Title:

Don't Worry, I'll Protect You

Summary

An AU of Dragon Age: Inquisition in which the Anchor is passed on to Dorian Pavus after the Inquisitor dies in a tragic accident. Instead of the Herald of Andraste, Dorian must garner the support of the people and marshal the forces of Thedas together to fight the threat of Corypheus. But can the scion of House Pavus, self-proclaimed pariah of the Tevinter Imperium, pull it off?

Not alone.

(Published weekly on Fridays)

Notes

Please be advised that the comments contain spoilers. If you read the comments before the story, do so at your own risk. ;)

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con
Category: M/M
Fandom: Dragon Age (Video Games), Dragon Age: Inquisition
Relationship: Dorian Pavus/Cullen Rutherford
Character: Female Lavellan, Cullen Rutherford, Dorian Pavus, Cassandra Pentaghast, Leliana (Dragon Age), Josephine Montilyet, Alistair (Dragon Age), Male Hawke, Varric Tethras, Iron Bull, Loghain Mac Tir, Amell (Dragon Age)
Additional Tags: Flashback Romance, Flashbacks, Slow Burn, Sloooooow Burn (like really slow i'm not kidding), Angst, Grief/Mourning, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Comfort, Eventual Romance, Non-Canon Relationship, Anger, Minor Female Lavellan/Cullen Rutherford, Past Relationship(s), Asshat Hawke, Friends to Lovers, Fade Dreams, Minor Alistair/Leliana, Slow Romance, Bros Before Roses, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Rape/Non-con Elements, Mind Control
Series: Part 1 of Dragon Age: Inquisition - Cullrian
Stats: Published: 2015-06-18 Updated: 2019-07-12 Chapters: 43/64 Words: 278777
With Act III, there is also a change in Rating and Active Warnings. They comprise a small part of the story, and the chapters will be clearly labeled.

See the end of the work for more notes.
An extra special thank you to xla-hainex for the absolutely fantastic art she drew for this story!
Dorian coughed, trying to get the cloud of dust and grime out of his lungs. Before he’d even managed to take his first shaking breath, however, he was struggling to his feet, uncaring that his staff had snapped in two or that something was wrong with his left ankle. All that mattered was the Inquisitor.

“Mailani!” he croaked as he forced his way closer to the cave-in. Behind him, he heard the others stirring, but he didn’t bother looking back. All that mattered was the Inquisitor. “Lavellan!” he tried again, a bit louder this time, and finally remembered that he was, in fact, a mage. The thought was followed by a sputtering wisp summoned from the Fade, whirling around his head to provide a feeble light.

There. Thank the Maker for that Dalish scarf she wore - it was like a beacon of green and gold in the darkness of cave around them. With faltering, fumbling steps, he moved towards it, ignoring the pain, the possibility of a further cave-in, of anything that got between him and his best friend. His only friend. The sputter of green light almost made him cry - if the Anchor could light up, it meant she was alive. Closing the remaining space between them, he fell to his knees and took that glowing hand in his, trying to pour what little ability he had for healing into the Inquisitor. “Mailani,” he breathed, “I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

At the sound of his voice, her head turned, and Dorian paled as he saw what had happened to her face. Blood covered the side of it, drenching her hair, and the top of her head was misshapen, crushed askew by an unseen force. “D-Dorian,” she mumbled. “C-can’t see you.”

No, no, no! The tears came to his eyes unbidden, and he squeezed her hand all the more tightly. “The others will come,” he promised. “Solas will be able to help, I know it, and Bull can--” He looked down her body, and began to tremble. Her body disappeared at about her waist, hidden under a pile of rubble made of stones large and small. She’d always been nimble, but never physically strong - not that even Bull would have held up well against a half ton of rock. “He... Bull can lift everything away, I’m sure of it.”

“Dorian,” she said, and the mage quieted. His hand squeezed hers so tightly now that his knuckles were white. “Dorian, I’m sorry.”

That... wasn’t what he’d expected to hear, and it wasn’t welcome - not at all. He shook his head. “No. You’ll be fine. The others will come.”

“Sorry,” she whispered. Her head shifted slightly, then relaxed, lolling limply on the ground, and the bright green of her hand flickered, then went out.

“No, no, no!” But he couldn’t deny it. No necromancer could deny the dimming of the eyes, or that last indrawn breath. Yet before he could even think of anything else, before he could cry or rage or attempt to bring her back, his world suddenly turned gold, then white, and then green before everything whirled away into a cloud of blackness.
Dorian awoke to pain. He wasn’t even aware of the groan he made as he curled up on his side, or the fact that he was on a bed, or the hand that landed on his shoulder. All he knew was that his hand felt like large shards of crystal had been shoved into it and were being moved by someone for nefarious purposes of their own. Vaguely he was aware that someone was muttering nearby, that the words were what he’d come to recognize as elvish, but he could make no sense of either the speaker or the words which were spoken.

When the hand moved from his shoulder to touch the source of his pain, he instinctively rolled away, crying out in protest. “Veshante kaffas!” he swore. “Go away!” It was like someone had gripped his head with a massive set of iron tongs and was slowly closing it, crushing him as they did so.

The muttering finally ceased, but Dorian almost didn’t even notice because the horrid pressure and pain abruptly switched off, as if he’d been removed from a fire.

With a gasp, he rolled onto his back and panted heavily, trying to make sense of what was happening around him. Finally the fact that his name was being spoken, over and over again, penetrated his senses, and he forced his eyes to open.

“I see you have returned to us,” a familiar voice said in an equally familiar detached manner. “It is good to see you awake again.”

“Solas?” he breathed, eyes sagging shut once more. Dorian had no energy, nothing left but the barest amount he required to breathe and force out the elf’s name. Well, and perhaps one other elf’s name. “Mailani?”

He felt a hand land on his shoulder once more. “I’m afraid not, my friend,” Solas said softly, and the detachment was gone, replaced by something so subtle it was hard to call it simple sorrow. Whatever Solas felt at the loss of the Inquisitor, it was, like the man himself, complex and deeply felt. “Sleep. The Inquisition needs you now more than ever.”

Wha-- The darkness rose even before he could complete the thought.

The pain was less the next time he awoke, far less like crystals shifting under his skin and in his bones and more like simply being stabbed in his palm by a dagger. Again the hand claimed his, again elvish soothed the pain away, and again Dorian fell into dreamless slumber. It wasn’t until he awoke the third time that he was able to move, was able to open his eyes and see the world for more than a bleary second or two. He didn’t move, though, and simply lay limp on the bed as he struggled to reconcile what he remembered with his strange awakenings.

Again a hand fell on his shoulder, but when he turned his head to look, fully expecting Solas, he instead found a far more severe face awaiting him. “Lady Cassandra,” he murmured, then gasped as his hand twitched in pain.

“Just relax, Dorian,” Cassandra said in a hushed tone. “Solas said that it might hurt for a while yet.”

“What might hurt--” He grunted as another stab went through his hand, and this time he managed to lift his hand and look at it, expecting to see it ruined by the cave-in. Instead, he stared, dumbfounded, as his hand suddenly lit with a familiar green flame, and an itching arose in the back of his mind. “What-- No, no, no, this is Mailani’s mark, she--”

“--is dead,” Cassandra said, the finality in her tone brooking no argument. “Iron Bull and Solas
managed to pull you out, but your hand was already like that when they found you.”

Dorian shook his head, ignoring the way the movement made the room spin. “She’ll come back, just like she did before.” Anything seemed more likely than Mailani being dead. “Corypheus couldn’t kill her at Haven. I won’t accept that she’s gone!”

I’m sorry...

He paused, looking around warily. “Did you hear that?” he whispered.

Sorry... An echo, a whisper, a sorrow, a memory... Or was it something more?

“I heard nothing, Dorian,” Cassandra said with a weary sigh. Her face was tight and drawn, the circles under her eyes deep and dark. “All I know is that somehow we now have an Inquisitor who is even less popular with the Chantry and the people of Thedas than a Dalish elf was. The Herald of Andraste is dead, and in her place we have a mage from the Tevinter Imperium. At this rate we’ll be lucky if even Leliana and Josephine can win us any support at all.”

“I could have sworn I heard-- Wait.” Dorian blinked and looked up at Cassandra. “New... new what?”

“You bear the mark now, Dorian. The Anchor is yours. You have... further to go to gain everyone’s trust, but you are the Inquisitor now. Or at least, you have the right to earn the title, just as Mailani did.” Cassandra patted him on the chest, then rose to her feet. “Sleep now. I’ll have some food and water brought up to you.”

Dorian would have objected, but the swaying of the world had been steadily increasing as Cassandra spoke, and his eyelids fluttered before falling shut.

The last thing he heard before he fell into slumber once more was, I’m sorry, Dorian.
Chapter Summary

Cullen can't quite figure out how to live in a world without Mailani Lavellan, but he won't let himself slow down long enough to feel the pain.

Chapter Notes

This is one of the few chapters I've written where I cried for the character while writing. Be warned: Cullen is very unhappy here.

The voices filled the air like annoying insects, filling Cullen with the overwhelming urge to swat at them. He knew that a lot of things needed to be discussed and crucial decisions had to be made, but none of it seemed to be of any importance. Before him lay the expanse of Orlais and Ferelden, crucial points of interest meticulously marked by various bits of wood and horn and bone, and yet his eyes stared at it all without actually seeing any of it.

Something was missing.

The empty spot on the opposite side of the large table loomed in his mind, driving out all other concerns or cares. Someone should be there, someone with a shy smile and a lively gleam to her eyes, someone who had not even heard of Andraste before suddenly being declared Her Herald, someone whose long, thin fingers ending with archer’s callouses had had an innate ability to chase away the pain and sorrow when the cravings got to be too much. Someone who had never judged him, who had filled a place in his life, in his heart - in his very soul - with a gentleness and warmth he’d never known before.

Something was missing.

His hand worked at the empty place at his side where a sword hilt usually rested, and something flashed through his mind: a darkened tunnel, Inquisition soldiers everywhere, mad chaos reigning as each man frantically moved stone and earth and reality itself in a desperate attempt to find the Herald. A voice calling his name, the urgency of its tone pulling him down into the tunnel where most of the rock had fallen. She’s here, Commander! A desperate scramble through rock and dirt and clouds of dust, ignoring the choking lack of air and the pain in his lungs at the chance that perhaps, perhaps she could be saved.

Cullen’s eyelids fluttered shut, but he could not unsee it. Could not forget skidding to a halt as the crew of soldiers heaved away the last rock. Could not forget the sound of the groans of dismay echoing in the cavern. Could not turn away at the sight of her crushed, tiny body, blood everywhere, no life, no hope of life, no hope at all. Could not bear to leave without first kneeling down to place a kiss on the dried blood covering her forehead, or to hold back the tears, or forget the rage that had coursed through him as he’d realized that she was truly, utterly, completely gone.

Something was missing.
“Commander?”

His eyes opened, and he turned to the red-haired woman who had spoken his name - most likely more than once - and stared at her silently for a few moments before finally nodding. “I’m sorry. Yes?”

There was sympathy on her face. It was an expression he’d become quite familiar with in the last few days. Everyone knew of his loss, and everyone was afraid to speak of it. In a way, that made the pain even worse, as if the silence simply amplified the agony. “If you need time, Commander--” she began, voice soft.

He shook his head. “Better to work,” he said. Distantly he heard the strain in his voice, the hoarseness from the hours of trying not to weep before succumbing in the wee hours of the night. Clearing his throat, ignoring the pain as he did so, he straightened and tried to force himself to look more alert. “What did you need?”

“I would like a report on our soldiers. I can’t help but notice that the number appears to have dwindled.” The concern didn’t leave her face, but at least she let them both pretend to dwell only upon business.

Cullen shrugged. “People are leaving. Without the Her-- With the In--” He stopped and took a steadying breath. “Many have lost their motivation to serve the Inquisition.” And I’m not really trying to stop them, he admitted with a distant guilt. It just… didn’t seem worth it, somehow. “Plus we’re running out of supplies as it is.”

“That is most certainly true,” Josephine noted, looking up from her clipboard. “Quite a bit of the financial support for the Inquisition has been withdrawn, either on a permanent basis or because they wish to see how we will deal with our current crisis of leadership. It becomes a spiral, then: we lose the ability to retain troops, and thus lose the ability to send them out to garner supplies, and then lose even more influence.” For a moment her pen stopped dancing on the paper, and Josephine sighed. “It is a difficult time.”

Cullen’s lips twisted. Crisis of leadership. “You mean no one wants to have anything to do with--”

“Thank you, Josephine,” Leliana said, hastily interrupting Cullen before he could finish his sentence. “We knew there would be challenges after… what happened.”

Before he knew that his hand was even in motion, Cullen’s fist slammed down on the table, sending a spike of pain shooting up his arm as he agitated the bruises on his knuckles. “After she died. After Mailani died. Why won’t you just say it?” he demanded. “No, instead you have to dance around it. Crisis of leadership.” He snorted, ignoring Josephine’s discomfort as she turned away. “The Inquisitor’s dead, and all of you just to pretend that things can go back to some farcical state of normalcy!”

“Cullen!” That voice came from the doorway, an edge of command in it that only Cullen himself could ever hope to match. Cassandra marched into the room, eyes flinty as they took in the trio and came to rest on Cullen. “What has happened has affected us all. None of us would deny your pain, but I will ask that you recall that we all held her in the highest regard.” Her gaze flicked to the empty place, the first person to look since the advisors had entered the room, and her expression softened. “No one would think less of you for needing time, Cullen,” she told him softly.

“I can work through it,” he insisted, looking everywhere but at that empty place. “I need to--” He stopped and cleared his throat. Her words had made an impact, as they usually did, and he took a moment to slowly breathe in and out before turning to Josephine. “I’m sorry, Ambassador. My
words were… poorly chosen.”

“It is forgotten, Commander,” Josephine replied immediately. “These are difficult times for all of us.” She didn’t speak of why it was more difficult for him in particular, of course, but it hovered in the air around them, a weight they couldn’t ignore any more than they could ignore her death.

Cullen opened his mouth to respond, but a movement at the door caught his attention. His head snapped around, and a fierce scowl came to his face. “What is he doing here?”

Cassandra looked to where Dorian stood, obviously uncomfortable in a way no one present had ever seen before. “I asked him to come here, now that he’s the-”

“Don’t say it.” Cullen’s voice cracked through the air like a whip, halting whatever Cassandra had been about to say.

“He bears the mark, Cullen,” Cassandra pointed out with a frown. “That is irrefutable fact now. The Inquisition must-”

“Maker’s breath, her clan just collected her remains yesterday and already you’re replacing her!” Cullen stormed past Leliana and Cassandra, and went to Dorian, shoving him into the hall leading to the war table room. “You don’t belong here!”

“Commander, I--” Dorian began.

Cullen didn’t relent, not even when Cassandra’s voice called his name sharply from behind him. He surged after the mage, all his impotent rage and directionless fury focusing on the man who would dare to take her place. His hands wrapped around the mage’s impossibly constructed shirt so that Cullen could shove him into the nearest wall. “You were the last one with her,” he grated, eyes narrowed in anger. “You were the last one who could have saved her, and you didn’t. You. Don’t. Belong.” He pushed the mage into the wall with each word for emphasis, never breaking eye contact.

Dorian’s pale eyes were wide with fear - fear, and a deep sorrow that Cullen refused to acknowledge because it wasn’t his. “I’m sorry,” he gasped. “I’m so sorry. I tried--”

“Well, obviously you weren’t good enough,” he snarled. “Pity it couldn’t have been you under those rocks.”

“Cullen!” Hands seized Cullen’s shoulders and ripped him away from Dorian, throwing the ex-Templar into the opposite wall with a metallic clatter. The impact was strong enough that he fell limply to the floor, the wind knocked out of him. “That is enough!”

Glaring up at Cassandra, Cullen slowly got to his feet and pointed to where Dorian had slumped down the wall. His rage hadn’t dimmed one whit. “Get him out of here. I won’t have the man who let her die remain in Skyhold.”

Cassandra’s slap caught him completely by surprise, rocking him back on his heels enough that he had to windmill his arms to remain on his feet. Her action had the intended effect, especially since she hadn’t pulled any of her strength, and snuffed his rage as effectively as if she’d used a bucket of water. A shocked silence reigned in the hallway as, still staring wordlessly at Cassandra, Cullen raised his hand to rub at his cheek, the pain and heat telling him that a bruise was already blossoming.

“I am going to assume that it was grief causing you to act in such a reprehensible fashion,” she told him in tight, clipped tones. “As such, I will not have you locked up in a cell for assault and slander
against a valued member of the Inquisition. As it is, Commander, I suggest you return to your quarters and think of several different ways to apologize to Dorian for both your words and your deeds.”

His breathing grew faster as he stumbled back to lean against the wall. “Maker, Cassandra, I’m sorr-

“Now, Cullen. And I am not the one from whom you should seek forgiveness.” She turned to look at Dorian, who was being helped to his feet by Leliana and Josephine.

Cullen automatically followed her gaze, wincing when he saw how badly askew he’d left the man’s clothes, though the marks of tears on the mage’s cheeks were somehow worse. As he made an attempt to move to Dorian, a half-formulated apology forming in his head, Cassandra reached out and grabbed his arm.

“Quarters, now.” Her voice was quiet, but firm. “Let him recover.”

Nodding slightly, Cullen turned and stumbled down the corridor, pausing only to look back over his shoulder once he reached the door to Josephine’s office. Cassandra stood in front of the door like a sentinel, arms crossed over her chest and expression stern, and no one else was in sight. Cullen fumbled with the door handle for a moment, then quickly shoved the door open, shutting it just as fast behind him.

Once inside, he leaned back, sliding down to the floor as his breath came in hard and fast pants and his eyes squeezed shut. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Even he didn’t know if he was apologizing to Cassandra, to Dorian, or to someone else entirely.

I’m sorry…

He gasped, eyes opening wide. “That voice… No.” Landing his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands and leaned forward. “No, it can’t be. Mailani?”

I’m so sorry…

Of course, it wasn’t her. It couldn’t possibly be. It was a memory, an echo of the guilt he felt, a phantom lingering in his mind coming out to haunt him when he was at his most vulnerable. Maker knew that Cullen was familiar enough with actual demons doing the same thing, so why shouldn’t the memory of the dead love of his life do the same?

Somehow, he managed to get to his feet. Somehow, he found his way back to his quarters, barred the doors, shucked his armor and clothing onto the floor, and laboriously climbed up to his bed. Rolling onto his back, he stared at the sky overhead for a few moments, but that calm didn’t last. Curling onto his side, he let the tears come again, the sobs heaving his shoulders as he occasionally punched the headboard, bruising the knuckles even further.

After he’d exhausted himself, the claws of sleep wrapped around him and held tight. As his eyelids dragged shut, the ghost - real or imagined, it truly did not matter - returned one last time, earning a final tear as he slipped into slumber.

I’m sorry.
Cullen’s back slammed into the ground with enough force to empty his lungs as he struggled against
the flame-wreathed figure above him. With a kick fueled by galvanized desperation, Cullen lashed
out, pushing the rage demon back and rolling away. By the time he’d completed the roll, the demon
had vanished. Just like always.

Nightmare. It’s just a nightmare, he reminded himself sternly as he lay on his back and closed his
eyes, desperately trying to pull himself from the Fade. It’s why he’d turned to alcohol in the last few
days to help him fall asleep, once the reality of Mailani’s death had finally sunk in. Drink made the
dreams duller, more distant.

But I didn’t drink myself into a stupor this time, did I? No, it had been grief which pulled him down,
and now all of his demons were trying to return home.

The ground beneath him shifted, changing into a bed - his bed, he suspected, though he did not open
his eyes - and a hand slipped over his waist as a familiar sensation nuzzled his cheek. “Bad dreams
again?” a voice asked softly.

Maker, no. No, not this again. “Go away,” he gritted between clenched teeth. “You’ve tried this
before, and I won’t fall for it.” Again.

A hand reached up to stroke his hair in that peculiarly gentle fashion that sang of Mailani to him.
“Do you really want me to leave? At least you can pretend for a while.”

“Go away!” Cullen made as if to strike at the desire demon, and ended up falling to the ground as
the bed disappeared, leaving him surrounded by nothing but the slowly shifting grey and green
landscape of the Fade and the lingering laughter of the demon.

Groaning, he pulled himself into a sitting position and buried his head in his hands. All he needed
was a moment, a calm moment, to leave the nightmare and force himself awake, as he had countless
times since Kirkwall.

“What do you think? White or red?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Inquisitor. Don’t you think pink would suit me rather well? My eyes do make
certain colors pop so incredibly well.”

A light, familiar laugh. “Pink it is, then.”

“So long as it isn’t that Maker-be-damned plaideweave.”

Cullen frowned as he looked up at the sound of the two voices. That was… different. Struggling to
his feet, he found himself on the ramparts of Skyhold, looking at the backs of two people leaning
against the stones to take in the view. He recognized the one on the right immediately, would have
known that slight form and constantly tousled hair anywhere.
“Flowers don’t come in plaideweave, Dorian,” the elf told the man beside her in an overly-serious voice.

“Oh, thank the Maker, or whichever gods to whom you sing your praises,” Dorian breathed in a suitably dramatic fashion. “I’m not sure my delicate sensibilities could handle that.”

“I only made that mistake once,” Mailani protested, then reached up to try to straighten her hair. It never worked - her hair was permanently mussed. “I’m not sure how we’ll get flowers to Skyhold,” the elf added as she looked at the mage with that achingly familiar smile on her face. “We’re a bit far away from flower dotted meadows now.”

Dorian turned to face her, his mustache twitching with amusement. “Oh, come, my dear. Don’t give up hope. Why, if you can grow that troll snot in the garden here, I’m sure we can arrange for a few flowers. Enough for at least two head wreaths, at any rate.”

Cullen’s brow wrinkled as he realized that this was no demon, no manipulation. It was Dorian, standing there on the ramparts with someone who… well… No, no, don’t think about it. Cullen looked around, taking in the fact that the ramparts weren’t connected to anything, and that the sky was as strange and hard to look at as it always was in the Fade. But Dorian was real.

And then it hit him: this was a dream. It just wasn’t Cullen’s dream.

“Ghoul’s beard, not troll snot!” Mailani insisted, though she was obviously trying not to laugh. “It has many medicinal purposes and can be made into a tincture for--”

Dorian waved a hand. “Yes, yes, you’ve told me all of that before. It still looks like troll snot.”

Cullen couldn’t help but stare as he realized he’d actually never seen the two of them banter like this. A tiny part of him was even starting to feel a little bit jealous, especially when Mailani clapped both of her hands over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

The jealousy faded, however, when Dorian opened his mouth again. “So Cullen’s the one, hmm?”

Mailani blushed, but didn’t look away. “Yes. Yes, I think so.”

“He’s handsome enough, I suppose - if you like the type,” Dorian mused, “but is that enough to make up for all that sass of his?”

Mailani laughed, that crystal clear laugh of hers which always sent shivers up Cullen’s spine. “Oh, you’re terrible! There’s a lot more to him than sass!”

Dorian smirked as he scrutinized Mailani, eyes twinkling with mirth. “Oh, he must be a fantastic kisser, then, to get that expression on your face.”

“Dorian!” Mailani and Cullen said together, but neither Mailani nor Dorian seemed to hear Cullen.

Ignoring her protest, Dorian continued, “A shem, Mailani! Oh, the shame! Why, you with a shem for a boyfriend would be like me having a… a…”

“A Dalish elf for a best friend?” she countered.

Dorian’s face softened. “Yes. Precisely. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if our ancestors were all
rolling over in their mutual graves. Or they would be, if mine weren’t little piles of ash and yours weren’t… wait, how do the Dalish tend to their dead?”

Mailani waggled her finger at him. “Oh, no, you’re not distracting me this time. I want to know what you really think, Dorian. And… well, you know, if you have any advice on how to handle it properly…” Her voice trailed away as she looked up at him with an entreatying look on her face.

Dorian faced her fully, mien more serious. “Well, you’re the Inquisitor and he’s the Commander. People will talk, though not nearly as much as if it were, for example, you and me. Evil Tevinter magister trumps everything in the South, as far as I can tell. So with him, the main concern will be controlling the gossip, since you won’t be able to avoid it. Be careful to avoid too many lingering looks and starry-eyed glances, but at the same time ensure that there is enough affection between you in public that they don’t think you’re hiding something or, worse, lying about something. Don’t change anything about his office, or his work duties, particularly in the beginning when you want to diminish rumors of favoritism, but don’t make it look like he’s a secret no one should know about, either. Private, but not a shame - that should be your guiding line on how to handle the court’s speculation.”

Mailani nodded slowly as Cullen raised his eyebrows, reluctantly impressed by the advice. He doubted Josephine could have added anything to it. “It’s so different back home,” Mailani sighed. “There, I would just make a wreath and put it on his head, and he’d do the same for me, and everyone would know where we stood. It’s so complicated here.”

Dorian patted her hand sympathetically. “Well, we shems are a bit misguided, aren’t we? Certainly I am.”

She gave him a wan smile. “You got better.”

“Because of you,” he reminded her, then reached out and lifted her chin so their eyes could meet. “He’s a good man, though I suspect you don’t need me to tell you that.”

Mailani blushed and shook her head. “No,” she said softly.

Dorian suddenly grinned. “Then I suppose I also don’t need to tell you that if he ever hurts you, I’ll freeze his sausage and nuggins until they fall clean off.”

“Dorian!” came the unacknowledged chorus again, and Mailani giggled. “That’s terrible!”

“Yes, well, men can be primal creatures,” Dorian pointed out airily as he tapped the end of Mailani’s nose with his finger. “Sometimes a threat is the only way to get our attention.”

Mailani laughed before turning to look out at the mountains around Skyhold. “I’ll let you tell him that, then.”

“Oh, fine, it’s all on me, then,” Dorian grumbled as he mimicked her posture, gaze sweeping over the landscape. After a moment, the mage glanced at Mailani once more. “I know this is a dream,” he said quietly, a depth of sadness in his voice which Cullen had never heard before. “I wouldn’t be much of a mage if I couldn’t tell the Fade from reality, but it’s been good to see you again, even if you’re just a… a memory.”

Mailani looked at him, and Cullen’s heart ached at the sight of the sorrow on her face. He watched as she reached out to touch Dorian’s clasped hands. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

And then something pushed Cullen, sending him stumbling backwards and off the ramparts.
Cullen’s eyes flew open, and he jerked himself up onto his elbows as he looked around the tower. The stars twinkled above, indicating he hadn’t quite managed to sleep through the night, but nothing seemed out of place or felt like the Fade, nightmare or otherwise.

Taking a deep breath, he let himself fall back into the blankets, pondering what, precisely, he had witnessed and trying to make sense of it. The longer he thought about it, the less he could recall of the details, yet the impact of what he’d seen continued to resonate deep within. When the sky above slowly began to lighten, he sighed and forced himself out of bed. He had work to do.

With any luck, maybe this time he could work hard enough to actually forget.
Dorian settles into the reality of an Inquisition with the Herald of Andraste, even though lingering questions remain.

The sad smile on Dorian’s face lingered after waking, the impression of a comforting, if poignant, dream difficult to dismiss. Granted, no smile ever lasted past his morning bath, and probably never would. It was a ritual by now, with water heated by magic and softened with an ever-diminishing supply of scented oils bought with the last of the money he’d gained from selling his heritage. The scarcity made each drop of water precious, a spur to ensure that he looked his best every day as a personal reminder of what he’d lost, what he’d given up, and what had been taken. He’d hoped to make the supply last until they defeated Corypheus and the Venatori, but he doubted that would now be true.

And that was assuming the Inquisition survived Mailani’s death.

I’m so sorry…

He paused in the act of drying himself with his towel. That… was not his thought. A whisper on the very edge of hearing, a memory of something borne anew on the winds of conscious… but it wasn’t his mind which had created those words. He glanced down at his left hand, glimmering a fitful green in the growing light of the rising sun, and frowned thoughtfully.

“I’d be a poor mage if I didn’t wonder how this came to be on my hand,” he said softly. “Even Corypheus could not unseat it with all the power of the orb.” He felt a pricking at the back of his eyes and quickly fought it down. “I’ll figure it out, I promise you. I never broke a promise to you, save one.”

The light on his palm flared once, then flickered out.

Hand clenching into a fist, he looked out of his narrow window, eyes burning with more than just the bright sun. “Maker, why did I have to fail that one?”

He blinked a few times, then looked away and finished his morning ablutions quietly. By the time he was done, the sun had risen high enough that it was out of view of his window, and he knew it was time to leave the dubious safety of his quarters.

The moment he was outside his chambers, Dorian felt them: the eyes. Expecting, weighing, judging, and, above all, everywhere. Even at home, he’d rarely felt this amount of scrutiny - he’d been a prominent Altus when he’d behaved, and a notorious one when he’d chosen not to do so, but it hadn’t been quite the same. In Skyhold, now and the last few days, he was caught in the limbo of ‘expected to fail but hadn’t quite managed it yet’.

At least I’m fairly sure I’ll meet their low expectations, he thought bitterly to himself. It seems to be my lot in life. Still, it wouldn’t do to show a surly exterior, particularly when the Inquisition was already treading on such thin ice, so he put on what he hoped was a pleasant expression while wending his way to the War Room to meet with the Iron Trio, as he was quickly learning to call
them in his head. There was something implacable about the way Cassandra, Leliana, and Josephine kept trying to prepare him for a role he had no desire to fill, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to tell them to simply let him close rifts and nothing more.

Even worse were the rumors whipping around him as he made his way determinedly through Skyhold. Rumors had been a pervasive part of his youth, after all, so his ears were attuned to hearing their pernicious susurrations, especially the half-whispers that were supposedly secret, but not really meant to be.

...lying to keep us here. The mark died with the Herald...

...follow a magister from the Imperium? They must be mad! Best to start packing...

...heard he let her die under those rocks, just to take the mark...

...Commander said that? Really? Well, he would know, wouldn’t he?

The last comments made him cringe internally, though he didn’t let it show. Apparently there truly were no secrets in Skyhold, even when the so-called secrets were exaggerations or outright lies. Still, he listened carefully, noting each and every variation. _Rumors_ he understood, and _rumors_ could be countered - if one knew of them. He’d been the cause of so very many iterations of them back home that ferreting them out had become second nature.

I’ll be comparing notes with Leliana later, I’m certain, he sighed. When he was just a Tevinter nobody, he hadn’t particularly cared. Now...

_What does the Iron Trio expect of me?_ he wondered again. _I’m dashing, but hardly a leader. Not like--_ He stopped that thought before he could complete it. _Well, I’m sure they’ll see reason soon enough._

As he walked through the main hall towards the war room, however, a commotion near the throne at the far end caught his eye. Though tempted to pass on by, he asked himself silently, _What would the Inquisitor do?_ and kept moving towards it. In his mind, of course, always and forever, the _Inquisitor_ would be Mailani.

As he approached, voices could be heard arguing, and he hovered long enough to get an idea of the situation. It became clear that a few of Cullen’s soldiers were standing in front of the Inquisitor’s throne, looking at each other nervously as their lieutenant argued with the man at the head of a group, presumably men and women who had come to join the cause - the Herald’s cause, that is. Dorian’s heart sank as he identified their leader as Horsemaster Dennet, but wasn’t particularly surprised. There were few in Skyhold who had been more staunch supporters of Mailani than Dennet.

“Seeker Cassandra has said no one is to touch the throne,” the lieutenant declared firmly, her arms crossed across her chest as she stared up at the man in front of her.

Dennet set his hands on his hips, jaw set. “Well, the people of Skyhold disagree with you,” he said, then pointed at the throne. “That is the Inquisition’s throne. And she’s gone.” Those words were spoken more quietly, and a number of the people gathered behind him bowed their head, a moment during which Dorian moved around the crowd to be closer to the front. The moment passed, however, when the man looked up with a stubborn expression. “I say we need to move it before the Vint sets his magister’s fat ass on it!”

Dorian glanced up to the heavens and gave an inward sigh. _Honestly._ Granted, as insults went, it was a fairly pathetic attempt, and for a moment he was tempted to simply turn around and walk away, as he always had before. He’d known from the moment he’d joined the Inquisition that he would never
be able to win their hearts and minds. His friendship with Mailani had proven to be a rare and precious thing in a world of disdainful looks and caustic judgments. As a mere follower of the Herald, he’d had the luxury of turning his other cheeks and walking away. Now… he flexed his hand slightly as it flared, the pain and the burden of the Anchor forcing him to take a deep breath.

*Very well. If I am to be her legacy, I shall do it properly. By going on the offensive, of course.*

He’d learned long ago the value of fighting anger with a sharp wit and sharper tongue, and he saw no reason to spare any of the people gathered before the throne from either. After heaving a loud, melodramatic sigh, Dorian began to cluck his tongue. “Oh, my blushing buttcheeks! *Please,* my good man. Is that really any way to insult someone?”

The guards and the people in the small crowd whirled to face him, and a few in the crowd started to edge away as Dennet’s expression darkened further. Before the man could say anything in response, however, Dorian continued. “What a hodgepodge of vitriol! Why, I’m uncertain where to even begin. For one, I am no Magister. The proper term is Altus. And for another, your phrasing was absolutely atrocious.”

As the Horsemaster’s jaw dropped at this unexpected rejoinder, Dorian slowly walked to stand close to the lieutenant, tapping his lips thoughtfully with steepled fingers. “Perhaps you could have used ‘the fat ass of the magister’ or ‘fat Vint’s Magister ass.’” He paused and pretended to consider it, head tilted as if in deep contemplation. “No, no, that wouldn’t do. Perhaps you should stick with ‘move it before the Magister’s fat Tevinter ass breaks it’.” He beamed at Dennet. “That rolls off the tongue much more properly, don’t you think?”

Now more than a few people were staring at him, and, to his relief, he saw a few grins appear among the sea of furrowed brows and angry glares. Dennet kept staring at Dorian, even when Dorian took advantage of the fact to step forward and clap his hand on the man’s shoulder firmly.

“Now. Here, my horsey friend,” he said with a sweeping wave of his left hand, grateful for once for the pain as the green light flickered and glowed despite the bright sunlight streaming through the windows, “we have the throne of the Inquisition, as you said. Of the Herald of Andraste. Of my dear friend, Mailani Lavellan.” He looked at it, not bothering to disguise the choking of his voice. “And you’re right. I am neither Herald, nor Inquisition, and certainly not worthy of sitting upon it, whether my buttcheeks blush or not.” That earned him a few titters from the people gathered behind him as well as from one of the guards standing next to the throne. To lessen the tension even more, he leaned in towards Dennet and said in a loud whisper, “You don’t *really* think my ass is fat, do you? It fits in those saddles of yours quite well, I thought.”

That earned a snort even from Dennet, though he valiantly tried to pretend it wasn’t amusement by frowning sternly. Pressing ahead with the advantage, Dorian said in a hearty voice, “What say you we turn it to face the wall, hmm?” He made a twisting gesture with his glowing hand, noting with satisfaction as the man stared at the green light. “Hard to claim any authority that’s not yours when you’re staring at a wall of bricks, wouldn’t you say?”

When Dennet didn’t reply immediately, the lieutenant dared to step forward. “With respect, Ser, Seeker Cassandra said—”

Dorian flipped his hand in a dismissive gesture, knowing it again brought all eyes upon it. He knew how rumors worked. He’d heard the bits and pieces earlier, but saw the life of those rumors in their eyes as they widened whenever the Anchor blazed and crackled. Oh, it hurt like the blazes, but it was necessary to be seen, in this case, to counter the whispers that it was all a lie, that the Inquisition was doomed. Granted, there were the other rumors still to tackle, but only one step need be taken at a time. “Come, come, lieutenant. Lay all the blame on me, if you like, and I shan’t say any differently
to the Seeker herself.” Pointing a trifle dramatically at the throne, he again clapped his hand on the Horsemaster’s shoulder. “What say you?”

Abruptly Dennet nodded. “Aye. We’ll turn it around.” He waved the crowd forward, and Dorian surged forward with them, earning some startled glances and a few approving nods. With a great deal of effort, they all turned the heavy throne around until the owl calmly faced the wall.

Once the deed was done, Dorian turned to the people around him and smiled. “There we are. No usurpers allowed.”

He watched as the crowd - which now included a fair bit more than just those who had followed the Horsemaster in the first place - heard those words, and waited for the moment when listening turned to understanding, then beyond. What he was looking for was acceptance - either of him or the idea that he wasn’t trying to replace the Herald. As the nods he was looking for began to spread through the crowd, he turned to Dennet. “The Inquisition still needs us, even if she can no longer stand here and tell us herself.” He held out his right hand. “Will you stay, for her sake?”

The words hung there for a moment, and then Dennet reached out and took Dorian’s hand in a firm shake as he nodded. “Aye, that I will. For now. Who’s to say what tomorrow shall bring?”

“Hopefully no more rifts and no more Corypheus. I rather think that would make everyone happy, don’t you think?” Dorian asked with a smile.

“That’s the Maker’s own truth,” the man grunted. For a moment, Dennet’s gaze remained on Dorian, but then he nodded. “We’ll just be on our way then.”

And… that was that. Dennet looked at the crowd still gathered around them and said, “To work! The Inquisition needs us!”

As the people slowly started to disperse, Dorian couldn’t help but wave at them with his glowing left hand, using a smile to cover the grimace of pain as he wiggled his fingers at everyone. Then they were gone - except for one. The blond man stood directly in front of Dorian, arms crossed over his chest and a little smirk on his face as he inclined his head. “You handled that well,” Cullen said. “I was just coming to deal with them myself.”

Dorian’s heart sped up slightly, his bruises not so quick to forget the events of yesterday as Cullen’s smile was. “Commander,” he said with an easy smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Had I known you were already summoned, I wouldn’t have bothered to get involved.”

“Then I’m glad you didn’t know.” Cullen glanced back at the people in the hall, then stepped closer to Dorian so he could speak in a lower voice, though his brow furrowed as Dorian instinctively swayed back from him. He glanced at the guards, then gestured to the door to his left. “Might I have a word?”

Dorian swallowed, but knew he couldn’t refuse the man. He could, however, control the situation, at least a little bit. “Of course, Commander. I was just on my way to the War Room. Perhaps you could accompany me.” He gave Cullen a nod and hurried past him, using briskness to conceal what actually felt like a retreat as he headed for the door to Josie’s office. The sound of Cullen’s boots could be heard after a beat of hesitation, but he still managed to get past the second door into Josie’s office before Cullen could corner him in that small space between. His smile faltered when he saw that Josephine wasn’t at her desk, but he quickly repaired it as he pivoted to face Cullen. “And here we are. Josephine must be in the War Room waiting for me with the others.” I will be missed if I’m late.
Cullen sighed. “Yes, I know.” His brows furrowed. “They don’t want me to join you until I’ve offered my apology.”

Join us... Pushing past the discomfort that arose with that thought, he raised an idle eyebrow.

“Apology, Commander? Oh, for that little scuffle we had yesterday? Pray give it no mind. Why, I’ve had far worse than that just wandering the countryside with--” His smile faltered, and he quickly amended what he had been about to say. “Just… wandering the countryside. Have you ever run across the length of the Hinterlands with a pack of demons on your tail? I think not. I’ll be perfectly all right.”

“No, I--” Distracted, Cullen looked at Dorian with a surprised look on his face. “Wait, have you?”

“A rather ignominious series of events, Commander.” Yes, repeating the word helped keep the distance, kept the person hidden behind the title. Absently he flexed his hand as it began to itch. “Not my finest moment, I’ll admit, but someone had to play bait to give the others time to--” He stopped, then, looking at his hand with a grimace as the itch flared into sudden, sharp pain.

“Is everything quite all right?” Cullen asked. “Is the mark giving you pain?”

Shaking his hand, Dorian chuckled and held it behind his back as he shook his head. “Oh, no. Just getting used to the glow. Let’s go to the War Room, shall we?” he asked, then began to head to the back door of Josephine’s office.

Cullen took a few large steps after him, his hand landing on Dorian’s arm. “Dorian,” he said in an urgent voice.

Stepping smoothly out of the grip, he turned to face Cullen with a brittle smile on his face. “I already told you, Commander--”

“Please, just... just hear me out.” Cullen reached up and rubbed at his forehead for a moment. “There are a lot of excuses I could try to claim for my behavior yesterday, but I won’t. The truth of the matter is that I treated you abhorrently. I forgot that you were a valued member of the Inquisition and...” He stopped, then shook his head. “That sounds... that’s... Let me try again.”

“Commander, I assure you, these measures are not necessary.” You’re still who you are, and I am still what I am, and what I always shall be. “We can work together as the Inquisition demands it. I belong to it now, after all. This little glowy thing just makes it more... official.” He tried for a smile as he waved his hand in front of his face. “Just try not to break any more walls with me, would you? Skyhold is an old, crumbling heap, after all. Who knows how much damage it can take from a sufficiently determined push?” He started to turn to the door.

Cullen’s groan of exasperation halted him, and Dorian glanced back in time to see Cullen bury his face in his hands. After a few moments, the man looked up, face still pale and a bit sweaty, but with a determined expression. “It won’t happen again. Just... please. Give me a chance. I promise there won’t be a next time.”

I’ll do better next time, Father. The words popped unbidden into Dorian’s mind, part and parcel of the way he’d arranged his thoughts since deciding that his departure from his family needed to be permanent. Please, give me another chance! Ruthlessly he pushed the memory of that vulnerable little boy away, refusing to think of why it had suddenly appeared in the first place.

Mouth inexplicably dry, Dorian inhaled sharply, left hand automatically rising to knead his brow. The very touch of that green light on his face made him flinch, and he hissed softly as he pulled his hand away quickly and stared at it. “Thank you, Commander. As you may have noticed, I am
apparently not a very gracious man, but I appreciate the sincerity of your words. I accept your promise.” he said softly. Clearing his throat, he said in a slightly stronger tone, “Perhaps you’d like to accompany me to the War Room, hmm? The Iron Trio will be expecting us by now, I’m sure.”

Cullen’s shoulders dropped a good two inches as Dorian spoke, but the last phrase earned a tired chuckle as he followed Dorian. “Iron Trio? I don’t even need to ask who you mean.”

“They’d be insulted if you did,” Dorian quipped as he led the way.

The meeting in the War Room turned out to be every bit as long and tedious as Dorian had feared, made worse by the not-quite-lecture Cassandra gave him regarding his handling of the situation with the throne. Although fruit and bread was already waiting for them when they arrived, the meeting stretched on long enough that more food and chairs were brought in shortly after the sun passed its peak. A while after that, Cassandra looked at Cullen and frowned. “Are you all right, Cullen?”

Cullen blinked as he looked at her from his chair, and Dorian realized it had been quite a while since he had contributed to the discussion. Though the food had improved his color initially, now he was just as pale as he had been when he’d approached Dorian this morning. Despite that, his face was gleaming with sweat, and Dorian frowned. “You’d better go take care of that headache,” he told Cullen. “Give it another hour, and you won’t be able to shake it for days.”

“And how would you know that?” Cullen snapped, then sighed and raised his hand to rub at his forehead. “My apologies. Perhaps you’re right.” He sighed, then stood. “I think you know as much as you need to about our troops and their deployment, anyway, given how few remain.” He grimaced, though this time it was more at his words than his pain. “I shall leave you to your work.”

“Cullen,” Cassandra said as the man stood, waiting until she had his attention. “Take care of yourself.” There was an odd note of caution in her voice as she said it, and Cullen nodded.

“Understood, Lady Seeker,” Cullen said, the formality odd to Dorian until he saw the little smile on Cassandra’s face as she watched the Commander leave.

*Private joke, most likely.* “How much more of this must I endure myself?” he asked as the door closed behind Cullen.

Josephine smiled apologetically to him. “Perhaps we could take a quick break in an hour or two?”

Dorian groaned and buried his head in his hands. “*Kaffās.* And I thought lectures in the Circle were bad.” With a sigh, he leaned back in his seat and glared at the map. “But we’re done with Orlais at least. What about that letter from Anora? I’d like to see that again.”

By the time he emerged from the War Room - although blessedly they’d been allowed a few breaks in the meantime - the sky was indigo, his back was stiff, and his head and hand were throbbing in pain. All he really wanted to do was go to the tavern and get a drink, or perhaps sneak a wine bottle out of the cellar and go to his room. *Maybe two bottles. It’s been that sort of a day.*

So when he emerged from Josephine’s office, the immediate hush which fell didn’t really *register.* He felt their eyes upon him, of course, but that was more obvious, even with masks, and so common as to be insignificant. Instead he just nodded to the nearest Orlesian noble - their masks made them interchangeable, really - and began to work his way through the room, unconsciously moving to the main door and the tavern before he remembered that perhaps that wouldn’t be the best idea. After all, he’d gone from *Tevinter pariah* to even lower. Would they even let him in? Well, the Iron Bull would drink with him, he was certain of that - the man had little subtlety in some things. Tonight,
Dorian was precisely in the kind of mood which would lead him to consider things he’d never pondered before, too.

As he stood on the threshold of the main hall, trying to decide if he was tired enough to go back to his bed or awake enough to contemplate seeking another’s, the hush swelled into a quiet symphony of words. A trick of the acoustics in the hall brought the distant whispers to him, caressing his ears with hints of rumors and secrets.

...declared no usurpers. What is his game?...

...Once a Vint, always a Vint...

...clearly has the mark. He doesn’t claim authority...

...worth watching, I think. Perhaps this isn’t the end...

A little smile came to his face, unseen by anyone behind him, and he held up his left hand long enough to glance at it, flexing the pain away as it flared. “I will be her legacy,” he said softly.

“Sparkler!”

Blinking, Dorian turned and saw Varric waving him over. Curious, he moved to where the dwarf stood next to the fire, moving close enough to bask in its warmth as he replied, “Varric.”

“I’ve been waiting for them to let you escape for hours now,” Varric grunted. “What did you do, have to provide examples for the class? Forget to bring enough to share? You were in there an awfully long time.”

Dorian groaned. “Oh, please don’t remind me. I really just want some wine and my bed right now. So unless you’re willing to offer the former without intruding upon the latter, perhaps we could continue this conversation at a later time?”

“Keep your pants on, Sparkler.” Varric shifted from foot to foot, and Dorian frowned slightly as he realized for the first time that Varric’s forehead was beaded with sweat.

“Varric, are you quite all right?” he asked, voice dropping slightly.

Heaving a sigh, the dwarf looked up the hall, apparently equally aware of the eyes upon Dorian at the moment. Finally, he gave a little shrug. “Look, Sparkler, I’m just here to look pretty and tell people what they need to do. And you need to go to the study in the basement.”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed momentarily. The request was… odd, to say the least, and the timing put it into an even more questionable light. “I did pay you those sovereigns I owed you, didn’t I?” Dorian asked lightly. “If not, it would be easier to simply ask for them, you know.”

That brought a grin to Varric’s face. “Don’t worry, Sparkler. If I wanted all your money, I’d just challenge you to another round of Wicked Grace.”

“I am not that poor a player,” Dorian protested.

“No, but your wineglass is,” the dwarf retorted with a smirk. “Just get going, would you? It’s… kind of important.”

Dorian frowned, though he banished it after only a moment to put the smile back on his face, all too aware of the eyes watching them. Questions raced through his mind in quick succession, but he
knew that it would, in the end, come down to whether or not he trusted Varric enough to take him strictly at his word. After a momentary struggle, and an internal reminder that Varric had always been the most forthright with him in praise or insult, Dorian chuckled. “All right, if it’s that important to you. We’re still on for Wicked Grace tomorrow, yes? I have some money I don’t need anymore, after all.”

Varric visibly relaxed and laughed. “Wouldn’t miss it, Sparkler. I need some more money for paper and ink, anyway.”

With a sly wink, Dorian nodded to the dwarf. “I’d better go get some wine for it, then.” For those watching, it would provide a perfectly good reason to explain why he backtracked and headed to the door leading to the lower levels of Skyhold.

When he reached the study, he found the door slightly ajar with a light glowing within. A reluctance abruptly seized him, partly because of the mystery, but also because this had been where Mailani went when she’d wanted time alone. Her quarters were a bit too easy to find, but most people still got lost trying to find the wine cellar, so it had been ideal for her.

Finally he took a deep breath, nodded to himself, and pushed his way in.

As he passed by the bookshelves to get to the desk, his fingers idly traced along their spines. His eyes darted around in the dim light, looking for a person, or a package, or _anything_ which would indicate why it was so important for him to be down here. When he heard the door click shut behind him, however, he pivoted quickly, calling fire to his hand as he readied it for defense or attack as necessary. “Who’s there?”

“Calm yourself,” a deep male voice said from the doorway. “I mean you no harm.”

Dorian frowned. The voice was… familiar, but not enough he could match a face to it yet. When footsteps approached, he instinctively backed up and around the desk, even if it meant he ended up cornered. When the man finally entered the light, however, Dorian straightened from his combat crouch and let the fire dim away. “Your Excellency,” he said with a bow, buying himself some time to wipe the astonished look from his face.

“Please,” the man grunted as he crossed his arms across his chest. “I get enough of that in Kirkwall. I prefer Hawke.”

Dorian rounded the desk again, though he was still a trifle wary. “I thought you and the Warden had gone ahead to the Western Approach.”

“We got bored of waiting,” Hawke noted dryly. “So we found some merchants. You know how much they love to talk. Heard about the Inquisitor and decided to come out here. Quietly, of course. Aveline’s probably sent a bloody squad out looking for me by now without Bran knowing about it.”

Dorian glanced around reflexively, a slight frown on his face. “Is the Warden here?”

“In Skyhold, yes. Said he had to go see an old friend.” Hawke frowned. “But I really came here to see you. Are the rumors true? You’ve got the mark now?”

Holding up his left hand, Dorian looked at it as a green glow filled the study before fading away. “I have the mark, but no title or authority.”

“And the Inquisition is falling apart around you, I’d imagine,” Hawke said, shaking his head. “That whole ‘Herald of Andraste’ thing was a disaster waiting to happen anyway. If it’s one thing I learned in Kirkwall, it’s never mix religion with politics. However, Corypheus is still out there, and I’d be
lying if I said I don’t feel partially responsible for that. So I’m here to help.”

Dorian’s eyebrows rose, and for a moment he just stared at the man. Then he cleared his throat. “I see. Well. This just got incredibly interesting.”
Old Friends

Chapter Summary

Cullen meets an old friend in Herald's Rest.

“Another.”

Cabot glanced at the mug which had been slammed onto the counter in front of him, then back up at the man who had put it there. “Are you sure, Commander?” he asked, his normally implacable voice tinged with just a hint of doubt.

With a scowl, Cullen planted his hands on the flat plank of wood between them and leaned forward, glaring at the dwarf for good measure. “Did I stutter?” he growled. The headache was making it rather difficult to concentrate, but at least the ale made him not care - about the physical or emotional pain. “Another!”

The bartender gave a little shrug and reached for the mug. “If you insist.”

Abruptly another hand reached out and snatched the mug, pulling it out of reach. “He doesn’t, actually, thanks all the same,” said a man in an easygoing voice.

Cullen rounded on whoever had come between him and his next drink. “I don’t need your--” He stopped, eyes widening when he saw who had spoken. “You!” It was like meeting a ghost from the past - a past he really would have preferred to forget.

“In the flesh. Bruised and battered as it may be,” Alistair answered with a grin. He did appear to be a bit worse for wear - the hems of his clothes still bore the mix of snow and mud common to those recently arrived at Skyhold, and a healing bruise was evident on his cheek. A griffon was emblazoned across his chest on blue and silver armor, a detail which Cullen blinked at as Alistair leaned on the counter and remarked, “I heard tell that you’re Commander of the Inquisition Forces now. I take it you got well away from Kirkwall after that whole business with Meredith?”

“Yes… Yes, Seeker Cassandra asked me to join the Inquisition,” Cullen answered almost automatically. His gaze dropped to the griffon, then moved back up to Alistair’s face. “So they took you back, then.”

Alistair glanced down, his hand rising for a moment to splay across the griffon. “Yes, they did. Anora insisted I not return to Denerim, or ‘consort’ with the Bannorn. As if I’d want to,” he muttered under his breath. Then he shook his head. “Never mind that. It took me a while to track you down once I got here. I certainly never expected to find you trying to get falling down drunk. Especially not after all those lectures you gave me back in the Hanged Man.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Have a place we can talk in private?”

Cullen scowled fiercely at Alistair, but when he found himself catching the edge of the counter to save himself from swaying too much, his cheeks darkened in embarrassment. “My office,” he said shortly.

It wasn’t the easiest walk back to his office, knowing that Alistair was likely watching him exactly as
he'd watched Alistair back in Kirkwall. He could imagine the pity in the Warden's gaze, remembering how he'd felt to see the companion of the Hero of Ferelden, one of the Wardens who had saved Thedas from the Fifth Blight, reduced to a joke of a drunkard in a lowly Kirkwall tavern.

*What am I, then?* A failed Templar, a man who had helped the Viscount of Kirkwall to end Meredith's reign, perhaps, but then deserted the city. Commander of the Inquisition Forces, but with no Inquisitor to lead them. *Oh, yes, a great improvement,* he thought bitterly. *I just waited longer to make a fool of myself.*

“Careful,” Alistair said in a singsong voice as he reached out to prevent Cullen from falling as he stumbled at the bottom of the stairs leading to the ramparts. “Wouldn’t want to make that nose of yours any more red than it is.”

Fighting the urge to rub his nose, Cullen paused a moment to get his bearings, turning to Alistair to cover his momentary unsteadiness under the guise of attempting conversation. Before a word came from his mouth, however, his attention was drawn to the conversation of two men standing nearby.

"He helped turn it around?" The man's voice was incredulous. "He never did."

"That's what Detton is saying. Helped, and then ordered the guards to make sure he got any blame for it."

"Could be a trick. He's a Tevinter." The first man didn't sound so certain, though.

"Detton doesn't think so, and he's telling people the same. Don't know what's going on, but... Shit. Maybe he's not so bad?" He grabbed the first man's arm and tugged him down to the courtyard. "Talk to him yourself, you'll see."

Cullen frowned as he considered the exchange. *If one of those men isn't Leliana's agent, I'll eat my cloak.*

"Everything all right, Rutherford?" Alistair asked, glancing after the two men.

"Hmm?" Cullen blinked, then nodded. "Yes. It's fine. We're almost there."

*Almost there* took them up the stairs and into Cullen’s office, where he went straight to his recently-installed sideboard and uncovered the brandy. “Drink?”

Again a hand reached past him and took the top of the decanter from his hand and replaced it, then tugged Cullen away from the drinks with an inexorable pull towards the ladder. “No, and neither will you. Come on, let’s get you in bed.”

“'s too early-- Ah, it is too early,” Cullen said, hastily correcting himself.

“To drink? I agree, but here you are anyway.” Alistair was clearly brooking no arguments as he dragged Cullen to the ladder. “ Now climb, or I’ll throw you over my shoulder and heave you up like a Honnleath bride.”

Cullen’s cheeks darkened, and he hastily began to climb the ladder. “I should never have told you about that,” he said darkly.

“Well, you *did,* and now I get to tease you about it endlessly,” Alistair called up as Cullen climbed over the edge of the platform. A pile of papers caught his attention on his bed, and he picked them up to see if it was anything which required his immediate attention. The sound of the ladder creaking didn’t really register until he heard Alistair clear his throat.
Cullen, guilt plain on his face, looked up at Alistair, standing with arms crossed and eyes narrowed. “I was just--”

“That doesn’t look like you’re going to bed,” Alistair pointed out sternly. “That looks like you’re trying to sneak in some paperwork when you’re not in the mental state to do it justice.”

Cullen glared at him, partially for invading his privacy, and partially because Alistair was absolutely right and he knew it. Still, when the man leaned over and took the papers from his hands, he didn’t object. “Since when are you my keeper?” he groused instead.

“Since the moment when you pulled me out of the gutter in Kirkwall and at least got me into the Hanged Man,” Alistair told him, pulling Cullen’s fur mantle from around his shoulders. “Even if you didn’t recognize me at the time.”

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?” Cullen said with a sigh. Still, getting the fur off felt… good. Like something had been lifted from his shoulders. “You hardly looked like the Warden I’d seen in Kinloch Hold.” Nor was I in the state of mind to really think beyond the demons, then, anyway, he thought with a shudder.

“No, but I can hardly blame you,” Alistair mused as he began to work at Cullen’s breastplate next. “I didn’t look like that Warden, or the Templar recruit you also might have recognized. ‘Drunk bum stuck on his ass’ is a far cry from either of those.” Hefting the breastplate up, he looked around for a place to put it. “Andraste’s flaming knickers, the stand is below, isn’t it?”

Cullen finally smiled, the first genuine one since Alistair had started taking his drinks away. “‘Fraid so.”

“Maker, you don’t have to be so smug about it,” Alistair complained as he set it down next to the bed, then patted the mattress. “Sit. I’ll get those boots off.”

“I am prefe--perfectly capable of doing that myself,” he protested, then yelped as Alistair poked a finger in the middle of his chest and forced him down onto the mattress.

“I thought so too, back in Kirkwall,” Alistair told him, then crouched to wrestle the heavy boots off. “And I was as wrong as you are.”

“You’re not playing fair.” Cullen would have added more, but a wave of dizziness washed over him and he quickly put his hands on the mattress behind him to compensate.

“I’m not going to ask how many drinks you had,” Alistair said quietly as he tugged the second boot off, “or when you started drinking today. I’m not going to ask how long it’s been since you’ve had a proper rest, or looked at yourself in the mirror. I don’t need to.” Setting the boot next to the other one, he settled back to sit on his heels and met Cullen’s gaze. “I heard what happened, and I heard the other rumors.” Reaching out, he squeezed Cullen’s knee with a sympathetic look on his face. “I’m sorry.”

Cullen’s eyes squeezed shut, and he took a deep breath. “So am I,” he said softly.

Rising to his feet, Alistair settled himself onto the bed next to Cullen. “Do you have anyone to talk about her with? Anyone at all?”

After a moment of forcing himself to consider the question, Cullen finally said, “I do, I just….” His voice trailed off.

“--haven’t actually talked to anyone. No, no, I get it,” Alistair said with a sigh. “After I left the
Wardens and Ferelden, it took me a long time to find anyone to talk to. Well… to listen. All the way to Kirkwall, in fact.” He glanced at Cullen. “Some fool of a Knight-Captain, actually.”

Cullen shook his head. “Truer words were never spoken.” Blinking slowly, he pushed himself forward so that his forearms rested on his knees. “I remember how I pitied you,” he admitted. “I mean, you weren’t the best Templar recruit, but you were a solid one. But then you became a Warden and had the bad luck to be with Amell.” Cullen shuddered slightly. “That man…”

“The less said of the Hero, the better,” Alistair said in a neutral tone, then frowned. “Though… that reminds me. Leliana, is she… well?”

Pressing a hand to his forehead and trying to will the growing throbbing away, Cullen asked, “How do you mean? She serves the Inquisition with dedication, as we all do.”

“It’s just that the last time I saw her, she was--” Alistair paused, then shook his head. “Maybe I’ll just talk to her myself. We did travel together for quite a long time, after all. And besides, that’s not the point, is it? The point is that… Well, you listened to me when no one else would. If you need someone to talk to…”

Craning his neck to look at Alistair, Cullen asked, “Why are you here anyway?”

“I’m the Warden who’s been working with Viscount Hawke, remember?” Alistair asked. “Fine fellow. Knows all the jokes about drunks, you should hear him when he’s on a roll.” The sarcasm in Alistair’s voice was palpable, enough to make Cullen chuckle. “But, as I learned during the Blight, you learn to work with the people who want what you want no matter how much - or little - you like them personally. So… that’s why I’m here. Because the one thing I do have left in the world, the Grey Wardens, are… well… getting into more trouble than they really are prepared to handle, and the trouble leads back to Corypheus.” He sighed and stood, beginning to pace along the bottom of the bed. “I’m not sure what the leadership of the Inquisition is like right now, but Hawke and I decided you need to know what’s happening.”

“Where’s the Viscount now?” Cullen asked, tensing up. True, he’d fought alongside the man, but that hadn’t made their relationship an easy one.

“With that mage from the Imperium. The one with that green thingie in his hand now.” Alistair paused his pacing. “Dairren?”

“Dorian,” Cullen said, then started to stand. “Dorian of House Pavus. And please tell me you didn’t leave the two of them alone together.”

When he swayed and started to tip over, Alistair quickly stepped to his side and grabbed Cullen’s arms. “This is really one of the worst places you could fall from,” he said with a deep chuckle, “and I don’t want to explain how I let the Commander of the Inquisition Forces accidentally fall to his death, all right?”

Cullen chuckled weakly as he leaned into Alistair for balance. “Not my intention.”

“So perhaps you should go to bed?” Alistair said pointedly. At Cullen’s sigh, he reached past the man and tugged down the blankets, then pushed Cullen lightly. “In you go.” As Cullen grumbled and climbed onto the mattress, Alistair asked, “Why were you so panicked about Hawke and this Dorian fellow, anyway?”

Cullen collapsed onto his stomach, eyes closing as he tried to ease the growing pounding in his head. “The Viscount… hasn’t had the best luck with mages,” he said softly.
“Huh. I don’t recall anything in particular. I mean, the man’s got a sharp tongue, but--”

“It was after you left,” Cullen said curtly. *And something I definitely don’t want to talk about.*
“Thanks for helping me get up here,” he said in a grateful tone of voice, both for distraction and because it was the truth. “I might have done something foolish, either at the tavern or here in the office.”

Alistair grunted, and Cullen rolled over to find Alistair with his hands on his hips and staring down at Cullen’s armor. “You *would* have. Trust me, I know. The only difference would have been that people would forgive you for your behavior. You have good friends, Commander,” Alistair added, giving Cullen a pointed look. “You should take advantage of the fact.”

Cullen flushed at the mild reprimand, a bit of belligerence finally working its way through. “Easy enough for you to say,” he snapped. “Easy enough for anyone else to say.”

“If you think you’re the only person in the history of Thedas to lose the one person that made life worth living,” Alistair said mildly as he bent down to pick up the breastplate, “you’d better think again, Commander.” Straightening, he headed to the ladder and awkwardly lowered himself over the edge, breastplate balanced on one shoulder. “We’ll talk tomorrow, Commander. There’s a lot you need to know, when you’re capable.”

The last stinging comment found no target, as Cullen was still dwelling on Alistair’s first sentence. *You’d better think again.* For some reason, those words stuck in his mind, and all he could think of was Mailani smiling up at Dorian on the battlements in that odd dream he’d had the night before, and the depth of sadness in Dorian’s voice just before Cullen had awoken. *The one person that made life worth living.* Did Dorian have any friends? Suddenly the question seemed important to ask, even if he had no answer.

The question followed him into his dreams, making them even more restless than usual.
Alistair

RUMORED TO BE KING MARC OF FERELDEN’S BASTARD SON, THERE WAS A MOMENT DURING THE RECENT FIFTH BLIGHT WHERE ALISTAIR COULD HAVE ASCENDED TO THE THRONE. INSTEAD, THE THRONE WAS GIVEN TO QUEEN ANORA, DAUGHTER OF THE TRAITOROUS TEYRN LOGHAIN—THE VERY MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATH OF ALMOST EVERY GREY WARDEN IN FERELDEN AT THE INFAMOUS BATTLE OF OSTAGAR. DISGUSTED, ALISTAIR ABANDONED THE GREY WARDENS, AND FOR YEARS LIVED IN DISGRACED EXILE IN THE FREE MARCHES. SEVERAL YEARS AGO, ALISTAIR WAS RETRIEVED FROM HIS EXILE, SOBERED UP, AND EVENTUALLY RE-ADMITTED TO THE ORDER... THOUGH HE CHOSE TO DO SO IN ORLAI$ RATHER THAN HIS HOMELAND.

(Part of Alistair's Character Codex extracted from game files)
Dorian wasn’t sure how long he wandered in his slumber before he realized he was in the Fade. All mages knew they visited the Fade in their sleep, of course, and learned to ward their dreams as a result. This, though, this was… different. This wasn’t his mind recalling embarrassing moments of the past, or the lure of a demon, or a nightmare of his father from which he invariably woke to lying in a pool of his own sweat. No, this was a waking dream: he walked the Fade in his sleep, a state both intriguing and quite, quite dangerous.

And highly unusual, if his own experience and study was any indication.

The landscape shifted and changed around him as he walked, though he could not perceive the pattern of the changes. One moment he saw men in armor practicing their weapon and shield work in a large room with a wooden floor, the next he saw vague figures moving through gloomy corridors with walls of large, grey bricks. The clash of swords striking shields turned into wails of horror, and the sound of his footsteps suddenly carried little splashes as he walked through pools of a dark liquid, which Dorian realized with a grimace was blood.

Random events and visions were not unheard of in the Fade, of course, so Dorian simply noted what was going on around him without taking especial heed. The sight of a man kneeling, surrounded by demons and shouting at them to stop invading his mind made the mage pause only because there was a vague familiarity somewhere in the scene. Then they vanished, replaced by a horde of rampaging Qunari destroying everything in their path in some unknown city.

It was only when a familiar face suddenly appeared that Dorian paused, arrested by the sudden appearance of what seemed to be a younger version of Viscount Hawke - the man who had occupied much of Dorian’s attention the previous day. This Hawke was angry and defiant as he glared at the man to whom he flung the words, “Mages have been systematically abused by the Templars for a thousand years.”

Dorian’s eyebrow rose, resisting the urge to interject himself into the conversation with the comment of, “Only in the south.” Partially it was because he knew he was in the Fade, but it was also because he realized that Hawke wasn’t the only familiar face in this new tableau before him.

“Mages cannot be treated like people,” declared the man in Templar armor standing across from Hawke, in a temper and tone quite familiar Dorian. Cullen seemed even more severe here in the Fade than he was in life, but the words and the conviction behind them rang true. “They are not like you and me,” Cullen continued, “They are weapons. They have the ability to light a city on fire in a fit of pique.”

Ah. Well, that explains a great deal, Dorian thought sadly. Not that Cullen had ever truly hidden his past status as a Templar, but to hear him - or even a simulacrum of him - say what seemed to be such a common southern misconception about mages… Well, it reinforced that feeling of unease he’d felt around the man. As Dorian turned away, however, Cullen cried out and fell to his knees, one hand raised as if to ward off danger.

Hawke began to laugh and circle Cullen, with every step changing until he was someone else entirely: an older woman, elegant with hard-edged pride etched into a face framed by pale hair, dressed in Templar armor and carrying a large red blade which seemed to sing. “Look at all this,” the woman snarled, gesturing around them. Dorian couldn’t help but do so, and saw more bodies, more blood, and more death. “Magic is a cancer in the heart of our land, just as it was in the time of Andraste. And like her,” the woman paused her circle around Cullen, lowering her blade to rest on
Cullen’s neck, “we are left with no choice but to purify it with fire and blood.”

“No, Knight-Commander,” Cullen gasped. “We are protectors, not murderers.”

“I will not allow insubordination! We must stay true to our path!” The woman hefted her sword, then drove it down - and both woman and weapon vanished just before the blade bit into Cullen’s neck.

Dorian stepped back as the Fade changed around him once more. Oddly, Cullen remained, but he also changed: the Templar armor shifted to more familiar fur and cloth over a standard breastplate, and his face grew pinched with pain and covered with a sheen of sweat. Shakily he pulled himself to his feet, every movement speaking of a torment whose cause was hidden. “I never meant for this to interfere,” he said in a hoarse voice.

As if the words were a trigger, agony suddenly flared into life in Dorian’s left arm, and he sank to the ground with a gasp as green light consumed his hand. A cold wind swept around him for a moment, then left, carrying the pain away but leaving him shuddering on the ground.

“I believe you,” a soft voice replied, and Dorian froze for a moment as the shock of recognition coursed through him. Slowly his eyes sought the source of those simple words, though he knew who it was before he found her standing next to him, framed by odd greenish sunlight which washed out the details. It didn’t matter, of course. He’d know the voice anywhere, even in a blizzard. The ache moved from his hand and head to his heart, and he pressed his hand over his mouth, trying to remind himself that it was not Mailani who even now crossed the room to approach Cullen.

“For whatever good it does,” Cullen said in a flat voice. “Promises mean nothing if I cannot keep them. You asked what happened to Ferelden’s Circle? It was taken over by abominations.”

Tearing his gaze from Mailani, Dorian instead stared at Cullen. The Commander had been in Ferelden during the Blight, Dorian knew that, but he had never heard the details. As Cullen continued talking about his past, as Mailani comforted his pain and his confusion, Dorian found himself frowning more and more, and not simply because of what he heard. His complex mind took those words, of course, those little bits of information about Cullen, and filed them away for later pondering. More importantly, though, he came to the realization that this wasn’t some shade, or a passing spirit, or even a random occurrence of the Fade. While that wasn’t - couldn’t possibly be - Mailani, the man with her was most definitely Cullen.

Yet… how could that be? Only a somniari could walk the dreams of another, particularly without an invitation, and Dorian knew he was not such a mage. Yet, as Cullen spoke, Dorian realized that he hadn’t been seeing random scenes pulled from the ether of the Fade: he had in fact borne witness to events in Cullen’s life as the Fade had shaped itself around the man’s dreams, a feat which should have been impossible without a great deal of ritual and magical expenditure.

A change in Cullen’s tone brought Dorian’s focus back to the two in front of him, but he found he could not ignore the pain in the man’s voice. “But these memories have always haunted me. If they become worse, if I - if I cannot endure this…”

If I cannot endure this… It was like an echo, an echo that fell on Dorian’s ears as well as his mind, and slowly he turned as again the Fade shifted around him. This time, however, it was not Cullen’s mind the Fade latched onto for inspiration. No Fereldan would ever have such intimate knowledge of the estates of House Pavus in Qarinus, after all, where Dorian had spent the better part of two years locked away from the world. This room he remembered all too well, sparse as it was. Only a chair and table, a single candle, and no windows, no comfort.

No hope.
His breath caught when he saw himself, seated at that table with his face buried in his hands, trying to ignore the stern-faced man who paced around him, to hold on to his sense of self even as the harsh words and harsher disapproval struck blows at every foundation of his soul. Two years he had been held there by his father, two years of browbeating and invective and guilt and self-doubt, two years where all he had had to cling to were memories and his own thoughts.

“You’re a disgrace to House Pavus, Dorian,” Halward grated, the disappointment evident in his voice. It was not the first time Dorian had heard it, of course - it had been a running theme in the privacy of their estates for many years. But hearing his father say it each and every day somehow did not make the words sting any less, and it was but a part of the lashing his father had heaped upon him during those two years.

Dorian forced himself to breathe slowly as he watched Halward lean onto the table, pressing in close so that the man seated there could not possibly ignore his words. “I raised you to be the next Archon, and instead you’ve become the laughingstock of the Imperium. Feckless, selfish, and thoughtless: that is what you are now.” He paused, as if waiting for a reaction. When he received none, he leaned even closer and growled, “Useless.”

Dorian remembered his thoughts in that moment. It had been days since he’d been allowed out from that room, a last push to try to get him to succumb to Halward’s will before resorting to more extreme measures. No sleep, little food, and no alcohol had left his thoughts scattered and dim. He remembered the warring urges to either blast his father with magic or to beg for forgiveness. Somehow, he had managed to simply do nothing, to endure.

“Very well, Dorian.” Moving to the door, Halward set his hand on the wood before stopping to look back at his son. “You leave me no choice.” Even now, the sense of finality in the words sent a shiver up Dorian’s spine, made that much worse as he recalled the precise nature of his father’s last resort, and what the man had been willing to do to force Dorian to obedience.

Halward left the room, slamming the door behind him, and Dorian watched as the man at the table lifted his head from his hands to reveal wet cheeks and reddened eyes. Unconsciously, Dorian reached up to wipe his own dry cheeks in a mirrored motion with his younger self as their lips moved in concert: “If I cannot endure this, I will cease to be.”

The room abruptly disappeared around him. His ears filled with the sound of the wind whistling over the battlements of Skyhold, while an odd green sunlight replaced the dimness of the single candle. He didn’t move, though, not sure what to think of what was happening, until he heard Mailani’s voice once more from behind him. “Is it always that bad?”

For the briefest of moments, Dorian thought she was talking to him, and the thought made Dorian smile despite the ache. When he turned around, however, it was to see Mailani settle her hand on Cullen’s arm, a little line of worry marring her forehead. She had worried about Cullen quite a bit, after all, a fact which Dorian had teased her about frequently.

“The pain comes and goes,” the Commander replied. “Sometimes I feel as if I’m back there. I should not have pushed myself so far that day.”

Mailani smiled and reached out to touch his cheek gently. “I’m just glad you’re all right.”

A smile came to Cullen’s face as he looked at her before turning to take in the vistas around Skyhold. “I am. I never told anyone what truly happened to me at Ferelden’s Circle. I was… not myself after that. I was angry. For years, that anger blinded me. I’m not proud of the man that made me. Now I can put some distance between myself and everything that happened.”
Dorian stared at the man as he heard words coming from Cullen’s mouth which could so very easily have come from his own. He’d escaped Qarinus, yes, but he’d never truly managed to escape his own past, both who he’d been and what he’d done. The decision to come to Ferelden, to seek out Alexius, had been an attempt to break the cycle he often lost himself to, the futility of seeking pleasure and finding only emptiness.

It had been Mailani who, gentle and encouraging, had pulled him from that cycle and given him a new focus, a new purpose: a worthy life. It could be argued that the Inquisition was his new purpose, but truly, all he had wanted was to ease Mailani’s burden. For all the reasons they should have hated each other, the Tevinter mage and the Dalish archer, she had found and cultivated the one reason for them not to: friendship.

His eyes stung as he watched her with Cullen, watched her smile and ease his pain as she had with Dorian, though he did avert his gaze when she leaned in to kiss the Commander tenderly. Watching such a tender moment seemed an invasion, even if only one of the people in front of him was real.

As he glanced away, the urge to leave the Fade settled over him. In all honesty, he should have departed long ago. He was a mage, after all, and there were techniques for leaving the Fade without resorting to brute force or waiting to wake up.

Drawing his wits about him, Dorian concentrated on getting out of the Fade, forcing his mind down the path which would put him back in his body in the waking world and out of the land of dreams. It wasn’t until he’d reached the clarity he needed to return to Thedas that the suspicion about the true nature of the mark on his hand, a suspicion which had sprung into being that morning in his bedroom, abruptly returned full force, and he whipped around to look at Mailani.

Cullen was still gazing at the world beyond Skyhold, but Mailani’s eyes were latched onto Dorian. Instinctively the mage reached out to her with his left hand, and her own lifted in response. For a moment, the green light in their palms pulsed and glowed with the same rhythm, the same heartbeat, and then her mouth moved in a whisper, the words terrifyingly audible even at this distance and despite the nature of the Fade itself.

*I’m so sorry.*

Then, without further ado, Dorian was plucked from the Fade and flung back to the waking world.
Regret

Chapter Summary

Does anyone live without regret?

Air rushed into Dorian's lungs as he woke from that push out of the Fade, eyes flying open even as his left hand flared with pain. Mailani?

"Does it always do that in the morning?" a deep voice asked from nearby. "Your hand, I mean, before you get any funny ideas."

Dorian started, then yelped as that little twitch made him roll out of bed and onto the floor. Bare skin struck cold wood, and he quickly wrenched himself to his feet, eyes wide as he stared at the man lounging in his bed. The naked man lounging in his bed, a blanket pulled up in a semblance of modesty that seemed to ill fit him. "Hawke?"

"Back to using family names already? Was last night such a terrible ordeal?" The man chuckled, his eyes roaming over Dorian's body. "I suppose Hawke is better than Viscount, at that." Before the mage could respond, though, Hawke's eyes settled on the green glow at Dorian's side. "It wasn't doing that last night. Not when we were otherwise occupied, anyway."

"Didn't it?" Dorian asked, mind racing. The dream had been so thoroughly distracting that he had to force himself to recollect the night leading up to it. At first all he could remember was the drinking, but then he remembered the rest of it, and cleared his throat to cover the abrupt memory. "Ah, I wouldn't know. " The words slipped out before he could stop them, though Hawke's boisterous laugh made him smile. "That…wasn't precisely what I meant to say."

Hawke snorted. "Trust me, if we're going to exchange tales of pathetic love lives, I would win the contest, title, and crown in the matter, especially when it comes to mages." For a moment, Hawke's face darkened, and he quickly looked away. "But I'm sure you don't want to hear about that."

Though tempted to let the matter lie, Dorian couldn't help but wonder - and the specification of mages had him a little concerned, based on what had happened last night. Slowly he settled down on the bed again, a little frown on his face. "You'll forgive me if I pry, but--"

Hawke waved the comment off, sighing heavily. "No, no, I'm used to people being curious. You simply have a better reason than most to ask." He turned back to Dorian, hazel eyes just as arresting now as they had been after they'd shared a few drinks in the secret study the day before. "Anders was my lover."

Dorian's brows rose. He wasn't as intimately aware of the details surrounding the conflict between the Southern mages and Templars as perhaps he should be, but even he knew of the explosion in Kirkwall, and the name of the man who had caused it. And his ultimate fate. "I--I never knew."

"I didn't want it to become part of his story. I don't think he would have appreciated it." Hawke frowned, his gaze growing distant as he continued, "I'm Viscount of Kirkwall, sometimes called Champion, and Anders traveled with me. That is common knowledge, but that's not all we were. We were lovers, then more. Or so I thought - sometimes it was hard to tell. For every tender moment,
there was a vicious argument to go with it. Mages were mistreated, yes, but his methods, his rhetoric… I could only go so far with him down that path. Justice…" Hawke's face twisted, and he fell silent for a long while. When Dorian opened his mouth to ask if Hawke would prefer to speak no further on the matter, Hawke reached out and set his finger on Dorian's lips, silencing the effort. "Never forget that justice can all too easily turn to vengeance," he said softly.

Sensing that Hawke was waiting for an answer, Dorian nodded slowly. Only then did Hawke lower his hand, a grim look on his face. "I had nothing to do with his actions against the Chantry. He refused to discuss his plans with me, because he knew what my response would be. And he was right." Hawke sighed. "I'm not proud of what I did, though I cannot say I truly regret my decision. But it seemed better, afterwards, for people not to know of what had been between the two of us. Let his legacy remain as a martyr against the Chantry, for the Circle. I don't need to be part of it."

Dorian remained silent for a long while, considering the other man carefully. Their nakedness leant a certain vulnerability to the situation, despite what Hawke had just confessed, and he felt a grudging sympathy where otherwise he might have felt none. Finally Dorian cleared his throat. "You'll understand if I don't condone your action, but I think you might be wrong about saying you do not regret it."

"Oh, I regret his death. I regret the need for it. But my decision? No." Hawke shook his head. "That I cannot regret, or I would be tacitly approving the deaths of hundreds of innocents. You weren't there, Pavus. You didn't see what he did, what he set into motion."

"Perhaps not, Hawke, but I have seen quite a bit of the conflict since arriving in the South," Dorian pointed out. "Certainly you can't expect me to accept that condemning a mage to eternal confinement is a reasonable response for them being born with the ability to light a candle with a flick of their fingers." He did so, a minute motion that set alight the candles spread throughout the room.

Hawke wrinkled his nose, then sighed. "Family names it is, then. Still, I suppose there are worse ways to end a long drought. For what it's worth, it is not magic itself I fear. Having a father and a sister who were both mages will do that for you. I had my reasons, though, for all of it. Don't we all?" With a shrug, Hawke rolled out of bed. "So you'll set up a meeting with your Advisors, then? They'll want to hear what we discussed last night. You know." Hawke gestured around the room. "Before the wine came up with better ideas."

"Clever wine," Dorian murmured as he glanced at the haphazard scattering of clothing, empty bottles, and toppled furniture. *Clever, perhaps, but not wise.* "And yes, I'll set up a meeting. Where will I be able to find you?"

"That little underground study works as well as any other place," Hawke said with a shrug as he began to pick up his clothes. "Though I would appreciate it if you could set aside some quarters for me. I believe you even mentioned something along those lines before dragging me in here."

"Naturally. I'll arrange for them right away, *Your Grace,*" he said in a teasing tone. He wanted to keep things friendly, so as to avoid antagonizing the man. Hawke was the Champion of Kirkwall, after all. Still, Dorian he couldn't deny he'd be happier to see the man gone from his room. What had seemed a brilliant idea while under the haze of alcohol seemed far less so in the bright light of a new morning, *particularly* after such an unsettling conversation.

"Good." As Hawke pulled on his clothes, he glanced up at Dorian. "And I'd appreciate it if you would keep that particular conversation to yourself. As I said, I'd prefer to keep my relationship with Anders out of his story. Even Varric respects that decision."

*Even Varric? Odd way to put it.* "I give you my word that none shall learn of it from me," he
promised somberly. His next words were much lighter in tone. "Though I wouldn't recommend it for
general morning after conversation material for you."

Hawke laughed loudly at that, then winked at Dorian. "I'll keep that in mind. You know, in case I
have any other ill-advised one night stands." Hawke shifted to look in the mirror, running his fingers
through his hair to attempt some semblance of order. "Not that I have anything against you, mind,
but I think we both might have reconsidered had the wine not been flowing quite so freely."

"Enjoyable as it was, I tend to agree. I'm not really in a position for--" Dorian paused, unsure how to
phrase it without offering possible insult.

"Compromise, political or otherwise. I understand." Hawke turned to face him, leaning back against
the bureau with his arms folded in front of him. "I envy the man who ultimately ends up in your bed,
but for now we should both avoid compromise of any sort. Which is why I hope you remember my
request."

Dorian was impressed. There weren't many with enough authority in their tone in such a situation to
turn a favor into an order without actually saying so. Ignoring the thinly veiled threat, he simply
smiled and nodded in return. "Naturally. My memory is, after all, as perfect as the rest of me. Or not,
when necessary." He put a finger to his lips to indicate his intent to remain silent on the matter, and
offered a cheeky wink to Hawke.

Hawke's shoulders lowered just a small amount, and he nodded. "I'll see you later, then. Oh, and
make sure Alistair is at the meeting, too. He's the Warden who's traveling with me, if you recall. He's
not the most reliable fellow in the world, but he knows more about the Wardens and their problems
than I do. Your Advisors will want to hear what he has to say."

"Noted," Dorian said with a nod.

"For now I'll leave you to your normal morning routine." Pushing himself away from the bureau,
Hawke headed towards the door, then paused for a moment. "And keep in mind what I told you
yesterday. Your position is precarious here. Wishes and rainbows aren't going solve your problems."
He looked over his shoulder at Dorian. "You need me."

And with that lingering in the air behind him, Hawke left the room.

Dorian took a deep breath and collapsed back on the bed. It had been a long time since he'd had such
an ill-advised liaison. "Fasta vass," he muttered under his breath. The headache he'd been ignoring
since being pushed from his dream suddenly came raging to the fore, and he winced. "Maker
preserve me, but I hope I don't come to regret this."

After another few seconds of fretting, Dorian's left hand began to throb, and reflexively Dorian
groaned and began to move. "All right, all right, I'm getting up," he grunted. As he gained his feet,
he idly wondered why he'd reacted in quite that manner. The change from horizontal to vertical made
the pain in his head spike, however, so he dismissed the odd thought and stumbled to where he
stored the elfroot tincture he kept for just such occasions.

Despite the ache in his head, though, he knew precisely who he was going to visit once he was
ready. And it wasn't the Iron Trio. The very idea of discussing his rather unwise liaison with any of
those three ladies filled him with dread, particularly Cassandra. No, no, best to seek out another
expert first.

He found Varric standing in front of the fireplace in his little corner of the Hall that most now called
the Storyteller's Corner. The dwarf seemed to be in a pensive mood, hands clasped behind his back as he watched the flames dance and flicker, and normally Dorian would have left the dwarf to his own devices. This morning, however, that simply was not an option.

Still, he had to be cautious: the eyes were on him once again. Watching, waiting, perhaps even hoping for Dorian to make that one mistake they could use against him. Hawke hadn't been wrong, unfortunately, about Dorian's precarious position, and Dorian kept that in mind as he entered the Hall and moved to Varric's side, each movement a study of a man at ease and quite cheerful. Normally, of course, he would have headed to the library, or, more recently, to the War Room, but Varric had enough visitors that his own presence shouldn't raise too many eyebrows. Or so he hoped.

As he came to a halt next to Varric, he mimicked the dwarf's posture and settled his hands behind his back. "A word?"

Varric grunted and glanced up at him. "I was wondering when I'd see you again."

Dorian reddened slightly, something about the twinkle in the dwarf's gaze making him wonder if perhaps the relocation to his room last night had, indeed, been observed by someone. "If you don't have time--"

"No, I have time, Sparkler. I have plenty of time." Varric casually glanced to the main door, then gave a little shrug. "I wouldn't mind stretching my legs. Why don't we go check out the ramparts? Isn't that one of your duties now? To make sure they're...I don't know, impregnable or something?"

"An excellent point, my dear Varric," Dorian said, knowing full well that Varric would never suggest such a thing unless he wanted to make sure they weren't overheard. "I'm not quite sure why I haven't thought of that all-important duty. Shall we?" He gestured to the door.

They chatted amicably about books and past bets as they strolled down into the courtyard and then up to the battlements. Dorian nodded and smiled at the guards they passed, more than a bit surprised when most of them smiled back. That certainly hadn't been the case before. Though curious, his time with Varric was important enough that he couldn't really stop to pursue the matter. He did, however, tuck it away into his complicated mind for later analysis.

Varric led him to a part of the battlements that was more a landing than a rampart, and moved to lean on the wall where it overlooked the courtyard. As Dorian settled in beside him, Varric said softly, "This is where Mailani met Hawke for the first time."

That got Dorian's immediate attention, of course, though he kept his reaction reserved. "Ah, yes, Hawke. Quite the fellow, isn't he?"

"That's one way to describe him, yeah." Varric drummed his fingers on the stone for a moment. "There are others, of course."

"Oh, certainly. Confident comes to mind." When Varric only snorted and shook his head, Dorian continued his list. "Knows how to handle authority. Intimidating. A bit...dangerous for mages, perhaps."

Varric didn't immediately respond to Dorian's fishing, but he did sigh and shift his footing. When he next spoke, Dorian recognized the caution in his voice. "One doesn't become Viscount of a city like Kirkwall easily. That business with the Chantry...It left shadows, you know?"

"I can well imagine," Dorian assured him. "It would be difficult to recover from something like that."

"Especially for Hawke." He frowned. "Except...not really. You have to know him as well as I do to
know why, of course." He glanced up at Dorian, and his voice got softer. "Did he mention Blondie?" Then, before Dorian could ask him to clarify, he added, "The Chantry guy."

Dorian just dipped his head in a short, curt nod, and Varric heaved another sigh.

"That's what I thought. I saw you two together last night, and…" Varric gave Dorian a sidelong glance. "No offense, Sparkler, but you looked like you weren't really the one making the decisions."

Wincing, Dorian fought the urge to rub his neck. "The Viscount and I may have shared a bottle or two of some rather excellent wine, yes."

"Uh huh. Well…I'm not one to judge, and Hawke isn't a good target for that kind of thing anyhow. But you've been a good Wicked Grace partner--"

Dorian snorted. "Which means you've been able to fleece me out of enough money to pay for all your writing materials for a year."

That made Varric grin. "Maybe. The point is that you've been…well, a friend. And I don't have a lot of those."

His eyes narrowed, and he muttered, almost too quiet for Dorian to hear, "Hawke made sure of that." Before Dorian could comment, he looked back up at Dorian. "I don't think it's a good idea to go into too much detail, but let's just say that you should be cautious around Hawke. Really cautious."

"The kind of cautious that avoids stumbling into my room with him in the wee hours of the morning?" Dorian guessed.

"Especially that kind of cautious, yeah." A grimace crossed Varric's face, though it faded back to a neutral expression quickly enough. "Look, he and I, we went through some serious shit in Kirkwall together, and he's saved my life a few times, but…" Varric looked guilty for a moment, then shook his head. "You're a mage. I'm just saying…be careful, okay? You're doing a pretty good job at getting a handle on the whole Inquisition thing. Don't make a mistake just because the Champion of Kirkwall has decided to grace us with his presence. Fair enough?"

Nodding slowly, Dorian puffed his cheeks full of air. "Quite." He paused, not entirely certain that his next question was wise. Finally, he gave in to the impulse and asked, "I rather think it important that I know more about the shit, as you called it. Can you--"

"Not yet," Varric said, cutting him off. "Later. When you're-- When the time is right, you know?"

Interesting answer. It was one Dorian had to accept, however, and he did so with a gracious inclination of his head. "Naturally. What better time could there possibly be?"

Varric chuckled as he pushed himself upright. "Right. Trust me, when that time arrives, we'll be talking again. Until then, we'll just talk about how much money you owe me." He offered a sly grin. "I'll even split a bottle of wine with you next time we play Wicked Grace, because I'm just that kind of guy."

"Oh, thank you, how generous of you," Dorian drawled as he, too, straightened. "I'll keep that in mind the next time I want to wake up with a hole in my coin purse."

"Any time, Sparkler. Any time," Varric said expansively.

As they turned and, by mutual unspoken agreement, headed back to the courtyard, Dorian said in a hushed whisper, "Thank you, Varric. I will be cautious."
"Good," the dwarf replied just as quietly.

They didn't speak again, though Varric gave him a friendly enough nod before he left Dorian in the courtyard to return to his normal spot in the Hall.

With a pensive sigh, Dorian glanced at the door of Cullen's office. The man had been in Kirkwall, after all - perhaps he would be able to offer yet another perspective on Hawke. As he mounted the steps to Cullen's office, however, the door opened and a vaguely familiar man stepped outside, blinking up at the bright sun for a moment.

*That man... "Warden Alistair?" Dorian called, hurrying up the remaining steps.*

"That's me," Alistair said cheerfully, then tilted his head. "Hang on, you're that mage, right? The one with the funny hand thing."

Dorian pressed his lips together in amusement, then chuckled and nodded. "In the flesh, even if it glows on occasion." Lifting his left hand, he flexed his fingers as the familiar green light emerged and swirled around him.

For a moment, he thought he heard a soft giggle, but the impression quickly passed as Alistair leaned closer and grunted. "Huh. And I thought I'd seen it all. Does it hurt?"

The question distracted him away from the momentary oddity, and he focused on Alistair, then his hand, as he considered his answer. "Hmm? Oh." Did it hurt? The better question would be, *Did it ever not hurt?* The first few days of agony aside, there was never a moment when he forgot about the mark. Even if the ache was dull and distant, he was still aware of it with every breath and pulse of blood through his body. Did it hurt? How could he answer that? "It can be a bit of an inconvenience, but on the other hand, I don't need a light spell to read in the dark anymore."

Alistair's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and Dorian knew the Warden had recognized the evasion. Rather than challenge it, though, Alistair just grunted. "That actually sounds familiar," he said cryptically, then turned as the office door opened behind him. "Ah, Cullen. I was beginning to think you'd gotten stuck to that desk again. I was ready to ask our friend here to help me pry you out."

Cullen chuckled as he shut the door behind him. "I don't think that will be necessary. Leliana and the Ambassador have taken to leaving little notes mixed in with the reports. *Don't forget to take a walk. Or Time for some fresh air.*" As Alistair and Dorian laughed, Cullen shook his head. "I'm just waiting for Cassandra to catch on and start leaving me little reminders to eat."

"Are you sure you only have *one* sister, Commander?" Dorian asked with a teasing grin.

"Oh, Maker, don't remind me," Cullen groaned. "And I have two, actually, though only Mia is stubborn enough to track me down every time I forget to write her." He looked at Dorian curiously. "How did you know about my sister, anyway? I don't recall telling you about my family."

Dorian paused, mouth slightly open, as he tried to remember. "I'm not sure, actually. Perhaps I overheard it. I didn't *always* stay ensconced in my little niche of the library, after all."

"Perhaps not, but you emerge from it about as often as I leave my desk," Cullen said with a grin. "At least according to Mai--" The grin faded, and Cullen cleared his throat as he looked out over the mountains. "That's not important right now," he said quietly.

An awkward silence fell over the trio, during which Alistair reached over and wordlessly put his hand on Cullen's shoulder. When Dorian inhaled to say something, Alistair shook his head slightly, and Dorian subsided, waiting for Cullen or Alistair to speak.
After a few moments, Cullen took a deep breath and reached up to squeeze Alistair's hand before removing it from his shoulder. "Thank you."

"Remember what I told you," Alistair said. "Don't keep it bottled inside. Talk about her. Find someone who cared about her and let it out. It will help. I promise."

"It does help," Dorian offered. "I've talked with some of the others. It hurts," Maker, did it hurt, especially at first, "but I think she would prefer you not to hold it within." A sad smile settled on his face as he became wistful for the presence of his dearest friend. "She never was one for keeping her emotions hidden, remember?"

Cullen chuckled as he bowed his head. "No. No, in fact, I remember one time when she--"

When he paused, Alistair nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

"I..." Cullen reached up to rub the back of his neck, then smiled. "I was just thinking of that time she got angry at that merchant. Remember that?"

Dorian laughed. "The one who thought he could use one donkey instead of three to bring that overladen wagon of supplies to Skyhold? Oh, yes. I almost felt more sorry for the merchant than the donkey when she was done with him. Almost."

"After she finished yelling at him in front of everyone in Skyhold, I doubt anyone had sympathy for him. I was sorry for Josephine, though. She was the one who had to make sure the merchant’s displeasure didn’t leave the mountain." Cullen smiled, an expression overlaid with sadness, then looked at Dorian. "You were looking for me?"

"Ah, both of you, actually," Dorian said, pulling his mind back to the present. "Hawke wants to have a meeting with all of us. We three and the Iron Trio, at any rate."

"The Iron-- Oh, the three ladies?" Alistair ventured, then smiled when Dorian tapped his nose and pointed at him to indicate he had guessed correctly. "Right. So we’ll discuss the situation with the Wardens, then?"

"Among other things, yes. I thought perhaps we could meet in half an hour? That should give us time to gather everyone."

"Or sooner than that," Cullen said, then began issuing clipped orders. "Alistair, you can find Leliana in the top floor above the library - any servant can take you there. I'll fetch Cassandra. Josephine will, of course, be in her office - not difficult to find. Dorian, you find Hawke and bring him to the War Room. I think it better to discuss the matter as soon as may be, since we have already been delayed."

"Yes, Commander," Dorian said, then gave the man a cheeky salute.

Cullen feigned an impressive glower at Dorian. "Just get going, soldier. I'd better not be kept waiting!"

Dorian laughed as he turned. "I wouldn't dream of it," he called back over his shoulder as he descended the stairs.

Still, as he made his way through Skyhold - first to Josephine, so that she could arrange some quarters for Hawke, and then to the secret study to fetch the man himself - he had to wonder at his choice of phrasing. His dreams the night before... It was Cullen, I'm certain of it. But how?

The thought made his hand twitch, and he glanced down at it, brows beetling. He'd had a pressing
thought when he'd woken up, a thought which had been abruptly overwhelmed by the discovery of a
naked Hawke in his bed. As he rolled his fingers and the green light pulsed, the core idea returned to
him, and again he had to ponder: how *had* he gotten the mark?

And again, he put the question aside. *Later.* He would ponder the matter later.

"So you're saying the Inquisition will do nothing about the Grey Wardens?" Alistair asked in a tight
voice.

They had all gathered around the War Table, which was large enough to accommodate the additional
numbers with ease. Refreshments had been brought but largely ignored as a discussion of the
Wardens had quickly turned a bit more heated than Dorian had expected. Hawke stood with his arms
across his chest, face impassive, as Alistair leaned against the table and glared at the Inquisition's
Advisors, sparing not even Cullen.

"No, Warden Alistair," Josephine replied calmly in the face of the man's accusation. "I am saying we
cannot. Our financial situation is poor, our troop numbers are diminished in size, and we have very
few political favors upon which we can call to make up for that lack. The death of Inquisitor
Lavellan dealt the Inquisition a serious blow, and it is one from which we are still recovering."

Hawke grunted and shook his head. "That's what you get for putting all your hopes on that little elf.
Did you really not have a backup plan?" When that dismissive tone earned the Viscount a few icy
stares from around the room, he put up his hands defensively. "All right, perhaps I could have
worded that a little more nicely, but the fact remains that all of you pinned the hopes of Thedas on
one person. That's always a bad idea, especially when you put religion into the mix. Believe me, I
know." He nodded to Alistair, whose face was grim. "So does Warden Alistair and, I daresay, you,
Lady Leliana. You don't have any coalition, you relied far too much on morale and religious fervor
to inspire the troops, and now you're paying the consequences."

"Are you quite finished, Viscount?" Cassandra said in clipped tones.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't think that the Inquisition is exactly what Thedas needs right now.
Maker, as long as it's anyone but me, I'm all for it. And you had a promising start - there's nothing to
say that you can't rebuild what's been lost." Pausing, Hawke looked around the table at each person
in turn. "You just have to figure out how to do that."

"And what, precisely, do you propose we do?" the Seeker demanded. "We have lost the support of
the Chantry, our Templar allies are greatly weakened, and the mages have joined with the enemy.
Our options are limited. Berating us about decisions we made in the past does little to aid us now."

Dorian had never heard Cassandra speak quite so coldly, save perhaps for the time he'd accidentally
frozen her with a Winter's Grasp spell. Either Hawke's comments had really gotten under her skin, or
he had already been there before the meeting had even started. *Didn't Mailani mention something
about Varric telling Cassandra all about the events in Kirkwall?* If that were true, and the events
were as unsavory as the dwarf had hinted…Well, that was definitely a matter for later consideration.

Pulling his thoughts back to the meeting at hand, he cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.
When they had all turned to him, some with surprise on their faces, he smiled faintly, then tried to
ease the chill in the room. "Is it really a surprise when I wish to contribute something to the
discussion? I thought everyone knew how fond I am of the sound of my own voice." When that
earned him some grudging smiles, he continued. "At any rate, it is an excellent question. What is the
Inquisition to do? I am not the Inquisitor, nor do I wish to be. That title belongs to Mailani, to the
Herald of Andraste. However, like Andraste herself, Mailani would not wish her works to fail simply
because she has left this world."

Sensing he had everyone's undivided attention, Dorian turned to Leliana and Cassandra, who stood next to each other. "We must find a way to reinvigorate the faithful. Would it be possible to change our narrative from the Inquisitor being guided by Andraste's hand to the Inquisition? I don't think we'll ever convince anyone that I was chosen by Andraste, but perhaps we could persuade them to view the organization as such. We do have the writ of the last Divine, do we not?"

Cassandra nodded. "Justinia entrusted her Right and Left Hands with the writ, believing we would use it for the good of the Chantry - even if the Chantry, currently, does not hold the same belief."

"And it is something concrete, something physical, linking the Inquisition to the Divine, to the legitimate voice of the Chantry," Leliana said in a musing tone. "We were so focused on promoting the Herald of Andraste as the Inquisitor, we have perhaps neglected our task in establishing the authority of the Inquisition itself." Her long fingers tapped thoughtfully at her chin. "I have been distracted for too long in chasing rumors surrounding the Inquisitor's death. That is a message my agents can disperse." She looked at Josephine. "I will need your aid to craft it, of course, but he is right. That should be our task."

Josephine nodded thoughtfully, her pen tapping her clipboard. "For a message such as that, there may be one or two clerics whom I can contact. While they would never enthusiastically support a Tevinter," she smiled apologetically at Dorian, who gave her a little shrug, "they might extend their names to bolster the Inquisition as a whole, particularly if we emphasize Divine Justinia's writ." Her face grew thoughtful. "And we must not let Mailani's name fail. As Dorian said, Andraste herself did not lose the war after her death. Perhaps we could extend that belief to encompass Her Herald."

Cullen grimaced. "That smacks of religious manipulation. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with Mailani's memory being used in such a fashion."

"It does," Josephine replied with a sympathetic look on her face, "but if it helps us save Thedas, then we must not discount it as a possibility."

"I know, I just..." He sighed and shook his head.

Josephine's face softened. "Perhaps we could use it only if necessary?" she suggested, then turned to Dorian. "Do you have any more suggestions for us?"

Dorian, who had figuratively stepped back while they talked amongst themselves, nodded. "Commander," Dorian said, turning to Cullen. "You need to keep doing what you've been doing: promoting order in a world gone mad. The Hinterlands are free of mages and templars, but refugees in the Hinterlands still fill the Crossroads and Redcliffe both. As the Inquisition regains lost ground and the troops surge in number once more, I trust you to continue the task set on you by Inquisitor Lavellan. Keep the peace, and keep the populace safe."

Cullen straightened, splaying his hand on his chest as he bowed slightly. "Of course. I will not fail her memory."

Knowing that, to Cullen, those words were a stronger invocation than the name of the Maker himself, Dorian accepted the Commander's response with a nod, then moved on to the next person. "Viscount Hawke."

"Somehow I knew you'd think of me," Hawke said with a grin.
"How could I not?" Dorian said, winking in return. "You have said you wish to help the Inquisition, have you not? It seems the time has arrived for us to call in those favors which haven't yet been negotiated."

Hawke raised an eyebrow. "You're going to ask for an alliance, aren't you?"

"Actually, I'm going to suggest that you act in both your roles: as Viscount and as Champion."

"Oh, this ought to be good." Hawke settled his arms on his chest again. "All right, let's hear what you have to say."

Dorian nodded. "As Viscount, you could offer an alliance which would be to our distinct advantage, particularly given the strong connections we each have to the Templars, you in Kirkwall and the Inquisition in Orlais. As Champion, you are beloved by the people." He laughed when Hawke and Cullen snorted in unison. "Deny it all you like, but the general populace hears the term Champion, and they don’t stop to wonder why he's called that. The important thing is that you're a hero to them. If you were to endorse the Inquisition directly, and in a manner that our lovely Ambassador and cunning Spymaster can swiftly turn to our advantage, that would be of immeasurable value in lifting our sinking ship from the cold waters. Don't you agree?"

"I do. I just thought I would be the one who would have to suggest it." Hawke inclined his head. "You'll have your alliance, and your endorsement. I just don't want to be the only one doing all the heavy lifting."

"Perish the thought," Dorian said, putting his hand over his heart. Turning to Alistair, he added, "And you can help our Ambassador. You were in Ferelden in the Fifth Blight, after all. That was the last time the Grey Wardens called in those treaties of theirs, yes?"

Alistair blinked, obviously caught by surprise. "Yes, I was, but what does that have to do with the present situation? We're not in a Blight."

Dorian's eyebrows rose. "Hawke did tell you that the leader of this army we are up against is, in fact, one of the first darkspawn? One of the very magisters who dared to enter the Golden City and thus, according to your Chantry, brought the Blights to Thedas? A man, in fact, who may have an influence over the Grey Wardens not terribly unlike the influence the Archdemon has over the hordes in the Deep Roads?" He gestured to Alistair with a bow. "Perhaps you could explain to the class why the Treaties would not apply in this case?"

"It's not-- I mean, he's not--" Alistair paused, face turning thoughtful. "I'll admit I didn't view it in quite that light."

"We have already attempted to use the Treaties to garner support, but recent events halted my progress," Josephine added. "With Warden Alistair’s assistance - the same Grey Warden who fought at the side of the man who stopped the Fifth Blight - I am certain we could use the Treaties to the Inquisition's advantage."

Alistair's back straightened, and his expression grew determined. "As long as you're willing to protect me from the Grey Wardens who might come looking for me, I'll do that. It's better than waiting around doing nothing."

"You will have our full support in the interim," Josephine assured him. "And remember, all these efforts are to ensure the Inquisition has the wherewithal to help you investigate the Grey Wardens."

"I find it impossible to believe that Corypheus is not involved, considering what you told the
Inquisitor," Dorian interjected. "We dare not be at anything less than our best when we return to the Western Approach to confront the Wardens."

That elicited a weary sigh from Alistair. "I don't like it, but I get it." His head bowed for a moment, and then he looked up at Dorian. "And when the Inquisition is back to full strength?"

Though Alistair likely didn't recognize the tension he'd just created, Dorian did, and the mage only had an instant to decide how to react. Dorian could either decide the Inquisition's role, consult with the Advisors, or give the matter over to them entirely. Each choice had a different nuance regarding his self-perceived role within the Inquisition, in both the present and the future. Mailani, as much as he adored her, would simply not have realized the true nature of this inadvertent test.

And Dorian was not the only one who saw it.

In that moment before he responded, he knew why Josephine's fingers tightened around her quill, why Hawke smirked and Leliana frowned. He'd spent the last few days so carefully avoiding the idea of authority within the Inquisition that he'd managed to convince himself that a green glow in his palm meant little more than being turned into a glorified errand boy.

Yet he had been the one to step forward in this meeting, issuing orders and deciding how best to build the Inquisition's strength. Surely he couldn't deny that implied a bit of assumed authority on his part.

So what would he do?

A gentle smile came to his face. The answer was simple, really, though it was, itself, another question: what would Mailani do?

With a nod, he turned to the Iron Trio and Cullen. "I believe once the Inquisition has returned to its former strength that we should aid Warden Alistair. Thoughts?"

Josephine and Leliana exchanged a glance, and something subtle relaxed in the latter's stance. After a small nod from the others, the Ambassador turned back to Dorian. "I believe that would be the best course of action for the Inquisition, yes."

Dorian nodded, accepting his part of the now shared authority, and turned to Alistair. "There you have it. The Inquisition will stand with you."

"Thank you," Alistair told him sincerely.

Setting his hands on his hips, Hawke looked pointedly at Dorian. "And what will you be doing while we're all running around like nugs in a thunderstorm?"

"I rather think it's time I started pulling my own weight, don't you?" Raising his left hand, Dorian tilted his head as he regarded the fitful light which awoke. "This is an obligation I've been ignoring for far too long. There are quite a few rifts out there, and as many desperate cries for help." He set his hand down on the table, splaying it so that his fingers bridged both Ferelden and Orlais on the map. "It is time for me to venture forth."

There. That sounded bold enough. Hopefully he wouldn't come to regret the decision.

"Why on Thedas did I ever think this was a good idea?" Dorian shouted as he brought his staff around in a swift arc, blasting the approaching demons with a wave of fire. They'd stumbled upon this rift while exploring the ass-end of the Hinterlands in search of a place to rest following an
ambush by three of the largest bears Dorian had ever seen in his life, and he was *not* in a good mood.

"Don't ask me, Sparkler!" Varric yelled back, even as he hurled some grenades at some nearby wraiths. "I was perfectly happy getting my ass warmed by the fire in Skyhold!"

"Well, you're absolutely no help!" Dorian snarled as he hastily danced out of the way of the ice sleeting from the despair demon they fought. "*Kaffas!* I'm getting slaughtered over here!"

Suddenly a huge axe appeared behind the demon, then slammed down into the thing's head. The demon gave a high pitched shriek, then collapsed to the ground. Taking no chances, Iron Bull chopped it once more, then grunted. "You're welcome, Vint."

Dorian quickly pointed his staff forward, sending a thin lance of fire into the shade that suddenly reared up behind the hulking Qunari. "Take that, you filth!"

"Hey!" Bull protested.

"Not *you,*" Dorian snapped. He quickly formed a barrier around the warrior, then pointed towards where Cassandra stood, shield raised, before a towering rage demon. "Go help her. Varric and I will attend to the rest."

Iron Bull just nodded and ran towards the demon, bellowing "Next!" to attract its attention just before his axe swung into its torso.

Once the last demon was down and the rift sputtered into a semi-quiescent state once more, Dorian pressed his hand to his side and panted heavily. He couldn't quite remember when he'd been hit, but he could tell there was at least a broken rib and possibly worse. "Not the most impressive showing for my first rift," he groaned with a grimace.

Varric chuckled breathily as he walked up to pat Dorian on the arm. "It could have been worse. At least this time you didn't have to run halfway across the Hinterlands looking for reinforcements."

"True," Dorian admitted. "Maker, don't remind me."

Axe slung over his shoulder, Iron Bull strolled over. "Well? It isn't going to get any greener, and I personally don't want to see if a pride demon decides it wants to visit."

Dorian took a deep breath and nodded before stepping forward. As he approached the rift, the light in his hand awoke - which he'd expected - and then began to *burn* - which he had *not.* Every step took him closer to the dancing chaos in front of him, and every step made the heat intensify and spread.

*Oh, Mailani, how did you stand this?* He couldn't know if this is what she had felt when closing a rift, of course. Her entire bearing had always been full of determination, her slight frame displaying a strength that bespoke grim purpose seemingly at odds with her gentle smiles and enthusiastic hugs. She had always seemed a touch otherworldly when she'd wrestled with the rifts, and only now did Dorian understand why.

He lifted his hand as he'd seen the Inquisitor do at least a dozen times, yet nothing happened save for a sudden ache that surged down his arm. He kept his face as neutral as he could, trying to keep his uncertainty hidden as he desperately tried to find the mechanism. No matter what he tried, however, it refused to yield to him, and the torment grew without restraint. When the pain finally grew too great for his body to handle, the world began to dim.

The presence of the rift meant that the Veil was thin, a risk that mages were always told to avoid. As
he was drawn inexorably to the Fade, his soul walked the line between the waking world and the other side of Veil with a delicacy that surprised even himself. It was only when he reached an equilibrium between the two, when the Veil wrapped around him like a snug blanket, that he felt a faint touch on his wrist, and a suggestion of breath against his ear. Like this.

And, just like that, it happened: a wrenching sensation which sent a burst of energy directly from the Anchor to the heart of the rift. He struggled to comprehend exactly how the rift worked, how the mark affected it, but in the end, it seemed to come down to just wiggling his fingers, which was followed shortly after by a boom as the rift exploded into plasmic debris.

Fascinating. He didn't notice his knees hitting the ground, or the sudden impact as his body tipped over to lie still in the grass. The world was a distant place, unknowable and untouchable for now, and his eyes fluttered shut as his mind tried to understand why it felt like a kiss had just been placed on his cheek.

The last thing he remembered before the remainder of his consciousness slipped away was a soft susurration, so soft he almost didn't hear the words hidden inside.

I'm so sorry.
Whispers

The sun beat down on the two men as they circled each other, watching for any sign of weakness. Above, the summer sun shone brightly, the heat weighing on Cullen more than the leather gambeson he wore. Sweat soaked through his armor and rendered his hair curly and damp, but his grip remained firm around the hilt of his sword as he watched his opponent carefully.

Too late he realized that he'd been maneuvered to face directly into the sun which, of course, was when Alistair chose to strike. Cullen barely raised his shield in time to ward off the sword whistling towards him, bashing it away with focused strength. In answer, his own blade thrust forward rather than swinging, causing the Warden to step back out of its reach. Pulling back before he could be caught in an over-extension, Cullen pivoted and bashed his shield hard into Alistair, using his leverage to push the man even more off balance. A final shove saw the man wavering on the edge of the practice ring before falling back with a startled yelp.

Cullen grinned as he sheathed his practice blade and moved forward, offering a hand to his sparring partner. "You're more than a bit rusty, Alistair," he said with a chuckle. "Not enough Darkspawn around to keep your skills sharp since the Fifth Blight ended?"

"Oh, hardy har har," Alistair muttered as accepted Cullen's offer. Their hands smacked together loudly before Cullen pulled him up, and for a few moments, they simply concentrated on getting their breath back. "Tell you what," Alistair finally said. "You go take on a couple of ogres and then come back and tell me how eager I should be to go forth and find new darkspawn to kill. Go on," he urged, gesturing towards the gate. "I'll be here, cozied up in your office. I'll take those reports you complain about over a pack of shrieks any day, believe you me."

"Are you sure about that?" Cullen panted as he waved Alistair to follow him to some nearby benches. There were others waiting to use the practice ring, after all. "You haven't seen Leliana's reports. They're each a small battle in and of themselves."

With a laugh, Alistair accepted a water skin from a young elf boy standing in the shade of the Herald's Rest, drinking deeply before he poured some on his head to cool down. "I can imagine," he said as he handed the water to Cullen to do the same. "From what I've heard, both of you have been rather busy of late."

Tugging off his gauntlets, Cullen tucked them into his belt and poured the last of the water over his head before raking his fingers through his hair. "That's one way of putting it." He looked out into the courtyard, noting the renewed bustling and activity, a sharp contrast to just a few short weeks ago. When Dorian had left, less than a score of people had gathered in the courtyard to see him off. Now...

Alistair followed his gaze. "There's more than when I first came here, by a fair margin. And morale is definitely improved a fair bit, as well." His lips pursed in thought. "I've also heard the mage's name on quite a few more lips. How long has he been running around, doing good deeds in the name of the Inquisition? Over a month, right?"

Cullen nodded, deep in thought. "Almost a month and a half, actually. He makes sure the others get to come back to Skyhold, but he hasn't done so himself."

"Smart move," Alistair observed. "They'll see it as dedication, keeping himself out like that, but also appreciate he didn't force the others. Little things like that get noticed, and remembered. He keeps saying he doesn't want to be Inquisitor, but..." Letting the thought trail into silence, Alistair shrugged.
and gestured the elf boy closer. "Another skin, please. The Commander used up the one I leant him."

"You mean the nearly empty one you gave me?" Cullen asked with a grin.

As Alistair chuckled and took the water, the boy looked up at Cullen. "Would you like another skin, Ser? Um, I mean Ser Commander!" he quickly corrected himself.

"I would indeed, thank you. What's your name, lad?"

The elf brightened. "My name's Taedor, Ser Commander. My mother and I just arrived last week, but my father has been serving the Inquisition since Haven! He works in the kitchen with Mother now, and I help here."

Cullen smiled. "You're doing good work. Keep it up."

"Thank you, Ser Commander!" Taedor said, attempting to give him a salute. "Father says we can't let the Herald or her Chosen down!" At that point, someone else came over to the benches, and Taedor hurried over to give him some water.

Swallowing harshly, Cullen sagged down to sit next to Alistair. His friend looked at him with a sympathetic expression as he patted Cullen's leg. "I hear that a lot, actually," he said softly. "I suspect Leliana's gently guiding hand."

"So do I," Cullen replied in hushed tones. He still wasn't sure how he felt about that, honestly. He knew Leliana would never want to replace Mailani in the hearts and minds of those who served the Inquisition, but he also knew that the Inquisition would do better to have a figurehead. It made him supremely uncomfortable, though.

"You know," Alistair said in a thoughtful voice, "it doesn't have to be."

"Have to be what?"

"Leliana's doing. I mean, it's not like Mailani burst out of the Fade saying she was the Herald, is it?" Alistair mused. "That came later, after she closed a couple of rifts. At least, that's what Leliana told me."

"That's true," Cullen said slowly, brow furrowing slightly as he considered the ramifications. "I'm not actually sure where the term Herald came from. I admit, I've always thought it was Leliana's work."

"Not a bad guess, but you might want to ask her at some point. Maybe it would make you feel better about the whole thing. Or at least not worse, if you already think she's started the rumor." Alistair patted his leg once more then gestured to the troops practicing in the courtyard. "To be honest, there are plenty of rumors flying around that aren't of her making that reflect well of the man. Rescuing the soldiers imprisoned by the Avvar in the Fallow Mire--"

Cullen had to snort a laugh at the mention of that particular mission. "You should have read the report Dorian sent back with Scout Harding about that mission. I've never read cold, miserable, and pathetic as a puppy so many times in an official report in my life."

"Did he mention his nose?" Alistair asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Hmm. No, actually. That was in Cassandra's report, not his." Now that he thought about it, the omission seemed odd.
And yet that detail is running around Skyhold. For a man with a reputation for vanity, a broken nose acquired while saving Inquisition soldiers is seen as significant." Alistair nudged Cullen. "But you already knew that, I'm sure."

Nodding slowly, Cullen thought about the other things he'd heard them talking about. "Of course, the fact he can actually close rifts helps, too."

"And he's been very diligent about it. He's closed quite a few in only a month and a half."

Cullen knew that had also resonated with the troops at Skyhold. It was measurable, and it harkened back to…before. A small smile came to his lips. "Maybe the Inquisition can survive after all."

"More than survive," Alistair said. "I think we're looking at a force that has the power to help me. The Wardens, I mean."

Cullen grimaced. "You know we can't make a decision on that until Dorian gets back."

"But surely that will be soon?" Alistair ventured. "He's been gone for quite a long time, after all."

A missive had arrived the previous day, actually, stating that Dorian and those with him would be returning to Skyhold 'soon', but no exact date or time had been given or promised. As Cullen opened his mouth to answer, however, he caught sight of a familiar figure stalking towards them from the direction of the gate. Rising to his feet, he gestured Alistair to stand as well. "Hawke," he muttered in warning just as the man rounded the training circle and headed towards them.

"Commander," Hawke said as he approached. When Taedor offered the Viscount a water skin, as he'd been instructed, Hawke pushed him back with an annoyed sigh. "Not now, boy." Uncaring of the way the lad staggered back and fell to the ground, Hawke came to a halt in front of Cullen and crossed his arms, looking the man up and down as Alistair rushed to help Taedor to his feet. "You're looking better than when I saw you last. Not quite so pale and timid."

Cullen's jaw rippled as he clenched his teeth. He's important to the Inquisition, he reminded himself firmly. Or at least Kirkwall will be. When he could trust his voice, he inclined his head. "You're looking a bit dusty and road-weary yourself, Your Excellency. I trust your journey was not in vain?"

Hawke barked a laugh, then nodded towards the main keep door. "Why don't you gather the ladies and that handsome mage friend of yours to hear the results? Not right away, though." He brushed some dirt off of his shirt. "I'd prefer to wash up first. Dust really isn't the best uniform for an official presentation."

"Dorian hasn't returned as of yet, Excellency," Cullen told him. "Shall I gather the rest of them?"

"Oh? I would have thought he'd be back by now. Those rifts must be intensely entertaining to keep his attention so long." Hawke frowned, then shook his head. "No. I'd rather talk to all of them at once, honestly. Any idea when he is due to return?"

"The last report we received from the field team only said Soon, Your Excellency." Cullen gave an apologetic little shrug, albeit a stiff one. "I'm sorry."

With a snort, Hawke reached out and clapped Cullen on the shoulder, sparing none of his strength. "Don't give yourself a sprain trying to apologize, Commander. We both know apologies don't carry much weight when they come from your lips, anyway." Ignoring Cullen's seething and Alistair's glare, he stepped back. "Just send a messenger to my quarters when he arrives, would you?"

"Of course," Cullen said through grated teeth.
With a smirk, Hawke turned and walked away, shoving Taedor aside without looking as he headed to his suite.

When he was out of earshot, Cullen snorted. "Yes, ser," he muttered under his breath, then went to Taedor and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Commander Ser, but..." Taedor sniffed, bravely putting on a strong face. "Did I do something wrong, Commander?"

"You did everything you were supposed to do," Cullen assured him. "The Champion is just, ah..." His mind, for some reason, was offering a series of less than flattering phrases, and it didn't seem like a good thing to say in front of an impressionable young lad.

"Not the nicest man sometimes," Alistair supplied.

"Oh. Like my granther?" Taedor offered. "He gets grumpy when his knee acts up."

"Yes." Except in Hawke's case it's his personality, not his knee. Still, it seemed better to leave the matter at that. "Why don't you go drop off the empty skins with the tavern and get some full ones? The second shift of training is about to start."

"Yes, Commander Ser!" He gave Cullen a salute. "I'm here for the Inquisition!" Quickly he trotted off towards the Herald's Rest to go about his duties.

Cullen sighed. "I'd better go back to my office and let the Iron Trio know that the Viscount has returned." That was one good thing about always having a scout or two hovering outside his office, at any rate.

"You do that," Alistair said. "By the whiff of things, I'm long overdue for a bath."

Clapping Alistair on the shoulder, Cullen told him with a straight face, "That's always true, my friend."

"Oh, hardy har har," Alistair said, shrugging off Cullen's hand with a rolling of his eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, then?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" Cullen nodded to Alistair, then set his feet in motion towards his office. Along the way, he made sure to talk to any soldiers and scouts he encountered, as well as dealing with the inevitable arrival of Jim. Cullen suspected the man's sole purpose in life was to shove reports in his Commander's face, and he couldn't help but give a little sigh as Jim did so now.

"This morning's Skyhold patrol reports, Commander!" Jim said with a crisp salute.

"Thank you, Scout." Cullen scanned the papers, brows furrowing slightly as he looked for anything out of the ordinary. "Any more sightings of giants?"

"No, Commander! Just a few bronto that have been reported to the hunters for later retrieval!"

Cullen managed to not smile in the face of the man's earnestness and nodded. "Thank you, Scout. Dismissed."

Jim executed another quick salute before marching away, and Cullen let his chuckle emerge as he set into motion again, analysing the reports as he walked. Around him, the rumble of conversation filled his ears with a constant hum. He heard snippets of the usual gossip, speculation about the Chargers, who could take on who in a practice round, complaints about the food, and other topics typical of
satisfied, if slightly restless, soldiers. *It's time to rotate the companies between our major areas of influence again,* he mused, and made a note to talk to the other Advisors about the matter.

"--but should we tell the Commander?"

Cullen's walk slowed, and he glanced up from his reports when those words struck his ears. As he tried to pinpoint the man he'd heard, a woman answered, "Isn't it just gossip, though? I mean...the Champion surely wouldn't do that, would he?"

"According to Baden, he would," the first man replied as Cullen located him and moved towards him. "I don't like it. The Chosen may be a Vint, but he's our Vint."

The woman with him, whose back was to Cullen as he approached, nodded her head. "The Champion needs to back off, he does. You..." Her voice lowered, and Cullen had to strain to hear it even as he got closer. "You don't think that's why the Chosen hasn't come back to Skyhold, do you?"

"How would I--Commander!" The man said, back stiffening as he gave Cullen a crisp salute. The woman started and quickly turned to face Cullen, mirroring the man's actions.

"At ease." Crossing his arms across his chest, Cullen put a stern, but not angry, look on his face as he looked them over. This close, he recognized them - two solid soldiers who'd been with the Inquisition since Haven, and not prone to idle gossip. "Now, Lisbeth, Conrad--what is it you aren't sure you should tell me?"

The two exchanged a glance before Conrad nudged Lisbeth's foot. "Lisbeth is worried about some of the rumors going around, Commander."

Cullen shifted his stare to the woman without a word, a raised eyebrow making his order to talk more than clear.

Swallowing hard, Lisbeth nodded. "It's just a rumor, Commander. That the Champion and Ser Pavus passed an evening together, if you take my meaning."

Though he'd heard the rumor and had it confirmed by Leliana, Cullen still didn't see why it was a cause for concern - for these two, at least. After all, very few people knew Hawke beyond the story of the Champion of Kirkwall from Varric's book, and certainly not as well as Cullen did. Though he himself had several concerns should Dorian pursue Hawke further, he needed to know why his soldiers were worried about it. "What of it?"

"It's just that...Well, you know His Excellency has spent quite a few days here in Skyhold between his trips elsewhere, Commander. And when he's here..." She glanced at Conrad, who nodded encouragingly, then looked at Cullen again. "There's some who've also spent an evening with the Chosen. You know, before...well, before, when he'd had a bit much to drink and such? The Champion, well, he went and had *words* with them. The men who'd been with Ser Pavus, I mean."

Cullen's brows drew together as he frowned. "Words?"

"Telling them to keep away from the Chosen from here on out," Conrad volunteered. "Spoke to one of them myself. Said the Champion smiled the whole time, but..." Giving a little shrug, Conrad shook his head. "There's smiles and then there's *smiles*, Commander."

Oh, Cullen knew that particular smile of Hawke's *quite* well, and his sense of unease increased. "So he's warning people away from Dorian?"
Both of them nodded, and Conrad added, "Not quite threatening, like, but making it plain that it would be best for them to keep their distance. And...Well, he's the Champion, so who's going to go up against him?"

Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. Damn. "This is something you should tell the Commander," he told the two of them. "And you should expect a visitor from someone else later, as well." As both Conrad and Lisbeth glanced up nervously at the window through which the Nightingale's crows flew, Cullen looked at the troops around them, wondering just how far this concern ran. "How widespread is the rumor?"

Lisbeth tilted her head slightly as she considered the question. "Not everyone knows, I'd say, but the rumor is spreading. And we're worried, Ser. The Chosen, we know him better now. He went in and rescued our people from the Avvar, he's fighting against the Venatori even though they're both from Tevinter, and more stories keep coming back every day of things that she'd be proud of, Commander. And he's doing it all in her name, not his own, because it's the right thing to do. She said that about him before, that he was a right proper man even if he was a Vint, but...well, now we've all seen it for ourselves."

"He's carrying on the Herald's legacy without claiming it for his own," Conrad chimed in. "That's important, Commander. He knows the Inquisition is bigger than any of us. He's one of us now, and she chose him to continue her work. We want to take care of our own."

"And we will," Cullen told them firmly. "You have my word, and that of the Inquisition. Champion or no, Dorian is one of us now, and we will protect him as such."

The soldiers visibly relaxed, then gave Cullen a matched salute. "Thank you, Commander," Lisbeth said.

"Dismissed." After they had walked away, a deep frown settled onto his face as he considered what they'd told him. Though it had ended on a high note, the meat of the conversation left a bad taste in Cullen's mouth as he finished the journey to his office, and did nothing to lighten his mood. As he went through the motions of his ablutions using the cold basin of water awaiting him, then carefully set his hair to order and ate part of the cold breakfast left on his desk, his gaze grew more and more distant. By the time he sat at the chair behind his desk, he only had enough energy to lean back and let his head fall against the wall as he sighed heavily and closed his eyes.

For a moment, he allowed himself to feel the weight on his shoulders, the hole in his chest, and the emptiness at his side. He forced himself to take a deep, slow breath, then another, and yet another. Finally his eyes fluttered open as he looked up at the hole in the ceiling above. "I promise I won't let you down," he murmured softly.

As his head slowly rose, his eyes wandered to the small square of slate he'd left propped up on his desk, its surface covered with a series of hatch marks. He added a line whenever he dreamed of Mailani, though he seemed to dream as much about Mailani with Dorian as he did about Mailani and himself recently. At first it had seemed odd, but now he simply accepted it. It was still a chance to remember Mailani, to see her, if only in his dreams.

And sometimes, that little reminder was all he needed.

With a final deep breath, he lifted his hands and took up his quill, dipping it into the ink as he penned notes to Leliana, Josephine, and Cassandra regarding not only Hawke's return to Skyhold, but also Cullen's discussion with his soldiers. Hawke was never a man to take lightly on the best of days, but his behavior was enough to warrant a discussion, at least in Cullen's opinion.
It would keep them busy. Every moment of busy now meant one less moment of emptiness later, a lesson hard learned, and a habit hard earned. One step at a time, and eventually he wouldn't notice how many steps he took.

Eventually.

The day passed swiftly, interrupted in the mid-afternoon only by the return of Dorian and his team to Skyhold. The horn heralding their return rang out loud enough to break Cullen's concentration, and he quickly set his pen down so as to jog down the steps to greet them personally.

There were circles under Dorian's eyes as he slid out of his saddle with a wince, but he still managed a bright smile and clapped Dennet's back as the man came to grab the reins. "I think my hindquarters fit that saddle a little too well after this many days in it," he said cheerfully, earning a dry chuckle from the stoic Horse Master. "But the steeds served us well. You have my thanks."

"I'll see what I can do about improving your seat," Dennet observed. "After all, my stables have filled up quite nicely in the last few weeks." He handed the horse off to a stable boy. "I'll always do my best for the Inquisition."

Dorian smiled and thumped his fist on top Dennet's shoulder. "Good man."

With a nod, Dennet turned and moved on to the next mount, leaving Cullen to step forward and catch Dorian's elbow as the man swayed slightly. "Let's get you to your quarters, shall we?"

"And hello to you as well, Commander," Dorian said with a weary smile. Nodding to where the Iron Bull was plodding away from the stable, he said, "I appreciate the offer, but Bull needs someone right now. You read the report, I presume."

Cullen nodded. "And Harding told us more," he said softly as he let go of Dorian's arm. "Bull a Tavashoth…I never would have thought it of him."

"It was the Qun or the Chargers, and I knew Bull would never remain himself if he chose the Qun," Dorian said softly. Absently he reached up and thumped his fist onto Cullen's shoulder, much as he had done with Dennet. As he swayed again, that fist flattened into a hand that gripped Cullen's fur hard as Dorian took a deep breath to steady himself. "It won't take long to get him a bit more settled, I promise. I just want to finish a conversation we started while on the way here."

"But you will rest after that, won't you?" Cullen asked, concerned about the mage's health. "You've had quite the eventful month or so."

"I have, haven't I?" Dorian asked with a seemingly careless laugh. "Don't worry, Commander, I promise you that I am quite accomplished at pampering myself." His eyelid dropped in a slow wink as he took a careful step back. "After all, someone should take care of me in the manner I deserve, hmm?"

A grudging smile came to Cullen's lips. "Fine. Be that way. Just don't push yourself."

"Never happen, Ser Pot," Dorian said airily as he turned and headed after the Iron Bull. "This kettle is far too much a wastrel for that dire fate, after all."

"I am not--" Cullen began to protest, but Dorian was already out of earshot as he hurried to Bull's side. With a shake of his head, Cullen returned to his office. He still had a lot of work to do, after all.
Restlessness finally drove him out of the office a few hours after that as the sun slowly set over the mountains to the east. The wind chilled Cullen's face as he leaned on the ramparts, looking out across the lands surrounding Skyhold. The sight of the snow fields and the frozen river were always calming, and the cold of the wind and air eased the pain which had been gnawing and throbbing in the back of his mind since he'd returned to his work after the short interlude with Dorian.

He resolutely put aside the thought that perhaps he had fled his office to ensure he was far from a specific box with its tempting blue contents. Later, he would deal with that, but for now, he let himself simply exist and breathe, ignoring the longing for the lyrium as best as he could.

"He's cold inside, cold and hungry and desperate."

The sudden intrusion of that particular voice made Cullen clench his teeth together for a moment. Cole was difficult for him to deal with at the best of times, and he was hardly at his best in this particular moment. Slowly he turned to face the pale man standing next to him. "Cole. You've been difficult to track down of late." In fact, now that Cullen thought about it, he hadn't actually seen Cole since word had arrived of Mailani's death, though Harding's reports had placed him with Dorian for at least two of the weeks the mage had been away from Skyhold. He peered more closely at the boy, a frown coming to his face as he noticed that Cole was even more pale than usual, and his lips were tinged a pale blue. "Cole, are you all right?"

"He wants what he cannot have," Cole said urgently. "He needs to fill the hole left by his dagger, and he doesn't care what happens to whoever he pushes into it."

Cullen frowned, his momentary concern at Cole's absence wiped away by the words. "Who are you talking about?"

Cole took a deep breath, and when he next spoke, the words fell over themselves in a rush. "His wings are broken, but he continues to fly and fall, lashing out at whatever gets in his way without thinking of the pain he inflicts. He hunts now, a prowling predator seeking his prize, his prey, his pleasure."

"It's Hawke, isn't it?" A chill ran down Cullen's spine when he received a spare nod in response. "Where's Dorian?"

Cole's shoulders sagged in relief. "He hides amidst works of wine and words, wishing the world away. He's vulnerable, open, eager to trust. Easy to push into a hole, but not so easy to pull out."

Cullen put a hand on Cole's shoulder. "I'll take care of it," he promised, then hurried past him towards the nearest stairs.

A whisper followed him. "She says thank you."

Those words were enough to make Cullen come to a hard stop and turn around, but Cole was already gone.

Shaking his head, he took the stairs two at a time, deciphering Cole's riddle as he went. Works of wine and words...He must mean the secret study. There were books there, after all, and the small wine cellar not too far away. Certainly it was a more likely candidate than the main library or the storage room in the back of the Herald's Rest. His strides lengthened as he took the quickest route from his office to the study, yet even then it almost wasn't enough.

"Hawke!" Cullen called out, his urgency at seeing the man reaching towards the door handle enough to make him bypass normal courtesies.
The man's shoulders stiffened, but his hand fell away from the door as he turned around, a cold expression on his face as he said in a sarcastic tone, "Cullen. It's been so long since we've talked."

"As you say, Your Excellency." Cullen gave a belated bow as Hawke walked towards him. "I trust you've been well?"

"Tolerably." Hawke's eyes narrowed. "Odd to run into you down here."

Lifting his chin, Cullen gave a little shrug. "I don't see why. There are several important books down here that I refer to on occasion." It was a not-so-subtle message, that Cullen belonged to Skyhold, and Hawke did not.

"And I take it such an occasion has arisen now?" The skepticism in Hawke's voice cut through the air between them, and for a moment, Cullen feared that Hawke would pursue the matter. Finally, though, Hawke simply shrugged. "Fine. Have it your way, Commander. I'd best be on my way, then."

Stepping back to give Hawke plenty of room to pass by, Cullen breathed a purely internal sigh of relief. When Hawke was right next to him, however, he paused and met Cullen's gaze. "You would not happen to have run down here because you heard something from one of your soldiers, would you?"

"What I say to my soldiers and what they say to me is the Inquisition's concern," Cullen said in a flat tone.

Hawke regarded him with tilted head for a moment, then stepped closer. "Odd, isn't it, how you've gone from never looking beyond the tip of your nose to sticking it where it doesn't belong?" Leaning in until his face was mere inches away from Cullen's, he said softly, "I was there, lest you forget. While Meredith slowly went insane and Kirkwall fell apart around her, you refused to pull your head out of your arse and do anything about it. His nostrils flared as his eyes narrowed even further. "And, as usual, I had to clean up the whole bloody mess. I don't know how you sleep at night with all that blood on your hands because you didn't dare question authority. Think on that before you start judging me based on a little rumor or decide that you'd be 'better' for him, hmm?"

Cullen forced himself not to back down and keep his breath even as Hawke gave him one final scornful look before stalking away. Damn the man.

The headache which had been bothering him earlier began to throb painfully, and he sighed as he rubbed at his forehead. Worse, Hawke was right - at least about Kirkwall - and Cullen knew it. Did that make him right about Dorian? "No. Not this time," he murmured, then quickly entered the study.

Inside, Dorian had collapsed into the lone chair, face buried in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. As Cullen approached, he raised his head to blink blearily at Cullen. "Commander?" In the dim lighting, his eyes looked red rimmed and swollen and the circles beneath them were even more pronounced than before, but Cullen couldn't tell if that was more than mere abuse of alcohol. "Is that you?"

"It's me, Dorian," Cullen said in a soft voice, again worried about the mage. He knew only too well the impulse to dull pain with drink. "I've come to take you to your rest. You know," he added, trying for a slightly lighter tone, "the one you promised you'd get, hmm?"

Dorian snorted as he tried to rise to his feet. Halfway up, he lurched sideways, saved from cracking his head on the desk only through Cullen's swift step forward to pull him fully upright. With a chuckle, Dorian tapped Cullen's nose with a shaking hand. "Deja vu. You seem to be making a habit of catching me when I falter."
"That's not such a bad thing, is it?" Cullen asked as he held Dorian in place. When the man still swayed in spite of his help, Cullen shook his head and carefully helped the mage back into the chair. "Maybe we should just sit and talk for a while," he suggested as he hitched himself up onto the desk.

With an absent nod, Dorian closed his eyes and sighed, then let his head fall back into the chair. "Yes. Talk. One of the two best things to do with your lips and tongue. That would be nice." He took a deep breath, then raised the bottle he still held to his lips. Only a vague look of disappointment on his face told Cullen that it was empty before he opened his fingers and let it drop with a clatter to the ground. "About what, pray?"

The mage's first comment made him suddenly remember Hawke's parting jab, and Cullen swiftly cleared his throat, pushing the absurdity of the idea out of his mind. Instead, he cast about for a topic that would avoid both the weather and Dorian's reason for drinking so heavily - at least, for now. "You were away from Skyhold for a long time. Any particular reason? Do you have anything to report?"


Cullen forced a chuckle. "That does sound terrible."

"Indeed," Dorian groaned. "I've rarely been more miserable in my life. But do you know the absolute worst part of the entire affair?" His eyes opened, gleaming wetly in the dim light. "She wasn't there. Maker, I'd have given every last breath in my body for her to be at my side."

The words came as a surprise, given that Dorian had never volunteered his own pain before, and hit Cullen almost like a blow. His hand rose to his chest as he gasped and bowed his head, an action that didn't go unnoticed.

"I'm sorry, Commander," Dorian said quickly, leaning forward and reaching out with his hand in a comforting gesture. "I should have considered your own--"

"No." The word came out softly, so Cullen shook his head more firmly and took Dorian's outstretched hand, speaking with a bit more authority as he repeated the word. "No. Please, tell me more. You were among those who fought at her side. Tell me what she was like out there." When Dorian seemed uncertain, he squeezed the man's hand and added, "It would mean a lot to me."

A sad, fleeting smile came to Dorian's face as he nodded. "As you wish. She was…utterly fearless on the field. It was odd to see sometimes, since she was such a kind soul anywhere but in battle, but if we came under attack, or if she saw someone in danger, the bow came out and her arrows flew true." Dorian reached up to wipe his tears away, though more fell mere moments later. "When it was all over, she was the first at everyone's side, making sure we were bandaged and tended to properly. She always made sure she was the last to drink any of the potions." The mage sighed, that tremulous smile again touching his lips. "She even lied about it a couple of times, the poor darling, just to make sure we'd all drink if we needed it. Iron Bull or Cassandra, and even Blackwall, had to carry her back to camp more than once because of it."

"That does sound like her," Cullen said with a wry chuckle. That selflessness had been one of the things he respected and adored the most. "Is that why she caught lung fever in the Storm Coast?"

"Precisely. Vivienne was most put out with her, as I recall," Dorian noted with a little shake of his head.

"As was Cassandra," Cullen noted. "That was after the Blades of Hessarian operation, wasn't it?"
As they talked, Dorian's tears eased, then ceased altogether, and both men started to smile as the act of remembering Mailani grew more fond and less painful. Their hands parted so that gestures could be made, and there were even moments when genuine laughter rang in the small room. Eventually the conversation found a natural lull, leaving both men in a pensive mood and lost in their own thoughts.

After a few moments, Dorian reached down to his belt and pulled away a small metal flask etched with runes. As his fingers traced the etchings, they glowed slightly, and Cullen raised an eyebrow. "What is that?"

"I found it on the body of a Venatori mage," Dorian replied thoughtfully. "I recognized its nature and have carried it ever since. Nevarran brandy, but of a very special sort."

"Intriguing. What makes it so special?"

"Its intended purpose," Dorian replied, tapping the glowing runes. "I mastered Nevarran magical arts, but I also studied their rituals. They treat their dead with as much respect as the living. More, in some cases." For a moment he fell silent, then continued in a heavy voice, "This brandy is what they drink when they wish to thank the departed for being a part of their lives."

Cullen's eyes were drawn to the intricately etched runes, their soft glow barely visible even in the dim light of the study. "And the runes?"

"Necromancy runes. According to the ritual, after drinking, there is a moment you can reach beyond the Veil and...feel them. For a moment only, of course, but..." Dorian sighed, a long, drawn-out sound. "A priceless treasure indeed, if true. Pity there is only enough for one use." Twisting off the cap, he offered the flask to Cullen. "But I think it should be yours to cherish."

"Are you certain?" Cullen's caution arose in part from not wishing to deprive Dorian of the experience, given his earlier state. The rest stemmed from his innate caution regarding any spell cast in his vicinity - magic was, after all, magic, and he had personal reasons to be wary.

"Quite certain," Dorian assured him quietly. "For all that it was one of the worst days of my life, at least I was with her in the end. You didn't even get that much."

Cullen winced as the vision of Mailani's crushed, dessicated body flashed in front of his eyes, the same image which had tortured him for weeks and could only be diminished with alcohol. Even now, it made his headache sharpen and his hands twitch, and he forced himself to close his eyes and take a deep, steadying breath.

Finally he reached out and took the flask from Dorian. "You're right." Even the chance of a farewell was enticing enough to override his reluctance, if only for a while. "How does it work?"

"Simply think of why you were grateful for her, and drink." Dorian tapped his temple. "According to my studies, the ritual raises a sort of spiritual beacon, and your thoughts determine what comes to investigate. So be careful, and be steadfast."

With a nod, Cullen stared at the flask for a moment before closing his eyes, determined not to let his mind wander. Mailani.

A welter of images and emotions from their time together ran through his mind and heart, an almost breathless reminder that as much as he had loved her, it had been her friendship which had sustained him for so long - and, in some ways, supported him even now. It was enough to push aside the last of his misgivings, and he raised the flask to his lips, quickly drinking its contents in one swift gulp.
As the brandy burned down his throat, Cullen bowed his head in silence.

Perhaps it was the strength of the brandy, or perhaps the ritual truly did work as promised, but…it was almost as if she were right there beside him. When a hand settled on his shoulder and squeezed, Cullen grasped it without thinking, his thoughts wholly on Mailani.

Thank you. Simply that: no embellishment, no explanation, and no exception.

For an instant, there was a sensation of a gentle touch on his cheek. Then the feeling faded, leaving him alone again.

With a shuddering sigh, he buried his face in his hands as he let the emotions wash over him. It was the closest to peace he'd felt since her death, though he could not say for certain that it had, in fact, been her touch he had felt. In the end, it didn't matter. What had truly happened was acceptance, something which he'd been struggling with for weeks. Whether it was the ritual, or simply talking with someone else who had also loved her, even if in a different way, he finally felt for the first time as if he would be able to cherish what he'd had without howling about what he had lost.

His breath came easier, his shoulders felt lighter, and the pain was gone from his head. A weight was gone - only one of many - but at least his burden had been lessened. Thank you, he whispered in his mind one more time.

Tears standing in his eyes, he finally looked up at Dorian. Words seemed inadequate in that moment, so instead Cullen simply reached out to the mage. Dorian grasped it wordlessly, accepting Cullen's need for silence as easily as he accepted his hand.

There were worse things than being alone together.
His Worst Nightmare

Darkness.

Cullen remembered this darkness, remembered the blistering cold and the freezing wind of the mountain blizzard. Remembered standing at the furthest edge of the firelight from the hastily constructed camp, his eyes searching the darkness for any sign of the Herald. Remembered waiting, praying more fervently than he had in years to see movement, to hear the shift of snow or a cry for help.

But mostly he remembered the darkness, inside and out, wondering if the endearing little elf whose smile seemed to warm him within had survived the avalanche which had covered Haven.

Why he stood there now, shivering in the cold despite his fur, heart racing with anxiety, he didn't know, or question. He only knew he must search the darkness, that someone needed to be saved. A vague memory came to him, of a cave full of dust and blood and despair, but it was fleeting. What was important was that he remain vigilant.

Whatever came, he would stand ready to meet it.

A light flickered in front of him, a burst of bright green that made his heart leap. Yes. That is the person I have to save. Blindly he stepped forward, pursuing that hint of green as his heart swelled with hope and fear.

When his foot landed, however, the darkness lifted, and he found himself in a tavern, of all places. An empty tavern, with sprawling tables and benches and not even a murmur of conversation. Confused, he turned to look behind him, and saw no tavern but a vast expanse of grim, grey rock and a flickering light that made him queasy. Only when he let his gaze move upwards and found the Black City floating above did he understand where he stood, but the realization registered in a vague, dreamlike fashion.

The sound of a door closing behind him caught his ear, tugging his attention away from the Black City, particularly when a familiar voice said, "Uh oh. Nobody's here. This doesn't bode well."

Dorian's comment pulled Cullen around, and as he turned, the world became a tavern once more. Accepting the oddity of the Fade, he focused on the two who had appeared, noting that both Dorian and Mailani appeared dusty and road-worn. He tried to step forward, but found his feet held to the ground as if his boots had grown into the stone beneath them. He looked down at them with a frown, just as another man spoke whose voice he didn't recognize.

"Dorian."

The voice made Cullen's skin crawl, and he looked up from his frozen feet just as Dorian replied, "Father." Dorian paused a bit, long enough for Cullen to see uncertainty become anger as he turned to face the other man, still hidden in the shadows of a stairwell. "So the whole story about the 'family retainer' was just...what? A smoke screen?"

"Then you were told," the man said as he stepped forward, into the light that was all at once brightly lit by candles and lanterns and dimmed by the green darkness of the Fade. "I apologize for the deception, Inquisitor. I never intended for you to be involved."

When Cullen saw the man to whom Dorian spoke more clearly, his eyes widened. The man himself seemed unremarkable - middle-aged with a lined face in a mage's robe. Behind him, however - and
large enough to block the view of the Fade on the other side of the tavern - crouched a spider-like creature of monstrous proportions shrouded in a spiky carapace of shadows and with more eyes than Cullen ever wanted to see clustered together. Despite its size, the thing was difficult to see, fading in and out of sight as if it weren't entirely there, and Cullen had to concentrate to see more than a vague outline.

Even more chilling than its mere presence, however, was the long, twisting line which stretched from the thing's mouth to gently coil around the man now talking to Dorian, a cord which pulsed with a sickly green darkness. Its presence sent a lance of cold down Cullen's back, as instinct shocked him with a recognition based more on his visceral reaction than on learned knowledge.

_Demon._ No other explanation made sense. And not just any demon, such as Cullen had encountered and fought before in Kinloch Hold and, later, Kirkwall and his nightmares. This was a creature of another order entirely, and its focus seemed to be entirely on the events within the tavern. Cullen's attention re-focused on the tavern as he realized that while he was not danger, the same might not hold true for Dorian.

Time had passed, and words exchanged, but it was Mailani's voice which made him truly pay attention to the conversation again. "I should leave you to work this out."

Dorian turned on her, his voice and stance softening slightly when talking to her rather than his father. "Oh, no you don't. I want a witness. I want someone to hear the truth."

"Dorian," his 'father' interjected, "there's no need for this--"

Continuing as if the man had not spoken, Dorian said, "I prefer the company of men. My father disapproves."

Mailani's eyebrows rose as she blinked. "That's…a big concern in Tevinter, is it?" Cullen recognized her tone immediately - it was a subtle jab at silly _shemlen_ beliefs.

"Only if you're trying to live up to an impossible standard," Dorian replied bitterly, but as he continued, Cullen's attention was drawn to the huge demon once more as it shifted its pulsating bulk.

A shimmer of dark green ran down the cord between its mouth and the figure of Dorian's father, who flickered - a quick blink of _there_ and _not there_. By the time Dorian turned on him, his anger built into a beautifully righteous wrath, the 'father' appeared completely human once more. His expression was a beautiful emulation of concerned sincerity as he pleaded, "Dorian, please, if you'll only listen to me."

Dorian cut the other man off with a gesture. "Why? So you can spout more convenient lies?" Taking a few steps closer, Dorian raised a hand to point an accusatory finger. "He taught me to hate blood magic. _The resort of the weak mind._' Those are his words."

Cullen felt the blood drain from his face. _Blood magic?_ Distracted for the moment from the hulking behemoth, he focused intently on Dorian. What _blood magic?_

Dorian hadn't so much as paused, though his face had darkened with ire. "But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life? You tried to... _change_ me!"

The tone of those last few words told Cullen more than an entire conversation with Dorian could have. Blood magic, used to force Dorian to his father's will, either to agree to the marriage - or worse, to change him in an even more fundamental way... Those were no words of a demon, a
nightmare conjured up to scare and terrify. The pain in Dorian's face and voice were all too raw and real. His father had, indeed, intended to do just that. Dorian must have escaped, but that level of betrayal...Cullen shuddered. "Thank the Maker you escaped that fate," he murmured fervently.

Dorian's 'father' shook his head, even as the coil around him began to glow. "I only wanted what was best for you!"

Shaking his head fiercely, Dorian said in a heated voice, "You wanted the best for you! For your fucking legacy! Anything for that!" With those words, Dorian turned and stormed to a nearby counter, planting his hands on it as he tried to regain control of himself. Mailani followed him silently, giving him a bit of space to gather his wits about him.

After a few moments, Dorian looked at Mailani, face tight with pain. "Why this?" he asked her, voice shaking with the strength of his emotion. "Why here? Of all the times we had together, why this meeting? Couldn't it have been something a bit more fanciful and beautiful with flowers and unicorns?"

And, just like that, Cullen realized that Dorian still thought this to be a normal dream, as all the others Cullen had seen before had been. Perhaps a bit more unpleasant, but a normal dream nonetheless. He didn't perceive the huge demon towering over the scene, or the fact that his father wasn't part of his own mind but rather an extension of a demon. After all, Cullen had learned as a Templar that the more powerful the demon, the more difficult it was to perceive it while dreaming - even for a mage as skilled as Dorian.

It was Mailani's voice which again drew his attention away from the demon. "I'm sorry," she said softly as she reached out to lay a gentle hand on Dorian's arm. In the next moment, however, she turned to face Cullen. No further words needed to leave her lips for him to understand the pleading in her expression.

Abruptly, he recalled standing in the darkness at the beginning of his time in the Fade, remembered the overpowering need to stand vigilant, to be ready to save someone. That feeling had returned, but he no longer stood in darkness.

It was time to act.

Even as he made the decision, he felt a weight on his left arm and in his right hand. As he lifted an arm newly adorned by his shield, his right hand tightened around the hilt of his sword, each band and twist of metal intimately familiar even in a dream. As he shifted his feet, the mysterious force holding him in place crackled and broke, and he nodded to her. Yes. He was ready.

With a grim expression on his face, he ran forward, each step gaining momentum and speed as he advanced on the puppet of the demon. Ignoring the surprise on Dorian's face as he raced past, he raised his sword and summoned long unused protections against demons and magic as he roared, "You shall not have him!" With the anger and frustration of years of fighting demons both within and without, he swung his sword and unleashed the Wrath of Heaven with a strength greater than he had ever summoned in the waking world.

Light flared from his sword and blasted into the human-seeming figure first, which gave out a cry so loud it echoed in Cullen's head. For a moment, it morphed into a demon with claws for fingers and multiple crab-like limbs emanating from its back before it vanished into a cloud of inky blackness. As it did so, a white-hot energy surged up the line connecting it to the monster above, and the huge creature reared with a shriek that shook the Fade around them.

The tavern disintegrated as wood and brick and stone flew apart, leaving them standing in an empty
expanse of the Fade. Above floated the Black City and the other stray rocks which always seemed to be part of the dim landscape, though a thickening fog obscured most of the immediate ground around them.

Instinctively Dorian moved to Cullen's side. "What in the Fade was that...that thing? I've never seen anything like it."

"Nor I." Cullen shook his head as he sheathed his sword. "Are you... all right?" he asked, a bit hesitant since he wasn't sure what effect the destruction of the dream's construct would have on the man to whom the dream belonged.

"Hmm?" Dorian blinked, then looked at Cullen. "Hmm? Oh, you mean--" He gestured around them. "I've had dreams invaded before, though never on this scale. Usually just wisps and shades attracted to a mage's vivid dreams. Solas and I have discussed the matter frequently." The man's head tilted as his face grew thoughtful. "Did I imagine it, or was there some sort of string connecting the demon playing my father and the larger one?"

Cullen nodded. "I assume the monster was controlling the smaller one somehow, though I don't know why."

Dorian tapped his finger thoughtfully on the little triangle of hair decorating his chin. "I think I do." With a grimace, he added, "At least, if my theory about that monstrosity is true. I think I was its lunch. Or at least, my emotions were."

"It was... feeding off of you?" Cullen asked. Abruptly he recalled Alistair's tale of the sloth demon which had briefly entrapped him and the rest of his companions during the Blight. The thought of that happening to Dorian sent a chill through him. "Thank the Maker we put an end to that."

"We?" Dorian asked, amused. "I seem to recall it was you who ran past, sword swinging, and saved the day." He glanced around. "Dream, that is. For which I am most grateful. I'll have to think of some way to repay you."

Cullen shook his head. "I wouldn't worry about--"

A sudden roar cut him off as it echoed around them, so loud the ground shivered beneath their feet. A staff appeared in Dorian's hands as a huge shadow suddenly loomed in the fog nearby. Cullen heard the whistle and shrieks of all manner of demons in that fog, sounds which hinted at the greatest fears in his worst nightmares. His hand tightened on the hilt of his sword as he drew it and braced himself for battle.

"That doesn't bode well," Dorian said, perhaps unconsciously repeating himself from earlier. In the next moment, however, he shook his head. "This is not a battle we need to fight." With a flourish, Dorian sent a white burst of magic towards a startled Cullen, who instinctively raised his arm to cover his eyes against the blinding light.

For a moment, Cullen felt himself falling, the rush of wind and that bright white light overwhelming all of his senses. It ended with an abrupt jerk as he landed, and he clawed his way upright...

...to the sound of birds chirping as the pale dawn light poured through the hole in the roof above his head. For a moment, Cullen simply sat there, chest heaving, as he tried to comprehend what had happened. Dorian's dream had been chilling, and left more than a few confused questions in its wake.

What was that demon? How had Dorian attracted its attention? Its presence must have been
connected somehow with the Anchor, which made Cullen wonder uneasily if Mailani had ever been its target - and if so, how that attention had affected her. Her description of Envy and what it had planned for her had given him a few nightmares all on its own. Even worse, if Dorian, a highly skilled mage, hadn't been able to perceive it without aid, would Mailani have even known if her nightmares had been natural or provoked?

Throwing his legs over the edge of the bed, Cullen shivered, welcoming the chill of the early morning as a contrast to the leeching cold of the Fade. "Maker, give me strength," he murmured in a quiet plea. He would not let anyone fall prey to the designs of demons as he had, particularly not someone he was quickly coming to regard as a dear friend. At least Dorian was safe for now.

Cullen shook his head to clear his thoughts, knowing that the subject was better discussed directly with Dorian. Not today, though. A smile came to his face as he rose from his bed and began to perform his morning rituals. Today was a significant day for Dorian, though the mage didn't know it yet. Cullen had to make sure that he himself stood ready to support the man as necessary, as both the Commander of the Inquisition, and as a friend.

It was time, after all. More than time.
This time when Dorian emerged from sleep, he found himself curled tightly around his hand, sweating and freezing all at once. Agony lanced up his left arm as the light flared brightly enough to light the entire room with a sickly green glow. His right hand latched onto his left wrist, instinctively trying to straighten it, but the muscles had seized into a tortured hook. The pain reminded him of when he had first awoken after being anointed with the mark - certainly not the happiest of memories. When he tried to move his fingers, agony shot up his arm and into his shoulder and neck.

"*Fasta vass,*" he groaned. Pushing himself out of bed, he stumbled towards the basin of water he used for his morning ablutions. Once there, he shoved his rigid hand into it and fed heat into the water with magic. Soon the basin was hot enough that his skin gained a red tinge, and he diligently massaged his hand and wrist as best as he could with his right hand. After an agonizing eternity during which he forced himself to breathe slowly, the knots in his wrist and fingers slowly began to unwind. He patiently worked at them for a while longer, until suddenly they released with an audible crack.

Hissing in pain, he yanked his arm out of the water and lightly ran fingers chilled with frost over his skin until it returned to its customary hue. After that, it was a matter of slowly pacing at the foot of his bed as he flexed and shook his hand until the pain was at least tolerable. Though this particular episode of cramping remained by far the worst to which he'd awoken, it wasn't the first such occurrence - and, he suspected, it wouldn't be the last.

It was only after he could rotate his left wrist without a sharp pain in his shoulder that he allowed himself to sag down onto his mattress. A glance to the window showed the faint light of early dawn, and Dorian sighed. He had a great deal of work ahead of him, and a restless night of sleep had done little to prepare him for it. He looked down at his hand, absently watching the mark flicker fitfully as he pondered the events in his dream.

"Is it the mark?" he mused in a hushed voice. "Is that why he was drawn to my dreams?" Any mage of the Imperium worth their weight in lyrium received training in how to deal with demons in a variety of settings, but this one... "Not a demon I'll forget about any time soon." It would mean a few extra precautionary measures before sleep, and a bit of extra wariness in places where the Veil was thin. Add to that the whole business of Dorian actively seeking out rifts, and it was a complicating factor that he would have preferred to live without. Still, it wasn't overwhelming.

*Yet.*

With a small shake of his head, he stood and began to prepare for the day, knowing he shouldn't keep the Iron Ladies waiting for too much longer. Cassandra had let it be known that Leliana and Josephine wanted a meeting, and he assumed Cullen would be there, too. Despite his haste, however, he maintained his ritual of a bath with scented oil, a morning habit as yet unbroken while in Skyhold. The slowly lowering level of the oil in the bottle gave him a gauge, something to measure how time was pressing against him, and against the Inquisition.

As he scrubbed his arms, hoping the movement and friction would ease away the last of the ache to which he'd awoken, a light knock came to his door. Before he was able to do much more than mutter, *"Kaffas,*" to himself and look around for his towel, however, the door opened.
"Well, now," Hawke murmured as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. "That's a rather enchanting view." Moving closer to Dorian, he settled his hands on his hips and canted his head, eyes freely wandering. "Not a bad way to start the day, I must say."

"Be grateful I don't enchant some manners into you," Dorian said rather pointedly as he tried to subtly rearrange himself so as to keep the view to a minimum. Usually, such admiration wouldn't bother Dorian, particularly with someone with whom he'd passed a rather enjoyable vigorous evening, but there was something about the man's gaze which made Dorian more than a little discomfited. "And here I thought that even Fereldans knew enough about common courtesy to wait for an answer before barging in."

With a laugh, Hawke settled himself on the bed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You can blame Kirkwall for that. What rough edges I still had after leaving Ferelden were encouraged while I was there. A fascinating city, Kirkwall. You would probably like it."

Unsure how to deal with Hawke's invasion or odd conversational choice, and unwilling to insult the Viscount's city to his face, Dorian affected a light chuckle. "Well, it used to be part of the Imperium, so that is likely true. I have a fondness for Tevinter history and architecture, after all, just not to the same extent as the Venatori. I prefer to leave the past in the past."

An odd smile came to Hawke's face then, warm but with a touch of sadness. "I'm glad to hear you say that."

"I can imagine. It would be a very bad thing if the mark somehow fell into the hands of Corypheus, hmm?" Dorian asked with a wink.

"That's one reason, yes." Hawke began to roll up his sleeves. "I didn't realize I would be interrupting your bath, but I may as well help." Making a circular motion with his finger, he said, "Your back. That's the usual place one offers to help scrub, isn't it?"

"Oh, there's no need to bother yourself," Dorian assured him. "I'm perfectly content as I am. Though I admit I'm rather curious as to what brought you to my room at such an early hour and with so little decorum." As careful as he was to keep the tone light and teasing, Dorian still tried to convey a hint of the disapproval he felt at the entire situation. "After all, the last time you were in my chambers, you spoke as if would be the last time."

Hawke's eyes narrowed slightly as he scrutinized Dorian. The answer obviously did not suit the man, and Dorian felt that edge of wariness inside grow sharper. "While that may be true, a man is entitled to change his opinion, isn't he? And you've presented some very compelling arguments."

"By not seeing you for weeks on end?" Dorian asked with a forced smile as he began going through the motions of cleaning once more.

"Temporary circumstance," Hawke dismissed with a wave of his hand. "It's become quite clear that you're a man of conviction, a man who wants to change the world. I admire that." His gaze softened as he added in a quiet voice, he said, "It reminds me of someone else, someone quite dear to me."

Dorian's mouth went dry at those words, his previous conversation with Hawke echoing in his mind. From anyone else, such a statement would have been flattering. From Hawke? Maker preserve me. Before he could figure out what on Thedas he could say in reply, however, another knock came at the door, crisp and precise, and Dorian knew who it would be even before he opened the door and entered.

"Dorian, Cassandra sent me to-- Oh." Cullen paused as he caught sight of Dorian in the bathtub,
obviously a bit taken aback to find the mage thus. The glance he sent to Hawke, however, held no such surprise. "Ah, yes, Cassandra sent me to let you know they're waiting for you. I'm under strict orders to bring you back with me." He gave a shrug. "And you know Cassandra."

Considering that the Iron Trio weren't expecting him until mid-morning at the earliest, that explanation was... interesting. Incredibly so, in fact. Still, Dorian was all too happy at that precise moment to play along with the charade. "I do, indeed. Far be it from me to invite the wrath of Cassandra."

"And such convenient timing, too," Hawke mused in a flat tone.

"Varric could tell you a great deal about Cassandra, if you'd like," Cullen offered, expression neutral. "When she says jump, you don't pause to ask how high?"

Hawke stood smoothly from his position on the bed. "Oh, I'm sure. I'll just let myself out, then. Dorian and I can continue our conversation later." When he crossed in front of Cullen, he paused and leaned in slightly. "Good day, Commander."

Cullen lifted his chin slightly. "And to you as well, Your Grace."

With a snort, Hawke sauntered to the door. "Enjoy yourselves," he called back as he opened the door, then closed it with a firmness that wasn't quite a slam, but wasn't far off.

"That man," Cullen muttered as he shook his head. He looked at Dorian, holding his hand out as if to assure himself the mage was unharmed. "Are you all right?"

"Quite, Commander," Dorian replied. "Though my pride has taken a few more hits than I'm used to, particularly so early in the morning. It usually takes until midday at the earliest to reach this level of indignity."

Cullen laughed as he fetched Dorian's towel and held it out to him. "Indignity, or indignance?"

Dorian snatched the towel out of Cullen's hand as he stood. "Now, that level of sarcasm is simply unwarranted, Commander. Have some respect for--" He paused as he saw the door open and hastily wrapped the towel around himself as Varric's head poked through the door.

"We good?" the dwarf asked.

With a nod, Cullen said, "For now. Thanks for letting me know."

"Anytime, Curly. Now I have to go hide in the basement all day before Hawke puts it all together." Varric nodded towards Dorian. "Sparkler. Looks like you're almost ready to pay off your last bet."

Dorian had to chuckle at that. "I didn't literally mean the clothes off my back, Varric. You do realize It's rather unfair to hold a man to a drunken wager made in the arse-end of nowhere, don't you?"

"Maybe, but I might just hold you to it," Varric replied with a wink. "All those buckles you normally wear could be melted down and sold for a tidy profit."

"Casting aspersion upon my national dress, are we?" Dorian held the back of his hand to his forehead dramatically. "Oh, my poor, benighted Imperium!"

Varric snorted. "And you started it by asking if it was a natural curl or not. I happen to like my shirts."
"Did I ever say I didn't admire the view?" Dorian protested.

"Maybe you should ask Curly that right now," Varric told him with a grin. "See you later, Sparkler."
And with that, he backed out of the room.

Dorian's brow furrowed, then looked at Cullen. "What did he-- Commander, are you *blushing*?"

"What? No," Cullen said immediately, then politely turned his back, presumably to allow Dorian some privacy. "You should get dressed, though. There is someone who wants to see you."

"Someone who isn't Cassandra, I take it." As he spoke, Dorian briskly wicked the water away with his towel and stepped from the tub. As he pulled his clothes on, he added, "And don't think I didn't notice that little conspiracy between you and Varric. What was that about?"

When Cullen didn't answer right away, Dorian paused in his buckling and turned to look at him. He immediately noticed the tension in the man's shoulders - something that not even all that fur could disguise - and the way his arms were crossed across his chest, hands locked around his elbows.
Stepping closer, he reached out and gently touched Cullen's arm. "Cullen?" he asked softly.

Cullen's shoulders sagged, and he released a long, soft sigh before turning to look at Dorian. "I don't trust Hawke around mages. And if you knew about my past, you would understand why that statement is one of the more ironic things you will ever hear me say."

A frown came to Dorian's face, since he did know some of Cullen's past - if his odd dreams could be trusted, at any rate. "I know what happened to Anders," Dorian said quietly. "Word of that moved through the Imperium fairly quickly, and Hawke even told me his side. You are saying there were other mages in his life?"

For a moment, Cullen looked to the side as he took another long, slow breath. Finally he looked up at Dorian, a grim expression on his face. "There *were.*"

"I see." That deliberate emphasis on *were* explained far too much, including a great deal of Varric's caution around the Viscount. "I will be cautious, I promise."

"That is all I can ask for," Cullen said with a nod. "And it still remains that someone is waiting for us."

"You are quite insistent upon this meeting, then?" Dorian chuckled and turned his attention back to his buckles, quickly latching them closed. "Then I ask you bear with me as I finish up." Moving to the vanity, he sat and attended to his hair, repairing the damage done to it after a night of restless sleep with deft fingers and a judicious mix of oil and magic. His face was given a similar treatment, and when he turned to Cullen it was with a bright smile. "There. Perfection achieved."

A crooked grin came to Cullen's face as he chuckled. "Ah, of course. That's what all that was about."

"Now, now, Commander," Dorian chided him, "don't think I'm oblivious to just how much effort you put into your hair every day. We all have our vanities."

Cullen reddened and cleared his throat. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," he said, then pushed himself away from the door so he could open it. "Let's go. We've kept them waiting long enough."

"Them?" Dorian asked as they emerged. "You are certainly piquing my curiosity."
"Good," Cullen said as he led Dorian through Skyhold.

As they walked, Dorian noted that Cullen was taking quite a roundabout route to whatever part of Skyhold he was taking them. He was able to quickly rule out the library, war room, and forge as probable destinations, a fact which only fed his curiosity. He was in the midst of constructing a map of Skyhold in his head so he could pinpoint where, in fact, Cullen was leading him when the man gave him a sidelong glance.

"Do you know what my soldiers have started to call you?"

"Hmm?" Dorian glanced at some stairs going up into the Keep proper as they passed. Those go up to the main hall, if I recall. "I presume I am still 'the Vint'? That's fairly common, after all." He had grown accustomed to it, in fact, ever since leaving the Imperium proper.

"Not exactly," Cullen said with a little smile. "They're starting to call you the Chosen, actually."

Those words stopped Dorian in his tracks, staring at Cullen as the man turned to face him. "The-- What?" For once, he felt at a loss for words.

"The Chosen of the Herald, specifically," Cullen added. "I'm still not convinced that Leliana had nothing to do with its origin, mind, but I'm hearing it more and more." A sad little smile came to face. "Just as with the Herald after she closed her first rift."

"I am not trying to replace Mailani." The response was almost instinctive. It wasn't that Dorian could claim he had no ambition, but his purpose here in the Inquisition was, to his mind, absolutely clear: to continue his friend's legacy, close the rifts, and defeat Corypheus. After that... His hand flexed unconsciously. After that, we'll just have to see. "I never knew."

Cullen laughed and clapped his hand on Dorian's shoulder. "When have you been back in Skyhold long enough to hear it, hmm?" he asked. "You've been so busy running around wearing yourself to a thread that you haven't stopped long enough to hear it." His fingers gripped hard for a moment as he added in a soft voice, "I think she would be proud of you."

Dorian's throat tightened as a smile came to his lips. "Nothing would please me more," he said in a hoarse voice, "save for her being here to do all of this in my stead."

For a moment, Cullen bowed his head and took a deep breath, just before Dorian found himself being pulled into tight embrace. The other man’s breath tickled Dorian's ear as Cullen whispered, "Thank you." Before Dorian could really react, Cullen pulled back abruptly and cleared his throat. "We should move along. We don't want to keep them waiting."

Dorian quickly followed after Cullen, swallowing several times to ease the tension in his throat. Unfortunately, that did little to address the pounding of his heart, or the odd flutter he felt in the pit of his stomach, neither of which made sense to him. It must be the emotion of the moment. There had been an instant, though, when Cullen's lips had brushed his ear...

No, no. No. No, Dorian scolded internally, thoughts shying away from considering any of the implications of those particular sensations. Out of habit and a sudden need to direct his thoughts elsewhere, he flexed his left hand and let the little spike of pain clear his mind as effectively as a shock of cold water. "So, ah, where precisely are we going?"

"What, tell you and spoil the surprise?" Cullen asked, turning to Dorian long enough to give him a broad smile. "Don't worry. It's not much farther."

"Don't worry, he says, as if there's nothing to worry about," Dorian shot back. When that earned him
nothing more than a laugh in response, Dorian sighed and settled back into speculation.

As they emerged from Skyhold into the courtyard, Dorian's eyes widened when they found Horsemaster Dennet waiting with a... steed at his side, though Dorian used the word only generously. If nugs could grow to the size of horses and somehow acquire horns along the way, then that's what was standing calmly next to Dennet.

A faint memory from Val Royeaux stirred in his mind as they approached the Horsemaster and his charge. "Oh, sweet Maker," Dorian said as they got closer. "Is this the ware of that insipid merchant?"

Dennet chuckled and scratched it behind its horn. "Indeed she is. A right fearsome war mount, too. And good for climbing, if it comes to that." Dennet pointed at the paws, which looked disturbingly like hands. "Climb on, give her a try."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Dorian asked with a raised eyebrow. "What is this thing called, anyway?"

"A nuggalope," Dennet said with an absolutely straight face, even as Cullen crossed his arms with one hand conveniently raised to cover what had to be a smirk.

Dorian paused with his hand on the saddle. "Truly? Dare I ask why?"

"That tale involves a Chevalier, a Crow, a Warden, and a great deal of drinking, so probably not," Dennet replied in a deadpan. "There might even have been bards involved."

"I see." A suspicious sound which closely resembled laughter emerged from behind Cullen's hand, and Dorian looked at the warrior with narrowed eyes before finally sighing and giving in to the inevitable. He didn’t see anything wrong with humoring the man, after all. Dennet knew his mounts and, more importantly, his saddles - for which Dorian's hindquarters were eternally grateful. "Then I shall mount my majestic steed, which is in no way one of the most simultaneously adorable and terrifying creatures I've yet to behold, and... do what, precisely, hmm? Strike a pose? I am rather pretty to look at."

Dennet barked a laugh as Cullen bowed his head, shoulders shaking. "Up you go," he said. "They're waiting."

Dorian's eyes narrowed once more, but the look he sent towards Cullen found the Commander with a straight face. "You do realize this is quite suspicious, don’t you?" Still, with a sigh, he moved to the nuggalope's side and smoothly mounted. Laying one hand on the saddlehorn, he set the other on his hip and turned his head to strike a dramatic pose. "Now, commemorate this moment - particularly my profile - in marble, and we'll have something truly majestic to display for the visitors to Skyhold, hmm?"

Cullen grinned and moved to grab the nuggalope's reins, smacking Dorian's thigh along the way. "I'm not sure the Inquisition could find that much marble."

Rubbing his leg to ease the sting, Dorian chuckled. "Why not? We've performed miracles before."

"Inquisition's got more important things to do," Dennet declared, just before his hand slapped the nuggalope on the rump.

The mount made an odd braying sound and then started forward in the direction it was facing - walking at Cullen's heels towards the stairs leading up to the main hall of Skyhold. "I say," Dorian said, "not quite the destination I had in mind for the ware's first mission."
"She's fine," Dennet told him with a shrug. "It's why we chose her, actually. Hands like that can't hurt the carpet."

"Carpet?" His suspicion increased sharply as he looked ahead and saw that the doors, open since they'd all trooped in from Haven, were rather mysteriously closed. Dorian's eyes narrowed as they crested the stairs. "Commander, what is this all about?"

Cullen paused with his hand on the door and looked back at Dorian, a smile on his face. "Making the Inquisition whole again." With a roll of his shoulders, he dropped the nuggalope's reins and pushed open the doors.

As he did so, the swelling sound of a cheer erupted from within, and Cullen stepped aside with a bow. "He's all yours, Horsemaster."

"Thank you, Commander." Dennet loosely wrapped the reins around his arm as he stepped forward and took hold of the cheek piece on the nuggalope's bridle. Then he led them inside.

Dorian simply stared around him as Dennet guided the nuggalope. As far as he could tell, everyone in Skyhold had gathered there, from the soldiers to the nobility to the companions, and they were… yes, they were cheering. For him. It wasn't to be believed, and yet, there they were, clapping and waving at him, and here he was, being led towards the other end of the hall. At first he simply stared, unable to stop the smile that crept onto his face, until finally he raised his left hand and waved, almost not feeling the pain as the green light flared into wakefulness. That was when he first heard the word *Chosen*, and once he heard it, he didn't stop hearing it. And the smile on his face remained as he found an answering one on so many faces.

*Am I Chosen?* He glanced at his left hand for a moment, a line of concern marring his forehead as he again wondered how, exactly, he had come to bear the mark. Solas and he had discussed it extensively when he'd called Solas to the field to assist with the exploration of several of the elvish ruins and landmarks in the Emerald Graves, but neither of them had been able to develop a conclusive theory that explained *why*. Perhaps once Dorian had a day to himself when he could truly investigate, he'd learn more. Until then...

The sound of the nuggalope's bray snapped him out of his thoughts, and he instinctively grabbed the saddle horn as it drew to a halt at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the throne, which was still turned to face the wall. The hall had grown silent behind him, and a glance around showed Dennet standing beside the nuggalope with his hand outstretched. "I think it's about time we set things to right."

Dorian glanced at the throne, still turned to face the wall, then back at Dennet's hand, then towards the Cullen and the Iron Trio, who stood prominently to the side. After receiving several smiles and nods, he took a breath and looked down at the waiting man. "I do believe you're correct, Horsemaster."

A cheer erupted as Dorian took Dennet's hand and slid from the saddle. As the two men approached the throne, footsteps followed them, so that by the time they had reached the throne and began to turn it, they had plenty of assistance. Soon enough the throne was turned, and Dennet stepped back and looked appraisingly at it as once again the hall fell silent.

"No usurpers allowed. That's what you said, all those weeks ago," Dennet said with a short nod. "And right enough, I don't see one here. Now, why don't you sit your Magister's fat Tevinter ass down, Inquisition? We've got work to do."

Dorian laughed and clapped the man on the back. "As long as the Advisors give their blessing." He
spoke loud enough to be heard, but not so loud as to make it obvious. It wasn't precisely theatre, not as much as his last encounter with Dennet in this very room, but the legitimacy came from both the people and the leaders.

Cullen stepped forward and gestured towards the throne. "Take your seat, Inquisitor."

A hush fell over the room as Dorian approached the throne, a quiet which was quickly broken as he settled himself into the wooden seat. He accepted the cheers, though each flare of his hand reminded him all too readily of the price they'd all paid for him to sit there. It was heady, true, but he tried not to let it go to his head - there was still far too much work to be done, after all.

The next few minutes blurred into each other after that, since Dorian insisted on rising from the throne and heading back into the hall, taking his time to talk to as many of the people as he could, including the Advisors and all his companions. Even Warden Alistair was there for a congratulatory shake of the hand and an easy smile.

The only time Dorian's smile faltered was when he turned to find Hawke beside him, a broad grin on the man's face and with his hand extended. "Congratulations, Inquisitor."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Dorian said demurely as he took the hand to shake - only to find himself pulled into a rather tight embrace.

Hawke's breath tickled at Dorian's ear. "Do let me know if you wish to celebrate later, hmm?" The words were followed by the press of lips to the shell of Dorian's ear, and then Hawke released him, a friendly smile on his face. "Until we meet again," he said with a little bow, then turned and walked away through the crowd, which gave the Champion a wide berth.

Dorian kept the frown off his face, but he did allow himself a sigh. That man... He was quickly coming to mean trouble.

Eventually the hall began to clear as people returned to their duties, leaving only the nobles, gossips, and perpetually curious remaining in the hall. Dorian found himself standing at the foot of the stairs leading up to the throne, left hand flexing in time to the pulse of green light coming from it. His mind whirled, grappling with the idea that Mailani wasn't here, and that he was the--

"Inquisitor?"

Clearing his throat, Dorian put a warm smile on his face as he turned to face Josephine. "Ambassador. A pleasure to see you, though I'll admit, a little warning for all this," he gestured around them, "would not have been amiss."

"It's more fun this way, Inquisitor," Josephine said with a little smile. "However, I also would appreciate it if you could please sit on the throne in a more official capacity. The need for judgment has not diminished in the last few weeks, and the Inquisition never rests. With your new acquisition the title of Inquisitor, it is even more important that you accept all the responsibilities of it, and show Thedas that you can hold those reins with competence and dignity."

"Ah. Yes, of course, Ambassador." He gave her a small bow, impressed all over again by her intelligence. "I'd quite forgotten about that aspect of being the..." His voice trailed off as his smile faded. It still didn't feel real. Perhaps it never would, and yet...he had to be her legacy.

Josephine's gaze softened as she smiled in understanding. "The Inquisitor?"

"Indeed. Yet, if that is what must be done, then you shall not find me wanting." Straightening, Dorian moved towards the throne and settled upon it, then inclined his head towards Josephine. "Let
us begin."

She nodded and gestured to the waiting guards, who obligingly brought someone forward. "This
was a surprise,” she began. “After you returned from the bogs, we discovered this man attacking the
building. With a…goat."

Dorian quickly held up his hand. "I beg your pardon?"


"The shaggy animal with horns that bleats? That kind of a goat?"

Josephine smiled. "Yes, Inquisitor."

Dorian pinched the bridge of his nose as he took a deep breath. Mailani, give me strength. "Very
well, Ambassador." He gestured broadly to the man decorated with paint and horns. "Pray
continue."

As Josephine laid out the details of the man's case, Dorian paid close attention. Unfortunately, he
simply couldn't keep the smirk off his face, even when he sent the man and his clan packing off to
the Imperium. Everyone needs a hobby, after all.

As the afternoon wore on, he caught himself more than once lightly stroking the palm of his left
hand, pondering what Mailani would do. Somehow, it just felt right. Later, he would ponder the
ramifications, both political and personal, for being thrust into the role he’d sworn he never wanted.
For now, he would just do the best he could.

For her sake.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act I - Inquisitor
Cullen’s breath puffed through his nose as he hurried to gather materials for the meeting in the war room. He was late - a rare event by anyone’s measure - but this time he was exceptionally late and didn’t wish to dally any more than he had to. A restless night followed by a headache had forced him to linger in bed longer than was his custom. After that, the morning had been whittled away by messengers and scouts and trying to ignore the box with the tempting blue liquid in it which he still had stashed away in a drawer of his desk, all coupled with a headache from the Void that just would not quit.

When a knock came at the door just as he reached for final batch of notes, he groaned before calling out irritably, “Come!”

The door opened to reveal Cassandra, a concerned look on her face as she entered. “Are you all right, Commander?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, Seeker,” Cullen snapped, then paused and took a deep breath. “I apologize for my tardiness,” he said in a calmer voice as he straightened. “I presume that’s why you are here?”

“Your absence has been noticed, yes.” Her eyes flickered to the food tray on his desk, and she frowned. “You have not eaten your breakfast?”

He winced and rubbed the back of his neck. “This morning proved to be very busy,” he told her. “I believe I saw Jim no less than five times.”

“That’s no excuse to neglect yourself,” Cassandra said in a severe voice.

He gave her a keen look. “I seem to remember you skipping a few meals yourself around the time of the Conclave.”

Making a dismissive gesture with her hand, Cassandra gave him a stern glare. “That is entirely different and you know it.” Moving to the tray, she lifted the pitcher of juice, then made a disgusted noise when she saw a piece of paper still beneath it. Retrieving it, she held it out to Cullen. “Also, it defeats the purpose of trying to send you hidden messages if you do not even find them when necessary.”

His eyebrows rose as he took the paper. “Hidden messages?” Cullen repeated. When she simply nodded, he unfolded the paper and quickly read it through once, then twice. With a muttered oath, he folded it again. “Maker’s breath, that’s all I need on top of this headache.”

Cassandra’s face grew concerned again. “Is it the withdrawal again?”

“Perhaps,” Cullen said, reaching up to rub his forehead. “Or perhaps it’s the headache one would expect to get after a restless night, a busy morning, and a skipped breakfast.”

“True,” she conceded. “You do seem to be improving when it comes to the lyrium addiction.”

Cullen nodded, though he couldn’t quite stop the grimace from coming to his face. “In truth, sometimes it is only the memory of Inquisitor Lavellan which prevents my relapse,” he admitted quietly.

Putting a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, Cassandra said, “You are still performing your duties to the Inquisition, and you are still not using lyrium. That is worth a great deal, I think. I have faith in
“I wish I had more faith in myself,” he admitted, then waved the folded note. “And I’ll admit, my first reaction to learning Hawke has returned to Skyhold and will be at the meeting was a temptation to use the stuff.”

A faint smile came to her face. “That is why we tried to warn you at breakfast,” she told him.

“Why a note, though?” he wondered. “You could have just come and told me.”

“We didn’t want to do anything unusual to attract his attention,” she told him. “He has been rather… odd of late.”

Cullen snorted. “That’s one way to put it. If he showed his interest in the Inquisitor any louder, they’d be able to hear it in Kirkwall.”

Cassandra gave him an odd look, but finally nodded. “Which would not be a problem if Dorian returned the interest.”

“No. It would be a worse problem if he did,” Cullen said grimly. “You didn’t see what Hawke did to Merrill.” And Fenris, he added in the vaults of his mind, but he assumed that Varric wouldn’t have told Cassandra the whole truth of that. Even Cullen only knew because he’d found Aveline deep in her cups the night after Hawke had been appointed Viscount as she debated whether to leave her post - and Hawke - behind, or stay despite a Viscount Hawke. Considering the woman never turned to alcohol to solve her problems, it had been a surprise to find her in such a state, and an even greater one when she’d launched into a lengthy, drunken confession. When Cassandra had approached him shortly thereafter to join the Inquisition, Cullen hadn’t even hesitated. Aveline’s words had simply solidified his alienation from the so-called Champion of Kirkwall.

“Merrill?” Cassandra blinked. “Varric only said she did not stand with Hawke at the end.”

“That is definitely true.” As the pounding in his head increased, he reached up and rubbed his forehead. “Perhaps it is simply best to say that I do not wish to expose the Inquisitor to certain… difficulties which Hawke represents.”

Cassandra’s face grew troubled. “I knew he made questionable decisions about the raider woman--”

“Questionable--” Cullen stopped his interruption and stared incredulously at Cassandra. “He handed her over to the Qunari. That’s beyond questionable, that’s--” Forcing himself to stop, he took a deep breath. “I suspect that Varric gave you the story he wrote in his book, Seeker,” he said quietly. “There are more details that I’m sure he’s never told anyone.”

As a frown came to her face, Cullen suspected that he’d unwittingly given her motivation to seek Varric out and ask further questions, but for the moment he was simply grateful she didn’t ask more of him. “I see. That explains why you and Varric seem so very eager to keep Hawke away from the Inquisitor.”

Cullen looked up at her sharply. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only to one who knows both of you well,” she admitted. “And I would presume Hawke does know Varric well. To those who do not know you, it might seem that you are pursuing the Inquisitor yourself.”

That comment made Cullen blink. “Pardon?”
“It is a rumor, Commander, though a faint one,” Cassandra said gravely, though the way she canted her head ever so slightly indicated something else entirely. “Leliana found it quite amusing.”

“She would,” Cullen muttered sourly.

Now Cassandra’s lips did twitch, but mercifully she moved on. “Hawke is starting to get irritated at the situation, if his mood in the war room today is any indication.”

Cullen rubbed his temple again, seeking to calm the pain. “Keeping him happy isn’t my concern. And as long as the Inquisitor is kept out of it, Hawke won’t get angry at him, just me and Varric.” A half-grin came to his face. “Just like old times in Kirkwall.”

“I am sure you know better in this matter,” Cassandra said with a small shrug. “I will, however, give the situation additional scrutiny when possible. It has only been a few weeks since Dorian became Inquisitor, after all. We are not strong enough to lose the Viscount’s support outright.”

“Which the Inquisitor and our Ambassador are keenly aware of, I’m sure.” Cullen grimaced and shook his head. “Politics. You can leave me out of it.”

“Except politics in this case means the difference between food and armor or nothing for your soldiers,” Cassandra pointed out. “Should Kirkwall distance itself from the Inquisition, it is likely others in the Free Marches will follow. The Lord of Starkhaven, for one. He has followed Hawke’s lead so far.”

Nodding slowly, Cullen grunted and retrieved his notes. “And standing around talking about it won’t make any of those problems go away.”

“Are you sure you can endure the meeting?” Cassandra asked.

“For the Inquisition’s sake, I will endure anything,” Cullen said firmly. “Even my worst nightmare can’t be worse than a world with Corypheus in charge.”

“From your lips to the Maker’s ears,” Cassandra agreed quietly, then turned to lead the way from Cullen’s office.

As they entered the war room, Dorian turned to greet them with a smile. “Ah, I see you found our wayward Commander, Seeker. I do hope nothing is amiss?”

“Sorry I’m late,” Cullen said brusquely as he took his customary place between Leliana and Josephine.

“Oh, don’t worry, Commander,” Dorian said with a wink. “We all need the sun to freeze once in a while when something impossible happens.”

Cullen mock-scowled at Dorian. “I’ve been late before. It’s not that rare.”

“On the contrary, Commander, I heard that you were on time for your birth,” Dorian said airily. “And probably saluted the healer when you came out. That’s how I imagine it, anyway.”

“That’s not how I--” He paused, noticing the smirks on the faces around him. “Maker, I’m not that bad, am I?”

“Of course not, Commander,” Leliana assured him. “Though there are stories about Cassandra’s birth.”
Cassandra’s eyebrows rose. “I did not salute anyone when I was born,” she protested.

“Perhaps not, but I’m sure you waited no later than your first birthday to do so,” Leliana told her in a teasing tone.

Though most of those around the table chuckled as Cassandra made a noise of disgust, one person simply folded his arms across his chest and frowned. “Don’t we have more important matters to discuss?” Hawke asked pointedly.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon, Your Grace,” Dorian said lightly, though the levity in the room faded noticeably. “I shall make certain to schedule such lighthearted matters to occur only at the appropriate time henceforth.”

Hawke smiled as he looked at Dorian directly. “Maybe after the meeting we could discuss that? Over a bottle of wine perhaps?”

As Dorian hesitated, obviously not wishing to reject the not-so-subtle invitation outright, Cullen stepped in. “I’m afraid that the Inquisitor won’t be available. There’s something which requires his attention.”

Eyes narrowing suspiciously, Hawke looked at Cullen. “I see. Well, far be it for me to get between the Inquisitor and his Commander.”

After a moment of awkward silence, Alistair stepped forward and tapped his finger on the map. “The Western Approach,” he said as he looked around the table. “We’ve been keeping an eye on Warden activities, and according to Leli’s agents,” he gave her a wink, “there’s quite a bit of Warden activity there.”

“And quite a few Venatori as well,” Leliana added. “It’s been building there since we’ve been driving them out of other areas around Thedas.”

Cullen leaned onto the table, setting one of his markers in the center of the Western Approach. “There’s an old Warden Keep there which would be a valuable addition to the Inquisition’s resources,” he noted. “Griffon Wing Keep. I’d suggest starting there so we can establish a presence in the region.”

“Or,” Hawke said with an edge in his voice, “we could go straight for the throat of the Wardens we’ve been tracking and not announce our presence in the Approach so that a blind and Blighted knife ear whore could spot it from one of the moons.” He gave Cullen a brittle smile. “But then, I’m not the tactical genius that you are, Commander. I’m only a Viscount, after all.”

Josephine shifted uneasily on her feet as the two men glared at each other. “I will point out,” she said in her time to be diplomatic voice, “that the Inquisition has had agents in the Western Approach for some time. We simply have limited it to scouts and Leliana’s agents. A small party consisting of the Inquisitor and a few select companions would, most likely, remain undetected for quite a while.”

“If we strike and take the Keep first,” Alistair said, nudging Cullen’s marker, “and then immediately head for the last known location of the Wardens in the Approach, there won’t be an opportunity to raise the alarm. We believe Corypheus is influencing the Wardens through manipulation of their taint, but we don’t have proof that they’re coordinating with the Venatori, do we?”

“They’re both serving Corypheus,” Hawke pointed out. “It would be tantamount to idiocy to assume they’re not.”

“Then let’s split the difference,” Dorian suggested, looking at the map thoughtfully. “The
Commander can take Griffon Wing Keep with the help of the Inquisition Forces and Leliana’s agents, while I take a covert group to deal with the Wardens directly."

“Perhaps we could add a wrinkle to the mix that the Venatori won’t expect,” Leliana suggested. “The Chargers would be a formidable addition to the Inquisition forces in a battle like that.”

“It has possibilities, Inquisitor,” Cullen mused. “If I send in Knight-Captain Rylen with a select group of Inquisition Forces and the Chargers with you, you should be able to claim the Keep very quickly. Then, while they’re making noises to make it seem that you, personally, remain at the Keep, Leliana’s agents could lead you to the Wardens’ last known location.”

“The Wardens might even take advantage of the Inquisition’s supposed distraction with the Keep to finally do that ritual they’ve been talking about in those messages Hawke and I intercepted,” Alistair mused.

Hawke’s angry stance softened as a calculating expression came to his face. “Yes, we need to make sure we see what they’re up to with that. Their correspondence made it sound like they were waiting for someone to arrive, someone who isn’t a Grey Warden.”

“And if that new ally is proven to be a Venatori, or allied with Corypheus, then we’ll have sufficient evidence to go to our allies and ask for further aid against the Wardens,” Josephine added.

“We don’t have enough already?” Dorian asked in surprise. “Even with Warden Alistair on our side?”

“I wouldn’t put too much weight on my name,” Alistair said sheepishly as he ran his fingers through his hair. “I mean, yes, I was one of the Wardens who fought in the Fifth Blight, but I also abandoned the fight before it was over and went off to become a drunkard in the gutters of Kirkwall. I don’t think my redemption story has circulated widely enough yet, or is… you know, exciting enough. About all you can say is that Anora graciously hasn’t asked for my head.”

“Don’t worry, old friend,” Cullen told him. “Some day the bards will sing your tale without quite so much ale being involved.”

“Thanks awfully, I feel so much better now,” Alistair told him sarcastically.

“That’s the plan, then,” Dorian said decisively as he straightened. “Cassandra, why don’t you go let the Iron Bull and Varric know we’ll be heading out to the Western Approach soon?”

As Cassandra nodded and moved to the door, Hawke grimaced. “The dwarf? Really?”

“That crossbow of his is positively lethal,” Dorian pointed out. “But then, you already knew that, I would imagine.”

Hawke’s jaw rippled slightly. “As you say. I’ll get ready for the journey, then. The Western Approach isn’t one of my favorite areas in Thedas, after all.”

“Nor is it for anyone in the Inquisition,” Cullen said softly, and a hush came over the room. They all remembered quite clearly the location of Mailani’s death, after all.

After a tense moment, Hawke inclined his head to Cullen. “Forgive me. I meant no disrespect to the memory of Inquisitor Lavellan. Until later, then.” With a curt nod to the room in general, he turned and left the room.

Alistair puffed his cheeks full of air. “He’s acting more and more like a grumpy bronto lately,” he
observed. “I don’t suppose you know any magical unicorn sprinkles spells, do you, Inquisitor?”

Dorian laughed. “Ah, no. Though that would be a rather spectacular spell, wouldn’t it?”

"It would certainly get everyone's attention," Alistair said with a grin as he stretched his arms above his head. "Almost as effective as lightning. That's how Amell used to do it. The lightning, I mean, not magical unicorn sprinkles. Effective, mind, but Morrigan didn't speak to him for weeks after he zapped her hair straight out of her head. She had a lot of hair."

Leliana laughed, though the sound was cut short as she quickly closed her mouth. "I'd forgotten about that. She even refused to make potions for him. It's the only time he ever apologized for anything."

"Ser High and Mighty apologize? Not him," Alistair said with a snort, glancing at the door for a moment. "Reminds me of someone else I could mention..."

"Oh, hush, Alistair." Leliana gathered up some papers and headed towards the door. "Come with me. I want you to brief some of my agents about what to expect when tracking Wardens."

"Right," Alistair said as he followed after her. "We can be a tricky bunch, we Wardens."

When the door had closed behind them, Cullen tilted his head for a moment, then glanced at Josephine. "Do you think--?"

"They did travel together during the Blight," Josephine noted with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. "And it was a trying time for both of them, from what she has told me."

"Is there something I should know about?" Dorian asked, one eyebrow rising.

"No, Inquisitor," Josephine said as she tucked her ledger close to her body. "Nothing at all. I will go make the necessary arrangements with the local lords on the way to the Western Approach so that Knight-Captain Rylen and yourself can proceed without running into any odious officials blocking the way. We don't want a repeat of what happened in the Emerald Graves, after all."

"You do think of everything," Dorian said with a brilliant smile. "Thank you, Lady Josephine. You are the Inquisition's greatest treasure."

Josephine smiled and curtsied to Dorian. "You are kind, Inquisitor. Now if you will excuse me."

With a nod to Cullen, she exited the room, humming softly to herself.

"We truly have some remarkable people in the Inquisition, don't we?" Dorian mused. "I don't know how she manages to keep everything straight. I have enough trouble keeping track of the Magisterium. She has to do that for so many countries it makes my head spin."

"Mine, too," Cullen said with a chuckle as he collected his notes and leaned over to move a couple of markers on the table to new locations. "A good thing I'm not in her position. I've been told tact is not one of my strong suits."

"You, Commander? Not tactful? Perish the thought!" Dorian laughed as he leaned against the table. "I'm sure that using Inquisition forces to march a Halla into a village as a sign of mourning is completely the diplomatic approach."

Cullen winced as he stood, hand rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. Admittedly, the momentary embarrassment was a good distraction from the dull pain of his headache. "I'll thank you not to remind me of that. Josephine wasn't too pleased with my suggestion, either."
"Thank me how?" Dorian teased him. "I can think of a few rather fascinating ways for that."

For a moment, Cullen stared at Dorian, then abruptly looked away, hand automatically rising to rub his forehead before he pulled it back down. Their friendship had grown stronger in the last few weeks, but Cullen preferred not to dwell on the rather fascinating ways that Dorian hinted at in his little remark. "Ah, there is something I wanted to show you," he said in a more brusque tone as he rounded the table and headed to the door. "If you'll follow me, Inquisitor."

Pushing away from the table, Dorian nodded. "Where are you taking me, Commander? It's not to another of those boring inspections, is it?"

"Your presence at those is very important for morale," Cullen responded automatically, then glared at Dorian as the man grinned at him. "What?"

Dorian chuckled and waved his hand, causing the door to the war room to open on its own. "Sometimes you are so dreadfully predictable, Commander."

Cullen raised a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I've asked you not to do that." Even he wasn't sure whether he referred to the magic Dorian had used to open the door, or the mage's teasing.

Grin widening, Dorian thumped his hand on Cullen's shoulder before walking past him into the hall and gesturing towards the far door with a flourish. "Oh, come now, Commander. Everyone's life could use a bit of magic in it, even a grumpy ex-Templar."

"I am not grumpy," Cullen groused, then grimaced as he realized that such a statement didn't do much to argue against the case. As Dorian's mouth opened to respond, he muttered, "And no comment from you."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Commander," Dorian said with a wink. "Now, where were you taking me, again?"

"Not an inspection, you'll be relieved to know," Cullen told him pointedly as he started to lead the way.

"In truth, I do not find those so very onerous, despite my complaints," Dorian admitted as he fell in beside Cullen. "I recall when Mailani would join you on those, and the smiles that always followed her. I may not have her gentle touch in such matters, but they seem to appreciate the gesture nevertheless. Who am I to put my creature comforts over theirs?"

Cullen gave him a sidelong glance. "I didn't realize you could see those before," he admitted.

"My little nook in the library has quite the view of Skyhold, Commander," Dorian reminded him. "Including the Courtyard. On occasion I would watch the display down there during training and such. Why, I even recall the time you removed that unsightly fur of yours to actually drill the men yourself. The scandal!"

"It is not unsi--" Cullen began, then stopped and glared at Dorian as the man's lips twitched. "Don't say that I'm predictable," he warned.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Commander," Dorian said smoothly. "I am a gentleman, after all. Even if some would argue that a Vint can never be a gentleman."

Unable to resist at least a smile at the sally, Cullen just shook his head and shoved the door to the Hall open. "Keep this up and I might take up that argument."
"I'm hurt, Commander, deeply hurt," Dorian protested, hand pressing to his chest.

Cullen rolled his eyes as he led them to the next door, one to the left and nearer the throne. "This way," he told Dorian, pushing his way into the Inquisitor's quarters.

When the footsteps didn't immediately follow, he turned to see Dorian lingering just outside the doorway. With a frown, Cullen moved back. "Are you all right?"

"I--" Dorian's eyes were a trifle wider than usual, and a line had appeared between his eyebrows as they pinched together. "I wasn't expecting you to bring us here."

"So it's true, then," Cullen said softly. "Bull was right. You never sleep here."

"Of course not," Dorian said, sounding aghast at the very notion. "Though Bull is hardly an authority on where I sleep."

Recognizing the deflection for what it was, Cullen remained on topic with a pointed reminder. "You are the Inquisitor."

"Yes, but... but these rooms aren't mine." His lips pressed together for a moment, but Cullen heard the unspoken words as clearly as if he'd spoken. They are hers.

Setting his hand on Dorian's shoulder, Cullen gave him a little smile. "This way," he said softly. "There's something I want to show you."

After another moment's hesitation, Dorian finally nodded and took a step forward. With his hand on the man's shoulder, Cullen could feel the moment when the tension left Dorian, at the same moment when his grey eyes gained more than a hint of moisture. "I suppose they've been... ah, tending to the cleaning and such? My eyes are so very susceptible to dust and such things."

"I'll try to keep in mind that you are a delicate desert bloom," Cullen noted blandly. Ignoring Dorian's answering glare, he nodded ahead. "This way."

As they walked along the wooden platform leading to the Inquisitor's quarters, Cullen had to take a few deep breaths of his own. Nothing had changed, and yet...

"It's strange, isn't it?" Dorian murmured as they moved upward. "It's the same as it ever was, but... everything has changed."

Startled to hear a mirror of his own thoughts, Cullen gave Dorian a sidelong glance. "I was thinking much the same," he admitted. "The first time I came here after... after she died, I was out of my mind with drink. The first few times, if I'm to be honest." He looked around them, focusing on trivial details like dust motes and cobwebs in hopes of keeping the words distant as he spoke. "I still remember the first time I came up here after her effects had been sent back to her clan. That was... difficult."

"I can empathize," Dorian said, a catch in his voice. Quickly clearing his throat, he added in a stronger tone, "I wonder what the reaction would be if we turned it into a shrine for the Herald of Andraste."

Cullen had to chuckle at the idea. "I don't think the Chantry would view it favorably if the Inquisition started designating sites as holy to Andraste," he pointed out. "Especially if a Vint is involved."

"True," Dorian said with a sigh. "Not even if that Vint is fabulously handsome." Though the words were light, the way he was looking around as they climbed the final set of stairs showed a tightness
around his eyes which indicated anything but levity. Once they stood at the top, however, his gaze gravitated to the portrait above the fireplace. "Oh-- Oh. I see."

Without another word, Dorian moved stand in front of it, his hand half-reaching towards it before he pulled it back. As Cullen moved to put his hand on Dorian's shoulder, Dorian exhaled suddenly. "It's perfect," he said in hushed tones. "It's... difficult to see, but comforting, as well."

Cullen nodded in agreement, looking at the portrait with a steady gaze. "I admit my initial reaction was a trifle wrought, but on the whole I agree. I don't know who Josephine hired to paint it, but they must have known her in real life."

"Agreed. Her eyes in particular... Mailani always had such endless patience," Dorian said, tone almost reverent. For a few moments, the men stood in silence as they contemplated the painting. After a few moments, Dorian cleared his throat and took a long, shuddering breath and reached up to wipe his eyes. "We will move this to the Hall, yes? Everyone will want to see it. Perhaps we could place it above the throne. That would be more than fitting, I would think. Oh, wait. Blast. The windows." He frowned for a moment, then suddenly smiled. "Ah, I almost forgot Dagna. I'm sure she can come up with something suitably magnificent to display Mailani without damaging the windows she loved."

Cullen again gave him a sidelong glance. "You remember that?" When he thought of Mailani and windows, it wasn't the ones in the main hall which came to mind, but the one in his bedroom in the tower. Though that was mostly because of the way she'd push him into it before pulling his trousers
down to 'explore'. *Best not to mention that.* "I didn't think anyone else knew about that particular interest of hers."

"Oh, she was inordinately clever," Dorian commented, oblivious to Cullen's train of thought. "She let me look through her sketchbook once, and the windows were in there. The conversation turned to architecture of all sorts, and we went through the entire library looking for renditions of buildings all over Thedas. Maker, but she had such an inquisitive mind." Moisture welled up in his eyes once more, but this time they hovered above a smile. As a tear spilled out, he quickly dashed it away and offered Cullen a sheepish smile. "It's exquisite. I'll speak to Dagna straight away. The entire Inquisition will wish to see it."

"We wanted to give those who knew her best a more private viewing first," Cullen told him. "You're the last to see it." Hoping to lighten the mood a little, he nudged Dorian with an elbow. "For someone who likes to lecture me on the extreme nature of my work ethic, you're a hard man to pin down."

"Oh, I'm quite easy to pin down when I'm hard," Dorian quipped in an absent tone, most of his attention still on the painting.

Cullen blinked, ears burning a bit as he worked through what Dorian had said, particularly on the heels of the vivid memory with Mailani. "P-pardon?"

"What?" Dorian turned to look at him, giving Cullen a good view as the man's eyes widened and his ears pulled back. "I-- Oh! Ah, perhaps we should just pretend I didn't say that, hmm?"

"I'm willing if you are," Cullen said quickly. After a moment, though, he laughed and nodded to Mailani's picture. "She'd never let you forget it, though."

Dorian fought it, but finally he laughed as well, his gaze warming as he looked at Cullen. "No, she wouldn't, the minx. I'd give anything for her to tease me about it endlessly now."

Settling his hand on Dorian's shoulder, Cullen squeezed gently as he nodded. "As would I."

"Oh?" As he tore his gaze from the canvas, Dorian turned it to Cullen with an eyebrow raised in inquiry. "What about?"

"Here," Cullen said, then pushed Dorian down onto the couch and settled down across from him. "This room. What should be your room. Josephine had it prepared for you the day of the ceremony. I'm sure of it. How long ago was that, hmm?"

Dorian quickly glanced away, leaning forward so that he could focus closely on his hands. "I'm perfectly content in my current quarters," he mumbled.

"You're the Inquisitor, Dorian." Cullen sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Look, it took Josephine and Leliana a while to convince me given... well, everything, but there are rumors."

"You think I haven't heard them, scuttling about and echoing off the walls of Skyhold like the blasted pests they are?" Dorian asked softly. "I'm only play-acting as Inquisitor, and am just a puppet for someone else. Hawke, perhaps, or the Imperium. That's one version. Oh, and then there's the guilt of murder. I can't sleep in the same place where she once slept for fear her spirit will find me and punish me." His voice took on a sing-song quality. "The evils of my past will find me in the room of the Herald, and I will pay for what I've done."

"He sighed and buried his face in his hands."
"And others. Those are just the strains I've heard so often I could play them on a lute."

After a moment of staring, Cullen reached out and set a sympathetic hand on Dorian's arm. "What's the real reason?"

"Aside from the nagging feeling that I don't belong?" Dorian asked. "I suppose I simply feel like I'm intruding. On her memory." He finally turned to look at Cullen. "Or yours. Of being with her."

Now it was Cullen's turn to look away. "I am ashamed to admit that I did think that once," he admitted. "Particularly in those early weeks."

"And you had darker suspicions, too, as I recall," Dorian said, though he slid his hand up to rest on top of Cullen's, keeping it where it was. "I understand. I still blamed myself back then. It's taken me a long time to finally admit there was nothing I could do, save what I did."

"Being with her at the end," Cullen said with a nod. "If I could not save her, that would be the next best thing. Making sure she didn’t die alone. To a soldier, the hand of a friend is sometimes the best you can hope for in the end."

Dorian smiled at that. "Very poetic, Commander."

"Oh, I can’t take credit for that," Cullen said. "Ask any soldier and they’ll tell you the same thing. And you gave her that. It took me a while to accept that, but... I thank you for it." He squeezed Dorian’s arm.

"And I did one more thing," Dorian said softly, opening his left hand. The green light of the Anchor flickered uneasily, then faded. "Just as important, I hope. I’m continuing her legacy. I don’t know if I’m essential to bringing down Corypheus, but the Anchor is certainly necessary for other tasks."

Cullen’s mouth curved in a smile. "There are many people who owe you a debt of gratitude for your actions, Anchor or no," he told Dorian. "I’d accuse you of modesty, but that is beneath you."

"Quite right," Dorian said with a nod. "A marvel of perfection such as myself does not need such mundanity as a modest disposition. You have a keen eye for detail, Commander, so I’m sure you agree."

Sitting back on the couch, Cullen pretended to study Dorian for a moment. The scrutiny took a bit longer than he originally intended, mainly because he realized he hadn’t really evaluated Dorian on the basis of his looks. He knew the mage was handsome, but only when he was deliberately searching for a flaw to tease him about did Cullen realize that the man was also attractive. And that came as an obscure surprise. To cover the length of his study, he hummed for a few moments before giving a little shrug. "Oh, I don’t know. Your clothing does seem to have a ridiculous number of buckles."

Dorian’s eyebrows rose. "You’re not one to talk about fashion, Commander, unless we’re discussing the southern reaches of Thedas where the barbarians live." Tweaking a bit of fur between his fingers, he added, "Fur? Really? That is so very Towers Age, after all. I’m surprised you let yourself be seen in public wearing the thing."

With a snort, Cullen batted Dorian’s hand away. "At least I can finish disrobing before my bath water cools."

"Ah, the advantage of being a mage," Dorian fired back. "My bath is always the perfect temperature."
“Fair point,” Cullen conceded with a laugh. “I don’t have that advantage, admittedly.”

“I could help you with that,” Dorian told him with a wink.

Cullen blinked a few times, then looked away. “Ah, thank you, but we needn’t share a bath.”

“Share a—” Dorian laughed aloud as Cullen felt his ears heat. “Forgive me, Commander. I did not expect your mind to go there. I only meant I could perform a magical feat on your behalf. A stone to keep the water warm, or perhaps an enchantment on the tub itself, if it were metal. Not sharing. We’re not in a barracks, after all.”

Ears now well and truly reddened, Cullen coughed. “Understood, Inquisitor.”

Dorian’s eyebrows drew together. “My apologies, Commander. I tease you too much, I know. I shall refrain in your presence.”

Cullen immediately shook his head. “No. It’s all right. In fact…” A smile came to Cullen’s face. “In fact, that’s something I wished to talk to you about. I’ve been thinking about the last few months, about the Inquisition, and… I wanted to tell you that…”

“Yes, Commander? I’m positively tingling with anticipation,” Dorian said.

Now that it was time to trot out his little prepared speech, Cullen found himself suddenly uncertain. What if Dorian was offended? Or hurt? What if it was too cheesy, or self-serving? Suddenly his headache returned in full force, clouding his thoughts when he needed them to be focused. Clearing his throat to buy time, he said, “I… I wanted to tell you that she would be proud of you. Mailani, I mean. You could have gone back to the Imperium, or simply chosen to do the minimum expected of you here in Skyhold. But you didn’t. You’ve poured your heart and soul into the Inquisition, even without her here to inspire you directly.” Encouraged by Dorian’s widened eyes, he set his hand on Dorian’s forearm and leaned in a little to give emphasis to his words. “You have been more than simply Mailani’s legacy, Dorian, and more than her heir. You have truly earned the title Inquisitor, and I will offer my sword to your service in any way you see fit.” With a little squeeze, he added, “I just thought someone should tell you.”

Dorian’s face worked through several emotions as his eyebrows rose and fell before his lips trembled into an almost shy smile. “Commander, I—I don’t know what to say. Usually when men speak to me in such a fashion, it’s a prelude to the use of a vastly different sword.”

After a few seconds of a blank stare, Cullen’s eyes widened, and he buried his head in his hand. “Maker!”

“Don’t worry, Commander, I didn’t misunderstand you,” Dorian assured him with a tone full of earnest sincerity. “And… I thank you. Your words… I can easily say that no one has ever spoken to me in quite such a fashion. Errant moments of support, perhaps, but never wholehearted endorsement.”

Aware that his face was still red, Cullen nevertheless looked up at him. “Not even your father?” He instantly knew from the expression on Dorian’s face that it was the exact wrong thing to say. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor,” he offered quickly. “I should have known better, after—”

Waving the comment away, Dorian smiled, though it held a brightness that spoke of its brittle nature. “No matter. I thank you for the compliment. I know such words are not easily gleaned from the Commander of the Inquisition Forces.” Standing, he gave Cullen a bow. “And I’m sure that you don’t need me twittering away at you all afternoon,” he added in a cheerful voice.
With a wince, Cullen reached up to rub awkwardly his neck, grimacing as he found a taut tendon. “I don’t mind, truly, Inquisitor.”

Dorian frowned and rounded the couch to stand behind Cullen. “Is this what’s causing your headaches?” he asked, then set his hands on Cullen’s neck. “Maker, Commander, I could use your shoulders as an anvil! Your head must feel like Bull sat on it in all his horned glory.”

Cullen groaned softly as strong fingers kneaded his neck. “I wish I could say I slept on it wrong, but—”

“But you didn’t sleep, did you?” Dorian prompted, then clucked his tongue. “Commander, what have I told you about keeping impossible hours?”

“It requires impossible effort,” Cullen replied sheepishly, though lack of sleep was only an element of his pain. The other part was the lack of the blue ecstasy he had spent half the night staring at in passive aggressive resistance.

“And am I wrong?” Dorian prompted as he worked over the knotted muscle.

“No.” Cullen sighed, rolling his head slightly to give Dorian a better vantage. “And I did get some sleep.”

“Not nearly enough,” Dorian scolded him as his fingers smoothed up to work at Cullen’s scalp. “Drums would envy you right now.”

Cullen chuckled, but as Dorian continued to work on his tension, an eerie feeling began to settle over him. When it grew too acute to ignore, he abruptly reached up and grabbed Dorian’s wrists. “Did you ever have headaches?”

“Me? The paragon of perfection? Not really, why?” Dorian leaned around to study Cullen’s face. “Your headache must be worse than I thought. You’ve turned pale as a sheet.” He nodded to the bed. “And flat is better than sitting up. Come on, up you go. I can’t afford to have my Commander collapse from pained exhaustion during drills, can I?”

With a little shrug, Cullen released him. “No. No, of course not. It’s just that for a moment…” He stopped and shook his head. “It’s not important. If you’re willing to offer help, I am more than willing to accept it. This headache has lingered far longer than most of its kind.”

Again Dorian clucked his tongue, then heaved Cullen to his feet. “Go, go,” he said, making a shooing notion. “And be glad I mastered the grease trap spell as a child. Oh, and remove that… thing,” he added, gesturing to Cullen’s mantle. “It’s rather hard to give a proper massage when you’re not sure if someone’s poorly chosen fashion accessories will eat you or not.”

Cullen laughed even as he shrugged it off and laid it on the foot of the bed. “It’s not that bad,” he told Dorian.

“I’ll be the judge of that, thank you. The only thing you spend time on when it comes to your appearance is your hair.”

Pausing in the act of arranging himself face down on the bed, Cullen looked at Dorian with raised eyebrows. “What do you know about that?”

“If you think that Mailani didn’t tell her best friend about your meticulous hairstyling regime, then you are seriously mistaken,” Dorian told him as he pushed Cullen lightly.
Falling flat with an *oof*, Cullen chuckled wryly. “I should have known. She teased me about it often enough.”

“And rightfully so, Commander. Dragonthorn hair cream? Truly?” Dorian clucked his tongue, even as his hands settled again on Cullen’s neck. “That must take a fair amount of your salary. Or you had an in with someone whose job it was to wander around the countryside and gather random herbal components. I wonder which it is, hmm?”

“Is that why there’s always enough?” Cullen’s eyes fluttered closed as slowly but surely the pain began to recede.

“It is part of her legacy, albeit a minor part. Far be it for me to not live up to maintaining the dignity and grace of your hair. Would the troops respect you if it collapsed into a flat, horrid mess?” Dorian asked, briefly patting Cullen’s head for emphasis. “I think not.”

With a tired chuckle, Cullen felt his body relax. “Whatever you say, Inquisitor.” If Dorian had an answer, he didn’t hear it. Instead, he simply let the motions of the fingers chase away the pain and stress of his waking hours to be replaced by a peace which had been sorely missing from his life.

And if, deep down, he wondered why Dorian’s efforts reminded him so keenly of Mailani’s deft touch, well… he chose not to dwell on the matter. Sleep seemed a far more compelling option for contemplation.
Dorian’s eyes slowly opened to find a dull, grey darkness. His fuzzy thoughts tried to recollect precisely where he was and how he had gotten there, but his mind rebelled against such trivial attempts to use it. With a groan, he blinked a few times and tried hard to focus, hoping for some hints. There were… grey blobs, greenish grey blobs, and - he squinted - yes, definitely some brownish grey blobs, all familiar enough to make him frown as he realized that he hadn’t awakened after all. The Fade was a tricky mistress at the best of times, but for some reason, it was particularly difficult to cudgel himself into action this time around.

Suddenly a distant pulse of pain swept up his left arm just as a woman’s giggle reached his ears. Sufficiently galvanized at last, he jerked himself upright and backed away from the sound, still trying to pierce the darkness with his gaze. When his back hit something solid, he blinked a few more times in an attempt to force his eyes to function. When the giggle was answered by a man’s indistinct rumble, Dorian looked around in a panic, wondering how much he’d had to drink to end up stumbling into some unsuspecting couple’s dream. It only slowly dawned on him that he actually couldn’t do that, as he was not a somniari. Only once that had settled in did he realize whose dream he must be visiting. Given that he hadn’t shared a dream with Cullen since before the coronation, Dorian had to admit to more than a little curiosity.

With the mystery of where he was solved, Dorian gradually moved towards the hum of conversation. Ahead of him, the light brightened, and the words shifted from blobs of sound to almost discernible words. The Fade teased him with a word here or there, but it wasn’t until he stubbed his toe that the scene in front of him abruptly coalesced into a coherent whole.

The toe-offending blunt object turned out to be the couch upon which he’d fallen asleep. His last waking moment came back to him all in a rush, lying on the couch in the Inquisitor’s quarters with a little smile on his face as he stared at a peacefully slumbering Cullen. Blinking to clear the image, he raised his gaze to look around the room, taking in the surroundings with a quick glance.

There were differences, of course, between the Inquisitor’s quarters in reality and where he found himself now. An archery stand now stood in the corner, the bow and arrows impeccably arranged in direct contrast to the haphazard piles of clothes around it. The desk spoke of chaos crowding in on order, and the windows were flung open to reveal what passed for a sunny day in the Fade. The bed was violently, incredibly unmade, with pillows and blankets flung hither and thither, and the two voices came from it.

As he focused on the two figures on the bed, the blobs of sound clarified into full words. “--and that’s when I threaded his trousers with an arrow,” Mailani said with another giggle. Her hair was down and loose around her shoulders, but thankfully for Dorian’s sanity she was fully clothed, albeit in a loose tunic and pants. More worryingly for that same sanity, she was sitting astride Cullen, who was lying face-down on the bed. A moment’s glance proved that Cullen was also fully clothed, and Dorian breathed a bit easier knowing there were some things he would not witness between the two of them. “Close enough to his bits for the arrow to kiss, as Sera would say.”
“Maker,” Cullen said with a chuckle. His head rested on his forearms, and the reason for Mailani’s position atop him became clear as her hands lowered from their demonstration of her shot to settle on his neck. As she began to knead that, he added, “I daresay Dorian and Bull suddenly developed hunchback disease.”

Mailani slapped her hand lightly on his back. “You’re awful. And yes, they did. But that man! Setting an ambush for us just to get at Red Jenny, and then having the gall to try and negotiate with me in favor of himself and his toadies. Ugh,” she said with a disgusted sound.

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with Cassandra,” Cullen noted. “You’re beginning to sound like her.”

“Oh, hush, you,” Mailani said affectionately. “Besides, I thought you said I was spending too much time with Dorian.”

“I didn’t say too much time,” Cullen protested. “I just noted you were spending quite a lot of time with him.”

“Well, he lets me put flowers in his hair,” Mailani said primly. “As long as it’s not plaideweave, he’s given me leave to adorn him as I wish.”

Cullen gave a mock shudder at the mention of plaideweave. “Leliana told me once that they use plaideweave as a punishment in some Val Royeaux bardic schools. Mess up on an assignment, and they force you to wear it for a week.”

“Thats awful!” Mailani said with a laugh.

“Leliana was sufficiently horrified by the notion,” Cullen noted with a warm chuckle. “Still, if anyone could pull it off and still look handsome, it would be Dorian.”

Mailani gave a little gasp, then leaned down so she could look into Cullen’s face. “Handsome, is he?” she asked in a teasing voice.

Cullen’s ears darkened, and he turned his head to the other side, obviously trying to avoid an answer. “Shouldn’t you be working on my shoulders by now?”

Mailani simply moved her head so she could grin at him. “I remember when I found you two playing chess that one afternoon,” she told him. “A very handsome pair of men, I thought.”

“Mailani,” Cullen groaned, burying his face in the pillow.

“Did you notice that when you first met him?” Mailani wondered, tone artless as she sat up and began to knead his neck. “You were very quick to catch him at Haven, after all.”

Dorian blinked, completely shocked that apparently, one of the things Mailani had once teased Cullen about was him. Shocked and far, far more enthralled by the notion than he had any right to be.

“He stumbled, and I caught him. There’s no great mystery to that,” Cullen groused. “Besides, he compared me to a blood mage later, remember?”

With a giggle, Mailani leaned down and nudged Cullen’s ear with her nose. “And you still played chess with him,” she reminded him. “Apparently even being called a blood mage wasn’t a bridge too far for you to want to spend time with him.”
“Mailani!” As she laughed, Cullen pushed himself to his elbows and looked over his shoulder at her. “Is this because I teased you about watching Bull practice with Krem?”

Mailani blushed instantly and looked away.

“Ah ha,” he said triumphantly. “I knew you enjoyed watching all those rippling muscles.”

Obviously wanting to give as good as she got, she shot back, “Well, who’s to say you don’t enjoy watching Dorian? You used to find excuses to go talk to Leliana more often, you know. More trips through the library, and all that. I wonder why?”

Dorian blinked. He had?

“How did you--” Cullen coughed, then let his head fall to rest on his forearms again. “Minx,” he muttered.

“Well, I admit, I was watching you a lot back then,” Mailani admitted, running her fingers through his hair. “Perhaps I’m a bit selfish, but I rather like how things turned out.”

“Me, too,” Cullen said with a smile. “Come here.”

Mailani complied, bending down to share a tender kiss with him, then frowned when Cullen winced in pain. “Your shoulder?”

He nodded and rolled it before settling back into position again. “This bed has done it no favors, sadly.”

Mailani’s fingers smoothed over his neck and shoulders. “It’s always seems to be this one muscle here,” she mused, running her fingers along the tightness that ran from one shoulder to his neck. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say the lyrium withdrawal was hitting your sword-bearing side harder than your shield side.”

And again, Dorian’s brows shot up. Lyrium withdrawal? He knew that Cullen had once been a Templar, but had assumed the man had continued to take the lyrium supplement despite leaving the order. That explains why the scent doesn’t linger on him as it does the other Templars I’ve met, he mused. Perhaps there’s nothing left of it to smell.

“There might be something to that,” Cullen admitted. “Defensive techniques either use a lower amount of mana over a wider area or simply infuse it into a shield. Most Templar attacks are fed through the sword arm using short but powerful bursts. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s affected my muscles in that arm over the years, and now that I’m not using lyrium to replenish myself… Huh.”

He hissed again as Mailani dug in with her fingers, then sagged beneath her. “Oh, yes. Right there.”

“A good thing I use elfroot in my massage oil mix,” she told him. “You know, I could ask Vivienne if we can add lyrium to it. It might--”

“No,” Cullen said swiftly, then took a deep breath and added in a softer tone, “No. Nothing lyrium, love.”

A sympathetic look came to Mailani’s face. “Nothing lyrium,” she agreed, then leaned down and kissed his cheek. “Go on and relax while I go fetch some of the oil with a higher elfroot content. You can’t drill with your shoulder in this condition.”

“I most heartily agree. I can only ask Cassandra to take over those drills so many times.” As Mailani pushed herself off the bed and walked out of sight, Cullen buried his head in the pillow and stretched
his arms up along the mattress. After a moment, he grasped the sleeves of his shirt and tugged it over his head, tossing it to the side before stretching once more. Dorian tilted his head, admitting privately to himself that he was quite enjoying the view.

Dorian was so taken with the play of muscles on Cullen’s back that he didn’t even notice when he took the first step forward. Drawn as a bee to honey - and given the capricious nature of the Fade in dreams - it seemed as if he merely blinked, and then suddenly he was standing next to the bed.

And next to temptation. Cullen remained blissfully unaware of his presence, and that bare, muscular back practically begged to be touched. Dorian licked his lips, then looked around, almost desperate for Mailani to reappear and remind Dorian that this wasn’t his place. When no such thing happened, he felt his gaze drawn inexorably back to the source of his temptation and bit his lip.

Finally he succumbed to the inevitable. A quick spurt of magic saw his fingers covered with grease, and he reached out to set his hands on Cullen’s shoulders. They were as tight as they’d been in the waking world, when Dorian had tried to chase away the headache plaguing Cullen, but this time… this time it was warm skin under his fingers, and nothing else.

And that sent a primal thrill through Dorian.

“Maker,” Cullen moaned softly. “Just like that.”

Dorian bit his lip again. *Sweet Andraste, did he have to moan like that?* The sound proved to be a strong encouragement, however, and in one of those odd *Fade* twitches, he suddenly found himself kneeling astride Cullen on the bed. Not sitting on the man, but with knees planted in the mattress on either side of his hips, and *definitely* far closer and far more intimate than before. Dimly Dorian noted, with raised eyebrows, that his own shirt had somehow vanished as well.

His hands glided over the man’s shoulders and ventured down his back, exploring the set of muscles and the sensation of grease-slicked fingers over hot skin. Slowly the massage shifted from *therapy* to *sensual*, despite Dorian’s struggle to remind himself that this *wasn’t* taking place in the privacy of his own mind, or in the loneliness of a true dream. This was *different*. This was actually Cullen, not some simulacrum of desire summoned forth from the Fade for its own amusement as had appeared in some of his *other* dreams.

He really shouldn’t be doing this, especially since Cullen obviously believed the hands belonged to someone else.

He really shouldn’t follow the line of Cullen’s spine with his thumbs, slowly drawing them all the way down to the tailbone, only to then draw them out and over the tight, curved musculature of one of the finest backsides in all of Skyhold.

Or push his hands up, fingers splayed wide so he could feel the entirety of Cullen’s broad back under them.

Or move his hands to run down Cullen’s sides to his hips, clasping them tight as his fingers found and traced down the line of muscle and tendon which poets called *the lower love line*.

Yet Dorian’s mouth still went dry as Cullen groaned and dug his hips down into the mattress. “Maker, please, just like that.”

*Sweet blessed Andraste.*

Tempting as it was to continue - and Maker knows, when the man made sounds like that and moved in that fashion, Dorian felt the temptation quite *keenly* - Dorian exerted a signal effort of will to pull
his hands away. It took him a moment after that, and a long deep breath, before he trusted himself to set a hand on Cullen’s shoulder with a far more chaste intent. “Commander,” he said softly. “We’re in the Fade again.”

Cullen started at the sound of Dorian’s voice, his whole body jumping enough that his hips momentarily pushed up into Dorian’s aching groin. As Dorian fought a groan of his own in reaction, Cullen turned his head to look at Dorian, eyes half-lidded above flushed cheeks, and both beneath a crown of tousled golden curls. “Inquisitor,” he breathed. “So it was you.”

Dorian’s eyes widened as they took in the sight of Cullen in such a state. It was beyond tempting, it was alluring in a way which had his fingers twitching to run through that blond hair both above and below. The vision of Cullen in dishabille combined with those particular words to make Dorian stare for a good, long moment as he tried to remember precisely why he had tried to remain virtuous. Finally, he cleared his throat and licked his dry lips. “P-pardon?”

As Cullen answered, however, a thunderous sound echoed throughout the Fade and drowned out his voice. Dorian looked around them wildly, remembering the nightmarish demon from before, but Cullen seemed to take no note of the cacophony. Indeed, when Dorian didn’t respond immediately, his mouth moved once more, but the return of the mysterious boom again filled Dorian’s ears so thoroughly that Cullen’s words were forever lost. Suddenly it felt as if Dorian’s limbs were encased in stone, and everything around him dimmed and became as indistinct as they had when he’d first opened his eyes.

With a muffled cry of frustration, Dorian struggled to move, but found himself immobilized. Vaguely he realized that he was losing the dream, but so desperate was he to hear Cullen’s response that he tried to force himself to stay in the state of slumber. What had Cullen meant?

In the end, it proved futile.
Dorian’s eyes flew open as he jerked himself into an upright sitting position. The sound of pounding on a distant door finally penetrated awareness, a moment before the pounding of blood in his groin seized his attention with a vengeance. With a groan, he fell back into the soft mattress on which he lay and rubbed his hands over his face, pondering his options.

And stopped mid-ponder as something occurred to him. *Wait. How did I get on the bed?*

Instinctively he let his hands flop to the sides, trying to gauge his position. When one of them found a warm body, he yelped and jerked away, falling off the bed and landing on the floor in an all-too-familiar manner. Muttering curses, he rose to his feet, hoping desperately that this morning wouldn’t be a repeat of the last time he’d ended up ignominiously on his ass right after awakening. His eyes widened when he saw Cullen, tucked under the blanket and with his fur mantle carefully folded under his head, still quite asleep. He wasn’t sure what surprised him more, that Cullen was able to sleep through the persistent abuse of the poor door, or the surge that increased the ache between his legs at the mere sight of the man peacefully sleeping.

“Maker’s breath,” Dorian muttered softly. His own clothing was all still in place, if a bit rumpled, so obviously the night had been innocent enough. The dream, though… it lingered, in ways both subtle and not-so-subtle.

Yet the ingrate at the door could not be ignored, so Dorian sighed and set into motion towards it. A quick run of his hands through his hair told him that it was hopeless, but there was no choice but to answer the door as he was, warts and all.

When he reached it, he jerked the portal open and growled, “What?” to the person on the other side - who turned out to be the Iron Bull, as dressed as he ever got and ready for travel.

Bull looked Dorian up and down, taking in the man’s dishabille with a widening smirk. “I interrupt something?”

Dorian reached up to massage his forehead with long fingers. “No. You interrupted nothing.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re grumpy.” Ignoring Dorian’s dire glare, Bull gave a little shrug and stepped back. “We’re supposed to be leaving soon to go to the Western Approach. I thought you’d prefer me to find you rather than Hawke, given who rumor says you disappeared with yesterday.”


“Yeah, well, maybe getting away for a while would be a good thing. The Commander can take care of himself.” Clapping his arm on Dorian’s shoulder, he added, “Let’s go. I got your bath ready and everything, complete with that special oil of yours.”

Dorian blinked. “You know about that?”

“I’m hurt that you’re surprised I know your little secrets, Vint,” Bull said, pressing his hand to his chest. “Come on. We don’t have much time, and frankly, your hair’s a mess.”

“Thank you, Bull,” Dorian said through gritted teeth. “Very well, let’s go.”

The journey through the hall meant, of course, the scrutiny of the masses. Dorian grew acutely aware
of his mussed hair, his clothing all askew, and the man he'd left in the Inquisitor's chambers behind him after a night together. After this, he could deny until he was blue in the face that it was an entirely different part of his body which suffered from that hue, and the rumors would still be flying before the sun hit its zenith. The thought of it made his face settle into a scowl, and Bull, predictably, began to tease him.

"Look, I know you can wiggle your fingers and summon a thunderstorm, but I don't think your face can, can it?" he asked, giving Dorian a sly glance as they passed a group of whispering Orlesians.

"How will I know unless I try?" Dorian quipped. "Do let me know if any passing clouds zaps you, would you? That will let me know if pure wrath is sufficient."

"Will do, boss, will do," Bull said with a grin.

Dorian gave him a startled glance, though a muted one, since Bull had never referred to him that way before. Of course, they'd never been in the Hall together before, either. Bull tended to haunt the Herald's Rest since he was rather conspicuous in a crowd, so it was a rarity for the nobility to see him. Covering his surprise quickly, Dorian snorted. "Those horns of yours put you at particular risk, you know. Lightning always seeks the highest object."

Their banter continued until they reached his room, with what Dorian presumed to be Bull's intended result. Dorian was fully awake and feeling almost cheerful, returning each sally from Bull with one of his own, and the ache between his legs was nothing but an awkward memory. After sending Bull off to fetch him a quick breakfast, he stripped down and sank into the water, letting the heat melt away his cares.

The inappropriate thoughts lingered, however, as he struggled to reconcile the growing, and much desired, friendship with Cullen with the rising, palpable attraction he had for the man. He'd let a few things slip through in the past few weeks, though thankfully Cullen seemed to remain relatively oblivious to them. Cullen wasn't simply some handsome soldier with whom he could spend a pleasant evening, after all. Granted, he wasn't Hawke either, with the latter's ever-present hunger under a veneer of dangerous beauty, but the fact remained that Cullen was - should be - off the table as an option.

But the dream lingered. The feel of Cullen’s warm, oil-slicked skin under his fingers could not simply be dismissed, nor could Cullen’s reaction when he’d learned just who had given him that not-so-therapeutic massage.

Ultimately, his thoughts simply ended up chasing each other round and round, and he had to stomp on them rather firmly to avoid getting himself into the same condition he’d been when he’d woken up earlier. Forcing himself to concentrate on the task at hand, he conducted his daily bathing ritual with a meticulous care which spoke of long habit, then reached for his towel. As he did so, the floor outside his door creaked just before it opened to let the hulking form of Bull through.

"Breakfast," the man said cheerfully as kicked the door shut behind him. Setting the tray down on the desk, he glanced at Dorian and grinned. "Still naked, huh? Looks like I'm just in time for the best part."

Dorian groaned. "Honestly, Bull. Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

"Yeah, someone tried to tell me about that shit once. A southern thing, right? Come on, we don't have much time left." He took the towel and tugged it wide, then shook it. "Out with you."

After a moment's hesitation, Dorian sighed and stood, using tendrils of magic to force water out of
his hair and off his body. By the time he stepped into the towel, he was mostly dry. "Thank you," he said as he reached to take the towel.

Bull, however, didn't relinquish it. "Just stay still," Bull told him. Before Dorian could ask him what he was about, Bull knelt and started to rub the towel briskly over Dorian's body. When Dorian opened his mouth to protest, Bull shook his head. As he worked his way down Dorian's torso, Bull rumbled in a surprisingly quiet voice, "Remember that Wicked Grace game about a week after your coronation?"

"It was not a--" Dorian began.

"Coronation," Bull said firmly. "It was, even if the crown is invisible and the only reward is a hand that glows green. Anyway, do you remember it?"

Dorian frowned, memories slowly trickling back. It had been a busy few weeks, after all. "The only one I remember you in was the one Hawke-- Oh."

"Yeah. You and Varric started, and Hawke bullied his way in. So I bullied my way in." Bull chuckled. "And I'm pretty good at bullying. Get it? BULLying?"

Dorian grudgingly smiled at the terrible pun. "Yes, I recall, Bull."

"Remember what happened after the game?"

Now Dorian's smile faltered. "Not as clearly," he admitted. "The wine flowed quite freely during that game."

Bull grunted. "With the way Hawke was eyeing you and kept refilling your cup, I'm not surprised. I really didn't get myself on his good side when I declared the Inquisitor had had enough and hauled you out of there."

"Considering he was likely hoping to do the same, I can imagine," Dorian said with a sigh. "Thank you. I don't really recall that part."

"Yeah." By now the towel had reached Dorian's waist, wicking away what little water remained, but it slowed as Bull moved even lower. "You remember what happened when we got back here?"

Dorian froze as vague images arose in his mind. His mouth suddenly went dry as the distinct image of Bull's pants piled on the floor flashed through his mind. "Maker. Did we--?" He glanced down, not quite sure what to say without being terribly insulting. "I thought we agreed after last time that--"

Bull's face split into a grin. "Your expression is priceless right now. And yeah, we agreed the last one was a pity fuck after the whole 'getting kicked out of the Qun' assassination attempt thing."

"I wouldn't quite call it that," Dorian protested, but Bull's huge shoulders moved in an expansive shrug.

"I would. It's what I needed, and you were willing to provide. It was fun, we both got some stress relief, and learned a little more about each other. I'm still grateful, but that's all it was, and that's okay. This, though... if you still want to know, that is." At Dorian's nod, he resumed his toweling, brisk and efficient. "We barely got through the door before you'd pushed me up against it. I have to admit, I was impressed that you had all that wine in you and were still hot to trot."

Dorian's hand reached up to massage his forehead again, a headache rising. "So we did."
Bull shrugged. "Depends on your definition."

"Definition?" Dorian asked, glancing down at Bull.

"Yeah. I mean, we got to the 'naked on a bed' part, and the 'hey let's toss all the blankets on the floor' part, but after that?" Bull looked up at him, the towel coming to a halt a hip height. "That's as far as we got."

Dorian's eyebrows rose, then pinched together. "Was I so uncivil as to fall asleep?" Given the circumstances, it was the most likely scenario, he had to admit.

"Nah. I mean, I would have left you alone then, too, don't get me wrong. As long as I felt you were agreeing to it, I was fine with a good fuck. But that wasn't it. No, things were going pretty smoothly until you gave this nice, long groan and gasped a name." His gaze was shrewd as he looked up and added, "I'll give you two guesses whose it was."

It took more than a few seconds for the implication to sink in, and then Dorian felt the blood drain from his face. "Maker."

"No, definitely not the Maker," Bull said with a grin. "Second guess?"

Restraining himself from batting the man's horns, Dorian buried his face in his hand instead. "Cullen."

"There we go." Bull chuckled. "And that was it for me. I'm into a lot of different things when it comes to sex, but I could tell it wasn't my cock you wanted to play with."

Dorian's eyes narrowed slightly. "Is there a reason you waited to talk about this until your hand was on mine?" he asked pointedly.

Sighing heavily, Bull turned serious as he settled back on his haunches. "Look, boss, we're going to be together a lot over the next few weeks. Going to the Western Approach isn't an afternoon jaunt, and we're not quite sure what we're going to find there. I know you and I have had our differences and our fun in the past, but shit's about to get a bit more real. The idea of a fucking demon army scares the shit out of me, and this is our first real step to figuring out how to make sure that doesn't happen. And a lot of that rests on you."

"Oh. Wonderful. Well, that takes all the pressure right off," Dorian said sarcastically.

Bull rolled his eye. "Yeah, yeah. Now listen, I'm being serious here, and that doesn't happen often. Before I stopped getting the reports, the Ben-Hassrath were really concerned about the things they'd dug up about the Wardens, and it's bad. Like, worst-nightmare-inducing bad. Pretty sure Nightingale has told you some of the more lurid rumors running around."

Dorian nodded, now equally somber. Alistair had also managed to get some additional information, though only he, Leliana, and Dorian knew all the details. "Go on."

"I'm just saying that you're the Inquisitor, but more importantly, you're my boss," Bull told him. "I owe you a lot, probably more than you can really understand without being from the Qun yourself. I don't know what's going on between you and Cullen, but I do know it's something that might get a bit distracting, and we can't really afford that now." He squeezed Dorian intimately, making the man jump. "And that's where I come in."

Dorian frowned. "Are you offering--"
"Call it stress relief, and yeah, you got it, boss," Bull told him with a nod. "Something nice and simple so that you won't work yourself up in a knot while you try to figure out what the fuck is going on with Cullen."

"There's nothing going on with Cullen," Dorian said. "And there shouldn't be. He is Commander of the Inquisition Forces and mourning love of my predecessor. It would be inappropriate to say the least. Besides, I'm a--"

"Vint, and yeah, all that is true. Some of the troops won't like it, some of the nobles would gossip, and some of your enemies will try to use it to weaken your position. I got that, trust me. I'm horny, not stupid." Bull sighed. "That's why you need me. Everyone knows I don't do the romance shit, and the rumors about us are already around. It will distract everyone else from the whole you and Cullen thing - and that will be a thing after you both entered that room and didn't come out all night - and you'll have the bonus of not running around with a rod between your legs at the most inconvenient times."

"But Cullen--" Dorian began, then bit his lip.

"Has his own shit to work through," Bull pointed out. "But I will add that he did stay in there with you all night. Maybe he's still working out the details himself, but I'm pretty sure he would have retreated to his tower if he didn't like the position he was in. And we both know him well enough to know that."

Dorian frowned as he remembered Cullen's reaction from the dream the night before. So it was you. That was not what he would have expected the man to say if he had truly thought it was Mailani kneading his back, and the ramifications made him swallow harshly.

"Hey, whoa now," Bull said with a chuckle as he patted Dorian's groin. "I didn't say you should start thinking about him again right this minute."

Dorian groaned and snatched the towel out of Bull's hands. "I can take it from here," he snapped.

"Right you are, boss. Just keep in mind what I said, all right?" Bull headed to the door, then paused and looked back over his shoulder. "We can't afford to have you distracted, and you're not going to see him again for a while." With a final nod, Bull tugged the door open, then paused before speaking to someone in the corridor. "Hawke. Fancy meeting you here."

"Is the Inquisitor ready yet?" Hawke asked, clearly irritated.

"The boss'll be down in a few minutes," Bull said as he stepped through the door in a fashion that blocked it entirely. "I was just getting some last minute instructions about the Chargers."

"Is that what you're calling it now?" Hawke asked in a sardonic tone as the door closed. After that, the voices continued for a few more exchanges before moving away from the room.

Only when the voices dimmed entirely did Dorian's shoulders drop. Hawke wasn't the most relaxing person to be around in the first place, given his reputation and the presence the man possessed, but his interest in Dorian had long ago shifted from flattering to worrying. Still, one did not simply tell the Viscount of Kirkwall to take himself and his support away, not when the man's own reputation and history pointed to a poor reaction to rejection.

Still, that was a worry for another time. The sooner Dorian and the rest of his party got in the saddle and headed west, the better.

As he wolfed down his breakfast and tugged his clothes on, he privately admitted that he was
grateful that Bull would be with him. Even if he never took the man up on his offer, at least there would be someone there who understood the pressures Dorian labored under. Particularly the self-inflicted ones.

Dorian looked down at the outfit lying on his sleeping roll with a sigh. He'd done his best, but even magic could only do so much against the constant onslaught of dust and sand, and the Western Approach had plenty of both. The grit was everywhere - in the food, in his hair, in his smalls - despite all his efforts to rid himself of it entirely. With a sigh of resignation, he ran a damp cloth over his body one last time, then slowly began to dress.

"Hey, Hawke."

"That's Champion to you, Qunari," Hawke replied with a sneer in his voice.

Dorian jumped. The voices sounded so loud that it seemed they were standing right outside Dorian's tent, but a quick glance around showed no telltale shadow. Curious, Dorian opened the flap of his tent cautiously and peered out into the camp. Seeing nothing, he shrugged and retreated into his tent to continue his task.

"Not a Qunari any more. Didn't you hear?" Bull replied with a grunt. This time there was enough of an echo that Dorian realized what was going on. The two men were standing in the nearby ravine, and a trick of acoustics worked to bring their conversation up to Dorian as if he were standing next to them.

Quite aware of the tension between the two, Dorian quickly summoned a wisp between his curled fingers, then whispered to it for a moment before releasing it from the tent. Once that was done, he summoned another one and whispered to it as well, still listening with half an ear.

"I did, but I don't believe it, Hissrad." A creak of leather and the scrape of metal sounded, and Hawke's voice was a bit clearer when he next spoke, as if he'd turned around. "What is it?"

"That elf you spoke to back at the Keep, while the Inquisition Forces were running around setting things up. Who was that?"

"Maker. I can't even speak to servants now? What if I was just looking for a good fuck?" Hawke asked acidly.

"Never seen a servant carry as many weapons as that elf did," Bull pointed out. "Or speak with an Antivan accent when in western Orlais. And you didn't spend enough time with him for a bad fuck, much less a good one."

"It's none of your business, ox-man," Hawke shot back.

As they spoke, the other wisp moved to hover above them, and the spell linking the wisps mirrored what it saw to the one between Dorian's hands. He stared at it intently, able to at least pick up the gist of the scene.

Bull grunted, and the larger of the two shapes edged towards the smaller one. "My instincts say otherwise, and I trust them more than I trust you."

"Watch your tongue," Hawke warned him. "I am a valued ally of the Inquisition."

"A valued ally who travels a lot for no real reason and speaks with suspicious characters when
everyone else is busy," Bull said in a musing tone. "Yeah. Totally trustworthy."

The smaller figure stepped forward, hand going to his waist. The sound of singing metal outside followed the motion as Hawke drew one of his serrated daggers. "Listen to me, you hulking buffoon," Hawke snarled. "Who I meet with and who I speak to is of no concern to you, or the Inquisition. You can rest assured that everything I do is to defeat Corypheus. He's the one mistake I will not let survive. Is that clear?"

Bull’s dark chuckle echoed up to Dorian, who was still staring intently into his wisp. "Clear as crystal. And I'm sure the Crow was just passing through on his way to somewhere more civilized."

"He's no longer a--" Hawke stopped, and a silence fell as Hawke stared up at Bull for a few moments. Finally he slammed his dagger back into his sheath. "This conversation is over, ox-man. This is not a matter that concerns the brutes of the Inquisition." With the sound of creaking leather, Hawke pivoted and stormed up the ravine, the effect slightly marred by his lack of solid footing on the sandy ravine floor.

Dismissing the wisps with a motion, Dorian quickly set about finishing the task of dressing in his newly de-sanded outfit. Just as he'd buckled the last part of his sleeve, a hand jerked the flap of his tent sharply upward to reveal Bull bending over awkwardly so he could look inside. "Wanna take a walk?"

Dorian raised an eyebrow, but nodded as he grabbed his staff. "As you wish."

"Varric said he spotted Alistair coming back," Bull said as he stepped away to give Dorian enough room to emerge. "Once he's back, everything starts, right? I thought you might want to go meet him."

"Thank the Maker," Dorian barked. "He said he'd only be gone an hour or so. He's been gone all night."

"Tell me something I don't know," Bull said with a grunt as he started to lead the way through their camp. "Still, if he really does have a contact out there with newer information, it's worth the wait. I don't like going into situations blind." Reaching up to tap his eye patch, he said, "I'm already at a half-disadvantage there, ya know?"

With a chuckle, Dorian patted Bull on the arm. "And the horns don't help, either."

"Just point me in the right direction and I'll charge wherever you tell me to," Bull said with a chuckle. After a few moments, he glanced at Dorian. "You heard all that, right? he asked in a quiet voice. "I picked where to pitch your tent for a reason."

Dorian raised an eyebrow. He supposed by now he shouldn't really be surprised when Bull showed exactly how smart he could be, but setting up a tent in a location precisely so that its occupant could clandestinely overhear a conversation? "Clever," he murmured. "And here I thought it was just so it was far enough away that no one could hear us if the need arose."

Bull snorted and shook his head. "If you haven't taken me up on my offer by now, you never will, boss. And that's fine. It's still on the table, though." A grin came to his face. "Just like you could be, if you wanted."

"Bull," Dorian said in a chiding tone.

"Yeah, yeah, all right. Focus. Got it." He glanced over to where Hawke stood at the edge of camp, staring out into the desert and presumably the tower where they'd tracked the Wardens the previous
day. "Anyway, this elf. It doesn't feel right. He was armed like an assassin, dressed in rich leathers and silks, and he wore a hooded cloak that covered his face. If that doesn't scream *Ignore me or die* I don't know what does."

"You suspect he's a Crow, then?" When Bull nodded, Dorian frowned in thought. "Why would he be talking with Hawke?"

Shoulders moving in an expansive shrug, Bull said, "You got me. I just thought you should know. The last thing we need is the Crows - or even a Crow - getting involved in a way we can't track."

"As if this weren't complicated enough," Dorian said with a sigh.


"Thank you ever so much," Dorian drawled sarcastically, then looked forward as a movement caught his eye. "Ah. There's our man. " As Alistair crested the dune and closed the last few feet between them, Dorian bowed smoothly. "Good to see you again, Warden Alistair. We were worried you would be late to the party."

Alistair laughed as he looked them up and down. "You don't look like you're having a good time," the Warden noted.

"Oh, but we are. Swimming, actually," Dorian replied brightly.

Alistair ran a hand through his hair, causing a pattering of sand to fall from his hair onto his armor. "I wouldn't mind a swim," he said sourly. "I can't wait until we can get out of here."

"What did you learn?" Bull pressed. "I'm ready for some action. Is it time?"

Alistair nodded, face turning grim. "Sorry I took so long to get back here, but it was worth it. My contact is waiting for us at the tower now, keeping an eye on them to make sure they don't suddenly decide to leave like they did last time."

"Good. Let's get going," Dorian declared as he turned to head back into camp. And in the process, almost ran headlong into Hawke, who had approached them from behind.

"Inquisitor," Hawke greeted Dorian in a brittle voice. "A word, if you please?"

Putting a brilliant smile on his face, Dorian said, "But of course, Viscount. I live but to serve."

"In private," Hawke added, looking at Bull and Alistair with disdain. "There are matters of a delicate nature to discuss."

"Sounds like someone woke up on the grumpy side of bed this morning," Alistair muttered, ignoring Hawke's glare as he looked at Dorian. "I'll brief Cassandra on what to expect. No time to strike camp, though. We shouldn't dally too long." With a final glance at Hawke, Alistair clapped Bull on the back as they headed back to the camp.

Once they were out of earshot, Hawke stepped closer and set his hand on Dorian's shoulder. "I don't know what your pet ox has told you," he said quietly, "but I met with a trusted agent in Griffon Wing Keep."

Feeling a little better that Hawke was telling him of his own volition, Dorian nodded. "I take it he brought you some important information?"
“He did: the name of the man the Wardens were waiting for.”

Dorian straightened. “The one who arrived yesterday?”

With a nod, Hawke replied, “The very same. He’s a Venator, a venal Magister by the name of Livius Erimond.”

“Livius?” Dorian asked in disbelief. “That pillock serves Corypheus? Actually, no, that doesn’t surprise me.”

“I take it you’re familiar with him?” Hawke asked in an amused tone.

“Familiar? Enough to know that he’s an idiot of the first order. Just the sort to fall for Corypheus’ promise of the return of the Golden Age of the Imperium.” Dorian sighed and shook his head. “And a blood mage, at that. It is the last resort of the weak mind, after all.” It wasn’t until the words fell from his lips that he realized what he’d said, and he quickly looked down, trying to push through the bitter moment of recalling that last conversation with his father.

Hawke settled his hand on the back of Dorian’s neck. “Is everything all right?” he asked in a low, intimate tone.

“What?” Dorian cleared his throat and looked up. Hawke was close, a bit too close for comfort, perhaps, but the genuine concern on his face was more than a bit disarming. “I’m perfectly fine, I assure you.”

After a few moments of searching Dorian’s face, Hawke finally nodded. “As you say. But if you need anyone to talk to, I am here. I know what it’s like to be weighed down by a burden you never asked for. Sometimes it’s comforting to have someone to talk to who understands the pressures you’re facing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Dorian said in a deliberately lighter vein, though silently he realized that he did have someone like that - back at Skyhold. “Though I admit, I thought I was but a passing fancy for you.”

One side of Hawke's mouth lifted in an almost tender smile. "Oh, no, my dear Inquisitor. You're far too exquisite for that. But I am a patient man, and you are worth waiting for."

“And you’ll have to wait longer,” he reminded Hawke, grateful that the man hadn’t come to him last night when other excuses would have fallen flat and it would have been harder to turn the man away outright without risking a poor reaction. “We’re due to give a rather odious toad a very sound thrashing. Oh, and to figure out the whole demon army of Corypheus thing.”

Hawke chuckled softly as his thumb moved to stroke Dorian’s cheek. “Later, then. I like the sound of that.” Leaning in, he stole a gentle kiss from Dorian, then pressed in for something more passionate, if not lingering. When their lips parted, he murmured, “After we’ve dealt with these troublesome Wardens.”

Lips tingling oddly and heart racing, Dorian gave Hawke a smile. Something felt... off, but he couldn't quite place his finger on what. Whatever it was, however, it made his teeth tingle. “They are overdue for a lesson, yes,” he said a trifle breathlessly. It wasn’t a commitment, but it obviously sounded enough like one that Hawke smiled and leaned in, presumably for another kiss. “Ah, but... we should be going. We won’t get this opportunity again, I think.”

“You’re right.” After a moment’s further hesitation, Hawke took one of Dorian's hands so he could raise it and brush his lips across the knuckles. Then he straightened, a cruel sneer coming to his face.
as he said, "Now let's go attend to these Wardens, hmm? No one unleashes a demon army on my watch."

Dorian chuckled, trying not to show his unease. "That is a sentiment with which I can heartily agree. Let us sally forth, then. It's time to save the world."

They approached the tower with caution from the east side, using the natural placement and size of the dunes and the shadows cast by the sun to conceal as much of their movements as possible. Every once in a while they'd send Varric or Hawke ahead in stealth to find the best route, and adjust according to the lay of the land.

When they were close enough to see the pillars marking one side of the bridge leading to the tower, Alistair drew close to Dorian and pointed ahead. "Keep an eye on the pillar closest to us," he murmured. "I told him to use his shield to reflect the sun once Varric gives the signal. Four times if it's safe to proceed, three times if it's not."

Dorian held up his hand to signal everyone to halt, then looked to Varric and nodded. Varric lifted Bianca and sent a special bolt up into the sky. When it reached its zenith, Dorian activated the spell he'd enchanted it with. Unless someone were watching the sky south of the tower, the brief flash of light would go unnoticed - at least, that was their hope.

Alistair's expression was tense as he locked his gaze on the pillar, then let his breath out explosively as the first glint of light finally showed. Once, twice, then three times. They all held their breaths until a fourth flash was seen, and Alistair nodded. "It's safe. Let's go."

Whipping his hand over his head, Dorian signaled Bull and Alistair to take the lead, falling in behind them with Varric and Hawke, leaving Cassandra to take the flanking position. They moved quickly but quietly, only slowing when they found a man in Warden armor and helm standing beside the pillar.

The man gestured them closer, moving towards them as he did so. Alistair extended his arm wordlessly, which the other man clasped and held for a moment before he turned to Dorian. "Inquisitor. Alistair has told me a great deal about you." Reaching up to remove his helm, he tucked it under an arm as he offered a bow. The face beneath was lined with care and years of sun, but the hair was still black as night. "My name is Loghain Mac Tir. I daresay you have heard of me."

"Ah, the pariah of Ferelden," Dorian said with a light chuckle. "As the pariah of the Imperium, I greet you as a comrade in arms regardless of the reason we are here."

A faint smile touched Loghain's lips. "As you say."

Glancing at Alistair, Dorian added, "I admit, based on what I've heard in the tales, I'm a bit surprised to see you two working together."

Loghain and Alistair exchanged a glance. "That was a long time ago," Loghain said finally. Turning, he pointed towards the tower at the other end of the bridge. "Whatever's happening has already started. I saw lights coming from the tower, but dared not approach alone. Whatever they're doing, it's holding their attention, at least. I counted no more than twenty Wardens who entered, half of them mages, and a single man in Tevinter garb."

"That would be Livius," Dorian mused.

Loghain raised an eyebrow. "You know who it is?"
"One of my agents was able to get the information," Hawke said with a pointed look at Bull.

"Fair enough. What is this man’s nature, Inquisitor?" Loghain asked, turning back to Dorian.
"Anything useful we should know?"

“He’s a lickspittle,” Dorian said with a snort. “A born toady. I’m not at all surprised he’s serving Corypheus. He is a Magister, though, so he does have magic at his beck. Not harmless, but no Corypheus, or even an Alexius, when it comes to that.”

“Then I suppose the time for action has come,” Loghain said as he settled his helm back onto his head.

"Yes!" Bull said, drawing his weapon.

"Now, now," Dorian cautioned. "Let’s observe for a bit first. The less information we have to drag out of them later, the better. If there’s an opportunity to observe undetected, we should take it rather than go in swords swinging."

"Maul," Bull said.

Dorian blinked. "Pardon?"

"This isn't a sword, it's a maul," Bull pointed out helpfully.

After glaring at the grinning Bull for a moment, Dorian shook his head. "Let's just get going, shall we?"

They kept the same formation, though Loghain fell in on the other side of Bull from Alistair to provide him another shield for the front. They encountered no scouts or resistance of any sort. In fact, they encountered no one at all until they reached the top of the stairs which led to a large open area at the top of the tower, and even then, their presence went unnoticed. Taking advantage of that, Loghain gestured towards some cover offered by a few stacked crates, and they moved to crouch behind them.

It soon became apparent why no one was watching them. All eyes were locked on a platform at the other side of the large open area at the top of the tower. On that platform stood a man Dorian did indeed recognize, and a sneer formed reflexively on his lip. "What a tool," he murmured.

Hawke glanced at him. “So my agent was right,” he murmured.


Though they couldn’t quite hear the words being spoken, it was clear that there was an argument of some sort. Dorian’s eyes swept over the assemblage, though their view wasn’t the best, his eyes widening as he slowly put the pieces together concerning the mysterious ‘ritual’ mentioned in the notes. He rose with a shout on his lips just as one of the Wardens stepped forward and stabbed his dagger deep into another, and the cry died in his throat. It was too late to save the man, after all, and perhaps watching the ritual which was to inevitably follow would glean some further insight.

Dorian’s eyes narrowed as he watched the flow of magic around the Warden who had murdered his fellow while he wove a spell using the blood of the fallen. Once the spell settled into place and the demon was summoned, however, Dorian saw Erimond make his move, and made a soft, “Ah,” sound. “That’s it,” he said softly. “That’s their game.”

“What?” Hawke asked. It was clear from the way his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared that he
found the whole proceedings reprehensible, but he still waited for the signal to advance.

“They don’t want to help the Wardens,” Dorian said. “They want to control them.” Abruptly he strode out of their concealment and moved to confront the Magister, deciding that enough was enough.

“Well, well, well, Dorian,” Erimond sneered as he approached. “So you’ve finally come for a visit? And how is the south treating you, altus?” The word was spoken with a biting sarcasm. Certainly the man meant it as an insult, given his own rank as Magister technically outranked Dorian as a mere Altus by Imperium standards.

“That’s Inquisitor,” Hawke snapped as he came to a halt next to Dorian. “And Inquisitor outranks worm by a fair bit, blood mage.”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Erimond’s face, but he quickly recovered. “Your presence is not entirely expected, but it would be remiss of me not to offer greetings,” he continued as if Hawke hadn’t interrupted him. “We heard about the demise of your predecessor. So very sad.”

“You’re positively dripping with sincerity, Livius,” Dorian remarked coldly. “I suppose that’s suitable, since you’ve never dripped with talent. Perhaps you should use sarcasm as a weapon. It’s certainly stronger than your magic.”

Erimond took an involuntary step forward. “I was recovering from being sick that day,” he told Dorian in an angry voice, then stopped and took a deep breath. In a more controlled tone, he said, “We are merely helping them defeat their greatest enemy: the Blight itself. That, and their Calling had them terrified. They were looking everywhere for help.”

“And there you were, willing to help them,” Alistair drawled. “How convenient.”

Erimond’s eyes narrowed. “I know you. You’re one of the pair that Clarel let slip.” His gaze shifted to Loghain, whose face was still hidden under his helm. “And I presume you’re the other.” When Loghain didn’t answer, he flipped his hand in dismissal and continued. “It was hardly a coincidence, either, since it was my Master who put the Calling into your little heads. When they went looking for help, we Venatori were prepared.”

“So you cheated. Just like you did in the Circle to get your Enchanter’s stole,” Dorian remarked.

The Magister’s face darkened. “I did not cheat.”

“Oh, proclaim it all you want, we both know you only attained that position because of your father,” Dorian drawled. “Clearly you can only dream of greatness and must ride someone else’s robe hem to get there. Is that what you get out of it? While Corypheus contemplates eternity from the Golden City
“Will you shut up?” Erimond snarled.

Dorian smiled privately. With only a little prodding, it seemed, Erimond was willing to tell them everything they needed to know. “Oh, please, do go on, Livius. Perhaps at some point what you say will actually have import.” He glanced around at the piled bodies of dead Wardens. “So that’s your game, is it? Teach them a ritual that binds the demons to them, and the mages to Corypheus? How very droll.”

Erimond’s hateful glare warmed the cockles of Dorian’s petty little heart, though his words had the opposite effect. “This was a test,” he said, gesturing around the platform at the pile of dead Wardens. “Once the rest of the Wardens complete the ritual, the army will conquer Thedas.”

“I don’t believe it,” Alistair said flatly. “No Warden would do this just for a promise to end the song of the Calling.”

Now Erimond’s expression grew smug. “Ah. But they think they’re raising the demon army to invade the Deep Roads and kill the Old Gods.”

“Clever bastard,” Alistair admitted grudgingly. “If it had the chance of a fire surviving in the Void, the Wardens might take that chance.”

“Am I missing something here?” Dorian asked.

“The Blights are caused by Archdemons,” Loghain started to explain, but Erimond cut him off.

“And an Archdemon is a corrupted Old God. No more Old Gods… Poof!” Erimond made, to Dorian’s eye, a rather silly gesture. “No more Blights.”

“And that’s why Clarel agreed at all,” Alistair said grimly.

“Indeed, Warden. All of you seemed to be so happy at finally being the ones to defeat the Blight completely that you went right along with my Master’s scheme like sheep into a fold.”

“A pity they don’t know that Corypheus is a Blight,” Hawke muttered.

Erimond’s eyes narrowed. “He commands the Blight,” he insisted. “He is not commanded by it, like the mindless darkspawn. The Blight is not unstoppable or uncontrollable. It is simply a tool.”

“No, Livius,” Dorian said in a resigned tone. “You’re the tool. And a fool.”

Erimond’s face darkened. “You know, my Master studied your predecessor at Haven quite closely when they met.” With a gesture, Erimond’s left hand came alive with red flames, and he pointed it at Dorian.

When his left forearm exploded with green flames in answer, a sharp pain shot up Dorian’s arm, forcing him to his knees with a sudden cry.

Somewhere, Erimond continued his prattling. “The Elder One showed me how to deal with you, in the event the Inquisition was foolish enough to interfere again,” Erimond said in a smug tone. “That mark you bear? The Anchor that lets you pass safely through the Veil? Your precious slant-eared Inquisitor stole that from my Master. He’s been forced to seek other ways to access the Fade.”
Through the fog of pain which wrapped around his mind, Dorian focused on those words. Pass safely through the Veil? Dagna had said something to that effect, but to hear Erimond refer to it so casually gave the idea more weight - and gave him a better idea of why Corypheus was so angry about losing the Anchor.

Forcing his mind away from speculation and ignoring the idiot’s blathering, Dorian concentrated instead on the spell Erimond had cast on the Anchor. Knowing Erimond’s abilities when it came to magic - or rather his lack thereof - Dorian had to assume that Erimond had learned the technique as a brute force concept rather than as something intelligently applied. Pushing through the pain, he delved deep, poking and prodding at the magical matrix of the spell surrounding the Anchor. Yes, it agitated the Anchor to cause the pain in the first place, but the nature of the spell was rooted in the nature of the Anchor itself. He felt the tension there, as if something was pulling at it deep within, and he narrowed his eyes as he mentally followed that tension.

There, a voice whispered, just on the edge of his consciousness, and he automatically followed the thought until he found his answer: the point where Erimond’s spell had tapped into the complexity that was the Anchor and yanked it askew. With a grim determination, he rose to his feet and extended his hand, seizing that weak point - and Erimond’s spell - with the same mental twist he used to close rifts. Once it was well-seated in his magical grasp, he shoved it back in Erimond's face - hard.

Erimond choked back a cry in the middle of his tiresome pontification and staggered back, the pain of his broken spell enough to make him fall flat on his ass - a lovely sight, as far as Dorian was concerned. Erimond scrambled to his feet, mouth agape, as Dorian clucked his tongue and laughed.

“There, there, Livius,” Dorian said as he raised his hand and summoned the flickering light of the Anchor. “Maybe someday you’ll be a match for me. Not while I’m alive, of course.” He gave Erimond a charming smile. “I’m far too good for that.” Then he pointed his hand at the man and unleashed a spell borne of both his necromancy arts and the Anchor itself.

The attack scored, and Erimond fell back, clutching his side as crimson flowed between his fingers. “Kill them!” he shouted, finally rousing his guard dogs from their stupor as he stumbled away from them.

“Coward!” Dorian shouted after him, surging forward in pursuit.

A hand landed on his shoulder and pulled him back. “Let him go. We’ve more pressing business,” Hawke grated.

“Now we go in mauls swinging,” Bull grunted with satisfaction, then roared as he raised his weapon over his head. “Time to have some fun!”

The fight was short and brutal, considering they had four warriors in the fray and the blood-controlled Warden mages tended to emphasize offense over defense. When the last Warden fell, Hawke shook his head and sneered, “Well, that went well.”

Alistair sighed and shook his head, sorrow on his face as he looked at the dead Wardens around them. “Our worst fears are realized. Thanks to that ritual, the Warden mages are enslaved to Corypheus.”

“Worse, the rest of the Wardens won’t know it until it’s too late,” Loghain said grimly as he tugged his helm off to examine a dent in one side. “Though now that we know Corypheus is indeed involved, I might be able to persuade a few away from this course of action. That name is known among Wardens.”
“I had a bad feeling about this business from the beginning, but this?” Hawke frowned fiercely. “I knew the Wardens would go too far.”

Dorian reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose for a moment. “Blood magic, human sacrifice, demon summoning… Honestly, who looks at this and thinks, ‘Maybe the Maker will forgive me just this once’?”

Hawke snorted. “The fearful and the foolish,” he declared, then looked at the two Wardens nearby.

Both men straightened, but it was Loghain who answered. “Despite their lack of wisdom, they acted out of necessity.”

“All blood mages do,” Hawke said, rounding on Loghain. “Everyone has a story to tell themselves to justify bad decisions, blood mages or not, but it never matters. In the end, you are always alone with your actions. Trust me. I know that intimately.”

Dorian looked at Hawke, considering those words coming from that particular man, and wondered if perhaps he had misjudged him after all.

Loghain snorted. “Don’t throw that at me, Champion. I’ve been regretting decisions longer than you’ve been alive, but that doesn’t make all of those decisions wrong. And it doesn’t make the decisions you don’t regret right.” Turning to Dorian, he said, “In the direction Erimond fled, the only structure of note is an abandoned Warden fortress. Adamant. I suspect we’ll find the Wardens there.”

“I guess they didn’t want to summon a demon army out in public,” Dorian noted. “Bad for their image, I suppose.”

“So what now?” Hawke asked, looking to Dorian.

Dorian sighed. “We split up,” he said grimly. “Loghain, you’ve been a valuable field agent for us thus far. Would you mind continuing that work?”

“For the sake of the Grey Wardens, I will do what is necessary,” the older man said with a nod. “I take it you want me to go ahead to Adamant?”

“Indeed. I’ll send along a few Inquisition agents from Griffon Wing Keep to aid you, but you can at least confirm that the Wardens are, in fact, there, and get a rough idea of the size and scope of the Fortress.” Dorian set his hand on Loghain’s shoulder. “It will be a dangerous business, but I’d prefer the eye of someone who’s been on more than a few battlefields and studied his fair share of fortresses to analyze the situation before we set the Inquisition Forces against it.”

Loghain nodded gravely. “That I can do, Inquisitor. It was going to be my suggestion regardless.”

“Good man,” Dorian said with a smile. “We pariahs have to help each other as much as we can.”

Loghain smiled faintly. “Not alone do we stand on the field of battle,” he murmured. "I will journey to Skyhold once I've confirmed the numbers and deployment of the Wardens at Adamant Fortress. Until we meet again, Inquisitor.” Giving Dorian a formal bow, Loghain turned to Alistair and extended his hand.

Clasping it with his own, Alistair pulled the man into a bear hug. “Don’t you die on me, old man,” he said softly. “It took me far too long to figure out why that’s a bad idea.”

Loghain smiled, and when he was released, nodded to Alistair. “You’re sounding more and more like your father every time I see you.”
“Maker forbid I let down the Theirin line,” Alistair said with a grin.

“Never that, my friend, never that. Some would argue I’ve done enough of that for the both of us.” He patted Alistair’s arm one last time, then settled his helm into place and set off towards the stairs.

Dorian turned his attention to Alistair and Hawke. “I need you to return to Skyhold. They need to start mustering the Inquisition Forces for battle at Adamant.”

Hawke frowned, eyes narrowing. “Alistair could go on his own, or you could even send a message from Griffon Wing Keep, if you didn’t want to return to Skyhold right away,” he pointed out. “I’d rather to stay with you and have that private discussion we talked about earlier. Why aren’t you heading back now?”

“Because there are still too many Venatori running around this place, and the last thing we need is a contingent of them joining the Wardens at Adamant,” Dorian pointed out. It was a reason, of course, and a perfectly valid one, just not the reason - which was that he needed to be away from Hawke right now. He simply couldn’t trust himself to resist Hawke if the man pressed him again, but Dorian didn’t know why, and that worried him. “We’ll sweep up the last remnants of the Venatori and head back to Skyhold, so we shouldn’t be too far behind you.”

“Alistair and I could help you with that,” Hawke insisted. “Why send us ahead?”

“I need both of you to give an in-person brief to Leliana and Josephine about everything we’ve learned here,” he explained. “While you do that, I’ll go back to Griffon Wing Keep and check in with Knight-Captain Rylen. I really didn’t get to spend much time there after we captured it for the Inquisition, after all. After that, as I said, we’ll sweep away the last of the Venatori here. Don’t worry, Hawke,” he added with a wink. “You’ll see me again.”

A slow smile came to Hawke’s face. “Good. That’s the important part.” Before Dorian could step away, Hawke reached out and pulled Dorian close, claiming his lips in a lingering kiss. Again, Dorian felt that odd edge of wrong, a warning humming at the brink of his conscious mind, but the sensation was overwhelmed by a heady rush of pleasure that swept over him, and he felt his hands sinking into Hawke’s hair before he realized he’d raised them at all. When their lips parted, Hawke seemed quite pleased with himself. “Until later, Inquisitor,” Hawke murmured, then pulled back and looked at Alistair. “Let’s go,” he commanded as he turned and marched to the stairs.

“Yes, ser,” Alistair muttered under his breath. He did pause long enough to give Dorian a worried glance, then shook his head and trotted after Hawke.

“You’ve got a real strange sense of good ideas sometimes, boss,” Bull noted with a grunt once they well out of earshot.

“Thank you for that incredibly insightful comment, Bull,” Dorian said, squinting as he looked north. “Let’s be on our way, shall we? That Servis fellow who’s been littering the Western Approach with notes and agents seems to have an overwhelming talent for causing trouble. It’s past time we paid him a visit.” And hopefully doing so will take long enough for me to recall why kissing Hawke is a bad idea.

With a weary gesture for his companions to follow after him, he set into motion. Why does it have to be so complicated?
Cullen frowned at the paper in his hand as he climbed the stairs to the Nightingale’s Roost, as most in Skyhold called it by now. "Leliana, have you seen this report from--" he asked as he looked up, then paused when he realized that Leliana wasn't in her usual spot. "And here I am speaking to thin air," he muttered, awkwardly reaching up to rub his neck.

"She's outside on the terrace, Commander."

Cullen jumped slightly, then looked to the elven woman on his right and smiled. "Thank you, Charter. Now I don't feel quite so foolish, knowing someone was here." Only somewhat foolish, he added privately.

Charter didn't smile in return, but then, she rarely did. "She's got company, ser."

"An agent?" Cullen guessed.

"No, ser." Charter's chin dipped down as she repeated with an odd emphasis, "Company."

Cullen blinked a few times, then looked over to the door leading outside. "Oh, company. Right. Well." Leliana and company was an odd concept to accept, honestly. He hesitated, glancing down at the paper in his hand, and finally sighed. "Then she'll have to arrange to meet them later," he said grimly and headed for the door.

As he approached, he realized that it had been left ajar, and hesitated at the threshold when hushed voices reached his ears. Deciding that a bit of eavesdropping was preferable to barging in on something else on a different tier of unforgivable, he paused and listened for a moment.

"--sure it was him?" Leliana was saying.

"It had to be," her company replied, and Cullen's eyebrows rose as he recognized the voice. "No one else has that tattoo or that scar."

"But what was he doing there?" Leliana asked, a faint and quite unexpected tremor in her voice.

Alistair sighed, and Cullen heard a sound much like a fist hitting stone in frustration. "I don't know. But we both know that he would never be allowed to wander around Thedas without a damned good reason. Maker knows we were all kept on a short leash."

"Until I was murdered," Leliana said in a soft voice.

Cullen's hand froze in the act of reaching out to push the door open, jaw dropping in disbelief. No. He must have misheard that.

"Maker, Leliana," Alistair breathed, and there was a creak of leather as someone moved. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to remind you of that."

"I still remember his face," Leliana said in an oddly toneless voice. "He enjoyed it. Enjoyed watching me lie there, burned and bleeding, knowing there was no way I would survive what he had done to me. The last thing I remember of him was the pressure of his lips on my forehead. And then--" Finally her voice cracked, and Alistair made some comforting noises.

Cullen's mind raced as he struggled with what he'd heard, torn between interrupting what was
obviously a private moment and the need to learn more. His indecision kept him frozen long enough to hear Alistair speak again. “When I heard you were with the Inquisition, I could hardly believe it. It was like a sign from the Maker, that maybe… maybe what we went through during the Blight was truly over. I may not be the Nightingale, but maybe I could be the Warden who helps to save Thedas. You know. This time. I didn’t do such a smashing good job last time, I suppose.” After a pause, he chuckled, though the sound was a bit strained. “Oh, good. A smile. You had me worried there for a moment.”

“This isn’t the time for games, Alistair,” Leliana scolded him, though she did sound far more herself than a few moments before. “We need to find out what Amell is up to.”

At the mention of that name, Cullen’s expression turned grim, and he shoved the door open to step out onto the terrace. As he’d suspected, Alistair had his arms around Leliana, though they quickly separated after Cullen’s abrupt entrance. He would apologize for interrupting later, but something else was more important at the moment. “What’s this about Amell?” he demanded.

Alistair and Leliana exchanged a glance, and Alistair conceded the matter to Leliana with a gesture. Face grim, she said, “Alistair saw Zevran Arainai at Griffon Wing Keep.”

“You’re absolutely sure?” Cullen asked in a sharp tone.

“Trust me,” Alistair said with a grimace. “Amell made sure I knew Zev very well before the Blight was over.”

“Maker.” Cullen ran his fingers through his hair. “I thought Amell was sitting this one out.” It had seemed too good to be true...

“The last I heard of him, he was trying to find a cure for the Calling,” Leliana told him. “But you know what he’s like. He’ll do whatever suits him, no matter the consequences.”

“I remember.” Cullen could never forget the man, nor forgive him. Shaking his head, he looked to Leliana. “But until we know more, there’s not much we can do, is there?”

She shook her head mutely, a tension around her eyes that Cullen had never seen before, not even in the worst moments after the explosion at the Conclave. “No. But my agents will be looking for any signs of Amell or Zevran, that I promise you.”

Alistair’s expression turned a bit wistful. “He wasn’t such a bad fellow, once. Zevran, I mean. Yes, he was an assassin, and yes, he tried to kill me the first time we met, but… You know. Water under the bridge and all that. Amell changed him, though. After Kinloch Hold, he--” He looked at Cullen as the man flinched. “Oh. Right. Sorry,” he said softly.

“A time best left in the past. For all of us.” Cullen scrubbed his face with his hand, then shook his head. “Regardless, there is nothing we can do now except watch and wait.” After a moment, he realized he still held the report in his hand, and raised it, desperate for a new topic. “Leliana, this came in. Have you seen it yet?” he asked, holding it out to her.

She took the paper and scanned it quickly, then more slowly as her eyes widened. “When did this arrive?”

“Jim brought it to me just a few minutes ago, fresh from the message bin.” Suddenly he snapped his fingers. “Charter.”

“Charter?” Leliana asked, confused.
“She’s in your roost, but was probably a bit more hesitant to, ah, interrupt,” he said, glancing at Alistair.

The faintest hint of color darkened Leliana’s cheeks, and she shoved the paper back into Cullen’s hands. “I need to speak with her,” she declared, then hastily pushed past Cullen and through the door.

“No comments, please,” Alistair said in a firm voice.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Cullen said, then smiled. “It sounds like you both could use a friend who understands.”

Alistair frowned, staring intently at the door through which Leliana had passed. “There’s not a single thing about the Blight that I don’t regret, save one. Knowing her. And Amell made sure he took even that away.” With a shake of his head, Alistair faced Cullen. “Or so I thought. Thank the Maker He had other plans. Or Andraste. I’d even sacrifice a boar to that wolf god of the Dalish if it turned out to be him.”

Cullen sighed and pinched his nose. “Alistair…”

“A little too blasphemous for the ex-Templar, am I?” Alistair said with a chuckle. “Don’t worry, I was joking. Mostly. I’ll let you know if I get accosted by any furry divinities.”

“Thank you, that’s exactly what I wanted to picture,” Cullen groaned.

Punching him lightly in the arm, Alistair said, “You weren’t always so uptight. I remember, you know.” He tapped the side of his nose. “You had a mischievous streak in you when we were young.”

“Young and stupid,” Cullen said with a reluctant grin.

Putting a stern look on his face, Alistair put his hands on his hips and posed. “No kitchen was safe from us, especially in the middle of the night.”

With a snort, Cullen looked him up and down. “That bottomless pit you call a stomach kept waking me up at night with its growling. Besides, an invasion of the kitchen was an excellent practical application of the tactical lessons we were taught.”

Alistair grinned. “And more suitable for nocturnal activities than some others I could name, according to you.”

“Alistair.” Reaching up to rub his forehead, Cullen sighed. “You’re certainly more forthright than when we were younger,” he finally observed dryly.

“I try,” Alistair said as his grin widened. “So, since we’re talking about me being nosy--”

“Were we?” Cullen asked.

“We were. What was in that report you showed Lel?” He made as if to reach for it, but Cullen folded it and tucked it away.

“Not your concern, Warden Alistair,” he said, tone part-teasing but also part-serious.

Alistair made a face at him. “Inquisition business, eh? Fair enough. I’m an ally, not a member. I envy you, you know.”
“Oh?” Cullen tilted his head. “Whatever for this time?”

“What do you mean, this time?” Alistair protested.

“Just answer the question,” Cullen told him with a smirk. He had to admit that the banter with Alistair was a good distraction from the earlier conversation, and he hoped it was the same for Alistair. “You’re the one who brought it up, anyway.”

Crossing his arms across his chest in a way that reminded Cullen of their shared Templar training, Alistair said, “Fair enough. I just meant I envy you your part in this. I was forced to be a Templar, as you know, but I muddled my way through until Duncan took pity on me. I enjoyed being a Warden, at least, until I met Amell. Now, though? Now I’m looking in the teeth of the Wardens being as much a danger to Thedas as the very Magister that inflicted the Blight upon us in the first place.” His hand clenched in a fist as his shoulders grew tense. “At least you’re part of something that’s fighting him. My side? No, they’re plunging headlong into their own destruction and spitting on their own legacy all the while.”

Cullen’s hand shot out to grip Alistair’s shoulder tightly. “It won’t get that far,” he promised. “The Inquisition won’t let that happen.”

After a few tense moments, Alistair released his breath explosively. “But it won’t be the Wardens who save themselves,” he said. “And that hurts. More than I’d like to admit, it hurts.”

“I wouldn’t say that. That it won’t be the Wardens.” Cullen nudged Alistair with a little grin. “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“True,” Alistair mused. “And it’s not like they’ve corrupted Weisshaupt. I suppose as long as we prevent the whole demon army business and trounce Corypheus like the blighter he is, the Wardens will still be around to fight the next Archdemon.”

“An ambitious man, I see,” Cullen said with a half-grin.

Giving Cullen a subtle wink, Alistair said, “Ambitious times, my friend. And ambitious times call for ambitious men.”

A little smile came to Cullen’s face. “Or maybe just the right man,” he murmured.

His friend gave him a shrewd glance. “Anyone in particular on your mind, hmm?”

“What?” The question caught Cullen by surprise, and he felt his ears heat. There had been, but it certainly didn’t warrant that tone from Alistair… did it? “No. No, of course not.” He hastened towards the door. “I’m going to talk to Leliana about that report.”

“Right, no one at all. I totally believe you,” Alistair called after him. The door cut off his chuckle, and Cullen paused to lean against it and regain his composure as best he could. Finally he looked around the roost and spotted Leliana and Charter standing next to her map on the table and pushed himself forward to join them.

“You are certain it was he?” Leliana asked.

Charter nodded. “One of our agents was able to get close enough to listen to the servants gossip. That name was used several times to refer to someone in the retinue. Lord Pavus.”

Well, that got Cullen’s attention faster than almost anything else would have. “Not just any Magister, then,” he said. “My report didn’t have a name.”
“No, Commander,” Charter said with a nod. “We didn’t want to trust the name to paper, considering…”

“Considering who our Inquisitor is, yes,” Cullen said with a nod. “A good decision, that. So a group of Magisters is coming to Skyhold. When will they arrive?”

Leliana grabbed the measuring line next to her map, consulting the report as she worked her way from the position in there to Skyhold. “A month, at the absolute earliest, and that’s if they don’t run into weather or giants,” she said. “My agents can move much more quickly than a caravan of dignitaries, after all, and the ravens can move even faster than them.”

Cullen frowned, brow knotting in thought. “We’ll be in the Western Approach by then, laying siege to Adamant, or making our way back if it’s a short siege.”

“Josephine can greet them on behalf of the Inquisition,” Leliana told him. “That, at least, we do not have to worry about, though we will need to make sure there are plenty of mages here in Skyhold when they arrive.”

“It’s a fairly sizable retinue coming from the Imperium,” Cullen said with a frown. “I don’t know if we can spare enough soldiers or mages to leave here to create a proper impression of the Inquisition’s force.”

"There are ways to give the semblance without needing the reality," Leliana assured him. "A few stable hands and servants in the right uniforms and livery, and it will appear we are at full strength regardless of how many actually know what to do with a sword."

Conceding the point, Cullen scrutinized the map and sighed. “Well, hopefully it will take longer than a month for them to arrive.”

“There are ways to delay them without tipping our hand,” Charter said. "They might be able to recover from a broken wheel more quickly than most, but a well-timed avalanche in a mountain pass could hold them up for a week or two, or force them to find another way."

"And Josephine is not without resources, either," Leliana noted with a smile. "She could approach key allies in their path and suggest all sorts of ways to give the ambassadors from the Imperium a welcome worthy of their status. And a proper Orlesian fete can take up to a week, if not more."

Cullen chuckled as he thought about that. “All excellent ideas. I knew the Inquisition could rely upon you. Let's plan on that. I would feel much better if they did not arrive while we were away.” And I likely won’t be the only one to feel that way. “When is the Inquisitor expected back, according to your birds?”

“Tomorrow,” Leliana said, still frowning at the map.

Tomorrow. For a brief instant, it felt like an eternity, and in the next instant, Cullen felt total confusion at that knee-jerk reaction. Forcing himself to nod briskly, he headed towards the stairs. "Then you go brief Josephine on the situation while I get back to readying the troops. The trebuchets needs to be calibrated."

“Again?” Leliana asked in a bland voice.

“Yes, again,” he said irritably as he looked back at her. “One frayed rope could mean–” He paused when he saw the subtle twitch of her lips. “A siege is not a jaunt in the park,” he muttered as he stomped down the stairs. “I’ll send a report in the morning.”
"As long as you sleep before you send it," she called after him.

He frowned as he moved through the library, since he’d hoped no one had noticed the sparseness of his sleeping hours. Most of it he blamed on lyrium withdrawal and the upcoming deployment to Adamant, but he had to admit that that wasn’t the only reason. His bed seemed awfully lonely of late, and that one morning of waking up in the Inquisitor's bed with the mattress still warm next to him hadn’t exactly helped - especially given the nature of the dream which had left him both aroused and bewildered and even a trifle guilty. He slowed as he passed the now empty niche where Dorian had once set up shop in the library, Mailani’s teasing once more echoing in his mind.

Little remained of Dorian in the niche now, of course. They’d moved everything but the chair to the Inquisitor’s quarters after Mailani’s portrait had been transferred to the hall. Yet just the mere sight of that plush, lonely chair tucked away in the corner of the library also reminded him of twinkling grey eyes and a curl of a mustache. He found himself smiling a bit wistfully at the thought, realizing just how much he’d missed Dorian’s presence in Skyhold over the past weeks. Though the loss of Mailani had left a hole in his life, it was no longer the aching wound it had once been, and his growing friendship with Dorian exemplified his return to normalcy in a fashion that felt… right. In addition to being a friend, Dorian had also become something more: a shoulder Cullen could lean on when needed, and Cullen had precious few of those.

And then, of course, there was that dream, still as vivid in his mind as when he had awakened with a warm emptiness in the bed next to him.

After a few moments, he realized he was just standing and staring while there was work to be done. When a quick, guilty look around him showed that thankfully no one seemed to have noticed, he straightened and set into motion again. He could let his mind wander when he was in bed. Now was not the time for woolgathering.

He had trebuchets to calibrate.

For the next few hours, Cullen traversed the expanse of Skyhold and the surrounding country several times over. Nothing was spared his attention, from the newest recruits to the grizzled veterans. The push to Adamant was going to be their first decisive blow against Corypheus since Haven's fall, and Cullen knew that more than a few of those in the Inquisition saw this as a way to get a bit of personal revenge against the mad Magister for the devastation he'd wrought.

As he worked his way through the ranks, sending scouts and soldiers alike scattering to get the last few pieces in place as he did so, he lost track of time. Even when the sun went down, he only paused long enough to get a lantern before setting back to work. It was only when everything was in place to his satisfaction that he headed back to his office, more than ready for his bed.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to his quarters, however, a voice whispered to him from a nearby shadowed niche. "Psst. Hey, Commander."

Cullen frowned and turned to the source of the sound, stepping towards it as he raised his lantern. "Bull? Is that you?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep it quiet, would ya?" The large man stepped out of the shadows, looming larger in the night than during the day. Reaching out, he took the lantern from Cullen and blew it out, leaving the area dark around them. "It's time to skulk."

Cullen's eyebrows rose. "Skulk? You want to skulk? You're starting to sound like Alistair."
Bull laughed softly. "He's an okay guy. Come on."

As Bull turned and headed towards a side door to the main building, Cullen hurried to catch up with him, his mind waking up from its pre-slumber stupor. "Wait, Bull. You were with Dor-- the Inquisitor. Is he here?"

Bull nodded as he held open the door and gestured Cullen through. "We got back a couple of hours ago. Josephine and Leliana pulled the boss into that fancy bedroom next to the throne for some sort of meeting right away. I tried to find you then, but couldn't track you down."

Muttering an oath, Cullen picked up his pace. "Where is he? The Inquisitor, I mean. Is he still there?"

"Josephine and Leliana left, but he didn't. Hawke went in for a while, but Varric lured him out when Cole started to panic."

"Maker," Cullen breathed.

"Yeah, it wasn't a pretty sight. I figure the boss needs a friend right now, and you came to mind, so I staked out your office."

"How long--"

"Was I waiting for you?" Bull finished for him, then shrugged. "Not long. Hopefully Varric's kept Hawke occupied, but the faster we move, the better."

"Agreed," Cullen said shortly. Despite his wariness concerning Cole, he remembered the last time the spirit-man had warned him about Hawke's predatory instincts when it came to Dorian, and knew he could trust Cole on that matter implicitly.

By that point, they'd reached one of the side doors for the main hall, and Bull eased it open to peek out. "Right," he said with a grunt. "I can see them arguing in front of the fire, but Varric's made sure Hawke's back is towards us. I'll stand and loom so it's harder to see you, but I'd still move fast if I were you."

Cullen didn't need any further encouragement. As soon as Bull stepped into the hall, he did as well, moving to the Inquisitor's bedroom with a quick step. As he shut the door behind him, he opened his mouth to call out, but paused when a faint sound reached his ears. Pushing away from the door, he stepped further into the room, trying to discern the nature of what he heard.

His eyes widened when he recognized the faint strains of music drifting in the air, played upon a string instrument of some kind. It wasn’t, perhaps, as polished as some of the bards who had passed through Skyhold, but it was lovely nonetheless, and held a sense of heartache that woke an echo of pain in Cullen. He suddenly recalled the small mandolin which had sat in Dorian's nook in the library, and his steps hurried as worry overcame him once more.

When he finally reached the top of the stairs, he had to strain to find Dorian amidst the shadows. There was no candle lit, so the only light to go by was the moonlight streaming in through the window. The first glint he saw proved to be a buckle from Dorian’s outfit, but it had been flung over the side of the couch near the stairs. It wasn’t until the music stopped and he heard the slosh of liquid in glass, then saw the moonlight dance on the bottle, that he saw Dorian sitting on the balcony. The same light also glowed on the sides of several other bottles littered on the ground around him, several tipped over on their sides.

“Dorian,” he breathed, then hurried over.
As he moved, Dorian set the bottle down and began to pluck at the mandolin once more. He sang as he played, so softly that Cullen couldn’t even hear it until he was very close. As he stepped out onto the balcony, the music stopped once more, but this time Dorian just stared blindly into the distance, face void of expression.

Hesitantly, Cullen laid his hand on the other man’s shoulder and whispered his name. Dorian started, nearly dropping his mandolin as he kicked one of the bottles off the balcony. “Oh dear,” he said. “I do hope that doesn’t ruin anyone’s evening.” When a curse rose from below, he tilted his head. “Ah. One more sin on my head. Or… well, I suppose my foot.” He turned to look up at Cullen, gaze bleary. “Is that you, Commander? How charming to see you. Would you--” He paused for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Would you care to join in my celebration?”

Cullen frowned. Dorian’s bright smile held the brittleness of a droplet of ice, and the dark circles under his eyes spoke of nothing to do with celebrating. “Are you all right?” he asked softly.

“I? Never better!” Dorian said brightly. “Why, I learned that I will be seeing my father soon. Isn’t that wonderful? He can finally put his arms on my shoulders and tell me how very proud of his son he is. I’m sure he’ll tell me… tell me how clever I was to infiltrate a powerful southern operation, or congratulate me on… on scheming my way to the top.” As Dorian spoke, his inebriation became more pronounced, his words slurring as he continued, “I guarantee you he’ll im--imply that power should never have been… been trusted to an elf anyway, and only a member of a House of the Magisterium will be able to deal appra--appro--appro--” He finally paused, staring at Cullen for a long moment before he closed his eyes and sighed heavily. “My father’s coming.”

“I gathered.” Gently Cullen reached down and extracted the mandolin from Dorian’s grasp, setting it to lean against the wall. Taking both of Dorian’s hands, he pulled the man to his feet. “Steady now,” he said as Dorian almost fell into him. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Ha!” Dorian said, then laughed as if Cullen had said something uproariously funny. “Bed. Yes. Oh, yes, that’s exactly... ah, exactly what Father will say.” Reaching up to tap the side of his nose and missing, Dorian glared at his hand suspiciously for a moment, then tried to take a step towards the door.

When he stumbled and kicked another bottle off the balcony, Cullen quickly swooped in and tugged one of Dorian’s arms over his shoulders. Ignoring the shouted curse from below as the bottle landed, he steered Dorian inside. “I think someone needs some tea,” he said with a chuckle.

“Tea? No, no, no, not tea. I think I had one bottle left. Besides, it did tell me to serve myself. Or at least one of them did.” He tried to turn to look behind them, almost knocking Cullen over. They were saved by the desk, but for a moment, Cullen found himself pinned between wood and mage.

“You got into the Ritewine?” Cullen asked, straining to right them. He didn’t want to push too hard with Dorian in his current state, or he might inadvertently knock the man over. “I thought Alistair warned you it tasted worse than horse piss.”

“Which makes it the perfect...the perfect wine for a pissy mood,” Dorian said, letting out a groan as he let his head fall forward to land in the crook of Cullen’s neck and shoulder. “I don’t suppose we can make it all go away? My father coming, or me being the Inquisitor, or the whole… the whole Corypheus thing? That would be ever so lovely.”

The hot blast of Dorian’s breath on his neck made Cullen acutely aware of how very close they were. For a few moments he tried to get his hands situated in a way that wouldn’t be scandalous, then finally gave up. “Ah... Can you perhaps push yourself up a bit?”
“When the world stops its infernal spinning,” Dorian replied in a dull tone.

Finally getting his feet under him, Cullen managed to lift Dorian enough that he could set himself under the man’s arm and get him moving forward again. “I think it might stop doing that when you’re in bed,” he said in a light tone. “Come on, let’s go.”

“It’s not even fair,” Dorian complained. “Father will simply assume I’ve claimed the most handsome man in Skyhold for my bed, and you’ve never even been near it. Well. Not in the way my father would think, I mean.”

Cullen swallowed, a bit surprised at how much it pleased him that Dorian considered him handsome, then eased Dorian down onto the mattress. “Can you sit there while I go get you some tea?”

Dorian peered at him owlishly, blinking slowly. “Sit? Sit. Sit! Yes, I can sit here and do nothing. That’s simple enough, I suppose, even for a failure like myself.”

“Don’t say that,” Cullen said, a knee-jerk response as soon as the words left Dorian’s lips.

“Oh, that scowl you’re wearing,” Dorian said with laugh as he reached up to tap the furrowed skin between Cullen’s eyebrows. “So very fierce, Commander. I would almost think you cared. But yes, a failure, at least as far as my father is concerned. I’m not Archon. I’m not a First Enchanter. I was caught fuck…fucking my way through the entire workforce of some of the seedier all-male brothels in Minrathous. Oh, and of course I had the audaci…the audacity to tell him no when he wanted to scramble my brain. What else can I… can I be?” His voice trailed away as he stared into Cullen’s eyes. “I tried so very hard, you see, but I was never good enough.”

Grateful that it was himself who had found Dorian in this state, and not a predator like Hawke, Cullen crouched in front of Dorian and took his hands. “Listen to me, Dorian,” he said in a firm tone. “You’re not a failure, and you are free to ignore your father as much as he ignored you.”

Dorian shook his head. “We’re far too much alike to be able to ignore each other. I’ve seen his best and I’ve seen his worst, and I know we’re not done with each other, not entirely.” He fell silent for a long moment. “And apparently there’s a woman with him. I fear that, too.”

“Your mother, perhaps?” Cullen asked.

“Or worse. Fiancée.” Dorian shuddered violently. “Just the thought of it makes me ill.”

_Fiancée._ Cullen remembered Dorian’s previous references to the marriage his family had arranged for him, and frowned. He wanted to ask more about that possibility, about what Dorian being Inquisitor meant to the Imperium, but knew this was not the best time to pursue the matter. So he kept his fretting silent. “Let me get you some tea,” Cullen offered. “Then we’ll talk, all right? I don’t want you to go to sleep like this. Maker knows what size your head would be.”

Dorian stared at him for a few long moments, then nodded. “Tea. Yes, I suppose that’s better than joining juice.”

“Good man,” Cullen said with a chuckle as he rose to his feet. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

“Promises, promises, Commander,” Dorian said, giving Cullen a nonchalant wave of his hand. “We’ll just see, won’t we?”

With a quick step, Cullen raced down to the hall and hailed the nearest servant. He gave the orders quietly, trying not to let his concern for the Inquisitor show, but inevitably wondered if he was successful as he turned to head back to Dorian. In the end, it didn’t matter - only the welfare of his
friend mattered.

When he reached the bed again, he found that Dorian had slumped to his side on the mattress in an incredibly uncomfortable-looking position. Gently tugging the man upright, Cullen sat down next to him and set his arm around the man’s shoulders to steady him. “Tea’s on it’s way,” he told Dorian. “Now. Maybe we could get you ready for bed in the meantime.”

“All the buckles are off already,” Dorian told him. “Hawke helped with that. Offered to take off more. Helpful fellow, Hawke.”

Cullen didn’t like the sound of that at all, or the way an almost haunted look came to Dorian's face as he spoke. "He didn't... hurt you, did he?"

"Hurt me?" Dorian blinked and turned to look at Cullen. "No, no. No, No, he didn't hurt me. He kissed me, touched me, told me... told me I was beautiful." His brow furrowed as his gaze went blank for a moment. "I felt... I felt something when he touched me, like someone telling me what to feel, telling me that it should feel good. Telling me to enjoy it when he... when his hands..." His voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes as his face took on an almost pained expression. For a moment, one of his hands settled on his groin before quickly moving away, and Cullen felt his teeth grind together when he saw that the laces on his trousers had been yanked askew. “Like I had no... no choice but to enjoy it. That's not right, is it?"

"No." Cullen swallowed harshly, a whisper of anger awakening deep inside. "No, it's not right at all."

"I thought as... thought as much." For a long moment, Dorian kept staring past Cullen into the darkness. Abruptly a shudder ran through his body, and green light flickered in his left palm as Dorian's eyes suddenly focused on Cullen. "Commander. It is good to see you. Did I... did I tell you that yet?"

Resisting the urge to take Dorian’s hand and squeeze it, Cullen said, "No. But I am glad to see you, if a bit worried as well."  

"Oh, this? Tut tut, Commander," Dorian said. "I'll be fine. It was simply that kind of-- kind of day which needed to end with some drinking." He stared into Cullen's eyes for a long moment, and Cullen felt heat slowly rise in his ears as he found he could not look away. When Dorian shifted towards him, Cullen’s gaze dropped to consider Dorian's lips for a moment, biting the inside of his lip when Dorian's tongue emerged to moisten them.

When a knock came at the door, Cullen found himself gasping for the air he'd forgotten to breathe, and stunned at what he'd been contemplating. Besides, whatever might have happened, the moment had passed, and Dorian slumped down once more. "That would be the tea," Cullen said as he stood, feeling oddly helpless. "I'll, ah, I'll go-- I shall return." When Dorian only sighed in response, Cullen quickly moved to the door.

When he opened the door, the tea was waiting for him, and so was Bull. As the horned man thrust the tray at him, he muttered, "Varric and Hawke went downstairs to that little library when they started shouting at each other, so you're still good. How's the boss?"

"Toiling under the auspices of several bottles of Ritewine," Cullen said with a sigh.  

"Ouch. That shit is brutal." Bull grimaced and shook his head. "Got it. I'll let the redhead know, at least. Good luck." He gently pushed Cullen back, then reached in to pull the door closed, leaving Cullen blinking.
After a moment, he gave a mental shrug and headed back to the bed. Dorian still needed the tea, after all. Setting the tray on the desk, he quickly poured a cup, added a bit of sugar to sweeten it, and pressed it into Dorian's hands. "There we are. Drink it down," he said in a gentle voice.

As Dorian sipped slowly at the tea, Cullen walked to the balcony and collected the mandolin to bring inside. It was a beautiful instrument, with silver inlaid in the wood in a pattern he could only surmise was Tevinter in nature, but as he turned it over to follow the silver along the back, he came across a surprise. "Felix?" he read, his finger tracing along the detailed filigree engraved on the body.

"Hm? Oh, the mandolin? Yes." Dorian smiled at what was obviously a fond memory. "He gifted it to me when I separated from his father’s mentoring. It was his way to let me know that he was still my friend, you see, regardless of what words Alexius and I had exchanged."

"You miss him, don’t you?" Cullen asked as he gently set the mandolin on Dorian’s bureau.

"Every day. He and I used to have the most fascinating conversations. Why, I remember once when we argued all night about whether or not someone could be made into a mage if they were not born with the ability. As a mage of lesser talent than might be expected of his heritage, it weighed heavily on him.” Dorian’s face grew sad for a moment. "Where another Magister might have disowned him or adopted another heir from a close bloodline, Alexius never held it against Felix. He loved his son so very much, it didn’t matter to him that Felix wanted to be a scholar rather than a First Enchanter. I… envied that, once upon a time.”

Cullen nodded as he carefully set the mandolin on the desk where it would be safe. “Did Leliana’s agents ever track him down?”

“They found the body of Alexius, after the Venatori were done with him,” Dorian said softly, a vast sorrow on his face. “I wish… I wish it hadn’t ended where it did between us.”

Wincing at the man’s sudden melancholy, Cullen moved to the bed and sat down. Taking one of Dorian’s hands into his own, he said, “I’m sorry.”

“As am I.” Dorian’s eyebrows peaked together. “Whatever he became at the… at the end, he saved me from my… from myself. He found me in a brothel, you know.” A faint smile touched Dorian’s lips. “I propositioned him, actually. I was… I was drunk at the time. Not on Ritewine, of course. And he politely declined, and then gently… ah, gently bullied me into his carriage and took me far away. To somewhere safe.” Dorian’s gaze grew distant. “That was a good time, with him. Until…”

“Until the darkspawn,” Cullen guessed softly.

“Yes. They ruin all they… all they touch, do they not?” A gleam came to Dorian’s eyes, and he took a deep breath and closed them. “As for Felix, no. Leli--Leliana says they found nothing. He must be dead. If even Alexius couldn’t sustain him, there is… there is no hope.”

Wrapping an arm around Dorian, Cullen pulled him into an awkward embrace. Dorian’s head fell onto his be-furred shoulder, so Cullen found his other hand rising naturally to stroke the man’s head. The feel of the silken strands under his fingers made him wonder if the man’s mustache would be as soft to the touch - and then he wondered why his thoughts had even wandered in that direction.

“At least I’m not alone,” Dorian murmured. Raising his head, his grey eyes met Cullen’s gaze as a winsome little smile came to his lips. “You’re a good friend, Commander, staying with me even when I’m… when I’m so dreadfully maudlin.”

The combination of that smile and those eyes left Cullen speechless for a moment, and he cleared his
throat to buy some time to think up a response. “You’re not so dreadful,” he finally said with a dry chuckle. “Though I think your perception of my virtues is a bit clouded at the moment.”

“Are you implying that I am drunk?” Dorian demanded. “I’ll have you know, ser, that I am not so easily drunk as that miscreant of a furry-chested storyteller in the hall.”

“Perhaps not,” Cullen said, amused, “but few could drink seven bottles of Ritewine—”

“Joining juice,” Dorian corrected, waggling his finger at Cullen. “Very important detail.”

“Of ‘joining juice’ strong enough to knock a Grey Warden on their ass and not be sozzled at the end of it,” Cullen finished, then firmly patted the mattress. “So why don’t you lie down and sleep, hmm?”


“Then get under the covers while I get you a glass of water. Hopefully that will help with the headache.” Rising to his feet, Cullen moved to the ever-present water pitcher next to the wardrobe and poured out a glass. Of course, by this point, it might be as effective as pouring a cup of hot water on a snowbank in terms of any effect it would have on the hangover, but at least it would be something. By the time he brought the glass back, Dorian had managed to lie flat on the bed, but the covers were proving to be a challenge. “Here you are,” Cullen said, holding out the glass.

Dorian took it with a look of distaste. “Are you sure wine wouldn’t be better?”

“Water,” Cullen said firmly.

“You truly are an unpleasant person when I’m drunk,” Dorian complained, yet gulped the liquid down nonetheless as Cullen drew the blanket over him.

When he was done, Cullen took the glass. “Now sleep,” he told Dorian. “And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As he turned to leave, however, a hand reached out and caught his. “Wait, Commander.”

Eyebrow raised, Cullen turned back. “What is it?”

“Will you stay yet a while? I… I need a friend tonight.” Dorian’s voice was soft, but the look in his eyes was so vulnerable that Cullen was doubly grateful he was here rather than Hawke. The thought of how Hawke would take advantage of Dorian as he had those in Kirkwall made his stomach churn, and he nodded.

“Of course I’ll stay,” he said. “Let me bar the door, though.”

The grateful smile that came to Dorian’s face could only be described as poignant. “Of course. I’ll be here, I promise.” He squeezed Cullen’s hand before releasing it. “Not sure I could stumble to the desk right now, honestly.”

Cullen chuckled. “Then perhaps it is better not to try.” As he made his way to the door, a moment of uncertainty came over him. He’d heard the rumors, naturally, about the Inquisitor and himself, but they’d dissipated quickly during Dorian’s absence. If Cullen were to spend the Inquisitor’s first night back with Dorian, no matter how chaste, the rumors would start again. His hand paused on the bar, pondering if he was creating a problem where none should exist, then remembered Dorian’s pleading look. He knew Bull was right - if Hawke got wind of Dorian in this state, he would try to take advantage of it. With that in mind, he quietly slid the bar home, then turned to go back to the bed.
As he did so, he heard footsteps approach the door, and a creak as someone tried to push the door open. A soft curse reached his ears when the way was found to be barred, and he stiffened as he recognized the voice. Hawke. Standing absolutely still and almost forgetting to breathe, his ears strained as he heard a muttered epithet of “Idiotic dwarf” before the footsteps retreated.

Shaking his head and frowning, Cullen set into motion again. Hawke was clearly going to present more of a problem than they’d realized. Still, for the moment, at least, they could both rest easy.

Quietly he returned to the bed and stripped off his outer layers. Gauntlets, a breastplate, and vambraces made poor bed companions for everyone, himself included. Settling down on top of the covers on the empty side of the bed, he lay on his back and glanced at Dorian.

When he saw a gleam of wetness on the man’s cheeks, he frowned and sat up again. “Dorian?” he ventured.

“It’s always too late, isn’t it?” Dorian replied in a whisper, his eyes still closed. “I can never do anything right. Not back home, not here. Not for Father, not for my friends. I’m always too late.”

Cullen closed his eyes for a moment, wondering how he could have ever thought that Dorian was culpable in Mailani’s death. Without a word, he shifted until he could pull Dorian into a tight embrace, since it was the best comfort he had to offer at the moment. “You’re not too late,” he said softly. “We need you, Inquisitor, because of who you are and what you’ve done, not in spite of it.”

“Kind words, ser,” Dorian mumbled. “You’re too kind.” Cullen felt him relax, though, and forced himself to relax further, hoping it would help the man.

“It’s not too late for the Inquisition,” he told Dorian. “You’ll see that more clearly tomorrow.”

“Will I?” Dorian asked, but it was clear that he was falling asleep even as he spoke.

Cullen smiled, patting Dorian on the back. “Go to sleep, Dorian,” he said quietly. “Things will be better in the morning.”

His only answer was a soft snore, and Cullen suppressed a chuckle. After a few more snores, he eased Dorian slowly onto his back, hand resting on the man’s chest until Cullen was certain Dorian would remain asleep. Only then did he start to pull back, then froze as Dorian’s hand rose and grasped Cullen’s tightly.


Cullen blinked, confused by the non sequitur. Unsure exactly what to say, he finally said, “Thank you.”

For another long moment, Dorian’s hand retained its grip. Abruptly it loosened, and Dorian’s hand slipped down to rest on the blanket. “I’m sorry, Mailani,” he whispered, clearly speaking from the throes of sleep. “I’m sorry.”

Cullen’s brow furrowed as sudden tears came to his eyes. He had no words to comfort Dorian, since the man clearly felt the same guilt as Cullen himself did. Instead, he watched as Dorian’s breathing slowed and deepened, then lay back on the covers and slipped his hands beneath his head.

Thoughts whirling, he stared at the ceiling with an unblinking gaze as sleep eluded him for a long, long time.
It seemed that he only blinked, but the ceiling of the Inquisitor's room suddenly shifted into the
greyish green, ever changing sky of the Fade in that split second. Cullen blinked again, hoping in his
dreamer's logic to make himself return to the waking world, but instead it simply turned into a
different sky, the Fade's attempt at twilight. He felt something tickle his ear, and turned his head to
find that he was lying in a bed of mixed grass and flowers. Pushing himself up slowly, he looked
around as a lush forest formed around him, deep emerald green mixed with the occasional flair of
flowers.

As he brushed some stray seeds and petals from his hair, he heard a familiar voice behind him and
turned to find Dorian standing in front of a large pair of stone doors inscribed with runes. Dorian's
hands were raised, holding his staff aloft as he intoned mystical words in a deep, sonorous voice.
When he finished, he brought his staff down in an abrupt motion, and a shimmering field of energy
settled over the doors. As Cullen watched, the runes on them faded from sight, and Dorian set the
butt of his staff on the ground. “And that, as they say, is that,” he said with a weary nod.

From his right two elves formed out of the Fade mist, one of whom was Mailani and the other an
older elf with white hair and a cluster of wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. The tattoo on his face
showed that he was a Dalish elf, with the staff in his hands indicating that he was a mage as well.
"Thank you, my friend," he said, then looked to Mailani. "I feared the worst when Taven did not
return from his search for Din'an Hanin. Though you could not save him, I thank you for cleansing
the Tomb and bringing me the scroll. Too much Dalish history has been lost to Chantry lies."

"To think that such an evil had invaded this place," Mailani said with a shudder. "Thank the Creators
it is now gone."

"Due in no small part to your efforts, da'len," Hawen said, then smiled. "My trust in you is well
placed."

"Then you will return to the Plains now?" Mailani asked him.

The older elf nodded. "My clan needs me, though I do not regret the journey. Taven and those with
him deserved a true Dalish burial for their efforts to restore our past." He looked at the now obscured
doors of the Knight’s Tomb, a sad expression coming to his face. “Besides, this is the Emerald
Graves, and that tomb was built to hold our honored dead. Those of my clan who have fallen will
find good company here with the heroes of our past.”

"These doors shall not open again, Keeper Hawen," Dorian promised. "The runes would need to be
re-inscribed, and even I would not know how to do so."

Hawen smiled, though the sorrow lingered in his expression. "There are none living who do. Still,
there is one more thing I can do." Hawen turned to the doors and raised his own staff, brow
furrowing in concentration. The plants and vines around the doors seemed to shift into life, but
Cullen quickly saw that they were, in fact, growing, extending and swelling until they covered the
doors so thoroughly that it was difficult to imagine it had ever been anything but another wall of
flowering vines.

"Clever," Dorian murmured. "I don't suppose you could teach me that trick, could you?"

Hawen chuckled. "Perhaps, after we all survive the trials that are to come."
Mailani nudged Dorian with her elbow as he opened his mouth - presumably to press the issue - and the mage quickly shut it again at her glare. "May we meet again when that has come to pass," Mailani said, bowing to the elf.

"Your way is dark, daughter of clan Lavellan," Hawen said gravely. "Know that you go with my blessing."

"Ma serannas, Keeper Hawen," Mailani said, her voice trembling slightly. "Dareth shiral."

"Dareth shiral, Inquisitor," the Keeper said gravely, then turned and left.

"That's it, isn't it?" Dorian asked. "We're done here?"

Mailani shook her head as she drew her bow and turned to where the door had been. Kneeling with the bow in her hands, she said, "I will keep a vigil tonight, as a final gift to the spirits of the fallen." She glanced up at Dorian. "You may return to camp. This is my choice."

Dorian paused, then gave her a smile. "And if a giant came along and squished you into Inquisitor paste? I would never forgive myself." Kneeling next to her, he held his staff between his hands and shifted a bit until he was comfortable. "There."

She gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you, Dorian."

"Well, what in Thedas are friends for if not to commune silently with long-dead spirits now and again?" he replied. "Besides, I am a necromancer. This is practically in my job description, isn't it?"

With a little laugh, Mailani said, "That's one way to look at it." Turning to face the door, her face grew somber. "We should think of them, though. This is their night." Her eyes closed, and she bowed her head to fall into the stillness of the vigil.

"And yours," Dorian said softly. It was clear from the sorrow on his face that this was the moment when the dreaming Dorian overrode the Fade’s script to speak his own mind, and that moment made Cullen's heart ache. An odd longing came to Dorian's face as he reached out to her, though his hand drew back before he made contact. Finally he took a deep, silent breath and wrapped his hand firmly around the shaft of his staff before bowing his own head.

Cullen didn't know how long he stood there watching them before he silently moved to kneel next to Mailani. A vigil was something he could understand, and paying his respects to the dead was also a familiar concept, though the exact circumstances of this vigil remained a bit of a mystery to him. He was touched at how readily Dorian acquiesced to the solemnity of the occasion, and couldn't help but feel as if their actions demanded a like response from him, even if it was only a dream.

As he knelt and bowed his head, however, everything changed. The gentle sounds of the forest around them abruptly altered to distant shrieks and a howling wind, and suddenly his body felt weighed down by a prison of metal. With a gasp, he raised his hand to his chest, his face turning pale as he found the Sword of Mercy on his breastplate. He looked around, eyes wild, and saw piles of bodies clad in Templar armor and Circle mage robes, blood pooling grotesquely underneath them. In the next breath, the red haze of a containment spell formed around him as two demons, Desire and Rage, pushed their way up from the ground and began to circle him, whispering and taunting him with hissing laughs.

"Get away from me!" he cried, hands rising to grasp the sides of his head. Dredging up the will from deep inside, he sent a smite out in a burst of energy, shoving the demons away to collapse in stunned heaps. With a roar he rose to his feet, a sword appearing his hand, and charged them in a mixture of
fear and fury. Helpless as they were, it didn’t take long to destroy them, and he whirled in a circle for a moment as he looked for other demons to appear. When none emerged, he collapsed to the ground, shaking from the jolt of adrenaline, and fought to clear his mind. Of all places, Kinloch Hold during the Blight was never a place to which he would wish to return, and it wasn’t only the demons that were the reason why.

As if the thought had summoned him, a flicker of movement caught his attention, and Cullen looked up to see him standing on the other side of the confinement spell. A sneer twisted the massive burn scar which covered the left side of his face, and his crimson eyes seemed to glow with a cruelty which had only grown after joining the Grey Wardens, but there was no mistaking Jorath Amell. Those eyes had haunted his nightmares as often as any demon had in the years since he’d left Ferelden, and Cullen felt a shiver of helpless fear crawl down his spine as the man came to a halt on the other side of the containment spell.

"Amell," he grated.

"Cullen." The red hue of the confinement spell accentuated the man's already odd coloring, making his red hair and fiery eyes that much more sinister. After a moment where the man seemed to enjoy Cullen’s discomfiture, Amell added, "You seem to have gotten yourself into some difficulty. Are your demons hounding you more than usual today?"

"I don't need your help," he said, voice cracking as he said help. It was hard to remember that this was a dream, that he wasn't truly back in the past, but he managed. Barely. He fought to push the fear away through sheer force of will, and his anger helped to remind him that this wasn’t real, that this Amell was just a demon playing one of his memories.

"Stubborn, stubborn Templar. I wonder if you will say the same when next we meet." Amell flicked his eyes over Cullen's kneeling form with a smirk. Cullen had to admit that whatever demon was portraying Amell even had his mannerisms down perfectly. "You look good on your knees, Cullen. Maybe when I've dealt with Uldred, you can demonstrate your thanks to me from down there. I'm sure I needn't elaborate, hmm?"

Cullen swallowed, but didn't deign to reply, and Jorath laughed softly, again clearly taking pleasure in a Templar’s unease. Cullen remembered all too well what had happened when he'd pleaded for the mage's help before. The part of him which yearned for the oblivion of lyrium still wondered whether death itself would truly have been worse than the price he’d paid for the man’s 'help.'

"Nothing to say? Pity." Amell blew him a kiss, then gestured to those with him to follow him up the stairs. Only the blond elf glanced at Cullen with anything approaching interest as the party passed him. The others had the blank look that Cullen had come to associate with the control of blood magic, including Alistair, though he hadn't recognized the man at the time. "Do give your captors my regards, Cullen. I look forward to killing them later."

As he disappeared, Cullen forced himself to his feet and took a deep breath. New demons - real or simply part of the dream, it didn't matter - were already prowling the space behind him, and he had to get out of there, out of both the confinement circle and the dream entirely. Squaring his shoulders, he tightened his grip around his sword and raised it high in preparation for a strike. It hadn’t worked in the real world, but maybe in a dream...

Even as he swung, an arc of energy hit the confinement spell from outside, and it collapsed in a shower of sparks. As Cullen stumbled forward when his sword encountered no resistance, someone swooped in and caught him, drawing him upright. "Commander?"

Cullen gasped in relief as he dropped the sword to lean against Dorian. "Inquisitor." Letting the man
lead him away, he concentrated on releasing the memory, hoping that the Fade would banish Kinloch Hold to where it belonged: the vaults of his mind.

"Who was that?" Dorian asked as the landscape melted around them and became neutral once more. "The red-haired fellow."

"Jorath Amell." Cullen shuddered as he fought to catch his breath.

"That was the Hero of Ferelden?" Dorian frowned, brow contracting in concern.

With a grunt, Cullen forced himself straight and nodded. "A demon pretending to be him, at any rate."

"I hate to tell you this, Commander, but that was no demon," Dorian told him.

Cullen's eyes narrowed, then widened as he realized exactly what Dorian meant. "Amell was here? In the Fade? How?"

"Oh, not in the flesh, of course," Dorian quickly assured him. "That hasn't been done since Corypheus and his fellow priests trampled over several rules of reality to walk the Fade. No, he was here as we are here. But that doesn't make it any less dangerous, if he's as... charming as he seemed to be."

Gut instinct told Cullen to run, but his first attempt left him swaying and wobbling like a fish out of water. "We must leave," he gasped. "Can't let him find us."

"Now, now," Dorian said, arm wrapping around Cullen to steady him, "I'm not entirely helpless here, you know. Don't worry. I'm here. I'll protect you."

Cullen stared at Dorian for a moment, then sagged into him and let his head fall into the crook of Dorian's neck. "Thank you." It wasn't so much the promise itself for which he was grateful as much as it was for the reassurance that he wasn't alone. Not this time.

"That's it," Dorian said in a soothing tone as his arm pulled Cullen closer. "Just relax. That will make this easier."

Thus assured, Cullen closed his eyes. For a moment, he dimly wondered if perhaps this was yet another demon pretending to be Dorian, then dismissed the thought immediately. This was Dorian, from the clicking of his silly number of buckles to the musky scent that always seemed to linger in his hair. This was his friend, as unlikely as that friendship might seem to others, and Cullen knew, deep down, that he could trust him.

The thought brought a smile to his face, even as a tickle of magic wreathed around them and Dorian's lips touched his ear.

"Wake up."
As Dorian's eyelids fluttered open, the first thing he noticed was bright sunlight streaming in through the stained glass windows. Of course, as soon as the light hit his eyes, he squeezed them shut immediately, wincing slightly as a hideous pain started to throb in his head. Whatever had transpired the previous night had definitely involved a large quantity of alcohol, and he could only pray that there hadn’t been a commensurate amount of embarrassment to go along with it.

The second thing he noticed, however, was the feel of another body next to him and the sensation of something tickling his ear. Slowly he opened one eye and cocked his head so he could investigate, and thus found a wavy nest of dark blond hair tucked into his neck. Further down, he saw an arm flung over his waist, and a fully clothed Cullen pressed against him. Opening both eyes and striving to push the pain of his hangover aside, Dorian shifted slightly so that he could get a better view of the sleeping beauty on his arm.

Slowly it dawned on him that his own arm was wholly asleep under Cullen's weight, indicating that Cullen had taken this position some time ago. Still, it seemed a small enough price to pay to see Cullen so utterly relaxed in sleep, an image completed by the small smile on the man's face. Dorian found an answering one on his own as he watched Cullen, though his memory of the previous evening wasn't quite clear on how Cullen had ended up in bed with him.

Even if the man was tragically, and chastely, fully clothed.

Still, it seemed peaceful contemplation had a limited lifespan in the Inquisition, as Cullen’s eyes suddenly flew open and he jerked upright with a gasp. After a few bleary-eyed blinks, he turned his head and focused on Dorian, who gave him a little wave with his left hand. "Good morning, Commander," he said cheerfully.

Cullen blinked again, then squinted at the sun for a moment until he finally ran his hand through his hair. "Maker's breath," he muttered.

Afraid that this was about to go the way of almost every time he'd woken up with someone in his bed, Dorian gave a light laugh. "Oh, don't worry, your virtue is perfectly intact. Even in my inebriation, I was a model of a gentleman."

"What? No, that's not the problem," Cullen told him, dismissing the notion out of hand. "It's past dawn, and I'm well beyond late for the morning patrol reports."

A little relieved at such a pedestrian explanation rather than the outright rejection he'd half-feared, Dorian chuckled and said, "The world won't end because of you're late, Commander, not when there are so many more juicy reasons available. A little problem called Corypheus comes to mind."

Cullen gave him a withering glance, then frowned as he scrutinized Dorian a bit more closely. "Your head hurts, doesn't it?"

"Not nearly as much as my arm will when it wakes up," Dorian admitted, glancing down at the offending limb. He still couldn't even lift a finger, much less move the arm. The tingle was just beginning to hit him, and it promised to be quite the pain when it finally roared into wakefulness. "A sacrifice I was glad to make to fulfill the all-important role of your bolster."

A rueful smile came to Cullen's face as he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "I was a log for that long?" he asked. "You have my apologies." Shifting on the mattress, he took Dorian's arm
between his hands and started to rub it vigorously. "Best to get the worst of it out of the way then."

Dorian winced as the tingling surged into a wave of prickles, but endured it. It was a distraction from
the headache, at least. "So... what was I like last night?"

Cullen glanced up at him, expression pensive. "You mean before you slept? Not in a good place. You
needed a friend, and I was glad to be here."

"That's why you stayed, then?" Dorian ventured. "Because I needed a friend?" At Cullen's nod, he
let his head fall back in the pillows. "I must have been feeling fairly pathetic, then."

"I'll admit, the image of a kicked Mabari did cross my mind once or twice," Cullen teased him.

"I protest, Commander," Dorian said, aghast. "I would never resemble a Mabaaaaah-- Kaffas!"
He cut off with a gasp as suddenly the prickling turned into a raging fire. Clenching and unclenching his
hand even though he could barely feel anything but a multitude of tiny little daggers stabbing it, he
groaned, "Vishante kaffas. Festis bei umo canavarum."

"I'm not sure what you just said, but the pain is a good sign," Cullen told him, his lips twitching a bit
too obviously. "It will be over soon."

Writhing in agony, Dorian gasped, "You just--quiet, you," he gasped. "This is all your fault."

"My fault?" Cullen asked with a grin.

"You slept on it," Dorian reminded him. "And after I saved you from that little trap you were in, too.
Very uncouth."

Cullen's levity faded, and his hands stilled on Dorian's arm. "Then it was real," he murmured. "And
Amell... You still think he wasn't a demon?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I'm afraid not." Dorian tensed his hand in a claw for a moment, breath hissing through his teeth,
then relaxed it and tried to concentrate on something else. At least the sensation was slowly starting
to fade. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was a somniari. Legends say that they could walk in
the dreams of others."

"Are you one?" Cullen asked.

"Me?" Dorian gave a little laugh. "Oh, how my Father would love that. He'd view it as practically a
guarantee to be considered for Archon. Of course, he also would have been far less likely to let me
out of my breeding obligations to House Pavus if that were the case."

"But we've been sharing dreams for months now. Ever since--" He paused, obviously still finding it
difficult to actually speak the words.

Dorian nodded, understanding both Cullen's point and his reluctance. "Honestly, I blame this." He
wiggled his left hand at Cullen, sparking an obliging green glow. "Dagna described it as a key, and
in many ways, the dreams of the sleeping are little locked rooms in the Fade. I'm still not entirely sure
of the mechanism, mind, but that's my working theory. We both had very strong emotional
connections to the previous owner of the Anchor."

"But Amell didn't."

"Amell certainly didn't, no. Thus my theory on what he may be." After a last shake of his other hand,
Dorian patted Cullen's arm. "Thank you. It is sufficiently roused now."
"But why would Amell be in my dream at all?" The thought made Cullen visibly distraught, though based on what Dorian had witnessed, he couldn’t blame the man.

"That is the far more disturbing question, to my mind." Dorian tapped his lip with a finger, sifting through the information at his disposal. "This is not the first time we’ve encountered a third party in these odd little dreams of ours, if you will recall."

Cullen shuddered and shook his head. "That monstrous spider-thing, yes. I remember it quite well. But that at least was a demon. Amell is..." His voice trailed off as he shifted uncomfortably before continuing. "Amell is unscrupulous and unsettling, even evil, but I wouldn’t go so far as to call him a demon."

"No, but a man might ally with a powerful demon for nefarious purposes," Dorian pointed out. "Such a practice has an unsavory precedent in the Imperium."

"That is not reassuring," Cullen groaned, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose tightly.

With a sigh, Dorian pushed the blankets back and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "No. It isn't. Perhaps Solas will have some advice on how to ward your dreams from such visitations again. My own I can protect, but you'd need to be sleeping in the room with me if I were to apply the same protections to you. And while that has a certain direct charm, I daresay the gossipmongers of Val Royeaux would be quite happy to turn it into something far more sordid than is necessary."

Cullen winced as he followed suit, rolling out of the bed to reach for his discarded armor and mantle. "What is it about Orlesians that makes them so obnoxious?" he asked sourly, all too clearly remembering how the tongues had wagged about himself and Mailani.

Dorian chuckled as he moved to the washbasin to rinse the foul taste from his mouth. "That, I could not tell you, though I think it has as much to do with the Game as with idle minds. The Game in Minrathous is a bit more direct, in my experience. Magic and such is far more a part of the machinations there than the subtleties of rumor and malice."

As Cullen opened his mouth to retort, a loud pounding came at the door. "And there's our reminder that the real world awaits," he said with a sigh.

"I'll go see who it is," Dorian told him. "Perhaps it's someone with a headache remedy. I could certainly use one."

Idly grabbing his tunic as he walked by the couch, he slipped it over his head and let habit of magic snap all the buckles into place as he walked. He did pause a moment to let the same magic settle his hair into place, since he was sure it looked horrific and he had a reputation for impeccability to maintain. Only then did he pull the bar back and tug the door open.

"Ah. Viscount. What a pleasant surprise," he said with a bright smile to the man glowering on the other side. "I was just about to fetch some breakfast. It's deucedly early for me, I'll admit, but the sun is so very bright today."

Hawke's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're quite chipper this morning," he noted.

"Well, I spent a wonderful night of falling down drunk and passed out in bed. Thankfully I didn't make a complete fool of myself, but I am more than a bit hungry as a result." Dorian smoothed a finger over his mustache with a slow wink. "For food, before you ask."

“I wasn’t going to,” Hawke said a bit sourly, though the edge of flirtation seemed to relax his shoulders a bit. “I came by last night to see if you needed any more help, but you’d already barred
“A better alternative than making a fool of myself in the tavern,” Dorian pointed out with a laugh. “A pariah from the Imperium has that luxury. The Inquisitor does not.”

“True.” Hawke’s gaze warmed as he looked Dorian up and down. “And as much as I’d like to discuss a bit of private fool-making, I didn’t come here for that.”

“No?” Dorian asked in mock surprise, using it to cover the relief he felt. “Then why are you here?”

Hawke grunted and gestured down the hall. “Council’s been summoned,” he said drily. “Loghain is here. Apparently the Wardens are planning something rather significant at Adamant Fortress, and he thinks it’s the final push to summoning the demon army.”

Dorian stiffened. “I’ll be right there,” he said. “I just need to get my boots.”

As he hurried away, Hawke said in a tone with extra bite, “And tell Cullen he’s expected to attend.”

Dorian hid his wince as he turned and gave Hawke a grin and a wave. “That I shall.”

With a final glower, Hawke disappeared from sight, and Dorian hurried the rest of the way back to Cullen. *Kaffas, why does it have to be so complicated?*

"So we just gather the trebuchets, march the troops up to the walls, and begin firing?" Alistair said. "Sounds simple enough."

Cullen sighed and rubbed his forehead. "No, Alistair, it's not that simple," he muttered. "Maker, this is why you needed my help to raid the kitchens when we were training together."

Alistair grinned at him. "You do the strategy, I'll do the tactics. And my tactic is to tell you to formulate the strategy."

Dorian joined in on the general chuckle as Cullen glared at Alistair. "Perhaps we should start from the beginning?" Dorian suggested. "I thought the Inquisition didn’t have a sufficient number of trebuchets to try such a tactic. Did you go digging in the snow around Haven while I was gallivanting about the wilderness?"

"Not quite, Inquisitor," Josephine said. "I was able to procure a promise from Lady Seryl of Jader for the use of her sappers in this matter. The additional trebuchets have been on their way to us for some time now, and the information you garnered in the Western Approach has ensured they will arrive at Adamant shortly before Inquisition Forces reach the area."

"Clever," Dorian said with a smile. "Even in Minrathous we've heard stories about her sappers. Dwarf-trained, aren't they? Jader's not that far from Orzammar, if my recollection suffices."

"Indeed, Inquisitor," Cullen said. "And they will be especially useful against Adamant Fortress."

"The Commander is correct," Loghain said, leaning over the table to spread out some large pieces of paper. While he set some markers on it, he continued, "Adamant is a formidable example of a Fortress from its Age, but it was not built to withstand modern siege equipment. With the help of the trebuchets, we will be able to overcome some rather severe disadvantages."

"Oh, I don't like the sound of that," Dorian noted. "What exactly are we looking at, then?"
Cullen and Loghain exchanged a glance before Cullen conceded to the older man with a nod. "The battle won't be easy," Loghain said grimly as he straightened. "The Wardens outnumber us by a fair margin, and even without the demons in the mix, they make formidable foes. The nature of their training, among other factors, makes each of them an elite in their own right." His face turned grim. "The Inquisition forces are well trained, but if we faced the Wardens on a standard battlefield, I would advise retreat. Thankfully, they have holed up in Adamant."

"Thankfully?" Dorian's eyebrow rose. "I thought the side who had their own fortress usually has the advantage."

"It means that we have more control over the encounter than we would on a straight out head-to-head battle in the open," Cullen explained. "It will be tough, but with sappers and trebuchets, we have a chance to use the capabilities of our own specialized forces to counter their advantage of numbers. Especially given these." He tapped the papers Loghain had spread out.

Dorian bent over the table, grabbing one corner as his eyes scanned the paper, eyebrows rising as he realized what he was looking at. "These are plans for Adamant, aren't they? Where did you find these?"

"I prefer to think of them as maps, Inquisitor," Loghain told him with a slight smile. "Although your Spymaster did aid me in acquiring them." He looked to Leliana. "You have my thanks."

Leliana inclined her head. "All for a good cause, Teyrn."

Loghain made a curt gesture with his hand. "I no longer have any claim to that title," he said. "I am a Warden, and I will be a Warden until the day I die, whenever that day may be." He surveyed those around the table with narrowed eyes, the weight of his gaze sufficient to stiffen their spines. "And I will not stand by while my fellow Wardens kill each other at the behest of the cause of the very Blight we are tasked to fight against."

"Damn right," Alistair said with a firm nod. "If this Coryphilus thinks he can use the Wardens as his pawns, then it's time to show him why darkspawn fear to show their faces above ground."

A silence fell around the table before Dorian finally asked, "You've been spending time with Sera, haven't you, Warden Alistair?"

Alistair coughed and rubbed his neck as the mood in the room lightened. "Oh. Ah. Sorry. That sort of ruined the moment, didn't it?"

Loghain smiled and chuckled. "Actually, you reminded me of someone else for a moment, though he was quite a bit younger than you at the time."

A sorrowful expression came to Alistair's face. "Yes, Maker keep his soul." Shaking his head, he laid his hand on the map of Adamant. "You know, Loghain, you really should see someone about this little obsession of yours. Your quarters are simply festooned with maps of all sorts. I swear there's even one for the Deep Roads down there, with each cluster of darkspawn carefully marked in varying shades of ick."

"I like to be prepared," Loghain said.

"Prepared, he calls it," Alistair said with a grin, though he subsided as Loghain gave him a look. "Right. Sorry. What were we talking about?"

"You were explaining how even with sappers and trebuchets and maps, we still have a chance against a superior force in their own territory," Dorian said helpfully.
Leliana leaned down to tap one of the markers Loghain had set into place. "With the help of Warden Loghain, we've located areas within Adamant Fortress which will serve as perfect chokepoints."

"Meaning?" Dorian asked. "Sadly my education on military matters is mostly through rather pompous asses pontificating upon their own past glory."

A faint smile came to Loghain's face, though it was Cullen who answered. "Meaning that while our troops draw the attention of the greater part of their forces, a small, mobile force can infiltrate the castle and move to confront Warden-Commander Clarel. The choke points mean that the small force can control the battles as they move through Adamant, and not get overwhelmed by superior numbers."

"And by a small, mobile force, I assume you mean me?" Dorian asked in a resigned tone, though he made sure to add a grin to the words to let them know it was humor. "Lovely. I get to be dangled in front of the enemy again. I suppose I am an attractive little dish for demons."

"Not just you, of course," Hawke said, speaking for the first time. "You'll have my daggers, and that's no small aid."

"And I'll be with you," Alistair added. "We know that the mages are all creatures of Corypheus, but Loghain and I hope that a fellow Warden will be able to persuade some of the other Wardens to lay down their arms, even if they won't join our side. The goal is to save the Wardens, after all, not obliterate them."

"The goal is to prevent a demon army from sweeping across the whole of Thedas," Hawke said harshly. "Let's not forget that. Saving the Wardens is all well and good, but if it comes down to a choice between them and Thedas, I'm afraid you'll find me no longer a supporter."

Alistair's face darkened as he opened his mouth to respond, but Loghain reached over and set his hand on Alistair's arm. Gaze set on Hawke, Loghain said quietly, "I was once in a situation where I had to choose the good of Ferelden over the good of those who I thought could not be saved. There will never be a day in which I do not regret my decision, yet I cannot say that I would change it, based on what I knew at the time. Take care to ensure that you know everything about a situation before you condemn people to their deaths, or your sleep will be as restless as mine for the remainder of your life."

Hawke stiffened, but didn't respond directly to Loghain's words. Instead, he turned to look at Dorian, head canted at an angry angle as he said, "We've gotten a bit off topic here. Who are you going to take with you into Adamant?"

Dorian pondered that for a few moments. "I think taking Solas with us would be ideal," he mused. "For all that he has an absolutely deplorable sense of fashion, his knowledge where demons are concerned is formidable. Surely that expertise can be of use to us on this mission. Of course, I'd still like to have a wall of muscle between my poor, delicate body and the demons, so Bull seems to be an obvious choice as well. Other than those two..." He tapped his chin thoughtfully, pondering the matter.

"Perhaps Blackwall?" Josephine suggested. "He is a Grey Warden, after all."

Loghain and Alistair exchanged an odd little glance before Loghain said, "I think it better he remain with the Inquisition troops. I'd prefer that someone with his knowledge of Warden tactics be available behind the lines for referral."

"But won’t you be with us?" Cullen asked, taken aback.
“For the initial part of the attack, yes, but I intend to also enter Adamant, though not with the
Inquisitor. My hope is that if I am alone and not with Inquisition forces, more of my brethren will be
willing to listen to me and lay down their arms.”

“Or kill you outright, since you’ll be alone,” Dorian pointed out. “They did try to kill Alistair, after
all.”

“That is a risk,” Loghain said with a grim nod. “But it is one I choose to take upon myself. Having
Blackwall remain with the troops will at least leave someone in Warden armor with the main body of
troops.”

An odd way to phrase it, Dorian noted, but shrugged and tapped his chin thoughtfully once more. “I
should probably bring someone sneaky. Perhaps—”

“Oh, Maker, you’re going to suggest the dwarf, aren’t you?” Hawke groaned.

“What is wrong with Varric?” Dorian asked. “Besides, I owe him money. He’ll take extra care to
ensure I emerge from the whole thing unscathed.”

"What about the knife-ear girl, or the ghost?" Hawke suggested. "Anyone but Varric."

Dorian felt the others bristle, but kept the hint of a smile on his face as he kept his attention on
Hawke. "While I adore Sera to little pieces, I don't think taking her into a situation which may
require diplomacy is best suited to her nature," Dorian said delicately. "And Cole, well..." A little
sigh escaped Dorian. "He's having a difficult time with this business. Wardens are supposed to help
people, and yet they aren't. It's a bit too confusing for him. Besides, we already have you if we need
death dealt by dagger. Best stick with Varric for death from afar, I think."

Hawke glowered at Dorian, but it was clear he didn’t really have an objection beyond personal
preference. “Fine. Have it your way. And when he writes the story about how we saved the world
from the perils of a demon army, don’t come crying to me when he gets all the details wrong and
makes you look like an arse.”

Now that was truly a fascinating remark, and Dorian considered Hawke silently as several thoughts
ran through his head in quick succession.

“That crossbow of his will come in handy, though,” Alistair noted. “And if we’re going to have
good control of the choke points, having an archer there with a lot of grenades at the ready is never a
bad idea.”

more than that, and we’ll end up tripping over each other when it matters the most.” He looked
around the table, then down at the maps of Adamant again. “Commander, work with Loghain and
Leliana on a final strategy and path through Adamant.”

“Yes, Inquisitor,” Cullen said. “We’ll need to pick the path that ensures you don’t end up too
exposed to our activities from the walls, either. It wouldn’t do for you to get brained by one our own
boulders.”

“Excellent point, Commander. I’d rather like to keep my mind where it is at present.” He tapped his
temple with a wink at Cullen, then turned to Josephine. “I presume you’ve already arranged a lovely
thank you of some sort for Lady Seryl, but do let me know if you need anything from me in
particular.”

Josephine smiled at him. “Of course, Inquisitor. I shall consider the matter.”
“Leliana, you… well, I certainly don’t need to tell you what to do,” Dorian said with a florid bow.

“Actually, I’d like to steal her away for a while, if I could,” Alistair interjected. “A question came up about Wardens and stamina.”

Dorian, to his credit, didn’t bat an eye. “As you wish, though of course, Leliana is a better person to ask than I am concerning her time.”

“Inquisitor,” Hawke said, “might I have a word?”

Though he’d been half-dreading that Hawke would want a moment alone, Dorian knew he should not refuse the man a simple meeting. “Naturally, Viscount.” With a casual wave, he gestured for Hawke to follow him from the war room. As they walked down the corridor, Dorian paused at the still broken wall, ostensibly to admire the view outside Skyhold. “This truly is a beautiful place, isn’t it?”

Hawke came up to stand next to him, close enough for their bodies to touch. “I’ve found the view quite pleasant in some parts of Skyhold, yes,” he murmured.

“The gardens, I presume?”

Hawke grunted. “Let’s keep moving. I’d rather discuss this in private.”

Dorian’s brow furrowed, but he nodded. His quarters were closer, so it made sense to lead the man there, but he had to admit, privately at least, to more than a bit of discomfiture. As they entered the main part of his room, he headed to the side table. “Brandy, Viscount? It’s from Antiva, a gift from one of Josephine’s many friends there.”

“I’d prefer it if you called me Hawke,” Hawke said softly as he came to stand behind Dorian. “Or even Garrett.”

Dorian paused, then poured two stiff measures of brandy. Taking one for himself, he turned and offered the other to Hawke. “The story doesn’t really highlight your given name,” he noted.

Hawke half-smiled as he took the brandy. “No. But then, Varric’s little tale is an exercise in masterful storytelling.” As he sipped the brandy, he studied Dorian’s face. “I’d have to be blind not to notice that you’ve been avoiding me,” he finally said. “You must realize how very clumsy your accomplices are. Varric, Bull… Cullen.” The last name was said with a bit of an edge, but then he exhaled slowly. “Is it wrong to admit my thoughts stray to you often of late?”

“How could it be wrong to contemplate perfection?” Dorian asked, trying to keep the tone light.

That made Hawke chuckle, and he reached up to lightly stroke Dorian’s cheek. When Dorian flinched and turned away, Hawke’s hand balled up and fell away as his expression turned darker. “What have they told you about me? Last night you were willing enough before we were interrupted. Whatever they said must have been pretty damned convincing to drive you into Cullen’s embrace.”

Last night I was drunk, Dorian noted silently. “Well, you did tell me that you killed your last lover,” Dorian reminded him. “That’s--”

“Hard, I know,” Hawke said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “And not something I’m proud of, which I also told you, necessary or not.” With a sigh, he drained the brandy, then again met Dorian’s gaze. “Though I admit I’m a bit surprised you would go from me to Cullen. The man doesn’t have a good history with mages himself, you know. Head for head, he’s probably killed more than I have.”
Dorian’s jaw tightened, even if he couldn’t deny the facts. “He doesn’t view mages in that fashion anymore,” he said softly.

“Are you sure?” Hawke reached past Dorian to set the glass down, though he didn’t retreat after the motion. “He was a Templar that served under a Knight-Commander that called for a Right of Annulment. Do you know what that is? It means that she asked the Chantry for the legal right to kill every. Single. Mage in Kirkwall’s Circle. And Cullen went right along with it until he finally got some sense through his thick skull.”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed slightly, trying not to flinch as the ugly truth was thrown at him. “You helped the Templars yourself, or they would not have supported your bid to become Viscount,” he pointed out. “Surely that’s not a detail Varric made out of whole cloth.”

“Af”

Hawke’s tone was oddly soothing, almost hypnotizing - enough so that Dorian found himself wanting to believe. This side of Hawke was more than a bit disarming, and, he had to admit, more than a bit compelling as well. Had his relationship with Cullen still been stuck where it had been after Mailani’s death, he knew he would have been tempted to accept Hawke’s interpretation of events, including the evaluation of Cullen’s character, with few qualms.

But he knew better now.

“I do think that Cullen no longer hates mages,” Dorian said. Though not the strongest of return sallies, it was the easiest to say to Hawke’s face. The truth of the matter was that most of the reasons why Dorian trusted Cullen boiled down to experiences and conversations that he felt were rather private. “And I also think that none of us have any right to lob stones at another’s past.”

Hawke snorted. “He certainly doesn’t seem to hate your cock, at least. But then, I can understand that on a personal level.”

“No, you misunderstand,” Dorian said hastily. “We’re friends.” Good friends, who can sleep in the same bed all night and dream the same dream, but who have never gone further than a more-than-friendly massage. Yes. Friends. Certainly that’s how Cullen viewed him, and Dorian preferred to treasure that than throw it away on some foolish fantasy chasing unicorns.

“You expect me to believe that?” Hawke asked skeptically.

“You should, for it is the truth,” Dorian told him.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Hawke murmured, then leaned in and seized Dorian’s lips in a kiss.

Though he’d been half-expecting it, the suddenness of the move still caught Dorian by surprise. For an instant, a heat filled him, the same heat he remembered from that admittedly glorious night of raw, hot sex the first time he’d met Hawke. At the same time, though, something rang oddly false, and his instincts rebelled. Pressing his hand on Hawke’s chest, he tried to push Hawke away, but the man’s
arm wrapped around him and drew him closer. Raising both hands to grab Hawke’s face, Dorian finally managed to separate them, but the man’s strength was formidable.

Hawke stared at him intently for a few moments, pupils dilated and lips parted slightly. Then he laughed and unwrapped his arm from around Dorian. “Too much?”

Dorian just nodded, heart racing and mouth dry. *Too much* was not wholly accurate, but it was easier than saying that for a moment, he had simply been afraid that Hawke wouldn’t stop. And it was far, far better than admitting that, deep down, a small voice inside had whispered that it would be better if Hawke hadn’t pulled back. *That* thought still tingled, nebulous and frightening, in the back of his mind, and he tried desperately to push the notion away.

“My apologies.” Hawke again stroked Dorian’s face. “You’re far too handsome for your own good, you know.”

“And you’re very pushy,” Dorian noted.

“With you, apparently, I have to be.” Still, Hawke did step back at that point. “And as much as I’d love to pursue the matter, you do have Inquisition matters to attend to, I’m sure. We’ll be leaving in the morning, I presume? Cullen will see to that, I’m sure. He’s very efficient.” Hawke’s words dripped with biting sarcasm.

“He is, isn’t he?” Dorian said with a light tone. “And yes, there are several people I need to see.”

“I wish you farewell, then. For now.” Hawke took Dorian’s hand and pressed a sensuous kiss to each knuckle, then gave Dorian a slow wink before heading towards the door.

Only when the door closed did Dorian release his breath in an explosive gasp. His drink clattered onto the side table, unnoticed as he brought a shaking hand up to wipe away the sweat on his forehead, not sure why his reaction was so very strong, and so very negative. Hawke was a handsome man, after all, and a powerful one - two traits Dorian had found quite attractive in the past. So what was different this time?

Shaking his head, he walked to the window, absently rubbing his bare arm. “Well, for one,” he muttered under his breath, “the others weren’t murderers.” He had to admit, though, that Hawke had brought up an uncomfortable, and true, point. If he could forgive Cullen for his past - as he most certainly had, no questions asked - why couldn’t he forgive Hawke for similar sins?

His feet set to pacing back and forth as he tried to reconcile his thoughts, hands occasionally rising to press against his temples as he struggled with it. “Their past… I don’t care about their past. Yes, they’re neither of them saints, but then, neither am I. I could not throw a stone of condemnation in their direction without getting pummeled in return.” With a groan, he moved to the side table and poured himself another brandy. As he raised it to his lips, he paused, then shook his head and set it back down. “Then it’s not the past, is it? It’s the present.”

*Yes.* That was it, wasn’t it? That felt right. It was the present that presented a problem. His hands clenched and unclenched a few times before he reached out and grabbed the glass again, bringing it to his lips for a long drink.

“What’s the present, boss?”

It was truly unfortunate that Bull chose just that moment to intrude on Dorian’s thoughts, since it meant a mist of fine brandy was sprayed all over the nearest windows. As Dorian coughed and futilely tried to wipe the brandy off his clothes before it stained them, Bull came over and pounded
him a couple of times on the back.

“Sorry,” Bull said with a grin. “I thought you could hear me coming a mile away.”

“Outside I can, you lummox! Not on carpet!” Dorian snapped, then forced himself to take a deep breath. “Why are you here, Bull?”

“Cullen sent word you wanted to talk to me,” Bull told him. “Thought I’d come right away. I was a little surprised to see Hawke strolling through the hall with a smirk on his face as I came over, though. And let me tell you, the man knows how to smirk, too.”

Dorian groaned again and turned to head to the bed, where he collapsed. “Of course he is. He probably waited until everyone noticed him in the doorway before leaving the room.” He sighed and buried his face in his hands. “Maker.”

“Pretty much what I figured, yeah. He’s a preener.” Bull crossed his arms over his chest as he gave Dorian a pointed look. “So what were you talking about when I came in? What’s not the past, but the present? Aside from, you know, the present.”

“Everything,” Dorian said with a groan as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Thanks, that really narrows it down,” Bull said sarcastically. “Come on, what’s going on?”

“Hawke is… pressing his case,” Dorian explained. “And he’s not quite someone I can say no to at this point. We need him for Adamant.”

“We need Kirkwall not to fuck off after, either, you mean,” Bull said with a nod. “Times like this make strange bedfellows. Or is that part of the problem? He wants to be a different kind of bedfellow, and you don’t?”

The question forced Dorian to pull himself back from the unease into which he had spiraled while speaking with Hawke and fully focus. “Hawke has decided that he wants me,” Dorian said slowly. “And it seems my feelings on the matter have little influence over it.”

Bull grunted and nodded. “He strikes me as that type. Met a lot of those kind in Val Royeaux, though usually it was human lords and elf servants.”

Dorian’s eyes narrowed as he thought of that, the reason for his unease becoming more clear. “And in the Imperium,” he said softly.

“Well, I wasn’t going to come right out and say it,” Bull said, “but yeah. There, too. Not that you haven’t been influenced on that whole bronto in the room since coming south.”

“Yes. Mailani saw to that.” Dorian felt a wave of sweet melancholy sweep over him as the memories rose. “She could put up with me being an arrogant shem and a vain peacock, but when I tried to tell her that slavery had a purpose…” He chuckled and shook his head. “Maker. I miss her, even when her tongue was sharper than any assassin’s blade.”

Settling down on the bed next to him with a loud creak, Bull laughed. “Yeah, we had a few of those tiffs, too. She didn’t like some things she heard about the Qun at all. I wouldn’t have expected her to stay silent when you started spewing the Imperium line about that shit.”

“And she didn’t.” In fact, all of those conversations they’d had together had gained new focus and new impetus in the months following her death.
“Is that why you told Morris to make sure we pay good wages to those escaped slaves who keep trickling into Skyhold?” Bull asked shrewdly.

“I pay you good wages, don’t I?” Dorian sallied back.

“Ouch, boss. That hurts,” Bull said with a laugh. “I wasn’t a slave, though. I was a Qunari. Damn, that still feels weird to say, you know? Thinking of it in the past tense, I mean.”

“Just because you thought the shackles were what you needed doesn’t mean you didn’t have them,” Dorian pointed out. “Everyone has shackles, though the ones we put on ourselves are harder to break.”

With a nudge, Bull said, “Just now figuring that out? And what does this have to do with Hawke, anyway?”

Dorian sobered again, trying to trace his thought patterns back. “I’m not… absolutely sure,” he admitted. “Aside from the fact that he keeps pressing his case to have me.”

“You mean possess you,” Bull said seriously. “That’s what he wants to do. I see the way he watches you, and the way he went after anyone who might have enticed you away.”

“What’s this?” Dorian asked, brow furrowing.

“What, Cullen never tell you about that?” Bull asked, then grunted thoughtfully. “Wonder why. But yeah, not long after you and Hawke had your little romp, Hawke went around Skyhold and found anyone who’d spent a night with you and told them to back off. Even tried to threaten me, and we hadn’t even had sex yet.”

Dorian’s ears heated a bit at the reminder of that night, but quickly cooled as he considered what Bull had told him. “No. No, Cullen didn’t tell me that. He probably didn’t want me to worry. And he’s hardly the only one who’s been warning me to stay away from Hawke when it came to the bedroom.”

“Good advice,” Bull noted.

“It’s more than that, though,” Dorian said slowly. “Just now, when I was alone with him, I felt as if there was… something more.”

“Not following you.” Bull craned his neck so he could give Dorian a straight look. “More than what?”

“More at play than just an obsession,” Dorian said. “The difference between pushing yourself, and being pushed, if that makes any sense. It’s a… feeling, but a strong one, and I can’t shake it.”

“Yeah, well, that sounds way above my pay grade,” Bull said with an expansive shrug.

“I wish it were above mine,” Dorian complained, then sighed. “At least I don’t have to worry about it for a while. It’s not like Hawke and I will be alone for any length of time in the near future.”

“That what you wanted to talk to me about?” Bull asked. “The near future?”

Dorian nodded. “The battle is planned, and it’s time for the pieces to be set.”

“Adamant, then?” A grin came to Bull’s face. “Good. A demon’s head makes a real pretty sight when I bash it open with my maul.” He smacked a fist into his open palm for emphasis. “Can’t wait
to beat the bastards back into the Fade.”

“Be careful how hard you hit them,” Dorian said with a laugh. “You might accidentally follow after.”

“Oh, fuck, no,” Bull said vehemently, shuddering as he rose to his feet. “Just the thought of the Fade gives me the creeps. Show me a demon and I’ll kill it, but ask me to follow it home and I’ll find something else to bash instead.”

“I’m sure there’s a wall you could hit with your head somewhere,” Dorian said, amused by Bull’s reaction.


When those proved too difficult to wrangle, Dorian sighed and stood. Perhaps a long, scholarly discussion with Solas about the nature of demons and dreams would help drive those thoughts away.

Then maybe he could forget the feel of Hawke's lips on his own.
Twas the night before the attack on Adamant, and all through the camp, not a creature was stirring... save for the Commander, it seemed. Though the ladders were hung on the siege towers with care, if there was a problem, Cullen soon would be there. While soldiers and Templars nestled snug in their bedrolls, with a decisive victory their ultimate goal, the Commander in his armor, with Jim in tow, stalked through the night, restless to strike the first blow. At last Cullen admitted all was in place, and he dismissed Jim to his sleep with a sigh of ill grace.

His steps slowed as he neared his tent, weariness finally setting in now that he'd assured himself that the Inquisition forces were as ready as he could make them. Pushing through the flaps with a sigh, he slowly took off his mantle and set to work on removing his armor, placing it one piece at a time on his armor stand to be donned in the morning. As he unbuckled his breastplate, he heard a rustle as someone entered the tent, and sighed. "Report," he said as he turned, then straightened in surprise when he recognized his visitor. "Your Grace."

Hawke gave a deep chuckle as he stepped further into the tent. The laces at the throat of his tunic hung loose as if he'd dressed with haste, exposing a good portion of his upper chest. That, coupled with the studied balance in his movements and the small flask of something probably much stronger than wine, gave Cullen a hint of Hawke's state. "Commander. I see you haven't turned in for the night quite yet."

"Nor have you," Cullen observed as he heaved his breastplate over to hang on his armor stand before turning to face Hawke fully. Whatever reason had brought Hawke here, it definitely merited Cullen's full focus. Besides, Kirkwall was full of stories of Hawke in his cups, and few of them ended happily for all involved. "Is there something you needed?"

Hawke nodded and took a long drink as he moved to consult Cullen's miniature war table. "I had some thoughts on the fight at Adamant," he said as he shoved the flask into an inner pocket. "I take it we're still following Loghain's suggestion to attack at night?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Cullen moved to Hawke's side and tapped a marker resting on the hand-drawn additions to the map of the Western Approach, updated with their latest reports. "Here's our current position. The dunes keep us out of sight of those in Adamant. So far they seem ignorant of our proximity and the nature of our forces."

Reaching out, Hawke traced the distance from the first marker to the one denoting Adamant. "At the pace these trebuchets move, that means we'll need at least an hour or two to get them and the siege towers into position, won't it?"

"About that, yes. Moving them during the day would make it a bit too obvious what we're doing, so we'll use the cover of night as best we can. Vivienne and some of the Inquisition mages will use magic to obscure them further. Once they're in place..." Cullen flicked Adamant's marker onto its side. "The siege begins."

A calculating expression came to Hawke's face as he slowly righted the fallen marker. "And the Inquisitor will lead his group through the gate when it's breached?"

"That was the plan, Your Grace, yes." Cullen settled back on his heels. "I take it you have another
"The first attempt to breach the walls with ladders will be brutal, you know that," Hawke said as he straightened with care. "You'll need someone up there to lead the assault on the battlements and be the heavy hitter, but there aren’t many up to the task." Tapping his chest, he said, "I nominate myself."

Cullen's eyebrows rose. "You want to go up the ladders?" He had to admit a grudging respect for the man to even suggest it, though he wondered how much was alcohol-fueled bravado. "It's a dangerous job, and you well know it."

"I can take care of myself," Hawke said with a careless shrug. "And once I'm up there, I can tackle the worst of the dangers while I wait for the Inquisitor to catch up with me."

"If it were anyone but you saying that, I'd call them foolishly arrogant," Cullen admitted.

"But it is me saying that, so you can just call me arrogant," Hawke said with a grin.

"Perhaps not even that. I have seen you fight, Your Grace. We may have our disagreements--"

"Oh, that's putting it mildly," Hawke said with a snort.

Scratching his forehead for a moment, Cullen said, "Fair enough. I don't think we'll ever be friends, Your Grace, but we've proven in the past that we can work together effectively regardless of personal prejudice."

"Precisely, Commander." Hawke offered his hand to Cullen. "For the good of this mission, to end the threat of the demon army, and to stick it to that bastard Corypheus, I hope to do so again."

For a moment, Cullen hesitated as he searched Hawke's face, half-wondering if this were some sort of trick. Finally he nodded and grasped Hawke's forearm. "We will, Your Grace."

Abruptly Hawke pulled Cullen towards him until their faces were mere inches apart. This close, Cullen could tell just how heavily Hawke had been hitting the bottle before coming to Cullen's tent, and wondered if that was the only reason Hawke had come here at all. "Promise me," Hawke said intently, "that no matter what happens come tomorrow, you will ensure the Inquisitor stays safe."

"Such is my duty, Your Grace," Cullen said a trifle stiffly.

"I'm not asking you to do this as his Commander, Cullen," Hawke told him with an edge to his voice. "I'm asking you to do this as his friend."

The ferocious intensity of Hawke's gaze and the tightness of his grip made Cullen shift uncomfortably. "Why does that matter to you?"

"I don't need to tell you that," Hawke said, nostrils flaring ever so slightly. "I just want you to promise."

"But why?" Cullen asked. "You've never been--" He paused, unsure how to continue without insulting the man.

"Sentimental?" Hawke suggested dryly. Releasing Cullen's arm, he stepped back and crossed his arms across his chest. "Perhaps. I had little time for frivolity in Kirkwall. If it wasn't a blood mage causing trouble, then it was a power hungry noble, or the Qunari running amok, or a dwarf begging for help, or the Knight-Commander slowly going insane. I didn't have time for nice."
"That was abundantly clear, yes," Cullen muttered.

"Not that you were much help," Hawke pointed out. "To you, everything was blood magic and the only good mage was either dead or in chains. I wonder what you would have made of the Inquisitor back then."

Caught off-guard by the attack, Cullen flushed and reached up to rub the back of his neck. "Knight-Commander Meredith--"

"--was not you," Hawke interrupted. "Forget her. Own your mistakes, man. Maker knows we both committed far too many of them."

That comment gave Cullen pause, and he regarded Hawke with narrowed eyes. "You don't often admit you made any."

"I'd be a fool to believe it, though. Oh, I might swan about Kirkwall without seeming to have a care in the world, but I know what I did. I know precisely whose blood is on my hands." As he spoke, Hawke removed his gloves and tucked them into his belt, then studied his scarred hands with a glare as if he intended to cut them off. "Friends, foes, even family. It's all here, mixed together in one huge crimson stain that will never go away." With a sound of frustration, he balled them into fists and stepped closer, meeting Cullen's gaze without flinching. "And you're blind if you don't see the same thing on yours."

Cullen felt the words like a blow on his chest, almost gasping as their weight hit him hard. After a moment of silence, he wrenched his gaze away from Hawke, finding it difficult to maintain the link. "You always know precisely where to strike, don't you?"

A sneer came to Hawke's face a moment before he barked a laugh. "They don't call me the Champion because I excel at macramé and fart unicorn dust."

Crude as the comment was, it did lessen the tension between them as Cullen gave him a reluctant chuckle. "True. But what does any of that have to do with the Inquisitor?"

"Don't you see? No. No, you don't, I suppose." Hawke sighed and rubbed his jaw with one hand. "Tell me, when you exchanged your vows of love with Inquisitor Lavellan, did it help to put some of your old ghosts to rest? Knowing that someone like her saw something worthwhile in someone like you?"

Again caught by surprise, Cullen instinctively leaned back. He never would have framed his relationship with Mailani in such a way, but once Hawke had voiced it... Again, the words hit hard and true. Finally he said, "Mailani was a remarkable person." It was all he could manage given the circumstances.

"As I thought of Anders, once upon a time," Hawke said. "A man of principle, a man of honor, or so I believed. He wore his fingers to the bone in that Darktown clinic of his, helping the poor and the lost abandoned by those in power. He saw the farce of the Warden, the hypocrisy of the Templars, and the injustice of the Circles, and he rejected them all." Hawke's gaze grew distant as he spoke. "Yet he had a darkness within, one which grew stronger as the years went by, and in the end I barely recognized him."

Cullen simply stared, struck by the stark contrast between the Hawke he thought he knew and the man standing before him. It didn't excuse Hawke's actions--he doubted the man could say anything that would justify what he had done to Fenris or, worse, his own sister--but Cullen had to admit to a certain sympathy. Not enough to forgive him, perhaps, but then, had Cullen himself earned
forgiveness, or simply been gifted it?

"Was I wrong, Cullen?" Hawke abruptly asked in a choked whisper, a haunted expression coming to his face. "Was I wrong to kill Anders?"

Cullen swallowed harshly. He couldn’t deny that, at the time, he’d thought Anders’ death was more than justified given the nature of his actions. Yet Cullen was no longer the man he had been in Kirkwall, and he’d also found a love of his own, however briefly they’d been together. To even think of taking her life with his own hand, no matter the justification… After struggling with his answer for a few moments, he finally said, "Perhaps it might have been more prudent to stay your hand until--"

"--until I knew more about the situation?" Hawke’s jaw rippled. “Therein lies the rub. Loghain was right, damn him.” Hawke stared at the lantern light as it guttered for a moment, then shook his head. "Be that as it may... For a time I hoped that Dorian might come to view me as your Mailani saw you, as I had seen Anders, but I would have needed to be a man worthy of him, wouldn't I? Instead, it’s been made abundantly clear that I am not. I may not like it, but even I can see the runes writ large eventually."

And again, Cullen did not know how to respond to that - at least, not without a direct insult. He kept his silence, unsure where Hawke was going with this conversation.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since we left Skyhold, a lot of fighting with… with myself, you might say. And I realized there is some blood I don’t want on my hands after tomorrow if--” Hawke’s voice faded as he stared at his hands again, his fingers curling and relaxing. Finally he looked up and met Cullen’s gaze as he reached out and grasped the other man’s shoulder, squeezing almost to the point of pain. "This is me stepping aside, Cullen," he said, an expression coming to his face that Cullen would have considered vulnerable on anyone else. "Promise me that no harm will come to the Inquisitor, either tomorrow, or thereafter."

Cullen studied Hawke’s face for a long moment, almost hypnotized by Hawke’s stare, and finally nodded. "I promise."

Hawke's eyes closed and he let his head fall back for a moment before he abruptly released Cullen and turned away. "I'll hold you to that, Commander."

"Good," was all Cullen could say. As Hawke moved to leave, however, Cullen abruptly called out, "Hawke!"

The man paused, then half-turned to look at Cullen over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Maybe after this is all over we could get a drink," Cullen said. "It sounds like you've never told anyone your side of the story."

"No, I haven't." For a moment, that odd sense of vulnerability flashed across his face once more, but the impression quickly faded when he shook his head and grinned at Cullen. "And there's a damned good reason for that." In the next moment, even the smile vanished as he barked, "Now get some sleep, soldier! We have a battle to fight."

"Yes, Your Grace," Cullen replied automatically, saluting Hawke as he left the tent. When he was gone, Cullen collapsed onto his sleeping cot and stared at the ceiling of his tent for a long, long time. Sleep, it seemed, would not be an easy pursuit.

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The next morning, his conversation with Hawke seemed almost to be a dream. He was half-convinc ed it had been a dream, save for the fact that Hawke seemed different somehow, a difference large enough for others to notice.

“Something’s wrong with Hawke,” Varric muttered at one point as he stood next to Cullen near the trebuchets, which were in the process of getting muffled with cloth so that those in Adamant wouldn’t see glinting metal or hear creaking wood. “He’s acting almost… nice to me.”

“I take it that’s unusual?” Cullen asked with a chuckle.

“Damn right it is,” Varric grunted. “You may not have noticed, but Hawke and I had a falling out about, oh, an hour after we met.”

Cullen’s eyebrow rose. “But you were friends with him for years, I thought.”

“We had our ups and downs, sure,” Varric said. “With Hawke, the ups are really up. He helped me with my brother, didn’t ask questions when I needed something done that was a little on the shady side, and he did save Kirkwall. I might not like how he did it, but I’ll give him that.” With a frown, Varric looked across to where Hawke was talking quietly with Loghain. “But the downs? You talked with Aveline. You know how bad he could get when they happened.”

“I think I saw it a time or two myself. Remember when I first met him,” Cullen reminded him.


“Can’t have the hero look too much like a villain,” Cullen muttered.

Varric shrugged. “Something like that. Cassandra really wanted Hawke to be a hero, but… well, he’s the Champion, not a nice guy.”

“Trust me, heroes aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, either,” Cullen said darkly.

Varric glanced at Cullen for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. I got that impression after listening to Alistair talk about the Hero of Ferelden a few times. And I thought I had it rough when Hawke was in a bad mood.” He shuddered.

Looking down at Varric in surprise, Cullen said, “I didn’t realize you’d spent much time with him. Alistair, I mean.”

“Oh, not in Skyhold. Not more than a few games here and there, anyway. He’s smart enough not to gamble money with me.” Giving Cullen a subtle nudge, he said, “He’s too busy coaxing the Nightingale into song.”

A smile came to Cullen’s face. “I’m glad, honestly. They both deserve someone to be with, I think, after all they’ve been through.”

“Tell me about it,” Varric grunted.

“So how do you know Alistair so well, if not Skyhold?” Cullen asked curiously. ”You never spent much time with him in Kirkwall that I ever saw.”

Varric’s brows drew together for a moment. “Isabela hired me for a caper a year or two after Hawke and I parted ways,” he said in a quiet voice, glancing around as if to make sure no one was listening. “She had a couple of passengers who were on a daring mission, and thought I’d be up for an adventure. Guess who one of her passengers was?”
Cullen blinked. “Alistair?”

“The very same.” Varric looked around once more before he went on. “He’d gotten some interesting information and wanted to investigate. I gathered that the Wardens weren’t too happy with him at the time, but let him go as long as he brought a chaperone with him.”

After a moment’s consideration, Cullen’s eyes widened. “Loghain?”

“Precisely. It turned out to be a bit more exciting than we anticipated, but… well, the details are kind of private. Suffice it to say that the two Wardens were a lot closer at the end of the caper than they were at the beginning, and a lot more somber. It was something they both needed to experience, even if it didn’t make them happy. Damnedest thing I’ve ever seen, but there you have it.” Varric shrugged. “At any rate, by the time we got back to Orlais, they were almost acting like father and son. Not that I was surprised, considering what happened.”

“An adventure with you, Isabela, Alistair, and Loghain?” Cullen said in a musing tone. “And it hasn’t made its way into a book? They must be holding something over you.”[1]

Varric chuckled and patted Cullen’s arm. “And if they are, I’m certainly not telling you about it. Anyway, that’s how I know Alistair. And why he’s learned not to bet money in a card game against me. Mostly because he doesn’t have any after the last time we played cards together on Isabela’s ship.”

Cullen laughed. “An excellent reason, Varric.”

“Oh, Varric never has excellent reasons, just extraordinary excuses,” a new voice said from behind them.

Turning, Cullen smiled at the newcomer. “Inquisitor.”

“Sparkler,” Varric said, looking him up and down. “I see you’re well muffled.”

Dorian looked down in distaste at the cloth covering his usually bright and sparkly armor. “Loghain insisted. I feel like an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. I hope I don’t have to run while like this. I fear I’d fall over after a few steps, and then how would I protect the dignity of the Inquisition?”

“Like you always do, Sparkler: badly,” Varric said with a grin.

With a gasp, Dorian pressed his hand to his padded chest. “Are you casting aspersions upon my person, my good dwarf?”

“Hey, as long as you owe me those five sovereigns, I get to say whatever I want about you. You should have thought of that before you lost big to a writer, you know,” Varric added. “It’s a good thing you’ve got Nightingale on your side, or tales of your card woes would be told from coast to coast.”

“You’re a cruel, cruel man, Varric,” Dorian complained. “I was wondering, though, if I might borrow your conversational companion for a moment?”

“Curly? Sure.” Varric nodded to Cullen and then to Dorian once more. “You should help him cover up his armor. Or at least the part his rug doesn’t reach.”

“It’s not a rug!” Cullen insisted as Dorian laughed merrily.

“Whatever you say, Curly, whatever you say,” Varric said with a wink, then turned and strolled
away.

Cullen turned to find Dorian looking at him critically. “You are a bit shiny,” he noted. “We should get all your armored bits covered, don’t you think? Before Loghain comes over and scowls at you, too.”

“That does seem to be a particular talent of his,” Cullen noted as he looked at the sky to gauge the time, and found that sunset was almost upon them. “Let’s go to my tent. It will be getting taken down soon, I’d imagine.” Gesturing Dorian to follow, he led them there, giving a few orders here and there as they went. Once they were inside, he began rummaging through his storage chest. “What did you need, Inquisitor?”

“Hawke came and talked to me this morning,” Dorian said in a subdued tone.

Cullen’s hands froze in the act of pulling out a roll of dark cloth meant to cover his table for eating. “What did he say?”

“It was a deucedly odd conversation,” Dorian mused. “He apologized, for one. Hawke never apologizes. Said he’d pushed too hard and too fast, and wanted to let me know that he could, in fact, take no for an answer.”

“That does sound unlike him,” Cullen said as stood with the cloth in hand. “But not wholly unexpected. We had a talk last night, he and I.”

Dorian’s brows rose. “I thought you two never got along.”

“Not that you’d notice, no,” Cullen admitted. “But last night was an exception. It was almost like he was expecting something to happen during the battle.”

“To him?” Dorian asked.

Cullen paused. He hadn’t meant it in that way, but now that Dorian mentioned it… “I… Perhaps. Mostly he just wanted to emphasize my duties to me.” At Dorian’s quizzical look, Cullen explained, “He made me promise to make sure that nothing would happen to you during the battle or after.”

Dorian’s eyebrows rose. “Well, of course you wouldn’t. You’re my Commander. That’s against your job description, or some such.”

“Which I told him, but he wanted something a bit more emphatic than that.” Cullen gave a little shrug as he began to wrap the cloth around his armor. “Besides, I’d protect you regardless. I’ve broken too many promises to those I care about. I won’t break a promise to you.”

Dorian canted his head slightly as he smiled at Cullen. “Those you care about?”

“Yes,” Cullen said, a bit distracted as he tucked the cloth in on itself and tugged it here and there to muffle any sounds.

“So you care about me, then.”

Cullen glanced up at him. “You’re my friend,” Cullen said, surprised it needed to be said. “Of course I care about you.”

“I suppose I just never heard anyone say it aside from Mailani. When she wasn’t twitting me about my mustache, at least,” he added, reaching up to lightly brush his finger along said offending facial hair.
Cullen’s eyes followed the motion, then dropped to consider Dorian’s lips for a moment before he jerked them up to meet the other man’s gaze. “Why would she tease you about that?”

“Most likely she teased me about that the way she teased you about your hair,” Dorian said with a wink. “Something about the vanity of shems, or some such.”

“Ah. Right,” Cullen said with a laugh. “That does sound like her.” He pointed to his table. “Those cloths there. We can put those over my vambraces, I think.”

With a nod, Dorian retrieved one and shook it out. “Hold up your arms,” he told Cullen. “I’ll do the wrapping.”

Obediently Cullen raised his arms and waited, watching as Dorian worked at concealing the vambrace from any errant light. This close, he was able to smell the subtle musky scent of Dorian’s hair, and instinctively leaned closer. “I wonder what she would make of our friendship,” he said after a few moments. “She always was fond of calling us her new clan.”

“Yes, the Inquisition clan, I remember.” Dorian looked up at him with a twinkle in his eyes. “I wager she’d be quite pleased, if a bit surprised. I’m not the best at making new friends, in case you didn’t notice.”

“We have had some rough spots, didn’t we?” Cullen said with chuckle.

“Well, Commander, most people usually don’t shove others into walls quite as hard as you did if they’re friendly.”

Cullen ducked his head in shame at the memory. “I’m sorry for that.”

“I won’t deny I would have preferred an entirely different reason for you to press me into the nearest wall,” Dorian admitted. “But we’re certainly beyond you threatening to throw me out on my blushing buttocks, so I’d say we’ve progressed.”

“Cassandra would have kicked me to Val Royeaux and back,” Cullen groaned. “And I don’t even want to think about what Bull would have done.”

“Bull? Why Bull?” Dorian asked as he retrieved the second cloth and moved to work on Cullen’s other arm.

“Ah,” Cullen paused as a fresh whiff of scent caught his nose, and forcibly cleared his throat. “Because of how close you are.”

“Ah. There are rumors about he and I, I take it?” Dorian sighed and shook his head. “He is a good friend, though.”

“So you’re not…” Cullen started, then let his voice trail off.

“No. Or rather, only insofar as I’ve also been with Hawke. Thankfully Bull is a trifle more laid back about the whole affair,” Dorian mused as he performed his task. “He’s vigorous, certainly, but he’s also just a friend.” He smiled at Cullen. “Like you.”

Cullen swallowed, trying very hard to avoid thinking about what Dorian meant by vigorous. “Right. Like me.” The words sounded strained, and he fell silent as Dorian tucked the edge of the cloth under the end of his vambrace.

“There we are,” Dorian said with a pat of his hand. “All muffled and covered.” Stepping back, he
frowned as he looked Cullen up and down. “What about your greaves? Those are still exposed.”

The thought of Dorian kneeling in front of him to wrap something around his legs made a shiver run down Cullen’s spine, and he quickly moved back to his cot. “That will be easier to do myself, I think,” he said as he tugged the wraps from around his pillows and sat down to put them on.

“Well, at least the rug won’t need to be muffled,” Dorian noted. “It’s like having a built-in muffler.”

“It’s not a rug,” Cullen repeated between grated teeth.

“Oh. Pardon me, then.” Dorian reached out to touch the fur, twining his fingers through it as he played with it. As he did so a flicker of green awoke in his palm. “Oh, stop that,” he told it absentely. “It is softer than I expected, actually. What animal is it from again?”

Cullen stared at Dorian’s hand as it toyed with the fur, struck by how familiar the motion seemed.

“Ah, animal? Yes, um, bear. Great bear, actually.”

“Oh, good. I’ve never met a great bear I’d invite home to meet the family, and if you knew my family, you’d know what a deadly insult that was,” Dorian said with a chuckle. “I suppose there’s some sort of heroic tale to go along with the acquisition of this fur?”

Lips curving in a half-smile, Cullen said, “I was cold.”

Eyebrow rising skeptically, Dorian asked, “That’s it? You were cold?”

“Isn’t that enough?” he asked innocently.

“Oh, I see, Commander. You’re trying to tease me.” Pulling his hand away, Dorian waggled his finger at Cullen. “That won’t work, you see. I’m far too wise to your ways.”

“Are my ways so very devious?” Cullen asked with a raised eyebrow.

Dorian tilted his head as he considered Cullen. “Perhaps not, Commander. This time, at least. Who knows what the future will bring, hmm?”

Cullen’s brows drew together, the words triggering something in him. Perhaps it was because they were on the cusp of a battle, perhaps it was Hawke’s visit the previous night, or perhaps it was something else entirely. Regardless, he suddenly stood and set his hands on Dorian’s shoulders.

“Promise me you won’t do anything foolish,” he said softly.

“Foolish? Me?” Dorian asked, blinking a few times. “I didn’t realize there were alternatives.”

“Please, Inquisitor,” Cullen said earnestly. “Be cautious. The Inquisition can’t afford to lose another Inquisitor.” He hesitated, then added softly, “I can’t lose another Inquisitor.”

“Is your sense of duty so very stern, Commander?” Dorian asked mock-seriously.

“You’re my friend, Dorian,” Cullen said, using the name deliberately. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Dorian swallowed visibly, the bump of his throat dancing up and down. When he spoke, there was a slight tremor in his voice. “Ah. Well. I shall strive not to disappoint you, then.”

“Good.” Cullen squeezed Dorian’s shoulders, searching for something else to say and failing to find anything. “Good,” he repeated, then stepped back, suddenly feeling a trifle awkward.

Clearing his throat, Dorian looked around the tent. “Ah, well, I’m sure there are all sorts of little pre-
battle rituals you need to attend to. I didn’t mean to take up quite so much of your time.”

Cullen chuckled as he sat down to wrap his legs tight. “You’re always welcome in my tent, Inquisitor,” Cullen told him. The moment the words left his lips and Dorian’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, Cullen groaned and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “I meant-- I didn’t mean--”

“Don’t worry, Commander,” Dorian assured him. “I won’t presume too much from those fascinating words. I should probably go myself. I promised Vivienne my aid with maintaining the illusion spells to hide us from sharp eyes in Adamant. It will be good to speak with her. She is an erudite woman, after all, and a most stimulating conversationalist.”

“As opposed to me,” Cullen asked with a grin, the blush mostly gone.

“Oh, it’s not your conversation I value the most, Commander,” Dorian said with a grin which could only be called wicked.

“Maker’s breath,” Cullen groaned as the heat returned to his cheeks.

Laughing lightly, Dorian bowed elegantly to Cullen. “Until later, my friend. I look forward to comparing notes about the battle. I may not be as strategically sound as you, but I like to think my tactical knowledge is less abysmal.”

Cullen smiled at that, remembering some of their conversations over the last few months. “I’d rate it quite a bit above abysmal, but we can discuss that later.” He met Dorian’s gaze as he turned serious. “Take care, Inquisitor.”

“And you, Commander,” Dorian said softly. Without another word, he turned and left the tent.

With a sigh, Cullen finished wrapping his legs, then stood. He still had a battle to fight - and win.

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The moment between his first shouted order and when the first barrage of stone hit the walls of Adamant seemed almost silent in Cullen’s head. The rush of blood and the beating of his heart: those far outweighed the whistling of the wind and the creak of the trebuchets. He craned his head to watch the boulders fly through the air with lethal grace, lips parted as he waited for the planning of the last few weeks to finally make the move from markers on a table to boots on the ground.

Once those stones hit the walls of Adamant, however, his senses woke with a vengeance. Even as the cheer from his soldiers rose into the air at the first real blow struck at the enemy, he barked orders, goading the troops into motion. “We haven’t won the battle yet! Get moving or you won’t get to celebrate!” As they quickly fell into place and started their advance on Adamant, Cullen paced through the ranks to make sure all parts of the Inquisition Forces were in place as needed, using his own shield when necessary to defend against the missiles of the foes within the fortress.

As the ladders began to rise and the rams closed in on the ancient gates, he finally fell back and studied the distribution of his troops from a more distant vantage point. He winced when he saw the first of his troops knocked from the top of the walls, but knew it was only to be expected.

“No commander likes to watch his troops perish,” a quiet voice said from one side, and Cullen turned to find Warden Loghain standing nearby. “I’ve been in my share of battles, and I’ve my share of regrets, yet it’s still a punch in the gut to see a soldier fall, never to rise.”

Cullen gave Loghain a measuring glance. Loghain's reputation, at its most charitable, could best be described as mixed, with the source of information being a large determinant of whether it was good
or bad. For the moment, he reserved his judgment, since Cullen knew he was the last man who should judge another for questionable decisions in his former life. "That's a good way to describe it."

Loghain's face was pensive as his gaze swept the battle. "I daresay neither of us are the sort to sit at our ease under a pavilion on a hill during battle. We were trained to fight, to feel the rhythm of the battle in our swords, not through messengers." He glanced at Cullen, grey eyes keen. "And we've both overcome our fair share of personally treasured prejudice, haven't we? You command on behalf of a mage, and I fight to save as many as I can amongst my Orlesian brethren. Fate has an odd way about her sometimes."

"That she does, Warden," Cullen said with a dry chuckle, then turned to look ahead as the first sound of the ram striking the gate echoed across the battlefield. "I should go."

"As should I," Loghain said with a nod, then secured his helm into place. "Each one of those demons means a brother or sister of mine has been murdered. I can think of no greater reason to strike them down with a vengeance. Good luck, Commander Cullen."

"And you, Warden Loghain," Cullen responded, already setting into motion towards the gate with his shield held high to deflect the stones of the defenders above. He wanted to be there when Dorian and the others passed through to begin their targeted infiltration.

When the gates finally burst open, he heard the shout from above ordering the Wardens to fall back. Rushing through the remnants of the gate, he sought out Dorian, easy to spot by now that his buckles had been freed to shine in the torchlight, and hurried towards him. "All right, Inquisitor, you have your way in. Best make use of it. We'll keep the main host of demons occupied for as long as we can."

Dorian gave him a wry grin. "There’s a worrying lack of specificity there, Commander. I do hope you’re not trying to get me worried, are you?"

Cullen flushed slightly. "There are more of them than I was hoping, Inquisitor. Loghain’s numbers don’t quite match up, so either there are more mage Wardens than we suspected, or they learned how to summon more demons than one per dead Warden. Either way, it’s not good."

"You don’t say?" Dorian drawled. "I’ll keep that in mind for when I need more blindingly obvious information." Face growing serious, he said, "Do what you can, Commander. I trust you to keep me as safe as you can. That’s what friends are for, yes?"

"Yes." *Friends. Yes, one of his true, dear friends.* After a moment, he realized he was staring at Dorian and quickly straightened. "Alistair will ward you as best he can. Keep to the plan, and look for Hawke with our soldiers on the battlements. He’s assisting them until you arrive."

His words were interrupted by a scream from above, and they both turned in time to see an Inquisition soldier get tossed from the heights above by a demon. Cullen made a sound of frustration. "There’s too much resistance on the walls. Our men on the ladders can’t get a foothold. If you can clear up the enemies--"

"I plan to," Dorian said with uncommon sobriety. The earlier levity seemed to have vanished with the sight of the soldier falling to his doom, and Dorian’s face was now a mask of concentration. "You do what is necessary here, Commander, and I assure you it won’t be in vain." Turning, he barked orders to those with him and moved forward, staff already moving with a deadly purpose.

Cullen watched Dorian head deeper into Adamant with a frown, then sighed. He had his own work to do. Returning to his troops, he lost himself in the rhythm of the battle. The demons added an
inhuman factor which required faster, more risky tactics, but he was not Templar-trained for nothing, and made sure to employ the Inquisition's Templar allies with pinpoint precision.

After one particularly nasty sortie against a cluster of Pride demons, he found himself panting in recovery next to a familiar face. "Ser Barris," he said with a short nod. "Your Templars are proving their worth today."

Barris chuckled breathlessly as he gave Cullen a salute. "Tell us where you need us, and we will be there, Commander. The Templars support the Inquisition."

Cullen grasped one of the Templar's arms and nodded. "Keep watch on this quadrant. There seem to be more Pride demons here than the others."

"Yes, Commander." Barris turned and began barking orders, leaving Cullen free to go to another part of the battle.

As Cullen headed back to the gates, since that was where visibility of all the activity around Adamant was clearest, he saw a familiar figure ahead of him and increased his speed. A couple of rocks bounced off his shield, but nothing too exciting, and he reached Loghain without incident.

"Commander," Loghain greeted him. "The number of assailants on the battlements has lessened."

Cullen nodded. "Yes, I noticed that our towers and ladders aren’t getting pushed off as frequently now. It appears as if the Inquisitor is as good as his word.” At Loghain’s questioning eyebrow, he added, “I asked him to deal with some of the forces up there once he joined up with Hawke.”

With a grunt of acknowledgment, Loghain said, “Whatever my opinion of Hawke, he has proven himself a formidable fighter.” Before Cullen had a chance to ask about that peculiar way of phrasing it, he said, “This would be an excellent time for me to go into Adamant, then. There may be some Wardens I could convince to lay down their arms, especially if the tide of battle is turning against them.”

Glancing towards the shattered gates, Cullen nodded slowly. A nagging feeling of danger kept prodding him, as well as the odd encounter with Hawke in his tent the night before. Take care of the Inquisitor in case of what? The question had been nagging him ever since, deep in the recesses of his mind, and as Loghain turned to leave, Cullen abruptly reached out to set his hand on Loghain’s arm. “I’m coming with you.”

Loghain turned in surprise. “I thought--”

“They don’t need me out here,” Cullen pointed out, as much for his own benefit as Loghain’s. “Cassandra and Blackwall are here for the Inquisition forces, Knight-Commander Barris leads the Templars, and all the plans now depend on what happens inside. And…” He frowned. “I have a bad feeling about this. Call it instinct if you like, or my bump of trouble, but I just feel like something is going to happen to them.” And losing him is not an option.

For a long moment, Loghain simply stared at him, then sighed and shook his head. “Very well, Commander. But if we run into any Wardens, let me do the talking, hmm?”

“Agreed, Warden Loghain,” Cullen said quickly.

“I’ll take the lead. I studied those maps longer than you did,” Loghain added before pivoting and moving towards the gates once more.

Cullen followed after him, ducking through the gate from the inner bailey to avoid the fire burning
along the top of its frame. Within, they found plenty of evidence of fighting in the wake of the Inquisitor and those with him: piles of ashes, scorch marks on the walls, and crossbow bolts, among other things. “It looks like they came through this way,” he called.

“It appears so, Commander.” As they moved through the fortress, Loghain’s turns were quick and decisive, up until they reached a closed door. Loghain frowned and pointed to a broken door leading to a staircase. “This door is the quickest way to the inner courtyard, but it appears they went to the battlements instead.”

“Perhaps the door was barred?” Cullen suggested, just as Loghain tried to push it.

“It would appear you are correct. Still, something hit it hard.”


Loghain smiled at that. “Very true. Perhaps we can force it open. It would save us a good few minutes.”

“I’m willing to try if you are,” Cullen agreed, getting into place next to Loghain.

The man proved to be stronger than Cullen had anticipated, and after a few grunts of effort and strong kicks and shoves, the door suddenly popped open. “There we are,” Loghain said in satisfaction. Pointing ahead, he said, “And there’s the a door leading to the inner courtyard, where Warden-Commander Clarel will gather everyone for the ritual they think will save them.” His face grew hard. “I’d rather make sure it doesn’t happen.”

Cullen nodded, face grim as he settled his sword back in his hand. “Then let’s go.”

The door emerged not into the courtyard proper, as it turned out, but to a balcony overlooking it. Cullen raced forward, taking in the scene below as he strained his eyes to look for the Inquisitor. “There,” he said, pointing down to where Dorian was standing at the edge of a group of Wardens.

“And there’s Erimond, Corypheus' sycophant,” Loghain said, pointing to another place above the other Wardens. “And Warden-Commander Clarel. So he hasn’t killed her, at least.”

“There is a dead Warden up there, though,” Cullen said grimly, pointing to the body lying ceremoniously on a trestle table. “Can you tell if Erimond’s taken control of Clarel yet?”

“It does not appear so,” Loghain said as he surveyed the scene. “It seems the Inquisitor is still trying to sway her, which he would not be able to do if the Magister had done so.”

“Then we’re not too late,” Cullen breathed.

Loghain laid a hand on Cullen’s arm and pointed to a group of Wardens gathering in a circle in the center of the courtyard. “Be cautious of an early celebration, Commander. Those Warden mages do not move as I remember. I daresay they belong to Corypheus already.”

Cullen’s face darkened. “How do we get down there?” he asked. “I don’t see any stairs.”

“Let me consider.” Loghain’s steely gaze swept over the courtyard, then grunted. “We’ll have to go back and find another way. Perhaps—”

“Wait! Something’s happening,” Cullen said, pointing towards the Warden mages.

Loghain sighed and shook his head. “And so it begins,” he said sadly.
Cullen nodded, but kept his eyes locked on what the mages were doing. The bright green light of a rift caught him off guard before he saw movement through the opening. “Maker. They're trying to pull a demon through the rift!” Cullen fixed his gaze on the roiling green energy and the demon lurking beyond, mind whirling. It wasn't a large opening, and the view was distorted by his vantage, but he would know that demon anywhere. “Hessarian’s Blade of Mercy. I’ve seen that demon before.”

Loghain’s eyebrows rose. “The one they wish to summon?” He squinted, obviously trying to see it more clearly. “It’s quite… large, whatever it is.”

“I saw it in a dream,” Cullen told him. “Well. Nightmare, really, and yes, it’s every bit as monstrous as you can imagine. If they manage to bring it through… Wait. They’re talking again.”

Both men fell silent as they strained to hear what was being said below.

“I don’t want to kill you,” Dorian was telling the Wardens. “But you’re being used. Surely some of you must suspect something!”

One of the Wardens, dressed in rogue leathers and with a dagger at each hip, suddenly stepped forward. “The mages who’ve done the ritual? They’re not right. They were my friends, but now…” He turned to look at the Wardens behind him, particularly the mages, who simply stood there. “They’re like… puppets on a string.”

Clarel stepped to the edge of her platform. “You cannot let fear sway your mind, Warden Chernoff!” she called down.

Hawke’s voice rose above all others as he stepped forward, a grim look on his face. “He’s not afraid, Warden-Commander. You are. You’re afraid that you ordered all these brave men and women to die for nothing. Why else would you hesitate?”

“Listen to me!” Alistair said, stepping forward. “You all know who I am. You all know that I was there, in Ferelden, during the Fifth Blight, and you all know that I failed my duty. I have been trying regain my honor as a Warden ever since, and you all know how hard I have fought to live up to my mentor Duncan’s example.” Cullen saw a wave of nodding heads and even expressions of sympathy as Alistair continued. “More than that, you know who is aiding me. Loghain Mac Tir stood where I could not, facing down the Archdemon at the very end of the Blight. Perhaps he didn’t strike the final blow, but he was there when the Archdemon fell. He was there when I was not. And he agrees with me, you all know this.”

When a few of the Wardens nodded thoughtfully - though none of the mages did - Alistair stepped further forward. “So I ask you: can we both be lying to you? Is it so impossible to think that we are being used?” Pointing at Erimond, he thundered, “That man serves Corypheus, one of the very Magisters who brought the curse of the Blight upon the world! Grey Wardens fight the Blight! We do. Not. Serve it!”

“Good lad,” Loghain said, a proud smile coming to his lips.

A silence settled on the courtyard, and all those Wardens who were not mages turned to Clarel, obviously waiting to see what her response would be to Alistair’s speech.

It was clear from the way she looked back and forth between Erimond and Alistair that his words had had an impact. Erimond took a step towards her. “Clarel, we have come so far. You’re the only one who can do this!”
Still Clarel seemed uncertain, rubbing her forehead as she shifted on her feet. “Perhaps we could test the truth of these charges to avoid more bloodshed.”

Cullen was watching Erimond, and saw the exact moment when the Magister decided that Clarel was a lost cause. “Be ready,” he told Loghain softly, and the man nodded.

“But perhaps,” Erimond said, turning from Clarel and lifting his hands to the sky, “I should bring in a more reliable ally. My Master thought you might come here, Inquisitor! He sent me this to welcome you!”

Suddenly a familiar roar echoed from the sky above, and a pitch black shadow with ragged wings appeared from the inky darkness. As Corypheus’ dragon arced down and sent a blast towards Clarel, Cullen watched in astonishment. “Did that idiot just summon an Archdemon into a Keep full of Wardens?”

“It would appear so,” Loghain said with a derisive snort. “Apparently he’s given up on trying to convert the remaining Wardens to his side. It won’t be hard to persuade those who remain to fight with us after this.”

“If we survive long enough to talk with-- Look out!” Cullen shoved Loghain to the ground just as the lyrium dragon settled onto the battlements above them and roared once more. The ledge upon which they stood trembled, then collapsed, and he wrapped his shield arm more tightly around Loghain as they began to slide down. “Brace yourself!” he yelled.

Their controlled tumble did get them down into the courtyard - and landed them right at the feet of a Pride demon. As they rose to their feet, Loghain barked orders to some nearby Wardens. After giving Loghain a startled glance after his abrupt appearance, a bulky Reaver and a dancing duelist ran to aid Cullen and Loghain against the monster, even as more demons appeared in the courtyard around them. By the time they’d dealt with that threat and a few shades and wraiths along with it, Dorian and the others had left in hot pursuit of Clarel and Erimond.

“Loghain!” one of the Wardens called as he ran over. “Is it true? Was that Magister in service to Corypheus all along?”

With a nod, Loghain made a sweeping gesture to the rift with his sword. “Look at what you wished to summon into this world,” he said. “We are Wardens, sworn to protect Thedas! These may not be darkspawn, but that demon might as well be an archdemon. Stand against the Magister and his demons, and save those who you can!”

“Yes, Warden Loghain!” The warriors all gave Loghain a quick salute, even as Cullen chafed at the delay. “What do you want us to do?”

“Set a sentry here on the rift and make sure none tamper with it,” Loghain ordered. “Then send the rogues out into Adamant to spread the word: we side with the Inquisition.”

“Yes, Loghain!” the warrior said, and quickly they began to organize themselves.

Loghain turned to Cullen. “Let us proceed. You are right. I have a bad feeling about this, as well.”

Cullen sent one last glance to the monstrosity on the other side of the rift, hackles rising. Erimond had clearly been hoping to use a mage of Clarel’s calibre to summon whatever it was through the rift. Just because the ritual was interrupted didn’t mean it couldn’t be completed, should circumstances turn to favor Erimond. Perhaps all he needed was for Clarel to have a moment of vulnerability. On top of that, Erimond had Corypheus’ pet dragon flying around the fortress, a danger that the
Inquisition had no direct defense against.

And Dorian was in hot pursuit of both of Erimond and Clarel. If Erimond succeeded, Dorian would be in grave danger. And if the dragon decided to get up close and personal with the Inquisitor?

He turned to Loghain, face grim. His friend needed him. "Let's go."

He burst into a run as he surged up the stairs in pursuit of Dorian. Time, and that persistent nagging feeling of something is going to happen, pressed down on him relentlessly. Ignoring the hitch in his side and the growing fatigue in his limbs, Cullen pushed on, only dimly aware that Loghain matched him stride for stride.

As they ran, their surroundings blurred. The demons they fought, the way the very stones of the fortress trembled, and even the shadow of the dragon as it passed overhead - they weren’t nearly as important as the distant figures ahead of them. Fate seemed to tease him, letting the group almost come within reach before throwing demons or Wardens at them. Even though the two men cut through their foes easily - or in the case of the Wardens on some occasions, avoided combat altogether when Loghain snapped them to attention - each delay increased Cullen’s frustration until he could feel his teeth grinding as they raced up what he desperately hoped were the last stairs.

And skidded to a halt as he found himself contemplating the haunches of a dragon from an uncomfortably close distance.

His heart raced and his hand tightened around the grip of his sword as Cullen took in the situation. The dragon stood between himself and the others, wings beating slowly as it roared and gathered itself for an attack. Cullen cast about for any way around the dragon, but found none as it slithered forward. Setting his jaw, he raised his shield and charged at it from behind, hoping to distract it if nothing else.

A movement under the dragon caught his eye just before the sudden lightning burst which followed it. After that, things happened fairly quickly. The dragon screeched and thrashed as the attack shoved it upwards and over the edge of the battlements. The pit of Cullen’s stomach dropped as he watched the thrashing leviathan drop off the precipice, claws dragging on the stone blocks before it disappeared from sight. Its actions tore at the foundations of the already ancient structure, and Cullen lurched once more into a run as the damage the dragon caused the ramparts to shift enough to send those upon it sliding towards the precipice.

Ignoring the groaning Magister and Clarel’s still form, Cullen fixed his gaze on the people in immediate danger. They were doing their best to run away from the worst of the damage, but his heart skipped a beat when he saw Dorian stop and run back to pull Alistair from the brink. A noble gesture, to be sure, but it was enough to seal his fate, since the motion to heave Alistair forward was enough to make Dorian’s foot slip beneath him.

As Dorian flailed for a handhold, Cullen broke into a run, dead-end drop at the end or not. Abandoning his shield completely, he held on to his sword only so that he could use it to halt his precipitous plunge. He jammed it between two stones just before reaching the edge, holding onto the hilt with one hand while his other reached out to latch onto Dorian’s wrist just before the man plummeted to his doom. The desperate act left Cullen half hanging off a jagged line of rock with Dorian dangling below, but—at least for the moment—they were stable, if not safe. The ramparts shifted a little more beneath them, then subsided into stillness once more.

Dorian’s eyes widened as he looked up. “Cullen! What are you doing here?”

Dimly, Cullen realized it was the first time the mage had called him by his name, but the thought was
quickly pushed away. “Trying to… rescue you, of course,” he grated through clenched teeth as he yanked himself fully onto the stone surface, then pulled Dorian higher with all his strength. He was dimly aware that the others were engaged in their own scramble for safety, but his only priority at the moment was the man holding his hand.

When he felt Dorian’s free arm snake around his neck, Cullen released an explosive breath and quickly shifted his arm down to snag the other man’s waist for better leverage. As he pushed himself slowly to his knees, he craned his neck to look at Dorian, whose face was now inches away, and smiled. "There you are."

“Quite the daring rescue, Commander,” Dorian said a trifle breathlessly.

“I made a promise, remember?” Cullen told him, though his own voice was a bit strained. This close, he could feel Dorian’s fast, shallow breaths against his lips, and found himself licking his own in reaction. Forcing his mind to the task at hand, Cullen kept his fingers tightly clenched around his sword’s hilt, using it for stability as he heaved them back from the edge. They ended up in a tangled heap of limbs with Dorian on top, and Cullen let his head fall back onto the stones of the rampart with an explosive sigh of relief. Releasing the hilt at last, he embraced Dorian with both arms and held him close. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you.”

Dorian, arm still wrapped around Cullen’s neck, gripped Cullen’s fur mantle as he took a shuddering breath and buried his face in Cullen’s other shoulder. “Thank you. Just… give me a moment. My heart is still pounding.”

“Take all the time you need,” Cullen told him, fighting the urge to bury his nose in the musky scent lingering in Dorian’s hair. Instead, he turned his head to look for the others, praying that they were all safe.

What he saw made his eyes widen. Bull hung from the edge of the ramparts, held in place both by his death grip on some flagstones and the aid of Alistair and Loghain, who had each grabbed a hold of one of Bull’s arms to keep him from sliding further. Varric had somehow managed to grab Bull by the horns before falling, but he dangled down Bull’s back without any leverage available to pull himself up in a way that wouldn’t risk them all. Shifting his gaze down, Cullen saw Solas clinging to one of Bull’s calves and Hawke’s arms wrapped firmly around the thigh of Bull’s other leg. All in all, it looked more than a bit precarious.

“Sweet Maker,” Cullen breathed.

“A little help, please?” Alistair grunted in a strained voice.

“Be right there,” Cullen said as he scrambled to pull himself and Dorian to their feet. Even as they rushed towards the others, however, a sharp crack reverberated through the stone beneath them.

“Well, shit,” Varric and Hawke groaned in an unforced chorus.

The rampart upon which their lives depended broke away with a ponderous slowness from the rest of Adamant, a fall which accelerated with every second. Bull struggled to maintain his hold, but the stones were breaking apart faster than he could find a new one. As the remnants of the ramparts toppled towards the ground far below, Cullen and Dorian lost their footing and succumbed to the forces of nature along with the others. Though Cullen tried to hold on to Dorian as long as he could, the rough motion and abrupt free fall drove the two men apart.

Yet even as Cullen reached towards Dorian in desperation, he saw a calmness fall over the mage which differed from that of a man who had accepted death. Face a mask of concentration, Dorian
extended his left hand with fingers spread wide. A flash of green light burst forth, heralding the awakening of the Anchor as Dorian swept his hand in a wide circular motion.

When the large expanse of a green rift not unlike the Breach flickered into being just below them, Cullen had just enough time to gasp in wonder before he entered it.

After that, there was only darkness.

Chapter End Notes

[1] This is in reference to my (unwritten) AU of the Dragon Age comics written by David Gaider (The Silent Grove, Those Who Speak, and Until We Sleep) wherein Alistair travels with Isabela and Varric on a quest to find his father, King Maric. In this world state, Warden Alistair and Warden Loghain both go with Isabela and Varric on the same quest. Since Alistair's quest is mentioned by Warden Alistair in the game, it is canon for Alistair to go looking for his father regardless of whether he is Warden or King. Therefore, I have incorporated it into my story.
Dorian felt the moment when he passed through the rift and into the Fade, since it hit him like a blow to the chest. His act of opening the rift had been one of desperation, his promise to Cullen ringing through his mind as he used the Anchor to open the way to a place no mortal had stepped in the flesh for over a thousand years. Yet breaking the laws of reality was, to him, a small price to pay to avoid breaking the same promise twice.

As he tumbled through the air, the nature of the Fade at least proved to work in his favor, saving him from a painful fall by electing to ignore silly little things like *up* and *down*. Instead he floated towards what he had thought was the ground, then hovered a few inches above it. Not until he dared to reach out and touch the nearest surface with his fingertip did his weight suddenly decide to assert itself, and he fell with an ignominious *oof*.

Rising to his feet, he absently dusted himself off as he surveyed his surroundings. Peripherally, he was dimly aware of the others nearby, but most of his attention was on the floating rocks, the vague landscape, and the swirling mists obscuring the distance. As a mage, he would have guessed where they were in a matter of moments regardless, but the way that the Anchor pulsed and burned in his palm seemed to be a rather strong confirmation of his surmise.

“Well, this is unexpected.”

Dorian blinked and looked up, then tilted his head as he contemplated the man standing sideways on a floating boulder. “You look a little off, Warden,” he noted with a grin.

“Thanks,” Alistair drawled, tapping his foot on the rock upon which he stood. It wobbled, but didn’t straighten, leaving the Warden situated where he was. “I take it we’re not in Thedas anymore.”

“No,” Solas said softly. Dorian turned to watch the elf mage take a few steps deeper into the Fade, a look of awe on his face as he slowly turned in a circle. “This is the Fade. The Inquisitor opened a rift. We came through… and survived.” Solas sounded surprised, but also eager. “I never thought I would find myself here physically. Look!” He pointed upwards. “The Black City, almost close enough to touch.”

“Well, this certainly looks nothing like the Maker’s bosom, so we can’t be dead,” a sardonic voice noted. Dorian whipped his head around again, blinking in surprise as he saw Hawke standing above him - upside down. The man looked down - or, given his vantage, *up* - at Dorian, then suddenly grinned. “That’s a new look for you.”

Dorian chuckled as he glanced around to make sure the rest of his companions were all well and accounted for. “The first time I entered the Fade, it looked like a lovely castle filled with gold and silks. I met a marvelous desire demon, as I recall. We chatted and ate grapes before he attempted to possess me.” He gave a little sigh, nodding to Bull and Varric as they drew near. “Perhaps the difference is that we are here physically. This is no one’s dream.”

“If it were a dream, I would see Cullen,” he added silently, trying not to panic. A tiny little voice inside also had to add, “And he’d be naked, if this were a true dream.”

“I’ve seen my father in the Fade, I’ve seen a demon pretending to be my sister in the Fade,” Alistair observed as he craned his neck to study their surroundings. “But I’ve never seen this.”

“The stories say Inquisitor Lavellan walked out of the Fade at Haven,” Hawke mused. “So it’s not completely unprecedented. I would wager it’s tied to that mark on your hand, Inquisitor.”
Realizing that he'd been rubbing at the green light in his palm as it flickered and sputtered fitfully, Dorian nodded, still searching the Fade around him for one more familiar face. “That would be a logical conclusion.”

“Well, whatever happened at Haven,” Hawke noted, crossing his arms over his chest, “we can’t assume we’re safe now.”

“An excellent assumption,” a rough voice said as its owner emerged from the green mist around them.

Dorian’s eyebrows rose, even as a bit of hope leapt in his heart. Surely if he were here... “Loghain? I see you survived our rather precipitous journey here. I do have to ask, though, why are you here?”

“I followed your Commander as he chased after you and Clarel,” Loghain explained. “He said he had a bad feeling about all this.” Loghain looked around, his eyes lingering on Hawke and Alistair and their odd perches. “And it would seem he was right.”

When Cullen failed to appear from the same mist, Dorian frowned. “Have you seen the Commander?”

Loghain shook his head. “Not here, no. I saw him go through the rift, and I wasn’t that far behind him. Once I landed, I began my search for you.”

Dorian fought to keep his reaction to that from his face and instead turned to examine the area around them again. “We’ll need to look for him on our way out, then,” he declared.

“Which brings up that oh so important question,” Varric pointed out. “Which way is out?” He nodded to Hawke and Alistair. “The Fade apparently doesn’t give a shit about up and down.”

“The mark is the key,” Solas said. “You unlocked the rift to grant us entrance to the Fade, and here we are. If we continue with that logic, then that means you should be able to use the same mechanism to take us back to the waking world.”

“What about that rift the Warden mages opened in the main hall?” Loghain asked. “That could be our way out, if you can open it enough to let us pass through from this side.”

“We’ll encounter resistance,” Hawke pointed out. “We are in the Fade, after all. There are bound to be demons.”

“Well, this is shitty,” Bull said, speaking for the first time. “I’ll fight whatever you give me, boss, but nobody said nothing about getting dragged through the ass end of demon town.”

“I’ll make sure to pay you a bonus,” Dorian quipped.

“I’ll hold you to that, boss,” Bull shot back, then sighed and pulled out his maul. “Well, I'm ready, at least. Who knows? Maybe killing some demons will make me feel better.”

Dorian chuckled. “At least it’s better than waiting for the demons to find us, isn’t it?” he suggested, then pointed to the large rift swirling in the distance. “And there’s our exit. Let’s go.”

With Bull in the lead, Alistair and Loghain quickly fell in to flank him, and the rest arranged themselves behind. As they began to move forward, Solas spoke once more, his neck craning while he looked at the Fade around them. “This is fascinating. It is not the area I would have chosen, of course. But to physically walk within the Fade…” He sighed, sounding almost content.
Varric gave him an incredulous look. “Right. You like it here. Isn’t that wonderful.” Shaking his head, Varric glanced at Hawke. “Remember last time we ended up in the Fade together?”

Hawke rolled his eyes. “Oh, how could I forget,” he drawled. “My closest friends showed such loyalty in the face of a demon’s temptations.”

Varric grimaced. “Well, we got better. Sort of.”

“Yes, you all went back to stabbing me from the front instead of from the other side,” Hawke said sardonically.

“That still sounds better than a certain Vint I could name right now,” Bull muttered darkly. Before Dorian could protest, Bull started to speak in a higher voice, obviously imitating someone else. “Hey, chief. Let’s join the Inquisition! Good fights for a good cause!” Dropping back to his normal register, he continued, “I don’t know, Krem. I hear there are demons.” Switching back to the other voice, he said, “Ah, don’t worry about the demons, chief! I’m sure we won’t see many!” He muttered a few choice oaths under his breath in a mixture of Trade and Qunlat, then finished with, “Asshole!” He nudged Loghain, who happened to be on his left. “Hey, if I get possessed, feint on my blind side, then go low. Cullen says I leave myself open.”

“I shall bear that in mind,” Loghain said in an amused tone.

“Solas, you’re the expert on the Fade, despite your deplorable sense of fashion. Even I’ll admit that,” Dorian noted. “Any useful little tidbits you might want to share with the rest of us?”

Apparently being in the Fade put Solas in a good enough mood to ignore Dorian’s little jab, or he recognized it for what it was: Dorian’s attempt to calm his own nerves. “The Fade is shaped by intent and emotion,” the elf noted. “Remain focused, and it will lead you to where you wish to go.”

Dorian again felt a little thrill of hope. And if my focus is to find Cullen? “That sounds important to know.”

“The demon that controls this area is extremely powerful,” Solas cautioned. “I suggest you remain wary of its manipulations and prepare for what is certain to be a fascinating experience.”

“Fascinating,” Alistair echoed. “You certainly like to be fascinated, Solas.”

“Life can only be experienced once, Warden Alistair,” Solas replied. “Thus I have found it beneficial to open myself to all that it has to offer. Fascination is but a logical extension of truly opening yourself to new ideas.”

“Riiight,” Alistair said slowly.

Solas gave a little sigh, but fell silent after that.

As they moved through the Fade, Varric dropped back to talk to Dorian. “So Curly’s here somewhere, right?” he asked in a quiet voice.


“We’ll find him, Sparkler—I mean Inquisitor,” Varric told him.

“Oh, don’t you start getting formal on me,” Dorian complained. “I have enough to worry about as it is.”
Varric chuckled. “Noted. So I can still remind you about the five sovereigns you owe me?”

As the vague burning sensation in his hand turned into a more demanding itch, Dorian started to scratch it. To distract himself from the oddity, he focused on Varric. “I'll tell you what. Help us all get out of here, Cullen included, and I’ll triple it. And find a publisher for your books in the Imperium. That’s a very large market waiting to be tapped, you know.”

“Huh.” Varric’s eyebrows rose. “You do know how to negotiate, though I might be able to get a better deal from my cousin’s widow. Still, she’s not here right now and you are, so I accept.” His eyes narrowed as Dorian muttered a strong oath and clenched his hand in a fist as the green flame suddenly flared and spread up his arm. "You all right, Sparkler?" he asked warily, taking a step back from the fitful glow.

"Venhedis!" Dorian gasped. "I'm... not sure." The light hadn't hurt this badly since he'd first acquired it, but right now it felt like someone was shoving several crystal shards through his palm.

"Inquisitor!" Solas said, urgency in his voice as he moved to Dorian's side. "Let me help!" His hands closed around Dorian's, face a mask of concentration as he tried to weave a spell.

The green glow died for a moment, then sputtered back into life as a wave of magical energy burst from Dorian's hand, knocking them all to the ground as Dorian screamed in pain. He curled into a fetal position as, for a moment, his world turned into nothing but agony.

And, from the center of that torment, came a whisper: I'm sorry.

Before he could wrap his mind around the meaning and origin of those two simple words, the agony centered in his palm spread to encompass his entire hand and then... pushed. A yell gargled and died in the back of his throat as the pressure built from within, clawing and scraping its way out from his palm with a desperation that would not be denied. His breaths came in shallow pants as he tried to push the pain away, tried to pretend he didn't hear a dull cracking of bones breaking deep within his hand, tried to think of anything except his hand as it swelled like a waterskin being filled far beyond its capacity.

And then, all at once, the building pressure burst. As the skin of his palm split open like that of a ripe plum, a sharp pain lanced through his arm--then just as abruptly vanished. A yell gargled and died in the back of his throat as the pressure built from within, clawing and scraping its way out from his palm with a desperation that would not be denied. His breaths came in shallow pants as he tried to push the pain away, tried to pretend he didn't hear a dull cracking of bones breaking deep within his hand, tried to think of anything except his hand as it swelled like a waterskin being filled far beyond its capacity.

Swiftly he reached up with his battered hand and grasped the one on his cheek, willing to endure the pain the motion sparked. When he felt a familiar surge of magical energy as their palms met, he sagged in relief. A thousand little questions and mysteries and hints and fears all suddenly coalesced into a final answer, and he smiled with bittersweet happiness. "Mailani," he breathed.

"I'm sorry, Dorian," that oh-so-familiar voice replied. "It was the only way."

Opening his eyes, he stared up at her, swallowing as he saw the worry on her familiar face. With a trembling hand, he reached up and touched her face in wonder. "You're here. You're truly here."

"Be cautious, Inquisitor," Loghain said in a wary voice. "Remember where we are. That is most likely a demon."

"Or it could be a spirit that identifies so strongly as Inquisitor Lavellan that it believes it is her," Solas
noted from where he stood nearby. When Dorian glanced at him, he found a thoughtful expression on the man's face.

Dorian swallowed, then looked up at Mailani. "Is it really you?"

A sad smile came to her face. "Proving my existence either way would require time we do not have," she said. "Can you stand?"

He nodded, but before she could help him rise, Hawke strode forward and lifted Dorian to his feet. The man's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he looked at Mailani, and it was clear from the way he put himself between Dorian and Mailani that he considered her a danger. "How hard is it to answer the question, really?" he said, an edge in his tone. "Especially given the circumstances. Let's try it this way: I'm a human, and you are--?"

Mailani met Hawke's gaze as she rose to her own feet. "I am here to help you. Everything is not as it seems."

Hawke snorted, arm still steadying Dorian as he pointed out, "We're in the Fade. I would assume that is a given in this place."

"The danger before you has more faces than you know," Mailani said, then looked past Hawke to Dorian. "And there are things you need to remember about my death."

Dorian shuddered, then gently pushed Hawke aside and stepped towards her. "What things? Why don't I remember them?"

"Because they were taken from you by the demon that serves Corypheus," she told him.

"Tell me, lethallan: what is the nature of the spirit who commands this place?" Solas asked as he stepped forward once more. "It is clear that it is shaped for a purpose, but I have never seen anything like it."

Mailani's face grew solemn. "I know it only as the Nightmare. I have only seen it in dreams, but I have seen enough to know that it deliberately inspires terror. It feeds off of fear and darkness, and uses its minions to enact a dreamer’s darker memories that it then consumes and hoards." She paused, glancing at Loghain and Alistair as she added, "And it is the one, as far as I can tell, that is responsible for the false Calling which drove the Wardens to their folly."

Logahin frowned as he exchanged a glance with Alistair. "Then perhaps we owe this Nightmare a visit," Loghain noted in a grim tone.

"You will have your chance," Mailani promised him, "for you cannot leave here without confronting him."

"Wait. The big demon that Erimond guy was trying to bring through?" Varric asked.

"Yes," Mailani confirmed.

"It's waiting for us at the exit?"

Mailani nodded gravely. "Yes."

"Well... shit," Varric muttered, then sighed as he pulled out Bianca. "You bring me to all the fun places, Sparkler."
Bull groaned and let the head of his maul drop onto the ground with a loud thud, then leaned on it almost casually. *Almost.* "So you're telling me that not only do we have to fight our way through the ass end of demon town, we have to fight their boss, too?"

There was a definite twitch of Mailani’s lips as she repeated, "Yes."

"Well, that's just great," Bull grumbled as he heaved his weapon up to rest on his shoulder again. "You always were trouble, boss. Little boss. Dead boss?" He shook his head. "Damn it, now I'm really getting confused. I guess that means I get to blame both of you."

Taking a deep breath, Dorian braced himself as he met Mailani’s gaze. “This demon… I’ve seen him before, haven’t I?"

Mailani confirmed his guess with a nod. “He has been watching the dreams of the one who bears the Anchor since I first stepped from the Fade at Haven.”

Dorian swallowed. “That… that explains much.”

Solas frowned and looked to Dorian. “Then you’ve seen the Nightmare in your dreams?”

At Dorian’s nod, Loghain grunted. “Odd. The Commander said much the same about the Nightmare.”

Solas frowned. “That is indeed most curious. A mage perceiving a demon in the Fade is always a possibility, but the Commander is no mage.”

“Demons have haunted Cullen’s sleep for years,” Mailani said, tone tinged with sorrow. “And the Nightmare found his dreams most satisfying.”

“I see.” Solas’ frown deepened. “Unusual, but not completely unheard of, in that case. I shall think on this.”

"You said that this Nightmare serves Corypheus," Dorian noted. "Is that why Corypheus has so many demons at his disposal? Because of the Nightmare?"

"I don't know how it works exactly," Mailani admitted. "But the Nightmare is drawn to those who inspire terror in the waking world."

"And Corypheus helped to unleash the Blight upon the world," Hawke said grimly. "It doesn't get more horrific than that."

"Then it must be a fear demon, as I suspected," Solas said. "Fear is a very old, very strong feeling. It predates love, pride, compassion... Every emotion save, perhaps, desire."

"Is it wrong to say that I preferred the desire demon?" Dorian asked with a sigh.

Solas smiled faintly, though the expression quickly slipped away. "Be wary, Inquisitor. The Nightmare will do anything in its power to weaken our resolve."

"Stealing people’s memories," Varric said with a shudder. "That’s low, even for a demon. Memories make us what we are. A monster that takes them away? I don’t want to think about that."

"After what it did to the Wardens, it's going to learn to fear itself," Alistair declared in a grim tone.

"Will you help us, Mailani?" Dorian asked softly. "Will you help us escape its clutches?"
"I will, falon. But first you must see the truth." She raised her left hand, and the familiar green light awoke and flickered fitfully. "Come. I will show you."

All eyes turned to Dorian to see what he would do, but he moved without hesitation. Stepping forward, he raised his own glowing hand, dimly aware of the blood that poured from the open wound in his palm caused by Mailani’s unexpected appearance. He didn’t feel the pain, though—or perhaps he simply chose not to feel it. Even as Hawke cried out and stepped forward, Dorian clasped his hand tightly with hers, and the light of their palms mingled and flared into an even brighter conflagration.

And around them, the Fade… faded away.

Dorian opened his eyes and found himself staring out over a vast expanse of sandy dunes lit a dull orange by the sun above. Raising his hand, he tried to block the glare of the sun, but the motion proved futile. With a sigh, he turned to the woman next to him and pouted. “You hate me, don’t you?”

Mailani raised an eyebrow. “Why do you ask that?”

“Because you keep dragging me out to the ass-end of nowhere, as Bull would say,” he told her. “Couldn’t we do this in more civilized places? Places with wine and peeled grapes and cheese?”

Her lips twitched in a smile. “I don’t think we could find quillback guts in Val Royeaux, Dorian.”

“How do you know? I’m sure the markets there are quite extensive.” He sighed and tried to brush some sand off of his armor, which of course resulted in a smear of dirt. “Oh, lovely.”

With a laugh, Mailani looked ahead and pointed. “Look, there’s the cave on that map I found. Maybe we’ll find something useful in there.”

“Only you would find a scrap of paper with vague references to landmarks and a scribbled X and think it means hidden treasure,” he teased her.

“And when have I been wrong?” she asked him smugly.

“Well… never,” he admitted, then harrumphed as she stuck her tongue out at him. “Oh, fine, be that way. Someday you’ll be wrong, and I hope I’m there to see it.”

As they approached the cave, a familiar honking sound came from behind them. Dorian turned to see the approach of a flurry of varghests, and sighed. “Oh, Maker, they really are looking for death, aren’t they?”

“You go on ahead, boss,” Bull told Mailani as he swung his maul in an impressive circle. “Me and Baldy got this.”

Solas pulled his staff from his back. “Need I remind you that I am not the only one here with no hair?”

“Yeah, but I’m bald with style,” Bull told him. “You just look like an egg.”


“A good egg,” Bull amended. “C’mon. Let’s chase these things back to the gas pits.” With a roar, he charged forward, the shimmer of a barrier surrounding him just before he hit the varghests--literally.
“Let them have their fun,” Dorian suggested with a chuckle. “I wouldn’t mind getting out of the sun for a little while. Besides, if we find what we’re looking for, we’ll be able to leave all this sand behind us for a while.”

Mailani, who had half-drawn her bow, smiled and set it back in place. “All right. Let’s go.”

The two of them pressed into the cave. The light from outside, as well as the zaps of Solas’ spells and the splats of Bull’s hammer, dimmed quickly, and Dorian frowned as they moved further into the depths. “The Veil is thin here,” he told Mailani. “Very thin. Be wary. I wouldn’t be surprised if a demon or two slipped through.”

She nodded and pulled out her bow, nocking an arrow as they moved forward. “Like the Orlesian camps in the Exalted Plains?”

“Precisely.” His staff twirled in his hands as he readied himself, just in case. They moved forward slowly, keeping an eye out for both enemies and evidence of treasure.

In the end, it didn’t do them any good.

At first, the earthquake seemed to be only a momentary inconvenience. As the walls shook and the rocks fell from above, Dorian quickly summoned a shield around them and pulled Mailani close to make sure they were both protected. The rocks bounced off his spell and fell to the side, and they exchanged a nervous smile. “That was close,” he admitted. “But don’t worry. I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

She smiled at him, then turned when Bull’s voice echoed down the tunnel. “Hey, boss! Everything all right in there?”

“We’re fine, Bull!” she called back.

“We’re coming in anyway,” he boomed back, and Dorian saw shadows block the light at the entrance as the two headed into the cave.

“I’ll go get them,” he told Mailani. “Don’t move. That barrier will hold while I’m gone, and I don’t want to risk a boulder landing on your pretty little head.”

With a laugh, she pushed him down the tunnel. “Just get going.”

He gave her a wink and started towards Bull and Solas. Before he’d gotten far, he heard her gasp and cry, “Dorian!”

His head whipped around, eyes widening as he saw movement beyond her. The man who stepped from the shadows was clad in a hooded robe so black that it was difficult to see him within the darkness of the cave, but his eyes glowed crimson beneath his hood. Raising a staff crowned with a red lyrium skull, the unknown mage sent an arc of energy towards Mailani, one which shattered Dorian’s spell seemingly without effort and dropped her to the floor, bound in a crushing prison of magic. As she struggled and Dorian started to run - too slowly, always too slowly - the red skull rose and whipped around in a circle, then slammed into the ground.

As the cave collapsed around them, Dorian lost himself in a cloud of dust and crushed stone.

The memory released him abruptly, and he collapsed with a gasp as his knees gave way. Mailani fell with him, her hand still tangled with his, and helped to steady him as he struggled to regain his breath. For a moment, all he could taste was the dust of stone, and all he could see was darkness, but
eventually the sensations faded and he remembered that he was no longer in that fateful cave in the Western Approach. “That man, the mage,” he whispered, still haunted by the oddly familiar glowing red eyes. “That was--”

“Jorath Amell.”

Surprised at the source of the words as much as by the venomous tone which delivered them, Dorian turned to look at Alistair. “You saw that?”

“We all did, Inquisitor,” Loghain said, expression grim even for him.

“That was the Hero of Ferelden?” Varric asked, eyebrows rising. “What a charming fellow.”

“Hero?” Alistair shuddered. “Maker save us from heroes like him. He killed the Archdemon and ended the Fifth Blight, yes, but…” His mouth twisted, and he looked away. “He’s no hero,” he said finally. “And if Amell had anything to do with the death of your predecessor, I would be checking under my pillow every night before going to sleep if I were you, Inquisitor.”

Varric’s eyebrows rose. “Is he truly that bad?”

“He is,” Loghain said softly. “When my daughter Anora ascended the throne of Ferelden as sole ruler following the Fifth Blight, she appointed him her Chancellor – against my advice. When last I saw her…” His voice trailed off for a moment as he shook his head. “She did as he bid her without question. My daughter was a strong-willed and intelligent woman, quite capable of ruling on her own. The change in her was not natural. When I left, the Chancellor made sure to let me know that my presence in Denerim henceforth would be unwise.” His jaw rippled as he gritted his teeth. “He took her from me in a way no parent should ever have to endure.”

“That sounds all too familiar,” Dorian whispered as his eyes squeezed shut. Blood magic, then. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and gave Loghain a sympathetic look. “I have seen such changes in personality back home, though I’m surprised he managed to get away with it considering she is Queen. I am sorry.”

“As am I,” Loghain said in a voice full of quiet regret.

Finally Dorian turned to look at the one person who might have anything else to say about Amell, and found Hawke staring intently at him. “Hawke?” he ventured. “He’s your cousin, is he not?”

Tilting his head, Hawke scrutinized Dorian closely for a moment or two before he finally said, “I never met the man. According to Mother, he came from the side of the family that the Amells in Kirkwall shunned. Far too many mages in a line already infamous for them in polite society.” His eyes narrowed, and he moved to kneel next to Dorian and Mailani. His finger lightly traced the back of Dorian’s hand as he looked at Mailani. “You’ve been in the mark the whole time, haven’t you? With Dorian.”

“It was the only way,” Mailani said softly.

“You’ve said that before,” Hawke noted.

“I don’t understand,” Dorian said with a frown. “How could I not know you were with me? I am skilled in the necromantic arts, after all. Surely I would have felt you in such a situation.”

Mailani ducked her head slightly, her drawn eyebrows and averted gaze demonstrating her guilt. “I… encouraged you not to notice. I didn’t want to give any of you false hope that I could return, but I had to be close to you. Sometimes, of course, our souls still touched.”
After a moment of puzzling over that revelation, Dorian’s eyes widened. “The dreams.”

“The dreams,” she said with a nod.

Dorian’s face softened in a smile, even as his eyes gleamed with unshed tears. “Thank you,” he murmured. “They were a true gift.” He couldn’t adequately articulate how, precisely, particularly with an avid audience nearby, but he suspected he didn’t particularly need to, given the link which still connected him to Mailani. Inhaling sharply, he cleared his throat. “And all those times that I started to suspect something and found myself distracted away from the thought? That was also you?”

Mailani nodded, eyes dancing with mischief. “It was. You’re far too clever for your own good, Dorian. You kept speculating about this and that, and I had to keep turning all those ideas into nothing more than a memory or a passing thought whenever your mind wandered too close.”

Dorian mulled over that for a while, then finally nodded reluctantly. “I… think I understand, but… why?”

“I had to make sure you were as closely linked to the Anchor as I was, so that it could not be taken from you by Corypheus… or anyone else.” Her eyes dropped to look at their linked hands. “And once done, I found I could not unlink myself. Either from you or the mark.”

“That rings true, Inquisitor,” Solas offered. “The strength of spirits and souls in the waking world is diminished, for they require a channel through which to work. Absent your awareness of her presence, she would have been compelled to remain with you, held by the Anchor’s power.”

“So once we came to the Fade…” Dorian began.

“I was able to assert myself,” Mailani said with a nod.

“Is that why his hand was broken and split like a ripe tomato?” Hawke asked harshly. For answer, Mailani lifted her hand away from Dorian and presented it to Hawke, who glanced at it with a frown. “Ah. I see,” he said in a tight voice.

Dorian, on the other hand, gasped as he saw the savage cut that split her hand. “Where did that come from?”

“She took it from you, I imagine,” Hawke told him, turning over Dorian’s hand to reveal a shiny new scar that was a mirror for the wound on Mailani’s hand. “The cut, at least.” His thumb smoothed over Dorian’s hand, causing the mage to wince as he felt broken bones grind together under the skin. “What about the rest of it?”

“Not yet,” she said softly.

Hawke frowned, obviously not liking that answer. “What does that--”

“Inquisitor!” Loghain called, drawing his sword. “It appears that we’ve been discovered.”

Dorian looked up and saw the approaching spider-like creepy-crawlies. Quickly rising to his feet, he called, “Time to earn your pay, Bull!”

“On it, boss,” Bull grunted, then charged forward with his maul raised over his head so he could bring it down and splatter the first demon with a giant squish. “Let’s have a little fun!”

“I like his enthusiasm,” Varric said with a chuckle as he raised Bianca and took aim.
It was a short, dirty fight, though not an easy one. When the last misshapen creature collapsed in a pile of rather squishy goo, Bull gave a loud shout of satisfaction. “Guess this Nightmare wasn’t such hot shit after all.”

“These are likely but servants of the true foe,” Solas pointed out.

Bull shot the elf an irritated glance. “Just let me have this moment to hope, all right?”

Dorian frowned as he looked around and noticed an absence. “Mailani?” When there was no answer, he sighed in regret, the brief reunion reminding him all too keenly of the pain of her loss. “Where did she go?”

“I believe we shall see her again,” Solas said. “Though it is time that we made our way forward rather than looking back.”

“And find Curly,” Varric said. “The Inquisition doesn’t leave anyone behind.”

“Don’t,” Hawke said with a growl as he stalked past Varric.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” Varric protested, but Hawke was already moving ahead towards the distant rift. “Touchy,” the dwarf muttered as he hefted Bianca to sit on his shoulder.

Dorian moved with them, occasionally looking at his hand with a grimace as the green light flickered and caused flashes of pain. Still, they had no alternative but to find the way out.

As they moved through the Fade, Dorian came to understand what Solas had meant when he said that this part of the Fade had been crafted for a purpose. They found snippets of notes, some of them from the point of view of the worst that humanity had to offer, and others from the perspective of their victims. There were remnants of those lost to the Blight, and of those who simply wished to understand why the Blight had destroyed their lives. Haunting horrors of innocence lost rested alongside the dark glee of evil embraced freely, and the combination was sufficient to make Dorian’s skin crawl.

Not that the graveyard made him feel any better, of course. When they found the tombstones engraved with the names and fears of all those Dorian held dear, Dorian paused and considered them for a long while. His eyes lingered specifically on the one emblazoned with Cullen’s name, pondering the intersection between the Commander’s fear and his own. They certainly had parallels, some of them quite tantalizing if he were completely honest with himself. For one, just like temptation, fear of surrender held a different connotation and consequence between surrender to lyrium, and surrender to desire. After a few moments, he sighed and moved on. It seemed better to find Cullen than to dally and maulder over what was obviously a trap of the fear demon, obscure though it may be.

Grimly they pressed forward after that, with only the occasional banter providing any relief from their host’s attempts to instill fear so that it might feed. As they progressed, the weighty feeling of anticipation grew from a nagging feeling to an almost oppressive burden. Something was going to happen, and soon.

And then the demon spoke.

“Oh, we have a visitor.”

Dorian’s head whipped around, trying to find the source of the sonorous tone. It tickled on the edge of familiarity, but he couldn’t quite place it. Instead, he simply turned in a slow circle as he said, “It appears our host has decided to greet us.”
“Some foolish little boy comes to steal the fear I have kindly lifted from his shoulders,” the deep voice continued. “You should have thanked me and left your fear where it lay, forgotten. You think that pain will make you stronger? What fool filled your mind with such drivel? The only one who grows stronger from your fears is me.”

“Well, we certainly aren’t growing stronger from its blathering,” Varric muttered under his breath.

The demon ignored the dwarf, if it even heard him. “But you are a guest here in my home, and not the only one.” At that comment, Dorian’s eyes narrowed, but he remained silent as the demon added, “I believe you know him, since he arrived at the same time as you. I knew him from before, as both frequent feast and annoying sting. Perhaps you should come visit him, since it seems he does not appreciate the nature of my hospitality.”

Dorian swallowed harshly. There was only one person who fit that description, and the implications of the demon’s words made his blood run cold. Cullen.

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“Perhaps your fear for him will make you stronger, perhaps not. Even so, by all means, let me return more of what you have forgotten.”

From the walls and stone around them, a veritable horde of demons suddenly burst forth and charged them with earsplitting shrieks and howls. “Here they come!” Bull roared, even as he wound up his body in preparation for his favorite whirlwind blow.

Before the first demon got close enough to attack, however, it screeched and fell to the ground, grabbing desperately as it was pulled out of sight by an unseen hand. The other demons likewise followed, each one scrabbling for purchase before being sucked from sight, leaving no one standing in front of them save for a familiar figure. For a moment more Mailani stood straight and true, glowing green hand stretched in front of her, before her eyes rolled up in her head and she slowly crumpled to the ground.

“Mailani!” Dorian rushed towards her, barely catching her before her head hit the ground. As he pulled her into his lap, his brow furrowed as he realized that she looked different. Her hair was dulled, with patches of stark white intertwined with the black, and an extensive pattern of lines and wrinkles now wreathed her face. As she looked up at him, he saw the clouds of age in her eyes, and a gauntness in her cheeks which had not before been present. “Mailani,” he breathed. “What’s happening?”

Her glowing hand reached out weakly towards him, and he clasped it tightly with his own. He felt the bones grind in his palm as he did so, but he ignored the pain as he kept his eyes on her face. “It is my time, Dorian,” she whispered. “And long past my time. I can help you, but first, you have to see all of it.”

“All of it? All of what?”

“The truth,” she whispered, even as darkness closed in around them.

Dorian coughed, trying to get the cloud of dust and grime out of his lungs. Before he’d even managed to take his first shaking breath, however, he was struggling to his feet, uncaring that his staff had snapped in two or that something was wrong with his left ankle. All that mattered was the Inquisitor.

“Mailani!” he croaked as he forced his way closer to the cave-in. Behind him, he heard the others stirring, but he didn’t bother looking back. All that mattered was the Inquisitor. “Lavellan!” he tried
again, a bit louder this time, and finally remembered that he was, in fact, a mage. The thought was followed by a sputtering wisp summoned from the Fade, whirling around his head to provide a feeble light.

There.

Thank the Maker for that Dalish scarf she wore - it was like a beacon of green and gold in the darkness of the cave around them. With faltering, fumbling steps, he moved towards it, ignoring the pain, the possibility of a further cave-in, of anything that got between him and his best friend. His only friend.

The sputter of green light almost made him cry - if the Anchor could light up, it meant she was alive. Closing the remaining space between them, he fell to his knees and took that glowing hand in his, trying to pour what little ability he had for healing into the Inquisitor. “Mailani,” he breathed, “I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

At the sound of his voice, her head turned, and Dorian paled as he saw what had happened to her face. Blood covered the side of it, drenching her hair, and the top of her head was misshapen, crushed askew by an unseen force. “D-Dorian,” she mumbled. “C-can’t see you.”

No, no, no! The tears came to his eyes unbidden, and he squeezed her hand all the more tightly. “The others will come,” he promised. “Solas will be able to help, I know it, and Bull can...” He looked down her body, and began to tremble. Her body disappeared at about her waist, hidden under a pile of rubble made of stones large and small. She’d always been nimble, but never physically strong - not that even Bull would have held up well against a half ton of rock. “He... Bull can lift everything away, I’m sure of it.”

“Dorian,” she said, and the mage quieted. His hand squeezed hers so tightly now that his knuckles were white. “Dorian, I’m sorry.”

That... wasn’t what he’d expected to hear, and it wasn’t welcome - not at all. He shook his head. “No. You’ll be fine. The others will come.”

“No,” she whispered. Her head shifted slightly, then relaxed, lolling limply on the ground, and the bright green of her hand flickered, then went out.

“No, no, no!” But he couldn’t deny it. No necromancer could deny the dimming of the eyes, or that last indrawn breath. Yet before he could even think of anything else, before he could cry or rage or attempt to bring her back, his world suddenly turned gold, then white, and then green.

This time, however, unlike when it had happened in the waking world, he actually saw what happened next. An unseen hand settled on his shoulder and pulled him back, allowing him to witness what followed from the safety of the darkness.

He saw the sudden flare of the Anchor, the green glow roaring like a raging wildfire as it grew to encapsulate both of them. He saw the glowing gold form rise from Mailani’s body and hover above it, a line of green keeping it tethered below. Saw the green light flex and explode once more, drawing the soul back down - into him. Saw his body collapse, limp, next to Mailani, their hands still joined even when he was unconscious.

He saw Jorath Amell approach them, saw him prod their hands with the bottom of his staff before he reached down and grabbed them in his own. Saw the resulting explosion throw the mage into the wall with enough force to bury him in a cascade of new stones.
He saw Bull and Solas appear, saw Solas bid Mailani a good journey to her final rest, and saw Bull roar and hit a boulder hard enough to break the bones in his hand. Saw them try to remove Mailani and give up when the boulders proved intractable, and saw them carry his own limp body from the tunnel.

He saw someone emerge from the shadows to pull Amell from his temporary tomb and awaken him. Saw the mask of rage on Amell’s face as he slapped his rescuer hard enough make them stagger, then in the next moment pull them close for a searing kiss. Saw the two of them depart, unnoticed by any member of the Inquisition.

All that, Dorian saw before the invisible hand on his shoulder tugged him away once more, shoving him out of the past and back into the Fade.

With another gasp, his eyes popped open, and he leaned heavily into Mailani. Her face was even more wizened than before, her eyes almost sunken holes on her face. As his hand tightened around hers, he noticed that while his bones were whole, hers now ground together in a way that made her wince. “Mailani…”

“I’m sorry, Dorian,” she said. “I had to give it to you. If I hadn’t…”

“I understand,” Dorian assured. “The Anchor in the hands of a man like that? It does not bear thinking about. What I don’t understand is why a man like Amell would desire it in the first place.”

“Who knows?” That was Alistair, who stood nearby with a grimace on his face. “I never really could understand his thinking. But if I were to try to guess, I’d say it was because he saw it as power, and that’s all the bastard ever seemed to care about.”

“What good would its power do for him, though?” Dorian asked, glancing down at the fitfully glowing mark with a furrowed brow.

“Do not discount the Anchor, Inquisitor,” Solas cautioned. “You have used it to open and close rifts, but that does not mean that its powers begin and end there. Behold the manner in which the Herald was able to drive the demons into another part of the Fade. I think that control of the rifts is but a small portion of the power at your disposal. It would appear that Amell covets that power for his own use.”

Bull crossed his arms over his chest. “So he’d be willing to fuck over the whole world so long as he got more power?”

Alistair snorted. “You don’t know the man. I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t think he could take Coryphilus down himself. He managed to kill the archdemon and live. No one’s ever done that before, either, and Amell is as arrogant as arrogant bastards can get.”

“Or perhaps we are overlooking a much simpler answer,” Solas suggested, expression turning thoughtful.

“And what is that?” Dorian asked.

“Amell is a Grey Warden.” Solas looked around at the group. “A Grey Warden mage.”

For a moment, they all stared at the elf in confusion, and then Alistair muttered a violent oath. “No. Andraste’s flaming knickers, the thought makes my blood run cold.”

“Well, shit,” Dorian breathed. “That puts an entirely new horrible perspective on it, doesn’t it?”
“If Corypheus has the ability to control the Blight as well as Erimond claimed, who is to say he did not corrupt Amell as well?” Leaning on his staff, Solas continued, “What if, during all this time, Corypheus has had one of the most powerful mages in Thedas working for him, out of sight and out of mind?”

“Is he really that clever?” Hawke asked skeptically.


“And if Amell was already looking for power,” Varric added, “Corypheus would have been a pretty damned convenient cart to hitch his horse on.”

Dorian shook his head and groaned. “We need to get out of here.” And we need to find Cullen.

“Yes,” Mailani agreed in a soft voice. “You do.” The way her eyes bored into his made Dorian wonder if Mailani was speaking more to the words left unspoken than those he had uttered. Rising painfully to her feet, she lifted her hands high, feet leaving the ground as she rose to hover a few feet in the air. As she leaned her head back and took a deep breath, she began to glow with a pure golden light. In a few moments, the Mailani they had all known was gone, replaced by the glowing gold figure from the memory they had just witnessed.

When her transformation was complete, she dropped her chin to meet Dorian’s gaze, and held up her left hand. A long green thread appeared, a pulsing band of energy which stretched between them and joined their marks. At both ends of the thread, the green glow of the Anchor flickered and danced, and for a moment, Dorian felt a tugging in his hand. In the next, the thread shattered into a thousand pieces of light, and the green light of her hand flickered and died for the last time. Floating down to hover in front of him, she touched two golden fingers to his forehead. “My time is past, Inquisitor. It is up to you to do what must be done.”

Settling his hand over his heart, Dorian nodded as his eyes brimmed with tears. “I promise to live up to your legacy.”

It was hard to see any details in the golden glow of her face, but he thought he saw a faint smile come to her face. “No. You need to make your own legacy now, and your own life.” Pointing towards the rift, she said, “I will prepare the way ahead. Follow, and I shall see you one last time.”

And in the next moment, she was gone.

Dorian took a long, shuddering breath as he reached up to rub his forehead. So much had happened so quickly that his mind was left whirling in response. In addition, he felt an odd emptiness inside, and wondered if it was simply the absence of Mailani, or something else entirely. He supposed only time would tell when it came to that.

In the meantime, he had work to do--and a promise to keep.

“Let’s go,” he said in a determined voice. “There’s a demon waiting for us.”

As they started towards the rift once more, each lost in their own thoughts, Hawke fell into step besides Dorian. “Do you really think the Nightmare has Cullen?”

“I don’t see why it would lie about that,” Dorian replied. “It must know that in this case, the truth is far more effective for feeding it our fears.”

Reaching out to put his hand on Dorian’s shoulder, Hawke said, “It will not have him. I promise you that, Dorian.”
Startled, Dorian looked over at the man beside him. “I thought you and Cullen--”

“--weren’t on the best of terms?” Hawke finished with a chuckle. “That is definitely true. But he’s gone through enough in his life and… Well, let’s just say I have my reasons.”

At a loss for what to say, Dorian reached up and put his hand on top of the one resting on his shoulder. “Thank you, Hawke. I admit, I worry.”

“I would be worried, too. Being in the hands of a demon is never pleasant.” Hawke looked forward for a moment, jaws rippling. “Or the hands of someone equally dark.”

When Hawke lapsed into silence, Dorian’s brow furrowed. “Hawke?”

Hawke coughed and pulled his hand away. “It doesn’t matter. We’ll find Cullen and kick that demon’s ass so far back into the Fade that even the wisps won’t be able to find it.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dorian told him. “You are a formidable man, Hawke.”

“Yes, well.” Hawke gave a shrug. “They don’t call me the Champion because I knit booties for orphans and write bad poetry.”

“Pity,” Dorian said with a smile. “Bad poetry is sometimes the best kind.”

“Oh? Then you should read some of the stuff Varric writes.”

“I heard that,” Varric called ahead.

“Good. I meant you to,” Hawke shouted back, then yanked his daggers from the sheaths at his hips. “I’ll go scout ahead a bit. Don’t worry, I won’t lose sight of you. The last thing we need is for the Nightmare to get more hostages.”

“From your mouth to the Maker’s ears,” Dorian murmured, looking around the Fade with a haunted look. Why does it have to be so complicated?

And where is Cullen?
Cullen’s eyelids fluttered as consciousness slowly returned. Odd sounds reached his ears: distant screams, disturbing squelching noises, and the disconcerting clack of chitin that reminded him of some of the more unsavory creatures in the depths of the caverns of Thedas. He lay on a hard surface, one with far too many pointy bits and grooves to be in any fashion comfortable, and a weight across his body limited his movement as he fidgeted.

Of more immediate concern, however, was his vision - or lack thereof. He blinked to try to clear his eyes, but that only seemed to make it worse. There was a strange sensation on his face, as if someone had poured honey on it, and whatever it was had also oozed into his eyes. When he shook his head in an attempt to get rid of it, pain lanced through him, and he gasped.

“Ah, you awaken.” The voice hit his ears, but also seemed to reverberate in the depths of his mind, sonorous and deep… and chilling, so much so that an instinctive shiver arced through Cullen’s spine.

“Who’s there?” Cullen demanded as he tried to sit up. It was only then he realized that he was bound tightly at both ankle and wrist. With a growl he struggled against his bonds. “Release me!”

“I am your host,” the voice said, just before a slow, malicious laugh echoed in Cullen’s head. “You fell into my realm and to your doom. I recognized you as the gnat who bit me in another dream, interrupting my repast with your ineffectual swatting, but also as a feast most succulent from times before. Thus I sent my minions to pluck you from the ether and bring you hither. Are you not enjoying my hospitality?”

His mind raced as Cullen tried to figure out what the voice meant by calling him a gnat and, more worrying, succulent. That was not a term he ever wanted a demon to call him. “I remember falling, and Dorian using the mark to--” His blood suddenly turned to ice in his veins as the meaning of the former reference suddenly became clear. “You’re the demon from his dream. The one I drove back.”

“Not just any demon, little bug,” the demon snarled. “I am the Nightmare. I am the one you forget upon waking. I feed off memories of fear and darkness, and grow fat upon the terror of mortals. You are here because I am the veiled hand of Corypheus himself! The demon army you fear? I command it. They are bound all through me!”

As the words roiled and echoed in his mind, Cullen fought against his restraints until he finally had to give up. As he lay panting, he focused more on the demon and locked onto the part which mattered most to the Commander of the Inquisition. “Bound through you?” he asked, poking and prodding the idea to see if he could gain any tactical advantage from it. “Then all we have to do is get rid of you, and the demon army will vanish as well? Consider it done, foul beast. The Inquisition will stop you!”

A caustic laugh crawled along Cullen’s spine as the sense of the demon’s presence overwhelmed his consciousness. “You think I should be afraid of the power of Inquisition. How very droll.” Its sarcasm was biting, and Cullen realized that whatever the demon felt about the Inquisition, it was not fear. “I think not. And even if they have sent their best and brightest against me, you are still my own personal guest right now.”

“You mean prisoner,” Cullen shot back.

A dry chuckle was his only answer for that sally. Abruptly something thick and supple wrapped around his wrists, and he was jerked up to dangle loosely, the bindings around his ankles mysteriously gone. “The words matter not, little bug. You are mine now. The paltry curse which
shadowed you before is as nothing compared to what I shall inflict upon you. Fear haunted your dreams, but now I will fill your mind with terror unending.”


“So you would like to believe. You mortals cling to the fragile tendrils of your hope with delightful tenacity. But my masters understand that, and know that fear is older even than hope. After all, one must feel fear before one can hope for it to end.”

Cullen swallowed, but the words echoed in his mind over and over, with one holding his attention more than any other. “Masters?” he gasped. “What masters do you serve?”

A gusty chuckle pricked Cullen’s mind, and he reflexively shook his head to be rid of it despite the pain the motion caused. “Mortals have many fears, and fears have many masters. Some are more powerful than others, little bug. His hands are upon you, and have been for years. Night after night after night, you have felt me deep within your mind, feeding off of the terrors you have endured, terrors borne of him. You think that to be but chance?”

Even as Cullen struggled to make sense of those words, something warm and slimy dragged along Cullen’s body before settling around his neck, a familiar scent flooding his nostrils as he opened his mouth to gasp for air. Lyrium. He shuddered, his struggles increasing as the scent grew stronger. “Release me!” he said through gritted teeth.

“Not until I feed,” the demon whispered— in his ears, in his mind, in his very soul.

Sweet Andraste. Trying not to show his fear, Cullen again tried to blink away whatever was obscuring his vision. “I fear not the likes of you,” he sneered.

The voice boomed with laughter, the sound grating to Cullen’s ears. “I will make you fear.”

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You lash out at the demons whispering in your mind, but the effort proves futile. They cannot be driven away. Minute by minute, hour after hour, the whispering continues, parading each and every one of your thoughts before you and mocking them. You watch as the others succumb; watch as comrades in arms slice open their wrists with an edge of their own armor, or run into the wall head first until they fall to lie on the floor silent and unmoving, or even claw their own eyes out in desperation to stop the visions. You see some turn into the very monsters you are sworn to kill, an irony too painful to dwell upon for long. You resist, but your strength weakens, your throat burns, your stomach empties of all but bile and fear, and your core deep inside yearns for the soothing song borne in blue liquid.

As time passes behind the confinement of the red light, you lose the ability to discern between reality and vision, between what the demons want you to believe and what is real. You start to forget life outside that red circle, start to believe the lies the demons whisper, and start to wonder if perhaps, just perhaps, it would be better to simply surrender.

Yes, the voices whisper. Give in to the madness and despair, the rage and the fear. Give in to us, Templar, and all the pain will go away.

Yet you refuse, you continue to stand steadfast against them, brute force of will serving you where even reason and passion fail. You will not give in, you tell yourself. You will not surrender.

When the whispers reach their peak, when you think that nothing could possibly get worse, the
barrier suddenly falls. You look up into the face of your saviour, your rescuer, into red eyes and a comforting smile. When the blue liquid is offered, you reach for it, desperate for the sharp bite of its harsh taste, but the vial is snatched back, and the comforting smile turns cruel.

“You think it will be that easy?” the man asks with a sneer. “I think not. You owe me, Templar, as few of your Order have ever owed a mage.” As he lets the vial swing loosely between his fingers, you stare hungrily at it. “What will you do for this bounty, Templar?”

You lick your lips in longing, then look up to meet his gaze. "Anything," you whisper.

His lips curve, and he reaches out to settle his hand on the back of your neck, stroking your cheek as he dangles the lyrium in front of you all the while. "Anything?" he murmurs.

You swallow, throat dry as your gaze locks onto the vial once more. "Anything."

"Such a good little Templar,” the man croons as he drags you closer. "Then let us start with the lyrium." He tilts your head back as he pops open the vial of lyrium, and you open your mouth eagerly in anticipation. "And end with you." Slowly he pours a few drops into your mouth, and, uncaring of the consequences, you surrender.

Cullen fought his way out of the vision with a yell, the struggles of his body a reaction to the hopelessness in the dream. “Out of my head, demon!” he groaned, struggling to push the nightmare away. The scent of lyrium remained strong, too strong, as something moist settled near his lips.

“Such a familiar scene, isn’t it? Played out in the theatre of your slumbering mind over and over for so many years, it has provided a sumptuous feast for me.” The demon’s voice, after a memory like that, crawled through Cullen’s mind like a snail inching across his eyeball. “Not to consume so that you would forget, no, but a repast served to me by a generous Master as a fine vintage to enjoy when I wish.”

A frown came to Cullen’s face. “Why would Corypheus--” he began, but stopped as a chill ran up his arms and to his head.

"Gah! Enough!"

That dark laughter filled his head again. “Then perhaps it is time for my next meal.”

Renewing his efforts to escape the tendrils holding his wrists and neck, Cullen roared in mindless fury even as the chill grew and encompassed the entirety of his body.

You thrust your sword strong and true, piercing the heart of the Champion without hesitation. His wide eyes stare at you as the life slowly drains from them, and you feel his weight fall off your arm as his body slumps to the ground.

Staring down at his still form, you pant heavily and wonder how it came to this: the death of the Champion of Kirkwall at your hand. But you were given the order, and you learned in Kinloch Hold that obedience is paramount over all else.

But his sister… your mind whispers, and your brow furrows as you strive to recall the fate of the Champion’s sister, and why it matters now.

“Well done, Knight-Captain,” a crisp voice says from behind you, and you turn to face her as the fate of any Hawke fades from your concerns.

“Knight-Commander.” You give her a quick salute, striking your gauntleted hand to your
“Kirkwall is safe once more. Hawke is dead, and all those who dared defy us are laid low. The city is ours.”

You watch as Meredith’s eyes scan the courtyard of the Gallows, and turn to do so yourself. Tilting your head, you admire the beauty of the sun reflecting off of the bloodstained stones before you. Such a marvelous color, red. It remains a wonder to you that you did not appreciate its luster more before Meredith set your feet once more upon the righteous path. It strikes you as a shame that some of those below could not be saved, and your eyes linger on a still form with red hair held back by a braided headband. Still, Hawke’s defiance of the Templars could not be borne, and so you acted.

When a familiar, tantalizing scent fills your nostrils, you pivot towards your leader, licking your lips in anticipation. “You have earned your reward, Knight-Captain,” Meredith says as she holds out a small vial. “You have my gratitude, and the gratitude of the one we serve.”

Dismissing all thoughts of the dead in the courtyard from your mind, you snatch your prize from her hand. Opening the vial, you gulp down the searing red liquid, shivering when its power surges through your body. The lingering grittiness of the crystal grates against your teeth, but soon you have sucked every last bit of the crimson lyrium down.

As the warmth floods through your body, you meet Meredith’s gaze with a smile on your face and a red gleam in your eyes. “Thank you, Knight-Commander.” You are glad you chose to obey. You are grateful you surrendered.

This time when Cullen emerged from the grip of the nightmare, he heard the harsh scream before he realized that it was his own, and snapped his jaw shut. “No!” he gasped. “No! That never happened!” His head twisted from side to side as he tried to avoid the slippery length that smelled of lyrium, desperate not to need it, and even more desperate not to surrender to that need.

“Your fears provide an exotic field of dread, little bug,” Nightmare said with a dark chuckle. “Who is not to say that you were but one choice away from such a fate? Perhaps that is what truly happened, and everything you believe to be real is but the hopeless, helpless nightmare of one buried in a body lost to corruption?”

A whimper echoed in the back of Cullen’s throat as he thrashed against his bonds. The demon’s words hit too close to home, echoing a fear which had lingered ever since he’d escaped the clutches of the demons during the Blight. What if it had all been a dream? What if it were all an elaborate hoax, like all the other perfect worlds they’d offered and then snatched away from him during his days of torment? What if Mailani were but a sop for his loneliness, Cassandra a reaction to his desperate need for a friend, and even the Inquisition itself an echo of his craving for purpose?

And what would that make Dorian?

Oddly, it was that last thought which drew him back from the spiral of despair. Certainly there was no way that a Tevinter mage with such innumerable buckles, excessive vanity, and enticing scent was an answer to anything Cullen had ever yearned for in the past. He was simply… Dorian, an unexpected gift in a world gone mad, a chaos inserted into Cullen’s order that, impossibly, fit perfectly into a niche Cullen hadn’t known existed. No demon could have possibly conjured up something so unlikely and so wonderful. And that, more than anything else, convinced him that his memories of Dorian were real and true and precious, and that meant that it was all real and no demon’s trick.

Swallowing harshly, he took a deep breath. “You shall not conquer me, demon,” he snarled.
“Then I shall devour you, little bug.” This time, it was not cold, but heat which gripped him, and Cullen struggled not to yell as it suddenly felt like he’d caught fire. “Slowly and with exquisite care.”

You fight your way through the crackling flames, careless of your own injuries. Around you only chaos reigns as the dragon above makes yet another pass, loosing more searing flame to render Skyhold to ash and ruin. Around you lie the motionless and charred bodies of your soldiers, killed by the combined might of Venatori and those who serve the new God of Thedas. Once the order was given to destroy the heretics of the Inquisition, you knew your days were numbered, yet the brutality of the assault still caught you all by surprise.

Stumbling over the broken stones of the great hall, you duck below the broken doors, desperately hoping against hope that you are not too late, that he might yet be saved. You emerge at the top of stairs now reduced to rubble, leaving you a difficult climb down to reach the courtyard, but climb you do, clambering and tumbling over the broken stone as you desperately try to reach the gates of Skyhold and the fierce struggle of the Inquisition's last stand.

As you fight your way towards them, you realize that only four still live to fight, clustered under the arched entrance to Skyhold as the forces of the new God close around them. The dwarf is the first to fall, followed by the Qunari. This leaves only two mages, fighting back to back, one cursing in Tevene while the other yells in elvish. When a lance pierces Solas through the torso and lifts him high, he raises his hands and cries out to the heavens, which flicker in response. Yet whatever magic he might have hoped to weave is halted when a thrown axe removes his head, leaving the lone Tevinter mage to face the might of his enemies.

You cry out as the horde overwhelms Dorian, but it is too late--for him and for you. As the gathered enemy descends upon the Inquisitor, a similar wave washes over you, overwhelming your senses as the light fails around you. Both of you are dragged, kicking and screaming, to be thrown before the feet of their adored leader and are there subject to his crimson gaze.

"And so the mighty fall before me," the new God says, his voice crawling over your spine and crackling through your brain, leaving a blaze of agony in its wake. "You who conquered the Grey Wardens and dictated the future of Orlais, you who brought down Corypheus and withstood the perfidy of the Imperium, are now defeated yourself." As he speaks, the God reaches down and grabs Dorian's left hand, pulling him high. "A pity you have proven to be outside my control, Inquisitor. You would have made a lovely pet. At least your death will end your petty resistance."

You scream as Dorian's body bursts into flame, struggling helplessly against those who hold you as the man whose life you hold more dear than your own dissolves into a pile of ash at the feet of the God. Dimly you are aware of the green light left scintillating in the God's hand, but that matters little. Dorian is gone, and your life no longer has meaning.

“And you, my good little Templar,” the God who was once Amell croons as he turns to you. “You will now take your rightful place.”

What else is there left for you but to surrender?

When Cullen emerged from that nightmare, he thrashed violently against his bonds, for the moment uncaring whether or not the lyrium trickled into his mouth. The fear and rage inspired by the nightmare burned with equal fervor as he fought against both what he had seen and what it implied about what was to come. His heart raced as the image of Dorian engulfed in fire played over and over in his mind, so much so that he didn't notice as the tendrils around his wrists tightened.
When one of his wrists broke with a sharp crack, he screamed and spasmed, dangling limply as his mind struggled to push the demon away. It proved distraction enough for something slippery and drenched with lyrium to slip into his mouth, though he twisted his head in a vain attempt to escape it. Cullen shuddered as the slow tingle of its seductive song spread through him, dismayed by how wonderful he felt in that moment, and fought not to reach for the source when it pulled itself away. “No,” he mumbled as he felt the familiar ache of despair grip his heart. “Never again. I… I promised.” He’d made that oath to Cassandra, to Mailani, and yet now… now he simply wanted more, regardless of the strength of his oaths, and the realization hurt him bone-deep.

“Do you find your fear to be more than you expected, more than you can endure?” the demon taunted him. ”I have found your fear, and I will break you with it. I will make you beg for mercy, and then I will make you beg for more.”

As the demon’s ghastly chuckle echoed in his head, Cullen stirred. “No,” he said, then clenched his eyes shut beneath the viscous liquid that blinded him and reached deep down to find the one, quiet truth that no amount of demonic manipulation could unseat: Dorian would never abandon him. “Never!” Cullen roared, trying to channel his fear and pain into wrath. “I will never surrender to the likes of you!”

“You are disciplined,” the demon noted. As it spoke, Cullen’s bonds shifted once more, releasing his wrists to instead wrap firmly around his torso where they slowly began to squeeze. “But it is not enough. Against me, it is never enough. Even now, your mind is seething with fear. It is beautiful.”

Cullen shook his head, ignoring the pain as he fought against the pressure of the demon’s grip. “It is not… fear, but hate!” he grated, struggling to draw each breath.

“And what can you do against me, little bug?” the demon asked with a dark chuckle.

Without his sword and shield, Cullen found himself wondering the same thing. Still, he could not do nothing, either. With a desperate cry, he kicked out at whatever was holding him in its clutches, connecting solidly with something large and heavy, but which still yielded slightly.

Laughter boomed around him as the Nightmare said in a mocking voice, “Puny mortal. You are a fool if you think that there is anything you can do against me. This is my realm, and all within it must inevitably bow to me, and be prey.”

“No… today. Not… ever!” Cullen managed through gritted teeth, and struggled to take a deep breath as he concentrated. It had been a long time since he’d attempted this particular maneuver outside of a dream, especially without a sword or a shield to help buttress and focus the attack. Yet in forcing Cullen to consume the lyrium in an attempt to toy with his fears, the demon had inadvertently given the ex-Templar a chance to fight back even when in such dire straits.

When the smite finally burst forth, it boiled up from within and swept over his surroundings with all the fury he could manage. A shriek pierced his ears as the hold around him loosened, an opportunity he quickly seized by flailing wildly against what gripped him. His attempts paid off as he slipped from the demon’s grasp, dropping to the ground like a lead weight. Dumb luck plagued him, however, as he landed on one foot at an awkward angle and felt his knee twist beneath him. Still, he had more pressing concerns. Quickly he raised his hand and scrubbed at his face, then stared at what he found on his hand, repulsed by the ichor and wondering what had placed it there.

A movement in front of him seized his attention and his gaze rose, eyes widening as he took in the full size of the demon in front of him. His dim memory from Dorian’s dream about his father was nothing before the sheer size and monstrosity of the thing when it loomed over him. Blocking out the pain of his leg and wrist as best as he could, he scrambled to his feet and lurched away from the
beast, knowing there was no hope of defeating it.

Suddenly another demon blocked his path, smaller than the Nightmare but no less fearful in its aspect. It had no eyes, but simply a bony plate that covered the upper half of its face, and a mouth full of sharp teeth. When it spoke, it was with the voice which had plagued him before. “Oh, no, little bug. You shall not escape me so easily.”

When the spikes of its many arms shot forward to wrap around him, Cullen screamed and tried to push them aside. “You shall not have me!”

“Wrong, little bug. You are the bait I dangle in my trap. Your friends will not leave without you, and I will make sure they never take you.” The mouth spread in a wide, fang-filled grin as it forced him to turn around to face the larger demon once more.

Cullen’s heart leapt. “Then they’re here? They’re safe?” he blurted aloud before he could stop himself.

The bulk of the gargantuan demon lowered as it approached Cullen. The voice sounded in his ears, in his mind, everywhere, and he couldn’t turn away from the hypnotizing stare of the huge eyes now inches from his face. “They are in my realm. I would not use the word safe to describe them,” the voice told him with a snarl. “And you are in my clutches. I would most certainly not use the word to describe you. You are mine, little bug, and I will feed well upon you.”

Cullen swallowed harshly, then lifted his chin in defiance. “Do your worst, demon,”

That gusty, dark chuckle echoed around him and within him as something slowly began to leak into his eyes once more. “I have not yet begun to show you my worst.”

After that, Cullen knew only darkness and pain… and, deep inside, a flickering pulse of hope.

Dorian would come for him. His friend would never break that promise.
After Mailani left them, the attacks came more frequently, both in the form of demons and little snarly things which kept shifting form. Solas identified them as Fearlings, and noted that they reflected the fears of those who fought them. "An unusual form of demon, certainly," he observed, "but not necessarily a surprising one given the nature of our surroundings."

Bull's nose wrinkled as he shoved the disintegrating carcass of one away with his foot. "I wish they'd leave us alone," he noted. "The squirmy little things leave a mess on my maul when I smash them."

"We could lodge a complaint if you'd like," Varric told Bull. "I'm sure the Nightmare would be interested to know if any improvements could be made. 'Not scary enough?'" Varric said in a deep voice, obviously trying to sound like the demon they'd heard earlier. "'Maybe I could find something worse for you.'"

"Don't give it any smart ideas," Bull muttered as he stomped to one side to swing his maul in a wide circle.

"And here you all are," the deep voice said with a dry chuckle.

Bull stiffened. "Dammit, Varric, tell me that was you."

"Sorry, Tiny," Varric said, Bianca shifting in his hands as he looked around anxiously. "I'm not that good."

"So this is who the Inquisition has sent to defeat me," the demon said dryly. "And somehow, with this motley collection, you presume that you will defeat fear itself?"

"It would appear our host has a fondness for its own voice," Loghain observed from where he sat inspecting his sword for damage. "Its words have no meaning otherwise."

"Ah, Teyrn Loghain Mac Tir, the brilliant commander," the voice noted in a sardonic tone. "Pity the one time you tried to rule, you failed so miserably. You had to be beaten, humiliated, lest you destroy your own country. You even doomed the Wardens by bringing the Inquisitor down on them. You destroy everything you touch, including your own children."

Loghain grunted as he sheathed his weapon and stood. "Is that all you've got? It's nothing I've not said to myself." When no reply came from the demon, Loghain shook his head and looked at Dorian. "Shall we move on, Inquisitor? I have an appointment to keep with our host."

Dorian nodded. "Capital idea. Let's go."

As they continued, their path twisted and turned while the meaning of time melted away. They could always see their goal, since the rift never quite disappeared from their sight, but the way towards it meandered, running back over itself before ducking through gullies designed to confuse the mind. Around every corner, yet another batch of foes lurked in waiting, until it seemed as if their progress forward became nothing more than a constant fight to gain their next measure of steps.

And, as a counterpart between each bloody skirmish, the Nightmare taunted them mercilessly, goading them in a manner similar to the way it had treated Loghain. It settled into a pattern as it sought to provoke fear and uncertainty: a battle, then a barb, fearingly crafted for each of them.

"The Qunari will make a lovely host for one of my minions. Or maybe I will ride his body myself."
Bull grunted as he led the way through a pile of bodies. "I'd like to see you try. Besides, looks like your 'minions' can't handle me anyway."

"Did the king's bastard think he could prove himself? It's far too late for that. Your whole life, you've left everything to more capable hands. The Archdemon, the throne of Ferelden, even that pathetic attempt of a rescue of your father... Who will you hide behind now?"

"Oh, please, is that all it's got?" Alistair sneered. "I've heard worse than that from Morrigan. Now there's a sharp tongue."

"Once again, you are in danger because of Hawke, Varric. Do you ever wonder when that danger will be him?"

Varric just rolled his eyes and went back to examining Bianca. "Just keep talking, Smiley."

"Dirth ma, harellan. Ma banal enasalin. Mar solas ena mar din."

Solas straightened, his face showing only a faint amusement as he replied. "Banal nadas."

"Any clues for the peanut gallery what that was about?" Varric asked hopefully.

"A philosophical discussion on the nature of inevitability," Solas told him.

Varric shook his head and sighed. "Right. Whatever you say, Chuckles."

"Greetings, Dorian... It is Dorian, isn't it? For a moment, I mistook you for your father."

Dorian sniffed when the demon finally targeted him. "Rather uncalled for," he muttered.

"It got tiresome rather quickly, didn't it?" Hawke noted with a growl.

Dorian frowned and looked at Hawke. As they'd progressed through the Fade, Dorian had quietly kept an eye on his companions. Some of them seemed almost unaffected by the circumstances. Loghain, not surprisingly, was one of those - the man seemed unflappable - as was Solas. Alistair and Varric both took a couple of opportunities while the group recovered after a fight to simply stand to one side and stare out into the Fade, lost in their own thoughts. Bull was a trifle worrying, given that he kept moving with a restless energy even when they paused to regroup or use potions. Dorian suspected that Bull would be paying for the constant adrenaline rush later, once they were finally out of the Fade and away from any possibility of encountering another demon.

Hawke, however... The first few battles he'd seemed to shrug off with ease. Once the Fearlings had appeared, though, something had changed. Each battle left him a little more agitated, a little more angry, and more prone to snapping at the others and going ahead for 'scouting'. It fed into his fighting and made his attacks that much more ferocious, but it was worrying, and Dorian found himself not looking forward to when the Nightmare finally decided to nudge Hawke directly.

Even as Dorian pondered the matter, another group of Fearlings burst forth from the area ahead of them. Hawke surged forward, using that odd, headache-inducing maneuver where he seemed to blur through the enemy so he could turn and pierce them from behind. He seemed almost reckless, striking at their foes without care for his own safety, and by the time the others had caught up with him, he'd paid for it with a deep slash across his face.

He didn't seem to notice, though, carrying the battle forward until a cliff stopped them and more demons joined in. His actions simply became more agitated, his blades a constant blur as they sought out any foe who dared draw near. When the last one finally fell, it was Hawke who dealt the final
blow which ripped off its head.

Even then, the man didn't slow. He moved to the cliff, serrated daggers still in his hands, and stared down at the formless lands below, chest heaving from his exertions. Uncertain what was running through the man’s mind, Dorian kept a close eye on Hawke as the man paced restlessly along the precipice. Every aspect of Hawke's mien spoke of agitation, from his narrowed eyes to his jerky movements to the way his lips moved silently as if he were arguing with himself. He’d witnessed Hawke’s anger before, of course, but this was closer to incandescent. He’d never seen the man in such a condition and, based on the expression on Varric’s face, neither had he.

And then, to make matters worse, the demon spoke once more.

"Do you think you mattered, Hawke? Did you think anything you ever did mattered? You couldn’t even protect yourself. How could you expect to strike down a god?"

Hawke stilled, his shoulders so tense that Dorian's ached just looking them. His head twitched, but he didn't acknowledge Nightmare in any other way.

"You're a failure," the demon told Hawke with an insouciant sneer in its voice, "and your family died knowing it."

Suddenly Hawke whirled in a complete circle, slicing the air around him, then raised his daggers high and roared, “I’m going to enjoy killing this thing!”

The demon’s dry laugh was Hawke’s only answer, the sound fading even as Hawke blindly stabbed the air in front of him. After a few more volleys, he finally collapsed to his knees and drove one of his daggers into the ground, then the other, his shoulders trembling with what Dorian had to presume was rage. Eventually, Hawke simply started slamming his fist into the ground over and over.

Dorian exchanged a pointed glance with Varric, and they hurried over to Hawke. Bracing himself against the possible reaction, Dorian laid his hand carefully on Hawke’s shoulder. “Viscount?”

Releasing an explosive breath, Hawke’s shoulders released all their tension at once. “Inquisitor,” he gasped as he sagged. “My apologies. This… thing certainly knows how to find sore points, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Varric volunteered, obviously trying to calm Hawke. “It’s still not as bad as listening to Acting Provisional Viscount Bran when he starts talking about himself.”

Hawke barked a laugh, though it was short. “Maker. That puts things in perspective, doesn’t it? And people call me arrogant.” Taking a long, deep breath, he shot Varric a glance. “Thank you.”

“No charge,” Varric said as a nervous smile came to his face. “You were, ah, pretty intense there for a moment. I’ve never seen you like that before.”

Hawke’s jaw rippled for a moment. “No. No, you wouldn’t have.” He reached up to rub his eyes, then winced. “Ow. What happened to my face?” he asked as he gingerly prodded at the cut over his nose.

“Honestly?” Varric asked. “Looks like one of the demons read my book.”

“Andraste’s flaming tits,” Hawke groaned. “A blood streak across my nose?”

Varric grinned. “About right, yeah.”
“Just like your damned book’s cover?”

“You got it, Hawke.” Varric’s grin widened. “Who knew I had fans in the Fade?”

“Shut up, dwarf,” Hawke muttered as he dabbed at the injury. He succeeded only in smearing the blood a bit, and finally sighed. “It doesn’t matter, does it? Just like everything else I do.” Yanking his blades from the ground, he pushed himself to his feet. “Dorian,” he said softly as he sheathed his weapons in a measured motion. “Might I have a word?”

Taken aback by the abrupt change from title to name, Dorian nodded. “As you wish, Hawke. Are you… all right?”

Hawke met Dorian’s gaze for a long moment, then looked away without answering as he moved away from the cliff. After a moment, he paused and glanced back. “You too, Varric. Get over here.”

Snapping to attention at the sound of his name, Varric grunted in surprise. “Well, how can I turn down such a gracious invitation?” he asked as he moved to join them. His face grew more puzzled as Hawke just set his hand on the dwarf’s shoulder and pulled him along until all three of them were as far as he could get them from the others and still remain within sight. “Uh, is this a good idea?” Varric asked, glancing around a bit nervously. “Those things are still out there, you know.”

“It won’t take long,” Hawke said softly.

“You’re really starting to creep me out, Hawke,” Varric admitted.

“Just… give me a moment. You can do that, can’t you?” Hawke pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. “You know how I’ve always said you didn’t know enough to tell the whole story?”

Varric snorted. “All the damn time. And I was with you pretty much everywhere except when you snuck off to be alone with—” His voice faltered for a moment as he clearly backed away from finishing that particular thought. Finally he simply nodded. “Yeah. I remember.”

“Didn’t you ever wonder why I asked you to tag along?” Hawke asked, staring intently at Varric. “Even though our relationship can be termed, at best, friendly rivals?”

“The thought crossed my mind a time or two, yeah.” Varric frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “What are you getting at?”

Hawke’s head fell back as he stared upwards for a while. “I needed a witness,” he said after a while. “Someone good at noticing things, someone who wouldn’t easily forgive me.”

Shifting on his feet, Varric exchanged an uneasy glance with Dorian. “All right, Hawke, now that you’ve really weirded me out, would you mind telling us why you’ve called this little meeting?”

Hawke frowned at a rock formation as it floated past above them. “Because I lied about something. Something important.”

“Ouch, but fair,” Hawke said with a breathy chuckle, but the mirth quickly passed. “Dorian,” he said, turning his eyes towards the man as he spoke, “I lied to you as well. When you asked me about Jorath Amell.”

A frisson shivered over Dorian’s skin as Varric inhaled sharply. “So you have met him,” Dorian
said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

“Not in the flesh, no,” Hawke admitted. “And long, long before Corypheus was even a name on anyone’s lips who wasn’t a Warden.”

“In your dreams, then?” Dorian guessed.

Hawke nodded. “I think he’s a *somniari*.”

Taken aback by hearing his own surmise echoed by Hawke, he canted his head slightly. “I’m impressed someone not of the Imperium has even heard the word.”

“I first heard it from an elf, actually. One of Merrill’s Dalish friends, her Keeper or some such, used the word when we were dealing with a half-blood back in Kirkwall.” Hawke glanced to the dwarf near them. “Varric, you remember. It was when you all betrayed me in the Fade.”

“Yeah, Hawke, I remember. Not that it ended well for the poor guy in question,” Varric reminded him. “*Some* of us didn’t follow the advice we were given.”

Hawke’s nostrils flared. “By that point I already knew how dangerous someone so powerful in the dream realm could be,” he said acidly. “You’ll forgive me if I didn’t want to give Feynriel the benefit of the doubt. The point is that Amell found me after I came back from the Deep Roads. Apparently once I got famous enough for him to care, he went looking for me. Told me *blood calls to blood*.”

“Maker,” Dorian breathed. “Not something you want to hear from a blood mage.”

“Back then, I didn’t know he was one,” Hawke said in a flat voice. “We talked a few times. At first, it was flattering. He *was* the Hero of Ferelden, after all, and I hadn’t heard the horror stories about him. I mean, Isabela always went quiet when the name came up in a song or tale, but it didn’t really mean anything at the time.”

Varric’s eyebrows rose. “And the fact that Blondie never mentioned him wasn’t a clue either? He was only a Warden *because* of Amell.”

“Later he talked about Amell,” Hawke said, eyes closing. “After it was too late.”

When Hawke fell silent, Dorian reached out and gently touched Hawke’s arm. “I take it eventually Amell did more than simply talk?”

Hawke nodded. “At first, I didn’t really notice. I just knew that I started to hear stories and rumors about things I’d done that I couldn’t remember doing.”

“Sweet Andraste’s ass, Hawke,” Varric breathed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And say what?” Hawke snapped. “*Oh, by the way, those things you saw me do and say? Not me. Blame the scary man in my dreams.*” He leveled a look at Varric. “Would you really have bought that as an excuse?”

Varric looked uncomfortable as he looked down. “I… guess not,” he finally admitted.

“At first, it seemed fairly trivial, and usually happened after some of my worst nights at the Hanged Man,” Hawke said. “After that it began to get a bit more sinister, and I thought perhaps I was simply going mad. After all, the world was going mad around me, or so it felt like. The truth didn’t really occur to me until…” Hawke’s jaw rippled. “Something happened with Anders. And afterwards, he started talking about some of the things Amell had done to him, to the people of Amaranthine, and…”
I realized what was going on."

“Did you tell Blondie?” Varric asked. "He had that… friend of his, maybe he could have helped.”

“I couldn’t.” Hawke grimaced and ran his fingers through his hair. “Literally couldn’t. Whatever Amell had done to me, my tongue was sealed.”

“So… giving Fenris back to Danarius?” Varric asked. "That was one of the top three for me."

Hawke's eyes squeezed shut. “I didn’t even know until I received a letter from the Magister, aside from the cold shoulders you lot gave me and the fact that Fenris wasn't at home anymore. Not that Fenris and I were chums, of course. He was still a knife ear and drank all the good wine without me, but… No. No, I would never have done that.” A haunted look came to his face. “Believe me, I would never give someone over to a blood mage. Not willingly.”

Varric reached out and patted Hawke’s back awkwardly. “I never knew. I never even suspected. I mean… well…”

Batting Varric’s hand away, Hawke frowned. “I was always a bit of a todger, I know. When I started getting nastier, it wasn’t as if it were a sudden change from sweetness and butterflies to abomination. Some of the things you couldn’t stomach probably were me, if we sat down and compared notes. I call elves knife-ears. I have no problem getting a little rough with the gents at the Blooming Rose. And I did kill Feynriel. And Anders.”

“Yeah, but…” Varric subsided when Hawke gave him a glare. “All right. So why tell us this now?”

“Because of where we are, and what we’ve been doing.” Hawke gave a long, drawn-out sigh. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but with each and every little Fearling we’ve killed, I'm actually starting to remember what he did through me.”

Dorian’s eyes widened as he caught the implication immediately. “That must mean the Nightmare stole your memories,” he breathed.

Hawke nodded, face grim. “And I’ve been getting more and more of myself back with each and every horde we’ve faced.”

“Well, shit,” Varric grunted. “No wonder you’re so angry. What did you remember this time? I thought you were going to turn into a rage demon for a moment there.”

“Bethany,” Hawke said curtly.

Varric paled and looked away. “Oh. Yeah, that was… that was pretty bad.”

Hawke nodded, but didn’t say anything more on the matter. “It got me to thinking, if my memories were coming back, and since it's become so clear that Amell is not just my own personal demon anymore, that perhaps I could actually talk about him, and should. It seems his influence on me is diminished while I'm here.”

“So you think he can’t affect you here?” Dorian frowned, puzzled. “But the Fade was how he found you.”

“My dreams were how he found me,” Hawke corrected. “This isn’t one of my dreams, we’re here physically. That has to be the difference that keeps him at bay. And by the Maker, I’m going to take advantage of that.”
Raising an eyebrow, Dorian asked, “How, precisely?”

“That part I’m still working out,” Hawke admitted. “But at least now you both know not to trust me once we get out of here. I have to assume he’ll get his hooks in me again as soon as circumstances change. For now, though, I am wholly your man, Inquisitor.”

“There must be a way to fight him in the waking world,” Dorian argued.

“Maybe, but we might not find out in time.” Hawke gave a shrug. “Either way, we need to get back to finding our way out. We certainly won’t reach the exit by standing still.”

“There’s one thing I don’t understand, though,” Dorian mused. “You said he approached you before you’d ever freed Corypheus.”

Hawke nodded. “Yes.”

“And you said that you’ve been recovering memories as we’ve been merrily slaughtering our way through the Fade,” Dorian continued.

With another nod, Hawke repeated, “Yes.”

“But isn’t the Nightmare a servant of Corypheus?” Dorian asked. “If it is, and Corypheus wasn’t free yet when you began forgetting things, what does that mean for the tie between the Nightmare and Amell?”

Hawke’s expression grew troubled. “Well… shit. I didn’t think of that.”

“Maybe the Nightmare thinks Corypheus is a better bet right now?” Varric guessed. “I mean, who would you pick for an ally? The Hero of Ferelden who, although a bastard, is still just a Grey Warden with some ability at magic, or one of the Magisters who started the Blight in the first place? Maybe the demon just switched allies when he found something higher on the level of fear.”

“True,” Dorian mused. “And a very good point, actually.”

“And it’s probably the closest we’ll get to answer right now,” Hawke said. “We should go.”

As Varric nodded and walked towards the others, Dorian reached out and set his hand on Hawke’s shoulder to pull him back. "We should do something about that wound on your face."

Hawke made a dismissive gesture. "'Tis but a scratch." When Dorian gave him a look, he sighed and folded his arms over his chest. "Oh, all right. If you insist, Inquisitor."

As Dorian pulled a kerchief from one of his many pouches and cleaned the cut, he murmured, "Thank you for telling us. It can't have been easy."

With a little shrug, Hawke said, "What did I have to lose? You both hate me already."

Dorian smiled slightly. "I wouldn't go that far. You made me uncomfortable, perhaps, but I won't deny that our first night together was quite enjoyable."

Hawke smiled at him, the expression oddly gentle in a way Dorian had never seen before. “I'm glad to hear it. I don't want to hurt you, Dorian.” He paused as Dorian pulled the cloth away and probed his nose, then met Dorian's gaze intently. "I never did."

Dorian frowned slightly at the odd emphasis, then recalled the strange tension in Hawke the last few times they’d been alone together, and the odd feeling of being pushed. “Then Amell--”
“Thought he could work through me to get to you. But I'm not using that as an excuse. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want it to happen, though for a different reason than he did. In that case, I let him use me, and I shouldn't have. I fooled myself into thinking that if I did what he wanted willingly, it would make it better somehow, that if you wanted me, it would not be the same as what he did to me.” Hawke grimaced. “Pure sophistry, I know.”

Unsure how to respond that, Dorian turned his thoughts instead to remembering those attempts. “It wasn’t just you, though, was it?”

“Not lately. He was getting impatient, you see. So he sent a little gift to help, a charm I was supposed to wear when I was with you.” Hawke looked down for a moment. “And to my shame, I did.”

“That agent you met at Griffon Wing Keep,” Dorian said as the timing suddenly fell into place. “He was the one who gave it to you, wasn’t he?”

Hawke gave a short nod. “It was supposed to make it harder for you to say no, to resist. I’m no mage, so I don’t know the words or anything for what he did, but it has to involve blood magic. I should have thrown the damned thing away without using it, and I didn’t. And that’s on me. I wish I could say I was afraid of what he’d do to me if I did toss it, but the truth is I wanted you to fill the void inside of me, and I saw it as the best way to sway you.” A sad smile came to his face. “Anders would have had my guts for garters by now, and I’d deserve it. He always was the best of me. Maybe that’s why I failed him so badly when he was no longer the best of himself.”

Dorian’s heart ached in sympathy, even despite Hawke’s earlier confessions. “Blood magic does things to people,” he told Hawke. “I’m from the Imperium, so I know of what I speak. It’s why I’ve always sworn never to use it myself.”

“No. No excuses. I don’t deserve the benefit of the doubt here.” Putting his hands on Dorian’s shoulders, he said, “I’ve wronged you, Dorian, and for that I am sorry. I’m just grateful that it didn’t succeed. But don’t let me fool myself or you into thinking that just because it didn’t work doesn’t mean I didn’t intend evil. I may be an arrogant asshole, but I know right from wrong, and I chose wrong. I don’t want an easy out. There are some things a man should have to earn, and your trust is definitely one of them, if ever I can regain it. If ever I had it,” he added. “I don’t really have a lot to recommend me beyond being the Champion of Kirkwall, and as I told your predecessor, I don’t use that title much anymore."

Touched, Dorian nodded and put one of his hands on top of Hawke’s. “I… I will think on it, though I do wish to offer forgiveness, even if the trust may be delayed a while.”

Hawke snorted and shook his head. “Not that I’m ungrateful, but your forgiveness won’t mean much until I forgive myself, and I’m still working on that for other things I’ve done. No offense, but… what I did to you isn’t exactly the worst sin I’ve committed.”

“I understand. There are a lot of things I’m still working on myself,” Dorian said quietly. After a moment of silent contemplation, he asked, “You’re, ah, not still wearing the charm, are you?”

Hawke chuckled with a rueful grimace. “A fair question, but no. I threw it into the sands of the Western Approach last night after the first or second bottle of Antivan brandy.”

Dorian’s eyebrows rose. “We had Antivan brandy on the march?”

“I brought it with me, for… fortitude, you might say. To remind myself how I’d stomped right over the line I’d sworn I would never cross. There’s a difference between a bit of rough sex and forcing myself on a man who doesn’t want it, even if it is only a kiss.” With a little shrug, he added, “And
you didn’t want it. At least, not from me. Not that I blame you, of course.”

Uncertain how to respond, Dorian simply asked, “Why Antivan brandy?”

A haunted expression captured his face as Hawke looked away and swallowed harshly. “That’s… personal. Maybe after we kill Amell, I’ll tell you.”

“All right,” Dorian said in a hushed tone, recognizing deeply buried pain readily enough. It was why he’d tried to find the bottom of so many bottles himself, after all.

Squeezing Dorian’s shoulders one last time, Hawke lowered his arms. “What I’m really afraid of is that once I stop being a willing accomplice in the matter, Amell might do more than a simple charm—which is why you should stay away from me once we get back. I don’t want to hurt you, I swear it.” A grin suddenly came to his face, easing his stern expression. “But don’t think for a moment that I wouldn’t hop back into bed with you given a proper opportunity. I just know I can’t trust myself, and neither should you.”

Dorian chuckled. “It was a rather poorly thought-out decision on both our parts that first night, wasn’t it?”

A cocky smirk came to Hawke’s face. “Oh, that night I’ll own entirely. Especially the bits where you screamed my name. Amell had nothing to do with that. His influence came later.” Hawke reached up to cup Dorian’s cheek, and for the first time since that first night, Dorian smiled at the touch. Hawke’s face, however, grew serious. “Promise me you won’t let anyone treat you the way I did after that night,” he said softly. “Politics or not, alliance or not, feelings or not. You deserve better from me, or anyone. You always have.”

Dorian’s eyes widened as the words hit home and resonated deep inside. “I…I don’t know what to say.”

“Then just agree with me and give me that promise,” Hawke told him.

“I promise,” Dorian said with a little laugh. “No one’s ever told me that before.”

“Shame on them, then,” Hawke said as his thumb lightly stroked Dorian’s cheek.

Before Dorian realized the other man had shifted closer, he felt Hawke’s lips on his, a soft caress with uncharacteristic tenderness. Letting his eyes flutter shut, Dorian accepted the tenderness as it was offered, with nothing expected or required other than the kiss itself. Only when Hawke drew away did he open his eyes to meet Hawke’s gaze. “What was that for?”

“A lot of things,” Hawke said softly. “Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll even tell you.”

Dorian wrinkled his nose at the man. “Beast.”

“Oh, that only begins to describe me,” Hawke said with a chuckle as he stepped back. “Come on, Inquisitor. We have a demon whose ass needs some serious boot damage dealt to it.”

“Just what I was thinking,” Dorian said as they walked back to the others.

The demons didn’t stop coming, though it seemed that the Nightmare had tired of taunting them personally. There did seem to be an escalation in the fights as the foes grew in both numbers and strength, but they simply bore down and pressed on regardless.
At long last, they turned the corner in yet another twisting canyon, and saw, closer than ever before and directly ahead, a beacon of shifting green energy. “The rift!” Hawke yelled, pointing at it. “We’re almost there!”

“Great, Hawke,” Varric said with a bite of sarcasm. “Why not just dare the Old Gods to try and stop you?”

“Let them try,” Hawke declared as he started forward. Started, but then stopped when a barrier suddenly sprang up in front of them, blocking the way. “Well, shit.”

“Good job, Hawke. You pissed off the gods,” Varric sighed. “I suppose I should be used to that around you.”

“Shut it, dwarf,” Hawke groused, but the glare he sent to Varric nevertheless had a fair mix of humor in it as well.

And for a wonder, Varric grinned back at Hawke. “Bite me.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Hawke quipped. With a frustrated grunt, he jabbed the barrier with one of his daggers, then yelped when it flared and zapped him. “Well, that didn’t work.”

“Anything else obvious you’d like to point out to the class?” Varric asked with a roll of his eyes.

“Perhaps we could try a magical solution?” Dorian suggested. “I’d recommend stepping away from the barrier, Viscount.”

“With pleasure,” Hawke said as he trotted back to the others. “It didn’t seem to like me, anyway.” Varric snorted. “I should welcome it to the club.”

Whatever response Hawke made was lost in the sound of Dorian’s magical assault on the barrier. After a few moments, he frowned and set his staff on the ground, looking at the still-intact barrier. “Hmph. Well, that didn’t work either.” Glancing at Solas, he gestured the elf forward. “Perhaps you could use that teeth-tingling magic of yours?”

“I do not think that magic will be very helpful in this case, Inquisitor,” Solas told him as he reached Dorian’s side. His eyes scanned the green barrier for a long moment, and then he nodded. “I suspect, however, that the key to this barrier is in your hands.” When Dorian raised an eyebrow, Solas dipped his head slightly. “Or should I say, in your hand.”

Dorian blinked, then laughed a bit sheepishly. “Ah. Yes, well. That did slip my mind. Perhaps I should have tried that first.” Flexing his left hand, he held it up as it burst into green flame, and his eyes widened slightly. “Odd. It feels more powerful than before.”

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“That could be attributed to the absence of Inquisitor Lavellan,” Solas surmised. “Or even your time spent here in the Fade. You will likely find that the Anchor will undergo subtle changes as time passes, particularly now that it is wholly yours.”

“Oh, that sounds thrilling,” Dorian drawled, then wove his will around the green energy and what he had come to think of as the Anchor’s magic. After taking a moment to center himself, he unleashed the energy with pinpoint precision at the barrier.

The green wall of energy jumped, then shimmered. Under the pressure of the Anchor’s magic, it slowly began to ripple and warp. Encouraged, Dorian called deeper into the Anchor and funneled even more magic into it, pushing harder and harder until the barrier suddenly burst into a cloud of
shimmering motes of energy. Cutting off the Anchor’s magic, he smiled and tilted his head. “Well, that’s pretty.”

“Well done, Inquisitor,” Solas told him, sounding grudgingly impressed. “Your control of the Anchor is admirable. Perhaps we could speak further, mage to mage, of the possibilities with its usage once we are back in Skyhold.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea, Solas,” Dorian agreed. “I should have done so as soon as I— Mailani?” He blinked at the golden figure which appeared in the archway where the barrier had stood.

“The Nightmare is close, and it knows you seek escape. With each moment, it grows stronger,” Mailani declared. “When it is strong enough, it will not need a mage to unleash itself upon the world. As long as the rift is open, it is a danger to Thedas.”

Dorian took a deep breath, then nodded. “Then it is time, gentlemen,” he said as he raised his staff. Already he could see the demons and Fearlings ahead, but he did not falter. “For Thedas!”

They surged up the final set of stairs towards the rift, cutting their way through their foes with practiced ease. The previous fights in the Fade had only honed their skills and their ability to fight together, and they moved in a violent dance that mowed down the enemy. When they emerged at the top of the stairs, however, their steps faltered for the first time.

“Maker’s breath,” Alistair gasped. “Look at the size of that thing!”

“Finally, something that won’t fall apart with one good hit! Let’s go!” Bull roared.

Dorian, however, found his eyes dropping from the hulking monstrosity in front of them to something hidden in its shadow. It took a moment for his eyes to pierce the darkness and parse the various elements into a cohesive whole, but once his eyes recognized the wavy blond hair for what it was, a pang of desperate hope ran through him. When he saw the blood covering Cullen’s face, anger joined in with it, and he felt his face turn into a mask of rage.

Before any of them could take another step, however, Mailani was in front of them, her golden light bright and growing moreso with every second. She paused long enough to look back at Dorian. “Farewell, Dorian. Take care of Cullen for me.”

“Mailani!” Dorian cried, reaching out, but it was too late. She was already moving up and forward, directly for the core of the gargantuan spider which lay between them and the rift. The light intensified until all of them had to turn away or be blinded, and when the light disappeared, she was gone.

As was the spidery terror of the Nightmare.

That didn’t mean they were without a foe, however. An aspect of the Nightmare remained, with no eyes, a mouth full of fangs, and several spider-like arms protruding from its torso. With a roar, Bull charged, maul already swinging. “Let me out of here!”

Loghain and Alistair followed after, coordinating their attacks with that of Bull’s in a deadly ballet of blades. As Dorian and Solas quickly buttressed them with protective spells, movement caught his attention, and he saw more demons converge on them from all directions. “Hawke!” he cried, then quickly wove a spell he’d created while working with Alexius on time magic. Hawke, already lethal, became a literal blur as he stepped outside time temporarily and moved faster than the eye could follow.
Varric, meanwhile, had worked his way over to stand next to Cullen. A clever mix of his caltrops and grenades, combined with the deadly accuracy of Bianca, worked to make the area around them unapproachable. He met Dorian’s gaze and gave him a subtle wink, clearly telling Dorian, I got this.

With a twitch of his eyebrow, Dorian turned his head to exchange a glance with Solas. “I’ll take defense,” Dorian told him, and Solas accepted that with a nod before blurring to the other side of the other fight’s arena, leaving demons screeching with pain in his wake.

After that, Dorian’s focus narrowed down to supporting the others with every fiber of his being. Oh, he got hit a few times, and had to down a few potions of various colors to keep going, but the stakes were too high to care about such things as blood in his clothes or cuts in his skin. All that really mattered was the defeat of their foes.

The demon with no eyes was the last to fall, unsurprisingly, though it was in doubt as to whether it was Bull’s maul to its head or Hawke’s daggers in its back which felled it at last. As it screamed and collapsed to the ground to curl up into a ball, Bull kept hitting it, over and over, long past when it had stopped moving. “How do you like that, huh?” Bull yelled at it. “Who’s afraid now?”

Finally Loghain reached out and grabbed the handle of Bull’s maul, effectively halting it with surprising strength. “Enough,” he said in a firm voice. “It’s dead.”

Chest heaving, Bull stared at the demon as it slowly dissolved, then nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s dead.” He spat at the ground as he slung his weapon across his back. “And good riddance.”

As Loghain and Alistair both chuckled and patted Bull on the back, Solas said, “I would not celebrate yet. That was but an aspect of the demon, not its entirety. We have conquered its current form, but it could return at any moment. We’d best make haste through the rift.”

“What about the demon army?” Hawke demanded.

“Closing the rift should prevent them from coming through as well,” Solas said.

“But you don’t know for sure,” Hawke noted.

Solas shook his head. “No. I do not.”

“So there’s a possibility that it could still come through?” Hawke persisted.

“Can we just get out of here?” Bull asked as he rolled his shoulders. “I really don’t want to tackle another version of that thing, you know? What if the that spider thing comes back?”

“Soon, Bull, I promise,” Dorian said, then ran past all of them to where Cullen was bound. Ruthlessly he used bursts of magic to break through the red, glowing tendrils of the spell which held the man in an unnatural position and pulled him into his arms. “Commander,” he said as he scrubbed the blood away as best as he could. “Commander!”

Cullen’s eyes fluttered open. “In-Inquisitor?”

Dorian nearly cried with relief, but managed to contain himself to a harsh swallow and a strained voice when he said, “Don’t worry, I’m here.” Cradling the man’s head with one hand, he whispered, “I’ll protect you.”

“Kn-knew you’d come,” Cullen gasped, a little smile curling his lips. “Knew you wouldn’t… leave me behind.”
Without thinking, Dorian pressed a kiss to Cullen’s forehead, then quickly cleared his throat as he drew back hastily. “Of course I wouldn’t,” he scolded the man. “I don’t have so many friends that I can afford to leave any behind.” Evading Varric’s knowing look, Dorian beckoned Bull over with an urgent gesture. “Bull will carry you out. Somehow the lumberjack only has a few scratches on him.”

“Hey, now, that’s not fair. It’s called talent,” Bull said as he knelt next to Dorian and spread his arms wide. “I can’t help it if I’m just that good.”

As Dorian transferred Cullen to Bull’s arms, he was able to take a quick survey of the damage, and winced in sympathy. “You’ll be all right, Commander,” he repeated, desperately hoping it would prove to be true.

Before Bull rose to his feet, Cullen’s hand landed on Dorian’s arm. “The Nightmare,” he said, fighting for each word, looking intently into Dorian’s eyes. “It’s the one in control of the demon army. It’s not… just part of it, or the leader. It’s how the army… happens at all.”

Dorian’s eyes widened. “What?”

“They’re bound to it. To Nightmare,” Cullen said. “It told me so while it was… holding me. So if you… banish it, keep it out of Thedas…”

“We stop the whole bloody army,” Dorian finished for him, the pieces which had evaded him on how, precisely, to do exactly that falling into place. “Marvelous.”

“Yes,” Cullen said, obviously relieved that Dorian understood, though the words were clearly getting more difficult to get out. Dorian couldn’t help but take one of Cullen’s hands between his own as the man struggled to continue despite the pain. “Once you… get through the rift, close it behind you with… all you have. Nightmare will be… cut off and that will… banish the demons who already…”

Suddenly his eyes rolled up in his head as he sagged, limp, in Bull’s arms.

“I think Curly’s down for the count, Sparkler,” Varric said with a frown. “Look at his wrist and that knee. That’s not how they’re supposed to bend.”

Bull stood, taking care not to exacerbate Cullen’s injuries. “I’ll take it from here, boss. He’ll make it, don’t worry.”

Dorian took a deep breath, then nodded. “You’re right, Bull.” Cullen had to make it. Dorian refused to believe any other outcome. He finally relinquished his grasp on Cullen’s hand and let Bull take him towards the rift, holding Cullen as gently as he would a child. Suddenly full of nervous energy, Dorian sprang to his feet and limped to stand in front of the rift. Ignoring his own wounds, he held out his left hand and commanded the damned rift to open. “Take him through,” he ordered Bull. “Varric, Solas, go with them. We’ll watch your back and make sure nothing follows.”

Varric nodded and led the way to the rift. “Come on, Tiny. I never want to see the Fade again. It’s unnatural.”

“That makes two of us,” Bull said fervently.

Solas followed after them, though he did linger to look behind him for a few moments. His eyes moved over the Fade, as if drinking the sight in one last time, and then he smiled. “Fascinating,” he said softly, then turned and walked through the rift.

Once they were through and he knew Cullen was safe, Dorian returned to Hawke and the Wardens. As he approached, he saw that Hawke’s armor was dark with blood in his right side. “Can you make it, Hawke?”
“What, this?” Hawke asked, dismissing the wound with a snort. “I’ve had worse.”

“Good.” And he meant it. Despite the tension which had grown between them, their time in the Fade had given him another perspective of the man. He hoped they would be able to find a way to help Hawke escape his cousin’s nefarious clutches, and perhaps even learn more about Amell once that hold was broken. Certainly the Inquisition knew far more about Amell now than they had before Dorian had inadvertently broken several rules in every major religion of Thedas. “Then let’s go. The sooner you’re in the hands of a healer, the better.”

“Inquisitor,” Hawke said, “remember what I told you.”

Dorian set a hand on the man’s shoulder. “I remember,” he said, “and I will not forget.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” Hawke grunted. Though his first few steps had a hitch in them, he quickly evened his stride as he led them to the exit. “I’ve had enough of the Fade for a lifetime. At least no one betrayed me this time.”

“And at least I didn’t find a hitherto unknown family member,” Alistair said with a chuckle as Dorian and the Wardens fell in behind Hawke.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” Dorian asked with affected surprise, feeling a bit whimsical now that the end of their little adventure was in sight.

Alistair gave him a confused look. “Tell me what?”

“That somewhere in the dank nethers of my family tree, your ancestors and my ancestors share a common person?” Dorian shrugged. “I could have sworn I told you.”

“You’re… We’re… related?” Alistair asked, blinking a few times.

“Oh, not very closely, mind. But bloodlines are very serious business in Tevinter. You’re taught lessons and tested,” Dorian explained.

A grin came to Alistair’s face. “Is that so?”

Dorian nodded, face quite serious. “Oh, yes. By very strict nannies.”

“Riiight.” Alistair squinted at Dorian. “This is a joke, right? You’re just having me on?”

“Would I do that to you, Warden Alistair?” Dorian said, though one corner of his mustache did begin to twitch. He couldn’t quite suppress it entirely.

Before Alistair could respond, however, a large, segmented leg descended from above. They all looked up in surprise as the monstrosity from before slowly lowered itself through the mists of the Fade. “Oh, come on!” Alistair protested. “I thought that thing was gone!”

“Apparently not,” Hawke said grimly, dashing to push Dorian back as another leg lowered to land in the place where the mage had been. “Quick, get out of its reach!”

“We need to clear a path,” Loghain declared as he readied his own sword and shield.

“All well and good, but how?” Alistair asked.

Hawke’s face turned grim as he spun his daggers in his hands. “We need a distraction.” Glancing at Dorian, he gestured towards the exit. “Go. I’ll cover you.”
“This isn’t the time to argue over who gets to stay behind,” Loghain said. “I’ve had my time. I’ll go.” He took a step forward, but Alistair grabbed his shield.

“No. The Wardens need you, need your experience, now more than ever,” Alistair told him. “You stood down the archdemon. You’ve fought more battles than I’ve even heard about. They need you to help them rebuild.”

Hawke rolled his eyes. “The Wardens need both of you. They lack a Commander, and they need to know what Amell is capable of. That means both of you need to go back. Besides, you need to make sure the Inquisitor survives long enough to close the damned rift. If he doesn’t, all that we’ve gone through will be for naught.”

“But the Wardens caused this mess in the first place,” Alistair shot back. “A Warden must--”

“Oh, stuff it, Alistair,” Hawke snapped as he glared at the younger Warden. “Go back to Thedas. Save your reputation. Get a pretty girl. Be the bloody hero. For me, there are more important things.” Hawke stared up at the beast as it shifted its bulk. “Like making sure this damned demon never sees the light of day.” Twirling his daggers once more, he looked at Dorian for a moment. “Take care of Varric for me, Inquisitor.”

And then, before any of them had a chance to respond, Hawke charged forward with a yell, slicing deep into the underbelly of the beast. It reared up with a loud scream, opening up enough room for them to get by.

“That’s our cue,” Loghain grunted, then surged forward, batting an errant leg of the monster out of the way with his shield when it got too close.

Dorian followed hot on his heels, though when Loghain paused at the rift itself, he did as well. It was only then that he realized that the two of them were alone, and he turned to see Alistair buckling his shield onto his arm. “Alistair! What are you doing?”

Glancing up from his task, Alistair shook his head. “I’m sorry, Inquisitor, but I need to see this all the way through. This thing cannot be allowed to control the Wardens again.” He took a deep breath, then turned back towards the Nightmare with an expression of grim determination. “Tell Leliana I’m sorry.” Only then did he roar and charge towards the Nightmare with sword raised, hitting it with a smite that knocked it off its balance just before its leg would have crushed Hawke like a bug. “For the Wardens! For Thedas!”

Instinctively Dorian took a step towards Alistair, only half-aware that he moved at all. He was halted by Loghain’s firm grip on his arm as the Warden said in a rough voice, “We should go, Inquisitor!” As Loghain hauled him through the rift, Dorian kept his gaze locked on the two seemingly tiny figures battling the monstrous bulk of the Nightmare, knowing why he had to leave, and wishing he could remain.

After that, there was only light.
A Chance to Breathe

Dorian managed not to stumble as he crossed from one side of the rift to the other, though the abrupt return to the real world fell like a hammer of renewed reality. Acting on pure instinct, he turned and held up his left hand, slamming the rift shut with a stern command sent through the Anchor. In doing so, he sealed not only the rift, but any possibility of a rift back to that part of the Fade to be made again. Once that was done, every demon still in the main courtyard screeched and melted into the floor as they returned to the Fade, unable to maintain their presence in the waking world without the strength of the Nightmare to draw upon.

When the last one disappeared, a cheer arose from the assembled soldiers and Wardens, and Loghain limped towards him. “Without the Nightmare, Corypheus loses both his Warden Mages and his demon army,” the Warden observed. “But in the eyes of your soldiers, their Inquisitor broke the spell with the power given him by the Herald of Andraste.”

Dorian gave a nervous laugh. “Ah, but surely a Vint couldn’t possibly be blessed by Andraste, even indirectly?”

Loghain canted his head to one side. “I think you underestimate yourself, Inquisitor,” he said softly. “But also remember that sometimes, people just want to believe the legend.”

Before Dorian could think of an adequate response, a familiar face hurried up and gave a sharp salute. “Inquisitor!” After Dorian’s nod of acknowledgement, Jim launched into his report. “The archdemon flew off as soon as you disappeared. The Venatori Magister is unconscious but alive. Seeker Cassandra thought you might wish to deal with him yourself. The Commander has been taken to the healers outside the gates. As for the Wardens, those who weren’t corrupted helped us fight the demons.”

Next to Jim, a Grey Warden in heavy armor straightened and gave Dorian a salute of his own, banging his hand across his chest. “We stand ready to help make up for Clarel’s tragic mistake.”

As Dorian considered the Warden’s statement, Varric moved closer, a puzzled frown on his face. “Sparkler, wait. What about Hawke?”

Yes, what about Hawke? The man had once more surprised him with his actions, and Dorian was still reeling with them himself. That last kiss he’d shared with Hawke… Dorian couldn’t help but wonder if the man had intended that to be his final farewell all along.

Putting his hand over his heart in a gesture of respect, Dorian spoke so that those gathered around him could hear his words. “Hawke sacrificed himself to save us and strike a decisive blow against Corypheus.”

“Are we talking about the same Hawke?” Varric asked incredulously. “Tall, dark hair, good looking, kind of an asshole?”

A sad smile came to Dorian’s face as he set a hand on Varric’s shoulder and said in a quiet voice, “I think he wanted to remain true to himself. Perhaps he feared he could not do so if he returned.”

“Oh. Right.” Varric looked down for a moment, then reluctantly nodded. “Yeah. That sounds like Hawke on his good days. When he wasn’t… you know.” He looked at the space where the rift had been, a pensive expression on his face, then shook his head. “I’m heading back to camp, Sparkler. Why don’t you come see me when you’ve got a moment?”
“I will,” Dorian promised, then turned his attention to where the Wardens stood speaking with Loghain. When they asked about Alistair, Loghain hesitated for a moment before looking around at the gathered Wardens and Inquisition soldiers. “Warden Alistair died striking a blow against the servant of the Blight. We will honor his sacrifice, and remember how he exemplified the ideals of the Grey Wardens.” Turning slowly so he could catch the eyes of each Warden as he spoke, Loghain added, “Do not forget the wiles of those who serve the Blight. We are better than what we have done and what we have shown to the world of late. It is our task to ensure that we live up to the honor of the Grey Wardens in the name of those who have fallen against the Blight.” Drawing his sword, Loghain lifted it above his head. “To Warden Alistair!”

Around him, the Grey Wardens lifted their own weapons in response. “To Warden Alistair!”

“May the Grey Wardens keep his name alive forever,” Loghain declared, then sheathed his weapon and turned to Dorian. While the Wardens followed suit, he said, “As the senior surviving Grey Warden in Orlais, I place our fate into your hands, Inquisitor. What would you have of us?”

After a long moment’s consideration, Dorian straightened. “You stay and do what you can to assist the Inquisition, just as the Templars have. Alistair sacrificed himself with the fate and duty of the Wardens forefront in his mind. You can now honor his memory by saving the world from the very enemy who misused you so. It is in your motto, is it not? In war, victory?”

As heads nodded, Dorian continued. “And we are still at war with Corypheus. Loghain believes the Wardens are worth saving, or he would not have fought so hard on your behalf. And I trust him. Be alert, though,” he added, raising a warning finger, “for you are still vulnerable to Corypheus, and possibly even his Venatori, so you can’t just go running off on your own. You can, however, kill demons. That’s usually a bit of fun.” His tone conveyed his sarcasm, since, of course, fighting demons generally proved to be the opposite of fun.

A chuckle did roll through the Wardens, but dimmed quickly as Loghain called for their attention with a raised hand. “I give all of you to the care of the Inquisition, then, until Corypheus is defeated. I can think of no greater enemy for the Grey Wardens than he who inflicted the Blight upon our world. Obey the Inquisitor as you would obey me.”

“But… but where are you going, Warden Loghain?” one of the Grey Wardens called to him.

“I have to report this to Weisshaupt, and make sure that Corypheus doesn’t catch the rest of the Order by surprise.” He lay his hand on his breastplate. “Until my return, remember your oath! In war!”

“Victory!” the Wardens shouted.

“In peace!”

“Vigilance!”

Loghain raised his hand and turned it into a fist. “And in death?”

“Sacrifice!” they roared as one, then fell silent as Loghain turned back to Dorian.

Giving a pained bow to Dorian, Loghain said, “The Grey Wardens now serve the Inquisition.” For a long moment, Loghain considered Dorian closely. “You have the makings of a great army, Inquisitor. Use it well.”

“I shall, Warden Loghain,” Dorian assured him. “Corypheus doesn’t stand a chance, I promise you that.”
“Good man.” Loghain stepped closer and put his hand on Dorian’s shoulder. “Take care, Inquisitor. Another good man gave his life so that you might live today.”

Dorian swallowed and nodded. “The Inquisition will honor his sacrifice. He will not be forgotten.”

Loghain exhaled, for a moment sounding far older than he ever had before. “Then that shall be sufficient. And now,” he added, in a voice quiet enough so that only Dorian could hear it, “I go to the heart of the Grey Wardens to ensure that Amell’s influence hasn’t reached there.”

“Amell-- Oh. Oh.” Dorian’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I traveled with the man. I saw what he did to my daughter,” Loghain said, face grim. “He would find a strange sort of satisfaction in bending the First Warden to his will, or to that of Corypheus if that is where his allegiance now lies. The world can ill afford to lose the Grey Wardens, even if there is no Blight at the moment.” With a heavy sigh, he squeezed Dorian’s shoulder and let his hand fall away. “Until we meet again, Inquisitor.”

As he moved to step away, Dorian reached out to stop him. “Loghain,” he said softly, “I’m sorry. It was never my intention to--”

“--leave a man behind?” Loghain asked. For a moment, he simply stood and stared at the spot where the rift had been only a short time ago. “No leader ever wants to leave their troops behind, Inquisitor, even when the circumstances demand it. Perhaps especially then.”

For a moment his gaze grew distant. “Had I known Alistair intended to remain, I would have taken his place without hesitation. If there is any blame to be assigned here, it belongs rightfully to me. He was right, and he was brave, and now… Now he is gone.” On that last word, Loghain’s voice broke, and he quickly looked down as he took a steadying breath.

After a moment, Loghain lifted his face to show reddened eyes but dry cheeks, and when he continued, his voice shook only slightly. “It was hard enough to lose his father, not once but twice. Now…” His words trailed off as his eyes closed for a moment. “Now I feel as if I have lost our son. I have much to answer for when I next see Maric. I doubt I will ever be able to wash the blood of both his sons from my conscience.”

Dorian’s brow contracted. “I don’t know what to say, Warden, save that you have my sympathy and my gratitude. The Inquisition will always have a place for you.”

Loghain barked a short laugh, and his voice grew stronger as he replied, “Depending on how matters proceed in Weisshaupt, I may just take you up on that offer.” With a shake of his head, he gave Dorian another awkward bow. “Regardless, it is time to take my leave, though I do believe I shall seek the services of your healers before I go.”

“An excellent idea after what we’ve endured,” Dorian agreed, but the words had already distracted him. The healers. That’s where Cullen was, wasn’t it?

Without another word, Dorian headed towards the gates, and to the tents of the healers beyond them. There would always be work for the Inquisitor. For now, though, he had something more important in mind.

Or rather, someone.

As Dorian passed through the gates of Adamant, a short, lonely figure standing next to a trebuchet on a hill overlooking the empty sands of the Approach caught his attention. The tightness of Varric’s
shoulders and the way his hands were clenched as they clutched each other behind his back spoke volumes of the dwarf’s mood. With a little sigh and an internal reminder that Cullen would likely be in the hands of the healers for a while yet, Dorian turned his feet so that his path led him to Varric’s side.

Without looking up at Dorian, Varric said, “Did I ever tell you about the time Hawke was on a Merchant Guild hit list?”

Dorian raised an eyebrow. “Only once? Are we talking about the same Hawke?”

Varric chuckled, though it sounded a bit forced. “Once was enough for them. You see, Hawke’s uncle got into an investment scheme with a couple of Merchant Caste businessmen. They took a lot of people’s coin in order to arrange the import of wandering hills from the Anderfels. A delicacy, I’m told."

“Wandering… hills.” Dorian shook his head. “Let me guess. After they got to Kirkwall, they wandered off on their own.”

“One of them did, at least.” Varric snorted. “The Guild traced the shipment back to Hawke’s uncle, but as usual, he was so far in debt he couldn’t see daylight. So they went after Hawke instead.”

“That sounds like a very poor series of decisions on their part,” Dorian mused.

“The Guild hadn’t quite caught on to what Hawke was really like, so they sent the guys from the local Carta to Hawke’s estate one night. Five big dusters, all armed to the teeth. They kick in the door, ready to make their demands, and find Hawke just standing there, fully armed, with me and the Guard-Captain on either side. Nobody said a word. The poor sods just looked at Hawke, looked at the Captain, and dropped their weapons. They never came back.”

Dorian gave a little sigh. “He did have an effect on people, didn’t he?”

“That he did,” Varric said softly. “A few days later when the Guild suddenly told Gamlen that all his debt to them was cleared, I got suspicious and investigated. Turns out that over the last few nights, someone had infiltrated the local Carta’s headquarters and left a few presents for them. You could say Hawke had gotten ahead of the game.”

With a wince, Dorian asked, “The five poor sods?”

“Yeah, the five poor sods.” Varric sighed. “Word was sent back to the Guild, and Hawke--and his family--was put on the list of people you don’t mess with.”

“I imagine that came in handy for you a few times, given your association with him,” Dorian mused.

“Well… it did,” Varric admitted. “They sometimes cut me special rates they wouldn’t give to anyone else, just to curry favor. But…” Varric shook his head. “I still didn’t like that he’d killed them. When I asked him about it, he just gave me an odd look and then laughed it off. Now, I just wonder if it was even him that did it--and if he wanted to tell me the truth, and couldn’t.” He glanced up at Dorian. “I always wanted to tell that story, but… well…”

Dorian sighed. “It would have been a nicer story if it ended with the poor sods simply leaving his estate, yes.”

“Yeah.” Varric gave a heavy sigh. “I guess I’ve got some letters to write. Acting Provisional Viscount Bran will need to know that Kirkwall needs a new Viscount.”
Settling his hand on Varric’s shoulder, Dorian said softly, “Hawke told me to take care of you.”

Varric’s shoulders sagged as he reached up to rub his forehead. “Dammit. I don’t know what’s worse. Him dying without telling me the whole story, or wondering if maybe I could have helped him if I’d… I don’t know. Paid more attention. Something. Anything.”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” Dorian told him softly. “It sounds like Amell took care to make sure that no one would notice. If even his victim couldn’t figure it out at first, and then couldn’t say anything about it after he did, how could you have known?”

“I suppose.” Gaze lifting to the stars, Varric said, “I guess I’ll never know. I will say this, though: I’m going to compose the worst poem ever written in his honor. Bastard. Dying on me before I could get the full story.” Turning to look up at Dorian, Varric added, “Thanks. I mean it.”

“Enough that I don’t owe you those five sovereigns anymore?” Dorian asked, hoping to lift the dwarf’s mood a little.

“Hey, now, let’s not get crazy,” Varric said, though the sadness lingered even in his smile. “Besides, I got Curly out of the Fade safely, didn’t I? You owe me an introduction to a book publisher in the Imperium, at the very least.”

Refraining himself from reminding Varric that the deal was supposed to cover all of them, Dorian just chuckled lightly. “I’ll send the letter as soon as we get back to Skyhold.”

“You do that, Sparkler,” Varric said, then faced the sands once more. “I think I’d like to be alone with my memories for a while,” he said softly, then muttered under his breath, “What I’ll do with them, I have no idea.”

“I quite understand.” Dorian patted Varric on the shoulder and then left quietly. He wished Varric luck in dealing with the complex ramifications of Hawke’s confession and subsequent sacrifice, but suspected it would take Varric a while to fully wrap his head around all of them.

As for himself, Dorian’s task at the moment was far more straightforward. A moment’s pause to orient himself was all he needed to locate the tents for the wounded, and in the next moment he was in motion towards them.

When Dorian arrived at his destination, he found the area bustling with activity. After a few moments of peering through the crowds, he finally managed to find a familiar face—or horns, in this case. Hoping that Cullen would be near him, Dorian worked his way through the crowd towards Bull, using those wide set horns as a guide.

"There you are," Bull grunted as Dorian approached him. His wounds had been dressed, and though he looked a bit odd sporting bandages over his torso, he still looked fit enough to fight a gurn. "Thought you'd swing by here." Jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the tent behind him, Bull said, "They took him in there when I first arrived. Lots of people coming and going, but he's getting help, probably the best help there is to get. He is the Commander, you know."

Dorian peered at the tent, noting the number of silhouettes moving around within, and swallowed. "So I should... leave them to their work?"

Bull put a sympathetic hand on Dorian's shoulder. "Give them a bit more time, yeah." He glanced around the area, then gently turned Dorian back to face it. "There's a lot of people out there who could use a word of encouragement after a big battle like that. And they all saw their Commander get brought here, so they know he’s pretty badly hurt. Now, normally Cullen would be the one going
from bed to bed and giving them a good word, but he can't."

After mulling that over for a moment, Dorian ventured, "So... you think I should do that in his stead? Give them a bit of encouragement, and all that?"

"It can't hurt," Bull told him. "It'll be a good distraction, and that way Cullen won't fret about it after he wakes up."

"He would, wouldn't he?" Dorian mused, realizing that Bull had come up with both a distraction for himself and a gift for Cullen all in one suggestion. "I'd better get started then. Thank you, Bull."

"No charge, boss," Bull rumbled.

Time passed more quickly than Dorian thought it would, but then, his focus on his task aided with that. After all, the wounded had earned more than simple gratitude. There were some here who had been with the Inquisition since Haven, and those who had joined only the month before. It didn't matter, of course: they were all Inquisition soldiers, and they'd all put their lives on the line. They'd earned more than a pretty speech or a perfunctory handshake.

So Dorian gave them all he had. He shook hands, yes, but that was only the beginning. He used techniques garnered from the tedious recitation of the Pavus family line through the Ages to recall names he'd heard during inspections and in passing at Skyhold. For those temporarily bound to their bed, he settled in and expounded upon the Inquisition's victory over Corypheus at Adamant, reinforcing the idea that their injuries had not been in vain. He brought meals to those who had been overlooked, told bawdy tales to those who needed a good laugh, and reassured them, over and over, that their Commander would indeed recover and be back to form before they knew it.

And, in a few cases, he simply sat by their side and held their hand as they slipped into the beyond.

The deaths shook him more than he cared to admit. It reminded him keenly not only of his responsibilities to them, but of the consequences should he fail. Raised a pampered noble, Dorian knew that he had been sheltered from quite a few of life's ugly truths, but death itself was not something which he dreaded. After all, as a necromantic mage, he had more than a passing familiarity with the soul's journey from flesh to Fade. But seeing a woman's final breath, knowing that it was his decision at the war table which had brought her to this end, was sobering.

As he rose from the chair beside her cot with a sigh of regret, a voice behind him said, "Thank you."

Dorian quickly turned towards Cole, eyebrows rising in surprise. Cole looked... different, somehow, his features more defined and his gaze more intense. Ever since Dorian had acquired the Anchor, Cole had seemed to keep his distance when not actually fighting at Dorian's side. Dorian had given the spirit the distance he seemed to desire, presuming that perhaps Cole, as a spirit of compassion, might not appreciate the finer points of associating with a necromancer. After a moment and a blink, Dorian replied, "Pardon?"

Cole's gaze darted to look behind Dorian as the attendant healer drew a sheet up to cover the woman's body. "The demon fell from the ramparts above so quickly they had no time to think," Cole said in his pale voice. "She had only one chance to save the sons who fought at her side, to ensure the life she'd brought into the world lived on after her time ended. She remembered them when they were young and innocent, straw still in their hair and stars in their eyes, but after the demons had poured from the rift over their home and killed all the others, they joined her to put on the uniform of the Inquisition and march at her side, to fight back. She was their mother, and she knew they would fight in her place if she fell. So she took that chance and gave them time, time to escape and fight the battles she would never see. Her only fear was that no one would know of her sacrifice, or that it
might have been in vain." Cole reached out and hesitantly touched Dorian's arm. "But you came back, Inquisitor. You sat by her side and held her hand, and she knew you would not let the demons win, and that she helped. You made her happy before she left. Thank you."

Throat tightening, Dorian gave Cole a little smile. "I'm glad for that, at least," he said softly. "She deserved better than to die at the hands of a demon."

"I know," Cole said, and Dorian had to smile at the matter-of-fact way Cole said it, though Dorian hadn't meant his words to be taken literally. "But it is good you know that. The Inquisitor should know that."

"And the Inquisitor does," Dorian assured him. "Though I haven't seen you often of late. I was worried you didn't like me anymore."

Cole swallowed. "She asked me not to tell you," he whispered. "She said you couldn't know, that you would try to bring her back. I didn't want to stay away, but I was afraid I would say something and you would know what I was saying."

After puzzling through all that, comprehension finally dawned on Dorian. "You mean you knew Mailani was lurking?"

"She was so bright, bright as the last flash of sunlight before it sets. How could I not see her?" Cole asked. "I wanted to tell you, but I gave her my word."

"That's quite all right, Cole," Dorian assured him with a pat on his shoulder. "It worked out in the end, never you fear."

Cole's eyes widened as an awed expression came to his face. "I believe you. You went to the land where fear dwelt and and then returned, barring the path back against all who might use it."

Dorian's smile faltered, and he looked down to study his left hand as the now-familiar green light flickered in his palm. "I only wish the price had not been so very high," Dorian said with a regretful sigh. "We lost two good men there. Or at least, one good man and one man who deserved a chance to aspire for more."

"Dark, darker, darkest their path leads, Inquisitor," Cole breathed. "Their sacrifice is not what you believe."

With a start, Dorian jerked his head. "What do you--" He stopped as he realized that the spirit was already gone. With a frown, Dorian looked down at his hand again, trying to solve the enigma of Cole's last words. In the end, he had to simply shake his head and hope that he could track down Cole later for a lengthier explanation.

Now that his thoughts were no longer focused on others, however, Dorian realized that his wounds, minor as they were in his own eyes, hadn't yet been cleaned. Even as he turned his arm to see just how far one particular cut ran, a hand landed on his other arm. "All right, come with me, then."

Startled, Dorian turned to find a woman with the white linen armband of a healer looking up at him with a determined expression. "Ah... I take it, dear lady, that any answer other than yes will be met with a firm scolding?"

Her face relaxed into a smile as she laughed. "Well, at least you've still got your wits about you. Good on you. This way, Inquisitor."

Letting himself be dragged to a small canopy near where Bull had stood, Dorian took the offered seat
and held out his left arm wordlessly. Her sharp eyes found far more wounds than that, of course, and he ended up sitting patiently on the low stool as she cleaned each and every one of his wounds, smiling as she muttered darkly about taking care of him properly. After a while, he finally allowed himself to ask the question which had never truly left his thoughts since his departure from the Fade.

"How fares the Commander?"

The healer gave him a smile as she cleaned what he hoped was the last injury. "Still asleep, poor love," she said with a distinct accent Dorian had come to associate with the more remote areas of Ferelden. "He'll be in bed for a while yet. Not that that's a bad thing, mind," she added with a sniff. "Tends to work himself far too hard, does the Commander. Some time off will do him good, that's what I say."

A faint smile came to his face. "I heartily agree with you."

"Mind, I could say the same about you, Inquisitor," the woman added with a raised eyebrow. "You've worn yourself to the bone a fair few times yourself. What would the Herald, Andraste bless her, say if she saw the hours you kept? Send you straight off to your bed with a bowl of porridge is what she'd do, I reckon."

Dorian couldn't help but chuckle at the woman's remonstration. "I daresay you are correct. Though does it really have to be porridge? I would much prefer something with more taste, such as, oh, an old boiled shoe."

The healer laughed as she wrapped a bandage tightly around the clean wound. "Keep that smile on, then, there's a dear. The Commander could use a bit of cheer after all he's been through." After a bit more fussing with the dressing, she finally nodded and jerked her chin towards the tent where Cullen lay recuperating. "Go on, then. There's a chair for visitors."

"Thank you, dear lady," Dorian breathed, even as he headed for the indicated tent. Once he reached it, he paused for a moment to brace himself, then pulled the entrance flap aside.

Cullen lay within, looking quite small in the midst of an expanse of blankets and linen bandages. Almost every part of him, it seemed, had been treated, leaving only one of his hands and most of his face uncovered, if still showing bruises. Dorian swallowed harshly as his eyes moved over the man slowly, trying not to imagine the damage under those bandages and failing rather miserably.

Stepping inside, he let the flap close behind him and settled into the chair. He reached out tentatively, his touch gentle as his fingers ran down the side of Cullen's face. A burst of relief flared within when Cullen's mouth twitched in response, and he took the bared hand between his own and squeezed lightly.

When that same hand weakly squeezed him back, his eyes widened and he leaned forward. "Commander?"

"Tingles," Cullen mumbled, and Dorian looked down to find that his hand had begun to glow.

"My apologies," Dorian said with a throaty chuckle.

"'S fine." Cullen said. "Best way to know it's you."

"S fine." Cullen said. "Best way to know it's you." His eyes opened slowly, showing deep bloodshot around the warm brown. "How bad do I look?"

Dorian gave him a smile. "You look wonderful."

With a snort, Cullen looked away, but a smile pulled at his lips. "I meant the injuries. How bad are they?"
"They look fairly terrifying, yes." Dorian kept the tone light, not wanting to chase that smile away. "I wouldn't recommend a round of calibrations any time soon."

"Nothing's missing?"

"No, nothing's missing." Dorian patted Cullen's hand companionably. "Granted, I haven't done a full inspection myself, but I think they would have told me if my Commander had left anything behind in his jaunt to the Fade."

"A full inspection, hmm?" Cullen asked as his half-smile trended towards a smirk.

"Oh, definitely. I am quite the hands-on Inquisitor. Hadn't you noticed?" Dorian sallied back with a grin of his own.

Though the reply made Cullen laugh, the laugh in turn made him wince with obvious pain. "Ouch. Perhaps... perhaps a bit less humor would be well-advised," he gasped.

Immediately contrite, Dorian patted Cullen's hand. "My apologies, Commander. Ask me anything, and we'll discuss that instead."

Cullen nodded, eyes closing as he caught his breath. "Did Alistair make it out in one piece?" When Dorian didn't answer immediately, he opened his eyes again. "No. Maker, not Alistair."

"A lot has happened." Bowing his head, Dorian started to speak softly, beginning with the moment they'd fallen into the Fade. He paused once or twice when the healers came in to check on Cullen and administer more potions as necessary, then continued when they were alone again. He held nothing back, including what he had learned about Hawke, and when he finished, Cullen simply stared at him in shock for a few moments before he finally let his head fall back onto the pillow.

"Mailani was with us all this time. I… I can't believe it." His brows twitched as Cullen considered that for a few moments of silence. "I wish I could have seen her."

A wistful smile came to Dorian’s face. “I wish you could have, too. Not that it was easy, seeing her as I knew her, and seeing that… diminish. And knowing she could never come back.”

“And all because of Amell.” Eyes narrowing in anger, Cullen growled. “Even more reason to hate the bastard.”

“It does seem that way, yes. Certainly we can’t afford ourselves the illusion that he's not involved in this business,” Dorian noted. “But finding him will likely prove to be a tricky business.”

“Leliana will find him,” Cullen whispered. “I’m sure of it.” His eyelids fluttered shut as he swallowed. “And Hawke… If he told you the truth, he suffered more than the rest of us at Amell’s hands.”

Dorian nodded. "So he claims. For what it's worth, I believe him. I felt a hint of magic around him a few times, so subtle I didn't realize that's what it was, but in hindsight, I think it could easily have been that charm Hawke mentioned."

"Oh, I can definitely believe Amell made him do things," Cullen said in a hollow voice. "That bastard seemed to delight in forcing people to do as he commanded."

Dorian frowned and reached up to lightly touch Cullen's cheek, trying to pull him back from wherever that particular memory had taken him. "What I saw in your dream... there's more to it, isn't there?"
Swallowing harshly, Cullen nodded. "He had no love for Templars. I was alone, and vulnerable, and needed his aid to escape the demons. He took advantage of that, and then took it further. I... I'm sorry." He turned to look at Dorian. "I'd rather not go into details. Suffice it to say, he was a large part of my distrust of mages, particularly blood mages, in my time at Kirkwall."

"Commander," Dorian breathed, surprised at how difficult it was to see the man's emotional pain. "You need never speak of that time again, I assure you. I will not inquire further."

Cullen relaxed visibly. "Thank you. Though I do wonder if Amell’s influence had anything to do with the way Hawke treated Alistair. He told me once that Amell seemed to delight in tormenting his fellow Wardens."

"We'll never know now, I suppose." When the silence dragged on too long, Dorian cleared his throat and continued, "But the great mystery of our shared dreams is solved, at least."

Cullen's eyes closed as he took a deep breath, obviously forcing himself away from unpleasant memories. After a while, a little smile returned to his face. "Leave it to Mailani to figure out a way to speak to us from the beyond," he murmured. "Given that the first dream didn't happen until after I shoved you into a wall, perhaps that was even her way to try to make me come around about you."

Dorian's eyebrows rose, then fell as he considered the remark. "She always was our little peacemaker here in Skyhold," he mused. "I... Yes, actually, I could easily see her do that given the opportunity. Certainly our first few dreams were almost designed to make us sympathise with the other's plight. Almost suspiciously so, now that I think of it."

Cullen's lips curved in a fond smile. "They must have been. Minx."

"Is it wrong to admit that I am glad for every bit of interference from her?" Dorian said a bit wistfully. "Being Inquisitor has been much easier knowing I had a friend nearby."

Hand squeezing Dorian's tightly, Cullen said, "I am glad. That I help you, and that we have grown so close."

Dorian smiled. "Why, you're making me blush, Commander," he teased.

"Even your buttcheeks?" Cullen said with a grin

Dorian's eyebrows rose to his hairline. "Are those on your mind of late?"

"What? No!" Cullen's cheeks darkened precipitously. "I was just quoting--I didn't mean--Maker's breath," he groaned, reaching up to cover his face.

Quickly taking pity on the man, Dorian chuckled lightly. "I know, Commander. I do believe I have mentioned my penchant for teasing before, and you are not at your best. I offer my apologies for taking advantage."

"No, no, don't apologize." Cullen's hand rubbed awkwardly at his neck for a moment. "Though I'm still not used to you sassing me."

Tilting his head, Dorian asked, "Instead of the reverse?"

"Only during chess," Cullen said firmly, his attempt to be serious betrayed by the twinkle in his eyes. "I reserve my best sass for when I need to distract an opponent."

With a laugh, Dorian shook his head. "Just how many potions have the healers stuffed down your
"Enough to make me wonder if I should stop talking," Cullen admitted wryly.

"Don't worry, Commander, my lips are sealed no matter what you say," Dorian told him with a wink.

"Thank the Maker for small favors," Cullen said, then closed his eyes and let his head fall back into the pillow. After a moment, he opened them again and stared up at the ceiling of the tent. "I almost can't believe it's over. All that planning and preparation..." He sniffed and turned his gaze to Dorian. "And instead of appreciating what we've accomplished, all I can think about is what is to come and what needs to be done."

Dorian's expression turned thoughtful as Cullen's words sparked thoughts which had been swimming in his mind beneath the leviathan of dealing with the demon army. "I admit to similar thoughts myself. This is the first decisive blow we've dealt Corypheus since he attacked Haven, that is certain, but it is still only the first of many. A victory here doesn't assure a victory elsewhere, after all."

Cullen sighed heavily and passed his hand over his face. "Hardly useless, Commander," Dorian said, quickly trying to break that depressing line of thought. "Impressive as your body is, I believe what we need right now is that mind of yours."

"What do you mean, impressive as my--" Cullen stopped, then looked away from Dorian and cleared his throat. "Ah. Yes. My mind. You mean strategy."

"Among other things. I hope you don't think that just because you can't walk, you're going to be excused from going to Halamshiral with me," Dorian warned him. "I am certainly not going into that Orlesian lion's den without the Inquisition's lion at my side, I assure you."

The comment made Cullen chuckle and relax enough to look back at Dorian with a grin. "I don't suppose Josephine will let me wear my mantle, will she?"

"No, but even if she would, I would ask the Inquisitor to expressly forbid it. And since I'm the Inquisitor… Well, consider the matter closed," Dorian told him mock- sternly. "This is a ball, after all, not some Ferelden country fair."

"And knowing Josephine, she already has some sort of Inquisition outfit we're all supposed to wear," Cullen said in resignation.

Dorian's brow furrowed. "Ah. True. Hmm. Do remind me to have a word with her about that when we get back to Skyhold, would you? I'd rather be certain that we are stylish as well as functional. Uniformity is all well and good, but I refuse to be boring for the sake of politics."

"Wouldn't that be the safer path?" Cullen asked with amusement.

"I do have standards, Commander," Dorian declared with a sniff.

"Plus I wouldn't want to be there if you tried to force First Enchanter Vivienne to wear something that isn't the height of fashion to an Orlesian ball," Cullen pointed out.

"That thought had crossed my mind, yes." Shaking his head, Dorian steepled his hands in front of his face. "So. Halamshiral. If Adamant has taught us anything, it's that those threats Mailani uncovered in Therinfal Redoubt are exactly, if not more, dangerous than we expected. The Nightmare was no
mean foe, and the sacrifice to be rid of it proved far too dear. And if my gallivanting about the Exalted Plains taught me anything, it’s that Orlesians are perfectly happy to smile in your face just before they stab you in the back. Not very different from home, really.”

“You make the Imperium sound so lovely,” Cullen noted.

“It is extraordinarily lovely,” Dorian protested. “The people, however, can leave a bit to be desired at times. At any rate, we can’t possibly know what Corypheus has in store for us at Halamshiral, but we must do everything in our power to ensure that it does not come to outright battle.”

"Agreed. We lost far too many in Adamant for my taste." Cullen glanced to the tent flaps. "And I haven't been able to make the rounds with the wounded. Hopefully Cassandra will have some time to see to them."

Dorian reached out and patted Cullen's hand. "I attended to that," he assured Cullen. "You needn't fret." When Cullen's eyebrows rose, Dorian added, "You don't have to look so very surprised. They serve the Inquisition, and that makes them my responsibility. Granted, responsibility is something I've quite often fled from with alacrity, but it is not something which I will deny or defer now."

Cullen blinked, then smiled slowly. “I… couldn’t have put it better myself. Or… or differently, actually.”

“You know,” Dorian mused, leaning in so that he could speak in a more intimate tone, “I told Mailani that I would serve her legacy. For so long, I did what I thought she would do as Inquisitor. Yet when I told her that, she said I should walk my own path and not hers.”

“That sounds like her,” Cullen murmured. His hand curled around Dorian’s and gave it a gentle squeeze. “How did that make you feel?”

“Honestly?” Dorian’s brow furrowed as he considered their clasped hands, and slowly he put his other hand on top of them, twining their fingers together idly. “I felt a bit empty. Or perhaps bereft is a better word, as if I’d lost her again, except… I’d lost more than her this time, I’d lost her guidance, her support, her… her friendship. I hadn’t felt that before, possibly because I’d been so focused on only doing what she would have done, or possibly because she was, in fact, still with me.” The green light flickered into being in his hand, and he sighed heavily. “Though I knew it not.”

Cullen’s fingers ran over the green light pulsing restlessly in Dorian’s palm. “You may no longer have Mailani with you,” he said in a low voice, meeting Dorian’s gaze with a sober intensity, “but you have me, broken and worn as I am. I may not be able to guide you, but I can and will support you, and be your friend regardless of what lies ahead, if you will have me.” A faint smile came to his face. “Even when things were darkest, even when the Nightmare found and exposed the fears I had thought long gone and buried, there was one certainty to which I held: your promise. I knew you would come for me. That’s why I never lost hope.”

Dorian opened his mouth, then shut it again as he blinked rapidly a few times against the sudden pricking in his eyes. He couldn’t help but think of Hawke’s admonition in the Fade, that Dorian deserved better. Was this what Hawke had meant? Not some fanciful ideal of unicorns and impossibilities, but the lasting, firm foundation of unshakable friendship? Oh, he’d had friends before, naturally, and quite lovely ones: Felix, in his time with House Alexius and, of course, Mailani. Yet this felt… different, somehow. Stronger, deeper, a bond such as he’d never shared with another person before, man or woman. His hands shifted so that they could clasp Cullen’s hands between them as a tremulous smile came to his face, yet no sound emerged from his mouth.

“You’re speechless,” Cullen observed, his tone somewhere between disbelief and amusement.
“It doesn’t happen often.” A breathy little chuckle escaped Dorian’s lips. “You’ve managed to catch me unprepared with such a strident declaration, Commander.”

“My strategy worked, then,” Cullen quipped with a subtle wink.

Dorian squeezed Cullen’s hand gently, still mindful of the man’s injuries. “Always the master of the field, even when broken and worn, is that it? I should find something for you to calibrate while you’re recuperating just to make sure you do not fall out of practice.”

“Just… not a trebuchet. Please,” Cullen said hurriedly. “I’ve seen enough of those to last me at least a month.”

“An entire month? Really? Hmm. Perhaps I could indulge in more teasing?” When Cullen just gave him a flat stare in return, Dorian had to laugh. “Definitely a no, then. You know, I’ll have to find something we can do that doesn’t involve teasing. Soon, ideally, before you wither away from all this boring healing business.”

A smirk formed on Cullen’s lips. “Something simple, perhaps? Like defeating you in chess again?”

Pressing a hand to his chest in mock indignation, Dorian drew himself upright. “You dare, my good ser! I believe I shall take that as an insult to my honor and challenge you to a daily duel. Of chess,” he added hastily. “You’re not quite in the right condition for any other sort of duel.”

“No,” Cullen said with a grimace, again glancing down at the bandages and splints and other evidence of his wounds. “And the pain is starting to creep back in.”

Dorian immediately rose to his feet. “I’ll go fetch the healer.”

“No, no, stay. Please,” Cullen said hastily, almost desperately, reaching out to grab Dorian’s hand. “Just… give me a potion or two and I’ll drift away. I should sleep anyway. Or try to.” Squeezing Dorian’s hand, he added in a whisper, “And… stay, if you would. Please”

When a haunted look stole over Cullen’s face, Dorian quickly sat down and leaned forward once more, squeezing the man’s hand between his. “Of course. After what you endured while in the clutches of that monstrosity, and what you’ve been through before… Sleep is no simple surcease for you now, is it?”

Swallowing harshly, Cullen’s eyes squeezed shut as he shook his head. “I… don’t want to be alone tonight,” he whispered. “What if the Nightmare is still there? If I go to the Fade… if he finds me…” Suddenly his eyes sprang open, gleaming with unshed tears. “And when I close my eyes, I see… I see more than darkness, more than dreams filled with demons. I see flame, and blood, and… and…” His face scrunched up in a grimace of both pain and fear as his breathing came hard and fast, and the hand wrapped around Dorian’s suddenly turned into a rigid claw of fear. “And him. You once said he was in my dreams, before even we went to the Fade.”

Amell. Abruptly Dorian understood exactly what Cullen feared. Dorian pressed a quick kiss to the back of Cullen’s hand, then reached out and cradled the side of the man’s face. “I understand,” he said in hushed tones. “They will not have you, not while I live.” Kissing Cullen’s hand again for emphasis, Dorian added, “I made you a promise, Cullen. I will protect you, even against the very source of fear. You trusted me before, remember? You can trust me now.”

Cullen’s gaze rose to look at Dorian, who gave him an encouraging smile in response. Gradually his breathing returned to normal, until finally his hand relaxed all at once. “You said my name,” he said softly.
Dorian blinked, surprised that that was what Cullen had latched onto. “Oh. I did, didn’t I?”

A faint smile touched Cullen’s lips. “I just hadn’t realized how little you’ve used it before.”

“Then perhaps I should use it more often,” Dorian suggested in a soft voice, grateful that the panic seemed to have passed—for now. “But it’s true. You are my dearest friend, Cullen, and as long as I have breath, I will do what I can to protect you.”

Cullen drew Dorian’s hand up to rest on his chest, though the eye contact between them remained unbroken. “And I promise to do the same for you… Dorian.”

The sheer sincerity of the comment, so very outside the stilted and restricted formal dance of words with which he’d been reared, made a tender smile come to Dorian’s face. “I know.”

“So very certain,” Cullen said with a chuckle, then frowned in obvious discomfort. “I could do with those potions now,” he admitted.

“Yes, yes, of course.” Giving Cullen’s hand one final squeeze before releasing it, Dorian rummaged through the potions sitting in a basket next to the cot until he finally found two he knew to be particularly efficacious. “I may not be able to heal a papercut—which, considering the amount of time I prefer to spend in libraries, is rather tragic—but I do understand the arts of the chirurgeon.” Leaning forward once more, Dorian popped the cork off of one bottle and gently lifted Cullen’s head so that he could swallow more easily. “Here we go. The numbing draught first.”

“Thank the Maker,” Cullen breathed, then quickly gulped the mixture down.

As Cullen relaxed into the mattress, Dorian prepared the other one and held it to his lips. “And the sleeping draught.”

Once he’d downed that as well, Cullen made a face. “Bitter,” he said. “Is that a requirement, do you think, that medicine is supposed to taste so bad?” Before Dorian could respond, Cullen suddenly broke into a jaw-cracking yawn, and laughed a bit sheepishly. "At least it works."

"Just what the healer ordered, if I recall," Dorian said with a little smile. "Sleep well, Cullen. I shall make sure your slumber is quite safe."

"Thank you." Cullen’s eyelids sagged shut. After a minute or so, his breathing slowed and evened, and his hand went limp in Dorian’s grasp. Just when Dorian thought he was asleep, Cullen mumbled, "You’re a… a true friend, Dorian."

"And I always will be," Dorian whispered, though he suspected Cullen wouldn’t even hear it. For a time he contemplated the sleeping man, searching for any sign of discomfort, then leaned in and pressed a kiss to Cullen’s forehead. When he found himself considering the man’s lips for a long moment, he forced himself to sit back and settle deeper into the chair. He’d made a promise to protect Cullen’s dreams, after all, and that meant he could allow no distractions.

Closing his eyes, he gathered his magic and wove a defensive ward around the tent, one which would bar any attempts to invade whether by land or by Fade. With a bit of inspiration, he enhanced the ward with the magic of the Anchor, reinforcing his standard spells with magic few would recognize or be able to counter. Only then did he let himself take a long breath and seek his own rest.

It would be a long journey back to Skyhold, but at least he had the best of company.
Alistair never knew who dealt the final blow to their gargantuan foe. His own sword bit deep into the beast’s belly from below even as Hawke launched a savage flurry of attacks into the center of its hideous collection of eyes. Perhaps each strike would have been insufficient on their own to end the monstrosity of the Nightmare, but combined, their blows against the swaying, staggering hulk of their enemy ultimately proved to be just enough.

Both of them still had to scramble out of the way when it fell, with Alistair needing a little extra help from Hawke given his position under the thing. Once they’d retreated to a safe distance, they leaned on each other, panting heavily, as they watched the monstrous demon topple onto its side and collapse into a pile of limbs, blood, goo, and general ick.

For a good long moment, they simply chased their breath and stared at the corpse, making sure it wouldn’t move again. It had pulled the trick of playing dead twice already, nearly killing Hawke the first time. Finally, after enough time had passed for their breathing to return to normal, Hawke said, “I think… I think it’s really dead this time.”

“Maker, I hope so.” Alistair worked his tongue around in his mouth in a desperate search for moisture, then finally gave up. “Feel like collapsing?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Hawke groaned. “Spiders. Always the Maker-damned spiders…”

Knees buckling, they slowly slid down in a tangle of limbs and weapons until finally they separated with a loud clang as they hit the ground. Time seemed to float in the distance, unimportant, as Alistair tried to ignore the many signals his body sent to his brain about everything that was wrong with it. The pain from his wounds blurred into a large, single ache, but at least nothing seemed to be missing--except possibly a lot of blood. After a few deep breaths, he gave a loud roar and raised the sword tightly clenched in his fist up high.

“What was that for?” Hawke asked with a startled glance.

Alistair grinned. “I don’t know. Just… felt good, I suppose.”

“Oh? Let me try.” Hawke raised both of his daggers, though one of them had broken in half during his final volley, and let loose a booming shout that ended up turning into a full-bodied laugh. “We’re alive! I never thought we’d survive that beast.”

“Wardens aren’t supposed to survive killing the Archdemon,” Alistair said with a chuckle.

“Well, that wasn’t an Archdemon, and I’m no Warden,” Hawke looked at his broken dagger with distaste. “That’s going to be expensive to fix. There’s only one smith in the world I trust with these things.”

“And you will see him again.” Alistair let his arm fall back to the ground with a clatter. “Maker, we’re alive.”

Hawke grunted as he pushed himself into a sitting position. “I appreciate the sentiment, Warden, but I’m going to go ahead and ruin the mood here by asking What now? We don’t have the Inquisitor and his handy dandy little rift maker anymore.”
As the high of survival slowly waned, Alistair frowned. “Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I didn’t think you had,” Hawke said. “And our prospects aren’t very hopeful.”

Alistair groaned and stared upwards without really seeing anything for a moment. “You’re no fun,” he complained.

“I’m a realist. Being a politician does that to you,” Hawke noted wryly.

Hearing a series of grunts, Alistair turned his head to watch as Hawke slowly pushed himself to his feet. When he saw that blood still seeped from a large rent in the side of Hawke’s armor, he frowned. “We should do something about that cut.”

“Just a flesh wound,” Hawke said with a dismissive shrug. "Anyway, we’ve got more important concerns right now." Looking at his weapons with another grimace, he shoved them into their sheaths without bothering to clean them and walked over to Alistair. With a quick motion, he reached down and hauled Alistair to his feet. “Let's go. The Fade’s not getting any smaller.”

“Does the Fade even have a size?” As a wave of dizziness overwhelmed him for a moment, Alistair quickly stowed his sword and shield and put his hands on his knees until the world stabilized. As he did so, he glanced at the carcass of their foe. “Maker,” he breathed, gesturing to the demon. “Look.”

One of Hawke’s eyebrows rose as he surveyed the quickly decomposing demon, then suddenly frowned. "Come on. We don't have much time."

"Time for--"

"No questions!" Hawke barked, hooking his arm around Alistair's as he dragged him back towards the stairs.

Still confused, Alistair let himself be propelled forward. When the ground rumbled under his feet, though, he picked up the pace into a half-hopping, half limping trot. The rumble turned into a sharp grinding, and as they ran up the short incline leading away from where they'd fought the Nightmare, a sharp crack echoed beneath their feet.

"Run!" Hawke yelled, even as he accelerated.

Not wasting time or breath on a reply, Alistair pushed himself forward, uncaring of the effort or the pain of the motion. Even so, they barely made it onto higher ground before the entire section of the Fade upon which the Nightmare had perished broke away with a sound almost too loud to comprehend, tilting and turning as it fell away from their new vantage.

They both paused long enough to catch their breath once more, Hawke’s hand falling on Alistair's shoulder as he panted, "Well, that was exciting. I guess the Nightmare is truly dead."

"Dead enough for its realm to change," Alistair guessed. "Lucky for us."

Hawke gave a sardonic chuckle. "I suppose that means we're in the normal Fade now. Whatever that means."


"I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to fully appreciate its nature," Hawke said dourly. For a moment, he turned and looked at the receding platform they'd come from, face unreadable. Finally he shook
his head. "Well. Standing around isn't going to solve anything. Here." He tugged a couple of potions from his belt with a clink and offered one to Alistair. "Let's drink a draught for luck."

Alistair grabbed the bottle and popped the cork out with a practiced flick of his thumbnail, then held it up for the toast. "To luck."

"To luck," Hawke said, tapping his bottle gently against Alistair's before raising it to his lips. Once it was empty, he heaved it up into the sky. As it kept moving without falling back down, he tilted his head. "I wonder how far it will go."

"In this place?" Alistair asked as he followed suit, then watched the bottles until they both disappeared from sight. The potion helped him feel better, even if their future was still uncertain, and an ember of hope flared to life deep within as he straightened and took a deep breath. "Maybe they'll reach the Black City and become poor little blighted bottles, haunting the dreams of mage apprentices for Ages to come."

With a snort, Hawke gave Alistair a curt signal and set into motion. "Let's get going."

Time - or what passed for time - slowed to a crawl as they wandered the Fade, but Alistair stubbornly refused to stop putting one foot in front of the other. Not surprisingly, their surroundings changed significantly following their former host's fall. The horrors and graveyards and eerie twisted statues of torment were gone, replaced by an empty stretch of formless land and a dim, dreary sky. Rocks of varying sizes floated above them, and if he squinted hard enough he could make out the dark remains of a great city. There was nothing around them, though. No hill or valley or rock or tree or ruin. There was simply... nothing. Eventually, he just stopped looking, concentrating only on moving forward.

After a while, the person he was following slowed and came to a halt. He followed suit, staring dumbly at the back in front of him and struggling to remember why the large wet stain was bad. When the one in front of him turned to stare at him, he blinked dully in return. "Alistair. That's your name," the man said.

"Alistair," he repeated, then nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, I think so."

The man's eyes narrowed. "I have a name. Don't I?"

Alistair thought about it for a long time before a word suggested itself. "Eagle?"

"Almost." With a frown, the other man ground his teeth together as his face creased with concentration. "Hawke. Viscount Hawke. No." He shook his head. "No. Garrett Hawke. And Alistair... Alistair Theirin."

For a long moment, Alistair considered that. "Garrett Hawke. Alistair Theirin. Yes. That's who we are."

Hawke reached forward and set his hand on the back of Alistair's neck, meeting his gaze so intensely that some of the grey fog which had settled over Alistair's mind shifted and receded. "They're trying to take us away from ourselves," he said softly. "Focus on the names, Alistair Theirin. Don't forget them."

"Right. Don't forget us. Them. The names." Alistair nodded as an odd feeling fluttered in his stomach, a hint of nausea. "We're... we're in the Fade."

"Right. The Fade." Hawke took a deep breath. "And we need to get out." Taking a deep breath, he let his hand fall away. "Let's get moving, Alistair Theirin."
Alistair nodded, falling into step behind Hawke once more. He tried to wonder for a moment who the they were that Hawke had referred to, but the curiosity quickly dulled as he began to simply concentrate on moving one foot in front of another.

*My boots are wet. Why are they wet?* he wondered idly. He lifted a hand to stare at it, trying to make sense of the red splotches that covered the gauntlet, or the red drippy bits that dribbled along his arm and dropped off onto the featureless ground. With a mental shrug, he focused on the man ahead of him, matching his pace with every limp and stagger.

_Not man,* he reminded himself. *Hawke. Garrett Hawke. And I'm... I'm... Alistair Theirin.*

The words only helped for so long, though. Soon his existence became little more than setting one foot in front of the other, one plodding step at a time, with no thought of why he was even doing so. A vague notion entered his mind that he should *want* something, or be *looking* for something, but the only thing that came to his mind was an image of a woman with vibrant red hair and beautiful blue eyes. He struggled to figure out what it meant, or who she was, until finally even that faded away.

Where am I going?

Step after step, each slower and more laborious than the last, he struggled to answer that question. Whispers started to echo in his ears, and he absently reached up to scratch them, hoping to get rid of the insidious sounds. At first he couldn't understand the words, so he concentrated harder on them. Slowly they became more audible, but the more he listened, the slower he walked. After all what did it matter?

*I'm... I'm me.* His brow furrowed as he stumbled. *What does that mean?*

One foot in front of another. Yes. That's what he had to do, even though he'd forgotten why. When the not-him man in front of him groaned and slowly toppled to the ground, he kept moving until he tripped over the body and fell on his face. For a long time, he simply lay there, unmoving and uncaring, wholly indifferent to his fate.

Silence settled over him for a long time, and he let his eyes close. *This is... this is fine.* "This is fine," he repeated out loud, with a voice dry and dusty with disuse.

"No."

His eyes opened in surprise, and he turned his head just enough to find a keen pair of eyes staring at him. Blinking slowly, he croaked, "What?"

"I said no," the other repeated. "You're... you're Alistair Theirin."

And again, the words and the intensity shoved hard against the apathy which had wrapped around his mind, and Alistair gasped, "Hawke." He struggled for a moment, then added, "Garrett Hawke."

"Champion of... of..." Hawke's eyes closed as his brow furrowed.

A word whispered through Alistair's mind. "Kirkwall."

"Yes," Hawke breathed."Kirkwall." He pushed himself laboriously into a sitting position, then thumped Alistair on the arm. "Get up," he ordered.

"But--" Alistair began, defeated for no reason he could name.

"Get up," Hawke repeated, hitting Alistair with a bit more strength.
Grumbling to himself, Alistair pushed himself up, first to his knees, and then to his feet. "What about you?" he asked Hawke.

"I'll need help," Hawke said curtly, holding up his hand. "And we need more than to just keep walking. We need a plan."

"A plan to... to what?" Alistair asked as he hauled Hawke to his feet.

Hawke's hand whipped around and slapped Alistair across the face, sending him sprawling on the ground. Angrily Alistair turned on him. "What was that for?"

"Andraste's flaming tits, Alistair," Hawke snarled. "You're giving up! You're letting them win! I won't have it, not from you. Not again."

The words sparked something deep within Alistair, and he rose to his feet much more quickly than even moments ago. "I will not give up!" he growled through gritted teeth, then charged Hawke and slammed his shoulder into the man's chest, knocking him down.

As Hawke lay there struggling for breath, Alistair straddled his chest, then struck a blow across his face. Rage burned deep within him now, and he couldn't seem to control his hand as it reversed course and struck Hawke again. "You know nothing of what I went through!" he roared, emphasizing his words with repeated blows. "No one does! Not you, not Amell, not Morrigan! Not even Lel--Leliana..." The fact that he remembered her name gave him pause, and the thought of those steady blue eyes made the rage dim a bit. He shook his head, trying to keep the anger at bay as he stared down at the bloodied, battered face beneath him. "H-Hawke?"

"Do you see them yet?" Hawke growled, though his words were a bit slurred now due to his cut lips and swollen jaw.

Alistair blinked, then slowly raised his eyes. Within the mist around them, shapes had formed: misshapen, twisted figures that stared at the two men with a palpable greed. One of them, a hulking, red thing made of living fire, raised its hands and roared, and Alistair felt an echoing surge of rage that made him look down at Hawke with a sneer of anger.

This time when his fist flew towards Hawke, however, the man's hand caught his wrist. "Fight, Alistair. Fight against it."

Alistair struggled against Hawke's grip for a moment, then looked up at the red thing again. Demon. That was a demon. With the realization came an awareness, knowledge borne from his time training as a Templar, and he forced himself to pause and take a deep breath. The fury still roiled in the pit of his stomach, but with every passing moment the emotion felt more and more foreign, as if it were being imposed on him. "They're demons," he whispered. "Rage, sloth, and..."

"Despair," Hawke grated. "Sloth and despair found us first. Tried to make us give up. It's why I hit you. Rage is weaker than they are. Easier to break you free from its grasp."

Looking down at Hawke, Alistair nodded slowly as his arm finally relaxed. "Good plan. Crazy, though."

Hawke snorted. "They don't call me the Champion because I frolic in fields of flowers and have a sound retirement plan," he told the other man. "Now that I have your attention... do something about it."

"Do what?" Alistair asked, puzzled.
"You were a Templar. You figure it out," Hawke quipped, even as the demons around them started to converge on them.

"Oh. Right." Alistair felt a bit sheepish, then frowned as the rage demon again raised its arm and pulled on the tenuous connection between them, trying to capture Alistair once more. "Not this time, demon," he snarled.

He used the remnant of the demon-fueled rage to buttress his smite, giving it enough force to stagger all of the demons for a moment. As they reeled from the unexpected attack, Alistair rose to his feet and drew sword and shield, then charged into their midst. Hawke vanished as he struggled upright, only to appear soon after behind a despair demon as his blades sunk into its back.

One by one their foes fell, though each slash of his sword cost Alistair in terms of pain and energy, until finally all of them lay still on the ground around the two men. Alistair and Hawke stood back to back, each using the other for support as they struggled to remain upright.

"I can't do that again," Alistair admitted in a strained voice. His arms felt like lead, and he knew he had nothing left to give, not to a fight, and not to resist a demon.

"Neither can I, not right away," Hawke admitted. "Maybe we should… rest a bit."

"Good idea," Alistair said with a groan as he collapsed into a sitting position.

After a few moments of mutual gasping for breath, Hawke looked over his shoulder towards Alistair. "Not that I want to appear ungrateful or anything," he said, "but why in the Void did you stay here? I just needed to make sure the Inquisitor escaped and slammed the rift shut behind him. You weren't needed for that."

Alistair chuckled breathily. "You're welcome."

Rolling his eyes, Hawke said, "I'm serious, Alistair. You had a lot more to go back to than I did. I saw the way you were cozying up to Leliana at Skyhold. That, and you'd finally be the hero you've always wanted to be."

The last words dripped with a bitterness that made Alistair's eyebrows rise as he stared at Hawke. "I didn't realize you hated heroes so much."

"I despise the entire concept of them," Hawke said with a sneer. "There aren't heroes, there are just people who get forced into positions where they have to choose between what's popular and what's necessary. Sometimes they're even the same thing, and then the bards write a song about them and their name lives on forever, even if they were an utter, gutless bastard who liked to burn down women and rape houses."

Alistair blinked at the man's vehemence, then blinked again as the order of the words as they were actually spoken settled in his mind. "Did you reverse--?"

"Never mind," Hawke said, flicking his hand dismissively. "The point is that staying here to be a hero isn't worth it, so I hope that isn't why you stayed."

"And it wasn't," Alistair said. "Believe me, traveling with Amell and then hearing him called a hero once the Blight was over pretty much took any shine off the word for me. I didn't do it because I wanted to be remembered as a hero, or to be one. I did it because it was the right thing to do."

"How so?" Hawke challenged him. "I was already taking care of the problem."
"And what if it wasn't enough?" Alistair shot back. "No one can save the world alone, Hawke, not even the Champion of Kirkwall."

Hawke grunted. "I've been trying to convince people of that for years," he noted in a sardonic tone. "You're the first one to believe that I can't, I think. Be that as it may, being bait for a monster isn't anything new. That, I knew I could do. I would have preferred you to go with the Inquisitor."

"And what if that thing got out after it squished you beneath its... its... paw? Claw? Talon?" Alistair shook his head. "Whatever a mountain-sized spider calls its foot. Besides, even if the Inquisitor closed the rift so tightly it couldn't pry it back open, what was to stop it from controlling the Grey Wardens again? There was no rift in Adamant when all of my fellow Wardens suddenly started to hear the Calling in their bones." Sighing heavily, he added in a softer voice, "Anyway, I couldn't leave without seeing it through. Not again."

"If you'd seen it through in the Blight, you would have been a puppet King instead of a pathetic Warden," Hawke pointed out acidly. "Not much of an improvement."

"What does it matter to you, anyway?" Pushing himself to face Hawke more directly, he met Hawke's gaze with hard eyes. "Why does any of this matter to you? Sometimes I forget why you even offered to help the Inquisition at all."

Hawke glared at him. "Because Corypheus is my responsibility."

"Oh, riiight. Because you failed to kill him properly the last time, now I remember," Alistair drawled, then winced as Hawke flinched and looked away. "I--Look, I didn't mean that, not really."

"Yes, you did," Hawke growled, then suddenly sagged where he sat. "And you're right. I failed. As I have so many times before."

Alistair coughed and rubbed his neck a bit self-consciously, not really knowing what to say to that. Finally, he asked in a quiet voice, "Why do you hate me? When Loghain brought me to that first meeting with you, you looked like you'd swallowed a lemon. You didn't even want my help, despite the fact that I was willing and able. Why?"

Nostrils flaring, Hawke stared into the depths of the Fade for a moment. "That isn't a subject up for discussion."

The answer quite suddenly made Alistair angry, though he couldn't pinpoint why. He just knew that he was tired, frustrated, and in pain, and Hawke still wouldn't give him an inch. "Why?" he demanded, not letting Hawke wiggle out of it this time. "Why have you always treated me like I'm not even worth the air to curse my name? Did I offend you somehow by singing off-key in the Hanged Man? Did you have to step too far out of your way one morning to get around me as I lay sleeping in the gutters of Lowtown? Why, Hawke?"

Hawke didn't answer him immediately, didn't even turn to look at him for a long, silent moment. When he did, a rage burned in his face that made Alistair instinctively pull back from the man. "After you left Kirkwall, I met a knife ear, a former Crow called Zevran Arainai," Hawke said in a voice that was too controlled, too steady. "Perhaps you've heard of him?"

Alistair swallowed harshly as a faint echo of the elf's cruel laughter rang in his mind. Over ten years had passed since he'd been in the elf's clutches, but some memories, it seemed, didn't fade. "More than heard of him," he said quietly.

"He told everyone he was in Kirkwall for some random business of sorts. I worked with some
Crows to find him. They thought they were playing me, the local errand boy, into helping them find an escaped Crow. It turns out we were all the fools, dancing to Zevran's tune so that he could meet me without raising any suspicions about why. "Hawke took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "He offered a special Antivan massage. I accepted and sent everyone away so as to enjoy it in private. Nothing wrong with a bit of fun, after all."

"Hawke," Alistair breathed as he squeezed his eyes shut. He remembered those special massages, all right. He still bore scars from them, in fact. He'd also never told anyone the truth about them, not even Leliana. Some things were better kept deep, deep inside.

"Towards the end, when I struggled for breath and simply wanted the pain to end, he patted my head and called me almost as good as Alistair. Later, that's what stuck with me the most. And when we met again?" He gave Alistair a glance. "That's all I could remember about you. His voice. His touch. His heated dagger."

"The brand below your navel?" Alistair asked in a hushed whisper. Hawke’s jaw rippled as he nodded. "Even Anders couldn't heal it entirely. Once I let him touch me again."

"Arainai wasn't always like that," Alistair whispered. "I actually liked him at first, after we got over the whole you tried to kill me part of our first meeting. But then he started to share Amell's tent, and... I don't know." Alistair bowed his head. "Amell warped anything he touched, or killed it if he couldn't." Like Leliana. The thought still made him boil inside. "He only didn't kill me because he thought he could use a bastard Prince to rule Ferelden. Then I balked when he wouldn't kill Loghain—or found my spine, I'm still not sure which—and left to become a bastard drunkard. Not that it helped Ferelden, of course. He still got a Queen." Shaking his head, Alistair looked off into the distance. "I never told anyone about what Zevran did to me, not in detail. I would always just... wave it away."

"Yes, well. It's not something you bring up in polite conversation, is it?" Hawke noted bitterly. "Anders scolded me for not paying attention to his warning, of course, but he didn't press the matter beyond that. He'd been a healer in Darktown long enough to recognize it for what it was. I got in over my damned head, but I moved on from it. Or so I thought."

"Until we had to work together," Alistair said with a sigh. "Fair enough. Too bad you didn’t tell me until now."

"I couldn’t tell you before now," Hawke told him seriously. "Amell sealed my tongue on the matter when he walked my dreams. But now that I’m here in the Fade outside of my dreams, that seal seems to have been broken."

Alistair turned his head sharply. "Amell?" he asked, a bit more harshly than he'd originally intended. Hawke closed his eyes for a moment. "It's a long story," he said at last.

"Well, so is mine," Alistair reminded him. After a long moment of staring at his hands, Alistair tugged off his gauntlets and dropped them to the ground. Holding up one hand, he pointed to a long scar on the back of it. "First one," he said. "Not even a week after Duncan died. It was only him, me, and Morrigan. I don’t even remember why he needed my blood, or why he left the scar except to claim me. But it was the first."

Hawke stared at it for a long moment, then raked his gaze over the rest of Alistair, or at least the parts that showed. There were other scars, of course. Most would simply assume that a Grey Warden with a sword and shield had earned those scars in battle. Most would, anyway. When Hawke's eyes rose
Pulling off his thick leather gloves, Hawke traced a similar scar on the back of his right hand. "I woke up one day not long after he first appeared in my dreams," he said quietly. "Before I was sharing a bed with Anders but after I moved into my estate. At the time, I didn't know why it was there and figured I'd gotten into a brawl at the Hanged Man the night before. Now I know better."

Alistair nodded. "That sounds familiar, too," he said grimly. "Poor Isabela never could look me in the eye after a night I don’t even remember, though she helped me willingly enough when I approached her later."

Hawke winced. "So that explains her reaction to the bard singing about Amell in the taverns. She would just... shut down, or leave, even if Fenris were there." Eyes narrowing, Hawke straightened and met Alistair's eyes with unflinching strength. "We can’t stop. Not now. Besides, we won’t get another chance to talk about this."

Slowly, haltingly, the two men shared more of their past with each other, their common experience with Arainai and Amell giving them a foundation they both had thought deeply buried. It wasn’t easy to unhook those barbs, sunk into their souls as they were, and try to release the poison that was Jorath Amell, but since time didn’t seem to matter in the Fade, and there was no way of knowing if they would even survive, they never really found a reason to stop. Dry throats were eased by the last of the potions tucked into the belts around their waist as they each revealed what both had formerly resolved to leave as secrets they would take to their graves. The longer they spoke, the more they came to understand the nature of the burden which had been placed on them, a combination of guilt and shame which they never could have faced alone.

"I have to admit," Alistair said after they’d both finally run out of stories and had sat alone in their own thoughts for a few minutes, "that if I ever had to pick a confidant, you would be the last man on that list. Or... almost the last. Third from the bottom."

"Above Arainai and Amell?" Hawke asked with dark humor.

Alistair nodded. "So at least you’re not the worst person I’ve ever met."

"Thank you," Hawke said dryly, then pushed himself to his feet. A sizable pool of dried blood darkened the ground where he’d sat, but he ignored it as he swayed a bit before bending over to retrieve his daggers. "But sitting here talking won't get us out of the Fade. Let's go."

"Hawke," Alistair said, even as he rose to his feet.

"Yes?"

For a moment Alistair hesitated, but only a moment. He truly wanted to know. "Would you want to leave if I wasn't here?"

Puffing some air into his cheeks, Hawke gave a little shrug. "I have a lot of sins to pay for. Staying here would at least be sufficient punishment."

"You could try to fix some of them if we get out," Alistair pointed out.

"Or risk getting controlled by Amell again," Hawke sneered. "Not a pleasant thought, that."

Alistair looked down, unable to really answer that honestly. "The Inquisitor would help you, I’m sure of it."
“If anyone could, yes. But he’s a little busy saving the world from Corypheus.” Suddenly Hawke’s expression hardened. “Corypheus. Now there’s a reason to return. Sending that thing to his permanent rest… Yes.” He nodded. “That’s worth returning for.”

“That’s the spirit,” Alistair said weakly.

With a snort, Hawke looked at Alistair. “Hoping I’d value redemption over revenge, were you?”

“The thought did cross my mind,” Alistair admitted.

“Who knows?” Hawke twirled one of his daggers, then sheathed both of them with a flourish. “Maybe Andraste will let me find both.”

“Or maybe you just need a friend to slap you when you start to get all revenge-y,” Alistair suggested.

Hawke hesitated, then looked at Alistair. “You’re not volunteering, I hope. Either to slap me or to be my friend. Bad things happen to my friends, and worse to my family. The Nightmare was right about that, at least. I am a failure.”

Reaching out to rest his hand on Hawke’s shoulder, Alistair said, “Never let a demon do your thinking for you. I’m an ex-Templar, after all. I can say that with some authority.”

“I think I already knew that, but thanks for the advice,” Hawke said sardonically.

“Fine. I guess you don’t need me, then,” Alistair sighed as he tugged his hand away.

“I didn’t say that.” When Alistair gave him a sharp glance, however, Hawke had already turned away and was surveying the Fade around him. “We need a plan, though, like I said before.”

"Right," Alistair frowned in concentration. "How do we do the impossible? Seems simple enough."

"Don't give up," Hawke said, an edge to his voice. “We’ve come too far for that.”

Alistair nodded, then gave Hawke a stern look. "Promise me that whatever we come up with won’t make me hit you again. You’re starting to look like chopped meat."

"So that’s what I feel like," Hawke said sardonically. "Focus, Alistair. Remember what Solas said? How the Fade shapes itself around what we want? That's probably why we couldn't make any progress. The demons took our resolve and will away."

"Effective tactic, you have to admit," Alistair pointed out.

"Not good enough, though," Hawke said with more than a hint of smugness. "But I think that if we both concentrate on nothing except finding a way out, the Fade will provide."

Alistair reached up to rub his neck, then winced and looked at the new blood he found there. "And hope we don't run into any more demons," he said with a sigh.

"That goes without saying." Eyes narrowing, Hawke looked at the featureless plain around them, then shrugged and started forward again. "Any direction will do, I suppose. As long as we remain focused, we’ll find our way out."

With a sigh, Alistair nodded and fell in beside him. "All right. Focus, then."

Their progress was slow, hampered by their fatigue and the injuries they’d sustained in their most recent fights, though their potions had helped a bit. It quickly became apparent to Alistair that his
greatest enemy would be himself in a race against his remaining strength. Between his pain and the situation and his yearning for the real world, he had to keep tugging his thoughts back to the task at hand.

A way out. A way back. Not what he yearned to see once they had escaped, but an actual path out of the Fade back to where they came from. Eventually his head started to ache along with the rest of him, and inevitably his thoughts began to wander back to what he most wanted to see on the other side.

Ahead of them the mists roiled, then pulled back, and Hawke’s arm shot out to stop Alistair in his tracks before reaching for his daggers. When he spoke, his tone was icy. “I said a way out, Warden,” he snapped as he started forward. “Not your next fuck.”

Alistair, meanwhile, could only stare at the beautiful red-haired, blue-eyed woman standing in their path, clad in such a manner that he had to blink and clear his throat ferociously. “Leliana?” he asked, then shook his head. Of course it isn’t Leliana, he scolded himself. It had to be a desire demon, acting on his confused, inchoate longing rather than what he should have been concentrating on.

As Hawke moved towards the demon, however, she tilted her head. “Do you think your own thoughts had no effect, Champion?” she asked in that lilting Orlesian accent. “Perhaps my appearance at the moment is due to his thoughts, but my purpose is something else entirely.”

Hawke’s eyes narrowed as he came to a halt. “Explain yourself, demon.”

“What if I could show you a way out?” she asked with a smile.

“I don’t believe you,” he said bluntly.

“Ah, but did your thoughts ever waver?” she pointed out. “Follow me, Champion, and I promise to show you a way out. And if I do not, you can kill me where I stand.” Her hands wrapped around herself, cupping her breasts as she leaned forward. “Or you could have some fun with me, and then kill me, hmm?”

Hawke gave a tired sigh. “Take that up with the Warden,” he said acidly. “But fine. We’ll play it your way for now. You have two hundred steps to lead us to the way out, and then my daggers drive home.”

“That will be more than enough, Champion,” the demon assured him. With a little twirl, she turned and led them off in a different direction from where they’d been heading, sending them a come hither look over her shoulder as she did so.

Alistair hurried to reach Hawke, then kept pace with him as they moved forward once more. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Hawke grunted. “I’ll forgive you if this works. Only if this works, mind. In the meantime,” he added, tilting his head, “at least the view is nice.”

Alistair had to admit that his eyes had locked onto something rather curvaceous in front of them. “She is beautiful.”

“She?” Hawke chuckled. “Oh. Right. Leliana. I suppose he still looks like her to you, hmm?”

With a blink, Alistair squinted at the swaying hips in front of them. “Um… Yes?”

“Good. Then I can pretend to enjoy his ass all on my own.” For all his salacious comments,
however, the skin around Hawke’s eyes remained tight, and his gaze darted around them. “One
hundred,” he muttered to himself.

“Right,” Alistair said with a nod, trying to pretend he’d been counting. “And we’re only letting her--
him--it have up until two hundred?”

“That was the deal,” Hawke said, then added sharply, “And for Maker’s sake, keep thinking about a
way out and not what you want to do to whatever it is you’re seeing.”

Snapping to attention, Alistair forced his thoughts from boudoirs and white petals and flushed skin
to where they should have stayed. It was difficult, but knowing that Hawke clearly saw someone
different helped to remind him that it was just a demon trying to entice him. Rather successfully, he
had to admit, but at least he was able to keep that firmly in mind.

Just as Hawke murmured, “Two hundred,” under his breath and tightened his grip on his daggers,
something loomed out of the mist ahead.

“Hawke,” Alistair whispered urgently, but the man simply nodded and moved towards the demon as
she turned to face them with a smile of satisfaction on her face.

“And here you are: your way out,” she purred.

Alistair frowned as he looked at the object to which they had been brought. At first glance it seemed
to be a mirror which showed only a mist of blue and grey light which swirled in the depths of the
glass. It was over twice as tall as they were, and a bit wider than Alistair could reach with his arms
straight out to his sides. All in all, simply looking at it made the hackles on Alistair’s neck rise, and
he frowned. “What is it?”

“That looks… uncomfortably familiar,” Hawke noted with a grimace, then nodded and looked at the
demon. “You’re right. This could be a way out.”

She smiled seductively and moved in close to him. “I kept my promise,” she murmured. “Do I get a
reward?”

A half-grin came to Hawke’s lips. “Well. I suppose I could give you a little something.” He grasped
the back of the demon’s head with one hand and hauled it into a searing kiss. The demon melted into
him with a moan, seemingly fully enjoying the kiss - right up until Hawke sank the blade held in his
other hand deep into her back.

With a screech, the demon pulled back, trying to reach over her shoulder to grab the dagger, but
found it to be just out of her reach. As she writhed and twisted, Leliana’s likeness faded away to
reveal a sight with which Alistair was much more familiar: the horns and lavender skin of a desire
demon.

“Put it out of its misery, would you?” Hawke said casually as he turned away.

Alistair nodded, his sword swinging even before Hawke finished speaking. The demon’s head flew
into the mist, and the decapitated body collapsed face down on the ground. It twitched a few times,
then lay still.

“An ugly business,” Alistair muttered as he prodded the body with his foot.

Kneeling next to the body, Hawke wrapped his hand around the hilt of his dagger. “It always is,” he
said softly. “And honestly, that’s one reminder I could have done without.” Alistair gave him a
puzzled look, but Hawke ignored it as he yanked the dagger out before moving to stand in front of
the mirror. The way he sheathed his dagger with a bit more force than warranted showed that something was wrong, but Alistair knew better than to ask.

“You said this looked familiar,” Alistair reminded him. “What is it?

“I think it’s an eluvian. They’re some sort of magic portal to another place, or something like that. I knew someone in Kirkwall who tried to repair one once. I told her not to, but she kept at it anyway.”

Hawke rubbed his face for a moment, absently picking off a newly formed scab and dabbing away the blood that seeped through beneath. “Let’s just say it didn’t end well for anyone involved.”

Alistair frowned as he looked at the eluvian. “Well. Whatever it is, it seems to be our only option. It has to lead somewhere better than here.” He paused, then looked at Hawke. “Doesn’t it?”

“I’d say we’d be fools not to find out.”

Hawke stepped forward and reached out to touch it. A frown came to his face as his fingers found only glass to touch. “Damn. I’m not sure how they work, exactly. I’ve only ever seen mages use them.”

“Wouldn’t that be just my luck,” Alistair muttered as he stepped forward, but a quick jab at the eluvian only confirmed Hawke’s finding. With a sigh of frustration, he banged his fist against the surface, causing a sharp ringing sound to echo around them.

“Careful!” Hawke told him. “This may be the only chance we get. There must be a trick to it or something. Keep prodding it, but don’t hit it again.”

“All right, all right.” Alistair grumbled as he began to work his way along the surface of the eluvian.

Just as he reached the frame and was starting to wonder if maybe his sword might get better results, the mirror suddenly made another sharp ringing sound. Both men jumped back warily, and Alistair’s eyes widened as a hand emerged from the blue and grey swirling mist. It was an unremarkable hand, clad in a scarred, worn leather glove. Once through, a single finger curled to beckon them closer before it turned to face palm up and opened.

Waiting.

“Well. If that’s not an open invitation, then I’ve really abused the hospitality of the gentlemen at the Blooming Rose,” Hawke noted thoughtfully.

Alistair couldn’t help but laugh, albeit nervously, at the remark. “Though I notice you’re not moving.”

“Neither are you.”

Hawke pointed out, then sighed. “There’s only one hand. We need to both take it at the same time. I’d rather that than have one of us get dragged through and the other left behind.”

“And here I thought you didn’t like me,” Alistair said with a chuckle.

“At first? No, I didn’t.”

Hawke turned to look at Alistair. “You were a drunken fool who wasted a good portion of his life lamenting that fact that he couldn’t kill a man. It took you a while to convince me that wasn’t still true. Besides, I know you don’t like me.”

With a shrug, he grabbed Alistair’s elbow and dragged him forward. “Regardless. My blade needs repair, and there’s a certain redhead you’re missing. And the longer we wait, the more chance there is that we won’t get back at all.”

Alistair shuddered. “Stay here for the rest of my life? No, thank you.”

“See? Not such a hard choice after all.”

His hand slid down to take Alistair’s, then raised both of them to hover above the waiting hand. “I’m not a religious man,” he told Alistair quietly, “so I’d
appreciate it if you could pray for both of us.”

“I’ll do that.” Alistair quipped, though a sweat had broken out on his forehead. He’d had hope turn into despair before, after all. *Still, it can’t possibly be worse than the Fade, can it?*

Hawke inhaled sharply and held his breath for a moment, then brought their hands down in a swift, sure motion.

The leather-bound fingers wrapped around their own firmly—almost a bit *too* firmly—and yanked them with surprising strength through the mirror. Unable to fight the sudden tug, both men stumbled forward and fell to their knees once they reached the other side.

When Alistair's hands hit the floor with a wooden *thunk*, he stared at it incredulously for a few long moments. After a bit, he poked it with one bare finger, only dimly realizing that the weight of his armor and weapons were gone, and his injuries were but a fading dream. Slowly he rose to his feet, looking around him with wide eyes at the homely comfort of the wood, brick, and smoke which all small town taverns seemed to possess.

"What'll it be?" a rough voice asked from his right, and Alistair turned in a daze to look at its source. A stout man with a weather-beaten face stood behind a worn counter of old but well-polished oak planks, absently running his cloth over it as he awaited an answer. His clothes spoke of no country, yet no one would mistake the simple homespun as anything noble or fancy, and he looked like the barkeep of many a town Alistair had passed through in his travels throughout Thedas, whether in Orlais, Ferelden, or Nevarra. The only notable aspect of him seemed to be a tattoo of a pair of curved lines swooping down the left side of his face, but Alistair couldn’t quite recall what that meant.

"Ah... Fereldan whiskey?" Alistair finally managed.

"And I'll have an Ander stout," Hawke said with rather more certainty.

The man behind the counter nodded and turned to pour their drinks. "You can wait out there on the patio," he said, nodding towards a door leading outside. "Someone'll bring the drinks out."

Suddenly desperate to see the sky again, Alistair nodded. "Thank you, my good barkeep," he declared, then strode to the door, followed closely by Hawke who, he noticed, also seemed to lack armor and weapons. In the next breath, he wondered why Hawke would ever need them, safe as they were in this place.

Wherever this place was.

As they stepped outside, Alistair took a deep breath to catch the scent of the sea they saw in the near distance. Both men moved to lean against the railing, eyes shining in wonder at the beauty the vista offered. The sun was setting on the opposite side of the building, causing long shadows to fall over the land even as they watched. A flock of cormorants took advantage of the shift in light to dive for fish in the water, coming away with beaks full of thrashing bounty.

Hawke was the first to turn as footsteps approached from behind, smiling as he reached out for the mug of stout carried by a man in a more than familiar uniform. "My thanks, guardsman," he said as he took the drink.

"It's just Donnen these days," the man said with a chuckle as he offered the smaller glass of whiskey out to Alistair. "Kept the clothes because they're well-made and sturdy, but my time in the Kirkwall guard is over."

*Donnen...* Alistair paused with the glass halfway to his lips, brow wrinkling in confusion. *I've seen*
Hawke laughed as he turned and looked out over the lake again, mug held loosely in his hand. The light of the setting sun had dimmed enough that the sea in front of them now shone a deep sapphire. "It's never really gone, Donnen," he mused. "Kirkwall finds its way into your soul, and once it's there, you carry it always."

"Maybe so," Donnen conceded as he stepped in between Hawke and Alistair to lean on the railing with them. In the air above, seabirds soared through the last remnants of light to return to their nest, and above them the stars were just beginning to emerge from the indigo of twilight. "But the world could always use a Champion or a Warden wherever they happen to go."

Alistair looked sharply at Donnen, glass hovering at his lips. "How do you know--" he started to ask, but Hawke simply laughed and raised his mug.

"I'll drink to that," Hawke said, though he paused with the mug an inch from his lips to gaze up at the stars and the beautiful, full moon before he did so. "This really is a peaceful place, isn't it?"

"That it is," Donnen said with a contented sigh. "That it is."

"Pity." Without any other warning—or even a change in expression—Hawke backhanded his mug directly into Donnen's face. As the man went down, spitting stout and curses, Hawke grabbed him by the neck of his tunic and hauled him over the railing, putting steady pressure on the man's neck as he bent over him. "Now that I have your attention, tell me what's really going on, Donnen."

The man hocked out a mouth full of blood, then looked up at Hawke. As he did so, the left side of his face seemed to melt into burn scars, which marred the smirk on his suddenly pale face. "You should have finished your drink, cousin."

Hawke's eyes widened as he jerked away from the man, but that was all the time he had before a ring of red magic surrounded him, yanking him up to dangle in the air a few feet above the mage. With a yell, Alistair surged towards Amell's back as he prepared a smite, but something thin and tight suddenly wrapped around his neck, and a well-placed knee in his back drove him to his own knees. A silky voice tinged with the spice of Antiva whispered, "Hello, my little prince. I've missed you."

Suddenly the tavern was gone, the ocean was gone, everything was gone except for the four of them gathered in a featureless cavern with nothing but a tall mirror to one side which seemed an exact copy of the one through which he and Hawke had passed. His armor and weapons—never truly gone, it seemed—dragged Alistair down as he abruptly noticed them again, and he gasped when the agony of his wounds returned with a vengeance heightened by its brief surcease. The stout barkeep shrank down into a handsome blond elf with a now-familiar tattoo, and the guardsmen swelled into the familiar tall, thin form shrouded in a dark cloak.

As Jorath reached up to pull his hood into place, Alistair stared at the patches of bare scalp showing through the bright red hair on Amell’s scalp. That’s new. Pushing the curiosity aside, he heaved against the one holding him, hoping to catch Zevran by surprise, but earned only a hard cuff to one ear and a tightening of the cord around his throat.

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While Alistair struggled to breathe until Zevran decided to relent, Amell circled Hawke as the man slowly floated down to the ground. A staff with a skull of red lyrium surmounting it glided through the air to Jorath’s outstretched hand as he chuckled in that spine-curving way Alistair remembered all too well from the years of the Blight. “Did you think you could escape me, cousin?” he drawled. “I’m hurt that you think so very little of my abilities. I will say, you didn’t have to kill the little pet..."
demon I sent to fetch you. He would have been perfectly happy to make you happy… for a while.”

Hawke shuddered and closed his eyes. “Not… not with that face,” he whispered.

As Jorath laughed mockingly in response, Alistair pulled his gaze away from the glowing red eyes, an old habit he’d sworn he’d left behind, and forced himself to look at Hawke. He wasn’t sure what he’d been hoping to see, but the utter despair emphasized as Hawke simply fell to his knees at Amell’s feet when the red barrier was dismissed—it hurt more than he cared to admit. “Fight, Hawke. Fight against him,” he pleaded in a whisper, not even realizing he’d said it aloud until the choker tightened ever so slightly around his neck—a reminder of just who had control.

Amell sent his fellow Warden an amused glance, then dipped his fingers under Hawke’s chin and lifted it up so that he could examine the man’s bruised and battered face. “Hmm. Not so handsome anymore, are you? I can fix that. Just as I have fixed so many others.” A cruel smile came to his lips as he stroked Hawke’s cheek. “Don’t worry, little bird. I’ll perfect you.”

When Jorath’s hand lit with magic and Hawke screamed, Alistair once again tried to break free, only to be brought up short by the loop wound around his neck. “Ah, ah, ah,” Zevran purred. “You’re mine, and I will not let you escape again. I have so many plans for you.”

Alistair’s breathing turned ragged as each breath grew more difficult than the last. Desperately he tried to cling to the light he’d found since leaving Amell behind: the friendship he’d forged with Cullen, the peace he’d made with Loghain, and the purpose he’d found once more with the Wardens. His mind yearned towards the memory of silken red hair scented with Andraste’s Grace, and the laughter captured in a pair of bright blue eyes.

Yet in the end, bereft of breath and hollow of hope, his strength failed, and the light slipped away with the last gasp of air from his lungs. In its place yawned an empty chasm of despair, and Alistair had no choice but to plunge headlong into the waiting darkness.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act II - Revelation

Psst! I posted a deleted scene from Act III over on my Tumblr. Go check it out!

Author's Note: This fic is not abandoned. The outline is ready and I've been working on it (albeit slowly) since finishing Act II. NaNoWriMo 2018 was good to the writing of Act III, which is about 75% done. Unfortunately the part that needs the most rewriting is
the beginning of the Act, so I have to tackle that before I start publishing. Still! There has been tremendous progress!

If you have any nagging questions in the meantime (which I will answer if there are no spoilers involved), leave it in the comments or send it to me on Tumblr. As well, I always put a ton of Easter eggs, foreshadowing, and leitmotifs in my stories, and I'm always curious what people notice, so feel free to let me know if you think you found one!

And, a final note: this act really only happened because of the readers, because you kept reminding me that this story was worth pursuing. So (and I honestly cannot say this enough) thank you. Thank you for reading, thank you for the kudos, thank you for the comments, thank you for everything! I really, truly appreciate the continued support of all of you. Thank you from the bottom of my little writer's heart!
The return to Skyhold proved to be not nearly as busy for Cullen as the departure had been. For one, he couldn’t simply hop on a horse and ride up and down the lines to inspect the soldiers. No, this time, he traveled in a carriage specially modified to give him as smooth a ride as possible. On top of that, with his knee and wrist wrapped in splints both physical and magical, he endured the healer’s scrutiny several times a day to ensure that the healing was progressing as it should. The first - and only - time he’d objected to ‘all the fuss’ and demanded a horse, Vivienne had been summoned.

Her expression told him the battle was lost before the first engagement. “Oh, I am so sorry, my dear, but I was under the impression you wished to walk again,” she noted in that oh-so-reasonable tone she reserved for dotards and dullards. “Was I perhaps mistaken?”

And that was the end of that.

Resigned to his fate, Cullen slumped in the admittedly quite comfortable seat of the carriage, ensured all the windows were open as wide as he could manage, and tried to keep himself distracted by reports and the occasional visitor. In the end, however, the primary occupant of his time was his thoughts. They wandered incessantly through his memories, from Kinloch Hold to Kirkwall, and from Haven to Skyhold. He recalled significant meetings, with Amell and Hawke, and later with Leliana and Cassandra. The two which truly drew smiles to his face were the ones with Mailani, in the midst of the devastation of the Temple of the Sacred Ashes, and Dorian, who had practically fallen into his arms at Haven.

The latter, in fact, was on his mind as the carriage slowed to a halt and the door popped open, revealing a man who apparently could add mind-reading to his list of skills. As Dorian hopped in and settled into the seat across from Cullen, he said, “I thought I’d come in and keep you company for a while. It must be dreadfully boring watching all that desert go by endlessly.”

Cullen gave him a warm smile. “Company is always appreciated, thank you.”

One of Dorian’s eyebrows rose. “Surely I’m not the first one.”

“Well, no,” Cullen admitted. “Cassandra has been by, of course. Bull popped his head in, but more of him wouldn’t fit through the door. Varric came by, and we… we talked. For quite a while, actually.” A sad smile touched his lips. “I think he wanted to compare notes about Hawke.”

“Poor man,” Dorian said with a sigh. “After Hawke told us the truth about Amell, there were a few brief moments where I saw someone I actually liked. I imagine it was the same for Varric, and given their history…” He shook his head. “Varric sent letters to Kirkwall to inform them of the death of their Viscount. Then muttered something about how he was glad he wasn’t there so he wouldn’t have to suffer through the politics as a new one was selected, but... Well, it was a lackluster effort at humor at best.”

“It’s just so strange to think that what I thought I knew of Hawke was so skewed,” Cullen admitted. “But then, he might have just walked out of the Fade and back into that waking nightmare again.”

“Sans demon, yes, but I agree. I half-suspect that possibility played a factor in his decision to remain behind. I’m sure we could have helped him, but perhaps not in time.” Running a finger thoughtfully over his mustache, he added, “But this conversation is a trifle more morbid than I intended. Perhaps we could move on to something else?”

“Gladly,” Cullen said in a relieved tone. “I was actually thinking about first meetings when you hopped in.”

Lips twitching, Dorian tilted his head. “Mine included?”
“Yours included,” Cullen assured him with a chuckle.

Dorian raised an eyebrow as a gleam of humor came to his eye. “You seemed quite eager to take me in your arms, as I recall.”

Instead of taking the comment amiss, Cullen just laughed. “And then we argued in the Chantry. You accused me of being a blood mage.”


“Oh, I beg your pardon, you’re right,” Cullen said with a roll of his eyes. “That is entirely different.”

Dorian laughed. “A bit of a rough beginning, I’ll admit.”

Giving him a cocky grin, Cullen said, “I’ve had worse, though not many.”

“You were simply overwhelmed by my incredible charm and grace, I’m sure,” Dorian said as he set his hand on his chest. “Most southerners would be. I have no equivalent down here, after all.”

"That must have been it," Cullen said with mock seriousness. "We poor southerners are simply blinded by your eminent perfection."

Dorian's finger smoothed over his mustache as he gave Cullen a wink. "As well you should be."

"Maker," Cullen said, reduced to laughing again. "I think Mailani once told me that Pavus meant peacock. I just never realized how much you were truly living up to your namesake."

"She gave away all my secrets to you, didn't she?" Dorian lamented, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead. "I am stripped bare before you because of her."

Cullen tilted his head as he looked Dorian up and down. "No. You have far too many buckles for that to be true."

"That's called fashion, not that a Fereldan would understand," Dorian corrected him in a condescending tone.

"No, because in Ferelden we believe in a little something called keeping warm," Cullen sallied back. Looking pointedly at Cullen's unadorned shoulders, then the pile of fur sitting next to Cullen on his seat, Dorian said, "Which apparently has its limits."

"We're in a desert," Cullen pointed out, gesturing to the featureless sand dunes as they slowly passed by outside the window. "I don't need fur on top of all that."

"True. I'm finally warm enough, but I have sand in places I'd rather not mention in polite company, or even yours, if it came to that." His mouth formed a moue of distaste as he blithely ignored Cullen's snort. "I wouldn't particularly call that an improvement."

Cullen stared at Dorian for a moment, then started to laugh helplessly. "I'm sorry, but your expression..."

"Oh, no, please laugh at my discomfort," Dorian said with a tragic sigh. "I'll just sit here and try to get the sand out of my hair before I go."

"You're not going already, surely?" Cullen asked, sitting up a little straighter.
Dorian's eyebrows rose. "I wasn't actually planning on it yet, no."

"Good." Cullen sagged back into his seat.

"I didn't realize you were enjoying my presence so very much," Dorian said in a light tone.

Cullen chuckled in response, though suddenly he realized that the statement, though flippantly made, was true. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this relaxed around anyone save for perhaps Mailani and Alistair. The realization stole a bit of the strength of his smile, but also reinforced just how important Dorian had become to him. When he realized that Dorian seemed to be waiting for a response while Cullen just sat there staring at him, he cleared his throat and nodded. "I am. And not just because I'm bored out of my skull, mind."

"Oh, that's good to hear. I'm better than sheer, utter boredom," Dorian drawled. "I could do tricks, if you like. Perhaps that would entertain you. I'm quite talented with scarves, I'll have you know."

"That's not what I meant," Cullen protested, then glared at Dorian as the man's lips pressed together in amusement. "Oh. I see."

"You are so very fun to tease, Commander," Dorian noted, then laughed softly. The sight of Dorian so relaxed gave Cullen an odd glow of happiness, but he danced away from pondering the why of it in favor of concentrating on the conversation. "I do believe I have previously noted it to be a poor habit of mine."

"I wouldn't have you any other way," Cullen said with a gallant gesture towards Dorian in lieu of a bow.

"Pity," Dorian murmured.

Cullen blinked, then looked away, his cheeks warming as an assortment of ways he could have Dorian flashed through his mind. "A poor choice of words, perhaps," he managed after clearing his throat. "I...I prefer you as you are, teasing and all."

"I feel much the same, Cullen," Dorian replied softly, the softening of his expression subtle but poignant. "And I never thought I'd say that to a Templar."

"Ex-Templar," Cullen interjected.

Dorian conceded the point with a gesture. "True. Ex-Templar, Commander of the Inquisition Forces, and bosom companion of the Inquisitor. That last part has a rather nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"Very nice, yes," Cullen said with a smile, even as that peculiar warmth stole over him once more. "One might almost consider it promising."

"Promising for what?" Dorian asked, again raising an immaculate eyebrow.

"Ah..." Cullen cleared his throat again. "That's a good question," he said a bit sheepishly.

"Do let me know when you find the answer, hmm?" Dorian asked in an amused tone, one corner of his mustache twitching upwards. "Surely you wouldn't leave me breathless with anticipation."

Cullen blinked a few times as his treacherous imagination provided a breathless Dorian--which, following on the heels of the thoughts of having the man proved to be enough to make his ears heat as he pulled his gaze away and looked into the desert. "I'll let you know."
“Excellent. I do so hate to leave such matters of importance dangling like that.” When Cullen looked at him sharply, he found Dorian looking out of his own window with a thoughtful expression on his face. “It does make me wonder, though.”

Relieved but also obscurely disappointed that Dorian had moved the conversation along, Cullen asked, “Wonder what?”

“What is to come, of course,” Dorian said. “For Thedas. For the Inquisition. For us.” Cullen’s throat tightened as those grey eyes turned towards him once more and met his own. “The world has proven to be vastly different than what we knew only a month ago, after all.” Scooting to one side, Dorian leaned forward and settled his hand on Cullen’s uninjured knee, face sober. “You will let me know if you need anything, won’t you?”

“What do you mean?” The warmth of Dorian’s touch spread throughout his leg strongly enough that Cullen almost suspected magic. Settling his hand on top of Dorian’s, Cullen squeezed it and smiled. “I’m perfectly fine. Or will be.”

Dorian’s brows drew together. “Are you?” When Cullen opened his mouth to respond, Dorian reached up and put his finger on Cullen’s lips. “I was with you last night as you slept, Cullen, as I have been since we left Adamant behind,” he said in hushed tones. “I’ve been protecting your dreams as I promised. It is plain to see that whatever you suffered at the hands of that demon lingers. Since I know no demon or man has invaded your sleep, I must conclude that your pain comes from within.”

Cullen swallowed harshly and squeezed his eyes shut as he ducked his head down. He had been trying to forget those nightmares all day, particularly the one where Dorian had been burned to a crisp by Amell. “I’ll be perfectly fine. I promise. I’ve survived nightmares before.”

“I know. You’re a strong man, Cullen,” Dorian replied. “But even strong men shouldn’t try to shoulder everything alone.”

“You’re the Inquisitor,” Cullen said, then took a shuddering breath. “I can’t impose--”

“It is no imposition to help a dear friend,” Dorian insisted. Cullen felt a finger hook under his chin, and he opened his eyes as Dorian pulled his chin up. The wistful little smile on Dorian’s face brought one to his own. “Bosom companion, remember?”

Again that warmth spread through him, easing away the chill of the previous night’s horrors. “I seem to recall those words being bandied about.”

“Good.” Dorian reached up to cup Cullen’s face with one hand. “You have endured much for the sake of the Inquisition, for the Inquisitor, and for me. Do not feel that you must bear the consequences of that sacrifice alone. Promise me you will let me know if you need anything.”

Cullen blinked a few times, then slowly nodded. “I promise.”

“Excellent.” Dorian patted Cullen’s cheek and then sat back in his seat. “You had me worried there. For a few moments, I thought you might try to remain stoic and aloof, the perfect warrior in a world gone mad.”

“I have a feeling you wouldn’t let me remain that way even if I tried,” Cullen noted. His cheek tingled from Dorian’s touch, and he swallowed as Dorian smiled at him.

“No, I wouldn’t. And you’d best remember that, or I shall be forced to take action,” Dorian told him with mock severity.
“Such as what?” Cullen asked, lips suddenly dry. Or perhaps he was just noticing the dryness for the first time, and realizing how fast his breathing had become.

Dorian tilted his head ever so slightly as his gaze dropped from Cullen’s eyes to somewhere lower on his face. “Isn’t that obvious?”

Before Cullen could answer, however, a loud knock could be heard from the front as the driver banged on the outside and shouted, “Commander! The healers are here!”

Straightening in his seat, Dorian shifted quickly towards the door. “Ah, well. Apparently that is all the time I am allowed to steal for us. Even the Inquisitor is helpless before the efficiency of the Inquisition healers, hmm?”

Cullen chuckled, though the sound echoed dully behind the blood pounding in his ears. The glance had been subtle, but unmistakable, and just that little bit had proven to be quite the provocation. There was no time to pursue it, however, as Dorian pushed open the door of the carriage and made to leave.

“I will see you later, won’t I?” Cullen blurted before Dorian left entirely.

“But of course, Commander,” Dorian said with a wink, though the shift back to using Cullen’s title signaled the return of the Inquisitor more than any other indicator. “Now, do be a good little ex-Templar and try not to antagonize the First Enchanter this time, hmm?”

Cullen gave him a dark look, then stuck his tongue out at Dorian.

“I am shocked! Such vulgarity,” Dorian said in a tolerable mimicry of Vivienne, then laughed as he pushed himself out of the carriage. “Until later, Commander. And perhaps next time I shall bear wine.”

“I look forward to it,” Cullen said, though it was more the company and less the wine that he would enjoy. As Dorian left and the healer climbed in, he settled back and waited for the inevitable poking and prodding.

And through it all, the smile remained on his face, even after his pulse returned to normal. Things just seemed a little better than before.

It proved surprisingly difficult to simply sit and watch others set up his tent for the night, especially when he couldn’t pace back and forth. He’d never realized how much of the work he did himself, and how easily he issued orders when he wasn’t. Once the tent was up and ready, however, the healers helped him inside and settled him down, then began an intensive healing session.

When it was done, they were able to remove most of the bandages. He would have a surfeit of new scars, but at least he wouldn’t be so stiflingly hot wrapped in all those linen strips. The wrist and leg remained bound, however, and he sighed as he tried to get comfortable in his cot despite his awkward position. An elevated arm and leg promised a restless night. He was contemplating the potion they’d left in case he needed a bit of help going to sleep when the sound of someone clearing their throat drew his attention to the tent flap.

“C-Commander?”

He smiled. “Jim! I’ve been wondering where you’ve been hiding. Come in, come in.” Maker, he’d
take an entire ream of reports right now if it meant he could feel useful. “What brings you here? A report, maybe?”

“No, Commander, ser,” Jim told him as he entered the tent. He had a large bandage around his head and a sling on one arm, but otherwise he seemed intact. “I just-- I mean, we just…”

“We?” Cullen asked, peering past Jim to see shadows outside the tent. His eyebrows rose. “There are quite a few of you in this we of yours.”

“Yes, ser, Commander, ser.” Jim cleared his throat, then turned and whispered animatedly with someone still outside. Finally he turned and stepped a bit closer to Cullen while some more people entered, crab-stepping their way into the tent due to holding something behind their back. “Well, Commander, when word came that you’d disappeared with the Inquisitor, ser, well, some of us went looking for you.”

Oddly touched, Cullen smiled warmly at the soldiers. “I’m grateful. It must have been difficult when you didn’t know what had become of all of us.”

Jim’s head bobbed up and down, and he looked at the other soldiers, who made a Get on with it gesture. Straightening, he said, “Well, when we heard you’d come back injured, we went back and looked some more, ser. Since you came back empty-handed and all.”

Cullen grimaced. “My sword broke,” he said. “Pity that. And my shield is probably buried under half of Adamant at this point.”

Shaking his head, Jim gestured at the soldiers behind him, beckoning them forward. “No, ser. That’s why we’re here.” As the soldiers lifted a heavy, cloth covered object between them, Jim pulled something smaller from behind his back and held it out to Cullen. “I’m sure Dagna or Harritt can repair them,” he added, as the soldiers pulled the cloth back to reveal his shield.

After a moment of staring at the battered but still whole shield and the hilt of his sword, Cullen felt a smile come to his face. “You lot went searching through all that rubble just to find my sword and shield?” he asked.

Jim nodded. “We can’t heal you, ser, and we can’t do what you do for the Inquisition. But it is what we could do for you, Commander.”

“I--Thank you.” Cullen reached out to run his fingers over the dented shield, touched by his troops’ concern. “I’ve astonished you even thought to look, and even more amazed you actually found something.”

“Well, we had a bit of help,” Jim admitted. “The ghost boy, he led us to the place where we found them. He seemed very concerned that nothing be left behind.”

“Huh.” Now why would that concern Cole at all? Still, that didn’t matter nearly as much as the fact that his soldiers cared enough about him that they’d gone digging through a pile of rubble bigger than Haven just to show their respect for him. He gravely raised his hand in a salute, and the soldiers in the tent--and outside, as far as he could tell--followed suit. “Your Commander is grateful,” he said in a carrying voice. “More than you know.”

“They say you’ll get better, Commander,” one of the soldiers behind Jim piped up. “They say you’ll fight again.”

“With all of you as my inspiration, how could I not?” Cullen asked with a chuckle.
All the soldiers stood a bit straighter, grins on their faces as they looked at each other. “That’s good to hear, ser,” Jim said, setting the sword hilt down on the table. As the others carefully arranged the shield next to it, he added, “You’ll be up and about in no time, Commander. I’m sure of it.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Cullen said with a wide smile, mood immensely improved. “I look forward to running you into the ground during a morning patrol when we get back to Skyhold.”

There was a general good-natured groan in response to that, just before a sudden scramble in the back as one soldier could be heard whispering “The Inquisitor!” Suddenly all the soldiers were standing to attention as Dorian, bottle of wine in one hand, slowly made his way into the tent with a quizzical look on his face.

“Are you mustering the troops to storm the healers’ tent for a reprieve, Commander?” he asked as he took in the assemblage.

“At ease,” Cullen told the soldiers before he continued. “No, Inquisitor. They were just returning my things.” With an awkward gesture, he indicated the items now on the table.

Dorian’s eyebrows rose as he surveyed the hilt and shield. “My word, are those yours? I would have thought them lost forever, given the circumstances.” An approving look came to his face as he turned to the gathered men and women. “Excellent work. I take it all of you were involved in the recovery?”

“Yes, Inquisitor!” Jim said.

“Good initiative, that.” He looked to Cullen, then back to the soldiers. “I see I’ll have to keep my eye on all of you.” His eyes swept over them, and then he nodded. “Jim, Elias, Corra, and… Samara, yes?” As the soldiers nodded, faces showing their surprise that the Inquisitor knew their names, Dorian added, “Draw up a list of everyone who helped and get it to Cassandra, would you? I have a special project in mind for all of you.”

Jim beamed as he saluted Dorian along with the others. “Yes, Inquisitor!”

“Capital.” Dorian gave them a little bow. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have something to discuss with the Commander myself.”

“Oh. Uh, yes, milord. Inquisitor, ser. Inquisitor!” Jim cleared his throat and then turned, dashing out of the tent with the rest of the soldiers.

“Maker, they make me feel positively ancient,” Dorian noted as he turned to Cullen. “And I think they’d follow you to the ends of Thedas.”

A smile came to Cullen’s face as he looked up at Dorian. “They’re good soldiers. They deserve my best. It’s a pity I’m reduced to this.” He gestured down to his leg, propped up on a bolster. “I should be out there with them. Not that you should tell Lady Vivienne that I said that,” he added hastily.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Commander,” Dorian assured him as he stepped further into the tent. “I see you’re settled in for the night. I imagine the healers have told you to get a good night’s rest, yes?” Holding up the wine, he said, “Hopefully this will help.”

“I’m grateful for your visit, but…” He glanced to the now closed tent flap. “Aren’t you worried about what they’ll say?”

“I don’t see why not,” Dorian said as he looked around the tent. “I’ve shared wine with most of the important people in the Inquisition. In the Imperium, it’s simply another way to talk business.”
“Yes, but--” Unable to articulate why it was different for Dorian to be seen alone with him, Cullen finally sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Forgive me. Apparently I’m finding phantoms to fret about.”

Dorian made a little *tsking* sound. “Sounds like you need something to occupy your mind. Do you have any glasses in here?”

“In my chest,” Cullen said, indicating it with a vague gesture. “I haven’t really unpacked anything yet.”

“Ah, good.” Setting the wine on the table, he moved to the chest and began to rummage inside. “Hopefully they’re still intact.”

“Well, they’re not made of *glass*, per se. They’re more like metal mugs,” Cullen admitted.

Dorian wrinkled his nose, then shrugged. “That still works, even if it is a trifle inelegant.” Suddenly he paused in his search and canted his head to one side. “Is this… Why, I believe it is.” Pulling a modestly adorned box from the chest, he turned it over in his hands slowly. “Isn’t this your chess set?”

“It is,” Cullen said. “After Haven, I just got into a habit of making sure it was always near me. I don’t want to lose it.”

“Your sister gave it to you, didn’t she?” Dorian asked as he traced one of the designs with a careful finger.

“Mia, yes.” Cullen smiled affectionately. “Maker, I’m overdue to write her a letter again.”

A thoughtful look had come to Dorian’s face as he smiled slightly. “Perfect.”

“Perfect that I am, according to my sister, the worst correspondent since Maferath?”

“No, I meant--” Dorian paused, then glanced at Cullen. “Did she *actually* tell you that?”

A sheepish look came to his face as Cullen said, “She might have been a bit upset with me at the time.”

“Oh, I *definitely* need to meet her,” Dorian said with a chuckle as he set the box next to his feet. “I meant it’s perfect for what I have in mind.”

Taken aback, Cullen asked. “Oh? For what?”

“Trust me,” Dorian told him with a beatific smile.

“I do… except when you smile like that,” Cullen told him. “Now I’m just worried.”

“I know what I’m doing. Oh, and look what was beneath it.” Pulling out a couple of metal goblets, he said, “Much better than the steel mugs I was fearing, too.” Closing the lid of the chest, he stood and moved to the table. “We might actually be able to make a civilized night of it.”

As Dorian poured the wine, Cullen struggled to think of a topic that wasn’t obviously forced. Their earlier conversation had sparked a bit of curiosity, however. “I was wondering--” he began, then hesitated. “No, never mind.”

“Oh, don’t think I’m going to let you get away with *that* little trick,” Dorian scolded him as he brought the wine over. Handing off one goblet to Cullen’s good hand, he settled a chair next to the
cot and gestured expansively. “Go on.”

“You said you wanted to meet Mia,” Cullen explained. “And I realized that I don’t really know enough about you to know who to want to meet. I mean, other than your father.”

Dorian’s eyebrows rose. “You want to meet him?”

“That’s usually the best way to punch someone in the face,” Cullen muttered darkly.

The answer clearly caught Dorian by surprise. In the next moment, he burst into laughter before leaning forward to put his hand on Cullen’s leg. “You really are from Ferelden, aren’t you, my dear man?”

Cullen felt his ears burn, though whether it was from the words or the touch, he couldn’t say himself. “He certainly deserves it.”

“Oh, I completely agree. It simply never would have occurred to me as an option. The Imperium expects a… well, a different sort of reaction to those who have… treated you poorly.”

“Treated you poorly?” Cullen said incredulously. “You make it sound like he mildly inconvenienced you.”

“By Imperium standards, my anger at my father is completely unjustified,” Dorian said mildly.

Cullen frowned. “How could it possibly be unjustified?”

“Because he did it for a reason they would understand,” Dorian explained. “For the purpose of increasing the power of his House. That’s how I was trained, you see. It wasn’t about what I wanted, or needed. Nothing mattered about me save for what I could do to strengthen House Pavus in the Magisterium. To do that, I had to be powerful in magic, lauded for my skill in it, and marry the woman my father—well, my parents, really—chose for me to finalize an alliance between our House and hers. Oh, and becoming Archon would have been nice, of course, but I quickly proved unsuitable for that. I had the magic, but not the willingness to do as I was told. It wasn’t my interest in men that was the problem, or at least, that could have been shuffled to the side in such a way that it wouldn’t pose a problem. The problem was that I refused, either to hide who I was, or to follow my father’s plan for me. In his mind, I betrayed him. And not just him, but every member of House Pavus up to the fiftieth generation.”

Cullen stared at Dorian for a few moments, trying to wrap his head around such an alien concept. “Surely you’re not serious?”

“Oh, I’m completely serious,” Dorian told him. “Breeding for magic is part and parcel of being a power in the Imperium. I was the end result of an extended breeding program that encompassed more than two Ages, as was the woman selected to be my fiancée. If I could not be the next Archon, perhaps our child would. The negotiations between Houses for such marriages can be formidable, particularly if both children are the only scions of their lines. More than one child is necessary, in that case, and which child will be designated for which House? My mother had siblings, or so would I have, despite my parents’ marked distaste towards being alone in a dark room together. And that’s when you’re only dealing with children born of your own body. We also have an extensive system in place for adopting heirs, as many in the Magisterium thought Alexius should have done when Felix proved to have little ability in magic. Becoming Archon, rising to the pinnacle of power in the Magisterium - those are the ultimate goals of the nobility in Minrathous, or so that is how I was raised.”
After blinking a few times, Cullen finally shook his head. “I cannot imagine such a soulless place.”

“Oh, not everyone has a staff up their ass,” Dorian conceded. “It’s one reason why I so adored Alexius, in fact. He loved his wife—married her for love, though she wasn’t from some ancient, magically gifted line. He loved Felix, a man with barely enough magic to light a candle, and was willing to go to any lengths to protect them both, even to the detriment of the entire world. I cannot agree with his methods, but I admire his passion a great deal. Of course, it did him little good in the end. I can only hope that the Venatori killed him quickly.” A melancholy expression came to his face. “I envied Felix so very much, to have the unconditional love of his father. I wanted that for myself, you see. But my father had other plans.”

Wishing that he could rise from his cot and do something to wipe that expression from Dorian’s face, Cullen frowned. “Not anymore, surely. Not after what he did to you.”

Dorian’s gaze grew distant. “Sometimes I wonder if that little boy inside will ever stop seeking his father’s approval,” he said quietly. “The oldest habits can be the hardest to break.”

Frustrated by his inability to offer much in the way of comfort, Cullen set his wine down and took Dorian’s hand with his own. “He’s not worth it, Inquisitor,” he said firmly. “It sounds like we need to find you some new habits, ones where you can accept that you are loved by others now and don’t need him anymore.”

A curl of Dorian’s mustache rose slowly as he met Cullen’s gaze. “Do you number amongst that limited multitude of others, Commander?” he asked quietly.

“You know I do,” Cullen insisted. “Maker, Dorian, if you don’t know how much I value our friendship by now, then… then…” He sighed, unable to articulate it as elegantly as he’d hoped. “Well, then Mailani needs to haunt your dreams some more so that she can slap some sense through your thick skull.”

As he’d hoped, the silliness of the suggestion made Dorian’s half smile turn into a soft laugh. “She would, wouldn’t she? Just to prove her point.” Dorian shook his head with a smile on his face before draining his goblet. “But I should leave you to your sleep,” Dorian told him as he sent the empty cup to the table with a touch of magic. “After all, you have a lot of vigorous sitting on your ass tomorrow. I’d hate to tire you too much.”

“How considerate of you,” Cullen said dryly. Lying back down on the cot, he adjusted himself as best as he could, grunting in effort as his pillow eluded his grasp.

“Allow me,” Dorian said, leaning over to adjust the recalcitrant pillow with ease.

Cullen simply lay silently and let Dorian do his work, licking his lips as the scent which always seemed to linger around Dorian suddenly filled his nostrils. An odd flutter in his stomach arose without warning, and he wasn’t quite ready to process what the sensation actually meant. When Dorian stepped back and gave him a questioning look, Cullen nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Dorian said softly. “And the light?” At Cullen’s nod, he moved to the lamp and blew it out, leaving only the torches outside to give any sort of illumination through the tent.

“There.” His shadow moved around the tent for a few moments, the slosh of the wine bottle telling Cullen what he was doing as the man retrieved it, then moved to the tent flap. He paused and looked back, the light of a torch hitting his face just enough to highlight the perfection of his profile. “Good night, Commander. I will see you tomorrow.”
For a moment Cullen closed his eyes, trying to see a night of rest and failing. Perhaps it was the empty darkness behind his lids, or the stark lack of warmth where Dorian’s body had pressed against his mere moments before. In his state of mind, it might even have been the chasm which seemed to yawn between them every time Dorian used the word Commander rather than his name. Regardless, Cullen suddenly gasped as his eyes opened wide. “Dorian!”

Brows pinching in concern, Dorian returned to his side immediately. “Yes? I haven’t left yet.”

“I--Please stay.” Cullen reached out blindly to seize Dorian’s hand, squeezing it tight. “I need someone to stay, to--” His voice trailed off as the terror which had plagued him each night since returning from the Fade arose within once more.

Dorian’s expression grew sympathetic. “To be with you in the darkness?” he murmured. “To be a light when the Fade threatens to take it all away? Cullen…” He raised their joined hands and pressed a kiss to Cullen’s white knuckles. “You need not even ask. I am here for you.”

A tension released deep inside, leaving Cullen limp in the blankets. “I’m sorry,” he gasped. “I’m not strong enough--”

“How now,” Dorian said quickly, cutting him off. “You were strong enough to bear the full attention of a demon powerful enough to garner the attention of the man who started the Blights. You were strong enough to think through that pain and that fear to guide me to the right solution for dealing with it. And you’re strong enough to admit that you cannot face the fear alone. Bravery does not always involve hitting something with a stick, after all. Sometimes it is far braver to stretch out a hand than to thrust with a sword.” Pulling up the chair next to the bed, Dorian settled into it and leaned forward until his elbows could rest on the bed, all without releasing Cullen. “I would be a poor friend indeed were I to leave you to deal with such things alone.”

“Thank you,” Cullen breathed. He’d always slept better when Mailani had been with him, after all. Why Dorian’s presence felt equally calming was a consideration to tackle for another day, but for now, the warmth of the hands around his own and the knowledge that he wasn’t alone were enough. His eyelids sagged shut as his breathing evened out, and his heartbeat slowed from a rapid jitter to something slow and deep.

He was on the brink of sleep when he felt a hand settle on his cheek, and something equally warm but much softer press against his forehead with a little tickle of hair mixed in, and a hushed whisper filled with an intense emotion which resonated deep within reached his ears. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

Cullen’s lips curved ever so slightly into a tremulous smile, even as his consciousness fled. It was a promise he could trust, and that was the most precious gift ever offered to him.

Perhaps someday he could return the favor.

The next few days of their journey to Skyhold proved challenging on several different fronts, in ways Cullen hadn’t anticipated. He’d expected to be frustrated and in pain, given what he knew of his own limitations and impatience when recovering from injury. Dorian’s presence, though a welcome gift, wasn’t enough to fend off the night terrors completely. Even if Amell couldn’t invade his dreams, the effects of the Nightmare and his torture lingered, rendering Cullen poorly rested and uneasy in his own mind.
The healers did what they could, of course, and each day his body grew stronger as they plied his injuries to the fullest extent of their abilities. Yet that didn't prevent cold sweats every time a loud sound reached his ears, or the pounding of his heart every time he nodded off and faced one of a variety of horrors which haunted the darkness behind his eyelids. The demons which haunted him need not come from the Fade to be effective, and he knew it.

Yet there proved to be one particular demon far worse than any night terror or echo of torture. It began as a small whisper, a faint keening which irritated without truly presenting a problem. At first the sensation refused to register with him, and he simply assumed the dull aching headaches and shaking hands derived from his weakened condition and restless nights. It wasn't until Ser Barris joined him in the carriage for a review of the role of the Templars in the Inquisition's activities that the truth hit him.

Or rather, hit his nose.

Barris was a Templar through and through, built on a bedrock of faith and care for his task to protect the world from the ravages of magic gone wrong. He and Cullen shared quite a bit in common, up to and including being the servant of a corrupted leader, and had fallen into an easy camaraderie with each other. The Templar reminded Cullen of the nobility he'd originally felt in his calling. And yet, closed up in that tiny space with the Templar as they settled in for a serious discussion, a tickle set in at the back of Cullen's nose. Quickly he pinched it to keep a sneeze in, but the very familiar act finally alerted him to the danger.

And, in that moment, he wasn't sitting in a carriage slowly making its way out of the Western Approach. Instead, he was dangling helplessly in the grasp of a monstrosity too great for the mortal mind to comprehend, struggling against its tight, hard grip. Something slippery and drenched with lyrium was pressed against his lips, though he twisted his head in a vain attempt to escape it. Cullen shuddered as the slow tingle of its seductive song spread through him, dismayed by how wonderful he felt in that moment, and fought not to reach for the source when it pulled itself away.

“No,” he mumbled as he felt the familiar ache of despair grip his heart. “Never again. I... I promised.” He’d made that oath to Cassandra, to Mailani, and yet now... now he simply wanted more, regardless of the strength of his oaths, and the realization hurt him bone-deep.

"Do you find your fear to be more than you expected, more than you can endure?" the Nightmare demon taunted him. "I have found your fear, and I will break you with it. I will make you beg for mercy, and then I will make you beg for more."

And when Cullen did finally beg, sobbing with the desperation of his need, the Nightmare’s ghastly laughter echoed in the Fade around them, filling Cullen's ears with the dark, raspy chuckle of fear itself.

“Commander?”

Cullen blinked a few times, pulling himself from the horror of the memory and back into the sunlit, warm interior of the carriage as it bounced over the old road left by pilgrims of the Chantry ages past. For a moment he stared blankly ahead, then turned to the man seated across from him. Barris. Yes, it was Ser Barris, Knight-Captain--and, if Cullen’s recommendation was followed, soon-to-be Knight-Commander--of what remained of the Templars, and a friend. This was real, and not a nightmare or a punishment. Yes.

This was real.
"Is everything all right, Commander?" Barris asked, leaning forward with a furrowed brow. "Shall I fetch the healers?"

"That's not necessary, Ser Barris," Cullen hastily assured him, as much for his own sake as for the Templar's. Maker. *I should have known.* "Just a bit too much a bounce for my leg, that's all."

Face softening, Barris nodded in sympathy. "I daresay we've all been on the wrong end of a practice thrust gone wrong or an unexpected kick from a bronto."

"Oh, definitely--" Cullen paused, his distracted mind quickly returning to the conversation at hand and away from his burgeoning panic. Seizing on the distraction, he asked, "Wait. A bronto?"

"Now there's a tale," Barris said with a grin. "One of the first apostates I had to track down, in fact. We'd gotten reports of a mage setting fields on fire and using the distraction to rob farmers' houses. As a newly minted Templar, I was selected to go with the patrol to investigate." From there, Barris launched into an entertaining and highly dubious story about tracing the steps of an apostate who had found a home with the most unlikely of allies: a herd of feral brontos.

Cullen forced his eyes to stay on Barris' lips, and not to let his gaze wander down. He forced his lips to remain pressed shut as he made appropriate noncommittal noises in reaction to the story, all the better to keep himself from asking that one burning question for which he would never forgive himself: *do you have any lyrium with you?* Instead, he let himself be pulled into the story, welcoming anything which would distract him from both the memory and its implications. Only after Barris left him to attend to his other duties did Cullen turn to stare sightlessly out of the window and contemplate this final, most insidious blow from the Nightmare demon.

The more he thought about it, the more obvious it became. The irritation, the headaches, the dry mouth, the shakes—all easy to blame on his injuries, and yet all too insidiously familiar. Tempting as it was to blame all his problems on the injuries and ignore the dragon in the room, he knew he had to take the bronto by the horns and face facts: whatever else the Nightmare demon had done to him, it had re-awoken his body's hunger for lyrium. Even now, the melody danced in the back of his mind as the keening shifted into the siren song he remembered all too well. His eyes closed as he took a deep breath to steady himself, bringing to mind his mantra of old.

*I won't let the demon win.*

Those six words had often stood out in the forefront of his mind in times past, whether he'd woken sweat-drenched from nightmares or fought the deep-seated ache of need for that precious blue liquid. It didn't matter whether the demon was from the Fade or within his own mind—he would not let them win.

Ever.

Taking a deep breath, he leaned his head back against the wall of the carriage as his mind settled into a series of mental exercises developed specifically to distract his mind from his desires. The enemy was in his sights, and he wouldn't let himself be taken by surprise again. Hopefully, that would be sufficient.

Unfortunately, it seemed that acknowledgement of the problem led to a heightened awareness of lyrium. He smelled it on the breath of the Templars with whom he consulted, and the hands of the healers as they worked on his injuries after he'd settled in for the night. When Dorian arrived for his nightly chess match before they left, Cullen braced for the worst, assuming that a faint miasma would linger around the mage as it had around the mages in the Circles.
"You're early," Cullen noted.

"I am indeed," Dorian told him with a brilliant smile as he started to arrange the chess pieces for what had become their nightly ritual. "I wanted to make sure to get here while the healers were still present so that I could convey my most ardent thanks for their tireless efforts."

"We're not about to let the Commander go untended, Inquisitor," the healer scolded him without looking up from her task of holding Cullen's leg in place while his bandage dried into stiffness.

Dorian grinned widely. "No, but I know that he can be a bit of a bear sometimes, possibly because of that rug around his shoulders."

"It's not a rug," Cullen growled, then blinked when the healer laughed. "Maker. I walked right into that one."

"There, you see? Utterly incorrigible," Dorian said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Well, he's been quite the gentlemen, the poor love." The healer gave Cullen a pat on the thigh. "Maybe a bit stubborn about eating his dinner, but quite polite to me and the gels. And Lady Vivienne speaks quite highly of him."

Cullen's brows rose a bit, surprised by the last comment. "She does?"

The healer chuckled and shook her head. "In her own way." Without another word on the subject, she patted the stiffened bandage around Cullen's knee and nodded in satisfaction. "There we are. Ready for a night of healing." Taking the small basket of potions they always brought with them, she placed it next to Cullen's cot. "And if you awaken in the middle of the night, don't be stubborn. There's nothing wrong with a bit of red relief, especially if it means you won't spasm in the middle of the night again."

"What's this?" Dorian asked, obviously surprised by this bit of news.

"I promise to drink a potion if I need it," Cullen said hastily, hoping to head off Dorian's curiosity quickly. "And thank you. You've a gentle touch, and it is much appreciated."

"Well, it's the closest I'll get to a handsome young bantam like you at this time of my life," the woman told him with a slow wink.

Cullen felt his ears darken as the younger healer hid a laugh behind her hand. "Ah... thank you. I think."

"And I thank you as well," Dorian said with a broad grin. "Red does wonders for his complexion, doesn't it?"

"That's enough," Cullen grated.

"And we're back to the bear," Dorian said with another extravagant sigh.

The woman smiled as she stood and gestured the younger healer to follow her. "I'll leave you to your game, Inquisitor," she told Dorian with a little curtsy.

"Ah, but I would be remiss if I didn't offer the formal thanks I intended." Dorian reached down and picked up a bottle of wine. "It's not much, but I do hope you have a relaxing evening. You and all the healers. The Inquisition is grateful."
With a smile, the woman graciously accepted the wine. "Thank you, Inquisitor."

Dorian's face grew a bit more serious as he added, "I know that this was not an easy journey for you," he said softly. "There were numerous wounded after Adamant, enough to keep you busy all the whole way back to Skyhold. I just wanted to make sure you know that we do notice, and we are grateful."

"Thank you, Inquisitor," the woman said, then reached up and patted Dorian's cheek. "We know, though it is nice to hear it. Now play your game and get the Commander to relax."

"A tall order, but I shall do my best," Dorian assured her with a grin, then gave her and the younger healer a little bow. "Do enjoy your evening, fortified by a bit of wine. The very best kind of evening, some days."

The healer gave a little sigh. "A sadly true statement, Inquisitor." With a last wan smile to Dorian, she left the tent, the younger healer in tow.

"They truly have worked miracles," Dorian said softly. When he turned around, Cullen saw the line on his forehead that he'd come to know meant concern. "You didn't have to see you, when we first found you in the Fade. When I saw the blood, I…" His voice trailed away as he closed his eyes, knitting his brows together.

"You feared the worst?" Cullen asked.

Dorian seemed to struggle with the words for a minute, then moved to sit next to Cullen to take one hand between his own. "I feared it would be like Mailani and the cave all over again," he whispered, still not looking directly at Cullen.

That made Cullen swallow harshly as a shiver ran down his spine. He still remembered finding Mailani’s body in the rubble of the cave-in, remembered how small and twisted she had seemed amidst the destruction around her. But he hadn’t seen the blood when it was fresh, or her struggles to breathe, or her life slipping away. Only Dorian had, and he knew now that Dorian had loved Mailani as fiercely as Cullen had, though in a very different way. Clearing his throat, he pulled his hand away so he could reach up to lift Dorian’s chin, forcing eye contact. "I’m still here," he said firmly. "You won’t get rid of me that easily."

That elicited a snort from Dorian, cracking the tension a bit. "Easy, he says, as if a romp in the Fade domain of a powerful demon is easy. Either you think too highly of yourself, or too lowly of the demon."

"Or maybe," Cullen said with a crooked grin, "I think just right of the man who I knew would come for me."

Dorian's eyes suddenly widened, and his lips spread into a grin. As it slowly dawned on Cullen that perhaps he could have made a better choice of words, Dorian pressed his hand to his chest and said in a scandalized tone, "Commander!"

"Yes, yes," Cullen snapped, quite aware that his ears were burning red. "You know what I meant. Bring the board over here."

"I do, more's the pity," Dorian said with a laugh as he turned to retrieve the game-board. "All right, let's see who comes out on top tonight."

Determined not to let Dorian think he was unable to meet the challenge of mistaken words, Cullen quickly seized the opportunity to turn the teasing right back on him. "I think we both know who
would be in what position, but honestly I don't think I have enough energy for that and a game of chess, so bring the board over here so we can start."

Dorian stared at him for a moment, eyebrows rising almost to his hairline. "Are you sassing me, Commander?"

"Merely stating the facts," Cullen replied with a decided smirk. Maker, but it felt good to relax and not care about his injuries or his fears. He grinned as Dorian threw back his head and laughed, waiting for the man to take a deep breath before adding, "I notice you didn't disagree with my assessment."

"I'm afraid I would need a hands-on experience before I could issue a position of my own on the matter," Dorian sallied back with a grin, then tilted his head as he looked Cullen up and down where he lay. "Care to volunteer?"

For a breath or two, Cullen was unsure whether or not Dorian was joking. And, in the next breath or two, he was unsure whether or not he wanted Dorian to be joking. Before he could work through either his thoughts or the surprising surge of heat that shot from head to toe, however, the entrance to his tent burst open to allow Bull's horned head to poke through.

"Good news, boss," Bull declared when both men turned to look at him. "A patrol sighted a dragon. A big one! Oh, and a rift. A big one!"

Dorian groaned and buried his face in his hands. "That isn't exactly good news, Bull."

"Yeah, you're right," Bull admitted, then grinned broadly. "It's fantastic news!"

"Bull..." With a shake of his head, Dorian rose to his feet and set the chess board aside. "And I suppose you've already rounded up a competent complement of companions for the battle?"

"I might have told Solas and Varric to get ready while I found you. Figured you'd be here if you weren't in your tent." He nodded to Cullen. "Cullen."

"Bull," Cullen nodded back to him, uncertain how he felt about Bull's assumption that Dorian would be in this tent. Logically, it made sense considering how much time Dorian had spent with Cullen as he'd recuperated following his capture at Adamant. Cullen simply hadn't registered that of course that time spent together would be noticed and remembered, much as his time with Mailani had been. Of course, this was different than that.

_Mostly._

That treacherous word slipped through his mind even as Dorian shooed Bull out of the tent and turned back to Cullen. "My apologies for the uncouth interruption," he said with a sigh. "We shall have to continue our game at a later date. I dare say that once I venture forth, I will find several more loose ends to tie up. Pity."

"I suspect you are right about that," Cullen said, deliberately keeping his voice light despite the stab of disappointment—an all too familiar feeling, though he'd never felt it about _Dorian_ before, at least, not with this strength. "I'd give you some sort of advice for fighting the dragon, but I'm not sure Bull would heed it anyway."

Dorian snorted and rolled his eyes. "The beast. Still, he is good at it, even if for all the wrong reasons. As long as he doesn't keep shouting that phrase over and over again, I can usually handle his enthusiasm in the fight."
Cullen's eyebrow rose. "What phrase?"

"Oh, Maker. Do you really want to know?" Dorian's lips pursed together in distaste. "It's in that Qun
gibberish, of course. I couldn't possibly repeat it, and the meaning is even worse. You should
probably just trust me on this one, unless you want to know a little too much about the buffoon's
amorous relationship with his hand."

"With his--" Cullen puzzled through the words for a moment or two, then laughed aloud as they fell
into place in his mind. "That certainly sounds like him. He'd have fit right in with my mates back in
the barracks during training."

"Oh, there you go, planting seeds in my head of stories to ask about later," Dorian teased him. "I'm
sure you'll have plenty of tales of Templar recruits and their passionate pursuit of romance with their
hands. Do regale me with them upon my return, hmm?"

With a laugh, Cullen waved Dorian away. "You should get going. Bull doesn't like to be kept
waiting, remember? Not when a dragon fight is in the offing."

"Ah, that is true." He gave Cullen a florid bow. "Do take care, Commander. I would be absolutely
devastated if something devastating happened to you."

"I'll take that under advisement," Cullen said with a faint smile. "And I do hope you know the
feeling is mutual."

Dorian gave Cullen a wink as he rose from his bow. "Naturally. I do have a tender hide, after all, and
it would be a shame if something were to happen to it. Until later, Commander."

As Dorian swept out of the tent, Cullen let his body sag into the cot. A welter of emotions swept
over him as he wrestled with the odd shifts and turns he'd felt in the past few moments. Out of all of
them, his mind honed in on one in particular, the one which he seemingly could not stop pondering.

A hands-on experience... A warmth trickled down his spine, leaving a tangle of tingling in its wake.
What had Dorian meant by that? Was it simply another teasing moment, or a serious offer? He'd
gotten so used to Dorian's sly remarks that it was difficult to tell the difference between the two, and
Dorian had been called away before Cullen could do more than wonder.

A frown came to his face, contemplating the danger Dorian would face--not just in hunting the high
dragon, but after. True, he'd gone out and closed rifts and faced dragons before, but that had been...
different. Before, he'd been the man trying to fulfill Mailani's tasks, a fellow soldier in the Inquisition
with a rather unique skillset. Now, he was Inquisitor, with all the duties and dangers associated with
that.

More than that, though, Cullen realized that the same fears and worries he'd felt about Mailani in her
travels around Thedas had awoken again, this time on behalf of Dorian. They'd learned that Mailani
had met her fate not due to chance, but to deliberate action. And they still had no idea where to find
Amell, or what his next move might be.

Suddenly Dorian's travels seemed far more risky, and Cullen found something entirely new to worry
about when it came to his Inquisitor.

As sleep dragged him inexorably into its grasp, Cullen struggled against it, knowing that the fear and
doubt now plaguing him would simply invite the demons of his sleep that much more quickly.
Without the benefit of a companion to keep him alert, however, the potion given to him by the
healers did its work, and he fell into slumber.
And there, the nightmares awaited him.

He burst from a slumber filled with flame and fury, sitting bolt upright with a stifled cry. A moment later he toppled from the cot with a groan of agony as his healing wrist failed to support the sudden pressure. He fell with a heavy thump, lying on the ground for a moment as he tried to remind himself that the nightmare was not real. That he was in his own tent surrounded by Inquisition troops. That he was safe. That the vivid image of demons delicately pulling his skin off inch by inch while the Nightmare mocked his pain was not real, and he was safe.

As his breath recovered and he managed to gather enough awareness to maneuver himself, slowly and painfully, back onto his cot, he allowed himself the small solace of acknowledging the saving grace of these nightmares: their familiarity. Just as with the nightmares following the Blight, these nightmares remained only elaborations of the tortures he’d suffered under the Nightmare. No hand guided them beyond his own memories, not even that of a somniari, just as Dorian and Solas had promised. His nights, though horrific, remained his own.

“Maker and his blessed Andraste will it to remain that way,” he breathed as he sagged into his cot and closed his eyes.

After a moment or two, however, he realized that simply falling back asleep was not in the cards. The fall from the cot had awoken a throbbing pain in both wrist and knee, and his mind still spun around the fading remnants of his dream. With a sigh, he reached down to the little basket the healers had left and grabbed a bottle. “Just a red a day keeps the healer away,” he muttered, even though the old Templar mantra wasn’t really true for him at this moment. Still, if the potion could help him rest until the healers came in the morning, so much the better.

Popping the cork out of the bottle with an experienced flick of his thumbnail, he raised the bottle to his lips and poured the contents into his mouth with one swift motion. It was only after the bottle had emptied and the liquid coated his tongue and throat that he realized the error of his ways.

Lyrium.

The smell overwhelmed his nostrils even as the liquid burned down the back of his throat. Careless of the pain the movements caused, he swiftly turned on his side and tried to bring the damned stuff back up, even going so far as to jam his fingers down his throat. No amount of gagging and choking helped however, though his efforts contorted his body enough that the bottle shattered in his other hand. Eventually he collapsed back onto the cot, gasping and wheezing as the effects of the lyrium coursed through his body.

As the blood dripped from his lacerated palm, washing the lyrium away before falling to the ground to be absorbed by the dirt, he stared up at the ceiling of the tent. The melody of the lyrium swept over him and through him, filling his senses with its seductive siren song. In an odd way, it did help with the pain, simply by putting it at a distance and making it a curiosity more than a concern. All Cullen cared about was the song, even as, somewhere deep inside, another Cullen was beating against the walls of his mind and raging.

He tried to ignore that Cullen, though. For now, there was only the song. Time seemed to slow, and Cullen found it harder and harder to keep his eyes open at all.

By the time a rustle came from his tent flap, Cullen could barely open his eyes to a slit. It was enough to see someone shrouded in a hooded cloak enter the tent, a familiar basket tucked under their arm.
They moved to the side of Cullen’s cot, and did something that caused a great deal of discordant clinking which marred the beauty of the lyrium’s song. Then the figure slipped out of the tent, fading into the darkness and leaving Cullen alone once more.

Alone with the beauty and the madness of the song.

“Maker help me,” he breathed, though he wasn’t quite sure why. It simply seemed an appropriate time to say it.
It begins with a glancing touch to your cheek, a touch you lean into with a smile. A spicy, familiar musk fills your nostrils, and your lips part to take in even more. In the next moment, they are captured in a passionate kiss enhanced by the tickle of a curled mustache brushing your upper lip. Letting loose a soft moan, you raise your fingers and sink them into the short, dark hair above.

After your lips part from his, a soft chuckle fills the darkness as a weight shifts to straddle your hips. Hands cradle your face for a moment before moving down, dismissing the sheets and clothing between you as they descend. "I take it you have no objections."

"None," you breathe, skin tingling with anticipation. Your heart pounds in your chest, raw desire consuming you as you smooth your hands over a muscular back. Again the clothing disappears with but a touch, the many impossible buckles and ties vanishing to allow access to the silken heated skin beneath. When a hand finds your shaft and strokes lightly, you gasp and arch your back with a groan of appreciation. "More," you plead, knowing it will not be enough, that you will never have enough of him.

"As you wish," the voice murmurs, even as the weight atop you shifts downward. Before you can think to speak your longing, a warm, wonderful wetness slides over your sensitive tip, and you again cry out to the inky black around you. "Perfect," the other man breathes, followed by a longer, more thorough exploration of your needy length by an oh-so-clever tongue.

"More," you pant with an urgency which won't be denied. Your hands rise to grasp the pillow under your head as waves of pleasure course through your body, the injury of your broken wrist mysteriously gone. For several long moments, only the slick wet sounds from below and the intermittent moans and gasps from above surround you as you climb closer and closer to your peak, until you are driven to cry out in ecstasy: "Maker!"

Abruptly hands close around yours, squeezing with a cruel strength which instantly cuts through the haze of pleasure wrapped around you. The warmth and weight below vanishes as a hauntingly familiar chuckle echoes in the darkness, this time with an edge of mockery at complete odds with the beauty of the intimacy from just moments ago.

Your eyes open wide in shock, and fear quickly overwhelms your lust as you meet the glowing red gaze of the man towering above you. Before you can properly assimilate Amell's presence, the mage says, "Not yet, alas. But have no fear, my little pet. I will claim my rightful place soon enough."

With a great shout, you shove against Amell's grip, fear galvanizing you into action. In the next moment, desperate to escape his grasp, you make the leap from the Fade, and away from his cruel gaze.

Cullen’s eyes flew open as the dream turned nightmare fell away, harsh breaths echoing in the tent. For a moment he stared upwards, a shudder running through his body as he remembered those red glowing eyes hovering above him. It took a few moments for him to realize that, for the first time since Adamant, this nightmare was completely unrelated to the torture he had experienced whilst in the Fade. For the first time since the wards had been placed around his dreams, Amell had found him.

And the knowledge filled him with a fear which was all too familiar.

Now that he was truly awake and aware, however, other things also demanded his attention. His
wrist ached once more, throbbing and pulsing with a now-familiar pain. In direct counterpoint to that, another part of him demanded attention, though with an unfulfilled need rather than pain. A glance down his body showed that the first part of his dream had left a lasting result.

Maker. Even Amell wasn’t enough to push away the memory of where his time in the Fade had begun. For a moment, the memory flooded through him—from the kiss above to the far deeper kiss below—and he felt a fresh wave of heat surge into his groin. With a low groan, he reflexively reached down to rub the ache away, remembering too late the events of the night before.

The sharp pain reminded him of the shards still embedded in his palm, and he gave a soft cry as he snatched his hand away and stared at it. Dried blood caked his palm and coated his fingers, and the muted sunlight seeping in from outside glittered on jagged slivers of glass. And, just like that, he remembered.

*Remembered the feel of the lyrium sliding down his throat.*

*Remembered the scent of the liquid blue bliss filling his nostrils.*

*Remembered the sound of the song which lulled him into his dreams.*

*Remembered the horror of the realization, and the way it faded into the dim background of his mind.*

It was that horror which suddenly shouldered its way forward in his mind, landing there with the force of a smite and curling around his thoughts like the jaws of a varghest.

And, as if the memory and his own revulsion had awoken it, he felt it once more: the shiver of need that swept through his body and gripped his soul, whispering into his ear that he needed more, and he needed it now.

As the headache formed, he gritted his teeth and turned onto his side, reaching down for the basket. He had enough of the shattered bottle left to see that its contents had been blue, even if he hadn’t thought to check until it was too late. Half of him wanted to find some more lyrium to drink, but the other half only wanted proof.

Instead of finding the basket full with bottled blue liquid, however, he found only the familiar sight of healing potions, their crimson hue unmistakable even in the dim light.

He frowned. The lyrium *had* come from this basket, he was certain of it. What--

It was only then that another memory ghosted across his mind, of... *something*. Something to do with clinking glass, and a moving shadow, and... He strove to pinpoint the fleeting memory, but the growing pain in his head made it hard to concentrate. Surely that had just been a lyrium dream?

He sagged back into the cot, staring at his hand while a spark of doubt wormed its way deep into his mind.

“Maker forgive me,” he breathed, though the words felt as empty and hollow as his hope. He didn’t even notice when the entrance flap to his tent moved aside to allow entry to the morning complement of healers.

After that, there was no time to think as the healers took one look at his hand and launched into action. While they bustled around him, Cullen simply stared at the ceiling of his tent, lost and adrift in the realm of his own mind.

Only two things truly mattered: his need for lyrium, and his need for Dorian. And he knew, deep in
his core, that he could not have both.
"Dragons are not polite creatures," Dorian declared. The words didn't carry very far, given his position lying face down on his sleeping roll in his tent, but it did reach the ears of the one tending to the burns on Dorian's tenderized backside.

Bull chuckled as he smoothed the salve over Dorian's damaged skin. "Well, maybe you shouldn't have run away from her."

"I was running from the monstrous fireball coming from her mouth, thank you very much," Dorian said acidly. "And drawing her attention away from where you were charging in to whack her feet out from under her."

"And it worked, too," Bull said proudly. "Knocked her off-balance long enough for Varric to blind her with a couple of bolts and Solas to wave his silly stick."

Wincing as the salve burned coldly on his wounds, Dorian tried to focus on the words rather than the pain. "Do keep in mind that Solas and that silly stick slammed a boulder into her noggin, which gave you a chance to mount the dragon and effectively brain her with your own silly stick."

"Damn right I did," he declared. "Teamwork. It's called teamwork." Dorian didn't need to look back at Bull to see the grin on his face, but he did anyway. For all his complaints about the horned man, it was good to see his friend so happy. "And damn good teamwork, too. I even got my tooth this time."

"Yes, that tooth. Why do you need it, anyway?" Dorian asked, then hissed as Bull hit a particularly sensitive spot. "Be careful, you oaf!"

"Sorry, boss," Bull said quickly, backing away for a moment. "I'll let it sit for a moment to let the elfroot kick in."

Dorian went limp and sighed. "Maker, but this is embarrassing."

"Oh, I don't know." Bull fondled the unburnt part of Dorian's ass for a moment, then gave it a sharp, relatively painless slap. "I'm having fun."

"Bull," Dorian said with a groan. "You promised you wouldn't take any liberties."

With a snort, Bull reached for the bottle of salve to spread some more on his hands. "And you told me you wouldn't enjoy it."

Dorian's ears heated, unable to deny his physical reaction given exactly where Bull had been touching him. "Beast," he grated between his teeth.

"Vint," Bull shot back. "Of course, I can always send for the others, if you'd prefer."

"Now, now," Dorian said quickly. Solas and Varric were dear friends, without question, but there
were some things better handled by someone who had already seen Dorian naked. "Let's not be hasty."

"I thought so," Bull said. This time Dorian didn't look back to see the smug expression on the Qunari's face—he just knew it would be there. "Don't worry about it, boss. I won't do more than enjoy the view. But there's no way you're getting on a horse until tomorrow. I mean, even with the salve it isn't going to be a fun trip."

As Bull continued his task, Dorian let loose a heavy sigh. "I am grateful," he admitted. "And not just for this." He peeked back once more, frowning as he saw the fresh pink scars on Bull's shoulder—and those were just the ones he could see from his current position. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"What, me? I'm indestructible, boss," Bull said with a shrug. "The scars just make me sexier, that's all. I'll get a lot of play out of these when I get back to Skyhold."

Dorian rolled his eyes as he laid his head on his forearms again. "Of course you will."

"Trust me. I mean, don't get me wrong—those scratches hurt, but better me than you, right? My hand doesn't glow in the dark." He nudged Dorian intimately with his hand as he added, "Though that would be pretty cool. I remember what it looked like when you stroked my--"

"Yes, yes," Dorian interrupted hastily, ears burning again. "Well, thank you. For taking the blow, I mean."

Even as the words dropped from his lips, he could hear Bull's grin. "Well... I mean, if you want to give one to me..."


"Just sayin', boss. The offer is always on the table," Bull said in a cheerful voice. "Just like you could be."

Something about the way Bull said the words as his fingers rubbed the salve over Dorian's anatomy suddenly struck him as the height of absurdity. A fit of laughter swelled within, sweeping over his body with an intensity which left him breathless and drained.

"Everything all right, boss?" Bull asked, reaching up to rest his hand lightly on Dorian's back. "I wasn't trying to be that funny."

"I'm fine, Bull," Dorian gasped. "I think the day is finally catching up with me."

Bull grunted, then patted Dorian's back and rose to his knees. "Then I'll let you sleep."

"But the sun is still out," Dorian pointed out. "I can--"

"Stay here and sleep," Bull said in a firm voice. "I wouldn't recommend getting into a saddle again until the salve has a chance to work, anyway, so don't even try. I'll come by in a few hours and check on you, but until then, just relax."

Dorian muttered an imprecation under his breath, then dropped his head onto his hands. "Oh, very well," he sniffed. "If you insist."

Bull slapped his backside smartly one more time, startling Dorian into a short oath. "You're grateful, admit it."
"Kaffas. I don't see how I can get some rest if you insist on lingering here," Dorian snapped back.

With a laugh, Bull covered him with a light blanket, then patted him gently. "Sleep, boss. You've earned it."

As Bull eased through the entrance to the tent, Dorian said quietly, "Thank you, Bull."

Bull paused and looked back. "I heard that."

"Good." Closing his eyes, Dorian added, "Because I am grateful, you oaf."

With a laugh, Bull left, dropping the flap closed behind him. Soon enough, the heat of the tent combined with the exhaustion of the fight with the dragon, and Dorian let himself fall into slumber. He had earned it, after all, even if the price had been near-immolation.

It seemed mere moments after his eyelids closed that he opened them again, however. He frowned as he pushed himself to his feet. The tent was gone, and he found himself instead in a vaguely familiar garden. His eyes widened as, for a moment, he forgot he was in a dream and only wondered how he had returned to the estate of House Pavus in Qarinus.

Before the moment passed, a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around, and he felt a shock course through him.

"Father," he whispered, taking an inadvertent step back.

"You," Halward snarled, tone laced with shocking vitriol. "This is all your fault." Before Dorian could respond, Halward shoved him down to the ground, then lashed out with his foot. "All your fault, you ungrateful wretch. You abandoned your duty and your House, and all for what? I hope those cocks were worth it."

Shocked, Dorian raised his arms to ward off the blow. Halward had never been this enraged, not even at his worst. "Father, I--"

"Silence! You don't deserve to speak," Halward spat, then heaved his staff around in a vicious arc clearly intended to strike Dorian in the head.

Dorian caught the end of the staff with his hands, staring at his father in confusion. This can't be Father, can it?

And, as he asked the question, Dorian knew where he was, and what was happening. The garden grew pale and wan as the Fade came to the fore, and with understanding of the dream came control of it. With a surge of magic, Dorian pushed himself to his feet, keeping a hold of the staff and his gaze locked on the demon wearing his father's face and form. As Halward's face darkened in anger, Dorian sent a shock of lightning up the staff and knocked the demon off his feet, turning the table as Dorian seized control of the encounter.

Swiftly he pinned the demon to the ground with the staff, pressing in as it struggled against his weight. "Now then, let's start this again, shall we?" Dorian asked in a cheerful voice.

Halward snarled at him. "It's all your fault."

Well, now... that was odd. "You really aren't making sense, even for a demon, you know," Dorian said companionably. "Besides, aren't you supposed to be trying to cajole or seduce me or something?"
The demon stared at him, then slowly grinned. A wound slowly opened on his father’s neck, and blood poured from it in shockingly bright rivulets of crimson as the demon laughed hoarsely. "You don't know, do you? You will soon, though. And then you'll understand."

Dorian frowned, no longer amused. He sent a swift burst of magic down the length of the staff, then gasped when both demon and staff disappeared, leaving him to lurch forward.

He collapsed onto a cracked, dirty floor of stone, the ground trembling and bucking around him. His eyes widened as he turned, though knowing what he would find did not prepare him. Again he saw Mailani shout his name and reach out, and again he saw her disappear beneath a pile of rubble. With a roar, he pushed himself to his feet and rushed towards her, desperation overriding his awareness of his surroundings.

Again he arrived far, far too late.

Struggle as he might to retain an awareness that this was only a dream of a memory, that he could take control back at any moment, he found he could not simply walk away or deviate from the echo of time demanded by the Fade. Again he took her hand, and again he wept over her body. This time, however, instead of being consumed by a coruscating cloud of bright light, he felt the rise of something else entirely, a burning rage which deserved only one name: vengeance.

Propelled by the wrath and the need to strike, he pivoted to his left, and to the shadows where the murderer lurked while waiting to claim his prize. Vision turning red, Dorian launched himself forward, staff raised above his head and magic at the ready as he prepared an attack on the one who had dared shake the very roots of the mountain to kill his dear friend.

For a moment he saw the gleam of red eyes and a smug smile, just before a blast of magic hit him full in the chest and sent him hurtling back, twisting and turning in the air as he gasped for breath and some modicum of control once more.

His back landed on something soft and bouncy, naked and--a quick glance down confirmed--aroused. At some point in all that tumbling through the air, his apparel had apparated away, leaving him bare as a baby but in a state far less innocent. Despite the softness of the landing, the force of it pushed the air out of his lungs, and for a moment all he could manage was to lay (mostly) limp and gasping, struggling to make sense of this decidedly odd dream.

Abruptly a shadow appeared above him, and a warm body pressed against his with as much rampant eagerness as his own. When the man leaned forward, Dorian's eyes widened at the sight of a familiar face. "Surely you don't have to leave so soon?" Hawke growled, just before he seized Dorian's lips in a passionate kiss.

This was no demon, Dorian knew that instantly. No, this was a memory, conjured from the depths of his mind and given form by his own magic and will. The kiss caught him off guard but not unready, and bore the same fire and passion he remembered from that singularly invigorating night with Hawke. When the man’s hand slipped between their torsos and grasped both men in a decidedly intimate fashion, Dorian moaned into the kiss and bucked his hips forward, lost in that moment between memory and dream. Something about that touch encouraged him to throw aside caution, a call his desperate body happily answered.

His skin heated under Hawke's roaming touch, which seemed somehow better without the haze of alcohol which had facilitated that evening in Skyhold. The distant sorrow of Hawke's fate gave this interlude a poignant beauty, which encouraged Dorian to dally perhaps a bit longer than he should have, or perhaps it was simply that Hawke knew how to please a man. It wasn't until he felt those same talented fingers probe a bit deeper that he snapped out of the pleasurable reverie and forced...
himself to once again take control of the Fade enough to push the scene away.

He collapsed back onto the phantom bed and groaned. Part of him regretted the need to push the memory away, but he simply couldn't relive it again, not while he was aware of it. It was one thing to enjoy a good dream--and Maker knows he had done so, with Hawke and others--but it was another matter entirely to willfully re-enact a moment with someone who had now passed. It felt dirty somehow, or at least disrespectful. "Not that the bastard would mind," Dorian half-muttered to himself, then sighed and shook his head. "Right. Time to wake up."

Closing his eyes, he calmed himself as best as he could, breathing deep as he fought to find his center and ground long enough to return to the waking world. The throbbing between his legs made it difficult at best, however, and finally with a noise of exasperation, he tried to do something about it.

Tried, anyway--only to find that he couldn't move his hands. His eyes snapped open, but he saw only darkness, alleviated by the sprinkling of light leaking through a tight blindfold. His heart sped as he struggled against the ropes binding his limbs, but it wasn't exactly fear that spurred him on.

A sardonic chuckle filled his ears, and a hot breath fell on his cheek as a familiar voice murmured, "Tight enough for you, Vint?"

Dorian swallowed harshly. He supposed it made sense that the night with Hawke would be followed by a wholly different, yet still as vigorous, memory. Usually if the Fade couldn't fulfill the dreamer's desire in one fashion, it found another way to work its way in, keeping the dreamer in its clutches as long as it could manage. And Bull, unlike Hawke, was very much alive, and thus avoided the awkward nature of that particular memory.

It posed quite the conundrum. His extensive training warned Dorian that he really shouldn't remain in the Fade for much longer, particularly in such a state. Strong emotions often proved quite the lure to demons, after all, and desire equally so. Still, as Bull's strong hands slowly worked their way over Dorian's body, testing the thin ropes in between maddening bouts of stroking and rubbing, Dorian found that logic hard to hold onto--especially as something else grew hard as a result of Bull's activities.

Maker.

He didn't realize he'd moaned the word out loud until the hands molesting him paused and Bull leaned in. "Enjoying yourself?" he asked in a rumble that Dorian felt in his core.

Dream. This is a dream. The words danced through his mind as he moaned again and nodded enthusiastically. Can't... stay.

Bull laughed, again in that deep, low rumble that punched down Dorian's spine and directly to his aching length. "Good. Then you're really going to enjoy the next part."

As Bull positioned himself behind Dorian, thumbs digging deep in all the right ways, Dorian sucked his breath between his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. Can't... stay!

It was enough--barely--to pull him out of the dream and back to the waking world. With a stifled cry, he pushed himself out of sleep and onto his elbows and knees, panting heavily as the tent whirled around him. With each breath, reality returned as the little details slowly solidified in ways the Fade simply could not replicate: the cold of the ground beneath his bedroll, the blooming pain of his burns, the scent of the night air in the foothills of the mountains.

His body sagged as he realized that he was safe once more. Mages always had to treat the Fade with
caution, of course, but the mark on his hand made it even more important for Dorian to retain control of himself. Not even the dreams orchestrated by Mailani had been quite that vibrant, and for a fleeting moment Dorian wondered at the possibility of a guiding hand.

After a bit more deliberation, however, he dismissed the notion. The first dream with his father had involved a demon, even if it had been rather unsubtle and easy to dismiss--a not-unheard of Fade encounter for a mage such as himself. After that, his dreams had been guided by nothing more than his emotions, brought on by nothing more than his exhaustion, more than likely.

Well, exhaustion and Bull's fondling from earlier. Dorian's ache persisted, even this long after waking, and he faced the prospect of lying on his stomach with a marked distaste. Leaning down so that his head could rest on his forearms, Dorian sighed as he contemplated his fate. "Damn the lummox," he muttered to himself.

It seemed the gods of caprice were not finished with him, either. Dorian started as a cool wind washed over his bare bottom, only belatedly realizing that his violent departure from the Fade had caused the thin blanket to fall away from him. "Well, now," Bull said with obvious appreciation. "That's not a bad view."

"Oh, shut up," Dorian snapped, quickly reaching to the side to find the blanket. "As if you could find any better."

Bull laughed as he settled down in the spot he'd vacated earlier. "I see you're awake. Pleasant dreams?"

*Kaffas.* "Obviously not, or I'd still be in them." Dorian sighed and rubbed his forehead, trying to remember he shouldn't blame his current state of discomfiture on Bull. "Sorry. It just hasn't been as restful a night as I'd hoped."

"Yeah, I can tell," Bull said. As Dorian bridled slightly, Bull added, "A little bit of your skin cracked open. I'll need to clean it again."

"Oh." Feeling contrite that he'd assumed something far more lewd, Dorian sighed and tried to get a bit more comfortable. "Thank you."

"No charge." For a moment there was the sound of sloshing and rustling behind him. "This part is gonna sting," he warned Dorian, then pressed a cloth to Dorian.

Bull waited until Dorian had hissed and then relaxed again before cleaning the area with a surprisingly gentle touch. Or perhaps not so surprisingly, now that Dorian considered it. After all, Bull had been quite tender with Dorian after he'd--

"You all right, boss?" Bull asked, stopping his ministrations for a moment. "You tensed up. Something I should know about?"

*Sweet Maker, no.* Dorian shook his head wordlessly, trying to get the lingering image of the *after* from his mind. Given the state of his cock, however, it was proving difficult. And, as Bull changed from cleaning to application of the salve, resistance grew even more difficult.

"You seem really tense, boss," Bull said quietly as he smoothed the salve over Dorian's skin. "Look, I know I said I'd wait for you to bring it up, but... well... I mean, it's *up* . And pretty happy to see me."

*Bull,* Dorian groaned. "I'm--"
"Fine, I know. Except you aren't." Bull's voice was completely serious as he started touching other points along Dorian's body while he spoke. "Your tension is creating a little knot in your lower back, and that's going to only get worse in the saddle. That will also carry down your legs and start affecting your knees and ankles if you leave it untouched for too long. Your shoulders are drawing in and holding tight, and in a few days it's going to start affecting your use of your staff. And that's not even touching on the mess in your neck right now." Bull's fingers lightly touched the bundle of tight muscles at the base of Dorian's neck, then traced it up to his temples. "Those headaches you're going to get soon will be pretty monumental. I'm not saying that a good fuck will get rid of all of it, but it would help. You need some relief, boss, and sooner rather than later. I'm not sure what you're holding in so damn hard, but it needs to come out."

"Beast," Dorian gasped, though even those light touches to his muscles released a tiny flare of pain he couldn't ignore.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But you also know I'm right," Bull said, voice still serious. "Maybe it's Cullen, or what happened at Adamant. Maybe it's the dreams you had last night, or the burns from the fight. It doesn't really matter, though, if it means in the end you're going to be a painful little mess of pulled muscle." With a sigh, Bull settled his hands on Dorian's shoulders and gently pulled him upright, positioning Dorian carefully so that no weight fell on his inconveniently placed burns. "I know I'm not Cullen, but I can help."

Dorian's eyes closed as he shuddered. "It's... everything." The words came slowly, almost shamefully, but they needed to come out. "It's finding out the truth about what happened to Mailani. It's knowing that two good men willingly sacrificed themselves to buy me time to do what had to be done. It's seeing Varric struggling to figure out whether or not he could have had a friend. It's hearing the soldiers talk about those lost in battle, even if they don't blame me for it."

"But you do," Bull prompted.

"I do." His head tipped back. "I'm the Inquisitor. I have advisors, true, but in the end, I'm the one who dictates where they go, who they fight. And maybe if I'd chosen more aptly, more of them would still live."

"That just means you're a good leader," Bull grunted. "Why do you think I keep the number of Chargers so low? It's because I never wanted to have so many people in my command that I'd be forced to take contracts that would mean one of them would probably die. As long as I can charge in and save 'em when they're in danger, that's enough troops for me."

Dorian's eyes opened as he turned to meet Bull's gaze. "The Qunari knew exactly what choice they gave you, didn't they?"

Bull gave a little shrug. "Pretty much, though I didn't figure that out until later. All I knew is that I didn't trust myself to make it. That's why I asked you to decide for me."

"Do you regret that?"

"Do you regret leaving your life in Tevinter behind?"

The question caught Dorian by surprise, but he considered it with the weight it deserved. "I miss the Imperium, or rather, I miss what it could be. But I don't miss my life there."

"Exactly," Bull grunted. "So no. I don't regret asking. Because I knew you'd make the right choice for me."
"Even though you are an uneducated oaf with the fashion sense of... of Solas, and I am the picture of perfection?" Dorian asked with raised eyebrows.

Bull gave him a broad grin. "Even then." As Dorian smiled, Bull nudged him in the hip. "But that's not all, is it? There's more going on in that mind of yours. Out with it."

Dorian's smile faded as he remembered why they'd gotten into this little exercise in the first place. "It's also the uncertainty of what lies ahead."

Eye narrowing shrewdly, Bull nudged Dorian again. "You don't mean Corypheus, do you?"

"No." For a long moment, Dorian fell silent, eyes sliding closed again. The cool of the night air and the warmth radiating from Bull's thick torso meant he instinctively leaned in towards the heat. When Bull wrapped his arm around Dorian, he startled a little, but didn't pull back. "No, though my worries rattle and bounce against each other like pebbles in a bucket."

"I think I can guess at some of them," Bull said, a hint of teasing in his tone.

"Only because you are an unprincipled lummox." The words carried no scorn and a great deal of affection, even though Dorian would, of course, deny that to anyone who asked him outright.

With a snort, Bull shook his head. "Yeah, that's what I figured. Well, if you're wondering... he is interested. More than interested."

"And how would you know?" Dorian asked waspishly, not bothering to deny the who of the whole discussion. Bull simply knew him too well.

"Well, maybe because of the way he perks up when he sees you coming, or the way he watches you when you leave," Bull mused. "Or the way you two manage to find a way to spend time together every day. I mean, that's where I'd start, anyway. If you asked."

Dorian opened his eyes to glare at Bull, finding him far too smug for Dorian's comfort. "We're friends."

"Friends. Right." Bull grinned widely at him. "So are we, you know. Even if I am a smelly barbarian who wouldn't know fashion if it hit me in the dangly bits."

That made Dorian laugh, even as he swatted Bull on the chest. "Oaf."

"That, too." Bull grew serious again. "But don't you see? It's not the same. What you have with me, and what you have with him. Sure, you can play chess with me, and we can drink together like we used to. Tonight, I may tie you down and fuck all that tension out of you, just like you need." As Dorian reddened, Bull continued, "But tomorrow, you'll be the boss, and I'll be the merc, and we'll still be just friends. I don't look at you the way he does, and you don't look at me the way you look at him. You need something from him that doesn't involve cock, even if you do want to get your hands on it eventually. And that's why you don't know what to do, isn't it?"

"You-- I--" Dorian inhaled sharply, then suddenly sagged into Bull's chest. "You're awful."

"Yeah, I really am," Bull said with a grin.

"The absolute worst."

Bull's laugh jostled Dorian as he replied, "That's sort of implied, yeah."
"And most terrible of all, you're right," Dorian said with a sigh. "You see far too much with that eye of yours."

"Damn right I do," Bull said, then patted Dorian's hip companionably. "So, you are going to talk to him about it, right?"

Dorian frowned, uncertainty seeping in once more. "I... don't know. And before you start prattling on again, it's more than just whether or not there's interest. It's whether or not it's appropriate."

"Well, it can't be because you're the Inquisitor and he's the Commander. That's been done before."

Bull paused, then grunted. "Oh. That's the problem, isn't it?"

"In part, yes. Oh, I'm not worried about anyone accusing me of anything, but in a certain light, it might be viewed as somewhat crass for me to pursue him."

Even as the words left his mouth, Dorian realized there was a bit more to it, something he felt compelled to put to words. "And... well, I don't want to lessen Mailani in his memory. Or supplant her. She was my dearest friend, and I have no wish to sully her legacy."

"So you want Cullen to die alone, then?" Bull asked.

"What?" Dorian blinked at the unexpected question. "Of course not."

"Then eventually someone will be in his life again," Bull pointed out. "I don't see the point in bowing out or waiting if you think that you can both be happier together now."

Brow furrowing, Dorian turned that particular perspective around in his mind. "I will ponder that."

"Not for too long, I hope." Bull's hand rose and settled on Dorian's shoulder, thumb digging into the tension there. "Hmm. One pebble left."

Dorian's shoulders tensed again, and for a moment his dream flashed before his eyes. Not the memories, no: the first dream, the one which had left a lingering sense of foreboding deep within. His father's twisted face filled his vision, his harsh words echoing in his mind once more: "It's all your fault!"

"I don't know if I'm quite ready to pick that one apart yet," he said softly.

"Fair enough." Bull settled his other hand on Dorian's knee. "Then I'll ask you again. Do you want me to work those kinks out? Because I don't think they're going to go away all on their own."

The question hung between them for a moment as Dorian tilted his head back and tried to be absolutely honest with himself. He didn't have much practice with it, so it took a while for the answer to formulate. In the end it was his body's reaction to the simple process of contemplating the act of stress relief with Bull that made the decision for him.

Bull chuckled and stroked his hand up Dorian's thigh. "See? You need me. Or at least part of you does."

"You don't have to be so smug about--" Dorian began, then gasped as Bull took him in hand and gave him a squeeze.

"Don't worry. I'll be gentle," he teased Dorian, then carefully eased him forward until he was on all fours again.

The thin blanket quickly became several long, sturdy strips, though the one Bull tied around Dorian’s
eyes had to be double-wrapped to be effective. From there, the experience quickly became a blur of pleasure and release as Bull's hands found and chased away the tension he could find, then created a new sort of tension entirely. Dorian lost track of time, but he also lost sight of his worries and fears as well, as Bull used his cock to pound them all away.

But the most important part came after that, when Bull untied the makeshift ropes and eased away the marks beneath with a mixture of massage and pressure. By that point, Dorian simply lay limp on his sleeping roll, eyes half-closed, aching in all the right ways and completely, utterly relaxed for the first time since assuming the mantle of Inquisitor. And somewhere in the delirium of the delicious denouement of desire, he managed to murmur, "Thank you, Bull."

"Any time, boss." Bull's hands paused just long enough for him to lean down and grin at Dorian. "My pleasure."

"Beast," Dorian whispered.

"Vint," Bull said with a rumbly chuckle, then turned his attention back to the matter at hand. "Besides, I'm just returning the favor. You gave me the Chargers back, remember?"

Dorian smiled, but found he couldn't quite open his mouth to respond. In fact, he found that he couldn't quite do anything, so he simply stopped trying.

Sleep came quickly after that. Sleep, and nothing more.

The next morning, he held a quick consultation with his companions about whether to return to the troops or proceed to Skyhold, given the latter's proximity and the fact that the two destinations lay in opposite directions. Much as Dorian would have preferred to see Cullen again as soon as possible, he also knew that there were likely a pile of papers awaiting him on Josephine’s ledger the moment he stepped foot in Skyhold once more.

After sending an agent back to deliver the message about their destination, they sallied forth to Skyhold. If Dorian’s saddle had a bit more padding on it than normal, no one made a comment about it. The salve had done wonders, but it was still a struggle to remain upright for the hours it took to reach Skyhold. By the time they rode through the main gate, he was quite happy to ease his way down to the ground and walk, stiffly but quickly, to the bathhouse.

After an hour or so, and a health potion or two, he felt much more himself. As predicted, once he was available, Josephine swooped in with her ledger and pen at the ready. “Inquisitor, there are some matters awaiting your attention.”

“Of course there are,” he said in a resigned tone. “Your office?”

“My office,” she affirmed.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Josephine took a folded piece of paper from her ledger and held it out to him. “I believe this is the most important piece of information I have to give you.”

Eyebrow raised, Dorian took the paper and unfolded it, reading it as he moved to the chair he normally sat in for their impromptu meetings. Halfway there, he stopped so he could focus his full attention on re-reading the letter before looking up at Josephine. “And you’re sure she wrote it?”

Josephine nodded. “Charter vouches for it,” she told him. “She found it in a cache known only to herself and Leliana, and all the ciphers are current.”
“It’s certainly unusual,” Dorian mused, then shook himself and headed to the chairs again. “She’s been gone for extended lengths of time before without leaving behind more than a I’ll be back notice. I wonder why she left such an extensive missive this time.”

“I’m more concerned about the timing, Inquisitor,” Josephine said as she settled in across from him in their chairs by the fireplace.

“Oh?” Dorian frowned a moment, making a few calculations of his own as he re-re-read the note, then leaned back in his chair as realization struck. “Oh.”

Josephine pressed her lips together and closed her eyes for a moment, a quirk Dorian recognized as her way of taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “After word reached us of the events at Adamant, she became almost a recluse,” Josephine said in a subdued tone. “For a day or two she threw herself into her work, but it must not have been enough.” Josephine sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Charter said her food went untouched, and her bed unused. Once I caught her muttering about her dreams, but—"

*That* caught Dorian’s attention, and he leaned forward again. “Her dreams? What did Leliana say about them, exactly?”

“Ah… Let me think.” Lips pursing thoughtfully, Josephine tapped her quill on the ledger a few times before she said, “She said something about not letting him control her again.”

A chill ran through Dorian. “Nothing more?”

“Not that I heard, no, Inquisitor,” Josephine said apologetically. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m not sure,” Dorian admitted. Leliana could have meant Alistair, after all, but somehow Dorian didn’t think that’s the him Leliana meant. “It is always difficult to lose a loved one, even for someone as formidable as Leliana. Grief can cause unexpected reactions.” When Josephine looked uncertain, he added, “And she didn’t simply leave for no reason. She is investigating Calpernia.”

“True,” Josephine conceded with a soft sigh. “Still, I am uneasy. Why sneak off in the middle of the night, and why inform us in such a fashion? A conversation would have been sufficient, I would think.”

Dorian shook his head. “I have no answer for you, Lady Ambassador. But at least one thing is certain: whatever Leliana’s purpose, we can be certain she will be triumphant, yes?”

That earned him a small smile. “I will keep that in mind, Inquisitor. Thank you.”

“If we worried about every little thing we didn’t understand, we’d never get out of bed in the morning,” Dorian said with a soft chuckle. “We must trust that Leliana knows what she is up to. Or at least, that’s what I think I’ll be telling myself until I see her again. Besides, I rather think that if Leliana does not wish to be found, we won’t find her.”

“That is most certainly true,” Josephine said with a smile. “Very well, then, Inquisitor. Charter and I will meet each morning to keep me apprised of the reports coming in. I will keep you informed of any updates on the matter.”

“Excellent.” Dorian straightened in his chair and tucked Leliana’s note into one of his pouches. “Now, I’m sure that isn’t the only piece of paper which requires my attention.”

“Indeed not, Inquisitor.” A sheaf of papers appeared in her hand as if by magic. “There are quite a few updates. Do you wish to start in Orlais, or Ferelden?”
Bracing himself, Dorian held out his hand expectantly. “I think Ferelden. They tend to be more boring, and I wouldn’t want to fall asleep later in the briefing if we wait too long to get to them.”

“Inquisitor,” Josephine scolded him.

“I spent weeks there on my own before the Inquisitor came to Redcliffe, if you’ll recall. Aside from the incidental fighting between mages and Templars, the only excitement was that someone actually made a tasty stew once. Can you imagine? In Ferelden? They were talking about it for days afterwards.”

That made Josephine laugh, then look slightly guilty as she put her fingertips to her mouth when her diplomatic nature got the better of her. “Perhaps we should discuss the reports, Inquisitor?”

“As you wish, Lady Ambassador,” Dorian replied, pulling up the first report and peering closely at it. “Oh. I see.” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You didn’t send word on to him yet, did you?”

“No, Inquisitor,” Josephine said gently. “I thought it might be better to discuss the message with you.”

Dorian sighed and stared at the name at the bottom of the letter, the guilt rising within once more. “Alistair spoke of the Arl with great fondness. Apparently he was the one who went to Kirkwall to finish what Cullen started in pulling him from the gutter. This was… not a letter I look forward to crafting.” Setting the stack of papers on the table between them, he considered Josephine for a moment. “At least I managed to persuade Varric to send off the notices about Hawke.”

“We also have messages from Starkhaven and Kirkwall, but those can wait.” Nodding towards the missive in Dorian’s grasp, Josephine set her pen to paper and waited expectantly. “What shall we tell Art Teagan?”

Heaving a sigh, Dorian stared down at the letter again. “The truth, or as much of the truth as we can tell. He should know that Alistair died a hero, to start.”

“They let us start there,” she agreed, her voice gentle. “Tell me what happened.”

Leaning back in his chair, Dorian stared up at the ceiling for a moment. “Alistair went to Adamant to save the Grey Wardens, and ended up giving his life to save the world. He was a good man, and I was proud to fight at his side even for a little while.”

As they crafted first the letter to the Arl, then the letters to send to the ruler of Starkhaven and others, Dorian couldn’t help but relive those final moments with Alistair and Hawke and wonder if, perhaps, he could have done something, anything, differently. In the end, he had to push the thoughts aside to concentrate on the task at hand.

After all, he still had a lot of work to do.

By the time he escaped Josephine’s office, Dorian felt more than a little stretched thin emotionally. He allowed himself a short visit to his balcony with a glass of wine, staring at the serene vista of the mountains around Skyhold until he found a modicum of the relaxation Bull had worked so tirelessly to gift him.

The thought which finally brought a smile to his face consisted of Cullen standing beside him, hand wrapped around his waist and the fur of his mantle tickling his habitually bare arm. Dorian caught his fingers rising to stroke the bared skin and halted them, choosing instead to reach up and smooth his
mustache. Still, he let the little scene play out in his mind for a moment as the wine slowly disappeared, then sighed and turned from the window when the glass came up empty.

He tried to hold onto to the warmth of the daydream as he wended his way back into the main hall, heading for the room where Solas generally lurked in Skyhold. Josephine’s report of Leliana’s muttering about her dreams left a lingering concern, and he wanted to confer with Solas to see if they could remotely protect Leliana’s dreams as they had Cullen and the others who had been to Adamant.

Before he reached the door leading to Solas’ lair, however, Varric’s voice reached his ear, edged with a bit more exasperation than was usual. “I appreciate the warning, but you shouldn’t have come yourself. What if the guild found out? Or… whatshisname?”

Dorian sighed a bit. That sounded like something the Inquisitor should know about. His work, it seemed, was never done. Slowing his pace, he changed his trajectory to intercept Varric while keeping a careful ear on the conversation.

As he approached, the person standing next to Varric made a nonchalant gesture. “Are you worrying for me or for yourself?”

“A little of column A and a little of column B. I am the expendable one, after all,” Varric muttered.

“I heartily disagree with that,” Dorian declared. “Who else is going to flagrantly cheat me at cards if not you?”

The woman turned to face him with an oddly knowing smirk on her lips. “Well, this is a surprise. You’re the Inquisitor, right? Bianca Davri, at your service.”

“Bianca?” Dorian’s grin widened. “I seem to recall teasing Varric a fair amount about molesting a Bianca. Alas, it was only his crossbow. More’s the pity.”

Varric sighed heavily as Bianca shot him an amused look. “Thank you, your Inquisitorialness. I’m not sure that she needed to hear that, though.”

“No charge,” Dorian said with a slow wink. “I take it you’re a friend of Varric’s, then?”

Bianca gave a little shrug. “Who isn’t a friend of Varric’s? You have met him before, right?”

“Long enough for him to empty my coin purse a time or two,” Dorian said with a laugh.

Her smirk widened into a grin. “Oh, good. That means he’ll actually have something for me to take in our next card game.”

“Can we talk about why she’s actually here, Sparkler?” Varric interjected. “I mean, if we’re done talking about ways to pick each others’ pockets.”

Bianca's eyes traveled over Dorian's outfit. "I think I can see how you earned that particular nickname," she observed. "I wouldn't want to try to hide that outfit in the Deep Roads."

"I assure you, my lady, that I am absolutely nowhere to be found when it comes to the Deep Roads," Dorian promised.

"Because he'll never go there," Varric put in. "Not because he has any special ability to hide."

"And can you blame me?" Dorian asked. "It's not as if you like going there, either."
"A man after your own heart, hmm?" Bianca asked Varric, rolling her eyes. "I suppose I should have known."

"And I can see why you two get along so splendidly," Dorian mused. "There seems to be a certain sarcastic synergy between you."

"I don't think I would have put it like that," Varric said. "Besides, I don't see Bianca very often. Usually only when something's wrong."

Dorian raised an eyebrow as he looked between the two of them. "I take it that something is wrong, then?"

"You might say that." Varric glanced at the woman at his side. "Bianca’s got a lead on where Corypheus got his red lyrium."

*That* caught Dorian's attention. "Oh?"

"The site of Bartrand’s Folly, the thaig Varric found, has been leaked," Bianca explained.

"The one where you found the idol?" Dorian asked, admittedly fascinated by the idea.

"Well, if the name didn’t give that little tidbit away, then I don’t know what to tell you, Sparkler," Varric said. Ignoring Dorian’s subsequent glare, he added, “Bianca said she spotted some suspicious activity nearby.”

“There’s a Deep Roads entrance crawling with strange humans carting out red lyrium by the handful.” Bianca wrinkled her nose. “Strange, stupid humans.”

“I take it they’re not taking proper precautions?” Dorian guessed. “Lyrium is quite common in Minrathous—it’s one reason the dwarves have as much political power as they do in the Imperium. I’ve had the volatility of raw lyrium drummed into my head since I was a wee tot. I would imagine red lyrium is far worse.”

“Oh, yes,” Varric said fervently. “Most definitely.”

“And these humans aren’t taking *any* precautions,” Bianca said with a grimace. “My guess is that most of them will be dead inside a year. Painfully.”

Dorian gave a little shudder. “After removing enough red lyrium to cause more problems than I want to imagine, I’ll warrant. Especially since it’s in the Deep Roads. Some of the slave traders in the Imperium have routes mapped from the Imperium to Antiva, so it would be a simple matter for them to distribute red lyrium across Thedas if they wished.” Dorian sighed, then glared at Varric in accusation. “This is all your fault.”

“My fault?” Varric’s brow wrinkled. “I may have helped fund the expedition, but it was all Bartrand’s idea.”

“No, no, not *that,*” Dorian said hastily. “I’m complaining about the fact that I actually have to go to the Deep Roads now. I *hate* the Deep Roads.”

“You and me both, Sparkler,” Varric sighed. “You and me both.”

Dorian didn’t want to elaborate on his hatred of the Deep Roads, since he preferred not to linger on his journey from the Imperium to Redcliffe, or the personal compromises and sacrifices he’d had to make on the way. Certain memories had been nicely buried, and really he only truly regretted the
sale of his last piece of personal history. Still, that was far too private to get into with the dwarf, good friend or no. Turning back to Bianca, he asked, “Are you sure they only have the one entrance?”

“Thankfully, that thaig only has one way in and out,” Bianca explained. “And even that took a special expedition to find.”

“After what happened with the idol, I tend to think that was done on purpose,” Varric grunted. “Who would want that stuff on the loose?” When Dorian gave him a look, he added, “I mean, what sane person would want that stuff on the loose?”

“Corypheus certainly doesn’t possess that particular attribute, true,” Dorian mused. “Still, that’s a bit of good news for our little investigation. I wonder how they found it in the first place?”

“There were a few people who knew,” Varric explained. “Hirelings from the expedition, a couple close friends…”

“How they found out isn’t important,” Bianca declared. “What matters is we know where they are now.”

Dorian tilted his head as he regarded her for a moment. “If it is such a secret, how did you learn of it, hmm?”

Varric shifted back and forth on his feet before he finally sighed. “I told her. Right after the expedition, I wrote and told Bianca what we found.” When Dorian simply crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow in expectation, Varric raised his hands in self-defense. “I had artifacts that needed buyers and she had more contacts that would pay for them. Besides, I owed her.”

“I see. Well, that’s reasonable enough, I suppose.” He glanced down at his clothes. “I presume I’ll need a different, less sparkly outfit for this mission.”

Varric gave a little chuckle. “I’d recommend it. Then you’ll go?”

Dorian closed his eyes for a moment. What he truly wanted to do was wait here until Cullen returned so that they could have that long overdue discussion Bull had highlighted, followed by a long night of incredibly primal activity. As it was, however, he acknowledged that learning more about this matter was better for the Inquisition as a whole, even if not for the Inquisitor. With a purely internal sigh, he opened his eyes and accepted his responsibilities.

"We have to deal with this as soon as we can, and preferably soon. As long as he has this source of red lyrium, Corypheus will be that much more powerful. And I can think of a few upcoming events I’d prefer him to be impotent, yes?" Besides, he added silently, I owe Varric. It remained unspoken because he suspected Varric wouldn’t understand the guilt Dorian still felt for leaving Hawke behind in the Fade, but the memory of Varric’s expression when he’d learned of Hawke’s fate still stung. “And here I thought I would be able to stay out of the saddle for longer than a day.”

"Sorry, Sparkler. At least Bull can help you if the pain gets too bad.” Ignoring Dorian's dour glare, Varric turned to Bianca. "Why don't you go ahead and scout the place? We'll catch up with you."

With a nod, she looked between Dorian and Varric. "You won't be too far behind, will you? I'm not looking forward to just hanging around a cave without much to do."

"Don't worry, my lady. We won't be far behind," Dorian assured her. "I just need to settle a couple of things, write some messages, and gather a suitably ferocious group to aid us."

"All right." Fixing her gaze on Varric, Bianca murmured, "See you soon. Don't keep me waiting too
Varric gave her a nod, his gaze staying on her until she'd disappeared through the main doors. "Should I go gather everyone?"

"Bull and Solas, yes," Dorian said with a sigh. "Honestly, you couldn't have waited a day?"

"She was here when we got back," Varric told Dorian in an apologetic voice. "Besides, I really want to investigate this. The last time I was down there was when I was with Hawke. Remember that staff Amell used against Mailani?"

Dorian's brows furrowed for a moment, then cleared as he recalled the red lyrium shining in the darkness of the cave in his memory. "Maker. I didn't think of that."

"Let's just say I'm really curious just how the Hero of Ferelden got his hands on that much red lyrium when, as far as I know, it was unknown until that expedition Bartrand and I financed." Varric rubbed his face roughly with one hand. "Maferath's balls. This shit just keeps getting crazier and crazier."

"That I can wholeheartedly agree with," Dorian said with a sigh. "Well. I'll get started on my letters, you get started on giving Bull and Solas the bad news."

"You got it, Sparkler." Varric glanced at his chair and the waiting sheaf of paper with its inkwell lying next to it with a look of longing, then shook his head before glancing up again. "And I'm sorry."

Dorian tilted his head. "For?"

Voice quiet, Varric said, "I know you wanted to wait here until the... the others got back to Skyhold, not running off to chase another rumor."

"I daresay the others will be back by the time we return, at least. Don't worry, Varric. This is important, too." A thought occurred to him that made him chuckle. "And maybe Solas and Bull will finally be able to finish their chess match."

"Is that why Bull chose Solas to go with us to fight the dragon?" Varric asked. "I would have thought Cassandra a better fit for that."

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll join us next time,” Dorian assured him with a wink.

Varric groaned and rolled his eyes. “Andraste’s garters, don’t even mention it. Maybe we’ll be lucky and that’s the last dragon we’ll need to fight.”

“Corypheus has one, remember?”

“Don’t remind me.” With a shudder, Varric shook his head. “Well, we’d better get started. I don’t want to keep Bianca waiting."

“You will tell me someday why your crossbow is named after her, won’t you?” Dorian asked mildly. “Or should I simply make the assumption that it’s named after its designer?"

Varric hesitated, then glanced towards the doors through which Bianca had made her exit. “It’s complicated,” he muttered almost under his breath.

“Ah.” Dorian clapped his hand on Varric’s shoulder. “Luckily we have at least a day or two of travel coming up rather soon. Plenty of time to tell me all about these delicious complications of yours. Off
you go. I’ll see you in the stables soon.”

He pretended not to hear the epithets Varric grumbled under his breath as the dwarf headed towards Solas’ retreat, and set his feet to return to Josephine’s office. Thankfully Solas would be with him so they could discuss the matter of Leliana, but he did have messages to leave for those who hadn’t returned to Skyhold. Granted most of them could be relayed directly by Josephine, but there was one in particular he didn’t trust to anything but a sealed envelope and the Ambassador’s iron-clad discretion in making sure no one else knew about it.

Now, of course, came the most difficult part of all: figuring out what, precisely, needed to be written.

Compared to that, a trip to the Deep Roads to crack down on the source of their foe’s red lyrium seemed but a pleasant walk on a summer day, no matter how many assurances Bull gave him. Dorian did have standards, after all. More worryingly, so did Cullen—and Dorian was all too intimately aware of his own flaws.

Maker. Why did the first step off a cliff have to be so terrifying?

By the time they emerged from the thaig, a pall had fallen over Dorian and his companions. The satisfaction of victory following a successful mission proved elusive, and rendered the journey to Skyhold relatively silent. The revelations in the thaig had proven troublesome for Varric in particular, reducing the normally loquacious dwarf to one-word sentences and grunts even at mealtimes.

Eventually Dorian drew his horse up next to Varric’s, waiting for Varric to acknowledge him with a glance before asking, “Need to talk?”

“I thought I talked too much,” Varric grunted.

“Not recently, no,” Dorian observed, though he’d expected that guilt to be a part of the reason for the dwarf’s self-imposed isolation. “It’s a bit worrisome, honestly.”

He saw Varric close his eyes and inhale deeply. “I’m glad I have answers, but… shit. The second I saw her at Skyhold, I knew, I just…” He shook his head, a mixture of anger and frustration leaking into his voice. “I let this mess happen. I gave her the thaig. And I am not good with dealing with shit like this.”

A rueful smile touched Dorian’s lips. “Name someone who is.”

“You’re not doing such a piss poor job yourself,” Varric pointed out.

“Perhaps I’m just better at pretending than most,” Dorian suggested. “Still. Try not to take too much of the blame onto yourself. Corypheus is large enough to spread that sort of burden around to several people.”

Varric snorted a laugh, albeit with obvious reluctance. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

When the dwarf fell back into silence, Dorian reached over to rest his hand on the dwarf’s shoulder. “I’m going to pick up the pace a bit. I think we could all do with getting back to Skyhold as quickly as we can. But do think on what I said.”

“Yeah.” Varric glanced up at him. “And… thanks. I mean it.”

“Well, don’t let anyone else hear you,” Dorian said, drooping one eyelid in a subtle wink. “I do have a reputation.”
Varric laughed. “Don’t worry, Sparkler. I’m pretty good at keeping secrets, most of the time. You know. Unless they end up incidentally unleashing an ancient Darkspawn magister on the world.” When Dorian gave him a look, Varric sighed. “I know, I know. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

With a shake of his head, Dorian decided to leave it at that for now and urged his mount to the lead. The sooner they reached Skyhold, the better.

They arrived at the last camp before Skyhold shortly after the normal dining hour, as the last light of the sun painted the horizon with a garish mix of pink and orange. The camp’s location had been chosen to provide an easy day’s journey for those leaving and returning to the Inquisition’s headquarters, and thus was populated by a constant stream of agents, soldiers, and merchants along with a small support staff permanently stationed there. Tempted as he was to push through the night, Dorian knew that Dennett would never forgive him for abusing the mounts like that--even if Bull insisted on riding the one that looked like a walking drake skeleton.

As they watched their mounts get taken away for the night, Varric looked up at Bull. “Hey, Tiny.”

“Hey, Varric,” Bull responded without missing a beat.

“Why do you ride that thing? I would have thought a hart or the nuggalope more your style. You know,” Varric made a gesture around his head, “with the bigger horns and everything.”

Bull laughed. “Ah, but you’re not thinking about how to instill fear in the hearts of your enemy. Harts aren’t very scary in combat, not like a dracolisk.”

“Well, what about the nuggalope? It’s a battlemount,” Varric pointed out. “It’s got armor and everything.”

Before answering, Bull looked around, then leaned down and whispered, “Have you seen their hands? Creepy.”

“Really?” Shaking his head, Varric gave a little chuckle. “That’s why you don’t ride the nuggalope?”

“Hey, I have one simple rule: never ride anything with bigger hands than your own,” Bull insisted.

Dorian couldn’t help but snicker at that. He might even have smirked a little, though he’d never admit to it in polite company. When Bull grinned and opened his mouth, most likely to reply with something definitely not suitable for polite company, Dorian hastily blurted, “Why don’t you go fetch us some dinner, Bull? It’s been quite a long day in the saddle, and I’m sure we’re all incredibly famished.”

Bull grunted, then patted his stomach a couple of times. “Yeah, well, good point. I’ll bring it to the meeting tent.”

“An excellent idea,” Dorian said enthusiastically. Hopefully the prospect of food would distract Bull from returning to the subject of hand size and riding. At least it would tide them over until they had found a bit more privacy. "We’ll see you soon."

As Bull strolled off, rolling his shoulders and exchanging greetings with others along the way, Varric muttered, "Nice save."

"Thank you." With a nudge, Dorian added, "No thanks to you, I must point out."

"How was I supposed to know the conversation would end up there?” Varric protested.
Dorian laughed. "Because it's Bull. It always ends up there."

"He is a rather unusual individual," Solas noted. "Not single-minded or simple of mind, but eager for others to perceive him as such."

Varric grunted. "Makes sense. People are easier to hoodwink if they think you're an idiot. That's kind of useful for a spy. Add in the dumb hulking brute impression to that, and you've got it made."

"Oh, he's a brute all right," Dorian said affectionately. "But he's our brute. Ah, here we are."

Dorian led the way into the meeting tent, only to find it had already been cleared out and prepared for them. Well, for him-- for the Inquisitor. Wine had been left on the table, and the fire built up enough that the tent glowed with a welcoming light. Basking in the warmth, Dorian moved to sit in one of the rugged chairs, picking one that still had a cushion in it before carefully taking a seat and gesturing the others to join him.

"Ahh, that's better," he said with a groan. "Once we return to Skyhold, remind me not to hop back in the saddle for at least a week. Preferably longer."

"Hey, at least your legs are long. Think about how I feel," Varric grunted as he settled himself into a chair.

"I would have more sympathy if you weren't the entire reason we left Skyhold in the first place," Dorian pointed out in a mild tone.

A wince crossed Varric's face. "I don't suppose I could blame Hawke, could I? I mean, he was the one who let Janeka go in the first place."

“It is fascinating to consider that Corypheus had the ability to control Grey Wardens to such an extent even back then,” Solas noted from where he stood at the tent’s entrance, watching the bustle of the camp. “Surely blame should not be placed upon those whose only sin is that of ignorance.”

“I’m not sure that helping an ancient demigod who wants to rework the world to fit his own mad vision is something you should be able to be able to beg off responsibility for, even if you helped only by accident,” Varric countered. “That just seems… wrong, somehow.”

“Then take solace in the fact that you are doing what you can to keep him from ultimate success,” Dorian said with some empathy. “After all, think of how my own involvement in this whole affair began. Alexius only made the advancements he did involving time manipulation because of me, and he used that knowledge to support Corypheus. Obligation to fight against evil does not always need to be founded completely in altruism.”

Varric rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, Sparkler. If Cassandra hadn’t dragged me here, I’d still be Kirkwall right now, pretending none of this was happening.”

Snorting in disbelief, Dorian gave Varric another scathing look. “And I would still be riding naked across Thedas on my unicorn, dispensing magical glitter and candy to happy little children throughout the lands.”

The sheer absurdity of the statement made Varric laugh, and even Solas smiled. “Can I borrow that for one of my books?” Varric asked, still chuckling.

“I don’t see why not, as long as I get credit for it,” Dorian shot back.

“Fine.” Heaving a sigh, Varric leaned back in his seat. “Have it your way, Sparkler. I’ll stop blaming
myself for *that*, at least. And maybe for other things." His brow furrowed. "Now that I've seen what happens to people after they're exposed to red lyrium, I think I can rest easier about my brother's death. It really was the best decision."

"The song of normal lyrium is compelling enough," Dorian said in a thoughtful tone. "I can't imagine what it must be like to hear a corrupted version of it."

Solas stirred and half-turned towards them. "Imagine the world as you know it, pristine and pure and real. Now imagine that changing, one element at a time, day by day, to something sinister and dark and corrupt. First the sky, then the ground, then the flowers and the trees, until even the animals are nothing but a blight upon the world. Nothing makes sense, and all you can hear is the mocking, twisted rendition of the song which had once flowed through your veins at such a subdued level you only knew it to be your heartbeat. *That* is what it is like: a slow loss of everything you hold dear until it has become a waking nightmare which can never end."

After a moment of staring at Solas, Dorian tilted his head and frowned. "You almost sound as if you speak from personal experience."

"I have never had the misfortune to be affected by red lyrium, no. Yet in my travels in the Fade, I have seen the fate of those who succumbed to the Blight, and experienced their dreams and memories of loss. It came as no surprise to hear that the corruption within red lyrium is related to the corruption of the Blight. It was powerful enough to destroy the fabled Golden City, after all."

"Wait. Does that mean the Black City is a living being as well?" Varric asked. "I mean, if the blight corrupted it."

Solas gave a little shrug. "Who knows? There is no one living who has ever walked the halls of the city, whether golden or black."

"Unless you count Corypheus," Dorian reminded him. "He does claim to have done precisely that. And he wasn't the only one, of course. All of the Magisters Sidereal participated in that particular little mad quest for power."

"The who of the what now?" Varric asked.

"Ah. The original Seven Magisters who entered the Black City. I believe you’re acquainted with at least one of them," Dorian said with a sly wink. "I suppose it’s not a very well known term outside of scholarly circles, at that."

"Huh. And here I thought they were just ‘those ancient Tevinter bastards’." With a shrug, Varric shook his head. 'You learn something new every day.'

"It strikes me that Corypheus was likely aided in his survival due to the efforts of the Grey Wardens themselves in their efforts to study him," Solas mused. "A true irony that their forced captivity of him may have preserved him to an extent. I would imagine the others have perished long since."

"Maker, I hope so," Dorian said fervently. "I'm not sure Thedas can withstand more boogeymen from its distant past rearing their head in the present. I'd rather keep it to one madman intent on remaking the world in his image, thank you."

"That would seem to be the more sensible option," Solas said with a faint smile.

With a short laugh, Dorian reached for the wine bottle. "Shall we toast to it?"

"Sounds good to me," Varric said with a chuckle. "Pour me a glass, would ya?"
"Naturally." Once the wine was poured, he picked up his glass and studied it for a moment as he gathered his thoughts and waited for Varric and Solas to retrieve their glasses. "Let's drink to a saner Thedas, shall we? An end to this nightmare we're facing once and for all."

Varric grinned as he tapped his glass to Dorian's own. " Couldn't have said it better myself. You've got a way with words, Sparkler."

A third glass joined theirs as Solas said, "I also agree most heartily, Inquisitor. I look forward to the day when the darkness is banished once more."

"Very well, then. To a brighter future!" Dorian clicked their glasses ceremoniously, then swallowed a decent amount of his glass. "Hmm. Not the Inquisition's best," he admitted. "Pity."

"Better than that Rite wine, though," Varric said with a shudder.

Dorian laughed as he settled back in his chair. "Quite true. Regardless, it should help me sleep well tonight."

"Yeah, you always do sleep better after a long, hard ride," a deep voice boomed from the tent's entrance, right before Bull swept into the tent, his arms laden with several types and layers of food.

Dorian pinched the bridge of his nose with a long-suffering sigh, resigned to the fact that Bull was, in a word, incorrigible. "Thank you, Bull."

Bull grinned at him as he started to unload his burden on the table. "No charge. Now come on, let's eat. I'm starving!"
'"Wake up."

Your eyes pop open as the words echo in your head, feeling distinctly odd as you stare up at the rough hewn rock ceiling above you. Your head feels hollow, and everything seems to be both magnified and muffled all at once. The only sound which is crystal clear is the steady rhythmic beat of your heart. For some reason, that fills your ears with a slow steadiness which cannot be ignored, even if everything else about your surroundings seems to be swaddled in thick cotton cloth. Your arms weigh down at your sides like lead as you try to move them, but when a hand slaps you sharply across the face, the pain arcs through your body with heightened agony.

"You heard me," an accented voice snarls, just before another blow lands. "Wake up. He wants to see you."

Confused and disoriented, you try to open your mouth, but instead your body simply obeys the order, albeit at a doggedly slow pace. You become aware that you are naked, and that there is pain all over your body, a constellation of cuts and bruises of varying intensity, yet somehow it seems distant and not truly part of you. In fact, this all feels wrong, as if you don’t belong here at all.

Of course, where here is, you don’t know. How you came to be here, when you fell asleep in a tent a day’s ride from Skyhold, you also do not know. And why an Antivan is ordering you around remains a mystery. Yet, somehow, you cannot disobey.

As you unsteadily gain your feet, a pair of hands shove you so hard you almost fall. Your guide follows it up with a cuff to your shoulder. "Hurry up. Your Master wants to see you."

Master? The throbbing, rhythmic pulse in your head makes it hard to concentrate, but a wariness sets in at the word. Where you hail from, a man who is cuffed and beaten at the behest of a Master is not a man with an extended life expectancy. You struggle to push this nightmare away, to control the Fade as you were taught, but to no avail. Here you are, and here you will remain, it seems.

Maker help you.

Woodenly you walk forward, unable to speak or do anything save what you are told. It is hard to concentrate on your surroundings, since your head refuses to obey your inclination to crane your neck and look around. In glimpses and pieces you manage to assemble an impression of a dark corridor with a rough wooden floor between crumbling brick walls beneath a massive network of beams holding back the rock above. Nothing specific enough to pin it down to any single country, and nothing unique enough to remember past the next moment.

When you pass through the door at the end of the tunnel, however, that can no longer be said. In the room beyond, you find an expansive area with a ceiling which disappears into the mists above, along with several rows of beds lined three or four deep along the floor below. Some of the beds are occupied, with the occupants securely tied down by various machinations to prevent any movement. At the far end of the room, overshadowing all else, a huge mirror dominates all, though most of it is obscured by a large piece of cloth. Hints of clouded glass peek out from below the cloth, and you feel an irrational surge of anger sweep over you as you look at it.

The hands of your guide, however, prove relentless and shove you forward, in the direction of two men speaking in hushed consultation. The shorter man is garbed in a worn Grey Warden mage robe, while the taller figure is obscured by a hooded black cloak. A warning flares in your mind at
the sight of him, but it slips away before you can get a firm grip on why the sight of him terrifies you. Perhaps that is the Master. That would be reason enough to fear him, at least in the bounds of this nightmare.

Even as you approach in slow, stolid steps, you once more try to flee this place, to push your trapped mind from whatever oddity you find yourself in. You feel no demon, as you have in other jaunts to the Fade, but as you again struggle against the unseen force holding you here, it dawns on you that you do not feel the Fade, either. You quell your burgeoning panic as best you can, but the realization is slowly settling in: this may be your dream, but this is not the Fade.

Yet if this is not the Fade, what is it?

A cursory glance at the bed closest to the two men reveals that the occupant is a dwarf with hair which might once have been bright copper, but now barely shies a dull orange. What little you can see of the prisoner’s skin displays a network of scars and burns, and you notice that one of his hands suffers from a constant twitch, as if it has been permanently damaged by some unseen horror.

"The dwarf seemed to react better to this version, my lord," the man bearing the crest of the Grey Wardens says in an obsequious tone as you and your guide come within hearing distance. "There aren’t many dwarf Grey Wardens in Ferelden in the first place, and since the female dwarf escaped, this one will need to act as our main test subject."

"And he’ll be happy to do it," the taller man murmurs, caressing the dwarf's face with long, white fingers. There is something familiar about his voice, a familiarity that slides down your spine and awakens a fear deep in your soul, but again it slips away before you can conjure up a name. "Won’t you, Oghren?"

At the sound of the name, one of the dwarf’s eyes opens slowly. "S-sod off," he growls in a dry, coarse voice.

"So very rude, my little friend," the man says in a scolding tone. "I thought we had an understanding. You help Avernus here with his experiments, and I won’t join your wife and child to the Grey Wardens. That sounds fair, doesn’t it?"

Oghren swallows, the motion obviously painful, then lets his eye slide shut. "Suck my kn-knob, wanker. Should’ve let Branka kill you."

A dry chuckle emerges from beneath the hood. "Charming to the last." Turning to Avernus, he says, "Start work on the next batch. Hopefully we’ll have more survivors this time around. I’ll have additional darkspawn and beggars brought in for you, as well as some of the stray Wardens we acquired after the events at Adamant."

Adamant. Your blood freezes at the word as you realize that whatever is happening here, it relates to you as well. Is that why you are here? To learn about this Master and his plans? Yet what mechanism could possibly explain your presence?

"Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord," Avernus says, and you snap your attention back to the men in front of you. As you watch, Avernus bends himself almost in half for a servile bow before rising and scurrying to the other side of the room where a massive array of bottles and potions and apparatus awaits him.

With deliberate slowness, the taller man turns towards you and your guide, allowing you to see beneath the hood for the first time. Your terror blooms into pure fury as you behold red eyes staring from a half-melted face, the shock of recognition buried beneath an all-consuming fire of hatred.
which blazes through your mind, and for a moment your vision turns red.

:Kill you:

It takes you a moment to realize that the words aren’t yours, that the thoughts echo around you because they belong here in ways you do not.

:I will kill you:

The words rip through you, burning with a need for vengeance surpassing even your own. For a moment, you have enough awareness to realize you are hearing another person’s thoughts. Could it be that you wandered through the Fade and into another person’s dream just before they awoke? It seems impossible, and yet...

You feel your host try to lash out, to yell, to do anything but stand there like a lump as Amell smirks knowingly and reaches out to lay his hand on your throat, thumb on your pulse. Even as he does so, however, his gaze turns to your guide. "Was your mission a success?"

“In and out with no one the wiser,” your guide says cheerfully. “The bait is set and ready. When the time is right, the trap will spring, si?”

Amell smiles. “Excellent. And you’re sure it will work?”

“He is a man of habit. Put him into his routine, and he will be hard pressed to deviate from it. And when he is alone, distracted, and in the right place…” A hard slap suddenly finds your ass, the sound echoing in the large room. “We will have him. He will be yours.”

“That pleases me.” Amell’s red gaze moves to settle on you, and you swear you can see a faint red glow illuminating the depths of his hood. “And here you are. Has he been behaving, my love?”

"Most of the time, amor,” your guide tells Amell. "Once in a while I think I see a thought in his eyes, but for the most part he struggles only for my pleasure."

:One day:

The words echo around you as if you stand in a great cavern, throbbing in your head in time with that rhythmic beat which has not ceased for a moment since your arrival in this dream-that-is-not.

:One day, you will make a mistake:

Amell smiles in a fashion that makes your skin crawl, then moves his hand up to caress your cheek. "A pity I have to do this to you,” he crooned. "You’re so much more interesting when you have your wits about you." He leans in and caresses your lips with his own, and again that cold fury fills the pit of your stomach, aligning so perfectly with that of your host that for a moment your thoughts mesh perfectly.

In that moment, you ride the crest of his hatred. A welter of images pass through your mind as your host replays a litany of reasons that Amell must die: an elf with glowing patterns in his skin walking away with a man in Magister robes; a raider woman cuffed and chained by two hulking Qunari; a Dalish elf with short dark hair looking up at you with tears on her bloodstained face as the life drains from her eyes; and a human woman with dark, shoulder-length hair in the robes of a Circle mage standing before you as a sword of red lyrium is thrust through her body from behind.

You know none of the faces, but you feel the depth of passion in your host towards them, along with a rage directed solely at Amell, and it is strong enough to frighten you. Quickly you wrench away
from that roiling flood of darkness and back into your own mind, even if you can’t quite figure out how to retreat back to your own body. Slowly your host’s emotions become dim again, and you see only what he sees with his eyes instead of seeing what lies behind them.

You find yourself again staring at Amell as he pulls back from the brief kiss, a decidedly possessive expression on his face as he strokes your cheek one last time. "Don’t worry,” he murmurs. “I’ll perfect you.”

In the next moment, as your host struggles once more against the spell that holds him in place, Amell steps back and again looks to your guide. “Prepare him for Avernus.”

The guide steps forward, and you finally get a good look at him: a handsome, blond elf with a distinctive tattoo of two curved lines on one side of his face. This time you do not recognize the face, but your host most certainly does, and the anger inside cools to a shock of pure hate so cold that you wonder that you don’t freeze. "It should be me preparing for that duty," the elf says softly. "You know I would do anything for you, amor."

A smile touches Amell's lips, though there is nothing gentle or loving about it. "I know you would, Zevran." The words hold no affection--indeed, Amell seems to be clinically stating an accepted fact. Yet when Amell cups Zevran's face, Zevran closes his eyes and leans into the touch, a tender motion at odds with Amell's cold sneer. You wonder if Zevran simply does not see what you see. "And I am touched. But I have need of you elsewhere."

"Surely not right now, though." Abruptly Zevran moves close enough to Amell to wrap his arms around him, the motion almost desperate in its strength. "Shall I return later?"

Amell's left hand flickers towards Zevran with almost inhuman speed, fingers burying themselves into Zevran's blond hair. For a moment you find yourself staring at the now-bare arm, freed from its robe by the darting gesture, and the tracery of old burns which twist along its length. With a swift motion, Amell yanks Zevran's head back, holding it at a painful angle. Judging by the way Zevran's breath quickens, however, it is a welcome trial.

Leaning down, Amell traces his lips along the long line of Zevran's pointed ear. "And what do you wish to do?"

Licking his lips, Zevran shudders and squirms with visible eagerness. "I wish to offer myself to you."

Amell smiles, then shifts position so that his other hand slowly glides down Zevran's torso. As his fingers reach the elf's trousers, he jerks the laces askew and reaches in. Zevran bucks and moans as Amell manipulates him shamelessly. "And what will you offer to me?"

"My... my blood, amor,” Zevran gasps. "My blood and my pain."

"Good." Amell seizes Zevran's lips with a savagery that speaks only of possession, and when he draws away, both their lips are drenched in glistening crimson which drips slowly down their chins. "Come to me later, then. But first..." He glances to the side, to where you stand in perfect, patient, helpless silence. "Whet your hunger on him. I want to taste his blood on your lips, and hear his pain in your moans. Only when every nerve is afire and every breath is ragged do I wish you to seek me out. Do this to him, and know I will be watching."

Zevran groans with urgency, trying to nod despite the iron grip in his hair. "Yes, amor. Thank you, amor."
Amell smiles, red eyes gleaming, then licks the blood from Zevran's lips. "Do not be overlong," he murmurs, then releases Zevran with a suddenness which staggers the elf. "You know I do not like to be kept waiting."

"Yes, amor," Zevran breathes. After taking a moment to catch his breath, Zevran turns to you and snarls, "This way. Avernus is waiting for you."

In short order, you are dragged to Avernus. Your panic returns in full force as you suddenly realize that you cannot predict what will happen if you are still here when your host is perfected--whatever that means. You scrabble at the boundary set around you, the one which holds you in place in this man's body, trying to ignore the world as Zevran tosses you face down onto a low table and shackles you into place.

Your apprehension peaks as you feel the cold of a metal blade pressed to your neck. Quickly you cease all activities, wondering if your ethereal struggles have been noticed. In the next moment, Zevran hovers close and presses a kiss to your ear that quickly turns into a bite. A trickle of blood flows down your cheek as he whispers, "You may not be my favorite, but you are still a delight when you struggle."

At the words, a small amount of freedom is returned to you, and immediately you writhe against your bonds, though your movements are weak. You cry out sharply as fingernails suddenly drag down your back, leaving rows of painful heat in their wake, then go even lower, coming to rest just short of something truly unthinkable before digging in with painful force. "That's it. Deny the inevitable, as you always do."

When the first lash of the whip lands, splitting newly scabbed wounds inflicted by similar treatments from before, you manage to finally pull your thoughts away from your host, if not fully away from here. His pain becomes more distant even as it increases, but you sense the distance will not last. Desperation drives you to seek aid from the one thing unique to you: the Anchor.

Even as you center your attention on it, however, a fresh new awareness steals over you, of something which evokes the Fade yet isn’t a demon. It is a presence which lurks nearby, just on the edge of your awareness, and it seems to be watching you.

And, as if it were waiting for you to make that discovery, a hollow voice echoes in your mind:

“That’s enough for now. Wake up.”

Dorian sat bolt upright in bed, chest heaving as a sharp rush of adrenaline slammed through him. For a moment he simply thrashed helplessly in the bed, trying to push away the terrifying immediacy of what he had just experienced, and failing miserably. All at once, the foul nature of the horrendous nightmare caught up with him, and he barely had enough time to grab the chamber pot before he lost the battle with his stomach.

A few rather disgusting minutes later, the chamber pot fell from Dorian's nerveless fingers as he sagged into the mattress. His mind whirled as he struggled to comprehend just what had occurred in his slumber. The who made no sense to him, as he had no idea as to the identity of his host, any more than he knew why he had suddenly been thrown into the midst of such a horrible situation.

The how, though: that ate at him. Now that he was awake, he could pin a name on something that was like the Fade and like a demon, but wasn’t either, but it raised more questions than it answered. Had Mailani returned for some unknown reason? Was Cole dabbling in ways counter to his nature? Was he being stalked by a denizen of the Fade, much as the Nightmare demon had stalked himself
and Mailani before him?

And what would he do if it recurred?

The answers remained stubbornly out of reach, and Dorian groaned in frustration as his head fell back onto the pillow. Sleep would not come, however, leaving Dorian to ponder the matter until the camp's horn greeted the rise of the sun. With a sigh, Dorian pushed himself to his feet and tried to empty his mind of the whole affair, or at least tuck it away until he had more information with which to analyze it.

For now, all he wanted to ponder was what awaited him in Skyhold.

Or rather, who.
The Walls Close In

Chapter Notes

Buckle up.

In the end, Cullen told no one.

The shame of the deception weighed on him, adding to the feeling of isolation hovering around him like a cloud. Trapped in a carriage, bereft of Dorian's companionship, and now bearing the burden of a self-imposed secret, Cullen sat listlessly and stared out the window, seeing and feeling nothing as the carriage advanced from the outer edges of the Western Approach and passed into the foothills of the Frostbacks.

When the door swung open, he jumped slightly, then winced as the surge of adrenaline and blood from the surprise spiked the pain in his head. Ser Barris paused in the act of pulling himself into the carriage, a precarious position since they were still in motion. "Forgive me, Commander. Is this a poor time?"

"What? No, no," Cullen assured him hastily. He'd forgotten that he'd arranged a meeting with Barris, and felt embarrassed about that as well. "I simply lost track of time. Sit, please."

Barris nodded amiably as he settled into the cushioned seat. "I'm not sure how one can keep track of time properly in this place," he noted with a chuckle. "My Templars are glad to finally be leaving the desert behind them, however. Sand and armor are not a good mix."

The comment made Cullen smile. "Oh, Maker, yes. In Kirkwall we had some stretches of beach where the sand was so deep that a single misstep could be a nightmare. Getting the stuff out of your joints and tabard alone was bad enough, but then you'd end up shaking it out of your gambeson for months after."

"Exactly!" Barris laughed, and Cullen fought to keep a pained look from his face as the sound echoed in the tiny confines in his carriage. Normally he would have enjoyed the Templar's easy-going nature, but at the moment, it grated. "We serve the Inquisition, but perhaps you could arrange it so our next mission involves less desert and more mountain."

"Are you saying your favorite task thus far was closing the Breach?" Cullen countered.

Barris shuddered. "Not as such, no. Unless you can figure out a way to keep dragons away from the battle theater."

"Good point. We should leave the dragons to Bull," Cullen said, then faltered as the words reminded him not only that Dorian was not here, but was also in decided danger as well. The thought of Dorian fighting a slavering beast the size of a trebuchet made him wince and look out the window once more.

"Are you all right, Commander?" Barris asked, the concern clear in his voice.

Waving his hand in a vague gesture, Cullen forced his gaze back to his visitor. "I woke up with a headache, that's all. It will pass."
The Templar glanced down at the basket of bottles between Cullen's feet. "And the healing potions aren't helping?"

"Those are there in case my pain flares up in my knee and wrist," Cullen explained. He'd checked each and every potion himself to make sure they were red this time, though half of him only did it to see if another lyrium potion had been slipped in by mistake--an impulse of which he was not proud. "I did try a sip or two, but it didn't touch the headache." He knew why, of course, but dared not speak the reason. "Perhaps the cooler air in the mountains will help."

Barris grunted in acknowledgment. "The desert certainly does no favors for headaches. After the battle, we had to beg for additional lyrium from the healers to help with the damned things."

Cullen stared at him for a moment, trying to gauge the whether the comment was deliberate or happenstance. Finally something clicked together in his mind, and he relaxed as he realized that the statement was simply coincidence. "You mean post-battle exhaustion."

"Exactly. We'd over-extended our talents--not a surprise, given the intensity of the battle--and the desert was making it even harder for us to recover." Barris' eyes narrowed slightly as he examined Cullen. "With all due respect, Commander, are you sure that's not your problem? I heard you were in the thick of things in the Fade, and your injuries indicate a battle." Before Cullen could respond, Barris dug into the small carrying pouch at his waist. "Here. Have some of this and see if it helps." Withdrawing a small vial filled with something of an achingly familiar blue hue, he held it out to Cullen. "It can't hurt, at least, you being a former Templar and all."

And there it was: temptation incarnate, offered with the best of intentions. The battle which raged within Cullen proved fierce but, ultimately, brief. His hand shook as he reached out and claimed the vial slowly, cradling it for a moment before he offered a smile to Barris. "You have my thanks."

"We are all in this together, Commander," Barris told him. "We must support each other to ensure we achieve victory."

"Yes. Victory." Cullen contemplated the vial in his hand for a moment, then loosened the cork out with a practiced flick of his thumbnail. Somehow he managed not to down the entire vial with one swallow, but instead took a moderate amount, then pushed the cork back in.

"I know it won't be as effective as a full draught, but it should at least soften the headache." Barris watched him closely for a moment, then smiled. "There. Your color is returning already."

"Indeed." The headache had, in fact, already dimmed. Unfortunately, the song of the lyrium rose in its place, seductive and soothing. He strove not to fall into its beauty, and yet... "I do feel better. Thank you."

"I am glad to help, Commander. I only wish I had thought of it sooner. I know you've not had an easy time since Adamant." He glanced out the window. "We're not that far from Skyhold now. Maybe a day or two away now, if I'm any judge."

Cullen gave a noncommittal response, staring out the window as the sense of dread returned. How could he return to his duties, regardless of his health, after succumbing so easily to his base desires? How could he look Cassandra in the eye--or worse, Dorian--knowing he'd failed himself, and the Inquisition, so badly? When Barris said his name, he started and turned to face him. "My apologies, Ser Barris--" he began, but Barris waved the words away with a sympathetic smile.

"I understand, Commander. My report, thankfully, is mostly perfunctory." He pulled a roll of paper from his pouch and leaned forward to set it on the seat next to Cullen. "We can discuss it tomorrow.
morning, at any rate. Most of it is simply the long-term projection of our field readiness based on the latest healer reports."

"Tomorrow, then," Cullen agreed hastily. The song kept swelling in his mind, and, much as he hated to admit it even to himself, he wanted to lose himself in it for a while.

With a small, modified salute, Barris said, "Until then, Commander." A moment later, he was gone, leaving Cullen alone once more.

Cullen had enough awareness to shove the partially consumed bottle into his pocket before he let his head fall back and closed his eyes. The song immediately filled his awareness, calming and soothing as it slowly eased away his concerns. After a while, the future didn't matter anymore.

Only the song mattered.

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Your lips move slowly over the body of the man beneath you, tracing each curve of muscle and line of tendon with a diligence normally saved for the battlefield. The dusky skin radiates the heat of passion, and you feel each groan and gasp echo down the length of your spine to pool in the hardness between your legs. Fingers sink into your hair and curl tightly as words in both Trade and Tevinter urge you to continue downwards. Though that is ultimately your intent, you take your time doing so, teasing him with an alternating barrage of kisses and soft bites which nevertheless still move you towards your intended target. You feel short, springy hair tickle your chin and smile, kissing the start of the trail that will lead to the treasure, and pause to glance up.

Flushed cheeks and parted lips make for quite the sight beneath a head of tousled hair, and you lick your lips as you hear the man’s silent plea as if he’d spoken it: More.

All too happy to continue, you lower your face again and close your eyes, following the soft curls of the trail downward, ever downward, until you feel a heated shaft on your cheek. Slowly you kiss and lick your way along his length, then pull the tip into your mouth. You smile as another moan echoes in the chamber, and hum for a moment before pulling your lips off at a teasingly slow pace.

"More?” you ask in a husky voice as you look up again.

And freeze.

“You always were good at this part,” Amell tells you, even as the fingers in your hair tighten to keep you in place. Amell’s eyes glow red, stealing the warmth from the room and replacing it with a sinister chill. “A little out of practice, perhaps, but I’m sure you’ll remember how to please me properly with a few more tries. Now get to it, Rutherford.”

You try to shove yourself away, but Amell seems to have gained superhuman strength. Clamping your lips tightly together, you continue to struggle against the hold on you with all your might. In the next moment, hands grab your shoulders and pull you roughly into a kneeling position, then hold you there. What is happening?

“Oh, come now, Rutherford,” Amell whispers into your ear. You try to flinch away, but fail to budge so much as an inch. “You have something I want, in your talented tongue. And I have something you want.”

“You have nothing I want,” you grate, recalling all too well what you’d endured when last you had begged Amell for aid.

A dark chuckle echoes in your ears and mind. “Oh, you can deny it all you want, Rutherford. But I have seen your dreams. I have tasted your desires. And I know what you crave as you try to force
“Yourself to settle for a poor substitute.” Something cold touches your lips, and you struggle to twist away as a terrifyingly familiar scent fills your nostrils: lyrium, but far, far more dangerous than what you’ve used before. “I have all you need waiting for you.”

You shake as the vial against your lips tilts, coating your lips with a crackly, gritty substance. You refuse to speak out of fear of letting it into your mouth, so you simply shake your head vigorously. “Never, hmm?” Amell’s hand suddenly locks onto your jaw and force your head back as fingers dig deep. “Then I will make you succumb to your desires.”

It takes every ounce of strength to keep your jaw clenched against the pressure trying to pry it open, and in the struggle, you open your eyes. Jorath hovers above you, his half-burnt face even more horrific than you remember, seeming to almost melt off his skull as the red eyes gleam. Trying not to let the man mesmerize you as you’ve seen happen to others, you force your gaze down to look at the vial pressed to your lips, and the tempting yet damning red liquid within.

The scent mixes with the sight of it, and suddenly you feel a longing surge within you, just as Amell’s fingers find the end of your ability to clench your mouth shut.

As the red lyrium pours over your tongue, you hear Amell croon, “There we are, Rutherford. Soon you will be mine, my little pet.”

And that—that was all you need. That triumph of possession spoken aloud, something to galvanize you with fear and anger both. With a great shout, you shove Amell away, using the rage to unleash a smite similar to the one you’d used on the Nightmare demon. “Never!” you roar, then reach for the waking world and pull with all your might, just as Dorian had taught you.

In the next moment, Cullen found himself hunched over tightly, breaths ringing harshly in the compact space of the carriage. Pressing a hand to his pounding heart, he reached up and explored his mouth, relaxing only when he found it dry as a bone. Whatever the nature of his nightmares, at least they could not carry over their terror from the Fade.

Yet.

The word ghosted through his mind, leaving a trail of terror in its wake. Amell was a somniari, after all. it seemed that he had found a way to get around the wards Dorian and Solas had placed around his dreams—who was to say what else the man was capable of?

The urge to flee struck him like a shield to the head. Everything was wrong, all at once: the carriage window too tiny, the air in the cramped confines too thick, and the roof too low. His body began to shake, and he clutched his head in his hands as the world darkened around him. "No," he whispered. "No, no, no, you won't have me!"

And, just like that, he snapped. He’d endured the limited space of the carriage for days on end already. Realistically, he knew that it wasn't that long—certainly nowhere near as long as he’d been on the ships which had taken him to and from Kirkwall, and the tiny, windowless cabin he’d suffered in them. But the dreams, combined with his fear and his memories, spurred him onward. Without thought, he lashed out with his uninjured leg, kicking the door open so that he could push himself out. The pain of landing on all fours, considering the still tender condition of his knee and wrist, almost knocked him out, but it was nothing to the relief that flooded him as he felt fresh air on his face.

He heard a few cries of surprise, but they echoed in his ears as if he were in a canyon. At least now, if he had to, he could escape, and that was all that mattered.
How long he remained on the ground, he didn't know. Long enough for his heart to slow, and the death grip his fingers had in the dirt to relax. He seemed to float in a little world of his own, uncaring of the world around him, but at least he wasn't in his nightmares.

When the hand landed on his shoulder, he instinctively jerked away, but the hand followed, keeping its hold firm. The echoing in his ears finally resolved into a word-- Cullen-- and a voice. After the word repeated enough times, he slowly opened his eyes and looked up into a familiar pair of warm brown eyes.

"Cassandra," he gasped.

"Cullen," she breathed, the relief evident in her face. "Can you rise?"

He swallowed, keeping his gaze locked on her face. "I think so."

She nodded and held out her hands to him. "Then let's get you up."

His gaze transferred to her hands, and he swallowed again, then reached out one shaking hand and placed it in hers.

"Good, Cullen," she said in a soft voice. "Now the other hand."

He nodded, then raised the hand that hurt and settled it into her own.

"Good," she repeated. "Keep your eyes on my face now. Let me do the work."

Slowly, in fits and starts, she helped him to his feet, giving him the time he needed to adjust for his still healing knee. By the time he was on his feet, she'd managed to work her arm around his body, supporting him firmly with her quiet, unyielding brand of strength. Only once he was fully upright did he dare to look around.

He blinked when he saw the position of the sun, and frowned. "How long--"

"Don't worry about that, Cullen," Cassandra urged. "Let's get you moving."

"I'm not going back to the carriage," he declared. "Never again."

"I know, Cullen," she told him. "I had a mount prepared for you."

At those words, a tightly held coil of tension deep within relaxed all at once, and he sagged in her arms. "Thank you," he whispered.

She gave a small sigh. "I should have done so earlier, but I admit I'd forgotten about your aversion to enclosed spaces until I saw you-- Until now. I am sorry. I should have made other arrangements as soon as I saw the carriage."

"No, Cassandra," Cullen told her, trying to sound firm but wondering what she had been about to say. "I did need it. Or at least my knee did."

"Perhaps. But I spoke with Vivienne, and with Dennet's assistant, and we found a mount which meets all our requirements." Her hand, still resting on his side, gave him a little squeeze. "I had all your belongings from the carriage put into your saddlebags already. Let's go, now. One step at a time."

As they moved along, step by slow step, he glanced down at Cassandra a few times until he could no longer keep silent. "How long?"
"How long?"

"How long was I like that?"

She sighed. "Long enough that we'll need to catch up with the troops. They'll get your tent ready for you as before, and the healers will be waiting for you."

"Long enough for the soldiers to see me?" he asked, wincing at the idea.

"The rumor will be that you tripped on your way out of the carriage and hurt your knee, nothing more." She looked up at him, expression grave. "They will not think less of you."

"How long, Cassandra?" he pressed. "The sun is not where it was when I left the carriage, and you had time to find a mount, and get my saddlebags ready. How long?"

With a grimace, she looked away. "Several hours. You---you could not hear me, or anyone. When they brought me, you were... talking to yourself."

Cullen closed his eyes, bracing himself for the worst. "What did I say?"

"I had to get quite close to understand any of it, but you did not sound... entirely in your own mind. It reminded me of some of your worst nights during the trip from Kirkwall to Ferelden." She looked ahead, then squeezed him again. "There. Your mount awaits."

He squinted up ahead, then widened his eyes as he saw what waited for them. "A halla?"

"They have the smoothest gait of all those in the stable," Cassandra explained. "Vivienne said it was the only one she would accept, so it was prepared for you. I... I hope Mailani would approve."

Of all the things Cassandra could have said, that was both the best and the worst thing for Cullen to hear in that moment. Regardless of the guilt he felt, though, it did bring a smile to his face. "I hope so, too."

As they walked up to the halla, it--she, Cullen corrected quickly after a little peek--knelt on the ground and waited patiently as Cassandra helped get Cullen into place. "Vivienne and the healers designed a special sling for your leg," she explained as she wrapped an extra piece of leather around his leg, holding it in a specific position. "She told me to let you know that if it ever comes undone, she will be most disappointed in you."

That made Cullen smile, since he was easily able to picture the First Enchanter saying exactly that. "I shall keep that in mind," he said with a chuckle.

"Hold on to the saddle, I'm going to ask her to stand up." After his hands locked into place, Cassandra moved to the head of the halla and took the reins in her hand, then tugged them gently upwards.

The halla rose with the same grace it had displayed earlier, and Cullen marveled that he felt not even an ounce of discomfort. "She's incredible," he said with a smile, leaning forward just enough to smooth his hand down her neck. "I didn't feel a thing."

Cassandra echoed the smile. "That sounds like a fair start."

Cullen mulled over those words as Cassandra mounted a horse next to him. As the terror he'd first experienced when waking from his nightmare faded, he made himself take a hard look at what had happened over the last day and night. As they set into motion, the halla's gait as smooth as promised,
his hand stole to the half-full vial of lyrium in his pocket, stroking it thoughtfully with a finger as he compared the timing of taking lyrium and the invasion of his dreams by Amell.

Clenching his teeth together, and before he could give it a second thought, he wrapped his hand around the vial and jerked it from his pocket, throwing it as far as he could manage. The sense of relief he felt as the glass glittered in the sun before vanishing from sight proved almost palpable, a wave of rightness washing over him which couldn't be denied.

"What was that?" Cassandra asked curiously.

"Nothing important," Cullen told her, trying wholeheartedly to believe it. "Let's pick up the pace a bit. I'm eager to rejoin the others."

As they rode in the footsteps of the Inquisition forces, he quietly acknowledged that it probably wasn't the end. But at least it was a step in the right direction.

When that night, then the one after, passed with only what he had come to consider his normal nightmares, Cullen dared to hope that the worst had indeed passed. Even though they'd received the disappointing news that Dorian had traveled back to Skyhold after dealing with the dragon rather than returning to the bulk of the troops, Cullen felt better than he had since Adamant. The simple act of riding out in the open did much to restore his flagging spirit, and he took the time to seek out and speak with all those who hadn't had a chance to visit his mobile cage.

The first day, he took note of an odd absence rather quickly. After riding up and down the length of the troops twice, he resumed his place near the head of the bulk of the forces with a little frown on his face. When Cassandra's horse settled in next to his halla, he turned to her. "Where's Jim?"

"Scout Jim?" she asked. When Cullen nodded, she said, "He was sent ahead to Skyhold by order of the Inquisitor."

"Really?" Cullen frowned slightly. "I wonder why."

"I'm not allowed to say," Cassandra said blandly.

He gave her a sharp glance. "You mean you know?"

She nodded.

"And you're not going to tell me," he guessed.

She shook her head, clearly a little smug about the matter.

Giving her a good glare, he muttered, "You're a terrible person, you know that?"

"I keep my promises, Cullen," Cassandra told him. "It is a principle I hold very dear to my heart."

"But especially when it annoys me, right?" he shot back.

"That is not a polite implication," she said in a scolding tone.

"And that is not a denial."

She hesitated for a moment, then made a disgusted noise. "You are incorrigible."

"Ah, ha. I knew it." He frowned. "Not that it helps me figure out why Dor--the Inquisitor sent Jim
ahead to Skyhold.”

“You will learn soon,” she assured him. “That I can promise you.”

He sighed and looked ahead of them, trying to tally the miles in his head. “Not soon enough.”

After he'd made the rounds on the second day, he rode to the head of the column and settled into position next to the banner-bearers. The ascent to Skyhold had begun, and he found himself yearning to see its towers and walls for himself. Quietly, he admitted to himself that what he truly wished to see was the curve of lips under a certain mustache and the gleam of the sun off a multitude of buckles. Barring that, he would accept the sound of mailed boots on cobblestones and the ringing of the smiths hard at work repairing and crafting equipment for his troops.

When some movement caught his attention from the corner of his eye, he turned to greet Cassandra with a smile. "We're almost there."

She nodded. "I wanted to ask you if you wished to ride ahead with me to Skyhold," she told him. "Vivienne gave her blessing as long as we don't jump over any obstacles. She is quite impressed with how much you've improved over the course of the last two days."

"Maybe I just needed the fresh air," Cullen said with a grin, heart suddenly feeling lighter. "And I would definitely like to ride ahead. I won't challenge you to a race, though," he added hastily. "I'm not sure Vivienne would approve."

"I'm quite sure she would not approve," Cassandra agreed, then kicked her horse into motion. "Let us go. I am certain they are eagerly awaiting our arrival."

As he urged the halla to follow, Cullen's eyes fixed on the path he knew would ultimately lead them to Skyhold. His hand strayed down and plucked a healing potion from his saddlebag, intently double checking that it was, in fact, red--a habit newly formed after his encounter with the blue lyrium. A quick count of the remaining potions left him grateful that he wouldn't have to go back and ask the healers for more as his supplies dwindled. Though it couldn't ever get rid of the headache--at least, not until sufficient time had once more passed--he'd found they could control the shakes and the irritability. He only wished he'd known that before. It would have saved poor Cassandra from some rather tiring arguments with him.

Once they came into sight of the stronghold, Cassandra turned to face him with a smile. "It is good to see Skyhold again."

"And it will be for the troops as well," Cullen noted, a smile coming to his own face. "Have we notified them to have all baths ready? Is a feast prepared? Are all their beds--"

"It's all been taken care of," Cassandra said in a firm tone. "Just as I told you yesterday."

He glanced down, feeling a bit sheepish. "Sorry. I suppose I'm just anxious. And honestly I wouldn't mind a hot bath myself."

"I daresay there are few who would pass up the opportunity as this time," Cassandra said with a smile. After a few moments of companionable silence, Cassandra said, "Cullen, may I ask you a question?"

Cullen's shoulders tensed a bit, almost certain that Cassandra would take advantage of their solitude to ask him about the large bronto in the room--at least, from his point of view. "You may."

"You and the Inquisitor..." She glanced over to him. "What lies between you?"
Oh. Oh. That bronto. Pulling his thoughts from trying to explain why he'd succumbed to the call of lyrium to something of an entirely different vein, Cullen felt his cheeks darken. "Oh. Ah. Well."
Clearing his throat roughly, his mouth opened and closed a few times before he stammered, "Wh-why do you ask?"

"Your reaction, for one," she noted with a distinct air of amusement. "I've rarely seen you so flustered."

"I wasn't expecting the question," he admitted.

"Really? I would have thought I was not the first to inquire." She shook her head. "If you do not wish to discuss it, I understand. I simply was curious."
Cullen sent her a knowing look. "Except this time you're asking me instead of the Inquisitor."
"Cullen!" Spots of red appeared on Cassandra's cheek. "Surely Mailani did not--"

"Oh, she did," Cullen said smugly, quite happy to flip the conversation against her. "Every single question, and every single answer. Including the one about--Hmm, what was it? Oh, yes, the creative use of silk and arrows. I always wondered, did you get those ideas from Varric's books?"
Cheeks now flaming, Cassandra snapped her reins, encouraging more speed from her mount. "We should go faster," she declared. "There will be much to do once we arrive."

"Excellent idea, Seeker," Cullen said, his grin now stretching from ear to ear.

Skyhold seemed oddly empty as they crossed the bridge and entered the courtyard proper. Everyone they did see was bustling and busy, presumably in preparation for the return of the troops, but it reminded him more of the early days after Haven than more recent times. Only that thought made him realize just how many people were now in the Inquisition, far more than had been a part of it even at the time of Mailani's death. He paused in the act of dismounting, allowing himself a moment of poignant sadness at the thought mixed with a burst of satisfaction that what she had led had not failed, even after its most trying hour.

With a shake of his head, he undid the sling for his leg and dismounted slowly, easing weight onto his leg at a rate he felt comfortable with. Taking the reins of the halla, he followed Cassandra to the stable and handed her off to Dennett. "She did a splendid job," he told the Horsemaster. "Make sure she gets all the treats you have."

"Will do, Commander," Dennett said cheerfully. "She's a special one, she is. She was the first Inquisition's preferred mount, you know."

"Truly?" Cullen smiled a bit wistfully and ran his hand down the halla's neck. "I can see why." With a friendly nod to the man, Cullen turned and looked for Cassandra, who he found already in consultation with Josephine. Oddly, a quick glance around the area showed no other personages of note. Where was Leliana?

More importantly, where was the Inquisitor?

He hurried over to them as best as he could, striving to hide the hitch in his step as he did so. When he arrived, Josephine turned to him with a sympathetic smile. "Commander."

"Lady Ambassador," he said in return, then opened his mouth to ask about Dorian.

Before a word could emerge, Josephine said in a bright tone, "You are looking much better than I
feared based on the reports sent back to Skyhold. I am glad to see you walking again.”

“Thank you,” he said, “but--”

“Cassandra has informed me that the rest of the troops will arrive today,” Josephine continued blithely. “I will ensure the requests I received from you yesterday are executed down to the smallest detail.”

He gave her a stiff smile. “Yes, that’s wonderful, but--”

“I trust you will find the meal and bath awaiting you to be exactly as you desired,” Josephine continued, glancing down at her ledger. “The water will remain warm. One of the acolytes we took in from the Hinterlands developed a way to sustain the heat in a bath with minimal amounts of magic. Isn’t that marvelous?”

“That sounds incredibly useful, but--”

“Oh, and one more thing.” She pulled a piece of folded paper from under the bottom of the pile on her ledger and presented it to him. “This is for you from Inquisitor Pavus. Some Inquisition business arose which required his attention.”

Cullen deflated a little as he reached out to take the sealed missive. “He’s not here?”

“I’m afraid not, Commander,” Josephine told him with an earnest sympathy. “Shall I send a messenger to you when he arrives?”

“I would appreciate that.” Staring at the paper in his hand for a moment, Cullen gave a little sigh and tucked it into a safe place. He suspected he would handle whatever the contents were better if he were in private. “Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome, Commander,” she told him warmly. “Welcome back to Skyhold.”

He straightened, belatedly realizing that perhaps he’d had too strong a reaction to the news that Dorian wasn’t here. “Ah. Yes, well... I’m glad to be back.”

“If you’ll excuse me, Commander,” Cassandra interjected, “I need to speak with Josephine alone.”

More than a trifle confused, Cullen looked around the courtyard once more. “What about Leliana? I would have thought she’d be here, at least. I wanted to talk to her about--” Alistair’s name died on his lips, since speaking the name made it all too real what he wanted to talk to Leliana about, and he paused for a moment. “--what happened.”

Josephine’s expression softened. “She departed from Skyhold on another mission after the first report following the events at Adamant were delivered,” she said softly. “We are awaiting an update from her.”

Cullen’s confusion turned into a deep frown. “That doesn’t sound like her.”

“It would not be the first time someone in Skyhold threw themselves into their work in the face of personal loss,” Josephine said in a gentle fashion which could only be called diplomatic.

Suddenly feeling a bit awkward, Cullen reached up to rub the back of his neck. “I think I’ll go investigate that meal you said was waiting for me, though if the bath stays warm as you said, I’ll leave that until I’ve gone through the reports.” He grimaced. “I’ll probably need something relaxing by that point.”
“I will leave that to your discretion, Commander,” Josephine said with a demure nod.

Cullen gave them a nod. “Until later, then. Just send a messenger if you have need of me.”

When they both returned the nod, he turned on his heel and headed for the stairs that would take him to his quarters. As he moved across the bridge, he paused halfway to look over the courtyard at the bustle. By this point, the preparation for the imminent arrival of the troops had reached a frenzy, and he suspected that as soon as the troops started pouring through the gates someone would come looking for him in his office. What little leisure the journey from Adamant had provided him for the purpose of rest and healing had come to an end, and he knew it.

With a sigh, he continued on his way, slowing when he noticed that the door was ajar. Curious, he pushed it open slowly, hoping that the neat piles which Josephine claimed to be awaiting him were not strewn all over the floor by errant winds. As the hinges creaked, however, the man standing next to his desk turned to face him with a brisk salute. “Commander!”

Cullen blinked as he stepped inside. “Jim.” Abruptly he remembered the conversation with Cassandra and took a few more steps into the room. “I heard you’d been sent ahead to Skyhold. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, Commander!” Jim suddenly grinned. “I was assigned a very important mission!”

“By the Inquisitor?” At Jim’s nod, Cullen folded his arms over his chest. “I don’t suppose you can tell me any of the details?” he drawled.

“This, Commander!” Jim hurried to the wall closest to the ladder going up to Cullen’s bed, grabbing one of two chains dangling from above—chains Cullen couldn’t remember seeing before. “He sent me to do this!” He tugged on the chain, and then looked up, causing Cullen to do the same.

Cullen’s eyes widened as he saw that the gaping hole in his roof had been replaced entirely. Not by a ceiling, no—he couldn’t have borne that. Instead, a strong and sturdy window, with just enough decoration to be a step above pure function, occupied most of the space above his bed. As Jim operated the two chains, the window opened and closed with ease. As Cullen traced the lines of the chains with his eyes, he realized that they’d been arranged so that he could even operate them from his bed, if he so chose. “That’s rather impressive engineering.”

“I had Gatsi help me with the design, ser. He can work really fast when he wants to,” Jim told him. “When I told him what I needed, he just grunted and said It’s about damned time we took care of that hole anyway.”

With a chuckle, Cullen walked over and pulled the chains himself a few times, marveling at the ease of the motion. The window had been well designed, and the opening had been enlarged to ensure that the view of the sky wasn’t obstructed in any fashion. The latticework of steel to hold the various plates of glass were thin, designed to be unobtrusive but still provide plenty of support even against the weather beyond Skyhold. “I’ll admit, this will be a welcome addition to my little home here, especially when the winter storms start up again.” Granted, he had gotten into the habit of snuggling with Mailani during the worst of the cold, but before that, he’d had his share of nights shivering under a pile of blankets.

Better that than covering the hole, though. He needed that opening. And the window served both purposes—covering and not covering—nicely.

“You said the Inquisitor told you to do this?” he asked, glancing at Jim.
The scout nodded. “Yes, ser. He said it was a very important mission that had to be completed before your return. Insisted that it be a window and not a repair of the roof.”

Cullen smiled as he looked up, comforted by the fact that Dorian knew him well enough to know how much he needed that freedom of the sky above. “Thank you, Jim. Excellent work.”

Jim beamed at him, then saluted. “I’ll go help the others, Commander,” Jim said.

“Good idea. The others will be arriving soon. Besides, you know where to find me if you need me,” Cullen said ruefully, then saluted Jim in dismissal. Once the man was gone, he pulled the window open and spent a few more moments looking up at it, a smile on his face as he considered the thought behind it. Finally he shook himself and turned his attention to his desk. There were, as threatened, a few neatly stacked piles of paper awaiting him, and he knew that putting it off would only mean more for later.

Settling himself into his chair, he pulled the first pile towards him along with the tray of food and began to work patiently through both. Thankfully quite a few of the reports could be set aside immediately, as they were out of date or regarded matters which no longer required his input. After finishing the meal, he really buckled down and let his awareness of the world fade away so as to focus entirely on the writing and ciphers awaiting him. Once in a while, an odd hollow ringing sounded in his head, but he dismissed it as simply an aspect of his lyrium headache and stubbornly pushed through.

As he progressed, however, that odd ringing persisted, developing a rhythm as he worked. At some point, the ringing seemed to move from inside his head out into the room, a change which did not actively register with him until the sound of ringing glass reached his ears in the same rhythm as that hollow ringing. Only then did his attention break from the report he’d been considering and force itself onto his idle hand—or, more specifically, the vial of blue liquid his fingers were casually tapping as it slowly rolled nearer to him. Nearby, a lyrium kit had been tucked into his papers and left open, the contents beckoning to him with a subtle seduction.

Releasing the offending object as if it were lava, Cullen shoved himself to his feet, stumbling as the motion put too much weight on his still-weak knee. His blood pounded in his head as he stared at the lyrium kit, mind struggling against the sudden and almost violent surge of desire which swept over him.

"Maker," he breathed. When he saw a hand reach out towards it, it took a moment for him to realize that it was his hand, and another moment beyond that for him to pull it back just before the fingertips would have brushed against that tempting blue vial. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he pulled the napkin from the tray and threw it over the lyrium vial. Taking it out of sight dimmed the raw need enough that he chanced grabbing it to drop into the kit so he could slam the lid down. He snatched his hands away quickly, staring at the box for a few moments, then quickly swept it into the drawer before closing it with enough force that the desk rattled.

With a groan, he turned and pressed his hands against the wall behind him, eyes squeezed shut and head bowed as the shudder of need throbbed through his entire being. It rode on the back of a sudden migraine which had grown out of his mostly tolerable headache, as if someone had thrust a sword into his eye and proceeded to violently jerk it back and forth. It weighed on him, making it that much more difficult to resist that insidious little voice inside that kept insisting that maybe a little bit wouldn’t hurt.

Wrestling with a burgeoning panic, he fought for equilibrium using a slew of techniques he’d developed over the months. Nothing seemed to work, though: slow breathing, combing the fur of his mantle with his fingers, even shifting back and forth on his feet in a walking pattern. All of it failed,
and before he knew it, he had collapsed to the floor and pulled the comfort of his mantle close, fighting the overwhelming urge to yank open that drawer and dive into the blue bliss awaiting him.

"Cullen? Is something wrong?"

Shoulders jerking spasmodically, Cullen rolled up into a sitting position and pushed himself into the wall, staring blankly at the woman standing nearby. It took a moment for the name to come to his lips, bursting out all at once. "Cassandra."

Her brows drew together as she knelt next to him, pressing a hand to his forehead. "You're feverish," she said in a soft voice. "Are you ill?"

He shook his head, then winced and squeezed his eyes shut as the pain ripped through his head again. The song of the lyrium swelled to a crescendo, then faded again, but just that much left him gasping. "I wouldn't say that."

"Are you certain?" she asked. "You were fine when I last saw you."

With a shaking hand, he gestured to the drawer. "There." After a moment, he heard the drawer slide open, followed by a gasp from Cassandra.

"Who did this?" Cassandra demanded. He opened his eyes in time to see her snatch the lyrium kit from the drawer and tuck it under her arm. "I swear to you, Cullen, I took this far away, just as I promised."

"That's not the one you took," Cullen told her. "Believe me, I knew every grain and scratch and scuff on that box. It is similar--a Templar's kit--but not mine."

"Then someone put it there deliberately," she said grimly. "I will speak with Ser Barris about this. Perhaps he knows to whom this kit belongs." She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, forehead creasing in concern. "You did not--"

"No," he said hurriedly. "No. I didn't." Swallowing harshly, he added, "But sweet Maker, I wanted it."

"You don't need it," Cassandra said fervently. "You defeated it before. You will defeat it again. You cannot let the demon defeat you in this manner."

Her faith in him, and the passion with which she voiced it, helped to steady Cullen's nerves, and he forced himself to take a slow, deep breath. "You're right," he said in a grim tone. "I would be letting it win if I started down that path again, wouldn't I?"

"You are strong, Cullen, strong enough to defeat this." She patted the box under her arm. "I believe that as firmly as I believe in the Maker." Her hand squeezed his shoulder. "You will not see this again, I promise you. I might even be willing to work with Varric to find out who put it here, if I must."

Cullen had to smile at that, which he suspected was her motivation for the comment. "Oh, there's no need to go quite that far. I have other resources, after all. I'm sure Leliana will be able to help, for example."

"When she returns. And we do not know what that will be. We need to solve this now," she declared.

He exhaled in frustration. "None of this makes sense. And I don't mean it just appearing. It's more
than that." Bracing himself, he forced himself to look at the box, and again, that insanely desperate need arose. Quickly he shut his eyes. "I can't even look at it."

"What do you mean?"

"When I do, it's like... the hunger gets worse." He shuddered. "Like nothing will ever be right again until I use the lyrium. But I don't know where the box came from," he repeated. "I swear it."

"I believe you, Cullen." And again, Cassandra's tone steadied him immensely. Her faith in him seemed to be as absolute as her faith in the Maker. "Can you remember anything else about what happened? Or when the hunger began?"

His hands clenched and unclenched as he forced himself to dig through his dim recollection of going through his paperwork. "I...vaguely remember opening the desk drawer to get something, but everything between that and seeing the kit on my desk I don't recall. Not opening it, not putting it on the desk. Nothing." A chill ran along his skin. "Will you check to see if I used any of it?"

Her hand squeezed his shoulder as she nodded. "I will."

He shut his eyes as she stood, forcing himself to simply listen to the creak of the box's hinge and the rustle of cloth. A lingering fear remained that if he saw the blue once more, he would lose his mind again.

"The vial is full," she said after a few moments. "It seems that whatever is causing this urgency within you was not enough to override your will."

Cullen smiled faintly. "You give me far more credit than I deserve," he said softly.

The sound of the box being closed with a firm touch came a moment before he felt a hand touch his cheek. He dragged his eyes open and found himself drawn to meet her calm gaze. "Tell me what happened, Cullen," she said in a gentle tone.

His eyes closed, even as his hand reached out to take hers and squeeze tight. "It started in the Fade," he whispered.

The explanation came in fits and bursts after that, as he told her in stilted words what the demon had done to him. Not all of it, of course--some of the torture was intensely personal, and nothing he could properly articulate now, or perhaps ever. But the force feeding of the lyrium by Nightmare, the mocking of the demon, the sabotage of his healing potions, and the manipulation of Barris to acquire more lyrium, all came tumbling from him. "I'm sorry," he said at the end, bracing himself for her disappointment which, oddly, seemed a worse prospect than her wrath. "I didn't resist when I should have. I failed you. I failed the Inquisition."

For a long moment, the only answer was silence. Then he felt a hand cup his chin and turn his head towards her. "Oh, Cullen," she said softly. "You did not fail anyone."

Slowly he opened his eyes. "I feel like I did," he whispered. "I'm not sure how to feel otherwise."

"You have been through more than any mortal should have to bear," she told him firmly. "You need to give yourself time to recover from what you endured."

A wry smile touch his lips as he reached up to touch the scar on her cheek. "You've never been one to rest when there was work to be done, either," he pointed out.

She batted his hand away impatiently. "I was not held captive by a demon as old as time," she
insisted. "We should have--"

"--done exactly what you did." He sighed and shook his head. "We didn't really have a choice in the matter. Out in the desert is not really the best place to sit down with someone for a heart to heart about unspeakable horrors."

Cassandra smiled. "At least you've kept your sense of humor."

"I hope to keep more than that. Which is why I have to beat this." He looked up at her. "I don't want to be like them."

"I know." Neither of them had to speak of it, of the old Templars with the empty eyes and their Chantry nursemaids with their expressions of pity. "And you will not be." That unshakable faith was back in her voice. "Not while we both have breath. And I am not the only one who will help you, Cullen. You have many friends in Skyhold." She paused a moment, then squeezed his hand. "And one particular one is now currently in residence again."

A shiver ran through Cullen's body. "He's back." The panic, temporarily suppressed, abruptly rose to the forefront of his mind again. "I can't see him," he panted. "I can't let him see me like this."

"He is your friend, Cullen, he will understand," Cassandra said encouragingly. "You don't always have to be strong for him."

The distant part of Cullen knew this fear wasn't rational, that Dorian would understand as Cassandra told him. But the rest of him couldn't bear to see Dorian, not in this state.

"I just need... time," he whispered. "To think."

Cassandra gave a sigh, an echo of the disappointment he felt about himself. "Very well. I will not press you on the matter. But I will keep reminding you that you are not alone."

He gave her a wan smile. "I know. I just--"

Her expression softened. "I will tell him you are indisposed. It is not so far from the truth, at the moment." Rising to her feet, she held out her hand. "But I think you should start by standing."

"You make it sound so simple," he murmured, flexing his hands as he stole a moment to take stock of himself. His knee immediately made its discontent known, as did his healing wrist. Quickly their complaints were bashed to the side by the ache that seemed to encompass his entire head, and he groaned slightly. "I'm not sure I can."

"One moment." Cassandra quickly moved to the door and retrieved a saddlebag by the door, one he recognized from that last leg of the journey back to Skyhold. "I came here to tell you of the Inquisitor's return, but also to return your belongings from the halla." She dug through the saddlebag for a healing potion, then set it on the desk after pulling one out. "Here."

He took it gratefully, swallowing the contents in one gulp before letting his head lean against the wall. slowly the worst of the pain eased, until even the headache was only a dull, distant pounding--painful, but not debilitating. "Thank you," he said. "I believe I would like to try now."

"Good." Holding her hands out, she braced her feet in preparation for his weight. "Come. We will bear this burden together."

The words made him smile, and he finally found the strength to reach out and take her hands in his own. It took a few false starts, but in the end, he was on his feet again, wounded and uncertain, but
ready to move forward once more. "Cassandra," he began, then faltered, not sure what he could say.

She squeezed his hands. "You are not alone."

He took a shuddering breath, then nodded. "I had forgotten."

"Well, do not forget again." Her tone brooked no disagreement: it simply was the way it would be.

A smile touched his lips. "Yes, Ser."

She rolled her eyes. "That was unnecessary."

"Was it? I'm not so sure." He glanced at the desk, then quickly looked away again as the hollow ringing echoed in his ears. "I would appreciate it if you took that...thing away, however."

"I shall. As I said, I will consult with Ser Barris on the matter." Her head tilted slightly as she studied his face. "I will need to tell him some of the nature of your past."

"Please do," Cullen said hastily. "I should have told him myself. Perhaps I would not be in so poor a position now if I had."

"You are not to blame, Cullen," she said, with sufficient conviction that Cullen almost believed it.

"Rest now. Use the bath. Seek your inner calm. Do what you need to do, then seek out the Inquisitor when you are ready."

His eyelids fluttered closed as he let the words sink deep. "I hope it will be that simple."

"It is, Cullen. Perhaps not easy, but it is that simple." She released his hands, and he heard her move to the desk and pick up the box.

"Do I have any potions left?"

"Let me check." There was a rustling on the table. "You have one left. Shall I have more brought here?"

He shook his head and dared to open his eyes to look at her. Oddly, something about Cassandra holding the box seemed to mute its effects. "No. I'll be fine." He offered her a smile. "In part thanks to you."

Her hand settled on his arm for a moment. "But mostly thanks to you. Be brave, Commander."

"I will try, Seeker."

"Then that is all I can ask for." She turned and headed towards the door, then paused and looked back. "Are you sure you do not require anything else?"

"I'm sure. The bath is ready, and my bed is waiting." With that marvelous window above. The thought of it warmed him, helped him to look forward to seeing Dorian rather than dreading it. "And please... let the Inquisitor know I will see him soon. But don't tell him about the rest of it. I would prefer to do so myself."

"As you wish," she said with a nod. "Take care, Cullen." With that she stepped through the door, silently closing it behind her.

Cullen sagged against the desk, catching himself only at the last minute. The hollow ringing was gone, but the headache was not, despite the potion he'd just consumed. He weighed the benefits of
drinking the last potion now, to see if doubling it would finally eradicate the blasted headache, then sighed and shook his head. *Best to use it to help me sleep,* he decided. Besides, the bath still awaited him, and perhaps a long, hot soak could accomplish what elfroot could not.

By the time the hot water had worked its magic on his battered body, the sun had set and the night patrol had reported for duty. A quiet servant had retrieved the lunch meal tray and left another, presumably for dinner, and he had to admit the food sounded good now. After the slow process of easing himself from the still-hot bath and drying himself off thoroughly, he tugged on some loose trousers and a tunic before stumbling to his desk to eat.

By the time he finished that, he found he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. The whirlwind of emotions from earlier, coupled with the extended time in the soothing water, had finally done what dozens of troop reports could not: tire him enough for an early night. Yawning, he snagged the last potion and his mantle before heading to the ladder. That required his full concentration to ascend, given the weakened state of his knee and wrist.

Wrapping his mantle around his shoulders for extra warmth, he wedged himself into his bed and gave a soft sigh. The trials of the last few days seemed to seep away as he stared up at the night sky above. The stars soothed him in a way few other things could, promising a freedom which had been snatched away from him far too many times. The tension of sleeping in a tent and riding in a carriage faded slowly into the background, and he smiled.

A good night's sleep seemed like just what he needed, and tomorrow morning he would go see Dorian. As simple as Cassandra had promised.

Taking the potion in hand, he verified its red hue with a glance before he popped the cork and drained the bottle with one gulp, swallowing quickly in a bid to avoid the bitter aftertaste of elfroot.

Except, he realized belatedly, that the potion did *not* taste of elfroot.

It tasted of sweet rot, of stagnant water, and of brackish swamp. It smelled of the fetid air of the Deep Roads, of the harsh smoke released by a burning corpse, and of despair itself. It left a gritty residue in his mouth, a residue he remembered all too clearly from his time in the Fade.

He tried to force himself to spit it out, but his body refused to obey him. Next he tried to scream, but no sound issued from his mouth. Efforts to push himself from his bed ended with his hands gripping the sheets beneath him and locking him in place as his body shuddered and convulsed violently.

As the red lyrium slowly claimed him, its corrupted song filling his mind and stealing his thoughts, his vision grew dark. The world fell further away with each passing moment, leaving behind only the Void, or so it seemed. When he finally reached the line between the waking world and the Fade, a sinister chuckle reached his ears.

*And now you are mine, my little pet.*
At first all you feel is the heat and the sweat.

Slowly the rest of the details fill in the world around you: darkness broken only by an occasional flicker of green as the hand to which it belongs spasms in the sheets below; the muscular thighs held apart by your hands; the moans in Tevinter filling the air with a rhythmic regularity; the rocking of your hips which sets the rhythm.

Then the pieces all snap into place, and you groan as pleasure arcs through your spine. You thrust your hips forward, hoping to hear his deep, throaty moan when you bottom out. As you dig deep enough to make the bed shake, the flickering light of the Anchor offers an enchanting series of quick-set images of him writhing in ecstasy, lost in a haze of sexual bliss.

"More, please," he begs. "I need all of you."

You grin and set your hips to their task once more, shifting your grip on his thighs to hold him in place while you tease him by alternating the pattern and depth of your thrusts. When you suddenly press in and roll your hips, his hands fist in the well-rumpled sheets as he lets loose a startled shout that turns into your name. The sound of it runs down your spine and pools between your legs, adding an extra snap to your hips as you reward him.

Still, you don't want it to end too soon. Deliberately you slow the pace, moving one hand to wrap around his swollen length and please him in a different way. Your hand is still slick with lotus oil, after all, and you so very much enjoy seeing his face when you match your thrusts below with firm strokes above. Though he is near his peak, you are not seeking to finish him, but to torture him. And, gauging from the moans and shudders beneath you, your victim is quite happy to be thus treated.

You lean down and claim his lips for a kiss, enjoying the sensuous sensation of his mustache brushing against your upper lip. The rhythm slows even further as you take the time to explore him as you did in the beginning, teasing the sensitive spot on the left corner of his lower lip until a shudder runs through him, then deepening the kiss as you mirror the motion of your tongue with that of your cock. You can feel his breath halt as he loses himself to the kiss, and when your lips part, he gasps for air even as he tries to chase after you.

"Someone's eager," you say with a chuckle.

"Festis bei umo canavarum," he groans, then bucks forcefully upwards even as he squeezes tight around you.

You growl deep in your chest. "Are you sassing me? Do that again, and there will be consequences."

Even in the flickering green light, you can see the defiant lift of his chin and the wicked mischief in his eyes just before his hips heave up into you once more.

With a playful shout, you pull out and use your soldier's strength to flip him onto his hands and knees. In the next breath, you push yourself back inside, then heave him up so that his back is crushed against your chest, mingling your sweat as you thrust up hard enough for him to shout your name once more. Your hand reaches around to take him in a firm grip, squeezing and stroking as you tug his earlobe with your teeth.
His hands reach up to sink into your hair, clutching the curls tightly as he whispers, "More, please, I need all of you."

"Oh, you'll feel all of me, I promise," you growl deep in your chest, then release the last restraint on your primal nature.

After that, you are only aware of the heat and the sweat and the pleasure, driving you both higher and higher. The green flickers grow in both frequency and strength, until finally it is time.

"Now," you whisper into his ear, then pull him down on you, hard. "Come."

And, with a long guttural moan, he does, his entire body arching against you with wild abandon as the darkness around you is lit with a green light so bright it's almost blinding. Somehow you survive the first few moments of him tightening around you, long enough to coax what you can from his length onto your hand. Then your own world turns on its head, and your long-delayed moan mingles with his desperate panting.

When the initial sensual glow has subsided, you use your remaining strength to ease him onto his hands and knees, letting him slide off your length with a satisfied smile to lie on his stomach with arms akimbo. Leaning down, you press a gentle kiss to his cheek, chuckling as you notice his breath is already slowing to the pattern of sleep.

Then you look up.

The glowing red eyes are watching you, as they have been throughout this encounter, and you know that it is time to do as you have been commanded. You swallow convulsively, but you know you must obey.

"You two make a lovely pair," Amell muses. "I almost wanted to join in. As I recall, your ass is wonderfully tight. It must have to do with all that self-discipline in which you place so much pride."

"M-Master," you whisper. The word comes grudgingly, but earnestly, since you know you must obey.

"Yes. I'm glad you remember after all that." You hear a muffled thud as something lands on the blanket. "There. Attend to your task."

Your hand reaches out to the source of the sound, closing over the hilt of the dagger crafted for just this purpose. A shudder runs through you, but you know you must obey.

"At least I let you have one last fuck with him," Amell points out, his voice filled with amusement. "And it was a glorious one, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Master," you say woodenly. "Thank you, Master." Even that was not enough, since you can never have enough of the man lying on the bed, but you know you must obey.

"Well?" You hear the impatience in your Master's voice and quake inside, knowing what will happen if you delay too long. "Get on with it."

You nod and lean over the sleeping man, pressing his left hand into the blanket as you set the blade at the midpoint of his forearm. The hand flickers into green life beneath your grip, but you know you must obey.

And yet, the dagger doesn't move.
You frown and try again, struggling to force the dagger down. You know you must obey.

No, a voice whispers in your mind. I won't.

You shake your head in confusion, arm trembling with the effort. You know you must obey.

Don't let him win. The words are a murmur in your mind, but compelling all the same. I won't let him win, remember?

You pause. Yes. That sounds right. And yet... you know you must--

I will never bow to his evil again! the voice roars, filling your mind with its fury, and suddenly your world turns white.

Cullen awoke with a great heave, tears streaming down his face and body curled into itself so tightly that he could feel his knees digging into his neck. Opening himself up from that position was no simple matter, either, since his arms had been wrapped around his legs for so long that he had to concentrate just to relax the joints of his fingers one by one. When his body did straighten, it was with enough force that the bed rocked on its foundation, leaving Cullen lying stunned on his back as he stared blankly at the stars.

And still, the tears fell. The horror of what Amell had wanted him to do overwhelmed every last vestige of strength he had managed to salvage before going to bed, opening wounds he had thought long dead and buried. He could not comprehend the evil of the man, but he felt the consequences of it with painful clarity. It seemed to be a special talent of Amell's, to turn something pure and beautiful into nothing but a twisted lie.

How long he lay there staring upwards he didn't know. The night was still dark when he finally stirred, so it couldn't have been that long, yet it felt like an eternity of guilt and rage and self-loathing. Somehow he found the strength and the will to push himself up, then looked down when something felt off.

He wasn't surprised to find his clothing in tatters, but he was surprised to find so many scratch marks on his chest and arms, particularly on the side of the hand which had held the knife in his nightmare. A close examination of his fingernails showed that it was self-inflicted, and he couldn't help but think it was his body fighting against the nightmare in its own way.

The thought woke a tiny bit of hope inside, and for the first time, his thoughts shifted from what he had done to what he had to do--and that did not include cowering in his bed.

Mustering what energy he could, Cullen rolled out of bed and stood, moving slowly but with great determination. Quickly he stripped the rags from his body and then, naked save for his mantle, descended the ladder so that he could use the still-hot bath to clean the jagged scratches in his skin. The water stung the wounds, but he barely noticed, focused as he was on what he needed to do next. Pulling on the clothes he'd removed before the bath earlier, he paused as he heard a rustle of paper in one of the pockets. It wasn't until he pulled out the sealed, folded paper that he remembered the letter Josephine had passed on from Dorian.

He stared at it for a moment, then slowly opened it with shaking fingers. The words were hard to make out in the dim light, but Dorian's strong, elegant hand seemed to almost jump off the page as his eyes scanned the message.

Commander,
I feel I owe you my most abject apologies for not being present and accounted for in Skyhold upon your return. Though most people would naturally feel quite bereft without me, in your case, I can assure you that the inverse is just as true. I very much hope my task does not make me tarry overlong, and if it does, feel free to blame Varric when next you see him. Of course, when next you see me, I do hope that your scolding is held to a gentleness befitting my tender hide, which I shall present for your inspection upon request.

Until next we meet,

Your Inquisitor

The smile on Cullen's face when he reached the end persisted for only a few moments as he bowed his head and let the emotions roiling within spill over into tears once more. He pressed the paper to his chest as he silently wept, teetering between joy and despair as he realized the position his obstinacy had now put him in. All his excuses not to see Dorian earlier had now revealed themselves as just that: excuses, and nothing more. And yet what a difference, those few hours now made…

How had it come to this?

The question echoed in his mind without answer. In a sudden burst of frustration, he punched the wall, hoping the pain would provide him with the answer. Instead, the pain simply awoke something else entirely. Covering his face with shaking hands as the panic attack struck, he hunched over where he stood and struggled not to scream. At least before, the problem had seemed surmountable. Arduous, yes, but he had conquered lyrium before and, as Cassandra had repeatedly told him, he could do it again. But now…

Now he faced an entirely different problem. In Kirkwall Cullen had seen for himself what red lyrium could do to a person, and as far as he knew, no one knew how much--or how little--was too much. Maybe he needed to have it several times before he was permanently damaged.

Or maybe a mouthful would ruin his life forever.

His hands dropped as he slowly straightened, looking up to the stars for reassurance that at least they would always be there. "Maker," he whispered. "I can't do this alone."

And, just like that, the decision was made. In the next few moments, after setting his mantle in place as if preparing for battle, Cullen had left his office behind. He would not find the answer there, after all.

But perhaps a friend could help.
Cullen had not been to the main hall at such a late hour for quite some time. As expected, he found it practically empty, with the only light coming from the embers of Varric's fireplace and the smoldering braziers scattered throughout the hall. The Orlesian chatter of the day had been replaced by the whispers of the night as the wooden beams creaked in sympathy with each other from the cold, and the banners whispered and rustled while they gossiped about the wind. He had several fond memories of this place at night, in particular on that large throne, since Mailani had shown a decidedly adventurous side in the dark hours of the night.

As he passed through the side door from the round room of murals, he reflexively looked towards the stained glass windows at the far end of the hall. He'd often found Mailani standing in front of them on those nights he'd promised to visit her chambers, and for a moment he almost thought he saw someone standing next to the throne. In the next instant, he realized it was only a shadow of something outside the window passing in the night, and a wistful smile came to his face. It was a fond memory, after all, and one he wouldn't mind sharing with Dorian if the mood arose.

Unlike the memory which immediately followed, of the time he'd sat on the throne with Mailani facing him while standing on its arms, hands on his head and naked from the waist down.

Hastily he suppressed that image as quickly as it arose, even as a small part of him wondered if perhaps it could be repeated with a specific someone else standing in the same place. "Maker's breath," he muttered to himself, "this is not the time."

Setting his shoulders back, he strode down the hall towards the Inquisitor's quarters with focused purpose. As he did so, a rhythmic tapping from the direction of the forge grew louder, and he smiled, wondering what new project Dagna was working on so very late at night. It was also a familiar sound, one he welcomed as he came to a halt at his destination. For a moment he hesitated, uncertainty bubbling within before he brushed it aside as sternly as he had the errant memory with Mailani.

Shaking his head, he reminded himself not to be a fool and quickly raised his hand to strike the door. The moments between the first knock on Dorian's door and the moment it opened seemed to stretch into an eternity. When it finally creaked open, Cullen released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and stepped forward even before the door had finished opening. "Amell," he blurted. "It has to be Amell."

The sleepiness in Dorian's eyes vanished at the name. "You are certain?" At Cullen's firm nod, he reached out to pull Cullen into the room, then shut the door behind him. "Let's go up top and you can fill me in on the details."

"The nightmares are back," Cullen explained as they walked up the stairs to the Inquisitor's room. "At first it was just Kinloch Hold again, and then the Nightmare demon in the Fade and his minions. But sometimes, it's worse than..." His voice trailed off as he halted at the foot of the final flight of steps, abruptly remembering what else had occurred in those particular dreams.

And with whom.

"Hmm?" Dorian asked, pausing at the top of the stairs to turn and focus on Cullen.

At first Cullen couldn't answer, instead staring up at Dorian as his eyes caught up with the rest of
him. *Maker.* The man was made to be drenched in moonlight, and the soft bathrobe he'd obviously thrown on in haste on his way to the door exposed quite a bit more than Dorian's normal attire. Above *that,* his hair, disordered and mussed as if the man had had a restless night himself, made Cullen's fingers twitch with the need to fix it, but that wasn't where his eyes lingered. No, his gaze fell to Dorian's lips and stayed there, as one of his dreams suddenly flashed through his mind and he imagined those same sensuous lips wrapped around his--

"Are you quite all right?" Dorian asked, face a picture of concern as he quickly descended the stairs and took Cullen's elbow in his hand. "Your face suddenly turned a charming but also worrying shade of red."

Those words, of course, only made Cullen's flush deepen. "I'm fine," he said, then winced as his voice cracked. Clearing his throat forcefully, he added, "I'm fine, truly. Just tired. I haven't slept well since Adamant."

"Unsurprising. We both knew you would likely have nightmares, but I thought the wards would keep Amell out of them. I take it he has returned to your dreams?" At Cullen's brief nod, Dorian frowned, then pulled Cullen after him as he guided him to the bed. "Tell me more about these nightmares. We need to get to the bottom of this immediately."

*Bed.* Cullen followed numbly and sat down as Dorian directed, but he had all too many vivid memories of this bed and *certain activities.* Granted he had shared them with Mailani before, but given the way his thoughts were trending, that wasn't as helpful a reminder as it might have been. Especially considering that the subject of his increasingly erotic dreams was now the main occupant of said bed.

"Ah… the nightmares usually have Amell in them," he said, knowing it was a rather lame description of the erotic dreams-turned-nightmares he'd been experiencing. Obviously Amell was in them, or Cullen wouldn't have been so spooked by them. "But lately it's been worse. As if he were talking to me directly."

Dorian settled him down on the edge of the bed and then knelt in front of Cullen as he took Cullen's hands in his own and peered up with a concerned expression on his face. "Hmm, perhaps if you gave me some context it would help. Is that all you dream of, or does something else precede them first?"

"I…" Cullen paused to lick his lips. *Maker, why does his head have to be down* there? "He usually appears after I've dreamt of something else."

"Were they similar to each other, these other dreams?" Dorian asked, gaze keen.

Cullen nodded slowly, forcing himself to consider the dreams clinically, and not speculate about… *things,* such as the fact that Dorian was on his knees in front of him, and that his hair was adorably mussed, and that it would be so very simple to reach out and straighten it—or muss it further. Clearing his throat and forcing his gaze to rise to the level of Dorian's eyes, he said, "Yes. In fact, they were almost always the same type of dream."

"Describe them to me," Dorian said, stroking the back of Cullen's wrist with what he probably *meant* to be a soothing touch, but which instead sparked a burst of heat which shot straight up Cullen's arm and down his spine to pool between his legs. "Perhaps the similarity will give us a clue."

*Sweet Andraste's ass.* Completely unready and unprepared to talk about the details of *those* dreams to
the man who figured so prominently in them, Cullen stammered, "Th-they were… a particular kind of dream." Suddenly inspiration struck him. "Of Mailani and me. In here. Doing... things."

"Ah." Dorian nodded, looking satisfied by the answer. "That explains it. The Fade reacts very strongly to human passion, after all. The strength of your feelings for Mailani would have lit up the Fade like a veritable beacon, and if the wards failed for some reason, those dreams would have made you all the easier to find for such as him." Pushing himself to his feet, he reached out and settled the tips of his fingers under Cullen's chin, lifting it slightly. "Let me get a closer look at you."

Cullen's mouth went dry, since Dorian's new position put his bare chest quite close to Cullen's face. Even in the moonlight, he could see that the musculature of Dorian's typically bare arm hinted at a promise well and truly fulfilled throughout his physique. "Ah, what are you looking for?" he managed, though half his mind was still spinning from what Dorian had said as he took the lie out and replaced it with the truth. The strength of my feelings…for Dorian?

"The ward, for one thing," Dorian murmured. "To make sure it's still intact and such." His fingers drew along Cullen's forehead, then down Cullen's cheeks and throat until they parted to fall on his fur-covered shoulders. The skin on skin contact re-awoke the fire of his blush and deepened it into a pure heat which countered the coolness of the night air around them.

He jumped slightly when one of Dorian's hands moved to cup his chin again, lifting it until their gazes met. Pulse beating rapidly in his throat, he watched as Dorian leaned down until their faces were but inches apart. When Dorian's thumb tugged at his chin, he dropped it readily, lost in a moment that seemed to have spawned from one of his dreams. His heart thudded as Dorian leaned in closer, even as the quiet voice within warned Cullen that a relationship tainted by red lyrium could only end in despair. The way the moonlight caused Dorian's eyes to glow, however, drew him in deep, and he closed his own eyes in anticipation of whatever came next.

When nothing happened, Cullen opened his eyes to see a small frown on Dorian's face as he pulled away. In the next moment, the intimacy was shattered as Dorian said softly, "I smell lyrium."

Of course. Dorian was a mage, naturally he would be sensitive to lyrium. His mouth went dry again, but this time for a different reason. "I--" But he couldn't continue, not while looking into those pale eyes.

"Cullen," Dorian said softly, hands reaching up to take Cullen’s face between them. "I'm your friend. You can tell me anything and I will not judge you. I promise you that."

As their gazes locked, Cullen felt the truth of those words, as clearly as he felt the care with which Dorian handled him--and as clearly as he needed to hear those words. "I know," Cullen whispered. "I just had a hard time believing it."

"Then believe," Dorian breathed, moving his hands to rest on the shoulders of Cullen’s mantle. "I’m here for you, never doubt that. Now." Taking a deep breath, he squeezed Cullen’s shoulders tightly. "I know you're a former Templar, but Cassandra told me you'd weaned yourself off of the stuff."

"I did. But I--" He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to avoid the disappointment he was sure would appear in Dorian's face. "Ever since Adamant, I--I just… need it again."

"I see." There was a rustle of cloth, and then a weight settled next to him on the bed. An arm wrapped around his shoulders as a hand claimed his own and squeezed it tight. "Tell me everything," Dorian said softly.

So Cullen did. Haltingly at first, then more and more rapidly, the words spilled from his mouth as he
told Dorian precisely what the Nightmare demon had done to him. He'd hinted at aspects of it before, of course, but never in so much detail. From the breaking of his wrist to the moment when he shattered his knee, Cullen spat out each moment in agonizing detail. When he got to the part which he feared most, his words finally faltered enough that he heard his own harsh, short breaths.

"There, there," Dorian said in a soothing voice. "You can pause for a while. Let's get that fur off of you, though. You're sweating like a certain oversized Qunari."

Cullen blinked, then looked at his hands as Dorian gently lifted the mantle away from his shoulders. Sure enough, they shone with moisture even in the dim moonlight, and when he reached up to wipe his forehead, beads of sweat poured down his face.

As he instinctively started to use his sleeve to wipe it away, Dorian quickly dissuaded him with a touch. "We're not barbarians," he half-scolded Cullen. "One moment." Quickly he rummaged in the drawer of the table next to the bed, then held out a small cloth to Cullen. "Here. This should work."

"Thank you," Cullen said, touched at the offer, then raised the cloth to wipe his face. All at once, his nostrils were overwhelmed by that same musky scent he'd noticed lingering around Dorian, and his eyes widened for a moment. Maker. In an odd way, though, sensual as the scent was to him normally, at the moment, it simply felt… safe. Like home. As he slowly wiped his face, the scent calmed and centered him, until finally he was able to take a deep breath and nod. "I'm ready to go on."

"All right." Dorian's tone was gentle as he again took Cullen's hand in his own. "As you can, Cullen. Don't push yourself on my account."

Cullen nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. "The Nightmare demon picked me up and… I dangled there, like a fennec in a snare, as he taunted me. I… I tried to fight him, but…" His throat seized up, and for a moment all Cullen could do was try to breathe.

Dorian's arm settled around Cullen's waist and pulled them closer together. "That's it," he murmured. "Breathe slowly. In and out, one after the other. You can do this."

The simple words helped to calm Cullen down as they got closer and closer to his true fear from his time with Nightmare. After a few more moments passed, Cullen finally exhaled, then nodded. "Something… A tentacle, a hand, I'm not sure, but something grabbed my throat and held my head while it pushed against my lips. I tried not to let it in, but that… that didn't work. And that's when it was forced down my throat."

"Lyrium?" Dorian asked softly.

"Yes," Cullen gasped. "But… remember the lyrium you saw there."

It took a few seconds for Dorian to catch his meaning, but Cullen felt the hand around his waist tighten as Dorian hissed through his teeth. "Kaffas. Not--"

"I can't think of why it wouldn't be," Cullen said, feeling a sense of hopelessness rise up in him. "I've tried to stave it off, to change it, to replace it with regular lyrium, but it's not enough. I fear it won't ever be enough." A chill passed through him again, making him instinctively burrow into Dorian's warmth. "And… and that's not all."

Dorian's brow furrowed. "No?" Before Cullen answered, Dorian made an odd little sound, one Cullen couldn't quite place. "Oh, of course. Amell."

"Amell." As Cullen told him of those dreams, when Amell had tortured him in insidiously malicious
ways, he chose his words with care, relying heavily on the fact that he knew Dorian would never want to hear any details about Mailani and her Commander—even if it was just a cover for something else entirely. But the parts of the dreams with Amell? Those he did not skimp on detail, which he told with gritted teeth until he reached the most difficult revelation of them all. "And then the dreams became reality."

"Amell didn’t—" Dorian started, eyes widening. "He’s not here, is he?"

"No, no," Cullen assured Dorian hastily. "Not Amell himself, but…” Cullen closed his eyes for a moment. "I had a basket of potions the healer gave me. I'm… not sure how it happened, but I used the final one last night, to help me sleep. And… it was red. Just not for healing."

Dorian muttered something under his breath. "You drank it?"

"A whole bottle's worth. I swallowed it before I realized what it was," he explained.

"Do you think the healers are responsible?" Dorian asked, suddenly worried.

Cullen forced himself to think of that for a moment. "No," he said slowly. "No, I don't think so. It's more likely Amell had an agent do it. The way he taunted me about the lyrium… That speaks of knowing too much."

"Oh, there's a cheerful thought," Dorian muttered. "Well. I'll bring that up with Charter, and Leliana when she returns. In the meantime, let's get back to the matter at hand. "He squeezed Cullen's hand gently. "Go on. The dreams. What happened after you drank the red lyrium?"

A shudder ran over Cullen's body. "That dream was the worst of them all. Amell had control of me, and he… he wanted me to…” He couldn't even voice it. His throat seized up and his vision darkened just remembering what it had felt like to even contemplate hurting Dorian.

"There, there." Dorian's arms wrapped around him, gently rocking him as he planted a light kiss on Cullen's ear. "You don't need to tell me. I've enough of an impression of him to know he would have wanted you to act in a way counter to your nature, to obey whatever sadistic command he gave you. Yes?"

It was that, and it was also more than that, but Cullen simply couldn't force the words out yet. Instead, he allowed Dorian's statement to stand with a short nod. The man's touch was comforting, more than it had any right to be, and slowly his shoulders and throat loosened. As Dorian's hand began to stroke his hair, Cullen realized that he wanted this now, and later, and forever, but he could never admit it out loud.

Not now.

"No one has ever survived the bloom of red lyrium, Dorian," he whispered, again feeling the hopelessness of the situation. "I don't know what to do."

Pressing another kiss to Cullen's hair, Dorian said, "No one until you, that is. I'll make certain of it. We'll find a way. We have to." Dorian's arms tightened around him for a moment. "I'm certainly not going to face Corypheus without you. That wouldn't be very fair, would it, to take all the glory?"

That did make Cullen smile, thought it was but a faint curve of his lips. "I don't need any glory." Not if I could have you instead.

"Well, perhaps not, but I need you," Dorian said firmly. "I didn't let the Nightmare keep you, and I'm certainly not going to let this red plague claim you either. You're my Commander."
And again, the words comforted Cullen, and the warmth they inspired in him helped to wash away the chill edge of despair. "Thank you, Inquisitor," he said quietly. "That… that means a great deal."

"Yes, well, just don't you forget it," Dorian huffed. "Still, what you told me does explain one thing: how Amell got into your dreams."

Cullen blinked, realizing that Dorian's touch had managed to distract him so much he'd honestly almost forgotten why he'd come to Dorian in the first place. "Truly?"

"Oh, indeed. You see, the wards for protecting dreams differ between those who don't use lyrium and those who do, because of the way that lyrium interacts with the Fade. It's one of the reasons why mages need more protection from dreams than non-mages. It's also why Templars reside in a grey area with regards to the Fade," Dorian explained. "My working theory is that the ward worked perfectly before you began using lyrium again, and then got progressively more ineffective the more lyrium you consumed."

"I--Hmm." Cullen ran the words through his mind, silently tracking back his usage of lyrium and comparing it to the increasing intensity of his nightmares and Jorath's appearance. Horrific as it was to finally know that it was, in fact, Amell in his nightmares, a sense of relief still swept through him. "That's exactly it," he breathed. "Thank the Maker. I feared the ward wasn't working because Amell could not be stopped."

"Oh, he's a sneaky bastard, that is certain," Dorian admitted, "but now that we know why the ward failed, I can fix the problem. Here, lie down."

Cullen blinked. "Pardon?"

"You look exhausted, Commander," Dorian told him. "So I'm going to force you to sleep for a few hours while I go investigate a few possibilities for your other little problem."

Unable to help himself, Cullen snorted in disbelief at the description. "Little?"

Suddenly Dorian's face sobered, and he released Cullen's hand long enough to cup his face. "I've been to Emprise de Leon," he said softly. "I saw what happened to those exposed to red lyrium up close. I will not let that happen to you. He pressed a kiss to Cullen's forehead, then stood. "Now lie down. You need to rest, and I need to get to work on a solution."

Resisting the urge to reach up and touch his forehead, Cullen swallowed and nodded. "You're a good friend, Dorian."

"I know," Dorian said, pressing a hand to his chest and fluttering his eyelashes at Cullen.

"And so very humble, too," Cullen said with a chuckle as he lay back down on the bed.

"Appropriately so, yes," Dorian drawled as he pulled the blanket over Cullen. "Good. Now, lie just like that while I fix the ward."

Cullen obeyed, lying still as Dorian's hands moved over him. Since the lyrium had re-sensitized him to magic, he felt the flow of it over him as the ward was first lifted and then laid on him again. Scads of goosepimples rose to full attention on both his arms, but he welcomed the feeling. Anything was better than Amell standing there, watching him.

"There we are," Dorian said cheerfully. "Now go to sleep. You're probably missing several hours' worth by this point."
Before Cullen could point out that the same was true for Dorian, at least tonight, the man had turned and strode away from the bed. With a sigh, Cullen burrowed a bit more deeply into the blankets, then paused. He was still holding the cloth to wipe the sweat away from his forehead, and after a moment, he brought it up to his nose and inhaled deeply once more. Smile on his face, he rolled over onto his side, curling up his arms so that he could drift off to sleep with Dorian's musky scent filling his nostrils.

It proved to be the most perfect sleep he'd found since leaving the Fade.

It took the sun striking his face for Cullen to finally rouse from slumber. The first thing he noticed, before even his eyes opened, was the strong musky scent of Dorian's hair. A smile curved his lips as the scent filled him again with that sense of comfort and home. Only as his treacherous mind woke further did more of the previous night filter through his thoughts and force him from the fuzz of half-asleep to the eyes-wide wakefulness which was more typical of him in the morning.

He shot upright, the cloth still in his hand, and looked around almost wildly. His eyes soon found a familiar figure sprawled on the nearby couch, and he winced as he realized that he'd kept Dorian from his own bed. Tugging the blankets aside, he rolled over until he could heave his legs off the oversized mattress without aggravating his healing knee. As he moved, Dorian stirred and shifted where he lay, the smaller blanket he was using sliding to the floor as he did so.

Cullen froze as several facts presented themselves. Firstly, the robe Dorian wore had come undone completely during the night, exposing the fact that beneath it, Dorian only wore a pair of loose trousers. Secondly, Cullen's eyes noted that although Dorian's chest was bare, he could see a hint of short, dark hairs starting just above the hem of said trousers, teasing Cullen with a hint of what lay further down. Thirdly--and this last fact pushed the first two aside rather quickly as demanding more attention--whatever Dorian had encountered in his dreams the previous night, he was quite clearly enjoying it.

And his trousers did very little to hide that enjoyment.

Licking his lips slightly as he forced his eyes away from Dorian's morning glory, Cullen gingerly pushed himself to his feet and moved over to the couch. Reaching down, he pulled the small blanket up and back over Dorian. It didn't hide everything, but it at least covered the most pertinent parts for privacy. As he straightened, Dorian shifted again, mumbling in what Cullen assumed was Tevene until something very clearly stood out: his own name. Maker.

Cullen stared down at Dorian for a moment, uncertain for several reasons. Ever since returning from the Fade, he'd been aware of his changing feelings for Dorian, but he'd shied away from contemplating the reverse, or the full implications of the inevitable outcome of those feelings. He'd already lost Mailani, and the thought of going through all that pain again weighed heavily on him. Yet, after last night, he could not deny that the thought of going without Dorian, or keeping him only as a friend, also posed a growing pain. Despite Dorian's promise, Cullen couldn't help but think of what lay in store for him, and visions of slowly turning into a large red crystal danced in his head. He'd succumbed to the lure of normal lyrium--who was to say he could resist red lyrium forever?

And he wouldn't wish a relationship with someone doomed to that fate on anyone, not even Amell.

Well, he privately conceded, maybe Amell.

Shaking his head, he quickly turned and moved to the bed to grab his fur mantle, hoping he could get back to his room as unnoticed as possible. Of course, the Court gossips would notice, and discuss it endlessly, but surely it was better than some of the alternatives--in the long-term, anyway.
"Sneaking away, are we?" a sleepy voice asked him as he reached the top of the stairs leading down the landing to the door.

He winced, then turned around. "I didn't want to disturb your sleep."

Dorian waved it away as he stood and stretched hugely, and Cullen swallowed harshly. *Maker, his skin is made to be drenched in sunlight, too.* Forcing his eyes upward, he watched as Dorian moved to his clothing chest and pulled out an outfit. "You can hardly disturb the dead, Cullen—at least not without a little magic. Trust me, I know. Now stay there while I get ready. Someone is eagerly awaiting our arrival."

Cullen raised an eyebrow, then turned around swiftly as Dorian tugged his trousers down. "Ah, who? And for what?"

The sound of rustling cloth and various degrees of voice muffling accompanied Dorian's reply as he said, "As for the what, it's dealing with the revelation from last night about the red lyrium. As for the who…" There was a pause, long enough that Cullen turned around again. He saw Dorian peering into a mirror and carefully setting his hair and mustache to rights. Once that was done, he lathered up some soap and rubbed it onto his face. "The who would be Dagna."

"Is that who you spoke to last night?" Cullen asked, striding over to stand closer to Dorian now that he was safely dressed.

"She does have more expertise in red lyrium than anyone else," Dorian pointed out. "I told her the basics and asked for her to come up with a few ideas and that we'd visit her in the morning. And it is now morning." He winked at Cullen through the mirror and then picked up a straight blade. "You can live without your reports for one morning, can't you?"

With a chuckle, Cullen reached up to rub the back of his neck. "Maybe if my Inquisitor demands it."

"Well, your Inquisitor does," Dorian said cheerfully, then fell silent as he worked on ridding himself of a night's worth of stubble.

Cullen found his eyes following the dance of the blade over those flawless cheekbones. He remembered Mailani watching *him* shave, even after he’d teased her about her rapt fascination with such a simple task. Watching Dorian gave him an entirely new perspective on the matter as he realized it was the *person* which had enthralled her, not the activity.

*No. No, I can't do that to him.* He still remembered the pain and despair of losing Mailani, of the black pit he'd fallen into and finally clawed his way out of, thanks in no small part to the man in front of him. Setting his jaw, he let his hand fall and watched Dorian silently until the blade was set down and a towel patted over his face.

"There we are, all ready to go," Dorian said cheerfully as he turned to Cullen with a smile. "Now. To Dagna. Thankfully for your knee, she isn't all that far away."

"What about my hair?" Cullen asked with a raised eyebrow.

"My dear Commander, we simply cannot inflict *too* much perfection upon the world at once," Dorian said with a grin. "Don't worry, you look splendidly disheveled. At least the fur will help hide the wrinkles."

Cullen leveled a flat stare at him. "Oh, good. Because *that's* what people will notice first. The wrinkles."
"But of course they would. What else could they possibly comment on, hmm?" Dorian asked, even as he swept past Cullen.

Shaking his head, Cullen moved to fall into step next to Dorian, already dreading what awaited them outside. He remembered the whispers and giggles all too well from those mornings when he'd left these same quarters before, and that had been early in the day. Surely this long after sunrise, the gossipers would be out in force.

When Dorian led him into the main hall, however, they found... no one. His brow furrowed as he looked around the cavernous room and the sunlight shining through the windows. "Where--"

"Ah. Our dwarf friend requested a day to close the hall down and work on those mosaics he assembles from the dross I bring back from my lovely trips across Thedas," Dorian said with a twinkle in his eye. "He's down there, see? Good old Gatsi." Dorian gave a little wave, and the dwarf at the other end of the hall waved back, then went back to mounting a huge square metal tile onto the wall. Varric was next to him, leaning against the closed main door and casually keeping one hand on the bar that kept it that way, though the two dwarves did seem to be holding a conversation.

Cullen blinked a few times, then narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "And he just happened to want to work on them on a morning I would have to emerge from your quarters conspicuously late in the morning," he noted.

"Yes, quite the coincidence, isn't it?" Dorian asked blandly. "A pity those gossipers won't get nearly as much fodder as they'd like. Ah, well."

"You clever bastard," Cullen said with a chuckle as they rounded the throne. "Though it seems like a lot of effort to quash such a small rumor."

"We're on the eve of venturing forth to the Winter Palace," Dorian reminded him. "The less the Orlesian court has to fuel their fire of ridiculous rumors, the better. Sadly. We would make quite the pair, would we not?"

"Yes," Cullen said almost without thought, then blinked and added hastily, "I mean, if it were a thing."

Dorian laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "You are my dearest friend, Cullen, but I shouldn't presume more than that, should I?" Pulling the door open to the forge, he gestured inside. "There we are. Dagna should be waiting."

Cullen's initial swell of disappointment from Dorian's seeming dismissal of something more quickly turned into a deeper, if brief, consideration of Dorian's actual wording. Shouldn't presume didn't mean he didn't want more, after all. Before Cullen could even think to pursue the matter with another question, however, Dorian passed into the forge. Biting his lip, Cullen followed after and squinted around the interior of the forge in search of the dwarf arcanist as he descended the stairs to reach Dorian's side. He did see Dagna, true, but he also saw something else that made him pause. "Is that--"

"See something you like, hmm?" Dorian asked with a chuckle. "Go on." He nudged Cullen towards where Harritt stood. "Ask him."

Cullen needed no more urging before crossing the room to stand at Harritt's side, nodding a greeting as the smith looked up from his task. "Harritt."

"Commander." Harritt set the object in his hands down on the table and gave it a final polish with the
oil-soaked cloth. "She's looking almost new again, don't you think?"

"Better than new," Cullen declared, eyes running over the bright metal of the familiar shield with an odd hunger. "I see you've worked your magic once more."

"I might have had a bit of help," Harritt conceded, glancing at Dagna, "but most of the work is from my own hands." After a moment of scrutinizing the burnished metal, Harritt grunted as he buffed away a scratch only his eyes could detect. "A man has a right to use the tools best fit to his hand. That includes you, Commander." He stepped back and gestured to the table. "Go on. Try them out."

Hands shaking with eagerness, Cullen reached first for his shield. It was a bit heavier than his wrist would have preferred, but he was still able to settle it in place with only a little effort. He then swept up his sword and turned it over in his hand, admiring the way the light reflecting from the waterfall outside dappled the metal. "This is superb work," he told Harritt. "I would never have guessed that you forged a new blade onto it." He paused, bringing the hilt close to his head for a moment. "And the enchantment is whole, as well. Who--"

"Who else?" Cullen turned to look at Dorian, who gestured towards Dagna with an elaborate bow. "The Inquisition does have an arcanist at its beck, after all."

Cullen chuckled softly. "I should have known." He took a few steps away from the others, then gave the sword a solid swing, testing its balance. "Amazing. It's as if it was never sundered."

"The shield had a good foundation, but I did mix a new alloy out of some stormheart to make it a bit stronger without weighing it down," Harritt explained. "And I added a bit of starmetal to the mix for the sword as well. It won't break again any time soon."

"Starmetal?" Cullen hefted the sword again as he admired it some more. "I am in your debt, Harritt. I could not have asked for more or better."

"I serve the Inquisition, Commander, the same as you. You're just fully equipped again." Still, there was a hint of a smile on Harritt's face, and Cullen knew his admiration counted for something. And, when Harritt turned back to the table in a clear signal that the conversation was over, Cullen knew it had been enough.

He moved over to Dorian, offering him a closer view of the items as he said, "I take it you had a small hand in this?"

Dorian's fingers reached over and trailed slowly along the length of the sword, and Cullen couldn't help but follow the motion with his gaze. "I may have ordered Jim to sneak into your tent at night and abscond with them to bring to Skyhold in advance of your arrival here. That is my prerogative as Inquisitor, after all. Still, I am glad to see you have your blade back in your hand. Don't do anything I wouldn't do with it, hmm?"

Cullen's eyes snapped back to Dorian for a moment, holding back the words to ask if Dorian meant rather more than he'd said. "Thank you," he replied instead.

"I'm truly not the one to thank," Dorian protested. "Harritt is a remarkable talent. The Inquisition is fortunate to have him."

The man in question grunted from where he leaned over a nearby table. "Don't try to butter me up for any more favors, Inquisitor," he said. "I can't pull many more miracles out of my hammer, even for you."

"But I am grateful that you did it this time," Dorian said warmly.
"And it's a good thing he did."

The comment was made by a familiar voice, but behind and below Cullen. Turning on his heels, he nodded to the woman now standing behind him. "Dagna."

"Commander." Her eyes narrowed as she looked him over. "Put those down and come over to my station. I need to take a few measurements."

As she moved to a table with a decidedly ominous looking apparatus attached to it, Cullen looked to Dorian with a questioning glance. "Don't look at me," Dorian replied. "She's the one with the ideas. I'm only here to look pretty while my hand glows."

"Thanks," Cullen drawled, even as he set his sword and shield down on an empty table. Following Dagna to her table, he asked hesitantly, "I... don't have to touch that thing, do I?" he asked, pointing at the rather intimidating looking metal skull mounted on her table.

"What? Oh, no, he's just there to keep me company," Dagna said with a little shrug. "I'm measuring you for a new mail shirt."

"A new--" Cullen's eyebrows rose. "Whatever for? And what did you mean by it's a good thing he did?"

"The Inquisitor told me about what you're going through," Dagna said. "I don't have a way to fix you yet, but I think I have a way to keep you safe until I do. The breastplate is part of it, and the sword and shield another." Pulling out a thick cord with all sorts of knots and notches and painted lines, she gestured to him. "All right, off with the rug and shirt."

"It's not a--" he began, then glared at Dorian when he heard a distinct snicker come from that direction. "Quiet, you." As he slowly removed the offending pieces of clothing, Cullen asked, "So I take it this mail shirt will be a close fit?"

She gave him an absent nod as she made a few marks on her notebook. "Based on my research, it has to touch you to have the best effect."

"That is true of oh so many things," Dorian noted from a few feet away, earning another glare from Cullen. "That's a good look for you, Commander," he added as Cullen pulled his shirt off. "Maybe I should have a set of that Qunari armor Bull sketched out made for you."

"Sweet Maker, no," Cullen groaned. "Mailani threatened to do the same thing."

Dorian laughed. "She did shove Bull in it a few times. Luckily he enjoys having his pillowy man-bosoms on display for all to see. Not my preferred look, of course. It's a little hard to maintain one's dignity that way."

"Then why order a set for me?" Cullen asked, eyebrows rising.

"Because it would be a favor to all of Skyhold," Dorian said blandly.

Before Cullen could come up with a suitable retort for the notion, Dagna raised the cord. "Kneel, please. You're a bit tall for me to get everything I need when you're standing."

"Of course." Cullen did so, holding his arms out when she tapped them lightly.

"Why don't you tell the class what it is you have in mind?" Dorian suggested to Dagna. "After all, you haven't quite said what you are doing and why, and some of us are quite intrigued."
"A while ago, Leliana brought me some notes her agents had found tucked away in an old Red Templar stronghold," Dagna explained, ticking off measurements on the cord and marking them down on a notebook lying on the table. "Apparently before the Inquisitor went in and got rid of their pet demon, a red Templar named Samson had--"

"Samson?" Cullen interrupted. "Are you sure that was the name?"

"Of course I'm sure," Dagna said. "I'm never wrong about details like that. It's other ones that get out of my control."

"Like remembering to put up a sign to warn people away from the smithy when you're testing explosives?" Harritt called from across the room. "I lost the last of my hair in that fright."

Ignoring the sally, Dagna said, "At any rate, Samson had become heavily dependent on red lyrium, and had roped in a Tranquil by the name of Maddox to figure out how to make help him make the lyrium more powerful without killing him. Maddox came up with an ingenious design, though I'm not sure he ever got to put it into use. Still, Leliana saw that it involved red lyrium, so she sent me all the papers over for analysis."

"Ah, Dagna," Dorian said, a look of alarm coming to his face, "we don't want to strengthen the red lyrium's effect on the Commander. We want to eradicate it entirely."

"Any tool or force always has an equal and opposite version, Inquisitor," Dagna said, as if that were obvious. "If that armor is real and out there, of course I'd have to know how to nullify it. But it also got me thinking in the back of my head and the last four pages of my journal about how it could be used to suppress red lyrium instead of enhance it. So I turned a few matrices around a full one hundred eighty degrees, reverse polarized the metal using some stock lyrium and a special magnet I developed to work with red lyrium, then pulled a few drops of red lyrium from a sample I have and ran it through a denaturing machine I use so that I can apply it to weapons to make them stronger. Oh, and this guy," she patted the creepy skull contraption, "helped me put another enchantment on it, a lyrium dampener."

Cullen blinked a few times, then looked at Dorian. "I hope you followed that, because I got lost halfway through and fell off a cliff somewhere."

"I found a soft landing," Dorian assured him, then leveled a stern look at Dagna. "And you're certain that it won't harm Cullen."

"Of course. Maybe. Yes. Naturally. Possibly." Dagna grinned at Dorian. "Indubitably, Inquisitor. He'll be far safer in my armor. And don't worry, I'm not going to make you run around in two breastplates. This will be all metal, but a sort of mesh with overlay. In fact, you should wear it under everything, even at night. It will protect your torso, which should do for now as long as you don't ingest or expose yourself to any more of the stuff." She reached up and tugged down his chin, peering closely into his eyes. "Hmm. You do have a hint of it there. I'll get to work on expanding it beyond the torso, but it should be enough to keep you stable at the Winter Palace."

"Stable?" Cullen asked in alarm. "What does that mean?"

"Oh, so you won't go insane, or have glowing red eyes, or run off into the wild looking for red lyrium, or feel your blood turn into red crystals. You know. That kind of thing. Now hold still." Before Cullen could say anything, she'd pricked his finger and squeezed some of his blood into a vial. "There."

"What is that for?" he demanded, still reeling from the litany of all the things that could go wrong.
"I need to track the amount of corruption in your blood," she told him. "Don't worry. I only need to do it every other day or so."

"Every other--"

"Thank you, Dagna," Dorian told her. "We appreciate your efforts tremendously. When will the armor be ready?"

Dagna's face turned calculating as she swabbed Cullen's finger with something that made him mutter an oath under his breath, then wrapped it tight with a small linen cloth that somehow stuck to itself. "Two days, Inquisitor. Don't worry, you'll have it before you leave for the Winter Palace."

"And that's the most important thing," Dorian said in satisfaction.

"What about the sword and shield?" Cullen asked.

"Oh. Well, one of the reasons your body is still susceptible to lyrium is that it keeps trying to use it for your Templar abilities," Dagna said with a shrug. "But you don't need it to use them, you just need it to perform the initial acclimation of your body to combat magic. So I worked some natural channels into the metal on the same resonance as lyrium so you don't have to fight your own equipment to do a lot of smiting. Because who doesn't want to do that once in a while, right?"

He blinked, not sure he was actually the wiser for the explanation, but accepted it with a nod regardless. "Ah… Thank you, Dagna. I am most grateful."

"No problem," she said cheerfully. "It's a fun little project. I'm sure by the time you get back from the Winter Palace, I'll have something even more spiffy for you."

As Cullen started to push himself to his feet, he found a hand thrust in front of his face. "Need some help?" Dorian asked in a solicitous tone. "That knee seems to be a bit stubborn of late."

"Yes, thank you," Cullen said as he took the offer. When Dorian pulled him up, he suddenly found himself very close to the man—close enough to see the dapples and whirls in those eyes and realize that he could spend a few hours looking into them. Quickly he cleared his throat and pulled his hand from Dorian's so he could reach for his shirt instead. "Ah, for all this, I mean. I never would have thought to approach Dagna about this."

"Or anyone," he admitted, a decision which, in retrospect, seemed foolishly obstinate.

"She is our resident expert, after all," Dorian said with a smile. "I pray that this makes you feel a bit more hopeful about your future."

Cullen gathered up his fur mantle slowly, avoiding Dorian's gaze as he considered his answer carefully. "I… do, but--" He sighed and closed his eyes. "There are a lot of questions still to answer."

He opened his eyes when a hand settled on his shoulder, and he found himself gazing into those pale grey eyes once more. "I'm not giving up on you, Cullen," Dorian said softly. "And neither should you."

Swallowing against a suddenly dry throat, Cullen nodded slowly. "I'll keep that in mind, Inquisitor."

"Back to titles already?" Dorian asked in an almost wistful tone. "Pity." Straightening, his hand fell away from Cullen's shoulder as he turned and headed to the exit. "Come. Let's get some breakfast in you. You look a little hollow, my friend."

"I haven't eaten much the past few mornings," he explained, waiting long enough to give a smile to
the smith and a little shrug when Dagna didn't even look up from her journal before hurrying after Dorian.

"Well, hopefully that will change." Dorian suddenly turned to him at the door, bringing them both to a halt. "I'm hoping the new ward will lessen your need for lyrium," he said in hushed tones. "But you do know you can always get help. If not me, then Cassandra, and if not Cassandra then Leliana when she returns. You're not alone, Cullen."

_Cullen_. Somehow, the way Dorian said it in quiet tones made Cullen's heart pound. "I--I'll remember that, Dorian. I promise."

"And I'll hold you to that," Dorian teased him gently. "I need you far too much to lose you now, after all."

"You mean the Inquisition does," Cullen corrected, almost out of habit.

"I most certainly do not," Dorian said, putting his hand on Cullen's shoulder once more. "You're not getting out of your duties to me so easily." Cullen froze when a thumb gently stroked down his neck, and stayed frozen when Dorian stepped towards the door and pulled it open. "At any rate, breakfast awaits. Hopefully the kitchen will have some of those fireberry eggs of which I've grown so fond."

"Y-you're the only one who can stomach them," Cullen managed through the roaring in his ears. "Aside from Bull."

Dorian waved his hand. "The only truly refined palate is a northern one. Even if it's a Qunari."

Cullen chuckled weakly as he walked at Dorian's side. Part of him wanted to reach out and take the man's hand, to see what the reaction would be, but it wasn't enough to override his caution about a relationship doomed from the start. He didn't have enough hope for that.

He _did_, however, have enough hope for a single small word to whisper in the back of his mind: _yet._
Though sleep in his own bed proved to be not as restful as in the Inquisitor's, at least his dreams were his own again thanks to the changes Dorian had made in the wards protecting him. He kept the Dorian-scented cloth close as well, cuddling up with it at night so that he could embrace the musky comfort that the scent brought to him, even though he still shied away from acting on the implications of it. That small spark of hope that Dorian had prodded into being also bled through into other aspects of Cullen's life. He rearranged his sleeping area so that no trace of lyrium could be found, even going so far as to work with the healers to use a variant of one potion that had some lyrium in it for the last stage of his recovery.

Granted, that meant the sweats returned, and the shakes, and the irritability. It meant that even with the scented comfort of the cloth and the strengthened wards he would wake from sleep in the middle of the night and reach for the ghost of his lyrium kit, or writhe in pain because he needed something. It meant a return to occasional bouts of anger and tears, but, as he had before, he managed to keep it out of sight of others in the Inquisition--especially the soldiers. They deserved his best.

When he tried to settle back into a work routine, he found himself more restless than not. He found that when he sat too long on his ass, the song would creep into his head, especially the disjointed, eerie notes of the melody from the red lyrium. In those moments, he forced himself out of his chair, out of his office, and roamed the breadth and depths of Skyhold. It didn't make it better, but it made it harder to wallow in his own mind. That, and it provided good therapy for his recovering knee.

On one such stroll, as he stared out over the courtyard to observe his troops in their practice, he heard mail-clad boots approach from behind, and held out his hand in anticipation of a report. "Midday patrol, I presume?"

"Not quite, Commander."

Cullen blinked, then turned to face Ser Barris. "Knight-Commander Barris."

Barris offered a faint smile as he settled in to stand next to Cullen. "So you heard."

"Heard? Who do you think made the final recommendation? Your work at Adamant was exemplary, but it was only the crown of your efforts, not the whole of them." He held out his hand, but this time for a firm handshake. "I can't think of a better man for the job. I only wish I could have attended the ceremony."

After a moment, Barris took Cullen's entire forearm with his hand, giving it a firm shake as he put his hand on Cullen's shoulder. "I thank you, but there is another matter I wished to discuss."

"Oh?" Cullen turned towards him, canting his head slightly. "Is there something the Templars need? I'm sure it can be arranged."

"No, Commander. But there is something I wish to offer you." Pressing his hands together, he offered Cullen a shallow bow. "My apologies."

Cullen didn't play dumb or pretend not to know what Barris meant. "There's no need for that," he assured Barris quietly. "I should have told you long ago."

"I am still guilty in my role, intentional or not," Barris insisted. "But it is also more than that. The lyrium kit you found in your office came from one of my Templars, but he reported it missing before we ever went to Adamant. I should have told the Inquisition about it, but at the time it merely seemed
to be an internal matter."

"Stolen, then," Cullen said softly, not surprised.

"Not just stolen, Commander. Tampered with," he explained. "We found a hollowed out compartment underneath the tools themselves, very cunningly crafted. It was Cole who showed it to us." Barris shifted on his feet, since he and his Templars felt the same ill at ease around Cole as Cullen did, then shook his head and opened the pouch at his waist. As he pulled out a kerchief and opened it on his palm, he said, "I'm not sure we would have found these, otherwise."

Cullen frowned as he looked at the objects in Barris' palm, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as his Templar training came to the fore. "Is that--"

"A lock of your hair? At a guess, I'd say yes," Barris said with a nod. "And I daresay if we had a maleficar at our disposal, they would say the blood on the wool belongs to you as well. This wasn't an accident or a simple trap, Commander. This was a deliberate attempt of sabotage."

"Maker," Cullen breathed. "Blood magic?"

"Without a doubt, but with a very narrow focus." Barris met Cullen's gaze. "You."

Cullen took a deep breath as a cold sweat broke on his brow. Again, it wasn't a surprise, but the scope and nature of the attempt shook him. "Who knows about this?"

"Seeker Cassandra, of course. Cole. And Lady Vivienne performed the magical analysis," Barris told him.

"Good," Cullen said with a nod. "We can trust them. Who else?"

"Normally my duties would require me to report all maleficar activity to the Chantry, but…" Barris hesitated. "I leave it to your discretion. The Chantry is not very well disposed towards the Inquisition at the moment."

"Or its Inquisitor." Cullen frowned, then carefully wrapped the wretched things into the kerchief again before shoving the whole mess into his pocket. "I'll inform the Inquisitor myself. In the meantime, double the guard on the lyrium and keep an eye on your Templars."

Barris nodded as if he'd expected the order. "I already had Vivienne examine our stores, and she found nothing amiss."

"There's that, at least. We can have her do the same for incoming shipments." Cullen swore softly as he realized they would have to watch the production of healing potions as well, to make sure they were not tampered with—at least until they got to the bottom of this.

"Understood, Commander." Barris cracked his arm over his breastplate in a quick salute. "Any suspicious activity will be reported to you immediately."

"Thank you, Knight-Commander." Cullen mirrored the salute expertly. "Return to your duties."

"Yes, Ser." Turning crisply on his heel, Barris marched away, leaving Cullen to his own thoughts.

The first thing Cullen did was go to the main hall. With a cursory nod to Varric, he pulled the kerchief with its vile contents from his pockets and flung them into the fire. As Cullen watched them burn to ash, Varric asked, "Was the sneeze really that bad, Curly?"
Cullen chuckled and glanced at Varric, glad to find a spark of humor in the situation. "The worst, Varric."

"Remind me not to get near you when I have a cold," Varric noted, then tapped the curls of his chest hair as he added, "I have a few things about my person that are particularly flammable, and I'd prefer to keep them whole."

Cullen's burst of laughter helped to clear away the shadows of fear a bit, and he grinned at the dwarf. "Don't worry, I'd never deprive a man of his favorite equipment."

Varric chuckled. "I think those are a bit lower, Curly. But I appreciate the sentiment."

And now they needed a change of topic. Quickly. "Are you still hosting those weekly games of yours?"

"Sure, if your purse is feeling too heavy," Varric said with a shrug. "It's usually just me, Sparkler, and Bull. Sometimes Blackwall, but he's been holing up in the stable a lot more lately."

"Then it sounds like you need a fourth."

"The more the merrier," Varric said with a wink. "Next game is in three days, if you're still feeling up to it."

"I'll be there." He could use some normalcy in his life, and a night of drinks and gambling sounded almost as normal as he could get.

"Got it. See you then," Varric said with a wink.

With a nod, Cullen looked at the fire to make sure the last bit had burned to ash. Once that was confirmed, he turned and headed to the tower, hoping to find Charter.

It was time to learn just how much the Inquisition knew about Amell's activities.

In his search to find Charter, Cullen's path eventually led him to the war room, where he found his quarry in consultation with Cassandra. They both looked up when he entered, and Cassandra gestured him over to join them.

"Charter was updating me on the newest reports from our agents," Cassandra explained.

A frown came to Cullen's face as he crossed the room. "Has there been any word from Leliana?"

"Nothing of note, Commander," Charter told him. "Instructions from her on matters we should investigate, but little concerning what she herself is doing."

"Little doesn't mean nothing," Cullen pointed out. "Have you deciphered her message? Can I read it?"

"Of course." Charter sorted through the papers in front of them, then pulled it out and gave it to Cullen. "Her writing is on the front, and the deciphered message on the back."

Cullen flipped the paper over and quickly read through the message, then read the original, cryptic wording as well. "You're right, there's not much here. This came by wing?"

"Yes, Commander, this morning, from a station not far from Val Royeaux." Charter leaned forward and tapped on the map. "Here. I've sent a message back to them asking if they saw her herself or
if she simply slipped in and released the crow without being seen."

With a sigh, Cullen rubbed his forehead. "I wish we knew why she is being so secretive. I mean, besides the fact that she's the Spymaster." Shaking his head, he gave the paper back to Charter. "I did have a question for you, however. How much information on the Hero of Ferelden has the Inquisition's agents managed to gather?"

With a grimace, Charter looked down at the papers on the table. "The Spymaster left specific instructions about him and his companion, Arainai."

Cullen raised an eyebrow. "Which were?"

"Seek, but do not engage," Charter said. "And we are to be wary of Fereldan Grey Wardens as well, if we encounter any."

That made Cullen pause for a moment as he quickly shuffled through past reports in his head. "Huh. That's true, all the Grey Wardens we've dealt with have been from Orlais. And your agents haven't encountered any from Ferelden at all?"

Charter shook her head. "None up close. Even the Grey Wardens in Crestwood were Orlesian Wardens. One of my agents was feathered with an arrow by a man in Warden armor a couple of weeks ago in the Frostbacks, but then they couldn't follow the trail after that. It's like the Wardens have disappeared from Ferelden entirely."

Cullen's jaw rippled. "Not a good sign. What about Amaranthine?"

"According to Arl Teagan, the Keep at Amaranthine has been empty of Wardens for weeks now," Cassandra put in. "Leliana told Inquisitor Lavellan of this, which is one reason she sought out Warden Blackwall in the Hinterlands. But Inquisitor Lavellan chose not to pursue the matter further, and they have not posed a sufficient enough threat to the Inquisition since to warrant a diversion of resources."

"We might want to discuss that with the Inquisitor," Cullen mused. "Not posing an active threat doesn't mean they aren't working against us from the shadows. And given recent revelations about the Warden-Commander of Ferelden..." He let the thought trail away.

Cassandra frowned. "I see your point. Charter, please find the Inquisitor and request he come here."

"Right away, Seeker," Charter said, then gave Cullen a salute.

"The last I saw him, he was with Josephine and Morris in the quartermaster's office," Cullen told her. "If that meeting can be rescheduled, it might be a good idea to bring Josephine back as well."

"Yes, Commander." With a nod to Cassandra, Charter headed to the door.

"It never even occurred to me that Amell might have had something to do with the Wardens' disappearance in Ferelden," Cassandra admitted quietly after Charter had left.

Cullen grunted. "I don't think anyone could fault us for assigning fault for that to Corypheus, especially after Adamant. I wish we'd thought to ask Loghain or Alistair about it before--" Again the words wouldn't come out, and he sighed heavily. "Even then, Corypheus is still the most likely reason, based on what we know."

Cassandra gave him a sympathetic look. "If our Wardens weren't away dealing with the darkspawn horde in the Western Approach, we could ask them. But they will not be away forever."
"True," Cullen said, then reached up to rub his forehead again, fighting the odd ringing of the song between his ears.

"Are you all right?" Cassandra asked. "You've done that a few times since your arrival."

Forcing himself to stop and look at his hand, Cullen smiled wryly. "I hadn't realized. It's nothing, just a bit of an ache. Nothing like before," he added, knowing he needn't elaborate.

The line of concern faded from her forehead as she nodded. "You seem much improved since last we spoke," she noted. "Was the Inquisitor able to assist you?"

Cullen's eyes narrowed as he focused on her. "How did you--"

A twinkle came to her eyes. "There is a particular little smile which comes to his face when he sees you walk through the courtyard of late. I assumed that you had gone to see him."

That answer made his ears heat, and he settled back on his heels, arms crossed over his chest. "And you, Seeker?" he asked, deliberately not pursuing that line of discussion even knowing that would in no way diminish her curiosity. "Are you well?"

The veiled amusement faded from Cassandra's expression, and she glanced down at the papers on the table. "I am worried about Leliana," she admitted quietly.

"Her absence is concerning, yes," Cullen agreed.

"It is more than that." She raised her eyes to meet Cullen's gaze. "From what I have gathered, you have your own past with Amell, do you not?"

Shoulders tensing, Cullen forced his expression to remain neutral as he nodded. "He was in Kinloch Hold Circle, my first Templar assignment. His Harrowing was my first, in fact. And I was there during the Blight." He'd already told Cassandra in general terms what had happened in Kinloch Hold, of course, but he'd never told her anything relating to Amell. Even now, it was difficult to speak of it with anyone, and Dorian only knew more because he'd witnessed some of it in Cullen's dreams. "He was a blood mage even back then, though we knew it not. It wouldn't surprise me if he killed Uldred to cover a loose end. I learned years later that Uldred had been grooming maleficarum under our noses for years."

Cassandra gave a soft sigh. "Yes. And that influenced you at Kirkwall."

"I'd like to think I didn't see blood mages in every corner as Meredith did, but it certainly made me more inclined to follow her lead when she used it as a reason to act," he said with a grimace. "I'm not proud of how long it took me to realize that I excused her paranoia as reasonable caution. But Amell..." His voice trailed away as he looked aside, struggling with the words for a few moments. "I think he delighted in leaving his mark on people."

"I believe Leliana would agree with you," Cassandra mused. "Occasionally I would overhear her speak with Divine Justinia of Amell and how he made her suffer. Had he been anyone other than who he was, the Divine would have sent a troop of Templars to deal with him."

"But being a Grey Warden, and more than that, the Grey Warden who ended a Blight, means even the Divine couldn't risk it?" Cullen asked, hearing the bitterness in his own voice.

With a nod, Cassandra added, "Especially in the aftermath of the Blight, when the Grey Wardens were able to use the Blight's relatively swift ending as a bludgeon to re-establish their status in Thedas. All Divine Justinia could offer Leliana was the protection of the Chantry and the position of..."
"Which is no mean protection," Cullen pointed out.

"No. But learning that Inquisitor Lavellan was killed by Amell... I do not know how that affected Leliana, but I do know that she would see it as a failure on her part." The worry returned to her face as she glanced out the window. "Just as she saw Divine Justinia's death as a failure."

Cullen closed his eyes for a moment. "And we still don't know the cause of that explosion, either."

Cassandra grew still. "You don't think Amell..."

"Amell?" Cullen shuddered, though once the thought was in place, he knew it would linger in the back of his mind. "Maker, I hope not. Corypheus seems by far the more likely culprit for the explosion, and you told me of what you heard in the Temple of Sacred Ashes when you first went there with Mai--with Inquisitor Lavellan."

"Yes." After a moment or two of silence, Cassandra added, "I wish we knew the truth of what happened there, before the explosion. It still haunts me."

Reaching over to place his hand on her shoulder, Cullen squeezed it gently. "Perhaps one day we will learn the truth. Until then--"

"Until then," she interrupted, "we shall continue as we must." She gave him a little smile. "All of us."

He nodded as he pulled his hand back. "All of us."

Her head tilted as she considered him for a few moments, a faint furrow appearing between her brows. "Which one do you consider the more dangerous?"

"Which-- Oh." He planted his hands on the table and stared down at the map. "We know that Corypheus has the Orb, and we know he seeks to become a god. He cannot be dismissed lightly."

"But?" she prompted.

He smiled ruefully, knowing that she knew him too well to not hear that unspoken thought. "But we don't know what Amell is truly after. And that... that frightens me." It was a bald statement, spoken quickly, but just saying the words made a chill run down his spine. "In the Fade, the Nightmare demon dangled a terrifying future with an Amell-turned-god in front of me, but I cannot know if that was my own fear or Amell's true ambitions. For all we know, what Amell seeks is worse than even that, hard as that may be to imagine."

Her hand landed on his, squeezing it tightly. "The Inquisition will not let them win," she swore. "Either of them."

Taking a deep breath, he tried to push the memory of his nightmares away and take strength in Cassandra's assurances. "You sound so certain."

"I am," Cassandra said firmly. "Yet perhaps if you can't place faith in my words, at least you can place faith in the Inquisitor, can you not?"

His glance instinctively turned to the door. As if in response to his gaze, the door opened wide and stayed that way, held open by Charter as she waited patiently for those behind her to pass through the portal. Dorian deferred to Josephine with a cordial bow, waiting until she had passed through to
straighten to his full height.

For the barest moment, as Dorian stood in a halo of sunlight pouring in through the broken wall of the hallway, Cullen felt a pulse of awe push through him. Inquisitor Dorian Pavus, Chosen of the Herald of Andraste... those weren't simply words. They were power, and a mandate, and a burden. And for that barest moment, Cullen forgot how to see beyond that to the man within, seeing only what the Inquisitor wished others to see.

And then their eyes met, and the titles fell away between them as Dorian smiled with a genuine warmth which stole Cullen's breath and invited a like response. He was the Inquisitor, but more importantly, he was Dorian --the man who had earned Cullen's faith even more surely than the Inquisition.

"Yes," Cullen said softly, and for Cassandra's ears alone. "I can."

As the Inquisitor stepped through the door, Cullen gave Cassandra's hand a final pat, then straightened. It was time for business, after all--a business with, Cullen privately allowed himself to admit, an impeccable view.

Especially when Dorian smiled.

The next day, as the sun was setting on the third day after his late night visit to Dorian, Cullen found himself staring blankly out of the window in his office across the foothills below. His chest was tight, and one hand gripped the hilt of his sword as if it were a lifeline. The anger was inchoate, but present, and when the wave burst, he ripped his sword from his scabbard and turned, driving the tip down into his desk with a precision which still found the center of a knot.

"Well," a voice said at the door cheerfully, "that's one way to make a hole to hold a quill."

Cullen looked up in surprise as a rush of embarrassment swept over him at his loss of control. "Inquisitor, I--"

"Ah, ah, ah," Dorian told him. "Don't apologize. I won't have it." As Dorian entered the room and closed the door before him, Cullen saw that he had a bag slung over his shoulder. "I'm going to assume you aren't mad at the foothills for existing, or the sun for going down, but do tell me if the truth is otherwise. The sun can be a cheeky bastard in the morning after I've had a bit too much wine, but I always assumed it leaves after a long day of showing its ass to recover a bit of its dignity."

A reluctant smile broke onto Cullen's face, and he laughed weakly at Dorian's description. "That is one of the silliest things I've heard you say," he admitted as he slumped down into his chair.

"Well, then obviously you need to spend more time with me," Dorian told him as he approached the desk. "Now. Care to tell me what that was really about, or would that prove too great a difficulty?"

Cullen's smile faded, and he looked down for a moment. "It's the lyrium. Well… it's the trying to let go of it. Again." The admission still hurt, a personal lapse he was too proud to blame on the Nightmare demon. "The song… it's dim, but in the quiet moments I hear it."

Dorian glanced to the orange sky outside the window. "The quiet moments when all the soldiers are at supper, the market is closed, and all you can hear is the deafening notes of it inside your head?"

Pulling the sword from the desk to slide home in its sheath, Cullen smiled warily. "That's a far more poetic way to say it than I could manage, but yes. Exactly that."
"Then I am glad I came," Dorian said with a smile that reached his eyes.

The smile seemed to reach inside Cullen and warm him through, pulling one to his own lips in return. "Me, too."

"Then you won't mind that I brought you a present, yes?" With a flourish, Dorian swung the bag onto the desk, where it landed with a metallic thwump. "Here we are. The fruits of Dagna's labor over the last few days. It's fantastic, though I'm no expert in metallurgy."

Cullen's eyebrows rose, and he pushed himself to his feet as the spark of hope deep within grew. "Already?"

"She is a remarkably quick worker, yes," Dorian said as he pulled a pile of finely knit chain from the bag. "She says it's an alloy of stormheart and volcanic aurum, along with everything else, because that would somehow make it lighter and stronger both. I'll just take her word for it." He held it up, showing a shirt which seemed to change color in the flicker of the candlelight and the darkening light from outside. "Here, try it on."

"What, now?" Cullen asked, eyebrows rising.

"It's not like I haven't seen you without a shirt on before," Dorian reminded him with a laugh. "I promised her I'd tell her if it fit or not in exchange for you not having to strip down in the forge again."

Cullen had to chuckle at that. "A fair trade. All right." He walked around the table even as he pulled his fur mantle off and laid it on the desk.

"Your limp is almost gone," Dorian noted. "The healers told me that you're almost ready to return to full duties."

"Almost full duties," Cullen said as he removed his belt and scabbard and set it in his fur. "I can't quite fight yet, at least not against a true opponent. At least I can get back to yelling at the recruits."

"Telling them to get their shields up over and over again?" Dorian asked with a laugh.

"It's better than sitting behind my desk all day, feeling useless," Cullen said a bit more harshly than he meant to, emphasizing the momentary surge of emotion by practically ripping his shirt off over his head.

"Or thinking about things you can't have?" Dorian asked in a gentle tone.

Cullen glanced sharply at him. Did he mean… "That's… that's part of it," he said hesitantly.

"Lyrium is hard enough to resist," Dorian said in sympathy, moving close so he could put his hand on Cullen's shoulder. "I can't imagine the nightmare of dealing with red lyrium in the same way."

Oh. Lyrium. Of course. Then he didn't mean… Cullen looked down, not sure if he was disappointed or relieved. "Thank you," he said quietly, and meant it. "I don't know how I would have handled this without you."

"Tish tosh. Now," Dorian said, raising the mail shirt again. "Let's get this on, shall we?"

It took some maneuvering, but finally they managed to get the chain mail shirt over his head and shoulders. As Dagna had promised, it was a sleek fit, but not an overly tight one. She'd lined it with fine silk for comfort, for which Cullen was grateful. More importantly, however, as soon as it was
on, the hint of the lyrium's song which had dogged his every waking moment for days on end simply... stopped.

His eyelids sagged shut as he leaned his head back with a sigh of relief. "Thank the Maker," he breathed.

"I presume that I may report a successful prototype to Dagna?" Dorian asked from behind him, tugging the last bit of it into place at the bottom.

"Hold on." Cullen took a deep breath and settled in to listen, to feel, to see if the respite was as total as he hoped. After a few long moments, he heard what could best be described as a memory of the corrupted song, but it was so dim that he could, at least, live with it. "I'm not sure how it will be long-term," he admitted. "But for now, at least, it's almost like being normal again."

"Surely you wouldn't wish to be so mundane, Commander," Dorian teased him. "You're far too interesting to be normal."

Cullen half-turned towards him, biting his lip when he saw Dorian's eyes flicker down in a way which seemed to indicate admiring the view. "I could say the same about you, Dorian," he murmured, the change to name rather than title quite deliberate as the little flame of hope tried to burn away his reticence. If Dagna could do this, a cure suddenly didn't seem so outlandish as it had even a few days ago.

Dorian smiled in response, then glanced upward. "I see you are using your new window," he observed.

A little surprised at the abrupt change in subject, Cullen followed his gaze. "I meant to thank you earlier. It's a simple answer to a simple problem."

"One you never let Mailani fix, as I recall," Dorian noted.

"She offered once, but the workers wanted to replace the whole roof." Cullen's brows tightened at the mere thought of it. "I told them it would take too long, and she never suggested it again. Why?"

"No particular reason," Dorian murmured. "Idle curiosity, hmm? Pay it no mind."

As Cullen puzzled over the odd comment, however, an abrupt image of Dorian's little nook in the library flashed through his mind, and his eyes widened. The nook wasn't just a place where Dorian could be surrounded by his beloved books, it was also the only place in the library right next to a window. "I never realized," Cullen whispered, only aware he'd spoken the words aloud once they hit his ears.

"Realized what, pray tell?" Dorian asked with a tilt of his head.

"You didn't choose your seat in the library by chance at all. You needed that window as much as I need my hole in the roof."

Dorian gave a heartfelt sigh. "I told Mailani when she first asked me that I needed it to compensate for the atrocious lighting in the library. She saw through that relatively quickly, considering I can conjure up better light for reading than even the sun can provide." He smiled sadly. "It took me a long time to admit the truth, even to her. I tend not to discuss it."

Fighting the urge to take Dorian's hand in his, Cullen said softly, "Tell me."

Dorian inhaled sharply and closed his eyes for a moment. "Perhaps we can take this conversation
outside?"

Again caught off-guard by the deflection, Cullen murmured, "Of course. Whatever you wish, Inquisitor."

"Hmm, I wouldn't go that far yet," Dorian murmured as he opened his eyes and met Cullen's gaze with a smile. "It's just that I imagine the sunset is quite breathtaking at the moment."

That smile definitely had a certain breath-stealing quality about it, and Cullen found himself staring a moment before he cleared his throat and nodded. "There's, ah, a bit of the ramparts next to the door that blocks most of the wind. We could stand there." After a moment's hesitation, he finally offered his hand. "I could show you."

Without hesitation, Dorian accepted Cullen's offer, squeezing their hands together tightly. "I would quite like that."

"This way." Cullen headed to his north door, aware of just how close they were as he brought them to the sheltered nook which let them look out over the foothills below Skyhold. The sun hadn't quite reached the horizon yet, but it wasn't far off.

He settled his free hand onto the ramparts, drawing Dorian to his side by pulling their joined hands to rest there as well. Once there, he felt Dorian relax his hold. Any disappointment he might have felt at Dorian letting go vanished as he felt a hand settle on top of his. For a long moment, his attention focused almost completely on the way Dorian's fingertips played with the outline of his knuckles, until finally he cleared his throat. "Ah, we were--you were going to--"

"...soothing." Cullen swallowed harshly. "Soothing, and maybe something more. But I'm not letting you wriggle out of this one," he said, as much for himself as for Dorian. "You want to tell me something, or you wouldn't have brought it up in the first place."

"True. I wouldn't." Dorian turned his gaze to look at the mountains beyond. "After Alexius and I parted ways as mentor and pupil, I didn't handle it very well. I became a drunken sot, to put it nicely. Eventually Father tracked me down--" Dorian's jaw rippled for a moment, and then his shoulders sagged. "And took me home, to Qarinus. And didn't let me leave."

Cullen frowned, concern replacing the heat as Dorian spoke. "For how long?"

"Weeks. Months. I lost track of the time, honestly."

"Months? " Cullen asked, incredulous. "Why?"

"Because I wouldn't dance to his tune. I refused to stop my indulgences, as he called them. I refused to wed a woman I had no liking for. Worse, I was unrepentant for any of my many sins, or for putting House Pavus in such a compromised position with my antics. So he took the last thing I had of value in my life: my freedom." An edge of anger stained his voice as he added, "And even that wasn't enough, in the end."
"That I remember," Cullen said softly. On impulse, he grasped Dorian's hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to Dorian's knuckles. "You deserve so much better."

The gesture made Dorian open his eyes and look at Cullen, lips easing into a smile. "Yes, well, that isn't a problem anymore, is it? I'm the Inquisitor now. He has even less power over me than he did the moment I finally managed to escape his clutches."

Cullen relaxed, glad to see Dorian's mood lighten. "It's good you realize that. I wish I could feel the same way about Amell," he admitted, a touch ruefully.

"Oh, well, that's perfectly understandable," Dorian said with a little shrug. "My father may be a cantankerous, powerful Magister who sought to completely rewrite my personality, but he is still no maleficar somniari regarded by Thedas as the Hero of the Fifth Blight because he struck down the Archdemon and lived. Both are creepy, but of entirely different orders of magnitude."

"Well, when you put it like that," Cullen said with a chuckle, turning so that he faced Dorian a bit more directly.

"Oh, but I do," Dorian said, turning around so that he could lean against the ramparts. "I get to do that, you know. Make declarations and all that. I am the Inquisitor, after all."

"Mmm, yes, I seem to recall that." As his thumb ran over Dorian's knuckles, he added, "Though you're not really the Inquisitor right now, are you? You're Dorian. That's all you ever need to be around me."

"Is it?" Dorian murmured. "I admit, I quite like the sound of that."

Cullen stepped a bit closer, his hand coming to rest on the rampart next to Dorian's waist. Maker, the man looked amazing even in twilight. "I… had a lot of time to think on the way back to Skyhold," he said softly.

The words didn't come easily, working as they were through a morass of emotion and thoughts that hadn't quite coalesced into words. His earlier concerns about what the red lyrium might mean to him, to his future, seemed to have dimmed with the donning of Dagna's armor. As the color of the horizon blazed into a mess of brilliant colors, Cullen realized just how much Dorian and he shared, an understanding so very different than any he'd shared with anyone else--even Mailani. It wasn't that it was better or deeper than what he'd felt for Mailani, but it was important to him, despite how long it had taken to bubble to the surface. Standing here on the ramparts, torso clad in an armor that worked miracles and speaking intimately with someone as he had once before so many months ago…

Somehow, it just seemed right.

"It must have been a rather boring trip back to Skyhold for you," Dorian murmured. His free hand moved to support himself on the ramparts, though that may have just been an excuse to settle it close enough to Cullen's hand that their fingers touched. "Seeing as I couldn't spend very much time with you."

"I admit, you were the highlight of each day, during the journey and thereafter." Touching wasn't enough, not for what Cullen intended, and he slowly slid his fingers up Dorian's arm. "And each night."

Dorian's eyebrow rose. "Now there you've lost me, I'm afraid, as I only recall the one night I ended up sprawled on my own couch."

Heart racing, Cullen shifted his hand to Dorian's side and slid it down to settle on the man's waist as
he murmured, "It wasn't Mailani in my dreams, Dorian. Not those dreams, anyway."

Dorian's eyes widened for a moment, then darted down to linger on Cullen's lips before dancing back up to meet Cullen's intense gaze. "I wonder if perhaps you could provide a demonstration for the class? Father always said I was a slow learner."

*Maker, please.* "Oh, I want to--" he began in a husky voice, even as he leaned in.

"Commander!"

There were a few times when Jim's interruption had been unwelcome in the past, but usually Cullen could take them somewhat in stride. This time, however, Cullen assumed the full bearing of the Commander of the Inquisition Forces as he turned and snarled, "What?" with irritation so evident that Jim skidded to a halt a few feet away.

Swallowing, Jim bravely held up a piece of paper. "Um… Important message, ser, for the--"

Snatching it from Jim's fingers, Cullen gestured towards the stairs. "Yes, yes, message received, thank you. Now be on your way." As Jim fled, Cullen crumpled the piece of paper and turned back to Dorian.

Or to where Dorian *had been*, at any rate.

With a frown, Cullen turned around, looking desperately for some indication of where Dorian had gone. For a moment he wondered if, somehow, he had simply read the man wrong, that his attentions were unwelcome. Before the panic had a chance to grab hold, however, a horn sounded from the lookout tower announcing the arrival of important visitors. A shiver ran down Cullen's back, and he ran back to the ramparts and looked down at the long, winding road leading to the front door of Skyhold.

He saw the lights before anything else, moving in the dark of early night. His Templar instincts immediately sounded a silent alarm as he realized that the lights were not torches, but rather a veritable parade of wisps and mage lights keeping the night at bay. Armed warriors marched before and after the carriages, and even as Cullen watched, banners unfurled at the front of the procession to flap in the stiff breeze coming down from Skyhold. Cullen's eyes immediately went from evaluating the soldiers to deciphering the emblem now displayed.

"Maker," he breathed, suddenly understanding exactly why Dorian had vanished, and *who* the message had been for. Only one country sported a serpent on their regalia, after all.

It seemed that Magister Pavus had finally arrived.
Dorian kept his face calm as he made his way to Skyhold's vaulted entrance. Calm. Yes. Calm. That would be his watchword no matter what happened, no matter what his father said, no matter the provocation by any member of the delegation or whatever they styled themselves to be. He would be the Inquisitor, Chosen of the Herald of Andraste and leader of the Inquisition, not merely a recalcitrant Altus or a pariah of the Imperium, and that would be that.

Josephine was already there, of course. He would have been shocked had she not been waiting for him. Coming to a halt beside her as they waited for the carriages to negotiate the final turn on the winding road leading up to Skyhold, he gave her a bright smile. "Ambassador. Why, it has been far too long since last we met."

"Inquisitor," she said with a little bow over her ledger, though her lips did curve slightly since it had been only an hour or so since their earlier meeting. "I have done what I can to accommodate our guests, but--"

Dorian waved her apology aside. "But they are here sooner than we expected, yes. I suspect someone wiggled their fingers. Otherwise I'm not sure how they traveled a day's worth of travel in half the time."

"Or perhaps this is only part of the entourage," Josephine said as the carriages came into sight. "Surely they did not travel so far with so little."

"Ah. Perhaps," Dorian murmured, but his eyes were on the lead centurions. Someone had taken care to remove all House insignias from their armor and spears, leaving their attire oddly plain. Even the snakes of the Imperium had been removed from their greaves and breastplates, though the pennants the standard bearers bore showed the serpent of the Imperium. Tugging his eyes from the soldiers, he scrutinized the carriages, hoping for a hint of who accompanied his father, but they bore no mark whatsoever. Rented, more than likely. "I don't suppose Charter received a report in the last bit of time with some sort of list?" he asked a bit plaintively.

"No, Inquisitor," she told him. "For all the flowery language in their official missive sent to the Inquisition, only Magister Pavus was named directly."

He sighed. "And no word from Leliana yet?"

"No, Inquisitor," Josephine said softly. "Nothing."

"I see." Dorian frowned for a moment, tucking that particular lingering worry into the back of his mind once more. There was little they could do about it now, after all.

"The lack of detail concerning our guests is a common ploy, Inquisitor," Josephine said. "Particularly when the visiting party wishes to keep their host off-balance upon their arrival."

"Or it could just as easily be that they didn't want the Venatori to intercept such a list. There are those in the Imperium who sympathize with the Venatori, and I'm sure it has become a gambit in the Magisterium. A list written down might prove politically inconvenient. My father, at least, could be viewed as a logical choice for this delegation." He fell silent for a moment, then muttered, "At least, logical if you have no heart."

Concern on her face, Josephine lightly set her hand on his arm. "I could welcome them in the name of the Inquisition on my own," she offered.
He patted her hand gently, grateful for the offer. "No, and you know precisely why I must be here, now, when they arrive. It would be seen as a sign of weakness if I am not here." With a little sigh, he squared his shoulders as the carriages drew to a halt and the centurions parted in precise formation to clear the way for those within. "Though I do hope you have a plan in the event that I blast the stubborn man off the top of the mountain."

"Ah..." Her expression in response to his words, he had to admit, proved priceless. "I would very strongly suggest you do not act in such a manner, Inquisitor."

With a chuckle, he gave her a slow wink. "I shall strive to avoid embarrassing you so very much, Lady Ambassador." Relief settled on her face, but it was the ching of mailed boots on cobblestones which made Dorian turn with a grateful smile. "Why, it appears the reinforcements have arrived."

"I'm not about to let a bunch of foreign soldiers into Skyhold without suffering my scrutiny," Cullen grunted as he settled into place next to Dorian. His normal armor and fur mantle were back in place, and he'd even gone so far as to strap his sword and shield on for display. "Besides, I wouldn't want them to think us without our own strength. The soldiers, at least, will respect my presence, even if the Magisters don't." Settling his hand on the hilt of his sword, his eyes swept over the soldiers. "And those centurions are professionals, if I'm any judge."

"That they are." And, Dorian realized for the first time, unfamiliar. So not soldiers of House Pavus. Before he could study them further, however, a footman pulled open the carriage door and assisted someone from within to the ground. The man--a Magister from the marks on his robe and his face hidden in the depths of the hood--waved the servant back and walked slowly towards Dorian and his two Advisors, then came to a halt a few feet away.

Slowly the man reached up and pushed his hood back, and Dorian felt his shoulders tighten. His father looked... older. More worn. The details caught Dorian's attention: dark hair previously only peppered with age was now all shades of grey, even sporting one or two solid streaks of white, and his face showed deeper lines than when they'd met in Redcliffe. Dorian blinked, and for a moment, he saw only the vital man Halward had been in Dorian's youth, in the days when Dorian had ached for even a proud nod from the man he'd respected above all others. With a quick mental shake of his head, Dorian dismissed the image and instead inclined his head towards his father in greeting.

"Magister." Dorian delivered the word in a neutral tone, hoping to conceal both the fear and the upset which filled him. His inner emotions roiled in a complicated mélange, concern for his father's health battling with the long-burning anger he still felt over Halward's plan to change him.

"Welcome to Skyhold."

Halward closed his eyes and bowed his head. After a moment, he cleared his throat and raised it once more. "Inquisitor. I am honored to be here."

"Quarters have been readied for you and your companions," Dorian continued, albeit stiffly. "You shall not find the hospitality of the Inquisition wanting."

"The representatives of the Imperium thank the Inquisition for their hospitality," his father said, continuing the ritual by rote, "and we thank them for their time."

"And we thank the representatives of the Imperium for their presence," Dorian said, completing the exchange with a bow that was, perhaps, a bit more shallow than it should have been.

Halward's returning bow proved to be a bit less petty, giving Dorian all the due of a Magister, which was a subtle shading between giving Dorian more than his due as Altus of the Imperium but less than his due as leader of the Inquisition. On the other hand, it was also the bow of equal to equal, and thus
an interesting choice for a father to make to his son. *Perhaps he means to behave while he's here.* That thought proved premature in the next breath, however, as Halward met Dorian's eyes with a slight frown. "And does the son not have a greeting for the father?"

Even as Josephine opened her mouth to respond with her usual tact and diplomacy, Dorian crossed his arms over his chest and stuck out his chin. "The Inquisitor has done his duty here," he said crisply. "The son owes the father nothing. I thought that quite clear when last they met."

"Dorian--" Halward began, then fell silent as Dorian made a sharp gesture.

"Don't, Father." Dorian heard the harshness in his voice immediately, realizing belatedly that it might be too much even before his father's face hardened.

"And here I thought you had perhaps grown with your new responsibilities," Halward noted in a tone just short of a sneer. Dorian knew it was a technique, designed to make him lash out, knew it was a facade his father used when he didn't want to show his emotions in front of others. After all, Dorian had learned his own self-defense mechanisms from the ones he'd deemed masters.

How many times had he heard the same tricks used in the bickering between his parents as they'd skirted every minimal barrier of outright fighting while eating as a family? Or during the few times they'd taken enough of a personal interest in his progress to actually spend some time with him instead of simply demanding perfection through the proxies of governesses and tutors? How often had he been forced to withstand those tongues turned on him when he didn't manage to live up to their impossible standards, or to endure the moments when he had done all he could only to be met with a shake of the head and a scathing comment?

It was no wonder he had so few friends.

Pressing his lips together, Dorian lifted his chin in defiance. "I do have many responsibilities, Magister. And I really should attend to them, if you'll excuse me."

"Oh, I'm sure you do," Halward said acidly. "Even after I've come all this way to bring aid from the Imperium, there are still things more important?"

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "Pardon? The Imperium is officially neutral on the matter of the Inquisition. Even your letter stated as such."

Halward looked at him as if he were a child. "The letter was a ruse, of course," he said disdainfully. "The last thing we want is for the Venatori to learn that elements of the Magisterium might actually support the Inquisition."

"Why?" Dorian demanded. "The Venatori represent every sad sack cliche about the Imperium that the South uses against us. Why worry about going counter to them at all?"

"I think this discussion should be taken--" Josephine tried to interject, but Halward had already moved closer to Dorian.

"You're being as stubborn as always when you're losing an argument," Halward said with narrowed eyes.

"And you are being as stubborn as always when your argument doesn't even have a place to rest its ass," Dorian shot back, not even caring at this point that they had made themselves into somewhat of a spectacle.

As Halward opened his mouth to respond, a woman's voice cut through the air. "Well, then, I think
that's enough entertainment for the troops. Perhaps we could all go inside?"

Dorian blinked and looked past his father to where a blond woman had descended from the carriage to stand and glare at the two of them with folded arms. "Mae?" he gasped.

"Yes, darling, it's me." Maevaris sauntered over to join them, an amused expression on her face. "I see the men of House Pavus are as deliciously themselves as ever. Still, could we perhaps move along? I'm getting a bit cold out here. The South is so dreadfully... Hmm."

"Rustic?" Dorian suggested, then pulled Mae into a hug with a laugh. She was truly someone he had missed from the Imperium. "It is, isn't it? Delightfully so, in fact."

She gave him a quick squeeze, then pulled back and swatted at his arm. "Appearances, Inquisitor. We must maintain our appearances, and it's hard to do that with wrinkles in my dress. I had hoped that Halward would be a sufficient representative until we got indoors, but apparently I can't trust either of you to behave." Halward coughed and looked abashed, and Dorian felt a sheepish expression creep across his face of its own will. With a laugh, Mae patted Dorian on the cheek. "It's good to see you, my dear, and I do want to speak with you, but... after a bath. You do have baths, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Dorian assured her. "Nice hot ones, I would imagine. I'm certain our dear Lady Ambassador has made civilized arrangements for you."

"Of course she did," Maevaris said with a slow wink. "Though since I am out in this barbaric cold, perhaps some introductions are in order."

Feeling quite like he was a teenager again--but then, Mae sometimes had that effect on people--Dorian took her hand and turned to Josephine. "My dear Josephine, may I present Magister Maevaris Tilani? Don't believe that smile of hers, my dear--she's a Magister, and that means she can be positively lethal."

Maevaris swatted his arm again, then smiled at Josephine. "A pleasure to meet you. I've read your missives to myself and others, and marveled at your ability to treat some of them as if they have a modicum of intelligence. Most impressive."

Josephine smiled as she settled into a deep curtsy. "Magister Tilani."

"And this is the Lady Josephine Montilyet, the inimitable and redoubtable Ambassador for the Inquisition," Dorian continued expansively.

"Well, working with you, she certainly has her work cut out for her." Maevaris ignored Dorian's mock-grasp of outrage and gave Josephine a wink. "Though perhaps we could finish the pleasantries later. Preferably tomorrow, given the hour."

"Of course, my lady Magister," Josephine said. "I have prepared your suites per the details in your delegation's letter, and suitable accommodations await all of you."

"Including baths?" Maevaris asked hopefully.

Josephine allowed herself a small chuckle. "Definitely including baths, my lady. I believe quite firmly in civilization myself."

"You are a darling," Maevaris breathed with a happy smile, then turned back to the carriages. "I'll see you later, Inquisitor Dorian. Halward, with me."
Halward sighed, though he didn't immediately follow. Instead, he looked at Dorian. "There are matters we need to discuss," he said quietly. "At your leisure."

Dorian looked sharply at him. That tone was highly unusual, proffering a rather wan apology through nuance and stance more than anything, but an attempt nevertheless. Something had changed since last he saw his father. His eyes studied Halward more closely for a moment, then widened as he saw the edge of a scar peeking over the top of the man's collar. Touching his own neck briefly, Dorian met Halward's gaze with a question in his eyes, and his father sighed and nodded.

"Until then, Inquisitor." After giving Dorian a bow that was closer to one owed the Archon than a Magister, much less an Altus, he turned and headed back to the wagon with slow and uneven steps.

A frown came to his face as Dorian watched him go. Oh, he was still angry, but a Magister of the Imperium didn't suddenly sprout a scar on his neck for no reason. And given Imperium practice, if something happened there which concerned House Pavus, it would, eventually, find him. As a refugee Altus suddenly sprung to newfound power at the head of the Inquisition, Dorian knew that he was more prominent than he would have been had he simply been the Inquisitor's friend--and in the Imperium, particularly in the Magisterium, notoriety meant danger.

As the troops took their marching positions in front of the carriage again, he turned to Josephine and Cullen. "I leave them in your capable hands, both of you," he told them, not daring to hold Cullen's sympathetic gaze for too long. "Following typical Imperium convention, they will 'freshen up'--which means they'll plot and bicker and decide how to present a united front--and then request a private audience. Thankfully, Mae sounds like she will postpone the unpleasantries until tomorrow morning, but I expect they will request to be the first business of the day."

Josephine's pen danced across her ledger as she took notes. "I shall see to it, Inquisitor. Do you have any special instructions for me in the meantime?"

Well, that's about the most diplomatic way to ask if I expect any problems to arise, Dorian thought wryly. "I anticipate a few more surprises from them," Dorian cautioned her. "Nothing dangerous, per se, but they wouldn't be Magisters if they weren't always looking for an advantage. Make sure there are always a few Templars visible from the windows of their suites, and check in with Charter to ensure none of their servants slip down to the kitchens."

"And I'll task Jim to keep an eye on their soldiers under the guise of guide," Cullen interjected.

"Krem's here, isn't he?" Dorian asked in a low voice. "Get him to work with Jim. It'd be good if we had someone who can understand our gibberish listening in on the soldiers when they're at their most relaxed. They won't be as guarded as the nobles."

"Noted. I'll take care of it," Cullen assured him. "If Bull hasn't already."

Dorian smiled fondly. "He is suspicious of those blasted Vints, true. Thank you." Straightening, he nodded to each of them--though perhaps his gaze did linger a bit longer on Cullen--before he moved past them and into Skyhold, signaling the delegation that it was time to officially enter the Inquisition's hospitality.

Habit took him forward and up the stairs, his brittle smile as fixed in place as his calm demeanor while he made his way to his quarters. Idly he listened to snatches of gossip as he walked, unsurprised to hear that most of it concerned the new arrivals and speculation about how it related to himself and the Inquisition. As he slowed to catch as many of the whispers as he could, however, a movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Quickly he angled to his right, obeying Varric's summons with a bright smile.
"Ah, I see you have settled into a front row seat for the entertainment, despite the hour," Dorian greeted him cheerfully.

Varric nodded. "Yeah, you know me. I'm not happy unless I'm near a fire. Especially when there's snow on the ground outside." Varric gave a little shudder.

"I wholeheartedly agree," Dorian noted. "I wonder if I should ask Solas if he has any other fortresses tucked up his sleeve, but down in the plains somewhere."

"That might be asking a little too much from Chuckles," Varric said with a grin. "Besides, as long I have this fire and you have that huge bed of yours, I think we'll be all right. It's only until we take down Corypheus. Well... A worried expression came to his face. "Probably only until we take down Corypheus."

"I certainly don't intend to play in the snow any longer than I have to," Dorian told him. "Austere stone is not really my preferred look for a domicile, attempts at domesticity aside."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Varric said fervently. "There's a reason I've never 'gone to ground' or whatever dwarves call it. I much prefer smoky dens and bad ale in a place where the windows open to the sky. I just prefer it with less snow."

"At least the fire is always burning," Dorian said with forced cheerfulness, then continued in a lower voice, "though I daresay you didn't summon me over here to discuss the weather."

"That would be a fair assumption," Varric said, his eyes darting around quickly. "Since Nightingale hasn't been around since we got back, I thought I should pass along a few things I've heard from some of my contacts."

Dorian's gaze sharpened, and he moved to stand next to Varric, both of them miming the action of warming their hands at the fire to avoid their lips being seen by those still gathered in the hall. "Very well. What do I need to know?"

"Well, let's get the general rumors out of the way first," Varric said with a chuckle, keeping his shoulders and face relaxed to mimic Dorian's nonchalance. "First of all, general consensus in Skyhold seems to be that they don't consider you a Vint anymore. That's good for morale, because it means that these new Vints are the interlopers, and not your bosses. I know that was one thing Nightingale and Charter were keeping an ear on. Bull agrees with me on this, too, and if anyone would pay attention to rumors about Vints, it's him."

"Good," Dorian breathed. For all that he still dearly loved his homeland, he wasn't sure that he could call it home anymore, even for nostalgia's sake. "What else?"

"Some rumors about a certain Inquisitor and a certain Commander canoodling on the ramparts is already making the rounds," Varric said with a grin. "Something about an interrupted kiss. Somebody should have remembered that rumors fly faster than sparrows around here."

"Veshante kaffas," Dorian muttered under his breath. "That was only half a candle ago!"

"Plenty of time for a bird to circle the Keep, much less a nice, juicy rumor like that," Varric pointed out. "Just thought you'd want to know. Maybe next time you should arrange to kiss him inside instead of up on the ramparts, even at night. Besides, elves can see in the dark."

Dorian's eyebrows rose. "They can?"

"Yeah. You didn't know that, I take it?" Varric chuckled. "Might want to keep that in mind in case..."
the urge to shove Curly into a convenient poorly lit corner overtakes you."

"Thank you, Varric," Dorian snipped. "That's more than enough on the subject. Is there anything else?"

"Word is that our resident Warden hero has been acting strange ever since we got back from Adamant," Varric said, becoming serious again. "He's always haunted the stable like a half-Faded ghost, but he's practically as much a recluse as the kid these days. You might want to keep an eye on him. He's not talking to anyone, and Tiny says he hasn't been in for a drink since Adamant."

Dorian frowned. "Hm. We're not the best of friends, Blackwall and I, but I've never wished him anything worse than a shower, a shave, and a decent fashion sense. I'll speak with him as soon as I can." As soon as I can figure out when that is, he added with a mental sigh. "Anything else?"

"Not right now, no. And I'm only really telling you all this because you need the distraction," Varric told him bluntly. "You're looking a bit thunder-faced. Might want to rein that in a little."

"I'll bear that in mind," Dorian sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"No charge, Sparkler. You owe me enough as it is." As Dorian turned, Varric added, "Just remember: kiss him inside next time, preferably away from a window or a balcony."

"Thank you, Varric," Dorian grated as he made his way to his chambers. The fixed smile returned to his face as he realized just how many eyes were on him, scrutinizing his every move. Still, he wasn't an Altus of the Imperium for nothing, and being Inquisitor had not diminished his skills at handling public attention in the least. Squaring his shoulders, he lifted an eyebrow imperiously and continued on his way, nodding regally at the worst offenders and giving subtle winks to those whose lips twitched in amusement beneath their masks.

Once he reached the safety of his quarters, however, and with the door closed firmly behind him, he leaned his head against it and took a long, deep breath as he forced the tension away. He thought he'd been prepared to meet his father, but once the reality hit, he hadn't been nearly as ready as he'd hoped. "Sweet Maker, but he was right," Dorian muttered. "We are too much alike, stubborn brontos that we are."

It took a deliberate thought to shove himself away from the door, but once he set into motion, it proved a simple matter to keep going all the way to his sideboard and its enchanting collections of carafes filled to the brim with high quality and above all else potent libations. Before he knew it, he had a glass full of fine Antivan brandy in his hand, and the will to consume it. For a bare moment he contemplated it, then knocked it back with one long swallow. That led to a second glass, and then a third, but instead of quenching the simmering anger within, each drink only seemed to make it burn hotter.

"Responsibility," Dorian snarled as he poured the last of the carafe into his glass and raised it to stare at the enticing amber colored liquid. "He wouldn't know responsibility if it bit him on his dick."

"I think most people would at least know they'd been bit on the dick, though," a deep voice rumbled behind him.

Dorian jumped a few inches, spilling quite a bit of brandy on himself, and turned to stare blearily up at a familiar face. "How on Thedas do you manage to sneak up on me like that?" he complained waspishly. "You're the size of a gurn, with the odor and hide to match."

"Carpet, boss," Bull said with a grin. "You said that before, remember?"
With a sniff, Dorian looked down at the near empty glass in his hand. "This is your fault," he accused, presenting the offending item to the ex-Qunari.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Bull leveled a direct stare, made more unnerving by the fact it was delivered by only one eye. "And just how many did you have before that?" he asked bluntly.

"One or two," Dorian said with a careless shrug.

"Uh huh." Bull's eye flicked down to where the empty carafe sat on the side table, then looked back up at Dorian. "Those are refilled every day," he pointed out. "So I'd say a couple more than one or two."

Dorian made a dismissive gesture. "Details, details."

"Maybe. Or maybe we could talk about this dick whose dick needs biting, or whatever you were mumbling about when I got here," Bull said, arms still crossed over his chest. "Seems like you're not the only Vint here anymore."

"Oh, that." Dorian sniffed and contemplated his empty glass for a moment. "Yes, my father has decided to grace us with his presence. I suppose it was inevitable that once I became something more than a vagrant wastrel squandering my life by freezing in some remote southern mountain, he would suddenly take an interest." With a shake of his head, he tossed the glass onto the side table and turned to face Bull. "I suppose it doesn't matter why he's here, does it? He's here. And I don't know what to do."

Bull grunted as he tilted his head. "Gotta admit, this is something I just don't get. Never had a father myself. I assume I got squirted out of a cock at some point, but I don't know whose. The people who raised me took good care of me. I mean," he gestured down his body, "that's pretty obvious. You don't get results like this unless you know what you're doing when it comes to raising kids, right?"

"Whatever you say, Bull," Dorian said, though a reluctant smile did come to his lips. "The point is that he's just a man, no matter what else he is. And maybe you'd have a clearer head about this whole thing if you stopped thinking about him as your father and just started thinking about him as a Vint."

Dorian's eyebrow rose. "You're telling me to reduce him? You, the man who always reminds me to consider everything?"

"Not reduce. Refocus," Bull clarified. "He's a Vint, probably sent by the Imperium because they figure it will give them an advantage while taking yours away. So instead of trying to win past arguments with him, pretend you don't owe him anything and don't have to win anything against him personally, and figure out how to tell the Imperium to get its nose out of Inquisition business."

"Mmm." Dorian's lips twitched. "You mean like the Qunari did?"

"Hey," Bull objected, hands moving to settle on his hips. "I told Mailani all about that, take it or leave it, and she took it. And I think she figured right. The Qunari aren't in our business anymore, remember?"

That made Dorian snort in disbelief. "Do you really believe that?"

"Well... no," Bull admitted. "But they're not getting anything from me anymore, so any vector they send in won't be able to get nearly as much information. I'm pretty good at what I do, remember?"
Dorian chuckled. "All right, Bull, you've made your point. I'm overreacting."

"And not thinking strategically," Bull said. "They came to you, outside normal diplomatic channels, because they need something. Maybe they're just taking advantage, but you have the high ground, so remember that."

"I do hope you don't mean literally," Dorian said with a sigh. "That's a dreadfully painful pun if so."

"Hey, never underestimate the power of a good pun told badly," Bull said with a grin, then wrapped his arm around Dorian's shoulder. "Now. It's past dinner time and you don't have to see any of the big, bad Vints until tomorrow. Why don't you wipe the brandy off, change into something comfortable, and find your focus again? Take advantage of their arrival time."

Dorian exhaled slowly. "Not even Father would come to see me before all things official have been navigated through," he confessed. "If I weren't the Inquisitor, he would, but since I am... Protocol demands certain steps in a certain order." He sagged into Bull as his tension slowly ebbed away. "Thank the Maker."

"I don't care who you thank," Bull said. "Just don't try to drink the rest of your side board by yourself, all right?"

"And here I thought you didn't know what a mother does," Dorian said with a weary chuckle.

"Hey, you try to run a group like the Chargers without feeling like a put upon Tamassran, especially on the day of a drinking contest," Bull said with a grunt.

Eyes widening, Dorian said, "I'd really prefer not to, actually. That sounds like a particularly forsaken part of the Void."

"Thankfully it only took once for Cabot to learn that lesson," Bull replied with a grin. "We did help him put everything back together and buy replacements for the things that couldn't be salvaged. Fun, though."

"You really are a beast," Dorian said, rolling his eyes despite the smile on his face.

"Maybe, but I got you to relax a little." Giving Dorian a little squeeze, he stepped back and looked Dorian up and down for a moment. "Now keep on doing it. Bath, soft robe, scented candles, whatever you need to do to prepare for tomorrow. And just remember: you have the high ground."

"I'll keep that in mind." The little smile persisted as he looked up. "Good night, Bull."

"Night, boss." After giving him the lazy kind of salute Bull reserved for people he actually liked, Bull headed to the door and left Dorian to his own devices once more.

Alone again, Dorian let his eyes flutter shut as he let the events of the day wash over him. Well, to be fair, it was really only the last couple of hours which had turned into quite the exciting nuggalope ride. The high had been so very thrilling with Cullen, and then the low had dropped so very far with his father.

And poor Jim's interruption between the two? Well, that particular might have been barely bore pondering. At least, not without another carafe of brandy.

With a sigh, Dorian slowly undressed and forced his mind onto more mundane matters than lost opportunities and lurking Magisters. His clothes did smell of brandy, after all, and a steaming bath would do a world of good to improve his mood. He took his time, heating up the water to just the
right temperature and giving himself a nice long soak in the darkness of the little storage closet behind his bed where he'd put the tub. He hummed a few bars of music, enjoying the echo, and finally was able to push the immediacy of his father's idiocy from his mind for a while.

Once he was out of the bath and in more comfortable apparel suitable for relaxation, however, he realized he was still feeling a trifle melancholy. While he was pondering the matter, his eyes lit upon the mandolin tucked into the corner between his desk and his bookshelf, and he smiled wistfully. "Ah, yes. Naturally." Retrieving the mandolin with a special reverence, he moved to the couch and sat down, cradling the mandolin in his lap. After tuning the instrument, he turned it over and traced the name engraved upon the back. "Felix," he murmured. "I missed Mae, but I miss you more." Restoring the instrument to its proper position, he played through a tune taught to him by Felix, remembering a warm afternoon with good cheese, good wine, and even better companionship.

When he heard a knock on the door, he at first felt disinclined to answer it, his fingers still straying across the strings with a poetic poignancy which echoed deep within. When the next knock rang in the room, however, he suddenly paused and listened. As the knock continued, his eyes widened. Surely it couldn't be--

Pushing himself to his feet, he left the mandolin on the couch as he ran in a mad dash to the door, heart pounding as he flung it open to see…

Nothing.

His heart fell. He'd been so very sure…

Suddenly someone popped into the doorway and pushed himself inside, closing the door behind him quickly. "Quiet, Dorian! I can't be seen."

Dorian's eyes widened. "Felix? But--"

"No time to explain! Quick, get away from the door," he hissed as he took Dorian's hand and tugged at him.

Confused, Dorian simply followed. A quick magical scan revealed no glamours, and no obvious spells in place. Yet Felix seemed to be in the prime of health--no sign of the sickness of the taint lingered in him. As he opened his mouth to ask a question-- any question--Felix abruptly turned and wrapped Dorian into a tight embrace. Dorian found himself returning the gesture and fighting the threat of tears at the same time. "Felix," he breathed. "I was just thinking about you."

"Oh, Dorian," Felix said, then abruptly pulled back and gave Dorian an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, it's just… I barely know where to begin. When I didn't see you again in Redcliffe, I admit I feared the worst."

"I could say the same of you," Dorian pointed out. "What happened?"

"You mean after the Inquisition moved its focus to the Templars instead of us?" Felix asked, tugging the hood of his robe back. "Disaster. The Venatori declared Father a traitor for failing to capture the Inquisitor, and decided that he would be better served as an offering to Corypheus rather than an ally. We barely escaped Redcliffe with our lives and a few retainers--all the others went with Calpernia."

"Alexius," Dorian murmured, again feeling that mixture of regret and sadness. "Is he alive?" It was a faint hope, given that Felix had survived... And one that was quickly dashed as Felix shook his head. "No. No, he died in Ferelden. A horde of darkspawn caught us in the Frostbacks. Killed almost everyone. Father gave his life just so that I and
one or two others could escape."

Dorian reached out and put his hand on Felix' shoulder. "I am sorry," he said softly. "Alexius was a good friend, before…” His voice trailed away and he shook his head. "I suppose that doesn't matter anymore, does it?" Setting his hand on the opposite shoulder, Dorian spent a few moments studying Felix in the face as a little frown settled on his own. "I… forgive me, old friend, but I have to wonder: how did you survive?" He meant more than the Venatori alone, of course, but found the rest difficult to voice.

"We found friends in the Frostbacks," Felix explained. "Some Grey Wardens on their way out of Ferelden who decided to investigate the darkspawn presence."

The information made Dorian more than a bit wary, considering what the Grey Wardens had gotten up to since he'd last been with Felix. "Oh? What were they doing up there?"

"They said something about going to Weisshaupt," Felix explained. "A man named Howe-- Nathaniel Howe--was leading them, said that they were going to petition for a change of leadership in Ferelden because they couldn't trust the man already in place."

"That… seems an awfully odd thing to tell a stranger," Dorian ventured.

"Oh, that was after--" He paused, then shook his head. "Let's sit down. This may take a while to explain."

"Of course," Dorian agreed. "There's a couch up there we could use, and I think I could use a glass of wine, in all honesty."

"Still the same old Dorian, hmm?" Felix asked with a laugh as he headed up the last of the stairs. "I remember you and Father spending entire nights in the study, talking about time theory this and Fade theory that and Void theory all the way over there until the sun made Mother come down and yell at you to go to bed."

Dorian chuckled as he headed to the sideboard. "Thankfully the wine here is passable, if you'd like to try it."

"I wouldn't mind a glass," Felix admitted, then fell silent. There was a rustling behind Dorian before Felix added, "Oh. My mandolin. You got it out of Redcliffe."

Dorian smiled as he turned around, a glass in each hand. "Yes. The Inquisition's--" He paused, not really wanting to talk about the Spymaster when so many questions yet remained to be answered. "An agent of the Inquisition went through Redcliffe after the Venatori left, to see what could be learned. That was found and given to me. It meant a great deal, even though I thought it meant you were…" He paused, then shook his head. Walking forward, he held out the glass to Felix. "You always said you'd leave it behind over your dead body, after all."

"We had practically no warning," Felix said softly as he ran a finger over one of the strings. "The Venatori simply appeared in the night. I know it wasn't time magic, at least. Only Father ever truly understood that. Well, and you," he added, smiling at Dorian. With a sigh, Felix settled back into the couch and set the mandolin aside so that he could take the offered glass. "Now I think I'd better tell you what I can."

Expression somber, Dorian sat down in the couch and faced Felix. "Tell me everything."

"We had to flee Redcliffe in the dead of night, for one thing," Felix began, then continued with a tale that spanned a struggle through the wilderness, an exhaustive hike in the Frostbacks, and a frantic
last stand against darkspawn somewhere in the trackless remotes of the deep mountains. "I thought we were done for. I didn't want to leave Father, but he... he said he had no point to live without me anyway." Felix swallowed harshly and looked down at his drink, then dashed the remnant back in one gulp. "So he sent me and Theron ahead. You remember Theron?"

"Oh, certainly. An excellent scribe with a weird fetish for swordplay," Dorian said with a chuckle. "Or perhaps a consummate warrior with a strange tendency for scholarly pursuits. A good man."

"He was," Felix said softly, then grimaced and stood, going to refill his own glass this time. "Father managed to hold off most of the darkspawn, but then we ran into some bears. Maker, the bears in Ferelden are worse than anything we have back home."

"Without a doubt," Dorian said fervently. "How did you escape?"

"Theron didn't. I climbed a tree and urged him to join me, but the bears..." Felix shook his head. "Then they started to climb the tree, and suddenly there were arrows flying and a group of warriors dressed in blue and silver appeared. Grey Wardens, they said, as I told you. Their leader was a man by the name of Nathaniel Howe, and there was a rather interesting dwarf with him. I never caught her name, but she had a tattoo I've never seen before, not even in Orzammar. They helped me down from the tree, and as we were talking, I fainted. When I awoke, they told me that I would be dead soon from the Blight, and that they could help."

Dorian blinked. "Just like that?"

"Apparently. I didn't question it, honestly. I was ready to just give up and let the bears eat me. I was alone, Blighted, an orphan, and... tired. So very tired, Dorian." He smiled wanly at his friend. "I always said that death wasn't the worst thing that could happen to me, didn't I?"

Avoiding that memory uneasily, Dorian asked, "So what did they do?"

"They made me a Warden," Felix said with a little laugh. "Me. A rather insignificant Altus, son of a Magister who loved his wife outside of Imperium protocol, and a fugitive from the Venatori, was suddenly a Grey Warden. But they were right. It fixed me right up. And that's when they told me a lot of things." For a few moments he fell silent, gaze distant as he drank from his wineglass. "I can't tell you everything," Felix said finally. "Some of what I learned are secrets of the Wardens alone."

"Understood," Dorian said with a chuckle. "We have a Warden here in Skyhold, in fact. He doesn't like to talk about certain subjects, either. Alas for my ever-hungry curiosity."

Felix smiled at that. "I'm grateful you haven't changed that much. At any rate, they wanted me to go to Weisshaupt with them, but I told them I had to go and take care of Father's estate. They consulted with each other again, and agreed. Why, I don't know. The dwarf said something about maybe it was better to keep me separate in case they were found."

Dorian's eyebrows shot up. "By whom?"

With a shrug, Felix replied, "I wish I knew. After that, they got a lot more closemouthed around me. I stayed with them at least until we got out of the Frostbacks, and then they pointed me to a caravan going to the Imperium and disappeared. It was odd from start to finish."

"That does sound... unbelievable," Dorian ventured. "I mean, a Warden is a Warden, isn't he?"

"You'd have to ask your Warden here," Felix said with a chuckle. "They just said to report to the nearest Grey Warden chapterhouse when I was done settling the estate, that the Grey Wardens there would recognize me as a Warden as soon as they saw me. But I didn't even get as far as the Alexius..."
estates. When the caravan reached Minrathous, I saw several carriages heading towards the docks, and noticed that one of them bore the Pavus crest."

Dorian frowned. "I could see how that would make you curious. The estates of House Pavus are mainly in Qarinus, after all."

"Exactly. So I followed them as best as I could. Which, given traffic near the docks in Minrathous, turned out to be fairly easy." Felix paused to sip from his glass, brows pinched together. "I'd heard the rumors about what happened to Inquisitor Lavellan by then, but I didn't know what had happened to you. Your name hadn't been linked to her yet."

"Ah, true," Dorian said. "And you wouldn't have even known that I joined the Inquisition formally, much less..." He waved his left hand in the air, leaving a trail of green light as he did so. "As far as you knew, I could have been anywhere."

"Or dead," Felix whispered. "If the Venatori had caught you as well."

"Well, thankfully, they did not, and I managed to push through to the Inquisition in time to tell them that Corypheus had brought an army of mages against them." Giving a soft sigh, Dorian looked down at his own wine, again wondering if perhaps things might have gone differently if Mailani had returned to him in Redcliffe rather than going to Therinfal Redoubt. In the end, he knew, it didn't truly matter.

This is where we are now.

Glancing up from his glass, he said, "So you saw a House Pavus carriage and followed. To what purpose, exactly? You know I had no wish to return home."

Felix looked down at his hands. "Given that it was going to the docks, I suppose... I suppose I feared it was going to retrieve you," he said softly. "That you'd returned to the Imperium, or rather, been returned. And if it were the the case..."

Dorian's face softened, and he reached over to take Felix' hand. "You were worried about me."

"Of course I was," Felix said, glancing up. "I know we didn't have nearly as much time to catch up as we'd have liked once you found me at Redcliffe, but you told me enough. I couldn't trust your father after that, and if I saw you going to him, I would not have remained silent."

"But that wasn't what you saw, I take it?" Dorian tilted his head. "Though I am touched by your concern, naturally."

Felix laughed and nudged Dorian’s arm. "Yes, I do care about you. You’re my friend, Dorian." His eyes darted up to Dorian’s face, searching it for a few moments. "I had no idea as to your fate. The Venatori came so quickly, and I knew you were in the vicinity of Redcliffe. I—I thought..." His voice trailed away as he looked down at his wine. "When I saw the carriage, I was afraid your father was there to ambush you, or something. That's why I followed."

“A true friend indeed, to be willing to risk the wrath of Magister Pavus,” Dorian mused.

“I can be clever at times. Sneaky, at least, when I need to be. I did get your message to the Herald, remember?”

A sad little smile came to Dorian’s face as he recalled Mailani’s rendition of the tale. “You did, yes. I... never did get a chance to thank you for that, did I? I had to go lurk in the hills around Redcliffe after that, hoping beyond hope the Herald would return. And when I saw the Venatori arrive
instead…” He closed his eyes. “I knew I had to leave, to warn the Inquisition about what was about
to drop on their doorstep without so much as a proper introduction. Even though it meant leaving
you behind to face the wrath of the Elder One.”

A hand took his, and Dorian opened his eyes to see Felix smiling at him. “I know, Dorian. And you
made the best choice. Besides, I’m here now, right?”

“That you are, my friend.” Dorian smiled. “Against all expectation and logic and reason, you’re
here.” A sense of relief welled up inside Dorian, and suddenly he cleared his throat and stood. “Ah,
and your glass is nearly empty as well. Here, let me correct that dire problem.” As he took Felix’
glass and moved to the sideboard, he knew that Felix would see right through the charade, but he
also knew that Felix knew him well enough to give him a few moments with his emotions.

As if in answer to the thought, Dorian heard the mandolin come to life behind him. A smile touched
his lips despite the burning in his eyes, and he let himself take his time as Felix picked through
the melody with deliberate tenderness. “That was your father’s favorite song, wasn’t it?” he said in a
deliberately light tone.

“My mother’s favorite, which meant it was my father’s favorite,” Felix said with a chuckle. “It’s why
I brought the mandolin south with us in the first place. It seemed to soothe him when I played it. He
would think less of his obsession with curing me, and more about the good times.”

Dorian fell silent as Felix continued to play, letting the notes wash over him and ease a few tears
down his cheek as he considered Felix’ words. The deep, unabashed love Alexius had felt for his
wife and son, unusual as it was in the Imperium, had been one aspect of his character which Dorian
had admired the most. He’d seen more than a few of those good times while studying with Alexius,
given that he’d been welcomed almost as a second son to the family, and the loss of Alexius—first to
grief, then to obsession—had cut deep. But he could still remember the good times, and he knew he
always would.

Alexius, unfortunately, had been unable to do the same. Or perhaps some pain simply could never be
forgotten.

For a moment, Dorian’s thoughts turned inward, pondering if he could sustain such sorrow as
Alexius had suffered and not break. Wiping his face dry with a small hand towel, Dorian retrieved
the now full wine glasses and turned to face Felix with a sympathetic expression ready on his face.
Whatever pain he personally felt, he still knew it paled in comparison to how the same losses had
affected Felix, and it showed in the way the notes lingered in the air.

Abruptly Felix spoke. “When I was running away from Father, at the end, I wondered over and over
again why I kept running. What kept me going. Mother was long gone, and now Father was dead,
and I was still sick with the blight. And…” His gaze rose, seeking out Dorian’s own. “And I thought
of you. Of how you came all the way from the Imperium to the south, alone and without aid, not
because of hate, but because of love. You loved Father, and didn’t want him to lose himself entirely
to the darkness to which he’d succumbed in his time of grief. Even after you fought with him, even
then, you loved him. So I kept going. I found that tree. I lived long enough for help to arrive. And
now… here I am.” The notes faded, and Felix set the mandolin aside. “Let me help you, Dorian. I
may not be my Father, but what I have, what I am, surely it can be of some use to the Inquisition.”

Dorian swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth, feeling a trifle overwhelmed by the sudden surge of
emotion washing over him. This time he couldn’t suppress the stinging in his eyes enough to keep
his eyes from brimming, nor the smile which sprang to his lips. “You always were the best of us,” he
said quietly.
Rising to his feet, Felix crossed to where Dorian stood. “Not from where I sit,” he said, taking one of the glasses from Dorian. “I heard a lot of stories about the new Inquisitor on my way back south, you know.”

“Ah, yes. You never did finish telling me just how you came to join the delegation,” Dorian mused.

“True.” Felix chuckled, looking down at his glass for a moment. “It’s quite a tale, honestly. But there’s something more important I want to do first.” Lifting his glass, he tilted his head and smiled. “To friendship.”

Dorian straightened, lifting his glass to tap against the one Felix held with a musical *ching*. “To friendship,” he murmured, then drank a wine that seemed all the sweeter for the toast.

Once the glasses were drained, however, Felix took them and moved to the sideboard to refill them. “Do you want me to start with before or after I snuck onto the ship your father boarded?”

Laughing easily, Dorian settled onto the couch as he waited for Felix to finish. “Sounds like trouble.”

Felix half-turned to flash Dorian a grin. “I like trouble.” Turning back, he poured the last of a bottle into Dorian’s glass, then took both glasses in one hand and a full bottle in another before returning to the couch to sit next to Dorian. “I’ll start with before, then. The docks at Minrathous are fairly exciting in and of themselves.”

As Felix regaled him with the tale of his journey south, Dorian smiled and sipped his wine. For a few hours, he let the world fade away. He didn’t think about tomorrow with its tiresome politics and the reunion he desperately wished to avoid, or worry about how his decisions and reactions would affect the fate of Thedas. Instead, he could simply enjoy himself for an evening of good wine and better friendship, whiling away a few hours in the presence of an old friend.

Just like old times.
"Wake up."

The crack of a whip jerks you from your slumber. In the same moment, you realize that the rhythmic, booming pulse from before has returned, signaling a return to the odd dream-that-is-real and the horrors of Amell. For a moment you shudder in pain as a patchwork of bruises and cuts on your body make themselves known in one large burst. In the next moment, the ache fades, and a new strength fills you, one recent in origin. You vaguely recall drinking something sticky and red from a bottle held by Avernus, something which makes the blood from the wounds Zevran inflicted on you shift from agony to exultation.

Except… no, no, that wasn't you, it was the nameless, faceless thrall of Amell. You are still you, in mind if not in body. It is easier now to hold yourself apart from the man you consider your host, but that doesn't mean you can simply dismiss what he experiences. For the moment, at least, you feel what he feels, for better or for worse.

Considering the nature of his Master, however, you suspect the latter is far more likely.

That suspicion intensifies as you stir and realize your arms are shackled and hooked over a chain high above your head. Your shoulders ache, but retain enough feeling for you to know you have not been in this position for very long. Blearily you shake your head, trying to clear the remnants of sleep from it.

You hear a crack of a whip and jerk your head up in response, eyes wide. Your stomach churns as you see something straight from the worst brothels in Minrathous: Zevran positioned behind a naked man lashed facedown over a barrel and bound in a manner which renders him helpless, with the added indignity of a sack wrapped over his head. The elf loosely holds a whip in one hand, the tip adorned with a bloody shard of glass designed for one purpose only: pain. At random intervals, Zevran times a lash of the whip with a forceful thrust of his hips, and those are the moments which elicit a pained grunt from the victim's lips. By this point blood streams freely down the man's back from a series of small, clean cuts, a sight which makes your hands reflexively wrap around the chains restraining you, but an inner caution holds you back from a stronger reaction.

For a moment, you see in your host's mind what had happened the last time he'd attempted to save the man currently being forced to sate Zevran's sexual avarice. Quickly you shy away the memory of the elf's punishment, sick to your stomach at the brutality inherent in it. It is enough, at least, to explain why your host does nothing more than grip his own shackles until they rattle.

"Ah, the sleeping beauty awakens," Zevran says with a cruel laugh, slowing his hips long enough to glance in your direction. "You disapprove?"
You feel the shudder of fear that runs through your host, even as you feel the cold hate at its foundation. Through the hatred you learn that the man being tortured so by Zevran is your host's friend, a man whose life he values more than his own. Still, that doesn't mean your host dares to openly indicate that he thinks Zevran is a monster, both for his own safety as well as that of his friend. Reluctantly you shake your head despite the disgust that fills both you and your host.

"Good answer." Zevran laughs, then casts aside the whip so that he can grasp the sack on his victim's head and pull the man's head up. As the room fills with the sound of labored breathing, Zevran's hips thrust deeper and with excessive force as a mask of concentration contorts his face. It is clearly no longer about Zevran's pleasure or even his victim's pain, but about control.

Which makes you wonder why Zevran is so desperate to assert it.

Unable to watch any longer, you close your eyes and draw your mind inward, hoping to find some way out of this madness. As you do so, the booming pulse swells once more into prominence, bringing with it an abrupt rapport with your host. As rage and frustration bloom within, your hands tighten on the chains above you while the intensity of those feelings sweep over you. Your sense of self weakens, leaving you truly a spectator tucked away in your host's world with no sense of agency.

A crack of the whip and a slash of pain across your chest makes your eyes fly open in time to see Zevran sneer at you. It seems the elf has found satisfaction, leaving your friend still tied to the barrel. As the elf stands in front of you, eyes traveling over your naked body with a lewdity which makes your skin crawl, you notice that he still wears his pants and shirt, though they are open at the waist and throat. The contrast between your forced nakedness and his clothed state announce louder than words his status over you, even more than the whip in his hand. "I admit, I like ploughing his ass more than yours, but your tongue is far more clever. I'll have to remember to wake you first when next my urges arise."

Your hands throttle the chains so hard you that a rough edge of metal cuts into your skin. The elf is trying to goad you, as he has before, but you are determined not to let Zevran win. Even a petty victory counts.

:Make you pay:

The words echo through your head, making the rhythmic pulses that much louder as they wash through your being. Hate and fury wrap themselves in a fire around you as you struggle not to succumb wholly to your host's powerful emotions. As it is, you find a way to watch without being him--if only barely.

:I will make you pay for all of it:

"Ah, you're thinking again, I see," Zevran noted, moving closer. "What are you thinking now, hmm? Some sort of elaborate scheme for revenge?" With a snort, Zevran's hand reaches down and seizes your flaccid cock, manipulating it expertly. "You know, I don't need to be aroused to enjoy you. I only need my blade and my imagination."

:Stop:

Suddenly the word is full of desperation, and you can feel why. Zevran's touch is almost preternaturally pleasurable, as if every inch of his fingers has been doused in the strongest magical aphrodisiacs available in the best whorehouses in Minrathous. Your host doesn't want to admit to the pleasure, or to the arousal, but slowly finds himself succumbing to both.
This time it is not the words themselves which surprise you, but what lies beneath them, the underlying tapestry of guilt which wells up and brushes against your mind. Abruptly you realize that your host loathes the pleasure not merely because of its source, but because he feels that he doesn't deserve to feel anything good.

And your heart breaks for him just a little bit more.

"Enjoying yourself, hmm?" Zevran says, a glint of malice in his eyes. "No need to answer. I feel the truth at hand."

You squeeze your eyes shut as your mind twists and turns in one with that of your host. The humiliation and self-loathing surge through you in equal measure as you writhe helplessly before Zevran's touch, trying to escape his grasp, but in the end helplessly buck your hips forward with a moan instead.

Still, the precise nature of your host's plight doesn't truly register until Zevran leans close and whispers, "And now for the grand fuck. Thankfylly I've already prepared a lovely ass for you. He's ready and waiting, and quite sturdy."

And just like that, the real horror of Zevran's torture becomes clear as you feel your host struggle not only against his bonds, but against the spell which wraps around him, bending him to the will of Amell and his elf lover. Without truly thinking before you act, you reach out and grasp that spell in your hands, trying to influence it despite its seemingly implacable strength. In that moment, the booming pulse fades away, and you find yourself better able to draw the line between your true self and your host.

Immediately you turn your full attention to the spell, wondering if there is any way you can help this poor victim of Amell's evil. Surely there is some way you can affect it...

Even as you turn your focus to the magical restraints restricting your host, the shackles fall away from his wrists, and he is pulled away from the wall cock-first. With a cruel laugh, the elf shoves your host towards the man lashed to the barrel, back still covered with oozing wounds. "Now," Zevran snarls. "I want to hear him scream."

Your host stares down in horror at his friend, trying to resist the command with all his might. In a fit of desperate inspiration, he slaps his hand across the already bruised and battered ass, then hits him again harder. To his credit, the friend catches on quickly and screams in response, and your aching length remains outside his body. You will not force yourself on him.

For a moment, two words whisper across your host's mind-- :Not again:-- and you shudder away from the implication, then throw yourself against the spell once more.

Pain blooms on your host's back as the whip lands in punishment for that act of rebellion, limited as it is. However, before Zevran can do more than one lash, the door to the room bursts open. Your host turns in shock, backing into the wall quickly as he stares with mute apprehension at the tall figure with glowing red eyes standing in the doorway. Something about his stance and fixed glare puts you on high alert, and your own magical assault is halted in fear that Amell will somehow sense the effort.

Zevran turns to Amell with a bright smile. "Mi amor, you return."

Amell barely gives you or the man tied to the table a glance as he steps into the room, one shoulder
hitched slightly higher than the other and his half-melted face set in an rabid snarl as he moves towards Zevran. His hood flutters back and off his head, and you stare with wide eyes. Clumps of dull red hair alternate with patches of discolored scalp on his head, shouting to you larger than words that Amell’s health is in jeopardy. The revelation startles you, as well as rousing your curiosity. Could that be what is driving Amell? The slowly encroaching claws of mortality?

What happens next, however, almost drives the observation from your mind as you watch Amell’s hand close around the elf’s neck and raise him high before throwing him into the nearest wall. The elf cries out in shock and pain, then falls to the ground and whimpers, all his bravado gone in an instant before the wrath of his Master.

"Amor," he pleads. "What did I--"

"Silence, knife ear," Amell snarls.

Zevran raises a shaking hand towards Amell. "But amor--"

A burst of magic lashes out and wraps around Zevran’s hand, tossing the screaming elf across the room again. Zevran hits the metal door with a heavy thud, then falls to the ground in a twitching heap. "When I wish to listen to a failure, I will," Amell roars. "You promised me my prize, my new pet!"

You stare, astonished, as Zevran crawls to his master, weeping and begging for forgiveness. Your host and his still-restrained friend are equally silent, not daring to draw attention to themselves when Amell is in the midst of venting his wrath.

And then, something truly odd happens.

Suddenly Amell grunts and raises his hands to cover his face, and you feel an odd shift in the air as a whisper of eldritch energy washes over the room. A pulse of force, enough to disturb the dust on the floor, pushes out from Amell’s body, and when his hands lower, his demeanor is completely different. He is calm and collected, and something about his face has changed. Abruptly you realize that one of his eyes no longer glows, and wonder at the nature and meaning of the change.

:Maker:

And, for the first time since joining your host, you feel true, abject terror flood through him.

:It’s here:

Two simple words, filled with a dread so strong it triggers an intense shudder throughout your body. Whatever happened, whoever it is, your host has seen this transformation before, and been given ample reason to fear it.

And it certainly is sufficient reason to maintain your caution, and remain completely still.

"The Commander is not mine," Amell says as he crosses the room. Even his voice is different, more cultured, more controlled. "You promised me the Commander of the Inquisition."

Your heart quails. Cullen? In the hands of this monster? You can barely conceive of it, but quite a few little details fall into place about how and why the red lyrium managed to sneak its way into Skyhold. The mention of Zevran’s ‘mission’ from before--could they have been discussing the effort to turn Cullen?

With every fiber of your being, you thank the Maker that they did not succeed.
Zevran gibbers as he scrambles away from Amell, eyes wide with fear. "Master, please," he begs. "I put the lyrium in his tent and potions, I hid the kit in his desk. I did nothing wrong!"

"You failed," Amell snarled, taking a threatening step towards Zevran. "I do not tolerate failure."

Raising his arms defensively over his head, Zevran pleads, "Please, Master. Give me another chance!"

"You know what I need," Amell said, inexorably drawing closer. "And you know what I said I would do if I didn't get it."

"Master, I--"

Amell lashes out with his left hand, his burned hand, scoring three bloody lines on Zevran's face. "I need an incaensor," he murmurs in a deadly soft tone. "You know this. You were the one to suggest the Commander. And now, he is not here, which means it is your failure. Your punishment. Your fate."

Your eyes widen. Amell, as far as you know, is as Fereldan as Cullen. How on Thedas would he know the word for such a uniquely Tevinter concept as a battle slave imbued with magic? And why did that terrify Zevran so?

Wildly casting his gaze around the room, Zevran points in your direction. "Surely one of--"

Amell's left hand lashes out once more, and additional wounds appear Zevran's face and neck. "I have plans for them, as well you know. Plans you cannot fulfill, flawed as you are."

On hands and knees, Zevran crawls towards Amell and wraps himself around Amell's legs, reaching up to grasp Amell's right hand and squeeze tightly. "Amor, please," he sobs, almost shrieking in his terror, "come back to me!"

Amell raises his left hand as if to strike, then pauses. You feel that eldritch shift in the air once more, and suddenly Amell staggers slightly, held upright mostly by Zevran's grip on him. The second eye, the dull eye, suddenly flashes red before settling into the same red glow as the other one. For a moment Amell touches his face, then glances down at the elf still clinging to his leg. "Zevran?"

Tears streaming down his face, Zevran nods violently. "Si, amor. It is me. Your Zevran. Remember?"

Amell takes a deep breath and stares at the ceiling for a long moment, then straightens. "Let go."

Relief relaxes the tension in Zevran's body as he hastily obeys, making you wonder how many times Zevran has witnessed this peculiar change in Amell. More than that, it seems the episodes scare Zevran to the same degree as it terrifies your host, and you cannot help but wonder if somehow that fear could be used to the Inquisition's advantage.

Even as you contemplate that fascinating idea, Amell strides across the room to stand before you, narrowed eyes traveling over your host's body as he approaches. "Your time is coming," he says softly. "I need you ready."

He reaches up and runs a finger across the scabbed cut Zevran inflicted earlier, and it vanishes at his touch. His hands continue to move over you, leaving flawless, fresh skin in their wake. "I've let Zevran indulge in the two of you long enough. Now we must prepare for your next steps, knowing what awaits you if you fail in your tasks."

He reaches up and runs his fingers through your hair, and an odd heat spreads throughout your scalp until you gasp on the edge of pain and pleasure. Amell chuckles, a smile twitching on his lips.
as if he knows the effect his touch has on you. The arousal from before has returned, but far, far stronger, and you struggle not to whimper with your need as you stare into his red eyes.

"You will do as I require. You will not fail me." The words are not a question, nor are they a suggestion. They are a force of reality, or at least, that is how your host feels them. Deep, deep down, buried beneath the power of Amell's spell, you feel an inchoate longing buried in your host, a terrible loneliness, and a sorrow which takes your breath away. But it doesn't reach the surface, where Amell might see it, and the moment passes quickly.

You watch as Amell turns to the man still tied and restrained, and watch in awe as his hands move over the bloody back, healing all the marks without a scar. Only the most powerful of spirit healers you've ever met could heal with such ease, and never a blood mage. Whatever else Amell may be, he is a highly skilled mage as well as a powerful one.

Not that that's worrying or anything.

Once the healing is done, Amell's gaze moves to Zevran as he burns away the bonds holding the man to the barrel. "I will take this one with me. He needs to be prepared in a fashion which does not expend his seed. I will forgive your transgression in failing to anticipate the Commander's resistance to our trap if you succeed in your next mission. It is time to enact the Witch's spell on the fallen angel."

Zevran swallows harshly. "You wish her brought here?" The surprise in his voice is evident, as well as more than a tinge of apprehension.

Amell nods emphatically. "Do it quickly and quietly, and use that special potion Avernus concocted to keep her unaware. She must never know she was in this place, or in our hands. Ensure she never sees how you bring her here, either. There are some secrets best kept hidden from all. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," Zevran whispers, even as you mentally curse at Amell's vagueness. What did he mean? Who is the Witch, or the angel? And what did that mean for the Inquisition? "It shall be as you command."

"Good." Turning his attention back to your host's friend, Amell settles his right hand on the now-healed back. "Stand." As the man slowly gains his feet, leaving the sack in place absent an order to remove it, Amell looks to Zevran. "Do not touch them again until after their next mission is done."

Zevran nods quickly. "I shall restrain myself, Master."

"Yes. You will." Amell cants his head to the side as a cold smile curves his lips, and raises his right hand in invitation. "Come here." A tremulous smile comes to Zevran's face, and he dashes to Amell's side. The mage suddenly pulls Zevran up into a deep, heated kiss, then presses their foreheads together for a long moment before speaking once more. "Always call me back."

A shudder wracks Zevran's body. "Always, amor. You know I am desolate without you."

"We will survive this," Amell whispers, then releases Zevran to rise to his full height before gesturing towards you. "Move him to their new quarters. They must prepare for what is to come."

"It will be done," Zevran promises him.

Without another word to the elf, Amell grabs the arm of the man he'd just healed and hauls him to the door, where they both disappear into the darkness beyond.
You feel a panic set into your host as his friend disappears from sight, leaving him alone with Zevran. It is a knee-jerk reaction, and memories of past times spent with Zevran alone flicker through his memory too fast to register. You also feel your host's intense worry that it might be the last time he sees his friend, knowing in whose clutches he is now. It isn't the love for a lover, but the deep, abiding sense of affection and responsibility you have come to know in your own role as the Inquisitor. In fact, you note that the responsibility is tied with an equally strong dose of guilt, as if the two emotions are somehow related to one another.

And again your host surprises you, as those words are not laced with concern for his personal well-being, but based upon an intrinsic sense of abandonment, of a lifetime filled with too many losses to contemplate.

Suddenly Zevran releases a long, gusty sigh, then squares his feet as he gives you a dour glare. "You saw none of this," he hisses. "And you will not speak of it. Ever."

You nod mutely.

"Stay here until I return. Touch nothing. Do nothing," Zevran snaps, then glances down at the evidence of your unwilling lust and smirks. "Ah, yes. That won't go away without some attention. Your Master's touch demands an answer, after all. Still, I am not a man entirely without mercy," he says with a grin. "Attend to that yourself while I am gone, and be quick about it."

With a dark laugh, he stalks to the door, slamming it shut behind him.

You sag back into the wall, and it is a mix of Amell's spell and natural desperation that has your hand settle on your hard length, angry that even something as simple as self-indulgence is no longer a choice. You do exactly as Zevran told you to do, quick and rough and dirty, each moment an agonizing mixture of pleasure and disgust. Once it is over, your host's head drops forward, and you feel a great weight descend upon his heart.

His resignation and despair fills your awareness as he tries to imagine what is to come, and sees only more pain, more darkness, and more Amell. The tears rise unnoticed by your host, falling to the ground to disappear without a trace, but you notice them, and know they have not even begun to relieve his sorrow.

Again your heart breaks a little, even though the man is unknown to you. In that moment, you decide that you must do something, no matter how small. Quickly you resume your study of the spell with which Amell has bound your host, looking for anything you can do despite the limitations imposed upon you by this strange dream-that-is-real. As you focus, the booming pulse you still do not understand aids you in your concentration, soothing your mind and allowing you to sharpen your focus.

You do not know how much time it takes until you find an opportunity. You only know that you feel as if you had been riding an unwilling mount for the better part of a week while wrestling with a series of recalcitrant rifts. It is not a pleasant sensation, but your triumph keeps your discomfort at bay. You feel that it has only truly been an instant in this strange place, but you still move to act
It is a small opportunity, practically unnoticeable, and only possible to budge because of the Anchor, with its unique ability to unlock what nothing else can. As you summon up its power, the rhythmic pulse swells in your mind even more, beating in time with your host's heartbeat. As he falls into a strange reverie, still forced to obey Zevran's orders to do nothing, you chip away at the spell bit by bit, until, finally, a crack appears.

Now you sit back in triumph. Oh, the spell is not broken by any means—even with the Anchor, you simply don't have the wherewithal in the here and now to dispel as powerful an enchantment as this. But at least you have altered its state sufficiently so that a constant pressure from within could widen the crack. It isn't much more than a sliver of hope, but it is more than your host had before.

And, as if it had been waiting for exactly this eventuality, the presence of the spirit you'd almost forgotten about rises once more from its task of watching you and speaks.

"That's enough for now. Wake up."

Dorian roused from sleep in an instant, shoved unceremoniously into wakefulness with all the power of a strike from a dragon's tail—something with which he was far too familiar. For a moment or two he simply stared at the stitching on his pillow cover, trying to puzzle out why he wasn't naked and sitting alone in some unknown location before his reality settled in once more.

With a groan, Dorian forced himself to roll into a sitting position. Felix had finally departed after a few bottles of decent wine and several hours of better conversation. The throbbing in Dorian's head reminded him that perhaps such a combination had not been the wisest course of action, especially the night before he was supposed to meet with his father, but it was far too late to reconsider now. Besides, it had been that sort of day.

Rubbing his face with his hands, Dorian tried to force his mind back to the dream—that-was-real. Despite his best efforts to recall what had happened—and unlike the previous occurrence—the details were already fading. Some things lingered, albeit faintly, so he quickly found a notebook to jot down what he could, scratching the page in his desperate speed: his pity for the man who played his host, Amell's use of an old Tevene word, the nagging feeling that Amell's strange change in demeanor signaled something dire, and even the mysterious mention of a Witch and an angel.

Even as his quill moved across the page, however, those little oddities felt distant and remote, and the words he'd just written appeared almost foreign, as if written by another hand. In point of fact, it felt as if someone didn't want him to remember, but that would be ridiculous.

He paused, frowning. Or would it? He still had no idea how or why he had come to partake in these strange dreams or whatever they were, but he did clearly remember how he left them. Whatever the nature of that unidentified being, they had a purpose all their own, and Dorian had no clue if they worked for good or ill.

His main hope rested in the belief that working against Amell meant working for the good of all. And for now, at least, the feeling he got from this mysterious force was that of cooperation, not hostility.

Setting the paper and quill aside, Dorian buried his face in his hands for a moment, the steady pulse of the mark a minor background to the whole evening. Finally he sighed and rolled over onto his side. Either he would sleep, or he would not. Regardless, he felt like he had done all that could be
done.

He found sleep again rather quickly, as it turned out—sleep, and pleasant dreams.
Changing Circumstances

The next morning dawned bright and clear, which Dorian took as a personal insult once it struck his face and dragged him from a blissful dream with a delightfully mussed Commander of the Inquisition forces. His mood only soured further when a knock at the door started him from a half-daze in the bath, and he cursed softly as he realized what time it must be. Dragging himself from the tub, he barely had time to pull a robe around himself to answer the door before he heard footsteps, and realized that he hadn't barred the door after shooing Felix out the night before. "I'm awake! I'm awake. How late am I?" he asked as he moved quickly to the wardrobe and started looking through it for the outfit he'd been planning to wear to the negotiations.

"Not late at all, but Josephine was starting to feel antsy," a familiar voice said with a tinge of amusement. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Being caught wet and covered only by a bathrobe proved not to be the most comfortable sensation when he heard the voice of the man who had featured so prominently in his dreams the night before. Using the action of retrieving his outfit as a means to cover his momentary discomfiture, he gave Cullen a bright smile. "Commander. I'm not sure who I was expecting, but it wasn't you, I'll admit."

"Why not?" Cullen asked with a raised eyebrow. "Though it does look like you're recovering from a late night. Should I tell Josephine to reschedule the meeting?"

"Oh, Maker, no," Dorian said hastily. "Rescheduling a meeting with a Magister is like presenting your ankle to a serpent. It's an invitation for biting. I'll be ready in time, I promise."

"Are you sure?" At Dorian's nod, Cullen settled back and crossed his arms across his chest as he surveyed Dorian with a thoughtful expression. Dorian returned the attention, and was relieved to see the gleam of Dagna's mail shirt peeking out of Cullen's collar, though he didn't draw attention to it for the moment. "Bull said that you were hitting the brandy hard last night."

"Naturally he did," Dorian said with a little sigh as he moved to the back room and hung the outfit on the valet. "What else did he tell you?"

Cullen followed after him. "Nothing I didn't already suspect. That you're not looking forward to dealing with your father, for instance."

As he smoothed his hands over the cloth and worked out the wrinkles with a little magic, Dorian glanced over at Cullen long enough to see the look on his face. "I wasn't drunk, Commander. Or at least, I didn't try to drink my sorrows away."

"Are you sure?" Cullen asked, glancing back into the room. "That's an awful lot of wine bottles for someone not trying to avoid something."

Dorian mulled over that for a moment, unsure whether or not he should reveal Felix's secret, then finally decided that if he could tell anyone, it was Cullen. "I got a surprise visitor last night after Bull left."

Looking surprised, Cullen asked, "Who? Not your father, surely."

"No, though I half-expected him to show up despite all protocol dictating to the contrary," Dorian admitted. "No, someone… someone entirely unexpected arrived at my door." He stepped back to study the outfit for a moment, nodding when he found no wrinkles, and turned to Cullen. "Felix."
"Felix?" Cullen blinked in surprise. "The son of Magister Alexius? I thought he was dead."

"Apparently they had just enough warning to escape Calpernia's agents in Redcliffe and cross most of Ferelden before they were caught in the Frostbacks by another menace," Dorian explained. "Alexius--" For a moment he paused as the pain bit deep, then continued. "Alexius bought him time with his own death."

"But I thought he had the taint," Cullen said. "Felix, I mean."

"Had, yes. He told me that he ran into some Grey Wardens, and they fixed him. By making him a Grey Warden." Dorian sighed and rubbed his face with his hands for a moment. "Quite an astonishing little revelation, that. It is logical, of course, that a Grey Warden would be immune to the taint to be able to fight the darkspawn effectively, but for them to be able to be able to cure someone already inflicted..." His eyes turned to the wine bottles. "Imagine how different matters might have been if Alexius had known that from the start. He might never have been involved with the Elder One. He might still be alive."

"And you never would have come South, and Amell might have gotten his hands on the Anchor," Cullen pointed out, settling his hand on Dorian's shoulder. "A lot of things might have happened. It's best to concentrate on the things as they are now."

Dorian's brow furrowed as he stared at Cullen for a moment, wondering what path his life would taken if he hadn't come South. Would he still be with Alexius, tinkering with the manipulation of time through magic? Would his father have become more subtle in his attempts to make Dorian toe the line and become his proper heir? Would he still have been him? And that's when it hit him: if he hadn't gone south, he never would have met Cullen.

And that prospect didn't appeal in the slightest.

Realizing that he was staring at Cullen, Dorian cleared his throat and forced himself to look away, pretending to perform a close inspection on his chosen outfit. "Ah, yes, well... It also strikes me as extraordinarily convenient. In this specific instance, I mean, considering our recent encounters with various Grey Wardens."

Cullen frowned and pulled his hand away from Dorian. "You mean Amell." In the corner of his eye, Dorian saw his eyes narrow slightly. "You don't trust it?"

"I'm... not sure." It hurt to say the words, more than he'd expected, but he couldn't deny the suspicion, minute as it may be. "Naturally I must admit to an inherent bias on the mater. After all, it's Felix. He was my best friend--my only friend, really--for so long, it's hard to doubt that." Moving to his nightstand, he touched his finger to the water in the basin and warmed it up without a second thought. "But the Grey Wardens, well... There's the spectre of both Adamant and Amell. And, of course, what Amell did to Hawke."

"I'm glad I don't have to point that out. I know only all too well how skilled Amell is at taking advantage of the situation." As Dorian winced, Cullen said, "Maybe we could have Vivienne or Solas take a look at him, try to find out if he's under anyone's influence. Or I could talk to him as well. I am Templar trained after all. Between a Templar and a mage, we should be able to spot any signs of tampering."

A frown came to Dorian's face as he mulled over the suggestions. "He wants his presence here to remain a secret as much as possible. He snuck aboard the ship and is pretending to be one of several soporati brought along because of their scholarly knowledge of the South. He studied in Val Royeaux, after all."
A smile touched Cullen’s face. "Yet you told me."

"I'm not about to start keeping secrets from my Commander," Dorian said with mock gravity. *Except perhaps for some of the details from last night's dream, anyway.* "That doesn't seem to be a strategically sound idea."

"And you'd be right," Cullen said firmly. "Still, my recommendation stands, and surely Vivienne can be trusted to be discrete in this as in other matters."

"Hmm, true." After a few more seconds of inner turmoil, Dorian finally nodded. "Do it. She might even recognize him, honestly. She was there that day in Redcliffe when--" Dorian's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, no. So was Bull."

"Then I'd better attend to the matter right away," Cullen said with a chuckle. "Bull will notice. It's what he does."

Dorian groaned and nodded. "You can attend to that while I'm in the negotiations. Take the mandolin with you. That way he will know you do so with my blessing." It still felt a bit like betrayal of trust, but he hoped Felix would understand. After all, Dorian wasn't just an Altus of the Imperium anymore. "Thank you, Commander."

"Well, if nothing else, Felix is another piece of the overall puzzle--especially if he is telling the truth and there are some Wardens not under the influence of either Corypheus or Amell out there."

Cullen's face grew thoughtful. "And if he was as close with his father as you've said, he may be able to give us more information about the Venatori."

Dorian nodded as he lathered up his shaving soap. "That's what he suggested. We talked quite a long time last night, and he seemed perfectly willing to be answer any questions about the Venatori, though the conversation didn't linger on them. All in all," he added as he moved his blade over lather-covered stubble, "it was nice to speak with him."

Cullen glanced at the sideboard with a maddening little half-smirk on his face. "And drink with him."

"Yes, well, it was a lovely night," Dorian said, blithely trying to ignore the smirk, and his own desire do unspecified but decisively encouraging to it. Instead he concentrated simply on easing the blade over his face and finishing the task of restoring perfection to himself once more.

"And explains why you were dead to the world when I first knocked," Cullen noted wryly. "I'll go tell Josephine you'll be down soon, shall I?"

As Dorian patted his face dry, he turned towards Cullen to answer the man directly, and hesitated. Perhaps it was the curl of Cullen's lips, or the slope of his shoulders, or the tilt of his head, but *something* of his manner reminded Dorian all too vividly of that moment on the ramparts when the air between them had veritably *hummed* with desire. For a moment, the urge to step forward and yank Cullen back to that interrupted moment swept over Dorian, and he shifted his weight forward, imperceptibly closing the distance between them.

In response, Cullen's lips parted ever so slightly as he took a half-step closer to Dorian, a certain gleam coming to his eye as he asked in a deep voice, "Is there something you need, Inquisitor?"

The word *You* formed itself in Dorian's mouth, but before it escaped his lips, the door to his quarters opened and Josephine's cheerful voice called, "Inquisitor?"

A brief look of irritation crossed Cullen's face, but he quickly got it under control and stepped back as Dorian muttered "*Kaffas*" and straightened quickly. Turning back to the mirror, Dorian quickly
finished his ablutions as if they'd never been interrupted. "Thank you for making sure I was awake," he told Cullen as Josephine appeared at the top of the stairs. "I wouldn't want my father to have a poor opinion of me due to tardiness, not when there are so many other thrilling reasons from which he may choose."

"That would never do." Cullen chuckled, then clasped his forearm over his chest in a salute before heading back down the stairs, nodding cordially to Josephine as he passed her.

“My dear Lady Ambassador,” Cullen said warmly. “As you can see, I was just finishing my morning ablutions. I had just finished giving the Commander some matters to attend to during the negotiations.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Anything I should know about?”

“Not quite yet,” he mused. “Let’s see what the Commander reports back about it. We will be discussing it in our next war table session regardless. I’m not intentionally hiding things from you, mind,” he added. “I just don’t have enough time to fill you in before the meeting. I take it you’re on the verge of anxiety at my imminent tardiness?”

Her smile remained bright, but the way her head tilted a fraction of an inch showed he had hit the mark. “I would not wish to make a poor impression on our guests, Inquisitor.”

“Nor will we. Go on, welcome them and offer them wine, and I’ll be down before they can formulate a polite way to ask after me.” He gave Josephine a deliberate wink. “I promise.”

“Very well, Inquisitor.” Inclining her head graciously, Josephine proceeded back down the stairs. “I will see you soon.”

Dorian shifted his gaze to stare into the mirror, firmly reminding himself that his father—Halward—was nothing but another Magister, and that for the entirety of the Negotiations, there would never be a father and son involvement. There would be Inquisitor Pavus, and Magister Pavus, the name nothing more than an odd coincidence.

And, he preemptively scolded himself, you will stick to that. Understand?

With a final scowl at himself in the mirror, Dorian rushed towards the outfit awaiting him and hurriedly pulled it on, bits of magic helping him along here and there. He couldn’t break his promise to Josephine, after all.

He owed her that much, and more. The meeting with the representatives of the Imperium proceeded far more smoothly than Dorian had any right to expect. A great deal of that smoothness came from Maevaris, of course. Though she was only one of three Magisters present, she by far and away held the most weight in the Magisterium of the three, and that gave her de facto speaking rights over the others. It didn't take long to get the heart of the matter once the many, many required pleasantries had been exchanged, and Mae didn't exactly beat around the bush, either.

"So, then," Dorian said, pouring himself another glass of the wine Josephine had arranged. "What does the Imperium wish from the Inquisition which can't be made fully public?"

"We need the Inquisition to defeat the Venatori," Mae said immediately.

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "Convenient since that is one of our goals, but why approach us now and not earlier?"

"Oh, Dorian," Mae said with a sigh, "you've seen the Magisterium in session. They couldn't agree on
how to conjure water if the Presidium was on fire."

Halward and the other Magister glared at her, but Dorian had to laugh. "True. They might decide to cast fire just to prove they're more powerful than it, anyway." Ignoring the glares that were now turned on him and the strangling noises coming from Josephine's direction, he blithely continued, "Very well. You want the Venatori gone, as do we. But that is not a light undertaking, and you wouldn't be here if you completely trusted us to do it without you, would you?"

Mae hesitated, then grew more serious as she leaned in. "We aren't entirely blind as to what's happening in the South," she said quietly. "The war between the Templars and the mages is serious enough for a country whose ruling class consists entirely of mages, but the rumors are spreading that Corypheus is the man who brought the Blight to Thedas."

"One of them, at any rate," Dorian said, reflecting her change of mood. "From what my predecessor said of his ravings, he spoke of going to the Golden City and finding it already black. From what the Wardens and others have told me, he truly is one of the original darkspawn, captured and held by the Wardens to study for Ages before he escaped."

"I've instructed some of my scholars to track down all information they can on the Magisters Sidereal, but what they found before we left the Imperium was slim indeed. One of the leading modern scholars on that time period, Magister Erasthenes, has also gone missing, with a timing too suspicious to be a coincidence." Her lips pursed in thought for a moment. "Regardless, I'm hoping they'll send us more information soon."

"Any information would be welcome," Dorian mused as he swirled his wine a few times. "I had considered reaching out to some former colleagues on my own, but you'll be able to commandeer a better response, I should think."

"Hopefully." With a grimace, Maevaris sipped her wine. "I prefer history to remain in books, thank you. Regardless of what is discovered, though, the rumor itself is a problem for the Imperium. I'm sure you can deduce why."

Dorian stroked his mustache, knowing just how much the gesture would irritate his father. "Oh, I can garner a guess. Corypheus threatens the balance between the North and the South. I take it that's why your delegation is here at all? A select few Magisters willing to put their reputation on the line to ensure that the problem is dealt with before a new Divine decides to consolidate power by dealing with the land from whence Corypheus came? An attempt to give the impression in the South that Corypheus is a rogue agent, despite the support he has garnered within the Imperium?"

"You know it is more than that, Dorian," Halward said gruffly. "Tensions have always existed between the Imperium and the other nations of Thedas. Corypheus is a concern, yes, but not even a newly installed Divine would legitimately believe him to be allied with the whole of the Imperium."

Tilting his head, Dorian mulled over that until the other reason made itself clear. "Ah, I see. If the Inquisition fails with me at the helm, then the blame wouldn't belong only to an ancient Magister from legend. It would also suddenly become a plot on the part of the Imperium to gain power in the South-- especially because of how I came to the role of Inquisitor." He grimaced, not liking the implication at all, but he was politically savvy enough to realize that it was something which could be exploited by those devious enough to do so. "You're right--the Imperium does require an official presence here, even if it is an understated one. You truly do need the Inquisition to take Corypheus down. Anything less will suggest a connection of complicity."

With a nod, Maevaris leaned back in her chair and toyed with her own wine, swirling it gently as she spoke. "The Imperium is already stretched for resources because of the war in the Seheron, for all
that they put on the facade that they are not impacted by it. An Exalted March against the Imperium would definitely be a blow, one the Imperium may not survive. The South may be weakened by the war between the mages and the Templars, and a bit lost for singular leadership without a Divine, but if Corypheus finds any measure of success, we know where a portion of the blame will be laid, and an Inquisitor from the Imperium simply heightens the tension. Already the boogeyman of the Imperium is being whispered in the halls of the Chantry in the countries nearest to us."

"The blood is bad enough between the North and the South," Halward interjected, a frown coming to his face. "Your abrupt and unexpected ascension to the role of Inquisitor caused ripples which spread across Thedas, in ways no one could completely predict, and circumstances...” His voice suddenly failed, and Halward looked down at his hands for a moment. When Maevaris reached out and touched his hand lightly, he shook his head and cleared his throat. “Circumstances have changed.”

"Understood," Dorian noted, though he did wonder at his father’s odd hesitation. Still, Dorian had been raised on political maneuvering, so what Halward had said didn’t surprise him. "But then the question rises why not stand with the Inquisition openly?"

His father considered him for a moment, a subtle change in his demeanor indicating an equally subtle shift within his mind. Finally he straightened in his chair. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

"Ah. The old curmudgeons back home, then," Dorian mused. "The Archon can’t refuse outright the stated purpose of the Venatori without looking like he doesn’t want the Imperium to return to greatness. But he also can’t afford an Exalted March by a pissed off group of Southern nations. Quite the pickle.” Leaning back in his chair, he took a languorous drink of his own before adding, “How very convenient that a Vint is in the position to do something about it without having to invoke the name of the Imperium overtly."

"I knew you were more than just a pretty face, Dorian," Mae told him with a slow wink.

"Ah, Mae. You have truly ruined me for all other women," Dorian said extravagantly, chuckling at the dour expression on his father's face. "Alas, I'm only twice the man your Thorold was."

Maevaris snorted laughter into her drink. "Perhaps we shouldn't get into the details of that here," she murmured.

"Hmm, best not to, no. We've scandalized poor Lady Josephine quite enough today, I'm sure, with all this direct talking. Negotiations are supposed to be all about misdirection and maneuvering and shenanigans of all sorts. Not actually talking about the problems. Tsk tsk." He glanced at Josephine with a twinkle in his eye. "My apologies, Lady Montilyet."

"You are quite forgiven, Inquisitor," she said with impeccable poise. "These are extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in, after all."

"Indeed. So. Covert aid, with a secret agreement signed and worded properly so that if necessary, it can be shown to the appropriate parties later to prevent outrage that the Imperium did nothing, then?" Dorian asked, sniffing his wine. "Does that about cover it?"

Mae nodded. "Halward will be one of your covert helpers, though," she said. "He is your father, and to most that is sufficient reason to explain his presence here."

Dorian's eyes flicked over to his father, only to find the man looking even more tired than he had the previous night. Frowning slightly, he said, "My disagreement with my father isn't precisely a secret
amongst the Inquisition."

"Then the appearance of a reconciliation, or the appearance of an attempt at one, might be for the best." Maevaris glanced between the two men. "Perhaps we should leave you alone to discuss the matter. I'll be outside in case lightning starts to fly." Standing smoothly, she took her wine with her as she gestured the third Magister to follow her from the room.

"Inquisitor?" Josephine asked softly, clearly leaving it up to Dorian whether he truly wished to be alone with his father or not.

For a moment Dorian closed his eyes as the memory of the last time he'd had a private moment with his father moved through his mind. He almost asked Josephine to stay, then in the next instant opened his mouth to ask her to call for Cullen. In the end, however, he simply exhaled. "I will speak with him alone. Thank you, Josephine."

"As you wish, Inquisitor," she said as she rose smoothly to her feet. "I shall keep our guests company. Perhaps we could begin discussing the document you mentioned in the negotiations."

"That sounds marvelous, my lady. Thank you," he told her warmly. "Though perhaps you should bring Maevaris and the other fellow back here rather than hovering in the hall like loons. I'll take Father to the war room for our discussion." Standing, he looked at his Father. "If that is agreeable."

Halward nodded and rose to his feet. "You are the Inquisitor."

"Why, Father, surely you aren't ceding authority to me?" Dorian jabbed lightly as he gestured towards the back door of Josephine's office with his wine glass. The negotiations were complete, after all, so Dorian could now return to being the son again. Preferably a bratty one.

With a put-upon sigh, Halward followed after Dorian. "Must you?"

"Oh, I must, Father. Or should I be calling you Magister Pavus, hmm?" The humor and lightness of his tone infuriated his father, he knew. He'd figured that out when he was twelve and beginning to realize how difficult it was to please the man, and thus found what pleasure he could in doing the opposite. "You'll like the war room. It has a big, impressive table you can pound on while you yell at me."

"Dorian," Halward said in a tight, strained tone that Dorian recognized quite easily. Strangely, he added nothing after it. When Dorian looked at him inquiringly, his father only shook his head and pointed to the door. "When we are alone," he said quietly.

Taken aback by the lack of any retort, Dorian frowned and fell quiet as they finished the walk down the broken passageway to the war room. Once they were inside, he closed the door with a touch of magic and then turned to face his father. "Very well, Father," he said. "What did you want to say?"

Halward moved to one of the windows and stared down at Skyhold spread out beneath them for a few moments before he answered, still not looking at Dorian. "Circumstances have changed, Dorian."

"I am quite well aware of that." Dorian's eyes narrowed. "Or are you referring to the new decoration on your neck? What is happening back home?"

With a sigh, Halward slowly turned to face him. "Before, I was the father of a son with a notorious rebellious streak who fled south rather than live up to the responsibilities waiting for him at home." As Dorian bristled, Halward held up his hand. "According to rumor which, as we know, has no subtlety and little truth."
“Fair point,” Dorian conceded, discarding his planned interjection. “Admittedly I’ve become severely reacquainted with the phantoms of rumor since becoming the Inquisitor.”

One corner of Halward’s mouth rose ever so slightly before it vanished again as he continued. “Then I was the father of a son who was helping an organization led by one of the wild elves against a madman who claimed to be an ancient Tevinter magister who had managed to sway several of the Magisterium to his cause. The rumors ran rampant, unhindered by anything so simple as fact or truth. Speculation that you were helping Alexius, that you’d killed Alexius, that you had cast a curse on him, that you’d turned Corypheus against him. The Magisters fight and debate amongst themselves with a decided frequency already, but this particular fire started by Corypheus is burning hotter than most, to borrow your analogy.”

"I can imagine." And for once, Dorian was not sarcastic in that statement. He had cut his baby teeth listening to his parents discuss the political maneuverings of other Houses, after all, and his various mentors and tutors had not neglected that part of his education amidst the many, many recitations of his bloodline. "There are many in the Magisterium who would be enticed by the promise of a return to the glorious days of the Imperium's youth. Control of all known lands, command of all religion, and power over every soul."

Halward bowed his head. "Sometimes I think the lure of power is our curse. It turns allies to enemies, brother against sister, and parents against children." His eyes looked up to meet Dorian's. "As I know all too well."

"Yes, Father," Dorian said coldly, finding himself compelled to add, "And children to puppets, if you'd had your way. Go there, Dorian. Turn this way and think that way. Marry this woman and seek that position." The anger rose in him again as he crossed his hands across his chest. "What does all this have to do with... us, Father? Those politics are all in Minrathous, and well away from here."

"Because circumstances have changed," Halward repeated. "You became the Inquisitor, and the Magisterium now views House Pavus through a skewed eye. The Magisters who think the Inquisition is significant now think our estrangement but a ruse to conceal my influence over you. And the ones who are rivals to House Pavus are breathlessly waiting for it to all fall apart and leave us both in disarray so that they can come in and pick apart the pieces for their own gain." His lips pressed together for a moment, then shook his head. "Whether you meant to or not, many within the Magisterium took your ascension here as an overt grab for power by House Pavus."

Dorian blinked in surprise, then frowned as he continued to worry at the thought. "I didn't think about that, considering how far rumors of my dramatic departure from the Imperium spread."

Leveling a reproachful look at Dorian, Halward said, "Many now consider that an excuse for you to remain south while you consolidate your hold on power for our House. I'm sure there were whispers here that you killed your predecessor for the position of Inquisitor, and whispers don't need more than a few loose lips to make their way north if there are those willing to speak them."

"I didn't--" he began hotly.

"I know, Dorian," Halward said. "Murder for power is not something you would even contemplate, much less that of a friend. I taught you well, even if I failed to provide a good example."

Dorian's eyes narrowed, echoing his suspicion. "That's not how you sounded when last we spoke," he noted.

"That's because..." His voice trailed away as he turned to stare out the window again, shoulders slumping. His voice sounded particularly defeated as he repeated in a dull tone, "Circumstances have..."
changed.”

For a long moment of slowly dawning horror, Dorian stared at his father as the meaning of all the little hints and unspoken shouts coalesced all at once into a harsh and unwelcome truth. The chill of realization washed over him as he viewed the scar on his father’s neck in stunned disbelief. "No," he whispered. “Please, Maker, no.”

"I'm sorry, Dorian," Halward said, and for the first time in Dorian's life, he heard true regret in his father's tone, untempered by politics or nuance. "I survived the attempt on my life. Your mother... was not so fortunate."

Dorian found himself leaning on the table as an invasive chill swept through his body. Nothing could have prepared him for this news, so he couldn't even blame his father for trying to avoid the subject for so long. A Magister never showed weakness, not even to his son—or at least, that is what he'd been taught. He wasn't even aware that his father had moved until he felt a hand grip his shoulder, and he took a deep breath to collect himself before looking up at his father. "What happened?" he asked in a harsh tone.

Bowing his head, Halward inhaled sharply before speaking in a voice dulled by grief. "We were in the garden of our summer house in Qarinus. The conversation soured between us, and she turned away from me in a temper. The arrow had magic behind it to counter our defensive wards, and passed through her before finding my neck. She died in my arms." Halward closed his eyes for a moment. "If she hadn't moved as she had, if we hadn't been arguing, she would be alive right now, and I...would be dead. Or perhaps, if we had not been distracted, neither of us would be dead."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Dorian tried not to imagine the moment, tried not to blame his father himself, and failed utterly in both. "Who?"

"The assassin died before he would reveal his employer, but my investigation led to a very distinct possibility," Halward said, face grim. "House Erimond has been quite vocal in its support of Corypheus and their belief in the promises of the return of a glorious Imperium, though Livius himself is rumored to be serving Corypheus here in the south. His brother Darius is just as craven as he, and has been known to use mage killers before. You were now a power in the south, the leader of the movement in direct opposition to the Venatori. I assume they hoped to weaken you by hurting you on a personal level." The words would have seemed detached, almost clinical, if Dorian weren't so familiar with his father and his ways.

They were quite alike, after all, father and son.

So he latched onto the part he could comment on without displaying too much of his own emotion. "Erimond?" Dorian swallowed, remembering all too keenly that Livius now sat in the cells below Skyhold. "For once, the rumors are true. Livius is in the south."

Halward's expression hardened. "Perhaps I could persuade Maevaris to search for him while we're here."

Unwilling to reveal Livius' precise location at this moment, Dorian shifted to another topic quickly. "Why keep her death a secret, then? Appearances?"

"For the most part, yes. House Pavus--"

Dorian made a grunt of frustration. "Oh, yes, of course. We can't have House Pavus looking weak, now, can we? Surely you don't think that will last, do you?"
"It only needed to last long enough for me to tell you the truth," Halward said. "I did not want rumor to tell you what I could not entrust to a messenger, and the trip south had already been arranged by that point."

The way his father's voice cracked as he said that made Dorian suspicious again. "Father, what were you arguing about that night?"

Halward held Dorian's gaze for a moment, then looked away. "She wanted to come south with me. I didn't want her to come." His father paused for a long moment, then sighed softly. "She wanted to see her son."

The answer sparked an intense emotional reaction within Dorian, and he pushed away from the table as he fought to work his way through it. Guilt, regret, anger, and despair, all in varying degrees, snaked through his arms and chest, leaving only cold in their wake. Moving to the window, he stared sightlessly out of it, unable to articulate everything running through his mind and heart.

In the end, a snap of anger flared, and he whirled to face his father. "Get out."

"Dorian--" Halward began.

"Get out!" Dorian repeated in a shout, heaving the door open with a surge of magic before turning back to the window once more. After a moment, he managed to collect himself enough to add in a more controlled tone, "We will talk later."

After a few tense moments, he heard a soft rustle of cloth behind him, followed by the sound of footsteps retreating down the hall.

Dorian swallowed harshly as his shoulders slumped, forcing away the tension and anger which had locked them. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, and the light of the anchor sprang into life, pulsing in a slow, steady beat. He ached for a way to express what he was feeling, except... except he didn't know what he was feeling. The roil of raw emotion in his heart was enough to bring a sheen to his eyes, but proved too powerful to express properly, leaving the storm to brew within.

He knew the marriage of his parents was an allegiance more than a relationship, though he'd seen love in another marriage when he'd studied with Alexius. He knew that his entire existence was predicated upon the assumption that he would grow to become the perfect son, the perfect husband, and the perfect Magister, if not the perfect Archon. He knew that what love his mother felt for him was more than likely somewhat perfunctory, and hadn't been shown in any dramatic fashion while he'd been reared by a small team of nannies and tutors before he'd been shuttled off to complete his education in the Circles.

He knew all of this, deep down where all the pain of his life had set its roots. And yet...

She was still his mother.

For a moment, he struggled to hold on to that sense of calm he'd sworn to maintain while his father was near, to resist the lure of his anger. And in that moment, he suddenly remembered the face of his father, twisted in rage, screaming at him.

"It's all your fault!"

He knew it wasn't actually his father who had said that. He knew it had been a demon, powerless and lashing out to obtain control of a mage in the Fade. He knew that it was irrational to even think of that at all right now, to make any sort of connection between that dream and the news of his mother's death.
And yet… he couldn't help but feel that it was, indeed, all his fault, since the assassin would not have been sent save for his ascent within the Inquisition. Oh, perhaps another assassin might have been sent another time against House Pavus--this was politics in Minrathous, after all. But this time, the arrow unleashed could be traced back to Dorian's own actions: his opposition to Corypheus.

"It's all your fault!"

And, just like that, all the seething, inchoate passion twisting and writhing and roiling within him coalesced into a new, more dangerous impulse: revenge.

Turning on his heel, he strode from the room. He knew precisely where he needed to be.

Dorian stalked through the halls of Skyhold, unaware of the implacable expression on his face or the slow steady pulse of green light in his left hand. Later, he could recall some of the details of that short journey: how he had stormed past Josephine and the Magisters without a second glance, how those in the main hall melted from his path with faint murmurs, how Varric had tried to get his attention with a worried expression on his face. The cool chill of the air outside did nothing to alleviate the fire within, and by the time he reached the door of the jail tucked away out of sight of the main courtyard, every movement was carefully controlled.

He dismissed the jail guard after retrieving the cell keys from her, then continued his path towards one cell in particular, one whose occupant had only recently been installed. The roar of the waterfall which occupied much of the floor of the jail made conversation difficult, so he didn't overhear the conversation between the two men in adjacent cells until he was much closer.

"--a fool, Erimond. Corypheus doesn't care about you," Dorian heard someone say in a scornful tone.

"You seemed willing enough to serve him at one point, Servis," Livius shot back.

"Because he has deep pockets," Servis said with a laugh. "You see, I am not a fool. I like money, and he had plenty of it."

"And it wasn't enough, from what I heard." The scorn in Livius' tone tried to be scathing, but since it was Livius saying it, it proved to be only mildly annoying. "But then, neither were you."

"If someone pays me enough, I'll do whatever they tell me," Servis said indifferently. "They'd just better keep paying me--Oh. Inquisitor."

Dorian ignored the bow of greeting Servis gave him as he stalked past the cell, focusing instead on Livius. The man was just as reprehensible as the moment he'd called down Corypheus' dragon in Adamant, but quite a bit more haggard--a fact which currently gave Dorian immense satisfaction. The shackles on his wrists which bound the Magister's magic also warmed him, though Dorian wasn't particularly proud of that reaction.

"Ah, so you've finally deigned to grace us with your presence," Livius drawled. "So good to see you again, Altus. And here I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

"Livius," Dorian greeted with a brief nod of his head, deliberately dispensing with honorifics. To a Magister, leaving it out was like spitting in his face. "Funny thing, that," Dorian continued with affected cheerfulness. He kept his eyes on the Livius' expression, knowing that the man's reaction would be telling. "You see, I received a message from back home."

And Dorian saw enough. A tightening of the lips, a widening of the eyes, a calculation in his
expression as Livius tried to determine what it would mean for his own fate. Dorian watched as Livius slowly licked his lips before replying. "Oh?"

Dorian crossed his arms over his chest and slowly lowered his chin while keeping his eyes locked on Livius, the forced cheerfulness slowly draining away. Peripherally he saw the steady pulsing beat of green light in his hand, marking the time as it passed in deliberate silence.

And the silence worked, its weight pressing on Livius in a manner which only a guilty conscience could feel. The way the man cleared his throat and shuffled back into the cell proved to be the final nail in convincing Dorian that Livius knew. After only a few tense moments, Livius looked away, unable to meet Dorian's gaze but also unwilling to endure the silence any longer. "And how fares House Pavus?"

"Do you want me to say it out loud?" Dorian asked in a soft voice, stepping closer to the cell. "Because that would make it far worse for you."

Livius' bravado returned with a sneer as he abandoned his pretense of ignorance, straightening where he stood. "You think that your threats mean anything to me? I serve a living god, Pavus. What do you serve? The common good?" His voice dripped with disdain. "Dispense your petty justice if you wish. Truth lies in the next world."

"What did you do, Erimond?" Servis chimed in. "It sounds like you were a very naughty boy." He subsided when Dorian glared at him, though the insouciant grin never left his lips.

Turning back to Livius, Dorian's eyes narrowed. "You forget, Livius, I am no longer constrained by the rules and morays of northern sensitivities." As Livius frowned, Dorian gave him a tight smile, then reached out to grasp the bars of the cell, the pulsing green light of his hand casting an eerie glow in the small space. "And I have something which even the Imperium doesn't have. I have Southern Templars, and they have no qualms setting the sunburst on a mage's forehead for all to see."

Eyes widening as the true meaning of the threat dawned on him--as Dorian had intended--Livius snarled, "You wouldn't dare."

"They don't call me the Inquisitor because I paint watercolors and dispense glitter across Thedas with the power of rifts," Dorian shot back, even as he launched himself into abrupt, almost violent motion. The next few seconds passed in a blur as Dorian unlocked the cell and surged inside so that he could wrap his hands around the man's throat and slam him into the wall--all without conscious awareness, as if he were a passenger in his own body. "Tell me why I shouldn't," he growled in a deathly quiet voice.

Livius struggled, twisting his head this way and that as he fought against Dorian's hold. His captivity had left him weak, however, and Dorian's anger proved difficult to fight against. "You have no right. I am a--a Magister of the Imperium."

Dorian felt a flare of anger, white-hot and pure, burst inside him as he grated, "And she was my mother."

"You didn't!" Servis said in mock horror from the next cell, proving that he was listening with no small amount of glee. "Oh, Erimond, you really are a fool."

"Shut--up!" Livius gasped, struggling to speak despite the hands slowly tightening around his neck.

"And that isn't my only option," Dorian grated. "There are so many choices to pluck from the Imperium's sordid history. Remember the fate of Eleni Zinovia, she who spoke of an Archon's
downfall? Would you prefer that?"

"Inventive, I like it!" Servis chimed in. "Stuck in a statue for eternity with no hope of escape. I don't think even your living god could save you from that, Erimond."

Livius shook his head, obviously growing more desperate for air with each passing second. His facade of arrogance had crumbled away, leaving only a man face to face with the consequences of his own actions. "Inquisitor," he managed. "Mercy!"

"Mercy?" Dorian snapped, the light of the mark growing brighter with each pulse as he felt his ire increase. "What mercy did you show her?"

Before Livius could respond, Dorian hauled Livius bodily from the cell, dragging him towards the waterfall. With a signal act of strength and determination, he grasped the front of Livius' tunic and lifted him high before turning, setting his own feet on the edge of the stone above the waterfall. If he relaxed his grip to any degree, Livius would plummet to his death—and it would not be a pleasant one, judging by the rocks jutting out from the cliff face over which the waterfall flowed.

"Mercy lies within my open hands, Livius," he growled, pulling the man's face close to his as he bit off every word. The green light of the mark was almost blinding by this point, its pulse steady and unrelenting as it noted each heartbeat which passed. "If you truly believe that truth lies in the next world, then all you need do is accept my offer."

"Inquisitor!"

The shout came from his right, where the door to the jail had burst open, and came from the one person who could penetrate the haze of vengeance which had sunk its claws into him. It still took a moment for Dorian to respond, since he forced himself to take a deep breath before turning his head to look at where Cullen stood, framed by the light streaming down the stairs behind him. For a moment their gazes locked, and even from this distance he saw something in Cullen's eyes that he would never have thought possible.

Fear.
Of him.

The light of the anchor flickered and died, the rage fading as if it had never been.

Dorian inhaled sharply through his nose, then turned to look at Livius. The mage had gone completely still, face pale and eyes more than a little wild as they stared fixedly at Dorian. Without a word, Dorian stepped back from the precipice, then turned and threw Livius bodily towards his cell. "Back in your cell before I reconsider calling for the Templars."

"Yes, Inquisitor." Without another word, Livius retreated into his cell, pulling the door closed behind him before locking it and throwing the keys out of his own reach.

As Dorian moved to retrieve the keys, he passed close to Servis' cell. "You play a dangerous game, Inquisitor," Servis said softly, all hints of his earlier levity gone.

"I don't play games, Crassius Servis," Dorian told him. "You would do well to remember that, when it is your time to stand before me." Dismissing the man, Dorian turned to Livius. "You will have your day for justice, and you will stand trial for conspiracy in the murder of Lady Aquinea Thalrassian, but it will be done in the light of day and before witnesses."

Livius refused to look at Dorian, but the way his fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles turned
white indicated he'd seen or heard something which left him shaken. "Yes, Inquisitor."

Only then did Dorian pivot on his heel and walk towards the entrance.

And towards Cullen.

As he approached, he searched Cullen's demeanor for any hint of what the man was thinking, but it was clear that Cullen had withdrawn into his role as Commander of the Inquisition, made evident when Cullen issued a field-perfect salute. "Inquisitor," Cullen said in a neutral tone. "The guard informed me you requested my presence."

Which was a polite fiction, a fact they both knew perfectly well. The tightness around Cullen’s eyes proved that most eloquently. "Thank you, Commander," Dorian said with a nod. "I appreciate your timely arrival." He held out the key ring to Cullen. "Return these to the guard, then report to my quarters."

For a moment, the Commander became a friend and studied Dorian's face closely. Then he snapped back to attention and took the keys from Dorian. "Yes, Inquisitor."

"Dismissed." With a nod, Dorian moved past him, somehow not pausing long enough to beg for forgiveness or shove Cullen into the wall for some other purpose entirely. Instead he kept his gaze facing forward resolutely, moving up the stairs with a dogged determination to pretend everything was normal.

Even if matters remained far from that.
As he ascended the stairs into the courtyard, Dorian fixed a smile on his face. Amiable, yes, but also one which didn't specifically invite intrusion. It wasn't so dissimilar from his normal expression so as to invite speculation, or so he hoped, but also enough to ensure he could proceed to his quarters without interruption. It proved to be effective, and he closed the door of his suite behind him with a sigh of relief. He'd also noted the complete lack of Tevinter robes as he'd proceeded through the hall, and silently prayed that Josephine had worked her own version of magic to keep the delegation occupied, especially his father. Dorian couldn't bear the thought of facing him at this particular moment, or Maevaris with her sharp eyes and keen mind. He just wanted to be alone for a while.

Well, almost alone. And that was part of his worry.

On the one hand, Cullen remained his dearest friend. Over the months, they'd learned how to communicate in ways that almost seemed to transcend words, and Cullen had shown it in their brief encounter in the jail despite the distance between them. Concern, care, caution: that had all been communicated through nothing more than the subtleties of his expression and the set of his shoulders. There was no one he trusted more than Cullen by now, not even Felix or Maevaris. Cullen had proven himself to be a firm foundation in their friendship, and… and possibly more.

On the other hand, Dorian had no clue what to say when Cullen arrived. How did one casually discuss whatever had happened down there?

Mind whirling, he pushed himself away from the door and headed up the stairs towards his quarters. Eventually he found his way to the couch and flung himself into it with a loud sigh, burying his face in his hands for a moment. His mind whirled as he forced himself to relive his outburst moment by moment, poking and prodding at the memory to figure out what had happened. Bad enough he had threatened the man with Tranquility or an eternity in stone, but to then hold him over a waterfall and revel in the man's fear? No, that was too far.

Over and over again, no matter how he tried to frame the matter, every analysis ended with him contemplating if he truly could have dropped Livius to his doom without any remorse. And every time he concluded that he could not. He knew the difference between vengeance and justice, after all, and that would not have been justice. Indeed, there was really only one word for those who killed outside the chaos of battle and the order of the court.

*Murderer.*

Eventually he realized that his thoughts kept running in circles over old ground and decided that he needed some liquid assistance. With a groan, he pushed himself up from the couch, deciding that a thorough investigation of his sideboard was in order.

As he stood in front of it in contemplation of the choice of drinks, he heard the door open without a knock, and instinctively straightened. Mentally he followed the footsteps as they climbed the stairs, waiting until his guest had reached the final landing before speaking without looking. “I suspect you have questions.”

“A few.”
Dorian blinked and quickly turned towards his visitor, a quick flash of guilt swarming over him as he saw Felix standing at the top of the stairs with his mandolin in his hands. “I see the Commander spoke with you.”

“Among others.” Felix frowned as his brow furrowed. “I didn’t realize I would get examined by a committee.”

Dorian’s face softened as that flash of guilt returned with more strength. “I’m sorry, Felix. I know you wanted to keep this a secret, but… well… we’ve had some problems of late with Grey Wardens. Problems involving demons and worse than demons.”

“Worse? What’s worse than demons?” Felix asked skeptically.

“An army of demons,” Dorian said, then sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “And a Nightmare of a demon powerful enough to control that army, working with Corypheus.”

Again Felix’s forehead wrinkled. “And the Grey Wardens enter into this how?”

“That is a long, thirsty tale, my friend,” Dorian said with a groan, then gestured Felix to follow him to the couch. “And it all started in Crestwood, when my predecessor met a rather rapscallion ruffian by the name of Alistair.”

From there Dorian told Felix in a bit more detail just what had happened, though he kept the telling to its bare bones for brevity’s sake—even going so far as to omit the fact they’d gone physically into the Fade. That detail he’d prefer to remain strictly within the Inquisition for as long as possible, and for the moment that meant he couldn’t tell Felix.

Finally, he settled back and made a vague gesture as he said, “And that is why I told the Commander, and why I gave my blessing for the committee. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to tell you, but I thought it best he talk to you while the Magisters were otherwise preoccupied.”

“True,” Felix mused. “Though I suppose there’s no real reason to keep hidden from them any longer. I hid mostly because I didn’t want to be sent back before I saw you, and… well.” He smiled faintly. “I have.”

“I did promise not to tell anyone, and I did,” Dorian said, still feeling a bit sheepish about it. “And I do apologize for that.”

Felix considered Dorian for a moment, then leaned forward and took one of Dorian’s hands in his own. “Thank you. But you’re right. Now that I know a bit more, I can see why me appearing out of nowhere with an association with the Grey Wardens would seem suspicious. Certainly I would endure worse scrutiny at home or in Val Royeaux. So…” Looking down at the mandolin in his lap, he lifted it and held it out to Dorian. “Take it back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely.” He suddenly grinned. “Besides, it would look odd if a mandolin most people here associate with you were to suddenly turn up in the Tevinter apartments.”

“Ah. Excellent point.” Taking the instrument with the care it deserved, Dorian smiled down at it. “I must say there were some dark hours soothed with its sweet song, and will be ahead.” As quickly as it had come to his face, however, it faded before the pressure of the rising turbulence within, making his breath catch in his throat as he struggled to keep the pain and rage from showing on his face. Abruptly he pushed himself to his feet and moved to the desk, gently laying down the mandolin with shaking hands before pressing them flat onto the desk as he bowed his head.
“Dorian?” Footsteps crossed the room behind him before a hand fell on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Dorian forced himself to pull in his scattered thoughts. He didn't have time to fall apart, regardless of... well, everything. His mother, his dreams, even his emotions—they all rolled into one large pile of powerlessness, at a time when the Inquisitor could not afford even the illusion of weakness, much less the actuality.

And Felix, Maker bless him, would not understand that. Alexius hadn't been nearly as exacting in his demands of his son as Halward had, despite the fact that both families belonged to the Magisterium. Beyond that, Felix had only ever seen the Inquisition and its leader from the outside, much the same as Dorian had before he had joined its ranks. His friend could offer a shoulder in support, and Dorian appreciated that more than he could ever say, but it the fact remained that Dorian needed something else besides a sympathetic shoulder.

Or perhaps, deep down, Dorian knew he needed someone else.

Straightening, Dorian turned to give Felix as strong an attempt at a smile as he could manage. "Something my father told me, that's all."

Felix frowned. "I remember Father getting frustrated with him sometimes, with how he treated you. They used to exchange letters about your progress, you know."

"I recall," Dorian noted, trying to push away the disappointment which had always resulted from those conversations. "My father was never a very research-oriented sort. He used to tell Alexius that we should stop wasting our time with the impossible and concentrate on the practical."

"Yes. Mother used to roll her eyes whenever Father mentioned that, as I recall."

A small smile came to Dorian's face at that, since he remembered that as well. "Did I ever tell you how much I adored your mother?" he asked Felix.

"Good. I'm glad." Felix reached out and settled his hands on Dorian's shoulders. "You were like a second son to her, Dorian."

Dorian felt a sheen of moisture rise, and quickly blinked it away. "Livia was a remarkable woman," he said, forcing himself to speak around the lump forming in his throat.

Sorrow came to Felix's face as he nodded slowly. "She was. I... I miss her, every day."

Wincing, Dorian reached up to take Felix's hands in his own. "I'm sorry. We don't have to talk about--"

"No. No, it's all right, Dorian." Felix gave him a weak smile of his own. "I'd... I'd like to, at least a little. I haven't been able to talk about either of them. No one else would understand. No one else was there to see..." He swallowed harshly and looked down. "To see what happened to Father."

"I remember," Dorian whispered. "It was hard enough for me. I can only imagine how difficult it was for you."

"It wasn't easy, watching Father tear himself apart to try to save me," Felix admitted. "Especially knowing that part of his obsession was due to the fact he'd lost Mother permanently. Considering everything that's happened, it's hard not to feel..." For a few moments, Felix tried to search for the right words. "Responsible, I suppose."
"You?" Dorian blinked. "How could you be in any way responsible?"

"They were only traveling because of me. Maybe if I'd come north on my own for the holidays, or even stayed in Val Royeaux to study instead of visiting, my mother would still be alive." Felix sighed and bowed his head. "And Father wouldn't have helped to unleash a madman on the world."

Dorian swallowed harshly, a chill running down his spine as he saw an echo of his own guilt and grief in Felix. As much as he wanted to simply pull Felix into a hug and tell him that he was in no way responsible for Livia's death or what Alexius had wrought, he didn't get much farther than a tight embrace before his words failed him. It could not be denied that Dorian carried a measure of guilt himself, both for his own mother's fate as well as for Alexius.

After all, *If I'd done something differently, perhaps my mother would still be alive* very much accurately reflected the vortex of guilt and pain swirling inside of Dorian even now.

With a deep breath, Dorian released Felix and set his hands on his friend's arms, deliberately echoing Felix's own stance earlier. "You think I don't feel a bit of that same guilt? For months after that last argument I had with Alexius, I felt guilty for deserting him, deserting you. I saw the same obsession that you did, and in the end, I ran from it. I'm not proud of that fact, and a part of me will always wonder if perhaps I could have persuaded him back to sanity if I'd just stayed a little bit longer."

Shaking his head, Felix said, "I remember that fight, Dorian. You were angry at him, yes, but he wasn't listening. Not to you, or to me. Nothing we said could have changed his mind. I--I wish it could have been otherwise." Felix took a shaking breath. "All I wanted was to spend what time I had left with my father. He didn't have to save me to show that he loved me. I would give anything for another night in front of the fire with him, or even just another conversation where we didn't talk about what he had to do to fix me." For a moment, a haunted look came to Felix's face. "There are worse things than death."

"I know." Dorian pulled Felix into another tight hug. "And I wish you'd never had to experience any of them."

Felix squeezed Dorian tightly in return. "I know."

For a few moments they remained that way, but finally Felix released Dorian and pulled back. "Thank you, Dorian. I didn't realize how much I needed a friend again."

"A friend who exposed you to question via committee," Dorian reminded him, still feeling a trifle guilty about that as well.

"No, don't worry about that. It hurt only because I thought it meant you didn't really care. Now..." Felix tilted his head. "Now I know you did it because you *do* care--about quite a few people." Suddenly a grin came to his face. "It's almost like you're--"

"Don't say it," Dorian said, a mock-frown coming to his face as he saw where Felix was heading.

"Growing up."

"Growing up," Felix said, then laughed as Dorian pressed the back of his hand to his forehead. "Betrayed by my own friend!" Dorian said in despair. "I'll have you know I'm as much as a wastrel now as I was before."

A corner of Felix's mouth curved upwards. "Except you're not, and you know it. You only fall back into those habits when you're not happy, or when you have nothing to lose. And that's not true right now, is it?"
A bit surprised at Felix's rather astute observation, Dorian blinked a few times as he tried to muster up a response. "That's hardly any of your business," he finally muttered, not quite ready to wrestle with the full implications of his friend's words.

"I'm glad you've found a home in the Inquisition, Dorian. I truly am." Face turning thoughtful, Felix pursed his lips as he scrutinized Dorian's face for a moment. "It's odd. I never really thought about how much I've placed my life on hold until now."

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You're... doing things. Taking risks. Making decisions. Living your life again. And I think it's time for me to do the same. I'd gotten so used to wondering when I would die that I forgot I had plans for the future once. Even if those plans have to include the Grey Wardens now, at least it is a future." Putting a hand on Dorian's shoulder, he said, "I'm going to go talk to Magister Tilani. I think it's time to come out of the shadows and find my own path."

"Yes, well, do allow her some time to recover from the surprise that the rumors of your death were greatly exaggerated," Dorian told Felix with a dry chuckle. "I'm rather fond of her, after all."

"I'll keep that in mind," Felix said with a laugh. "Thank you, Dorian." When Dorian started to demur, Felix held up a finger in warning. "You're the Inquisitor. It's perfectly acceptable for people to be inspired by you, and I'm afraid you're simply going to have to deal with it."

Squirming away from the idea of being an inspiration, Dorian scowled at Felix. "I shouldn't be forced to endure this egregious act of unadulterated adulation, you know."

Felix smirked, completely unrepentant of his crimes. "I'm sure it is an incredible burden, all these weighty compliments. I'll have to keep that in mind next time I see you."

"See that you do," Dorian said loftily, then laughed and pulled Felix into a fierce, albeit brief, hug. "I'm glad you're back. It's nice when something goes right for a change. You always were the best of us."

That earned him a measuring look. "I'm not so sure that's true anymore," Felix observed. "I'd better get going, though. I'm overdue for a talk with Magister Tilani."

"Do give Mae my regards, would you?" Dorian made the request in a light tone, but mostly that was to cover up his confusion about Felix's comment. As Felix departed, however, the puzzlement remained. What did Felix mean, that wasn't true anymore?

Shaking his head, Dorian took a deep breath and let his head fall back so he could stare blankly at the ceiling. The conversation with Felix had proven quite a successful distraction, and one welcomed by Dorian all the more for its success, but in the end, it was only that: a distraction. Things hadn't really changed. Certainly he had gained some perspective on a few matters, but that didn't make the pain go away, or his actions in the jail any more explicable.

That didn't make the fear he'd seen in Cullen's eyes any less terrifying.

With a shudder, Dorian moved to stand in front of the array of drinks available to him, pondering which one he should start with and wondering how many he could finish before the Commander arrived. Deciding to stay with the tried and true, Dorian poured himself a healthy measure of brandy, then brought the glass to his lips. Before he could take a sip, however, he heard the door open once more.

Mouth suddenly dry, he set the drink on the table and bowed his head as he once more tracked the
movement of his visitor, mentally counting the steps until they reached the bottom of the final flight of stairs. Only then did he turn and face the man whose arrival he both dreaded and desired.

Cullen paused where he stood, bathed in the sunlight from the window behind him, and Dorian couldn't help but tilt his head at the sight of it. The man's dark golden hair glowed like a beacon, the backlight accentuating his broad shoulders and military bearing. Whether it was intentional or not, Dorian let himself freely admit just how much he enjoyed looking at the man, even though he knew that his need for Cullen exceeded simply enjoying the view.

And that worried him. Especially after what he'd seen in Cullen's eyes.

"Commander," he said, breaking the silence with what he hoped was a welcoming smile. "Do join me. I won't bite, I promise."

Cullen chuckled as he stepped forward, leaving the sunlight behind. "Are you sure?"

"Why, Commander." Pressing a hand to his chest, Dorian followed Cullen's cue by keeping the tone light, though he found he had to keep using the man's title as a shield. "Are you concerned that I will, or that I won't?"

Without answering the question, Cullen closed the distance between them and reached up to take Dorian's face between his hands. Taken by surprise, Dorian remained silent as Cullen scrutinized his face closely, turning it this way and that until finally he asked, "Are you all right?"

And, in that moment, looking into those warm eyes and seeing the depth of Cullen's concern for him, Dorian knew that he could not lie, not to him. "No," he whispered. "I'm not."

Cullen reached down to take Dorian's hands in his own. "Cole told me I had to find you, that a hole had opened up deep inside of you. What happened?"

"I'm not sure, honestly." Unable to meet Cullen's gaze, Dorian turned his head away. "But I do know I would have let go if you hadn't stopped me."

"The man was an agent of Corypheus whose actions almost unleashed a demon army upon Thedas," Cullen reminded him. "Speaking as an ex-Templar, I can't say the man hasn't earned such a fate."

"Death by waterfall?" Dorian asked, eyebrow rising.

"It would have gotten the job done," Cullen said.

"Then why stop me?"

Cullen frowned, searching Dorian's face for a few long moments. "Because I wasn't sure you wouldn't regret it later."

Dorian swallowed, then forced himself to ask, "And that's the only reason?"

The words hung between them until Cullen finally shook his head. "No. Not the only reason. Tell me, what do you remember?"

"Too much for comfort, but not enough for comprehension, I think." Dorian closed his eyes for a moment. "What did you see that I could not?"

He felt fingers find his face with a controlled strength, drawing invisible lines on his cheeks and forehead. "I saw a pattern of white light tinged with green here and here, and your eyes shone the
same color. Your mark glowed as well, pulsing like a heart. It was only for a few seconds, while you held Erimond over the waterfall, but it was long enough." The touch fell away. "It frightened me."

Dorian shuddered at the image Cullen conjured with his words. "I can see why Livius lost his nerve."

"Judging from the expression on his face, he probably lost control of his bowels," Cullen said wryly.

Laughing despite his better judgment, Dorian shook his head. "I can't say he didn't deserve it."

"Nor I," Cullen noted with a chuckle, but in the next moment, his voice had turned serious again. "So you don't know what came over you?"

"No." When he heard cloth rustle, he opened his eyes to find a thoughtful look on Cullen’s face. “I have some vague ideas, but little more.”

Cullen’s brows drew together. “All right, then maybe we should talk a bit about why you were in the jail in the first place. You hadn't gone to see Servis since arrived, and he’s been here longer than Livius. What changed?”

Dorian’s mouth immediately went dry, and he turned back to face the drinks. “I’m not sure I can talk about it yet.”

As he reached for the glass of brandy, however, hands fell on his shoulder and gently turned him around to face Cullen once more. “Dorian,” he said softly, the name falling from his lips with a tenderness which made Dorian’s eyes well up. Reaching down, Cullen took Dorian’s hand and placed it in the middle of his chest, squeezing it gently. “You know I am here for you. I won’t force you to do anything, but if you need to talk, know that I am at your command.”

That careful caress proved to be Dorian’s undoing. The pain and anger rose from where he had shoved them deep down, desperate to avoid them forever, bursting forth with a vengeance that made Dorian’s hands clench into angry balls of fury even as the tears lingering on his eyelids spilled down his cheeks.

Without a word, Cullen wrapped his arms around Dorian and held him tightly. “I’m here for you,” he repeated firmly. “Never doubt that.”

With a nod, Dorian forced himself to speak. “I spoke with my father after the negotiations. He told me…” Squeezing his eyes shut, he took a deep breath, then forced himself to continue. The words came out as he freed them from within, carrying the debilitating effect of the emotions away with them and leaving only exhaustion in their wake as he spoke of learning of his mother’s death, and of Erimond’s potential involvement in it.

Throughout the ordeal, Dorian felt the constant strength of Cullen’s presence quietly but firmly offering support as Dorian fought and twisted and wrestled with his inner turmoil, trying to externalise it so he could both examine it and make sure he never lost control because of it again. In the end, he felt hollow and weary, but also lighter and more focused than he had since rising from his bed. For a long moment he closed his eyes and rested his head on Cullen’s shoulder, feeling calmer than he had all day.

“Thank you,” he whispered at last, unable to find the words to fully express the depth of that gratitude.

“I will always be here for you,” Cullen murmured. “Remember that.”
Dorian nodded slowly, truly believing the words for the first time. He’d never allowed himself to be so vulnerable with anyone, having been taught that vulnerability was itself a weakness, just as emotion itself was, in many ways, a weakness. After taking another slow, deep breath, he said, “As you wish. Then I think I’m ready to talk about what happened down there.”

“It certainly seems connected to your emotional state,” Cullen observed. “I’ve seen enough mages in training to know how strong the link between emotion and magic can be when it’s powerful enough.”

Reluctantly Dorian pulled away from Cullen as he opened his eyes, unsure of what he would find on the other man’s face. When he found only concern, he relaxed slightly and forced himself to consider what Cullen had described to him about the incident in the jail. Given the green light, a theory did spring immediately to mind, and it was easier to tell Cullen of that one than the one which followed on its heels. "From what you told me, what with the green light in evidence, I can’t help but wonder if it's some odd manifestation of the Anchor. We don't know what it can do, after all, and even Solas said that it might manifest in different ways after what happened in the Fade."

"That is a possibility," he agreed, but Dorian heard the doubt in his voice, saw the calculation on his face. As had happened in the past, Dorian was struck by the way the man didn't just listen, but analyzed. It was a quality Dorian held in high esteem in others, and one reason why he and Bull had become such good friends despite all cultural reasons to the contrary. "Though I can't help but think there's more to it than that. I mean, the Anchor's caused unexpected things to happen, certainly, but it has always been in the form of magic and energy, not the mind. Mailani was always Mailani, and you…" He paused, leaving the rest unspoken.

Dorian winced and looked away. "I was not myself."

"No. And that worries me," Cullen admitted.

"I presume tales of abominations are dancing in your head?" Dorian asked, trying to keep it light. "A common story here in the South, from what I gather."

He’d expected Cullen to chide him for making light of such a possibility, or for downplaying the idea. He was surprised when Cullen instead cupped Dorian's chin in one hand and gently brought Dorian's face around so that Cullen could meet his gaze. "You must really be worried."

Dorian searched Cullen's eyes, looking for a hint of fear or judgment, and found none. "You know me far too well," he murmured.

"Someone has to," Cullen pointed out.

"Touché." Dorian realized distantly that one of his hands had sought the warmth of Cullen's mantle, and idly began to twine the fur around his fingers. "I don't really need to give voice to some of the other possibilities, do I? I'm sure they're at least anecdotally familiar to the both of us, given what we are."

"The Templar and the mage." Suddenly a smirk came to Cullen's lips. "We sound like one of Varric's books, when you put it like that."

"Oh, Maker, no," Dorian groaned, then laughed. "Can you imagine? Cassandra pressing a book to her bosom after reading about our first--" He stopped, then hastily cleared his throat. "Ah. This has gone rather far afield. I only meant that we both know what to think when a mage starts to act strangely."
Cullen's brows gathered together, and his eyes hardened slightly. "I can't accept that. Not of you. I won't have it."

"So fierce, Commander," Dorian murmured, then bit his lip as Cullen leaned in and pressed their foreheads together.

"You told me we would find a way to save me from the red lyrium, and I believed you," Cullen whispered, each word brushing Dorian's lips with a pulse of hot breath. When Dorian nodded wordlessly, he continued, "Then believe me when I say that there is nothing that will prevent me from protecting you."

"You're sure about that?" Dorian asked, then closed his eyes and shivered as Cullen worked his fingers into Dorian's hair and stroked Dorian's ear with his thumb.

"I will do whatever must be done," Cullen told him in a firm tone. "I will not lose you. Not to your father, not to a demon, and not to death."

Dorian dared to settle his hand on Cullen's neck, his fingertips playing with the loose ends of Cullen's hair. "You are glorious," he breathed.

"I am your Commander." Dorian felt Cullen's hand shift down so that he could use his thumb to tip Dorian's head up ever so slightly, forcing their gazes to meet as Dorian slowly opened his eyes. "And I will protect you."

Dorian blinked slowly once, then twice, unable to pull his eyes away from Cullen's face, from the stubbornly endearing line between his eyebrows, or from the set determination in his compressed lips. The rest of the world didn't matter, he realized, nor the whispers of those in the hall outside—not when it came to this. It didn't matter what his father thought he should do, or what the Magisterium made of his ascension to Inquisitor. It didn't matter that Cullen's future remained clouded, and that Dorian's strange dreams hinted at matters to which no mage dared admit. The only thing which mattered... stood right in front of him.

Cullen opened his mouth to continue, but Dorian refused to wait one more moment. Sinking both hands into that blasted fur mantle, he tugged Cullen close until their lips met. He let his eyes flutter shut as Dorian waited for the man's moment of surprise to turn into a reaction, for good or ill. His heart skipped a beat as Cullen's hands dropped to rest on Dorian's hips, pulling them into undeniable intimacy as Cullen returned the kiss in equal measure.

The kiss remained tender and brief, despite—or perhaps due to—the sheer strength of the emotions which preceded it. That first kiss, however, led to another, and then a third, all lingering, sinfully delicious caresses which acknowledged what had grown between them without delving too deep into what it meant beyond the moment. When their lips finally parted, Dorian lifted his eyes to meet Cullen's gaze with a tender smile on his face. "And I am your Inquisitor."

That maddening, cocky little half-smile came to Cullen's lips as he murmured, "I know."

Dorian leaned his head on Cullen's shoulder, grateful for the man's strength and heart. For some reason, even the way the fur of his mantle teased his mustache was endearing at the moment. "Thank you."

"For?" Cullen asked, letting his head rest lightly atop Dorian's hair.

"Being a friend. Being here." He settled his arms around Cullen's waist and closed his eyes. "Being you."
"I will always be here for you," Cullen said with a soft fervency which nevertheless warmed Dorian all over. "Without hesitation."

Dorian took a deep breath, then released it slowly. "Good. Because that's precisely what I need."

He never knew how long they stood there in the quiet of his suite, drenched in the warmth of the sun and the heat of each other's bodies. It didn't matter, really, considering the perfection of the moment. The cares and concerns of the world fell away, leaving the two men in a little circle of sorely needed peace. Whatever awaited them could wait for a while longer as they savored the confession they'd made to each other in ways that words could not convey.

But perfection could not last forever. Eventually, they were interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat in the most delicate manner possible.

The next few moments were a comedy of startled coughs mixed in with one or two splutters as the two men quickly separated, to the evident amusement of the woman standing at the top of the stairs. When Dorian and Cullen had sorted themselves out to something somewhat presentable while studiously avoiding each other's gaze, Dorian drew himself to his full height and glared at her. "I suppose you enjoyed that."

"I am sorry for interrupting, Inquisitor," Josephine said, though the subtle lift of one corner of her mouth told the lie of those words. "But some matters have come to our attention that I thought you should know. When you did not answer the door, I thought to leave a note."

"A note." Dorian's eyes narrowed, trying to decide if he believed her or not. Surely someone had seen Cullen enter.

Josephine nodded, expression a picture of innocence. "Cassandra went looking for the Commander, but I presume she will shortly return to the War Room when she does not find him in his office."

"Oh, marvelous," Dorian drawled, even as Cullen sighed and buried his face in his hands. "Well. Why don't you go find her, hmm? We'll be along shortly."

"Of course, Inquisitor," Josephine said, her face completely and utterly diplomatic--save for the nearly constant twitch of amusement in one corner of her mouth. Dorian only saw it because he was looking for it, so hopefully no one else would notice. "I shall see you soon."

Once she had left, Dorian shook his head and turned towards Cullen. "I wonder if Cassandra will--"

He never got to finish the sentence. Abruptly Cullen seized a double handful of buckles and hauled him close, claiming Dorian's lips with his in a primal kiss which stole both Dorian's breath and his senses. As Dorian floated in a haze of sudden heat, Cullen's hands sank into his hair, pulling Dorian even closer as he deepened the kiss. Dorian's eyes fluttered shut, losing himself fully in the moment and honestly unable to do much more than moan ever so softly into Cullen's mouth.

When their lips parted at last, Dorian had to take a few moments to catch his breath as he tried--and somewhat succeeded--to collect his bearings. "I see you enjoy playing with fire, Commander."

Cullen's lips curved into that Maker-be-damned smirk of his. "I've been wanting to do that since before your father arrived. Leave it to family to interrupt you at the worst possible time."

Dorian couldn't help but laugh. "He has a history of that, I'll admit." The warmth still in his eyes and heart, Dorian set his hands on Cullen's hips and leaned in for another, more gentle kiss. "Still, we'd better be going, or I fear Josephine might return and find us in an even more compromising position."
"If it's not one family, it's another," Cullen groaned. "All right. Let's go find out what's so important, then. And it had better be good."

"Fittings."

"Yes, Inquisitor," Josephine said, her expression and demeanor breathtakingly earnest. Crossing his arms over his chest, Dorian assumed as polite an expression as he could muster while still maintaining a displeased air. "You sought me out because you wish to arrange fittings for our dress uniforms. Simply that? No other reason?"

"Our departure to the Winter Palace fast approaches, Inquisitor. It is imperative that we all look our best for the masquerade," Josephine said, again with that all-too-perfect sincerity emanating from the entirety of her being.

"I thought we were going to tell him about the information from the Magisters," Cassandra said, brow furrowing.

Josephine tapped her pen on her cheek. "Oh, of course! How silly of me. That is of course why I wished to look for you. Do forgive me, Inquisitor."

Cullen and Dorian exchanged a resigned look as Josephine looked down at her ledger. "Naturally, my lady," Dorian assured her. "We all have our moments, after all."

Offering Dorian a warm smile which wasn't quite enough to distract him from seeing the mischievous twinkle in her eyes, Josephine tugged a piece of paper from her ledger and pushed it across the table. "I concluded the first part of the negotiations with Magister Tilani. They have offered us some compelling aid to assist in our endeavors, in exchange for herself and Magister Pavus to go with us to the Winter Palace."

Dorian paused in the act of reaching for the paper. "They want to go to the masquerade? I know Mae enjoys parties, but I wouldn't have thought she'd travel halfway across Thedas just to go to an Orlesian ball."

"She said that their agents had learned of a plot against the Empress, and grew concerned that a Tevinter element involved in the death of the Empress of Orlais could have negative consequences for the Imperium." As Dorian studied her notes and frowned, she continued, "Their best information indicates that the largest danger lies in Celene's own family. Unfortunately, one of those suspected is our own sponsor to the Masquerade."

"Duke Gaspard? Ah, family." Dorian gave a little laugh. "Naturally. Who better to kill you than your own kith and kin, hmm? Still, that's a bit more than we've managed to glean, if it is true. And if Gaspard is the one doing the plotting, he may be trying to set the Inquisition up for a fall. As it stands, that seems to be a reasonable request from the sneaky Vints. I'll look over the details of what they've offered in return, but for now, I'll trust your judgment." He folded the paper and put it into his pouch. "I suppose they wish to be there in case of magical impropriety?"

Josephine inclined her head. "Indeed, Inquisitor. To offset suspicions, they will present themselves as Orlesian supporters of the Inquisition. One of Magister Tilani's scholars is quite well versed in the etiquette and protocol of Orlais, and will assist them during the masquerade as necessary."

Ah. That would be Felix. His friend had attended the University of Orlais, after all, and would best know how to translate the rules of the Orlesian Game into terms members of the Magisterium would understand. "I would also suggest putting Vivienne with them in the carriage on the way to the
Winter Palace," Dorian mused. "It would be good for the Magisters to hear her perspective as former Court Enchanter. Besides, I have a feeling that Vivienne and Magister Tilani will take a certain liking to each other."

"An excellent idea, Inquisitor." Her pen moved to make note of the matter in her ledger. "However, if we could return to the matter of the fittings..."

"Somehow I knew you would," Dorian said with good humor. "Very well. When is the tailor available?"

Before Josephine could answer, Cullen grunted sourly. "Dress uniforms. I can't say I'm looking forward to spending an entire evening in ribbons and lace."

"Whatever gave you the notion that you’re going to be shoved into that sort of monstrosity?" Dorian asked, surprised.

"That's what they wear in the hall," Cullen noted. "The nobles, I mean. Apparently it's necessary to look your finest while you gossip."

Josephine covered her mouth with the end of her quill, the corners of her eyes crinkling with hidden laughter as Cassandra made a disgusted noise. "I agree with Cullen. The warriors should be allowed to wear what is practical. We are anticipating a fight, after all."

"Ah, but we cannot show that we are," Dorian reminded her. "We must appear poised and beautiful and perfect. We are guests of honor to witness the heralding of a new dawn in the Empire of Orlais. As such, we cannot afford to draw any suspicions to the true reason we are there. It will be difficult enough for me to find the freedom to discover the identity of Corypheus' agent at the court as it is."

Cullen heaved a sigh. "Are ribbons and lace the only option?"

"I should hope not," Dorian declared. "I unleashed Vivienne on the uniforms because quite frankly, I refuse to let a quartermaster design such a pivotal attire for us. I gave her the final approval before we left for Adamant, and I know we will look our finest. A moderation of lace, perhaps, and one or two ribbons, but they help to disguise the practicality beneath the surface."

"What did the quartermaster come up with first?" Cassandra asked curiously. "I've rarely seen such a look of disdain on your face."

"Oh, some red and blue monstrosities." Dorian shuddered and shook his head. "No. I refused. The man has his uses, but fashion design is not one of them."

"Thank the Maker," Josephine breathed fervently.

"So, the fittings?" Dorian prompted her.

"Ah, yes." Josephine consulted her ledger. "I have in fact already arranged the times for you."

As Josephine gave them the details, Dorian's eyes wandered over to Cullen, trying to imagine him in something besides fur and metal. Something form-fitting across those broad shoulders would do wonders, of course, but he was most looking forward to the trousers. Tight below the waist was the fashion for men in Orlais this season, after all, and Vivienne was nothing if not fashionable.

"--agreeable to you, Inquisitor?"

Dorian blinked and turned his attention back to Josephine quickly. "Ah, yes. Tomorrow morning.
Capital." When Josephine and Cassandra exchanged an amused glance, he cleared his throat and sought a quick diversion. "A pity Leliana will not be joining us. She is Orlesian, after all."

And, incredibly, it worked, though he did feel a trifle guilty about the worry which replaced their amusement. "There is always hope, Inquisitor. We simply have to have faith in her," Josephine noted. "I will arrange to bring her dress uniform with us, just in case."

Dorian smiled gently. "A good idea, my lady. Now, I think we all have our tasks to do, so I will leave you to it and attend to mine."

"As you wish, Inquisitor," Josephine said, then turned to Cassandra without skipping a beat and added, "Lady Seeker, I would appreciate a moment of your time in my office, if you can spare it."

Cassandra proved to be slower on the uptake. "Well, I do need to speak with the--" Then she blinked and looked between Cullen and Dorian for a moment. "Ah. Of course, Ambassador," she said hastily. "I am at your immediate disposal."

With a serene nod, Josephine herded Cassandra from the room with a bright smile, closing the door firmly behind her as they left the two men to blink at the closed door for a moment. Dorian's eyebrow rose when he heard the faint sounds of a giggle from the other side. "Maker, I hope that was Josephine. I simply cannot imagine that sound coming from Cassandra."

Cullen broke the silence with a soft chuckle as he awkwardly rubbed at his neck. "I… suppose that means they approve?"

"Approve of-- Oh." Dorian glanced at the door, then looked at Cullen, a little smirk coming to his face. "Well. One less thing to worry about, then."

"Out of all the things on our plates right now, I'll admit, it's nice to know we don't have to worry about sneaking around like adolescents," Cullen admitted.

"Quite." For a moment, Dorian fell silent, letting the warmth rise to his eyes as their gazes met. "Commander."

One corner of Cullen's mouth curved upward. "Inquisitor."

Slowly Dorian set into motion, moving around the table towards Cullen with his fingers trailing along the surface of the polished wood. "We seem to be quite alone."

"So it would seem," Cullen murmured, stepping away from the table as Dorian moved closer.

Dorian came to a halt in front of Cullen, though he didn't press in too close. "Perhaps we could continue our discussion from earlier?"

Cullen chuckled softly and reached up to cup Dorian's neck with one of his hands. As his thumb caressed Dorian's ear, he murmured, "Do you really have to ask?" Before Dorian could respond, he claimed Dorian's lips in a lingering kiss.

Dorian's eyes closed as he placed his hands on Cullen's hips and leaned in, letting himself learn how the man felt and acted in these quiet moments of passion. Despite the man's endearing shyness when teased, there was nothing at all shy about the way he used his lips and tongue, or the way he slowly drew his fingernails along Dorian's scalp in a way that made the mage shiver. When their lips finally parted, Dorian slowly opened his eyes and met Cullen's gaze with a smile. "Thank you," he murmured.
"I think you already said that," Cullen said with gentle humor.

"Perhaps, but it needed to be said again, I think." He leaned his head onto Cullen's shoulder once more. "Hold me."

Strong arms immediately wrapped around him, cradling him close. "Always," Cullen whispered into Dorian's ear.

The word made a wistful smile come to Dorian's lips, but he didn't comment. Instead he simply let himself savor the moment, however brief it might be. Already thoughts of the outside world hedged around him, of things he still had to say, or do, or decide. He still hadn't told Cullen of his mother's fate or the strange dreams, after all, and the approach of their journey to the Winter Palace--and all that came with it--weighed heavily on his mind.

But for the moment, he wanted to hold on to this perfection as long as he possibly could.

Chapter End Notes

200k before the first kiss! What can I say, I was committed to my Slow Burn tag!
Cullen let his reins rest on the pommel of his saddle for a moment as he slowly worked through a series of stretches to relax his back. Even though the gait of his halla mount remained smooth as silk, sitting for hours on end in the saddle would be a test for endurance for anyone. As he slowly rolled his neck, he heard a loud pop as some tension eased and sighed with relief.

"I heard that," Varric said as he drew up beside Cullen. "Impressive. I wonder if they heard it in Skyhold."

"Considering we left it behind days ago, I hope not," Cullen said with a chuckle. "I see you decided to escape the carriages."

"Yeah, well, Mae suggested a card game and I wanted to protect my purse," Varric said with a shrug. "Although I have learned that it's a good thing the Iron Lady never joined our card games."

Cullen's eyebrow rose. "Lady Vivienne? Really?"

"For all her manners and dignity, that woman is a cutthroat card player. When we reached the inn last night, she and Mae had to agree to split the pot because even the cards couldn't decide who should win. I think they mentioned something tonight about inviting our dear Lady Ambassador to the table."

"Maker," Cullen breathed. "I'm not sure I'd want to watch that."

"Are you kidding?" Varric asked. "I'm thinking of charging admission. Three card players of that caliber don't often end up in the same place at the same time with money to spare."

"Wait. I thought..." Cullen's voice trailed off. He distinctly remembered Mailani telling him of the Montilyet family's financial woes, and recalled that Dorian had disappeared to Val Royeaux with Josephine sometime before Adamant. And Vivienne... well, actually, he wasn't sure about her personal finances, and would never dream to inquire.

"Oh, Mae's got enough to spare and is happy to do so," Varric explained. "For her, it's not about where the money starts, it's about whose pocket it ends up in after the game is over."

Cullen nodded, since competition was part and parcel of his own drive to improve his skill at cards. "I can see that. Lady Vivienne certainly wouldn't back down from the challenge."

"And Ruffles has an entire nation's reputation to uphold," Varric grunted. "It should be a fun game. To watch, anyway. The innkeeper will like that. He'll be filling mugs all night."

"Too bad Cabot isn't here. Sounds like something he'd endlessly complain about doing and secretly enjoy the whole time," he said with a chuckle, even as an idea ghosted through his mind. If everyone was down in the main room watching the game, would they notice a couple of absences? Finding the opportunity to steal away with Dorian for some time alone had been challenging enough at Skyhold, but doing it on the road had proven impossible.

So far, anyway.
Varric, meanwhile, was still chuckling at Cullen's comment. "I see you've got his number. Don't get me wrong, I like Cabot. But would it kill him to smile once in a while?"

Cullen laughed. "We won't know until he does. Though I have seen him get close when Sera starts in on him."

"Yeah, he likes her. He's really protective of her, too, I've noticed. I wonder if that's why she's allowed to set up permanent camp in the Herald's Rest when he doesn't allow anyone else to stay more than a day or two," Varric mused.

"And Cole," Cullen pointed out.

"Yeah, well, Cole... Cole's special." Varric glanced behind them for a long moment. "And the kid's been through some hard shit. I'm glad he's not going to the Winter Palace, though. The Orlesians aren't what I'd call a good influence for him."

Cullen gave Varric a shrewd glance. "Now who's protective of who?"

"Geez, keep it down, would you?" Varric looked around hastily. "I have a reputation to protect."

"Right," Cullen said, then laughed and clapped Varric on the shoulder. "Varric, the man of business and shady deals, but don't you dare suggest he actually believes any of that stuff he puts in his books."

"Sweet Maker, are you finished?" Varric complained, with a roll of his eyes.

Cullen pretended to think about it, then grinned. "Yes. For now."

"Wonderful," Varric told him dryly. "And now I have to remember why I came up to talk to you in the first place."

"You mean it wasn't for my company?" Cullen asked absently, eyes scanning the faces around them. He didn't realize why until his eyes lit upon Dorian's carriage and lingered there for a moment.

"I take it you'd prefer it if someone else were here?" he heard Varric ask in a smug tone.

"What? No!" Cullen jerked his eyes back to the front, stubbornly not looking at the dwarf. "I suppose I'm just surprised you sought me out."

Varric grunted, but didn't reply to that. Instead, he said, "You've been in a pretty good mood the last few days. Anything you'd like to share with the class?"

His ears grew hot as he kept his gaze stubbornly forward. "The healers cleared me to start sparring again." And it had improved his mood immensely, being able to take his sword up for something besides show again. But he knew that Varric was fishing for something else.

"That's good news actually." The serious tone made Cullen finally glance at Varric, whose face had turned thoughtful. "I mean, I really don't expect to get out of the Winter Palace without a fight, do you?"

"No," Cullen admitted. "From what I've seen, combat is only an aspect of the Game for most Orlesians. Corypheus, on the other hand, went straight to raising a demon army."

Varric nodded, looking a bit moody. "Yeah. And that worries me. I suppose it's too late for me to go back to Skyhold and settle in next to my fire?"
"Not as such, no." Cullen studied his face for a moment. "You are worried. Has something happened?"

"You could say that." Varric squinted into the distance ahead of them. "I had a dream last night."

"A dream?" Cullen's brows pinched together. "I thought--"

"Me, too," Varric grumbled. "It's why I hate the Fade even more than the Deep Roads. I've only ever gone there when shit went north. But yeah, and it was a weird dream."

"Tell me about it," Cullen said softly.

Varric straightened in his saddle. "I was writing in a book. Except it wasn't my book, or my story. Instead, it was..." His voice trailed away for a moment, and then he shook his head. "It was about Hawke. And Alistair."

A shiver ran down Cullen's spine. "You're sure?"

"Damn right I'm sure. You think I'd make up something like that?" Varric demanded. "The story was just about them ordering drinks in an inn and watching the sun set. They were looking forward to retirement. They talked about drinks and cheese. Then Hawke backhanded someone with his mug and a fight broke out, and... that was it. I didn't have anymore to write, so I closed the book and put it on a shelf, and that's when I woke up."

Cullen blinked. "That's all?"

"That's all, yeah. Weird shit, right?" Varric sighed heavily. "Just having a dream is weird enough for me. But for it to be about Hawke and Alistair? Not that they did anything out of the ordinary for them. I mean, Hawke started fights at the Hanged Man all the time."

"I remember the lectures Aveline would give him," Cullen said with a sad smile. "I'm still not sure why she remained so loyal."

"Because for all that he was an asshat, Hawke fixed Kirkwall. He got his arms bloody up to the shoulder to do it, and he sometimes didn't seem to care who was guilty or innocent, but he did things that no one else could--or would--do." A grimace came to Varric's face as he absently rubbed his chin. "I may not like what he did, but he was the Champion."

And Amell is the Hero of Ferelden. The words echoed in Cullen's head, but he didn't say them aloud. He knew it wasn't a fair equivalence, particularly due to Amell's influence on Hawke. "You miss him."

"I do. And I never thought I'd say that." Varric looked up at Cullen. "And not just because he died without telling me the whole story."

Settling his hand on Varric's shoulder again, Cullen squeezed it gently. "I don't know why you had the dream, but maybe you should just appreciate seeing him one more time," he suggested in a low voice.

"It just gnaws at me sometimes," Varric said. "I wouldn't want to leave someone behind in the Deep Roads because of how much I hate them, and leaving someone behind in the Fade is ten times worse. I just wish I had a body to burn, at least."

Cullen nodded. "I feel the same way about Alistair. We weren't particularly close when we were Templars--roommates and sparring partners, but not friends, for all our reminiscing. But when I saw
him in Kirkwall..." Cullen's voice trailed away as he stared forward, still remembering the shock of recognizing Alistair lying in the gutter and quietly singing an off-key song to himself. "I could have been there with him, I think, if I'd chosen to run instead of embracing my duties. Of course, that led to its own problems later."

"Yeah, well, Meredith was a special kind of problem," Varric noted with a shudder. "And the red lyrium certainly didn't help."

The mention of the red lyrium drove another shiver down Cullen's back, though for a different reason. "I still can't believe how blind I was to all of that."

"Well, she went mad quietly. With Bartrand, he practically hired town criers and had them parade around Kirkwall shouting the news," Varric grunted, the pain still evident in his voice. "So, don't blame yourself. We still don't know enough about red lyrium to know exactly how it affects people. For all we know, that's why Amell went from twisted to full-blown evil. You saw that staff of his, right?"

"I don't quite follow," Cullen admitted.

"Oh, right. You weren't with us then, you were--" For a moment Varric paused, then cleared his throat. "I forgot. Sparkler told you about Mailani, though, right? About how she showed us what actually happened when she died?"

Cullen nodded. "We've had a few discussions about it, but he didn't mention anything specific about Amell's staff. I do recall Amell had red eyes when I knew him in the Circle. It was just his natural eye color."

"Did they glow?"

"Only when he wanted to intimidate someone," Cullen said. "It was a glamour, though. Even as a child, he preferred to keep people at a distance."

"Huh. Well, they definitely glowed in that vision, though I couldn't tell you if it was magic or not. But his staff..." Varric shuddered. "It had a skull at the top of it, but not just any skull, no. It was made of red lyrium."

**Amell, you arrogant bastard.** "You're sure? It wasn't just red stone, or something? Greagoir told me about the time he stole an animal skull from one of the Enchanter's rooms once and painted it red to put on a staff. Irving took that away fairly quickly, as you can imagine." The memory still made Cullen roll his eyes. "He was twelve."

"So he was precocious in his creepiness. Got it. And yeah, I'm pretty sure it was red lyrium. Red stone wouldn't have that weird light thing that you see around pure red lyrium, right? I remember that light around Meredith's statue, and those clumps of red lyrium in Emprise de Lion." A grimace came to Varric's face. "Makes me wonder if the light itself is part of the corruption."

"I'm not really sure I want to know just how much that amount of red lyrium can affect someone like Amell." In fact, the idea made him break out into a cold sweat, and he found himself rubbing his hands together reflexively as goose pimples rose along his forearms beneath his vambraces.

"Makes me wonder how he controls it. Or if he does, but has just been lucky so far." Varric shook his head with a sour expression on his face. "Maferath's balls, how did we end up in crazy-town all at once?"

The comment drew Cullen out of spiraling thoughts about Amell and red lyrium, making him snort
in amusement. "Just lucky, I guess."

"I think you need a recalibration on the word _lucky_, Curly," Varric told him.

"I only calibrate trebuchets," Cullen shot back with a grin.

"Oh, right. I forgot. Well, good luck with that." With a sigh, Varric gathered his reins in his hand. "And now I should go talk Tiny out of trying to crash the card game tonight."

Cullen's eyes widened as he tried to imagine Bull at the table with three of the most refined women in their entire delegation. "Well, you can't say it wouldn't make for good entertainment. Especially if he decides to get drunk and _accidentally_ loses some clothing again."

"Andraste's ass, don't remind me," Varric groaned. "The pants are eyesore enough. Besides, it's not like Mae needs any more incentive."

"What's this?"

With a shake of his head, Varric said, "Tiny and Mae. I'm starting to think Tiny has a thing for Vints, and I _know_ Mae admires a man with strength. My cousin was a solid wall of muscle. That, and she's a real flirt. She even flirts with _me_ sometimes, and she was all over Alistair."

"Alistair?" Cullen asked in surprise. "When?"

"Remember that caper I told you about with Alistair and Maric?" Varric asked. "Mae got mixed up in that mess, too."

"You really need to write that story down sometime," Cullen told him.

"No, I really don't." Varric shuddered. "Some things are better left only in memories. Anyway. Time to take the Bull by the horns, I guess. Wish me luck."

As he watched the dwarf ride to where Bull rode his scaly mount near the carriages of the delegation—ostensibly for protection, though now Cullen had to wonder if that were the _only_ reason—Cullen's mouth curved into a frown again. He strongly suspected that Amell was behind the red lyrium which had been mixed in with his healing potions, and Varric's offhand comment about Amell made him stop and think.

Amell was a Grey Warden, and had endured whatever rituals the Grey Wardens performed to render them immune to the effects of the blight. And red lyrium, as Dorian and Varric had learned, was lyrium corrupted with the taint of the Blight. Did that help Amell to use or control red lyrium in some mysterious fashion that not even Corypheus would know about? Try as he might, Cullen could not recall an encounter with a Grey Warden afflicted by red lyrium, but he had to admit that there were so few Grey Wardens left, and red lyrium so scarce, that it was hard to imagine how he would have encountered such an individual.

Yet his mind could not let the thought go.

Were Grey Wardens immune, or at least resistant, to red lyrium? And if so, could that help _him_ somehow? The mail shirt helped, but he had learned to take short baths and limit his time without it due to the impact the resurgence of the twisted, tilted song inflicted on his mood. He could _survive_ like this, but he _couldn't_ _thrive_.

Making a mental note to bring the matter up with Dorian and, later, Dagna, Cullen rode the rest of the day's journey in thoughtful silence. Perhaps they could do more than simply hold the red lyrium
Perhaps they could find some more hope.

When they arrived at the inn, Cullen went out of his way to ensure that the troops were housed properly, unlike the last place where the innkeeper had tried to offer a muddy field for their use. Once the soldiers' camp had been set up to his satisfaction, he reviewed the roster and selected the night's patrols so that each round would only need to walk for three hours. Tomorrow they would arrive at the Winter Palace, and he wanted all his troops to be as well rested as he could manage.

Satisfied that things had been settled, he left his lieutenants in charge and headed to the main building of the inn proper. Large and expansive, this one also had the distinction of having sufficient rooms that all the dignitaries had their own quarters rather than having to share. He retrieved the key to his own room from the inn's house mistress and headed to the stairs, pausing only when he heard someone call for him.

A smile came to his face as he turned and gave a salute. "Inquisitor."

"There you are," Dorian said with a twinkle in his eye. His gaze dropped for a moment to contemplate Cullen's lips, then rose again as one corner of his mouth rose ever so slightly.

"I was attending to the disposition of the troops, ser," Cullen explained.

"Ah, yes. Last night was a disaster." Wrinkling his nose, Dorian added, "I sent someone ahead this morning to ensure it wouldn't happen again here. Are they well taken care of?"

Grateful that Dorian had thought to arrange things for his troops, Cullen smiled. "Everything is more than satisfactory, Inquisitor. Thank you."

"Excellent." Dorian gestured upstairs. "We were all just about to sit down to dinner in a private dining room on the third floor. I've been assured that the room provides an absolutely fantastic view of the night sky. Won't you join us?"

"I could use a good solid meal," Cullen mused, then grinned. "But I suppose this one will have to do."

"Ah, ha. Letting your Fereldan prejudices show, I see," Dorian chuckled. "Let's go, shall we?"

As they moved down the corridor, continuing small talk about inconsequential matters, it was difficult not to reach out and take Dorian's hand in his own. Instead, he kept an eye out for the room name engraved on his key. "Here's my room," he said as they reached the end of the corridor and the bottom of another flight of stairs. "Ours."

"That's probably not how the Orlesians pronounce it," Dorian noted with a chuckle. "Still, it appears they took my request to heart for you. I asked for one at the end of the building with a large window." Dorian tapped the number on the door, then glanced up at Cullen. "Perhaps we should verify that part, yes?"

"It shouldn't take long," Cullen agreed as he unlocked the door and led the way inside.

He had just long enough to notice the room was empty and the curtains closed before he found himself pressed up against the swiftly closed door. Dorian's lips closed over his hungrily as hands took two fistfuls of curly blond hair with an urgency which made Cullen moan softly. His own hands reached out to land on Dorian's hips, tugging him closer until there was no air between their bodies.
save their own breaths.

When Dorian released him, he didn't move away but instead pressed his forehead against Cullen's temple so that his lips caressed Cullen's ear. "Your Inquisitor has missed you, Commander."

Maker. Just the feel of Dorian's mustache brushing against the shell of his ear was enough to make the heat rise in his body. Pressing a lingering kiss to Dorian's ear in return, he murmured, "Your Commander awaits your orders, Inquisitor."

With a sigh, Dorian pulled away reluctantly. "Alas, that order has to be dinner. With the others, I mean. I simply... needed a moment with you."

Cullen reached up to press a finger to Dorian's lips, then let his fingertip trace the line of Dorian's lower lip, especially the sensitive part on the left side. "I'm glad," he said quietly as Dorian shuddered and bit his lip. "I'm not sure we'll get many chances for these stolen moments in the next few days."

"Then we'd better make sure to find some more later in the evening." Dorian stole one more gentle kiss, then stepped back. "But if we do anything more at this moment, I won't be strong enough to open that door any time soon."

"Agreed," Cullen said fervently. Cautiously he pulled the door open, checked that they were still alone, then opened it fully and bowed Dorian through. "Let's go. I'm famished."

"For food?" Dorian teased him as he strode into the corridor.

In response, Cullen slapped him smartly on the backside before he got out of reach, the sound of impact drowned out by the thick cloth of Dorian's travel outfit. "That, too." He knew he would pay for it later, but had no regrets whatsoever. Ignoring Dorian's glare, he casually turned to lock the door, then gestured towards the stairs. "Shall we?"

After dinner, he retired to his room rather than endure the last minute discussions between Dorian and the others about the tactics they would all employ for the Orlesian Game. It was all politics anyway, and Cullen knew he had little insight to offer them in that field. He discovered that some, if not all, of the reports had come in from his lieutenants, as had some reports from Charter's agents in Skyhold, so he sat down at the desk and slowly went through them.

When the knock came at his door, Cullen didn't even glance up from the report in his hand. "Come," he called, and after the door clicked closed, he added, "Did you bring the third patrol group's report? For some reason it's missing."

"That's because I took it."

Cullen started, staring up at Leliana for a moment before surging to his feet. "You're back!" A moment later, he paused and looked around the room of the inn. "Wait. How did you--"

"I'm the Inquisition's Spymaster, Commander," she reminded him. "If I can't find the Inquisitor while he's traveling, I wouldn't be very good at my job."

"Good point." He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "We didn't expect to see you, I admit. At least not until after the party."

"Ball," she corrected automatically.

Brow furrowing, Cullen asked, "What's the difference?"
"A party is for enjoyment," Leliana explained. "A ball is for the Game."

"Of course it is," Cullen said, rubbing his forehead for a moment as he pointedly ignored the amusement on her face.

"I saw the extra carriage in the stable," she noted. "The Tevinter entourage arrived, I presume."

"They did, two days before we left Skyhold," Cullen confirmed. "The welcoming ceremony went probably about as well as you might expect."

"I would imagine that Josephine prevented too many international incidents," Leliana said with a hint of amusement in her voice. "She wasn't in her room when I first looked."

"Ah, no, they're having a last minute discussion about political strategy for tomorrow," Cullen explained. "Trying to make sure that when a fire starts, nobody's dangly bits get burned."

A smile touched Leliana's lips. "I'm not sure that's how Josephine would describe it. Sera, perhaps."

Cullen looked a bit sheepish. "Oh, well, there was a bit that happened with her and my desk and wobbling and... Well, it's all better now. But that's why I'm not up there with them. I'm a soldier, not a diplomat." Cullen paused a moment, searching for what to say, and finally settled for honesty. "I'm glad you're back, and I know Josephine and Cassandra will be, too. And the Inquisitor."

"And Charter. I'll go to see her next, of course. But first..." Cullen watched her move to stand near the window, putting herself in the shadows even as she ensured she could see outside without obstruction. "I'm sorry I left with so little warning."

"I admit, it did catch us a bit by surprise," Cullen admitted, then took a deep breath as he braced himself. "Leliana... about Alistair--"

She held up her hand in a swift motion. "Don't. The birds told me."

He bowed his head. "He was very brave."

"And very foolish," she snapped, then stopped and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"No need to apologize," Cullen said hastily. "It's been rough for all of us since Adamant. But when you disappeared and didn't send any updates--"

"Did Josephine not get my second message?" Leliana asked, glancing at him for a moment.

He shook his head, frowning. "No. Nothing."

She frowned. "That's odd. I sent it a few days ago. It should have arrived before the Tevinter entourage. I'll work with Charter to figure out what happened. Sometimes even ravens can fall." Her eyes moved to the outside again. "I've learned a great deal about Calpernia during my absence, some of it more useful than others."

"You didn't have to leave to do that," Cullen pointed out. "You could have sent someone else."

"Not in this instance."

Cullen opened his mouth, then hesitated, wondering if this was something he should press her on. Finally he shook his head. "I still find it hard to believe that was the only reason you left Skyhold."
Leliana paused, and for a moment she went as still as a statue. Finally she shook her head. "No. That is not the only reason. I..." After a deep breath, she continued. "The nightmares started almost as soon as you left for Adamant. The details, they were too accurate, too real. I knew it couldn't just be normal dreams. So I went looking for him myself."

She didn't mention a name, or specify who, but Cullen instantly knew. "Maker," Cullen breathed. "Why didn't you tell us?"

For a long moment Leliana didn't answer. When she turned to look at Cullen, he was struck by the hollows under her eyes. "It was a personal matter," she said softly. "And I felt ashamed of giving it priority over Inquisition business."

Cullen straightened as he suddenly realized that Leliana would not have heard the truth about Mailani's death. Certainly that hadn't been put into any message sent back to Skyhold from Adamant. "You shouldn't feel shame," he said in a firm tone. "There have been some developments when it comes to Amell and the Inquisition."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Tell me."

He did so, though the telling raised some anger in him still. As he spoke, Leliana closed her eyes and listened attentively, taking in every word. Her questions were sharp, and when he didn't have the answer, she would press her lips together, then nod. By the time he reached the end of what Dorian had told him, her hands clenched tightly at her sides.

"He will pay for this." Her voice was void of all emotion save one: hate. "More than that, he must be stopped."

"I agree with you," Cullen said with a nod. "It is clear he has ambitions, even if we do not know his ultimate goal as we do with Corypheus. The fact he was seeking to take the Anchor from Mailani troubles the Inquisitor greatly."

"And also makes Inquisitor Pavus a logical target for whatever Amell plans to do next," Leliana said with a frown.

Cullen's teeth clenched at the very thought of it. It was obvious, but that didn't mean he wanted to dwell on the prospect of Dorian in Amell's clutches. "We can't let that happen," he said grimly. "If he learns that the Inquisitor is attending the ball--"

"We must assume he knows," Leliana said sharply, "and plan for it."

"You're right, of course. And if that is the case, perhaps the presence of the Magisters will prove to be an unanticipated boon." Cullen sighed and rubbed his face with his hands. "And those are words I never thought I'd say."

Leliana's lips twitched ever so slightly. "I would think that true of any southern Templar."

"Ex-Templar," Cullen reminded her absentely, still frowning. "Perhaps we should warn them directly about Amell. At the moment, they think the only concern are the Venatori."

"Or let the Inquisitor decide how much to tell them. He is the one who knows them best, after all," Leliana pointed out. "And we don't want the Inquisition to appear weak, either."

Making a face, Cullen made a dismissive gesture. "Politics."

"True, but they are necessary, Cullen," Leliana said, a hint of humor back in her voice.
Cullen made an exaggerated sigh, just as happy that the very dangerous side of the Spymaster seemed to have subsided. "Unfortunately, yes." After a moment of gauging her mood again, he stepped forward and laid a hand on her arm. "You should talk to Dorian about your dreams," he urged. "He's developed some sort of ward that helps to protect our dreams from Amell. I swear it works."

Her body shivered ever so slightly. Had he not been touching her, he wouldn't have even noticed a reaction, since her face remained neutral. "I will discuss the matter with him. A Spymaster should not be distracted. By anything."

He frowned slightly at the edge her voice gained in her last few words, easily recognizing hardness used to cover fear. He'd mastered it himself at Kirkwall, after all. "Are you all right, Leliana? Amell..." He paused for a moment, then forced himself to continue. "He knows how to worm his way into people's minds, is all. Something we both know from personal experience."

Her shoulders sagged ever so slightly. "Sometimes I forget that you were once subject to his whims as well," she said softly. "At least you didn't labor under the mistaken idea that it was simply a test from the Maker to gauge your faith."

Cullen's eyes widened. "Is that what you thought?"

"During the Blight? Of course," she said bitterly. "I had a vision that the Grey Warden would save us all from the coming darkness. He would be hailed as a Hero. I started to write his saga in song. I tried so very hard to give him reasons to be... the way he was. He was raised in a Circle and treated poorly. He'd watched his best friend betray him with blood magic. He'd been nearly killed by darkspawn in Ostagar. On and on. But they were lies." Her gaze grew distant in a way that had nothing to do with what she saw and everything to do with the past. "And the worst part is I made them all myself. He never had to give them to me. I just had to make myself believe in them."

Cullen closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm sorry you had to endure that, Leliana," he told her. "And I'm sorry I didn't see the truth sooner. Divine Justinia and I spoke of the matter extensively, but I spent far too long doubting my own worth and sanity." There was a peculiar blankness about her expression which Cullen knew all too well. He'd seen it in the mirror often enough after he'd left Kinloch Hold behind.

"Not to mention what he did to you," Cullen ventured cautiously, unsure how to respond.

She swallowed. "I would prefer not to speak of that at all," she whispered.

"Of course. My apologies," Cullen said hastily, then cast about for another approach to the discussion. "Did you find anything? About Amell's activities, I mean."

She shook her head. "Hints. Whispers. A murmur of a Crow with a unique tattoo here, a rumor of a hooded figure passing through the night with a staff that glowed red elsewhere. Nothing more. I did send a pair of trusted agents to investigate an abandoned Warden's keep in Ferelden, but I won't hear back from them for a few days at the earliest. The only thing I've learned is that the Venatori know nothing about him. If he's working with Corypheus, even they don't know about it."

"I suppose it was too much to hope for," he said softly.

"That snake knows how to hide when it suits him," Leliana said in a venomous tone. "I'll talk with Charter about it when I see her next."

"Good idea." Cullen grimaced and ran his fingers through his hair. "I hate not knowing what he's up
Leliana nodded slowly, her eyes studying him closely. "Do you still dream of him? Even after the Inquisitor's aid?"

"Memories, yes, but nothing more. He's gone." He sighed, absently drumming his fingers on the table in frustration. "I'm not sure what can be done about what remains aside from enduring the nights. I wish I had something more helpful to tell you, but I've yet to discover a cure for the horrors inflicted on my soul."

Her jaw rippled as she gritted her teeth. "Then that is what I will do. Endure."

He frowned. "And nothing more than that?"

"For a short while I thought I had hope for something more," she said, voice tight. "But that was taken from me." Before Cullen could even think of how to respond to that, Leliana shook her head. "But that is of no import now. How many of the Imperium are with us?"

"Ah… Three. Magisters Pavus and Tilani, and--" Cullen paused, realizing another explanation was needed. "And Felix Alexius."

Her eyes widened. "The Magister’s son?"

"The same. Apparently he and his father managed to escape Redcliffe, but were then beset upon by darkspawn in the Frostbacks. Felix was saved by Grey Wardens." When her expression hardened, Cullen added, "I spoke with him, as did Lady Vivienne and Iron Bull. If he’s influenced in any way, they could not see it."

"Which Grey Wardens saved him?" Leliana asked as her eyes narrowed. "Did he say?"

"Nathaniel Howe was the name he mentioned," Cullen told her. "A Ferelden Warden, not associated with the ones stationed in Orlais."

Her shoulders relaxed slightly, though she didn’t seem entirely reassured. "I know of him. He worked with Amell in Amaranthine, but left a year or two ago, when Amell was still playing Warden-Commander of Ferelden. What little I could learn seemed to indicate that his disappearance was a surprise to Amell."

"That sounds much more promising than working with Amell," Cullen admitted. "Regardless, Vivienne is keeping an eye on him. He rides in the same carriage as Tilani, and either Vivienne or Dorian is always in the carriage with them."

"Very well. That will have to do for now." Her eyes moved once more to the window. "I presume they won’t present themselves as Magisters to the Orlesian Court?"

Cullen had to chuckle at the thought. "No. They’ll be posing as Orlesian nobles and a servant. We left all the Imperium soldiers at Skyhold."

"Did Krem remain at Skyhold?"

With a nod, Cullen stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm having him keep an eye on the Vints, and Dalish is helping to keep an eye on the rest of the Imperium contingent herself. I will say that Dalish and her, ah, bow have proven to be surprisingly useful at detecting mage-work. Even though she is definitely not a mage," he added with mock gravity. "Oh, and of course the Templars remained in Skyhold, in plain sight of the remaining Imperium delegation. I'm not sure they
would be welcome in Orlais anyhow, not after the showdown in Val Royeaux with the Chantry and the mess at Therinfal Redoubt."

Leliana nodded, face calculating. "Good. I will be conducting a quiet review of them when we return to Skyhold, of course, but Charter said that she didn't find any Venatori agents in their ranks. We can hope I find a lack as well."

"What did you learn about Calpernia?" Cullen asked.

Now a frown touched Leliana's lips. "She is not what I expected," Leliana admitted. "She was a slave herself once, and bloomed into her magical instruction later. In some ways, she sounds a great deal like the Inquisitor: she loves the Imperium, but is frustrated by what it has become. Everything I have learned of her points to her viewing Corypheus as an opportunity not just to restore the Imperium, but also to correct what she sees as its flaws."

"Huh. That… does sound like the Inquisitor. Not the working with Corypheus part, of course, but the rest." Cullen frowned in thought. "What flaws is she most concerned about?"

"Slavery, it seems. She has expended considerable effort into bringing slaves out of the Imperium to use in the ranks of the Venatori. I can only conclude that she somehow believes Corypheus will support her in this."

Cullen shook his head slowly. "That seems a dubious hope at best."

"It is only a guess on my part," Leliana admitted, "based upon what I have found. But it's clear she has a passion to aid those enslaved."

"And it offers the potential for a rift between her and her new master if he does not commit to her goals," he mused. "Tension in the enemy ranks is usually a good thing, right?"

"We can hope." With a small sigh, she turned away from the window and looked him up and down. "You seem to be recovered from the wounds you received at Adamant."

"After a lot of resting and too much being useless, yes," he said, hearing his tone only when her expression became amused. "And no, before you say, it I was not--"

"--grumpy. And yes, you very much sound like you were," she told him with a smirk. "Almost as grumpy as when you think about the Game, or Orlais."

He couldn’t help but bristle a little bit. "Now hold on--""Tell me I’m wrong," she said with a little twitch on her lips.

Which, of course, he couldn’t. Herded into a corner, he snapped his mouth shut and glared at her for a moment before he finally gave an aggrieved sigh. “I have my reasons," he groused. “I’m a--"

“--soldier, not a courtier, yes. I know." Leliana smiled sadly. “You aren’t the only one who’s said that to me."

Cullen winced internally. “I’m sorry, Leliana."

“As am I. But there is nothing to be done about it.” Her gaze turned towards him, an edge to her expression she hadn’t had before. “Unlike Corypheus."

He nodded, straightening to attention at the reminder. “Which is tomorrow. As I said, I am glad
you’ve returned. I’m certain the--"

A knock sounded on his door then, a sudden burst of sound which made his head snap around and Leliana melt into the shadows after drawing her dagger. "Come," he called, his own hand falling to the hilt of his sword.

The door opened to allow in a particular dark-haired gentleman who at this moment had a frown on his face as he looked at a piece of paper. "Commander, do you have a minute? An odd report just came in that we'd like to discuss with you."

"We?" Cullen asked, just before Josephine appeared behind Dorian. Glancing at Leliana, who had nodded and put her dagger away, he said, "Of course, Inquisitor. I also have a report to make."

"Oh?" Dorian looked up at him, apparently every bit as tired as he sounded. "Nothing earth-shattering, I hope."

"It's good news, actually." Cullen smiled and nodded to Leliana. "Our prodigal bird has returned."

"Leliana!" Josephine gasped, then ran to hug the woman in a fierce embrace. After a moment, she pulled away again, blushing. "Ah, that is, I am glad to see you are safe."

"I'm fine, Josie," Leliana said, a little smile on her face. "There were just things which needed to be investigated which I could trust to no one else."


"Yes and no, Inquisitor." Leliana waited for them to get situated, then reached into her pocket and withdrew a pouch. Setting it on the table, she said, "I retrieved these from the house of a merchant in Val Royeaux. A man by the name of Vicinius."

"Vicinius? That's a Tevinter name," Dorian noted.

Leliana nodded. "I traced a connection between him and Calpernia, so I went to investigate. I found several dead bodies within, all killed in a similar manner to other victims of the Venatori."

Dorian sighed. "So she ordered him killed."

Leliana nodded. "Not for the reason you might suspect, however," she noted. "Apparently she was paying him to smuggle slaves out of the Imperium. She found out he was mistreating them, and decided to punish him for it."

"That--" Dorian's eyebrow rose. "That sounds... not so evil. On her part, at any rate."

"It matches up with what I have been able to learn of her," Leliana told him.

"Yes, yes. She was a slave herself, as I recall, serving a member of the Soparati." Dorian frowned a bit, then looked at the pouch. "What are these, then?"

"I found them in the house of Vicinius. I think he was keeping them in hopes of using them against"
her, should she find out about his dealings. Apparently she took action against him before he had a chance to implement the plan.” Tugging open the pouch, she poured the contents, a large glowing red crystal which reminded Cullen uncomfortably of red lyrium, onto the table. “When first I touched them, they rendered me unconscious. Thankfully no one discovered me while I lay vulnerable.”

"Caution noted," Dorian said with a nod.

“They?” Cullen peered at the large crystal warily. “I only see one crystal.”

“I had Dagna repair them when I arrived at Skyhold,” Leliana explained. “Perhaps a day or two after you’d left. Once she had completed it, I followed you. But even she said to handle them carefully.”

“Ah, ha! So that’s how you knew where we were,” Cullen said with a grin. “Morris gave you the travel plan, I take it?”

As Leliana nodded, Dorian examined the crystal, though he didn’t reach to pick it up yet. "It looks like a recording crystal. Those who can afford to buy them in the Imperium use them to record agreements and contracts, though they can be used for other purposes. It belonged to Vicinius, then?"

She shook her head. "I can activate it when I wear gloves," she explained. "They're recordings taken of Calpernia, clandestine ones. This Vicinius must have had an agent in her midst."

"That's odd. Magic usually doesn't distinguish between cloth and skin." Dorian nevertheless picked up the bag and used it to hold the crystal as he scrutinized it further. "This is absolutely dusted with magic, though, more than anything Dagna could have done to it. And the recording spell is one I'm familiar with, though a bit old fashioned. Whoever Vicinius hired to re-activate the Shaper’s spell must have had very traditional training. A Tevinter Circle mage, perhaps. There are plenty for hire up in the Imperium, after all." He smiled for a moment. "Or perhaps I've just been around innovators for so long I've developed a distaste for the old ways."

Setting the crystal down carefully, he looked to Leliana. "What's the gist of the conversations?"

"She mentions a Shrine of Dumat," Leliana said with a frown. "I've come across the phrase before. It seems to be serving as some sort of headquarters for the Venatori, a place for their leaders to meet. Calpernia hasn't been invited there yet, and she was complaining about it."

"Dumat. Hmm." Dorian's gaze grew distant for a moment. "The God of Silence. Corypheus was rumored to be his High Priest, so that's not surprising. Do we know where it is?"

Leliana shook her head. "Not exactly, no, though I may have a strong lead. Right after you left for Adamant, I received reports of an ancient Tevinter ruin in northern Orlais that was infested with Venatori. My people managed to gather enough information to learn that someone of importance was imprisoned there, and stole several abandoned satchels of notes which turned out to be research notes about the properties of red lyrium."

"Ah, yes. And you gave those to Dagna, yes?" Dorian asked, sending a glance to Cullen. The glance made Cullen acutely aware of the mail shirt next to his skin, and he wondered if he was happy knowing the origin of Dagna's notes for its construction. “And you think this might be the Shrine?”

"Yes, Inquisitor. My agents never could learn what the Venatori called the place or why it was so well guarded, but based on the conversation in the crystal, I would put it at the top of the list for possible locations.” She paused, then tapped the table with a frown on her face. “I would need to refer to my notes on my map at Skyhold to pinpoint the location exactly, however. There are many ruins in Orlais."
"Fascinating. A Tevinter ruin dedicated to Dumat. I can see why Corypheus would choose to use it, if that is true." Dorian frowned in thought. "We’ll discuss this further once we return to Skyhold. Anything of particular interest to Corypheus or Calpernia should be of interest to me. Perhaps I can make that my next mission after the Winter Palace."

"As you say, Inquisitor," Leliana said with a half-bow.

With a brisk nod, Dorian picked up the piece of paper he’d brought in with him. "At any rate, we should figure out what to do about this report from the agent Charter sent to the Palace ahead of us." He held out the paper to Cullen. "It states the number of troops our agents were able to spot entering the Winter Palace over the last few weeks."

"I sent those agents to Halamshiral before you left for Adamant," Leliana said. "The Game operates on a large scale, and I wanted to ensure we had a good a view as was possible."

Cullen scanned the paper, a frown coming to his lips. "This is rather more than I would expect for a party, even a party with all the nobility of Orlais gathered. I notice it doesn't mention anything about who they belong to."

"They would have entered without heraldry," Leliana explained. "Someone would have added them to a list when they arrived, but only if they were seen entering. And the right sum in the right hands would ensure that those set to watch would look elsewhere." Her brows drew together. "Were they able to discern Chevalier from Imperial Guard? I gave them sketches to work with. Traditionally, Chevalier would side with Gaspard, and of course the Guard would serve Celene."

Cullen's eyes quickly ran over the message. "They just note that the troops entered the palace dressed in plain clothes but with large amounts of luggage suitable for transporting armor."

"The Empress must know this as well," Josephine pointed out. "Surely our agents were not the only ones watching for precisely these maneuverings, even if the Game dictated no official notice."

"She would know, yes. She is no fool, nor are the rest of the House de Chalons." With a sigh echoing an unusual weariness, Leliana rubbed her forehead for a moment. "The letter has nothing more than numbers? Nothing at all?"

"It just mentions something about how the Council of Heralds are all present save one," Cullen said, reading the last part. "I'm not quite sure what that part means, actually. It mentions something about--"

His sentence never finished as Leliana snatched the paper from his hands to read for herself. "The Council of Heralds? For what are supposed to be peace talks?"

"Surely they would be there regardless," Josephine said.

"Not in that number. Usually only half of them would attend a function such as this," Leliana replied, face thoughtful.

Despite an honest effort to concentrate on the conversation, Cullen quickly got lost after that, since apparently he was the only one who didn't know what the Council of Heralds was or why it held such importance. He let himself settle back in his chair, taking advantage of the women's distraction to study Dorian with a frown.

His Inquisitor looked more haggard than when they'd stolen their moment before supper, which made Cullen wonder just what had happened during the consultation with the Magisters. A treacherous certainty crept into Cullen’s mind about who, in particular, might have been responsible
for Dorian's evident change in mood and energy, and it wasn't the woman Dorian clearly counted as a friend. He turned his frown down to his hands, wishing that he could have some privacy with Dorian, and soon.

And not just to ask him what had happened. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed whiling away an hour or two with Dorian until they had left Skyhold and hadn't been able to find even ten minutes without someone running to Dorian or himself with a question or a request of some sort. Maker, all he wanted was to get Dorian alone so he could rip open those maddening buckles and--

"Cullen?"

He blinked, then looked up to find the three of them looking at him expectantly. With an embarrassed cough, he quickly straightened in his seat. "Ah, sorry. I was...calculating based on the new information." Yes, that sounded much better than admitting the truth.

"We were just going over a few last things before we arrive at the Winter Palace tomorrow," Dorian said in a cheerful tone. "I asked about the status of the troops."

"Ah. Yes, Inquisitor." Jerking his mind away from things he really shouldn't be dwelling upon, Cullen cleared his throat and concentrated on the reports he'd been going through when Leliana had entered. "Ah, we have a good force of mixed elves and humans, in case some of them need to infiltrate the servants' quarters. With Leliana returned, I'll coordinate the final version of the signals we'll all use to identify ourselves to each other to avoid confusion. Oh, and I've picked out your honor guard."

"My what?" Dorian asked, eyebrow rising.

"Your Honor Guard, Inquisitor," Josephine told him. "All guests of a certain rank need one at least when they arrive." When Dorian's expression turned to amusement, she added in a prim tone, "We do have to maintain standards, Inquisitor."

"Naturally, Ambassador," Dorian said with a laugh. "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten." Dorian focused on Cullen again. "Anything else, Commander?"

"No, Inquisitor," Cullen said, glancing over his report just to make sure. "They've all been selected for their familiarity with Orlesian customs, so they should be able to mingle if necessary with the other guest's soldiers as well. Which, it seems from that last report you got, they have definitely brought in."

"Some of those soldiers will belong to Gaspard," Leliana declared. "Perhaps most of them. He is a military-minded man, and would not walk into a situation such as this without a sizable retinue, peace talks or no. For all he pretends to loathe the Game, he can use it with blunt force or a subtle touch as necessary. His personal retinue will be Chevalier, but I would also be wary of more, especially if he suspects Celene of bringing in forces of her own through the secret passages."

"There are secret--" Cullen pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course there are."

Leliana's lips twitched from evident amusement. "Many of them collapsed in the fire which tore through the Palace recently, but I must assume some are still open."

Cullen snorted and shook his head. "Peace talks. In Orlais, that just seems like a pretty name to cover up the dirty deeds below."

"And in the Imperium, it's a pretty name for a blood bath, usually. I rather prefer the Orlesian version," Dorian noted.
"Well, I for one am not going to dance to its tune," Cullen said firmly. "Or to any tune."

"Do you not dance, Commander?" Josephine asked with a tilt of her head.

"Put a pig in silk, and you'll end up with dirty silk," Cullen said.

The phrase made Dorian's eyebrow rise. "Is that a Fereldan way to say no, or are you confessing to something far more startling?"

"What? No, I mean… Yes, it's a Fereldan saying." Cullen reached up to rub his forehead. "I'm a soldier, not a dancer. I'll leave that frippery happily to someone else."

"Pity," Josephine murmured. "You do have such beautiful calves."

Cullen blinked. "P-pardon?"

"And that's enough for this meeting," Josephine said cheerfully. "I must depart now, as I have an engagement for a card game."

Cullen stared as Josephine practically ran to the door, wondering if Varric had managed to figure out how to profit from the card game. If anyone could, it would be Varric.

"And I need to speak with Charter," Leliana told Dorian. "Should I need to speak with you after, I will send word."

"I am at your disposal," Dorian assured her, rising to his feet to give her a bow. "I'm sure you won't have difficulty finding my room."

She smiled faintly. "I wouldn't be a very good Spymaster of the Inquisition if I couldn't track down the Inquisitor," she said in an echo of what she'd told Cullen earlier, then inclined her head before moving silently to the door.

"Maker," Dorian breathed once the door closed behind her. "I thought they'd never leave."

"Nor I," Cullen said, in the next moment pushing himself up from his chair.

They met somewhere in the middle, with Cullen seizing the initiative first to claim Dorian's lips in a searing kiss. As their lips parted, Dorian had a twinkle of humor in his eyes. "Eager, I see."

"Very." Cullen considered Dorian carefully, his thumb gently caressing Dorian's cheek. "You're tired."

"I am. The ball has been some time in the future for so long, it's still a little startling that the future now means tomorrow. And it will be all politics and maintaining a facade and searching for secrets. How very dull." Giving a little sigh, Dorian settled his hands on Cullen's wrists and slowly traced upwards. "Nothing as straightforward as clumping someone in the head with your staff because they looked at you funny."

"I thought the Imperium was all about politics and facades and secrets," Cullen pointed out. "I'm usually the one complaining about not being able to apply my sword to any situation."

"Well, obviously you've been a poor influence on me," Dorian said, one corner of his mouth rising. "Surely I can't have changed, can I?"

"Oh, no. Never that." Cullen smiled as he leaned in for a soft kiss. "You're perfect, remember?"
"Mmm. Quite," Dorian frowned as his fingers reached Cullen's shoulders, then dug in. When Cullen grimaced, Dorian made a tsking sound. "And what have I told you about putting rocks here?"

"It's the saddle," Cullen admitted. "No matter how silken smooth an animal may walk, there's no way to make a saddle comfortable without giving it so much padding that a stiff breeze can blow you off."

"Which is why carriages have doors," Dorian noted, though no invitation to the carriage followed--for which Cullen was grateful. If he had his way, Cullen would never ride in a closed carriage again. "We could talk to Dagna to see if she could come up with something more clever than a mountain of pillows. I somehow think she would have some fun with an odd little project like that. A breath of fresh air in between working on the next phase of your armor."

The reminder brought a frown to Cullen's face, and he let his hands drop to Dorian's hips as he pressed their foreheads together. "I'm not a fool, am I, to hope that she finds something more permanent than a cocoon of metal?"

Dorian's fingers moved to stroke up and down between the nape of Cullen's neck and his tunic. "If that is your definition, then we are the both of us fools," he murmured. "But I prefer to think that hope is never foolish."

Eyes falling shut, Cullen tried to force himself to relax, but it was hard to just push all the concerns away. The mail shirt was a constant reminder that Cullen had to keep his guard up, and they still didn't know exactly what had happened with Dorian in Skyhold's jail, though nothing seemed to have come of it since. "I hope you're right."

The next few moments slipped by in silence as Dorian wrapped his arms around Cullen and squeezed him tight, then just... stayed that way. Taking the cue, Cullen returned the gesture, savoring the intimacy that spoke more to the worry in his heart at the moment than another kind might have. Finally Dorian turned his head and pressed a kiss to Cullen's cheek. "You will let me tackle that tension someday, won't you? When we have time?"

Cullen smiled slowly as he leaned back and caught Dorian's eye. "As long as you promise it won't be just a dream this time."

Dorian's eyes widened. "I'd almost forgotten about that."

"Well, I never did." Cullen felt warmer just from the memory of that dream. "Especially when you stroke my neck like that."

"Did you truly know it was me in that dream?" Dorian asked, raising his hands to return to the task of easing Cullen's tension.

A heat rose in Cullen's cheeks. "I... didn't know it was actually you in my dream." After all, Dorian had invaded his dreams on occasion. It simply hadn't been so very literal before Mailani had interfered.

Dorian's eyes widened for a moment, just before one corner of his mouth rose in a cocky smile. "Oh. I see."

"Maker," Cullen breathed, then hauled Dorian close enough to kiss that smirk away. Judging by the soft moan against his lips, he succeeded in his aim, but that goal swiftly faded in the face of that moan. Time and duty melted away as one kiss led to another, and hands started to roam. It was only when Cullen felt deft fingers opening his belt that he realized just how far they'd gone.
He reached down and took Dorian's hands in his own, letting their kiss break with a breathy chuckle. "Now who's eager?"

Dorian's eyebrows rose in clear surprise. "You don't want more?"

The question gave Cullen pause. Raising Dorian's hands to his lips, he held them tightly as he met Dorian's eyes. "I do. I very much do. But I also want everything else as well."

"Whatever do you mean?" Dorian gave a little laugh, almost convincing Cullen that the man was truly nonchalant and not worried in the slightest. *Almost.* "It's not as if everything is truly available until the clothes come off."

Cullen's face softened, and he dropped Dorian's hands so he could reach out and cup his face. "What if I want to weave flowers in your hair?"

Dorian blinked. "Pardon?"

"Or what if I want to hold your hand while we stand on your balcony in Skyhold? Or fall asleep under the stars in my bed after a long, boring day without you? Or spend a good hour just learning what makes your breath quicken when I trail my hands all over your body? There are a lot of things I want to do with you in addition to everything *primal.*" Leaning in for a kiss, he slowly explored Dorian's lips with just enough heat that he managed to earn another small moan from Dorian. When he pulled back, he knew his smirk was in full force. "Besides, I don't want to tire you out for tomorrow."

Dorian licked his lips slowly. "I *hope* that is a promise for later."

"Oh, it is," Cullen told him fervently. "When you give me the order, Inquisitor, I will ensure that you are unable to rise from the bed afterwards." He leaned in and brushed his lips against Dorian's before whispering, "And then I'll do it to you again. On a table, if need be."

A shudder ran through Dorian's body. "You drive a hard bargain, Commander."

Cullen couldn't help but smirk. "Believe me, it's hard for both of us."

"Evidently." Dorian's hands settled on Cullen's hips and drew him close, providing a further proof to Cullen's words. "But I do agree that a sufficiently primal romp tonight will not benefit either of us on the morrow. Pity."

"There are alternatives," Cullen reminded him with a chuckle. "We can still be together."

Dorian tilted his head to one side, brows pinching together ever so slightly as he studied Cullen's face. "And explore some of that *everything else* for a while?"

Cullen couldn't help but smile in response as he pressed his forehead against Dorian's. "As much as we can."

A definite smirk came to Dorian's lips. "Is that an order for your Inquisitor?"

"Consider it ongoing advice from your Commander, to be followed as necessary," Cullen replied with a chuckle, then laid his hand high on Dorian's chest so that his fingertips could slowly stroke up and down Dorian's neck. "Whatever tomorrow brings, I will see you on the other side of it."

For a brief moment, Dorian's hands tightened on Cullen's hips. "Is that a promise, Commander?"
"A vow, Inquisitor," Cullen murmured. "And nothing will make me forsake it."

Or you.

He left that part unspoken, for now. Dorian had enough to think about, and he would need all his wits about him the next day at the Winter Palace.

Besides, Dorian had already ensured that Cullen's lips were too busy for talking.

Chapter End Notes

*Ours: The French (and presumably Orlesian) word for bear. The pronunciation can be found here.
"Wake up."

This time the words are a whisper, a desultory caress in your ear which slowly stirs you to wake. The booming pulse in your head has returned, steady and ever-present, and feels almost like a friend by this point despite the mystery. Around you, the world is dark at first, a mix of muted shadows and vague edges which slowly resolve into shapes with no color. You turn your head instinctively to check the entrance to the tent, wondering if Zevran had snuck in as he had the night before to hover and remind you of what your punishment would be if you did not complete your task. But you see no one.

And, in the next moment, you abruptly realize where you are, and who you are. You deliberately create distance between yourself and your host, even as you again try to find your way back to your own dream. You have not been to this dream-that-is-not since before the outburst in the jail, and you preferred not to be there now-- especially now.

Unfortunately, it seems there is no escape now that you are here--at least, not yet. In resignation, you settle in to observe, hoping for an opportunity to learn and then leave.

Pushing yourself into a sitting position, you slowly gain your feet and take a moment to stretch, reveling in the fact that there is no pain. A faint sound reaches your ears, and you recognize the snore of your friend across the tent. You move to kneel next to his sleeping roll, studying him as best as you can in the dim light. It's hard to see much, given the way he's rolled onto his stomach and buried his face in his pillow, but it's enough to make you smile. His back isn't covered with half-healed cuts, and the snore means he's fallen into a true sleep, uninterrupted by nightmares and Zevran.

You reach out and take his hand in yours, savoring the fact you can do so without feeling or causing pain. As with any time you spend with him, the guilt weighs heavily on your shoulders, but you take the guilt and feed it into your determination. You have made your decision and found your guiding star: to see this man freed from the clutches of his captors, no matter the cost to yourself.

:Promise:

The word echoes in you and through you, so powerful are the emotions which drive home the vow being made. It pushes you out of alignment with your host due to the intimate nature of the emotions behind it, and you admire the strength of his conviction.

:I promise that you will be free of them:

The words take on the quality of an oath, never to be forsaken, and you shiver as you realize that
your host literally means to succeed or die trying. Flashes of punishment involving pain and despair worse than anything you have personally witnessed in these dreams—that-are-not quickly strafe through your mind, making your host's determination that much more understandable and vibrant.

And it inspires another, certainly unintended, consequence: to do for your host's friend what you did for him. Even as your host catalogs and justifies what he will do and why he must do it, you seize the proverbial reins and dive deep into the spell around the sleeping man through the tenuous connection created by your host holding his hand.

Familiarity aids you here, reducing the time needed to scour the breadth of the spell to find its weak points. You see differences between this spell and the one on your host, and those differences are tied to blood in a way you don't quite understand, but you are still able to find an opportunity. You exert yourself quickly and apply pressure using the magic of the Anchor, seeking to unlock what nothing else could open.

Your reward finally comes with a rather spectacular flare of magic, and you quickly expend even more energy to hide the result. The effort leaves you exhausted, however, and once your task is done, you withdraw back into a corner of your host's mind, and pray that your work will pass unnoticed.

You turn your head to towards the source of the sound, the other tent in your small camp. An angry voice, a sharp crack—that is not anything you ever expected to hear outside of Zevran sating himself on his captive audience. You release the hand between your own and rise to your feet, setting your path to carry you to outside.

With every step, you feel the spell of compulsion grow stronger, trying to make you stay, to obey the order to remain inside the tent and sleep all through the night. By the time you halt an arm's length from the tent flap, your body shakes with the effort of struggle, striving to push back against the need to obey. Your hand reaches out to push the tent flap open, but freezes halfway there as a wave of pain washes over you. The spell rises, trying to force you to its will, but still you remain in place, fighting.

The small part of you not lost in the conflict itself watches intently as your host battles the spell you damaged during your last visit here. Is he strong enough? Your knowledge of your host remains limited, but you know the potential is there. You only know that he can, not that he will.

After another moment of struggling against the seemingly implacable force of Amell's magic, your host suddenly clenches his teeth together and pushes his hand forward. For a moment it feels as if he is pushing his hand through a bucket full of broken glass, but as his fingers touch the tent, the pain vanishes. You feel the spell crack further under the pressure, and smile.

Yes. He is strong enough. With a satisfied nod to yourself, you let yourself fall back into the moment.

You slip outside and look around the small camp. There are no guards, of course, because Amell relies on spells at the perimeter to keep enemies out, and spells on his slaves to keep them in. Still, your heart is racing as you sneak to the other tent, the one which houses Amell and Zevran. Even as you draw closer, you hear the sound again, the sharp crack of a hand striking flesh, and the voice raised in anger. Moving as slowly as can be, you use the clouded night to your advantage and sneak into the shadows until you are close enough to hear everything. There is enough light within the tent for you to see their shadows inside, though at the moment you only see one person on their feet, with someone kneeling at their feet.

"You do not make demands of me," you hear Amell snarl.
"But, amor--"

"Silence!" Amell roared, followed by another sharp crack as the arm of the standing figure lashes out and rocks the kneeling figure with a full strike of their hand. "You will please me when I demand it. I will use you when it pleases me. If it pleases me to give you to Avernus, I will. If it pleases me to watch you suck every cock between here and the Korcari Wilds, you will. But you do not make demands of me."

"Yes, amor," Zevran says, voice subdued.

Amell chuckles, the sound dry as dust. "You did well in acquiring the costumes we will need for this mission, however. That pleases me."

"Thank you, amor." Now Zevran sounds almost happy, and you shake your head in frustration. Surely the elf can see what Amell is doing to him?

"And all it took was one evening and a bit of humiliation," Amell notes, then suddenly leans down as the shadows of his arms merge with the shadow of the kneeling elf. You hear the rustle of cloth, and then a soft moan. "Or did you enjoy the price, hmm? A fuck toy for a night, with your ass and mouth the prize for a group of drunken nobles as they enjoyed a game of cards?"

There is a hiss, followed by another moan, and you wonder just what is going on in there. "I thought only of you."

"And is that why you returned to me with your demands?" Amell croons.

"Please, amor," Zevran begs, almost sobbing. "Can you just try to--?"

There is another sharp crack, followed by the silhouette of Amell suddenly lifting Zevran from the ground and holding him high. "You know my difficulty," Amell says in a dark tone. "The taint has taken its toll on both my mind and body. Is that why you enjoyed being the prize for a card game? Because those Orlesians could give you what I cannot?"

"N-no, never!" Zevran chokes out, obviously struggling for breath. "You are absolute perfection! I need no other!"

Even as you try to puzzle through Amell's words, the two shadows merge, and your ears deduce that a rather savage kiss is underway. It ends abruptly, however, when the shorter figure drops to the ground. "Then accept that you do not make demands of me."

"Yes, amor." Zevran's tone sounds defeated, and an odd thought strikes you.

:Perhaps:

The words sits in your host's mind, swirling in the middle of a barrage of thoughts which move too quickly for you to follow, until suddenly more words emerge from the cloud.

:Perhaps Zevran can be turned against Amell:

"Do not worry, my love," Amell tells Zevran as he walks across the tent. "You will have your own toy back again once his task is finished and I have confirmed his renewed seed has found fertile ground."

"He is not you, amor," Zevran whispers.
"And if I tell you to fuck him?" Amell asks in a harsh tone.

"Then I will. Of course I will." The barest moment of hesitation before he speaks, however, says far more than his words ever could.

A note of dry humor enters Amell's voice as he asks, "And if I tell him to fuck you?"

Again Zevran hesitates, albeit briefly. "May I pretend he is you?"

"When I give you leave, you may." Amell's tone shows his indifference to the question, but also--and more tellingly--his indifference to Zevran's preferences and, presumably, happiness. "But only then."

"Thank you, mi amor," Zevran replies, this time with a bit more enthusiasm which leaves you again baffled. Surely the elf realizes how badly Amell treats him?

And then... it happens. The burst of eldritch magic washes over you, just as it did before, raising your hackles and making your body tense as something ephemeral pulses from within the tent. Again you feel the almost-panic of your host, and feel him fight the urge to run far, far away.

When Amell next speaks, you hear the difference in his tone and diction, and can't help but feel as if there is something familiar about his speech. When you can't see the change in Amell's body, you realize it sounds even more striking, as if it is another person speaking entirely, heralded by that burst of energy.

"Do not forget the reason for our mission, slave," Amell says in sonorous tones. "Your targets have been assigned, your task set."

:It's here:

The panic rises up in your host, and without thinking you exert yourself just enough to keep him in place. You need to hear this. After a moment your host sags to the ground, alert and terrified, but also with the thought that staying put is better than risking attention by running.

:Maker keep me safe:

"Yes, Master." Zevran definitely sounds different. Gone is the beaten down man trying to appease his abusive lover. Now Zevran sounds like any other servant of a bad master: weary, respectful, and with a touch of resentment beneath his tone. "And the Inquisition?"

That snaps your attention to a laser focus. What is Amell planning next? Does he mean the ball, or something else entirely? You mentally curse as various scenarios dance through your head, but in the end you can only listen closely and try to glean what you can from the conversation.

"Ignore them unless interaction proves necessary. We know what that idiot Sethius wants, and we must ensure he does not acquire it, by any means possible." Suddenly an arm shoots out and lifts Zevran into the air. "Do you understand? I will be most wroth if you fail me in this, and I will hold you personally responsible for all failures."

Sethius? You frown. That is certainly a Tevinter name, but you cannot place it within the Magisterium or the soporati with whom you are familiar. Is it one of Corypheus' Lieutenants? One of Calpernia's assistants? Surely Leliana would have learned the name of all of the prominent Venatori by now. You file the name away for later analysis, turning your attention back to the scene inside the tent.

"Y-yes, Master!" Zevran says in a hoarse, choked voice, then makes a strangled sound.
“This is your second chance to prove your worth. I am a generous man. I will allow you three. If still you have not proven your worth, I will make you worthy.” With those words, Zevran is again dropped, though this time the landing sounds more painful. "Now leave me. I have matters to attend to."

You do not hear Zevran's response, as Amell's words galvanize you into action. Quickly you sneak back through the small camp to your tent, slipping inside and making your way to your sleeping roll. Arranging yourself so that you face the entrance, you relax into a sleeping posture, and hope it will be enough for what you are sure will follow.

A few tense breaths later, you hear Zevran enter. As you watch through slitted eyes, the elf falls to his knees next to the sleeping roll of the man still gently snoring in slumber. You notice the dark bruise around one of his eyes, the same eye that is now swelled shut, and again wonder at Amell's hold on Zevran. You see him reach out, but pull up his hand just short of touching the sleeping man, and you wonder if perhaps Zevran is under a spell of compulsion as well.

In the next moment, the elf unbelts his trousers with clear intent, his gaze fixed on the man lying before him. You shut your eyes, suffering through the noises as Zevran works himself into a frenzy, unable to completely block out the sounds but at least grateful he is doing it without forcing participation. After a while, however, the sounds change enough that you don't recognize them, and carefully you open one eye.

:Impossible:

You feel your host's astonishment at the sight of Zevran hunched over, one hand still wrapped tight around his swollen length as he jerkily strokes himself towards release. The surprise comes from the fact that Zevran's other hand is clamped tightly over his mouth, trying to muffle the sounds of his sobs. Even in the dim light of the tent, you can see the glimmer of tears on the elf's face, and see the heaving of his shoulders as his muffled cries try to escape past those tightly closed fingers.

:He never cries:

And yet, as you watch, it becomes more and more undeniable that Zevran is doing just that, even as the movement of his lower hand grows increasingly erratic. You watch in pained fascination as his back suddenly arches sharply and his hips thrust forward, a strangled scream cut short as an all-too-familiar scent fills the tent. Zevran breathes heavily, hand still covering his mouth, as he rocks back and forth for a what seems like an eternity but which likely is only a few minutes.

Finally he shudders and shakes himself bodily. He pulls a kerchief from his tunic and carefully cleans himself, then tucks it away. Another clean one is tugged out and scrubbed vigorously over his face to clear all traces of his tears, then similarly tucked away. At one point, you think you hear him whisper. "Soon it will be perfect again."

But you cannot be sure.

In all this time, you somehow manage to maintain your façade of slumber, processing the oddly vulnerable scene you've just witnessed. Your thoughts whirr round and round, wondering if you can take advantage of the disagreements between Amell and Zevran, or if it would be too dangerous to even try?

When Zevran turns towards you, you immediately shut your eyes completely, not wishing even a glimmer to warn the elf that all is not as it seems. This time you feel a hand lightly stroke your hair, leaving your skin crawling as you feel a pressure on your ear. A kiss? A glancing touch? It doesn't matter, and soon the sensation lifts as another whispered word reaches you: "Soon."
Then the footsteps recede, leaving only the soft snores of the other man to fill the tent at regular intervals.

A cautious glance around the tent shows that Zevran is indeed gone, and you roll onto your back, shaking with the effort of lying motionless throughout those long minutes. After a moment, you take a deep breath and slowly sit up once more, cautiously reaching into the hidden pocket you’ve painstakingly worked into your pillow. You withdraw some paper and writing materials, remembering quite clearly how dearly you’d paid for every part of it.

It’s almost time, and you need to be ready. Hopefully it will all be worth it.

Or rather... your host needs to be ready, though you're not quite sure what he needs to be ready for, or how he is preparing for it. You push away from your host's thoughts and simply observe as he slowly draws on the paper, but gain no clues. Whatever his thoughts are, they aren't loud enough for you to hear, and finally you give up on trying to determine the details.

Instead, and for the first time in one of these dreams-that-are-not, you turn your attention outward, trying to locate the being who you believe is responsible for your presence here in the first place. Before, it always came to you, but you wonder if perhaps you could hunt it down instead. The incident in the jail with Livius means that you need answers, and for that, you have to take risks.

You cast your awareness out into the very edges of your host's mind, forsaking visions of the real world for the uncertain world of your host's soul as you search for a hint of the one who has before always sent you thither from the dream. The steady, booming pulse that is always present in this place swells in your mind as you do so, as if aware of your curiosity, but you sense that to be a peripheral matter and unrelated to the being you seek. At first you find nothing, and feel no eyes upon you, and you wonder if your search may prove to be futile in this dream-that-is-not.

In the next moment, however, you find it--as if it were waiting for you to come looking.

You only have a moment to process what you see: a man in worn trousers with feathers sprouting from his shoulders and hair pulled back in a tousled queue, leaning on a staff of obsidian. He tilts his head, a strange pattern of dark purple energy blooming to light in his face and eyes, and smiles.

"That's enough for now. Wake up."

Dorian roused from his sleep all at once, pulse pounding in his ears as any notion of further slumber fled from his mind. Who was that? He reached up to touch his face, and noticed his mark flickering in a steady, persistent pulse. He swallowed harshly as he realized that the rhythm was now intimately familiar, and wondered at the connection between the pulsing mark and these dreams-that-were-not.

The being he'd found, though... Dorian's brows drew together in concentration, trying to remember every last detail. It certainly didn't appear to be a demon, though appearances could be deceiving. It didn't feel quite like the spirits Dorian had interacted with in the past, but then, those spirits had been under magical control. The light pattern on that being's face, the glowing of the mark... Was that what Cullen had seen in the jail? Was that spirit in the dream, whatever it was, trying to gain some sort of hold over Dorian?

Or had it already succeeded? The dreams, after all, had returned.

With a groan, Dorian fell back into the bed and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Maker," he breathed. "I do not need this right now."

In the following few seconds of silence, he heard a short, firm knock on the door, and frowned. A
glance at the window showed only the faint light of pre-dawn outside, indicating that most people
would not have roused from their beds yet given how late the apparently riveting card game had run.
As he pushed the blanket away from his legs, he eased himself from bed, surprised to find he was
still a little weak. That, more than anything, convinced him that the dream was definitely not only a
dream: he had expended quite a bit of magical energy during his slumber. "Who is it?" he called as
he looked around for his robe.

"Your father."

Dorian paused, staring at the door for a moment. Finally he snagged his robe from where he'd flung
it onto the chair and pulled it on. "One moment." Quickly he went to the mirror and ensured his hair
was in order with a flick or two of magic, then rolled his shoulders and drew himself to his full
height. Only then did he move to the door.

"Father," he said cheerfully as he opened the door. "You're starting this most marvelous day at a
rather early hour, aren't you?"

"It's a little too early for that, Dorian," Halward said with a pained expression.

"Oh, not at all." Dorian laughed merrily and pulled the door open more widely, inviting his father in
with a wide sweep of his hand and a bow. "Do come in, would you? Shall I ring for breakfast? I'm
sure someone is awake down there, the poor soul, and I'm fairly sure one of the ceiling cords around
here will summon someone, no matter how hungover they are. Apparently the card game was quite
the event last night."

"Dorian." Halward paused and sighed, closing his eyes for a moment before he nodded and stepped
into the room. He waited until Dorian had closed the door before turning to him. "I thought this
would be a good opportunity to speak with you."

Dorian made a *tsk*ing sound. "So very early? Were you hoping to catch someone in my bed and
make me send them away in shame? It wouldn't be the first time."

Halward's expression turned to stone for a moment before he turned away. "Would he have made
you happy?"

The question caught Dorian completely by surprise, and in the next moment his levity vanished.
"You mean Rilienus," he said softly. Suddenly not wishing to discuss the matter on an empty
stomach, Dorian headed to the carafe of something that spoke of alcohol on the sideboard. "He did
make me happy. He didn't tell me to leave in the morning, for one thing. Of course, I'd already been
dragged kicking and screaming from his bed by your thugs at that point, so I can't be completely
certain."

A shift in Halward's shoulders spoke of extreme discomfort, but his father again surprised him.
"Your mother never invited me to stay. After our marital duties, I mean. Once you were born, we
became friends at the table and in political matters, but rarely more. I ignored the satisfactions she
found on her own, and she ignored mine. I suppose... I suppose I thought you could manage the
same."

Dorian slowly poured himself a good sized portion of what on first sniff turned out to be cognac,
remaining silent as he stoppered the carafe. Picking up the glass, he pretended to admire the color for
a moment. "That wasn't what you told me."

"No. I told you to obey me." Halward snorted softly. "As if you hadn't spent your entire life showing
me that obedience wasn't your strong suit."
"You also told me something else. 'Get out,' you said. 'You are no son of mine.'" Dorian remembered Halward saying that in all his icy glory, the last thing his father ever said to him on Tevinter soil. And those words still hurt, even after all this time.

Again Halward sighed heavily. "I know. And I wish I could claim it to be only anger, and not sincere, but at the time... Yes, at the time, I meant it."

At least he's honest about it. Still, that merited more than a small sip, and Dorian quickly downed half the glass before he squared his shoulders and turned to face his father. "Until I became Inquisitor," he pointed out in a harsh voice. "Is that why I'm part of the family again? All I had to do was become a power in Thedas and suddenly you'll welcome me back to House Pavus with open arms?"

Halward rubbed his face vigorously with his hands, then slowly turned on his heel. The weariness in his actions spoke of a long, restless night, and the way he reached up to scratch at the scar on his neck spoke of a nervous habit newly formed. "No. And in some ways, it is still hard to think of you as my son. Not because you are not worthy to be my son, but because I find it hard to think of myself as worthy to be your father."

"I--" Dorian paused, then shook his head as he tried to reconcile what he'd expected to hear with what his father had actually said. "Pardon. What was that?"

"I once told you we are much alike," Halward said in a quiet tone. "It's been a long time since I was your age, and longer since I was a child, but I remember dreams and aspirations that did not involve power and politics. At one time, I had an ardent desire to be an animal trainer for the arena, after my parents took me there for my tenth birthday."

"I can't imagine that went over well with your parents," Dorian said in a neutral tone.

Shaking his head slowly, Halward said, "I never saw the arena again. And that year they sent me away to the Minrathous Circle, where I learned my place."

For a long moment, Dorian considered his father. Finally, he said, "You weren't trying to change me because you were angry at me, were you? You were trying to change me into you."

Halward winced. "You see more clearly than I did. The older I get, the more I realize how much of my father is in me, because his was the hand which shaped me. But you... you are not me, not wholly. I don't know if it comes from your mother, or some other element entirely, but for all that I can see the similarities, the older you get, the more I can also see the differences." Making a vague gesture to the world around them, Halward said, "I could never have done what you have done since you left home, and it all started by rejecting my plan for you."

"You almost sound proud, Father," Dorian said, then quickly cleared his throat before it could close on him. "Not that I would necessarily know what that would sound like if you were. I almost don't recognize you as it is."

Halward's hand rose to touch his neck again. "I cannot claim to have loved your mother, and you would call me out for the lie if I did claim it, but our lives wound together in many ways. What we lacked in love, I would like to think we shared in purpose. And losing her... it made me rethink my purpose."

Dorian stared at Halward, not quite sure what to say in light of his father's words. Finally he drained the glass and set it on the table without looking, trying to reconcile this man with the man who had declared Dorian was no longer his son. "If I didn't know better, Father, I'd say you've been humbled."
A very faint smile came to Halward's face. "Who is to say you do not know better? It is one reason I was so angry at you."

"I thought that was because I had a taste for cock," Dorian said, picking his words purely to provoke. A provocation his father seemed to not even notice. "No. At least, not entirely. I was angry you flaunted it, angry that there were so many rumors about you because of it, angry about the compromises I had to make because of those rumors. And I was angry that you went to such lengths to be so impossibly stubborn about it."

Dorian opened his mouth to make a sarcastic remark about how much he knew about lengths, but then forced himself to close it again, the sarcasm left unspoken. He did want to hear what Halward had to say, after all, and there was only so far he should push. For now, anyway.

A frown settled on his father's face for a moment as his gaze grew distant. "But no, my true anger arose because you could see what I would not. More than that, you acted on it. I saw the cage my father put around me, the cage of House Pavus and my duties to it, and simply accepted it. But you--"

His eyes suddenly focused on Dorian, pinning him in place. "You noticed the door to the cage had no lock, and left it all behind. And I hated you for it."

"So you tried to pull me back in." Dorian tried to keep his tone neutral, but couldn't quite keep the acid from his voice.

Halward nodded. "And turned my back on every good thing I taught you in doing so. When I lay in the gardens of my estate, holding my dead wife in my arms as my life's blood poured from my neck, I suddenly realized that you had achieved more than I had ever thought possible. More than that, you were able to do so not because of what I gave you, but in spite of it."

A silence fell between them as Dorian stared at his father, brow furrowed as he analyzed everything his father had revealed. Eventually he felt compelled to offer his own observations. "I--I knew you were trying to protect House Pavus. Beneath all the pain and anger, I knew that. And I hated that I knew that."

"Are you not of House Pavus?" Halward countered. "I did a poor job of protecting it by driving you away. And so your mother told me. Several times."

Dorian had to laugh at that, picturing his mother during one of her lectures. "She always was good at letting you know when you were acting the damn fool."

"And I was never good enough at listening to her." The faint smile on Halward's face faded as he bowed his head. "Don't forgive me, Dorian. I can't ask that of you. I only ask that you be better than me."

"A week or two ago I would have said that would not be a difficult proposition," Dorian noted, then frowned as he realized he couldn't simply leave it at that. "I admit, however, that I've been thinking quite a bit about Mother since you arrived at Skyhold. And about you, and my childhood. You weren't always such a terrible father."

Halward gave Dorian a sad smile. "I taught you well enough for you to recognize when I did become one. But the courage to actually leave your home because of it? To join the Inquisition because it was the right thing to do? That was all you, Dorian. Your own strength. Your own courage. That, I could not teach you, for I do not possess it myself."
The words shook Dorian more than he cared to admit, more than he could truly process at the moment. "I don't know what to say," he admitted after a long lull. "This… this is the last thing I ever expected to hear from you."

"Then I am glad I lived to say it," Halward said, again unconsciously rubbing his neck. "And I am sorry that I caused you such pain."

Dorian half-turned to reach for the glass again, intending to fill it once more, before pausing in mid-motion as he pushed himself past the initial anger those words awoke. Deliberately closing his hand in a fist, he faced his father again. "I'm not sure that's enough, after what you've done."

Halward's eyes closed for a moment as his brows drew together. "I know. I don't think it ever will be."

Eyes narrowing, Dorian crossed his arms across his chest. "Then why apologize at all? I'm certainly not going to be rushing into your embrace any time soon."

"Because..." His father smiled ever so slightly, though the expression also reflected a wistful sorrow. "Perhaps because someone very wise once told me that sometimes, you must do a thing because it is the right thing to do."

The words hung between them for a long moment as Dorian's heart clenched in his chest. He recognized those words, the same words he'd flung in frustration at his father during their confrontation at Redcliffe. Normally he would have accused Halward of using them out of spite, and dismissed them entirely.

This time...this time, he found he simply couldn't. Perhaps it was the news of his mother's death, and the weight of all the words he wished he could have said to her. Perhaps it was a foolish hope that there was something between the father and the son which could be salvaged. Or perhaps, he simply realized that hate, even justified, tended to lead down a path he didn't have the energy to follow.

In the end, he simply sighed and gestured to the small table set in front of the window. "Father, would you care to join me for breakfast?"

Halward glanced at the table, clearly surprised by the offer. "Are you certain?"

Taking a deep breath, Dorian forced himself to see the man in front of him now. The towering figure whose approval and affection he'd sought for years was gone, withered down to a man whose own actions had left him very much alone. The memories of what had driven them apart were still there, and Dorian remained uncertain about whether he could ever truly forgive the man. Yet, he could remember the desperation he'd once felt in trying to earn his father's love, and understood a bit more of what had happened to Halward when he'd been in the same position.

It didn't absolve Halward of blame, of course, but it did serve to make him more human.

With all that in mind, he nodded in answer to his father's question. "I thought we could reminisce about Mother. She did so adore parties, after all, and we're going to a ball tonight. Perhaps between the two of us, we could remember enough of her wisdom to aid us in the coming day. I believe she would approve."

Halward bowed his head for a moment. "I agree, she most certainly would." When he lifted his face, there might have been a sheen in his eyes, but Dorian knew better than to draw attention to it. "Then yes. I would like to join you."

As Dorian moved to pull the cord which would summon a servant, he muttered a silent prayer that he
hadn't committed a colossal mistake. Today, of all days, he simply could not afford any.

The fate of Thedas hung in the balance.

For those of you who have not read it, I highly recommend *The Final Conversation* by David Gaider which, while not technically canon, does inform my writing when it comes to depicting the relationship between Dorian and Halward.
Dorian resisted the urge to check the set of his sash one last time as he took a deep breath. His brow wrinkled, then firm as he kept his gaze fixed on the door of the carriage, waiting for it to open as his mind worked its way through several rather tricky equations in a bid to remain calm.

"I know that look," Maevaris murmured. "You're thinking in polynomials, aren't you?"

He shot her an irritated glance. "You're not supposed to remember that."

"You were drunk, Dorian, and I wasn't," she teased him. "It's a clever little tactic, I'll give you that. 'Numbers and nerves can't survive in the same space or the same mind.'" She paused and tilted her head. "Is it working?"

Dorian kept his gaze on the door. "As long as the door is closed and the world is out there, yes. The true test comes when where I am becomes out there. I only have one night to convince the world that the big, bad Tevinter mage is actually a rather nice fellow they'd prefer not to send assassins after and whatnot."

Maevaris looked surprised, even under her mask. "I thought southerners didn't have assassins at parties."

"What is this?" Josephine asked, eyes widening.

"It's a Tevinter peculiarity, Lady Josephine," Dorian told her. "Parties are seen as a lovely place for wining and dining with a side of murder. If there's not at least one attempted assassination, then the party is deemed a failure. All weapons are on the table: magic, poison, words… whatever it takes to defeat a rival. Why, Magister Tilani here once ended a dynasty with three words, if I recall."

Maevaris laughed. "Three words and a well-placed archer, Dorian," she scolded him. "Don't exaggerate. Oh, and a great deal of well-placed money. Let's not forget that part."

"The point still stands, my dear," Dorian said with a slow wink, glad that the Inquisition had decided to keep the masks off for the ball, even if the Tevinter guests had to use them in their guise as Orlesians. "That is an Imperium oddity, not a southern one. They might wish me dead, but it's considered rather bad form to have the assassins actually do the deed at the party itself. The House of Repose does have standards."

Josephine nodded, then reached out and made a minute adjustment to Dorian's sash. "The door is about to open," she informed him.

"How do you--" Dorian began, just as the door opened and the stairs were folded down. Outside, the four honor guards already stood, waiting to lead the Inquisitor through the gates of the Winter Palace with the all the pomp and circumstance Josephine had deemed necessary. "Well, then," he murmured. "Into the fray."
The smile became a fixed feature on his face as he descended from the carriage, where he was whisked away to meet the man who had guaranteed their entry to the ball. Gaspard was, by Tevinter standards, brusque and straightforward with little grace in presenting his agenda and aims. It seemed that he would have welcomed anyone that would give him the throne he so desired, and given what Dorian had seen in his gallivanting through the Exalted Plains, he could see why even Gaspard was seeking negotiations rather than combat to end the civil war—with him as Emperor, of course. For the moment, at least based on their first interaction, Dorian mentally marked the man as too obvious to be subtle, though as one of the three prime candidates to be working for Corypheus, it was possible that his subtlety extended to inviting the Inquisition simply to ensure a victory over them.

Once he'd taken as thorough a measure as he could of the man, Dorian began his secondary task: playing the Game. There was no way he could effectively have an impact this night if he did not do so, and do so well. It didn't take long to work his way through the courtyard, probing for information and being his utterly charming self in the face of people who had all sorts of reasons to mistrust his very being, much less his presence. Every frown was noted, every smile a victory, and he even managed to relax one noble enough that he was casually invited to a very private party after the ball was over, which Dorian declined with a bow and an almost sinfully intimate kiss to the palm.

Once he'd gleaned all he could from those beyond the palace itself, he braced himself and moved within. It was a dance he was familiar with, at least: the dance of power amongst the powerful, a play which meant life or death for all involved which everyone politely pretended not to notice. In a truly honest moment, as he walked at Gaspard's side, the Altus part of him reveled in the gasps of surprise as he was introduced to the assemblage. The pleasantries with Celene were poetic and stilted on both sides, as expected, and he filed her words and stance away for later perusal, just as he did for the reaction of Gaspard's sister, Florianne.

Then, of course, came the time to unleash his charm on the court proper.

His first stop, of course, was to chat with Josephine, just as his mother had taught him. Always start with an ally, preferably a friend, she'd told him over and over again. It's predictable, setting you into a pattern you can break when it is advantageous to you, and it puts you in a good mood for when you need it later.

His smile remained in place as he moved to Josephine's side, giving first her and then the woman standing next to her a florid, overly Orlesian bow. "My dear Lady Josephine, I don't believe I've had the honor of meeting this beauteous creature."

"I am most assuredly and utterly charmed, my younger lady Montilyet," Dorian said with a twinkle in his eye as he bowed over her outstretched hand. "I see quite clearly that beauty runs in the family."

"Can we keep him?" Yvette asked with bright eyes. "He's ever so much more handsome than that fellow you keep trying to foist off on me back home."

"That is not something I wish to discuss with you right now," Josephine hissed, then cleared her throat. "Inquisitor--"

Unable to restrain herself any longer, Yvette interrupted Josephine to say, "I've heard so much about you! But not as much as I want. Josephine writes, but she never tells me anything."
"Yvette--" Josephine began, but Yvette clearly had the reins in her hands.

"Is it true that the rebel Templars in Therinfal Redoubt bathed in red lyrium during their orgies before you saved the good ones?" she asked breathlessly.

It was all Dorian could do not to laugh as Josephine, clearly aghast, asked, "Where did you hear such nonsense?"

"Everyone in Antiva says so!" Yvette declared. "Is it true?"

"But of course it is. Every last bit of it," Dorian said, as if it were obvious. Ignoring Josephine's clear glare of you're not helping, he added, "Especially the parts where everyone was nude."

Yvette clapped her hands together in delight. "I knew it! And is it true that--"

"Ah, thank you, Inquisitor, for coming to speak with us," Josephine said hastily. "But you have quite a lot to do before the peace talks start, do you not?"

"Alas, you are correct, my dear lady Ambassador," Dorian said with mock regret. "And I would have so loved to hear some stories of when Josephine was a little girl."

"Oh, I could--" Yvette began.

"Not a word," Josephine warned her.

Yvette's face fell, but then she brightened. Rushing the words out before Josephine could stop her, she blurted, "She still plays with her doll collection when no one is looking!"

"Yvette!" Josephine grated. "That's...absurd! Absolutely preposterous! And I told you to say nothing!"

"That wasn't about your childhood," Yvette protested.

"In her defense, Lady Ambassador, she has you there," Dorian pointed out. "Since I assume it is something you do in the present."

Josephine looked up the ceiling, no doubt silently invoking the Maker and Andraste both, and possibly Mailani as well, as Yvette giggled behind her fan.

When she turned her subsequent glare on Dorian, he decided it was time to get back to work. "I'll see you later." He made some more bows, especially to Yvette, before stepping away and immersing himself once more into the Game.

He did his best to do his mother proud, taking in more information about the people with whom he spoke than he gave away as he wandered around the ballroom hoping to get a hint about the plan Corypheus had put under way. The gossip was flowing freely by this point, and he heard snatches of whispers here and there that he dutifully memorized for recitation to Leliana later. At one point he got cornered by a woman with a skirt wide enough to sweep everyone to the side, and politely listened to her extol her several dead husbands. As each death grew more and more lurid and ridiculous, he decided he quite liked her.

"A violent tailoring accident?" he asked at one point, a smirk on his face. "That sounds dreadful."

"Oh, my poor Etienne," she sighed as she patted her heart with one hand. "Such a good man. Such a pity about that outfit. And it was for Satlinalia, too."
"Oh, then it was extra tragic," Dorian commiserated, knowing all too well what had likely really happened. "Hopefully the needles and thread were brought to justice."

"They were indeed, my lord Inquisitor," the lady assured him. "I forced my nephew to wear them—the next year. So out of season! The clothing was laughed out of court. No admiration for that dastardly collection of fabric and stitches."

"And your nephew?" Dorian asked, curious what the answer would be.

She waved a hand in dismissal. "He recovered, eventually. The outfit was burned, however. A fitting punishment on behalf of my poor, poor Etienne."

"Most fitting, my lady," Dorian said with a chuckle. The chuckle faded, however, as his eyes strayed to the side and caught a glimpse of a handsome figure. It wasn't until the woman turned to follow his gaze that he realized he was staring, and he quickly cleared his throat. "Ah, my apologies, my lady."

"Who would not allow their head to be turned by such a vision of perfection?" she asked, snapping her fan open and cooling herself off dramatically. "Oh, but he does remind me of my poor Maximilian."

Dorian quickly counted back in his head. "Ah, the fourth one, yes?"

The fan snapped closed and tapped thoughtfully against her mask for a moment. "You remembered. I am impressed, Inquisitor. Most do not truly listen to the prattling of an old lady." She held out her hand for him to bend over. "We were not introduced, my Lord Inquisitor. I am the Lady Mantillon."

Now that was a name he'd had drilled into his head not only by Leliana, but also Vivienne in their preparatory sessions before the ball. She was quite high on the list of people he shouldn't upset or alienate, and also high on the list of people to flatter and cajole. Taking her hand, he bent over it and laid a delicate kiss on her gloved knuckles. "The honor is all mine, my lady," he told her warmly.

"Or it would be, if that fetching man weren't over there," she told him with a twinkle in her eyes. "Oh, do go talk to him. I want to see his face light up when you seek him out."

Dorian managed to keep his reaction to that little statement down to a single raised eyebrow. "A...singular requirement, my lady."

"Hmph. At my age, I have to find my fun in fairly exotic ways, Inquisitor." She patted his cheek, then waved him away. "Go on. Your evening is just beginning, I daresay."

Knowing that those words might be the truest of the night, Dorian kept to his word and headed next to join Cullen where he stood. He had to admit that the way Cullen's face brightened once he noticed Dorian was, in a word, adorable, though the way his eyes warmed as they followed the lines of Dorian’s body was something rather different than adorable. "Commander," he said cheerfully. "I see you have acquired a coterie of admirers."

Cullen's expression grew sour as he glanced at the women and men standing nearby. "I can't imagine why. They won't leave me alone."

Dorian chuckled, since the reason why was clear to him--especially from the rear view. "I do hope they don't detract from your enjoyment of the party."

"At this point, the headache I'm developing is preferable to their company," Cullen noted with a sour grimace. "Orlesian social events are not my area of expertise."
"That's all right, Commander," Dorian assured him. "Not everyone can be perfect like me."

A smirk tugged at Cullen's lips. "I shall bear that in mind."

Still, Dorian knew he dared not linger. He hadn't spoken for very long to the others of the Inquisition, and he didn't want to make his affection for Cullen too obvious by staying here—especially with a particularly nosy lady's gaze upon them. "Alas, I should attend to said socializing," Dorian said with a dramatic sigh. "Do keep an eye out for anything unusual. Your eyes may not be keen when it comes to the Game, but I trust them to notice other things."

Cullen hesitated, looking around for a moment before leaning in to observe in a low voice, "Like there not being enough Imperial Guards? If this were my command, I'd fire the man who arranged the assignments and promote his subordinate. It's disgraceful."

Dorian blinked, then nodded. "Yes. Exactly that, Commander. I'll check in later."

Turning over that particular observation in his mind as he moved away from Cullen, Dorian forced the smile back on his face as he strolled down the length of the ballroom—where he was promptly cornered by three women who looked alike and sounded very slightly different.

After an impromptu negotiation with Celene's spokeswomen, Dorian steered past them and looked out over the balcony for a moment. His teeth tingled ever so slightly, and he frowned since he knew what that meant. Magic. His first instinct was to go investigate it himself, but as he turned, he already saw his father tilting his head from where he spoke with a circle of Orlesian nobles. Their eyes met, and his father nodded, then made his excuses and began to circle the immediate area.

Hoping that his trust in his father was well placed, Dorian headed towards the door leading inside, then paused as he realized there was something unusual about the woman standing next to it. It took a moment for him to realize that it was the first elf he'd seen all evening wearing a mask, a uniqueness which warranted investigation. Turning smoothly to her, he bowed. "My lady, I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

"My lord Inquisitor," the woman said, tilting her head slightly. "Most here are very assiduous in not acknowledging my presence."

"And yet here I stand, bereft of knowledge of your name," Dorian pointed out.

A faint smile touched her lips. "I am Ambassador Briala, my lord Inquisitor. I speak for the elves in these peace talks."

His eyes widened. "I am glad to hear they have a voice, my lady, particularly one who hopefully can speak to their plight."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly under her mask. "I admit, I did not expect to hear such a sentiment from a man in your position."

"And with my country of origin?" he guessed. "While generally that would be true, my predecessor, Inquisitor Lavellan, guided me towards a far more informed perspective when it comes to elves and their treatment. I am not perfect, by any means, but I very much wish to do right by her. The Imperium could certainly use some change in their view of elves, though from what I've heard as I've wandered the halls, Orlais is overdue as well."

"Some would call those dangerous words, my lord Inquisitor," she murmured. "Her Majesty, for one."
"Why is that?" Dorian asked. "She seems a reasonable person."

"Ah, but reason is cautious. Reason looks for compromise. Reason doesn't choose radical change." A note of bitterness entered her tone as she added, "However sorely it may be needed."

Dorian stroked his chin for a moment. "I prefer to look at it from the perspective that reason had better figure out a way to change before a more radical solution pokes something sharp into your gut."

She considered him for a moment. "I suppose only time will tell whether you believe in those bold words, Inquisitor."

"Time is the only thing which tells everything," Dorian said with a chuckle. When she saw her eyes shift their focus, Dorian turned to see Halward make a subtle gesture with his hand as he adjusted the fold of a sleeve. Turning back to Briala, he gave her a bow. "Alas, I must continue my inquisiting. I have quite the inquisitive nature, after all."

"Another time, then, Inquisitor," Briala murmured.

With a bright smile back on his face, Dorian turned and headed back into the ballroom. Knowing that it would be unwise to proceed directly to the pre-selected meeting place with his father, based on the eyes on him, he instead moved to the balcony on the opposite side of the room, where a single Chevalier guarding the doorway stepped aside with a crisp salute as he passed by. There, as he’d suspected, he found the man he’d been looking for, the third piece of the puzzle of the peace talks which were supposed to take place--or so everyone kept saying.

As he walked up to Gaspard, the man turned around and welcomed him with a warm smile. "My friend! Come, come. It is always good to see you. Have a drink!" He gestured to a nearby table where he had clearly already had a thumb or two of a dark liquid. "Navigating the intrigues all right? Nobody's poisoned you yet, have they?"

As the words came on the heels of an offer for a drink, Dorian quickly took his estimation of Gaspard from *too obvious to be subtle* and switched it to *so obvious he is subtle*. His answer, however, was a smile. "Why, I haven't even begun to work up a thirst--at least, not one for wine or brandy."

"Oh?" Gaspard chuckled. "Ah, I see. You thirst for knowledge."

"Ever and always, your Grace," Dorian replied with a laugh. "Perhaps we could start with you. I'm afraid I know very little about your background." Which was a lie, of course. Leliana and Vivienne had seen to that. But his mother had always drilled home that you can never learn everything about someone without asking them personally.

"All of Orlais knows my story," Gaspard demurred, then paused. "But then you, my friend, are far too sensible to be Orlesian."

"Too sensible to be Orlesian, but not enough to not be a Vint," Dorian pointed out. "I'm not sure where that leaves me. Certainly not within the realm of *common* sense, hmm?"

Gaspard laughed at that. "And we both are certainly not common people. Still, as for my story, the heart of it is simple: I am the rightful heir to the throne of Orlais." Dorian noted the conviction in the statement, along with the bitterness which rode alongside it. As he made sympathetic noises and nodded at various places, Gaspard expounded on his claim to the crown, including how it had been snatched from his fingers.
"I can see why you dislike politics so. But then, what sane person doesn't?" Dorian mused.

"Except it will take politics to restore the crown to its true owner," Gaspard noted with distaste.

Dorian deliberately looked at the table with the carafe of alcohol on it. "And I take it that requires a bit of liquid assistance?"

"From brandy comes bravery, or so we say in Orlais," Gaspard noted. "We must navigate a nest of vipers, my friend. Maker willing, there will be enough port."

"Maker willing, there will always be enough port," Dorian said with a light laugh. "It was a delight to speak with you, my friend, but I'm afraid I must return to the nest. Pray to the Maker I escape intact."

"I will pray for us both, then, my friend," Gaspard said, and they gave each other a polite bow before Dorian moved back to the ballroom, nodding absentely to the Chevalier who again gave him a sharp salute. He did pause for a moment just inside the ballroom as that odd tingling returned to his teeth, but a moment's consideration told him it would be better to consult with his father on the matter first. Mentally marking the spot of the teeth-tingle in his mental map of the Winter Palace, Dorian let himself move towards the rendezvous with his father in a heightened state of awareness.

Thankfully it didn't take him too long to navigate the ballroom since it was his second jaunt. As he started to head to the place Leliana had previously suggested for relatively private rendezvous, however, the woman herself stepped out from a small group of courtiers and caught his attention. With a little sigh and a hope that his father would forgive his tardiness, Dorian fell into step besides Leliana. "What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

Leliana frowned for a moment before she came to a halt next to a large plant, one which would mostly hide their conversation from others. "There is someone I wish to caution you about, Inquisitor, an associate of the Royal Court."

Dorian raised an eyebrow, wondering why she had waited this long to discuss the matter with him. "Who?"

"Traditionally, a mage serves at the leisure of the Ruler of Orlais, acting as a personal advisor on all matters mystical and magical."

"Ah, yes. Didn't Vivienne hold that position?" Dorian asked, searching his memory. "I could have sworn she mentioned something about serving Celene directly."

Leliana nodded. "Yes. In fact, this person is her successor to that title, though this one is no Circle mage."

"An apostate?" Dorian asked, eyebrow rising. "That's a trifle unusual, isn't it?"

"Even the Divine rarely tells the ruler of Orlais what to do to their face," Leliana explained. "The Game would deem it impossibly rude."

"Naturally," Dorian said with a roll of his eyes. "So the current holder of the position concerns you? Why is that?"

"Amell."

Cullen frowned as he straightened in his chair. "Amell? He's not Celene's—" He stopped himself even as he started, shaking his head. "No, of course not, we would have known that even before we
arranged to go to the ball if that were true. I take it this apostate has a past history with Amell?"

A sad smile came to Leliana's face. "A similar one to my own, yes."

"Ah. You mean during the Blight," Dorian guessed. "One of the ones you traveled with, I take it?"

Leliana nodded slowly. "Alistair told me that she left Ferelden the day Amell killed the Archdemon and hasn't been seen since. Which makes her insertion into the private circle of the Empress of Orlais suspect."

"You mean Celene just hired her on?" Cullen said, an alarm bell ringing in his head.

"Well...no," Leliana confessed. "She entered the employ of Celene a few years ago, but since we don't know of Amell's whereabouts or plans..."

"Understood," Dorian said, expression thoughtful. "What is the name of this mage?"

Leliana’s lips pressed together for a bare moment before she answered, though her face remained inscrutable as far as Dorian could read it. "She is called Morrigan. A formidable mage, and not a woman to be trifled with. I do not like to think of her as subject to Amell's will, but we cannot discount the possibility out of hand."

"Sad, but true." Dorian sighed heavily. "It is a terrible time when even former comrades must be viewed with suspicion."

Leliana laughed softly. "We were never close, save for the abuse we suffered under Amell. I truly hope she found her own happiness, free of his influence."

"So can we all hope," Dorian said with a sage nod. "I will keep a keen eye for the woman, you can rest assured. As it is, Father may have found something."

“Oh?” Leliana’s gaze sharpened. “Keep me informed.”

“But of course. It wouldn’t do me much good to keep anything from my own Spymaster, would it?” He flashed her a charming smile, then bowed. “Good eve, my lady, until next we meet.”

From there, it was only a matter of a minute or two before he reached where Halward waited for him, standing in front of a line of statues at the bottom of the stairs. Leliana had called in the Hall of Heroes, and Dorian had to admit the statues were at least well crafted.

As he fell into place beside Halward and pretended to study the gleaming Heroes, he murmured, "What have you found?"

Reaching up to tug his mask off, Halward studied it with a frown for a moment. "I wish this were not a requirement," he muttered.

"I will say it is odd to see you in southern garb," Dorian admitted. "I’d almost forgotten what you look like in trousers."

Halward wrinkled his nose. "They know who we are," he grunted. "There are enough bards here to power Minrathous on the force of their gossip alone."

Dorian's lips twitched. "I had noticed."

"I think Maevaris just wanted an excuse to wear an Orlesian gown," Halward added.
"And possibly to make you both less other and less objectionable," Dorian noted. "We knew the chance we were taking by bringing you at all. By local standards, you're apostates."

"As are you," Halward pointed out.

"Ah, but I'm the Chosen of the Herald of Andraste," Dorian reminded him. "Which ranks right up there on the list of all-time terrible titles, I might add. I should talk to someone about getting that changed someday. I'd hate to be the bane of future schoolchildren everywhere. It's bad enough that I was forced to learn my family tree twenty generations back."


"I cheated," Dorian told him. "I stopped at twenty."

"Such a disappointing son," Halward said.

Dorian paused, then looked at Halward. "Was that a joke, Father?"

"I believe it was. I hope it was." Halward sighed and rubbed his face over his hand. "At any rate, I stopped to speak with Maevaris briefly to see if she'd noticed anything as well, but..." His voice trailed away as he glanced back towards the ballroom.

"Yes, perhaps letting her pick Bull for her escort was a miscalculation," Dorian admitted. "They're quite taken with each other, or at least seem to be. If I know both of them, it's a facade in front of a scheme enshrouding an enigma, so it's hard to tell how much is an act to elicit information and how much is genuine."

"For her, it could be both," Halward reminded him. "She's clever. I could wish my own child to be so clever."

"Oh, that hurt," Dorian said, pressing a hand to his chest. This was, in his estimation, the oddest conversation he'd ever had with his father, but he couldn't help but admit that he preferred it to their usual fights and sniping. "Since you've decided to be so hateful, perhaps you should just tell me what you wanted to discuss."

Halward nodded, then pretended to study the statues again. "I managed to track down the source of that magic we both felt earlier," he said quietly. "A Chevalier and a nobleman were talking quietly in a corner, but the air around them was humming. As I observed them from afar, I noticed oddities. Twitching hands, abrupt nods, interrupted sentences—as if they were fighting against their own minds. Most southerners wouldn't recognize it—"

"Or merely think it a batch of itching powder put into a rival's outfit to embarrass them," Dorian pointed out.

"Only you ever did that, Dorian," Halward said with a sigh.

"Well, maybe. But Livius deserved it," Dorian said with a sniff, then winced as he saw the flash of pain in his father's eyes. That name, apparently, still remained a memory too close to his mother's death. Not that Dorian didn't also feel the pain, but apparently holding a man over a waterfall did a great deal to turning the pain into a sort of humming, livable rage. "Go on, Father," he said quietly. "What else?"

Pushing his momentary weakness away with an inhaled breath, Halward continued, "I wouldn't be a Magister if I hadn't seen such behavior before, even if the only time I contemplated using its source is the decision I have come to regret the most."
It took only a moment for Dorian to parse through that, and his face hardened. "Blood magic."

His father nodded. "That is my fear. Be cautious. Corypheus would be a master at blood magic, after all. Our own records state that he and the other High Priests were responsible for the deaths of thousands through their rituals of blood magic in their quest to get to the Golden City. Controlling a few people to ensure he succeeds tonight would be but a fraction of that."

"Perhaps if we find those two men, we could at least narrow down the list of who might be coordinating with him," Dorian said thoughtfully, though he was well aware that Corypheus was not the only blood mage they faced.

Halward frowned in thought. "They separated when a servant brought them some drinks, so they would need to be tracked down first."

"There was a Chevalier near my last teeth tingling moment. He was standing guard outside Gaspard's balcony," Dorian noted. "Perhaps you could start there."

His father raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

"I'm rather well known here," Dorian pointed out. "As an unknown, you might have better luck learning something useful."

Halward didn't reply immediately, instead giving Dorian a sidelong glance. "If you trust me with such a task."

Dorian ducked his head, mind swimming as he tried to think of how to respond to that. "You taught me many things, Father," he said. "A few too many things."

"I taught you that I am capable of betrayal. I do not expect your trust." After a moment's hesitation, he added, "I do not feel worthy of it."

"Nor should you," Dorian replied in a flat tone. Their conversation that morning had been a step forward for Halward, but on a path which seemed to stretch endlessly in front of him. Besides, Dorian remained uncertain if any amount of humility and remorse could balance the scales in that matter. "You’ve a lot to answer for, Father."

Halward gave a heavy sigh. "There is only one thing I regret more than seeking that path to change you."

Dorian's face drew into a tight mask as he turned to face his father. "Oh? And what was that? Having to sacrifice mother’s life before you found a semblance of humility?" It was petty and he knew it, but he couldn’t stop the words once they started.

Part of him regretted it almost instantly when Halward pivoted towards him, face tight in a mixture of anger and grief--but only part of him. "Dorian--"

Interrupting his father with a curt gesture, Dorian shook his head and glanced up the stairs. "Never mind, Father. We can have that discussion--"

Suddenly his father's arm shot out, letting loose a bolt of magic which knocked Dorian into the large statue behind them. Even as Dorian fell back, too astonished to resist, a burst of the most desperately wrong-feeling magic he could imagine sliced through the air where he'd been standing in a flash of green light and slammed into his father. It took Dorian a moment to realize that the glow had a shape, and that shape was an arrow, even as Halward cried out in pain and fell to the ground. Dorian turned to confront the attacker, only to see a figure disappear through an open door.
Fear and an odd feeling of not again swept through him as he turned and raced towards his father. Blood. Why is there so much blood? Time slowed as the crimson stain on the marble below Halward’s body grew, and Dorian fought against a rising sense of panic. His mind flipped back and forth between chasing down the perpetrator and making sure he wouldn’t lose his sole remaining parent, unable to choose a path and knowing that every second which passed made either decision that much harder to pursue.

When a hand landed on his shoulder, he jumped and whirled to face them. “Mae?” he gasped as recognition sparked. “There was a--”

“Yes, we saw,” Mae said, squeezing his shoulder. “Take Bull and go after him. I'll take care of Halward.”

"Every second counts, boss," Bull insisted urgently from where he held the door open to what appeared to be the servant’s quarters. "We'll have to hoof it as it is."

It was a snap decision both necessary and agonizing, but in the end, Dorian nodded and gestured for Bull to follow as he burst into a run. "With me," he snapped.

The next few moments were a mad dash of trying to catch up with the archer but only managing to catch occasional glimpses of him. It was frenetic and heart-racing, but they could see the distance growing smaller with each turn of every corner, until eventually the distance had become only a matter of a few yards just as they reached a small fence with no apparent gate through which to pass.

As the figure bounded up and over the fence, Bull cried, "There! I can throw you, boss."

"You want to toss me over the fence now?" Dorian asked incredulously.

"Just to hold him with magic," Bull said as he picked Dorian up bodily. "I'll be right behind you."

Something didn’t set right with that, and Dorian shook his head. "Bull, wait! Put me down, you oaf and stop Bullhandling me!" When Bull didn't stop immediately, Dorian touched Bull with a little zap, enough to make the ex-Qunari curse and drop Dorian. "Think for a moment! This is exactly what the assassin wants. That's why he's slowly been letting us catch up to him," Dorian insisted, the nagging thought at the back of his mind suddenly blooming into certainty. "To get me alone and put me in a vulnerable position. Send me over that fence, and I guarantee an ambush is waiting for me on the other side. Think, man, you're smarter than this."

Bull snorted, then shook his head violently. "Well, shit. You're right."

"And this is why I never trust a Reaver with tactics," Dorian said in a shaky voice. "Don't worry. They counted on my own anger to keep me going, too. Let's go find the others and pursue this matter a bit more logically, hmm?"

"Yeah, yeah, rub it in, boss," Bull groused as they turned around. He frowned immediately, though. "Although you might have to convince these guys to let us go get some of the things we left behind."

"Well, shit," Dorian muttered, summoning barriers into place around both of them as the group of Venatori which had suddenly appeared behind them slowly approached. "Though I suppose it's further confirmation that Corypheus is involved here. Think we could charge through again?"

"If I was armed, maybe," Bull said dubiously. "Too bad you can't just open a rift on their asses."

The comment made Dorian's eyes narrow slightly as he remembered the little trick he'd pulled on Erimond in the Western Approach. "That wouldn't be my first choice, no, but… Hmm." Raising his
left hand, he called the energy of the anchor to his whim with enough of a sound and light show that the enemies slowed to a stop, hunkering down in caution. "Perfect. Now, if I'm right…"

He released the pent up energy loose at them all at once, feeding into it not just the energy of the anchor itself, but also a fair amount of his necromantic magic wound with a twist of the spells he'd learned from watching Solas work. The result was a widespread network of green energy which lashed out, seized each of their foes with ruthless precision, and shook them violently in the air before slamming them down hard.

"Damn," Bull said admiringly. "Remind me not to piss you off."

"It was rather satisfying," Dorian noted, tilting his head, "but I'm not sure when I'll be able to do it again any time soon." Indeed, his brow had broken out in a sweat, and he was already reaching for a lyrium potion. "And we can't assume they were alone. We'd best get moving."

"Right, boss." With a nod, Bull led the way back towards the main part of the Palace. "I hope we can find the guy who tried to shoot you."

"Me, too, Bull," Dorian said quietly. And, deep down, he hoped that he still had at least one parent still alive by the end of the evening. Even if that parent was an insufferable bore.

They traced their way back to the Hall of Heroes without another encounter. There they found the Hall empty except for an Inquisition agent posing as a servant as she cleaned up a pool of blood. Moving to the doorway, Dorian quickly saw that things looked absolutely normal, as if nothing were amiss. "Do I have any stains on my outfit?" he asked sotto voce to Bull.

"You're good. Might want to fix your hair, though," Bull supplied. "Looks like whatever Mae did, she did it with a minimum of fuss. Or maybe Orlesians are just that used to assassination attempts at parties."

"Back home we simply call it politics, so possibly," Dorian mused. "Go gather the others quietly and bring them back here, and let Cullen and Leliana know what happened if you can. I'm going to go look for Magister Tilani's assistant. He'll know where she is." And, hopefully, the status of my father.

"Got it, boss," Bull murmured, then moved through the room with surprising ease considering his bulk.

Using a bit of magic to tweak his disheveled locks back into place, Dorian fixed a cheerful smile on his face and stepped forward, hoping to find Felix in fairly short order. As he headed into the Vestibule, however, a bell sounded, and Dorian abruptly recalled its significance. As Vivienne had explained to him, the bell summoned everyone back to the ballroom and, more importantly, back to the sight of the monarch. Apparently some Emperor had decided that too many people out of sight for too long meant too much plotting in corners. Don't be too eager, my dear, she'd warned him, but don't be too late, either. Dorian winced as he realized he had to make an appearance or risk losing some of that favor he'd scraped together so painstakingly before, but he had no way of knowing if he were late or early. With a little internal sigh, he threaded his ways to the doors, trying to ignore the twitch between his shoulder blades with every step.

As he reached for the door to the ballroom, however, a voice with a dark velvet undertone caught his attention. "Well, well. What have we here?"

Turning slowly, he considered the woman who had spoken, squinting in consideration as she descended the stairs and continued to speak. "The new leader of the new Inquisition, following in the footsteps of the fallen Herald to keep the faith. What could bring such a unique creature as yourself
to the Imperial Court, I wonder? Do even you know?"

He gave her a little chuckle paired with a bow. "As with all proper court intrigue, I do not. Otherwise it wouldn't be very intriguing, would it?"

A half-smile came to her lips. "Such intrigue obscures much, but not all. I am Morrigan," she told him, bowing ever so slightly before sweeping into motion and inviting him to join her with a gesture. "Some call me advisor to Empress Celene on matters of the arcane. You..." she gave him a sidelong glance, "have been very busy this evening, hunting prey which struck with dubious accuracy."

Morrigan. Remembering Leliana's warning, Dorian observed the woman carefully through slightly narrowed eyes. "What do you know of this prey?"

"Of yours I am less certain," she admitted. "I have been more involved in my own hunt, you see. Recently I found, and killed, an unwelcome guest within these very halls. An agent of Tevinter."

Venatori. Dorian was certain of it, though he made no mention of it. "Most odd."

"Is it? And yet you don't seem surprised," Morrigan noted. "So I offer you this, Inquisitor: a key found on the Tevinter's body. Where it leads, I cannot say. Yet if Celene is in danger, I cannot leave her side long enough to search. You can. And, I suspect, you will."

Dorian inclined his head in acknowledgment, though again he did not speak of it directly. "So who watches Celene now?" he asked. "At least one man with a bow is on the loose."

"I must return to her anon, but she is safe enough...for the moment. 'Twould be a great fool who would strike at her in public, in front of all her court and the Imperial Guard."

"'Twould indeed, my lady, though I daresay that your interest in protecting her is as much personal as it is duty," Dorian murmured. Unless Amell wishes to keep Celene safe. Still, she did not exhibit any signs of being controlled, even subtle ones. And, odd as it was, her very manner of speaking supported the evidence that she didn't seem to be influenced. Controlled people were rarely so articulate.

"Should it not be?" Morrigan tilted her head as she gave a short laugh. "If anything were to happen to Celene, eyes would turn first to her 'occult advisor.' Even if they knew otherwise. There are sharks in the water, and I will not fall prey to them. Not now, not ever."

The steely glint in her eye made Dorian believe not only that she would not fall prey, but also that she would do fairly well in the bustle of the Magisterium. "Well, if I find the time to try a door or two, I will keep you in mind, my Lady."

"Proceed with caution, Inquisitor," she warned him as she led him to the door of the ballroom. "Enemies abound, and not all of them aligned with Tevinter."

Hmm. Subtlety to distract me from considering her as such, or a subtle warning in and of itself? Keeping the thoughts from his face, he simply gave her a subtle wink and a smile. "Then I will be cautious, my lady."

When they reached the door, she reached out and touched it a moment before looking at him with a decided smirk on her face. "What comes next will be most exciting."

And with that, she pushed the door to the ballroom open for him, then walked away, leaving him alone once more.
So that was Morrigan. It was easy to see why Leliana had spoken of her as she had, and Dorian was glad to have met her. Whether or not she was somehow aligned with Amell had yet to fully determined, but for the moment he cautiously decided she was likely not controlled.

Of course, one did not have to be controlled by magic to be an agent.

With a mental sigh, Dorian carefully secured the key in an inner pocket before turning and sweeping into the ballroom as was expected of him. Thankfully, he caught sight of a familiar outfit near one of the doors and quickly worked his way towards his old friend with a slow but steady determination. Soon enough, he found himself at Felix' side and gestured for the man to follow. As they walked slowly back to the Hall of Heroes, he asked quietly, "Well?" That was all he asked, hoping he needn't elaborate for the sake of prying ears.

"He's been taken to a secure area," Felix assured him. "Magister Tilani says that you can speak with him later."

Which was her way of letting him know that Halward was expected to survive. A tension inside Dorian eased enough that he felt his shoulders drop, and his smile turned from a frozen rictus to something a trifle warmer. "That is excellent to hear," he said. "Anything else?"

"One of Leliana's agents said to give this to you when I saw you," Felix said, slipping a piece of paper into Dorian's hand. "I didn't ask for details, but they said they couldn't find anyone else to give it to."

Dorian frowned. It was very odd, to say the least, that an agent would give such a message to someone not of the Inquisition, but for the moment he simply nodded. "Very well. Return to Magister Tilani and let her know that I'll take care of the rest."

"Be careful, Dorian," Felix cautioned him. "I mean, Inquisitor. This feels a bit too much like a party at home, if you catch my drift."

"I do, and I agree," Dorian said quietly. "Stay safe yourself, my friend." When Felix nodded and then disappeared into the crowd, Dorian casually made his way down the stairs towards the statues and to where he saw some familiar shapes in the shadows. "Is everyone here?"

"Everyone I could find, yeah," Bull said with a nod.

"Including someone who was perfectly happy tucked away in his little corner," Varric muttered.

"Well, I for one am glad to be doing something more useful than enduring the inane chatter of the party and repeatedly insisting I do not wish to dance," Cassandra declared. "Surely it is past time to find and stop Corypheus' agent."

Dorian smiled faintly, quickly surveying the group. It seemed, in fact, that Bull had indeed gathered everyone save for his Advisors and Cullen’s troops. Even Blackwall was here, tugging at the neck of his finery with a grimace of discomfort. Oddly, Solas seemed as fully at ease in his finery as Vivienne did, despite his normal mode of dress—a fact which gave Dorian a bit more hope that perhaps the elven mage could be brought around to the concept of good fashion.

Well, hopefully Leliana and Josephine will be able to endure the subtle questioning about our activities. 'Excellent, thank you, Bull.' Dorian raised the paper Felix had pressed into his hand and unfolded it. A frown came to his face as he looked at the lines and curves on the paper for a moment with incomprehension. "What is this?" he asked irritably.

"Give it here," Bull said, taking the paper from him. "Oh, yeah. It's a map of the gardens, see? With
"an X to mark the spot." He pointed at the paper. "Where did you get this?"

"Ah, one of Leliana's agents." Best not to mention Felix at the moment, I think.

"Might be the assassin, then, or information about him." Bull squinted at the map a bit more closely. "Those are her agent's hatch marks on the corner though, so it seems genuine. I mean, I'd've sent it back to Qunandar back when I was doing shit like that."

Dorian smiled. "Thank you for your honesty, Bull," he said with a chuckle. "Very well, that's where we'll go, then. I think it's time we changed into something a bit more practical for hunting, hmm? I certainly don't want to go without arms and armor this time around."

"Fucking finally!" Sera said in an exasperated tone. "I can't wait to get away from these dodgy noble twats."

"You are a treasure, dear-heart, and also more than correct," Dorian noted with a laugh. "Let's go."

Unfortunately the first sight which greeted them through the door proved to be a sobering one. Cassandra stiffened as she laid eyes on the crumpled, still body of the elf servant lying in a pool of blood, and said in a quiet, lethal voice, "Someone will be held accountable for this."

"Some big lord wants to wear a fancy crown, but it's the little people who pay the price," Sera said, the skin around her eyes tightening. "It's always them that suffer."

"I very much intend to make the one responsible for this pay the price," Dorian said grimly. "Bull, were these here before? I don't recall them."

"Not that I saw," Bull growled. "But we were a little busy at the time."

Dorian gave a heavy sigh. "True. Still, the timing doesn't matter, does it? The act merits a return in kind, once we find the perpetrator." Shaking his head, he forced himself to move forward. "Well, then. Our equipment should be in the next room. Let's go."

Sera looked at him a moment, her lips pressed together in anger, but finally nodded.

Matters did not improve from there. Every room they searched had a dead servant sprawled on the floor or flung onto a bed, and Dorian's mood grew bleaker with each discovery. "And here I thought Orlais considered itself more civilized than the Imperium when it came to the elves. From where I stand, this is the same play, different players."

"The tragedy is as much in the actors as in the audience," Solas murmured. "The curtain stands drawn, and yet both sides remain blind to the other. Little can be done when such ignorance is the assumed truth."

"Well, I intend to ensure that the actors do not escape their obligation to the audience in this case," Dorian said. "Bull, where do we need to go?"

"That way, boss," Bull said, pointing towards a door that led outside. "We need to cut through the gardens."

Dorian nodded as he surged forward, his anger at the senseless deaths of the servants fueling a bit of his motion as he took a dramatic leap from the top of the wall down into the gardens proper. Only to find another body, this time sprawled at the foot of an exquisite fountain.
"Oh, Maferath's left nipple, this is getting ridiculous," Dorian swore.

Sera laughed merrily. "Who's left nip--"

Cassandra desperately interrupted her. "This man is no servant."

"Hmm, true," Dorian mused, moving to examine the body more closely. "I wonder who it is, then."

"This man was a Council of Heralds Emissary," Vivienne supplied. "Curious to find him here."

Taking a step forward, Cassandra reached out and lightly touched the hilt of the dagger sticking out from the man's torso. "The crest of the de Chalons family. Duke Gaspard will answer for this."

Dorian sighed, though he did notice that Cassandra seemed to have forgotten there were two members of the de Chalons family in attendance at the ball. "Wonderful. I suppose we should go back so that I may speak with--"

He was interrupted by the sound of a loud shriek to their left, and without thought he stood and sent a blast of energy towards the figure pursuing a frightened servant girl. The...person, dressed in ridiculous motley garb, dodged the blast with a spin that tore its dagger through the girl's back. Bull roared and charged forward, but it was too late. The harlequin had already thrown a smoke bomb, using the cover to leap to a nearby ledge above them.

Before they could even think to pursue the murderer, a group of Venatori emerged from the smoke and charged towards them, weapons raised.

"Attack!" Bull warned, then roared and dove into the pack of enemies, maul swinging.

They immediately fell into battle formation, months of working with each other feeding into their every move. Bull roared and demanded the enemies' attention, Cassandra and Blackwall charged the distracted enemies, Varric and Sera joined forces picking them down from afar, and the three mages effortlessly combined their varying talents to make short work of their foes. Once the last one fell, Dorian frowned and took a quick assessment of the situation. "That was a bit more than I was expecting," he noted. "But not more than they were expecting. The body was bait. They were watching this place."

"The death of the Emissary will have to wait. Let's see what we find on the way to that X."

"Which seems even more likely now to be an ambush," Varric pointed out.

"Why thank you, my eternally optimistic friend," Dorian said with a laugh. "Still. I could not hope for better companions. On the other hand, it's so important that someone marked it with an X on a map. We couldn't possibly ignore that, could we? Bull, do we have to go that way to reach it?"

Dorian pointed to the pathway he hoped was the right one.

"Got it in one, boss," Bull grunted.

"Great, let's start with cliches straight out of a bad adventure novel," Varric groaned as he slung Bianca across his back again.

"You mean one of yours?" Dorian lashed back with a grin.

"That hurt, Sparkler," Varric protested, pressing a hand to his chest. "That hurt right here."

"Can we please concentrate on the mission?" Cassandra asked in a pained tone.
"It would seem our enemy agrees with you, Seeker Cassandra," Solas noted, hefting his staff. "Already more lie in wait."

"This is going to be a riveting evening, I can tell," Varric said with a sigh. "You bring me to all the fun places, Sparkler."

The fighting and exploration alternated in hand, as the path to the spot marked on the map wound not only through the gardens, but the apartments which abutted the gardens. Not that the journey itself was useless--indeed, they found several little important tidbits along the way. Most interesting of all, however, was the little room tucked away next to one of the apartments which opened with a little coaxing to reveal several treasures--rather expensive ones--waiting within.

"I wonder which fancy pants toff this place belongs to," Sera mused as she moved to a large bureau and began rummaging through it.

"I believe these items belong to the Empress herself," Vivienne noted, sighing a little as Sera cackled and started to fill her pockets with coin. "Do leave some of it here, darling."

"Why? She took it from the little people first," Sera said with a shrug. "I'm just giving it back, that's all."

Dorian shook his head and glanced around the room on the lookout for documents or paper, since that seemed to be what he might need the most.

"Hey, boss," Bull called to Dorian. "Come look at this."

Dorian moved to where Bull had opened a small and obviously not secure enough safe. "What is it?"

"This locket here. Anything strike you as odd about it?" Bull asked.

He studied it for a moment, then frowned. "It's elven by design, for one. That's an odd thing for the Empress of Orlais to have."

"In her personal safe room in her own palace? Yeah, Real odd." He nudged Dorian. "Kinda like something someone keeps to remember someone by, don't ya think?"

Dorian's brow furrowed for a moment until a few tantalizing tidbits he'd overheard over the course of the evening suddenly clicked into place, and then he blinked. "Fascinating. I wouldn't have thought Celene to be so sentimental." Taking the locket in his hand, he held it up to the light, then nodded and put it in his hidden pocket. "It seems I need to talk to Her Majesty as well. This is turning out to be quite the talkative evening. You have your uses, Bull."

Bull grinned broadly. "No charge. But we'd better get moving. The night won't last forever."

"Thank the Maker," Dorian muttered under his breath as he led them out of the apartments and back to the gardens. "Are we close to that mark yet?"

"Yeah, boss. Practically on top of it. I'm not sure what we'll find there, though, after all this dawdling we've done," Bull grunted.

"Dawdling?" Dorian asked, amused by the choice of words. "That's one way to put it."

"It could still be the mark of an ambush, as Varric said." Cassandra's mouth twisted, as if simply agreeing with Varric were the worst thing imaginable, and the expression made Varric chuckle.
"You're just grumpy because it took over a minute to introduce you at the ball," Varric told her with a wide grin.

Cassandra made a disgusted noise. "That is not true, dwarf, even if your previous observation is likely correct. We should proceed with caution, Inquisitor."

"I agree, Cassandra. And we shall." Dorian's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the area in front of them. "All right, everyone. Field positions. For all we know X marks the spot of a rift ahead."

"Dammit, boss," Bull muttered. "Don't jinx it. The night's pissy enough already without any demons getting involved."

"Sorry, Bull," Dorian said sardonically. He took a moment to reset everyone's magical protections before giving the forward signal with his staff.

Which, naturally, was the moment that the enemy burst from the bushes around them as the first volley of arrows fell from above. Their assailants moved with swift purpose, a mixture of Venatori warriors and armed Orlesians who frankly could have been working for anyone. The combination, however, showed beyond words or any other evidence the nature of the alliance that the Inquisition was here to find, and Dorian called out, "Keep one for questioning!" even as the battle began.

Sera and Varric quickly fell back to deal with the attackers above while the rest of them launched an assault on those below. Vivienne and Solas launched into the fray with all manner of offensive spells alongside the trio of warriors, so Dorian moved to a position which allowed him to put his back to the wall as he directed his own magic towards protection and wards. The number of enemies swarming over them demanded the whole of their attention, leaving no chance to focus anywhere but the battle itself.

Thus Dorian only had a moment of warning, a flicker of movement seen in the corner of one eye, before a figure emerged from the shadows and clapped a hand over Dorian's mouth. With a surge of strength, his unexpected attacker hauled Dorian back and through the door leading to an enclosed garden in a burst of black, inky shadow. Just as Dorian realized where they were, his captor kicked the door closed so hard that the bar fell into place, cutting off those outside before they realized that Dorian had been separated from them.

Struggling proved useless, and Dorian found himself jerked bodily around until he was shoved back into the nearest wall so hard that the breath whooshed out of his lungs. As the world swam around him and Dorian struggled for air, his assailant collected his wrists in one hand and slammed them to the wall above Dorian's head. In the next moment, Dorian felt the cool touch of metal against one cheek, and he froze as an odd, eerie lethargy swept over his body, holding him in place with all the power of a paralysis spell.

"No magic for you," the man grated, a growl that barely sounded human. Dorian stared at him, bereft of magic and mobility both, and felt true fear for the first time since the ball had started. The man’s mask rendered his assailant into a nameless, faceless monster with eyes hidden in the depths of the shadows, leaving Dorian wondering just who this man served. As the dagger tapped his cheek, Dorian realized that the metal felt the same as the arrow which had earlier missed him and found its mark in his father.

The assassin had returned, it seemed. Corypheus had been more subtle than he'd anticipated.

Mouth suddenly dry, Dorian swallowed harshly. Whatever spell had been worked into that metal, it had an even stronger effect than magebane simply by proximity. He dared not think of what would happen if it actually pierced his skin. As it was, no matter how hard to reached for his magic, it was
like trying to grab sand—it kept slipping through his fingers. His breath shifted into short pants despite
his efforts to hide his fear, squeezing his eyes shut as the dagger slowly traced the line down his
neck, along his shoulder, and then up his arm. When he felt it settle in the center of his left forearm,
his eyes suddenly opened wide. "No," he whispered.

"He only needs the mark," the man growled in that savage tone, even as he shifted the dagger to hold
it ready. "He doesn't need you."

Heart racing, Dorian tried to struggle, to fight back, but the effort proved futile. There was nothing he
could do but brace himself as best as he could and hope help would arrive in time.

He felt the tension in his assailant's body, felt the grip of the hand restraining his wrists grow tighter
and tighter with each passing second as the dagger trembled against his skin. Yet, despite the man's
stated intent, nothing actually happened. The shaking in the man's body grew more pronounced
with each passing moment, until Dorian felt it throughout his whole being. Finally the man groaned
and jerked the dagger away, releasing Dorian as he staggered back a step. In the next moment, he
leaned over to gasp for breath as if he'd just run across the whole of the Hinterlands with a pack of
Great Bears on his tail. "I--I can't. Not again," he gasped in a far more normal tone, then glanced up
at Dorian. "I can't hurt you."

That voice. Dorian paused in the midst of unleashing a magical retort, eyes wide. That's impossible.

In his moment of hesitation, the man reached up and tore the mask from his face. The hair beneath
glowed a shocking pale blond even in the dim light, and his cheeks and chin bore no sign of facial
hair, but the instant their eyes met, Dorian knew who it was. The eyes could not lie.

"Hawke," he breathed.

Without another word, Hawke surged forward, pinning Dorian again to the wall. His dagger
clattered to the ground as he cupped Dorian's face, claiming a kiss from Dorian which also stole the
air from his lungs. Then he pulled back, staring into Dorian's eyes with a sorrow on his face that
Dorian knew would haunt his dreams. "I--I can't explain. There's no time. Zevran will be here soon."

Quickly stifling the urge to barrage the man with questions, Dorian nodded. "Surely we can get you
away from--"

"No," Hawke said firmly. "They still have Alistair. I won't leave him alone in their clutches, and it's
my fault they have him at all. I can't break my promise to him, Dorian. I've broken too many
promises already." His thumbs caressed Dorian's cheeks as he stole another searing kiss, then pressed
their foreheads together. "Promise me you won't forget me."

Dorian sagged a bit. "Hawke, I--"

"Promise," Hawke whispered. "I don't know how long I'll be me. The spell always comes back."

It sounded so...final. Dorian heard the resignation in Hawke's voice, but also a determination that he
knew could shake the world. Even as he opened his mouth to answer, however, something about
what Hawke said broke through with extra emphasis: I can't break my promise to him.

And suddenly the realization hit him: this was the man of his dreams.

"Wait a moment," Dorian pleaded, twining his fingers in hair which should never have been blond.
He tuned out Hawke's warning about Zevran to focus his attention solely on the spell, confirming
that it was, indeed, the spell he'd cracked before. He saw the damage Hawke had done to it,
widening that crack bit by bit with the sheer power of his will, but also saw that it wasn't enough. Of
course, when Dorian had created the weakness for Hawke to exploit, he'd been heavily restricted in the amount of power at his disposal.

That was no longer true.

And, more importantly, he would not let Amell twist this man into what he wanted. The very thought of it made Dorian's blood boil.

The power rose with a burst of green light, surging through Hawke with enough strength to make the man gasp. Dorian's aim wasn't simply to destroy it, however—what would invite Amell's scrutiny, which Hawke could not afford. Exposure to magical duels in the Imperium and long nights of theoretical discussion with Alexius gave Dorian enough knowledge to leave the shell intact, visibly whole, but change the warp and woof of the weaving within the enchantment sufficiently that Hawke would remain himself. Manipulation of blood magic was a challenge, but not an impossibility.

Only when it was done did he realize just how much magic had been necessary to change the spell rather than simply abolish it, and he again marveled and cursed Amell's power and skill. The effort left him weak, and he abruptly realized that if he had misplaced his trust in Hawke, he had just guaranteed his own demise. As he started to crumble to the ground, Hawke caught him in his arms and pulled him close, holding him there as he stared into Dorian's face. "What did you do?" he whispered.

"I gave you you," Dorian murmured. "With a bit of making sure Amell won't notice."

Hawke's eyes widened. "But--"

"Ah ah, no time for questions, remember?" Dorian asked, then feebly reached up to grip the man's Orlesian tunic, realizing only in that moment that this was the 'Orlesian noble' his father had suspected of being an agent for Corypheus. "You'll have to pretend, to be careful."

"I can do that," Hawke said. "Long enough to free Alistair, at any rate."

Dorian shook his head slightly. "Promise me you'll free yourself."

Hawke smiled slightly. "I'm not that important." When Dorian opened his mouth to object, he pressed a finger to Dorian's lips. "Inquisitor, I--thank you. I will do what must be done with this gift."

Dorian smiled. "I know, Champion."

A sad smile came to Hawke's face. "I don't go by that title much anymore. " He pressed close for another lingering kiss, savoring Dorian's lips as if he were a starving man. When their lips parted, he gently laid Dorian on the ground and stroked his cheek.

It was only when Hawke pressed the glowing dagger to Dorian's throat that Dorian's smile faltered. "I'm sorry, Dorian," Hawke whispered. "But he cannot know the truth."

As the lethargy and magical block once more swept over him again, Dorian saw Hawke twirl the dagger high, then slam it down and to the side before Dorian could even react. He felt the metal and its spell pressing along his side, but felt no pain. "What--?" he gasped, confused.

Abruptly a door opened on the side of the room opposite to the gate through which they'd entered, and he heard a voice he now knew from their shared dreams. "What is taking you so long?" Zevran hissed.
"He put up more of a fight than I thought he could manage," Hawke sneered, then settled his hands around Dorian's neck, going through the motions of choking Dorian.

Zevran cursed softly in Antivan. "If you'd done your job properly the first time… Never mind. Did you get the hand?"

Dorian closed his eyes as the world started to swim around him, making the appropriate choking noises as Hawke's fingers pulsed around his neck without really tightening to the point of true suffocation, hoping that Hawke simply acted for Zevran's benefit. It was either trust him, or die.

Hawke laughed. "I was just about to. After I had a little fun."

"There's no time for that," Zevran snapped. "Their Spymaster whore and that Commander are on my tail. Just kill him and be done with it. We have to leave now."

_Cullen?_ Dorian felt hope bloom inside.

Hawke chuckled, the sound dark and sinister. "Whatever you say." Removing his hands from Dorian's neck, he leaned down to take what would look like a demanding kiss to anyone else, but which gave Hawke the opportunity to whisper _"I'm sorry"_ against Dorian's lips.

Before Dorian could even process the apology, agony bloomed in his side. Jerking his head to look along his body, he saw Hawke's white-knuckled grip on a dagger rising from Dorian's torso, then looked up in confusion at Hawke. As he struggled to breathe, each gasp a searing torment, he stared as Hawke released the dagger, leaving it in place, and calmly placed his fingers on Dorian's neck as if checking for a pulse.

As if through a blanket, Dorian heard Zevran grunt in satisfaction. "Meet us at the rendezvous point after you're sure he's dead. I'll go try to lead his friends away from here and buy you some more time. Don't forget to bring the hand." As the world started to dim, Zevran's footsteps faded into the distance.

Hawke abruptly reached out to cradle Dorian's head, then leaned down so that their eyes met. "I've done what I can," Hawke said in a hoarse voice. "And more than I can ever forgive. The rest is up to you."

Dorian tried to make some sort of sense from that, but in the end the world was fading too quickly in a way which bespoke to him of alchemical aid. He kept his gaze locked with Hawke's even as the lights dimmed, finding nothing but regret and pain, and tried to forgive him.

Finally even Hawke disappeared, leaving him floating alone in the dark void.
Cullen found the evening more and more tedious as time wore on. He knew he had little talent for small talk, and being surrounded by people who seemed to want to do nothing more than deliver pretty little empty compliments to him did little to ease his temper. At one point when a hand settled familiarly on his backside, the thought flashed through his mind that the Inquisitor knew better before he realized that it was not, in fact, Dorian. He barked at the man, who backed away with a stammered apology, then settled into what he hoped was a standoffish silence.

That, unfortunately, did little to help his mood. People still tried to come up to him and ask him questions he felt were far too personal for a private conversation, much less one in the middle of a ball. The night was broken up by an older, heavyset noble who only wanted to talk to him about the events at Therinfal Redoubt, but even that turned into a debate about the necessity of the Templars, a matter that Cullen still couldn't quite reconcile in his head. The encounter, even though it ended on friendly terms, left him feeling restless and achy, with a growing headache. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, hearing Josephine's whimper in his mind even though the woman was on the other side of the room, and sighed. 

Damn this politics business.

Politics… There was someone he knew who was comfortable with politics. His eyes automatically worked across the room until they found him, the beacon of everything that explained why he was even here in the first place. Once he located the man, he found he couldn't quite stop staring. He'd known that Dorian was raised to all this, but to see him in the element was, well… to put not too fine a point on it, distracting. That smile, the eloquent gestures, the way his pants hugged tight to his--

"The Inquisitor does cut quite the dashing figure, doesn't he?" someone murmured from behind him. Cullen jumped and flushed slightly, hoping that his staring hadn't been too obvious as he forced himself to turn and smile at the woman in the mask who had moved in close--or at least as close as her voluminous dress would allow. "Far more graceful of one than I could ever manage, my Lady," he said at an attempt to deflect potentially another flirtatious offer for a private conversation.

The woman chuckled. "He was raised a courtier, if I am a good judge of character--and I am--while you are a soldier born, much like the Grand Duke Gaspard. When life calls for such different results, we should celebrate them, not scorn them. But please, do not tell anyone I said that, would you?" she asked with a little nudge and a wink. "It is so very un-Orlesian."

Bereft of an adequate reply, Cullen simply nodded. "Of course, my Lady--?" He left the question trailing, uncertain of the etiquette involved in asking for people's names.

The woman tittered. "Oh, my dear Commander. You remind me so very much of my dear Maximilian. He was my fourth husband, you know. It took four Chevalier to kill the bear that took him down." She pressed a hand to her chest and looked upwards. "Ah, I miss him so."

"I am sorry for your loss, my Lady," Cullen said, dimly realizing that he had no idea what was happening, and no real way to know what strategy or tactics to use for this entire encounter.

"Oh, you dear man. No, no, I have found l'amour a few times since then." Reaching out, she took his hand and patted it companionably. "Oh, just as I suspected. Such strong, manly hands. You are a treasure. I do hope the Inquisitor knows that."
Cullen felt his ears turning red. "I, ah, serve the Inquisition with all my heart, my Lady." Sweet Maker, this isn't politics. This is worse.

"As you should, my darling, as you should." The woman patted his arm again, her hand lingering on his upper arm as she sighed happily. "Oh, marvelous. And do go back to watching him, my dear Commander. Your Inquisitor deserves to be admired by someone who does so with affection." Caught by surprise by the remark and the way she said Your Inquisitor, Cullen started to stammer something, but the lady waved her hand dismissively. "Come now, Commander. I've had enough husbands to recognize certain things when I see them. I saw the way he eyed you earlier, you see. I do think I overwhelmed the poor dear. He's been avoiding me ever since I told him about my eighth husband."

Blessed Andraste. Eight husbands? "I, um, perhaps he's simply busy," Cullen managed. "And I am sorry for your--"

"Crushed by handbags," the woman said, shaking her head. "Oh, it was terrible. Such a tragic loss for us all. At any rate, I won't keep you any longer, my dear. It was absolutely charming to meet you." She patted his hand again, then looked him up and down. "A pity you aren't available for anything more stimulating than a conversation. You would make a fine husband, and ten is such a nice round number, don't you think?"

Cullen couldn't quite process that little gem, and in the end only managed to stammer out a rather bumbling attempt at an answer. "N-no. I mean, yes. I mean, good evening, my Lady."

"Good evening, my dear." She gave him a slow wink. "Ah, you do so remind me of my dearest Maximilian. You blush quite charmingly, you know. Don't ever let anyone take that from you."

And with that, the woman sashayed away, the wide skirt of her dress clearing a path as effectively as a guard, leaving Cullen still ignorant of her name.

Flustered, Cullen looked here and there around the room, wondering who had heard what and what gossip was now galloping around the ballroom. Now you're just acting paranoid, he scolded himself as he reached up to loosen the infernally tight collar of the ridiculous getup he'd been forced to wear. When a servant came up to him and offered a drink, he didn't think twice about grabbing the nearest glass and gulping it down in one swallow--in direct, if distracted, defiance of the repeated warnings from Leliana and Josephine to avoid doing just that.

In the instant that he realized his error, the taste of the liquid coursing over his tongue and down his throat hit him with all the power of a mace between the eyes, and he staggered slightly. Even as the tremors began, he raised the glass and stared at the vestiges of the drink with wide eyes, noting the way that the red within clung to the sides of the glass in a way no wine would ever do.

It took an instant after that to realize that what he'd just drunk was not, in fact, wine, and another moment to try to spit as much as he could back into the glass even as his heart started to race and his hands to shake.

Red lyrium.

Wildly he looked around the room, and caught sight of the servant with the tray slipping around a corner. He lurched into motion after the man, trying not to attract attention, but only made it a few steps before an arm hooked around his and tugged him over to the side of the room.

"Cullen," Leliana hissed in a low voice, "what is wrong? Everyone is staring."
Cullen shoved the glass towards her, his hand now shaking violently. "L-lyrium," he gasped. The world shimmered and glowed around him, and he almost felt as if he could see things which simply weren't there--or seeing details he'd never before been able to see. It was hard to tell the difference at this point.

Leliana's eyes widened as she saw the hue of the liquid, and quickly took the glass from him as her eyes darted around the room. "Who gave it to you?"

A quick search verified that the servant who'd held the tray was long gone, and he groaned softly. "Gone. Just a servant." He fought the urge to press his hands to his temples, instead forcing his hands to press flat against his pants. The pounding of his heart roared in his ears, and his body felt hot--particularly under the shirt. He had a vague memory of Dagna saying something about not ingesting red lyrium while wearing the mail shirt, but he couldn't quite recall the words. The world was too bright and too distracting to concentrate.

"What did we tell you about taking drinks from the servants?" Leliana gave a soft sigh, though her expression was more sympathetic than her tone. "Come on. Let's find you a place to recover."

"Milady Leliana?"

Both of them blinked and turned to look at the servant waiting patiently nearby. "Yes? What is it?" asked Leliana, obviously cautious.

The servant held out a small long, narrow package wrapped in linen. "A gift for you, milady. From an admirer."

Leliana hesitated, then forced a smile on her face as she took the delivery. As she did so, the linen opened, revealing a rose and a white flower tied together with a cord which also wrapped around a small stone. Leliana's eyes widened, and she reached out to pull the servant close before he moved too far away. "Who gave this to you?" she demanded urgently.

The servant quickly pointed towards the balcony at the far end of the room, "Him, milady. The Chevalier over there. He said to tell you if you asked."

Leliana pushed the servant away and moved through the crowd, leaving Cullen staring after her in shock for a moment before he shook his head and followed on swaying feet. Every sound jarred against his ears, and he felt he could hear the sounds of the patrol's feet on the balcony as well as the giggles of the ladies as he passed, and he didn't particularly trust himself to move fast enough to catch up with her. Frowning, Cullen focused on the Chevalier the servant had indicated, hoping for some sort of hint about what had made her react this way. His eyes narrowed as his oddly heightened senses shouted at him, insisting there was something familiar about the man, about the set of his shoulders and the way he stood, but Cullen couldn't quite put his finger on why.

As Leliana approached the Chevalier, he ducked through the doorway to the balcony and disappeared from sight. That made Leliana surge forward with almost indecorous haste, with Cullen ignoring the stares around them as he followed suit. Something was definitely wrong.

He burst out onto the balcony at Leliana's side, barely in time to see the glint of a dagger prepared to strike. In the moment it took Cullen to recognize the one holding the dagger as the servant who'd given him the red lyrium, and further realize that the servant stood directly behind a man with clear intent to murder, Leliana had already surged forward. Before Cullen could do more than bellow a warning, Leliana launched herself directly at the would-be assassin, tackling him to the ground and knocking the dagger from his hand.
The intended target turned around with an oath, and Cullen's eyes widened as he recognized Grand Duke Gaspard. Galvanized into action, Cullen surged forward and pulled Gaspard away from the fight. "Stay here, Your Grace," he snapped, then grabbed the dagger dropped by the assassin and charged towards Leliana and the 'servant'.

Their struggles had taken them to the edge of the balcony, and when the servant saw Cullen approaching, he grunted and kicked Leliana off with enough force that she lost balance and fell backwards into her would-be helper. "Maldición," he snarled, then leapt over the balcony's railing and dropped from sight.

"What is happening?" Gaspard snapped. "Who was that?"

"We'll tell you once we find out, Your Grace," Leliana told him, then followed the elf over the balcony just as two Chevalier burst onto the balcony from inside, swords already drawn. Whether either one was the Chevalier who had sent Leliana the gift was impossible to say. Cullen had lost track of that Chevalier in the frenzy to save Gaspard from assassination.

Which, now that he thought about it, was odd. Wasn't Celene the target, and not Gaspard?

Shaking his head, Cullen focused on the matter at hand. "Protect His Grace," Cullen ordered the Chevalier with all the brusque authority he'd gained while Commander of the Inquisition forces, then leapt over the railing himself as he took up the chase.

Somehow they managed to stay in sight of the retreating assassin, weaving and ducking their way through the gardens of Halamshiral with little regard for their own safety. Cullen's mostly healed knee ached right from the start, and he couldn't help but wonder just how dearly he would pay for the chase later. In the heat of the moment and the uncertainty of the time, the pain was worth it. Besides, the red lyrium seemed to be at least acting in his favor in this regard, giving extra strength and more power to every step. His body still burned with heat, but he could at least use it for the good right now.

Time slowed to a blur as they raced through the grounds of the Winter Palace, and it wasn't long before they saw signs of struggle. "Was that a dead body?" he yelled at Leliana as they flew past a crumpled heap on the ground.

"Yes, a Venatori," she shouted back. "It appears Gaspard was not the only target."

Indeed, their mad dash led them past a few more crumpled forms, or sometimes small groups of them, though Cullen had trouble seeing details. One, however, did surprise and even anger him. "That was a servant! Who would do such a thing?"

"Here?" Leliana leapt over another body, this time a Chevalier. "Far too many."

Every time they found a dead body, Cullen's heart contracted just a little bit more. Every time they lost sight of the assassin, anger would push him to run just a little bit faster, the red lyrium would flare in the presence of the strong emotions, and the chase would be on again. Whatever drove Leliana proved to be equally strong as they raced over fences, through bushes, and once through a door blasted to bits with a surge of undirected Templar power which normally would have left Cullen shaken and weak but instead only exhilarated him. The dance carried on, however, until he and Leliana jumped over a ledge and landed to find the assassin waiting for them with his weapons drawn in one of the many enclosed gardens.

And that was when Cullen realized he knew this man.
“You are persistent, aren't you?” Zevran growled. “You should have left well enough alone.”

That was all the warning they had before the elf launched his attack, blurring into the shadows and vanishing as he swept to one side. Without thought, Cullen roared and swept his arms in a wide gesture as he purged all magic from the immediate area, suspecting that Arainai had been bolstered by Amell before being dispatched on his lethal assignment. Zevran cursed as he abruptly popped back into visibility, pawing at his neck even as he rolled to the side before one of Leliana's thrown daggers found its mark. Tossing a smoldering amulet to the side, he glared at Cullen as he climbed to his feet. "Damned Templar!" he snarled. "I knew I shouldn't have given you that lyrium until _after_ Gaspard was dead."

Literally seeing red, Cullen drew the dagger he'd stuffed into his belt, the one Zevran had dropped earlier, and charged, using the dagger to guide his next attack as he unleashed a holy smite upon the elven assassin. The elf did stagger under the onslaught, but recovered all too quickly as he dropped into a crouch and launched himself away from Leliana's flanking attack to roll past Cullen. When he regained his feet, he whirled on his heel and stabbed with both daggers. Only one actually found its target, but it dug deep enough into Cullen's thigh that he staggered forward and into Leliana.

Shouting in pain and cursing his own foolishness at being flanked, Cullen somehow managed not to drag down Leliana with him and instead jerked himself to fall flat on the ground, leaving her free to act. She did so with a will, leaping towards Arainai with her dueling blade out and a second throwing knife already flying towards the elf.

"Meddlesome bitch," Arainai snarled as he again dodged out of the way. "I only wish I had violated your corpse when first I had the chance. I will not hold back when the opportunity presents itself again!"

"Then you will be left forever wanting," she told him, surging forward in another attack. The attack itself proved to be a feint as her hand dipped into her tunic and then flung something towards him. Zevran couldn't quite pull aside this time, and the object hit him full in the chest with the sound of smashed glass. As the sudden sound of angry buzzing filled the small courtyard, Zevran squawked in surprise and fear before running to the nearest wall and clambering to the top in a desperate bid to escape the wrathful bees on his tail. "This isn't over, Nightingale!" he called, then dropped out of sight.

"Go after him," Cullen grated. "I'll be fine."

Leliana sighed and dropped next to Cullen, pulling out a handkerchief as she examined his leg. "That would be foolish," she said softly. "You cannot follow, and I cannot leave you alone. Besides, he's trying to draw us after him."

"What do you mean?" Cullen asked, teeth gritted in pain. He knew from long experience that the wound was painful more than debilitating, and with a little rest he could have continued the chase.

"I mean, there must be something nearby he does not wish us to see. Listen."

Puzzled, Cullen strained his ears, trying to understand where her line of reasoning had led her. His eyes widened as he heard the sound of fighting nearby, particularly a loud bellow of Qunari profanity which could only mean one thing. "Bull! That's Bull."

"And if he is fighting, then the Inquisitor must be near." Rising to her feet, Leliana held out her hand. "That is more important than finding an assassin who missed his mark."
"Definitely," Cullen grated, letting her help him to his feet. "I trust your sense of direction in this maze more than mine. Lead the way."

Leliana's direction was swift and sure, over the wall opposite of the one Zevran had used and towards a small gate hidden within the ivy. As soon as they opened the gate, however, they saw not Bull, but two men, one lying prone and one kneeling over him. Acting on instinct, Cullen shambled into a run towards them, a run that accelerated as the kneeling man stood and moved away from them at speed. A glance down at the man on the ground dragged Cullen to a halt, however, and he dropped to his knees without a thought for the pain of it.

"Dorian!" he gasped, then glanced down to see the dagger sticking out of his torso. Without thinking, he reached for it, but Leliana quickly grabbed his hand and pulled it back.

"Wait," she said in a harsh voice. "We don't want him to bleed out. See if you can rouse him."

Cullen nodded, cursing extensively as he cradled Dorian's head in his hands gently, imploring the man to wake up. A moment later, there was a thud against a larger gate inset on the wall between them and the fighting. "Boss!"

"In here, Bull!" Cullen yelled, still incessantly stroking Dorian's face. "Come on, Dorian," he begged. "Wake up."

After another thud or two, the gate slammed open, and Bull landed with a grunt on the ground. He had several fairly exotic wounds on his arms and a laceration across his face which he ignored as he looked around wildly. "Boss!"

"Solas!" Leliana called urgently. "Vivienne! Here, quickly. The Inquisitor is hurt!"

The next few minutes proved chaotic as the mages pushed Cullen aside and worked on Dorian. Cullen paced, ignoring the pain in his injuries, as the dagger was removed from Dorian's side and tossed aside, and potions and bandages and spells of varying kinds were used and discarded and employed.

At one point, Cullen almost tripped over the dagger drawn from Dorian, and he growled and kicked it aside in frustration. Instead of hitting the ground, though, it hit Varric in the leg, who bent over to pick it up. "Calm down, Curly," Varric warned him. "Sparkler will be fine."

"That doesn't mean I have to treat that dagger with any restraint," Cullen said through gritted teeth.

"Well, no, but--" Varric's voice trailed away as he frowned, turning the offending weapon over and over in his hands. "Wait. Curly. This dagger." He held it up for Cullen to look at. "Imagine it with one more blade on this end."

"What are you talking about, only Hawke had a--" Cullen's eyes widened as he hurried over and snatched the dagger from Varric's hand and turned it over. It was battered and broken and worn, but it was also, unmistakably, Hawke's signature double-bladed weapon. "That's impossible."

"Yeah, that's a good word for it," Varric said grimly. "Last time I saw this weapon was when he was in the Fade, after we fought that Nightmare spider demon thing. Not a pleasant memory."

Cullen's brow furrowed as he looked at Dorian for a moment and forced himself to calm, making himself recall exactly where the blade had been in Dorian's torso. "Hawke wouldn't miss."

"Tell me about it," Varric muttered. "The man's a killing machine."
"That's exactly what I mean, Varric," Cullen said. "I saw the man who did this to the Inquisitor. He was close enough that there was no way he could miss his intended target. Unless--"

"Unless… not killing Sparkler was the intention?" Varric ventured, blinking rapidly. "That… That sounds sneaky enough to be Hawke, if he had something to hide. But why?" Suddenly he hit his palm against his forehead. "Give me the dagger."

"But--"

"Now, Curly." When Cullen reluctantly handed it over, Varric put his hands on both sides of the handle, then twisted it sharply. With a little snick, the handle popped into two pieces, and a piece of paper fluttered out. "Well, I'll be damned," Varric breathed, then dropped the blade to retrieve the paper. "I don't know what the Fade is going on, but I have a feeling that things are about to get even more interesting."

"So the man who stabbed the Inquisitor was Hawke?"

Cullen turned sharply to face Leliana, slowly coming out of the helpless fog he'd spiraled into while Dorian was being treated. "That seems to be the best guess now. Either Hawke, or an incredibly skilled imposter."

"It's Hawke," Leliana said decisively. "It must be." Reaching into her tunic, she pulled out the linen wrapped flowers she'd received earlier and presented them to Cullen. "Do you know what these are?"

Cullen's brow furrowed. "A rose. Um… The white flower, that would be--"

"Andraste's Grace. My favorite flower, though few are aware of that." Leliana murmured, then picked up the stone tied to the string holding the flowers together. "And then there's this. Only one person would know the significance of this to me."

"Looks like a runestone," Varric offered. "You can buy 'em ten for a copper in Ferelden."

A sad smile came to Leliana's face. "That's where I gave it to him, yes. A long time ago."

Cullen's eyes widened as he took in her meaning. "Maker. The Chevalier?"

"I am sure of it," she said with a nod as she carefully rolled the linen around the flowers again. "Especially if Hawke was the one to carefully orchestrate a failed assassination of the Inquisitor. Given the timing of this gift with our ability to foil Zevran's attempt to kill Gaspard, I cannot help but wonder at the coincidence."

"Hey, Nightingale, any chance that your boy could have left a message for you in his little gift?" Varric suddenly asked. "Hawke left one in his dagger."

Leliana's eyes widened, and she looked down. "Possibly. I didn't think to look."

As she began to study the linen more closely, Cullen heard Vivienne call his name and hurried over to kneel next to her. "Yes, Lady Vivienne?"

She gave him a strained smile, the closest to losing her composure he'd ever seen. "Enough with the formalities, my dear. I have need of your special skills for a moment."

His eyebrows rose. "My special--"
"As a Templar, dearest." She pointed at a dagger stuck into the ground next to Dorian. "Every time Solas or I touch that blade, our magic is blocked. Do be a dear and get rid of the wretched thing, would you?"

"Not permanently," Solas cautioned. "I have a feeling that we would benefit from further study of it. For the moment, however, it is proving a hindrance to our efforts."

Cullen nodded immediately and reached out to grasp the hilt in his hand. A cold shock ran up his arm, and he gasped as a feeling almost of a smite washed over him. "This is… Templar work, or something… something very similar," he said, eyes widening. Shaking his head, he jerked it from its place deep in the soil and stood, putting space between it and the three mages.

As soon as the blade was more than an arm's length from Dorian, the man's eyelids flew open, and he gasped for air. Vivienne and Solas immediately bent over him, and Solas reached down to touch where the blade had been. "Remarkable," he murmured. "The blade went through his shirt to pin him down, but didn't pierce the skin. That took a great deal of skill, if done on purpose."

"It was," Cullen said grimly, staring down at the blade. Shaking his head, he cast his gaze around, looking for something to wrap around the offending weapon. "I'd best keep this. I have a feeling we were meant to have it."

"Let me, Commander," Cassandra said, holding up a cloth obviously torn from a Venatori mage’s robe. "If a Templar can carry it, so can a Seeker."

Cullen nodded and held it out to her hilt first, shivering as the glow flickered up his arm. Once she'd taken it and wrapped it a few times, he rubbed at the ache in his wrist. "I have a feeling that this evening isn't over," he said grimly. "We'd best keep alert."

"Agreed, Commander," Cassandra said, frowning as she studied his face. "Are you all right?"

Thankfully Cullen was saved from an answer by Vivienne calling his name. "The Inquisitor is asking for you," she said smoothly.

Cullen hurried over, all else forgotten as he knelt down to clasp one of Dorian’s hands between his own. "You're awake."

"That I am, Commander," Dorian said, blinking slowly a few times. "I understand I was in quite the state when you first found me."

"Thankfully, the Inquisition has many talented people serving it," Cullen said, smiling as he ran his thumb over Dorian's knuckles. Peripherally he was aware of people withdrawing to give them space, and a small part of him felt a little odd at the acknowledgment of the change in his relationship with Dorian… but mostly, he just wanted to see the man smile.

"That it does," Dorian said, a faint smile coming to his lips. In the next moment, though, his brows contracted in worry. "Your eyes, Cullen," he said quietly. "It's faint, but I can see it. What happened?"

Only then did Cullen recall what had occurred only a short time ago. "Someone slipped me red lyrium in a drink," he said grimly. "You weren't the only target tonight, either. Even for Orlais, tonight has been complicated."

Dorian groaned. "I never thought anything could make me yearn for the simplicity of the Magisterium's machinations," he mused, "but apparently here we are. Very well. Help me up."
Blinking, Cullen stared at Dorian for a moment. "Pardon?"

"Help me up," Dorian repeated. "We still haven't figured out exactly who here is aiding Corypheus in his plan, after all. Until Celene is safe and Corypheus and his agent vanquished, the world still isn't safe from that threat, no matter the nature of the new ones which have arisen."

Even though he knew Dorian was right, Cullen still felt reluctant to help the man up—mainly because he would have to release his hand. "Just one more potion, perhaps?" Cullen suggested. "I mean, you did just get almost stabbed to death."

A sad smile came to Dorian's lips. "He knew someone would find me, didn't he?"

Cullen's eyes widened. "You knew who it was?"

"He damned near shoved his tongue down my throat," Dorian groused. "Of course he did," Cullen said with a roll of his eyes. "So it really was Hawke."

"Oh, yes. And I'm not sure what he meant by it, but he said the rest was up to me. Wherever he is now, he's in a place we cannot follow, I think." He frowned. "And given that Zevran came and spoke with him, I daresay we'd best not contemplate following him for now."

Cullen swore under his breath, knowing exactly what that meant. "But you're right," he said. "Whatever game Amell is playing doesn't matter if we can't stop Corypheus." Taking a red potion from where it lay in a heap near some mostly empty bottles, Cullen flicked the top off and cradled Dorian's head in his hand. "Here. One more potion."

As Dorian opened his lips obediently, he raised his hand to hold the bottle steady. At least, that was true for a moment or two. His fingers inched up until they were touching Cullen's, stroking slowly as he met Cullen's gaze with his own. Cullen couldn't help the smile that rose to his lips as he felt a sense of relief that Dorian was going to be all right, that that horrid moment when Cullen had seen the dagger sticking out of him was just another bad dream instead of a living nightmare.

Once the bottle was empty, Cullen reluctantly drew back and nodded. "Now, let's get you up."

It took a couple of tries, mainly because of a bout of dizziness which marred the first attempt, but once he was up, Dorian looked around him with keen eyes. "Everyone here? Good. What did I miss?"

Bull barked a laugh. "Nice one, boss. Hey, look, don't scare me like that, all right? You're starting to make me feel like I'm a failure as a bodyguard."

"No, no, you're very good at lurking around being large and dangerous looking," Dorian assured him. "Just make sure no one figures out you actually have a brain, too."

"Yeah, well, speaking of that." Bull held up the piece of paper with the map on it which had led them to the ambush in the first place. "The map was a trap, and I fell for it."

"The marks were from one of my agents," Leliana explained, "but they washed off the original message and put their own map on it. If the marks hadn't been outdated, I would have thought it genuine, too."

"Thanks for trying, Red, but we both know I should have known better," Bull said grimly.

Dorian made a little tsking noise. "Now, now, I walked into that ambush just as eagerly as the rest of
us. We knew it the potential to be a trap. We just didn't know its nature or its source."

"Wait a minute." They all turned to face Varric, who was still contemplating the slip of paper which had fallen from Hawke's dagger. "The guys we were fighting. Venatori and mercenaries. That definitely isn't who Hawke was allied with, is it?"

Cullen straightened. "No. No, it's not."

"Somehow, some way, he fell into Amell’s clutches," Dorian told Varric with a heavy sigh. “I saw him speak with Zevran before I lost consciousness.”

“Wait a minute.” They all turned to face Varric, who was still contemplating the slip of paper which had fallen from Hawke's dagger. "The guys we were fighting. Venatori and mercenaries. That definitely isn't who Hawke was allied with, is it?"

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“Wait a minute,” Varric said with a scowl. “Dammnit, Hawke, only you could find a rescuer that’s worse than being in the Fade.” With a shake of his head, Varric forced himself to continue. “So it sounds like Amell is playing both sides—ours and Corypheus,” Varric pointed out. "They knew about the ambush, but they didn't help either side in it. They just took advantage of the distraction to strike at Sparkler. Or am I reading that wrong?"

"No, that's a good point, Varric," Leliana mused, a thoughtful expression on her face as she ran her fingers over the flowers still cradled in one hand. "Hopefully that means our theory that Amell and Corypheus are not working together is accurate."

"Or if they were at one point, that Amell is starting to act independently," Dorian said. "Nothing I have learned about the man indicates he enjoys being under the heel of another."

Varric grunted, then frowned at the paper in his hand. "Well, either way, I can't make heads or tails of this."

"Oh?" Dorian asked, walking over to retrieve the paper. "What is it?"

"Back in the old days in Kirkwall, Hawke got it into his head that someone was reading his private messages. I mean… now I get it," Varric said, looking guilty, "but at the time we just thought it was more of his paranoia. So he got special daggers made with the proceeds of his estate, with a handle you could open if you knew what you were doing. As far as I know, he only ever showed the trick to me and Aveline, 'just in case'. He never did say just in case of what, though."

Dorian grimaced as he took the paper and stared at it. "Well, considering the trouble he took to get it to us, you'd think he'd make the message more obvious. 'Find me in silence' isn't particularly helpful at the moment."

"If he's with Amell, I kinda get where he's coming from, though," Varric noted. "If there's anyone who you should be paranoid around, it's him."

"All right. We'll put it aside for now, then." He offered the paper to Leliana, but she shook her head.

"You keep it for now. For the moment, this message is more important anyway." Leliana held up a paper of her own. "This was inside the bloom of the Andraste's Grace, only big enough for one name."

"Oh?" Dorian held out his hand, and Leliana handed it over obediently. "And where did this message come from?"

Leliana closed her eyes for a moment. "Alistair," she said softly. "He is here tonight dressed as a Chevalier. Like Hawke, he was here for a purpose which he did not see through."

"Amell won't forgive either of them for that," Cullen noted grimly as Dorian glanced at the message.
"Whose name is it?"

Dorian frowned slightly. "If everything else we've discovered until this point is also true, the name of the person working for Corypheus." He glanced up at Leliana. "Which wouldn't be a complete surprise, all things considered, hmm?"

Leliana shook her head. "Though we should seek more proof than a ragged piece of paper extracted from a flower sent by someone who is believed to have been lost in the Fade."

"Very true. Rulers need proof before treason can be declared, or at least culpability." Tucking both pieces of paper away into a pouch, Dorian paused for a moment before extracting a small locket from the same pouch. "Leliana, could I use this to request a private audience with the Empress for me?"

Face puzzled, Leliana took the necklace and scrutinized it for a moment before her eyes widened. "Easily, Inquisitor."

"Excellent. Then arrange that for me, if you please. I believe the events of this evening warrant a private little chat, hmm?" Dorian patted his hands over his body, then looked at the rather sizable group around him. "Very well. Now, it won't do to go tromping back to the palace in such large numbers, and there are still parts of the apartments that I wanted to investigate. Let's see… Half of you should go ahead to let Josephine know why the Inquisition suddenly seemed to desert the party. Leliana?"

Straightening, Leliana nodded. "I think I should return with Lady Vivienne and Iron Bull, at the very least," she mused. "Their absences would be noted the most, aside from your own."

"And take Varric with you," Dorian said. "There were some dwarves muttering something about the Carta and supplies that I wanted him to look into."

"Oh, yeah, them," Varric grunted. "Me, too. Thanks for the reminder. I have a hunch it has to do with that little jaunt we took with Bianca."

"Well, then I doubly want you to investigate." Dorian looked around at them thoughtfully. Cullen opened his mouth to suggest he return, since presumably his absence would also be noted, but shut his mouth again when Dorian shook his head subtly. "Cassandra. I want someone there who can stare down even the Lady Mantillon, and I daresay there are few in Orlais who would directly challenge the former Right Hand of the Divine. Quell the rumors and the gossip as much as you can with that iron stare of yours."

Cassandra made a disgusted noise before she reluctantly smiled. "As you say, Inquisitor. I do not have much tolerance for such matters."

"Excellent. The rest of you, stay with me." Cullen blinked as Dorian set into motion, then quickly caught up to reach out and support Dorian by the elbow as his first few steps were marred by a bit of lurching.

"Easy, there," Cullen murmured so the others couldn't hear. "You won't save the world if you end up falling flat on your face because you pushed yourself too hard."

"I know that," Dorian snapped, then halted and bowed his head. "You're right, of course, Commander," he groused. "It would be terribly embarrassing to fall like that. Not to mention letting Corypheus triumph would be a lackluster legacy, wouldn't it?" He glanced behind them, waiting until the others had caught up, then nodded. "Let's go. And be alert. Who knows what--or who--we'll encounter."
"If you think we're going to encounter trouble, let me get some actual equipment," Cullen told Dorian. "Blackwall, if you could help me."

"Certainly, Commander," Blackwall said as he hurried over to help Cullen perform the unsavory task of stealing from the dead.

Once he was more properly suited with light armor—if still in pain—Cullen grunted and shoved the dagger he’d been carrying absently into his belt, just in case. Adrenaline and time seemed to have dimmed the effects of the red lyrium, thankfully, but that also meant he was starting to feel pain in his knee. Still, he preferred that to the sparkly, red haze of the lyrium. "Right. Let's finish this, then."

The what turned out to yet more groups of Venatori, scattered throughout various points of the gardens and some apartments. Dorian shook his head as he zapped one of the muttering mages down with a particularly vicious burst of energy from his mark. "Honestly, where do they come from? It's like Corypheus is pulling them out of thin air."

"Would the person whose name is on that paper be able to pull this off?" Cullen asked speculatively. "Or at least be able to sneak them into the Palace?"

Dorian turned to look at Cullen. "Oh, most assuredly." Suddenly his eyes widened, and he raised his hand. "Look out!"

Cullen whirled just in time to see a Venatori stalker leap from the shadows towards him—a leap interrupted by the dagger which flew from behind to embed itself in the back of the erstwhile attacker’s skull. His eyebrows rose as a slim elf woman emerged from the adjoining corridor. "You have my thanks, Lady--"

"Ambassador Briala?" Dorian asked, then laughed. "Fancy meeting you here. I must say I am surprised to see you."

"The feeling is mutual, Inquisitor," Briala said smoothly as she walked around them with a wary eye. "You've cleaned this place out. It will take a month to get all the Tevinter blood off the marble."

"Yes, sadly, our blood is particularly stubborn," Dorian said with a dramatic sigh. "Precisely why I wear white so very often. It just means I get new outfits after every fight. Who wouldn't want that?"

Briala's lips tugged into a reluctant smile before she turned and walked to a nearby balcony. "I came out to avenge or save my missing people, but you beat me to it."

"Not all those from Tevinter are cut from the same cloth, Ambassador," Dorian said as he followed her. Cullen instinctively fell into step behind Dorian, remembering the rumors he'd overheard about Briala and her servants. "This particular Vint recognizes an atrocity when he sees one."

"Would the death of an elf servant be such a thing in the Imperium, Inquisitor?" Briala asked in a tense voice.

"Sadly, only as much as it would be viewed so here," Dorian said softly. "Both lands could use rulers who acknowledge it rather differently, I think."

Briala turned to face him, looking him up and down before doing the same to Cullen. For the latter, her eyes widened. "That dagger on your belt. Where did you get it?"

Cullen blinked, then reached down and pulled it out. "Earlier this evening, Ambassador," he explained, hoping whatever shades of truth he had to use now in his explanation would match whatever Leliana came up with. "An assassin made an attempt on the Grand Duke's life, and
dropped this during his escape."

"May I examine it more closely?" Her hand extended, open and expectant.

After glancing at Dorian to see his nod, Cullen flipped the knife and laid the hilt in her hand. "I do owe you a dagger after you sacrificed one to save my life earlier," he said with an attempt at a smile. His gratitude was genuine, at least, even if the circumstances made the smile falter a bit.

Briala frowned as she examined the dagger, oblivious to the attempt at humor. "This is my dagger," she said, looking up at Cullen. "I only saw it was missing this morning, but I know this blade. It's the one I carry with me for defense, but I would never throw it as I did just now because others would recognize it if it were left behind."

"An incriminating weapon, then, I take it?" Dorian asked.

"Without a doubt." She turned it over to study the hilt once more. "And you said an assassin was going to kill Gaspard with it?"

"Yes, Ambassador," Cullen said. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"And it wouldn't have been my work any more than what happened to the Council's Emissary is yours," she murmured. "I suspect Gaspard behind the death of the Emissary, but what would he gain from an attack upon his own person? Was it meant to succeed, or was it a feint, do you think?"

"Gaspard was meant to die," Cullen said firmly. "That I believe."

"Most strange. Someone wanted to make it appear as if I were responsible for his death. I knew Gaspard was smuggling Chevaliers into the Palace, but--"

Cullen's eyebrows rose. "He what?"

"Ah, Orlesians," Dorian said with a chuckle. "Light treason is excellent fodder for supper, it seems. Still, Ambassador, I agree that it appears you were the secondary target in that assassination attempt."

"Someone is desperate," Briala said with a frown. "I had thought it was Gaspard. Thank you for saving his life, Commander," Briala told Cullen. "If this had happened before the talks or before Gaspard had fully committed to the treason he planned, it would not look good. Not for Celene."

"And certainly not for you, hmm?" Dorian asked. "Take the blade with my blessing, Ambassador. I fear you may need it."

Briala straightened. "I misjudged you, Inquisitor. You just might be an ally worth having." She tilted her head. "What could you do with an army of elven spies at your disposal? You should think about it."

Dorian chuckled. "You do know how to make an idea sound attractive, I'll give you that."

"I know which way the wind is blowing," she said with a little shrug. "Before the night is over, you'll be part of the peace talks. I'd bet coin on it."

"Oh? How much?" Dorian asked with a grin. "I owe a certain dwarf some money."

That made Briala laugh, albeit quietly. "You are a dangerous man, Inquisitor. Even better for us if you were to lean a little bit our way." She turned and walked to the edge of the balcony, then glanced back over her shoulder. "Just a thought."
And then she dropped from the ledge.

"Maker, do Orlesians realize that not everything has to be dramatic?" Cullen groused.

"Oh, Commander," Dorian said with a chuckle. "That was merely slightly rambunctious. If you want drama, well... I guarantee you'll see it later. Now, then. I need to go investigate those Chevaliers she mentioned, and talk to a few Council members." Dorian stepped back into the corridor and looked at the dead bodies with a wrinkled nose. "She's right, you know. The blood will take a while to clean out. Pity. This really is a beautiful palace."

With a sigh, Cullen fell back into formation. Hopefully it wouldn't be too much longer before they could return to the relative normalcy of the ball itself.

Once they'd reached the entrance to the servants' quarters and changed back into their fancy outfits, Dorian gestured them close. "All right. Solas, Blackwall, remain ready. I fear there is more fighting to come."

"Hopefully not too much more," Blackwall muttered. "It doesn't feel right, fighting on marble while surrounded by silk."

"Agreed," Cullen said fervently.

"Unfortunately, that is where we find ourselves." Absently rubbing the side which had been pierced, Dorian looked to Solas. "Keep your magical eye peeled for anything out of the ordinary. If ever we are to see them take chances, it would be after the failure of that ambush."

"Agreed, Inquisitor. I will be most alert to any oddities which may take place," Solas said with a nod, then slipped through the door.

"And Blackwall. You're a warrior. I want you to talk to the Imperial Guard. The Commander noticed that there aren't as many here as there should be. See if you can get any hint of why out of them. If Briala knows that the Chevaliers have been brought to the Palace in numbers, Celene may know as well. Perhaps the Guard knows--" Dorian raised an eyebrow as Blackwall swallowed harshly. "Are you quite all right?"

Blackwall straightened. "I'm fine, Inquisitor. I'm just not that good at talking to nobles. It's like dressing a nug in silks when I try."

"Would you prefer talking to the Chevaliers?" Dorian asked.

"No," Blackwall said hastily. "No, Inquisitor, you're right. I'll talk to the Guard and see what I can find out, if they're willing to talk to a rough clod like me." He gave Dorian a bow and clapped Cullen on the shoulder before heading from the room.

"That was odd," Dorian mused. "I thought there was a universal camaraderie among warriors."

"Is there one among mages?" Cullen asked in amusement.

"Well, no. But we're all a bit too convinced in our own superiority to really have good conversations amongst ourselves," Dorian admitted.

Cullen laughed. "It can get that way sometimes with warriors, too." Face sobering, he reached out and cupped Dorian's face with one hand, his concern overriding his shyness. "What do you need of me?"
"Right here, right now?" Dorian asked. "This." Leaning in, he claimed Cullen's mouth for a soft kiss, lingering for a few moments as he explored Cullen's lips with care. Cullen closed his eyes and floated in the warmth of the kiss for a few moments, and suddenly, Orlais seemed very far away indeed.

Inevitably, of course, the kiss had to end. When their lips parted, Cullen pressed their foreheads together. "Be careful," he said in a whisper. "I can't-- When I saw you on the ground, I--"

"Shh, I know," Dorian murmured, silencing Cullen with a brief kiss. "And if I could stay here with you and keep showing you how much better I am than that moment, I would. But there's work to do. I need you to go ready the troops. If there are Chevaliers in the palace, and those Venatori keep popping up like fennec in the Hinterlands, then we're going to need them."

With a deep breath, Cullen nodded and pulled reluctantly away from Dorian. "Maker help us."

"We're going to need it, I think," Dorian sighed. "Take care, Cullen. And save me a dance, would you?"

Cullen couldn't help but laugh softly. "No promises on that one," he said. "My poor leg has taken a beating so far today."

"Alas. Then you'll just have to save me something else that's near both your legs, hmm?" As Cullen's cheeks reddened, Dorian laughed. "And now, back into the fray, Commander. Wish me luck," Dorian bowed extravagantly and moved towards the door, where he paused and looked back at Cullen. "Oh, and Commander? I'd recommend a quick bath and new clothes. At least the rest of us were wearing armor."

Glancing down at himself, Cullen had to admit that Dorian was right. If he showed up at the ball looking like this, tongues would wag indeed. "I'll see to it, Inquisitor," he promised.

"Good man," Dorian said with a chuckle. The Inquisitor was already taking over, it seemed. "Maker keep you." And with that, he pressed through the door leading into the Hall of Heroes.

"Maker keep us all," Cullen breathed, then followed shortly after, taking an entirely different route through the palace to return to where the Inquisition's troops waited. There was a lot to do, and not much time to do it.
Winning Hand

Spine straight and smile shining, Dorian moved through the Winter Palace with all the brilliance of a shining star. He oozed charm, breathed good humor, and laughed with delight at each and every sally, no matter how insignificant. Eyes followed him as he walked, eyes which he was sure had noticed his absence quite as clearly as they noticed his return. Resisting the urge to touch his magically restored side and make sure there was nothing amiss, he bowed and wheedled and coxsured his way to the main ballroom. He had a feeling that someone very specific had noticed him gone, after all. Someone who likely would wish a dramatic gesture.

Sure enough, as he proceeded into the ballroom, he found someone waiting for him. "Inquisitor Pavus," Florianne said with a warm, if stilted, smile. "We met briefly. I am--"

"Ah, the ebullient hostess of the evening, the Grand Duchess Florianne de Chalons," he said with a deep bow, snatching her introduction from her as a subtle tactic of ownership. "This has been a most splendid gathering. Why, I can't remember a party this exciting since my cousin decided to try to tame a dragon to light his promotion ball."

Florianne smiled politely at his riposte and curtsied with equal grace. "You are a most amusing man, Inquisitor. And, I cannot help but notice, a man who also lives up to his title."

His eyes twinkled. "Are you calling me nosy, your Grace?"

"This is Orlais, Inquisitor. Nothing happens by accident." With a gesture, she indicated that he should walk with her. "I believe tonight you and I are both concerned about the actions of... a certain person." After a show of looking around them, she nodded towards the dance floor. "Perhaps it would be best if we spoke where none could overhear, my lord Inquisitor."

"Ah, and here we are. Who is she going to dangle in front of me, I wonder? His smile remained in place as he bowed and presented his arm to her. "Shall we dance, Your Grace? It would be a signal honor."

She smiled and laid her hand on his. "I would be delighted, Inquisitor, and the honor entirely mine."

As he led her down onto the dance floor, a lifetime of training rose to the fore and claimed his limbs. Dance was both a matter of courtesy and a matter of pride among the Magisterium, so it went without saying that Dorian's education on the matter had been of the highest calibre. His motions became impossibly fluid and graceful, taken from the realm of thought to that of reaction, which meant that his conscious mind could devote itself entirely to the machinations of the Game which he was sure would consume the bulk of the dance.

Florianne led with the first volley, naturally, as the instigating party to this particular battle. "You are from the Imperium, Inquisitor. How much do you know of our little war?"

"Little war. The battle which had consumed most of the Exalted Plains, leaving behind it a wide swath of destruction months in the making and decades for the undoing, was nothing but a little war to the Game. None of that showed on his face, however, as he smiled at her. "The concerns of the Orlesian Empire are the concerns of all Thedas, Your Grace."

"Perhaps they are," Florianne mused. "I should not be surprised to find the Empire is the center of everyone's world." It took a signal effort of will for Dorian not to inform her that every single member of the Magisterium would say exactly the same about the Imperium. Instead he simply gave
her an amiable nod as she blithely continued. "It took a great effort to arrange tonight's negotiations. Yet one party would use this occasion for blackest treason. The security of the Empire is at stake. Neither one of us wishes to see it fall."

He had to admire the singular vague truth of her words. Even his mother would have approved of the subtlety. "It is true that anyone of right mind believes in the stability and security of the Empire," he said, agreeing without actually endorsing her statement.

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, almost too quick to notice. "I hope we are of one mind on this."

"In times like these, it is important that allies support each other fully, Your Grace," Dorian replied with careless ease.

Finding that path blunted, Floranne rallied and tried a different approach. "I know you are here as a guest of my brother, Gaspard, and have been everywhere in the palace…" she said, trailing off in the hope he would fill in the gap. When Dorian failed to oblige, she added, "You are a curiosity to many, Inquisitor… and a matter of concern to some."

_Dearie me, I wonder who?_ Dorian kept his expression and tone neutral as he replied, "I prefer to think of myself as the best of all worlds to everyone."

"That would be a very hard path to follow this evening," she noted. "Not everyone wishes tonight to end the same way. I wonder what role you will play? Do you even know who is friend and who is foe? Who in the court can be trusted?"

"And that is the question of the hour, is it not?" he asked with a little half-smile. "We should all be pondering the matter."

"In the Winter Palace, everyone is alone," Florianne told him. "It cannot have escaped your notice that certain parties are engaged in dangerous machinations tonight."

More certain of her particular angle now, Dorian allowed himself a small chuckle at that observation. "And here I thought the pursuit of dangerous machinations to be the primary past-time in both Orlais and Tevinter. A pleasant passing of an evening, so to speak." So saying, he twirled her in a grand circle and then dipped her down in suitably dramatic fashion, drawing some gasps and cries of delight from their now avid audience. "I prefer dancing, honestly," he told her as he brought her to her feet.

"You have little time for either," she told him as they started the final sweep down the dance floor. "The attack will come soon, and you must stop Gaspard before he strikes. In the Royal Wing Garden, you will find the Captain of my brother's mercenaries. He knows all Gaspard's secrets. I'm sure you can persuade him to be forthcoming."

Dorian smiled as they gave each other the final bow. "We'll see what the night has in store, won't we?" he said with a subtle wink. "You are an impeccable dance partner, Your Grace. Perhaps we could dance again before the evening is over."

She smiled and tilted his head. "You may be sure of that, my Lord Inquisitor," she murmured, then moved away to disappear into the crowd above.

_Well, shit._ Apparently he hadn't played the Game quite as well as he'd hoped if _that_ was her response. Still, she had dangled the bait of her brother in front of him, and he would be remiss if he ignored such a blatant invitation--even if it was likely to lead to his third ambush of the evening. With a mental shake of his head, he climbed the stairs, where he found a pair of conniving ladies waiting
"You'll be the talk of the court for months," Josephine said with a wide smile. "We should take you dancing more often."

"I do have lovely calves," Dorian noted. "However, I'm not sure they are sufficient to solve all our problems this evening."

"Yes, but dancing with Duchess Florianne," Leliana said. "A bold move, Inquisitor." Hidden under her comment was the subtle question about the veracity of Alistair's note, which Dorian answered with a smile and a wink. With an answering nod, she held out the locket to Dorian. "I have word from the Empress, Inquisitor. She has requested a moment of your time."

Ignoring Josephine's look of surprise, Dorian took the locket and returned it to his pouch. "I will attend to her as quickly as I may. Thank you, Leliana." He held out his hand

"You are not going to try to warn her, are you?" Josephine asked. "Warning Celene is pointless. She needs these talks to succeed, and to flee would admit defeat."

Leliana frowned slightly as she lowered her voice. "Then perhaps we should let her die."

"Her fate--everyone's fate, in fact--has not yet been decided," Dorian replied in similar fashion. "I understand our goals, and I'm not letting myself get sentimental, but I do think we're not quite seeing the whole picture yet." When Leliana opened her mouth to speak, he added, "All options will be considered, I promise you that. We will not leave the Winter Palace until the matter is settled in our favor."

"Then I am content, Inquisitor," she murmured.

"What did Florianne say during the dance?" Josephine asked, clearly not wishing to dwell upon the matter.

"Oh, she pointed me like an arrow towards Gaspard," he said. "She said the Captain of his mercenaries are in the Royal Wing, and that I should speak to the man regarding secrets and whatnot. Given the mix of forces we encountered in the gardens, I am definitely interested in a conversation."

"We cannot be sure those guards belonged to Gaspard," Leliana cautioned.

"Nor can we assume otherwise." Dorian sighed and fought not to rub his eyes in frustration. Such a gesture would be noticed, after all. "I intend to follow her bait."

"Which could be a trap."

They all turned to look at Cullen as he joined them. Dorian's eyes raked over him, noticing the lack of a limp along with a freshness to his outfit, indicating that Cullen had taken his advice before returning to the ballroom. Dorian offered him a half-smile, which Cullen returned with one of his own, before turning to Josephine as she added, "Or a lead."

"Either way, you should search the Royal Wing," Leliana urged Dorian.

"Which is certain to be locked. Get me access," he told her. "I'll be along after my meeting with the Empress."

"At once, Inquisitor," she said, then slipped away into the crowd.
"As for you, Lady Josephine, I need your ears," Dorian said quietly. "It's certainly no secret that I've had wandering feet all evening, but hopefully that means their tongues will wag a bit more while I am out of sight. Stay alert. Who knows what you'll hear at this stage in the Game?"

"Of course, Inquisitor," Josephine said. "If you need me, I will be with my sister." Which was also near the Imperial dais and the balcony to which Gaspard had withdrawn--an excellent place to overhear conversations, as Dorian well knew.

Cullen smiled a bit ruefully as Josephine moved away. "I hope you don't expect the same from me. I'm not quite that skillful."

"I have another task for you," Dorian assured him. "You mentioned that there are fewer Imperial Guards, and you're right. I've noticed quite a few Chevalier about, but rumor puts them on Gaspard's side. Why are there so many more of them? I want you to talk to the Chevalier, get a feel of whose side they're on in this whole affair. You're a warrior and a Fereldan, so they won't suspect the Game, because you won't be playing it. Just conversation."

Rubbing his neck awkwardly, Cullen said, "I'll do my best, Inquisitor, though I can't promise I'll be able to uncover anything useful."

Dorian smiled sympathetically. "Understood, Commander. But given tonight's circumstances, I'll take what I can get."

"Very well." For a moment he stared at Dorian, brow furrowed in concern. Finally he sighed. "And I'd best be going. I'll speak to you later, Inquisitor."

"Likewise, Commander." Maker, but he wanted to do more than exchange stilted words with the man. Still, he at least got to admire the view as Cullen walked away.

Quickly shaking himself from the pleasant reverie, Dorian settled a fairly neutral smile on his face and headed towards the corner which held Celene's personal attendants. An Imperial audience was overdue.

To their credit, the ladies in waiting were all smiles as they greeted him warmly before ushering him into the back room which Celene had chosen for her isolation prior to the peace talks. As his earnest guides curtsied and withdrew, closing the door behind them, he took three steps towards Celene and bowed deeply, per protocol. "Your Imperial Majesty."

"Inquisitor." Celene smiled warmly at him, her facade as strong as a skilled player of the Game could make it. "I regret that we did not make time to speak in private earlier. No doubt you have questions about many things."

"I daresay that's true for both of us this evening," Dorian acknowledged with a nod. "Yet I did not come here to pester you about your cousin or your caterer. Forgive my abruptness, Your Majesty, but time, as we are all aware, is short. The locket I found. We both know who gave it do you, don't we?"

If Celene found his manner or question displeasing, she didn't show it. "She gave it to me for my coronation. I don't know why I kept it. It was a foolish thing to do."

"Some matters bend to logic less easily than others," Dorian murmured. "I do wonder, however, what caused such a rift between you?"

"She wanted change," Celene said. "And she thought I should deliver it."
"Change for the plight of the elves, I imagine," Dorian mused.

"As you say, Inquisitor." Her tone changed ever so slightly as a certain wistful sadness colored it, and Dorian had to imagine she was not seeing him so much as another with whom she'd argued. "My word is law, but laws don't command people's hearts. Culture does not transform itself overnight."

"No," Dorian murmured. "But change requires a catalyst nonetheless. Voices of dissent are all well and good, but eventually the pen must meet the paper, before the torches light the pyre. I've seen the parts of the palace you've cordoned off from your visitors. I daresay that the latter has already happened."

Celene fell silent and looked down at her clasped hands. After a few moments, she admitted, "I failed her. I should have dared more. But the past, like so many things, is beyond my command."

"You make it sound as if the past and the future are separate beasts, and the present but a nebulous maybe which cannot connect the two in a meaningful fashion." Taking a half-step closer, he let his voice drop as he said, "You didn't keep the locket because you were foolish, your Majesty. You kept the locket because it means something to you, something important."

"Perhaps it does." Celene gave an almost imperceptible sigh, and he saw her face harden as she seemed to come to an internal decision. With a tight shrug, she turned from Dorian and moved away, signalling an end to their audience. "But not more important than all the people of my empire. Dispose of the locket however you like. It means nothing to me."

I wonder if even she believes that lie, Dorian mused, but only bowed and quietly left the room. Her words did hold a certain resonance with him, of course. Any leader, whether of an empire like Orlais or an organization like the Inquisition, had to hold the good of all in mind, and a relationship with a subordinate inevitably invited complications. He was well aware that the gossips in Skyhold waited with bated breath for Dorian's clear preference for Cullen to start showing itself in his decisions and policies. He could only imagine the intense pressure and disapproval Celene would face from the court if they perceived that her relationship with an elf in any way shaped her policy, particularly in the elves' favor.

For a moment Dorian felt a burst of irritation on behalf of Mailani, an irritation which arose out of the deeper sympathy for elves she had instilled into him, but he quickly pushed it down. There was an opportunity here that, for Mailani's sake, he would not let it slip through his fingers. Briala's influence on Celene was a chance for Orlais to diverge from their current path of viewing the elves as only good for service, and Dorian suspected there was another who felt the same way as he did.

As his feet took him once more to the balcony outside the ballroom, he wondered if he could persuade her that the pain was worth the chance.

Briala inclined her head in greeting as he approached her, seemingly unsurprised at his approach. "We meet again. Given any thought to what I said?"

Dorian tilted his head. "A great deal, actually, though I am not sure you will approve of the method I believe may prove the most effective for its execution."

The way her stance instantly changed to wariness told Dorian more about her life than almost any set of words she could possibly string together. "Oh?"

Pulling the locket out, he presented it to her. "This is yours, isn't it? I found it while wandering about."
Briala's eyes widened as she took the locket, peering at it closely. "She kept this? What was she thinking? If Gaspard had found this, it would have ruined her."

"She doesn't strike me as absent-minded," Dorian mused aloud. "Which leads me to think it meant something to her."

"Maybe it did." Briala's lips tightened. "Once."

"Or still," Dorian countered. "After all, she did hold on to it."

Briala didn't answer that, but there was a certain softening around her eyes that said that she had heard, and that it mattered.

Reaching out to lightly touch the locket, Dorian said, "It is a lovely evening, Ambassador, with a world of possibilities open to us all. Keep it. Perhaps it will help you remember that it is never too late for Orlais, or any of us, hmm?" He paused for a beat, then stepped back and bowed. "We'll speak more later, Ambassador."

She smiled ever so slightly. "Another time, Inquisitor."

Hoping that it had been enough, and that it wasn't a mistake to have opened the path as one of those possibilities of which he'd spoken, Dorian returned to the ballroom. This time, however, he was only passing through on his way elsewhere. As he conversed his way back to the vestibule and beyond, he made a point to speak with his comrades, letting them know where to meet him, as well as revisiting those nobles he thought leaned in the direction of supporting the Inquisition. Their support could mean much when the time came, after all.

It did surprise him a little when a familiar wide skirt impeded his progress forward, and he quickly bowed to the woman to whom it belonged. "My Lady Mantillon. It has been far too long since you graced me with your presence."

"Oh, yes. An entire hour," she said with a low chuckle, being a lady of an age far too dignified to giggle. "Walk with me, Inquisitor. I wish to take a turn about the vestibule. It's frightfully hot in here."

That surprised him, given what he knew of the power dynamics of the Orlesian court as drilled into his head by Leliana and Vivienne. For her to make such a request of him showed a significant interest in his activity--and a covert blessing of it, as well. "Your pleasure is mine, my lady," he told her warmly as he offered his arm to her.

She led him to the doors and beyond, chattering and pointing at various personages in a way that looked and sounded harmless, but was anything but. Dorian listened in awe to a master of the Game prattle on about seemingly nothing, yet hand him pieces of knowledge the Inquisition could use to their true benefit. He engaged her at that level, giving her tidbits here and there about Ferelden and Nevarra and even the Imperium. Neither of them gave the other too much of an advantage, but each offered just enough to prove each other's good intent. Finally they came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs in the back of the Vestibule, and she looked up at him with a smile.

"A pity you've eyes on someone else, my lord Inquisitor," she mused. "I have a strong belief that my tenth husband, whoever the Maker sends my way, will be the best one. Ah, well." She held out her hand for him to grace with a kiss, which he did. "Do give the Commander my regards, would you? He has quite the delicious derrière."

Dorian couldn't help but choke a bit at that, but managed to recover quickly enough to return the
sally. "A sentiment with which I wholeheartedly agree, my lady."

Her eyes twinkled merrily behind her mask. "Have a pleasant evening, Inquisitor," she told him, then turned and swept back towards the ballroom. Which, given the width of her dress, also swept everyone else with her, leaving Dorian to himself.

Allowing himself a moment for a blink or two of astonishment, Dorian headed up the stairs and ducked to the right where he found his companions ready and waiting. "Now. Where is my proper armor and staff, hmn?" Bull held them out obediently. Once he was appropriately adorned, Dorian took a deep breath as he glanced around at them. "Into the deep we go, my friends. There's no turning back now."

The theme of the evening presented itself fairly quickly once they'd passed through the door and delved into the Royal Quarters: betrayal. From the servant girl betrayed by Briala, to the rather young nicely naked soldier in the comical helmet betrayed by Celene after he'd betrayed Gaspard on her behalf, to the dark hints and double dealings of the notes and hidden messages they found along the way, Dorian was beginning to wonder if anyone in Orlais understood the value of loyalty, or if loyalty itself was but another victim of the Game.

"Orlais is starting to remind me a bit too much of home," he observed as they paused so Sera could rifle through yet another bureau. "All these lies and double-dealings and left hand, right hand trade-offs. Why, it's practically Tevinter of them. I wonder if they did it just for me? A sort of welcome mat in lovely colors marred by the bloody handprints."

"Don't forget the dagger sticking out of it," Varric said with a grin.

"Ah, yes. Only the most gracious of hospitable hosts is kind enough to provide assassination attempts," Dorian said with a shake of his head. "Oh, Orlesians. At least the soldier was a bright spot in an otherwise dull evening. Or at least his choice of adornment was."

"I don't know, I think some thigh high lace up sandals would have really set that helmet off better," Bull mused. "And maybe a nice little bow under his belly button. You know. Just to round things off."

"Can we please talk about something else?" Cassandra exclaimed in a pained tone.

"You never know, Seeker," Varric said with a grin. "That might just end up in one of my books someday."

Cassandra threw up her hands and stalked forward. "The Venatori would be preferable to this," she muttered.

"Which brings us back to our purpose, true," Dorian noted. "That door over there is the last one we haven't opened. Hopefully we'll find our Captain of the mercenaries behind it."

Instead, they found a darkened hallway lined with more construction, mainly scaffolding and crates. Shaking his hand absentely, Dorian led the way down the hall, looking for doors between the towers of bound lumber and draped cloth. Just as he found a new one, a burst of foul language came from behind the door that ended with a rather colorful invective of a pox on all you pony Orlesian bastards! Dorian's eyebrows rose. "Now there's a mercenary if I've ever heard one, that's for certain," he mused, then gestured the others to follow as he burst through the doorway.

And directly into the sights of about a dozen archers, arrows already pulled back and waiting.
Instinctively he froze, and he heard his companions come to a halt behind him. A movement above caught his eye, in time for him to look up and see Florianne appear on the balcony above. Ah. Naturally.

"Inquisitor! What a pleasure! I wasn't certain you'd attend," Florianne said with a smug air. "You're such a challenge to read. I had no idea if you'd taken my bait."

Ignoring Bull's sour grunt, Dorian called up, "One of my little foibles, your Grace. I never met an ambush whose invitation I could refuse, particularly not yours."

Florianne smirked. "Such a pity. You could almost be Orlesian, if you were just a little quicker."

"And you could almost be Tevinter, if you were just a little less of a coward," he shot back.


Her hand tightened into a fist before she forced it to relax, but it was enough for him to know his blow, small as it was, had landed. "It was kind of you to walk into my trap so willingly. I was so tired of your meddling. Corypheus insisted that the Empress die tonight, and I would hate to disappoint him."

As she spoke, Dorian let his eyes casually wander, taking in their surroundings: a small courtyard, archers--and likely more than archers--and, glowing fitfully in the midst of it all, a locked rift. A glimmer of an idea formed in his head, suitably desperate to match his situation, but he forced himself to turn his attention back to Florianne. A villain deserved some attention to her soliloquy, after all, no matter their level of competence.

When her words reached their end, he decided to play for time, knowing the archers would tire the longer they had to keep their bows fully drawn, and for knowledge. "You taking out Celene, I can understand. She's the greatest barrier between yourself and the throne. But why does Corypheus want her out of the way?"

"She would never see the truth as I have," Florianne insisted. "Her death is a stepping stone on the path to a better world. Corypheus will enter the Black City and claim the godhood waiting for him. We will cast down the useless Maker and usher in a united world, guided by the hand of an attentive god."

"Didn't he already try to do that once and failed?" Varric muttered, only to be hushed by someone, most likely Cassandra.

Dorian ignored the comment, though he did slowly start moving his left hand behind his back so that he could give the signal to the others to be ready on his signal. "So he will get the heavens, and you will get the world, is that it?"

"But of course. I'll deliver the entire south of Thedas, and Corypheus will save me," Florianne told him. "Then when he ascends to godhood, I will rule all Thedas in his name."

"I think I've heard this play before," Dorian mused, even as he heard the shifting and rustling behind him that let him know his friends had seen his signal. "It's not too dissimilar from a story I would read in one of those copper-a-copy novels they sell outside the privies in Minrathous. Frame Gaspard in the death of a Council of Heralds Emissary. Kill Celene and then point the finger at your brother. After the Council votes to execute him for high treason, they'll have no one else to turn to for rulership than the last living heir to House de Chalons, and look! There you are, ready and willing to rule the Empire during this time of great tragedy and uncertainty." Dimming the flickering green in his left hand, he brought it to the front and began to clap slowly, noticing the tightness of her lips as
he did so and reveling in her irritation. "Brava, your Grace. Brava. And all you had to do was sell
your soul to a dark god."

It took her a visible moment of deep breathing to calm herself down enough to respond, and when
she did speak, her voice could have frozen Lake Calenhad. "Kill him and bring me his marked hand.
It will make a fine gift for the master." And with that, she turned on her heel and disappeared from
sight.

Dorian was already moving, however, tumbling forward and to the side in a desperate maneuver. His
gamble that the long time of holding the bowstrings taut paid off since only one arrow found its mark
in his leg. Ignoring the bite of pain, he rolled into a crouching position and unleashed his mark on the
rift, forcing it open with a burst of energy.

The archers fell back in surprise as demons poured from the rift, and Dorian's friends immediately
surged forward, beginning the three-way battle in earnest.

The world was nothing but chaos for a few moments. Dorian took a moment to break the shaft of the
arrow off and discard it before finding a more strategic position from which to continue his attacks.
The archers fell before them in about the same amount of time that the initial wave of demons met
their end, which meant they could concentrate on the second wave without distraction. This proved
to be a blessing in disguise as a bevy of greater demons descended upon them, howling and
gibbering.

Dorian, well aware of his vulnerability, kept to the edges of the battle and supported his friends from
afar as best as he could. In the midst of blasting a despair demon slowly wearing down the mobile
turret that was Blackwall, his world upended in a whirl of pain and rift magic. Blinking slowly, he
stared up at the terror demon as it screamed over him, raising his staff only just in time to block its
attack. The move cost him, however, as the demon's claw ripped the weapon from his hands. Dorian
held up one hand helplessly as the next attack ripped through his barrier, knowing there was no one
close enough to aid him and not enough time to stop a demon such as this with his already depleted
magic.

Suddenly a heavy body crashed into the terror demon, sword thrusting deep into its stringy torso as
his rescuer roared at the top of his lungs. Once he was safe, though, Dorian stared in astonishment at
the man--specifically, at the man's gleaming Chevalier armor. There was little artistry to the sword
strokes which cut down the demon, but Dorian had to admit that the brutality was effective. In
moments, the demon had collapsed and been pulled back into the Fade.

After the demon fell, the Chevalier turned to look at Dorian for a moment, and their eyes met. Again
a shock of recognition rang through Dorian, despite the fact he couldn't see the man's face. He just…
knew.

"Alistair," he whispered.

"Inquisitor! The rift!" Solas called from behind him, making Dorian turn for a moment. By the time
he looked back for the Chevalier again, the man was gone.

Cursing vociferously in Tevene, Dorian pushed himself to his feet. He didn't need his staff to close
the rift, thankfully, but it did need his full attention. After the wailing and gnashing of the Fade had
dimmed and the rift was gone, Dorian spared a last glance around the courtyard, hoping for a
glimpse of the Chevalier anywhere.

Instead, he saw a man tied up in a fetal position nearby. After blinking in surprise, Dorian limped
over to him. "You look like you could use some help there, my friend."
The man spat at the ground, then nodded hastily. As Dorian untied the knots around his bound wrists, he exclaimed, "Andraste's tits! What was all that? Were those demons? There aren't any more blasted demons coming, right?"

Dorian's eyebrows rose, and then he laughed as all the tension fled from him in one fell swoop. "I see you are an observant man, my friend. Those were definitely demons, and definitely disastrous."

"Maker bless me. Demons?" He looked around in fear. "How could there be demons in the fucking Winter Palace?"

"Right?" Bull demanded as he walked up to join them. "That's what I said. But nooo, the boss had to jinx us all and make a joke about it earlier." Dorian's glare made him subside, but not before he muttered, "Fucking demons," under his breath one more time.

The freed man, however, just shook his head. "I knew Gaspard was a bastard, but I didn't think he'd feed me to fucking horrors over a damned bill."

For a moment, Dorian felt worried. "Duke Gaspard lured you here?"

His momentary fear was dispelled immediately when the man said, "Well, his sister, but it had to come from him, didn't it?"

"Ah. Another pawn, another decoy, another deception, another betrayal. "And her little exchange with me?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Utter nonsense garbage. We both know Gaspard had to be the mastermind. He's the one who brought us into the Palace for the coup, you know." The mercenary grunted and crossed his arms over his chest. "The Duke wanted to move on the Palace tonight, but he didn't have enough fancy Chevaliers."

"Which is where you came in, hmm?" Dorian asked.

"Me and my men, yes. At triple our usual pay." The mercenary turned his head and spat on the ground. "Stinking, poncy cheesemongers."

Bull barked a loud laugh. "I like this guy, boss. Can we keep him?"

The comment gave Dorian pause as he studied the mercenary more closely for a moment. After a moment of consideration, he shrugged. "Why not?"

The mercenary's brow furrowed. "What's that?"

"Come join the Inquisition," Dorian said in a merry tone. "The pay's good, the ale's hearty, and we could always use a good mercenary company. Unlike the one we have now."

"Hey!" Bull protested, putting his hands on his hips. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, you're hiring, eh?" The mercenary looked Dorian up and down. "I'm game. Anything's better than this bullshit. Oh, and if you want me to talk to the Empress, or the court, or sing a blasted song in the chantry, I'll do it."

"Then it's a deal, my friend," Dorian said with a laugh. "Go find the Commander of the Inquisition forces, a fellow by the name of Cullen Rutherford, and he'll take care of all the details."

The mercenary nodded, then turned and stalked out of the courtyard, muttering to himself.
Apparantly *sinking, poncy cheesemongers* was the most complimentary of his descriptions for Orlesians.

The encounter put a smile on Dorian’s face, but that was the only respite before his leg buckled beneath him. "Oh, right," he said shakily as he reached up and pressed a hand to the arrowhead still embedded in his thigh. "I forgot."

The next minute or so were a blur of Vivenne's scathing lectures, Solas' dry commentary, and a melange of various potions. Eventually his strength returned, and he forced them away with a stern glare. "We don't have the time. Florianne could kill Celene any moment now."

That shut everyone up, and he let Bull drag him to his feet. After taking a moment to gain his bearings, Dorian took his staff from Varric and pointed. "The ballroom is that way. We'd best hurry."

During the time they spent racing to the ballroom, Dorian managed to revisit and reconsider every step of the path which had brought him there. Had he made his explorations too obvious? Had he misread the Orlesian nobles as he played the Game? Should he have stayed with his father instead of running off after the would-be assassin? These thoughts and others tumbled through his mind, and each one had to be wrestled with before being shoved ruthlessly aside. This was no time for doubt. Only for action.

By the time they finally found the door to the ballroom, conveniently barred shut from their side rather than the opposite, Dorian had a stitch in his side and had worked up a sweat. As he shrugged off his outer armor and threw it to Bull, he used a handkerchief to repair what damage he could and set his hair straight with a few licks of spit and magic. "There. I don't look like I've been running all over Orlais, do I?"

Vivienne considered him for a moment, then politely handed him another soft cloth. "A bit more work on your forehead, my dear."

Taking the advice to heart, Dorian looked around at the others as he attended to the matter. "Be ready, but don't take any precipitous action. I will decide how to handle it from here." Once his face was dry once more, he tucked the kerchief into a pocket and moved to the door. His magic lifted the heavy bar up and away, and he set his hand on the portal for a moment as he took a deep breath to collect his thoughts, then pushed it open.

Deciding it would be better to make a desultory entrance than a dramatic one, he slipped through the door as quickly as he could and joined the crowd that was obviously gathering to watch Celene's speech which would announce the start of the negotiations. He spotted a familiar mop of blond, wavy hair and moved towards it, keeping to areas of low light as much as possible. Everyone seemed calm, at least, and he could see Gaspard and Florianne speaking to each other in low voices, with Briala close behind them, as the court prepared for Celene's appearance.

He came up to stand next to Cullen, letting the man know he was there by gently nudging his arm. "I do hope I didn't miss anything important," he murmured.

Cullen started, then turned his head towards Dorian. "Thank the Maker you're back," he breathed. "The Empress will begin her speech soon. What should we do?"

"Wait here, Cullen," he said with a subtle wink. "I'm going to try the power of persuasion on our dear Grand Duchess."

"What? But… there's no time!" Cullen glanced towards the stage. "The Empress--"
"Trust me," Dorian said with a wink, then stepped forward with all the boldness he'd acquired in his many years of training to be a Magister of the Imperium. For all their machinations, Orlesians still didn't really hold a candle compared to a Magister. Most of them couldn't summon fire with their fingertips, for one. When he reached the bottom of the stairs going up to Celene's dais, he raised an arm and declared in a genial tone, "We owe the court one more dance, Your Grace."

She paused for a moment before turning to face him, her expression devoid of emotion. "Inquisitor." As she did so, Gaspard and Briala backed away, uncertainty in their demeanor.

Dorian made a soft *tsk*ing sound that only Florianne could hear as he ascended the stairs one slow step at a time. "Come now, Your Grace. Our audience is every noble in the Empire. Remember to smile, now. We're friends after all, are we not?"

A stiff smile bravely worked its way onto her face, but her body refused to cooperate as it backed away from him slowly. "Who would not be delighted to speak with you, Inquisitor?"

"Ah, now there's the thing, isn't it?" he said, raising his voice a bit. He slowly began to circle around, forcing Florianne to turn her back to her brother and the court one step at a time. It also forced her to slowly face the dais where Celene was now standing after emerging from the back room. "I do seem to recall you saying something about keeping me from reaching the ballroom. What was it now? Ah, yes. Because you needed time enough to strike."

Florianne's stiff smile turned into a grimace, but he knew she dared not run now. Of course, he also knew she was feeling the claws close in around her slowly, and he did not regret one moment of it.

Just to drive the lesson home, he raised his voice again, pitching it to carry this time. "Your archers in the garden failed, by the way. I'm still quite alive. I'm afraid they were not so fortunate, Your Grace." As the gasps and murmurs swept through the assemblage, he added, "I feared you wouldn't save me this last dance. Your last dance, Your Grace."

He saw Florianne's eyes flick up to look at where Celene stood, watching the little exchange, and knew he saw what everyone saw: Celene would not stop Dorian in his inquiries.

"Startling, isn't it, how easy it is to fall from high grace?" Dorian asked, moving closer with every spiraling step. This, of course, forced Florianne to keep turning to avoid facing him, which suited Dorian perfectly. He wanted her to be facing Gaspard during Dorian's next announcement, so that she could not twist away from the shock on her brother's face as he added, "You even framed your brother for the murder of a Council Emissary."

Once Florianne was facing the court once more, Dorian halted in place, making sure Celene could see him fully. "It was an ambitious plan, I'll grant you that. You arranged to bring all your enemies--Celene, Gaspard, almost all of the Council of Heralds--into one place under the guise of peace, when you had anything but that in mind. Remarkable."

Realizing that no one so far had stepped forward in her defense, Florianne finally tried to come to her own. "This is very entertaining, but surely you do not think anyone believes your wild stories?"

Dorian did not answer, instead turning his gaze to Celene, along with everyone else in the room.

Accepting the scrutiny with grace, Celene replied, "That will be a matter for a judge to decide, cousin."

In a fit of desperation, Florianne turned to her brother. "Gaspard? You cannot believe this! You know I would never..." Her voice trailed away as Gaspard silently raised his hands and backed
away, before turning around completely in a silent spurning. Her eyes widened as two members of the Imperial Guard moved past Gaspard towards her, their intent clear. "Gaspard?" she called again, to no avail.

For a bare moment, Dorian felt sympathy for the Grand Duchess. Then, of course, he remembered the still, silent forms of the servants lying dead in their own quarters, some of them in their own beds, and his face hardened. No. He would not feel sorry for her. Instead, he kept his expression stern as the Imperial Guards simply stood and stared her down until she dropped to her knees with a sob.

"Accept defeat with the dignity you did not display in victory, Your Grace," Dorian told her as the Imperial Guard hauled her to her feet. "At least that, you can rightfully claim as your own."

The court fell silent as Florianne was taken away, then burst into a cacophony of hissing conversations. Dorian knew that alliances were being sundered and reborn with different participants, that lives were being ruined and elevated. The sound simply drove home the fact that this night would have far-reaching consequences for many, and not just in Orlais.

And have the side effect of making Leliana's job that much more difficult.

In the midst of the controlled chaos, Dorian turned to Celene and gave her a bow. "Your Imperial Majesty, I believe we might benefit from a private conversation." He glanced back at the buzzing crowd, then added, "Elsewhere."

Celene inclined her head with a serenity few could match, given the circumstances, but Dorian did his best to match her. "But of course, Inquisitor."

Smile fixed on his face, Dorian braced himself as he led the way onto the veranda. And now the real work begins.

Gaspard and Briala were already bickering and pouring the blame on each other by the time Dorian and Celene emerged onto the balcony, even before the Imperial Guard took their place alongside Inquisition soldiers for protection. Dorian exchanged an amused glance with Celene, then moved over to watch the proceedings, keeping his expression mild and slightly bored until Gaspard and Briala had expended at least some of their frustrations. Inside, however, his mind had returned to polynomials--except this time, it was the final calculation adding up everything he'd learned, and what he would do with it.

He knew he could point his finger and drag any one of the three before him to the gallows. His wanderings had uncovered more than even he'd expected to find, and all the little facts and drips of knowledge slowly coalesced into the course he knew he must follow. As Celene declared, "For the safety of the empire, I will have answers," he straightened and stepped forward, giving them all a florid Orlesian bow.

"Well, since you're asking so nicely," Dorian drawled, "I will give them to you."

All three of them froze for a moment, as if they'd forgotten he was there, so he gave them time to turn their attention to him, waiting with a smile he had to admit was designed to be predatory. Here was where the efforts of his evening would bear fruit, whether or not he would regret his decisions later. "Now, where shall we begin? Perhaps with some good news first." He nodded towards Briala. "For one, I daresay Florianne would have emerged victorious without Briala's timely assistance tonight."

A look of surprise came to Celene's face, noticeable even despite the mask. "You were working together?"
"Of course," Briala said, her tone implying that any other option would have been too absurd to contemplate.

"You see, your Majesty, your cousin here has been quite the naughty boy," Dorian said, choosing language he knew would irritate Gaspard the most. "For one, his own mercenary captain will confirm that Gaspard paid for his services--at an outrageous price, by the way--to be used in the palace for a delightful little coup d'etat."

"Mercenaries?" Celene asked with a sneer. "So much for your Chevalier honor, cousin. I didn't expect you to stoop so low, even for the throne."

"Don't be naïve, Celene," Gaspard retorted. "The only difference between a mercenary and a common soldier is a uniform."

"And, apparently, the pay," Dorian put in.

When Gaspard's face darkened, Briala smirked and said, "Keep talking, Gaspard. Eventually you'll convince somebody."

"Ah, but let us not forget another strike against you, your Grace," Dorian put in. "You see, your Majesty, he also ordered his general to bring Chevaliers into the Winter Palace." Of course, thanks to the well-muscled soldier with the comical helmet, Dorian already knew that Celene was well aware of that aspect of the coup. Still, the Game demanded some theatre, and he was happy to feed it--as long as the results came out in his favor. "I don't believe you authorized that particular realignment of troops, did you, your Majesty?"

"It was a defensive choice," Gaspard grated. "I expected betrayal here, though not by my own sister." In those few words, Dorian heard the Duke's resignation to his fate.

"This was all a most tangled web to unweave, as you can imagine, Your Majesty," Dorian told Celene. "Briala's desire to protect you proved to be most valuable."

He saw Celene's gaze turn to Briala, and their eyes met for a moment before Celene faced Gaspard with a renewed look of determination on her face. "In light of overwhelming evidence, we have no choice but to declare you an enemy of the empire. You are hereby sentenced to death."

Harsh, but necessary, Dorian mused. Besides, Gaspard had earned his fate even before Dorian had stuck his flawless nose into everyone's business. Instead, Dorian's thoughts turned towards another matter, one which had been weighing heavily on him ever since he'd learned of the purging of the Alienage. That moment of eye contact between Celene and Briala, however, proved to be just enough to help him finalize his decision. "Since you are doling out justice, your Majesty, might I suggest a suitable reward for Briala? After all, she's been just as busy as I have."

Celene nodded graciously, her demeanor visibly softening as she looked at Briala once more. "I can scarcely believe you did all this for me."

Briala smiled, the expression hesitant but genuine. "Celene…"

As the Imperial Guards came to take Gaspard away, Celene turned back to Dorian, her composure restored. "Thank you, Inquisitor. For all your efforts tonight. I owe you my life, and Orlais owes you its future." With a gesture, she invited Dorian and Briala to follow her back inside. "You have done so much. For my people and…" she glanced at Briala, "for us."

Briala returned the glance. "We won't forget this."
"Ah, but the pleasure was entirely mine," Dorian said with a warm smile. The half-lie tumbled from his lips easily, leaving his expression unmarred by the burst of guilt that briefly took him. After all, the Game had not demanded that the two women be drawn back together, and Dorian could only hope that what they felt towards each other was enough to help Celene atone for the sins of her past. A lesser evil, but still an evil, and one which Dorian prayed fervently would ultimately be to the benefit of all. "Though I am curious what your first steps will be following this joyous reunification?"

The two women exchanged a long glance until Celene deferred the answer to Briala with a little nod of her head. "There will be some… changes to the court," Briala told Dorian.

"Not just the court," Celene interjected with a sly look to Briala.

"I'll pretend I didn't understand what you just implied, your Majesty," Dorian said with a low chuckle.

Celene smiled as she turned towards Dorian again. "Come, stand with us, Inquisitor. We must give the good news to the nobility."

Dorian gave a small sigh of relief as he fell in behind them. And hopefully, there won't be any more damned ambushes.

That urge to remain alert remained present, even as Celene gave a pretty little speech and declared Briala a Marquise while Dorian stood in a very obvious fashion next to them. Celene giving Briala a title was a lovely touch, and a promising one, but his eyes nevertheless scanned the crowd, just in case. He spoke only as necessary, preferring to make his support of the Empress through a smile and the careful placement of Inquisition soldiers around the ballroom than through any outright threats to send the nobles to their rooms without their dinners. When the empire didn't collapse as Celene ordered the festivities to commence, he allowed himself another little sigh of relief, then headed towards the nearest balcony and some fresh air.

Once outside, he leaned onto the railing with a louder sigh, half-listening to the cheers behind him as they settled down into the more normal murmur of excited conversation at a large event. His teeth suddenly tingled ever so slightly, however, and he turned his head to see Morrigan approaching him.

"My lady," he greeted her, though he couldn't quite bow as he had been doing all evening. His leg absolutely refused.

"The Orlesian nobility make drunken toasts to your victory, and yet you are not present to hear them?" she asked in an idle tone as she joined him at the railing. "Do you tire so quickly of their congratulations, Inquisitor? 'Tis most fickle, after all your efforts on their behalf."

"I tire of their inability to provide a suitable drink after all that effort," Dorian told her with an exaggerated sigh. "I would have thought Orlesians, at least, would have planned for sufficiently strong alcohol on a night of such import. You can be sure I will tell the gossip mongers in Val Royeaux of this scandalous oversight."

She laughed in a short, curtailed fashion that told him he'd caught her by surprise with his humor. "Indeed? Let us see if you take this piece of news as poorly." Lifting her chin, she said, "By Imperial decree, I have been named liaison to the Inquisition. Celene wishes to offer you any and all aid--including mine. Congratulations."

Dorian kept his surprise to a minimum, simply tilting his head a little as he scrutinized her closely. "Something tells me this isn't your idea," he mused.
"The assignment has been given to me, regardless of my personal interest." Morrigan's gaze flicked towards the door leading to the ballroom for a bare moment. "Celene knows you face an opponent who wields great magical power, which is far more important than her own curiosity."

"Not just one opponent, in truth." Dorian presented the statement as much to test as to inform, wondering if Morrigan was aware of the situation. When her shoulders tightened, he knew he need not elaborate. "I see that tidbit comes as no surprise."

"My experience will prove vital to the Inquisition, I assure you," Morrigan told him, "and you will require my knowledge if you are to defeat such magic--no matter the source. The foes you face are a threat to Orlais… and to myself. Thus I am not opposed to the appointment."

Giving her a nod of acknowledgment, Dorian said, "Excellent. We can discuss the particulars of your contributions once we are all ensconced once more in Skyhold, but for now…" He gave her the best bow he could, using the Tevinter style to bow at the waist rather than irritate his leg further. "Welcome to the Inquisition, Morrigan."

She smiled in response. "A most gracious response. I shall meet you at Skyhold."

As she walked away, Dorian leaned against the railing once more. Not moving sounded good right about now, he decided, then gauged the railing to decide if the width was sufficient to support him if he took a quick nap.

The sound of sturdy footsteps approaching didn't really register until he heard Cullen's voice from his right. "There you are! Everyone's looking for you."

It was, thankfully, a voice guaranteed to warm the cockles of his heart. That, and birth a burst of mischief along the way. "I ran into the Lady Mantillon again," he told Cullen. "She said she had twelve daughters, and was wondering if you were still available."

Cullen's eyes widened in evident alarm. "I thought she was looking for a tenth husband."

"Ah, you spoke with her, did you?"

"Yes," Cullen said, glancing back towards the ballroom with an uneasy expression. "She said I looked like her fourth husband."

"That would be Maximilian." Dorian shook his head as he leaned forward to stretch his back using the railing. "A delightful woman, but arguably best appreciated from a few hundred miles away."

"I couldn't agree more," Cullen said fervently. With a shudder, he absently placed his hand on the small of Dorian's back and joined him on the railing. "Things have calmed down for the moment. Are you all right?"

The touch was soothing, enough that Dorian allowed himself a long sigh. "If I get ambushed one more time tonight, I refuse to be held responsible for the consequences," he declared. "And I'm swearing off those disgusting red potions for at least as long as it takes for that horrid aftertaste to go away."

Cullen chuckled as his hand began to move in a circular motion on Dorian's back. "It has been a long night, yes. I'm glad it's over." He leaned in a bit closer. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that you survived the night. That we survived the night."

"There were a couple of nail biting moments here or there," Dorian admitted, deciding not to tell Cullen about the near-miss with the demon and the probable identity of his rescuer. He preferred to
keep that in a little box for now and deal with it later. "At least we won. The day was saved, snatched from the jaws of yet another cliché."

"By you," Cullen said with a smile. "That's no small accomplishment."

"By us," Dorian corrected. "Or rather, the Inquisition. There is no single hero here."

"Mhmm. Whatever you say." A smile came to Cullen's face, and he glanced towards the ballroom before looking at Dorian with a twinkle in his eye. "You know," he murmured, "I may never have another chance like this, so I must ask." Stepping back, he offered Dorian a surprisingly proper bow with his hand held out. "May I have this dance?"

Dorian blinked once or twice. "I thought you left a swath of broken hearts behind you because no one could persuade you to dance."

"I suppose it depends on the partner." His hand remained steady, awaiting an answer.

"I… wish I could," Dorian said with a sigh. "But I'm afraid I'd collapse halfway through."

Taking Dorian's hand in his own, Cullen drew him away from the railing. "Just a few steps then. We don't have to go far."

Intrigued, Dorian let Cullen cajole him into his arms. The feel of Cullen's arm around his waist and the heat of his nearness did a great deal towards dimming the slowly building headache he'd been trying to ignore. Then Cullen's words finally sank into his bemused brain. "Go far? What do you mean?"

"I just want to get us out of sight of the doorway," Cullen murmured, even as he gently twirled Dorian away from the light shining through the entryway to the ballroom.

"A bit of privacy would be welcome," Dorian admitted. "I feel like everyone has been watching me all—" Before he could finish the thought, however, Dorian found his back shoved against the wall, and his lips claimed for a heated kiss. The surprise quickly melted into something entirely different, and Dorian's hands sank into the wavy blond hair with as much strength as he had remaining. It was evident before the first kiss ended that something had snapped within Cullen. Suddenly he couldn't seem to get enough of Dorian as he alternated between deep, fervent kisses and grazing his lips along Dorian's mustache and jaw and neck. His hands settled on Dorian's hips and stayed there, holding Dorian close to him as his lips wandered freely. After the initial wave of pleasure, however, the sudden passion both confused and worried Dorian. This wasn't normal for Cullen, after all. After an intense minute or so of delicious desperation, Cullen finally let his head rest on Dorian's shoulder as he panted in short, quick breaths. Dorian recognized internal turmoil when he saw it, so he simply stroked Cullen's hair with a gentle touch, letting the man know that he was here for him. Something was happening deep down inside Cullen's mind, and Dorian could wait for the man to come up for air on his own.

When Cullen did finally lift his head, he cupped Dorian's face with one hand and claimed a gentle kiss before pulling back. His eyes roamed over Dorian's face as his thumb stroked Dorian's cheek, until finally their eyes met once more. "Promise me," Cullen said in a voice a hair away from trembling. "promise me, that I will not lose you, too."

And suddenly it all made sense: Cullen's sudden passion, his roving touch, and even more his sudden and inexplicable panic attack. When Cullen had seen Dorian lying on the ground, unmoving and unresponsive, it wasn't just Dorian that he'd seen. For all that Dorian had been present at Mailani's
death, he'd heard about how Cullen had been there to find her body, and the spiral of grief and despair that sight had sent him into--a spiral which had only ended when he'd shoved Dorian into the wall outside the war room. Dorian's expression softened as he settled his hand on the nape of Cullen's neck, playing idly with the curls he found there. "I'm afraid you can't get rid of me that easily," he murmured.

Cullen took a long, shuddering breath, then pulled Dorian into an embrace that was almost too tight before releasing as quickly as he'd pulled him in. "Thank you."

A smile carried a curl of Dorian's mustache upwards and into the path of Cullen's wandering thumb. "You are welcome." For a moment, all he wanted to do was stare into Cullen's warm eyes and let the world drift gently away around them. Certainly Cullen's fit of frenzy had roused him in ways that a mere dance couldn't have, but there were few places less suited to pursuing those passions than a corner of a balcony outside a crowded ballroom in the Winter Palace at Halamshiral. Besides, Dorian found himself enjoying the presence more than the activity, and that in itself was a glorious mystery he wanted to explore.

A word hovered on his lips, a word which had slowly been working its way to the forefront for quite some time--ever since Adamant, in fact. As Dorian debated yet again whether this was the moment he would utter it, the sound of someone delicately clearing their throat caught his attention, and he tore his gaze away from Cullen to find Leliana and Josephine waiting quietly in the shadows next to the entryway. Leliana's expression hovered between apologetic and amused, whereas Josephine simply looked fascinated.

Cullen quickly pulled back, looking more abashed than embarrassed. "My apologies, ladies. I, ah, forgot."

"What's this, then?" Dorian asked mildly.

"We asked the Commander to let you know we needed to have a quick meeting before leaving the Winter Palace," Leliana noted, amusement finally winning out as she held up a piece of paper. "Charter brought me this just as the Empress declared victory. Apparently it was left in one of our agreed upon drop points here in the Winter Palace, but there are no agent markings upon it."

Dorian frowned. "That's… odd."

"It's more than odd, it's worrying," Leliana corrected. "It means someone knew who to watch to learn the locations of our information drops."

Dorian straightened and pushed away from the wall. "Like the map that marked the ambush," he said.

"And that almost proved disastrous," Cullen pointed out in a too-grim voice.

"It didn't, though," Dorian mused thoughtfully. "What does the note say?"

"This one?" Leliana asked, then shook her head and held it out to Dorian. "Nothing. It has an image on it, but I don't know what it means."

Taking the paper from her, Dorian stared at it thoughtfully. "I've seen this before, and not too long ago. Ah. Of course." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out the paper Varric had found in the hilt of Hawke's dagger. "There. This paper has the same mark on it."

"That would make sense, Leliana," Cullen said slowly. "Hawke would know who our agents were."
"And he didn't look like himself," Dorian added, realizing that no one else would have seen him close enough to notice. "His hair was blond. All the scars were gone from his face and neck. Oh, and he'd shaved. Or been shaved, knowing Amell."

Cullen frowned. "I wonder why the change."

"Anonymity, most likely. Hawke is fairly well known, after all, thanks to Varric's books." Frowning, Dorian took the paper from Leliana and compared it to the one in his hand. "The same mark, but blank otherwise. I think. The lighting isn't very accommodating out here." Balancing the paper between the fingers of one hand, he summoned a small fire to his fingertips and held it a careful distance away from the papers. As he did so, letters suddenly bloomed into view, and Dorian's eyes widened. "Heat activated ink? Is that possible?"

"Possible, yes," Leliana said, "It's generally not used because even body heat can reveal it if kept next to the skin."

"Perhaps that's what he intended," Dorian said, eyes scanning the words as his controlled flame brought them into being. "He says that Amell is obsessed with a place called the Shrine of Dumat, and equally obsessed with making sure we don't go there." Suddenly Dorian’s eyes widened as enlightenment dawned. “Dumat. Of course. Hawke wrote, ‘Find me in silence.’ Dumat was the Old God of Silence. That's what Hawke meant.”

Cullen frowned. "Isn't that the place you told us about, Leliana? The one Calpernia mentioned in those crystals?"

"Yes, Commander. According to the messages, only Dumat's faithful can enter it." She frowned as she plucked the first paper from Dorian's hand and read it again. "It must be the ruins of which I spoke, although I'd have to return to Skyhold to verify its location."

"Or perhaps not," Dorian murmured as he turned his fiery finger onto the second paper. "Behold." Her eyes widened as she saw not words, but lines and curves appear on the second paper. "A map."

"How much would you want to wager it would lead us straight to the Shrine?" Dorian asked with a grin.

"The question is, should we?" Cullen's face darkened at the thought. "It sounds like another ambush to me."

"Except Hawke went out of his way to keep me alive," Dorian mused. "That dagger, the glowing one. What happened to it?"

"I believe Seeker Cassandra still has it," Cullen said.

"I'd like to examine—" He paused as another figure rushed out onto the balcony, his shoulders tensing as all other thoughts fled. "Felix?"

"Felix?" Leliana echoed, eyes widening.

"It's about your father, Dorian," Felix said, trying to catch his breath. "Magister Tilani says you'd best come quickly."

And suddenly it all came rushing back, the part of the night which, more than any other, he'd ruthlessly stamped down into a tiny little box inside his mind to be dealt with later: more than being stabbed, more than seeing innocents killed, more than learning that Hawke and Alistair still lived as
Amell's pawns. His eyes widened as he remembered his father lying on the floor in a pool of blood, knowing the arrow had been meant for him and feeling the chill echo of his mother's murder once more seeping over him. Swallowing harshly, he took a deep breath as he stepped forward. "Take me to him."

After all, it was finally later.
"Wake up."

You wake up coughing and sputtering, nose and mouth full of water and bile. Your head throbs with the implacable beating of the rhythmic pulse, overwhelming your other senses for a moment. In the next moment, pain sets in as you become aware of a multitude of cuts and burns, all of recent origin, and all inflicted in the name of punishment. As you try to catch your breath, you squint through the water running down your face at Zevran, trying to ignore just how much blood is mixed in with that water.

The elf tosses aside the bucket of water he'd used to rouse you and reaches out to grab your jaw with his hand, squeezing painfully. You instinctively struggle against the hold, but the ropes binding you to the cross frame used for your torture refuse to budge. "Wake. Up," the elf snarls. "I'm not done with you."

And then he raises the whip again.

The pounding pulse sets into your mind as you struggle to pull yourself away from Hawke's mind. The revelation that it has been Hawke all along has turned what had been tragic but distant into something far more intimate and horrifying. You cannot help but feel the heavy burden of guilt, of knowing that Hawke and Alistair have suffered as they have in part because of the sacrifice they made for you. Through sheer strength of will you erect a thin veneer between your mind and his, but you will not block him out entirely—not even for your own sanity. The thought persists that perhaps you can help him, somehow.

You owe him that much.

Hawke braces himself against the blows as best as he can before they land, striving to ignore the bursts of pain. It is getting harder, of course. The longer the punishment drags on, the angrier Zevran becomes as his victim refuses to react, sparking even harsher treatment. No mercy can be begged, and no surcease given, not even that of being knocked unconscious, but Hawke accepts each blow with a grim fatalism. In an odd way, the 'perfection' he'd received from Avernus aids him now, turning the pain and blood into a twisted sort of stamina. The main difficulty remains in trying to ignore the sound of his blood dripping onto the floor.

"How could you both have failed so badly?" Zevran demands, clearly in a frenzy himself. "Perhaps I should have left the Orlesians to you, and taken the Inquisitor for myself."

:Never:

The ferocity of that emotion catches you by surprise, a spark of warmth amidst the cold of Hawke's pain. Even in the throes of Amell's madness and control, Hawke cannot bear to think of you at their
mercy—though you notice he shies away from exploring why it is so important—but the sheer power of the emotion underlying the why takes you by surprise.

On the tail-end of that emotion, a surge of self-loathing washes over Hawke, and for a moment you see through his eyes as, in his mind, he again drives his blade home in your side. It proves difficult to wade through the morass of emotions, but you see enough to understand a little better what was in his mind in that moment, to see the fear that Zevran would kill you if Hawke didn't pretend to do so first. Considering how events played out, it was the correct, if utterly ruthless, choice, and one for which you have already forgiven him. It is clear, however, that he has not forgiven himself—that, perhaps, he never will.

You only wish you could talk to Hawke about it, and about the specific feelings for you he keeps trying so desperately to deny.

:They will never have him:

"Then why didn't you?" Hawke grates between his teeth, though he already knows the answer. Even Amell wasn't completely immune to a clever tongue, and Hawke had taken deliberate advantage of that, regardless of the pain and humiliation in doing so. Through that manipulation Hawke had arranged one more opportunity to see the man who meant so much to him, despite knowing what the punishment would be when he failed the mission.

At least he has the memory of Dorian's lips against his own one last time.

The intimacy of the thought stands out in direct contrast to the brutality of the punishment, and the quiet fervency in the manner that Hawke clings to the memory renders you strangely humbled. You recall the absolute determination which Hawke showed when he spoke of ensuring Alistair's freedom, and decide to use that as your guide for you own vow, to ensure Hawke also finds it as well.

You also make another, less altruistic vow: that it would not be the last time your lips touched his, even if it is only a kiss to welcome him back from the Void.

The whip pauses its barrage in response to Hawke's question, right before Zevran's fist lashes out and lands a blow across the face which rocks him back. "I do not question the Master. Still, you are not the only one who failed."

Hawke curses silently as Zevran starts to turn away, and quickly tries to attract Zevran's attention again. "I thought you weren't done with me yet."

Zevran snorts. "Oh, don't worry, little bird. I'll return to you soon enough. But I wouldn't want to neglect my favorite, would I?"

Fighting against his bonds, Hawke watches helplessly while Zevran walks over to the other cross frame in the room, occupied by another bruised and bloodied victim. Zevran grabs a fistful of dark blond hair and yanks Alistair's head up, pressing the bottom of the whip's handle into Alistair's throat in a way Hawke recognizes all too well. As Alistair's breathing grows labored, Zevran croons, "You had one task: stand in your pretty Chevalier armor and look menacing until my deed was done. And you couldn't even do that." As Alistair's eyes roll up in his head, Zevran sneers and pulls his whip away. "Useless."

"Killing them will not absolve you, slave."

An atavistic shudder shakes Hawke's body as he looks to the doorway of the abandoned ramshackle
hut Zevran had stolen for the purpose of pain, trying unsuccessfully to blink away the blood dripping down his face. Amell stands silhouetted there, the light of the setting sun granting his shadow an uneasy reddish hue accented by the aura of the red lyrium skull atop his staff. The matching glow emanating from within his hood completes the sinister image, though Hawke studiously avoids staring at the eyes as best as he can.

He dares not fall into that trap again.

Still, Amell's words alert Hawke that the monster has returned, putting him on high alert. Hawke’s time in Kirkwall had been partly an education in possession, after all, and he has become well familiar over the last few weeks with the signs of warning from Amell. As his cousin steps into the room, Hawke's eyes narrow as he picks them out: one shoulder slightly higher than the other, the sonorous timbre in his voice, and the ever so subtle limp which mars his step. Finally Hawke dares a glance at the eyes, and sees his worst fear confirmed: one of them is dimmer than the other.

More than any of those, however, it is the use of the word slave which clinches the identification. Whatever twisted form of love exists between Amell and Zevran, Hawke's cousin would never call Zevran a slave, even when he treats him like one.

:Maker:

Hawke's inner revelations leave you momentarily stunned, and also puzzled. As the eldritch energy you noticed previously washes over the room, you scrutinize Amell closely, trying to discern any hint of the Fade about the man, and find nothing. Even a tenuous investigation with the Anchor finds no hint of spirit or demon about the man, yet you cannot shake the feeling that Hawke is right. The change in Amell is too stark, too sudden, to be anything but another entity.

Which begs the question: which entity?

:Maker preserve us:

Hawke sees the change in Zevran, as well, watching as the elf shifts from abused lover to fearful servant. "Master, I--"

That is all he is allowed before Amell slams the butt of his staff into the ground and points his opposite hand at Zevran. A sickly red light suddenly surrounds the elf, who shrieks in pain as the arcing energy flickers and glows around him. "Do not call me that," Amell said in a dark tone. "You are no longer worthy to call me that. The failure of these two will be punished, but their success, though anticipated, is not vital to my plans. There will be other days and other ways to acquire what I need from the Inquisitor."

Hawke’s blood freezes in his veins as Amell’s gaze flickers to the two bound men, then dismisses them immediately to bore into Zevran once more. "But you… You are an assassin, trained by one of the greatest guilds in Thedas, or so you claimed. You were meant to blunt the efforts of that idiot Sethius and drive all of Orlais into chaos beyond retrieval. Yet you could not even strike the first blow. I required the fall of the House de Chalons, and have nothing to show for it."

And suddenly, the realization hits you: in this context, in that specific usage, there is no denying that Amell must be referring to Corypheus by the name of Sethius. You are familiar enough with the history of the Imperium to know that Corypheus means nothing more than the Conductor, a shortening of his full title of the Conductor of the Choir of Silence, and certainly not his name. You recall Maevaris mentioning she’d tried to hunt down something to confirm or deny Corypheus' claim to be the same Conductor which helped to bring the Blights upon the world, but you'd never been able to pursue the matter yourself. Could it be that Amell had investigated and discovered the name
in the Imperium archives for himself?

Yet, if that were true, why does he speak of Corypheus as if he is a peer? Or, if Hawke is right, why does the entity within Amell speak of Corypheus in such a fashion?

"Master, please," Zevran sobs, then screams and collapses to the floor as Amell's hand squeezes into a tight fist. "I did not fail with the Commander!"

Amell's fist opens slightly, giving Zevran a brief respite as he mulls that over. "You are sure he drank all of it?"

"Every drop, Master," Zevran pants. "I watched him drink it myself."

Leaving his staff with its tip embedded in the ground, Amell stalks towards the elf, reaching down with his burned left hand to haul him to his knees. "Very well. I will hold my final judgment of you in abeyance. But fail me again, and I will have no choice but to ensure your worth."

Clearly desperate, Zevran reaches up and wraps his arms around Amell’s hips, clinging tightly. "Amor, please! Come back to me!"

For a moment, the two men become so still that Hawke wonders if they are somehow frozen in time. Then Amell suddenly straightens, right hand clutching at his chest where something glows brightly enough to shine through his robes. Taking a deep breath, he looks down at Zevran as the glow slowly fades. "We are running out of time," he says softly.

Zevran reaches up to touch Amell's face with his fingertips, nodding and blinking rapidly. "I know, amor."

"We have to get to the Shrine of Dumat. I need to speak to--" Amell stops, then takes a deep breath. Abruptly he pulls Zevran up into a savage kiss, and for once there is no blood on their lips when they part. "Release me."

Zevran does so hastily, scrabbling back as Amell regains his feet. With a gesture he calls his staff to him, and Hawke instinctively tenses as he sees that baleful gaze fall on him.

"So," Amell says as he moves to stand in front of Hawke. "It would seem you did not obey me, despite all your protestations of loyalty before we went to the Winter Palace." Hawke barely has time to register the shiver of magic that runs down his spine before his body locks into place so tightly that each breath is a struggle. With a little smile, Amell strokes Hawke's face, then draws his finger up to rest lightly on Hawke's forehead. "You had one directive, cousin: render the Inquisitor powerless. I spent weeks on the spell for that arrow which found the wrong target, and slaved over the dagger you were to use to bring me the mark as your trophy. Do I ask too much of you?"

You shiver, noting very clearly that, unlike Zevran, Amell doesn't mention killing you—only rendering you powerless. Somehow, all things considered, that seems far, far worse than a simple assassination. You also realize it goes a long way to explain what happened to your father.

The anger and grief swells within you, but you quickly push it down. You will deal with that when you awaken.

Hawke tries to swallow, but finds himself unable to do even that. Whatever Amell wants from him, it isn't an answer.

"From what I saw in my far-seeing before coming here, the Inquisitor is alive and well, and you return to us empty-handed." Amell's fingertip wanders down Hawke's face until it rests on his cheek.
"I feel as if I've been too lenient with you, cousin. You seem to take punishment rather well after Avernus had his way with you, however, so that seems a pointless avenue to pursue. I need you whole for another task I have in mind, so that prevents other types of corrective measures. Yet I still believe there is a way to fully demonstrate that your behavior at the Winter Palace was unacceptable."

Frozen in place and suddenly terrified, Hawke only hears the distant thudding of his heart as Amell shuffles to the side, his fingers trailing a path from where they rested on Hawke's cheek down to his lower stomach, fingers curling through the short hairs they find there with a gentle touch.

Considering the treatment Hawke received from Zevran earlier, even the barest touch of Amell's fingers awaken agony, and his skin crawls as Amell toys with hairs meant to be played with only by a lover.

As his fingers slowly stroke their way lower, Amell leans in close and puts his lips next to Hawke's ear. "I wish I could visit unto you the consequences of failing your duty in a suitably direct manner, but as I said, I need you whole. On the other hand..." A tendril of magic shifts the angle of Hawke's head until he is looking directly to where Alistair still hangs, tightly bound, on his cross frame.

Hawke's heart clenches and skips a beat as he sees Zevran standing next to Alistair, holding a familiar two-bladed dagger--the only thing left of Hawke's life as Champion. A cold sensation consumes him as he sees the sadistic grin on Zevran's face, and a strangled noise comes from his mouth as he struggles wildly against the spell holding him in place. In the end, however, Hawke can only watch as Zevran smirks and uses Hawke's own dagger to carefully cut a thin line across Alistair's forearm. For a moment, Zevran meets Hawke's gaze, clearly making sure that he is watching, as a half-smile comes to his lips.

Then, with a savagery Hawke knows he will not soon forget, Zevran raises the blade high over his head and slams the blade into the freshly inscribed cut, grinding down until he hits bone.

That rouses Alistair from his pain-induced stupor, making him scream and thrash against Zevran while the elf saws through the rest of his arm. The elf ignores the man's whining and concentrates on his task with an almost gleeful expression on his face. Hawke tries to scream along with his friend, but again only a strangled noise emerges from his throat as Zevran finishes his butcher's work, then presents the severed limb to Amell with a charming smile.

"I will not fail you again," Zevran declares in a hoarse, broken voice.

The horror of the moment drives you out of Hawke's mind, the ever-present pulse booming loudly as you try to deny what just happened. You struggle to blunt the gut-wrenching, searing agony of guilt which settles into Hawke's soul as Zevran flaunts his macabre prize, and you wonder if you will ever be able to forget the insane expression on that blood flecked face, or the screams echoing off the walls.

Somehow, you don't think so.

The separation does not last for long, however, though for the first time you feel as if you are being pushed back into Hawke's mind.

Amell steps back from Hawke long enough to take the offering from Zevran. Without a change in expression, he turns and strikes his cousin full across the face with Alistair's hand. Once, twice, then another and another, each time leaving more and more blood behind. Somewhere in the middle of the beating, the spell of paralysis holding Hawke in place drops, but he doesn't even notice as the stomach-wrenching horror continues. Eventually an audible crack fills the air as Hawke's nose gives way before the onslaught, and Amell finally relents. "And that is why you do not disobey me," Amell
tells Hawke in a harsh voice. "Do you understand?"

By that point, the world is a contorted, blurry mess for Hawke, and the pain of his nose only makes it harder for him to nod. He does anyway, though, afraid of what would happen to Alistair next if he doesn't. "Yes, Master," he wheezes, even though using the word leaves a foul taste in his mouth.

Of course, that might just be the blood.

"Tie off the fool's arm to slow the bleeding until I can heal him, then throw this trash away," Amell says, handing the limb back to Zevran. "Alistair still has another arm if I need to repeat the lesson, after all."

"Yes, amor," Zevran says quickly, and Hawke dimly hears the elf scurry away.

As the door closes behind Zevran, Amell smiles and strokes Hawke's cheek once more. "I do not wish to hurt you, cousin," he says softly, "but I also cannot have you fail me again. I see now that I put too much upon you, expecting a Champion to be greater than an Inquisitor. That will not happen again, I assure you. But fret not. I will make you greater." He reaches out and splays his hand across Hawke's chest, pressing hard until Hawke's limited breath is almost completely suppressed. "But remember, my little bird: birth is a painful process."

Suddenly the world is nothing but a burning pain which starts with Amell's touch and dances down through every nerve and fibre of Hawke's being. He yearns to scream, to struggle, to do anything but wait in desperation for the pain to diminish. His eyes squeeze shut as the agony grows worse and worse, until the world fades away entirely.

He floats in that darkness for a few moments, slowly becoming aware that he is not truly asleep, and he is not truly alone. In desperation he reaches out,

and you quickly grasp his hand, squeezing it tightly

_and he knows that someone cares, even if he doesn't know who it is. For the moment, it is enough.

For the moment.

But that moment is all you will have as you feel a hand land on your shoulder and pull you away.

"That is enough. Wake up."

Dorian jerked awake with a violence befitting the nature of the dream he'd just endured, falling from the chair which had served as a makeshift bed onto the floor and fighting the urge to empty his stomach. Now that the emotional distance of slumber had been removed, he felt each and every torment visited upon Hawke and Alistair with a new light and a new guilt, the horror fresh as the events of the dream play in front of his mind in a swift, compressed fashion. How long he remained curled up on the floor, reeling as he attempted to process everything he'd seen, he never knew, but it seemed an eternity.

Eventually he pushed himself to his knees and settled his elbows on the bed, careful not to disturb its occupant. With a soft groan, he rested his head on his wrists, unable to comprehend the sheer evil he'd witnessed. He knew he shouldn't dwell upon it, but he found it difficult to simply push it aside when it involved those who had sacrificed themselves for the sake of the Inquisition.

When a hand gently touched his head, he started and looked up, staring at the man lying in the bed. His father had returned to sleep by the time Dorian had reached the inn after leaving the Winter
Palace, but that meant he’d been able to have a long, uninterrupted talk with Maevaris. The talk had been sobering, but nothing in it had truly prepared him for the oddly blank expression on Halward’s face, as devoid of emotion as Maevaris had warned him. Being told what had happened to his father hadn’t prepared him in the slightest for seeing the reality of it himself.

"Are you in pain?” The tone, the words…there was not a single ounce of concern or care there. It was a factual inquiry, nothing more.

Dorian forced a smile onto his face. "No. I had a bad dream, Father. That's all. I'll be fine in a moment."

"Those can be distressing, from what I remember." Halward closed his eyes. "It is good you are awake, then."

"Yes. Yes, it is good." Pushing himself back into the chair, Dorian reached out and took Halward's hand. "How are you feeling, Father?"

"There is pain in my shoulder when I move it," Halward observed.

Dorian hesitated for a moment, then said, "Does that make you mad? That someone hurt you?"

"Should it?"

Swallowing harshly, Dorian said, "Most would be at least a bit miffed by an arrow in the shoulder, I would imagine."

"Ah." Halward's brow furrowed. "You think I should be angry."

"I--I just mean that you should feel something," Dorian murmured.

"I feel discomfort. That is something," Halward pointed out.

Logically, that was true, but only logically. "Yes. That is something." Dorian pressed his lips together for a moment. "The arrow was meant for me."

"I know. That is why I pushed you from its path," Halward said calmly. "It was the best decision."

"The most logical one," Dorian whispered. "And there was no other reason?"

Halward hesitated. "That I do not remember," he said finally, then closed his eyes and relaxed his head into his pillow. "I tire."

"Then you should sleep," Dorian put Halward's hand back on the blanket. "I will see you in the morning." He watched as his father's breathing slowed into slumber, then bowed his head. He would have preferred a return to the cold and distant Halward of his youth, or another shouting match about Dorian's refusal to marry, to...to this.

He wondered how far those feelings were from wishing his father had been killed by that arrow instead, and violently shoved the thought away.

Pushing himself to his feet, he stumbled to the door and stepped out into hallway of the inn, unable to endure the direction of that particular thought. As he closed the door to the room, he leaned his head against it and took a shuddering breath. The nightmare, and seeing his father's condition for himself, combined into a weight which threatened to drag him into a pit of despair difficult to escape. He didn't want to be alone, not after that.
He could only hope Cullen would understand.
Cullen woke from a fitful sleep at the sound of a tentative knock. Acting without thought, he shoved the blankets aside and raced to the door to pull it open. Before Dorian could do more than blink, Cullen reached out and pulled him into the room. "Are you all right?" Cullen asked as he shut the door, then took Dorian's face between his hands. "Did something happen?"

Dorian's face was a study of emotion, flitting through a series of minute expression changes before settling on bemusement. "I don't think I've ever seen your hair quite that mussed."

"My--" Cullen reached up to his unruly curls, made worse by his tossing and turning of the night before, then shook his head. "Blame Orlais. It's been damp."

"It's charming," Dorian murmured, then leaned in for a soft kiss. "Also, hello."

Immediately Cullen felt a bit sheepish. "Hello," he said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Ah. I've been worried about you, is all."

"I noticed." Dorian reached up and took both of Cullen's hands in his own. "I hope I'm not imposing."

"Of course not," Cullen assured him. In all honesty, he had no idea what time it was, other than night. "I am here for you, I promise."

A smile came to Dorian's face. "Good. Because I need someone right now, and I'd prefer it be you."

Turning Dorian's hands over, Cullen planted a kiss in both palms before looking up to meet Dorian's gaze. "What do you need from me?"

"Well, for one, a comfortable seat would be nice," Dorian admitted. "I fell asleep on the chair next to Father's bed and seem to have developed a dreadful crick in my neck."

"Then I'll do you one better." Cullen tugged Dorian to the incredibly Orlesian one-armed sofa near the bathroom. "Here. This is the softest thing to sit on in this room, perfect for you to relax on while I work on your shoulders."

"What? My Commander, noticing such things as creature comforts instead of only the practical things in life?" Dorian asked in a mock-surprised voice. "Whatever will people say?"

"Hush, you," Cullen said with a chuckle. "Sit down while I fetch a few things." Leaving Dorian for a moment, Cullen moved to the bureau and pulled a few supplies out of it, then grabbed the water pitcher and a glass on the way back. As he settled everything on a small table next to the chaise, he said, "That should be most of what I need." He considered Dorian thoughtfully for a moment, then shook his head. "But first we need to get that off."

Dorian's eyebrow rose. "Get what off, exactly?"
"Your tunic, of course. You've been wearing it long enough, and I can't rub your shoulders through all that anyway." Not that he could deny he had other, ulterior motives for the request. It had been less than a day ago that he'd seen a dagger sprouting from Dorian's side, and he wanted to reassure himself that Dorian wasn't trying to make light of any lingering wounds.

A small inner voice pointed out that it was also more than *that*, as well, and Cullen knew it. That moment when he'd seen Dorian lying in a pool of blood on the ground with a dagger in his side still haunted him. He needed to be close to Dorian-- *had* needed to be close to Dorian ever since that moment, but one thing or another had reared its ugly head to prevent enough time to truly assure himself that Dorian was safe.

And, more importantly, to be as close to Dorian in all ways as he possibly could be.

Thankfully Dorian wasn't in his normal outfit, or Cullen suspected they would have had to spend a few minutes just undoing the buckles. As it was, the formal uniform only needed a few ribbons tugged loose and some buttons undone before Cullen was able to ease it off over Dorian's head. "There we are. Now let's get you set up right..." Guiding Dorian to lie on his stomach and cross his arms for a headrest on the slightly raised arm of the chaise, Cullen moved to stand at Dorian's head and retrieved the oil bottle. "Let's work on that neck, shall we?"

As Cullen poured some of the lotus oil onto his hands, Dorian asked, "I have to ask: why do you happen to have oil for this?"

"Oil is necessary to maintain arms and armor," Cullen explained. "Any good soldier will always have some in their kit."

"Oh." Dorian sounded disappointed. "That's rather... pedestrian."

"Why else would I have it?" Cullen asked absently, even as his hands found Dorian's neck and began to smooth the oil over his skin.

Dorian chuckled even as he leaned his head forward a bit. "I rather think I shouldn't answer that. It might reveal too much about me."

Cullen's hands slowed, then stopped completely as his mind puzzled through the words before arriving at the most likely answer for such an odd response. "Oh." He felt his ears redden and cleared his throat. "Well... Ah. That's... not an unheard use, either. Especially after a long or dangerous battle, when you feel like you're lucky to be alive. Fighting really gets the blood pumping."

When Dorian half-turned his head to glance up at him with a twinkle in one eye, Dorian asked, "Do you speak from personal experience, Commander?"

The heat in his ears burned a bit hotter. "I thought you wanted to talk."

Cullen felt Dorian's muscles tense under his fingers. "I do, but I wouldn't mind a little distraction first."

"And you think my tales of past encounters with lotus oil will somehow help with that?"

"Oh, you have no idea," Dorian told him, his voice suddenly the epitome of sultry.

*Maker.* Cullen cleared his throat before answering, determined not to let Dorian lead him *too* far astray from the real reason for his visit. "Well, I never used it in company after a fight, no. It was more stress release than anything, a reminder than I was alive and the demons were gone. And of course, sometimes it was... necessary after an encounter with a desire demon. At least, when I was
younger. Before the Blight." He frowned, the topic losing some of its amusement factor. "After that, for a long time, I couldn't even bear to--" He stopped himself, then cleared his throat. "Mostly it was stories I heard when I was a recruit, and the jokes you hear in the barracks."

Dorian reached up and set his hand lightly on Cullen's arm. "Couldn't bear to what?" he asked softly.

For a long moment, Cullen debated whether or not to answer, then finally sighed. "Touch myself. For pleasure, anyway. Not after... not after the Blight. Not for a long time."

He waited, chest tight, for Dorian to ask questions, to want to know more, but Dorian simply nodded slowly and put his arm under his head again. "Your hands feel marvelous," he said in a warm tone.

Recalled to his task, Cullen dug into Dorian's neck and shoulders again with a will. "I'm sorry," he offered. "That probably wasn't as distracting as you had hoped."

Dorian's shoulders moved in a small shrug. "Don't apologize. Perhaps it was not diverting, but I learned something about you. That is precious to me, and always will be."

A smile came to Cullen's lips. "I suppose I don't talk about myself a great deal."

"Any more than I do. I mean, other than about my obvious perfection," Dorian said with a chuckle.

Cullen rolled his eyes even as he grinned. "Obviously." Still, the combination of the conversation and Cullen's massage seemed to be doing Dorian some good. "Your neck is getting looser, though that doesn't mean I'm done with you. It just means you can start talking about what drove you here in the middle of the night."

Dorian fell silent again, and remained so until Cullen began to knead his shoulders. When he finally spoke, it was with a peculiarly dull voice. "Father woke up."

Cullen's fingers tightened on Dorian's shoulders for a moment, then went back to the massage. "Is it... bad?"

"I--" Dorian's voice failed, and he took a deep breath. "Yes. It is."

Cullen knelt and wrapped his arms around Dorian as best as he could, knowing he'd done the right thing when Dorian's hands reached up and gripped his arms tightly. "Can it be undone?"

"I don't know. It's like no spell we've ever seen, and nothing like the Templar ritual--and that's the only one I'm even peripherally familiar with which achieves the same result." Dorian sighed again, hands spasming where they gripped Cullen. "Cassandra said she'll work with Maevaris to see if the dagger can give us a hint about how it works, since the spells on both the arrow and dagger are the same, but... but for now, my father is... broken."

Noticing how Dorian danced around the more common word for his condition, Cullen simply help Dorian tight. "I'm sorry, Dorian."

"I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forgive him what he's done, what he tried to do," Dorian whispered, "but he's still my father. And he took that arrow while trying to save me. I... I can't forget that, even if he couldn't have known the consequence."

"I know," Cullen said. He couldn't bring himself to defend Halward, not after what he'd done, but he could at least support Dorian. When Dorian shifted beneath him, Cullen eased up on his embrace and helped Dorian sit up before joining him on the chaise. Wrapping his arm loosely around Dorian's
waist, he took one of Dorian's hands in his own and gave it a little squeeze. "Talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking."

For answer, Dorian sighed and leaned his head on Cullen's shoulder. "It's not just my father that's bothering me, true."

"Oh?" Cullen asked, shifting to make Dorian more comfortable, and secretly grateful for the other man's closeness. "Or do you mean your mother?"

"No, though I do find Fate an exceedingly cruel mistress to have struck down both of them with the same instrument," Dorian noted. Cullen again noted the odd dullness in his voice, and decided that was probably Dorian's way of dealing with his grief—or whatever emotions plagued him.

"I'd be angry, too," Cullen said, drawing Dorian down to sit next to him on the couch. "I can't imagine how you're even managing right now, with all that's burdening you."

Dorian lifted his head long enough to reach up and cup Cullen's face with one hand, a little smile coming to his face. "I think you have more faith in me than I do."

"Or maybe you don't have enough faith in yourself." Cullen reached up to squeeze the hand on his face, slowly stroking Dorian's wrist with his thumb. "From where I sit, you've been pretty damned impressive. Empress Celene is still on the throne, you made sure there's an elven voice in the Orlesian Court, and you managed to survive all the machinations of both Corypheus and Amell. You should be proud of what you've accomplished."

He could tell by the way Dorian's brow knit together that pride was the furthest thing from Dorian's mind. "Then why can I only remember what I failed to do?"

"Ah. Now there was a guilt Cullen understood all too well. It was one he felt every time he had to write the final letter home to a family who would never see their child again. "Need to talk about it?"

"With you? Yes." Dorian met Cullen's gaze and smiled. "I trust you completely." As the warm feeling again spread through Cullen, Dorian added, "And it ties into what you saw at Skyhold. Hopefully between the two of us, we can figure it all out. We can be rather clever at times, after all."

"You can be," Cullen said ruefully. "Listening to you talk to Magister Tilani about magic makes me feel like a recruit again."

"And listening to you talk to Bull about fighting rather leaves me quite confused, I assure you," Dorian said with a chuckle. "Don't try to pull that on me, Commander. I won't believe you."

Cullen raised an eyebrow. "I thought you trusted me."

The comment made Dorian tilt his head ever so slightly as he studied Cullen's face for a few moments. Suddenly he reached up and took Cullen's face between his hands, drawing him into a brief, tender kiss before pressing their foreheads together. "I do, as I have trusted no other."

Shifting so they could be a bit more comfortable without losing the intimacy of the connection, Cullen settled his hands on Dorian's knees and squeezed lightly. "Tell me everything."

Dorian took a long, shuddering breath, then claimed Cullen's hands as he straightened, demeanor now completely serious. "When it started, I thought it nothing but dreams."

At first, Cullen simply listened, though his concern grew with each new revelation. For a while, he simply built a list of questions to ask, but eventually he could no longer contain them. The
monologue quickly shifted to a discussion, then an analysis, and, ultimately, a frank exchange of lingering fear and speculation.

And, along the way, a great deal of discovery.

"So it was Amell who arranged for the red lyrium in Skyhold," Cullen breathed at one point. "I mean, I knew, but it was more a hunch and a fear than proof."

"That is the way I see it, though I didn't know until after you'd already consumed it." Rubbing his forehead with a sigh, Dorian grimaced. "I feel like I should have been able to put it together sooner, to realize that you were their target earlier, but by the time I heard their plan, it had already failed despite you falling prey to them--or so I thought. Dagna had done her work, and you were doing better. And I didn't want to concern you." When Cullen leveled a look at him, Dorian hastily added, "Ah, even more than you already were. Though now I wish I'd talked to you before the Winter Palace. Perhaps--"

Cullen quickly reached up and placed a finger on Dorian's lips. "No, don't go there. I'd been warned plenty of times to drink nothing because of Orlesian intrigue, and I still gulped it down like a fool. That's my fault. And I'm not sure how much more alert any of us could have been. Thankfully, it doesn't seem to have had much more of an impact than to make that part of the evening...odd." He patted the mail shirt on his chest. "Though I have this to thank for it."

He didn't mention the brief time he'd removed it to take a bath, and ended up quickly using a wet cloth and soap to clean the worst of the battle away before stuffing himself back into it once more. The keening of the corrupted song of the red lyrium had pressed on him as soon as the mail shirt came off, and he dared not take the chance of seeing what happened if he listened to it for long. He tried not to think about what it would be like without the mail shirt, however. They already had too much to worry about.

"For me, it was pride which led to my downfall," Dorian mused, pulling Cullen away from his spiral of thoughts. "Despite knowing, and being warned repeatedly, that the map led to an ambush, I thought that preparedness on our part could overcome planning on theirs. And I was wrong."

"But even Leliana said she would have accepted the map as genuine on its surface," Cullen pointed out. "Surely there's no need to beat yourself up about it." Dorian frowned and looked away, obviously still troubled about something relating to the map. When he remained silent, Cullen added, "And look how much you learned from that mistake."

"Only because it was Hawke, and I'd already--unknowingly, I might add--compromised Amell's spell on him. If it had gone the way Amell had intended..." Dorian's voice trailed off as he looked down at his left hand and clenched it into a fist. "The evening would have had quite the different ending."

Snatching up Dorian's left hand, Cullen quickly planted a kiss on the back of it. "It didn't. Maybe Andraste is watching you after all, or maybe you used up an entire lifetime's worth of sheer dumb luck, but it didn't, and now we know a great deal more than we did."

"But not quite enough." Dorian's thumb ran over Cullen's fingers for a moment before he looked up to meet the other man's gaze. "Besides, I haven't told you the worst of it."

Cullen felt himself tensing up, but forced himself to relax as he twined their fingers together tightly. "Go on," he said, grimly. "Though I have a feeling I'm not going to enjoy this."

"No." Dorian's eyes closed again, and a furrow Cullen knew meant pain creased Dorian's brow.
“By the time I got to Father, he was asleep, so I settled into the chair to wait for him to awaken. And I dreamed.”

As Dorian forced out the words to describe what Amell had done to Hawke and Alistair in retribution for their failure, Cullen felt his blood turn to ice. “Amell… possessed?”

“Hawke seems to think so, and certainly there is something odd about his behavior.” Dorian’s gaze grew distant. “Perhaps it was because I was there at a distance, instead of physically being there, but I couldn’t feel a whiff of the Fade about Amell. So either he is possessed, or simply insane.”

“I don’t like either option,” Cullen admitted.

“Insanity would explain what he did,” Dorian said with a grimace.

Cullen frowned. “What do you mean?”

“To Alistair.” Dorian’s eyes closed, and then the explanation came all in a rush, the words falling over each other as Dorian described just how, precisely, Amell had punished Hawke and Alistair for their insolence of failure.

The ice in Cullen’s veins flashed over to boiling anger as Dorian finally fell silent. After another long moment of shock, Cullen suddenly growled, “We will destroy him. For this, for the murder of Mailani...” His voice failed him at that point, but he saw Dorian nod.

“Yes, we will.” Dorian’s eyes opened, an implacable fury in his expression. “We must.”

Caught speechless, Cullen nevertheless could not let that declaration pass unrewarded. Still, it was more than passion which made his hands reach up and sink into Dorian’s hair, pulling him into a heated kiss. It proved hard to pin down precisely what he felt in that moment: pride in his Inquisitor, the burn of shared righteous fury, or simply desperation to reassure himself that Amell had failed—utterly and completely—in his attempt to destroy the man who lips he now claimed with devout adoration. Whatever the cause, by the time he released Dorian’s lips and pressed their foreheads together, their breath came in short pants as they gulped down air.

“You will,” Cullen breathed. “And I will be by your side every step of the way.”

Dorian’s forehead creased, and he pulled back from Cullen, his pale eyes searching Cullen’s face closely. “You are glorious,” he murmured, but Cullen saw the doubt stir deep in his gaze.

Cullen frowned. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Can it be that simple?” Dorian wondered. “I haven’t forgotten about what happened in the jail at Skyhold. And there was clearly an outside entity involved in drawing me into Hawke’s dreams. In all honesty, there truly is only one word for that when a mage is involved, isn’t there? ”

Cullen’s shoulders tensed up. "You're no abomination," he said tightly.

Dorian's eyes closed as he took a long, shuddering breath, as if the word had triggered something within. "What we have between us, it couldn’t... There's no room for that."

"No," Cullen said, then reached up to cup Dorian's cheek. "Just as there's no room for a red lyrium addict. Thankfully neither of us are those things."

"But--" Dorian began, then fell silent as Cullen again pressed a finger to his lips.
"We're not," Cullen said firmly. "Let's just work our way through this. I mean, this isn't the first time our dreams have been manipulated, have they?"

"No," Dorian admitted. "Mailani--" He paused, then looked down at his left hand again, expression thoughtful. "Mailani brought us together in the Fade," he said slowly.

"You said you thought it was because the Anchor can unlock dreams, right?" Cullen prompted. "But she was always there, too. Maybe it wasn't unlocking dreams, but... well, anchoring someone to her own presence there. So she'd go to your dream and pull me in, or be in my dream and pull you in. It's unlocking, yes, but she was the... the focus."

Dorian frowned in concentration, obviously turning the concept around in his mind. "The spirit I saw, the one who sent me back every time... you think he was the being the anchor pulled me to? I wonder why? Mailani at least had a previous tie to the mark, and maintained it until she was finally able to separate from it in the Fade. Perhaps it is different for a spirit than a soul."

"A spirit might be drawn to your dreams if they evoked its nature. Like a demon, but less... demon-y." Brow furrowing, Cullen added, "Some recruits mentioned meeting spirits in the Fade during their Harrowing, though that does involve a ritual and not merely a dream. But the Anchor might prove to be more a lure than even a mage."

Raising his left hand, Dorian flexed it slowly as the green light sprang to life. "You know... a few nights before the first of these dreams, I had an odd series of dreams. One of them was with Hawke, of that night we--" He paused, then suddenly cleared his throat violently. "Ah, it was a... vivid dream, let's say."

"Vigorous, even?" Cullen said, unable to keep himself from grinning. It was rare that he saw Dorian flustered, after all. "Just how long was he in this particular dream, hmm?"

Ignoring the question, Dorian continued on, though Cullen noticed that he pointedly avoided looking at Cullen's knowing smirk. "At any rate, at the time, I simply thought it a normal dream, if a bit... ah, intense. But now I wonder..."

"Oh, I see. You think that's when the spirit found you, perhaps?" Cullen frowned. "But what is their connection to Hawke?"

"Hawke was in the Fade," Dorian pointed out. "Physically, I mean. And he's no mage. I can't see him succumbing to a demon, but an alliance with a spirit? Perhaps even one that helped them to escape the Fade?"

"It's possible," Cullen conceded dubiously. "And it does sound like the sort of twisted luck that always seemed to work for Hawke in Kirkwall. Except for when it didn't, of course." Suddenly Cullen frowned as a macabre idea came to him. "Wait. Hawke." After a moment or two of prodding the idea, he caught Dorian's gaze. "That morning in the jail. That was right after you found out about your mother's murder, wasn't it?"

Dorian nodded. "Directly after, in fact. Why?"

"It's... well, it's just that Hawke's mother was murdered," Cullen explained. "By a blood mage. Rather horribly, in fact. It's one of the reasons why Meredith even gave Hawke the option to stand with the Templars despite being Anders' lover--because she respected the pain he'd experienced at the hands of a blood mage."

Dorian's eyes widened, remembering the almost incandescent rage he'd felt that day, with Livius' life
dangling by a thread over the waterfall. "So... you're saying maybe it wasn't a spirit at all."

"Let's just say that the way you acted that day would not have been out of character for Hawke," Cullen said. "I don't know if that's the whole answer, but if our theory is anywhere close to being true, then he would have been able to look through your eyes as well, wouldn't he? And you did say that the mark glowed like a heartbeat whenever you woke up from one of those dreams. I'd say that's a sign it was involved, somehow, wouldn't you?"

"There was always a pulsing beat when I was there. At first, I just thought it was the heartbeat of my host--of Hawke. I didn't notice the mark glowing that way until later." Dorian frowned, brow knitting tightly as his fingers drummed on his leg. "It's not a bad theory, of course, but I'm not sure how we can ever prove or disprove it. Besides, seeing through someone's eyes isn't quite the same as influencing their actions."

"You were able to modify the spell on Hawke," Cullen pointed out. "That implies some sort of influence is possible. And I could see Hawke having less restraint about interfering if he were angry."

Dorian fell silent for a while, mulling the idea in his mind. "I still think we're missing something," he admitted, "but for now, at least, it's a cheerier prospect than thinking I've succumbed to the untoward influence of a darker denizen of the Fade."

"Yes," Cullen said fervently. "I--I can't bear to think of you... like that." Just the thought of Dorian at the mercy of a demon made a chill run down his spine.

A sad little smile came to Dorian's face. "I admit, I'm a bit surprised you haven't absconded for the hills upon hearing that I may have a whiff of the Fade about me. After what you've been through, I wouldn't expect you to take that chance."

Something in the tone, or maybe in his expression, made Cullen pause before replying. His eyes searched Dorian's face closely as he tried to figure out what he should respond to in that statement first. Finally, he simply took Dorian's hands in his own. "What I've been through includes more than what demons and blood mages did to me, Dorian," he said softly. "It also has taught me who I can trust to help me back to my feet once the demons are gone."

A bit of tension left Dorian's shoulders, and the sadness left his face. "I'm grateful. I suppose I keep bracing myself for when--" Dorian paused, then cleared his throat. "You are a remarkable man, Commander."

Now Cullen frowned, hearing the uncertainty in Dorian's tone. "When what?" When Dorian hesitated, Cullen let himself get a bit stern as he added, "If you won't let me do that, I'm not going to let you do it, either. Out with it."

Dorian's brows pinched together as he quickly looked away, but not before Cullen saw the flash of pain in his eyes. "When I'll be alone again."

Something about the combination of Dorian's hesitation and the pain in his eyes made Cullen realize that the words reached far beyond himself, and he swallowed the immediate platitudes he wanted to give. Instead he took Dorian's hands and twined their fingers together as he evaluated how best to proceed. "Tell me what you fear."

Dorian's eyes closed as he took a shuddering breath. "I take it you don't mean the rather pedestrian fears of Corypheus and Amell and being parceled out for parts like a festival nug?"
Recognizing Dorian's need for reassurance, Cullen squeezed Dorian's fingers. "No. I mean the fear that really matters right now."

"Since I am pressed for an answer," Dorian began, then hesitated once more. "I suppose I'm afraid I demand too much of you. What you said before, about how you want me to experience all the moments. It... it reminded me so very much how impossible such moments have been for me all my life."

Cullen's brows pinched together. "Impossible? Because of your father?"

"Oh, not him alone. Where I come from, anything between two men...it's about pleasure," Dorian explained. "It's accepted--that is, relations are accepted, along with a sly wink and a knowing nod, but then it is taken no further. You learn not to hope for more, such as... well, such as what I saw between you and Mailani. It would be foolish to hope for that, as foolish as hoping for a unicorn. They're the same in the Imperium: a mythical beast which entices you with its beauty but in the end is nothing but a lie."

Cullen felt each and every emotion in those words in the muscles of Dorian's fingers, in the form of tension and trembling both. At the same time, he tried to wrap his mind around what living in that environment must have done to Dorian, in addition to all the problems heaped on him by his parents. Finally a little smile came to his face. "Do you even know how brave you are?"

That was enough to make Dorian blink at him. "Pardon?"

"I didn't think so." And suddenly, just holding Dorian's hands wasn't enough. Cullen reached up and hooked his hand behind Dorian's neck, pulling the man into a heated kiss. Dorian's surprise quickly faded, then rose again when Cullen shifted tactics and pushed Dorian until his back was pressed against the sloping arm of the chaise, with Cullen straddling him. As the kiss deepened and lengthened, Cullen settled his hands on Dorian's shoulders, then slowly raked them down Dorian's chest and sides until they came to rest on the hips below.

Dorian moaned softly into the kiss, his own hands rising to sink into Cullen's hair. When the kiss ended--due to the need for air more than anything--he gazed up at Cullen with that now-familiar tender smile. "Maker," he breathed. "Where did that come from?"

"Because you just told me that every kiss and every intimate conversation we've ever shared is because you were brave enough to do it even though everything you know told you it might be our last," Cullen said. "You don't think that's brave?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite in those words," Dorian said with a chuckle, trying to make light of it. "I would," Cullen insisted. "And I will. Because bravery isn't about being strong enough to go to battle when you know you'll win. It's about fighting even when you're certain you're going to lose."

Dorian's eyes searched Cullen's face with darting little motions as the furrow in his brow slowly faded. "You are glorious," he whispered, then hauled Cullen down for another kiss.

This one was quite the different animal. A brush of the lips turned into a caress, and the caress shifted into a slow, thorough exploration. Cullen's eyelids fluttered shut as he surrendered himself to it, and to Dorian. The light touch of Dorian's mustache against the scar on his lip as Dorian deepened the kiss made Cullen's toes curl, and he ran his hands up and down Dorian's sides, savoring the sensation of bare skin beneath his fingers. The world around them faded away, leaving behind only the heat and passion to bloom between them.
By the time *that* kiss came to an end, Cullen could quite intimately feel the effect it had on both of them. He saw it in Dorian's face, too, in his half-lidded eyes and the hint of color in his cheeks. One of Dorian's hands rose to rest on Cullen's neck, fingers playing idly with the curls at the nape of his neck as he tilted his head and smiled that almost vulnerable little smile which made Cullen feel warm all over.

And Cullen knew he would never have enough of him.

Lowering his head, Cullen brushed their lips together for a moment, then set his hands on either side of Dorian for support as he set to exploring more of Dorian than just his lips. As his mouth moved down Dorian's neck, he experimented a little to see how Dorian reacted. Nibbling elicited a breathy gasp, while sucking turned the gasp into a soft moan—but a soft bite at the point where neck and shoulder met earned him a buck of the hips and a Tevene oath that was half-growl, half-groan.

Cullen grinned and filed that away for later, but for the moment, he had something else in mind. As his mouth continued its downward journey, his lips brushed over Dorian's silken, heated skin with a fervent adoration. The burning need from before had returned, the need which had driven him to pin Dorian to the wall of the Winter Palace and damn the consequences, and he gave into it with a will. The need didn't call for a rush to climax, but for a continual state of the sort of intimacy he suspected Dorian had never been allowed to experience.

Beyond all else, Cullen needed to **feel** Dorian—and to feel him in a way untainted by the dreams soured by Amell.

So Cullen moved his mouth over Dorian's torso, savoring every inch in as many ways as he could imagine, memorizing which spots drew the most reaction for future utilization. He found the remnants of the wound from the Winter Palace, treating it gently as the new-formed scar deserved, but happy it had already been reduced to but a memory. Every so often he would pull himself up to Dorian's lips for a searing kiss, stealing Dorian's breath and leaving him gasping before he returned to his thorough exploration.

As he did so, Dorian's hands moved restlessly, kneading and clutching at Cullen's shoulders, neck and head. Occasionally he would shudder and hiss something unintelligible under his breath, but for the most part, Cullen reduced him to wordless gasps and moans. He wasn't without a response of his own, however, particularly during the kisses. Every time Cullen's lips met his, Dorian's hips entered the fray with a slow, steady rolling motion.

Cullen groaned when he felt Dorian's now-hard length press into his own, the clothing barely an impediment between them. Each roll of Dorian's hips meant a long, firm stroke along his own ache, the clothing adding a sensation he hadn't realized could be so damned erotic. Finally he muttered an oath of his own and raised his hand to sink into Dorian's hair, pulling him into a hard kiss as his body shifted to open a bit of room between them. While he dug his length into Dorian's thigh, Cullen slid his free hand down Dorian's body until he found the hardness between the legs. A long, firm stroke earned him a desperate moan, and he chuckled into the kiss before pulling back so he could smile down at Dorian. *"Enjoying yourself?"

"I would think that's more than evident," Dorian gasped, hips edging upward to press himself into Cullen's hand. "This is revenge, isn't it? For all my terrible teasing?"

"I haven't even begun to fight," Cullen murmured, then claimed Dorian's lips before the man could retort to *that* blatant lie.

Even as Dorian's hands latched onto Cullen's head for another passionate kiss, Cullen's fingers deftly tackled the lacings of their plush velvet prisons. Once the captives had been freed, Cullen set to
exploring Dorian's with a touch which alternated between gentle and stern. Dorian broke the kiss then, pressing his head back into the arm of the chaise as he groaned, "Kaffas. You... really don't play fair, Commander."

"Do you want me to?" Cullen asked with a smirk, even as he shifted to straddle Dorian once more—but not for long. His hands landed on Dorian's hips long enough to grind his newly freed erection against Dorian, then gripped the mage's pants as Cullen slid off the couch and pulled. The pants came off with enough suddenness that Dorian yelped, but the motion also pulled Dorian's hips down a bit.

The mage instinctively kept himself on the chaise by gripping the upholstery, trying to find his balance for a moment or two. Cullen took advantage of that moment to shove his own pants to the floor and get on the couch again, rubbing his aching length against Dorian's as he claimed the man's lips once more.

As Dorian moaned into the kiss, Cullen let his hips begin a slow, steady rocking motion. This is what he needed: to feel Dorian, to hear Dorian, to know that they were both alive. Twining their fingers together, he raised their hands above Dorian's head and pressed them into the chaise as he deepened the kiss into something more primal, losing himself in the heat of the kiss and the steady rocking of his hips.

He let the heat continue to build between them, not content with the thought of a swift climb and fall. No, he wanted to savor each and every instant: the creaking of the chaise, the sound of Dorian's moans, the sensation of heat and hardness pinned between them. This is what he craved, what he would never have enough of, and this was something he would treasure when their duties pulled them apart once more.

Eventually the kiss had to end, and Cullen buried his head in the crook of Dorian's neck as he gasped for air. Releasing Dorian from his grip, his hands moved to Dorian's ass, shifting the angle of his lower body as his own hips began to dig deeper. At some point Cullen blindly found the lotus oil abandoned from before, anointing both of them as he took matters in hand more directly. As he stroked and squeezed their lengths together, he found and matched the sublime rhythm of their hips, driving them ever higher and higher in a long, tantalizing arc. The goal might not be a mystery, but the journey was what truly mattered.

He lost himself in the moment, and the world became nothing but Dorian: the heat of his breath, the softness of his lips, the tickle of his mustache, the roll of his hips, and the desperation of his moans. Nothing else mattered, nothing else existed, except for the man panting and writhing beneath him.

Together they found the peak, and together they fell into pure bliss.

It took a while for him to return to the mundane world after that, though he did slide a bit to one side so as not to crush Dorian. His head found its perfect home on the man's shoulder, a home he didn’t want to leave any time soon. After all, their vigorous activity had warmed them enough that their state of undress didn’t matter, once the towel had been retrieved and put to good use to clean up a bit. Snuggling close, Cullen laid his arm over Dorian's stomach and twined their legs below, shifting a bit here and there until they were both comfortable.

After that, they simply rested in one another's arms. Words proved unnecessary, and after a few moments, Cullen felt a soft kiss on his ear. With a smile, he let his eyes slide shut as sleep claimed him.

For the moment, at least, he was exactly where he wanted to be.
Cullen woke to the sensation of fingers running through his hair. His eyes refused to open yet, but he flexed his hand where it rested on Dorian's abdomen as a signal that he was awake...sort of.

"Mmm, is the sleeping beauty rousing from slumber?" Dorian asked in a velvety voice that made a shiver run down Cullen's spine.

With a grunt, Cullen tried to take account of his position. He'd forgotten how hard it was to wake up after falling asleep in someone's arms. "No."

Dorian chuckled, and the fingers moved to tuck a lock of curly hair back behind his ear. "I'm afraid your hair is an absolute catastrophe at the moment."

Cullen's lips moved into that half-smirk as he finally managed to open his eyes and squint up at the man next to him. When he found Dorian's hair suspiciously neat, he said, "And you cheat."

"Me? Cheat?" Dorian affected innocence.

"Yes, you." With some difficulty, Cullen pushed himself up to his elbow, then leaned in and claimed a soft, lingering kiss. When their lips parted, he murmured, "Hello."

"Hello," Dorian replied, that oh-so-beautiful tender smile on his lips.

It was so beautiful that Cullen found himself unable to resist kissing it, then let the kiss naturally deepen. His hand stole up to rest on Dorian's cheek for a moment before moving down Dorian's body, tracing the lines of the man's neck and chest with gentle worship. When their lips parted, Cullen slowly opened his eyes and met Dorian's gaze. "I could get used to this."

"The kissing? I daresay you already are," Dorian said with a chuckle.

"Not just that," Cullen told him. "Falling asleep in your arms. Waking up next to you. Saying good morning with a kiss, and good night with some bliss. All of it."

The emotions which flitted across Dorian's face in response to Cullen's words moved too rapidly for Cullen to properly assimilate, but he knew uncertainty when he saw it, even before Dorian spoke. "I find it difficult to believe in unicorns, Commander."

"You don't need to believe in them," Cullen whispered. "You just need to believe in me."

Dorian's brow furrowed as his grey eyes searched Cullen's face with little darting motions. Bit by bit, the worry and lines eased from his face, leaving behind only that little smile which begged for a kiss. "I believe I already do," he murmured as his fingers gently tucked a curl behind Cullen's ear. "Thank you."

"For?"

Without giving an answer, Dorian leaned in and brushed his lips against Cullen's. "We'd better find some soap and water before too long. Eventually someone will oh so politely inquire as to my whereabouts."

Cullen groaned, remembering all too well those oh-so-polite inquiries. "Josephine enjoys them a bit too much, I think," he grumbled.

"Oh, I can think of worse offenders," Dorian said with a laugh. "Imagine what it would be like if they send Bull to find me."
That thought spurred Cullen to his feet, almost before he realized he was moving. In fact, he rose so quickly that he found himself momentarily dizzy. "That was cruel," he accused Dorian as he rubbed at his spinning head.

Dorian's lips clamped together, obviously trying not to laugh as he rose more slowly to his own feet. "In truth, now I just wonder what thought galvanized you to such a swift reaction. Are you afraid he'll invite himself to join in?"

That hadn't actually been the foremost thought on his mind, but once Dorian suggested it, Cullen couldn't stop the subsequent image from flashing through his mind. With a groan, he rubbed his face with his hands. "Don't even... Don't even joke about that."

"Whyever not?" Dorian asked, the amusement clear in his voice.

Cullen sighed heavily. "Because Mailani, the minx, once asked me if I'd be interested in a little extra fun. With Bull." As Dorian laughed, Cullen reached up to rub the back of his neck with a rueful expression on his face. "I suppose I shouldn't have teased her so much about observing him while he practiced."

"Well, no wonder she asked," Dorian said with a grin. "She never was one to leave a good tease unanswered. How did you respond?"

Cullen hesitated, remembering that afternoon quite clearly. His papers had been out of order for days after that from being swept off his desk so abruptly. "Ah... well, she never suggested it again," he finally offered.

"I see," Dorian said in a knowing tone. "Well, I won't pry. But I will speculate."

"Of course you will," Cullen said in a resigned tone.

"I do recall a few times when the smile never left her face after an extended visit with you in your office," Dorian noted in a thoughtful tone. "And she did tell me about one time on the throne when you--"

"Ah, yes, well, the soap and towels are over here," Cullen said hastily as he walked over to the pile next to the bath. "These should work, shouldn't they?"

He paused when he felt arms wrap around his waist from behind, and half-turned his head as he felt a weight fall on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't tease you about Mailani, should I?"

Cullen smiled and let his head rest for a moment against Dorian's crown of thick hair. "I don't think she'd appreciate it if I told you to never mention her around me," Cullen said. "And that's not what I want, anyway." Setting the towel down, he turned in Dorian's arms and took the man's face between his hands. "Even if we didn't share the same kind of feelings for her, we both loved her, and she loved us. I think that wherever she is, she'd be happy for us right now."

"And I'm not stepping on any toes?" Dorian asked, that familiar line of worry appearing between his eyebrows.

"Not where she's concerned, no." Cullen gave Dorian a soft kiss. "Besides, she told you to take care of me, didn't she? So here you are. Taking care of me."

"Last night, I rather think the reverse was true," Dorian observed. "And I'm not talking only about the rather spectacular conclusion, either."
With a chuckle, Cullen pressed their foreheads together. "All the better, to my mind."

Dorian reached up to rest his hands on Cullen's wrists for a moment, closing his eyes with a deep sigh. "I do hope you'll let me return the favor when I return to Skyhold," he murmured.

The word choice caught Cullen's attention immediately. "When you return? Not we?"

After a moment's hesitation, Dorian pulled back slightly. "I'm not going back quite yet, no. I made a promise to someone, and I mean to keep it. Soon." His brows drew together tightly. "I can't leave Hawke and Alistair in Amell's clutches, Cullen. If there's even a chance that going to the Shrine will help them, then I must take the chance."

Cullen closed his eyes and took a deep breath, fighting down the urge to tie Dorian to the saddle of his halla and take them both safely to Skyhold right then and there. "What if it's a trap? What if... what if all those messages and cryptic codes and... and even those dreams are simply a plan to lure you there, so he can succeed where he failed at the Winter Palace? We still don't know his true goals, and Amell has proven to be nothing if not diabolically cunning."

"Then I'll have to be infernally clever," Dorian countered. "I'm certainly not traipsing in alone this time. I was going to ask you to put together a complement of soldiers to accompany me. We have sufficient mounts for a small force, if I am not mistaken, and of course I'll bring some of my closest companions with me."

"And me," Cullen said immediately. In his mind, there was no question that he would accompany Dorian, so he frowned when the man shook his head.

"We can't risk it," Dorian told him. "Not with his utterly strange obsession with you. And..." Dorian reached up to rest his palm on Cullen's chest. "I'm not sure even Dagna would trust her work around him. I can't lose you. It would have been hard before. Now?" He shook his head. "Now it doesn't even bear thinking about."

Again Cullen struggled against a knee jerk reaction, knowing all too intimately the terror of losing those he cared for. "I'm a soldier," he said. "Eventually you'll have to accept that risk when I go into battle."

"Venatori are one thing," Dorian said softly. "A somniari such as Amell? Let us say that I would still worry even if the entirety of the Inquisition Forces were between you and him. Please, Cullen. Indulge me in this."

"So I can sit in Skyhold and fret about you?" Cullen asked pointedly.

Dorian's brows contracted together. "I know it's unfair. Believe me, I am well aware of the hypocrisy of sending you to Skyhold while I gallivant forth into darkest danger. But dangling both of us in front of him at the same time is too much of a risk. If he doesn't get one, I fear he will get the other. Better to leave you well out of it." Reaching up, he trailed his finger along the edge of Cullen's lower lip. "I'm sorry. I know I am asking a great deal of you."

Expelling his breath in one large burst, Cullen shook his head. "You are, but if I am to be honest with myself, I know exactly where you're coming from. And my first instinct was to... Well..." He reached up to rub the back of his neck. "It wasn't to let you go."

"I take it you wanted to tie me to your saddle and carry me away to Skyhold?"

"I won't soon forget the sight of you lying still on the ground with a dagger in your side." He managed to hold the words to a quiet level, but he couldn't quite help the way his hands grabbed
Dorian's and squeezed tight. "In some ways, I feel as if you're going into a danger even greater than Corypheus."

"Well, I do have my little green good luck charm," Dorian murmured, wiggling the fingers of his left hand. "That's got to count for something, doesn't it?"

**Luck charm.** Cullen blinked a few times, then kissed Dorian abruptly before releasing him. "Wait here," he said, then dashed over to his travel bag and began pawing through it. *I thought I left it in here somewhere.* When his hands finally closed around the little bag, he took a deep breath before pulling it out.

When he turned around, he found Dorian quite close, further proof that the mage was, among other things, a very poor observer of direct orders. "Are you quite all right, Commander?" Dorian asked him, a look of concern on his face.

"I'm fine, I just…" Cullen cleared his throat, then chuckled. "Your words, they made me remember something I'd almost forgotten, that's all." He took Dorian's hand and lifted it palm up, then tugged open the neck of the small bag. "I want to give you this," he said softly, then tipped the bag over.

A small silver coin fell out, and Dorian picked it up to examine it closely. "I sense there's a story behind this," he murmured.

"There is," Cullen said, for a moment remembering the coin resting the palm of someone else very dear to him. He looked up to meet Dorian's eyes. "My brother gave it to me for luck when I left to start my Templar training. I gave it to Mailani for the same purpose, but she told me to keep it." Pausing for a moment, he took a moment to steady himself before adding, "She told me she didn't want my luck to run out."

Dorian's expression softened, and he reached up to lightly touch Cullen's cheek. "I'm sorry."

"For a long time after she died, I wanted to throw it away, but… I couldn't. It was still connected with her, even if I felt like my luck had run out. But now…" A little smile came to his face as he gave Dorian a gentle kiss. "I can't help but wonder if my luck has returned." Closing Dorian's hand around the coin, he took the closed hand between his own. "Take it with you. Please. But more importantly, bring it back to me."

Knowing where the truth lay, Cullen chuckled and lifted their joined hands so he could press a kiss to Dorian's knuckles. "You know how much I hate owing people money."

"How could I not?" Dorian put his hand on top of Cullen's, clasping it tightly, and it became clear that the emotion in that grip vastly belied the lighthearted flippancy in his voice. "You know how much I hate owing people money."

Knowing where the truth lay, Cullen chuckled and lifted their joined hands so he could press a kiss to Dorian's knuckles. "Is that why you've perpetually owed Varric five sovereigns for months now?" Cullen teased him.

"Such sass, Commander," Dorian scolded him, stepping closer. "I'm sure there's some sort of rule against insubordination somewhere in our rules."

"Probably in the same part where it talks about fraternization," Cullen countered with a smirk.

A gleam came to Dorian's eyes as he leaned in until his breath fell on Cullen's lips. "Clearly you are not a nice man."

Cullen's lips settled into a cocky grin. "Does that mean we can dispense with the pleasantries?"

A corner of Dorian's mouth curved upwards. "Oh, I hope--"
That was as far as he got before Cullen claimed his lips for a soft kiss that swiftly deepened into something more heated. It didn't take long for Cullen to push Dorian back onto the chaise, though this time his own knees met carpet rather than upholstery.

It was past time for him to break his fast, after all.
They set out for the Shrine the next day, after a healing session which magicked away the worst of
the injuries without actually making either of the men feel better. As Hawke watched Amell attend to
Alistair's shortened arm, his stomach churned at the evident pleasure the mage took in his friend's
discomfort. Something about the way Amell's long fingers stroked the newly healed stump struck
Hawke as lewd rather than comforting, and he had to look away as Amell planted a soft kiss on the
newly healed flesh and gave Alistair a cruel smile. Any attempt Hawke made to draw Alistair into
conversation after that fell flat, and finally, he just rode at his friend's side, trying to simply be there.
He hadn't felt so helpless since seeing the ogre slam his brother's body to the ground.

The first night of camp, as Hawke expected, Amell retired to his tent early--as the sun set, in fact--
and Zevran went straight to Alistair and dragged him into the tent meant to be shared by Hawke and
Alistair. From the sounds, it was clear what Zevran had wanted, and Hawke had to force himself not
to storm the tent and drag Zevran off his friend. Later, after Zevran staggered out, Hawke forced
himself to watch Zevran instead of running to help Alistair as a wild plan slowly formed in his mind.

As he'd expected, Zevran swaggered to where Hawke knelt by the fire, sinking his hand into
Hawke's hair and pulling his head back until all Hawke saw were stars and the elf's sneer. "Such a
good little Hawke," he crooned. "You didn't even try to escape."
"Would it have done much good?"

Zeran chuckled expansively, releasing Hawke so he could pat him on the head. "No. Now come for
your shackling, little bird. We wouldn't want you to wander away in the night and get hurt, now,
would we?"

Hawke pushed himself to his feet, keeping his face neutral as he allowed himself to be ushered back
to his tent. There he found Alistair naked and lying on his side on his sleeping roll. Before Hawke
got more than a glimpse of him, Zevran shoved him forward.
"Lie down," Zevran commanded, and Hawke obeyed, trying to appear meek and obedient. Once the
shackles were in place and the wards keeping Hawke within the boundaries of the camp activated,
Zevran again patted him on the head. “Sleep tight,” he told Hawke mockingly, then left the tent,
tying the tent flaps open so that the two men couldn't even pretend to have any privacy.

Hawke kept an eye on him, waiting for the elf to go to Amell's tent. He was surprised when the elf
did not, and instead spread a sleeping roll across the entrance to Amell's tent instead. With a frown,
Hawke considered that positioning, and the dynamic it implied. Surely they still shared a tent, if not a
bedroll, didn't they?
And if not, why not?

After watching to ensure that Zevran intended to remain outside Amell's tent, Hawke forced himself
to wait for the elf to fall asleep, or at least to turn away from their tent. That took a little longer, but eventually Zevran rolled onto his side away from them and mumbled sleepily in Antivan. Only then did Hawke crawl over as quietly as he could manage to lie next to Alistair.

As he pulled a blanket over the man's naked body, he felt Alistair tense. "Easy," he whispered. "It's me."

"Hawke," Alistair breathed, then blindly reached out with his single hand and pulled Hawke towards him. "I... I can't," he breathed. "I can't take much more of this."

Hawke swallowed, hearing the depth of the despair in his friend's voice. Instinctively wrapping his arms around Alistair, he simply cradled his friend tightly for a good long while as he let himself fully understand what Alistair was telling him. Finally he exhaled loudly. "I know."

"Will you... help me, if comes to that?" Alistair swallowed as his body shook. "Like you did with Anders?"

Eyes squeezing shut, Hawke felt a cold wave of rage wash over him. Not at Alistair, of course--the man was wholly innocent in all that had happened. No, his anger was solely directed at himself. "I should never have dragged you into this mess," he growled vehemently.

"I chose to go into the Fade--" Alistair began, then fell silent when Hawke's arms tightened around him.

"I was the one who pulled you into my crusade against Corypheus," Hawke insisted. "I couldn't bear to be a failure again and used you to do something about it."

"But the Wardens--"

"Fuck the Wardens. I knew you weren't corrupted. I should have taken your information and left you out of it. Or left you behind at Skyhold with Leliana before we went to Adamant or..." His voice trailed off as Alistair began to shake slightly. "What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

"Well, yes, but..." Alistair shook his head, and abruptly Hawke realized that the man was laughing, albeit weakly. "The Wardens are my life, Hawke. I would never have abandoned that investigation, never have left the Fade knowing that Nightmare could corrupt them all over again if left unchecked. Every step of this journey was my choice. I wanted redemption, to prove I wasn't a failure."

Hawke fell silent, then buried his face into Alistair's hair for a moment as he took a deep breath. "Well. When you put it that way... there's some old saying about birds of a feather, and I am a Hawke."

"Exactly." Alistair's hand reached up and sank into Hawke's hair, trembling as his fingers closed tight. "And if it comes to that choice for me, I know that I cannot live with this pain, with him. I can't. Not again."

Silence settled over them once more as Hawke forced himself to be less of a selfish bastard and actually focus solely on Alistair's needs. Eventually, he knew what the answer had to be. "Of course I'll help you, should it... should it come to that."

Alistair didn't say anything, but the tension seemed to melt out of his body at the words. "Thank you," he whispered in a broken voice, even as Hawke felt something drip onto the arm underneath Alistair's head.

"I'm your friend, Alistair," Hawke murmured, but left it at that. As Alistair wept silently, Hawke
simply held him. When the man fell into slumber, Hawke tucked the blanket in nice and tight around
him, then eased back to his own sleeping roll, eyes burning as he stared at the ceiling of the tent. He
had to save Alistair somehow, whether from Amell or Zevran, and damn the consequences to
himself. Thoughts whirled in his mind, exploring several different possibilities as to how to do that,
until exhaustion overwhelmed him.

The next night, he waited until Amell had retired to his tent before enacting his nebulous plan. When
Zevran moved towards Alistair, Hawke stood in the way. "Do you have a moment?" When Zevran's
eyes narrowed, he hastily added, "Please, I—I beg for a moment of your time."

From the way Zevran tilted his head, Hawke had succeeded in gaining the elf's attention without
angering him, and a raised eyebrow spoke of intrigue. "Is that the sound of humility I hear?"

Hawke forced himself to bow his head, letting his shoulders drop as if in defeat. "I have been
thinking," he said. "Today, I mean."

"And you wish to expound upon your wisdom?" Zevran chuckled. "Very well. Your tent, then.
Alistair can wait out here."

With a nod, Hawke obeyed, thankful that Alistair could remain well out of it. Leading the way
inside, he stood and waited obediently next to his sleeping roll for Zevran to indicate that he should
speak.

Naturally the elf refused to do so immediately. Instead he ordered Hawke to strip, then circled him so
that he could trail his fingers along the lines of Hawke's muscles. "I see the Master has well and truly
claimed you," he murmured as his fingers rose to trace the outline of the handprint on Hawke's
chest.

Hawke fought not to react, surprised that even a light touch still hurt as much as it did. Amell had
burned it into him the same day that Alistair's arm had been butchered, after all, and supposedly had
healed it. *Supposedly.* "As is his right," he said softly.

"That it is, little bird." Zevran's fingers moved down Hawke's torso, idly following the faint scars of
the whip marks he himself had left in punishment, which Amell had not erased as he had done for
older scars. "You are strong to absorb such pain. Or perhaps you have learned to enjoy it, as I
have."

Hawke paused a moment, seeing an opportunity. "As the Master taught you?" he ventured.

"Oh, yes." For a moment, in demeanor and expression, Zevran became little more than a servant of
Amell. "He freed me from so very many misconceptions. He showed me the limitations I labored
under, and lifted me into a higher awareness than I dreamt possible." Zevran's eyes fluttered closed
as he shivered, and his hand pulled away from Hawke to touch his own ear.

Hawke squinted, trying to discern the significance of the motion. He'd noticed before that one of
Zevran's ears had been damaged at some point, the earlobe cut away and the cartilage nocked as if
with a knife, and it seemed that was the ear that Zevran fondled. "If he wishes to attain godhood, that
makes sense," he ventured when Zevran didn't speak.

With a sneer, Zevran dropped his hand and opened his eyes. "You still think of him as nothing more
than a poor shadow to Corypheus," he said. "He is not that. Corypheus suffers delusions of
grandeur. The Master wishes to save the world, not rule it."

Hawke's shoulders tightened, then relaxed as Zevran's shift in mood didn't lead to an immediate
punishment. "Forgive me, Master," he breathed. "I meant no insult."

"Then perhaps you are ready for an education," Zevran mused.

"I have no future without the Master," Hawke said, trying to sound sincere and fumbling for an example to follow. Sebastian, right. Now, how did Sebastian do it? "My struggles only show me that I cannot prevail against him. I... Please, master," he said, falling to his knees. "I wish to learn."

Zevran's eyes narrowed, and his hand suddenly shot out to grab a handful of Hawke's hair. "If I learn this is a trick," he hissed, "then all your pain before this will be but a kiss of the breeze on a calm summer day."

"N-no trick!" Hawke gasped. Servile, servile, act servile! Sweet Maker, how did Bodahn manage to put up with me for so many years? "Please, Master!"

Something must have convinced Zevran, at least enough that his face relaxed into a cocky smile. "Perhaps I believe you. Or perhaps I just want to see if you can maintain this act, if that is what it is." As Hawke opened his mouth to protest, Zevran placed a finger on his lips. "Regardless, I shall test your resolve. You have sworn to obey and serve. So. Serve me as you have before."

Hawke nodded, shoving any hesitation far away as he reached to tug open Zevran's trousers with an eagerness he hoped would convince the elf of his sincerity. "Thank you, master!"

He did his best to sate the elf's peculiar lusts, both for sexual gratification as well as for power and pain. When Zevran finally collapsed on top of him, panting for air, Hawke felt a small surge of victory despite the agony that sitting in a saddle the following day would likely cause him. "Have I pleased you, master?"

Zevran took a moment to answer. "You have done well, little bird," he murmured. "It almost reminded me of--"

When Zevran stopped speaking, Hawke tensed, bracing in anticipation of a punishment. When the elf abruptly shoved him to the side and stood, Hawke raised his hands to protect his face, peering at Zevran through the cracks in his fingers. Zevran, however, wasn't paying attention to him; instead he stared straight at Amell's tent, face a mask of confusion. In the next instant, he cursed profusely in Antivan and lashed out at Hawke, landing a solid blow which sounded a loud crack in the night air.

"Do not move," Zevran snarled, then stormed from the tent. For a heart-stopping moment he paused near where Alistair sat next to the fire, then simply kicked the Warden before continuing on to Amell's tent and going inside.

Dragging himself to his feet, Hawke staggered as quietly as he could towards the tent, hoping to overhear some of the conversation. He halted as soon as words reached his ears, surprised how clearly they carried to where he stood halfway between the tents.

"--long has it been, mi amor?" Zevran's voice quavered in a way Hawke had never heard before, and he blinked in astonishment. Is Zevran...crying?

Amell sighed heavily. "I have told you, my love, the Blight--"

"Fuck the Blight!" Zevran took a shaky breath. "I understand the taint causes difficulties, but there is nothing wrong with me, with my body. And..." Zevran fell silent for a moment. "And I miss you, mi amor."

"Are you making demands of me?" Amell asked in a quiet voice, but the threat underlying the words
could be heard loud and clear.

He could almost hear Zevran shrink back from Amell, and certainly his voice went from defiant to simpering. "N-Neve I would never do that to you."

"Good. Then do not bring up such frivolities again." Amell said in a firm tone. "Now leave me. I have much to do, and I don't have time for your foolishness."

Hawke quickly returned to his tent, praying that he would reach it first. By the time Zevran had returned, he was back to lying on his sleeping roll, as close to the position Zevran had left him in as he could remember.

Zevran's movements as he clapped the chains around Hawke's limbs displayed an anger not unlike the elf's moods when the whip came out, and Hawke lay as still as he possibly could. When he was secure, Zevran grabbed the chain around Hawke's neck and jerked him up with a surprising show of strength. "Tomorrow night," he snarled. "Be ready."

Then, as Hawke nodded hastily in response, Zevran hauled him into an angry kiss, one which left Hawke's lips bleeding from the savage bite which accompanied it.

Then Zevran opened his hand, dropping Hawke like a sack of potatoes as he moved to collect Alistair.

Stunned, Hawke lay limp while blood trickled from his mouth. He couldn't quite comprehend what had happened, or what would happen over the next few days, but it seemed he had set himself on a dangerous path.

In the following nights, as they traveled over land and sea to the Shrine of Dumat at a punishing speed, the group settled into a pattern: Amell retired to his tent, Alistair settled into a semi-stupor next to the fire, and Zevran took Hawke into the other tent and vented his frustrations. Those proved to be varied in their manifestation, from the blade and the blood to Hawke draining Zevran's balls dry with only his mouth. Every morning saw Hawke sore and exhausted, left to nurse a bag of potions Zevran dropped in his lap after he was tied in the saddle, but also each morning he felt closer to his goal of finding a chink in Zevran's armor, a crack in the bond between him and Amell.

Then, one night and without warning, the dynamic abruptly changed.

That night began as the others had, with Zevran 'instructing' him in the arts of learning to enjoy the pleasures of pain as Amell had once taught him. Partway through one such lecture, however, Zevran suddenly stopped and stared at Amell's tent for a few moments, then closed his eyes and bowed his head, forehead furrowing. The dagger dropped from his hand and he sagged to his knees next to Hawke, who kept himself still.

Finally Zevran looked up at Hawke, whose eyes widened as he took in the tears shining in the elf's eyes. In the next moment Zevran's hand reached up to sink into Hawke's hair, but the motion was less possessive and more desperate, pulling Hawke into a kiss which reflected the sudden change in demeanor. As the kiss deepened, Zevran's other hand fumbled at the rope holding Hawke's arms behind his back, freeing him from its grasp. Once that was done, Zevran lay back onto Hawke's sleeping roll, drawing Hawke after him with their lips still entangled in a kiss.

Unwilling to risk violence and unsure of what else he could do in the situation, Hawke wrapped his arms around Zevran and followed the elf's lead. He tried to work past the hatred and resentment he harbored towards Zevran and find a way to connect with him, to weaken him, perhaps even to change him as he himself had been changed. Whatever was running through Zevran's mind, whatever obscure need drove him, Hawke knew that this was a far better expression of it than the
habits Amell had instilled in him.

Despite all that, however, Zevran still caught him by surprise when the kiss ended and the elf hissed, "Take me."

Hawke's eyes widened. "You want me to--"

"Fuck me, si." Zevran reached for his pants and retrieved a familiar vial which he pressed into Hawke's hand. "As hard and as fast as you can manage. I want to feel that again."

With a frown, Hawke glanced down at the vial of oil in his palm. "Feel what, exactly?"

"Pain." Zevran frowned, then shook his head. "No. More than that." He drew Hawke down into a searing kiss, though it felt oddly hollow considering what Hawke felt towards him. "Appassionata."

After a bit of fumbling on his part, mostly due to the unexpected nature of the request, Hawke found himself doing exactly as Zevran bid. At first the elf urged him towards roughness, slapping Hawke's face and chest and urging him for faster and harder. As time moved on, however, those demands slackened, until Zevran simply clutched the sleeping roll beneath him and moaned softly with each thrust of Hawke's hips. Forcing himself to pretend it was Anders and not Zevran, Hawke did what he could to bring the passion Zevran had claimed to desire, even as his mind whirled about the implications of what he was doing with whom.

Zevran came with a suddenness that caught Hawke by surprise and made him freeze. When his hips paused their motion, Zevran clawed his way upright and wrapped his arms around Hawke's neck. "Don't stop," Zevran hissed, rolling his hips urgently. "I want to feel you finish inside me."

Remembering what Zevran had said about the Blight causing difficulties with Amell, Hawke had to wonder when was the last time he'd felt his own lover buried deep inside him. With Zevran's face hidden but his breath hot on Hawke's neck, it was easier for Hawke to close his eyes and enter the careful internal fantasy he'd constructed. As his hips jerked and his hands tightened on Zevran's hips, even he wasn't certain if it was thought of dark blond hair in a messy queue or the memory of a dark, curled mustache which kept him hard and moaning. In the end, it didn't matter which memory helped him, as he finally found his own release with a long, muffled groan of pleasure.

Even then, however, Zevran did not pull away. As things slowly cooled and relaxed between them, Zevran's arms remained around Hawke's neck, his fingernails digging sharply into Hawke's shoulders as his hips moved in the same small circle over and over again. It was a moment of odd, perilous intimacy, and Hawke had to wonder what it all meant, and how long it would last.

"Tell me, Hawke," Zevran whispered into the skin of Hawke's neck, "who were you thinking of to manage this?"

Hawke cleared his throat. "You, of course."


Struggling to recover from that unexpected bite of pain, especially considering they were still connected, Hawke finally said, "I'm... not sure."

"Ah, so more than one, then?" Zevran asked. At Hawke's nod, he murmured, "Both mages, I presume?" Zevran sighed and pulled back, staring into Hawke's eyes for a moment. "So we both thought of others not in our grasp." His hand suddenly settled around Hawke's neck and slowly squeezed, cutting off most of Hawke's air. "And if you ever tell Amell I said such a thing, I will
emasculate you, fry the bits in oil, and force you to eat them. Understood?"

Hawke nodded hastily, his struggle for air less important than Zevran's anger.

"Good." With a final shake, Zevran abruptly shoved Hawke down onto his back and stood. Pressing a foot to Hawke's throat, he slowly dug in until Hawke's lungs strained for air. "You are an adequate fuck, Hawke. A pity we will reach our destination tomorrow. Who knows what you could have accomplished with your little ploy if you had more time? You might even have found that weakness you sought, or possibly even someone worth saving." Reaching down, Zevran took Hawke's clothing and cleaned himself off with them, then dropped it on top of Hawke as he stepped back. "Dress."

Knowing better than to argue or hesitate, Hawke did so despite the overwhelming smell of sex and Zevran emanating from his apparel. When he had finished, Zevran trussed him up like a nug on his bedroll, then fetched Alistair to do the same. He left them, then, walking to Amell's tent and disappearing inside--a silent but firm declaration of his continued allegiance to the man.

Hawke let his body go limp, still reeling from the encounter. There had been small bits and pieces of a Zevran outside of the context of Amell, but it was precious little and, as Zevran himself had pointed out, too little, too late. The hopelessness of their situation again settled in on Hawke, and he instinctively curled into a fetal position as the realization finally sunk in: there was no hope, no escape. He had nothing left. Not even the memory of a last, stolen kiss with Dorian could ease the crushing blow of seeing his efforts to get through to Zevran end so thoroughly in defeat.

There truly was nothing he could do, for him or for Alistair, save for perhaps a final end.

Hawke started when he felt a weight wrap around his waist, and twisted to see that Alistair had crawled over to lie behind him. "Theirin." It was all he could manage as the defeat swept over him along with a fresh bout of despair.

Alistair pressed his face into the crook of Hawke's neck for a moment before he finally spoke. "Thank you, Hawke," he murmured.

"Don't start getting sentimental on me," Hawke said, a pure reflex against something as unlikely as sincere gratitude directed towards his failure. "It didn’t work, anyway. I thought…” His voice trailed away as he closed his eyes. "I thought perhaps there was still someone screaming for help inside of him."

"Someone like us?"

Hawke paused, then reached up to grasp Alistair's hand. "We're not there yet," he said quietly. "We’re not what he’s become. I won’t let him make us like that."

"I feel like Amell's toying with us," Alistair said, tone weary. "As if any moment he could snap his fingers and take our minds away. I spent so much of the Blight in a fog I barely remember anything. I know what he can do."

Shifting awkwardly, Hawke turned until he could take Alistair's face between his hands. "He is toying with us, perhaps, but they don't call me the Champion of Kirkwall because I paint watercolors and breed nugs for the feasts in Orzammar."

As he'd hoped, the words brought a smile, however faint, to Alistair's lips. "You have a plan, then?"

"A plan? Me?" Hawke snorted, trying to feel as confident as he sounded. "I don't need a plan. All I need is an opportunity, even if I have to make it myself."
Alistair's eyes closed for a moment before he nodded. "And if not?"

"I won't let him do that to you," Hawke said fiercely. "Not while I have breath."

"Why?" Alistair asked bluntly. "Shouldn't you be saving your own skin first?"

Hawke winced and looked away. "I suppose that's what I would have done before. But now…" His eyes narrowed. "No. That won't happen now. If Corypheus is my responsibility, then ensuring that my cousin never gets his hands on the Orb is my duty. I may be an ass, but I'm a dutiful ass."

Alistair smiled again. "And insufferable. But… thank you. And not just for that. Whether you meant it or not, the last few nights I've been left alone. That's… I did not expect that from you."

"A happy coincidence," Hawke dismissed quickly.

"Not the first night, it wasn't. Was it?" With a warning shake of his head, Alistair added, "And don't deny it. Going to him that first night before he got a hold of me just made it harder on you. Made him harder on you. You did that for me. You called yourself my friend, but that...that proved it. I won't forget that, Hawke, no matter what may happen to us."

"Yes, well, don't spread any untoward rumors, will you?" Hawke muttered, unsure exactly how to respond to that. "I have a reputation to protect."

"I don't think Zevran would be interested," Alistair noted wryly, "so I think your little secret is safe with me."

Heartened by the hint of old Alistair rising to the surface, Hawke met the Warden's gaze and grew serious. "Promise me that if I tell you to jump, you'll jump," he said softly. "No matter what."

"But what if--" Alistair began, then quieted when Hawke put a hand over his mouth.

"No. Matter. What." Hawke's voice almost disappeared in the night, but he knew it was loud enough to reach Alistair's ears when, after a moment, the man nodded reluctantly. "Promise me you'll go back to Leliana and give her every kiss she deserves for putting up with you."

And again a hint of a smile touched Alistair's lips under Hawke's palm, and he nodded again.

"Good." Hawke moved his hands to Alistair's shoulders and squeezed them tightly. "Now go to sleep. I have a feeling we're going to need all our wits about us tomorrow."

"You're right. I think…" A thoughtful expression came to Alistair's face as his voice trailed away. "I think something has to go right for us at some point. Why not tomorrow?"

"That's the spirit," Hawke said encouragingly. "Take that with you into your sleep."

Alistair nodded, seeming lighter than he had since the Fade. "Yes." He took a deep breath, then pulled Hawke into a crushing one-armed embrace. "Yes. I… I can hope tonight, at least."

"You do that," Hawke said, putting every ounce of swagger he'd ever possessed into the statement. It was only after Alistair had crawled back to his sleeping roll that he fell limp once more, staring at the ceiling of his tent. Sweet Maker's ass, what am I going to do now?

He found no answer before Zevran came to rouse them for the final stretch of their journey--only hours of doubt and dread.
"This is a bit large for a shrine, isn't it?" Hawke observed, craning his neck to look up at the edifice as they paused in the archway. After a moment he turned and squinted into the brightness of the courtyard, wondering what was taking Zevran so long to return to them from his task of making sure no one would follow them.

Amell snorted in amusement as he glanced at Hawke, one eye winking with a red flare before he looked inside again. "The High Priests of the Old Gods suffered from a hubris almost unheard of in modern times," he noted. "Their shrines and temples had to be larger, stronger, better than any other building, and in Minrathous, or so the records say, they competed for money to build up the temples even more."

"Sounds like a recipe for revolution," Hawke noted sardonically.

"By whom? The gods were difficult to argue against, back then. And the High Priests were powerful men." Amell stepped beyond the sunlight and into the shadow of the entryway, peering into the darkness of the Shrine ahead. "There should be Venatori here. Quite a few of them, in fact."

"There were quite a few in that courtyard," Hawke grunted, rolling his shoulders to settle his chains into a slightly more comfortable position. "You really should release me, you know. What if you run into more than you and Arainai can handle?"

"Unless that includes Corypheus, I will not need your assistance," Amell told him acidly. "The last time you promised to do as I bade you, nothing happened the way it should have."

"Corypheus didn't win," Hawke pointed out.

"Because of the Inquisition, not because of you." The disdain in Amell's tone made Hawke's shoulders twitch. "You never succeed at anything, cousin. Or had you forgotten?"

Hawke frowned, Amell's casual dismissal of him all too reminiscent of others in his life, particularly family. But then, Amell was family, much as Hawke was loathe to admit it. "I succeeded in failing," he blurted before he could stop himself.

Amell turned to regard him again, then held up his hand. As it slowly bloomed into a dusky red glow, the handprint on Hawke's chest started to burn, a faint, distant sensation that swelled swiftly into an agony which drove him to his knees with a loud groan before it stopped in the next instant. As he gasped for breath, Amell's hand dropped down to rest lightly on his head. "Don't work against me again, cousin," he said softly. "I would prefer your mind to be intact, but I don't need it. All I need is a vessel."

Blinking away tears of pain, Hawke nodded dully. "Understood, cousin."

"Then take it to heart," Amell grated. "I tire of your endless yearning for freedom. Accept your fate, and you will be far better off for it. You are mine, cousin, as you have been since you left Ferelden. I need you, but I can snuff out your rebellion if I so wish it. Thus far, I have not. Don't tempt fate. Obey."

At that moment, Hawke believed him, the concept of escape so far out of reach as to be laughable. His eyes moved to where Alistair leaned back against the building, hand massaging the stump of his arm, and again he felt a lance of guilt, followed swiftly by a burn of ambition. Perhaps his own fate was sealed, but that needn't apply to Alistair.

A movement caught his attention, and he turned to see Zevran approaching, a grin on his face and a good-sized coin purse in his hand. "I ran into some Venatori, and apparently one of them was either
"It was lucky at cards," he reported to Amell as he ascended the stairs. "Sadly, his luck ran out."

"Is that what you were doing?" Amell asked in amusement.

"Once a rogue, always a thief," Zevran replied with a laugh as he tucked the jingling bag into his tunic. "Come. Let's go slaughter some more, shall we?"

Amell grinned, then slapped Zevran's ass soundly before he led the way inside. Zevran grabbed the chains to the collars around their captives' necks, dragging them after.

For the hundredth time, Hawke wondered why Amell didn't simply bespell them instead of keeping them in pain, on the edge of starvation, and half-healed. Perhaps it was more of the twisted training Amell had used on Zevran and Alistair during the Blight, to force them to bow to his whims. Perhaps it was pure malice for his own twisted enjoyment. No matter the reason, the thought plagued Hawke even as they stumbled along after Amell and Zevran into the imposing Shrine of Dumat.

Once they'd moved into the Shrine proper, the Venatori swiftly descended in a relatively impressive onslaught of magical fury, but it was not enough. For all the hatred Hawke bore towards his cousin, Amell had earned his reputation as a formidable combat mage. Each skirmish followed the same pattern: Zevran launching ahead, drawing the enemies closer one by one, then dancing away at the last second as Amell unleashed his attacks. And unleashed proved to be the correct term: his magic fell on their foes like a force of nature, encasing them in ice or engulfing them in flames. Once, Amell simply brought the roof down on their heads, then left them groaning in the rubble with no chance of escape.

The spectacle sobered Hawke immensely, and not only because of the sheer power on display. It hammered in how difficult it would be to overcome Amell, even for the Inquisition, and how slim his chances for escape remained. I don't matter, he reminded himself, and kept his eyes open for an opportunity.

Someday, Amell would make a mistake, and Hawke had to be ready.

After the third encounter, however, Hawke wondered just what propelled Amell forward. After all, Hawke had lived with a mage his entire life: first his father, then his sister, then Anders. The toll required to cast that much flamboyant magic surely must be wearing on Amell by now, but he seemed as fresh as a dawn lotus. Suspicious, Hawke stared at Amell like his own namesake, trying to catch a glimpse of the man sneaking in a bottle of lyrium, but failed to see anything but murder and mayhem. Finally, after yet another a lightning storm great enough to literally cause their foes to spontaneously catch fire, he turned to Alistair with a question for the former Templar on his lips.

And found Alistair face-down on the ground.

The question died unasked as he rushed to Alistair's side, flipping him to lie on his back as Hawke looked for some sort of explanation for the man's collapse. A quick examination found cold sweat and a constant shiver, along with a sallow hue to his skin totally at odds with the man he'd walked into the Shrine with just a short while ago. It was as if the life had been sucked out of him, but Hawke couldn't understand how.

"Theirin," he said, slapping the man's cheek lightly. "Alistair. Come on, wake up. Don't scare me like this. What in Thedas happened to him?"

"Pick him up and carry him along," Amell ordered Hawke from a few feet away. "We've not found the heart of this place yet, or the answers I'm looking for."
Hawke glared at Amell, but he feared if he did not obey that Alistair would be left to rot. As he gathered his friend in his arms, Hawke glanced back towards the inviting sunlight of the door leading outside and away from the blood and horror of this place. A harsh tug on the chain around his neck snapped his attention back, and he stumbled forward until he reached Zevran’s side.

"Don't even think of it," Zevran hissed. "There is no escape for you."

Giving the elf a dull stare, Hawke tried to muster up enough energy for an angry retort, but the attempt sputtered and died before he even had a chance to say it. A low moan caught his attention from ahead of them, and he turned with a frown as he sought its source.

He saw Amell standing over a fallen Venatori mage, pinning him with the end of his staff. The moan had come from the man lying on the ground, a byproduct of his attempts to escape the one towering over him. Even as the Venatori struggled, a red cloud seeped from his body and spun itself into a sinuous line of flickering energy which spiraled up Amell’s staff to the red lyrium skull at its top. After a few moments, the skull emanated a red glow, one which grew stronger and more desperate. Abruptly the skull flared with a bright red flash of light, a burst accompanied by a high-pitched scream from the captive before he suddenly collapsed into stillness. Amell's face held a smile which smacked more of coital pleasure than malice, and that alone was enough to make Hawke shift uneasily on his feet. When the base of Amell's staff moved to tug off the hood covering his victim's face, however, Hawke's stomach twisted as he beheld what lay beneath.

A corpse, ancient and shriveled, lay upon the ground. Had he not seen the man's death with his own eyes, Hawke would have assumed this was another of the undead he'd fought from time to time in areas where the Veil was thin, not a recently deceased Venatori mage.

Eyes wide, he watched as Amell reached into his tunic and tugged out his amulet, pressing it to the red lyrium skull with an expression of intense concentration. A high-pitched whine filled the room as a twisting coil of red magic emerged from the skull and worked around the amulet, and Hawke squinted as a pale light swelled from the amulet itself. Abruptly the white energy burst from the amulet and surged through the room with a rumble that gripped him to the very core. For a moment Hawke felt as if a fist had closed over him, freezing even the air in his lungs as he hung, suspended, for an indeterminate, stretched out moment. When the sensation finally passed, it left him gasping for air in its wake as he fell to his knees in an effort not to drop Alistair to the ground.

As Hawke struggled to fill his lungs, he noticed Amell smile and release the now scintillating amulet to rest upon the front of his robe. His eyes flicked up to meet Hawke’s, sending a shudder down Hawke’s spine when he saw how very brightly Amell’s eyes glowed.

Jerking his gaze away from Amell, Hawke hovered near Alistair as Amell moved to another fallen Venatori, this one pinned beneath a portion of the roof Amell had collapsed earlier, and repeated the procedure. This time, however, the victim's face was clear to all to see—as was his transformation from alive to dead.

Hawke couldn’t help himself. As the man’s face shriveled and his eyes withered away, Hawke set Alistair aside so that he could heave what little remained in his guts onto the floor of the Shrine. It was one thing to know that a blood mage used blood for his magic, it was another to see Amell suck someone dry the same way a farmer drained a nug for slaughter. As he shakily reached up to wipe his mouth, his eyes glanced at Alistair, then stayed there as a terrifying thought occurred to him.

What if Amell hadn't used lyrium in the fight because he was getting his energy from somewhere else? Some one else?
Horrifying as the thought was, Hawke couldn't deny that it filled in a lot of odd little gaps. They had been under Amell's control for so long, and the man's magic was so powerful, it seemed more than plausible that the man could use them in such a manner. Moving over the Alistair, he slowly pulled the man into his lap and peeled back an eyelid, not at all surprised to find the eye rolled back. Sweet Maker. What has he done to you?

Abruptly a hand struck his head, and he unthinkingly ducked away before the chain pulled him back. "Time to get up," Zevran hissed. "We have no time for your weakness."

As Hawke struggled to his feet, Amell approached them on light feet. The red skull on his staff crackled and shimmered with energy, and Amell himself exuded an air of power unusual even for him. "Leave Alistair," he commanded Hawke. "And step back."

Hawke did as he was told, reluctant though he was to leave Alistair to Amell's machinations. His shoulders tensed as Amell settled the tip of his staff on Alistair's chest, and he unconsciously reached for where his daggers once rested on his hips. Only Zevran's hold on the chain around his throat held him back as a spark of red light caused Alistair's body to jump. When Amell turned away, however, Alistair's chest abruptly heaved, and he rolled over onto his side as a coughing fit took over. Hawke immediately knelt down and eased Alistair into a sitting position. "Easy there," he murmured, clapping Alistair on his back until the man's coughing fit eased. "Get it all out."

"Andraste's tits," Alistair swore. Whatever Amell had done had restored him completely, it seemed, save for the arm. His color was back, and he seemed even better than when they'd entered the Shrine. "What was that?"

Before Hawke could answer, Zevran shook their chains. "Get up and follow the Master," he snapped.

As they scrambled to their feet, Alistair almost fell on his face before Hawke caught him. "Thanks," he muttered as they got to their feet. "For a moment, I almost forgot about--" He waved his elbow stump aimlessly. "Hawke hiked Alistair's whole arm over his shoulders and hooked his own hand around the man's waist. "Don't worry, I've got you." At Zevran's insistent jingling of the chains, they moved after Amell. Alistair grew more certain of his strength with every step forward, but made no move to push Hawke away.

"Thank you, Hawke," he said quietly as they approached Amell where he stood in front of a head-sized cluster of red crystals.

Daring only to squeeze Alistair's waist in response, Hawke kept his eyes on Amell as they drew closer. The man stood close to the crystals, studying them with obvious curiosity from several sides before tapping his right cheek thoughtfully. "Shaperate crystals," he mused, glancing back to Zevran. "Similar to the ones you left for the lost angel to find in Val Royeaux."

"Without your spell, amor, how could it compare?" Zevran asked, flashing a grin at Amell.

Amell chuckled softly. "Well, then. Let's see what our erstwhile host has put into this one." Passing his hand over the crystals, Amell sat back and tilted his head as a sonorous voice came from the air.

"I recited the old verses. How easily they come, even after so long a slumber. Yet still I do not feel the presence of Dumat - hear no whispers, no commands. Silence has fallen."

Hawke snarled silently. That voice he knew all too well, and his hands flexed with the need to
throttle its owner. Someday. In the meantime, however, he simply sat and listened as Corypheus pontificated, remembering all too clearly that day in the Warden ruins where his failure had cost the world so dear.

His anger faded, however, as Amell shifted on his feet, a motion which left one shoulder slightly higher than the other. Hawke frowned as he studied Amell's posture, realizing something off about it, something which rang alarm bells in his head. When Amell turned to face them, Hawke felt his blood freeze in his veins. The left eye no longer glowed. Tightening his grasp around Alistair's waist, he kept a careful eye on the situation, taking his cue from the sudden wariness in Zevran's demeanor.

The monster had returned.

"It would seem the idiot Sethius left some messages for his faithful to hear," Amell--or whoever it was--sneered. "As if he ever heard Dumat in the first place. He heard only the call of his pride and no more." Its eyes, one glowing red and the other dull and seemingly lifeless, scanned the Shrine. "There are more. With me, slaves. I wish to hear more of his folly. And there will be more. He will have spread his words throughout this place as an ode to the time when Dumat's voice whispered in loud silence through these halls."

They obeyed it silently and without question, Zevran included, in an effort not to spark another rage. Hawke knew not the nature of Amell's visitor, but whatever it was, even Zervan treated it with caution or desperation, as merited. Hawke had never asked about it, and he suspected Zevran would never speak, but he'd seen what it could do to people.

He'd learned it was better to avoid its attention entirely.

So they stood in front of another crystal, where Hawke quietly took Alistair's hand and held it tightly, hoping that it helped Alistair to have a friend nearby as much as it helped him

"Awake, in a world twisted into perversion and ruin. Awake, only to discover the light of wisdom has gone black. Samson has failed. But Calpernia stands ready."

"Samson," Amell's monster mused thoughtfully. "That was the name of the former Templar we recovered for study, was it not, slave?"

"It was, Master," Zevran answered quickly. "Avernus has found him most instructive."

Amell's monster nodded. "Typical of that idiot Sethius to discard a tool after a failure, even when it may still be of use. And Samson is not our only acquisition gleaned from his servants. The fool. But then, he always did enjoy the sound of his own voice more than he enjoyed the exploration of knowledge." With a sniff of disdain, he gestured them to follow him deeper into the Shrine. "Come. There will be more to discover."

As more crystals were found, Hawke fervently prayed that one of them would somehow make the monster disappear as quietly as it came, but the words of Corypheus only seemed to amuse it.

At least, until they reached the last of the crystals.

"Did the others never return from the Black City? There is no record even of our names! We are vilified by legend. They spit on our deeds and claim we brought darkness into the world. We discovered the darkness. We claimed it as our own, let it permeate our being. If the others have not returned, they are lost. I am alone in my glory."

For a long moment after those words echoed in the expansive darkness around them, Amell's
monster simply stared at the crystals and tapped the fingers of its left hand--its preferred hand--thoughtfully against its burnt cheek. Then it chuckled ever so softly, a dry creak of a sound. "So his thoughts did turn to us at least once before he twisted our absence into yet another moment for self-aggrandizement. I will thank him for that before I send him to his final rest."

Hawke's eyes widened. *Us? Does it mean--?* No matter how Hawke turned the words around in his head, he could not escape the certain and unmistakable implication of what Amell had said, and the realization made his blood turn to ice. *Sweet Maker and breath of Andraste preserve us.*

"But we have no more time for the gratification of that idiot's ego," Amell's monster continued with a shake of its head, even as Hawke struggled to deny the truth. "Come. I wish to see what so many of his servants would gladly spend their lives to protect for his glory."

And with that, it stalked towards the large double doors leading to the back of the Shrine.

Hawke and Alistair exchanged a wordless glance of terror even as Zevran jerked on their chains. They *had* to follow, even if they wanted to run screaming for the hills.

*All I need is one opportunity,* Hawke repeated in his head like a mantra. *That will be enough.*

*It had to be.*
Dorian held up his hand to halt those behind him, eyes scanning the horizon ahead. "It would seem Hawke's map is accurate. That's a Tevinter waystone," he told the woman riding at his side, pointing to a leaning pillar about as tall as Bull to their right. "We're close. If this Shrine dates back to the time of Ancient Tevinter, the shrine itself will be on the top of a hill. Something about the supplicant approaching in humility, and whatnot."

Leliana's eyes narrowed as she studied the road ahead of them, then moved to one particular expanse of dirt between the scattered stones. "And those tracks I told you about continue up this road, mere hours old. If they belong to Amell as we suspect--"

"--then we are close," Dorian finished for her, hand tightening on his reins. "Take the lead and watch for those tracks. Let me know if they diverge for any reason."

"Yes, Inquisitor." Leliana's horse edged forward to take the lead, and Dorian signaled the rest to follow him a few paces behind. Bull, Varric, and Solas rode with him, of course—together, they formed a team with a particularly powerful punch. Along for the ride were Cullen’s carefully curated selection of the best of the Inquisition troops, as well as Sutherland and his small band of mercenaries, brought along in case Dorian needed to get a secure message back to Skyhold in a hurry. They’d all split off several days ago from the force returning to Skyhold, a small but elite squad intended to be an arrow more effective than the one which had targeted Dorian at the Winter Palace.

He turned his head as Bull rode up to join him, his skeletal steed clacking as it walked. "You know this is a trap, right?" Bull asked without preamble. "I mean, it's gotta be. All the pieces line up a bit too neatly not to be deliberate."

"You've said that before, yes," Dorian said. "But it's a risk we must take. We knew that much of the Winter Palace was a risk, after all, including the parts that didn't include Amell."

"Yeah, but... I mean, Corypheus is sort of like a bronto in a shop full of those fancy white dishes the Ambassador likes so much. He doesn't really try to hide what he's up to because he's so sure he'll win it never occurs to him to be subtle. Amell, though..." Bull frowned, staring ahead of them for a few moments. "We don't know what he wants, we don't know where he lives, and we don't know what he can really do. And yet, he's already done more real damage to the Inquisition than Corypheus did with an entire army of Venatori."

"We did lose quite a few troops at both Haven and Adamant," Dorian reminded him. "So I'm not sure that's an accurate assessment."

Bull grunted, conceding the point. "But we didn't lose the Inquisitor at either place. Sands, Mailani went up against Corypheus face to face and still managed to bring down a whole mountain's worth of snow on him. You faced down a pet Archdemon and the biggest demon I never want to see or dream about again. This guy? Amell? We only saw the blade long after the attack landed. I remember that map Mailani found that led to the cave where she died. Who's to say that wasn't Amell who left the map for her to find in the first place?"

That thought gave Dorian pause. He'd almost forgotten about that, but Bull was right. They'd found the map on the edge of the Western Approach, near the lair of the dragon, alongside the burned body of what they'd presumed to be a treasure hunter. Granted, during their travels, Mailani had proven to have an obscenely keen eye for the weird and unexpected, and they'd discovered all sorts of odd
maps and trinkets and scribbled stories that he was sure would later show up in Varric's books. Yet it had never occurred to him the map which had led to the cave might have been Amell's handiwork.

But then, the man had somehow managed to get both blue and red lyrium smuggled to Cullen, so perhaps the idea wasn't as far fetched as it appeared to be on the surface.

Finally, though, Dorian shook his head. "Even if it the map were his doing, we had no idea at the time that he could possibly pose a danger. Now we do, and we can prepare accordingly."

"Yeah, that didn't work out so well in the Winter Palace," Bull muttered. "Remember?"

Dorian absently rubbed his side where Hawke's dagger had struck. "Intimately. But I still argue that is the primary reason we have to do this now." With a frown, Dorian tried to separate the urgency of rescuing Hawke and Alistair from the logical, acceptable reasons they needed to go up against Amell now rather than later. Bull wouldn't accept anything less. "Before, we suspected an ambush, but didn't know whose hand. Now, we know whose hand, and better understand the nature of how it can strike. But most importantly, we simply cannot afford to have him disappear into the shadows again. His most deadly attacks seem to occur when he leaps from the shadows unannounced."

After mulling that over for a bit, Bull heaved an expansive sigh. "Well, I still don't like it," he grumped.

"Neither do I," Dorian told him sympathetically. "But if Corypheus is a bronto in a porcelain shop, then Amell is the adder waiting in the grass: easier to kill when they are in sight, rather than walking around hoping they decide your ankle doesn't look tantalizing."

"And your ankles are downright delicious, right." With a snort, Bull added, "But you knew that. All right, boss, I'll go along for now. And I think we'll both be happier if I don't have to say I told you so later."

"Indubitably," Dorian said with a soft chuckle. The sound faded as he squinted ahead to where Leliana had dismounted. "Leliana's found something, I think."

Bull kicked his mount ahead with Dorian's. "You sure it's a good idea to have her along?" he asked in a low rumble. "I mean, I get the whole facing your worst fear thing, but if he's got any hooks in her at all, it could turn real nasty real fast."

"It's not just that, and you know it," Dorian murmured in return. Leliana's request to accompany him had caught him by surprise until he had realized just who would likely be with Amell, especially if, as Hawke had suggested, he and Alistair were dragged along for the ride. "Besides, we're not going up against only Amell, and if there's anyone I'd trust to send against a former Crow, it's the Spymaster of the Inquisition."

"Good point," Bull grunted. "Arainai might be a little too slippery for me to handle."

“To put it mildly,” Dorian said in a wry tone. “She also says we dare not leave him alive if Amell is dead, and I’m inclined to trust her judgment on the matter.”

“I hope she’s right,” Bull muttered, then fell silent as they drew closer to Leliana.

Once they reached her, Leliana pointed to the ground. "Their tracks go to the side here, into that copse of trees. Either they found a shortcut to the Shrine, or they made camp. Either way, there are no tracks coming back to this path."

"Fair enough." Dismounting quickly, Dorian summoned the others with a gesture before pulling his
staff from his saddle. "Let's investigate, shall we?"

The next few minutes proved to be tense, as those with silent feet crept ahead to let the others know the coast was clear before they could sneak forward themselves. As one of the decidedly not stealthy ones, unlike Mailani and her ability to slip through shadows with ease, Dorian fretted every time Varric or Leliana disappeared from sight. At one point, when they were gone longer than before, Dorian exchanged a worried glance with Bull, wondering at what point longer meant too long.

When Varric returned alone, his anxiety increased, but Bull nudged him with an elbow. "He's not sneaking," he pointed out. "He's walking normally. Amell must not be there, but it looks like they found something."

Bull's surmise proved correct, given the way Varric waved them over to join him, and Dorian released his breath in an explosive burst. "Let's hope you're right," he muttered, then signaled to the soldiers to follow as he rose to his feet.

"Nightingale sent me back to get you," Varric explained as he approached. "We found something interesting."

"Oh?" One of Dorian's eyebrows rose. "Very well. I take it there is no Amell, then?"

Varric muttered *Thank the Maker* under his breath as he shook his head. "No, but they did make camp here. And more."

The remark puzzled Dorian until they emerged from the trees, and Dorian's eyes widened. "Horses? That's odd."

"Four of them," Leliana said from where she stood rifling through the saddlebags. "Most likely they came directly from the Winter Palace, just as we did." She pointed to two of the horses. "Look at the manacles. Whoever rode those mounts did so against their will."

"Hawke and Alistair," Dorian said, understanding her point immediately. "So they have regained some free will."

She nodded, her expression studiously distant. "Unless this is his way of punishing them for what happened. He kept us in the fog most days during the Blight, but sometimes he would free us for short periods, one or two at a time. I don't know if his magic wasn't strong enough, or if he simply enjoyed our pain, but sometimes having our own mind while still being subject to his will was worse."

Sensing the matter to be too painful for further discussion, Dorian forbore further comment as he took a moment to look around the clearing. "We must be close, then, if he left the horses here. There, I think," he added, pointing to the far side of the grove. "There's a path there. He might have taken a back way to the shrine to avoid alerting the Venatori of his approach. The Shrine would have a large courtyard, after all."

"Easy to spot anyone trying to get in from the main road, you mean?" Varric asked, glancing up from where he was checking Bianca again, a sign the dwarf was anxious. "Four people against a horde of Venatori is still a bit one-sided, though."

"And that's assuming he lets Hawke and Alistair fight," Bull pointed out, taking one of the manacles dangling from a nearby saddle in hand. After a moment's scrutiny, he grimaced and dropped it. "You know, boss, I'm starting to think this guy is worse than demons."

Dorian glanced at Bull, trying to gauge his mood. Demons remained one of the ex-Qunari's greatest
fears, but if he perceived Amell as worse... "Would it help if I promise to hit you with a big stick once all this is over?" he asked in a deliberately teasing tone, hoping to ease Bull's worry a bit.

That made Bull bark a laugh. "Yeah. Maybe. Or let me hit you with mine." In the next moment, though, his face settled into a frown. "There's just something about this whole situation that doesn't sit well in my head, like I'm missing something so obvious it's going to smack me in the ass or stab me in the back. Or both."

"Pretend as if it might, and stay alert," Leliana interjected, her tone almost sharp. "It will keep you alive."

For a moment, they all looked at her. Finally Bull gave a little grunt, breaking the tension, and straightened as he peered towards the almost hidden path. "Good advice. So we're going up the sneaky way, right?"

Leliana nodded, then turned to Dorian and held something out to him. "But before we follow, there is an opportunity here."

His eyes narrowed at the sight of the crystal in her hand. "Another memory crystal? Maker, those are exceedingly rare. I wonder where Amell found it?"

"Even during the Blight, he explored ruins in hopes of finding treasure and power," Leliana said. "I would not be surprised if that's how it came into his possession. Can you activate it? If we can see some of his memories, we might learn something valuable."

Dorian reached out to take the crystal, but his hand froze in midair as another thought occurred to him. "I can... Wait a moment." His hand dove into the pouch at his waist and extracted the red crystal Leliana had brought to him from Val Royeaux. "You know, I gave this to Maevaris for analysis while I was tending to my--" The word father died on his lips, and he paused to clear his throat. "At any rate, she figured out how to work with it and taught me the trick. I was going to ask you to smuggle it back to Calpernia for some additional spying, but..." He frowned a moment, then brought the crystal in his hand closer to the one in Leliana's palm, and felt a faint hum which resonated up his arm. When his mark flared into life as well, he murmured, "Fascinating. I think this will be useful."

"Inquisitor?" Leliana asked.

"I could mirror them instead," he mused, even as he gathered his magic to do just that. "Crystals are essentially a collection of matrices, and these particular crystals are highly susceptible to manipulation by magic. I don't know how the Shaperate uses them among the dwarves, but the few that end up in Imperium hands have been studied extensively by magical scholars. In fact, Alexius developed an amulet to test our time-manipulation magical theories using a crystal he changed using one such analysis as a guide. Initial testing showed that it worked, albeit in a very limited fashion, though I do not know how far he got with those experiments after I left."

"Because they can hold a moment frozen in time?" Varric ventured. "I mean, that's pretty much what a memory crystal does, right?"

"That was his reasoning, yes. At least to start with." Dorian's face was a mask of concentration as he manipulated the makeup of the crystal in his hand to match the other. In a fit of inspiration, he called on the magic of the Anchor, using its power to change the substructure of the crystal more quickly with its peculiar abilities to manipulate the substrate of energy. In the next moment, the mark changed from a fitful flicker to a small orb of green light encompassing hand and crystal both, and suddenly the task became much easier and quicker. "It's working," he said softly. "Good. This way we can leave the crystal you found in the saddlebag without them being the wiser if it comes to that."
"You saying we won't beat these guys? I'm disappointed in you, boss," Bull grunted.

Dorian smiled tightly. "I'm saying I'd rather have a contingency plan in place as a precaution than assume we'll emerge triumphant and lose an opportunity. Remember what I said before we left." He spared a glance to Bull. "No martyrs, Bull. Not even you. This is important, but not a suicide mission. Ultimately our primary goal remains the defeat of Corypheus."


Ignoring that, Dorian returned his focus back to the crystal. "Did you discover anything else of use?" he asked Leliana.

"Some messages, but they are unsigned and do not use names or places," Leliana explained. "I believe they are from his agents. There is mention that they continue their search, but not what they are looking for, or where."

"Well, that's not very helpful. Why bother leaving messages to be spied upon if they aren't informative to the spy?" With a final twist, Dorian completed his work, then compared the two crystals. "There we are."

Varric gave a low whistle. "They even look the same, now. Not bad, Sparkler."

After looking at the crystal in his hand from a few more angles, Dorian nodded and tucked it away in his pouch once more. "You can put that back now. Hopefully it will pay off." As Leliana turned back to Amell's horse, Dorian straightened and faced the soldiers, eyes scanning their ranks. "Jim, come here."

Jim quickly stepped forward and gave Dorian a quick salute. "Yes, Inquisitor?"

"You'll stay here with Sutherland and his Company. They have been tasked with making sure our horses remain safe while we're investigating the Shrine so we don't have to walk back to Skyhold, but I need you to do a bit more than that." Nodding to Amell's horses, he said, "I need you to find a safe hiding place and watch these horses in particular. If Amell returns before we do, follow him if you can do so unseen, but only if you can do so unseen. Do not take any chances, and do not engage with Amell or anyone with him. Understand?"

Jim's face fell. "You don't want me to go with you to the Shrine, ser?"

Dorian smiled faintly at that, and he put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "I need a man I can trust to do this," he told the man in an earnest tone. "And you've earned that. It may not be glamorous, but it could be of vital importance. Besides, Sutherland can sometimes take a bit too much initiative. I need you to be the steady head in this."

That made Jim brighten a bit. "Yes, Inquisitor. I can do that, ser."

"Good man. Remember, stay hidden," Dorian repeated. "Stay safe." Patting Jim's shoulder, Dorian watched as Jim walked over to stand with Sutherland and his oddly assorted crew, a faint smile on his face. Then he turned to the remaining soldiers standing nearby. Unlike Jim, who had promise but was still relatively young, Cullen's chosen volunteers represented the more experienced of the Inquisition soldiers. He recognized all of them, and some of them he'd shared more than a pint or two of ale with in the Herald's Rest as he'd listened to their stories of being a Nevarran soldier, or an Orlesian legionnaire, or, in one case, a woman who had stood in the path of the darkspawn as they laid siege to Denerim during the Blight.
They were good, solid fighters, and he knew he could depend upon them—which is why they'd been chosen for this mission. They didn't need a pep talk, just orders, which he gave with only a few words: "The rest of you: with me." They nodded, and he turned to lead the way to the Shrine.

He only hoped that he wasn't leading them to their doom.

The path Amell had taken led them to a small crack passable for people, but not animals. It provided a good answer as to why Amell had opted to leave his horses behind, especially when Bull had to strain a bit to fit through the narrow gap. Once they were through, however, they found themselves only yards away from the main entrance, with the vast courtyard stretched out before them.

A vast courtyard pockmarked with bodies.

It was a sobering sight, and one which they all took to heart as they moved towards the vast maw of the shrine's entrance. Dorian felt the change in demeanor as weapons were drawn, shields hefted, and staffs readied. Silence accompanied them as they moved into the Shrine proper, pausing to let their eyes adjust to the change in light.

And saw that the carnage outside was but a mere harbinger of the chaos within.

Dorian's eyes widened as he surveyed the signs of destruction around him. The Venatori hadn't just been killed, they'd been obliterated. The smell of burnt flesh lingered in the air as they moved cautiously ahead, and nothing stirred aside from themselves. Sunlight shone through the ceiling above through ragged holes, giving Dorian far too good a view of what, exactly, Amell had done to decimate the Venatori so very thoroughly.

"Inquisitor."

Dorian blinked at the first spoken word he'd heard since they'd entered the shrine, and looked to its source to see Solas gesturing him over. Quickly he moved to Solas' side, knowing that the elf would never speak in the circumstances unless it was imperative. When Solas gestured downward, Dorian automatically transferred his gaze as indicated.

And recoiled at the sight which welcomed him. Raised and trained in the Imperium, Dorian knew blood magic well enough to recognize its remnants at a glance. But even to him, the sight of a corpse literally sucked dry of its life essence proved to be the stuff of nightmares, a tale from the days when the High Priests had ruled the Imperium in the name of the Old Gods, when hundreds of slaves were sacrificed in the name of great deeds and greater power, and atrocities such as this had been almost commonplace. His stomach clenched as he stared at the shrunken corpse, and it took him a while to recognize the robes which garbed it.

It was only then, as he stared at the insignia of the Venatori on its chest, that he realized that the corpse wasn't a remnant of the distant past, some poor soul sacrificed to Dumat. Despite looking as if it had lain under a desert sun for centuries, this was a servant of Corypheus in his current incarnation, reduced to a shell by a spell which hadn't been used in over a thousand years.

Since the time, in fact, of Corypheus.

"Maker," he breathed.

"Magic such as this would explain the thinness of the Veil here," Solas mumbled in low tones. "We must be cautious."

"We are fortunate we did not walk into a bevy of demons," Dorian agreed, glancing around out of habit just to make sure.
"Pray such fortune continues." Solas looked around them, a deep sorrow on his face. "And this is not the only one in such a state."

Dorian frowned as he surveyed some of the dead bodies nearby. "No, it isn't. Which would explain how one mage could do all this without needing to drink his own weight in lyrium."

"Even supplemented by lyrium of either hue, I would think arcane works such as this would test the limits of power for any mage." Solas idly traced his fingers along his staff as he studied the drained corpse for a moment more before lifting his gaze to meet Dorian’s. "It is imperative that we proceed with utmost caution. What can be done to the Venatori could just as easily be inflicted upon us as well."

"Then let us hope we find him suitably distracted," Dorian murmured, glancing down at the corpse with a shudder. "Aside from the brutality of the act, however, I must wonder where Amell learned such a spell. I recognize it from descriptions in the archives of the Minrathous Circle, but know of no living mage capable of such a feat."

"It would seem that his path has taken him down dark and twisted turns." Kneeling, Solas reached out to hover his hand over the body for a moment, then shook his head and stood. "There is nothing there. I daresay even your skill could not raise this man."

"But that would mean--" Dorian frowned, and stepped back so that he could move his staff and gesture with an innate grace, trying to summon up the man from the dead. Yet he found that Solas was right: there was nothing to call upon. "This goes beyond anything I know. Life energy is one thing, but to consume a soul? I cannot imagine such evil."

A haunted look passed over Solas' face for a moment. "I have seen such brutality in my travels, in the Fade."

Setting his staff down, Dorian laid a companionable hand on the elf’s shoulder and squeezed gently. "Let us push forward," he said in a hushed voice. "Perhaps we can prevent further evil."

Leaving the disturbing bodies behind, Dorian took the lead once more as they moved cautiously through the ruins towards the large double doors closed in the back. Occasionally they would pause as a scout ran quickly to check the side rooms, but they would always return with a shake of the head.

By the time they reached the doors, every person in the group had their hands on a weapon and moved with as quiet a tread as could be managed. Even Bull walked slowly and hung back a bit to ensure that a clink of his armor wouldn't give away their approach. This close to another mage, Dorian dared not cast any new spells, but he was already running through scenarios of what to do depending upon which circumstance they encountered.

They reached the doors to find them left slightly ajar. Taking a slow breath, Dorian stepped forward to grasp the door.

And heard a voice.

"--questions for you, and you will provide me with answers."

That voice. Dorian swallowed harshly. It was Amell's voice, yes, but Amell with the sonorous overtones and odd stilted cadence of Amell's monster. Freezing in place, he signaled for the others to wait and tapped his ear to indicate he wanted to eavesdrop, then tilted his head as he listened closely.

An old man's voice answered, querulous and thin, speaking over a faint hum of sound which spoke
of magic to Dorian’s ears. The hum merged with the man’s words as he spoke, giving them an otherworldly edge as his voice twisted and curled around itself in response to the spell. A spell of containment, perhaps? Dorian wondered idly, then shook the speculation away as the man answered, “To Corypheus I am bound, to answer every question— gaah!”

Dorian frowned as the man cut off speaking with a cry of pain, wondering what Amell had done to him. Surely not even Amell would torture someone who was already cooperating. Would he?

“Then let us begin with your name,” Amell said in a chill tone. “You are Erasthenes, yes? Magister of the Imperium, scholar of the Old Gods?”

“That I am, yes,” the man replied in a strained voice. “For Calpernia’s sake, I am lost.”

Dorian’s blood ran cold as recognition went through him. Erasthenes? Dorian remembered the man vaguely from a lecture he’d given at the Circle of Minrathous about the Magisters Sidereal years prior, when a sullen youth called Dorian who had all but given up on his aspirations within the Circle sulked sullenly through the entire lecture. Why is he here?

"The slave means little to me,” Amell said in a dismissive tone. “Tell me of the Conductor’s interest in you.”

Erasthenes took a shaky breath. “One night, he came to my door. For my relics, I thought. My writings and runes… But instead, my slave went to his side. Calpernia. To become the Vessel, and save Tevinter.”

“More the fool, she,” Amell sneered. “Sethius never could see beyond his own lust for power, but he has always been able to find those blind enough to believe his delusions.” There was a pause, and then Amell’s voice lowered in volume, too low to hear anything clearly.

As the conversation progressed, Dorian eased the door open as slowly as he could, peering inside with all the caution he could muster. His eyes quickly picked out two forms leaning against a nearby wall, though a vice gripped his heart when he saw that one of them had a shortened left arm, tucked in tightly against his body as if even Alistair didn’t want to think about it. The sight of it solidified that truth of what Dorian had experienced, even more than what had occurred at the Winter Palace: that he had, indeed, been seeing the world through Hawke’s eyes in all its brutal honesty.

After a moment of assimilating that recognition, Dorian continued to work at the door with the help of Bull, until it stood wide enough for someone to stand in the doorway. A brief peek around the door showed Zevran staring at Amell from the wall opposite to Hawke and Alistair, and Dorian retracted his head before the elf could catch a glimpse of him. As it stood, however, he had a clear view of Hawke and part of the room beyond, and Zevran could see nothing but the partially open door.

A small victory, at least for now.

Reaching down, Dorian picked up a piece of debris from the ground and launched the small missile with a touch of magic to guide its course. A moment later it landed on Hawke’s cheek, and Dorian tensed as he waited to see what Hawke’s reaction would be. Without touching him, there was no way to know if Amell had replaced the spell of control on him or not.

With admirable self-control, Hawke didn't even flinch when the stone struck his cheek. Instead, his eyes opened slowly, and he spent the next few moments casually looking around the room until finally he turned to the open door. Their eyes met, and Dorian felt his mouth go dry at the intensity in the other man’s expression as his eyes raked over Dorian and then darted to those who stood with
him. Dorian saw the man make a gesture, but wasn’t sure what it meant. When someone tapped his arm, he looked down at Varric in surprise, then bent until his ear was level with the dwarf’s mouth.

"That was one of our old battle signs from Kirkwall," Varric whispered in explanation. "So we knew who to attack first. That one means mage first."

Ah. Well, that made sense, particularly in this context. More than that, it, coupled with Hawke’s behavior, indicated that Hawke hadn’t been turned into a mindless thrall again. Dorian straightened and gave Hawke a nod of understanding. Still, there was also an opportunity here, and one Dorian refused to ignore. He met Hawke’s gaze again, then touched his ear and pointed at Amell, watching for Hawke’s short nod to see that the man understood his meaning before focusing his attention on the conversation once more.

Now, however, Dorian had at least a partial view of the interrogation, and what he saw made his eyes widen. It wasn’t so much the sight of Amell leaning on his staff with the red lyrium skull, or the man kneeling in a ritual circle as it was the dome of magic shimmering in the air around the kneeling man. That containment spell! It would hold a dozen pride demons! Even as he watched, the spell flickered red, and Erasthenes doubled up in pain. Dorian winced in sympathy—if the spell was as powerful as that, then the pain would be equally powerful. Given the runes drawn on the ground around Erasthenes, and what Dorian had heard so far, it wasn’t Amell causing Erasthenes pain at all, but Corypheus.

With a shake of his head, Dorian forced himself to listen to the conversation and put off any further speculation until later—after dealing with Amell.

"—their names are forgotten, outside of rare copies of the Liberalum." Erasthenes paused to catch his breath, hands trembling as they lifted to gesture vaguely towards Amell. "A book that—"

“I know what it is,” Amell snarled, clearly frustrated. "But it is clear too much of the Imperium has forgotten. But tell me this: how is it that the Imperium has no record of our--of the fates of the Magister Sidereal after they entered the Black City?"

Dorian felt a chill grip his spine as he focused on Amell's seeming slip in word choice. *Our?*

"Though the Imperium does not hold the Magisters Sidereal to be the reason for the Blights, most records of them were later destroyed or hidden out of fear. With the Old Gods gone and the Temples abandoned, their names became spoken only in hushed whispers, " Erasthenes explained through laboured breathing and several pauses. "There were rumors, scattered reports of encounters before and after the First Blight, but they were whispers of rumors as much as rumors themselves. Scraps of paper, snatches of overheard conversation written down and forgotten." A long, weary sigh came from Erasthenes. "So little knowledge. So much lost. I fear for our future, that we cannot see the dangers of the past."

Amell shifted on his feet, leaning heavily on his staff as he leaned forward. "Like Sethius?" Before Erasthenes could answer, Amell straightened. “No. How could he? He didn’t see what happened to the world after our--after the failure of the Magisters Sidereal. He didn’t see the Blights, or Andraste, or any of the consequences of searching for the Gods.” Amell shifted so he could look up at the hole in the ceiling of the roof, his left hand toying with an amulet around his neck which glowed a bright white. “Time has not passed for him because the people and events who lived in that time are not real to him. He saw none of it, and despises all of it. And that is why he will ultimately fail.”

A chill ran down Dorian’s spine as he listened to those words, his eyes drawn irresistibly to the amulet around Amell’s neck. *Something* about it called to him, a faint hint of familiarity which gnawed at the edge of his awareness and burrowed into his mind. Before he could do more than
notice it, however, Amell’s hand suddenly closed tight around it, and he went still for a long moment—so still it seemed he’d stopped breathing. Then the amulet fell from his fingers, and Dorian’s eyes widened as he saw Amell’s dulled eye flicker into life, though he only caught a glimpse of it before Amell faced Erasthenes once more.

Still, it was enough to warn Dorian to listen closely, and he heard the differences. The slow, sonorous tones of what Hawke called Amell’s monster were gone, and the voice sounded much more Ferelden in flavor.

“Tell me more of the Vessel,” Amell said softly. “What will Corypheus gain from it?”

“Power,” Erasthenes wheezed. “He seeks more power, and the Vessel will hold it for him.”

“What if she refuses?” Amell demanded.

Erasthenes shook his head weakly. “He does not need his Vessel to have free will. About her, these same chains will fall.” Weakly he gestured at the glowing light around him. “Iron, to cage lightning. My binding is the poor pencil sketch. Calpernia will be the masterpiece.”

As he spoke, Dorian saw Amell’s head slowly turn towards the back of the room. Swiftly Dorian ducked away from the door’s opening, praying Amell hadn’t spotted them, and didn’t move back to the door until he heard Amell speaking again, the sound of his voice indicating he was facing away once more. “Power without free will,” Amell mused. “So that is the role of the Vessel. Excellent. Efficient and reliable.”

“Yoked like a Qunari mage, a saarebas, a circumscribed sycophant,” Erasthenes muttered with a clear note of disgust in his voice.

Amell simply laughed at that, the sound decidedly unpleasant as it echoed in the expansive space. “Sometimes a bit of ruthlessness is called for to accomplish great things,” he told Erasthenes. “Whether it’s to end the Blight, or to save the world. Life is pain, after all. Anyone who says differently is selling something.”

Save the world? Dorian frowned. Is that what he believes he’s trying to do?

“I have had enough of pain.” Erasthenes raised a hand to press against his face a moment. “I have answered your questions. Please. Breach the circle--its wards will trigger. I will be dust and light. Free.”

Realizing that the time for surprise was now drawing to a close, Dorian glanced down at Varric as a glimmer of an idea came to his mind. Gesturing Varric closer, Dorian touched his fingers to Bianca, then pointed inside, raising his eyebrow in silent query. Varric nodded silently, then held up the crossbow when Dorian mimed the lifting gesture. Setting his fingers to the tip of the crossbow bolt, Dorian crafted a subtle spell for the arrow with magic pulled mostly from the Anchor, a spell designed to ‘open’ any magical barriers it found. It was a bit rough around the edges, but it should suffice long enough to get the bolt through regardless of Amell’s defenses.

Squeezing Varric's shoulder, Dorian stepped aside and gestured the dwarf forward. With a grim expression, Varric stepped forward on noiseless feet to stand in the doorway, risking a moment's visibility to get the best shot at this, their one shot of surprise. Dorian held his own breath as Varric raised Bianca, aimed down the sights, and slowly sucked in a deep breath.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The bolt glittered in the air as it shot forward. Dorian felt the moment when it hit Amell’s defenses,
and an odd pain shot up his left arm for a blazing instant. In the next, however, Amell shouted and stumbled, stopping just short of falling into the shining barrier around Erasthenes. Before Bull even had a chance to yank the door open, Leliana surged forward, her daggers already in motion as she faded into the shadows. Dorian heard an Antivan curse as they all surged forward, and saw Amell's staff swing through the air in a large circle before it was slammed hard into the floor. A jagged green line suddenly appeared in the air on the other side of the room, then burst open to allow a horde of howling demons to pour through.

After that, things got complicated.

Leliana kept Zevran occupied as the wave of demons surged towards the Inquisition forces, an attack met with the cool calm of professional soldiers. Leaving them to their task, Dorian summoned a nimbus crafted from both his own magic and that of the anchor around his staff, using the added strength of that energy to help him hack his way across the battlefield, roaring in rage to attract Amell’s attention.

When their eyes met, grey and glowing red, Dorian realized that he'd made the jump from annoyance to enemy in Amell's mind. While good for keeping his attention, it had the potential to prove bad for the sake of his tender hide. Still, there was no choice, and Dorian knew it.

No duel in the Imperium could have prepared Dorian fully for what followed, and he'd seen quite a few where one or even both parties of a duel had ended up a pile of dust on the ground. He instantly knew that, without the Anchor, Amell would have crushed him within the first few exchanges of magic. He fought off fire and responded with lightning, melted sheets of ice and shot back with bolts of pure magical energy, summoned a sturdy barrier around him to fend off chunks of falling ceiling and called on the souls of those sacrificed long ago to rise from the very ground and launch themselves at Amell.

Which... worked, Dorian noticed with some surprise, though it had been meant only as a distraction. He watched with raised eyebrows as Amell veered away from the outstretched arms of the ghouls given a ghostly form by Dorian's necromancy. Face locked in a sneer, Amell lurched to the opposite side of Erasthenes and the man's dome prison before finally sweeping his staff through the pale shades with a roar that sounded almost frantic.

Tucking that odd reaction away in the back of his mind, Dorian took advantage of the break to launch his own attacks upon Amell, and in the next moment they were locked once more in a mage’s duel. Around them the battle raged between Dorian's companions and the demons, but for the moment, Dorian's attention was focused entirely on Amell--and the reverse, he sensed, was true. As the battle progressed, it became evident that Amell was shocked to learn that Dorian could hold his own against him, and Dorian wondered if he could use that surprise to his advantage.

As the battle extended, Dorian called upon the power of the Anchor more and more frequently, until all the spells he cast were supplemented by the pale green of its power. He observed his opponent keenly, watching the sneer on Amell's face slowly falter into a look of intense concentration as an easy victory—or perhaps any victory—grew more and more elusive. The air around them filled with the zap and whine of magic in a way few duels even in Minrathous could garner, and Dorian pressed in with his attacks over and over again, until finally he thought he saw a weakness in Amell's defense. With a sudden inspiration, he grabbed his staff with both hands and cracked it sharply down onto the ground, sending a burst of energy which shone a bright green arcing into Amell—or, more specifically, the magic protecting Amell. The mage's barriers and personal wards burst wide open, and Amell staggered back even as he raised his staff in defense against whatever Dorian might throw at him next.
Except that the next blow came from behind, and not from magic.

Appearing as if from nowhere, Hawke surged into Amell's back with a roar. Dorian's eyes widened and he reached forward with a wordless shout as the impact toppled Amell forward—

—and into the round dome of light around Erasthenes.

The spell Corypheus had crafted to contain the Magister until his death flashed as it activated, sending a burst of light through the room. Amell crumpled to the floor with Hawke on top of him, unmoving, but Erasthenes... Dorian shuddered as the man turned into a glimmer of dust and light, then disappeared entirely. Even the remnant of his soul was gone. Whatever Corypheus had done, it was no incidental magic.

And the spell around Erasthenes, if Dorian recalled the conversation accurately, was only a sloppy prototype.

In the next moment, he realized that the sound of fighting had stopped, and looked around quickly. The demons, no longer held in the waking world by Amell's spell or will, had simply vanished. Without another moment's consideration, Dorian quickly raised his left hand and sent a burst of green light towards the rift Amell had torn open, sealing it tight to prevent more enterprising demons from finding their way across the divide.

Before he even had a chance to lower his hand, however, harsh words spoken with an Antivan accent ripped across the room:

"Stop, or the Champion dies!"

Dorian froze in place, as did the others, as he watched Zevran haul the weakened Hawke into his grasp and set a knife to the man's neck. Dorian and Bull exchanged a glance, and he saw as clear as day Bull's unspoken question:

Is Hawke worth saving at this price?

Even as Dorian pondered the matter, a movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention as Zevran dove towards Amell's body. Bull took that as a signal to act and rushed forward with his maul raised high, but Dorian's eyes were on Zevran's hand as he pulled that disturbingly familiar white amulet from around Amell's neck. With one arm still tight around Hawke's neck, Zevran swung the amulet down so that it hit the red lyrium skull on Amell's staff just as Bull's maul started its descent.

There was a blinding flash of light and burst of magic of the sort Dorian had never thought to feel again. When his vision finally returned, he wasn't at all surprised to see that Amell, Zevran, and Hawke had vanished, or that a trail of blood led away from them and through the doors. While the others cried out in various stages of surprise and Bull roared in fury as his maul crushed the center of the empty spell circle, Dorian simply stared at the open doors leading out of the room, mind whirling. After all, he was intimately familiar with the sort of magic which Zevran had unleashed from that skull with the aid of the amulet around Amell's neck.

But how had Amell learned of it? So far as Dorian knew, there were only two people in the whole world familiar with that particular kind of magic. One of them was himself... and the other one was dead, killed by darkspawn in the Frostbacks as he'd fled the wrath of Corypheus.

Wasn't he?

“Alexius,” Dorian breathed. “What have you done?”
Current publication schedule: weekly until Act III (of IV) is complete.

This is a sloooow burn fic of Four Acts. There is angst, hurt, comfort, angst, humor, and lots and lots of hand touching along the way. (I like hand touching, okay?) It won't always be what is expected (did I mention the angst?). But it will be a wild and, eventually, steamy ride, I promise you that.

Many, many thanks to my beta reader, Bethadots She is also an amazing writer in her own right, so please check out her works!

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Psst! I posted a deleted scene from Act III over on my Tumblr. Go check it out!

Also just wanted to drop a quick word that there's a Cullrian discord server, The Herald's Rest, where I lurk on occasion, so stop by and say hello!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!