparking over his skin.

"Fuck, sorry," Mahanon says, sitting up and forcing himself to calm the fuck down, hauling his magic back under his skin. "Sorry, sorry-"

"Hey, don't worry about it," Bull says, still laughing. "It kinda- tingles a bit, honestly."

Mahanon groans, putting a hand to his hair, thinking hard. "Alright, I- I'm probably going to find myself questioning my own sanity in a few minutes, but- fuck, I think I would enjoy that. You-doing that to me. Um-" Mahanon closes his eyes, and says, "-do you... happen to have magebane on you?"

Bull's smile drops abruptly. "You don't have to-"

"I know," says Mahanon, flicking a stray spark off his hand before it can drip onto Bull's arm. "But I- if you want my surrender, for me to give you *everything*, I can't- I wouldn't be able to do that if half my head is focused on not bringing a lightning bolt down on you for tormenting me as much as I suspect you plan to."

"Fair point," Bull says, a nervous flicker crossing his scarred face for the briefest of moments as he grimaces. "I don't want to ask anything of you that you're not willing to give."

"I'm willing," Mahanon says firmly, leaning up to look Bull directly in the eye. "Bull, I'm very fucking willing."

Bull nods, and kisses Mahanon very gently, so softly it feels like a reward. "Alright. If you want everything to stop, you say 'katoh,' alright? That's your escape - 'katoh,' it ends, we have some chocolate, and we calm down for the night."

Mahanon laughs. "Do you actually have chocolate with you?"

"I do, and I mean it - I'm very serious about chocolate."

Mahanon loops his arms around Bull's neck, feeling like his heart might burst from affection. "'Katoh,' huh?"
"Katoh," Bull echoes.

"What if I want to- just pause, not stop?" Mahanon asks. "If I have a question, or- I don't know, just need to catch my breath for a moment?"

"Sure," Bull says, his hand drifting down along Mahanon's thigh, fingertips tracing over the bare skin under the lace-up of the leggings. Mahanon forces himself to keep still, but a few more sparks trickle away from him in response. "What's something you know for sure you wouldn't say in bed by accident? A name, or a word..."

Mahanon thinks for a moment, then says, "Halla?"

"Something you wouldn't say in bed, I hear some weird shit about the Dalish."

Mahanon makes a face and shoves Bull, who grins. "Ass."

"Definitely not 'ass,' or we'll really be fucked."

"You- ugh." Mahanon balances his forehead against Bull's collarbone and thinks, tries to think of the least erotic word imaginable. "Hahren, perhaps?"

"What does that mean?"

"It's how we refer to our Elders," Mahanon says. "A term of respect."

"Hmm," Bull says. "I mean, some people are into that kind of thing. You know, calling people 'ser.'" Bull grins. "I mean, I wouldn't mind you calling me 'ser,' let's put it that way."

"I'll keep that in mind. Still, this would be more akin to calling you 'grandfather,'" Mahanon says, raising a brow. "Really respecting your... advanced age."

"Ouch," Bull says with a wince. "Fair point, but I still think it's too loaded. We're playing with power here - you'll want something nice and mundane."

"'Durgen,' then," Mahanon says. "It just means 'stone.' Nothing very sexy about stones."

Bull ponders this, and nods. "That should work. 'Durgen' for pause, 'katoh' for stop. Agreed?"

Mahanon smiles. "Agreed."

"Okay." Bull presses his lips to Mahanon's hair and says, "I also want to fuck you tonight."

Mahanon breathes in sharply, shifting closer in Bull's arms. "I would certainly hope so."

"We're going to have to take that real fucking slow, given some uh- serious size discrepancy," Bull says, and Mahanon snorts. "And it's been a while for you, hasn't it?"

Mahanon squeezes his eyes shut. **Shit.** He was sort of hoping this wouldn't come up.

Bull must feel him tense - certainly takes notice of Mahanon's silence - and pulls back, taking Mahanon's face in his hands and searching his expression. "You haven't actually done this before, have you?"

"I mean, I'm hardly some- blushing virgin, or whatever," Mahanon says, even as he feels his face go very red indeed. "I've had- encounters, and one I'd say that definitely counted as- well. Just. Nothing quite so... in-depth. There was never really a chance, with my clan, and not a lot of time on
my own the few times we ventured into human cities." Mahanon drops his eyes. "Quite honestly, being invited back to a human dwelling is how a lot of my people go missing, especially if- if you can't tell the rest of your clan where you're going and what you're doing, knowing how they might... react."

Bull says nothing in the wake of Mahanon's babbling, and Mahanon laughs nervously. "Anyway, I decided that I wasn't so desperate to fuck that I was willing to risk that sort of nonsense, and, well. Here we are, now. I really know how to kill a mood, don't I?" Bull gives a slow shake of his head, even as Mahanon buries his face in his hands. "Ugh, I shouldn't have said anything."

"Hey," Bull says again, very softly. "It's okay. I want to know these things."

Mahanon's feels his heart go dangerously soft, dangerously wanting at Bull's tender tone, and has to remind himself who's holding him right now. At the end of the day - night, whatever - no matter what they do here... it's sex, and maybe friendship, and Mahanon is happy enough to receive and provide both, but it's not- well, Mahanon has no illusions about what it is and isn't. So he takes comfort in Bull's arms and words, but he does not take more than what's being offered.

"Are you sure this is how you want things to go, then?" Bull says. "Kinda jumping in at the deep end a bit, don't you think?"

Mahanon meets Bull's gaze, squaring his chin obstinately. "Maybe I like the deep end."

"Still-"

"Bull, I want this - I want you - far more than I'd want some stranger at a bar," Mahanon says boldly. "Are you saying I need to work my way up through mediocre nights with people I'm not attracted to for- what, practice?" Mahanon looks away. "If you're not comfortable with- well, I understand, but I don't know how many times I have to say I'm very willing."

"I'm comfortable," Bull rumbles, tangling his fingers up in Mahanon's curls again and pressing his lips to Mahanon's temples. "Believe me, I want you."

"Then take me," Mahanon breathes.

Bull makes a hungry, guttural sound in his throat, his lips finding Mahanon's mouth again. Mahanon moans softly into Bull's kiss, still revelling in every touch, the intimacy of Bull's lips on his, feeling small in Bull's arms.

"Alright," Bull murmurs, stroking his hand down along Mahanon's bare back, resting briefly on his hip. "Let me grab some things. Anything you need to do?"

"Set up a silencing sigil, that won't take too long," Mahanon says. "Just so everything in this room, er, stays in this room."

"Worried we might wake up the other patrons?" Bull grins.

"Something like that. I've already-" Mahanon struggles for a moment, then says, "-well, I'm already prepared, if you catch my meaning."

"You-" Bull blinks. "Huh. You were only gone for a few minutes before I left the table."

Mahanon shrugs. "Magic can be very useful."

He makes the flicking gesture that accompanies his usual cleaning spell, and Bull nods in
understanding. "Fuck." Bull smiles broadly. "That opens up a lot of possibilities for hooking up on the road."

"Creators only know what the others would think of that," Mahanon mutters, slipping out of Bull's lap and starting his sigil work on the door.

"Why, do you care?"

Mahanon glances back at Bull over his shoulder, biting back a smile as the Qunari's eye roams over the lines of vallaslin cascading down along his spine and over his hips, and lower still. It's a heady experience, being on the receiving end of that kind of desire. He's still not entirely sure he trusts or believes it - Mahanon is Mahanon, after all, he's Mouse, and Bull is... well. "Not really. Not at all, actually."

Bull stands, unclasping the buckles of his harness and slipping it off over his broad shoulders. Mahanon keeps half an eye on Bull as he completes his sigil work - the sigil will last at least a few hours, even after Mahanon's magic is suppressed, but it takes a little longer to cast than a normal invocation.

He watches with curiosity as Bull pulls out a small jar from his bag, placing it on the bedside table, and brings over the water jug and two cups as well. He also arranges some towels and cloths beside the bed, quickly wetting one of them in the nightly wash water left by the inn's cleaning staff.

"I can clean up after," Mahanon offers. "Or- well, whenever my magic comes back."

Bull shakes his head.

"There's a pretty hefty chance you won't be in a state to do much of anything when I'm finished with you," Bull says conversationally, and Mahanon's hand jitters on his work, releasing a small bolt of lightning into the wood of the door with a sizzle. "Don't worry about it. Your only job will be to relax, I promise."

"Doesn't seem fair," Mahanon says, focusing his attention on his craft to avoid any further misplaced sparks. "You doing all this work, then everything after too- shouldn't I be serving you? I promise I don't mind."

"Different kinds of serving, and pretty fuckin' bold of you to think you won't be doing any work," Bull says. "I've seen you, Ser 'I Will Not Sleep Until The Accounts Are Settled.' Letting go of all that, actually letting someone else do the thinking for you - that's gonna be tough. Probably make you work up a good sweat over it." That edge is back in Bull's voice as he adds, "And that's without taking into consideration all the other ways I'm gonna make you sweat."

"Fuck," Mahanon mutters, nearly slipping on one of the last lines of the sigil. "Even still..."

"That's the trade-off, here," Bull says firmly. "You give me everything - everything - and I take care of the rest. I take care of you."

Mahanon swallows. "That actually sounds sort of-"

Romantic, he almost says, just managing to catch himself - keep himself from fucking ruining everything - in time.

"-chivalrous," he manages instead, finishing the sigil and giving it a strong, even pulse of power, enough to keep it running for a good long while. Instantly the sounds of the inn below them, the rooms around them, the hallway outside the door and the busy streets of Lydes beyond the window
- it all dims, and a gentle silence falls.

Mahanon turns and startles to see that Bull is _there_, right behind him. Sneaky bastard can move _very_ fucking quietly when he wants to, even with the metal brace.

"Do you trust me?" Bull says, brushing a few curls from Mahanon's eyes. "That's not a trick question. I won't do anything to you without telling you first and getting your full consent. I just have to know that you trust me to look after you, and that you'll trust me enough to tell me if you want things to stop. I won't be disappointed, and I won't go anywhere. Understand?"

Mahanon does, and he doesn't. He understands what Bull is saying, trusts that Bull will keep every word and vow put forward here. He does trust that. And he trusts, to an extent, Bull's attraction to him.

But offering to go so far with him, to take control, to look after him... he trusts that Bull _will_. He just isn't sure he understands _why_.

"I trust you," Mahanon says, meaning it. "I just- I don't know. Feel sort of stupidly lucky, I guess."

"Luck-" Bull starts, looking utterly bemused. Then he frowns, his enormous hand coming to rest on Mahanon's cheek, and Mahanon leans into the touch. "It's not luck, it's you. You get that, right?"

"Not really," Mahanon admits, turning his face to brush his lips against Bull's wrist. "But as I said - I trust you."

Bull still looks far from satisfied with this answer, but he says, "Well. We'll work on that, then."

There's a clink of a buckle, and Mahanon glances over to see, for the first time, the long, worn-leather belt in Bull's other hand. His eyes widen, breath catching in trepidation even as his leggings become uncomfortably tight in certain places, and Bull chuckles in an entirely unhelpful way at his response.

"Good to know, but no, it's not what you think," Bull says, tilting Mahanon's face up towards his with a knuckle under Mahanon's chin. "Though believe me, I've been thinking up some fun ways we can work off those thirty coppers you owe me."

"It was twenty-seven!" Mahanon says, his voice coming out in an indignant squeak.

"That was yesterday, and you _still_ keep apologizing," Bull says mercilessly. "I'm gonna have to put you over my knee at some point, aren't I?"

The noise Mahanon makes at this is something between a whine and a growl - either way, it's utterly involuntary, and Mahanon instinctively clasps his hands over his mouth with a fierce blush.

"Nope," Bull says, taking Mahanon's wrists and gently prying them away from his face. "You don't get to hide from me, now. Keep your wrists here, like this."

That commanding tone, that _edge_, is back in full, and Mahanon is eager to obey. He keeps very still as he offers Bull his wrists, watching closely as Bull first wraps each one in soft cloth, protecting Mahanon's skin from the base of his hands to half the length of his forearm. Then the belt comes back up, and something hot and necessary pools in the pit of Mahanon's stomach as Bull carefully loops the leather around each wrist, securing them tightly and locking them in place with the buckle.
"How is that?" Bull says softly. "Too tight, too loose?"

Mahanon gives the bindings an experimental tug, biting back a full-body shudder of arousal - there's no escaping these bonds on his own. "They're- fuck, good."

Bull lifts his wrists and takes one of Mahanon's fingertips between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing slightly. He nods. "I'll be keeping an eye on this tonight, but so you know - see when I press down on the nail here, your skin goes pale? Then when I release-" he lifts his thumb from Mahanon's forefinger, and colour quickly floods back into the skin. "That's how we know the binding isn't too tight. Let me know if you start to lose feeling in your fingers, though."

Mahanon nods, with interest - interest that is somewhat curbed by the growing aching need between his legs, but interest nonetheless. "I understand."

"Good."

And then, quite suddenly, Mahanon is no longer standing on his own two feet - Bull has scooped him up into his arms, carrying him over to the bed.

"I get the feeling you like being swept off your feet, especially by big burly Qunari mercs," Bull murmurs, even as Mahanon finds himself hiding his face in his bound hands again (and curling close against Bull's chest in the process). "Am I wrong?"

"No," Mahanon moans - he's pretty sure his blush has extended to the tips of his ears by now. "Am I that fucking obvious?"

"I mean, yeah," says Bull, carefully depositing him on the bed. "But I also know what kinds of books you read. What was that one? Caught on the Horns of Desire-?"

"You said you weren't reading over my shoulder!"

"And you believed that?" Bull kisses Mahanon's nose even as the elf scowls up at him. "It was good shit. Gave me some fun ideas."

"You're- you-" Mahanon tosses his head back against the bed with a growl. "There are words, you know."

"Mm, lots of words," Bull says cheerfully, producing a short length of sturdy rope and looping it through the belt buckle of Mahanon's bindings. He pulls Mahanon's hands up over his head, neatly tying his wrists to the headboard of the bed frame with only that short length of rope to allow for movement. "Might wanna keep in mind which ones you choose, though, seeing as you're at my mercy now - ouch."

Bull snatches his hand back from Mahanon's wrist, as a small bolt of lightning zaps his finger. "Sorry," Mahanon says, only half meaning it.

"Thirty-one, now, but that's a good reminder," Bull says, testing the rope tie with a satisfied nod. He picks up a small phial from the bedside table filled with a very familiar grainy liquid, and for the first time Mahanon's hungry anxiety and anticipation flips to a small thrill of... well, if not fear, then something close to it.

Bull's eye softens, and he strokes Mahanon's cheek with one of his large knuckles. "This part is totally up to you - I'm not asking you to give up your magic."
"I know," says Mahanon. "I want to. For you. And- and for me."

Bull nods, and kisses Mahanon's hair. "Alright, two things, first - yes or no, if you're into it or not. I want to sink my teeth into you - no blood, but hard enough to leave a mark. Yes or no."

"Yes," Mahanon says, instantly.

"Second thing, and the last time you'll have to think tonight. I like holding people down by the throat. Some people are into having their airway cut off - breath control, you know. Right to the edge. Would you want to try that?"

Mahanon thinks for a moment, feeling strangely pragmatic even with his hands tied above his head.

"I'm alright with you holding me by the throat," Mahanon says slowly. "I'd like that, actually. But I still need to breathe - I think if my breath was cut off, or the blood flow, I'd start- I would panic, probably."

"Okay," Bull says - no trace of disappointment in his tone, not even the slightest hint of a concession being made. He smiles when he sees Mahanon watching his reaction carefully. "Like I said; nothing without your consent. If it's not fun for you, it's not fun for me - simple as that."

"Huh," says Mahanon, then grins. "That's nice."

"That's just being a decent person, and you're not going to think I'm very nice in a few minutes," Bull says, uncorking the phial. "You remember our watchwords?"

"'Durgen' for pause, 'katoh' for stop."

"Good. You ready, then?"

Mahanon nods, shifting as a spike of nerves rolls and jumps in his chest. Giving up his mobility is one thing - giving up his magic...

And he wants to; he absolutely wants to. The thought of accidentally hurting Bull is far more discomfiting to him than the thought of trusting Bull with - well, everything. He wouldn't want to risk this sort of intensity with his magic still so close under his skin.

But even so.

"Look at me," Bull says, his voice soft. Mahanon meets his gaze, desperately trying to keep his nerves in check - not that it would do much good even if he could, given Bull's ability to see right the fuck through him. "I've got you. Yeah?"

Mahanon nods again, and parts his lips, glancing at the phial and up to Bull's eye again. Bull slips a hand under Mahanon's head to help him up, just enough so he can tip the magebane into his mouth for him to swallow, his eyes still fixed on Bull's.

There's no helping the full-body shudder as the potion immediately starts sapping Mahanon's magic from him, that terrible forgetting, the awful numbness in his chest - Mahanon's hands twist in his bonds, and for a moment he's worried he's made a terrible fucking decision, that maybe this is just all too much for him, that he might be too much-

"Hey," Bull says, still so gently, and Mahanon forces himself to focus - Bull's hands cradling his face, a thumb brushing over his cheek, fingers carding through his curls. "Breathe, it's okay."
Mahanon breathes, desperately searching Bull's expression for any sign of doubt, any irritation with his nerves, any reluctance - but there is none. Just that soft smile, deep reassuring affection that does far more to calm Mahanon than breathing, and a building heat in his eye that makes Mahanon's hands flex in his bonds again for entirely different reasons.

"You with me?" Bull asks, and Mahanon nods. "Out loud, Mouse."

"Yes." He is. That missing piece in his chest where his magic should be, that numbness, fades into a pool of warmth under Bull's touch that relaxes rather than panics him. It's all tied in together, Bull's voice, his hands, his face, his confidence in all of this - the important thing is that Mahanon's not alone, here, and the magic is one less thing to think about. Something he can give, so he doesn't have to carry it. It's not everything yet, he knows, but it's a bit like sinking slowly into a hot bath - one inch at a time, to get accustomed to the temperature.

"Good boy," Bull says, and Mahanon bites his lip to muffle a groan at the praise. "Hey, pretty sure I said I wanted to hear you."

"Force of habit," Mahanon mutters, choking on a sharp gasp as Bull lets his fingertips trail over the taut, sensitive skin of his lower belly, right between his hips.

"Then let's break the habit," Bull murmurs, and pulls Mahanon close to kiss him.

There isn't much Mahanon can do with his hands tied above his head but relax in Bull's arms and fall into Bull's kiss, and he finds - paradoxically - that it's... freeing, almost, having no choice but to be held, to be kissed, to experience and feel. He pulls at his bonds instinctively once or twice, feeling that he should be doing something, contributing to Bull's pleasure more. It still doesn't feel fair, receiving this sort of attention and consideration, when he wants to show Bull- wants to impart, somehow, everything he knows he cannot and should not say, so Bull can take and feel what he wants from Mahanon's heart without having to deal with everything else that comes with it.

"Relax," Bull murmurs, and Mahanon just cannot argue with that tone. He sinks a touch deeper, and lets himself accept - just a little - what's being given in this freedom. "That's it. Good."

Bull's lips start wandering lower again, and Mahanon braces himself, knowing these kisses will be far more inflaming than soothing. Already he's far too close to the edge for his own pride, has been since Bull first lifted him and pinned him against the door. "Bull, I-"

Bull's thumb comes up to trace one of Mahanon's nipples then, brushing the sensitive skin with his own calloused thumb, and Mahanon's head falls back with a sharp inhale, leaving his throat vulnerable to Bull's lips. Mahanon squirms, Bull's hand tangling in his hair again to keep his head pulled back and his neck exposed to Bull's attentions, even as he continues to tease at Mahanon's nipple with his other hand. "Bull-"

"Don't worry," Bull says, and Mahanon can hear the bastard smiling again even as Mahanon presses his lips together against a whimper. "I'm not going to let you come yet. Pretty sensitive here, huh?"

"Y-you're really not helping either of us in that regard," Mahanon says shakily, tensing as Bull's lips trace a line of vallaslin down across his chest. "Wait-"

Bull puts his mouth over Mahanon's nipple and sucks, kissing and licking as Mahanon cries out and arches against him. The sensation of Bull's mouth on him seems to go straight to his cock, and the tight constriction of his leggings is a blessing and a curse, the friction of the fabric teasing him
further as he shifts and writhes under Bull's touch.

"If you want me to last until-" Mahanon tries, voice breaking into a shuddering whine as Bull's teeth close on his nipple, a sharp spark of pain and pleasure that causes his thoughts to fracture before he can finish thinking them.

"It's kinda cute that you think I'm going to let you get away with only coming once tonight," Bull murmurs into his skin, taking Mahanon's slim waist in his enormous hands and forcing him still. "I happen to know that elves have a very quick recovery period. Still, I mean it - you're not coming until I make you." Bull kisses Mahanon's nipple, barely brushing his lips against the hypersensitive skin. "Or else."

"A-at least take off my leggings, then, or- fuck-

"But they look so good on you," Bull says, the brush of his facial hair over the stiff peak of Mahanon's nipple as he speaks wringing another strangled sound from Mahanon's throat. "Shows off the thighs, shows a little skin..."

Bull's fingertips trace the cross lacings along the side of Mahanon's leggings, and Mahanon lifts his hips, hoping Bull will release the ties and relieve some of the pressure between his legs. Bull slips a finger under the laces, gently teasing, and Mahanon hauls in a long breath through gritted teeth. Of course the Qunari wouldn't let him off so easy.

"Never seen these on you before tonight," Bull says, his voice a low rumble. "I would have noticed."

Mahanon closes his eyes, trying to focus, keep his mind off that single teasing finger roaming under his leggings, tantalizingly close and so damn far from where he needs to be touched. "They're not exactly practical f-for the road."

"Mm," Bull says, his mouth coming up again to Mahanon's ear, teeth closing briefly on the point before he murmurs, "so many eyes on you tonight. You and your legs, your incredible ass-"

"Not that many, surely-" Mahanon starts, but stops as Bull lets out a growl that sounds almost like a warning. The hand that isn't still very distractingly toying with the laces of Mahanon's leggings comes up to nest in Mahanon's hair again, closing into a tight grip that pulls hard enough for Mahanon to gasp in pain.

"You could have had any man you wanted down there," Bull says, his soft tone a sharp contrast to his vise grip. "Anyone. I know it's not like you to court attention, so maybe you just don't want to see it. You want to talk about 'luck?' Any man, any one, and you were waiting outside my door. Having you in my bed is a fucking privilege. You don't have to understand it, just tell me you believe it. Believe me."

"I-" Mahanon starts, thrown far more off-balance by the words than the pain, until Bull gives his hair a sharp twist and Mahanon cries out - more startled than anything else. "Fuck- yes, I- I believe you! Bull-"

Bull releases his hair, and the relief from pain comes as a tingling rush - his chest heaves with a long sigh that leaves him panting, falling a little deeper into that cozy, weightless heat as Bull strokes his hair to soothe the lingering ache, kissing his temple tenderly.

"Bull," Mahanon says again, the feeling behind the name starting to crowd any other word or phrase from his mind.
Bull's lips meet his, so Mahanon ends up gasping against his mouth as Bull gives the ties of the lacings a sharp yank, loosening Mahanon's leggings and easing the confinement of his arousal.

"Remember to relax," Bull says, following with a gentle nip of Mahanon's lower lip before he moves down over Mahanon's body, taking his time, running his hands down along Mahanon's ribs to his waist to his hips. He pulls the ties on the other side of Mahanon's leggings and works them loose as well, sliding the cloth free from Mahanon's legs and tossing them aside.

And then, well, it's all just there - Mahanon's cock, hard and aching where it rests on his stomach, all of him laid bare in front of Bull. It hits him in dizzying waves, all of this; realizing again and again where he is, what he's doing, who he's with. Everything becomes sharp and blindingly real, too cold and loud, and he is all the things he tries not to think about - small, and quiet, and weak, and awkward, and nervous-

Mahanon tugs at his restraints, forgetting his hands are bound. He turns and presses his face into his arm, feeling fucking ridiculous for hiding, but equally - equally, having to face all this, letting himself be seen this way-

Then Bull is there, taking Mahanon's face in his hands and carefully - but insistently - guiding him out again to face him. He searches Mahanon's tight expression and kisses him - his lips, his forehead, his cheek, the points of his ears, so softly and patiently that Mahanon can scarcely breathe, and starts to melt again.

"I've got you," Bull murmurs. "I get to have you. Yeah?"

"Of course you do," Mahanon says hoarsely. "Whatever you want from me- whatever I can give you, it's yours."

"Then trust that I want it, and trust that I want you," Bull says, his hand gripping Mahanon's curls - not as tight as last time, no pain, but a reminder. "It's just you and me, here. Just us. No one gets to see you, gets to hear you, except me. Do you trust me?" Mahanon nods fervently, wincing as he pulls his own hair against Bull's grip in the process. "Out loud."

"I trust you," Mahanon whispers.

Bull kisses him again, tender and deep, his hand trailing down over his chest and stomach and, for a brief moment, Mahanon sucks in a long anticipatory breath, hoping Bull might finally put his hand on him-

Bull's fingertips just barely brush the length of Mahanon's cock, causing Mahanon to arch with a desperate, strangled cry, before taking a hold of Mahanon's thigh instead.

"Bastard," Mahanon gasps, his shyness and anxiety fading fast as Bull presses his legs open and settles between them, grinning. Amazing how quickly the Qunari can swing from soft reassurances to being a fucking torment in the space of a breath. Without the drag of cloth over him, Mahanon's far less likely to come prematurely, sure, but there's also no friction to satisfy his need for touch, nothing to scratch the desperate itch of arousal building in the pit of his stomach.

"Brave of you to call me names when I'm holding all the cards," Bull says, arching a brow. "How many times do I have to take you to the edge and back before I can give you any kind of relief?"

Bull strokes a rough knuckle along the underside of Mahanon's cock, holding his hips down firmly with a single hand as Mahanon thrusts up into the unbearably light, inflaming touch. Mahanon is pinned, forced still by Bull's grip as he traces his length with light strokes, his legs spread open
around Bull and unable to close them to protect himself from Bull's teasing. Even so, even just by those gentle brushes of Bull's skin against his, Mahanon can feel his release start to build- he squirms and presses upwards, knowing whatever relief he gets from this will not go far to satisfy his need, but it would at least take the edge off-

Bull moves his hand away from Mahanon's cock, taking hold of Mahanon's thighs in either hand, and Mahanon grits back a frustrated snarl. "Please."

"Begging is a good start," Bull muses, shifting down the mattress. "I told you I wanted to taste your tattoos, didn't I?"

"Fuck-" Mahanon says weakly, and then Bull dips his head down between his spread legs, nibbling along a line of *vallaslin* that curves along Mahanon's inner thigh. It's unbearable, being this hard, utterly trapped, with Bull finding every last sensitive part of him and- setting him on fire, somehow. The drag of his lips and brush of teeth following the path of blood ink desperately close to where Mahanon needs his mouth, his hand, fucking anything at this point, then up further to where the *vallaslin* follows the inner curve of his hip- it reduces Mahanon to a mess of breathless noises, vague pleadings and curses, his voice pitched and needy and embarrassing, if he had two thoughts left to care. Bull licks his way across Mahanon's lower belly, just above (and dangerously close to) his cock, pressing his lips to the muscles jumping and quivering under Mahanon's skin with a wicked smile. By the time his mouth finds the complementary spill of ink trailing down over the opposite thigh, Mahanon is pulling actively at his bonds, writhing in Bull's unforgiving grip, desperate to escape and desperate for more all at once.

"Please- Bull," Mahanon whimpers, voice catching as Bull's only response is to press his thighs further apart, expose more of him, the scratch of his beard as he comes back down to mouth at Mahanon's inner thigh rough and inflaming.

Bull glances up at Mahanon, still fucking smiling, and keeps his gaze locked on Mahanon's eyes as he leans up to brush a few gentle kisses from the base of Mahanon's cock right up to the tip, holding Mahanon down tightly as Mahanon jerks hard with a shout. He almost comes - almost comes from just that, the barest touch of Bull's lips on him, facial hair tickling the tight, flushed skin of his swollen length.

Then Bull ducks his head down again and sinks his teeth into Mahanon's inner thigh, hard, and Mahanon hisses. Really hisses.

Bull looks up at that, and Mahanon gives his head a good shake. A Sliabh hiss - ears flat back, teeth bared in a snarl, meant to intimidate during a battle or a hunt (or, in some cases, a very heated argument) - it's not something Mahanon's done in years. It was one of the many cultural mannerisms the Lavellans did not approve of in their new First.

"Huh," says Mahanon faintly, as Bull says, "Hot."

Mahanon groans, letting his head fall back against the mattress. "Please don't take that as encourage- fuck!"

Bull bites Mahanon's other thigh, this time deeper, harder, the pain radiating right to the base of Mahanon's spine and stopping his breath, holding him on a precipice until Bull releases him. Another wash of pain as the skin springs back, then that full-body rush of tingling relief.

"When you dress tomorrow," Bull says, punctuating his words with kisses and licks over the
bitemarks in Mahanon's skin, as Mahanon shivers and moans. "Whenever you walk, or sit - you're going to feel my teeth in you, and think of my face right here, between your thighs."

"Mythal'enaste," Mahanon breathes helplessly, crying out as Bull bites him again. "Fuck, Bull-fuck, please, please let me- make me-

Bull clamps down harder, until Mahanon can't speak or breathe for the delicious pain of it, waiting until Mahanon sobs for air before releasing him again.

As Mahanon reels from another wave of pain and relief, suddenly Bull is up, looming over him, then pinning him down by the throat, angling his face up towards his.

"Who's in control, Mouse?" Bull says softly.

"You are!" Mahanon gasps.

"I know that," Bull says. "Do you? Or are you still trying to think your way out of this, trying to work your way around it?"

"Bull-

Bull tightens his grip on Mahanon's throat, presses him down more - but does not cut off his airflow or blood flow. Grips him hard without constricting.

"The condition of your release is surrender," Bull says. "So, until then..."

"I surrender!" Mahanon says, desperate and pleading as Bull releases his hold on his throat and settles back between his thighs. "Bull, please-

"Yeah, words aren't gonna help you much here," Bull says, pressing another teasing kiss to the head of Mahanon's cock - which is leaking freely now onto his stomach, and Mahanon watches with wide eyes and a soft groan as Bull licks a drop of precum from his lips. "I want to suck you off so fucking bad, you know - get my lips tight around you, lick right under the head until you can't fucking bear it, swallow you down-

"Creators, please- please-

"Not yet," Bull says, giving Mahanon's balls a quick, light scratch with his fingertips that makes Mahanon jerk and yelp. "I don't think you've given me everything yet. You're close, though."

"I don't know what else I can give!" Mahanon cries, tensing as Bull's head ducks down again. "Wait- please, Bull-

"You can try to fight me a little more, if you want," Bull says casually, briefly swirling his tongue over the hypersensitive head of Mahanon's cock as Mahanon convulses with a sob. "You won't win, and I'll still keep teasing you. Keep you right on this edge, right where I want you."

Mahanon does try - he's not sure his sanity can take more of Bull's mouth and teasing fingers between his thighs. He pulls up, tries to curl up in on himself as much as the bonds will allow, but Bull catches him and pulls him back into that long, vulnerable spread. He tries to close his thighs, tries to flip over, get some friction from the sheets beneath him - Bull forces his legs open again around his waist, pinning him on his back, thighs spread wide.

"Who's in control, sweetheart?" Bull says again, the endearment causing Mahanon's heart to flip and ache even as he leans down and starts to tease Mahanon's thighs with his lips again. "Who's in
charge of when you come, and how?"

"You are, I said- I already said."

"So what can you do, right now?" Bull licks along the seam where Mahanon's thigh meets his pelvis, causing Mahanon to heave a broken cry. "What are you in control of, in this situation?"

"Nothing- I can't- fuck, I can't fucking do anything-" Mahanon choke outs, and he can't- he's bound, magic gone, and Bull is far too strong to fight even if he truly wanted to-

"So what do you think you need to do, to surrender to me?"

"I-" Mahanon's mind spins, skitters out, fractures as Bull's lips nibble up along the underside of his cock again, before returning to his thighs. "I can't-"

"No," Bull agrees. "You can't. So why are you still fighting?"

"I-"

Bull bites him again, harder still, and while Mahanon knows distantly that Bull said he wouldn't draw blood, it really feels like his teeth are breaking skin, piercing deep into his flesh, and Mahanon screams - pain, frustration, need, all of it wrapped up and focused on a building point of sharp pain, intimate pain, begging for release-

But there's nothing he can do.

It hits him, hard - like a revelation, like a full-body slam into a vast, hot ocean. He isn't in charge. There are no decisions to be made, nothing beyond the very basics - surrender, or pause, or stop. He doesn't want to pause, doesn't want to stop, so all he can do is surrender, and leave the rest - all of it - up to Bull.

Bull will give him pain, when he wants. Pleasure, when he wants. None of that is on Mahanon now. All he can do is bear it - no, not bear it. Surrender to it. Experience it.

"Do you trust me?" Yes, he trusts Bull - has trusted Bull, even knowing the many layers there, the sharp edges, for months now. He still trusts Bull. He doesn't have to understand him or his motivations to trust him implicitly. And maybe that's a little fucked, and maybe he's a little fucked, but Bull has him. All he has to do is give himself over. All he wants to do is give himself over, give himself to Bull, let Bull take him and devour him-

Mahanon breathes in, and out, and in the wash of relief from pain as Bull releases his bite, in the aftermath of his scream, he calms. More than calm - everything is utterly still, inside and out. There's no space for anything else but the warmth of his utter trust, his utter faith in Bull. Bull will look after him. He promised. Bull promised.

It's so blessedly fucking quiet in Mahanon's head that tears spring to his eyes, start to trail over his cheeks, and he doesn't- he can't care, he doesn't have anything left in him to care, because he's given it away.

"There," Bull says, a quiet, affectionate awe in his voice that makes the tears flow faster over Mahanon's cheeks. He isn't fully weeping, but there's a release of emotions - a release from emotions - that feels as clean as crying.

Bull moves up again, leaving the space between Mahanon's thighs. Mahanon instinctively starts to close his legs, draw them up around the ache of his arousal, but Bull puts a hand on his thigh and
says, "Stay."

And Mahanon does. Keeps his legs exactly in place, because Bull told him to, and all he has to do to keep this quiet in his head is obey. It's so blessedly, mercifully simple.

Bull takes Mahanon's face in his hands, tracing the pad of his thumb through the trail of Mahanon's tears, and smiles - so happy, so-proud, genuinely proud, and Mahanon smiles wetly back.

"So fucking good," Bull whispers, pressing his forehead to Mahanon's. "So fucking brave, you are. Look at you."

"Bull," Mahanon whispers, sighs - he's still hard and aching, still in so much fucking need, but there's nothing he can do about that but trust Bull to take care of it. Take care of him.

"I'm going to make you feel so good," Bull says, as serious as a vow, another promise, and Mahanon nods. Yes, he believes him. "You're doing so fucking good, so fucking good for me."

Mahanon relaxes back as Bull kisses him, his lips parting for Bull's rough tongue, every part of him, every nerve and muscle falling into the quiet warmth of surrender.

Then Bull is back at the base of the bed, gently hooking Mahanon's legs over his shoulders, a hand softly rubbing over the bites in Mahanon's thigh. It hurts, there's pain there, but it's just another sensation he can only experience and cannot control. Mahanon whimpers but does not cry out.

"So fucking good," Bull says again, and takes Mahanon's cock in hand, guiding it up to suckle briefly on the tip before swallowing it down into the wet, tight heat of his mouth.

Bull bobs his head once, twice, and it's enough - more than enough - for Mahanon's hips to hitch as he finally, finally finds his release, in Bull's arms and his mouth and completely at Bull's mercy. He's far too loud as he comes, far too honest in his reactions as a wave of pleasure and relief floods through him, but there's no room for embarrassment here. Bull swallows and licks him clean, his mouth working Mahanon through his climax until he's oversensitive and shifting in Bull's arms. He doesn't pull away, even as Bull's tongue threatens to take him over the edge again, far too soon for comfort.

But Bull carefully lays Mahanon back down on the bed before they get to that point, stroking his thighs and hips.

"How're you doing?" Bull asks, his voice tantalizingly rough. Mahanon tries for a word, a sentence, but all that comes out is a garbled groan. "Gonna need more than that. Try again."

"Good," Mahanon manages on a long exhale. It's still so deliciously quiet, he really doesn't want to think too much, lest he shatter the spell Bull's woven for him. "Bull-"

"I'm here," Bull says, his gentle rubdown moving up along Mahanon's sides to his arms, his bound wrists. Mahanon feels Bull press down on one of his fingernails, and remembers - yes, he was supposed to say if he lost feeling in his hands, and he hasn't so far, but he also hasn't been thinking much, so he's glad Bull's checking for him. Checking on him. "You good to keep going?"

Mahanon doesn't want to think, doesn't want to decide anything right now, but this is an easy choice - he nods, then adds, "Yes," before Bull can ask him to say it out loud.

"Alright," Bull says, grounding Mahanon with a kiss - Mahanon can taste himself on Bull's lips, on his tongue, and tries to arch up despite his restraints to kiss further, show his appreciation - his lips finding purchase on Bull's chin, his neck, and Bull laughs at Mahanon's efforts - not unkindly.
"You're happy, then."

"Let me do something for you," Mahanon murmurs, pressing himself up against Bull, sliding a slim, bitten thigh between Bull's legs and gratified to feel how hard the Qunari is beneath those ridiculous pants. Bull groans low in his throat as Mahanon rubs sinuously against him, doing anything his bonds might allow to bring Bull the kind of pleasure he's shown him. "Please - in my mouth, my ass, whatever you want- I want to make you happy, please-

"You already have," Bull says, stilling Mahanon's movements with his hands on Mahanon's hips. He does press himself against Mahanon's thigh though, almost reflexively, and Mahanon smiles as Bull's eye flickers closed for a moment. "Fuck, you do."

That stirs something deeper in Mahanon's chest, something beyond this tranquil space, but before he can begin to think about it Bull turns him over onto his stomach, and he quite forgets what it is he was so moved by in the first place.

"We're going to take this slow," Bull says, and Mahanon can feel him more than he can see him - a weight and warmth along his back, large hands massaging his shoulders and moving down along his spine. "The oil I have for this has some elfroot in it to help people manage - well, the size - but it's still gonna be a fuck of a stretch. You're up for this?"

"Yes," Mahanon moans, lifting his ass for good measure. "Creators, yes."

"Patience, then," Bull says, his knuckles digging blessedly deep into Mahanon's muscles. "I know elves recover fast, but not that fast. Just relax for me."

Mahanon wants to protest, wants to insist he's ready now so Bull won't have to wait, but... it's not his call. Not his decision. He shifts and stills under Bull's hands and falls into the quiet of his mind - a vast and terrifying space, if not for the steady presence of Bull's hands massaging his back, his hips, Bull's murmuring voice - Tradespeak, sweet gentle praises, then Qunlat, and Mahanon has no idea what's being said. Only that Bull is there, and that's really all that matters.

Mahanon fades, slips away, until Bull is speaking Trade again and saying his name, calling him back.

"You still with me? Mahanon-"

"Yes," Mahanon says, the word feeling viscous and tangled on his tongue. "Yes, yes."

"Good boy."

Mahanon feels Bull take hold of his ass in his large hands, spreading his cheeks wide, and he's expecting - well, he's not sure. Oil, a finger - surely not the whole thing all at once.

What he does not expect, is to feel the now-familiar rough flat of Bull's tongue lick up from just behind his balls right over his hole, lips following in an open-mouthed kiss.

Mahanon shouts in surprise, then groans, hands flexing and balling into fists as Bull's tongue laps at his entrance, tracing teasing circles and soothing with long, even strokes.

"Has no one ever done this for you, licked your sweet, tight ass?" Bull says, turning his face to bite deep into Mahanon's cheek. Mahanon chokes, squirming. "Tell me I'm not conquering new territory here-"

"No one," Mahanon gasps, keening as Bull's tongue swirls over his hole. "Fuck-"
"All I could think about- any time you bent over, stretched, those fucking exercises- fuck, your ass is distracting," Bull growls, scraping his teeth over Mahanon's skin.

"Fuck me," Mahanon says, biting at the sheets of the bed as Bull continues to lick and kiss at his hole, beard and moustache rubbing the skin raw between his cheeks. "Ah- Bull, please- please fuck me, please-"

"One thing at a time," Bull says, stroking Mahanon's lower back.

Mahanon presses back against Bull's mouth with a feeble cry, but Bull seems quite intent on his mission to drive Mahanon completely insane. He licks until the thin skin of Mahanon's hole is sensitive almost to the point of overstimulation before slipping his tongue into him, a sensation so alien to Mahanon yet so fucking good that he can only breathe in open-mouthed gasps. Bull works him open slowly, first on his tongue, then just the tip of his smallest remaining finger - and even that is almost too much of a stretch, too quickly, Mahanon inhaling sharply as the intrusion comes with a flicker of pain.

"So tight," Bull says thoughtfully - almost doubtfully - and Mahanon tries to push himself back onto Bull's finger to prove this will work, prove he can take it- "Hey. We're taking it slow, remember?"

"I can-"

"I know." Bull leans over and kisses Mahanon's shoulder blade. "You're doing so good - I just don't want to hurt you. So we're going to do this nice and slow."

Mahanon turns his face and buries it in the bed, muttering into the cotton sheets, "Gonna die of old age, first."

This surprises a laugh out of Bull, and he feels Bull's lips along the back of his neck as the Qunari says, "But what a way to go, huh?"

Mahanon grins, and Bull kisses the tip of his ear.

It is slow work - torturously slow work - as Bull dips his fingers in oil and carefully works Mahanon open, stroking his back and hips as he does. Mahanon floats in place, mind drifting, able to let the discomfort and occasional pain of the stretch wash over him until Bull's fingers work deep enough to touch on something- something very good, very sensitive, deep inside him.

He jerks hard, hoping to catch Bull's fingers against that spot again, and Bull chuckles quietly. "Right, so we've found that bit, then."

"It's- it's a good bit." Mahanon pants, hips hitching as Bull's fingers brush against it once more. "Oh- shit, fuck-"

Bull pulls his fingers out, much to Mahanon's dismay, which he vocalizes with a desperate whine until Bull carefully flips him over again onto his back, stroking his inner thighs.

"I wanna see your face as I fuck you," Bull says, low and guttural, and Mahanon feels like delicious prey under his intense gaze. Surrendered and willing, waiting to be taken. Devoured.

"Wanna see your eyes on mine when I'm buried inside you. Can you give me that?"

"Anything," Mahanon says, utterly meaning it.

Bull grins.
He slips off the end of the bed, unbuckling his belt with practiced speed as Mahanon watches him with growing hunger. Then his pantaloons drop and he steps out of them, kicking them aside before climbing back onto the mattress, kneeling between Mahanon's spread legs.

It really is something to behold, this massive man and his horns, his searing one-eyed gaze, nearly every inch of him scarred or gnarled or worn by battle. Mahanon remembers, vividly, that strange mix of terror and arousal that had taken him when he first woke up in Stitches' tent to see Bull watching over him. His size and bearing touches on something almost primal in Mahanon, fierce and aching desire. All of this is still very much wrapped up in how Mahanon sees Bull, even now, towering over him.

But then Bull had to go and open his mouth, and reveal a sharp mind and caring heart behind it all. The fucker.

Bull could have had him that day, that very minute - Mahanon was his by the end of the first sentence spoken.

Mahanon wonders, faintly, if Bull knows. If maybe he's always known.

Here, and now, Bull lifts Mahanon's hips into his lap, and Mahanon finds his feet on the mattress, getting a sense of the position Bull's aiming for. He feels Bull's length press against his ass, long and hard and thick, and swallows.

Bull slips his fingers into the jar of oil, spreading it along his length with a long groan. He slicks his oiled finger over Mahanon's entrance again for good measure, smiling as Mahanon flinches at the stroke of his fingertip on sensitive skin, and nods. "Look at me, and breathe."

Mahanon does - there's really nowhere he'd rather be looking.

He feels Bull's cock pressing into him; the massive head slowly sinking in, spreading him just that bit wider than Bull's fingers worked him. Mahanon grits his teeth and winces at the stretch. It really is a dicey blend, pain and pleasure swirled together as Bull presses closer, deeper-

"Breathe," Bull says again, his own voice sounding very tight, and Mahanon obeys. Breathes.

They move slowly, Bull filling him inch by creeping inch, and Mahanon focuses on breathing, relaxing, breathing, Bull, relax-

And then Bull is still, and Mahanon is full. Mahanon lifts his head. He blinks at the Qunari, who blinks back, looking momentarily stunned.

They both start laughing - laughing stupidly, recklessly, helplessly, and Bull's laughter mingling with a satisfied groan.

"You- you really thought you wouldn't fit!" Mahanon snickers, feeling light-headed, buoyant and happy and wanting all at once, laughing with Bull buried so deep inside him.

"You looked pretty fuckin' surprised too," Bull accuses, but he's still grinning, still laughing, and Mahanon could listen to him laugh like this for hours.

And Mahanon is still smiling, and laughing, breathless giggles that's more joy than mirth, until Bull starts moving inside him, and his laughter turns to needy gasps.

The dull pain is still present, but negligible in the wake of the pleasure and sheer pride of this - Mahanon can take Bull, can do this for Bull, can give and take and give-
Bull grips Mahanon's hips hard in his hands, clearly keeping Mahanon's size and comfort in mind as he fucks into him with shallow, controlled thrusts. Mahanon digs his heels into the mattress and presses closer, pulling at his restraints to do so, taking Bull in deeper with a sharp cry.

"So fucking tight," Bull groans, hips hitching as he picks up speed. "So good- fuck-"

"Take me," Mahanon begs. "Bull- Bull-"

Bull shifts, and it's such a slight change in angle- but it's enough that on each thrust, the head of Bull's dick rubs perfectly over that sweet spot deep inside Mahanon. Mahanon shouts and thrashes in his bonds, nearly coming again right there, just barely holding on. "Bull-"

"I've got you," Bull says roughly.

He grips the base of Mahanon's cock tightly, and Mahanon jerks again with a panicked cry - but he doesn't come. Can't, despite the pleasure of Bull's fingers wrapped tight around him. Stimulating him and keeping him from his release, all at once.

"Mythal's sweet fucking mercy," Mahanon whimpers, breaking into a wordless yell as Bull starts to fuck him in earnest, stroking that delicious spot inside him with every snap of his hips. There's no relief, no release, no mercy save Bull's, and Mahanon falls deep into that hot pool of thoughtless desire with nothing to distract, nothing to take his attention save his need, the sensation of Bull moving in him, his heart battering at his ribcage with- trust, endless trust, and- and-

"Look at me," Bull says, and Mahanon looks. Locks his eyes on Bull's, and there's no hiding it- nothing left to strip away, no defences left in place, no will to keep any of it at bay. Even clutching at the headboard, toes curling in the sheets, sweat tangling in his hair and dripping along his tear-stained face- even in all this fucking incredible mess that Bull's reduced Mahanon to, the soft background haze of his mind shines through, he's sure - want, and need, and desire, and trust, all tied up and offered, willingly given over to Bull for him to devour.

There's a word for this, Mahanon knows.

Bull's eye widens.

Bull's hips hitch and stutter, and the Qunari curses, riding those last few exquisite thrusts into Mahanon at the perfect angle as he softens his punishing grip on Mahanon's cock to stroke him off. Between Bull's hand and his cock rubbing up along Mahanon's prostate, the pleasure is immediately overwhelming - Mahanon comes on himself with a helpless shout, his release spattering over his chest and belly. He keeps his eyes fixed on Bull's, determined not to break his gaze even as he shudders and keens, Bull stroking and fucking him through his climax. He tightens around Bull, so perfectly full, and with another hard jerk and a snarl Bull comes as well.

Mahanon gasps at the sensation of Bull's hot, slick seed spilling into him, Bull meeting his gaze with - such hunger, still, such incredible heat, utterly claiming Mahanon inside and out.

Bull.

Whether he says it out loud or thinks it, it's the last thought on Mahanon's mind before everything promptly dissolves into a sweet, hot haze. Trust. Warmth. Sated, deeply sated, months of hopeless yearning finally given some relief.

His breath catches as Bull slips from him, and it's- the quiet is almost too much, now, without Bull inside him, touching him, and a brief swell of panic threatens to take him under-
"Hey, hey," Bull says, and Mahanon blinks through teary eyes to see Bull at his side, taking his face in his hands. "Hey, I'm here. I'm here. Let me just get your hands free."

Mahanon needs him closer, so much closer, but doesn't know how to say it- words are slipping through his mind faster than he can figure out how to shape them on his tongue, so he just turns his head and presses his face into Bull's palm, hoping he'll understand.

"I know," Bull murmurs, stroking Mahanon's sweat-soaked curls from his brow. "I've got you. Let me just-"

He reaches up over Mahanon's head, and in moments the rope is pulled free from the headboard.

"Bull," Mahanon says, nearly voiceless, feeling heavy in his own skin and- fuck, needing him, needing Bull so fucking badly-

Bull climbs onto the bed and pulls Mahanon into his lap, wrapping his arms around him as he eases Mahanon's hands back down over his head. Mahanon's arms are far more sore than he's expecting, but it's a distant soreness - the far more pressing panic of Bull's absence slowly eases as Mahanon tucks in close under Bull's chin, feeling the rise and fall of Bull's chest against his back.

"You did so good," Bull murmurs, unbuckling the belt around Mahanon's wrists and carefully freeing him. "Look at you, so fucking good, you went down so beautifully for me."

Mahanon rests his head against Bull's shoulder, letting his eyes close. "D-do you need-?"

"Nah," Bull says, pressing his lips to Mahanon's brow. Mahanon sighs, letting Bull adjust him however he needs as the Qunari starts gently working that damp cloth over his chest and stomach to clean him. "I've got everything I need, here. You just let me clean us up a bit. You're good. Relax."

Relax. An order, something to follow. Something to obey.

Mahanon goes limp and pliable in Bull's arms, occasionally letting out small, half-formed sounds as Bull trips on aches and sore spots as he washes them both down with the cloth. He doesn't flinch away, allows Bull to arrange him however he needs to, trusts. Trusts.

Bull leans over the side of the bed, still balancing Mahanon in his arms, and helps Mahanon sit up. Mahanon is spineless, boneless, but tries to keep himself upright for Bull as he presses a cup of water to Mahanon's lips.

"As much as you can get down," Bull says. Mahanon's hands come up to shakily guide the cup, and he's surprised to find he's desperately thirsty as the water tips into his mouth. He drinks eagerly, quickly, until the cup is dry and his thirst sated. "Good, good."

Then finally Bull settles back, pulling a blanket over both of them as he cradles Mahanon close, big hands gently massaging Mahanon's wrists and hands. Mahanon's half asleep by now, half-certain this has all been some endless dream he's equally certain he never wants to wake up from.

"If..." Mahanon starts, trailing off, his voice sounding far away and hazy to his own ears. Bull rubs his back encouragingly, and Mahanon breathes to try again. "If I... sleep, will you still-? Will you be here, when-?"

"I'll be here," Bull says, and Mahanon's head falls against his chest with a relieved sigh. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here."
And it's all warmth, all comfort and silence in Bull's arms, and then it isn't anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

**BRIEF UPDATE: HeyScience, amazing human being, mentioned that for scenes it's honestly best to do kink negotiations without touching or contact, basically as touch-sober as possible - and I agree! If I depict another full scene I'm definitely gonna work that in. Again, this is why ya don't get your info from fanfic folks. HeyScience is a fab human and has her own Inquisition fic going which I HIGHLY recommend, "Sweeter Than Fiction".

Love you all, thank you so much to everyone who's commented and supported the fic so far ^_^
Chapter Notes

THIS CHAPTER TOOK ME LIKE THREE TRIES TO WRITE. CHRIST.

Just a short little endcap chapter as we finish off part two and barrel into... *part three*

Song rec: Ecstasy from the ongoing playlist.

Thank you thank you thank you to everyone who's commented and given kudos to the fic so far, and hopefully we should be back to our regularly scheduled weekly updates now that I've worked through this stuck bit ^-^

Oh and quick content warning on the chapter for a brief description of anxiety/subdrop at the beginning.

Also there's like a *little* porn in this chapter. So.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mahanon drifts, sensation coming back to him slowly - first hearing, the sound of breathing and soft night noises; then touch, skin on skin on rough blankets; and then suddenly his mind is flooded all at once as he jerks awake.

It's overwhelming, his mind starting to spin on into endless thoughts and second guesses, the bottom dropping out of his world as everything is suddenly far too real to bear-

He doesn't realize he's sitting up, gasping in air, until two large hands come to rest on either side of his face, turning his head to face a soft, one-eyed gaze.

"Hey," Bull says, and smiles.

Mahanon clings to that smile, leaning into Bull's touch, swallowing hard as he tries to keep himself from shaking. "Is this- normal-?"

"Sometimes, yeah," Bull says. He opens his arms to Mahanon, and Mahanon tries not to feel too self-conscious about how quickly he falls into them, utterly relieved to curl back up into Bull's warm embrace. "You went through some intense shit tonight. Awesome shit, but intense. Coming back down from that - well, some people get hangovers, essentially."

Mahanon presses his face close into Bull's chest, concentrating on Bull's hands - stroking his hair, rubbing comforting circles into his back, grounding him. Keeping his mind from spinning off into dark, cold places. The panic that seized him begins to ease. "Sorry-"

"Thirty-one - fuck, you're gonna make me lose count," Bull says. "You're good, Mouse. More than good."

Mahanon wants to feel embarrassed - and some part of him does, a little - by how badly he needs this right now; needs Bull's approval, his warmth and acceptance, but there's no trace of frustration or annoyance in Bull's voice, so Mahanon lets himself relax. Just a little.
It's strange, how lying here in Bull's arms feels far too close to an absent daydream for Mahanon to wrap his head around, yet still feels like the most natural, inevitable thing in the world.

He fits, here. He wonders if Bull thinks so too.

"What time is it?" Mahanon asks eventually, the last of that strange spiralling darkness ebbing away.

"Late, but not so late it's early yet," Bull says, settling back against the pillows with a contented sigh. He seems happy to keep Mahanon wrapped up close against him in his massive arms, so Mahanon carefully rests his head on Bull's chest, ready to spring up and leave if Bull asks him to. He's still not entirely sure he knows what Bull wants and does not want, here, and he certainly doesn't plan to outstay his welcome. "You were out for... eh, about an hour and a half, maybe two."

"You were awake that whole time?"

"Sorta. Every Qunari is taught meditation pretty much from birth - you're resting, but still aware. It's great for stakeouts and guard duty." Bull starts to play with Mahanon's hair, working his crooked and scarred fingers through Mahanon's curls, scratching and gently tugging. Mahanon goes a little limp, eyes fluttering closed, all thoughts of leaving momentarily driven from his mind. "I wanted to make sure I was awake for when you came back up."

"Nice of you," Mahanon murmurs, tracing one of Bull's chest tattoos with his fingertip before flattening his palm over the broad expanse of skin.

"It's part of it," Bull says. "Making sure you're okay."

"Are you okay?" Mahanon asks, before he can think the question through. Bull's hand stills in his hair. "I just mean- with your people, with... you're not going to get in shit for this, are you?"

Bull laughs, that low, full-body rumble that makes Mahanon weak. "I mean, yeah, probably."

"Fuck, Bull-"

"It's fine," Bull says, and though Mahanon's fully aware that Bull can't see his face clearly right now his expression twists skeptically regardless. "It's honestly fine. There'll be some raised eyebrows, I'm sure, but hey. This..." Bull smooths his free hand over Mahanon's shoulder and down along his side, over his hip, coming to rest on the curve of Mahanon's ass and even giving it a little possessive squeeze. "It's worth it. Yeah?"

Mahanon desperately, desperately wants to ask what "this" is. What "this" means to Bull, what the expectations are.

But... he's afraid. Afraid if he presses for some answer, some definition, it could all come crashing down. There's a freedom here in this fuzzy grey, just as there was a kind of freedom in the torment of the past few months - Bull could say one thing and do something else, tell Mahanon they had to be professional and flirt with him all the same. Plausible deniability, of a sort.

If Mahanon were to ask Bull for specifics, demand a definition, or - Creators forbid - admit the depth of his feelings, well. That would banish this misty grey they're fumbling through, and Mahanon doesn't want the fog to lift only to discover that he and Bull are in entirely different places from where he thought. Or hoped.

"I mean, I certainly think so - for me, at least, definitely," Mahanon says slowly, trying for a light tone, and Bull huffs a little self-satisfied laugh. "I just don't want to be the cause of-" Mahanon
swallows back what he wants to say, knowing it would reveal too much of what he knows, what he suspects, and says instead, "-something bad happening to you."

Bull takes Mahanon's hand in his, lifting it to brush his lips against Mahanon's wrist in a soft kiss, which- is entirely unfair, is what it is, because it sends every last thought in Mahanon's head scattering to the four winds. "Don't you worry about me, Mouse. I'm good."

Mahanon wants to argue that actually, he not only has every right to worry about Bull but more than a few damn good reasons, but Bull's lips start venturing further up along his arm, pausing to lick at the sensitive crook of his elbow. Mahanon squirms with a little grumble, having had enough teasing for the night. Bull laughs as Mahanon takes him by the horns and tugs hard, dragging Bull's face down to meet his to kiss the Qunari thoroughly.

Bull rolls Mahanon under him, deepening the kiss, but Mahanon nudges Bull's side with his knee and rolls them back over so he can straddle the Qunari's broad torso, a hand on Bull's chest and another cradling the back of his head. Bull's still grinning against Mahanon's lips.

"I had a point I was trying to make-" Mahanon mutters, cut short again by Bull's mouth on his, Bull's hands on his ass and thighs, gripping tight. "Fuck, you're a menace-"

"And you're not?" Bull says, nipping at Mahanon's lower lip. "Those leggings- the fuck, Mouse."
Mahanon has the grace to blush at that. "Ah. Yes. Alright, those were new, I'll admit it."

"Oh?"

"I noticed you seem to have a thing for- certain types of clothes, especially with corset-style laces-"

"Oh?"

"-and I saw those in the marketplace, and I just thought-"

"O-ho."

"-if you hadn't been such an insufferable tease these past few months-"

"You really were trying to seduce the big bad Qunari merc, huh?"

"'Trying,' no," Mahanon says, raising a brow. "I think the apt term is 'succeeding,' wouldn't you say?"

"Aw, nice to see that a good fucking brings out your sassy side," Bull says, pinching Mahanon's ass and snickering as Mahanon yelps and smacks his hand away with a scowl. "The leggings were a smart move. Well done, you."

"At this point I figured my options were either dress up nice and throw myself at you, or break into your room and wait naked in your bed," Mahanon says.

"Well, fuck, that probably would have worked too." Bull makes a point of looking Mahanon over with a lazy smile, making Mahanon suddenly quite conscious of his current state of nakedness as well as his half-hard cock resting on Bull's stomach, and his flush deepens. "If you ever wanna try that in future-"

"I feel like the element of seductive surprise is a little moot at this point."

"-I'm just saying, I'm never gonna be upset about finding a naked elf in my bed."
"I'll keep that in mind," Mahanon says, and kisses Bull heatedly.

One thing sort of leads to another, and about a quarter of an hour later they collapse back against the pillows and sheets again, panting and sated and more than a little disgusting. Mahanon instinctively flicks his hand, and is pleasantly surprised to see the mess they've just created flicker and disappear.

"So you've got your magic back, then," Bull says mildly, as Mahanon tucks his head under his chin with a contented little murmur. "Shit, it's gonna be hard to keep my hands off you, now."

"What a shame," Mahanon says with a yawn. "A terrible fate for me, truly."

"Alright, Ser Sass, but we are gonna have to lay down some ground rules," Bull says.

"I know," Mahanon says, more seriously. "You're still my boss."

"And you still work for me," Bull says. After a moment that would seem like hesitation if it weren't Bull - brazen, confident Bull - the Qunari adds, "And with the Ben Hassrath investigating you, it's a bit-"

"Fraught?"

"I was gonna say 'fucked,' but yeah."

And they're back to this again. Mahanon closes his eyes, savouring the warm tangle of their limbs, Bull's arm resting easy around his shoulders, and allowing himself to wish momentarily that the two of them, this thing they have, could be the product of entirely different circumstances.

"Your people see sex as sort of... separate from emotional attachment," Mahanon says slowly, knowing he's skirting a dangerous edge of honesty, here.

"Uh-huh," Bull says.

"However you need to frame this in your report - whatever you need me to do, or not do, to help you frame it that way, just... tell me, and it's done," Mahanon says.

Bull doesn't say anything, and for a moment Mahanon's certain he's gone and absolutely fucked shit up. Then Bull squeezes his arm around Mahanon's shoulders and says, "Thanks."

Mahanon bites back a sigh of relief.

"Boundaries are the most important thing, I think," Bull says breezily. "In this room - no matter where this room happens to be, if it's a tent or- fuck, a cave or something, whatever - you don't work for me, and I'm not 'Chief,' yeah? No orders, except the fun kind."

"Agreed."

"Outside this room, we can flirt, but work comes first."

"You're the Chief, I'm Mouse."

"Yeah."

Mahanon nods. "I'm good with that."

"Are you?"
Mahanon lifts his head to see Bull watching him, his face... troubled, but unreadable.

*Please don't ask me that*, Mahanon thinks desperately, but does not say. *I won't ask you, and you can't ask me. Please.*

If they can make this work - this strange double-life, whatever the fuck they're signing themselves up for... it'd be worth it. Isn't that what Bull said? This could be- this *is* worth it.

Bull touches Mahanon's cheek, and Mahanon puts his hand over Bull's, and neither of them speak.

- Bull wakes just before dawn, as usual, opening his eyes to cool grey light filtering into the room.

He can't help but smile wryly at the warm, sleight weight pressed against him, the curly head resting on his shoulder, a thin arm draped carelessly over his chest.

*A really fucking terrible idea*, is what this was, *is*, but Bull can't convince himself to regret it. Not all of it, at least.

Bull tries not to think too far ahead, in general. Seheron was good training for that - in a place like Seheron, you get used to the idea of counting your future in hours instead of days, never mind years. Attachment, expectation, disappointment; these are all things that exist within a time frame. The shorter your time, the less they seem to matter.

Mahanon doesn't think this way, Bull knows. He's never had to. Bull's watched him piece things together, plan and estimate a year, two years, decades down the line. The first thing the elf did when he took over the accounts was ink a template for general monthly and yearly sumskeeping and write up a short step-by-step guide on his process.

"Just in case something happens to me," Mahanon said, handing both off to Bull for safekeeping. "Then it'll be easier for someone else to come along and take my place."

Bull turns his head now, carefully pressing his lips to Mahanon's curls, gently so as not to wake him. The elf shifts and makes a very small sound in his sleep, but his breathing stays deep and even.

Yes, Bull tries not to think too far ahead, but even so, he can't help but wonder if there's any possibility of a future where this doesn't end painfully. Because if Bull's keenly aware of anything it's that nothing in this world is fair, and it takes far more than it gives, and he has no real fucking clue what it means to want someone who's already in his bed and in his arms like this but he's certain, certain that it's far too late for him to learn.

There's that fine knife's point again, in all this. What he can allow himself to have, without giving up what he knows he needs. Without giving in entirely.

Bull's sure he can convince the Ben Hassrath that this is just sex, just fucking. It'll take some careful phrasing and not a small amount of outright lying, but he'll manage. And he and Mahanon can take this day by day, and keep to their boundaries, and enjoy what time they've got together.

They'll be careful in what they do, and far more careful in what they say. Mahanon's smart. He's learning to read between Bull's lines.

He shouldn't have to.
The best Bull can hope for is that one day Mahanon will realize that if he wants more than this, with anyone, there are safer and easier bets than Bull. Mahanon could easily find someone a little younger, a little less broken, and Bull would be fucking happy for him. He would. And if he can help Mahanon see that he deserves that, well, then all of this - this, will be worth it.

Bull slips into a meditative doze, his face still half-buried in Mahanon's hair, for another hour as the dawn starts to turn gold and the room slowly fills with light. Eventually Mahanon's breathing eases, and he stirs again in Bull's arms, then flinches, ears flicking.

"Ow," Mahanon groans quietly.

Bull grins. "Where?"

"Everywhere."

"Poor little guy." Bull says sympathetically, his smile widening as Mahanon lifts his tousled head to glare at him through sleepy, half-shut eyes. "Need me to kiss it better?"

"Tempting," Mahanon mutters, face-planting into Bull's chest. "I'm not awake yet."

"I can see that." Bull, taking some pity on the elf, pulls Mahanon on top of him, ignoring Mahanon's muffled complaints which quickly become a long, grateful groan as Bull starts massaging his shoulders and back. "Good sleep?"

"Mmm," Mahanon murmurs, folding his arms under his head and sprawling out along Bull's torso. "You?"

"Oh, yeah," Bull says, working his palms into Mahanon's lower back. "It's real relaxing, you know. Falling asleep with you."

Mahanon balances his chin on his hands, meeting Bull's gaze with soft eyes and a gentle smile. "Is it?"

"Mhm," Bull says. "Like having a big cat all cuddled up with me."

Mahanon's smile drops. "What?"

"A happy cat."

"No."

"With a nice, loud purr."

Mahanon puts his hands over his face, ears low. "I didn't-"

"You did. A lot." Bull twacks the point of Mahanon's ear. "It's okay, I'm used to it."

"No."

"After Halamshiral-"

Mahanon makes a mortified sound and tries to roll off of Bull, but Bull wraps him up tight in his arms, refusing to let him escape. Mahanon squirms for a moment, then buries his face in Bull's collarbone with a defeated groan.

"It's really cute, you know," Bull says conversationally, thoroughly enjoying Mahanon's distress.
"Just that nice, long rrrrrrrr- hey, no zapping."

"Don't tease me and I won't zap you," Mahanon grumbles into Bull's chest, though he does call the little thread of lightning at the tip of his finger poised over Bull's right nipple back into himself.

"But teasing you is so fun," Bull says, leaning forward and gently biting the tip of Mahanon's ear. Mahanon breathes sharply, still hiding his face in Bull's chest. "You get all flustered, you start squirming - and you can't pretend you don't like it, not with your cock at half mast right now."

"And clearly you enjoy doing the teasing," Mahanon says, his voice low as he slips a thin thigh between Bull's legs, pressing gently against Bull's own hardening length.

"Clearly I do," Bull says, shifting his hips to rub himself up against Mahanon with a sigh.

Mahanon moves slowly, his lips trailing down over Bull's chest - neither avoiding nor focusing on the many scars carved into Bull's skin, for which Bull is certainly grateful. Bull's hand flexes in the sheets, the other hand coming up to settle in Mahanon's hair as the elf's hand carefully wraps around Bull's cock and he kisses his way from root to tip, eyes half-closed as he licks over the head.

Bull groans, letting his head fall back against the pillows. Mahanon seals his mouth around him and sucks, taking in as much of Bull as he can.

"Fuck," Bull murmurs. Mahanon tightens his grip and jacks Bull slowly into his mouth, plush lips kissing and suckling at his tip. Mahanon dips his head lower to mouth at Bull's balls, rolling them gently in his hand before coming up again to suck him off. "You've got a beautiful fucking mouth, you know that? Perfect lips, so fucking good for me."

Mahanon lifts his head, looking startled at the praise, but Bull pushes him back down.

"Keep your mouth full," he says firmly, adding softly, "Lift three fingers if you need a break, okay?"

Mahanon's eyes go dazed and heated at Bull's commanding tone, but he makes the hand-sign for "yes" and fills his mouth with Bull's cock again.

"I want you to lie there, my cock gagging you, while I tell you how fucking beautiful you are," Bull says, and Mahanon moans around him, cheeks flushing deep red. "I wish you could have seen yourself last night, how you looked under me when I was buried in you, so fucking wrecked and gorgeous. Those big eyes of yours on me, so I could see just how much you were giving up to me when you came. An absolute masterpiece."

Mahanon squirms, and Bull knows this is another kind of torture for the elf, having to hear these sorts of compliments without being able to hide or negate them. He tries to take Bull in deeper, clearly trying to show some kind of appreciation, and chokes as Bull's cock hits the back of his throat, tears springing to his eyes.

"Easy, easy," Bull says, gently pulling Mahanon's hair. "You don't have to prove anything to me, I already see you. You're already so fucking good for me, you know."

Mahanon looks up, his stormy eyes meeting Bull's, and for a moment Bull doesn't give a shit about boundaries, about uncertain futures, about anything other than this elf- this sweet fucking elf-
"Who the fuck?" Bull calls conversationally, muffling a groan as Mahanon's hand continues to stroke him, keeping him hard and wanting.

"Just me," says Krem through the door, and Mahanon and Bull trade a look. "Apparently the duke sent a runner with a message before dawn. Was wondering if you wanted to take a look at it."

"Give me-" Bull looks at Mahanon, who seems to do a quick round of mental math before lifting his hands with all ten fingers splayed - then, after a thought, lifting two fingers. "-about twenty minutes, and I'll come down and take a look."

"Sure," Krem says slowly. "Quick question first."

"Can it be very quick?" Bull grumbles, as Mahanon starts to jack him off again.

"Very quick," Krem says. "Is Mouse in there with you?"

Mahanon's hand stutters on Bull's cock, and he gives Bull a startled look.

Bull shrugs. Mahanon, red-faced but lips curving into a reckless smile, shrugs back.

"Uh," Bull says. "Yeah."

There's a long sigh from the other side of the door, and a thud that sounds suspiciously like Krem knocking his head against it. "Fucking-you two couldn't have helped a poor bloke out and kept it in your pants a bit longer?"

Bull raises an eyebrow as Mahanon lifts his head and calls, his voice very rough, "Who won the bet, then?"

"Grim, and despite who he is as a person you'd better believe I'm never going to hear the end of it," Krem grouses. "Fine, alright, enjoy the morning as you two seem determined to do. Chief, please don't break the elf, he owes me money and I'm about to be very broke."

"Thanks for your concern, Krem," Mahanon says, as Bull rolls his eye.

They hear Krem grumble again, then footsteps leading away from the door.

"Well, that takes care of that, then," Bull says, as Mahanon laughs lightly into his hip. "Hope you're in for some serious ribbing at breakfast."

"I don't mind," Mahanon says, looking up with a cheery smile. "It's worth it, yes?"

Bull reaches down and pulls Mahanon up into his arms, feeling something settle and twist in his chest simultaneously as the golden light hits Mahanon's curls, his freckled skin, his swollen lips from sucking Bull's cock and those stupidly beautiful eyes of his, the ones that say far too much and ask for far too little in return.

"Worth it," Bull says, kissing Mahanon. With a grin, he flips them both, rolling the elf under him and relishing in the way Mahanon's startled laugh quickly becomes a breathy moan as Bull's hand slips between his legs.
END PART TWO
Part Three - Kadan

Chapter Notes

hnnnnNNNNnnnnNnnnnnnNnnngh, that is where my brain is at right now

Song rec: Euphoria

Playlist

Come yell at me on Twitter at @FoxNonny, it's locked again but if you're fandom folk I'll let ya in. I subsist off kudos and comments and, currently, lethal amounts of coffee. It's my final week of school and extracurriculars; pray for me. I love y'all.

OH ALSO WE'RE IN PART THREE WOO IT'S GONNA BE A FUN RIDE (HOPEFULLY)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This, right here, is the part Bull hates about these assessments - watching someone else read through his report.

For one thing, it's boring as fuck, especially if the report is particularly long or the reader particularly slow. There's about fifteen other things Bull could be doing right now instead of sitting on this splinterly stool in this poor excuse for an inn, watching the Ben Hassrath agent across from him leaf through a stack of parchment. He can't even allow himself to slip into meditation - he has to keep an ear out for any suspicious creaking around the door of this private room while the Ben Hassrath's attention is occupied.

Questions, he can handle. Conversation comes easy to him. Waiting? Not so much.

He tries to amuse himself by analyzing the Qunari agent before him. There's a chance he lucked out, here - he's heard of Rethlok, a Ben Hassrath masking themself as a Tal Vashoth mercenary, like Bull. Reth has the unique ability to present themself as either a man or a woman depending on the need, due to their androgyny. They're often assigned to bodyguard bas assets until the Ben Hassrath no longer need them, at which point they'll either let nature take its course or dispose of the bas themself, before burning their identity and starting again elsewhere. Brutal and duplicitous, but from what Bull's heard, they never kill unless instructed, and take little pleasure in doing so. That's more than Bull could say for himself, never mind other Ben Hassrath.

Right now Reth is masquerading as a woman, their vivid violet eyes lined in thick black kohl and their white hair flowing free between their horns, ears pierced with gold loops and gem studs. Bull's not sure who the asset is, but he has his suspicions - there's a political activist in town advocating for tariffs to be levied against Tevinter merchants until the country ends their slave trade. The activist's ideas have been catching on in certain circles; Bull hopes she'll outlive the Ben Hassrath's interest in her.

Reth is nearing the end of the report, but there's no point in trying to read their expression for any hint of opinion or reaction. Bull could have written that he fucked the Divine in there and Reth's face would remain still and utterly neutral. After being around bas for so long, where half of what
they say is less about the words and more in how their faces move when they say it, it's odd to be on a level playing field again.

Reth's eyes track through the final lines of Bull's report, reading them once and - if Bull's not mistaken - twice over before slipping it back into the stack of parchment. Bull doesn't sigh with relief, but he certainly feels it. Finally.

"The Ben Hassrath are pleased with your work regarding the bas saarebas fraternity," Reth says. "With the information you provided, we were able to press our advantage. The Orlesians did attempt to track down your... 'Mouse,' but the threat was quickly neutralized."

Bull nods. Another point of relief - he's been half-expecting to have to fight off a few Crows these past few months, making him itchy any time Mahanon has wandered out of his limited sight. Luckily that hasn't happened too often; they've been spending a lot of time together recently.

"The bas saarebas recruit seems to be proving himself useful," Reth continues. Without blinking or raising an eyebrow, nor any change in tone, they add, "Very useful."

And there it is.

"I try to make the most out of the bas under my charge," Bull says.

"That is apparent," Reth says. They thumb through the pages of parchment. "There are several risk elements here that I've identified. I would appreciate it if you could give me your own assessment."

"Intelligence," Bull says instantly. "The bas saarebas is quick. He asks questions."

"How do you mitigate that risk?"

"He doubts himself," Bull says. There's a gnawing, sick feeling in his stomach, but it's far divorced from his mind. He can refuse it. "He trusts others over his own judgment. He trusts me. It's easy to manipulate; so is he."

Reth nods. "What else?"

"He's an exceptionally strong saarebas," Bull says.

"So?"

"Magebane exists."

Reth smirks a little at that, their impassive face cracking ever so slightly. "That it does. What else?"

"The Chargers like him," Bull says. "I mean, they all like each other. It's a tight unit. They're loyal to one another."

"Does their loyalty to one another outweigh their loyalty to you?"

It's a hard fucking question to answer. Bull wants to explain that the best way to keep folks loyal is to test that loyalty as little as possible; that he would never put the Chargers in a position to choose between him and one of their own; that, and he'd be reluctant to admit it, but if it did come to that, he could probably convince the Chargers to choose him with a few careful half-truths.

However. All of that would sound like equivocating.
"No," Bull says.

"Anything else?"

It's a gamble, but Bull says, "No."

Reth blinks. "You don't see any other risk involved."

"I don't."

Reth picks out the last page of the report again, looking it over. "You mention here that you've had sex with the bas saarebas."

There's an unmistakable curl to Reth's lips as they say this, particularly on the end of the phrase. Bull gets it. Fucking a bas is one thing, and something many within the Qun would find distasteful. Fucking a mage? Well, Mahanon is Bull's first, and it's not like he hasn't had offers in the past.

"I have," Bull says.

"Why?"

"The bas saarebas offered," Bull says. With anyone else, he would throw in a shrug. "There's no tamassrans around here. It seemed like a convenient solution to satisfy certain needs. And anyway-" that gnawing pain grows a little keener, a little harder to ignore, "-I figured it would strengthen the saarebas's emotional attachment to me. Make him easier to control, if need be. At this point, I figure he'll do just about whatever I ask him to without hesitation. Helps mitigate those other risk factors we discussed."

"Emotional attachment," Reth echoes, putting the page aside. "That's a risk factor I identified in your report - a chance you'll develop an emotional attachment to the bas saarebas. You don't agree?"

"Fuck no," Bull says with a sharp snort. "No offence to your assessment. Don't get me wrong, I like the bas saarebas just fine. He's useful, just as all my Chargers are useful. But at the end of the day, a bas is a bas."

"If the Ben Hassrath asked you to abandon the bas saarebas, or turn him over to the templars, or kill him, you would do it?"

"Without hesitation," Bull says.

Reth sits in contemplative silence, watching Bull carefully. "How often have you and the bas saarebas had sex?"

"I haven't been keeping count," says Bull.

"And you intend to continue."

"Unless instructed otherwise."

A muscle clenches and releases in Reth's jaw, and they pass another uncomfortable moment in silence.

"Given how bas conflate sex with attachment, there's a chance you could risk an unfavourable situation if you were to stop," Reth says, a thread of coolness in their tone. "I do not think accepting
the bas's offer was wise. However, I do not see an immediate risk... nor an immediate solution."

Which, as far as reactions go, exactly the kind of uneasy middle-of-the-road response Bull was expecting. Still. *Fuck.*

"The bas saarebas has, as we have both agreed, proven himself to be a useful asset for now," Reth says, and there's a definite emphasis on those last two words. "I can... understand, I suppose, the desire to keep him on a tight leash. I would not overestimate his worth, however."

Bull nods. "Understood."

"That aside, is there anything else you know about this bas saarebas that isn't in the report?"

Bull's eye flicks to the stack of parchment. It's only six pages. What Bull has learned about Mahanon over the past few months could fill a hundred.

He could draw a map of Mahanon's most sensitive areas, for instance - of which there's a delightful fuckton, plenty of areas to tease and kiss and stroke to reduce the elf to a whimpering mess in moments.

He could list Mahanon's hard and soft limits, hashed out over nights of negotiation and careful experimentation. The list of things Mahanon likes would be much longer and a fascinating read. They've recently added leather to that list - Bull caught Mahanon eyeing his fingerless leather gauntlets and decided to wear them to bed, winding up with a *very* happy elf in return.

He could also write a few pages worth of endorsement for fucking mages - not only for easy clean-up and creating sound barriers so they don't wake up everyone else in camp when they decide to make questionable late-night decisions, but for things Bull never would have imagined every enjoying. Those little tingling sparks Mahanon produces when he's aroused can, as it turns out, be put to *very* interesting uses, depending on where the elf's hands and fingers wind up.

But it's more than just the sex - which is precisely the fucking problem.

Because Bull could fill pages upon pages of little details - how Mahanon murmurs in his sleep sometimes, but only ever in Elvhen, and only in what Bull's starting to recognize as the Sliabh dialect versus the dialect Mahanon uses when he speaks with Dalish. How he gets cold easily and is a right little bastard about shoving his frigid hands and feet against Bull to warm them up, adopting a perfectly innocent expression when Bull grumbles at him over it. How Mahanon won't *tell* Bull that he's in the middle of a really good chapter of his book and Bull is distracting him, but he'll get a very polite and somewhat pained look on his face, and Bull will try to wrap up whatever the fuck he's saying as quick as possible so Mahanon can get back to it.

How Bull, often, doesn't have to say when he needs a night or two to himself, and Mahanon never looks hurt or disappointed setting up his own tent. They both appreciate solitude. It works.

And yes, it's sometimes unsettling, the way Mahanon can read him. Mahanon won't say anything - there's so much they don't say, the two of them - but Mahanon's careful. When they're fucking, he'll alter positions to accomodate Bull's various aches and old wounds, and it would make Bull feel far too *seen* if Mahanon weren't so easy about it. Never pitying, no cloying sympathy, just a kind of logical practicality that Bull can't bring himself to get defensive over.

Mahanon still looks pleasantly surprised, when Bull compliments him. Bull still needs to clear Mahanon's mind, earn his surrender before Mahanon will accept without doubt or confusion everything Bull wants to give him - pleasure, praise, care, attention. The fact that Mahanon
deserves these things, should expect these things, still seems like a foreign concept to the elf.

It does not help, Bull knows, that he can't truly give Mahanon everything he deserves. But fuck if he isn't trying to make Mahanon see his own worth in the meanwhile.

He's starting to apologize less, at least, though Bull suspects this is partially due to the elf's inability to sit down without wincing for a few days after Bull finally worked out those thirty-one "coppers" Mahanon owed him.

With a riding crop.

Bull's still keeping count, and it's always fun to see a pleasant flinch of anticipation and dread in Mahanon's face when Bull casually whispers the current number into one of his long, pointed ears.

Bull could mention that he's becoming far too accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of Mahanon's purr and the elf's slight weight on his chest or tucked in close against his side. That while the sex is fucking great, Bull's starting to get addicted to the late nights they spend far too exhausted from their travels or battles to do anything other than curl up with one another and talk, often for hours. Mahanon still challenges him - there are a few debates they've yet to come to a middle on. The other Chargers know better than to even mention the name Loghain MacTir around the two of them lest they be subjected to hours of bickering between Bull and Mahanon regarding whether the Hero of Ferelden was right to execute him or not.

("He had business dealings with slavers, Bull-Chief.")

("I'm not saying he was a good guy, I'm just saying you might want to wait until after killing the big-ass fucking demon before chopping the head off of one of the country's best tacticians-")

("Hardly one of the best, seeing as he wound up one head short of a full Ferelden before the end-")

Mahanon's funnier than he lets on, smarter than he lets on, and far too fucking kind. Still too fucking kind. He hides his hurts behind easy smiles and he's becoming a far better liar, now, being with Bull, and despite the implications Bull can't help but agree with Reth's assessment - there's no immediate risk to him or Mahanon, here, but no immediate solution either.

But it's still good - if it weren't still good, if Bull didn't think there was any good to be had here for Mahanon, for both of them, he would put an end to it. He would.

Fuck, they're having fun. Of course, there's all this shit hanging over their head, all the time, and there's about a million ways this could end badly for both of them, but they're both happy, aren't they?

It's not nearly enough - not that Bull has any fucking idea what more would look like - but for what it is, it's worth it. It's still worth it.

So, yes, there's more Bull could say about Mahanon. Much more. Pages and pages of information he did not, could not include in his report.

"Nothing important," he says.

- 

Mahanon doesn't realize he's drifted off into his own swirling thoughts again until a walnut pegs him right between the eyes.
"Ow," he says pointedly, rubbing his forehead and glaring at Rocky across the table.

"Just trying to help a little Mouse out," Rocky shrugs. "It's your turn."

It's late evening, about an hour past dinner service in this low-ceilinged little mercenary pub. Arlesans is a strange city, ancient in its structure but with a somewhat abandoned feel to the streets. Commerce and populace has largely shifted south to Val Royeaux over the centuries, and while there are plenty of lordly summer homes in the surrounding hills and plains of Ghislain, the city itself isn't exactly teeming with business. Mahanon suspects this might change over the coming months as the cool autumn breeze becomes a stiff winter wind in the south, and nobles shuffle north for warmer climes.

He and the other Chargers have a lively little game of Wicked Grace going to while away the mellow evening - though by the looks of the bards setting up in the corner of the inn looking to take over from the singer by the fireplace, there's sure to be some sort of dance soon. Mahanon plans to escape to his room long before the tambourine gets going.

Wicked Grace is a dangerous game to play with a distracted mind, and he's not a terribly good player to begin with. He frowns at his cards, trying to remember what his strategy was. He's sure he had one at some point, but now he's sitting here with only one song card played on the table, two knights in his hand, a dagger, a serpent, and an angel.

Biting his lip, he places one of his knights next to the song and draws-

"Fuck," he groans, his head falling back against the back of his chair with a clunk.

"Show us the damage, Mouse," Stitches says.

Wordlessly, Mahanon flips them the Angel of Death card he's just pulled to a chorus of cheers and groans.

"I believe this round is mine, gentlemen," Skinner says with her customary sharp grin, reaching forward to scoop the stack of coins in the middle of the table.


"Not with my serpents in reverse-"

"I think it's a tie, actually," Stitches says with a thoughtful squint.

Mahanon's attention is wandering again, the slight pang of losing so abysmally doing little to distract him from his thoughts. His gaze slides over to the door of the inn. An hour honestly isn't that long an absence, but even so...

He realizes Krem is watching him - Dalish, too, both wearing far too knowing, far too sympathetic expressions. Mahanon offers them both a slight smile and a nod, and takes a sip of his mead.

Mahanon likes to think that he and Bull have done a good- well, if not good, then decent- no, probably not even decent, but he'll be fair and call it an adequate job of keeping what they do on their own time and how they act in the field with the Chargers present separate. It's never impacted their work; bandits are still being hunted, nobles are still plying them for strange tasks, dragons are still being slain.

(The fact that after the dragon was slain Bull immediately tugged Mahanon into the nearest cave while they were both still covered in blood, sweat, smoke, and char from dragon fire to- well, that
was Bull's fault, and his idea entirely, and quite frankly it was a bit insulting that no one believed Mahanon when he explained that he'd twisted an ankle during the fight and that's why he was walking with a slight limp afterwards.)

Mahanon is still Mouse, and Bull is still Chief, and honestly Mahanon's pretty sure they flirt about the same amount now as they did before that night in Lydes - only with far less helpless frustration involved, which Mahanon's sure is better for everyone on the whole.

But sometimes, on nights like tonight, well. Mahanon's never been good at hiding his feelings, and he's certain that they're written all over his face right now for everyone to see. Stitches was adamant about getting a game of Wicked Grace going, and Skinner bullied Mahanon into playing despite his terrible track record with cards (or maybe because of it - the Chargers have made quite a lot of money off of Mahanon over the past few months). Mahanon can't help but suspect the Chargers might be trying to distract him, and he's certainly grateful, if not particularly receptive.

Mahanon can't even try to convince himself he's not worried about Bull. But he does try to tell himself that it will be fine, it'll all be fine.

Bull can talk himself out of anything, Mahanon tells himself forcefully. He smiles wryly. And into anything. And, if all else fails, through anything - and he doesn't need words for that. He'll be alright. The Ben Hassrath won't - Bull will be fine. What we have - it's just sex, after all. His people don't care about that. Sex and friendship. Nothing more.

Mahanon's smile fades. That's not a helpful line of thought to be following either.

Mahanon's cards are tugged out of his grip and he blinks as Dalish makes a soft "tch" at his terrible hand. She scoops up the rest of his cards and hands them to Skinner, who's looking a touch sore - she's got half the pot, while Grim meticulously stacks the other half in front of himself.

"We're dealing out another round," Dalish says kindly, putting a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. "You in?"

Mahanon thinks about saying no, about retreating to his room and trying for a little peace and quiet before the bards get the dances going. But there will be nothing peaceful about the quiet, nothing but endless pontificating on all the things Mahanon is trying so desperately hard not to think about; the fear that Bull might not come back, that he'll be - and it would be Mahanon's fault -

"Of course he's in," Krem says with over-bright cheer. "Aren't you, Mouse?"

Krem's been like this since Bull left, his voice far too loud and relaxed.

Mahanon feels a sudden swell of irritation with himself - he's not the only person who's worried. He's not the only person who cares about Bull. Bull and Krem are practically brothers, though neither of them would admit it aloud. And here Krem is, trying to make Mahanon feel better - well, for fuck's sake.

"Yes, of course," Mahanon says, forcing an equally bright smile and giving his thigh a little pinch under the table to snap himself back to the present. Focus. Stop fucking moping. He pulls out a frankly depressing handful of coppers and tosses them to the centre of the table. "Let's see if I can't improve on my last hand."

"Anything would be an improvement on your last hand," Dalish says, but she pats him on the shoulder with a nod of approval before pulling out a few coins of her own.

This time Mahanon has the pressure of guilt to keep his mind on the game - any time his thoughts
start spiralling he looks at Krem and the Chargers, laughing and joking to keep each other from thinking too hard, **helping** one another, and he forces himself back out of his head to join in.

He's so intent on remaining focused that he doesn't immediately look up when the door to the inn swings open again. Still, a seven-foot Qunari profile is hard to miss. Mahanon catches sight of this from the corner of his eye and nearly drops his cards, his entire body giving a strange lurch as he instinctively starts to rise from his chair, every part of him determined to close the distance between them-

_Calm the fuck down!

Mahanon forces himself still as Bull catches sight of their table and starts making his way over, negotiating his considerable bulk between the tables and chairs. He seems cheerful enough, but it's Bull - that doesn't necessarily mean shit, quite honestly.

"Who's winning?" Bull asks once he's in earshot. There's a chair open next to Rocky at the table, but Bull doesn't take it.

"Grim," says Rocky, just as Skinner says "Me." Skinner glares at the dwarf.

"How were drinks with your 'friend?'" asks Krem, his voice back to normal - he's clearly relieved too.

"Terrible," Bull grunts. "We definitely picked the right inn, that place across town is a fucking pit - and not the fun kind."

"Well, we've got drinks, we've got cards - are you joining us?"

Bull eyes the free chair, but he shakes his head. "Nah. Long day - probably just gonna get some shit done and turn in. Don't have too much fun, we're up and out first thing tomorrow."

The Chargers grumble their acquiescence, and Bull glances at Mahanon - just briefly, their eyes just barely catching - before the Qunari turns and leaves.

Mahanon watches him go, feeling stuck and uncertain, until Skinner reaches across the table and snatches his cards from his hands, smacking them down on the table. "Go on, Mouse."

"Thanks," Mahanon says, tossing back the rest of his mead and springing up from his chair.

Bull is already in his room with the door closed by the time Mahanon catches up with him, and Mahanon pauses on the threshold for a moment, a little unsure.

Sometimes - not often, but sometimes - this fine line they're straddling seems to stretch gossamer-thin, and Mahanon's not sure what will happen to them if it breaks. It's in the little stupid details; when they come to a new town, a new inn, Mahanon makes sure to ask the innkeeper for his own room, even if more often than not he winds up in Bull's. It keeps a door open, gives them both a way out; really it's a symbolic gesture more than anything, showing that they both understand what this is, and what it isn't.

What it has to be, and what it can't be.

But there's so much tangling in all this that sometimes Mahanon can't even keep track of his own thoughts and feelings on the matter, never mind Bull's. What they're saying and doing because they have to say and do it, to keep those boundaries firm, and what they wish they could say and do.
Specifically, what Mahanon wishes he could say and do. Because there's always a chance he's reading more into this, into what they have, than Bull is.

There's always a chance that Mahanon might show up like this, on Bull's doorstep, and Bull might not want him there.

Mahanon closes his eyes for a moment, steeling his nerves, and starts to knock.

The door opens before Mahanon can finish knocking.

"Didn't want Skinner to take all your money, huh?" Bull says, with a crooked sort of smile.

"Something like that," says Mahanon.

Bull steps aside to let Mahanon through. "Works for me."

Mahanon waits until the door is closed before casting a silencing spell over the room. At Bull's request, he's been working on a more finicky variation on the enchantment - a casting that allows sound in, but not out. He's still working out the kinks, but he's getting better at it - they can still hear the sounds of the common room from here, but the street sounds beyond the window are a bit warbled and muted.

"Not bad," Bull says.

"I think the glass in the window might be warping the casting," Mahanon says, crossing over to the window in question and giving it an experimental tap. The street sounds ripple and distort, causing Mahanon and Bull to both wince. "Something to think about for next time."

"Sure."

Mahanon keeps his gaze focused on the lights of the streets below, shining and twisting through the purled glass of the window. "I know I can't really- I shouldn't ask-"

"Nah, it's okay," Bull says, and in the reflection of the glass Mahanon watches as Bull locks the door and takes a seat on the edge of the bed. "Good news - no one's trying to kill you anymore."

Mahanon turns away from the window. "Anymore?"

"The Orlesians took a contract out on you with the Crows, like we thought they might. My people dealt with it. I'd take the victory if I were you," Bull says. "Anyway, I wouldn't have let that happen."

"How very deeply comforting," Mahanon says uneasily. "But- alright, well, that is good news. And, um, how did it go with...?"

"Kinda how I thought it would go," Bull says. "You made a good impression with your work with the Orlesians, so that helps. I'll find out over the next few months if they're gonna get twitchy about us fucking. But for now..." Bull shakes his head. "You don't have to worry about any of this shit, you know."

"I mean, I sort of do," Mahanon says, feeling a bit stung. "Seeing as I'm at least somewhat involved, last I checked."

"I just mean- with the Ben Hassrath, with my work, with-" Bull balances his elbows on his knees. "It's messy shit, Mouse. But it's my shit. None of that's on you. Do you get what I'm saying?"
There's two ways to read this - Bull is shutting Mahanon out, or Bull is trying to protect him. Maybe both. Either way, it's a line, one of their many boundaries, and Mahanon doesn't want to push.

"I do," Mahanon says reluctantly. "But- I do care about what happens on that end, with you. Even if I can't know the details. Even if there's nothing I can do to help."

"I know," Bull says, his voice soft. He looks down at the floorboards. "Hey- are you happy, Mouse?"

Mahanon blinks. "What?"

"Think of it as a- six-month employee check-in, or whatever," Bull says, scratching at one of his horns. "With the Chargers, with your work - with how things are, here. In this room. You know?"

"Bull, of course I'm-"

"Just- think about it, for a moment, before you say anything. Please."

Mahanon does think about it. Really thinks. The answer is still obvious to him, and does not change.

"Bull, before I was with the Chargers, I was-" Mahanon grips at his arms, feeling a strange remembered surge of the old anxieties. "You saw how I was. I wasn't... myself. I don't think I even had the faintest idea what it meant to really be myself. Now, I think I'm starting to figure it out. That's a gift, truly."

Bull tilts his head. "That's... huh. You think you know yourself better, now?"

"I know I do," Mahanon says. "Being able to become my own man, make my own path, my own decisions? Not having some prescribed role I was never meant for-"

He stops talking. Bull is just- looking at him.

"It doesn't scare you, even a little?" Bull asks quietly. "Never being sure what exactly you're supposed to be doing? So many fuckin' choices, so many ways it could go to shit?"

Mahanon swallows hard. There's a nakedness in Bull's expression he's only ever seen slight flashes of, quickly covered, now laid bare, and Bull looks... tired.

"I'd rather have the choice - every choice - than no choice at all," Mahanon says. "If it all goes wrong- well, then I know that it went wrong because of me, and no one else."

"You really like carrying the world on your shoulders, huh," Bull says.


Bull stares at him for a long moment. "I... admire that, you know. I admire you."

Mahanon's breath catches.

The quiet spell between them is abruptly shattered by a loud crash of music from the common room and an enormous cheer. Mahanon groans as he hears the tambourine start up, the patrons of the inn banging on the tables in time with the screeching fiddle.

"Huh," says Bull with a wince. "I kinda thought we were being attacked for a moment there."
"I'd qualify it as an assault," Mahanon says, touching his ears to stop them from flicking irritably at the noise. "I'm sure I can adjust the spell to block it out-"

"Nah, wait a moment," Bull says, getting to his feet. With a smile, he offers a hand to Mahanon. "Dance with me?"

Mahanon's heart flips, his lips curving into a shy grin despite himself. "I'm a terrible fucking dancer, Bull, you know that."

"Oh, I know," Bull says. "But it's just us, here. Yeah?"

The music is categorically awful, but it's chasing away the last of that strange, fragile energy from the room, and Bull's face is settling back into his usual cheer. It's just them, just the two of them, and there's safety in that. Maybe a flimsy excuse for safety, but safety nonetheless.

"Yes," Mahanon says, and takes Bull's hand.

Bull grins and tugs Mahanon in close, spinning them both out into the centre of the room in time with the tambourine. There's not a lot of space in here to navigate, but they make do.

At first Mahanon tries to focus on the beat, trying to wrestle his steps into line and always falling behind, but Bull takes his hands and pulls him in close again.

"With me, Mouse," Bull says. "Like this."

Bull steps back, and Mahanon follows. He turns them both, pivoting on his braced leg, and Mahanon lets Bull guide him. Once Bull seems satisfied that Mahanon's following him, he gives a wicked smile and twirls Mahanon in a sudden spin, catching him as he trips with a yelp and tugging him back into the regular steps.

"When the fuck did you learn to dance?" Mahanon gasps, as Bull puts his hand on Mahanon's waist and leads them into a spirited two-step.

"Lots of nobles get a kick out of teaching the burly uncivilized ox-man how to waltz," Bull says, dipping Mahanon low. "It starts to catch on after a while. Don't tell anyone though - being uncivilized is part of my charm."

"Counterpoint - this is extremely fucking charming," Mahanon says, as Bull pulls him back up.

Bull's eye glitters dangerously. "You might want to hold on tight, then."

Mahanon does exactly that, gripping Bull's hand nervously. "Bull-"

What follows next feels a little like being caught in the midst of an aggressive whirlwind of dips, spins, and steps, all in time with the exuberant music in the common room. At first all Mahanon can do is hang on, letting Bull take him through the frenetic steps of the dance. Then he starts to relax into it, becoming bolder with his own moves, his own attempts to match Bull's rhythm. He's still not very good, and he's sure he looks ridiculous - but fuck it if it isn't fun. He doesn't realize he's laughing, both of them laughing, until he's teary-eyed and nearly out of breath with mirth and easy joy.

As the last few long notes of the dance complete, Bull sweeps Mahanon up off his feet and into his arms, still spinning them in a slow, easy circle.

"I'm pretty sure that's cheating," Mahanon says, his hand finding Bull's cheek, smoothing his
"Are you complaining?" Bull asks, still grinning. "Seem to recall you mentioning something about being charmed a few minutes ago."

"Consider me still extremely fucking charmed," Mahanon murmurs.

Bull's lips meet his, and Mahanon curls in close, wrapping as much of himself as he can around Bull and moaning softly as the Qunari licks into his mouth.

There's still so much they do not say, the two of them, so much they probably should. But as Bull walks them back over to the bed, laying Mahanon down gently with hungry, deep kisses - Mahanon sometimes likes to think that in these moments, with Bull's hands and lips on him and sharing nearly every breath, they understand one another perfectly.

Later, much later, as the sounds of the inn start to settle around them and Mahanon lies close in Bull's arms, Bull stroking his wild hair, Bull says, "You never answered the second bit."

"What second bit?" Mahanon murmurs, half-asleep already. He turns and tucks his face into the crook of Bull's neck, pressing his lips to Bull's throat.

"Are you happy, Mouse?"

"I already said -"

"In this room. Wherever this room is." Bull pauses then adds, "With me."

Mahanon lifts his head, Bull's single eye glittering back at him in the dark.

What can Mahanon say? That these hours they spend together, these nights, feel as natural and as necessary to Mahanon as breathing? That despite the limitations and the confusion, Bull- fuck, Bull still manages to make Mahanon feel wanted, and Mahanon's never- no one's ever- "Happy" just isn't the word for it. There's too much on either end for the word to even begin to apply.

But that's not the sort of relationship they have, and if Mahanon strips away everything else, to just this, what they're supposed to be, ostensibly - Mouse and Chief outside this room, sex and friendship within it - well, he has to scale it all back to make sense of it, but it's not a lie when he says, "Of course I am."

Bull touches Mahanon's face in that gentle way he sometimes does, like he's afraid Mahanon might shatter or disappear if he applies too much pressure, his fingertips barely ghosting over Mahanon's cheek. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I know," says Mahanon. He smiles. "You won't."

- Winter is shit, but it's lucrative shit, and the Chargers make do.

They take a month-long job guarding a trade caravan along the Imperial Highway from Montfort to Val Foret, then spend a few weeks routing out a nest of darkspawn that have settled in amongst the snowy, spindly trees of the forest. Rocky nearly gets eaten by an ogre and Skinner gets frostbite on the tips of her ears (which prompts some good-natured ribbing from her longer-eared Dalish
companions and nothing but sympathy from the rest of the Chargers, for whom she has far less patience on the whole), but otherwise they make it to the turning of the year in one piece.

Bull doesn't hear anything from the Ben Hassrath other than the usual updates - who's operating where, the locations of nearby dead-drops, whispers and useful hints of information. He starts to relax; not a lot, but enough that he has very few qualms about spending the winter with Mahanon warming his bedroll (well, more like Bull warming Mahanon's bedroll - Mahanon still gets cold far too damn easily, Bull's half worried if the elf slept in his own tent they'd find him frozen to death the next morning).

Life settles into something like a routine, if life with the Chargers could be considered such. Even the conflict between the templars and the mages seems to have stalled into an endless uneasy stalemate; Mahanon starts wearing his staff out in public again, and though it does attract one or two sideways glances, there's far less uneasy suspicion directed his way than there was months ago. Dalish stops stringing her "bow" as stringently, happy to toss a fireball here and there when the situation calls for it.

A month or so into the new year, the Chargers make their way back up the Imperial Highway to Val Royeaux - one of Bull's recent missives from the Ben Hassrath indicated that there's a dead drop to collect waiting for him there, and there's always shit tons of jobs in the capital.

They're on foot these days - horses are expensive as shit to try and keep fed during the winter, and walking keeps the Chargers far warmer than riding would. Bull can't imagine sitting still for hours in this cold anyway; his leg seizes even when they pause for short rests, and it hurts like a motherfucker to get moving again.

Dalish is the first to spot trouble off in the distance, stopping mid-sentence in her argument with Stitches about the properties of felandaris. Bull pauses mid-step to look at her, frowning as Dalish's features tighten. "Something wrong?"

"Aravels," Dalish says quietly, pointing.

Bull follows her finger and squints - there are sails on the horizon for sure, just up the road, cresting the top of the hill ahead of them.

Bull's face twists a bit. They've run into the Dalish before, of course, and experiences have ranged from friendly and curious to cold and hostile. Every clan is different, and has different opinions of outsiders... and deserters.

They've never encountered the Dalish with Mahanon.

"Anyone we know?" Bull asks lightly.

"No," Dalish says stiffly, as Mahanon says, "Not off hand, but I recognize the colours. My clan's probably traded with them before. They must be well-established, if they're willing to risk the highway."

Bull glances over at Mahanon. He's biting his lip, frowning slightly. Of course he'd know how his People feel about ex-Dalish.

"Well, there's plenty of highway for both of us," Bull says, shouldering his pack. "Let's keep moving."

As they approach the Dalish aravels, they quickly realize that the landships aren't coming any closer. They've stopped at the crest of the hill, elves grouped around one of the aravels as other
clan members huddle by a makeshift fire on the side of the road, watching warily as the Chargers approach.

"Andaran atish'an," one of the elves calls, tossing a long raven braid over her shoulder and casually unslinging her bow from her back.

Bull raises his hands. "Good day to you too, ma'am. Everything okay?"

The elf gives him a narrow-eyed once over, but plants the butt of her bow in the earth. "Broken axel."

"I thought aravels were magic," says Krem, coming to stand at Bull’s side.

"Magic helps," the elf says, with a raised brow. "But not if the wheel's dangling off."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Mahanon blurts out.

The elf cuts a look at him and frowns, and she's not the only one - a few heads lift at Mahanon's voice, clearly recognizing the Dalish accent.

"Kind of you to offer," the elf says coolly. "But we're nearly finished with our repairs." Her gaze finds Dalish, standing well at the back of the Chargers with a stoney expression. "Seems you've picked up a stray or two, serah."

"Wait, isn't that the Lavellan's First?" says one of the elves, squinting at Mahanon. "From the mid-summer market a few years back, in the Free Marches-"

"That was me, yes," Mahanon says, his voice faltering.

"Not anymore, clearly," says one of the other elves flatly.

"Atish'an, Fel," says the raven-haired archer, holding up a hand. "Vir na dirthalin."

The elf, Fel, settles back against the broken aravel, still eyeing Mahanon warily.

Mahanon clears his throat. "Are you- are you all-?"

"Making our way to the Arlathvhen?" the archer says. "Slowly, in our own time, but yes."

"Right," Mahanon says. "Well. Safe journey, then."

"Dareth shiral," the archer says. After a moment's hesitation, she adds, "If I see Keeper Istimathoriel... I will tell her I have seen you, and that you are well."

"Ma serannas," Mahanon says, with obvious feeling.

The archer's lips flick briefly into a smile, and she gives Bull a strong nod, which he returns.

They're almost free of the encounter, shouldering their packs and setting off again, when Fel steps forward to plant himself in Mahanon's path.

"Ar nuvenin Lavellan ma banal las halamshir var vhen," the elf spits. "Era'harellan."

"Masal din'an, dirthara-ma!" Dalish snarls, pushing forward to stand at Mahanon's side.

"Fel, enough!" the archer barks. "Garas."
Fel gives Mahanon one last disgusted look but moves out of the Chargers' way. Bull lets his hand drop from the hilt of his ax - he hadn't even realized he was reaching for it.

The Chargers move on past the caravan in distinctly awkward silence. Dalish keeps her arm wrapped tight around Mahanon's shoulders, even once they're well clear of the aravels, murmuring to him in their own language.

"Pleasant folks," Krem mutters. "Poor Mouse. Any idea what that feisty bloke said to him?"

"No idea," Bull says, frowning at Mahanon's back. His shoulders are hunched, his head bent a bit - it's an anxious, uncertain posture Bull hasn't seen in him since their early days together.

"Never thought to learn the language of the man you spend nearly every night with, huh?" Krem says with a long side-eye.

"Well, we don't tend to do a lot of talking." Bull says. Which isn't exactly true - in fact, it isn't true at all - but it's worth it for the disgusted look Krem gives him.

Predictably, as soon as they make camp Mahanon sets up his own tent and disappears into it without another word.

"The first run-in is always the worst," Dalish says, coming to stand beside Bull as starts to build a fire. There's a flicker from Dalish's palm, and the logs burst into a roaring bright flame. "He'll be alright."

"What about you?" Bull asks.

Dalish shrugs. "I'm... I want to say I'm used to it, but- well." Dalish rubs her hands together, glancing across the fire to where Skinner is finishing getting their tent together. "I've got someone looking after me, though. I hope Mouse does too."

Bull frowns at her, but she's already moving away, going to help Skinner with the final knots and tethers. Skinner puts an arm around Dalish's waist and whispers something to her, pressing an uncharacteristically tender kiss to her pale hair.

Bull gives Mahanon a few hours before he approaches his tent with a few extra blankets tucked under his arm. There's not a lot of privacy afforded to them here in camp, but the Chargers are all either tucked away in their own tents or still grouped around the fire, drinking and chatting, so it'll have to do.

He taps the canvas flap. "Mouse?"

There's a long pause, and Bull doesn't hear any movement. Then there's a rustle and a cough, and the flap is pushed aside. Bull doesn't have Mahanon's night vision and the flickering light of the fire doesn't do much to illuminate things, but even in the shadows Mahanon looks pretty rough.

"Chief," Mahanon says quietly.

"Just thought you might like some company," Bull says.

Mahanon huffs out a sharp breath, not quite a laugh. "I don't know that I'm much fun to be with right now."

"I'm not here for fun, I'm here for you," Bull says. He winces. "That- uh, that was supposed to be like, a supportive thing to say, not- like, you are fun most days-"
"I get it," Mahanon says quickly, even smiling weakly. "Um. If you're sure-"

"I'm sure," Bull says.

It takes some maneuvering to get Bull in - Mahanon's tent is smaller than Bull's, and by the time the flap is tied over it feels more like he and Mahanon are trussed up in a canvas sack more than anything else. Still, it does offer at least the semblance of privacy for them. Mahanon waves a hand and a familiar muffled feeling washes over Bull's ears, though the sounds outside the tent remain crystal clear.

"You're getting great at that," Bull says.

"Practice helps," Mahanon says, his eyes fixed on the blankets beneath him.

Bull brushes a curl out of Mahanon's face and frowns, feeling Mahanon's skin. "You're fucking freezing."

"I'm fine," Mahanon says.

Bull rolls his eye and unfolds the blankets he brought, wrapping one tightly around Mahanon. "Uh huh. I'm starting to think elves are exclusively summer creatures. No internal heat regulation."

"Just because Qunari give off heat like an oven," Mahanon mutters, and it's nice to hear a little sass from him despite his listless delivery. "You don't- it's alright, you don't have to be here, if you've got- I'm fine."

"Sure," Bull says, rubbing his hands over Mahanon's arms to try to warm him up. "Do you want me to be here, though?"

"I-" Mahanon brings his knees up to his chest, looking... small, in every sense. "I do, of course I want you here, I just- I'm not good company right now, for anything, and I can't- I can't offer you anything, really, right now, not conversation or-" Mahanon buries his face in his knees. "Creators, what am I saying?"

Bull stares at Mahanon.

"If I was having a bad night - or fuck, if Dalish was, or Krem, or any of the others - you'd want to help us, right?" Bull says. "It's not about what you're offering me, Mouse. If it was me, I'm sure you'd come to my tent, whether I was good company or not."

"If you'd have me, of course I'd be there," Mahanon says quietly, wrapping his arms around his shins. "But... that's different, isn't it?"

"How?"

Mahanon lifts his head and looks at Bull - just looks at him, bold and direct, and Bull realizes what it is he's saying, and what he's asking.

It's been nearly four months since Bull passed off his report on Mahanon to the Ben Hassrath. Four months, they've had the information that he and Mahanon are sharing a bed. There have been no further tugs on the leash, no tightening of the collar. Just business as usual.

It's enough to give a man a false sense of security. To make him feel bold enough to take another inch towards a sharp drop that's feeling a little less like oblivion, these days.
"Maybe it's not as different as you think," Bull says.

Mahanon's eyes widen slightly, lips parting at Bull's words.

Bull pulls Mahanon into his lap, holding him close, and Mahanon carefully - still hesitant, still tense - rests his head against Bull's shoulder.

"Talk to me," Bull says.

Mahanon's hands bunch in the blankets, and he shivers. "I get- nervous sometimes. You know that."

"Uh huh."

"Less often, now, than when I was- with the Lavellans, it was-" Mahanon makes a frustrated noise at his own stuttering. "It's like my own tongue is trying to strangle me, or something. Or like my nerves are going to rattle until my bones fall apart. It's- difficult, and it hasn't happened in a while, but when I saw that clan today- it was like I was- I'm not explaining very well."

"Like you were the First again, with the Lavellans," Bull says. "Instead of you."

Mahanon takes a long breath and nods. "Yes. I don't know. I should be more upset about- what they said, I suppose, and how they acted with me and Dalish, but- even when I was a Lavellan, and a First, it still felt like that. Like everyone was looking at me, constantly, and all the ways I wasn't- I couldn't-" He shakes his head. "I'm sorry."

"You're having a bad night, so I won't count that one," Bull says. "What did that guy say to you, anyway?"

"He said he'd tell the Lavellans that I do nothing to further our People," Mahanon says dully. "As far as Dalish insults go, it's meant to be fairly cutting. Honestly, I don't think I was doing much to further our People when I was a proper Dalish, anyway."

"Fuck that, and fuck that guy," Bull says. "You saved your people, remember? You almost fucking died doing it. They don't know that, and they don't know you."

"Thank you," Mahanon whispers. He presses close. "Ugh. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be so self-pitying."

"Okay, I am gonna count that one, so we're back up to eleven," Bull says, and Mahanon grumbles. "It's fine, Mouse. It's just a bad night. I've got you."

They don't say much after that. Eventually they get themselves into a bedroll, and Mahanon - predictably - shoves his cold hands and feet directly against Bull's skin, giving an unrepentant little snicker as Bull mutters a startled curse under his breath.

Bull thinks that Mahanon's fallen asleep - he's well on the way there himself - when Mahanon asks, quietly, "Are you happy, Bull?"

*What a loaded fucking question*, Bull thinks wearily.

"More specific," Bull says.

"In general," Mahanon says, with a slight smile in his voice that suggests he's aware that he's being contrary. Then, more soberly he adds, "And with me."
Bull takes a long breath, tangling his fingers in Mahanon's hair to give himself something to do while he thinks. If he rubs the nape of Mahanon's neck just right it kicks off Mahanon's purr completely involuntarily, and Bull considers doing so now, but he's guessing Mahanon wouldn't appreciate that while he's trying to have a somewhat serious conversation.

"I like to think of myself as a pretty happy guy, in general," Bull says, giving Mahanon's hair a little tug. "I've got a good merc crew that only try to kill each other once or twice a day and almost always only by accident, we've got plenty of coin in our accounts and I don't have to count it anymore, and I've got an elf with an incredible ass in my bed. Shit's good."

"Technically my bed right now," Mahanon murmurs.

"You wanna try being in charge? Could be fun doing a little role reversal-" Mahanon yawns pointedly. "Yeah, fair enough. I mean it, though. Things... yeah, things are good."

"I'm glad, I just-" Mahanon breathes. "Earlier, you said..."

Mahanon trails off, and Bull wonders if Mahanon might really do this - call Bull on what he said, what he meant, really ask for clarification, and Bull wonders what Mahanon might do or say if he hears the truth of Bull's feelings and, fuck, confusion; if Bull could even explain the truth in a way that could possibly make sense, to someone whose whole life wasn't decided and shaped and moulded for him the way Bull's was-

But Mahanon doesn't say anything. His breathing becomes louder, steadier, and Bull realizes the elf has fallen dead asleep.

"Probably for the best," Bull sighs into the quiet night air.

His hand settles on the nape of Mahanon's neck, squeezing and stroking gently. Almost immediately, a low rumbling starts up deep in Mahanon's chest, Mahanon shifting in his sleep and arching into Bull's touch.

Bull smiles and closes his eye, allowing the comforting roll of Mahanon's purr to lull him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I fuckin posted this whole ass chapter and didn't add translation notes:

Atish'an - peace

Vir na dirthalin - we don't know the story (cobbled together from elvhen language page ayo)

Ar nuvenin Lavellan - "$\text{I will tell the Lavellans}$", the rest is literally just "$\text{you do nothing to further our people.}$"

Era'harellan - "$\text{harellan}$ means traitor, "$\text{era}$" is a prefix used for a lot of magic shit, so it's like traitor but specifically magic based for extra punch.

"Masal din'an dirthara-ma" - "$\text{masal din'an}$ is a threat of some kind without translation, the second part means "$\text{may you learn}$" - sounded cool
"Garas" - come
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

LONG-ASS CHAPTER TO HOPEFULLY MAKE UP FOR THE SLIGHTLY LATE POSTING, AYO.

I'm gonna throw in the song rec at the end for.... tonal reasons, but you can, as always, follow the playlist here (at some point I'll throw in an album cover, I swear).

As always I am absolutely floored and fuelled by comments and kudos. Please follow me on my twitter @FoxNonny where there are links to other ways to support my general existence. It's a locked account again (sorry) but if you're obviously fandom folk, I'll let you in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's not the first time Mahanon's seen Val Royeaux, Bull knows - by now, not even the second or third - but his eyes still widen with unmasked excitement as they approach the gates.

"How long are we gonna lose you to the library this time?" Bull asks, nudging Mahanon's arm.

"You may never see me again," Mahanon says gleefully, rubbing his hands together. "Last time I was here they said they were working on a six-volume reference series regarding magical practices across Thedas - I know nothing about the Avvar, and apparently the entire second book is dedicated to studying their."

"Chief, if you get him going we'll never hear the end of it," Rocky moans.

"I might go with you, Mouse," Stitches says. "Been meaning to update my field manual, and I heard there's a botanist at the university who's rewriting some of the old army herbals."

"It's getting pretty late in the day," Bull says. "Stitches, I'm trusting you to drag Mouse out before they close up. We don't want a repeat of Churneau."

There's a round of good-natured snickering, and Mahanon flicks his ears with a scowl. "Honestly, you get locked in a library one time..."

"I'm going to head to the stables," Krem says, with a pointed look at Bull. "If we're keeping north, it should be warm enough."

"I haven't said yes to horses," Bull says. He sighs. "But, fine, sure. Might as well see what the options are. No company purchases though, we still need to run inventory and figure out where we're headed next. This is strictly a personal business day."


"Whatever."

As the others start chatting among themselves about their plans for the few business hours left to them, Bull takes a sidelong glance at Mahanon. He's recovered from the uncomfortable encounter
with the Dalish clan, all smiles and gentle cheer again. Bull knows the prospect of the enormous and well-stocked Val Royeaux library has helped to improve the elf's mood, and honestly that enthusiasm and hungry excitement in his expression - it's so damn disarming, fucking dangerous really. Bull's starting to find that Mahanon's happiness is not only contagious, but addictive.

Which is really what settles it, and propels him to go through with his admittedly stupendously terrible idea.

He reaches over and puts a hand on Mahanon's shoulder, just outside the gates. Mahanon looks up. "Everything alright?"

"Fuck yeah," Bull says. "Just need to borrow you for a sec."

Mahanon nods, and waves Stitches on. "I'll catch up."

Stitches shrugs and continues through the gates with the rest of the Chargers.

"I was thinking we could do something a little different tonight," Bull says, taking Mahanon's hands in his. Mahanon looks a bit stunned at the public display of affection, as tame as it is, which only furthers Bull's resolve. "Something fun. There's a place in town that serves the good shit - all that fancy Orlesian crap, Tevinter wine and tiny plates of fuck knows what. Thought maybe we could check it out - just the two of us."

Mahanon's eyes widen. "Just us, like a- fuck me, really?"

"I mean, that part would probably come after dinner-"

"Shush," Mahanon says, but he's beaming, and- shit, it takes so little to make him happy, and it somehow makes Bull's chest feel full and warm and a bit sick with guilt at the same time. "Bull-fuck, Chief, I'd lo- I'd really like that." He squeezes Bull's hands and bites his lip, a shadow of worry creasing his brow. "Is that- would that be alright, though? I know you have... work, here."

"Just a pick-up," Bull says. "And- fuck it, it can wait for tomorrow. It's Val Royeaux, it's the first somewhat-warm day of the year- let's just relax, yeah?"

Mahanon's eyes shift as he searches Bull's face, but that smile returns in full. "Alright, then." He winces. "Oh, Creators, they'll be expecting- some sort of Orlesian fancy garb, no doubt- what should I wear-?"

"Don't worry, this place- well, you'll see it," Bull says. "They've got kind of an eclectic clientele; definitely upscale, but not stuffy. Still..." Bull takes a small step forward into Mahanon's space, grinning as the elf's eyes darken in response. "If you wanted to get dressed up all nice and pretty for me - well, I'd be into that."

"Oh," Mahanon says weakly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Bull releases Mahanon's hands gives his hair a quick ruffle, snickering when Mahanon smacks him. "You'd better catch up with Stitches, he's got a much longer stride than you."

"Fuck off," Mahanon says, but he's still beaming. "I'll see you tonight, then?"

"Tonight," Bull says.

Mahanon takes his first few steps backward, as if reluctant to tear his eyes from Bull, before finally turning and taking off through the gates to find Stitches.
Bull shoves his hands in his pockets with a little careless whistle, chasing the last of his misgivings from his mind with the memory of Mahanon's enormous smile. Everything else... well, everything else can wait until tomorrow. He's determined to make tonight a damn good night.

Stitches turns as Mahanon finally catches up with him, out of breath from sprinting with his full pack on his back.

"Everything alright, Mouse?" Stitches asks. "That took longer than I thought."

"Everything is- fucking wonderful, honestly," Mahanon wheezes, bending over and resting his hands on his thighs. "Fuck, this pack is heavy. I think I might actually put off my trip to the library until tomorrow - you don't happen to know where Skinner and Dalish went, do you? I- I sort of need their help."

Mahanon catches himself reaching to fiddle with his hair for about the fifteenth time in the last half hour and drops his hand with a frustrated little growl.

He paces in his room, sneaking little glances at himself every time he passes the small mirror set over a wash basin in the corner. It's a bit warped in places - not terrible for a cheap looking glass, but there's an unfortunate ripple set right about the height of his nose that emphasizes the crooked bit and makes it look as though it takes up about half his face. Even so, it doesn't entirely ruin the effect of Dalish's work.

How the other elf managed to take his untamable curls and turn them into something somewhat becoming is beyond Mahanon; there'd been two types of combs and some sort of floral-scented oil involved, and Mahanon suspects he lost a few chunks of hair in the process - his scalp is still tingling and prickling in places from the abuse. What really keeps catching his attention in the mirror however are his eyes. Dalish had insisted that Mahanon allow her to add a thin line of kohl to them.

"They really are your best feature, da'len," she said sweetly, grabbing his jaw in an iron grip when he started to shrink away from the sharp pencil advancing towards him. "Now don't move, blink, flinch, or cry, you'll make me smudge it."

The process of applying the kohl is not one that Mahanon is keen to repeat - ever - but he has to admit, if somewhat grudgingly, that the effect is striking. His already-large eyes look bloody enormous now, but... well, a bit pretty, too.

And Bull likes pretty things.

Which, speaking of - Mahanon catches himself fussing about with his clothes too and once again forces himself still. It's really not the clothes themselves so much as what's under them that's causing him to fidget, more due to sheer nerves than anything else.

He nearly breaks and completely bottles out on - not the whole thing, just maybe this one little part of it, maybe that one step too much and too far, something he's been agonizing back and forth over at least once a minute since he got dressed - but a knock at the door steals that option from him once and for all.

*No going back now, then,* Mahanon tells himself, sucking in a long breath to steady himself. *Confidence, confidence - confidence is key.*
He reaches for the doorknob and flinches back as a small bolt of lightning snakes out from his palm to strike the brass knob with a crackle and a metallic ping. Grinding his teeth, Mahanon wills his magic to fucking behave before he grasps the slightly-smoking knob and pulls the door open.

Mahanon blinks up at Bull, who blinks down at him.

Bull - Creators, but Bull looks good. His customary loose, loud mercenary pantaloons have been swapped out for... well, pantaloons, still. It's not bright yellow plaidweave though, for once, but an almost tasteful pinstripe pattern of grey and black. He's also thrown on some sort of loose linen button-up vest - left unbuttoned, predictably, but even so.

Mahanon wants to express, somehow, just how hard his heart is hammering at his ribs right now, some incredible mix of attraction and affection that makes him feel like he's on fire, a little bit.

"You're wearing a shirt," Mahanon says instead. Dumbly.

"You're wearing shoes," says Bull, sounding equally thrown.

Mahanon's mouth twitches, as does Bull's, and in a moment they're both laughing at themselves.

"Mythal'enaste, I believe what I was trying to say is that you look very nice," Mahanon says, shaking his head.

"You too," Bull says, his voice low and warm. He takes Mahanon's chin and tilts his face up to the light, frowning a little. "Did you do something with your hair?"

"I had some help," Mahanon admits.

"Dalish?"

"Yes - honestly, it's a miracle I have any hair left after that."

"Fuck, that was brave. You should ask Rocky about the time he had her help him with his unibrow."

Mahanon frowns. "Rocky doesn't have a unibrow."

"Not anymore, no."

Mahanon shudders.

Bull grins and leans down, pressing his lips to Mahanon's in a very tender, gentle little kiss. "Come on, let's go have fun."

It takes a few minutes of walking for Mahanon to get used to the shoes he's wearing. Despite the fact that they're barely more than thin slippers, it's jarring, not being able to feel the cobblestones beneath his feet.

"I saw something like this once," Bull muses, as Mahanon nearly trips and takes an odd careful half-step to catch himself for about the fifth time in as many minutes. "This one arl had these cats that kept clawing at his fancy silk curtains, so he had the servants put little booties on their paws. Completely threw off their balance. They were all just kinda stumbling around like-"

Bull mimics Mahanon's careful steps with a smirk. Mahanon rolls his eyes and gently shoves the Qunari. "The Creators gave us perfectly good feet to walk with. Shoes- complicate things."
"Uh-huh."

Though the sun is well set and night has truly taken the city, the streets of Val Royeaux are brightly-lit by extravagant lines of oil lamps, painting the buildings and stonework in a wash of soft orange and gold. Every few blocks or so is another street performer, filling the night air with music and song - a violinist here, a flautist there. Mahanon's ear twitches as he swears, for a brief moment, he hears a Dalish whistle on the breeze, but the wind changes and the snatch of music is gone as quickly as it drifted past.

They make an odd couple, him and Bull - a small and slight Dalish elf and an enormous Qunari mercenary. Two unlikely sights in Val Royeaux to begin with, never mind walking side by side. Mahanon's certain he's not imagining the feeling he has that they're being watched, or at the very least catching attention and observation from the shem'len they pass; though in a sea of Orlesian masks it's hard to tell who's looking where.

The shy, nervous part of him is tempted to care. Tempted to shrink down and hide his face from the scrutiny of so many strangers. But the rest of him?

The rest of him is walking with a man, a friend, that he's really quite fond of, with the confidence that comes from being well-dressed and in good company, so the rest of him quite honestly couldn't give less of a damn.

Bull directs them down what looks like little more than a side alley, though it's unexpectedly cramped with people - a teeming night market has sprung up here, as if the night life of Val Royeaux is spilling out of the cracks of the city. Stalls of fine silks and crystals and contraband and potions line the sides of the alley, and the masks the shopkeepers wear are far more elaborate than those of the streets - instead of perfect faces of fine porcelain or plate silver, there's a variety of animal masks, twisted demon faces, colourful depictions of warped humanity, elvenkind, dwarves, and even one or two Qunari.

"'La Ruelle des étoiles,'" Bull says by way of explanation as they make their way down the narrow walkway, ignoring the merchants calling out to them. "Er, or something like that- my Orlesian's not too great. Watch your purse around here."

"This is incredible," Mahanon murmurs, though he does keep a hand on the small coin pouch at his side.

A woman dressed as a Rivaini seer - or an Orlesian approximation of a Rivaini seer - stumbles into their path, holding up a hand. "Messeres! Allow me to tell you what the spirits have seen of your future!"

"Yeah, no thanks," Bull grunts, carefully maneuvering himself around the woman. "Unless the spirits are seeing gravy in my future, I don't really wanna know."

Mahanon gives the woman a polite nod and tries to follow Bull, but she reaches forward and snatches his left hand, holding it up to the light and examining it with wide eyes.

"Oh child," she breathes. "You've escaped a terrible fate."

Mahanon stops short despite himself. "I- what?"

"Despite your doubts, you would have been a great leader, though it would have cost you much," the woman murmurs, and Mahanon feels an odd chill run up his spine. "But it seems you have chosen a different path."
Mahanon forces a slightly strangled laugh. "A better one, I hope."

"A different one," the woman says dismissively, still frowning at Mahanon's hand. She traces her fingertip crosswise along Mahanon's palm. "Hmm. You are not who you were, nor will you be who you would have been, and yet some paths still converge..."

"Right, thanks, that's very helpful," Bull says, handing the woman a copper and tugging Mahanon away. He leans in to murmur, "The trick is to just keep moving, yeah?"

"Mm," Mahanon says noncommittally, glancing back over his shoulder at the woman, who watches him go with those large eyes still fixed on his left hand. Then, strangely, her head lolls back and she stares up at the sky. "That was a bit- spooky. How did she know I used to be a First?"

"I wouldn't worry about it, Mouse," Bull says, putting a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. "Think of it this way - if she has even a drop of magic, she'd be able to sniff out your, uh, special abilities. Pair that with your Dalish markings, the fact you're wandering around with a Qunari merc instead of your clan... there's a few possibilities there, a few guesses you could make. She just happened to peg things pretty fucking accurately."

"I suppose," Mahanon says, feeling a bit foolish - it does certainly make sense, laid out like that.

"I actually knew someone in my line of work who spent his time masquerading as a fortune teller in Amaranthine," Bull says. "He was fucking amazing at reading people, could tell 'em their whole history back to their faces like they were open books. Made some damn good coin doing it, too- had a few nobles who just loved him, couldn't wait to tell him every last dirty little secret to see if their secret lovers were cheating on them, that sort of thing. Fuck, he was a smart guy."

"What happened to him?"

"Disappeared about five years back - we think he got to be a bit too successful, and some bright spark of a noble figured out that he had half the political heavy-hitters in Ferelden hanging on his every word. We're not sure if he was imprisoned, murdered, or if he's just on the run, but we're pretty sure he managed to keep his cover either way, so..." Bull winces. "Sorry, probably should have told a story with a less shitty ending."

"I don't mind," Mahanon says with a shrug. "I mean, that's terrible for your- colleague, but it does make for an excellent story. 'The Seer of Amaranthine' - a tragic tale of espionage and adventure."

"You've been reading too many Tethras books," Bull says. He grins. "But yeah, I'd read that."

They come to an ornately-carved side door at the end of the alley, lit by two bright lamps on either side. Bull gives the door a solid knock.

Mahanon's expecting the door to open, and tilts his head when instead, a small slot opens in the centre of the door and a tiny tray is pushed out.

"Right, fuck," Bull mutters, fishing about in his pockets. He pulls out a small silver coin that he places onto the tray, and Mahanon catches sight of a blindfolded lion carved into the face of the coin before the tray is whisked back through the door and the slot closes over.

"You gotta prove you're a patron in good standing with them," Bull says. "I'll explain when we get inside."

Mahanon has questions - many questions - but he holds his tongue as the door swings open and a man in a plain black mask ushers them in.
"Any masks or weapons to declare, messeres?" the man asks in a crisp Orlesian accent. He seems utterly unfazed by the oddness of his guests as he closes the door behind them, leaving them standing in a dim entrance hall with a thick black curtain lining the wall across from them. It's very quiet - shockingly so, given the din outside - and Mahanon carefully reaches out with his magic. Sure enough, there's a strong silencing spell cast over the room.

"Uh, just this," Bull says, fishing a short sword out of his pantaloons and handing it off to the masked man. "Mouse?"

Mahanon wrests his attention away from the spell. Reluctantly, he unhooks his sheathed Sliabh dagger from his belt and presents it to the masked man. "It's- um, it's got sentimental value, so..."

"We treat our guests' items with the utmost care and respect, messere," the man says, and Mahanon feels a bit strange about how the man is speaking to him until he realizes he's just not used to hearing respect and courtesy directed his way from an Orlesian shem'len. "However, for an item this small, a peace bond will suffice, if you will allow it."

"Oh. Um, of course."

The man fishes a leather thong from his pocket and quickly binds the dagger into its sheath, securing it with a strong knot and handing it back to Mahanon in the space of a minute. "We also strictly prohibit the use of any magic beyond the curtain. As we do not harbour apostates within our patronage, I trust this will not be a problem for either one of you."

"Nope," says Bull, and Mahanon shakes his head.

With a smile, the masked man ushers them through the curtain with a bow. "Enjoy *La Confiance*, messeres."

Mahanon, still entirely bemused, steps through the curtain and- fuck, he can't help it. He gasps. Going through the curtain is like stepping into a completely different world. What looked like a ramshackle old building on the outside is a grand, two-level banquet hall, with a sparkling gold and crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling and what appear to be statues of ice sprinkled throughout the room. Mahanon is hit with a wall of sound as he passes through the barrier of the silencing spell - a quartet of masked musicians play a gentle and familiar-sounding ballad in the corner and the hall is rife with whispers and laughter from the many patrons, all of whom are bare-faced. The only masks in sight are worn by the waitstaff, all dressed in black outfits and black face masks like the man in the front hall. It's an unusual sight in Orlais, to see so many unmasked people.

And the people themselves, the patrons- it is, as Bull promised, an eclectic clientele. Nobles seem to be rubbing shoulders with merchants and mercenaries, templars and mages, elves and dwarves and humans - there's even a man who looks like a wealthy pirate captain in the corner, laughing with a woman who appears to be a Chantry sister. There's a relaxed nature to the room that's entirely at odds with the heightened, careful and constant anxiety that seem to plague the Orlesians of Val Royeaux.

"Thought you might like this," Bull murmurs, as Mahanon stares open-mouthed at the elaborate spectacle.

"What *is* this place?" Mahanon asks, as Bull guides him over to an empty table in a nice little private nook. They have a good view of the rest of the hall from here, but are neatly obscured by shadows - the only light in their corner comes from a single flickering candle on their table.
"It serves a few purposes," Bull says, pulling in his seat. His eye lights up as he catches sight of a small bowl of candied nuts on the table. "Oh, fuck yes, I love these things - watch out, they've got a kick." He pops a handful into his mouth as Mahanon takes a careful nibble on one, quickly reaching for the water goblet in front of him as the spice hits his tongue. "So, Val Royeaux. Big ass city of secrets where everyone's waiting to get dirt on everyone else and no one can ever fucking relax. We'd never allow that kind of shit under the Qun, it would just drive everyone fucking crazy - and it does. You want to know how old your average Orlesian noble lives to be?"

"Not very old, I imagine," Mahanon says, diving back into the bowl of candied nuts despite the spicy burn. Bull's right - they're very good.

"About forty, and that's if you're lucky. Otherwise, you get murdered, executed, or your heart gives out from the stress. It's kind of ironic - all these privileged fucks grappling for power and wealth, day in and day out, and none of them really even enjoy what they get." Bull shrugs. "I mean, some do. But honestly, you should be terrified of any Orlesian who says they enjoy 'the Game.'"

"So how does a place like this exist in a place like Val Royeaux?" Mahanon asks, looking around. "It seems... I don't know-"

"Scandalous?" Bull says, grinning. "It is. There's about ten people I've spotted in here so far getting real cozy with people who are definitely not their noble spouses, not to mention all the backroom deals happening with the smugglers in the shady areas. See, this place started as a nice hall where unsavoury types with a little extra coin could get a taste of the high life - mercs like us, privateers, pirates, brothel-owners, prostitutes. The only type they don't let in are slavers."

"Good," Mahanon mutters, taking a sip of his water goblet.

"Right? Anyway, nobles started sneaking in with the riff raff - making deals, having affairs, or just blowing off steam. The owners liked having the higher class clientele, but realized if word got out that this was where important people were letting their hair down, the important people would make themselves scarce to avoid tarnishing their reputation. Bit of a double-edged sword on that one. So they changed things up a bit." Bull snatches another handful of nuts from the bowl. "They told everyone they were moving to a new location, and they did - there's another hall like this one that's open to the public, same idea; fancy shit for not-so-fancy people. But they gathered up their regulars and gave them an offer: a safe haven where you can do what you like, be who you like, and be with who you want to be with. In return, you buy access with secrets. Your secrets."

"I'm not sure if I understand," Mahanon says, frowning. "Why would anyone - especially an Orlesian noble - willingly pass their secrets over for this? What's to stop patrons from blackmailing one another with what they see in here?" Mahanon raises a skeptical brow. "The food must be very good."

"Oh, it is," Bull says. "To answer your question? Mutually assured destruction. The owners take discretion very seriously - if they hear a complaint from a patron that something that happened within these walls made it out to the streets and they're able to trace it back to you, you're kicked out - and every patron is gifted your secret as an apology. Bad behaviour is dealt with that way too; no harassing the staff, no picking fights, no getting wasted and breaking the fancy furniture." Bull shrugs. "In return, you get this: possibly the most honest damn building in all of Val Royeaux. A lot of Orlesian nobles would give anything to relax - and some do."

Mahanon stares at Bull. "Everyone in this room is- what, being blackmailed by the owners?"

"You could see it that way," Bull muses, taking a sip of his water. "And not everyone - the more they trust you, the more privileges you get. I've got that silver coin to show I've been a good and
steady customer for a few years now, and I know how to keep my mouth shut." Bull nudges Mahanon's shin under the table. "Means I can bring a guest if I want, and the guest doesn't have to hand any personal secrets over."

"I'm not sure I'd have anything that exciting to give them, honestly," Mahanon says. He takes another look around the room. "Huh. That puts me at a bit of an advantage over some of the nobles here, doesn't it?"

"Truth can be a fuck of an equalizer," Bull says, grinning. "I thought you might pick up on that. If we were to go and mingle with some of the other guests, you'd be surprised to find how polite and reasonable a mighty duke might suddenly be with a lowly ex-Dalish merc. The people who are most overlooked in society, who have the least power? They're treated real fuckin' nice in here. You'd be harder to trace if you let a few secrets slip, and you don't have a lot to lose." Bull leans in. "I mean, I'd appreciate it if we didn't test that, because I'd kinda get fucked, but-"

"I wouldn't- won't," Mahanon says quickly. "What do they have on you?" He winces. "Er. You don't have to answer that."

"What do you think they've got on me?" Bull asks.

Mahanon thinks, and frowns. "Creators. Do they know what you do for your people?"

Bull munches through another mouthful of spiced nuts, but he gives a very slight nod.

"And your people allowed-?" Mahanon stops, realizing. "Oh. Of course they would. If someone else fucks up-"

"I get a little extra information to do with what I please," Bull says. "It's all win, low risk. I keep my head down and get a nice fancy dinner, and every once in a while I learn something very interesting. I don't do anything too scandalous in here - there's a few bedchambers up in the loft but they're expensive as fuck - so it's not like any of the patrons have anything to hold over my head."

"Where do I rank on the scandal scale?" Mahanon asks, grinning.

Bull smirks. "Depends on how much of a scandal we want to cause." He leans forward, his eye taking on a sudden flickering intensity as the light of the candle reflects over his face. "You look damn good, Mouse."

Mahanon swallows hard. "How expensive are those rooms upstairs-?"

A server shows up at their table just then, interrupting Bull's laughter at Mahanon's comment. Mahanon occupies himself by hiding behind a menu as Bull orders drinks - he knows less than nothing about good wine or fancy Orlesian liquor and is quite happy to let Bull do the talking.

"It still all seems terribly risky," Mahanon says later, after the server sweeps through with their wine and takes their dinner orders (Mahanon is pretty sure he's ordered some sort of fish, but with the Orlesian writing on the menu he can't be certain). "I'm surprised this place doesn't turn into an extension of the Orlesian 'Game' in some way - these powerful people, putting themselves in such a vulnerable position...

"There's a trust element, sure, but I think that's what makes it work," Bull says. "These people are raised not to trust a damn person in their lives - not their people, not their family, especially not whoever they share a bed with. In here, though, trust and honesty isn't just an expectation - it's a selling point." Bull regards Mahanon, his expression suddenly soft. "Maybe you don't see it
because you're kind of a trusting and honest person, but if you don't live that way - if you can't - trust and honestly, openness, it gets to be pretty fucking addictive. Even if it's dangerous. Fuck, maybe even because it's dangerous."

Mahanon chews through that for a moment, leaning back in his chair and taking a long sip of his wine (which tastes... good, quite good, but Mahanon's honestly not sure he'd be able to pick it out from a line up of lesser wines, and he's starting to think that the more pretentious patrons of their usual inns who bemoan the lower quality of public house wines are all just very enthusiastic liars). This whole notion of trust being some sort of prized commodity...

Unbidden, Mahanon thinks of those longer, more... involved nights with Bull - giving over all control, allowing Bull to bind him and take control, ply him with pain and pleasure and guiding him to that complete surrender. He grips his wine glass tightly, shifting in his chair. Isn't that - all of that - about trust? Doesn't Mahanon often crave to give Bull that trust, that total honesty?

"What are you thinking about?" Bull asks, his voice low and soft, with just a touch of a heated edge.

"I think these Orlesian nobles need a fucking watchword," Mahanon mutters, taking another good swallow of his expensive wine.

Bull smiles, his eye fixed on Mahanon in that intense way of his. "So you do see it."

"Maybe a little," Mahanon says, and smiles back.

They pass the time in that private little corner of theirs talking and observing the patrons of La Confiance after Bull assures Mahanon that yes, they can look at the other patrons without breaking any house rules, though Mahanon is still careful not to stare too openly now that he knows the lay of the land. They wind up making a quiet little game of guessing each patron's secret, their current status, and reason for dining at the hall.

"Banker who defrauds customers," Mahanon murmurs, squinting at an elaborately-dressed older human man sitting at one of the centre tables with a swarthy-looking dwarf. "Pretty obvious why he's here - he and the dwarf are lovers."

"You always go for the forbidden romance," Bull says, raising a brow.

"Well, you brought me to a place that's practically built for affairs, so excuse my entirely logical assumptions," Mahanon says.

Bull shakes his head. "Merchant, not banker - definitely a fraudster of some kind. The dwarf is his business partner."

"Depends on what sort of business you're talking about."

"You're gonna sprain your face wiggling your eyebrows like that."

"Will not." Mahanon just manages to catch and muffle his triumphant shout as the man reaches over and murmurs something into the dwarf's ear, a hand on the dwarf's chest. "$Lovers, Bull!"

"They could be very friendly business partners-"

"Well, he is certainly kissing that dwarf on the lips in a very friendly way, now-"

"Okay, yeah, you've got me there."
The food, when it comes, is as good as Bull promised. Mahanon is quite relieved to see that he did end up ordering fish, drenched in some sort of incredible wine and butter sauce that makes Mahanon quite grateful for the small portions.

"How does the Empress eat this way every day and not die?" Mahanon groans after a few bites. "Fenedhis, this is delicious, but-

"Oh yeah, rich fucks love their rich food," Bull says, though he seems to have no problem ploughing through his - well, it looks like beef stew, but very fancy beef stew. "And believe me, my people? We're not too worried about Orlais, if we get on with things and really start pushing south. Between the empire's addiction to drama and backstabbing and this whole decadence thing, we don't really see them as much of a threat."

Mahanon takes another bite of his fish. He's not terribly fond of the Orlesian mindset and culture, on the whole, but it is a bit jarring to think about the empire collapsing and succumbing to an invading force - especially with a spy from said invading force sitting right across the table from him, practically inhaling his marinated beef with gusto. "How likely is that to happen within our lifetimes, do you think?"

Bull winces. "Honestly? I try not to think about it. I believe in the mission and the message and all, I get it, but it's... I don't know. A place like this wouldn't do so great with my people in charge. Sometimes I wonder if we're not better off just staying up north; maybe just focus on getting Seheron back and call the whole thing there."

Mahanon regards Bull carefully. It's always a bit dicey, talking about these things, but it's comforting to hear that the man Mahanon's been sharing his bed with isn't entirely hellbent on the invasion and subjugation of all the lands in Thedas.

Which is certainly a strange thought, and a strange place to be in his life, considering that this time last year he was whiling his way through the final days of another cold grey winter with his clan and preparing for the journey north to Bastion, eager for the slightest taste of life beyond his People's expectations of him, if only for a brief moment.

* A very different path indeed, Mahanon thinks wryly.

That wry thought fades as he mulls Bull's words over, and Seheron hangs in the air between them. Bull still doesn't know what Mahanon knows - or suspects - of his past there, what he guesses might be lingering in the shadows of Bull's memories. There's no way for Mahanon to express that he understands - or thinks he understands a little of the pressure Bull is under without airing his wild assumptions and guesses and digging up bits of the past that Bull clearly wants to keep buried.

It's just... yet another thing they do not say.

What Mahanon says instead is, "I mean, if your people wanted to push a little further south and give Tevinter a good shove, I doubt many would oppose you."

Bull gives a loud guffaw at this, and the spectre of Seheron is successfully banished from the conversation. "Fuck Tevinter. I promised Krem I'd give him a piece of Minwrathous if the Antaam ever gets around to toppling it."

"That's very sweet of you."

"Well, I'm kind of a sweet guy."

"You really are," Mahanon says, before he can stop himself. He quickly looks away. "I just mean-
thank you. For bringing me here, this is... you're- this is really-

Bull reaches across the table and takes Mahanon's hand in his, and Mahanon chances a look up at the Qunari's face, relieved to find a gentle understanding there. "I figured we could both do with a good night, yeah?"

"This is certainly that," Mahanon says, and smiles.

-

The night market in the alley is still in full swing when Mahanon and Bull finally leave the hidden dining hall, though the fortune teller from earlier seems to have vanished.

"Probably for the best," Bull says, catching Mahanon's eye as he scans the alley for her. Bull leans in close. "What I've got planned for us later probably isn't something we want some crazy lady to announce to the whole street, hmm?"

Mahanon shivers. "Well, that's going to make the walk back a bit-

"Hard?"

"Shush."

Puns aside, Bull certainly doesn't make it easy - every time he catches Mahanon's eye he has a heated, hungry look like he wants to eat him, and a smirk to suggest that he's well aware that Mahanon would be perfectly fine with being devoured. Every brush of his hand against Mahanon's arm, his hip, at one point his ear to fix a stray curl, causes something like an electric shock to race up Mahanon's spine.

And, of course, eventually results in a very real electric shock racing up Bull's arm.

"Sorry," Mahanon mutters, as Bull shakes out his hand with a laugh.

"Eighteen coppers," Bull says, grinning. "I like knowing when I'm getting you hot and bothered."

"Maybe I'm neither hot nor bothered," Mahanon says airily, stretching his hands above his head with an exaggerated yawn as they cross the street. "Perhaps there's just a storm coming in. A bit of static in the air."


Bull cuts into an alley and Mahanon follows, muffling a surprised yelp when the Qunari suddenly turns and catches his wrists up in his massive hands, pinning him to the brick wall behind him.

"That is not playing fair!" Mahanon accuses, as the Qunari looms over him with an absolutely self-satisfied smirk.

"What, you're not bothered by this, are you?" Bull murmurs, switching to a one-hand grip as he presses closer, easing a massive thigh between Mahanon's legs. Mahanon squirms with a quiet whimper as he tries to keep his hips still, wanting nothing more than to grind hard against Bull's thigh to relieve some of the sweet pressure building there. "Awful lot of static in the air tonight, huh?"

Mahanon growls, low in his throat, fully aware that sparks are dripping from his fingertips and winding through his curls. "You're a menace."
"And you can't wait for me to show you just how much of a fucking menace I'm gonna be tonight, admit it," Bull says, his fingertip trailing along Mahanon's throat and tracing his collarbone before slipping lower, brushing over the cotton of Mahanon's shirt.

Bull frowns, his touch turning into an inquisitive poke that makes Mahanon snort and jerk in Bull's grasp. "If you tickle me I will fucking bite you, see if I don't."

"That's fucking adorable," Bull says, and Mahanon bares his teeth. "But nah, just- are you wearing armour under your shirt, or something?"

"Oh." Mahanon reddens. "Uh. No."

"Then what-?" Bull's eye widens a little, then darkens, his voice low and rough as he asks, "What are you wearing, Mouse?"

"Take me back to the inn and I'll show you," Mahanon says, lifting his chin.

Bull releases Mahanon's wrists with a swift nod, though he does claim a quick, passionate kiss from Mahanon before he turns and starts to double-time it back to the inn at a long-legged quick stride. He keeps this speedy clip going until he seems to realize that Mahanon is jogging to keep pace with him, and slows to a more reasonable walk.

They eschew the common room entirely and go straight to Bull's room, where Bull locks the door as Mahanon casts a quick silencing spell over the room. Bull turns, eye glittering with anticipation.

"Could you- maybe sit on the bed," Mahanon says, swallowing his nerves. "And just, um, please don't laugh."

Bull takes a seat without a word, and it's- actually surprisingly gratifying, how quick the enormous Qunari is to obey him. It certainly gives Mahanon a few ideas, but... well, perhaps for another time.

Mahanon breathes, flexing his hands, and pulls his shirt off over his head in one swift, quick jerk. He can't look at Bull, can't look at him, instead riding this brief wave of bravery to quickly undo the laces of his leggings and drop those as well - forgetting that he's wearing the cursed shoes, still.

"Fucking shit," Mahanon mutters, leaning over and fumbling with the laces, kicking the slippers off in an ungainly tangle of clothing. But finally it's off, it's all off, and he's pretty sure he's absolutely scarlet from head to toe, but- well, nothing ventured.

It was surprisingly easy, finding a corset that would fit him, as well as some lacy underthings and long stockings to match - despite being an elf, and male. You really can find everything in Val Royeaux, and according to the elf woman who ran the shop (and who was very accommodating of Mahanon's nerves), men of all races in lingerie is quite a common feature in many of Val Royeaux's more respectable brothels.

This set is black, with a pink trim lace, and Mahanon is just praying he doesn't look ridiculous, praying that Bull won't fucking laugh, or that his heart doesn't just up and give out from sheer anxiety-

"Come here."

Bull's tone is low and firm - that tone, the one that Mahanon melts under, would happily give everything over to. It's a relief to have something else to focus on, the simplicity of obeying, as Mahanon quickly closes the distance between them. Mahanon's still not quite brave enough to meet
his eye, though, so he keeps his gaze fixed on Bull's knees as he comes to stand in front of him.

Bull's hands reach out, taking hold of his thighs and pulling him closer, guiding Mahanon to straddle his lap, Mahanon's knees coming to rest on the mattress on either side of Bull's hips. Mahanon grabs Bull's shoulder to steady himself, still unable to bring himself to look at the Qunari until Bull takes hold of the point of his chin and tilts his face up with a firm but gentle grip.

This close, there's nowhere else to look - Mahanon finally meets Bull's gaze.

His breath stutters at the heat and desire in Bull's expression, but more than that; there's heat, yes, but warmth too, and the two are very different things, despite the similarity of the concepts.

There's also something... something a little like yearning, almost sad, and Mahanon doesn't fucking understand it.

I'm here, he wants to say. I'm here, I'm yours, you have me - all of me, if you want.

But maybe Bull sees Mahanon starting to frown, starting to wonder, or- Mahanon doesn't know. Either way, Bull suddenly pulls Mahanon up into a searing kiss, and it's hard to think of anything beyond Bull's lips and his large hands moving over Mahanon's skin to explore the lines of silk and satin, lace and cotton.

"You're so fuckin' pretty," Bull says roughly, and Mahanon ducks his head. "You look so fucking sexy like this, shit, this is- fuck, you really don't do anything half-assed, do you?"

"Absolutely not," Mahanon says, draping his arms over Bull's shoulders and shivering as Bull's fingertip traces the line of lace at the bottom of the silk panties, right along the curve of where Mahanon's bottom meets the back of his thighs. "Just- full-ass all the way, that's me."

Bull booms out a loud laugh and gives Mahanon's ass a tight squeeze through the panties, making Mahanon gasp sharply. "Full-ass all the way, huh."

"You may quote me on that, good ser."

"Oh, may I?" Bull rolls them both onto the bed, pinning Mahanon under him as Mahanon laughs. "Damn, you look good in pink. It's real nice on your skin."

"I heard it's your favourite colour," Mahanon murmurs, tilting his head back and shifting with a groan as Bull's lips find his throat.

"It is," Bull says, his teeth brushing Mahanon's collarbone. "Hands above your head, Mouse, and no moving them until I tell you." He leans in close, pressing his lips to Mahanon's ear as he adds, "No coming either."

"Sadist," Mahanon mutters, but he obeys, crossing his wrists above his head. Bull sits up between Mahanon's legs, his hand resting on the patch of bare thigh between Mahanon's panty and stocking. "How do you plan to torment me tonight, then?"

"I'm not," says Bull softly. "Or at least, not as much as I was planning to. Ever heard of a prickle wheel?"

Mahanon frowns. "No."

Bull reaches under the bed and comes up with a tiny silver implement with a little wheel of metal spikes at the end. "This lil' guy. You and he were gonna have some fun together tonight."
"What sort of fun?" Mahanon asks, curious despite himself. Of all the things Bull's produced for them to experiment with, this one looks... well, pretty innocuous, honestly.

Bull raises an eyebrow, and Mahanon nods. Shrugging, Bull takes hold of Mahanon's thigh and runs the wheel over his skin.

Mahanon yelps and jerks away, scrambling up the bed. The wheel- tickles, but it stings somehow too, an absolutely hellish mixture of sensations that leaves Mahanon's skin still tingling where the spikes rolled over him.

"So I will have to tie you down when I bring this out next," Bull says cheerfully, tucking the device back under the bed as Mahanon stares at him. "Good to know. Hands up, remember?"

"That thing is evil," Mahanon says, still shivering a little as Bull takes his legs and stretches him out along the bed again, warily resting his hands up above his head once more. "Evil."

"Oh, it was gonna go everywhere," Bull says, grinning as Mahanon squirms and gives him a baleful look at the thought. "Right along your thighs, your ass, all your most sensitive areas - and it's still gonna, one day. Just not tonight."

Mahanon gives a shudder for his future self, but relaxes back against the mattress, ribs pressing against the tight lace of his corset as he breathes. "What do you want from me tonight, then?"

Bull smiles, and leans down, brushing his lips against Mahanon's forehead.

"All I want from you, is for you to relax," Bull says, his voice rumbling above Mahanon like a roll of quiet thunder. "And I'm gonna take my time with you, nice and slow, so we can both appreciate just how fucking pretty you are inch by inch."

Mahanon bites his lip, feeling flushed and exposed, despite the comfort of having Bull so close. "I-I never know what to say when you say things like that. Um. Thank you?"

"I plan to say a lot more than that, and you don't have to say anything," Bull says, putting a hand on Mahanon's cheek. He places another careful kiss against Mahanon's temple. "Would it help if I gagged you?"

Mahanon nods fervently, oddly relieved at the prospect. "Please."

Bull reaches under the bed again, rifling through a small bag of familiar toys and devices (plus one evil prickle wheel, Mahanon now knows), coming out with a soft fabric knotted gag.

"Two fingers for pause, three for stop," Mahanon says, before Bull can ask. "I remember."

Bull smiles. "Good boy."

Mahanon looks away, ears flicking at the praise, but Bull takes his face in his massive hands and kisses him so deeply there's no room to be shy, or embarrassed. There's just Bull, and Bull's warmth and heat, and Mahanon can do nothing but melt under it all.

He opens his mouth for the knot of the gag, his eyes on Bull's as the Qunari slips the knot between his lips and carefully secures the gag in place.

"Relax," Bull murmurs, and Mahanon nods, eager to obey. To give himself over. To trust.

Bull is true to his word, beginning with Mahanon's magic-scarred hands - pressing his lips to every
finger, tracing over Mahanon's palms and wrists, praising every inch with words and kisses. Mahanon squirms under the attention, his mind spitting up a million reasons why the compliments are entirely unearned, but with the gag in place there's nothing he can do to refute or downplay Bull's words. Nothing to do but accept it, and trust that Bull is, if not correct, then at least feels that he's correct in saying so. Trust that this is how Bull sees him.

It's an odd, intoxicating mix of psychological torment and physical pleasure that in some ways feels as equally torturous as pain. Bull's touch is less teasing than it is just... stirring, somehow, as if Bull's carefully learning every part of Mahanon. Mahanon's arms shake with the effort of keeping them above his head as Bull's lips find his nipples, just above the line of the corset, and sets about kissing and sucking at them until they're swollen and oversensitive and Mahanon is reduced to whimpering into his gag.

After every whispered praise and compliment, Mahanon starts to wish - and it's too much to ask for, too much to demand, but with the safety of the gag in place his mind starts to wordlessly beg that Bull would add a simple word: "Mine." Because fuck, he is, he's Bull's, whether Bull knows it or not, and there's really nothing he can do about it but pray that Bull finally claim him, damn him, damn him-

Bull takes hold of Mahanon's hair, those careful curls, and tugs his head back, and Mahanon heaves out a relieved, muffled sob as Bull sucks a bruise in the shape of his lips into Mahanon's neck. It's something, all of this is something, more than enough - it has to be - and he's grateful, no matter what he wishes.

Bull lifts his head, meeting Mahanon's eyes, his expression so soft Mahanon heart pounds at the sight of it.

"You deserve to hear this," Bull murmurs, pressing his forehead to Mahanon's. "Fuck, you deserve all of this, and everything, and more."

If Mahanon were not gagged, he might say that what people deserve and what they want can sometimes be very different things.

He might also say, "vhenan."

But thankfully he is gagged, so he says nothing, but keeps his eyes on Bull as the Qunari kisses his cheek, then the tip of each flicking ear, before moving down over him again, touching and teasing until Mahanon slowly sinks into that calm nothingness, and, thank every last god, does not have to think.

Bull wakes an hour before dawn.

He glances down beside him, wishing he had Mahanon's ability to see in the dark. Even with his eyes adjusted, all he can see of the elf tucked in close against his side, resting his curly head on his shoulder, are shadows. It's more about touch, feeling - Mahanon's warm breath against his skin, the rise and fall of his chest against Bull's, his curls spilling over Bull's arm.

Mahanon's face is expressive even in his sleep, Bull knows - calm and clear when he's past the point of dreaming, smiling sometimes during a good dream, frowning slightly if his sleep is troubled. Unguarded, open, always.

Bull can't see well enough to guess at what sort of sleep Mahanon might be having right now, but
he curls over and kisses Mahanon's brow, touching Mahanon's cheek. "I have to get up."

Mahanon definitely frowns at that, his forehead wrinkling under Bull's lips as he murmurs a sleepy, wordless protest.

Bull smiles, easing his arm out from under Mahanon, catching Mahanon's hand as the dozing elf grabs at him with a low growl. "Yeah, I get it, you don't want your big ol' bedwarmer to fuck off on the job. I know." Bull tucks Mahanon back under the covers, stroking Mahanon's hair and back until Mahanon stops growling at him. "You're a fierce little guy when you're sleepy, you know that?"

Mahanon grumbles and shifts, pressing his face into the pillows. Bull leans over and buries his face in Mahanon's curls, just for a moment, before kissing his head and saying, "I'll be back soon. Promise."

Mahanon heaves a long sigh at that, and seems to slip back into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Bull watches him for another minute, then eases himself up and out of bed, dressing quickly in the dark.

There's a pre-dawn mist coming up off the water and drifting through the streets of Val Royeaux. Bull grits his teeth and shoves his discomfort at the sight of it to the back of his head, moving quickly. It's not thick enough to remind him of- well, it just isn't, but it's definitely good incentive to get this shit over with quickly and get back to his nice warm bed with a nice warm elf to spend the morning with.

The dead-drop is by the docks, an easy place to slip through unnoticed - even for a big guy like Bull. He ambles through the crowd of straggling fishermen scrambling into their boats, unhurried, reaching a long line of lockers meant for fishermen stowing personal goods before heading out on the water for the day. The lockers are protected by expensive combination locks - luckily for Bull, he has the combination he needs.

He finds the dead-drop locker and opens it. He blinks.

There are two Ben Hassrath missives inside. One, a bound stack of parchment containing the usual updates and directions. The other, a thick, stuffed envelope.

Bull slips the missives from the locker and into his pouch. He's itching to rip the envelope open here and now, in plain view of everyone milling about the docks.

He should, of course, wait until he's in the privacy of the inn, his own room, before doing anything with the documents, no matter if they're in code or not.

Bull splits the difference and breaks into a conveniently empty condemned warehouse, setting himself up in the quartermaster's office. Judging by the dust, it hasn't been used in a while.

There's an oil lamp on the desk, the glass shattered in places, the metal rusty with age and exposure to salt water air, but it only takes a few tries to light it. Bull unsheathes a knife from his belt and quickly slits the envelope open, sliding the contents out onto the dusty oak surface.

It looks like an active investigation file; a few short profile reports, diagrams of buildings, several timelines. Bull quickly gathers that the file seems to be detailing a series of killings across Thedas - recent killings, the last one taking place just over a week ago. Bull reads on, frowning hard enough for the stiff leather of his eyepatch to dig into his brow.
The victims are all Ben Hassrath. All murdered by being stabbed through the eye - quick and clean, with virtually no mess to contend with aside from a body.

With a stab of unease and a sting of unexpected loss, Bull turns to the most recent case and sees the location: Arlesans.

Rethlok is dead.

"Fuck," Bull mutters, meaning it. He's lost a good deal of comrades and acquaintances over the years, never mind friends, but - fuck, he liked Reth.

He buries his anger at Reth's murder and focuses on the investigation notes. If he were to hazard a guess at the weapon... a kata-kas, a Ben Hassrath assassin's blade - long, thin, and perfectly honed to the sharpest possible edge before each job. The concept of a kata-kas is simple; you sharpen it, and you only use it one before sharpening it again. One swift deadly stroke. The whisper-thin blade would be narrow enough to slip between ribs, the joints of armour - and of course, right through an eye socket.

A Ben Hassrath, murdering Ben Hassrath. The thought is fucking chilling.

There's one small note meant for Bull - so short he almost misses it. It only takes a few scans to decode it.

_We suspect the Tal-Vashoth once named "Taasha" is involved. Given your past dealings with her, your aid is requested. Meet with me in Val Chevin._

- Arvaariss

The air seems to leave the room, and the next lungful Bull breathes in is hot and humid, sickly sweet with the scent of the jungle.

_"I can't do this, Hissrad. I can't follow you."

"The re-educators will look after you once we see this through, we need you-"

"Can't you see it's wrong, it's all wrong-"

"Hissrad." A pair of silver eyes, a reflection of Hissrad's rage, his need for revenge, but sadness too. "Just let her go. I'll take her place at the front-"

Bull falls to his knees in a mess of splintered wood, shattered glass, scattered papers, in a room he has no memory of destroying.

Shaking, he collects the papers, stumbling out of the abandoned warehouse into a full sunrise. In plain sight, in bright light, but he needn't worry about being seen.

The mist off the water has blown up into a dense, impenetrable fog.
Chapter End Notes

Song rec: **Blindness** by Metric.

OH HEY LOOK A PLOT KICKED IN :) :) :) PART THREE IS GONNA BE ENDLESS ENDLESS FUN.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

A short chapter but hey, if anyone was hoping for a whole bunch of emotions, WELL.

Song recs: "A Sadness Runs Through Him" by The Hoosiers and "Iscariot" by Walk the Moon which will also pair well with stuff in the next chapter so like... nng.

Which you can follow along on the playlist.

TAGS ON THIS CHAPTER FOR PTSD RELATING TO BULL'S BACKSTORY. If you don't know it and don't mind spoilers, it can basically be chalked up as Super Harsh War Shit, but you can read it here for context: World of Thedas 2: Iron Bull.

Sorry this chapter was delayed by a week - I took last week to focus on FINALLY updating not a straight line but a triangle, so if some of my readers here have been waiting for that - GUESS WHAT IT UPDATED WOO.

Thank you everyone so so much, as always I survive off comments and kudos. You can follow me on my twitter @FoxNonny as always where if you're feeling generous and kind there are other ways to support me listed there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mahanon comes to awareness slowly, tucking his face closer into the soft pillows with a long exhale, reluctant to fully wake. Mornings like this are his favourite; slow and lazy, relishing in the pleasant aches from the night before, the scent of him and Bull twined together in the air and sheets around them. It's soft and easy, intimate; just enjoying Bull's company, sleepy and gentle.

Mahanon stretches out to find Bull, to press in closer, but his hand closes on a tangle of cold, empty sheets.

He lifts his head, squinting through bleary, sleepy eyes.

Bull isn't in bed.

Mahanon frowns. In all the nights he's shared with Bull, he's never once gone to bed with the Qunari and woken up alone.

There's a rustle of parchment elsewhere in the room. Mahanon rolls over, sitting up slowly.

Bull sits at a small table in the corner of the room, fully dressed, leafing through a hefty stack of parchment. There's a deep frown set between his brows and a distinct downward pull to his lips, far more troubled than pensive. The look carefully eases into something a bit more neutral before he glances over at Mahanon - his mouth even quirks into a crooked smile.

"Nice hair," Bull says.

Mahanon touches his curls with a muttered curse, unsurprised to find them entirely out of order again. "I guess Dalish's work could only last so long."
"In her defence, that's probably my fault," Bull says. "Definitely had some fun getting my hands in there last night."

It's an attempt at his usual flirty tone, but there's a strained edge to it. Mahanon offers Bull a smile anyway. Bull smiles back before returning to his papers.

Mahanon picks at a loose thread in the sheets, chewing on his lip for a moment before asking, "Is everything alright?"

Bull doesn't answer for a long moment, his smile fading. At this angle, all Mahanon can see of his face is the side profile, the eyepatch, making his expression nigh-on impossible to read.

"No," Bull says eventually. He drops his head, slowly rubbing one of his massive hands over his shaved dome, face unmovings. Then he breathes, long and deep, heavily-muscled shoulders lifting and falling with the effort. "Not your problem, though."

Mahanon swallows - Bull doesn't say it as a rebuke, more an exhausted sigh, but it certainly feels like one. "Probably not, no, but... is there anything I can do? If you need to talk-"

"I don't," Bull says shortly. Softer, he adds, "I can't."

Mahanon drops his gaze.

The silence stretches between them, unbearably chilly.

Bull scrapes his chair back, crossing the room to take a seat on the mattress close to Mahanon.

"We have to set out for Val Chevin as soon as everyone's packed," Bull says gently - so gently, damn it, and that gentleness is usually something Mahanon could wrap himself in for hours, that soft tone that he really only hears from Bull when it's just them, but here, now; fuck, it's as if he's trying to comfort Mahanon for something that's happening to Bull, some hurt Mahanon doesn't even know the shape of, and... it hurts, hurts to think Bull might see him as so fragile. Bull, who was the first who seemed to see every part of him so clearly. "I'm gonna put Krem in charge once we're there, he'll find you all some fun shit to get up to while I'm- while I'm getting this all sorted out."

Mahanon narrows his eyes. If this is some Ben Hassrath business Bull cannot share and does not plan to involve the Chargers in, it hardly makes sense to bring the entire company to Val Chevin, a town with far fewer job opportunities than Val Royeaux. If it's urgent, well - Bull would move far faster on his own.

Unless he doesn't want the Chargers to stray too far from him.

"Are we in danger?" Mahanon asks baldly.

Bull blinks, and Mahanon feels a visceral, almost cruel satisfaction at that. The satisfaction quickly dissolves into a shade of guilt as Bull looks away from him, that exhaustion settling into the lines of his face. Mahanon would never for a moment think of Bull as old, Creators, and even "older" is a stretch, though he's aware that Bull has a few years on Mahanon in terms of age. But right now, so tired in the morning light... there is a sense of time, there, in Bull's face and the slump of his shoulders, and it really isn't about the number of years so much as the weight of them.

"You shouldn't be," Bull says quietly. He tries for a crooked smile. "No more than usual, anyway. But... just in case."
Stomach churning, Mahanon reaches out and takes Bull's hand. "Are you in danger, Bull?"

Bull meets his gaze again, that crooked smile still fixed in place. "No more than usual."

"Bull -"

"I know," Bull says, gripping Mahanon's hand tightly. "I know you want to know, I know you want to help. I'd be frustrated as fuck with me if I was you. If I could tell you - if I thought for a moment it would help either one of us, I would. Can you trust me on that?"

"Of course I trust you," Mahanon says, instantly, instinctively, and he could swear Bull almost flinches to hear it. "You know I trust you, I just..."

Mahanon looks down at their joined hands, clenching his jaw. There's nothing he can say that will sway Bull on this, he knows, and nothing of his feelings that would be worth airing right now.

Bull leans forward and kisses the furrow between Mahanon's brows.

"Don't you go worrying about me, Mouse," Bull murmurs. "I'm gonna fix this. Promise."

Mahanon grits his teeth against - well, any number of responses. Sympathy, that deep-seated need to find a way to take that weight from Bull's shoulders, knowing that he can't. Hurt, that Bull seems to think Mahanon can just take what he want from this thing between him and leave all the negative aside, that he can somehow care this much for Bull and choose not to care about the things that pain and worry him.

Anger follows quickly on the heels of hurt. Not all of us are so good at compartmentalizing, you know.

But... not all of us were forced to.

"I understand," Mahanon says quietly. "But- I'm here, you know."

Bull kisses his cheek, then tilts Mahanon's face up towards his to kiss his lips, softly. Gently. "I know, ka-" Bull breathes. "I know."

Mahanon starts to lean in to him, but Bull is already getting up and pulling away, his fingers slipping from Mahanon's hand.

"We should get moving," Bull says, gathering up his papers from the small table. "The others are gonna be pretty cranky about leaving Val Royeaux so soon, I'm hoping we can get on the road before the hangovers wear off and they realize where we're going."

Mahanon nods with a weak, forced smile, his empty hand falling into the cold sheets at his side.

- 

The quiet of the road is discomforting, but there's no helping it - even if the Chargers were in a mood for their usual rambunctious conversations, the dense fog swallows every sound, muffling even the rolling wagon wheels and clopping of their mounts' hooves. Krem was ultimately successful in his push for horses, but the victory seems to have been dampened by the urgency; Bull was open with the Chargers about his need to get to Val Chevin quickly, if nothing else.

The Chargers have had their quiet days before - subdued by hangovers, exhausted from a difficult job, or simply enjoying a little peace and quiet with everyone happy to occupy themselves with the
scenery and the company of their own thoughts. But there is no scenery today; often, Mahanon loses sight of the other Chargers in the thick mist, even with his keen eyesight. Shapes move in the distance without form, and though they keep well to their side of the road, they have a few near-miss collisions with other travellers who seem to appear abruptly in their path, equally startled to find themselves face to face with others on the highway.

Mahanon knows, on an intellectual level, that the fog is perfectly normal. His clan would often lose themselves in the mist travelling along the coastline at this time of year; in fact, they worked it to their advantage, avoiding unfriendly eyes with ease. If Mahanon wasn't so concerned about Bull, he'd honestly find the fog oddly comforting. Mahanon liked the silence of the fog when it meant his own silence amongst the clan was seen as less remarkable, less of a flaw that needed to be fixed, and melting into the mist became something of a specialty of his.

But he is concerned, as hard as he tries not to be.

The other Chargers are better at hiding it, despite the uneasy quiet. They don't cast furtive glances Bull's way, they don't whisper to themselves, and they look bored and restless and unhappy about the weather but otherwise, on the surface, unperturbed.

They all know, however, that they're not heading off to Val Chevin on a pleasure jaunt. They know there are things Bull will not, can not tell them about this journey. And they all know that Bull does not like fog.

The fog is perfectly normal, yes, Mahanon knows this. But it's just such terrible, torturous timing that Mahanon doesn't half wonder if the Creators are having some cruel laugh at their expense right now.

The few times Mahanon catches clear glimpses of Krem's face he sees the other man has a similar notch between his brows that Mahanon can feel in his own, a tight concern around his eyes that could be written off as irritation with the weather. Could be.

But it isn't.

There is at least an odd sense of solidarity, here, with the Chargers; all of them, Bull included, trapped in this murky grey limbo of things that are understood but never said, never discussed, never spoken aloud. They all care, damn it, but sometimes there just is no recourse for taking any action on caring.

So they all drift on in the fog, quiet and brooding, all very much together and quite alone at the same time.

Supper that night is a silent affair. Of everyone, Bull seems by far the least affected by the poor weather and odd circumstances on the surface; though quiet, like the rest of them, he still speaks with his affable, brusque authority as he outlines the travel plans for the next day.

It's in Bull's actions, rather than his demeanour. He constantly scans the fog around them, spends a few minutes kicking up twigs around camp to make it easier for them to snap audibly if anyone treads on them, and he eats from his own private road rations rather than the shared stew Grim brews up for the Chargers. He organizes a watch roster for the night, but leaves himself off it - something Mahanon's never seen him do before.

"Need my beauty sleep," Bull says with a shrug and a grin, smiling wider as Rocky mutters "lazy sod" under his breath. "That's 'lazy sod, Chief.' Perks of being in charge."
Mahanon snags the coveted position of first watch quite by accident - he doesn't mind a broken sleep as much as some Chargers do, and he's quite happy to curry favour with some of the others by volunteering for the later (or earlier, depending on one's perspective) shifts. But he's so wrapped up in trying to understand Bull's mind that his hand goes up when the first watch is called without thinking, and takes the envious grumbles (and pinecones from Rocky) slung his way with some baffled blinks before he realizes what he's done.

Mahanon sets up on the edge of camp close to the horses and the wagon as the rest of the Chargers retire, his staff at his side, peering out into the dense fog. There's obviously not much to see, exactly; if bandits or wolves were to sneak up on them, Mahanon wouldn't know until they were right in his face. Really, his only job is to shout loud enough to wake the others if something does come, and hope he can hold the danger off until the Chargers can join him.

It's a disconcerting notion. More disconcerting, as the moon and starlight far above lends the fog an eery glow. It would be far too easy to let the imagination run away with itself, making monsters out of shifting shadows, turning every night sound - few as they are - into footsteps and heavy breaths.

Mahanon glances back over his shoulder to the jumble of tents; to Bull's in particular, just barely visible through the clouds of mist. Bull doesn't sleep much, even on a good night. He's usually awake past the first and second watch and earliest of all of them to rise in the mornings. This whole notion that Bull just wanted an extra hour or two to sleep tonight - it's bullshit, really.

But as Mahanon sits there in the eerie silence, ears flicking and twitching at the slightest sounds, peering into the shroud of mist settled over them... well, he remembers that book he sometimes wishes he'd never read, and the chapter on the Fog Warriors of Seheron in particular; guerrilla fighters who make use of the mist and fog to attack in complete silence, killing and retreating so quickly that the only trace of them would be the bodies left in their wake.

It's enough to make anyone wary of a foggy night, just to read about them. Mahanon, of course, has never lived it. But he's well aware who has.

What would Bull see, Mahanon wonders, if the Qunari were forced to sit here and stare out into the shifting mist?

Once his watch is finally over and he wakes Grim to take his place, Mahanon pauses between his tent and Bull's. There's no way Bull is asleep yet.

*If I was having a bad night... didn't Bull say that, only last week? I'm sure you'd come to my tent, whether I was good company or not.*

Mahanon wants to - if Bull will have him, if Bull will let him, of course he wants to be there. He takes a step towards Bull's tent, and pauses again.

*Not your problem, though.* Bull said that, too.

And Dalish, that first night in Bastion after Bull hired him on - Mahanon still remembers her warning. *We all know to give him his space when the fog rolls in.*

Even so, Mahanon takes another step, even lifting a hand to nudge at the canvas of the tent's entrance flap.

He hesitates.

How much is too much? How much of this is out of caring for Bull, and how much is his own
selfish need for more, for the kind of relationship Bull has never promised him, pushing the limits of this unspoken understanding between them? Does Bull really need him, or does Mahanon just want him to need him?

And what could he, Mouse - small and shy, anxious and awkward... what could he possibly offer that someone like Bull would need right now, anyway?

He drops his hand, mouth twisting wryly. "Right now" - a generous qualifier to add to that sentence, if he's being honest with himself.

Quietly, without a sound, Mahanon turns and walks back to his own tent, slipping inside and tying the flap over tightly.

- 

Patience wears thin as the days roll on and the fog clings stubbornly to the road. It's claustrophobic, truly, being stuck inside the relentless mist, unable to see much further than the arse of the horse in front of yours; at times, the head of Mahanon's mount disappears entirely, and he can only trust that the horse has a better idea of where they're situated on the road than he does. On one of the worst days, they start counting off on the hour just to make sure all members of the company are still present and accounted for. For a panicking few moments they think they've lost Rocky, only to find he's fallen dead asleep on the back of his horse and missed the count.

Bull's attitude sours alongside everyone else's, though he does not snap and grouse the way the others do. Instead he becomes quiet, uncharacteristically withdrawn, prone to staring out into the fog and losing track of conversations, missing questions and sometimes answering in Qunlat before giving his head a shake and trying again in Trade speak. He calls Krem "Ashaad" one afternoon and does not seem to realize it; no one corrects him on the mistake.

It's on the fourth night out that things come to something of a head; Dalish and Rocky get into a bickering argument over firewood, Stitches, Skinner, and Grim are on some mission to find a misplaced ladle that each of them swear the other has, while Krem and Mahanon hash out the accounts and have a rare disagreement over the price of horse feed (Mahanon is certain he checked the market boards before they left Val Royeaux to see what the price difference would be in Val Chevin, but Krem stubbornly insists the price will be higher than Mahanon's estimates). It's a jumble of tense noise on a tense night, snatches of arguments muffled and swirling about in the fog so at one confusing point Rocky and Skinner start sniping at each other in a strange mishmash of disparate disagreements, until finally Bull stands up and snarls, "Parshaara!"

It's as loud and effectively shocking as an actual boom of thunder, echoing in the now utterly silent campsite. No one moves; in fact, the Chargers even seem reluctant to breathe in the wake of it.

Mahanon's seen flashes of Bull's temper before, of course - the Qunari employs rage as a weapon in battle as effectively as he swings an ax or greatsword. He's never seen it directed at Bull's own men. Not like this.

They all stare at Bull, stock-still and silent, and Bull stares back, his face an unrecognizable mask of hot fury, massive fists clenched tight at his side. Then he closes his eye, and he breathes. His clenched fists relax, and when he opens his eye he's Bull again.

"Don't you all think getting the dinner going might be a better use of our time than bitching?" Bull says calmly, folding his arms. "Dalish, Stitches, make it happen. I'm gonna go get some more damn firewood myself, if it's such an issue. Krem, you're in charge. Don't wait on me."
Without another word, Bull turns on his heel and leaves the stunned campsite, quickly disappearing into the mist.

He doesn't return for dinner, nor for a round of much-needed after-dinner drinks - a furtive passing of a skin of hard liquor amongst the Chargers, conversation kept to a low mutter. Mahanon glances up at every rustle of underbrush, every crack of wood in the distance, his jaw perpetually clenched against the urge to spring up from his seat and take off into the fog himself to look for Bull.

Eventually Krem comes and takes a seat next to him, handing him the liquor skin.

"Give it another quarter hour," Krem murmurs, voice barely breaking above a whisper. "Then you and I'll go find him. Yeah?"

Mahanon nods, nearly sagging in relief as he takes a long, grateful sip.

You could tell, after a while, who'd been on the island for too long.

When His rad's handlers assigned fellow Ben Hassrath "Taasha" to his unit, he'd shared a knowing look with Vasaad - his oldest friend on the island, his closest, his kadan. She had that look. The other agents were about as clear as Ben Hassrath could be with His rad; they suspected Taasha was nearing a breaking point, and wanted her under close observation. His rad was good at recognizing the signs, after all. It was something of a specialty.

His rad- no, Bull, Bull gives his head another good shake. How long has he been fucking standing here, in this clearing? Impossible to tell, in this fucking fog - no moon or stars to judge the time by, just like it was back there, back north- back in-

-Seheron wasn't somewhere a person could stay for too long without changing, without being changed. His rad sometimes relished the way people looked at him when they heard how long he'd been on the island; awe, respect, fear that he was still an effective weapon, grinding through every blood-slick day.

Despite the obvious weight of stress and trauma on her, Taasha was remarkably calm - always calm, living up to her nickname. His rad admired that; he was never calm, himself. There was always this hot, sick rage just under the surface of his skin. He could make a weapon of it, though. He could make a weapon of anything. That was the only way to survive, really.

Vasaad understood. Vasaad was angry too, in a different way. Always thinking, sorrow always closely tied with rage, but he understood, and that was the important part. It felt like having permission, being around him - permission to rage, to grieve, to question.

His rad curses in Qunlat, then Bull curses in Common, turning. He's not lost - he can navigate the fog, damn it, he knows how to get back to camp, but he's not going back empty-handed. He just needs to fucking remember what he came out here to do in the first fucking place, is all, he just keeps getting distracted by thoughts of-

-Taasha liked Vasaad and did not trust His rad, and that was fine - His rad wouldn't trust His rad if he were in anyone else's shoes and had half a brain, quite frankly. But as the months wore on, they grew closer. His rad was impressed, despite himself; whatever had tossed Taasha so close to the breaking point seemed to be ebbing in her mind, an unpleasant memory carefully tucked away and purposefully kept out of her daily thoughts.

One night he asked her, drinking with her and Vasaad, how she kept it all together. She watched
him in that placid way of hers, and they both knew it was a loaded question, that the answer would be carefully marked down somewhere and handed off for analyzing, but in the moment they could both pretend this was a frank conversation between friends and comrades.

"You are Hissrad," she said, and tilted her head. "You should know how lies can construct a reality, shouldn't you? Who do we lie to first, before anyone else? You should know."

Hissrad is moving, and Bull fucking hates the trees, always has on nights like this - every branch looks like an arm and a weapon and every drawn bow and lowered spear looks like a fucking branch. Why the fuck did he leave his weapons behind at the campsite? It made sense at the time, he had a reason, but all he has is a half-dull hatchet at his side for - firewood, that was it, fuck - and his own fists, and it'll have to be enough, it should be enough, he was-

-trained to kill, so how else should he have reacted when the Tal Vashoth struck again? That same fucking poison, the exact same, and he always knew that if an enemy struck successfully once you could be forgiven for being caught off-guard; twice was laziness. Twice was not paying attention.

They used to visit that school at least once every few days or so - Vasaad sometimes taught lessons there and the kids always liked to swing from Hissrad's horns, or ride on Taasha's broad shoulders. It was medicine, seeing them. The war hadn't crushed them yet; there was life and light in even the smallest and saddest among them.

There's an unspoken rule, isn't there? So sacred it shouldn't have to be spoken. You don't kill children, not ever.

How was he supposed to react, what was he supposed to do, when he heard what had happened? When he ran to the school and found an empty building- well, not empty, just empty of life, and full of- they were so small, all of them-

Hissrad isn't being watched - it would be impossible for anyone to see Bull, wouldn't it, in all this fog? Wouldn't it? But he's not- there's something hunting him, watching him, he's never wrong about this kind of shit. His hatchet is in his hand in an instant. Let them come, let them fucking try it. He's a survivor, isn't he? He's a veteran of-

-the fog was everywhere, everywhere, but if there were warriors lurking in the depths they steered clear of Hissrad as he tore back to his encampment with death on his mind, the scent of it still in his nose, in his blood and pounding heart. He knew where the bastards were holed up, if the Antaam had any fucking balls at all they would have routed it weeks ago when Hissrad first reported the stronghold's existence, but no fucking matter. He and Taasha were command enough, between the two of them they had the authority necessary to take it down, raze the Tal Vashoth to the ground, make a fucking example-

Hissrad thinks he sees a glint in the trees and bares his teeth. Not a Fog Warrior, then. The elves among them have ways of concealing their eye-shine in the fog. The Tal Vashoth are far clumsier, the Tal Vashoth are-

-murderers, all of them murderers, and Vasaad understood why they had to die, but when Hissrad turned to Taasha- when he asked-

Hissrad stops walking, and sure enough, there are footsteps- quiet, but not quiet enough, and he-

-let her go, Vasaad's hand on his arm, because there were bigger problems ahead and neither of them were willing to kill a friend, their friend, and the Tal Vashoth-
is only a few steps from him, but Hissrad is patient, he won't telegraph his plan, even as it speaks and says a word Hissrad doesn't know like a name, like a question, and-

-the Tal Vashoth-

-moves closer, and-

-the Tal Vashoth killed Vasaad, arrows sprouting from his throat-

Hissrad whirls with a silent snarl - he can kill quietly, can rage quietly, he's had to, it's the only way to survive - and he brings the hatchet down on the Tal Vashoth.

It bounces off an energy shield, lightning crackling up Hissrad's arm - a saarebas, no less, which means there must be a master holding the leash somewhere nearby. Hissrad drops the hatchet, his hand completely numb, but no matter- he lunges at the saarebas, determined to get through that shield before it casts some spell, and it must be trying to by how it's hollering, and it's shouting-

"Katoh!"

Bull stops cold, fists raised, bearing down on - no, fuck, please no - Mahanon.

Mahanon, his staff held in a defensive block behind his lightning shield, his eyes round as he stares up at Bull.

Bull drops to his knees, palms in the dirt - cold dirt, scattered with long-dead pine needles and cones, so unlike the humid broad-leafed jungles of the island - and breathes, tries to breathe, but all that comes out is "I'm sorry" over and over and over again-

He feels a hand on his head, another on his shoulder, steady despite the obvious bone-deep trembling - he can't tell if it's him or Mahanon who's shaking the most, but either way Bull doesn't fucking deserve this touch, this comfort, and he knows that, he's always fucking known that. But he gets it anyway.

Mahanon wraps himself close around Bull, terribly steady and present given the circumstances, dropping his staff aside.

"I'm alright," Mahanon murmurs shakily. "It's alright, vhenan, we're alright."

"I'm sorry," Bull says again, like they're the only two words he knows, and maybe they are. There's not much else in his head right now besides regret - for this, for what he almost did, for so many other things besides.

"I know," Mahanon says softly, as if he does. Or, as if he can understand, even without knowing. "It was an accident."

"That doesn't- I could have-"

"I know," Mahanon says firmly, if anything holding Bull tighter. "I'm saying I forgive you."

As if forgiveness is so simple. As if it could be.

Maybe it can be. It's not a world Bull knows.

If the leash were ever to snap completely, it's not just the plunge Bull fears. Not entirely. It's the fate of those ill-equipped to catch him, who might just go and try anyway out of a misplaced sense
of obligation. Krem, the Chargers, now Mahanon - fuck, Mahanon. If Bull isn't strong enough to carry himself, how could he possibly expect anyone else to do so?

"Let me help you," Mahanon whispers. "Please."


It's not a world Bull knows.

He tests it, just a little, inch by inch - resting his forehead against Mahanon's chest, letting the elf take some of the weight off him - not all of it, not even most of it, but some. Some. Half-expecting Mahanon to fall back, to stagger, to tell him it's too much.

But Mahanon is steady against him despite their disparate sizes and statures, and he does not falter.

Bull breathes, and releases, and Mahanon does not let him fall.

Chapter End Notes

"Parshaara" = enough

"Taashath" = calm
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Endless pontificating on emotions, the musical!

Song recs from the playlist:

Arrival of the Birds by the Cinematic Orchestra

The Wild by Mumford and Sons

Desperado by Celtic Thunder (which honestly works as a good singing voice claim for Mahanon just... just sayin')

As always your kudos, comments, love, and support means the absolute world to me and I really really appreciate it. This chapter was hard to get through in terms of balancing emotional arcs so I hope people enjoy it <3

"I still don't know why they did it," Bull says dully. "That's the shit that gets me. The Tal-Vashoth never seemed to have any fucking reason for doing what they did; no direction, no end goal in mind. Just death."

In the soft glow of Dalish's crystal, Bull can see Mahanon watching him carefully from the corner of his eye. He keeps his own gaze focused on the bedroll, the blankets balled up in his fists, gripping them tight like he might slip off the edge of the world again if he doesn't hold on.

The walk back to the campsite is a foggy blur in Bull's memory - step after step, shifting mists and shadows pulling at his mind, but he had Mahanon's hand holding his so tightly to guide him back. Unacceptable, completely unacceptable, to put himself in that position, to have to rely so much on another person.

And a bas, no less, part of him whispers. There are these doubts, of course.

But every time the doubts rose up on the path in the forest, every time he paused, Mahanon would turn and press himself close, wrap his arms around Bull, warm and present and alive, and there was just no fucking arguing with that even if he wanted to, and he didn't.

It panics Bull - if Bull could truly panic, if it wasn't burned out of him years ago - as much as it... almost thrills him to admit it, recklessly, that the Qun did not lead him out of the forest tonight, out of the fog. The Qun did not forgive him, did not speak to him to fill the silence to keep him grounded, did not act without judgement or expectation.

It should have felt like danger, like madness, giving himself over so entirely to trust anything but the Qun. But following Mahanon felt like the first sane thought Bull's had all day. Felt like clarity.

Bull started talking the moment Mahanon got them settled in and cast a silencing spell over Bull's tent. It always seems to come down to these fragile spaces - nighttime and shadows, silent corners, pockets of time and careful allowances carved out for the two of them.
Bull started talking, saying so many things he shouldn't say, but it feels like lancing a wound to say them. Telling Mahanon about Seheron is far different from writing details in a report or explaining his actions to a re-educator. He'd appreciated the neutral reception of the Ben Hassrath at the time, the clinical assessment, the peace in knowing that his words could lead to his destruction at the hands of his own people; a destruction he'd have been grateful for, then. He had told his story praying for consequences, for judgement.

There's nothing neutral or clinical about Mahanon; no consequences, and no judgement. Just a quiet warmth at his side, sitting close, listening. Bull watches Mahanon's expression from the corner of his eye for traces of disgust or pity; any warrior could tell you that those who've never seen an ugly battlefield make for poor audiences, that you've got to curtail your experiences to the glorious or humorous to avoid putting anyone off their dinner. No one wants to be reminded just how fucking shitty the world can be, or the kinds of things people are capable of doing to each other in the twisted spaces where the rules stop making sense.

But Mahanon never pities. Never shuffles awkwardly, never seems to try to block Bull's words from his mind to avoid the images they might conjure there.

He watches, that little pensive frown knit between his brows, his hand on Bull's knee. Mahanon has not once stopped touching Bull for longer than a few moments since finding him in the woods. There's a part of Bull that wants to pretend it's for Mahanon's comfort rather than his own, and he's sure it is, at least a little. Mahanon was still trembling a little bit when they first entered the tent, and even with Mahanon's forgiveness it hurts like a knife in the gut to know how close Bull came to...

Bull wants to apologize - fuck, he never wants to stop apologizing, sometimes has to fight the urge to get to his feet and walk right back out into the fog and beg it to swallow him whole - but he knows how the conversation would go, what Mahanon would say:

Nothing happened. You stopped. You didn't hurt me. I forgive you.

There comes a point when you're no longer apologizing to comfort the person you hurt, but so the person you hurt can comfort you with forgiveness. It's usually right after the first apology.

So Bull will sit with what he did tonight - what he could have done, what he almost did - and he will not apologize anymore.

No matter how much he wants to. Needs to. Should. Shouldn't.

Anyway, Bull talks. He owes Mahanon his words - more than he can give, so he gives as much as he can to make up for it.

"About a year before- before all this shit went down, my commander went Tal Vashoth," Bull says. "I hunted him down myself. I was at peace with it, but looking back, I wonder if the Ben Hassrath didn't give Taasha the same instructions they gave me. I never found out what her baggage was, but we were both in Seheron for longer than most folks. It would be... efficient, to have two Ben Hassraths on the verge of burning out keeping an eye on each other.

"After the Tal Vashoth forced a merchant friend of mine to poison some of my men, I located a stronghold a few miles out from our base - about a league or two, if that makes more sense to you. I figured they were operating the local cells out of there; command, if you could call it that. So when-" Bull grips the blankets a bit tighter, and Mahanon presses close. "When they hit the school... fuck, those kids just had no chance. We were spread so thin, we didn't have the right people watching things, checking the food - but who would kill a bunch of kids? Like I said: no
reason, no plan. They just saw an easy target and they didn't care, didn't give a fuck. The moment I saw what was done, I knew it was them. The Tal Vashoth... they're just so fucking empty. Lost. No one else would have done that."

Bull has to explain - has to explain to Mahanon, make him understand the unacceptable, inescapable madness of the Tal Vashoth. How deep that void goes. Mahanon saw a trace of it tonight, didn't he? Didn't they both?

He keeps waiting for Mahanon to nod, long and slow, in sudden recognition - maybe to look away, shudder, leave. But he doesn't. He just keeps listening.

"As long as I framed it as an investigation, I could do - well, not whatever the fuck I wanted, but near enough," Bull says. "I used the poison as evidence in the paperwork, said I didn't know how many Tal Vashoth were in the compound, but I had a pretty damn close estimate. I asked Taasha to lead the assault with me, but she just... after the school, she just broke. I tried to convince her to go to the re-educators, if she wouldn't stand with us. She refused. She had no fucking faith left." Bull grinds his teeth. "I should have killed her."

Mahanon's hand twitches on Bull's knee as the elf flinches. Bull sighs, and finally looks at Mahanon directly.

"It would have been a mercy, Mouse," Bull says quietly. "Not revenge, not spite. When Ben Hassrath go bad, we tend to go real bad. We become monsters. We have to be put down."

"I don't believe that," Mahanon says, lifting his pointed chin stubbornly.

Bull can't help it - he smiles. "Neither did Vasaad. Fuck, you really do remind me of him sometimes."

Mahanon's face softens. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should. Smartest guy I ever knew, and... kind, despite everything. Loyal." Bull looks down again. "Loyal to a fault, poor bastard. He convinced me to let Taasha go, stood by me as I led our people to the stronghold. Took point - he was first through the door." Bull breathes; it's a dull ache, the guilt and pain of it, like an old injury never allowed to heal properly. "He didn't even get two steps in before the archers took him down. That's when I broke."

Bull says the rest in a rush of words, cold facts, a waterfall of information.

"Next thing I knew I was kneeling just - surrounded by corpses, and there were Ben Hassrath agents saying the survivors from my unit left the stronghold hours ago. I'd killed all of them, every last Tal Vashoth there, and I barely remember doing it. I lost control. I knew I couldn't be around people anymore, not in that state. I turned myself in to the re-educators - I knew if they couldn't fix me, they'd destroy me, and either one was fine by me."

Mahanon breathes in sharply. "They would kill you?"

Bull shakes his head. "Not if they could help it - we don't like wasting shit under the Qun. The tamassrans have a poison - qamek, it um, basically makes you harmless. You don't think, you're not really a person anymore, but you can still be useful; you can be directed to do mindless tasks. Building roads, cleaning, that sort of thing. So even if they couldn't fix me, they could."

"Make you Tranquil," Mahanon says, and there's a bit of the horror Bull's been expecting, lacing his voice.
Bull looks at Mahanon. "Never really thought of it that way, but I guess it's not far off. Execution would be a last resort."

Mahanon opens his mouth to say something, but seems to think better of it, looking away for the first time. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Bull says. "Not about the re-educators, anyway. They gave me another purpose, helped me get my head back on straight. Sent me out here." He puts his hand over Mahanon's, tilting his head. "Now, strictly out of curiosity - how much of this did you already know?"

Mahanon looks up sharply, eyes wide. Bull just raises his eyebrow, and Mahanon's lips thin into a tight, guilty line.

"None of the details, obviously," Mahanon says slowly. "It was just basic math. The book I read said that most soldiers on the island - no matter what side - rarely last more than a year or two in service there. Tevinter forces put their people on a strict rotation, but the Qunari fight until... until a breaking point is reached." Mahanon drops his eyes. "It mentioned Qunari re-educators, but the writer didn't know what re-education entailed, and from your stories - you were there much longer than one or two years."

"Eight," Bull says. "I was there eight years."

Mahanon closes his eyes, his grip on Bull's knee tightening.

"I don't know how long Taasha was there, but... I guess she never left the island, in here," Bull taps his head. "Some don't. And now she's killing her own people, just like every other Tal Vashoth we fought up there."

"That's not on you," Mahanon says.

"Isn't it? I let myself think for a moment that it wouldn't turn out the way it always does-"

"But maybe it wouldn't have if- I don't know, if circumstances had been different, if." Mahanon seems to struggle with himself for a moment, then blows out a long breath. "Look, I'm not Qunari. I can't speak to your experiences. But I don't think it's an inherent madness that causes the Tal Vashoth to be... the way they are, I don't think that's what turned your friend this way. That war hurt all of you, didn't it? Everyone on that island. The difference isn't that the Tal Vashoth didn't have the Qun and you did, it's that you had a community and they didn't. I'm not saying it's anywhere near the same thing, but- well, it's like- it's like when I left my clan, a bit."

Bull looks at Mahanon. So he does see it.

Keeping his tone level, Bull asks, "Is it?"

"Again, I'm not Qunari, but..." Mahanon bites his lip. "Those first few weeks on the ship, once it really sunk in that I wasn't a First anymore, that I wasn't even really Dalish anymore, it could have been terribly lonely. And it was, in some ways. Being ship-bound really gives you far too much time to stare out into the endless ocean and question every choice you've ever made in life, you know?"

Bull huffs a short laugh. He does know.

"If I'd been with any other crew, or with people who didn't care, I don't know what I would have done," Mahanon continues. "But whenever I became a bit melancholy, Dalish would show up with a deck of cards - or Krem, or Skinner, or you. You all helped me. Bull, you helped me. You told..."
me that the Chargers look after one another, help one another, and we do. If your friend left Seheron and found a group like ours; purpose, community, everything we have, I don't think she would have turned, Tal Vashoth or no."

It's a bit too close, too close to answering some questions Bull's been trying not to ask outright in his own mind for comfort. So this has been Mahanon's takeaway, his experience diverging from the path. This is Mahanon, a Tal Vashoth of sorts, making far too much sense for Bull's peace of mind.

"At least, that's just what I think," Mahanon says, faltering a little in the wake of Bull's pensive silence. "Sorry."

Bull takes a breath to speak, then stops short, and laughs. "Fuck. I've lost count."

Mahanon laughs too, clearly relieved by the break in tension. "Does that mean the count reverts to zero?"

"That means I'm pretty sure it was somewhere close to twenty, so we're starting there," Bull says, giving Mahanon's cheek a gentle pat. "But nice try. Very cute."

Mahanon shoves Bull's hand away with a wry smile, and for a moment everything feels... normal. Almost normal.

"So," Bull says, and he shouldn't- should ask, but... "You read a book that told you everyone who fights in Seheron goes batshit at some point, or dies, figured out that something like that had happened to me, and... what, still thought jumping into bed with me was a good idea?" Bull keeps his tone light, and he really is more curious than anything else, but- well, fuck. "Bit bold."

"I didn't need a book to tell me anything I needed to know about you," Mahanon says, his smile fading as his expression turns serious. He looks Bull square in the eye. "You're a good man."

Bull's mouth twists. "Not this again."

"I mean it- Bull, I mean it." Mahanon reaches up, hesitating only slightly, as if waiting for Bull to pull away. When Bull doesn't move, he takes Bull's face in his hands. "You're a good man, you-fuck, I've never met anyone so careful in all my life."

Bull snorts. "That's not usually what people say about me."

"There are different kinds of careful," Mahanon says. "Storming a Tal Vashoth stronghold might have been reckless, but turning yourself into the re-educators was careful. Running a band of mercenaries is reckless, but the way you look after every one of us is careful. What we do in bed could count as reckless, but watchwords are careful. Understand? If you were truly at risk of becoming a monster, you wouldn't care, would you?"

Bull smiles ruefully. "I wish I had your faith."

"Well, that's the thing, Bull," Mahanon says softly. "You do."

Bull meets Mahanon's eyes, glinting in the soft light of Dalish's crystal as he looks up at him, warm and open and utterly sincere.

What would it be like to believe in this, to trust in this? Reckless, for sure, no matter what Mahanon says. There would be nothing careful about it.
"Thanks," Bull says, surprised by how hoarse his voice is. Like he's been screaming or shouting for days. It sort of feels like it, to an extent.

Mahanon smiles, but his gaze turns piercing again, guiding Bull's face towards the light. "Have you slept at all?"

Bull thinks about lying, but somehow he doesn't think Mahanon'll buy his bullshit tonight. "Not since Val Royeaux."

"Creators-"

"I've stayed awake longer."

"That's not something to boast about." Mahanon bites his lip. "Will you let me try something?"

Bull frowns. "Not magic-"

"Not magic," Mahanon says quickly. "But it might help."

Bull shrugs. Mahanon looks him over, seeming to assess the best angle of approach, and with a little shake of his head he climbs into Bull's lap, leaning up on his knees to look Bull in the eyes.

Bull grins. "Need a ladder, little Mouse?"

"Not my fault you're so damn big," Mahanon grumbles, taking Bull's face in his hands again.

"I'm pretty sure you like how big I am," Bull says, resting his hands on Mahanon's slim thighs - thicker with muscle, now, from Skinner's exercises and hard-won fights during the long, cold winter. "You use me as a mattress often enough."

"Because you're also very warm," Mahanon says. "Now just... relax, alright?"

"Easier said than done," Bull mutters, closing his eye.

"I know," Mahanon says. "That's why I'd like to help."

Bull isn't sure what he's expecting - well, actually, he's half-expecting Mahanon's lips to find his, and honestly he'd be more than alright with a little closeness.

Instead, Mahanon's fingertips settle on his temples, the heels of his hands pressing in just under Bull's cheekbones at the hinge of his jaw. Bull doesn't realize his teeth are clenched tight until Mahanon starts to apply a gentle pressure there, massaging slow circles into Bull's temples with his fingertips. His thumbs smooth along Bull's cheeks, aside the bridge of his nose, up over his brow - carefully working around the straps of Bull's eyepatch.

Bull breathes, feeling the muscles loosen despite himself - despite the confusion and horror of the night, despite his misgivings and doubts, despite everything. An ache in his head he hadn't even known was there starts to ease under Mahanon's hands, his firm but careful touch.

"This some kind of Dalish thing?" Bull murmurs, letting himself lean into Mahanon's palms.

"Sort of," Mahanon says softly. "Da- um, my father used to do this for me, when I'd get nervous. I used to have all sorts of night terrors as a child - we didn't know why, until my magic manifested. It got to a point where I was afraid to fall asleep, especially when the Keepers told me that the things I was seeing were real, to an extent. This... helped."
Bull opens his eye. "You really miss them, don't you? Your birth clan?"

Mahanon smiles very slightly. "Sometimes. A lot of the time, actually."

"Sorry."

"One copper."

Bull raises his brow at Mahanon, who raises a brow right back.

"Sassy elf," Bull mutters, settling back. With a thought - a reckless thought, a dangerous thought - he reaches up and unclasps the strap of his eyepatch and, before he can think better of it, slips it off.

There's still a part of him that expects Mahanon to recoil at the ruin of his face, the ugly mass of scars where his left eye used to be. Maybe that, maybe that finally would be the breaking point, what finally makes Mahanon see him for what he is.

Mahanon doesn't even fucking blink.

He nods, a little - acknowledgement. Acceptance. But that's it.

Mahanon waits until Bull is finished removing the patch, then gets right back to work without a word, smoothing his fingertips over Bull's skin as if it's all just skin, as if the scars are no different from any other part of Bull's flesh. As if he doesn't care.

No, not as if he doesn't care - as if he cares in some holistic way that Bull can't begin to understand. As if every part of Bull is worth touching.

And suddenly Bull is fucking exhausted, so fucking tired, and maybe it's because of Mahanon's gentle massage and maybe it's because he's spent the night gutting himself in one way or another, pulling out every ugly part and laying it all in front of Mahanon and waiting, expecting the inevitable. Waiting for it to be too much, to finally prove that this isn't something he could ever learn to have or want.

And Mahanon's taken all of it, all of it, and turned it into something warm and comforting, and Bull has no fucking clue how he managed that any more than he knows how Mahanon can pull lightning down from the sky.

He's tired, and he doesn't want to fight this. He doesn't want to fight anymore.

Bull's approached all of this with the understanding that one day he'll have to let Mahanon go, and he knows that, he still knows that. But right now, the thought of losing this - something he doesn't even have, not really - hurts, it all hurts, and he doesn't want to hurt anymore either.

What would peace feel like? Silence in his mind, even for a moment - what would that be like?

Mahanon's hands go still. "Bull?"

Bull blinks, and Mahanon's face swims in his vision.

Bull reaches up and touches his eye, utterly nonplussed when his fingertips come away wet.

"Huh," he says. "Long night."

Mahanon nods. "Long night."
Bull looks at Mahanon, drinking him in like some kind of heady liquor - his big eyes and wild hair, crooked nose and full lips, every last little scar and freckle.

What would it be like?

His hands find Mahanon's wrists, his skin smooth and dry under Bull's fingertips, and Mahanon just watches him - searching his expression, lips parting, seeing all of him, all the scars laid bare.

Mahanon is free and Bull is not, and they both know this. Mahanon knows this. But Mahanon searched for him in the forest, brought him home, has given and given. If Bull was a free man - free to trust, free to speak - what could he give in return?

To abandon the path is to embrace blindness and abandon hope. That's what the Qun says. Bull's seen it himself.

But right now, hope is in his arms and sees him so damn clearly, maybe better than he sees himself, and he knows he can't have this. But what would it be like? What would it taste like, even for a moment? How far can they go, what can be said without saying, without making it too real to be safe?

Mahanon glances at Bull's lips and up again, a brief flicker and flutter of his long lashes, waiting for Bull. Always waiting, far too fucking patient.

What would it be like, to live so fucking bravely?

Bull closes the distance and kisses Mahanon like a free man might, recklessly warm and honest in his need, letting go of Mahanon's wrists to wrap his arms around him and pull him tight against him. After all the ghosts in the fog and far too present in his thoughts, this - this feels like life, Mahanon's breath against his mouth, the soft sounds he makes as he presses close and kisses back with all his open affection.

There's heat, of course there's heat, but more than that there's comfort in this - allowing himself to feel it, to accept this, to give in. Mahanon's hands are on his skin, smoothing over old scars with not a single moment of hesitance. Bull's fucking proud of most of those scars, always has been, the way they tell a story of the kind of weapon he is, and Mahanon touches him like he knows that. Like he really knows who Bull is, and maybe even knows a little of who Bull could be.

Bull starts to lean forward, fully intent on laying Mahanon down on the sleeping roll so he can try and show him what he's feeling, as if he has any fucking clue what he's feeling, but Mahanon puts a hand on his chest and breaks their kiss.

"You lie back," Mahanon says quietly. "Lie back, and let me take charge."

Bull blinks, but Mahanon just lifts his chin, unyielding. Asking for Bull's trust.

And Bull is so, so fucked in that moment, because he knows - within the bounds of what he can give without risking this, without putting Mahanon in harm's way - fuck, he would give this elf anything, everything he asks for, if it's in his power to give it.

It should be terrifying, but it just feels like peace.

Bull lies back.

Mahanon moves over him slowly, meticulously, touching him with that firm but gentle pressure. He kisses Bull sweetly, deeply, lets Bull put his hands on him but shakes his head in warning if
Bull starts to play on his weak spots. It's instinct for Bull at this point to trace the tips of Mahanon's ears, trail his fingertips along the backs of Mahanon's thighs, slip his hands under Mahanon's shirt to rub his thumb over Mahanon's nipple. Much harder to lay back and let Mahanon pace things, set the tempo and take care of them both, but after only two soft shakes of Mahanon's head he gets the idea.

Bull's experienced this before, of course - he's surrendered himself like this to the tamassrans, and in other ways to the Ben Hassrath, to the re-educators, to the Qun. He knows the shape of how it should feel. Surrender is hard, and then it's so very easy. It's breath after breath, a thankful quiet, a deep cool ocean. Like calming a fever.

This doesn't feel like that - not entirely. It's hard, yes, but then he looks at Mahanon and loses himself in Mahanon's smile, his warm eyes, the soft sound of his voice, and then it's easy. But it's not a cool, empty ocean; it's warm, and full, and blossoms out from somewhere deep in his chest.

It's still quiet, but it's a gentle silence, and there's permission somewhere in all of this. Permission to be soft, just here. Just for this moment.

Mahanon undresses them both, constantly checking at every stage that Bull is still with him, still present. Meticulous and careful in all of this. Caring for him.

He takes Bull into his mouth, and Bull closes his eye, expelling a long breath. Somewhere under the surface of all this are all the same doubts and fears, but this warmth is pushing them out, making them smaller somehow, and there's not a single part of Bull that wants to fight it, to dredge any of it back up again. All he wants is to be here, now, with Mahanon. With Mahanon.

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He hardens under Mahanon's lips and tongue, in his hands, and he waits with ebbing patience until Mahanon finally pulls off him with one last gentle kiss and starts to move over him again before he opens his eye again and sits up, keeping his hands at his sides, balling his fists in the sheets to keep them still.

"Can I touch you?" he asks, his voice rough as he gazes down at Mahanon, nearly shaking with a building, desperate need that has very little to do with sex. He's surrendered everything, given all he can, and now he just wants to sink in this with Mahanon, take them both down together.

Mahanon nods, eyes soft and understanding, seeing Bull, and Bull is on him in an eager instant. They move together, guiding by touch, taking and giving comfort and whispered praises in turns.

Bull sinks into Mahanon slowly, supporting him with an arm around his back as Mahanon arches with a quiet gasp. His lips find Mahanon's hair, his throat, tasting his pounding heartbeat under his tongue, every pulse a thrill that they're here, they're alright, they're alive and for now the ghosts can't catch them, they're both safe and Bull has never been so fucking grateful.

They move, reading each other's bodies and half-delirious with touch and trust, honesty in every breath. When they find their climax it's within moments of one another, Bull coming first and Mahanon curling close to rest his forehead against Bull's chest as he follows him with a gasp and a long shudder.

"Ir mala, ma vhenan," Mahanon whispers breathlessly, shoulders heaving as he struggles to catch his breath.

"Na'thek, kadan," Bull murmurs, without really thinking.

Slowly, reluctantly, they pull away from one another. Mahanon flicks a shaky hand and the mess
disappears as Bull straightens out the tangle of blankets. He gathers Mahanon into his arms as soon as this is done, settling into his bedroll with Mahanon nestled close against him, already rumbling a low, soothing purr.

"Thank you," Bull says softly. "For helping me."

He feels Mahanon smile against his shoulder, and Mahanon's hand finds his under the blankets, grasping it tightly. "Thank you for letting me."

And as Bull starts to drift asleep for the first time in far too many nights, he finds himself thinking of a drunk, teary-eyed elf at a summer campfire, awkwardly asking him if he'd ever "truly made love."

He smiles, and kisses Mahanon's hair.

-

*It'll be a bloody battle no matter what, but that's the sort of thing Hissrad was built for - blood, and death. He can't wait to get the taste of it between his teeth, to drive the fury into a terrifying vengeance.*

Vasaad is shaken, and shaking, but there's a determined set to his shoulders and he's baring his teeth in a familiar snarl made satisfyingly monstrous by his *vitaar*, harsh black lines emphasizing the furious angle of his brows over stormy grey eyes.

*No. No, his eyes are silver, have always been silver, cold and sure as a coin.*

*They storm the gates with a war cry, cutting through the useless sentries with ease, and Vasaad moves up to take point as Hissrad follows up with a clean sweep along the left flank. Vasaad casts aside his double daggers and takes his staff down from his shoulders, lightning crackling up the intricately carved knots and swirls in the wood.*

*His head swivels as one of the Tal Vashoth sentries along the right side shouts a warning - it should be dead, it shouldn't be shouting anything, damn it. Hissrad looks back to Vasaad, now hefting a longsword as he prepares to kick in the door. Hissrad's spine tingles, his senses screaming- he pushes forward-*

*The old door gives way easily, rotted damp wood from jungle fogs and rains splintering apart under the strength of Vasaad's blow.*

*The sounds of the jungle muffle and twist into a keening whistle in Hissrad's ears as time slows, then jumps, skittering all around him as a bundle of rough-hewn shafts suddenly sprout from Vasaad's throat. His kadan collapses back and disappears into the crowd as the rest of the antaam surge forward through the door, bottle-necked but furious, and Hissrad can hear battle fully joined inside the compound.*

*He doesn't care.*

*Hissrad drops to his knees as the others push through, finally revealing his kadan, Bull's beautiful kadan - looking so terribly small and broken, still struggling to breathe despite the arrows buried in his throat, blood starting to pool and seep into his curly hair.*

*"It's alright," his kadan tries to say, choking on blood, reaching for Bull. "We're alright."

*Bull pulls his kadan into his arms, cradling him close, knowing there's no saving him, knowing he*
did this, knowing he knew better than to bring him here, to make him a part of any of this, and begging to please, please be given another chance, even as the last spark of light leaves Mahanon's eyes-

Bull wakes up.

He doesn't gasp or flinch - in Seheron, noisy sleepers were dead sleepers, no matter how bad the night terrors got. He's drenched in a cold sweat though, and his breathing is far from steady.

There's a shift at his side, and he glances down to see Mahanon lifting his head, blinking sleepily in the low light of Dalish's crystal. "Ma ceart go leor, vhenan?"

Even in spite of his turmoil, Bull smiles a little. Mahanon never seems to realize what language he's speaking when he's half asleep.

"I'm good, Mouse," Bull whispers, stroking Mahanon's cheek with his knuckle. "Go back to sleep."

Mahanon squints happily at him and presses into Bull's touch, his eyes momentarily glinting silver in the low light before closing again.

Bull's smile fades, even as Mahanon cuddles in close and settles with a sigh, resting his head on Bull's shoulder.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you," Bull says, nearly voiceless. "Promise."

He seals this oath with a kiss pressed to Mahanon's smooth brow. Mahanon murmurs something back, senseless and incomprehensible, already asleep again.

Bull lets his head fall back against the pillow, stroking Mahanon's hair, and he does not fall asleep again.

The fog is still clinging to trees and obscuring the sky as the Chargers pack up camp the next morning. The irritable tension of the past few days is broken, but in its wake is a raw and almost painful silence, hurting and healing the way an open wound exposed to air hurts and heals.

Bull hitches the horses and climbs up into the wagon with a sigh and a grind of his teeth. He'd hoped the fog might be decent enough to clear the fuck off by now.

He's about to urge the horses onwards, eager to leave the forest, when someone suddenly clambers up onto the seat next to him.

Bull turns and raises his eyebrow at Mahanon. Mahanon settles himself in the seat, a book in his hand, and raises his eyebrow right back at Bull.

Bull sighs and gives the reins a short snap, trying not to smile as Mahanon smirks triumphantly and opens his book.

They don't speak to one another and they don't really touch, aside from brushing legs and elbows from time to time. But it helps, facing down the fog with someone at his side, even just quietly reading.

As the morning wears on into noon, Bull starts to feel a bit warmer. He writes it off as wishful
thinking, but he glances down at the page of the book Mahanon's reading and can't help but notice that the words are a little easier to read, standing out a little sharper against the page. The road begins to slowly stretch before them, sound filtering back into the world - birdsong and faint breezes, the crisp clopping of their horses hooves against the packed earth, even distant waves from a far-off shoreline.

Within an hour, they top a rise and emerge into a sunny afternoon, bright and clear and promising. Bull hears a few relieved sighs from behind him as the Chargers come out of the last faint clammy touches of mist, with Skinner exclaiming a heartfelt "thank fuck."

Mahanon beams at Bull, his smile nearly as bright as the sun far above them. If Bull was a free man, he might press his lips to that smile, sharing this moment of relief. It's tempting, always tempting.

But he's not a free man.

He smiles back though, clapping his hand on Mahanon's shoulder and giving it a friendly squeeze. Mahanon puts his hand over Bull's, just briefly, before they pull away from one another. It's fine. They're both happy. They both know where the lines are, and why the lines are there.

They stop for a very brief lunch before setting out again, and this time Bull climbs into the wagon alone. Mahanon mounts his horse, muttering a little Dalish curse as the horse immediately wanders off the path to start chewing on a bush, ignoring the elf's attempts to haul it away and guide it towards the road. Everything's back to normal.

Bull sets his eye on the horizon. They're about a day out from Val Chevin, and whatever the fuck is waiting there for him.

Death of some sort, most likely. Ideally someone else's. But the case file of murdered Ben Hassrath in his pack doesn't look too promising.

There's a round of laughter from the Chargers as Mahanon starts to plead with his horse, offering it an increasingly creative and unlikely list of bribes in exchange for its cooperation.

*To call a thing by its name is to know its reason in the world.* That's what the Qun says, and it's one of Bull's favourite meditations. *To call a thing falsely is to put out one's own eyes.*

He knows Mahanon's name. He's known it for quite some time.

But there's danger literally on the horizon, and he understands - to call this by its name, to bring what they are to one another into the light... there are eyes on Bull's every action, every decision. It's no coincidence that he's being summoned to deal with Taasha himself. The Ben Hassrath know he let her go, and they never forget a mistake.

He's not a free man, and Mahanon is. And he'd rather put out his own eyes than compromise that freedom.

Bull closes his eye, just briefly.

"Come on, Mouse," he calls cheerily. "Give your horse a kick and let's see if we can't get to Val Chevin before midsummer, yeah?"

"Fuck off, Chief," Mahanon calls back sourly, prompting another burst of snickers from the Chargers.
Mouse, and Chief. That's who they have to be. Any other names they'll just have to keep to themselves.

The mood is light and relaxed as the Chargers set up camp that night, taking advantage of the clear weather and slowly lengthening daylight hours to get a round of sparring in before dinner. Skinner is pent-up and merciless, driving Mahanon through their exercises with vicious glee, happy to take advantage of his wandering attention to send him crashing to the ground again and again.

After about an hour Mahanon retreats to a nearby stump at a valiant hobble, quickly draining his water skin as he eases himself down with a pronounced wince. Bull and Krem are paired off, happily bashing away at one another with practice swords and shields, while Grim and Stitches wander off to get dinner started and Rocky and Skinner start placing bets on the spar.

Dalish comes over after a few minutes, taking a seat on the ground next to Mahanon without a word. He glances down, noting the slight frown between her brows.

They sit in silence for a few long moments, watching Bull and Krem. Bull takes a swipe at Krem's knees, which Krem dodges with a triumphant "Ha!"

"Ma'lath ish," Dalish says eventually, matter-of-factly.

You love him.

Mahanon swallows, keeping his gaze fixed forward. "Vir ga'lath ish."

We all love him.

Dalish cuts a hard glance at Mahanon, which he tries very hard to ignore.

"Does he know?" Dalish asks quietly, still in Elvish.

Mahanon bites his lip. "Probably."

"Bastard."

Mahanon looks at her, alarmed. Dalish sighs, putting a hand on his knee. "I know he's a good man, da'len, but good men can sometimes be bastards when it comes to matters of the heart. Even if he doesn't mean to take advantage-"

"He's not," Mahanon says, feeling a bit horrified at the thought. She shakes her head skeptically. "No, it's not- look, I knew what this was when I got into it. I'm well aware of what it is, and- and what it's not. What it can't be. We're both just... we give what we can and we take what we can, and we're friends, and it's fine."

"Oh Mouse," Dalish says. "It's not like you to be this thick."

"I'm not-"

"He's in love with you, da'len," Dalish says. Mahanon stares at her, mouth fallen open slightly. "He is, and you know he is, and if you two keep walking circles around one another trying to protect each other from your own damned feelings you're both going to get hurt. Like idiots."

Mahanon's brain sputters, trying to think of about a dozen different arguments and counter-arguments, but instead in a small and defeated voice all that comes out is, "He... can't. We can't."
Dalish squeezes Mahanon's knee, her eyes softening, far too sympathetic. "Then you deserve to be with someone who can, don't you?"

Mahanon shakes his head, looking away. "That's not how it works, I don't think. Not for me, anyway. As long as we can have this - even if it's not everything, it's something, isn't it? More than something, it's- we're fine. I'm fine." He smiles, and it's a real smile. "I know what I'm doing. Promise."

Dalish blows out a long breath. "Even so-"

"Hey, no elfy gossip on the sidelines!" Bull calls, planting the tip of his sword in the ground and squinting at Dalish and Mahanon. "What are you two going on about, anyway?"

"You," Mahanon and Dalish call back in unison, trading a smirk.

"Don't like that," Bull mutters with a scowl, turning back to Krem. "Don't like that one bit."

Dalish gets to her feet and leans over, planting a quick kiss on Mahanon's forehead before wandering away to join Skinner and Rocky. Mahanon leans back on the stump, watching as Bull knocks Krem onto his ass with a bellow of laughter. It's a welcome contrast to the uncertain and haunted look Bull wore even this morning, all through the last stretch of fog.

Yes, of course Mahanon loves him. Loves Bull in a way that's starting to settle into the fabric of who he is, in every breath, every heartbeat. And while it's neither smart nor safe to dare let himself believe it, he thinks Dalish might be right - maybe Bull does love him too, and shouldn't that be enough? More than enough, even if it's never said aloud? Even if it's just quietly understood, designated to the dark corners, foggy nights and all kept behind locked doors and silencing spells?

Mahanon's gaze drops to his knees.

No. No, it's not enough. Of course it's not.

Because in his mind, this limbo doesn't stretch on forever, until he and Bull are both old and grey and still pretending this isn't what it is, what it could be. No, he's still stuck in his stupid romances, where love always wins and the heroes overcome life's struggles hand in hand.

Mahanon balls his fists, gritting his teeth, an odd swell of anger overtaking him. The people he loves, the people who love him - they've always been protective, haven't they? Because he's small, because he's shy, because he's soft-spoken and anxious. His da, quietly talking him through night terrors; Alaine, shielding him with her massive sword and fierce personality; Dalish, convinced that Bull will hurt him; Bull, convinced that Bull will hurt him. That Mahanon couldn't possibly survive the tangled web of Bull's past and present, that they can't face such things side by side as equals.

And why not? Why wouldn't people think this way? He is small, he is shy, he is soft-spoken and anxious, he is naive enough to believe in love and patience. He doesn't want to change these things about himself - well, not everything, at least.

A fiercer man than Mahanon might demand love from Bull. A braver man than Mahanon might leave all of this behind and start fresh somewhere else, seek out the love and life everyone keeps saying he deserves. A stronger man than Mahanon might actually keep to his own internal ultimatums - if this gets out of hand, I'll say something, I'll end it.

He knows he can be fierce, and brave, and strong. He can be. If it comes down to it, if he's really pressed, if there's truly no hope for a future here... he will be all of those things. He's certain of
"Had enough of a break, Mouse?" Krem calls.

Mahanon blinks. When did he stand up from the stump? When did he take his practice staff back into his hands?

"Yes," Mahanon says, trying for an easy smile. "Yes, I'm in a mood to kick someone's ass, actually."

This is met with a round of light-hearted laughter from Bull and Krem, Rocky and Skinner. Dalish just smiles at him, still far too sympathetic for Mahanon's liking.

"Tough talk for such a little elf," Krem says with a smirk, swinging his practice sword up onto his shoulders. It's the usual Chargers banter, and nothing Mahanon hasn't heard dozens of times before.

"Careful, Krem," Bull says cheerfully, taking a seat on the sidelines. "He's a fierce and mighty Mouse, yeah?"

Yes. Yes, he is. And one day Mahanon will prove it - to himself, to Bull, to anyone who thinks otherwise. He will.

With a sharp grin, Mahanon joins Krem on the practice grounds. He waits, and watches, and when Krem starts to move, he strikes forward with a Sliabh warrior's hiss.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

HI HELLO SORRY FOR THE THREE-WEEK HIATUS. I got some contract work that's been eating my time for breakfast, but HERE WE ARE NOW.

Of course it wouldn't be a chapter of Path without song recs, SO:

- For the new character we meet this chapter, **Short Change Hero** by The Heavy
- For the stuff that happens after **Entanglement** by Imogen Heap

And there's a third one at the bottom for the last few bits, but I'll link it in the end notes for like, idk, tension and stuff. If you wanna follow the playlist you can check out the link [here](#)

As always your comments, kudos, and encouragement absolutely fuckin fuel me. Thank you so so much, and please feel free to follow me on my Twitter [@FoxNonny](#). It's locked but I let most people in unless they look very not fandom-y.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Imperial Highway arches up through low mountains, softened and rounded by time. The Sliabh Keeper once told the children of the clan stories about the movement of the earth beneath their feet - how young mountains yearned to see the sky and shot up from the ground, reaching as though the peaks were fingers of the land aching to brush the stars. Once the spirits of the land had drunk their fill, they'd slowly descend back into the earth, settling in for a long sleep.

Mahanon thinks of the stories as they crest the low peaks, the ancient mountains becoming little more than foothills as they approach Val Chevin. The Sliabh Keeper - and the Sliabh First, come to think of it - were both adept with earth magic, bending the ground beneath their feet to their will. The Sliabh's always knew when to give the Keeper her space, as the forest floor would start to rumble like a growling beast when she was particularly irritated.

Mahanon has little skill for earth magic, himself. His magic has always taken the form of sparks, lightning, wind. He once heard the Sliabh Keeper comment to his father, Diemne, how strange it was that someone of Mahanon's shy temperament would develop such a loud and unpredictable gift.

"He's Fen'Asha's son, is he not?" Diemne said with a shrug, as if that explained it all. Perhaps it did.

Regardless, one does not live a nomadic life with the Dalish - no matter the clan, and no matter if one is a mage or not - without learning to read the land. The earth beneath their feet feels old, ancient and settled, sturdy as they go.

They take a mid-morning break a few hours out from Val Chevin to work out the aches of the long ride. A few of the Chargers take to sparring, but Mahanon sees Bull standing off to the side, arms folded and frowning. Ignoring Dalish's pointed look, Mahanon stretches and quietly walks over to join him.
From here, the highest point of the mountain path, they can see the highway wend its way down through the hills and on to the city, all laid out below them like a map spread over a table.

"What does the city look like to you from here?" Bull asks, his voice soft.

Mahanon tilts his head, narrowing his eyes. Thankfully the day is overcast, allowing him to see without having his light-sensitive eyes blinded by the sun.

The city is smaller than Val Royeaux - less grand, too. The main core is nearly a perfect square, with only a few farms and homesteads dotting the surrounding hills. While there's still a sense of Orlesian ostentation in the construction, there's something almost military about the hard lines of the streets and alleyways. However, Mahanon realizes with unease that the streets twist and turn and dead-end in odd places, everything narrow and cramped.

"It's a maze," Mahanon murmurs.

Bull nods slowly. "Started off as a military camp - and a prison. There's a whole mess of tunnels under the city where they used to make people disappear. Even if you got out of the tunnels, you'd have to navigate the city. Of course, all the guards and military folks knew the streets backwards and forwards."

"Is it still a prison?" Mahanon asks.

Bull snorts. "Nah. Somewhere along the line the prisoners started making deals with the guards, and, well. Those tunnels are great for smugglers - I know there's at least a few that lead out to the ocean. The Orlesians wanted something bigger and sexier for their Imperial army, so Val Chevin was kinda left to do its own shit."

Mahanon looks at Bull. "You said one of your... colleagues called you here to deal with Taasha?"

"Uh huh."

"To a city that's built to have hiding places and dead ends and escape routes?"

Bull meets Mahanon's gaze, mouth twisting into a smile that borders on a grimace. "Fucked, yeah?"

"Really fucked, why-?"

"I'll find out when I meet with him," Bull sighs, stretching out his bad leg with a wince. "Maybe to make Taasha feel like she's got the upper hand, or... I don't know, maybe Arvaariss knows the territory well enough to make good use of it. I don't know much about him."

Mahanon mouthes the unfamiliar name with a frown. "Arvaariss? Like-"


"Arvaarad." "The one who holds back evil." Hunters of Tal Vashoth... and the ones who keep Qunari mages leashed and shackled.

Mahanon drops his gaze to the sturdy earth beneath his feet, schooling his expression. He learned long ago how the Qunari treat their mages. There were even illustrations in the book on Seheron - illustrations that Mahanon has spent over half a year trying to purge from his mind. He can't reconcile the images with Bull, and how Bull sees him- how he thinks Bull sees him, how he hopes Bull sees him, but sometimes...
Bull takes Mahanon by the elbow - gently, guiding without pulling - and leads him a few steps to the side, putting a pile of boulders between them and the rest of the Chargers.

Mahanon looks up at Bull, and while the Qunari seems to have largely recovered from those terrible days in the fog, Mahanon can see it, still. A flicker of uncertainty. Fear, maybe.

"I've thought about it over and over again," Bull says, his voice whisper-soft. "Whether I should have left you all back in Val Royeaux-"

"I'm glad you didn't," Mahanon says quickly. "I want to be here- we all do. We have your back."

Bull smiles, but that uncertainty grows. "That's the kind of shit I'm worried about. I get edgy when the crap from up there gets tangled with things down here. If I thought it was safer- but Ben Hassrath are taught to move sideways, and Taasha was real good at thinking sideways. Better to have you all within hollering distance. But with a guy named Arvaariss around..."

"Dalish and I will be careful," Mahanon says.

"I know," Bull says. He takes Mahanon's face in his enormous hands, palms rough and dry against Mahanon's skin. "Quick, and quiet, and clever - you understand? The safest way to get through this is to stick to our roles. I need you to be a mouse. To be Mouse."

"Of course," Mahanon says, putting his hand over Bull's, ignoring the now-familiar sting in his chest. It's a strange waltz they're forced to dance, the two of them, with every step forward countered by two steps back. "If I can help, though-"

"Mouse."

"I'm just saying you don't have to protect me, Bull," Mahanon says, his voice clipped with an unexpected flash of temper. They stare at one another for a moment, before Mahanon carefully amends, "Chief, I mean."

Bull drops his hands to Mahanon's shoulders and searches Mahanon's face with a piercing look. Mahanon lifts his chin, refusing to shrink under Bull's scrutiny.

"Do you trust me, Mouse?" Bull says.

"You know I do," Mahanon says. "And if you ask me again I'll give you the same answer, but I might also kick you in the shins for asking."

Bull quirks a smile at that, but it's a brief one. "Can you follow my orders, as your Chief, even if you don't like them?"

"What?"

"I'm asking."

"I know what you're asking," Mahanon says sharply, feeling his hair lift with static as irritated sparks start to wind through his curls. Bull winces but doesn't let go. "Have I ever not followed your orders?"

Bull raises a brow. "Val Moraine."

Mahanon scowls. "That was an accident, I didn't-"

"Montfort."
"We both agreed that man was a-

"Val Foret."

"Technically you never said I couldn't-"

"Mouse," Bull says, softly, and Mahanon relents. "This is what I'm talking about. Shit could go really fucking badly down there. The people I'm dealing with... I know how they think. But you?"

Bull leans down - really leans, and Mahanon is far too sore of heart to help him close the distance by meeting him halfway. Even so, he feels his irritation soften as Bull presses his lips to Mahanon's forehead.

"You have a habit of surprising me," Bull murmurs. "It's a good thing. A real fucking good thing. But not here, not now. If we're lucky, we'll barely see one another once we're there. You and the Chargers'll be off on work, I'll be dealing with this shit. But I have to know that if I give you an order - even if you don't agree with me, even if you're worried about me - you'll do it."

Mahanon grits his teeth, trying to bite back what he knows he shouldn't say, but- fuck, after everything, every last painful moment they've endured over the past few days- "You don't have to do this alone, you know."

Bull sighs, sounding... tired, sad and tired. Mahanon looks away with a wince. He knows, he knows why things are the way they are right now. He doesn't have to make things harder than they already are. "Mahanon-

"No," Mahanon says. He squares his shoulders, meeting Bull's pained look with a determined nod. "No, sorry, you're right. I'm Mouse. You're Chief. I understand."

"Twenty-two coppers," Bull says, almost reflexively. He looks like he's about to say something else, something important by the way his grip tightens slightly, his expression shifting, but instead he surges forward and captures Mahanon's mouth in a deep kiss - and this time, Mahanon leans up on his toes to meet him halfway, despite the weight of his heart sitting heavy in his chest.

Later, back on the horses and winding their way down the highway over such sturdy, ancient soil, Mahanon wonders if Bull realizes that despite what was said, Mahanon never promised to follow orders.

He will, of course. He trusts Bull. He'll do whatever his Chief commands of him. He will.

That is, unless he has a very, very damn good reason not to.

Val Chevin is a city of stone and straight lines, one street nearly indistinguishable from the other. Streets are narrow, alleys barely wide enough to accommodate Bull's broad shoulders. It's suffocating, claustrophobic. Scarves and banners are hung from windows and doorframes in an attempt at Orlesian resplendency, but no one is fooled. This city is an entirely different kind of game from the glittery Orlesian banquet halls; a sharper game, played in the shadows, but just as deadly. All the Chargers hold their belongings a little closer.

The usual job posting boards are set in the town square, so Bull parts from the Chargers there to make his way to the Ben Hassrath dead drop at the docks. It's hard, leaving his people behind. He half expects to get jumped in the streets, in the alleys, on the boardwalk. Half expects to come back and find the Chargers gone, or dead.
It was always like this up north; that low thrum of anxiety, certainty that death was waiting around every corner. Knowing that it could be. The background whisper of danger in Bull's mind has never left him, of course, even in the less twisted south, but it's louder now than it's been in years.

Nothing at the dead drop by the docks, save an address and a time - half an hour before sundown. Fine, then.

Bull drops by the inn to freshen up and offload some gear, passing Krem and Stitches in the common room. They nod to one another, but that's it. They've got their own shit to deal with. Bull has his.

It's harder, passing by the other way some hours later. They're all gathered together, deep in discussion - probably planning for whatever job they've got lined up. Mahanon has his spreadsheets out, pencilling in numbers with a studious frown.

Bull doesn't realize he's paused, hesitating on the threshold, until Mahanon glances up at him.

There were, of course, so many things Bull should have said to him earlier. His mind keeps spinning, running through every possible scenario. He should tell Mahanon who he is to Bull, finally come fully clean. He should tell Mahanon to leave the Chargers, get as far away as he can. There are risks in every outcome, and the dreams keep getting worse with every passing night. Mahanon, with arrows buried in his throat. Mahanon, stabbed through the eye with a Ben Hassrath's kata-kas. Mahanon in pain, Mahanon dying-

"You don't need to protect me." There'd been a flash of that inner storm when Mahanon said that earlier, and Bull knows he was right to say it. Bull's seen for himself what Mahanon's capable of.

But this is different - Mahanon has to realize that this is different. Doesn't he?

They've been holding one another's gaze for a good long while now, and Bull's aware that his face is showing far too much of his thoughts. Mahanon, conversely, regards him with a flat look, uncharacteristically stone-faced.

Mahanon has every fucking right to be angry with him, if he is, for- all of this. Every last inch of this tangled mess that Bull feared they might wind up in when he felt that first pull of desire for Mahanon over half a year ago.

Mahanon continues to watch him, expressionless. Finally his face shifts - slowly, a touch hesitantly, but it settles into one of his gentle, reassuring smiles.

It's alright. We're alright.

It's only a slight weight that lifts from Bull's shoulders at the sight of Mahanon's smile, but it makes a difference. It feels like a little grace, a little forgiveness, a little permission. Bull smiles back before he turns away, vowing that after this is all said and done and dealt with and Val Chevin is in their fucking dust, he'll find a way to show Mahanon how much the width and breadth of his forgiveness means to him.

Far more importantly, he'll find a way to stop testing how far Mahanon's forgiveness extends.

The streets aren't really numbered or marked in any meaningful way, but Bull's been through Val Chevin once or twice before and manages to find the address - a door in a weathered side alley, almost too narrow for Bull to move through. He opens the door and steps inside without hesitation.
The first room is empty, dark, and dusty, quite abandoned. Bull slips Dalish's crystal from his pocket and lights it, carefully examining the dust. No footprints, no strange disturbances. There are two doors leading out of this front entrance - both of them locked.

Bull frowns, taking another pass through the room. No blood, no magic, no sign of struggle. It could be that Arvaariss is dead already. If so-

There's a whisper of noise from the corner and Bull whirls, the light of Dalish's crystal glinting off two enormous elfin eyes peeking out from a little slot in the wall that wasn't there a moment ago. Enormous eyes, yes, but child-like.

"Who're you?" the elf whispers, eyes blinking. Definitely a child.


The eyes widen, and abruptly disappear.

A portion of the wall swings out on well-oiled hinges, revealing a grubby city elf urchin - no more than ten, if Bull's estimating correctly. He feels a twinge at the child's cold, assessing stare. Kids in a city like Val Chevin would be well used to the comings and goings of unsavoury sorts and would know how to make a little coin from it if they're careful. It was much the same in Seheron - children passing messages, bringing food to soldiers, doing little tasks on the edges of warfare, shielded by their innocence.

At least, they should have been shielded.

Bull follows the child into another silent chamber, smiling as the boy eyes Dalish's crystal with open curiosity. "A friend of mine gave it to me. Wanna touch it?"

The elf glances up at him warily, but like with so many kids, curiosity wins out over caution. Gingerly, the child reaches out and gives the crystal a careful poke. Those elfin eyes light up in fascination, and the boy - clearly emboldened by the first experimental prod - lays a tiny hand over the crystal, admiring the way the light shines through his slim fingers.

That twinge turns into a full pang as Bull watches the child play with the light. He's always liked kids. There's a part of him that wonders if he might not have made a good tamassran; to have his own herd of little minds to shape and protect, to guide and watch over.

And why not?

Bull closes his eye for a moment. It might have been his thought, but it sounded an awful lot like Mahanon, as many of his questions and doubts tend to these days.

He's told Mahanon how the Qun handles child-rearing - he's never admitted that sometimes, a part of him wishes he might have a hand in the process. It's just one of those idle thoughts people have sometimes. Like wishing you could fly, or breathe underwater.

Or admit your love for someone outside the Qun. To love that person the way they deserve, to do it all properly, without everything falling apart.

The child is still staring at the light, utterly entranced, and the pang lingers.

"Do you want to keep it?" Bull asks.

The child looks up sharply, as if he'd forgotten Bull was there. His face falls, losing that curious
spark, and the child steps back with a shake of his head.

Bull smiles and lowers the crystal.

He watches as the child fishes a vial out of his pouch, handing it to Bull. "Drink, then I have to check your face."

Bull uncorks the vial, giving it a cursory sniff. He's taken all the usual antidotes, of course, but it never hurts to check. He blinks when he realizes what he's smelling. *Magebane.*

With something of an internal shrug, Bull tosses back the grainy substance, working his tongue and lips a little to swallow it all down. Not the worst thing he's ever tasted, but not great. Mahanon's grimace and obvious discomfort whenever he takes it must have more to do with the sensation of losing his magic than the flavour.

The child reaches up and Bull leans over, allowing the elf to poke and prod at his cheeks, tug on his ears, check his horns. He gets the necessity. Some Ben Hassrath and other agents of similar types have ways of altering their appearances with putty and borrowed skin. The thought always creeped Bull right the fuck out, so he never picked up the knack. That kind of deception was never his specialty, anyway.

"You're alone," the elf says. Not a question.

"Yep," Bull says. "You kids got a network around here?"

The elf opens his mouth to reply, then closes it with a frown.

"Good answer," Bull says, straightening. "The safest thing to say is nothing at all."

The child nods, serious as a student, and beckons Bull forward.

The next room is just as empty as the first two, but this time the elf crouches down and fiddles with something in the floorboards. After a few moments a trap door flips open, revealing a rickety-looking ladder.

Bull purses his lips. "That gonna hold my weight?"

"Probably not," the child says, looking Bull up and down skeptically.

"Hey, now," Bull grumbles, but it's good to see the elf grin, even if it's at his expense. "You should go down first then, just in case I break it."

The child shakes his head. "I don't go no further, ser. Just here."

"Oh." Bull takes a seat at the edge of the trapdoor, swinging his legs into the dark hole below. It strikes him, looking at the city elf this close, that Mahanon would have been about this age - maybe a year or two older - when he was separated from his parents.

There should be a limit, some kind of universal law, on the kind of pain a child should be forced to endure. But the world doesn't seem to give a shit about protecting kids. In Bull's mind, knowing this, makes it all doubly unforgivable when the people who can and should protect them don't.

He doesn't know anything about this Arvaariss, but he knows a shield when he sees one. Smart, using a kid as a first line of defence, especially given Taasha's past. Ruthless. The kind of sideways thinking that defines a good Ben Hassrath.
Bull can feel a familiar sick rage bubbling just under the skin and tamps it down, breathes through it. He can't blame Arvaariss for doing his job. He shouldn't, at least.

He reaches into his pocket and fishes out a healthy handful of coins, holding them out to the elf boy. The elf's eyes widen again. He shakes his head.

"Go on," Bull says. "You've earned more than a few good meals. Maybe a shiny crystal of your own?"

The elf bites his lip, but carefully takes a few copper and silver pieces from Bull's hand. Bull gives him a look, and the elf snatches up a gold coin as well before stepping back, slipping the money into his pocket.

Bull leaves the rest of the coins on the floor and gives the stunned elf boy a little salute before descending through the trap door. The ladder gives a few worrying creaks, but thankfully does not snap under Bull's weight.

The ladder reaches down about fourteen feet, the air becoming damp and earthy around Bull. He steps off the ladder onto a set of marshy wooden boards, softened by time and moisture. A smuggler's tunnel, no doubt, perhaps connecting to the prison tunnels further on. Bull lifts his crystal and sees a makeshift door up ahead - more a suggestion of a barrier than anything else.

There's a creak above Bull and he glances up just in time to see the trapdoor close. He waits to hear the click of a latch, locking him in, but nothing comes.

Alright. One way out, then, if the ladder can handle me a second time.

Bull pads along with his hand on the throwing ax at his side, wincing at every wet groan of the boards beneath his feet as he makes his way through the tunnel to the door. He lifts his hand to push it open, but needn't have bothered - the door swings open before he can touch it.

Bull straightens, folding his arms. "Arvaariss, I take it?"

It doesn't take a Ben Hassrath's observation training to tell that this man is another Seheron veteran. He's of an age and height with Bull, horns curving back tall and jagged - one horn looks as though it was hacked off in battle and smelted back on with hot iron. A long scar bisects his stern face on a diagonal, slicing through his brow and taking a chunk from the bridge of his nose. Unlike Bull, both the man's piercing red eyes were spared by whatever injury left the mark. One of his hands looks half-melted, obviously badly burned a long time ago. The other arm, Bull notices with discomfort, sports scars similar to those on Mahanon's hands: thin white forks of lightning, branching over Arvaariss's skin like a tree.

Bull recognizes the build of muscles along Arvaariss's arms and shoulders. If he had to hazard a guess, he'd say the man was reaver-trained, like Bull. A killer, a weapon, trained to turn blood frenzy into an unstoppable force.

What he does not recognize, winking in the light of Dalish's crystal, is an engraved metal medallion resting on Arvaariss's chest. No, not resting, not a necklace - the token has been implanted into Arvaariss's skin.

"Hissrad," Arvaariss says, his voice a gravelly baritone. He tilts his head. "Or should I be calling you 'the Iron Bull?'"

Bull shrugs. "The bas know me by the latter."
"Of course." Arvaariss's eyes flick down to the glowing crystal in Bull's palm. "Ah. I told the boy no magic."

"No magic," Bull agrees, twisting his hands around the crystal until the light dims to nothing. He stuffs it into his pouch. "He administered the magebane and did a thorough search. He seems like a good kid."

"A bas," Arvaariss says dispassionately, turning on his heel.

Bull follows him through the door into a perfect smuggler's hideaway. There's a sleeping roll in the corner of the earthen chamber, a covered fire in the centre, and a few boards assembled into a makeshift desk covered in scattered parchment. Two tunnels lead out from the cave, both blocked by similar shoddy doors - though reinforced from this side by sturdy barricades. "How long have you been in here?"

"Weeks," Arvaariss says, lip curling. "She knows I'm here, of course, but I could not risk a confrontation on my own."

Bull shifts. "So it really is Taasha then, huh?"

"Unfortunately," Arvaariss says.

Bull looks up at the other Qunari, a bit taken aback, and is further thrown when Arvaariss's stern expression cracks a bit, showing... remorse, maybe? Sadness?

Arvaariss catches his look and smiles - just slightly, but enough to break that severe exterior. "So she never spoke of me to you."

"No," Bull says, even as he scrambles back through all his painful, fog-filled memories of those last months in Seheron for any conversation, any mention. "You knew her?"

"Very well," Arvaariss says. "I thought I did, at least. She was the one who saw my potential. She recommended my reassignment to the Ben Hassrath after monitoring my work in Seheron."

"You were arvaarad before," Bull says.

"I was. But Taasha saw that I could further serve the Qun in a more... flexible position." Arvaariss gives Bull a wry look. "Seheron, as you might recall, was in dire need of minds like ours."

Bull nods, and it all feels almost... good, for a moment. Speaking with a fellow Ben Hassrath, someone who understands these terrible fine lines and misty corners. Someone who remembers the sticky heat of the jungle and the kinds of horrors one could trip upon while hacking your way through the underbrush.

But then Bull remembers the elf boy upstairs, and the comfort of the phrase "minds like ours" rapidly diminishes.

"I left a trail here for Taasha to follow," Arvaariss says, taking Bull's silence in stride. "According to local sources, a Tal Vashoth landed at the docks four days ago. I'm certain it was her. Tomorrow I will lure her to one of the abandoned prison tunnels under the southwest corner of the city, and we'll strike her down there."

"Are we sure she'll take the bait?" Bull asks. "We can't make a reliable plan until we suss out her motivations-"
"Listen to you," Arvaariss says softly, sounding more awed than anything else. "You've spent far too much time among the bas, Hisrad."

Bull raises his hands, acceding the point. "I wasn't trained to hunt Tal Vashoth the way an arvaarad would be, so I'm following your lead all the way. I'm just curious."

"A good trait in a Ben Hassrath, I believe, so long as one is asking the right questions," Arvaariss says. He steps over to the smouldering coals of the covered fire, leaning down to give them a quick stir with a long, charred stick. "The Tal Vashoth are mindless. Empty. As you know. Many seek to fill the void with blood, taking revenge on those they deemed to have wronged them and shaped them to be so broken. Taasha was Ben Hassrath before she lost her way. Thinking as a Tal Vashoth thinks, would she not seek the blood of her former peers? Twisting her purpose to destruction?"

Arvaariss's words make far too much sense for Bull's peace of mind. He remembers the blind rage of the Tal Vashoth, their tortured screams as they took their revenge for every imagined failing of the Qun.

But reconciling that with Taasha - steady, careful Taasha, calm and calculating Taasha-

*She wasn't calm at the end though, wasn't she?*

No one was calm that day. No one was calm, seeing the destruction of the school, the little bodies scattered like broken dolls-

"You understand," Arvaariss says, straightening and turning back to Bull.

Bull wants to scream that no, no he doesn't fucking understand, of course he doesn't- but that's not what Arvaariss means. "Yeah, I can see it."

"The two of us should present an irresistible target for her blood rage," Arvaariss says. "I was once... an apprentice of sorts, to her, perhaps. You and she were close. You allowed her to escape the re-educators. Surely she must resent you for it now."

Arvaariss says this with even practicality, not an ounce of reproach or derision. Qunari consider any trespasses committed prior to re-education forgiven (though never forgotten), only mentioned among other Qunari for the purposes of education or basic necessity. Even so, Bull finds it hard not to wince. "That was a mistake."

"And one the Ben Hassrath have seen fit to allow you to atone for," Arvaariss says, regarding Bull with a kind of respect and camaraderie that... well, it's a far fucking different flavour of camaraderie than Bull has with his Chargers, but there's comfort in it nonetheless. "It is an honour of trust, is it not? That they have decided you are recovered enough from your re-education so you might face this final ghost?"

"I'm grateful," Bull says, trying to convince himself that there's at least part of him that means it. "It's been weighing on my conscience, regardless of the re-educator's efforts."

"I cannot imagine," Arvaariss says. "Well, tomorrow it will be done with. If you wish to take point-"

"Fuck no," Bull says with a laugh. "You've cased the city longer than me, you've got a plan in motion. I'm just here to help."

"You have more years of Ben Hassrath training-"
"And arvaarad are trained to hunt Tal Vashoth in particular," Bull says. "I'm confident in your assessments and abilities. I would be honoured to serve you."

Arvaariss smiles and holds out his scarred hand, which Bull takes in a firm grasp. "Noon tomorrow, then. We'll meet here."

Bull nods, even allowing himself to grin. This feels familiar, this kind of shadow talk. Despite everything, despite his misgivings, he can see himself working well alongside a guy like Arvaariss. His people, straight through to the core. "Noon. Sounds good."

"Let me give you a city chart. The streets are confusing, and maps hard to come by."

Arvaariss kneels by his makeshift desk, sorting through the stray parchments and papers, rolling a few sheets together into a tight bundle as Bull watches. Without looking up, Arvaariss says, "Your... 'Chargers' are with you, then?"

"Mm," Bull says. "Figured it could be good to have back-up if we need it, and if Taasha's coming for me specifically all her targets will be in one place."

"We won't need back-up, but the reasoning is sound," says Arvaariss, tying a neat knot around the charts. "The bas saarebas are with you as well, then? That new one, 'Mouse'- it is here in the city too?"

It.

Of course Mahanon would be an "it" to Arvaariss - all bas are mindless things, under the Qun, and mages doubly so. Some kind of unmanaged natural disaster, like a wildfire or a flood.

Or a thunderstorm.

"Didn't make sense to leave anyone behind," Bull says, and the level calm of his voice feels like some kind of betrayal - betrayal of the Qun or betrayal of Mahanon, Bull doesn't even know anymore. "Mouse and the other bas saarebas, Dalish- my second-in-command Krem'll keep an eye on them. He's got a good head on his shoulders."

"You put quite a lot of faith in the bas."

"I have to, down here," Bull says. "It's not our world."

Arvaariss stands and turns, handing Bull the charts with a smile. "Yet."

Bull accepts them, inclining his head. "Yet."

- 

Stepping into the quiet murmur of the late evening common room is like stepping back into another skin. Bull pauses on the threshold for a moment, rubbing his temples. As discomforting as his conversation was with Arvaariss at times, it all made sense. There was no questioning of the Qun, nothing that conflicted with the philosophies and creeds that Bull has sworn himself to live by.

When he first came south, "the Iron Bull" was a mask, an identity forged the way a sword or armour could be forged. The best way to live a lie is to believe it, Bull's always known this, but there's always a risk of losing oneself in the process.
You of all people should know how lies can construct a reality. Taasha's wisdom. She understood it well, and even she lost her way in the end.

But is his life, the life of the Iron Bull - is it truly just an elaborate lie? And what even is the fucking difference anymore, if he thinks with the Iron Bull's mind and breathes with the Iron Bull's lungs, feels aches and pains in the Iron Bull's skin and sleeps in the Iron Bull's bed?

Even so, he was Hissrad again tonight, and it felt as true as the Iron Bull. Bull's starting to think that these falsehoods, these truths, these lives; that's where the real danger of madness lies, as they all threaten to spin his thoughts into oblivion.

Bull forces a smile. His *tama* always told him he thinks too much.

He catches sight of Krem sitting by the fire and ambles over, taking a seat across from him and reaching over to steal his ale. Krem shoots him a glare but allows the theft with a beleaguered sigh.

"Don't tell Mouse, but he was right about the price of horse feed," Krem mutters, shuffling through a stack of account papers.

"Guaranteed, he already knows," Bull says, nudging Krem's foot. "But you know him. He won't rub it in unless you were *real* obnoxious about being wrong."

Krem steals his flagon back and takes a long swig. "Job lined up tomorrow. Creepy one."

"Oh?"

"North-east corner of the prison tunnels saw some blood magic back in the day." Krem makes a face. "Every once in a while you get some shades, wights, swashbuckling skeletons - all the fun shit. Apparently it's been a bit noisier than usual over there, so we're gonna go clear it out."

Bull shudders. "I'm gonna be real grumpy if one of you comes back possessed."

"If one of us gets possessed, we won't be coming back," Krem vows grimly. "From what I hear, it's basically pest management at this point. Nothing beyond the pale. There are enough merc crews coming through looking for work to keep anything really nasty from getting legs."

Bull nods. "Well, the Chargers'll have a good captain watching out for them, so. Should be good either way."

Krem smiles at that, raising his flagon in a brief toast before downing the rest of it.

Bull shifts to get to his feet, but pauses as Krem says, "You and Mouse alright?"

Bull looks at Krem, who looks steadily back at him. "Why?"

"Mouse was quiet tonight," Krem says. At Bull's raised brow, Krem adds, "Quieter than usual."

Bull scrubs a hand over his face, staring into the fire. "Things'll go back to normal once all this shit is dealt with."

"Has it occurred to you, oh mighty Chief, that 'normal' might just be the problem?" Krem asks.

The fire pops and crackles, casting sparks up into the chimney.

"Yeah," says Bull.
Krem seems to wrestle with himself for a moment, then leans forward, speaking quietly. "We don't talk about this shit, and I get why, but... we'd have your back, all of us, if you ever wanted to leave."

Bull snorts. "Nice try, but you won't get rid of me that easy. I'll be Chief of the Chargers a while yet."

"That's not what I'm talking about," Krem says.

Bull meets Krem's earnest stare, just briefly, before returning his gaze to the fire. "If I asked you to get up from your chair and leave your bones behind, could you do it?" Krem says nothing. "'Night, kid."

He gets up and leaves Krem sitting by the fire. Bull's never been one for tactical retreats, but they do occasionally have their uses.

Bull passes by the line of rooms, realizing with an odd twinge that he has no idea which room Mahanon is in for the first time in months. Probably for the best. It'd be too dangerous, too tempting, with all the uncertainty and shifting lies closing in around him.

He thinks this, is convinced of this, right up until he opens the door to his own room and finds that a little folded note has been slipped under the door. Bull picks it up with a frown, just barely managing to catch the key that slips out from the parchment. The note is simple, barely anything, just a number; but Bull recognizes the hand.

Don't. Don't do it.

He thinks this, but he's already walking, already locking the door to his own room behind him and counting down the numbered doors until he finds the right one. Slips the key in the lock, opens the door and steps over the threshold, leaving "Hissrad" and "Chief" on the other side and choosing the Iron Bull, choosing this for the night, one tiny space carved out for the mask that has become the skin he lives in.

The room is dark but he can see Mahanon well enough as the elf sits up in bed, eyes glinting in the moonlight as Bull closes the door behind him.

"Bull," Mahanon says - not "Chief," not "Hissrad," and it's everything Bull needs to hear. "I wasn't sure-"

Mahanon drops his gaze. Bites back his words.

Bull closes the distance between them, taking a careful seat on the edge of Mahanon's bed. "So. Skeletons, huh?"

Mahanon huffs a laugh. "I'm sure you're really quite torn up to be missing it."

"I am absolutely the fuck not," Bull says with feeling, and Mahanon grins at him. "What time are you setting out in the morning?"

"We're not, actually," Mahanon says, stretching with a stifled yawn. Bull's eye follows the spill of tattoos shifting over Mahanon's skin like living ink, the bedsheets falling away to reveal bare skin right to his narrow hips. It's the last thing Bull should be thinking of right now, but- well, fuck, he's thinking about it. "The ghosts and ghoulies are most active come nightfall, so. It'll be a late one for us. If we weren't all so exhausted from the road, we might have gone in tonight."
"Well if you're exhausted, don't let me keep you up," Bull says, moving to stand.

Mahanon catches his arm, a little zap of static lightly stinging Bull's skin - entirely deserved. He looks back at Mahanon, smirking at the sparks already winding through his wild hair, but his smile fades at the look of open need on Mahanon's face, a need that goes beyond desire.

"I- I know there's so much going on, and-" Mahanon swallows, dropping his gaze. "I just- I don't want to think right now, and I can't stop, and I- it's not fair for me to ask-"

Bull silences Mahanon with a kiss, wrapping Mahanon's slight frame tight in his arms. The elf is tense from head to toe, every muscle clenched tight and shivering, and Bull can feel his rattled nerves in every last inch of him.

"I'm sorry," Mahanon whispers, pressing close to Bull. "I just-"

"Twenty-three coppers," Bull says, and Mahanon looks up at him balefully. Bull takes hold of Mahanon's wrists and lays him back down on the bed, pinning him gently to the mattress, and Mahanon sighs in relief. "Let me take care of you, kadan."

Mahanon blinks, but murmurs, "Please."

Bull has the charts spread across the sheets on one side, Mahanon curled up close against him on the other when the elf finally stirs sometime after midnight.

"You were down for a while," Bull says, losing his fingers in Mahanon's curls.

"Tired," Mahanon says roughly, shifting to lay his head on Bull's shoulder. He frowns at the charts. "Is that a map of the city?"

"Sure is."

Mahanon curses under his breath. "I spent all afternoon trying to track something like that down."

"Knowing how to get around town is a kind of power here," Bull says, putting the charts aside. He pulls Mahanon fully into his lap, massaging the elf's wrists. There'll be marks from the ropes tomorrow for certain, but Mahanon likes the marks, he knows. He'll sometimes catch Mahanon smiling at the light bruises and love bites Bull leaves on his skin. "Power like that is expensive as fuck, and not too many people are willing to sell it."

"Yes, yes, all-powerful whispermen only, I quite understand," Mahanon says sourly, though he relaxes back in Bull's arms with a contented sigh as Bull works his hands over Mahanon's skin.

Bull smiles and presses a kiss to Mahanon's temple. "You can look at them tomorrow before I go, if you want. You said you weren't leaving until sundown, yeah?"

Mahanon looks at Bull with curious, hungry eyes. "Really?"

"If there's one thing I know about my fantastic fucking crew, it's that no one in it has any fucking sense of direction whatsoever," Bull says, and Mahanon laughs. "If I ever want to see your sorry asses again, someone ought to know how to navigate the tunnels."

"Thank you," Mahanon says, smiling brightly.

Bull smiles back, and for a moment it doesn't fucking matter, really, any of it - not Taasha, not
Seheron, not Hissrad. He doesn't have to know himself with any real certainty or clarity to know what he feels, now, with Mahanon close and safe in his arms and smiling.

Another moment, and Bull is thinking wild thoughts - thoughts such as, there are ships sailing in and out of Val Chevin every hour of every day. They could leave, all of them, run south and disappear; the Chargers are beholden to no one but themselves, and Bull could be the same if he chooses. Run, and keep running, and meet whatever consequences as they come. He could live that way, could he not? Has he not already been living that way, to an extent?

But Bull... Bull, who was once ashkaari, the one who thinks. Bull, who was once hissrad, weaver of lies. Bull has seen those he loves cut down around him, has watched his kadan die once already.

Bull could abandon the Qun and find his purpose in the Chargers. In Mahanon. He could. It would be far easier than he's willing to let himself believe.

But for all that Bull knows he feels for Mahanon - no, because of what he feels for Mahanon - he can't. Losing Vasaad destroyed Hissrad, but the Qun was there to remake him. Losing Mahanon would destroy the Iron Bull, and it wouldn't be fair, wouldn't be right. The madness would take him again and there would be nothing to salvage, and he cannot make Mahanon responsible for his wellbeing in such a way.

He cannot leave the Qun for Mahanon. Mahanon is a man, a mortal man, and for all that Bull feels for him, mortal men can die. They can change their minds, they can leave. A stronger man could live with that possibility as all men do, able to weather the tides of grief that mark the pain of living. But if Bull were to leave the Qun for Mahanon... it would change things, and something would break, and then everything would.

Some might consider love a higher purpose, but Bull knows there are higher purposes still. He knows Mahanon did not abandon his clan for love, but for something bigger. Something that would remain even if everything else was taken from him.

Bull hasn't found that yet.

He wonders, a bit bitterly, if he might have found Mahanon instead a few years too soon.

"Bull," Mahanon whispers.

Bull kisses Mahanon, pressing reassurances into Mahanon's skin with his lips. The timing was wrong, perhaps, but they're here now, and Bull has to find a way to do right by his kadan.

Even if it means letting him go.

He feels Mahanon's hand on his face, pulls back to see Mahanon watching him with his heart in his eyes as always, and when Mahanon breathes to speak Bull can't help but wonder-

Then Mahanon bites his lip again, and looks away.

Bull smiles and takes Mahanon's hand in his, brushing his lips against Mahanon's wrist. "Earlier you told me I don't have to protect you."

Mahanon winces. "Sorry, I was-"

"Twenty-four. Anyway. I know. I know you're more than capable, I know you're strong and brave. You're my asaaranda." Bull grins as Mahanon squints at him. "'Thunderstorm.'"
Mahanon smiles. "I could get used to that."

"'Mouse' is a lot easier for the crew to say, so keep that in mind if you're in the market for a new nickname. Still, I know that, but I want to protect you anyway." Bull touches his forehead to Mahanon's. "Just like you protect me, don't you?"

Mahanon meets his eye, looking - vulnerable, almost frightened, his face betraying nearly every word he's never said for Bull's sake. Slowly, he nods.

"What if we stop trying to protect one another, then?" Bull murmurs. "Not tonight, not now, not here-"

"Not yet," Mahanon says, his voice shivering.

"Not yet," Bull agrees. "But... when we're both a little braver, maybe?"

"What would that look like for us?" Mahanon asks, voiceless.

Bull takes a long breath. "I don't know."

Slowly, Mahanon nods, his eyes still wide and nervous. And here it is - the uncertainty they've been trying to put out of their minds, the shadow they've been trying to ignore. The knowledge that the fog must lift eventually. For once, it's far from a comforting thought.

"But not tonight," Bull says.

"Not tonight," Mahanon echoes, and kisses Bull with a desperate need.

Bull kisses him back hard, knowing Mahanon's fear in his own core, like a borrowed heart - the fear that these nights, these careful pockets of time for them might be numbered.

Chapter End Notes

- Everything the boys are thinking without saying, when the party's over by Billie Eilish (and the reason why I'm been having Emotions for da y s)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A NICE LONG CHAPTER FOR ALL Y'ALL, WHEE. Apologies in advance cause it's a rough one so um. Ye. You've been warned.

I also must thank my amazing and thorough and lovely beta reader, Stitch, for going over the fight scene and reminding me that it's important for people to know where other people, like, *are* while reading. I love them to death and they have a fucking amazing FenHawke fic with beautifully written action and an amazing FenHawke dynamic that I will stan forever and a day. Go read Albatross, it's Good Shit.

A quick note on the chapter because BioWare hates us and wants us to suffer - qunari = Them That Dost Have Horns, whereas Qunari = Them That Dost Follow The Qun. So you can have non-qunari Qunari and qunari Tal Vashoth (who are also sometimes called "Vashoth" and fuckin... fuckin.) There is a name for the horned race that ISN'T "qunari" but they purged it from their records long ago lore-wise and only a few tamassrans know it. So. Hope that clears things up but I understand completely if it Does Not At All.

Song Rec: Razors Edge by Digital Daggers. You can listen to the full playlist here.

As always your comments and kudos and general encouragement keep me f u e l l e d. I love you all so much and I hope you're all enjoying the story <3

The tunnels are just as winding and claustrophobic as the rest of the city. Instead of the rotting wood and ramshackle corners of the smuggler extensions, however, the prison tunnels proper are bricked with stone and iron gates, cells upon cells stretching in confusing, twisted rows. The more well-travelled portions of the tunnels are quite populated; a market has sprung up in the broader southeast corner, closer to the water. People of all sorts travel the main corridors to make their way from one sector of the city to the other in an obvious bid to avoid the already lax lawkeepers of Val Chevin. Bull's familiar with the sort of principle the city operates on: nearly anything is legal here, so long as one does not get caught.

According to Arvaariss, the southeast corner of the tunnels doesn't see a lot of traffic throughout the day. Too many dead ends and not enough upkeep - there've been a few collapses here, and the thought of being unexpectedly entomed is enough to keep most folks out of the crumbling walkways. Smugglers will brave the passage at night to sneak their goods into the tunnels that lead out of Val Chevin into the sturdy bedrock of the cliffs, meeting with ships well out of view of the city's harbormasters. But for now, the tunnels are nearly empty save a few shuffling urchins and plenty of spiders and rats.

It might as well be night for how dark it is down here. The prison tunnels, unlike the smugglers' cuts, had some kind of magic worked into the stone long ago to provide soft light that waxed and waned with the cycles of day and night, keeping the prisoners and their guards from constantly choking on torch and lamp smoke. The spells have long since faded, however. In the main tunnels various mages have tried to revive the spellwork with patchwork success. Here, in the outskirts, there is only a faint glow to light Bull's way, leaving Bull half-blind as he makes his way to the
ambush point.

He could, of course, use Dalish's crystal; but that would entirely defeat the purpose. The darkness is an advantage. Arvaariss is making his own way to the ambush point, leading Taasha to one of the tunnel's fatal dead ends. Bull will hide in the shadows of one of the surrounding cells, his eye adjusted to the dim light. A classic pincer move. Taasha is an efficiently brutal fighter, Bull knows, but there are few who could come out the better in a fight with a fully-trained Qunari reaver - never mind two.

Bull reaches the ambush point well in time, giving it a thorough search. The corridor used to loop back to the main causeways but caved in a month or two ago. The collapse has yet to show up on the current maps and charts, and the odds of Taasha casing this specific tunnel out of hundreds ahead of time are entirely remote.

There's a smaller tunnel entrance a little ways up from the collapse that Bull nearly misses in the dim light, but a few steps in and Bull sees the tunnel was bricked off some time ago. Still, the near-miss has Bull grinding his teeth. He wishes he had Mahanon's keen nocturnal vision - any false step, any stray detail could prove fatal.

Fatal for the wrong party, that is. Blood will be spilled either way.

Bull finds a cell across from that bricked-up side tunnel and settles back into the shadows to wait.

This sort of work - staking out a place hours in advance for a window of opportunity that may take ages to present itself... it's very Qunari, is what it is. Though it's far from Bull's defining personality trait, Bull was raised in a doctrine that reveres patience. He's seen it pay off in combat time and time again. Other forces might suffer the wandering minds of bored sentries; not Qunari.

Bull wonders - absently, traitorously - if this penchant for patience hasn't prevented his people from properly identifying lost causes when they see them. A victory a hundred years down the line is worth as much as a victory tomorrow if one sees oneself as a single drop of blood in an immortal, undying collective thought. The antaam up north feel the same emotions any person would when faced with loss and setbacks, but the idea of a resounding defeat is never even entertained. Victory in Seheron is seen as an eventuality. Victory in all of Thedas, a similar eventuality. Why stress about the hours, the days, even decades and centuries spent waiting, when the point is never individual loss and gain?

It's a philosophy Hissrad understood well. Bull... well, maybe he's getting older (a strange and unsettling thought for someone who fully expected to die young), but his mind does wander a bit from the serene silence of duty and patience. Not much. But a bit.

Of course his thoughts veer north as they tend to in the shadows. He should prepare himself for what he's about to do; seeing Taasha again for the first time in years, the first time since the day he lost everything - it's a pressure point, he knows it is, he knows it could fuck him right up. And he promises himself he'll meditate on it, get himself grounded before Arvaariss arrives with Taasha on his heels, but- fuck, he has time.

Instead, Bull lets his mind wander where it shouldn't. A little ways off the path.

Bull woke up this morning with Mahanon's arms wrapped tight around him, one of his skinny legs hooked over Bull's thigh like the elf was worried Bull would disappear sometime in the night. Bull smiled then and smiles now to think of it, but even if the urge to cling so tightly was an entirely unconscious one (as Mahanon claimed when he woke up some time later and realized what he was doing), Bull thinks he understands it. Bull poked gentle fun at Mahanon's death grip on him, even
as he fought a similar need to pull Mahanon close and wrap the bedsheets around them as if he could prevent the two of them from ever having to leave the bed again.

They spent the morning together poring over Bull's maps and charts, trading parchment back and forth and discussing various routes and rumours while Mahanon took careful notes. It all felt easy and natural, if Bull could ignore the little frown knit between Mahanon's brows, the way his sharp teeth worried at his bottom lip. Which, of course, Bull couldn't. But he was willing to let Mahanon take his time to form his thoughts.

Mahanon waited until Bull was gearing up and preparing himself to leave before he said, very quietly, "I could come with you."

Bull almost dropped his great axe. He should have expected this. But the flutter of panic at the thought was such that he couldn't think of a more diplomatic response than, "Sweet fuck, no."

"You'd have my eyes for the dark tunnels," Mahanon said, a desperate edge in his voice even as he spoke with steady practicality. "My magic would give you an advantage she wouldn't be expecting. I have enough notes that I can pass them along to Krem, so the Chargers could get on without my navigation. And you can trust me. Your- colleague, Arvaariss, he's here for Taasha. I'd be there for you."

Bull sighed, setting his axe aside. He turned to see Mahanon watching him with his pointed chin obstinately squared, his arms folded.

"Where was this big, confident sales pitch back in Bastion, that night I recruited you?" Bull said, reaching out to fix one of Mahanon's many stray curls. "And where is my quiet little Mouse?"

"My" is a dangerous word, and Bull kicks himself every time it slips out - because Mahanon isn't his, not really, not in any real sense. But Bull couldn't bring himself to regret it, watching Mahanon's eyes soften at the words. It wasn't a fair advantage, but Bull was willing to press it.

"Surely it couldn't hurt to have more swords on your side?" Mahanon said. "Even just one more?"

"Somehow I don't think Arvaariss would be too thrilled about a bas saarebas joining the hunt," Bull said.

Mahanon's eyes narrowed. "No disrespect, but I'm not sure I give a flying fuck what 'Arvaariss' thinks."

"'No disrespect?"

"Alright, some disrespect. But more with regards to him as a concept than a person. I'm sure he's..." Mahanon worked his jaw for a moment. "Pleasant."

Bull shrugged. "More pleasant than I expected."

"That isn't saying much, is it?"

"Nah, not really. But he seems like a decent guy."

Mahanon reached out and took Bull's hands in his, looking up at him with those large, anxious eyes, and that- if Bull wasn't playing entirely fair, neither was Mahanon, because Bull's come to find himself paralyzed by that look more than a few times, now. It makes him want to drop everything and fix things, fix anything that might be causing that worried crease in Mahanon's smooth brow, to see him smiling and laughing again. Damn elf.
"I'm not trying to make things difficult, I swear I'm not," Mahanon said. "And if I am, I'm sorry. But if there's any way, anything I could do so you have someone on your side down there-"

"I'll have another Ben Hassrath-"

"-you don't know him-"


What Bull could not say, of course, was that he'd much rather risk Arvaariss's life than Mahanon's. Far better to risk a stranger than his kadan.

Mahanon's eyes dropped and he nodded, but Bull could still see the wheels of Mahanon's sharp mind spinning away behind his eyes. He could only imagine the thoughts gathering there, like a bank of swirling clouds before a storm.

A kind of thrumming, quiet panic took Bull then, because this was exactly the sort of thing he was afraid of. Mahanon thinking a few steps ahead, acting unpredictably; one of Bull's favourite things about him that he's terrified will get the elf killed one day. Maybe even today.

So Bull took a breath and said, "Just in case I'm not making myself clear, you're staying with the Chargers today. That's an order, Mouse. Understand?"

Mahanon looked up sharply, lips parting. It shouldn't have felt as cruel as it did; Bull's given Mahanon plenty of orders since he joined the Chargers, just as he would any other recruit.

But... no, this was different. This was new. This was the first time he'd given Mahanon an order in their private space that Mahanon could not refuse. An order from a chief to a subordinate.

Mahanon's hands slipped from Bull's and he stepped back, dropping his head. "I understand, Chief."

Bull searched his face and could tell Mahanon meant it. He would follow Bull's orders, even if he didn't like it. Mahanon's voice wasn't cold, and he didn't appear to step away out of anger. He didn't even seem hurt, which somehow felt worse, because fuck knows he should have been.

Or maybe Mahanon had the right of it with his quiet acceptance. Bull was his Chief, and Mahanon was Bull's Charger, and it should have felt entirely natural to issue the command. Bull should have felt relieved, knowing he was keeping Mahanon out of harm's way.

But Mahanon's defeated acquiescence has been haunting Bull's every step since he left the elf standing there in his room, parting with a simple squeeze of Mahanon's shoulder. A gesture from a captain to his charge, no more. Bull couldn't say goodbye any other way after that. He drew the lines and knew he could not cross them. Fuck, even the idea of crossing them made him feel a bit sick.

It was the right thing to do. Bull's certain of that, no matter what angle he examines it from. As a Ben Hassrath, of course he couldn't let a wayward bas saarebas jeopardize the mission, no matter how clever and useful the bas saarebas might be. As Chief of his Chargers, he couldn't deprive his second-in-command of Mouse's skills. As Bull, he couldn't allow Mahanon to risk his life to protect him from his own past.

But it felt wrong. It still feels wrong.
They promised last night, didn't they? In so many words, they promised to really come clean with one another after this is all said and done. All Mahanon asked from Bull was for some idea of their future together, some reassurance, and all Bull could tell him was that he didn't know.

And he doesn't know. Between the complications of the Qun and the balance of responsibilities, the day-to-day necessity of treating Mahanon like any other Charger... the uncertainty gnaws at him. For once - here, in the present, doing what he's been trained his entire life to do, the shit he knows he's *good* at - he has no patience. His attention wanders, his concentration lapses, and as the hours pass all he fucking wants is to be back in bed with Mahanon, tangled so closely together that all the reasonable uncertainty in the world couldn't rip them from one another.

So Bull really isn't entirely as prepared as he should be when he hears approaching footsteps. Just one set at first, heavy and methodical. *Arvaariss.*

Even in the dim light, the Qunari reaver is an impressive sight to behold as he comes into view. The black-and-white patterns of his *vitaar* seem to glow in the darkness, giving his face the impression of a floating skull with those sharp crimson eyes glinting out from dark sockets. He's got his battle gear on, arm guards and shin guards of worn, dented steel, gauntlets with razor-sharp claws. Terrifying on the whole, and Bull almost grins. This is exactly the kind of soldier he would have killed to fight alongside up in Seheron, the kind of fighter he's always admired. Bull trusts in his rage, size, and skill to win a fight, but a smart killer knows that fear is as much a weapon as anything out of an armoury. This is honest fear - not the kind of cheap, sick terror the Tal Vashoth tried to cultivate with their random attacks on innocent targets, but the true terror one can instil in others by virtue of being the deadliest thing in the room.

*Arvaariss* doesn't glance around as he moves, doesn't search for Bull as he passes down the corridor of empty cells. Of course he doesn't. This was the trust that Bull tried to explain to Mahanon this morning. They don't have to know one another to know that the title of Ben Hassrath indicates a purpose, a shared goal. Trust is the true strength and sinew of the Qun.

Which is why the Tal Vashoth are so fucking dangerous. They corrupt the ground Qunari walk on. They disrupt the whole. The Tal Vashoth are a sickness, and Hissrad is determined not to let it spread.

Bull blinks. *Fuck, not here. Not right now.*

No- no, *yes* here, *yes* now. He *is* Hissrad, he's Ben Hassrath, he's *fucking* Qunari. He doesn't have to think or question beyond the here and now, beyond the demands of the Qun. It's a fucking relief, sinking into his old skin. To truly know himself and his purpose. He curls a lip, berating himself for his earlier distractions. What was he doing, letting his mind wander for hours and tangling himself up in knots over things that don't fucking matter? He never would have done that back in Seheron.

But... he did do that back in Seheron, at least a little bit. Didn't he? He wasn't a calculating agent of the Qun every minute and hour of the day. Sometimes, there were cards and drinks with Vasaad, trading stories with the *antaam*. Sometimes there were riddles and puzzles with Taasha, and when they ran out of the ones they knew they'd try to make some up, but Vasaad was always the best at crafting them. Sometimes there were afternoons spent with the children at the school-

Was Hissrad ever the man Bull thought he was?

He's so twisted up in thoughts of the north that he doesn't notice the approaching footsteps. Doesn't even blink as a tall, broad-shouldered qunari woman walks past his cell, slow and graceful like a drifting ghost. He knows those footsteps, knows the woman, it's just another day in the jungle and
"You think I do not know a trap when I see one, arvaarad?"

Bull goes still, time seems to still, and for a moment he is Hissrad and Bull and nothing but a shadow in a cell, trapped by memory.

"And yet you still came to answer for what you've done."

Arvaariss's voice brings Bull back to himself. He feels the fire of bubbling rage building within him, searing through his blood and turning his thoughts into blazing white heat, and for once, thank fuck, he doesn't have to fight it. Just burn, just let it all fucking burn-

"For my mistake, yes," says Taasha.

Taasha, who saw what the Tal Vashoth did to that school, those children, and decided to become one anyway.

Taasha, who Hissrad allowed to leave without answering to the re-educators, dooming her to become a monster.

Taasha, who abandoned them, who was not there when Vasaad died in Hissrad's arms. Taasha, who killed Reth. Taasha, who Hissrad once thought— all Hissrad could think, at one time, was that they truly had so very much in common-

Then Bull is Hissrad and he is the Iron Bull, and either way he's standing in the hall, his great axe in his hands.

Even from the back, even from about a half dozen long strides away, Taasha looks older. Worn. Her head hangs a little lower, as though carrying a weight far heavier than the horns curved back over her ears. She used to keep her hair cropped short for battle and the jungle heat - now it reaches her shoulders, though it's braided tight against her skull. Gone is the proud Qunari armour, the shield with the colours and patterns of their people painted and carved and polished to a shine. It's all mercenary scrap work, battered clothes, armour, and weaponry.

Taasha, the very nightmarish picture of a Tal Vashoth.

She turns her head slowly, calm copper eyes finding Bull's. She doesn't look insane. But the sad look she regards him with is entirely maddening.

"Hissrad," she says, her voice low and soft. Just as it ever was. "I was hoping you would not come."

Bull snarls, his rage bursting as he lunges forward.

An explosion hits Bull hard from the right, sending him flying into the wall beside him with a crash; the walls around him groan and rumble ominously. Pain in combat becomes less about feeling hurt and more about sussing out damage, and a significant sharp stab in his right shoulder is nothing to him but an indication that he's been hit. He glances down at a jagged shard of rubble imbedded deep in his skin and lifts his head to see five mercenaries spilling out from that blocked side tunnel he scoped out earlier. Not fucking blocked anymore.

Five ragged mercs and a Seheron veteran, Tal Vashoth or not, might have been enough to take Arvaariss on his own. As it is, even with the two of them fighting the odds are far more even than Bull would prefer. But fuck if he's going to let a Tal Vashoth kill another one of his people in front
Bull hurtles forward, great axe swinging. A pincer attack won't work with this many combatants - better to fight side by side, cover one another’s blind sides. Far ahead of him Taasha is already engaged in combat with Arvaariss, weaving and dodging between his powerful swings as one of her mercs tries to swipe at him from behind. The rest of Taasha’s people converge on Bull.

Bull barrels through two of the mercs in his path easily, burying his axe in the first man's chest and carrying through the force of the blow to slam the merc's body into one of his comrades. The scent of blood and battle spurs him on, even as he’s hit hard from behind with a spiked mace that sinks itself between his shoulder blades. The blow would have easily killed a smaller man; as it is, it drives Bull to his knees.

He turns his fall into a roll and comes up swinging. The man with the mace is a big fucker, and the merc who Bull body-slammed with her dying friend has managed to get out from under the body with her teeth bared and murder in her eyes.

There’s one merc unaccounted for in all this; someone disappeared after bursting through the side tunnel. Bull keeps his axe moving as he steps back, working his way down the corridor towards Arvaariss and Taasha while keeping the two mercs from landing any more lucky hits. He spots an opening and stabs forward, catching the man with the mace in the ribs with the spike at the tip of the great axe. It’s a good solid hit, piercing right through the man's plate armour - not deep enough to kill, but enough to give the man something to think about.

But this leaves an opening on his blind side. The woman rolls under Bull’s guard and aims for an armpit strike, clearly hoping to bury her long dagger into Bull's chest through the vulnerable flesh. Bull twists away in time, but catches a long, deep slash under his arm. He bites back a curse. The blade is definitely poisoned. It won't kill him, not with all the antidotes swimming in his system right now, but it'll take a while for the wound to properly heal. The mercs might look shabby, but they clearly know what they're doing.

He keeps his axe buried in the man with the mace to push him out of range, switching to a one-handed grip so he can backhand the dagger-wielding woman hard in the side of the head. She stumble back, blood pouring over her face from a split in her temple.

Bull yanks his great axe back, twisting to bring it down on the woman while she's off-balance, when he's suddenly forced to the ground by an invisible weight as if the sky itself just fell on his head. He struggles to stay on his knees, every limb feeling as heavy as a mountain, barely able to breathe under the crushing pressure. With a growl, he forces his eyelid open enough to see the elusive fifth mercenary standing well back from the scrum, staff outstretched. *A fucking mage.*

The woman stabs in with her knives, unsteady on her feet but determined. Bull catches the blades on his shoulder guards, gritting his teeth against the pain of the force magic weighing him down. He's not as lucky with the mace, which smashes into his collarbone. The spikes bite deep, and he's pretty sure he feels something snap.

Suddenly the mage screams and the pressure abruptly disappears. Bull sucks in air and surges to his feet, swinging his axe in a long arc that knocks the mace-wielder and the dagger rogue back from him. The space affords him enough time to look to the mage, who lies crumpled on the ground, struggling against some unseen pain and terror. It looks like magic, and for a horrifying moment Bull looks around wildly, half-expecting to see Mahanon somewhere close, too close, disobeying his direct orders-

But instead, he sees Arvaariss - collapsed back against the wall, a merc lying dead at his feet,
Taasha picking herself up off the ground and gearing up for another attack a few steps away. Arvaariss’s crimson eyes are narrowed, fixed on the writhing mage, a single fingertip pressed to the silver token embedded in his chest. A token that's glowing lyrium blue.

There's no time to try to figure out what in the fuck that's all about. The mace-wielder and the rogue are collecting themselves for the next round. Bull takes advantage of the moment to stumble forward to Arvaariss's side. The other reaver has a nasty slash in his leg and there's blood in his teeth, but on the whole he seems to be in far better shape than Bull.

Bull hefts his axe up to guard as Taasha advances forward, blinking blood from her pale eyelashes from two long cuts over her brow - the work of Arvaariss's gauntlets, no doubt. Her knee looks bloody and mangled, and she's breathing hard. The rogue and mace-wielding warrior flank her sides, glancing at one another apprehensively.

Bull grinds his teeth. If Arvaariss can keep the mage down, Bull could probably take Taasha before the two mercs take him. There's a chance he might even survive it. Maybe.

Death has always been a present possibility. It's never really bothered Bull before. Hissrad would have been perfectly fine to die fighting side by side with his brothers and sisters in arms. Bull's no different, really, in this respect.

But when he thinks of dying in battle... it's Krem he imagines at his elbow, not Arvaariss. And he thinks of how he left Mahanon this morning, all hard lines and a single touch of his arm, nothing resolved between them.

Dying in service of ridding the world of a Tal Vashoth that he himself set loose would be a fitting end to Hissrad's life. But Bull? Is this how the Iron Bull would die, surrounded by strangers and murdered by the shell of a friend from another life?

Doubt creeps in, and Bull shivers to cast it off. He's Ben Hassrath. He's Qunari.

"Hissrad," Taasha says, her low voice laced with pain as she brings her shield up to guard. "I will find some way to share with Vasaad how formidably you fought today."

The name pierces through Bull's uncertainty like a dagger to the heart, and he barks a harsh laugh.

"Vasaad is dead," Bull says flatly. "But sure, tell him anything you'd like when you see him, basra."

Taasha's copper eyes flare, brow crumpling. Bull moves quickly to take advantage of the distraction but Arvaariss is faster still, lunging forward to run Taasha through with his great sword.

She doubles around the blade in her midriff, the air punched out of her, her eyes still wide with shock and fixed on Bull's face as her features twist in pain. It's... qunari pain, the pain of a person, sorrow and agony and regret, and Bull pauses to see it. Just for a moment.

There's a swing of iron and Arvaariss falls, having taken the mace square in the head, leaving him lying prone and still - unconscious or dead, Bull can't be sure. The other merc is already moving, a dagger slashing towards Bull's throat, but Taasha raises a bloody hand to stop her, the other clutched tight over her wound.

Bull recovers from his momentary lapse and snarls, swinging his axe, but once again the weight of magic crushes him to the ground and he's in far too much pain, far too exhausted to fight it.
With Arvaariss down the mage seems to have recovered from whatever torment the Qunari reaver was inflicting upon them, though they look pale and shaken as they come to stand at Taasha's elbow. The magic holding Bull flickers, lifting briefly, losing potency as the mage struggles to keep the spell going. Bull takes advantage of this to pull himself over, shielding Arvaariss with his own bulk, lifting the axe into his hands and baring his teeth even as the magic presses on him.

The message is quite clear. They'll have to kill him before they can reach Arvaariss. Bull doesn't even care if all he's guarding now is a corpse.

"Temperance?" the woman with the daggers mutters, glancing up at Taasha. It takes Bull a moment to realize what she's saying.

'Temperance.' Is that Taasha's... name?

Taasha stares at Bull for a long moment, blood leaking from between her fingers, doubled over and panting. One of the mercs passes her a healing potion, and she uncorks it with her teeth, eyes still fixed on Bull as she tosses it back and tucks the empty bottle into her pouch.

It's such a strange fucking moment, but Bull can't help but smile a little at that, despite the red haze of his blood frenzy. Taasha always used to scold the antaam for tossing valuable glass vials away after drinking healing potions in the field. Apparently this... Tal Vashoth, "Temperance," never lost the habit.

"We retreat," Taasha says quietly.

The mercs stare at her, dumbfounded. "They're pinned down-"

"You'll get your pay either way," Taasha says, her tone cool. "We retreat. Binder, stay by my side as the others check the bodies. Hissrad will attack us the moment the spell is lifted."

Bull narrows his eye, hands clenched around the shaft of his axe. It's true - the blood rage is still pounding at his temples, frustrated by his inability to finish the fight. A reaver is by far at their most dangerous when injured. Taasha would know this well.

The mercs tend to their fallen comrades, trading grimaces and shaking heads. Nothing to salvage beyond some coin and a few personal effects.

"You will not hear me," Taasha says to Bull. "But I am not the monster Arvaariss has told you I am."


"Yes," Taasha says, pained and exhausted. "And he is Qunari, heart and soul."

Bull's eye falls to the long, thin sheath at Taasha's side. A Ben Hassrath's kata-kas.

"You shouldn't be carrying that," Bull finds himself saying. "You gave it up when you gave up your name."

Taasha glances down at the sheath. "Perhaps you're right," She looks at Bull, eyes level and calm. "I see you no longer wear yours, now that you have become the 'Iron Bull.'"

"I am not Tal Vashoth," Bull grits out. "I am not you."

"Only pretending, to satisfy the demands of the Qun," Taasha says, nodding slowly. "Another lie,
no doubt, to serve the people. But I asked you once, Hissrad, did I not? Who do we lie to first, before anyone else?"

The mercs return to Taasha's side, the woman with the daggers offering Taasha her shoulder to lean on. Taasha takes the offer with a grateful sigh - the healing potion slowed the bleeding, but a sword to the stomach is a hard thing to ignore.

"If you wish to serve the Qun to your last, then you are right where you should be, Hissrad," Taasha says. Her eyes slide to Arvaariss. "But if you have doubts, doubts of any kind, you should let me kill him now, or flee as far as the winds can take you from him."

"I am Qunari," Bull growls.

"Then you have nothing to fear," Taasha says, her voice dry. "In the meantime, I will find a way to make you hear me. If you are willing to listen, we will meet again."

She starts to walk away and pauses, her eyes dropping to the ground. "I'm... sorry, about Vasaad. It explains much. He died that day, didn't he?"

"Taking point," Bull says flatly.

"I see," Taasha says.

And then she and the mercs are stumbling away, back along the corridor and into the side tunnel. There's a distant rumble, and Bull knows the mage has caved in the path behind them.

The force spell lifts and Bull falls forward, struggling to catch his breath as the fury ebbs and the pain from his many injuries washes through him.

“T’m not you,” Bull says again, his voice echoing off the damp stone around him. I will never be you.

But Taasha… let him go. Let them both go. It doesn't make sense.

Of course it doesn’t. She’s Tal Vashoth now. Lost, completely lost.

Bull closes his eye, feeling the sick, crawling dread worming its way through his mind that accompanies his thoughts of the Tal Vashoth, his fear of madness. More than anything else, it’s terrifying how entirely sane Taasha seemed.

He pulls himself up with a groan and reaches into the pouch at his side, taking out a few healing potions. It’s the good shit, Stitches’ brew, but he’ll be damn lucky if it gets him on his feet and moving. Grimacing, Bull takes three vials one after another before quickly bandaging his arm. Only then does he finally turn to Arvaariss, still lying stiff at his side.

Bull doesn’t let himself think, doesn’t really let himself breathe too deeply until he presses his fingertips to Arvaariss’s neck and feels the Qunari’s pulse thudding against his fingers. Bull relaxes. The vitaar did its work, preventing the mace’s spikes from piercing Arvaariss’s skull. He’ll have some impressive scars, but he’ll live.

Bull searches through Arvaariss’s belt for his potions pouch, his fingertips briefly trailing over the kata-kas sheath at Arvaariss’s side. Taasha wasn’t entirely wrong; Bull stopped wearing his kata-kas the moment he left Seheron with his new identity forged and a new life ahead. He didn’t even take it with him to stow away somewhere as some sort of token of his past life. The Ben Hassrath have it stashed in their armoury, or it’s been given to another agent where it will see proper use. He
hasn’t really thought of it. In his mind, the *kata-kas* belonged to Hissrad, and he is no longer Hissrad but the Iron Bull.

He wonders, now, if he shouldn’t have kept it. Mahanon still carries that little chunk of wood he carved from his old staff, the one that was destroyed in his final act as First. Bull will catch him worrying at it sometimes, polishing it with wax resin again and again only to wear the polish down with his anxious rubbing. Maybe it reminds Mahanon of who he used to be, and why he chose a different path.

Maybe Bull could use a reminder of who he’s *supposed* to be.

Bull gives his head a shake and fishes out some healing potions from Arvaariss’s pouch. He forces Arvaariss upright, the Qunari’s head lolling onto his shoulder, rivulets of blood trickling over the skull-like *vitaar*.

“Don’t fucking choke,” Bull mutters, tipping the potions into Arvaariss’s slack mouth. He finds an elfroot poultice and applies it to Arvaariss’s head for good measure.

It takes a few minutes, but Arvaariss slowly comes around, twitching and stirring. He opens his eyes with a start.

“I’d take it easy if I was you,” Bull warns. “You took a pretty hard hit to the head.”

Arvaariss ignores him, sitting up ramrod straight and looking about. His lip curls, eyes flashing as he turns to Bull. “Where is she?”

“Retreated,” Bull says, letting his own head fall back against the wall behind him with a defeated *thud*. “Personally, I would have aimed a bit higher if I was going for a death blow. The heart was right there.”

“Vashedan,” Arvaariss snarls, smacking the ground at his side. “You let her go?”

“Hey,” Bull says, his eye narrowing. “I didn’t do shit aside from save your ass - you’re welcome, by the way. The mage got me when you conked out.” Bull frowns, that silver token in Arvaariss’s chest glinting at him in the dim light. It’s not glowing anymore, but up close Bull can see it for what it is: some kind of rune, lyrium laced through the metal like thin spiderwebs. “What is that, anyway?”

“An experiment that proved successful,” Arvaariss says obliquely. “She refused to kill you, then.”

“Yeah,” Bull says. He looks sidelong at Arvaariss, remembering the elf boy from the day before. The boy Arvaariss used as a shield. “You knew she wouldn’t kill me, didn’t you?”

“I suspected,” Arvaariss says with a cool shrug.

“Not such an ‘irresistible target’ then, huh?”

Arvaariss’s lips go thin, and he pushes himself up to his feet, offering Bull a hand. Bull takes it, careful to avoid the points of Arvaariss’s gauntlets as the other Qunari helps him stand.

“The mind of a Tal Vashoth is hard to predict,” Arvaariss says, walking over to the merc corpse nearest them and kicking it over with a disgusted look. “Their very nature is chaos. A *bas* is one thing; they struggle blindly for purpose, following whatever credence and truism is fed to them, never seeing beyond themselves. A *bas* is contained by their own self-interest, their own endless ignorance. But a Tal Vashoth has tasted true purpose. They once knew what it was to be part of a
Arvaariss wipes the blade of his great sword on the merc’s body before returning it to the sheath at his back, swaying for a moment to regain his balance with a prolonged wince. He opens his eyes, his crimson gaze finding Bull’s.

“Do you think she was showing personhood, in refusing to kill you?” Arvaariss asks, his voice soft. Bull says nothing. “If so, you’re correct. It was an act driven by the need to become a person again. Some Tal Vashoth cling desperately to such token efforts, to fleeting moments of connection. It is but a step on the path to oblivion. It is denial. A real person would know that duty to the Qun exceeds all other instincts.”

Arvaariss walks over to the other corpse, giving the body a cursory search as he continues. “Connection is in the Qun. Anything real and true lies in knowing one’s purpose, and our purpose is to live by the Qun. Once a Tal Vashoth truly comes to recognize this, they turn from their efforts to regain a sense of personhood and focus instead on finding purpose again, only to finally know that there is none for them outside the truths they have long since betrayed.”

Arvaariss pulls out a small vial of healing potion from the corpse’s pocket, giving the contents a quick sniff before swallowing it down. He tosses the empty vial away, fixing Bull with a hard look as the glass clinks and shatters against the stone.

“Valuing individual people above purpose is the blade that has severed so many Qunari from their place in the Qun,” Arvaariss says softly. “It is a trap, a seductive lie. Not every Tal Vashoth starts as the raving monsters you and I fought in Seheron. Often they are bred of those who care a little too deeply. Who forget that mercy is nothing if it does not serve a higher purpose.”

Arvaariss moves forward, step after step until his bloodied skull-like face is barely a foot from Bull’s. “This is twice now that the Tal Vashoth that was once Taasha has escaped you, Hissrad,” Arvaariss says softly. “Or is it the will of the ‘Iron Bull’ to show mercy without purpose?”

Bull lifts his chin, meeting Arvaariss’s eyes with a steady glare. “The moment I thought I was no longer fit to serve the Qun, I turned myself over to the re-educators.”

“And you would do it again?”

“In a fucking heartbeat.”

“But what would your Chargers do without their Chief?” Arvaariss says, his tone mockingly sympathetic. “What of your little Mouse?”

“I don’t see how irrelevant questions serve the Qun,” Bull says coolly.

Arvaariss’s eyes flicker.

“I will help you back to your inn and see to your injuries,” Arvaariss says, turning away. Bull is about to argue that he doesn’t need any fucking help, thank you, but even as he draws in a breath to say this he’s hit with a wave of nausea from the blood loss and bites back a grimace instead. “We will have to regroup.”

“You said she was working alone,” Bull says, falling in step with Arvaariss and trying hard not to limp. As prickly as things are between them, he lets Arvaariss take some of his weight as the other Ben Hassrath agent puts an arm around his waist to support him. That trust, again - trusting in the
purpose, not the individual. Arvaariss might be a zealot, but Bull can’t deny the truth of his words.

“I thought she was,” Arvaariss says. “That was… my mistake. My information was wrong. No doubt fed to my network by her own paid bas.”

“By ‘network’ you mean those kids,” Bull says. He’s a little too tired, in a little too much pain to keep the disdain from his voice.

“Yes,” says Arvaariss simply. Unapologetically.

_Fucker_.

“She said she was going to try to make me ‘hear her,’” Bull says.

“Are you so eager to listen?” Arvaariss asks flatly.

“I’m ‘eager’ to get her alone and I think she’s gonna give us an opening,” Bull says sharply. “If she’s looking to speak with me we can catch her off her guard. Does that work for you, or are you done thinking every passing shadow is a fucking Tal Vashoth?”

They turn a corner and the walls spin, causing Bull to stumble with a stifled curse. Yeah, he’s pretty fucked, and there’s a good chance Stitches won’t be back until well after midnight. _Damn it._

“Forgive me,” Arvaariss says quietly.

“Not your fault,” Bull mutters.

“You misunderstand me,” Arvaariss says. “Your record speaks for itself, Hissrad. I should not doubt you.”

Bull glances at Arvaariss. The guy seems sincere enough. “Well, I don’t think I can fault you for that either. You are Arvaariss.”

“‘To call a thing by its name is to know its reason in the world,’” Arvaariss recites.

“‘To call a thing falsely is to put out one’s eyes,’” Bull finishes.

Arvaariss smiles. “Perhaps when this is done I will recommend that the Ben Hassrath call you back to more active service so you might cast aside this ‘Iron Bull’ and become Hissrad once more.” Arvaariss looks at Bull sidelong. “To save your remaining eye, if nothing else.”

“Bad joke,” Bull grumbles.

“Well, I am an Arvaariss, not a jester,” Arvaariss says. “But I’m sincere. Perhaps it’s time you fought alongside real people again, not these dimwitted bas.”

The part of Bull that is Hissrad feels a wash of relief at the thought. It would be so much easier, so much safer, to be just one whole person again. To sink into that cool sea of submission and obedience.

The part of Bull that is _Bull_ wants to tell Arvaariss that his _bas_ are some of the smartest fucking people he’s ever met.

“Whatever best serves the Qun,” is all Bull says aloud.

-
Despite his shy and occasionally nervous disposition, there isn't much in this world that Mahanon finds truly frightening.

The northeast tunnels under Val Chevin seem absolutely designed to test one's nerves, however: from their twisting and crumbling corridors, dark shadowy cells, and wandering shades and ghouls.

Mahanon isn't too bothered by the creatures, and he can see perfectly fine in the dim light. While the ripples of dark magic aren't exactly pleasant to experience, it doesn't stir as much fear within him as some of the other Chargers. In fact, the most startling part of the night so far occurs when he accidentally sneaks up on Rocky and nearly takes a cudgel straight to the face.

"Not my fault his big-ass eyes fuckin' glow in the dark, shit's terrifying," Rocky moans as Krem reams him out for nearly killing one of his men. Mahanon just grins, having to stifle his snickers with a hand over his mouth. "Creepy shit in a creepy place, it was reflexive, I swear!"

The argument is interrupted by a few shrieking skeletons bursting out of the nearby cells, though Rocky does give Mahanon an apologetic pat on the arm once all is said and done.

In truth Mahanon has been far too distracted by thoughts of Bull to find the tunnels frightening. It's pathetic - truly pathetic, honestly, but not even ghosts, corpses, and the particularly aggressive revenant they're fighting right now does much to capture Mahanon's focus. He's worried.

Worried, and... a bit irritated. Maybe a little angry, and he has no right to feel any of these things, not really. He knew what he was signing up for when he became a Charger. He knew that there would be lines to contend with when he started bedding Bull. He knew, he absolutely knew.

Knowing, of course, is worlds away from experiencing it. And it's not fair, it's really not, to expect Bull to let him in, let him help. The fog, the forest, the progress they seemed to make on the way here; perhaps that was all just a fluke, a momentary lapse on Bull's part. Perhaps Dalish was reading far too much into things when she told Mahanon that Bull loved him, or perhaps Bull's definition of "love" is far different from Mahanon's, and perhaps Bull is fine with this back and forth, content to treat Mahanon as equal then lesser and back again, perfectly happy to order Mahanon to stay behind - fuck, to order Mahanon to follow orders-

It's at about this juncture in Mahanon's spiralling train of thought that the revenant hooks its chain around Mahanon's ankle, yanks him forward, and hits him hard across the face with a gauntleted hand, knocking Mahanon clean out.

Mahanon comes to with a groan, the taste of healing potion mingling with coppery blood in his mouth as Stitch and Krem loom over him.

"Full name and current location," Stitches says, pulling Dalish's crystal out of his pack. Mahanon eyes it warily.

"Mouse, previously Mahanon Lavellan, Sliabh before that, we're in Val Chevin - no don't-!"

Mahanon gives a strangled yelp as Stitches activates Dalish's crystal, the light stabbing into Mahanon's sensitive eyes like daggers. "Mythal'enaste, fucking- how the fuck is blinding me going to help, damn it?!"

"Bit grouchy, but otherwise fine," Stitches says unsympathetically, stowing Dalish's crystal. He presses another healing potion into Mahanon's hand as Mahanon blinks rapidly to clear the massive spots from his vision. "Get that down. Let me know if you start feeling sick."
"Thanks ever so," Mahanon mutters sourly, tossing back the potion with a groan.

Krem helps him to his feet, giving him a pat on the shoulder. "Look sharp, Mouse. I don't want to lose anyone down here on a throwaway job, yeah?"

Mahanon nods, his sore and watering eyes dropping to his feet as any lingering irritation gives way to shame. It's not an admonishment, not really, but it should be. Letting his mind wander, letting his emotions take hold of him... the Chargers are far more forgiving of this than the Lavellans ever were, but even so. He's not just putting himself at risk with his distracted thoughts.

He lifts his head, still struggling to regain his dim light vision, and of course Dalish is watching him with an all-too-knowing look. Mahanon purses his lips and carries on after Krem, praying for another revenant to strike and save him from awkward conversation, but Dalish is at his elbow in an instant.

"Everything alright, da'len?" Dalish asks in their language, her voice low. "Is someone being a bastard?"

Mahanon presses his palm to his face, a little startled to feel that his cheek is wet. He's honestly relieved when his hand comes away with dark splotches of blood instead of... well, it would be just like him to start getting all teary-eyed and moody about troubles of the heart while everyone else is just trying not to get chewed up by skeletons. "Not really. I just- said some stupid shit earlier, that's all."

"Stupid shit" such as, "Take me with you."

Such as, "I'm here for you."

Such as, "What would that look like for us?" As if there is an "us." Isn't there?

Dalish is looking at Mahanon wryly, a bit dubious and sideways, and in a sudden heartsick flash Mahanon finds himself missing Alaine. Dalish reminds him of her sometimes, though she seems to see Mahanon more as a younger brother or even a strange, misplaced nephew than a cousin, a best friend. What would no-nonsense, whip-smart Alaine make of this mess?

Likely, she'd smack Mahanon up the side of the head with the flat of her practice sword for getting himself into it in the first place.

There was one miserable night after a terribly awkward confrontation with one of the other clan members - Mahanon can't even recall what the crux of the conflict was now, it was so long ago - when Alaine came to find him hiding behind the Keeper's aravel, arms tight around his knees and curled up as small as he could make himself so the aravel wheel could block him from view. Mahanon wishes with keen retroactive embarrassment that he'd learned to stop literally hiding from things at an earlier age. A child might be forgiven for seeking out dark shadows and tucking oneself away up in the boughs of trees or behind large rocks, but at fifteen summers Mahanon was far too old for such things, and Alaine was entirely comfortable telling him so.

"You know what your problem is, Hanny?" Alaine said, taking a seat on the ground beside him. That was always Alaine's way; pointing out when Mahanon was being shy and strange, but joining him in the strangeness regardless.

"I'm an idiot," Mahanon muttered.

She nudged him - well, shoved him, but Alaine's affection was always a shade or two closer to violence than most people's. "You're not, and you know you're not. Your problem is you know
exactly how badly something is going to go for you, beginning to end, but you go and let it happen anyway on the single off-chance it somehow all turns out alright." Mahanon buried his face in his knees, and Alaine put an arm around his shoulders. "Then you get all miserable and heartbroken like this when that miracle doesn't come through. It's no way to live, lethallin."

There isn't much Mahanon truly misses from his time with the Lavellans, but Alaine... he misses her every day. Even if he knows that if she could see him right now, she'd fully ream him out for even pretending to be surprised by his own sore feelings. She would happily point out every shy and strange step he took along the way to this conclusion.

And then she'd sit with him, and she'd share in the strangeness. And he would still feel like an idiot, but it would be better somehow, having her acceptance.

"It's fine," Mahanon says, fixing his eyes forward and ignoring Dalish's raised brow. "Anyway. Skeletons, yeah?"

"Skeletons," Dalish sighs.

As if summoned, a dry rattle and a gasping shriek echoes through the tunnel as bony, decaying hands burst up from the ground ahead of them. Mahanon lights up with magic, letting lightning crackle over his skin and along the length of the staff, finally allowing himself to be properly distracted.

They don't make it back to the inn until the early hours of the morning, the common room reduced to a sleepy buzz as drunken night owls mingle with hungover early risers. Grim and Rocky grab a table for some late dinner and drinks, but Skinner, Dalish, and Stitches immediately part from the group to find their beds. Mahanon fully intends to join them, but he pauses for a moment by the stairs as Krem approaches the sleepy innkeeper at the bar.

"You didn't happen to see a big Qunari bloke wander through here earlier, did you?" Krem asks in a hushed undertone. Even Mahanon's sharp ears can barely pick up his words.

The innkeeper yawns, not bothering to cover his mouth as he reveals jagged rows of yellowing teeth. "Not s'posed to discuss the other patrons, ser. But as a matter of fact, I did see 'im come in - two of 'em, actually. Looked like they'd come off a rough job. I thought about calling a healer in, but you know. Not sure any healers 'round here would know what to do with a couple of oxmen, yeah?"

Mahanon feels a terrible chill at that, frozen in place as his instinct to sprint to Bull's side wars with his need for more information. Krem seems to be in the midst of a similar inner battle himself, working his jaw as he asks, "When was that?"

"I told you, it's not professional to be discussing-" Krem shoves a few coppers across the bar with a pronounced scowl. The innkeeper grins and scoops the coins up. "Hours ago, now. My guess is they're well asleep, and you'd best believe I'll be charging them double for the room in the morning. Can't just drag in another whole-and-a-half person to share the night without paying, no matter how big 'n bloody you are."

Krem gives the innkeeper a sarcastic little salute and steps away, his eyes meeting Mahanon's.

"I'm sure the big idiot's fine," Krem says softly, walking past Mahanon to the stairs. Mahanon follows after him. "If he was really fucked he wouldn't have been able to make it back here. Bit hard to toss the Chief over one's shoulder and lug him around, you know?" Krem frowns. "Sounds like his, uh, friend is looking after him, anyway."
"Has Bull ever brought his work home before, so to speak?" Mahanon asks.

"Once or twice," Krem says. "Never met another one of his type before, though. I mean, I've met Qunari, but not..."

Mahanon nods his understanding. Another Ben Hassrath.

They reach the landing, and Krem gives Mahanon a brief pat on the back.

"First thing tomorrow, we'll check in on him," Krem says. He grins. "You can tell the Chief how he missed you getting bitchslapped into oblivion by a revenant."

Mahanon groans, his temple throbbing. "I'm sure there are better stories we can share."

"Like Rocky thinking you were a terrible ghostie and trying to take your head off?"

"Yes, well."

Krem smirks. "Night, Mouse."

Mahanon watches Krem walk away before turning and making his way down the hall to his room.

Mahanon pauses on the threshold of his chamber, glancing down the corridor towards Bull's. The dark hall is quiet and empty now, the sounds of the common room little more than a distant murmur, every creak of a floorboard beneath Mahanon's bare feet obnoxiously loud.

It's almost physically painful, knowing Bull is hurt but not knowing the extent of his injuries. Knowing that he's mostly fine, probably. That someone else has been looking after him, probably. Having to trust all this without seeing it for himself.

Two things stop Mahanon from rushing to Bull's side. The first being that if this "Arvaariss" is in Bull's room, Mahanon bursting in at such a late hour could... complicate things, to say the least.

The second reason is a practical one: Mahanon doesn't have a fucking key.

He tips his head forward to knock against his door with a defeated huff, forgetting the bruises from the revenant's smack. He mutters a curse as pain shoots through his brow and pulls out his own room key. Bull will just have to wait, and Mahanon will have to find some calm, some trust, some patience.

He's short on a few of those virtues right now.

All thoughts of Bull and the general grumbles of the evening are abruptly banished from Mahanon's mind the moment he steps into his room.

The room is silenced. Muffled, the way a basic sound containment spell silences a room, making Mahanon's ears flick back in irritation at the sensation. This is the first thing Mahanon notices, but it's not what gives him pause.

There's someone in his room.

Mahanon is rarely truly frightened, and in truth, it's not exactly fear that he feels now. But there's an instinctive pull to either flee or start throwing lightning at the enormous Qunari sitting, calm as you please, in a chair by the window. It could be the crimson eyes fixed on Mahanon with cool disinterest, or the jagged horns arcing back high over the Qunari's head. It could be that the man's face is bloodied and painted like a giant skull. It could even be the great sword laying over the
Qunari's lap, which he was obviously in the midst of cleaning and oiling, judging by the fresh sheen along the blade.

But Mahanon's seen this sort of thing before - maybe not quite so unexpectedly, but he's met warriors and killers of all kinds by now. There's something more, here. Something that makes it hard to contain the sparks trickling through his hair and over his skin.

The Qunari narrows his eyes at that, scarlet irises flicking to follow the magic dripping from Mahanon with obvious disgust. Which, of course, would make sense, if this is the man Mahanon suspects he is.

There's a wink of lyrium blue in the moonlight that catches Mahanon's eye - a token sitting on the small side table at the Qunari's elbow. A rune of some kind, no doubt, which would explain the silencing charm on the room. If Mahanon isn't mistaken, there's a similar token resting on Arvaariss's chest.

Mahanon blinks. No, not on. The token is set in his chest, imbedded in the Qunari's very skin.

The silence has gone on far too long already, and Mahanon suspects the Qunari is examining him as much as Mahanon is examining the Qunari. Mahanon should get out of here - he can't possibly see how this might end well for him. He can hear Alaine's voice at the back of his head telling him to stop being such an idiot, to move, to leave.

But leave and... do what, exactly? This is Bull's world, not his. He can't very well retreat to the common room with his tail between his legs and pretend there isn't a massive Qunari warrior happily taking up residence in his sleeping quarters. Going to Bull for help feels - well, foolish. Maybe even weak. Maybe Bull knows this is happening anyway, maybe...

Mahanon hasn't felt that awful, cold sense of loneliness too often since joining the Chargers. But he has no real sense of what he's supposed to do with this, and can't really think of anyone who might have answers for him that wouldn't come with a whole host of other complications.

So Mahanon closes the door behind him. With the silencing spell in place, the latch makes no noise as it clicks shut, but Mahanon feels it in a very visceral sense. "Who are you?"

The Qunari tilts his head. "You know who I am. If you didn't, you would have attacked me on sight or called for help."

Mahanon clenches his jaw.

Reluctant to take his eyes off the Qunari - Arvaariss, of course it's Arvaariss, there's no sense in pretending otherwise - Mahanon takes a few careful steps towards his bed. His saddlebags are tucked under the bed frame; he only has a single lyrium potion left in his side pouch, but there's more in-

Mahanon stops again, his gaze torn from Arvaariss despite himself. All of his belongings, every single one of them - potions, ledgers, pencils, clothing, washcloths, soaps, his books - are all carefully laid out on the mattress in neat piles. Every single one of them, obviously rifled through and thoroughly examined, not a single personal item left untouched.

Hours, the innkeeper said. Arvaariss could have been in here, looking through Mahanon's things, for hours.

Mahanon just stares at it all, then at Arvaariss, feeling sick. "Why are you here?"
"I had a question," Arvaariss says simply, taking something off the side table and holding it out to Mahanon. "And now, I have my answer."

Warily, Mahanon crosses the room, that sick feeling becoming far more pronounced as he sees what Arvaariss has. The key he left for Bull last night, wrapped in the note with his room number scrawled on it.

Arvaariss twitches his hand impatiently. Mahanon gingerly takes the key and the note from Arvaariss's palm, quickly tucking them into his pocket as if hiding something shameful.

"Is he alright?" Mahanon asks despite himself, the question sort of bursting out from him without any real thought or care.

Arvaariss shrugs. "We had a hard fight today. He will need to rest."

Which doesn't really mean shit all, honestly, but Mahanon isn't about to start pressing this man. Even if all he wants to know, all he wants to ask, is if Arvaariss found the key, or- no, Bull would never have given it to him. He wouldn't.

Mahanon steps back, watching the Qunari. Arvaariss watches him, unmoving.

"Can I help you with something?" Mahanon asks flatly, his patience fraying. "Or might I have my room back, now?"

"Strange," Arvaariss says softly, as if to himself. As if Mahanon isn't there. "Strange, how the bas saarebas understand themselves in this world. Strange how it speaks like a person."

Mahanon feels his ears press flat back, the room starting to flicker with light as the sparks cascading over Mahanon become full threads of electricity weaving through his hair and arcing between his fingers. "Look, I don't know why you're here-

"But of course you do," Arvaariss says, standing. He's as tall as Bull, easily, but he carries his height differently. Mahanon's always thought of Bull's size as oddly comforting - sturdy and safe, only ever frightening in battle against others or in a sort of exhilarating sense when the two of them are alone.

Arvaariss towers over Mahanon with cold purpose, his chin lifted, looking down on him as if he's a particularly irritating insect. Something to be stepped on or over. Mahanon struggles to keep his own chin up in return, fighting the instinct to duck his head and look away from those cold red eyes.

"You know why I'm here," Arvaariss says, "because I suspect your 'Iron Bull' has told you who and what I am. I know that you know who we are and what we are meant to do. I'm certain you are aware that part of my duty to the Qun is to identify and hunt Tal Vashoth wherever I find them."

Mahanon opens his mouth to argue that Bull isn't Tal Vashoth, he's not, but stops. Everything he says, any wrong word could be used as a weapon against Bull.

The safest thing to say is nothing at all. Bull's told him that, time and time again. He's already said far too much by that metric.

Mahanon shuts his mouth.

"You are afraid for him," Arvaariss says. "I can see that. But what I do not know is whether you are
deluded, or he is." Arvaariss takes a step forward, lips curving into what on another person might have been a smile. "Tell me honestly. Do you think he loves you? It's clear you believe yourself to be 'in love' with him."

Mahanon doesn't say anything, focusing all his willpower on keeping his face neutral, terrified even to move in case his body language gives something up. Arvaariss smiles a little wider, takes another step forward.

"I'll admit, I was starting to have my own concerns about Hisrad," Arvaariss says, now entirely within Mahanon's space. "But seeing you... well. I am satisfied. You truly are nothing."

It's not a comment that should sting as much as it does - Mahanon's heard far worse from arguably saner people. But the cutting edge of it all is how Arvaariss says it; not maliciously. Not as though he's purposefully trying to injure Mahanon with his words.

He believes it. This man wholeheartedly believes that Mahanon is not a person.

"I see why it is called 'Mouse,'" Arvaariss says dryly, off of Mahanon's silence. "I thought Hisrad might have been trying to protect you. I've tried to get him to speak of you a few times now, and he has so very little to say. I thought he might have been trying to hide something. But he was right all along, wasn't he? There is nothing to hide, nothing to say about you. Just a misshapen weapon, a tool with very few uses." Arvaariss's lip curls. "I cannot understand why Hisrad would feel compelled to make use of you the way he does, but no matter. I have been too hard on him. It is only practical to take what is freely and conveniently offered."

Mahanon's cheeks burn with humiliation and he struggles to keep his face still. There is no helping his magic, though; the air crackles with static electricity now, the room filling with the metallic scent of ozone, and Mahanon knows full well if Arvaariss gets any closer he won't be able to contain the field of energy buzzing in his ears and throughout his body. Anyone else, Mahanon might warn to step back until he gets his emotions under control, lest they accidentally take a lightning bolt to the heart.

Mahanon isn't terribly concerned about Arvaariss's health right now. Nor is he convinced that the crimson-eyed Qunari has a heart.

"Nothing to say now, I see," Arvaariss says. "Disappointing. I thought there might have been something of interest to see in you, despite the unfortunate nature of your existence. I suppose I ought to have expected your fear of me to outweigh all else."

"I'm not fucking scared of you," Mahanon snaps, lightning sizzling in his palms.

"You are, and you are right to be," says Arvaariss, eyes flashing in the light of Mahanon's magic. "No one knows your kind better than I. The saarebas accept that they are nothing but conduits, nothing but weapons, a tool to be shaped and wielded. You bas saarebas act as little more than puppets for whatever might fill the hollowness within. Have you never wondered why bas saarebas become empty shells when severed from their magic? It is because you are nothing, and you will always be nothing."

"For a man with nothing useful to say, you certainly talk a lot," Mahanon says, clenching his fists. "You should go."

Arvaariss snorts. "Does it seek to protect me from what it cannot control? Truly, I am in no danger."
"I wouldn't test that theory," Mahanon says, his voice crackling with barely-contained magic, the storm within just about ready to burst.

Arvaariss smiles and lifts a hand to his chest.

Something deep, deep inside Mahanon twists, and he's suddenly crushed by white-hot ropes of searing, sick pain. He drops with a choked scream - can't help but scream, the sound is wrenched out of him entirely involuntarily. It feels like his bones are being liquified, his veins torn out of his skin and turned to binding chains, and he can't think, can't breath, bound up as tightly as he is.

The magic - his magic - no longer feels like a part of him. His body is rejecting it like a virus, trying to push it out, even as the magic clings tight to his core.

It's tearing him apart; physically, heart and soul, from whatever wellspring a mage's magic comes from, his body is somehow no longer able to tolerate the presence of magic. But magic is a part of him. Mahanon retches, the pain of the schism wracking through him, and he finds himself praying-Creators, praying for the pain to overwhelm him entirely, praying to pass out, maybe even die to escape it, even as he knows that whatever Arvaariss is doing to him- it's not fatal, it's not merciful enough to be fatal. He'll go mad from the agony long before his body gives up.

"Do you understand, now?" Arvaariss says, taking a knee at Mahanon's side. Mahanon seizes and writhes, his body entirely alien from him, moving and making sounds that he has absolutely no control over as tears of pain and horror stream down his face. "This would not happen to a real person. It reveals you for what you are - cursed. Empty. Nothing, save a vessel for this weapon you do not have the strength of spirit to comprehend."

"S-stop," Mahanon chokes out, and there's no room to even hate himself for begging this monster for his mercy. Pain and panic are the only instincts left to him.

Arvaariss reaches down to grasp Mahanon by the throat and all Mahanon can do is let him, entirely bound by his own magic.

"I read Hissrad's report on you," Arvaariss says, applying pressure slowly, his eyes glimmering in the darkness. "Dalish elf. Mage. Mahanon of Clan Lavellan. Quiet, easily manipulated, naive. Quite complimentary, for such a leftover scrap of a thing. Our agent asked him if he was emotionally compromised by you. He assured us that you were nothing, and he was right." Arvaariss squeezes tighter and Mahanon wheezes, the edges of his vision darkening as he starts to choke. "You understand, don't you? According to Hissrad's own words, he would kill you himself if the Qun demanded. You might notice he's not here right now to stop me."

Mahanon claws at the floorboards beneath him, desperately trying to fight the pain and bindings, desperately trying to block Arvaariss's poison from his mind. "Please-"

"If Hissrad were here, would he defend you from me?" Arvaariss asks, leaning in close, and Mahanon knows - knows Arvaariss could kill him, would do so without any second thought or sense of remorse, could snap his neck easily in his massive hand. "Would he step in to protect you? I want to know, truly, if you think that's something he would do. Does he value your life more than his duty to his people?"

Mahanon wants to scream yes, yes, of course Bull wouldn't let this happen- of course- if Bull were here, right now, he would- Creators, please, of course Bull would- Bull would-

"Answer me, basra," Arvaariss whispers, tightening his grip. "Answer me, and this will stop."
But he should say that Bull wouldn't, that Hissrad wouldn't, because Arvaariss would kill Bull, or hand him to the re-educators again, and it would be Mahanon's fault for ever getting involved, and- he can't put Bull through this pain, he can't- Bull is loyal to the Qun, but this isn't- this can't be what he wants-

"Answer me," Arvaariss snarls. Mahanon's vision goes entirely grey, his terror spiking as his consciousness starts to fade, and all he can think about- all he asked Bull, last night, was- what it might look like, some clue of what they mean to one another, what it would mean to be truly honest, and Bull- Bull said-

"I don't know," Mahanon cries, the words coming out as a wheezing choke- if he had any air in his lungs it would be a scream, but it feels like one anyway, ripped from somewhere real and painful deep inside. It's agony to say, hurts the way only truth can hurt. "I don't know, I don't- I don't-"

Arvaariss releases his throat and then finally, finally the pain and pressure dissipates. There's no relief in the release, though - his magic feels like an alien thing now, like some kind of foreign parasite crawling through his veins and settling back into his bones, leaving him feeling entirely sick and broken. Mahanon rolls onto his front, shuddering violently.

"Thank you," Arvaariss says. Pleasantly. "You have set my mind at ease."

Mahanon doesn't move, doesn't get up. He doesn't even watch as Arvaariss retrieves his sword and deactivates the silencing rune, only knows that Arvaariss has finally left the room by the creak of his footsteps, the groan of the door as it opens, the click as it latches shut.

Mahanon doesn't move for a very long time.

Slowly, still shaking, barely able to get his hands under him, Mahanon pushes himself up. He immediately doubles back over and retches hard. There's nothing on his stomach, but his body still seems determined to try to purge something from his system, anything to get that sickly, crawling feeling out of his skin and bones.

But that sickly, crawling feeling is his own magic. There's no getting rid of it. No relief in sight.

And even if he could, as Arvaariss pointed out, as his own Da once told him... there would be nothing left of him. Somehow, the Qunari has made this most basic, fundamental part of Mahanon feel vile and disgusting.

All Mahanon can think is how badly he needs Bull right now. Bull, who can hold him close and calm his mind. Bull, who has seen so many parts of him and always meets every twist and new strange thought with a smile.

Simultaneously and in equal measure, all Mahanon can think right now is how he can't ever face Bull again. Can't look at him, can't stand to think of him. Something got corrupted there too, somehow.

Mahanon lifts his head, seeing his entire life, all the contents of it as it is right now spread across his bed. Arvaariss flayed him open and decided there was nothing to see within. Cracked open his ribs, found all his doubt and fear, and shoved it in his face. Mahanon could not stop him.

Mahanon knows that Bull would have at least tried to stop Arvaariss, if he'd been here. Mahanon has to believe that, has to cling to it with everything he has, because otherwise-

But maybe Hissrad wouldn't have. Maybe Hissrad would have seen all this, watched Mahanon scream and twist on the ground like a worm on a hook, and done nothing.
No, truly, there isn't very much in this world that Mahanon finds frightening. And he is far too old to hide.

Even so, Mahanon pulls a blanket down from the folded pile at the end of the mattress and crawls under the bed, curling up in the dust and filth in the farthest, darkest corner of the floor.

There in that tiny space, hidden from the rest of the room, Mahanon wraps himself tight in the blanket and shakes, far too terrified to sleep.
hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha. hahahahahaha. part three is fun, right kids??

Song rec: "Lost" by KT Tunstall

Playlist here.

Another rough one. Honestly, we can just anticipate Rough Stuff for, like, a bit.

Thank you so so SO much to everyone who is commenting and supporting the fic, you are all fucking wonderful humans and you honestly are absolutely making this fic exist. I love y'all as much as we all hate Arvaariss, which is to say, hopefully: A Lot.

Bull doesn't wake with the dawn.

He tries to, really gives it a good effort, but his body screams at him to stay down. So he does.

It's a few hours later when a pounding at the door finally gets Bull up. Groaning, Bull forces himself to move, swinging his aching bad leg off the mattress first to try to counterbalance the rest of him as he pushes himself up to sit.

Everything fucking hurts. Every last fucking thing. If he had to pick the most distracting pain, it'd probably be his broken collarbone, but it's a close tie with his whole fucking body.

He puts a hand to his face with a grimace, squinting at his room. He has very vague memories of Arvaariss helping him hobble to bed, stitching up the gash under his arm and tending to the mace strikes, but it's all pretty fuzzy. He snorts a little to see that Arvaariss left a few things on the bedside table for him; cup of water, a few healing potions and painkillers, and even a bruised apple.

Of course, there's also a note bearing a time and an address. This will not be a restful day.

Bull frowns. That apple. If he's not entirely fucking insane, that's the same apple he had tucked in his saddlebags when they rode in. He completely forgot about it. Arvaariss must have searched through his things while Bull was conked out on healing potions.

Well, it shouldn't be surprising. Knowledge is a weapon, and Arvaariss is definitely a guy who appreciates having a full arsenal. For all the other Ben Hassrath went on about trust and apologies yesterday, it clearly didn't take.

Bull rolls his eye. It's annoying, but there isn't anything he can think of among his possessions that Arvaariss or the Qun would object to. Even his bag of very personal items wouldn't warrant much
Something tickles at the back of Bull's mind, like he's forgetting something important. Something risky. But another firm knock at the door quickly distracts him, and he puts the thought aside with a shake of his head. "Fuck, I'm up, I'm not dead."

Bull hauls himself over to the door and opens it, finding Krem on the other side.

"Shit," Krem says, brows spiking up towards his cropped hairline. "You look awful."

"Thanks," Bull grumbles, stepping aside to let Krem in. "Some folks dig the whole battle-roughened charm."

"Bit of a difference between a dashing scar and looking like you came off the worse in a battle with a rockslide," Krem says, taking a look around. "Has Stitches looked at you yet?"

"Nah," Bull says, easing himself down into a chair as Krem pulls up a stool. "Just woke up."

Krem frowns and opens his mouth, then quickly closes it, looking suddenly awkward.

Bull narrows his eye. "Something you'd like to share with the class, Krem?"

"No, just-" Krem adopts a far too casual expression. "So... Mouse didn't come to see you this morning?"

"Why?"

"He left the inn pretty early," Krem says, scratching at his head. "He wasn't alone, don't you worry. Everyone's on a strict buddy system. He went out to the market with Dalish and Skinner, I think. I just thought... he was pretty worried about you last night. Innkeeper said you looked a bit rough." Krem eyes Bull. "Understatement, clearly."

"Maybe he knocked at the door and I just slept through it," Bull says, trying for a shrug.

Krem raises a brow. "You really think Mouse - Mouse - knocked on a door with an injured man behind it and just shrugged shoulders when no one answered? Mouse, who once wept real tears because he thought Rocky'd kicked it after the dwarf went too hard on your shite Qunari liquor and fell asleep for fourteen hours?"

"In Mouse's defence, I think the weeping was more because of his own hangover than because he thought Rocky was really dead," says Bull. "But I take your point. Did he seem... alright?"

"Hard to tell," Krem says. "His face got a bit messed up last night. Met the wrong end of a revenant's right hook."

Bull winces. "He's usually quicker on his feet than that."

"I think he was a bit distracted. You know. Worried." Krem looks away. "He's not the only one, Chief."

Bull sighs. "I know."

"But it's over now, right?" Krem says, forcing a jovial tone. "Your - uh, business here, it's all wrapped up?"
Bull says nothing. Just looks at Krem and lets his second-in-command read the answer from his expression.

Krem's face falls, but he squares his jaw like the soldier he was, acknowledging Bull with a rough nod. "Well, alright then."

Bull grips his aching knee, wincing as this causes the muscles in his shoulder and back to pull and flex, his broken collarbone grating. Fuck knows he's not in fighting shape right now. Maybe ten years ago, without the build-up of a decade's worth of hard living and near-death experiences, he could bounce back and charge on through the pain like always.

He can fight like this. Technically. He's grit his teeth and borne more injury in combat than most people. But being able to fight, and being able to fight well, being able to win... different things, completely fucking different things. He can swing an axe if he has to, but dodging is a whole other matter.

If the world were any kind of fair and reasonable, Bull would get to spend the day in bed, as much as he fucking hates bedrest. Maybe he'd steal one of Mahanon's soppy books, or better yet, talk Mahanon into reading to him. Bull once tried to do that for Mahanon when the elf was sick, but couldn't take the subject matter seriously and earned a pillow to the face for his troubles.

*Why didn't Mahanon come to see him?*

Bull grinds his teeth. He's never needed anyone to watch over him before, to stay by his bedside and hold his hand. He doesn't need anyone taking care of him. Especially not Mahanon, who's already done far too much for him already.

But it would have been nice to see him, because... Taasha will find him. He's sure of that. There will be another fight, and Bull isn't sure it's a fight he'll get to see to the end.

"You're a good leader, Krem," Bull says. "Solid head on your shoulders, a good eye for the needs of the folks under you. If-"


Bull's lips quirk into a half-smile. "See? You're already giving orders."

"If you're trying to test whether or not I'm willing to punch a man while he's down, you're on the right track for finding out," Krem says, getting to his feet with a scowl. "The Chargers are at your disposal, whatever the fuck it is you're up to. If you get yourself killed, I'll let fucking Rocky deal with the funeral rites, see if I don't."

"An exploding funeral barge would definitely be a pretty fucking hilarious way to go," Bull muses.

Krem makes a disgusted noise and turns to leave. He stops, hesitates, and turns back, laying a hand on Bull's shoulder.

"I know they're your people," Krem says quietly. "But so are we, damn it."

Without another word, Krem walks out of the room, closing the door hard behind him.

Bull stares at the shut door for a long moment.

A sharp twinge in his shoulder shakes him out of his thoughts. With a low growl, Bull reaches over
to his bedside table and starts tossing back the healing potions and painkillers. He's not expecting the sheer power of one of the elfroot tinctures - definitely magic-infused. He can feel his broken collarbone knit itself together with a flash of white-hot pain. It's not healed, not entirely, and the mend feels as fragile as spun glass, but at least the bones won't be grinding up against one another with every step.

Bull picks up the apple and takes a bite, ignoring the unpleasant mealiness of the bruised parts as he looks around the room again. He doesn't even know why he's so nettled about Arvaariss rustling through his shit. Anything he has to hide is in his head and heart, not amongst his few possessions. If anything, Bull should feel a little vindicated. Maybe at last Arvaariss's suspicions will be laid to rest.

But the other Ben Hassrath is twisty the way all Ben Hassrath are twisty. Every agent has their own twisty flavour. Bull is open and honest and likeable; he cultivates trust and loyalty and only tells the kind of lies people want to believe. Taasha used to make people nervous with her long, thoughtful silences, leave them desperate to fill the air with chatter. Then she'd sift through all the words to find the exact right ones she was looking for.

Arvaariss... well, if Bull had to describe the Qunari, it'd be something like a noose. A bear trap. A field of gaatlok, buried beneath the ground, so you're never quite sure which step will lead to an explosion. Inspiring fear and endless nerves despite sounding like the most rational man you could ever hope to speak with. Bull can't help but admire the methodology.

Hopefully soon, he'll be able to admire it from a significant fucking distance.

"Watch it!" Dalish snaps at the giggling children running past, catching Mahanon's arm as he stumbles into her. It's about the third time they've been swarmed by the little miscreants: a herd of children of various races and ages who seem quite comfortable elbowing and stampeding their way through the busy market. "Little shits."

"Check your purses," Skinner warns, a hand on her belt. "That's how we used to scoop things from idiot shem who'd swan through the alienage."

Mahanon touches his coin purse, more reflexively than anything else. He still has his gold.

"You sure you're alright, da'len?" Dalish asks gently, putting a hand on his face. It takes everything in Mahanon not to shrink back from her touch. "You look a bit peaky. Didn't you get anything to eat before we left the inn?"

"Course I did," Mahanon lies brightly, his voice rough and strange to his own ears. "Just didn't sleep very well, that's all."

Dalish bites her lip. "Those bruises don't look any better than they did last night, you know. Maybe Stitches should take another look."

"You're mothering again," Skinner says, putting her arms around Dalish's waist and tugging her away as she winks at Mahanon over her shoulder. "Mouse's face looks just fine for a man who got knocked silly by a revenant, leave him be."

"I'm not mothering," Dalish scowls, rolling her eyes as Skinner kisses her temple.

Mahanon follows after them with a slight smile, carefully adjusting his scarf in case the children knocked it loose.
It would be nice if he could see Stitches. He's sure the healer would be able to give him a stronger healing potion to contend with his bruised and throbbing face, or something to settle his stomach. His body is still adjusting to the now-sickening presence of his own magic in his veins. It eases with every passing hour, but slowly. Far too slowly.

If he goes to Stitches for help, however, the healer might ask questions for which Mahanon has no answers. He might even notice Mahanon's bloodshot eyes and the deep bruising around his neck, bruises Mahanon can only barely cover with his scarf. What would Mahanon say? What could he say?

Mahanon winces as sunlight bounces off some sort of metal or glass in the market and shines into his sensitive eyes, ducking his head as his face gives a painful throb. It's far brighter today than such a strange and oppressive city has any right to be. Part of him wishes he'd just stayed in his room at the inn.

No; no, staying at the inn would have been far worse. If Mahanon had stayed, he might have had to face Bull, and he... can't. Not yet, anyway.

Dalish turns and shows Mahanon a pair of leather wrist guards, passing some comment on the craftsmanship while Skinner barters for some leather oils. Mahanon nods and feigns interest, his mouth forming words to reply to Dalish and reflect back some of her enthusiasm, and he truly has no idea what he's saying but she seems satisfied by his response as she turns away again.

Small, and weak, and nervous, and useless. Mahanon stews in his anxieties, far too tired and sick and pained to fend them off.

Mahanon could go to Bull, of course. Should go to him. Beyond the fact that they're friends, damn it, beyond how Mahanon feels about him, even at the most base level of their relationship, Bull is his Chief. Bull should know what his fellow Ben Hassrath has been up to. Mahanon could frame it as a professional duty, rather than what it feels like - an admission that Mahanon is too scared and weak to fend for himself. That Bull was right all along and Mahanon does need protecting from Bull's life and struggles because he's just not strong enough to measure up to the challenge.


Just like when Mahanon was left for dead on the mountain by those guardsmen and, honestly, his own people. Just like when the Chargers took him in, because he was too weak to make the long journey back to his clan and too much of a coward to face that life again. Just like when the Templars caught him unawares by Val Moraine, forcing Krem and Bull to have to come to his rescue. "Mouse" indeed.

It would be fucking awful, seeing Bull's face, knowing how heavily guilt weighs on the Qunari's shoulders when things go wrong. It would hurt him.

And that's if Mahanon is being optimistic.

Mahanon shuts his eyes as if he can shut out the darker thoughts, the more twisted and brutal doubts. It's like trying to shut out the sunlight - try as he might, the glare still shines bright against his eyelids, seeping in through the cracks.

Bull has asked time and time again if Mahanon trusts him, and Mahanon does. He trusts him so much and so deeply that the question itself feels absurd. It's Bull. Even from that first frightening moment when they met, once Bull started speaking to him in that open, calming way, Mahanon trusted him.
Mahanon placed his faith and trust, his heart, in a man who told him within the first week of knowing one another that the Qun had raised him to be a spy. Bull has taught Mahanon over the months how to manipulate, how to lie, how to wheedle one's way in and out of situations by preying on what people want to believe.

It would have been terribly easy, wouldn't it? Mahanon knows why he could never get away with anything as a child, knows why he loses every single game of Wicked Grace he's ever played. He can't hide his thoughts or feelings worth shit. How badly did he want to believe that Bull wanted him, that Bull cared for him, that Bull loved him? How long did he spend with his heart in his eyes? How easy would it have been for Bull to spin this little fantasy? To let Mahanon come to his own deluded conclusions?

We start by lying to ourselves, Bull told him once. He laid out every single aspect of how he does what he does, why his own people call him "Hissrad" - liar - and Mahanon wanted so very badly to believe that things were different between them anyway.

What kind of fool would put his heart and trust in a man like that? Who would give a man like that a key to his room?

If Mahanon went to Bull and showed him the marks around his neck, told him what Arvaariss did to him, would Bull pretend at guilt and remorse and rage, then go to Arvaariss with another face entirely? Would they laugh at how naive, how so very easy Mahanon is to, as Arvaariss put it, "make use of?"

Mahanon's eyes prickle with tears, and he blinks them back with half a silent snarl. Pathetic, all of this is pathetic, but most pathetic of all is this endless spiralling. Pathetic, to trail along after Skinner and Dalish like a sad little shadow with no real direction or plan, lost to self-pity and fear.

Pathetic, how much the damned sunlight is getting to him, the bright flashes and reflections stabbing into his eyes like knives.

It's not just the sunlight, though. The bruises along Mahanon's face give another unpleasant throb as a child's shriek nearby pierces his ears. The sounds and smells of the market start to feel overwhelming and heavy, and-

Mahanon stifles a groan. Well, of course.

Dalish glances back, frowning. Before she can ask, Mahanon taps the side of his head with an exasperated shrug, and she nods knowingly.

The Chargers all have their various aches and pains and worries; Grim gets debilitating joint pains that can lay him up for days if untreated. Skinner is prone to ear infections, and only Stitches and Dalish are allowed anywhere near her when she's sick with them. Rocky suffers gout from time to time and every once in a while Krem has to take a few days off to deal with his monthly cycle, which can make him incredibly ill.

Mahanon gets headaches. Bad ones. Mostly during the summer, when his sensitive eyes are exposed to far too much bright light. The Dalish had their own terms and treatments for it, but Stitches calls them "migraines." Between the herbal remedies Mahanon usually reaches for to fend off the ache and Stitches' tinctures, however, they haven't slowed him down much. In fact, he hasn't had a full episode in months.

Mahanon reaches into his pouch now for the satchel of herbs and medicines he keeps close for moments like this, grinding his teeth. The tinctures Stitches makes for him work so well
because they interact with his magic, using his own access to the Fade to heal his head. Mahanon has no idea how that will work now, with his magic the way it is-

Mahanon frowns. Digs a little deeper into his pouch.

His face gives another significant throb, pain and pressure starting to spread across his brow and around his eyes as he searches, fingertips closing on nothing.

"Fuck," he grits out.

"Da'len?"

Mahanon looks up at Skinner and Dalish, both watching him now.

"I must have left my herbs back at the inn," Mahanon says, voice tight with exasperation. "I'll have to nip back."

"We'll come with you," Dalish says. "Krem told us to stick together-"

"It's only a block or two," Mahanon says, feeling his eyes tighten as his vision starts to blur. He presses his palms to his eyes for a moment, grateful for the dark; when he opens them again, Dalish and Skinner are trading a look. "No, please - don't wait on me." He forces himself to smile, and it feels like his cheekbones are about to drop off his face from the ache of it. "I'd rather you two enjoy the market without worrying about me. Yeah?"

"Tall order," Skinner says, arching a brow. "Dalish lives to worry."

"I do not," Dalish says. She sighs, putting a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. "Alright. Maybe try to get some sleep? We have the day off, no one's expecting anything from us."

Mahanon puts a hand over hers with a nod. "Sure. A nap would be nice."

Dalish leans over and kisses his cheek, and the two women part from him.

It's a slow walk back through the market. Mahanon fights to maintain focus even as he starts to become dizzy and disoriented. Too much sound, too much light, too many people, and he can't even see clearly enough to avoid being bumped and jostled along the way. He struggles to keep his eyes open, a hand out in front of him like a stumbling drunk. One foot after another. Focus.

Mahanon pauses on the street corner, leaning against the grey brick of the building beside him, a palm pressed to his pounding head. It'll be a bad one if he doesn't do something about it soon; the sleepless night on the floor of his room has left him in no condition to fend it off. He's exhausted, he's nauseous, he's upset... Mythal'enaste, he really should have seen this coming.

Bull once hypothesized that Mahanon's nervous nature likely contributed to his headaches. He showed Mahanon, his large hands gentle on Mahanon's skin, how all the muscles along Mahanon's back and shoulders became tight and tense when he was worried, right up his spine to the nape of his neck.

Bull then proceeded to brutally massage all the tight muscles loose in what was easily one of the most painful evenings of Mahanon's life. As with so many things, the big Qunari was merciless with his hands and seemed to have very little pity for Mahanon's pained whimpers.

"The more we do this, the less it will hurt," Bull told him cheerfully, working his knuckles deep into Mahanon's sore shoulders as the elf hissed and squirmed and called him all sorts of terrible
names in the Sliabh dialect. "Yeah, get it all out, you can thank me later. Trust me, you'll have a lot less trouble with your head if we keep on top of it. It's all connected, you know."

Bull was right. Of course he was right. And as painful as it has been, Mahanon has never called "Katoh" or turned Bull away when he's brought out the massage oils with a sadistic gleam in his eye. Because Mahanon trusted Bull.

Mahanon waits for the wave of pain to pass, rubbing at his sore eyes. Then, gritting his teeth, he starts forward again.

The last time Mahanon was taken down by one of these headaches was back in fall. It took a great deal of convincing on Stitches part to keep Mahanon in bed for the day despite the pain. There was nothing to distract his mind in the dark room, nothing to keep his thoughts from spinning away from him - even reading hurt, and between the boredom and the anxiety Mahanon couldn't possibly relax.

But then Bull came in sometime during the afternoon; ostensibly, to bring Mahanon tea and see how his laid-up Charger was doing. But Bull didn't leave, even after the tea had long since run out. Bull covered Mahanon's eyes with a cool cloth and offered to read one of Mahanon's books out to him by the light of his glowing crystal. He only stopped when Mahanon started throwing pillows at him - the Qunari wouldn't stop mocking the flowery prose and kept giving the main characters funny voices.

So instead Bull joined him in bed and told Mahanon stories of various jobs the Chargers did over the years; stories of people he'd encountered up in Seheron; stories of life in Par Vollen. It turned out to be a good day after all. An amazing day, lying together in the dark. Just listening.

Mahanon sways on his feet as his vision goes dark for a moment, muttering another curse. He tells himself that the prickling of tears at his eyelids is just the pain and heaviness of the ache, nothing more, but...

Try as he might, as cynical as he should be, Mahanon can't reconcile that Iron Bull, his Iron Bull, with Arvaariss's taunts. What would have possibly been the motive for Bull to be so caring and kind? How long could someone lie and pretend? Surely there was nothing calculated about Bull's pain and need in the forest, how he'd opened himself to Mahanon, finally let him help.

Guilt slams into Mahanon like a physical force. Guilt for doubting, guilt for fleeing. Bull was injured last night, and Mahanon hadn't even checked in on him to see if he was alright.

But if Bull knew what Arvaariss did, it would put him in such a terrible position.

Mahanon growls in pain and frustration. \textit{Fuck}, fuck all of this, and fuck this ill-timed ache in head-

Mahanon turns the corner, shrinking back from the direct sunlight shining down on him. Only a few more steps to the inn, and he'll have his herbs in hand. He'll face it all head on and figure out what to do next. He won't hide or run away anymore.

It's as Mahanon is thinking this that he's bowled over again by someone he can barely see, just a vague blurry figure passing by, causing him to trip and stumble into the alley beside him. For a brief moment, he's almost grateful; the dark shadows of the narrow side street soothe the ache in his head, allowing his vision to clear ever so slightly.

Then someone grabs Mahanon's arm and yanks him through a door.
To anyone passing by, it would appear as though the stumbling, exhausted-looking Dalish elf simply vanished.

Another empty building of winding hallways, another child to guide Bull's way - a different one from before. Quieter, less curious, more fearful. Bull gives her plenty of space and tries as best as he can to be kind, though he's sure his battered appearance doesn't help much.

Arvaariss waits for him in a proper room this time, a few charts spread out before him on a low table. He doesn't even glance up; just shoos the girl away with an impatient hand and waits for the door to close behind her before speaking.

"I won't keep you long," Arvaariss says, gesturing to an empty stool across from him. Bull eases himself down, pain shooting through him with every movement. "We want you to be a visible target for Taasha's message. Initially I'd planned this to be a quick debrief of yesterday's encounter - however, we've had a stroke of luck."

"Could use one of those," Bull grunts, stretching out his bad leg. "Thanks for the apple, by the way."

Arvaariss's crimson eyes flick up, quickly scanning Bull's expression before returning to the charts. Whatever he was looking for in Bull's reaction, Bull has no fucking clue if he found it.

"I have reliable information that Taasha intends to flee town tonight," says Arvaariss, ignoring Bull's comment entirely. "She'll be taking a boat from one of the smuggler cuts through the cliff, here." Arvaariss points at one of the more complex tunnel charts. "Her mercenary crew will already be aboard a longship further out on the water. I do not know their heading, so this is our last chance to take her before she disappears."

Bull frowns. "Why the fuck would she retreat? She has the superior numbers."

"She was badly injured last night," Arvaariss says, shrugging. "She likely knows that she would not survive another encounter with us."

"She will if she hangs back and lets her mercenaries take us out," Bull says, gesturing at himself reluctantly. "Don't know if you noticed, but I nearly had my ass handed to me yesterday."

"Perhaps she believes we will employ your, ah, 'Chargers.'"

"Maybe we should," Bull says, nearly growling aloud in frustration as Arvaariss shakes his head.

"Unnecessary. As I said, according to my sources, she will be quite alone."

"Your 'sources' weren't too fucking reliable yesterday."

"They have since learned," Arvaariss says coldly. Bull feels his face twist despite himself, thinking of the quiet fear of the little girl who led him here. "I trust that the information is accurate."

"But it doesn't make any fucking sense," Bull snaps. Arvaariss arches a brow. "Maybe you have some kind of deep understanding of Tal Vashoth that I don't - fine. Good for you. But I was made Ben Hassrath because I understand people. If Taasha's killed so many of us and she has a good chance of doing it again, why the fuck would she run?"

"It's clear she fears facing you," Arvaariss says.
"She said she wants to talk to me," Bull says. "Doesn't sound too fearful to me."

"What is your point, exactly?"

"My point is, like I said before, if we can suss out her motives, we can figure out what she's planning," Bull says. "If it's a trap, then I think we should bring in some fucking backup. If it's not and she really does want to talk, then maybe I can convince her to turn herself in."

Arvaariss stares at Bull. "Turn herself in."

Bull sits back with a long exhale, scratching at one of his horns. It's something he's been turning over in his mind again and again since seeing Taasha again last night. The rage is still there, yes, that sick crawling disgust to see someone he once counted as a friend twisted so far from herself. But much of his reeducation was dedicated to putting thought before feeling, the Qun before the heart. He's supposed to channel his rage into purpose. It's what Vasaad would have wanted, after all.

"Taasha was one of the best of us, once," Bull says quietly. "You remember, don't you? You knew her, maybe better than I ever did. You said that Tal Vashoth get to a point where they need to find purpose again. If we can take her back to Par Vollen, or one of the re-educator compounds, they might be able to figure out what went wrong with her. Keep it from happening to anyone else, you know?"

"Have you forgotten that she has murdered other Ben Hassrath?" Arvaariss asks flatly.

"No," says Bull, though - fuck, it really is hard to imagine the Taasha he encountered last night committing the killings in the report he read. "But I don't know why she did it. Neither of us do, not really. If she's a different kind of Tal Vashoth from the ones up in Seheron - the really mindless, completely mad ones - then we should be learning everything we can about how she thinks and how she got to this point. I'm sure the higher-ups will have shit tons of questions to ask her."

And Bull wouldn't have to kill one of the last people who knew Vasaad, and maybe... maybe he'd be able to figure out how someone who he once thought was something of a kindred spirit got so fucked up. In the internal struggle between curiosity and revenge, curiosity has ultimately won out. He just needs to convince Arvaariss.

Arvaariss watches Bull, fingers steepled, crimson eyes narrowed in thought. Outside, Bull thinks he hears children laughing and shrieking, maybe playing some sort of game in the street.

"We will not be using your Chargers," Arvaariss says, his tone final. He looks away with an almost careless shrug. "Perhaps they are loyal to you - even that little bas saarebas, though after last night... well. I would not trust them to have my back in battle."

Bull's brow snaps into a frown. This is so clearly a fucking trap - he can practically see a mound of freshly turned dirt in the path ahead of him, gaatlok buried beneath, so obvious as to almost be clumsy.

He steps anyway.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Arvaariss stands, his scarred, scabbing face impassive as he turns from Bull, hands clasped comfortably behind his back.
"There was a key and a note in your room," Arvaariss says. Bull's blood goes cold with dread, then boils with hot rage just as quickly. "You didn't even notice they were gone this morning, clearly. I hardly blame you." Arvaariss laughs, a strange uncanny sound. "It's almost perverse to think that the Ben Hassrath were concerned that that mindless little basra would tempt you from the Qun, with its... what, intelligence? Its wit? Its beauty? What strange tastes one would have to have."

Bull grips his knees so tightly his scarred knuckles turn greyish-white, forcing himself to be calm. Mahanon is alive. Krem saw him this morning. He's alive, he's alright, he's safe with Dalish and Skinner.

But Mahanon did not come to see Bull this morning. He left the inn as soon as he could. Things are starting to click, starting to fall into place, and it's painting a sick picture.

"You spoke with Mouse, then," Bull says, his voice level. Calm. "Why?"

"You cannot think of a reason?"

Bull closes his eye, forcing the blood rage down. "You're investigating me."

"You can't have really believed that with your, ah, history, the Ben Hassrath would have let this go without at least a passing inquiry," Arvaariss says, matter-of-fact. "I did, and do, need your help with the Tal Vashoth Taasha. But I - we - needed to be certain of your dedication. I am no longer concerned." Arvaariss tilts his head. "Your other bas followers were marked as points of contention as well. Depending on how the mission goes, I might feel comfortable enough to leave them be. I wouldn't want to undermine their commitment to you, as I fear I might have done with the bas saarebas."

Another trap. An entire fucking minefield.

"What did you do to him?" Bull's voice is still calm, still steady, but everything - the room is starting to turn crimson in his vision, and he's just about sweating with the heat of his anger.

"Nothing permanent," Arvaariss says. "I would not presume to break your things. The bas saarebas was belligerent, uncooperative. It threatened to attack me, so I severed its magic from it. Uncomfortable, but not life-threatening."

Bull remembers, far too keenly, the mage they fought yesterday. The way they screamed in fear and agony when they went down, subdued by the glowing token in Arvaariss's chest, writhing in pain on the damp tunnel floor.

Arvaariss lets out another odd laugh. "It was very effective, you should know. It was far too terrified of me to do much aside from weep and beg for mercy."

There is no control, there is no calm, there is no thought. Bull is up and his hand is gripped tight around the other Ben Hassrath's throat as he slams Arvaariss into the nearest wall. The pain of Bull's half-healed collarbone fracturing again is so deeply overcome by the inferno of his fury that he hardly feels it. All that matters is the steady pounding of Arvaariss's pulse against Bull's hand, those hateful crimson eyes staring Bull down.

"Go on, then," Arvaariss says, his voice hoarse as Bull's grasp tightens around his throat. "I am not fighting you. This is your choice. You will be doing what so many Tal Vashoth before you have done - defining your fall to madness by murdering one of your own people."

"There was no need," Bull snarls. "No need to talk to him, to hurt him-"
"Look at you," Arvaariss snaps back. "Look at what you're doing. What do you think happens next? That you will kill me, leave the Qun, run off with your bas companions and your little basra bedwarmer? Do you think the madness will leave you, that you will not do this again and again, lose control exactly like this?" Arvaariss bares his teeth in a terrifying approximation of a grin. "Do you think you will not find yourself a year from now, two years from now, with your hands wrapped around one of your precious bas's throats, just as you are doing now? Tell me, Iron Bull - have you never lost control down here in the south, among the bas? Have you never once, even for a moment, succumbed to the rage within?"

The words are fucking poison, and Bull should just kill him, but-

No.

Because there was so much from that night - so much from that awful, foggy night, but... Bull cannot forget how he came back to himself, fists raised, in the midst of attacking his kadan. Cannot forget how Mahanon stared up at him with round, terrified eyes. Cannot forget how close he came to hurting Mahanon, killing Mahanon-

Arvaariss puts a hand on Bull's wrist, prying him off his throat, and Bull does not resist. "Who did you hurt?"

Bull meets Arvaariss's eyes. The other Qunari is quiet now, his gaze sympathetic, that icy cruelty gone from his voice and expression.

"I almost-" Bull swallows. "Mahanon."

Arvaariss nods. "Of course. And so you overcorrect here, now, due to the guilt."

Bull steps away, pressing his palms to his temples, his head - spinning, spinning and fuck, vashedan. "You hurt him."

"Briefly, yes. It was necessary, just as it was necessary to push you now. I needed you to see."

Bull shakes his head. "You didn't have to hurt him."

"Hissrad," Arvaariss says, his tone imploring. "I had to. For your sake. You have already hurt all of them, you just cannot see it. Every Ben Hassrath I've spoken to, every Qunari I've met who has spent so long from their own kind becomes this. They all have stories of hurting those around them. You think it will be different, you think the bas who place their trust in you will save you from yourself? They can't even save themselves from you."

Bull looks at Arvaariss, stricken despite himself.

"It was a simple question that I asked him," Arvaariss says quietly. "He was in no position to lie,
and in truth, the elf does not seem proficient in falsehoods in any case. I asked him if you would stop me from killing him. If you would even try." Arvaariss shakes his head. "He said he did not know."

Bull knows pain. He's well-acquainted with it, emotionally and physically. He survived Seheron. He survived losing his eye, he survived nearly losing his leg, he survived losing a few fingers. Pain is part of him now, part of every hour of the day with his aching joints and torn muscles.

Arvaariss's words hurt worse than anything. Far worse, because Bull knows the other Qunari is not lying, and knows that Mahanon can't tell a lie to save his life.

And why would Mahanon think otherwise? What has Bull ever done for him, ever given him beyond reason after reason to doubt him? When has he ever made Mahanon feel like the kadan he is, when Bull hasn't ever even explained what that means?

"One has to wonder why the elf would share a bed with a man he does not trust if not out of fear," Arvaariss says, and Bull almost retches with sudden, horrified nausea at the thought. "Do you understand, now? You do not have to commit violence to injure these people, and we both know the kind of violence you are capable of. Let me protect them from you. Let me protect the world from you."

Bull collapses back against the nearest wall, feeling - mad, truly mad, and fuck, he'd give anything not to feel anything, not to think. All these months, all this time... how could he have been so fucking blind?

But he knew, didn't he? Bull knew he was hurting Mahanon. He just thought he was hurting him with his distance, when proximity, closeness was the problem the whole fucking time. He should never have gone anywhere near him.

The Chargers, too - Krem, Stitches, Dalish and Skinner, Rocky and Grim... all of them, loyal. All of them at risk.

"Protect them," Bull hears himself say, his voice broken and exhausted. "How?"

Arvaariss closes the distance between them, putting a hand on Bull's aching shoulder. Squeezing tight, and the pain helps, honestly. It helps.

"There is no hope for Taasha," Arvaariss says firmly, and Bull closes his eye. "You sealed her fate long ago. We must accept this loss and move forward."

Bull nods. Yes. Another life on his conscience, another mistake. He knows.

"You must be strong until nightfall, Hissrad," Arvaariss says. "She will find a way to contact you, or she will not. Either way at sundown we will meet in the tunnels. I have had gaatlok explosives placed at the seaside mouth of the cut, and I can trigger them with this." Arvaariss points to the token in his chest. "We will cut off her escape. We will trap her there, and we will end this together.

"Then I will take you home, Hissrad, and the Qun will ensure you do not hurt anyone else. The Qun will grant you peace at last."

- 

Despite being half-blind, off-balance, exhausted, and in pain, Mahanon still manages to get in a few good hits and at least one crack of lightning before his assailants - at least two, he thinks, but
cannot be sure - wrench his arms back and bind his hands, stuffing a black hood soaked in magebane essence over his head.

It's unintentionally helpful. The darkness is good for Mahanon's sore eyes and pounding head, and the magebane alleviates the nauseating presence of his magic. His stomach settles and his body finally starts to recover as he's led through twisting hallways and down a flight of stairs by rough hands, his captors grumbling in a language that he thinks might be Rivaini.

They eventually stop and shove him into a chair, binding him to it as he struggles to free himself, hissing and cursing in every language he knows. Someone hauls his head back and jacks up the hood, forcing his mouth open as a handful of herbs is carefully maneuvered in between his sharp teeth.

Mahanon's herbs. Soaked in Stitches' tincture. He chews on them, nonplussed but desperate, until the pain abates and the pressure in his head slowly lifts.

Mahanon sits, his mind racing, bouncing between questions of who and why to methods of escape and back again. He has his suspicions, of course, but...

The ropes are tight and coarse, and while Bull has shown him plenty of knots and methods of binding over their time together (and threatened to stop showing Mahanon when the elf started undoing them whenever Bull's back was turned, just to prove he could and to make Bull bind him tighter), Mahanon cannot wriggle his way free from these ones.

Mahanon tries to break the chair by knocking himself over. This only results in a bruised shoulder and some exasperated curses from his captors, who right him and steady the chair between a few crates before leaving him again.

Mahanon tries to think like Bull, tapping his bare foot against the spongy wood floor thoughtfully. *Every detail counts.*

Spongy wood. Damp. Down, they went down - in the tunnels, then, but not the stone-paved prison tunnels. So that's a where. He was in too much pain to track the turns they took to get here, and of course he was blinded by the hood, but it's a start.

*Think. Every detail.*

Mahanon's captors are not the ones in charge, or they would have dealt with him already. But they knew enough about him to prepare magebane and to know where he'd be. How they knew he'd come back to the inn alone, of course, he has no idea-

No. No, he's a fucking idiot. Of course they knew. Mahanon thinks of the kids in the marketplace swarming him, knocking him about. There's no way he would have forgotten his medicine satchel this morning - someone took it from him.

The flashes of light in the marketplace. It was a bright day, yes, but the flashes really did feel targeted. Perhaps they were. Perhaps someone knew Mahanon was prone to terrible headaches, knew how to trigger them. Maybe Bull mentioned this weakness in his report on Mahanon to prove his supposed disregard for Mahanon's wellbeing, and someone set a trap accordingly.

It's sideways thinking. Ben Hassrath thinking, using Ben Hassrath knowledge - whether shared or stolen, who could say?

Which leads Mahanon right square back to his initial suspicions and honestly, none the wiser for the mental path it took to get him here.
He pulls at his bonds in frustration, wincing as the rough hemp burns his skin.

If this is Arvaariss... Mahanon feels a thrill of terror at the thought he's been trying to bury since he was initially taken, but forces the fear back down again. No running. No hiding. Face it head on.

Maybe Arvaariss took him. Maybe. But Mahanon cannot see Arvaariss instructing his men to give him his medicine back. The people who took him bound him and cursed at him, stuffed his head in a bag, but so far they have not truly hurt him. They could have left Mahanon to flop around on the floor after he knocked his own damn chair over, but they didn't. They could have knocked him out to keep him from trying to escape, but they didn't.

Mahanon relaxes, even though he knows damn well he shouldn't. Still, if his terrifying encounter with Arvaariss gave him one advantage, it's that he now has a sense for how the Qunari operates. This all seems out of character.

So. Ben Hassrath thinking, but not Arvaariss. That only really leaves one logical option.

But if everything Mahanon has heard is true, it doesn't make any fucking sense.

There's movement suddenly. Footsteps - someone new. A relieved mutter passes through the room.

A low female voice speaks out. An unfamiliar voice. "Thank you. The ship sails in an hour; your payment is aboard. If all goes well, I'll join you at nightfall."

"You've paid us enough for another full day's service," says one of the more familiar voices reluctantly.

"I've already cost you two of your people in this endeavour," says the woman. "There is an... unexpected debt that I owe. I am the one who must pay it, not you. Please leave us."

Footsteps moving away, and the new set moves closer, close enough that Mahanon can feel air shifting past and vibrations in the wood at his feet.

A board creaks, and Mahanon flinches back as he feels the hood pull and bunch around his face, then lift entirely.

It takes him a few blinks before the woman comes into focus - though thankfully the tunnel is dimly-lit, perfect for his deep forest vision. She's tall and broad-shouldered, her skin a dark charcoal-grey, horns curving back over scarred and notched ears. Her brilliant copper eyes capture Mahanon's attention, gleaming in the dark.

Mahanon swallows and lifts his chin, determined to show no fear. He will not speak this time, will not give anything away with his words or his expression. He will not betray the man he loves, no matter what is done to him.

The qunari woman regards him for a long moment, her face utterly impassive.

"Mahanon of Bull's Chargers, previously of Clan Lavellan, also known as 'Mouse,'" she says simply, stating the facts. "I am Temperance, also known as Taasha. I believe you are one of only a few people who might be able to help me. I only hope that you will hear me."
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I HAD JUST ENOUGH TIME BETWEEN ONE APPOINTMENT AND ANOTHER TO EDIT AND POST THIS SO UM. RIP.

Song rec: "Forest Fires" by Lauren Aquilini

And there's gonna be a song rec at the end so. Ye. Ha. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mahanon flicks his ears, his eyes fixed on Taasha's molten copper gaze. Regarding and being regarded in equal measure, trying to read one another's responses. It's a very familiar feeling.

Taasha pulls up a crate and takes a seat, still watching Mahanon closely. She doesn't wince, exactly, but her expression flickers, and Mahanon breaks their stare to look her over properly. She's bruised and battered, her lip swollen and split, bandages showing through the armour covering her torso.

Mahanon glances up to catch her eyes again, and she nods.

"I had hoped Arvaariss would not be so bold as to involve Hisrad," Taasha says, settling her weight onto the crate with a careful grace despite her injuries. "It was a desperate action on his part, though I fear it places Hisrad at great risk."

Mahanon feels his lips tighten and he breathes to speak, but he grits his teeth against the urge.

Taasha inclines her head slightly, as though acknowledging a point. "Of course. You have been with Hisrad long enough to take in some of his wisdom." She smiles very slightly. "He thinks very highly of you. Even while trying to remain impartial, practical, his admiration for you shines through."

She produces a bundle of rolled parchment from her belt, flipping through it. Mahanon feels an odd twinge of panic - even in encrypted symbols and odd lettering, he recognizes Bull's writing.

"Intelligent, insightful, a powerful saarebas - easy to overlook and underestimate," Taasha says, scanning through the pages. She rests the stack of parchment in her lap, meeting Mahanon's stunned look. "I apologize for the pain we inflicted upon you. I needed to speak to you alone, and Hisrad has always been protective of his people. His current second-in-command - the Tevinter, Cremisius Aclassi - would have been far more difficult to isolate. I will try not to take up too much of your time."

"You're going to let me go?" Mahanon blurts out, utterly nonplussed.
Taasha stands, pulling a dagger from her belt, and for a moment Mahanon is sure he's fucked it all up and he's about to have his throat slit open, left to bleed dry in this damp tunnel-

Then the qunari reaches over and carefully severs his bonds, one by one, until Mahanon is entirely free.

"Your magic will return to you in time," Taasha says, sitting back down as Mahanon rubs his wrists and stares at her in utter confusion. "Perhaps now we might have a proper conversation."

"The last 'conversation' I had with one of your kind didn't exactly go well for me," Mahanon says, his voice sharper than he intends, and he hates the thread of fear he can hear in his own voice. "I know how a Ben Hassrath can use their words as weapons."

"Not just words," Taasha says softly, her gaze falling to Mahanon's throat. Mahanon reaches up to touch his neck despite himself. Of course the scarf is loose around his shoulders, leaving the bruises Arvaariss inflicted fully visible. "I see we have a common foe. It should be some comfort to you, then, that I'm no longer Ben Hassrath, but Tal Vashoth."

"Not really," Mahanon says. His eyes flick over to the mouth of this little cavern and the tunnel beyond. It's a long shot, but he's certain if he finds the main black market thoroughfare he can navigate his way back to the surface.

"You are free to leave if you wish," Taasha says, following his gaze. "I am hoping for Hissrad's sake, however, that you might lend me a little trust and listen to what I have to say."

Mahanon clenches his hands. This is... entirely stupid, and reckless, and dangerous. "I won't help you hurt him."

"I do not wish to hurt Hissrad."

"You hurt him last night."

"Injury in battle is a fair pain, and one that Hissrad can live with," Taasha says calmly. "If my intention was to truly hurt him, you would neither be alive nor unharmed. In that respect, I fear Arvaariss has already done more to injure Hissrad than I have."

Mahanon shifts in his chair, feeling obscurely guilty. "What do you want from me, then?"

"I have information that Hissrad needs, and I need him to receive it from someone he trusts," Taasha says.

"You think he trusts me?"

"I know he does," Taasha says, laying a hand on the report at her side. "I know he cares for you a great deal. It's easy to read between the lines, if you know what you're looking for. It's why Rethlok did not submit Hissrad's report on you to their superiors."

Mahanon's head snaps up at that. The name is unfamiliar, but- "The Ben Hassrath didn't read the report?"

"They read a report," Taasha says. "Far less flattering, I'm sorry to say. Reth is-" Taasha drops her gaze, "was aware of the need for Ben Hassrath agents to be afforded some... flexibility, especially agents operating abroad. For years they have carefully doctored certain reports to keep agents in the field who were doing good work, despite what some might consider violations of the Qun. Just a touch or two, a few edits here and there."
"The Ben Hassrath would have wondered if Hissrad was compromised by his relationship with you. If they had read his report, they would have known he was." Taasha closes her eyes. "Reth was a good Ben Hassrath and a good person. The two aren't often found in the same individual. They protected their people, and Arvaariss killed them for it."

Mahanon's lips part with a sharp intake of breath. "I thought-"

"That I am the one who has been murdering Ben Hassrath?" Taasha raises an eyebrow. "Hissrad truly does trust you, then, to be sharing investigation details with you."

Mahanon puts a hand over his mouth with a deep grimace. 

"No matter," Taasha says softly. "It is good that you know. It will make this quicker."

"Up until a few months ago I was working in Rivain on a large fishing boat. I mended nets, traded wares in the market, balanced accounts. A good life, a simple one, quite different from what I knew before." Taasha meets Mahanon's dubious look with a smile. "Temperance's life has been good to me. I put Seheron as far behind me as I could. For years I could not even bear to pick up a sword after what I'd seen, though I always slept with a butcher's knife under my pillow. Some habits do not die with old identities.

"I was lured to Antiva City on false pretences. While I was there, a group of Ben Hassrath enforcers attempted to kill me. I searched their things and discovered orders for my death, as a Ben Hassrath agent had been investigating a string of murders across Thedas and had implicated me as the killer. Even while I was in the city, a prominent Ben Hassrath was murdered - and there I was, conveniently in the same place at the same time."

Taasha takes a long breath, stretching out her arms.

"The investigation was, of course, ordered and organized by Arvaariss. I believe now that he wanted me to know it was him. He wanted me to do exactly what I did - follow his path right across Thedas, city after city. I did not understand at first why he kept moving; he had to know I was on his trail. I thought, foolishly thought that if I showed him evidence of my innocence, he would abandon his hunt and clear my name. I was concerned that he was so focused on my supposed guilt he might miss the real killer." Taasha gives a bitter shake of her head. "But city after city, more Ben Hassrath fell. And I realized who the killer was.

"But of course I, too, had been spotted in each city shortly before each murder. Evidence was mounting against me. Every step was a trap, and I kept stepping, because I knew I was responsible for his crimes - though not in the way the Ben Hassrath think I am. I had to stop him. He knows I am coming to kill him." Taasha touches her bandages with a rueful look. "I was, at any rate. But I cannot do so now without killing Hissrad, and I have neither the strength nor the will to do that. In any case, I am too weak to continue the hunt with any reasonable expectation of success."

"I don't understand," Mahanon says, his mind spinning. "Why would Arvaariss kill Ben Hassrath?"

Taasha tilts her head, watching Mahanon for a long moment. "I am curious. Why do you think?"

Mahanon fights a scowl. He doesn't mind so much when Bull does this to him - the Qunari will know the answer to a question but ask Mahanon anyway, just to see what he'll say. It's flattering; he knows that Bull isn't trying to test him, but genuinely curious for his opinion, maybe even looking for a different answer from his own. But right now, with so much at stake...

Mahanon buries his irritation and thinks, digging his fingertips into his knees to fight the panic that
comes from even bringing Arvaariss to mind, never mind trying to plunder the depths of the Qunari's twisted thoughts.

Arvaariss is cruel and terrifying, convinced of his beliefs, absolutely dedicated to the doctrine. Mahanon thought, at one point, that most Qunari were probably like Bull - respectful of its teachings but conflicted, as most people are conflicted with regards to the beliefs they have held since birth. Not Arvaariss, The fact he could look at someone like Bull, who'd given so much of his life and sense of self to the Qun, and see a potential Tal Vashoth-

"My duty to the Qun is to identify and hunt Tal Vashoth wherever I find them."

Mahanon blinks.

"Wherever I find them."

"Creators," Mahanon breathes, feeling sick. "If Ben Hassrath bend the Qun to complete their work-"

"-then by our own teachings, every Ben Hassrath is either already Tal Vashoth or greatly at risk of becoming one," Taasha says wearily, though she offers Mahanon another slight smile. "Hissrad did not exaggerate. Your mind is as quick as he says."

"If Arvaariss killed the Ben Hassrath who switched Bull's report on me-"

"Few know what Reth has done for the Ben Hassrath," Taasha says. "Fewer still knew that they kept the original copies of the reports they altered for their own reference, in a carefully concealed vault. I was one of the few. Arvaariss will not have seen this particular report, only the doctored one. I believe he has been testing Hissrad, however, to see if he has become Tal Vashoth by Arvaariss's steep metric."

"Then Bull truly is in terrible danger," Mahanon says, panic rising in him.

"Perhaps," says Taasha, looking troubled. "Perhaps. At the very least, I believe he will be safe until I am dead. Arvaariss would not discard such a useful and deadly weapon until he is sure there is no longer a use for it. It is not his way."

"You speak like you know him."

Taasha looks away, almost slumping on the crate. "Many of us who fought in Seheron have our ghosts. Just as demons plague the minds of the saarebas in sleep, so these spirits haunt our thoughts; memories, regrets... mistakes. Arvaariss is the greatest mistake I have ever inflicted upon this world. Taasha cuts a look at Mahanon, her eyes passing over the bruises around his throat once more. "Once, he was simply arvaarad. I am the one responsible for his becoming Ben Hassrath."

Mahanon tightens his scarf, covering the marks. "I can understand what you might have seen in him. He is... dedicated."

"Dedicated to the word of our law, not its spirit," Taasha says coolly. "And what is a people without spirit? But in any case, it was never my intention for Avaariss to become Ben Hassrath. I miscalculated my peoples' priorities, blinded by my own devotion to the Qun. My own interpretations." Taasha breathes. "Believe it or not, Mahanon of Clan Lavellan, our people have a great respect for your kind. For saarebas."

Mahanon barks a sharp laugh despite himself. "Sorry, but- Creators, I would hate to see what
"I believe you have seen a sample of it," Taasha says. "Under the Qun, we see magic as a powerful tool, a weapon. Those that wield it are given a terrible burden to bear. An arvaarad takes on part of that burden - caring for them, protecting them, ensuring that they do not lose sight of what they are. We do not hate our saarebas, we do not despise or revile them as your templars and your Chantry seems to revile their charges. We honour their sacrifice."

"You keep them in chains," Mahanon says flatly. "Perhaps that is respect to you. Perhaps that is honour to you. Not to me."

"Have you never given up freedom or power to another?" Taasha asks. "Have you never found peace in trusting someone else to shoulder the burden of choice?"

Mahanon flushes deep crimson despite himself. It's probably not what Taasha's talking about, but... well, of course he thinks of Bull, and what he gives over to Bull in private. Even so-

"If I do, it is by my own free will," Mahanon says stubbornly. "And I can take back that burden if and when I want."

"And that makes a difference to you?"

"Mythal'enaste, yes," Mahanon says, almost a bit aghast. "It makes all the difference in the world. Trust cannot exist without choice."

Taasha stares at him. Slowly, her eyes fall upon the severed bindings hanging from the arms and legs of Mahanon's chair.

"You remind me of an old friend," Taasha says softly. "He would have liked you very much, I think." A look of genuine pain deeper than wounds crosses Taasha's face, and she closes her eyes. "Forgive me. I have only just learned of his passing."

"I'm sorry," Mahanon says.

Taasha shakes her head. "I digress. Arvaariss was a dedicated arvaarad in Seheron - one of our finest. His saarebas were well-treated and he was innovative in their care, designing new armour, new focii, anything to keep them at their best. He was absolutely devoted to their wellbeing and took every loss as a personal failure; in fact, he was known for taking his rage out on the antaam for using his saarebas recklessly or putting them at risk."

"That... really doesn't sound like the Arvaariss I met," Mahanon says slowly.

"Does it not? I would not mistake his devotion to his saarebas for kindness. A weapons master knows the value of his finest blades."

Taasha unsheathes a long, thin dagger at her side, the blade glistening as though crafted from liquid steel.

"This is a Ben Hassrath's kata-kas," Taasha says. "It has a single purpose; a quick and painless assassination. We only use it once between sharpenings. Even unsheathing it now to show you is an act of disrespect."

Taasha sheathes it again.

"You would not use a kata-kas for cutting fruit or hacking your way through the underbrush."
"Now, you might know that the Qun prefers to convert our captives rather than destroy them. Those we cannot re-educate, we turn into viddath-bas - labourers under the Qun, tamed by our tamassrans. However, we do not ever attempt to re-educate bas saarebas. They-" Taasha grimaces, "-you are seen as far too corrupted by the powers you wield to ever truly submit."

"So you turn us Tranquil," Mahanon says, narrowing his eyes.

"That is... not how we see it," Taasha says softly. "But yes. We were expecting several dozen Tevinter bas saarebas to be sent to our re-education centres in Seheron. They never appeared. The paperwork was all in order, overseen by Arvaariss, but we had inconsistent eyewitness reports regarding the numbers of bas saarebas prisoners travelling from battlefield to headquarters. I was sent to investigate. I met with Arvaariss at his camp..."

Taasha squeezes her eyes shut, a hand coming up to her forehead.

"He did not deny that he had been taking his own bas saarebas prisoners," Taasha says, her steady voice trembling for the first time. "He was convinced he was developing a solution to the problem he had been so passionately devoted to fixing: our need for magic, balanced against the lives of his saarebas. His precious weapons. He took me to his holding cells." Taasha opens her eyes, and Mahanon feels a chill run up his spine as he sees the steadfast qunari's lashes glisten with unshed tears. "He was experimenting on the prisoners. Combining the dwarven practice of runework with... vashedan, I did not understand it myself, but he found a way to use the bodies of the bas saarebas as conduits. Somehow their spirits could strengthen the runes, make them more potent, make them last longer.

"And it was not just practical runework; he was developing weapons to fight the Tevinter bas saarebas. Weapons meant to inflict endless suffering, to turn their magic back on them, to rip it from them to strengthen our weapons. He would, of course, test these weapons on the prisoners. Even the process of creating them was torture for those who suffered under him." Taasha's voice breaks. "The prisoners he had were utterly destroyed by him. Mind, body, and soul. And yet they still breathed, and he had more tests, more experiments he used them for past the point of cruelty. It was sickening."

Mahanon grips the arms of his chair tightly, transfixed by Taasha's words. Bull had said that Taasha was troubled by something when he met her, that he never figured out what it was. Mahanon suspects he now knows and sorely wishes he didn't.

"I could see that Arvaariss had neither remorse nor the slightest doubts regarding his actions," Taasha says, blinking her tears away. "He was proud to show me his work, expecting only praise in return. He would not be stopped or convinced by a single Ben Hassrath agent, and I was vastly outnumbered in his camp. So, I feigned support for his endeavours. I told him to report to my superiors and explain his work to them. I thought they would see him for the monster he was and have him re-educated. Instead..."

Taasha clutches at her wounded torso, shaking her head.

"They admired his ingenuity," Taasha says, barely whispering. "They, too, were of the belief that the bas saarebas's suffering meant less than nothing. That the bas saarebas were not deserving of
the sympathy one might afford another living person. When I heard that they had decided to make Arvaariss Ben Hassrath, I voiced my opposition. I was reassigned and suspected of harbouring Tal Vashoth beliefs."

"You couldn't have known that they would do that," Mahanon says, his voice hushed.

Taasha gives a bitter laugh. "Couldn't I have? The Ben Hassrath are the heart of the Qun, the defenders and enforcers of our beliefs. I did not know the heart of my own people, and when I saw it for what it was, compared to what it could be... my faith cracked, then shattered utterly."

Mahanon chews his lip. "Are there other Qunari up north with Arvaariss's runework? That token he has..."

"One of my mercenaries explained its effects to me, after Arvaariss used it on them," Taasha says, her voice hollow. "I am truly sorry if he employed it against you. There was one caveat to the runework he developed; the magic is harvested from living hosts, and so must be grounded by a living host. It was a hard notion to sell for many Qunari. Many could not see the difference between using Arvaariss's implants and runes and becoming saarebas themselves. Perhaps they are still working on a solution, but as far as I know, Arvaariss is the only warrior of his kind."

"I need to warn Bull," Mahanon says, standing. "He needs to know what kind of monster Arvaariss is."

"I truly hope you can help him," Taasha says. "Be careful, though. I do not wish you to be hurt in all this. It is not your fight, nor your burden to bear."

"People keep saying that," Mahanon says, fighting a scowl. "But I chose this fight. I chose Bull long ago. He might not like my choice, but he can damn well respect it."

Taasha gives another one of her slight smiles. "Perhaps we are named too quickly. You do not strike me as much of a Mouse."

She stands with a pronounced wince, pulling another bundle of papers from her satchel.

"You will not have to take my word to him alone," Taasha says, handing the roll to Mahanon. "These are shipping manifestos and receipts from my work in Rivain, complete with town council seals. They prove that I was nowhere near the scenes of the first few murders before Antiva. I cannot kill Arvaariss myself, but no matter their beliefs, I trust the Ben Hassrath to avenge their own people. I recommend that Hissrad leave the task of apprehending Arvaariss to his superiors."

Mahanon nods. As much as he hates Arvaariss, his fear of the man and what he might do to Bull outweighs it. He's happy to make the rogue Ben Hassrath someone else's problem.

"And though I have already asked far too much of you today," Taasha says, almost hesitantly, "I have one more message I wish you to pass along."

"Of course," Mahanon says, stowing the roll in his tunic.

"Amongst those papers is a map," Taasha says. "It shows where I will be tonight at sundown. Hissrad can find me there, if he wishes. I will wait until moonrise for him."

Mahanon frowns. "Why?"

"Not to fight him," Taasha says, reading Mahanon's expression. She looks down. "I cannot leave this city and become Temperance once more until I have answered for what Taasha has done."
His *kadan* died fighting in my place."

"*Kadan*?" Mahanon echoes. The word sounds familiar.

"In our language, a *kadan* is the place where the heart lies," Taasha says, putting a hand over her chest. "Once, Hissrad's heart lay within Vasaad - until I abandoned that final fight. Now, it is clear to me that it resides elsewhere."

Mahanon doesn't really know where to look or what to say about that. Nor is he brave enough to think about it much.

"In any case, I owe Hissrad a chance for us both to make peace with our pasts," Taasha says. "I will pay whatever price he deems fit for the loss."

"But you didn't kill Vasaad," Mahanon says. "Bull knows you didn't. You should get out of town before Arvaariss finds you again, leave while you still can."

"Taasha fled when she should have stayed," Taasha says. "If I wish to truly be rid of her and live as Temperance, I must choose a different path."

The qunari turns away, speaking over her shoulder as she walks.

"Two lefts and a right, then follow the corridor until you can no longer smell the scent of the sea," she says. "A staircase will lead you back up to where we took you. Farewell, Mahanon."

Mahanon takes a few steps after her, trying to think of some way to change her mind, but she takes a righthand turn out of the cavern and vanishes into the shadows before he can speak.

He clutches the parchments close to his chest, feeling anxious sparks weaving through his hair.

Sparks.

Startled out of his concern, Mahanon lifts his hands. His magic is returning to him, trickles of light and energy weaving through his fingers. Aside from hunger pangs from not having eaten all day, Mahanon does not feel that terrible illness from earlier. His magic is energizing and comfortable, settling back into his veins as naturally as his own life blood.

Perhaps it was the magebane; perhaps Mahanon just needed time to recover. Either way, Arvaariss's twisting manipulation of this most fundamental part of him was not permanent.

Mahanon smiles, casting a little flickering ball of lightning and tossing it from hand to hand before whisking it out of existence. Despite everything, despite his fear and uncertainty, at least he has this back. He's still Mahanon after all.

"Oi," says Krem, waving Mahanon over with a frown as the elf slips into the common room. It's a golden afternoon, plenty of mercs and sailors mulling about at the tables and lazily diving into a long evening's worth of indulgences a few hours early. Krem sits at a table with Stitches going over the company inventory, judging by the parchment scattered about the table before them. "We're just finishing up here; about to head out for the evening. Where are Skinner and Dalish?"

"Still at the market, probably," Mahanon says, anxious to keep moving. He cuts off Krem's protests with a shake of his head. "I know we're supposed to stick together; I got one of my stupid headaches, and- fuck, it's complicated. Do you know where Bull is?"
"In his room, probably," Krem says, folding his arms and eyeing Mahanon closely. "He came back in about an hour ago. Said he was expecting a message of some sort to come in for him."

"Ah," Mahanon says. "Good."

"Hey," Krem says, sitting up as Mahanon turns to charge off again. "Is everything alright?"

"Er," Mahanon says. "Hard to say."

Mahanon trots off before Krem can stop him again, casting an apologetic wave over his shoulder as he goes.

Mahanon feels an obscure prickle of remembered fear passing by his room. He tries to shove it from his mind, though he suspects the dark shadows of that place, the dust under the bed, the feeling of clawing at the hardwood beneath his fingers as his magic was torn from his body, will stay with him for quite some time.

*Tomorrow's worries,* Mahanon thinks firmly. *Tomorrow's problems.*

Mahanon half expects no one to answer when he knocks on Bull's door, and the momentary breath it takes between knocking and hearing familiar footsteps on the other side is almost too nerve-wracking to bear.

Then the door opens, and Mahanon inhales to speak only for his breath to catch in his throat.

If Taasha looked rough from last night's battle, Bull looks... worse. Roughly bandaging covers his upper chest and back as well as his left arm, but more than that - there is a deep exhaustion hanging from the lines in his face, making him look older and wearier than Mahanon's ever seen him.

"Bull," Mahanon says, nearly voiceless.

Bull quirks a broken little smile. "Not exactly at my prettiest right now, huh?" His smile quickly drops, as though it cost him far too much effort to conjure in the first place. "Are you okay?"

"I'm-" Mahanon remembers, vividly, a flash of Arvaariss kneeling over him, the Qunari's hand tightening around his throat. He winces. "I'm fine. I need to speak with you."

Bull doesn't respond right away. Doesn't even move. He stands there, motionless, watching Mahanon, and it strikes Mahanon in a chilly moment just how much Bull has allowed him to see of his inner emotions in previous conversations. How much he's chosen to give away, almost as a courtesy. This is... different. Bull's thoughts seem entirely divorced from his expression, like he's forgotten how to feel properly.

"Okay," Bull says eventually, and steps aside to let Mahanon in.

Mahanon casts a silencing charm over the room the moment Bull closes the door, pacing anxiously. It comes to him just how enormous the task Taasha has set him truly is, and how much faith she has placed in Bull's trust in him. Not just Bull's trust in Mahanon as a person, but in Mahanon's judgement. *Creators.*

Bull takes a seat on the edge of his bed, folding his hands. Mahanon notices he's packed one of his walking bags and has his weapons prepped to go, as if anticipating a quick call to action. It only serves to heighten Mahanon's nerves.

"Look-" Bull starts, as Mahanon blurts out, "I spoke with Taasha."
"You what?"

"She, um - it sounds bad, but I understand why she did it, she had me taken to her in the tunnels under the city," Mahanon says, speaking rapidly. His heart sinks as Bull just slowly puts his face in his hands. "She didn't hurt me, Bull. She just wanted to give you some information and didn't know how else to do it, what with - everything."

Bull clasps his hands in front of his face, that same blank, exhausted expression pulling at his scarred features. "What information?"

Mahanon explains as quickly as he can, struggling to keep his thoughts in order as he shares everything Taasha told him about Arvaariss. Bull's face changes so slowly Mahanon cannot account for the exact moment that the transformation occurs, but by the end of Mahanon's gush of information Bull looks as though he's aged another decade, something dull and terribly lifeless in his single eye.

"She could have been lying," Bull says quietly, once Mahanon is finished.

"She wasn't," Mahanon says. Bull, his Bull might have raised an eyebrow at that, but this tired shell sitting on Bull's bed just waits for him to elaborate. Mahanon swallows and pulls the receipts from his tunic, handing them to Bull. "It's proof that she couldn't have committed the first killings. Taasha is hoping it will convince the Ben Hassrath to apprehend Arvaariss. She doesn't think we should go after him ourselves, and I think she's right. I mean, maybe with all the Chargers we could, but they're kind of all scattered to the winds right now and-"

"What's this?"

Bull pulls the map from the top of the stack, and Mahanon rubs his temple.

"Taasha wants to meet with you tonight at sundown," Mahanon says. "She thinks - I'm sorry, Bull, I'm so sorry to bring it up, but she feels responsible for Vasaad's death, and she wants to give you an opportunity to - fuck, seek justice or something? Talk, at the very least. Anyway, that map will lead you to her. I took a look at it myself; it looks like she's taking one of the smuggler cuts through the cliffs."

Bull nods slowly, stowing the the map in his belt pouch. He slips the receipts into his walking bag, careful and deliberate, before standing. "I should go to meet her, then. Sundown's not too far off."

"Let me come with you," Mahanon says, and Bull doesn't react - doesn't even look at him. 
"Arvaariss is still out there, and you're hurt-"

"I'm alright," Bull says softly. "It'll be fine, Mouse. You've already done more than enough, more than-" Bull settles his great axe over his back with a wince before shouldering his walking bag, his eye fixed on the floor. "Please stay here."

"Bull," Mahanon says. "You're alright, aren't you? We're... alright?"

Bull stands still as a statue in the muffled silence, the cut of the golden afternoon light through the window leaving everything from his shoulders up in dark shadow. Then he turns, and his exhaustion softens as he takes Mahanon by the shoulders, touching him carefully - lightly, his palms barely brushing Mahanon's skin, as if afraid to even touch him at all.

"All I've ever wanted for you was for you to be happy," Bull says, reaching up to fix one of Mahanon's stray curls as he's done so many times before, only to stop an inch from Mahanon's face and drop his hand. "You deserve better. Fuck, you deserve so much fucking better."
Mahanon swallows hard. "What are you saying?"

Bull hesitates, and steps back, shaking his head. "Nothing, Mouse. Sorry. It's been a long few
days."

"I know," Mahanon says. "Just - promise me when you get back we'll talk, yes?" Bull doesn't say
anything. Mahanon clenches his fists, a desperate edge in his voice as he says, "At least promise
me you'll come back, Bull."

It's all too fucking quiet, and so is Bull when he says, "I'll come back."

Mahanon wants to believe him. By all the gods he knows and every last ounce of trust and faith he
has, he wants to believe Bull so badly.

Which is why Mahanon lifts his hand as Bull turns away, casts his magic before Bull touches the
door knob, and seals the door firmly shut.

Bull tries the knob, going dangerously still when it doesn't budge.

"Liar," Mahanon whispers.

Bull doesn't deny the accusation. "Open the door."

"No."

"Please open the door."

"No."

Bull turns on his heel, his face a mask of cold rage. "Open the fucking door."

Mahanon doesn't flinch. He's seen Bull's anger, his real anger. This isn't even a full-hearted
attempt at a facsimile of it - just a mask, and not even a particularly convincing one. "No."

Bull heaves in a long breath and his face spasms in pain. Mahanon just watches. It feels, a little,
like his own ribs are fracturing in his chest, to see Bull like this. Mahanon never knew how literal
the sensation of a breaking heart could be.

"As your Chief," Bull says slowly, his eye narrowing, fists clenched and teeth gritted against the
obvious ache of his injuries. "I am ordering you to open the door. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you," Mahanon says. "I won't do it."

"I'm giving you a direct fucking order, Mouse. Open the damn door."

"Then I quit," Mahanon says sharply.

Bull reels back as if struck, the first real reaction Mahanon's seen him express since entering the
fucking room.

Mahanon takes a shivering breath, but he does not back down. "I resign, Bull. So I'm not your
Charger, you're not my Chief, and I'm not beholden to your orders. I am your equal." Mahanon
steps forward. "And as such, and as someone who fucking loves you, I will not open that door until
you tell me what the fuck is going on."

Bull just stares at Mahanon as if he's never seen him before in his life, and Mahanon cannot
honestly blame him. All Mahanon knows, knows down to his core, is that if Bull goes through that door right now he will never see him again.

So maybe it's fear, maybe it's anger, maybe it's grief, maybe it's all of these things in such overwhelming quantities that Mahanon has no space for anything else. But for now, just now, Mahanon knows that he is in control, and Bull is not.

Mahanon lifts his chin, matching Bull's stunned stare with his own stubborn gaze.

Bull looks away first.

"Arvaariss knows where Taasha plans to meet," Bull says, rough and stilted, as if fighting every word. "He's planned an ambush."

"So we need to warn her," Mahanon says.

"No," Bull says. "You don't understand. I'm going to help him finish the mission, and then he's turning me in to the re-educators."

Mahanon's breath stutters, his resolve wavering as his knees threaten to buckle. "Why? Because of - because of us?"

"Because of everything, damn it," Bull says, crumpling back against the door, his hands on his knees. "Because - fuck, because of everything. Because Arvaariss might be fucking right. I'm dangerous, I'm breaking, I'm... tired. Shit, I'm so fucking tired."

Mahanon doesn't move, cannot move, even as he feels tears spilling over his cheeks. He's not even weeping really, just watching, something beyond sadness twisting in his heart as Bull falls apart before him.

"You're not happy," Bull says quietly, his voice tight. "I know you're not. Maybe you were, once - fuck, I want to believe that I made you happy for a time. But I always knew I'd have to let you go one day. All of you, all of this. I'm so fucking sorry I wasn't strong enough to do it before now."

Mahanon shakes his head, tears dripping from his chin. "Arvaariss is the killer."

"Yeah, probably."

"He's not going to bring you to the re-educators," Mahanon says. His breath hitches. "Bull, he'll kill you."

Bull doesn't speak, but he doesn't have to. Mahanon knows what he's thinking. It's written in every exhausted line of his bruised face.

Mahanon pulls his father's dagger from the sheath at his back. Bull doesn't move.

"If that's what you truly want," Mahanon says.

Mahanon closes the distance between them and takes Bull's hand, pressing the hilt of his father's dagger into Bull's palm.

"The spell will end if I cannot maintain it," Mahanon says. He unloops the scarf from around his neck, casting it aside and offering his bruised throat, heart flickering at the look of guilt and rage that crosses Bull's face at the sight of the marks. "I will not fight you. You are far bigger and stronger than me - I know you can make it quick."
Bull looks from the dagger in his hand to Mahanon and recoils with sudden understanding. "No."

"Why not?" Mahanon challenges. "Arvaariss explained it all quite clearly to me last night. I am not a person, am I? I'm a thing, a dangerous thing, and I am in your way. It should mean nothing to you to cut me down."

"Fuck, no."

"Why the fuck not?" Mahanon cries. "You said you would kill me if you had to, Hissrad - this is your chance to prove it. If Arvaariss is right about you, if he's right about Taasha, if he's right about anything at all, then he's right about me too, isn't he? I am a worthless thing, and he was right to torture me, just as you would be right to kill me."

"No!"

Bull's shout is swallowed by the silencing spell, but it reverberates between them nonetheless, both of them breathing hard as if having just run a mile.

But Mahanon sees it - buried beneath the anger and horror and exhaustion etched into Bull's face, there's a trace of... him. Mahanon's Bull. The Iron Bull. Returning to him, breath by haggard breath.

"Or maybe," Mahanon says, his voice quiet and torn, "Arvaariss is wrong. Maybe I am not nothing, and maybe you are not a broken weapon, but a man. A good man."

Bull shakes his head, but Mahanon closes the distance between them, putting his hands on Bull's bandaged chest.

"You have asked me time and time again if I trust you," Mahanon says. "I do. Now I'm asking you to trust me. You can choose to be the Iron Bull; you can choose to be Hissrad. But if you give in to Arvaariss, if you let him twist your mind, all you'll be choosing is not to choose at all."

Bull breathes, and Mahanon breathes, and neither of them move.

Then, slowly, Bull reaches around Mahanon and slips Diemne's dagger back into its sheath at Mahanon's back.

"If I had been there, I would have stopped him," Bull says, his voice utterly broken. "I would never have let him hurt you. Please know that."

Mahanon closes his eyes, something settling deep in his heart. "Thank you."

Bull hesitates, then puts his arms around Mahanon, holding him close. Mahanon presses into his embrace, mindful of Bull's injuries but - fuck, so fucking relieved.

"I'm sorry, kadan," Bull murmurs, stroking Mahanon's curly hair. "I'm so sorry."

Kadan.

Mahanon smiles, even as Bull holds him a little tighter - a little too tight for comfort, honestly, something pinching the side of his neck-

By the time Mahanon realizes what Bull is doing, there's nothing he can do to stop him.

There's an explosion of sparks, an instinctive panicked response, and then everything goes black.
Bull grits his teeth as lightning forks up his arm, making his hand go numb, but it doesn't matter - Mahanon slumps in his arms, unconscious.

Bull releases Mahanon's pressure point, smoothing his thumb over the skin as if he can wipe away the small bruise starting to form there.

Bull sweeps Mahanon's limp form into his arms and carries him over to the bed. Judging by the deep circles under Mahanon's eyes, it's doubtful the elf has had much sleep, if any. Mahanon's exhaustion should keep him under for at least a few hours. Bull arranges him gently, pulling a blanket up to Mahanon's shoulders and slipping a pillow under his curly head.

Those terrible marks around Mahanon's throat stand out livid against his dark skin, and his freckled cheeks are still damp with tears.

Bull watches Mahanon sleep for as long as he can afford.

Then, quietly, Bull gathers his things, hand hovering briefly over the letter he left for Krem on the desk. He leaves it lie.

He goes to the door, putting a hand on the knob. It turns freely.

Bull pauses, looking down at his arm. A cascade of branching welts arc up from his wrist to his elbow, even climbing up a little further toward his shoulder.

Carefully, quietly, Bull slips through the door and pulls it shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Song rec: "Little Lion Man" by Mumford and Sons
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Song rec: The Other Side by Woodkid

Playlist link

Thank you everyone, everyone, everyone for kudos and comments, it makes all of this so entirely worth it.

This chapter is dedicated to TinyOwlBear, whose birthday it is upon this day. Happy birthday love <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cliffs beyond Val Chevin are riddled with crevices and openings formed by centuries of natural processes. Smugglers over the centuries have delved through these openings, scrappy tunnels carved back through crumbling sandstone to sturdy bedrock towards the prison corridors of Val Chevin's dark under city.

The tides have aided their endeavours greatly. At low tide, one less canny might never think of the higher gaps and caves as escape routes; the drop to the rocks below is far too steep and sheer. At high tide, the lower tunnels flood, covering the tracks of anyone willing to risk getting caught between a cave-in and the rising sea to enter the city undetected. Ladders are let down from the higher caves when the water is high, goods passed up and down by pulley system between rowboats and merchants. On moonless nights when the tide is right, the cliffs become a hive of illegal activity, dark shapes moving in and out of hidden spaces like termites in a rotted log.

The cave Temperance emerges into from a dank, unlit smuggler passage is smaller than some; less travelled, set dangerously high up the cliff's face. Regardless, as she blinks to allow her copper eyes to adjust to the fiery sunset glistening off the water and casting glittering light about the cave's close and cragged walls, she sees evidence of recent smuggler activity; a few abandoned crates, some empty liquor bottles, a few piles of ash from tapped pipes and small signal fires. There's a well-oiled pulley system fit for small bundles and packages, as well as a sturdy-looking rolled rope ladder carefully concealed behind a rock at the seaside mouth of the cave.

Temperance walks over and stoops to investigate it, giving the ropes an experimental tug. The rope has been waxed and oiled to resist water. Temperance will have to trust that a rotten rung or moldy knot will not give way under her weight as she descends. The water is high enough that she would very likely survive even a dead drop from the ledge, but her body is pained and weakened. Ideally it's not something she'll have to test.

It's unlikely she'll even have a chance to test it, at any rate.

Temperance smiles to herself, her heart full and settled. Then she breathes, and allows herself to become Taasha one last time.

"Do you remember Aban-Astaarit?" she asks aloud.
For a moment, Taasha expects no answer, save perhaps a blade through her throat.

Then, slowly, footsteps approach. Uneven gait, but only slightly. Despite nearly losing half his leg, Hisrad was always determined to never develop a full limp.

"I remember," Hisrad says.

"The antaam warned our men not to take that passage," says Taasha. "I warned you not to take the passage. We thought there was no way to get from one end of the cave network to the other before the rising sea would take you. You proved all of us wrong."

"Reeds," Hisrad grunts. "I saw some of the locals swimming through the rivers with 'em. Figured I could swim that last stretch faster if I didn't have to come up for air."

Taasha straightens and turns, taking in her old friend's battered appearance - the shadows beneath his single eye, the stoop of his sloping shoulders, the downturned pull of his lips.

"You've changed," Taasha says quietly.

Hissrad snorts at that, humourless and exhausted. "So have you." He fixes her with a hard look. "The Taasha I knew wasn't comfortable taking hostages."

"I make no excuse for my actions," Taasha says. "I could not think of any other way." Hisrad says nothing, so Taasha adds, softly, "I see why you value the elf so. He reminds me of-"

"Vasaad."

"Yes."

Hissrad clenches his fists, then flexes his fingers, over and over. Thinking.

"It was quick, when Vasaad..." Hisrad clears his throat. "He wasn't alone."

"You were with him."

"Uh huh."

"The Qun would say it was a good death," Taasha says. "Death in battle, his kadan by his side."

"That's what the re-educators tried to tell me," Hisrad says. "It's not that I didn't believe it. It's that it didn't fucking help."

"It was supposed to be me," Taasha says. "I was meant to take point, not him."

"Yeah," Hisrad says.

"I'm here to answer for that now. For Vasaad."

Hissrad starts to pace, a hint of a wince creasing his features with every step, hands still flexing and clenching.

"I don't know what you want from me," Hisrad says finally.

"What do you want?" Taasha asks.

Hissrad shakes his head. "Would it make you feel better if I put an arrow through your throat? Is
that what you're looking for? Either way, you still got to live all these years and he didn't. It wouldn't bring him back, he wouldn't have wanted -"

"What do you want, Hissrad?"

Hissrad growls, low and dangerous, like a dragon's warning rumble before a spout of flame. "Why did you turn on the Qun? Why did you leave? You, of all fucking people..."

"I never turned on the Qun," Taasha says, her voice sharpening ever so slightly. She closes her eyes. "Never. Not truly. In all honesty, I likely bear more love for the Qun than many of its current devotees, and I say that without pride or false estimation. I still live by many of its teachings, I still dedicate myself to its wisdom."

"Then come back," Hissrad says, stopping short. He turns and meets Taasha's gaze, looking almost desperate. "Turn yourself in to the re-educators, like I did."

"The re-educators are not the Qun," Taasha says coolly. "Neither are the tamassrans, nor the Triumvirate. That is the truth of it. For all that the Qunari describe themselves as part of one living whole, one thriving body, very few of you are allowed to truly live."

"You sound like a bas," says Hissrad. "The ones who think we're all brainwashed, like mindless puppets. You know it's not like that."

"I know it is not the whole experience," Taasha says. "I know I was happy within the ranks of the Qunari, once. I know there are many who find fulfillment living that life. But the enforcement ruins it - we ruin it. People should be allowed to question, to come and go as they please, not to be punished or cast out entirely for doubt or lack of understanding. I thought I loved the Qunari, I trusted in the Qun my whole life, but that trust was an illusion, Hisrad." Taasha pauses, almost smiling. "Trust cannot exist without choice."

Hissrad blinks. "That sounds like something Vasaad would say."

"Doesn't it?" Taasha says softly.

Hissrad looks down, teetering on the edge of something. Taasha watches and waits.

"What was it like?" he asks, voice quiet and stilted. "What has... freedom been like?"

"Terrifying," Taasha admits. "For a time, it felt like death. Yes, terrifying, to be solely accountable for one's own actions and decisions. Terrifying, to give everything up. To allow myself to become truly lost."

"For a time?"

Taasha smiles. "You get used to it. And you realize you don't have to give everything up. As I said, I still live by many of the Qun's teachings. In fact, I think I understand them more, having built that understanding for myself." Taasha takes a step forward, and Hisrad doesn't move away. "Of course, you have something I never did. Friends. Family. Even someone who truly loves you in ways I myself have never really understood..."

Hissrad's eyes drift to the side, and Taasha follows his gaze. A series of branching welts crawl up his arm, newly scarring him from hand to shoulder in distinct lightning patterns.

"Oh," says Taasha. "I am so sorry."
"He wanted to come with me," Hisrad says. He laughs a bit wildly, scrubbing his scarred hands over his scarred face. "For such a sweet little guy, he can be so fucking stubborn. But I couldn't... he couldn't, not when... fuck."

"Not when you're undecided," Taasha says.

Hisrad meets her gaze, and for a moment, it almost feels as though nothing has changed at all between them. They were both closer to Vasaad than one another, back in the jungle, but perhaps it was only because they understood one another far too well.

There's a crunch of rock and sand from within the tunnel. Hisrad's face sets in hard lines, as if carved from stone.

Over Hisrad's shoulder, Taasha sees Arvaariss emerge from the shadows, his ghostly vitaar applied in gruesome lines over his scabbing, ruined face.

"Hisrad," Arvaariss says, his voice dangerously soft. "You did not meet me in the tunnels as planned."

Taasha meets Hisrad's single eye, her gaze imploring. Trying to place everything, *everything* into a single look.

Hisrad turns away from her. Head hung low, shoulders slumped. "No, I guess I didn't."

Arvaariss sighs. "I had hopes for you, Hisrad. Truly. Is this... where you choose to stand?"

Taasha blinks at the wording, still far too steeped in years of Ben Hassrath training to frown, as someone else might have done. And Arvaariss is staying well back, as if...

Out of the corner of her eye, Taasha spots them - very slightly disturbed patches of rock and sand, carefully placed crates, at either side of the mouth of the cavern. One is set scarcely a stride's length from her left side.

"You were right, Arvaariss," says Hisrad, sounding utterly, horrifyingly defeated, as if half-dead already. "About me, about all of us. We can't be saved. We can't go back. We need to be put down, before we hurt anyone else."

Arvaariss nods, looking upon Hisrad with mixed respect and sympathy. "I am sorry, Hisrad. You must know I have no choice in this."

"The Qun's demands are clear," Hisrad says. "I get it. You're doing the right thing."

Taasha watches with a sickened heart as Arvaariss swells with pride at Hisrad's words.

"Not many achieve enlightenment before the end," Arvaariss says. "Some, but not many. I will tell our people that you died a true Qunari."

Hisrad offers Arvaariss a Ben Hassrath salute and bows his head.

Arvaariss's gaze slides to Taasha, his expression slipping as his lip curls. "But you do not have to die standing beside a Tal Vashoth, Hisrad."

"Asit tal-eb," Hisrad says simply. *It is to be.*

Taasha breathes. Yes, this does feel right. Hisrad and Taasha meeting their end together. A fitting death. *Oh, Vasaad, forgive me, I could not save him.*

Arvaariss reaches up to touch his token, and Taasha turns her face to the final dying light of the sun, determined to fill her eyes with the beauty of the world before she leaves it.

An explosion rocks the cavern, and the entire cliff face gives an answering, echoing rumble. Part of the ceiling above collapses, causing a ripple effect of cave-ins and blockages throughout the network of tunnels.

Taasha catches her balance, nearly toppling off the ledge and down to the frothing sea below. She whips back around.

Nearly the entire back half of the cavern has been blown out, reduced to a massive, shifting pile of smoking rubble and boulders. There's only a slim crack of the tunnel left visible, scarcely large enough for a small animal to fit through.

Under the rubble, Taasha can see the glint of molten iron, a few patches of grey skin. Arvaariss - or, perhaps, what's left of him.

She looks at Hisrad, who regards the pile of rocks dispassionately, uncharacteristically cold.

"I guess someone must've shown up just before you arrived and moved the gaatlok traps he placed here," says Hisrad flatly. "Shame Arvaariss didn't check them before setting it off."

Taasha just stares at him. "I thought you were undecided."


Taasha eyes the pile of rubble. Yes, this is the temper she remembers from Hisrad. That justified rage.

"I left your evidence in the Val Chevin dead drop," Hisrad continues, turning to Taasha. "Only had time to write a quick note before you guys got here, but it hits the highlights. No matter what happens, the Ben Hassrath will know you're not responsible for the murders."


"No, not really," Hisrad admits.

He turns away from the pile of rubble, squinting out over the sea, arms folded. Undecided, conflicted, but there's little trace of that defeated acceptance he showed Arvaariss only moments ago.

_Hissrad indeed._

"Killing you would definitely solve a few problems for me," Hisrad says. "Might even get the Ben Hassrath to ease off for a while. Fewer check-ups, a longer leash. I could make up for letting you go all those years ago."

"Vasaad would want you to be safe," Taasha says softly. "And I have my own debt to repay you."

"Taasha was supposed to take point," Hisrad says. "Maybe if she had, Vasaad would still be here."

He winces, rotating his arm carefully, a hand on his bandaged chest. "Problem is, you're not Taasha, are you? I heard those mercenaries call you 'Temperance' yesterday."

Taasha looks over at him. He meets her gaze, briefly, and offers her something like a smile -
exhausted, and pained, but a smile nonetheless.

"What if Taasha, Vasaad, and Hissrad all died that day?" Hissrad says quietly, his voice heavy. "Together, side by side in glorious battle, faithful to the Qun and one another to their last breaths."

The sea and the dusky twilight spreading out before them become hazy in Taasha's vision. She smiles, too. "It's a very pretty lie."

"Well if we can't lie to ourselves, who can we lie to?" Hissrad murmurs.

Temperance holds out her hand and Hissrad... no, the Iron Bull takes it, giving it a firm shake.

"I have a boat waiting below." Temperance starts to say.

There's a shift of rocks from the back of the cavern.

Temperance and the Iron Bull look over, still holding one another's hands, tensing.

Rubble starts to roll away from the smoking pile, boulders and clumps of sand rising and tumbling as a mass of bloodied grey skin begins to emerge, tall horns carving up through the debris. The cavern echoes with a low, seething rumble of building rage, the kind of unstoppable fury only a reaver can summon.

Heart hammering, Taasha tries to reach for her blade, but the Iron Bull does not release her hand. She looks to find him smiling at her, his single-eyed gaze warm and forgiving.

"Live well," he says simply, and throws her from the ledge.

Bull watches Temperance fall as he takes his great axe down from his shoulders, gasping from the pain of its weight. He can barely lift it with his broken collarbone, never mind swing it. Gritting his teeth, he nevertheless feels a welcome swell of relief as he sees Temperance hits the water feet-first, breaking up through the waves moments later with an open-mouthed gasp.

Putting relief aside to draw upon his rage, that much-needed internal inferno, Bull turns on his heel only to immediately take a throwing knife to the shoulder. He collapses to the side with an agonized grunt, instantly paralyzed. In the corner of his vision, a token imbedded in the hilt of the knife glows a familiar, tell-tale lyrium blue.

It doesn't matter now - the how or the why of it all. No, it doesn't matter at all. This was never a fight he was going to win.

But it's not how Bull or Hissrad would have wanted to die, lying prone on the ground as a bloodied, mad-eyed Qunari reaver approaches, half a greatsword in hand; Arvaariss's once-glorious blade has been shattered halfway to the hilt. There's blood in Arvaariss's sharp teeth and dribbling down over his chin, crimson eyes merciless and searing with betrayal and hatred.

This is the true strength and terror of a reaver - one is never more dangerous, more cruel, more deadly, than when one is right on that gory edge between life and death, steps and breaths and mere heartbeats from the end.

This is how Hissrad would have wanted to die, and for an obscure moment, Bull almost envies Arvaariss. The very picture of a proper Qunari, right to his last.

For his part, the Iron Bull wanted to at least go out swinging, damn it.
But here he lies, broken and tired, rendered utterly helpless. He should be struggling, screaming his own rage as Arvaariss shambles forward, meeting bloody teeth with bloody teeth and broken blade with broken blade.

There is nothing to struggle against.

Bull has never liked that line of the Qun. So much of his life has been a struggle, feeling torn up from the outside in and back again.

There is nothing to struggle against.

Bull saved one last friend, just one more life, one more time. It will have to be enough.

"You shameful, traitorous, misshapen waste," Arvaariss snarls, collapsing to his knees at Bull's side. He spits blood onto the rock beneath them like a curse. "Hisrad."

"My name," Bull says, every word an effort, "is the Iron fucking Bull."

Arvaariss lets loose an animalistic, gargling roar, and unsheathes his kata-kas.

Bull closes his eye - he doesn't need to see this bit, and he's already given Arvaariss far too much of his last few moments.

He hasn't been the Iron Bull for very long, but he tries to be proud of what life he has to recall nonetheless. He's damn proud of his Chargers, of course. They'll get on just fine. They have each other, after all. Strange, to spend years building a family and never really realizing you've been a part of it all along.

Krem'll be fucked for a while, but Bull's glad he left that letter for him. It doesn't say everything it should, not by half, but he's sure Krem knows the rest. Not everything has to be said to be felt.

Mahanon. His kadan.

There's no time to dwell on how things ended this afternoon, and Bull is selfish; he thinks only of Mahanon's smile, his eyes, every warm and open curve and angle of his body. Bull lets himself imagine he's about to fall asleep at the end of a long day, Mahanon pressed close against his side and already sleeping soundly, safe and happy. His.

A pretty lie, as Taasha would say, but one that feels right and true.

Look, kadan, Bull thinks to himself. Look who I am, at the end of it all. Look who I could've been with you.

Thank you for this.

He opens his eye just as Arvaariss strikes down with the kata-kas, the perfectly-honed blade flashing in the twilight.

The point stops an inch from Bull's eye.

Bull blinks. Mercy?

No, not mercy. A thin, crackling barrier of energy, surrounding Bull like a gossamer shroud.

And a familiar voice echoing from the back of the cavern, made almost unrecognizable by cold, terrifying fury.
"Get the fuck away from him."

There's something like a small explosion of lightning and Arvaariss is thrown back, tumbling head over heels to the other side of the cavern.

The gaatlok left only a slight gap between the cave-in and the tunnel entrance. Only the narrowest slip of space to squeeze through.

Perfect, if one were small enough, and flexible enough, and daring enough. Perfect, for an elf with the nickname "Mouse."

Mahanon throws himself staff-first into the cavern and races to Bull's side, trailing sparks as he goes.

"Paralysis," Bull grunts as Mahanon drops to his knees beside him. "Knife."

Lips pressed tight, Mahanon yanks the small throwing knife from Bull's shoulder.

The paralysis does not lift.

"Blood magic," Mahanon whispers. "It's in the blade."

In the corner, Arvaariss pushes himself to his feet with a harsh, ragged snarl. A shadow of genuine terror crosses Mahanon's face at the sound.


Mahanon closes his eyes, takes a long, trembling breath, and shakes his head. When he opens his eyes again the fear is still present, but vastly outweighed by stubborn anger.

Mahanon rises to his feet, pulling a potion from his belt pouch and downing it in one swift movement. Across the cave, Arvaariss does the same, one healing potion after another, his eyes almost glowing crimson in the dark.

"You should know, Hissrad, that I will take no pleasure in this," Arvaariss says, though the fury and blood rage threading through his voice belies his words. "The bas saarebas will die screaming on your account. Is this what you betrayed your people for?"

Bull tries to ignore him, tries to fight the paralysis with every shrieking nerve, every useless muscle, as Mahanon brings his staff up to guard. "Go, Mouse. That's- fuck, that's an order, damn it!"

Mahanon barely flicks an ear, eyes fixed on Arvaariss. "I don't work for you anymore, remember?"

"Pity," Arvaariss says, reaching up to touch that terrible token in his chest. "Hissrad claimed you were clever."

Bull tenses, remembering the mage mercenary from the tunnels, preparing himself for Mahanon's pained screams-

Nothing happens.

Arvaariss frowns, stabbing his forefinger against the token with a frustrated growl. Mahanon watches coolly.

"You know something?" Mahanon says. "I am pretty fucking clever, actually."
He drops his empty potion bottle, and as it clatters to the ground, Bull sees drops of grainy purple liquid clinging to the glass. *Magebane."

Mahanon, his *kadan*, plans to try and take down a full reaver-trained Ben Hassrath enforcer at his most dangerous, with no magic.

"Please," Bull says, his voice breaking.

Mahanon ignores him and crouches, stormy eyes glinting in the dark as Arvaariss bares his bloody teeth and hefts his broken greatsword.

"You will not get past me," Mahanon whispers, something like a threat and a prayer in equal measure.

Arvaariss lets loose a bellowing roar and Mahanon answers with a primal scream, something one might only hear in the darkest depths of an ancient, shadowy forest, and the two lunge at one another to meet with a crash of weapons in the ruins of the smuggler's cave.

Chapter End Notes

"Ataash varin kata. Meravas." = in the end lies glory. so shall it be.
About a month after Bull recruited Mahanon, they had their first real scrum clearing out a nest of bandits along the coastline. Mahanon was new to the crew and new to the life, still awkwardly transitioning from his rigid Lavellan training to the more fluid and natural fighting styles Bull and Skinner were teaching him.

Mahanon was almost killed in that fight. Bull remembers it distinctly, sometimes has nightmares where things go the other way.

Grim was pinned down, stuck between a proficient daggerman and an Avvar outcast with a wicked curved blade. Despite having little close-quarters combat training, Mahanon threw himself between Grim's blind side and the Avvar, coming so close to having his head lopped off by Avvar's scythe that he actually had a few curls clipped by the blade. As it was, he did not come out of the encounter unscathed.

Mahanon was one of a few injuries that day - Grim had a few fingers broken and caught a nasty slice from the daggerman, Rocky took a black eye, and Krem cracked a tooth. All in all, the gash along Mahanon's thigh was almost negligible. Not life-threatening, and Mahanon set about stitching it up himself once Stitches confirmed that the wound wasn't deep enough to kill him.

But Bull saw what almost happened. How it happened. And how it happened was a problem.

Bull came and sat with Mahanon as the elf carefully worked the sharp hook in and out of his skin, biting his lip with a frown against the pain. Elfroot salve helped, but couldn't numb the wound completely. He'd cut open his leggings for better access while maintaining his dignity - there was a long walk back to camp yet before them.

They were out of earshot of the other Chargers, which was good. Bull didn't like admonishing his
people in front of each other if the matter was serious. Humiliation as a learning tool was only helpful if everyone could laugh at themselves at the end of the day, and Bull wasn't laughing about this.

"I've seen a lot of guys go down taking a sword to the thigh like that," Bull said quietly. Mahanon wasn't looking at him, eyes focused on his work, but he started to slowly shrink into himself at Bull's tone. Even back then, even when Bull was still trying to convince himself he had nothing but a professional and, yeah, maybe physical interest in Mahanon, it was fucking hard to tell him off for anything. The moment those ears started to droop Bull couldn't help but feel like he was kicking a puppy. "A few inches deeper..."

Mahanon nodded, very slightly. "I'm sorry, Chief."

"What for?" It wasn't a rhetorical question.

"I-" Mahanon swallowed hard, still carefully sewing himself back together. "I used the wrong block."

Bull blinked. "What?"

"It was such a stupid - I don't know, I stopped thinking, and I fell back into bad habits," Mahanon said, shaking his head. "I'll go over it next time we train, I promise. It won't happen again."

"Mouse," Bull said, incredulous. For a moment he wasn't sure if Mahanon was fucking with him or not, but... no, Mahanon was being earnest. "It's not about the block."

Mahanon paused at that, blinking up at Bull.

"You do get that you're kind of a small guy, right?" Bull said, feeling absurd and - fuck, a bit mean, actually, having to spell things out like this. "You're a mage. Means you get to hang back and do mage shit. No one's expecting you to pull any heroics, and you don't have to try and prove yourself by getting sliced in half by the meanest fucker on the field."

"I wasn't - fuck, I wasn't trying to show off or anything," Mahanon said quickly, looking mortified and a bit offended at the thought. "I saw what was happening but I was running low on magic and couldn't cast an energy field around Grim in time, so-"

"So you call one of us big fucks over to deal with it," Bull said, frowning as Mahanon shook his head. "That's an order, not a suggestion. We don't do heroics. We're just trying to get the job done."

Mahanon looked back down at his leg, returning to his suturing, and muttered something under his breath.

"Didn't catch that," Bull said.

"I said, 'Krem. '" Mahanon said crisply. "Chief."

Bull glared down Mahanon through his single eye, lips pressed tight together, as the elf continued to quietly work away on his stitches. Somehow, Bull thought this conversation would go a fuck of a lot differently. A few "yes, Chiefs," one or two "no, Chiefs," a "so very sorry, Chief," and that would be that.

But that's not why Bull recruited Mahanon, and it wasn't why he was so damn interested in the elf despite himself. It's because this tiny mage who flinched if too many people spoke to him at once,
who seemed constantly embarrassed by his own existence and was only now just slowly beginning to become more settled in himself, drifting and quiet and awkward and strange... this damn elf, at the end of the day, could calmly and politely throw Bull's whole damn point back in his face, and carry on with his task as if he hadn't just pissed off his seven-foot Qunari commander.

Bull couldn't tell if Mahanon was afraid of almost everything, or completely fucking fearless. And in all honesty, he wasn't even really that pissed.

"What happened when I met Krem happened on my downtime," Bull said gruffly, and he could have sworn he saw Mahanon's lips twitch into a triumphant little smirk. Clearly the elf had noted Bull's momentary pause. "When you're working for me, no fucking heroics. It's all fun and games until someone gets killed. No more going head-to-head with fuckers twice your size, no matter how much you fancy Grim."

That startled an offended noise out of Mahanon, and he cursed as his hand slipped and he poked himself with the hook. "I do not fancy Grim!"

"Could've fooled me," Bull shrugged. "Thought maybe you were trying to impress him."

"Well, that wouldn't be very professional now, would it?" Mahanon said tersely.

Bull smirked and ruffled Mahanon's curls, fingers tingling from the sparks, before getting up and leaving a now distinctly irritated little elf to finish his stitching.

Mahanon, of course, never promised not to put himself in harm's way like that again.

Bull has always liked fighters who are willing to shoulder in if something needs doing no matter their specialty. But it did make him nervous sometimes, how Mahanon's instinctive drive to protect was so wildly at odds with his size, stature, and experience. It didn't matter how many times Bull and Skinner dumped him on his ass in training, didn't matter how often the reality of his strengths and weaknesses as a fighter was brought home to him; the only time Bull ever saw that nervous, self-conscious energy Mahanon carried within him at all times, as unpredictable and frenetic as the lightning magic he wielded as easy as breathing... the only time it ever truly fell away was in those moments where Mahanon felt he had someone or something to keep safe from harm.

Which is why Bull knows, with aching, horrified certainty, that it doesn't matter how much breath he wastes bellowing at Mahanon to run. It doesn't matter that Arvaariss is far too much for Mahanon to take on. Mahanon will not give up this fight.

And Bull also knows with equal certainty that he's about to watch his kadan get torn apart in front of him.

But it doesn't happen in the first clash of weapons.

Arvaariss's shattered greatsword comes down on Mahanon's staff, but Mahanon directs the blow to the side and lands a kick under Arvaariss's guard, snapping the heel of his foot right into Arvaariss's burned and bloodied ribs. The gaatlok explosion shattered bone there, if Arvaariss's pained roar is any indication. The reaver recovers by rearing back and swinging the broken blade in a wide, wild arc, but Mahanon drops and rolls out of the way just in time to avoid the blow.

Small and quick.

Bull doesn't dare hope for Mahanon's chances, but... Arvaariss was critically wounded by the explosion-
-making him all the more dangerous-

-and Mahanon is faster now, he's been training to fight without magic-

-for less than a year, against a man who was shaped by his people to be a weapon-

-no, there is no chance, there is no hope. Bull is not so blinded by his feelings for Mahanon to overestimate him.

Bull can see it in Arvaariss's face, too, as Mahanon ducks and dodges his attacks, makes narrow escape after narrow escape. The elf is always defending, rarely managing to land an offensive strike, and Arvaariss does not waver. The reaver is making the most of his raging fury, but Bull can see that even through his blood rage Arvaariss is far from concerned about how this fight will end. Mahanon will lose momentum eventually; slip, eventually. Victory here for Arvaariss is as inevitable as the Qun, endlessly certain and, in Arvaariss's mind, relentlessly infallible.

Just as Mahanon looks equally certain, equally determined, that he will keep true to his vow; he will not let Arvaariss past him.

Bull struggles against the paralysis gripping his body, snarling in frustration as his limbs weigh him down, keeping him prisoner in his own fucking skin. Arvaariss's throwing knife lies on the rocky cavern floor only inches from his shoulder, and that rune imbedded in the handle is still pulsing lyrium blue. There's nothing Bull can do. Nothing. Nothing but watch.

Mahanon has reach with his staff that Arvaariss does not have, but Arvaariss - in spite of his fury - is far from mindlessly hacking away with his broken sword. He's watching, calculating, crimson eyes narrowed as Mahanon weaves around him, nimble and quick. Mahanon might be fast, but Arvaariss can take far more punishment than him; it would only take one good hit, one mistake on Mahanon's part, one missed step, and this battle will be over.

Bull knows Arvaariss's first priority will be to break Mahanon's staff or wrench it from him; it's what Bull would do. It's what Bull has done, training with Mahanon.

*If someone has an advantage, you take it out of the equation.* Bull has told Mahanon that, right? Does Mahanon remember? Shouting a warning now would only distract the elf, and Bull can only fucking pray that he's been a good enough teacher to him.

And here it is, just as Bull is thinking it - cornering Mahanon against the cavern wall, Arvaariss lunges forward and feigns a swipe at Mahanon's midsection, reversing the arc of the broken blade halfway through the strike to curve up under the staff and catch the pole. Mahanon just manages to avoid being yanked within Arvaariss's deadly reach by releasing the staff with one hand and spinning it neatly back into his grasp, but it leaves him open. Arvaariss presses his advantage and brings his blade down on Mahanon's left forearm.

Mahanon catches the blade on his hard leather wristguard, but his pained shout and the drops of blood that fleck off the jagged point of Arvaariss's sword as the reaver completes the arc of his swing confirm what Bull already knows. The blow might not have severed Mahanon's hand from his wrist as Arvaariss clearly intended, but he's hurt, now. Injuries distract. Injuries weaken. Injuries can slow even the quickest of fighters.

Mahanon ducks under Arvaariss's reach to escape the hard limit of the wall at his back, but Bull sucks in a breath at the direction - instead of retreating towards the cave-in, with a pile of rubble and a narrow escape through the tunnel at hand, Mahanon's position now places him between Arvaariss and the cliff's edge.
It's a mistake. The kind of thoughtless, panicked mistake that Arvaariss will have been waiting for.

Arvaariss does not pause, does not relent. He presses forward in a series of punishing blows, rage fuelling his speed and power as he advances on Mahanon, step after step, crowding him towards the cliff. Mahanon catches each swing of the broken sword by inches, deflecting and stumbling back, blood pouring freely down his arm. The injury seems to have entirely put Mahanon off his rhythm, and Arvaariss clearly knows it. The reaver eagerly presses his advantage as Mahanon struggles to keep up with him with wide and frightened eyes, until they're only steps away from Bull's paralyzed form and a few scarce paces from the cliff's edge.

And there it is; inevitable, utterly inevitable. Mahanon stumbles.

Arvaariss bellows and lunges forward in a powerful overhead strike. Bull watches, trapped in his bones, helplessly impotent to save Mahanon.

Time seems to slow, and Mahanon's eyes flash in the dim twilight.

Mahanon's back foot lands steady on the ground behind him. Bracing. Intentional. That fearful look on his face, that panicky terror, utterly vanishes. As if discarding a mask.

Bull recalls, in a brief flash, a spring day that feels so very long ago. An anxious, misplaced elf mage who tried to take the full impact of a reaver's overhead strike onto his slim arms and shoulders. Entirely unoffended and eager to learn when Bull offered to show him another way.

Bull also thinks of all the people who have underestimated Mahanon - because he seems so small and quiet, strange and shy. The Baron's guards. The Orlesians. Fuck, Bull himself, time and time and time again.

_Dirthara-ma._ That's the Dalish curse, isn't it? "May you learn."

Mahanon catches Arvaariss's blade on his staff and keeps moving, twisting and letting Arvaariss fall forward with the momentum of his own swing. The pole of the staff catches on the cross guard of the blade as Mahanon completes his rotation, his staff blade carving up towards Arvaariss's throat.

Arvaariss throws himself back out of the path of the staff blade with a strangled snarl, forced to release the hilt of his broken sword as he does.

The shattered greatsword flies free, over the side of the cliff and tumbling down, far down to the breakwater below. Despite Arvaariss's quick reflexes, the staff blade doesn't entirely miss the mark, carving a deep cut along thick neck muscle.

Not enough, not deep enough.

Arvaariss screams his fury and lunges to snatch at Mahanon's staff, but Mahanon throws himself under Arvaariss's grasp into a forward roll away from the cliff's edge and deeper into the cavern.

It's a victory, but the battle is far from over. The reaver will not underestimate Mahanon again, Bull knows, and even without his sword Arvaariss is still a terrifying force to reckon with.

Mahanon comes up swinging, aiming a long sweep across Arvaariss's midsection. Arvaariss twists to avoid it, deflects the following stab towards his heart with his steel gauntlet, catches the next blow on his horns with a bloody snarl. Mahanon might be attacking now, but Arvaariss is still advancing on him with single-minded focus. The reaver takes a slash across the chest without a flinch, does not waver when Mahanon's blade skitters off a thigh guard and slices along Arvaariss's
calf. These minor injuries will only spur the Qunari warrior on, Bull knows - to take down a reaver, the death blow will have to be quick and clean and absolute.

Mahanon's brow is furrowed, sweat tangling in his curls and pouring over his skin as he tries again and again to land that final strike, aiming for Arvaariss's heart, his throat, his eyes. Bull can tell that the elf is starting to tire. Arvaariss might have lost the offensive advantage of a blade, but he can outlast Mahanon in this creeping defence, deflecting and dodging as Mahanon hammers away at the reaver to no avail.

Arvaariss ducks another swing, twisting, his unguarded underarm presenting an obvious target. Too obvious.

But Mahanon is desperate and frustrated; Bull can hear it in his voice as Mahanon strikes forward with a strangled shout, eager for the killing blow through the armpit and skewering through Arvaariss's chest.

Arvaariss drops his arm, but does not catch the blade on his shoulder guard as Bull expects him to. Instead, he allows Mahanon to bury the staff blade deep into his bicep, carving straight through flesh and muscle and piercing out the other side.

Bull realizes Arvaariss's plan a half second before Mahanon seems to catch on, but either way, they're both too late. The blade has pierced too deep for Mahanon to easily or quickly dislodge his staff.

Arvaariss presses his skewered arm tight against his body, bracing the blade between bone and muscle, and twists, falling forward. Mahanon leaps out of the way, surrendering his staff to avoid being crushed under Arvaariss. Arvaariss hits the ground hard, and Bull winces as he hears Mahanon's carefully carved and crafted staff snap like a broken bone. Mahanon's one advantage over Arvaariss, gone.

Run.

Bull can't tell if he thinks this, if he whispers it, if he screams it. Mahanon has an opening: Mahanon's back is to the partially-blocked tunnel and if he turns now, leaves now, Arvaariss won't be able to get to his feet in time to catch him before he slips through that narrow gap. Mahanon can escape. He can live.

Whether Bull says it aloud or no, Mahanon meets his eye from across the cavern. The elf is panting, open-mouthed, blood still dripping down his left arm.

But Mahanon will not run.

Baring his teeth, Mahanon reaches behind himself and unsheathes his father's dagger, laughably small compared to Mahanon's opponent - even if the blade were lodged in Arvaariss's chest Bull doubts it would come close to reaching Arvaariss's shrivelled heart.

Regardless, Mahanon does not hesitate, and he throws himself onto Arvaariss's prone form with another hissing shriek of rage.

Arvaariss twists and catches Mahanon before he can bury his little blade anywhere deadly. The two roll across the cavern floor, tangled up in a bloody embrace, clawing at one another with Arvaariss's snarls matched by Mahanon's furious hisses as he stabs at the reaver again and again - his back, his thick neck, anywhere Mahanon can reach. Arvaariss tries to pin Mahanon down, but Mahanon is pressed too close against him to get a grip on, his legs wrapped tight around
Arvaariss's torso as he catches Arvaariss's gnashing teeth against his bloodied wristguard. The reaver falls on Mahanon, tries to crush him, tries to throw him off, but Mahanon is tenacious and will not let go.

Arvaariss roars. A flash of those steel gauntlets, and Mahanon's enraged hisses break into a terrible scream of pain as Arvaariss claws at his back and finally rips through his thin leather armour, the spiked and sharpened tips of the gauntlets carving deep, bloody slashes into his skin.

Bull can only watch. Can only lie there and watch.

Arvaariss twists again, and Bull sees the reaver's own back and shoulders are peppered with open, bloody wounds, the results of Mahanon's endless efforts with his dagger. He also sees Mahanon's face over Arvaariss's shoulder, covered in blood, creased in agony and wild rage. Frustration. Pain. This isn't working - Mahanon can stab at Arvaariss's back all he wants, but his dagger is too small to achieve the depth needed to hit anything vital. He can't keep his grip on Arvaariss forever. The reaver is still shredding his skin with his pointed gauntlets, still ripping into him, and every second Mahanon spends uselessly stabbing into Arvaariss's thick muscles brings him closer to being entirely flayed alive.

Still thinking. Still calculating, even now. Bull can see it.

Gritting his teeth, Mahanon rears back as if to allow enough room to slash at Arvaariss's neck. Arvaariss takes the opening, quick as a snake. He pulls his bloody gauntleted hands back, one guarding his throat as the other shoves at Mahanon hard, dislodging the elf from his death grip on the reaver as Mahanon strikes.

Mahanon's swipe misses the mark - misses the mark so badly, in fact, it's as if he was never aiming for Arvaariss's neck, instead slashing down in a shallow strike at Arvaariss's chest.

Arvaariss suddenly emits a harrowing scream, and he surges upward, twisting and throwing Mahanon off of him. Mahanon, already off-kilter and weakened, cannot keep his grip and tumbles away from Arvaariss, rolling over and over again until he slams hard against the cavern wall.

Mahanon lies there, panting and unmoving, crumpled and vulnerable, clenching something bloody and silver tight in his left hand, the object pulsing with a lyrium-blue glow that rapidly fades with every breath.

Arvaariss stumbles to his feet, massive sloping shoulders rising and falling with heaving breaths as he advances on Mahanon, his gauntlets clenched tight enough to pierce his own flesh. Bull struggles to move, knowing it's pointless, knowing the paralysis is too strong.

Mahanon tries to push himself up, his entire body trembling with exhaustion, but his arms give out from under him. He collapses again to the cavern floor, utterly spent.

"You are nothing," Arvaariss spits, looming over him. "Nothing!"

Arvaariss falls to his knees beside the elf, blood pouring from the gaping wound in his chest where the implanted silver token used to be.

Used to be, before Mahanon carved it out of him.

(Beside Bull, the flickering lyrium light of the paralysis rune set in Arvaariss's throwing knife flares and goes out.)

Mahanon grips the silver token implant tight in his hand, Arvaariss's blood and severed flesh
squelching in his palm, and closes his eyes.

Arvaariss wraps his gauntleted hand around Mahanon's throat.

Bull slams into Arvaariss from the side, nearly a half-second too late - a sharp point from Arvaariss's gauntlets catches Mahanon's face and carves a long, deep cut from cheekbone to chin, but Bull hears Mahanon cough and wheeze, alive. Alive.

The pain is there, the agony is there from his many injuries, but Bull is a reaver too. There's blood in the air and pain to be had and it doesn't fucking matter whose it is, he will not lose his kadan again.

Arvaariss snarls and crashes his gauntleted fist into the side of Bull's head, lacerating flesh, but Bull barely feels it. He falls onto Arvaariss with a roar, tearing at the Qunari with his bare hands, surrendering to his own fury. They lock horns, twisting and tumbling, and he feels Arvaariss's gauntlets rip into his skin again and again and does not care, does not care-

The cavern suddenly lights up with a blinding flash, a crackle of hot-cold energy, an echoing rumble of thunder, and Mahanon's voice cuts through Bull's rage as he shouts, "Get back!"

Bull cannot think, but he does not have to think. It's his kadan. It's not a decision to obey so much as instinct.

Bull throws himself back from Arvaariss despite everything, everything within him screaming to continue pounding at the reaver until there's nothing left of him, damn whatever consequences. He tries to look to Mahanon, but he can't - he can see a few newly-discarded empty lyrium vials littering the ground around Mahanon, but Mahanon himself is so lit up with sparks and crackling threads of lightning that he can only barely see the slightest form of an elf beneath it all.

Arvaariss, seemingly on instinct at the sight of magic, smacks at his chest to touch a token that is no longer there.

Mahanon is on his knees, barely keeping himself upright, but lightning gathers along his arms as he points his father's dagger at Arvaariss's heart as a makeshift magical focus, energy gathering and building and crackling-

With one more primal roar of fury, Arvaariss staggers to his feet and tries, one last time, to throw himself at Mahanon.

There's an utterly blinding flash, a crack of thunder louder than a gaatlok explosion, deafening in the echoing space of the cavern.

Then, nothing.

Bull's ears ring, and he cannot tell if this is truly silence, or oblivion. The flash of the lightning bolt has seared itself into his vision, echoing in bright bursts, and there is nothing.

Slowly, painfully slowly, black becomes grey, then muted twilight. The distant roll of waves begin to overtake his ringing ears.

There's a shuffling sound, and Bull blinks blinded tears from his eye to see a bloody and utterly exhausted Mahanon drag himself the final few paces to Arvaariss's smoking body where it lies upon the cavern floor, a disgusting, bloodied heap. Mahanon keeps his father's dagger gripped tight in his hand, even as it sizzles with ebbing heat, the silver of the blade blackened by the lightning bolt it channeled.
Shaking violently, Mahanon takes one of Arvaariss's tall, curving horns in his hand, twisting the
dead Qunari's head up to face him.

It's slow. Almost methodical, careful and calculating, as Mahanon slides his dagger deep into the
reaver's eye, and twists. Just to be sure.

Bull gets it. He would have done the same.

Mahanon lets Arvaariss's head drop to the ground with a resolute thud.

And it's done.

The elf stares at the body. Mahanon is bloody and grey, his eyes enormously wide. Shock, entirely
in shock.

Pain washes over Bull again, pain he cannot twist to make a weapon of. Physical pain, yes, but
pain also to see the lines of horror now etched into Mahanon's kind face.

Bull cannot haul himself up to his feet, and so he drags himself as Mahanon did, pulling himself
inch by painful inch until he's by Mahanon's side. He forces himself up to his knees, and Mahanon
does not look at him, still staring down at the corpse, blood dripping and pooling around him from
his flayed back, his sliced-up wrist, his face. Far too much blood.

Bull reaches out to Mahanon. "Kadan."

He really should expect Mahanon to punch him in the face.

He doesn't, though.

It's a hard punch, too, catching Bull square between the eyes - well, eye and eyepatch - and nearly
blinding him for another few moments. When his vision clears, Mahanon is no longer gazing with
terrible wide-eyed vacancy at the corpse. Instead, he stares up at Bull with wild-eyed rage, baring
his teeth, his fist pulled back as if ready to deliver another blow.

"You," Mahanon snarls, reaching forward and grabbing Bull by his weapons harness with his
bloody left hand, hauling himself up and forward until they're nearly nose-to-nose. "How
fucking dare you. How-" Mahanon hisses a string of words in what Bull recognizes as the Sliabh
dialect, his slight frame trembling as sparks spill over his skin, zapping Bull with sharp little
pinpricks wherever they land. Bull doesn't pull away. "You - you did whatever the fuck you did
and I woke up and you were gone, you - how could you, how-"

Mahanon's voice catches and breaks, tears spilling over his cheeks as he crumbles into open-mouth
sobs, burying his face in Bull's shoulder even as he hits him again, a weak shove against Bull's
aching chest. Bull moves slowly, uncertainly, testing every inch as he puts his arms around
Mahanon, relieved when Mahanon only cries harder but wraps his arms tight around Bull's neck
and shoulders in response.

"You broke my fucking heart, you bastard," Mahanon sobs, his body shuddering in Bull's embrace,
unable to fully catch his breath for weeping. "How could you do that to me, how-? Fuck, Mythal'enaste, I thought-"

"Kadan," Bull murmurs, pressing his hand to the wounds carved into Mahanon's back. They're
depth, far too deep, far too much blood spilling between Bull's fingers. "Kadan, please, you're-"

"What does it mean?" Mahanon demands, pulling back from Bull and looking him hard in the eye,
his own eyes bloodshot and wet, tears mingling with sweat and blood on his face. "What does 'kadan' mean to you, Bull?"

"Your back-"

"Tell me what it fucking means!"

There's still so much blood and Bull can tell, searching Mahanon's desperate expression, that he already knows what the word means. Of course he already knows. Maybe he read it somewhere, maybe Taasha told him.

But knowing, and hearing it. Hearing it said aloud, hearing it confirmed. Lifting the fog between them and knowing that they're really, truly standing side by side, and have been all along. It shouldn't matter more than bleeding out, than how hurt they both are in body and spirit, but it does. Of course it does.

Bull keeps a hand pressed to Mahanon's back, still trying to staunch the flow of blood, but puts another on Mahanon's face.

"It means 'my heart,'" Bull says, and Mahanon closes his eyes, taking a long, shuddering breath. "It means... you."

Mahanon nods, and breathes, and settles. Relaxes in Bull's arms, despite everything. He opens his eyes, and that wild look is gone, and Mahanon is calm.

"If you ever pull something like this again, I will lop your horns off myself and whittle them into little nugs," Mahanon says, almost conversationally.

Bull winces. "Understood, boss."

"I mean it," Mahanon says, deadly serious. "You can't - I don't fucking care what you thought you were doing, I make my own decisions. You took that away from me. You took my choice away from me. You weren't protecting me, you hurt me."

"I know," Bull says. "I'm sorry. You're losing a lot of blood, we need to-"

"Swear you won't ever do that to me again. Promise me."

"Kadan-"

"Promise me."

Stubborn elf.

But fuck, Bull doesn't blame him.

Bull takes Mahanon's bloody hands in his own bloody hands, Mahanon watching him with cool authority as Bull bows his head.

"I let you down, and I hurt you," Bull says quietly. "I fucked up. I swear on my life I won't ever violate your trust like that again."

Mahanon's eyes flick down to Bull's arm and the branching lightning welts, and back up to Bull's face. He nods.

"Alright," Mahanon says, squeezing Bull's hands. "Anything else - everything else... we'll deal with

Then Mahanon's face crumples into a pronounced wince, and he slumps with a long groan. "Fuck, I feel terrible."

"It's the blood loss."

"I know it's the fucking blood loss."

There aren't many healing potions to spare, and the damage is far beyond the powers of elfroot to fix, but they take as much as they have to slow the bleeding and clear up the smaller cuts and bruises. Bull eyes their surroundings as they split the potions between themselves and toss them back one at a time, thinking. Mahanon is far too weak to slip through the gap in the rubble and run for help. Bull could widen the gap so he could make it through as well, but he can't carry Mahanon in this state; his collarbone is entirely broken, he's losing blood too, and the blood rage that bore him through his brief contribution to the fight with Arvaariss has long since cooled. They could risk the climb down the cliff, trusting in the water to catch them if they should fall, but they're both far too fucked to swim. They're stuck.

One thing at a time.

Bull pulls a roll of bandages from his injury kit as Mahanon discards the remains of his leather armour, swaying on his knees as he does. Bull puts the bandages aside and helps Mahanon with his tunic and undershirt, a dance of undressing they've completed many times before under far better circumstances. It's familiar motions, familiar movements, and Mahanon's eyes are exhausted and hurt but trusting as he turns to allow Bull to tend to his back.

Bull's been on far too many battlefields to react the way a normal man might react at the sight of Mahanon's wounds. Arvaariss's gauntlets have rent deep, ragged gashes through Mahanon's smooth skin, in some places carving nearly through to the bone. Bull can only assume that Mahanon's pain has been numbed by shock and battle fever.

Mahanon looks over his shoulder at Bull, pained stormy eyes questioning and maybe a little fearful. All that uncharacteristic calm, cold certainty has slipped from his expression.

Bull kisses Mahanon's brow. "You're gonna be alright, kadan."

"Don't bullshit me," Mahanon murmurs. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Bull nods as he starts to wrap the bandages tight around Mahanon's midsection. They don't have anything to clean the wounds with, so Bull can only hope the elfroot potions Mahanon took will stave off infection until Stitches can deal with it all properly. "It's bad. But you're a tough little guy, yeah?"

Mahanon nods, and slumps, Bull quickly catching him in his arms. "I... killed a Ben Hassrath."

"Fuck yeah you did," says Bull, and Mahanon huffs a pained laugh. Blood immediately starts to seep through the bandaging, so Bull balls up the remains of Mahanon's shirt and presses it tight to Mahanon's back. "Not just any Ben Hassrath either, a fucking Qunari reaver."

Mahanon grips Bull's arms, shaky and grey, but smiling as he says, "Was it as sexy to watch as it sounds?"
"Kadan, if we both weren't critically fucking injured I would have you right here and now."

Mahanon raises an eyebrow. "Who's to say I wouldn't have you?"

"Think you could take down two reavers in one night?"

"Try me," Mahanon grins, then bites back a pained sound as he spasms. "Or - fuck, maybe not."

"I believe you," Bull says. "You're going easy on me, I get it."

Mahanon leans away from Bull and frowns. "We have more bandages, right?"

"Nah, that's it-" Bull catches Mahanon's hands as he starts to unwind the bandages around his midriff. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"You're hurt..." Mahanon says vaguely, his eyes losing focus as he waves at Bull's shoulders. Bull's starting to feel it; Arvaariss carved him up damn good with those gauntlets too while they were wrestling on the ground, and the long stitched slash under his arm has ripped open again. But he shakes his head.

"I'm okay for now," Bull says, pulling Mahanon close against him with a grimace of pain as he settles back against the cavern wall. It's fully night now, and the wind coming up off the water is freezing, as if to remind them that they're only a few weeks into spring. Bull grinds his teeth, his heart jumping as Mahanon's eyes drift closed. He gives Mahanon a gentle shake. "Stay with me, yeah? We've got a long night to get through."

"S'alright," Mahanon says, pressing his face into Bull's shoulder. "Chargers'll be here soon."

Bull smiles, his heart aching at the certainty in Mahanon's voice. "They're good, kadan, but I don't know that they're that good."

Mahanon reaches up a bloody hand as if to caress Bull's face. Instead, he zaps Bull's nose with a sharp sting. "I'm not that far gone, you ass. I left a note for Krem. Told him you were doing something stupid and where to find us."

Bull rubs his sore nose but laughs despite himself, despite the pain, his head falling back against the cavern wall in relief. "Thank fuck for my smart kadan. Looks and brains!"

"Stop," Mahanon mutters, but his ears perk a bit at the compliments. "I'm only taking a brief break from being extremely fucking crossed with you because I'm tired."

"I know," Bull says, sobering. "We have a lot to talk about."

Mahanon nods. "Later, though."

"Later."

The frigid wind picks up, and they both shiver. Bull curls as much of his mass around Mahanon as he can to try to keep him warm, but Mahanon is still trembling, and they're both cold, they're both far past the point of exhaustion, they're both bleeding.

Bull presses his forehead to Mahanon's, and Mahanon shifts close, struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Hey," Bull whispers. "I let Temperance go. She's safe."
Mahanon's eyes crinkle around the edges, soft and smiling. Proud, and Bull's heart lifts to see it. "Of course you did."

Minutes pass, maybe hours, and Bull doesn't know when Mahanon loses his struggle to stay awake. One moment Mahanon's eyes are open, and then they're closed and Mahanon is limp in Bull's arms, and Bull cannot rouse him again.

Bull curses and holds him tight and counts Mahanon's breaths, the slight rise and fall of his shoulders, the soft movement of air against Bull's skin even as Bull drifts, in and out, his ears ringing again, louder and louder-

The ringing becomes shouting, and the crash and clatter of rocks against the cavern floor, rumbling and footsteps, and more shouting. Mahanon starts to pull away - no, Mahanon is pulled away, and Bull fights to hold on, snarling and blinded by exhaustion-

"Easy, Chief, easy." A familiar voice, and familiar hands on Bull's arms, his wrists, gently coaxing Bull to release his death grip on Mahanon. "It's just us, we've got him. We've got you both, yeah?"

"Krem," Bull murmurs, and then the ringing in his ears overtakes all the noise until everything goes utterly silent and black.

Chapter End Notes

SONG REC: North and South by Hey Marseilles
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

FOUR TIMES. THAT'S HOW MANY TIMES I REWROTE THIS CHAPTER. FOUR. OVER AND OVER AGAIN. THESE GODDAMN BOYS.

Song recs:

Rules for Lovers by Richard Walters (GOD BLESS YOU STITCH IT'S SO FUCKING PERFECT FOR THIS CHAPTER)

Dream by Tessa Violet

Playlist link here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later, neither Bull nor Mahanon will remember much about the long, stumbling walk back through the tunnels to the inn.

Stitches gets them both fixed up enough to move, but even then Bull has to rely on Grim and Krem supporting him every painful step of the way. Skinner and Stitches take turns half-carrying Mahanon, who is barely conscious even after Stitches poured enough potions and liquids down the elf's throat to replace the blood he lost several times over.

It feels like days. Long, painful days spent in the gloomy dark of the Val Chevin under city. Bull isn't surprised when they finally emerge from the tunnels to find that they've come out the other side of the night, a bright pink dawn lighting up the streets around them.

Bull trades a grateful look with Mahanon, though the look is paired with distinct grimaces. They both look far worse in the light of the new day than either of them had anticipated.

But they're both alive.

Exhausted as he is, Mahanon still manages to put his foot down when the Chargers try to help him back to his own room, ignoring very sensible arguments about the tiny size of the beds at the inn and the need for a proper rest.

"I'm going to fall asleep either way," Mahanon snaps, "and when I wake up I'll probably want to shout at Bull for another good long while and I don't want to have to walk any sort of distance to do so."

None of the Chargers can fault the reasoning, Bull himself included. So Mahanon is placed in Bull's room, where he immediately - as promised - slips into a deep sleep once armour, belts, and weaponry are removed and accounted for. He does not wake even as Stitches tends to them both, suturing wounds and packing herb poultices under layers upon layers of bandaging, shaking his head and muttering all the while.

Feeling a bit hazy himself between the potions, the welcome heat of the nearby fire, and his own exhaustion, Bull notices Krem moving through the room over Stitches' shoulder. Krem pauses at
the desk, his fingertips trailing over a folded piece of parchment with his name on it. The letter Bull left for him.

Krem doesn't look at Bull, or speak, but Bull is certain that Krem knows Bull is watching him.

Coolly, calmly, Krem sweeps the letter off the desk. Without so much as unfolding it, Krem takes the letter over to the fire and tosses it into the flames, taking up the iron poker propped up against the fireplace and stoking the fire with a few aggressive stabs at the embers.

Bull blinks, and suddenly Stitches and Krem are gone, the fire reduced to smouldering coals, and the windows are shuttered tight against an early afternoon sun.

There's shifting and quiet, anxious murmuring at his side. Bull turns his head with effort to see Mahanon's slight form tossing in the sheets, eyes closed but his brow furrowed, his breathing ragged.

Bull searches through the blankets until he finds a slim elven hand and takes it firmly in his own, rubbing a thumb over heavy bandages. Mahanon stills, his breaths becoming slow and even, and even in his sleep he tightens his grip around Bull's hand and doesn't let go.

The room swims and dissolves into a feverish nothing. When Bull next wakes, the bed is empty next to him.

He lifts his head to see a slight figure at the window, barely lit by dusk, clutching the wall to support himself as he squints through the slats.

"You shouldn't be up," Bull rasps, and coughs.

"I wanted to see what time it was," Mahanon says, his voice sounding equally rough. He turns to Bull, his eyes glinting in the dim light. "How are you?"

"Oh, you know," Bull says, pushing himself up with a pronounced wince. "Can't complain. You?"

"I've certainly had better days," Mahanon says. "Of course, it's not exactly day anymore."

"Not exactly."

Mahanon makes his way back to the bed, his movements slow and stiff. Bull forces himself to watch, forces himself to take in the sight of Mahanon wrapped in thick bandages, every step causing obvious pain. Bull's well-versed in how wounds heal over time; some sink back into the skin as if they were never there, and others linger.

No matter Stitches' skills, the damage to Mahanon's back will linger. The gash cutting along his cheekbone down to his chin will linger. Thick scars pull and ache, make you feel older and slower than you are. Unavoidable, really, in a mercenary's life, and Mahanon has his own persistent aches already. But the guilt Bull feels...

The guilt Bull feels will not heal Mahanon, nor will it help either of them. He lets himself look away.

One of the Chargers must have dropped by the room while they were both asleep and left a tray for them laden with fruits, breads, cheeses, and seed cakes, as well as tall jugs of water and another round of potions. Mahanon and Bull sit side by side on the edge of the mattress and work through the food with occasional winces and bitten back grunts and gasps of pain. The next day after a hard fight is always the worst, once all the aches have had a chance to settle deep into the bones.
Among the many pains afflicting Bull is a familiar ache in his face; he's been wearing his eyepatch for too long. Stitches never touches it unless he has to - none of the Chargers do. It's a respect thing. Bull appreciates it.

So, gritting his teeth, Bull tries to reach up and unfasten it. Of course, lifting his arms becomes a pretty tall fucking order with a broken collarbone to contend with.

Mahanon glances over at Bull's pained and irritated growling and touches Bull's shoulder. Mahanon doesn't ask aloud. Just looks up at the strap fastened around Bull's horn, and meets Bull's frustrated expression with a practical one. No pity.

Bull sighs, hesitates, and tilts his head down.

Mahanon is quick-fingered and gentle, and Bull's next sigh is one of relief as the strap comes free, relieving the aching pressure on his bruises. Mahanon hands the patch to Bull with a half-smile and returns to his food, and it's as simple as that.

Once he finishes eating, Bull puts his plate aside and reaches over to grab the first of a fuckton of healing potions. He pauses as he feels a full-body shiver, head to toe. Patches of dirt and streaks of blood and sweat evaporate from his skin, the remains of his clothes, the bedsheets around him.

Bull looks at Mahanon to see the elf's hands outstretched, little sparks of magic still clinging to his fingertips. Mahanon shrugs with a wince.

"We both smelled pretty awful," Mahanon says by way of explanation. His eyes lose focus and he slowly doubles over, head in his hands. "Shit."

"I guess it's too late to warn you not to overdo it, huh?" Bull says, and Mahanon weakly flips him off. He puts the potions aside and helps Mahanon back into bed, ignoring the stabbing ache of his broken collarbone as he moves. Mahanon allows himself to be shifted and tucked back under the sheets, accepting each potion Bull passes him with a quiet, grateful nod.

Bull takes his own potions and settles himself back, and then there's really nothing left but the bustle and chatter of the evening outside the window and throughout the inn surrounding them, and a slowly thickening silence between them.

Bull turns his head. Mahanon is lying on his side, his eyes downcast, fiddling with the sheets.

"Fragile" is not the right word to apply to an elf who fought and killed a blood raging Ben Hassrath reaver only one night previous, but there is a nervous and tenuous energy in how Mahanon is holding himself. Bull knows the elf well enough to know when his anxiety is rattling him. Usually, Bull has a pretty good idea of how to proceed, how to help.

But that's the thing about problems. They're always far easier to solve with distance. Far easier for Bull to soothe Mahanon's troubled thoughts when he knows for certain he's not the cause of them.


Mahanon pauses with his fiddling, clenching the blankets tight in his bandaged hands. He shakes his head slowly. "We should, but I can't tonight. I'm too tired, and it's all so close... I'm sorry."

Bull opens his mouth to offer to leave and give Mahanon some space - it would take some fucking effort, but he thinks he can manage the short walk to Mahanon's room - and stops. Thinks.

Offering to leave would be the courteous thing to do, wouldn't it? It really is a small bed, and Bull
is taking up most of it. Mahanon is tucked in his usual spot between Bull and the wall, and Bull has no fucking clue why Mahanon always insists on placing himself there; Bull can't imagine how claustrophobic it must be to lack an easy escape if needed. He's offered Mahanon the free side time and time again, but the elf always turns it down.

It's an odd habit of Mahanon's that Bull has noticed, how he seeks out these cramped places for comfort. It was always a source of easy entertainment for Bull on that ship from Bastion to try and ferret out where Mahanon was hiding when the crew and passengers became too loud or friendly for Mahanon's nerves to take. Under the stairs, in the slightest gap between crates, down amongst the luggage and saddlebags, in the darkest corners of the galley. Mahanon once curled up to read in a pile of discarded rope netting and managed to get so tangled that Bull had to help him free, Mahanon beet red and stammering apologies all the while.

Strange. Mahanon is so strange and quiet, and Bull loves him so fucking much, and even just the freedom to think this is overwhelming. If he could, if they were different people in different circumstances, Bull would never stop talking about his kadan.

Keeping Mahanon for himself has always felt utterly selfish. Selfish, that he gets to be the one to hunt for Mahanon in the quiet corners, who gets to hear his unexpected thoughts and calm his endless nerves. It has always felt like borrowed time from someone else, someone better.

In the interest of proving this to Mahanon, Bull has tried to offer him every ounce of freedom he can. No expectations, no burden of attachments beyond friendship. He's always known it wasn't what either of them wanted, but it felt safer, kinder, not to bind Mahanon to someone like Bull the way people in love are bound.

But.

If the Qun has taught Bull anything, anything at all, it's that freedom looks completely different to different people.

Maybe freedom looks different for an elf who has never felt certain of his place in the world, who has been given up and left behind and overlooked time and time again. Maybe freedom looks different to someone who has experienced true, deep loneliness, who might fear being left alone again. Bull guessed, instinctively, that Mahanon might find sexual freedom in bondage; freedom from shame, freedom to trust and breathe. Surely, this isn't much different.

Maybe freedom and security are not entirely opposing forces. Isn't security what has kept Bull bound to the Qun, in spite of everything? Hasn't he always criticized the bas for not understanding that there really is a kind of freedom to be found in the Qun?

Mahanon is curled up in the small sliver of bed between Bull and the wall and there's barely an inch of space between them. But it's where Mahanon likes to be, quietly contained, and maybe there's a security in small spaces that Bull doesn't have to understand to respect and appreciate. To trust that Mahanon is, and always has been, exactly where he wants to be.

Maybe Bull doesn't have to feel that he deserves Mahanon to do right by him. To make sure that this strange and quiet elf never feels lonely again.

And Bull thinks, maybe, he knows how to help Mahanon tonight.

Bull reaches between them, those scant few inches, and takes Mahanon's hand in his, bandages and all. Mahanon meets his gaze with a nervous look.
"Hey," Bull says softly. "I love you."

Mahanon's face freezes, then shifts - opening, sort of like a slow-blossoming flower, his eyes widening and lips parting. It shouldn't be a surprise after yesterday, but there's a difference between "kadan," a difference between "my heart," and this. Bull knows that Mahanon will have been carefully hedging his expectations, despite everything.

Mahanon has always been the one to bridge the gaps between them and take these careful steps forward. Always.

*Brave, always so brave. My brave* kadan. Well, Bull can be brave too, damn it.

"We don't have to talk now," Bull continues, reaching over and touching Mahanon's face. It fucking hurts to move, but it's worth it for how Mahanon leans into his touch, the nervous look utterly falling away from his eyes and replaced with soft trust. "But when we do talk, whatever happens, keeping you with me - keeping you, doing right by you... that's gonna be my priority."

Mahanon's eyes fill and he looks away, squeezing Bull's hand. "I can't work for you anymore-"

"I know," Bull says. He smiles. "We'll work something out, if you want to stay with us. I know the Chargers won't want to lose you either."

Mahanon closes his eyes, nodding. "I want to stay." He opens them again, looking up at Bull. "You love me?"

"For a good long while now," Bull says, and Mahanon takes a long, shuddering breath. "Anytime you need to hear it, you let me know. I've got you."

Mahanon curls forward and presses his forehead into Bull's shoulder, hiding his face. Bull doesn't mind. He's happy to be the place where Mahanon hides when he needs to.

"I love you," Mahanon whispers, the words coming out in a breathy rush like a sigh of relief. He huffs. "Now was that so *fucking* hard?"

Bull barks out a laugh despite himself, instantly regretting it as his chest aches in response. After a moment, Mahanon laughs too.

There must be a sleep aid in the potions, because one moment Bull and Mahanon are murmuring to one another in the soft dusk light, and the next the room is utterly dark and the inn is silent, the shadows stretching into tree limbs around Bull. He breathes in slick, cloyingly humid jungle air, and as he squints into the trees he catches sight of a pair of crimson eyes peering out at him from the darkness.

"Who did you hurt?"

Bull reaches for his great axe, but it's not there - all he has is a dull hatchet for cutting firewood, and the fog is rising.

"Who did you hurt?"

Bull snarls and lunges off the jungle path, into thick underbrush, barrelling towards those hateful crimson eyes. With a flash of lightning the Qunari reaver in his path becomes a backlit shadow, but instead of tall, curving horns Bull sees a flat rack of dragon horns, broad and pointed at the ends.

Bull throws his hatchet with a roar, directly into the shadow of Hissrad's chest, right through the
heart.

There's a pained scream, and when the fog lifts Bull falls to his knees next to the slight, curled-over form of an elf, clutching at the hatchet buried in his chest, fading stormy eyes wide and accusing.

"You hurt me. How could you do that to me?"

And Bull is begging forgiveness from a corpse, but when he lifts his kadān into his arms there's another beneath him, a dead silver-eyed Qunari half-buried in the vines-

Someone tugs on Bull's hand and he turns, and Mahanon is there, alive and warm and smiling. Pulling Bull away from the bodies, the guilt, the regret.

Bull does not resist, and Mahanon leads them both out of the fog.

There's a loud rumble like thunder, and for such a destructive force of nature, Bull can't begin to imagine a more comforting sound.

Bull opens his eye, but the thunder continues.

No, not thunder.

Mahanon is curled close around him, as much as their injuries will allow, and purring - not the lazy, sleepy purr Bull is used to, but a loud, purposeful hum. Grounding Bull, comforting him, bringing him back.

Bull touches Mahanon's curls, and Mahanon turns his face to brush his lips against Bull's wrist, and Bull has no fucking idea if either of them are really awake.

But they're here. Together.

And Bull feels free.

-

The morning light stabs daggers into Mahanon's sensitive eyes.

He groans, covering his face with his hands, and mutters a low and sincere "Fuck."

"Shit. Sorry kadān."

The light dims, and Mahanon risks a peek between his fingers to see Bull at the window, fiddling with the slats.

"You shouldn't be up," Mahanon says groggily.

"If I spend any more time lying down parts of me are gonna start rotting off," Bull grouses. He does come back to bed though, awkwardly using a chair as a makeshift crutch - his leg brace is off, lying with their discarded weapons and belts at the foot of the bed. "Didn't mean to wake you up, though."

"S'alright," Mahanon yawns, sitting up with a sharp hiss. He's still not used to the state of his back, though between Stitches' poultices and potions it's already feeling far better than yesterday. "That sun seemed far too bright for dawn-"

"It's mid-morning," Bull says, taking a seat on the mattress, and Mahanon groans. "Stitches'll be so
proud of us for lounging about for so long without trying to sneak off. Must be a new record."

"I say we pull a jailbreak this afternoon," Mahanon says, even as he grimaces with every movement, reaching around Bull to grab a cup of water. "Go for a good run, maybe pick a fight with some nobles."

"Check out the library?"

"Creators, yes."

Bull grins and hands Mahanon an apple, which Mahanon considers for a long moment, his stomach turning. His appetite has been significantly curbed by pain and nerves, but he knows Bull will notice if he doesn't eat.

It's hard. Of course it's hard. Whenever Mahanon closes his eyes all he sees are Arvaariss's burning crimson eyes, as if they've been indelibly seared into his vision. The memories are an unavoidable part of him now: the scent of blood, the feeling of Arvaariss's gauntlets ripping into him, the sensation of sinking his dagger into Arvaariss's skull and twisting...

Mahanon forces himself to bite into the apple, looking at Bull sidelong. It's not comparable, of course, but these things never are; one would have to live another person's life down to the second to understand every part of them and even then, even then. But Mahanon suspects he has a better sense of the scars Bull carries within, now.

Which of course, brings them here. Now.

"So," Mahanon says slowly. It's far less terrifying to approach in the light of day, with Bull's love assured, than it was last night. Even so.

"Yeah," says Bull.

Mahanon drinks some water. Bull produces another apple from somewhere and takes a loud, crunching bite.

Mahanon casts a silencing spell, gritting his teeth. His nerves feel a bit raw and raked over from that final crash of lightning he expended fighting Arvaariss; even with the quantity of lyrium he chugged to counteract the magebane, it was still difficult to cast through it.

"The Ben Hassrath," Mahanon says, once the spell is in place. "The Qun."

Bull nods, frowning. Thoughtful but torn.

"I doubt anyone's come by to pick up my notes from the dead drop yet," Bull says. "I have no fucking idea what information Arvaariss has been feeding them. The murders didn't even come up in any of my regular reports."

"I don't know if it helps, but Taasha told me that Reth covered for us," Mahanon says slowly. "Arvaariss seemed to think some of your superiors were still... concerned, about our, um - involvement."

"They're concerned about a lot of things," Bull says quietly, dropping his gaze. "Probably just something to add to the list. They're not going to fully trust me until I make some kind of big fucking gesture to prove I'm still loyal."

"Like killing Taasha."
"Something like that."

Mahanon takes another sip of water, and makes a face. "Fuck this. Does liquor mix interact badly with healing potions?"

Bull barks one of his thundering laughs, clutching his collarbone. "Hasn't killed me yet."

Mahanon pushes himself up off the bed with his good arm and searches through Bull's things, retrieving a familiar brown bottle. It's about half-full.

"Good enough," Mahanon mutters.

Mahanon takes a seat at Bull's side, and the Qunari eyes him skeptically. "I'm sure we could rustle up some mead for you-"

"If Stitches sees me hobble up to the bar you know he'll start scolding," Mahanon says, uncorking the bottle with a satisfying pop. "I'm in no mood for it."

With far more bravado than sense, Mahanon tosses back a mouthful of Bull's Qunari liquor and immediately regrets it.

"Aw, kadan," Bull says sympathetically. Mahanon just barely manages to swallow the stuff and feels his entire face contort in panicked disgust with a hacking wheeze. "Want me to water some down for you?"

Mahanon sinks his teeth into his apple and glares at Bull, letting the fruit soothe the harsh burn of the alcohol. Once he can speak again, he sputters roughly, "I've seen you drink that shit out of full mugs!"

"Yeah, well, I also paint my face with poison mud almost daily," Bull says, taking the bottle from Mahanon. He makes up a cup for Mahanon that's half-water, half-liquor, and only half-full. "Take it slow."

Mahanon rolls his eyes, which is more than enough to make him dizzy, proving Bull's point. He accepts the cup of watered-down liquor a bit sheepishly. "The Ben Hassrath."

"Uh-huh." Bull takes a swig from the bottle with a grimace. "They won't be happy about what happened here, but I could spin something for them that won't be too hard to swallow. Or..."

Mahanon looks up at Bull. Bull's gaze is fixed on his hands, his knees. "Or?"

"I meant what I said last night," Bull says quietly. "You're my kadan. I take that shit seriously - should've started treating you like it ages ago. I just... didn't want you getting mixed up in all this shit."

"I know," Mahanon says. He shifts closer, leaning into Bull's side. "I know. That's just not how it works. We can't pick and choose when and how we care. Even if it's your people behind it, there's no way I would let anything happen to you."

Bull sighs, but he turns his head and kisses Mahanon's hair. "Stubborn little elf."

"Mhm."

"But I still don't want any of this to happen again," Bull says. He puts an arm around Mahanon's waist, hand lingering for a moment on the bandages wrapped tight around Mahanon's back. "These
past couple of days have felt like every fucking nightmare I've ever had coming true. It's not fair, you getting hurt because of my shit. I'm not okay with it."

"Bull-

"So what if I left?"

Mahanon lifts his head, stunned. Bull meets his gaze with an entirely naked expression, open and earnest, every last line of confusion and uncertainty creasing his scarred face.

"What if I left the Qun?" Bull repeats, sounding almost small. "And then there won't be any Ben Hassrath, no need to pretend I don't love you, no demands, no expectations?"

Mahanon reaches up and takes Bull's face in his hands, his heart thudding in his chest. "Tell me honestly, vhenan - are you ready for that?"

Bull closes his eye, leaning into Mahanon's palms. "There's never gonna be a good time, and at this point... it's inevitable, isn't it?"

"Maybe so," Mahanon says. "But... that doesn't answer my question."

Bull puts a hand over Mahanon's, opening an exhausted eye.

"They'll come after me," Bull says dully. "Once they close the books on me for good, they'll probably send a few agents to try their luck. After that, I'll be free game for any Qunari who happen to be in the area, wherever we go. But if we go South-"

"You know the Chargers and I will kill anyone who tries it," Mahanon says fiercely, meaning it. Softer, he adds, "That's not why you're hesitating."

Bull shakes his head, very slightly.

"I've lost control before," Bull says, his voice heavy. "I have. I can't... I can't explain to you how it feels to know that that could happen again. The Qun put me back together. Despite everything, they still did that. Having something bigger to answer to, a cause - fuck, anything... knowing that I can be held accountable. It's safer. Maybe one day I won't need that. But Arvaariss was able to talk my head into knots, and it was easy for him. You got hurt. That's gonna stick with me a while."

Mahanon nods, his heart aching. "I understand."

Bull gives a bitter little laugh. "Can't you be more angry with me? Shout at me some more, hit me with a stick or something?"

"If I start shouting, it won't be because Arvaariss hurt me," Mahanon says. "And we already talked about what you did to me. There was a lot of yelling and crying and bleeding at the time, but I know it was real. I know you won't do it again."

Bull looks away, brow furrowed with guilt. "Still..."

"I would never ask you to leave the Qun for me," Mahanon says firmly. "Nor would I ask you to leave before you're ready. They raised you. They're your people. You've given them everything. I'm telling you I understand."

Bull touches his forehead to Mahanon's. "I want to give you everything, kadan. This isn't fair."

"Maybe not," Mahanon says, closing his eyes. "But I have a list of demands, if you're willing. And
if they can be met, then I'll be more than alright."

Mahanon feels Bull smile. "The demands of Mahanon."

"Something like that. I am, of course, willing to negotiate - as you know."

"Oh, I know," Bull says, kissing Mahanon's brow and leaning back to take another swig from his bottle. "You become quite the little haggler sometimes. Like when it comes to how many 'coppers' I ask you to pay me back in one night."

Mahanon flushes. "Well-

"Or how many more minutes I'll let you sleep in before we get up in the morning."

"That's not-

"Or what you'll do for me in exchange for letting you come when-"

Mahanon cuts Bull off with a strangled noise, taking a long sulky sip of his watery liquor and chasing it with an irritated crunch of his apple. "Not very nice to be talking like that when we're both too injured to do anything about it."

"Believe me, kadan, when we're all healed up I'm stealing you the fuck away to one of those nice expensive inns, and we're gonna have ourselves a full fucking weekend," Bull vows earnestly. He grins. "Heh. Literally."

"I'll hold you to that," Mahanon mutters. He gives his head a quick shake, the alcohol causing a pleasant shiver to run up the length of his aching spine. "My demands."

"Yes."

"You already crossed one of them off the list," Mahanon says, his voice softening. He smiles, his eyes on the floor. "I... needed to know how you felt about me. How you really feel."

"I love you," Bull says seriously, and Mahanon nods, his heart lifting at the words. "As I said before - whenever you need to hear it."

"Thank you," Mahanon says. "The next one is harder." He looks up at Bull. "I need you to be honest with me. Really honest. I know you can lie while telling the truth, and I don't ever want to think you're doing that to me. I need to trust you." Mahanon looks away again. "I know it's a lot to ask."

"I'll do it."

Mahanon blinks, both at how quickly Bull responds and the earnest tone of his voice. Bull puts his hand over Mahanon's and smiles.

"You're always so open with me," Bull murmurs, entwining his fingers with Mahanon's. "Always. I want to have that with you. If I stay with the Ben Hassrath I might not be able to tell you everything, but I won't ever lie to you." Bull squeezes Mahanon's hand. "I mean, unless the Chargers are planning a surprise party or something. They pull that kind of shit from time to time. But for things that matter."

Mahanon nods, utterly relieved. It feels bald-faced and brash, demanding a man called "Hissrad" to embrace honesty, but... Bull sounds almost eager to try it.
"I can't work for you," Mahanon says, "but I can work with you. I'd like to continue joining you and the Chargers in the field, and I'll follow your orders when we're out there, but it's out of respect - not obligation. I don't want to interfere with the chain of command at all, so however we can negotiate that..."

"Fair," Bull says. "We'll still need our accounts balanced. Feels like kind of a lateral role to me." Bull grins. "We could list you as a consultant! Like a proper Orlesian-educated pencil-pusher."

"Ugh," Mahanon says, wrinkling his nose at the thought. "We'll work on that another time. Anyway, that's about it for demands. I guess we'll just tackle the rest when it comes up. Together. That's all I ask."

"That's it?" Bull asks, raising his brows. "Nothing else?"

Mahanon shakes his head. "I know with the Qun it's... complicated. I don't want to make things more complicated. I know we'll probably have to remain discreet in public, just in case, so the Ben Hassrath don't start looking too closely, but this, here - you love me. I know you love me. You know I love you. That's enough for me."

"You ask for far too little," Bull says softly. "I'll throw in one extra for you."

Bull puts his arms around Mahanon, and Mahanon tucks in close, careful of Bull's injuries. He's missed the safety of Bull's arms, these past few days - the full trust of it, without doubt and fear gnawing at his mind.

"I will never choose the Qun over your safety or wellbeing," Bull says with quiet intensity. "We can be discreet, but if they find out about us and tell me to leave you or leave the Qun, I'll choose you. If they tell me to do something that might benefit the Qun but put you in harm's way, I'll choose you."

Mahanon buries his face in Bull's shoulder, his thoughts racing. "I'm not asking you to-"

"But you should, so that's what I'll do," Bull says. "I do have to ask something of you, though. You won't like it."

Mahanon tenses, lifting his head. "Am I going to want to start shouting again?"

"Maybe," Bull says ruefully. He takes a long breath. "As you're well aware, sometimes the Ben Hassrath ask me to take the Chargers on dangerous missions. It's basically the only reason why they don't mind me having a whole company of bas to pal around with." Another breath. "I'm going to ask you not to join us on those jobs."

Mahanon freezes. "No."

"Kadan-"

"Creators, Bull, was killing a Ben Hassrath reaver not enough to prove that I can handle-?"

"I know you can handle it, kadan, I know," Bull says, leaning far enough back to look Mahanon in the eye. "You can. I can't. Please, vashedan, dragons, darkspawn, pirates - all of that, any of it, we can take it side by side. But please don't ask me to let you risk your life for the Qun. It's hard enough risking the Chargers, being put in a position where I have to act like their lives are worth less than the Qun." Bull sighs, putting his hand on Mahanon's cheek. "I know I'm being selfish. But if you died because of the Qun, because of my people, because I asked you to... I can't risk it. Anything else, I swear, I won't leave you behind. Just this."
Mahanon grits his teeth, fighting a growl. "I don't like it."

"I know."

Mahanon clenches his fists, squeezes his eyes shut, thinks. Thinks.

And, finally, manages a bitter "Fine."

No, Mahanon doesn't like it, but it helps to hear Bull's sigh of relief, how Bull almost sags around Mahanon as he pulls him close against his chest again. "Thank you, kadan. Thank you."

Mahanon is still utterly disconcerted, a crawling fear turning his stomach at the thought of Bull and the Chargers walking off to face danger without him... but Bull needs it. It might not have been a demand, or an order, but it's a need, and Mahanon can wrestle with his feelings about it on his own time.

"Vhenan," Mahanon murmurs, putting his arms around Bull's waist. He lets himself smile. "I think we can make this work."

"Fuck yeah we can," Bull says roughly. He pauses, then asks, "What does vhenan mean anyway?"

"Oh," Mahanon says, and - utterly in spite of himself - promptly collapses in a fit of giggles.

Bull pulls back, peering into Mahanon's eyes. "Drink hit you a bit hard there, kadan?"

"No, I just-" Mahanon puts a hand to his mouth, unable to stop laughing. "Sorry! It-"

"One copper."

"Shush, it's just - it means-" Mahanon snickers. "Fuck, it means 'my heart' too."

Bull blinks, and also starts to laugh. "I guess there isn't much creativity lost between Qunari and Dalish, huh?"

Mahanon shakes his head, clutching his aching ribs. It hurts far too much to laugh, but there's no stopping it.

Bull puts Mahanon's drink in his hand and takes up the bottle again, raising it in a toast with a broad, happy grin. "Kadan."

"Vhenan."

They both drink and double over again, utterly lost to gales of laughter.

When Stitches comes in to check on Mahanon and Bull, they're lying tangled up on the bed together, fast asleep. Stitches is almost proud of them until he sees the empty liquor bottle on the floor next to the bed, and the next time the two wake up (hungover at five in the afternoon) they receive a good quarter hour's worth of scolding from the healer and are sentenced to another full day of bed rest.

Chapter End Notes

END. PART. THREE. WE MADE IT GUYS HOLY FUCK.
As always thank you so so so much for commenting, we have one more part after this and kasjdlnfkajnfkadf. Thank you. I love you all and I hope this ride has been worth it so far ^_^
Hello everyone. This is an update but not a chapter! Allow me to explain and link a few things:

First of all, I'd like to apologize for the delay in posting. These past few weeks have been crazy busy for me, and while I anticipated a bit of a break between part three and four, it was NOT MEANT TO BE THIS LONG. Whoops.

I have some sweet sweet content meant to take place between part three and four - however because of the nature of the content (slightly off the plot and also delving into aspects of BDSM that might not be for everyone - flogging, marking, bloodplay(ish), etc) I decided to make it a separate fic. Then it got REALLY LONG and is set to be a two-parter. Whoops. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO READ THIS CONTENT, PLEASE CLICK HERE. We will be back to our regularly scheduled content here in a jiffy for PART FOUR (which is also the last?? part of this fic??? aksjdnkajsnd????)

Second of all, I wanted to feature this amazing art of Mahanon that I commissioned the incredibly talented Baldrsmoke for. Rob is fantastic and hilarious and just the coolest dude, so please give him all the love on Twitter or in the comments below. Also, Rob has a fucking kick-ass series about his Adaar Inquisitor that is HIGHLY RECOMMENDED READING, so I'm gonna link it here too, check it out!!

Alright, enjoy the art and the fic and the interlude, and we'll be back soon with part four. Thank you all so much for reading!!**
"I must admit, I'm still a bit confused."

Krem looks up from his purse, which is where he'd forced his gaze once he realized his eyes were lingering a little further south of the barmaid's face than might be considered strictly polite. "About what?"

The barmaid bites a full lip with a puzzled frown, crossing her arms under her bosom pensively (not that Krem notices, what with his eyes fixed to her face with the focus of an Imperial sharpshooter). "You call the big horny man 'Chief,' don't you?"

That startles a snort out of Krem. "You mean the one with the horns?"

"Did I mean that?" The barmaid dimples at Krem with a wink. "So I assumed he's in charge."

"He is in charge," Krem says, leaning an elbow on the counter. "He's so damned in charge he named the company after himself just to make sure we all knew it once he took over from the last fucker."

"And he certainly seems to have a take-charge attitude," the barmaid says with a bit of a purr, and Krem fights to keep from rolling his eyes. "But I could have sworn I heard him call that little curly one 'Boss.'"

"Ah," Krem says with a slow nod, smiling. "Yes, well, here's how it works."

Krem turns and leans back against the counter, gesturing towards a packed table in the far corner by the fire. The barmaid leans in to match sight lines with him, her chest brushing the back of Krem's arm.

"Big horny fuck is in charge of all the rest of us, so he's the Chief," Krem says, motioning to the Iron Bull - lounging comfortably in a chair that looks seconds from buckling under the strain of his relaxed weight, listening and laughing with a sharp one-eyed gaze between swigs of ale from a mug the size of a small bucket. "We all answer to him, no one else."

The barmaid's low laugh is warm against his ear. "So what about that one, then?"

She presses against Krem to point over his shoulder, and if Krem didn't know precisely who she meant, he might have had trouble spotting her intended target. The "little curly one" in question is easily lost in the protective cloak of Bull's massive shadow, a faint outline with a wild head of curls.
and large reflective eyes that occasionally catch and gleam eerily in the candle and firelight.

"That's Mouse," Krem says. "He takes care of the sums and keeps us all fed, sheltered, and clothed. He's not in charge of us, but we certainly appreciate having him around."

"So why would your Chief call a sumskeeper 'Boss'?

"Well," Krem says, lowering his voice. "That's because - and the Chief'll start growling if he hears me say it, but he knows it's true - Mouse is in charge of him."

The barmaid stares at Krem. Krem looks back over his shoulder at her and raises a brow.

"Oh," the barmaid says, and there's really quite a lot that an "oh" can say if said right. She laughs and shakes her head. "Well, damn. There goes my plan for the evening."

"As far as I understand it, they've got some kind of open arrangement," Krem shrugs. "Depending on how the night goes..."

"You misunderstand me," the barmaid says, shaking her head. "See, I'd hoped I could figure out if the handsome merc ordering drinks from me was interested in more than just the drinks by how annoyed he got any time I mentioned fancying his boss - well, 'Chief,' I suppose."

Krem blinks. "Maker, woman, you could just ask a bloke."

"Consider this me asking," the barmaid says with an impish smile.

Krem blinks again. "When do you get off?"

"Midnight," the barmaid says. She grins. "And then a few times afterwards, I should hope. Maybe you could help me with that."

She hands Krem a large pitcher of ale and a bottle of mead and sweeps away before Krem can think of a response.

Bull waits until Krem has the drinks on the table before commenting. "Well, that was fucking painful to watch. No woman should have to work that hard to get her point across."

"With all due respect, Chief, shove it," Krem says, planting himself firmly in his seat. He doesn't look very annoyed, though his cheeks are a deep crimson. "Stop lip reading."

"How else am I supposed to keep an eye out for mutinous talk from my crew?" Bull says.

"Chief, you know we'd tell you to your face if we were mutinousing," Rocky says, following with a belch. "'S'only polite."

"'Mutinousing?"' Skinner picks up a roasted hazelnut from the sharing bowl and bounces it off Rocky's head.

"How would you go about saying it then?" Rocky says, catching the hazelnut and tossing it into his mouth with a thoughtful look. "'Doing a mutiny,' but in a more active sort of way. How would you say that?"

"You don't if you wanna stay employed," Bull comments mildly.

"Aye, Mouse'd know, wouldn't he?" Dalish says. "All his books."
"Oi, Mouse," Stitches says. "Is there an active word for 'mutiny'?"

"'Mutining,'" Mahanon says without looking up from the papers in his lap, barely flicking an ear. "Very outdated though - really only shows up in the older texts. Dialectically it seems as though there are still pockets of Rivaini authors who use the term, but it's more likely they're aping the language of older stories. So to be modern about it, you would 'commit a mutiny' - the active word being 'commit,' 'committing,' so on and so forth."


"Fine, then," Rocky says. "Chief, I promise if we ever start committing, we'll be upfront about it."

"That'd be the day."

"Committing a mutiny, he means - you've got to say all of it, you drunk sod," Krem says, also tossing a hazelnut at Rocky. The dwarf catches it in his mouth. "Anyway Chief, that's why you don't have to get all nosy when I'm just trying to have a nice conversation with a fine young lady, alright?"

"Oh, very fine, was she?" Dalish teases, eyes twinkling.

Krem fields a round of ribbing as Bull glances down at the elf still single-mindedly rustling through a stack of papers, tucked in close against his side.

"So are you going to join in the uprising, then?" Bull says, nudging Mahanon's arm. "Toss me over for a charming swashbuckler?"

"I suppose," Mahanon says absently, squinting at a spreadsheet and counting something on his fingers. Bull continues to stare at him until Mahanon eventually looks up with a puzzled blink. "What?"

"Nothing," Bull says, shaking his head. "Thought we agreed no busywork at the table."

"Technically it's in my lap," Mahanon says, trying for a very sweet and innocent look when Bull narrows his eye in response. "I just thought - with what we heard this afternoon, we would want to head back west tomorrow, wouldn't we? To catch some of our regulars coming down the Highway?"

Ah yes. What they heard this afternoon.

There'd been whispers for months, of course - whispers of some sort of grand summit in the works at the behest of the Divine as the Mage-Templar War dragged on, sparking and spitting the way this kind of conflict does. Folks were already heading south in anticipation, plenty of wealthy travellers hoping to lean in on a political event that could shape the history of the Chantry itself.

Bull's known about some juicier specifics for a while now, but as of this afternoon the word's gone out through more official channels than the ones Bull keeps an ear to. The Divine Justinia V has called for a Divine Conclave to be held at the recently rediscovered Temple of Sacred Ashes in the Frostbacks. Hundreds of mages and templars all shacked up together trying to figure out how to stop killing one another. What could go wrong?

"I know why you'd want to avoid the event itself, given that - well, they've um, hired people already," Mahanon says awkwardly, stumbling around the sensitive information Bull shared with him a few weeks ago. A Tal-Vashoth mercenary crew, the Valo-Kas, are slated to act as very well-muscled peacekeepers for the event; a neutral third party with very little skin in the political aspect
of the proceedings. The Ben Hassrath have had some opinions about this. One missive Bull read recently described it as a "shameful opportunity" to get an agent on the inside (another agent, that is; they've already got three with the Chantry crew). "But we're on the right side of the water to catch business heading down to Cumberland, and there's sure to be some crowd control work around those bottlenecks coming into the city itself - what with the scramble of it all."

Mahanon is right, of course. The official announcement gave Thedas only a few week's notice before the event, obviously hoping to keep troublemakers from having too much time to plan anything too disruptive. The Highway and the docks will be a nightmare, and a great place for some well-respected mercs to make top gold keeping noble heads from getting bashed in by anxious crowds.

But Bull, honestly, can't give much less of a fuck about the Conclave or its attendants, beyond a general interest for the turning tides of the world. He already has plans.

"It's good thinking," Bull says.

Mahanon peers up at Bull, obviously sensing a "but."

Bull smiles and takes one of Mahanon's hands in his own, lost in the shadows between them. "Thanks to your excellent and meticulous sumskeeping, we're not hurting for money. There'll be work, yeah, but also a lot of antsy people. Shit gets messy fast. We don't need that kind of trouble."

Mahanon still flusters when Bull praises him, even after several years' worth of experience with it. Mahanon's hand tightens in Bull's and he struggles to fight a shy smile, but his voice is impressively steady as he says, "The Iron Bull I know doesn't mind a mess if there's a good pay-off to be had."

"Well that's definitely fucking true," Bull says in a low tone, grinning as Mahanon shifts in his seat. "Alright there, Boss?"

"I thought we agreed that you're not allowed to use that voice in public," Mahanon whispers tightly.

"We also agreed no busywork at the table," Bull says. "We should get these 'agreements' in writing somewhere, make it official."

"Don't tempt me," Mahanon mutters. He looks up at Bull. "So, if not west...?"

"East," Bull says. "Still east. If everyone and their nug is heading west, that's gonna leave some smaller towns without protection or leadership. Plenty of trouble gets stirred up when the competent folks have to leave. More fun for us, less chance of accidentally knocking a noble on his ass if the dock crowd gets rowdy."

"We're very nearly out of 'east,'" Mahanon says, tilting his head. A comment, not a challenge. "A few days and we'll be in the wilds, then we'll have to take the forest road if we want to stick close to the coast... north to make better time if we're aiming for the southern Marches."

Mahanon frowns. "Are we still licensed for the Marches? Mythal'enaste, it was bad enough getting our paperwork in order when we crossed into Nevarra..."

"Tomorrow's problem, Boss," Bull says gently, leaning over and kissing Mahanon's curls. "It can keep."

Mahanon smiles at the kiss. Still, his gaze is a little too keen as he says, "As far as I'm aware, we've never spent this long away from Orlais."
"Good to go abroad sometimes, get some perspective," Bull says breezily. "That's how we found you, yeah? Going east worked out real well for me last time."

Mahanon snorts. "You can't expect to trip over an abandoned elf willing to look past yellow plaidweave pantaloons every time you visit the Marches, Bull."

"Why not? I'm one for one so far." Bull grins. "And admit it, you like the plaidweave."

"I think you're confusing my eagerness to rip them off of you for desire."

"Different journey, same destination," Bull says, ruffling Mahanon's hair. Mahanon bats his hand away. It's a practiced dance by now.

"Anyway, I was just wondering if there was a reason we've been pushing east," Mahanon says. "That's all."

Bull shrugs. "Like I said. Good to get out of our usual haunts from time to time. See some new shit."

Mahanon gives Bull one of those searching looks of his, all big eyes and furrowed brows. Finally the elf looks away, lifting Bull's hand to press his lips to Bull's scarred and calloused knuckles. "Well, it'll be nice to see the forest again."

Bull smiles softly, and does not for one second believe that he's off the hook.

"We're counting in for cards," Stitches says, nodding to Bull and Mahanon. "You both in?"

"I'll do a round," Bull says easily. "Still got some ale left in this mug."

Stitches lifts a glass to Bull and looks to Mahanon, but Bull already knows what the elf's answer will be. Social fatigue sits on Mahanon like a physical weight pulling at the tips of his ears, the corners of his eyes, the tilt of his brow, the shape of his smile. It's a bit like watching a flower wilt.

Mahanon is not fully wilted, but there is certainly a droop to his ears. He smiles at Stitches and shakes his head, tucking his papers into his tunic. "I think I'm good for the night, but thank you."

"You're just trying to keep your gold safe from me after our little tussle back in Graverock," Rocky says with a broad grin. "You could win it all back, you know."

"No need," Mahanon says primly, getting to his feet. "I've been skimming coppers from each of your payouts. I should be all settled by Summerday."

Rocky's expression slips blank. He narrows his eyes. "No you fucking haven't."

Mahanon smiles sweetly. "How would you know?"

Rocky scowls as the others laugh. Mahanon takes advantage of the noise to lean over and murmur in Bull's ear, "I won't be sleeping for a while yet, vhenan. Take your time. I'll wait up."

Bull turns his head to fix his kadan with a heated look, a bloom of satisfaction and affection warming his chest as Mahanon's eyes grow dark in response. He still has Mahanon's hand in his, so he tugs the elf close and kisses him, deep and thorough, ignoring the whistles of his Chargers as Mahanon smiles against his lips and presses close to kiss him back.

Years. Years have passed since Val Chevin - two years, nearly three. The lightning scars etched into Bull's arm remain, spindling branches reminding him of his promises every day. The scars
carved into Mahanon's back remain, thick enough to pain him from time to time when the weather gets too damp and cold. But enough time has passed that the aches have settled into the skin and become a part of them both, a part of their shared story.

Years, and Bull has been testing his superiors, he knows. For months after Val Chevin he and Mahanon acted as indifferent strangers in public, awaiting a cold response from the Ben Hassrath that never came. Bull's people expressed their disappointment that Taasha ultimately escaped him and denounced Arvaariss as a rogue Tal-Vashoth infiltrator, but they were satisfied with Bull's handling of the situation on the whole. There was no mention of Mahanon.

So they grew bolder by inches. Bull grew bolder. Mahanon has let him set the pace and decide what is safe outside the privacy of closed doors, always smiling in shy triumph with each new daring show of affection.

Bull thought the hammer might come down after Montsimmard, where he kissed Mahanon boldly in the streets and spent a week sharing a private room with his kadan in a trader's inn, even marking Mahanon with his own teeth. Nothing.

As the months became a year, and then another, their relationship has relaxed and blossomed to a point where Bull cannot think for a moment that the Ben Hassrath aren't aware of it. They do not take separate rooms at inns. They've taken private retreats with one another. Bull, and occasionally his Chargers, affectionately refer to Mahanon as "Boss" - though the Chargers only tend to do this when Mahanon is doling out bonuses.

Bull still sleeps with other people from time to time, either as an aspect of his work or on the rare occasion when he's in the mood and Mahanon would prefer a quiet night to himself (and sometimes, once or twice, when a handsome man catches Mahanon's eye - though Mahanon prefers to initiate these encounters with Bull's involvement, rather than on his own). Neither of them equate the physical act of sex with what they have together, and what they have... works. Very blatantly works.

Bull knows himself well enough to know that he's been baiting his own people into forcing a situation where he'll be... no, Bull can't even form the words in his mind. It's why he hasn't quite admitted what it is that he wants just yet. But in a broad, hypothetical sense, Bull is finding the prospect of holding himself to one of the promises he made years ago easier and easier with every passing day. He knows he can choose Mahanon over the Qun.

If it comes to it.

"If," not "when," because the problems that kept Bull from leaving years ago are still firmly in place. Bull cannot leave the Qun for Mahanon, not unless they force him to.

Bull wonders sometimes if he's not caught in an odd gamble with his own people, both sides trying to hedge their bets as to who needs the other more.

Regardless, it's a good night and Mahanon's lips are honey-sweet on Bull's, and when his kadan pulls away those warm grey eyes are smiling and bright. Calming, despite the storm in them.

The sounds of the the common room filter back into Bull's awareness as if dimmed by the peace of Mahanon's kiss. It's a stupidly romantic little thought.

Mahanon squeezes Bull's hand and steps away, cheerfully flipping off the Chargers for their bawdy comments as he passes by them.
"I think I liked it better when you were both miserable," Skinner says. "You're both so... ugh. Domesticated."

"She doesn't mean that," Dalish says, nudging her on-and-off lover (far more "on" than "off"). "She steals Mouse's little romance books from time to time, you know."

"Do not!"

"Oh, so they're your little romance books, then?"

Bull drains his mug with a satisfied smile as another round of good-natured bickering breaks out while Stitches deals the cards. It's not all perfect and plenty of doubts and concerns remain, but this?

This, right here, is fucking good.

- 

Mahanon doesn't look up from his work as the door swings open, tapping his charcoal stylus to his lips thoughtfully and frowning down at the pages of odd symbols and his own scratchy work notes.

"Okay, I know we agreed no busywork on the bed," Bull grumbles, closing and locking the door behind him.

"It's not busywork," Mahanon says, squinting at a line of symbols and comparing them back to his notes. His ears are starting to get a little sore, and it occurs to him that they've probably been stuck in the one-up, one-down state of elven confusion for a good half hour now. He pauses to rub at them before Bull has a chance to notice and tease him for it. "Strictly fun only, I promise."

"When I said that the bed is for fun and sleeping, code-breaking isn't what I meant," Bull says, but Mahanon can hear the grin in his voice. The mattress sags as Bull takes a seat and shuffles up behind Mahanon. Mahanon shifts to make room for him. "How's it going?"

"These ciphers are fascinating," Mahanon murmurs, his focus still fixed on his work. This becomes slightly more challenging as Bull curls close around him, slipping his large hand under the hem of Mahanon's shirt, his breath warm on Mahanon's curls as Bull presses his lips to them. "But they're just for general training, aren't they? Pattern recognition, getting the rhythm and speed of breaking them..."


"Translating them is tedious, but learning the method takes only seconds," Mahanon says, determined to persevere with his point. "One only has to glance at the cipher key for this one, for instance-" Mahanon unburies a worksheet from under his current project, showing a series of lines, dots, and squares, "-to get the gist of how it works. That's not very.." Mahanon breathes to steady his voice as Bull starts to nip and kiss his ear, his hand exploring sensitive areas under Mahanon's shirt. "Secure. Are you even listening to me?"

"Uh-huh," Bull says, even as he traces a teasing circle around one of Mahanon's nipples. Mahanon bites back a very embarrassing little sound at this. Bastard. "Lots of these are building blocks for more complex shit, kadan. You gotta start with the simple stuff before getting fancy. Like with math." Bull closes his teeth on the tip of Mahanon's ear. "Among other things."

"We did not fucking start with the simple stuff," Mahanon mutters, even as his traitor body starts to relax and respond to Bull's teasing. "I - you know, I was in the middle of something..."
"Nothing's stopping you from continuing, *kadan,*" Bull says warmly. Smugly. He gives Mahanon's nipple a hard pinch, starling a yelp and a jerk from the elf caught in his embrace. "Think of this as training, too. Agents have to be able to perform no matter the conditions." The hand not currently teasing under Mahanon's shirt slips down between Mahanon's thighs. Mahanon falls back against Bull's chest with a moan, letting the papers tumble from his hands. "No matter the *distractions.* You should be able to sit there and work away at these problems no matter where or how I'm touching you."

Mahanon presses himself into Bull's palm to ease the growing ache between his legs and tilts his head back, meeting Bull's gaze with an exasperated smile. "I suppose I'll need more intensive training, *vhenan.*"

"Mm, that could be hot," Bull says. In a move too fast for Mahanon to counter even if he wanted to, Bull has him turned around and pins him down by his wrists on the mattress, sprawling right across his forgotten papers. "Senior agent educating the junior agent? Plenty of gold to mine there, huh?"

"You can't just toss me around whenever you feel like it," Mahanon complains. He wraps his legs around Bull's hips, tilting his head back invitingly. Bull's lips find his throat. "Just because you're bigger than me."

"Pretty sure I can," Bull teases, pressing Mahanon's wrists into the mattress. Mahanon shifts under his lover with a soft groan, the sheets of parchment crinkling beneath him. "Pretty sure you like being tossed around, too. Knowing I can have my wicked way with you."

"Very wicked," Mahanon agrees, arching up to meet Bull's lips for a kiss. "Very wicked, keeping me waiting so long. I nearly decided to take care of myself for the evening."

"You could have," Bull says, nosing in under Mahanon's chin again, biting at Mahanon's throat. "You're always so sweet after the first time you come, you know that? All relaxed, still needy, still hungry to be fucked..."

"I'm at least two of those things right now," Mahanon says. He grits his teeth as Bull finds a sensitive spot under his jaw and starts to tease at it with his lips. "'Relaxed' might not be one of them."

"I could change that," Bull rumbles quietly, and for a moment Mahanon almost entirely forgets himself. "I can think of a few ways I could change that, actually, unless you've got something in mind."

Mahanon squeezes his eyes shut. *Focus.* "I do, actually."

"Oh?"

"Mhm." Mahanon gives Bull a sultry look from under his lashes, giving a little sinuous squirm under him that certainly catches the qunari's attention. "You know what I would find *relaxing,* good ser?"

Bull grins sharply, sliding his grip forward to lay Mahanon out beneath him fully, settling between Mahanon's legs. "What's that, *kadan?*

"I just think it would be very hot..." Mahanon leans up to whisper his words against Bull's lips. "If you would tell me why the fuck we keep going east."

Bull stares at him for a stunned moment before breaking into a groaning laugh, hanging his head.
"Damn it, elf, can't you just **pretend** to be blissfully ignorant for once?"

"Absolutely not," Mahanon says stubbornly, squirming in a far less sensuous manner now as he struggles to escape Bull's grasp. Bull lets him go and they both sit up, Bull eyeing Mahanon with fond vexation. "It would be one thing if we were meandering as we usually do, but we're moving at-pace **away** from the action. I wasn't sure until we barrelled through Cumberland like we were afraid they'd close the gates on us if we lingered too long, and now with the Conclave-"

Bull cuts Mahanon off with a kiss, deep and warm, and Mahanon finds it hard to keep frowning.

"You're entirely too smart for your own good," Bull says, tucking a few stray curls behind Mahanon's pointed ears. He sighs. "I wasn't trying to keep anything from you, kadän. I just... didn't want to say anything, just in case things didn't work out."

Mahanon blinks, his ears tilting in spite of himself. "What things?"

Bull smiles and tugs the point of a lopsided ear before getting to his feet.

Mahanon watches in utter bemusement as Bull takes up one of his travel packs and fishes through the pockets, pulling out a small clothbound bundle.

"I, uh..." Bull scratches at the base of a horn, hesitating. Finally he shrugs to himself and passes the bundle to Mahanon.

Burning with curiosity, Mahanon unwraps the bundle of cloth until what looks like an ornate hairpin falls into his lap. Mahanon turns it over with a frown.

Freezes.

In fact, everything seems to go very still and quiet for a long moment, the world falling away as Mahanon stares at the curling woodworked knots of the hairpin, intricate and heart-achingly familiar.

Mahanon does not breathe. Does not dare. The air will not smell of pine and birch and dense undergrowth, damp wolfhound fur and sweet-scented smoke, even though it should. Even though that is the scent of the only other place Mahanon has encountered these knots, this wood, this craft.

"That showed up about four months back," Bull is saying quietly, pulling Mahanon back to the reality of the inn. "First solid lead I've had in over a year."

"I don't understand," Mahanon says numbly. He'd forgotten this particular knot, a variation on the standard shield. Staring at it now feels a little like stumbling across a bedtime story or a lullaby from long ago, rediscovering a familiar tale so deep in his heart it might as well be part of him.

"You missed your chance to see your family again at the Arlathvhen when you joined us," Bull says softly. "Your birth clan. I know you're still hurting from that, and from losing them." Bull shakes his head. "And fuck, you weren't kidding when you said they're hard to find."

Mahanon closes his hand around the hairpin, struggling to comprehend, to **believe...**

"Kadän," Bull says, and kneels down with a grunt in front of Mahanon to catch his eye. He takes the point of Mahanon's chin and guides the elf to look at him, smiling. "I didn't want to make them feel hunted or watched, so I had to be careful about it, but... I really think I've found them. I've got an idea of their trading patterns now, and if our timing is right, we might be able to catch up with
them. There are a couple of human villages they touch base with around this time of year before disappearing."

"We're going east into the forest," Mahanon says, utterly voiceless. He swallows painfully. "My forest."

"Yeah," Bull says. "Your people, kadan."

Mahanon can't help it. He bursts into tears.

"Oh fuck," Bull says in rough dismay as Mahanon weeps in front of him, shaking with full-body sobs. "Ah, shit - fuck, I should have... I'm sorry, damn, I shouldn't have sprung this on you without-"

"H-happy crying, Bull, this is happy crying!" Mahanon gasps, struggling to choke out the words as his breath hitches and catches and tears spill over his cheeks and into his lap. "You found - we're going to - fuck, you wonderful man, vhenan, thank you, I can't-"

Mahanon throws his arms around Bull's neck and kisses him, desperately grateful, before tucking his face into his lover's shoulder and collapsing into helpless sobs.

Bull sighs in relief and wraps Mahanon in a tight embrace, scooping him up to settle them both back on the bed in one another's arms. "Fuck, kadan, I thought my heart was gonna give out." Bull rubs Mahanon's back as the elf continues to weep into his shoulder. "You're so damn cute, you know that? 'Happy crying.' Shit."

"Thank you," Mahanon says again, clutching the hairpin tight enough to hurt. "Mythal' enaste, Creators, ma serannas vhenan, ar lath ma, thank you..."

"No guarantees here," Bull says gently. "Lots of variables to consider, and I don't want to break your heart if we miss them."

"I understand," Mahanon says, sitting up. He wipes at his tears with shuddering breaths, struggling to control himself. It hits him in massive waves, what Bull has given him, what Mahanon might have a chance to reclaim... Creators, his people. His home. His family. "Vhenan, even this - even just knowing they're all still out there, sometimes... you hear stories of whole clans disappearing, especially the smaller ones, and I... Bull, this is everything to me. Thank you."

Bull takes Mahanon's face in his hands, tears and all, and Mahanon nearly collapses into fresh sobs all over again. This man, this beautiful man. Bull has never shied away or shown discomfort in the face of Mahanon's emotions. If anything, Bull seems to field them with a kind of fascination and affectionate awe. It's a far cry from the irritation or embarrassment Mahanon is used to encountering from men outside his birth clan.

"You're gonna make me get all sappy, and neither of us are drunk enough for that," Bull says, and Mahanon rolls his watery eyes and smiles. "Getting to be with you... it's a fucking gift, you know? You're a gift. I want to make you happy." Bull kisses Mahanon and adds, "Even if making you happy means making you cry like someone died or something."

Mahanon laughs at that, shoving Bull's shoulder. "Fuck off."

"See that? That is a happy sound, kadan," Bull says, kissing the tears from Mahanon's cheeks as Mahanon grins and tries to squirm away. "And smiling! That's definitely more the reaction I was looking for, look at that."
"I'm happy, Bull!" Mahanon catches Bull's lips with his own, trying to stem the tide of Bull's teasing. "I could show you just how happy I am, if you're looking for proof."

"There's a thought," Bull grins, keeping one arm wrapped tight around Mahanon as he leans over and shoves all the scattered parchments off the bed. "Pretty sure I can think of a few ways to keep you smiling."

"I'm sure you can," Mahanon purrs, sprawling back as Bull lays him down along the bed and moves over him again, a hungry look in his eye.

Honestly, after a few years together and knowing what Bull is like as a person, knowing that Bull never forgets a tease or a taunt like the one Mahanon pulled on him earlier, Mahanon should have been far better prepared.

As it is, by the time Mahanon realizes Bull's intentions, he's fully pinned beneath the qunari with no chance of escape as Bull slips his hands under Mahanon's shirt and proceeds to tickle him within an inch of his life, only stopping when the ensuing panicked sparks and crackles of lightning scorch the blankets and nearly set the whole damn bed on fire.

- Mahanon of Clan Sliabh felt the same way about shem'len as he did when the Keeper started in on her spookier stories of spirits whose wails foretold the coming of death and the Dread Wolf stalking the shadows of the forest; there was a thrill and a danger about them, a sense of the unknown. Mahanon's maae and baae were fierce hunters who braved the wilds to defend and provide for the clan, but Mahanon couldn't help but think that there was a similar, terrifying bravery in his soft da's fearless interactions with the local human villages for trade. Certainly many children among the clan were of the same opinion, whispering that Fionn must have some sort of hidden, terrifying powers to keep the shem'len in line. How else could he disappear into the unknowns of the human world for days at a time and return with such incredible bounties?

(And always a book or two for Mahanon, though Fionn's bonded partners wryly complained about how much room they took up in the aravel.)

Mahanon was still quite young the first time his da suggested bringing him along for such a journey, perhaps only five or six. He was leaning back against Fionn's legs by the family campfire and working through a fascinating little wooden puzzle toy, which he nearly dropped when Fionn voiced his idea aloud.

Mahanon's baae Diemne glanced up at Fionn, his dark features as impassive as ever.

"Our child amongst the shem?" Diemne murmured in their language, returning to his mending. Taoirse was off on one of her lone tasks, perhaps tanning hide or working twine into bowstring. "He is of shadows, not sunlight, wouldn't you say, vhenan?"

"I agree," Fionn said. Mahanon was always fascinated by his da's voice, how he sometimes tripped over parts of the dialect, a respectful hesitance in his words. "But I am thinking of his future. Do you see him with a sword or bow in hand?"

Diemne's lip curved into the slightest smile. It was answer enough.

"It might be good for him to see the shem," Fionn said. "The ones we are familiar with. I could use the help when he is older."

Diemne inclined his head, his smile turning distinctly wry. "It will be your task to convince our
Fen'Asha.


It did take some convincing. Taoirse would often become tight-lipped and colder than usual if Fionn's visits to the shem'len took even an hour or two longer than expected, and that was her protective nature with regards to her bonded partner, never mind her own son. Members of the clan often joked that little Mahanon was the safest creature in the whole forest, as Taoirse's first and so far only child.

Somehow, by some miracle, Fionn managed it. And so the next time they ventured close to a human village, Mahanon curled up in the cart amongst the various Sliabh goods and crafts and continued on into his first shem'len town.

In Mahanon's child mind, he expected the experience to be similar to stories of crossing over into the Fade; an entirely different world full of strange creatures and odd structures, far from the familiar comforts of the forest. There were stories of shem, of course, stories in the books Fionn would read to him, stories in books with helpful pictures and easy lettering that Mahanon had quickly grasped despite the struggle of his imperfect Trade speak. Mahanon could read the shem'len language far better than he could understand it spoken aloud, and he understood it far better again than he could speak it himself. He didn't speak very much to begin with, so it wasn't as though he was practicing very often.

As a result, Mahanon's expectations were limited to sketches and flowering descriptions of castles and towers, and when the cart rolled through thinning trees into a blindingly bright daylight, Mahanon's eyes cleared and widened in awe.

In truth, the village was little more than a small grouping of homesteads; small farms providing goods to a larger town down the road that featured a traveller's inn. But to Mahanon the ramshackle buildings were as good as castles and towers, all bathed in a constant stream of golden sunlight with no dappling leaves or branches to cut the glare. It hurt to look at, but Mahanon rubbed at his eyes with his impatient little fists to soothe them so he could continue to gawp at the alien surroundings.

People started to approach as soon as the Sliabh cart rolled to a halt, calling out loud, confident greetings. Shem'len. Real shem'len, not just stories and illustrations of strange round-eared people with odd dents between their eyes as if someone had carved a smooth chunk out of the join between their brow and nose.

The real thing was bigger than Mahanon was expecting, a throng of towering giants ambling towards them. Mahanon knew he was small even amongst his own people, but his da was considered tall. Many of these humans were taller still, with one broad shem striding about as though an ancient pine had sprouted legs.

Mahanon slunk down in the cart with a thrill of fear, peering out from between the slats and hoping that the glint of his eyes wouldn't give him away, even in all this blinding sunlight. Everything was so loud. The Sliabhs always spoke with the weight of the forest on them. Here, out in the open, these shem roared like predators with no fear of becoming prey.

"Oh, da'len," Mahanon heard his da murmur, his shadow falling over Mahanon's hiding place in the cart. He stroked Mahanon's curls as Mahanon blinked up at him with wide eyes, ears flat back against the unfamiliar noises, heart hammering. "Would you like to stay in the cart, or can I hold you a while?"
Mahanon swallowed. Every last instinct told him to stay hidden and watch from the shadows. But he thought of the heroes in those _shem'len_ stories, all brave and daring in ways he never understood. It seemed a very stupid way to live, throwing yourself into danger with only glory and valour for a reward. Courage was a skill in clan life, not an inherent moral value.

But courage was a skill that his family had honed to a point of expertise, and Mahanon was no different. He straightened slowly and reached up to his da, allowing Fionn to pick him up out of the cart and balance him on his hip.

Mahanon was not so courageous that he did not hide his face in his da's shoulder for the first quarter hour, clinging close as the humans arrived and started conversing with the elves. Their language was slow, loud, and blocky, with all the hard bits clunking out from strange places in the mouth and none of the soft clicking whispers Mahanon knew.

Mahanon's ears flicked as he heard his father say his name, prompting an odd babbling chorus of clumsy attempts to pronounce it from the _shem_.

"Mahànon," Fionn repeated, then slower again, "Ma-hà-non."

"Ma-hah-non?"

Fionn laughed.

Mahanon, feeling a bit daring, turned his face just enough to catch a careful look at the _shem_.

There were two of them speaking to Fionn, both taller and broader (though none of them as frightening tall as the pine tree man currently trading with one of the Sliabh craftsmen). Fionn tried to explain to Mahanon that humans who wear skirts and have breasts are usually female, those who wear pants and don't have breasts are usually male. This made very little sense to Mahanon, but he trusted his da, and decided that they were likely speaking to a man and a woman.

Fascinatingly, the man had hair all over his face instead of just on his head, as if he had attempted to become a bear like the shapeshifters in the stories but got stuck halfway. Mahanon stared openly at this, blinking, until the man took notice and gave a broad grin.

"It's a beard, little one," the man said. "Want to touch it?"

Mahanon, utterly startled at being caught out and addressed and with no real understanding of what the man was saying to him, quickly buried his face in Fionn's shoulder again.

"He's a quiet one," Fionn said. Mahanon could barely catch the words, but he heard fondness in his da's tone, and relaxed. It was strange to hear Fionn speaking like this, that stumbling hesitance completely absent from his voice. "He's never seen anyone quite like you before."

"And he's nearly six, you say?" The woman clucked. "Maker, Serah Fionn, are all your people's children so small? We have goat milk if you're in need, it's what I give my babies."

"Thank you, but he comes by his size honestly," Fionn said. "The Sliabhs - _our_ clan is built for the forest. Small and quick."

"He does look like a little forest spirit," the man chuckled. "Hey, it might be easier on him to meet someone his own size, you know? Or, well. Close enough."

There was a bit more conversation, then Fionn was moving, still chatting in animated familiarity. Mahanon did not take much heed of this, content to hide and listen to all these strange words with
the heat of a strange sun bearing down on him, until Fionn paused and murmured to Mahanon in their own language.

"Would you like to say hello to a little human?" Fionn patted Mahanon's back. "A child, your age. You don't have to."

Mahanon struggled for a moment, but the curiosity was overwhelming. A smaller *shem* would be far less frightening. He wondered if they would have the male shem's face fur.

Mahanon lifted his face to nod.

Fionn carefully put him down, waiting until Mahanon got his feet under him before straightening. Mahanon hugged close to Fionn's leg, blinking as he saw a small *shem* standing scarcely a foot away from him, also hugging close to their father's leg and blinking right back at him.

Mahanon tilted his head, ears flicking in lopsided confusion and flinching back when the *shem* child suddenly giggled in delight. They were bigger than Mahanon, but similarly proportioned - and yet unmistakably *shem*. They had little blue eyes like buttons in a round face, those odd round ears, and their nose was an absurd little upturned scoop as if it was simply sprouting from above their mouth like an afterthought. Their hair was gold like Fionn's, wispy and fine about their ruddy face. They seemed as equally fascinated with Mahanon as he was with them, though nothing caught their attention quite like Mahanon's ears.

They reached out with a curious hand and Mahanon heard one of the big *shem* sigh out an admonishment, but Mahanon turned his head and allowed the human child to touch the point of his ear. They gasped as it flicked out of reach, and giggled again.

Mahanon, in turn, leaned out from behind Fionn fully and allowed himself to touch the *shem's* curved ear, flinching back when it stayed perfectly still.

"Da," Mahanon whispered, tugging on Fionn's tunic. Fionn leaned down to hear him as Mahanon whispered to his Da in their language. "The *shem'len*'s ear is broken, Da. It can't move."

Fionn laughed aloud at that, and after a quick translation the *shem* gave a gentle laugh too. Mahanon scowled. He wasn't sure what exactly was so funny.

Still, seeing a smaller *shem* helped, and though Mahanon did not ever fully emerge from behind the protection of Fionn's legs, he made the most of the visit as he stared around the human world with growing curiosity.

Mahanon curled up in the cart to nap on the way back to camp, dreaming of all the impossible things in all the stories he'd heard and read. The illustrations filled themselves in from sketches to blocks of stone and thatched roofs, cities and castles illuminating in full sunlight, *shem'len* given shape and sound and life. He felt a little older, having seen them for himself. There were so many things Mahanon did not understand about their world, but the *shem* felt both more and less dangerous than they had this morning. Less, because these ones had been loud and strange but nice, in their own way. More, because they were large, and *real*.

"How big is the world, Da?" Mahanon asked sleepily as Fionn lifted him from the cart, carrying him over to his family's aravel.

Fionn smiled. "About as big as that question, *da'len*."

"All those stories..." Mahanon yawned, tucking in close. "They could all be happening somewhere, couldn't they? If there's so many places and people. And no one would know any of them at all!
The stories, and the people..."

"I don't think I've ever heard you so talkative," Fionn said, kissing Mahanon's temple. "Or philosophical. Are you planning on seeing the world then, vhenan?"

Mahanon shrugged. "I've seen it, now. Books are good for the rest." Mahanon wrinkled his nose. "Quieter."

"Your mamae will be delighted to hear it," Fionn said. "We'd miss you if you went off exploring, you know. We're selfish like that."

"I'm not scared of seeing more shem," Mahanon said, as Fionn sat down by the fire and gently settled his son in his usual place, curled up against his legs. "But only if it's like today, and we come back home after. That's long enough away, I think."

"You're quite right," Fionn said with an official kind of sincerity, prompting a little giggle from his son. "It's only fun if we all come straight back home before sundown. We're in agreement, then." Fionn combed his long fingers through Mahanon's wild curls. "We should work on your Trade speak, da'len."

"Hmm," Mahanon said, noncommittally. "They should work on saying my name right."

Fionn laughed, warm and fond, and when mamae and babae joined them at the fire with hot food and warm drinks Mahanon and his da told them all about the day, and Mahanon dozed into a warm nap as the fireflies started to blink around the tents, teasing the wolfhounds, the damp earth of the forest comfortingly familiar under Mahanon's hands and all around him the sound of his people's voices, their language, speaking softly into the night...

-

Bull wakes to a quiet murmuring. He smiles.

Bull has heard Mahanon talk in his sleep before, of course, snatches of a dialect Bull doesn't understand. These aren't snatches, though. Mahanon is dead asleep, head pillowed on Bull's chest, and whispering a steady flow of words with an ease that Bull doesn't recognize, a familiarity and calm in his voice. No hesitation, no stumbles, no nervous rephrasing. Just an ongoing musical lilt of language, quiet but relaxed and confident.

"Soon," Bull murmurs, and he could swear Mahanon smiles in response.

Chapter End Notes

If you're worried you're pronouncing Mahanon's name wrong now, YOU'RE GOOD I PROMISE. I feel like his name amongst the Sliabhs would be pronounced differently and it would kind of get... assimilated into the "Ma-HAH-non" pronunciation with humans and other clans.

(But yes, his true name is properly "Mahànon" ^-^)
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

OKAY THIS IS MY THIRD TIME TRYING TO POST THIS JESUS CHRIST

*tag on this chapter for description of an anxiety attack

Song rec: "Parallel", Laura Brehm

And you can listen to the full playlist here!

Because people asked imma... drop a pronunciation guide at the bottom for the names... WHEE!

Thank you everyone so much for caring about Mahanon's family as much as I do T-T
I hope y'all enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mahanon recalls little of his journey south to the Arlathvhen where he was traded over to the Lavellans.

Abject, desperate denial wiped any recollection from his mind quite early on. Mahanon remembers, a little, just an odd sense of shock. Everything felt dreamlike and dazed, and every morning he woke in a new and unfamiliar place but still certain that this was all a terrible dream, a nightmare from which there would have to be an eventual waking.

The journey east, now, is a little similar. Mahanon is no longer a frightened and confused child, thrust out from the only home he’s ever known and forced to leave his family behind. But as the Chargers venture into the wilds and the landscape gains an unsettling familiarity, Mahanon feels as though he’s living half awake and half asleep, memories he’d long since pushed from his mind rising to the surface, like scabs scraped off old, half-healed wounds.

Mahanon started having nightmares when he was seven or eight; terrible dreams that threatened to drive him mad, voices and whispers cajoling and begging him for his attention. He woke up screaming the first few times, startling the clan into unnecessary action and drawing the knowing eye of the Keeper.

Mahanon might have been sheltered from the world, but he always listened to the stories told around the fires at night. He knew that no good could come from dreaming of spirits.

So, Mahanon lied. Mahanon remembers how odd it felt, the ease with which he explained through his tears to a gathering of concerned Elders that he’d heard terrible stories of darkspawn from shem’len children in the settlements while he accompanied Fionn on his trades, and that they had frightened him. Mahanon was well-known for his helpless honesty. If the Sliabh children had wandered into forbidden parts of the forest or stolen sweets from the clan stores, the adults knew to ask Mahanon. He would certainly try to lie to protect the others, but he would always break eventually.

Perhaps it was the terror of what he’d seen that fuelled him, or perhaps it was the knowledge that
he could be sent away that quelled his conscience. Either way, Mahanon lied that night, and another two nights afterwards over the following weeks, until eventually he learned to wake without screaming and cry without making a noise. The Elders had no reason to doubt him, and his parents – the ones who knew him best – perhaps felt the same desperation to believe him as Mahanon felt to lie.

Once the danger seemed to have passed Mahanon overheard his parents discussing the matter well into the night after Mahanon had retreated to his portion of the aravel to sleep. He’d hung the canvases himself, creating the small secure space he craved for resting, little more than a shadowy nest. He liked it this way. Small, and quiet, and within earshot of the murmurings of the campfires. Like a shadow.

“There is no magic in my family,” Taoirse was saying in a low voice. A statement of plain fact. “Our stories have been with the Keeper for generations, we would know.”

“There was a family whisper about a tree shaper on my mother’s side many ages back,” Diemne said. Mahanon could imagine him shrugging. “It is hardly magic. It is an… understanding of the world, nothing more.”

“We have three in the clan already,” Fionn said, his voice tight. He’d been keeping his anxieties to himself around his child, but Mahanon could always tell when his da was carrying burdens of the mind. “Mahànon is so gentle, he can’t… Maker, what would the world do to him?”

Mahanon flinched. His da only slipped and invoked his old Andraste faith when he was truly upset.

There was a rustle of fabric, footsteps, and Mahanon thought that maybe his mamae or his babae might have moved to comfort Fionn.

“They’re just dreams,” Taoirse said firmly, but there was reassurance in her voice. A soft quality, and that scared Mahanon more than anything. His mother was many things, but soft was not one of them. “Of course the shem’len would try to frighten him. You know how he is about his stories.”

“I’m sorry,” Fionn said. “I’m sorry. I know we’re all worried.”

“You give voice to Taoirse’s thoughts,” Diemne said. There was the distinct sound of a smack, and Diemne added, “As well as mine. But who among us did not have night terrors as a child? The Keeper said the contents of the dreams did not indicate the interference of spirits. With the world as it is right now, I imagine few are sleeping easily. I’ve had a few dreams of darkspawn myself.”

Mahanon had never heard his babae say so much in one instance. It seemed as though he was half convincing the others, half convincing himself.

Just dreams. Mahanon shut his eyes tight as the conversation turned to the rising rumours of darkspawn appearing in greater numbers to the south. He had to believe his own lie, had to. For his parents’ sake, as well as his own.

But magic cannot be hidden nor contained and becomes wilder the more one tries.

Mahanon was examining a bush one day during the dry season, fascinated by the peeling bark of the branches that resembled parchment and paper, when a noise startled him. Lightning forked from his fingertips and struck the dry wood and the bush exploded into flames.

Forest fires were a very real danger for the clan. Mahanon’s panicked screams drew the First’s attention, and luckily for the clan the blaze was contained by her magic and quickly burned away into nothing but harmless, drifting ashes.
Mahanon was gently interrogated, of course. All he could manage were broken sobs – “I don’t know,” again and again. It wasn’t a lie, really. Mahanon had no idea how the lightning had sprung so easily from his hand. No idea that the strange energy that had been building within him for months, maybe years, could manifest in such a way.

But there was no disguising the movement of the Fade around him. So the Keeper, her First, and her freshly-appointed Second took Mahanon away from the clan, deep into the forest, into a small cave richly carved with symbols and runes. One of the hearts of the Sliabh history, a sacred place that the Sliabh’s movements through the forest pivoted around.

The Keeper was old, and wise, and looked eternal the way that the earth felt eternal. In Sliabh fashion, she took the name passed down through the ages when she became first – Cuimhne. The First still had her name, Lainn. The Second had recently chosen their true name, Isuìl.

Mahanon had learned to weep quietly, so he sat in that cave full of history he knew instinctively he was never destined to touch, one way or another, and tried to sop up the tears cascading down his cheeks with the sleeves of his tunic.

“You have not been dreaming of darkspawn,” the Keeper said simply.

Mahanon said nothing. He wasn’t sure what was more painful; admitting that he had indeed been dreaming of demons or admitting that he had lied. Had been lying, for close to a year.

Isuìl kept their gaze firmly on the ground. They weren’t very much older than Mahanon, in truth – perhaps a year or two. The discovery of their magic and their recent appointment as Second was a cause for a sort of wry celebration amongst the Sliabhs. It was certainly good to have a few people in line for Keeper, but it was considered a worrying amount of magic for the size of their clan.

There would be no celebration for Mahanon. There was no such thing as a Third.

“The child has been dreaming since the harvest, hasn’t he?” Lainn gave Mahanon a look that he was not well familiar with; sympathy, yes, but mingled with disappointment. Mahanon felt sick to his stomach with guilt. “Isuìl’s magic manifested very soon after the dreams began. Perhaps Mahànon’s magic is… a gentler sort. Smaller.”

“There is a storm in him,” Keeper Cuimhne said, tilting her head. “But we shall see. However, we cannot leave this place until the child knows himself. I would hear the truth from you, Mahànon.”

It took time. Mahanon had, to an extent, convinced himself of his own lies; that the dreams were not of spirits, but of darkspawn and monsters from old stories. He could not comprehend his own power, had no means of understanding it in proportion to himself. He was Mahanon. He was small, a shadow, quiet. He would grow to become a trader like his da, or a craftsman with his babae’s talent, and he would live a quiet life amongst the trees. Absorb, and listen, and experience. That was Mahanon.

The Keeper was patient and true to her word. No one would leave until Mahanon admitted what he was.

That disappointment and irritation in Lainn’s gaze softened to pity as the hours crept on. Isuìl wept alongside Mahanon for a while. Mahanon asked, only once, if he could go home to his parents, his voice small and broken. The Keeper shook her head.

Finally it was at dawn, as Mahanon succumbed to exhaustion and slipped into a momentary dream and a demon called to him and offered to make this all stop, make the dreams stop, return him to
his parents and take his magic for good… at dawn, Mahanon startled awake with a short cry.

“What was it, da’len?” The Keeper asked simply.

“A demon,” Mahanon answered, and put his face in his hands.

That first day was the worst, the worst day Mahanon had experienced in all his life. The clan was not angry so much as shocked that Mahanon would put them all in danger by trying to hide his magic. His parents were caught between disappointment in him, guilt that their child could have hurt their clan and the forest they called home, and the gripping grief and terror that they might have to give him up. The destructive power of falsehood seared itself in Mahanon’s mind as much as the destructive power of magic.

But the Sliabhs were a close-knit group, and grudges could not easily survive in such an environment. The anger faded and the Keeper took Mahanon in with her other apprentices, and Mahanon prayed that his magic remained small. A nothing sort of magic. An understanding of the world, as Diemne put it. That wouldn’t be so bad. He was a good student, he was calm, he was quiet. Mahanon was determined that he was not, could not be dangerous.

To prove this, Mahanon kept his magic stifled as much as he could, letting it out in little wisps and occasional sparks. Gentle magic. Little magic.

Which was likely what prompted the thunderbolt. His magic, far too pent up, released itself as an unexpected strike of lightning directly in the middle of camp.

Mahanon ran. Not very far, and he did not hide in any place unknown; he didn’t want to add to anyone’s worries and burdens by forcing them to search for him. He just did not want to be seen, could not be seen…

Fionn found him after an hour or so. It was a nook Mahanon knew well, amongst the curled and knotted roots of an ancient oak overlooking a little stream. You could curl up there for ages without being bothered, if you were small and quiet.

Fionn’s pale skin betrayed him as he sat next to Mahanon’s hiding place. He seemed calm, perhaps a little sombre, but his eyes were red and his cheeks flushed with recent tears.

“I’m sorry,” Mahanon said, before Fionn could speak. “I didn’t mean to – I just mean, it won’t happen again. I promise, da. I’ll control it better. Promise.”

Fionn took a long breath. “No one is angry with you, da’len. It’s… your nature.”

Mahanon shook his head, horrified. “It’s not! I promise it’s not. It was just an accident, but I know better now. I don’t think I’d be able to do it again even if I tried.”

That was more honest than it wasn’t. Mahanon truly had no idea how he’d summoned a lightning bolt. The Keeper’s magic as well as the First’s was magic of the earth, solid and sturdy. The Second’s magic was a hodge-podge of skills, and they were focusing on the healing arts as a clan necessity.

The Keeper was right. There was a storm inside Mahanon. Chaotic, wild, unpredictable, powerful. Everything Mahanon never was.

Fionn gently lifted Mahanon from his hiding place and into his lap, cradling him like a younger child than he was. It had been years since Mahanon had been held like this, but he didn’t mind – he clung close to his da, desperate for comforting words. Desperate to hear something, anything other
than what he knew Fionn was about to tell him.

“Not the coming summer, but the one after,” Fionn said slowly, calmly, every word sounding weighted and strained regardless. “How old will you be by then, da’len?”

Mahanon did some quick math, finding an awful sort of comfort in the numbers. “Ten at first, then eleven by the end of it.”

Fionn nodded slowly. “It’s a learning age, ten. You gather up the loose threads of your childhood and weave them into something familiar, something you can understand, before age and fate blows everything apart again.”

Mahanon wasn’t sure what his father was saying, only that he suddenly felt a deep apprehension at the idea of turning ten.

Fionn nodded again and rocked Mahanon gently, stroking his hair. “We all love you, vhenan. All of us. Your mamae, your babae, the Keeper… the clan loves you. No one is angry with you, and no one is punishing you. We are always going to love you. Do you understand?”

Mahanon shook his head. He understood, yes, he understood, but he didn’t want his da to keep speaking. He didn’t want to hear it.

“Mahànon,” Fionn said, sighing as Mahanon began to cry. “There is an Arlathvhen that summer. Our People… need you. Others need you. You’re very special, and – and we can’t…” Fionn took in a shuddering breath, and Mahanon knew his da was crying again too. “I told you years ago, didn’t I? That your mamae and babae and I, we’re very selfish people, truly. We don’t ever want to give you up.”

“You don’t have to,” Mahanon whimpered, clinging to Fionn’s tunic like an infant might. He felt like an infant, lost and confused and terrified in an entirely new world of unknown fears.

“Andraste guide me,” Fionn wept in Trade speak, then said, “But we do, da’len. We do.”

- Mahanon wakes up in an odd state of motion, being pulled and arranged until he’s sitting nearly upright and held in enormous, well-muscled arms.

Mahanon sways a little, blinking sleep and tears from his eyes. He coughs. Disoriented, and maybe still dreaming.

Large, calloused hands with missing fingers cradle his face, thumbs smoothing tears from his cheeks. Mahanon blinks until he can meet Bull’s gaze, concern drawing itself in stark lines across the qunari’s face.

Mahanon swallows hard, his face aching. How long has he been weeping? “Did I wake anybody up?”

“Just me,” says Bull, kissing Mahanon’s swollen face. “Talk to me, kadan.”

Mahanon tucks himself close against Bull. There are fresh tears waiting to be shed, no matter that Mahanon has had quite enough of crying.

They’re just on the edges of the Planasene Forest now, camped in a convenient grove that keeps them hidden from the road. Familiar scents have been catching on the breeze; not the true, deep
Mahanon knows he’s rambling, caught in an anxious spiral. But Bull hears him out regardless, his large hands coming to rest between Mahanon’s shoulder blades and on his hips, the weight
endlessly comforting in a way Mahanon cannot put words to.

“Anyway, it’s why the Dalish don’t like to see us out and about away from the clans,” Mahanon says, trying to stem the endless tide of his worries. “They don’t know if we’re fully exiled or just… separated, I guess. It’s complicated.”

“Dalish isn’t exiled, is she?”

“I don’t think so,” Mahanon says, familiar anger at Dalish’s treatment by her clan casting a bitter note to his words. “It was disgustingly unjust and irresponsible of them to turn her out like they did. Making her an exile would have been…” Mahanon shakes his head. “She still doesn’t like to talk about it, vhenan. Not even with me.”

“That’s fair,” Bull says. “I’m a nosy fuck, is all. I really should start learning your language.”

“Which dialect?” Mahanon asks innocently. “Ancient Elvhen is the most structured, but you’ll rarely hear it used today. The trading Elvish is the one I speak with Dalish, though we both have regional variants. And Sliabh-”

“Vashedan, alright, fuck, I’m already getting a headache,” Bull says, grumbling as Mahanon laughs lightly into his collarbone. “Like I said, kadan, I don’t know shit about parents. And it’s clear I know less than shit about your people. But no matter what happens, whether we see them or not, or how they react… I’ve got you, yeah? You’re gonna have a family and people to come home to at the end of the day, no matter what.”

Mahanon presses close, his voice catching. “Thank you, vhenan.”

The winding forest road feels, a little, like a cleft path between two sheer cliff faces, the woods standing tall and dark and imposing on either side. The trees of the Planasene are enormous and ancient, well-tended and protected. Mahanon knows that the Sliabhs are not the only ones guarding the forest; he has vague memories of trading with one or two other Dalish clans, but very rarely. There was always the threat of annihilation if the clans spent too much time together in one place, providing a tempting target for those who would prefer that the steadfast forest guardians were not there to impede their acquisition of timber and land for livestock.

The rules, if you could call them that, for navigating the Planasene are quite simple. You stay on the road. There are several human settlements along the way, usually spaced a convenient day’s walk away from one another so no one is forced to camp amongst the ancient trees. Mahanon does not have to warn the Chargers not to take their axes to the wood for tinder. Even Rocky seems a bit subdued by the weight of the forest around them, the shifting shadows and whisper of leaves, the occasional creak of the pines.

By now the Chargers are well aware of Bull’s intentions. Mahanon can’t help but feel oddly mortified, pulling the Chargers so far from their usual territory on what is essentially an entirely personal journey, but the others don’t seem to mind.

“There is business out this way, so we’re not likely to be bored,” Stitches assures him one afternoon, his voice hushed. The road is particularly narrow along this stretch, and tree branches arc above them like a long Chantry archway. “And we’ve never done the Planasene road before. Everyone’s always up for an adventure.”

“Besides, you know we’ve taken some interesting detours for the sake of a personal longing
before,” Krem adds, coming up on Mahanon’s other side. “We brought some supplies to Skinner’s grandmother back in her alienage before you joined us, and you were with us last year we checked in with some of Rocky’s old partners – oh, what was that wedding we went to?”

“Old captain of mine from the Blight,” Stitches says. “I’m surprised any of you remember that.”

“I remember getting into town and getting out of town,” Krem shrugs. “I’m told a wedding happened somewhere in the middle. No one drinks like the army does. Anyway, Mouse, we’d kick up a fuss if we really didn’t want to be here, spooky as this place is.”

Mahanon has noticed that the Chargers seem ill at ease with the forest. Not disturbed, the way they would be in darkspawn territory or in some of the ancient ruins they’ve had to clear for interested nobles looking to plunder old wealth. But certainly cautious. Wary.

Mahanon, on the other hand, finds himself fighting the urge to turn and disappear into the trees with every step he takes. It feels almost perverse and strange, padding along this tame packed road, when he could feel the give of real earth beneath his bare feet and rest his eyes in the shadows, really see every last flicker of movement without constantly having to shield his eyes from the sun’s glare.

This isn’t his home, not yet. This is not the territory of his people. But it’s heart-wrenchingly close, so close that there is a part of Mahanon that wonders if he couldn’t just find his way to his clan by instinct, sprint through the trees and underbrush to his people’s hidden pathways and follow his feet back to the aravels and the fireflies, the wolfhounds, the stories…

Three days into the forest they rest at a small inn just off the road, almost completely overtaken by the trees. Outside of a few villages and settlements, the inns are little more than waystations supplied by both human traders and elves alike. A well-stocked inn means less trespassers into the forest, and the innkeepers know better than to shortchange the elves who trade with them. A profitable partnership, but there’s no question of where the true power in the forest lies.

Mahanon is grateful for the ale when it comes to the table. It’s been an odd day, his mind split amongst memories, current concerns, and endless possibilities for what the coming days could bring. It feels as though he’s swallowed an entire cauldron’s worth of Stitches’ stimulant tea, vibrating and strained, flinching at every stray noise. He’d honestly been a bit startled when Bull called for the Chargers to pull up for the night. He could have kept going, he’s sure. Could have sprinted down the forest road all on his own, until…

Mahanon nearly inhales his first cup of ale all in one go, pouring himself another and willing the alcohol to settle him. It’s irritating, he decides, having to stop so often, so close to home, for the others. It’s utterly unfair and downright ungrateful to think so, but he’s thinking it nonetheless. He’s gone without sleep before, and truly, he’s certain there will be no sleep for him tonight anyway. He could slip away in the night, maybe, and continue on his own. So close, teeth-grindingly close…

A bowl of bread rolls is placed in front of him. Mahanon picks it up with the intention of passing it along to Grim beside him, food nothing more than a distant thought, but instinct compels him to glance at Bull.

Of course the qunari is watching him closely. No judgment, no concern, really. But Bull is watching him in such an opaque way that it’s clear he wants Mahanon to know he’s being watched. A comfort and a warning, or something in between the two.

Mahanon fights a scowl and takes a bread roll before passing the bowl along. Sometimes, very
occasionally, there are downsides to being cared for by someone so persistently observant.

It’s not very long after this that Mahanon finishes his second ale and is reaching for a third (it must be weaker stock than he’s accustomed to – his limbs feel heavy and there’s a touch of looseness in his thoughts and words, but that frenetic energy is still rattling through him) when Skinner nudges Mahanon’s elbow.

“Someone’s got their eye on you, Mouse,” she murmurs.

Mahanon’s certain she’s speaking of Bull for a moment, but Mahanon follows her gaze as he pours his ale to find one of the barkeepers staring right back at him.

Mahanon blinks and tilts his head, finding no reason to disguise his bemusement. The drink might not have calmed his nerves, but it has dulled his shyness somewhat.

The barkeeper flushes and hastens out from behind the long counter.

“I don’t mean to disturb you, serah,” the barkeeper says once he’s within earshot, nervously glancing about the table. He’s caught the attention of all the Chargers now. “I don’t know if you’ve passed through these parts before, but the People here… well, I don’t see them often myself, but they look a bit like you.”

*The People.* Mahanon’s heart stutters and aches. It’s been a while since he’s heard that mix of careful respect and unease from a *shem.* “The Good People of the Forest.” That was what they would call the Dalish here.

“I… my family is…” Mahanon stumbles over his words, his tongue feeling awfully clumsy in his mouth. He grimaces and takes another swig of ale to whet his speech. “I’m People. My people are People, or were, that is.”

“Oh.” The barkeeper gives another strange look at the rest of the Chargers, a million questions passing over his face before he decides on a shrug. “Well, no matter the circumstances, it’s good to see your kind still walking the roads. Seemed as though you all but disappeared for a bit.”

“Probably the Arlathvhen,” Mahanon shrugs, flicking his ears to clear his head. He takes another long swallow of ale. “Our kind gather every so often to trade stories and whatnot. It’s a whole thing.” Mahanon snorts at Dalish’s scandalized look. In Elvish he says, “It’s no secret, *lethallan.* I’d rather the *shem* know we move around sometimes than think we’re all…”

That frantic, electrifying energy chokes Mahanon suddenly, like a visceral force. “Gone” or “dead,” whatever he’d planned to say, his body will not allow him to finish the thought. He finishes his ale instead.

“I’m glad,” the barkeeper says, though he looks increasingly wrong-footed as he glances between Dalish and Mahanon, then the rest of the table. “Darkspawn came through the woods tailing the end of the Blight, and… well, I know there were some hard battles fought in the trees. Some of us were worried—”

Mahanon does not decide to stand up from the table, so much as he suddenly finds himself standing. Everyone is staring at him, every last pair of eyes in the inn and maybe a few beyond that, and his stomach gives an awful lurch under the scrutiny.

“Thank you,” Mahanon says to the barkeeper, clawing for whatever words will make this situation even remotely comfortable. “For speaking with me, and – um, for having such an excellent inn.”
Mahanon turns before the man can respond, feeling stares stabbing at his retreating form like daggers, like burrowing insects under his skin, leaving him utterly infested with unwanted attention. He thinks again of the road, the trees, of taking off into the forest like a wolfhound, running until he finds the home he’s looking for or else running until he cannot run anymore.

Instead, Mahanon forces himself to the rooms, pulling the key Bull handed to him when they all first sat down from his tunic. He fumbles it, struggling to read the number on the handle, but manages to get the gist and wrestle his way into the chamber he’s sharing with Bull.

Mahanon feels a little like sleeping, a little like running, a little like vomiting until nothing comes up, a little like pounding his fists against the hardwood beneath his feet and weeping like a child for no reason. Instead of doing anything quite so mad, he paces. Around and around in dizzying circles, then in loops of eights, then back and forth in straight lines, and there’s an endless chattering inside his head with no real discernible thoughts amongst them.

The door opens as Mahanon paces towards the window, but he cannot break his pattern to look behind him. He reaches the end of the room, toes touching the line between one board and another, before he turns around again and Bull is watching him from the doorway.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Mahanon mutters reflexively. Bull is between him and his next path of pacing, and he cannot start before the way is clear. “I just need to… sort out my thoughts.”

“You’ve been gone for a while,” Bull says.

Mahanon frowns at the ground beneath Bull’s feet. The passage of time has nothing to do with any of this, whatever this is. Bull is standing exactly on the line Mahanon needs to touch, and there’s an awful sensation like a ticking clock grating at the back of his mind and telling him that he does not have long to reach the other end of the room before something terrible happens.

Terrible like darkspawn. It stands to reason. Mahanon lied about his dreams, said he was dreaming of darkspawn, so of course the darkspawn would come to his forest. The spirits would have heard his lies; perhaps they called the monsters here. Perhaps-

Bull is moving, suddenly, but he’s still blocking Mahanon’s path, and Mahanon surprises himself with a frustrated growl. “Bull-”

Bull takes Mahanon firmly by the shoulders, his grip strong enough that it’s just a shade above painful, and it stops Mahanon short. Stops Mahanon’s words, his chattering thoughts, just a slight skip in the narrative as he’s physically grounded in place.

Bull touches his neck, checking his pulse, and Mahanon realizes that his heart is pounding. He’s not breathing but panting, shivering and damp with a chill sweat.

“Oh,” Mahanon says.

Mahanon pulls away from Bull, and Bull lets him go. The pace and tempo of his spinning thoughts might have been interrupted, but – Mahanon still can’t, still can’t quite…

Mahanon sits on the edge of the bed and presses his palms into his eyes, gripping at the curls of hair that slip within reach of his fingers.

"I didn't know," Mahanon says after a few moments, once he can speak steadily. He's still breathing a little too quickly, a little too deeply, but already the panicked itching at the back of his mind is starting to abate now that he's been made aware of it. "I didn't realize I was... getting like this. Fuck, I was being an ass, wasn't I?"
Bull snorts. "Kadan, your 'being an ass' is how most of us are when we're being halfways polite."
More gently, Bull adds, "We know you're going through shit. No one blames you for it."

No one is angry with you. No one is punishing you. It's your nature.

Mahanon starts to laugh suddenly, a strange crackling sound, little lightning sparks leaping from 
his fingertips.

"It's not very funny," Mahanon tries to say, aware that Bull is watching him closely, aware that 
his laughter is not rational in the slightest, but completely unable to stop. "Just - no one could ever 
figure out how I got to be like this, why my magic looks like this." Mahanon lifts his sparkling 
hand, snorting again. "I was supposed to be quiet, and - I wasn't supposed to be anything at all. But 
even back with my family, as sheltered from the world as a person could be, I was still so fucking 
*nervous*, Bull. So-" Mahanon gives a full-body shudder, like hot-cold lightning crawling up his 
spine. "Magic like this doesn't run in my family, but demons seek out those with... poor emotional 
control, I suppose, and I would have been the easiest target imaginable, wouldn't I? What is 
lightning, if not an expression of this, of-?"

Mahanon is abruptly engulfed in Bull's arms, the qunari holding him punishingly tight - sparks and 
all - until the awkward, awful laughing stops.

"Sorry," Mahanon whispers.

"Not 'sorry,' *kadan*, remember? Try again."

Mahanon closes his eyes. "Thank you."

"Better." Bull relaxes his grip and sits next to Mahanon on the bed, keeping an arm draped around 
Mahanon's shoulders like a cloak or a heavy blanket. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Mahanon sighs. "I don't even know what 'it' is, *vhenan*. We're just so close, and... Creators. It's a 
lot."

"If my information is accurate - well, about as accurate as it can get - we should be crossing paths 
with the clan the day after tomorrow," says Bull, all practicality. "We both know it's long odds, but 
we'll be close. Worst case, we can talk to people who might have an idea of where they're at."

Mahanon opens his mouth. Closes it. Breathes, and says, "Darkspawn."

"Yeah."

"Not even just darkspawn, but - part of the reason why my clan had larger family units was 
because the life of a hunter or warrior can be dangerous, and..." Mahanon closes his eyes. "It wasn't 
uncommon to lose people. I sometimes forget that, you know. Between *shen'len* poachers and 
trespassers and the darker parts of the forest, it's really not the safest life, no matter... no matter 
what the fuck I was going on about just now."

"So I guess the question is, would you rather know or not know?" Bull asks. "We don't have to do 
this. We can keep right on going, and you'll get to see your forest again and you can tell yourself 
whatever you want about your clan; that they're all safe and happy together, that they're getting on 
just fine, anything you'd like to believe."

It would sound like condescension or mockery from anyone else, but Mahanon knows Bull is 
presenting this as a real option. A tempting one. A pretty lie to cling to, rather than facing a 
potentially brutal truth.
Mahanon lifts his face to Bull's and smiles.

"I'd rather know," Mahanon says.

Bull echoes his smile and kisses his brow. "Yeah, that's my kadan."

Mahanon can't quite pinpoint how he knows when the Chargers cross into his family's territory, but he knows.

The trees all look the same as they did yesterday. The road is no different. The hard-packed earth is the same as it has been throughout the journey. But whether it's a shift in the scents on the breeze or a changing lilt in the birdsong around them, Mahanon knows.

Mahanon breathes, in and out. In and out.

Mahanon doesn't realize that he's clutching Diemne's dagger hard enough for the knotwork patterns on the hilt to imbed themselves in the skin of his palm until he feels a touch on his shoulder and looks over to see Dalish at his side. Her smile has a bitter angle, one she's clearly trying to smooth over by the softness of her gaze.

Mahanon does not have the words in their language or Trade speak to express his gratitude for her company as a fellow ex-Dalish and mage these past years; how excited he is to have her in his forest; how he understands that she's happy for him, but there's pain in that happiness too, and he doesn't begrudge her for it.

Mahanon cannot say any of this, so instead he touches Dalish's wrist with a smile of his own and hopes she understands.

Eventually they just about trip over another road branching off from the main thoroughfare. The trees are a little thinner here, and Mahanon thinks he can make out a few modest homesteads and even some small farmland in the distance.

"There's a proper village about another hour's walk down the road," Bull says, consulting his map as he turns to the Chargers. "Nice big inn, from what I've heard. You all are free to go on ahead if you want. Boss and I are gonna have a chat with some folks over that way."

Bull gestures down the side road, and Mahanon's heart flips. He squints through the trees, turning his head this way and that to try to get a better picture of the buildings in the distance. Does he know this place? Has he been here before? He must have - this has to be one of those small shem'len settlements Fionn travelled to for trade, with Mahanon quietly accompanying him and dreaming of a bigger world.

"We're due for a rest anyway," Krem shrugs, rolling his shoulders. "We'll sit ourselves here for a while before heading on, if it's all the same to you, Chief. That way if the locals come after you with pitchforks we'll be on hand to scare them back into the trees, yeah?"

"Your call," Bull says. "Don't do anything stupid while we're gone."

The Chargers grumble a multitude of responses to this, but Mahanon is hardly listening. His heart is pounding in his throat, every nerve tingling. He has to remind himself to mind his expectations, keep his thoughts in order, but all he can think of is... fuck, to come this far and get to the end of this little road and find his father's arms open and waiting for him, his parents, his People...
Bull is taking his hand and squeezing it tight before Mahanon even realizes the qunari is standing next to him.

"Ready, kadan?"

Is he ready? Could anyone be ready for something like this?

Mahanon breathes, in and out, and smiles. Nods.

The trees thin out as Mahanon and Bull make their way down the side road, side-stepping soft spots and animal dung as they go. There's very little farmland in the forest, if Mahanon recalls correctly, but the elves and humans have negotiated over the ages to allow places like this: small clearings converted to contain some modest agriculture, pens for fowl and one or two larger beasts - horses for transport, goats for milk and cheese, maybe a single cow if there's room enough.

Mahanon used to think these places were the wide open plains he read about in his books. There was a time, after all, when he could not imagine a horizon without trees.

Mahanon frowns at the gathering of homesteads as the trees part for a clearer view. It certainly feels familiar, but it could all just be wishful thinking. He was also quite small at the time; with the shift in perspective, everything about the forest feels both familiar and unrecognizable in nearly equal measures.

It's a strange thought, but Mahanon remembers what he said to Bull before they entered the forest. Perhaps he developed this way of thinking to cope with his losses, but there is a sense of truth to the fact that Mahanon of Clan Sliabh was an entire life over from Mahanon of Clan Lavellan, and again from Mahanon of Bull's Chargers. Even if he does know this settlement would he recognize it now, looking through the eyes of an entirely different elf from the little boy he was?

Mahanon is lost in his thoughts, but not so lost that he doesn't notice a few humans catching sight of them up ahead. They disappear from view, and a few minutes later, a portly figure in leather armour carrying some manner of pole arm comes trotting down the road toward them. As the person approaches it's clear that the armour has seen very little use, and that it was hastily thrown on by someone with little experience wearing it.

"Er, hold up for a moment, serahs," the person pants once they're in earshot, voice trembling only a little as they seem both determined not to look away from Bull but equally determined not to look him in the eye. Their own features are obscured by the helmet, though Mahanon can see ruddy pink skin and two round blue eyes blinking out from the shadow of their helm.

Mahanon and Bull trade a bemused look and stop, Bull holding up his empty hands for good measure.

The person looks from Bull to Mahanon and back again, seemingly at a loss for what to make of them both. They lick their lips nervously. "You alright then, Master Sliabh?"

Mahanon's breath catches, but it's Bull who replies. "You know him?"

"We know the People," the person says, lifting their chin. "Enough to recognize kin. We're on good terms with them."

Mahanon swallows hard, struggling to find his voice. "Maybe - maybe you might know my father, then. He looks a bit different from the rest of us; fair hair, and pale skin, but he trades with... I mean, he used to trade with humans, I don't know if he does anymore, his name is Fionn?"
The stranger watches Mahanon with a slowly narrowing look as he stutters and rambles, as though trying to piece together a particularly difficult puzzle, but when Mahanon says Fionn's name their eyes flare open. They drop their pole arm, the weapon bouncing and dully clattering against the ground.

"Maker's breath and jizz," the person says breathlessly. "Hanny?"

Before Mahanon can reply or even really process the old nickname, the person lunges forward and hauls him into a crushing hug.

"Andraste's lush fanny, I'm - Maker, Da's gonna flip his tits when he sees you!" They pull away from Mahanon and haul off their helm, revealing a halo of bright hair escaping from a long loose braid. Round blue eyes and an upturned scoop of a nose over a broad, familiar grin. "Remember me?"

Mahanon grips their arms, gobsmacked and giddy. "Shep?"

"Actually, it's Shara now," they say, flushed with excitement. "Serah Fionn was an absolute blessing when that all came about, but - blighted horseshite, it's really you, isn't it? And-" Shara glances up at Bull and startles a little, as if she'd forgotten his looming presence in her delight. "Er. Mind introducing your friend?"

"Shit, of course," Mahanon says, grinning apologetically at Bull. The qunari just shrugs, his single eye dancing with amusement. "Shara, this is my..." Mahanon pauses, momentarily stuck. Business partner? Lover? He tries again. "This is the Iron Bull, of the mercenary group Bull's Chargers. I'm their sumskeeper, and he's - we're, er-"

Bull, the bastard, watches Mahanon flounder with a broadening grin, and Mahanon knows the qunari is going to be merciless in his teasing about this later. Luckily Shara seems to put the disparate pieces of Mahanon's woeful explanation together and suddenly gives a long, knowing nod, eyes widening. "Huh. Maker, Hanny, when Da told me you'd gone off in the world to do big things..."

Bull barks a loud, thunderous laugh at this, and Mahanon considers fleeing right back down the road again, flushing a deep crimson.

"Anyway, Bull, Shara was a playmate of mine when I was small." Mahanon beams at Shara despite his embarrassment. "One of the first humans I ever met, actually."

"He couldn't pronounce my name and I still can't fucking pronounce his," Shara says, tweaking the point of one of Mahanon's ears. "Your Common's gotten better, though. Fuck, we gotta tell Da, come on!"

Shara snatches up her pole arm and races off towards the homesteads.

"I like her," Bull says. "'Big things.'"

"Shush," Mahanon says, breaking into a light jog to follow Shara down the road.

More people emerge from homesteads, small fields, and pens to gawk at Bull and Mahanon (mostly Bull) as they trail after Shara through the heart of the settlement. Mahanon catches glimpses of half-remembered faces, snatchings of familiar voices, even as he scans for any sign of clan activity; a cart in the corner, maybe, or a half-empty market stall. Anything to suggest his people are here, or wandering about nearby.
They catch up with Shara around the side of a two-storey farmhouse to find her pounding on an outhouse door.

"It's important, Da, and you've been in there half the blessed afternoon already!" Shara is shouting.

"Can't a man get some bloody peace and quiet to do his business?" a muffled voice shouts back.

Mahanon covers his mouth with his hand to suppress his giggles. Bull just snorts.

"Sure, only I've got Fionn's boy here and I thought you might want to know," Shara hollers.

The ensuing pause makes Mahanon quite viscerally aware that the other farmers and their families have followed after him and Bull, watching the proceedings with great interest. Mahanon does a double take when he sees a man as tall as a young pine - older, now, but still instantly recognizable as one of Fionn's merchant friends.

"Maker's heavy bollocks," the man breathes, staring at Mahanon with wide eyes. Then he stares at Bull with even wider eyes. "Giant bollocks."

"Serah Bernd," Mahanon says with an incline of his head, the name coming to his tongue faster than he'd expected after so long. "This is the Iron Bull-"

"I'll fucking say," Bernd states. "We heard rumours about oxmen in Kirkwall, but-"

"Da, that's not polite!" Shara scowls, smacking her father's arm. "They're called 'Qunari,' damn it." She turns to Mahanon and Bull, her scowl quickly transforming into a shining smile. "We saw some other folks sitting down by the road - they're not yours, are they?"

"Yeah, those are my mercs," Bull says, and Mahanon can't help but admire the ease and friendly good humour with which Bull fields the farmers' fascination with him. "They'll be heading along to the traveller's inn in a bit, so-"

"Absolutely not," Shara says. "We don't get any excitement around here nor any proper visitors, and we've room enough for plenty of both." She looks to the farmers assembled around her. "A full shindig tonight then, yeah? If your boys don't mind sleeping a bit rough, we won't charge you anything but good company if Hanny'll vouch for your character."

"They don't mind," Bull says, as Mahanon says, "Absolutely, they're excellent people." Bull cuts Mahanon an amused look and Mahanon amends, "Well, they're alright."

"Then it's settled! I'll go invite them in." Shara claps her hands and takes off again, followed by a few interested farmers as everyone else converges on Mahanon and Bull.

It's overwhelming, being passed around from handshake to handshake by people who seem to know and recognize him, welcoming him back, patting him on the shoulder, speaking all at once and excitedly to one another about the night to come and old memories of elven markets ("He wasn't that Bowman's child, was he-?" "No, the blondie merchant one! I know they don't look much alike-!"). Eventually Mahanon finds himself in front of Bernd again, and the man takes his arm and leads him away from the others as they start to ask Bull about a thousand different questions about Qunari and Kirkwall. Mahanon casts an apologetic look over his shoulder at Bull, who just grins and starts to answer as best he can.
"I'll be honest, it didn't sound like we'd be seeing you anymore," Bernid says, shaking his head. "Serah Fionn never got into the specifics, but he told us your people had you passed along to another clan due to some sort of traditional practice. Poor man was proper devastated, I'm sorry to say."

"You've seen him, then?" Mahanon says. "We heard - well, we thought my people would be trading through here, and I'd hoped..."

"Of course you did," Bernid says softly. He pauses and scratches his beard, wincing. "Alright, well, the good news is, your da's just fine, far as I know. Still trading for your people and doing damn good business, even after the darkspawn came through."

Mahanon's heart swells in his chest, painfully hopeful and relieved all at once, even as the mention of darkspawn comes as a sharp jab between his ribs. "Mythal'enaste, thank you-"

Bernid holds up a hand. "I said that was the good news, boy.

"Bad news is, you just missed them. They came through about a fortnight back, and won't be around again until next harvest."

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Chapter End Notes

PRONUNCIATION TIME! It's gonna be a fun mix of Irish and.... Nonny Making Shit Up, So Whoo! (And for the Irish I tend towards Munster-Leinster pronunciations if anyone is keeping score here.)

SLIABH: SHLEE-uv

MAHÀNON: not super different from how you'd imagine! I know most people say ma-HAH-non, so this would be... okay, do y'all know how to do a french accent grave? It's like a mix between an "AH" and an "AW", with more "AH" than "AW". The main difference here is that the MA and the HÀ would have nearly the same weight, so a bit more of a lilt - "MA-HÀ-non."

FIONN: Fin

TAOIRSE: TER-shuh

DIEMNE: JEM-ne (like a long "e" sound, but short)

CUIMHNE: QUEE-ne (bit of an "h" sound at the end of "QUEE," almost like a very soft "v") (means memory!)

ISUIL: ISH-ul

LAINN: LAY-in (but short on the "in", almost like "Lane")

THAT SHOULD BE GOOD FOR NOW
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

WHAT KIND OF BAD CHOICES CAN I MAKE HERE IN TERMS OF POSTING FIC WHEN I SHOULD BE LEAVING FOR WORK SOON IF I WANT TO GET THERE IN TIME TO GRAB COFFEE

PRIORITIES I GUESS

I'm gonna do the unforgivable and post my first song rec in the middle of the chapter because I'm a monster. This is Twitter's fault for asking for a longer chapter. There's also a song rec at the end that will kinda spill into the next chapter too and ANYWAY, none of this is important.

What's important is that I thank you so so much for your patience on this one, and exciting things happen in this chapter so I really hope it's worth the wait <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's nearly dusk by the time the chaos of throwing together an unexpected party dies down enough for Mahanon and Bernid to have a proper conversation.

Mahanon spent the better part of the afternoon burning with frustrated curiosity that he did his best to stifle as the farmers excitedly welcomed a bemused troupe of Chargers to their homes and put them to work preparing food, building fires, assembling tables and chairs, all while rough ale and spirits were passed around to keep the buoyant energy up. Despite the intimidating amount of enthusiasm, the Chargers seem to have taken to their hosts with the usual affability. With dinner over and done with, the mercenaries have split off into a few odd groupings: Krem, Skinner, and Rocky seem to be playing a kind of drinking game with a few of the burlier farmers; Dalish is happily fielding questions and wide-eyed curiosity from the village children; Stitches has found a few Blight veterans to share drinks and old war stories with, and Shara has been speaking with (or more accurately, at) an unusually contented-looking Grim for the better part of an hour now.

Bull has kept to Mahanon's side, providing a hand on his shoulder or a brief touch at the small of Mahanon's back every so often when he seems to sense Mahanon's impatience boiling over into nerves. It helps.

Bernid finds Mahanon and Bull sitting by one of the fires and casts them a bit of an odd look before taking a seat, passing Mahanon a dusty-looking bottle. Mahanon knows a few of the farmers have been looking a bit askance at the pair of them all through the afternoon, and Mahanon finds the curiosity amusing more than anything else. A qunari is a rare enough sight - an elf taking a qunari lover, well.

"Let's get you caught up then," Bernid says, nodding for Mahanon to pop the loosened cork atop the bottle. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Once these folks call a shindig, there's no calming 'em down until a shindig is had."

"Of course," Mahanon says with a smile, even as his heart gives an anticipatory lurch. He pulls the cork and passes it to Bernid for the first sip, but the farmer shakes his head.
"That's all for you, lad," Bernid says, glancing at Bull. "And for your, er, friend there, if he's keen. You'll understand in a moment."

Mahanon takes a sip. Sweet, rich mead edged with the sharp bite of pine and juniper fills his mouth. Mahanon looks up sharply, a thousand memories flooding his mind with the taste.

"Sliabh stock," Bernid says with a satisfied nod. "Top end, and we're right in the perfect moon for drinking it. Wanted to welcome you home properly, seeing as your clan isn't here to do so."

"They'd only let the children try a sip or two during the midsummer festivals," Mahanon says softly, more to himself than to Bull and Bernid. "And then during the Arlathvhen, the night before..." he swallows hard, blinking campfire smoke from his eyes. "Bernid-"

"Drink, and keep drinking," Bernid says. He leans back in his seat and fishes out a pipe and sachet, shaking his head. "The forest has seen some troubles over the years. You should know some of what's gone on here in your absence."

Mahanon drinks, chasing out the icy chill that starts to gnaw at his heart with the warmth of the mead before passing the bottle to Bull. "I heard darkspawn came through the forest."

"Aye," Bernid says quietly. He packs his pipe and passes it through the fire to light it, settling back to smoke. "This was after your People came back from their thingie down south, thank the Maker. Our best soldiers were still out fighting the Blight proper with the larger armies. Called to duty, you understand. They couldn't have known what was happening here.

"The Warden and her troops may've broken the back of the darkspawn forces, but plenty of scattered remnants still came prowling. They were chased out of the Marches for the most part, only to start holing up here. The darkspawn liked the forest - nice and dark and twisty, a bit like home for them, maybe. They started building nests in the cave systems. The Marchers didn't much care where they were herding them so long as they were somewhere else. They weren't about to trespass into the forest to go chasing after them."

Mahanon frowns. "If they were fighting darkspawn the Dalish wouldn't have hurt the humans for trespassing. We've made alliances before."

"Mhm," Bernid says, making a face. "Well, that's the rough part. Once the darkspawn started settling in we knew we had a problem on our hands - elves and humans alike. The road wasn't safe, so our usual trading partners started fucking off, and the People found themselves at war in the trees. So a few representatives were sent to hold negotiations with some of the human strongholds around the outskirts - some of our folks, some of your folks, a sampling of the people who call the Planasene home. It would have been in everyone's best interest to give the elves some help clearing the forest, if just to keep the forest road open."

"I'm guessing it didn't go well," Bull says quietly.

Bernid spits with a grimace. "The Dalish made a generous fucking offer. A tentative seasonal lumber agreement. They would mark trees suitable for cutting and guide axemen through the forest for collection. Not just scrapwood, mind, but real staff-making wood. Ironbark, even. Just in exchange for a few hundred men to join them on a full forest sweep to clear out the nests before they got out of hand and had us overrun."

Mahanon's eyes widen as Bernid speaks, and he's grateful when Bull passes him the mead again. "Fenhesis. We've never let any shem'len anywhere near our ironbark outside of trade goods!"
"Things were bad," Bernid says flatly. "It was a wrench, and I'm sorry to say it was all for nothing. The Marchers and the folks from the Nevarran Vinmarks tried to gin up the offer. Wanted fully ceded territory, whole chunks of the forest carved out for consumption. From what Fionn told me, the People almost caved to the demands, too. The only reason your folks held fast was because they weren't sure the Marchers and Nevarrans wouldn't just double-cross them in the end anyhow and let the darkspawn wipe them out so they could get the rest of the forest too."

Mahanon grits his teeth against his rage and grief, staring into the flames. *Shen'len*.

"We got some help from the wilds to the west, and I think that's the only thing that saved us at the end of it all," Bernid says. "They're good folks out there, and they need that road open as badly as we do. We still had the odd Marcher pass down the road, telling anyone who'd listen that the elves were getting us killed by refusing a good deal and being precious about their trees. None of us believed it, of course. We knew the People were suffering to keep us all safe. For our part, here at the homestead, we tried to keep the fight going and give the elves anything they needed. What few able-bodied people we had left who weren't off at war already, whatever food we had left in our stores..." Bernid looks down. "My wife was heading down to the traveller's inn to to drum up some more grain to pass along when they got swarmed on the road. I hear she put up a hell of a fight before she went down."

"I'm so sorry," Mahanon says, meaning it. He remembers Bernid's wife and her constant offers of goat milk to "try and get a little meat on those little bird bones of yours, dear."

Bernid shakes his head. "Nearly killed poor Shara with grief when it happened. And I'm sorry to say your people had their losses, Mahanon. Serah Fionn keeps tight-lipped about numbers, and I understand why, but I do know your Keeper was killed about a year in."

Mahanon winces, clutching the bottle tightly. "*Mamae* - my mother once told me our Keeper Cuimhne was her father's Keeper too. She was a good woman."

Bull puts a hand on Mahanon's shoulder. Mahanon leans into his touch, a dull ache in his heart.

"From what I understand, one of the south-eastern clans sent people north with the wildlings to help clear some nests," Bernid says softly. "It helped take the burden off your People and turned the tide of things. I heard the People to the south-west were just about wiped clean out, before enough merchants complained about road conditions that finally some bright spark in Kirkwall sent a few mercenaries along to lighten the load. I heard a *real* wild rumour that the remaining elves have been sending some whispers out through certain circles, offering refuge for city elves and escaped slaves to come live in the trees with them to build their numbers back up, but that could all be bardic hogwash. You know how these things go. They sound like they're recovering, but it's taking time, and meanwhile poachers have been nipping at their territory."

"I know my da would have kept our privacy, but..." Mahanon looks down, biting his lip as he struggles for phrasing. The loss of his first Keeper is a hard blow to manage, and Mahanon finds himself going over half-forgotten names and faces, knowing in his heart that many of them are likely gone. "My mother, and - and my father..."

"I wish I had more I could tell you," Bernid says, his voice heavy with smoke and sorrow. "There weren't many specifics. I know you've got another Keeper - met her once, actually, a few years back. She's got a good head on her shoulders, and she's certainly mastered that Sliabh air of ancient mystery you folks tend to get."

Mahanon smiles. *Laìnn*. Well, "*Cuimhne,* now, *if the rites of succession have been completed.*
"Your hunters and their hounds still prowl around, and they still won't give me a stud to breed with my ladies," Bernid gives a good-natured scowl about this and nods his head to one of the lazy farm dogs lounging nearby. "I'm not asking for a full-breed, I know I wouldn't know the first thing about training those damn uncanny things, but not even half!"

"Sliabh wolfhounds are prized amongst our people," Mahanon says archly, but a grin tugs at his lips. "To gain one's trust is to gain a companion for life."

"You and Fereldens and your damned dogs," Bernid grumbles. "No idea what such tiny people need with such big fucking hounds anyway."

"Probably to make up for the tiny part," Bull says, and Mahanon elbows him.

"Anyway, I know the warriors were the hardest hit overall," Bernid says, the levity leaving his eyes. "We saw Serah Fionn a lot in those days, running back and forth to coordinate human aid with elves and wildlings - he's a damn good diplomat, your da, though I thank the Maker he doesn't have to do it anymore. He disappeared for a while and I thought he'd been taken by the blighted fucks, but he showed up a few months later looking like he'd aged about a decade. Said someone in the family was hurt bad in one of the raids. I don't know if that means anything to you, I know you all see each other as family, but if it helps apparently whoever it was was pulled through in the end."

Mahanon takes a long sip from the bottle of mead. Someone in the family. Fionn has no blood relations among the Sliabhs, so Mahanon is certain he couldn't have been talking about any one of Mahanon's cousins, aunts, or uncles.

Mamae. Babae. Alive, but...

"Like I said, lad, I wish I knew more," Bernid says quietly. "Half a story is sometimes worse than no story at all. I hope I haven't added to your troubles."

"No, Bernid," Mahanon says firmly. "I can't thank you enough for... fuck, all of this, honestly - what?"

Bernid is chuckling, shaking his head. "Maker, boy, you really are something else now, aren't you? Last I saw you I could barely get two words out of you if they weren't 'please, ser' and 'thank you, ser.' Now look at you. Cursing and everything! You and Shara both are really trying to push me into the grave, here, with all your growing up nonsense."

Mahanon flushes, but he smiles. "Shara's doing well for herself."

"Aye, she's been running circles 'round me these past few years," Bernid says with exasperated fondness. "I keep sending her down to the inn to see about finding a husband, a wife - Maker, anyone who can take her off my hands so she'll stop nagging me about my health, but she's her own woman to be sure. She kept trying to run off to fight the darkspawn herself, you know, but she was barely more than a kid at the time. I think she's eager for a fight, honestly." Bernid fixes Bull with a sudden stern look. "If she asks to join your crew I'm expecting you to say no, Ser Qunari. No offence, but there's no need for her turning mercenary just because she's restless."

Bull raises his hands in acquiescence. "Wouldn't dream of stealing your daughter away, ser."

"Hmm," Bernid says, eyeing Bull and Mahanon in turn. "You might want to practice that line before meeting the elf's folks. Like I said, they've got big hounds."

"I'll keep that in mind," Bull says warily, as Mahanon laughs.

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"I'll keep that in mind," Bull says warily, as Mahanon laughs.
They talk a little longer into the night, discussing potential routes and meeting points for Mahanon to head for next in his search for his clan.

"At the very least," Bernd says, "I'll let them know when they come through for the harvest season that I've seen you. It'll be good to see Serah Fionn smile again, after everything that's happened."

Shara comes around soon after this, shooing her father off to bed as the fires die down. Mahanon and Bull trade smirks at the bickering that ensues between father and daughter, but there's no denying who the winner of the bout is as Bernd growls his way back to his house and slams the door.

Shara leads them around the side to an adjacent stable, showing them a small but clean and cozy little room tucked up against the stalls where a few sheep and two goats have already settled in for the evening.

"We sometimes get farmhands coming up the road during the harvest season, and we put 'em up in here," Shara explains, unhooking a chain to let a wooden slat bed frame and musty straw mattress down from the wall. She looks at the narrow frame for a moment, then at Bull and Mahanon, sizing them up. Tutting to herself, she pushes the bedframe up and secures it to the wall again.

"You've got bedrolls with you, yeah?"

"We do," Mahanon grins.

"Well, the room will keep you warm, at least," Shara says. She winks. "Or you could keep each other warm, so long as you don't wake up the goats. You wouldn't believe how loud they can get when they're vexed."

"We're used to tents and nosy mercs, so..." Bull says, as Mahanon just puts his face in his hands and groans loudly. "I should check on the boys-"

"They're all sorted, don't you worry," Shara says, waving Bull off. "The ladies are being put up at the Mulberry's place; the healer and the Tevinter bloke are taking up the rooms alongside the smokehouse. We almost put the dwarf in with Longstride but apparently Ben's little girl was getting too interested in the exploding powders, so we thought it safer if he stayed with the grain stores - it's comfortable in there, I promise!"

"What about Grim?" Mahanon asks.

Shara smiles, slow and mischievous. "The handsome one? He'll be with me."

She kisses Mahanon and Bull (after he stoops down) on the cheek before walking away, whistling cheerfully.

"Five coppers says they chase us out in the morning with pitchforks," Bull says once Shara's out of earshot.

"Bold choice on their part to put Rocky with the grain," Mahanon comments, putting his things aside and rolling out his well-worn bedroll. "You remember-?"

"The arsonist in the fields outside Arlesans who blew the granary," Bull grunts, unbuckling his harness and settling into his own nighttime routine. "There's no forgetting a fifty foot flame like that, Boss. I thought they'd gotten hold of some gaatlok or something."

Bull waits until their armour is set aside and the bedrolls are prepared, pushed together to form
their usual cozy nest of blankets and bedding, before he speaks again. "Where's your head at, kadan?"

Mahanon burrows into the blankets but props his chin on his hand to meet Bull's piercing eye, thinking. He eventually settles on a small smile. "I'm alright, I think."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

Bull opens his arms and Mahanon takes the invitation, shuffling over into the qunari's embrace and curling in close against Bull's chest. There's still a bite to the air, making Bull's significant warmth all the more welcome.

"I do wish I knew..." Mahanon swallows. "I didn't realize how small my clan was until I was sent to the Lavellans. Knowing we've had losses... I would have known them, Bull. Every one. And it is hard to have to guess at the names and faces." He closes his eyes. "The Keeper - you know, when I was a child, I thought elves were still immortal because of her? She was about as ancient as the trees. It's hard to think of the Sliabhs without her."

"If you like we could turn to raiding and banditry when we get out of here," Bull says, startling a bemused laugh from Mahanon. "Go fuck with some of those strongholds that tried to hold the forest ransom during the Blight."

"Don't tempt me," Mahanon murmurs darkly, anger coiling in his heart. "They won't forget that, you know. It'll be ages, I imagine, until anyone from those strongholds will feel safe near the trees again."

Bull shivers slightly beneath him. "Kadan, you're damn scary when you're angry, you know that?"

"Well, now you know where it comes from," Mahanon shrugs, flicking his ears to stave off a slight blush. He sprawls along Bull's chest, looking up at Bull with a soft smile. "Where I come from."

"At least we know we're on the right track," Bull says, resting his hand on the small of Mahanon's bare back. "I'm sorry we missed your people here."

Mahanon shakes his head. "This... there was nothing I could have expected that would have matched the reality, and I knew that. I'm happy, vhenan. Just knowing my da is alright..." Mahanon sighs, resting his chin on his folded hands. "My poor da. Creators, I hope he's well, in spite of everything."

"Sounds like they had a rough time losing you," Bull says gently. "Fuck, I get why the Dalish have to keep shuffling things, and fuck knows my people don't give a shit about blood family, but if I had kids... I don't know that I'd be able to hand them off like that."

"It's to keep us safe," Mahanon says, a bit defensively.

"I know, I know, I'm not saying - shit, I guess I'm not really saying anything," Bull sighs. "I just... I'm sorry your parents had to go through that. I don't really know what that kind of pain is like, you know?"

Mahanon leans up and presses a soft kiss to the prickly point of Bull's chin, just to show he understands, before resting his head on Bull's chest. The steady pounding of Bull's heart against his ear soothes and calms him, and Mahanon is nearly lulled into an easy doze when his mind finally catches up with Bull's words and his own heart skips a few beats.
"Is that something you think about, vhenan?" Mahanon asks before he can stop to think through what he's asking, before - fuck, before he can really think. "Having children?"

Bull goes very still under Mahanon, a brief corporal pause, before he predictably lets out a laugh. "Why, have you got something to tell me?"

Mahanon scowls. "Bull."

"I mean, I'll warn you right now, I hear I was a big fuckin' baby from the start, and I don't know if you've quite got the hips to bear the unlikely fruit of our loins, but-"

"Bull."

Bull sighs, his laughter dying as he lets his head fall back against a camp pillow. "You sure you don't wanna wake up some goats with obnoxiously loud lovemaking instead of having this conversation, kadan?"

"I'm just curious," Mahanon says, fully awake now. Bull is silent, and Mahanon presses his forehead against Bull's chest. "We don't have to talk about it tonight - or ever, really. Just when you said-"

"I know," Bull says quietly. He tangles his fingers in Mahanon's hair, combing through the curls, and another long few moments pass before he finally says, "Yeah. I think about it sometimes."

Mahanon lifts his head. Astonishment isn't the emotion, not really - he's seen what Bull's like around children, the warring emotions of joy and pain that pass over the qunari's scarred face in their presence.

It's just... never something Mahanon ever expected Bull to admit aloud. Or even admit to himself, quite honestly.

"What about you?" Bull asks, and Mahanon realizes with a twinge of guilt that he hasn't responded to Bull - and in fact, hasn't done anything other than stare at him. "Since we're talking."

Mahanon looks away, chewing his lip. There are thoughts upon thoughts and layers again, between thoughts and dreams and expectations. He has few, if any, expectations.

But plenty of thoughts. Plenty of dreams.

"Sometimes," Mahanon says slowly, swallowing hard to try to summon a stronger voice. He closes his eyes. Smiles, a little, and opens them again. "I think about gardening sometimes."

Mahanon feels Bull's raised eyebrow more than he sees it, but the qunari's voice is patient as he echoes, "Gardening, huh?"

"Every clan has their own method of cultivation," Mahanon says, aware that he's circling the subject, rambling even. But it's easier this way, and Bull knows he sometimes needs to take the long path to a sensitive point. "The Lavellans were foragers, mostly, and damn good ones too. But they had an aravel where they kept the necessary herbs for poultices and such. If I remember right, the Sliabhs had designated groves? Our patterns through the forest throughout the seasons would sort of follow a bit of a spiralling path around sacred places and groves where we grew our crops."

Mahanon traces circles on Bull's chest to make his point. "We'd send clan members out every once in a while to check the growth and work the land, then at the end of that particular season everyone would pitch in for the harvest and leave the land to recover as we moved on to our next point. Back and forth throughout the forest. Temporary, but not temporary. Touchstones, almost. Like our
sacred places."

Bull watches Mahanon speak, and says nothing.

"I don't know what it would be like, quite honestly, to stay in a single place for years on end," Mahanon says softly. "I imagine it would drive us both quite mad."

Bull huffs a little laugh at that. "You'd run out of stock at whatever library was closest in a few weeks, probably."

"Probably," Mahanon touches Bull's face, tracing a thumb along the sharp angle of the qunari's cheekbone, the texture of scars and skin turned almost to callouses from years of *vitaar* rising and rippling against Mahanon's fingertips. "But sometimes I see those little gardens *shem'len* keep beside their houses, and I think - maybe a small cottage, somewhere. Close to the forest, away from *shem*, with one of those big fireplaces and real shelves for books and about a dozen cats and dogs."

"Hold up, cats-?"

"...and yes, children," Mahanon says, and Bull's expression smoothes from a frown at the mention of felines to a soft look. "Children who could use a home, and parents. The Blight, the war between templars and mages... there are far too many children out there without someone to look after them. I sometimes think - *far* in the future, mind - if I could make even one child feel safe and wanted... well. I think about it, yes."

Bull turns his head as much as his horns will allow to kiss Mahanon's palm, his breath warm on Mahanon's wrist as he sighs. "I see plenty of ghosts when I see kids, *kadan*, you know that. I don't know... I don't know if that would be good for a little one to grow up around. I don't know if *I'd* be good."

"I've never seen *taking* your past out on a child, *vhenan,*" Mahanon says seriously, holding Bull's face firmly as he winces back. "Not even once. Not even close. You're protective. You're safe. I promise you that."

It's not often that Mahanon sees Bull like this - truly vulnerable, something of the youth buried deep under years of hardship coming to the fore in an uncertain look, a worried crease of his brow. A need for reassurance.

But Mahanon sees it now, and wraps himself around Bull - as much as he can, as close as he can, as tight as he can. He kisses Bull's brow, his lips, and murmurs to him until the creases fall away, and eventually Bull rolls Mahanon under him to find comfort in other ways (thankfully, without waking any livestock in the process).

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*(Song: "Scared of the Dark")*  

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Bull wakes up only moments after Mahanon does, the qunari's body processing far faster than his mind that something is very, very wrong.

The only stimulus Bull can identify to justify this sudden full-body shock to wakefulness is Mahanon himself - wild-eyed and moving, frantically throwing bedding aside and reaching for armour and weapons with shaking hands, speaking in a panicked mix of Common and Dalish.
"We need - Creators, ma halani, Mythal'enaste, Bull, we need to get everyone up right now, we need-"

"Kadan," Bull cuts in - almost a shout, loud and firm, trying to snap Mahanon back to his senses and damn whatever goats he wakes up in the process. Mahanon looks back at him but doesn't stop moving, pulling on his leather cuirass and reaching for his greaves. Bull sees the elf in the flickering light of agitated sparks and snaps of lightning lifting Mahanon's hair like a startled cat, and it would almost be funny if not for the frantic look in Mahanon's enormous eyes, his ears pressed flat back against his head.

Terror. Mahanon is terrified.

"I was dreaming at first," Mahanon starts, "But then I woke up and heard-

An enormous explosion rocks the stable, causing the loose wooden boards to rattle against old nails and the walls to groan dangerously in the aftermath. The chain of one of the fold-up beds jostles loose and Bull only just manages to snatch Mahanon's arm and yank him out of the way in time to keep the elf from getting knocked in the head by the wooden frame as it falls.

"The fuck was that?" Bull exclaims, thinking for a wild, stupid moment of Rocky and the grain stores.

"I don't know," Mahanon says, shaking in Bull's hands. "Creators, Bull, I don't know what's happening, I don't-"

A sound fills the stables then, loud and echoing, a keening screech of some kind - something so entirely beyond Bull's experience, Bull's world, that Bull can't put any kind of name to other than "evil." Mahanon claps his hands over his ears with a bitten-back scream.

"What the fuck," Bull says numbly, helplessly, his voice drowned out by the din. "What the fuck."

Mahanon shakes his head, sparks spilling from his hair, and the stable gives another hard shake around them as something like a roll of thunder sweeps over them. Over the last echoes of the alien shrieking and booming explosions, Bull starts to hear the sickly familiar sounds of panic: screams and cries, clattering, dogs howling, and the heavy footsteps of something big. Maybe a few somethings.

Focus. They're under attack. It doesn't matter the what or why of it. Just get out alive.

Bull reaches over Mahanon's shivering form and grabs the rest of his kadan's armour, helping him into it as Mahanon collects himself until his hands steady enough to complete the job on his own. Bull almost considers leaving his leg brace behind for the sake of speed, but between the screams and strange sounds filtering through the flimsy walls of the stables, he suspects there's a hard fight ahead. He's not about to give... well, whatever's out there any kind of unnecessary edge on him.

There's another wave of awful sound, and Bull's fingers slip on the buckles of his leg brace as he curses, feeling - sick, utterly sick, and weak, and he should be far better than this: than a ragged excuse for a qunari reaver huddling in the shadows, useless without aid, he's better than this-

Slim elven hands take hold of his leg brace. Bull snarls and moves to shove them away because he doesn't fucking need help, but Mahanon catches sight of the movement and snaps, "Katoh, Bull!"

It stops Bull short, filling him with a very different sensation of sickness as the sound dies away, sounding almost like the tail end of booming laughter.
"You can't listen to them," Mahanon says, tightening the straps and checking the buckles with practiced hands. He swallows, and Bull sees sweat trickling over Mahanon's temples, his eyes still round with fear. "Y-you have to focus on what's you, and what's them. Understand? You can't - fenhedis, Andruil las halani, you can't -"

There is something piercing the back of Bull's mind, cold and shrill, and Bull refuses it from his thoughts because to acknowledge it would be death. Bull knows, yes, he knows what Mahanon is talking about. Some part of him knows what's waiting for them beyond the walls of the stable.

_Tama, I'm scared._

"Got it," Bull grits out, finishing the last few buckles himself. "Sorry."

Mahanon nods, and there's no time for further conversation. Another explosion, and light starts filtering in under the door - a confusing mix of firelight red and gold, as well as a sickly green.

There's no rescuing the bedding, no time for Bull to sling on his eyepatch, no time to pack clothes or personal belongings beyond the minimum. Mahanon grabs his lightest pack and Bull does the same.

But they do pause a moment, just inside the door. There's another terrible unworldly screech and Mahanon cries out again, and Bull is thrown into a dense fog of the mind, _bodies strewn across a jungle floor, empty death and insanity and broken things far too small to lie so still_.

Bull grabs Mahanon's hand and finds his _kadan's_ eyes in the flickering shadows, and Mahanon's mouth finds his, and for a brief moment the comfort of touch crowds out fear and despair, pride and rage.

Then one or both of them open the door, Bull can't tell, either way they're barrelling into the stable together with their weapons raised.

Due to the half-open nature of the stable they can see flashes of what's happening outside, but not enough to make any kind of sense of it. Fires and screams, and people running, animals running, and incomprehensible shapes moving through the clearing - drifting rags and massive things with claws and and spikes, spectral chains, bolts of green light drifting like terrible moonbeams or bubbling up from the ground.

Mahanon is shouting something, tugging Bull's arm, and Bull doesn't realize he's frozen in some kind of bone-deep horror staring at the mess. He snarls and reaches within himself for rage, for battle fever, fucking _anything_ he can make use of to fuel his survival. Anything other than fear. _Anything_, fuck, please, _anything_.

Bull bolts after Mahanon as they sprint the length of the stable to the entrance, barely dodging _something_ that crashes through the stalls like a heavy _baqoun_ projectile with another thundering laugh. An insane need to turn and fight the monster surges in Bull's chest, but - _no_, it's not him, these aren't his thoughts, and Mahanon is still shouting and pulling him along, and he follows and does not look back.

They stumble out into the night, and this time both Bull and Mahanon stop short, caught in an appalling kind of rapture as they stare up at a broken sky.

_Broken. Truly broken, ripped open and bleeding monstrosities, a sickly green and dark wilderness flickering in the chasm between stars._

_What is this?_
Mahanon makes a small sound, somewhere between a wail and a sob, and Bull *feels* it. Feels it and fuck, really, for a moment, wishes he had the kind of freedom to scream and weep at what he's seeing, wash it out of his soul with tears before it buries in deep and starts to fester.

Only for a moment.

A crash, and Bull and Mahanon turn in tandem to the narrow road leading back to the main thoroughfare. The split in the sky gapes widest there, explosions flashing up from the ground, creatures and spirits tumbling out to lunge at whatever breathing thing is closest. Mahanon cries out in dismay as a fiery shape springs up from embers and descends on a fleeing farmer. Some people seem to be chancing a run for the forest road through one of the small pastures, but the entire area is thick with monstrosities, and Bull knows the chances of escape through that direction are slim to none.

In and around the homestead, even in all the chaos, Bull catches sight of his people - Stitches with his sword in hand, the veterans from before fighting at his elbows against a swarm of ghostly assailants. An explosion that Bull recognizes as one of Rocky's, thank fuck, and Grim emerges from the shadows of Bernid's house to lunge at some wraith with a voiceless snarl. Shara follows after him moments later clad only in a nightgown, her rough pole arm held high as she throws herself into battle at Grim's side. Bull hears a shout that sounds like Krem, a scream that sounds like Dalish-

Mahanon hauls on Bull's arm to turn him to face him, eyes still wild and streaming tears but blessedly fucking focused in spite of the chaos.

"Right there," Mahanon shouts, pointing across the clearing. "I remember - between the two oaks, there's a footpath. You won't see it at first. It's our only way out-"

Something broils the ground beneath their feet, and before Bull and Mahanon can react a wave of terror strikes them like a physical force seconds before a *creature* springs up between them, tossing them apart from one another like weightless ragdolls.

Lying there, on the ground, that piercing, freezing knowledge strikes Bull like an arrow of ice through the mind, in his one good eye and out the back of his head, as an enormous spindly *thing* towers over him and lets out a victorious shriek.

Demons. *Demons.* Demons he's never seen before. Here, in this world, inches from him, and more demons still...

The *thing* turns its face to reveal a mess of empty holes where eyes should be, long clicking mandibles edged with sharp teeth, and it lunges at Bull with spindly-fingered hands outstretched, hungry for his terror-

A long-buried scream wrenches itself from Bull's lungs, a horrified sound he doesn't recognize as his own voice, but his axe comes up and buries itself in the thing's chest just as a familiar crackling shield of energy bursts into life around his prone form.

The demon screeches its anger, eye holes contracting and blowing wide as if the thing is heaving breaths through them. It scrabbles at the blade in its chest, mandibles clicking furiously. Bull scrambles back and yanks his axe free as he rises, Mahanon's protective shield following him as he moves. It might be a demon, but Bull felt the give of its stringy flesh under his blade. It can be hurt.

Bull knows how to hurt things. So, okay.
Bull swings again, and under the demon's elbow he sees Mahanon slam the blunt end of his staff against the earth to ground his energy as crackling bolts of lightning slam into the creature from behind. Bull's axe carves through the demon's awful face, interrupting another shriek, and between the two of them they topple it to a smoking heap on the ground. The corpse dissolves into a green sparkling nothing, spilling back up into the rift above their heads.

Bull hears a scream, and Mahanon hears a scream, and they both look in two directions - Bull, towards the blocked-off route back to the main road, where he sees Skinner and her blades standing over another elven form that is limp and unmoving, sprawled on the ground. Bull glances back to see Mahanon staring at a distant farmhouse in flames, and hears the child's cry that must have caught Mahanon's attention to begin with.

"No-!" Bull shouts, grabbing for Mahanon's arm to stop him. But Mahanon is already off and running, calling back over his shoulder, "Get them to the trees, Bull!"

Bull spouts a stream of curses under his breath, torn in two, before turning from Mahanon and the burning house in the distance and barrelling towards Skinner, pulling out his rally horn as he goes.

Before Bull can even take a breath to blow the horn, the ground shakes beneath his feet and his ears are assaulted by hideous laughter, as well as familiar shouting - bravado, and then pain.

Bull allows himself to give in to the disgusting surge of misplaced courage that follows the laughter and changes course, taking a turn between two broken buildings to find the enormous monster from earlier bearing down on-

*Krem.*

Bull can see this new hellspawn in full relief now, and sorely wishes he couldn't. It's as tall as the two-storey farmhouse it's left half-crushed and burning, crackling with a sickly lightning that simultaneously resembles but looks nothing like Mahanon's natural magic. Its flesh is made up of spiky plates like armour, twisting horns sprouting from the top of its head, and as it turns its face to Bull he can see that it, too, has empty holes where eyes should be.

"You plan to best me, then?"

Bull roars to drown out the words as well as the crawling realization that this fucking thing is *intelligent.* It can speak. It can *think.*

Krem is shouting too, indignant and furious, and Bull sees his second-in-command collapsed back against broken boards and bleeding. "Get the *fuck* out of here, Chief! I don't need your help!"

"Oh, don't you?" The demons swivels its head back to Krem, advancing on him with another roll of laughter. *"Haven't you always needed his help? A dashing hero to rescue the poor, confused little fool. A real man could take me-*"

Krem howls like a wounded beast and lunges, his sword skittering off the demon's heavy plates. The demon laughs again and snaps a coiling whip into existence, crackling with lightning as it lashes around Krem's sword arm.

Krem's shout turns into a scream of pain, and finally, *finally* the blood rage crowds out the fear and Bull is moving, ducking under the monster's arm and striking at the whip with his axe again and again until it finally gives. The demon swipes at them both but Bull drags Krem down beneath him, ignoring the Tevinter's anguished and furious shouting as the thing's sharp claws scythe through the air inches above Bull's head.
"Don't listen to it!" Bull shouts as he drags Krem away with him. They stumble and nearly fall with gasps and grunts of pain as a wash of lightning rips through them. They scramble on with numb limbs and feet, though Bull manages to keep his hand tight on the scruff of Krem's neck. "It's a fucking demon, don't fucking listen to it, fuck!"

"I wasn't-"

With a loud crash and the sick splintering of solid wood beams the farmhouse beside them collapses entirely. Bull throws Krem forward and tumbles after him, just narrowly avoiding being caught under the rubble. More laughter, and Bull realizes the demon has given up its chase of them for the sheer joy of destruction.

Bull's ear catches Skinner's shriek of fury in the distance, and more screams besides, confusing instructions to run here - no, there - no, go back to the loghouse - no, no, into the trees, to the road, anywhere-

A quick glance at Krem is enough to confirm that the man is far from fighting shape - his face is grey, and Bull can see ugly welts and burns through the singed remains of Krem's shirt. Krem managed to pull his chest plate on, but seemingly had little time for anything else.

Bull presses his rally horn into Krem's hands and points out the same two trees Mahanon did, praying he's aiming the right way. "Rally between those oaks, Krem. Now."

Krem scowls, stubborn even in his shaken state. "I can fight, Chief-"

"That's a fucking order." Bull pushes Krem off in the direction of the oaks. "Get everyone to the oaks or I'll kick your dumb ass all the way back to your fuckin' homeland, 'Vint."

Krem snarls, but there's something like gratitude in his eyes as he turns and sprints off to the tree line, dodging shades and wraiths as he runs.

Bull forces himself to turn from this, too, placing wild and reckless trust in Krem's ability to make it through the fray and refusing to think on his chances. Any of their chances.

There's a rhythm to all this that feels familiar enough for Bull's body to settle into the motions, grounding his mind into the steady beat of warfare - breath after breath, a hard swerve to the side, a swing of his axe, a leap over rubble and fires and something that was once alive left to bleed in the grass. You think, but you do not feel, not unless you can use the feeling as fuel.

Rage. Yes, good, rage. These were good people, innocent people, and Bull has no fucking clue what's going on except that the world might just be ending, and Bull is furious.

Bull hacks his way to his Chargers through a swarm of shades, snarling his anger in their ghostly faces as he bats them aside, cuts through their mists. The path clears before him and there is Skinner, bloodied and screaming her own fury, and behind her Dalish lies motionless on the ground.

Bull surges forward to Skinner's side. There are plenty of demons circling, but Skinner seems to have her sights set on one in particular: a ragged, floating cowled thing, and Bull's stomach turns to see nothing but rows of enormous teeth under the hood. It swoops close to them with a chilling wail, dodging away as Skinner slashes out with her knives. It gnashes its enormous teeth and spins, a ball of energy building in its too-large hands.

Bull doesn't need Skinner's shouted warning to throw himself out of the way. The demon casts a powerful beam that misses Bull's left side by scant inches. Bull grunts; even without being hit, his
skin burns with a terrible icy sensation, like frostbite but deeper, somehow.

_Madness calls at him, inevitable as the endless tides on the shores of Seheron. Vasaad's empty silver eyes. Mahanon, weeping and bruised and betrayed, pressing his knife into Bull's palm and daring him to slit his throat. The children, all those children Hissrad couldn't save._

Skinner shoves him hard. Bull gives his head a shake with a frustrated snarl.

"That thing got Dalish in the chest," Skinner says, her voice rough and shaking. She turns and plunges her daggers into the face of a wraith looming over Dalish's prone form, spitting a curse. "She's breathing still, but..."

A rage demon springs up from the ground then, and Bull cuts it down, still trying to keep his good eye on the drifting cowled monster. They're about to be fully overrun. Most of the farmers have stopped trying for the main road and are fleeing elsewhere, and more demons keep springing from the bubbling green pools around them or spilling from the rift above their heads. It doesn't take a master tactician to judge the odds here.

Just then, Bull hears it - the long, smooth call of the Charger's rally horn, far across the clearing. The force of his relief is enough to clear the last dregs of despair from his bones. _Krem made it._

"I've got Dalish," Bull says, stooping to sling the unconscious elf over his shoulder. There's not enough steady light nor enough time to get a good look at her, but her skin is a ghostly white and her breathing is shallow against Bull's back. "You heard the horn, Charger."

Skinner tightens her lips. Nods.

They run, Skinner clearing a path with her knife blades flashing green in the sick light of the broken sky. Bull keeps one arm wrapped tight around Dalish's legs, fending off monsters with a one-handed grip on his axe, and the horn cuts through the night again and again to beckon them onward.

Screaming, endless screams and shouts, but Bull stops short and turns when he hears one in particular bellow, "Chief!"

Bull recognizes it, only in how he does not recognize it. After all, he can't remember the last time he heard Grim's voice.

"I'll take her," Skinner shouts, pivoting, both of them dropping to a crouch behind an upturned picnic table as one of those sickly green bolts of energy shoots out from the rift over their heads. "We're close and I'm fast, I'll get her to the trees!"

Bull doesn't argue. There's no time, and there are already demons scrambling towards them as they crouch in the centre of the clearing with only flimsy wooden planks to shield them. Bull drapes Dalish's limp form around Skinner's narrow shoulders, pausing only to make sure the mage is secure on the elf's back. Skinner surges up as though entirely unencumbered by weight, steely determination in her eyes as the horn blasts out another call from the forest's edge.

Bull is bursting forward again, lungs burning, his bad leg screaming in pain. Steady combat, fucking normal combat, that's one thing. This pelting from one crisis to another, dodging demons and ghosts, head swimming with surges of emotion that aren't natural, aren't _his..._ fuck, he's not made for this. No one could be. There's no training, no conditioning for having the sky rip open and fall down about your ears.

Grim doesn't call again, but Bull sees him waving from a small stone-bricked shed by a cluster of
small storage buildings, mostly in flames as demons ravage through the wreckage. Bull signals to the trees, already turning and expecting Grim to bolt out from shelter and join him in his dash to the rally point, but Grim shakes his head and signs, *trouble here.*

Bull picks up his pace and all but swats a passing shade out of his way, hurtling through the open door past Grim, who slams it hard behind him and deadbolts it.

"That's not gonna keep them out for long," Bull pants, swiping a hand over his face to clear the sweat and grime before it drips into his eye. He scowls at the naked mess of scars under his palm and shoves his axe aside, fishing his eyepatch from his belt pouch and taking advantage of the brief shelter to strap it into place. "Boss says there's a footpath, I'm having Krem call everyone there-"

"I know it," says Shara suddenly, coming into view as Bull's sight adjusts to the darkness. Her nightgown is torn and stained with mud, or blood, or grime and ash from the demons, there's really no telling, but aside from a slight shake in her low voice her tone is calm. A good soldier, a warrior despite her father's misgivings. "I'm surprised Hanny remembers it. We've never touched it ourselves, ser, that's Sliabh land."

Bull blinks and looks around the shed, feeling less distracted now with his eyepatch in place. It's a kind of cold storage, he realizes - shelves upon shelves of preserves, very little standing space left for him, Grim, and Shara.

And, more importantly, there's a set of old stairs scarcely three paces from the door, leading down into the earth. Bull hears whispers and quiet sobbing from below, motherly reassurances and children's whimpers.

"How many are down there?" Bull asks, understanding now why Grim called him in.

Shara closes her eyes for a moment, breathing to steady herself. Grim, uncharacteristically tender, reaches between them to take her hand. Shara casts him a grateful look, lips flickering into something like a smile, before she speaks.

"We connected our cellars a few decades back - before I was born, anyway - after a bad winter," Shara explains. "To keep everyone fed and accountable, to limit personal hoarding... we ended up using it as a shelter when darkspawn swarmed through. We'd hear the warnings from the forest guard and we'd hide down here, lock off any entrances, and wait it out. They'd lose interest after a time. I haven't done a full count, but I think we've got all the town's children rounded up - save Longstride and his girl, Maker watch over them, and the Tillers... Andraste's tits, I *told* them to get to the cellars, but they tried for the main road and..."

Shara puts a hand over her mouth as her voice breaks, a few tears escaping her round eyes, but she swallows hard and continues.

"I know a few others went out to fight, and a few are hoping to get to the inn for help," Shara says. "My da was with the Blight vets, last I saw, damned fool. Some of the families want to wait whatever the fuck this is out in the cellars, but-"

There's a full-throated scream outside, something like a dragon's shrill call gone terribly *wrong,* and - no, it's Mahanon, screaming in tortured agony - no, it's Krem, demon-possessed and hurling *himself towards danger* - no, *it's a child,* choking on *poison*-

The shed shudders as if something has grabbed it and given it a good shake, jars toppling from shelves and crashing on the packed floor, smashing into shards of glass and puddles of vinegar and limp pickled vegetables.
"My mother," Shara whispers, horrified. "That was her, I heard her, she-"

"That's not her," Bull says roughly, shaking the sound from his head. "It's new, though."

Bull turns away and rubs his temples, thinking. If they can close up the cellars, maybe. There's food down there, probably water down there, and it's probably better than the alternative: a sprint with families and small children across the last patch of commons before the trees with plenty of demons and shades and wraiths and fuck knows what else between here and there... suicide, honestly, and there will be casualties, broken little bodies.

"You'll fail them again, Hissrad."

Bull freezes, only somewhat cognizant of Grim and Shara doubling over at his side, hands on their ears, lost in their own personal hell as a slippery voice drifts through the bolted door.

"I won't even have to take your soul myself, won't have to push... but it will be fun to watch you slide into the madness. Maybe you'll butcher the lot of them yourself. Like little lambs."

Children are screaming in the cellar, and no, they cannot stay.

"They're not like darkspawn," Bull says, his voice awful and detached. He turns back to Shara and Grim, both pale-faced and drawn. "These fucks are smart. They're not gonna swarm and go. As long as the sky keeps spitting them out, they'll come after you."

The shed gives another hard rattle, and Shara just stares at Bull. "The children..."

"I know." Bull picks up his axe again, running strategies through his mind. Scattering won't work - there's too many adversaries, between the demons and shades. So, safety in numbers, but Bull, Grim, and Shara aren't enough of a guard to protect them.

There are no good options. People are going to die, and every minute they waste here will just increase the death toll.

"Grim, Shara, you two take the front," Bull says quietly. "You're both faster than me. Shara, you know where the path is. Don't get bogged down with killing, just get anything in our way out of our way. Keep moving no matter what. I'll take up the rear."

Bull steps over to the stairs and crouches down, seeing dark shapes of huddled parents and crying children below, the occasional glint of eyes peering up at him from the shadows.

"We're going to make a run for the trees," Bull says. He holds up a hand at the wave of hushed protests and fearful moans. "We can't fight these things, we can't wait them out. They're going to keep coming, and we can't assume it'll blow over or stop any time soon. If you can carry your kid, do it. Kids, if you're too big to carry, hold onto your ma or da's shirt and keep moving. Eyes forward. Don't look at anything other than your own two feet, and don't listen to anything weird you hear. Got it?"

"Do we know that the forest is safe?" one woman asks, her voice trembling.

"We don't," Bull says honestly. "But we know that it's not safe here. So we're just gonna hope real hard, yeah? Pray, if that's what you're into."

Bull straightens and claps Grim on the shoulder, giving his Charger a firm nod. "I'll go out first and clear the way. On my signal, you bring 'em out and I'll fall in line behind. No heroics. Got it?"
Grim nods. Shara hoists her pole arm, lifting her chin.

A breath, and another, then Bull unbolts the door and shoves his way out into the shattered night once more.

His vision is obscured by shades at first, so Bull doesn't immediately see the source of the slippery-voiced whispers and harrowing screams. Not until he slices through the apparitions and turns on his heel for a hard spin, nearly dropping his axe at the sight of the demon looming above him.

It's almost humanoid, like the strange cowled creature from before, but wrong - too many feet dangling beneath its ragged robes, no eyes but instead a head shaped like an ornate headdress ending in swinging appendages on either side of its snarling mouth. But worst of all, are the enormous spider legs arcing out from its back, currently clutching the shed in a pincer-tight grip to give it another hard shake.

"I have tasted your nightmares, Hissrad," it whispers, craning its head beyond a natural neck-snapping point to regard Bull with an eyeless gaze. It does not move to detach from the shed, but Bull can see its wiry musculature bunching, preparing to strike. "Won't you feed me a few more? Or shall I ride your bones myself and turn you into a new kind of horror to inflict upon the world?"

"Grim!" Bull bellows.

The shed door flies open. The spindly spider demon pounces, but Bull is ready, his axe blade coming up to meet it square in the face before it can fall onto the fleeing families spilling out onto the ragged field, mothers and fathers and children pouring out after Grim and Shara.

A shout in the distance, and Bull looks over - Stitches and the Blight vets, along with a few strong-armed farmers wielding sickles and hoes, caught in a furious scrum a few dozen paces away by the grain stores. They've obviously caught sight of the desperate rush for the trees and have started battling their way towards the families, carving through wraiths and smaller demons with practiced fervour.

They might just make it.

Bull is thinking this, and is still thinking it as the spider demon shrieks and hurls itself onto him, Bull's axe still stuck uselessly in the thing's face.

Bull lets go of his axe handle and brings his arms up to guard his throat from the demon's clawed hands. The demon bowls him over easily, a tumble of spiny limbs that are far less fragile than they look, tangling Bull up in an iron grip of claws and pincers. Bull snarls and thrashes, hollers his pain as the pincers bite deep into the flesh of his back, the strange spider legs curling tight around him like a steel trap.

"Traitor," it whispers, it's mouth far too close to Bull's face, teeth and fangs gnawing against Bull's arm guards as those frail-looking clawed hands start grasping at his chest, his arms, scrabbling for his throat. Bull shouts at the awful sensation of it, being bound up by a nightmare, probing demon hands scratching and clawing at his skin. "Traitor and a failure, broken, the world is broken, and you are all so scared and small and alone..."

Beyond the awful twitching limbs of the demon, all Bull can see is the broken sky above him, split open in a way he does not understand. Lying flat on his back and bound up in the demon's grasp, screams in the distance... yes, everyone is going to die. The world is dying. Bull was a fool to think
he could fight this, to think he should even try.

There’s a wash of cold, and the cowled demon drifts past, the toothy maw wide open beneath its hood and making horrible sucking sounds, chattering, screeching.

Mahanon is probably long-dead by now, consumed in flames or overrun by demons or possessed, and they will both die alone, here, never knowing why, never even having the slightest chance or hope of escape.

"Thank you," the spider demon croons. "You are a feast."

Bull reaches for his rage but finds only fear, only despair, and there’s just nothing left as the demons descend on him. The rally horn is nothing but a distant, plaintive cry, echoing and multiplying, warping into a chorus of strange drifting notes, as if-

As if there’s more than one horn.

Rage cannot revive him. Neither can hope. Bull has nothing left but the slightest, smallest dregs of curiosity, pulling him back from the brink.

Bull has never heard these horns before. Hollow and earthy, sliding in pitch in and around one another, followed by a pack of howls that cause Bull to shiver at the sound. Like wolves, almost, but not like wolves, and with loud hisses and shrieks intermingling with the melodic baying.

The spider demon turns its head, axe and all, just in time to catch an arrow straight through where an eye might have been. It rears back with a strangled scream, and Bull doesn't have the energy to take advantage of the reprieve, but he doesn't have to - an enormous shaggy shape leaps over Bull's head and slams its paws into the demon's shoulders, knocking it back. Bull comes to his senses as he tumbles along with the demon, still speared on its pincers, his face inches from the snarling, gnashing jaws of the shaggy beast trying to rip into the demon's flesh and the demon's flailing hands.

Bull untangles himself with significant effort, catching a swipe from the beast's claws and forced to rip his flesh free of the demon's pincers. He staggers back, snatching up the handle of his axe and wrenching it from the demon's head, immediately falling to the side and retching as if poisoned, somehow.

Think. Breath. Focus.

Bull pulls a healing potion from his belt with shaking hands and knocks it back, willing his stomach to behave.

More horns, and the whistle of arrows, calls and commands in a familiar dialect...

Bull shakes his head and pushes himself up to his knees, then to his feet, standing fully and lurching off towards the trees, his vision clearing as he stumbles, then runs.

There’s at least a dozen of them. Small, fleet-footed shadows, enormous eyes flashing in the night as they slip in amongst the demons and shades with bows and long, slender curved blades.

Elves. Dalish elves, but not like any Dalish Bull's ever met, save one.

They call to one another and their beastly companions: truly enormous creatures that Bull nearly mistakes for wolves or bears, but only for a moment. They have the shape of hounds despite their size and shaggy pelts, a vicious kind of intelligence burning in their bright orange eyes as they
tackle demons and pounce on shades and wraiths alike without fear or hesitation.

A few hounds and Dalish hunters herd the fleeing farmers and their families towards the rally point between the oaks. A swarm of spiders burst up from the ground and give chase, only for the earth to shake and split just behind the families, the demonic spiders swallowed up into a chasm that abruptly slams closed with an awful crackling noise of shattered exoskeletons and appendages. Bull catches sight of an elf standing aside the crowd of farmers, her expression passive and almost serene as she looks out over the chaos. No staff, but there are stones affixed to either palm with ornately crafted gauntlets that glow as she appears to dance with her magic, the earth rumbling and shaking and shaping itself accordingly.

Bull is distracted, more distracted than he should be, so he's grateful for the warning call close to his left that alerts him just in time to heft his axe and turn to catch the wraith bearing down on his blind side. His axe slices clean through the ragged thing, and soon it dissolves back up into the rift.

"Thanks-" Bull starts, glancing up, and halts.

It's Mahanon.

But no, no, of course it's not Mahanon - Mahanon's hair is not long enough to braid into such a lengthy rope, and he does not keep his head shorn on either side around his pointed ears. Mahanon's skin is darker, younger, and does not bear the same scars as this elf - nor the same vallaslin for that matter.

Also, this elf appears to be a woman.

But these are Mahanon's eyes in Mahanon's heart-shaped face, albeit colder, far colder, and currently staring right back at Bull with no sense of recognition or any patience for his confusion.

"Amadán," the elf who can only be Taoirse, Mahanon's mother, says in a rough, lilting tone. "Unless you wish to die, stop your staring and flee."

Chapter End Notes

Song rec: "Heartland" by Celtic Thunder (don't judge me for my love of celtic thunder guys pls im love them)
Chapter Notes

OKAY I THINK.... I DID IT, WHEEE.

Song rec for the Sliabhs: Bitter Wind by M'anam (also carries over into next chapter too)

Playlist link: hell yeah

ALSO @NAXXART ON TWITTER DID AMAZING FUCKING CUTE ART OF THE BOY WHICH I HAVE LINKED AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CHAPTER. Please give him so much love, you can see the original tweet here.

I am also on Twitter! It's a locked account because of work reasons but I let fandom folks in. Come hang out with me @FoxNonny for long threads about Irish Wolfhounds and me complaining about life.

Thank you all so so so so incredibly much for the amazing feedback on the last chapter by the way, holy fuck it meant so much to me. I wish I had the lack of social anxiety to respond to everyone but rest assured I screencap a lot of your comments to look back on when I have bad days and it really does mean the world holy shit. Thank you, and I hope this chapter delivers!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two oaks leading into the tree line have become a tight bottleneck swarming with activity. Impatient baying hounds circle the families fleeing into the trees, herding and snapping at the shades and wraiths that drift close and wail hungrily for easy prey. Farmers bearing pikes, shovels, and the occasional rough dull sword fight alongside the Dalish hunters to defend as best they can, but the demons have taken notice of the crowd and push ever closer through the fighting lines.

A Dalish hunter lifts a horn to his lips only for the ground to explode at his feet, a spindly demon bursting up and tossing him back into the crowd with a victorious shriek. It surges forward after its quarry only to be taken down by a great axe between the shoulders.

Bull kicks the demon loose of his blade with a rough snarl and, with another swing, lops its clicking head from its body.

Bull steps over the demon's disintegrating corpse with the intent of checking after the fallen Dalish hunter, but one of the other elves is already there, pouring a healing potion into the hunter's slack and bloodied mouth. Someone else takes up their horn and the night fills again with the reedy, earthy bellows of the Sliabh hunting calls.

Instructions are echoed down the line, mingled and obscured by language and accent and the chaotic noises of the night, but Bull starts to get the gist: "All humans retreat."

It makes sense. The last of the families are funnelling into the forest. The Dalish are clearing the field.
Bull isn't human, of course, but he's not going to push the technicality. He knows the last thing any well-organized unit wants in a crisis is some asshole maverick "helping" by breaking chain of command and introducing a rogue element to the mess. So Bull joins the last of the farmers and retreats towards the oaks, shouldering his great axe in favour of a throwing hatchet, mindful of the close quarters.

Bull negotiates the older farmers and veterans to go before him, keeping a watchful eye on the enemy at their backs. He catches Stitches' eyes in a flash of green light, sees his healer's mouth moving, but can't make out the words before the man is lost in the press of people and slips beyond the tree line.

Bull almost follows after, but changes course when he spots a hunched-over shape a few trees down, collapsed back against the bark and obviously struggling to stay standing, a rally horn clutched in his hand.

"We're going, Krem," Bull calls over the din. He reaches his second-in-command and hauls him upright by the shoulders, ignoring the man's gasp of pain. The adrenaline of the massive scaled demon's attack has obviously left Krem by now, and the battle fatigue is evident in Krem's drawn expression. "Come on, lean on me if you have to."

"Can't," Krem says heavily, swaying on his feet. "Been counting, Chief. Can't go yet."

"Counting-" Bull swears, his grip on Krem's shoulders tightening. "Counting Chargers?"

Krem nods, gripping Bull's wrist to steady himself with a shaking hand. "Not going till we're all back, can't... won't do it, I-"

"Krem."

Bull gives Krem a little shake, giving his cheek a few pats for good measure to try to spur him back to full awareness. "You did good here, okay? But you're done. You're done now, got it? Tell me who we're missing and get the fuck out of here."

Krem meets Bull's eyes, and by the furrow of his brow and the terribly sympathetic look in Krem's eyes, Bull knows exactly who's missing before Krem even says the name.

"Just Mouse," Krem says, and coughs. "I haven't seen him on the field at all, Chief, I've been looking - fuck-"

Bull is already moving, half-carrying Krem to the path between the oaks and snatching a Blight vet's arm before she can slip into the woods.

"Please," is all Bull says, passing Krem to her, and she doesn't need anything more - with a rough nod she loops Krem's arm over her shoulders and drags him into the forest with her.

Bull turns back to the battle-torn commons, his focus narrowed to a single point of light: a burning farmhouse on the edge of the homestead, nearly a field's length away from where he is now, and he doesn't feel any of his aches or bleeding wounds as he breaks into a run-

A massive hound suddenly cuts into his path and rears up before him, slamming its paws into his shoulders and shoving him with a bark, nearly bowling him over entirely.

Bull roars back at the hound, only the distant memory of Mahanon's voice mentioning how dearly his people love their hounds keeping him from burying his hatchet in the damn thing's skull. As it is, Bull holsters the hatchet and reaches for the great axe, hoping to spook it enough to allow him room to pass.
The stretch of a bowstring catches his attention to the left. *His blind side.* Lip curling, he turns his head and is unsurprised to see a familiar - *far too fucking familiar, the same eyes, the same heart-shaped face* - elf aiming an arrow for his heart.

"We said *retreat*," Taoirse snaps, utterly unfazed and distinctly unimpressed by the desperate temper in Bull's thunderous glare as he turns on the huntress. "The farms are lost."

"*Mahanon is out there,*" Bull snaps, knocking the bow aside to take the huntress by the shoulders. Her look of rage at the imposition quickly slips to shock as Bull's words sink in. "*Your son-*"

The hound crashes into Bull once more, harder this time, enough to bowl him over entirely. Bull releases Taoirse's shoulders to avoid dragging her down to the ground with him and bites back a snarl as the hound's massive jaws close on the thick muscle of Bull's neck and shoulder, fangs piercing deep into his flesh.

Taoirse shouts a command. The hound releases Bull and bounds off of him with a sharp bark and a growl, watching Bull through narrowed orange eyes.

Bull rolls to his side and pushes himself up, flinching in surprise as elven hands help him to his feet with wiry strength.

"The farmhouse," Bull grunts as he regains his balance, taking his great axe down into his hands. He's seen the expression twisting Taoirse's face before - in Seheron, in the Marches, in Orlais... fuck, even in the shitty backwaters of Ferelden, massive bears and their mewling cubs. Across peoples and species, there's something to be said for the terrifying look of a parent ready to burn the earth and sky for the safety of their child.

Bull points, and Taoirse is gone.

Bull curses and takes off after her, blood trickling from the bite under the leather of his harness and smearing in sticky lines over his chest.

The shades and wraiths slow Taoirse just enough that Bull can keep her and her massive hound in his sights as they duck and dodge their way across the broken field, but even so she pulls far ahead with her fleet-footed sprint, the hound baying and howling further ahead still.

The farmhouse is truly ablaze, and with a waft of smoke on the wind Bull feels an echoing spark of rage in his chest. *Rage.* His eye stings, and he almost laughs. Of all the demons to contend with, he can handle these fucks.

The house is close to the tree line, and the fire is spreading into the forest. A tall pine has fallen, nearly bisecting the house at the heart, smashing through the thatched roof and old wood. The fire has nearly reduced one side of the building to ashes, and the other half looks ready to collapse into smouldering embers. There are drifting, fiery shapes amongst the debris, nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the inferno. Demons.

Bull can't hear the screaming child from earlier. There's nothing but the crackle of flame, the tortured groan of timber, the shouts and screeches of demons and hunters across the homestead.

Nothing, and Bull hears himself hollering for Mahanon - for Mouse, for Boss, for his *kadan-*

Taoirse is suddenly at his side, knocking his arm with her bow to get Bull's attention, already shouting as Bull turns to her. "*Did you sleep with Mahànón tonight?*"

Bull's sharp, confused intake of breath causes him to choke on woodsmoke.
Taoirse smacks him with her bow again, harder this time. "Your scent, qunari! Would he smell of you?"

Bull nods, still wheezing, and firmly certain he's about to take a Dalish arrow through the eye.

Taoirse shouts again, this time in Elvhen, and Bull stumbles back as the hound circles around to his front and balances its massive paws against Bull's bloodied chest, shoving its damp nose half into Bull's armpit.

The hound rears back and howls before landing on all fours, pressing its nose to the ground. Leaning up to sniff the air. Down, and up again, then bounding forward with a sharp bark.

Taoirse and Bull follow the hound, stopping short and fending off drifting shades whenever the hound pauses to orient itself and catch the scent again. The hound leads them to the blazing heap of embers and charred wood that is the ruins of one half of the farmhouse, and Bull and Taoirse trade an awful look before the hound yips and takes off again.

They chase the hound around the back, the breeze thick with heat between the blaze of the house and the fires beginning to devour the treeline. Bull blinks smoky tears from his stinging eye, his head snapping up as Taoirse hisses and almost falls - the grass beneath their feet has begun to smoke and curl in spots, lit by drifting embers. Clearly Taoirse stepped on a hot spot, but regains her footing quickly and cuts Bull off with an impatient wave of her hand when he grunts his concern.

They catch up with the hound by a smoking stack of firewood, nosing into a damp-looking bundle of cloth and whuffing impatiently. The bundle answers with a terrified, pitched wail.

Taoirse darts forward and pulls what turns out to be the half-charred and water-soaked remains of an old cloak aside to reveal a young girl, maybe six or seven, shrinking back and screaming hoarsely and waving a glowing crystal and a small, silver dagger in front of her face to ward Taoirse away.

Bull knows that crystal. It showed up in Mahanon's bedroll during his first Satinalia with the Chargers, courtesy of Dalish.

And it's clear by Taoirse's stricken expression that even after all these years, even blackened twice over by magic and fire smoke, Taoirse recognizes Mahanon's father's dagger.

"We're not here to harm you," Taoirse says gruffly. The hound nuzzles into the girl's shoulder, licking her face until her screams quiet to gentle sobs. "Where did you get that knife?"

The girl shakes her head, leaning into the hound and sobbing into its fur. Taoirse growls.

Bull steps forward, dropping to his knees. He's not offended when the girl rears back from him with a whimper. Big guy, horns, blazing inferno, giant bloody axe, eyepatch - none of this is exactly child-friendly, and he gets it.

"You don't have to talk," Bull says, as gently as he can over the crackle of flame and his own pouting urgency. "It's a scary night, yeah? We're gonna get you somewhere safe. But someone was here earlier, right? An elf, like her-" he points to Taoirse, and the girl's eyes flick to the huntress and back again, "-but with shorter hair? A boy elf? Even if you could just point to where you saw him last..."

She points back to the farmhouse with a shaking hand.
"He got stuck," the girl says, her voice small. "He told me to run."

"Las'eth!" Taoirse barks, and the hound takes a protective guarding stance over the girl, uncanny amber eyes sharply scanning the surroundings for danger.

Taoirse is unhesitant, fluid as she slings her bow over her shoulder and quickly scours the burning wreck of the farmhouse for an opening. A few steps away is a rough pair of open shutters, bright orange flame flickering just inside - likely the girl's escape route.

"I don't-" Bull starts, but Taoirse is already there and hauling herself up to slip in through the shutters, disappearing into the flames.

There is of course no way in fuck that Bull will be able to follow her. But there's another entrance a little ways down, a back door closer to the heart of the fire, far too close to the fallen tree for safety.

Bull is moving, conducting a risk assessment as he goes, the likelihood of collapsing what remains of the house and making everything worse... fuck, fuck it, he has to get inside. Whatever kept Mahanon from escaping was enough to overwhelm one nimble fighter, and a mage to boot - he can't trust that Taoirse's strength will be enough.

The door all but crumples like parchment as Bull kicks it in, another few lengths of roofing collapsing onto his horns and shoulders as he does so. Bull shoves his way through blackened and burning planks of wood, smouldering embers and drifting ashes, and he can't see for shit through the smoke. Can't breathe for shit either.

Bull hauls a handkerchief from his belt pouch and stuffs it over his mouth and nose, limiting himself to shallow, reluctant breaths. This was one of the lessons they taught the antaam during basic training. Smoke will kill you more kindly than fire will, but you'll be dead all the same.

Bull works as carefully as he can, the heat blistering his thick skin. He shoves debris aside with his axe, clears a path for himself as best he can, keeping low and peering through the billowing black clouds for anything, anything-

He kicks at a section of roof blocking his path and uncovers half a body, charred but still recognizable as having once been a living humanoid creature, but - no, too long, too long to be an elf by far-

There's a burst of heat behind him and Bull pivots, stumbling back from a towering column of flame bearing down on him with hands like molten rock outstretched.

Rage, yes, good. Bull lets rage fill him up, the heat of it steaming through his pores, and when he brings his axe down on the demon with a roar he half expects to spout flame from his mouth like an ataashi.

The demon falls away and Bull hollers his frustration, the blood fever demanding more, more, more to fight and kill until his lungs boil and burst with searing hot fury-

No. Mahanon-

-they hurt Mahanon, Bull's kadan, and-

No!

No. Mahanon needs him.
Bull turns away from the flames and presses forward, lightheaded and stumbling. Too much smoke, too much...

He thinks he's searching room by room, or the remains of them at least, but it's nothing more or less than luck that through the smoke and flames and his own flagging concentration, his lungs screaming for clean air, Bull stumbles across a toppled support beam blocking his way forward.

Bull almost turns away. But he blinks, and his vision briefly clears, and-

Bull shouts and drops to his knees, and he hopes the crash of wood behind him is Taoirse and not another demon following the sound of his voice. He scatters clumps of thatched roof and splinters of wood, presses a finger to damp, hot skin.

Nothing.

No, Bull hasn't found anyone at all. No one is here.

Just a body.

Smoke and sizzling heat, and Bull cannot breathe for so very many reasons, but suffering is a choice - no, not a choice. The only option he has is to refuse it.

Bull reads the scene in flashes of insight. He turns the body over from where it lies curled up on the ground, buried under debris, and Bull can imagine the final, fading attempts to protect the mouth and nose from choking smoke. A staff with a blunted, half-bent blade slips from bleeding and blistered hands, and Bull brushes away a few more scraps of smoking wood to see scratches and chips in the support beam where it pins the body in place by the legs. There are even signs of magic blasts, a desperate fight for freedom before the smoke and heat put an end to it.

The problem with the support beam is that it is, of course, far too heavy. It's also very long, and Bull suspects it bears the weight of the tree that crushed the farm house. There was no chance of escape here, nothing that could have been done.

Yes, Bull can imagine it.

Bull imagines it all very quickly, and he straightens, leaving the body on the floor. His legs give under him, but only for a moment, and Bull catches himself before hitting the ground again. The smoke. The heat.

Bull glances down at the body again, unsurprised to see Taoirse leaning over it now though he doesn't recall seeing her arrive. There's another terrible expression on her face. Another familiar one.

"I lift, you pull," Bull calls. Muffled through the handkerchief, the smoke, the crackle of flames, but he doesn't wait to see if she's heard him.

The beam is too heavy. Far too heavy. Of course it is.

There's a roar in the distance, another rage demon, and of course Bull is terribly angry, but he's thinking of lighter loads than anger right now. Slight weights. Gentle pressures, tucked in close against his side, resting on his chest, pillowing on his shoulder. A hand on his, soft lips brushing his chin, fingertips tracing the base of his horns.

It's nothing at all like sweeping a lover into his arms, none of the same muscles apply, but that's what Bull is thinking of. Charred and burning wood bites into his palms, his bleeding shoulders
strain and pop with effort, thighs bunching and cramping and aching, and Bull is thinking of all the hundreds of times but maybe, maybe one time in particular: maybe that first time, when Dalish told him he wasn't looking at a body but, in fact, a young unconscious elf clinging to life after pulling off some kind of drastic miracle, and Bull still remembers what it felt like to gather that sad broken bundle into his arms and carry it back down the mountain with no idea, no fucking clue just who and what exactly he had found.

The beam does not answer Bull's efforts by surging into the air as if made weightless by the force of Bull's own thoughts. But it does, with a long groan of pain, lift by a meagre inch.

An inch is all that's needed. Taoirse slides the body free. The wood splinters in Bull's grasp and falls away from him, crashing right back into place.

Bull is torn and broken, but the fire is coming closer and the world is spinning around him. Any longer in here and there will be three bodies to contend with.

Bull stoops and slings the discarded staff over his shoulder. Taoirse is struggling to hold the body, to find an easy way to carry it. Bull reaches over and tries to take it from her.

Taoirse recoils with a hiss, ears flat back and smoke-reddened eyes wild with rage and grief, cradling the body close.

Bull is patient. He holds out his arms.

Stormy grey eyes search Bull's. Bull's quite accustomed to this scrutiny, albeit from a different source.

Taoirse doesn't relinquish her hold and does not offer the body to him, but she relaxes her death grip and doesn't fight when Bull lifts the body away from her and into his arms.

There isn't much to say about the stumble back out of the burning house. Things collapse behind and all about them. They make it back out the door, burned and blackened and barely breathing. Stumbling into clean air feels a little like waking up, and neither of them are coughing so much as wheezing blackened moisture from their lungs with every laboured breath.

And there is a body in Bull's arms.

Something beyond words has happened here, a few sets of ideas assembling themselves into sentences without meaning. Bull knows what a body looks like - fuck knows he's seen enough of them. This one had names, many names, but Bull is keeping the concepts separate for now. He feels like he's missing something obvious, some escape from the facts presented to him.

But the facts are certain. Bull breathed that smoke himself. It would have only taken minutes to lose consciousness, then... even now, Bull feels as though he's suffocating, drowning-

Drowning.

Bull falls to his knees and lays the body out before him. Someone is shouting about a healer in a broken voice, but the healers are far away and would not be able to do much with a body aside from offer up a few prayers.

Bull has been north and south and around far too many shitty corners of the world, and has seen first hand all the stupid ways that death and life shake hands with one another. The dumbest shit can kill you if you're not careful. Likewise, Bull has felt blades grinding against his ribs and slicing through his organs, has lost more flesh than some people have to their bones, and should have died
about ten times over from all the awful crap that's tried to kill him, and he's still fucking here.

Sometimes the dumbest solution, the most obvious one, can work. And Bull remembers a really fucking dumb solution from sailors up north who swore up and down that they'd brought comrades back from the grave after a drowning.

There is a body on the ground in front of Bull's and it doesn't belong to him, but the person who owns it isn't present right now and has trusted Bull with these things in the past. Trusted Bull to take care of it, and him, and every part of him.

Bull rips open the leather cuirass, snapping buckles and belts unapologetically until the body's chest is laid bare.

Bull laces his fingers together, palms down, and it's a really fucking dumb solution but there's a kind of logic behind it. The person is not here to keep their heart beating.

So Bull will keep the heart beating. As long as it takes. As long as Bull's own heart beats in his chest.

It really is a good thing that Bull knows the rhythm of this particular heartbeat better than his own. He digs his palms into the centre of the body's chest, pushing and pressing in time, over and over again. It's like any other of the many familiar rhythms Bull has learned over the years.

The rhythms of combat, clashing in the field, with someone who can anticipate every move by now, watching over one another and ready with a bolt of lightning or a shield to defend when needed.

The rhythms of practice, learning new blocks and strikes, and how naturally such rhythms can settle into the body's memory when the technique is just right, and natural.

The rhythms of conversation, late into the night or drifting through lazy afternoons, back and forth and familiar, if never predictable.

The rhythms of lovemaking, of course; hours spent learning the shape of a mouth and nothing else, then beyond, territory that Bull knows like another word for home.

The rhythms of breath, early in the morning when Bull wakes with the dawn but doesn't rise for hours, not until slow steady sighs become anguished groans, sleepy demands for another few minutes of peace before the day begins.

Breath, yes, and Bull remembers - right, yes, he remembers what comes next, because someone called out a bawdy comment about sailors finding any excuse to mack on one another, and-

Bull leans over and pinches a crooked nose closed, pressing his mouth to slack lips, and breathes as much of his air as he can into the body. The chest rises slightly with Bull's lungful, falls with a whisper of breath against Bull's cheek when he moves away to start the chest beats again.

Kadan. Literally, the centre of the chest. The place where one's heart is kept.

Bull pushes and presses, and the rhythms become a mantra, and the mantra is a name, and it's kadan, kadan, kadan, and another breath to lend the body's lungs, then kadan again, and again-

The body convulses, and bruised and bloodshot eyes fly open to reveal Mahanon behind them, gasping in a long, rattling breath.
Bull turns Mahanon over and pulls his last healing potion from his belt, uncorking it. Mahanon is clutching at his chest and throat and hacking out blackened globs of sticky fluid from his lungs, fighting for every breath.

Bull pulls Mahanon upright, ignoring the elf's thrashing panic and pained, choked gasps. He presses the potion to Mahanon's lips, wrestles him steady, and the only thing that matters is getting the damn potion into Mahanon's body and in that, at least, Bull succeeds.

Mahanon sags back into Bull's arms as the potion courses through him, numbing pain and starting the complicated processes of healing, the elf's breathing steadying but still loud, still guttural, still thick with smoke and blood.

Bull turns Mahanon's face to his and finds Mahanon's eyes, swallowing as the wide-eyed panic settles into exhaustion and gratitude and all those softer recognitions. Trust.

"We've got you, kadan," Bull says. "Just stay with me, that's it. You don't have to do anything else."

Mahanon nods, already drifting out of consciousness, but as his gaze slips from Bull he frowns and his lips form the shape of an attempted "m" before he slumps in Bull's grasp, and is gone again.

No, not gone. Not really. Not this time.

Bull looks up to face the sharp, glimmering point of an arrowhead, barely a foot from his one good eye.

The bowstring sings its release.

There's a sliver of hot pain along Bull's cheekbone, an awful shriek behind him, and the shade that was bubbling up from the ground at Bull's back is already dissolving by the time he turns to see it.

Bull looks up again at Taoirse. The huntress's eyes are narrowed and streaming, tears tracing clean lines through the soot on her cheeks.

The path between the oaks and into the forest is a series of switchbacks between the trees and thick foliage, creating an illusion of impenetrability. Bull follows carefully in Taoirse's footsteps. It's clear the Sliabhs have encouraged plant life to grow over the path, save two thin strips for cart wheels. Easy to get turned around and led astray if one isn't keeping a careful eye on their footing, and between the slack weight of Mahanon in his arms and the smoke poison still swimming through Bull's head and tangling in his lungs, he's not really in a mood to squint for fine details in what little moonlight filters through the branches.

The demons and shades have tried following them, of course, but they seem reticent to stray too far from the rift in the sky. Reluctant, or unable to, Bull's got no fucking clue - but he's hoping for the latter.

The girl Mahanon rescued is clinging to Taoirse's back, though in truth she's not very much smaller than the huntress. Taoirse stumbles once or twice, her breathing as throaty and ragged as Bull's, but she does not fall or slow. Bull recognizes the stubbornness, and holds Mahanon a little closer for it.

The further they pass into the forest, the more it feels like... a descent, maybe, though the path stays relatively level. The air becomes closer, the sounds more muffled, as if they're travelling through a narrow and thickly carpeted hall rather than the wilderness. The stars and moon
disappear entirely under thick canopies of overlapping branches, leaves, vines. Every time Bull thinks it's the darkest a night can get, they lose a little more light, until Bull is entirely blind and forced to follow Taoirse by sound alone (and knocks his horns on low branches and intruding trunks with frustrated grunts).

The longer Bull spends in here, the further he goes, the more he starts to truly understand the elf drawing his own troubled, ragged breaths in Bull's arms. Bull could draw easy lines of explanations between Mahanon's nervous disposition and need for quiet to his upbringing in a forest. But now, being here... well, Mahanon's nerves and sensitivities seem far less like understandable quirks, but completely rational reactions to being thrown into an entirely different world.

Mahanon likes small spaces. Quiet. The dark, for the sake of his eyes.

Bull has never felt more claustrophobic, deafened, or - fuck, even blinded, walking this path. But it's comforting, almost, to think of how well-suited Bull's kadan is for this place.

Bull is thinking of this, and not thinking of what happened at the burning farmhouse. What almost happened. It didn't happen, not really. He can refuse it.

They turn another corner and Bull flinches back, bathed in a sudden explosion of light and sound. He blinks and shakes his head, clearing spots from his vision and trying to make sense of the noise, of...

A glade opens up before him, the branches thin enough overhead to allow for dappled moonlight to slip through. The light that Bull found so blinding shines from a few sources - the moss beneath his feet is... glowing gently, shifting green and blue in the wake of disturbances, and there are strange drifting motes that Bull realizes are some kind of firefly. A few lanterns, here and there, and honestly it's not very much light at all, but it might as well be day for how bright it is compared to the depths of the path.

And the noise. Well, it's not very much noise, either, but a low persistent murmuring. A few sobs, pained whimpers, scattered groans.

The clearing is packed with farmers and elves tending to one another, comforting each other, passing healing potions and bandages and poultices. Despite the camaraderie, there's a clear separation between Dalish and human; the Dalish hunters and warriors cloister in one close corner of the clearing next to a few carts and an aravel, their hounds among them.

Bull spies Stitches at the far end, stooped over and tending to a patient. Plenty of injuries amongst the crowd, and - Bull grimaces to see - one or two fine-woven cloths draped over still figures, surrounded by loved ones in prayer and mourning.

Bull takes a step towards Stitches, but is stopped by a hand on his elbow.

Taoirse has put the little girl down next to her faithful hound and is looking up at Bull, exhaustion pulling at the lines of her soot and tear-streaked features. She's burned and bleeding in places, reeking of smoke and ash and death, and Bull is sure he doesn't look much better himself.

"My son's People will care for him," Taoirse says roughly, "as you tend to yours."

She holds out her arms.

Bull clenches, his grip on Mahanon tightening despite himself. All through the walk here, the darkness, the quiet, he's had Mahanon's breath on his skin, the rise and fall of his chest in Bull's
arms. It wasn't a conscious thing, how Bull clung to that, the solid proof of Mahanon's life, but...

Taoirse just waits, and Bull thinks there's something like sympathy softening her severe expression, but no sign of yielding. Of course not.

Bull breathes, and he carefully passes Mahanon to Taoirse.

The huntress bears her son's weight with unexpected ease, cradling him close. She stares at Mahanon's face for a few long moments in close examination, before she looks up at Bull and nods.

Without another word, Taoirse turns and walks away to join her fellow hunters.

Bull watches her go, but forces himself to stop watching when he hears a little sniffle somewhere close to his waist.

"Okay," Bull sighs, turning to the little girl. She's clearly been utterly terrorized by the night, but other than the damage to her spirit Bull can't see any other pressing injuries. "Is there anyone I should take you to?"

She sniffs, her eyes filling. "I want my da."

Bull winces, remembering the long-limbed charred corpse he stepped over in the ruins of the farmhouse. "I'm sorry, little one. I know."

The girl stumbles forward and throws her arms around Bull's waist, crying quietly into his side.

It's almost too close, and Bull remembers other children who came to him like this, who laughed to see how many it would take to properly wrap their arms around his midriff like an enormous old oak, and-

Bull breathes, and exhales, and lets the memory fade like a passing shade.

He leans down and scoops the girl up into his arms, carefully picking his way through the clumps of resting farmers and keeping eyes and ears peeled for anyone who recognizes his charge. Bull feels a press of cold stone against his collarbone and realizes the girl is still clutching Mahanon's crystal. Taoirse must have taken the dagger from her at some point.

"You know," Bull says, wincing as his harness rubs against a burn along his shoulder. "I know the elf who gave you that crystal. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you keep it."

The girl sniffs again, lifting the crystal to examine it. "I don't know how it works."

"I'll show you when we set you down someplace, okay?"

It takes a few minutes of awkward ambling, but Bull is eventually waved down by an older woman and able to pass the girl along to her own people. He shows her how to twist her hands around the crystal just so to make it glow and dim as her guardian watches on, her face drawn.

"Her father..." the woman asks, and Bull shakes his head. "I understand. Thank you for keeping her safe."

Bull opens his mouth to correct her - he wasn't the one who went charging in to rescue the girl on the basis of a distant scream, but... well, it doesn't matter much, right now. He nods, and leaves the girl with her guardian, brightening and dimming the crystal again and again. Distracting herself
from tragedy, as children do.

He finds the Chargers in their own huddle, and it's clear that not a single one of them made it out unscathed. Rocky's hands are heavily bandaged and judging by the singes in his clothes and moustache, it's easy to put the pieces together. The dwarf always cuts his fuses dangerously short for his explosives. Bull will rib him for it another day.

Grim has an ugly slash across his temple, made uglier by the gooey mess of healing poultice smeared over the wound. Skinner's got a split lip and bruising to suggest an oncoming black eye, but she has Dalish bundled up close against her and doesn't seem to be minding her own injuries.

Bull stoops, taking a closer look at his "archer."

Dalish is unconscious, and shivering, her lips a delicate shade of blue standing stark against white skin. Even her eyelids have darkened to a sickly grey.

"According to the First, the shivering is good," says Skinner quietly, without looking up at Bull. "Would be worse if she were still. Says the best thing we can do is hold her until she wakes up. Called it 'etha...' something. She needs to warm up from the inside out... I don't get it. The demon did something to her. Not possessed though."

"The First was here?"

"They've been doing rounds," Skinner says, shifting with a wince. Dalish's head lolls against her shoulder, her fair brows creasing. "They're a proper healer. Spreading themself a bit thin right now, I think. They've got strange eyes, Chief."

"Bad?"

"No. Just strange."

Bull nods and takes hold of Skinner's shoulder, giving it a tight squeeze. After a moment, he leans over and kisses Dalish's forehead. Her skin is frigid against his lips.

Stitches is tending to Krem, smoothing salve over branching welts and burns up Krem's arm and over his shoulder, branching across his collarbone. Krem keeps a muscled arm held tight over his chest, lips tight with several kinds of pain, and some of it is pain that Bull can neither touch nor understand. Obviously there wasn't time enough for Krem to lace up his undershirt binder before running out to battle, and his shirt is open to allow Stitches room to work.

But Krem does manage a wan, distant smile when he sees Bull looming, even if he clutches his chest a little closer.

"You look like shit," Krem says.

"You and I both look like different flavours of the same fucking mincemeat, Krem," Bull says amicably. "No winners in this beauty contest."

Krem snorts, then winces as Stitches turns his burned arm to reach another angle. Krem nods his head towards his welts. "Guess we match now, huh?"

Bull glances down at his own lightning scars, faded spidery lines spilling from hand to shoulder. Mahanon's work, reminding Bull every day of his mistakes and the promises he made to avoid repeating them.
Krem's lightning marks from the scaled demon are jagged and ugly, something antagonistic and spiky in their nature. Hateful.

"We'll have to make it part of the uniform," Bull says, keeping his thoughts to himself.

Krem tries for a smirk, but it falls away in moments. "I saw you carrying Mouse in. He's alright, yeah?"

"He's..." Bull remembers a body with no breath, no heartbeat. "Yeah, he's okay. Got a bit smoked up. His folks are looking after him now."

"His folks? Parents?"

"One of them." Bull touches the deep hound bite in his shoulder, lips twisting. "I don't think I made a good first impression to be honest."

"You should get some salve on that," Stitches says, barely glancing up. "Bites fester quickly, no matter the creature."

"In a minute," Bull says, already distracted. He sees Bernid and Shara congregating nearby with the Sliabh Keeper. The old farmer is leaning heavily on a makeshift cane, an arm around his daughter's shoulders for support and comfort. Shara's wearing a shirt over her battered nightgown that Bull recognizes as Grim's. "You're all good here?"

"No," say both Krem and Stitches flatly. The two share a look, and Krem says, "Go on, Chief."

Bernid's already speaking as Bull approaches, but it's easy to pick up the gist of the conversation.

"...grateful, we had no idea you folk were still in hollering distance," says Bernid, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "If it wasn't for you and-" Bernid catches sight of Bull and nods to him, "-this bloke's lot, Mahanon's crew... no idea what's going on, but I know more of us would have been... well."

The Sliabh Keeper is younger than most Keepers Bull's met, though pinpointing a Dalish elf's age at a glance is a fraught endeavour. Her skin is a smooth chestnut brown, coils of mahogany hair intricately braided into something like a crown over her head. Like Mahanon, she has large, luminous eyes and long ears. Her skin is richly embroidered with curling knots of vallaslin, the designs fading and overlapping to the extent that it seems like a natural pattern and texture rather than ink. In fact, every part of her seems to have that same, organic sense. Her gown has more in common with drifting tendrils of moss and smoke than fabric, and while the gauntlets she used to channel her magic are crafted from metal and stone, there is nonetheless something about the twisting lines of wire and soft leather to protect her skin that brings to mind skeletons and flesh, not armour. Not weaponry.

"It was not luck," the Keeper says, her eyes drifting over Bull and returning to Bernid. Her voice is soft and carries the same heavy lilt that defined Taoirse's heavy accent, that has always whispered through the rhythms of Mahanon's speech even all these years later. "Isuïl, our First, is a skilled Speaker. The forest has been whispering of a stranger on the road who resembled our kin. Isuïl charted the likeliest path for the traveller, and we thought we would stay in our current camp a quarter moon longer to investigate and see the stranger for ourselves. However, Isuïl's spirits warned of a calamity tonight, and-"

"Your First can tell the future?" Shara asks.

The Keeper tilts her head and smiles, just a little. "No, not as such. They receive the wisdom of the
Fade, and they interpret what they can. The spirits who watch our world do not understand its intricacies. However, when a great many spirits cry of an oncoming disaster, we prepare. It was so during the Blight, and tonight."

"So do we know what happened?" Bull asks.

The Keeper looks at Bull.

Bull holds out a smoky, bloodstained hand.

"I'm the Iron Bull of Bull's Chargers," he says. "No pressure on the handshake, I haven't had a chance to get cleaned up."

The Keeper takes his hand in a brief, strong grasp, unflinching at the grime. The stones and metal of her gauntlets are unexpectedly cool and leave an odd tingling sensation on Bull's palm when she releases her grip.

"The Veil between worlds has been sundered," the Keeper says, and Bull feels stupidly lightheaded at the words. Of course he knew that, there was no other possible fucking explanation, but... vashedan. "The rift that opened over your farms is not the only one. In fact, we are quite far from the heart of this calamity."

"There are more?" Shara gasps.

The Keeper nods, touching her fingertips to her temples with a troubled frown. "We will have a better idea of how far this spreads once Isuiil is finished and recovers their strength. Our People will need to convene. The heavy rains of the previous moon will keep the fires from spreading far, but any demon strong enough to venture from the rifts will find shadows to infest and poison the forest..." The Keeper shakes her head. "Forgive me. There is much to do, and far too few to do it."

"You'll have our help," Bernid says roughly, straightening with a pronounced wince. "Always, Serah Keeper. We don't forget our friends."

The Keeper inclines her head, a respectful gesture Bull's seen Mahanon do hundreds of times over, never thinking of where it might have come from. "Such vows are appreciated. For tonight, you are free to rest in safety here. We must return our injured to their families, but we will leave some hunters and hounds to watch over you and guide your safe passage to the road come morning."

The Keeper hesitates a moment, then looks to Bull. Despite the significant height difference, Bull doesn't get the sense she's looking up at him in any way.

"I will admit I am... not certain of your situation or intentions, the Iron Bull, nor what knowledge you may possess regarding the elf Mahànnon," the Keeper says slowly. "You may know that he was once a part of this clan."

"I know," Bull says. "That's why we came to the forest, ma'am. So he could see his family."

"I see," the Keeper says softly. There's something markedly fond, and equally sad, in the lift of her lips - far too melancholy to count as a smile. "Strange fates. I understand he is injured."

Bull nods. Shara and Bernid look at him with sharp dismay.

"We will care for Mahànnon ourselves, the Iron Bull," the Keeper says. "We will, of course, find a way to inform you of his condition should it change, and what he decides should he wake."
"Decides?" Shara asks.

"He is one of us," the Keeper says. "It will bear discussion, certainly, but the... problem that forced him to part from us is - resolved. Regardless, he will return with us tonight, to live or pass as a Sliabh, on Sliabh land."

*Mahanon is going to disappear into the woods, fate unknown, and-*

"No," Bull says flatly.

The Keeper's eyes narrow. "Step carefully, qunari. I will not argue claim with you."

Bull is too tired. He's too fucking exhausted, and he should have seen this coming. There's nothing left inside him to process the words, to feel them properly beyond a tug somewhere deep inside him, like a hand clenched around his spine.

"Keeper," Shara says nervously, eyes darting between elf and qunari. "Meaning no disrespect or intrusion, promise, it's just - they're together, is the thing. Hanny and this Bull fellow. Like, in a romantic sort of way, you know?"

Berind puts a hand over his face. The Keeper looks sharply at Shara, then at Bull again. Bull folds his arms.

"If this is true," says the Keeper, a dubious emphasis on the *if*, "then you should want what's best for him. You travelled to this forest for this reason, you say. Then you must understand why he should be with his People."

Bull's temper flares. "You-"

Bull closes his eye, grinding his teeth against the rest of the sentence.

*You were his People. That's what Bull was going to say. You gave him up. You abandoned him. You broke his heart and it never really fucking healed.*

But Mahanon would not agree with Bull, and Bull knows it. He knows Mahanon loves this forest, his family, his birth clan. He knows Mahanon saw the pain inflicted on him as a tragic necessity, the survival patterns of a people who've faced hundreds of years of subjugation and hardship. If Mahanon holds no bitterness for the Sliabhs, what right does Bull?

It's not Bull's decision to make, not really, or at least it shouldn't be.

*What would Mahanon want? What would be best for him?*

That terrible coiling fear that Mahanon's people will bear him away into the heart of the forest to unknown fates... that is Bull's burden, and Bull's alone.


It was clearly not the response the Keeper was anticipating, but after a moment she inclines her head again. "We will be leaving soon." After an uncertain beat, she says, "You are, of course, welcome to stay with him until we go."

"Thanks," Bull says, the word ringing hollow in his ears. He doesn't look at Berind or Shara. He
can feel their sympathetic gazes on him, following him as he turns to pick his way back across the
glade to the tight cloister of Dalish hunters.

It doesn't take Bull long to find Mahanon. Even amongst brethren, Taoirse is distinct. Her burns
have been briefly tended to, salved and bandaged. Mahanon lies in a bed of glowing moss at her
side, similarly bandaged and his leg splinted. His hand is wrapped up tight in Taoirse's, the
huntress's eyes tracking every laboured rise and fall of her son's chest.

Taoirse's massive hound lies alongside Mahanon, watching over him as closely as another parent.
The moment Bull steps close it rises with a warning growl.


The hound eyes Bull skeptically, but settles back into the moss with its massive teeth bared warily.

Bull stands there, uncertain how to proceed, until Taoirse snaps her fingers and gestures to the
hound. It shuffles away with a distinct grumble, leaving room at Mahanon's side for Bull to sit.

"Thanks," Bull says, lowering himself to the moss with effort. His injuries are starting to catch up
with him, as well as the horrors of the night. All he can hope for to ease his aches is that the
traveller's inn will have a private bath big enough for him and Mahanon tomorrow-

No, just him. Not Mahanon.

Conscious of Taoirse's presence, Bull takes Mahanon's hand in his, smoothing his thumb over
familiar scars and callouses. Something pokes Bull's skin, and Bull looks closer to see splinters in
Mahanon's palm and fingertips, skin scratched raw and scabbing from how desperately he fought
to free himself from the wreck of the farmhouse before the smoke took him, or the heat.

"Isuìl could only see him for a moment," Taoirse says. Quiet, it's all very quiet, and Bull gets it.
Even in this glade, the trees still muffle sound. No need to shout. "His..." Taoirse clicks her tongue
in frustration, gesturing to her chest. "Scamhòga, where the breath goes-"

"Lungs."

Taoirse lays her hand on Mahanon's chest, over the rebellious Sliabh knot vallaslin, her face heavy
with unnamable emotions.

"He is breathing like this because they are a bit... broken," Taoirse says. She glances at Bull. "As
are ours. We will need healing too, before it becomes unfixable. Otherwise we will get sick."

Getting sick, worrying about getting sick - it's the farthest thing from Bull's mind at present, but he
nods like he cares. Mahanon's skin is grey beneath the smudges of ash, every breath rattling deep
in his chest, and Bull remembers how they fell asleep together only hours ago with Mahanon
purring in his arms...

A small jar is passed into his field of vision. Bull accepts it without thinking, twisting it open and
giving Taoirse a bemused look.

"For the bite," Taoirse says, gesturing to Bull's shoulder. "We carry it with us always, when we
hunt with our hounds. There are accidents, sometimes."

It's not an apology, and Bull isn't expecting one. Doesn't want or need one. He murmurs a thanks
and dips his fingers into the contents of the jar, a thick gel.
Bull spreads it into a thin layer over his shoulder and blinks at the sting as his fingers catch on the ragged edges of the bite. A sharp pain, a burning sensation, then a sudden chill, and the ache numbs to a complete lack of sensation.

Bull hands the jar back to Taoirse, who slips it into her pouch.

"Your arm is marked by lightning," Taoirse says. Brusquely, a statement of fact. "You might know my question."

Bull takes Mahanon's hand in his again.

"Your son," Bull says. "I deserved it."

"He forgave you."

Bull nods, bringing Mahanon's hand to his lips, holding it close.

Taoirse leans over and pulls the ragged collar of Mahanon's open tunic aside, fingertips brushing over a distinct scar.


Bull has never once in his life been a man for blushes. But he does freeze, stock-still, as Mahanon's mother looks up at him with cool curiosity, clearly waiting for an explanation.

"Uh," Bull says, praying for Mahanon to wake and save him from this conversation. "He asked?"

Taoirse watches him for another long, heart-stopping moment, then slowly smiles. It's a sharp smile. Mischievous. Bull recognizes it.

So being a little shit runs in the family, huh Boss?

"I saw how he looked at you," Taoirse says. "I understand what you are to him. You saved his life. I know that too."

Taoirse stands abruptly, clicking to her hound. It rises with another long look at Bull, eyes narrowed suspiciously, but pads after Taoirse without hesitation as the huntress walks away.

Bull sighs, shifting a little closer to Mahanon. "'Wolf Woman,' huh? I get that."

Bull leans in, letting himself cradle Mahanon's face in his palm. Mahanon always looks so... fuck, "small" isn't the right word, and "precious" just feels fucking dumb. But when Bull holds his kadan's face in his hands, and Mahanon leans into his touch with a soft smile, eyes warm and trusting, everything feels quiet and settled. Easy.

But Mahanon's brow is creased in pain, his lips parted for every gasping breath, flinching every so often, and there is no peace here to be found right now.

"You're gonna be okay, kadan," Bull murmurs, brushing a few stray curls aside. Bull slips his hand down, cradling the nape of Mahanon's neck, gently stroking the spots he aims for when Mahanon's head starts to hurt or his nerves get the better of him. "You're a tough little guy, yeah? I didn't just bet on you that first day for the long odds. I knew you'd wake up, no matter how shitkicked you were. I knew you'd wake up, no matter how shitkicked you were. You're a stubborn fuck. I could tell. Fuck, I was so damn curious about you, you know that? Before I even really met you. Just this tiny bird who tumbled ass over ankles out of the nest because you were so fucking determined to fly. I could see it."
Bull kisses Mahanon's knuckles again, his lips coming away tacky with drying blood.

"I'm gonna give you such shit when you wake up for running off and leaving me with all the fucking demons, by the way." Bull leans in and adds in an undertone, "Not to mention your scary mum."

Mahanon's breath hitches and, for a moment, stops.

Bull's heart stops too, he thinks, until Mahanon coughs and tosses, dragging in another long breath.

"It's not too much to ask," Bull says quietly. "Not too much to ask for you to live, huh? Even if you wind up choosing to stay with them. That's okay. Maybe send me a letter or something, but even if I just know you're breathing the same air as my dumb ass, no matter where the wind takes it... that'd be enough. It'd make whatever's left of this world in the morning... well, not great, but decent. I can do decent. Sort of."

Mahanon, of course, does not respond. Just breathes.


Bull whispers his love to Mahanon's slack fingers, wishing for a pair of Stitches' slim pincers to pick the splinters from Mahanon's hands for him, any last thing he can do for his kadān before he's taken-

No, not taken. He's going home.

It's an old thought, a warning from years ago that Bull has tried to set aside as a single brick in a wall he's spent years chipping away at, just to make the slimmest crack so someone small and quick might slip through.

You'll have to give him up someday. You've always known that.

Bull smiles, and it's not forced. It hurts like a motherfucker, but it's real.

If nothing else, at the end of the day, after a long and twisted road... Bull brought Mahanon home. No matter what comes next, even given the very worst of possibilities, Mahanon will be home. In his quiet forest, with the People who understand him best. If this is where they part, at least Bull can think back on the journey and know the destination was worth it.

Almost.

"The Iron Bull."

Bull doesn't immediately look up at the unfamiliar voice, reluctant to waste any remaining moments with his kadān. He eventually turns his head.

The person standing next to him isn't very much taller than the points of Bull's horns, even with him seated as he is. They are small with wide, soft curves, their skin a deep black that shines blue in the dappled moonlight and moss glow. Their hair is a thick dark cloud, pinned and bundled with ornaments of knotwork, flowers, leaves.

But their eyes are what captures Bull's interest. Dark blue, with irises so large they nearly devour the whites, and no discernible pupils. They reflect little glimmers of light like stars or fireflies, though Bull cannot identify a source.
The First, Bull guesses, from Skinner's description. *Strange eyes.*

"I am Isuil, First and Speaker," the person says. Their voice is kind and soft. "Mahànon's mother Taoirse has asked that you be granted the right of *ethamin sumeil'lath.*" Isuil pauses, as if listening to an answer that Bull has not provided, and nods. "You are not familiar with the words."

Bull frowns. Mahanon told him a little bit about Isuil, the Second - now First, of course, with the passing of the Keeper. How they were playful but uncertain. How they'd felt endless guilt over Mahanon's exile, due to their taking the final place for mages within the clan.

This person bears little resemblance to Mahanon's descriptions.

"The years have changed us all, the Iron Bull," Isuil says, and Bull's unease becomes a low hum of warning in the back of his mind. "Please put aside your misgivings. You know my gift. You were trained in it. The only difference is that I Speak what you Listen."

Bull does not react, does not respond. He's distinctly worried that he knows exactly what Isuil is talking about.

"*Ethamin sumeil'lath* is simple," Isuil says. "In times of hurt, it is the presence of others that aids in healing. If a Sliabh requires a deep healing in one of our sacred spaces, drawing on the heart of our home, those with the right of *ethamin sumeil'lath* are allowed to accompany them where otherwise they would not be permitted to pass." Isuil smiles, and Bull sees a hint of that playful personality Mahanon described. "It is... unusual, the bounds that Taoirse is intending with her claim on your behalf. Our Cuimhne - Keeper - is not convinced by the claim. So I will Speak your heart, and then a decision will be made."

Bull's head swims. He massages a temple with his free hand, reluctant to let go of Mahanon. "I'm not sure I get what you're saying."

"Let me phrase it another way. Taoirse has claimed that you have a right, as someone who is close to Mahànnon, to accompany us to the clan holdings and stay within our boundaries while Mahànnon recovers. The Keeper disagrees." Isuil smiles again. "So I will Listen to your heart, the Iron Bull, and I will Speak my decision on the matter."
"ethamin sumeil'lath" - is cobbled together elvhen, roughly meaning "rest/safe love/closeness." the concept of healing by proximity and community.

"las'eth" - more cobbled elvhen, "grant/give safe" - basically, "guard."

"tish'an" - "atish'an," but in the Sliabh dialect things are contracted and more relaxed (and mixed with Irish) - for example, "ab'las" instead of "ir abelas".
"Scàth" - irish for shadow, and yes, Taoirse was not very creative when naming her hound

"falon. hamin, fen'len." - elvhen, "Friend. Rest, little wolf." basically "I get it but please don't chew on my son's boyfriend anymore because that will be very awkward to have to explain to him when he wakes up"

"scamhòga" - irish, "lungs"
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

I have been... writing this chapter sentence by sentence, chunk by lil chunk, over the 
course of like *checks posting date* a month, holy shit. Next chapter should be out?? 
Sooner?? IT'S REAL LONG IF IT HELPS.

Song rec is gonna be at the end but playlist link is here.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING AND COMMENTING AND ALL THE 
GOOD STUFF?? IT REALLY MEANS A WHOLE LOT TO ME LIKE FUCK. 
Especially right now, I'm back in school and losing my mind between work and that 
and submissions and *waves hand* EVERYTHING. Seriously, I absolutely appreciate 
your support in ways I can't even express, thank you so incredibly much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mahanon could feel the searing rage of the demons before ever stepping foot in the farmhouse. But 
rage is not a weakness of his, so he could put the echoing swell of insanity aside.

Another scream, but this one was closer, different - Mahanon blasted the front door open and 
pushed his way through and it was not a child but a man, the man he'd long ago thought was part 
tree for how tall the shem'len was, all long limbs and toothy grins.

Those long limbs were charred now, half-burnt and flailing, and the man was screaming in 
frenzied wrath as he attempted to beat the flaming demon before him into submission. His fury 
crowded out pain and common sense, leaving him utterly unaware that he was burning himself 
alive in the process of trying to kill the monster with his bare hands.

"Creators, no!" Mahanon cried, thick smoke stinging his eyes and coating his mouth, his tongue, 
his lungs spasming into a sputtering cough.

The tall man rounded on Mahanon with a senseless snarl, and with one look Mahanon could tell 
there was no saving him. Mahanon buried his blade in the man's chest to spare him the agony of 
continuing to act as the rage demon's plaything.

Mahanon watched the man crumple to the ground and go still. The horror of this sank well past 
Mahanon's waking thoughts into some deeper, darker place. No, this was a substantial rainfall 
into a quiet ocean of grief to be reckoned with another time.

The rage demon bellowed, another springing up at Mahanon's elbow, but Mahanon was quick - he 
leapt through the flames and slashed back, calling up a wall of ice to cover his escape. Not a very 
strong wall, but Dalish's careful tutoring on hot and cold magics had not gone to waste, despite 
Mahanon's lack of proficiency. The demons quailed back long enough for Mahanon to dodge 
around the corner, deeper into the house, calling out for the child that drew him here, and every 
time he sucked in a breath to shout his chest cramped, and he felt - almost, absurdly, a little as 
though he were drowning...
Isuîl takes a seat on the glowing moss at Bull's side, something eerily serene and unbothered about their demeanour given the circumstances. Bull glances up to see Taoirse and the Keeper approaching. Hesitantly. Keeping a respectful distance, sure, but watching closely all the same.

"You can keep holding Mahànnon's hand if you like," Isuîl says, adjusting their robes. "It comforts both of you."

Bull looks sharply at the First. "He knows I'm here?"

"You want a simple answer to a difficult question, Iron Bull," Isuîl says. "The divide between our waking and resting mind is a self-made function, not a true barrier. Especially now." Isuîl looks away, their face creasing in something like pain, before looking up with a smile. "It's kind that you do not think me mad, though you find my words uncomfortable."

"I just don't think mixing dreams up with real shit is a good idea," Bull mutters.

"It has only ever hurt you in the past," Isuîl says softly. "I understand. Truthfully, few are well-suited for walking with a foot in both worlds."

"And you think you are?"

Isuîl smiles again, sharper, their strange starry eyes twinkling. "I have made myself well-suited. Now, I will see what you have made of yourself."

Bull grips Mahanon's hand a little tighter. Years, decades of Ben Hassrath training and conditioning are screaming at him for even thinking of making himself so vulnerable.

But Bull promised. Years ago, he promised he would never put the Qun above Mahanon's safety or wellbeing.

Bull closes his eye.

"Just so you know, if you're reading my mind or some shit... I'll be betraying my people by letting you do that," Bull says quietly. He opens his eye, fixes his gaze on Mahanon's slack face. "If it means I can stay with him, then - well, I'll make peace with it on my own time. I just ask that you keep whatever you find in there to yourself. For my people's sake, and yours. They'll send folks after you if they think you're spreading Ben Hassrath secrets."

"Hmm," Isuîl murmurs, sounding maddeningly unconcerned. "Your people are more frightfully capable than they know, or will even allow themselves to become. Still, they would have some trouble here. Even the mightiest dreadnought is made equal by the wild forces of the world at sea, and the forest..." Isuîl shakes their head. "I'm distracted. I will not be learning any secrets from you tonight, save the ones you keep closest and dearest, and I doubt your Ben Hassrath would be bothered by that small invasion. I'm Speaking your heart, not your mind. Not your memories."

"Yeah, I still have no fucking clue what that means," Bull says. "Sorry."

"Then let me show you," Isuîl says, offering Bull a small hand with short, thick fingers. This close, Bull sees the tiniest tendrils of roots and vines twining about each digit.

Bull takes the First's hand. The First glances down at his missing fingers with piercing curiosity, but only for a moment.

Something tickles Bull's palm, and he realizes with a swell of unease that the little curls of plant life adorning Isuîl's fingers are moving.
"It will be far easier for you if you relax, no matter what you feel," Isuil says.

Bull narrows his eye, but nods.

At first, Bull doesn't feel anything aside from the squirming plants. Isuil's eyes go gently unfocused and their grip on Bull's hand is firm, but if there's any other magic going on, Bull can't perceive it. Good.

_Fuck, but I hate magic._

Bull winces. It's an instinctive thought, one that's been true for decades, but these past few years Bull can't think it without a reflexive pinprick of guilt.

No, not even guilt. More like the tripped-up half-step of repeating a long-disproven folk myth out of habit, or just making old mistakes without thinking. Repeating patterns, patterns that have been so engrained in his upbringing they might as well be the blood that runs in his veins, the structure of his bones.

Because Bull doesn't _really_ hate magic; not all magic, anyway. Feeling Mahanon's energy shield slip over him on the battlefield is almost as comforting as shrugging on a warm, dry blanket after cold, wet day. Crackles of lightning shooting over his shoulder to cover his blindspot are fucking invigorating, impressive; a bit terrifying, sure, but only in the best way possible.

So maybe Bull doesn't hate magic, but he definitely hates demons. Demons are what make magic go bad, right? That's easy enough, and Bull's still pretty confident on his dislike.

But Mahanon had to go and complicate that for him too.

The first few times Mahanon woke up in Bull's bed from demon-plagued nightmares were not good nights for either of them. Bull couldn't help but be reminded of all the warnings he'd heard about bedding mages over the years: horror stories of folks waking up next to twisted abominations in place of their lovers. Mahanon could guess at Bull's thoughts and discomforts and would crumple under the weight of his shyness and anxieties. Usually after a stilted and awkward conversation one of them would leave the bed to sleep elsewhere.

No, those were not good nights, and it wasn't even the thought of demons whispering a little too close to Bull's ears that really bothered him. It was that Mahanon would wake up shaken, often exasperated, but very rarely frightened. It was _Bull_ who would break out in a cold sweat upon realizing what was going on with his bedmate; _Bull_ who would struggle to fall asleep for hours afterwards, wondering what might be waiting for him in his own dreams.

Bull was far more afraid of Mahanon's nightmares than Mahanon was, and Bull fucking _hated_ that.

_Why aren't you afraid of demons?_

Bull doesn't think he phrased the question that way, doesn't remember the exact words, but that was what he meant. Bull's curiosity and frustration with his own terror eventually broke through one night, and the conversation was finally had.

Mahanon took his time to respond, Bull remembers. But eventually he said, _I am a bit afraid of them, honestly. But mostly I just feel sorry for them._

Yeah, Bull didn't like that response.
Mouse, that's pretty fuckin' unnerving to hear, you gotta know that.

Not so sorry for them that I'm willing to give them house and home in my mind, thank you.

(Mahanon gets very crisp and polite when he's annoyed. Still does. Bull has no fucking clue what turns Mahanon into an inconvenienced royal diplomat when he's cross, but it's so hilariously endearing that Bull has made a personal vow never to mention it in case Mahanon gets self-conscious and stops.)

In the old stories, my Keeper told me that most demons used to be spirits. Not evil or good, just sort of existing. It's only when they're misunderstood by us or cast out into a world they can't understand that they turn evil. It's like taking a wolf from its pack and dumping it in an Orlesian square, then getting angry at the wolf for lashing out and eating people. You still have to get rid of the wolf, but not because you hate the wolf, and maybe not even because you fear it. It's just... sad. Does that make sense?

No, it didn't make sense, not really. But Bull could respect the kind of bravery it would take to pity a monster. The next time Mahanon gasped awake and gave Bull a familiar guilty look that meant the elf was dreaming of demons, Bull just pulled him in close and told him to go back to sleep, and that was that.

Bull thinks of this now, one hand holding Mahanon's, the other holding Isuïl's, and how he fucking wishes Mahanon were awake to make any kind of sense of tonight's horrors and this quiet forest, or at least explain it in a way Bull could respect and admire, even if he doesn't understand it himself...

The feeling of missing Mahanon blooms hot under the surface of Bull's skin like fire, flashes of emotions he knows are his but louder, somehow, overwhelming. Fuck, it's like being a child all over again, the kind of kid who might burst into tears when their tama leaves them for the night because the need for love and closeness is far too intense to bear alone, before learning how to manage and divide and tamp down and bury and-

"Please relax," Isuïl murmurs, and it takes everything Bull has not to yank his hand out of the elf's grasp.

Fury and fear. The First is doing this to him, peeling back layers of control, exposing everything he's fought so hard to manage-

Shame, slamming into him like a tidal wave, for letting his anger escape the confines of its sheath, like swinging a blade with no accounting for those close by who might be cut down in its wake-

But Bull would never hurt Mahanon's People, would he?

Fuck no, no. Bull could never hurt Mahanon, not if he can help it, and hurting his People would wound Mahanon beyond healing. Grief, and guilt, then... calm, security, because Bull knows he can be better. Mahanon believed it first, and Bull promised - he promised-

Loyalty, how quickly Bull can be stopped short by Mahanon's word, by the strength of a promise. Yes, loyalty has always been a constant touchstone. Loyalty to the Qun. Loyalty to his Chargers (and another swell of affection, unfamiliar words and concepts like family, like friends without the shared landscape of ideology, like acceptance, maybe), loyalty to his people.

Who are Bull's people? His People? Is he qunari, or Qunari?

Bull is here, and he's allowing his heart to be stripped and examined, utterly compromising in ways the Ben Hassrath could never anticipate.
And because they cannot anticipate it, perhaps it is not betrayal, and perhaps they do not have to know, and perhaps Bull can remain one of them. He's still so very useful, after all. He was trained to always be useful.

Useful, that Bull has carefully mapped out every human settlement along the forest road and their allegiances. Committed snatches of conversation to memory.

The People rule this forest. Bull's getting a better sense of their migration and trade patterns. You can learn as much from what you don't hear and see as from what you do. Inference. Filling in the blanks. Bull's learning so much, so much he can pass along, so much his people can take and use.

Anything can be used.

There are tensions between the People and the surrounding city states. That can be used.

The Wildlings to the west sided with the People. That can be used. Elves fleeing persecution bolstering the clans to the south-east. That can be used. Regional dialects help them distinguish outsiders, infiltrators, but there are openings there. Vulnerabilities. Bull now knows at least one forest path into Sliabh territory, even as dark as it was, where it starts and where it leads and how not to be led astray-

Isuïl pulls their hand from Bull's.

Bull hears heavy, rattling breathing. His own. He touches his face and finds his eye is streaming.

"I imagine you would have preferred if I had Spoken your mind, Iron Bull, rather than your heart," Isuïl says softly. "‘The Iron Bull.’ That is a name you chose?"

Bull swipes at his cheek, smearing blood and tears and ash. He nods. The re-educators did this too - pulled everything up by the roots for examination. He should be used to this shit by now. Nothing secret, nothing sacred.

Why does it still fucking hurt?

"A dangerous name for a dangerous man," Isuïl says. No judgement, just fact. "I chose my name too, Iron Bull, for different reasons. Sometimes I am confused too, but I am not undecided. I'm afraid that is where we differ." Isuïl pauses, and adds, "It will not be as simple as choosing him in the end."

Bull is still far too raw to look at the First, but he manages to say, "I know."

"I was asked to Speak your heart to my Keeper and judge if you pose a threat to us," Isuïl says, standing. "You know what you are, even if you have not yet decided who you are."

Bull strokes his thumb over Mahanon's hand, careful of the scrapes and splinters.

"No, choosing him will not be enough when the time comes," Isuïl says again. "But tonight it will suffice."

Bull blinks, but by the time he manages to haul his head around to look up at the First they're already walking away to meet with their people, speaking in that lilting Dalish dialect as calmly and cheerily as if discussing the weather.

Bull touches his chest, massages it as if he can settle everything back in place that way. He closes his eye, willing himself calm, and-
-he opens his eye and Mahanon is gone. Everyone is gone, and everything is dark again.

Bull snarls and tries to lunge to his feet, but a weight he can't describe keeps him in place, like the air is solid from his shoulders down-

"Kost, maraas shokra. Be still, Iron Bull."

Bull blinks, the familiar words jarring him from his confusion and rage. He looks up.

"Your Qunlat needs work," Bull grunts.

Taoirse narrows her luminous eyes, and despite the darkness Bull sees the faint outline of her hand resting on her knife pommel. "A student is as good as their teacher."

A growl behind Bull answers the question of her hound's location before Bull can think to ask it.

Isuìl comes to stand at Taoirse's side, the tendrils of plant life curled about their hands twisting and glowing just as the moss did back in the glade.

"You have a strong mind, Iron Bull," Isuìl says. "We could not allow you to learn the path to our holdings. You consented to having your memory erased. You gave us a passphrase to prove this. Your weapons have been left with your people. I will lift the binding spell on you if you repeat the oath we agreed upon that you will not harm us."

"An oath I don't remember making, from terms I don't remember agreeing to?"

"You are not meant to remember," Isuìl says. "This is how we discern your word as binding truth. What vow would you offer to convince us that you will abide by our laws and trust in our testimony?"

Bull swallows a frustrated growl. So far, this all adds up with some dumbass fucking bullshit he might do to himself. Have Taoirse handle the passphrase because he knows the huntress is a straight shooter in every sense. Let them take his memory because whether he means them harm or not, knowledge is dangerous in his hands, and Isuìl would know that by now after getting a feel for how he thinks.

So he made some kind of oath he knew Isuìl would trust. Isuìl's right. If Bull was being genuine, his thought process would land him on the same conclusion whether he remembers what he said before or not.

And after that, it's really not very difficult at all to suss out what he might have said before.

"I swear on the bond with my kadan that I won't hurt any of you," Bull says slowly. It's the truth of the matter, the simplest conclusion. These are Mahanon's People, his family, and no matter what strangeness they subject Bull to, he truly does not mean them harm.

"Nearly the same wording," Isuìl says thoughtfully. Taoirse grunts.

The magical binding on Bull lifts, and some of the darkness seems to lift with it. It's still frustratingly dim, but that strange glow of plant life and drifting fireflies helps illuminate his surroundings.

It's... fuck, Bull is a far cry from a bard, and he can't help but think the sight of this place is wasted
on his lack of artistry. Unlike the previous glade, there is no space between leaves and branches for starlight to shine through - just the tall, twisting, arching boughs of enormous and ancient trees. It's an odd connection to make, but the interlacing vines and roots and plant life remind Bull strikingly of the knotwork patterns unique to Mahanon's people, how it all intertwines and tangles into a beautiful kind of chaos.

There are aravels, of course - throughout and grouped around the edges of the clearing, a small village of sails and banners, canvases draped and arranged into cozy shelters. Some structures twine up into the trees, forming look-out posts and what appear to be small platforms for worship or reflection. There are statues that seem permanently stationed, such as the tall and weathered figure of an Elven huntress that Bull assumes is Andruil, as well as the enormous stone effigy of Fen'harel close to where Bull is seated at the mouth of the clearing. Amusingly, this seems to be the preferred resting place of many Sliabh wolfhounds, lounging about the Dread Wolf's paws in a sprawling, yawning pack of contented canines.

There's no real telling what time it is, but Bull's internal clock guesses a few hours past midnight. There's activity at the heart of the holding, injured elves returning to anxious families, receiving further treatment, trading stories. More than a few curious glances are cast in Bull's direction - a few from elf children who, Bull recognizes with an odd thump, share Mahanon's curls and inquisitive eyes. Cousins, maybe?

Bull swallows. "Mahanon-"

"-is taking well to the healing, and is receiving care alongside the other wounded," Isuîl says. Taoirse looks away, her jaw clenched, and Isuîl sighs. "The Keeper would prefer that you remain under guard and away from our families for now. If we reach daybreak without incident, or Mahànón wakes and can speak to your character himself, you will be allowed more freedom of movement. I'm sorry."

Bull rubs his temples, suddenly exhausted, and it occurs to him that he has no idea how far he walked to get here. A fair distance, if his screaming bad leg is any indication. "Makes sense. Don't suppose you could've been more careful wiping my head though? Would have been nice to remember the first time we had this chat."

"I was very careful," Isuîl says. Still kind, still gentle. "We told you our conditions. Your mind is very quick. Knowing what we planned to do while still in the company of allies, even for a few moments as you passed over your weapons, might have been enough time for you to think of a way to subvert our precautions."

Bull huffs something like a laugh. "So if I made some kind of plan to keep my memory of the journey here or lead my Chargers after me, you didn't want me remembering it?"

"I trust that your heart is good, and that your love for Mahànón is very strong," Isuîl says. "But I hope you will not begrudge me or our People some caution. Nor the desire to hold something of an advantage over you."

Bull shakes his head. This - well, this is the kind of thinking that drew him to Mahànón in the first place. Kindness, sweetness even, such gentle hearts... with quick, razor-sharp minds.

"One of my hands will be along shortly with bedding and to properly dress your wounds," Isuîl says. "Please rest. Whatever you need will be provided, you need only ask."

Bull nods, his lips twisting into a sardonic smile. Rest, huh?
Isuil walks away without a second glance, but Taoirse hesitates. Bull thinks of how Mahanon described his mother when recounting childhood stories - imposing, fierce, cold. Bull gets that, but he wonders how much of Taoirse’s aloof demeanour was due to this halting awkwardness and uncertainty.

*I think you and your mum might have more than just looks in common,* kadan.

"*Hamin'anseo, Scàth,*" Taoirse mutters, and Bull hears an inquisitive *whuff* a little too close behind him. "*Fair Bull'falon, las'eth.*"

The wolfhound grumbles. Bull chances a look over his shoulder to see the massive hound peering at him with those unnervingly intelligent yellow eyes, before settling down into the moss at Bull's back with a beleaguered sigh.

"Scàth is a good companion," Taoirse says roughly. "If you have need of me, you say 'Taoirse' and point, she will understand." Taoirse shrugs. "Or maybe she won't. Your tongue is clumsy on our words."

"*Ma serannas?*" Bull tries, raising an eyebrow.

Taoirse snorts. "*S'rannas,* here." Taoirse looks down. "If... if-*" Taoirse works her jaw for a moment. "You will know if Mahànón needs you. I will make sure you are there."

"Thanks," Bull says quietly.

Taoirse nods, her brow furrowed, lips pressed tight together, before following after Isuil.

True to the First’s words, a young elf comes along with a few comically small bedrolls and blankets piled on his back, his hands laden with a bucket of water and an injury kit. The elf doesn't speak much Common, but there's an apologetic tone to his hand gestures as he indicates pushing the bedrolls together, then Bull's size, then rapidly covering with abrupt apologies for gesturing to Bull's size-

"I get it," Bull says quickly, putting his hands up. "Thank you, uh - s'rannas?"

The elf brightens, obviously relieved. "*S'rannas.*" He points at himself. "Ghibhàn. *Ainm'ma?*

"Iron Bull," Bull responds, guessing at the elf’s intent.

The elf - Ghibhàn, Bull assumes, though there's no fucking way he plans to try to pronounce that without a few tries first - nods, and sets to work tending to Bull's injuries.

It takes longer than Bull expects. Every time Bull thinks Ghibhàn has slathered elfroot over every burn, every gash, every scrape, the elf manages to find something else to bind and tend to. The water in the bucket quickly turns muddy with ash, blood, and gore as Ghibhàn works to clean Bull up as best as can be managed with a washcloth and soaps, but it's a losing battle and they both know it.

"I'll find a creek to jump in tomorrow, or something," Bull says reassuringly, as Ghibhàn sighs at his thoroughly soiled washcloth and gives Bull another apologetic look. "I think this is about as good as it's gonna get tonight."

"*Ar'gà farraige mhór do var mhór'vhenallin,*" Ghibhàn murmurs, wringing the cloth out into the bucket.
"Uh huh," Bull says. "Exactly what I was thinking."

Another elf comes along with a few dense cakes of dried fruit and seeds and several waterskins, staring at Bull with blatant curiosity until Ghibhàn growls something in Sliabh that sends the wide-eyed elf scurrying away (though the other elf pauses to trade what sounds like a playful half-hiss with Ghibhàn and a respectful nod to Bull before fleeing).

Ghibhàn finally gathers up his kit and the bloodied rags, but frowns and hesitates before leaving. He looks between Bull and the untouched cakes and back again, his ears flicking off-kilter, and slowly mimes bringing the cake to his mouth. "Eh- er, eating, vhenallin?"

"S'rannas," Bull says again, picking up a cake and giving Ghibhàn an awkward toast with it. "Just, uh. Not super hungry."

Ghibhàn narrows his eyes. Whether he understands Bull or not, he doesn't seem the least bit satisfied with Bull's response. With a sinking feeling that the elf might stay here all night if need be, knowing at least a little of Sliabh stubbornness, Bull takes a solid bite of the seed cake and makes an exaggerated noise of satisfaction at the taste.

Well, not entirely exaggerated. Part of him recognizes that the dense cake is good, even if it's not exactly an Orlesian roast. But there's nothing that can be done for Bull's lack of appetite and how it causes the dried fruits and seeds to glue to his teeth in a grainy mass, heavy and unappealing through no fault of its flavour.

Bull's performance seems to satisfy Ghibhàn, however. With a relieved nod the elf parts from Bull, leaving him alone with his exhausted and rapidly scattering thoughts.

Scàth wheezes out an enormous canine snore behind him.

Bull smiles wryly. Not entirely alone.

Bull lays out the sleeping rolls and blankets, feeling as though he's dragged himself through a long, hard, and exhausting lifetime since completing this same ritual only hours earlier with Mahanon at his side. Trading jokes about goats, of all things. Talking about the future.

Is there a future left for them, any of them, with the sky ripped open above their heads?

Bull grits his teeth and settles himself under the blankets, staring up at a dense ceiling of branches and leaves and infinitely grateful that the forest is too thick for him to see the broken sky beyond them.

Exhaustion takes Bull under in moments, only for dreams of empty-eyed demons with sharp clicking pincers and spindly limbs to chase him awake mere minutes later.

Bull grits his teeth and tries to sink into sleep once more, running through the old Qunari meditation drills - long, steady breaths. In. Out. Take note of every muscle, every nerve. Tense, and slowly release. Mark every sensation as it comes.

A familiar weight settles close, stubbornly negotiating its way into the comfortable nook between Bull's arm and his side, and Bull smiles to himself. "Cold, kadan?"

"Always." A curly head rests on Bull's shoulder. "Can't sleep?"

"How could you tell?"
"I always know." A long-fingered hand rests on Bull's chest. "We know everything about you."

Bull frowns. "Kadan?"

Low laughter, and the fingers on Bull's chest are too long, grasping and scrabbling at his skin, and Bull opens his eye to match gazes with a pair of empty eye sockets and a grin baring multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth-

Bull is too hardened a soldier to sit up and gasp, far too conscious of the deadly necessity of sleeping quietly no matter the terrors the night might bring. But he does waken instantly, his eye flashing open, and he digs his hands into the sleeping rolls beneath him as if he can maintain his grip on this waking world by the fingertips. As if the waking world is any safe haven from demons now.

There's a shuffle of movement to Bull's left.

Bull lifts his head slowly, his vision still clearing, and frowns.

Another elf is in the process of settling himself next to Bull, rolling out a similar sleeping mat to the ones Bull was provided with. It's been a whirlwind of a night, but Bull knows he hasn't encountered this elf yet. Bull would remember the elf's striking looks - small in stature and frame, but with years of dense muscle packed under dark, freckled skin. The elf wears his curly black hair short, revealing a broad, sharply square-jawed face, high cheekbones, and keenly angled dark eyes under thick brows.

Well, one dark eye. The other is half-blind and milky, surrounded by a mass of scarring. His brow bone and cheek bone - fuck, a good portion of the right side of his face - looks almost flattened, crushed. The point of his right ear has been entirely lost, leaving the clean knife work scars of a healer trying to cut away damaged tissue to save the rest. His right arm ends in a hook, his right leg a complicated-looking prosthetic of polished wood, leather, and iron.

Yeah. Bull would have remembered seeing this guy.

"It was not my intention to wake you," the elf says softly, so softly he might as well be speaking in an undertone, a whisper, but Bull can hear him clearly all the same. "Apologies."

"Haven't really been sleeping," Bull grunts, his voice booming in comparison despite Bull's efforts to speak quietly.

The stranger nods, settling himself on his sleeping roll. He pulls a stuffed cloth sack around and starts removing various items - a thick water skin, a few odd metal instruments, some chunks of wood, a blanket.

Bull hears the unmistakeable huff and rustling of Scàth rising from her sprawl. The enormous wolfhound circles Bull once, as if checking him over for any suspicious behaviour or scents, then plods over to the new elf's sleeping roll. She settles herself behind the elf with a jaw-cracking yawn, and the elf smiles and leans back against her flank.

Maybe because Bull's just that fucking exhausted, or maybe because Mahanon really does look so much like his mother, but only now does Bull start to recognize the dark freckled skin, the curve of the stranger's smile. "You're one of Mahanon's dads - uh, fathers, aren't you?"

The elf closes his dark eyes. "He called me babae, once." He looks up. "You can call me Diemne."

The elf - Diemne - smiles again, a quiet humour twisting the corner of his lips, seeming to imply a deeply sarcastic "You don't say?" without uttering a single word.

"One of the farmers, Bernid, said a member of Fionn's family nearly fell to darkspawn a few years back," Bull says, pushing himself up with a wince. He's been lying here long enough for his aches to settle deep and his burns and gashes to pull on fresh scabs. "Not to be blunt. That was you?"

"There was a very large ogre," says Diemne, shrugging. "I am not a very large elf. A lucky one, though." Diemne tilts his head. "You have seen war yourself, Iron Bull."


Diemne pushes the waterskin towards Bull. "A warrior's rest is rarely easy, especially when alone."

Bull takes the waterskin, watching Diemne carefully from the corner of his eye. So far, the elf strikes Bull as an almost comical opposite to Mahanon's mother - warm and welcoming where Taoirse is cold and awkward, soft-spoken and gentle where Taoirse is sharp and gruff.

Bull considers himself a good judge of character by nature, trained and honed to a precise expertise over years of Ben Hassrath conditioning. To say Diemne is more dangerous than Taoirse, or Taoirse more dangerous than Diemne, would be inaccurate. Different tools for different purposes.

There is something unsettlingly quiet about Diemne. Calm. Serene and deadly, like doldrums on the open ocean.

Bull nods his thanks to Diemne and drinks from the waterskin without hesitation. It's thick, brackish liquor, like they've managed to ferment an entire pine tree into pungent sap. The taste is strong enough by far to cover any poison, if that's the way Diemne plans to take things.

Diemne waits for Bull to take a few good swigs before reaching between them, his good hand outstretched.

Bull passes Diemne the skin, and Diemne takes a drink himself before capping the skin and placing it equidistant between them both. Unsettling, still, but Diemne's smile extends to the crinkles of his eyes, leaving Bull with the distinct impression that he's managed to pass some sort of test.

"How is he?" Bull asks quietly.

Diemne doesn't answer right away. He shakes out his right arm and starts to unscrew the hook from the rest of the prosthetic. As Bull watches, Diemne adjusts the straps, puts the hook aside, and screws one of the strange metal instruments in its stead.

"Strong," Diemne says eventually. There's no apologetic inflection in his voice to suggest any significant time has passed between Bull's question and Diemne's answer. "I remember my son as a shadow, a wisp of smoke who I feared might fade in sunlight or be blown away on the wind."

Diemne takes up a chunk of wood that Bull sees now is half-carved, the rough outline of winding knots scratched into its surface. "There is an elf in my aravel who wears my son's face and all the years we lost between us, and that elf - even now - is solid in a way I cannot put into words, not in the Trader's tongue. Perhaps it is fading realm of memory that fails me, but I wonder. Was my shadow child solid when he met you, Iron Bull?"

None of this answers Bull's question, not really. An idiot might wonder if the ogre's attack so many years ago might have left Diemne short a few crucial brain bits.
But for the most part - well, in this at least, Bull's not an idiot. The elf sitting across from him is clearly as sharp as his tools, and this is a conversation taking place entirely on Diemne's own terms, and in his own time.

"Yes and no," Bull says slowly. Not because he's trying to be a jackass, though if Diemne wonders at his intentions with the vague answer, the elf doesn't show it. "I met... well, honestly, I found Mahanon right after he took out a dozen jumped-up humans to save his own people, so. Not exactly the meekest guy." Bull looks down at his hands, and he can't help but huff an odd chuckle remembering how he'd expected Mahanon to be some kind of cold-hearted tactician behind an innocent face. Yes... and no. "Everyone in my company gets nicknames. His is 'Mouse.' Believe me, he earned it."

Diemne's lips quirk. He works his new prosthetic attachment - a fine blade, Bull realizes - into the carving in his other hand, and either the wood is softer than it looks or there's something really fucking weird going on, because the sharp tool carves a fluid swath through it like it's a piece of ripe fruit. "Is he still 'Mouse' to you?"

"To the others, he is," Bull says, and now his voice is too fucking soft. Too raw. He takes up the skin of liquor. "Not to me."

Diemne blows a few curls of wood from his carving, his good ear drifting back. Bull isn't sure how to take this - whenever Mahanon's ears press back, Bull knows to brace himself for the lightning strikes to follow - but after a moment Bull realizes it might just be the Sliabh equivalent of a pensive frown.

"Mahanon of Clan Lavellan was declared lost at the most recent Arlathvhen," Diemne says. His tongue is slow and careful on Mahanon's name, pronouncing it without the Sliabh inflection. "'Lost' can mean many things. If a clan member died dishonourably, a clan might declare them 'lost' to preserve their memory. If a clan member is taken by slavers, 'lost' can cover a clan unwilling to sacrifice others to recover them. 'Lost' also means 'departed,' for good or bad. It is a nothing word, and there are those happy to spin sails from nothing."

Diemne smooths a thumb over the carving, peering closely at the wood. Bull gets the sense this elf doesn't talk much. So Bull drinks and says nothing, allowing Diemne to take a breather before continuing.

"The Lavellans are a social clan." Diemne's tone is still soft, still perfectly congenial, but Bull doesn't think he's imagining the slight touch of an edge to the elf's words now. "The 'lost' First of Clan Lavellan encountered others over the years, scant meetings and moments that left room for plenty of... opinions. We heard that this First was a known malcontent; a coward, a malingerer. Selfish and withdrawn. Kinder voices suggested he was perhaps just a bit shy, but they agreed he was not fit to be Keeper. Few who 'knew' him were surprised that he had abandoned his duty. Not much of a loss at all for our people, this 'Mahanon,' not really." Diemne glances at Bull. "There was even a whisper that he had turned mercenary, but this was decided to be a wild rumour. The life of a mercenary would be an odd choice for one so... meek."

Bull doesn't know what to say to any of this. He can only imagine how Mahanon's face might shutter and close off to hear his worst anxieties confirmed, with regards to how his departure was discussed by his people.

At least Mahanon wasn't exiled. Cold comfort, and Bull doesn't offer it aloud.

"The loss of Mahanon of Clan Lavellan was not our loss," Diemne continues, returning to his careful carving. "We mourned Mahànon of Clan Sliabh ten years before, did we not? The Keeper
of Clan Lavellan owed us no apology, owed us nothing, but I know the look of one who wears the
guilt of failure. She was sorry in ways she could not say, and we were hurting in ways we could not
say." Diemne turns his carving over. "Then one morning we woke up to find a Lavellan in our
camp wishing to speak to the parents of this wandering 'Mahanon.' We were told for the first time
that our son was no coward, and that he had not run off on an idle whim."

"Was that Alaine?" Bull asks, thinking of how fondly Mahanon tends to speak of his "cousin" and
closest friend amongst the Lavellans.

Diemne blinks. "I do not believe so. This was a man, a father himself - 'Tashen,' if I remember
right. His children ascended to First and Second after Mahànons left. Tashen assured us that
although there was little love lost between them during Mahànons time with his clan, he would not
hear a word spoken against our son, and we were not to hear it either."

The name isn't familiar to Bull, but the shape of the circumstances are. Mahanon seemed to think
that particular family hated him for taking up space where their children should be, potentially
forcing a separation like the one Mahanon had suffered himself as a child.

"So that is where my knowledge ends, Iron Bull," Diemne says. "My shadow parted from us and,
from what we heard, faded as we feared he would. Then he left his clan and became... someone
else? A stranger, of some kind. Solid, as I said."

Diemne puts the carving aside and slips a hand into his tunic, pulling out Mahanon's silver dagger
blackened twice over, now, from the magic he channeled during his fight with Arvaariss and the
smoke of the fire that nearly claimed him tonight.

"If you cannot sleep, then I would ask a boon of you," Diemne says, placing the dagger on the mat
before him. He looks up at Bull. "In our clan, it is a terrible curse to assume an unknowable
certainty aloud, for Fen'Harel is far more forgiving of dreams than plans. We would not say, 'I will
lay out the washing tonight, for surely tomorrow will be warm and dry.' So I will not say my
expectations, only my dreams that there will be a great many stories shared amongst us... all of us,
over the coming days. For tonight, however, I would be grateful if you would tell me a little of your
'Mouse'."

Bull chokes out an odd laugh, his breath catching on the raw sore spots in his chest from the
smoke. "Sure, but - shit, where do I start?"

"Anywhere you would like," Diemne says.

Bull rubs his temples. "Right. Um, fuck, okay. How about this: Me and my Chargers - my mercs
and I - we were out on this weird job by Bastion, north of the Marches? And we see that
someone's gone and brought down half the mountain on the Baron's private guard...

Time feels suspended in some way as Bull recounts stories of Mahanon's exploits over the years.
He weaves little notes on Mahanon's character throughout the tales: Mahanon's endless obsessive
hunger for books and libraries, which causes Diemne to quirk an eyebrow the way a more obvious
man might let loose a snort or a knowing snicker. How terrible Mahanon is at cards despite how
quick he is with math, puzzles, logic. The pranks Mahanon has pulled - and has had pulled on him
over the years.

Bull soon realizes that many of his anecdotes revolve around various hard fought battles and
dangerous adventures he and Mahanon have engaged in since meeting one another. A typical
mercenary life, of course, despite how atypical their lives often seem to get. But it's after the
second dragon hunting saga that Bull starts to wonder if "and that other time we all almost died"
might not be the best thing for a concerned parent to be hearing about their beloved long lost son.

"I promise all that's just a... special occasion thing though," Bull finishes with a cough. "Dragons, I mean. Usually it's a bit more - I mean, the Boss does our sumskeeping for us, so we all try to keep him very safe, promise. As much as we can."

Diemne raises his thick brows, but he smiles all the same. "I am well aware of the dangers of the world, Iron Bull. It is... surprising, not upsetting, to hear that our son has found he has a warrior's heart alongside his gentle soul, and has faced the dangers of a warrior's life." Diemne takes up Mahanon's silver dagger, inspecting the blackened hilt and blade. "Was this from a dragon, then?"

Bull fights a wince. "Uh, nope. A Qunari reaver, actually."

Diemne looks up, his good eye sharp. "Like yourself?"

"Sort of. Mahanon... fought the guy without magic, and won." Bull looks away. "He shouldn't have had to do that, but - your son is a damn impressive man, is what I'm saying."

"Your... hmm. What was the phrase?" Diemne puts a hand on his own chest.

"Kadan," Bull says.

Diemne nods. "Your kadan. As I said, he has a warrior's heart." Diemne smoothes a thumb over the blackened silver knots of the dagger. "And you have his."

"We made an agreement that he wouldn't get tangled up with anything the Qun asks of me going forward," Bull says firmly. "Like I said, he shouldn't have had to fight that fight."

"He was protecting you?"

"I - yeah."

"You seem sorry for it."

"Of course I am," Bull says. He scrubs a hand over his face, forgetting his scrapes and burns, but the sting helps to ground him a little. "Honestly, if I thought it would undo any of it, if I thought it would help, I'd start off every morning apologizing for the shit I've dragged him into. But that doesn't help, and I know he won't hear it."

"Perhaps because it sounds like Mahànon was not 'dragged' anywhere he did not wish to go."

"Alright, fair point - I don't know what he was like as a kid but he's stubborn as a rock some days."

"Ah. That would be Taoirse's blood in him."

Bull smirks at that, but his smile fades. "You said he's changed, and... he has. Even from when I first met him." Bull looks down at his hands. "You're right, of course the world is dangerous. And there are things we're capable of doing to survive and protect people we care about. But finding out what you're capable of firsthand... not everyone winds up having to do that. I never wanted him to have to do that."

"You saw a little shadow and feared he might fade in the sunlight?" Diemne says. "A wisp of smoke that could be blown away by a strong wind?"

"Maybe," Bull says. "I knew from the moment I found him that he has a ruthless side, but it hurts him to use it. I didn't want him to hurt for me. I still don't."
Diemne nods very slowly, taking up his carving again. This time, however, he lets his hands fall into his lap after a single smooth slice, his gaze softening into something distant and distracted.

"Mahànon is - was, at least, but in many ways from what you've told me, perhaps still is - very like his other father, Fionn," Diemne says. "Gentle-hearted. Uncertain of himself. Too many books." He quirks an affectionate smile. "His mamae's face, his babae's laugh, his da's heart. We used to say that. Hmm."

Diemne puts the carving aside and picks up the liquor skin, nearly draining the rest of the contents in a long swallow.

"Fionn was apprenticed to a wealthy merchant as a sumskeeper many years ago," Diemne says. "He was a city elf, Mahànnon might have told you. He still does not speak much of his upbringing. His apprenticeship was... well, it was more like servitude. He never made much coin for himself, he was subject to his master's whims and tempers, and the very worst part was he was so very grateful for it all. He was travelling, he was out of the alienage, he was making some personal coin, learning, meeting people... yes, he was very grateful.

"The merchant would travel the forest road, and we knew of him. Our shem'len allies would whisper of his rudeness. He was too craven to dare trespass into the trees, but he would show his disrespect in other ways. None of our People would trade with him, and he was very angry that he could not buy rare Planasene goods. He started sending Fionn out on his own to some of the smaller homesteads, thinking an elf would have better luck buying from elves, no matter how wild or stubborn."

Diemne offers Bull the liquor skin, indicating for him to finish the rest. Bull does.

"I met Fionn at this time, after he made some friends amongst the shem of the forest. He had a gentle nature, a quick mind, and the eyes of a man who had every excuse to become cruel, but wanted nothing more than a reason to be kind. He sometimes spoke of running off into the woods with me and meeting my bonded partner, my clan, perhaps staying in the heart of the forest for good. I said he was welcome to. 'But no,' Fionn would say, 'I cannot. I could not betray my master after all he has done for me.'

"Mahànnon asked once when he was very small, I don't know if he recalls - but he asked why his da's back was covered in ridges. He could not yet recognize them as scars, you see. Fionn said they were from another life outside the forest that he no longer cares to remember. The work of his kind master, of course, and yet at the time there was nothing anyone could say to make Fionn understand that his master was no friend of his, even when the beatings nearly killed him.

"Well, one day Fionn refused to shortchange traders from our clan as his master directed him to and returned with less coin than expected. The merchant he served thought it would be clever to leave Fionn beaten and bleeding a few steps into the forest. Fionn, still desperate to believe that he had not wasted his loyalty on a cruel man, thought that this was perhaps the merchant's attempt to pass him over to us for aid. The truth is that many people abandon what they wish to hide or simply no longer want a few steps into the forest, believing that no one else would dare venture into the underbrush for fear of the People.

"Fionn eventually woke up to find himself safely healing in one of our clan holdings. We told him we found him in the forest. He asked where the merchant was. We said he was last spotted heading west and would not be returning. This was true. The merchant was heading westward to the next inn, no doubt confident that if Fionn were to return, it would be with the coin he felt he was cheated of in his last transaction. And I knew the merchant would not be returning from the shadows of the trees where I watched my hound rip him apart and devour him living."
Diemne smiles, as calmly and gently as he has all evening. Scàth curls closer to the elf in her sleep, her shaggy tail twitching.

"My people love deeply, Iron Bull," Diemne says. "Fiercely, and without mercy. And I am glad in some ways that Mahànnon is a little less forgiving than his da. I do not regret what I did for Fionn, and I doubt my son regrets anything he has done for you.

"Yes, my son is changed, and you have had a hand in changing him, as he has had a hand in changing you. That is the nature of bonding." Diemne inclines his head deeply. "I am far more grateful for the love you have shown him than saddened by the risk of it, and if I am sad it is only as a father who missed watching his son grow into such a remarkable man."

Bull, unsure of what else to do, inclines his head as well.

Then, softly, Bull asks again, "How is he?"

Diemne puts his hand on Scàth's flank, tangling his calloused fingers in her shaggy black fur.

"He is with Taoirse and Fionn, and he is still fighting," says Diemne, suddenly sounding far older and far more tired than he has all evening. "I am told that my bondmates sat by my side in ethamin sumeill'lath for over a week before I woke up, and I was far more likely to die than live. I was grateful, but I never understood the strength that must have taken until tonight."

Bull stares at the weave of the sleeping roll beneath him. The Sliabh liquor is easing his aches and calming his thoughts a bit. He'll probably have a more successful go of it if he tries for sleep now.

"Hey," says Bull. "Wanna hear about the time your kid nearly got us all arrested in Val Foret after getting himself accidentally locked in the library overnight?"

Diemne looks up, startled out of whatever dark thoughts he'd lost himself in, and smiles. "Yes, I would like that very much."

- It was only by chance that Mahanon managed to find the girl at all.

He was ducking down, trying to find clean air under the smoke and ash to breathe to clear out the black spots overtaking his vision, and there she was. Crouched under a straw bed that was already starting to smoke, embers drifting into rough blankets that looked seconds from catching alight.

"We-" Mahanon tried, but his throat was half closed-over and his mouth sticky and dry. The girl was paralyzed with fright, and Mahanon was sure his wild hair, enormous flashing eyes, and rough, charred looks were not helping matters.

There was a sudden billow of hot air against Mahanon's back, hot enough to startle a pained hiss from him, and he looked back to see flames utterly consuming the path he'd taken from the entrance.

No time. Mahanon reached under the smouldering bed and pulled the girl out by her arms, ignoring her frightened wails and attempts to squirm away from him, and wishing dearly (not for the first time) that he had Bull's physical strength. The girl had wrapped herself tight in an old cloak despite the heat. With a croaked-out apology, Mahanon tore the cloak off from around her shoulders and channelled as much cold magic as he could muster into the thing, pulling what little moisture was left in the air to make it damp enough to hold the spell.
“Is there a back door?” Mahanon coughed, draping the cold cloak over the girl's head and around her shoulders. His voice wasn't much more than a desperate whisper. "We need another way out, da'len."

"Da said I should hide," the girl wept.

Mahanon choked again, this time on half a sob, but grit his teeth against the guilt and grief and said, "He told me to come get you. We can't go out the front."

The bed finally burst into flames, fire spreading to the walls and floors, and it was becoming so very difficult, so very impossible to breathe...

Mahanon fished out the crystal Dalish gave him a few Satinalias past and lit it, pressing it into the girl's hands. The room was rapidly becoming an oven, and there was no time at all to continue negotiating. "Come on!"

Mahanon bundled the girl forward and out of the room, back into the hall, eyes streaming and stinging as he looked about for an exit. The fire was still spreading to the other end of the house, but there were encouraging pockets of shadows to chase. If Mahanon wasn't mistaken the smoke seemed to be billowing down the corridor - perhaps towards an exit, an open window, anything...

They only took a few steps when the ground shook and a hot roar bellowed out from behind them. Mahanon yanked the girl aside inches from a rage demon's swipe, throwing her forward to free his hands for his staff. He spun on his heel, trying to toss up another wall of ice, but only pulling a whisper-thin lattice of frost from the parched air that quickly melted under the heat of the flames.

The demon reared back, then surged forward with a victorious howl.

Suddenly the world came crashing down on Mahanon's head, or so it felt. There was a rain of sparks and wood, an explosion of pain as Mahanon was slammed to the ground under the weight of the collapse and smacked his head hard on the rough floor. For a moment, there was only an overwhelming, numbing blackness.

A piercing scream brought him back moments later. That, and the agony of his leg, crushed under... something, some mass of burning timber Mahanon could barely see through his smoke-stung eyes.

The collapse had, helpfully, smothered some of the flames, but that wouldn't last for long. The girl was at his shoulder, shaking him, starting to cough through her wheezing sobs.

The smoke. Yes, they had to go. Mahanon put his palms under him, forced himself up, and tried to pull himself out from under the debris.

Pain shot up his leg straight to his spine like daggers, nearly taking Mahanon under into the darkness again.

Mahanon struggled to find purchase on the wood flooring beneath him, kicking to free himself before leaning over and tossing bits of wood and roof thatching aside to see what was trapping him before he finally saw it - the thick, massive support beam of the house, pinning him in place. He wouldn't be able to lift that alone on a good day.

Stuck. Stuck, and with the fire creeping ever closer.

The girl was still there, too close, shining the crystal this way and that, crying out for her father.
Mahanon gasped for air and inhaled only smoke and ash, struggling to think, to breathe. Stupid. This was all so terribly stupid.

He searched his pockets, his satchels, his belt, a few potions and poultices falling out around him. Mahanon uncorked a lyrium draught with shaking hands, forcing himself to swallow it down and barely managing not to choke in the process. He touched the girl's cloak to give it a little more dampness, a little more chill, steam rising from the old cloth in a drifting haze.

Then his dagger. Mahanon unsheathed it and pressed the familiar silver knots to his lips with a short prayer, a plea, and passed it up to the girl hilt-first.

"Run," Mahanon said, his vision blurring. "Get out, get to the trees if you can. Find." he broke into a hacking cough. "Find someone big to look after you. Don't wait on me... or your da. Understand?"

She didn’t reply, only stood there and stared.

The collapsed pile of timber shifted, some delicate part of the debris giving way, slamming more weight down on Mahanon's leg. His shout of pain came out utterly voiceless, choked by smoke. Desperate, he gave the girl a hard shove. "Go!"

This prompted another broken wail from the girl that tore at Mahanon's heart, but the push seemed to wake her up. Finally, finally she turned away and fled.

Mahanon watched the girl go by the light of his crystal, the shape of her becoming a blurry orb in the shadows, then disappearing - perhaps into another room, down another hall, out a door or a window, Mahanon could only hope.

There was still some lyrium in Mahanon, and he was not dead yet. He took a healing potion and turned to the matter at hand.

Mahanon tried to lift the debris with force magic - far from his most proficient art, but occasionally... sometimes, every once in a while, he would get lucky, and something would click. He just needed an inch or two.

He felt the pressure on his leg abate ever so slightly, the wood groaning a loud protest at being pulled by opposing forces. Then the magic hit something it could not move and slipped. The beam smashed down again. Mahanon retched in pain, coughing up an ugly glob of sticky grey muck in the process.

It wasn't just the beam, then. Something must have fallen on the house.

Mahanon blasted at the beam a few times, more from agonized frustration than strategy. This caused another painful shift, and the beam was left otherwise whole.

Panic overwhelmed him as the air thickened and became hotter, drier. The thought of burning alive, pinned here and thrashing like an animal in a trap - Creators, Mythal, no, he could not die that way, he couldn't-

Mahanon tossed and kicked, stabbed his staff blade into the wood again and again before going at the beam with his bare hands, ripping skin and fingernails and doing absolutely nothing, nothing at all to get himself free, only gasping in lungful after lungful of that awful smoke and releasing it in curses and prayers, pleading, begging...

His vision greyed out, ears ringing, and he fell back into that awful numb place again, barely
managing to shake himself conscious. Lying flat on the ground, he could hear the oncoming crackle of flames, could feel the building heat, even as he slapped at his chest in a senseless attempt to draw air into his stifled lungs.

He thought about cutting off his leg. Truly, he should have thought of that first. But Mahanon knew he did not have the strength or space to gain enough momentum to amputate a limb with his staff blade, and would likely only result in cutting some crucial artery and bleeding out on the floor while the fire overtook him and the smoke flooded his lungs.

Burning, or drowning. Those were his choices now. There was some kind of parallel in that, wasn't there? Something from one of his books...

Mahanon's ear gave a listless flick, and he thought he could hear horns - not just any horns, but the ghostly call of a distant memory, fireflies and narrow paths through the trees, and People who spoke his language and called him... it was just a bit different, a slight lift of the breath, what they called him...

Drowning would be far better than burning. Mahanon opened his mouth wide and sucked in as much smoke as he could before his body convulsed and rejected the fumes, wracking his body with violent hacking and coughing.

Again, then. He would do it again and again until the numbness took him under, and then he wouldn't have to struggle, wouldn't feel any pain-

No. No, that wasn't who he was. Right?

No, of course not. He remembered - Mahanon could remember crawling up a gravel path with his bare hands, beaten bloody and broken in every way imaginable, knowing his people would not be coming to save him. Long ago, years ago, he had crawled past the point of blindness from the blood loss, crawled into the bushes with absolutely no sense or hope of rescue.

And then Bull had found him. Of course he had.

Mahanon curled around himself, covering his nose and mouth as much as possible.

There was nothing else Mahanon could do to save himself, and it was not fair to expect Bull to find him again. He truly hoped Bull was far away and safe, far from smoke and flames and demons - Creator, his poor vhenan, who feared so little and feared demons so badly...

It was not hope or expectation, but almost... almost something like a courtesy. Just in case. Just in case, on the off chance Bull would try to come and find him, or anyone for that matter, Mahanon wanted to make the effort worth their while.

He struggled to keep his eyes open, struggled for every aching breath, woozy from pain and the rising heat and the smoke, everywhere the smoke and ashes, and he remembered - Bull had shouted, told him to stop when Mahanon bolted from him to chase the cry of a scared little girl, and that might have been the last conversation between them.

If I saved her, then it was worth it, vhenan, Mahanon thought to himself, half-convinced Bull could hear him. You know you would have done the same. You and your soft heart. Ab'las, s'rannas vhenan, ma vhenan...

Mahanon dreamt that he could hear shouting, Bull’s voice again and again, and another, and the familiar howl of a Sliabh wolfhound, and the heat was no longer terrifying or blistering but warm like a summer's day, like a hot bath in winter, like two bodies sharing a single bedroll, like...
...like a fever, maybe, but a healing one. Like the weight of large furs wrapped tight around slim shoulders. Like the warmth of a caring hand on the brow.

Mahanon dreams he's a child again, lying in his family's aravel after some misadventure or perhaps fighting off an illness. His da used to read to him while his babae sat close and whittled and carved, both to watch over his son and because he liked to listen to Fionn's stories, no matter his teasing about the impractical nature of heavy-bound books for a nomadic people.

Taoirse would wander in and out with food and water and teas from the healer, quiet and cold, but she would tuck warm furs close around Mahanon's shoulders and would be the first to risk an illness by pressing her lips to his brow to check his fever, the first to suture and bandage any injuries. Mahanon quickly learned that his da would fret and his babae would try to reassure with easy humour and his gentle smile, but Mahanon would watch his mamae closely and read his condition from her response. If she seemed worried, he would worry. If she smiled, Mahanon knew he would be fine.

Mahanon drifts, coming back again and again to the dreams of his family aravel - less by sight than by touch and smell, imagining the weave of the blankets beneath his fingertips and the familiar scents of wolfhound fur, carved wood, bundles of parchment, herbs in drying bundles, smoked meats... he'd forgotten that, the savoury-sweet scent of smoked meats during the curing days, when his mother would be in and out of the sheds to prepare travelling food for their next journey to a new holding...

Mahanon knows these are dreams, because he is not a child anymore, and he is not a Sliabh anymore, not really. But the scents are so clear, and sometimes he hears whispers of his da's voice, his mamae, back and forth and hushed and gentle, but - pained, and unhappy.

Mahanon frowns, or tries to frown. He doesn't want this unhappiness. The dream is a good one, a soft one, a healing one. He wants his da to read to him, to hear his babae's quiet laughter. Not this strange, anxious muttering.

Someone says his name like a question. Louder, closer than a dream, maybe.

*No, no, I'm not ready to wake from this, thank you.*

Mahanon tries to sink back down again, down into the comfort of his memories, but it's too late. Awareness buoys him from his rest, dragging him up through dark and murky waters until he starts to break the surface and slowly trickle back into his waking skin.

The first thing that comes to Mahanon is the numb ache of softened pain. The strange drift of healing magic and potions, poultices, bandages, anything to soothe broken and battered flesh.

The dream lingers in the scents and sounds, almost drowned out by the irritating drag of every breath - so loud, so *fucking* loud and painful, breathing really shouldn't be so fucking difficult. His breath hitches as the ache in his chest compels him to stop to save himself some pain, but he cannot take in those familiar and comforting scents without breath. Mahanon hisses his frustration - hissing hurts far less than groaning right now, and he does not care if Bull makes fun of him for it.

*Bull. Creators, Bull.* The Chargers, and the demons - the little girl and the *fire-*

Mahanon's eyes flash open and he bursts up with a choking gasp, nearly smacking his head on the low ceiling above him before immediately falling back with another pained snarl, clutching at his
chest with bandaged hands.

Familiar voices, voices from Mahanon's dreams are speaking - excitedly, soothingly, in different tongues and dialects and Mahanon is dreaming, because he looks around as he pants for air and sees the stained old wood of his family's aravel, and the weave of blankets beneath him is the same, and the furs...

But the furs are smaller. The aravel is smaller. Or rather, Mahanon is bigger.

A hand on Mahanon's cheek gently turns his face, and though it's hard to focus his gaze Mahanon sees pale hair streaked with silver, and warm, clear eyes - always kind, always a little sad, framed by unfamiliar creases and lines of care.

Mahanon frowns again. Even frowning hurts, but the reality of the pain is dearly welcome, because... everything, everything will hurt so much worse if this turns out to be a dream after all.

"You're alright, da'len." The kind eyes fill, just a bit, but the creases curve into a smile. "Just breathe."

"Ma'shiral din'an, las var en'sal," a rough voice adds. "Mir da'len, g'ras vhenas'eth."

Mahanon lifts his head, his eyes meeting a gaze that is a perfect reflection of his own - colder, though, and stern, but there is a vast ocean of love behind them that Mahanon feels pulling at his heart like a tide.

"Mamae," Mahanon whispers, his voice a broken croak. He lets his head fall back, looking up into those kind eyes, that careworn face again, nearly lost as his vision starts to swim with building tears. "Da?"

A nod - yes, his da, Fionn, Mahanon's da, nods, stroking Mahanon's singed curls as his mamae rests her calloused palm over one of Mahanon's hands.

"Welcome home, Mahànnon," Fionn whispers.

Mahanon tries to smile for them, and he does. But the weight of so many years lost, so many shames and failures, so much fear and uncertainty - it all comes crashing down on Mahanon like a rockslide, like a cave-in, like a burning farmhouse roof. His breath catches hard, and a cough becomes a broken sob, and he covers his face with a bandaged hand and starts to shake with uncontrollable weeping.

"Da'len," Fionn murmurs, and Taoirse does the same, and the two of them wrap their lost son up between them and cradle Mahanon as close as the child he has grown terribly far beyond as he cries.

Chapter End Notes

Song rec: "Welcome Home, Son" by Radical Face (an orchestral version!)

LANGUAGE NOTES WILL BE EDITED IN... LATER

EDIT: LANGUAGE NOTES ARE HERE! SORRY FOR THE WAIT, HAD TO RUN FOR DINNER.
"Kost, maraas shokra." = "Peace. There's nothing to struggle against."

"Hamin'anseo, Scàth. Fair Bull'falon, las'eth." = "Rest here, Shadow. Watch friend Bull, give safety."

Ghibhàn = hee-VON, only the "GH" is... not quite an H, and the "BH" is not quite a V. For "GH," put your mouth and tongue in place for a hard "G", but don't touch your tongue to the top of your mouth. What comes out should sound a bit like a German "ich" and a bit like a "yuh". Same principle applies for "BH" - go for a B, don't quite connect it, get a soft V instead. So the name is almost like "Yvonne" but like. On Irish pronunciation hard mode.

"Ar'gà farraige mhór do var mhór'vhenallin." = "We need a great(large) ocean for our great(large) friend."

"Ma'shiral din'an, las var en'sal. Mir da'len, g'ras vhenas'eth." = "Your journey ends, granting us joy*(in triumph over loss). My child, come safely home."

Thank you Dragon Age devs for the absolutely shattering "enasal" as a specific word for the joy that comes from essentially finally catching a goddamn break. Very elf.
Chapter Notes

A short(ish??) chapter that took about a million years to write because wheeeeeeerreeee ufckajnsdkfjaf school.

NO SONG REC ON THIS CHAPTER because I decided to split it here instead of making one long fuck, both so I can reap the sweet sweet validation of posting and because it's DRAGON AGE DAY Y'ALL FUCK YEAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!

Thank you everyone so much for reading, I hope you enjoy this: what I decided to do instead of papers and studying for the final I'm taking in *checks clock* five hours. I love y'all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Diemne opens his eyes.

It's a slow dawn for the clan this morning. Most will sleep in, extending the night past the patterns of the stars to make up for time stolen by the crisis. Diemne himself has only slept for an hour or so. Likely less.

But he has a feeling.

"An understanding of the world." That's what his mother's clan called it. Like the tree shapers who mapped and tended the ancient paths through the forest, from the summer birches to the winter pines. Not magic, not really. A way of seeing. Listening.

It comes from different places with different shapes and sensations. Not worth describing overmuch. But Diemne has always felt this particular feeling like a small, steady drum beat under his breast.

It first pulsed, unformed and barely a whisper, a question more than anything else, at twilight in the late months of the harvest season over two decades ago. Diemne glanced at his bonded partner Taoirse, and he knew.

He told her, of course. And together they told Fionn. The pale elf's new vallaslin was still healing on his cheeks that day. Diemne recalls how the healing scabs cracked with how wide Fionn's eyes flared at the news.

They spent three days discussing that little whisper. That question.

The answer came nine months later near midsummer of the following year. The moment Diemne's child opened his eyes, that whisper became a drum song. Still quiet, always quiet, but steadily pulsing.

Diemne has felt that pulse quicken and skip, fall slow and even, and at times draw taut and far too thin. Diemne told himself it was distance that made the drum beat so weak, in those moments. A lie, of course, but some lies are worth telling and believing.
Diemne was not aware of that pulse at all hours of every day. He suspects if he were he would go quite mad. But every once in a while, over the past eleven years or so, he would take a moment and find his focus. Breathe. And there, quietly thrumming away, he would feel it.

Last night, for the first time, Diemne felt it stop.

Diemne does not remember what he did when this occurred, but he knows that he was on his knees, clutching at his chest with his good hand, and he remembers thinking that even after losing two limbs this loss, this absence was so much worse, and then-

It was like the first time, almost. Diemne remembers how calm it was in the moment when Mahànnon's eyes opened for the first time, and something caught like a fire in his chest.

This was similar, except - it felt like someone was there to blow on the embers, coax smouldering coals into fresh life. It was gone, and then it was there. Beating too quickly. An anxious, weakened flutter of a drum song, but it was there.

And now.

Diemne opens his eyes, because he knows his son's eyes are open. Just as he knows the grain of the wood he carves, how to coax the shapes he imagines into being just so.

An understanding of the world. Nothing more.

Diemne turns his head.

The Iron Bull's chest is rising and falling in slow, steady breaths. Asleep at last. There's a frown notched deep in the man's scarred brows, but he will not be dreaming. Diemne put enough peaceroot tincture in the resin wine to make certain of that.

Diemne's mouth twists, watching the qunari sleep. He knows little of the Iron Bull's culture, beyond the stories that drifted through the forest from Kirkwall and Fionn's books. If the Iron Bull were a Sliabh, or even just People, Diemne would not hesitate to hold him the way family hold one another in such times.

But Diemne does not need his sense of understanding to see the walls around the Iron Bull's heart, how the young man carries himself like a warrior twice his age.

Someone will be coming soon. Taoirse, likely. The Iron Bull will wake, as he is trained to, no matter how much peaceroot and liquor he's consumed. This is fine. It would not be kindness to let him sleep and keep him apart from the one person he might allow to comfort him a moment longer.

But for now.

Diemne trades a wry look with Scàth, who woke the moment Diemne did. The great wolfhound glances at the sleeping qunari, settles deeper into her paws, and closes her great amber eyes once more.

A few more minutes. A few more minutes of peace. Diemne can give the Iron Bull that.

- 

Mahanon's weeping quickly turns to wheezing.
He puts a hand on his chest with a choked, frustrated snarl, struggling to catch his breath. No matter how deeply he tries to breathe, his lungs don't feel properly full, not by half.

"Tish'n, tish'n," Taoirse murmurs, as Fionn echoes, "Easy, da'len. Slowly."

Mahanon grips the furs and struggles for control as his body spasms for air. What the fuck have I done to myself?

"Where is the-" Fionn's voice is as tight as if his lungs are rebelling right along with Mahanon's. "I thought I put it..."

Always the worrier, Mahanon thinks, fondly lightheaded, right up until Fionn shoves a bundle of rags directly into Mahanon's face.

For a very brief moment Mahanon wonders if perhaps this is all some sort of wild hallucination, and he's in the middle of being murdered.

Then he gasps in another breath, and something in the bundle of rags blasts through his mouth and nose straight into his chest. Ice cold, at first, then burning, finally cooling to a warm throb. It's not comfortable. Mahanon feels a bit like he's just gargled some of Bull's awful Qunari liquor. But his chest feels far more open, now, and his head starts to clear.

Fionn pulls the rags away with a relieved sigh. "Isuïl was right. Better?"

Mahanon nods, not quite ready for words yet. He massages his chest with bandaged hands, starting to take a slow stock of his injuries. Burns, yes, he's used to the feeling of burns, he's fought enough damned dragons over the past few years to become well acquainted with the sensation. Bruises from head to toe. His leg is aching fiercely, but he can't tell if it's fully broken or just badly crushed.

Fionn is still moving, setting the rags aside and turning back around with a cup in his hands. "Here, get this down."

Mahanon shakes his head - he's barely able to suck down air, never mind anything liquid - but Taoirse gives a gruff warning growl. As a child, there was never any arguing with that sound. Mahanon is wearily unsurprised to find that despite terrible amounts of time and distance, his mother's disapproval has the exact same cowing effect on him. He takes the cup from Fionn.

Mahanon stills his breath as much as he can and drinks, expecting water and surprised by the taste of some cooled herbal tea instead. He nearly spews out the first half-sip when his breath hitches involuntarily, but there's something in the tea that smoothes over his tongue and throat and saps away some of the pain and irritation.

"As much as you can, the healers said," Fionn says gently. "Taoirse, ir's n'mal-?"

Taoirse waves Fionn off, watching Mahanon keenly. It takes significant effort on Mahanon's part not to duck his head under the scrutiny. He's never forgotten the intimidating nature of his mother's stare; however, remembering is a far cry from experiencing.

But it's different, now. Not Taoirse's intensity, nor Mahanon's shyness, but maybe his understanding of it all. He's fielded other kinds of looks over the years since leaving the Sliabhs, other kinds of scrutiny. Measuring him up, staring him down, tilted in pity or the opposite angle in disapproval.
This isn't that. This...

Mahanon once saw a barn cat in a field with two kittens. He remembers thinking it strange, maybe a little funny, how seriously that cat sat by and watched the kittens at play. It was poised stock still aside from a twitching tail, ears flicking to listen for danger, narrowing its eyes at any passing butterflies that dared flutter too close to its oblivious kits. Fascinated by its own brood and fiercely protective all at once.

Mahanon meets his mother's eyes and manages a smile. She blinks as if startled to be noticed and looks away.

"Ir ghil's then..." Taoirse pauses, and clicks her tongue with a shrug. "Gach duine?"

"In mel'na," Fionn says, taking the cup from Mahanon and putting it aside. "They can wait. It's barely dawn, he needs more rest-

"I'm fine," Mahanon croaks, scowling as Fionn starts to tuck the covers over his shoulders again to coax him back down against the blankets. "I need to know what happened. The others - 'gach duine', when you say everyone, do you mean - are we at the holding, and the farmers - the Chargers, fuck-"

"Tish'n," Taoirse says again, lifting a hand. Mahanon realizes with a dimwitted thump that his mother, too, bears signs of a healer's work: bandages and dried salve flaking over shiny burns and scrapes. "He will not rest without answers, Fionn. And the big man will want to know."

"Big-" Mahanon sits bolt upright, scattering the furs again and ignoring his father's beleaguered sigh. "Bull? Mythal'enaste, is he-? Is he alright, is he-"

Mahanon's words split in his throat, and his questions scatter into violent coughing.

"I imagine this 'Iron Bull' will need his rest too," Fionn says firmly, determinedly pressing Mahanon back into bed. "It has been a very long night for all of us."

"The qunari is here for ethamin sume'il'lath," Taoirse says, folding her arms. "For Mahànòn. Not the hounds."

"I'm sure they can appreciate his company a little longer-"

"If Bull is here I want to see him," Mahanon says stubbornly, pushing himself back up again. "I have to know he's alright. Where is he?"

It's quiet for a moment. Taoirse stares at the ground with an odd smirk on her lips. Fionn stares at Mahanon.

Then, with a soft smile that tears at Mahanon's heart in a way he doesn't fully understand, Fionn says, "Your Trade speak is... so good now, da'len. Perfect, even."

Mahanon blinks.

"The annex is set for them," Taoirse says in Sliabh. To Mahanon, she says, "Your... 'Iron Bull' is alright." She pauses, and adds, "A good man."

Mahanon's heart lifts at this, but the relief of Taoirse's approval twists a bit when he realizes she's directed this comment more to Fionn than Mahanon. The pale elf says nothing, though his eyes flick to the side and he presses his lips tight together.
Taoirse stands to leave. Pauses. "Da'len, I should tell you. Your man matches you now."

Mahanon's ears flick off-kilter. "Match?"

"Mm." Taoirse touches her shoulder. "My hound bit him here during the battle. Not badly. But it will scar, probably, so."

"Why did-?" Mahanon starts, then chokes and slaps a hand over his own shoulder with an utterly mortified squeak. "Mamae!"

"I'm going to assume I don't want to know," Fionn mutters as Taoirse makes a noise that sounds eerily like a snicker before leaving the aravel. "Please lie down, da'len. Maker, it's enough that you've returned to us, no need to overdo it."

Still blushing fiercely, Mahanon forces himself back under the furs and allows himself to really get a good look at his da for the first time. It's still a struggle to believe any of this is real, that he's home and he's here, but in the end it's not the things that have stayed the same that bring the reality home to him, but what has changed.

Fionn still looks like Fionn, of course - same kind eyes, same cornsilk hair. Mahanon remembers realizing one day as a child that Fionn didn't really look like any other members of the clan. He was taller, paler, with shorter ears. Mahanon remembers, too, the first time he encountered a gathering of city elves with the Lavellans and recognized their shorter ears and flat feet from walking paved roads and thought of his da with a stab of homesick longing.

But there are changes to be found in Fionn. Lines around his eyes, his smile, creasing in his brow. Strands of silver mingling with gold in his hair - hard to pick out at first, then frightening in their abundance.

_The years must have been hard on him_, Mahanon thinks, remembering Bernid's awful stories of darkspawn. But - no, that's not all of it.

Age. Age, and time. It occurs to Mahanon that he doesn't know how old his da is exactly, but he figures the elf must at least be approaching fifty.

Fifty looks different to some Dalish than it does to most city elves. Mahanon knows this. But seeing it...

Plenty of things can be reclaimed, if one is stubborn and daring enough. But time, once stolen, is stolen for good. The loss is a bitter sting.

Fionn touches Mahanon's face with that gentle smile of his, tracing the curling lines of Mahanon's Lavellan _vallaslin_.

"I have spent years trying to imagine you as you are now, da'len. Grown, like this." Fionn's fingertips brush the crooked bridge of Mahanon's nose, the older elf's expression flickering as he marks the long scar curving up from Mahanon's jaw along his cheek. "I prayed for your safety and happiness every night, but..."

"Sometimes the two don't quite line up, da," Mahanon says, putting a hand over his father's. "Mamae and babae-" Fionn looks away and Mahanon inhales sharply, remembering what Bernid said. _Someone in Fionn's family_. "Babae?"

"He's alive," Fionn says quickly, which is - fuck, so much _worse_, that that's the best that can be said, and Mahanon feels his eyes widen. "No, da'len, he's alright. You'll see soon, he's just..." Fionn
sighs. "I'm making a mess of this, Creators. We had darkspawn in the forest after the Blight, I don't know how much you know-"

"I know," Mahanon says, closing his eyes briefly. "Cuimhne. The Cuimhne I remember."

Fionn nods, his expression troubled. "And others, but yes. She was... a good woman. It was hard to see that at the time." At Mahanon's questioning look, Fionn says, "We knew she was bound by clan law to bid us give you up, da'len. But it cast some shadows on our relationship with her. She understood. Those were not good years." Fionn shakes his head. "Your babae was badly hurt during a darkspawn attack. He's a craftsman, now. Vir Bor'ssan."

"'Bend but never break,'" Mahanon recites, reeling a little. His babae, putting aside the hunt?

"Where is babae now?"

"For all his endless patience, your babae is a restless man," Fionn says with fond exasperation. "Once we settled you in here he set about preparing a proper annex for you, and then, well. I believe he left to speak with the Qunari."

Mahanon frowns. He's not imagining it. Fionn's tone becomes distinctly cooler every time Bull is mentioned. "His name is the Iron Bull, da."

"I thought Qunari use titles, not names," Fionn mutters. "Though that would certainly be a strange title."

"Bull is - well, he's a bit different," Mahanon says, stung. "You don't like him."

"I haven't met him, da'len, so I don't truly have an opinion of the man," Fionn says, though he cannot seem to meet Mahanon's eyes. "Your mamae claims he saved your life, and he allowed Isuil to take his memories so he could accompany you here-"

"He did what-?!"

"so it certainly speaks well of him," Fionn continues, ignoring Mahanon's outburst. "I'm... hmm. I'm unclear on how the two of you.. met, exactly. Rumours and hearsay placed you as a mercenary, of all things, and now those rumours are apparently not at all unfounded-"

"He did save my life," Mahanon says firmly. "More than once. And I asked to join his crew. I chose not to return to the Lavellans."

"His crew. The crew he captains."

"Yes, and-"

"And you still work for him."

"No, I - well, I work with him, now."

"'For' him or 'with' him, I see a man who recruited you at your most vulnerable and - Maker, Mahânon, I never wanted you anywhere near that world!"

Mahanon stares. "What world?"

"My world," Fionn says, his voice uncharacteristically hard. "The world that takes, where people prey on one another and call it kindness, or love. I only ever wanted to protect you from it, da'len, we gave you up to protect you from it, and now..."
Fionn leans back and clasps at his fine hair, closing his eyes tight and struggling to catch his breath.

When Fionn opens his eyes again there's an exhaustion that Mahanon remembers seeing flickers of as a child. Only flickers, carefully contained and smoothed away with a quick smile, but Fionn is not smiling now. "Were you working with him or for him when he first approached you?"

"Da."

"You know what I'm asking, da'len."

Mahanon narrows his eyes. "I approached him."

Fionn searches Mahanon's expression for a long moment, lips tight, before looking away again. "We could not protect you. I could not protect you. And now there is a stranger in the holding who looks like a weapon and is of a culture that I know is trained not to love or feel, and I am told he has your heart?"

"And I have his," Mahanon says, lifting his chin.

"And what a heart it must be," Fionn says acidly.

Mahanon hisses and Fionn startles back. It's a Sliabh gesture, yes, but not one the elf is used to receiving from his quiet son.

"I have lived and fought by his side for years," Mahanon says, breathless with his hurt and anger. "You take one glance at him from a distance and - what, because he's qunari-?"

"I do not need to know him because I have met men like him," Fionn says, eyes blazing. "I do not need to see him any closer because I have seen you, and what those years with him you prize have done to you. You cannot tell me your scars are from your time with the Lavellans. Andraste, I saw your back."

Mahanon winces. The scars from his fight with Arvaariss.

Mahanon realizes, a bit sickly, that they must look similar to the scars he knows Fionn has. The scars from a past life Mahanon knows little of, but the details of which he's slowly pieced together after years in the wider, crueller world. My world, as Fionn put it.

Mahanon is angry, yes. Angry with Fionn, his da, and it hurts to be angry within the first scant minutes of reuniting. He can only remember being truly angry with his da once before, the last day they spent together before he was given up at the Arlathvhen. Anger that his da would not let him have his magic taken away by humans, as the other children assured him could be done.

Mahanon only really forgave Fionn when he learned what the rite of Tranquility actually entailed. It was a begrudging forgiveness, several years too late. It's frustrating to forgive a parent for being right, after all.

Harder, to forgive a parent for being wrong.

Mahanon supposes that most children come to a point in their lives when they see their parents for the people they are. He's tried to imagine them as such, over the course of their absence - much the same way that Fionn said he tried to imagine his son as a grown man, Mahanon suspects.

Mahanon is hurt, and he is angry. But he does not know how much time he has with with his da,
nor what the future holds for them, and he knows how the ghosts of a terrible past can cloud someone's vision of the present. He cannot fault his father for having his blind spots anymore than he can fault himself. Not without trying to help Fionn see, first.

"The scars... weren't his fault, da," Mahanon says slowly. "I don't know what you think happened, but that wasn't him."

"A better man would have protected you, no matter the cause of them," Fionn says bitterly.

"As you and mamae protected babae from his scars?"

Fionn rears back, stricken. "That's not-"

"It's the same thing! The exact same. You're not being fair to him, and I know you know that."

Fionn says nothing.

Mahanon takes Fionn's hands. Fionn's pained gaze fixes on the bandages.

"These were my choices, da," Mahanon says, and Fionn shuts his eyes. "The Iron Bull is a good man. I walk my own path, whether you or he or anyone else likes it or not. I chose him, just as I chose to leave the Lavellans, because I know he's right for me. Just as this life is right for me, scars and all."

A tear slips over Fionn's cheek, and for a moment, Mahanon suspects he and his da are dearly yearning for the exact same thing; for Mahanon to be small again, small enough to curl up against Fionn's legs by the fire or hide in the shadows of his trading cart. Back when the world was a distant dream beyond the close, dark quiet of the forest.

Mahanon has come home, but he has not come back. The wider world is something he brings with him wherever he goes now. He knew, somewhere deep inside himself, that there was no returning to the forest of his childhood, but that knowledge is not enough of a balm to ease the ache.

Finally, Fionn mutters, "He's too old for you."

"Da, he is not."

Fionn looks skeptical, but his lips twist into a forced smile that looks painfully close to a grimace. "You love him. I trust that you love him, and I must trust in your choice to love him, so I... suppose I must find a way to love him, too." Fionn narrows his eyes. "Liking him, however, will be another matter entirely."

"It might help if you try talking to the poor man," Mahanon says dryly.

"Perhaps," Fionn says, sounding utterly unconvinced. He relents under Mahanon's firm look with a sigh. "Perhaps you're right, da'len, I'm not being fair. I suppose I just thought... now that you're home, I had hoped-"

The aravel creaks, and Mahanon and Fionn both look to see Diemne step into the low-ceilinged quarters of the landship.

Mahanon's breath catches in his throat. Whatever he'd been imagining, he's not prepared for the sight of his babae - his strong, quiet babae - so brutalized. There's almost a childlike terror in taking in the masses of scar tissue, the prosthetic arm and leg. Another holdover from the naive expectations of his young mind, that his hunting parents, the warriors, were untouchable. That they
There are tears in Mahanon's eyes and he flushes with shame to feel them prickle at his eyelashes.
He blinks them away as he sits up and prays the love in his voice overwhelms the pain as he says,
"Aneth'ra, babaë."

Diemne inclines his head, the light catching on the mangled remains of his right ear. Mahanon
catches himself in a wince and schools his expression as best he can.

Diemne closes the distance between them, placing his hand on Fionn's shoulder. Fionn puts his
hand over Diemne's and leans into his side, gazing up at him with something like gratitude. Softly,
Fionn's distress eases in Diemne's presence.

Diemne tilts his head as he looks at his son, reaching over to brush a few stray curls from
Mahanon's brow with his hook.

"Ah, Mahànôn," Diemne says solemnly, shaking his head. "It pains me to see how the Creators
have seen fit to ruin your good looks with such ugly scars."

Mahanon stares at Diemne for a stunned moment before collapsing into startled gales of laughter.

"For the love of Andra - Andruîl, Diemne, he only just started getting his breath back," Fionn
groans.

Laughing hurts, and he is starting to lose his breath again, but Mahanon can't help it. This
exhausted, this overwhelmed, Mahanon suspects it's either laugh or weep at this point, he'd much
rather laugh.

"Would that I could give you what I have, da'len," Diemne says straight-faced, but he smiles after
a moment and leans down to press his lips to Mahanon's forehead. "I am glad to see you awake and
smiling."

"I'm glad to see you too, babae," Mahanon whispers, and what tears yet remain in his eyes are
happy ones. "It's been... a long road."

"So I have been hearing," Diemne says. He reaches into the folds of his tunic and produces a
familiar silver knife, examining it a moment before offering it back to Mahanon hilt-first. "Please
do not give this away to shem'len again, da'len, they're not accustomed to such craftsmanship. They
might cut themselves."

"It was the only thing I could think to do," Mahanon says apologetically, a wash of relief
overcoming him to have the knife back in his hand. He smiles up at his father. "Save tonight, this
has never left my side."

Diemne nods his approval. "I'm glad. A toothpick of such quality is a hard thing to find."

"Vhenan," Fionn sighs, as Mahanon wheezes out another few snickers, though it's clear Fionn is
trying hard not to smile.

And Mahanon has yet another realization - or rather, a new understanding, perhaps. The way Fionn
looks at Diemne is different from how he looks at Taoirse. The love is equally strong, but different
even so. Mahanon recognizes, now, that the kind of affection Fionn holds for Taoirse is likely
closer to how Mahanon feels about Alaine, or Dalish. When he speaks of Diemne, Fionn's voice
becomes soft and full, and now that Diemne is here... for a moment Mahanon almost smiles to
think there was a time where he wondered which of his two fathers - well, fathered him.
"Taoirse is... discussing things with the Cuìmhne," Diemne says delicately. "I assumed her success, so I have placed our guest in the annex. Da'len, if you wish to see him-"

Mahanon is already struggling to his feet, grinding his teeth against exhaustion and pain as he does so. Fionn makes a distressed sound, hesitating as if trying to judge whether to insist Mahanon stay down before ultimately deciding to help him up.

There's no putting any weight on his mangled leg, Mahanon quickly realizes. He balances himself on his other foot and hoists himself up out of bed with Fionn's help, and even that is enough to wind him entirely. He falls sideways into Fionn's shoulder, his head swims, and the world goes dark for a moment.

"Da'len-"

"I'm alright," Mahanon murmurs, straightening as best he can. "I'll be fine, promise."

Mahanon's vision clears, and he feels Diemne put his good arm around his waist to help steady him. Mahanon nods his gratitude.

Standing here, side by side, Mahanon and Diemne are eye-to-eye with one another. Eye to eye with his babae, his warrior father, who Mahanon often thought of growing up with the Lavellans and keenly wishing he were a few inches taller, a little broader in the shoulders, more like his parents.

Diemne is Mahanon's height. Possible a hair's width shorter.

Diemne raises his brows at Mahanon's scrutiny and flicks his good ear. Mahanon flicks an ear back at his father, and grins.

Though Mahanon has grown accustomed to the tents and inns of a mercenary life, he has certainly missed the beauty and ingenuity of Dalish aravels. The landships are partly the result of ages of craftsmanship and skill, partly magic, and every aravel tells a story of the family who owns it - sometimes spanning generations. Mahanon drinks in the familiar carved knots and swirls as Diemne and Fionn help him out of the narrow main body of the aravel, and then-

Mahanon's eyes widen.

The scents, the sounds, the aravel, and now the forest. His forest. The ground beneath his feet has the gentle give of layers upon layers of leaves and moss, better than any Orlesian carpet. It's a soft, quiet dawn, and those unfamiliar with the low light of the forest might yet mistake it for night, but Mahanon can see perfectly and without shielding his eyes from a bright sun's glare, can hear without being overwhelmed by noise.

The aravel sails are spun in his people's style and colours. His People. And there, the wolfhounds sleeping in a pack by Fen'Harel's paws, and even still now there are yet fireflies drifting through the last few minutes of the night before retiring for the day.

"Da'len?"

"I've missed this place," Mahanon whispers. He looks at Fionn. "I'm alright, just..."

"I understand." Fionn touches his brow to Mahanon's. "This place has missed you too."

Annexes of aravels are deceptively complicated mechanical constructions. The skeleton of an annex is built into the hull of the landship to be unfolded into a large tent frame when desired. A fully-expanded aravel often resembles something like a small house of weather-resistant fabrics.
and delicate-looking supports. Ironbark is the ideal, of course, for building the annex frames - lightweight and virtually indestructible.

Mahanon isn't terribly surprised to enter the annex Diemne assembled for him to find Bull awkwardly crouched, mindful of his horns as he examines the ironbark framework with his keen eye narrowed. But whatever fond recognition Mahanon feels in witnessing his vhenan at work is quickly overshadowed by his surge of relief, matched by a surge of distress as he takes in the layers of bandaging on Bull and the deep, haunted shadows in the qunari's face when he turns his head towards him.

"Ka-" Bull is saying, quickly cutting off into a pained "-ooof" as Mahanon breaks from his fathers and throws himself into Bull's arms, hugging him desperately close. It hurts, everything fucking hurts, but Bull is holding him just as tight and seems to care as little about the pain of it as Mahanon does. "Hey, kadan."

"Vhenan." Mahanon pulls away and takes Bull's face in his, desperately searching his expression. "The Chargers-?"

"Everyone's accounted for," Bull says, and Mahanon blows out a shaky breath. "A bit roughed up, though. Dalish got the worst of it, but the healer said she'd be okay. Rocky nearly lost his fucking fingers again."

"His fuses-"

"Yeah, I'll give him shit for him when I get back."

Mahanon frowns at that - "I?" Not "we?" - but Bull looks over Mahanon's shoulder, obviously mindful of their audience. "This, uh, tent thing. Your work?"

Mahanon follows Bull's gaze to see Diemne gently inclining his head. "We haven't used it in quite some time, but it is good to have space for new guests and new family."

Fionn, standing by Diemne's side, is examining the canvas flap of the annex entrance as if he's never seen the fabric before in his life. His lips go quite thin at the mention of "new family," however, and though his ears aren't quite as mobile as a native Sliabh's, they tilt back at an unmistakable angle.

Mahanon stares at his father until Fionn catches his gaze. The elf clenches his jaw and allows the canvas to fall away from his hands before turning and, with the determined courtesy of a lifelong merchant, offers his hand to Bull. "We've not yet met. Andaran atish'an. I'm Fionn."

"Bull," Bull says, keeping one arm wrapped about Mahanon's waist as he reaches up to take Fionn's hand and give it a firm, quick shake. "I'd stand but uh, I don't think that'd end well. You know." He taps his horns with an apologetic shrug.

Fionn smiles thinly. His face softens as he shifts his focus to Mahanon.

"Vir g'las, ma hamin 'tishan vhenan," Fionn murmurs. "Vir sumeil."

Mahanon takes Fionn's hand and squeezes it. "S'rannas, da."

Fionn hesitates a moment, but finally lets go of Mahanon's hand and steps back to Diemne's side. Diemne is watching Fionn with his usual affable, almost distantly amused expression, but there's something keen in his good eye that suggests he has some understanding of the conversation that might have taken place between Mahanon and Fionn prior to his arrival in the aravel.
"Isuil will likely be by later as part of their rounds, once they've recovered from the night," Fionn says. "Please rest in the meantime. If you have need of anything, well. We're here."

"Appreciated," Bull says, as Mahanon says "s'rannas" again.

Fionn stands there a bit awkwardly until Diemne takes his arm with a quiet murmur and guides him out, closing the canvas flap behind him.

"The fabric is spelled to keep sound in," Mahanon murmurs, tucking his face into Bull's shoulder and breathing as deep as his lungs will allow him. "Privacy isn't exactly prioritized among my people, but even we have our limits."

"Good to know," Bull says. "So no one can hear us out there?"

"Not unless you're really bellowing, no."

"Alright." Bull shifts, and in the dim light Mahanon can see him wince as the movement pulls on his injuries. "Your da pretty much hates me, huh?"

Mahanon sighs, pinching the bridge of his crooked nose. "I'm sorry-"

"One copper. Anyway, I get it. Honestly, my whole charm with a lot of nobles is how much they know bedding me will piss off their parents."

Mahanon snorts at that. "We're hardly nobles, vhenan."

"Nah, but your folks are... wary," Bull says gently. "It's okay, is all I'm saying."

Mahanon opens his mouth to respond but cuts himself off with a hiss when the tent suddenly floods with light. "Ow."

"Ah fuck," Bull mutters, twisting his hands around his glowing crystal until it dims to something more manageable. "Sorry, you might have your big elfy eyes, but I can't see shit in here. Just wanted to get us settled in properly."

Mahanon blinks spots from his vision as he and Bull disentangle themselves from one another to find and arrange the bedrolls and blankets laid out for them. The relief of seeing Bull and having him close again, though still strong, is no longer enough to push the pain of his injuries to the back of Mahanon's mind, and they both move in stilted motions to settle themselves in the nest of bedding.

"Here," Bull says once they're tucked in together. He twists the crystal until it goes dark and tries to hand it to Mahanon, who just blinks at him. "I gave yours away to that little girl, take mine."

Mahanon shakes his head and presses the crystal back into Bull's hand with a soft smile. "That's alright, vhenan. Maybe I'll finally convince Dalish to tell me how she makes them."

"She'll just pretend she doesn't know what you're talking about," Bull warns, but he tucks the crystal away. "You know what she's like."

"Mm, and then I'll find another one in my bedroll come Satinalia, so either way I'll be well looked after," Mahanon says. He rests his head on Bull's shoulder, mindful of the bandages. "The girl is safe?"

Bull doesn't answer at first, and when he eventually speaks there's an odd flatness to his voice.
"She's back with her people."

Mahanon closes his eyes. "Good."

Bull is quiet, and for a moment Mahanon thinks the qunari might have fallen asleep, until he says, "Can you promise me something, kadan?"

Mahanon frowns. "What?"

Mahanon feels Bull work his jaw before responding. "Don't... do that again. Please. Running off like that."

Mahanon lifts his head. Bull is still speaking in that strange, flat tone. "Bull, you know I can't promise that."

"Vashedan, Mahanon, I don't mean don't help people and I don't mean don't do dumb dangerous shit, that's basically half our daylight hours," Bull says. It's all very contained, all very even, but strained. "I mean, the sky ripped open and we were ass-deep in demons, and I had to choose between going after you or rounding up my Chargers. That kind of shit gets - well, it gets people killed. I never want to have to do that again."

Mahanon blinks. It's really very stupid, how surprised he is to realize that Bull is angry with him. "It was close, yes, but you shouldn't have had to come after me, it was just-"

Bull mutters a stream of Qunlat that Mahanon suspects are either prayers or curses, maybe a solid mix of the two. "I saw what was left of that house. If you try telling me that there was any way you could have taken all that shit on your own... kadan, I love that you like to test the odds, but not like that. There's being reckless and then there's just throwing your life away without thinking."

Mahanon tenses. "If I hadn't gone in, that girl-"

"Would have died. I know."

"-and she didn't-"

"But you did."

Mahanon sits up and stares at Bull, his chest aching in long, dull throbs.

Bull mutters a stream of Qunlat that Mahanon suspects are either prayers or curses, maybe a solid mix of the two. "I saw what was left of that house. If you try telling me that there was any way you could have taken all that shit on your own... kadan, I love that you like to test the odds, but not like that. There's being reckless and then there's just throwing your life away without thinking."

Mahanon tenses. "If I hadn't gone in, that girl-"

"Would have died. I know."

"-and she didn't-"

"But you did."

Mahanon puts a hand on his chest, dumbstruck. "How-?"

"The questionable healing practices of homoerotic Orlesian sailors, and I'm sure we'll be able to laugh about that at some point," Bull sighs. "It wasn't just 'close,' is what I'm saying."

Mahanon tries to remember... thinks he might remember, very briefly, in hazy flashes, fire and smoke and pain, and Bull's hands on him, a healing potion in his mouth and firelight glimmering off an arrowhead... "I'm sorry."

"Fuck, don't apologize for dying," Bull groans, his voice taking a hard, exasperated edge that
makes Mahanon flinch. Bull breathes, long and careful, and takes Mahanon's face in his hands. "I'm not your Chief. I can't order you around, and I don't want to. We're supposed to be partners, you and me, yeah?"

Mahanon nods.

Bull nods as well, watching Mahanon's face carefully. "I had to let you go to look after my people, and I lost you. We managed to haul the best possible outcome out of that fucking mess, but only by sheer fucking luck, and even then..."

Mahanon nods again, forcing himself to hold Bull's gaze even as every last nerve in him begs to duck his head and hide - not from Bull's words, nor his anger, but from Mahanon's own damn guilt.

Because Bull isn't angry. He's hurt. And that is far more difficult to bear.

Bull strokes his hands over Mahanon's curls and leans in close, touching his forehead to Mahanon's.

"You scared me, kadan," Bull whispers. "You scared me so fucking badly tonight. I'm not asking you to be safe, I'm asking you to work with me. The world has just gotten monumentally shittier and if we're ever in a situation like that again, I need us to be on the same page."

Mahanon closes his eyes tight, his face burning with shame. "You're right.Fuck, you're absolutely right. Vhenan, I'm so sorry."

"I know," Bull says. He kisses Mahanon's brow. "I'll take that one. Forgiven, kadan, always. Your heart was in the right place, even if your head wasn't. Or the rest of you."

Mahanon tilts his face to meet Bull's lips and goes easily when the qunari settles back and wraps him close in his arms, heartbeat to heartbeat.

"Do we know what happened, yet?" Mahanon asks.

"Just that the Veil's fucked," Bull says roughly, a sliver of fear touching the edges of his words. Mahanon presses closer to comfort him. "No idea how, why, or - fuck, where, for that matter. Your clan's First said it didn't start here." Bull twines one of Mahanon's curls around his finger. "I'll know more when I get to the next dead drop for sure. My folks will have sent out a primer."

"Any guesses?" Bull grunts out a laugh, but Mahanon traces the prickly point of the qunari's chin to silence him. "You always have at least a few, vhenan."

"Yeah, for sane shit. Real world shit, not..." Bull trails off, and Mahanon can imagine the pensive look he might be wearing in the shadows. "Shit."

"What?"

"Pretty sure the Conclave started up this week."

Mahanon inhales sharply and instantly regrets it, the breath stabbing into his chest like a lance. Even so, he chokes out, "All those - mages, templars - the Divine in one place, and-"

"Yeah, yeah," Bull says, patting and rubbing Mahanon's back as he struggles to regain his breath. "Hey, take it easy. Nothing we can do about it here."
"If it's-" Mahanon chokes off a wheeze with a frustrated growl. "If it's *that*, then - Creators, this is - so much worse than K-Kirkwall-"

"No shit," Bull murmurs. "Fuck, if it wasn't demons, I'd almost..."

Mahanon wipes his streaming eyes and forces himself to take steady breaths. His voice still comes out shaky and choked as he asks, "Almost w-what?"

Bull is quiet for a long moment, and is still quiet when he says, "I'd almost think my people were behind it."

That just about stops Mahanon's breath entirely.

Bull curls a little closer around Mahanon, and when he speaks next he's nearly whispering, his lips in Mahanon's hair as if hoping to conceal his words in the tangles.

"We learned ages ago during the first wars that having the best armour, the best weapons, the best fighters... it didn't mean shit. The home advantage is always more likely to win out in the end. That's why it's better to wait. Look for cracks. Make 'em bigger." Bull shudders. "Can't get a much bigger crack than a fuckin' rip in the sky."

"I suppose you can't," Mahanon says softly. "But like you said, Bull. Demons. They wouldn't, would they?"

"Nah, they wouldn't," Bull says, though he sounds only halfways convinced of his own words. "Still, this kind of chaos? It's exactly the kind of thing they... well, we've been waiting for, I guess."

Mahanon clenches his fists against Bull's chest, anxiety fluttering through him. War, and duty, and the Qun... ever since Val Chevin, Mahanon has tried so hard not to put these things too far from his mind. They're far too dangerous to forget or wish away, even as this thing, this love he has, this *life* he's built for himself with Bull has grown, blossomed, and set down roots too deep in his heart to pull up and resettle.

Bull is still Ben Hassrath. Qunari. Mahanon is not. And they both knew there would be another reckoning like Val Chevin and Arvaariss to contend with someday.

"You'd think I'd be used to things changing by now," Mahanon says. "Just when everything starts to make sense."

Bull rumbles deep in his chest, something like a sigh and a laugh all in one. "Aw, *kadan*, you'd get bored if it did, though. We both would." He tickles the point of Mahanon's ear and snorts as Mahanon flicks it away from him. "We're both a little fucked like that."

Mahanon tucks his head under Bull's chin, smiling a little in spite of his worries. "We would get bored, wouldn't we?"

"Oh yeah. We'd have to let Rocky blow something up just to make things interesting." Quieter, Bull adds, "There's gonna be a lot of hard choices to make over the next few days, weeks - fuck, *months* would be an optimistic cap. But... you've made me better, *kadan*. A better man. I hope you know that."

Mahanon closes his eyes. "You've made me better too, ma *vhenan."
They sleep through to the early afternoon when a touch of magic wakens Mahanon and alerts him to a presence at the mouth of the annex.

Mahanon lifts his head, leaning over to kiss Bull's cheek when the qunari groans at the disturbance. "Ab'las, vhenan. Hamin, hamin."

Mahanon is slow to rise and slower to move, forgetting the state of his leg and wincing with every awkward limping half-step.

He pulls the flap aside to see - well, it takes him a moment. He remembers a bright-eyed and mischievous youth and instead sees a grown elf with deep, starry eyes, exuding a confidence and power he does not recognize.

Not until their lips lift in a familiar, playful smile.

"Isuïl," Mahanon says, and offers the First a deep incline of the head. "Aneth'ra."

"Mahànon," Isuïl says, touching Mahanon's arm. "It has been many journeys since last we saw one another. Do you remember?"

"I do," Mahanon says. He drops his eyes, his smile twisting a little. "At the Arlathvhen. The last thing you told me was-"


Mahanon winces. "I was not... graceful in my response."

"Nor should you have been," Isuïl says. "I, too, was saying nothing. Only louder."

Mahanon laughs at that, the laugh catching in his chest and quickly turning to a cough.

Isuïl tilts their head in empathy. "That will get better, but it will never fully heal. Our cousins to the south see it in their tree shapers and hunters during the fire season. Smoke, cold, and damp will make it worse. There is medicine to manage it, but you will have to be careful. "More careful, in future."

"I've already been pretty thoroughly scolded on that matter, I promise," Mahanon says, wincing.

Isuïl's starry eyes crinkle in the corners. "I am no longer sorry, as I was when I saw you last. Only sorrowful for what you have lost, and overjoyed for what you have gained."

They glance past Mahanon into the annex where Bull seems determined to continue sleeping, though Mahanon has no doubt the qunari is listening to the conversation intently. Mahanon flushes a little and inclines his head again with a sheepish smile.

"I would like to tend to your wounds before I leave you both to your rest," Isuïl says. "And I would also like to prepare you, lethallin."

Mahanon frowns. "For what?"

Isuïl looks away, their smile fading into a more distant, troubled expression.

"We have stayed overlong in this part of the forest, and we are far too close to the shadows," they murmur. "We will be leaving soon. Very soon. As I tend to our people today I will determine for our Cuimhne how quickly we can depart without causing further harm and distress to our
wounded. A day or two, I imagine."

They return their gaze to Mahanon.

"There is much to discuss tonight," they say. "Our People, the forest... our world is facing the kind of danger one rarely sees twice in one age. There are powers rising that are beyond our memory, and we are all tied to their fates and decisions no matter our individual paths."

Mahanon looks down, thinking of Bull with a heavy heart, but Isuil touches the point of a thick finger under Mahanon's chin and lifts his face to theirs.

"Some people fly straight as an arrow through life, da'len," Isuil says softly. "Others plot their courses on a vast, free ocean. But you are and always have been a child of the forest; our lives are the work of forking branches and tangled roots and the constant heartache of changing seasons."

They place a hand on Mahanon's shoulder, tendrils of sprouts and vines stretching out from their fingers and curling over Mahanon's bandaged skin.

"We have a Keeper, lethallin, and we have a First," Isuil says. "By the laws of our kin and the Arlathvhen, we have room for one more. Another Sliabh with magical gifts would be a boon in this time, I am certain."

Mahanon's heart skips. "You mean-?"

Isuil's smile returns, and they nod. "If you would like to remain and become Mahanon of Clan Sliabh once more, you have a place and a home here amongst your family and People. Forever, if that is your wish."

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATION NOTES:

Tish'n = Peace, or "calm the fuck down Mahanon you have like one cubic centimetre of functioning lung space"

Ir's n'mal = Where is your...?

Ir ghil's then... gach duine? = I'll go wake/alert... everyone?

In mel'na = In a moment

Aneth'ra = Hello

Vir g'las, ma hamin 'tishan vhenan. Vir sumeil. = We'll go, rest peacefully love. We're close by.

Ab'las, vhenan. Hamin, hamin. = Sorry, love. Rest, rest.

Ab'las, lethallin. Malas am'lin ne vhenas. = I'm so sorry, friend/cousin. I hope you find a new home.
Bull emerges from the narrow footpath into the Sliabh glade running time calculations in his head with frustratingly incomplete numbers. No idea how long it will take to get back to the forest road, no idea how long it will take to make it to the inn, no idea what manner of bullshit they'll encounter on their way to the next town to slow them down....

At least all this uncertainty will make his report easier to write. Yes, easier not to have to account for a day spent off the grid, far from where he should be, for reasons that would tip the scales between Bull and his superiors in this never-ending dance of balancing duty with love.

Bull ducks under a low branch with a wince. The whole point of netting up his thoughts with math was to avoid these kinds of questions. The big ones. The hard ones.

He comes up from beneath the bough and nearly barrels into the pale elf crossing into his path from his blind side, both of them awkwardly stuttering in their steps to avoid a collision.

"Sorry," Bull grunts, his bad leg twinging. "Didn't see you coming."

Fionn's clear eyes flick to Bull's eyepatch, and he seems to chew through his words for a few moments before finally saying, "I thought Mahànon was with you."

"He was," Bull says. "He's a little ways back by the creek. Needed some time to think, you know?"

Fionn narrows his eyes. "He shouldn't be alone in his state."

"Yeah, that's what I said," Bull sighs. "But as he told me, he's got a crutch and his magic and he's in hollering distance. He's got a lot knotted up in his head right now. Believe me, when he gets like this it's best to give him some space to work out the tangles."

If anything, this makes Fionn's eyes narrow further. "I see."
It would be easy to pretend that the conversation is over. Easy for Bull to act like he doesn't see Fionn lining up his questions, carefully choosing his words. Easy to keep right on walking to find a friendlier reception elsewhere.

Easy, and if Bull didn't care so damn much, he might have been tempted by easy. But he does care. So he waits.

"I imagine Mahànon spoke with you regarding the clan's offer," Fionn blurts out eventually, the words tripping out of the elf's mouth with the cadence of impulse over strategy.

Bull holds Fionn's gaze. "We talked about it."

"I always knew something like this might come up, Boss. Actually, I kind of hoped it would."

Mahanon raised an eyebrow at him. "Trying to get rid of me?"

"Well, it'd be nice to start getting that sumskeeper bonus again."

"I wanted you to have a choice," Bull said quietly. "Every choice. Every opportunity."

"I know," Mahanon whispered. "But if I'm weighing choices... what would you choose, Bull? What would you want me to choose?"

Fionn turns away from Bull, and for a moment Bull thinks the elf is done with him. But the merchant quickly turns back again, and Bull recognizes the patterns of anxious pacing.

Bull almost smiles. Bull was trained to study people, and it's been every kind of pleasure to spend these last few years making himself an expert in the ways of his kadan. Seeing flickers of Mahanon in the elves who raised him... it's a bit like discovering new territory to sketch in more details of a well-worn map.

"You are not like the Qunari I've met," Fionn mutters quietly.

"You've met Qunari?"

"A few. I first heard of them as a child in the alienage. We were told the Qunari were recruiting converts. 'Elves are treated equally under the Qun. There is work under the Qun. No hunger under the Qun.' But we could not speak too broadly of their presence, lest the city guard start hunting for unlawful converts among us."

Fionn glances at Bull, a shadow passing over the elf's face. "You might guess what was truly occurring."

"Slavers," Bull says.

"Seven families and a dozen more elves besides walked willingly into the bowels of a slaving ship and never returned, lured in by the promise of equality and fair treatment," Fionn says coolly. "Not even freedom - no, freedom was never promised, even under this false 'Qun.' At least the slavers
got that part right. Just equality. A fair chance to be stripped of name and assigned a purpose like everyone else."

Fionn keeps his voice low, even lower than the quiet clicking murmur of the Sliabh tongue, obviously conscious of the possibility of anyone overhearing. Despite his chilly demeanour and the bitterness in his tone, Fionn does not hide his uncertainty well. Guilt and frustration furrow his brow, and he cannot hold Bull's gaze for longer than a few quick glances as he continues his anxious pacing.

Bull settles back on his heels, arranging his expression - receptive, but neutral, giving Fionn space in his silence.

"When I was..." Fionn hitches in his steps, a shadow crossing his face, but he swallows and presses on. "When I was - apprenticed, to... well, when I was a merchant's apprentice, we were set upon by Tal-Vashoth while we were trading along the north-east coast. First time I saw your kind in the flesh."

"They're not-" Bull starts reflexively, vehemently, and stops with a wince.

Fionn's gaze flickers over, darting from Bull's horns to his broad shoulders, his grey skin...

"That is what the hunter said, when he arrived to help us cut them down," Fionn murmurs. "They are not Qunari. They are nothing. Something like that. We likely would have been overrun without his help."

Fionn stops his pacing, planting himself before Bull and gathering himself to fix Bull with a hard, unyielding stare.

"Well," Fionn says. "His help, and the help of the Qunari mages he kept on leashes."

Bull does not wince or look away. Not even as Fionn, with all his inner turmoil and uncertainty, manages to bring a hammer square down on one of the many schisms at the heart of Bull.

But Bull knows the cracks in himself as intimately as he knows his own scars. He does not break or try to cover for them. There are no explanations or excuses to be made to reconcile the point Fionn is building to.

Fionn searches Bull's expression, those pale eyes turning to icy fury at Bull's lack of response.

"Eyes sewn shut," Fionn presses. "Lips sewn shut. The hunter said his role under the Qun was to manage dangerous things. He told us that we, who were not Qunari, were things as well, but harmless enough. For now. Things."

Bull is too good a Ben Hassrath to betray his thoughts with a shift of his weight, a flinch, a tightening of his muscles, a press of his lips. But he thinks he and Fionn might be thinking similar thoughts right now, from different angles. Dark curls, a shy smile, a big damn heart with love as loud and obvious as a thunderstorm...

A thing? A dangerous thing?

Bull could try to explain the imperfect translations of Qunari dialect and philosophical concepts to Common sensibilities. That it's no more hurtful to consider someone a thing, really, than it is to consider them part of the Qunari whole. A misplaced speck of sand is a thing, but a million grains of sand in the right place makes a beach, and that's the point.
Purpose doesn't just make existence mean something, purpose means existence. Not even the most devout, hardened Qunari would consider a bas a "thing" on equal footing with a rock or a scrap of parchment; it's a matter of definition, of which way your head's screwed on by the philosophies you're raised with.

But even so, even by the heart of the Qun that shapes Bull's thoughts... even so, Mahanon is not a "thing." It's a devout kind of heresy, but the way Bull sees it, by the Qun's own teachings, Mahanon is far too bright with purpose to lack existence. Even in all his uncertainty, his doubts, there is a resolve to be in Mahanon that drew Bull to him in the first place.

A hunger Bull recognized. A raw, unshaped drive to sate it on one's own terms that Bull did not.

Bull could try, yes, to explain these things: the sutures expanding to bridges across these schisms of identity that Bull relies upon to reconcile how right it feels to let himself be guided by the Qun and how well the moulded shape of his purpose fits within it, and how right it feels to let himself be guided into strange new worlds of unexpected freedoms by his kadan and how well they fit in one another's arms, in one another's lives, such as they are.

(And it is strange, a bit funny even, to think of that night in Bastion when Bull weighed the moral implications of... leading Mahanon away from his path? Turning the elf from his purpose? Well, Bull's loathe to admit it aloud if only for the sake of his pride, but the question of who wound up leading who off into the wilds has turned out to have a far different answer than Bull could have ever anticipated.)

Even so, even if Fionn were willing to listen to Bull's opinions on the day-to-day process of living the Qun, there is no equating what Fionn saw of Bull's people with any kind of love or tenderness. It's a schism Bull has yet to find a mend for, thin excuses and reasonings snapping halfway and spiralling into half-formed thoughts-

- stitched eyes and mouth, but only to keep them from-

- imagine the harm they could cause, HAVE caused, the demons-

- the arvaarad treat them with care, respect, yes, respect, respect like you would respect a weapon-

- and usually resulting in nightmares of Dalish and Mahanon kept on leashes held by Bull, eyes and mouths sewn shut and tightly collared, and there's nothing of the image that doesn't turn Bull's stomach. He tries to tell himself that the saarebas of his people are raised to understand - or, well, maybe accept - that it's different, they're not people, and fuck knows who Bull means when he thinks "they" or what he means when he thinks "people" when he gets twisted up like this, and either way it's wrong. It's wrong.

Bull tries not to think about it. When the nightmares wake him he finds Mahanon wherever the elf is curled up in the sheets and, on the worst nights, allows himself to press his lips to Mahanon's soft, thankfully unbound mouth; to kiss each eyelid, the elf's long lashes tickling his skin instead of cruel threads. Sometimes Mahanon frowns or murmurs in his sleep, more often presses closer, and sometimes he'll blink sleepy eyes open to briefly examine Bull for lingering ghosts. Then Mahanon might smile, or wrap himself around Bull to offer warmth and comfort, and it feels like forgiveness and permission to hold off on trying to bridge the gaps for at least one more night.

"You don't speak the way the hunter did," Fionn says flatly, off of Bull's ongoing silence. "But neither do you strike me as mad or marauding, like the Tal Vashoth who attacked us."

This is leading to an easier line of questioning. Dangerous, but easy. Thank fuck.
"There are folks who look like me who didn't grow up in the Qun," Bull offers. Even now, even with all his fractures, there's still a thread of distaste in his head as he says this. *Not exactly like the Tal Vashoth, not as fucked, but...* "Just 'Vashoth.' You see 'em around Rivaini, among other places."

"You're not Vashoth."

Bull thinks. Makes a decision. "No."

Fionn works his jaw. "Then what-"

"I'm Ben Hassrath," Bull says. "You might say we come in a range of flavours, but my job is to get along with people. Write shit down. Report back. People out in the world think I'm a Tal Vashoth mercenary, so they tend not to think too much about what they say around me, and where their words might wind up. Make sense?"

Fionn takes a full step back, all ice and frustration and suspicion slipping from his face.

Suspicion floods back pretty quickly. Still, Fionn's voice is strained with incredulity as he says, "If you're saying you're some sort of spy-"

"The books make it sound more exciting than it is," Bull says with a grimace. "That Tethras guy from Kirkwall's got a lot to answer for on that front. But that's the basic gist."

"I-" Fionn's hands go to his hair, smoothing gold and silver strands back from a face that looks somehow older and younger in the wracking swings from bewilderment to anger and back again. "Why would you tell me that, if it's - if you're even-?"

"I'm telling the truth," Bull says. "Most folks outside the Qun don't know the first thing about us, so it's not much of a secret. Given where you're situated and what you do, you'd have to put some effort into sharing this information with anyone who might give me and my people and grief over it. Getting yourself tangled up in all that just to try to hurt me could put you and yours in harm's way, so I doubt you'd risk it. That's not a threat," Bull adds, raising a hand as Fionn bristles, his ears tilting back. "Just something you would consider, yeah? And I'm telling you because I don't blame you for being cautious about me."

"How very gracious of you," Fionn says curtly. His hands fall to his sides, clenched in tight fists. "Mahànon knows?"

"Yeah," Bull says. "I told him the night he asked to join the Chargers."

"To work for you."

Bull doesn't blink. "Uh-huh." No defence for that, either, and Bull doesn't offer one.

Fionn's eyes drop to the forest floor, the muscles in his narrow jaw bunching and clenching as if the elf is physically chewing through Bull's words.

Eventually, slowly, Fionn says, "My son... trusts you."

There's weight there, and pain, and a familial kind of loss that Bull has no fucking insight on beyond intuition and guesswork. As uncomfortable as this conversation has been, Bull can't find a single ounce of resentment or bitterness within himself towards Fionn. Sometimes people need to be angry with someone, something, anything.

And in fairness to Fionn, Bull can think of plenty of reasons for Fionn to be angry with him.
"Mahanon trusts me," Bull echoes. "And I trust him. Word of advice, you might want to do the same."

Fionn's head snaps up at that. "Of course I trust him, how dare-"

"It's easy to trust people when they're doing what you think is best for them," Bull says, his voice low but firm. "It took a while for me to trust Mahanon knew what he was doing when he chose to be with me. I almost lost him, in every sense, because I didn't. And I'm telling you this because for as long as I've known him, Mahanon has missed you. His da. His People. You don't have to like me, but you'll break his heart all over again if you can't accept the things he's decided for himself over the years he's been forced away."

There are tears building in Fionn's eyes as Bull speaks - tears of anger, tears of grief, maybe a bit of both. Fionn looks away again.

"We thought we were keeping him safe," Fionn whispers, choked and voiceless. He closes his eyes. "I thought we were keeping him safe."

"He knows that," Bull says. "He's never blamed any of you for letting him go."

Fionn gives an odd bitter huff at that. "He doesn't..." Fionn shakes his head, reaching up to brush away any stray tears clinging to his pale lashes. His eyes are still wet when he opens them again. "I don't suppose you'll tell me what you said to him? When he told you of our clan's offer?"

*Bull helped Mahanon take a seat on the knotted roots of an old oak. The burbling of the small creek beside them was as quiet as anything else in this forest, muted by layers of branches and leaves and dense underbrush.*

"I think I used to come here," Mahanon murmured. His voice was still rough, his breathing laboured by their brief walk. "When I was a child... it feels familiar."

*Bull had his own aches to contend with: his leg, the lacerations from the awful spidery demon, the burns, his own fucked-up lungs. But they felt distant enough not to matter. Distractions, easily set aside.*

*Bull fixed Mahanon's mussed curls, tucking them out of his face behind those pointed ears. Placed Mahanon's crutch within easy reach. Took up his waterskin and uncorked it, handing it to Mahanon as the elf watched him with quiet, fond amusement.*

"You're fussing," Mahanon said, though he took the waterskin and set about drinking with a wince as he forced himself to swallow a few mouthfuls past his sore throat.


Mahanon raised a skeptical brow and handed the waterskin back. "You haven't answered my question, vhenan."

*Bull corked the waterskin, and he thought - not for the first time - about the whole damn point of splitting a dragon's tooth and giving one half to the person who's got your heart beating inside them, something Bull still has yet to do. It's never safe, never certain, but the whole damn point is..."
"I told him I'd love him no matter where he is or how far apart we are," Bull says. "I'm not going to ask him to choose between me or his family. If he wants to stay, I'll have to go, sure. But what we have isn't going anywhere."

Fionn observes Bull for a long moment, sad and weary. But the irony in his voice is gentle when he says, "So even if Mahànon remains with us... there's still no getting rid of you."

Bull grins. "'Fraid not."

Fionn's lips twitch into something very similar to a smile.

- 

Mahanon breathes.

Isuíl's magic and treatments have been good. Miraculously good. Mahanon knows that, even as his body aches and his chest rattles with every breath. Healing can only take things so far, and one has to rely on time and personal will for the rest. No running off into the unknown and no life-or-death battles for at least a little while if he wants to recover his old strength, or as much of it as he can.

Mahanon takes his mind off the pain by forcing his awareness to other sensations. The textures of rough and smooth bark under his fingertips. The steady trickle and bubble of the creek. A touch of breeze through the branches and leaves, the dense sponge of the forest floor under his feet.

Home? Perhaps... perhaps.

*His forest. His language. His People. His parents.*

Yet;

*His adventures. His friends. His freedom. His love.*

Mahanon smiles and closes his eyes. Ah, of course Bull would know all about the burdens of choice, and in his love and kindness he's tried to lessen the weight for his *kadan*. Mahanon could take up his place in the clan, in the forest, and know that out in the world his extraordinary *vhenan* is off having adventures of all sorts and perhaps yearning for the day they would reunite.

Of course they'd write letters. Occasionally they might find time for one another between duties and travels, maybe try for a few stolen nights per season in some moonlit glade by the forest road. Terribly, tragically romantic, all of it.

It's one thing to imagine those passionate reunions in all their bardic splendour. Something else entirely to imagine the intervening months of sleeping alone with no warm embrace to curl into, no unexpectedly tender murmurs to ease Mahanon before slipping into dreams hand-in-hand with his lover. Love is as much habit as heart, and Mahanon's become quite addicted to these rituals of comfort. Never fully accustomed - he still remembers keenly what it was like before, and often finds himself in awe of his luck to have this, to have *found* this - but Creators, to be alone again...

And what of the others? Krem, Dalish, all the Chargers. Friends. *Family.*

Despite the complicated feelings he had for the Lavellans, it still hurt to part from them after so
many years together. His love for the Chargers comes without the caveats of uncomfortable responsibilities, years of misunderstandings and old resentments. There will be no sense of relief to soothe the ache of leaving them.


Strange, how names can carry the weight of choices. Or perhaps the Qunari have the right of it in this respect; identity might be something intrinsically tied to purpose, something about *what you are* being *what you do.* What you *choose* to do, as often as you're given a chance to choose.

There was no choice in the matter, really, when Mahanon's magic manifested and he was forced to leave his quiet life in the forest. It wasn't even really choice which resulted in him leaving the Lavellans - more like chance and opportunity wrapped up in desperation.

So strange, then, to be sitting here and faced with such a miraculous abundance of choices and freedoms. A far wiser elf than Mahanon would be grateful for such a curse.

But Mahanon is tired. A bit heartsick. Overjoyed to be home, horrified by the unravelling of the world beyond the forest, physically aching and dearly wishing for... Creators, he doesn't even know what he's wishing for. If he did, he imagines his path forward would be clearer.

A rustle in the underbrush nudges Mahanon from his thoughts. He opens his eyes, turning slowly; cautious, but not terribly concerned, even as his ears twitch to catch the sound. There are plenty of wildlife in the forest, and Mahanon knows he's more likely to startle the poor beast by moving quickly than he is likely to be devoured by whatever it is.

The dense tangle of bushes and vines a few feet from Mahanon's seat shiver and shake, until finally a panting, shaggy dark bundle of overlarge paws and bright eyes stumble out.

Mahanon grins. "*Aneth'ra, banal'ras-len.* Are you lost?"

The wolfhound pup trots over to Mahanon and tilts its head at him, lifting its snout to catch Mahanon's scent. Mahanon struggles to pinpoint the hound's age; it's already the size of the prized Orlesian hunting dogs Mahanon's seen proudly accompanying nobles on small game hunts, but the clumsy paws and floppy ears are all puppy. A few months, perhaps.

With a curious little noise, the pup trots closer to sniff at Mahanon's bandaged leg. Mahanon aches to reach down and bury his hands in the pup's tangled fur but remembers to keep his hands to himself. Sliabhs have a strict bonding and training process with their hounds, so the hunters can have the most reliable and single-minded companions at their back in the dark shadows of the forest. If this pup imprints on the wrong scent, it could interfere with the bond it might later develop with another Sliabh.

"Ah. A wanderer finds a wanderer."

Mahanon does startle this time, which startles the pup in turn. The pup falls back on its rump with a nervous yap.

Taoirse emerges from a bend in the forest path, arching an eyebrow at her son. "The world has deafened you. I was not being quiet."

Mahanon smiles. There's still something shy and nervous that flutters in his stomach under Taoirse's scrutiny, but he's determined to ignore it. He gets the feeling his mother can no more help her blunt and removed nature any more than he can help his shyness. "I can't imagine you were being very loud."
"Loud things are dead things," Taoirse shrugs. She narrows her eyes at the pup which, having recovered from its alarm, has gone right back to investigating Mahanon's bandages. "Curious and wandering things, too, sometimes. Garas."

The pup looks up at Taoirse with sad eyes, but slowly shuffles over to curl up at her feet.

"One of Scàth's?" Mahanon asks.

"Scàth's grandpup," Taoirse says, glancing around herself and finding her own gnarled root to sit herself down upon. Her weight is carefully balanced, her heels digging into the earth, ready to spring up and away at a moment's notice. The pup, in contrast, yawns. "Hmm. No instinct for hunting, too restless for guarding. Strange little thing. Like you, a bit."

Mahanon blinks, and his ears flick lopsided before he can stop them. Taoirse catches sight of his confusion and winces, quickly looking away when Mahanon looks to catch her eyes.

"How do I say this." Taoirse grips her legs, her fierce brow furrowed. "You heard my stories, yes? Child stories?"

Mahanon nods slowly, only roughly certain he catches his mother's meaning. Taoirse's family has been with the clan for several generations. Though his grandparents passed when Mahanon was young, there were cousins and blood relatives among the Sliabhs who remembered Taoirse's childhood, and would share those stories with Mahanon to fill some of Taoirse's distance and silence.

_Fen'Asha._ Wolf Woman. They say Taoirse's mother and father joked they had birthed a wolf cub rather than an elf. Quiet and serious, cold like a hunter, even as a child. Once she was focused on a task or a hunt, there was no capturing her attention until it was completed. Some great aunts even claimed that Taoirse did not speak at all or look anyone in the eye for longer than a few moments (save for her occasional uncanny stares) until she was nearly grown and Diemne's family handfasted into the Sliabh clan. The first full conversation Taoirse had, if the stories are to be believed, was a quiet argument with Diemne regarding the fastest way to skin a nug.

"I do not understand why our babes are born so soft," Taoirse mutters. She nudges the wolfhound pup with her toe, snorting when she receives a distinct grumble in response. "Pups are only soft for a moon's turning. And their hearts don't remember hurts like babes do.

"I am _Fen'Asha._ An elf might mother a pup, but can a wolf mother a babe?" Taoirse shrugs. "Then Diemne brought Fionn to our clan and our aravel, and I thought, should I birth a babe and not a pup, there will be an elf to care in all the soft ways I cannot. But still, I was scared I would birth a babe, even so. I thought at least if I birthed a pup, I would know how to raise a wolf. And then there was you."

Taoirse smiles at her hands.

"Pups and babes, all of it, whatever I thought before - I had a _son_. And you were so soft, and small, and everything I feared, except that not having you was all of a sudden far more fear-making than having you, even if I might not ever understand you." Taoirse lifts her keen eyes to the trees, her gaze flicking from branch to branch. "I have met _shem'len_. Once or twice. Even other elves, our People. It is not enough for them to know someone, they must know every thought and think it is like theirs, and that is how they _know_ you, by knowing themselves only. And if they can't..."

Taoirse flexes. Rolls her bandaged shoulders, her face set and grim.
"You were not born a wolf, da'len," Taoirse says quietly. "But I thought of your shadows and quiet and I thought they would see that before the heart, and the softness. Other people. And the worst thing was already going to happen, and I would not have you anymore. So I asked Fionn to take you away."

Mahanon's mouth slips open.

"I thought it would hurt your heart less," Taoirse says. "It was cruel to ask, but losing you was cruel too, so was it wrong? I do not know. I asked Fionn to leave in the night with you. Raise you outside the Dalish, away from the needs of our People." Taoirse tilts her head. "Near a shem'len school, I said. I thought you would like all the books. And Fionn would protect you and your heart. But he refused." Taoirse flicks her ears. "Loudly."

"Why?"

The question tumbles out before Mahanon can catch it. Taoirse turns her head, glancing over Mahanon's bandaged leg, his hands, the burns and scars, new and old.

"The world broke Fionn's heart," Taoirse says. "And other things. Would you have been happy with him? I think so. Would you have been safe? Fionn told me some things. Shem'len, templars, hunger, sickness. No place for pups or babes. But you found the world, the world found you, and I think Fionn is thinking..."

"'What if,' " Mahanon murmurs.

Taoirse nods. "'What if.' "

What if.

Mahanon tries to imagine it. Fionn taking him to some alienage somewhere in the Marches, or Nevarra. Scraping by as a merchant or sumskeeper. During the awful final journey with the Sliabhs to the Arlathvhen and all those lonely years with the Lavellans, Mahanon could see a younger version of himself leaping to take that escape. It would still hurt beyond words to lose his clan and his mamae, his babae, but he would have his da. No expectations of future leadership. No disappointing his people.

But Mahanon has seen the alienages. The communities are close-knit as all elves are close-knit, no matter their personal squabbles, but he doubts there would be any more allowances made for a shy, awkward child who barely spoke the Trader's tongue there than there were with the Lavellans. If he thought the transition from a quiet forest clan to a boisterous trading clan was a shock, he can't imagine how jarring it would have been to go from the forest to a human city.

And, as Taoirse said, there would be templars. Shem'len. How long could Fionn have kept Mahanon's magic a secret, with Mahanon trailing sparks wherever he walked? How long before the templars would have come for him?

Fionn would lose the clan who took him in. His family, his People. Mahanon would never receive any vallaslin of any kind, nor the stories of the Dalish he learned and recited over the years he spent as the Lavellan's First.

"Fionn would not like that I told you," Taoirse says. "But you are here, and things should be said."

There's an unspoken measure of time in that. Things should be said... before.

Choices, again.
Mahanon watches the creek, following the eddies and swirls around rocks and thirsty tree roots, clumps of moss and rotting leaves.

"I used to dream of the forest every night when I was with the Lavellans, at first," Mahanon says softly. "Then it became once a week. Once a month, before Bull told me we were coming here. I used to implore the Evanuris, each of them in turn, to bring me home. Then when that didn't work, I called to Fen'Harel to bring me home just to spite the Evanuris." Taoirse snorts at that, her lips twitching into a smirk. "And now I'm here and I never have to leave. Only, the sky's torn open and I've gone and fallen in love with a man who can't spend his life walking our paths with me if I choose to stay."

Taoirse shrugs. "Well, it is good to know Fen'Harel is still listening, if nothing else."

Mahanon gives his mother a weary look. Taoirse stands, nudging the pup awake with her toe until it rises with another long whine.

"When we gave you up, you could not keep yourself and we could not keep our son," Taoirse says. "But should you leave now, you will still be my son. The forest will remember that you have come home. You can take our love and our name into the world, I doubt the Elders would mind."

Mahanon smiles and huffs a frustrated laugh. "Bull said nearly the same damn thing, only the other way around. That he'd still love me if I stay."

"Mm," Taoirse says. "Makes the choice harder, no?"

Mahanon looks up at her, his wolf mother, Fen'Asha, and he thinks that for all her worries that she might never understand her own son... well, he can't help but think that at least in this moment, they understand one another quite perfectly.

Mahanon has forgotten how quiet a Sliabh feast can be.

And this is a feast, despite the drawn faces and uncertain glances mingled with the warm smiles and gentle murmurs passed among the elves.

"Shiral'vunin din'an," Mahanon says to Bull in an undertone. "Other clans do it too. In Trade speak we'd call it 'Leaving's Eve.' We eat up everything that won't keep on the road, bid our farewells to the space that has housed us, that sort of thing. It was less of an event with the Lavellans, since we moved about so often."

"'An event,'" Bull says, casting a skeptical eye about the sombre gathering. "Your kin sure know how to party."

Mahanon elbows him, a smile tugging at his lips.

It's a brief moment of respite with Bull from the past hour of reacquainting himself with his people - close family, good friends, all stretched and aged over a dozen years beyond Mahanon's childhood memories of them. Unlike the boisterous welcome of the farmers, these are gentle reunions. Much is expressed with the eyes, a flick of the ears, or a warm rumbling purr as fingertips trace new vallaslin and scars. One of Mahanon's great aunts, a wizened old elf with skin like a shrivelled fig, frowns to see him and whispers suspiciously that he's grown quite a bit since he parted from them at the last Arlathvhen, and will not hear anyone who tries to tell her that he's been gone for over ten years.
Bull carefully seated himself on the sturdiest carved stool he could find at the beginning of the evening. He has not escaped the attention of the Sliabhs, though the elves seem torn between curiosity and caution. The more adventurous ones crowd around Bull, politely waiting for a nod of permission before touching his horns and trading excited murmurs and glances. An elf Mahanon eventually recognizes as Ghibhàn (though he remembers Ghibhàn as a small boy the last time he saw him) is proudly explaining all he knows of the Qunari to the assembled Sliabhs in their own language, occasionally glancing at Bull for confirmation. Bull, of course, doesn't understand a single word Ghibhàn is saying, but shrugs or nods along encouragingly at the appropriate points.

(Mahanon wonders when he should let Bull know that he's publicly confirmed that Qunari are carved out of stone as a unisex species with no genitalia to speak of.)

The cautious Sliabhs either hover on the far side of the assembly from Bull, or within close enough distance to strike should the qunari move too quickly. Mahanon catches sight of Diemne quietly working his way through the latter group, assuaging fears with his gentle humour and a few careful words.

Fionn seems determined to keep himself busy, drifting from family to family to go over final accounts and inventories. He and Mahanon occasionally catch sight of one another throughout the evening, but neither approach, afraid to speak to one another with the weight of the evening’s decisions yet to be voiced. It stings, a bit, but Mahanon understands, just as he's certain Fionn understands.

Eventually as the fireflies come out and the cloak of night settles over the glade the Sliabhs find their way to the stools and mats gathered around low warm fires spread through the clearing. The council of Elders, the hahren'al, Mahanon's aunt included, take their seats behind Isuìl and the Keeper Cuimhne at the centre fire.

Isuìl steps forward first, their starry eyes touching those of every Sliabh assembled as well as Mahanon and Bull. Bull shifts slightly at Mahanon's side, relaxing when Mahanon slips a bandaged hand into his.

Then Isuìl begins to speak.

"They're sharing an accounting of events that have transpired here," Mahanon whispers to Bull.

Mahanon translates as best he can as Isuìl discusses the harvest, the pilgrimages Cuimhne has taken to their sacred space close by, the trade with the farmers, the hunt. Then, of course, the rumours that a Sliabh was spotted wandering the forest path, the decision to stay longer in the glade to meet with this traveller (and several Sliabhs smile in Mahanon's direction). Then the whispers from beyond the Veil that a catastrophe was looming, whispers which turned to screams. The fight for the homestead, and a listing of what was lost - two hounds that fell in battle; four hunters who have been injured too badly to take up the hunt next season; and one who is not expected to fully recover and must instead choose another life's path.

"As of tonight," Isuìl says in Sliabh, Mahanon quickly echoing their words in whispered Trade speak for Bull, "the tear in the Veil is stable and has ceased spreading. The spirits tell me a power has risen in the south at the heart of the rift; very new, and very old."

Strangely, Isuìl's gaze finds Mahanon's face, and Mahanon has the uneasy feeling that the First is not the only one watching him through those starry eyes.

"Our People have been called to watch these events closely," Isuìl says. "Our past has shaped these nights, and our futures will be shaped by the days to come in turn. Some streams may break away
from the river, and yet the water flows to the sea nonetheless."

"What does that mean?" Bull grunts.

"No idea," Mahanon whispers, feeling like a liar for reasons he can't quite express.

Isuïl inclines their head and steps aside, leaving room for the Keeper Cuimhne to come to the centre of the gathering. The elf who was once Lainn wears the mantle of Keeper well, Mahanon thinks, steady and stern like her earth magic. She's a good match for Isuïl's more ethereal nature.

The Keeper's eyes narrow a touch, watching Mahanon whisper his translations to Bull, but she seems to accept the situation with only a slight flick of her ear before turning to the rest of the clan.

"Our hahren'al have decided that we should begin our journey east tomorrow," Cuimhne says. "We will move at half-speed, with care for those still recovering from battle. If any oppose this plan, let us hear their concerns."

A brief discussion begins between the family of one of the wounded hunters, the Keeper, and the hahren'al, the back and forth of which Mahanon doesn't bother to translate word for word.

"Isuïl thinks another rift might have opened near one of our sacred spaces in the east woods," Mahanon murmurs to Bull. "The hahren'al want to shore up the magical defences there. The hunters think the clan should split so the injured can rest longer and the others can go on ahead without being slowed down."

Bull frowns. "It's not just a religious thing, huh? The demons at the homestead didn't seem keen on chasing us into the trees."

Mahanon nods. "The forest is a conduit for magic, as far as I understand it. Maintaining the sacred spaces keeps us in tune with it, and keeps the forest in tune with us. But the magic can be corrupted, if the demons linger long enough to poison things."

"So, safety in numbers to keep the clan safe and risk the forest," Bull mutters, "or risk the clan to save the forest?"

"That's the debate," Mahanon says.

In the end, it's decided that Isuïl and three hunters will travel ahead to scout the sacred space. Taoirse volunteers for the scouting mission and scowls dangerously when the Keeper refuses her aid.

"You are still recovering, Fen'Asha," Keeper Cuimhne says firmly. "You are the heart of our hunters. I will not lose you through lack of care."

"It's hard to tell with your mum," Bull says quietly, his eye on Taoirse's fierce glower, "but she doesn't look too happy about that."

"Babae will talk her down," Mahanon whispers. "Look..."

Already, Diemne has found his way to Taoirse's side and slips his good arm about her shoulders. Taoirse's frown deepens, her lip curling up over a sharp incisor, but she leans into Diemne nonetheless.

Discussions of logistics and strategy carry on for another quarter hour, and it's with a strange sense
of fond nostalgia that Mahanon is reminded of how *boring* he found this part of the evening as a child. Only ten paces away, Mahanon sees a curly-haired elfling who can't have more than seven summers to them cuddle close to their mother with heavy, blinking eyes and an enormous yawn. More than a few young elves will likely wind up carried to their beds tonight, already fast asleep to escape the mundanities of travel planning and road rations.

"Then there is but one matter to settle before we take our leave," Cuimhne says eventually.

She turns to Mahanon, and suddenly the eyes of the clan turn to Mahanon as well.

Bull squeezes Mahanon's hand - gently, mindful of the bandages, but enough to provide comfort through presence. It takes more than a few ounces of will for Mahanon to keep from curling close against Bull to seek the security of his arms.

Later. Hopefully, yes, later.

"Some time ago our clan gifted Mahànon, Taoirse's son, to our brethren at the Arlathvhen," says Cuimhne. It's not pain in her eyes, exactly, but deep empathy, and Mahanon wonders how well she remembers that awful night spent they spent together in one of the Sliabh sacred spaces with Isuìl and the previous Keeper. "This past Arlathvhen, the Lavellans declared their First lost to the Dalish, and so Mahanon of Clan Lavellan is no more."

Mahanon's eyes drop to his feet, his face burning. *Mahanon of Clan Lavellan is no more.* Simple enough to say, but far more complex in truth, as these matters often seem to be. Mahanon doubts he can shed his Lavellan life and how it shaped him any more than he could fully shed the Sliabhs.

"Éirigh, da'len," the Keeper says softly. "We speak of the past only to inform, not to pass judgment. You will find no condemnation here."

Mahanon forces himself to lift his head, though he can feel his ears still drooping low, jolts of anxiety coursing through him like threads of lightning.

But no one is staring. No one is peering at him to guess at his motives with an unfavourable slant, or grimacing with pinched secondhand embarrassment. No disappointment. Curiosity, maybe, and plenty of empathy, but as the Keeper promised... no judgment.

"Éirigh," the Keeper says again, even offering a kind smile. "Garas, Mahànon."

Mahanon turns to Bull and realizes that the poor man must have little idea what has been said, as Mahanon's nerves have sidetracked him from translating. But Bull, resident expert on reading the room, seems far from lost and bewildered.

"I'll be here, kadan," Bull says softly, touching a calloused fingertip to Mahanon's cheek. "You're okay."

And he is. Mahanon is all right, in spite of everything.

Mahanon surges up to claim a kiss from Bull before he can think better of it, but there's no round of scandalized titters or bawdy jokes at their expense. Physical affection is not the stuff of shadows and embarrassment with the Sliabhs as Mahanon has become accustomed to it being in the broader world.

Bull, of course, has never given a shit about such things no matter the setting or circumstance and kisses Mahanon back with equal passion, until Mahanon feels bolstered enough to pull himself away and rise to his feet, a hand on Bull's shoulder to steady himself as he settles his weight
against the crutch he's been leaning on all day.

Even with the easy acceptance of the Sliabhs and the heat of Bull's kiss still tingling on his lips, Mahanon still finds himself tensing as he takes careful steps through the glade to Cuimhne's side. Love and kindness are soothing balms to be certain, and Mahanon's confidence has grown since leaving the Lavellans, but Mahanon knows he will never be fully at ease with this kind of attention directed at him.

_A Mouse is still a mouse_, he thinks to himself, and almost manages a smile.

"You were once Mahànón, of our clan," Cuimhne says to him once he takes his place before her. Despite the gentle intimacy of her tone, her voice carries through the crowd. "Your story was once one with ours. By the laws and traditions of our people, we are within our rights to reclaim you. You would be Second of Clan Sliabh, and a boon to our People in these uncertain times... if that is your wish."

Mahanon closes his eyes. _If that is your wish._

As if Mahanon hadn't spent years wishing for this very scene; the fireflies, the hounds, his parents, his People, the forest. Acceptance. Home, all of it, with such a keen pain that nights of wishing often led to nights of silent tears and palms clenched tight over his ears against the cloying whispers of demons promising him exactly this.

When Mahanon opens his eyes again now there are tears, yes. But he feels no need to stifle them, no embarrassment, and surprisingly little pain. Some tears, he has learned, can be clean and healing. _A release._

Not a release from the wish, but a release from the need for it. The loneliness, despair, embarrassment, all of it, if only for this moment.

Wishes and wants do not build a life. Decisions do. And this decision is entirely his own to make.

"To be recognized as a Sliabh again would..." Mahanon tries, his voice thready with nerves and emotion and breaking from the rough pain of his smoke-scarred lungs. He coughs with a wince and starts again. "It would be an honour to join my story with those of the clan's once more, if you will have it, and an honour to serve my People again."

It would be cruel even to take a breath before continuing, but the ache in his chest gives Mahanon no choice.

He can feel the eyes of all in the glade on him like a physical touch as he drags in a shaky gasp of air. He's speaking the Sliabh dialect, leaving poor Bull without a translator, but it's alright. Mahanon told him after returning from the forest what he planned to say - or, at the very least, what he planned to propose, looking for an outsider's perspective and advice on how best to approach things.

"Kadan," Bull said in response, warm and affectionate and, of course, with a crooked, teasing smirk. "_I thought I would have taught you well enough by now to never be afraid to ask for exactly what you want._"

Mahanon swallows. It's only been a moment, but long enough for any interruptions to arise. None do.

"I can't.-" Mahanon's voice quivers, and he has to swallow again. "I cannot, however, be your Second."
No one speaks, but Mahanon can see the Elders trading bemused glances. The Keeper's ears tilt very slightly off-kilter, but her expression remains receptive. Isuìl stands aside, quietly observing, but Mahanon could swear a slow smile has begun to tug at their lips.

"We are all three of us young," Mahanon continues, nodding to Cuimhne and Isuìl. "I was sent to the Lavellans at the Arlathvhen because... well, we know why. I cannot imagine watching that happen to another child and knowing it was because I could not accept my own past." Mahanon looks at his bandaged hands, pale spidersilk lightning scars branching over what little skin has been left exposed. "But I have accepted it. There is no undoing it. The child who had to leave his People is not gone, not ever - he is part of me, always, as this forest is and always will be a part of me. But he is not me anymore."

Mahanon is tempted to glance back over his shoulder, now, to take in a nod or smile of encouragement from Bull. But his parents are watching. His People. He can only guess at their reactions, and he doesn't know if he'll have the courage to keep going if he sees disappointment. So he breathes again instead, and keeps his eyes forward, and ploughs on.

"Keeper Istimaethoriel often told me that one cannot lead with half a heart. I love this forest, the clan... Creators, but I love-" Mahanon's voice breaks again, his throat far too tight to continue.

The Keeper reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, her eyes filling as well. Easy affection, easy empathy, and it helps and hurts in equal measures. Mahanon puts a hand over hers and tries again.

"I love my People, Keeper," Mahanon says, his cracked voice only a whisper. "So much so that the years apart might have killed all the love in me, had I not been fortunate enough to find it elsewhere. I cannot put that love aside now, nor would I want to. It is part of me, as all of you have remained part of me, no matter what names the world saw fit to give me."

Mahanon looks past Cuimhne to the assembled hahren'al.

"If it best serves my People that I remain with you while we face this new threat, then at the will of the hahren'al and my Keeper I will do just that," Mahanon says. "But I do not wish to be considered as a future Cuimhne unless there truly are no other possible options - and even so, I would pass the title down to the first Sliabh-born mage who the Creators see fit to gift us with. However, I believe I might further our People in another way.

"The People of the Planasene safeguard the ancient holdings. Other Dalish, such as the Lavellans I served and learned much from in my time, spend their years wandering far and abroad to gather knowledge. I am in a unique position; assumed outcast, already serving a group for whom travelling is both life and coin. Quite conveniently, we often find ourselves right near the heart of the worst kind of trouble."

A gentle chuckle ripples through the holding, bolstering Mahanon's spirit.

"Shem'len tend not to notice our people, and most tend not to notice me in particular," Mahanon says. There's no trace of bitterness in his words, just fact. Maybe even a little pride. "I have learned several dialects of our language, Trade speak, and some ins and outs of the shem'len world - as well as a bit about dwarves, and... well, er, Qunari, for reasons that are likely obvious."

Another round of laughter, but well-natured. Given that there's no Elven word for "Qunari," Mahanon is certain Bull will have caught the bent of the humour.
"I listen closely, I learn quickly, and I can go where it best serves our People for me to go and do what must be done," Mahanon says. "So if it pleases the hahren'al, our Cuimhne, and our First, that is what I offer. I can listen and learn and act for our People, wherever such actions are needed."

"Our clan has no political aspirations that would warrant a spy, if that is your proposal," one of the Elders says, more inquisitive than dismissive.

"Not a spy necessarily, and not a matter of politics," says Isuìl, stepping forward once more. "The signs are clear that the days ahead will be a question of survival for us all. We could use an... influence, of sorts, beyond the borders of the forest. An ear or a whisper in the right places." They shrug. "South, for instance."

The Keeper listens to Isuìl carefully before turning back to Mahanon, her lips pressed together.

"If that is truly how you wish to serve us, on those terms... we would not be able to reclaim you properly at the next Arlathvhen," Cuimhne says gravely. "Not if you wish to give up your claim as Second, and not if we should wish to keep any child of magic born in the years to come. You would still be considered lost to our kin beyond the forest, with all that entails."

It stings, but it's a sting Mahanon has been expecting. He inclines his head. "It would be enough for me to serve, to visit, and to know in my heart that I am a Sliabh of the Planasene, whatever the world might think of me."

The Keeper nods, and though the smile that lifts her lips has a sorrowful bent to it, it's a smile nonetheless. She turns to the Elders.

"Are there any in opposition to what has been proposed?"

Mahanon holds his breath for as long as his lungs can bear it, waiting for someone to speak up. There are some thoughtful looks and a few quiet murmurs amongst the Elders, but otherwise the gathering remains silent.

The Keeper inclines her head to the hahren'al, to Isuìl, and then to Mahanon, before straightening to address the clan at large.

"Mahanon, First of Clan Lavellan, is no more," the Keeper declares again, "and the child Mahànnon left us long ago." She puts a hand over her heart, the twining ironbark of her gauntlets glinting in the light of the lanterns, fires, fireflies, and glowing moss of the glade. "But the story of this Mahànnon who stands before us will join ours nonetheless, and we will know him in our hearts as People and as Sliabh when we see him on our lands."

"A strange path for strange times, perhaps. So, Mahànnon, it is to your will; when we set forth tomorrow, will you be accompanying us?"

Mahanon does, now, allow himself to look back over his shoulder to Bull. He almost laughs to see his poor vhenan so out of place among the small shadows of his People - truly his People again, properly and for always - but the humour falls away at the look on Bull's face.

There aren't any words for it; none that would do the feeling justice, at any rate. It isn't soft by any means. But there's that rapt kind of focus in Bull's gaze that has always taken full hold of Mahanon's heart and mind since the day they first met, that Mahanon used to crave even as he shied away from it. That, and something more.

If Mahanon were to flatter himself, he might admit that he's seen Bull look at enormous fire-breathing dragons with a similar expression. It's a uniquely Qunari thing, Mahanon thinks. A
respect so deep and strong that it carries the heat of passion with it.

Mahanon smiles, tears still streaming over his cheeks, and Bull smiles back.

"Someone must know something about these rifts in the sky," Mahanon says, tearing his gaze away from Bull. "I have a better chance of learning more from the world beyond, and a few ideas of where to start. If there is any aid to be offered, any knowledge that will help us secure our lands, then I will find it and bring it home as swiftly as can be done."

"Then for those reasons as well as your safety and companionship, we will pray to our Creators for your quick return," the Keeper says, inclining her head.

To Mahanon's surprise and immediate discomfort, the hahren'al all incline their heads too, as well as Isuil. He glances to the side, the clan fires that are within his field of vision, and realizes other Sliabhs are doing the same. He doesn't dare look around to see if the whole damn glade is bowing to him.

The Keeper lifts her face and smiles, eyes crinkling with a gentle mirth, and Mahanon realizes he's shrunken into his shoulders a bit and his ears are cast low in embarrassment. "Still so quiet-natured, da'len. Mala suledin nadas. There are many who will wish to embrace you tonight, in both welcome and farewell."

Cuimhne steps forward and takes Mahanon's face in her hands, the grounding earth magic in her gauntlets tugging at the lightning in Mahanon's veins as she kisses Mahanon's brow.

Isuil follows next, embracing Mahanon tightly. It would hurt if not for the pulse of healing magic Isuil sends through him, easing the ache in his chest.

"I will instruct you on the medicines you will need before you part from us," Isuil murmurs. They step back and look up, a mischievous kind of wisdom in their eyes as they place a vine-wreathed hand over Mahanon's chest. "Istimaethoriel was correct that one cannot lead with half a heart. But you should know you possess the heart of many."

The words are familiar, but Mahanon can't quite put the pieces together before the hahren'al stand to embrace him too.

It is as the Keeper warned him; a flood of affection from his clan as families rise to reclaim him. In spite of his churning stomach and rattling nerves Mahanon can't bring himself to mind. These are his People, calling him lethallin, da'len, cousin, brother. Some have tears in their eyes and on their cheeks to match Mahanon's, and there is no shame in it, not at all.

A swirling murmur of well wishes, warm welcomes, and whispered prayers for safe travels fill Mahanon's ears, one after another, until Mahanon turns to find himself face to face with Fionn.

Well, almost face to face. The other elf is still taller than Mahanon by at least half a handspan. But Fionn seems oddly small as he meets Mahanon's eyes, his expression worn.

"I'm sorry, Da," Mahanon whispers, his heart sinking. "I know this isn't what you wanted-"

Fionn shakes his head hard and pulls Mahanon in close to him, holding him tight with a long, shuddering breath.

"All I have ever wanted was your happiness," Fionn says fiercely, his voice thick. "You are strong and brave; braver than me by far. You never have to apologize to me for that, or - or for anything at all, for that matter." Fionn pulls back, smoothing his hands over Mahanon's curly hair with a
shaky smile. "But I will insist that you write, da'len. And that you return to the forest when you can."

Mahanon swallows a hitching breath to smile back. "I promise."

"Good." Fionn narrows his eyes and cuts a hard look off to the corner where Bull is sitting. "Also if there is to be a hand-fasting, it really should be conducted here, in accordance with our customs."

"Da."

Diemne and Taoirse soon join them, with Diemne wryly promising to teach Mahanon more advanced carving techniques upon his next visit and Taoirse murmuring that her son should learn something of hound-rearing, and all agreeing that he should be properly inked with the family vallaslin, and Mahanon finds himself beaming even as exhaustion starts to overtake him.

"It's almost like cheating a bit, isn't it?" Mahanon murmurs to Bull a quarter hour later as they settle into the blankets and mats of the aravel annex. He tries not to think about how much his body aches from the light exertions of the day, how heavy his lungs sit in his chest. Tomorrow's concerns. Tomorrow's worries. "I feel like... I don't know, I got to choose not to choose."

"No, kadan," Bull says softly, catching Mahanon's attention with the tenderness in his tone. "You chose what you wanted your life to look like and how you want to live it. That's not cheating. Take your victories as and when you can." He pulls the blankets up over them both. "And... you're sure about giving up your claim as Second? I get why you wouldn't want to be Keeper, but..."

Mahanon tucks himself close against Bull, resting his head on Bull's chest and closing his eyes to the comforting drumbeat of Bull's heart. There is a sting of loss, yes. Loss of his clan's stories and secrets that only the Cuimhne and their apprentices ever learn, the sacred spaces and patterns of the forest he'll never know as intimately as he might have, in another life.

"I meant what I said," Mahanon responds eventually. "Maybe there was once a version of me that might have been happy to become utterly consumed by the forest and share in its knowledge, like Isuil or Cuimhne. I would want to be able to dedicate myself that way, entirely and utterly, if I were to take on the role of Second, but... I can't. That will be someone else's joy and burden, I'm afraid."

"And you're still technically outcast."

"Well, I couldn't let Dalish have all the fun on that account." Mahanon humour quickly fades, thinking of his friend. "I hope she's alright."

"Yeah." It's only a single word, but Mahanon can hear all the weight in the syllable as Bull says it.

Mahanon lifts his head, propping himself up to look at Bull and taking care not to put his weight on any injuries. Bull's good eye is closed, his scarred brow furrowed slightly in thought or concern, maybe both.

"You're an extraordinary man, you know," Mahanon says quietly.

"That's the resin wine talking, kadan," Bull says, though his lips quirk into a little smile at the compliment. "I'm still not convinced your da isn't dosing it with something."

"Which one?"

"The one that isn't still thinking about feeding me to the hounds."
"Sorry, which one?"

Bull cracks his eye open to cast a weary look in Mahanon's direction. Mahanon leans up to kiss Bull's cheek.

"I mean it, though," Mahanon murmurs. "Everything you've done for me... for everyone, vhenan. For what it's worth, I really do think you're extraordinary."

"Stop," Bull mutters, but he turns his head to meet Mahanon's lips. "You're gonna make me blush."

"A blushing Bull! I'd pay to see that."

"Would you?" Bull kisses Mahanon again, letting him feel his grin. "You still have a few coppers owing on your account, little elf. Maybe worry about paying those off before trying to purchase a blush from me."

Mahanon feels his cheeks flame and knows by Bull's chuckle that even if he can't see in the darkness, he must feel Mahanon's ears twitch at that. "I'm certain we had a rule about not flirting when we're too injured to do anything about it."

"Get it in writing," Bull grunts, tucking Mahanon's head under his chin. "Sleep well, kadan. I'm damn proud of you."

Mahanon's throat gets far too tight for him to respond with anything so meaningful, anything that might express how he feels upon hearing that.

Then Bull settles his hand on the nape of Mahanon's neck and he starts to massage the sore muscles there, startling a rumbling purr from Mahanon before he can think to contain it.


"Bastard," Mahanon grumbles, but between the comfort of Bull's touch and his own exhaustion, he finds himself falling asleep to the sound of Bull's quiet laughter.

That first night Mahanon spent drinking on the beach with the Chargers long ago stands out in Bull's memory as solidifying his interest in the elf past a piqued curiosity to something deeper. Bull has always liked folks with an instinct for pulling their own weight, and watching how awkward and anxious Mahanon became as he was forced to sit back and allow others to do the work of setting up camp and prepping the meal started a few gears turning in Bull's head, shifting his thoughts on Mahanon from "fascinating stray" to "potential Charger."

Anyway, Bull is only thinking of this to distract himself from his current state of awkward uselessness.

It's full morning in the glade, though the weak light filtering through the dense branches feels more like the cool glow of false dawn. Bull thinks he's starting to get used to the darkness of the forest, maybe, and feels a pang of sympathy for his light-sensitive kadan. Being raised in a place like this, how could anyone not find the bright loud world beyond the forest overwhelming?

The glade is the busiest and noisiest Bull's seen it thus far as the clan prepares to depart, but even then everything is done with a gentle hand and hushed calm that Bull can't help but admire, even as he weighs the pros and cons of it. Care and urgency seem to be at odds with each other here. Nothing is happening particularly quickly, with the priority placed upon checking in with other
clan members, making time for children's questions and conversations between families and even games and laughter, but Bull can see how the stress of the situation weighs on the faces of the older elves even so.

It can't even be called an organized chaos; while every elf has their own duties and tasks to complete, there doesn't seem to be any sense of time to pressure efficiency. But there's no chaos either - no shouting, no snapping, no frustration. When tensions arise, either the Keeper or Isuìl quickly appear to resolve the situation, usually resulting in smiles and warm embraces all around.

Bull feels a bit... itchy, honestly, watching it all. If this were a Qunari camp they'd have been packed and on the road hours ago.

Judging by the way Fionn has been gnawing on his lip for the past hour as he goes about his tasks, Bull suspects the city elf might be experiencing a similar angst.

_Different worlds._ Bull feels his lips twitch as Fionn glances past him, the elf's brows knitting briefly as he obviously fights a scowl before setting off to another part of camp. _We've got that in common, don't we? If you're not careful, merchant, you're going to wind up liking me._

No one will let Bull help with anything, for all the usual reasons - he's a guest, he's injured, everyone's just fine, really, and Bull gets it. Sometimes a helping hand winds up being the stray bolt that causes the whole damn machine to break down, and he can imagine why the Sliabh elves might find seven feet worth of clumsy qunari to try to contend with far more daunting than beneficial to the cause.

Taoirse and Diemme have taken Mahanon for some kind of walk through the forest with wry promises to bring him back "soon," something about making sure he's fully reconnected with the Sliabh land before they leave.

_Finding his roots._ Bull looks at the surrounding trees and smirks. _Heh._

"They are nearly returned, Iron Bull."

Another man might have jumped and yelped. As it is, Bull lets himself flinch before turning to the Sliabh First, trying not to look too closely into the elf's starry eyes as they smile up at him.

Bull respects Isuìl, sure. Likes them well enough. But he can't forget that they combed through all his thoughts and feelings and, from what he's gleaned from all the cryptical mystic shit, has chats with demons on the regular. "Spirits," sure, whatever. He's relaxed his opinions on these things since taking up with Mahanon, but the fear lingers. Rational fucking fear.

"You ever think about wearing a bell?" Bull mutters.

Isuìl's uncanny little grin broadens, then fades into something far too sympathetic for Bull's liking.

"There will be more, and you will confront the Nightmare, I think," Isuìl murmurs, tilting their head. "Yes... choices, choices, but you were always meant to be there. More so than Mahànnon. Fate binds you a little tighter than him, I fear."

"Um," Bull says. "Thanks?"

Isuìl smiles again, reaching into their pouch. "Odd to thank me before the gift is given."

"Oh, fuck, you don't have to-"
"I would like to," Isuìl says, pulling out a small, flat silver disc and passing it up to Bull.

Bull takes it, holding it up to the dim light with a squint. The disc is intricately moulded in Sliabh knots, and though Bull isn't familiar enough with the symbology to be sure, he thinks he can make out the shape of a wolfhound's head amongst the worn curves of the design.

"It is not magic," Isuìl says, their voice kind, and though Bull wasn't planning to ask he feels a rush of relief nonetheless. "I cannot yet allow you to know our paths, no matter your love for Mahànon. But should you seek to enter our lands in an hour of need and Mahànon is not with you, this will ensure that you - and only you - are not shot on sight. It may even protect you from the forest's... shadows, shall we say."

Bull bows his head in thanks, but can't help himself as he says, "That sounds a bit like magic."

"The trees remember," Isuìl says simply, like that isn't an utterly unnerving statement all on its own. "They know those tokens well. If you bear it, you bear our favour."

Despite his unease, Bull musters a full Qunari salute for Isuìl. "Thank you."

Isuìl nods, then straightens and turns their head with a flick of their ears. "Ah. Well, I will leave you to his farewells."

They trot away before Bull can respond, and Bull is wearily unsurprised when Mahanon, Taoirse, and Diemne emerge from the trees nearby a moment later, the giant wolfhound Scàth trailing along behind them.

Yeah, Bull likes Isuìl well enough. But he can't say he's not looking forward to returning to his own, more solid world, even if it might be in the process of crumbling right now.

Mahanon is leaning heavily on his crutch, and despite the sounds of Sliabh chatter and the creak of aravels being prepared for travel, Bull can hear every rattling breath Mahanon takes long before Mahanon limps close to him. There's a grey cast to his dark skin and deep circles under his eyes, and it's not bright enough for Bull to tell but he thinks there are lines in Mahanon's face that weren't there before the battle at the homestead.

Some fights cost more than others. Bull's seen enough war to know this well enough. Mahanon's survival had a price on it, and only time is likely to tell how steep.

But for now Mahanon is smiling, and so Bull tucks the Sliabh token into his belt pouch and smiles too. "Good walk?"

"Good walk," Mahanon says, slipping a hand into Bull's and leaning against his side. Scàth circles the pair of them with a ferocious amount of sniffing, cutting Bull a suspicious look before bounding off towards the assembled wolfhound pack by the Fen'Harel statue. "Bull, would you ever consider-?"

"Only if you promise it won't rip my throat out in my sleep."

"Vhenan, you can't possibly know what I was going to say."

"Okay then, look me in the eye and tell me you weren't going to suggest taking one of those things with us."

"I wasn't!" Mahanon looks up at Bull, all innocence and sweetness. "Not today, anyway, that's not how it's done."
Bull heaves a weary groan. "You and your damn big eyes are gonna get me eaten by some elfy beardog, aren't they?"

"I thought you were building up an immunity to my 'damn big eyes.' "

"Slow process. Working on it though, so watch out." Bull puts an arm around Mahanon's shoulders. "It doesn't get to sleep in the bed with us."

"But-"

"No, absolutely not, those things are bigger than you and I'm *not* losing my *kadan* by letting you get smothered in your sleep by a giant fur rug with teeth."

"All right," Mahanon sighs, in a tone that Bull recognizes not as loving acquiescence, but a prelude to absolutely trying to smuggle a massive wolfhound into bed with them at some point in what is likely to be the far-too-near future. *Damn it.*

Bull stays by Mahanon's side as he says his farewells to the Sliabhs, trying his best to keep up with the rapid flow of elvish passed amongst the clan members. A few elves wish Bull well in varying levels of Common, and Ghibhàn even manages a carefully enunciated "travels safe, big horny friend" before throwing his arms around Bull's midriff and hugging him tightly.

"Close enough," Bull shrugs, patting the elf on the back. "Er, *dareth shiral, falon...len? Da'falon?*"

Ghibhàn steps back with a laugh, squeezing Bull's arm. "*Ma nuvenin, lethallin.*"

Then come the hardestgoodbyes, the last ones, as Taoirse, Diemne, and Fionn see them to the mouth of the clearing. Both Mahanon and Bull have been given new packs and supplies to replace what was lost at the farmer's homestead, as much as they can carry with their injuries.

"*Isuïl will Speak the quickest way to the next traveller's inn to you, da'len,* but there's no need to rush," Fionn says, the lines in the corners of his eyes creasing with concern as he smooths his hands over Mahanon's shoulders. "*More important to get there in one piece, yes? And you have the list of our trading partners now, I know our raven system is a bit complicated-""

"*Da,*" Mahanon says, putting a hand over Fionn's with a soft smile. "We'll be alright, promise. I'll write you as soon as we reach the inn."

Fionn nods, biting his lip, and pulls Mahanon in close for another tight embrace. "I know it seems silly to fret, I haven't really known where you've been at any time over the past ten years, I just..."

"I know," Mahanon murmurs. "*Ar lath ma, Da.*"

Fionn closes his eyes, his face tight. "*Ar lath ma, da'len. Mel'nada, ir'ssal ma'ghilas.*"

Taoirse nudges Bull's arm with the hilt of a hunting dagger, catching his attention. "You'll watch him?"

"As best I can," Bull says, "and as much as he'll let me."

Taoirse grins, and as little as Mahanon has in common with his mother in terms of temperament, Bull knows this particular sharp-toothed smirk all too well. "Good answer, qunari."

Diemne has his hand on Fionn's shoulder and his good eye on Taoirse with a very different kind of quiet smile on his own lips. He looks up at Bull and inclines his head. "I enjoyed speaking with
you, Iron Bull. If you will allow it, I have some ideas for adjusting your leg brace next time we meet."

Bull inclines his head back at Mahanon's babae. Normally he wouldn't be too thrilled about anyone getting too cozy talking about his brace, never mind offering suggestions for improvement, but it's different coming from someone like Diemne. Someone who gets it. "I'd appreciate that."

Fionn looks at Bull, working his jaw as if ramping up to say something, but he looks away when Bull meets his gaze.

_Ah well. Next time, maybe._

Isuìl and the Sliabh Keeper drift close to join them, and Mahanon takes a long, shaky breath at Bull's side.

"_Kadan,"_ Bull says softly. "Are you sure you're ready to leave?"

"Never," Mahanon says. He looks up at Bull with full eyes, tears starting to gather in his long lashes, but he smiles. "It's different when it's not forever, though. I'll be alright."

"Yeah you will," Bull says fondly. "My tough kadan."

Taoirse and Diemne gather close to Mahanon to whisper their goodbyes in the Sliabh tongue as the Keeper and Isuìl turn to Bull.

"We still cannot allow you to know our paths," the Keeper says. She's still a bit cool to Bull, but far less removed than she was when they first met. "Isuìl will be placing you under an enchantment that will break once you are back on the main road. You will not remember the journey."

"I understand," Bull says, even as he fights a shiver. _His body walking through the forest without his mind involved... fuck._ He tries not to think too hard on it.

"Trust, love, and loyalty will guide your path one way or another, Iron Bull," Isuìl says. "Just as it always has."

Bull shifts his weight with a wince, wishing the First wouldn't just _say_ shit like that, out loud.

Isuìl looks to the Keeper, who nods, and steps towards Bull with their hands raised, tiny flowers blooming out from the little vines twined around their fingers. "It was a gift to cross paths with yours. I pray we meet again."

Bull tries to think of something nice to say in return, but realizes there's magic building in the First's hands and feels a cold sweat break along the back of his neck, any and all possible niceties wither in his throat.

"_Vhenan._"

Bull turns his head and Mahanon is there, placing his bandaged hands on Bull's face with a soft, reassuring smile, then leaning up on his toes in spite of his injured leg and guiding Bull down to kiss him. Bull does, gladly, finding comfort in the familiar shape of Mahanon's lips on his, and-

-when he lifts his head to break the kiss he's wincing in the near-blinding light of sunset beaming through sparse tree cover onto the packed dirt of the forest road.
Bull looks around, feeling the deep ache of a day's travels in his bones and nothing in his head to show for it, and shudders. "Don't like that shit."

"I know," Mahanon says, wrapping his arms around Bull for a tight hug. "It's nice to have you back, vhenan."

They're a ways yet from the inn, but already Bull starts to get the wearily familiar sense of walking through a war zone. There are more people on the road than he's seen throughout their entire journey through the forest thus far; uprooted families pulling hastily packed carts, merchants and travellers bearing the signs of a demon attack, the low nervous buzz of rumour and confusion. People cast Bull suspicious looks as he and Mahanon make their way down the road, but many seem to relax at the sight of Mahanon - some even nod or bow their heads in respect as he passes by, which Bull finds kind of amusing even as Mahanon flushes and awkwardly bows back with off-kilter ears.

"They're not wrong, kadan," Bull murmurs. "You're a proper Sliabh again, remember? They know they're on your land."

"Hush," Mahanon mutters, but there's a pleased grin hiding in the corners of his mouth.

Any smiles between them fade however as they round a bend in the road and come across the inn itself, stuffed well past capacity if the tents set up along the tree line are any indication. There are roughly erected banners with healer symbols scrawled in rough charcoal here and there, another few indicating food and supplies collections. Children crying, quiet conversations in hushed, frantic whispers, a few militia patrolling through with hoes and pikes for weapons while the more honed hunters watch the perimeters with their crossbows clutched close.

Bull grits his teeth. He knows a refugee camp when he sees one.

"Creators," Mahanon whispers, clutching Bull's arm. "How many rifts are out there?"

"Might not just be the rifts, kadan," Bull says grimly. "If we're right and something happened at the Conclave, the mage-templar shit will be back in full swing. War kind of has a landslide effect."

"Right," Mahanon says. "People taking advantage of... opportunities."

Bull cuts a look at Mahanon, but Mahanon has a distant look on his face and doesn't seem to notice.

People, like Qunari. Yeah, Bull anticipates some very interesting orders left for him at the next dead drop.

They spot Shara first, her pole arm slung over her back as she directs new families to free camping spots along the road. She's found a pair of trousers somewhere along the line, the remains of her nightgown torn away into a rough shirt that she wears, still, under Grim's coat. Shara catches sight of them quickly and waves them over, her face lifting with relief as she sees Mahanon.

"Maker," Shara breathes, tugging Mahanon into a tight hug with a shaky laugh. "I thought - Andraste's wet fanny, you still look awful, but when Bull carried you in I thought-"

"I was lucky," Mahanon says, his voice squeaking out of compressed lungs. Shara relaxes her grip on him with a quiet "oops." "Is everyone else-?"

"Your people are set up around the back, next to ours," Shara says, tossing her arms around Bull and hugging him too. "We've had ravens and runners up and down the roads - there's a great
bloody tear in the sky at the west end of the road, so the main path out through the Wilds is blocked off. The Good People to the south have been guiding folks through their lands if there's an urgent enough need to go that way, otherwise we're all being directed out to the Marches. Kirkwall's about to get dreadfully busy."

"I'm sure the guard captain is gonna love that," Bull grunts. He nudges Mahanon. "Hey, I hear she's a redhead."

"And I'm sure she's terribly fond of Qunari, given her past dealings with them," Mahanon says coolly. To Shara, he says, "Does anyone know-?"

"What the fuck is going on? Well, pick whatever story you like best," Shara shrugs. "Some people say the dwarves accidentally set off some sort of explosion in the Deep Roads that broke the world, but I don't see how that makes any kind of sense. No one's seen hide nor tail of the Wardens for a while, apparently, so some are saying they've all been killed off to prepare for a bigger, more spectacular Blight. People are blaming mages, templars, Qunari, elves, the Circle, the rebels, the Maker, anyone you can think of."

"What are the constants in all the stories?" Bull asks.

Shara looks away, her jovial face falling grim. "The constants are... not good. S'why I like the stories better. They're saying the Divine is dead. Whether it was mages or templars who did it, who can say, but the Temple of Sacred Ashes was destroyed along with everyone who was in it at the time."

Mahanon puts a bandaged hand over his mouth, his eyes turning round, and Bull just feels... heavy. War means profits for the Chargers, of course, and all the intrigue to follow is sure to pique his curiosity in the morning, but for now... it's just a bit much, for right now.

"How many figureheads would have been in there?" Mahanon asks, his voice hushed with horror. "How many people-?"

"The smart ones will have sent envoys and assistants," Bull says grimly. "Peace talks are pretty obvious targets. Fuck, what a mess."

"It's well outside our world," Shara says, shouldering her pole arm with a stiff nod. "Always has been, every time shit kicks off. All we've got to do is survive whatever politics the high and mighties get tangled up in. Typical bollocks, eh?"

Shara guides them around the camp, frequently interrupted by refugees asking questions and coming to Shara with concerns or complaints. Shara shoulders all this as easily as she does her pole arm, answering and providing directions and words of encouragement where needed, until finally someone comes with an urgent request for her attention elsewhere.

"Shit," Shara mutters, turning to Bull and Mahanon. "If I leave that particular pot simmering it'll boil over something awful. Your folks are under that healer banner, Stitches has been doing such good work for us. Don't take off without saying goodbye."

With that Shara sets off after the refugee, shaking her head and cussing under her breath with every step.

"I really do like her," Bull muses.

"So do I," Mahanon says softly. "Creators, I hope she'll be alright."
There's a crowd under the healer banner, but Bull manages to make brief eye contact with Stitches before continuing on. He doubts the man has slept at all going by the circles under his eyes, but Stitches brightens at the sight of Bull and Mahanon nonetheless and points towards a cramped clump of tents before getting back to work on his current patient.

The Chargers have managed to get a fire going and something resembling stew bubbling over it, if the smell is anything to go by. The trees are casting long shadows as the evening turns to dusk, making it hard to pick out individuals, but Bull does a count of lumps huddled about and blows out a quiet breath of relief when he sees none are missing.

"Seven feet tall and none of you see me coming in time to roll out a proper welcome?" Bull booms, stepping into the circle of tents with Mahanon quietly groaning at him by his side. "Makes a man feel unwanted." Bull just manages to catch the skin of hard liquor slung at his face by a distinctly unimpressed-looking Grim. "Alright, good enough."

Bull settles himself between Krem and Skinner, putting a hand on his second-in-command's shoulder. The kid still looks pretty shaken from his fight with the big demon, and Bull suspects the wounds go a bit deeper than the vicious-looking lightning burns winding up the Tevinter's arm. "Everyone okay?"

"Holding up alright," Krem says, lifting his chin. Stubborn git. "Mouse?"

Bull looks over to see Mahanon curling up next to Dalish across the fire. The other mage is, thank fuck, awake and looking far better than the half-dead elf Bull left in Skinner's arms two nights before, but she's got a harrowed look to her and a long stare that Bull knows far too well.

Mahanon doesn't say anything, but wraps his arms around her and holds her close, and Bull even hears the low rumble of the purr Mahanon makes when Bull's sick or hurting. A few Chargers glance up at that, but no one makes fun. Not tonight.

Dalish looks startled at first, then leans into Mahanon and closes her eyes, a few tears slipping over her stark white cheeks.

"Holding up," Bull says, uncorking the liquor skin and taking a long swig. It's quiet around the fire, everyone lost to their own thoughts even as the sounds of the camp filter in, maybe a few echoes of demons on the mind; rage and injured pride, despair and fear...

"'No one can beat the Chargers,' " Rocky grunts suddenly - it would be far too generous to call it singing, but the rhythm is there, "'cause we'll hit you where it hurts.' "

Skinner, of all people, casts Rocky a cockeyed look, but joins in. "'Unless you know a tavern with loose cards.' "

"'-and looser skirts!' " Bull adds, winking at Mahanon. Mahanon rolls his eyes.

"'For every bloody battlefield, we'll gladly raise a cup.' "

Bull hears Stitches singing along from his healer's tent, and as everyone else adds their voices to the song, he sees Dalish gently mouth along to the words with a slow half-smile.

"'No matter what tomorrow holds, our horns be pointing up!' "
For obvious reasons, the Qunari have recommended that all Qunari with "obvious lineage" avoid Kirkwall since "the incident." So no matter Bull's teasing about redheads, he doesn't really plan to follow the flood of refugees to Kirkwall unless he absolutely has to.

Instead, he and the Chargers emerge from the forest a week later and wander into the lesser known fishing village of Three Rivers, right off the trailing remains of the forest road and down by the coast. It's busier than Bull's ever seen it, but most people with business to tend to seem anxious to scurry along to Kirkwall or up the valley through the Vinmarks to Wildervale, so by some miracle the Chargers manage to cram themselves into the local tavern (though Bull and Mahanon and Dalish and Skinner are the only ones who manage to take the last two private rooms; Mahanon shuffles some coin around so the others can afford nicer lodgings the next time to make up for it).

Mahanon's breathing is still far more laboured than Bull likes to hear, but the medicines Isuìl put him onto have been helping, and he's walking without the crutch now and only a slight limp to show for it. Stitches has been spending an hour at the end of each day checking over every Charger in turn, even managing to bully Bull into taking a few foul-tasting tinctures for his own injuries. The claw marks from the demon's attack haven't been healing as quickly as they should, though there's no sign of infection in the wounds.

"We'll keep dressing them up and cleaning them," Stitches says to Bull and Mahanon, who hovers close by with an anxious look at the ugly marks. "Time will have to do the rest. This demon shite just doesn't play by normal rules."

Bull grits his teeth at that. He's starting to get an idea of the kind of "rules" these wounds play by. If Dalish is left to her thoughts for too long, she'll turn wan and nearly blue with cold, clutching her cloak tight about her and rubbing at her chest with a pained look until Mahanon or Skinner, anyone, starts a quiet conversation to pull her from her thoughts. Some idiot called Krem "sir - oh, sorry, ma'am-?" as they trudged into town and Krem flinched and rubbed at the burns on his arm with a low, agonized hiss.

For Bull's part, the gashes in his back pull and sting with a crawling, ugly pain if he thinks too hard about what they're facing, or when the nightmares catch up to him. He caught sight of a flash of green lightning in the distance signifying another rift a day or two ago, and he wasn't too surprised to find later that several of the claw marks had split right back open again.

But Bull shoves all these thoughts aside and just nods his thanks to Stitches, eager to get back to his work.

The Qunari dead drop in this region was shifted to Three Rivers once things in Kirkwall started going tits up. Though there's no proper port for large transport ships, there are a few decent ferries to the islands between Ferelden and Orilais, and it's only a hop skip and a jump from there to the mainland. Bull suspects Three Rivers will expand over the coming years to become a far bigger trade town in the wake of Kirkwall's ongoing struggles to rebuild, but for now it's a hidden gem that Bull is thankful for.

The dead drop was predictably stuffed with missives, all in desperate need of decoding - a tedious headache, but Bull's practiced enough to get through it quickly if he can sit down and concentrate. The messengers clearly aren't taking any chances, which honestly makes Bull worried about the potential involvement of his own people in all of this, but... no, they would have told him, if this was the plan.

Wouldn't they?

So once Stitches leaves Mahanon and Bull retreat to their separate spaces in the cramped room to
work in silence - Mahanon, balancing stocks and accounts of what they have left after their losses at the homestead, rifling through the woefully incomplete and out-of-date financial reports from the various banks around Thedas dropped in Three Rivers this past month to gauge where their coin is likely to be safest, while Bull decodes missive after missive, swigging a strong ale and wishing for something stronger as he combs through the news.

*Mages and templars back at war...* predictable, yes, and apparently the fighting has just about routed the Ferelden Hinterlands... *no Divine, but someone's still pushing ahead to try and call a Chantry Inquisition...* fuck, that would be a twist if they manage to get that off the ground... *mingled reports from the Conclave that there was a single survivor, unknown if suspect or victim...* likely the former, but tough to say, a name would be helpful... Bull turns the page and decodes a few more lines.

Blinks.

He squints and goes back over his work, again and again. Three times, just to make sure it's not the ale or all his time with the elves fucking with him, but the survivor's name in the report is clear. Far too clear.

"Um," Bull says, his voice a bit strangled. "Boss?"

Mahanon looks up from his reports, his ears adorably off-kiltered, and if Bull's head weren't spinning like a fucking maelstrom he might have managed a teasing snicker. "Everything alright?"

"Er," Bull says, scratching at the base of his horns and, a bit sickly, remembering everything the First Isuìl had muttered on about paths and fates and destinies and all the bullshit that makes Bull sweat to think about. The claw marks in his back start to tingle. "I don't suppose there's more than one 'Lavellan' clan out there, huh?"

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATIONS:

"Aneth'ra, banal'ras-len." = "Hello, little shadow."

"éirigh" = "rise" (ish) (stealing some irish and stretching it a bit)

"mala suledin nadas" = "now you must endure"

"dareth shiral, falon...len? da'falon?" = Bull trying to say "safe journeys, little friend"

"ma nuvenin, lethallin" = "as you say, close friend" ; basically "aww you tried buddy"

"Ar lath ma, da'len. Mel'nada, ir'ssal ma'ghilas." = "I love you, little one. For always, wherever you go."

Holy shit guys next chapter is... well. All I can say is we're gonna meet one of my fucking fave OCs who never gets enough screentime in my stories.

Thank you all so so so much for reading, next chapter should go up MUCH SOONER.
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